

Political Conduct and Misconduct: Probing Public Opinion¹

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ABSTRACT

The media and public responses to the expenses scandal of 2009 demonstrated the enduring importance of standards of conduct in British public life. This article addresses some basic questions concerning citizens' attitudes towards political wrongdoing, including how much notice people actually take of politicians' misbehaviour, how much importance citizens attach to politicians' integrity and how big a problem in politics political misconduct is thought to be. Drawing on responses to a representative survey of the British public, this article finds that most people do take some notice of scandals, and that most people, when forced to choose, prize honesty in their politicians over competence. It also finds that these factors influence how big a problem certain types of behaviour are perceived to be.

MANY PARLIAMENTARIANS will want to forget the events of 2009. Few will be able to. In January that year, the *Sunday Times* alleged that four Labour peers had expressed a willingness to under-cover reporters to amend legislation for money. The House of Lords responded by suspending two of those peers, Lords Truscott and Taylor, the first time it had exercised this power in over 350 years. Yet, the peers' misconduct was no more than the curtain raiser to a far bigger drama. The New Year had brought a trickle of allegations that some MPs, including senior ministers, were abusing their official allowances. When in May the *Daily Telegraph* began to publish details of MPs' past claims under the Commons' second-home allowance scheme, the trickle became a flood. Politicians, panicked by the public outcry, scrambled to respond. Backbench MPs forced the hapless Speaker, Michael Martin, from office. The Government promised changes to the allowance system and duly rushed through the Parliamentary Standards Act onto the statute book. Other politicians called for a variety of wider changes to the political system, including the introduction of a largely or wholly elected House of Lords, a new voting system and recall elections for errant MPs.

Voters, for their part, were simply angry. A YouGov survey, published by the *Daily Telegraph* just after it had begun printing details of MPs' expense claims, reported that 86 per cent of respondents said

there was 'a widespread problem involving a large number of MPs claiming money to which they are not entitled'.² A month later, in the June European parliamentary elections, voters had a chance to register their discontent with the main parties. The Conservatives came top with a paltry 27.7 per cent of the popular vote, ahead of UKIP on 16.5 per cent, Labour on 15.7 per cent and the Liberal Democrats on 13.7 per cent. Between them, Labour and the Conservatives, the two major parties in a supposedly two-party system, won the support of only two out of every five of those who bothered to vote.

Judging by their response to the expenses scandal, citizens clearly value standards of conduct in public life. Perhaps because this point is so obvious, surprisingly little attempt has been made to explore in any detail even basic questions concerning citizens' attitudes towards political wrongdoing. This article takes as its starting point the likely importance of citizens' attention to misconduct, specifically, and to politics more generally, as well as the information to which they are exposed, in shaping opinion.³ Its aim is not to develop a full theory but simply to shed new empirical light on the topic. To that end, the article is driven by three practical questions. First, how much notice do people actually take of politicians' misbehaviour? Second, how much weight or value do citizens attach to individual politicians' integrity compared with other personal characteristics or other unpalatable features of political life? Finally, how big a problem in British politics is political misconduct thought to be? This article addresses these questions and reports some initial findings from an exploratory study of public attitudes conducted in April 2009.

Public opinion and press coverage

Academic studies into public perceptions and expectations of conduct in British public life are few and far between. In an article published in 1991, Michael Johnston explored what members of the public thought to be right and wrong in both private and public situations.⁴ He found respondents judged dubious actions more critically when performed by people acting in public roles than by people acting in a purely private capacity. Another study, taking a very different approach, explored the extent to which the Conservative party's then sleazy reputation was a contributing factor to its defeat at the 1997 general election.⁵ In only one constituency, Tatton, where the independent Martin Bell defeated the disgraced incumbent, Neil Hamilton, was one candidate's misconduct clearly a decisive factor.

Academic studies elsewhere have provided further advances in understanding attitudes towards political misconduct. Normative expectations of official conduct have been shown to influence individuals' perceptions of misconduct, while perceptions have also been shown to be affected by partisanship and demographic characteristics like ethnicity, social class, education, age and gender.⁶ Media

1. Behaviours by MPs and government ministers considered extremely important,
2004–2008

	2004	2006	2008
They should not take bribes	88	85	85
They should tell the truth	75	75	76
They should make sure that public money is used wisely	73	72	74
They should not use their power for their own personal gain	72	73	73
They should be dedicated to doing a good job for the public	64	63	66
They should be competent at their jobs	58	62	61
They should be in touch with what the general public thinks is important	56	52	59
They should own up when they make mistakes	55	52	53
They should explain the reasons for their actions and decisions	43	45	48
They should set a good example for others in their private lives	31	28	33

Source: CSPL, *Survey of Public Attitudes towards Conduct in Public Life*, BMRB Social Research, 2008, p. 27.

consumption too has been shown to condition citizens' perceptions of and responses to misconduct, but its precise impact, together with the general notion that 'media malaise' is a cause of poor evaluations of politicians' conduct, is somewhat contested.⁷

Back in Britain, the various ethical 'watchdogs', bodies like the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) and the Local Standards Board, established to promote high standards of integrity in government, have also contributed to our empirical knowledge of public attitudes by conducting their own research. For example, in surveys commissioned by the CSPL and conducted in 2004, 2006 and 2008, respondents were asked how important they found certain types of behaviour by national politicians, including MPs and government ministers (Table 1). Consistently large majorities (in excess of 70 per cent) in all three years answered that it was extremely important that MPs or ministers should not take bribes, should tell the truth, should make sure that public money is used wisely and should not use their power for their own personal gain. Clear majorities also said that it was extremely important that MPs and ministers should be dedicated to doing a good job for the public, should be competent at their jobs, should be in touch with what the general public thinks is important and should own up when they make mistakes. These findings suggest that misconduct in the public's eyes could well amount to more than financial conflicts of interest and the misuse of official resources and also include matters of honesty and diligence.

