

Note

This report was prepared for the Horizon Scanning Event of the CSPL – the Committee on Standards in Public Life, to report on questions in the BES (British Election Study) internet panel survey (BESip) that relate to the Committee’s 7 Principles of Public Life (also known as the Nolan Principles). This event took place on July 10, 2017.

In the analyses reported in this report weights were used as follow: if a variable occurred in only one wave, the weight for that specific wave was employed. If a variable was measured in multiple waves, either the ‘full’ weight for all waves was used or a multiple-wave-weight that covered the specific waves of relevance.

For the purpose of replication, the British Election Study and most of the Public Standards survey data can be freely accessed and downloaded from the UK Data Service data archives (<https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/>).



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English Public Attitudes to CSPL - Relevant Questions

Insights from the British Election Study
Internet Panel

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**A report prepared for the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL)
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1. Fact sheet

In the CSPL surveys (2004-2012), respondents consistently have more trust in their own MP than in MPs generally: almost half trust their own MP while less than 1 in 3 trust MPs in general

In waves 1-10 of the BESip, levels of trust in MPs fluctuate, from 1 in 5 to almost 1 in 3 expressing trust in MPs in general

In the CSPL surveys (2004-2010), there is an increase in the belief that selflessness influences MP voting behaviour. Initially, 1 in 10 believed that MPs worked to the best interests of the public, though this figure rose to 1 in 4 in 2010. Now, approximately 1 in 10 people believe that MPs act to the benefit of their local constituency

In waves 1-5 of the BESip, more than of respondents half agree that politicians only care about people with money

According to the data from waves 1-4, 7, 9 and 10 of the BESip, a large number of people disapprove of the UK Government. This fluctuates, but in 2016 approval-disapproval rates were 50/50

Considering, with caution, both the CSPL survey data (2004-2010), as well as that from wave 2 of the BESip, it appears that the ratings of UK public office holder standards of conduct are improving

Perceptions and expectations regarding standards in public life (measured in wave 2 of the BESip) become more negative with age and generally improve with education level and social class. Those on the right of the political spectrum are consistently more confident in the standards of public life than those who self-identify as left-wing



2. Introduction

At the request of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESip) has included, in several of its surveys, a number of questions relating to matters of direct interest. Some of these questions monitor the developments in public opinion, which were raised in the Committee's own Public Attitudes Survey between 2004 and 2014, whilst others address new and 'stand-alone' topics of interest to the CSPL. Additionally, many of the other questions in the BESip survey, also relate to the Committee's interest in attitudes regarding standards in public life. This report presents evidence from some of these surveys, where possible in conjunction with findings from the CSPL's Public Attitude Surveys (henceforth referred to as the 'CSPL surveys').

Wave	Date
1	20 Feb – 9 Mar 2014
2	22 May – 25 Jun 2014
3	19 Sep – 17 Oct 2014
4	4 Mar – 30 Mar 2015
5	31 Mar – 6 May 2015
6	8 May – 26 May 2015
7	14 Apr – 4 May 2016
8	6 May 2016 – 22 Jun 2016
9	24 Jun – 4 Jul 2016
10	24 Nov – 12 Dec 2016
11	Late April – early May 2017
12	May – early June 2017
13	Post-election June 2017

The surveys, in which requested questions were included, are part of the BES Internet Panel (BESip) which started in February 2014 and has since been fielded in 13 'waves', the most recent of which, immediately followed the snap general election of 8 June 2017.

Questions that were adopted in various waves of the BESip included:

1. A set of questions on standards in public life, which are identical to those found in the CSPL's own public attitudes surveys between 2004 and 2012. These ask how respondents rate public office holders' standards of conduct; how much confidence they have in the commitment of authorities to improve standards, and how much confidence they have in authorities uncovering and punishing wrongdoing in public life. These questions were included in wave 2 of BESip.



