

Citizens' evaluations of electoral pledge fulfilment in Finland: Individual pledges and overall government performance

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Abstract

This study addresses citizens' evaluations of government parties' electoral pledge fulfilment at two levels, distinguishing between the fulfilment of individual pledges and the overall extent to which the government parties have fulfilled their pledges. At the level of individual pledges, those identifying with a party are more likely than non-identifiers to offer both positive and negative judgements on pledge fulfilment, but no clear differences are evident between government and opposition party identifiers. When it comes to evaluations of overall pledge fulfilment, government party identifiers tend to provide above-average performance ratings, whereas those identifying with an opposition party tend to give relatively negative ratings. Respondents who indicate that they do not identify with any party and have little

interest in politics tend to choose the ‘can’t say’ alternative when faced with questions about the fulfilment of individual pledges. This study draws on survey data from the 2019 Finnish National Election Study.

Keywords

electoral pledge; party identification; political interest; political knowledge; trust

1. Introduction

Electoral pledges are central to established theoretical conceptions of representative democracy, while the programmatic aims that candidates in electoral contests promise to pursue once in power arguably serve a double purpose. On one hand, campaign promises help voters choose candidates whose aims are most in line with their own individual policy preferences. On the other hand, electoral pledges also provide a means to evaluate an incumbent’s performance at the end of the electoral term: if the incumbents have failed to fulfil their campaign promises, the voters can respond by removing them from office. Employing Jane Mansbridge’s (2003) provisions, the traditional model of promissory representation is centred on the notion that voters can influence policies by exacting promises from their representatives and monitoring whether those promises have been met.

According to this perspective, responsive government presupposes that parties offer distinctive packages of policies in elections and fulfil their pledges once they are in a position to do so (see also Bartolini 1999; 2000; Schedler 1998). Equally importantly, voters must be able to differentiate fulfilled pledges from unfulfilled ones and use this information when evaluating incumbents’ performance. An extensive body of research addressing the policy effects of parties’ electoral commitments has documented that parties indeed tend to offer distinctive policy packages and fulfil a notable share of their pledges once they are in government (e.g. Thomson et al. 2019). In this literature, electoral pledges are defined as commitments to specified actions or outcomes whose occurrence can be clearly determined (Royed et al. 2019, 24). This research field places significant value on analysing how the objectives that parties present in elections are translated into policies.

In contrast, empirical evidence on people’s perceptions of pledge fulfilment is far more limited. Some authors studying political attitudes and behaviour, such as Achen and Bartels

(2016), explicitly reject the notion that the electorate can be sufficiently well-informed and unbiased to hold incumbents accountable for their policy choices. Instead, they argue that voters tend to resort to group identities – notably party identification – and myopic economic retrospection when forming their own opinions on government performance.

A limited number of survey-based studies have specifically addressed the ways in which voters perceive the fulfilment of real electoral pledges presented in government parties' manifestos (Belchior 2019; Duval and Pétry 2020; Naurin and Oscarsson 2017; Pétry and Duval 2017; Thomson 2011; Thomson and Brandenburg 2019). These studies suggest that a systematic, albeit imperfect, connection exists between government performance and individuals' evaluations as when the government has fulfilled a pledge, it increases the likelihood that people perceive the pledge to be successful. Nevertheless, the aforementioned studies suggest that government performance is not the only factor affecting evaluations. Party identification and heuristics such as political trust arguably colour perceptions, prompting those who trust in politicians and identify with a government party to offer relatively positive judgements on pledge fulfilment (Belchior 2019; Duval and Pétry 2020; Pétry and Duval 2017; Thomson 2011).

Alongside adding a new case, Finland, to the literature, this study emphasises two issues that have remained largely undiscussed in related studies. One of them is the fact that many people refrain from providing judgements on the fulfilment of specific pledges. The large share of 'don't know' or 'not sure' answers to survey questions about pledge fulfilment has been a recurring phenomenon. Nevertheless, scholars have typically excluded such responses from their analysis, which has sometimes led to significant reductions in the number of data points. However, based on research regarding respondents' motives for providing some kind of answer to factual knowledge questions in surveys (e.g. Nadeau and Niemi 1995), it is nonetheless plausible that 'don't know' answers are systematically associated with key explanatory variables, such as party identification and interest in politics. Moreover, this study addresses citizens' evaluations of the overall extent to which government parties have achieved their campaign promises. While such overall evaluations are central to theoretical conceptions of representative democracy, previous studies have provided little empirical evidence on them.

Moving on, the aims of this study are threefold. First, it sheds light on factors that affect the propensity to provide a judgement on pledge fulfilment rather than abstaining from doing so

(cf. Duval and Pétry 2020, 444–445). Making judgements that are consistently in line with actual policies requires detailed knowledge that few are likely to possess. Interest in politics can nevertheless encourage one to offer some judgement, regardless of whether that judgement is in line with the evidence or not (cf. Nadeau and Niemi 1995). Thusly, ‘can’t say’ answers are included in the analysis, making it possible to draw conclusions about the likelihood that individuals are prepared to evaluate pledge fulfilment from the outset, including the positive or negative tone of the offered evaluations.

Second, a distinction is made between the two levels at which voters can evaluate pledge fulfilment by government parties. On one hand, evaluations can pertain to *whether or not the government has fulfilled a given pledge*, that is, whether the government has taken a specified action or attained an outcome. On the other hand, perceptions of *overall pledge fulfilment* pertain to beliefs about the extent to which the government parties have met their promises. The distinction is theoretically relevant because perceptions at the latter level form the ‘running tally’ that presumably affects people’s decisions about rewarding or punishing incumbents. Even if voters were able to arrive at unbiased evaluations in terms of individual pledges, it is unlikely that this ability would translate into reasoned vote choices – in the sense of rewarding or sanctioning incumbents based on their objective performance – if overall perceptions nevertheless were dependent on factors such as partisanship and trust.

Third, a question format that has previously been used to understand the motives behind an individual’s evaluations of the fulfilment of specific pledges is applied in a new context. The study draws on data collected in connection with the 2019 Finnish National Election Study. Previous studies using a similar question format have been conducted in Canada (Duval and Pétry 2020), Ireland (Thomson 2011), Portugal (Belchior 2019), the province of Québec (Pétry and Duval 2017), Sweden (Naurin and Oscarsson 2017) and the United Kingdom (Thomson and Brandenburg 2019).

The Finnish political system provides an excellent environment for assessing the generalisability of previous findings. While Finnish parties have strong programmatic traditions, the electoral system combines a list system of proportional representation with candidate voting, whereby the voter *must* choose one candidate and candidates’ votes are pooled to determine parties’ vote shares (Nurmi 2019). As Coffé and von Schoultz (2021) emphasise, open-list proportional representation, whereby numerous candidates compete with each other within the context of strong parties, makes vote choices demanding for the voters.

Moreover, the party system lacks clear alternatives in terms of prospective government compositions. For decades, there has always been some overlap in the partisan compositions of consecutive governments. Relatedly, Finnish parties have exhibited flexibility in coalition building; most parties represented in the parliament have shared government responsibility with most of the other parties at some point. It is reasonable to expect that in such a setting, parties' actions and citizens' party preferences have relatively little impact on citizens' evaluations of pledge fulfilment.

