

The No-Promises Promise

*What Oxnard Politics Teaches Us About Varying Approaches to
Campaign Promises in Modern Elections*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a Public Policy Advisor working primarily outside of the community in which I live, I often find myself experiencing the stinging disconnect of understanding how and why things in politics and governance work a certain way, while at the same time expecting otherwise. Municipal governance in the City of Oxnard, California - in which I have lived since 2023 - has more recently occupied a considerable portion of that frustration. A comparably small city of roughly 200,000 people, covering over 26 square miles of the Central Coastal Plains, Oxnard offers us a classic, and yet grim, picture of the existence and obtainability of campaign promises in modern elections. In short: campaign promises are becoming less prevalent by the election year, while the obtainability of many promises made during an elected official's term seems often impossible. Impossibility arises from a number of factors, including alliances on the dais, partisan rivalries, and statutory authority. Moreover, the ability for constituents residing within the jurisdiction to hold elected leaders accountable has become elusive. Local political parties, regional gerrymandering in the form of districting, partisanship among constituents, bias in the local media, voter apathy, and the ability to easily work around campaign finance laws have all severely obfuscated the ability for any individual or organization to hold local leaders accountable to a meaningful degree. There is a considerable body of data to help us understand and evaluate just why this is happening, or what a promise even means in the context of modern, American elections. This paper will discuss logistical and strategic changes in promise-making and defining accountability for those promises by/for candidates and elected officials. It will evaluate the current governing body of Oxnard, California as a case study in better understanding this point. Finally, it will offer sensible solutions to the problem in the interest of preserving good governance at the local level.

THE DEFINITION OF PROMISE

There exists a wealth of evidence that the definition of a promise made by elected officials to voters has changed drastically in modern, American elections. Voters continue to (Tomz and Houweling, 2012)¹ overwhelmingly support promise-keeping by elected officials, and express (Bonilla, 2022)² a strong dislike for broken or modified promises. However, what it means to keep a promise is - today - strongly aligned with partisan views, and varies based on the political party.

Moreover, the impact of (Bonilla, 2022) partisan views on voters' abilities to critically evaluate elected officials and their actions has been broadly impacted by those views. Across dozens of studies completed between 2010 and 2022, partisanship had repeated, negative impacts on voter assessments. Partisanship (Bullock, 2015)³ decreases accuracy of information. Partisanship also is (Thomson Et al., 2017)⁴ the top ranked determinant of voter decision-making. What a promise kept even means is (Bonilla, 2022) varied between voters, with significant nuance being found between major parties. During an election period, voters (Bonilla, 2022) tend to focus exclusively

¹ Tomz, M., and R.P.V. Howling, 2012. "Political Pledges as Credible Commitments." *Unpublished Manuscript*.

² Bonilla, T. (2022, June 30). *Promises kept, promises broken, and those caught in the middle* (WP-22-27): Institute for Policy Research - Northwestern University. Promises Kept, Promises Broken, and Those Caught in the Middle (WP-22-27): Institute for Policy Research - Northwestern University. <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/our-work/working-papers/2022/wp-22-27.html>

³ Bullock, J.G., G.A.S.H.S., 2015. "Partisan bias in factual beliefs about politics. Quarterly Journal of Political Science." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 10 (4): 519-578.

⁴ Thomson, R., T. Royed, E. Naurin, J. Artés, R. Costello, L. Ennser-Jedenastik, M. Ferguson, P. Kostadinova, C. Moury, and F. Pétry, 2017. "The Fullfillment of Parties' Election Pledges: A Comparative Study on the Impact of Power Sharing." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(3): 527-542.

