

# **Partisan bias in opinion formation on political scandals: evidence from Great Britain**

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## **Abstract**

When a politician is involved in a scandal, some voters think that the politician's actions were very wrong and that he or she should resign, while others will be more forgiving. In this paper, we argue that voters form these judgments about scandals through a process of motivated reasoning driven by two goals: the desire to reach an objectively accurate conclusion (*accuracy*) and the desire to reach a conclusion congruent with pre-existing views and beliefs (*direction*). If scandal opinions are driven by accuracy goals, then voters' opinions on scandals should be consistent with their overall underlying tolerance of political wrongdoing. If opinions are driven by directional goals, then voters' opinions may be explained by their predisposition toward the party of the politician involved in the scandal. The impact of directional goals may depend on political sophistication, though past research differs in its findings. We estimate the influence of accuracy and directional goals using data from a 2011 British survey that measured voters' opinions on three specific real-life political scandals, their party identification and their underlying tolerance of political wrongdoing. We find that partisan predispositions and tolerance of political wrongdoing are similarly important in shaping scandal opinions and that partisanship has the strongest influence among the more knowledgeable and interested voters. These findings further our understanding of how voters react to scandals in particular and new political information in general.

## **Introduction**

Scandals are part of political life in any democracy. They can be eventful periods, often characterised by intense media attention and an incremental uncovering of the facts of the case. Whether politicians can survive a scandal depends on a variety of factors. For example, the so-called ‘Alistair Campbell’ rule, named after British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s former director of communications, states that ‘no Minister can survive beyond a two-week feeding frenzy in the press.’<sup>1</sup> But while media focus on a political scandal undoubtedly puts instances of politician misconduct on the public agenda, the consequences of a scandal episode depend very much on the opinions voters form about just how wrong and punishable such misconduct was. For one, nowadays almost instant polls ask voters for their opinion regarding a scandal and the results of these polls can influence both media coverage and the politician’s strategies. Moreover, scandals can also have electoral consequences, for example when voters punish misbehaving politicians at subsequent elections (Ahuja, et al. 1994, Banducci and Karp, 1994, Clarke, et al. 1999, Dimock and Jacobsen 1995, Farrell et al. 1998, Pattie and Johnston forthcoming, Peters and Welch 1980, Welch and Hibbing 1997).

There are two key voter opinions on a scandal. How wrong were the politician’s actions? And what should the appropriate consequences be for that politician? The first question relates to the ethical or moral acceptability of the politician’s behaviour in light of their political duties. The second question addresses what should happen as a result of the scandal. Most often, the key issue here is whether a politician should resign as a result of his or her actions.

We view voters as forming their opinions on these two questions in the same way they form opinions about other political events: through a process of motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000). According to this view, voters form opinions by incorporating

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<sup>1</sup> This is the version of the Alistair Campbell rule cited by Polly Toynbee in the Guardian, 16 December 2004 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/dec/16/schools.davidblunkett>).

and evaluating new incoming information, but they do so in ways that are guided by specific goals. The two goals highlighted by political psychologists are accuracy and directional goals (Lodge and Taber 2000). Accuracy goals exist due to the need to reach a *correct*, truthful conclusion. Directional goals exist due to the need to reach a *specific* conclusion, so one that is in accordance with prior opinions and predispositions. These two goals are always present, though one of the two is often stronger than the other (Lodge and Taber 2000).

In this paper, we assess the relative strength of these two motivations in opinion formation on political scandals. We do so by considering the effect of two pre-scandal voter attitudes: a voter's underlying tolerance of political wrongdoing on the one hand and his or her partisanship on the other. If a voter's tolerance of political wrongdoing in general predicts reactions to a scandal, then voter scandal opinions are shaped by accuracy goals: their view on the specific scandal is consistent with the toughness of their underlying normative stance towards political malfeasance. Given similar information about a scandal, two accuracy-minded voters would then disagree on how wrong the politician's behaviour was only to the extent that they have different overall standards regarding morality and ethics in politics.

In contrast, if partisanship predicts reactions to a scandal, then voters' opinions are shaped by directional goals. It is well-known that partisanship, also known as party identification or party affect, has an important impact on how voters react to political events (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Zaller 1992; Bartels 2002; Johnston 2006). Campbell et al. (1960) thus famously described partisanship as creating a 'perceptual screen' that affects how voters process information. This view has been elaborated on in more recent research on motivated reasoning and selective processing (Lodge and Taber 2000), also in relation to political scandals (Fischle 2000). While much of this research has been focused on the US, there is evidence that partisanship influences opinion formation in the UK as well (e.g. Evans and Anderson 2004, Marsh and Tilley 2010, Tilley and Hobolt 2011). In the case of a scandal, we would expect partisanship to exert a directional effect on voter reasoning: if the politician is

from the party the voter is attached to, then the voter's judgment may be more lenient, whereas if the politician is from a rival party, then the voter's judgment may be tougher (Chang and Kerr, 2009).

In this paper, we compare the influence of accuracy and directional goals on voter opinions on political scandals. In determining voter opinions on scandals, what has a stronger impact: a voter's general attitudes towards political wrongdoing, or her affect towards a political party? In other words, are voter opinions shaped more by general normative standards or by pre-existing sympathies? Answering this question is important for two reasons. First, from a normative point of view we want to know what the sources of public disapproval of politician's behaviour are. Ideally, voters would base their reactions not on partisan or other types of affect, but on careful consideration of the facts about the politician's conduct and by benchmarking this conduct against their personal moral or ethical expectations of politicians. Second, this knowledge may help us understand how scandals play out. If public reactions depend on the extent to which generally held ethical norms were violated, the politicians should be more likely to face calls for resignation depending on how normatively wrong their actions were. However, if public reactions depend largely on affect, then the popularity of the politician's party (and his or her own popularity) will become important. Knowing the extent to which each factor influences opinions thus helps us understand the course of political scandals.

Finally, we also consider whether the influence of directional goals depends on voter characteristics. The central and persistent question in the literature regarding the influence of partisanship has been its relationship to a voter's political awareness and knowledge (Shani 2006; Blais et al. 2010). On the one hand, it may be that low levels of political sophistication mean that the reliance on partisanship as a guide may be stronger; on the other hand, it may be precisely the more sophisticated voters who have the motivation and ability to 'refuse to

internalise messages that they recognize as inconsistent with their underlying predispositions' (Zaller 1992: 121).

We carry out our empirical analysis using data from a specially conducted nationally representative internet survey carried in the UK in May 2011. Our main questions concern voter reactions to three recent or on-going scandals involving prominent politicians: the Conservative Ken Clarke and the Liberal Democrats Chris Huhne and David Laws. We also have information on respondents' party attachment. We measure each respondent's tolerance of political wrongdoing in general using responses to 14 hypothetical scenarios, an approach modelled on that used and validated by Allen and Birch (forthcoming).

Our research design has a number of advantages for investigating voter reaction to scandal. For one, all three events for which we gauge respondent reactions fit Thompson's (2000) definition of a scandal: each episode exhibited the violation of widely held moral and ethical norms, garnered public disapproval of the event and ran the risk that the revelations would damage the participant's reputation (Thompson, 2000:13-14). Though the scandals are different in nature, they share definitional commonalities that make them comparable. Secondly, we use actual scandals as opposed to hypothetical scenarios, which should increase the likelihood that responses will reflect genuine feelings about the event as opposed to reactions to an 'imagined' scenario. We therefore do not have to temper our findings with consideration of the impact of hypothetical scenarios on voter response. Finally, each scandal took place very near to the time of the survey or was currently on-going when the survey was fielded. This ensures that the events are fresh in voter's minds, allowing us to estimate the impact of accuracy and directional goals at the point in time when voters are forming opinions.

We find that, as predictors of opinions on a scandal, the influence of partisanship and of general normative attitudes towards political wrongdoing is very similar in importance. These results show that both directional and accuracy goals have a powerful impact on voter

reactions to scandal. Finally, we present evidence that it is among the more politically aware and knowledgeable voters that partisanship is particularly influential. This indicates that party affect is not a heuristic used by uninformed voters to guide their reactions. Instead, directional goals shape views among those who are most closely engaged with the political process.

This paper is structured as follows. We first describe in greater detail how accuracy and directional goals may influence opinion formation on political scandals and how political sophistication may moderate this influence. After describing the survey and the coding approach, we present our results and finally discuss the broader relevance of our findings.

