

DELTA POLL

delta – Variation of a variable or function – A finite increment – A defined change.



Qualitative and Quantitative Review

**A Research Report from Deltapoll for the
Committee on Standards in Public Life**

September 2021

Background and Methodology

The independent Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) is conducting a review into the effectiveness of standards regulation in England. The objective of the *Standards Matter 2* review is to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the policies, processes and institutions responsible for the implementation of ethical standards in public life in England.

As part of this review, Deltapoll was commissioned by the Committee to undertake online polling to investigate the general public's perceptions of the ethical behaviour of MPs, ministers, and those delivering public services. This was followed by an online qualitative investigation to determine to what extent ethical standards matter to people, and to find out what their specific concerns are.

The core themes that the Committee wished to explore included:

- ⇒ Public perceptions of the ethical standards of political and non-political public office holders, with a focus on ministers and MPs
- ⇒ To what extent the public cares about high ethical standards, and if so, why
- ⇒ The public's view on what constitutes acceptable conduct around lobbying and business appointments

Deltapoll conducted an online opinion poll among a representative sample of 1,590 members of the public between the 23rd and 26th July 2021. Post-fieldwork, data was weighted using iterative proportional fitting to the population profile of UK adults. Data was weighted by age, gender, region, social grade, terminal education age, and ethnicity variables. In all cases target percentages for both quotas and weights are derived from large national, random probability surveys and utilise national census data wherever possible.

Following this research, two focus groups were conducted 'virtually' on Zoom on the 24th and 25th of August 2021. Groups were comprised of a mix of gender and age and were recruited across social and economic categories BC1C2. All participants were 'interested' in politics and voted in elections, with varying levels of knowledge of the way party politics is funded.

Qualitative research is an interactive process between researcher and participants: its strength is in allowing participants' attitudes and opinions to be explored in detail, providing an insight into the reasoning underpinning their views. However, discussion results are based only on a small cross-section of the public, especially when only two focus groups are held. Both Deltapoll and the Committee recognise the limited nature of the qualitative investigation, outcomes from which (reported here) should be considered to be indicative rather than definitive. Further, the design features employed imply that outcomes cannot be taken to be necessarily fully representative of the wider population.

Research findings

Public perceptions of ethical standards

It is largely irrefutable that cynicism is endemic among the public when discussing the ethical standards of elected office-holders. This research revealed a lack of confidence in MPs and ministers to abide by ethical standards - especially in contrast to other public sector workers.

In both focus groups, discussions reflected a belief among participants that politicians often rely and fall back on their social standing to get themselves out of trouble in a way that ordinary members of the public cannot. Past examples of corrupt behaviour, such as the MPs expenses scandal, have created long-term trust issues between the public and the political class.

Different current and former politicians were immediately associated with the word ‘sleaze’, including Matt Hancock, David Cameron and Boris Johnson, with a feeling for some that these politicians do not possess the core values expected from political leaders. This created a general sentiment that it is one rule for them and a different rule for everyone else. This is borne out by the quantitative findings, which showed a great deal more confidence that public sector workers such as doctors, teachers and judges have high ethical standards (50%), in comparison to MPs (20%) and ministers (24%).

If you compare [politicians] to a Head Teacher, who is paid by the state to set an example... if they were constantly jumping the queue or not abiding by the rules, then it all descends into chaos.

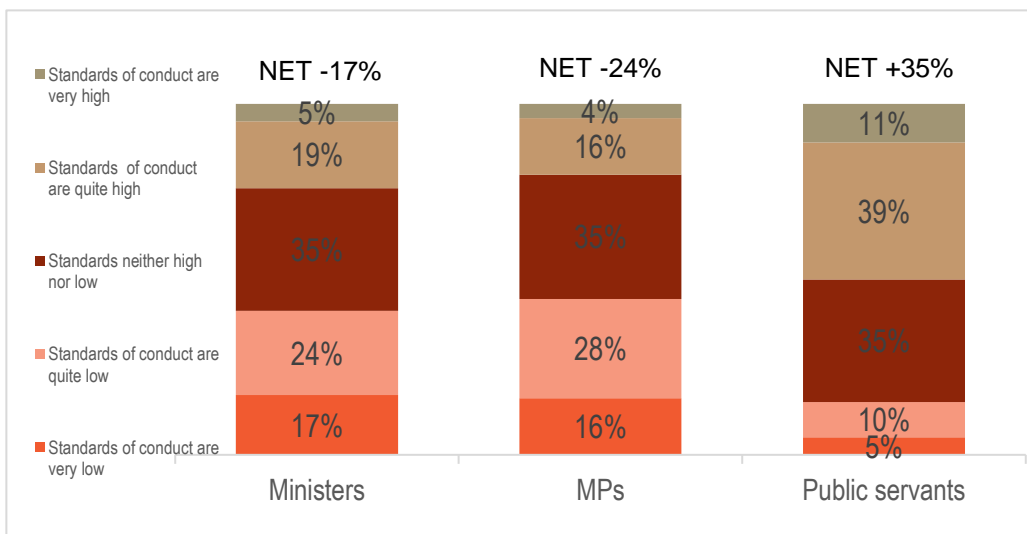
I think all politicians go into politics with the intention of doing the best they can... but you only have to look at some of the expenses scandals... politicians don't act in our best interest.

