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# The effects of party identification on (mis)perceptions of pledge fulfilment: Evidence from Portugal

Ana Maria Belchior

## Abstract

Empirical research has found that, despite citizens' perceptions to the contrary, political parties tend to deliver on their campaign promises. What are the reasons for this mismatch between perceptions and performance? Research to date has paid insufficient attention to the reasons for such mismatch, and the research carried out so far has not paid enough attention to the effects of political predispositions (such as party identification and sympathy for the government). This article argues that it is such political predispositions that cause biased perceptions of pledge fulfilment. Bias towards perceiving pledges as unfulfilled is expected to be higher for voters whose political predispositions are more unfavourable to government. The argument is supported by data on Portuguese voters and party manifestos in the 2011 election, contributing to better understanding the mechanisms of political accountability.

**Keywords:** citizens' political perceptions, party pledges, party identification, government decision-making, issue salience.

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The perception that politicians generally fail to deliver on their electoral promises is widespread among public opinion in many Western societies. To a great extent, this perception appears unrelated to a party's effective performance – a paradox that calls for clarification. How can we explain such a mismatch? Empirical research has demonstrated that the level of congruence between parties' campaign policy promises and governments' ensuing political actions is indeed higher than conventional wisdom suggests (e.g. Klingemann et al., 1994; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Moury and Fernandes, 2016; Thomson, 2011). Recent laboratory experiments reiterate these findings, demonstrating that electoral promises are more than just cheap talk (Corazzini et al., 2014; Born et al., 2017). Despite this inconsistency, little attention has been paid to the reasons underlying the mismatch. This is a topic of the utmost importance, given that parties' electoral manifesto policy pledges are the basis on which voters hold them accountable for concrete decisions (Schedler, 1998: 197), and that promises have a significant influence on voters' beliefs and voting decisions (Corazzini et al., 2014; Born et al., 2017). The present study has sought to contribute to this less widely explored field of research by looking at citizens' misperceptions of pledge fulfillments and exploring the underlying explanations as to why this is the case.

As far as we know, only a few studies have ever researched citizens' evaluations of the fulfillment of campaign policy commitments. One of them is Thomson's work on the Irish case (2011), in which he directly correlates citizens' evaluations with actual government decision-making (i.e. whether pledges are fulfilled or not) and finds that actual government performance regarding pledges is the most significant explanation for citizens' assessments. Also relevant is the study in which Naurin and Oscarsson employ a similar approach to the case of Sweden (2017), demonstrating that when voters' evaluations are in fact correct, it is more likely to be due to their political knowledge than to any partisan attachment they may

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feel. Our research goes beyond these previous studies, in that it does not merely consider whether or not voters' views of pledge fulfillments are accurate, but more specifically addresses how pledges are misperceived (e.g. as being unfulfilled, when in fact they actually were fulfilled) and the underlying reasons for such misperceptions. To this end and using the 2011-2015 Portuguese government as a case study, we explored the extent to which political predispositions (party identification and sympathy for the government) act as a screen that biases perceptions.

Identifying the existence of systematic errors in the way citizens perceive the political sphere is of the greatest importance. This is especially true when what is at stake is a mechanism for political representation and accountability – the case of the accomplishment of electoral promises, which is at the core of this article. Studying this issue has important implications for the representation process, given that mandate fulfillment is not only a central element in the question of government-electorate responsiveness, but is also linked to political accountability, because electoral manifestos are the basis on which governments can be held accountable (Schedler, 1998: 197).

Our research is based on a study of the 2011 Portuguese legislative election and the consequent PSD/CDS-PP (center-right Social Democratic Party / Christian-Democratic People's Party) coalition government (2011-2015). This election was held at a time of profound economic crisis and growing public dissatisfaction with the country's political elite and institutions (Teixeira et al., 2013). It was characterized by increasing electoral polarization and heightened party confrontation, affecting voters' perceptions regarding responsibility for the country's economic performance (Magalhães, 2014: 191-197). Additionally, in 2014 more than half of Portuguese citizens stated that they followed politics in the media less than once a week,<sup>i</sup> again demonstrating the typically low levels of political

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information among the Portuguese. Acknowledging that the measurement bias present in evaluations by individuals is not constant over time (see Duch et al., 2000), and according to the perceptual bias explanation, it is reasonable to assume that the process whereby voters' political perceptions are distorted is potentially more salient in adverse circumstances like those prevailing in Portugal during this period. As party polarization and confrontation become more accentuated with the crisis, the effects of party identification and political evaluations can also be expected to become stronger. Taken together with dissatisfied and poorly informed citizens, all of this contributes to making this case an exceptional framework within which to highlight the reasons for biased perceptions. This case study combines a set of conditions that increase the likelihood of the occurrence of a motivated reasoning process – that is, a process by which citizens feel motivated to misperceive information that is dissonant vis-à-vis their prior beliefs and attitudes, denying incongruent evidence (Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). It is thus an appropriate opportunity for us to achieve our goal of exploring the factors that trigger this process. Because this is a case study and because its findings are constrained by the unique context of the crisis, the Portuguese case implies limitations on any generalization of the results. Our main aim is thus not to generalize in that way, but rather to highlight the reasons underlying the occurrence of a motivated reasoning process, based on a case in which such a process is more likely to happen.

