

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

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The principles relating to our political impartiality are set out in the BBC's Charter and Agreement and are central to our coverage of politics. Over time we must aim to give due prominence to all the main strands of argument and to all the main parties. Although the government of the day will often be the primary source of news, the voices and opinions of opposition parties must also be routinely aired and challenged.

PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL IMPARTIALITY

- We must treat matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy with due accuracy and impartiality in our news services and other output.
- We must not express an opinion on current affairs or matters of public policy other than broadcasting.
- We must not campaign, or allow ourselves to be used to campaign.
See Section 4 Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion.

Chief Adviser Politics advises on all matters in this section of the guidelines.

REPORTING OF UK POLITICAL PARTIES

Network output must reflect the political parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For this reason specific party labels are preferable to general descriptions of "the opposition". The exception to this is in phrases like "the official opposition" or the "shadow cabinet" and titles like "the Leader of the Opposition" or "Shadow Minister" which, in the Westminster context, have a formal and specific meaning. The description "Shadow Minister" is reserved specifically for the main party of opposition at Westminster.

POLITICAL INTERVIEWS

We should be clear when making requests for political interviews about the nature of the programme and context for which they are intended. Our arrangements must stand up to public scrutiny and must not prevent the programme asking questions that our audiences would reasonably expect to hear. See Section 5 Fairness, Contributors and Consent – Refusals to Take Part.

Any programme proposing to invite a politician to be a guest, when to do so is the exception rather than the rule, should consult Chief Adviser Politics at an early stage.

INTERVIEWS WITH OR PROFILES OF PARTY LEADERS

Except for brief news interviews, any proposal to interview or profile any of the party leaders in the UK for BBC network and English regional output areas must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics.

Chief Adviser should also be told whether the invitations are refused or accepted to ensure:

- the BBC as a whole is robust and consistent in its dealings with the party leaders.
- at all times of high demand for one or more party leaders, bids are rationalised within the BBC.
- due weight is given to appearances by all party leaders over time.

Except for brief news interviews, any proposals to interview or profile any of the party leaders on BBC Scotland, BBC Wales or BBC Northern Ireland must be referred in advance to the Head of News and Current Affairs in the respective nation.

POLITICAL CONTRIBUTORS

We must take care when inviting politicians to contribute to our output on the basis of their expertise outside their political field, not to give them such prominence as to give them undue advantage over their opponents. This applies all the time, and not only during election campaigns. If in doubt about whether it is appropriate to invite someone with an overt party political label to be a contributor or presenter to non-political output, consult Chief Adviser Politics.

PAYMENT TO MPS

We should not normally pay the following people for their contributions to BBC news programmes:

- MPs at Westminster.

- members of the European Parliament.
- members of the Scottish Parliament.
- assembly members of the National Assembly of Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- politically active members of the House of Lords.

BROADCASTING OF PARLIAMENT AT WESTMINSTER

We must observe the rules of coverage laid down by Parliament for the broadcasting of proceedings in both the House of Commons and House of Lords, including Committees in both Houses. These include:

- no internal editing of speeches. When using two sections of a speech, a definite break must be provided to make clear the two sections are not continuous.
- no manipulation of the pictures or sound.

We can only use parliamentary material in news and factual programmes or for educational purposes.

We must not use any parliamentary recordings in light entertainment, fictional or drama programmes or items or programmes of political satire.

BROADCASTING OF OTHER PARLIAMENTS AND ASSEMBLIES

We must observe the rules of coverage for the broadcasting of proceedings of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the European Parliament.

There are no restrictions on the coverage of the London Assembly.

POLITICAL BROADCASTS

We are obliged by the Agreement to make airtime available for party and referendum broadcasts. Party broadcasts are quite separate from our own journalism and their transmission does not imply BBC support for the views

contained in them. A series of broadcasts is assumed to provide balance. The copyright of party broadcasts resides with the parties but extracts may be used without the consent of the political parties.

Parties make the broadcasts at their own expense and are responsible for their content. However they do have to abide by rules laid down by the BBC and Ofcom, which include an obligation to observe the law, for example on libel, incitement to racial hatred and violence, and the BBC Editorial Guidelines on harm and offence.