2. Questions regarding trust in one's own MP and in MPs more generally. While only the first 6 BESip waves include questions about trust in one's own MP, questions regarding trust in MPs generally are part of every wave.
3. Questions about the funding of political parties and referendum campaigns (wave 7)
4. Questions about the fairness of the electoral process, asked as expectations (before the fact) and experiences (after the fact). These questions focussed on the Scottish Independence Referendum of September 2014 and the EU Referendum of June 2016 in Scotland and Great Britain respectively, as well as on the General Election of June 2017 (Scottish Independence Referendum in waves 2 and 3 and the EU Referendum in waves 7, 9 and 10)
5. Questions on MPs' outside interests (wave 11)

Other questions which also speak to the interests of the CSPL include those regarding public perceptions of MPs' outside interests, including their satisfaction with the way democracy works, and so on¹.

This report examines information derived from the questions listed under points 1 and 2, and for waves 1-10 of the BESip; questions referred to under point 3 are discussed in Dee Goddard's "Public Attitudes to Party Funding in Britain". Similarly, questions regarding the fairness of the electoral process are reported separately by Jonathan Rose and Cees van der Eijk. Those relating to MPs outside interests (see point 5, above), as well as satisfaction with the workings of democracy, will be reported in separate documents later this summer.

In the following sections, this report focuses on several questions that were included in the BESip; a separate appendix provides further information about the surveys and some general methodological caveats.

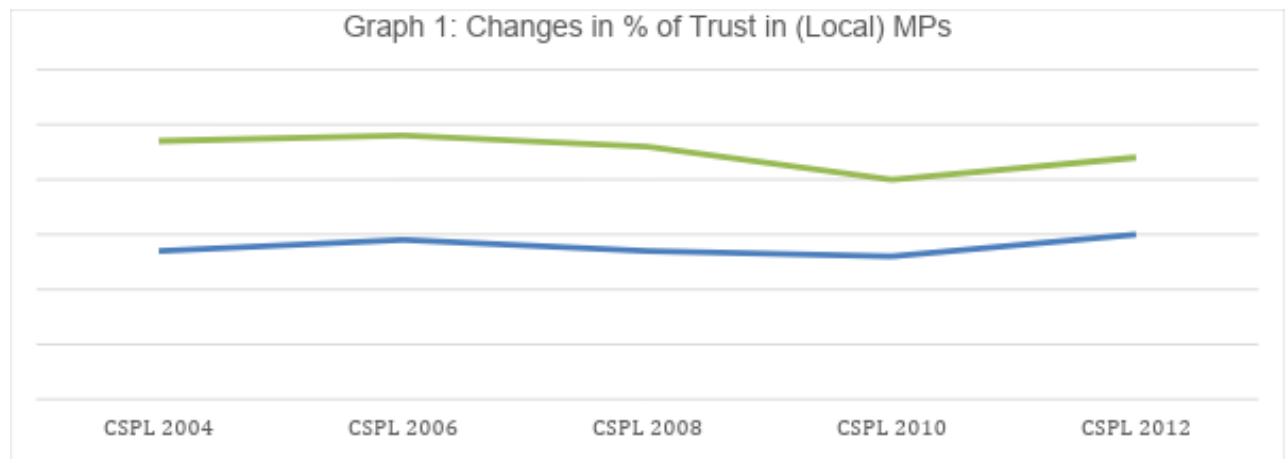
3. Trust in public office holders

In the CSPL surveys, local MPs are consistently viewed far more positively than MPs in general. As suggested previously, this could be due to the fact that local MPs are usually better known by their respondents, which often means that they are viewed in a better light; this also suggests that respondents are less likely to trust their MPs if they do not know them well enough. Philip Cowley however, has pointed out that this difference is not as significant as it may appear, suggesting that it is both party affiliation and party support for

¹ For a full list of questions contained, see: <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data-objects/panel-study-data/>



