



# Election Guidelines 2018

**Election Campaign for:**  
**Local Government in parts of England (including mayoral elections)**

**Polling Day:** 3rd May 2018

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## **1. The Election Period**

### **1.1 The Election Period and when the Election Guidelines (“the guidelines”) come into effect**

For the elections taking place on 3rd May 2018, the election period begins on:

**Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018 at 00.01**

However, election campaigning may begin before the formal election periods and content producers should be sensitive to the need for particular care running up to the Election Period. Advice is available from the Chief Adviser, Politics. The Guidelines remain in effect until the close of polls at 22.00 on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May

There is no formal distinction during the election periods between the days before and after the close of nominations. The close of nominations will be on 6<sup>th</sup> April.

### **1.2 Elections**

Taking place in England, by “First Past the Post”:

32 London boroughs – total of 1,833\* seats

34 metropolitan boroughs - 1,010\* seats

17 unitary authorities – 353\* seats

67 districts – 1,174\* seats

Plus, by Supplementary Vote:

Mayoral elections in: Hackney, Lewisham, Newham, South Yorkshire (New), Tower Hamlets, Watford.

**TOTAL: 150 councils, approximately 4,370\* seats, all in England.**

•\* estimated

### **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 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 the BBC 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 smaller parties should also receive some network coverage during the campaign.
- when producing UK-wide output, 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.

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

**BBC output with regard to the election period is also subject to [Sections 5 and 6](#) (except 6.8 – 6.12) of the Ofcom Code, the associated [Guidance Notes](#) and relevant evidence of electoral support as set out in the [Ofcom Digest](#).**

#### **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 proposal to invite a politician or candidate on a programme or area of content where to do so is the exception rather than the rule, or which does not usually cover political subjects, must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics first.

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 content intended for audiences in England (including UK-wide coverage), where elections are taking place and which cover any aspect of the election.

## **2 Summary of Mandatory issues and referrals**

### **2.1 During the Election Period:**

- Any proposal to invite a politician or candidate on a programme or area of content where to do so is the exception rather than the rule, or which does not usually cover political subjects, must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics first.\*
- All bids for interviews or proposals to profile UK 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 candidate without an opportunity for comment or response from any other parties or candidates must be referred to a senior editorial figure and the Chief Adviser Politics. (see context 4.5).
- The BBC will not commission voting intention polls for publication during the campaign.
- 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 votes (online, SMS/text or social media) attempting to quantify support for a party, a candidate or a party political policy issue.
- Any proposal to conduct a vote (online, text or social media) 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 campaign on any BBC outlet or social media.
- It is a criminal offence to publish details of how people have voted in the elections.

### **3 Due Impartiality**

#### **3.1 Coverage of Parties and Candidates**

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 between 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.

To achieve due impartiality, each bulletin, programme or programme strand, as well as online and social media channels, must ensure that the parties (and, where relevant, independent candidates) are covered proportionately over an appropriate period and overall across the Election Period.

Electoral support in previous local elections in England 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 other elections, such as the 2017 general election, changed political circumstances (e.g. new parties or party splits), other evidence of current support, as well as the number of candidates a party is standing.

Relevant evidence of electoral support as set out in the [Ofcom Digest](#) shows that:

Parties which have secured substantial electoral support across England during the last two electoral cycles are:

The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

They should be represented with similar levels of coverage in appropriate election output.

For UK-wide coverage and online, all other parties fielding candidates in at least one-sixth of the seats available in England (ie 729\* seats out of 4,370\* being contested) should receive some coverage proportionate to the largest parties, where the elections are covered, including online.

Local and regional programmes covering the elections should take account of any different patterns of past/current electoral support and the number of candidates parties field in their areas.

Independent candidates attract significant levels of electoral support in many local

elections and the audience will expect that to be reflected in relevant coverage.

The audience will be referred, as appropriate and where possible, to a full list of parties and candidates standing, for instance, on council websites or specifically published on BBC Online.

Further advice on coverage, including of smaller parties and independent candidates, can be sought from the Chief Adviser Politics.

### **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.

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 getting substantially out of kilter in their coverage of parties or candidates. There may be times when inevitably one party dominates the news agenda, but in that case care must be taken to ensure that appropriate coverage is given to other parties or candidates at appropriate times and there is clear sign-posting, forwards and backwards.

Weekly programmes, or running series within daily sequence programmes, which focus on one party or another, should also 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](http://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 section 5 below).

Editorial Guidelines (4.4.14) say that programme-makers “...should not automatically assume that contributors from other organisations (such as academics, journalists, researchers and representatives of charities) are unbiased and we may need to make it clear to the audience when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint...”

In the context of the elections, content producers will need to take all reasonable steps to be sure that contributors are appropriately described, and that they have taken account, for instance, of comments made by them on social media, how their organisations are funded and the nature of quoted research or polling. In reporting, in particular, on press coverage of the campaigns and in newspaper reviews, they

should also take account of any relevant subjective editorial stance.