Nevertheless, the results are in line with previous studies to the extent that even in the Finnish case, evaluations are associated with actual policies. However, it was not possible to replicate a key finding according to which government and opposition party identifiers differed from each other with respect to the tone of their judgements on the fulfilment of individual pledges. The results do suggest that party identification is associated with pledge fulfilment evaluations, but clear differences between government and opposition identifiers are only visible at the level of overall evaluations. Moreover, political trust is positively associated with evaluations at that same level. When it comes to the fulfilment of individual pledges, party identification is associated with the tendency to offer a judgement, but the main difference appears to exist between those who identify with one of the parties and those who do not. High interest in politics is also associated with a tendency to offer both positive and negative judgements. Political trust, in turn, is mainly associated with a tendency to avoid negative judgements. Hence, the associations between key explanatory variables and evaluations depend on the level at which evaluations are made.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Studies on the policy consequences of parties' campaign pledges have repeatedly concluded that once parties reach power, they tend to fulfil a notable share of their pledges to take specific actions or bring about specified outcomes (e.g. McMillan 2020; Naurin 2014; Royed 1996; Schermann and Ennsner-Jedenastik 2014; Thomson et al. 2017). Political parties' successful fulfilment of numerous pledges notwithstanding, citizens nonetheless tend to be sceptical of such campaign pledges (Naurin 2011). This apparent mismatch between citizens' scepticism and the empirical evidence appears to be due in part to the different definitions applied by citizens and scholars (Dupont et al. 2019; Krishnarajan and Jensen 2021; Naurin

2011). While scholars operationalise electoral pledges as commitments that resemble research hypotheses in terms of their clarity and testability (Royed et al. 2019, 24), citizens tend to interpret a much larger variety of messages as pledges. Scholarly analyses of pledge fulfilment draw on detailed evaluations of electoral manifestos and policy outputs while alternatively, citizens' personal scepticism plausibly reflects more general disappointment and dissatisfaction with political decision-makers (Naurin 2011).

Moreover, the media tend to place greater focus on those pledges that remain unfulfilled (Duval 2019; Müller 2020), and the conventional way of measuring pledge fulfilment rates as the simple ratio of fulfilled pledges to all pledges can understate the fact that pledges that people consider especially important have remained unfulfilled (Mellon et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the notion that parties and politicians break their promises can be considered a widespread and established heuristic. Survey experiments indeed suggest that framing a set of policies as 'pledges' elicits more negatively-toned evaluations of their fulfilment than framing the same policies as 'proposals' (Duval and Pétry 2020; Thomson and Brandenburg 2019). In the Finnish case, the 2016 round of the International Social Survey Programme indicated that approximately one in five Finns agreed with the statement 'the people we elect as MPs try to keep the promises they have made during the election' (ISSP Research Group 2018). The share is hardly exceptional relative to international standards (cf. Naurin 2011, 71).

2.1. The level of individual pledges

When it comes to individual pledges, previous studies have established a systematic yet imperfect connection between government performance and citizens' evaluations of pledge fulfilment. If the government has fulfilled a pledge, people tend to perceive that pledge as fulfilled rather than unfulfilled, despite their general scepticism of electoral pledges. Arguably, citizens are encouraged to rely more on knowledge than personal cues when faced with specific pledges because specificity discourages people from making their own interpretations, which rely on heuristics and stereotypes (Naurin and Oscarsson 2017, 863). However, citizens' evaluations often deviate from scholars' evidence-based fulfilment assessments. Such deviations are not always random but associated with subjective factors, notably party identification, trust and information resources, for example, factual knowledge of politics. Beginning with Thomson's (2011) study, scholars have documented how those identifying with a government party tend to offer more positive evaluations of the fulfilment

of government parties' pledges (Belchior 2019; Duval and Pétry 2020; Pétry and Duval 2017; Thomson and Brandenburg 2019).

Such findings support the notion that party identification is a relatively stable political identity that affects thinking and the ways in which people perceive political reality, rather than a sum of preferences that people constantly update based on parties' objective performance (e.g. Achen and Bartels 2016, Ch. 10; Johnston 2006). Namely, these findings imply that partisanship shapes preferences and perceptions in ways that lead citizens to accept information and arguments that are in line with their pre-existing views and reject those opinions that are not. Party identification arguably fosters motivated reasoning whereby the 'motive is to arrive at a particular, directional conclusion' (Kunda 1990, 480) rather than arriving at a conclusion that is, objectively speaking, correct. Nevertheless, as Thomson (2011, 198) notes, 'partisanship is only one of the explanations of citizens' evaluations of pledge fulfillment.'

Trust is another heuristic that previous studies have identified as a driver of biased perceptions of pledge fulfilment (cf. Rudolph 2017). Pétry and Duval (2017) argue that political trust is causally prior to evaluations so that trusting people are likely to perceive a pledge as fulfilled even when it has remained unfulfilled. In contrast, distrusting individuals are prone to perceive pledges as unfulfilled even when said promises have been fulfilled. This view is in line with the notion that trust shapes people's perceptions of incumbent performance, whereas causality is weaker in the other direction (Hetherington 1998).

In sum, previous research suggests that citizens' evaluations of pledge fulfilment, at the level of individual pledges, depend on actual government performance, subjective factors that may bias perceptions and factors that can counteract these biases, for example: political knowledge, the visibility of the pledge in public debates and the specificity of the pledge (e.g. Naurin and Oscarsson 2017). However, the existing research sheds little light on factors that encourage people to offer judgements on pledge fulfilment in the first place. The established way of eliciting evaluations is to present survey respondents with a series of pledges from government parties' electoral manifestos and ask respondents to evaluate whether each of the pledges has been fulfilled or not; however, many respondents have commonly refrained from doing so. For example, in Duval and Pétry's (2020) study, the shares of 'not sure' answers range from 29 to 62 per cent per pledge. Scholars have typically treated such responses as missing data (for exceptions, see Naurin and Oscarsson 2017; Duval and Pétry 2020, 444).

As Kuklinski et al. (2000) observe, it is important to distinguish between being uninformed, or simply lacking information, and being misinformed or holding false beliefs and being confident about these views. It is plausible that nonresponse is associated with key independent variables. Excluding ‘don’t know’ or ‘not sure’ answers thus creates the risk that the uninformed are left out of the analysis while the misinformed are included, leading to skewed conclusions about associations between perceptions and the independent variables.

Survey questions about the fulfilment of individual pledges pertain to policy details. It is likely that people tend to respond to such questions ‘off the top of their heads’, resorting to educated guesses (Nadeau and Niemi 1995). Nadeau and Niemi argue that interest in the topic to which the survey item refers is associated with a motivation to provide some form of answer. Moreover, those who are motivated to answer but are unsure about the correct answer are likely to resort to various cues. In a similar vein, Dancey and Sheagley (2013) find that higher levels of political interest are associated with a lower probability of answering ‘don’t know’ to a question about a senator’s voting behaviour. When facts are not in line with partisan cues, the highly interested are likely to provide incorrect answers, that is, be misinformed.

In line with this reasoning, Sturgis and Smith (2010) argue that the probability of providing ‘pseudo-opinions’, or evaluations of policy issues that do not exist, increases with self-reported interest in politics. The effect of political knowledge is the reverse but weaker. Sturgis and Smith assume that interest in politics is associated with thinking that one ‘should express an opinion’. De Geus and Green (2021) find that political attention, closely related to the concept of political interest, is positively associated with the likelihood of recognising actual but obscure parties. Simultaneously, this same occurrence is associated with claims of familiarity with non-existent parties. Self-reported levels of political attention or interest may therefore reflect genuine interest but also virtue signalling or norm abiding, whereby interest is correlated with a perceived need to appear politically sophisticated.

The discussion above leads to the following hypotheses:

H1. The actual fulfilment of a pledge is positively associated with citizens’ tendency to perceive the pledge as fulfilled.

H2. Those who identify with a party are more likely to offer a judgement on pledge fulfilment than those who do not identify with a party.

H3. Political interest is positively associated with the tendency to offer a judgement on pledge fulfilment.

H4. The likelihood of positive judgements increases with political trust.

