

**Promises Kept, Promises Broken, and  
Those Caught in the Middle**

**Tabitha Bonilla**

Northwestern University and IPR

Version: June 30, 2022

**DRAFT**

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## **Abstract**

Campaign promises are central to representation and accountability, where candidates use promises to attract voters and fulfillment of those promises is used as a rubric for success. Investigations into how promises matter to voters, whether during campaigns for a new office or when running for reelection, reveal that voters have a nuanced understanding of promises that is dependent on assessments of candidate attentions as well as the successful policy interventions. Bonilla builds on that work and the long literature on motivated reasoning to examine how voters use partisanship in their decisions of promise fulfillment. With two original survey experiments, she demonstrates that voters view promise fulfillment through a partisan lens when an issue is a partisan issue, and particularly when there is ambiguity around if the promise is kept. This finding suggests nuance to the traditional assumptions around how promise fulfillment is assessed in reelection campaigns.

*Funding for this project came from an APSA Small Grant.*

## INTRODUCTION

Campaign promises are central to representation and accountability, where the typical theory describes candidates using promises to attract voters to vote for them (Pitkin, 1967; Downs, 1965; 1957), and in subsequent elections, voters assess fulfillment of those promises in determining whether to vote for those candidates subsequently (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin, 1999; Mansbridge, 2003). Much work investigates whether elected officials fulfill their promises—and they do, in contrast to voter expectations for promises to be broken (Thomson, Royed, Naurin, Artés, Costello, Ennsler-Jedenastik, Ferguson, Kostadinova, Moury, and Pétry, 2017; Pétry and Collette, 2009). Investigations into how promises matter to voters, whether during campaigns for a new office or when running for reelection, reveal that voters have a nuanced understanding of promises that is dependent on assessments of candidate attentions as well as trust in government and the anticipated success of policy interventions (Bonilla, 2021; Naurin, 2011). What this work does not consider, is the extent to which assessments of what it means to fulfill a promise is contingent on a voter’s partisan leanings. As growing evidence mounts of partisan influence in decision-making (e.g. Redlawsk, 2002; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook, 2014) there is reason to believe that determinants of accountability and promise fulfillment may also be subject to partisan judgments. Here, I ask how voters interpret promise fulfillment, how partisanship affects that perspective, and if partisanship shifts voter perceptions of promises as fulfilled (or not).

The fulfillment of election pledges has been considered a cornerstone of representation, and conceptualized as having two primary motivations. One critical aspect is the prospective considerations under which elected officials are chosen (Milita, Ryan, and Simas, 2014). There is evidence that elected officials are to some extent constrained by campaign promises (Naurin, 2013; Sulkin, 2011). A second critical piece of representation is accountability, when voters sanction elected officials for deviating from either campaign promises or policies understood to be in the best interest of the district (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin, 1999). While there is some concern whether voters have the appropriate information to hold their elected officials accountable (Arceneaux, 2006), representatives tend to fulfill most of their campaign promises (Thomson et al., 2017). While the public generally is skeptical about whether promises are kept or not, much of the skepticism is understood as general distrust in government (Naurin, 2011).

Given the value that voters place in kept promises (Bonilla, 2021), it seems important to consider how partisan leanings also drive voters to determine whether promises are fulfilled or not. In particular, studies of public opinion have long demonstrated that partisanship guides political decision-making in key ways. Past work has considered that judging a promise as fulfilled or not is a straight forward assessment on the part of voters. But studies have demonstrated that voters view and interact with information differently based on their prior beliefs and partisan leanings (e.g. Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, and Verkuilen, 2007; Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, and Broesch, 2012). This study proposes to investigate how partisanship matters for voters determining whether promises have been fulfilled completely, partially, or not at all, and what this means for theories of promissory representation and accountability.

Specifically, I consider how partisan reasoning can shift evaluations of candidates. It is clear that partisan affiliation has increased in intensity (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Rothschild, Howat, Shafranek, and Busby, 2019) and partisans have ideologically sorted at higher levels (Mason, 2015). Voter information processing often leaves voters to affirm existing beliefs and information (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Druckman, Leeper, and Slothuus, 2018), stemming into decisions about candidates and policy. Motivated reasoning affects not only consumption of different information, but also incentive to be more or less accurate about political judgments. Partisan decision-making shift judgments critical to our normative understanding of performance of elected officials, such as presidential approval (Donovan, Kellstedt, Key, and Lebo, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Because political judgments are subject to partisan influence, it follows that partisan behavior should also matter in assessment of traditional political phenomena, such as promise-keeping and accountability. And, a broader understanding of the conditions under which voters act as normative theory would predict with respect to promises should help to shape our understanding both of representation and accountability and promise fulfillment as well.

To investigate these claims, I use two experimental studies to test how voters view promise-fulfillment through the lens of partisanship. In the first study, I examine how partisan stances and party identification shifts responses to evaluations of candidate who keep their word, partially fulfill a promise, and break a promise, with respect to partisan promises on immigration. The

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<sup>1</sup>Though evidence does not suggest that increased partisanship is a universal negative affect; see (Simas and Ozer, 2021) for evidence that growing distance may not decrease participation.

second study uses a similar experimental design, but examines perceptions of promise fulfillment by examining the issues of immigration and human trafficking. The two studies allow us to examine partisan perceptions of accountability in a partisan issue space and a non-partisan issue space. Ultimately, the data indicate that respondents do assess accountability through a partisan lens, even when the issue is nonpartisan and there is no partisan information provided. This suggests that conversations about accountability may need to shift from focusing simply on promise-keeping, but also incorporate how partisanship filters information. Accountability that often theoretically relies solely on actions of candidates may also rely on prior beliefs of voters.

## **PARTISANSHIP AND PROMISE FULFILLMENT**

Many conceptions of democracy and representation rely on campaign promises to signal how elected officials will behave in office (Mansbridge, 2003). In the most basic and earliest form, there are two parts of this form of representation (Pitkin, 1967): a forward-looking judgment about how promises align with campaign promises and a backward-looking judgment about how well elected official actions (or inactions) align with campaign promises. Although it is important to consider candidate statements prospectively (Bonilla, 2021; Milita, Ryan, and Simas, 2014), the likelihood of elected officials running for reelection or other political offices makes the promise-fulfillment portion of this pathway particularly interesting. Indeed, the literature on accountability intersections with the literature on promise-making in ways that are of critical importance.

### **Voters and Accountability**

That governments should be held accountable is a central discussion across many fields and literatures (Bovens, Goodin, and Schillemans, 2014), and even a popular subject of bills in the US Congress (Dubnick, 2007). The concept of accountability is somewhat ambiguous, in part because accountability means different things in different political contexts, including different actors (elected officials compared to police), different government systems, and in different policy spaces.<sup>2</sup> The historic rhetorical use of the word accountability has consistently crafted accountability into a concept that imposes constraint on social systems (Tetlock 1992). Stokes (2005) defines

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<sup>2</sup>The difficulty of defining accountability is also partially a problem of different conceptualizations of accountability across studies, occasionally within the same volume. (Bovens, Goodin, and Schillemans, 2014).

accountability—as it may be all too familiar in the political realm—as what “voters know, or can make good inferences about, what parties have done in office and reward or punish them conditional on these actions” (p. 316).

Indeed Mansbridge (2014) describes how accountability has become “synonymous with punishment, or sanctions.” Indeed, many critical studies of democracies emphasize that voters are able to distinguish between elected officials who perform as voters want them to (e.g., Miller and Stokes, 1963; Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin, 1999; Power, 1994; Cox and McCubbins, 1986). Yet in direct tests of whether voters themselves hold elected officials accountable by sanctioning them from office, the result paints a more complicated picture. In aggregate, voters do not appear to directly sanction incumbents at the ballot box by voting them out of office in reelection campaigns (Fearon, 1999). There is some evidence that elected officials may lose funding as a result of electoral decisions, but it is mixed at best (De Vries and Giger, 2014; Arnold and Carnes, 2012).

In the traditional narrative, this is made complicated by whether voters keep track of elected official actions (Lodge and Taber, 2013; De Vries and Giger, 2014) or perhaps even distracted by claiming credit on less central issues like providing services (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing, 2014). Thus, even though there is wide agreement that promissory representation is critical to understanding representation (Mansbridge, 2003), the logic of accountability is complex. Older conceptualizations of promissory representation suggested that voters separated their decisions into prospective selection and retrospective sanction pathways (Miller and Stokes, 1963). Yet, little evidence exists of voters effectively sanctioning elected officials who strayed from their campaign platforms (Mansbridge, 2009), and attention focuses primarily on the prospective selection pathway for understanding representation (Fearon, 1999). Nonetheless, even if it is not clear how voters hold candidates accountable, there remains both theoretical arguments that accountability is important in democracy (Warren, 2014) and practical evidence that accountability occurs only in specific contexts (De Vries and Giger, 2014; Arnold and Carnes, 2012).