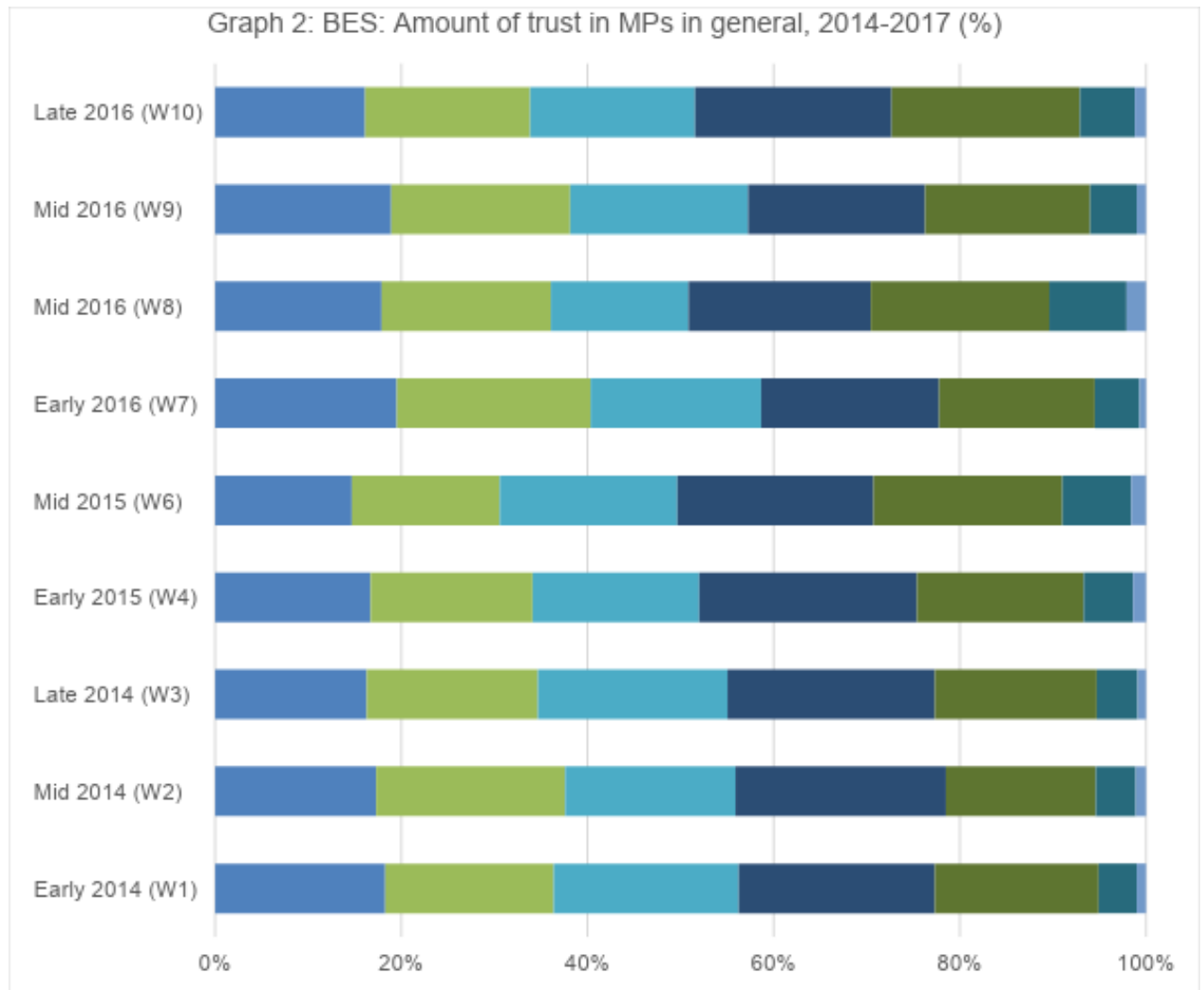
an MP, which influences public opinion regarding local politicians.² In his words, there are “vanishingly few people who ‘hate’ MPs in general but ‘love’ their local representative”.



As we can see from the graph above, there is not a consistent downward or upward trend; instead, it shows us that levels of trust fluctuate year on year. While there appears to have been a sudden decrease in trust in 2010, this could be attributed to the MPs expenses scandal, and in any case, the results from 2012 suggest that levels of trust in public office holders are once again on the rise.

Similarly, the BESip asks the public how much trust they have in members of parliament generally, as well as how much trust they have in the MPs within their local constituencies. Regarding trust in MPs generally, we saw a sudden decrease in trust in wave 7, despite a steady increase in trust since wave 1. Given that there was increase in political tension surrounding the EU referendum campaign, an increase in scepticism from the general public is not surprising. After all, and perhaps as a result of this, the values in subsequent waves fluctuate more than the ones before (see graph 2); rather than reflecting a real change in the levels of trust, however, a cross-wave comparison suggests that it reflects more of a trendless fluctuation in public opinion. No significant differences were found in regards to the levels of trust that local MPs receive from the electorate, however.