### **Motivated reasoning and political scandals**

How do voters form opinions about political scandals? Individuals generally develop political opinions through the cognitive process known as motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990, Lodge and Taber 2000). According to Kunda (1990: 481), such reasoning is what occurs when ‘forming impression, determining beliefs and attitudes, evaluating evidence, and making decisions’. This reasoning is *motivated* because it is goal-oriented: we reason because we want to achieve a particular outcome. According to research in cognitive psychology, individuals are motivated primarily by accuracy and directional goals (Kunda 1990, Lodge and Taber 2000). A voter guided solely by accuracy goals would consider the available information, search out confirming and disconfirming evidence, and come to a reasoned conclusion. Such an individual would be what Lodge and Taber (2000) call a ‘classical rationalist’.

We argue that one way in which accuracy goals shape opinion formation on a scandal is as follows. First, voters have some pre-existing moral standards by which they judge the conduct of politicians. Existing research has shown that people indeed have well-developed notions of right and wrong regarding politicians’ behaviour and that these can be well-summarized using a single attitudinal dimension (Allen and Birch forthcoming). This means

that voters vary in the moral standards to which they hold politicians, but how they do so can be summarised using a single summary indicator that captures these normative beliefs. When confronted with information about a scandal, voters then judge how wrong the behaviour of the politician was against their own personal moral political standards. Those voters with tougher normative beliefs will then develop more negative views of the politician than those voters who are more tolerant of wrongdoing. In addition to their view on how wrong the behaviour was, voters will also form an opinion about the consequences that the politician should face. While the range of 'punishments' for scandal is large, from simple reprimands to large fines or prison terms, media reporting and public discussion usually focus on whether the politician accused of wrongdoing needs to resign.

In sum, one way in which opinion formation is guided by accuracy goals is through the benchmarking of a specific instance of misconduct against a voter's own tolerance of political misconduct in general. Such careful consideration may seem like the way an ideal democratic citizen should develop preferences.

However, Lodge and Taber (2000: 186) rightly argue that such an individual could only ever exist in 'the ideal worlds of philosophy or fiction', and that voters are also likely to be guided by directional goals. In reasoning about scandals, individuals might therefore want to reach not an accurate but a preferred conclusion. This motivation already manifests itself in how individuals collect information: those guided by directional goals actively seek out facts that supports their predispositions (confirmation bias), see confirmatory arguments as compelling and opposing arguments as unsatisfactory (prior attitude effect) and use their reasoning powers to argue against arguments that contradict their desired conclusion (disconfirmation bias) (Olson and Zanna 1993; Taber and Lodge, 2006).

What pre-existing opinions and sympathies underlie directional goals in opinion formation on scandals? Voters may of course already have a view on the specific politician before the scandal erupts, for example that they like and trust her. They may also have views

on the political class in general, for example that they believe that corruption and misbehaviour is widespread. While these are important prior opinions, in this paper we concentrate on partisanship as a source of predispositions. Affect towards political parties has been shown to have a large impact on how voters process information, form opinions and perceive facts (Campbell et al. 1960, Zaller 1992, Fischle 2000, Taber and Lodge 2006, Gaines et al. 2007, Nyhan and Reifler 2009), also outside the United States (Evans and Andersen 2006; Marsh and Tilley 2010, Tilley and Hobolt 2011).

The influence of partisanship on scandal opinions should be as follows. If voters have a positive prior view of the politician's party, then their directional goal will be to exonerate the politician or to tolerate her malfeasance if at all possible.<sup>2</sup> If they have negative prior views, the directional goal will be to believe that the politician engaged in severe wrongdoing and should face consequences, for example resignation. These directional goals will influence opinion formation: voters attached to a party may thus seek out or be more open to information casting doubt on guilt or emphasising innocence. They may also discount revelations about that politician as unconvincing and be more sceptical of information implicating that politician. In other words, directional goals mean that voters have a desired conclusion before they begin to form an opinion about the specific scandal, and this will affect how they gather and process information and then decide on their view on the scandal.

In sum, both partisanship and underlying tolerance of political wrongdoing are likely to influence how wrong individuals think the action of a politician is and whether he or she should resign. In this paper, we test the extent to which each source of motivated reasoning influences voter opinions on specific instances of political scandal. We pay particular attention to the *relative* influence of tolerance of political wrongdoing and of partisanship on

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<sup>2</sup> A rival expectation would be that partisan identifiers may want the politician to resign in order to 'decontaminate the brand' of their party by getting rid of unpopular or controversial politicians.

voter opinions. In other words, we ask whether voter opinions are shaped more by general attitudes towards political wrongdoing or more by voters' partisan leanings.

### *The role of political sophistication*

Finally, we also take into account that voters are heterogeneous: the influence of partisan affect on opinions about scandals may not be the same for all individuals. Instead, the outcome of this reasoning process may depend on characteristics of the voter him- or herself. In this paper, we consider the role of a voter's political sophistication (Luskin, 1987, Zaller 1992), which we treat as the extent to which a voter pays attention to and knows about the domain of politics (Gomez and Wilson 2001). In the literature on the cognitive effects of party identification, there is an important debate surrounding how political awareness and knowledge are related to motivated reasoning.

On the one hand, there are arguments that the least sophisticated would be the most biased. This is because such voters would be particularly likely to have strong directional and weak accuracy goals. Relatively unsophisticated voters will not be interested enough in politics to put much effort into reaching a 'correct' conclusion (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 114, Lodge and Taber 2000, Shani 2006). Such voters might therefore also be more inclined towards using heuristics in determining their political opinions. This means that they may rely more on simple decision rules when forming beliefs about politicians' behaviour. In turn, more sophisticated voters should arguably have more objective opinions (Berelson et al., 1954) as they are generally less likely to rely on simple heuristics and may care more about reaching accurate conclusions.

On the other hand, other scholars argue that voters with higher levels of political sophistication may be *more* biased as they have invested more time and resources in formulating their opinions and will, accordingly, fight to preserve them (Lodge and Taber, 2000: 211). Thus, Shani (2006: 31) concludes that 'political knowledge does not correct for

partisan bias in perception of “objective” conditions, nor does it mitigate the bias. Instead, unfortunately, it enhances the bias; party identification colours the perceptions of the most politically informed citizens far more than relatively less informed citizens.’ In this view, partisan bias affects decisions more among people with higher levels of political knowledge because they are also more likely to recognize the partisan aspects of an issue in the first place and are able to *consciously* judge it in relation to their pre-existing partisan loyalties (Zaller, 1992: 121).

The theory and evidence on the moderating influence of political sophistication is therefore mixed and inconclusive. In this paper, we contribute to this debate by assessing how political sophistication affects voter judgements on political scandals. Importantly, how political sophistication influences opinion formation also affects the balance of accuracy and directional goals in how voters react to political scandals. We will now turn to an empirical test of the influence of general attitudes towards political wrongdoing and of partisanship on scandal opinions.

## **Data**

We fielded a number of survey questions as part of a broader YouGov internet survey between 20 and 23 May 2011.<sup>3</sup> The total sample size was 1937. All questions used in this paper are presented in the Appendix in the order they were asked.

We asked respondents about their opinions concerning one recent and two on-going scandals. The first scandal we asked about was that involving David Laws, a Liberal Democrat MP who had to resign as Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 29 May 2010, just 17 days after the deal to create a coalition government was announced. He had claimed parliamentary expenses for rooms he rented in a flat belonging to his partner. The second

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<sup>3</sup> Sanders et al. (2007) compare YouGov-run internet with face-to-face surveys and show that models explaining political behaviour yield almost identical results.

scandal was that surrounding Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, who at the time of our survey was being accused of putting pressure on his ex-wife to take responsibility for a traffic violation (and collect points) even though he himself had been at the wheel of the car at the time. The third scandal concerned statements made by Ken Clarke, the Conservative Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, on 18 May 2011. He had proposed halving the sentences of criminals who pleaded guilty early, even those of rapists; by using the term ‘serious rape’, he had also appeared to argue that some forms of rape were not necessarily ‘serious’.