At the same time, the CSPL surveys suggest a widespread perception that not all of those in public life always meet the high standards expected of them. In the 2008 survey, there was a general consensus that ministers and MPs do not take bribes: 59 per cent of respondents said all or most ministers do not, and 61 per cent of respondents said the same for MPs. But only a small minority, 22 per cent, said they would trust all or most ministers to tell the truth, and only 26 per cent

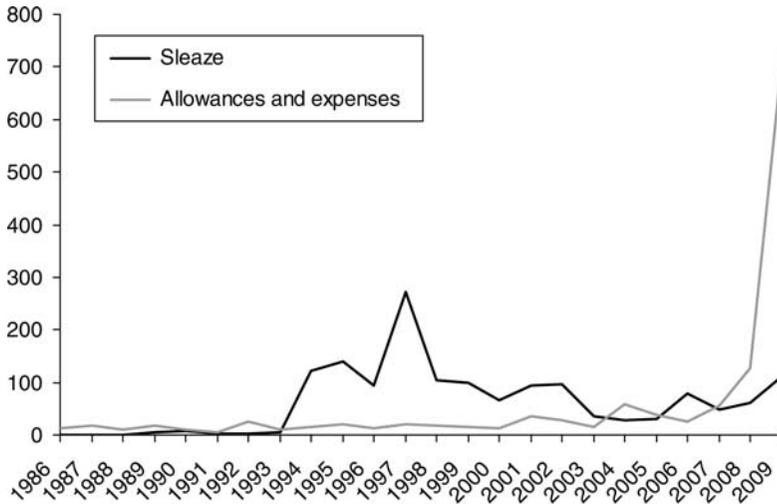
responded similarly in respect of MPs. In fact, the 2008 CSPL survey identified four areas in which there was a pronounced gap between expectations and perceptions: ‘telling the truth’, ‘making sure that public money is used wisely’, ‘being in touch with what the general public thinks is important’, and ‘owning up to mistakes’. Such gaps accord with one commentator’s suggestion of a prevailing ‘culture of detachment’, in which citizens appear alienated from the governing elite and established political practices.⁸ Or, as another commentator has noted, ‘perceptions of the integrity of public office holders appear, in short, to be closely tied to a general disdain and distrust of elected and appointed representatives.’⁹

Newspaper opinion polls can also provide a general sense of the public mood, for example, in respect of different parties’ reputations for sleaziness and wider evaluations of probity in public life. But such polls have shortcomings. On the one hand, the data usually reported are purely aggregate-level snapshots of public opinion. On the other hand, their timing is largely dependent on editors’ whims; questions are asked only when they are considered to be worth asking.¹⁰ Because pollsters are seldom commissioned to ask relevant questions until political misconduct is newsworthy, responses are going to be heavily influenced by the current headlines. And, as one student of public opinion notes, ‘If we measure issues mainly when they are hot, quite probably we measure them when attitudes are atypical.’¹¹

Figure 1 provides a crude indication of the changing media salience of political misconduct in recent decades, or when the issue has been ‘hot’ in British politics. Drawing on the LexisNexis database, an online resource that contains ‘the full text of all the major UK national newspapers and leading UK regional newspapers’,¹² it reports the number of articles that were published in *The Times* and *Sunday Times* each year between 1986 and 2009 and which contained the keywords ‘MPs’ or ‘Parliament’ and either ‘sleaze’ or ‘allowances’ and ‘expenses’. ‘Sleaze’ was selected as a keyword because of the media’s use of the word in the 1990s to unite a variety of wrongdoing and unethical behaviour, including MPs’ financial misconduct.¹³ The alternative keywords, ‘allowances’ and ‘expenses’, were chosen in the light of recent events.

The graph illustrates vividly the explosion of articles linking the word ‘sleaze’ to MPs or Parliament in the mid-1990s, in line with previous studies.¹⁴ The number of articles suddenly surged upwards in 1994, just as the ‘cash for questions’ scandal involving Neil Hamilton and others surfaced, before peaking in 1997, the year of the general election and Labour’s landslide. Since then, the number of articles has gradually declined, although they have been rising again since 2005. Interestingly, the use of the word ‘sleaze’ in conjunction with MPs and Parliament did not surge dramatically in 2009. Journalists did not use the word when writing about the expenses scandal as frequently as

Figure 1. *Times* and *Sunday Times* articles citing 'sleaze' AND 'MPs' OR 'Parliament', or 'allowances' AND 'expenses' AND 'MPs' OR 'Parliament', 1986–2009.



they might have been expected to. Even more remarkable, however, has been the sudden increase in the number of articles referring to MPs and their allowances and expenses in recent years. There was a notable upsurge in 2007 and 2008, and then a phenomenal increase in 2009. If anything, media coverage of the allowances and expenses controversy has far surpassed the coverage of Conservative sleaze in the mid-1990s. Given that press coverage of this issue was overwhelmingly critical and negative, it is easy to gain some sense of the panic that gripped Westminster.

