



DRAFT Election Guidelines

Election Campaigns for: **The General Election across the UK
Local Government in England**

Polling Day: **7th May 2015**

1.	Introduction	2
1.1	The Election Period and when the Election Guidelines and Appendices (“the Guidelines”) come into effect	2
1.2	Elections	2
1.3	The Guidelines.....	2
1.4	Who the Guidelines apply to	3
2.	Mandatory issues and referrals.....	4
2.1	During the Election Period:	4
2.2	Polling day (00.30 – 22.00):	4
3.	Due Impartiality in coverage of parties and issues.....	5
3.1	Coverage of the Parties	5
3.2	Impartiality in Programmes and Online Content	5
3.3	Coverage of other political issues, other Parliaments, Assemblies and Councils in the UK during the Election Period.	6
3.4	Order of Parties	6
3.5	Items which may not require contributions from other parties or candidates.....	7
4.	Fairness to Candidates - Code of Practice	7
4.1	Reports on specific Electoral Areas (Constituencies or Wards).....	7
4.2	Use of Candidates in issue based packages and phone-ins.....	8
4.3	Welsh and Gaelic Language Services	9
5.	Social Media and Audience Contributions	9
5.1	Use of Social Media	9
5.2	Audience contributions.....	9
5.3	Vox Pops	10
5.4	Audience Programmes	10
5.5	Material from parties or candidates.....	10
6.	Polls and other tests of opinion.....	11
6.1	Reporting Polls	11
6.2	Commissioning Polls.....	12
6.3	SMS/Online Voting	12
7.	Party Leader Interviews	13
8.	Polling Day.....	13
9.	Complaints Handling.....	13
	APPENDIX 1.....	14
	Party Coverage 2015	14

1. Introduction

1.1 The Election Period and when the Election Guidelines and Appendices (“the Guidelines”) come into effect

The Election Period, when these Guidelines come into effect, begins at **00.01 on Monday 30th March** (25 working days before polling day and the dissolution of Parliament).

The Guidelines remain in effect until the close of polls at 22.00 on Thursday 7th May.

However, election campaigning will begin before the formal election period and content producers should be sensitive to the need for particular care in the period between now and then. Advice is available from the Chief Adviser, Politics.

There is no formal distinction, once the election has been called, between the periods before and after the close of nominations. It is all referred to as the “Election Period.” The close of nominations is on 9th April.

1.2 Elections

The General Election will be contested on the basis of a first past the post system in the 650 Westminster constituencies across the whole of the UK.

The English Local Elections will be contested in:

36 Metropolitan Boroughs

49 unitary authorities

194 district councils

5 mayoral elections

Altogether, approximately 9,500 (tbc) seats will be contested.

For further information specific to the General Election and the English Local Elections, please refer to the Appendices.

1.3 The Guidelines

There is no area of broadcasting where the BBC’s commitment to due impartiality is more closely scrutinised than in reporting election campaigns.

These Guidelines are intended to offer a framework within which journalists:

- can operate in as free and creative an environment as possible,

- deliver to audiences impartial and independent reporting of the campaign, giving them fair coverage and rigorous scrutiny of the policies and campaigns of all parties.

The BBC is also legally obliged to adopt a **Code of Practice** with respect to “the participation of candidates at a parliamentary or local government election in items about the constituency or electoral area in question which are included in relevant services during the election period”. This obligation is fulfilled by [Section 4 of these Guidelines](#).

The BBC is also required, under the terms of its Charter and Agreement of 2006 to ensure that political issues are covered with due accuracy and impartiality. These Election Guidelines supplement the Editorial Guidelines (Chapter 4, [“Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion”](#) and Chapter 10, [“Politics and Public Policy”](#)). They should, in particular, be read in conjunction with the sections in Chapter 10 on “Reporting UK Election and Referendum Campaigns” and “Broadcasting During Elections”, which say we must ensure that:

- news judgements continue to drive editorial decision making in news based programmes.
- news judgements at election time are made within a **framework of democratic debate** which ensures that due weight is given to hearing the views and examining and challenging the policies of all parties. Significant minor parties should also receive some network coverage during the campaign.
- we are aware of the **different political structures** in the four nations of the United Kingdom and that they are reflected in the election coverage of each nation. Programmes shown across the UK must also take this into account.

