

Social Research Association Seminar

## Researching standards in public life

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# The Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life

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## What I'm going to cover

A bit of background

Some key findings (2006 Survey)

The 2008 Survey

**A bit of background**

## The survey cycle

- Conducted on a two-yearly cycle
- Baseline survey in 2003/4 (BMRB)
- Second survey in 2005/6 (Ipsos-MORI)
- Third survey currently in the field (BMRB)
- Very little change between baseline and second surveys

# Survey aims

## **What does the public expect?**

- What does the public see as acceptable behaviour?
- How important are different behaviours?
- How far do the Seven Principles reflect public priorities?

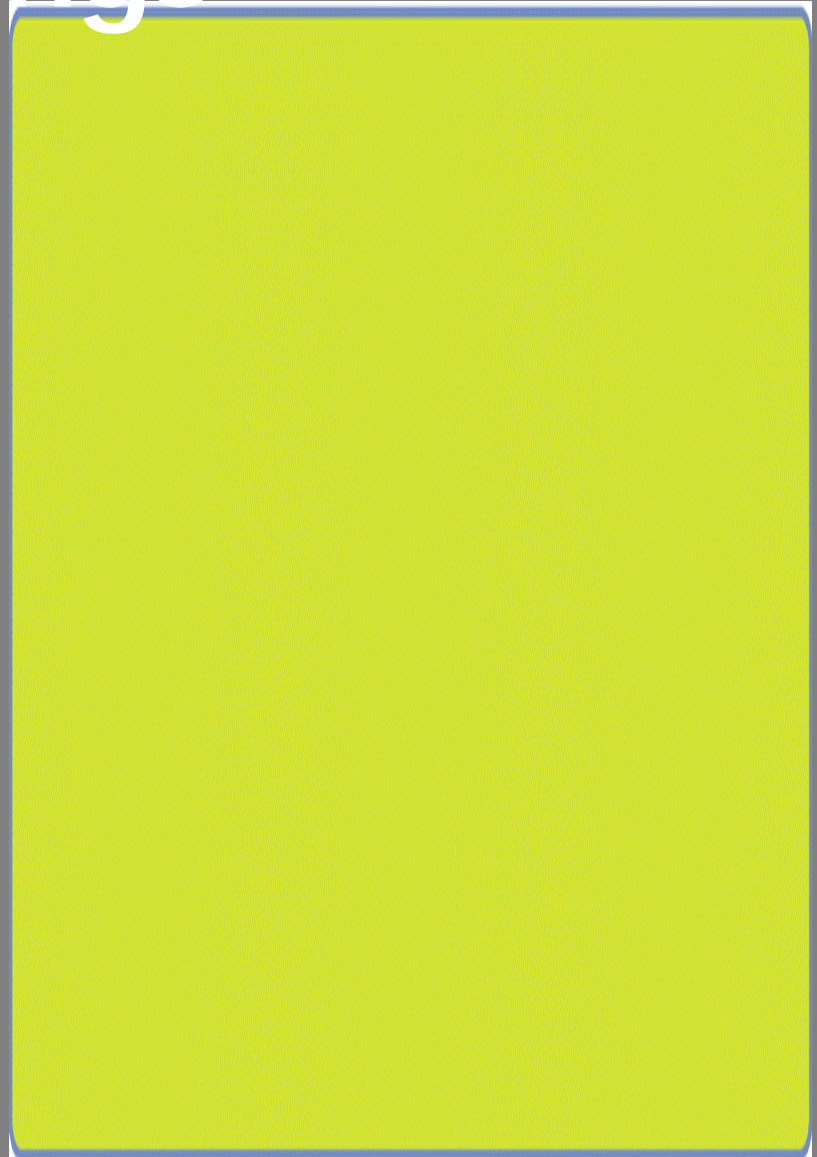
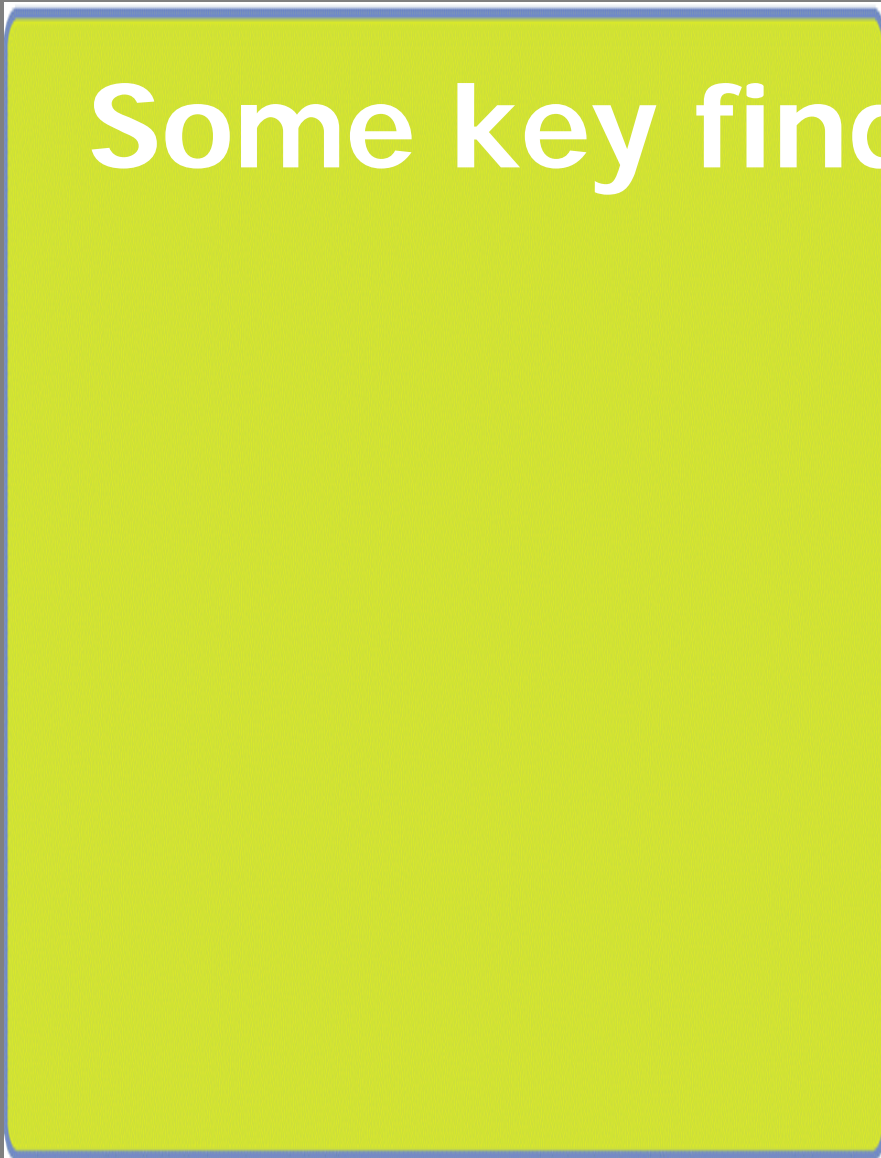
## **Are expectations being met?**

- How does the public perceive public office holders to behave in practice?
- Does the public believe public office holders are held to account for their behaviour?

# Survey method

- In home interviews using random sampling among core sample of 1,100 adults (18+) in GB
  - 2006: Boost in Scotland and separate Northern Ireland sample (400 interviews in each)
  - 2008: Boost in Wales (400 interviews)
  - Response rate around 55%
- Questionnaire development
  - Exploratory qualitative research (NatCen, 2002)
  - Research Advisory Board
  - Subject specialists from Oxford University
  - Final approval by the Committee
  - Comprehensive programme of question testing

# Some key findings



What standards do people expect and how far are they met?



# Priorities and perceptions measured in relation to 10 attributes

## Ten attributes

Dedicated to doing a good job for the public

Not use power for their own personal gain

Not take bribes

Own up when they make mistakes

Explain reasons for actions and decisions

Set a good example for others in private lives

Tell the truth

Make sure that public money is used wisely

In touch with what the public thinks important

Competent at their jobs

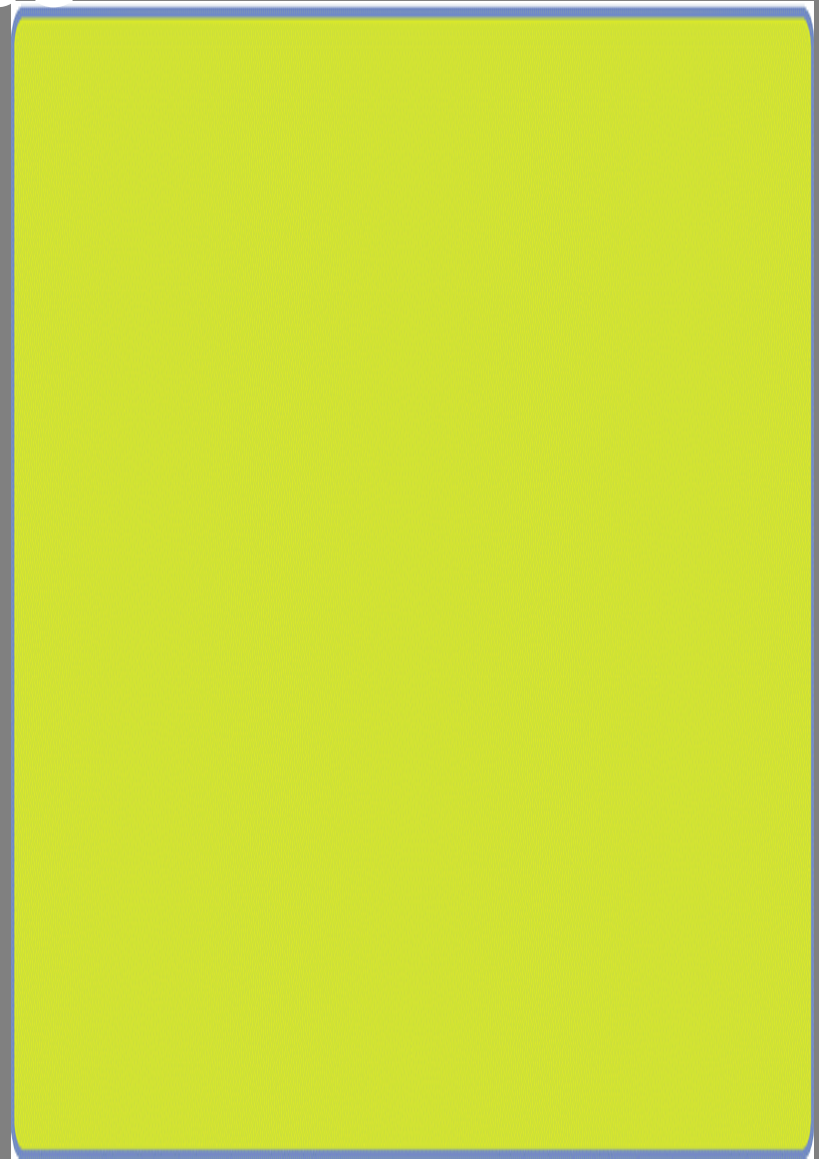
# Behavioural attributes covered in the research

Ten attributes	Based on
Dedicated to doing a good job for the public	Selflessness
Not use power for their own personal gain	Selflessness & Objectivity
Not take bribes	Selflessness & Integrity
Own up when they make mistakes	Accountability & Openness
Explain reasons for actions and decisions	Accountability & Openness
Set a good example for others in private lives Tell the truth Make sure that public money is used wisely In touch with what the public thinks important Competent at their jobs	<b>Stage 1 Qualitative research</b>

# Behavioural attributes covered in the research

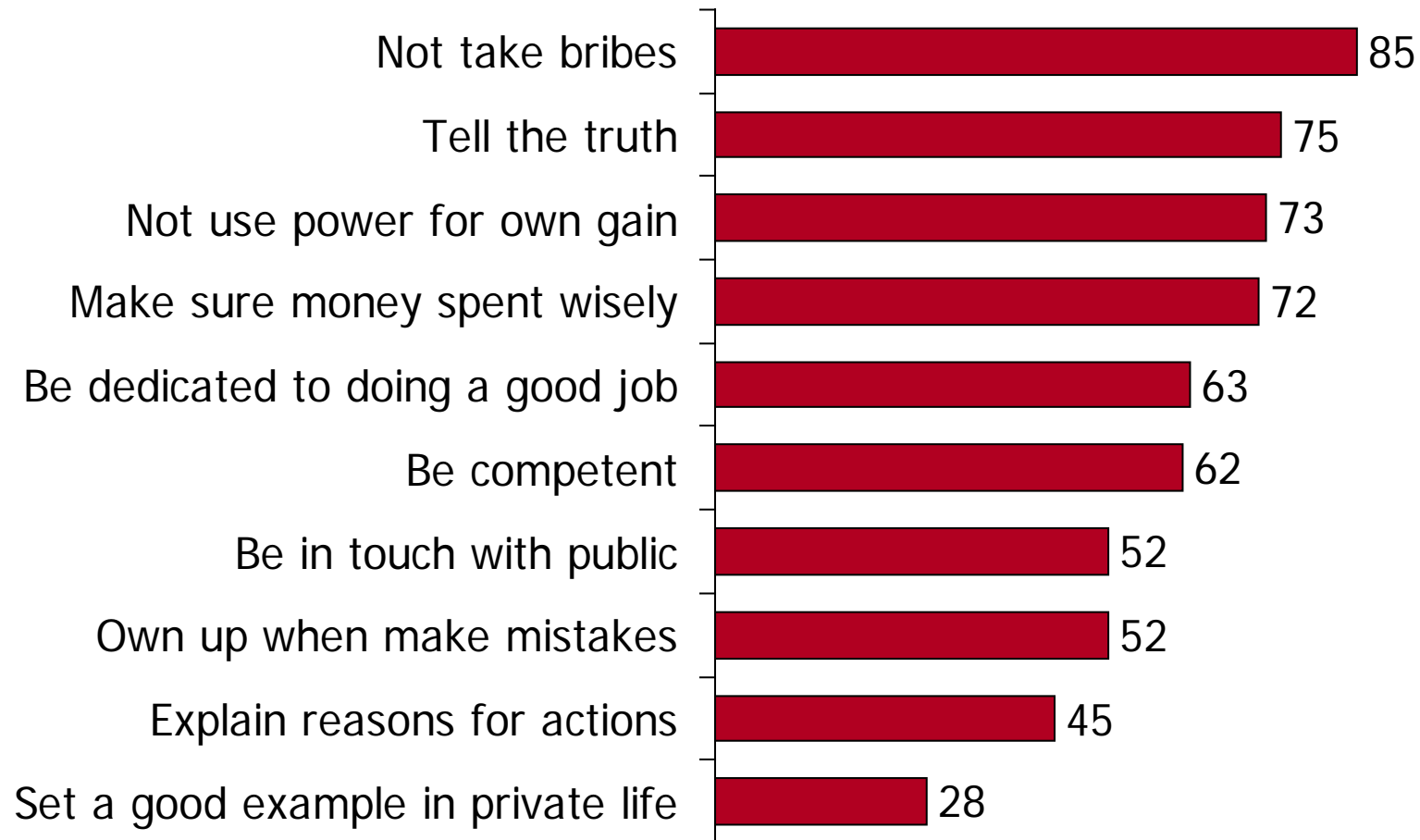
Ten attributes	Based on	Questions
Dedicated to doing a good job for the public	Selflessness	<b>Expectations</b> How important are they?  <b>Perceptions</b> What proportion behave in this way?
Not use power for their own personal gain	Selflessness & Objectivity	
Not take bribes	Selflessness & Integrity	
Own up when they make mistakes	Accountability & Openness	
Explain reasons for actions and decisions	Accountability & Openness	
Set a good example for others in private lives Tell the truth Make sure that public money is used wisely In touch with what the public thinks important Competent at their jobs	<b>Stage 1 Qualitative research</b>	<b>Types of POH</b> MPs Govt Ministers 'Senior public officials'

What do people see  
as important?