Do people take notice?

Talk of newspaper coverage brings us to the first practical question this article addresses: how much notice do people actually take of politicians' misbehaviour? To answer this question, and others, a number of questions were included on a representative survey of British citizens fielded as part of a larger academic project exploring attitudes towards political ethics and politicians' conduct.¹⁵ The survey was administered by the British Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (BCCAP) and conducted by YouGov between 21 and 25 April 2009. Politicians' conduct was obviously on the agenda during this time, but the survey was fielded before the *Daily Telegraph* began publishing details of MPs' past allowances claims. The sample included 1388 adult respondents from across Britain. The data were weighted to reflect the demographic characteristics of the entire adult population.

YouGov administers on-line surveys to panellists recruited on the Internet. Until recently, academic researchers have been reluctant to rely on data generated this way because on-line surveys tend to over-represent citizens who are politically knowledgeable and engaged. Best practice in this area has changed in recent years, however, following a number of studies that have assuaged many of these concerns.¹⁶ In fact, Internet surveys have some methodological advantages over face-to-face surveys, which suffer from increasingly high non-response rates, while their utility has also been demonstrated in studies of misconduct.¹⁷

To explore how much notice people take of political misconduct, the BCCAP survey asked questions about people's familiarity with particular instances of wrongdoing. The respondents were asked, from what they knew, which of the following had been reported in the British newspapers or on television in recent years: MPs misusing their parliamentary allowances when employing members of their family; Members of the House of Lords being prepared to accept money in return for attempting to change laws; MPs accepting money in return for asking questions in Parliament; party activists applying for postal votes using false names and MPs writing cheques when there is not enough money to cover them in their parliamentary bank account.

We had in mind specific scandals for each of these questions. The misuse of allowances question referred principally to the Derek Conway case of early 2008. Conway, a Conservative MP, was found by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Standards and Privileges Committee, the bodies in the House of Commons responsible for monitoring and regulating standards of conduct, to have employed his son out of public funds for work that he probably did not undertake. The House of Lords question referred to allegations first made by the *Sunday Times* in January 2009 that four Labour peers had discussed their willingness to table amendments to legislation in return for a fee. The question about MPs accepting money in return for asking questions in Parliament referred to the well-known events of 1994 and the 'cash for questions' scandal. Unlike the first two questions, it sought to ascertain individuals' longer-term recollection of political misconduct. The question about postal-vote fraud referred to a subject that is often more complex than straightforward parliamentary misconduct and is rarely linked to notable personalities. The final question about the parliamentary bank account was a red herring and referred to a scandal in the US House of Representatives in 1992. It was included to identify respondents' tendency to say 'yes' to every scandal.

Individuals' recollection of reported stories provides some indication of what they remember reading or listening to; and what the public has read or listened to will, at some level, almost certainly influence what the public thinks.¹⁸ Media coverage might be expected to influence

public opinion in several ways. At one level, it may directly affect what individuals think.¹⁹ Thus, if numerous press reports have claimed that MPs are venal, individual members of the public may be persuaded that this is indeed the case. At another level, media coverage may exert an agenda-setting influence. It may affect what issues people think about rather than what they think about them. A growth in reporting of misconduct may, for example, cause people to think that unethical behaviour has increased simply because more attention is being devoted to the issue. Finally, the media may shape public opinion by framing the way people think about politicians. Framing is a process by which a communication source, such as a newspaper story, constructs and defines a political issue for its audience. For recipients of the message, framing affects the perceived relevance of different considerations and thus how people think about that issue.²⁰ Thus, the journalist John Lloyd suggests that contemporary media coverage in Britain is framed by a 'master story' that portrays politics as 'a degraded profession'.²¹ The public in turn may place greater weight on politicians' misconduct and assume that no politician can be trusted.

As we would probably expect, given contemporary media coverage about expenses and allowances, a large majority of respondents to our survey, 81.7 per cent, said that accounts of MPs misusing their parliamentary allowances when employing members of their family had been reported (Table 2). Another sizeable majority, nearly two-thirds, said stories of MPs accepting money in return for asking questions in Parliament had been reported. Their responses suggest a general recollection of the 'cash for questions' affair. Intriguingly, fewer respondents, 60.4 per cent, recalled the 'cash for amendments' scandal being reported, even though the allegations had been published in the *Sunday Times* just four months before. Only a minority, 42.5 per cent, recalled coverage of postal-vote fraud, while nearly one-tenth of respondents mistakenly recalled coverage of a British 'House bank scandal'.

By combining responses to these questions, it was possible to compile a scale of 'scandal familiarity', reflecting whether respondents recalled reading about none, one, two, three or four of the actual scandals. To simplify matters, it was assumed that a 'don't know' and a 'hasn't been reported' meant the same thing: that the respondent could not recall reading or hearing about the misconduct described. The scale also included all those respondents, 130 in total, who answered wrongly that the fake bank scandal had been reported. There may well have been a tendency among these respondents to see scandal everywhere: 58 per cent of those recalling having read or heard about the bank scandal also recalled hearing or reading about all four other scandals. An attempt to control for this tendency is provided in multivariate analyses (see what follows). For the time being, responses to the other questions were treated as honest and reliable.

2. From what you know, which of the following has been reported in the British newspapers or on television in recent years (in per cent)?