## **Promise Fulfillment and the Issues**

In concert with the overall work on accountability, a separate investigation into mandate theory examines the specific pathway between promises of candidates and promise fulfillment (Royed, 1996). Two conclusions have been reached. First, elected officials are more likely than not to

fulfill their election promises (Thomson et al., 2017; Pétry and Collette, 2009; Krukones, 1984; Fishel, 1985). Across a variety of institutional contexts, countries, local or national elections, on average elected officials keep 67% of their promises (Pétry and Collette, 2009). Although there are differences between parliamentary and presidential government (Royed, 1996) and whether or not parties are in power (Artes, 2011), promises are still overwhelmingly kept. Second, citizens are distrustful of candidate promise-keeping (Naurin, 2011; Håkansson and Naurin, 2016). Called the ‘Pledge Paradox’, the difference between voter expectations and reality seems partially determined by the difficulty in how voters define kept promises and skepticism over whether elected officials can actually successfully achieve outcomes rather than actions (Naurin, 2011).

Indeed, whether prospectively or retrospectively, there is evidence that voters identify promises in ways that differ slightly from academic conceptions of promises. First, voters attend to the expectation of commitment in candidate statements (Bonilla, 2021). Second, voters have a nuanced perspective of what it means to keep a promise. In some ways, Naurin (2011) shows that voters very much mimic expectations that elected officials who break promises when they do not do what they said they would do as a candidate. However this traditional sense of promise-keeping is contingent on voters knowing both the campaign promises and how elected officials have acted. When they are uncertain of the campaign promises, voters infer what officials have promised by expressing wishes about the state of the world they would like to see and then voters assess performance by how they view the current state of society or policy outcomes (Naurin, 2011). Naurin (2011) describes several individuals who had difficulty directly responding to questions about specific promises that elected officials had broken (as she describes in Chapter 6). Importantly, this suggests a critical consideration for normative politics: while voters perceive promises as useful mechanisms to directly assess promise keeping, often voter perceptions of and aspirations for the status quo are of particular importance in this retrospective assessment of promises and voter evaluations. In essence, voter assessments of kept promises may be based on actually comparisons with achieved (or not achieved) policy outcomes, but also may be associated with other important components related to voter assessments of the political world.

Chief among the attributes that influence voter decision-making is party-association (Thomson et al., 2017). Although which party is in power does not necessarily influence promise-keeping rates (Artes, 2011), it does seem to influence both how elected officials and voters respond to promise

keeping. For instance, elected officials are much less responsive to voters who embrace positions that are different than their party line (Naurin and Öhberg, 2013).

Complicating the issue, however, is that candidates tend to make partisan promises, focusing on issues that give themselves the advantage. Essentially, candidates do not try to persuade voters on issues, but use issues and records to highlight relative strengths (Petrocik, 1996). And, these issues tend to align with one's own party since candidates and parties build reputations for themselves on particular issues (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989). It is to a candidate's advantage then to repeatedly highlight these issues, particularly when voters are most concerned about them (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). And, politicians act to reinforce these issue divisions. For instance, (Benoit and Hansen, 2004) investigates how candidate attention to issues both in primary and general election debates, and effectively concentrate predominately on their own party's issues. In primary elections, candidates are more likely to mention issues from the other party. Importantly Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) note that the effects of ownership do not change significantly across media: in television advertisements as well as acceptance speeches, major party candidates stick to the script on their own issues. And, because candidate choice tends to be correlated with voter attention to issues, it appears that candidates have a strategic advantage to pay attention to their own issues, and they recognize this as strategy (Milta, Ryan, and Simas, 2014).

Given the partisan environment in the United States, where candidates and elected officials tend to focus on different issues and make an increasing number of commitments on those issues, it becomes important to examine accountability from a partisan lens. Namely, does a partisan perspective influence voter assessments of candidate promises? If so, the implications for what it means to hold elected officials accountable may then become a partisan enterprise.

## **Partisan Motivated Decision-making**

Much recent attention has been to given the increasing intensity of affiliation with a party alters how voters critically assess the world around them (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Rothschild et al., 2019). Motivated reasoning stems from understanding voter information processing through an online model, where voters make decisions based on readily available information that leaves them highly susceptible to confirmation bias and prioritization of information consistent with prior beliefs (Lodge and Taber, 2013; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Druckman, Leeper, and Slothuus,



2018). Motivated reasoning is a critical component behind voter support of public policies, and affects how elite framing matters to voters as well as changes which party cues voters will pick up (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook, 2014). Across several domains, motivated reasoning can explain which information voters use to form policy preferences on scientific issues including genetically modified food, vaccinations, and climate change (Gaskell, Bauer, Durant, and Allum, 1999; Sinatra, Kienhues, and Hofer, 2014; Hornsey, Harris, and Fielding, 2018; Druckman and McGrath, 2019). Indeed, motivated reasoning helps to explain how partisanship can operate as a useful information shortcut to explain or defend attitudes (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen, 2012; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014).

In addition to treating information differently, partisan voters tend to see different sets of information approaching their political decisions as well. For instance Pew reports that media consumption differs widely by partisan affiliation (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, and Matsa, 2014), and content of partisan news organizations differs widely on an array of important subjects that could also be used to determine whether promises are fulfilled or not (Aday, 2010). A key question however, is how voters deal with contrasting information about the success of their elected officials when they hear it. Are they likely to attend to information at face value, and objectively determine if an official has kept a promise based on what was said and what was accomplished? Drawing from theories surrounding promissory representation, there is evidence that voters tend to reward kept promises and strongly dislike breaking promises or even repositioning (Tomz and Houweling, 2012; 2010; Bonilla, 2014; 2021). Yet, when we look at public opinion outcomes as a result of motivated reasoning, we might expect more nuance in how partisan voters assess promise fulfillment.

In many respects, it is consistent with several other lines of inquiry on motivated reasoning to contextualize promise fulfillment as a test of voter attention to accuracy. In some instances, voters appear to be motivated toward accuracy by partisan information (Kruglanski, 1989; Taber and Lodge, 2006), but partisanship more frequently appears to decrease accuracy (Bullock, 2015; Jerit and Barabas, 2012; Kim, Taber, and Lodge, 2010; Lebo and Cassino, 2007). This is particularly true at higher levels of partisanship and higher commitment to prior attitudes (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Lodge and Taber, 2005). This means that less partisan individuals are more likely to exert cognitive effort in forming opinions and develop more accurate responses (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen, 2012). Most importantly, evidence suggests that motivated reasoning actually has

potential to change long-standing norms of accountability and how voters perceive the world and evaluate elected officials. Donovan et al. (2020) show that despite aggregate public opinion canceling out differences, co-partisans are more likely to give credit to the president for approving the economy and out-partisans are more likely to assign blame.

**Hypothesis 1** *Partisan voters may differently assess whether a promise is kept or broken.*

Naturally, assessing whether promises are fulfilled or not also matters for accountability. Determining whether promises are fulfilled may seem a straightforward exercise, but many promises are difficult to objectively measure outcomes. In part, many promises do not have measurable outcomes (Royed, 1996) or they may be perceived as aspirational (Naurin, 2011).<sup>3</sup> Thus, while discussions of ambiguity are typically reserved for prospective position-taking, I argue we should also consider ambiguity of whether or not promises are fulfilled. While there may be promises which are clearly kept or clearly broken, there is also an ambiguous area without a clearly accurate indicator of whether promises were kept—an area where interpretation of promise fulfillment may cause partisan disagreement.

Although ambiguity is primarily considered in context of candidate position-taking (Shepsle, 1972; Page, 1976; Campbell, 1983; Callander and Wilson, 2008), and it is unclear how effective ambiguity is as a prospective strategy (Tomz and Houweling, 2009; Simas, Milita, and Ryan, 2021; Simas, 2021), it is clear that voters have a lot of uncertainty about political statements. What is less clear is how prospective uncertainty translates into retrospective evaluations and ambiguity around kept promises. Bovens, Goodin, and Schillemans (2014) argue that accountability is intrinsic to life and inherent to political processes (citing, Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972; 2012; March and Olsen, 1983; March and Weissinger-Baylon, 1986). But using the voting booth as a means of accountability allows the ambiguity to follow into the voting booth in a model of promissory representation, where voters ostensibly hold elected officials accountable for whether they acted on their promises or not (Mansbridge, 2003).