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.

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

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 and Elected Bodies**

The elections do not happen in isolation and other elected bodies will continue their normal activity during the campaign. 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 reportage of Westminster and the London Assembly during the campaign; some councils' business will also continue during the election period. These should continue to be covered in the normal way, though any issues relating to any of the elections in England which are discussed 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, including ministers, shadow ministers and other party spokespeople and members of parliaments and assemblies who are not involved directly in the elections, intervening in issues relevant to the elections and ensure that due impartiality is maintained. Some members of other elected bodies may also be candidates in these elections; 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 it is 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 – for instance, in debates - simply by drawing straws.

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

In exceptional circumstances, comments from candidates 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 person 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 and debates in specific Electoral Areas (Wards/Mayoral boroughs)**

**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 ward/mayoral 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: further advice should be sought, in such circumstances, from the Chief Adviser, Politics.

Programmes may decide to use either candidates or their representatives in items. But if a candidate is invited to take part, the other participants should, where at all possible, also be candidates. In exceptional circumstances, if a candidate is genuinely unavailable, the opportunity may be offered instead to a suitable party representative or substitute (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 or candidate 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 or debates about a specific electoral area, such as a council ward, should give due weight to candidates who have demonstrated substantial electoral support in that area (either through their own candidacy, for instance, as independents, or from support for their party). 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. How that is achieved will be a matter for editorial judgment, but the following should be regarded as a minimum:

Short reports and items, including those online, which refer to only some of the candidates in an electoral area (or areas) should also refer 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 or station, the online list of candidates should be referred to on each occasion and at least once the list should feature visually and/or verbally.

For longer items or programmes, such as debates - if not all the candidates are taking part - (or where there is no online list available for the relevant electoral area), then the candidates should be listed, visually and/or verbally, in addition to any reference to a full online list of candidates.

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 any contributor who is expected to stand as a candidate.

#### **4.2 Use of Candidates in issue based packages, wider debates and phone-ins**

As well as debates or other items using candidates within wards, all types of content may use an appropriate range of candidates from different wards or electoral areas to discuss together election issues. There may also be circumstances in which it is appropriate to use both candidates and non-candidates (for instance, where a party spokesperson is not standing, or for debates between party leaders.)

Reasonable references to local examples within a ward, for instance, to local hospitals, schools, examples of crime, 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 candidates or 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.

A candidate taking part as a national spokesperson should not gain an unfair advantage over their local opponents by making repeated references to their own area. This may mean advising them in advance of the BBC's due impartiality obligations, or swift intervention by the presenter of a live programme, or editing

before broadcast, as 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 others in the same electoral area. 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.

## **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, for instance, by expressing their own views (or endorsing the views of others) 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 elections 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 must 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](http://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 Pop**

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, including Debates**

Any programme, or set of programmes (e.g. organised across local radio or regional TV) covering elections and planning to use a live (eg studio) 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.

There is no single way to assemble an audience for these sorts of programmes. Producers will need to take account of many different factors, such as the format – e.g. the role of the audience, the make-up of the panel, the geographical area, etc. What is most important is that – editorially – each and every programme has made a carefully considered judgement about fairness and impartiality in those particular circumstances.

### **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 relevant party sites, provided that it does not give strong grounds for concern that this breaches the [BBC Harm and Offence guidelines and the Ofcom Code](#) or the law e.g. defamation or incitement to racial hatred.

Any speeches or other material published 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 organized campaigns or lobbying by parties, pressure groups, candidates or people acting on their behalf. If mass mailings or other organized lobbying is suspected during the Election Period, contributors may be asked to provide contact details for verification purposes. The [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. For that reason, we should not normally base a news story on a single voting intention poll, unless its impact has caused a separately newsworthy story.

So, the general rules and guidance applying to the reporting of polls need to be strictly applied during election campaigns. They are:

- not to lead a news bulletin or programme simply with the results of an

opinion poll (especially 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"; it is important that other editorial judgements – eg which aspects of the election may be given more coverage – do not rely too heavily on what the polls may appear to be indicating.
- 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;

Particular care should be taken with newspaper reviews; polling alone should not normally 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 elections may be published on polling day (from 00.30) 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.

There will be not SMS/text or online votes attempting to quantify support for a party, politician or policy issue during the election period

During the Election Period, the BBC will not broadcast or publish numbers of contributions received on any campaign issue to estimate support for any side or party. There will be no online votes attempting to quantify support for a campaign, 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 text 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 voting on any political issue that could have a bearing on 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, bbc.co.uk or our official channels on social media and other websites. Online sites will not have to remove archive reports.

Particular care should also be taken in personal use of social media on polling day.

Coverage on the day 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**

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.**

**Ric Bailey  
Chief Adviser Politics**

**Email: [ric.bailey@bbc.co.uk](mailto:ric.bailey@bbc.co.uk)**