They take advantage of their power, status and financial position.

When you mentioned sleaze I straight away thought about Matt Hancock... it seems like one rule for them and different ethical standards, morals and etiquette for everybody else. It's all according to class, power and money.

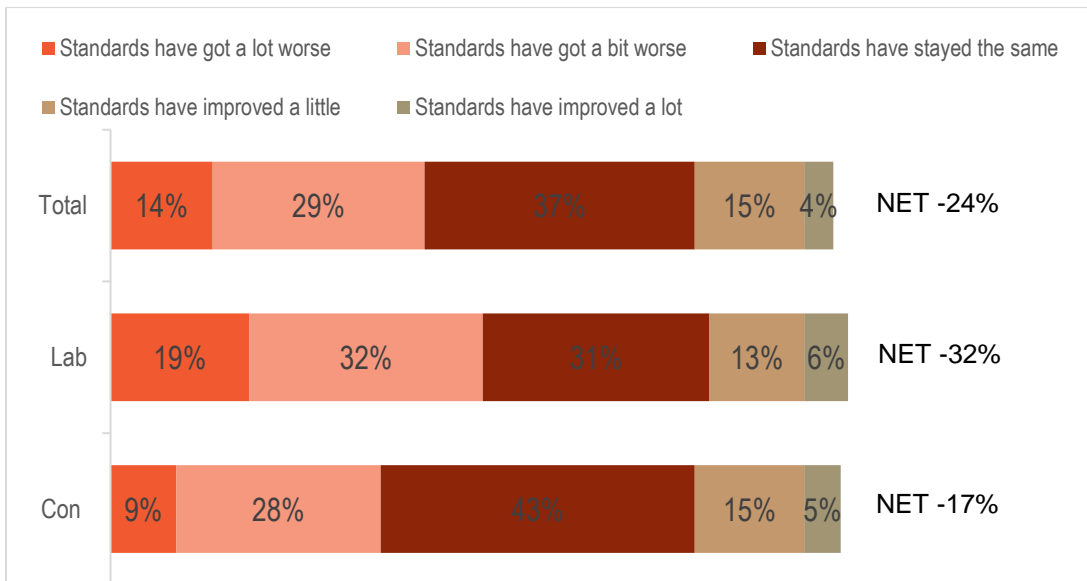
I've got a lot of negativity towards the Government at the moment because of their double standards with Covid restrictions.

In the last few months things have come out about cronyism, I think that is an ethical issue more than anything. It highlights the way it's jobs for their mates and family, which is just highly unethical, the



Base: 1,590

To an extent, the erosion of public trust in MPs and ministers ability to behave ethically has been exacerbated by Covid. Participants were visibly angry as they recounted the strict pandemic rules they had to follow which they believed were disregarded by various politicians who subsequently faced few or no consequences. Of course, public scepticism toward the political class has always existed, but when asked whether they believe ethical standards have got better or worse in recent years, it was not only stated that they have always been relatively poor, but that awareness of poor standards has dramatically increased in recent months.



Base: 1,590

Participants took the view that the pandemic has exposed poor behaviour by politicians that would previously have gone unnoticed. Participants spontaneously recalled examples of public procurement contracts during Covid being awarded to friends of MPs and ministers. This was seen as highly unethical and undermining official tendering processes. Whilst some expressed the view that giving contracts to friends was understandable given the impending pressures of Covid, it was generally felt that this was a breach of ethical codes of conduct and should not have been permitted. The bypassing of due processes provoked suspicion of wrongdoing and the word 'cronyism' was brought up in reference to these examples several times.

These concerns were exacerbated by the general consensus that a politician acting unethically is a far more serious concern than a member of the public doing the same - politicians are held to a different standard because they have been voted into office on conditions of trust. There is a firm belief that integrity and honesty are integral to the election of candidates, who they believe, have a duty to the public to abide by ethical codes and rules. Whilst for some there was a perception that MPs do not earn much money and that they should therefore be able to take perks from their job, for most others this was deemed unacceptable as Government is not viewed as something that can be run like a business.

