

## Retrospective pledge voting: A comparative study of the electoral consequences of government parties' pledge fulfilment

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**Abstract.** Does pledge fulfilment bear any electoral consequences for government parties? While previous research on retrospective voting has largely focused on electoral accountability with respect to the economy, the theoretical framework presented in this study links government parties' performance to their previous electoral pledges. It is argued that government parties are more likely to be rewarded by voters when they have fulfilled more pledges during the legislative term. Good pledge performance of a party is associated with the ability to maximise policy benefits (accomplishment) and to be a responsible actor that will stick to its promises in the future as well (competence). Analysing data from 69 elections in 14 countries shows that a government party's electoral outcome is affected by its previous pledge performance. A government party that fulfils a higher share of election pledges is more likely to prevent electoral losses. This finding indicates that voters react at the polls to party pledge fulfilment, which highlights the crucial role of promissory representation in democratic regimes. Surprisingly and in contrast with economic voting, there is no evidence that retrospective pledge voting is moderated by clarity of responsibility.

**Keywords:** retrospective voting; pledge fulfilment; representation

### Expanding retrospective voting to pledges

Does pledge performance bear any electoral consequences for government parties? There can be significant variability in government party pledge performance. The British Conservatives, in government between 1987 and 1992, kept more than 90 per cent of their pledges. In contrast, only 24 per cent of the policy commitments of the right-wing FPÖ, which became the second strongest party in the Austrian elections in 1999 and entered government for the first time in a coalition with the conservative ÖVP, were enacted by the end of the legislative period in 2002. This study investigates whether citizens consider this difference in performance for their voting choices. Do government parties have to fear electoral losses if they give a poor performance?

This article builds upon four major strands of literature: research on election pledge fulfilment, on citizens' perceptions of pledge fulfilment, on retrospective voting, and on prospective voting. Only in recent years have scholars started to give serious thought towards using government performance as a record of fulfilment of promises made by parties in their electoral programs, and to study differences across countries and under different institutional arrangements (Naurin et al. 2019). Of course, political scientists have been interested before in promissory dimensions of democratic accountability (Mansbridge 2003), and have empirically studied the linkage between electoral programmes and policies. Research on saliency has analysed the congruence between a party's relative emphasis

on topics in its electoral program and the subsequent budgetary expenditures in this area (Klingemann et al. 1994). The pledges approach offers a more detailed analysis of the linkage between electoral programs and outputs. Election pledges are “commitments in parties’ programs to carry out certain policies or achieve certain goals” (Thomson et al. 2017, 528). Thus, the pledges approach focusses on specific parts of a party’s electoral programme, prospective policy commitments (and not all statements in a manifesto), and depending on the content of the pledge associates them with different sources, such as legislation, ministerial decrees, or budgetary issues. The empirical results of Thomson et al. (2017) have shown that while parties’ electoral promises are not “cheap talk,” not all of them are kept.

Scholars have also recently started to analyse how voters perceive pledge fulfilment. Admittedly, the narrative of pledge breaking politicians appears to be firmly anchored in society (Naurin 2011, 69–98). However, beyond this broad assessment of the general ability and willingness of any politician and party to keep previously made pledges, voters appear to be better informed about concrete pledge performances of government parties. Different scholars have provided evidence that citizens’ perceptions mirror actual pledge performance (Thomson & Brandenburg 2019; Duval & Pétry 2018; Thomson 2011).

Research on retrospective voting has provided a wide range of evidence that voters consider parties’ and politicians’ past behaviour for their voting decisions. Many scholars have studied the status of the economy as a predictor of voting choices (Lewis-Beck & Ratto 2013; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). It appears that elections are instruments through which voters reward incumbents for good economic performance, and punish them for bad economic performance. There is also some evidence that voters consider government performance in other policy fields beyond the economy, such as internal security, for their voting decisions (Cook et al. 1994; Cummins 2009; Marsh & Tilley 2010).

Previous research has also provided a wide range of evidence for prospective voting: voters care for parties’ policy positions and specific proposals offered in election campaigns (Downs 1957; Budge & Farlie 1983; Hsieh et al. 1998; Elinder et al. 2015). Prospective voting models consider competition between political parties, assume that election platforms are binding for the political parties and that citizens vote in accordance with their expected utility regarding the policies that a party supports in its platform.

This study aims to bridge these different perspectives on government performance and voting. I analyse retrospective pledge voting at the aggregate level, as many economic voting studies have done (Nannestad & Paldam 1994; Paldam 1991; Powell & Whitten 1993). In contrast to economic voting however, the notion of performance used in this study does not rely on an abstract, universal economic condition such as the GDP, unemployment, or inflation, but links an incumbent party’s own promised policies to the actual output. The main difference between my approach and economic voting relates to how voters attribute responsibility for outputs and outcomes to parties. For economic voting, voters themselves must attribute responsibility to government parties. The economy is a very complex phenomenon: it is not only political parties that are involved but many different players, such as companies, interest groups and other states. Thus, when responsibility is not clearly attributed a priori to one of these actors, deciding which of these players to make responsible for a bad state of the economy is a very difficult task and it is inevitable that different people attribute responsibility to different actors.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of retrospective pledge voting, however, parties declare themselves responsible for different

policies and outcomes. Thus, retrospective pledge voting naturally establishes a link between expectations which have been created by a party itself by making promises to its voters, and the actual delivery of these promises during its time in government.<sup>2</sup>

This is the first study that analyses electoral consequences of government party pledge fulfilment from a comparative perspective. Up until now, the very few scholars who have studied the effect of pledge fulfilment or breakage on voting have either conducted experiments in controlled laboratory conditions (Feltovich & Giovannoni 2015; Born et al. 2018) or relied on empirical evidence in specific countries or regions (Elinder et al. 2015; Johnson & Ryu 2010). The results of these studies have been mixed: while the experimental scholars have found evidence that pledge breakage leads to electoral punishment of a candidate, the authors of the empirical studies – that have only focussed on specific countries and single economic pledges – have not found any support for retrospective pledge voting. This study examines electoral consequences of pledge performance of government parties beyond the economy, in various policy fields, in 14 different countries.

I argue that voters do not forget about a government party's previous election pledges and react to this party's record of fulfilment of pledges at the following election. This is to be expected because of two mechanisms: first, the enactment of pledges implies policy benefits (rewarding accomplishment), and second, government parties that do stick to their pledges during the legislative term are perceived as credible and accountable actors, and consequently voters will trust them in the future as well (attributing competence). The results of the comparative analysis indeed indicate that a government party's pledge fulfilment affects its electoral outcome. Thus, it appears that government parties worsen their chance of being re-elected if they do not stick to what they promised their voters during the previous election campaign. However, interestingly and in contrast to economic voting, retrospective pledge voting is not more likely to emerge when clarity of responsibility is high.