Portugal is also a critical setting for this study, because the tendency of its citizens to affirm that electoral promises are not kept coexists with a level of fulfillment that is actually quite high. More than 80 per cent of Portuguese citizens agreed in 2014 that parties and MPs do not try to fulfil the promises made during campaigns (similar findings were reached in 2012 for Spain, where 87.2 per cent of respondents disagreed with the proposition that parties

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try to keep their promises;<sup>ii</sup> and also in 2000 for Sweden, where two thirds of respondents said that parties usually break their promises (Naurin, 2002)). Even accepting that Portuguese citizens are not the only ones with negative perceptions of party performance, and that the emergence of the economic crisis may have played an important role in that tendency, the Portuguese were already ranked very low in this regard before the crisis emerged. In 2006, Portugal ranked 27<sup>th</sup> of 33 countries (democracies and non-consolidated democracies around the world), above only Russia, Taiwan, Poland, Latvia, Croatia, and Israel. A mere 14.7 per cent of Portuguese respondents agreed that MPs try to fulfil their promises when they reach parliament.<sup>iii</sup>

Concomitantly, research on election pledges in Portugal indicates that the level of fulfillment has been reported to be as high as it is in the western countries with the best performance, such as the UK, Sweden, or Spain, and significantly above the USA, Germany, or the Netherlands (Thomson et al., 2012: 17-18, 29). The average fulfillment rate of Portuguese governments between 1995 and 2011 was around 70 per cent (wholly plus partially fulfilled pledges; see Moury and Fernandes, 2016: 12). This paradox makes Portugal a singular case study.

The paper is structured as follows: we begin by exploring the literature on party promises and public opinion, and enunciate our hypothesis; we then set out the data and methods we used; and finally, we present and discuss our results and conclusions.

### **Party Promises and Bias in Public Opinion**

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The linkage between what parties promise during election campaigns and what governments do afterwards is consensually considered to be a central element of democratic representation (see e.g. Mansbridge, 2003; Maravall, 2003; Schedler, 1998). The well-known party mandate model, aka the 'promissory representation model' (Downs, 1957; Mansbridge, 2003) or 'responsible party model' (see e.g. Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999, chap. 6-9), is usually the basis for studies about that linkage. This model normatively assumes that voters choose who to vote for in accordance with their proximity to party policies, and that once in power, parties are expected to take decisions in line with their promised policies.

While on the one hand, the premise of the party mandate model for the accomplishment of governments' promises is to a great extent met in western societies, on the other, the premise that voters are informed is far from being observed. There is a general consensus that western voters know little about politics and are mostly divorced from what happens in the political sphere (Althaus, 2003; Zaller, 1992). However, some authors say that even in a context of little political information and involvement, citizens are able to take valid decisions, either because they use information cues, such as the opinions of experts or their own party's position (Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001), or because looking at opinions on an aggregate level can overcome the limitations posed by individual views (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2001). Aggregating individual opinions is said to eliminate the problems related with random answers and lack of knowledge, because they tend to cancel each other out. While individual evaluations may not accurately reflect a government's actual performance, at the aggregate level public opinion is supposed to be quite accurate.

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However, there could be systematic errors caused by individual perceptual biases, as opposed to purely random error, and in that case these errors would not be cancelled out during the aggregation process. For example, Althaus demonstrated that individual levels of information may distort the overall result of public opinion, thereby affecting democratic representation (2003); Enns and colleagues found that the partisan perceptual screen of Republican and Democrat evaluations of the economy prevailed in the aggregate (2012); and others have generally concluded that aggregation does not ensure collective preference representation (Duch et al., 2000; Thomson, 2011: 189).

These errors can be explained by the misuse of heuristics by individuals, and the consequent tendency to make distorted political judgments (Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000), especially in the case of less sophisticated voters (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). When we ask citizens if they think a promise has been fulfilled, we are essentially dealing with a subjective evaluation and not an objective or factual assessment. The main reason for this is simply a high probability that the individual has little or no information that would enable them to perform that task. Additionally, it has long been argued both by social psychologists and recently by political scientists that the potential for perceptual bias is enhanced in a context of low or ambiguous information (see e.g. Fiske and Taylor, 2013, chap. 7-8; Maravall, 2013: 28-40). As with other political performance assessments (Marsh and Tilley, 2010; Rudolph, 2003; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011), evaluating pledge fulfillment is not a simple matter of objective analysis. In short, according to the cue approach, individuals are expected to use contextual information or their own estimates to infer what has probably happened, and this makes mistaken perceptions more likely.

Not only might individuals not have the required information, but their extant attitudes and beliefs might also lead them to analyze new political information in a biased manner



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(Fiske and Taylor, 2013: 224-226; Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Political predispositions such as party identification are expected to play a major role in this motivated reasoning. As the seminal work by Campbell and colleagues puts it, 'identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation' (Campbell et al., 1960: 133). Many others have reiterated this idea of partisan selective evaluation (e.g. Duch et al., 2000; Evans and Anderson, 2006; Gerber and Huber, 2010: 153, 155-156; Tilley et al., 2008). Party identification has also been found to be important to the way in which voters attribute responsibility for a government's political performance (Hobolt et al., 2013; Marsh and Tilley, 2010), and also seems to condition perceptions of political objects (Bartels, 2002; Zaller, 1992), namely in terms of perceiving politicians as keeping their promises or not (Naurin, 2002: 13). Party identification is not, however, the only relevant political predisposition biasing perceptions.

As an example, recent research on responsibility attribution has reported that voters' evaluations of the government are conditioned by their previous political predispositions. Voters tend to attribute success to their favored party and failure to parties they oppose (Duch et al., 2000; Gerber and Huber, 2010; Enns et al., 2012; Rudolph, 2003; Tilley et al., 2008; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Voters also tend to: show support for a party in the light of the credit and blame they attribute to it (Marsh and Tilley, 2010); make responsibility judgments that are supported, among other things, by their perceptions of the institutional context (Rudolph, 2003); assess party popularity – the extent to which they feel against or in favor of a party – or approve the President or Congress on the basis of their perception of economic performance (Evans and Anderson, 2006; Rudolph, 2003).

