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Keeping them Honest: Public and Elite Perceptions of Ethical Conduct among Australian Legislators

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Public confidence in politicians across all democratic countries has fallen to historic lows in recent years. In Australia, around one in three voters believe that legislators use their public office for financial gain, and only one in four believe that legislators have a high moral code. Governments in many countries have attempted to deal with this problem by establishing codes of ethical conduct for legislators. This paper examines what standards citizens expect from their politicians and, in turn, what standards politicians themselves regard as important. The data come from the 1996 Australian Election Study survey which asked voters and elected representatives what importance they attributed to the eight principles laid out in the federal parliament's own ethical guide. The results show that voters expect higher standards from legislators than do legislators themselves, particularly with regard to the proper use of public resources and rejecting favouritism. A range of hypotheses are tested to account for citizen and elite beliefs about legislators' ethical conduct. The results show that stronger democratic culture and political skills are important for the public, and lengthy exposure to political parties and democratic institutions for the elite.

Those who talk about the peoples of our day being given up to robbery and similar vices will find that they are all due to the fact that those who ruled them behaved in like manner.

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, III (29)

During the past decade, the conduct of politicians and their perceived lack of accountability to citizens has become a major public issue. In the USA, President Bill Clinton's involvement in the Whitewater land deals of the 1980s and allegations concerning his sexual improprieties have dominated the headlines. In Britain, corruption was such a major issue during the 1990s that it was encapsulated in the term 'sleaze'.[1] In Australia, allegations of misconduct among politicians have been rife, ranging from paedophilia and financial corruption to the falsification of expense claims for travel and accommodation.[2] Since 1990, nine federal ministers have resigned for ministerial impropriety, more than the total number who resigned for impropriety during the course of the previous half century.

As never before, it would appear that the conduct of politicians has fallen below the standards that the public expects. But what standards of behaviour does the public expect from their politicians? What standards do politicians themselves see as appropriate for their job? And what factors among the two groups help to explain their attitudes towards the ethical conduct of legislators? This paper examines these issues by analysing public and elite perceptions of the importance of different dimensions of political conduct, drawn from the Australian federal parliament's own recommendations about the proper conduct of federal politicians. The data come from the 1996 Australian Election Study (AES) survey, conducted immediately after the March 1996 federal election.[3]

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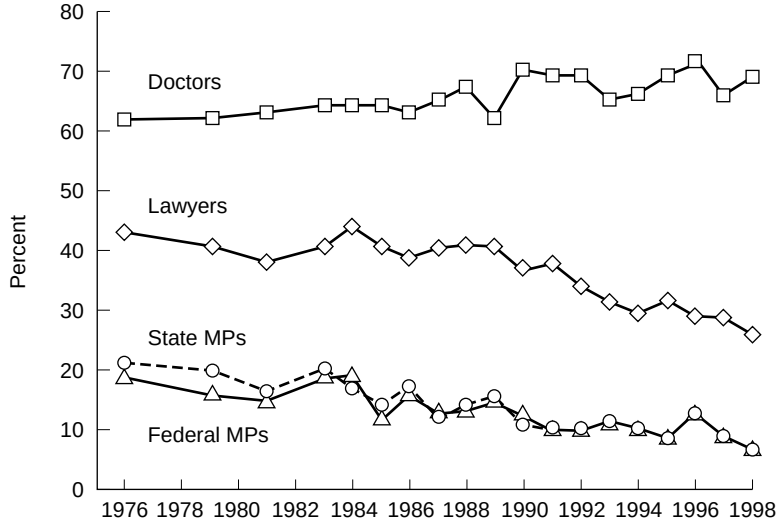
Public Confidence in Politicians

In almost every advanced democratic society, voters' trust in their politicians has reached historic lows in recent years. American voters' trust in their politicians halved between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, with the sharpest decline occurring immediately after the Watergate crisis and the resignation of President Richard Nixon.[4] Studies in most other democratic countries show similar findings.[5] In 1994, almost two-thirds of British voters agreed with the statement that the parties favour their own financial supporters in making appointments and trust in government to put nation before party has declined from 39% in 1974 to 22% in 1996.[6] In no democratic country is the trend stable, let alone showing greater confidence: the only question is the rapidity with which the decline in public political confidence is taking place.

The proportion of Australians who believe that state and federal politicians display 'high' or 'very high' ethics and honesty has declined by two-thirds in just over two decades (Figure 1). This is the largest proportionate decline among all of the 25 professions for which longitudinal data are available, and places politicians second only to car salesmen in overall public confidence. By comparison, slightly more people believe that newspaper journalists have high ethical standards, and seven times more people believe that doctors have high standards. These trends are very similar to those found across a range of advanced societies and have been associated with greater voter apathy towards politicians and the political process, and to a weakening sense of civic responsibility.[7]

Other survey evidence suggests that Australians do not take as jaundiced a view of their politicians compared to voters in other countries, although their levels of

Figure 1: Public Perceptions of Professional Groups Possessing Ethics and Honesty in Australia



Note: Estimates are for those saying groups had 'high' or 'very high' ethics and honesty.