This study is a first step towards improving the understanding of citizens' voting considerations by linking a prospective and retrospective perspective on voting. The findings pave the way for a better understanding of citizens' voting considerations with regards to promissory democratic representation (Mansbridge 2003). Especially in times of rising populist parties who challenge existing democratic structures and criticise established parties for not being responsible actors, it is essential to understand how citizens evaluate and react to parties' actual performances. A notion of performance that is based on election pledges acknowledges that the relation between representatives and represented goes beyond rational benefits and is also about trust. Trust is necessary to ensure that voters actually feel represented by their representatives – and the role of election promises in this relation should not be underestimated (Rose & Wessels 2018).

## **Retrospective pledge voting**

### *Rewarding accomplishment and attributing competence*

I argue that election outcomes depend on a government's past performance in fulfilling election pledges. This study incorporates the Comparative Party Pledges Project's concept of highly specific pledges. It defines an election pledge as "a statement committing a party

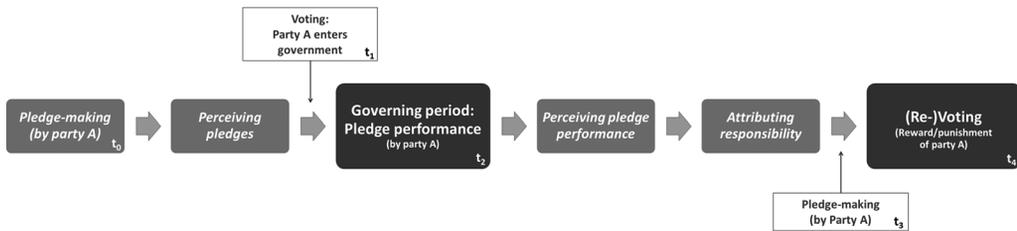


Figure 1. Stages from pledge-making to voting.

Note: The figure shows the single stages from pledge making to voting in order to illustrate the theoretical assumptions and causal mechanisms as explained in the main text. The focus of this study is to analyse the link of pledge fulfilment to voting at the aggregate level, as indicated by the bigger, dark grey boxes.

to one specific action or outcome that can be clearly determined to have occurred or not.” (Thomson et al. 2017, 532).<sup>3</sup> I refer to the ability (or willingness) of a government party to enact its election pledges as *pledge performance*. I propose that the better a government party’s pledge performance, the better its electoral outcome is expected to be at the next elections. The theoretical perspective of this study builds upon the established model of retrospective voting at the aggregate level, as has been suggested by economic voting scholars who see electoral outcomes as a result of general economic performances (Nannestad & Paldam 1994; Paldam 1991; Powell & Whitten 1993). However, this study widens the traditional perspective on retrospective voting by linking election outcomes to specific performances of individual government parties.

Based upon a rational choice approach of individual action (Downs 1957), I assume voters to be rational actors and policy-seekers who consider policies supplied by parties in the form of election pledges. They care for pledges when they are made and also scrutinise how well incumbent parties keep their pledges during the legislative term. Thus, I assume that voters do not forget about election pledges, but consider how well a government party has performed in fulfilling its pledges, and are more likely to reward that party at the next election when it has shown a better pledge performance.

There are several steps in the causal chain between pledge fulfilment and voting, as illustrated in Figure 1. To begin, we have to go back in time. Consider Party A, offering a policy program and making pledges during an electoral campaign at  $t_0$ . These pledges are perceived by citizens, who decide based on the content of these pledges whether they want to vote for party A at  $t_1$ . Party A then receives sufficient votes to enter government. During the legislative term ( $t_2$ ), A fulfils or breaks its electoral pledges. Its pledge performance is perceived by citizens who attribute responsibility to A. Finally, citizens cast a vote at  $t_4$  and decide, based on A’s pledge performance at  $t_2$ , either to reward or punish it by maintaining or withdrawing their vote.<sup>4</sup> Before elaborating on the causal mechanisms of rewarding accomplishment and attributing competence that link pledge performance and voting (the variables that this study is mainly interested in), I will briefly go through the different steps of this chain in order to elaborate on the underlying assumptions that are inherent to retrospective pledge voting.

The first two steps preceding pledge performance are pledge-making and perception of pledges. During election campaigns, parties compete with each other by offering different

policy proposals that are written down in their electoral programmes. They emphasise different issues (Wagner & Meyer 2014), and promise different policy actions and outcomes to their voters (Ferguson 2012, 67; Royed 1996, 56–59; Wagner & Meyer 2014).

When it comes to perception of pledges, of course most citizens do not read the electoral programmes of all competing parties. However, research has suggested and shown that media reports the content of electoral programmes to citizens (Bara 2005; Merz 2018), and that citizens indeed consider different political offers as made in electoral programmes for their voting decisions (Budge & Farlie 1983; Downs 1957; Hsieh et al. 1998; Elinder et al. 2015). In addition, the way pledges are defined by the Comparative Party Pledges Project implies high specificity – and specific pledges are much more likely to be identified as core policies by voters, and a party's success (or failure) to enact specific pledges is more likely to be accurately perceived by voters (Naurin & Oscarsson 2017, 6). Thus, it can be assumed that electoral platforms and the pledges contained in them play a crucial role during electoral campaigns and affect a party's chance to maximise its votes when citizens are attracted by its policy proposals.

After a party has been voted into government office, it is expected to stick to its promises during the governing period ( $t_2$ ). The idea of linking policies in electoral programs to actual policy outputs and outcomes has been manifested in the mandate theory, the responsible party model and in the concept of promissory representation (Mansbridge 2003; McDonald & Budge 2005; Klingemann et al. 1994). Citizens consider pledge fulfilment as one of the most crucial qualities of good governing behaviour, and the abandonment of pledges leads to great distrust in political parties (Rose & Wessels 2018). Empirically, electoral programs do indeed predetermine the legislative agenda to a large extent. However, there still is a variance between governments in their ability (or willingness) to stick to their pledges during the legislative term (Thomson et al. 2017). The government setting clearly affects a party's ability of fulfilling its original election pledges. For example, being in a coalition makes it a priori more difficult for a party to enact its election pledges when compared with a single party government. Usually, coalition partners write a coalition agreement at the beginning of the legislative period which to a large degree sets their governing agenda (Timmermans 2003; Moury 2011).<sup>5</sup> In line with that, pledge scholars have found that election pledges that are supported in the coalition agreement are more likely to be enacted (Mansergh & Thomson 2007; Matthieß 2019). However, even if on average the share of pledge fulfilment is lower for parties in coalitions when compared with single party governments, there still is considerable variation within each of these groups. In the empirical sample used in this study, pledge fulfilment of single party governments empirically ranges from 45 to 92 per cent and for coalition parties from 23 to 83 per cent. Consequently, I assume that voters react to different performances given by parties in coalitions – although it might be to a lesser degree when compared with parties in single party government, as will be elaborated below (H2).