When compared to perceptions of the economy, perceiving whether governments keep their electoral promises seems a more complex task for ordinary citizens, and it would be

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overly simplistic to say that errors in perceptions are due to random assessments of the political world caused by citizens' 'non-attitudes' (Zaller, 1992). The relevance of previous political predispositions to the conditioning of current political perceptions (i.e. of motivated reasoning) seems to be pervasive in individuals' interpretations of the political world, and they potentially play a significant role by distorting that information in order to be consonant with their holders' own prior attitudes and beliefs (Festinger, 1957; Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Our main argument is that perceptions of the fulfillment of pledges by governments are mainly motivated by voters' party identification and sympathy for the government. Although the literature mostly focuses on party identification as the predisposition driving political perceptions, it also broadly suggests that prior attitudes and beliefs lead individuals to analyze new political information in a biased manner (Fiske and Taylor, 2013: 224-226; Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Casting a ballot for opposition parties, and having a non-sympathetic view of the government's performance, can therefore be expected to motivate individuals to distort their perceptions, leading them to see the government as much less promise-compliant than it really is. While likely correlated, as party identification supposedly influences political evaluations (Hobolt et al., 2013; Marsh and Tilley, 2010), both variables are expected to have independent effects on perceptual bias. Casting a vote for a party increases the likelihood of having a sympathetic view on that party's performance, but not necessarily so; as a result of the unfolding of the mandate, party voters can as well be non-sympathetic towards that party's performance.

Matching two independent but convergent branches of the literature – motivated reasoning (e.g. Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006), and the perceptual screen theory (Campbell et al., 1960) – our hypothesis states that citizens' biased perceptions are underlain

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by a motivated reasoning process triggered by political predispositions: party identification and sympathy for the government. The hypothesis is as follows:

H1: The more unfavorable the political predispositions of voters towards the government (not identifying with or being unsympathetic towards the parties that form the government), the higher the perceptual bias in perceiving pledges as being unfulfilled when they have in fact been fulfilled.

Since motivation potentially trumps information (Fiske and Taylor, 2013: 224-226; Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006), voters' policy issue salience and other previously tested independent variables (e.g. media exposure, political knowledge, education, and experience with the policy issue) are used to control this relationship.

### **Data and Methods**

#### ***The 2011 Portuguese Parliamentary Elections***

The present research focuses on the fulfillment of electoral pledges during the 2011-2015 Portuguese legislature – a period that corresponded to the peak of the economic crisis. As in other European countries, the 2008 international economic crisis had major consequences for legislative elections in Portugal (Magalhães, 2014). The 2009 Portuguese election campaign was immediately dominated by the effects of the economic crisis. The incumbent Socialists (PS) won the election, but lost their absolute majority and began to implement a set of austerity packages, while facing a very hostile majority in Parliament. The Socialist Prime Minister resigned on 23 March 2011, after the announcement of a fourth austerity

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package, which was not supported by the main opposition party, the center-right PSD. This led to the calling of elections in June 2011.

After his resignation, but before he actually stood down, an unbearable increase in Portugal's borrowing costs forced the Prime Minister to accept financial assistance from the European Union and International Monetary Fund and the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding. This agreement was officially signed by the PS government, but enjoyed the support of both the PSD and the smaller conservative CDS-PP party.

The PSD received the largest number of votes in the June 2011 elections (38.7 per cent), and formed a coalition government with the CDS-PP (11.7 per cent). Together, the two parties enjoyed a parliamentary majority of 132 out of a total of 230 seats. The Socialist Party, PS, which was now the main opposition party, won 28.1 per cent of the vote (78 MPs), the Communist/Green PCP-PEV coalition won 7.9 per cent (16 MPs), and the left-libertarian Left Bloc (BE) won 5.2 per cent (8 MPs). The new center-right parliamentary majority was thus able to pursue compliance with the commitments to the country's creditors, implementing socially severe measures imposed by the Memorandum with a major impact on the living conditions of the Portuguese population.

### ***Electoral Promises: Data and implications***

The project 'Public Preferences and Policy Decision-Making'<sup>iv</sup> collected the party pledges in the 2011 electoral manifestos and analyzed their fulfillment over the course of the 2011-2015 legislature<sup>v</sup>. It used the method that Royed (1996) developed in order to assess the extent to which electoral programs were converted into political decisions. She classifies a 'pledge' as: 'the commitment to carry out some action or produce some outcome, where an objective estimation can be made as to whether or not the action was indeed taken or the

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outcome produced' (1996: 79). Her method simply consists of collecting the pledges and then verifying if they were accomplished or not, searching many different sources, such as experts and journalists' reports, official websites, direct phone calls to public departments, or legislative databases.<sup>vi</sup>

The present research is based on a selection of five pledges that were included in the 2011 electoral manifestos of either the PSD or the CDS-PP. Besides assessing pledge fulfillment, the project also encompassed a questionnaire targeted at the Portuguese electorate<sup>vii</sup> that included questions asking respondents to rate the fulfillment of the five electoral pledges. The sample is composed of 1,204 interviews, and fieldwork took place between 30 June and 14 October 2014. The question was worded as follows: "Before the 2011 Legislative Elections, the following pledges were made by one or both parties that later formed the Government (PSD and CDS-PP). With regard to each one of them, do you think the pledge was completely fulfilled, partially fulfilled, or not fulfilled at all?" The pledges were selected in order to reflect some variation in policy areas which citizens report as being important (all popular except one: cuts in benefits and tax deductions) and which were emphasized in the party manifestos: employment, healthcare, taxation, social security, and public-private partnerships (PPPs). Both party manifestos included a significant number of pledges in each of these policy areas (each area representing 5 to 9 per cent of the total number of pledges in the manifestos, except the PPPs, which only represented 2 per cent), which together encompassed a total of 29 per cent of all pledges in the two manifestos. All of them were highly salient in the media during the campaign and were presented as emblematic of the government's program. By selecting the five pledges from these policy areas, we aimed to ensure that we chose pledges which were noticeable and relevant in the eyes of citizens.<sup>viii</sup>

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The fulfilled pledges considered in the study are as follows:

- A reduction in the previous working period required for access to unemployment benefits (the working period decreased from the 450 days imposed in 2006, to 360 days in 2012).

