Does it Matter if Parties Keep their Promises? The Impact of Voter Evaluations of Pledge Fulfilment on Vote Choice

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Abstract

Theories of promissory representation posit that voters reward governing parties that carry out their previous election pledges and punish those that do not. An extensive body of research demonstrates that governing parties tend to enact their promises, while an emerging literature on citizen perceptions shows that voters (in the aggregate) make accurate assessments of the fulfilment of specific promises. However, little is known about what voters do with this information. To test the expectation that pledge fulfilment affects parties' electoral fortunes, we examine the impact of pledge fulfilment evaluations on vote intentions using British Election Study internet panel data (2010-2015). We find that perceived pledge fulfilment has modest but important effects on voting behaviour. These effects vary depending on previous vote choices and party issue ownership, and manifesting differently for first- and second-order elections. Our findings have important implications for promissory modes of democratic representation and explanations of voting behaviour.

Keywords

vote choice; voting behaviour; representation; mandates; election pledges

Introduction

One of the long-standing debates in the literature on vote choice, particularly in relation to economic voting, is whether voters base their decisions on prospective or retrospective judgements. The jury is still out on what matters more. Some scholars find that voting is primarily retrospective (Lanoue 1994, Norpoth 1996), others report the opposite (e.g. MacKuen et al 1992), and yet others conclude it is an even mixture (Lewis-Beck 1988). Though there is disagreement on the causal story of time and vote choice, researchers largely agree on what prospective and retrospective voting consist of. The notion of retrospective voting traces back to V.O. Key's (1966) idea that elections are essentially a means by which voters reward or punish office holders for their performance in government. In contrast, prospective voting is about party platforms and policy voting, relating to voters' expectations of what and how well incumbents or challengers would do once elected. Other elements, such as the role of party leaders, can be conceptualised as part of either the prospective or retrospective calculus (Nadeau et al 1996).

Prospective voting is about attraction (who has the most attractive policy platform, the most impressive or trustworthy leader etc.) while retrospective voting is about evaluation (how has the government performed, what do we know about either leader etc.). Campaign pledges - promises by parties or candidates to enact certain policies or behave in a certain way if elected - are one of the most common tools used by parties in their attempts to *attract* voters.

For this reason, proponents of retrospective voting models tend to reject the idea that campaign pledges are relevant to voters. As Ferejohn states "the key to the voting decision is found not in the earnest pledges of the contenders but, rather, in the infamous remark of a Kansas farmer: 'But what have you done for me lately?'" (1986:6). In contrast, we challenge the notion that pledges are only part of the prospective calculus of voters. While policy promises may attract when they are being made, their fulfilment (or lack thereof) during the preceding governing term can also enter into retrospective evaluations. In addition, we view the relationship between election pledges and vote choice as an unresolved empirical matter. Given the prominent role of party manifestos in election campaigns, and in light of a growing body of research on demonstrating that parties take their promises seriously (Thomson et al. 2017), it is appropriate to investigate whether exposure to these policy appeals influences citizens' voting behaviour.

We present one of the first empirical investigations of this relationship. Using British Election Study internet panel data (BESIP), we test the impact of respondents' perceptions of the fulfilment of election pledges made by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties in the 2010 general election. These two parties went on to form a coalition government after the 2010 election. Our study examines whether citizens' evaluations of pledge fulfilment affected their vote choice in the 2015 election. In agreement with the recent findings of Naurin et al. (2019a) in the Swedish context, we demonstrate that perceived fulfilment does indeed matter for vote choice, especially when citizens who voted for a party believe a promise to have been broken. However, in contrast with the conclusions of Naurin and coauthors, we demonstrate that parties can also gain support - rather than simply avoid losing it - by enacting their promises. These findings have important implications for how scholars understand the programme-to-policy linkage and its intersection with voting behaviour in democratic elections.

Pledge fulfilment and vote choice

Our research focus is embedded in established theory and evidence regarding representation and parties' behaviour. Downs's (1957) theory of party competition expects rational parties to detail their policy intentions and, for fear of voter retribution in subsequent contests, carry these out if elected. Downs described this dynamic as "party responsibility", while the connection between campaign promises and government policy itself was later conceptualised as the "programme-to-policy linkage" (Thomson 2001). In practice, the democratic tradition of publishing party manifesto documents filled with substantive policy pledges is a ubiquitous feature of election campaigns. Manifestos are taken seriously by parties, allowing them to develop central campaign themes, capture media attention and pre-empt intra-party or bureaucratic resistance to their policy priorities (Däubler 2012; Harmel 2018). Their publication during campaigns is also a "time-honoured activity" which could be costly to abandon unilaterally (Eder et al 2017: 77). As David observed (1971:304), for all the "blood, sweat and tears" dedicated to manifestos by parties, it is impossible to conclude that they are unimportant. Because of the effort parties invest in developing manifesto documents and the format they take, these documents are widely considered "uniquely authoritative" (Pétry 2014) statements of parties' policy positions. Although parties can use their manifestos to send signals to various audiences – including intra-party factions, competitors and the mass media – the documents are chiefly aimed at voters, to whom the documents are addressed.

The literature on election pledges has grown rapidly in recent years (for contemporaneous overviews of the literature see Pétry and Colette 2009 and Naurin et al. 2019b). A recent comparative study by Thomson et al. (2017) demonstrated that, in every country investigated, governing parties fulfil a greater share of their pledges than those in opposition. Overall government fulfilment rates range from to 86% in the United Kingdom to 50% in Austria, and the most important source of variation was found to be whether parties govern alone or in coalition with others (ibid.: 539). This suggests that, at least from the perspective of political parties, the idea of a mandate remains relevant. Manifestos "streamline" the campaign for voters, the media and elites alike.

While it is widely recognised that few voters engage directly with manifesto documents, specific policy pledges are communicated through the mass media (Volkens and Bara 2013; Kostadinova 2017). Parties often hold press conferences to launch their election manifestos, ensuring a day of dedicated news attention. Candidates and activists can use manifestos as a reference and talking point while interacting with constituents and sometimes distribute summaries of their pledges (Däubler 2012). So although manifesto pledges are usually organised into a single large document, they are disseminated indirectly via these channels. Costello and Thomson (2008) found that 40% of the total pledges made in party manifestos were mentioned by the Irish media in advance of the 2002 election, with the programmes of the two largest parties receiving by far the most attention.

Finally, manifesto documents are a common source of data for political scientists (see e.g. Benoit, Laver and Mikhaylov 2009). The dataset released by the MARPOR Manifesto Project, which measures party "thematic emphasis" by counting the percentage of manifesto content dedicated to different themes, is the most popular source of party position estimates in the literature (Gemenis 2013). The Manifesto Project coding scheme, however, is underpinned by a set of "very distinctive theoretical assumptions" (Laver et al. 2003:312) in the form of the "saliency theory" of party competition. This theory holds that parties do not compete on the basis of substantive policy positions, but that they attempt to dominate

the public discourse with issues which they believe they "own" (Budge and Farlie 1983). Hofferbert and Budge went so far as to state that investigations of the programme-to-policy linkage "cannot be based on analyses of specific pledges" (1992:154). Given what is known about the content of manifesto documents, the widespread importance and fulfilment of specific campaign promises, and the way party positions are disseminated via the mass media, political scientists should look beyond thematic emphasis to consider how election pledges impact upon vote choice.

Existing research on voting behaviour, however, pays little to no attention to the impact of specific campaign promises. In the literature on prospective voting, most scholars focus on ideological congruence between party and voter policy positions, or expected performance, which often conflates prospective judgments with retrospective information (Lacy and Christenson 2017, Rosema 2006). How past promises and their subsequent fulfilment (or not) might enter the retrospective calculus at subsequent elections has rarely been contemplated. Rather than asking whether voters are attracted by party promises when they are being made, this would mean asking whether voters reward or punish incumbents for fulfilling or breaking promises that got them elected in the first place.

