# 1 *Why study perceptions of politicians' conduct?*

> We all have standards we agree to. We agree you should not lie, hide anything, use public money for yourself . . . that goes all the way through politics, it's just a matter of enforcing it.
>
> (Female focus group participant, Hackney)

The May 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal was a remarkable episode in British politics. Day after day, the newspapers, led by the *Daily Telegraph*, were filled with lurid details of MPs' past expenses claims, many of which had been made in contravention of the spirit, if not the letter, of the rules (Winnett and Raynor 2009). The remorseless media coverage suggested widespread impropriety at the heart of democratic life and triggered an explosion of apparent outrage at politicians' conduct. One seasoned commentator compared the goings-on with the condition of British politics in the late eighteenth century and described them as 'the new corruption' (King 2009). For another, the expenses scandal was 'the biggest crisis of legitimacy for a century' to hit the country (Kenny 2009: 504).

Perhaps inevitably, the expenses scandal reinvigorated a long-standing debate about standards in British public life and what people could expect of their politicians. It also led to the creation of yet another ethical regulator, in this case the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), whose grand title masked a narrower remit of paying and overseeing MPs' salaries and expenses. The scandal was, in both respects, merely the latest in a series of similar events that have occurred recently in Britain. In keeping with an established pattern, the shock and outrage that greeted the allegations of misconduct were soon followed by introspection and then institutional reforms intended to restore public confidence in politics. But if previous reforms were anything to go by, the latest changes were unlikely to transform levels of trust. Britons did not suddenly come to see their

elected representatives as dishonest in May 2009; they had long regarded them in this way (Newell 2008).

This book is about improving our understanding of the prevailing mood of disaffection with British politicians. More specifically, it is about how citizens evaluate the integrity and propriety of politicians' conduct and elite political practice, and what consequences those evaluations have for the health of the political system. It is also about why a large proportion of existing institutional attempts to promote high ethical standards of conduct often miss the point. The book focuses primarily on the ethics and conduct of Westminster-based politicians, especially Members of Parliament, who, collectively, constitute the population of Britain's only directly elected national representative institution. Politicians in general are one of the least trusted groups in British society, as shown in Figure 1.1. In regular honesty contests, they lag far behind other groups, such as doctors, teachers, judges and even the ordinary man or woman in the street, and compete with journalists for the reputational wooden spoon. Yet politicians are absolutely essential to the smooth working of British representative democracy and perform crucial governmental functions. Ministers direct the government of the day. MPs represent us,

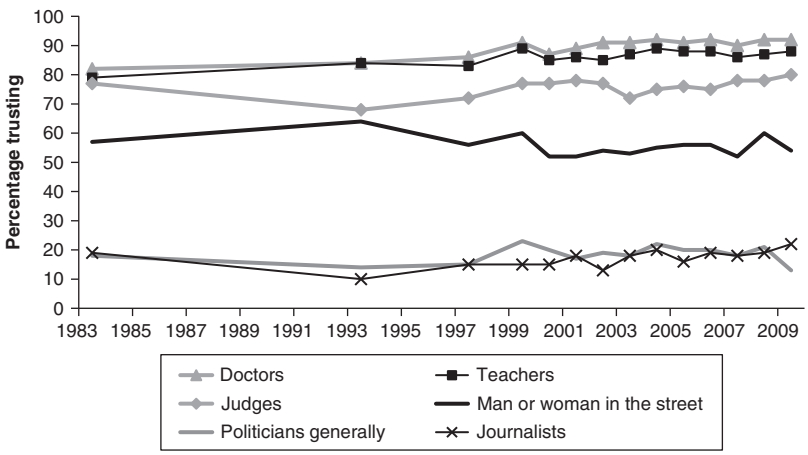


**Figure 1.1** Percentage willing to trust members of different groups to tell the truth

Source: Ipsos MORI, 'Trust in Professions', available at: www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=15&view=wide.

intervening with government on our behalf, scrutinising government actions and conferring popular assent on binding measures of public policy. Their conduct and their collective reputation matter.

