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Promises Made, Promises Kept

Political parties and governments are better than their reputation.

This also holds true for the previous German grand coalition composed of the CDU/CSU and SPD: Of the 188 total promises in the 2013 coalition agreement, almost 80 percent were either fully or partially fulfilled. However, less than 13 percent of all eligible voters see things this way. The majority underestimates what the parties and the government achieved.

In its 2013 coalition agreement, the German coalition government composed of the CDU/CSU and SPD agreed on 188 concrete measures and goals. Almost 80 percent of these were completely or partially fulfilled, and roughly two-thirds of all promises were completely enacted. Thus, measured in terms of keeping their promises, the grand coalition was relatively successful. The government program agreed to in the coalition agreement was already largely enacted during the first half of the legislative period. However, when asked, only 13 percent of all eligible voters believe that “all, almost all” or at least “a large part” of the promises contained in the coalition agreement were actually kept. Indeed, the majority underestimates what the government parties achieved. The general feeling is that political parties promise the moon in

the run-up to elections, and then have no interest in actually keeping their promises. Citizens also believe that the ruling parties supposedly do not enact the projects agreed upon in coalition agreements. Thus, there is a gap between the actual and perceived keeping of campaign and government promises. However, people do rate the enactment of concrete individual projects more positively than the government’s overall performance. When asked about concrete measures and achievements, the majority of voters almost always have the correct judgment. Nevertheless, the predominantly positive assessment on the details does not cancel out the negative overall view. Comparing actual and perceived fulfillment of promises shows very clearly that parties and governments in Germany are better than people think.

2013 Coalition Agreement Contained 188 Promises

A total of 188 government promises can be identified in the 2013 coalition agreement between the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD). The criterion for being “a promise” is their ability to be empirically verified. It must be possible to measure whether or not the promise has been fulfilled. Thus, a promise is only present if one can also pinpoint a verifiable fulfillment criterion.

In terms of content, the promises agreed to are spread out very widely among the areas of responsibility of the 14 federal ministries: A bit more than half of all promises fell to only four ministries, while half of all the ministries were only involved in roughly one-fifth of all promises. Almost one-fifth of all promises – and thereby the most in absolute and relative terms – fell to the Health Ministry alone (32 agreements), followed by 24 projects to the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry, 21 projects to the Interior Ministry and 20 to the Finance Ministry. The fewest agreements were related to fields of culture and media (4), food and agriculture (2), and foreign policy (1).

In terms of typology, one can distinguish agreements on measures and goals as well as promised changes and agreements on preserving the status quo. Almost all (95 percent) of the promises identified in the 2013 coalition agreement pertain to the enactment of measures that describe the means that will be used to achieve a certain objective. Only a small share (5 percent) of the projects merely promise to achieve certain goals without describing the means that will be used to do so. At the same time, almost all (84 percent) of the agreements were promises of

change, and only 16 percent of them were pledges to preserve the status quo.

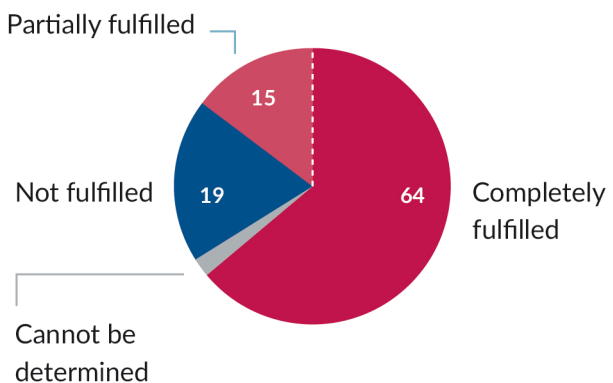
Almost 80 Percent of All Promises Fulfilled

A promise could have been completely, partially or not fulfilled. A complete fulfillment is only achieved if the promised measure or the stated goal was also realized to the extent agreed upon. If visible efforts to enact the measure or goal were undertaken, but it was not completely achieved, the promise is regarded as having only been partially kept. Lastly, promises are regarded as not fulfilled if the relevant legal situation did not change or if the relevant indicators did not develop in the agreed upon direction completely or partially.

