Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2014

March 2015

Prepared for the Committee on Standards in Public Life by Chris Prosser and the Committee's Research Advisory Board, using data collected by GFK NOP as part of the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement.

Contents

Executive Summary

In order to provide some continuity with the previous biennial surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life, the Committee on Standards in Public Life inserted six questions that had been asked in the biennial survey series into the Hansard Society's Audit of Democratic Engagement survey. This report analyses the results of this survey and compares the results with those found in the Committee's previous surveys.

On the whole respondents had a fairly negative views about the standards of conduct of people in public life: few respondents thought the standards of conduct of those in people life were high, more respondents thought standards had got worse in recent years, and most respondents were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life or that wrongdoing would be uncovered or punished by the authorities. Opinions about these topics were more negative than those found in any of the Committee's biennial surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life. Comparison with responses to some of the questions asked in the Hansard Society's Audit of Democratic Engagement shows that opinions about standards of conduct in public life are associated with opinions about the functioning of Britain's political system more generally, suggesting a link between wider dissatisfaction with politics and attitudes towards conduct in public life.

Headline findings

- **Overall standards of conduct of public office holders**
  - More respondents rated the standards of conduct of people in public life as low (36%) than rated them as high (18%). This is the first time in a survey commissioned by the Committee that those who said they thought standards were low outnumbered those who thought they were high.
- **Change in standards of public office holders**
  - More respondents thought the standards of conduct of public office holders had got worse (36%) than had improved (16%).
- **Confidence that authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life**
  - Most respondents (56%) were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life.
- **Confidence that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Most respondents (61%) were not confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office.
- **Confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Most respondents (58%) were confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office.
- **Confidence that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong**
  - Most respondents were not confident that people in public office caught doing wrong would be punished (63%).
- **Satisfaction with Britain's political system and public attitudes towards conduct in public life**
  - A consistent pattern emerged across several variables measuring different aspects of satisfaction with Britain's political system. Those who were positive about Britain's

political system also gave more positive answers about standards of conduct in public life, suggesting an association between attitudes towards the political system in general and perceptions of standards of conduct in public life.

Comparison with previous surveys

- **Overall standards of conduct of public office holders**
  - Fewer people said that overall standards of conduct of people in public life were high and more people said that standards were low than recorded in any of the 2004-2012 biennial surveys.
- **Change in standards of public office holders**
  - The proportion of respondents who thought things had improved (16%) is lower than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
  - The proportion of respondents who thought things had got worse (36%) is a slight decrease on the proportions recorded in the 2008-12 surveys.
- **Confidence that authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life**
  - People were generally less confident in the authorities' commitment to upholding standards than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
- **Confidence that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Levels of confidence that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing were lower than in any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
- **Confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Levels of confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing were lower than in any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
- **Confidence that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong**
  - Levels of confidence that wrongdoers will be punished were lower than in any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.

Demographic differences

Very few demographic differences emerged in the analysis, and the small number of differences that are apparent do not suggest a consistent pattern of attitudes towards standards in public life between demographic groups.

- **Political affiliation**
  - Conservative party supporters were more likely than non-voters to say they were confident that authorities were committed to upholding standards, that authorities and the media would uncover wrongdoing, and that the authorities would punish those caught doing wrong.
  - Labour supporters were also more likely than non-voters to say they had confidence in the media to uncover wrongdoing and to be confident that wrongdoers would be punished.
  - Liberal Democrat supporters were much more likely to say they thought overall standards of conduct were high.

- UKIP voters more likely to say they thought standards had got worse compared to a few years ago. They were also more likely than non-voters to be confident that the media would uncover wrongdoing.

- **Gender**
  - Female respondents were less likely to think standards of conduct were high, were more likely to think standards had got worse, and less likely to have confidence in the commitment of authorities to uphold standards.
- **Ethnicity**
  - Ethnic minority respondents were more likely to think that standards were high, were less likely to think standards had got worse, and were more confident that authorities would punish wrongdoing.
- **Age**
  - Older respondents (45 and over) were less confident that the authorities were committed to upholding standards than were younger respondents. The oldest respondents (65 and over) were more likely to think that standards of conduct had got worse in recent years.
- **Social Grade**
  - Those in the C2 and DE social grades were less likely to have confidence that the authorities would uncover wrongdoing by those in public office.

Introduction

The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) set out its understanding of the principles of public life in its First Report to the Prime Minister in 1995. The principles identified are: Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty, and Leadership.[1] The Committee takes considerable interest in the general public's understanding of – and attitudes towards – these principles and the extent to which senior public office holders are seen abiding by them.

To understand better the public's attitudes towards standards in public life, between 2004 and 2012 the Committee commissioned five biennial surveys that covered a wide range of questions that examined:

- What the public sees as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour by holders of public office.
- How far the public believes the behaviour of public office holders conforms to these standards. And,
- How confident the public are that public office holders are effectively held responsible and accountable for any unacceptable conduct.[2]

Following the recommendations made in the 2013 Triennial Review of the Committee, it was decided that the 2012 public attitude survey, which was published on 23 September 2013, would be the final stand-alone survey commissioned by the Committee. That survey drew on all four previous surveys to chart changes in attitudes over the past ten years.

To continue to monitor public attitudes towards standards in public life in a way that provides some continuity with previous surveys, the Hansard Society, at the Committee's request, inserted six questions that had previously been asked in the Committee's biennial surveys into their 2014 audit of Political Engagement survey. These questions all asked respondents about their perceptions of the conduct and accountability of public office holders:[3]

- How they saw the overall standards of conduct of public office holders.
- How they thought standards of public office holders had changed compared to a few years ago.
- How confident they were that the authorities in the United Kingdom were committed to upholding standards in public life.
- How confident they were that the authorities or the media would generally uncover wrongdoing by public office holders.

[1] The Seven Principles on Public Life were set out in the First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 1995. These were further clarified in the Committee's fourteenth report, Standards Matter: A review of best practice in promoting good behaviour in public life (Command 8519, January 2013).

[2] For more information about the questions ask in previous surveys see the report of the 2012 survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-attitudes-survey-2012

[3] The following explanatory wording was provided to the survey respondents:

- *By public office holders I mean government ministers, MPs, local councillors and public officials with jobs in government departments, local councils or other public bodies.*
- *By standards of conduct I mean with respect to being honest, acting honourably and trying to make sure they serve the interests of the public.*

- How confident that public office holders caught doing wrong would be punished by the authorities.

This report presents the results from these questions and compares them with the results from the same questions from the Committee's biennial survey series. It then analyses differences in answers between demographic groups in order to better understand the nature and distribution of public perceptions of standards of public life in 2014.

Key findings

Overall, the survey paints a fairly bleak picture of the public's perceptions of standards in public life. More respondents thought overall standards of conduct were low than thought they were high and more said that standards had got worse compared to a few years ago than thought they had improved. The majority of respondents were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life, that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office, or that the authorities would punish those caught doing wrong, though a majority did think the media would generally uncover wrongdoing.

For all six of the questions asked here, opinion about the standards of public life are more negative than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.

Technical information and reporting conventions

GFK NOP conducted 1,123 face-to-face interviews on a representative quota sample of adults aged 18+ in Great Britain (GB) between 20th November and 5th December 2014. The interviews comprised 27 questions (not including demographic information) of which six were asked for the Committee.

Data were weighted to match the profile of the population, using the Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB) and the National Readership Survey (NRS) as sources. Booster interviews were conducted in order to make comparisons with BME, Scottish and Welsh respondents. These interviews are down-weighted in the overall dataset, but as these subgroup sizes are larger, this allows for more robust statistical comparisons between them.

Readers should note that although the survey was conducted only on GB respondents, for consistency with previous surveys, three of the questions asked respondents for their views about issues concerning standards in public life with respect to the United Kingdom as a whole.

It is possible that the change in format and polling company between the 2004-2012 biennial surveys and the 2014 survey has exaggerated the change between previous findings and those of the present survey. Some of the variation between surveys could occur as a result of random sampling variation and differences in methodology between survey companies, rather than any real change in the underlying trend. Whilst it is important to bear this caveat in mind, there are several reasons to think that the results here reflect real differences between surveys: Most of the differences between this and previous surveys are relatively large and outside the generally accepted bounds of random sampling variation (± 3% for a survey of the current sample size). Most of the results continue trends previously identified in the biennial surveys. The current survey and previous surveys have found that there is a very limited effect of demographic differences on responses to questions about standards in public life. This suggests that differences in sampling of population subgroups is likely to have less of an impact on the results of the questions in the current

survey than it would on questions in which there are large demographic differences in attitudes. All of these suggest that the results of the present survey are broadly comparable with those of previous surveys and at least indicative of the current public opinion about the standards of conduct of public office holders.