The Guidelines are publicly available and the BBC can expect to be held accountable for their implementation during the campaign.

1.4 Who the Guidelines apply to

It is the responsibility of each editor to ensure that their content producers are aware of how the Guidelines apply to their output.

Any programme which does not usually cover political subjects or normally invite politicians to participate must consult the Chief Adviser Politics before finalising any plans to do so.

The Appendices set out information specific to the different elections and different parts of the UK.

Each programme, strand, website or channel must bear in mind the location of its intended audience in applying these Guidelines.

These Guidelines apply to any programme or material intended for UK audiences, covering any aspect of the election.

2. Mandatory issues and referrals

2.1 During the Election Period:

- Any programme which does not usually cover political subjects or normally invite politicians to participate must consult the Chief Adviser Politics before finalising any plans to do so.*
- All bids for interviews with party leaders must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics before parties are approached. Offers of such interviews should also be referred before being accepted.*
- Any proposal to use a contribution from a politician without an opportunity for comment or response from other parties must be referred to a senior editorial figure and the Chief Adviser Politics. (see 3.5)
- The BBC will not commission voting intention polls
- Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on politics or any other matter of public policy for any BBC service must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics.*
- There will be no online votes or SMS/text votes attempting to quantify support for a party, a politician or a party political policy issue.
- Any proposal to conduct text voting on any political issue that could have a bearing on any of the elections must be discussed with the Chief Adviser, Politics, as well as being referred to the relevant departmental senior editorial figure and ITACU.
- The BBC will not broadcast or publish numbers of e-mails, texts or other communications received on either side of any issue connected to the campaign.

* referral is also mandatory outside election periods.

2.2 Polling day (00.30 – 22.00):

- No opinion poll on any issue relating to the election may be published.
- There will be no coverage of any issues directly pertinent to the election campaigns on any BBC outlet.
- It is a criminal offence to publish anything about the way in which people have voted in that election.

3. Due Impartiality in coverage of parties and issues

3.1 Coverage of the Parties

To achieve due impartiality, each bulletin, programme or programme strand, as well as online and interactive services, for each election, must ensure that the parties are covered proportionately over an appropriate period, normally across a week.

Determining appropriate levels of coverage should take into account levels of past and current electoral support (see Appendices).

Electoral support in the previous equivalent election is the starting point for making those judgements. However, other factors should be taken into account where appropriate, including evidence of variation in levels of support in more recent elections, changed political circumstances (e.g. new parties or party splits) as well as other evidence of current support. The number of candidates a party is standing may also be a factor.

3.2 Impartiality in Programmes and Online Content

Daily news magazine programmes should normally achieve proportional and appropriate coverage within the course of each week of the campaign.

This means that each strand (e.g. a drive time show on radio) is responsible for achieving impartiality itself within the week and cannot rely on other outlets at different times of day (e.g. the breakfast show) to do so for it. This does not preclude programmes, in specific circumstances, from co-operating to organise joint coverage, thereby achieving due impartiality across the station or channel. But such an arrangement needs clear sign-posting and should normally be referred to the Chief Adviser, Politics.

Programme strands should avoid individual editions getting too far out of kilter. There may be days when inevitably one party dominates the news agenda, e.g. when party manifestos are launched, but in that case care must be taken to ensure that appropriate coverage is given to other manifesto launches on the relevant days.

The News Channel and television and radio summaries will divide the 24 hour day into blocks and aim to achieve due impartiality across a week's output in each one.

Weekly programmes, or running series within daily sequence programmes, which focus on one party or another, should signpost both forward and backwards so that it is clear to the audience that due impartiality is built in over time. In these instances, due impartiality should be achieved over the course of the campaign.

The same guidelines as those for programmes will apply to BBC Editorial content on all bbc.co.uk sites. These will apply to audio and video content as well as text content, e.g. blogs, podcasts and downloads, as well as any social networking which is associated with the BBC, including material that appears on sites operated by third parties (see 5.1 below).