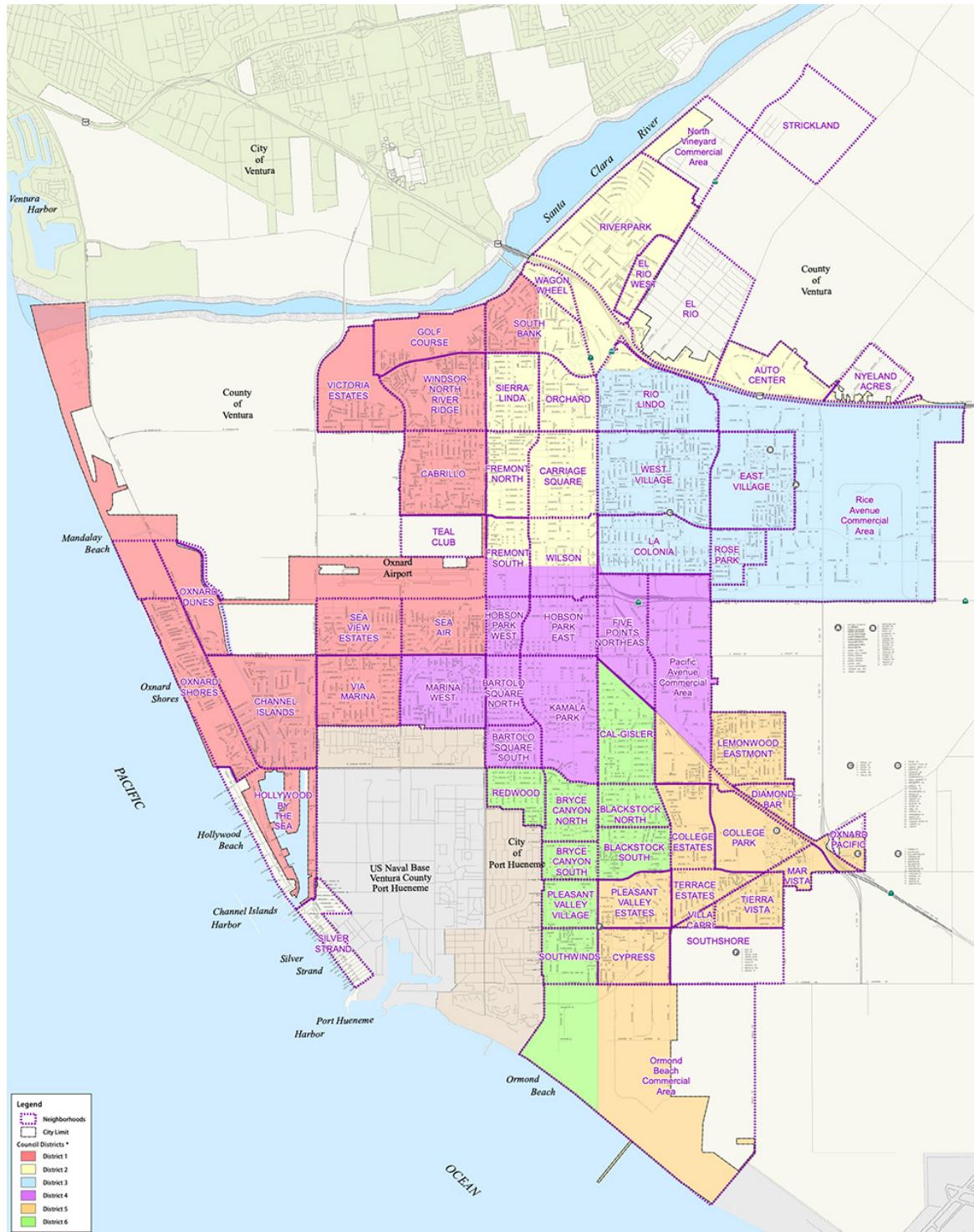
on partisan issues, in turn evaluating later performance based upon those issues alone. This occurs even in instances where the “promises kept” are more values-based, and outside the statutory authority of the governing body. In other words: elected officials are often considered as having “kept their promises,” even if they only continued verbalizing support on issues they cannot even do anything about in their specific capacity as an elected official. As increases in partisan affiliation have been observed nationwide, media consumption (Bonilla, 2022) has been skewed by party. This evidently has impacted the worldview of voters based upon party lines. In the absence of campaign promises, voters (Naurin, 2011)⁵ even turn to world affairs and what political party is holding the majority of higher offices nationally to evaluate performance of elected officials as low as water and sanitation boards, even when those positions remain strictly non partisan or are held by members of the party in opposition to that at the national level.

