Future of Democracy | 02.2019

Better Than Its Reputation

In the first 18 months of its government activity, Germany's grand coalition has already fulfilled or started on two-thirds of its 296 promises. This points to a record-breaking mid-term balance for the current government. At the same time, only ten percent of all citizens still believe that political parties and governments also keep their promises. Why is that? And what can we do to change that?

In its 2018 coalition agreement, Germany's grand coalition government agreed on 296 concrete measures and goals. By the end of September 2019, the federal government had already fully or partially enacted or achieved 154 of these measures and goals, and a further 40 have at least been started on.

Thus, after the first half of the legislative period, it has fulfilled or at least started on two-thirds of its coalition promises. This points to a record-breaking mid-term balance at the half-way point of this grand coalition. At this same point in time, the previous grand coalition had only fulfilled or started on more than half of the promises it had made in the 2013 coalition agreement. Then, by the end of the 2013–2017 legislative period, almost 80 percent of all its promises had been fully or partially enacted. Compared to those of other countries, this was already a very good performance. If the current federal government continues to work at its current pace, it will most likely surpass these values. However, more and more people underestimate what political parties and governments actually achieve. The negative overall view of many people persists. Indeed, the share of people who believe that politicians either don't want to or aren't able to deliver on their promises has increased even more in recent years. Only one in ten people believes that at least "a large part" of the promises agreed upon in a coalition agreement will actually be kept. Thus, despite comparatively good performances, the gap between actual and perceived fulfillment of promises has grown even wider. More mutual understanding about these discrepancies, fair play in the public discourse about them, and a focus on government communication could help.

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2018 Coalition Agreement Contains 296 "Real" Government Promises

The 2018 coalition agreement between the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) contains 296 "real" government promises. That is almost 60 percent more than the 188 individual promises in the 2013 coalition agreement. The criterion for being classified as a "real" promise is that it is concrete enough for its fulfillment to be empirically verifiable. This means that this study only examines promises that have a sufficiently clear formulation and contain a fulfillment criterion that can be used to measure whether fulfillment has occurred.
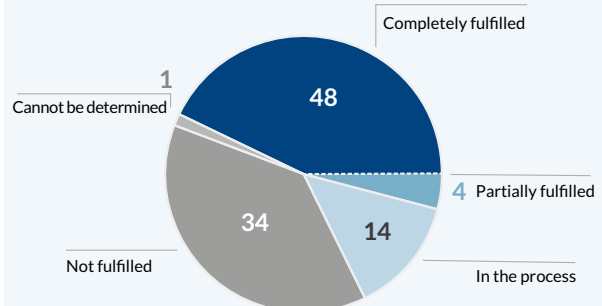
Almost 70 percent of the promises agreed upon in the new coalition agreement are only spread out among six of the 14 federal ministries and one minister of state: In absolute terms, the most promises fell to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (49), followed by the Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs (33), the Ministry of Health (32), the Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure (30), the Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection (29), and the Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (27). The fewest coalition promises were related to the fields of culture (7), economic affairs and energy (7), economic development and cooperation (5), and foreign affairs (2).

The vast majority of promises were only mentioned in one place in the coalition agreement. However, some promises were also repeated in the coalition agreement, which lends them more weight. For example, the grand

coalition has repeatedly promised the introduction of a "child home support" allowance of €1,200 per child per year, the gradual elimination of the solidarity surcharge, and the creation of a digital citizens' portal that will make all administrative services available online. It also includes many of the more politically important individual promises, such as introducing a basic pension above the level of basic security benefits, creating a law on the immigration of skilled workers, providing massive financial support for social housing, equipping all schools with strong digital infrastructures, and limiting the number of refugees.
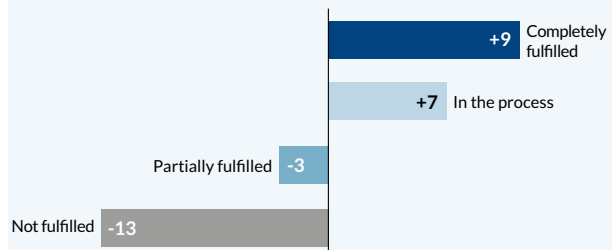

Coalition Promises of 2018

As a percentage of the 296 coalition promises of 2018

- Completely fulfilled: 48
- Partially fulfilled: 4
- In the process: 14
- Not fulfilled: 34
- Cannot be determined: 1

Compared to fulfillment of coalition promises of 2013

In percentage points

- Completely fulfilled: +9
- In the process: +7
- Partially fulfilled: -3
- Not fulfilled: -13

Source: 2013 Coalition Agreement (As of: 30.09.2015) and 2018 (As of: 30.09.2019), authors' research and calculations.