# Everything!

■ % rating as extremely important for MPs/Ministers



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Though private behaviour relatively unimportant

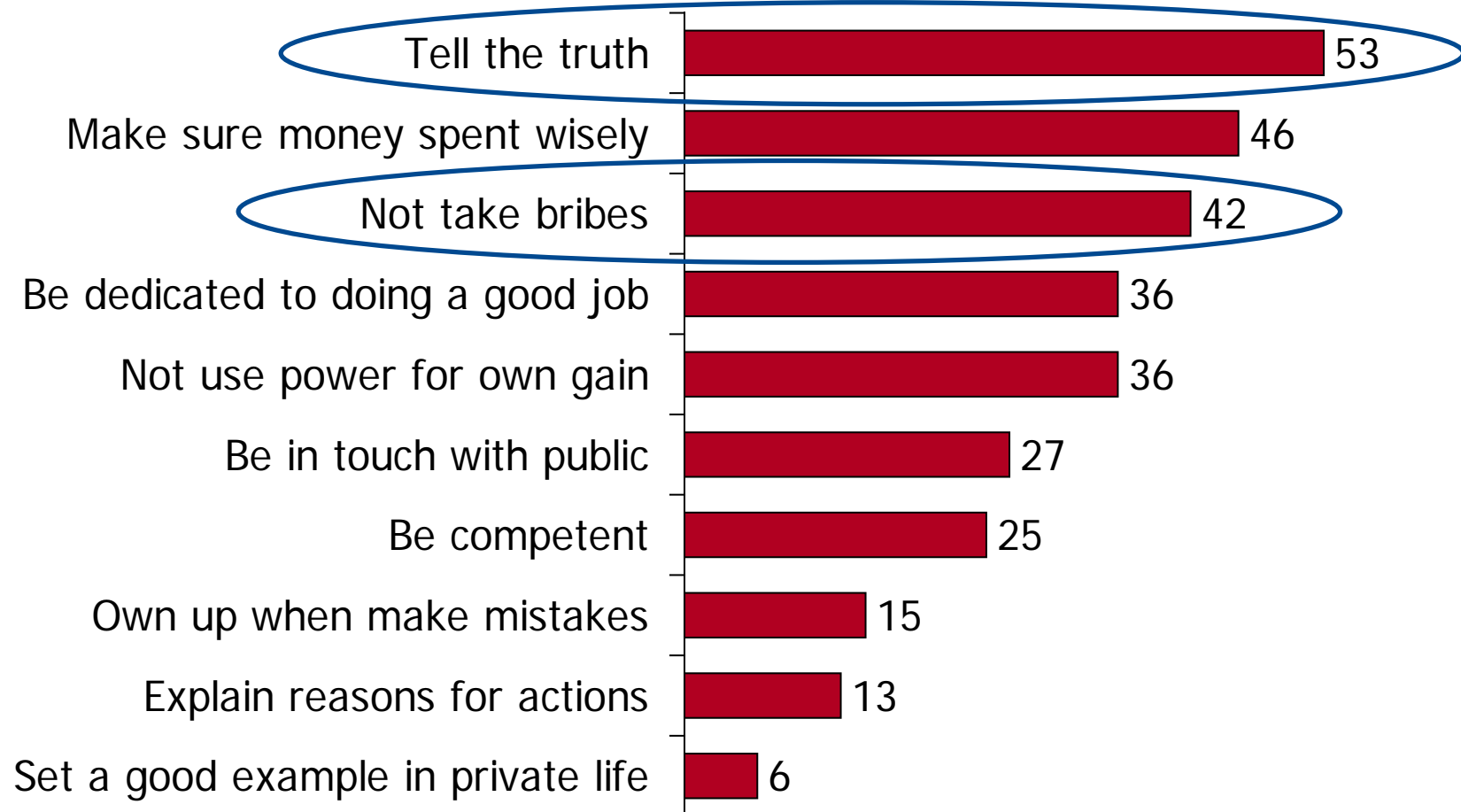
■ % rating as extremely important for MPs/Ministers



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Honesty particularly important ...

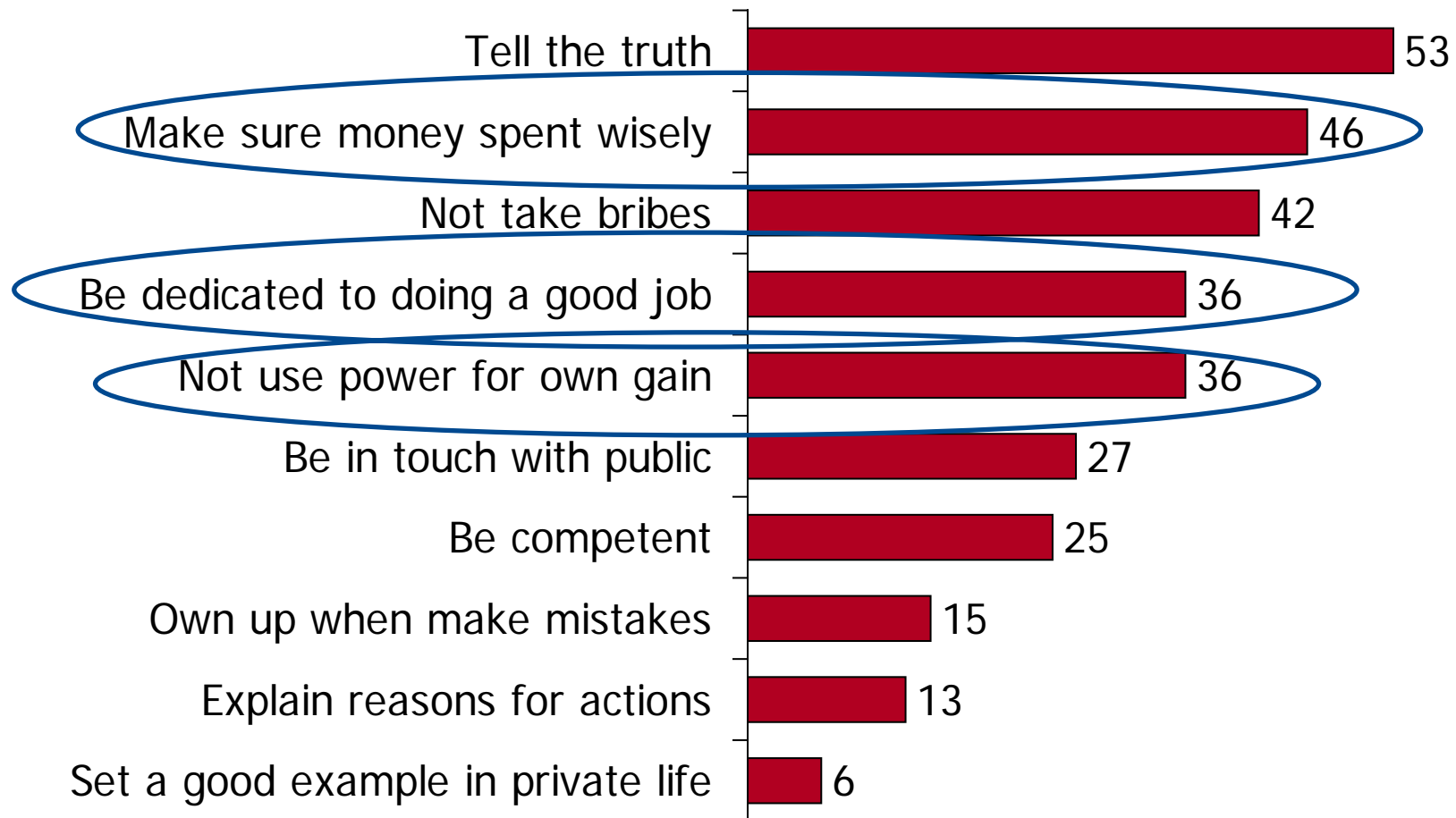
■ % rating as one of the three most important attributes for MPs/Ministers



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

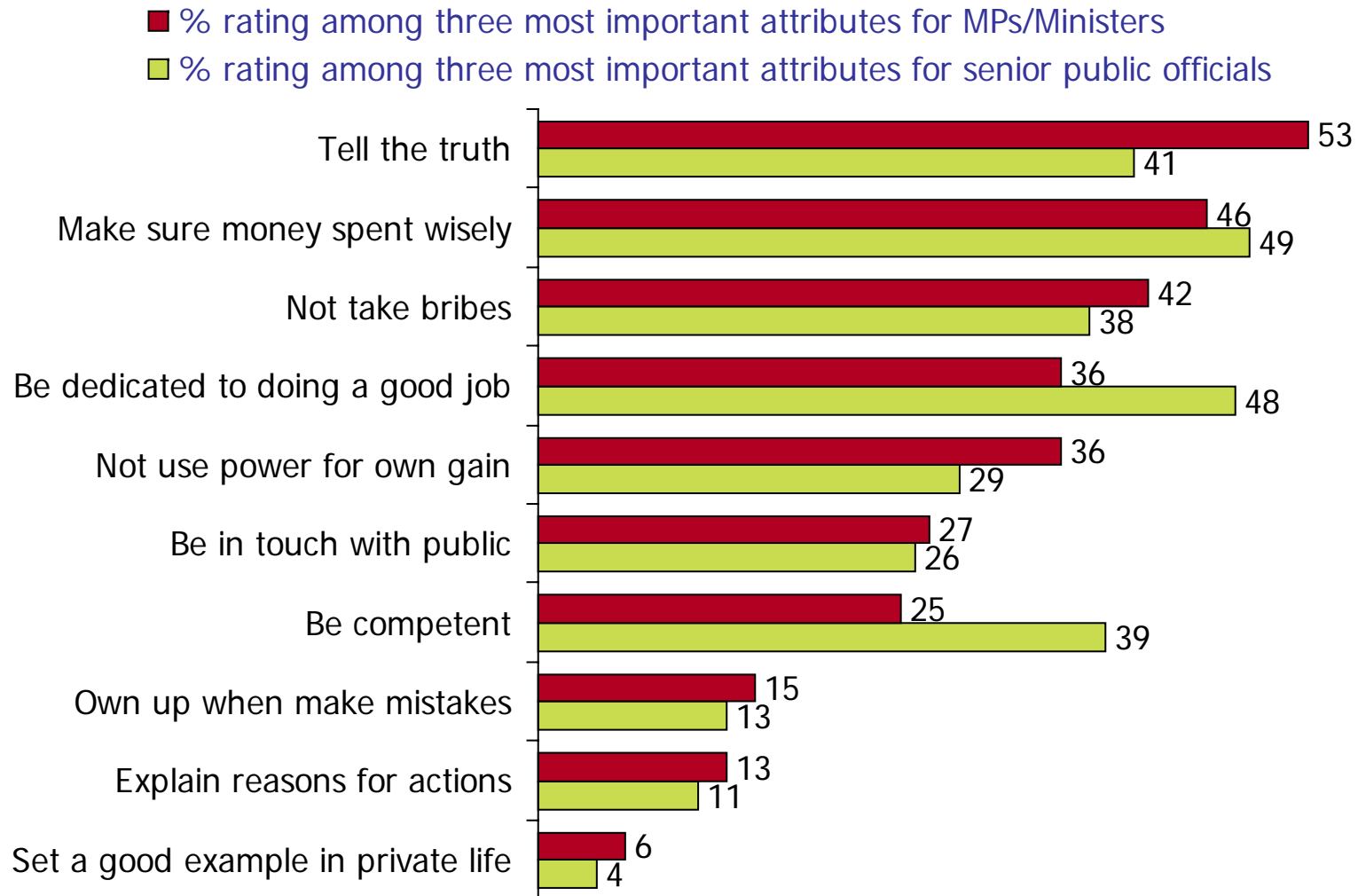
## ... as are prudence and selflessness

■ % rating as one of the three most important attributes for MPs/Ministers



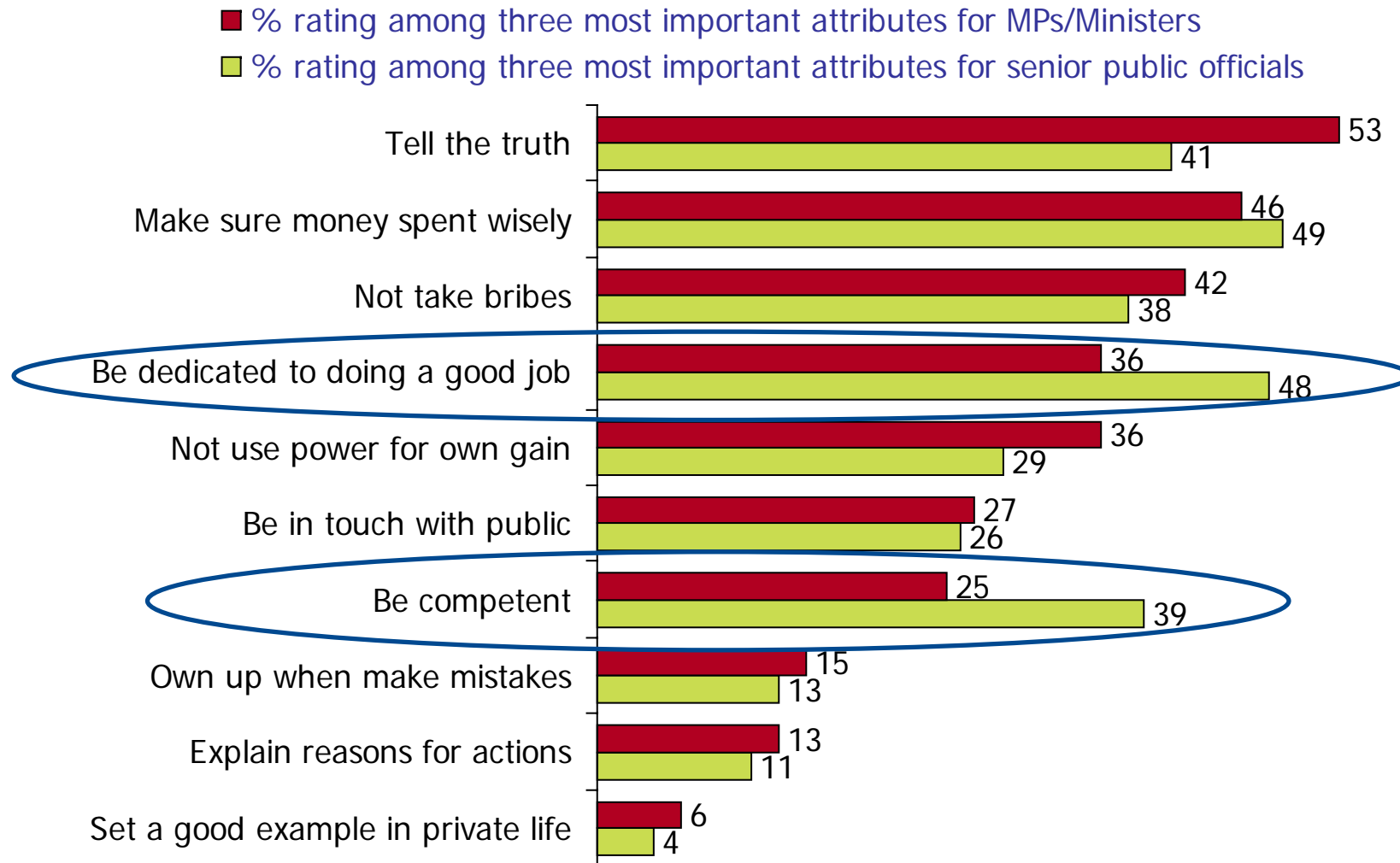
Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Broadly similar pattern for appointed officials