The Committee has questions in a number of other surveys that are currently in the field or under analysis. These surveys will shed further light on the current state of public attitudes towards conduct in public life and provide useful evidence in assessing the veracity of the findings of the present survey.

1. Overall perceptions of standards in public life

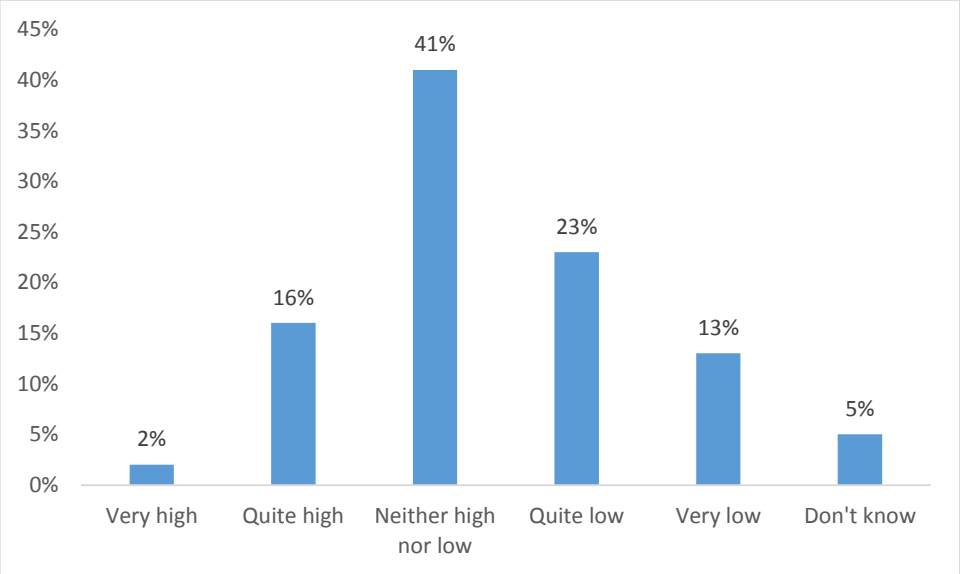
Key findings

- More respondents rated the standards of conduct of people in public life as low (36%) than rated them as high (18%). This is the first time in a survey commissioned by the Committee that those who said they thought standards were low outnumbered those who thought they were high.
- Fewer people said that overall standards of conduct of people in public life were high and more people said that standards were low than recorded in any of the 2004-2012 biennial surveys.

To gauge respondents' general view of standards of conduct of people in public life they were asked, 'Overall, how would you rate the standards of conduct of public office holders in the United Kingdom?' They were offered five response options on a scale that ranged from 'very low' to 'very high'.

In general, the respondents were fairly pessimistic about the standards of conduct of public office holders. As shown in figure 1.1, more respondents thoughts standards were 'quite low' (23%) or 'very low' (13%) than thought they were 'quite high' (16%) or 'very high' (2%). The modal response was one of ambivalence, 41% of respondents said they thought standards were 'neither high nor low'.

Figure 1.1 – Overall, how would you rate the standards of conduct of public office holders in the United Kingdom?

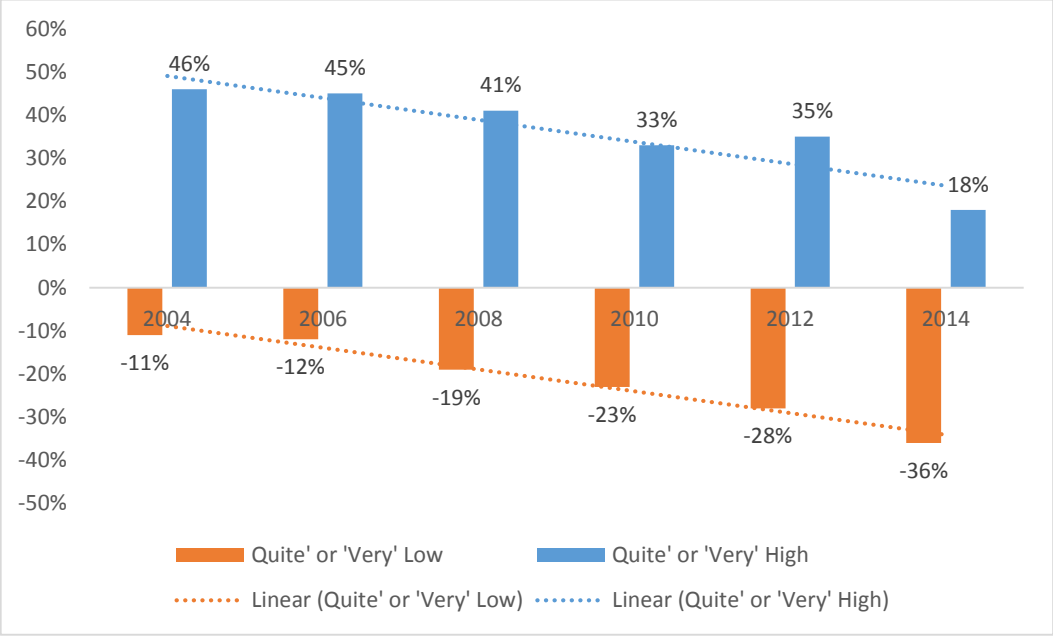


These results suggest that public attitudes towards standards of conduct in public life have become more negative in recent years. As figure 1.2 shows, the results of the 2014 survey continue the previous trends identified in earlier surveys – as shown by the regression lines – of a decrease in the number of those who thought public standards were high, and an increase in those who thought public standards were low.

The 2014 results represent a particularly notable low point in public perceptions of the standards of conduct of public office holders:

- The proportion of those who said they thought standards were high (18%) is barely half the proportion of those who said the same thing in 2012 (35%);
- The proportion of respondents who thought standards were high (18%) is now half that of those who said that they thought standards were low (36%). This is the first time those who said they thought standards were low outnumbered those who thought they were high.

Figure 1.2 – Overall rating of standards of conduct ('Quite' or 'Very' Low and 'Quite' or 'Very' High), 2004-2014



2. How standards compare to a few years ago

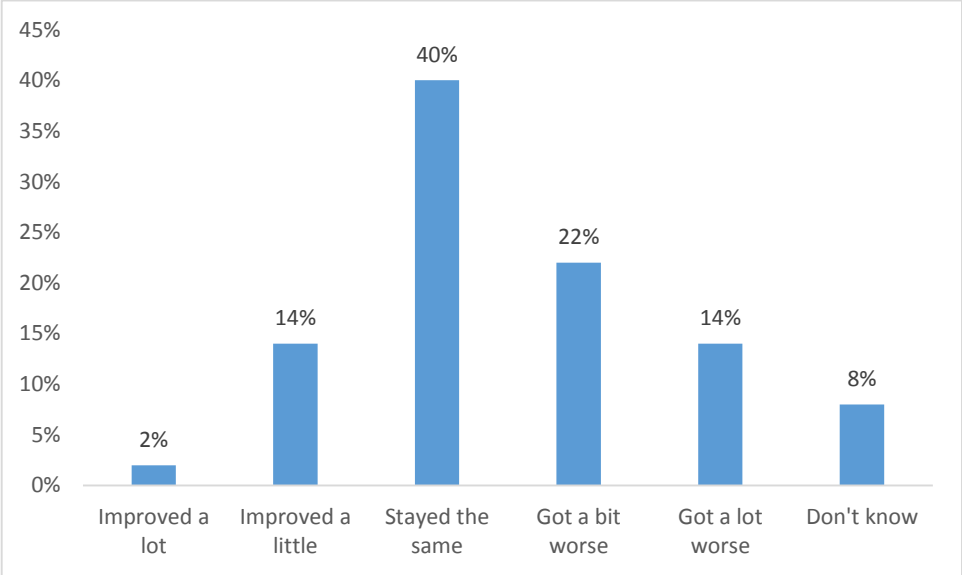
Key findings

- In line with previous surveys, more respondents thought the standards of conduct of public office holders had got worse (36%) than had improved (16%).
- The proportion of respondents who thought things had improved (16%) is lower than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
- The proportion of respondents who thought things had got worse (36%) is a slight decrease on the proportions recorded in the 2008-12 surveys.

To assess how the public saw standards of conduct as changing in recent years respondents were asked: 'And how do you think standards of public office holders in the United Kingdom today compare with a few years ago?' They were offered five response options on a scale that ranged from 'improved a lot' to 'got a lot worse'.

As with perceptions of current standards of conduct of public office holders, respondents offered a fairly negative assessment of how standards of conduct had changed compared with a few years ago. As shown in figure 2.1., more respondents thought standards had got 'a lot worse' (14%) or 'a bit worse' (22%) in recent years than thought they had improved 'a little' (14%) or 'a lot' (2%).