² Cowley, P. (2016). Not Love, actually: the public and their MPs. In P. Cowley & R. Ford (Eds), *More Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box: Another 50 things you need to know about elections* (pp. 149-152). Biteback Publishing.



4. Perceived selflessness of public office holders

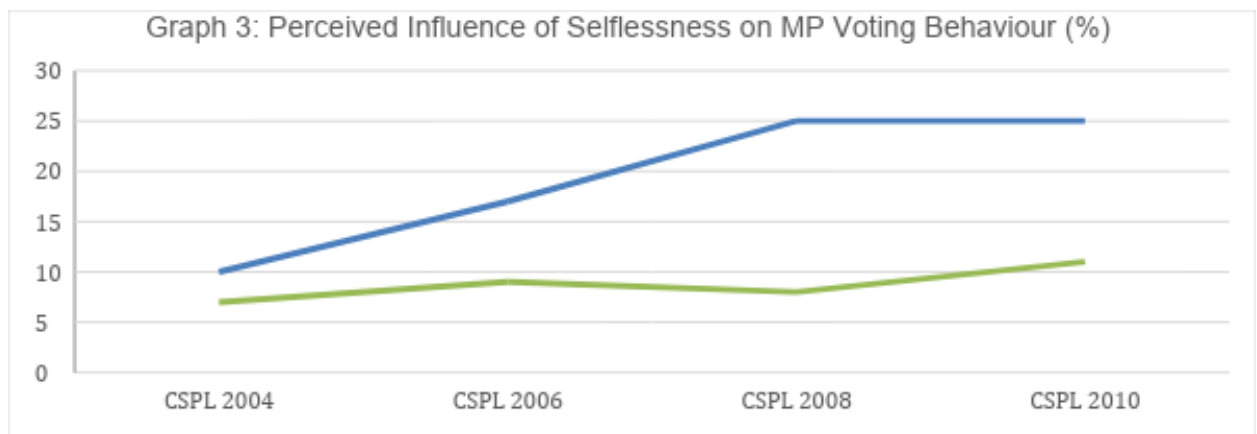
Between 2004 and 2012, the CSPL surveys asked respondents what they believed to influence the voting behaviour of MPs. The answer options below show how public wellbeing has the capacity to influence voting behaviour:

[This voting behaviour is mainly influenced by...]

1. What would benefit people in the country as a whole
2. What would benefit people in the local constituency



Graph 3 shows the CSPL survey data from 2004 to 2010: notably, it shows that respondents increasingly believed that the voting behaviour of MPs was influenced by selflessness.



In wave 4 (March 2015) of the BESip, the following assertion deals with selflessness: “my member of parliament tries hard to look after the interests of the people who live in my constituency”. Disregarding the ‘don’t know’ responses, the majority of respondents disagreed with the statement (43.2% versus 24.6% of people who agreed). See the table below for an overview of how these responses differ by a number of the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