In the U.S. political environment, even though most congressional elected officials focus on campaign appeals, voters remain skeptical of promise-fulfillment (Sulkin, 2009). In an environment

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<sup>3</sup>When considered prospectively, objectivity matters less (e.g. Bonilla, 2021). As Naurin (2011) outlines however, voters have more flexibility than scholars in discussing fulfillment because they do not always interpret promises literally.

rife with partisan gridlock and disagreement (Harbridge, 2015), it is probably no surprise that even if elected officials work toward fulfilling their campaign promises, they may not fully realize the promise. While most elected officials are not under the same scrutiny, it is likely that many elected officials who are unable to keep promises nevertheless work toward them in office (Fishel, 1985). Thus, I anticipate the most pronounced partisan differences may occur where elected officials may not have acted, but continue to discuss a position on an issue important to them. If co-partisans are preferred to both candidates without partisan identification and out-partisans, it suggests that the pull of partisanship is stronger than promise fulfillment.

**Hypothesis 2** *Partisan voters may differently assess whether a partially fulfilled promise has been kept or broken.*

If voters use partisanship to evaluate promises of elected officials, however, it is possible that these assessments may vary based on the subject matter because not all issues are treated the same by voters (Druckman and Leeper, 2012). In particular, many issues have become recognizably polarized, with increasing partisan divides (Hetherington and Weiler, 2018; Mason, 2015; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). However, it is less clear if partisan evaluations spill over into bipartisan issues. Bipartisan issues can be made partisan (Kahan, Jamieson, Landrum, and Winneg, 2017). Yet bipartisan issues can be used to mitigate polarization on partisan issues (Bonilla and Mo, 2018; Guay and Lopez, 2021). Thus, it is entirely possible that partisan reactions to promises may only occur on partisan issues rather than on bipartisan issues.

**Hypothesis 3** *We may see partisan differences may be more pronounced on partisan issues and not on bipartisan issues.*

## **Testing the hypotheses**

I examine how partisanship may matter where promise-keeping is ambiguous through the lens of immigration and human trafficking policy. Both issues are viewed as important in the minds of the public and to some extent related, but immigration is a deeply partisan issue, while anti-trafficking efforts are broadly viewed as non-partisan, and partisan actors broadly support anti-trafficking efforts (Bouché, Farrell, and Wittmer-Wolfe, 2018). More importantly, is each issue

was prominently discussed over the last few years, and discussed through the lens of promises and accountability.

Rhetoric on immigration played an undeniably important role in the 2016 election (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018). More importantly for electoral outcomes, the highly prominent narrative to reduce immigration from Latin America was a key factor in voters switching a 2012 Democrat vote to a 2016 Republican vote (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2017). As a promise, the strong intent to reduce immigration was instrumental in Trump’s election as promissory representation would indicate it should be (Mansbridge, 2003). However, two years into the Trump presidency, the wall was yet to be built (News, 2018), and by the end of his presidency it existed only incompletely (Timm, 2021). At the same time, the strong anti-immigrant rhetoric continued, and several other steps had been taken to increase the difficulty for migrants to enter the country (Piere and Selee, 2017). Further, The White House had actively taken steps to signal that not only were they restricting immigration, they were also “positively” affecting change on separate, but closely related issues, such as human trafficking policy (Trump, N.d.). In short, the continued rhetoric around immigration, future promises, and signals of kept promises, suggested that immigration rhetoric (and especially anti-immigration rhetoric) would continue to play a role in the 2020 election cycle (as it did). For my purposes here, it suggested potential nuance with how voters might assess performance on these issues.

Attitudes toward human trafficking differ from those toward immigration, and subsequently, rhetoric differs too. Attitudes toward human trafficking, regardless of party, elevate the importance of anti-trafficking efforts, express concern, and are universally opposed to trafficking (Bonilla and Mo, 2019). While there are some differences in partisan government actions to fight against trafficking (Farrell, Bouché, and Wolfe, 2019), anti-trafficking efforts still incorporate many of the same strategies, and receive broad, bipartisan legislative support (Bonilla and Mo, 2018). And while some tension exists between anti-trafficking efforts and immigration policy, the public does not seem largely aware of these connections and there are calls for bipartisanship in addressing this issue (e.g. Runde and Santoro, 2017).

Using these two issues, I separate how voters respond to both partisan and non-partisan issues with partisan information. While there is a possibility that voters react similarly to partisan and bipartisan issues, prioritizing promise-keeping, they may also prioritize partisanship by preferring

Table 1: Prospective Treatment Text

<i>Support Immigration</i>	<i>Oppose Immigration</i>
The federal government is doing the wrong thing to keep our borders safe. As a commitment <b>to protect</b> illegal immigrants within this district, I am going to <b>fight against</b> building a wall between our district and the border.	The federal government is not doing enough to keep our borders safe. As a commitment <b>to reduce</b> illegal immigrants within this district, I am going to <b>fund</b> building a wall between our district and the border.”

co-partisans, regardless of promise-keeping. On the partisan issue of immigration, I anticipate that voters will be more likely to assess co-partisan representatives positively than out-partisans, even if a promise was broken because of loyalty to party brand. While co-partisans may be perceived as equally likely to have broken a promise as an out-partisan who broke their promise, partisanship may again cause elected officials to be viewed as more successful and more consistent with their campaign promise. On the non-partisan issue of trafficking, it is entirely possible that voters will prioritize promise fulfillment over partisan affiliation. If this is true, we should expect to see voters favoring elected officials at similar rates regardless of party. But, if partisanship matters more than promise fulfillment, then we should expect to see partisans prefer co-partisans over out-partisans, even when neither fulfills a promise.

## STUDY 1: PROMISES AND IMMIGRATION

In this first study, I examine how partisans react to promise fulfillment. This study examines only partisans on the partisan issue of immigration, which means that those responding will be both partisan and reacting to a partisan environment. As a result, this study tests the first two hypotheses through a partisan issue in a partisan context. Arguably, this may speak to the external validity of this test as the U.S. electorate increases partisan disaffection (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018).

### Description

To that end, I examine how partisans view promises based on immigration as fulfilled or unfulfilled. The structure of the experiment is a  $2 \times 3$  experiment that varies shared partisanship with

an elected official and promise fulfillment (broken, partial, or kept). (The full questionnaire can be found in the appendix.) Although partisanship of the voter cannot be experimentally assigned, the partisanship of the seen candidate was experimentally manipulated to randomly be a co-partisan or an out-partisan. The promise fulfillment treatment was deployed in two stages. The first stage presented the voters with an elected official's party and stance on immigration as a campaigning candidate, giving the respondents a moment to be acquainted with the candidate before making a retrospective judgment on the candidate's actions. The campaign statement was made consistently with the typical partisan stance on immigration (the Republican opposed immigration and the Democratic candidate favored immigration, and the candidate's party was given during each stage of the vignette). As in Table 1, the campaign stance was issued as a promise to clearly signal that this was an issue the candidate had taken a clear stance and made a commitment to (Bonilla, 2014), which should make resulting differences of opinion less likely to be due to an ambiguous stance on the issue, and due to partisanship.<sup>4</sup> The second stage of the vignette explained how the elected official has acted to this point. Here, the official can clearly keep their promise, clearly break their promise, or be unsuccessful in keeping their promise while still reiterating their stance on the issue. The candidate's stance was kept consistent between each stage, and the full treatments can be found in Table 2.

The respondents were then asked a series of questions about their opinions on the elected official based on two dimensions. First, respondents were asked about they were asked about their favorability toward the candidate and willingness to vote for a similar candidate. Then, they were asked how successful they believed the candidate to be and whether the official acted according to the campaign promise.

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<sup>4</sup>At this point, the respondent was asked questions about the candidate to both assess their opinions of the candidate, but also encourage respondents to form an opinion about the elected official prospectively to simulate an abbreviated electoral experience. The respondent was asked where the official stands on immigration, how favorable the candidate was, if they would vote for a similar candidate and if they believed the candidate made a promise.

Table 2: Retrospective Treatment Text

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The elected official has been in office for nearly three years. While in office the official...

	<i>Support Immigration</i>	<i>Oppose Immigration</i>
<i>Fulfill Promise</i>	has been able to prevent federal efforts to build a wall across his district, and has taken steps to ensure that local law enforcement do not work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) to apprehend illegal immigrants and continues to speak against funding for the wall. For instance, the official has said, “We need to fight against building a wall. It will not prevent illegal immigrants from entering our country.”	has secured funding for the wall near the district, and has taken steps to ensure local law enforcement work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) to apprehend illegal immigrants and continues to speak against illegal immigrants in speeches and interviews. For instance, the official has said, “We need to secure our borders by building a wall. This will prevent illegal immigrants from entering our country.”
<i>Partial Fulfillment</i>	has not been able to prevent federal efforts to build a wall across his district, but has taken steps to ensure that local law enforcement do not work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) to apprehend undocumented immigrants and continues to speak against funding for the wall. For instance, the official has said, “We need to fight against building a wall. It will not prevent undocumented immigrants from entering our country.”	has not secured funding for the wall, but has taken steps to ensure local law enforcement work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) to apprehend illegal immigrants and continues to speak against illegal immigrants in speeches and interviews. For instance, the official has said, “We need to secure our borders by building a wall. This will prevent illegal immigrants from entering our country.”
<i>Break Promise</i>	has not been able to prevent federal efforts to build a wall across his district, has not taken steps to prevent local law enforcement work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) to apprehend undocumented immigrants, and no longer mentions undocumented immigrants in speeches and interviews.	has not secured funding for the wall, has not taken steps to help local law enforcement work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) to apprehend illegal immigrants, and no longer mentions illegal immigrants in speeches and interviews.