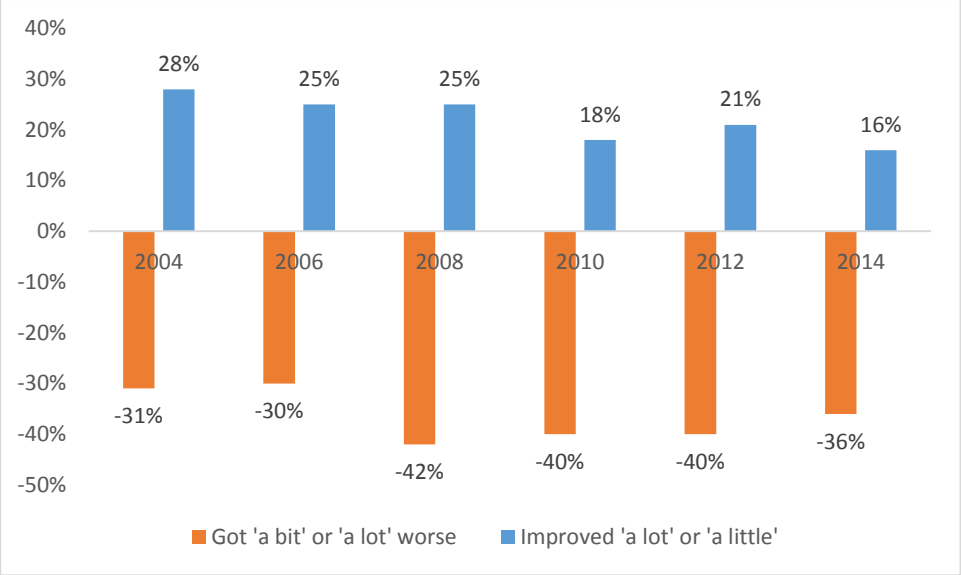
Figure 2.1 – How do you think standards of public office holders in the United Kingdom today compare with a few years ago?



Compared to the previous surveys the results of the 2014 survey offer a mixed picture, as shown in figure 2.2. The proportion of respondents who said that they thought standards of conduct had

improved ‘a lot’ or ‘a little’ was only 16%, the lowest recorded in any survey conducted by the Committee. On the other hand, the proportion who said that they thought standards had got ‘a bit’ or ‘a lot’ worse was 36%, the lowest proportion recorded since 2006, though in line with previous surveys, this was considerably more than thought standards had improved. One way of thinking about this is to say that, while confidence about improvement is low, fewer people think things are getting worse, even though, (see figure 1.2) people have more negative views about overall standards than in previous surveys.

Figure 2.2 – Ratings of how standards of public office holders have changed compared to a few years ago, 2004-2014.



3. Confidence in the authorities' commitment to upholding standards

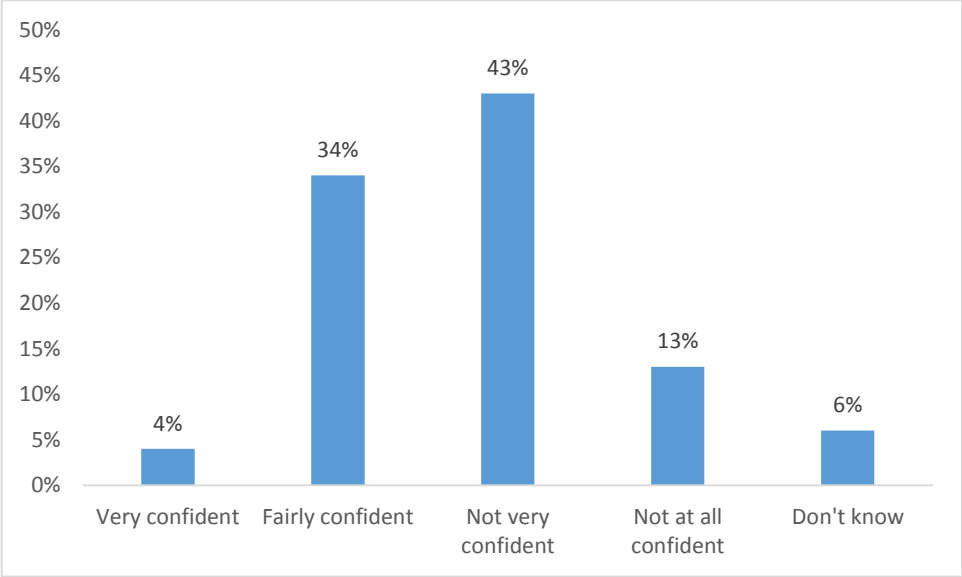
Key findings

- Most respondents were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life (56%).
- Levels of confidence in the authorities' commitment to upholding standards were lower than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.

Respondents were asked 'How confident are you that the authorities in the United Kingdom are committed to upholding standards in public life?' They were offered four response options on a scale that ranged from 'very confident' to 'not at all confident'.

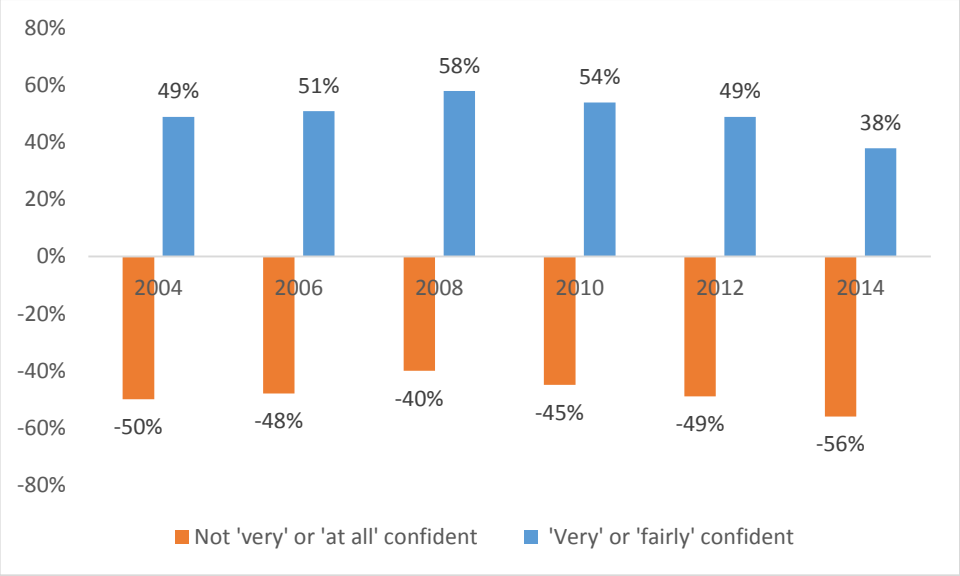
Most respondents were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards, as shown in figure 3.1, 43% said they were 'not very confident' and 13% said they were 'not at all confident'. Only 4% of respondents were 'very confident' that the authorities are committed to upholding standards, whilst 34% said they were 'fairly confident'.

Figure 3.1 – How confident are you that the authorities in the United Kingdom are committed to upholding standards in public life?



These responses continue an existing trend of declining confidence in the commitment of authorities to upholding standards in public life, as shown in figure 3.2. After improving ratings between 2004 and 2008, subsequent surveys have recorded declining confidence, with the results for this year being lower than that recorded in any of the biennial surveys. For the first time more than half of respondents said they were not confident that the authorities were committed to upholding standards in public life.

Figure 3.2 – Confidence that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life, 2004-2014



4. Confidence that wrongdoing will be uncovered

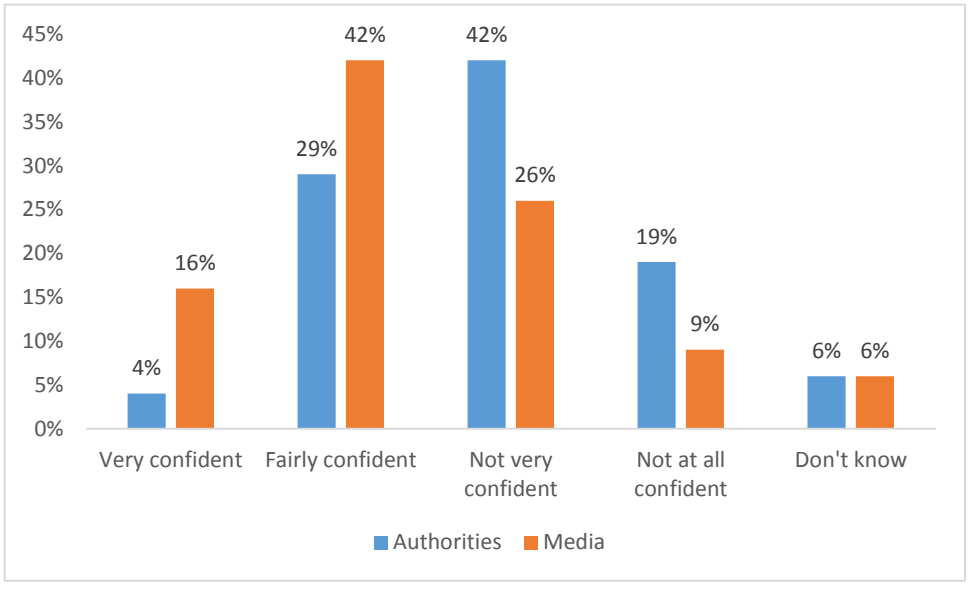
Key findings

- Most respondents were not confident (61%) that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office.
- Contrastingly, most respondents were confident (58%) that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office.
- Levels of confidence that either the authorities or the media will generally uncover wrongdoing were both lower than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.