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Sources:

Survey data cited in the text comes from polls conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung by the Allensbach Institute between June 1 and 12, 2019. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a total of 1,273 individuals age 16 and older. The results are thereby representative for the entire population of Germany.

The coding of the 2018 coalition agreement and the research on fulfillment was carried out by a team including Luise Martha Anter, Nico Eschkötter, Carlo Greß, Robin Groß, Pauline Kleinschlömer, Svea Komm and Lisa Zehnter, which was led by Theres Matthieß (WZB Berlin Social Science Center) and Lars Bischoff (Bertelsmann Stiftung). For additional details, explanations and analyses, cf. the study of the same name, "Besser als ihr Ruf – Halbzeitbilanz der Großen Koalition zur Umsetzung des Koalitionsvertrages 2018" ("Better Than Its Reputation – Mid-term Review of the Grand Coalition in Terms of Implementing of the 2018 Coalition Agreement") by Robert Vehrkamp and Theres Matthieß, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, November 2019.

Among the supposedly "smaller" promises are, for example, the introduction of a "wilderness fund" for the federal states to create wilderness reserves, lower taxation of company cars that are e-vehicles, and testing new methods to more effectively prevent noise.

Already Two-Thirds of All Promises Implemented or Started On

If we take a preliminary mid-term review, how has the current federal government done so far? How many

of its promises have already been fulfilled or at least started on? A promise can be completely or partially fulfilled, be in the process of being fulfilled, or not (yet) be fulfilled at all. A promise is only completely fulfilled if the promised measure or the stated goal has also been realized to the extent agreed upon. A promise is regarded as partially fulfilled if it has been enacted but not to the full extent agreed upon. If substantial implementation steps have already been initiated but not yet completed, the promise is considered to be in process of being fulfilled (i.e., started on). Promises are regarded as not fulfilled if the relevant legal situation did not change or if the relevant indicators did not develop in the agreed upon direction completely or at least partially.

Based on these criteria, the following picture emerges for the preliminary mid-term review of the grand coalition (as of 30 September 2019): In the first 18 months of governing, the federal government has already fulfilled or at least started on two-thirds of its 296 promises. Of these, 142 individual promises (48 percent) were completely fulfilled and 12 more promises (4 percent) were partially fulfilled. Furthermore, the government has launched efforts to enact 40 additional promises (14 percent). To date, only about a third of the promises (34 percent) has yet to be started on.

Record-setting Mid-Term Review

Thus, at the midpoint of its legislative period, the current grand coalition has fulfilled or started on more of its promises in absolute (+94) and relative (+12 percent) terms than the previous government had at the same time. Although the longer coalition negotiations gave it a bit more than three months less time to govern, its mid-term review is still noticeably better than that of its predecessor on the same date – and the latter's results were already above-average: Despite its somewhat poorer mid-term results, the previous government ultimately either fully or partially fulfilled almost 80 percent of its promises by the end of its legislative period in September 2017 (cf. Vehrkamp/Matthieß 2018). When comparing its fulfillment of campaign and coalition promises with those of other countries, this was already a relatively good performance at that time. The current grand coalition has shown an even better performance up until now, and this points to a record-breaking mid-term balance. If the federal government continues to work at its

current pace, it is possible that the grand coalition will have fulfilled almost all of its promises by the end of the legislative period in 2021.
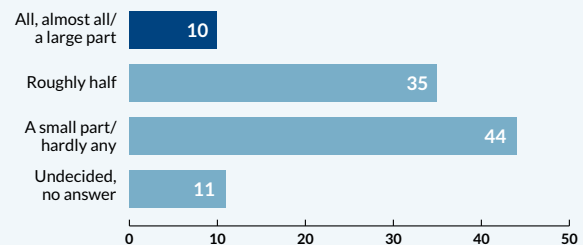
Only One in Ten Correctly Assesses Fulfillment

