Politicians never keep their promises!

This widespread belief is virtually an article of faith among the cognoscente. The essence of it has been succinctly captured in the cynical admonition to voters attributed to Bernard Baruch: Vote for the man who promises the least—he'll be the least disappointing.

Voters themselves in polls express the same pessimism about political promises. In a recent typical question respondents were asked how often do political parties keep their election promises—most of the time, only some of the time, or hardly ever. Almost 90 percent said promises were kept only some of the time (56%) or hardly ever (32%). Only about one in ten (10%) said promises were kept most of the time.

Some of the public cynicism about political promises is driven by the tone of media coverage. An editorial published by a Texas newspaper after the last election is typical:

Any lingering doubts that this year's political promises like countless campaign pledges before them were mostly made to be broken are being dispelled. Thanks to the (local controversy) we are getting clarity a little earlier than normal this season, but the cleansing has only begun.”

And media coverage is reinforced by political commentators themselves—who are usually available to upbraid politicians for not keeping their promises. Political gadfly and comedienne Dick Gregory always got a laugh with this one and a half liner:

Political promises are much like marriage vows. They are made at the beginning of the relationship between candidate and voter, but are quickly forgotten.

Politicos themselves or their aides often feed the same perception that promises are made to be broken. Bill Clinton’s advisor George Stephanopulous only raised a few eyebrows with his response to a question about whether Clinton was going to keep a particular campaign pledge: "The President" Stephanopulous said, "has kept all of the promises he intended to keep.”

The political lore then is strong that politicians make promises they do not keep—in fact do not even intend to keep. It is, however, a tradition that does not stand careful scrutiny.

The fact is that politicians who win elections do try to carry out all or most of their promises and a large majority of promises are actually carried out.

A number of research findings from a variety of sources support this conclusion. At the national level the research has centered on the party platform promises made by the two major parties. The conventional wisdom has been that party platforms are glib, meaningless documents, that don't provide a reliable guide to what party leaders will do if elected.
But careful analysis has shown these stereotypes to be wrong. In fact, party platform promises do differ sharply between Democrats and Republicans. About 65 percent of platform promises are unique to one party.

Even more important, platform promises get carried out to a remarkable extent. Over time, the party making them carries out 65 to 75-percent of all platform promises.

Congressional level research shows much the same. One recent study of the 105th congress used a pre-election survey of campaign promises to compare with post election legislative votes and other legislative behavior. The conclusion: campaign promises are a strong predictor of a wide range of post-election legislative actions.

And there is more evidence at the state level here in Pennsylvania from the recently departed Ridge-Schweiker administration. Estimates are that from the 1994 campaign through 2002, the administration racked up close to an 85-percent success rate in keeping its major promises--failing only with tuition vouchers, the sale of the state's liquor stores, and the merit selection of appellate judges.

So, the evidence is strong if not overwhelming that politicians do keep their promises. The cynics have this one wrong. And it's an error that does some mischief. The perception that politicians forget their promises after the election undermines confidence in the political system, and contributes to existing widespread voter indifference.

But there is a twist here worthy of a good Franz Kafka plot line--because, while politicians don't forget the promises they make to voters, voters themselves seem to forget the promises made to them by politicians.

The most recent evidence of this comes from a 2003 Madonna Young poll on educational issues. Here's the wording of the question:

As you may remember Governor Rendell talked about education during last fall's campaign for governor. Do you remember whether he made any specific promises about what he would do about public education, or not?

If the 2002 gubernatorial campaign is remembered for anything, it certainly should be Ed Rendell's promises. He not only made them incessantly throughout the campaign, but he has been reminding Pennsylvanians almost daily since the election.

Yet the poll's finding is striking, just one in five people (21%) said they remembered that he had made some specific promises. Roughly 80-percent of us remain clueless.

Clearly voters don't remember the promises made to them--promises that politicians not only remember, but also to a large degree actually keep.

All of this has important implications for the American political system in particular for the way we think about political campaigns, and in the attention we pay to them.

An old piece of folk wisdom advises us to be careful what we wish for because we might get it. Equally good advice might be to be careful of what our politicians promise us, because we are very likely to get it.
It is not that politicians won't keep their promises that should concern us. It is instead that they will keep them and surprise us, that we should worry about.

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