Any programme or content giving coverage to any of the elections must achieve due impartiality overall among parties during the course of the whole campaign.

In all elections, the BBC must take care to prevent candidates being given an unfair advantage, for instance, where one candidate's name is featured through depicting posters or rosettes etc.

Anyone who is in doubt as to how this applies to their own content should contact the Chief Adviser, Politics, for advice.

3.3 Coverage of other political issues, other Parliaments, Assemblies and Councils in the UK during the Election Period.

The elections do not happen in isolation and other elected bodies may well continue their normal activity during the campaign. However, a General Election is particularly dominant and content producers need to comply with the general requirement of due accuracy and due impartiality, aware of the possible influence of any other political coverage on the election campaign.

This applies to all Parliamentary reportage during the campaign, including from the Scottish Parliament, the Assemblies in Wales, Northern Ireland and London and the European Parliament. Some council business will also continue during the election period. These should continue to be covered in the normal way, though any issues relating to local government in England or the General Election across the UK which are discussed in the parliaments or assemblies must be reported with care to maintain due impartiality.

All content producers need to bear in mind which issues are within the remit of the different bodies and ensure it is clear to the audience when stories have a bearing on an election. They also should be alert to other party politicians who are not involved directly in the elections, including MSPs, MEPs etc, intervening in issues relevant to any of the elections and ensure that due impartiality is maintained. Some members of other Parliaments and Assemblies may also be candidates in the General Election for the Westminster Parliament; care should be taken to ensure that unfair advantage in the election campaign is not derived from their other political roles.

Where there are other major news stories, special care is needed to ensure that any political element is covered comprehensively, but also reflects the fact that we are in an election period. How this is achieved will depend on the particular circumstances of each case. For example, where there are major stories which fall outside inter-party rivalry, due impartiality may be achieved by allowing more time to those politicians most closely involved, reporting fully statements giving the audience factual information and, on occasion, reflecting vigorous internal debates within parties.

3.4 Order of Parties

The order in which parties appear in packages or are introduced in discussions should normally be editorially driven. However, programme makers should take care to ensure they vary this order, where appropriate, so

that no fixed pattern emerges in the course of the campaign. Fairness may sometimes be best achieved simply by, for instance, drawing straws.

3.5 Items which may not require contributions from other parties or candidates

In exceptional circumstances, comments from politicians can stand alone, without any other political contribution, where to use one might appear insensitive or risk the appearance of a media circus. This might include interviews about a personal tragedy, a public disaster, or where the politician concerned is an eye witness to a news incident. Any proposal to use a comment in this way must be referred to a senior editorial figure and the Chief Adviser, Politics.

4. Fairness to Candidates - Code of Practice

4.1 Reports on specific Electoral Areas (Constituencies or Wards)

The intention of these guidelines is to encourage vigorous debate and to give a higher profile to candidates in general, without giving unfair advantage to one candidate or party over another.

Candidates or parties declining to take part in constituency/ward reports or debates cannot, by doing so, effectively exercise a veto over such coverage.

However, this does not weaken in any way the BBC's obligations of fairness in ensuring the audience is informed of all main strands of argument.

Reports or debates about a specific electoral area, such as a council ward or a Westminster constituency, should give due weight to candidates of parties which have demonstrated substantial electoral support in that area. This means that if any candidate takes part in an item about a specific electoral area, then these other candidates should also be offered the opportunity to take part, or be given a similar opportunity across a series of reports. Candidates or parties who have not demonstrated that they have substantial electoral support in that area must still be offered proportionate coverage.

Programmes may decide to use either candidates or party representatives. But if a candidate from one of the parties is invited to take part, the other participants should, where at all possible, also be candidates (see below [4.3 Welsh and Gaelic Language Services](#)). In exceptional circumstances, if a candidate is genuinely unavailable, the opportunity may be offered instead to a suitable party representative from within the electoral area (e.g. party official or agent) but it should normally be made clear to the audience that the missing candidate was invited and why they were unable to take part. If a party declines to put forward a representative or nominates someone in a way which risks unfairness to other candidates, the item/programme may go ahead without them.