This offers for us a perplexing electoral landscape, where a promise’s meaning is illusory and - essentially - non existent. The result of this has been (Bonilla, 2022) a significant rise in the “no-promises promise”: that is, ambiguity in campaigning platforms and/or a total absence of candidates taking positions on issues relative to the position.

CASE STUDY: CITY OF OXNARD, CALIFORNIA

In December 2024, a new, governing body was formed as a result of the 2022 and 2024 General Elections held in the City of Oxnard, California. Elections are held on a district-basis, with three districts (1, 2, and 5) up for election in the Gubernatorial/Midterms, three districts (3, 4, and 6) up for election in the Presidential General, and the mayor being elected At Large every four years.

⁵ Naurin, E., 2011. *Election Promises, Party Behavior and Voter Perceptions*. Palgrave Macmillan.



In 2024, two district council members (Aaron Starr and Michaela Perez), as well as the mayor (Luis A. Mc Arthur), outlined (Ventura County, CA – County Clerk and Recorder / Registrar of Voters, n.d.)⁶ specific promises in the Ventura County General Election Voters Guide, while the third district council member (Gabriela Rodriguez) published only an exhaustive list of personal, professional, and community based experience. In 2022, two district council members (Bert E. Perello and Gabriela Basua) outlined (Ventura County, CA – County Clerk and Recorder / Registrar of Voters, n.d.) specific achievements in their previous terms in office, while the third district council member (Gabriel Teran) offered a combination of achievements, experience, and aspirational goals for the city.

Additional promises and aspirational comments were made at the League of Women Voters - Ventura County candidate forums, as well as on campaign websites. Notably, Gabriela Basua left all promise-making to her campaign website, where she included an exhaustive list of aspirational goals for her next term of office. Of the available, remaining websites and the recorded candidate forums, we see every member of the current City of Oxnard governing body offer some specificity of promises from which we may evaluate for accountability purposes. Though more ambiguity and cited experience exists or is predominant in these outlets of candidate information dissemination as well, suggesting that at least 57% of the current council (four of seven) relied on the newer, “no-promises promise” as a prospective strategy to win their respective elections.

⁶ Ventura County, CA – County Clerk and Recorder / Registrar of Voters. (n.d.). <https://clerkrecorder.venturacounty.gov/elections/elections/>

Mayor - Luis A. Mc Arthur

Through out his campaign in 2024, Mc Arthur offered a voluminous list of promises voters should be expecting to see at least some results on. They included:

- Bring good paying, union jobs to Oxnard;
- Support first time home buyers;
- Reopen the Carnegie Museum;
- Add playgrounds to Plaza Park;
- Bring more events to downtown;
- Collaborate with local artists;
- Support street vendors with permitting and prohibit vendors from outside of Oxnard;
- Keep parks open later;
- Be a "full time" mayor;
- Support infrastructure improvements to upgrade roads, parks and the performing arts center; and,
- Act with leadership, integrity, and transparency.

As we see later is the case with District 5's representative, it is possible Mc Arthur has offered such a high volume list of goals that even achieving a handful will be sufficient for the public to consider his "promises kept," should he seek re election in 2028. Six months into his first year in office, his ability in achieving some, if not most, of these goals though remains uncertain. Mc Arthur has partnered with local radio stations, local artist Young Quicks, and the McMarro Family McDonalds chain to bring events to area high schools, and has posted numerous publications on social media indicating the number of hours he is operating as mayor. However, Mc Arthur has yet to offer meaningful dialogue on addressing several of his promises, in particular on city-specific issues (such as permitting and street vendors from outside the city), as well as a continued lack of transparency around his campaign donations and expenses over the course of multiple filings in 2024.