	Misuse of allowances	Cash for questions	House of Lords	Postal vote fraud	'Bank scandal'
Has been reported	81.7	65.4	60.4	42.5	9.4
Hasn't been reported	2.9	7.2	7.1	8.8	20.9
Don't know	15.4	27.3	32.5	48.7	69.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100

3. Total number of scandals recalled, by gender and age (in per cent)

Number of scandals recalled	Men	Women	Under 35 years	35-54 years	Over 55 years	Total
None	12.9	18.6	25.2	16.3	7.6	15.9
One	7.5	12.5	15.4	7.8	8.2	10.1
Two	11.1	17.3	19.9	14.0	10.1	14.3
Three	29.0	26.5	23.4	26.4	32.6	27.7
All four	39.4	25.2	16.1	35.7	41.5	32.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 3 reports the range of familiarity by sex and age. These two characteristics have been included since previous studies have shown them to affect general perceptions of corruption.²² In total, a clear majority of respondents, 59.7 per cent, answered that three or four of the real scandals had been reported, and at least 84.1 per cent answered that at least one of the four scandals had been reported. That still meant that 15.9 per cent did not recall any of the four scandals. Between the sexes, men were much more likely than women to have come across all four of the scandals, by 39.4 to 25.2 per cent, and among the three age groups, the under-35s were much more likely to be unfamiliar with any of the four scandals. The over-55s were likely to be most aware.

In many respects, the pattern of scandal familiarity accords with general patterns of attentiveness to politics. In addition to asking about specific scandals, the survey also asked how often individuals followed what goes on in government and public affairs. Excluding those who answered 'don't know', some 27.3 per cent of the respondents replied 'most of the time', 33.4 per cent answered 'some of the time', 23.0 per cent said 'only now and then' and the remaining 16.3 per cent said 'hardly at all'. A simple cross-tabulation of the attentiveness and scandal-familiarity variables (Table 4) suggests an expected and significant relationship between an individual's engagement with national politics and their knowledge or familiarity with political wrongdoing.²³ A majority of those following politics most of the time, 51.7 per cent, recalled reading about all four scandals; and a sizeable plurality of those who followed politics hardly at all, 27.4 per cent, did not know of any of the scandals being reported. At the same time, of course,

4. Total number of scandals recalled by how often respondents follow government and public affairs (in per cent)

Number of scandals recalled	Most of the time	Some of the time	Only now and then	Hardly at all
None	5.6	6.6	16.4	27.4
One	6.1	9.8	11.5	18.1
Two	8.9	15.6	19.1	18.1
Three	27.8	34.2	32.6	15.8
All four	51.7	33.8	20.4	20.5
Total	100	100	100	100

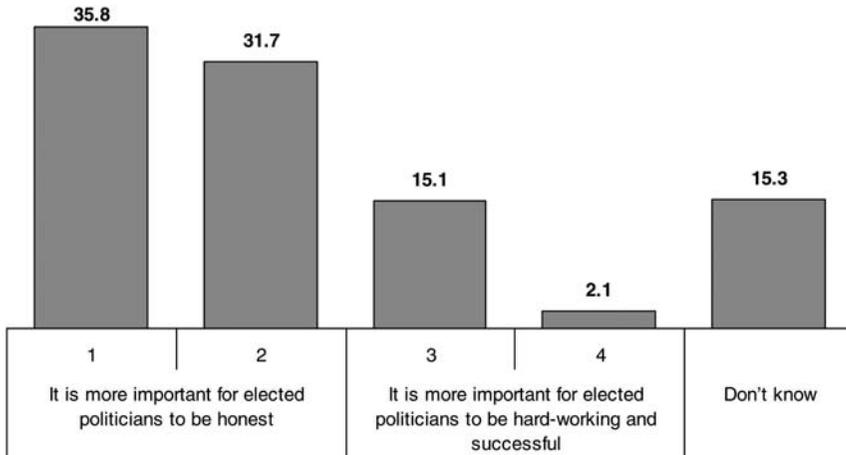
individuals' awareness of misconduct is also likely to be affected by external factors. On the one hand, awareness of misconduct appears to be influenced by how attentive someone is to political developments. On the other hand, the more prominent a scandal is in the press, the more likely it is to be memorable. A large number of respondents, for example, still appeared to recall the 'cash for questions' affair, nearly 15 years after the event. Given its current media salience, we can expect the furore concerning MPs' expenses to imprint itself on the long-term popular memory.

Intriguingly, it also seems likely that most individuals suspect their elected politicians get up to more than is reported. The questionnaire asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that the scandals that are reported in the newspapers and on television are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the misconduct that actually goes on. In all, 75.1 per cent tended to agree or agree strongly with this statement. Only 3 per cent disagreed. Rightly or wrongly, the British public are a cynical lot.

Do people value ethical conduct?

It is no surprise that some of the more high-profile scandals, such as 'cash for questions', are long remembered by the public. But how citizens respond to such scandals and to media reports of misconduct more generally is likely to be influenced greatly by the value they place on ethical conduct among politicians. As successive surveys conducted by the CSPL make clear, certain specific attributes and features of conduct are clearly desired by the public: clear majorities of the public think it *extremely* important that those in public life should not take bribes, should tell the truth, should make sure that public money is used wisely, should not use their power for their own personal gain and so on. At the same time, however, it is important to take a step back and ask whether citizens are prepared to compromise on integrity for other qualities. As one recent study suggests, the quality of our politicians rests on two principal dimensions: competence and honesty.²⁴ Most people, given a choice, would want politicians to score highly on

Figure 2. Is it more important to have honest politicians or successful and hard-working politicians (in per cent)?



both dimensions, but some people may accept a trade-off depending on the relative value they attach to competence and honesty. Some politicians' ethical shortcomings may well be overlooked on account of their wider contributions to public life. The personal conduct of David Lloyd George does not always bear scrutiny, but no one can dispute his enormous contribution to the country, both in peacetime and war.