As discussed above, each of these scandals fit Thompson’s (2000) definition of a scandal. Also, each MP involved was serving as a member of the Coalition government at the time the scandal broke. As a result of the high-ranking status of these politicians, the events were covered heavily in the news media. The level of coverage and the relatively similar profile of these MPs make these cases comparable for the purposes of this study. Further, an additional feature that adds to the explanatory power of our case choices is the differing nature of the scandals themselves – one was financial, one moral and one policy-based. Past research has found that voter reaction to scandal can differ depending on the type of scandal it is (Funk 1996, Welch and Hibbing 1997). Therefore, if we find consistent effects across the three types of scandal we can usefully add to the extant discussion on variation in voter reaction to scandal by focusing on the impact of partisan predispositions and general attitudes towards political wrongdoing in informing their response.

In the survey, we first briefly described the scandal in neutral terms and asked whether the respondent had heard of the scandal. Approximately 88 per cent had heard about the Ken Clarke scandal, 82 per cent about that involving Chris Huhne and 77 per cent about David Laws’ scandal. To those that answered ‘yes’, we then asked two further questions on their opinion on the politician involved. Our first question asked whether the politician’s actions were right or wrong, taking everything into account. The response scale ranged from 0 to 10,

with 0 labelled ‘wrong’ and 10 ‘right’. This question measures the respondent’s opinion about the gravity of the specific scandal. Figure 1 shows how the responses to this question are distributed in our sample across the three scandals (with the scale reversed so that 10 is ‘wrong’). We can see that our respondents were similarly hard in the cases of David Laws and Chris Huhne. They are the most divided concerning Kenneth Clarke, who is the only one of the three politicians where many respondents give moderate ‘wrongness’ responses. This shows that opinions on scandals are not knee-jerk responses: voters do distinguish between the politicians involved. It is also worth noting that the correlation of opinions between scandals is relatively low: the correlation is 0.36 for the perceived wrongness of the actions of Huhne and Laws, 0.20 for those of Huhne and Clarke and 0.12 between those of Laws and Clarke.

Figure 1 about here

We then measured opinions about appropriate consequences of the scandal with our second question, which asked whether the politician should resign or not. Resignation is usually the focus of the media-led public debate surrounding scandals (Dowding and Kang, 1995). When politicians lose their job, this is a sign that their position has become untenable as a result of the scandal. Resignation has also been shown to boost the popularity of the government as the resignation indicates that the PM has ‘control’ over his administration and can act to restore faith in the establishment (Dewan and Dowding, 2005). When scandals occur, the focus of media reporting is usually on whether new revelations increase the likelihood of resignation or on how many days the politician can still remain in her post. We therefore believe that this question captures opinions on the appropriate consequences well. In our sample, 79 per cent said Laws should have resigned, 62 per cent said the same for Chris Huhne, and only 34 believed that Ken Clarke should step down.

Our two core independent variables measure respondents’ underlying tolerance of political wrongdoing and their partisanship. We measure a respondent’s underlying tolerance

of political wrongdoing based on his or her reactions to 14 hypothetical scenarios involving political misconduct. This follows the approach suggested by Allen and Birch (forthcoming). Specifically, we present a short scenario to respondents and ask whether they think the action described was wrong and punishable, wrong but understandable or not wrong at all. The full list of scenarios is listed in the Appendix. We then create a composite indicator based on all answers to these questions; the Cronbach's alpha for the scale is a satisfactory 0.73. The indicator is calculated using responses to as many questions as each respondent answered, so 'don't know' answers are disregarded. We standardise this scale so that it has a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, with higher values indicating a greater intolerance of political misconduct in general.<sup>4</sup>

We measure party identification using the standard British Election Study question ('Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?'). We use the answers to this question that respondents provided to YouGov when they first signed up to the panel. This has the advantage that the responses were recorded in a different, prior survey and mostly before the scandals occurred.<sup>5</sup>

We also interact our measure of partisanship with two measures of political awareness: attention to politics and political knowledge. We measure attention to politics using a self-reported assessment. Respondents were asked to rate how much attention they generally pay to politics on a 0-10 scale, with 0 labelled 'pay no attention' and 10 'pay a great

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<sup>4</sup> In our survey, we also asked respondents whether they thought it was more important to have honest and trustworthy or successful and hardworking politicians; this question is modelled on that used by Allen and Birch (2011). This question can also be seen as a measure of general tolerance of wrongdoing by politicians. We ran all our models using this alternative question, leading to very similar results in both significance and magnitude. Those replying that having honest and trustworthy politicians is more important were coded as 1, all others as 0.

<sup>5</sup> However, the disadvantage of using these responses is that we do not know when each respondent joined the panel. To make sure our results did not depend on this measure, we re-ran our models using current vote intention (which we measured in the same survey) rather than party identification. The empirical results remain substantively the same across our models.

deal of attention'. We measure knowledge by providing respondents with a list of six politicians and asked which of these were currently in the UK Cabinet; only three of the politicians actually were. Respondents could select as many politicians as they wanted; 'all of the above' and 'none of the above' were further options. The maximum possible correct number of answers is 6, a score that could be attained if the respondent correctly chose the three names that corresponded to members of the Cabinet, and only those three names. In other words, we score each name separately and give 1 point if the respondent correctly said whether that politician was or was not in the Cabinet. The resulting variable thus ranges from 0 to 6, indicating the number of correct answers. Those answering 'all' or 'none' were coded as giving three correct answers. Only 11 per cent of respondents got fewer than three answers right, while 41 per cent gave six correct answers.

In our models, we use several controls that may influence respondent opinions about political scandals. We measure general trust in people using a 0-10 scale, with 0 labelled 'most people can't be trusted' and 10 'most people can be trusted'. A lack of trust has been shown to have a large impact on how voters assess scandals (Dancey 2011). We assess whether people think politicians are socially and behaviourally distant with a question that asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement that 'Politicians are not that different from people like me'; responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale. We also include three socio-demographic controls: gender (female coded as 1, male as 0); age in years (and age squared to allow for nonlinearities); and social class (ABC1, or higher managerial or professional, lower managerial or administrative and skilled or lower non-manual, coded as 1; C2DE, or skilled manual, semi- or unskilled manual and others, as 0). Like party attachment, the variables gender, class and age (i.e. year of birth) are measured when respondents first joined the panel; here, we either do not need to be concerned about significant changes (age and gender) or can assume that change will be very limited (class).

## Results

We begin our discussion of the results by examining voter opinions on the politician's actions.

We then consider views on whether the politician should resign before examining the moderating influence of political sophistication.

### *Voter opinions on a politician's actions*

Our first results concern the influence of partisanship and general attitudes on right and wrong on how wrong voters think a politician's behaviour was. Our dependent variable is the respondent's assessment of this 'wrongness' for each of our three politicians, which we model using OLS regression. We measure general attitudes towards political wrongdoing using the single indicator described above. We assess the influence of partisanship by including a party identification dummy for each party. We use the party of the politician involved as the reference category in every case. For each scandal, we present two sets of models: the first uses just our key independent variables, while the second additionally controls for age and age squared, gender, social class, knowledge, attention, general trust and identification with politicians ('not that different from people like me'). We use robust standard errors throughout.

We present the results for each scandal (Laws, Huhne and Clarke) in Models 1 to 6 (Table 1). First, Models 2, 4 and 6 show that our control variables do not always have the same effects. For the Laws scandal, only trust helps to explain perceptions of wrongness: those with greater levels of trust are expected to give lower wrongness scores. For the Huhne scandal, significant associations exist for knowledge and age: older and less knowledgeable voters are expected to give higher wrongness scores. For the Clarke scandal, trust and knowledge are again significant predictors, but so are attention and the perception of politicians: those with lower levels of attention and those who do not think politicians are like them are expected to give higher wrongness scores. Women and respondents from the C2DE

class are also expected to think Clarke's actions were more wrong. The different effects of our control variables across the three scandals suggest that these scandals do vary in their nature.

Turning to our key variables, we can see that a respondents' general tolerance of political wrongdoing has a strongly significant effect on their views on each specific scandal across all models. A one-standard deviation increase in the intolerance scale leads to a predicted increase on the 0-10 right-wrong scale of between 0.35 and a 0.55. The variables measuring partisanship are also significant in many cases. For instance, the effect of the 'no identification' indicator is estimated at between 0.46 and 1.18, with all p-values below 0.1. This means that having no party identification generally increases the perceived wrongness of the politician's actions compared to identifying with the party of the politician.