- A reduction in the average waiting time for hospital appointments and surgeries (the average waiting time for hospital appointments decreased from 130 days in 2011 to 115 days in 2014; and for surgeries from 3.13 months in 2011, to 3 months in 2014).

- A reduction in benefits and tax deductions linked to the Personal Income Tax (IRS) (several laws were passed during the legislature, revoking previous legislation and leading to an effective reduction in IRS-related benefits and deductions).

The partially fulfilled pledges were:

- An increase in the minimum social and rural pensions (the promise also referred to increasing pensions in line with inflation, but this did not happen: the inflation increased on average 1.6 per cent during the period between 2011 and 2014, while pensions only increased 1.1 per cent; the government thus made an approximation in order to fulfil this promise, and so we considered it to have been partially fulfilled).

- Renegotiation of the public-private partnerships in which the state's interests were not safeguarded (some renegotiations took place, leading to substantial savings for the Portuguese state, as reported by the European Commission;<sup>ix</sup> however, not all PPPs that failed to respect public interests were renegotiated – road concessions are one example).

It should be noted that the way in which promises are defined is not irrelevant when people come to gauge their fulfillment; for instance, when a pledge is for an undefined general increase or decrease, its meaning is subjective. From the voters' points of view, it

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may well be that the promised improvement has simply not been large enough, and that this is why they say the promise has not been kept. Citizens' evaluations of pledge fulfilment can thus diverge from that of scholars, and the less specific pledges are, the more difficult it is for voters to evaluate their fulfilment (for a discussion, see Naurin and Oscarsson, 2017: 862-865). Our assumption is that the ordinary citizen does not usually have the political knowledge to objectively assess the extent to which a pledge is fulfilled, even in the case of widely debated and salient pledges, such as those selected here. When asking voters for their perceptions of the fulfilment of these five pledges, we are therefore most probably receiving poorly informed and rough appreciations of the government's performance in relation to each policy issue. This assumption that we are not dealing with an objective analysis on the part of citizens is commonplace in research on political perceptions (Duch et al., 2000; Marsh and Tilley, 2010; Rudolph, 2003; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011).

### ***Dependent Variable***

The dependent variable corresponds to whether or not citizens' perceptions of the fulfilment of election pledges are biased. 0 represents 'non-biased perception', when voters accurately perceive the pledge as fulfilled, while 1 refers to 'perception biased towards unfulfillment', when voters perceive the pledge as unfulfilled, but it was actually 'fully' or 'partially fulfilled' (for analytical purposes, the 'full' and 'partial' fulfilment of pledges are merged, as has been done in similar research, see e.g. Mansergh and Thomson, 2007).<sup>x</sup>

### ***Independent Variables***

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As discussed above, a major trend in recent literature agrees that party preferences mold political (and economic) perceptions (see e.g. Evans and Anderson, 2006; Hobolt et al. 2013; Naurin, 2002: 13; Rudolph, 2003; Tilley et al., 2008; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). In the present research, identification with parties in government (PSD or CDS-PP) versus opposition parties (PS, BE, or CDU) is used as a core independent variable to test the perceptual bias hypothesis (question: “Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party? If so, which party do you feel close to?”). Although some authors state that party vote can be more important than partisanship to an explanation of the predisposition to evaluate selectively (Anderson et al., 2004), in the current case opting for party identification makes a better contribution to mitigating the potential problem of endogeneity between party linkage and political evaluations, due to the likely higher stability of identification.

The other core independent dimension is sympathy for the government. According to Zaller (1992), individuals with a consolidated political predisposition are open to accepting new information insofar as it enhances their previous political beliefs. This is because, as Festinger seminally states (1957), individuals look for cognitive consistency between their predispositions and new information or perceptions. Also basing ourselves on Taber and Lodge's notion that individuals become involved in bias-strengthening processes, thereby reinforcing their biased interpretation of information (2006), we consider that extant evaluations of government performance can be expected to help explain perceptual bias, inasmuch as they may be considered political predispositions to interpret the fulfillment of government parties' pledges in a particular direction. Sympathy for the government is assessed using an index of citizens' opinions of the government's policies, composed of five variables (Cronbach's Alpha=0.822). The question we asked was: “Thinking about the general performance of the Passos Coelho government, how would you evaluate the work



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of that government in the field of economics and public finances / education / health / employment and social security / and justice and security?” (scale ranging between 1=Very bad, and 4=Very good). Political evaluations of government have already been used in a similar way to study voter attribution of credit and blame (Marsh and Tilley, 2010). The assumption here is that systematically positive evaluations convey sympathy, and negative ones convey antipathy.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***Control Variables***

The analysis uses the following control variables to help explain perceptual bias: voters' policy issue salience, media exposure, political knowledge, education, and experience with the policy issue; each discussed below.

Research on this topic has generally underestimated the fact that campaign promises are not all equivalent in voters' eyes (taxes and salaries are presumably more important than foreign policy). Assuming that voters attach greater importance to some policy issues to the detriment of others (see e.g. Spoon and Klüver, 2015), it is likely that the amount of attention a voter pays to a promise will match the policy salience it holds for him/her. He/she can therefore be expected to tend to more accurately assess government performance with regard to promises that are especially salient. The proxy used to measure voters' issue salience was the voter's identification of the most important problem facing Portugal at the time (question: “What do you think is the most important problem facing Portugal today?” (open-ended); dummy variables corresponding to the issue considered for each of the dependent variables were created in each case). Although not a straightforward measure of the issue salience of each pledge, and despite being limited in scope because each respondent could only allocate salience to a single policy area, the most important issue can be considered a valid proxy of

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voters' issue salience, and is widely used in studies of voter priorities (e.g. Spoon and Klüver 2015).