In particular, participants expressed annoyance at double-standards: those that members of the public in specific occupations are expected to follow (one social worker stated that they were unable to accept anything more than tomatoes from someone's greenhouse), whilst at the same time politicians get away with accepting large gifts and sums of money from people who wish to influence decision-making. Inevitably this contributed to the feeling that it is one rule for the elite, and a different one entirely for the public.

Ultimately, whilst people were angered by poor ethical behaviour there was also an underlying sense of resignation, bordering on cynicism, that this is just how politics operates and the system will never be entirely ethical. Consequently, there was wearied acknowledgment from some that this is something they personally have to accept because they are doubtful about whether things can be changed easily. Some believed that MPs and ministers do go into their jobs for the right reasons, and that they have a social and ethical conscience, but that their own self-interest can override their sense of conscience. The

way somebody is making millions off this Covid pandemic.

The track and trace scheme has been very lucrative and there was no proper tendering process. If you are ethical in Government you would follow the normal tendering process and [choose the company] best able to meet the needs of the contract. [Instead] the contracts are given to their friends, often with disastrous results... Track and trace has been very unsuccessful and wasted vast quantities of public money.

The head of a business giving themselves certain privileges... is entirely different to somebody who's been voted in. They're in a role that they've earned and we've voted them in because we believe they have a social and ethical conscience.

I think it's wrong but we do accept it to a certain extent. We expect this is how the Government runs things. That it won't be fully truthful, it won't be fully transparent, and there will be backhanders. I would love to have transparency, I would love trust, and I would

acceptance of backhanders from people in power is seen as an inevitable part of this. In spite of this, there was a strong hope that things could be different, and that greater transparency and higher ethical standards of behaviour might prevail.

love ethics... but we're talking about politics here.

Do the public care?

Although there is cynicism and resignation, the public clearly believe that MPs and ministers should abide by ethical standards and provide full transparency for their actions.

By accepting it as a nation, you start setting dangerous precedents.

A number of explanations for why it is unacceptable for politicians to break rules and codes were spontaneously mentioned. There was a strong belief that if unethical behaviour, however minor, goes unchallenged, this will set a dangerous precedent which will eventually snowball into more severe corruption. The concern that the acceptance of backhanders from people in positions of power will escalate into greater rule-bending was a shared sentiment across both focus groups, underpinned by a belief that some politicians do not know where to draw the line.

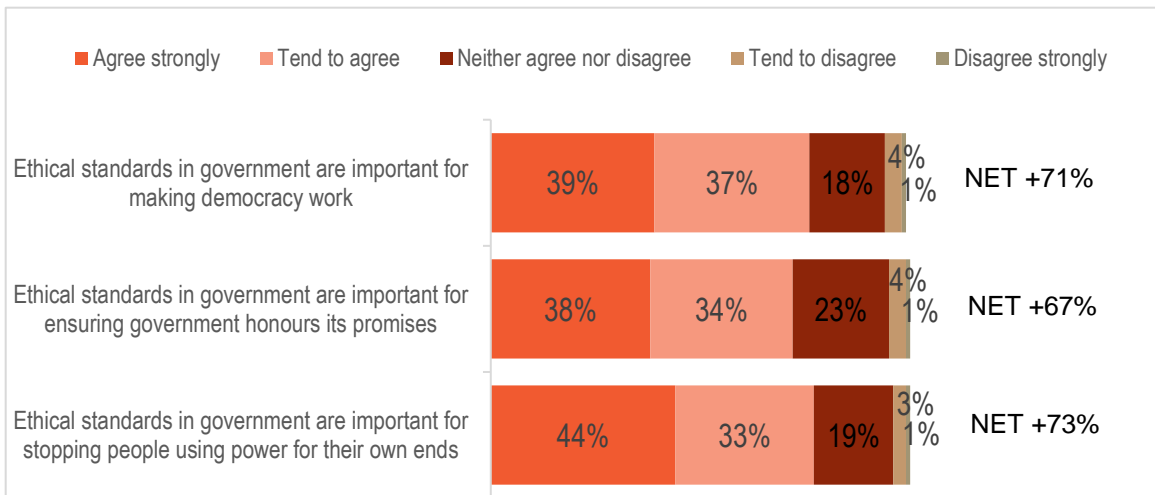
If we allow the Government to be corrupt... where does that extend? The next [Government] comes in and it'll be 'well they've done that, we'll do a little bit more.' Eventually we'll find ourselves in a situation where its uncontrollable.

In addition, participants regarded the upholding of ethical standards as a central tenet of democracy, without which democracy is just a pretence. It was felt that honesty from those elected to serve in Government is of fundamental importance, and that the absence of honesty leads to lies and deception. Recent examples of behaviour perceived as corrupt were spontaneously recalled at this point, including the Government awarding contracts for PPE without proper tendering processes. Participants also mentioned that not only were these contracts awarded without an official public procurement process, but that they were often not published *at all*, meaning that nobody could be held to account until it was too late. Other examples, such as David Cameron lobbying the Government on behalf of Greensill Capital, were also felt to undermine public trust in democracy.