Despite these high fulfillment rates, quite a different picture emerges regarding voters' opinions. When asked whether and to what extent the promises of a coalition
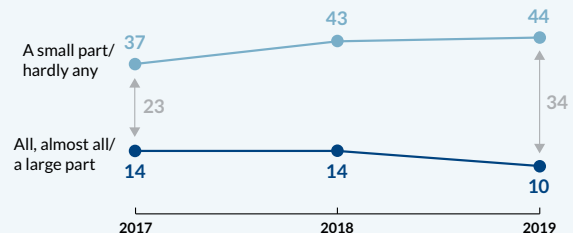
Perceived enactment of coalition promises

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

In percent

All, almost all/ a large part	10
Roughly half	35
A small part/ hardly any	44
Undecided, no answer	11

Changed perceptions over time

In percent

	2017	2018	2019
A small part/ hardly any	37	43	44
	23		34
All, almost all/ a large part	14	14	10

Basis: Population of Germany age 16 and older

Source: Allensbach Institute Survey conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (May 2017, February 2018, June 2019). | Bertelsmann**Stiftung**

agreement have generally been fulfilled, only a bit less than ten percent of all people in Germany respond that either "all, almost all" or at least "a large part" of all the promises were also actually kept. Forty-four percent of respondents assume that only "a small part" or "hardly any" of the promises were kept. Still, a bit over one-third (35 percent) assume that "roughly half" of all the promises in the coalition agreements have actually also been kept as a result of government action.

Thus, the gap between actual and perceived fulfillment of coalition promises has widened even further over the last two years. While the difference between the "fulfillment optimists" ("all, almost all" or at least "a large part" have been fulfilled) and the "fulfillment skeptics" (only "a small part" or "hardly any" have been fulfilled) was already 23 percentage

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points in 2017, it has risen by an additional 11 percentage points – to what is now a bit over one-third (34 percentage points) – within only two years' time. The already gaping divide between the parties' and governments' actual and perceived faithfulness to fulfilling promises has grown even wider. More and more people underestimate just how many coalition promises are actually fulfilled – and even the good implementation rate of the previous legislative period were not able to alter this impression.

Negative Assessments Are Widespread

The strongly negative overall assessment of governing politicians' faithfulness to fulfilling promises can be observed in all social strata, age groups and income classes. Granted, the share of negative assessments decreases with age, and the assessments of people living in the former East Germany do turn out to be slightly more negative than those of people in the former West Germany. However, rather than being truly fundamental, the discrepancies here are ones of degree. The gap between governing politicians' actual and perceived faithfulness to fulfilling promises appears to be a phenomenon related to society as a whole rather than just to specific target groups that have either broken away from or lie on the margins of society.

In contrast, there are significant discrepancies between supporters of different political parties as well as between individuals with varying levels of interest in politics. Twenty percent of CDU/CSU and SPD supporters – or almost twice as many as the general average – think that a government usually enacts "all, almost all" or at least "large part" of its promises. Almost 18 percent of supporters of the business-friendly Free Democratic Party (FDP) hold this same view. More than six in ten CDU/CSU and SPD supporters and more than half of FDP supporters believe that coalitions keep at least "roughly half" or more of their promises. In contrast, belief in the keeping of coalition promises is lowest among supporters of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Only five in 100 AfD supporters assume that "a large part" or more coalition promises will be enacted. On the other hand, more than half (55 percent) believe that "hardly any" or only "a small part" of promises are kept.

The discrepancies in respondents' assessments were almost as pronounced depending on their level of

interest in politics. More than twice as many people with a more pronounced interest in politics (14 percent) than people with a lower level of interest in politics (6 percent) assume that at least "a large part" of the promises in a coalition agreement is usually enacted. Inversely, twice as many of those with a lower level of interest in politics believe that "hardly any" promises are kept.

The following overall picture emerges: A massive underestimation of the parties' and government's faithfulness to fulfilling promises is also widespread and deeply rooted among people with a higher level of interest in politics and among supporters of the mainstream parties. Although people sometimes have opposite assessments regarding the enactment of individual promises, the perception of many people is dominated by what appears to be a negative overall attitude regarding parties' and governments' overall faithfulness to fulfilling their promises. Counteracting these faulty assessments via concrete government actions along with good fulfillment rates will be a Sisyphean task for the ruling government.