Perception of pledge performance and attribution of responsibility link the two main steps – pledge performance and voting – to each other. In general, there appears to be a negativity bias with respect to citizens' evaluations of parties' abilities and willingness to fulfil their pledges (Naurin 2011, 69–83). However, despite this general negativity bias, citizens still perceive differences in pledge performance. Research that has more thoroughly looked into evaluations of pledge performance – perceptions of the overall rate of pledge

fulfilment as well as the enactment of single pledges – has demonstrated that citizens' accurate evaluations of pledge fulfilment depends significantly on the actual performance of government parties. These studies have shown “that people hold far more nuanced and accurate views on promise keeping and breaking than suggested by their responses to general questions” about whether political candidates or parties generally stick to their election pledges (Thomson & Brandenburg 2019, 25). General questions about whether political parties keep their pledges might actually be a measure of political trust rather than a way to evaluate citizens' knowledge about actual pledge fulfilment (Naurin & Oscarsson 2017, 3). Of course, how people perceive and evaluate political information in general (Simon 1955; Campbell et al. 1960, 133; Evans & Andersen 2006) and pledge performance in particular, might be moderated by their prior beliefs (Belchior 2019; Markwat 2014; Duval & Pétry 2018). Belchior (2019) has argued and shown for Portugal that people who do not sympathise with the government and who identify with an opposition party are more likely to be biased in judging actual fulfilled pledges as broken. But, this is not necessarily inconsistent with my argument: voters who identify with and/or voted in a previous election for a government party are expected to be better at accurately evaluating that party's pledge performance. Thus, even if there might be a general negativity bias in evaluations of pledge performance (e.g. 50 per cent of actual pledge fulfilment might generally be perceived as only 40 per cent), I assume that citizens who generally identify with a government party still do perceive different levels of congruence between specific promises and outcomes (that empirically range from 23 per cent to over 90 per cent) and are able to attribute responsibility to the party in question – and this ultimately affects their voting decisions.<sup>6</sup>

Turning now to the main causal mechanism of this study: how does pledge fulfilment influence voting? I argue that a party's pledge performance affects its chances of being re-elected in at least two different ways. The first one involves the idea of *rewarding accomplishment*. This argument builds upon the established theory of retrospective voting used by economic voting scholars who see elections as instruments with which voters reward or punish governments on the basis of past economic developments (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). The perspective of rewarding incumbents based on their performance is expanded to individual government parties that, as I argue, are held accountable according to the congruence between their formerly made policy propositions in various policy fields during the electoral campaign and the policies implemented during the legislature. It is worth taking another look at Figure 1 which traces the path from pledge-making to voting. As has been argued above, voters decide to vote for the party who is closest to their own preferences for a past election at  $t_1$  (Downs 1957). Policy proposals made at  $t_0$  are expected to satisfy these voters' personal desires. Since voters are policy-seekers, the enactment of these pledges maximises their utilities. Thus, when the party they supported enters government after the election, they expect that party will stick to the policy proposals offered during the electoral campaign and will translate them into actual policies and outcomes during their time in office. At the next election at  $t_4$ , voters look back and reward their party by re-electing it if it has fulfilled its pledges. Equally, they punish it for failure by withdrawing their support and electing a competitor (or abstaining from the election). Thus, according to this first scenario of rewarding accomplishment, citizens' voting decisions are based on backwards-looking reasoning: past achievements are rewarded on the day of election.

The second causal mechanism that I present here refers to the idea of *attributing competence* to a party. In this scenario, voters are not only assumed to look back and reward or punish a party according to its past performance, but also look to the future and use the past performance that a government party has shown as a source of information. In this way, they select competent officials who will continue to run for office over the long term (Ferejohn 1986). Building upon the idea of prospective voting, when electing a party at  $t_4$ , voters must choose based on the offer of different policy proposals (Downs 1957), and in doing so take a leap of faith. But how can they be sure that the party that they have elected will not forget about its election pledges after entering government? A valuable source of information for deciding whether to trust someone in the future is past experience. Competence and trust are essential qualities of political candidates that are considered by citizens for their voting decisions. Abramowitz (1988) has emphasized the increasing role of candidate characteristics, since the “weakening of party loyalties in the electorate means that candidates must increasingly rely on personal appeal to gain votes” (398). In particular, it appears that incumbents lose significant support when their involvement in political scandals is revealed to the public (Abramowitz 1988; Krosnick & Kinder 1990; Peters & Welch 1980). Thus, a government party that has shown good performance by sticking to its promises during  $t_2$  is perceived as a competent and responsible actor, and voters will trust that this party will be committed to its promised policies in the future as well. Equally, voters will be sceptical when a party has not kept the promises upon which it was elected into office in the first place. A party suffers from credibility problems with respect to holding future commitments when it has strongly deviated from its past policy agenda and has shown fundamental ideological shifts – voters will not perceive this party as a competent actor, lose trust, and consequently, withdraw their support at the polls even if they do not oppose the party’s new electoral program at  $t_3$ . Thus, in this second scenario of attributing competence, citizens employ forward-looking reasoning for their voting choices: based upon on a party’s past performance, an evaluation can be made as to whether that party is a competent and trustworthy actor that is expected to stick to promises in the future as well, and should therefore be supported at the polls.

Both perspectives, rewarding accomplishment and attributing competence, are plausible mechanisms that link pledge performance to voting. They might be valid at the same time, and thus are not mutually exclusive. For example, voters might simultaneously be forward- and backward-looking: they want to support party A at the polls because they are pleased with its past performance, and at the same time they can be certain that the party’s new program will be implemented as well. This study does not aim to disentangle both mechanisms. What is essential here is that there are at least two mechanisms that provide reasonable arguments as to why pledge performance affects voting.

I expect that voters decide whether to support a party in future elections based on its previous pledge performance. The sum of these individual decisions is then expected to be observable at the aggregate level, which is reflected in election results.

*Hypothesis 1:* The better a government party’s pledge performance, the better its electoral outcome.

### *Clarity of responsibility*

The previous arguments were based on the assumption that voters are rational, policy-seeking actors. This assumption implies that voters are always equally well informed about outcomes of policy-making-processes, and that they all apply the same reasoning when judging an individual party's ability and willingness to keep its pledges – independently of the context. However, there is a wide range of various government and institutional settings that might decrease the chance that voters accurately perceive information about pledge fulfilment and make strict judgments about a government party's pledge performance. Thus, under certain conditions, such as higher levels of complexity in policy-making, a citizen's rationality might be bounded or affected by other conditions when taking retrospectively informed voting decisions (Powell & Whitten 1993; Hobolt et al. 2013).