MINISTERIAL BROADCASTS

We may be required to provide time for a broadcast by the Prime Minister or relevant senior minister. This will only happen in exceptional circumstances, such as a decision to go to war. We will also have to consider requests from the leaders of the opposition parties for a reply. The BBC, as publisher, is responsible for ensuring the ministerial broadcasts meet appropriate legal and other standards.

BROADCASTING DURING ELECTIONS

Our commitment to impartiality and fairness is under intense scrutiny when we report election campaigns. All political parties will seek to influence editorial decisions. Content producers should take all complaints seriously and be aware that anything they say may be construed as “BBC policy”. We should explain that general complaints or allegations of bias must always be dealt with at a higher level, and refer them accordingly.

We should make, and be able to defend, our editorial decisions on the basis that they are reasonable and carefully and impartially reached. So 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 should also take this into account.

The way in which due accuracy and impartiality is achieved between parties will vary. It may be done in a single item, a single programme, a series of programmes or over the course of the campaign as a whole. But content producers must take responsibility for achieving due accuracy and impartiality in their own output and not rely on other BBC services to redress any imbalance for them.

REPORTING UK ELECTION AND REFERENDUM CAMPAIGNS

The BBC is required by law to adopt a code of practice at each election to govern the participation of candidates in each constituency or electoral area. Before drawing up a code the BBC is required to “have regard to any views expressed by the Electoral Commission”.

Election and referendum guidelines will be agreed by the Board of Governors and issued by Chief Adviser Politics before each election or referendum.

On polling day the BBC, in common with other broadcasters, will cease to report campaigns from 06.00 and until the polls close. We will restrict our coverage to factual accounts, for example the level of the poll, politicians’ appearances at polling stations and the weather; to ensure that, while the polls are open, nothing in our output can be construed as influencing the ballot.

REPORTING OVERSEAS ELECTIONS

The principles of fairness and impartiality which underlie our coverage of UK elections should also inform our election reporting in other countries. When we report elections overseas we may need to take into account the circumstances under which the particular election is being held, especially where serious questions are raised about the openness or fairness of the electoral process.

Additional issues may arise when we are broadcasting to the actual country in which an election is taking place. We owe a special responsibility to audiences who are about to vote. We may need to consider the timing of the re-transmission on international services of programmes originally made for the UK audience. The closer to the election date the greater the need for care. If it is considered that a programme could have an undue and unfair influence on the election, then we

should delay transmission until after polling.

LEGAL ISSUES AND OVERSEAS ELECTIONS

UK electoral law does not apply to elections outside the UK, but other countries may have specific laws applying to broadcasting during their elections. Where the BBC is re-broadcast in that country there will be legal issues to consider. In some countries legal election requirements may come into conflict with the BBC's fundamental editorial principles, especially those of fairness and impartiality. In such cases, the BBC will maintain its editorial principles even if that means that the local broadcaster refuses to transmit the BBC service. This is particularly important for BBC World Service, BBC World and BBC Online which all reach overseas audiences.

COMMISSIONING OPINION POLLS

We must take care to ensure that a poll we commission is not used to suggest a BBC view on a particular policy or issue. It is particularly important that a BBC poll is not used to imply BBC intervention in a current controversy.

Any proposal to commission or sponsor opinion polls purporting to sample party political support or voting intentions in the electorate at large must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

We should generally avoid running joint polls with other organisations as they often carry particular problems of impartiality in their presentation.

Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on politics or any other matter of public policy for any BBC service must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics for approval. Technical advice, for example, on question design, is available from the Political Research Unit.

POLLING METHODS

Polling is generally conducted face to face or over the telephone. Some companies conduct polling over the internet. As there is some debate about the reliability of this, any proposal to commission an internet poll should be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

REPORTING OPINION POLLS

The following rules for reporting the findings of voting intention polls in the United Kingdom, conducted by any polling organisation, must be applied:

- we do not lead a news bulletin or programme simply with the results of a voting intention poll.
- we do not headline the results of a 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.
- we do not rely on the interpretation given to a poll's results by the organisation or publication which commissioned it. We should look at the questions, the results and the trend.
- we report the findings of voting intention 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 care.
- we do not use language which gives greater credibility to the polls than they deserve. We should say polls "suggest", but never "prove" or even "show".
- we report the expected margin of error if the gap between the contenders is within the margin. Television and online graphics should always show the margin of error.
- we report the organisation which carried out the poll and the organisation or publication which commissioned it. This information too should always be shown in television and online graphics.
- we report the dates of the fieldwork, and include them in television and online graphics, and draw attention to events which may have had a significant effect on public opinion since it was done.
- we report whether the poll was carried out face to face, by telephone or over the internet.