Source: Morgan Gallup. 1998 at http://www.roymorgan.com.au/polls/1998/3088/index.html

Table 1: Beliefs About Politicians' Conduct in Australia and Britain

Most federal politicians/MPs ...	Percentage in agreement		
	Australia 1996	Britain 1985	Britain 1994
... make a lot of money by using public office improperly	36	46	64
... have a high personal moral code	27	42	28
... will tell lies if they feel the truth will hurt them politically	78	79	87
... care more about special interests than about the general public	60	67	77

Note: Australian estimates combine those answering 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

Sources: 1996 Australian Election Study; Transparency International at http://www.transparency.de/sourcebook/Part_C/cvA/a2.html.

cynicism are still high. Table 1 shows the proportions of Australian and British voters who agreed with four statements about politicians' conduct. Just over one in three Australians believed that politicians made a lot of money from using their public offices improperly. This figure is, however, almost half the proportion of British voters who hold the same view. The two groups are similar in the proportions who believe that politicians have a high personal moral code: just over one in four believe this to be the case. There is, by contrast, little disagreement among voters that politicians will tell lies if they believe that the truth will hurt them politically, although again British voters are more negative than their Australian counterparts. Finally, 60% of Australians and 77% of the British voters believe that their politicians care more about special interests than about the general public.

While the levels of Australian voter cynicism about the motivations of their politicians are high, comparing them to the British results suggests several interesting comparisons. First, while a significant minority of Australian voters believe that their politicians are financially corrupt, this is far below the British figure; to the extent that Australians are cynical about their politicians, it is with regard to their obfuscation of the truth and political favouritism rather than to blatant financial corruption. Second, British voters became significantly more cynical about their legislators between 1985 and 1994, following the widespread allegations of sleaze which emerged in the early 1990s. Australian public opinion more closely resembles the pre-sleaze period in Britain. In the event that many more serious allegations of impropriety were to become public in Australia, it would be reasonable to expect patterns of public opinion to more closely resemble those found in Britain in 1994.

Ethics and Public Accountability

The survey evidence is unambiguous: Australian citizens have a low opinion of the ethical standards of their politicians, and one which has been declining steadily for the past decade. But how do citizens redress this problem and make politicians

more accountable for their conduct? The direct method of enforcing popular accountability is through elections, and by electors simply voting out an incumbent party who is considered to have misused its position of power. There are also two indirect methods which involve some form of self-regulation through parliament, by monitoring conduct through parliamentary privilege or by establishing and enforcing a parliamentary code of ethics.[8] While public opinion has no direct role in this context, citizens' opinions indirectly influence what activities legislators may regard as acceptable and unacceptable.

Under the system of responsible government, the public holds their governments accountable through regular, free and fair elections. Governments or individual members who behave irresponsibly are subject to the principle of 'throwing the rascals out'. This assumes, however, that electors are sufficiently well informed about the misdemeanours of their elected representatives for them to take collective electoral action. It also assumes that electors will be able to overcome their partisan loyalties, by perhaps voting against their favoured party in order to remove an unsatisfactory elected representative. For example, the persistent allegations of sleaze during the 1990s were a significant factor in the defeat of the Conservative government in the 1997 British general election, but their main impact was in contributing to a national desire for change, rather than in the punishment of individual members – although there were a small number of instances in which this occurred.[9]

Studies in the USA have come to similar conclusions. Studies of US Congressional elections have concluded that incumbents of both parties against whom allegations had been made suffered between a 6 and 11% loss in the years 1968 to 1978, and a 9% loss in the years 1982 to 1990.[10] But despite these substantial diminutions in electoral support, most candidates charged with corruption in the USA still managed to win, with only 25% of the incumbents losing in the second time period examined. Nevertheless, this was a smaller incumbency return rate than among other US incumbents. A study of the 1992 Congressional election and a study of one incident of corruption charges, the House 'check kiting' (bank overdrafts) scandal of the same year,[11] have confirmed these findings. In short, enforcing accountability and a proper standard of legislative behaviour through elections is a blunt, and usually ineffective, instrument.