It is plausible that when confronted with survey questions about pledge fulfilment, those who hold well-defined political views and are interested in politics, are more likely to answer such questions in the first place. Being interested in the subject matter can foster the motivation to find a correct answer (Kunda 1990; Nadeau and Niemi 1995), but it can also encourage the use of heuristics in order to arrive at some type of answer. The connections between party identification and fulfilment evaluations identified in previous research lead to the following hypotheses:

H5. Those who identify with a government party are more likely to give a positive verdict than refrain from proffering a judgement, independent of whether or not the pledge was actually fulfilled.

H6. Those who identify with an opposition party are more likely to give a negative verdict rather than refrain from proffering a judgement, independent of whether or not the pledge was actually fulfilled.

2.2. The level of overall pledge fulfilment

Previous studies have not included explicit analyses of whether or how factors that explain evaluations at the level of individual pledges are associated with evaluations at the level of overall pledge fulfilment. However, as Matthieß (2020) notes, voters expectedly form impressions of what she calls pledge performance or parties' ability and willingness to fulfil their pledges, and reward or punish parties based on the successful achievement of campaign promises. Matthieß analyses electoral results in fourteen countries and concludes that instances where government parties have fulfilled a small share of their electoral pledges have been associated with relatively large electoral losses for those parties. At the macro level, there appears to be a connection between the incumbents' failures to meet their promises and weak electoral success. It is therefore plausible that the overall extent to which government parties fulfil their pledges affects people's perceptions and thus voting behaviour.

Insofar as the specificity of pledges discourages the use of heuristics while encouraging the use of information resources, the effects of heuristics should be at their strongest when no reference is made to any specific pledge. That is, if perceptions of whether individual pledges have been fulfilled are subject to systematic biases and the aggregation of such biases should render the effects of the use of heuristics clearer. If perceptions of overall pledge performance are to a meaningful extent driven by subjective factors rather than objective evidence, it is likely that the connection between the government's objective pledge performance and aggregate electoral results remains weaker than it otherwise could be. This is because some part of the electorate would remain largely unaffected by failures to meet promises while another part would remain unconvinced even if policies were in line with pledges. In line with this reasoning, recent work on macroeconomic perceptions (e.g. Bailey 2019) suggests that while perceptions are systematically associated with actual economic developments, they are still moderated by factors such as party identification.

The hypotheses to be tested regarding evaluation of overall pledge performance are as follows:

H7. Identifying with a government party is associated with positive evaluations of overall pledge fulfilment.

H8. Identifying with an opposition party is associated with negative evaluations of overall pledge fulfilment.

H9. Political trust is positively associated with evaluations of overall pledge fulfilment.

3. Data and methods

The data used in this study were collected in connection with the 2019 Finnish National Election Study (FNES).¹ The data were collected in the spring and early summer of 2019, soon after the April parliamentary election. The FNES survey consisted of a main questionnaire collected through face-to-face interviews as well as a self-administered drop-

¹ The data are available at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (Grönlund and Borg 2021).

off questionnaire. Questions about pledge fulfilment by the government in office from 2015–2019 were included in the drop-off questionnaire. The total number of respondents was 1,598, of whom 753 returned the drop-off questionnaire.

During the electoral term 2015–2019, Finland had been governed by a three-party centre-right coalition. Initially, PM Juha Sipilä’s government consisted of the Centre Party, the National Coalition and the Finns Party. Major themes in the government’s programme were deregulation of the economy and the labour markets, as well as balancing the budget and reforming public administration. The popularity of the conservative-populist Finns Party, which had no previous experience in government, decreased sharply during the first half of the electoral term. The party then split in the summer of 2017 after a national party conference where its anti-immigration wing succeeded in occupying all major leadership positions. The old party elite, including all ministers of the party, formed a new group that later became known as the Blue Reform Party, which remained in government while the Finns Party, now with a more explicit focus on immigration, joined the opposition. Because the government programme² remained unchanged despite the party split, in this study, the Blue Reform Party is treated as the successor of the original Finns Party.

3.1. Dependent variables

To measure evaluations of government parties’ overall pledge fulfilment, the respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which the government parties had kept their electoral promises. The wording of the question was: ‘In your opinion, to what extent did the parties in PM Sipilä’s government keep their election promises during the parliamentary term 2015–2019?’ Respondents were asked to use an eleven-point scale ranging from zero (‘not at all’) to ten (‘completely’).

Respondents were then asked to evaluate the fulfilment of eight pledges originating from the government parties’ manifestos from the previous parliamentary election. The question was formulated as follows: ‘Before the parliamentary election in 2015, the parties in PM Sipilä’s

² In Finland, the coalition agreement or government programme lays down, in detail, the policy guidelines for the government’s term in office. Recent government programmes have been quite extensive and have contained, among other items, detailed spending and revenue targets. Government programmes are drafted in post-electoral negotiations as Finnish parties do not form pre-electoral coalitions with joint manifestos.

government made the following promises. To what extent have these promises been fulfilled?’ Respondents were asked to evaluate the fulfilment of each pledge using the four-category scale ‘fully fulfilled’ – ‘partially fulfilled’ – ‘not fulfilled’ – ‘can’t say’. To avoid small-*n* problems in the analyses, the ‘fully fulfilled’ and ‘partially fulfilled’ categories were combined into a single category (‘fulfilled’). In the statistical analyses, ‘can’t say’ was used as the reference category.

The pledges presented to the respondents, alongside information about the party or parties that made the pledge and whether the pledge was fulfilled, are listed in Table 1. The pledges pertain to diverse policy areas and contain both fulfilled and unfulfilled pledges. The pledges reflect themes that were central to the programmatic profile of the government coalition, including fiscal conservatism, entrepreneurship, labour market and service system reforms, as well as the adoption of a harder line on security threats. However, the pledges exhibit variation in terms of their centrality to electoral campaigns and media visibility. The inclusion of low-salience pledges expectedly increases the likelihood that the effects of various biases become visible (Naurin and Oscarsson 2017). Justifications for coding the pledges as fulfilled or not fulfilled are outlined below.

Table 1. Pledges presented to the respondents

Pledge	Party	Fulfilment
1. Prevention of the rise of the total tax rate	C, NC	Fulfilled
2. Introduction of tuition fees for students coming from outside the EU/EEA	C, F, NC	Fulfilled
3. Introduction of a tax deduction for entrepreneurs	C	Fulfilled
4. Abolishment of the determination of the availability of labour	C, NC	Not fulfilled
5. Introduction of a ‘freedom of choice’ model in public healthcare	NC	Not fulfilled
6. Criminalisation of travelling abroad in order to join a terrorist organisation	NC	Fulfilled
7. Reintroduction of anti-personnel landmines in national defence	F	Not fulfilled
8. Extension of employees’ trial period to a maximum of six months	NC	Fulfilled

Note: C = Centre Party, F = Finns Party, NC = National Coalition

Preventing the total tax rate from rising (pledge 1) was one of the major aims of the Sipilä government. The pledge was coded as fulfilled because the ratio of all taxes to the gross domestic product was somewhat lower in 2019 than in 2015. All three government parties

pledged to *introduce tuition fees for students coming from outside the European Union (EU) or the European Economic Area (EEA)* (pledge 2). The pledge was fulfilled as new legislation was introduced making it obligatory for higher education institutions to collect tuition fees from students coming from said countries. The pledge to *introduce a special tax deduction for entrepreneurs* (pledge 3) was fulfilled when the deduction was included in the Income Tax Act. *Abolition of the labour availability consideration* (pledge 4) refers to a legal requirement according to which an employer must demonstrate that no suitable domestic workforce is available before non-EU/EEA employees can obtain working permits. The pledge is here coded as unfulfilled because the requirement remained in force. *The freedom of choice model* (pledge 5) was one part of the government's attempt to reform the system of public social and healthcare services. The idea was essentially to create a voucher system that would have given the private and third sectors a stronger role in service provision, but plans to implement the model were eventually abandoned. *The criminalisation of travelling abroad in order to join a terrorist organisation* (pledge 6) was one part of the so-called terrorism legislation package introduced during the electoral term and therefore the pledge was coded as fulfilled. In 2011, Finland joined the Ottawa Treaty banning the use of anti-personnel landmines. However, the pledge to *reintroduce anti-personnel landmines in national defence* (pledge 7) remained unfulfilled. Finally, *extending employees' trial period* (pledge 8) during which both the employer and the employee can more easily terminate the employment contract was one of the government's measures to increase the flexibility of labour markets and the pledge was thus fulfilled.