Mayor Pro Tem/District 2 - Gabriel Teran

Mayor Pro Tem Teran was initially added to the Oxnard City Council as a special appointment, then re-elected in 2022. Teran's statements in the Ventura County Gubernatorial Voters Guide, as well as on his campaign website, offer a wealth of experience and accomplishments during his time on the council (he even cites attending neighborhood council meetings and reporting pot holes to the Oxnard 311 app), and the primary aspirational goals of investing in youth and providing equity for Oxnard residents. It is difficult to evaluate Teran's performance on the issue of promise-keeping given the ambiguity of his goal setting; however, notable is the programming for youth initiated in the City under his tenure. This includes the EMS training program for disadvantaged youth, as well as the newly formed Oxnard Youth Academy.

District 1 - Bert E. Perello

Council member Perello's Ventura County Gubernatorial Voters Guide entry is blunt and to the point, containing no forward promises from which we may evaluate his performance on promise keeping since re-election. Perello offers instead a single paragraph outlining at length his accomplishments during his prior term. Some of those accomplishments include statements such as: "I consistently fight for good local government" and "I pushed to improve financial management" and "I made the unpopular vote to end the golf course and the performing arts center subsidies, and to lay off 32 staff in 2019," and concludes with "I believe I have earned your trust." In the League of Women Voters - Ventura County candidate's forum, Perello also stated his commitments to always state the truth to the public, and to appoint more qualified individuals to the planning commission. Perello won re-election in 2022 against three opponents with an overwhelming 47% of the votes cast, and of his specific promises

made during the candidate's forum, he has voted to offer a paid stipend to garner and retain talent for the planning commission.

District 3 - Aaron Starr

Council member Starr won election in 2024 by defeating the incumbent council member, Oscar Madrigal. Starr has run for council and mayor numerous times since moving to Oxnard in the early 2010s, and upon evaluation of his campaign promises, they have remained consistent over the multiple times he ran for office. They include:

- Oversee spending of tax dollars;
- Bring in high paying jobs to the city of Oxnard;
- Clean up the streets and alleys, fix potholes;
- Prohibit homeless encampments;
- Expand crime prevention;
- Reduce housing costs; and
- Act with responsiveness, transparency, accountability.

Of these promises, Council member Starr has managed to improve responsiveness to residents, and has made a considerable showing of exerting fiscal oversight. Many of his promises, however, are beyond the perview of the city council. For example: reduction of housing costs is a complex issue that is largely dependent on a variety of factors the council has no control over. Moreover, in response to measures that directly impact the costs of housing, such as tenant protections, Council member Starr voted in opposition to those specific ordinances. Finally, the council member continues to dodge constituent questions regarding the funding of his numerous campaigns for public office, of which he reportedly "loaned" himself in excess of \$75,000 per election, over the course of multiple elections, as well as the financing of his numerous lawsuits against the City of Oxnard (some of which are ongoing).

District 4 - Gabriela Rodriguez

Council member Rodriguez's statement in the Ventura County General Election Voters Guide does not contain any promises, either with specificity or aspirational goal setting. At the League of Women Voters - Ventura County Forum, however, she did state the goals of:

- Tax incentives to businesses for recycling;
- More mixed use and affordable housing;
- Return items from the Carnegie; and,
- Hire locals for municipal jobs.

Of these four promises stated during that forum, she has voted or advocated for at least 50% of those promises during her first six months in office.

District 5 - Gabriela Basua

While the Ventura County Gubernatorial Voters Guide in 2022 did not contain any specific promises by Council member Basua, her responses to questions in candidate forums, as well as the content outlined on her campaign website, listed an exhaustive list of promises. Those include:

- Keep community safe from crime and natural disasters;
- Advocate for new youth mentorship programs;
- Make sure city utilities have necessary funds to address aging infrastructure;
- Address lack of maintenance in city parks;
- Support aggressive campaign to repair deteriorating roads, sidewalks, bridges;
- "Parking permit programs" to deal with neighborhood parking issues;
- Fiscal responsibility ;
- Support business growth with affordable housing;
- Maintain wetlands;

- Offer more electric vehicle infrastructure and rebates;
- Open an aquatic center in South Oxnard; and,
- Homeless shelters.