Reports and items which refer to any candidates should also refer – as a minimum – to an online list of all candidates and parties standing (or, if before close of nominations, to a list of candidates so far). If such a report is being broadcast several times on the same channel in a day, the online list of

candidates should be referred to on each occasion and at least once the list should feature visually or verbally. For longer items, especially where only some candidates are receiving significant coverage, such as debates – or, where there is no online list available for the relevant electoral area - then the candidates should be listed, visually or verbally.

Content producers must ensure generally that candidates are not given an unfair advantage; for instance, camera operators should take care where a candidate's name is featured prominently through depicting posters or rosettes etc.

Where candidates have other roles – political or non-political - care should be taken to ensure that they do not gain an unfair advantage in the election campaign over other candidates.

Before the close of nominations, content producers need to ensure due impartiality in regard to contributors who may have expressed an intention or who are expected to stand as a candidate.

Reports referring to the list of candidates before the close of nominations should make it clear that these are known candidates so far.

4.2 Use of Candidates in issue based packages and phone-ins

As well as debates or other items using candidates within constituencies or wards, all types of content may use an appropriate range of candidates from different constituencies or wards to discuss together election issues.

When a candidate contributes in that way, the other participants should, where at all possible, also be candidates in the same election. (see [4.3 Welsh and Gaelic Language Services, below](#)). Reasonable references to local examples within a constituency or ward, for instance, to local hospitals, schools, etc, are allowed, providing it does not result in any unfairness to a candidate who is not taking part.

In order to maintain due impartiality, the choice of parties represented should be appropriate to the item. The choice of candidate to represent a party will be made on editorial grounds, but care must be taken over the course of the campaign to ensure that one candidate is not unduly favoured at the expense of others or that a party spokesperson does not gain disproportionate coverage at the expense of candidates from other parties.

If a candidate is being interviewed as a national spokesperson, they should not be allowed to gain an unfair advantage over their local opponents by making repeated references to their own area. This can best be achieved by advising them in advance of the BBC's due impartiality obligations. If this fails, swift intervention by the presenter of a live programme, or editing before broadcast, will be necessary.

Candidates may be encouraged to take part in phone-ins about the election or election issues. However, callers must be checked to see if they are candidates and it must be clear to the audience that they are speaking not as ordinary members of the public but as contributors with a political agenda.

Care must be taken that over time programmes are not giving undue prominence to one party or undue preference to one candidate over another. Care should also be taken – and advice sought - with regard to any contribution from a candidate during a phone-in or similar programme which is not about the elections or political issues more generally.

Further advice on use of candidates can be sought from the Chief Adviser, Politics.

4.3 Welsh and Gaelic Language Services

Some politicians in Wales are not Welsh language speakers. In the event that a party is unable to find a Welsh speaker, Radio Cymru and BBC Wales programmes for S4C may draw on both candidates and other party representatives.

Few politicians are Gaelic speakers. In the event that a party is unable to find a Gaelic speaking candidate, Radio nan Gaidheal and BBC Alba programmes may draw on both candidates and other party representatives.

5. Social Media and Audience Contributions

5.1 Use of Social Media

BBC editorial staff and anyone involved in producing election-related content must avoid compromising the BBC's impartiality or bringing the BBC into disrepute by their activities, such as by expressing their own views on political matters, either on personal websites or social media, eg personal Twitter accounts.

5.2 Audience contributions

Audience contributions offer immediacy and interactivity to the BBC's output both broadcast and on the web. These contributions are an expression of opinion and are not an indication of the weight of opinion on one side or another of a question. The range selected for inclusion must be chosen to achieve due impartiality, not just by the weight of audience activity. However, we must not seek to achieve what might be considered "artificial" balance by giving a misleading account of the weight of opinion.

