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Public Opinion with Respect to MPs' Outside Interests

Insights from the British Election Study

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1. Fact Sheet

The BES internet panel data shows that 2 different, virtually unrelated opinions exist amongst the general public regarding MPs' outside interests

Opinion-dimension 1 relates to the working hours of MPs. Opinion-dimension 2 concerns their contact with the general public

Opinion-dimension 1: a great majority (approx. 2 out of 3) of the respondents supports the idea that MPs should not have outside employment, and certainly not those that yield considerable income

Opinion-dimension 2: a large majority (c. 7 out of 10) accepted outside interests that help MPs to stay in touch with the public, and that yield no significant income

Opinion-dimension 1: the young (between ages 18 and 29), South-Asian and Caribbean ethnic minorities and Hindu, Muslim and Jewish faith groups are least convinced that MPs should devote their time exclusively to their parliamentary work

Groups that feel marginalised or disempowered, such as those with low levels of political trust or those with less understanding of the political system, are more averse to income-generating outside interests



Introduction

Following the ongoing review on the subject of MPs' outside interests by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) a number of questions regarding the issue of MPs' outside interests were included in Wave 11 of the British Election Study's Internet Panel (BESip)¹. This brief report summarises this data.

The questions were formulated as statements for each of which the respondents had to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with them. The 5 items were as follows:

1. Once they are elected, MPs should be full-time, professional politicians
2. MPs need to stay in touch with ordinary people by being engaged in activities other than politics
3. As long as my MP represents my constituency well I do not mind whether he or she has another job
4. MPs should only have second jobs that were declared to the public at the time of their election
5. It would be a source of concern if my MP was making more money from his or her second job than from their MP salary

The following responses could be given: disagree strongly / disagree / neither disagree nor agree / agree / strongly agree / don't know.

The items were formulated so as to reflect the most prominent elements of public discourse for and against MPs holding outside interests, following the announcement that George Osborne MP was appointed editor of the London Evening Standard in

¹ Fieldwork for Wave 11 of BESip was conducted from 24 April 2017 to 3 May 2017, i.e., very shortly after the announcement of the 'snap' general election that was held on 8 June 2017. The questions were asked to a randomly selected section of 7903 respondents of the entire sample of 31,014.



Spring 2017 as well as to reflect some of the earlier recommendations of the CSPL's position on this matter (see 2009 report on MPs' Expenses and Allowances²).

This brief report comments on the distribution of responses to these questions, and continues to ask how such responses should be interpreted vis-à-vis each other: do they all reflect qualitatively different opinions or do they all emanate from a single, more fundamental and underlying opinion with respect to MPs' outside interests? Or do they reflect something else yet? We find that the responses identify two qualitatively different, and virtually unrelated opinions with respect to outside interests. The following section reports on these two opinions, looking at how different groups of respondents compare in terms of their responses. These groups are distinguished in terms of demographic and social background, as well as relevant political attitudes and orientations, which were also observed in the British Election Study's Internet Panel (BESip, see footnote 1). The report ends with a few overarching conclusions and reflections.

Responses to questions on MPs' outside interests

Table 1 reports the distribution of responses. The far right-hand column contains the percentage of respondents who stated "don't know"; On average some 7.6% of respondents were unable or unwilling to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the questions below (with only minor variation between the items). Compared to other BESip questions regarding political opinions, this is neither exceptionally low nor exceptionally high, and shows that the majority of respondents did not encounter particular difficulty in understanding and reacting to the questions. Perhaps this is understandable in view of the extensive (and generally quite critical) public discussion, triggered by the appointment of George Osborne MP to the position of editor of the London Evening Standard in March 2017.

²https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336903/MP_expenses_main_report.pdf



The columns in table 1 that are not shaded grey present the distribution of responses when disregarding the “don’t know” responses.

Unsurprisingly, respondents expressed a variety of opinions; none of the responses, however, were evenly balanced between the ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ side. Rather, we observed for each of the items, a very clear imbalance between the two sides.