Council member Basua offers us an interesting strategy in promise-making as a candidate and elected official. In opposition to the more current “no-promises promise” being employed increasingly across the modern, American electoral landscape, Basua appears to offer an anything goes approach. This is to suggest that by making so many promises or aspirational goals through out her campaign, she then has a voluminous list of achievements from which she may select her highlight reel in the coming election. We see her do this in the 2022 Ventura County Gubernatorial Voters Guide, and it is likely she will do the same should she run for re-election in 2026.

District 6 - Michaela Perez

Similar to Council member Starr and Mayor Mc Arthur, in 2024, Council member Perez offered several promises, though specificity is primarily observed through candidate forums and on her campaign website. In Perez’s statement in the Ventura County General Election Voters Guide, she relies on aspirational goals when she states that her priorities include: “Safety and Quality of Life, Family Wage Jobs, Small Business Investments, Affordable Housing, Equitable City Services, and Oxnard’s Seniors and Youth.” Notably, she stated in the League of Women Voters - Ventura County candidates forum that a priority was to remove Ormond Beach toxic waste, and since election she has been a vocal advocate for restoration of Ormond Beach and decommissioning of the OB electrical facility. She has also indicated high levels of activity within her district. Though also, she stated at that same forum her promise to provide faster response times from police, which - generally speaking - is beyond the scope of ability for a sitting council member, rendering that promise likely unobtainable as a personal achievement.

While the Oxnard City Council is considered a non-partisan body, every member of the current governing body is (City Clerk's Office - City of Oxnard, n.d.)⁷ affiliated with, endorsed by, or received funds during their most recent campaign by a political party.

Position/ District	Member Name	Most Recent Year Elected	Party Affiliation
Mayor - At Large	Luis A. Mc Arthur	2024	Democrat
Mayor Pro Tem/District 2	Gabriel Teran	2022	Democrat
District 1	Bert E. Perello	2022	Democrat
District 3	Aaron Starr	2024	Libertarian
District 4	Gabriela Rodriguez	2024	Democrat
District 5	Gabriela Basua	2022	Democrat
District 6	Michaela Perez	2024	Democrat

⁷ City Clerk's Office - City of Oxnard. (n.d). <https://www.oxnard.gov/city-clerks-office>

If partisanship participation at the community level continues to trend upwards, though, the fulfillment - or lack thereof - of promises from members of the Oxnard City Council may, however, prove irrelevant. At least a few of the members of the current governing body have transitioned towards the “no-promises promise” approach; whereas others continue to rely on traditional norms in promise making and keeping as a strategy for success. Also, partisan Democrats tend to (Bonilla, 2022) view a commitment to partisan issues as fulfillment of keeping promises, and every Democrat on the current governing body has routinely, and increasingly, advocated for partisan values in supplement to their activities within their non-partisan city roles.