The concept of clarity of responsibility is best suited to describe these distortions in rational decision making that arise from complex institutional and government settings (Powell & Whitten 1993). As has already been argued above, the government setting, such as sharing power in a coalition, appears to affect a government's ability to enact its election pledges at  $t_2$ . It is not just that multiple veto players in the government make the policy making process more complex due to the necessity of negotiating and compromising (Tsebelis 2002), but also that citizens are expected to have difficulties in accurately perceiving and encoding political information, such as pledge performance, when compared to situations in which only one party is in charge of the government. Various scholars have argued and shown that for economic voting if power is unified in the incumbent government, citizens are more likely to place responsibility for outcomes on incumbents (Powell & Whitten 1993, 398). According to Hobolt et al. (2013), there are two forms of clarity: institutional clarity refers to the formal, relatively static division of power within a country that is, among other things, determined by the governmental system and the existence of institutional veto players, such as second chambers. Governmental clarity concerns the cohesiveness of an incumbent government at a given time, which can change within a country, e.g. coalition versus single party government or minority versus majority. As is the case with economic voting, I expect that retrospective pledge voting is moderated by clarity of responsibility at the institutional and government level. Voters are more likely to perceive pledge fulfilment and hold parties accountable when lines of responsibility are clear.

Clarity of responsibility might moderate the relation between pledge performance and voting in two ways: first, voters face challenges in accurately perceiving information about pledge fulfilment. If lines of responsibility are blurred because a minority coalition government is formed, it becomes more difficult to receive information and make an accurate evaluation of a government party's performance when compared to a situation where a single party government with a secured majority in parliament exists. A government party with less power and fewer seats has greater difficulties in communicating its policy positions to voters than a party with more seats and power (Spoon & Klüver 2017). Similarly, it can be expected that voters are more likely to perceive the achievements of a single-party majority government than of a government party in a minority coalition, who has to find compromises with its coalition partner and additionally depends on the support of opposition parties.

Second, even if voters were fully informed about a party's pledge performance, institutional and governmental settings might affect the attribution of responsibility: voters might realise that a party's ability to successfully enact its program depends on the existence of other veto players, such as coalition partners, that make it necessary to agree on compromises, and consequently to break pledges. In such situations, it is expected that voters are more lenient in their judgments. Empirically, it is difficult to disentangle whether the conditioning effects emerge during the stage of accurate perception or attribution of responsibility. However, for the purpose of this study it is important that blurriness in lines of responsibility is expected to weaken the effect that a government party's pledge performance has on citizens' voting decisions.

*Hypothesis 2:* The higher the clarity of responsibility, the more likely that a government party with a better pledge performance will improve its electoral outcome.

## Research design

### *Case selection*

This study examines the effect of pledge performance across 14 countries and 69 elections between 1977 and 2015. The country selection includes Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Table A1 lists all included governments.

Using this comparative sample allows for analysis of the electoral consequences of pledge fulfilment in different institutional and governmental settings – thereby increasing the confidence in the external validity of the findings. For example, there is variation between countries with respect to institutional features such as unicameralism and federalism. Federal, bicameral countries such as Germany as well as unitary, unicameral systems such as Sweden are considered in this study. In addition, the governmental settings differ both between and within countries: in Ireland, for example, single-party executives with and without legislative majorities, as well as minority and majority coalitions, have been formed. The variation in institutional and government features will be considered in the analysis by controlling for different degrees of clarity of responsibility.

### *Measuring electoral outcome*

The dependent variable is operationalised in three different ways: change in vote share, absolute vote share and vote ratio. *Change in vote share* is an established measurement in the economic voting literature (Powell & Whitten 1993; Paldam 1991). Incumbent gains or losses are calculated by subtracting the percentage of valid votes won by each government party in the current election by the percentage in the previous one. Data source for calculating the dependent variable is the Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2017). On average, the vote share is -0.05. Thus the government parties considered in this study suffer a 5 per cent vote share loss on average.<sup>7</sup> The *absolute vote share* is measured by the percentage of votes won by the government in a current election at  $t_2$  (Lewis-Beck & Mitchell 1990). *Vote ratio*

is calculated as the incumbent gains or losses by dividing the percentage of valid votes won by each government party in the current election ( $t_2$ ) by the percentage in the most recent one ( $t_1$ ).

### *Measuring pledge performance and clarity of responsibility*

The main independent variable, pledge performance, is operationalised as the *share of election pledge fulfilment* for each government party and is calculated by dividing the number of fulfilled pledges by the number of total pledges for each party. The data are extracted from the large-scale comparative analysis of election pledge fulfilment assembled by scholars from the Comparative Party Pledges Project – CPPP (Thomson et al. 2017). According to the CPPP's definition a pledge is “a statement committing a party to one specific action or outcome that can be clearly determined to have occurred or not” (Thomson et al. 2017, 532). This means that in order to be identified as a pledge, an electoral commitment is required to have specificity, so that a researcher can find clear evidence for its fulfilment. After a pledge has been identified, a second coding step consists of determining its status of enactment. Document sources for deciding whether a pledge was fulfilled include legislation, ministerial decrees, and budgetary, as well as secondary sources. In order to ensure high quality data, the CPPP has conducted several coder reliability tests for both coding stages, within and between countries (see online appendix).

The data for France and New Zealand are added from country studies conducted by Bouillaud et al. (2017) and McCluskey (2008) who have applied a similar coding procedure, as suggested by the CPPP, when gathering their data. However, since these data have not been part of the CPPP's project and there is no information about the coder reliability, I will also run analyses without these countries in order to ensure that my results are not driven by deviating coding procedures.

Figure 2 shows that there is variance in pledge performance across the cases that are included in this study. The average share of pledge fulfilment at the party level is 60 per cent. The lowest rate is 23 per cent (Irish Green Party in a coalition with two other parties, 2007–2011), and the highest 92 per cent (Swedish Social Democrats in a single party minority government, 1994–1998). There are countries in which parties have constantly higher rates of pledge fulfilment, such as the UK (78–92 per cent), and other countries such as Austria (24–58 per cent) where government parties generally show lower rates of pledge fulfilment. However, as the box plots by country in Figure 2 show, there is also substantial variation within countries.

In order to test H2, this study measures clarity of responsibility. As has been proposed by Hobolt et al. (2013), I also consider clarity of responsibility as a two-dimensional concept, incorporating institutional and government clarity. I use the identical components for measuring institutional clarity as in Hobolt et al. For government clarity I make slight adjustments which allow, as I argue below, measuring this dimension more precisely for the purpose of this study.