Almost three out of four respondents agreed or strongly agreed that MPs should be full-time, professional politicians (item 1); and a similar majority expressed that income from second jobs should be limited compared to MPs salaries (item 5). An even larger majority (~80%) supported the statement that outside interests are acceptable only if declared at the time of election (item 4); yet, at the same time, some 70% agreed that MPs should stay in touch with ordinary people via activities other than their political work (item 2). Item 3 (expressing that one does not mind about other jobs as long as one’s constituency is well represented) yields the most divided response, with neither the ‘agree’ nor the ‘disagree’ side being supported by a majority of respondents.

This inspection of responses gives rise to two conclusions. Firstly, public opinion (as an aggregate phenomenon), is quite strong in one direction or the other for most of these statements, meaning that in spite of individual differences, there is a relatively clear sentiment, which is supported by a rather large majority. This likely reflects the overall tone of public discourse at the time. We also observe, however, seemingly contradictory elements in the responses to the questions, which are illustrated most clearly by items 1 and 2. A large number of people express that MPs should be full-time professional politicians, though many agree that in order to stay “in touch” with ordinary people, they should also be engaged in activities other than politics. It would, however, be overly simplistic to interpret this as mere inconsistency (which often leads to the idea that public opinion can be ignored or disregarded). Asking questions about *what* the respondents were expressing in their answers is important and may lead to interpretations other than mere inconsistency.



Table 1 – Responses to questions on MPs’ Outside Interests

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	% Don’t know (from n=7903)
1. Should be full-time politicians	30.0%	42.2%	20.2%	6.8%	0.9%	100% (n=7348)	7.0%
2. Stay in touch via other activities	20.9%	50.8%	21.1%	5.8%	1.6%	100% (n=7389)	6.5%
3. Do not mind if constituency is well represented	4.7%	26.7%	23.9%	30.9%	13.8%	100% (n=7296)	7.7%
4. Only if declared at election	29.9%	48.9%	13.9%	5.3%	2.1%	100% (n=7278)	7.9%
5. Concern if income from second job highest	37.3%	36.2%	17.4%	7.7%	1.5%	100% (n=7200)	8.9%

Note: Source: BESip Wave 11 (v0.1), no weights applied



The meaning of the responses

At first glance, the meaning of each item is reflected in its wording; from this perspective, they all address somewhat different issues and concerns. Yet, even at the face-interpretation level of meaning, it must be recognised that some items contain more than a single element that can motivate the response. Item 2 for example, states that “MPs need to stay in touch with ordinary people by being engaged in activities other than politics”, and respondents may focus on the ‘need to stay in touch’ element, or on the ‘activities other than politics’ element, or on both. As such, it is necessary to go beyond a mere inspection of the specificity of the text of the items, to interpret its meaning.

At a more abstract level, each item taps into feelings about the extent to which MPs’ outside interests should be welcomed, or conversely, constrained. For items 1, 4 and 5 the ‘agree’ response is an expression of the desire to constrain the existence of outside interests of MPs; for items 2 and 3 however, it is the ‘disagree’ response that expresses such a desire. Whether or not the responses to these questions emanate from a single underlying (and latent) respondent attitude about welcoming or restricting outside interests cannot be taken for granted, though as it has to be tested explicitly. When doing so, we find that this hypothesis has to be rejected, despite the fact that the five items do not reflect five qualitatively different opinions. More specifically, this analysis leads to the following conclusions:³

- Respondents’ answers to items 1, 3 (where responses are inverted) and 5 reflect very much a single opinion: whether MPs outside interests should be

³ We use for this purpose an ordinal cumulative IRT scaling procedure known as Mokken scaling. For more information on this method, we recommend: van Schuur, W.H. (2011). *Ordinal Item Response Theory: Mokken Scale Analysis (Series: Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences)*. London: Sage. For the purpose of this analysis the coding of items 2 and 3 has been reversed, so that for all items the highest scores reflect the strongest desire to impose constraints on outside interests.



constrained or welcomed.⁴ More specifically, the three items that define this opinion-dimension imply a reasoning that MPs should be exclusively directed to their political work; similarly, it shows that an MP representing their constituency well, does not justify holding outside interests, particularly when those interests are accompanied by substantial and additional income.