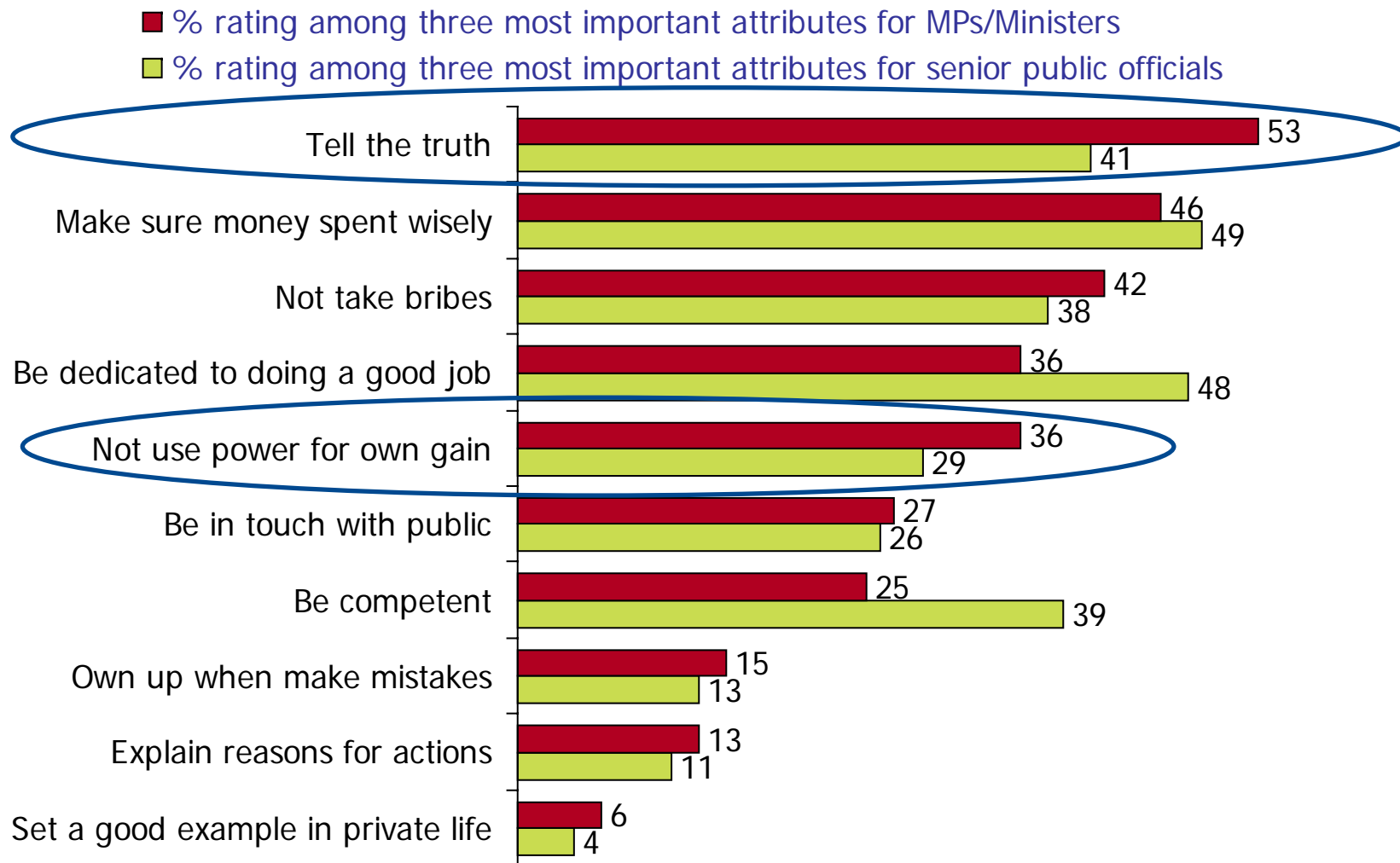
Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# More stress on dedication and competence ...



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# ... and less on honesty and abuse of position



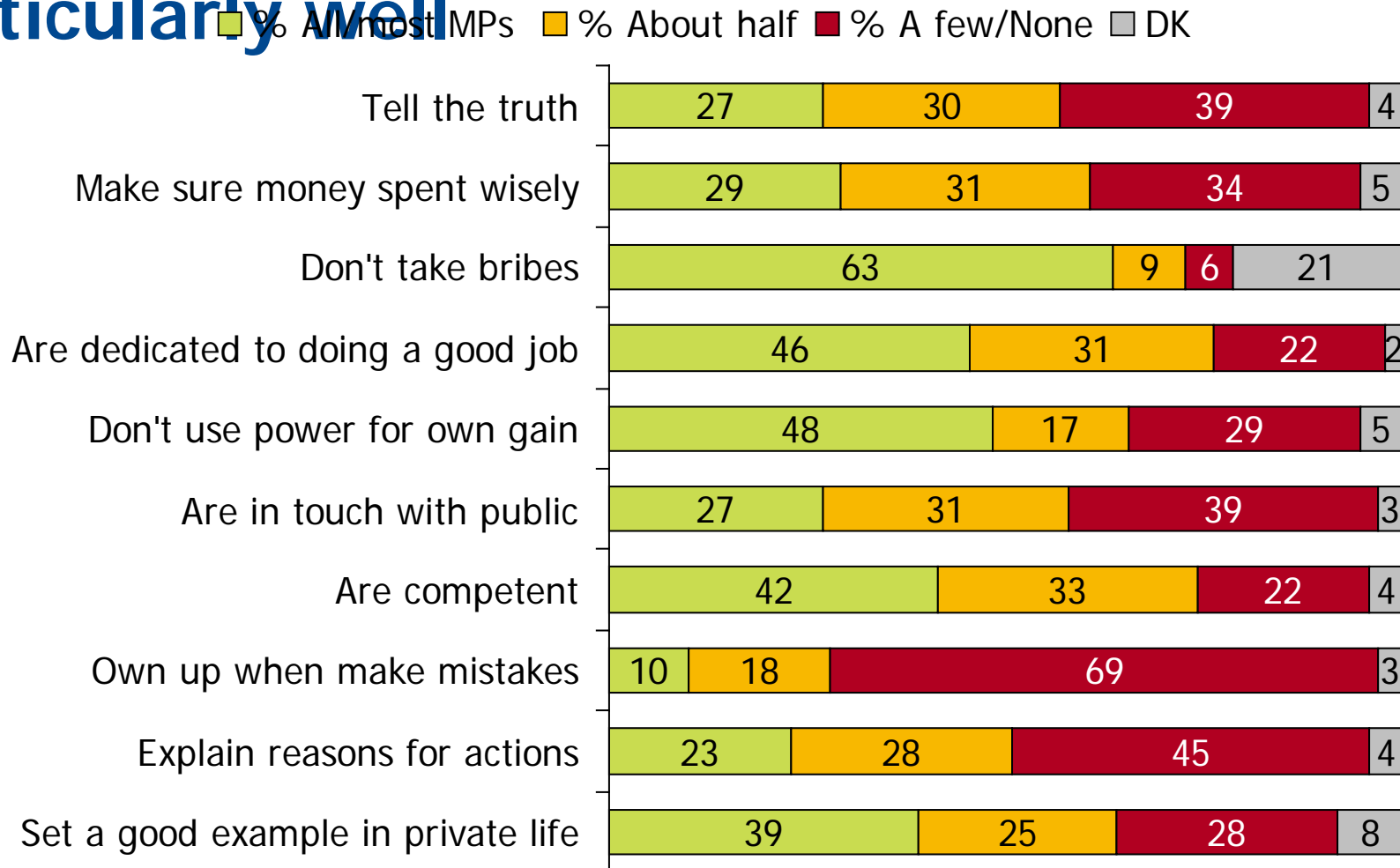
Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

**How do public  
office holders  
measure up?**



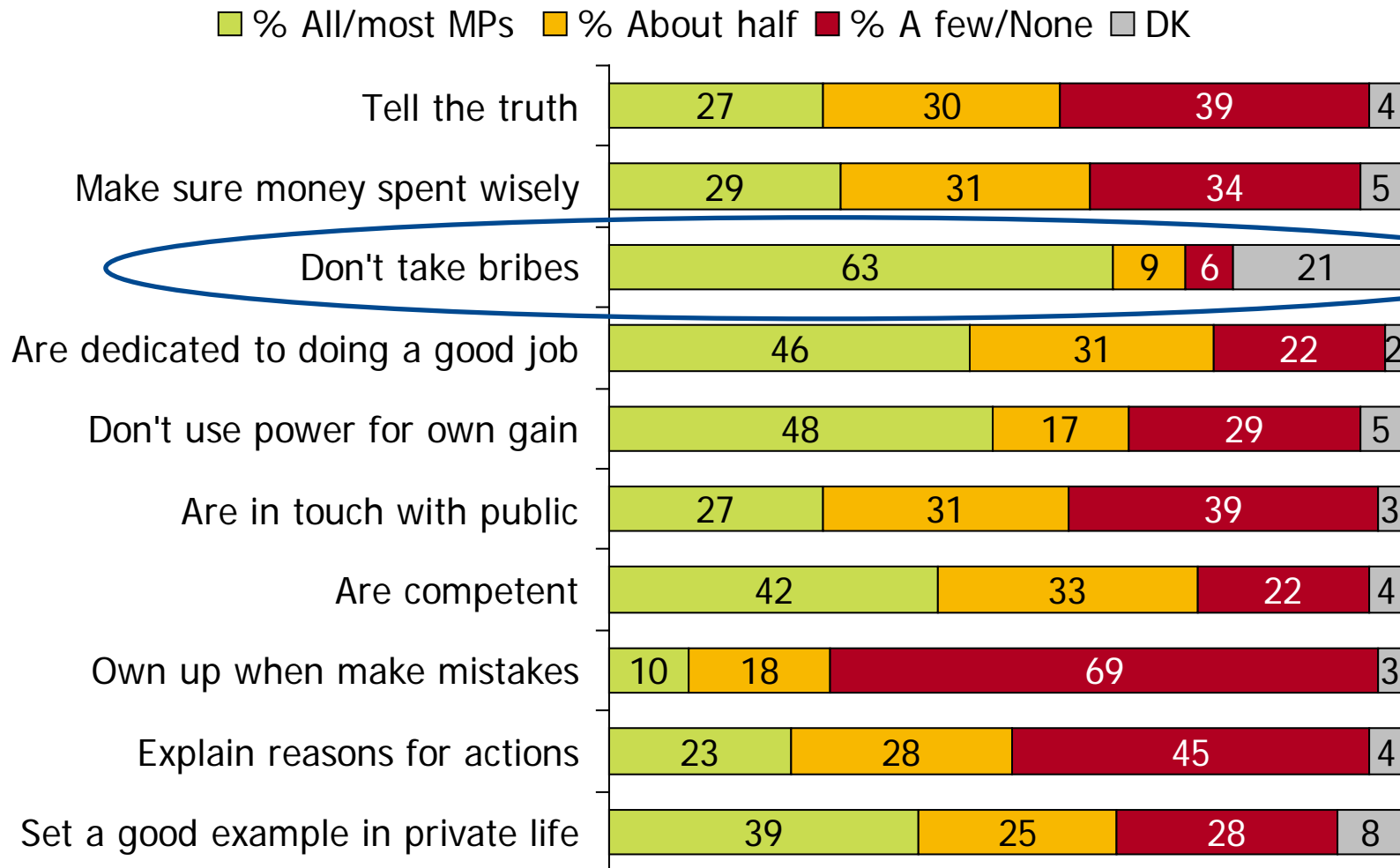
# Few measures on which MPs perform particularly well

## particularly well



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

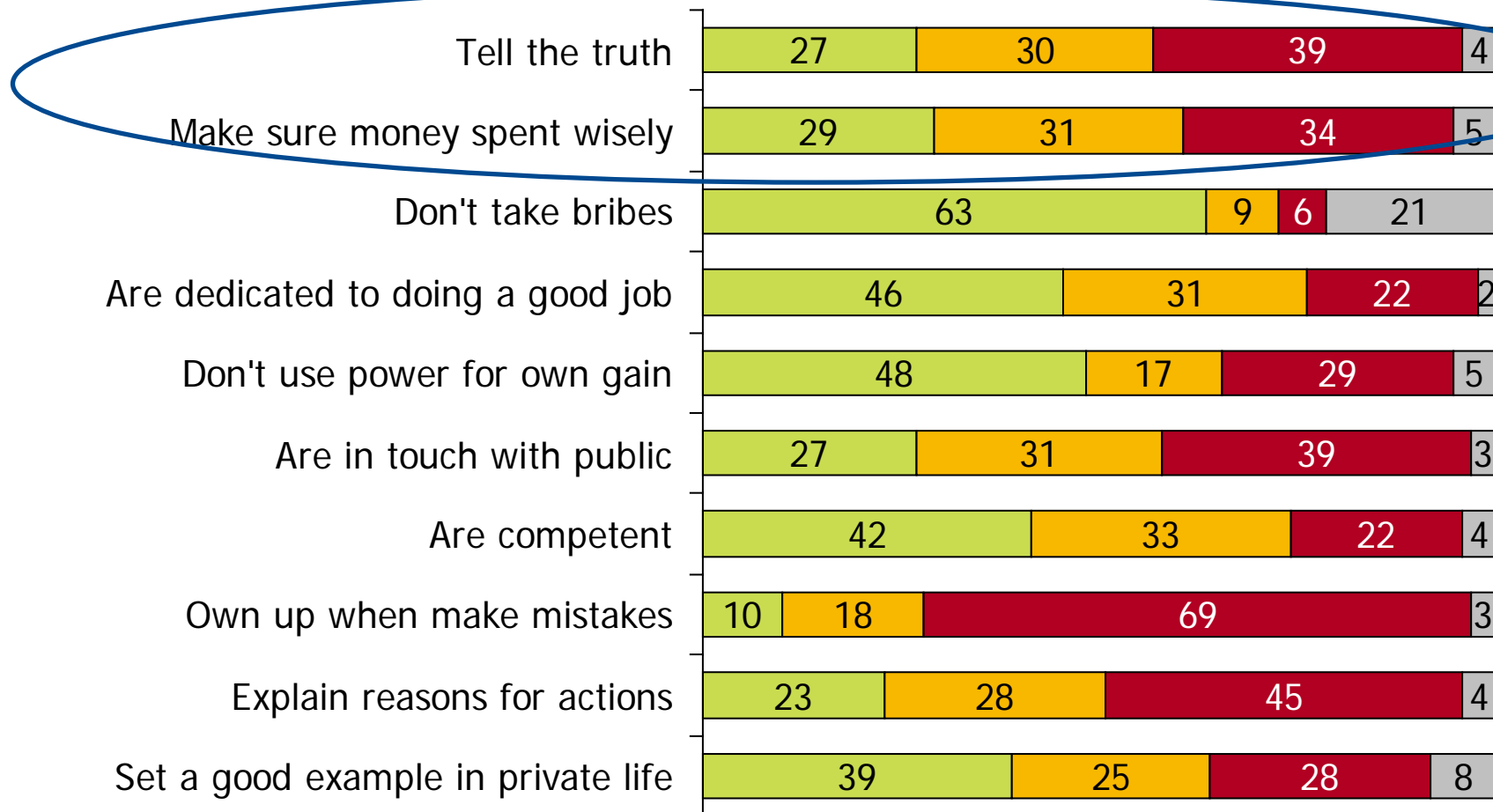
# Few see them as overtly corrupt



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Not highly rated on honesty and prudence