As in Hobolt et al., this study measures *institutional clarity* by considering four components: weak committee structures (1 for weak, 0.5 for middle strong, and 0 for strong committees),<sup>8</sup> unicameralism (1 for uni- and 0 for bicameralism), unitarism (1 for

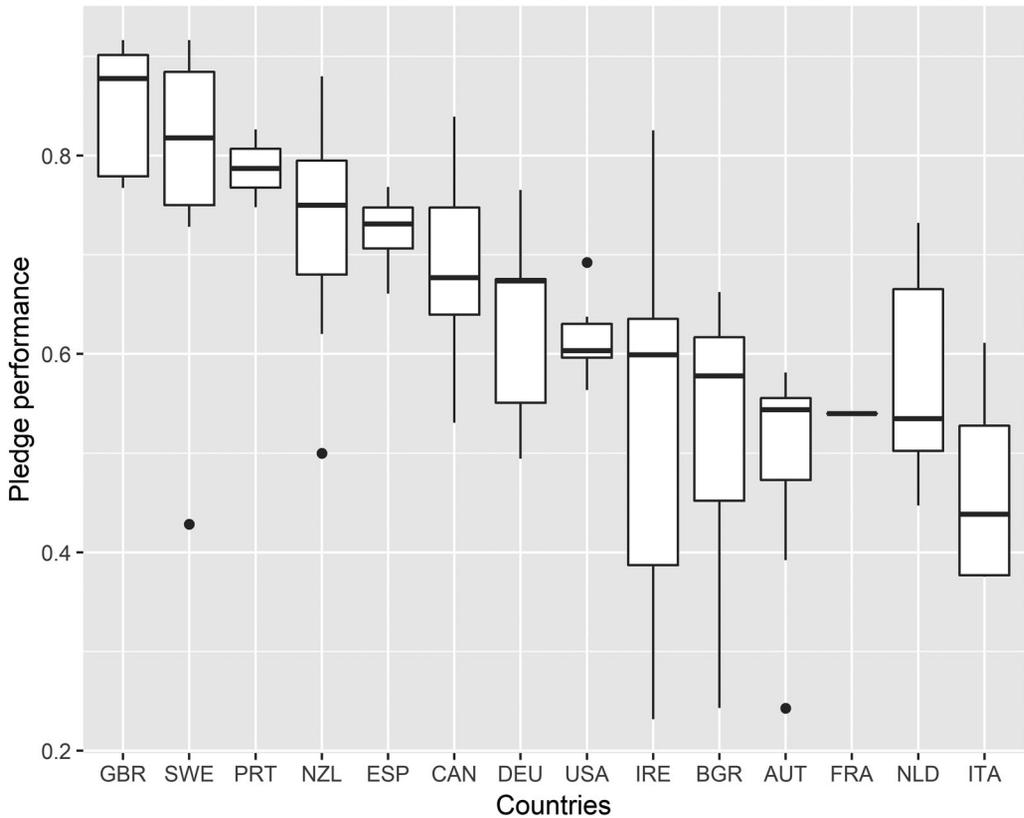


Figure 2. Distribution of pledge fulfilment by country.

Note: Boxes are ordered by the country median of the share of pledge fulfilment from high to low.

unitary and 0 for federal state), and parliamentary system (1 for parliamentary and 0 for (semi-)presidential).<sup>9</sup> The assigned values are added up and then divided by four – the number of components. The index has an observed maximum of 1 and a minimum of 0.

For *government clarity*, the following components are considered: single party vs. coalition government (1 vs. 0), a government's majority status (1 for majority vs. 0 for minority government), non-existence of bicameral opposition (1 for non-existence and 0 for existence), and ideological cohesion within the government (continuous measure: 1 for maximum cohesion, 0 for minimum distance).<sup>10</sup> Ideological cohesion is calculated by considering variation between ideological positions: it is measured as the ideological distance between the leftmost and rightmost parties in coalitions, using the positions on a left-right-dimension as indicated by the Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2017) and rescaled to run from 0 to 1. In single party governments, ideological cohesion is coded as 1. Finally, the assigned values for a government's coalition status, its majority status, the existence of bicameral opposition and ideological cohesion within a government are added up and divided by four. Empirically, the index for government clarity runs from 0.46 to 1.

### *Measuring control variables*

I include three control variables which might possibly confound the hypothesised relationships. First, I consider a country's economic situation by controlling for the average *economic misery*. The Economic Misery Index (EMI) goes back to the economist Arthur Okun (Okun 2011). It is calculated by adding the unemployment rate to the inflation rate (percentage change in the Consumer Price Index). For each legislature, I considered the mean of the unemployment and inflation rate between the years of two elections. The log of the variable is used in order to account for the EMI's skewed distribution. The EMI is chosen over other economic measures such as the GDP because it includes two aspects, unemployment and inflation, and these are much more likely to be perceived by citizens because they are more directly affected than by changes in the GDP. However, in order to account for the use of different economic measures in models of retrospective voting, I also estimate models as robustness checks that include alternative economic measures, such as the average GDP growth.

In addition, I control for confounding effects at the party level: a government party's *vote share of a past election* and its *distance to the median position*. In line with previous studies, the past vote share is expected to be negatively related to incumbent gains, because "it is easier to lose absolute percentage points from a larger base" (Powell & Whitten 1993, 395f). The distance to the median position is included in order to control for citizens' prospective voting considerations at  $t_4$ . The smaller the distance to the median position at a current election, the more likely a government party is expected to gain votes (Downs 1957). The distance is calculated by subtracting a government party's rule score as it appears in the Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2017) from the median position. The absolute distance is divided by 100 so that it could theoretically range from 0 (occupation of the median position) to 1 (highest distance to median position). Empirically, it ranges from 0.01 to 0.47.

### **Analysis**

In order to empirically test the formulated hypotheses about retrospective pledge voting, I rely on OLS regression models. The observations are clustered into countries and therefore all models have been estimated with clustered robust standard errors. First, I investigate the effect of pledge fulfilment on voting (H1). Second, I test whether retrospective pledge voting is moderated by clarity of responsibility at the institutional and government level (H2).

Table 1 reports the full results of the estimated regression models. There are three different measures for the dependent variable that capture a government party's electoral outcome: change in vote share (A), the absolute vote share (B), and vote ratio (C). Each of the models 1 includes pledge performance as the main independent variable and controls for the economic situation as well as the distance to the median position. The results of the models 1.A-C show that pledge fulfilment has a positive and statistically significant effect on the electoral outcome. Higher levels of pledge fulfilment appear to be of advantage for the electoral support of a government party. Thus, the results indicate that the electoral outcome is positively affected by pledge fulfilment, as has been suggested by H1.

Table 1. The effect of pledge fulfilment on electoral performance

	DV: $\Delta$ Vote share			DV: Vote share			DV: Vote ratio		
	Model 1.A	Model 2.A	Model 1.B	Model 2.B	Model 1.C	Model 2.C			
Pledge performance	0.151*** (0.043)	0.430 (0.273)	0.151*** (0.043)	0.430 (0.273)	0.39* (0.154)	1.149 (1.042)			
Institutional clarity	-	0.070 (0.086)	-	0.070 (0.086)	-	0.404 (0.376)			
Inst. clarity*PP	-	-0.168 (0.150)	-	-0.168 (0.150)	-	-0.789 (0.585)			
Government clarity	-	0.151 (0.273)	-	0.151 (0.273)	-	0.230 (1.000)			
Gov. clarity*PP	-	-0.214 (0.444)	-	-0.214 (0.444)	-	-0.340 (1.584)			
Previous vote share	-0.215** (0.078)	-0.221* (0.079)	0.785*** (0.078)	0.779*** (0.079)	-0.164 (0.386)	-0.171 (0.415)			
Distance median	0.009 (0.048)	0.033 (0.057)	0.009 (0.048)	0.033 (0.057)	-0.06 (0.126)	-0.013 (0.173)			
EMI (log)	-0.026*** (0.007)	-0.024* (0.011)	-0.026*** (0.007)	-0.024* (0.011)	-0.021 (0.014)	-0.018 (0.022)			
Constant	-0.003 (0.05)	-0.174 (0.204)	-0.003 (0.05)	-0.174 (0.204)	0.741*** (0.213)	0.304 (0.779)			
Observations	92	92	92	92	92	92			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.236	0.264	0.757	0.766	0.056	0.082			
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.201	0.193	0.746	0.743	0.013	-0.007			

Notes: Results from an OLS regression with clustered robust standard errors. PP – pledge performance, EMI – Economic Misery Index. \*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05, p < 0.1.