- On the other hand, it shows that being an MP is not a profession, which requires full-time attention; respondents with such attitudes saw no problem with MPs deriving additional income from other activities, as long as they represent their constituency well.⁵
- Item 4 reflects a similar opinion, though in a weaker form; this is due to the fact that the ‘disagree’ response may arise from quite opposite motivations. The question asks whether outside interests would be acceptable only if declared at the time of the election by an MP. One may disagree with this statement for either of two, quite different reasons: either because one disagrees entirely with MPs holding outside interests, irrespective of whether or not they were declared at the time of an election; or because one is not opposed to outside interests but objects to the qualification ‘only’.
- Qualitatively, Item 2 reflects a different opinion, relating particularly to the specified outcome, which may arise from outside interests, namely ‘staying in touch with ordinary people’. The four other statements do not specify any kind of outcome to be obtained from the existence of outside interests at all, which leaves the interpretation entirely to the respondent – a great majority of whom see this as a distraction from an MPs core political job, to which they object. Moreover, we find a negative relationship between responses to items 2 and 5, which suggests that ‘staying in touch with ordinary people’ is seen as incompatible with obtaining sizeable income from outside interests.

⁴ The coefficient of scalability of these items, denoted by H, is 0.57, which is strong.

⁵ Adding item 4 to the scale defined by items 1, 3 and 5 reduces the overall scalability from 0.57 to 0.48 (which is, according to well-established criteria a drop from ‘strong’ to ‘moderate’) while the item-specific fit of item 4 in that scale is 0.37 (or ‘weak’).



To summarise, the responses to this set of statements reflect two different opinions: firstly, that MPs should focus, free from distractions, on their core political job, and secondly, that MPs can sensibly combine politics and other outside interests, which may yield additional income. Opinions regarding the professionalism of MPs (see diagram on p.14), are most clearly expressed by responses to items 1, 3 and 5; comparatively, attitudes on the desirability for MPs to stay in touch with ordinary people are expressed in item 2, which may conceivably be achieved by outside interests, but not by extensive remuneration. Item 4 predominantly reflects the first attitude, though responses are not fully unequivocal in their meaning because ‘disagree’ can be given for a number of different and mutually incompatible reasons; as such, we will not focus on item 4 in our subsequent analyses.

Because they reflect the same underlying opinion, the responses from items 1, 3 and 5 can be combined into a single measure without the loss of relevant information; going forward, we will refer to this attitude as ‘full- vs part-time MPs’. The Mokken Scale analysis also shows us how people feel about MPs staying in touch with ordinary people, which is addressed by item 2; we refer to these as opinions regarding the representation by MPs. Interestingly, opinions on these two dimensions are virtually unrelated to each other.⁶

In the next section, we focus on these two attitudinal dimensions, looking at the average opinions for the population as a whole, as well as for different groups within the population. In the following tables, and to allow for the ease of interpretation, we rescale the measures of both attitudes to a range of 0 and 1.

⁶ The inter-correlation between these two opinions is -0.04, which is, for all purposes, negligible.



Comparing attitudes on MPs' outside interests across the population

The average scores for samples on both the 'full- vs part-time MP' and the 'stay in touch' opinion dimensions are 0.68 and 0.71 respectively. This reflects a large skew of support for full-time (rather than part-time) MPs, as well as for the perspective that outside interests are desirable if they help MPs to stay in touch with the general public – an attitude already visible in Table 1. These averages are useful as benchmarks against which to interpret the averages of a variety of groups; though before doing so it must be emphasised that although skewed, opinions on these dimensions are not unanimous. Indeed, some 30 percent of the sample deviates from the majority and does not support the view that MPs should consider their political activity as an exclusive and full-time job, and the same can be seen in regards to staying in touch with ordinary people. Clearly, different perspectives exist regarding the role of MPs, which leads to occasional outbursts of moral indignation by those subscribing to what is currently the majority opinion. In the context of political disengagement, where there is a lack of faith in the political system, as well as a failure to engage in the political process, this is likely to put a strain on how citizens regard their representatives.