Though the literature on citizen evaluations of pledges is growing, so far only a small handful of studies have investigated the effect of these evaluations on attitudes toward governing parties. Elinder et al. (2015) used 1991-2002 panel data from the Swedish Election Study to assess whether voters who were personally affected by specific promises and then executed changes to childcare provisions (i.e. parents with small children) responded more to initial government pledges or the consequences of the executed policies. Their findings indicate that citizens react strongly to policy promises when they are made, but suggest that implementation has no impact on subsequent attitudes. Thomson (2017) reports that Irish citizens' evaluations of promise keeping affected the development of their party identification. This finding sits neatly with the revisionist understanding of party identification as a running tally of citizens' assessments of parties' performance (Fiorina 1981).

More recently, Naurin, Soroka and Markwat (2019a) used data from a large-n Swedish survey experiment to show that being primed to think of broken pledges exerts more influence on government performance evaluations than being primed to think of fulfilled pledges. This dynamic is ascribed to negativity bias, an individual-level psychological mechanism whereby people assign greater weight to negative information than positive information. This dynamic has also been identified in studies of perceived overall government performance and vote choice (Boyne et al. 2009). To put it another way, it seems that while voters punish bad performance, they do not especially reward good performance. Naurin et al. (2019a) also argue more generally that governments are "damned if they do, damned if they don't" carry out their promises, since the votes retained or gained from party sympathisers as a result of fulfilment do not offset those lost among citizens unsympathetic to the substance of the policies.

Our approach has two advantages over previous studies. Unlike Elinder et al. (2015), we consider a range of policy areas and investigate the direct connection between real pledges and voter perceptions of fulfilment. Our decision to estimate the impact of perceived rather than actual pledge fulfilment as part of the retrospective calculus of voting is in line with the ways in which retrospective voting models operate in general: a voter can only reward or punish an incumbent for actions they have come to notice. This approach was also taken by Naurin et al. (2019a). However, their sample was a cross-section taken between elections, they used government evaluations rather than vote choice as their dependent

variable, and also theirs is a study of priming where voters are being made aware of individual pledges that they are told have either been fulfilled or not. As a result, they could not examine the impact of pledge fulfilment perceptions on actual vote choice, or trace voters from one election to the next. Hence, our contribution builds substantially on previous studies. In the next section, we derive several hypotheses about the role of pledge fulfilment perceptions in vote choice.

Expectations

Our main expectation is that voters' evaluations of the extent to which governing parties fulfilled their previous pledges factors in to their voting decisions. It is therefore apt to consider the determinants of voters' evaluations of pledge fulfilment. Despite overwhelmingly negative perceptions of pledge fulfilment in general (Naurin 2011), many citizens are capable of recognizing kept and broken promises when asked about individual pledges. Studies interrogating the accuracy of evaluations of specific pledges have found that, although various heuristics bias voter perceptions, real-world fulfilment status is among the strongest predictors of a correct assessment (Thomson 2011; Naurin and Oscarsson 2017; Pétry and Duval 2017; Thomson and Brandenburg 2019). Public disdain for politics in the abstract does not entirely skew voters' assessments of reality. Consequently, the impact of voters' perceptions of pledge fulfilment can be seen as a proxy for the impact of governing parties' actual performance in terms of pledge fulfilment. We cannot, however, include actual performance as an explanatory variable in the present research, because this would have the same values for all respondents in our sample.

Perceived pledge fulfilment is, of course, also affected by a range of individual-level characteristics and heuristics. Arguably, the most important of these is partisanship, and we control for this variable in our models. Supporters of a party in power are more likely to believe that party fulfilled its pledges than non-supporters. Research on perceived pledge fulfilment also controls for partisanship, and several other individual-level characteristics such as trust and knowledge. Even after controlling for these variables, actual fulfilment status is a major determinant of perceptions. This demonstrates that that voters can and do realistically assess the extent to which government parties deliver on their pre-election promises. That being the case, we posit a straightforward formulation of the "responsible electorate" hypothesis.

> *H1: Voters who evaluate a governing party's previous pledges as fulfilled (unfulfilled) are more (less) likely to vote for that party.*

The context in which we are testing the impact of pledge evaluations is one of coalition government, but we assume here that parties only benefit from delivering on their own promises, not from delivering on promises their coalition partner made.

This coalition context also allows us to test an additional interesting hypothesis about how the impact of pledge fulfilment varies by prior vote choice:

> *H2: Voters who voted for the party that made the pledges are more influenced in their voting behaviour by their evaluations of that party's record of pledge fulfilment than voters who did not vote for the party.*

Voters who voted for the governing party have more of a stake in that party's performance, which should mean a stronger motivation to reward or punish those parties for their pledge fulfilment. As

expected by Downs (1957), voters who gave a party a mandate to govern by electing them on the basis of their programmes should be more invested in the delivery of that mandate.

However, pledge fulfilment is not solely about parties fulfilling their commitment to voters who may have been persuaded by their promises last time around. Pledge fulfilment can also be about reputation building. According to the valence model (Clarke et al. 2004; 2009), governing is about performance, proving a party's value as the team that manages public affairs well. Since elections are not one-off affairs, incumbents can hope to attract new voters by proving that they are reliable promise keepers. This means that while we do expect that perceived pledge fulfilment matters *more* for voters who previously voted for the party in question, we also expect some effect on previous opposition voters. But we can be more specific here: a governing party reassures existing voters by delivering on issues it owns (Petrocik 1996), while it builds reputation and attracts erstwhile opposition voters by delivering on issues that the opposition owns.

> *H3a: Perceptions of pledge fulfilment retain voters when the pledge was in a policy area most salient to core voters of the promising party.*
>
> *H3b: Perceptions of pledge fulfilment recruit new voters when the pledge was in a policy area most salient to opposition voters.*

In our case, we have two prototypical cases of issues that lend themselves to this kind of analysis. One of the pledges we include in our analysis is about immigration, an issue of particular salience to Conservative voters and one important to the party because of the challenge, at the time, of UKIP to its right. We expect that perceived pledge fulfilment on immigration will matter more for retaining existing Conservative voters than winning new recruits. Another issue we include is health, a traditional Labour issue on which Conservatives have long struggled to gain the public's confidence. We posit that existing Conservative voters from 2010 are unmoved about the NHS pledge, while those who voted for other parties, especially Labour, are more likely to vote Tory if they think the government delivered on the party's pledge to ring-fence or increase health spending year on year.

Finally, it is noteworthy that we study coalition government in a country that typically produces single-party governments with clear assignment of responsibility. In coalition governments, it is typically the larger coalition partner that is punished and rewarded more than the junior partner (Fisher and Hobolt 2010). We expect this to be true in the UK. Indeed, the majoritarian political culture is likely to reinforce the dynamic. Hence, we hypothesise that perceived pledge fulfilment is likely to matter more (if not exclusively) where voting for or against the Conservatives, than voting for or against the junior partner, the Liberal Democrats.

> *H4: The effect of perceived pledge fulfilment is a stronger determinant of voting for the larger coalition partner than for the junior coalition partner.*

Since we conceptualise perceived pledge fulfilment as part of the retrospective calculus of voting, we need to control for variables typically used in models of retrospective voting – evaluations of national and personal economic development, evaluations of party leaders and the like – in order to assess comparatively how much of the reward or punishment that is dished out to governing parties is down to their pledge fulfilment or promise-breaking, respectively (Healy and Malhotra 2013). As noted above, we also control for partisanship, which has been found to impact upon perceived pledge fulfilment.