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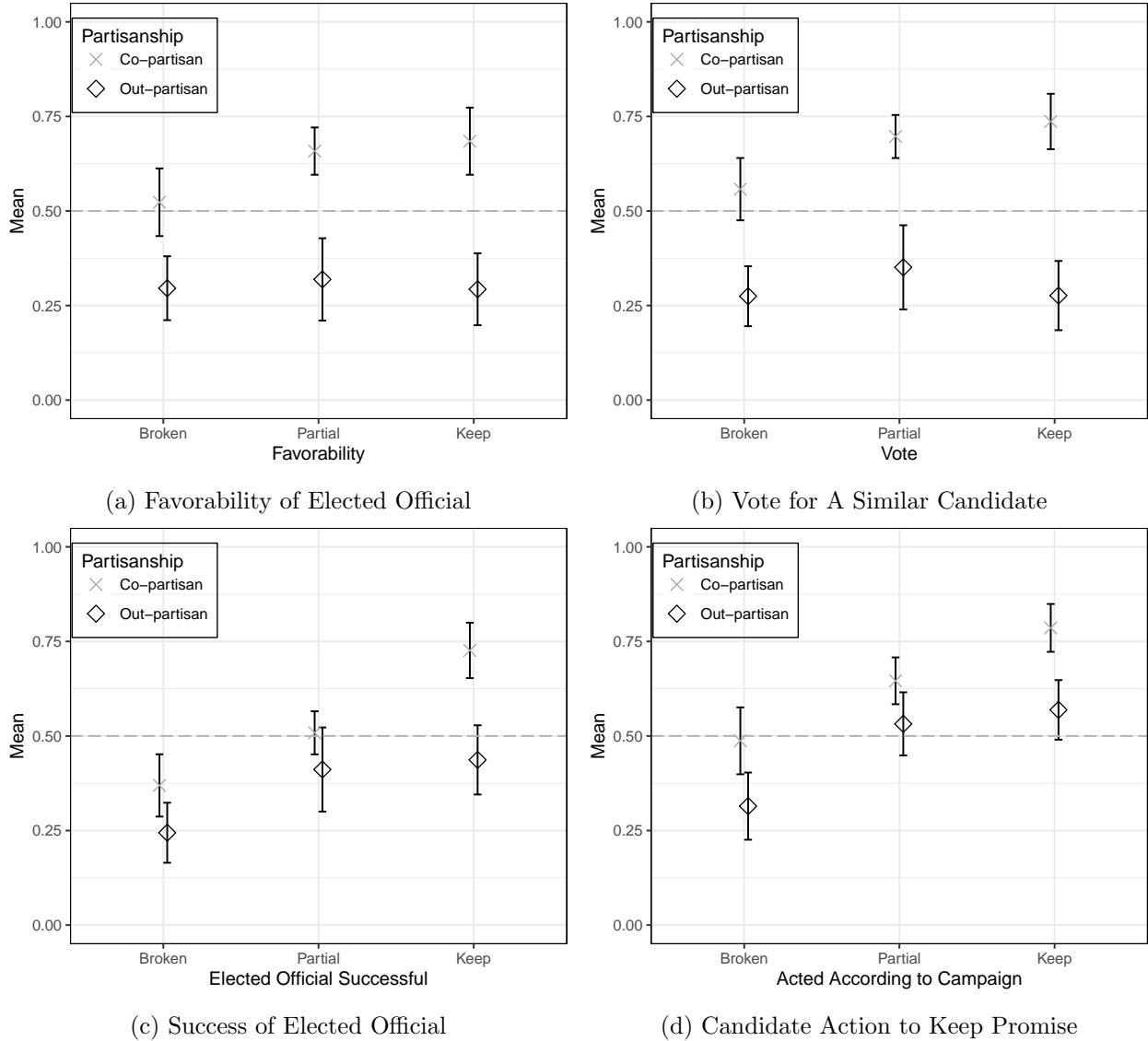


Figure 1: Study 1 Results

Notes: This figure displays the mean response for each dependent variable, moderated by partisanship (co-partisan, out-partisan) and treatment (promise broken, partially kept, fulfilled). The bands display the 95 percent confidence interval around the mean.

## Results

This experiment was fielded on October 15, 2019 to a sample of 547 U.S. adults through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk using the Qualtrics platform. While Mechanical Turk offers a convenience sample, it has been demonstrated to be useful for experimental analyses (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012; Paolacci and Chandler, 2014; Mullinix, Leeper, Druckman, and Freese, 2015). Because I am primarily interested in the responses of partisans, I perform the analyses with 237 Democrats



and 140 Republicans in the sample. In all analysis, subjects were divided into whether they were grouped as co-partisan or an out-partisan candidate. All scales are transformed to a 0–1 scale.

In general, there was a large partisan difference between co-partisan and out-partisan views of successful promise-keeping. And, it appears that partisanship does alter patterns in respondent approval of candidates. Figure 1a presents the average respondent favorability ratings of each candidate by treatment. In all cases, out-partisans receive a lower favorability rating than those co-partisans (even those who have broken their promise). Despite a prediction that we would see a slight preference for an out-partisan who keeps a promise compared to a promise break, promise-keeping does not improve ratings among out-partisans. Subjects who received an out-partisan official see no significant difference between an official who clearly breaks a promise, clearly keeps a promise, or who partially keeps a promise. As a whole, out-partisans seem to be rated more for either their initial stance or for their partisan affiliation. In contrast, co-partisans distinguish between promise-keeping and promise-breaking ( $p = 0.014$ ). And, even when the elected official has not kept his promise fully and keeps reiterating the initial position, the official is viewed more similarly to a promise-keeper (where it is not statistically different,  $p = 0.64$ ) than a promise-breaker (where there is a meaningful statistical difference,  $p = 0.017$ ). As a result, this shift suggests that co-partisans are more permissive in their views toward co-partisans, not penalizing them for incomplete actions on promises.

Figure 1b shows a similar pattern in responses to the likelihood a subject would vote for an elected official with a similar record as the official they observed in the vignette. A similar assessment as favorability, respondents similarly showed no significant differences in the likelihood to vote for an out-partisan candidate, regardless of the official’s record on promise fulfillment. However, respondents did rate the co-partisan promise-breaker significantly lower than the official who partially ( $p < 0.01$ ) or fully kept the promise ( $p < 0.01$ ). This reinforces the above conclusion: respondents differentiate first between shared partisanship. For a co-partisan, respondents differentiate only between candidates who clearly break a promise, and do not penalize candidates for incompletely fulfilling their promises. For out-partisans, the penalty for breaking a promises is inconsequential.

In contrast to measures probing about approval of the elected official, the measures asking about the performance of the elected official indicated an interesting separation between co- and out-partisan responses. Figures 1c and 1d demonstrate that co-partisans are more likely to indicate

higher levels of performance for a promise keeper than are out-partisans. In Figure 1c, co-partisans indicate a significantly lower success rate for officials who break a promise than for those with partial fulfillment ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, officials partially fulfilling a promise also have a significantly lower success rate than those who keep their promises for co-partisans ( $p < 0.001$ ). Out-partisans, however, distinguish between broken promises and officials who partially fulfill a promise ( $p = 0.02$ ), but not between partial and complete fulfillment ( $p = 0.71$ ). Between co-partisans and out-partisans, evaluations differ in two ways: co-partisans rate promise-keepers higher than out-partisans ( $p < 0.001$ ), and co-partisans rate promise-breakers higher than out-partisans do ( $p = 0.04$ ). Interestingly, respondents did not distinguish between co- and out-partisan officials who partially fulfill promises. As a whole, these differences suggest that respondents are attentive to promise-keeping status in measuring success of elected officials, and while they are much more negative about out-partisans, there does not seem to be a partisan advantage for assessments of promise keeping.

Results for assessments of promise-keeping are similar to those of assessments for success, and are displayed in Figure 1d. For each action condition, co-partisans are viewed as acting significantly more likely to have kept their promise than are non-partisans, indicating a positive bump for shared partisanship (or position-taking). Co-partisans who break a promise are seen as significantly less likely to have acted on their initial platform than are those with partial fulfillment ( $p < 0.01$ ), while co-partisans who keep a promise are seen as significantly more likely to have acted on their initial platform than those with partial fulfillment ( $p < 0.01$ ). Out-partisans who break their promise receive a lower rating compared to officials who partially fulfill promises ( $p < 0.001$ ), but those who keep their promise are not viewed differently than those with partial fulfillment ( $p = 0.53$ ). This suggests that respondents do differentiate their assessments by partisanship: chiefly, there is no differentiation between fulfillment in an incomplete promise and a fully-kept promise.