When comparing population groups on these opinion dimensions, we consider two kinds of grouping criteria: the first contains geographic, demographic and socio-economic group distinctions, including country (England/Scotland/Wales), gender, age, class identification, occupational grade, ethnicity and religion, and the second, political preferences, perceptions and attitudes. Group distinctions include: the political party voted for in 2015, the choice made in the 2016 EU referendum, self-placement on a left/right scale, the perception of worsening economic conditions, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in MPs more generally, as well as who should make the most important decisions for the country.



We compared groups in terms of their average scores on the full- vs part-time MP and the 'stay in touch' opinion-dimensions and found no significant difference between them in regards to the latter; in all of the groups, however, we found approximately the same level of support for the opinion that MPs should stay in touch with ordinary people. Although this opinion is not unanimously endorsed (indeed, the average for the entire sample is 0.71), any differences in opinion are not socially or politically structured.

In contrast, opinions regarding the working hours of MPs differed across groups. We found no significant difference between genders, though when considering age, we saw that young people (18-29) were less likely to agree that MPs should devote themselves exclusively to their political work (their average is 0.60, compared to 0.68 for the entire sample). Interestingly, those who saw themselves as working class did, on average, hold the same opinions as those who saw themselves as middle class, though ethnicity and religion influenced opinion. Those with a background in the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean, were less insistent than other groups on MPs working full time as professional politicians (their averages are 0.61 and 0.60 respectively, versus 0.68 for the entire sample); this also holds for Hindu, Muslim and Jewish faiths, who averaged 0.58, 0.60 and 0.63 respectively. All in all, and in terms of these social characteristics, we found some minor differences in the degree to which groups agreed that being an MP should be a full-time profession. Despite this, these differences are relatively minor in terms of the extent to which they deviate from the overall distribution of opinions in the entire sample. Moreover, in all of these instances, the groups that deviate significantly from the wider population are themselves relatively small (the youngest age group, specific ethnic minorities, and specific faiths).

While the differences between social and demographic groups were relatively minor in this regard, they were far more pronounced between those who held different political preferences, perceptions and attitudes. Respondents who voted for the Conservatives in 2015 were least supportive of the idea that the job of an MP should



be full-time (average on this measure is 0.63), whereas voters of UKIP, Greens, SNP and PC scored on average 0.73 or higher. Those who placed themselves on the right of a left-right scale were less convinced that MPs should work full-time hours (average 0.65) than those placing themselves distinctively on the left (0.75). No significant differences were found, however, between those who voted remain or leave in the 2016 EU referendum.

We also found that the following respondents were more likely to agree that MP's should devote all of their time, exclusively to their political work:

- Those who felt that their personal economic circumstances had deteriorated in the past year (average 0.75, in contrast to 0.61 for those who feel that their economic situation has improved)
- Those with low levels of political efficacy, as indicated by their strong agreement with the statement that 'politicians do not care about the opinions of people like me' (average 0.76, in contrast to 0.63 for those who strongly disagree with this statement)
- Those who subscribe strongly to the notion that 'the people, not politicians should make important decisions in the country' (average 0.78, in contrast to 0.66 for those who reject this idea)
- Those with low levels of trust in MPs (average 0.74, in contrast to 0.64 for those displaying high trust in MPs)

These comparisons demonstrate that those who feel marginalised or disempowered are most likely to subscribe to the opinion that MPs should be full-time, professional politicians without high-earning second jobs. It is not surprising that support for this opinion is also strongly related to satisfaction with democracy: people who are strongly dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the UK have an average score of 0.77, while people who are very satisfied in this respect score on average 0.59. This measure of satisfaction is generally regarded as an indicator of 'regime legitimacy', or the feeling that the allocation of power and the governance of the country is fair and just.



