Code of conduct for campaigners: postal voting, proxy voting and polling stations

Campbellers are an essential element of a healthy democracy, and their right to put their arguments to voters should be supported and protected. It is equally important, however, to ensure that the activities of campaigners do not bring into question the integrity of the electoral process.

This Code provides a guide for campaigners, electoral administrators and police forces to what is, and is not, considered acceptable behaviour at polling stations and in the community during the lead-up to polling day.

As a guiding principle, if there is any doubt about a particular activity, campaigners should ask themselves “What would a reasonable observer think?”

More detailed guidance about electoral offences can be found in the full guidance published jointly by the Electoral Commission and the UK’s Associations of Chief Police Officers, which is available on our website at:

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/integrity-guidance/electoral-events

This Code has been agreed by the political parties represented on the House of Commons Parliamentary Parties Panel and the panels for the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, and is endorsed by the members of the Electoral Commission’s UK Electoral Advisory Board of senior Returning and Electoral Registration Officers and Electoral Integrity Roundtable.

The Code has been sent to all registered political parties in Great Britain, and Returning Officers will draw it to the attention of all candidates and parties contesting elections.

Scope of this code

This code covers all those actively involved in campaigning in elections or referendums in Great Britain. All references to campaigners in this code include:

- Candidates standing at an election, their agents and their staff and supporters
- Political party officers, members and supporters campaigning at an election
- Other people and organisations campaigning for or against a candidate, a group of candidates or a party at an election
- People and organisations campaigning for or against a particular outcome at a referendum
Compliance with this code

Any concerns that this code has been breached should be raised first with the candidate, political party or campaigner in question.

Any further concerns should be drawn to the attention of the Electoral Commission. The Commission will raise them with the relevant party or campaigner if appropriate, and will agree appropriate actions to remedy or prevent a reoccurrence of any breach.

1 Postal and proxy vote applications

1.1 Campaigners should ensure that any bespoke postal or proxy voting application forms conform fully to the requirements of electoral law, including all the necessary questions and the options open to electors.

Campaigners can download a template form from our website at:

https://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/register_to_vote/postal_vote_application/blank_postal.aspx

1.2 Campaigners should always explain to electors the implications of applying to vote by post or appointing a proxy.

It is important that electors understand that they will not be able to vote in person on polling day if they or their proxy apply for and are granted a postal vote, and will not be able to vote in person if their appointed proxy has already voted on their behalf. To avoid duplication and unnecessary administrative pressures for Electoral Registration Officers, campaigners should try to ensure that electors who are included in current postal or proxy voter lists, or have already applied for a postal or proxy vote for a particular poll, do not submit an additional application.

Postal vote applications

1.3 Campaigners should not encourage electors to have their postal ballot pack redirected to anywhere other than the address where they are registered to vote.

Electors should take care to protect their ballot paper and postal ballot pack, and they will be best able to do so at their home address unless there are compelling reasons why receiving the postal ballot pack at the address where they are registered to vote would be impractical. Electors must state on the application form the reason why they need their postal ballot pack sent to another address.

1.4 Campaigners should ensure that the local Electoral Registration Officer's address is provided as the preferred address for the return of absent vote application forms.
To minimise the risk of suspicions that completed applications could be altered or destroyed, campaigners should always provide the relevant Electoral Registration Officer’s address as the preferred return address, even if an alternative address is also given.

1.5 Campaigners should send on unaltered any completed application forms given to them to the relevant Electoral Registration Officer’s address within two working days of receipt.

To minimise the risk of absent vote applications being refused because completed forms arrive with the Electoral Registration Officer after the statutory deadline before a poll, campaigners must ensure that there is no unnecessary delay in forwarding on application forms which have been received directly.

Proxy vote applications

1.6 Electors should be encouraged to explore other options for people to act as a proxy – including relatives or neighbours, for example – before a campaigner agrees to be appointed as a proxy.

To minimise the risk of suspicions that campaigners may be seeking to place undue pressure on electors, electors should not be encouraged to appoint a campaigner as their proxy.

2 Postal voting ballot papers

2.1 Campaigners should never touch or handle anyone else’s ballot paper.

If you are asked for assistance in completing a ballot paper, you should always refer the voter to the Returning Officer’s staff at the elections office who may be able to arrange a home visit if necessary. Assistance will also be available for electors at polling stations.

2.2 Campaigners should never observe voters completing their ballot paper. If you are with a voter when they complete their ballot paper, remember they should always complete it in secret.

Equally, you should ensure that the voter seals both envelopes personally and immediately after completing their ballot paper and postal voting statement. If you are asked to give advice, it is acceptable and often helpful to explain the voting process, but do not offer to help anyone to complete their ballot paper.

2.3 Campaigners should not ask or encourage voters to give them any completed ballot paper or ballot paper envelope.

Wherever practical, the voter should be encouraged to post or deliver the completed ballot paper themselves. While campaigners may be approached for help by a voter who is unable to post their ballot paper or make arrangements for it to be returned in time, other options for delivering the postal ballot pack – including relatives or
neighbours, for example – should be explored before a campaigner agrees to deliver a postal ballot pack.

2.4 If asked by a voter to take a completed postal ballot pack on their behalf, campaigners should immediately post it or take it directly to the office of the Returning Officer or to a polling station.

To ensure completed postal ballot papers are received by the Returning Officer before the close of poll, and to minimise the risk of suspicions that they could be altered or destroyed, campaigners should ensure that there is no delay in forwarding on postal ballot packs which have been given directly to them. Campaigners should not allow large numbers of completed postal ballots to accumulate before forwarding them to the Returning Officer or handing them in at an appropriate polling station.

3 Campaigning outside polling places

3.1 Campaigners should be allowed to put their messages to voters on polling day, including in public spaces outside polling places.

Polling station staff and police officers should not seek to discourage or remove campaigning who are otherwise peacefully communicating with voters, as long as they are not within or impeding access to the grounds of the polling place. Campaigners should be careful, however, to ensure that their approach is proportionate and should recognise that groups of supporters may be perceived as intimidating by voters.

3.2 Campaigners should keep access to polling places and the pavements around polling places clear to allow voters to enter.

The Presiding Officer is responsible for maintaining order in the polling place, and campaigning who appear to be impeding access by voters to a polling place may be asked to move by polling station staff or police officers.

4 Complaints and allegations about electoral fraud

4.1 Campaigners should be prepared to give the police a statement and substantiate any allegations of electoral fraud they make.

The police will investigate allegations where someone is prepared to provide evidence or a statement in support of the complaint, but unsubstantiated claims about electoral fraud have the potential to damage confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. Campaigners should ensure they are confident that evidence can be provided to the police before considering whether it is appropriate to publicise any specific allegation.
4.2 Campaigners who are concerned or think that electoral fraud may have taken place should raise the matter with their election agent or local party, or with the relevant Electoral Registration Officer or Returning Officer for the area.

They may be able to explain whether or not an election-related crime has been committed, and refer it to the police if appropriate or provide details of the police contact for the relevant area so that campaigners can report their allegation. Concerns about breaches of the political finance rules should be raised directly with the Electoral Commission.

4.3 Any campaigner who has actual evidence of an electoral offence having been committed should report it directly and without delay to the police.

If appropriate, the police will investigate the matter. Every police force has designated a Single Point of Contact (known as a SPOC) to lead on election matters and who will deal directly with the matter or give advice to local police officers. The Electoral Commission can help provide contact details for local police force SPOCs.

Agreed and effective from March 2013