While popular perceptions of elected representatives' conduct are much lamented, they are ill-understood. Anyone seeking to address this puzzle could follow several lines of inquiry. They could focus on citizens' expectations and the ethical standards they demand from their politicians. They could examine politicians' actual behaviour, including changing patterns of misconduct. They could investigate the role of the media and citizens' exposure to mediated accounts of politicians' misconduct. They could assess citizens' personal experience of dealing with politicians and their first-hand knowledge of misconduct. Last, but not least, they could analyse politicians' own understandings, and possible misunderstandings, of how citizens judge them. After all, when politicians fail to see things from others' points of view, it weakens their ability to act according to the standards that others demand of them and to respond effectively to their own ethical lapses.

The following pages touch upon all these issues. However, the book's primary purpose is to improve our knowledge and understanding of what drives individual citizens' beliefs about the ethics and behaviour of those holding public office. In particular, the book aims to shed light on what citizens actually think is proper conduct for politicians, and what they think is morally dubious, but perhaps unavoidable. It aims to investigate how much weight citizens attach to misconduct in public office compared with other considerations when they make judgements about actors and institutions, and how citizens respond to allegations of impropriety. Perhaps most importantly, the book aims to explore how citizens' evaluations affect the way they act in and engage with – or fail to engage with – social and political life.

## The importance of perceptions

There is an obvious challenge to any research that focuses on perceptions of politicians' conduct: that a study of actual conduct is more important and pressing than a study of mere perceptions. After all, the integrity of office holders and the way they perform their duties can directly affect the quality of governance in a political system. A disregard for accepted standards can lead, among other things, to the misappropriation of public money, to the appointment of

incompetent or unqualified people to positions of authority and influence, to decisions being taken for improper reasons, and to the neglect of pressing and important matters of public policy (Herrick 2003: 6–7). Yet citizens' perceptions do matter, as do their conceptions of political ethics, by which we mean the rules of conduct recognised as appropriate to political leaders. Both are an integral part of the fabric of any society. Shared norms and values play a central role in facilitating communication, enabling cooperation towards common goals, and articulating shared identities. They also help to define the content of accepted standards. Moreover, citizens' ethical evaluations of their politicians – often studied in the behavioural literature under the rubric of regime support, political support or public trust – are of fundamental importance in structuring public engagement with the political system. In this respect, citizens' perceptions constitute a reality of their own.

There are a number of reasons for wanting to improve our understanding of the present reality. For a start, public concerns about the honesty and integrity of elected office holders are thought to be one aspect – if only one aspect – of a wider malaise surrounding democratic politics in Britain and elsewhere (Stoker 2006, 2011; Hay 2007; Riddell 2011; Flinders 2012). As the literature on comparative regime support has demonstrated, this 'anti-politics' mood has a number of attitudinal and behavioural symptoms, notably declining levels of turnout and expressed support for democratic institutions (Pharr and Putnam 2000; Seligson 2002; Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Bowler and Karp 2004; Dalton 2004; Chang and Chu 2006; Birch 2010; Norris 2011). It is a discomfiting development for advocates of democratic participation. The health of any democracy is in part dependent on citizens having confidence and trust in those who rule them. Though a certain level of popular scepticism is healthy and may well strengthen democracy, democratic politics invariably suffer when there are high levels of cynicism and distrust (Norris 1999, 2011; Warren 1999; Hetherington 2005). Citizens who are very mistrustful of their political leaders are likely to disengage from politics, which has the potential to breed a vicious cycle of mistrust and further disengagement (Wroe *et al.* 2013). In turn, the mechanisms of accountability that are the foundation of any democratic system may be eroded and may potentially stop working altogether.