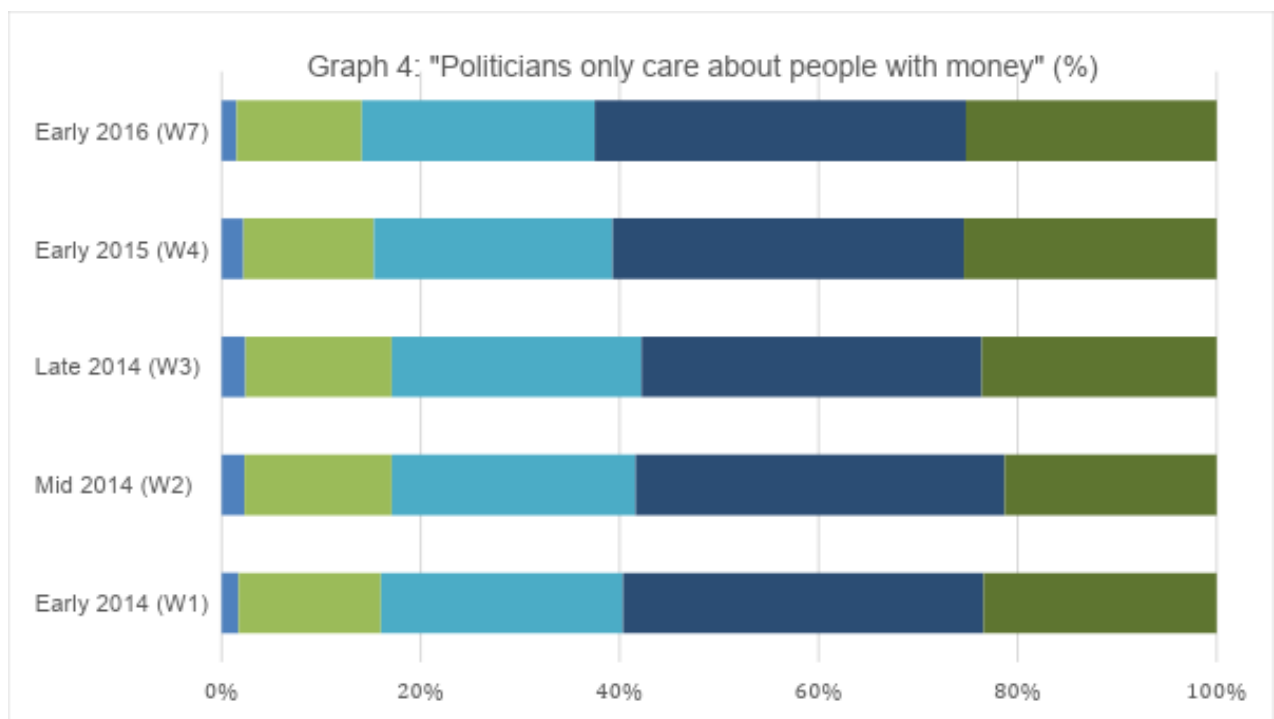
The perceived selflessness of public office holders based on agreement with the proposition
“My member of parliament tries hard to look after the interest of people who live in my constituency.”

Age	Older respondents (of 55-year-olds and over) agreed more strongly than younger respondents (67.8% agrees versus 63.8% on average)
Education	Higher educated respondents expressed greater agreement (with 43.7% versus 40.8% on average)
Gender	Females had a slightly more positive stance : 65% agreed with the statement: (in comparison to 61.3% of men)
Ethnicity	Those self-identifying as ‘other white’ expressed the least agreement with 52.7% (vs. 64% and 66.4% of the ‘white British’ and ‘other’ ethnicities)
Social class	Those self-identifying as working class agreed less than middle-class respondents (60.3% vs. 72.9% of middle-class respondents)
Political alignment	Rightist respondents agreed most with the statement (76.7% vs. 63.7% for left respondents)



5. Perceived Integrity of Public Office Holders

Waves 1, 4 and 7 of the BESip ask respondents the extent to which they agree that politicians “only care about those with money”. Graph 4 suggests that the degree of agreement remains fairly consistent, and no significant differences were found between demographic groups (including age, education, gender, ethnicity, social class and political alignment).