Data

The data we examine come from the British Election Study Internet Panel (Fieldhouse et al. 2019), and refer to British citizens' evaluations of the fulfilment of six specific election pledges that were made in the campaign prior to the 2010 British General Election. Citizens' evaluations of the fulfilment of these pledges were measured in February-March 2014 in the first wave of the British Election Study's Internet Panel. We selected six election pledges from the 2010 election campaign to put to the public in 2014 to obtain their evaluations of fulfilment. Three of the pledges were made by the Conservatives and four by the Liberal Democrats (one was made by both parties). The selected pledges vary with respect to fulfilment: two were not fulfilled, two were partially fulfilled, and two were fully fulfilled. The six pledges were chosen to cover policy areas that respondents report as the most important: economy, health, education, immigration, domestic security and pensions.

The first two pledges we describe are the unfulfilled ones. The first pledge is the Liberal Democrats' promise to "scrap tuition fees" in higher education. As part of the coalition agreement, the party dropped this manifesto promise and instead agreed with the Conservatives to treble tuition fees to a maximum of £9,000 per annum, which resulted in widespread student demonstrations. Given the large amount of media attention given to this unfulfilled pledge, including the public apology by the Liberal Democrats for breaking it, we expect the overwhelming majority of people to identify this pledge as unfulfilled.

Second, we include the Conservatives' unfulfilled pledge to "take steps to take net migration back to the levels of the 1990s – tens of thousands a year, not hundreds of thousands". There was no decline in net migration after 2010, but rather an increase over the course of the coalition's time in office. Net migration first declined from over 200,000 in 2010 to 150,000 in the middle of 2012, and then rose again to over 300,000 in 2014. A considerable amount of media attention was given to this issue and the Conservative Party's promise on it.

The next two pledges were fully fulfilled. The third pledge is the promise made separately by both parties in their 2010 manifestos, to "scrap ID cards and the next generation of biometric passports". The introduction of ID cards was set out by the previous Labour administration in the Identity Cards Act 2006 but not carried out before 2010, and both Conservatives and Liberal Democrats pledged to scrap the plan entirely when in office. They included this pledge in the coalition agreement and the Identity Card Act 2006 was indeed repealed in 2010. Hence, this is a fulfilled pledge. Fourth, the Liberal Democrats pledged to "scrap compulsory retirement ages, allowing those who wish to continue in work to do so". This election pledge was fulfilled, as default retirement ages were phased out by the end of September 2011.

We also include two partially fulfilled pledges. The fifth pledge is the Conservatives' pledge "to increase health spending in real terms every year". In 2012 the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority wrote a letter to Health Secretary in which he stated that this had not been achieved, and indeed that expenditure in 2011-12 had been lower than 2009-10, but that "given the small size of the changes and the uncertainties associated with them, it might also be fair to say that real terms expenditure had changed little over this period".[1] Given the severe cuts to other departments, we consider the ring-fencing of Health spending and real increases in some years to constitute partial fulfilment of the pledge. Sixth and

[1] https://fullfact.org/health/nhs-spending-rising-or-falling/

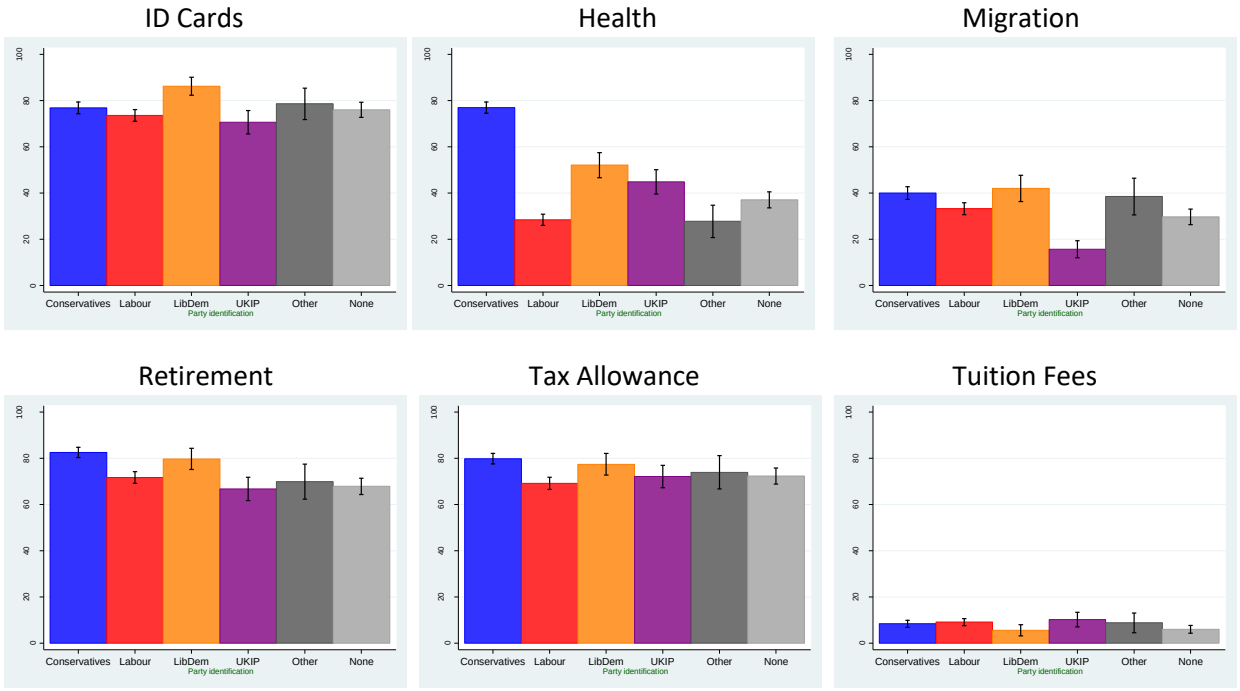
finally, we selected the Liberal Democrats' promise to raise the tax-free personal allowance to £10,000 for the start of the financial year 2011-2012. This is a partially fulfilled promise, insofar as it took two years longer than stated to raise the tax-free allowance to the promised level. It was finally raised to £10,000 by the beginning of the new tax year in May 2014.

BESIP provides us with a reasonable set of control variables. We include some basic socio-economic variables: age, gender, education (coded as having a degree or not) and class (derived from the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification that is included in the panel data, from which we constructed the simple three-class version "Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations", "Intermediate occupations" and "Routine and manual occupations"). We include two policy scales, measuring the distance of the respondent's own position on a 0-10 EU integration and a 0-10 redistribution scale from the perceived position of the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats. We selected three variables as typical measures of valence politics: party identification, a 0-10 like-dislike variable concerning party leaders (in our case David Cameron and Nick Clegg), and a 5-point scale measuring retrospective economic development ("How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months?"). Finally, we use a 2010 vote variable which, as noted, is not a recall question but the respondent's own contemporaneous answer, recorded at the time by YouGov and included here as part of a respondent's prior profile.

Findings

We first examine the extent to which our main explanatory variable, perceived pledge fulfilment, relates to actual fulfilment and partisanship. As previous research has shown in other contexts, partisanship is one of the heuristics that respondents use when evaluating pledge fulfilment, but not to the extent that pledge evaluations become mere reflections of partisan preferences (Thomson 2011, Pétry and Duval 2017). In Figure 1, we show how different partisans evaluated all six of our pledges. For each of the six pledges we show the percentage within each partisan group that considers the pledge fulfilled, with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1: Percent perceiving a pledge to be fulfilled, by party identification



For four of the six pledges, we find remarkably little cross-partisan variation. The ID Cards pledge, a fulfilled joint Liberal Democrat and Tory promise, and the two partially or fully fulfilled Liberal Democrat pledges on retirement and tax allowance are widely perceived as fulfilled. In each case, supporters of the two incumbent parties are slightly more likely to consider the pledge as fulfilled, but rarely are the differences to opposition party supporters statistically significant. The same is the case with the unfulfilled tuition fee pledge, which almost all respondents agreed was not fulfilled.

