

Politics, Public Policy and Polls

10

10.1 *(p.190)*

Introduction

10.2 *(p.191)*

Mandatory Referrals

10.3 *(p.193)*

Guidelines

- Reporting UK Political Parties
- Political Interviews and Contributions
- Parliamentary Broadcasting
- Political Broadcasts
- Elections
- Opinion Polls, Surveys and Votes

10.1 Introduction

The principles relating to the BBC's political impartiality and independence from political influence are central to our coverage of politics and public policy. Over an appropriate timeframe we must aim to give due weight and prominence to all the main strands of argument and to all relevant political parties. Although those in government will often be the primary source of news and will, in particular, need to be held to account, the voices and opinions of other parties should also be routinely aired and challenged. One of the BBC's public purposes is 'To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them ... so that all audiences can engage fully with major local, regional, national, United Kingdom and global issues and participate in the democratic process, at all levels, as active and informed citizens.'¹ It follows that there is a special responsibility to audiences who are about to vote in elections or referendums.

Political opinion and campaigning are not limited to political parties and due impartiality must apply across the range of political activity and to all contributors to political debate.

The Guidelines in this section should be read in conjunction with Section 4 Impartiality. Following both will ensure the BBC's output meets the standards in Sections 5 (Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy and Undue Prominence of Views and Opinions) and 6 (Elections and Referendums) of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

The BBC must treat matters of politics and public policy with due accuracy and impartiality and must not express an opinion on matters of public policy other than policy concerning broadcasting or the provision of online services.

¹ Article 6(1) Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016.

10.2 Mandatory Referrals

(Mandatory Referrals are part of the BBC's editorial management system. They are an essential part of the process to ensure compliance and must be observed.)

Referrals to Editorial Policy

10.2.1

Where content would not normally include political issues, political opinion or politicians (for example, sport, quiz/panel shows, factual entertainment) content producers must consult the Chief Adviser Politics in advance before inviting a politician (or anyone who has taken a prominent political stance) to take part in their output, or before accepting a request to participate. This reference is irrespective of whether their contribution to the output is itself 'political'. Where there is a proposal to involve in such output others who may have taken a prominent political stance, advice is available from Editorial Policy.

See 10.3.2

10.2.2

Chief Adviser Politics must be consulted in advance about proposed bids or offers of interviews (or other active participation) for the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition at Westminster, the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland. In the nations of the UK, the respective Heads of News must also be consulted.

See 10.3.3

10.2.3

Any proposal to amend material from the chambers of Parliaments or Assemblies (including Westminster) or any proposal to use material from the Parliaments or Assemblies at all outside news, factual programmes or content for educational purposes must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics.

See 10.3.7

- 10.2.4** Any request for a ministerial broadcast or a reply to a ministerial broadcast must be referred promptly to Chief Adviser Politics.
See 10.3.11
- 10.2.5** Any approach by a government department to relay official messages or information films which involve a degree of public policy or political controversy must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.
See 10.3.12
- 10.2.6** Any proposal to commission an opinion poll (or use other methods, such as data analysis) with the intention of sampling party political support or voting intentions must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics for approval.
See 10.3.27
- 10.2.7** Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on 'controversial subjects' in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.
See 10.3.28
- 10.2.8** Any proposal to report voting intention derived through methods other than polling – such as data analysis – must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics.
See 10.3.30
- 10.2.9** Any proposal to commission a BBC survey on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on 'controversial subjects' in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.
See 10.3.36

10.2.10 Any proposal to conduct a vote on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

See 10.3.46

10.2.11 Any proposal to carry out a phone, text or online vote must also be referred to the Interactivity Technical Advice and Contracts Unit (ITACU) and the appropriate approval process must be completed.

See 10.3.47

10.3 Guidelines

Reporting UK Political Parties

10.3.1 The UK has diverse political cultures in the different nations; so achieving appropriate coverage for political parties, especially for UK-wide output, means assessing relative political strength in this devolved structure. Achieving due impartiality involves taking account of the different parties in each nation, as well as those with electoral support across the UK.

Particular care should be taken with the use of language in this context, for example avoiding phrases such as ‘the main parties’, unless appropriately qualified, or descriptions of smaller parties as ‘minor’.

When referring to a policy, it should be clear to the audience which part of the UK it applies to.

See Guidance online: Reporting the UK

Political Interviews and Contributions

10.3.2 Requests for political interviews should be clear about the nature of the output and the context for which they are intended. All arrangements must stand up to public scrutiny and must not prevent interviewees being asked appropriate questions.

When inviting politicians, or those who may be seeking office, to contribute to non-political output, whether on the basis of their expertise outside politics or of their celebrity, we must not give them such prominence as to afford undue political advantage, especially in the run-up to and during election periods. Where relevant, their political allegiance should be made clear to the audience.