Most of the pledges were of relatively low salience in terms of the most visible political debates and media coverage around the election of 2019; however, two pledges stand out in this respect. Restricting the size of the public sector was one of the major aims of the Sipilä government, reflected in the pledge to prevent the total tax rate from rising. Fiscal policy was a major theme in the 2019 election, the government parties favouring fiscal conservatism and the centre-left opposition parties advocating a more expansionary line (Raunio 2019; Palonen 2020).

A central issue in the 2015 election had been the failure of the previous government to reform the social and healthcare service system (Nurmi and Nurmi 2015). Given the widely shared perception that the system needed a thorough renewal, the reform had been on the agenda of several consecutive governments. Nevertheless, no plan had proven politically feasible. Thus, the Sipilä government inherited the problem. The 'freedom of choice' model was an

important component in the Sipilä government's plan to reform the service system. Politically speaking, the initiative was highly divisive throughout the electoral term. Moreover, during the months preceding the 2019 election, the substandard quality of care in several private-sector nursing homes caused a major scandal and placed the government in an uncomfortable position as private service providers played a major role in the reform plan. The failure of the government to ratify its plan in the parliament eventually led to PM Sipilä's sudden resignation only weeks before the election (Palonen 2020). The climate change and environmental protection became, somewhat unexpectedly, major topics in the election (Raunio 2019), leaving, for example, labour market issues partially in their shadow.

3.2. Independent variables

Party identification was measured using the question: 'Do you feel a little closer to one of the political parties than the others? Which party do you feel closest to?' Those who indicated that they were close to one of the parties in the Sipilä government (Centre Party, National Coalition, Blue Reform) were coded as having a *government party ID*. Correspondingly, those who indicated that they were close to any other party were coded as having an *opposition party ID*. All other respondents were coded as having *no party ID*, which was used as the reference category in the statistical analyses. Because the placement of those who identified with the Finns Party is somewhat open to interpretation because of the party split, separating the Finns Party identifiers from the remaining opposition party identifiers was used as a robustness check.

Political interest was measured using the question: 'How interested are you in politics?' The response alternatives were 'very interested' (below: *high interest*), 'somewhat interested' (*medium interest*), 'not very interested' and 'not at all interested'. Because of the small number of respondents indicating no interest at all, the last two categories were combined (*low interest*). This category was used as the reference category in the statistical analyses.

In models where the dependent variable is the evaluation of the fulfilment of an individual pledge, whether the pledge had actually been fulfilled (*fulfilled pledge*) was used as an independent dummy variable (1 = fulfilled, 0 = unfulfilled) or a criterion by which the dataset was divided (see Section 3.3). In said models, *pledge salience* was also controlled for (see Naurin and Oscarsson 2017). Based on the discussion in Section 3.1, the pledges to prevent the total tax rate from rising and to introduce a 'freedom-of-choice' model were coded as *salient*. As indicated in Section 3.1, one pledge was fulfilled, while the other was not. In line

with Duval and Pétry (2020), simple dummy coding is used to distinguish between salient (one) and less salient (zero) pledges.

Political trust was measured using a sum variable consisting of four items: trust in the parliament, the government, parties and politicians. Each of the items was measured on an eleven-point scale ranging from zero ('don't trust at all') to ten ('trust completely'). Political trust was defined as the mean of the items, higher values indicating stronger trust. The scale exhibits strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.92).

In addition, a set of control variables was included in the analyses. *Political knowledge* was measured using responses to five factual questions. For each question, respondents were given four response alternatives, one of which was correct. The measure of political knowledge used here is the sum of correct answers. *Education* was operationalised as the highest level of education completed. For the purposes of this study, the original variable was recoded into a three-level variable whose possible values are primary, secondary and tertiary education. *Gender* was controlled for by using a binary variable, one standing for female and zero for not female. Finally, *age* was measured by subtracting the respondent's year of birth from 2019.

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Continuous variables	n	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Perceived extent of pledge fulfilment	724	0.00	10.00	4.17	2.50
Political trust	753	0.00	9.50	5.76	1.81
Knowledge	753	0.00	5.00	2.89	1.50
Age	749	18.00	91.00	51.26	19.87
Categorical variables	n	Valid %			
Fulfilment evaluation ^a	5914				
Fulfilled	1742	29.5			
Not fulfilled	1758	29.7			
Can't say	2414	40.8			
Party identification	753				
Government	158	21.0			
Opposition	332	44.1			
No party ID	263	34.9			
Political interest	753				
High	205	27.3			
Medium	343	45.6			
Low	203	27.0			
Education	747				

Primary	179	24.0
Secondary	399	53.5
Tertiary	168	22.5
Gender	753	
Female	387	51.4
Not female	366	48.6

^a Based on a stacked dataset

3.3. Methods

The data were adjusted using a weight variable specific to the drop-off questionnaire. The models in which the dependent variable is the perceived fulfilment of individual pledges were estimated using multinomial logistic regression. The models were estimated in stages. First, all eight pledges were included, and whether the pledge had actually been fulfilled was used as a dummy-coded independent variable. Second, fulfilled and unfulfilled pledges were analysed separately to see whether the associations between the independent variables and evaluations were dependent on pledge fulfilment. For the purposes of the multinomial logit models, the dataset was stacked so that each fulfilment evaluation became a row in the data matrix, that is, an observation. Hence, each respondent appeared a maximum of eight times in the stacked dataset. To account for the fact that the observations were no longer independent of each other, standard errors were clustered by respondent.

The model in which the dependent variable was the perceived extent to which the government parties had fulfilled their pledges was estimated using ordinary least squares, the dataset coming in the standard (non-stacked) form. The results of both logistic and linear regression analyses are summarised in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 using graphs. Detailed results are provided in a table format in the Supplementary Material.

4. Results

Before proceeding to formal statistical analyses, it is worthwhile to take a descriptive look at the outcome variables. The shares of positive ('fulfilled') and negative ('not fulfilled') evaluations as well as 'can't say' responses per pledge are shown in Figure 1. The share of accurate evaluations, i.e. those in line with the evidence, is larger than that of inaccurate ones, except for one pledge. Nevertheless, the share of 'don't know' answers is quite considerable. The pledges identified in Section 3.1 as salient stand out, however; for the pledges on the

total tax rate and the freedom of choice model, the shares of ‘can’t say’ answers are the smallest. Hence, respondents appear to have been less prone to take a stance on the fulfilment of pledges that were relatively peripheral.