Political trust is a broad and multifaceted concept. Thus, a recent book on the subject defines it in general terms as 'the degree to which

people perceive that government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations' (Hetherington 2005: 9). Not surprisingly, there are many (potentially legitimate) reasons why citizens mistrust politicians. Politicians may be incompetent or inefficient, or they may have opposing ideological beliefs or belong to parties that represent divergent interests. It is entirely understandable, for instance, if left-wing voters are less inclined to trust right-wing governments. Trust may also reflect citizens' moral beliefs or the inadequacy of existing mechanisms for protecting them from betrayal (Fisher *et al.* 2010). While our work contributes to the wider academic literature on political trust, we are interested in it only insofar as it reflects citizens' ethical evaluations of conduct and the perceived integrity of politicians as trustees. If the literature is to move beyond generalised talk about distrust in politicians, it is important to begin focusing on what citizens actually expect of their elected politicians' conduct, how they judge them, and what shapes their general perceptions of integrity in politics.

A better knowledge of citizens' ideas about political ethics and integrity may also be of practical benefit to politicians. A major backdrop to this book is the comparatively recent enthusiasm in Britain for codified standards in political life, and for more and more ethics regulation. The demand for such measures achieved an institutional breakthrough in the 1990s, prompted by a moral panic about 'sleaze' and standards of conduct in public life (Oliver 1997; Behnke 2002). Codes of conduct and official investigators now extend throughout the British political system, the product of attempts by politicians to bolster public confidence in their integrity, as well as to improve actual standards of conduct. Most ethics reforms have followed high-profile scandals, as exemplified by what happened in the wake of the 2009 expenses scandal. Yet most such reforms have failed to achieve all their objectives insofar as they have not led to a pronounced improvement in perceptions of politicians' conduct. Efforts to 'scandal-proof' British political institutions have thus been no more successful than similar attempts in the United States, where a growing number of rules and regulations have done little to bolster public confidence or prevent the types of scandal that undermine it (Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996; Mackenzie 2002). By improving our knowledge of what political integrity means to ordinary citizens, we may learn more about why, despite the raft of measures introduced in recent decades, public perceptions of politicians' integrity continue to be so critical.

Improving our understanding of citizens' poor evaluations of elected representatives may also point the way towards a clearer view of other political attitudes and behaviours, in particular the importance of leaders' 'moral authority'. From voting in elections, through obeying the law, to participating in socially beneficial activities, such as recycling and undertaking voluntary work, politicians need to persuade individuals to act in ways that they might not otherwise do. On the one hand, politicians lead by example, and their standards of conduct send signals about what is acceptable behaviour throughout society. On the other hand, their ability to provide public leadership relies on some measure of legitimacy and moral authority, which in turn rests on perceptions of their integrity. There has been considerable debate in recent years among policy analysts over how people can be persuaded to modify their behaviour voluntarily (Thaler and Sunstein 2008; John *et al.* 2009). If it is the case that poor ethical evaluations of elected officials impede the ability of political actors to 'nudge' citizens in desired directions – or to accept more noticeable personal sacrifices – this may have significant implications for a number of long-term policy challenges, for example, the need to tackle environmental degradation or the problems posed by an aging population.

The basic argument set out in the following pages is essentially threefold. The first part of our argument is that most members of the British public tend to have a more expansive understanding of political ethics than is reflected in institutional rules, codes and cultures. Citizens tend to construe more broadly the scope for understanding elite behaviour in ethical terms. Or, put another way, what many politicians take for granted as 'normal politics', many citizens will think about in terms of right and wrong, and make their judgements accordingly. In this sense, the present study adds further weight to the claims made by others that stress the disjuncture between official preoccupations and citizens' own conception of ethics (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2004).

