



2026 ELECTION COVERAGE GUIDELINES

2026

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The 2026 Election Coverage Guidelines have been developed to help broadcasting stations to broadcast election-related information that is accurate, balanced and disseminated in a fair and equitable manner. This would enable citizens to have access to election information, make informed decisions and vote correctly to lessen spoilt votes.

These Guidelines shall apply to all broadcasting stations in Zambia. The Authority on its part shall ensure that all broadcasting stations comply with the provisions of these Guidelines throughout the electoral process by monitoring compliance, taking appropriate actions against offenders, providing guidance to broadcasting stations and facilitating the resolution of disputes between broadcasting stations and electoral stakeholders.

The Election Coverage Guidelines are well aligned with Electoral Process Act, No. 35 of 2016, specifically the Schedule on Code of Conduct which stipulates the duties of the media.

The development of the Guidelines has also been informed by the Authority's experience in monitoring election content. This includes oversight of media coverage during the 2016 and 2021 general elections, as well as by-elections for Members of Parliament, Mayors, Council Chairpersons, and Councillors.

2.0 EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF ADHERENCE TO THE ELECTION COVERAGE GUIDELINES

The issuance and implementation of these Guidelines are expected to result in improved compliance with broadcasting standards and ethical conduct during the electoral process. Specifically, the Guidelines are anticipated to:

- (i) Strengthen regulatory clarity by clearly outlining the obligations and responsibilities of broadcasting stations during elections, thereby reducing ambiguity in enforcement.
- (ii) Promote fair, balanced, and equitable election coverage across all broadcasting platforms, ensuring that all political parties and candidates are given reasonable access to airtime.
- (iii) Enhance public trust in the media by ensuring accurate, verified, and responsible dissemination of election-related information.
- (iv) Minimise incidences of hate speech, tribalism, misinformation, and incitement to civil disorder through strengthened monitoring and enforcement

mechanisms.

- (v) Improve collaboration and coordination between the Independent Broadcasting Authority, the Electoral Commission of Zambia, and other electoral stakeholders in managing election coverage.
- (vi) Contribute to informed citizen participation in the electoral process, thereby supporting free, fair, and credible elections.

3.0 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS AND WORDS

"Act" means the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act No. 17 of 2002 and as amended by No. 26 of 2010. If the Minister issues a commencement order to give effect to the new IBA Act, then the word Act will refer to the IBA Act No. 25 of 2025.

"Authority" means the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

"Balanced Coverage" means providing fair reporting of campaigns, policies, meetings, rallies, and press briefings of all registered political parties and candidates during the campaign period.

"Commission" means the Electoral Commission of Zambia

"ECZ" means the Electoral Commission of Zambia.

"Election Programme" in relation to an election for the office of president or parliament or any local authority means a programme that:

- (a) Encourages or persuades or appears to encourage or persuade voters to vote for a political party or candidate in the election; or
- (b) Advocates support for a candidate or political party; or
- (c) Meetings held or to be held in connection with an election.

"Equitable airtime" does not mean equal – it means that all candidates and parties get airtime to share their ideas on issues with the public.

"Guideline" is a recommended practice, principle, or instruction that advises on how something should be done or how to behave. It serves as a roadmap to achieve a desired outcome.

4.0 ELECTION COVERAGE GUIDELINES

Broadcasting stations must ensure fair and thorough coverage of elections through equitable distribution of airtime to political parties and candidates. The following are the Guidelines to broadcasters to refer to when covering the electoral process.

4.1 Guidelines on Conducting Interviews

- ✚ Broadcasting stations must conduct interviews with candidates with fairness both in the style of the interview and in the amount of the time given;
- ✚ Interviewers must refrain from expressing their own political opinions, commentary or assessment, and where they do so, clearly identify the opinion, commentary or assessment as their own and carefully balance it to avoid bias;

4.2 Guidelines on Conducting Political Adverts

It is a responsibility of broadcasting stations to ensure that:

- ✚ Political adverts are reviewed for tribal sentiments, hate speech, character assassination, immorality, gender sensitivity;
- ✚ Refuse to air any political advert containing elements of tribal sentiments, hate speech, character assassination, immorality, gender based harmful content and generally material that violates public decency.