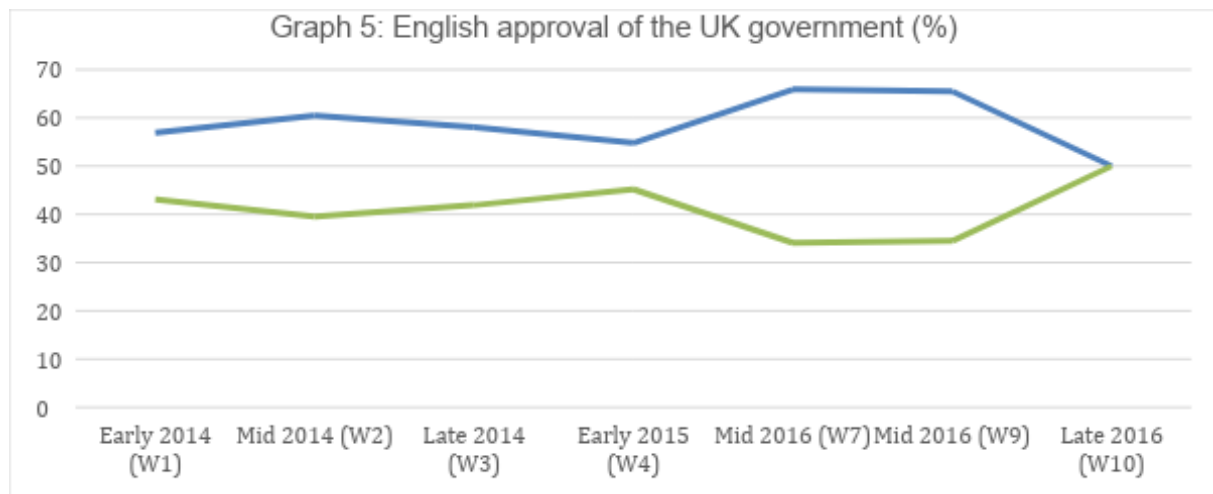


6. Government Approval

In several waves of the BESip, respondents were asked to indicate whether they approved of the UK government, the European Union and the local council. Based on graph 5, we can see that public approval of the UK government has been subject to fluctuations over time. Whilst there has always been a greater disapproval than approval of the UK government, there is almost a 50/50 split between those who approve and disapprove of the government in wave 10; this means that there is a greater approval of the UK government among respondents than previously. As seen in waves 11-13 however, the approval of the EU has barely changed over time. In wave 7, 49.5% of respondents approved of the local council, meaning that 50.5% of those asked disapproved with the



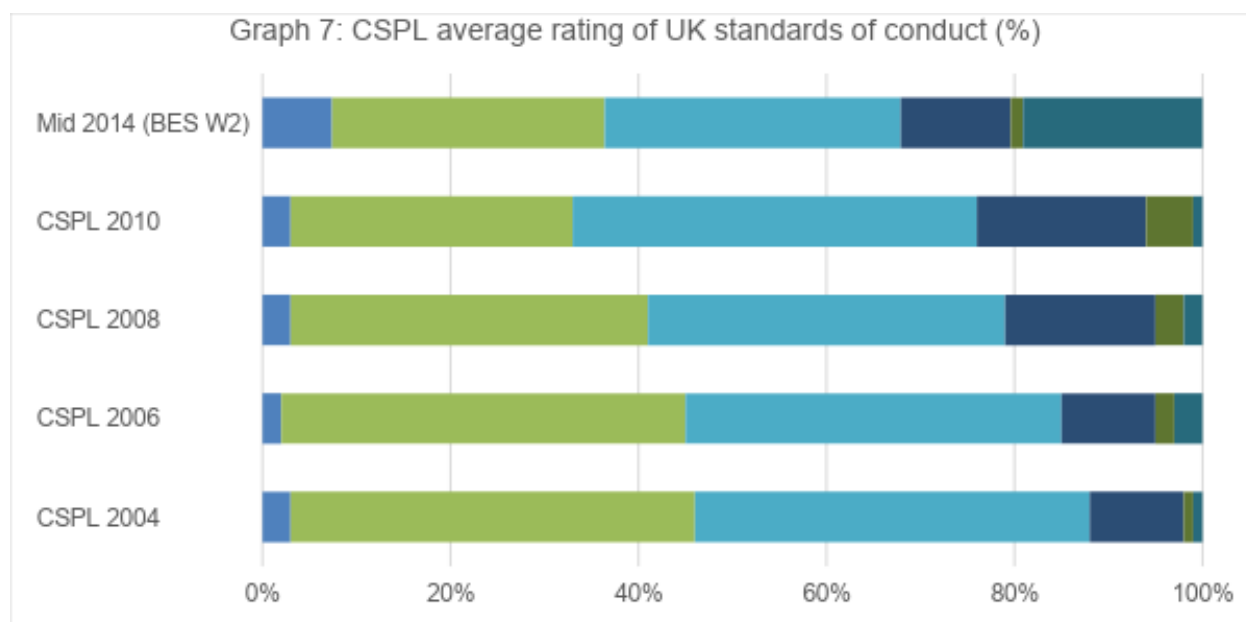
way that it was run. Generally, none of these results were significantly influenced by demographic characteristics, such as age or gender.