If you don't have good ethical standards from your politicians then democracy itself is damaged, it's a myth.

This is strongly supported by quantitative findings indicating that ethical standards are considered to be important in making democracy work (76%), ensuring Government honours its promises (72%), and stopping people using power for their own ends (77%).

Thinking about corruption, the two that spring to mind lately are David Cameron... who was questioned for seven hours about lobbying... and the other week it was Matt Hancock giving all the PPE contracts to his mates... Rishi Sunak's wife has a business that is around £1.7 million in debt. He used our money to bail her out. That is corruption and a conflict of interest.



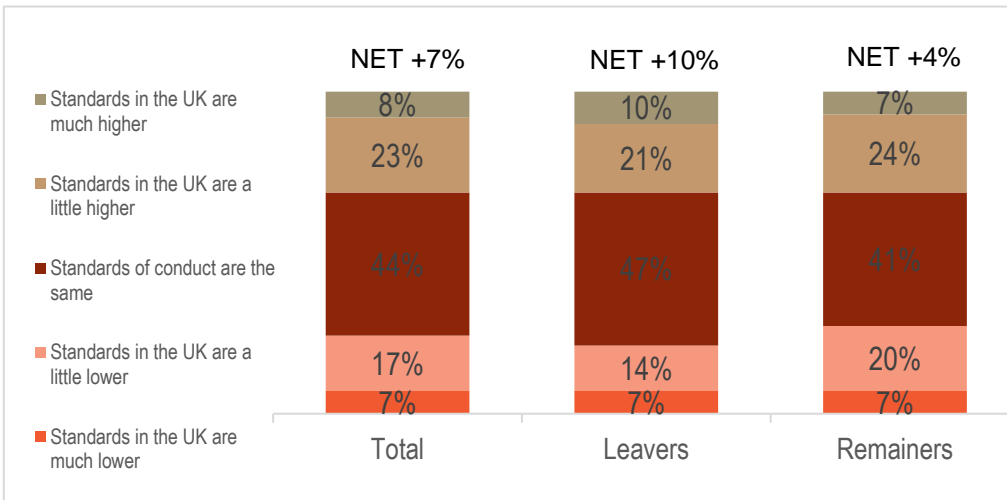
Base: 1,590

If ever the UK was a leader in upholding high ethical standards, there was a sense that this image is slowly being eroded. Tellingly, only around one-third of those polled think that standards are higher in the UK, the remainder feeling that they are either the same, or lower

Our parliament used to be called the mother of

than other similar countries. That said, just one in four (24%) felt that standards here were lower than abroad.

all parliaments and was held in high regard by other countries but the way some of our politicians have acted has damaged that reputation both at home and abroad.



Base: 1,590

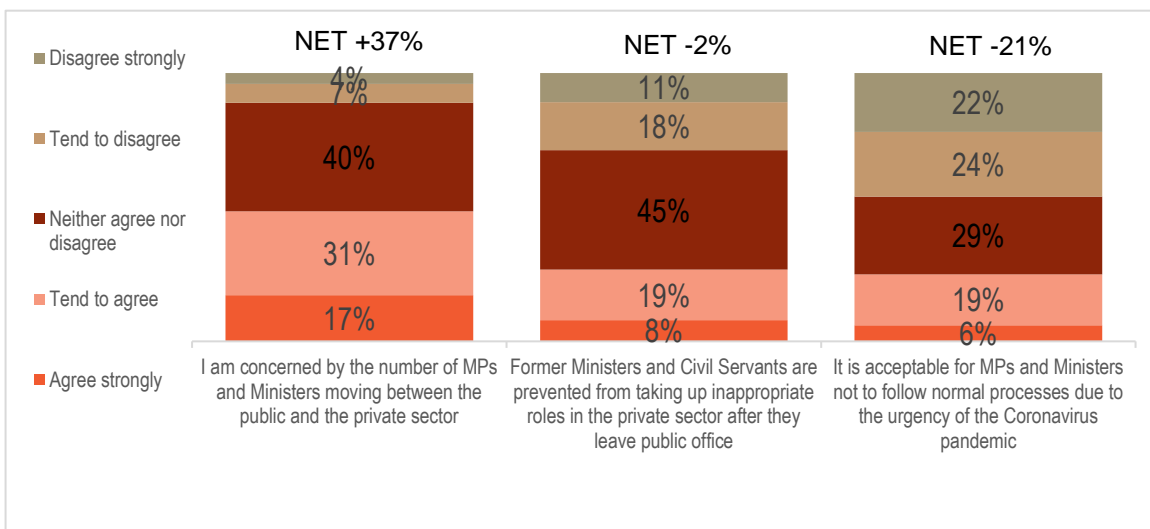
Participants were asked if a government is 'successful', does that absolve them of responsibility for instances of unethical behaviour? There was unanimous agreement among focus group respondents that even if Government delivers on all its promises and has popular policies, there is no excuse for poor ethical standards. This unanimity was reflected in the views of people from the full spectrum of political leanings. Even those participants who believed the Government had delivered on Brexit and 'gets things done' felt that none of this mattered if ethics were being side-lined. Ultimately people do not like being lied to in any capacity, even if policies are being delivered, and it was generally felt that breaches of ethical standards are forms of deception.