More Promises are rooted in the SPD's Election Platform

The difficulty of such an undertaking can mainly be seen in the survey results regarding the SPD: Although a significantly larger number of the coalition promises that were made and then also ultimately enacted derived from the election platform of the SPD rather from that of its CDU/CSU coalition partner, SPD voters are still even less likely to believe that "their" coalition will remain faithful to fulfilling promises than CDU/CSU voters are.

Of the 296 individual promises in the coalition agreement, 119 (40 percent) can be derived to the SPD's election platform. More than 60 percent of these (73 promises) were exclusively rooted in the SPD's election platform, while an additional 46 (16 percent) of them were also rooted in the CDU/CSU election platform. In contrast, only 78 of all the coalition promises (26 percent) can be traced back to the CDU/CSU election platform. Of these, only 32 promises (11 percent) exclusively derive from the CDU/CSU election platform, while the majority of the CDU/CSU promises (46 individual promises, or 16 percent) are also rooted in the SPD's election

platform. However, the mere fact that more coalition promises were already mentioned in the SPD's election platform does not necessarily mean that the coalition agreement also bears a stronger Social Democratic signature overall. On the one hand, this analysis does not evaluate the individual promises according to the political weight of a promise or its subjectively perceived significance from the viewpoint of the parties. Instead, the analysis evaluates each promise individually and with equal weight. On the other hand, almost half (49 percent) of all the individual promises in the coalition agreement were not mentioned at all in either of the two election platforms. One possible explanation for this is the fact that election platforms and coalition agreements come into play at different stages of the representation process and thereby fulfill different functions. Election platforms are published before elections, when political parties are competing for potential supporters. In contrast, coalition agreements are the product of negotiations among two or more parties that govern together. They represent a compromise and serve to guide and prioritize government actions. These are related, but not identical functions.

In overall terms, it has been shown that more coalition promises can be traced back to the SPD's election platform – and this, in turn, indicates that the SPD was more successful than the CDU/CSU during the coalition negotiations when it came to anchoring topics from its own election platform in the ultimate coalition agreement.

Balanced Enactment Rates of the Coalition Partners

Conversely, the track records of the coalition partners in terms of enacting promises have so far been more balanced. In this respect, the CDU/CSU and the SPD have already been able to either fully or partially enact roughly the same number of individual promises deriving from their respective election platforms. By this study's reference date (September 30, 2019), the SPD had succeeded in enacting 51 percent (61) of the 119 of its promises that had been anchored in the coalition agreement. The CDU/CSU, on the other hand, was also able to enact 53 percent (41) of its promises that had been anchored in the coalition agreement. Thus, while more SPD promises were enacted in absolute terms, the enactment rates of both parties were more or less balanced in percentage terms.

At the same time, the enactment rates of both parties are also roughly balanced – when it comes to promises that can be exclusively traced back to one of the election platforms: While 53 percent (17 out of 32) of the CDU/CSU-only promises were enacted, 51 percent (37 out of 73) of the SPD-only promises were enacted.
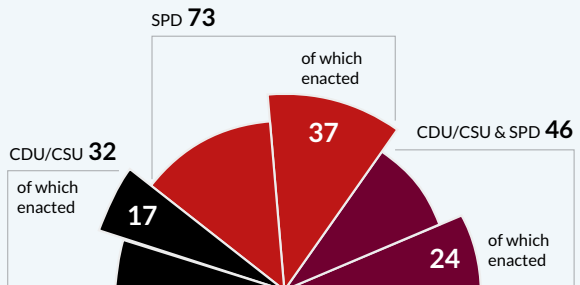
From which election platform did the 296 coalition promises of 2018 come?

Number of promises (percentages in parentheses)
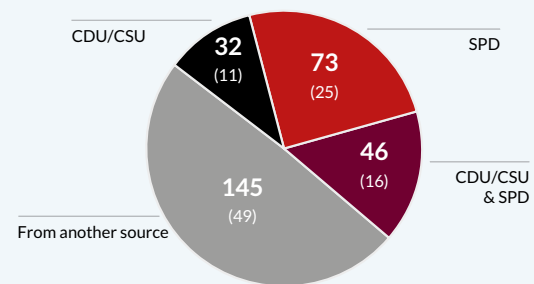
Which party fulfilled more promises?