7. Overall rating of standards for public office holders

In both the CSPL surveys and the second wave of the BESip (in 2014; N = 6715), respondents were asked how they would rate the standards of conduct for public office holders in the UK; graph 7 shows an overview of the distribution of responses to this question³. As we can see, there was a slight improvement in the average rating of UK standards of conduct between 2004 and 2010, as measured by the CSPL surveys; respondents of the BESip survey answered similarly, though a large percentage of those asked said that they did not know (19.1%). Out of the respondents, 13% rated the standards as high, and 36.4% rated them as low; a significant number of respondents said that they did not rate them as either (31.5%). This could be because wave 2 of the BESip was distributed four years later, in 2014, because there were differences in the sample or for example because of inconsistencies in measuring data. The table below shows how these responses differed by demographic.

³ The CSPL 2012 data could not be included because this was excluded from the CSPL survey reports.



Overall rating of standards of public office holders

Age	Older respondents rated these standards more negatively than their younger counterparts. For example, 78.4% of over 55-year-olds gave a low rating, vs. 72.2% of respondents between 35 to 55 and 68.51% of respondents who were 35 years old or younger
Education	Lower educated respondents (those with no qualifications) gave a more negative rating of the standards (80.3% rated them as low) in comparison to respondents with formal education short from a degree (74.3%) and those with a degree (80.3%)
Gender	Females were less positive about these standards than males (23.8% rated these standards highly, versus 27.7% of males)
Ethnicity	Many of those self-identifying as 'Other White' rated these standards as neither high nor low (49.3%). The ratings of the 'Other' and 'White British' respondents are more varied. The 'White British' gave the lowest rating , with 75.4% seeing the standards as being low and just 24.6% considering them high. Those respondents identifying as 'Other White' and 'White' also give low ratings, but to a lesser extent (72.1% vs. 60.1% respectively)
Social class	Middle class identifying respondents gave a higher rating than working class respondents. For example, 66.4% of the middle-class respondents gave a low rating and this in comparison to 79% of working-class respondents
Political alignment	Those who place themselves on the left only have a slightly more negative overall rating than those respondents who identify as being centre or right. Out of the leftist respondents, 76.5% give a low rating vs. 54.7% of rightist respondents



8. Perceptions and expectations about standards in public life

In the second wave of the BESip (2014), respondents were asked the following questions:

- “Are you confident that authorities in the United Kingdom are committed to improving standards in public life?”
- “Are you confident that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public life?”
- “Are you confident that when people in public life are caught doing wrong, the authorities will punish them?”

The majority of BESip respondents are not very confident that the UK authorities are committed to improving standards in public life (50.2%). Similarly, the majority of English citizens are not confident that the authorities will uncover the wrongdoing of public office holders (64.6%); neither are they confident that wrongdoers in public life will be punished (66.3%). The tables below highlight demographic-based differences:

Confidence that authorities are committed to improving standards in public life by demographic	
Age	There is a decrease in confidence by age : 50.6% of the under 35 age group are confident that the authorities are committed to improving standards in public life, in comparison to 40.4% and 30.2% in 36-55 and >55 year olds respectively
Education	There is an increase by education level : the higher educated citizens (those with a degree) have more confidence than those who do not (42% vs. 37.5% on average)
Gender	Males are slightly more confident than females: 40.8% vs. 37.7%.
Ethnicity	Those identifying as Other White have less confidence than the White British and Other ethnicities (35.8% vs. 39.3% and 40.7% respectively)
Social class	Self-identified members of the middle class have a greater confidence than self-identified members of the working class (49.6% vs. 34.1%)
Political alignment	Those identifying as right aligned have a much greater confidence than those identifying as being centre or left. More specifically, whereas ‘leftist’ respondents have 35.8% of this confidence, the right respondents have 65.1% confidence

Confidence that authorities will uncover wrongdoing of public office holders	
Age	There is again a decrease in confidence by age : 48.2% of < 35-year-olds are confident, vs. 37.2% of 36 to 55-year-olds and 27.9% of over-55-year-olds
Education	This confidence increases by education level : 41.6% confidence for those with a degree, vs. 35.4% on average
Gender	Males are slightly more confident than females: 38.3% vs. 34.7%
Ethnicity	Those self-identifying as white British have the least confidence with 35.8% vs. 38.7% of those identifying as ‘other white’ and those identifying as another ethnicity (44%)