I think just accepting it because we're happy with their policies isn't the way.

I think they've got a duty, whether they deliver on a policy or not, to uphold ethical standards.

The quantitative research indicated that 46% of people felt that it is unacceptable for MPs and ministers not to follow normal processes due to the Coronavirus pandemic, whilst only a quarter (25%) felt that it was acceptable, a clear indication of the strength of feeling on this issue from both the quantitative and qualitative stages of the research.

When you've got a big contract worth billions, giving it to somebody who has never made PPE before in their life, and PPE is something that needs to be made to a strict specification, is a red flag.

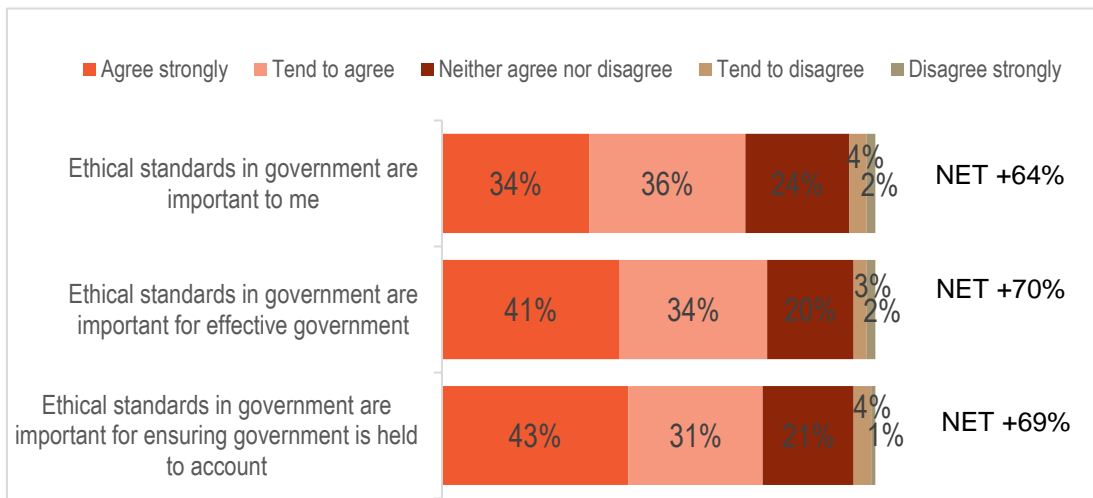


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As well as being important in making democracy work, 74% of respondents to the survey endorsed the view that ethical standards in Government are important in ensuring that Government is held to account. This view was repeated in the focus groups where a lack of accountability in Government was spontaneously mentioned multiple times. Specifically, concerns and doubts were expressed about proper scrutiny, enforcement of ethics rules, and consistent implementation of codes. There was some feeling of resignation that even if ethics rules are breached by MPs and ministers, action will not follow because they are not being held responsible for their actions. The qualitative research suggests that it is a sense of resignation rather than a lack of interest in Government accountability that underpins the public's apparent cynicism, and greater adherence and enforcement of ethics rules would be welcomed. The focus groups highlighted the public impression that processes for the enforcement of rules are currently being disregarded.