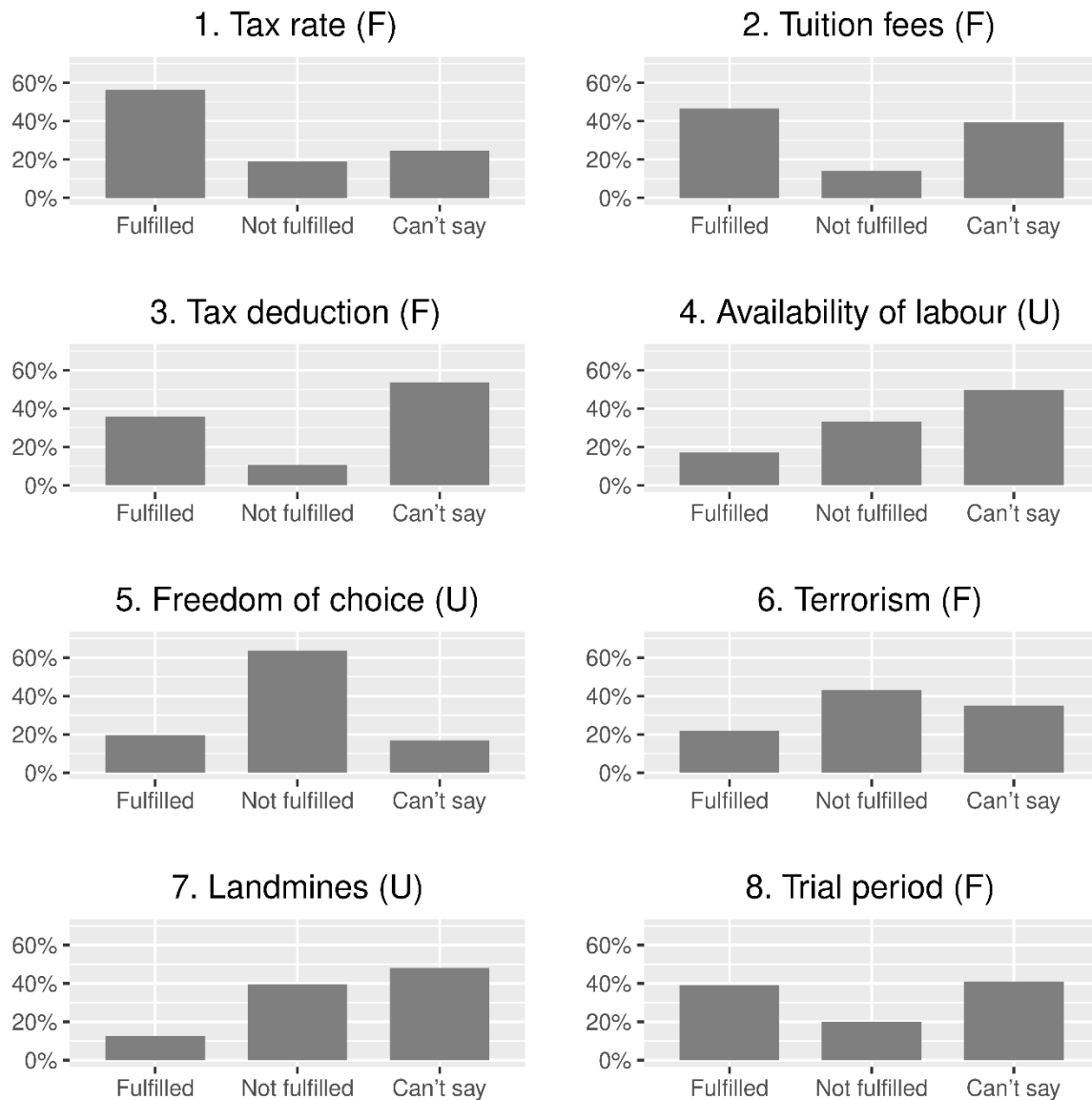


Figure 1. Evaluations of the fulfilment of individual pledges. The scale on the vertical axis shows the share of respondents choosing each of the alternatives. F = fulfilled pledge, U = unfulfilled pledge.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of performance scores measuring the extent to which respondents believed that the government parties had fulfilled their electoral pledges. The heuristic notion of the pledge-breaking party does not appear to have been the only factor

affecting performance evaluations; if that were the case, the distribution should have been strongly skewed to the right. It can nevertheless be noted that few respondents stated that the government parties had fulfilled their pledges completely or almost completely.

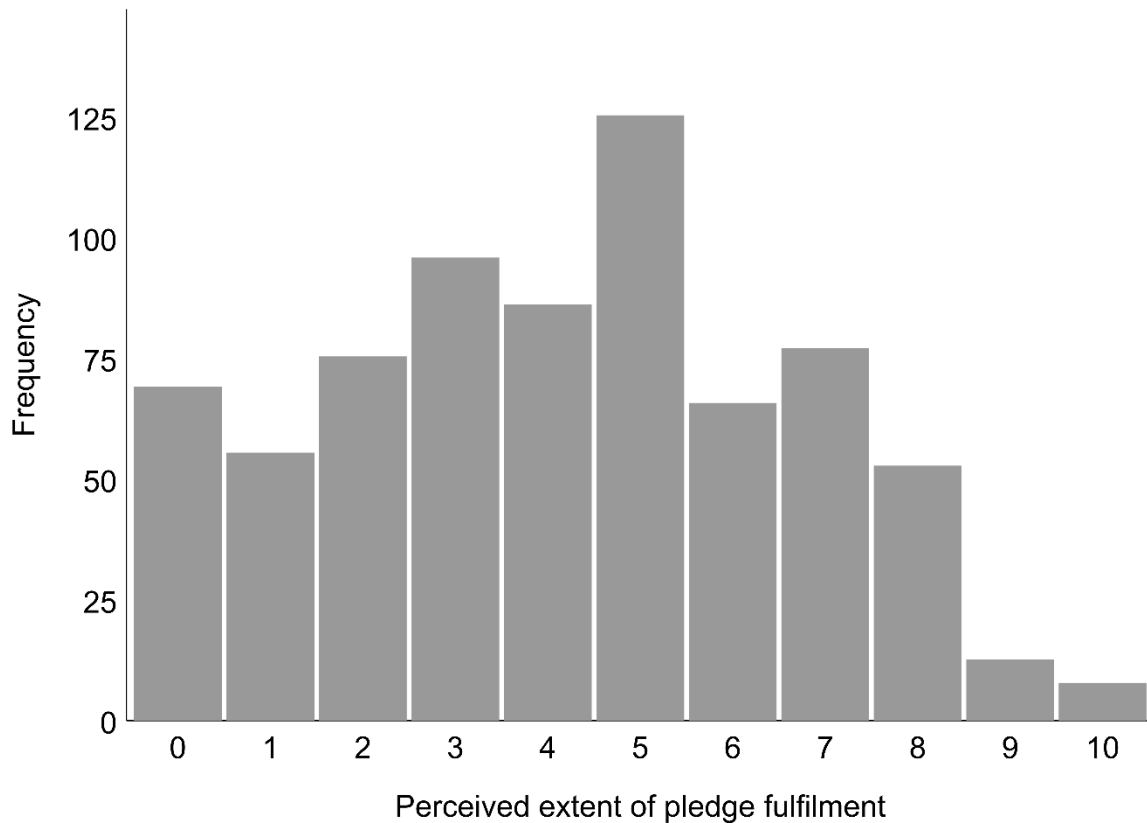


Figure 2. Overall evaluations of the extent to which the government parties had fulfilled their pledges

4.1. Fulfilment of individual pledges

The results of a multinomial logistic regression analysis, including all pledges, are shown in Figure 3. The figure shows the point estimates of the regression coefficients (log odds), surrounded by the 95 per cent confidence interval. In the case of a fulfilled pledge, the odds of a positive evaluation are higher than those of responding ‘can’t say’. Conversely, the odds of a negative evaluation are lower. Thus, the model renders support for H1. When it comes to party identification, government party identifiers are more likely than non-identifiers to provide a positive evaluation. The odds of providing a positive evaluation are also higher among opposition party identifiers than non-identifiers. Moreover, both government and

opposition party identifiers are more likely than non-identifiers to offer negative judgements. Instead, no clear differences are visible between government and opposition.