Social class	Those self-identifying as middle class have more confidence than self-identified members of the working class (44.6% vs. 33.4%)
Political alignment	Those who place themselves on the right on the political spectrum are more confident than those who place themselves on the left side of the political spectrum, with 46.7% versus 37.3%
Confidence that wrongdoers will be punished	
Age	Also a decrease in confidence by age : older respondents have less confidence than their younger counterparts. Of those respondents in the 56-99-year category, 74.8% have no confidence, whereas of those in the 26-55 and 0-35 categories have 66% and 53.3% have no confidence
Education	Higher educated respondents are somewhat more confident : Respondents with a degree are 39.2% confident, vs. 32.8% on average
Gender	Males are again slightly more confident than females: 34.9% vs. 33.2%
Ethnicity	Minimal differences in terms of ethnicity: those identifying as 'other white' have a slightly, negligible lesser amount of confidence that the wrongdoers will be punished (67.9% have no confidence vs. 66.6% of the 'white British' respondents and 57.4% of those respondents of another ethnicity)
Social class	Members of the middle class again have greater confidence : 40.3% vs. 30% of the working-class respondents
Political alignment	Those respondents who place themselves on the left side of the political spectrum are less confident than those who place themselves on the right side of the spectrum (33.2% vs. 46.6% confidence respectively)

9. Conclusion

This report has looked into questions from the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESip), which are of relevance to the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL); these questions of interest were selected and subjected to analysis, with the exception of those to be addressed in separate publications going forward.

When observing the data from the CSPL surveys, we can conclude that were positive trends for trust, perceived selflessness and UK standards of conduct. Where the data from CSPL and the BESip could be compared, we can see minor differences in the distribution of attitudes between both surveys, particularly in regards to trust and standards of conduct. These differences could be attributed to survey specific differences rather than any real changes in perceptions of standards in public life. The BESip data concerning trust, integrity and approval of the government most likely reflects trendless fluctuation instead of a genuine improvement or decline. The perceptions and expectations about standards in public life appear to improve with age, education level and social class. Furthermore, males consistently have a more positive perception and more positive expectations of these standards, as do those who place themselves on the right instead of the left side of the political spectrum. In contrast, for ethnicity, the results are mixed.



10. Appendix

Methodology: Preparation and Transformation

To use the survey data first the variables of interest were transformed in order to facilitate the analyses and comparisons. Thereafter, time was spent on ensuring that the weights were used appropriately. Non-English respondents were excluded from the analyses and sorted out of the data file since the Committee is concerned with the circumstances, status quo and perceptions of citizens in England.

The Questions and Surveys

In order to investigate public attitudes to matters of interest to the CSPL, this report draws on a series of questions asked in Waves 1-10 of the British Election Study Internet Panel, complemented by the data of the CSPL Public Attitudes Survey 2004-2012. Both series of surveys are concerned with the perceptions of citizens of the behaviour of UK public office holders and were conducted by YouGov, which takes an online sample from the members of its panel. The CSPL survey – also referred to as the Public Attitudes Survey – was distributed 5 times between 2004 and 2012, in 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012 and specifically concerns the transparency and accountability of the English government, concerned with “measuring the public attitudes towards ethical standards in the UK”⁴.

In turn, the BES internet panel survey study is ongoing, having started in 2014. The first wave of the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESip) was conducted in February-March 2014 and wave 13 has – at the time of this report – just finished. As such, these waves of the BESip surveys cover the period between early 2014 and mid-2017. A panel study concerns a survey that includes the same sample of individuals, tracking their responses to a number of identical questions, over a period of time. The majority of the questions addressed in this report were asked on behalf of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and address public perceptions of the issues surrounding the behaviour of political parties.

Limitations

At all times, we have to bear in mind that the internet panel is not based on a fully random sample design (it is sampled from a very large pool of potential respondents, that itself is largely based on self-selection) and that it, therefore, is not an ideal basis for inferences about the population of citizens in Great Britain who are eligible to vote in general elections at the time of the surveys.⁵ Analyses reported here are based on the use of weights provided in the BES which will, as good as possible, match the composition of the sample to that in the population in terms of demographics and geography. For many purposes, this

⁴ Quote taken from the description provided at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/cspl-surveys-of-public-attitudes>

⁵ The British Election Study does not cover Northern Ireland.



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will result in descriptions which will reflect the (unknown) population characteristics quite closely, while proper standard errors cannot be presented in view of the self-selection elements of the sample.