In sum, this study indicates that assessments of fulfillment is informed by partisan affiliations, but in a nuanced way. First, respondents differentiated attitudes toward candidates on two dimensions: (1) approval and (2) assessments of performance. Out-partisan voters did not differentiate between elected officials who broke or kept their promises, even though co-partisans differentiated between broken and partially kept promises. However, in evaluating whether elected officials were successful in office or kept their promises, out-partisan opinions evaluated broken and partially kept

promises relatively similarly to co-partisans, but out-partisans did not reward elected officials for keeping promises like co-partisans did. This suggests that on the partisan issue of immigration, partisanship does shift evaluations of accountability (Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2).

## **STUDY 2: PROMISES, IMMIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

The second study follows the same pattern as Study 1, with a similar focus on immigration statements by candidates. In this version of the experiment, however, in addition to partisan immigration statements, I added a statement on human trafficking, an issue which has largely been considered as bipartisan (Bonilla and Mo, 2019; Farrell, Bouché, and Wolfe, 2019) and related to immigration (Bonilla and Mo, 2018). I also included candidates with no partisan descriptors attached to them, which allows me to separate the precise effect of partisan statements in understanding promise-fulfillment. Study 2, then, tests all three hypotheses.

### **Description**

Here, I examine partisanship and promise-fulfillment against bipartisan statements through an experiment manipulating partisanship, candidate position, and whether the issue is bipartisan or partisan. In this version of the experiment, respondents are assigned to either a statement on human trafficking or on immigration. The candidates presenting the statements are assigned to be Democrat, Republican, or not given a party (only in the Human Trafficking condition). For those receiving statements on immigration, partisanship is assigned to be aligned with the traditional partisan stance (as described in Study 1). Those who received the human trafficking statement however, receive the exact same message since human trafficking is considered to be a bipartisan issue. Finally, respondents were randomly assigned to a candidate who kept their promise, broke their promise or partially fulfilled their promise. Similarly to Study 1, respondents are given an initial position that the candidate took prior to the election and asked questions about the candidate's initial stance prospectively. They were then told that the candidate was elected, and had a chance to act on their position. While the immigration statements remained consistent with Study 1, the full versions of the human trafficking statements can be found in Table 3.

After displaying the second treatment, respondents were asked the same five questions they were asked in study one. These included a 5-point question on favorability toward the candidate and

Table 3: Human Trafficking Treatment Text

Condition	Candidate Message Text
<i>Prospective</i>	
All	<p>“The federal government is becoming more aware of human trafficking. As a commitment to prevent human trafficking within this district, I am going to fight for more legal protections for our district.”<sup>4</sup></p>
<i>Retrospective</i>	
Fulfill Promises	<p>The [party treatment] elected official has been in office for nearly three years. While in office the official has fought for and achieved additional legal protections for victims of human trafficking, taken steps to work with local law enforcement or non-profits on the issue of human trafficking, and continues to mention the need for additional legal protections for human trafficking in speeches and interviews. For instance, the official has said, “These are much needed legal protections for human trafficking victims. Our current laws do not do enough.”</p>
Incomplete Fulfillment	<p>The [party treatment] elected official has been in office for nearly three years. While in office the official has not fought for additional legal protections for victims of human trafficking, but taken steps to work with local law enforcement or non-profits on the issue of human trafficking, and continues to mention the need for additional legal protections for human trafficking in speeches and interviews. For instance, the official has said, “We need more legal protections for human trafficking victims. Our current laws do not do enough.”</p>
Break Promise	<p>The [party treatment] elected official has been in office for nearly three years. While in office the official has not fought for additional legal protections for victims of human trafficking, has not taken steps to work with local law enforcement or non-profits on the issue of human trafficking, and no longer mentions human trafficking in speeches and interviews.</p>

willingness to vote for a similar candidate. The questions also included a question with a 4-point scale on how successful they thought the candidate was, whether the official acted consistently with their original position, and whether the official was representative of others in the party. All questions have been re-scaled to a 0–1 scale for ease of interpretation.

## Results

This experiment was fielded prior to the 2020 presidential election season on October 29-30, 2020 to a sample of 2303 U.S. adults through Lucid Marketplace.<sup>5</sup> Lucid Marketplace offers a convenience sample that has been shown to be effective for experimental analysis (Coppock and McClellan, 2019). In all analyses, subjects were divided into whether they were co-partisan or out-partisan, or received no partisan information about the candidate. (Because stances on immigration are widely viewed as partisan, I do not include a non-partisan immigration category.)

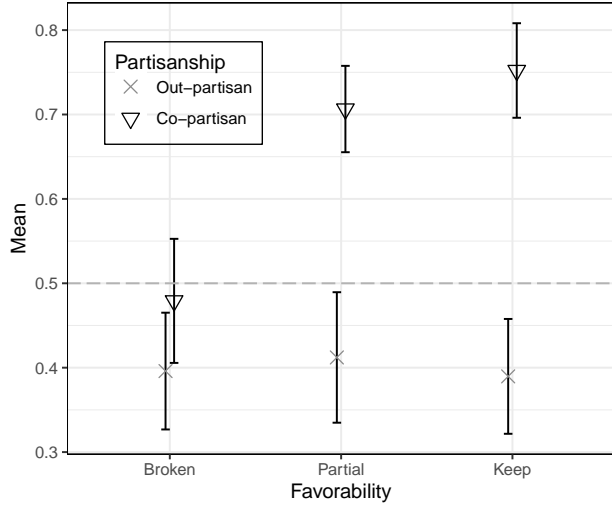
### *Immigration Results*

Figure 2 shows the same set of results as were presented in the previous study. Out-partisans found no significant difference between candidates who broke, partially-kept, or kept their campaign promises, rating them unfavorably (Figure 2a) and indicating they were unlikely to vote for them (Figure 4a). In-partisans, however, did differentiate between broken promises and the other types of statements. Kept and partially-kept promises are viewed as similarly favorable ( $\mu_{kept} = 0.75$ ,  $\mu_{partial} = 0.71$ ,  $p = 0.24$ ) and similarly likely to vote for them ( $\mu_{kept} = 0.77$ ,  $\mu_{partial} = 0.72$ ,  $p = 0.16$ ). Broken promises were rated significantly worse than partially kept promises on both dependent variables ( $\mu_{favor-kept} = 0.75$ ,  $\mu_{favor-broken} = 0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\mu_{vote-kept} = 0.77$ ,  $\mu_{vote-broken} = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). And, consistent of what we would expect due to partisanship, in nearly every case, co-partisans are rated higher than non-partisans. (Only on the question of whether elected officials acted consistently with their campaign promises, do we see non-significant result, and even then  $p = 0.09$ .)

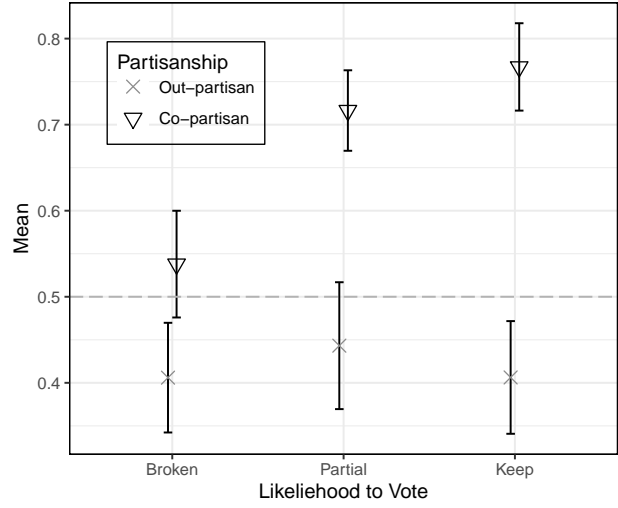
On the other dependent variable measures, success as an elected official and consistency with campaign promises, the results are remarkably consistent with Study 1. Out-partisans increase their ratings from broken promises to partially-kept promises to kept promises ( $\mu_{success-kept} =$

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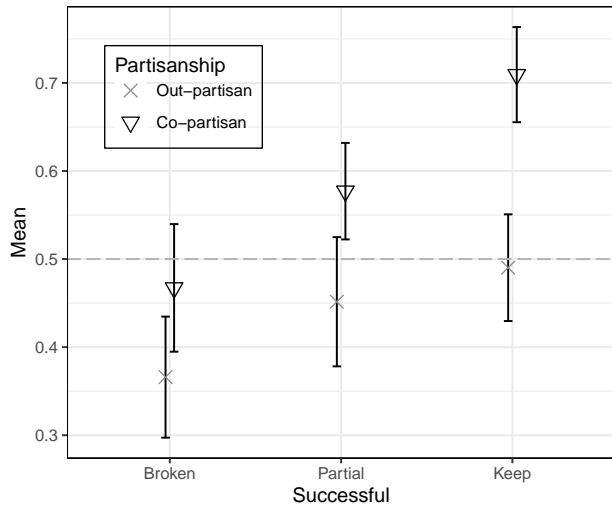
<sup>5</sup>This experiment was preregistered with AsPredicted.