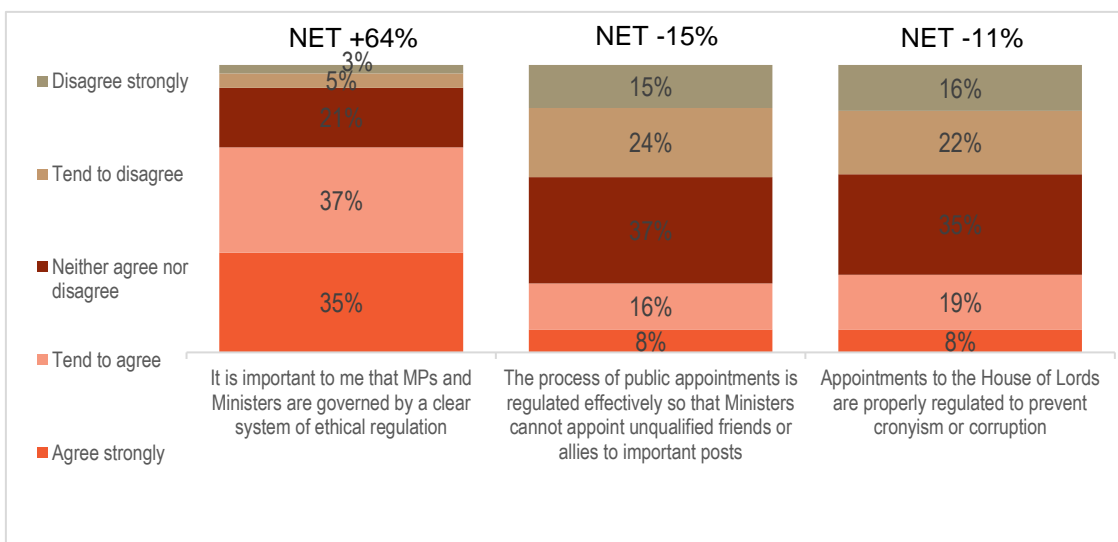
There's no accountability, is there? There's nobody regulating what they do, as far as I'm aware. There's nothing.

There should be a new body that's created to oversee what the Government are doing, to hold them accountable. I'd be willing to pay £1 a month out of my money, and if the rest of the country did too, we could oversee what they're doing.



Base: 1,590

Whilst a large majority (72%) stated that it is important to them that MPs and ministers are governed by a clear system of ethical regulation, there is less certainty about how governance works in practice. Only around a quarter felt that public appointments or appointments to the House of Lords are regulated effectively.



Base: 1,590

Both focus groups shared the view that there needs to be some form of deterrent for politicians who are inclined to bend the rules, coupled with the perception that there is no strong regulatory body holding the Government to account with sanctions for rule breaches. In the opinion of the qualitative respondents, the current system does not work very well, and the public tend not to hear about corruption until politicians are ‘caught out’ or it is too late.

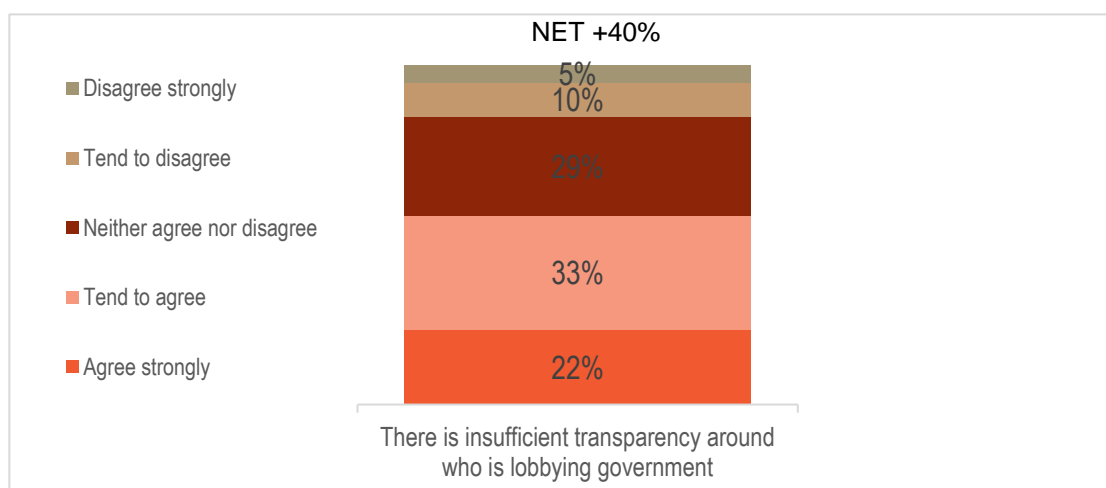
Although not all felt that dishonesty was prevalent among all politicians, there was a view that ‘we get what we vote for’, and that the public was aware of the poor standards of some office holders but voted for them regardless. The stories that have emerged recently in the press about cronyism and sleaze have fuelled the perception that there is not a proper system in place to manage corruption, and simply not enough sanction applied to politicians who ‘break the rules’.

I don't think that they are sanctioned enough if they break the rules.

There's no regulatory body that oversees what they do. If you had a problem with your GP you'd go to the General Medical Council... But there's none of that, there's no accountability... There has to be someone they're accountable to for their actions.

Lobbying

The issue of lobbying was raised spontaneously in the focus groups and elicited an animated response. The quantitative research found that 55% of the public believe that there is insufficient transparency around who is lobbying the Government, with only 15% disagreeing and believing there is sufficient transparency.



It seems a bit backroom... As much as it isn't illegal or anything, I'm still a bit unhappy. It's one person coming to somebody and saying something that could have a huge positive or negative impact on the country.