Our survey included a question that sought to probe the potential dilemma between honesty and competence. Respondents were asked whether it was more important to have honest politicians or more important to have successful and hard-working politicians and to answer by placing themselves on a 1–4 scale, where 1 meant it was more important for politicians to be honest and 4 meant it was more important for them to be hard-working and successful.²⁵ Figure 2 reports the answers. Many respondents, 15.3 per cent, were unable to decide which was more important. Otherwise, it was immediately apparent that a large majority favoured honesty as an attribute, with 67.5 per cent placing themselves at that end of the scale. That said, only 35.8 per cent were most committed to the view that it was important for elected politicians to be honest; others were willing perhaps to forgo some honesty in return for hard work and successes. A minority, 17.2 per cent, were inclined to the view that it was actually more important for politicians to be hard-working and successful. These respondents perhaps attached greater weight to having politicians who could get the job done.

If we exclude the 'don't knows' and collapse the categories into two groups, those inclined to think it more important for elected politicians to be honest outnumbered those who think it more important for politicians to be hard-working and successful by a ratio of about 4:1.

5. Is it more important to have honest or hard-working and successful politicians
(breakdown of responses by gender, age and social class; in per cent)

	Men	Women	<35	35–54	>55	ABC1	C2DE	Total
Honest	79.0	80.5	66.7	81.2	87.0	82.5	76.1	79.7
Hard-working and successful	21.0	19.5	33.3	18.8	13.0	17.5	23.9	20.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Looking at these two groups in more detail, there was no significant difference among the genders, as Table 5 shows. Some 79 per cent of men said it was more important for politicians to be honest compared with 80.5 per cent of women. However, there were significant differences among age groups, with the under-35s considerably more likely to value hard-working and successful politicians compared with the older groups. A comparatively small proportion of this group, just two-thirds, said honesty was more important. In contrast, 87 per cent of the over-55s said the same. We obviously cannot know on the basis of a single cross-sectional study whether this difference is a cohort effect, that is, because younger people have acquired different values through exposure to changed social structures, or a life-cycle effect, in which people come to value honesty more as they get older. Nevertheless, the differences are intriguing.

There were also significant differences among socio-economic groups. Respondents loosely defined as middle class on the basis of occupation (ABC1 or higher managerial or professional, lower managerial or administrative and skilled or lower non-manual) were more likely to prioritise honesty over efficacy compared with those loosely defined as working class (C2DE or skilled manual, semi- or unskilled manual and others). The differences are not large but they are interesting. It is also unclear how they sit with previous research. Some studies have shown that better-educated and higher-earning citizens are likely to take a more legalistic view of political ethics, while individuals on a lower socio-economic rung are more likely to condemn behaviour that embodies blatant self-interest or runs contrary to community values, including perceptions of social justice.²⁶ It may well be that those on the bottom rungs of the social ladder are more likely to be mindful of the question: what can a politician do for me?

How big a problem?

The final question this paper seeks to probe is how big a problem certain types of behaviour are thought to be in British politics. In practice, a wide variety of misconduct occurs in public life. To take just one example, MPs have been suspended from the House of Commons for various misdemeanours, including failing to register outside interests, failing to declare interests in debate, breaching Parliament's 'lobbying for reward or consideration' rule, misusing official expenses,

breaching parliamentary privilege, acting in a way that brings Parliament into disrepute and obstructing inquiries undertaken by the House of Commons ethical regulators, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Standards and Privileges Committee. Needless to say, most members of the public are unlikely to distinguish in such detail between different forms of misbehaviour. To keep things simple, the BCCAP survey therefore asked respondents how much of a problem four potentially unethical types of behaviour by elected politicians were today. Two of the behaviours related to general aspects of honesty and the politics-as-normal activities that many members of the public seem to dislike: not giving straight answers to questions; and making promises politicians know they cannot keep. The other two behaviours described actions closer to more conventional notions of corruption: misusing official expenses and allowances; and accepting bribes. By no means were the four behaviours described assumed to be equal in any way, either in respect of their objective impropriety or in respect of their prevalence. The intention was to allow ordinary members of the public to distinguish between them and, in so doing, to identify how big a problem they regarded each as being in British politics today. Respondents were accordingly asked to respond on a 0–10 scale, where 0 meant it was not a problem at all and 10 meant it was a very big problem.

Table 6 reports the answers to these questions. On the basis of the frequencies and the mean scores, the behaviour by elected politicians generally regarded as being the most problematic among respondents was the misuse of official expenses and allowances. Some 48.3 per cent of respondents, nearly half, responded with the highest possible score, 10, and a further quarter responded with a score of 9 or 8. The mean score was 8.8. The collective response to this question was perhaps to

6. In your opinion, how much of a problem is the following behaviour by elected politicians in Britain today (in per cent)?