In order to evaluate the public's confidence that wrongdoing by people in public office would generally be uncovered, respondents were asked two questions. The first asked 'How confident are you that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office?' and the second asked 'How confident are you that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office?' For both questions respondents were offered four response options on a scale that ranged from 'very confident' to 'not at all confident'.

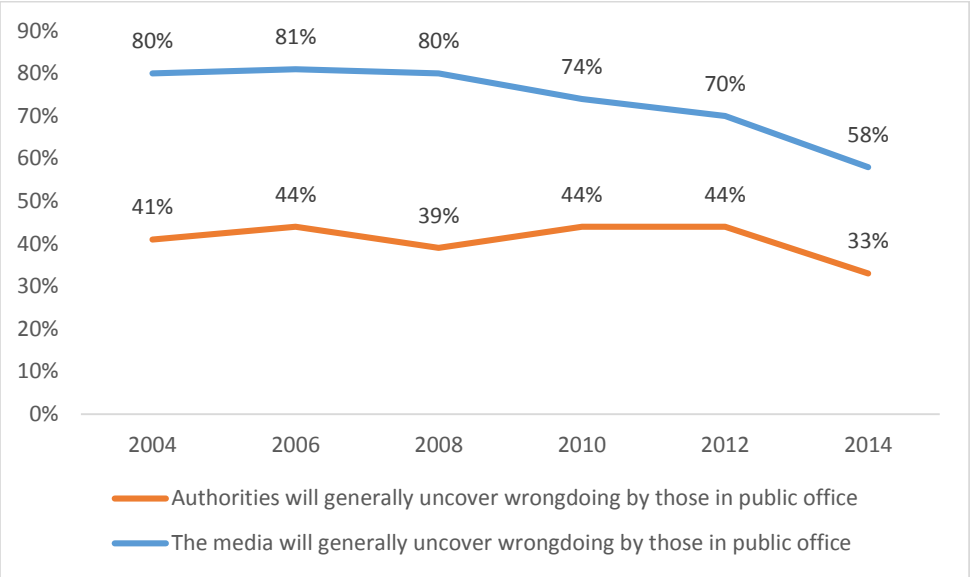
As figure 4.1 shows, most respondents were not confident that the authorities would uncover wrongdoing: 42% said they were 'not very confident' and 19% said they were 'not at all confident'. Only a third of respondents had any confidence that the authorities, 29% said they were 'fairly confident' and only 4% said they were 'very confident'. Respondents were more confident that the media would uncover wrongdoing and the majority of respondents said they were confident that the media would uncover wrongdoing: 42% said they were 'fairly confident', and 16% said they were 'very confident'. 26% said they were 'not very confident' that the media would uncover wrongdoing, and 9% said they were 'not at all confident'.

Figure 4.1 – How confident are you that the authorities or the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office?



Once again the 2014 survey represents a low point in the public's confidence in the standards of public life. As figure 4.2 illustrates, confidence that either the media or the authorities would uncover wrongdoing is lower than in any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life. Confidence in the media has continuously decreased over the last three surveys, whilst confidence in the authorities had previously fluctuated between 39% and 44%.

Figure 4.2 – Proportion of respondents confident that wrongdoing will be uncovered, 2004-2014



5. Confidence that wrongdoers will be punished

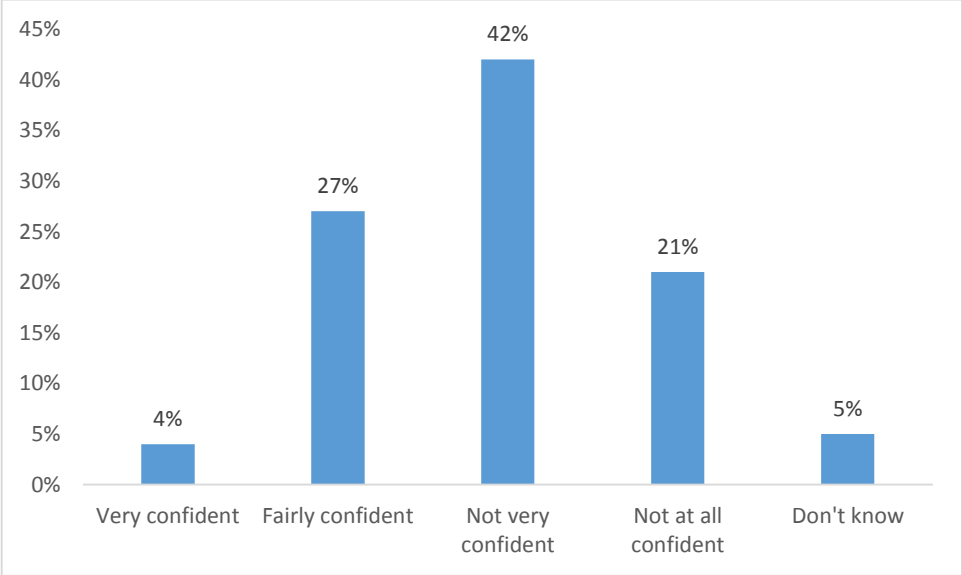
Key findings

- Most respondents were not confident that people in public office caught doing wrong would be punished (63%).
- Levels of confidence that wrongdoers will be punished were lower than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.

Finally, to gauge whether the public thought that public office holders who were caught doing wrong were likely to face consequences for their actions, respondents were asked 'And when people in public office are caught doing wrong, how confident are you that the authorities will punish them?' Again respondents were offered four response options on a scale that ranged from 'very confident' to 'not at all confident'.

As with other questions, most respondents were not confident that the authorities would punish public office holders caught doing wrong. As shown in figure 5.1., only 4% said they were 'very confident' and 27% said they were 'fairly confident', whilst 42% said they were 'not very confident' and 21% were 'not at all confident'.

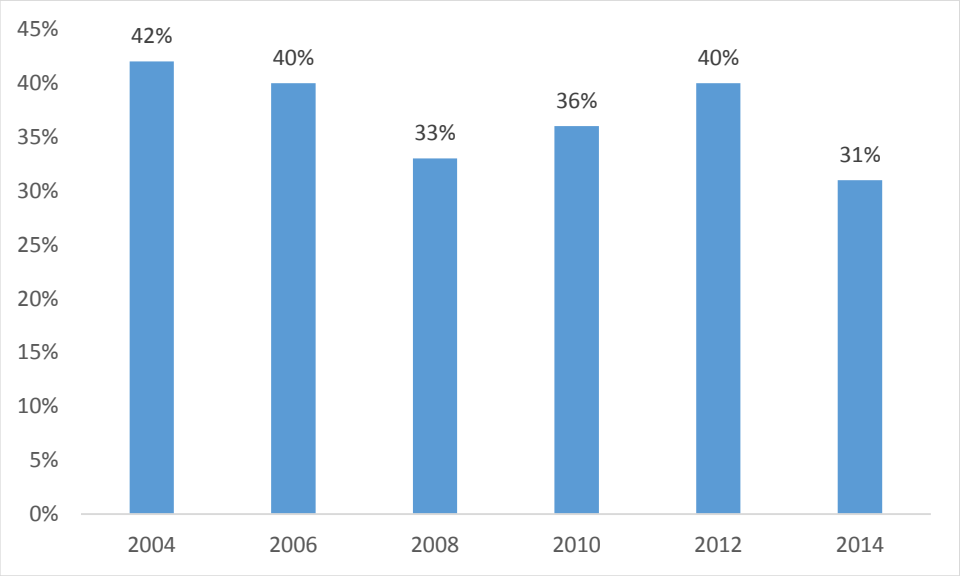
Figure 5.1 – When people in public office are caught doing wrong, how confident are you that the authorities will punish them?



The levels of confidence that wrongdoing will be punished reported in the 2014 survey are lower than those recorded at any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life, as shown in figure 5.2. Unlike most of the other questions however it is less clear that this is a continuation of previous trends, as confidence that wrongdoers will be punished has fluctuated

considerably, with the previous low of 33% recorded in 2008, before returning to the second highest level of confidence recorded in 2012.

