

What is political impartiality?

Political impartiality means treating everybody equally despite their political persuasion, therefore, being nonpartisan, non-judgemental and objective in your conduct and opinion.

Political impartiality is an ethical principle that helps to ensure democratic engagement with political topics. In order to be politically impartial, judgements or opinions should be based on objective and relevant criteria, critically examined without bias or prejudice and not take sides. 

Legal requirements for schools and political impartiality

With school pupils spending 714 hours at school every year, there is an enormous pressure on the UK's educational establishments to both introduce students to political and ethical subjects via the curriculum as well guide them through the ongoing discourse around them – both in real life and online. 

Schools are required to consider how meaningful political balance across the whole curriculum and during pupils' time at school can be achieved as well as ensure pupils are taught about a diverse range of views and ideas – all whilst actively promoting the fundamental British values of:

- Democracy
- The rule of law
- Individual liberty
- Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs

Furthermore, all schools in the UK have a legal duty to remain politically impartial which means prohibiting the promotion of partisan political views and taking steps to ensure the balanced presentation of opposing views on political issues when they are brought to the attention of pupils. 

Teachers and political impartiality

The existing arrangements for the regulation of teachers' professional conduct are fairly strict. Under the teachers' standards, teachers must ensure that personal beliefs are not expressed in ways that exploit pupils' vulnerability or might lead them to break the law. Teachers can also be subject to a prohibition order if their actions or behaviours undermine fundamental British values. 

The new guidance on political impartiality states that teachers should not present dangerous and discriminatory views unchallenged and be clear about the facts including laws in place to protect groups targeted by such views, as well as present the risks and harms of such views. 

Although there is no blanket rule against teachers expressing their own political opinion, as a general principle, the guidance suggests that they should ‘avoid doing this unless they are confident that it will not amount to promoting their personal views to pupils’.

Ultimately, teachers and staff are advised to interpret their schools’ legal duties relating to balance, using their own ‘reasonable judgement’. School leaders, staff and teachers will need to use their discretion to make sensible decisions on how best to apply the advice laid out in the new guidance. 🧑🏫 🏫

What are the new guidelines for political impartiality in schools?

The new government guidance on political impartiality was released in order to help those working with and in schools to understand how their legal duties might impact teaching and extra-curricular activity. It does not actually include any new statutory requirements. 🧑🏫

Although the new guidelines call for the ‘balanced presentation of opposing views’, that does not mean that pupils must be taught about an opposite view to every view which is covered, or that different views are always given equal time in teaching or cannot be critically assessed.

The guidelines clearly state that schools should continue to promote social justice and tackle intolerant or discriminatory attitudes or incidents by condemning any behaviour derived from them – this should be seen as part of schools’ wider anti-bullying and safeguarding duties. 📝

Examples of political impartiality in school

So, what kind of subjects and scenarios might require political impartiality? To help us demystify the term, let’s look at some examples of political impartiality in the classroom as outlined in the new government guidance.

Climate change

Teaching about climate change and the scientific facts and evidence behind this, would not constitute teaching about a political issue. Schools do not need to present misinformation to provide balance here.

However, different groups, including political parties and campaign groups, may have partisan political views on the best way to address climate change. This part of the topic should be taught in a balanced manner. 🌍

Humanitarian crisis

When teaching about an ongoing humanitarian crisis and whether the UK should intervene militarily, teachers may just outline broad arguments in favour and against this option.

Teachers are not required to teach about every possible resolution to the crisis that has ever been proposed or considered. They should however avoid presenting versions of arguments that are exclusively in favour of or against military intervention, instead of exploring the difference in opinion on the issue.

Discrimination

When teaching about the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK, it may be important to teach about the prejudicial views held by those that opposed the change.

Teachers are not required to present these discriminatory beliefs uncritically or as acceptable in our society today. They can and should be clear with pupils on the dangers of present-day sexist views and practices, including the facts and laws about discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. 