



General Election 2017: five key manifesto promises

Whichever party wins the coming general election, their manifesto will be the basis for governing. The manifesto must tell voters about the kind of government they are electing, to give the Government a clear mandate. It must show how the issues that are most important to the public shape the Government's priorities. And it should commit the Government to measures that will help it make better decisions over its term in office – and help it run the country better.

Here we set out five promises that all parties should include in their manifestos.

1. Set priorities

Manifestos should be an exercise in ruthless prioritisation, not long shopping lists of popular measures. Our [polling shows](#) the public has little confidence in politicians keeping election promises. Two-thirds say they would be more likely to vote for a party that is honest about how it intends to implement policies once in government. Focussing on a few, clear promises will win public trust and make for a more effective government.

This is particularly true when so much government time is taken up by Brexit. In this regard the 2015 Conservative manifesto, with its 544 commitments, now looks out of

date. The next two years are likely to see 10 to 15 Brexit bills, dramatically reducing government's ability to legislate on other issues. All manifestos need to recognise the limits that Brexit puts on pursuit of other policies.

2. Give detail on Brexit

All parties face a balancing act in deciding how much of their Brexit negotiating position to expose in a manifesto. Some calculations on trade-offs and compromises need to be kept under wraps. But parties should not expect to get away with demanding a blank cheque from voters.

All parties should provide more detail on four issues:

- **What they would do if there is no deal.** If the EU and the UK fail to agree a free trade agreement inside two years, it could result in a “cliff-edge” in 2019. All parties should set out their contingency plans for managing this scenario.
- **The role for Parliament and scrutiny.** Manifestos should set the goals of Brexit negotiations and the process. Parties should compete for votes on the basis of their commitments to transparency and the level of scrutiny that Parliament will have during the negotiations.
- **Life after Brexit.** These manifestos will serve as the basis of government for the next five years. The UK might only be in the EU for the next two. That means that the manifestos should contain policies on areas where responsibility currently sits in Brussels, but may revert to the UK. These include immigration, international trade and agriculture.
- **The role of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.** Many powers that will return to the UK after Brexit are devolved to these administrations by default, including those on agriculture, fisheries and the environment. If the manifestos propose UK-wide policies in any of these areas, they need to be explicit about how they would secure the support of devolved administrations.

3. Establish credibility on public services

In recent years, the Government has failed to maintain the scope and quality of public services while controlling spending. Many changes that were supposed to be transformative, such as focusing on preventative care to reduce pressure on hospitals, have simply not worked. Our *Performance Tracker Spring 2017* report, an analysis of key public services, found obvious pressures across public services – spiralling prison violence, people trapped in hospitals because of a lack of social care, and soaring A&E waiting times.

If the next government is going to maintain public confidence and manage continued financial constraints without allowing services to fail, it must ensure that its spending decisions are realistic, and focus on achieving efficiency while not overstating the potential savings.

All manifestos should:

- **Commit to independent scrutiny of the assumptions behind its spending decisions.** Our *Performance Tracker* report called for such scrutiny to be carried out by a new organisation modelled on the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR): what we have called an ‘OBR for public spending’.

4. Reform tax policy making

In our report *Better Budgets* we set out how to address the systemic problems of our tax system: proliferation of measures, taxpayer confusion, burdensome compliance. Parties need to avoid making commitments during the election that limit their future room for manoeuvre and force them to rely on gimmicks to raise taxes. The manifestos are an opportunity to signal their commitment to a better approach.

All manifestos should:

- stick to the current Chancellor’s commitment to return to a single annual Budget
- give a clear statement of the principles and strategy underlying tax reform, to give people the certainty they need to make long-term decisions
- set out roadmaps for reform in key areas, allowing earlier consultation and giving taxpayers and employers time to adapt
- promote more honest and open public debate on tax policy.

The refusal of politicians to engage the public on the choices facing the country is the central reason why they are faced with an eroding tax base and a system which is hard to reform. That is bad for credibility.

5. Make sense of infrastructure

All major political parties say significant infrastructure investment will form part of their economic plans. Done well, major projects can improve productivity, which is sometimes described as the UK’s toughest economic problem. But chosen for the wrong reasons, they can saddle the UK and consumers with expensive and poorly used infrastructure.

All manifestos should:

- Make clear parties' positions on those infrastructure decisions that have dogged governments for decades, such as Heathrow and HS2, and set out how they will deliver any commitments at an acceptable cost. The **final parliamentary vote on Heathrow must take place as planned in the autumn**, to give residents and businesses the clarity they need.
- Confirm their **continued support for the National Infrastructure Commission** and commit to delivering the requirements set out in in the National Infrastructure Assessment due in 2018.

Conclusion

These five promises should be included in all parties' manifestos. They will help whoever forms the next government to run the country better.

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Institute for Government
2 Carlton Gardens, London, SW1Y 5AA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

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