To compare the predicted effect of our key variables, we presented expected changes in the 'wrongness' scale in Figure 2, calculated based on our models that include the set of controls. The top four rows show how much the perceived wrongness of the politician's actions is expected to change when the general intolerance of political wrongdoing changes by 1, 2, 3 or 4 standard deviations. All these shifts are statistically significant at a 0.05 level. A change of one standard deviation in general attitudes towards political wrongdoing can be seen as a moderate shift, for example from 0 to 1, i.e. from an average to a moderately tough position. A change of two standard deviations is equivalent to a large shift, for example from -1 to 1, or from a moderately lenient to a moderately tough position. Below these numbers, we present the expected change in the wrongness scale for various shifts in party identification, either from identifying with the politician's party or from identifying with no party. Here, the changes significant at a 0.05 level are indicated by an asterisk.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 allows us to compare the magnitude of the influence of our independent variables. For example, moving from identifying with the politician's party to having no identification has an effect that is about as large as a one standard-deviation change in

intolerance of political wrongdoing. To take the case of Huhne: a one-unit shift in general intolerance is expected to lead to a 0.36 point increase in perceived wrongness, while moving from identifying with the Liberal Democrats to identifying with no party is expected to lead to a 0.49 point increase (this latter effect is only significant at the 0.1 level). Still looking at the Chris Huhne scandal, a further shift from no identification to Labour partisanship is expected to lead to a 0.33 increase in perceived wrongness. Finally, the expected effects of moving from shared partisanship with the politician to having the partisanship of a rival party are naturally even greater. Specifically, switching partisanship in this way has a predicted impact that is similar in magnitude to a two standard-deviation change. The differences between identifying with Labour and identifying with the politician's party or with no party are particularly stark and generally strongly significant. For example, again looking at the Huhne scandal, a two-unit shift in general intolerance to political wrongdoing leads to a 0.72 increase in wrongness, while the wrongness perceived by a Labour identifier is expected to be 0.82 units higher than that perceived by a Lib Dem identifier.

In sum, the effect of partisanship on specific opinions about scandals is strong and consistent, as is the effect of general intolerance towards political wrongdoing. Clearly, voters are guided by both accuracy and directional goals in how they react to specific scandals. However, our results also indicate that the effect of the two motivations is substantively similar in magnitude. Moving from having to not having a partisan identification is similar to a standard-deviation change in general intolerance to political wrongdoing, while a reversal of partisanship is similar to a two standard-deviation change. When it comes to assessing politicians' behaviour, prior partisan affect matters at least as much as the general normative standards one judges a politician against.

### *Resignation*

When it comes to political scandals, the debate is just as much about the appropriate consequences of the particular wrongdoing as about the gravity of the case itself. Here, we consider the question of whether a politician should resign. How do accuracy and directional goals affect calls for resignation?

To answer this question, we consider the estimated impact of partisanship and general intolerance of political wrongdoing on right and wrong on whether a respondent thinks a politician should resign. Our dependent variable here is the resignation question for the three scandals, coded 1 if respondents think the politician should resign and 0 for those who do not or who answer ‘don’t know’. The party identification variable is coded as in previous models. Again, we show the results from two sets of models: first with only the key independent variables and then controlling for the same variables in Models 2, 4 and 6.<sup>6</sup> We model the response using binary logistic regression.

We present the results in Models 7 to 12, Table 2. Turning directly to our two key variables, we can see that general intolerance of political wrongdoing always has a strongly significant effect on opinions on resignation. Similarly, the dummy variables measuring party identification almost all have a strongly significant impact on calls for resignation.

To understand the magnitude of these effects, it helps to calculate predicted changes in the dependent variable, as in Figure 2. In Figure 3, we therefore presented changes in the predicted probability of thinking the politician should resign, based on Models 8, 10 and 12. We set all control variables to their mean (continuous variables) or mode (indicator variables). For the general intolerance of political wrongdoing variable, we set partisanship to ‘none’ and then calculate four ‘typical’ changes in tolerance: from very lenient to very tough (-2 to 2),

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<sup>6</sup> We also ran the same models while controlling for the respondent’s perceived wrongness of the politician’s actions. This control obviously accounts for a lot of the variation in our dependent variable, especially as the two questions were asked after one another in the survey. Nevertheless, our results do not change substantively if we include it: while the impact of partisanship and general attitudes towards right and wrong decrease, the relative magnitudes of their impact remain largely the same.

from moderately lenient to moderately tough (-1 to 1), from moderately lenient to average (-1 to 0) and from average to moderately tough (0 to 1). For the effect of partisanship, we hold general attitudes towards political wrongdoing at 0.

We can see that a shift between partisanship and lack thereof is again similar to a shift from an average to a moderately tough or lenient moral position on political wrongdoing. For example, looking at the Clarke scandal, moving from -1 to 0 leads to a predicted increase in the probability of calling for resignation of 0.1. Similarly, moving from a Conservative party identification to having none is also predicted to lead to a 0.1 increase. The equivalent values are similar for the other scandals and party identifications as well.

Moreover, shifting from partisanship with the politician's party to that of a rival party is again roughly equivalent to a two standard-deviation shift. In the Clarke scandal, moving from a moderately lenient to a moderately tough position would increase the probability of wanting Clarke to resign by 0.22. Moving from identifying with the Conservatives to identifying with Labour is predicted to lead to a similar change of 0.2. Again, other values are similar.

In sum, the impact of partisanship again appears to be of roughly equal magnitude compared to the general intolerance of political wrongdoing. Accuracy and directional goals both clearly influence calls for resignation, and do so strongly. In this, opinions on resignation are similar to opinions on the wrongness of a politician's behaviour.

### *Political sophistication*

Finally, we hypothesised that political sophistication may moderate the impact of partisan identification on scandal opinions. To test this, we re-run Models 2, 4 and 6, this time adding an interaction effect between party identification on the one hand and two measures of political sophistication, namely attention to politics and political knowledge, on the other. The

full results are presented in Models A.1 to A.6 in Appendix 2.<sup>7</sup> Interaction effects are difficult to interpret directly, so we present results graphically following the recommendations of Brambor et al. (2006).

Figure 4 shows how the marginal effect of party identification changes for different levels of attention and Figure 5 for different levels of knowledge. Each Figure also includes the distribution of each variable as a histogram; since so few respondents have knowledge values below 3, we only show predicted values for knowledge values of 3 and above. The Figures provide evidence of a clear pattern, and one that is quite consistent across the three scandals: the effect of partisanship on specific reactions to the scandal is greater for those respondents with higher levels of political sophistication. These results are clearest for the comparison between the main opposition party – Labour – and the party of the politician involved in the scandal. The interaction coefficients are thus consistently significant at conventional levels for Labour identifiers. In other words, across all three scandals we can conclude with confidence that the difference in scandal opinions between Labour identifiers and voters who identify with the party of the scandal-hit politician becomes accentuated among the more politically sophisticated. When comparing Conservative to Liberal Democrat identifiers in the cases of Huhne and Laws, there is an increase in the effect of partisanship as sophistication increases only for the Huhne scandal. Finally, comparing Liberal Democrat to Conservative identifiers in the Clarke scandal, we see no clear difference in effect depending on sophistication.

Substantively, the moderating effect of sophistication is relatively constant across the scandals and the two measures. At low levels of sophistication, there is often no biasing effect of party identification, whether we measure this as attention or as knowledge. However, at

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<sup>7</sup> We also carried out the same analyses using resignation as the dependent variable. The results are substantively similar for the Huhne and Clarke scandals. For the Laws scandal, there is no moderating effect of political awareness on the influence of partisanship on resignation views.

higher levels of sophistication the impact of partisanship is clear and strong. In sum, there is a clear pattern regarding how political sophistication moderates the impact of partisanship on opinion formation: greater sophistication leads to stronger directional goals in motivated reasoning. While past evidence is mixed, here the finding is straightforward. The more attention voters pay to politics and the more they know, the more likely it is that their reactions to specific scandals are shaped by their predispositions. This indicates that the arguments made by Zaller (1992), Taber and Lodge (2006) and Shani (2006) have a strong foundation, also in non-US contexts.

