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# *Ethics and Integrity in British Politics*

Public perceptions of political ethics are at the heart of current political debate. Drawing on original data, this book is the first general account of popular understandings of political ethics in contemporary British politics. It offers new insights into how citizens understand political ethics and integrity, and how they form judgements of their leaders. By locating these insights against the backdrop of contemporary British political ethics, the book shows how current institutional preoccupations with standards of conduct all too often miss the mark. While the use of official resources is the primary focus of much regulation, politicians' consistency, frankness and sincerity, which citizens tend to see in terms of right and wrong, are treated as 'normal politics'. The authors suggest that new approaches may need to be adopted if public confidence in politicians' integrity is to be restored.

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# Ethics and Integrity in British Politics

## How Citizens Judge their Politicians' Conduct and Why it Matters

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# *Preface and acknowledgements*

It is always tempting at the end of a project to reflect back on its origins and progress. The origins of this book can be pinpointed to a chance conversation on a stairwell in the Department of Government at the University of Essex. One of us was an established member of staff there, undertaking comparative research into electoral corruption. The other had recently completed a PhD thesis on standards of conduct in the British House of Commons. Both of us were thinking about political ethics, albeit from different perspectives, and both of us expressed the view that academic researchers had so far paid insufficient attention to public attitudes on the topic. Some months later an opportunity presented itself to participate in the British Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (B/CCAP), a collaborative multi-wave survey led by Ray Duch, Simon Jackman and Lynn Vavreck, and to explore, in a small way, some of the issues we felt ought to be addressed. A chance conversation thus became a small self-contained project, which became a slightly larger project as we secured funding to participate in additional B/CCAP waves and to conduct several focus groups.

Little did we know when we began planning the project in the autumn of 2008 that Britain was about to be rocked by one of the largest and most unsettling political scandals of recent times. Scandal is, of course, no stranger to British politics. But rarely does a single scandal embrace virtually the whole political class, as it did in the late spring of 2009. Back in the 1990s, a number of 'sleaze' allegations, some serious, some not so serious, had besmirched and embroiled the Conservative Party and, in turn, prompted the creation of a new ethics infrastructure across the public sector. In 2009, allegations about MPs' use and systematic abuse of their allowances and expenses besmirched and embroiled the whole of national political life. Like many others, we were taken aback by the force and power of the media frenzy that followed the publication of leaked details of MPs' expenses by the



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*Daily Telegraph*. Like the pounding of an artillery barrage, each day brought new information about apparent abuses, which only served to fuel the fires of popular outrage and shock. Many colleagues were quick to tell us that our project was now 'very topical' when we told them what we were up to. We could not disagree. Yet, as we were equally quick to point out, our project could have been described as very topical at almost any point over the last two decades.

The book we have written is very much an academic work, but we have not written it just for academics. The subject matter is important for everyone, for citizens and politicians, for the represented and representatives alike, and we have sought to make our findings as accessible as possible for a wider audience. Those interested mainly in the book's practical implications can even skip straight to Chapter 8, though a brief perusal of Chapter 1 will help such readers to understand how we reached these findings.

What did we find out over the course of the project? Our research confirmed, if any confirmation was needed, that politicians' motives and conduct are distrusted. It also shattered our prior, and perhaps naive, belief that individuals' ethical judgements were more balanced and measured than survey responses suggested them to be. Most importantly, our research also revealed that current elite institutional preoccupations with ethics, if not individual elites' understandings, often miss the mark. In line with most contemporary political codes of conduct, citizens think that politicians should not advance private interests or be motivated by personal gain, and most citizens think that sexual transgressions and other traditional personal vices should not be a matter of public concern. At the same time, however, citizens see politicians' consistency, frankness and sincerity in terms of right and wrong, no less so than the reconciliation of public and private interests. While financial integrity is the focus of much ethics regulation, what might be termed verbal or 'discursive integrity' is not. What many citizens see in ethical terms, politicians tend to see as 'normal politics', and as political leaders go about their daily business, they earn the public's opprobrium. There are no easy solutions, to be sure, but politicians do have some scope for responding to this state of affairs. And they should do so. Politics demands a certain amount of verbal dexterity, but democracy is the greatest loser if politicians' conduct in the pursuit of power creates a desert of public engagement, goodwill and trust.

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We have incurred many debts over the course of the project on which this volume is based. Our biggest gratitude goes to the British Academy (grant No. SG-52322), and the Economic and Social Research Council (grant No. RES-000-22-3459), for the funding that enabled us to collect the original survey and focus group data that form the core of our empirical evidence. We are grateful to Ray Duch, Iñaki Sagarzazu, Akitaka Matsuo and the rest of the B/CCAP team for guidance and support. We also owe a special debt to YouGov, and in particular to Joe Twyman and Ellen Vandenbogaerde, for their help with the survey data.

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Although the research on which this book is based grew out of a chance conversation in the Department of Government at the University of Essex, changing professional circumstances have meant that it has been housed in a variety of institutions. In addition to Essex, we owe debts to the supportive intellectual environments provided by the Constitution Unit at University College London, the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London, and the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

We also wish to thank a number of friends and colleagues for comments on earlier versions of our work, including Gavin Drewry, Oliver Heath, Donald Searing, Gerry Stoker and Paul Whiteley. In time-honoured tradition, it is only fair to absolve them from any errors of fact or interpretation. These remain ours alone.

Finally, we wish to thank Isabelle and Keith for their patience these past few years. Isabelle has been a constant reminder that there is more to life than researching, teaching and administration. The same goes for Keith, who has shown forbearance in enduring yet another book.

Nicholas Allen
Sarah Birch

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