It needs to go through Government first before any [public meetings] take place in offices. Everything should be transparent.

Base: 1,590

The current lobbying system is considered to be not fit for purpose due to the perceived unofficial nature of many of the conversations which take place. Different examples of lobbying were presented to participants in the focus groups, some taking place inside ministers' offices, some in luxury restaurants and some at party fundraiser events. Focus group members were asked what they thought of each location and whether the setting changed their opinion of the acceptability of lobbying.

Generally, it was considered that Government offices are the most suitable environment for 'official' business, on the condition that the meeting is properly documented, and that more people should be part of the discussion. There was notable shock among some respondents that lobbying really does take place in what were considered unofficial settings, and an underlying view that lobbying of any kind is not considered appropriate given the implications for transparency. It was also felt that all examples of lobbying given,

If it's an official discussion, I think more people should be part of that discussion and it should happen in an office somewhere, where it feels more official, more documented and regulated, rather than a place where it's just a conversation.

If you can get away with lobbying that is good morally, you can get away with lobbying that is bad morally, so

even those that were deemed moral, such as a CEO lobbying for more refugees, should be forced to go through the same official process, and that no meetings take place outside of a fully accountable context.

that's why everything has to be a clean sheet and made public.

However, there was a consensus that even if the lobbying takes place inside an official location such as a Government office, it is non-negotiable that the meeting is minuted and subsequently published, for fear of deceptive behaviour if undocumented. Respondents believed that the secrecy inherent in important conversations being held behind closed doors creates the suspicion of wrongdoing. This issue of secrecy was a major concern for the qualitative respondents, who maintained that all forms of lobbying should be recorded and made available on the Government's website in order to avoid both the accusation and the reality of unethical behaviour. If there is not full transparency about lobbying, respondents claimed that the public can only find out about unethical activity retrospectively.

I think they should make it available information on the Government website... It should happen in a meeting which is recorded, with minutes taken... then if anything happens in the future, you can go back and see what happened at the meeting, who was there and what was said.

It was also felt that lobbying can lead to decisions being made in Government that conflict with the interests of the country. Examples were mentioned of the Government making favourable decisions following lobbying from oil companies, who reciprocate by giving money to the governing party, thereby creating a conflict of interest for a Government with already-established environmental pledges. It was felt that too many meetings take place with companies and businesses lobbying the Government that result in decisions that run counter to the public interest, and which remain undisclosed until they appear in the media. Whilst participants acknowledged that this is not illegal, it was regarded as deeply unethical. As a result, it was felt that there needs to be stricter rules in place identifying forms of lobbying which are allowed.

One aspect of corruption is lobbying of MPs and the Prime Minister. For example, Shell Oil giving money to the Conservative Government so they keep open their oilfield when that conflicts with the green agenda.

In both groups, people were unaware of who has responsibility for upholding ethical standards, with people generally pointing to the media. A more official regulatory body that can oversee ethical codes of conducts and any rule breaches was felt to be needed, with stronger powers to sanction those who break the rules as respondents felt that there is currently no meaningful deterrent.

I think there should be a limit [on party donations] because if you take the Conservative Party, they have far more donations than some of the smaller parties so they have an advantage... there should be a cap on political donations right across the board. So it isn't just money buying influence because it's not fair and it's undemocratic.

Some participants took the view that a cap on party donations was necessary. This was spontaneously raised as an issue intrinsically bound up with lobbying, with favourable decisions for a company or industry more likely to result in a sizeable party donation. When probed this was also considered undemocratic on the grounds that large donations benefit large parties such as the Conservatives, at the expense of smaller parties with less political power.

Business appointments

Following service in public office, MPs and ministers taking jobs in private companies were considered to have a clear conflict of interest. Once again, the theme of one rule for the Government and a different one for everyone else was brought up. Participants in the focus groups illustrated this point by spontaneously recounting personal workplace clauses preventing them from working for specific businesses over whom they may have had previous influence.

I don't think it's ethical. I've worked on contracts for businesses before where I had a clause that didn't allow me to work for certain companies... because

The main reason for concern was the belief that politicians will influence current policy decisions whilst they are still in office in the hope or knowledge that this will pave the way for a career in a particular private company or sector following their period in public office. It was felt that should this continue to be allowed, there was a danger that MPs and ministers might not make decisions in the best interest of the public, instead setting themselves up for a comfortable life after holding public office. This was considered to be in direct conflict with ethical standards, and therefore in need of stricter regulation.

obviously it's a conflict of interest.

