

Politics and power in election campaign coverage: Are we missing something?



Ahead of tomorrow's UK general election, [Lee Edwards](#), Professor of Strategic Communication and Public Engagement at the LSE, explores how ideals of impartial election coverage are undermined by the realities of politics and powerful interest groups.

Perhaps the most common-sense principle of elections is that they are designed to allow citizens to intervene in the political sphere in a very direct way. Surely, then, covering politics is absolutely central to good election coverage.

Ofcom's [regulatory guidelines](#) certainly confirm that impartiality, and appropriate weighting of the views of different political parties and actors, is required during the regulated election period. Citizens might expect clear, accurate and balanced coverage of the campaigning parties' policy arguments, the issues they are campaigning on, and their manifesto content. To help us decide how to vote we might want journalists to challenge all parties on the claims they are making, and dissect the credibility of [their manifesto promises](#). And this should be happening within different media outlets, as well as across all outlets, so that we can engage with a range of views and types of coverage.

These regulations mean that election coverage, by traditional media at least, is managed to some degree with fairness in mind. However, this does not mean that it adequately reflects the operation of the political sphere. Elections should be focused on political parties and candidates, of course, but politics is a complex business; parties and candidates are not the only powerful actors in the mix. Indeed, one aspect of politics that garners limited visibility within and outside election periods, is the influence of powerful

corporations and industries on policymaking.

How election coverage obscures networks of power

Between election periods, we see intermittent coverage by excellent investigative journalists about the links between corporates and politicians, as well as the profits that businesses make from policy implementation working in their favour. This is not a partisan issue: stories have implicated both Labour and Conservative politicians and peers. Consider, for example, the 2012 [Cash for Access](#) scandal uncovered by the Sunday Times; the 2021 [Greensill scandal](#) involving ex-Prime Minister David Cameron; the 2022 [PPE procurement scandal](#) involving Conservative peer Michelle Mone; and further in the past, the scandal involving Formula 1 Racing owner [Bernie Ecclestone](#), which revealed then-Prime Minister Tony Blair's intervention to secure an exemption for F1 in legislation banning tobacco advertising. This investigative work, alongside the generally [light-touch approach to lobbying](#) in the UK that is in need of [significant reform](#), confirms the close connections between politics and business through ongoing and systematic practices of informal connections, private negotiations, and preferential treatment among their most powerful actors.

Yet, during an election, these links become opaque. Our political choices are framed primarily in terms of parties, candidates and policies. The systemic networks of power that both structure and underpin the political sphere are rarely mentioned. In the process, the media sacrifices the opportunity to develop a broader awareness of how political decisions, including those relating to critical issues such as migration, climate, or digital safety, are made not only in light of the public interest, but also with commercial interests in mind.

Commerce is covered in election campaigns primarily in line with manifesto promises linked to [economic policy](#) related to industry strategies, trade regulations, international competitiveness and challenges that the economy faces such as productivity and employment. This kind of coverage assumes that business is an object of political decision-making, not a driver of it. But in the UK plentiful lobbying scandals have demonstrated that businesses drive policymaking through representation and negotiation with policymakers, often behind closed doors. Business leaders do not make policy – but policymakers frequently act with business interests in mind. Yet during the election

period, these crucial connections are not covered.

Citizens' needs vs. corporate interests

There are two main reasons why this should be a concern. First, politicians appeal to us as if we were the only actors on which their success depends, and frame their policies as if the interests of citizens are the primary consideration. These narratives are only partially true. Certainly, the electorate has the power to confirm or deny office within the confines of a particular electoral system. But in a representative democratic system, that power is limited to the election itself and we subsequently depend on the integrity of the political system to ensure accountability on our behalf. The fact that this system – and particularly lobbying activity – is largely closed to public scrutiny leaves it open to corruption.

Second, the definition of citizens' interests is a matter of debate; deciding exactly what they constitute and how they might be realised is context-dependent and complex. In these situations, those who have the resources for lobbying, communication, and persistent and sustained contact with policymakers, often win. Corporate interests often have the advantage here, not least because of the resources they wield to invest in both lobbying politicians directly, and to deploy public and stakeholder communication campaigns that offer solutions to public concerns in ways that serve their own interests, by influencing public opinion about policy options. Without this, policymaking in areas critical to our collective wellbeing may be undermined by private interests (consider, for example, [the lack of action in response to](#) the UK's Climate Change Act of 2008, or the [need for more democratic accountability](#) from companies leading AI developments).

The need for investigative coverage and deeper questioning

How can election coverage be more honest and obvious about these links, given that they have such a crucial effect on the realisation of promises made to us during election campaigns? It does not seem beyond the bounds of possibility for us to demand two things.

First, we need more explicit coverage of the scale and impact of lobbying on political practice. While large-scale scandals are rightly investigated, better and more consistent coverage of the more mundane but systemic forms of power that lobbyists and business

leaders exert in Westminster – in the context of both the limited nature of formal consultations and the privacy of individual meetings – is critical. This is needed both during election periods, so that all parties might answer questions about their approach to engaging with commercial interests and be held to account for their answers; and between election periods, so that our understanding of this kind of power and its influence on our capacity as citizens to influence policy on our most critical collective concerns (climate, generative AI) is better understood.

Second, we need more explicit questioning of candidates and party representatives about their engagement with business leaders and lobbyists in relation to manifesto promises. The vast revenues that policy initiatives can generate for private sector companies delivering associated services means that we need to be sure that decisions about both implementation and procurement are insulated from undue influence or favoritism. We know from past experience that this isn't always the case, but in the context of election promises designed to persuade us to support one party or another, the integrity of commitments needs to extend beyond discourse to include practice.

Media coverage of elections is rightly constrained by concerns about the integrity of the election period. But if coverage nonetheless delivers an incomplete representation of the political system and its connections to other forms of power, journalists and commentators may still fail to ask questions that are crucial to what happens post-election. Expanding the scope of election coverage to cover these systemic realities might go some way to mitigate the problem.

This post was [originally published](#) on the Media Reform Coalition blog, and is reposted with thanks. It represents the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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