Number of fully or partially enacted coalition promises from the election platform

Source: 2018 Coalition Agreement and 2017 election platforms of the SPD and CDU/CSU, authors' research and calculations. | Bertelsmann**Stiftung**

Varying Performances of the Ministries

A less balanced track record of enactment success emerges when comparing those of the individual ministerial portfolios. If one uses the number of promises that have already been fully fulfilled as a yardstick, then the Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community has the best record to date, with 29 fully enacted promises. With more than 59 percent of the promises related to it having been fully enacted, the Ministry of the Interior is also in proportional terms at the top of the six ministries that have to do with more than 70 percent of all the promises in the coalition agreement. In overall proportional terms,

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only the Ministry of Defense (77 percent) and the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (71 percent) have enacted more promises, although both of them – with a total of only 13 individual promises for the former and seven for the latter – only account for a very small proportion of all promises in the coalition agreement.

Looking at the federal government's promises that have not yet been fulfilled, one notices the above-average non-fulfillment rates related to the fields of culture (71 percent), finance (61 percent), and economic cooperation and development (60 percent) and food and agriculture (45 percent). However, with only five (economic cooperation) and eleven (food and agriculture) individual promises, the two ministerial portfolios are responsible for only a very small proportion of all coalition promises. The lowest non-fulfillment rate among the ministerial portfolios with many promises is once again the Ministry of the Interior: Only 13 (27 percent) of the total of 49 promises have not been started on yet. But the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection also stand out for having a non-fulfillment rate of just 28 percent each. Having enjoyed only 18 months of government activity between the conclusion of the coalition agreement (in late March 2018) and the reference date of the coalition's preliminary mid-term review (September 30, 2019), this is a considerable success: In less than half of the available period of governing, over 70 percent of the coalition promises related to the three ministries have either been fulfilled or at least started on.

Relatively Little Understanding for Unkept Promises

But what if parties fail to keep their promises? When asked whether there are acceptable reasons for not enacting campaign promises, four in ten (40 percent) of all people in Germany believe that there is no case in which that is acceptable. A slight relative majority (43 percent) concedes to political actors that there certainly "can be acceptable reasons" for not keeping a campaign promise. In fact, among the respective supporters of the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and Greens, more than half of respondents hold this opinion. AfD supporters are once again the outliers here, with more than 60 percent of them finding it unacceptable in any case to not keep campaign promises and less than a quarter of them (23 percent) believing there can be "acceptable reasons" for doing so.

In the responses to the question regarding acceptable reasons for not fulfilling campaign promises, significant discrepancies can be observed if one compares respondents' varying levels of formal education. While a clear majority (56 percent) of respondents with a university-track secondary school diploma (Abitur) and/or some university-level studies acknowledges that there are acceptable reasons, this view is only shared by slightly more than one-third (34 percent) of those with a lower level of formal education from elementary schools or lower-level secondary schools (Hauptschule). Inversely, almost half (47 percent) of the respondents with a lower level of formal education consider it "unacceptable in all cases" to not keep campaign promises, while only 30 percent of those with the higher level of formal education view things in such categorical terms.

Among those who acknowledge that there are "acceptable reasons" for failing to keep campaign promises, more than eight in 10 respondents (82 percent) accept such failures when they result from compromises that had to be made with a coalition partner.

Understanding for failing to keep promises is much lower when the justification given is the inability to finance certain promises (48 percent), changed political or social circumstances (42 percent), and having overlooked important details when making the promise (24 percent). In overall terms, it appears that voters have relatively little understanding for the failure to keep campaign and government promises once they have been made. At the same time, people attach great importance to their enactment. Thus, the discrepancy between actual and perceived fulfillment of government promises threatens to become a dangerous magnifier of political disenchantment, which is already widespread.

Faulty Assessments Risk Increasing Political Disenchantment

If people were indifferent about the fulfillment of campaign promises, the massive underestimation of government actors' faithfulness to fulfilling promises would not be so significant. However, most people are not indifferent to the enactment and keeping of campaign promises. In fact, when asked how important it is to them that the party they vote for keeps its campaign promises, almost nine in ten (89 percent) people in Germany say it is "important"

or even "very important" to them. Only four percent of all respondents thought it was "not very important" or "not important at all," although there were no appreciable differences among the population at large or among the supporters of the various parties.