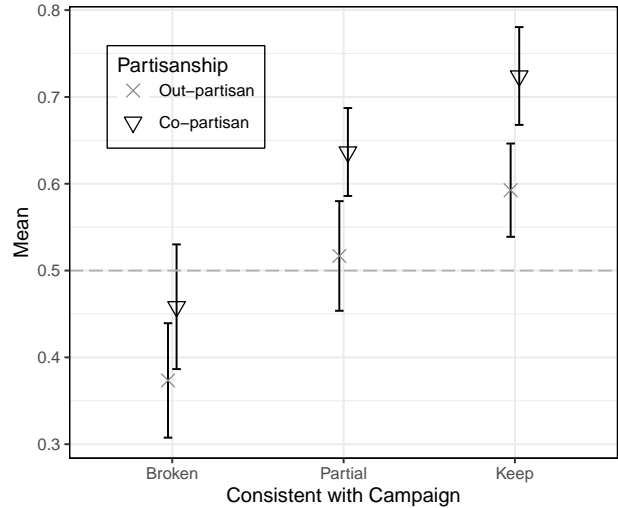
(a) Vote Immigration



(b) Vote Human Trafficking



(c) Vote Immigration



(d) Vote Human Trafficking

Figure 2: Study 2: Immigration Results

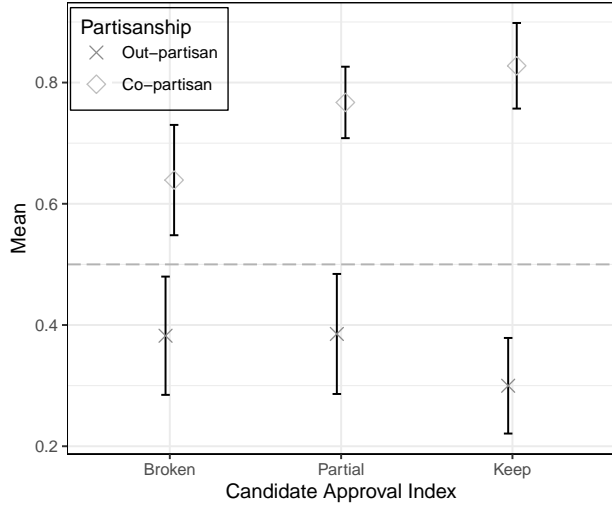
Notes: This figure displays the mean response for each dependent variable, moderated by partisanship (co-partisan, out-partisan) and treatment (promise broken, partially kept, fulfilled). The bands display the 95 percent confidence interval around the mean.

0.49,  $\mu_{success-broken} = 0.37$ ,  $p = 0.16$ ). And, while partially-kept promises are not significantly different from either category, broken promises are rated significantly worse than kept promises ( $\mu_{success-kept} = 0.49$ ,  $\mu_{success-broken} = 0.37$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ) for out-partisans. A similar structure can be seen among co-partisans, though in this case, partially kept promises are distinct from both broken and kept promises ( $\mu_{success-kept} = 0.71$ ,  $\mu_{success-partial} = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\mu_{success-broke} = 0.47$ ,  $\mu_{success-partial} = 0.58$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). More importantly, on these issues, co-partisans and out-partisans were significantly different in their views of candidates who broken their promise ( $\mu_{out-partisan} = 0.37$ ,  $\mu_{co-partisan} = 0.47$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). Additionally, they were also significantly different where candidates partially-kept their promise ( $\mu_{out-partisan} = 0.45$ ,  $\mu_{co-partisan} = 0.58$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), and where candidates fully fulfilled their promises ( $\mu_{out-partisan} = 0.49$ ,  $\mu_{co-partisan} = 0.71$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

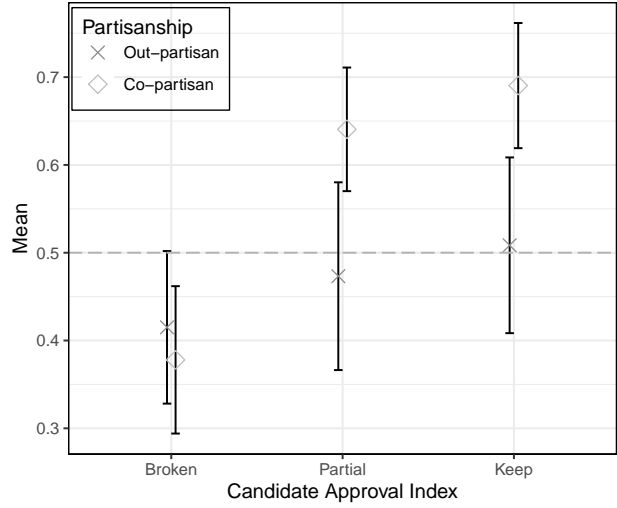
I further examine the results by the partisanship of each respondent, to examine potential asymmetries by party, either caused by external features or by the asymmetries of opposing or favoring the building of a wall itself. For this analysis, I simplify the dependent variables into two dimensions, based on the two sets of dependent variables: candidate favorability (the approval and voting variables) and a promise-keeping index (the successful and consistent variables). Figure 3 contains these results.

The top row displays the candidate approval index, with results for candidates favoring the wall on the left in Figure 3a, and those opposing the wall on the left in Figure 3b. The two panels suggest that respondents do not react symmetrically to the candidates—either because the candidates offer different positions or because the partisans themselves have asymmetric responses (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016). Nonetheless, the overarching findings largely remain: in almost every instance, co-partisans are rated higher than out-partisans, and broken promises-are punished compared to both partially- or fully-kept promises. And, importantly, on the candidate approval dimension, out-partisans do not significantly differentiate their approval based on promise fulfillment.

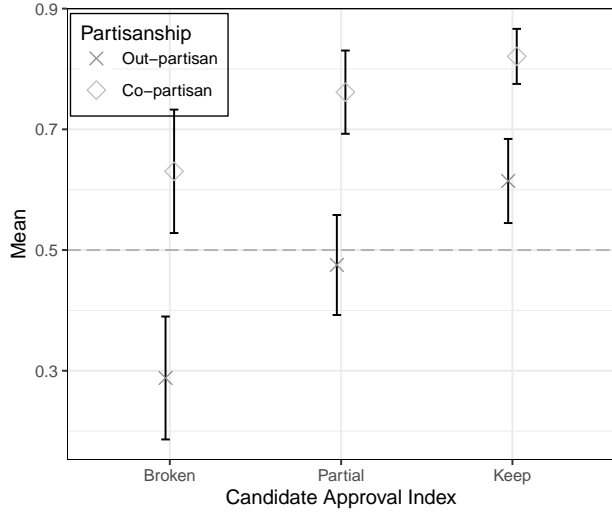
The bottom row displays the promise-keeping index, with results for candidates favoring the wall on the left in Figure 3c, and those opposing the wall on the left in Figure 3d. Here, we do see some differentiation between the two issue positions. Where the candidate favors the wall, co-partisans similarly see an increase in perceptions of promise-keeping between fully-kept promises and partially-kept and broken promises, and co-partisans are more likely to think out-partisans were successful in promise-fulfillment than out partisans. We do not see that same differentiation



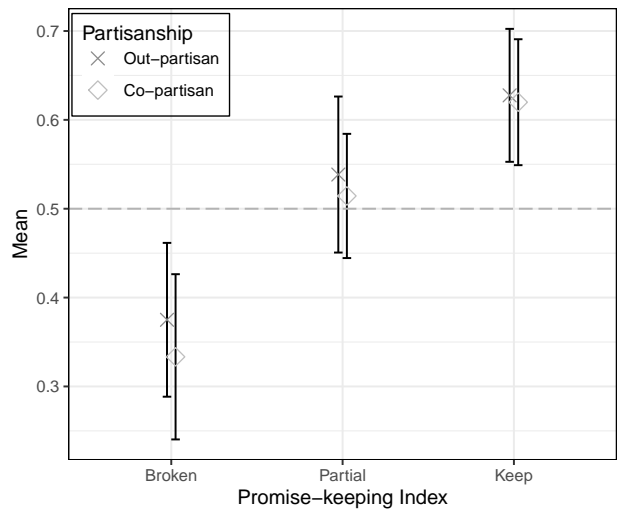
(a) Republican candidate (favors the wall)



(b) Democrat candidate (opposes the wall)



(c) Republican candidate (favors the wall)



(d) Democrat candidate (opposes the wall)

Figure 3: Study 2: Immigration Results by Issue Position

Notes: This figure displays the mean response for each dimension, moderated by partisanship (co-partisan, out-partisan) and treatment (promise broken, partially kept, fulfilled), and presented by the candidate's position on the issue. The bands display the 95 percent confidence interval around the mean.