## **Conclusion**

What influences voter reactions to political scandals? This research has suggested that accuracy and directional goals are both important to understanding how voters respond to reports of misbehaviour by politicians. We measured accuracy goals using the impact of general attitudes towards political wrongdoing and directional goals by the influence of partisanship. It is not surprising that both factors play a role in shaping voter beliefs. What we have shown here is that these two prior attitudes have a similar weight in determining how voters react to scandals. Moreover, we have shown that partisanship exerts more force on those voters who are more politically sophisticated. It is not the case that weakly informed voters use a politician's party affiliation as a simple decision rule to guide responses to a scandal. Instead, it is among the more sophisticated voters that partisan leanings have the greatest influence. This may be because it is these voters who are better able to interpret new information in light of their predispositions and to use their cognitive resources to disregard disconfirmatory information.

Our overall findings can be interpreted in two ways. A positive interpretation would be that voters' responses to scandals are clearly guided by their general attitudes towards what is acceptable and what is not in political life. Overall normative standards have a clear,

substantial and consistent impact on how wrong voters think a politician's actions were and whether he or she should resign. A more balanced view would stress that voters are influenced just as much by their partisan leanings as by their normative standards. Partisanship is a powerful influence on voter reactions, and one that is equal to normative views.

We would expect partisanship to have a similar effect in other contexts. For one, we found similar effects across the three scandals, even though they differed quite significantly in their nature: one was mainly financial, one moral and one policy-based. In addition, existing scholarship argues that the influence and importance of party identification in Britain is similar to that in other European countries and lower than in the United States (Shiveley 1979; Westholm and Niemi 1992; Dalton 2008; Milazzo et al. forthcoming). To the extent that this indeed the case, the influence of partisanship should be more or less the same in other European states and greater in the United States.

In terms of general political consequences, our findings lead to at least two important conclusions. If partisanship is so important in determining voter opinions, then parties that have strong supporters – and lots of them – will find it easier to maintain even politicians involved in a scandal in their positions. In contrast, small parties will find that voters quickly turn against them. A second consequence from our findings relates to the fact that the strongest contrast was always between Labour supporters and those identifying with the politician's party. In contrast, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat comparison was generally weaker. This shows that there might be important coalition-related thinking among party identifiers. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats support their government, and ministers involved in scandals are part of that government even if they are from the rival party. This also appears to have an important influence on how partisanship influences opinion formation. Future research could investigate further how partisanship influences how voters react to new information, especially in more complex situations characterised by multi-party systems and

coalition governments. Overall, our findings have highlighted both the relevance of general normative standards and the impact of partisanship on voter reactions to scandals, and future work should consider when, how and why the influence of partisanship can vary.

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## Appendix: Questions

If there were a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

- Conservative
- Labour
- Liberal Democrat
- Scottish National Party (SNP) / Plaid Cymru
- Some other party
- Would not vote
- Don't know

On a scale of 0 to 10, how much attention do you generally pay to politics?

- 0 Pay no attention
- 10 Pay a great deal of attention
- Don't know

Do you believe it is more important to have honest politicians or successful and hardworking politicians?

- It is more important to have honest politicians
- It is more important to have successful and hardworking politicians
- Don't know

Please say if you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Politicians are not that different from people like me'

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

On balance, would you say that most people can't be trusted or that most people can be trusted? Please use 0-10 scale to indicate your view?

- 0 Most people can't be trusted
- 10 Most people can be trusted
- Don't know

From what you know, which of the following politicians are currently in the UK Cabinet?

- Ken Clarke
- Chris Huhne
- David Laws
- Yvette Cooper
- Boris Johnson
- Theresa May
- All of the above

None of the above  
Don't know

There have been allegations that Chris Huhne, the Secretary of State for Energy, once asked someone else to falsely claim they were driving his car when he was caught speeding in order to avoid getting points on his driving licence.

It has been alleged that Chris Huhne asked his wife, Vicky Pryce, to take the points on her licence. Mr Huhne and his wife have since separated. Ms Pryce has not confirmed or denied that she took the points on her driving licence.

Had you previously seen or heard anything about this?

Yes  
No  
Don't know

Taking everything into account, would you say that his actions were right or wrong? Please use 0-10 scale to indicate your view?

0 Wrong  
10 Right  
Don't know

Based on what you have seen or heard about the case, do you think Mr Huhne should or should not resign?

Should resign/have resigned  
Should not resign/have resigned  
Don't know

In a radio interview this week Ken Clarke, the Justice Secretary, implied that some types of rape were more serious than others, and that date rape was not "serious, proper rape". Mr Clarke has since said that he did not intend to suggest this, and that he thinks all rape was serious.

Had you previously seen or heard anything about this?

Yes  
No  
Don't know

Taking everything into account, would you say that his actions were right or wrong? Please use 0-10 scale to indicate your view?

0 Wrong  
10 Right  
Don't know

Based on what you have seen or heard about the case, do you think Mr Clarke should or should not resign?

Should resign/have resigned  
Should not resign/have resigned  
Don't know

David Laws resigned from the government shortly after the election when it was revealed that he had broken Parliamentary rules by claiming rent on his expenses for a room hired from his partner. Mr Laws said he made the claims because he wanted to keep his sexuality private, and that he did not benefit financially, as had he registered his partnership he could have claimed for the mortgage of the house instead.

The House of Commons authorities have now decided that Mr Laws did break the rules and have suspended him from the Commons for 7 days. Mr Laws has also repaid the expenses claimed.

Had you previously seen or heard anything about this?

Yes  
No  
Don't know

Taking everything into account, would you say that his actions were right or wrong? Please use 0-10 scale to indicate your view?

0 Wrong  
10 Right  
Don't know

Based on what you have seen or heard about the case, do you think Mr Laws should or should not have resigned?

Should resign/have resigned  
Should not resign/have resigned  
Don't know

For each of the following, please indicate whether you think the act is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable.

- A government official gives a job to someone from his family who does not have adequate qualifications
- A government official demands a favour or an additional payment for some service that is part of his job
- A public official decides to locate a development project in an area where his friends and supporters lived
- A cabinet minister promises an appointed position in exchange for campaign contributions.
- A cabinet minister uses his or her influence to obtain a contract for a firm in his or her constituency.
- At Christmas, an MP accepts a crate of wine from an influential constituent.
- A major company makes a substantial donation to the government party. Later, the chair of the company is given an honour.
- A local councillor, while chair of the planning committee, authorises a planning permission for property owned by him or her.

An MP is retained by a major company to arrange meetings and dinners in the House of Commons at which its executives can meet Parliamentarians.

An MP uses his or her position to get a friend or relative admitted to Oxford or Cambridge University, or some other prestigious institution.

An MP hires a spouse or other family member to serve as his or her secretary.

An MP is issued a first-class airline ticket as part of a parliamentary delegation. He or she exchanges the ticket for an economy fare and pockets the difference.

A government special advisor begins a relationship with a person who, it is later discovered, works as a prostitute. After the discovery, the person continues to work as a prostitute and the special advisor decides to continue the relationship.

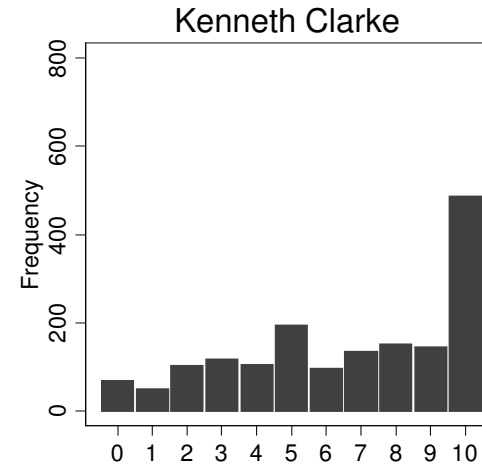
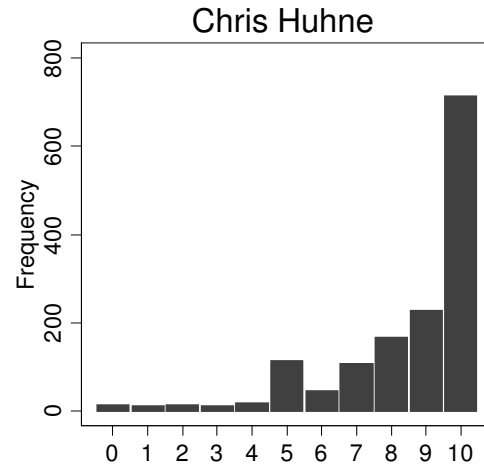
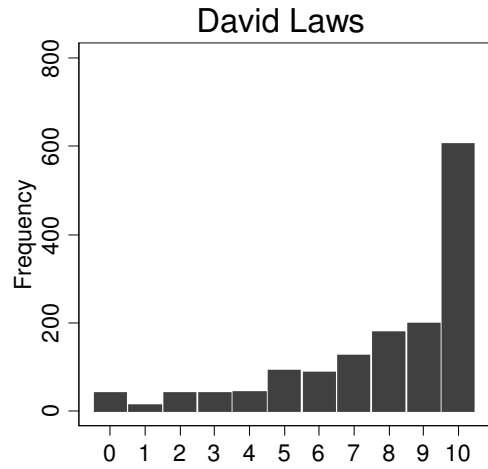
A prime minister does not disclose the fact that he is suffering from a serious medical condition.