Where content would not normally include political issues, political opinion or politicians (for example, sport, quiz/panel shows, factual entertainment) content producers must consult the Chief Adviser Politics in advance before inviting a politician (or anyone who has taken a prominent political stance) to take part in their output, or before accepting a request to participate. This reference is irrespective of whether their contribution to the output is itself 'political'. Where there is a proposal to involve in such output others who may have taken a prominent political stance, advice is available from Editorial Policy.

10.3.3

Interviews with or Profiles of Party Leaders

Due weight should be given over time to participation by party leaders in any output; the BBC should be consistent and robust in its approach to interviews, ensuring there is appropriate scrutiny and editorial independence, which may, on occasion, require bids to be co-ordinated and rationalised. Except for brief news interviews gathered on the day without pre-arrangement, **Chief Adviser Politics must be consulted in advance about proposed bids or offers of interviews (or other active participation) for the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition at Westminster,**

the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland. In the nations of the UK, the respective Heads of News must also be consulted.

10.3.4

Chief Adviser Politics (and, where appropriate, the relevant Head of News and Current Affairs) 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 parties
- at all times of high demand bids are rationalised within the BBC
- due weight is given to appearances over time
- there is a consistent editorial approach, for instance, in terms of tone, in any series of interviews.

10.3.5

Payment to Politicians

We should not normally pay active salaried politicians, such as MPs, MSPs, AMs, MLAs, or others clearly identified as representing political parties, for routine appearances or other contributions to BBC output in which they are speaking for their party or expressing political views. They can, where appropriate, be paid a limited and realistic disturbance fee and/or any reimbursement for genuine expenses.

They may be paid for contributions to non-political output, where they are appearing on the basis of their expertise outside politics, or of their celebrity, or, exceptionally, where they are taking part as a politician but fulfilling a role beyond that of a normal political contribution.

See Section 10 Politics, Public Policy and Polls: 10.3.2-10.3.4

Parliamentary Broadcasting

- 10.3.6** The House of Commons, the House of Lords, committees of both houses, as well as the Scottish Parliament and the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland have rules of coverage which should normally be observed.
- 10.3.7** **Any proposal to amend material from the chambers of Parliaments or Assemblies (including Westminster) or any proposal to use material from the Parliaments or Assemblies at all outside news, factual programmes or content for educational purposes, must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics.**

Political Broadcasts

- 10.3.8** **Party Political, Election and Referendum Broadcasts**
 We are obliged to make airtime available for party and referendum campaign broadcasts². These are separate from the BBC's own content, and their transmission does not imply BBC support for the views contained in them.
 Appropriate allocation of a series of broadcasts fulfils the requirement for due impartiality.
- 10.3.9** The copyright of broadcasts belongs to the parties or referendum campaign groups, but extracts may be used without their consent.
- 10.3.10** Parties make the broadcasts at their own expense and are responsible for their content. However, we have to ensure they are compliant for broadcast, conforming

² Schedule 3 (5), Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016.

to the law, and the relevant parts of both the Ofcom Broadcasting Code and the BBC Editorial Guidelines as outlined on the Broadcasters' Liaison Group website.

10.3.11 Ministerial Broadcasts and Government Information

In exceptional circumstances, such as a decision to go to war, the BBC may be required³ to provide time for a broadcast by a UK government minister. In such circumstances, it may also be necessary for the BBC to consider whether responses from other political parties are appropriate. The BBC, as broadcaster, has the final say on the broadcast's acceptability in terms of its compliance with appropriate legal and other standards.

Any request for a ministerial broadcast or a reply to a ministerial broadcast must be referred promptly to Chief Adviser Politics.

10.3.12 Any approach by a government department to relay official messages or information films which involve a degree of public policy or political controversy must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

Elections

10.3.13 UK Elections and Referendums

Our commitment to impartiality and fairness is under intense scrutiny when people are preparing to vote. The BBC publishes specific guidelines for each national election and referendum which supplement the Editorial Guidelines. For elections, they include a code of practice regarding the participation of candidates in each constituency or electoral area, as required by electoral law.

³ Clause 67 Defence and Emergency Arrangements, Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016.

During election periods and in the run-up to election campaigns, some output (for instance, one-off dramas even if of a historical nature, appearances by politicians in non-political output or programmes achieving impartiality by relying on a longer timescale) may need extra care and consideration with regard to scheduling. The Chief Adviser Politics should be consulted at an early stage.

10.3.14

Content producers should take all complaints seriously and be aware that anything they say may be construed as ‘BBC policy’. It should be explained to complainants that general complaints or allegations of bias are normally dealt with at a higher level, and the complaint should then be referred accordingly. Political parties, activists and referendum campaigners may seek to influence editorial decisions.