Parliamentary privilege provides a second method of enforcing accountability for legislative conduct. The original concept emerged in seventeenth century England, where it was intended to protect members of parliament from intimidation by the crown, so that they could speak freely on matters of public interest without fear of imprisonment. Until 1987, when a Parliamentary Privileges Act was passed, the Australian federal parliament was deemed to have the same privileges as the British House of Commons at the time of federation.[12] The 1987 Act codified much of the privileges which were vested in precedent and convention to allow members to conduct their business without interference. It also extended privileges to members of the public who become involved in parliamentary business, mainly through the committee system.

Parliament may punish a member for breach of privilege and in 1988 the Senate extended this principle by making members' privileges conditional on their proper

use. For example, the Senate stipulated that the use of senators' right of free speech had to be balanced by 'regard to the right of others' and the Senate rules allow for a right of reply for those who judge themselves to have been disadvantaged by a privileged statement delivered in the Senate. To date, the Senate has upheld all 24 applications for a right of reply.[13] Nevertheless, parliamentary privilege is a complex instrument with which to establish proper rules of conduct for politicians, and there is little evidence that the public understands how it may benefit them, let alone how they might use it to redress inappropriate conduct by legislators.

Finally, a parliamentary code of ethics can be used to enforce standards of behaviour on politicians. In most countries this has been interpreted as requiring members to declare their pecuniary interests, but it also encompasses the much rarer act of drawing up a code of ethical conduct. In the former case, the regulation of legislators' private financial interests is predicated on the belief that full and open disclosure is the best guarantee of avoiding a conflict of interest. Many European countries have accepted the principle of open disclosure of legislators' financial interests, while accepting in practice that members will always seek to maximize their salary. Even in Britain, where such regulation is taken more seriously, the regulating body has observed that conflicts of interest are probably inevitable.[14]

The ineffectiveness of attempts to monitor politicians' financial interests has led some countries to propose codes of conduct. Such codes define standards of conduct which underpin the principles that are regarded as central to the public interest. One of the earliest attempts to enforce standards was the Ethics of Government Act, passed in the USA in 1978, which required senior executive officials to disclose their financial interests. An Office of Government Ethics was established in 1989, to oversee the disclosure process and to enforce standards of conduct defined by statute or executive order.[15] Similar bodies have been established elsewhere in recent years, notably the Central Bureau to Prevent Corruption in France[16] and Britain's Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.[17] Most, however, have suffered from the problem of enforcement: courts are unwilling to adjudicate on anything other than criminal matters, while legislatures regard it as a central tenet of their independence to regulate their conduct themselves.[18]

The Australian Parliamentary Code of Ethics

Attempts to establish a register of Australian federal members' pecuniary interests date from 1974, when parliament appointed a Joint Committee on the Pecuniary Interests of Members of Parliament. The committee, which reported in September 1975, recommended the compulsory registration of members' interests and the appointment of a parliamentary registrar to oversee the operation of the system. Several motions to give effect to the recommendations lapsed with the change of government in 1975. In February 1978 a committee into 'Public Duty and Private Interest' was established under Sir Nigel Bowen. The committee reported in 1979 and recommended the drafting of a set of principles 'to promote the avoidance and if necessary the resolution of conflicts of interest';[19] these principles would, in effect, constitute a code of conduct. In 1984 the House of Representatives established a

Committee of Members' interests, which requires members to register their interests at the beginning of each parliament.

After the failure to implement the recommendations of the 1975 Joint Committee on the Pecuniary Interests of Members of Parliament, the Senate made no moves to initiate any form of ethics instrument until the 'Sports-Rorts' affair in 1994. This affair involved apparent political inference in the allocation of sporting grants, so that Labor marginal electorates gained disproportionate benefit; the resulting scandal precipitated the resignation of Ros Kelly, the minister responsible. The affair caused the Senate to commit itself to an accountability accord, including a ministerial code of conduct and the compulsory registration of senators' financial interests.[20] Later in 1994 the Senate adopted a scheme for monitoring all senators' pecuniary interests, to be overseen by a committee with a majority of non-government members.[21]

As part of the accountability accord between the two houses, the two presiding officers convened a working party to draft a common code of ethics to guide legislators' conduct. In 1995 the committee released *A Framework of Ethical Principles for Members and Senators*, which was intended to establish 'the minimum standards of behaviour which … the Australian people had a right to expect of their elected representatives'.[22] The working party believed that it was impossible to draft any single statement about appropriate conduct and instead concentrated on identifying a series of general principles which should apply to all aspects of public life. The principles identified by the working party were listed under eight broad headings, as follows:

- loyalty to the nation and regard for its laws;
- diligence and economy;
- respect for the dignity and privilege of others;
- integrity;
- primacy of the public interest;
- proper exercise of influence;
- personal conduct; and
- additional responsibilities of parliamentary office holders.

These broad principles form the basis of the conduct which is expected of Australian federal legislators.