The two exceptions are the partially fulfilled Conservative health pledge, and their unfulfilled migration pledge. The health pledge is considered fulfilled by a large majority of Conservative supporters and by about half of Liberal Democrat identifiers, but considered unfulfilled by almost three quarters of Labour supporters, and by equally many supporters of "other" parties, which include mostly left-of centre parties like the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens. In contrast, the migration pledge sees roughly equal distributions across all major parties, apart from UKIP whose supporters are much more critical in their assessment of pledge fulfilment.

The first control variable we introduce is past vote choice at the 2010 General Election. This is not a recall variable (which tends to always be confounded with projection from current partisanship), but a measure of stated vote choice from YouGov panels at the time of the last election. This control also allows us to test whether perceived pledge fulfilment helps more to retain previous voters or to recruit new ones.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show again bar charts with confidence intervals that report the relationship between perceived pledge fulfilment and 2015 vote choice for erstwhile voters of the promising parties when the promise was made versus those who did not vote for the respective party in 2010. Figure 2.1 looks at all three of the Conservative pledges. The ID Cards pledge matters for neither group. The Conservatives retained over 75% of their 2010 voters and recruited about 15% of new voters in 2015, but in neither

case were they more successful among those who thought the pledge was fulfilled than among those who didn't. The story is very different for both the Health and the Migration pledge. The Health pledge works for both groups, but seemingly more as a recruitment than a retention tool. Perceived fulfilment increases retention of 2010 Tory voters by over 20 percentage points, which is more than the difference for new voters in absolute terms, but in relative terms new recruitment balloons with perceived fulfilment, more than quadrupling.

There is also a significant bivariate effect of the migration pledge on Conservative vote choice, but in this case we only find an impact among previous Tory voters. They are more likely to continue to vote for the party if they perceived the pledge to be fulfilled, whereas no such impact is found for those who had not voted for the Conservatives before.

Figure 2.1: Conservative vote share in 2015, by perceived pledge fulfilment and vote in 2010

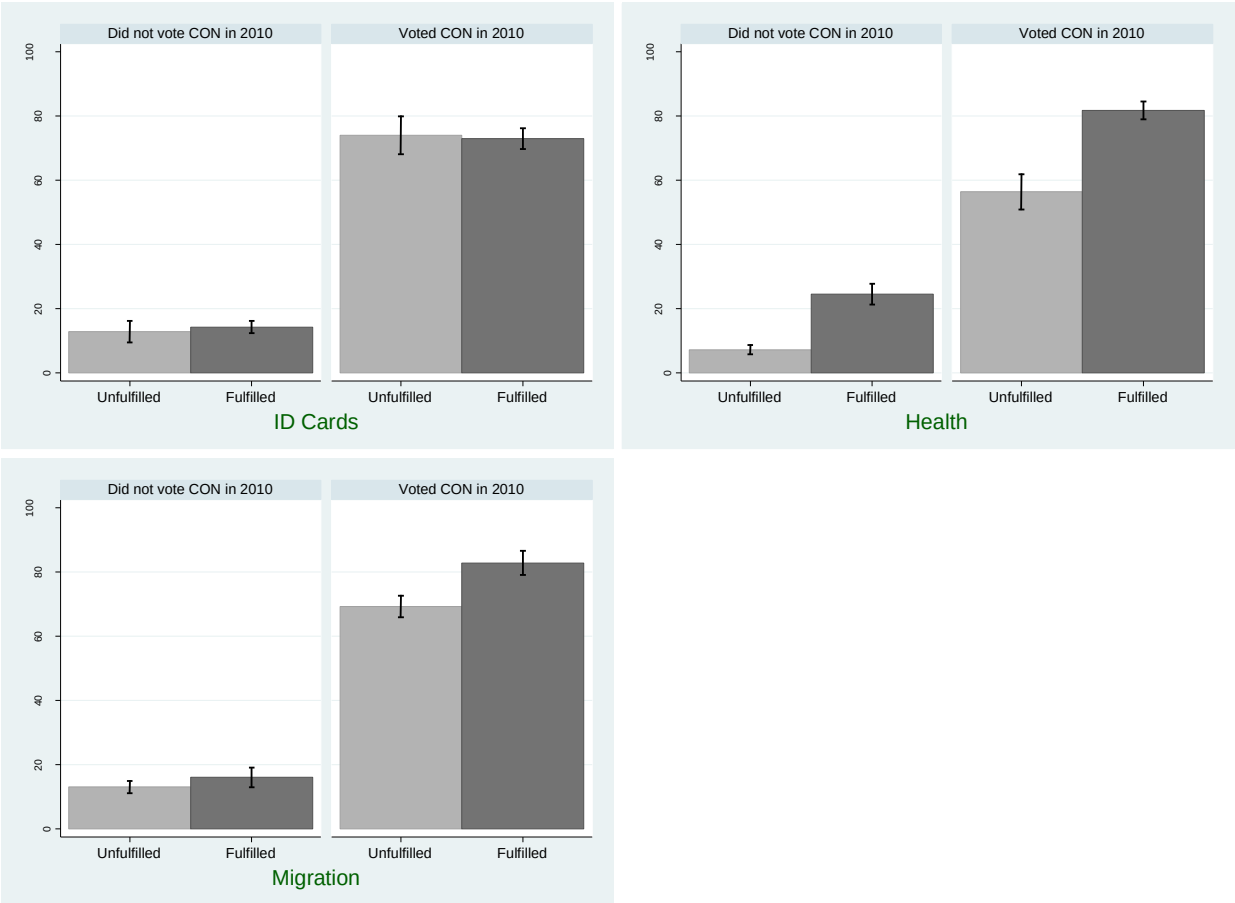
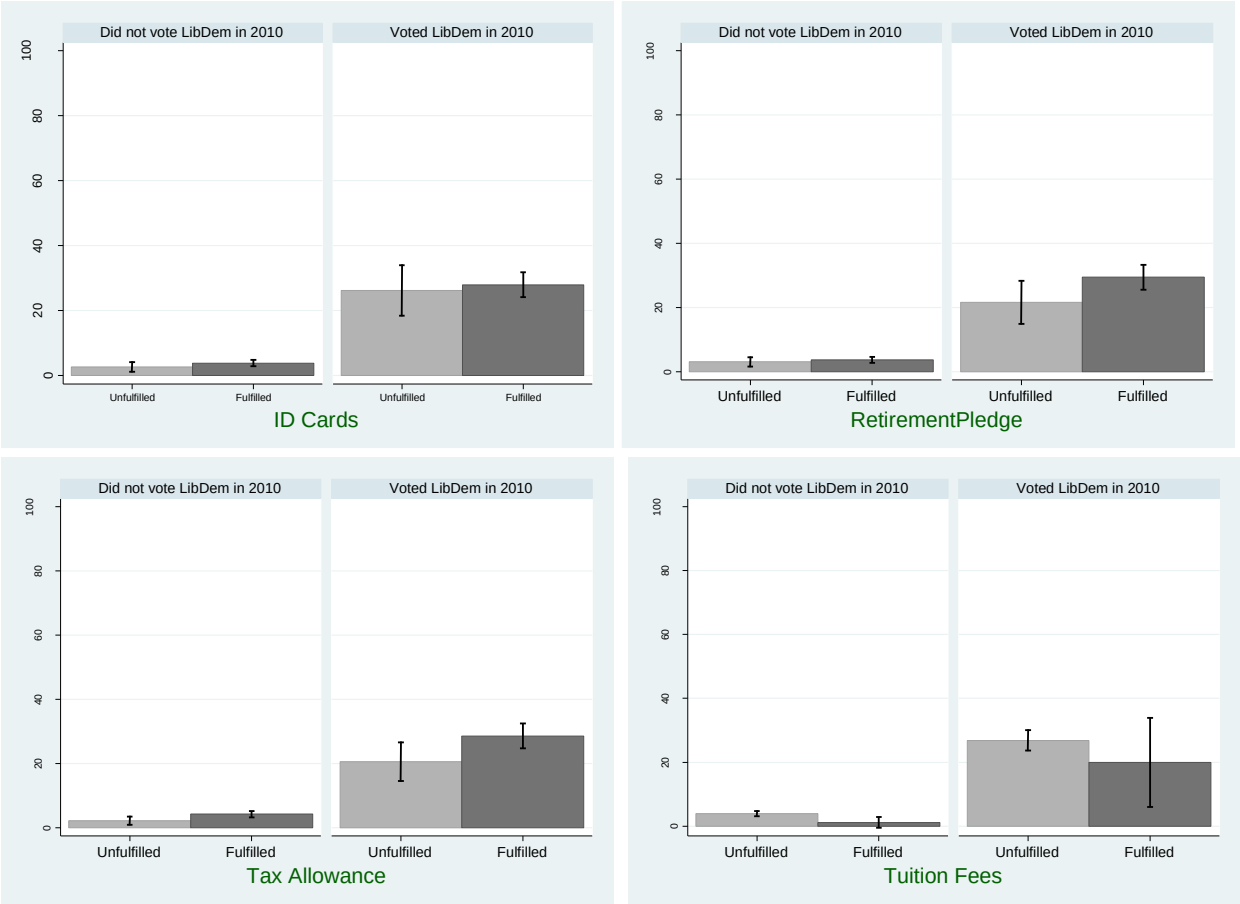