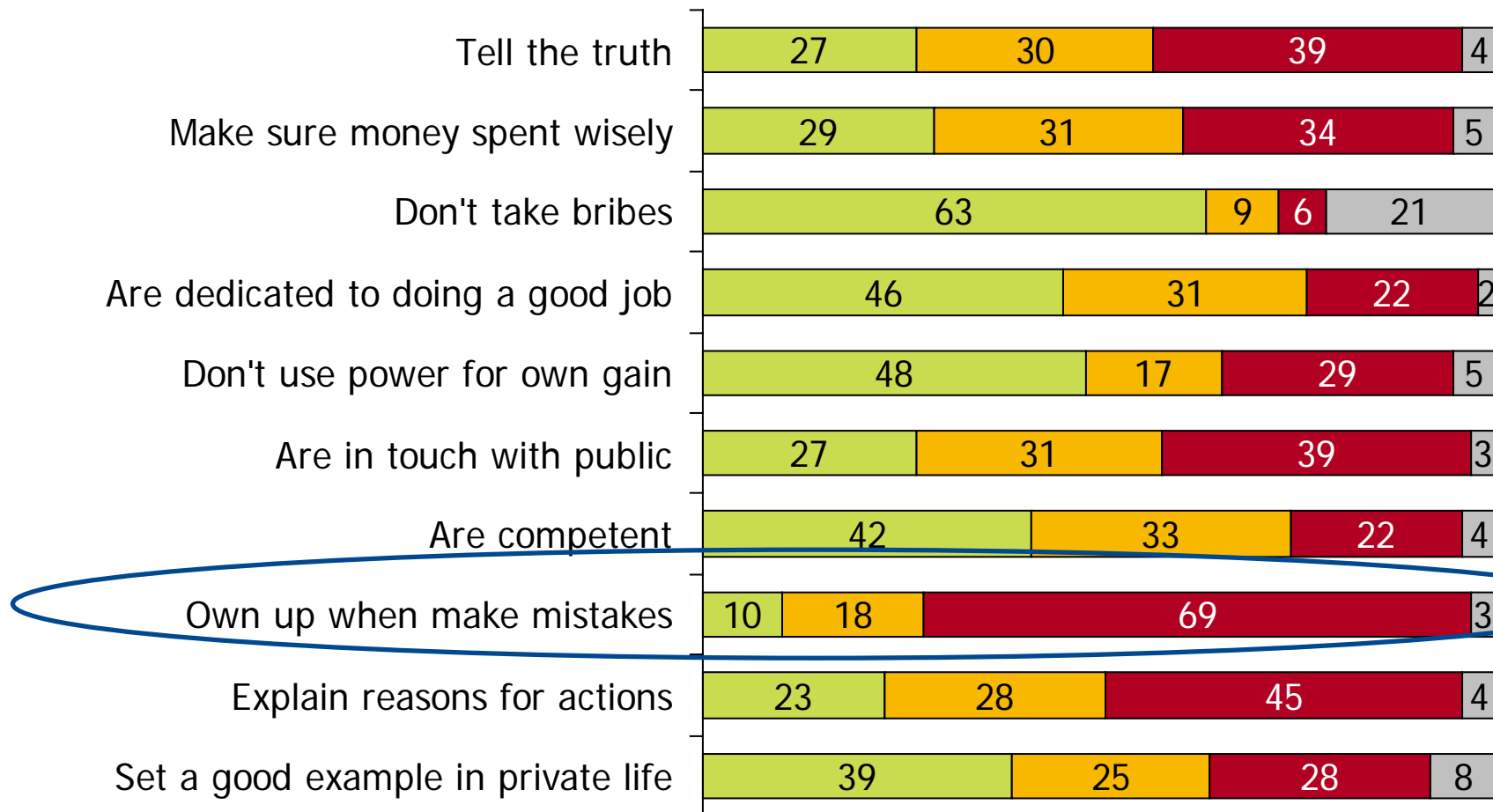
■ % All/most MPs ■ % About half ■ % A few/None ■ DK



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

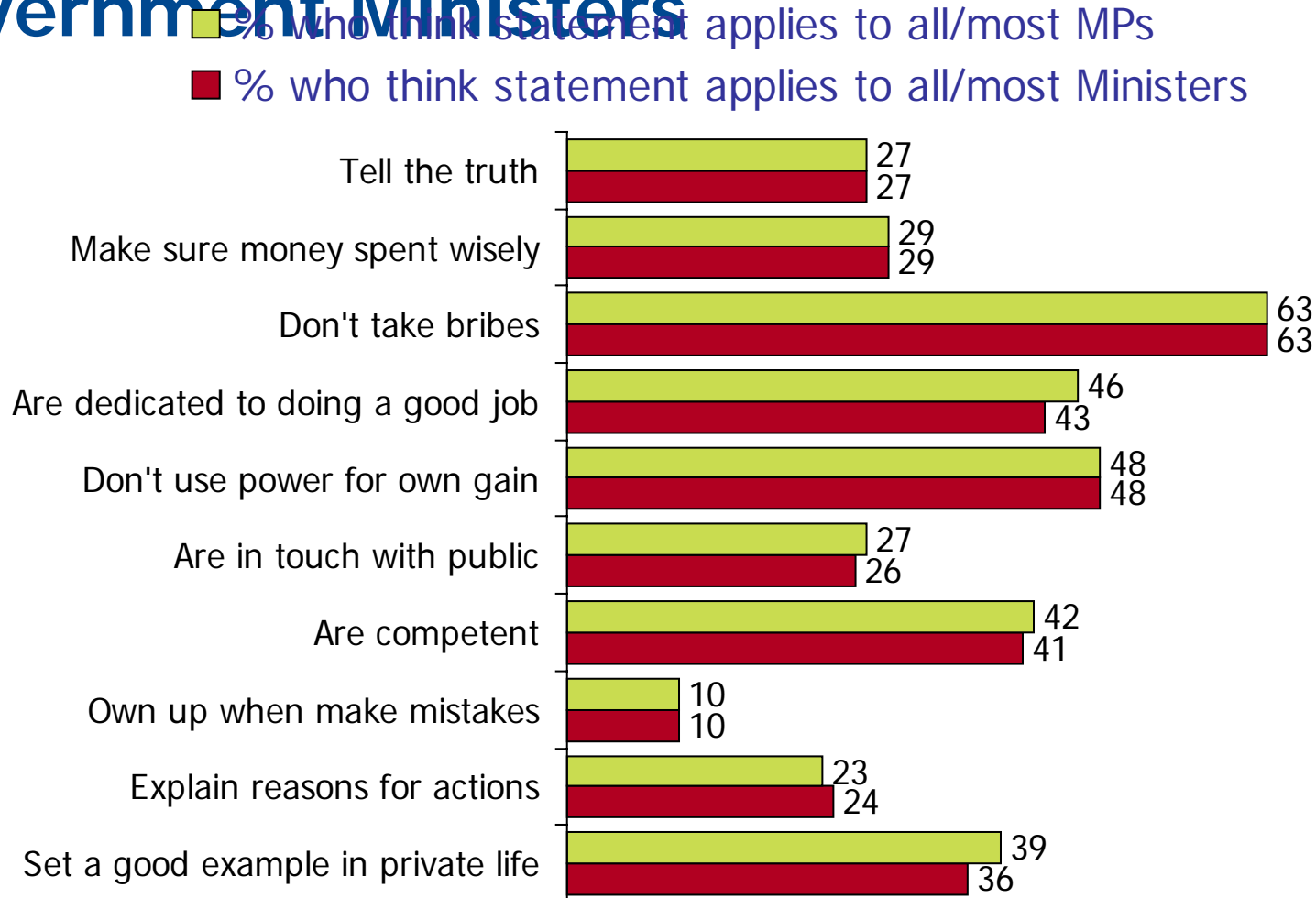
# Not seen to take responsibility for actions

■ % All/most MPs ■ % About half ■ % A few/None ■ DK



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Little distinction between MPs and Government Ministers

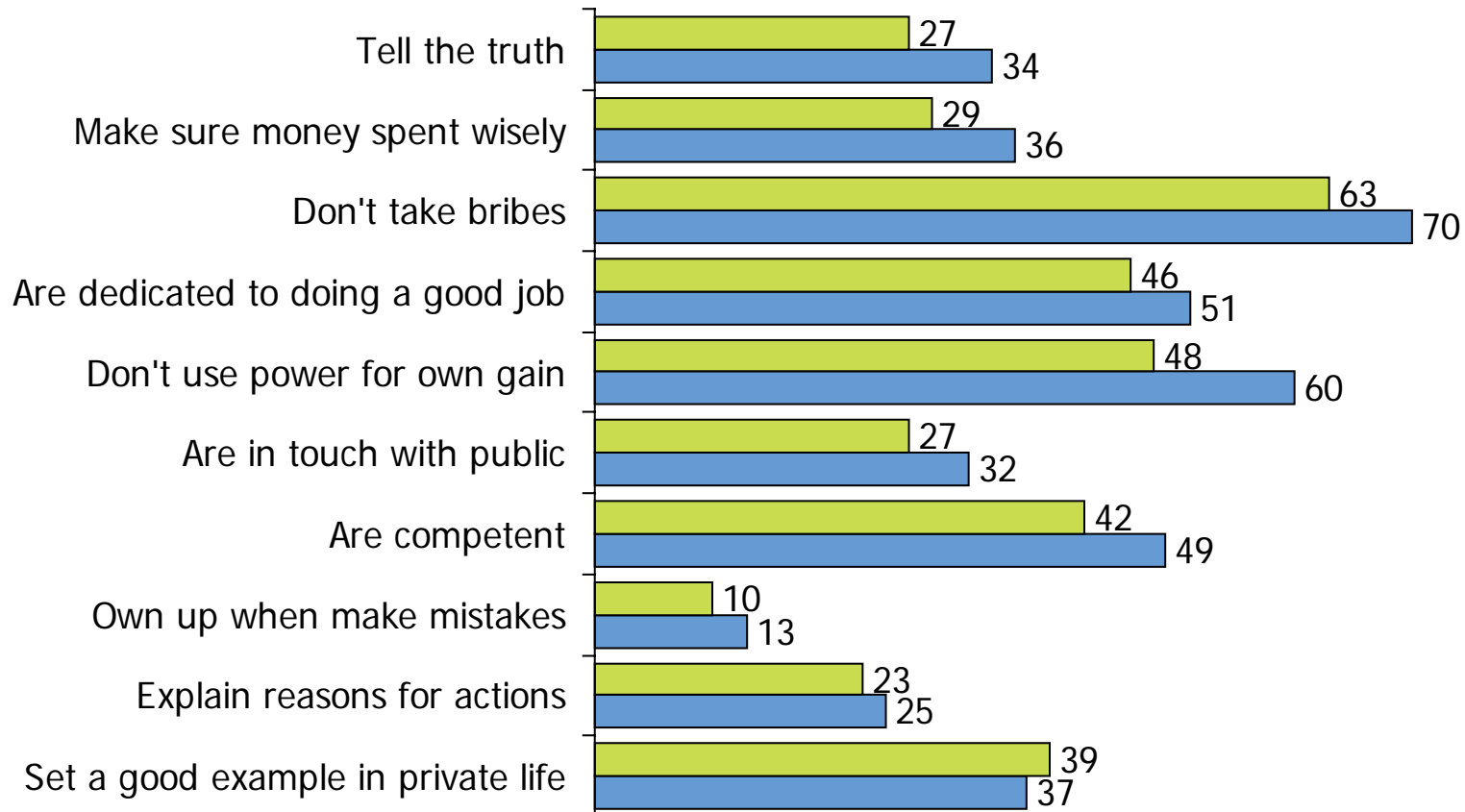


Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Appointed officials more positively perceived

■ % who think statement applies to all/most MPs

■ % who think statement applies to all/most senior public officials



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# But not seen to take responsibility for actions

- % who think statement applies to all/most MPs
- % who think statement applies to all/most senior public officials



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

How should and how do  
MPs vote on issues of  
national importance?