It has been suggested that political involvement and sophistication influence how voters perceive the performance of the economy: the most interested and sophisticated have more accurate perceptions (Duch et al., 2000; Tilley et al., 2008: 674-675). Informed and educated people are expected to be more interested in politics and to pay more attention to what politicians do, and for those reasons to more accurately perceive whether politicians keep their word. A set of variables was used to measure levels of political information and education: an index of media exposure (frequency with which the respondent followed politics in/on newspapers, radio, television, internet, news websites, social networks, and blogs – Cronbach's Alpha=0.806); an index of political knowledge (using factual questions about the name of the health minister and the unemployment rate); and level of education.

Even considering that citizens may have similar political preferences and information, they may also be influenced by their subjective interpretation of the real conditions. An individual's personal experience promotes such subjective interpretations (Duch et al., 2000: 638). An additional independent variable of personal experience in relation to the issue on which the pledge was made is therefore included in the model, corresponding to the following dummies, regarding each of the dependent variables: if the respondent was unemployed; if the respondent or anyone in his/her family were on a waiting list or had received medical treatment; if he/she was a part or full-time employee; and if he/she was retired (no variable was included for the renegotiation of PPPs).

### **Analysis**

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It has been argued that coalition governance decreases the likelihood of pledge fulfillment, even if the coalition is in a majority (Mansergh and Thomson, 2007: 316-317; Thomson et al., 2012: 17-20). It is also known that under changing external circumstances such as an economic crisis, the realization of campaign promises becomes ‘either impossible or undesirable’, and promises lose their binding force (Schedler, 1998: 202-203). For these reasons, and also due to external intervention, as expected, Passos Coelho’s two-party coalition performed relatively poorly in terms of keeping its campaign word (only 60 per cent of pledges were fulfilled).<sup>xii</sup> However, recent research has demonstrated that to a great extent, external recommendations corresponded to structural reforms that PSD leaders had long wanted to implement in Portugal (Moury and Standing 2017). Even if external intervention did significantly limit the government’s ability to fulfil its program, that would have had no major impact on our research, as we were not specifically focused on the government’s performance, but rather on citizens’ perceptions of that performance.

Among the pledges related to the issues voters said were the most important (reducing or not raising taxes; increasing or not cutting pensions; creating jobs or fighting unemployment; improving the economy; and increasing or not cutting salaries and wages),<sup>xiii</sup> the fulfillment rate was always above 40 per cent. However, if we look at the unfulfilled promises in more detail, they include highly popular policy measures, such as reducing income taxes (whereas the government fulfilled all its promises to increase taxes). Rises in certain taxes (e.g. income taxes) that were not provided for in the electoral manifestos also occurred during the legislature as a consequence of external intervention. As a result, net pensions, salaries and wages fell significantly in Portugal between 2011 and 2015. Although some partial measures to fight unemployment were undertaken, other important ones were not accomplished. In addition, a high level of unemployment persisted throughout the

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legislature (the unemployment rate only fell slightly, in the last few months of the legislature, from around 16 per cent in 2012 and 2013 to 14 per cent in 2014). From the voters' perspective, this represents a negative performance on the part of the government parties in terms of keeping their campaign commitments.

Figure 1 presents a descriptive analysis of the Portuguese respondents' perceptions of the fulfillment of the five electoral promises under analysis. It shows that the distributions are practically equivalent, regardless of the pledge or the political area to which it belonged, whether it was popular or not, and whether it was fully or partially fulfilled. In all cases the percentage of respondents saying the pledge was not fulfilled is always around or above 50 per cent. These findings are convergent with the perceptual bias hypothesis.

Figure 1. (ABOUT HERE)

Systematic bias in political perceptions is not new. On the one hand, severe systematic distortions can occur due to the individual's cognitive errors when making political judgments supported by cues (Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000). On the other hand, the pervasiveness of the results suggests that a 'partisan "cheering" effect' (Gerber and Huber, 2010: 153, 155-156) could be present: individuals may simply assert that the government has fulfilled the promises if they identify with it, and the opposite if they do not. Furthermore, the non-fulfillment of campaign commitments that voters considered very important – a characteristic of this legislature, as we have already shown – may also have played a relevant role in explaining the biasing process.

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Table 1 shows that, notwithstanding a general tendency for citizens to be inaccurate in their perceptions of fulfilled pledges (more than 50 per cent of respondents), citizens who identify with government parties or are more sympathetic towards the government tend to be more accurate in perceiving pledges as fulfilled than opposition-party identifiers and government non-sympathizers<sup>xiv</sup>. When the relationship between effective performance and citizens' perceptions is moderated by party identification and sympathy for the government, a pattern compatible with the motivated reasoning hypothesis becomes evident. The percentages of misperceptions of pledges as unfulfilled when they were in fact fulfilled are substantially higher among voters who identified with an opposition party or were not sympathetic towards the government, than for voters who identified with or were sympathetic towards it. The former tend to see fulfilled pledges as unfulfilled, while the latter tend to accurately perceive them as fulfilled (association tests show statistically significant coefficients in all cases).

Table 1. (ABOUT HERE)

In order to consolidate these findings and directly test our hypothesis, we used three models with pooled data concerning voter bias towards unfulfillment in their perceptions, the results of which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. (ABOUT HERE)

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The models shown in Table 2 consolidate previous findings, supporting the hypothesis of a motivated reasoning process in pledge misperception triggered by party identification and especially by sympathy for the government (the coefficient is always significant and more robust for the latter). The less citizens identify with the government parties or the more critical they are regarding the government's performance, the more likely they are to perceive fulfilled pledges as unfulfilled. Among the control variables (Model II) only political knowledge and level of education are significant: as expected, the more educated and informed respondents are less biased in their perceptions of the government's performance (only education maintains significance in Model III). Neither voters' policy issue salience, nor media exposure, nor having personal experience with the issue on which the pledge was made seem to have had any effect on their perception of whether pledges were fulfilled.