Audience contributions may come by text, social media message or email, or some other interactivity mechanism, including "vox pop". They may be unsolicited, or they may arise from calls to action, in either broadcast output or online. However we receive them, content producers should be rigorous about establishing the origins of materials offered as audience contributions and take responsibility for their authenticity. It may be necessary to verify that a contribution apparently from an individual in the public eye is genuine. Where such contributions come from candidates, that must be clearly identified.

All web pages prompting debate on the election will be actively hosted and properly moderated to encourage a wide range of views. Those parts of the

BBC's online presence which do not normally engage in political issues should seek advice from the Chief Adviser, Politics, before doing so.

Unless specifically hosting election discussions, non-news sites should direct users who want to discuss the election in message boards or comments to appropriate areas of the news site such as political blogs or relevant news articles. All election-related discussion areas on bbc.co.uk must have appropriate moderation, filtering, hosting and escalation in place.

Journalists and moderators will have to make fine judgements between remarks that constitute robust debate and personal abuse. The general rule of thumb should be if we would not broadcast it on radio or TV, it should not be online. Filters for harm and offence and personal abuse will operate as usual, but they should not be relied on as a substitute for effective moderation.

During the Election Period, we must not broadcast or publish numbers of contributions received on any campaign issue to estimate support for any side or party.

If contributions are edited for length, care should be taken to ensure that the contributor's opinions are fairly and accurately represented.

5.3 Vox Pops

The value of vox pops to programmes is to allow different sides of an issue in question to be expressed through the voices of the man and woman in the street. But the context should always make it clear that they are an expression of an argument, not an indication of the weight of opinion on either side. It follows that special care must be taken with vox pops during an election campaign, for instance, to give consideration to the location in which they are recorded and to edit them, when appropriate, in such a way as to ensure a range of views is reflected.

5.4 Audience Programmes

Any programme covering elections and planning to use a live audience should consult the Chief Adviser Politics to discuss the selection of the audience and how to achieve due impartiality. All such procedures must stand up to public scrutiny

5.5 Material from parties or candidates

BBC News Online will not normally link directly to election-related material on the websites either of political parties or individual candidates, unless there is an editorial justification (e.g. a row caused by a prominent figure publishing policy on his/her website contradicting the manifesto on the party's website) and then it will be promoted only for a limited period and mindful of any impartiality issues.

BBC News Online will list links to all available party sites, provided that it does not give strong grounds for concern that this breaches the [BBC Harm and Offence guidelines](#) or the law e.g. defamation or incitement to racial hatred.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-harm-introduction/>

Any speeches or other material published by or contributed by candidates or parties which are carried in full or in part must be selected on news value, while bearing in mind that due impartiality requires that an appropriate range of such material is carried.

Content producers should be particularly alert to organised campaigns or lobbying by parties, pressure groups, candidates or people acting on their behalf. If mass mailings or other organised lobbying is suspected during the Election Period, contributors may be asked to provide contact details for verification purposes. The [bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) escalation strategy must be activated immediately, and it may be necessary to, for example, put a message board into pre-moderation or read only mode.

6. Polls and other tests of opinion

Section 6 of the Election Guidelines should, where appropriate, be read in conjunction with Chapter 10 of Editorial Guidelines and the Editorial Policy Guidance "[Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes, Straw Polls](#)", available on the Editorial Policy website.

6.1 Reporting Polls

During the campaign our reporting of opinion polls should take into account three key factors:

- they are part of the story of the campaign and audiences should, where appropriate, be informed about them;
- context is essential, and we must ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the language used in reporting them;
- polls can be wrong - there are real dangers in only reporting the most "newsworthy" polls – i.e. those which, on a one-off basis, show dramatic movement.

So, the general rules and guidance about reporting polls need to be scrupulously followed. They are:

- not to lead a news bulletin or programme simply with the results of a single voting intention poll;
- not to headline the results of a single voting intention poll unless it has prompted a story which itself deserves a headline and reference to the poll's findings is necessary to make sense of it;
- not to rely on the interpretation given to a poll's results by the organisation or publication which commissioned it, but to come to our own view by looking at the questions, the results and the trend;

- to report the findings of voting intentions polls in the context of trend. The trend may consist of the results of all major polls over a period or may be limited to the change in a single pollster's findings. Poll results which defy trends without convincing explanation should be treated with particular scepticism and caution;
- not to use language which gives greater credibility to the polls than they deserve: polls "suggest" but never "prove" or even "show";
- to report the expected margin of error if the gap between the contenders is within the margin. On television and online, graphics should *always* show the margin of error;
- to report the organisation which carried out the poll and the organisation or publication which commissioned it;

Take particular care with newspaper reviews. Polls should not be the lead item in a newspaper review and should always be reported with a sentence of context (e.g: "that's rather out of line with other polls this week").