A comparison of government and opposition identifiers, using estimates from the model displayed in Figure 3, indicated no statistically significant differences between the groups in the odds of responding either ‘fulfilled’ ($B[\text{government}] - B[\text{opposition}] = 0.17$, 95% CI = -0.25...+0.58) or ‘not fulfilled’ ($B[\text{government}] - B[\text{opposition}] = -0.003$, 95% CI = -0.39...+0.38). To be certain, an analysis of the equality of coefficients (see Hosmer and Lemeshow 2000, 268–269) suggested that there is no statistically significant difference between the odds of positive and negative verdicts for either government or opposition identifiers. Thus, no evidence is available for the notion that government and opposition identifiers differ from each other with respect to the tone of their fulfilment evaluations. Those identifying with a party have higher odds than non-identifiers of providing some judgement, which is in line with H2.

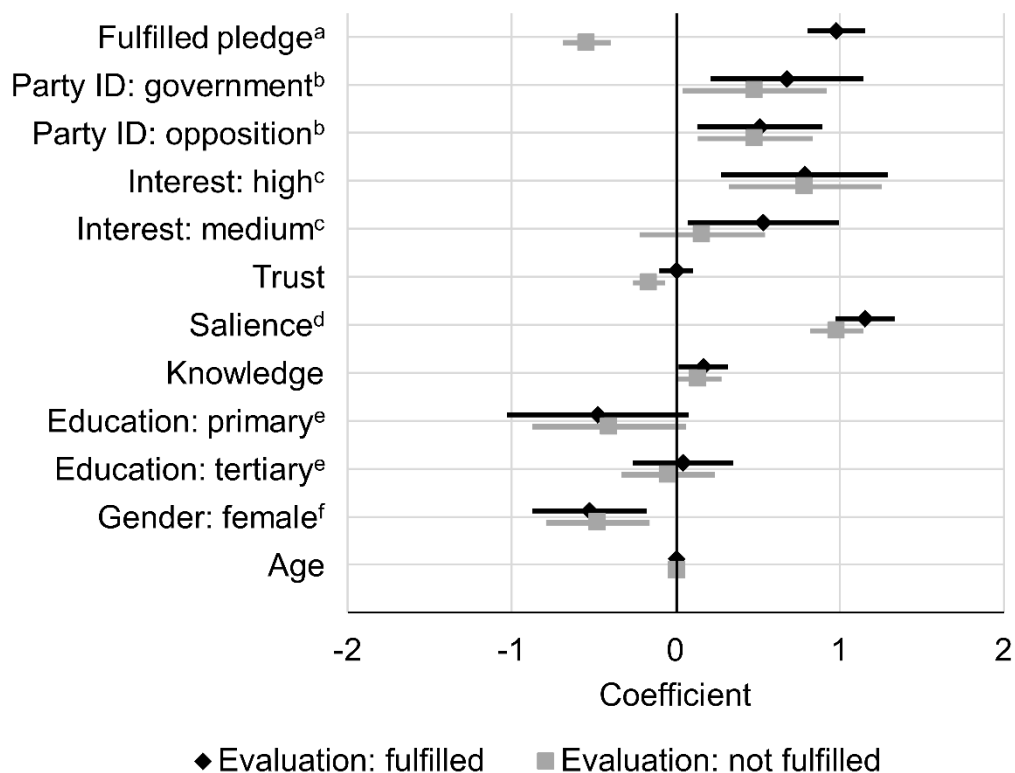


Figure 3. Multinomial logistic regression results: all pledges (base category: can’t say).

The coefficients displayed are log odds (surrounded by the 95% confidence interval).

Reference categories: ^a not fulfilled; ^b no party ID; ^c low interest; ^d not salient; ^e secondary education; ^f not female.

Being highly interested in politics is associated with high odds of providing both positive and negative evaluations. Medium interest is associated with higher odds of positive evaluations. Hence, the data support H3, at least as far as high levels of interest are concerned. Higher levels of political trust are associated with lower odds of providing a negative judgement but not with higher odds of offering a positive judgement. Therefore, hypothesis H4 is only partially substantiated.

The log odds shown in Figure 3 do not directly convey the probabilities of choosing a given alternative. To create a more easily interpretable insight into the associations between party identification and fulfilment evaluations, the probabilities with which average respondents, who only differ from each other with respect to party identification, expectedly choose any of the alternatives were calculated based on the model. When calculating the probabilities, the values of the other categorical variables were fixed to their modes and those of the continuous variables to their means. The predicted probabilities are shown in Figure 4. It supports the conclusion that those who do not identify with a party are the most likely to answer, ‘can’t say’. It should be noted that even those who do identify with a party are highly likely to choose the ‘can’t say’ alternative. The predicted probabilities support the conclusion that there are no decisive differences between government and opposition identifiers when it comes to the tone of fulfilment evaluations.

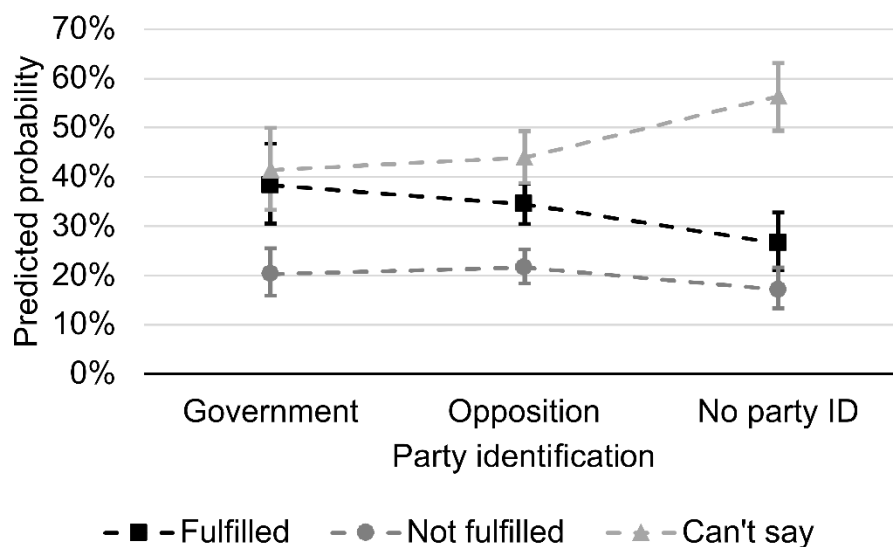


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of fulfilment evaluations. The scale on the vertical axis shows the predicted probability with which a given alternative is chosen. The point estimates are surrounded by the 95% confidence interval.

The model displayed in Figure 3 was re-estimated separately for fulfilled and unfulfilled pledges. The results are summarised in Figure 5. The panel on the left displays the results when only the fulfilled pledges were included in the analysis. In this case, a positive evaluation can also be interpreted as an *accurate* evaluation, i.e. one that is in line with the evidence (cf. Duval and Pétry 2020; Pétry and Duval 2017). Again, the odds of a positive (accurate) evaluation are higher among those who identify with a party, be that party in government or opposition. The odds of a negative (inaccurate) evaluation are higher among those who identify with an opposition party than among non-identifiers. As for the odds of negative evaluations, no statistically significant difference is discernible between government identifiers and non-identifiers ($B[\text{government}] - B[\text{opposition}] = -0.01$, 95% CI = -0.43...+0.42). Despite these subtle differences in comparisons of government and opposition identifiers *vis-à-vis* non-identifiers, no clear differences are discernible between government and opposition identifiers. Being highly interested in politics is associated with higher odds of both accurate and inaccurate evaluations, and medium interest is associated with higher odds of accurate evaluations.