	Misusing expenses	Straight answers	Making promises	Accepting bribes
10 A very big problem	48.3	40.8	33.9	21.9
9	14.0	14.7	13.9	5.5
8	10.5	13.6	15.9	8.7
7	7.3	10.1	13.2	9.4
6	3.7	4.1	6.5	7.5
5	3.2	4.8	4.7	10.6
4	1.3	1.3	0.9	5.2
3	1.0	0.5	0.3	5.5
2	0.5	0.4	0.6	4.6
1	0.3	0.2	0.0	2.4
0 Not a problem at all	0.4	0.4	0.5	1.4
Don't know	9.5	9.1	9.7	17.5
Mean score	8.8	8.5	8.3	6.7

be expected given the massive media attention focused on MPs' allowances in early 2009 (the survey was conducted in late April). Had this survey been conducted a fortnight later, after the *Daily Telegraph* began publishing details of MPs' expense claims, the misuse of allowances may well have been perceived to be an even bigger problem.

Smaller but still large proportions of respondents also regarded politicians not giving straight answers to questions and politicians making promises they know they cannot keep as being a very big problem. (The means scores were 8.5. and 8.3, respectively.) These responses accord with many citizens' known dislike of the way politics is conducted in Britain.²⁷ The public, it seems, would appreciate greater candour from their politicians. However, their responses also suggest that members of the public as a whole do distinguish between politicians' tendency to dodge questions and oversell their promises, and some politicians' tendency to abuse their positions for financial gain. Voters may dislike some aspects of party politics, but they also recognise when there is a problem involving personal ethics.

Politicians accepting bribes was regarded as being the least problematic of the four behaviours described (mean score of 6.7). Bribery and corruption are almost synonymous in British law, and Britain has a reputation for being comparatively free of corruption.²⁸ Given how few cases of straightforward bribery are reported in the press, it was perhaps surprising how many people—over one in five of those taking part—still regarded it as being a very big problem. It is probably a reflection of how few cases of bribery come to light that this behaviour elicited by far the largest proportions of don't knows, 17.5 per cent. A large proportion of the public did not feel in a position to be able to say bribery was a problem, but equally, they also felt unable to say it was not a problem.

Although there were clear differences in responses to the four types of behaviour, there were also similarities in the way responses were distributed. To ascertain the extent to which respondents actually differentiated between the specific behaviours, a factor analysis of the responses to these questions was undertaken. The results suggested some consistency in individuals' perceptions of how problematic specific types of behaviour are.²⁹ In other words, they seemed to be tapping a general perception of unethical behaviour by politicians.

The next step was to undertake multivariate analyses in order to ascertain what explained respondents' tendency to regard the various behaviours described in Table 6 as being problematic. The analysis also included an additional dependent variable, an aggregate scale based on responses to the four behaviours, which served as a measure of how big a problem unethical behaviour in public life was generally perceived to be.³⁰ We were particularly interested in the extent to which respondents' familiarity with reported scandals and the value they attached to politicians' honesty over competence had an impact

on how big a problem certain behaviours were perceived to be. Three broad categories of relevant variables were included in this analysis (Table 7). First, we included some standard demographic control variables: respondents' age, gender, education (the age they left full-time education, whether over the age of 18 or not) and income (whether a respondent earned less than £20,000, between £20,000 and £39,999 or £40,000 and over).

The second set of variables related to respondents' political involvement.³¹ These included: party identification, an individual's underlying allegiance to a party, which may make them more or less sympathetic to certain political actors and more or less likely to regard their behaviour as being problematic³²; general attentiveness to politics and public affairs, a measure of how engaged individuals are with the political process, which could well influence how problematic they perceive certain behaviour to be; and familiarity with previously reported scandals. We would, of course, expect those who are more familiar with past scandals to think unethical behaviour is more problematic today. The scandal-familiarity variable was essentially the scale reported in Table 3 and was based on respondents' ability to recall a number of scandals reported in the press or on television. However, the variable used in the multivariate analysis sought to control for any tendency to recall imagined scandals by weighting respondents' scores on the basis of their answer to the fake bank scandal question. If an individual answered that they had read or heard about MPs writing cheques when there was not enough money to cover them in their parliamentary bank account, their familiarity score, based on answers to the other four questions, was halved.³³ This weighting assumed some familiarity with the reported scandals, but it also assumed a tendency to over-report across the board among certain respondents.

The third set of variables consisted of a number of attitudinal controls, including individuals' levels of inter-personal trust, their personal ethics, their ideological position when it comes to taxes and public expenditure, their perceptions of the state of the economy and their responses to the honesty-over-competence question reported in Figure 2. The inter-personal trust variable was a five-point scale based on responses to three standard 'trust' questions.³⁴ Essentially, a higher score reflected higher levels of trust. If individuals were more trusting, they could be expected to trust politicians to act honourably and perhaps think unethical behaviour to be less of a problem. The personal ethics variable referred to someone's tolerance of potentially unethical behaviour in their own private life. A 0–10 scale was constructed on the basis of whether respondents thought avoiding a fare on public transport, telling a lie if it was in their interest and claiming government benefits to which they were not entitled could always or never be justified. The scale was constructed in such a way that a