Figure 5.2 – Proportion of respondents confident that wrongdoers will be punished, 2004-2014



6. Demographic differences

Key findings

Very few demographic differences emerged in the analysis, and the small number of differences that are apparent do not suggest a consistent pattern of attitudes towards standards in public life between demographic groups. The differences that did emerge were:

- Conservative party supporters were more likely than non-voters to say they were confident that authorities were committed to upholding standards, that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing, that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing, and that the authorities would punish those caught doing wrong. Labour supporters were also more likely than non-voters to say they had confidence in the media to uncover wrongdoing and to be confident that wrongdoers would be punished. Liberal Democrat supporters were much more likely to say they thought overall standards of conduct were high. UKIP voters more likely to say they thought standards had got worse compared to a few years ago. They were also more likely than non-voters to be confident that the media will uncover wrongdoing.
- Female respondents were less likely to think standards of conduct were high, were more likely to think standards had got worse, and less likely to have confidence in the commitment of authorities to uphold standards.
- Ethnic minority respondents were more likely to think that standards were high, were less likely to think standards had got worse, and were more confident that authorities will punish those caught doing wrong.
- Older respondents (45 and over) had less confidence in the authorities' commitment to upholding standards than younger respondents. The oldest respondents (65 and over) were more likely to think that standards of conduct had got worse in recent years.
- Those in the C2 and DE social grades were less likely to express confidence that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office.

Previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life have demonstrated that to a certain extent perceptions of standards in public life are related to respondents' demographic, social, and economic characteristics, though it is not clear that these factors are playing a causal role. As the 2012 report put it:

> *'All things being equal, younger people are somewhat less sceptical than older ones, those in higher social grades are somewhat more positive than comparable people in lower social grades, and individuals from ethnic minorities are somewhat more positive than comparable people from white British and Irish backgrounds.*
>
> *Yet, these relationships are relatively weak. The differences in how people perceive standards become more distinct when comparing subgroups defined in terms of several of these characteristics. Such analyses also demonstrate that variables such as age, social grade and ethnicity do not exert a uniform effect on perceptions of standards. This implies that it is not people's social and economic background as such that is relevant, but that these variables are (imperfect) proxies for relevant*

experiences of politics and governance and expectations about public officials that people derive from their daily life.'[4]

In order to see whether the relationship between perceptions of standards and the characteristics of respondents in the current survey is consistent with previous findings, a section of the analysis conducted on the 2012 survey is replicated with the 2014 survey.[5] This analysis tests the impact of a set of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on respondent's answers to each question using a series of multivariate logistic regression models.[6] These models estimate the effect of each variable, controlling for the effect of others, allowing us to isolate the effect of related variables (for example people who own their own houses may have more positive views of public standards, but this might be because such people tend to be older and in higher social grades). The characteristics included in the models are age, gender, ethnicity, whether the respondent lived in England, Scotland or Wales, social grade, housing tenure and political party preference.[7]

To run the models, the responses to each question were transformed into a series of binary response variables (those who answered 'don't know' are excluded at this stage of the analysis):

- Whether respondents thought standards of conduct were 'quite high'/'very high' or not.
- Whether respondents thought standards had got 'a bit worse'/'a lot worse' or not.[8]
- Whether respondents were 'very confident'/'fairly confident' that authorities are committed to upholding standards or not.
- Whether respondents were 'very confident'/'fairly confident' that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing or not.
- Whether respondents were 'very confident'/'fairly confident' that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing or not.
- Whether respondents were 'very confident'/'fairly confident' that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong or not.

The results of these models are illustrated by a series of tables for each characteristic showing the weighted proportion of each group falling into the response category. Results that are 'statistically significantly' different at the 95% level from the reference category are indicated with an asterisk. Statistical significance at the 95% level means that there is at most a 1 in 20 chance that the differences shown could have occurred through random sampling variation. Only differences that are found to be statistically significant are commented on in the text. This sort of analysis, when applied to a great many variables can throw up spurious results, and so any result that occurs in isolation and does not fit a wider pattern must be treated cautiously.

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[4] *Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2012*, p.50. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-attitudes-survey-2012

[5] See appendix B of the 2012 survey report.

[6] Multivariate logistic regression allows us to predict the outcome of a binomial dependent variable (with values of 0 or 1) according to a number of predictor variables.

[7] The 2012 survey also tested for the effect of private schooling but this information is unavailable in the 2014 survey. The 2012 survey did not report any statistically significant effects of private schooling and so this is unlikely to substantially affect the present results.

[8] The 2012 survey report did not include this question in its demographic analysis.

6.1. Political party preference

Political party preferences were measured by asking respondents which party they would vote for if there was a general election tomorrow (or which party they were inclined to support if they were undecided).[9] As shown in table 6.1, Conservative party supporters were the most distinctive group in the analysis and were more likely to say they were confident that authorities were committed to upholding standards (58%, compared to 35% of non-voters), that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing (49%, compared to 30% of non-voters), that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing (78%, compared to 49% of non-voters), and that the authorities would punish those caught doing wrong (48%, compared to 27% of non-voters). The 2012 survey also found that Conservative supporters were more confident that authorities are committed to upholding standards and will generally uncover wrongdoing (though not that the media would uncover wrongdoing or that wrongdoers would be punished).

Table 6.1 – Results by political party preference.

	None (ref)	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	Scot/ Welsh Nat	Other
Quite high or high overall rating of standards of conduct	15%	24%	22%	42%*	11%	15%	15%
Thinks standards have got a bit or a lot worse compared to a few years ago	34%	38%	26%	37%	52%*	44%	45%
Confident that authorities are committed to upholding standards	35%	58%*	45%	40%	30%	33%	31%
Confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	30%	49%*	39%	49%	26%	36%	20%
Confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	49%	78%*	62%*	67%	78%*	62%	52%
Confident that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong	27%	48%*	39%*	35%	25%	23%	25%

[9] This is slightly different to the way in which political affiliation was measured in the 2012 survey, which asked which party/parties respondents would consider voting for in a general election.

Labour supporters were also more likely than non-voters to say they had confidence in the media to uncover wrongdoing (62%) and to be confident that wrongdoers would be punished (39%). Neither of these differences were found in the 2012 survey, although that survey did find that Labour supporters were more confident that the authorities were committed to upholding standards, a difference that is not found here.

Liberal Democrat supporters were much more likely to say they thought overall standards of conduct were high (42%, compared to 15% of non-voters). This was also found in the 2012 survey, which also found that Liberal Democrat supporters were more likely to say that authorities were committed to upholding standards, a finding not replicated here.

UKIP voters, who were not analysed as a separate category in the 2012 survey, were more negative in their assessment of how standards have changed compared to a few years ago, 52% said they thought standards had got worse, compared to 34% of non-voters. They were also more likely than non-voters to be confident that the media will uncover wrongdoing (78%).

6.2. Gender

Unlike the 2012 survey, which reported no gender differences for any of the questions asked here, several substantial gender differences emerged in the 2014 survey. Female respondents had a more negative view of public standards than male respondents, as shown in table 6.2. Female respondents were less likely to think that standards of conduct were high (14%, compared to 24% of male respondents), were more likely to think that standards have got worse compared to a few years ago (44%, compared to 33% of male respondents), and less likely to have confidence that authorities are committed to upholding standards (34%, compared to 47% of male respondents).

Table 6.2 – Results by gender.

	Male (ref)	Female
Quite high or high overall rating of standards of conduct	24%	14%*
Thinks standards have got a bit or a lot worse compared to a few years ago	33%	44%*
Confident that authorities are committed to upholding standards	47%	34%*
Confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	35%	35%
Confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	64%	61%
Confident that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong	36%	30%

6.3. Ethnicity

As done so in the 2012 report the effect of ethnicity was tested between white British or white Irish background, and any other ethnic background (including 'white – other' respondents, on the basis that a large proportion of this group are likely to be recent Eastern European migrants).

Ethnic minority respondents were generally more positive in their assessment of public standards as shown in table 6.3: they were more likely to think that standards were high (28%) than white British/Irish respondents (17%), were less likely to think standards had got worse (18%, compared to 44% of white British/Irish respondents), and were more confident that authorities will punish those caught doing wrong (48%, compared to 29% of white British/Irish respondents). These results mirror those found in the 2012 survey, although that survey also found that ethnic minority respondents had more confidence that authorities are committed to upholding standards and had greater confidence that the authorities would generally uncover wrongdoing, results which were not replicated here.

Table 6.3 – Results by Ethnicity.