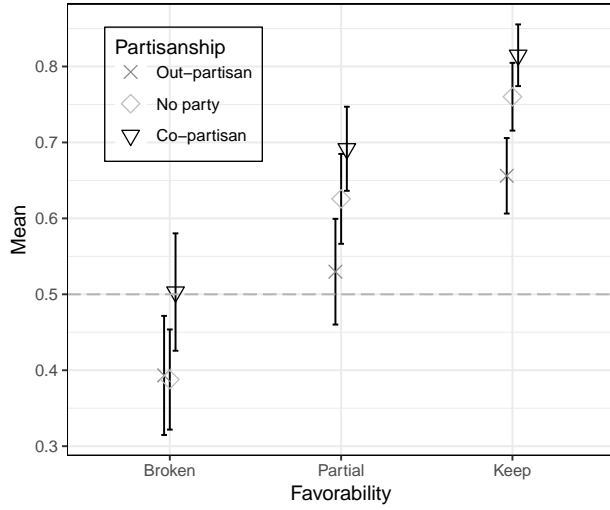
where candidates opposed the wall. Here, both co- and out-partisans were indistinguishable from each other at every level, and broken promises were penalized compared to both partially- and fully-kept promises. Despite this shift, the conclusions largely remain the same: voters do use partisan information in their calculations of promise fulfillment on partisan issues, though with potentially asymmetric results.

### *Human Trafficking Results*

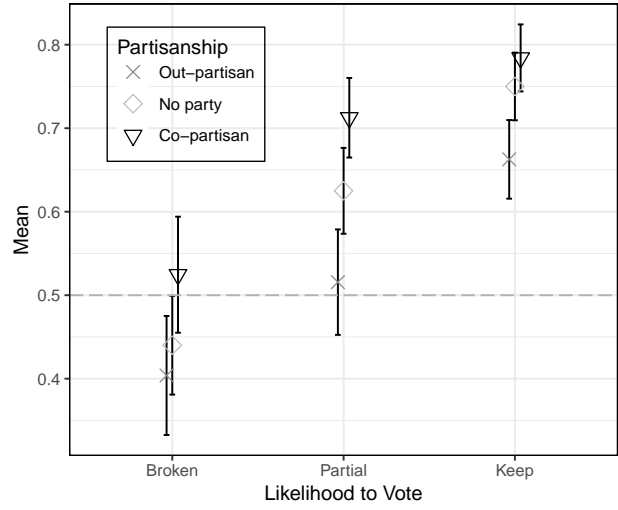
The human trafficking issue helps us to further differentiate the effects of partisanship on assessment of promises because it allows a viable opportunity to exploit variation in an issue that is widely considered to be bipartisan, and it is feasible for candidates from either party to take similar stances. Figure 4 displays the same set of dependent variables as above, though also taking into account a candidate without party affiliation. Unlike in the immigration studies, on this non-partisan issue, all four dependent variables bear a striking resemblance to each other. Regardless of partisanship, broken promises are rated lower than partially kept promises, which are rated lower than kept promises. On the partisan issue, respondents diverged in their responses to the status of promise fulfillment based on partisanship. With the bipartisan issue of human trafficking, respondents react similarly to the status of fulfilled promises.

However, despite similar reactions to the status of promises, out-partisans are rated worse than candidates with no party or co-partisans, *except* where candidates broke their promises. Where candidates broke their promises, respondents are viewed candidates more favorably ( $\mu_{copartisan} = 0.50$ ,  $\mu_{outpartisan} = 0.39$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). However, the largest benefits of being a co-partisan are apparent when a promise is fulfilled ( $\mu_{copartisan} = 0.81$ ,  $\mu_{outpartisan} = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Also interesting is that the non-partisan candidate is rated the worst when they break their promises where they are indistinguishable from out-partisans, but rated the same as co-partisans when promises are fulfilled. This suggests that even on a non-partisan issue, partisanship still matters by slightly decreasing ratings for partially-fulfilled promise by out-partisans and emphasizing the ratings of fulfilled promises by co-partisans.

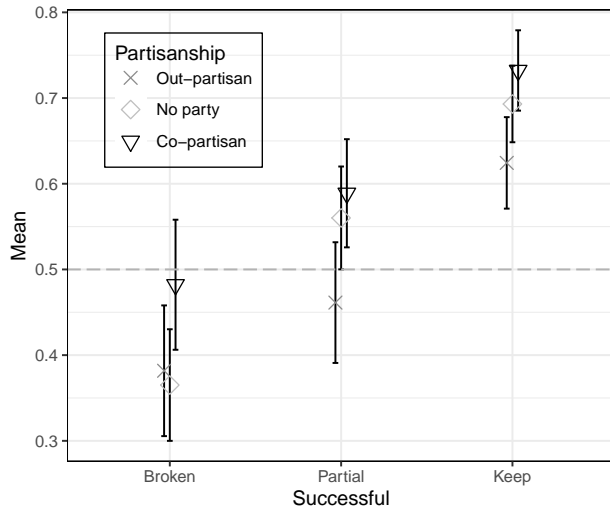
Figure 5 shows the human trafficking results by partisan affiliation. Unlike in the immigration experiment, the candidate positions are completely symmetric, with the only shift in the labeled part of the candidate. Similarly to the immigration results, I summarize the dependent variables



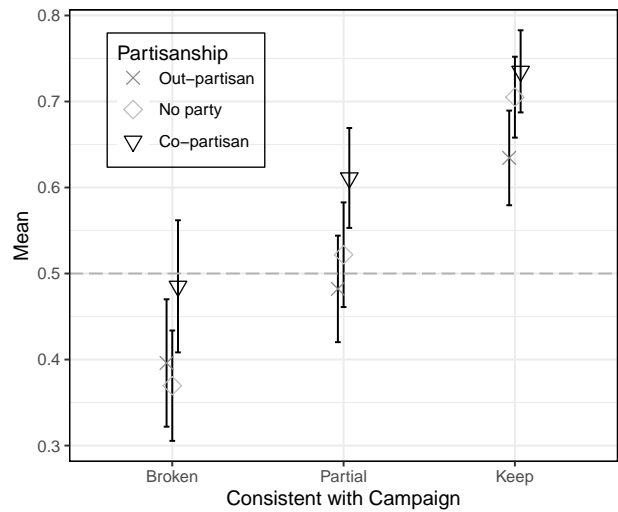
(a) Favor the elected official



(b) Vote for the elected official



(c) Success of the elected official



(d) Elected official consistent with campaign

Figure 4: Study 2: Human Trafficking Results

Notes: This figure displays the mean response for each dependent variable, moderated by partisanship (co-partisan, non-partisan, out-partisan) and treatment (promise broken, partially kept, fulfilled). The bands display the 95 percent confidence interval around the mean.

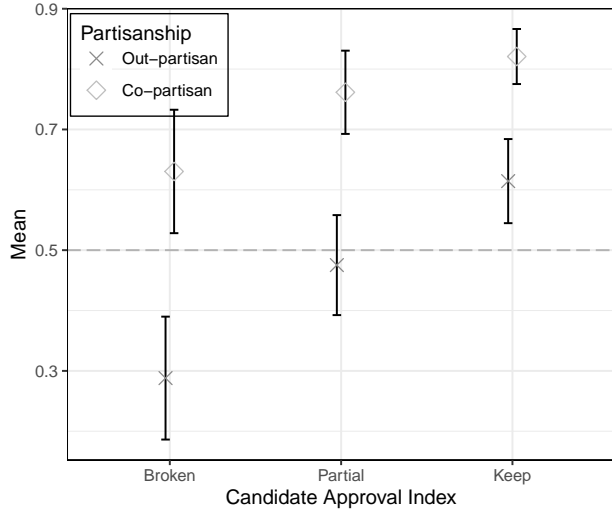
using an index for candidate approval (results in the top half) and promise-keeping (results in the bottom half). Again, we see asymmetric results between Republicans and Democrats. On both indices, Republicans as out-partisans and co-partisans prefer kept promises to broken promises, with partially fulfilled promises in the middle. While Democrats maintain a similar ordering between out-partisans as co-partisans, though we see stronger differentiation of partially fulfilled promises from both broken and kept promises. And, only for the Republican candidate do we see complete differentiation between out- and co-partisan responses, suggesting that some of the asymmetry seen on the partisan issue may in fact be due to partisan differences in approaches to promise-keeping.

