

NatCen

Social Research that works for society

The need for fact checking in Britain

What people think about
fact checking services

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Main findings

- **Relatively high interest in politics / very low trust in politicians:** around three-quarters of people have at least some interest in politics but over four-fifths of people have no or not very much trust in politicians to tell the truth
- **Fact checking of politicians and journalists is seen as important by the public:** overwhelming majority of the British public, across all major demographic groups, think that it is important that an organisation exists that fact checks claims made by politicians and journalists
- **Publishing corrections of incorrect statements by politicians and journalists is seen as important by the public:** overwhelming majority of the British public, across all major demographic groups, think that it is important that politicians and journalists publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements
- **Support for fact checking and publishing corrections varies by level of interest in politics and trust in politicians:** those with higher levels of interest in politics are more likely to think that fact checking and the publishing of corrections are important. Those with no trust in politicians are more likely to think that it is 'very important' that politicians' claims are fact checked and that politicians and journalists publish corrections, compared with those who have higher levels of trust in politicians

Introduction and methodology

Full Fact¹ is an independent fact checking charity that provides free tools, information and advice, so that anyone is able to check claims made by politicians and the media.

Full Fact commissioned a short survey to explore whether the British public believes there is a need for the impartial fact checking of claims made by politicians and journalists.

NatCen Social Research designed the survey questions, analysed the data and produced this report. The survey fieldwork was carried out by YouGov, via online interviews with 2,233 members of their survey panel, between 29 February and 1 March 2016. The responding sample was weighted to the profile of adults in Britain.

This report explores the extent to which people in Britain think there is a need for the claims of politicians and the media to be fact checked and whether this varies across standard demographic characteristics and also whether it varies by how much interest people have in politics and how much they trust politicians.

Importance of fact checking in Britain

The survey data shows that the British public has relatively high levels of interest in politics (73% say they have at least ‘some interest’ in ‘what is going on in politics’). In addition, over half (53%) of people ‘use the media to get political news or information’ at least once a day. However, levels of trust in politicians are very low (85% have ‘not very much trust’ or ‘none at all’ in ‘politicians generally to tell the truth’). These data chime with recent British Social Attitudes survey findings on the levels of interest in politics and trust in politicians.²

Given that interest in politics is relatively high but that trust in politicians is very low, it might be expected that many people would consider the impartial checking of claims made by politicians (and the media) to be of great value. This is exactly what the survey data shows. Respondents were asked a number of questions (listed below) about whether they think that fact checking and the need for politicians and journalists to published corrections are important.

How important or unimportant do you think it is for an organisation to exist that checks if claims made by politicians are factually accurate?

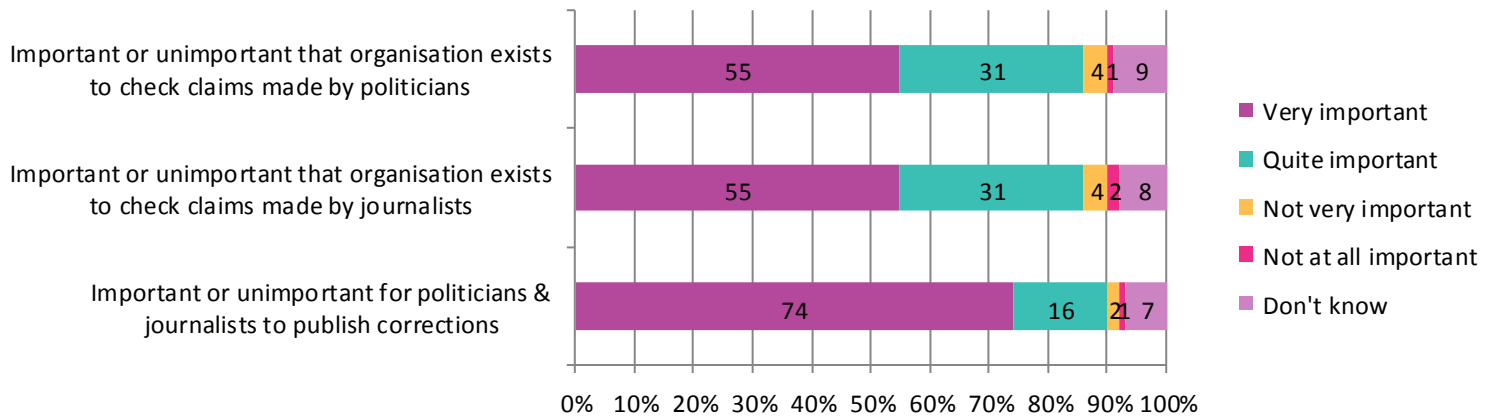
How important or unimportant do you think it is for an organisation to exist that checks if claims made by journalists are factually accurate?

