[GB] Regulator announces allocation of party election broadcasts

IRIS 2015-5:1/17

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Although political advertising is not allowed in UK broadcasting, the Communications Act 2003 makes provision for the allocation of free party election broadcasts before elections and referendums to be shown by the major broadcasters. The broadcasts are to be allocated to major parties included in a list drawn up by Ofcom, the communications regulator, which has also drawn up a set of rules relating to the broadcasts. Each major party is entitled to at least two such broadcasts, whilst other parties are entitled to one broadcast if they are contesting one-sixth of seats in the election. The BBC has its own rules on election broadcasts administered by the BBC Trust.

Ofcom has now announced its list of major parties for the May 2015 general election. It undertook consultation and assessed evidence of previous elections, including an analysis of the share of votes alongside seats won. Ofcom also examined trends in opinion polling data, although it did not regard party membership as being as robust an indicator of wider support as the other factors.

Ofcom concluded that, in Great Britain, the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats are entitled to the two free broadcasts. Additional parties would be so entitled in each of the constituent nations of the UK. These were, in Scotland, the Scottish National Party; in Wales, Plaid Cymru (the Welsh Nationalist Party); and in England, UKIP (the UK Independence Party). Reflecting the fragmented state of Northern Ireland politics, the Alliance Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Fein, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Ulster Unionist Party would be entitled to two broadcasts.

The most controversial part of the decision was the exclusion of the Green Party. The Green Party had achieved only 1% of the vote and one Parliamentary seat in the 2010 General Election; it had achieved 8% of the vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections and its opinion poll rating had increased to 7%. By contrast, UKIP had secured 29% of the vote in England in the European Parliament elections and, in 2015, had a poll rating of 15%.

Ofcom, "Ofcom Statement on Party Election Broadcasts", 16 March 2015

http://media.ofcom.org.uk/news/2015/major-parties-statement/

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