For the 2013 coalition agreement, the research on fulfillment reveals an exceptionally positive overall picture: Almost 80 percent of all promises were

COALITION PROMISES 2013

In percent



Source: 2013 Coalition Agreement, authors' research.
(Values as a percent of the 188 coalition promises of 2013)

completely or partially kept. In absolute figures: Of the 188 promises, 148 were completely or partially fulfilled, of which 120 were completely fulfilled. In other words, more than eight in 10 of the enacted promises were fully enacted.

Thus, the overall assessment of the research on fulfillment can be summarized as follows: In the previous legislative period, the grand coalition kept the promises it had made to voters in the coalition agreement to a very large extent and, for the most part, even completely. It enacted almost two-thirds (64 percent) of its projects completely and a further 15 percent at least partially.

Sources

Survey data cited in the text comes from polls conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung by the Allensbach Institute between February 2 and 15, 2018. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a total of 1,271 individuals age 16 and older. The results are thereby representative for the entire population of Germany.

The coding of the 2013 coalition agreement and the research on fulfillment was carried out by the “Democracy and Democratization” research unit of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center by a team including Luise Martha Anter, Fabio Ellger, Carolin Herrmann, Johannes Oswald and Klaudia Wegschaider which was led by Theres Matthieß. For additional details and explanations, cf. the “Factsheet” of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, February 2018.

Only One in Eight People Correctly Assesses Fulfillment

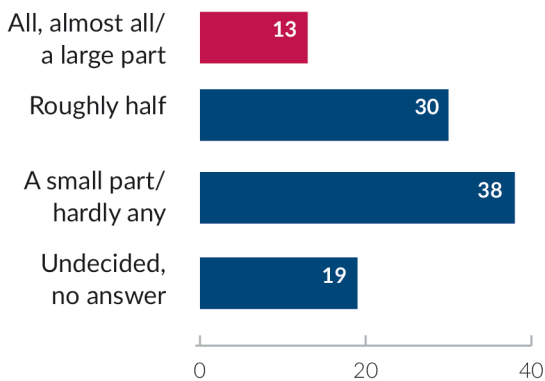
In contrast, if one asks voters whether and in which proportions the promises of the parties before the election and of the governments in their coalition agreements were later also actually kept, another picture emerges: Only one in eight eligible voters correctly assesses the fulfillment of the promises made. This holds true both for the campaign promises of the parties in their election platforms and for the concrete agreements on government policies in the coalition agreement.

When asked how many of the plans from its coalition agreement the prior grand coalition implemented, only 13 percent of all eligible voters respond that either “all, almost all” or at least “a large part” of the promises were also kept. Still, almost one-third (30 percent)

PERCEIVED ENACTMENT

“How many of its projects from the coalition agreement did the grand coalition enact?”

In percent



Basis: Population of Germany age 16 and older (n = 1,271 surveyed individuals)

Source: Allensbach Institute Survey conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Feb. 2018)

assumes that at least “roughly half” of the agreements were fulfilled. However, the relative majority of people (38 percent) assume that only “a small part” or “hardly any” of the measures and goals agreed upon in the coalition agreement were actually also enacted or achieved as a result of government action. A slightly more negative picture emerges with the campaign

promises of the parties. When asked how many of the promises that the governing parties made before the election were enacted, only one in 10 eligible voters (11 percent) assumes that “all, almost all” or “a large part” of them were enacted. Still, one-third (33 percent) assumes that “roughly half” of the announced projects were carried out, while almost half (47 percent) of all eligible voters believe that the parties fulfilled “only a small part” or “hardly any” of their campaign promises through government action.

„Only one in eight eligible voters correctly assesses the fulfillment of the promises made.”

Majority Underestimates Parties and Government

Eligible voters’ overwhelmingly negative overall assessment of the faithfulness to fulfilling promises of the parties and the government extends through all age groups and social strata. Granted, the assessment of people living in the former East Germany do turn out to be slightly more negative than those in the former West Germany, and the share of positive assessments slightly increases with age, level of interest in politics, and level of formal education. However, significant differences can only be seen between the group of regular voters and determined non-voters. While a slightly above-average 16 percent of all voters assume that the coalition agreements have been completely or at least predominantly enacted, only 4 percent of all non-voters view things in this way. One in two non-voters assumes that only a small part or none of these kinds of agreements has been enacted. Non-voters’ negative image of the parties and government can be seen even more clearly when looking at the campaign promises of the parties before the election: More than two-thirds (68 percent) of non-voters assume that the governing parties have only translated their pre-election promises into actual government action “to a minor extent” or “not at all.”