4.3 Guidelines on Equitable On-Air Time During Campaign

Equitable treatment applies to the following types of election coverage:

4.3.1 Paid Campaign Advertising Time

- ✚ If a broadcaster sells advertising time to one candidate or party, other candidates and parties must also be given the opportunity to buy commercial airtime from that same station.
- ✚ Stations must divide up the available advertising time on an equitable basis.

4.3.2 Free Campaign Advertising Time

If a broadcaster offers free time to a party or candidate, it must then offer equitable free time to other parties and candidates.

4.3.3 Political debates during election campaigns

- ✚ Debate programs do not have to include all parties or candidates.
- ✚ However, broadcasting stations need to ensure that, in general, they are informing their audiences on the positions of candidates and parties on the main issues in a reasonable manner.

4.4 Guidelines on Coverage on Polling Day

On polling day, radio and television stations shall not broadcast any campaign interviews for political parties or independent candidates or predict election results.

4.5 Guidelines on Broadcasting of Opinion Polls

Broadcasters must ensure that they:

- ✚ Inform the public on the source of any public opinion poll and indicate the margin of error.
- ✚ Disclose who sponsored or paid for the poll.
- ✚ Disclose who conducted the poll.
- ✚ Inform the public when the poll was conducted.
- ✚ The population from which the survey was drawn including the sample size.
- ✚ Avoid broadcasting new opinion survey results on election day before polling stations close.

4.6 Guidelines on Election Results Programmes

Broadcasters must ensure that they:

- ✚ Disclose accurate election results;
- ✚ Provide updates on the progress of the vote counting process;
- ✚ Avoid announcing speculative election results but shall broadcast confirmed election results as they are announced and published by presiding officers.

4.7 Guidelines on Complaints Handling

Electoral stakeholders have the right to complain against broadcasting stations they feel are not covering any political party, candidate and/or electoral issues fairly. During the election period broadcasters must ensure that they:

- ✚ Respond to election-related complaints raised against their station within two days.
- ✚ Understand that if the station does not respond within two days, or if the complainant is not satisfied with the response given, they can launch a complaint to the IBA.
- ✚ Understand that upon receiving the complaint, the IBA shall launch an investigation which should be completed within four days and appropriate action taken.
- ✚ Comply with the IBA directive within three days, failure to which the Authority may act and/or may seek the High Court intervention to force the broadcasting station to comply.

5.0 GENERAL OFFENCES

Offences under these Guidelines may include the following:

- Unbalanced coverage
- Promotion of civil disorder
- Promotion of tribalism
- Promotion of immorality
- Promotion of hate speech
- Blocking political adverts without justifiable reason
- Blocking out political parties
- False accusation
- Misrepresentation of facts and character assassination
- Broadcasting of unverified election-related information

Other offences may arise from non-compliance with the provisions set out in specific Guidelines.

6.0 PENALTIES

In instituting penalties against the breach of these Guidelines, the Authority will apply the provisions in the IBA Act and the Guidelines for Enforcement and Handling of Compliance Breaches. Other penalties under these Guidelines shall include:

- ✓ Verbal and/or written guidance
- ✓ Verbal and/or written warning
- ✓ Fast track hearing

- ✓ Appeal to the high court especially for failure to comply with directives emanating from complaints against the station
- ✓ A combination of any of the measures given in this section, or
- ✓ Any other penalty the Board may deem fit.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The 2026 Election Coverage Guidelines represent a critical step toward strengthening the integrity, professionalism, and credibility of broadcast media coverage during the electoral process in Zambia.

By clearly outlining the expectations, responsibilities, and ethical obligations of broadcasting stations, the Guidelines provide practical direction for ensuring that election-related information is accurate, balanced, fair, and equitably disseminated.

This framework is essential in enabling citizens to access reliable information, make informed electoral choices, and meaningfully participate in the democratic process.