Not wrong at all

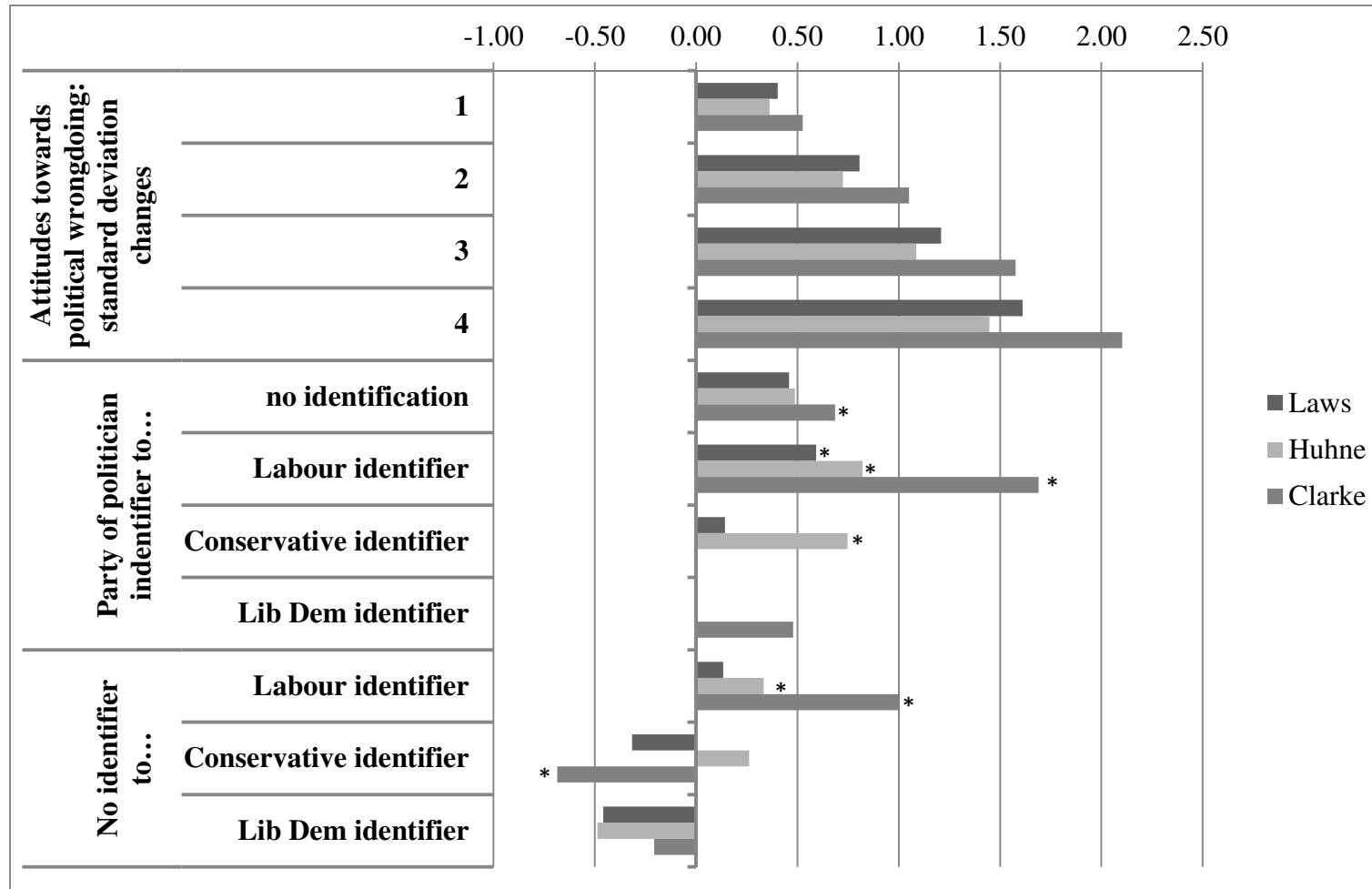
Wrong but understandable

Wrong and punishable

**Figure 1 Distribution of voter opinions on wrongness of politician's actions**

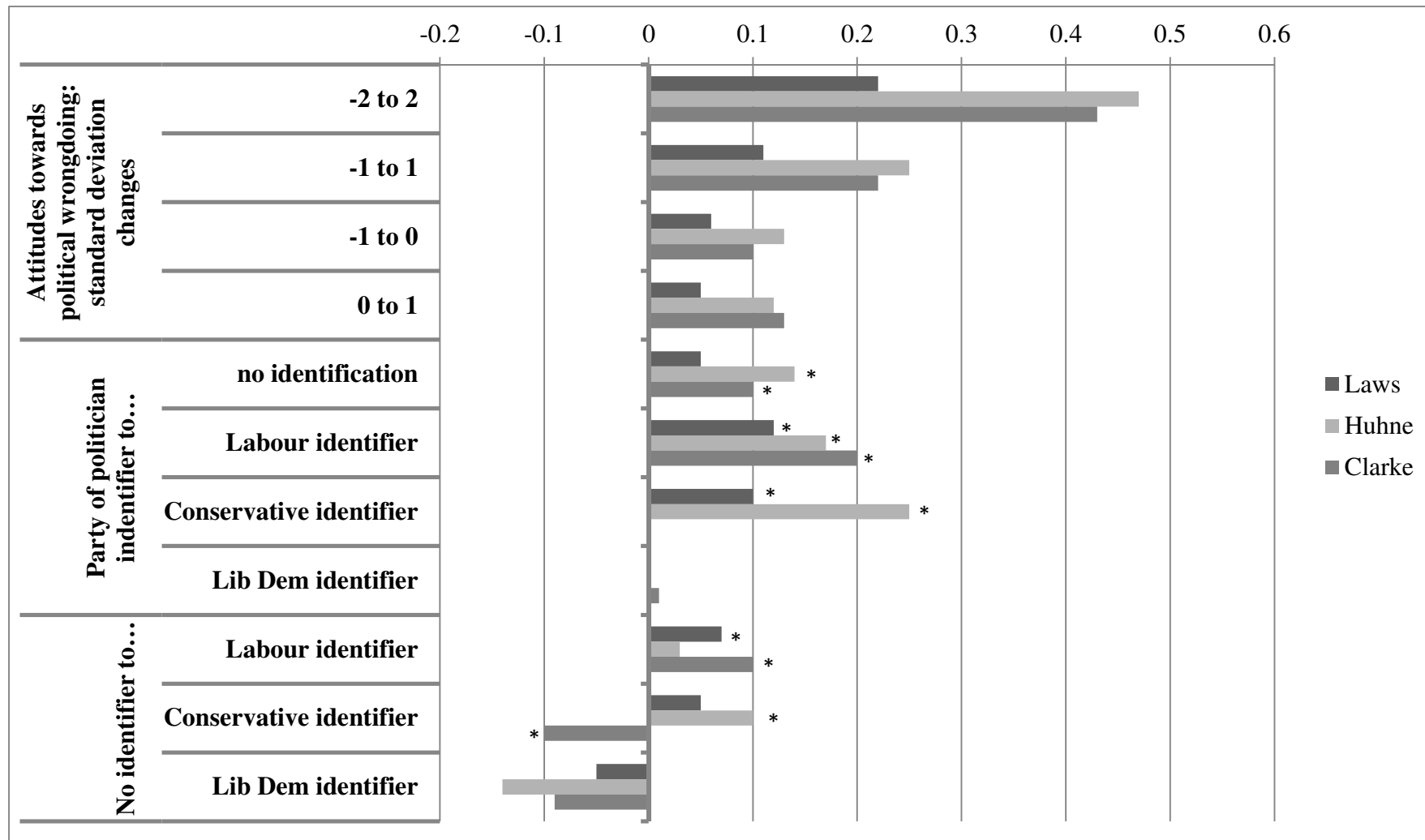


**Figure 2 Predicted change in perceived wrongness of a politician's actions**



**Note: for partisanship, effects sig at  $p < .05$  indicated by an asterisk; all effects significant for general attitudes**