The overall picture shows that the majority of eligible voters in Germany distrust the parties and the government, and assume that they either don’t keep or only keep a small part of the promises they had made before the election and in coalition agreements. At the same time, the study on fulfillment has shown that the actual

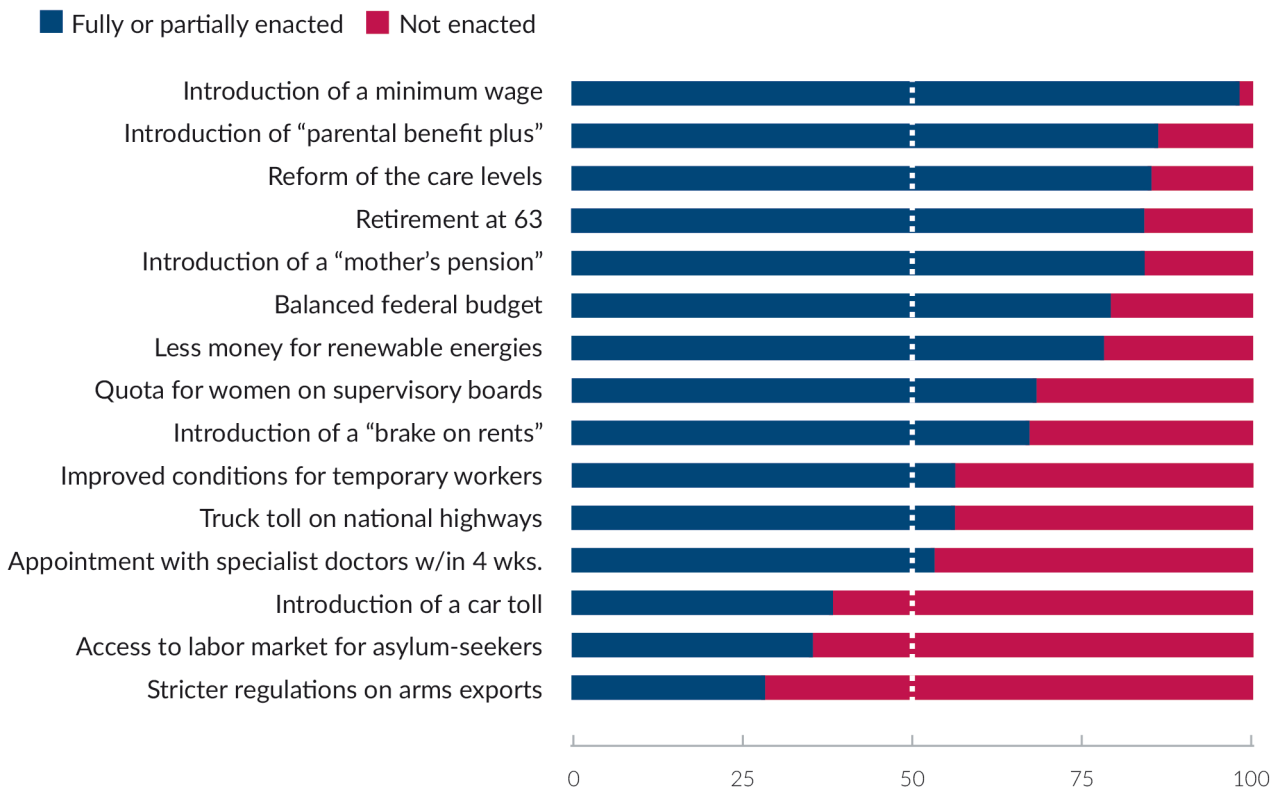
fulfillment rate of the CDU/CSU and the SPD in the prior grand coalition was significantly higher than people think. The objective faithfulness to fulfilling promises of the government's actions exceeds what the demos subjectively perceives. There is a gap between the reputation of the parties and government and what they actually accomplish.