How important or unimportant do you think it is for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements?

¹ <https://fullfact.org/>

² <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-32/politics.aspx>

Chart 1 Views on importance of fact checking claims made by politicians and journalists and the importance of publishing factual corrections



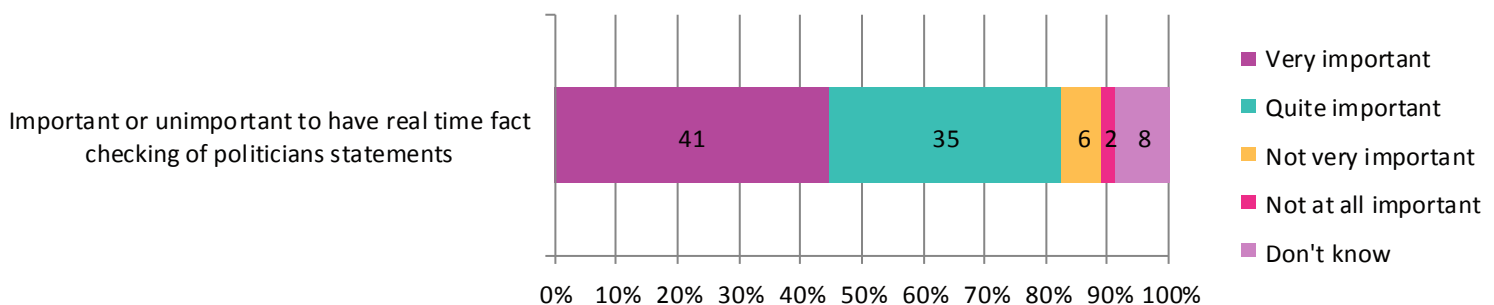
The data on which chart 1 is based are shown in Table A.4 - A.6

As Chart 1 shows overwhelming majorities of the British public think that fact checking and publishing corrections of factual inaccuracies by politicians and journalists are important requirements of public life. This belief is shared across all major demographic groups, with over four-fifths of all age groups, both sexes, those of different social grades and those with different political party identifications saying that it is important that these things happen.

Full Fact have trialled a specific type of fact checking, called 'real time fact checking', whereby claims made by politicians would be responded to in real time, as they are making a speech, either via text on a television screen or on Twitter. Respondents were asked if they think such a service is important and around three-quarters (76%) of people think that it is.

How important or unimportant do you think it to have impartial information on the factual correctness of statements made by politicians in real time? For example, when politicians make a factual claim on TV, real time reporting would mean saying whether or not the factual claim is right via text commentary on the TV screen alongside them or on Twitter

Chart 2 Views on importance of fact checking claims made by politicians in real time



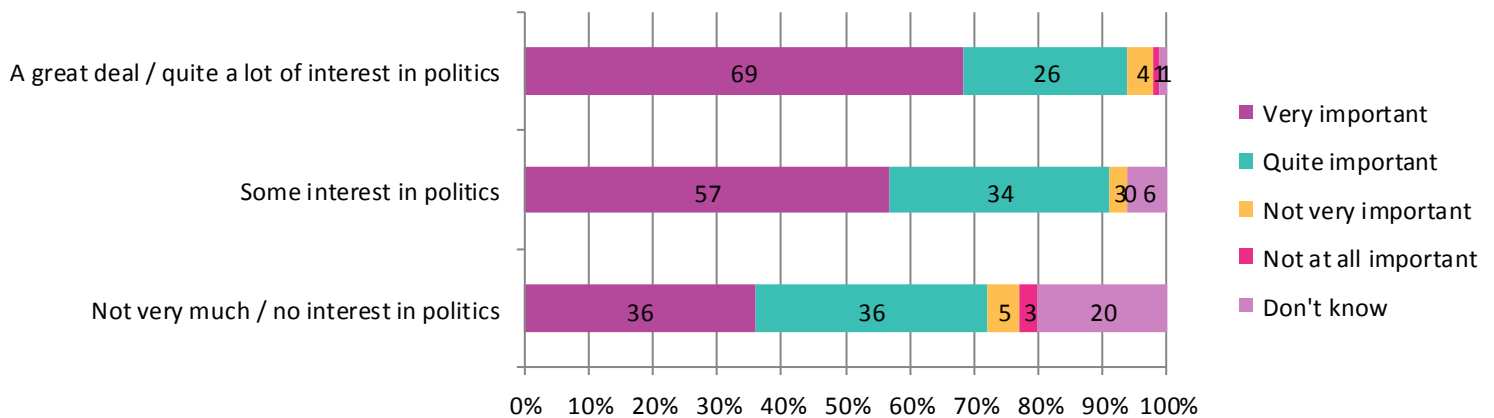
The data on which chart 1 is based are shown in Table A.7

Impact of level of political interest on support for fact checking

There is a widespread belief in Britain that it is important that fact checking organisations exist and that politicians and journalists should publish corrections where they have made statements that are factually incorrect. These views are widespread across standard demographic variables, such as age, sex and class. However, are there differences in these beliefs between people with differing levels of interest in politics and different levels of trust in politicians?