	White British/Irish (ref)	Ethnic minority
Quite high or high overall rating of standards of conduct	17%	28%*
Thinks standards have got a bit or a lot worse compared to a few years ago	44%	18%*
Confident that authorities are committed to upholding standards	38%	48%
Confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	34%	41%
Confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	64%	56%
Confident that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong	29%	48%*

6.4. Age Group

Respondents were divided into four similarly sized age bands, reflecting both life cycle and generational effects: 18 to 29, 30 to 44, 45 to 64, and 65 or over. The results, shown in table 6.4 show that only two differences in relation to age emerge in the analysis. The oldest respondents were the most pessimistic about the change in the standards compared to a few years ago, 57% said they thought standards had got worse, compared to 28% of those in the youngest age group. Respondents over the age of 45 were less confident that authorities were committed to upholding standards, only 34% of those 45 to 64, and 35% of those 65 and over thought that they were,

compared to 49% of 18 to 29 year olds and 47% of 30-44 year olds. With these exceptions no differences emerged in overall ratings of standards of conduct or confidence that wrongdoing will be uncovered or punished. These results mirror those found in the 2012 survey, where younger people were more likely to think that authorities were committed to upholding standards, but no other differences emerged.

Table 6.4 – Results by age group.

	18-29 (ref)	30-44	45-64	65+
Quite high or high overall rating of standards of conduct	20%	24%	15%	19%
Thinks standards have got a bit or a lot worse compared to a few years ago	28%	25%	43%	57%*
Confident that authorities are committed to upholding standards	49%	47%	34%*	35%*
Confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	38%	36%	33%	34%
Confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	56%	61%	66%	64%
Confident that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong	35%	38%	31%	30%

6.5. Social Grade

Social grade classifies respondents' occupations and frequently used as a measure of social or occupational class. Four groups are analysed here: Managerial and technical (AB), clerical and supervisory (C1), skilled manual (C2) and unskilled manual and unemployed (DE).[10] On the whole, responses did not vary according to social class as shown in table 6.5. Differences between social grades emerge only for one question: those in the C2 (28%) and DE (30%) social grades were less likely to have confidence that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office than those in the AB grade (45%). The 2012 survey also found very few differences between social grades, though as with the analysis of countries, the 2014 survey does not replicate those differences that were found in 2012 (ABs were more likely to rate standards of conduct as high, and ABs, C1s, and C2s were more confident than DEs that those caught doing wrong would be punished).

[10] The effect of housing tenure, which might other effects of social position was also tested. As in the 2012, which does not report any differences, there appears to be very little variation in responses according to different housing tenure groups in the 2014 survey and no differences between housing tenure groups are found to be statistically significant and so are not reported here.

Table 6.5 – Results by social grade.

	AB (ref)	C1	C2	DE
Quite high or high overall rating of standards of conduct	23%	19%	15%	19%
Thinks standards have got a bit or a lot worse compared to a few years ago	37%	39%	37%	42%
Confident that authorities are committed to upholding standards	47%	44%	35%	34%
Confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	45%	37%	28%*	30%*
Confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	68%	67%	60%	53%
Confident that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong	35%	36%	35%	27%

6.6. Country

On the whole there were few differences between respondents in England, Scotland, and Wales as shown in table 6.6. Only two differences emerged in the analysis. Respondents in Scotland were more likely to say that standards were high (25%) than those in England (19%) or Wales (11%). Respondents in Wales were much more confident that the media will uncover wrongdoing by those in public office (82%) than those in England (61%) and Scotland (63%).

The 2012 survey also found very few differences between England, Scotland, and Wales but it is important to note that neither of the differences found in the 2014 survey were found in the 2012 survey, and none of the differences reported in the 2012 survey (Welsh respondents were more likely to think standards were high and both Scottish and Welsh respondents were more likely to say they had confidence that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong) are replicated here. Beyond the conclusion that perceptions of public standards are very similar in England, Wales, and Scotland, any inferences about between country differences based on either survey should be made with extreme caution.

Table 6.6 – Results by country.

	England (ref)	Scotland	Wales
Quite high or high overall rating of standards of conduct	19%	25%*	11%
Thinks standards have got a bit or a lot worse compared to a few years ago	38%	38%	56%
Confident that authorities are committed to upholding standards	40%	40%	47%
Confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	34%	40%	39%
Confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	61%	63%	82%*
Confident that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong	33%	32%	35%

7. Satisfaction with Britain's political system and public attitudes towards conduct in public life

Key findings

- A consistent pattern emerged across several variables measuring different aspects of satisfaction with Britain's political system. Those who were positive about Britain's political system also gave more positive answers about standards of conduct in public life, suggesting an association between attitudes towards the political system in general and perceptions of standards of conduct in public life.
- In general, respondents were more positive about the Britain's political system than they were about standards of conduct in public life.

The embedding of the Committee's questions on public attitudes towards conduct in public life within the Hansard Society's audit of democratic engagement survey enables us to make comparisons between the public's attitudes towards conduct in public life with their attitudes about the way the UK is governed more generally.

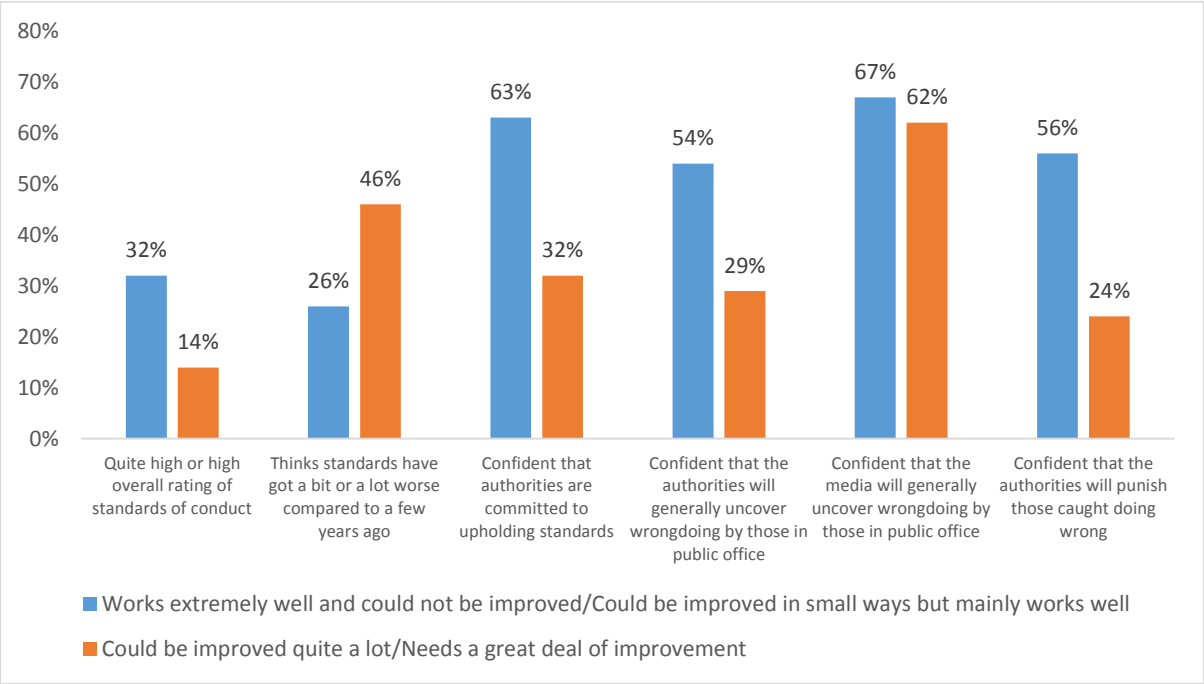
A consistent pattern emerges from this comparison: those who have a negative opinion about the way Britain is governed are also more likely to be negative in their assessment of standards of conduct in public life. This suggests a close association between public attitudes towards standards of conduct in public life and broader dissatisfaction with democracy and governance in the UK.[11]

7.1. How well the present system of governing Britain works

To measure their overall views about how well the present system of government in Britain works, respondents were asked: 'Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain?' and were given four response options: 'Works extremely well and could not be improved', 'Could be improved in small ways but mainly works well', 'Could be improved quite a lot', or 'Needs a great deal of improvement'. Due to the small number of respondents who gave the most positive answer to this question (only 15 respondents said the present system of governing Britain 'works extremely well') answers to this variable are transformed into a dichotomous variable. Figure 7.1 shows the proportion of respondents answering either that the present system of governing Britain 'works extremely well'/'Mainly works well' or 'could be improved quite a lot'/'needs a great deal of improvement' who gave the response to the standards in public life question shown under each set of bars.

[11] As in the preceding section, the analysis that follows is based on multivariate logistic regression models which include all of the demographic variables discussed in section 6 and each of the three democratic engagement questions discussed here. As in the last section only those differences that are statistically significant at the 95% level are discussed in text. For all three questions the differences are statistically significant for all of the public standards questions except confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing, which was not statistically significant for any of the three democratic engagement variables. Several other variables (political interest, political knowledge, and political participation) were tested in this analysis but were found to have no statistically significant effects and so are not reported here.

Figure 7.1 – Attitudes towards conduct in public life by respondents' opinions about the present system of governing Britain.