# The questions

Respondents asked to say which of a number criteria:

- are reasonable for MPs to take into account when voting on a matter of national importance
- is the most important thing they should take into account
- most MPs would base their vote on in practice

# The criteria

National interest

Manifesto promises

Constituency interests

Personal belief

Local party wishes

Leadership wishes

Effect on popularity of party

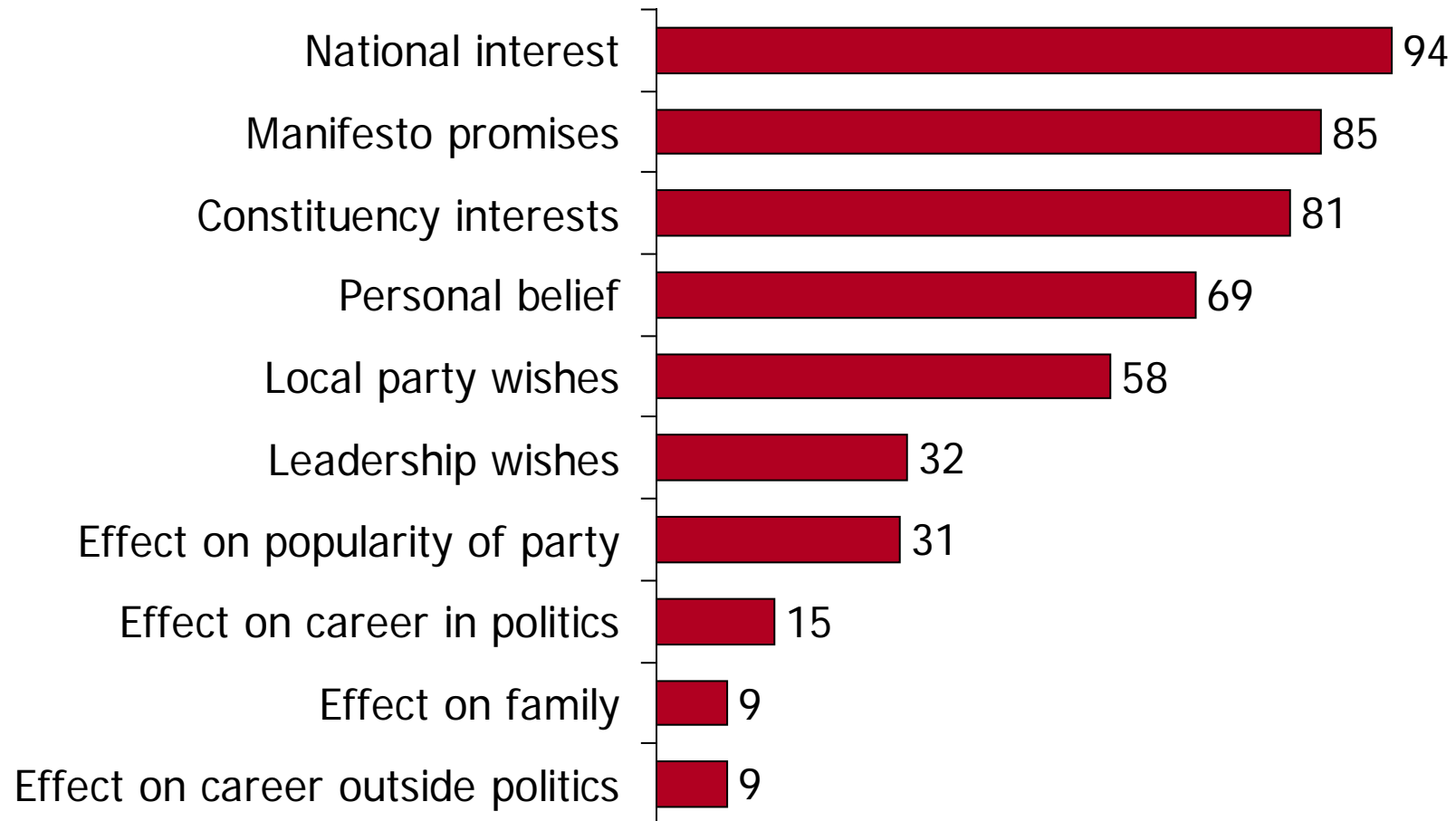
Effect on career in politics

Effect on family

Effect on career outside politics

# A range of criteria seen as reasonable

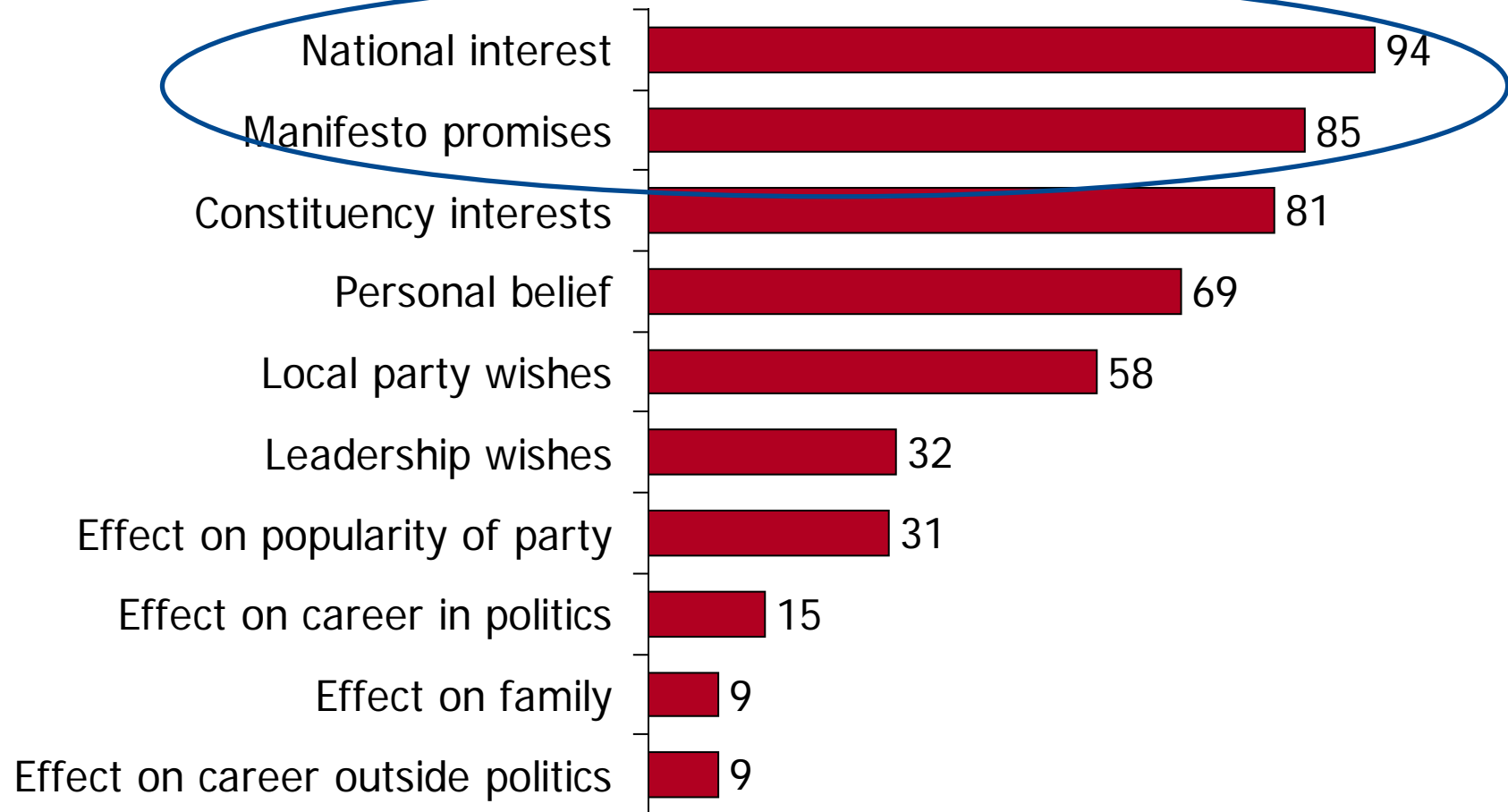
■ % saying reasonable for MP to consider when voting on national issue



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

## Public good and honesty ('keeping promises') again important

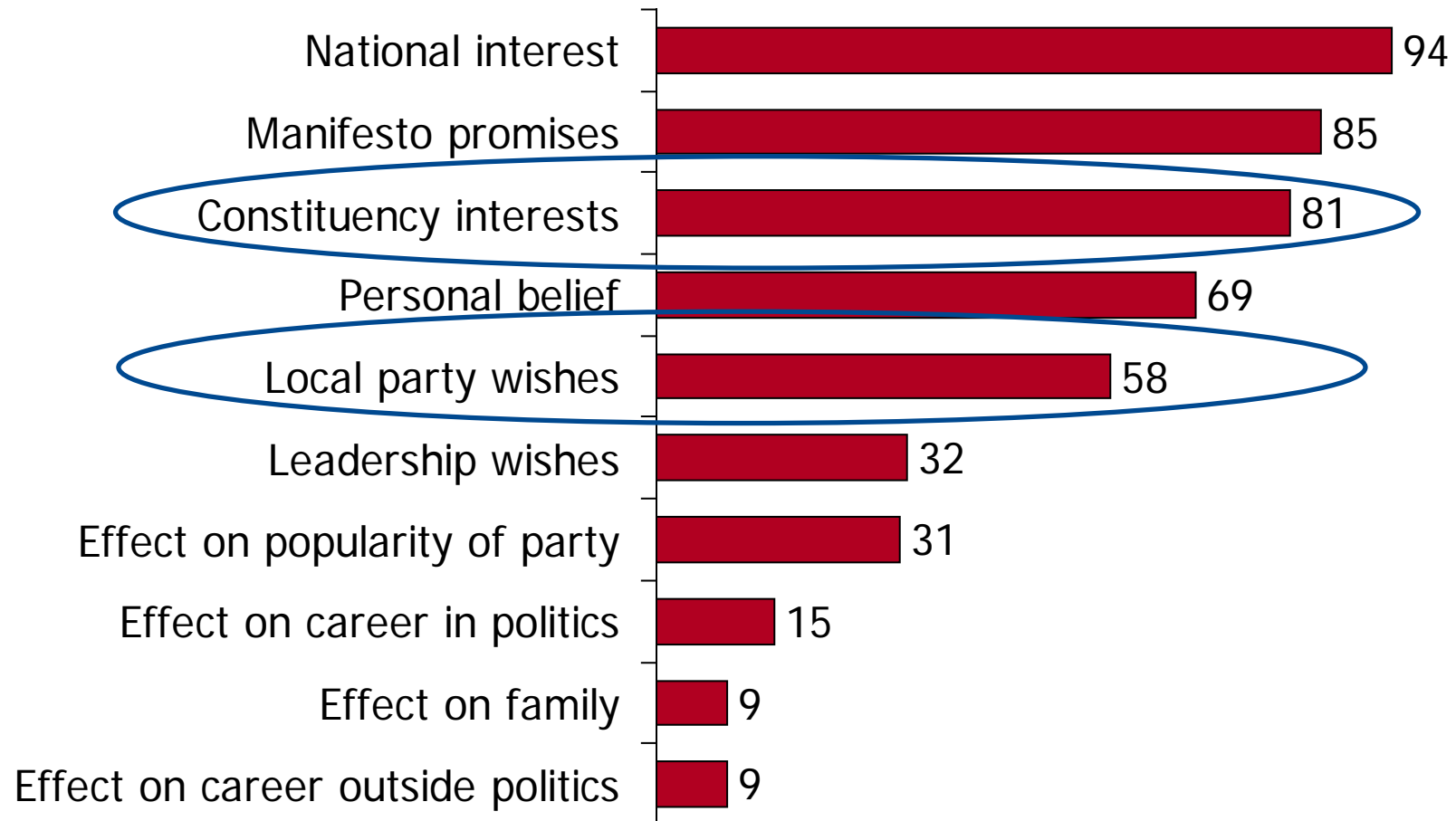
■ % saying reasonable for MP to consider when voting on national issue



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Local interests also seen as relevant

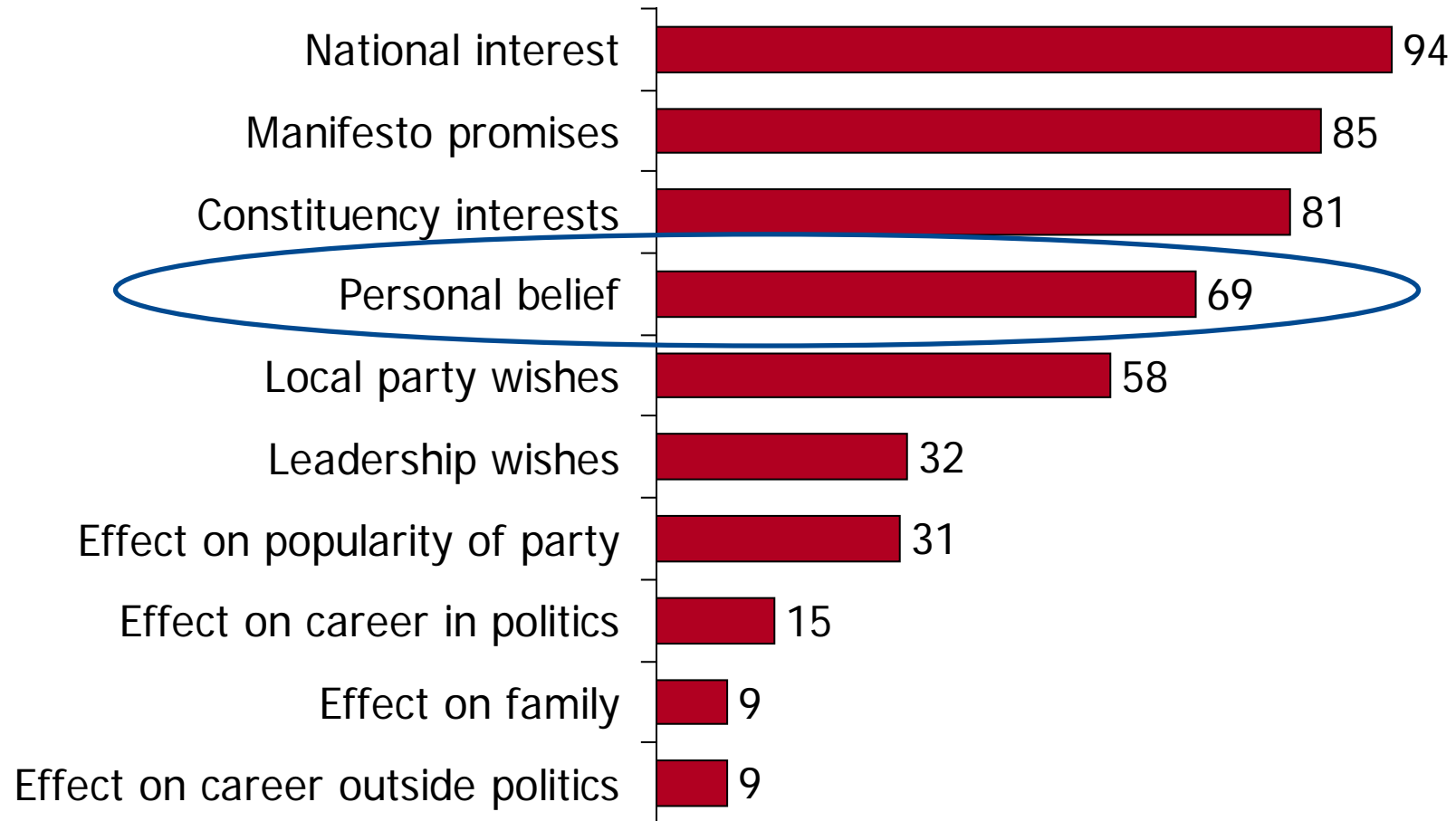
■ % saying reasonable for MP to consider when voting on national issue



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Widespread support for MPs following own convictions