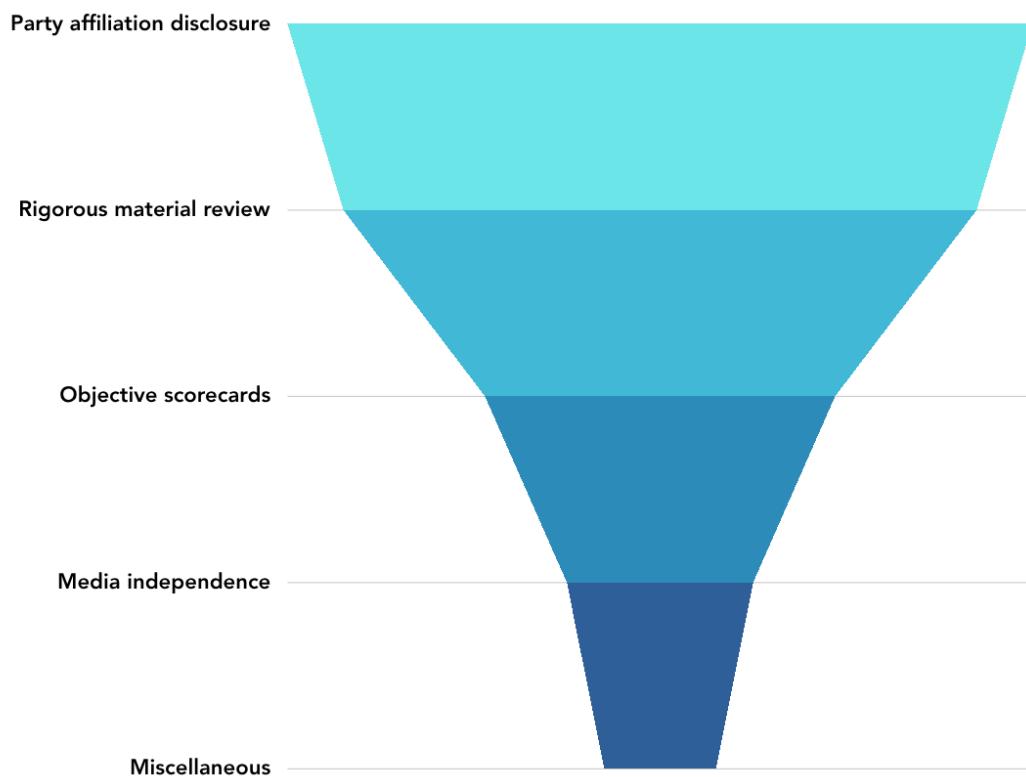
The City of Oxnard has (Ventura County, CA – County Clerk and Recorder / Registrar of Voters, n.d.) a statistically high number of voters registered as Democrat - roughly 52% of all registered voters in the city. This offers at least some members on the council an advantage when voters head to the polls in their next elections, based on the nuanced ways in which (Bonilla, 2022) partisan Democrats tend to view promise keeping.

Outliers to this, however, were the unprecedeted losses of incumbents Oscar Madrigal (to Aaron Starr) and Arthur Valenzuela Jr. (to Michaela Perez), with Madrigal’s district changing from Democrat to Libertarian affiliation. With only (Ventura County, CA – County Clerk and Recorder / Registrar of Voters, n.d.) 806 voters registered as Libertarian through out the entire city, it is unlikely partisan views of promise keeping will have enough sway in overcoming potential gaps in promises kept in the future. In fact, the election of Starr to office with over 52% of the vote over an incumbent that had objectively fulfilled promises made (both in terms of city needs, and partisan values) during his previous term suggests that approval rating and regional popularity are of higher priority to voters than promises kept, even through a partisan lens. This suggests Starr must either be popular within his district when this term concludes, and/

or spend the remaining years of his time in office working to keep his promises. And even assuming he is successful in keeping a percentage of them, that may not be sufficient if his popularity continues to decline, as it has since his election.

AUTHOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategies to address changes in promise keeping caused by partisanship and other outside factors include: (1) requiring candidates disclose party affiliation on ballots, even in non-partisan races; (2) hiring qualified and independent election clerks to evaluate financial and candidate statements more rigorously than is the standard practice today; (3) revising Voter Guides to offer scorecards to both require specificity in campaign statements, and to offer voters clearly stated outcomes; (4) ensuring the independence of regional media by establishing journalism funding overseen by an independent body; and (5+) more.



What we may glean from both the research and the case study in the City of Oxnard, is that to counter these trends in promise keeping, we must make these, and other, reforms to elections to improve governance and outcomes. Of course partisans will argue these trends in promise-keeping are advantageous to them, or simply a product of a broader change in cultural attitudes towards promises and accountability. Though as we've learned through gerrymandering and campaign finance rulings, what is advantageous politically is not always in the best interest of equitable and fair service to the public. For while views of what it means to keep a promise may have morphed through the partisan lens, or become deprioritized in favor or as a result of other factors, keeping promises still remains a key priority for voters, and essential for the implementation of good governance and integrity of local elections.

