

If the divide between politicians and the public is to be bridged, we need better understanding on both sides

By Democratic Audit UK

Over recent years, the relationship between members of the public and the democratic process has fallen into serious disrepair. To an extent, this is to do with perceptions of the ethics of politicians, but it is also to do with politicians communications techniques, particularly in interviews. **Sarah Birch** and **Nicholas Allen** argue that a greater degree of understanding is required on both sides of the divide if the problem is to be overcome.



We want our politicians to be honest, but what exactly does this mean? Different people have different understandings of political honesty, and new evidence suggests that there is a significant gap between the standards to which different groups in society expect their elected representatives to adhere.

In [our research](#) we have found that the British citizenry has a far more expansive understanding of political integrity than is reflected in elite practice. Many citizens are concerned about things like expenses fiddling, envelopes full of cash and preferential treatment for friends, but they are equally angered at what they see as chronic verbal dishonesty among the political class, including spin, not giving straight answers to questions, and politicians' making campaign promises they know they won't be able to keep.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that there is such a gaping disconnect between voters and those they vote for; when these groups talk about standards in public life, they are to a large extent talking past each other, as they mean different things.

The upshot of this situation is that our political leaders undertake seemingly never-ending reforms to the institutions and regulations that govern their behaviour. In the 1990s the cash-for-questions scandal led to the creation of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Following the 2009 expenses scandal the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority was invented.

While these were all valiant efforts to address mishandling of the resources with which we entrust our elected

representatives, none of these reforms dealt with the verbal malpractice which so enervates the British public. And it is difficult to see how any institutional measure would be capable of making politicians talk straight, be frank about what they expect to achieve in office and be open about the limits of their accomplishments.

We've also [found differences](#) in understandings of political standards among citizens themselves (Birch and Allen, 2015). Those who are most attentive to politics and public affairs are tuned into the idea of 'conflict of interest' that subtends elite discourse and institution-tinkering. According to the conflict-of-interest principle, representatives hold a public trust, and they therefore have a duty to act in the public interest when they perform their roles. It is considered inappropriate for MPs, local councillors and other elected leaders to use their positions of trust to line their own pockets, help their friends, fill their parties' war-chests or in other ways serve their unofficial interests as individuals or party members.

So far so obvious, but interestingly, our research shows that citizens who are less attentive to public affairs do not relate this principle so directly to political integrity. For these citizens, what really matters when it comes to dealing with resources is whether politicians follow the law. If they do, then their handling of resource-related matters is not necessarily considered terribly problematic, even where it violates conflict-of-interest norms.

What are the implications of these findings for policy? How can the gap between elite and mass conceptions of political ethics be breached? One place to start is education for those on both sides of the divide. Not only would citizens benefit from being instructed – perhaps via citizenship education – in the principles subtending public office and the norms attached to elected roles (including the conflict-of-interest norm), but the representatives themselves would be helped considerably by greater direct exposure to citizen views of the way they use and abuse words. One idea might be for Members of Parliament to attend focus groups where the topic of discussion was how members of the public understand honesty in politics. Such a sobering experience might well encourage politicians to engage in more honest talk and less spin.

There are also a range of reforms – beyond changes to institutions specifically designed to ensure integrity – that would help reduce popular anger at politicians' behaviour and provide an outlet for it when it does occur. The Labour Party's recent suggestion of curtailing MPs' outside income would help address the popular sense that politicians are 'just in it for themselves'. The Conservative party proposal to hold recall elections for misbehaving MPs would provide voters with a sanction far more satisfactory than most currently available. For lesser misdemeanours, a simple requirement that MPs who are found to have broken the rules apologise to their constituents – perhaps in the form of a letter printed in the local newspaper – in addition to apologising to Parliament, would increase the perceived accountability of holders of this office.

Many politicians in the UK are undoubtedly honest, hard-working and accountable to those they represent. But they have a serious collective image problem. Our research indicates that this problem is at least in part due to a lack of shared norms and understandings of the sorts of behaviour that is acceptable for elected representatives to engage in. With a General Election looming, politicians would be wise to listen more carefully to what voters think of them, and voters would do well to pay careful attention to how politicians balance their public and private roles.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of Democratic Audit UK, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

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