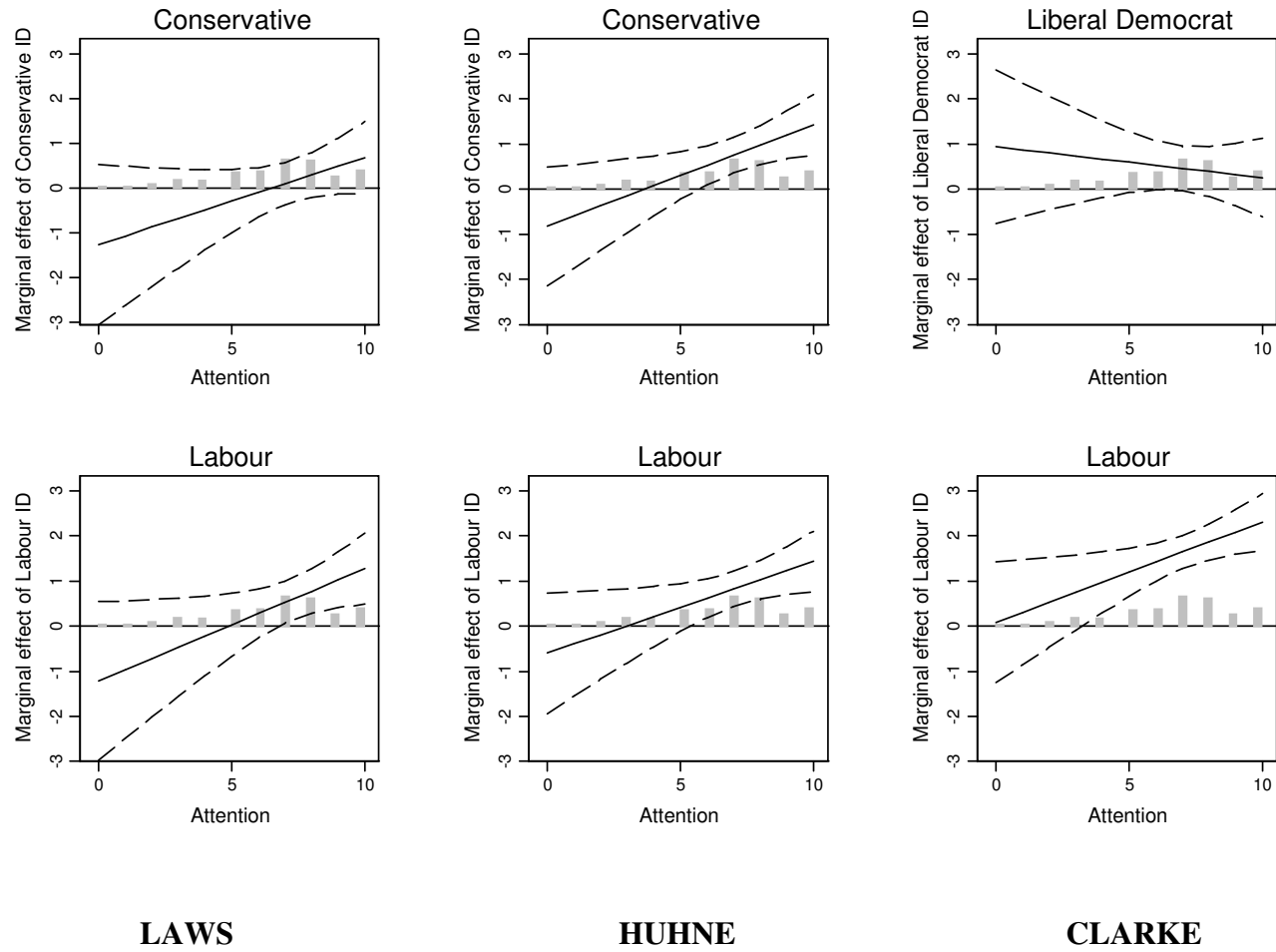
Figure 3 Predicted change in the predicted probability of saying the politician should resign



Note: for partisanship, effects sig at  $p < .05$  indicated by an asterisk; all effects significant for general attitudes.