7. Multivariate analysis of responses to perceived problems by elected politicians in Britain today

	Answers	Expenses	Bribes	Promises	Scale
Demographics					
Age	0.011* (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.008)	0.004 (0.005)	0.002 (0.004)
Sex (male)	-0.284* (0.132)	-0.429** (0.136)	-0.795*** (0.208)	-0.290* (0.130)	-0.430*** (0.116)
Left school (over 18)	-0.147 (0.128)	0.047 (0.132)	0.010 (0.201)	0.043 (0.126)	-0.038 (0.112)
Income (middle)	-0.181 (0.157)	-0.130 (0.162)	-0.082 (0.247)	-0.181 (0.154)	-0.182 (0.138)
Income (high)	-0.233 (0.169)	-0.264 (0.173)	-0.313 (0.266)	-0.151 (0.166)	-0.239 (0.149)
Political involvement					
Labour party identification	-0.277 (0.192)	-0.019 (0.198)	-0.249 (0.302)	-0.308 (0.189)	-0.249 (0.168)
Conservative party identification	-0.119 (0.198)	0.424* (0.203)	0.057 (0.311)	0.061 (0.194)	0.147 (0.173)
Liberal Democratic party identification	-0.321 (0.254)	-0.405 (0.260)	0.010 (0.397)	-0.567* (0.249)	-0.279 (0.221)
Other party identification	0.004 (0.232)	0.040 (0.239)	0.177 (0.360)	0.274 (0.227)	0.106 (0.201)
Scandal familiarity	0.185*** (0.057)	0.188*** (0.059)	0.053 (0.089)	0.149** (0.056)	0.137** (0.050)
Interest in politics	0.010 (0.068)	-0.189** (0.070)	-0.598*** (0.108)	-0.117* (0.067)	-0.224*** (0.060)
Attitudes					
Honesty over competence	0.368*** (0.082)	0.366*** (0.084)	0.504*** (0.128)	0.373*** (0.080)	0.396*** (0.071)
Personal ethics	-0.042 (0.036)	-0.091* (0.038)	-0.003 (0.057)	-0.048 (0.036)	-0.050 (0.032)
Inter-personal trust	-0.063 (0.073)	-0.260*** (0.075)	-0.516*** (0.114)	-0.235*** (0.072)	-0.264*** (0.063)
Ideology (tax and spend)	0.066 (0.035)	0.037 (0.036)	0.063 (0.053)	0.083* (0.034)	0.056 (0.030)
Economy got worse	1.011** (0.333)	0.840* (0.341)	0.760 (0.536)	0.904** (0.326)	0.984*** (0.299)
Economy got better	0.476 (0.577)	-0.460 (0.592)	1.266 (0.900)	0.452 (0.564)	0.440 (0.502)
Constant	5.753*** (0.613)	7.745*** (0.631)	7.998*** (0.966)	6.719*** (0.601)	7.087*** (0.538)
N	808	803	744	802	741
Adjusted R ²	0.98	0.120	0.121	0.104	0.159

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; cell entries are coefficients (standard errors).

higher score reflects a higher degree of ethical tolerance. Those whose own personal ethics were stricter might respond more strongly to politicians' reported misbehaviour and, therefore, regard misbehaviour as being a bigger problem.

The ideology variable employed in the analysis reflected whether a respondent thought government should generally increase levels of taxation and expenditure or reduce them. Although previous research provides little guidance in this respect, there is reason to suppose that more right-wing positions on economic issues may correlate with a tolerance of behaviour that deviates somewhat from public-service ideals. The state of the economy variables reflected whether a respondent thought the economy had improved or deteriorated in the preceding year (the baseline variable was that the economy had stayed the same). These variables were included to control for the possible effect of respondents blaming 'dishonest' politicians for poor economic performance. Finally, the attitudinal variables included respondents' answers to the honesty-competence forced-choice question. We might expect that if respondents attach greater store to honesty over competence, they are likely to think that unethical conduct is a bigger problem.

Table 7 reports the resulting OLS regression in respect of the four behaviours and the aggregate scale. Among the demographic variables, age was only significant for predicting responses to how big a problem individuals thought politicians not giving straight answers to questions was. Older people tended to think it more problematic. A person's sex was a significant predictor for responses to all the behaviours, including the combined scale. The negative sign for the relevant coefficient in all five columns indicates that men were less likely to think all behaviours were a problem. Men were particularly less likely to think that politicians taking bribes was a problem; keeping the impact of all other variables fixed, male respondents were likely to give a score 0.8 points lower than women on the 0–10 scale. The last two demographic variables, education, measured on the basis of school-leaving age, and income, whether a respondent earned between £20,000 and £39,999 or over £40,000, appeared to have no effect on how problematic the behaviours were perceived to be.

Among the political involvement variables, identifying with a certain party seemed to have little impact on perceptions, with two exceptions. The exceptions were Conservative party identifiers, who were more likely to think that the misuse of expenses was a big problem, and Liberal Democrat identifiers, who were more likely to think that politicians making promises they know they cannot keep was less of a problem. Conservative identifiers may well have associated the misuse of allowances with several Labour ministers who had recently been accused of misconduct, notably Home Secretary Jacqui Smith and Employment Minister Tony McNulty. The tendency among Liberal

Democrat identifiers to attribute importance to politicians making insincere promises is less easy to interpret.

What is interesting, however, is the impact of scandal familiarity: it had a significant effect on respondents' perceptions in respect of three of the four behaviours. Familiarity seemed to make an individual think that the misuse of allowances, politicians' inability to give straight answers to questions and politicians making insincere promises were more problematic. The exception was bribery, where there was no significant relationship between scandal familiarity and the perception that bribe-taking was a very big problem. The absence of a relationship may well reflect the fact that most political scandals in Britain do not involve such obviously corrupt behaviour. Finally, respondents' interest in politics seemed to have the opposite effect on perceptions of problematic behaviour. With the exception of politicians not giving straight answers, the more attentive individuals were less likely to say that certain behaviours were a problem. Attentiveness had a particularly strong impact on perceptions of bribe taking. Those who were more attentive to politics were much less likely to think bribery was a problem.