Higher Scores on Individual Pledges

However, a noticeably more positive picture emerges when it comes to people's assessments of the enactment of specific pledges. When surveyed on a total of 15 concrete measures and goals of the coalition agreement that were either completely or partially enacted, eligible voters were correct at least a majority of the time in 80 percent (12 out of 15) of the cases. The highest values were with "introduction of a minimum wage": Almost seven in 10 eligible voters (67 percent) believe that this promise was fully fulfilled, and an additional 27 percent partially.

Almost six in 10 eligible voters (56 percent) view the "retirement at 63" promise as fully enacted, and an additional 19 percent partially. A majority of people also believe that the following promises were fully or at least partially fulfilled: "reform of care levels," "introduction of a 'mother's pension,'" the "brake on rents," the "balanced federal budget," the "parental benefit plus," the "quota for women on supervisory boards," and the "reduced promotion of renewable energies." If one disregards the surveyed individuals who did not express an opinion, even an absolute majority of people is of the opinion that 12 of the total of 15 measures agreed upon in the coalition agreement were either fully or partially enacted by the government. It was only with three measures – the "introduction of a car toll," the "stricter compliance with rules on armament exports," and the "quicker access to the labor market for asylum-seekers" – that the majority of people had a more negative assessment than our research on fulfillment suggests. Thus, on the whole, a noticeably more positive image can be

PERCEIVED ENACTMENT OF INDIVIDUAL COALITION AGREEMENTS



Basis: Population of Germany age 16 and older (n = 1,271 surveyed individuals); "don't know" answers excluded.
 Source: Allensbach Institute Survey conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Feb. 2018)

seen when it comes to assessments of the fulfillment of individual promises than in the general assessment, which is much more negative across the board.

Negative Overall Assessment Dominates

Given these circumstances, the question arises: Why don't the noticeably more positive levels of knowledge about and assessments of individual promises lead to an overall assessment of the faithfulness to fulfilling promises of the parties and government that is closer to reality and more positive in tenor? In other words, despite better knowledge about and realistic assessments of individual promises, why does the negative overall assessment clearly dominate eligible voters' general view of parties' and governmental actions? It is challenging to draw any clear conclusions about the causes of this finding. But the results hint at the presence of a negative evaluation heuristic, meaning that many people have a general tendency to evaluate things negatively. Their general negative judgment of parties and governmental action also determines their overall assessment of the faithfulness to fulfilling political promises of the parties and the government, even though they actually know them in better detail and have a more positive assessment of them. The negative overall picture dominates their perception of concrete governmental action. Phrased the other way around: Individual measures of governmental action have not been able to sufficiently change or influence the negatively tainted general assessment. This is consistent with the results of other studies: The more concretely a promise is evaluated, the more objective and well-informed the assessments turn out to be. At the same time, when it comes to across-the-board assessments, the dominating factors are basic personal mindset, tendency to evaluate negatively, and heuristics of judgment formation.

Good Performance Compared to Other Countries

Comparative international studies also show that, on average, governing parties fulfill roughly 60 percent of their campaign and coalition promises. For representative democracies, this does not appear to be a bad record of success. Their normative requirement to fulfill the promises they have made to the electorate through governmental action is in large part kept. In Germany, at almost 80 percent, the fulfillment rate of the projects stipulated in the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition agreement was even 12 percent higher than the average of coalition governments formed in

Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy. The closest comparison with the German government in terms of performance can be found in the Belgian coalition governments formed in the 1992-1995 and 1999-2003 periods, which were also able to fulfill over three-quarters of the promised policies that the coalition parties jointly stipulated. A glance at studies analyzing the enactment of campaign promises of individual parties – but not the fulfillment of coalition promises – shows that Germany (between 2002 and 2013) was average compared to other countries in terms of its rate of fulfilling campaign promises, at a bit over 60 percent.

