



GENERAL ELECTION COVERAGE ADVICE FOR RADIO – 2019

by Paul Chantler

This advice is intended only as a short guide to the coverage of the General Election on radio. For full details, go to the Ofcom website and view the Broadcasting Code.

- The law and Ofcom take a stern view of anyone who prejudices the FAIRNESS of a General Election. Political parties monitor stations for any hint of bias.
- Polling day will be on **Thursday 12th December**. The Election Period starts with the Dissolution of Parliament on **Wednesday 6th November**. After this date, the rules come into effect.
- The aim is to achieve BALANCE of coverage of each party over the campaign as a whole. Ofcom say broadcasters should use their own judgement of parties based on evidence of past and current electoral support. Ofcom has published a digest of this to help and is available via the Ofcom website. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/176409/electoral-digest-121219-general-election.pdf
- There is no requirement to give equal time to all parties. Not every party has to feature in every item. But overall coverage must be IMPARTIAL across the campaign. In other words, you must be seen not to be supporting any one side and all major parties must be treated equally.
- Balance - To achieve balance, news teams would be wise to keep timing sheets over the length of the campaign recording the coverage given, duration, in what form (copy, interview, wrap/package) and transmission time.

- Presenters - Candidates must not act as presenters during the Election Period. Presenters must also remain neutral. Several radio stations have been fined by Ofcom after presenters declared their political allegiance on air.
- Programme Packages - Constituency reports must include equal contributions from each of the main parties. On first broadcast the same day, the package must include the name and party of every candidate. Subsequently, you can direct listeners to a website link.
- Discussion Programmes – All candidates must get roughly equal airtime. A stopwatch is not needed but there must be no glaring discrepancy. The chair must be impartial but put forward policies of absent candidates for discussion.
- Libel – Beware candidates saying something defamatory during discussions, particularly accusations of racism, fascism and lying. It is no defence to say you are simply reporting what someone else said. However, if you are reporting a public meeting, you are protected from libel if the report is accurate, fair and without malice.
- Phone-Ins – Candidates should not appear on phone-ins (either election or general programmes) as callers as it could cause problems with balance. You should ask each caller off air whether they are standing in the election. A range of views should be reflected. Presenters should not take advantage of their position on air. Where alternative views are not available, presenters should summarise an alternative point of view.
- Pitfalls for Music Shows– Presenters should avoid flippant comments, reactions after news bulletins, comedy promos and any reference to politics.
- Opinion Polls – Polls can be reported as news as long as the terminology is correct. Polls “suggest”, they do not “show” or “prove”.
- Polling Day – Polls open at 7am and close at 10pm on Thursday 12th December 2019. During this time, NO political comment must be broadcast at all, even if it is balanced. Basic facts are allowed – the weather, general predictions about turnout, politicians voting – but NOTHING ELSE. From 10pm, all restrictions end.

- Exit Polls – It is unlawful to publish the results of an exit poll before polling has finished.
- Social Media – These rules apply to broadcasts only. Apart from abiding by the law generally, social media posts are free of restriction though it would be wise to be cautious when posting or tweeting from a radio station or presenter account.

IF IN DOUBT, LEAVE IT OUT!

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