Public and Elite Views of Ethical Behaviour

Public perceptions of what constitutes ethical conduct on the part of legislators represent one way in which accountability may be enforced on parliament. The other part of the equation is how political elites regard certain patterns of conduct, and whether or not they accord the same importance to certain behavioural norms as the citizens that they represent. Heidenheimer identifies three categories which reflect public and elite views about ethical behaviour.[23] The first is unethical conduct that he sees as 'white', where both the public and the elite agree that a particular activity is improper, but that it is insufficiently serious to be worthy of sanction. The abuse of legislators' postal privileges or failing to declare a small election campaign overspend constitute examples of 'white' misconduct. By contrast, unethical behaviour that is 'black' occurs when both public and elite agree that an activity is clearly inappropriate and should receive a significant sanction.

Examples of 'black' misconduct include bribery, the misuse of public funds for travel or lying to parliament. The third category, which Heidenheimer refers to as 'grey' misconduct, identifies a situation where the public and the elite disagree about how unethical a particular activity is.

Political systems require widespread public and elite agreement on white misconduct to maintain the stability of the political system; any significant variation in the expectations about what constitutes a proper standard of conduct may generate strains and crises within the political system.[24] However, unrealistic expectations on the part of either the public or the elite may also trigger a crisis of political legitimacy. For example, unrealistic expectations by the public about how elites should behave may result in declining voter trust in politicians, a trend which has been all too evident within the established democracies. Equally, unrealistic elite expectations about voter conduct may produce strains of a different kind. In post-communist Russia, unrealistic expectations about the degree to which citizens will comply with tax laws has produced a crisis of governance, as politicians seek a level of tax take from the population which is never matched in practice.[25]

The 1996 Australian Election Study survey asked voters and elected representatives to rate the importance of eight aspects of ethical behaviour, from extremely important to not very important, broadly corresponding to the principles laid down in the federal parliament's own *A Framework of Ethical Principles for Members and Senators*. Table 2 shows the proportions of the public and the elite who considered

Table 2: Public and Elite Perceptions of Ethical Behaviour

	Percentage saying 'extremely important'		
How important do you think it is for federal politicians to ...	Public	Elite	Public-elite difference
(*Black*)			
... respect the dignity and privacy of members of the public	75	55	+20
... use public resources economically	75	50	+25
... act honestly at all times	74	73	+1
... always put the public interest ahead of their personal interests	73	59	+14
... always tell the truth to the public	73	51	+22
(*Grey*)			
... always behave in a dignified manner	59	48	+11
(*White*)			
... not favour special interests	49	23	+26
... refuse to accepts gifts of any kind	46	24	+22
Mean	66	48	+18
N	1,794	105	

Source: 1996 Australian Election Study, voter and legislator samples.

each of the eight statements to be 'extremely important'. Overall, the public placed more store on the eight principles than the elite: the average response among all voters to the question was 66%, compared to 48% for the elite. By that measure, at least, the Australian public expects significantly higher ethical standards from their elected representatives than the representatives themselves. Of the eight statements, only one – 'act honestly at all times' – demonstrates mass-elite agreement, and in none of the eight cases does the elite expect higher standards than the public. By contrast, activities such as 'using public resources economically' registers 26% more citizens believing that it is extremely important compared to the elite, with similar proportions believing that it is extremely important that politicians should 'not favour special interests'.

Using Heidenheimer's typology, five of the eight questions can be classed as 'black' misconduct, insofar as a majority of both the public and the elite agree that it is very important that high standards be adhered to. Just one aspect of politicians' conduct – the belief that federal politicians should always behave in a dignified manner – produces dissension and can therefore be considered as a 'grey' aspect of politicians' conduct; in this instance, the difference between the views of the public and the elite is 11%. Two aspects of conduct are classed as 'white', namely favouring special interests and the acceptance of gifts. In the case of both the public and the elite, a minority consider these to be very important, although less so among the elite than among the public. There is, then, a clear consensus among the majority of voters and the majority of the political elite about the types of behaviour which constitute 'black' misconduct, and these types of behaviour constitute a large area of federal politicians' behaviour.

Citizen Explanations

How do we explain public support for particular standards of conduct among federal politicians? One possible explanation is that increased *political participation* leads to the expectation that politicians will have higher standards of conduct. This is based on the argument that participatory democracy has an educative effect on the citizen, so that he or she will develop a more sophisticated view of the complexities of the political world. As Pateman puts it, the major function of participation is 'educative in the widest sense, including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures'.[26] Greater political participation has been linked empirically to a range of political skills, notably greater political competence, political knowledge, as well as to an enhanced sense of efficacy and trust.[27] Political participation is measured by party membership, one of the most direct forms of individual participation in the political process, and in the number of events that the voter participated in during the course of the election campaign.