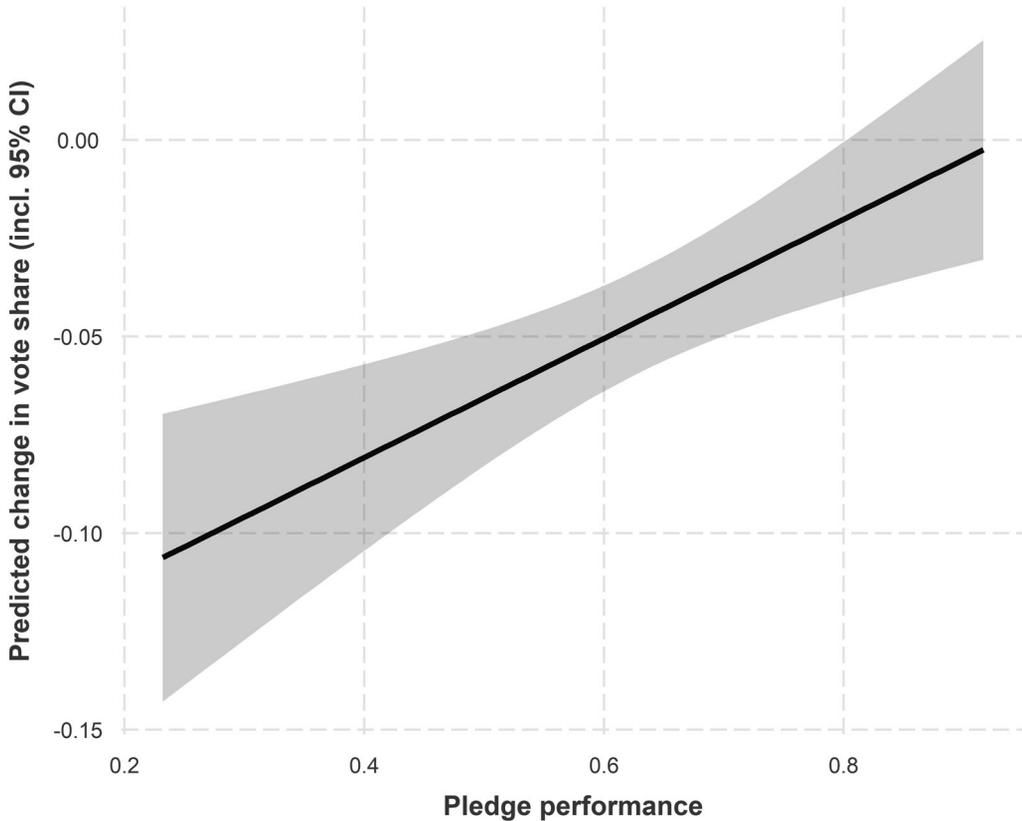


Figure 3. Effect of pledge fulfilment on electoral performance.

Note: The figure is based on model 1.A in table 1. Grey area indicates 95% confidence intervals.

Based on model 1.A, Figure 3 illustrates the predicted values of pledge fulfilment on the change in vote share. All other variables are held at their mean. The point estimates of the predicted values are indicated by the solid lines and the 95 percent confidence intervals are illustrated by the grey area. The figure shows that the electoral performance of a government party steadily improves with the pledge performance. A government party that enacts 50 per cent of its election pledges would have to fear losing seven per cent of its votes, while a party that reports a pledge fulfilment rate of 80 per cent would lose two per cent of votes from one election to another. Thus, there is a tendency to lose rather than win votes for government parties at subsequent elections – this has been also suggested and shown by previous studies (Whitten & Palmer 1999; Paldam 1986). Nevertheless, this predication is in line with H1: a government party shows a better electoral performance when it has shown a better pledge performance.<sup>11</sup>

Now looking at models 2.A-C and the impact of clarity of responsibility that has been shown by previous studies to be a crucial moderator of retrospective economic voting. For voting based on pledge performance, however, the story seems to be different. For both clarity measures negative – albeit not statistically significant – interactions terms are reported. Higher clarity does not appear to make retrospective pledge voting more likely to

occur. Thus, clarity of responsibility does not show the expected effect, which is yet another indication that retrospective pledge and economic voting differ from each other in some key aspects.

With regard to the control variables in Table 1: as expected and in line with previous studies, the vote share of a past election is negatively related to changes in vote share - it is easier to lose votes from a larger base. Only in the models 1.B and 2.B a positive effect is reported: the vote share in the previous election (lagged dependent variable) appears to positively impact the current absolute vote share. But this is not surprising: for example, a party that gained 30 per cent of votes at  $t_1$  might lose votes at a subsequent election, but is still more likely to receive 25 per cent of votes at  $t_2$  when compared to a party that had a vote share of 5 per cent at  $t_1$ . As expected, the economic misery index (EMI) shows a negative and (apart from models 1/2.C) statistically significant impact on an incumbent party's electoral performance. The effect for the distance to the median position is positive (as expected) in the model variants A and B, but negative in C, but in all models it is neither substantial in size, nor statistically significant.

In order to validate the findings, different robustness checks have been performed. All of these additional models can be found in the appendix.<sup>12</sup> First, the models have been re-estimated without France and New Zealand which have not been coded by the CPPP (Bouillaud et al. 2017; McCluskey 2008). Table A2 shows that the results do not substantially differ when these cases are excluded. Second, table A3 considers the clarity measures as additional controls for testing H1 (model 1) and different variants of interaction effects for testing H2: a separate test for government (model 2.1) and institutional clarity (model 2.2) as well as for the difference between single vs. coalition party governments, which is one component of the government clarity index (model 2.3). Regarding the latter: studies that have been interested in pledge fulfilment as dependent variable have shown that pledges originating from single party governments are more likely to be fulfilled when compared with coalitions (Thomson et al. 2017). However, retrospective pledge voting does not appear to be affected by this difference. The remaining checks in table A3 also do not differ substantially from the results that have already been presented in Table 1. For both, institutional and government clarity, negative and not statistically significant interactions are still reported. In sum, all additional robustness checks do not contradict the main findings of the analysis above.<sup>13</sup>

The results of the analysis lend considerable support for the hypothesis that pledge fulfilment affects electoral outcomes: a government party appears to be less likely to lose votes when it has shown a better performance at pledge fulfilment. Different measures of electoral success – changes in vote share, vote ratio and absolute vote share – have been considered in the analysis and the results have been shown to be robust. However, there is no evidence that retrospective voting with respect to pledge performance is more likely to occur when clarity of responsibility at the institutional and government level is high.