„Despite positive individual appraisals, the overall assessment remains negative.“

Indeed, as a general rule, the fewer the parties and the longer the period of governing, the higher the rates of fulfilling campaign promises, as well. Political parties that have the highest rates of pledge fulfillment are those that govern alone rather than with coalition partners, as is the case in the UK. Parties of the political center also achieve higher fulfillment rates in government than polarized governing majorities. The same holds true for the parties of the respective head of government vis-à-vis the junior partners in a governing coalition. Furthermore, the issue of majority is less important than the number of coalition parties and the degree of polarization. In fact, even without a majority, single-party governments achieve better results than coalition governments with stable majorities. While no minority government has been formed at the federal level in Germany to date, there is some experience at the Länder level, such as the SPD-Greens minority government formed in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2010. A comparative analysis has shown that this minority government in no way performed worse than comparable majority governments. During the two years in which it governed (2010-2012), it realized almost exactly the same number of campaign promises as the CDU-FDP government that preceded it, which enjoyed a secure parliamentary majority during its first two years in power. Measured in terms of the absolute number of enacted promises, it was even a bit more successful. Just as with Germany and the grand coalition, the gaps between objective and perceived fulfillment of campaign and government promises described above

are also seen in other Western democracies. In other countries, as well, the demos regularly and significantly underestimates the overall faithfulness to fulfilling promises as well as the fulfillment rates of campaign and government promises. At the same time, when it comes to individual measures, it tends to be noticeably correct and therefore also more positive than with the overall appraisal. Thus, the negative assessment heuristic of the demos seems to be a common problem of Western democracies rather than an exclusive problem of German governments.

Two-thirds of Promises Fulfilled in First Two Years

Could this maybe result from the pace and timing of fulfillment? When governments drag their feet and only start to enact their campaign promises shortly before the next election, voters have already passed their negative judgment and no longer perceive delayed enactments at all. This would suggest that it is best to already enact most campaign promises immediately after the election or at least to start doing so sufficiently in advance to fulfill the high post-election expectations in a timely manner.

However, this is precisely the strategy that the last federal government already pursued very rigorously: Two-thirds (66 percent) of all the kept promises were already enacted in the first half of the legislative period, i.e., between 2013 and 2015. It then enacted another 15 percent in 2016, and another 19 percent in 2017, the year of the next Bundestag election. At any rate, given this pattern and chronological progression of enactment, there is no reason for the sustained disappointed expectations of the electorate immediately after the 2013 Bundestag election. Right after the election, the ruling parties got started with enacting the government program they had agreed upon; and, by the middle of the legislative period, they had already fulfilled more of them than voters ascribe to the grand coalition for the entire four-year term of the last government.

Varying Performances of the Ministries

Another possible reason for the credibility gap regarding governmental action could be the “visibility” and “tangibility” of individual ministries and policy areas. If important ministries responsible for many promises do not enact them at an above-average rate, this could influence and negatively

distort the overall perception of governmental action. However, the research on fulfillment shows that the ministries that are particularly visible and responsible for fulfilling the most promises in the coalition agreement have even implemented at a slightly above-average rate, with a fulfillment rate of 80 percent. Of their combined total of 97 promises in the coalition agreement, the Labor and Social Affairs, Interior, Finance and Health ministries implemented 77 promises, of which 61 were fully implemented (63 percent) and 16 partially implemented (17 percent). Thus, the ministries that are large as well as particularly visible to voters performed just as well as the government overall. But, inversely, it is precisely the ministries with the most promises in absolute and proportional terms that are able to show not only the highest absolute number of promises kept, but also the absolute majority of the promises not kept. This can be seen most clearly with the Interior Ministry: With eight unfulfilled promises, the Interior Ministry had the most non-fulfilled promises of the four large ministries in absolute terms as well as the highest relative share. At the same time, however, this primarily concerned rather unspectacular promises in the areas of federal

„The grand coalition also performed well compared to other countries.“

administration, IT security and counterespionage. What are perhaps the most tangible and conspicuous broken promises come from the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry, and they concern the “introduction of a solidarity pension for lifetime achievement,” which primarily aims to achieve a systematic improvement of the situation of low earners in the statutory pension insurance scheme. However, the government had already abandoned this project during the middle of the legislative period because, upon further examination, the conceptual design originally agreed upon proved unsuitable for achieving the goals it targeted.