An alternative hypothesis to explain attitudes towards political ethics is *democratic culture*. Following a resurgence of interest in the role of political culture in shaping political behaviour,[28] social learning theories have identified cultural factors as important influences on democratic political attitudes and beliefs. As a result of mass immigration, around one in five Australians have been born overseas, slightly more than half of them in non-English speaking countries. Many immigrants have arrived in Australia in adulthood, and their formative political years have been

spent in other countries, many of them countries lacking democratic traditions. Being born outside Australia and whether the donor society is a democracy is therefore one important measure of the extent to which individuals have absorbed democratic values. Another is the period of time that they have been exposed to this culture, in the case of Australians measured by age, and in the case of immigrants, by their period of residence in Australia.[29] Finally, democratic values can be measured by the degree of national pride that individuals have in Australia and its achievements. In each of these cases, we would predict that individuals with more exposure to democratic values would expect higher standards of conduct from their politicians.

A third hypothesis relates to the *political skills* that an individual possesses. Education, and more particularly tertiary education, is normally viewed as the major factor influencing political knowledge and skill, with tertiary education sometimes being seen as a surrogate for knowledge itself. Education has several consequences, politically the most important of which is political competence, or the extent to which a citizen can utilize abstract political concepts to interpret the political world, to evaluate arguments and debates, and to make informed political decisions.[30] Almond and Verba view political competence as the ability to participate in the political process, and to feel that such participation will make a difference to political outcomes;[31] this is the sense in which political competence is used here. Another aspect of political skill is the extent to which individuals believe that politicians are in touch with ordinary people. The possession of tertiary education and political competence, and the belief that politicians are in touch with the public, should result in the expectation of higher standards of conduct among politicians.

The fourth and final hypothesis is concerned with *media exposure*. One of the most widely discussed explanations for post-war political change is the growth of the electronic media and its consequences for politics, notably for the conduct of national elections.[32] The electronic media have forced an unprecedented restructuring of political discussion in all of the liberal democracies, establishing themselves as a crucial institution for the effective dissemination of political information throughout the electorate. Without the attention of the electronic media, a political party or a government will gain little or no popular visibility. Much of this attention has been directed towards the personalities of major leaders and politicians; inevitably this has examined their private lives and (occasionally) uncovered unethical conduct and behaviour. Media exposure can be measured by the extent to which respondents followed newspapers, radio and television during the course of the election campaign.[33]

These four hypotheses are tested in Table 3, which shows partial and standardized regression coefficients predicting the probability of supporting black, grey and white conduct among federal politicians. Overall, there is no support for the political participation hypothesis; greater involvement in the political process, either through party membership or involvement in the election campaign, does not influence how citizens view the behaviour of their politicians. Equally, there is support for the media exposure hypothesis only in the context of explaining white conduct, and here only for following the election campaign in the newspapers. Those who

Table 3: Factors Affecting Popular Beliefs About Politicians' Ethics (OLS Regression Estimates)

	Black		Grey		White	
	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta
Political participation						
Party member	–0.12	–0.01	–0.45	–0.03	0.19	0.01
Campaign participation	0.06	0.03	–0.14	–0.04	–0.18	–0.05
Democratic culture						
NESB, democratic	–0.13	–0.02	–0.14	–0.01	–0.22	–0.02
NESB, nondemocratic	–0.52**	–0.07**	–0.19	–0.02	–0.62	–0.04
Age	0.00	0.04	0.02**	0.11**	0.05*	0.27*
National pride	0.12**	0.12**	0.28**	0.17**	0.03	0.01
Political skills						
Tertiary education	–0.34**	–0.09**	–0.62**	–0.10**	–0.08	–0.01
Political competence	0.17**	0.11**	0.08	0.03	0.01	0.01
Politicians in touch	0.57**	0.09**	–0.15	–0.02	0.83*	0.07*
Media exposure						
Radio	–0.19	–0.04	–0.13	–0.02	–0.06	–0.01
Newspapers	–0.06	–0.01	–0.09	–0.01	0.64*	0.07*
Television	–0.03	–0.01	–0.06	–0.01	–0.45	–0.05
Constant	6.94		5.50		4.21	
Adj. R-squared	0.05		0.07		0.09	
N	1,692		1,692		1,692	

$^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression results showing partial (b) and standardized (beta) coefficients predicting support for higher ethical standards among federal politicians. The three dependent variables are defined in Table 2 and are multiple items scales scored from 0 (not at all important) to 10 (very important). The independent variables are measured as follows: party member, NESB, tertiary education (1 = yes, 0 = no); age (single years); campaign participation (number of activities engaged in, from 0 to 5); politicians in touch (from 1 = not in touch to 5 = fully in touch); media exposure (followed politics a good deal = 1, some = 0.67, not much = 0.33, 0 = not at all). National pride is a multiple item scale measuring items dealing with pride in Australia's sporting, literary, scientific and military achievements, and scored from 1 to 10. Political competence is a multiple item scale combining items dealing with beliefs about whether it makes a difference who is in power and whether voting makes a difference, and scored from a low of 1 to a high of 5.