## Conclusion

Does pledge performance bear any electoral consequences for government parties? I find that electoral outcomes of government parties depend on their performance of pledge fulfilment. This study has looked at the relation between pledge performance and voting at

the macro level, which can be considered as a hard test. As I have argued, there are several intermediate steps between pledge fulfilment and voting which might present challenges when looking at the direct link between pledge and electoral performance of a government party. However, despite these challenges, this study finds evidence that voters do respond to government party pledge fulfilment. Government parties are not rewarded for pledge fulfilment, but it appears that they are able to prevent bigger electoral losses if they show better performances in keeping their pledges. The general tendency of government parties to lose rather than win votes at subsequent elections has also been shown by previous studies (Paldam 1986; Whitten & Palmer 1999). But obviously, electoral losses can be prevented if government parties meet their own standards and voters' expectations. Thus, the main finding of this study is that pledge performance matters for voting.<sup>14</sup>

I do not find conclusive evidence that institutional and government clarity of responsibility moderates the relation between pledge performance and voting. This is surprising because clarity of responsibility has been shown to be a crucial moderator of economic voting (Hobolt et al. 2013; Powell & Whitten 1993). Thus, it seems that pledge performance and economic voting differ from each other in some key aspects.

My findings have important implications for research on voting, pledge fulfilment and citizens' evaluations of pledge fulfilment. First, retrospective voting considerations do matter – beyond the economy. Citizens appear to be able to consider differences in party pledge fulfilment, and to hold government parties accountable for promises that were made in the past. Moreover, if as this study has shown there is a direct effect of pledge performance on voting, political parties should be aware of the long-term costs that they risk when election pledges are ignored. A party that consistently disregards its own guidelines will neither be regarded as a responsible nor as a competent player to which voters are willing to delegate power. Second, the findings of this study add empirical evidence to the normative ideal of promissory representation that has guided research on pledge fulfilment (Mansbridge 2003; Thomson et al. 2017; Naurin et al. 2019). Parties should take their own pledges seriously, because voters obviously do not forget about them. Or said the other way around: if voters do indeed punish or reward political parties at elections for bad or good pledge performances respectively, then parties should have an incentive to keep their electoral pledges (Aragonès et al. 2007), and be careful when they make pledges. Knowing that voters do not forget about past elections puts pressure on parties to be truthful and not to try to bait voters with unrealistic promises. Third, this study has incorporated the perception of pledge fulfilment as a crucial step between pledge performance and voting in its theoretical assumptions. Even if there is a general negativity bias with respect to how people perceive pledge fulfilment (Naurin 2011; Thomson 2011), actual differences in pledge performance still appear to result in different electoral outcomes – at least at the aggregate level. Thus, it appears that voters do not only expect (Rose & Wessels 2018), but also react to party pledge fulfilment.

This study serves as a crucial step towards understanding the linkage between pledge performance and voting, though the results do raise interesting questions for future studies to answer. One puzzling finding is that high levels of clarity of responsibility do not positively impact pledge performance based voting. In addition, future research should look into the relation between pledge performance and voting not only at the aggregate level, but especially at the level of individual voters. This would allow a closer look at the causal

mechanisms that are assumed to link pledge performance and voting to be taken. One interesting question to address in future research is, for example, whether different kinds of voters react differently to party pledge fulfilment.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Country and government selection

<b>Single-party executives with legislative majorities</b> (23 governments)	
Bulgaria	1997-2001, ODS
Canada	1993-1997, Liberals; 1997-2000, Liberals; 2000-4, Liberals; 2011-15, Conservatives
France	2007-2012, UMP
Ireland	1977-81, Fianna Fáil
New Zealand	1972-5, Labour; 1978-81, Nationals; 1981-4, Nationals; 1984-7, Labour; 1987-90, Labour; 1990-3, Nationals; 1993-6, Nationals
Portugal	2005-9, PS
Spain	1989-93, PSOE; 2000-04, PP
UK	1974-79, Labour; 1979-83, Conservative; 1983-87, Conservative; 1987-92, Conservative; 1992-97, Conservative
United States	1977-81, Democrats
<b>Single-party executives with legislative minorities</b> (16 governments)	
Bulgaria	2009-13, GERB
Canada	2004-6, Liberals; 2006-8, Conservatives; 2008-11, Conservatives
Ireland	1987-89, Fianna Fáil
Portugal	1995-99, PS
Spain	1993-96, PSOE; 1996-2000, PP
Sweden	1994-98, Social Democrats; 1998-2002, Social Democrats; 2002-6, Social Democrats
United States	1981-85, Republicans; 1985-89, Republicans; 1989-93, Republicans; 1993-97, Democrats; 1997-2001, Democrats
<b>Coalition executives with legislative majorities</b> (25 governments)	
Austria	2000-3, ÖVP/FPÖ; 2003-7, ÖVP/FPÖ; 2007-8, SPÖ/ÖVP; 2008-13, SPÖ/ÖVP
Bulgaria	1995-96, BSP/NS; 2001-5, NDSV/DPS; 2005-9, BSP/NDSV/DPS
Germany	2002-5, SPD/ Greens; 2005-9, CDU-CSU/ SPD; 2009-13, CDU-CSU/ FDP

(Continued)

**Table A1.** Continued

Ireland	1982-87, Fine Gael/Labour; 1989-92, Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats; 1992-94, Fianna Fáil/ Labour; 2002-7, Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats; 2007-11, Fianna Fáil/ Progressive Democrats/ Greens; 2011-16, Fine Gael/Labour
Italy	2001-6, Berlusconi II's coalition (FI/AN/LN/UDC/NPSI/PRI); 2008-11, Berlusconi IV's coalition (PdL/LN/MpA/PID)
Netherlands	1986-89, CDA/VVD; 1989-94, CDA/PvdA; 1994-98, PvdA/VVD/D66
<i>New Zealand</i>	1996-9, Nationals; 1999-2002, Labour; 2002-5, Labour
Sweden	2006-10, Moderate Party/Centre Party/People's Party/Christian Democrats

**Coalition executives with legislative minorities (4 governments)**

Ireland	1997-2002, Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats
Italy	1996-98; Prodi I's Ulivo coalition (PDS/PPI/RI/FdV/UD); 2006-8, Prodi II's coalition Unione (DS/DL/PRC/RnPPdCI/IdV/FdV/UDEUR)
Sweden	2010-14, Moderate Party/Centre Party/People's Party/Christian Democrats

Source: Thomson et al. (2017b), except for New Zealand (McCluskey 2008) and France (Bouillaud et al. 2017) that are written in italics.