Chart three shows that those who have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of interest in politics are more likely to think that it is important for an organisation to exist that fact checks claims made by politicians than those with ‘not very much’ or ‘none at all’ interest in politics. Indeed, just over two-thirds of people who have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of interest in politics think that it is ‘very important’ that such a fact checking organisation exists compared to just over one third of people who have ‘not very much’ or ‘none at all’ interest in politics.

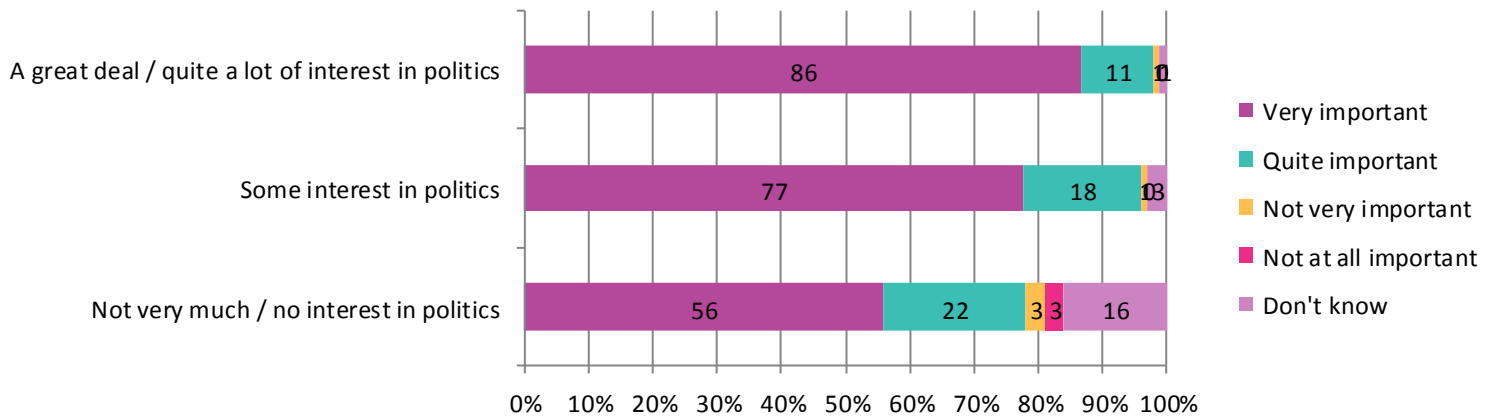
Chart 3 Views on importance of fact checking claims made by politicians by level of political interest



The data on which chart 3 is based are shown in Table A.10

Chart four shows, a similar pattern. Although nearly four-fifths of those with ‘not very much’ or ‘none at all’ interest in politics think that it is important for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements, an even higher proportion (97%) of those with a ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of interest think that it is important. Those with a high level of interest in politics also feel more strongly about it, with 86% thinking that it is ‘very important’ for politicians and journalists to publish corrections, compared with 56% of those with the least interest in politics.

Chart 4 Views on importance of politicians and journalists publishing corrections when they make factually incorrect statements by level of political interest