Little Understanding for “Excuses”

However, the demos displays little understanding for these kinds of explanations from political actors. Once a promise has been made, most people expect that it will also be enacted, even if the circumstances

change or if political decision-makers have also changed their intentions or projects due to altered assessments. However, a relatively large number of eligible voters will accept the argument that politicians' failure to fulfill promises they've made can be explained by necessary coalition compromises. Still, four in 10 eligible voters (41 percent) believe that keeping their promises is important to the parties, but that they are often prevented from doing so due to compromises made with their coalition partners. However, almost half (47 percent) of all eligible voters assume that parties "promise the moon" before elections and "have no interest in actually enacting their promises." People have an even more dismissive attitude when changed assessments or new informati-

on are given as a justification for not keeping the campaign promises one has made. Only a bit more than a quarter (28 percent) will accept better knowledge as an "excuse," while more than six in 10 eligible voters (62 percent) don't believe in such a case that the politicians intended to keep their promises at all. Likewise, the justification for not keeping one's promises with the slightest chance of being accepted by citizens is a "changed societal or political situation." Only less than one-quarter (24 percent) of all eligible voters will accept this justification, while two-thirds (66 percent) suspect that it is actually just a "lazy excuse" from politicians who don't have any interest in keeping their promises anyway.

FULLFILLMENT RATES OF THE GRAND COALITION 2013-2017

POLICY AREAS	Number of promises (abs. and in %)		Completely fulfilled (abs. and in %)		Partially fulfilled (abs. and in %)		Completely and partially fulfilled (abs. and in %)		Not fulfilled (abs. and in %)	
	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %
Health	32	17%	25	78%	5	16%	30	94%	2	6%
Labor and Social Affairs	24	13%	15	62%	4	17%	19	79%	5	21%
Interior	21	11%	11	52%	2	10%	13	62%	8	38%
Finance	20	11%	10	50%	5	25%	15	75%	4	20%
Transport and Digital Infrastructure	18	10%	8	44%	3	17%	11	61%	5	28%
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women & Youth	15	8%	12	80%	1	7%	13	87%	2	13%
Economic Affairs and Energy	13	7%	6	46%	4	31%	10	77%	3	23%
Environment, Nature Conservation, Building & Nuclear Safety	12	6%	9	75%	0	0%	9	75%	2	17%
Justice and Consumer Protection	9	5%	5	56%	2	22%	7	78%	2	22%
Education and Research	6	3%	5	83%	1	17%	6	100%	0	0%
Defense	6	3%	4	67%	0	0%	4	67%	2	33%
Culture and Media	4	2%	4	100%	0	0%	4	100%	0	0%
Food and Agriculture	2	1%	1	50%	0	0%	1	50%	1	50%
Foreign Office	1	1%	0	0%	1	100%	1	100%	0	0%
Other	5	3%	5	100%	0	0%	5	100%	0	0%
Total*	188	100%	120	64%	28	15%	148	79%	36	19%

* Vier Versprechen sind im Prozess der Erfüllung (2) bzw. es konnte nicht festgestellt werden, ob sie erfüllt sind (2).

Parties and Governments Better Than Their Reputation

In summary, it is evident that the political parties and governments of most Western democracies are better than their reputation. On average, they keep significantly more of their campaign and government promises than the voters ascribe to them. The analysis of the 2013 coalition agreement has shown that, with a fulfillment rate of 80 percent, the last CDU/CSU-SPD government did very well compared to other countries. Furthermore, comparative analyses on the enactment of campaign promises suggest that the individual parties have performed well. The odds of fulfilling campaign promises go up when the number of parties in government decreases and the less polarized these parties are, among other factors. In contrast, the issue of whether there is a secure parliamentary majority is less important for the fulfillment rates of campaign and coalition promises. In fact, governments controlled by a single centrist party without a parliamentary majority can even operate more

successfully than coalition governments with a secured majority in parliament. Thus, the security of one's own majority is no guarantee of the highest possible fulfillment of campaign and government promises. One major challenge for representative democracies is the distressing gap between actual and perceived fulfillment of political promises by parties and governments vis-à-vis the electorate. The legitimacy of representative-democratic governments depends in large part on the promises from acting parties and governments, that is, on keeping what has been agreed upon in (campaign) programs and government agreements, and on translating this into concrete governmental action. The results of the present study demonstrate very clearly that the poor overall reputation that parties and governments enjoy among voters in this regard appears to be unwarranted. In any case, their actual governmental actions aimed at keeping their promises is noticeably better than their poor overall reputation with the electorate would suggest.

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Further reading:

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