In this vein, Zaller suggests that the most informed voters are likely to be better able to resist persuasive messages that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, and thus more capable of correctly gauging the political reality (1992). Naurin and Oscarsson (2017) conclude, indeed, that voters' accurate evaluations of pledges fulfilment are mainly due to their political knowledge. However, what these results also indicate is that perceptual bias tend to overcome characteristics such as political knowledge and education (as well as issue salience), as has already been found in the past (Bartels, 2002: 127-130; Thomson, 2011).

Interaction terms between the two main effects – party identification and government evaluation – and the two most relevant variables in Model II – political knowledge and education – reiterate these findings (Model III). Both interaction terms of party identification - with political knowledge and education - show that increasing levels of political knowledge and education decrease the probability that the perceptions of government identifiers will be

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biased towards unfulfillment (although education to a lesser extent; see both variables' predicted probabilities in Tables A1 and A2, in the Appendix). The other interaction terms are not significant, or are opposite to expectations, suggesting that political knowledge and education do not strengthen the effect of political predispositions on individuals' misperceptions of pledge fulfilment. Political predispositions seem to act in a way that is quite independent of an individual's education or political information.

As displayed in Figure 2, the probabilities of a bias towards unfulfillment are much higher for citizens who consider the government has done a bad job than for those who think it has done a good one. Although the perceptions of government party identifiers tend to be less biased towards failure to fulfill pledges than those of opposition party identifiers, negative evaluations of the government outperform and cut across party identification.

Figures 2. (ABOUT HERE)

To sum up, these findings are convergent with the idea that party identification can actually be more a result of political evaluations and perceptions than a cause of those evaluations or perceptions. This has already been suggested by Achen (1992), pointing to an endogenous relationship between the two variables (Anderson et al., 2004; Enns et al., 2012). It implies that, although party identification can be considered a pervasive dynamic force that shapes citizens' perceptions (Bartels, 2002), other endogenous political predispositions should also be taken into account in the equation, since they can potentially outweigh partisanship, as is the case here.

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## **Conclusions**

This research focused on testing motivated reasoning as the main reason for voters' perceptual bias in relation to governments' fulfillment of pledges. The findings support the hypothesis that party identification, and to a greater extent sympathy towards the government, trigger distortion of individual perceptions of pledge fulfillment (although there currently also seems to be a pervasive trend towards perceiving promises as unfulfilled, probably enhanced by governance subject to external intervention, and by widespread political dissatisfaction and lack of information). Citizens' negative evaluations of the government's performance or identification with opposition parties promote bias towards perceiving pledges that have actually been fulfilled as unfulfilled, leading citizens to see the government as less compliant with promises than it really is. Indeed, sympathy for the government cuts across party identification, as it conditions perceptions among both government and opposition identifiers. Party identification helps explain biased perceptions to a lesser extent, although its effect is systematic.

Findings not only support Campbell and colleagues' party perceptual screen on voter's political views (1960: 133), but also make it possible to extend and reinforce such attributes to political predispositions in general (as is the case of citizens' evaluations of the government), underlying the motivated reasoning approach (Fiske and Taylor, 2013: 224-226; Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). By contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between party mandate accomplishment and voters' ability to hold a government liable, these results have implications for democratic representation and accountability, in that one of the basic principles of representative democracy is that governments must be held accountable for their performance. Biased perceptions make it more difficult, or even impossible, to reward governments that keep their word and punish those that do not. To the



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extent that citizens have a tendency to use cues to assess a government's performance regarding pledge fulfillment, and that they tend to do so in accordance with biased perceptions when it comes to holding government responsible for its performance, this may ultimately reduce or even annul a government's commitment to respond to voters.

Given that this research focuses on a relatively unexplored topic, there is a lot of room for future research. One useful way forwards would be to take the role of the media in molding citizens' perceptions into account; another important pathway for progressing research would be to analyze a wider range of promises and adopt a comparative framework of analysis.

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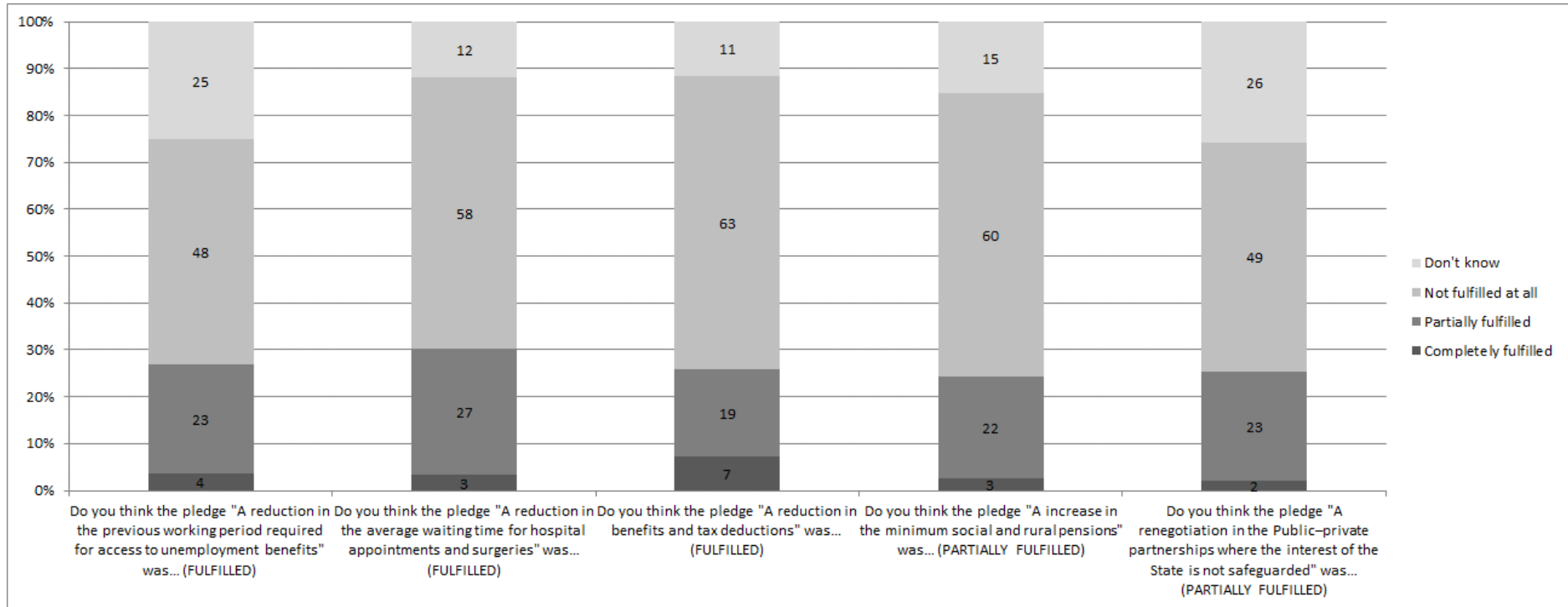
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# The effects of party identification on (mis)perceptions of pledge fulfilment: Evidence from Portugal