Thus, the following overall picture emerges regarding the enactment of campaign and government promises: Almost all people find it important that promises are kept. At the same time, the available empirical research on enactment rates indicates that this also occurs to a large extent. Most political parties and governments actually do deliver on a large share of

their promises, and the current grand coalition – like its predecessor – is doing well compared to other countries thanks to its above-average enactment rates. On this issue, there is a gap when it comes to perceived enactment. Many – and it appears to be more and more – people assume that parties and governments do not keep their promises. This is a dilemma – and one that brings with it the risk of disenchantment on both sides: among voters, because they feel betrayed; and possibly among politicians, as well, because they continue to be confronted with negative overall assessments despite having demonstrably been faithful to fulfilling their promises.

FULFILLMENT RATES OF THE GRAND COALITION 2018-SEPTEMBER 2019

POLICY AREAS	NUMBER OF PROMISES		COMPLETELY FULFILLED		PARTIALLY FULFILLED		IN THE PROCESS		NOT FULFILLED	
	abs. and in %		abs. and in %		abs. and in %		abs. and in %		abs. and in %	
Interior*	49	17 %	29	59 %	1	2 %	5	10 %	13	27 %
Labor and Social Affairs	33	11 %	16	48 %	2	6 %	1	3 %	14	42 %
Health	32	11 %	16	50 %	1	3 %	6	19 %	9	28 %
Transport and Digital Infrastructure	30	10 %	13	43 %	2	7 %	2	7 %	13	43 %
Justice and Consumer Protection	29	10 %	12	41 %	1	3 %	8	28 %	8	28 %
Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety	27	9 %	9	33 %	1	4 %	5	19 %	12	44 %
Finance	19	6 %	6	32 %	0	0 %	6	32 %	7	37 %
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth	18	6 %	10	56 %	1	6 %	1	6 %	6	33 %
Education and Research	13	4 %	8	62 %	0	0 %	2	15 %	3	23 %
Defense	13	4 %	10	77 %	0	0 %	1	8 %	2	15 %
Food and Agriculture	11	4 %	4	36 %	0	0 %	2	18 %	5	45 %
Culture and Media	7	2 %	3	43 %	1	14 %	1	14 %	2	29 %
Economic Affairs and Energy	7	2 %	5	71 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	2	29 %
Economic Cooperation and Development*	5	2 %	1	20 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	3	60 %
Foreign Office	2	1 %	0	0 %	2	100 %	0	0 %	0	0 %
Other/not assignable	1	0 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	1	100 %
Totals*	296	100 %	142	48 %	12	4 %	40	14 %	100	34 %

*It could not be determined whether two of the promises have been fulfilled.

Source: 2018 Coalition Agreement, authors' research and calculations. (Reference date: 30.09.2019)

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What Can Be Done? – Understanding, Fair Play and Focus

How can the dilemma regarding the disenchantment of disappointed voters, on the one hand, and frustrated politicians, on the other, be resolved? For starters, one should note that having voters who are skeptical toward and critical of political parties and governments naturally isn't a problem in a democracy. On the contrary, they are part of the essence of a democracy. But if skepticism and criticism turn into sweeping preconceptions and disenchantment, it can damage the legitimacy of democracy itself and endanger its levels of acceptance and stability. The following three thought-provoking ideas and suggestions could help:

First, we need to gain a better understanding of where this gap between voter perceptions and actual government performance actually comes from. Is it the often-long time lags between when a promise is formally enacted and when it has a tangible effect on citizens? Or is the dominant feeling one of being poorly represented overall? With their promises, do political parties and governments insufficiently reflect the real wishes and needs of the electorate?

Second, more work also has to be done on political awareness-raising and education. How can more people get a more realistic picture of how campaign and government promises are actually kept? This is a task for society as a whole. How "fairly" do we speak about and assess the enactment of campaign and government promises? More "fair play" in this regard could lead to fairer perceptions.

Third, political actors also need to communicate in a better and more voter-oriented fashion. No one can or would want to know by heart the almost 300 individual promises in a coalition agreement. A stronger focus on political priorities and an overarching narrative could therefore be helpful. What are the three core promises that the government stands for? That is already hard enough to communicate to voters!

To summarize:
We need *understanding*, *fair play* in public discourse, and a *focus* on political communication! It might not be a panacea – but it's still a good start!

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