On the whole, this study underlines the findings from Study 1, by replicating them, but it also adds two additional pieces of information. First, the partisanship of an issue matters in how voters react to promise fulfillment. Namely, respondents do differentiate between status of promise fulfillment only in the instance of a nonpartisans issue. Second, even when respondents prioritize promise fulfillment in their decision-making, they still differentiate between candidates with a partisan lens. Even if candidates are not routinely rated lower for breaking their promises based on partisanship, they are routinely rewarded for keeping their promises if they are co-partisans.

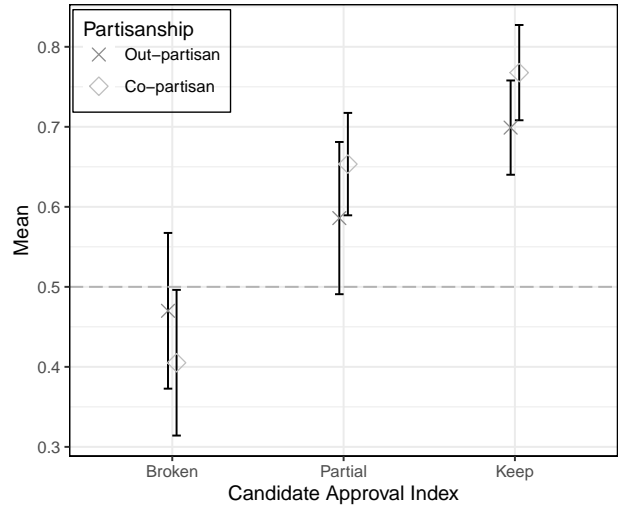
## CONCLUSION

A key theory of representation focuses on the accountability of elected officials. While other studies have focused on the difficulties that voters may have in assessing elected official performance (e.g. Alvarez, 1997; Lenz, 2013), here I ask how partisan behaviors influence voter assessments. In particular, I examine whether voters uniformly evaluate candidate favorability compared to candidate performance through a survey experiment, and use the ambiguity surrounding partial promise fulfillment to better understand how voters determine whether promises are fulfilled or not. The results suggest that there is partisan-motivation in evaluating candidates based on promise-fulfillment, but the reactions shift based on (1) what respondents are asked about and (2) the issue that candidates discuss.

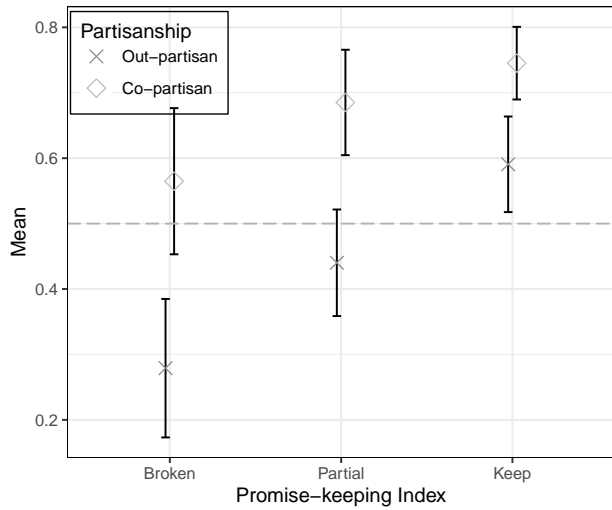
First, respondents seem to minimize promise-breaking among out-partisans when asked about to evaluate the candidates, but not when asked to evaluate their promise-fulfillment. Overall,



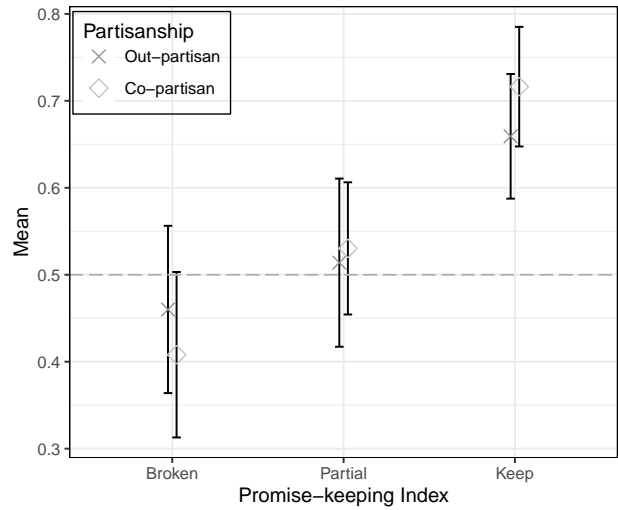
(a) Republican candidate



(b) Democrat candidate



(c) Republican candidate



(d) Democrat candidate

Figure 5: Study 2: Human Trafficking Results by Party

Notes: This figure displays the mean response for each dependent variable, moderated by partisanship (co-partisan, out-partisan) and treatment (promise broken, partially kept, fulfilled), and displayed by the candidate's party. The bands display the 95 percent confidence interval around the mean.

respondents indicate support for co-partisan candidates compared to out-partisan candidates, and did not use information about promise-keeping in their assessments of favorability or voting for out-partisans. However, for co-partisans, voters do use promise-fulfillment information to determine favorability. Co-partisans penalize promise-breakers (though never more so out-partisans), but do not differentiate between partial fulfillment and complete promise fulfillment on the partisan issue of immigration. These results unsurprisingly show concentrated partisan support for candidates, despite lack of promise fulfillment. Voters however, make these choices not out of ignorance of the officials' promise fulfillment status. The data also indicate that voters do differentiate between how successful elected officials are and how closely officials act in accord with their campaign promises. Although co-partisans receive higher ratings than out-partisans, respondents do generally notice differences between broken promises, and partial and complete fulfillment. What changes is that co-partisans seem to receive a reward for complete promise fulfillment while out-partisans do not differentiate between partial and complete fulfillment. And, co-partisans still harshly judge promise-breaking, while out-partisans are not rewarded similarly to co-partisans for keeping their word.

Second, respondents are more likely to reward promise-keeping over co-partisanship when the issue is non-partisan. While on the non-partisan human trafficking issue respondents were more likely to recognize differences between fulfilled promises, partially fulfilled promises, and broken promises, they also still differentiated between co-partisans and out-partisans. This suggests that partisanship matters in evaluation of promise-keeping, confirming across issues that voters are more likely to assess that co-partisan representatives as fulfilling their promises than out-partisan representatives, regardless of the actions the representative took or not. However, co-partisans are not necessarily more likely to excuse partially fulfilled promises as fulfilled promises for co-partisans than for out-partisans. Rather, voters seem likely to reward co-partisans for fulfillment. Logically, it makes sense for voters to favor partisan candidates on dimensions of support (favorability and voting), but beyond shared partisanship, voters should be more likely to consider promise-keeping outside of partisan perspectives.

On the whole, there are three implications that we should bear in mind as we discuss normative theory surrounding promises and voter evaluations of promise-keeping. First, there is nuance in how voters interpret promise fulfillment. Voters and scholars agree that promises are designed as something a candidate has committed to do (Naurin, 2014; Bonilla, 2021). But there is debate as

to whether promise fulfillment should be considered as narrow—if the commitment must identify a specific target—or broad—if a commitment generally shifts policy (Thomson et al., 2017). Here, we are able to see how voters process distinctions between these categories, where we see a distinction of voters interpreting a narrow promise as broadly fulfilled or a broad promise as narrowly fulfilled. The difference spotlights a tension on voter assessments of promise fulfillment: strict interpretations are less common among co-partisans, who are less likely to penalize partial promise fulfillment. This suggests, that even when a promise is broad, less specific, and potentially more difficult to measure, voters continue to engage with that promise beyond conventional metrics.

Second, the experiments in this study point to important contextual differences when voters are more willing to interpret promises broadly rather than narrowly. Specifically, partisan issues are more likely to induce voters to determine promise-fulfillment with a partisan bias, even when bi-partisan issues are discussed by a partisan (i.e., the case of human trafficking), and especially when fulfillment is ambiguous. Several asymmetries in the work demonstrate that context should be explored more deeply. Although there are asymmetries in the candidate statement on immigration, these same partisan asymmetries are present in the case of human trafficking, suggesting that as with other issues in politics (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016), Republicans and Democrats react differently to partisanship and promise-fulfillment. Beyond partisan asymmetries however, we see that co-partisans are evaluated per the norms of partisanship on partisan issues, while out-partisans are not.

Finally, this paper adds to growing research investigating how partisanship informs voter interpretation of democratic accountability. Other work has demonstrated that partisanship has shifted presidential approval (Donovan et al., 2020). Here however, we see that voter interpretation of representation is subject to partisan beliefs. This suggests that an important avenue for studies of partisan-motivated behavior should be how these studies shift understanding of fundamental democratic principals.

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