**Figure 1.** Portuguese citizens' perceptions of pledge fulfilment, 2014



Source: Project 'Public Preferences and Policy Decision-Making'.

## The effects of party identification on (mis)perceptions of pledge fulfilment: Evidence from Portugal

**Table 1.** *Sample descriptives and accurateness of voters' perceptions of pledges fulfilment*

	%	Accurate perception (%)	Inaccurate perception (%)	Don't know (%)	Total (%) (n)	Cramer's V
Level of fulfilment						
Partially fulfilled	40	26,3	54,9	18,8	100 (2399)	<i>ns</i>
Fulfilled	60	29,2	55,5	15,3	100 (3596)	
ID						
Government	18,9	42,5	40,2	17,3	100 (1132)	<i>0,180***</i>
Opposition	81,1	24,7	58,8	16,6	100 (4863)	
Gov. evaluations						
Good evaluations	83,7	47,0	38,1	14,9	100 (979)	<i>0,204***</i>
Bad evaluations	16,3	24,3	58,6	17,0	100 (5016)	
Level of fulfilment vs. ID						
Partially fulfilled: Government ID	-	38,5	42,3	19,2	100 (452)	<i>0,156***</i>
Partially fulfilled: Opposition ID	-	23,5	57,8	18,6	100 (1947)	
Fulfilled: Government ID	-	45,1	38,8	16,0	100 (680)	<i>0,195***</i>
Fulfilled: Opposition ID	-	25,4	59,4	15,2	100 (2916)	
Level of fulfilment vs. Gov. evaluations	-					
Partially fulfilled: Good evaluations	-	43,6	39,8	16,6	100 (392)	<i>0,191***</i>
Partially fulfilled: Bad evaluations	-	23,0	57,8	19,2	100 (2007)	
Fulfilled: Good evaluations	-	49,2	37,0	13,8	100 (587)	<i>0,213***</i>
Fulfilled: Bad evaluations	-	25,3	59,1	15,6	100 (3009)	
Total (n)	-	28,0	55,3	16,7	100 (6020)	

Notes: The data are supported on pooled data of the five pledges. Cramer's V is computed excluding the "don't know".



## The effects of party identification on (mis)perceptions of pledge fulfilment: Evidence from Portugal

**Table 2.** *Generalized estimating equations for voters' biased perceptions of pledge fulfilment (0=non biased perceptions; 1=biased perceptions towards unfulfillment)*

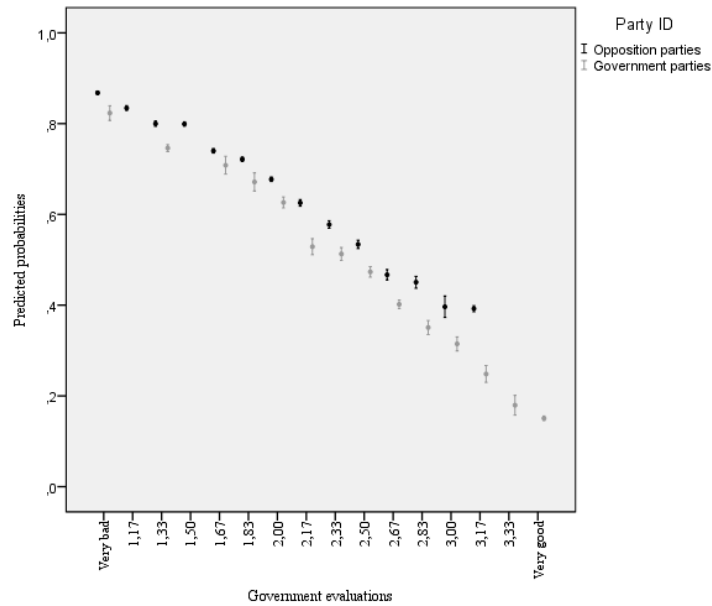
	Model I	Model II	Model III
Intercept	2,843*** (0,074)	4,028*** (0,087)	4,518*** (0,356)
Party ID (1 = PSD or CDS/PP; 0= Opposition parties)	-0,579*** (0,127)	-0,522*** (0,124)	-0,471 (0,365)
Evaluation of government's performance (4=very good)	-1,035*** (0,059)	-1,050*** (0,060)	-1,450*** (0,171)
Voters' issue salience (=1)	-	-0,027 (0,110)	-
Media exposure (35 = highest)	-	-0,009 (0,007)	-
Political knowledge (3 = all answers correct)	-	-0,138** (0,052)	-0,068 (0,229)
Level of education (11=PhD)	-	-0,132*** (0,019)	-0,262*** (0,042)
Experience with issue (=1)	-	-0,027 (0,110)	-
Party ID * Political knowledge	-	-	-0,358*** (0,109)
Party ID * Level of education	-	-	-0,062** (0,109)
Evaluation of government's performance * Political knowledge	-	-	0,016 (0,137)
Evaluation of government's performance * Level of education	-	-	0,064** (0,020)
QIC	4352,865	4312,592	4300,5889
QICC	4343,922	4299,672	4292,737
<i>n</i>	3697	3697	3697

Source: 'Public Preferences and Policy Decision-Making'.

