

# Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2014

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## Executive Summary

In order to provide some continuity with the previous biennial surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life, the Committee on Standards in Public Life inserted six questions that had been asked in the biennial survey series into the Hansard Society's Audit of Democratic Engagement survey. This report analyses the results of this survey and compares the results with those found in the Committee's previous surveys.

On the whole respondents had a fairly negative views about the standards of conduct of people in public life: few respondents thought the standards of conduct of those in people life were high, more respondents thought standards had got worse in recent years, and most respondents were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life or that wrongdoing would be uncovered or punished by the authorities. Opinions about these topics were more negative than those found in any of the Committee's biennial surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life. Comparison with responses to some of the questions asked in the Hansard Society's Audit of Democratic Engagement shows that opinions about standards of conduct in public life are associated with opinions about the functioning of Britain's political system more generally, suggesting a link between wider dissatisfaction with politics and attitudes towards conduct in public life.

### Headline findings

- **Overall standards of conduct of public office holders**
  - More respondents rated the standards of conduct of people in public life as low (36%) than rated them as high (18%). This is the first time in a survey commissioned by the Committee that those who said they thought standards were low outnumbered those who thought they were high.
- **Change in standards of public office holders**
  - More respondents thought the standards of conduct of public office holders had got worse (36%) than had improved (16%).
- **Confidence that authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life**
  - Most respondents (56%) were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life.
- **Confidence that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Most respondents (61%) were not confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office.
- **Confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Most respondents (58%) were confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office.
- **Confidence that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong**
  - Most respondents were not confident that people in public office caught doing wrong would be punished (63%).
- **Satisfaction with Britain's political system and public attitudes towards conduct in public life**
  - A consistent pattern emerged across several variables measuring different aspects of satisfaction with Britain's political system. Those who were positive about Britain's

political system also gave more positive answers about standards of conduct in public life, suggesting an association between attitudes towards the political system in general and perceptions of standards of conduct in public life.

### Comparison with previous surveys

- **Overall standards of conduct of public office holders**
  - Fewer people said that overall standards of conduct of people in public life were high and more people said that standards were low than recorded in any of the 2004-2012 biennial surveys.
- **Change in standards of public office holders**
  - The proportion of respondents who thought things had improved (16%) is lower than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
  - The proportion of respondents who thought things had got worse (36%) is a slight decrease on the proportions recorded in the 2008-12 surveys.
- **Confidence that authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life**
  - People were generally less confident in the authorities' commitment to upholding standards than any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
- **Confidence that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Levels of confidence that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing were lower than in any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
- **Confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office**
  - Levels of confidence that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing were lower than in any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.
- **Confidence that the authorities will punish those caught doing wrong**
  - Levels of confidence that wrongdoers will be punished were lower than in any of the previous surveys of public attitudes towards conduct in public life.

### Demographic differences

Very few demographic differences emerged in the analysis, and the small number of differences that are apparent do not suggest a consistent pattern of attitudes towards standards in public life between demographic groups.

- **Political affiliation**
  - Conservative party supporters were more likely than non-voters to say they were confident that authorities were committed to upholding standards, that authorities and the media would uncover wrongdoing, and that the authorities would punish those caught doing wrong.
  - Labour supporters were also more likely than non-voters to say they had confidence in the media to uncover wrongdoing and to be confident that wrongdoers would be punished.
  - Liberal Democrat supporters were much more likely to say they thought overall standards of conduct were high.

- UKIP voters more likely to say they thought standards had got worse compared to a few years ago. They were also more likely than non-voters to be confident that the media would uncover wrongdoing.
- **Gender**
  - Female respondents were less likely to think standards of conduct were high, were more likely to think standards had got worse, and less likely to have confidence in the commitment of authorities to uphold standards.
- **Ethnicity**
  - Ethnic minority respondents were more likely to think that standards were high, were less likely to think standards had got worse, and were more confident that authorities would punish wrongdoing.
- **Age**
  - Older respondents (45 and over) were less confident that the authorities were committed to upholding standards than were younger respondents. The oldest respondents (65 and over) were more likely to think that standards of conduct had got worse in recent years.
- **Social Grade**
  - Those in the C2 and DE social grades were less likely to have confidence that the authorities would uncover wrongdoing by those in public office.