10.3.15

The BBC should make, and be able to defend, editorial decisions on campaign coverage on the basis that they are reasonable and carefully reached, with due impartiality. News judgements must continue to drive editorial decision-making in news-based programmes and those judgements at election time must be made within a framework of democratic debate. That framework should ensure that due weight is given to conveying, examining and challenging the views and policies of all relevant parties. UK-wide coverage must take account of and reflect the different political structures in the four nations of the United Kingdom.

10.3.16

The way in which due impartiality is achieved among parties will vary, depending on the format, output and platform. Deciding respective levels of coverage for different political parties, who have varying levels of political support, requires, primarily, good and impartial editorial judgement, rather than mathematical formulae. But content producers must take responsibility for achieving due impartiality in

their own output without necessarily relying on other BBC content or services.

10.3.17

On polling day the BBC, in common with other broadcasters, will cease to report campaigns from 06.00 until the polls close. Coverage will be restricted to uncontroversial factual accounts, such as the appearance of politicians at polling stations or the weather. Subjects which have been at issue or part of the campaign, or other controversial matters relating to the election, must not receive coverage before the polls close, to ensure that nothing in the BBC's output can be construed as influencing the ballot.

10.3.18

Reporting Overseas Elections and Referendums

The principles of fairness and due impartiality that underlie the BBC's coverage of UK votes should also inform reporting in other countries. However, reporting of elections overseas may take into account the circumstances under which the particular election is being held, especially where there are questions about the openness or fairness of the democratic process.

10.3.19

Additional issues may arise when BBC content is aimed at an audience within the country where an election or referendum is taking place. Content originally made for the UK audience and distributed on international services may influence a vote. Where appropriate, distribution may need to be delayed until polling is over.

10.3.20

Legal Issues and Overseas Elections and Referendums

UK electoral law does not apply to elections outside the UK, but other countries may have specific laws applying to reporting during their votes. Where BBC content is distributed specifically to that country there may be legal issues to consider.

In some countries, legal requirements around votes may come into conflict with the BBC's fundamental editorial principles, especially those of fairness and

impartiality. In such cases, the BBC will maintain the editorial principles in its output even if that means the local broadcaster is unable to re-distribute BBC content or services. This is particularly important for BBC World Service, BBC World News and BBC Online, which all reach overseas audiences.

Opinion Polls, Surveys and Votes

10.3.21 Accuracy, credibility and impartiality are as important when the BBC reports on ‘polls’ and ‘surveys’ as elsewhere.

10.3.22 ‘Polls’ or ‘surveys’ commissioned by the BBC carry reputational risk, so care must be taken to ensure that the audience can trust their findings, and that we do not give them undue weight when reported.

10.3.23 For any BBC-commissioned opinion poll, the methodology, data and accuracy of the language used to report it, must stand up to scrutiny.

The BBC’s reporting of a poll it has commissioned must not suggest a BBC view on a particular policy or issue, or that it has been commissioned with the intention of influencing opinion on a current controversy.

10.3.24 **Commissioning Opinion Polls**

We must ensure that any poll conducted jointly with another organisation meets the requirements of due impartiality.

10.3.25 We should take particular care in commissioning opinion polls seeking the views of children and young people; the Chief Adviser Politics should normally be consulted.

10.3.26 When the BBC commissions opinion polls, the full results and accompanying data should normally be

published. Any proposal not to do so should be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics.

10.3.27

The BBC rarely commissions polls on voting intention or other indications of party political support. **Any proposal to commission an opinion poll (or use other methods, such as data analysis) with the intention of sampling party political support or voting intentions must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics for approval.**

10.3.28

Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics. Technical advice, for example, on question design, is available from the Political Research Unit.

See Section 4 Impartiality: 4.3.4-4.3.9

See Guidance online: Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls

10.3.29

Polling can be conducted face to face, over the telephone or online. In the UK, on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, polls should normally be commissioned using members of the British Polling Council.

10.3.30**Reporting Opinion Polls**

When reporting the findings of opinion polls (especially voting intention polls in the United Kingdom), whether commissioned by the BBC or others:

- the result of an opinion poll should not be the lead or be headlined in broadcast or other output, unless it has prompted a story which itself merits being the

lead or headlined and reference to the poll's findings is necessary to make sense of the story

- language should not give greater credibility to polls than they deserve. For example, polls 'suggest' and 'indicate', but never 'prove' or 'show'
- we should not normally rely on the interpretation given to a poll's results by the organisation or publication which commissioned it
- the BBC should report the methodology used, the organisation which carried out the poll and the organisation or publication which commissioned it. Such polls should not be described as 'a BBC poll'. All relevant details, including the questions, results and sample size, should be made available so the audience can understand the methodology and results
- where editorially relevant, dates of the fieldwork and subsequent events which may have shifted opinion should be reported.