Notes: The dependent variable is the respondent's perception of the pledge as being unfulfilled or fulfilled (biased or non biased); that is, of perceiving the pledge as unfulfilled when it was indeed fulfilled, or of accurately perceiving the pledge has fulfilled). Type of correlation structure specification: AR(1) matrix. Link function: logit. Values are beta coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<.001; \*\*p<0.01; \*p<0.05.

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**Figure 2.** Predicted probabilities of pledges biased perception towards unfulfillment: Evaluation of government's performance by party identity



Source: Table 2 (Model 2).

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## APPENDIX

Table A1. Mean predicted probabilities of biased perceptions by party ID and levels of political knowledge

	Party ID: Government			Party ID: Opposition		
	Mean probability	Standard deviation	N	Mean probability	Standard deviation	N
0 correct answers	0,617	0,240	250	0,768	0,149	1273
1 correct answer	0,600	0,234	505	0,736	0,143	2100
2 correct answers	0,548	0,239	380	0,745	0,144	1510

Table A2. Mean predicted probabilities of biased perceptions by party ID and levels education

	Party ID: Government			Party ID: Opposition		
	Mean probability	Standard deviation	N	Mean probability	Standard deviation	N
None	-	-	-	0,641	0,205	15
Incomplete Primary Education	0,593	0,304	15	0,891	0,128	55
4 complete years (complete Primary Education)	0,670	0,257	200	0,777	0,150	589
6 complete years	0,651	0,234	125	0,731	0,151	429
9 complete years	0,555	0,227	160	0,757	0,138	825
12 complete years (complete secondary education)	0,528	0,192	205	0,730	0,144	1340
Post-secondary education completed	0,640	0,265	45	0,755	0,171	140
University (bachelor)	0,550	0,224	350	0,743	0,141	1255
Post-graduation	0,458	0,000	5	0,740	0,156	25
Master	0,767	0,305	25	0,755	0,137	160
Phd	0,242	0,000	5	0,773	0,128	50

Source: 'Public Preferences and Policy Decision-Making'.

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<sup>i</sup> Data from the project on the basis of this research (at:

<http://www.cies.iscte.pt/en/projectos/ficha.jsp?pkid=530>).

<sup>ii</sup> CIS, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, "Congruencia ideológica entre electores y representantes políticos", study no. 2930, at:

[http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/EN/1\\_encuestas/estudios/ver.jsp?estudio=13624](http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/EN/1_encuestas/estudios/ver.jsp?estudio=13624).

<sup>iii</sup> ISSP, International Social Survey Programme, "Role of Government IV", study ZA4700, at:

<https://www.gesis.org/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/role-of-government/2006/>.

<sup>iv</sup> At: <http://www.cies.iscte.pt/en/projectos/ficha.jsp?pkid=530>.

<sup>v</sup> The total number of pledges in the PSD (261) and CDS-PP (95) manifestos was 356.

<sup>vi</sup> See Moury and Fernandes, 2016: 11-12, for more detailed methodological procedures.

<sup>vii</sup> Data collection was supported by two different interview methods: (a) full interviews by telephone; (b) interviews started with a telephone block and completed through an online questionnaire. 84 per cent of interviews were conducted by mobile phone and 16 per cent by landline phone. The selection of respondents was random. In the case of mobile phones, the respondent (selected from a random sample of mobile phones) was the person who answered the phone. In the case of landlines, the respondent was the member of the household with the most recent birthday.

<sup>viii</sup> An analysis of the promises published in a Portuguese mainstream newspaper – *Público* ([www.publico.pt](http://www.publico.pt)) – during the election campaign (22 May to 3 June) reveals the salience of such pledges. For instance, either PSD or CDS/PP promised: not to raise taxes (24 May); to improve the conditions of the unemployed (30 May, 1 June, and 3 June); to intervene regarding hospital waiting lists (30 May); or to defend the increase in pensions (22 May). No news media reported the PPP pledge, although the issue was widely debated in the media before elections and with significant public impact (see e.g. *Jornal de Notícias* ([www.jn.pt](http://www.jn.pt)), 13 April 2011, or *TSF* ([www.tsf.pt](http://www.tsf.pt)), 26 April 2011). These issues were also widely debated in other newspapers and media venues.

<sup>ix</sup> At: [http://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_finance/publications/occasional\\_paper/2014/pdf/ocp191\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/occasional_paper/2014/pdf/ocp191_en.pdf) (see page 109), and

[http://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_finance/publications/occasional\\_paper/2014/pdf/ocp208\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/occasional_paper/2014/pdf/ocp208_en.pdf) (see page 32).

<sup>x</sup> The 'don't knows' were coded as 'missing'.

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<sup>xi</sup> A suspicion of endogeneity may arise in this relationship: perceptions that pledges have been fulfilled may also explain sympathy towards the government. The assumption in this research is, however, that sympathy towards the government is a more subjective and emotional appreciation (predisposing individuals' motivated reasoning) than perceptions of whether substantive pledges have been fulfilled or not, with the latter thus more prone to being the consequences of the former than its cause. The research thus focuses on one angle of that relationship by assessing the extent to which, acting as political predispositions, broader feelings of sympathy in relation to the government's performance influence individuals' perceptions of specific pledge fulfillments.

<sup>xii</sup> The source of this data is the project at: <http://www.cies.iscte.pt/en/projectos/ficha.jsp?pkid=530>.

<sup>xiii</sup> The source of the data is the project at: <http://www.cies.iscte.pt/en/projectos/ficha.jsp?pkid=530>.

Most respondents (58 per cent) admitted not remembering or not knowing which the most important pledge was.

<sup>xiv</sup> The correlation between sympathy towards the government and party identification is 0.413.