Source: 1996 Australian Election Study, voter sample.

reported following more newspaper election coverage expected higher standards from their politicians.

The results in Table 3 show more consistent support for the democratic culture and political skills hypotheses. Democratic culture influences views about ethical conduct through birthplace, age and national pride, and in each case results in effects which are in the predicted direction. Voters who are immigrants from non-democratic countries are less likely to endorse higher ethical standards compared to the

Australian born; immigrants from democratic countries have views that are virtually the same as the Australian born, indicating that it is not being an immigrant that matters, but an immigrant from a country which lacks a democratic tradition. Older people are also more likely to endorse higher standards, and age is a particularly important influence in predicting white conduct. Those who have stronger feelings of Australian national pride are, not unexpectedly, more supportive of higher standards of conduct.

All three measures of political skills are significant influences, notably in the case of predicting black forms of conduct, with political competence and believing that politicians are in touch with ordinary people predicting higher standards of conduct. Tertiary education is a significant influence, but not in the predicted direction: those possessing such education are less likely to view ethical conduct as important as those lacking it, net of the things. It would appear, then, that increased cognitive skills, while leading to better political competency and knowledge of the political system, also has the effect of reducing expectations about politicians' conduct. This may well occur because better cognitive skills produce a greater awareness about the complexities of the political world, and the difficulties of making firm judgements about particular standards of conduct.

Elite Explanations

Explaining support for ethical standards among legislators requires a different set of hypotheses.[34] Research into elite attitudes suggests three possible areas that may influence opinion: the experiences of elites once they are elected; their involvement with political parties; and their degree of integration with the constituents they represent. *Elite socialization* occurs when experiences within an elected body modify a legislator's previously held views or policy preferences.[35] It is most likely to occur in parliamentary systems, which combine the legislature and the executive, and to involve procedural and institutional political outlooks, which are formed mainly in adulthood through direct political experience. An important example of such socialization occurs in the British parliament, where there is a clear correlation between parliamentary involvement and political views.[36]

Elite socialization is usually measured by the extent and depth of the person's involvement within the political institution in question. These aspects of elite experience are measured here by whether or not the person has gained cabinet or shadow cabinet membership in the course of their political career, and by whether he or she was an incumbent or a new member. We might expect that cabinet or shadow cabinet members would have higher ethical standards than others, since they bear the burden of responsibility for major public policy decisions. Equally, new members, untrammelled by the complexities of government policy, might be expected to have higher standards than their incumbent counterparts, who possess more political experience.

Party socialization often appears to override the 'natural' political views of elites, so that elite political opinions conform to party-imposed norms, particularly in countries with strongly disciplined party systems. This is particularly pertinent in Australia, where the level of discipline that the parties enforce on their members is among the strictest found in the Anglo-American democracies, with dissent from the party

line within the House of Representatives almost unknown.[37] The possible importance of party-related factors in shaping views about ethical standards of conduct can be measured by three variables. First, party activism is an important prerequisite for nomination and it can be measured by whether or not the person has occupied an elected party position. Second, since defections from the Australian parties are rare, length of party membership is a significant indicator of lifetime party commitment. Third, there is an increasing trend towards legislators having held a fulltime paid party position prior to election, usually by working in a minister or MP's office. This is particularly the case in the Senate, where the parties' ability to ensure election through position on the party list transfers considerable power to the party organization.[38]

Notwithstanding the evidence that elite socialization and party-related factors are the predominant influences on elite opinions, it may also be possible that the level of contact between the elite member and his or her constituents may influence the member's views of ethical conduct. The *constituency connection* may be particularly important since the data show that voters have higher expectations of ethical conduct than political elites, and because issues of public ethics abound in the mass media they may well be transmitted to more locally-attuned members. This connection is reflected in two measures. First, the number of local community organizations that the legislator is a member of provides a succinct indicator of community participation. Second, most members find it important to reside in the constituency they represent, so the length of time they have lived in their constituency is an indicator of community integration.[39] In each case we would expect a stronger community connection to result in stronger support for ethical standards.

