

Britain's poor view of politicians is more to do with their inability to answer a straight question than perceived corruption

By Democratic Audit

*British politicians have an appallingly poor reputation with the British public, with many regarding them as slippery, corrupt, and concerned chiefly with their own financial well-being. But, as **Professor Sarah Birch** and **Dr Nicholas Allen** argue, Britons are actually less concerned than German or French citizens with outright bribery, and more irritated by politicians refusal to give straight answers to questions.*

It has become a commonplace of modern politics that most people in the UK take a dim view of their elected representatives. The 2009 MP expenses revelations and the subsequent drip-drip of variegated sleaze are but the latest in a long series of scandals that have sent regular ripples over Britain's political landscape. At the same time, outright corruption in UK politics is relatively rare in comparison with



The political interviewer and scourge of politicians, Jeremy Paxman (Credit: englishpen, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

what is found to take place in many other countries. An interesting and largely unanswered question is how the British people come to hold such negative views of their elected leaders, given that by international standards, British politicians are relatively clean.

There are a number of factors that are likely to contribute toward shaping evaluations of politicians, from the workings of the contemporary media to British political culture. But one neglected factor is the way in which ethical deviance is understood by different sectors of the polity. Our research shows that while policy-makers and reformers tend to see official misconduct largely as a matter of how elected representatives use money and other material resources, the public at large are equally exercised by the way in which politicians use language. It is not that they do not care about pocket-lining and cronyism; on the contrary, they care intensely about these things, but they also care about what politicians say. In other words, citizens tend to construe ethical issues quite broadly.

Definitions of public ethics devised by British political thinkers have long had a relatively narrow focus on questions surrounding conflict of interest, which has been the core preoccupation of those intent on maintaining political integrity. Indeed, the Committee on Standards in Public Life's original 'seven principles of public life' defined terms such as 'integrity' 'objectivity' and honesty' exclusively in terms of how politicians use public resources, completely neglecting to consider the discursive aspect of these concepts. The public, by contrast, cares greatly about how politicians use words. Not only do they resent spin and backtracking on promises, but they view these as ethical issues on par with the abuse of public funds.

For the British citizenry, honesty and integrity are largely a matter of doing what you say you are going to do and refraining from prevarication. Given this gaping chasm between elite and mass understandings of public ethics, it is not surprising that there continues to be a gap also between the standards people hold for their representatives and the behaviour they perceive. Unlike the minimalist and legalistic mindset of many politicians, most people want leaders who are genuine and sincere, and this is where they often feel let down

Considered comparatively, we find that discursive integrity looms large in all three countries, but it is undoubtedly the primary bugbear among British respondents. As the data in Table 1 show, Britons are less concerned than German or French citizens with outright bribery, but more annoyed at politician not giving straight answers to questions.

TABLE 1: *Perceived extent of different problems involving elected politicians in Britain, Germany and France (mean score)*

	Britain	France	Germany
Accepting bribes	6.4	8.0	6.9
Misusing official expenses and allowances	8.1	8.3	7.3
Making promises they know they can't keep	8.3	8.2	8.6
Not giving straight answers to questions	8.5	7.2	7.9

Note: The figures in this table are mean scores on the 0-10 scale. Don't knows are excluded.

Data are taken from batteries of questions fielded by the authors as part of the Co-operative Campaign Analysis Projects carried out in the UK, Germany and France between 2008 and 2013.

These findings have non-trivial implications, as they show why repeated efforts to hold MPs to account by devising more complex and demanding systems for monitoring the use and possible abuse of pecuniary resources are likely to miss the mark. What would really help to improve the image of politicians in the eyes of the people is to find some way of inducing a greater degree of straight talking among them. Spin-control is undoubtedly difficult to engineer, but it could well go a considerable way toward raising the reputation of politicians in the eyes of the people.

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Note: This post represents the views of the authors and not of Democratic Audit or the LSE. *It summarises some of the key findings contained in the forthcoming book by Nicholas Allen and Sarah Birch, Ethics and Integrity in British Politics: How Citizens Judge Their Politicians' Conduct and Why It Matters, Cambridge University Press, 2014, further details of which can be found [here](#).*

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