Conclusions and reflections

The survey data included in the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESip) shows that two different and virtually unrelated opinions exist in the general public regarding MPs outside interests. On the one hand, we identified an opinion-dimension which relates to the working hours of MPs; essentially, it asks whether or not they should be devoted full-time to their parliamentary work, whether they should entertain second jobs, and whether such non-parliamentary activities may lead to substantial remuneration. On the other hand, we identified an opinion-dimension concerning MPs contact with the general public, asking whether activities other than parliamentary work are to be welcomed if they help them to stay in touch with ordinary people. It is clear from the analysis that such activities do not include those which yield substantial incomes.

We did not find universal support either way for either of these issues, but for both, we did find that a large majority supported one of the sides. For the first opinion-dimension, we found that a great majority (about 2 out of 3) supported the idea that MPs should not have outside employment, and certainly not those that yield considerable income. For the second opinion-dimension, we found that a large majority (approximately 7 out of 10) accepted outside interests that help MPs to 'stay in touch' and that yield no real income. This second opinion, although not subscribed to universally, is subscribed to in virtually the same degree across all kinds of groups. To the extent that people have different views on this issue, these differences are thus not socially or attitudinally structured. This implies, that any perceived transgressions are unlikely to lead to reactions with other consequences than individual-level disappointment by some members of the public in the MPs in question.



Different views on the first of the two opinion-dimensions are, however, distinctly related to other characteristics: the young, South-Asian and Caribbean ethnic majorities and Hindu, Muslim and Jewish faith groups are least convinced that MPs should devote their time exclusively to their parliamentary work (although they also support that view more frequently than its opposite). But the contrasts in opinions are stronger in terms of politically relevant attitudes and perceptions. Most averse to income-generating outside interests are groups that feel marginalised or disempowered in one way or another: supporters of minor parties, people who see their economic circumstances deteriorating, citizens with low levels of efficacy or political trust, and people who, consequently, express low support for the way the political system works.

The most important of these findings have been summarised and visualised in schematic form on page 15 of this report.

With some regularity, public debate is triggered by MPs' outside interests, often with overtones of moral indignation. Although the existence of (income earning) outside interests is not prohibited, their existence does generate moral offense amongst substantial majorities of the British public, and most strongly so amongst those groups who feel marginalised and disempowered, which undermines their support for the way in which the political system works, and, as a consequence thereof, their involvement in that system via elections and other forms of political participation.



We identified two, statistically unrelated dimensions of opinion about MPs' Outside Interests

Professionalization of MPs

Whether or not position of MP should focus exclusively and full-time on parliamentary work

Opinions range between:

Being an MP is not necessarily a full time job and can be combined with additional jobs and income

Score 0



Score 1

Sample average 0.68

Being an MP is a full-time job, not allowing for additional jobs or additional income

Age 18-29	0.60
Ethnic (South Asian/Caribbean)	0.60
Religion (Hindu/Jewish/Muslim)	0.60
Voted in 2015 UKIP/Green/SNP/PC	0.75
Place themselves 1 or 2 on 10-point Left/Right	0.75
Personal economic circumstances worsened	0.75
Low efficacy	0.76
Important decisions by people, not by politicians	0.78
Little trust in MPs	0.74
Strongly dissatisfied with working of democracy in UK	0.77

Representation by MPs

Whether or not outside interests without earnings help MPs stay 'in touch' with ordinary people

Opinions range between:

Non-earning outside interests are not required to stay in touch with ordinary people

Score 0



Score 1

Sample average 0.71

Non-earning outside interests help MPs stay in touch with ordinary people

No significant differences were found on this opinion dimension between groups distinguished on demographic, social and political or attitudinal characteristics