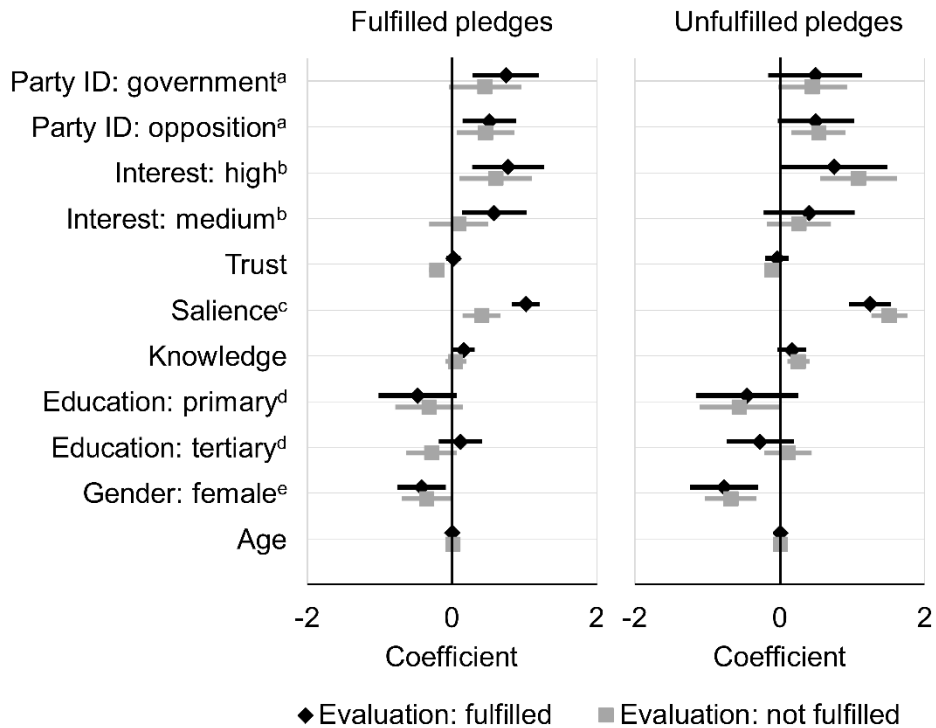


Figure 5. Multinomial logistic regression results: fulfilled and unfulfilled pledges separately (base category: can't say). The coefficients displayed are log odds (surrounded by the 95% confidence interval). Reference categories: ^a no party ID; ^b low interest; ^c not salient; ^d secondary education; ^e not female.

When it comes to unfulfilled pledges (the panel on the right in Figure 5), once again, there are no clearly visible differences between government and opposition identifiers. While opposition party identifiers do have higher odds of providing a negative (in this case accurate) evaluation compared to non-identifiers, the difference between government and opposition identifiers, here as well, is statistically insignificant ($B[\text{government}] - B[\text{opposition}] = -0.08$, 95% CI = $-0.53 \dots +0.37$). The odds of both accurate and inaccurate evaluations are higher among the politically highly interested but not among those whose level of interest is medium, compared to those whose level of interest is low. Political trust is associated with lower odds of providing a negative evaluation on both fulfilled and unfulfilled pledges, but the odds of providing a positive evaluation does not seem to increase with political trust.

The tendency to *refrain* from providing a judgement is associated with several variables. While an average respondent is quite likely to respond ‘can’t say’, it appears that especially perceived remoteness from the political system discourages the proffering of evaluations. Specifically, those who do not identify with any party are likely to choose the ‘can’t say’ alternative. Similarly, low to medium levels of political interest are conducive of ‘can’t say’ responses, as are relatively low levels of factual knowledge of politics. Because such variables tend to be central to studies on citizens’ evaluations of pledge fulfilment, it is questionable whether ‘can’t say’ responses should be treated as randomly missing data. A gender difference is also visible as women are less likely to provide both positive and negative judgements.

4.2. Evaluations of overall pledge fulfilment

The results of a linear regression analysis with the perceived overall extent of pledge fulfilment as the dependent variable are outlined in Figure 6. The figure shows the point estimates of the regression coefficients surrounded by the 95 per cent confidence interval. When it comes to the association between party identification and performance evaluations, Figure 6 is in line with expectations. Those identifying with a government party tend to give more positive performance ratings than those who do not identify with any party, whereas opposition party identifiers tend to offer more negative ratings. Hence, the data support H7 and H8. Moreover, political trust is positively associated with evaluations of overall pledge performance, in line with H9.

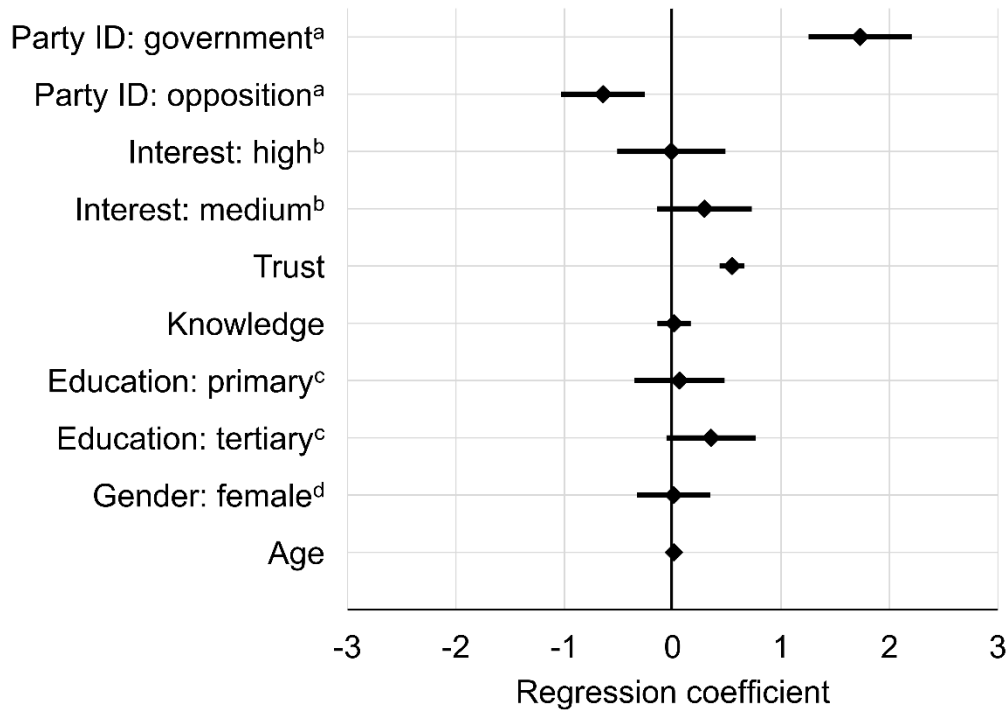


Figure 6. Linear regression results. The dependent variable is the overall evaluation of the extent to which the government fulfilled its electoral pledges. The coefficients displayed are unstandardised betas (surrounded by the 95% confidence interval). Reference categories: ^a no party ID; ^b low interest; ^c secondary education; ^d not female.

4.3. Robustness

A series of alternative specifications were estimated to assess the robustness of the results. Robustness tests are reported in detail in the Supplementary Material and the main results are summarised here.

First, those identifying with the Finns Party were separated from the other opposition party identifiers and the models shown in Figures 3 and 6 were re-estimated. This led to no major changes in the substantive results. If anything, the differences between government and opposition (excluding the Finns Party) identifiers became even less pronounced.

Second, the multinomial logit model summarised in Figure 3 was re-estimated one pledge at a time. While the point estimates of the coefficients, alongside their confidence intervals and statistical significance, changed somewhat from one pledge to another, they all nevertheless alluded to the same substantive conclusions as those summarised above. This only differed

with respect to one pledge whereby government and opposition party identification obtained coefficients with opposing signs; however, both coefficients in that case were statistically insignificant.