Among the attitudinal variables, individuals who valued honesty in politicians more than competence were more likely to see as problematic all the behaviours described. This finding suggests that how much of a problem patterns of behaviour are thought to be reflects both the perceived prevalence of such behaviour and the values that individuals have regarding such behaviour. Someone who thinks that honesty is very important may well think a single act of dishonesty to be very worrying. Someone who does not prize honesty so highly may not be worried by even multiple instances of dishonest behaviour. The personal ethics variable had a significant relationship only in respect of the misuse of expenses. Interestingly, the more personally upright individuals thought this behaviour to be less of a problem, when we might have expected the relationship to be inverted. Respondents who had higher levels of inter-personal trust, who were more trusting of fellow citizens, were also less likely to see most of the behaviours described as being problematic, with the exception of politicians not giving straight answers. A respondent's ideology only had a significant effect on responses to the promises question; this finding may be explained by a tendency among people who want lower taxes and lower levels of government spending to be more frustrated that promises to this effect are rarely delivered. Finally, judgements about the state of the economy, particularly judgements to the effect that the economy had deteriorated, significantly affected perceptions of how problematic misusing allowances, not giving straight answers and making empty promises, were. It may well be that perceptions of politicians' honesty are particularly sensitive to an economic downturn.

Discussion

The main findings reported in this article are broadly in line with what we might have expected: most people take some notice of scandals, and most people, when forced to choose, seem to prize honesty in their politicians over competence. The multivariate analysis also suggests an interesting relationship between political attentiveness and familiarity with scandals and the extent to which misconduct is perceived to be a problem. While attentiveness or interest in public affairs leads to greater familiarity, it does not by itself lead to a greater concern with misbehaviour. If anything, attentiveness seems to condition citizens into being more relaxed about reported misconduct. Familiarity with past scandals, in contrast, has the opposite effect. Meanwhile, the state of the economy also seems to affect perceptions. It may well be the case that prosperity runs counter to Puritanism: the public may be more tolerant of misbehaviour during the good times than the bad.

Further research is clearly needed if we are to understand fully the dynamics of public opinion. We might, for instance, try to disaggregate more clearly citizens' concern with ethics and conduct from policy outcomes and other aspects of 'process space'.³⁵ More research is also needed to investigate the impact of media coverage over the longer term, as well as how individuals make sense of and respond to specific types of wrongdoing.

The simple message for the time being, however, is that standards of conduct in public life matter. Politicians should always think about how their actions are likely to be judged. If they breach those standards, they should be mindful of the consequences. At the constituency level, politicians who misconduct themselves face de-selection by their local party associations or even rejection at the ballot box by voters. A May 2009 Ipsos MORI poll found that 52 per cent of respondents said they would vote for a different party's candidate if the candidate for the party they would normally vote for was a sitting MP who had been caught up in the expenses scandal.³⁶ At the national level, party leaders are very conscious of the damage that sleazy and disreputable behaviour may wreak on their party's image. Their concerns can be seen in the punishments meted out to a few transgressors. Ironically, the local response may differ from the national. In a July 2009 by-election, the voters of Norwich North appeared to come down harshly on the Labour party at least in part because it had come down so hard on the outgoing MP, Dr Ian Gibson. Local constituents may want to punish erring MPs; but they seem to respond badly to other politicians doing so.

What all this means for the broader issue of public confidence in the political system is hard to say. Most politicians, as well as public bodies like the CSPL, usually, if unknowingly, follow David Easton's distinction between 'specific' and 'diffuse' political support.³⁷ Specific

support relates to political authorities—the holders of political office—and what they do. Diffuse support, in contrast, is more fundamental in nature and is directed at basic aspects of the political system, such as governmental institutions and the wider political community. It represents ‘more enduring bonds’ and makes ‘it possible for members to oppose the incumbents of offices and yet retain respect for the offices themselves, for the way in which they are ordered, and for the community of which they are a part.’³⁸ Only time will reveal the long-term impact of the 2009 expenses scandal on diffuse support. MPs at Westminster only had to wait until the general election to ascertain the impact of the scandal on voters’ specific support for them.

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- 25 The precise wording of the question was: 'Some people say that it is more important to have elected politicians who are honest, even if they are not always successful and hard-working. Others say that it is more important to have politicians who are successful and hard-working, even if they are not always honest. Using the scale below – where 1 means it is more important to have honest politicians and 4 means it is more important to have successful and hard-working politicians – where would you place yourself?'
- 26 Redlawsk and McCann, 'Popular Interpretations of "Corruption" and Their Partisan Consequences'; M. Johnston, 'Right and Wrong in American Politics: Popular Conceptions of Corruption', *Polity*, 18, 1986, 367–91.
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- 30 The scale was reliable by conventional standards with a Cronbach alpha of 0.731.
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- 34 The questions were: 'Thinking for a moment about whether people with whom you have contact can be trusted please use the 1–5 scale to indicate your view where 1 means they definitely can be trusted

and 5 means they definitely cannot be trusted'; 'Would you say that most of the time people you come into contact with try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?' and 'Do you think that most people you come into contact with would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?' The Cronbach alpha for this scale was 0.777, which meant that the scale, based on a number of different variables, was internally consistent and reliable by conventional standards.

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