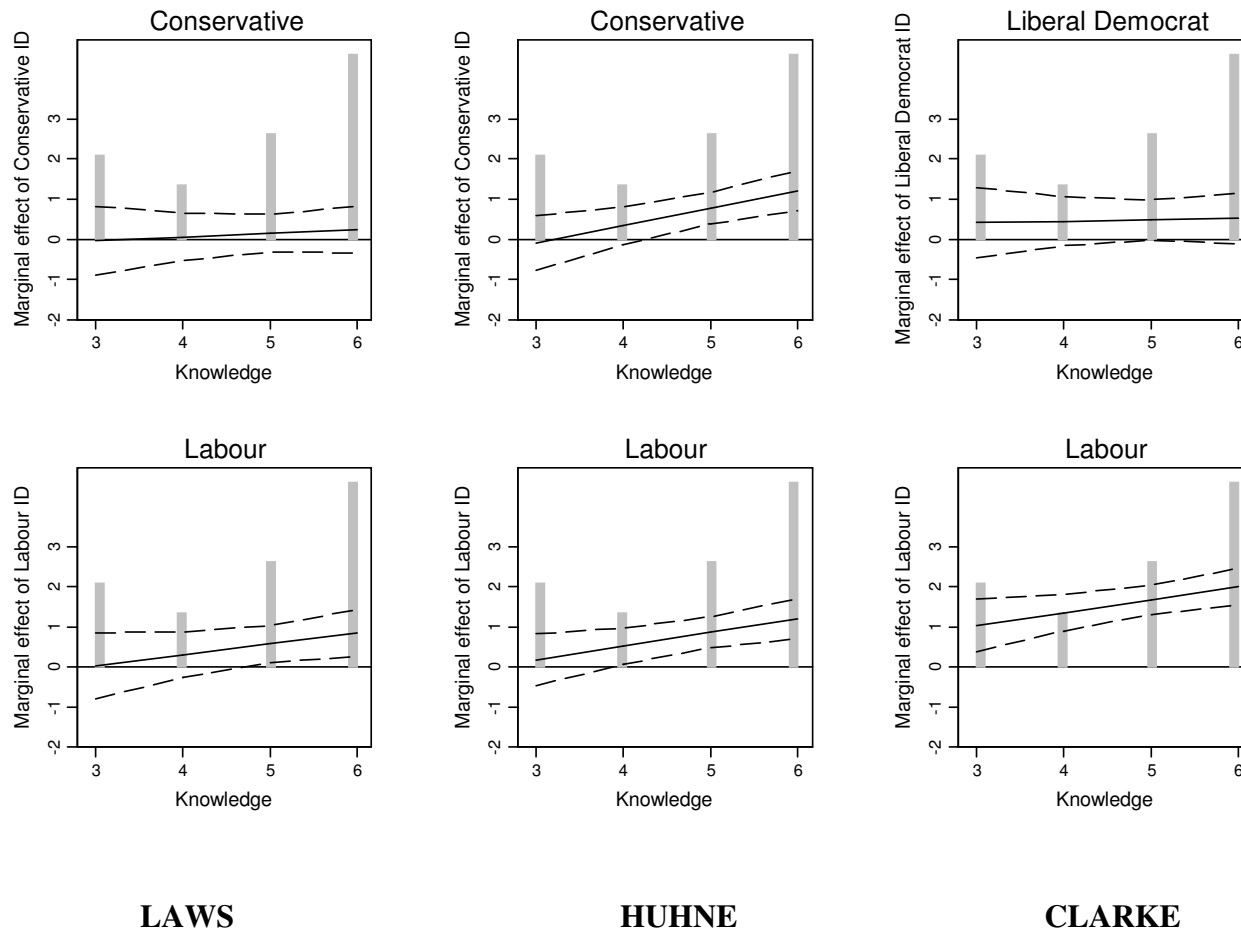
**Figure 4**

**Effect of party ID conditional on attention**



**Figure 5**

**Effect of party ID conditional on knowledge**



**Table 1 Laws, Huhne, Clarke: Wrongness**

	<b>Laws</b>		<b>Huhne</b>		<b>Clarke</b>	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Attitudes towards political wrongdoing	0.483*** (0.076)	0.403*** (0.080)	0.415*** (0.062)	0.362*** (0.066)	0.550*** (0.077)	0.526*** (0.076)
Conservative party id	0.267 (0.242)	0.142 (0.245)	0.784*** (0.233)	0.748** (0.236)		
Liberal Democrat party id					0.608* (0.272)	0.479 (0.261)
Labour party id	0.596* (0.233)	0.592* (0.235)	0.806*** (0.226)	0.820*** (0.226)	1.853*** (0.188)	1.691*** (0.187)
Other party id	0.909** (0.289)	0.788** (0.289)	0.764* (0.300)	0.656* (0.297)	1.045** (0.321)	0.955** (0.309)
No party id	0.542* (0.249)	0.458 (0.252)	0.569* (0.249)	0.487 (0.250)	1.185*** (0.223)	0.686** (0.220)
Trust		-0.088* (0.036)		-0.051 (0.030)		-0.110** (0.038)
Politicians are like me		-0.136 (0.146)		0.028 (0.122)		-0.406** (0.154)
Attention		-0.004 (0.038)		-0.025 (0.029)		-0.107** (0.037)
Knowledge		0.108 (0.064)		-0.105* (0.047)		-0.158** (0.058)
Female		0.018 (0.142)		0.110 (0.116)		0.830*** (0.151)
Age		0.040 (0.028)		0.050* (0.023)		0.019 (0.030)
Age <sup>2</sup>		-0.0002 (0.000)		-0.0003 (0.000)		-0.0003 (0.000)
ABC1		-0.025 (0.155)		0.017 (0.122)		-0.353* (0.16)
Constant	7.395*** (0.200)	6.134*** (0.774)	7.812*** (0.210)	7.153*** (0.661)	5.607*** (0.145)	7.919*** (0.771)
N	1462	1448	1440	1429	1648	1637
R <sup>2</sup>	0.044	0.06	0.049	0.066	0.097	0.164

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

**Table 2 Laws, Huhne, Clarke: Resignation**

	<b>Laws</b>		<b>Huhne</b>		<b>Clarke</b>	
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
Attitudes towards political wrongdoing	0.409*** (0.066)	0.362*** (0.071)	0.575*** (0.059)	0.535*** (0.062)	0.593*** (0.062)	0.557*** (0.064)
Conservative party id	0.812*** (0.208)	0.679** (0.218)	1.111*** (0.189)	1.044*** (0.195)		
Liberal Democrat party id					0.093 (0.210)	0.087 (0.216)
Labour party id	0.782*** (0.206)	0.837*** (0.216)	0.696*** (0.184)	0.697*** (0.189)	1.043*** (0.144)	1.021*** (0.149)
Other party id	0.620* (0.291)	0.518 (0.302)	0.978*** (0.255)	0.812** (0.261)	0.707** (0.223)	0.644** (0.228)
No party id	0.254 (0.218)	0.305 (0.229)	0.621** (0.198)	0.579** (0.206)	0.677*** (0.162)	0.570*** (0.169)
Trust		-0.077* (0.037)		-0.097** (0.030)		-0.125*** (0.028)
Politicians are like me		0.151 (0.145)		0.022 (0.118)		-0.128 (0.119)
Attention		0.018 (0.035)		-0.003 (0.029)		0.022 (0.028)
Knowledge		0.103 (0.053)		-0.128** (0.048)		-0.067 (0.044)
Female		-0.517*** (0.143)		-0.251* (0.115)		0.312** (0.115)
Age		0.092** (0.028)		0.064** (0.024)		0.0361 (0.025)
Age <sup>2</sup>		-0.0007* (0)		-0.0004 (0.000)		-0.0004 (0.000)
ABC1		0.212 (0.151)		-0.187 (0.123)		-0.28* (0.119)
Constant	0.822*** (0.165)	-1.869* (0.767)	-0.242 (0.157)	-0.757 (0.654)	-1.303*** (0.114)	-1.056 (0.637)
N	1497	1482	1579	1566	1693	1680

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

**Appendix Table 1 Laws, Huhne, Clarke: Wrongness / Attention**

	<b>Model A.1</b>	<b>Model A.2</b>	<b>Model A.3</b>
Attitudes towards pol wrongdoing	0.411*** (0.074)	0.365*** (0.060)	0.525*** (0.076)
Conservative party id	-1.258 (0.908)	-0.826 (0.673)	
Liberal Democrat party id			0.938 (0.869)
Labour party id	-1.216 (0.894)	-0.603 (0.680)	0.079 (0.683)
Other party id	-0.264 (1.218)	-0.734 (0.886)	1.663 (1.063)
No party id	0.088 (0.899)	-0.176 (0.649)	1.095 (0.644)
Attention	-0.152 (0.103)	-0.179* (0.078)	-0.130 (0.068)
Attention x Con party id	0.194 (0.121)	0.226* (0.092)	
Attention x Lib Dem party id			-0.068 (0.119)
Attention x Labour party id	0.249* (0.119)	0.204* (0.093)	0.223* (0.092)
Attention x other party id	0.147 (0.158)	0.199 (0.119)	-0.094 (0.138)
Attention x no party id	0.040 (0.124)	0.086 (0.093)	-0.073 (0.093)
Trust	-0.087* (0.036)	-0.051 (0.029)	-0.109** (0.037)
Politicians are like me	-0.136 (0.144)	0.031 (0.118)	-0.409** (0.151)
Knowledge	0.108 (0.057)	-0.106* (0.045)	-0.165** (0.059)
Female	0.033 (0.141)	0.121 (0.114)	0.851*** (0.148)
Age	0.041 (0.030)	0.053* (0.024)	0.0171 (0.031)
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.0002 (0.000)	-0.0004 (0.000)	-0.0003 (0.000)
ABC1	0.004 (0.151)	0.034 (0.121)	-0.322* (0.156)
Constant	7.149*** (1.078)	8.129*** (0.833)	8.136*** (0.929)
N	1448	1429	1637
R <sup>2</sup>	0.066	0.072	0.171

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

**Appendix Table 2 Laws, Huhne, Clarke: Wrongness / Knowledge**

	<b>Model A.4</b>	<b>Model A.5</b>	<b>Model A.6</b>
Attitudes towards pol wrongdoing	0.402*** (0.074)	0.354*** (0.060)	0.507*** (0.076)
Conservative party id	-0.311 (0.938)	-1.409 (0.751)	
Liberal Democrat party id			0.311 (0.974)
Labour party id	-0.778 (0.912)	-0.847 (0.725)	0.072 (0.718)
Other party id	0.390 (1.113)	0.169 (0.894)	1.742 (1.123)
No party id	0.430 (0.988)	-1.032 (0.756)	1.334 (0.762)
Knowledge	-0.006 (0.151)	-0.417*** (0.124)	-0.276** (0.102)
Knowledge x Con party id	0.092 (0.180)	0.437** (0.147)	
Knowledge x Lib Dem party id			0.034 (0.190)
Knowledge x Labour party id	0.271 (0.177)	0.343* (0.144)	0.322* (0.139)
Knowledge x other party id	0.078 (0.219)	0.094 (0.179)	-0.174 (0.220)
Knowledge x no party id	0.005 (0.194)	0.321* (0.152)	-0.127 (0.152)
Trust	-0.089* (0.036)	-0.054 (0.029)	-0.117** (0.037)
Politicians are like me	-0.144 (0.144)	0.035 (0.118)	-0.464** (0.151)
Knowledge	0.023 (0.140)	0.112 (0.113)	0.895*** (0.146)
Female	0.044 (0.030)	0.053* (0.024)	0.0237 (0.031)
Age	-0.0003 (0.000)	-0.0004 (0.000)	-0.0004 (0.000)
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.026 (0.151)	-0.005 (0.120)	-0.376* (0.156)
ABC1	6.575*** (1.051)	8.448*** (0.856)	7.701*** (0.913)
Constant	1450	1430	1638
N	0.065	0.073	0.166

Standard errors in parentheses  
 \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001