



Scottish Parliament election 2026: pre-election period of sensitivity

The DeHavilland Guide

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/ Key takeaways

- The effective pre-election period will run from 26 March to 7 May 2026, combining campaign recess, Clerk closure, and formal dissolution on 9 April.
- Parliamentary activity winds down in a staged way before stopping entirely at dissolution.
- Ministers remain in post, but operate under tighter constraints, with new policy activity largely paused.
- Government continues to function, but the focus shifts from policy to operational continuity and neutrality.
- Access narrows quickly, particularly after dissolution, requiring a more careful and less overtly political approach to engagement.
- The most important window for influence is likely to come after the election, once a new Parliament and government are in place.

/ The pre-election period

For the 2026 election, polling day is scheduled for Thursday 7 May 2026, with dissolution expected on Thursday 9 April. However, in practical terms, the pre-election period begins earlier as the Parliament has agreed a campaign recess from Wednesday 26 March, with the Office of the Clerk also closing during that period, meaning the effective campaign window runs for around six weeks.

The purpose of this period is straightforward: to ensure that public institutions remain politically neutral during the election campaign. That affects both sides of the system. Parliament gradually winds down its activity, while the Scottish Government continues to operate but under tighter constraints.

What changes in the Scottish Parliament?

The shift at Holyrood is not an abrupt stop but a [managed wind-down](#). The final sitting week is expected to end on Wednesday 25 March, after which the Parliament enters recess ahead of dissolution. You can see this clearly in how parliamentary business is tapered off. For example, the last day on which Members could [lodge Written Questions](#) was Thursday 12 March 2026, with those questions due for answer by Wednesday 25 March.

Once recess begins, the closure of the Office of the Clerk prevents new motions, amendments, questions or petitions from being lodged in the usual way. That effectively brings new parliamentary activity to a halt even before dissolution formally takes place.

Dissolution itself marks the hard stop. From 9 April, MSPs cease to hold office, committees disappear, and parliamentary proceedings end entirely. Any Bills that have not completed their passage fall; motions that have not been taken fall; parliamentary questions stop and petitions remain technically live, but cannot progress until a new Parliament is established.

There are a few technical exceptions, particularly around secondary legislation, where scrutiny periods are paused rather than cancelled, but in practical terms, the parliamentary system is no longer operating in a political or legislative mode.

What changes in the Scottish Government?

Unlike the Parliament, the Scottish Government does not shut down. Ministers remain in post throughout the campaign period and continue to run departments and respond to events. The expectation set out in [official guidance](#) is that the government avoids doing anything that could shape the political contest or tie the hands of an incoming administration. In practice, that means fewer new announcements, fewer consultations, and a general reluctance to take decisions that are forward-looking or politically significant.

Rather than launching new initiatives, the emphasis shifts towards keeping services running and managing ongoing work. Communications also become more restrained, with a clear effort to avoid activity that could be seen as promoting policy or competing with candidates for attention.

/ What this means for public affairs

Communications and engagement

The tone of engagement [changes](#) quite quickly once the pre-election period begins. On both the parliamentary and government sides, there is a [strong emphasis](#) on neutrality and perception.

Ministerial visits, announcements, and external engagements tend to reduce, or are handled more carefully. Anything that looks like advocacy, promotion, or policy positioning is likely to be avoided unless there is a clear operational need.

For stakeholders, this means the usual routes of influence become less effective. Engagement is still possible, but it needs to be framed carefully and is more likely to be informational than outcome driven.

What still happens?

This is not a complete shutdown. Urgent issues are still dealt with, public services continue to operate, and ministers remain accountable for day-to-day decisions. The key difference is that the system is no longer advancing new political or legislative work. Instead, it is maintaining continuity and avoiding controversy until the election has taken place.

For policy and public affairs teams, the instinct to push harder before an election is often counterproductive in this context. By late March, parliamentary routes are already closing down, and by early April they have disappeared altogether, with no sitting MSPs or committees through which to advance issues.

The more effective approach is to adjust expectations. This is a period for maintaining relationships, keeping lines of communication open, and recognising the constraints that ministers and officials are operating under. Engagement is still possible, but it is more likely to be noted than acted upon.

That shifts the focus towards preparation rather than delivery. Organisations should be planning for different electoral outcomes, identifying likely ministers, committee conveners and regional MSPs, and ensuring that briefing material and policy asks are clear, concise, and ready to deploy.

The most important window is likely to come immediately after the election, when a new Parliament is formed and priorities are still being set. Those who are prepared for that moment are far more likely to shape outcomes than those who try to force progress in the final weeks before polling day.

What happens next?

Once the election has taken place, things move quickly as MSPs are returned, the Parliament meets, a Presiding Officer is appointed, and a First Minister is nominated. Ministerial teams and committees follow shortly after.

The Presiding Officer has [indicated](#) that the first meeting of the new Parliament is expected on Thursday 14 May 2026. The day will begin with members taking the oath, followed by the election of the Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding Officers in the afternoon.

In practical terms, this is the point at which the parliamentary system becomes fully operational again, and the window for early engagement begins to open.



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