Additional consideration when reporting voting intentions:

- the findings of voting intention polls must be reported in the context of trend, which 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 are out of step without convincing explanation should be treated with particular care
- the audience should be told when the reported difference between two significant parties is less than the margin of error of the polling methodology.

Any proposal to report voting intention derived through methods other than polling – such as data analysis – must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics.

10.3.31

The BBC must consider whether the findings from polls are sufficiently credible to report. Where there

are doubts about the methodology of a poll or the bona fides of those carrying it out, appropriate qualifying language is essential. Advice is available from the Political Research Unit.

10.3.32 **Opinion Polls During Elections and Referendums**

Guidelines for each formal election and referendum period will include specific advice on the treatment of opinion polls.

10.3.33 No opinion poll on any subject relating to politics or the relevant election, including voting intention polls, may be published on polling day until after the polls have closed; it is a criminal offence in the UK to publish information about how people have voted while the polls are open.

10.3.34 **Surveys**

A survey, as against an opinion poll, is normally addressed to a smaller and specific group. This may be a group of individuals (such as MPs, university vice-chancellors or members of a particular society) or a group of organisations (such as health trusts, FTSE 100 companies and local authorities).

10.3.35 If audiences are told that a survey has been commissioned by the BBC, they must have confidence that it has a level of statistical credibility which justifies any claims or assumptions about how representative it is.

10.3.36 **Any proposal to commission a BBC survey on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.**

See Section 4 Impartiality: 4.3.4-4.3.9

The survey must:

- have a defined and finite group whose opinions, policies or behaviours are being analysed
- have numerical parameters agreed in advance, such as an acceptable minimum response rate
- have an agreed methodology, including questions that are worded appropriately and posed consistently
- be reported in language that ensures nothing is claimed by the BBC which cannot be supported by the data.

10.3.37 The result should normally be reported using actual numbers of respondents; percentages should be used only with care and appropriate context.

10.3.38 Guidance must be prepared for other BBC outlets (including the press office) who may wish to report the findings, ensuring that adapting the language for other audiences does not alter the meaning or inflate the claims of the original research.

10.3.39 There may be a particular risk to the perception of the BBC's impartiality if a survey is commissioned but not published, especially on politics or other 'controversial subjects'. Before such a decision, Chief Adviser Politics should be consulted.

10.3.40 Surveys commissioned or carried out by other organisations should be treated with appropriate scepticism, and, where necessary, their methodology should be described. Care is required, particularly in news output, not to report such surveys in a way which leads the audience to believe they are more robust than is actually the case.

See Guidance online: Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls; and Reporting Statistics

10.3.41**Focus Groups**

The BBC must not imply that the views of focus groups, however carefully selected, represent the views of the population as a whole, and they must not be used as a means of trying to estimate party support in the electorate at large.

Focus groups, when properly selected, may be used to examine why certain views are held but not the extent to which they are held.

10.3.42

Any proposal to commission focus group research on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, should be referred to Chief Adviser Politics and the methodology checked with the Political Research Unit.

10.3.43**Vox Pops**

It should always be clear that vox pops – either on the street or online – only illustrate some aspects of an argument and do not give any indication of the weight or breadth of opinion.

10.3.44**Phone, Text, Social Media, Online Votes and Other Straw Polls**

‘Straw polls’ – including phone, text, social media and online votes – have no statistical or numerical value.

They can be an effective form of interaction with the audience, illustrating a debate, but they should only be used with an explicit reference making it clear to audiences that they are self-selecting and not representative or scientific. Such votes cannot normally be said even to represent the audience for the programme or website; they only represent those who chose to participate. A large response does not necessarily make them more representative.

See Section 17 Competitions, Votes and Interactivity: 17.3.1-17.3.5

10.3.45

Results can be given within the context of the programme concerned in terms of actual numbers or as percentages if it is appropriate to the size of the response. However:

- results should not feature in news bulletins
- the summary of an online or text vote can be reported on the radio or television programme, website or blog with which it is associated, but it should not normally be reported elsewhere in news, on other television or radio programmes, on other BBC websites or in press releases
- when straw polls are carried out on the same subject at different times, the results must not be presented in a way which may suggest a trend
- straw polls should never be used to gather serious information on party political support.

10.3.46

Straw polls on controversial issues are vulnerable to highly organised pressure groups. The outcome, even when it is made clear that the poll is not representative, can damage the reputation of the BBC.

Any proposal to conduct a vote on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

10.3.47

Any proposal to carry out a phone, text or online vote must also be referred to the Interactivity Technical Advice and Contracts Unit (ITACU) and the appropriate approval process must be completed.

See Section 17 Competitions, Votes and Interactivity: 17.3.1-17.3.5

See Guidance online: Audience Interactivity; and Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls