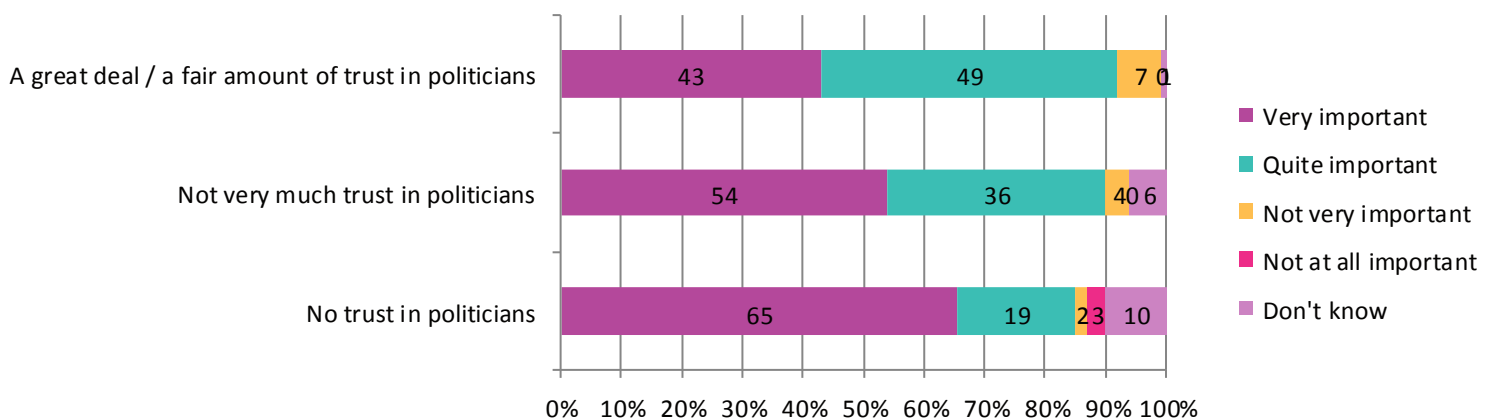


The data on which chart 4 is based are shown in Table A.11

Impact of level of trust in politicians on support for fact checking

The data on the importance of fact checking claims made by politicians is interesting. Chart five shows that although those who have 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount of trust' in politicians are slightly more likely than those with 'none at all' trust in politicians to think fact checking politicians claims is important, those with 'none at all' trust in politicians are more likely to feel strongly about this. Nearly two-thirds of those with no trust in politicians think that it is 'very important' for claims made by politicians to be fact checked, compared with just over two-fifths of those with a 'great deal' or 'fair amount' of trust in politicians think that it is very important.

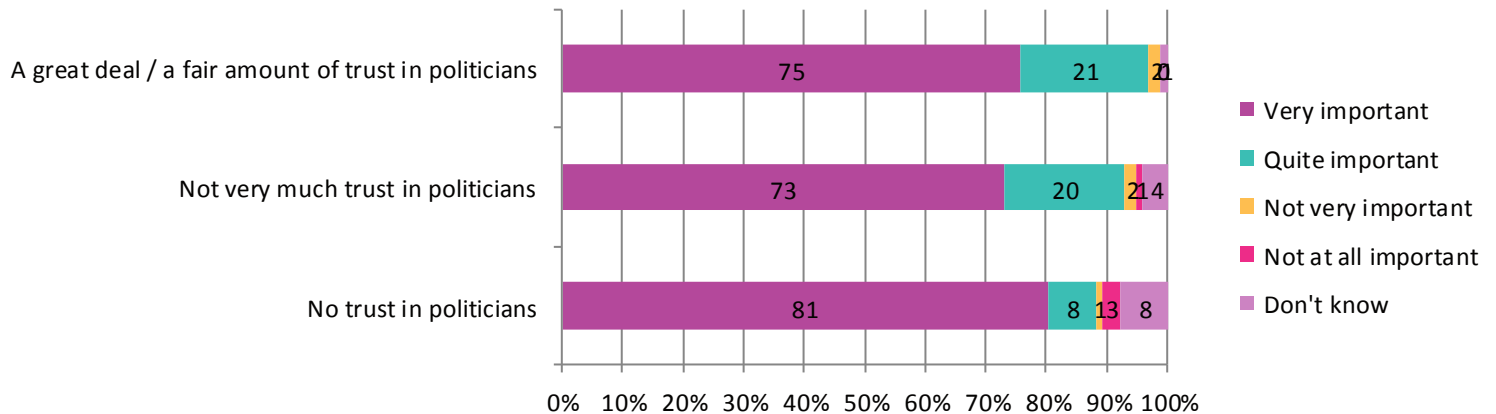
Chart 5 Views on importance of fact checking claims made by politicians by level of trust in politicians



The data on which chart 4 is based are shown in Table A.12

Chart six shows a similar pattern, whereby those with relatively high levels of trust are slightly more likely to think that it is important for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements, than those with no trust in politicians. However, those with no trust in politicians are more likely to feel that publishing corrections is 'very important', compared with those with higher levels of trust in politicians.

Chart 6 Views on importance of politicians and journalists publishing corrections when they make factually incorrect statements by level of trust in politicians



The data on which chart 4 is based are shown in Table A.13

Conclusions

There is clearly a demand for fact checking services in Britain and for an organisation that pushes politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements. Of particular interest is the fact that those people with the least trust in politicians are most likely to think that fact checking and the correction of incorrect statements are 'very important' things. Although these people are very sceptical about politicians, they still appear to be in the market for services that hold politicians to account, indicating that they might not have given up on the political process completely.

Appendix – data tables

Table A.1 How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics?

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
A great deal	11
Quite a lot	27
Some	36
Not very much	17
None at all	8
Don't know	2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.2 How often, if at all, do you use the media, including television, newspapers, radio and the internet, to get political information?

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
Several times a day	27
Once a day	25
5-6 days a week	5
3-4 days a week	8
1-2 days a week	8
Less than 1 day a week	13
Never	9
Don't know	3
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.3 How much interest do you trust politicians generally to tell the truth?

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
A great deal	*
A fair amount	11
Not very much	52
Not at all	33
Don't know	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

* less than 0.5%

Table A.4 How important or unimportant do you think it is for an organisation to exist that checks if claims made by politicians are factually accurate?

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
Very important	55
Quite important	31
Not very important	4
Not at all important	1
Don't know	9
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.5 How important or unimportant do you think it is for an organisation to exist that checks if claims made by journalists are factually accurate?

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
Very important	55
Quite important	31
Not very important	4
Not at all important	2
Don't know	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.6 How important or unimportant do you think it is for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements?

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
Very important	74
Quite important	16
Not very important	2
Not at all important	1
Don't know	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.7 How important or unimportant do you think it to have impartial information on the factual correctness of statements made by politicians in real time? For example, when politicians make a factual claim on TV, real time reporting would mean saying whether or not the factual claim is right via text commentary on the TV screen alongside them or on Twitter

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
Very important	41
Quite important	35
Not very important	6
Not at all important	2
Don't know	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.8 If there is evidence to prove that a politician made a factually incorrect statement and fails to correct it, which, if any, of the following possible penalties do you consider to be appropriate? (code all that apply)

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
Spoken apology in the House of Commons	42
Suspension from Parliament	31
Salary withheld for a set period	29
Require the politician to receive training on the use of facts and figures	24
Written apology to Parliament	23
A penalty other than those listed here	6
No penalty should be applied	2
Don't know	12
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.9 Before today, which of the following organisations, if any, had you heard of?

<i>Base: all respondents</i>	
	%
Citizens Advice Bureau	91
Which?	85
Money Saving Expert	75
The Office for National Statistics (ONS)	65
The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS)	53
Full Fact	2
None of these	1
Don't know	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2233

Table A.20 How important that an organisation exists that checks if claims made by politicians are factually accurate by interest in politics

<i>Base: all respondents</i>				
How important for organisation existing that checks if claims made by politicians are factually accurate				
	% How much interest generally have in politics			
	A great deal / quite a lot	Some	Not very much / none at all	Don't know
Very important	69	57	36	5

Quite important	26	34	36	3
Not very important	4	3	5	1
Not at all important	1	*	3	0
Don't know	1	6	20	91
<i>Weighted base</i>	840	800	542	51
<i>Unweighted base</i>	930	843	420	40

Table A.11 How important for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements by interest in politics

<i>Base: all respondents</i>				
How important for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements				
	% How much interest generally have in politics			
	A great deal / quite a lot	Some	Not very much / none at all	Don't know
Very important	86	77	56	6
Quite important	11	18	22	0
Not very important	1	1	3	5
Not at all important	*	*	3	6
Don't know	1	3	16	83
<i>Weighted base</i>	840	800	542	51
<i>Unweighted base</i>	930	843	420	40

Table A.12 How important that an organisation exists that checks if claims made by politicians are factually accurate by trust in politicians

<i>Base: all respondents</i>				
How important for organisation existing that checks if claims made by politicians are				

factually accurate				
	% How much do you trust politicians generally to tell the truth			
	A great deal / a fair amount	Not very much	Not at all	Don't know
Very important	43	54	65	17
Quite important	49	36	19	10
Not very important	7	4	2	2
Not at all important	*	*	3	0
Don't know	1	6	10	71
<i>Weighted base</i>	254	1164	733	81
<i>Unweighted base</i>	264	1216	688	65

Table A.13 How important for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements by trust in politicians

<i>Base: all respondents</i>				
How important for politicians and journalists to publish corrections when they make factually incorrect statements				
	% How much do you trust politicians generally to tell the truth			
	A great deal / a fair amount	Not very much	Not at all	Don't know
Very important	75	73	81	20
Quite important	21	20	8	9
Not very important	2	2	1	*
Not at all important	0	1	3	2
Don't know	1	4	8	69
<i>Weighted base</i>	254	1164	733	81
<i>Unweighted base</i>	264	1216	688	65