Figure 2.2: Liberal Democrat vote share in 2015, by perceived pledge fulfilment and vote in 2010



Moving on to the Liberal Democrat pledges, we find no impact of perceived pledge fulfilment on vote choice. Even though their two fulfilled pledges were largely understood as such (Figure 1), the Liberal Democrats reaped no benefits in terms of increased vote share among those who recognised pledge fulfilment. Likewise, the most notorious broken promise of the 2010 election concerning tuition fees had no marginal effect, because almost all respondents recognised non-fulfilment. The absence of an effect is largely due to our individual-level research design. With individual-level analysis using survey data, we are never directly measuring reward or punishment for governing parties' *actual* accomplishments but only their *perceived* accomplishments. Any case of success or failure in government that is so clear-cut as to result in homogenous evaluation does not provide the possibility to measure the impact of these evaluations.

So far, the analysis indicates a number of things. Retrospective pledge evaluations may matter for vote choice, but only for the major party. Pledge fulfilment perceptions also vary as to whether they serve as a voter retention or recruitment tool, depending on the nature of the policy area in which the pledge was made. Before presenting more complete models that allow us to comprehensively control for alternative explanations of vote choice and test in detail how much pledge evaluations add to our understanding of retrospective voting, we will test one of the main hypotheses –H4, that retrospective pledge evaluations primarily (if not solely) matter for the main coalition partner.

Table 1 presents a simple multinomial model, which controls only for prior vote choice. Table 1 basically combines the variables from Figures 2.1 and 2.2 into one model. The reference category for the Vote in 2010 variable in the multinomial model is voting for any party other than Conservatives or Liberal Democrats in 2010. The model also includes interactions with the Vote in 2010 variable. Not surprisingly, voting for the respective party in 2010 makes a respondent considerably more likely to vote again for the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats in 2015. Note how none of the pledge variables, including any interactions, produce significant effects on Liberal Democrat vote choice. Some effects are positive, but none reach statistical significance. For the Conservatives, by contrast, we find strong corroboration of what we saw earlier. There is a very strong direct effect of the health pledge variable. This means that voters who voted for parties other than the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats in 2010, and who perceived the health pledge as fulfilled, were significantly more likely to vote Conservative in 2015, than similar voters who perceived the health pledge as unfulfilled. The negative interaction between the health pledge variable and Con2010 indicates a weaker (but still positive) effect of perceived health pledge fulfilment on voting Conservative for those who voted Conservative in 2010. In contrast, for the migration pledge there is a significant interaction effect, but no direct effect. This means that only those who had previously voted Conservative became more likely to do so again if they thought the migration pledge was fulfilled, or of course less likely to do so if they thought the migration pledge had not been fulfilled.

Table 1 – Multinomial Model of Pledge Effects on Conservative Vote Choice in 2015

	Voting Conservative		**Voting Liberal Democrat**	
	b(SE)	*p*	*b(SE)*	*p*
Vote in 2010				
Conservatives	2.76 (.44)***	.00	.83 (1.01)	.41
Liberal Democrat	2.76 (.59)	.54	2.12 (.69)**	.00
Pledges and interactions				
ID Cards pledge	.20 (.28)	.47	.54 (.53)	.31
Con2010 x ID Cards	-.21 (.25)	.55	-.82 (.75)	.27
Lib2010 x ID Cards	-.69 (.44)	.11	-.70 (.60)	.24
Health pledge	1.49 (.25)***	.00	-.07 (.46)	.88
Con2010 x Health	-.65 (.32)*	.04	-.76 (.66)	.25
Lib2010 x Health	.25 (.40)	.54	.91 (.52)	.08
Migration pledge	-.21 (.26)	.428	.35 (.44)	.43
Con2010 x Migration	.91 (.34)**	.01	.85 (.65)	.19
Lib2010 x Migration	.49 (.40)	.02	-.14 (.50)	.78
Retirement pledge	.14 (.31)	.66	-.21 (.49)	.67
Con2010 x Retirement	.02 (.38)	.97	.96 (.83)	.25
Lib2010 x Retirement	.41 (.50)	.41	1.01 (.58)	.08
Tax allowance pledge	-.07 (.27)	.79	.27 (.50)	.59
Con2010 x Tax	.48 (.35)	.18	.61 (.83)	.47
Lib2010 x Tax	.20 (.46)	.67	-.16 (.57)	.78
Tuition fee pledge	-.04 (.39)	.93	-.08 (.78)	.92
Con2010 x Tuition	-.23 (.51)	.64	-14.14 (711.54)	.98
Lib2010 x Tuition	-.94 (.77)	.22	-.62 (.933)	.51
Constant	-2.80 (.34)***	.00	-3.76 (.58)***	.00
N	1,892			

Log Likelihood	-1,209.2872
Likelihood ratio Chi-Square	1,058.28
Pseudo R^2	.30

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

We can draw some conclusions from these analyses. The Liberal Democrats did not benefit from perceived fulfilment of their pledges, despite widespread acknowledgement of fulfilment of both the retirement and tax allowance pledge. This is qualified by the strong likelihood that they were punished for the broken tuition fee promise, but as noted above, these data do not allow us to test this directly. So it appears that the major party is retrospectively evaluated more rigorously on whether or not it kept key promises. Thus, H1 finds some support, but this is qualified by the findings in favour of H4. In addition, there seem to be major differences between the two pledges of importance: The Conservative's health pledge matters for voters who did not vote Conservative in 2010, while the Conservative's migration matters for voters who previously did vote Conservative. This raises doubts over the general applicability of H2: it is not always those who voted for the party for whom pledge fulfilment matters. Instead, this analysis gives initial support to hypotheses H3a and H3b: immigration is an issue that is key to traditional Conservative voters and matters to them more than to others, while health is an issue that Conservatives do not "own", and it rather seems to matter to those who did not vote Conservative when the pledge was made.