In Section 4.1, response categories ‘fulfilled’ and ‘partially fulfilled’ were combined. To ensure that the conclusions did not depend on this coding decision, the models displayed in Figures 3 and 5 were re-estimated retaining the original four-category coding. However, the results did not influence the main conclusions. The odds that government and opposition identifiers choose ‘fully fulfilled’ instead of ‘can’t say’ are higher compared to those with no party ID. The same applies to the odds of choosing ‘not fulfilled’. Government identifiers have somewhat higher odds of perceiving a pledge as fully fulfilled than opposition identifiers do. With respect to perceiving a pledge as partially fulfilled, no statistically significant difference exists between government and opposition. Government party identifiers are more prone to declare a pledge as fully fulfilled but this does not contradict the overall conclusion that identifying with a party increases the likelihood of both positive and negative evaluations.

Finally, the models shown in Figures 3 and 5 were re-estimated with ‘can’t say’ responses excluded, which has been conventional in previous studies. In the re-estimated models, the outcome variable was binary, one standing for ‘fulfilled’, with ‘not fulfilled’ being the reference category. Party identification had no statistically significant association with the odds of responding ‘fulfilled’. Thus, it turned out that it was not possible to replicate an earlier finding about the association between party identification and the tone of fulfilment evaluations. It is possible that the considerable reduction of observations and the accompanying decrease in statistical power contributed to this. Nevertheless, it appears important to account for the effects of party identification on evaluations of pledge fulfilment within diverse settings in future research.

4.4. Summary of findings

The results of this study are in line with the hypothesis that at the level of individual pledges, individuals’ evaluations of pledge fulfilment depend on actual government policies (H1). The findings are also in line with the hypotheses according to which identifying with a party (H2) and interest in politics (H3) increase the likelihood of offering a judgement on pledge fulfilment. The associations between political trust and fulfilment evaluations can be summarised so that those whose political trust is high, avoid offering negative evaluations but

are nevertheless not particularly prone to provide positive evaluations. No clear evidence was found for the hypotheses according to which the tone of the evaluations differs between government (H5) and opposition (H6) identifiers. When it comes to evaluations of the government's overall pledge performance, party identification did have the expected association with performance scores: government party identifiers gave, on average, more positive ratings than non-identifiers (H7), while the reverse applied to opposition party identifiers (H8). Moreover, political trust is positively associated with evaluations of overall pledge performance (H9).

In addition, some remarks can be made about the control variables. While gender was not associated with overall pledge fulfilment ratings, at the level of individual pledges, women were less likely to provide both positive and negative evaluations. This is in line with previous studies according to which women tend to be less likely to guess when confronted with factual knowledge questions to which they do not know the answer. One explanation is the notion that women tend to be more risk averse (Lizotte and Sidman 2009). With respect to political knowledge, the odds of incorrectly declaring that a fulfilled pledge had not been fulfilled were smaller for highly knowledgeable respondents. The odds of correctly declaring that an unfulfilled pledge had not been fulfilled were, in turn, higher for the highly knowledgeable. Thus, there was some evidence for the notion that political knowledge is associated with evaluations that are in line with actual government policies.

5. Conclusion

This study addressed the ways in which citizens perceive government performance when it comes to the fulfilment of electoral pledges. Such perceptions are central to established theoretical conceptions of representative democracy, such as the notion of promissory representation (Mansbridge 2003). However, based on political psychology and public opinion research, it is far from clear that citizens possess the level of information that such theoretical conceptions tend to presuppose, or that citizens are able to process information in a sufficiently unbiased manner (e.g. Achen and Bartels 2016; Nadeau and Niemi 1995).

In this study, a distinction was made between two levels at which evaluations take place: whether the government has fulfilled specified pledges and the overall extent to which the government has fulfilled its pledges. The results suggest that when the government fulfils a

pledge, people more often tend to perceive the pledge as fulfilled than unfulfilled. This is so despite widespread scepticism of electoral promises as a general category. However, the results also suggest that when asked to evaluate the fulfilment of a series of pledges, many people prefer not to provide any judgement, which is in line with previous studies.

Alongside objective government performance, subjective factors such as party identification, political interest and trust, all play an important role when citizens evaluate pledge fulfilment. The exact ways in which evaluations are associated with those factors seem to be somewhat different at the two levels. Those who identify with a party tend to be more willing than non-identifiers to provide evaluations on the fulfilment of individual pledges, but no clear differences are discernible between government and opposition identifiers when it comes to the tone of the evaluations, that is, whether pledges are perceived as fulfilled or unfulfilled. Unlike in some previous studies, no evidence was found for the notion that party identification biases perceptions, at least at the level of individual pledges. This may follow from the fact that the Finnish party system provides no clear alternatives in terms of prospective government compositions and intraparty competition between candidates is sometimes intense. However, these features of the political system do not provide an entirely satisfactory explanation because when it comes to overall performance evaluations, a government–opposition divide becomes visible.

One could argue that an individual who is an opposition party identifier and dislikes government policies may declare that the government has fulfilled its pledges but arrives at this conclusion for different reasons than a respondent who identifies with a government party and presumably wants to think the best of the government. After all, for someone who identifies with an opposition party, pledge fulfilment may serve as a testimony of the fact that the government not only pledges bad policies but indeed implements them and therefore makes things even worse. However, this reasoning is unsupported by the findings reported above: when one is asked to evaluate the overall extent to which the government parties have fulfilled their pledges, government party identifiers tend to give above-average ratings and opposition identifiers below-average ones.

At that level, the evaluations by those who indicate that they are highly interested in politics do not differ from the evaluations by those who are less interested. However, when it comes to individual pledges, being highly interested in politics is associated with relatively high willingness to report fulfilment judgements. Citizens with strong political trust tend to

perceive overall pledge fulfilment quite positively but their trust is hardly associated with a tendency to declare that individual pledges have been fulfilled; rather, it is connected to a tendency to avoid negative evaluations.

It is plausible that overall evaluations of the government's pledge performance reflect general attitudes toward power holders, while the lack of reference to any specific policies invites citizens to base their evaluations on pre-existing biases and stereotypes (Naurin and Oscarsson 2017). However, given the available data, it is impossible to delve deeper into the reasons for these apparent mismatches between the two levels. Therefore, to obtain a better understanding of them, more work drawing on different research designs is needed. Future research could benefit from differentiating between partisan and issue preferences more clearly: for example, does agreeing with the policy in question affect the likelihood of perceiving a pledge as fulfilled even if one disliked the party that made the pledge? Moreover, we currently do not know what kinds of weights people attach to individual pledges when forming their perceptions of overall pledge fulfilment – or whether any 'rational' aggregation of fulfilment evaluations takes place in individuals' minds.

As in many previous studies, the share of 'can't say' answers was considerable when respondents were asked to evaluate the fulfilment of individual pledges. The findings indicated that independent variables that tend to be central in related studies – notably party identification, interest in politics and trust – are associated with the probability of choosing the 'can't say' alternative. Future studies could benefit from breaking down the 'can't say' category into more precise alternatives or allowing respondents to indicate the degree of certainty of their proffered evaluations. This would make it possible to study the factors affecting the preparedness to take stance on pledge fulfilment in greater depth.

This study nevertheless suggested that insofar as citizens' vote choices depend on their overall perceptions of pledge fulfilment, partisanship does matter. The government's ability to influence party identifiers' perceptions of the 'running tally' by actually fulfilling its pledges may be quite limited, particularly given that government and opposition identifiers perceive the fulfilment of individual pledges largely similarly. However, whether and how the perceptions of floating voters, who do not identify with any party, change with actual pledge fulfilment rates is another issue that cannot be studied using the cross-sectional data currently available.

Supplementary material

Appendix 1. Regression results

Appendix 2. Robustness tests: Finns Party identifiers

Appendix 3. Robustness tests: Fulfilment evaluations pledge by pledge

Appendix 4. Robustness tests: Original coding of fulfilment evaluations

Appendix 5. Robustness tests: Excluding ‘can’t say’ answers

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