No opinion poll on any subject relating to politics or the election may be published on polling day until after the polls have closed.

6.2 Commissioning Polls

The BBC does not commission voting intention opinion polls during election periods. Editorial Guidelines say "any proposal to commission an opinion poll on politics or any other matter of public policy for any BBC service must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics for approval".

Care must be taken to ensure that any poll commissioned by the BBC is not used to suggest a BBC view on a particular policy or issue. A poll may be commissioned to help inform the audience's understanding of a current controversy, but it should not be used to imply BBC intervention in a current controversy.

6.3 SMS/Online Voting

There will be no SMS/text or online votes attempting to quantify support for a party, politician or policy issue during the election period, nor should other quantitative methods, such as a count of the number of texts or social media contributions, be used to assess the level of support.

Producers must ensure that votes are not translated into anything that could be construed either as a representation of public opinion as a whole, or the BBC's opinion. Any proposal to conduct text or online voting on any political issue that could have a bearing on any of the elections must be discussed with the Chief Adviser, Politics, as well as being referred to the relevant departmental senior editorial figure and ITACU.

7. Party Leader Interviews

With the exception of brief newsgathering interviews gathered on news value on the day, all bids for party leader interviews must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics before parties are approached. Unsolicited offers should not be accepted without consultation with senior managers and a reference to the Chief Adviser Politics.

8. Polling Day

There will be no coverage of any of the election campaigns on polling day, from 00.30 until polls close at 22.00 on TV, radio or bbc.co.uk. However, online sites will not have to remove archive reports. Coverage will be restricted to factual accounts with nothing which could be construed as influencing the ballots.

No opinion poll on any issue relating to politics or the election may be published until after the polls have closed.

Whilst the polls are open, it is a criminal offence to publish anything about the way in which people have voted in that election.

9. Complaints Handling

Complaints will be handled at the appropriate level from programme editors upwards. The aim is to ensure that whether a complaint has come via BBC Audience Services, direct to a programme or to a correspondent or individual journalist, from a politician or member of the public (who may or may not be a political activist), from a senior party official or an individual candidate, the BBC's response is consistent, robust and swift.

For that reason, normally, on receiving a formal complaint, details should be taken and referred to the appropriate person before any initial response – other than acknowledgement and timescale – is given to the complainant.

Anyone requiring further advice on the application of these Guidelines should consult the Chief Adviser Politics.

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APPENDIX 1

Party Coverage 2015

General Election 2015 and Local Government Elections (England) Party Coverage

Deciding respective levels of coverage for different political parties, who have varying levels of political support, requires, primarily, good and impartial editorial judgement. There will be legitimate differences in interpretation and application for different programmes and formats. Advice is available, on a case by case basis, from the Chief Adviser, Politics, both before and throughout the campaign.

So although each outlet must ensure its coverage is proportionate among the parties, that should be treated as a guide rather than as a set mathematical formula. However, there must be good editorial reasons for any significant variation and these cannot supersede the over-riding obligation for due impartiality and fairness.

The relative amount of coverage given to political parties in each electoral area (from the UK as a whole to individual constituencies) should reflect levels of past and/or current electoral support. In considering this, bearing in mind the intended geographical audience, the following factors should be given due weight:

- performance at the last equivalent election (i.e. the 2010 General election) in terms of representation and/or share of the vote.
- performance in subsequent elections, where relevant
- other relevant evidence of current electoral support
- the number of candidates a party fields in the election
- any relevant political context, such as electoral pacts, new parties, coalition agreements etc.