**Table A2.** The effect of pledge fulfilment on electoral performance – w/o FRA and NZL

DV: $\Delta$ vote share	Model 1	Model 2
Pledge performance	0.150** (0.049)	0.444 (0.292)
Institutional clarity	–	0.106 (0.114)
Inst. clarity*PP	–	–0.317 (0.213)
Government clarity	–	0.089 (0.333)
Gov. clarity*PP	–	–0.109 (0.524)
Previous vote share	–0.207* (0.085)	–0.238** (0.085)
Distance median	0.014 (0.053)	0.027 (0.062)
EMI (log)	–0.026*** (0.007)	–0.019. (0.011)
Constant	–0.006 (0.055)	–0.169 (0.228)
Observations	80	80
R <sup>2</sup>	0.238	0.303
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.197	0.225

Notes: Results from an OLS regression with clustered robust standard errors. PP – pledge performance, EMI – Economic Misery Index. New Zealand and France are excluded.

\*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05, p < 0.1.

**Table A3.** The effect of pledge fulfilment on electoral performance – clarity of responsibility

DV: $\Delta$ vote share	Model 1	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3
Pledge performance	0.182*** (0.052)	0.287*** (0.061)	0.457 (0.287)	0.165. (0.087)
Institutional clarity	-0.039 (0.032)	0.085 (0.052)	-	-
Inst. clarity*PP	-	-0.194 (0.077)	-	-
Government clarity	-0.002 (0.035)	-	0.250 (0.22)	-
Gov. clarity*PP	-	-	-0.400 (0.356)	-
Single party	-	-	-	0.141 (0.094)
Single party*PP	-	-	-	-0.152 (0.156)
Previous vote share	-0.220** (0.080)	-0.218** (0.072)	-0.213* (0.083)	-0.303*** (0.077)
Distance median	0.016 (0.047)	0.016 (0.049)	0.044 (0.057)	-0.005 (0.053)
EMI (log)	-0.021. (0.011)	-0.023* (0.009)	-0.025** (0.009)	-0.028*** (0.007)
Constant	-0.013 (0.049)	-0.072 (0.055)	-0.199 (0.203)	0.012 (0.082)
Observations	92	92	92	92
R <sup>2</sup>	0.252	0.262	0.247	0.287
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.200	0.209	0.193	0.236

Notes: Results from an OLS regression with clustered robust standard errors. PP – pledge performance, EMI – Economic Misery Index. The variable “single party” is coded a dummy (1 – single party government, 0 – party in a coalition).

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.1$ .

## Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

**Table 5. The effect of pledge fulfilment on electoral performance – alternative economic control variables**

**Table 6. The effect of pledge fulfilment on electoral performance – PEC**

**Table 7. The effect of pledge fulfilment on electoral performance – w/o distance median**  
**Supporting Information**

## Notes

1. See for example Marsh and Tilley (2010) who have shown that only when citizens attribute credit or blame to the government, evaluations of the economy (and also other policy fields such as health) matter for their voting decision.
2. With respect to the relation between pledge performance and the economy: Pledge fulfilment appears to be affected by economic growth. However, this does not mean that a good pledge performance is the same as a good economy. These are theoretically and empirically distinct phenomena, and as Thomson et al. (2017, 539) have shown, “the effect [of economic growth on pledge fulfilment] is not consistent throughout the subset of cases” that they and I use. Consequently, even if economic voting and retrospective pledge voting might have theoretical and empirical similarities, they are not equivalent.
3. Before the CPPP scholars agreed on a common pledge concept, some of the scholars involved had previously supported a broader definition of pledges in their own case studies. One reason to agree on the narrow definition of pledges was for the purpose of comparison across countries. From a theoretical point

of view, I follow the scholars who support a narrower pledge definition. They “believe that the mandate model of representative democracy is about parties that tell voters what they would do and how they would do it if they enter government office. [...] responsible parties must set out their plans in detail.” (Thomson et al. 2017, supporting information). Empirically, I expect that parties are more concrete and make specific policy offers about issues that are salient to them and their voters. Moreover, they can be clearly identified as pledge breakers if they do not stick to their specific pledges, whereas there is more room for interpretation with respect to more vague and ambiguous pledges (Dolezal et al. 2018, 243; Ray 2007, 17). For more information, see online appendix.

4. Pledge-making at  $t_3$  is part of the full theoretical chain and is therefore illustrated in Figure 1. Theoretically, it is incorporated in the causal mechanism of “attributing competence” that is presented in the main text. Though, it has to be noted that this study mainly builds upon a retrospective perspective on voting and consequently, does not seek to test how voters weigh prospective against retrospective considerations.
5. Legislative agendas that are more like short-term agreements than coalition agreements and are especially important for minority governments appear to largely pre-determine the legislative agenda (Klüver and Zubek 2018; Osnabrügge 2015).
6. Even if there might be other random errors and biases at the individual level, such as lack of political sophistication, they are expected to cancel each other out at the aggregate level (Erikson et al. 2002).
7. One observation had to be dropped because the Irish Progressive Democrats who entered the government in 2007 dissolved before the next elections in 2011.
8. I add “0.5” as a middle category. Hobolt et al. have only considered weak (“1”) and strong committees (“0”).
9. I use Thomson et al. (2017)’s categorisation of (semi-)presidential systems.
10. This composition of the government clarity index deviates slightly from Hobolt et al.’s proposition who originally included the following items in their index for government clarity: the dominance of one party (head of government party’s share of cabinet posts), single party government, absence of cohabitation and a government’s ideological cohesion (Hobolt et al. 2013). For more information on how my measure of government clarity deviates from Hobolt et al.’s, see online appendix.
11. Marginal effects (pledge performance on change in vote share) have also been calculated based on model 2.A. The results provide evidence for H1: the electoral performance of a government party steadily improves with its pledge performance.
12. The models that are reported in the appendix consider the change in vote share as dependent variable (model variant A in Table 1). The checks have also been performed when vote ratio or absolute vote share are considered as dependent variables. Since the results do not substantially change, I only report the results of model variant A for the purpose of clear presentation.
13. Additional robustness checks are reported in the online appendix, e.g. with alternative economic measures and PECs as controls. The results of the variables of interest do not substantially change.
14. Though this study cannot fully prove that the theoretical chain presented in this paper is the only plausible explanation for why there is a relation between pledge performance and voting. Two alternative mechanisms could be: First, voters might rely on experts and the public opinion who might be better informed about the actual pledge fulfilment than individuals are (Erikson et al. 2002). Second, even if voters do not keep track of every single pledge, they might still perceive when a party deviates from its general ideology – which can be associated with pledge breaking. However, at least from a theoretical point of view, pledge breaking is not identical to ideological shifting: there might be situations in which parties stick to their general ideology (e.g. more welfare state expansion), but do not stick exactly to those specific policies that were promised before elections (e.g. no increase in childcare benefits as had been promised, but instead more money for hospitals which had not been promised).

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