These three hypotheses are tested in Table 4, which predicts legislators' opinions towards black, grey and white corruption from the three groups of independent variables. Although elite social background is significant, there are more substantial influences attributable to elite and party socialization, and to constituency involvement. As expected, prior elective experience is important; legislators who had been elected to local government at some earlier stage had consistently lower ethical standards than other elite members, net of other things. The experience of local politics, and of local decision making, is thus a formative political experience among those aspiring to national political office. As predicted, cabinet and shadow cabinet members had higher ethical standards than others, notably with regard to black misconduct. There was no significant effect for newly elected legislators.

There are also significant effects for the three party-related variables, again in the predicted directions. In all cases, more party involvement results in lower ethical standards, and there are particularly strong effects for previous party employment. In the cases of grey and white misconduct, previous party employees were significantly more likely to endorse lower levels of conduct than their counterparts who possessed no such employment experience, net of other things. The close involvement with decision making and public policy from a party political perspective has obviously left them with the view that ethical standards in these marginal areas does not require to be a high as others believe.

Finally, constituency involvement is also important, although it operates through local community memberships rather than through length of residence in the area.

Table 4: Factors Affecting Legislators' Beliefs About Politicians' Ethics (OLS Regression Estimates)

	Black		Grey		White	
	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta
Elite socialization						
Prior election (none)						
Local government	–0.64**	–0.20**	0.50	0.08	–0.45	–0.07
State parliament	0.06	0.01	0.87*	0.13*	–0.14	–0.02
New member	0.28	0.10	0.05	0.01	–0.15	–0.03
Cabinet, shadow cabinet	0.71**	0.23**	0.57	0.10	–0.51	–0.09
Party socialization						
Elected party position	–0.71*	–0.17*	–0.92	–0.12	–1.20*	–0.15*
Party membership	–0.02	–0.14	–0.06**	–0.22**	–0.03*	–0.13*
Party employee	–0.27	–0.09	–1.40**	–0.24**	–1.46**	–0.25**
Constituency connection						
Local memberships	0.16**	0.20**	–0.09	–0.06	–0.21*	–0.14*
Residence in constituency	0.00	0.01	–0.01	–0.05	–0.01	–0.05
Constant	8.91		6.99		7.63	
Adj. R-squared	0.11		0.05		0.09	
N	105		105		105	

$^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.10$, two-tailed.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression results showing partial (b) and standardized (beta) coefficients predicting support for higher ethical standards among federal politicians. The three dependent variables are defined in Table 2 and are multiple items scales scored from 0 (not at all important) to 10 (very important). The independent variables are all scored zero or one, except for party membership and residence in the constituency (years) and local membership (number, from zero to 8).

Source: 1996 Australian Election Study, legislators sample.

In the case of black corruption, greater community involvement results in expectations of higher standards of conduct. However, in the case of white corruption, stronger community involvement results in lower standards, presumably because white misconduct – such as furthering the interests of the representative's own electorate or state – is also a goal which is shared by many of his or her constituents. In other words, while pork barrel politics is regarded as technically wrong, it is also recognized that it can bring significant benefits to the local community.

There is clear evidence, then, that the experiences of political elites, with representative institutions and with their own parties, modify their views of what constitutes proper standards of ethical conduct. For the most part, these influences work in different ways. Contact with nationally representative institutions produces support for higher ethical standards, a trend that becomes particularly strong among those who achieve cabinet or shadow cabinet rank and who are, or might expect to be, charged with the responsibility of taking major public policy decisions. This

may be explained at least in part by policy makers' greater contact with the federal public service, which maintains high ethical standards. In this case at least, Lord Acton's principle that power corrupts appears not to be confirmed. Contact with political parties, by contrast, works in the opposite direction and increased involvement with parties reduces expectations of ethical conduct.

Conclusion

In almost all democratic countries, popular trust and respect for politicians and their role has rarely been lower. Many governments have attempted to deal with the problem by establishing a range of institutions to investigate and regulate political conduct. In Australia there has been mounting evidence of impropriety in parliamentary conduct. The most dramatic scandals have occurred in the states, and since 1980 a series of commissions of inquiry into various aspects of government has uncovered 'improper or reckless conduct by public officials, including ministers, in the use of power and public funds'.[40] There has been evidence of direct financial impropriety, as demonstrated by the royal commission which investigated the commercial activities of the West Australian government, or what has become known as 'WA Inc'. More recently, in September 1997, three federal government ministers were forced to resign over irregularities in their travel claims, and one senator currently faces criminal charges over similar allegations.

The response to public concern about legislators' apparent misconduct has been to establish a code of ethics. Although efforts to ensure more accountability date back to the mid-1970s, it was not until 1984 that the House of Representatives set up a register of members' interests, and not until 1994 that the Senate followed suit. The survey data presented here show that voters strongly endorse the principles underlying this code of conduct, but that elite support is less enthusiastic. However, the importance of public support for such codes of conduct cannot be overemphasized. The analyses show that support for higher ethical standards is intimately bound up with public support for democratic culture and with citizens' political skills. If voters' expectations about the proper conduct of politicians are continually frustrated, then it has the potential to undermine public confidence in the democratic system as a whole.