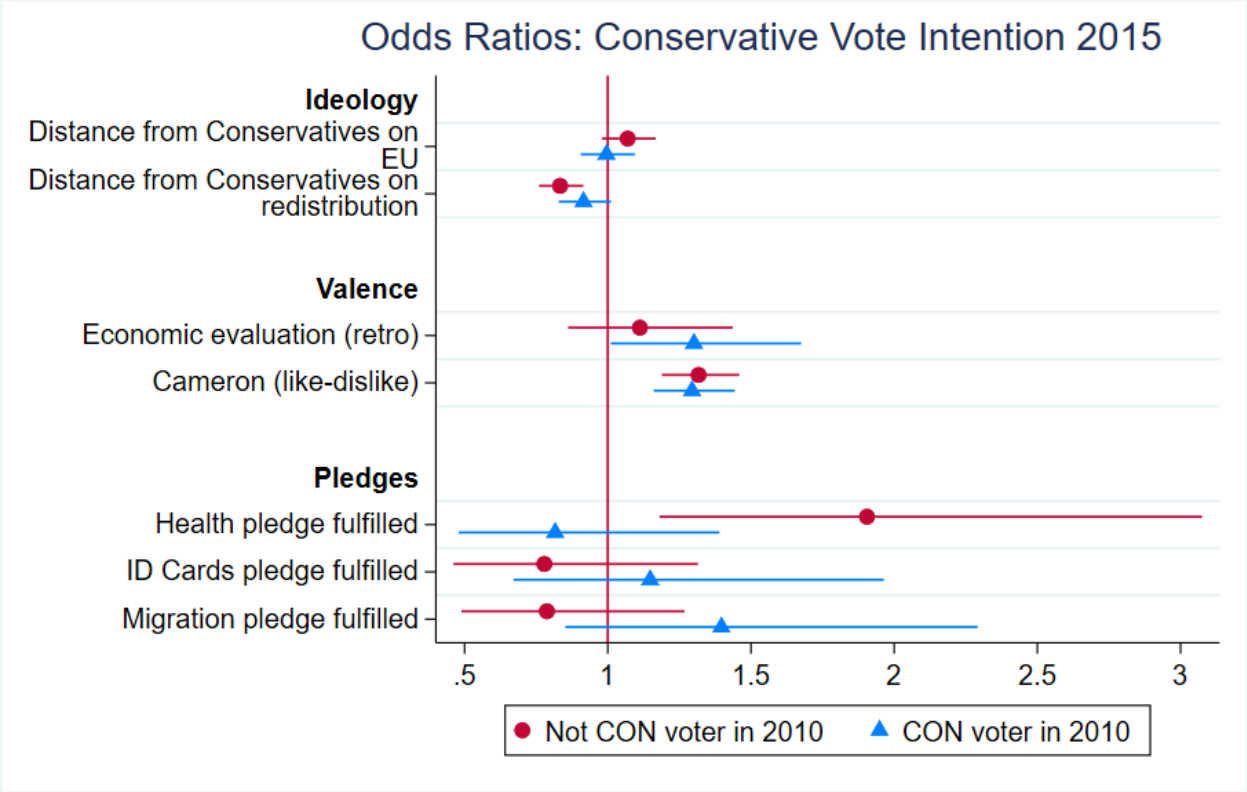
We now focus exclusively on the Conservative pledges, which allows for a simpler modelling strategy. When introducing control variables, we now do not need to include measures of ideological proximity to the Liberal Democrats, or Liberal Democrat leader assessments etc. Since our sample sizes are not huge, it is important not to overload the model.

In the following, we run a series of logistic regressions predicting Conservative vote intention in 2014 and vote choice in 2015, controlling for socio-economic characteristics (age, gender, education, class), ideology (self-reported distance from the Conservatives on an EU integration as well as a redistribution scale), and a range of typical measures from the valence politics model (party identification, retrospective economic evaluations, leader evaluations). We run separate models for respondents who voted for the Conservatives in 2010 and those who did not to permit easy comparison.

The results of the logistic regressions are shown in Table 2 and Table 3 in the Appendix, which report coefficients with standard errors, odds ratios and p-values. Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 show plots of the odds ratios from these models, with sociodemographics and party ID omitted from display (the former since they are controls and the latter due to its enormous effect). Across these models, we find that the perceived fulfilment of specific pledges has clear effects on vote choice, and that these vary according to the electoral context and party support.

For 2015, we find no statistically significant effect of perceived pledge fulfilment status on previous Conservative voters. However, we find that voters who did not vote for the Conservatives in 2010 were nearly twice as likely to vote for the party in 2015 if they believed the NHS spending pledge had been honoured. Remarkably, after party identification, in our models this variable is the strongest predictor of 2010 non-Tory voters choosing the party in 2015. Here we find more qualified support for H1. Perceived pledge fulfilment by a governing party *does* make citizens more likely to vote for them. But this seems to only apply to particular pledges or issue areas.

Figure 3.1: Marginal effects on Conservative vote choice in 2015



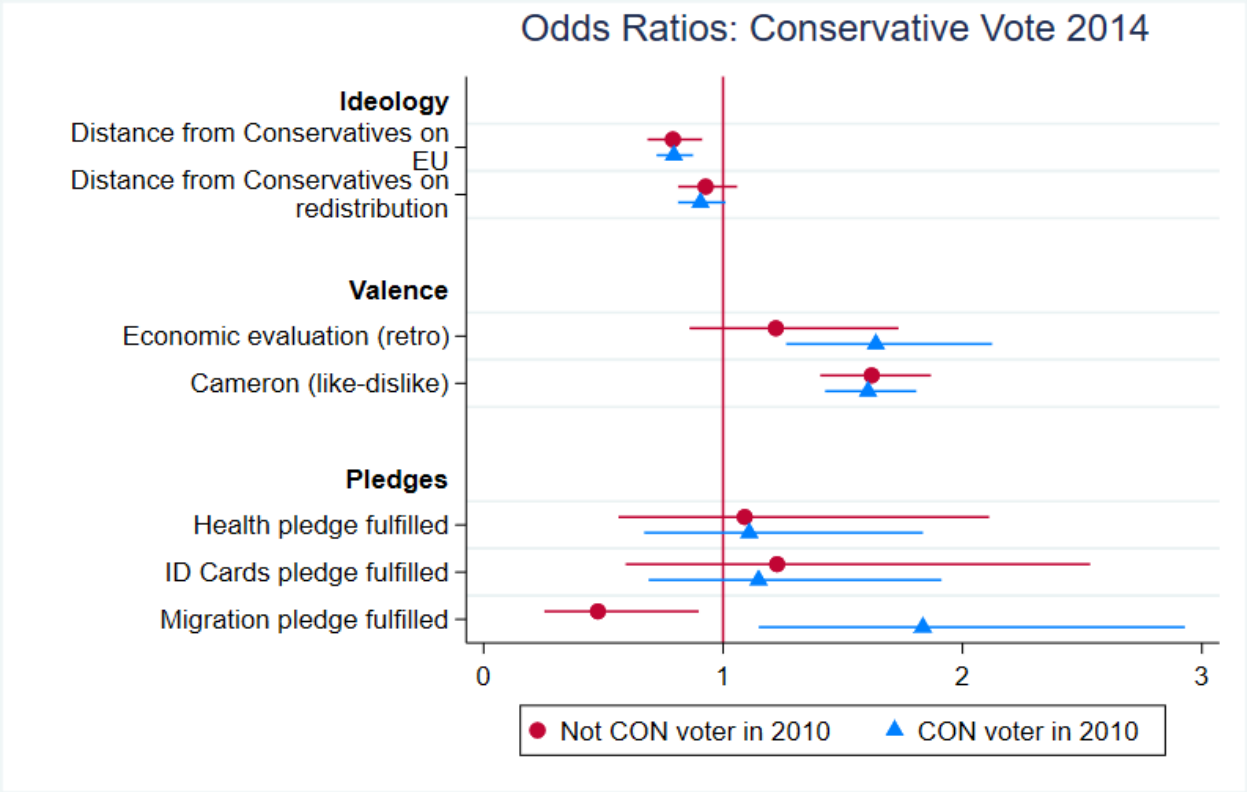
Note: Figure shows marginal effects from logistic regression using standardized variables (z-scores)

H2 meanwhile, which stated that pledge fulfilment should matter more for those with a stake in the promises (i.e. previous voters), finds no support from this evidence. Together, these findings somewhat confound expectations by suggesting that, in the correct context, party responsibility can win new voters rather than simply retain existing ones. This contradicts the findings of Naurin et al. (2019) to some extent. It seems that the Conservatives did not hang on to any voters because of how they delivered on what they promised to them in 2010. But they made inroads elsewhere, recruiting new voters among those who believed the party had followed through on its promise to ringfence NHS spending. That could be interpreted as the Conservatives having, at least with some voters, overcome their stigma of not being trusted with the NHS. Indeed, this perceived confounding of typical issue ownership dynamics may be what convinced these voters to switch. Finally, it is also worth noting that the apparent effect of the migration pledge on core Tory voters loses significance once we control for other determinants of the vote.