On the whole, those who thought the present system of governing Britain worked well were more likely to have positive opinions about standards of conduct in public life. Respondents who thought that Britain's system of governance worked well were more likely to rate overall standards of conduct as high (32% compared to 14% of those who said that the present system of governing Britain needed improvement), were less likely to think standards have got worse compared to a few years ago (26% compared to 46%), more likely to have confidence that the authorities are committed to upholding standards (63% compared to 32%), more likely to be confident that the authorities will uncover wrongdoing (54% compared to 29%), and more likely to be confident that wrongdoers will be punished by the authorities (56% compared to 24%).

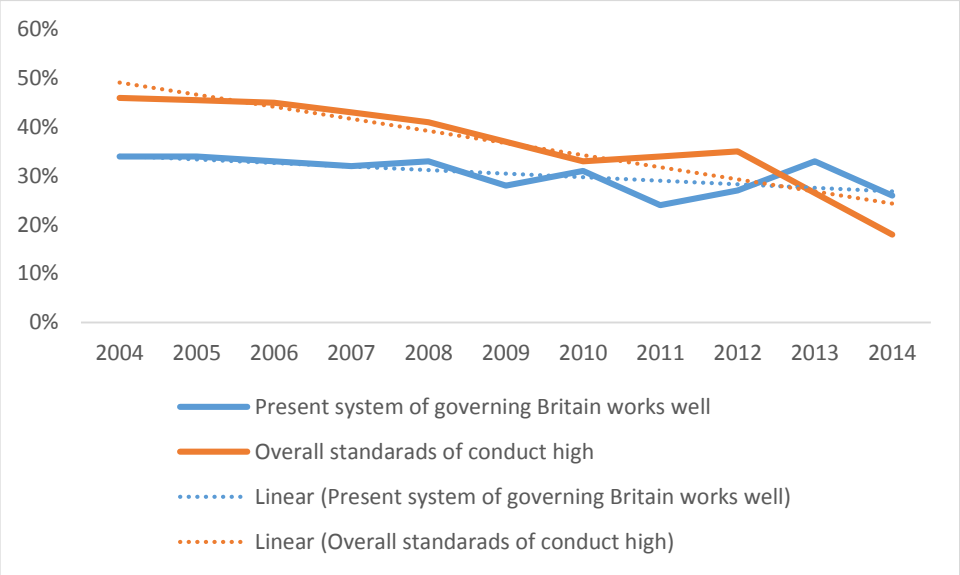
These results also suggest that even compared to the generally negative assessment of how well the system of governing Britain works (only 28% of respondents thought the system 'works extremely well' or 'mainly works well') perceptions of standards of conduct of people in public life are particularly negative: slightly less than a third (32%) of those who thought Britain's system of government worked well rated the standards of conduct of those in public life as high (by comparison 55% of those who rated standards of conduct as high thought Britain's system of government worked well).[12] Similarly, roughly a quarter of those who thought Britain's system of government worked well also thought that overall standards of conduct had got worse compared to a few years ago.

That there is a link between the two is also suggested by comparing trends in answers to both questions over time, as shown in figure 7.2. Although the trend of fewer people saying standards are high is steeper than the trend of fewer people saying that Britain's system of government works

[12] Of the 15 respondents who said that the system of governing Britain 'works extremely well and could not be improved' only 5 said that standards of conduct were 'very high' or 'high'.

well, and the latter has greater fluctuation in recent years, both have downward sloping trends between 2004 and 2014, suggesting that they are being influenced by similar things.[13]

Figure 7.2 – Proportion of those saying the present system of governing Britain works well and that Overall rating of standards of conduct are high, 2004-2014.



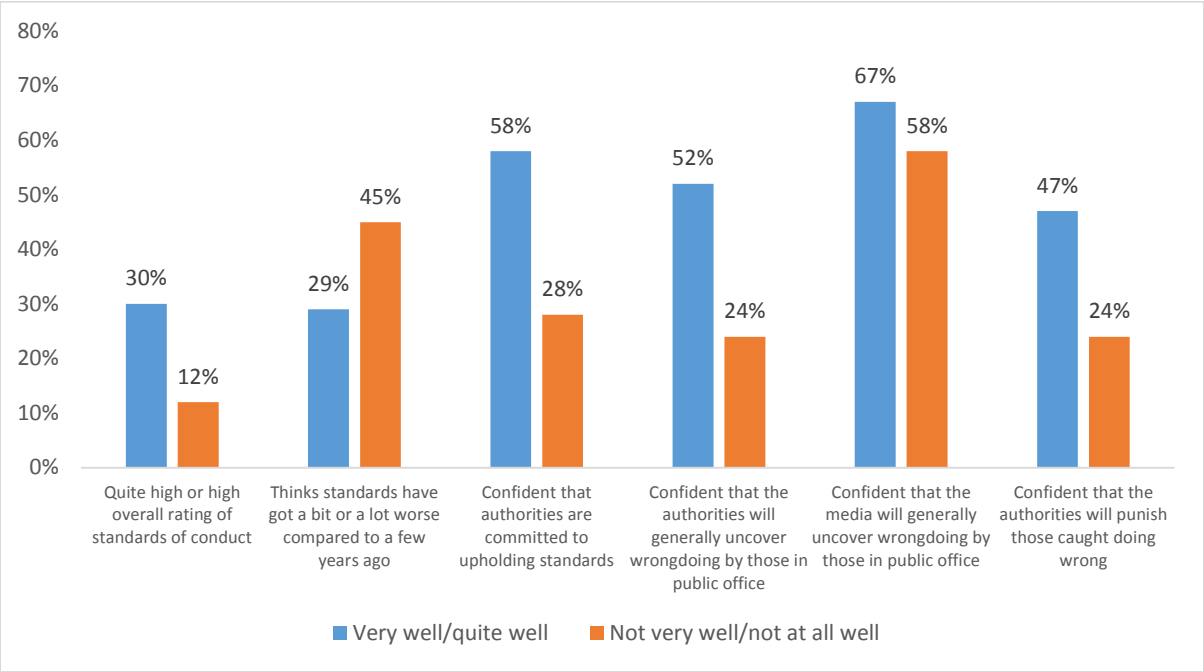
7.2. How well the current democratic system addresses respondent's interests

An additional question addresses a slightly different aspect of overall satisfaction with Britain's system of government and asks respondents to make an personal assessment of Britain's democracy: 'Generally, how well do you think that the UK's current democratic system addresses the interests of you and your family?' and were given four response options: 'very well', 'quite well', 'not very well', or 'not at all well'. Again because of the small number of respondents (27) who chose the most positive response, answers are transformed into a dichotomous variable.

The pattern of responses, shown in figure 7.3, mirrors that found for the previous question: respondents who thought that the current democratic system addresses their and their family's interests well were more likely to rate overall standards of conduct as high (30% compared to 12% of those who said the current democratic system did not address their interests), were less likely to think standards of have got worse compared to a few years ago (29% compared to 45%), were more likely to have confidence that the authorities are committed to upholding standards (58% compared to 28%), were more likely to be confident that the authorities would uncover wrongdoing (52% compared to 24%), and were more likely to be confident that wrongdoers would be punished by the authorities 47% compared to 24%).

[13] The relatively smaller decrease in people thinking that the system of governing Britain works well may in part be due to a floor effect – that is, because fewer people thought Britain's system of government works well than thought public standards were high in 2004, there is not as far for them to fall.

Figure 7.3 – Attitudes towards conduct in public life by how well respondents thought that the UK's current democratic system addresses their interests and those of their family.