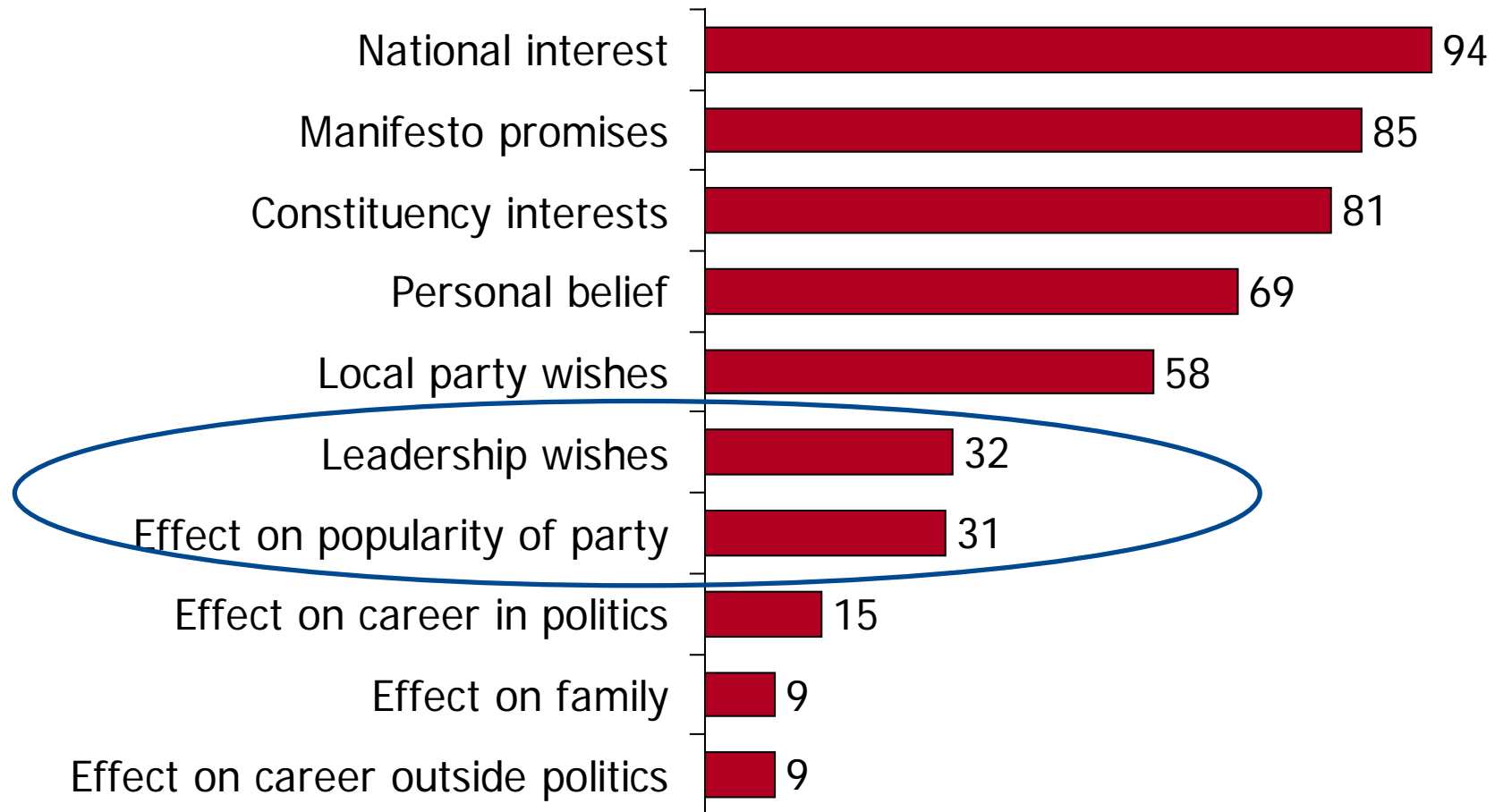
■ % saying reasonable for MP to consider when voting on national issue



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Party considerations less widely accepted

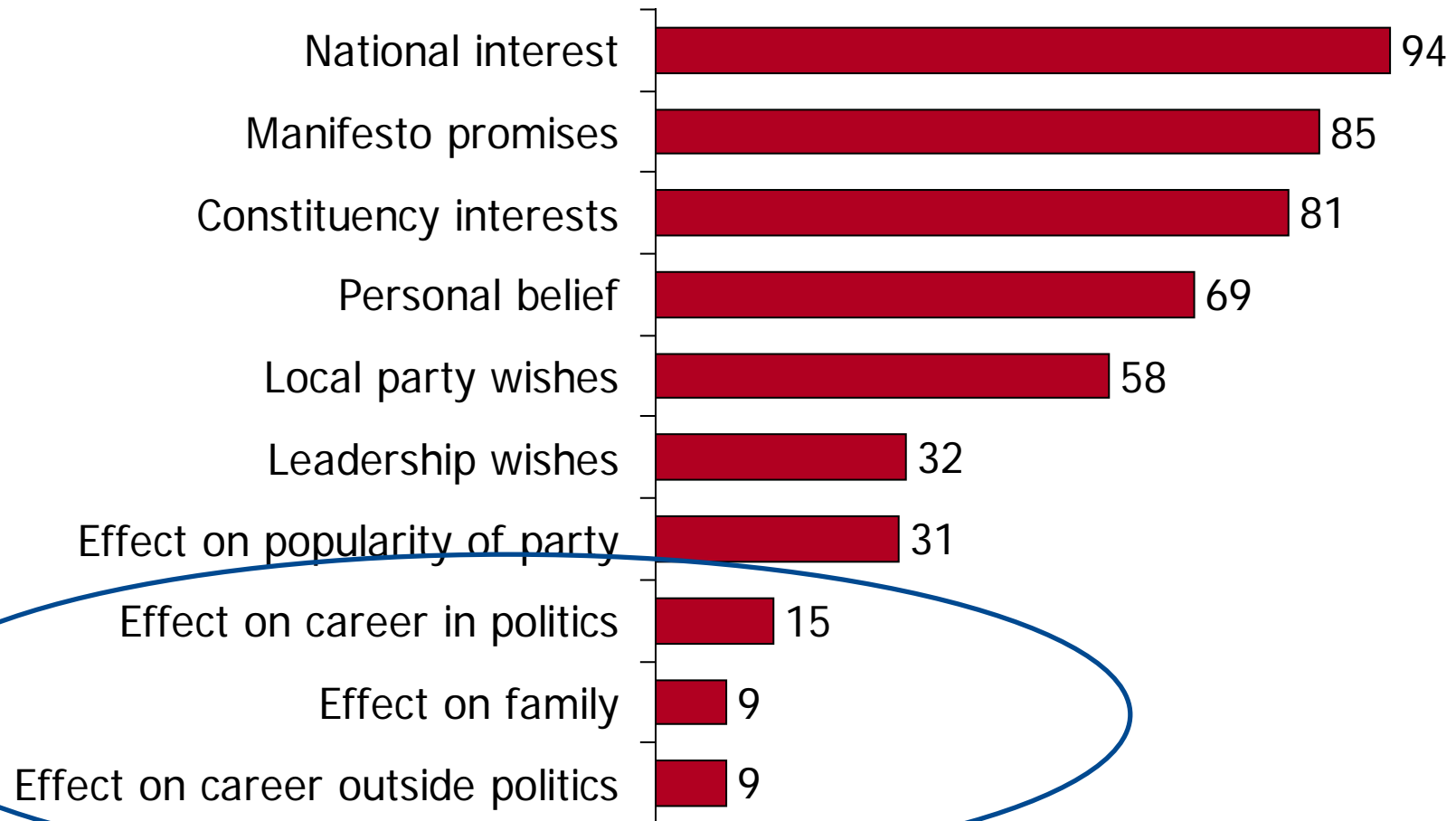
■ % saying reasonable for MP to consider when voting on national issue



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Personal gain generally seen as unacceptable

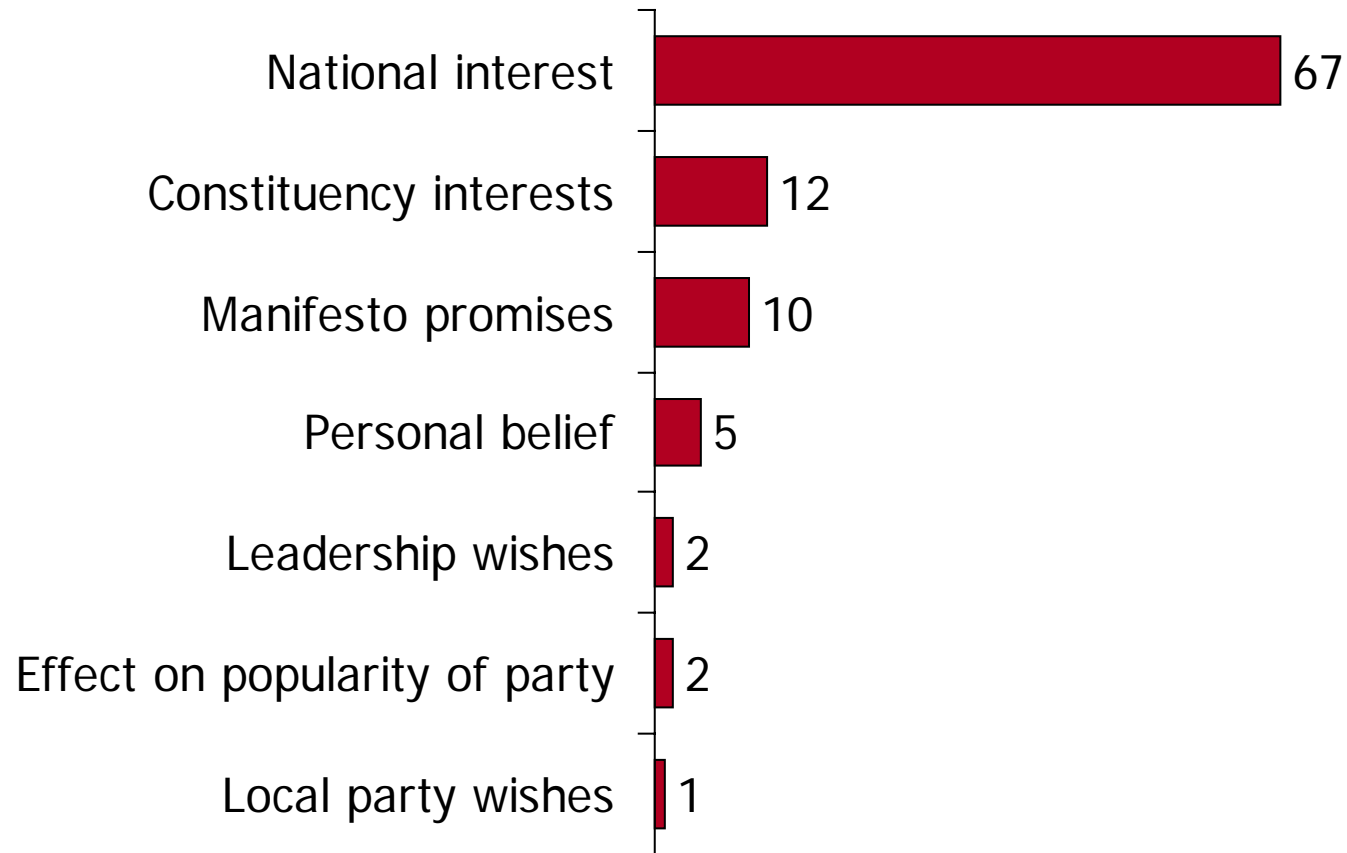
■ % saying reasonable for MP to consider when voting on national issue



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# National public interest the overriding consideration

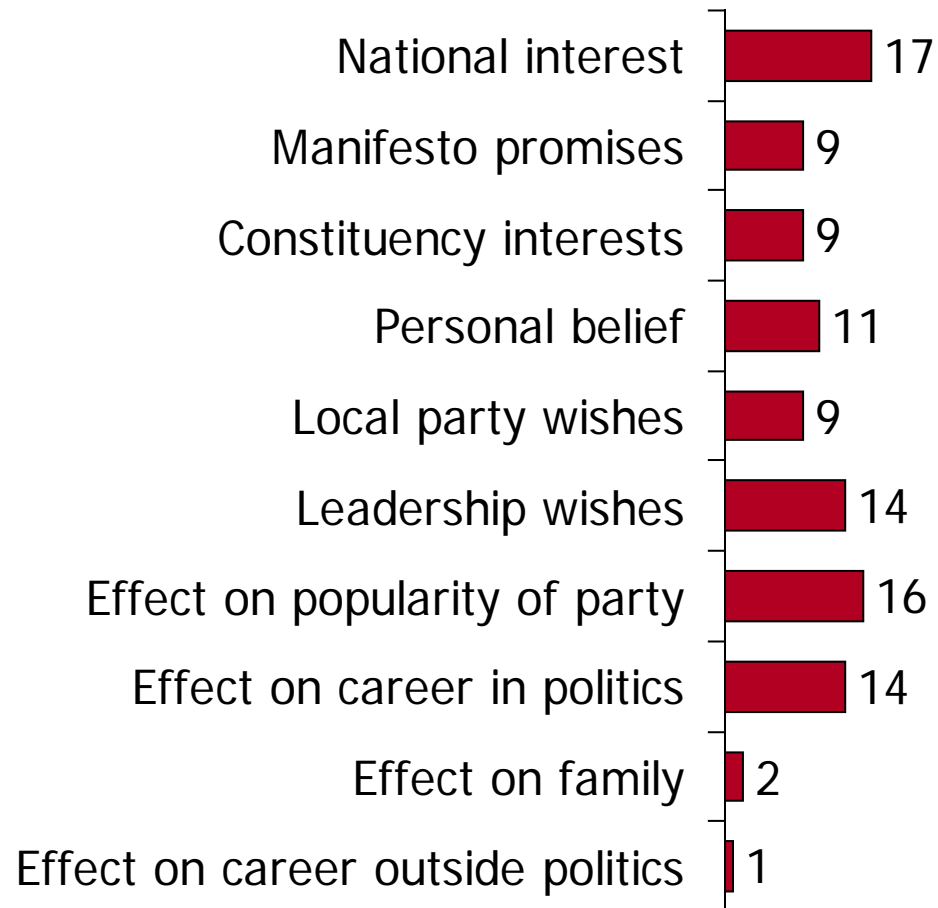
■ 66% saying most important factor for MP to consider in voting on national issue



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# No consensus on what actually happens ...

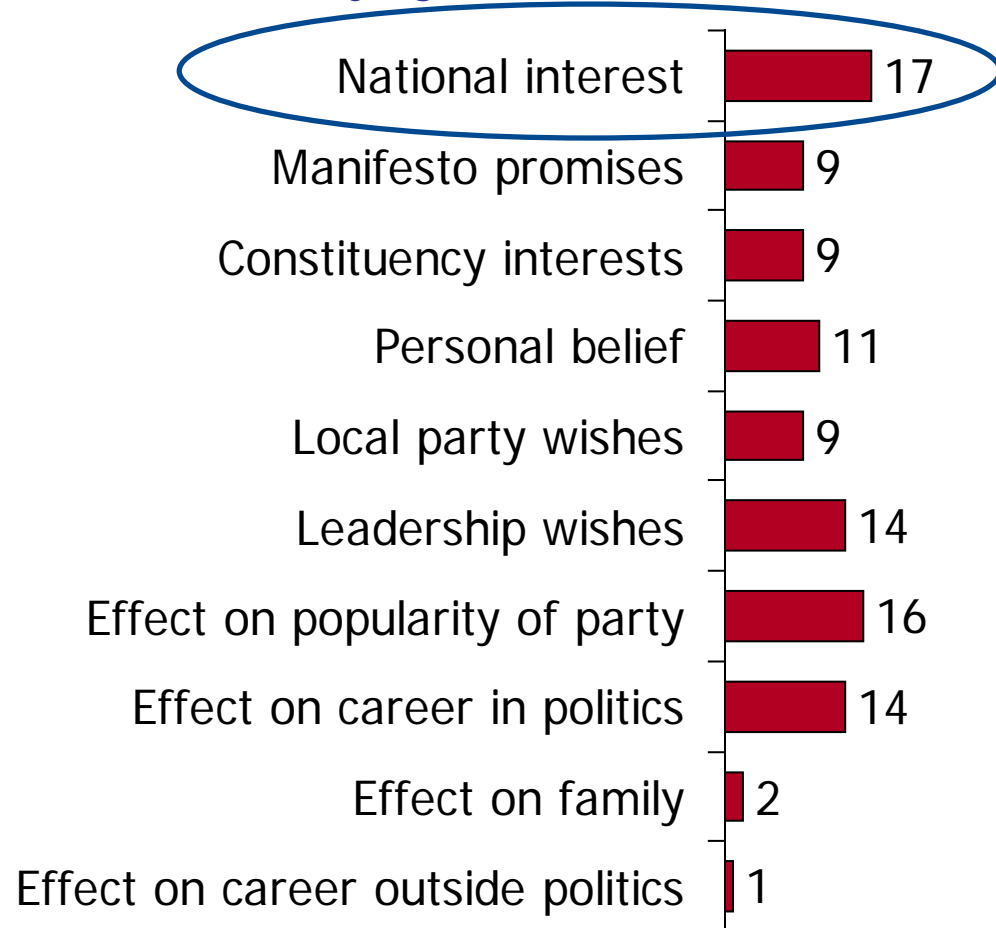
■ % saying most MPs would base decision on this factor



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# National interest most widely mentioned ...