When we report polls which do not reveal voting intentions we should always give the name of the polling organisation, the sample size, the nature of the sample and as much information about the margin of error and fieldwork dates as feasible.

POLLS AT ELECTION TIMES

Guidelines on polls at elections times will be agreed by the Governors and issued by Chief Adviser Politics before the start of each election campaign. See Section 15 Interacting with Our Audiences.

No opinion poll may be published on the day of the election until the polls close or, in the case of a European election, all the polls have closed across the European Union.

SURVEYS

We must conduct surveys such as those of small specific groups, like MPs or health authorities, with care and must never report them as polls.

We must not mislead our audience about the status of the information. The remit of a survey should not be translated into percentages but reported in straight numbers. **Any proposal to conduct a survey should be referred at an early stage to the Political Research Unit and to Chief Adviser Politics.**

Any proposal to commission a survey of MPs on any subject must be approved by the Chief Adviser Politics.

FOCUS GROUPS AND PANELS

We must not imply that the views of panels, however carefully selected, represent the views of the entire population, and they must not be used as a means of trying to estimate party support in the electorate at large.

Panels or focus groups, when properly selected, may be used to examine why certain views are held rather than the extent to which they are held.

Any proposal to commission focus group research on political party issues should be discussed at an early stage with Chief Adviser Politics and the methodology checked with the Political Research Unit.

PHONE-IN AND TEXT VOTES

Phone-in and text votes may accurately be described as “straw polls” even when the subject is serious. As a programme’s audience is self-selected and is never representative of the population as a whole, we should make it clear in our reporting of the results that they only represent the views of the audience at that time. If we do this and the numbers of the audience responding is reported at the same time, we may express results of phone-in or text votes in percentages.

We should not seek publicity for the results of phone-in polls or text votes outside the output areas in which they are conducted. BBC news programmes should not normally report the results of phone-in polls and text votes.

Output areas featuring phone-in polls and text votes on the same subject taken at different times (for example at the start and then again at the end of a programme) must not present the results in such a way as to suggest they demonstrate a shift in opinion by the people who voted.

We must never use phone-in or text votes to gather serious information on party political support.

STUDIO AUDIENCES

Straw polls of studio audiences should be treated with care. We should not make claims for the significance of the views expressed beyond that they represent the opinions of those in the audience at the time, even on those occasions where the audience has been selected to be broadly representative of, for example, party allegiance.

VOX POPS

We should always make it clear that vox pops only represent one side of an argument and do not indicate the weight of opinion on either side of it. Vox pops on politics or matters of public policy must be edited to ensure that both sides of the issue are covered and/or that they truly represent those whose opinions have been solicited.

ONLINE VOTING

On BBC websites which may relate to political or public policy issues, we must take care that online expressions of opinion are not translated into anything that could

be construed either as an accurate representation of public opinion as a whole, or as the BBC's opinion.

Any summary of online voting or expression of opinion should:

- not be called a poll.
- make it absolutely clear that the results have no wider significance and represent only the views of the audience at that time.

Provided this is done explicitly and the numbers of the audience responding is reported at the same time, results of online votes may be expressed in percentages.

If the vote is to be about a political or controversial public policy issue it must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics or in the case of a website in a language other than English, to the relevant World Service Head of Region or National Controller, who may also consult Chief Adviser Politics.

REPORTING THE RESULT OF AN ONLINE VOTE ELSEWHERE

We can report any summary of online voting on the radio or television programme associated with the website, but we should not normally report it elsewhere in news, or on other radio or TV programmes, or on other online services. As with opinion polls, the programme should report the results of an online vote in the context of the story to which it relates.