There has long been a tendency among political actors and decision makers to limit the potential scope for applying ethical principles to political conduct. In official practice and discourse, as well as everyday politics, the space set aside for ethical consideration is small, and it has usually centred on concerns about conflicts of interest, whether apparent or actual. Usually, the conflict of interest dilemma is framed even more narrowly as a clash between the proper administration or

exercise of public office – which is seen as a public trust – and an office holder's private financial interests (Stark 2000). Writing specifically about legislative ethics, Bruce Jennings (1985: 151) describes this tendency to focus narrowly on financial conflicts of interest as 'moral minimalism' in which: 'Financial disclosure and conflict of interest are virtually the only issues given much attention ... and the prohibition against the use of office for personal financial gain is the only ethical principle that has been clearly defined.' Needless to say, institutional norms and socialisation processes help to inculcate politicians into this more 'minimalist' mindset.

Yet, while official practice is often to view the scope of ethics in minimalist terms, the public tends to extend ethical judgements to more aspects of elite behaviour. To be sure, the use and misuse of public office for private gain is accommodated within this broader conception of integrity, but so too is the discursive dimension of political conduct. Indeed, in the public's mind, the scope of political ethics also embraces the conduct of politics itself and especially how politicians relate to and engage with them. The boundaries of the ethical in this broader conception thus embrace the words that politicians use, the promises they make and break, and the extent to which elite behaviour accords with the standards that politicians themselves claim.[1]

The second part of our argument, which is related to the first, is that there is a pronounced gap between citizens' aspirations as to how their politicians should behave and their perceptions of how politicians actually behave. The idea of such gaps is not a new one and has been applied recently to public attitudes towards specific institutions and even democracy itself (Flinders and Kelso 2011; Norris 2011; Flinders 2012). It is, however, especially useful for understanding public attitudes towards politicians' conduct. The gap that we identify and flesh out in the following pages can be explained by a number of factors, both systemic and cognitive. One of these factors relates to citizens' somewhat broader conception of political ethics than official and institutional preoccupations, as noted. Because politicians generally see things differently, it is hard for them to be responsive to public preferences or to alter their behaviour. Put simply, politicians often

[1] As we will see in Chapter 4, the broader conception of political integrity does not generally extend to such things as politicians' sex lives or drinking habits. Most individuals tend to draw the familiar distinction between purely private behaviour and public behaviour, and to discount the former.

appear unethical, since empty or broken promises and evasive answers tend to be part and parcel of 'normal politics' for them, but are a question of integrity for citizens. Most elected representatives are career politicians and want to get ahead in politics. They have to play a game that the public dislikes and have little incentive not to do so.

Another factor that helps us to account for the perceptions gap relates to the nature of the modern media and contemporary coverage of political conduct. The relationship between politicians and journalists has always been uneasy, even if both sides belong to the same 'political class' (Oborne 2007), but it has arguably become more antagonistic in recent decades. Many journalists take great delight in highlighting failings in politicians' conduct, partly because they think it is their democratic duty, partly because it sells newspapers or increases viewing audiences. Moreover, in the era of 'sound bite' politics, politicians are trained to get across a pre-prepared answer rather than to answer the questions asked: politicians are being trained in a way that makes them appear dishonest to citizens. The fact that they mostly prefer to risk not answering questions rather than appearing unprepared or ineloquent is an obvious problem. But this is what they are often told to do by their parties. The current structure of the media environment is thus geared towards driving a wedge between citizens' preferences and perceptions, which suggests a variation on the older arguments about 'media malaise' – the idea that the media should be responsible for negative attitudes towards politics.[2]

Yet another factor has to do with human psychology: most individuals, when presented with new information, tend to reach a judgement that is consistent with their prior beliefs and values. When it comes to politicians, cynicism and mistrust are deeply ingrained, and every new case of alleged misconduct will affirm most people's pre-existing negative views. At the same time, people also tend to generalise from more salient incidents, such as reported cases of misconduct. Good conduct, which is rarely reported, will almost inevitably be discounted. In other words, citizens are psychologically inclined to project dishonesty and malign intentions onto politicians. They are almost predisposed to mistrust.