7.3. Influence over decision making

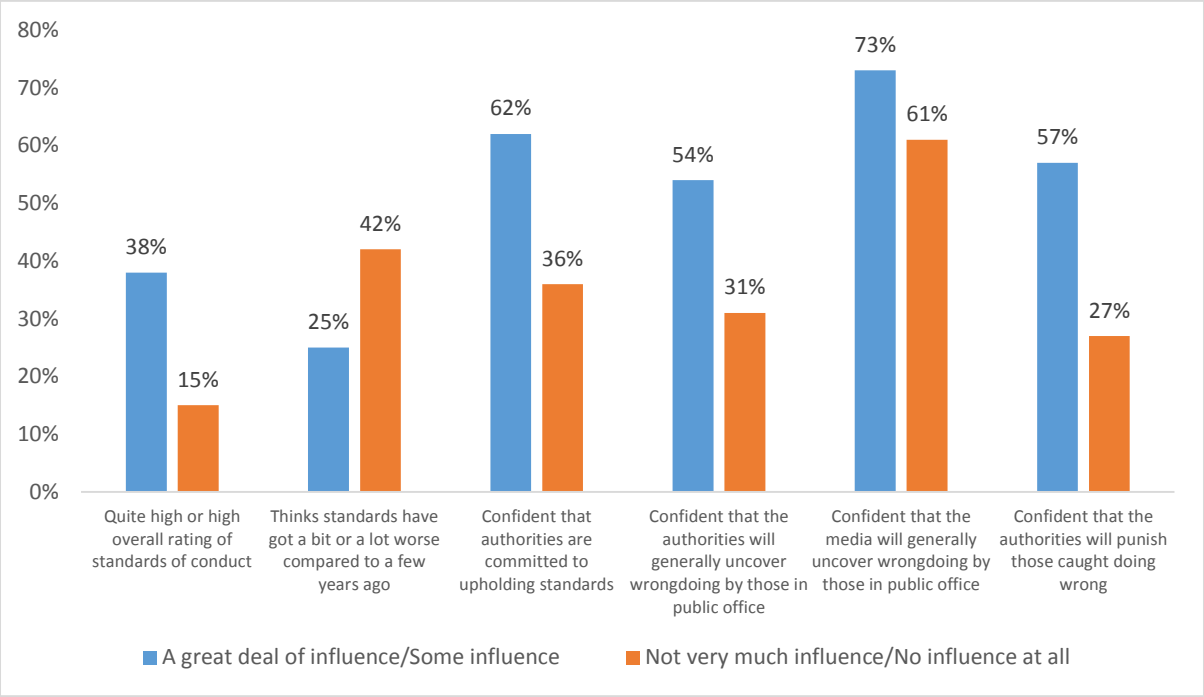
A third question gauges respondents' sense of 'political efficacy': the extent to which a respondent feels that their actions have an impact on the political process. Political efficacy is often used as an indicator of the health of a democratic system as it measures the extent to which citizens feel that the political system actually responds to the wishes of the public and is an important predictor of participation in the democratic process.[14]

Respondents were asked 'How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision making in the country as a whole?' and were given four response options: 'A great deal of influence', 'some influence', 'not very much influence', or 'no influence at all'. Again only a small number of respondents (17) chose the most positive response and so answers are transformed into a dichotomous variable.

The responses follow the same pattern established by the previous two questions, as shown in figure 7.4: respondents that said they had a great deal or some influence over decision making in the country as a whole were more likely to rate overall standards of conduct as high (38% compared to 15% of those who said they had not very much or no influence), were less likely to think standards of have got worse compared to a few years ago (25% compared to 42%), were more likely to have confidence that the authorities are committed to upholding standards (62% compared to 36%), were more likely to be confident that the authorities would uncover wrongdoing (54% compared to 31%), and were more likely to be confident that wrongdoers would be punished by the authorities 57% compared to 27%).

[14] See for example Jeffrey Karp and Susan Banducci (2008) 'Political Efficacy and Participation in Twenty-Seven Democracies: How Electoral Systems Shape Political Behaviour' *British Journal of Political Science,* 38(2), pp311-334.

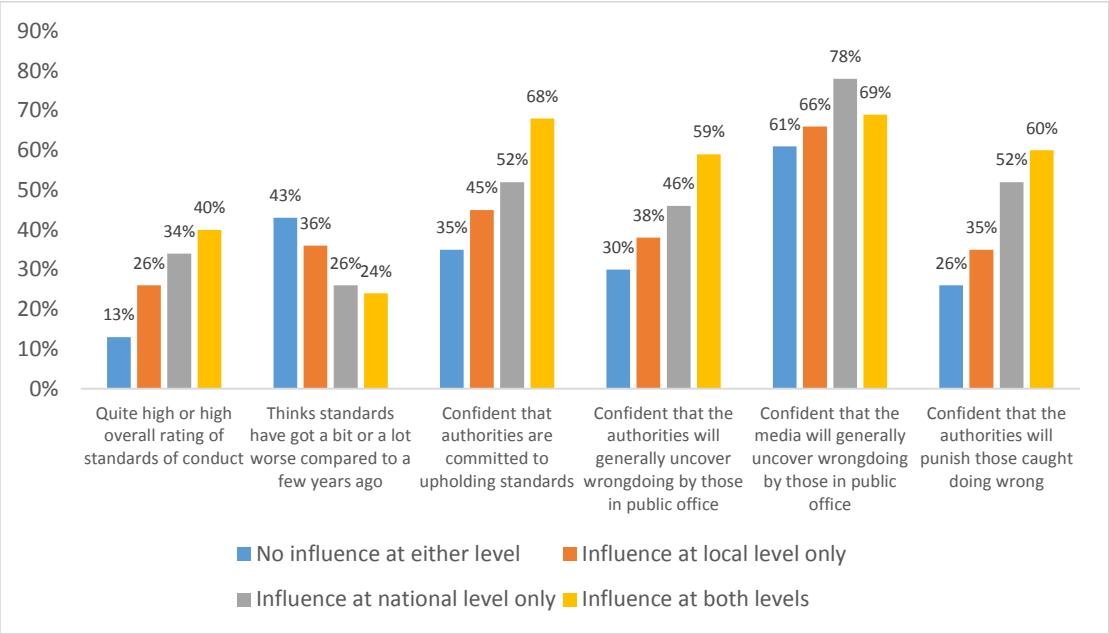
Figure 7.4 Attitudes towards conduct in public life by how much influence respondents felt they have over decision making in the country as a whole.



The survey also allows us to compare respondent's sense of political efficacy at the national level with the local level. As shown in figure 7.5, a consistent pattern emerges: those who feel they have no or nor very much influence at either the local or national level (72% of respondents) have the lowest perceptions of standards in public life, followed by those who said they had influence at the local level but not the national level (10%), then those who said they had influence at the national level but not the local level (7%), and those who said they had influence at both levels (11%).[15] This pattern suggests two conclusions: first it reiterates the conclusion above that political efficacy is important and that those who feel disempowered by the current political system have a much worse perception of the current standards of conduct in public life than those who said they had at least some influence, and secondly that influence over national decision making seems to have a greater effect on perceptions of standards than influence over local decision making.

[15] With the exception again of confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing.

Figure 7.5 Attitudes towards conduct in public life by how much influence respondents felt they have over decision making at the local level and in the country as a whole.



Conclusions

Overall, the survey suggests that the public continue to have a very poor valuation of the current standards in public life. Respondents generally gave negative answers to all six of the questions asked here: More respondents thought overall standards of conduct were low than thought they were high. More respondents said that standards had got worse compared to a few years ago than thought they had improved. The majority of respondents were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life, that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office, or that the authorities would punish those caught doing wrong (a majority did think the media would generally uncover wrongdoing).

For all six of the questions asked here, opinion about the standards of public life are more negative than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life. This suggests that although public life has not been rocked by anything comparable to the parliamentary expenses scandal in recent years, public office holders have not been able to restore public confidence in those who hold public office.

The analysis in section 7 suggests a very close link between perceptions of standards of conduct by public office holders and broader attitudes about the way the current political system works in the UK: those who are dissatisfied with the way the political system works or the level of influence they have on politics are more likely to have negative perceptions of current standards of conduct in public life.

The design of the current survey cannot disentangle the causal relationship between perceptions of conduct and satisfaction with Britain's political system but perhaps the most plausible relationship between them is a reciprocal one: saying that the standards of conduct of public office holders are low may be at least in part an expression of a general dissatisfaction with politics, rather than any actual decline in the standards of conduct of those in public life, but for those who do see the standards of conduct of public office holders as poor, this may decrease overall confidence in Britain's system of government

There are several reasons to think that reported perceptions of standards of conduct in public life are associated with a broader dissatisfaction with politics rather than necessarily poor standards of conduct of public office holders:

- Despite the absence of any public standards scandals of a similar magnitude to the parliamentary expenses scandal, public perceptions of the overall standards of conduct of public office holders have become considerably more negative since 2010.
- Evidence from the UK and Europe suggests that trust in public officials is not necessarily linked to experience with corruption (see the Committee's report *Public Perceptions of Standards in Public Life in the UK and Europe*).[16]
- Academic research suggests that satisfaction with democracy is at least in part driven by the performance of political institutions.[17] From this perspective it should not be surprising that

[16] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-perceptions-of-standards-in-public-life-in-the-uk-and-europe

[17] See for example, Sara B. Hobolt 'Citizen Satisfaction with Democracy in the European Union' *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50(S1) pp.88-105.

satisfaction with the political system – including perceptions of the standards of conduct of those in public office – have become more negative during a period of economic downturn.[18]

All of this suggests that it is important to view the public's increasingly negative perceptions of standards of conduct in light of the link between perceptions of standards in public life and broader dissatisfaction with Britain's political system. This suggests that the public's perception of standards in public life are not necessarily due to the actual standards of conduct of those in public office getting worse. However it also suggests that restoring public confidence in standards in public life will not be as simple as addressing standards in isolation.

[18] On this point see also the Committee's *Public Perceptions of Standards in Public Life in the UK and Europe*.