Among legislators, contact with democratic institutions increases support for ethical standards, as many studies have shown. In that respect at least, democratic institutions provide an important means of acculturating politicians into the complex norms and values of representative democracy and making them into what McCloskey has called 'carriers of the Creed'.[41] However, the results also show that contact with political parties diminishes elite support for standards of conduct. This is hardly a new theme; for most of the twentieth century, representative institutions have sought to defend their independence and integrity from the encroachments of political parties. But it does highlight the potential dilemma for those charged with enforcing ethical standards of conduct, when the two major forces in democratic politics produce such different outcomes.

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Notes

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1 F. F. Ridley and A. Doig (eds), *Sleaze: Politicians, Private Interests and Public Reaction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

2 See, for example, E. Chaples and B. Page, 'The New South Wales Independent Commission against Corruption' in M. Laffin and M. Painter (eds), *Reform and Reversal: Lessons from the Coalition Government in New South Wales, 1988–95.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995; A. Hede, S. Prasser and M. Neyland (eds), *Keeping them Honest: Democratic Reform in Queensland Politics.* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1995.

3 The 1996 Australian Election Study (AES) voters' survey was a nationally representative post-election self-completion survey of voters in the March 1996 federal election, with names drawn randomly from the electoral register. The total number of cases was 1,788, representing a response rate of 61.5%. The survey of election candidates was conducted in parallel with the voters' survey, and was also based on a self-completion questionnaire. It was conducted among all major party candidates standing in the election, resulting in 427 cases representing a response rate of 63.5%. The results presented here are restricted to the 105 election candidates who succeeded in gaining election to the federal parliament.

4 P. R. Abramson, *Political Attitudes in America.* San Francisco: Freeman, 1983.

5 R. J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies.* Chatham NJ: Chatham House, 1996.

6 R. Mortimore, 'Public Perceptions of Sleaze in Britain' in Ridley and Doig, *Sleaze: Politicians, Private Interests and Public Reaction*; K. Newton, 'Social and Political Trust' in Pippa Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governments.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, Table 10.

7 D. Fuchs, G. Guidorossi and P. Svensson, 'Support for the Democratic System' in H.-D. Klingemann and D. Fuchs (eds), *Citizens and the State.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

8 John Uhr, *Deliberative Democracy in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 170.

9 The major example occurred in the Tatton constituency, where allegations of impropriety had been levelled against the sitting Conservative, Neil Hamilton. The Conservative constituency association endorsed Hamilton as their candidate in the election, apparently against the wishes of the national party. In an unprecedented move, the two other parties, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, did not nominate candidates to oppose Hamilton, putting their support behind an independent candidate and ex-BBC war journalist, Martin Bell. Bell won the seat with a 24.7% swing against Hamilton. See D. M. Farrell, I. McAllister and D. T. Studlar, 'Sex, Money and Politics: Sleaze and Conservative Incumbency in the 1997 British Election' in D. Denver *et al.* (eds), *British Elections and Parties Review, 1998.* London: Frank Cass, 1998.

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11 G. C. Jacobson and M. A. Dimock, 'Checking Out: The Effects of Bank Overdrafts on the 1992 House Elections', *American Journal of Political Science*, 38 (1994), 601–24; C. Stewart, 'Let's go fly a kite: correlates of involvement in the House Bank Scandal', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 19 (1994), 521–36.

12 Uhr, *Deliberative Democracy*, p. 172.

13 H. Evans (ed.), *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice*, 1998, 8th ed. at *http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/pubs/html/httoc.htm*

14 A. Doig and J. Wilson, 'Untangling the Threads' in Ridley and Doig, *Sleaze*.

15 R. Williams, 'America' in Ridley and Doig, *Sleaze*.

16 C. Fay, 'France' in Ridley and Doig, *Sleaze*.

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18 Indeed, in Britain the courts are precluded from adjudicating by Article 9 of the Bill of Rights, 1689, as well as by Parliament's own privileged laws. I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for drawing my attention to this point.

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20 Evans, *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice*, p. 477.

21 Uhr, *Deliberative Democracy*, p. 174.

22 Barlin, *House of Representatives Practice*, p. 166.

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25 S. White, R. Rose and I. McAllister, *How Russia Votes*. Chatham NJ: Chatham House, 1997.

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29 Period of residence is not available for immigrants.

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32 T. Glaser and C. Salmon, *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*. New York, Guilford, 1991.

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