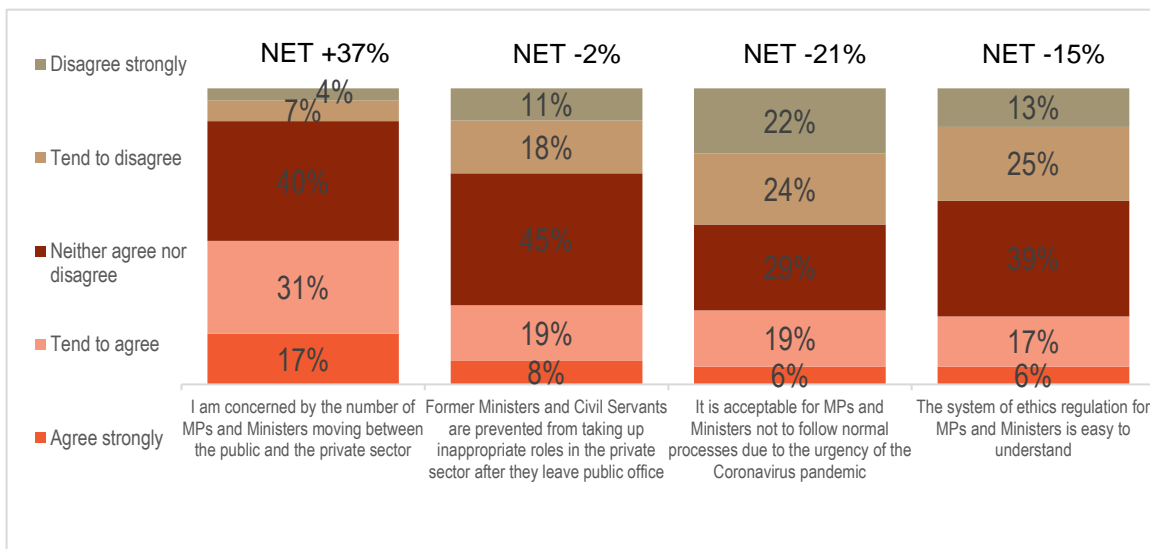
Some of our politicians are so unethical they will be wanting to take advantage... and want perks and large sums of money in return for influencing Government policy.

There was a general consensus in both focus groups that there should be a period of time before a former minister can take a position in a private company, if that minister's activity in office was in any way related to the private company. There was a suggestion that this should be written into contracts for MPs and ministers before they begin working in Government. However, for some, no matter the length of time that has elapsed, taking a job in a private company over which they have previously had influence in public office should never be allowed. At the other end of the spectrum, some expressed the view that what ministers get up to after leaving office should be of no concern to the public. However this view was not widely shared.

There should be some sort of clause where there's a timeframe where they're not able to interact with those people and then further down the line they possibly can.

The quantitative research reinforces the view from the focus groups that for most people there is a substantial level of concern (48%) about the movement of politicians between the public and private sectors.

I think MPs should have some sort of employment contract that prevents them from doing things like taking a job in a company after they've given them a contract.



Base: 1,590

Conclusions

The public have a firm belief that ethical standards are integral to democracy itself, and that politicians have a fundamental duty to the public to abide by ethical codes and rules. However, the public lack confidence that MPs and ministers abide by such standards, and see some politicians as possessing neither the core values expected from leaders in public life, nor matching up to the higher ethical standards displayed by other respected public sector leaders, such as judges, doctors and teachers.

This negative perception of UK politicians has been exacerbated by Covid, and the ease with which politicians were able to bypass the pandemic rules which the public had to strictly

adhere to. The undermining of official tendering processes during Covid was considered to be a breach of ethical standards, provoking the use of the terms 'cronyism' and 'one rule for us and another for them.'

However, there is an underlying sense of resignation, bordering on cynicism, that this is just how politics operates and the system will never be entirely ethical. In spite of their expressed resignation to poor ethical standards among politicians, the view was shared that unethical behaviour should be challenged to prevent further deterioration, and that alongside greater transparency, ethical standards may improve. This reflects public interest in upholding ethical standards for political office holders.

Transparency is seen as crucial in preventing secrecy around lobbying, which participants said should be attended by officials and take place in Government offices, always documented and made publicly available. The lack of such transparency is considered to be detrimental to the democratic process, leading to conflicts of interest, which may also arise if MPs or ministers are directly involved with private companies during or too soon after their time in public office.

Greater adherence to ethics rules would be welcomed, and there is a perception that a strong regulatory body holding the Government to account with sanctions for rule breaches is currently missing, and that there are simply not enough sanctions when politicians 'break the rules'. Respondents were generally unaware of who has responsibility for upholding ethical standards, with people generally pointing to the media. A more official regulatory body that can oversee ethical codes of conducts and any rule breaches was felt to be needed, with stronger powers to sanction those who break the rules. In addition to better enforcement, the system of ethics regulation for MPs and ministers was not seen as easy to understand, and greater clarity is needed in communicating this to the public.