We turn now to the additional analysis of vote choice at the 2014 EU election, during Wave 1 of the panel study, which is when we asked the pledge evaluation questions. The findings are presented in Table 3 and Figure 3.2 and are unexpected. The health pledge has no effect, but the migration pledge matters greatly; its effect is significant and positive for prior Conservative voters and negative for all others, with a relatively high odds ratio of 1.83. Again, aside from party identification, this variable is the strongest predictor of vote choice in the model. So if respondents voted for the party when the promise was made, they were more likely to consider doing so again in 2014 if they thought the party had delivered on its promise, and less so if they thought the party had broken it. When we asked the

questions in 2014, H2 found more support than when the next election came along in 2015. What these findings suggest, however, is that the pledge itself, its issue area and the wider electoral context are more important than the simple question of promise fulfilment.

Figure 3.2: Marginal effects on Conservative vote intention in 2014



Among those who voted for other parties, respondents were slightly less likely to switch to the Conservatives if they believed the party had kept its promise on immigration. The vast majority of those who did not vote for the Conservatives in 2010 are Labour and Liberal Democrat voters, who care less about immigration and often have positive attitudes towards immigration. So curbing immigration would not actually be a vote winner with many of this group. Furthermore, health does not yet appear to matter in 2014, and we find that both ideology and valence variables have much stronger effects than they do one year later when the election takes place.

These two analyses reveal some interesting dynamics in how pledge evaluations come to matter. For the reward from perceived fulfilment of the health pledge to come to fruition, voters needed to see the term out and only came around at the very end. In contrast, the migration pledge mattered at some stage through the electoral cycle, but not by the time the next election happened. What made the migration pledge effect temporary and disappear on election day? There are two possible explanations for this. One is that the pledge remained unfulfilled, so perceived fulfilment amounts to a misperception. Perhaps those who still gave the Conservatives the benefit of the doubt when we asked the question on the matter simply realised over the next year that the promise had been broken and reversed their judgment. That would mean any extra votes gained from perceived pledge fulfilment in 2014 were lost by the time the election happened in 2015.

An alternative explanation focuses on the negative side of the equation: the main impact of the migration pledge evaluation on vote intention in 2014 may have come from those deserting the Conservatives at the time we asked the question. These voters could have moved over to UKIP out of disappointment with continuing immigration flows. But when the election in 2015 came around, these erstwhile deserters of the party may have reconsidered and placed the prospect of an outright election win for the Tories ahead of their protest over continuing immigration, thus rendering retrospective migration pledge evaluation irrelevant for vote choice.

It is difficult to test these competing explanation directly, but we can study some observable implications of these propositions. If the first story that respondents corrected a misperception is true, we should see something of a flow of voters away from the Conservative party between 2014 and 2015 among those who thought the pledge was kept. However if the second story is true - that some deserted the party in 2014 out of protest about a failed immigration policy but returned when it mattered on election day in 2015 - we should see a flow away from the Conservative party, particularly towards UKIP between 2010 and 2014, among those who thought the promise was broken, but with many returning back to the fold in 2015. A simple way to illustrate this is the use of Sankey diagrams.

Only focusing on those who voted Conservatives in 2010, Figures 4.1 and 4.2 present the their pathways through 2014 to 2015, i.e. showing those who stuck with their party throughout, those who switched permanently to another party, and those who moved away and then came back. Figure 4.1 focuses on those who considered the migration pledge unfulfilled, easily the larger group (the size of the two diagrams reflects the number of voters in each group). Figure 4.1 indeed shows that among those 2010 Conservative voters who thought the party had broken its migration promise, around half left the party by 2014, most of them switching to UKIP. But by the time of the 2015 election, the Conservatives had recovered the majority of these voters who had deserted them for UKIP.

In contrast, Figure 4.2 shows very little movement among those who thought the party had kept its migration promise (i.e. those who misperceived the promise as fulfilled). The Conservatives lost a small percentage of voters among this group as well between 2010 and 2014, although a lot less, but during the year running up to the election, they recaptured more than they incurred new losses.

Figure 4.1 Pathways of 2010 Conservative voters considering migration pledge unfulfilled:

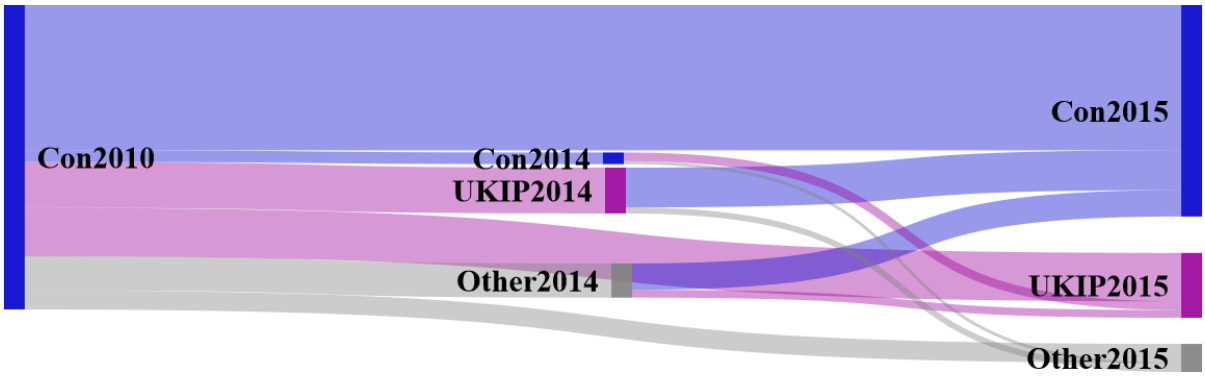
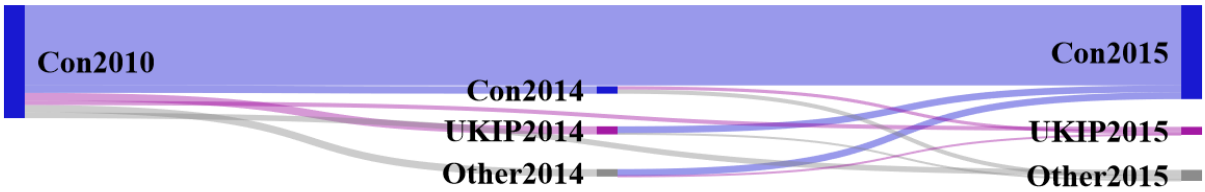


Figure 4.2 Pathways of 2010 Conservative voters considering migration pledge fulfilled:



This provides circumstantial evidence for the second proposition discussed above. The disappearance of a significant effect of perceptions regarding the migration pledge on vote choice can be attributed to Conservative voters flirting with anti-immigration UKIP between elections before returning to their party when it mattered.