■ % saying most MPs would base decision on this factor

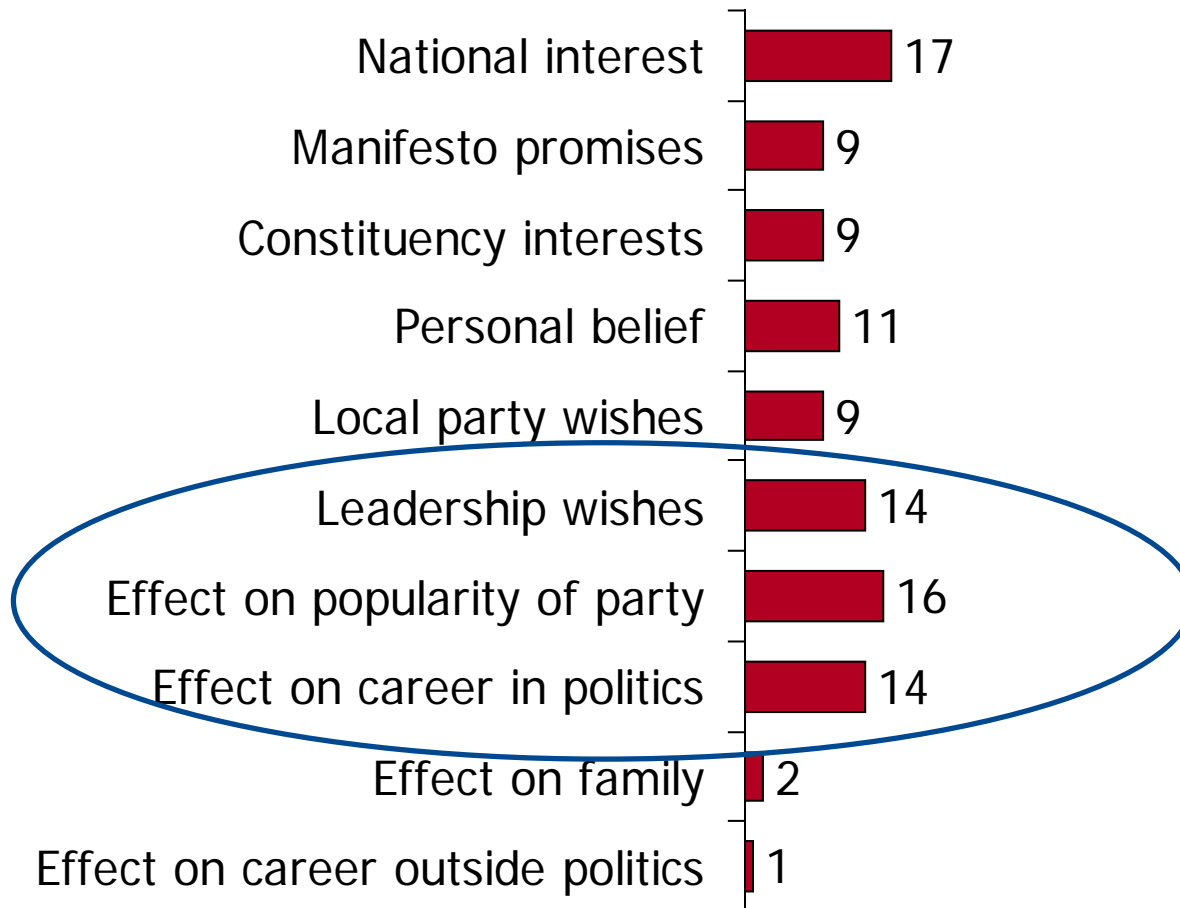


Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# ... but party & impact on career also

**prominent**

■ % saying most MPs would base decision on this factor



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

Who do we trust  
to tell the truth?



## The question

These cards show different types of people. Please put them on this board to show which you would generally trust to tell the truth and which you wouldn't. Please read out the letters that apply.

INTERVIEWER, IF NECESSARY: If there are any you are not sure about, please put them to one side.

## The question

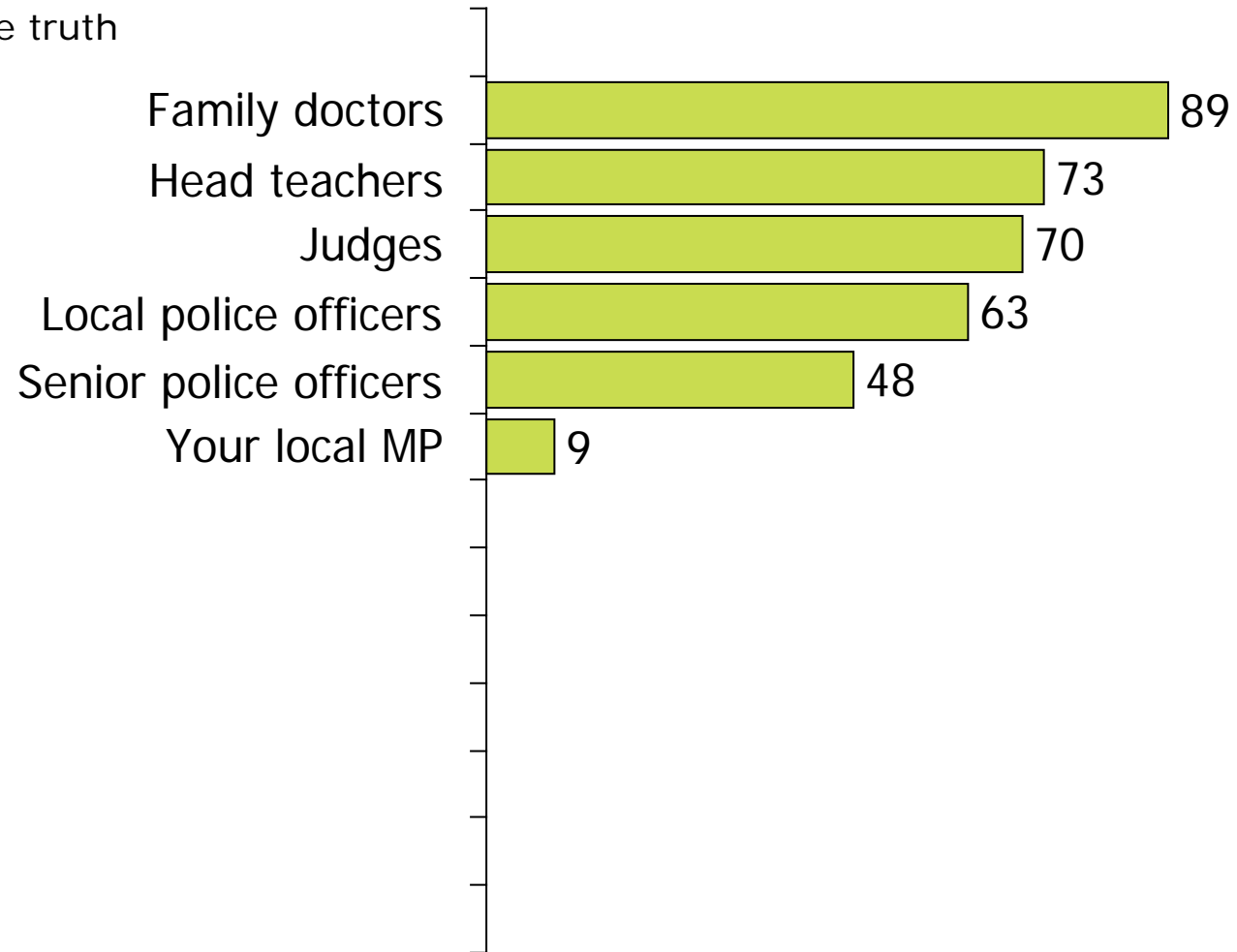
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INTERVIEWER, IF NECESSARY: If there are any you are not sure about, please put them to one side.

**Figures shown represent level of 'net trust' – proportion of respondents who say they trust the professions to tell the truth minus the proportion who say they don't**

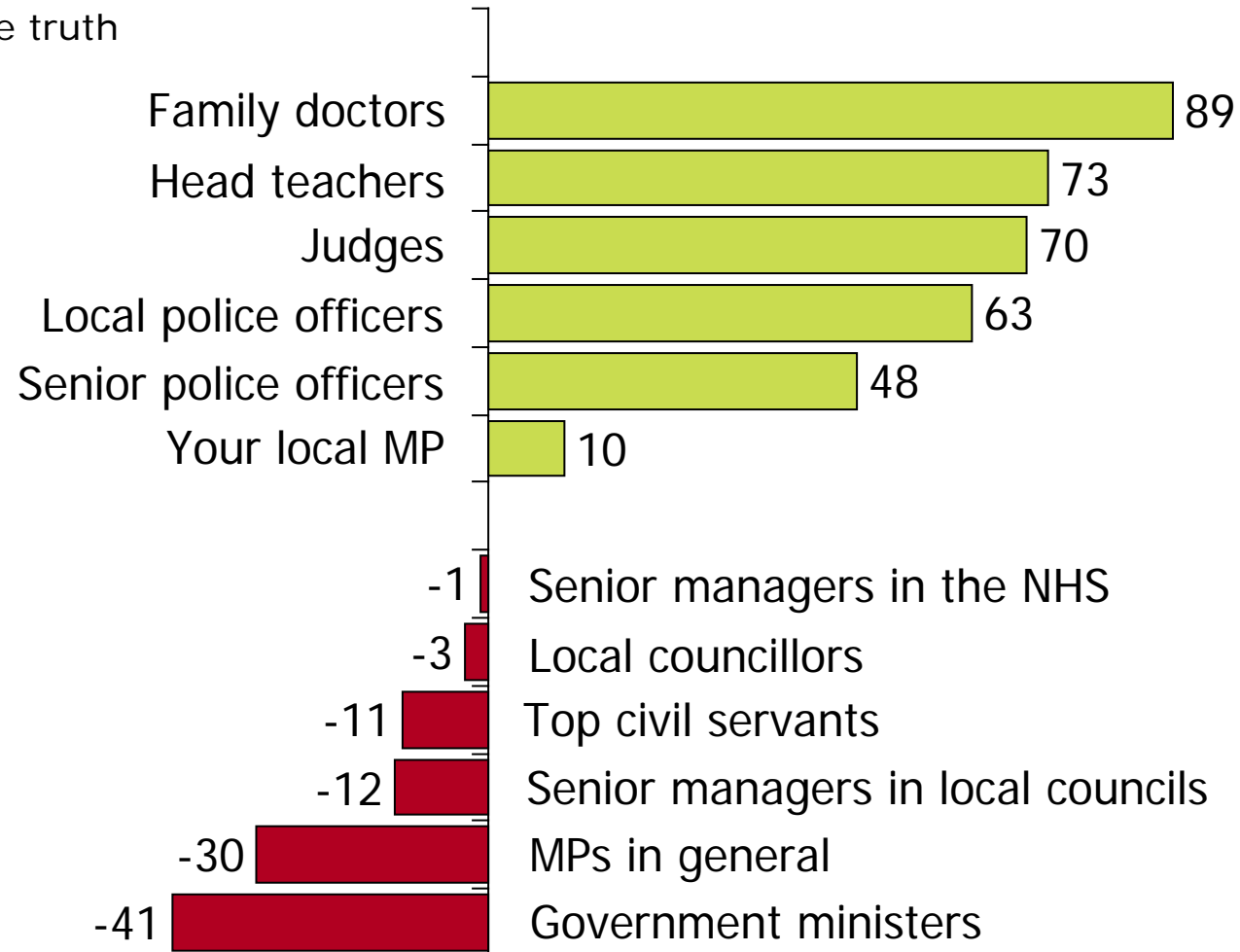
# 'Frontline' public servants widely trusted

% net trust to tell the truth



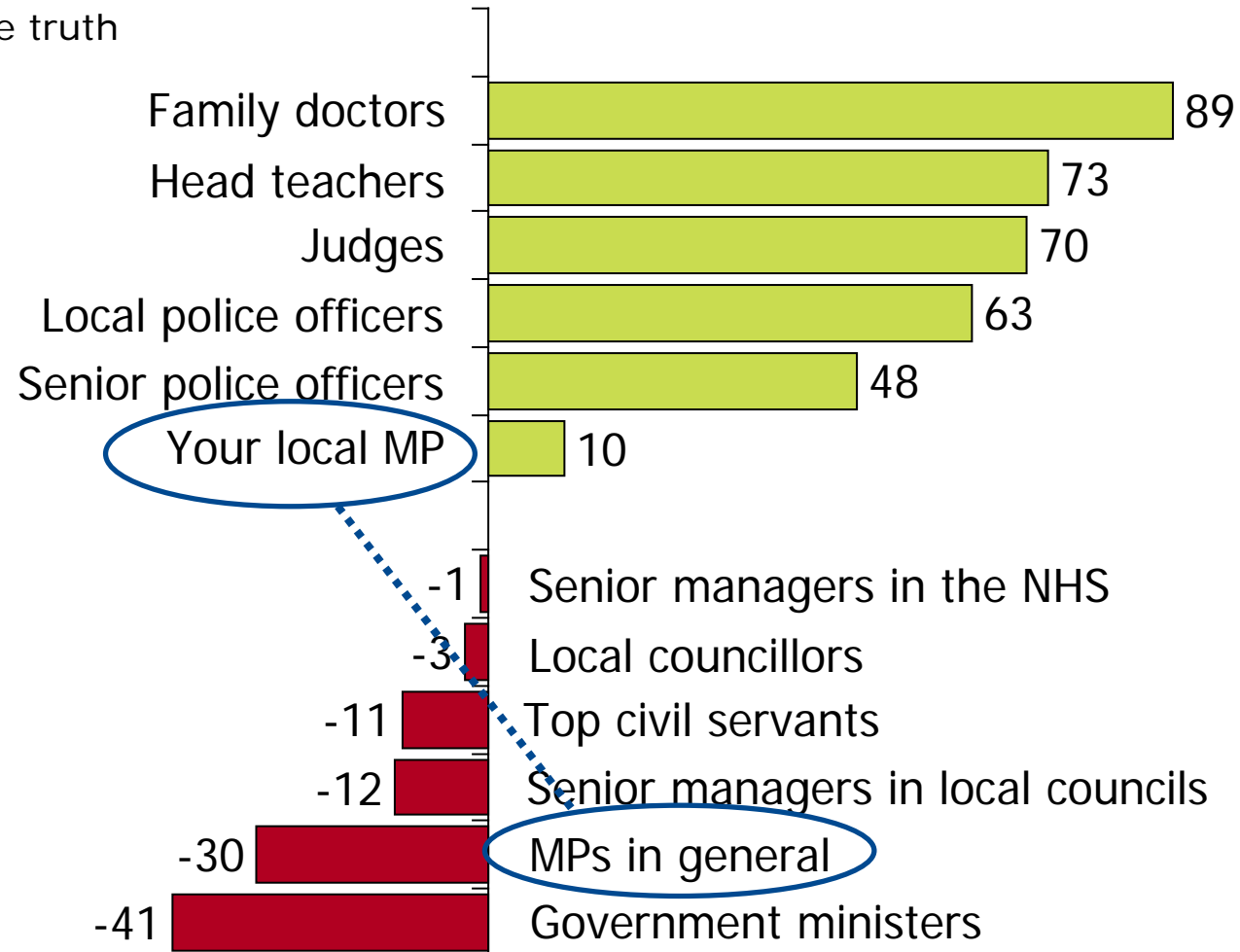
Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Much lower levels of trust in 'bureaucrats' and politicians