The third and final part our argument is perhaps the most straightforward and relates to the consequences of citizens' negative

[2] For a review of the literature on this topic, see Kenneth Newton (1999).

evaluations. As we show, these evaluations matter. The views that many citizens hold about standards of conduct in Britain and politicians' integrity lower their enthusiasm for participating in formal democratic processes, their willingness to comply with the law, and their susceptibility to political leadership.

There are precedents in the academic literature for each of our claims, but their combination here represents a major advance in developing a full account of citizens' perceptions of politicians' conduct. The result is the first general account of popular understandings of political ethics in the British context. It offers insights into what is perceived to constitute ethical behaviour among different categories of political actor, the dimensions that structure respondents' values and evaluations, how people go about forming judgements of their leaders' integrity, and the relationship between popular understandings of political conduct and other social and political beliefs, including partisan support.

## Methods and data

There are many ways to study popular perceptions of political objects, including politicians' conduct, from laboratory experiments to participant observation. This book has opted for the stock tool of the political scientist, the representative survey, but with a couple of twists. Our surveys were sandwiched between a series of focus groups, which enabled us both to hone our survey questions and to explore the results in greater detail. Our surveys also embedded several experiments that allowed us to simulate a wide range of different practical situations. This combination of qualitative and quantitative, observational and experimental methods enabled us to approach our research questions from several different angles.

The core of the research project on which this study is based is a three-wave representative survey of British citizens. The unique character of the survey was a product of both design and serendipity. The advent of the two-year British Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (B/CCAP) made it possible to administer an extended range of questions to the same respondents at regular intervals between 2008 and 2010. The project, which was run by a team of researchers at the universities of Oxford and Stanford, included a total of approximately 10,000 respondents, who were all asked to complete a baseline survey in late 2008. B/CCAP was designed so that individual teams of

researchers could 'hire' sections of this sample and ask them questions at various points before the 2010 general election. We 'hired' a tranche of approximately 1,000 respondents, who were asked to answer our questions at three points in time: spring 2009 (B/CCAP's wave 2); autumn 2009 (B/CCAP's wave 3, immediately before the party conference season); and spring 2010 (B/CCAP's wave 5, fielded in the run-up to the general election).[3] Finally, all 10,000 respondents who formed part of the B/CCAP panel were invited to take part in a post-election wave, fielded in June 2010.

The project's multi-wave design enabled us to trace the views of individuals over time and to probe their responses to events.[4] For this purpose, a number of key questions were posed in all three bespoke waves of the survey, while other sets of questions, including a number of survey experiments, were designed to be asked only once. The resulting dataset thus includes data from five points in time, with the questions that formed the core of this study included in the spring 2009, autumn 2009 and spring 2010 waves. Details of the questions we employed from the B/CCAP surveys, and how we constructed our variables, can be found in the Appendix.

The element of serendipity in our research involved the timing of the first wave of the survey, which was fielded in late April 2009, only days before the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper began its daily coverage of MPs' past expenses claims in May 2009. The timing of our surveys meant that it was possible to measure the impact of the scandal by comparing respondents' views before it took place with those expressed in the following autumn and then again twelve months later.

The surveys were conducted online by the YouGov polling organisation. Some readers may wonder whether online surveys can achieve the same level of scientific accuracy as the more traditional face-to-face

[3] The spring 2009 wave was completed between 21 April and 6 May, the autumn 2009 wave between 23 and 28 September, and the spring 2010 wave between 23 April and 4 May.

[4] While the panel design provides us with rich individual-level data, the limited timeframe inevitably imposes constraints on our study. In particular, we are unable to explore long-term changes in citizens' beliefs about political ethics and their attitudes towards politicians' conduct. We are also unable to explore how such beliefs and attitudes respond to changing elite-level practices, as well as the importance of historical events, such as the Blair government's alleged misuse of secret intelligence to justify Britain's participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. See Whiteley *et al.* (2013).