Conclusions

This study provides some of the first empirical insights into the extent to which perceived fulfilment or non-fulfilment of key election promises plays a role in subsequent individual-level vote choices. Our research contributes to the literature on the role of election pledges in democratic representation and voting behaviour. We find significant evidence that the perceived fulfilment of pledges enters into voters' decision-making calculus. This evidence partially supports V.O. Key's (1966) idea of a responsible electorate consisting of voters who reward or punish office holders for their performance in government. However, as demonstrated by Mellon et al. (2018), not all pledges are equal in the eyes of voters, and we find that only two of the six key pledges examined are associated with significant effects. Voters' issue priorities and parties' issue ownership matter greatly for the extent to which perceptions of pledge fulfilment impact upon voting decisions.

The impact of perceptions of pledge fulfilment differ by the power of the party concerned. Previous research on the attribution of credit and blame in coalitions found that the larger coalition partners are rewarded and punished more than junior partners (Fisher and Hobolt 2010). Likewise, we find that perceptions of pledge fulfilment by the Conservative Party sometimes matter, but not perceptions of pledge fulfilment by the Liberal Democrats. We qualify this conclusion, however, by noting that our analysis does not allow us to directly measure how much the Lib Dems were punished for their broken promise on tuition fees, since almost all voters evaluated this pledge as unfulfilled. Nonetheless, the more marked effects for the Conservatives suggest that voters hold the more powerful party to account

for performance, rather than the junior partner. Voters appear well aware of the importance of prime ministerial power, which also features prominently in many theories of policymaking in coalitions.

The more nuanced findings can be interpreted in the light of theories of issue ownership in party competition (Budge and Farlie 1983; Hofferbert and Budge 1992). However, we add the insight that being perceived to perform well on an issue it does not own can win a party new voters. The Conservatives were rewarded by voters who had previously voted for its opponents but believed the Conservatives delivered on their health spending pledge. Health is an issue the Conservatives are not traditionally trusted on. This reward materialised at the end of the government's term, the point at which voters have the most information about pledge fulfilment. Meanwhile, the broken promise to reduce migration, an issue of which the Conservatives have greater ownership, led to a considerable number of previous Tory voters deserting the party and supporting UKIP (perhaps even voting for them in the 2014 European election). But they came back into the Conservative fold when it mattered at the ballot box for a first-order contest in 2015.

These findings both reinforce and challenge the limited existing evidence. Our findings align with those of Naurin et al. (2019a) who found that perceived pledge fulfilment status has a modest but evident impact on voter attitudes, and that voter agreement or disagreement with the policy content of pledges interacts with perceived fulfilment status. However, unlike those authors, we identify a scenario in which a party was able to overcome the apparent "cost of governing" in the context of election pledges. The Conservatives recovered from a loss of support by breaking a promise partly by attracting new voters by fulfilling a pledge in an issue area typically owned by its main opponent. Their finding that "the negative effect of pledge breakage is larger than the positive effect of pledge fulfilment" (Naurin et al., 2019a, p. 20) may not generalise to every country, election or issue context. Unlike Naurin et al.'s study, which examined a cross-section of respondents at one time point, we followed the same respondents for several years. This enabled us to show that sometimes promise-breaking has only temporary consequences. Habitual party supporters might calculate that ensuring their party wins a majority outweighs the temptation to punish it relentlessly for broken promises. Moreover, our analysis suggests that pledge fulfilment is not only about retaining existing voters but also winning over new ones, perhaps even enough to offset the loss of some previous supporters. In the cases we examined, this happened when a party was perceived to deliver in an issue area it does not historically own and where expectations were low.

Beyond these specific findings, this study plants the evaluation of campaign promises in the ground of theories of retrospective voting (Lewis-Beck 1988; Lanoue 1994, Norpoth 1996). The making of campaign promises is often thought of as a device to retain or attract voters through their prospective calculations. Our findings show that voters' evaluations of pledge fulfilment complement their retrospective evaluations too. These promising results warrant efforts to collect new evidence on voters' evaluations of promise keeping and breaking in a wider range of contexts to establish with greater certainty the effects of these evaluations on vote choice.

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Appendix

Table 2 – Logistic Model of Conservative Vote Choice in 2015

	Conservative voter 2010			Non-Conservative voter 2010		
	e(b)	*b(SE)*	*p*	*e(b)*	*b(SE)*	*p*
Socio-demographics						
Age	1.01	.01 (.01)	.17	1.00	-.00 (.01)	.86
Gender	1.38	.32 (.26)	.21	.98	-.02 (.23)	.95
Social class (ref: managerial)						
- Intermediate	.80	-.22 (.27)	.40	1.48	.39 (.27)	.15
- Manual	.72	-.33 (.33)	.31	1.06	.06 (.32)	.85
Education	1.04	.04 (.24)	.86	.91	-.10 (.25)	.70
Ideology						
Distance on EU	1.00	-.00 (.05)	.93	1.10	.07 (.04)	.13
Distance on redistribution	.92	-.09 (.05)	.08	.83	-.18 (.05)***	.00
Valence						
Conservative Party ID	4.61	1.53 (.25)***	.00	6.67	1.90 (.30)***	.00
Economic evaluation	1.30	.26 (.13)*	.04	1.11	.11 (.13)	.41
Cameron (like-dislike)	1.29	.26 (.06)***	.00	1.32	.28 (.05)***	.00
Pledges						
Health pledge fulfilled	.82	-.20 (.27)	.46	1.91	.64 (.24)**	.01
ID Cards pledge fulfilled	1.15	.14 (.27)	.61	.78	-.25 (.27)	.35
Migration pledge fulfilled	1.40	.33 (.25)	.19	.79	-.24 (.24)	.33
Constant	.04	-3.18 (.87)	.00	.05	-3.10 (.82)***	.00
N	622			1,014		
Log Likelihood	-255.49			-276.83		
Likelihood ratio Chi-Square	206.64			260.47		
Pseudo R^2	.29			.32		

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 3 – Logistic Model of Conservative Vote Choice in 2014

	Conservative voter 2010			Non-Conservative voter 2010		
	e(b)	*b(SE)*	*p*	*e(b)*	*b(SE)*	*p*
Socio-demographics						
Age	1.00	-.00 (.01)	.70	1.00	-.00 (.01)	0.76
Gender	.95	-.06 (.24)	.82	.88	-.12 (.30)	.68
Social class (ref: managerial)						
- Intermediate	.65	-.42 (.26)	.10	.57	-.56 (.37)	.28
- Manual	.88	-.13 (.34)	.70	.65	-.44 (.39)	.30
Education	1.14	.13 (.24)	.59	.83	-.19 (.32)	.44
Ideology						
Distance on EU	.79	-.23 (.05)***	.00	.79	-.24 (.07)**	.68
Distance on redistribution	.91	-.10 (.06)	.08	.93	-.08 (.07)	.81
Valence						
Conservative Party ID	11.50	2.44 (.26)***	.00	28.18	3.34 (.32)***	15.15
Economic evaluation	1.64	.49 (.13)***	.00	1.22	.20 (.18)	.86
Cameron (like-dislike)	1.61	.47 (.06)***	.00	1.62	.48 (.07)***	1.41
Pledges						
Health pledge fulfilled	1.11	.10 (.26)	.69	1.09	.09 (.34)	.56
ID Cards pledge fulfilled	1.15	.14 (.26)	.60	1.23	.20 (.37)	.59
Migration pledge fulfilled	1.83	.61 (.24)*	.01	.477	-.74 (.32)*	.25
Constant	.01	-4.90 (.85)***	.00	.01	-4.69 (1.08)	.00
N	819			1,410		
Log Likelihood	-276.32			-172.86		
Likelihood ratio Chi-Square	517.85			446.26		
Pseudo R^2	.48			0.56		

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001