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

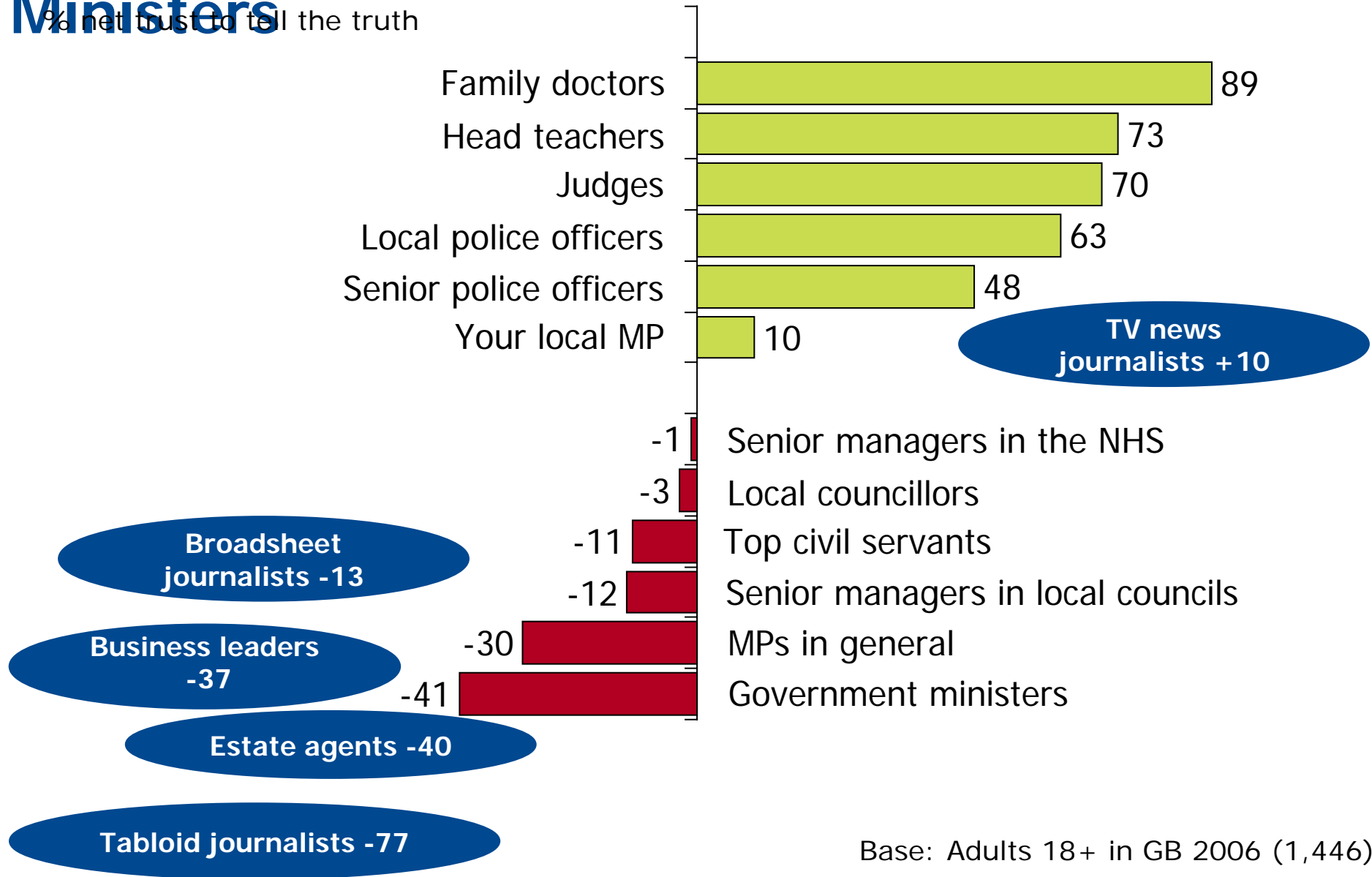
# People trust their local MP more than MPs in general



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

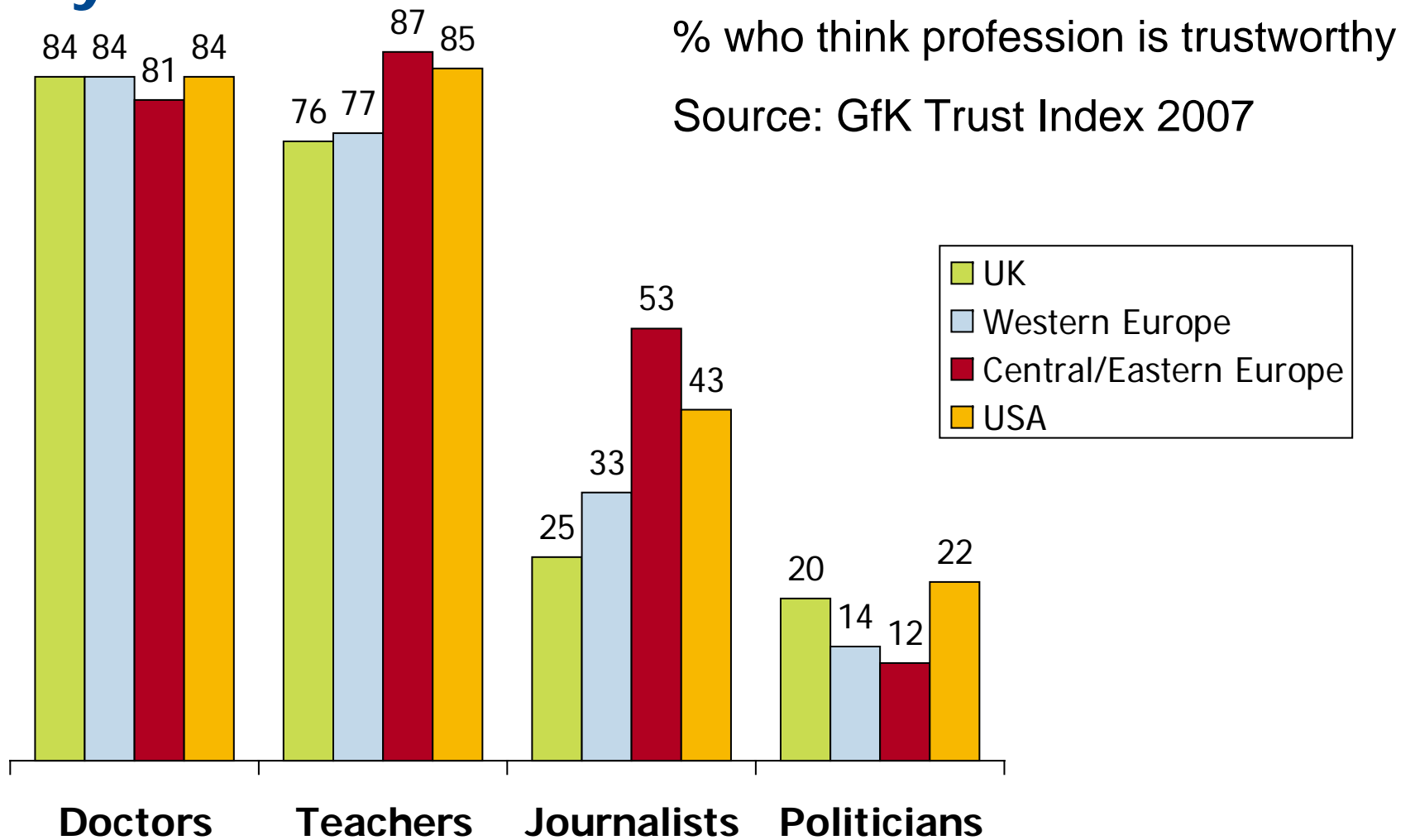
# Only tabloid journalists less trusted than Ministers

% net trust to tell the truth

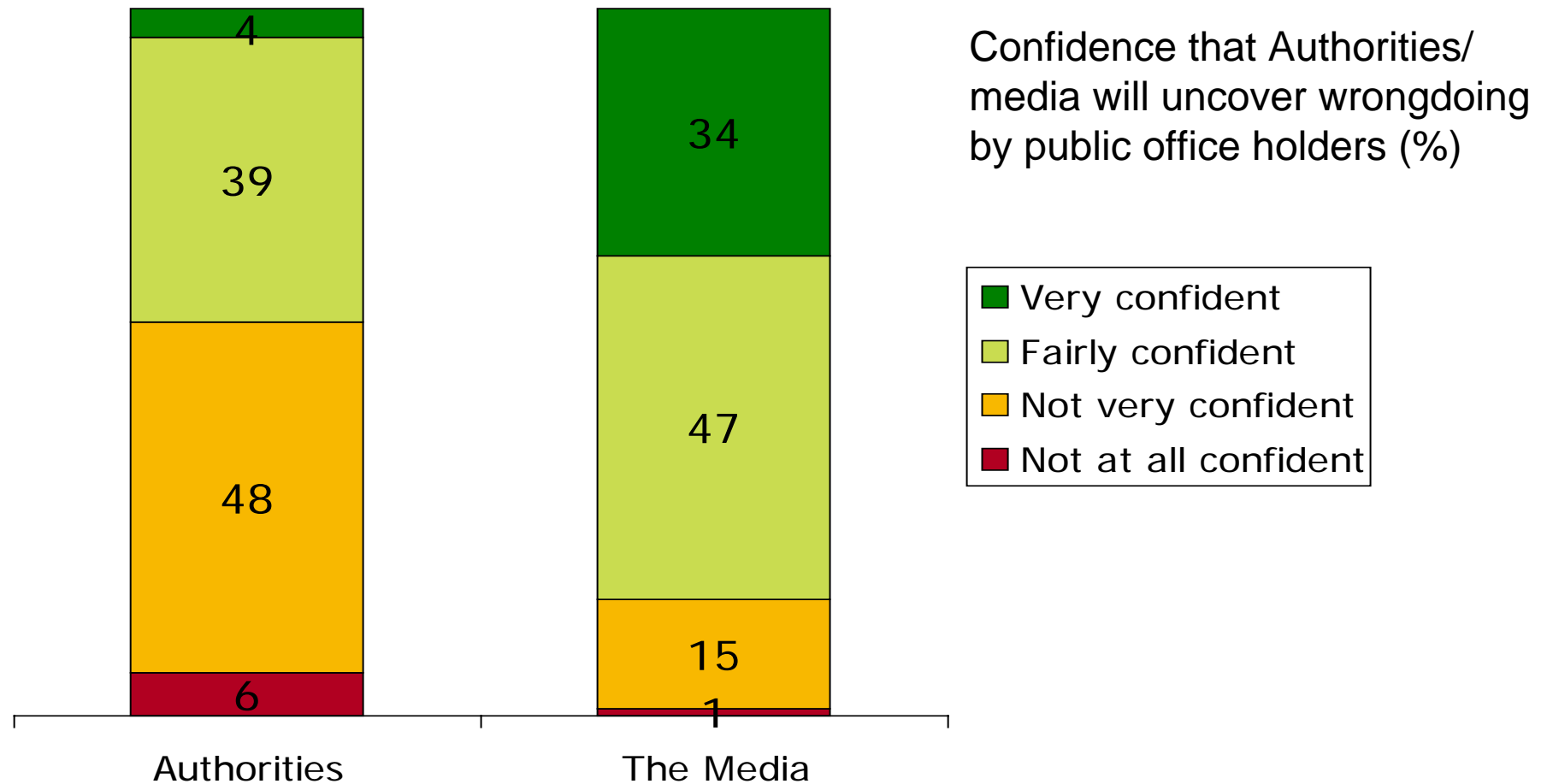


Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

# Mistrust of politicians is not unique to this country



# Media mistrusted, but seen as effective watchdog



Base: Adults 18+ in GB 2006 (1,446)

## People think the media partly responsible for loss

“The media were widely felt to encourage public distrust in elected public office holders.

Though clearly valued as the *'watchdog'* of public affairs ... the sheer quantity of attention shown to the public and private lives of politicians meant that issues were often *'blown out of proportion'*, which only served to induce a further loss of confidence.

Allied to this view was the belief that the media [concentrated] only on bad or improper conduct”

Source: Guiding Principles (NatCen, 2003)

## A view shared in parts of the media ...

“The media, which the public does not believe tell the truth, are notwithstanding the greatest influence in forming the public's views.

The public's low opinion of government ministers, in other words, reflects the media's own.

Is that the fault of the ministers or of the media? In our view, neither partner is blameless, but what is clear is that the whole system of public trust is poisoned by the interaction between the two.”

(Guardian leader, Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2004)

## ... but up to politicians to take the lead?

"... the study confirms [that] the public ... don't think politicians ... tell the truth, ... explain the reasons for their decisions and actions, and ... own up when they make mistakes.

These behaviours ... are more about the way the business of government and politics is conducted than about financial 'sleaze'.

People do not believe they are dealt with in a straightforward, honest and open manner. These are matters that cannot easily be rectified through codes and rules alone.

What is needed is a sea-change among politicians ... in how political business, political debate and ... government is conducted. The media has a responsible role to play here too, but politicians need to show leadership .... to increase confidence in the political system."

Sir Alistair Graham, CSPL press release, 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2006



## Questionnaire coverage - 2008 survey

- Core questions to measure trends
- Views on electoral registration systems in Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- Attitudes towards coverage of political news by different media
- Personal experience of unfairness in recruitment
- Experiment to test the impact of varying response options for question on trust in professions

Social Research Association Seminar

# Researching standards in public life

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## The Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life

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22<sup>nd</sup> April, 2008

