



Future of Democracy | 03.2021

Promises kept – a final balance sheet for the grand coalition, 2018–21

Parties and governments are better than their reputation. That includes Germany's grand coalition: out of a total of 294 promises included in the 2018 coalition agreement, almost 80 percent were realized in full or in part. This is also reflected in surveys showing that people have significantly more trust in politicians to implement coalition agreements. For the new government, too, this represents an opportunity.

With a total of 294 promises, the 2018 coalition agreement contains almost 60 percent more individual promises than the 188 included in the 2013 coalition agreement. Of these 294 promises, the grand coalition had fully implemented 214 (73 percent) by the end of the legislative period, while another 15 promises (5 percent) were partially fulfilled. This means that the current coalition's final balance sheet is somewhat better than that of the previous government, with a significantly higher proportion of fully implemented promises. The last government implemented 64 percent of its pledges fully, and 15 percent partially. Nevertheless, even in this legislative period, 64 individual promises remained unfulfilled, more than one fifth of the total. This is not a small number. However, both in the national and in the international context this makes for a comparatively high implementation rate and a very good overall picture. The government has therefore largely done what it promised. This is also reflected in significantly improved levels of public trust:

22 percent of people now believe that "all, almost all" or "a large part" of coalition promises are kept, and another 39 percent think that at least "roughly half" are kept. The gap between optimists and skeptics has thus almost closed. Only four percentage points more of those surveyed are still skeptical about fulfillment (26 percent), and there are now almost as many optimists (22 percent). Negotiating good coalition agreements with concrete policy promises is therefore worthwhile. When they are implemented, there is a greater likelihood of trust, an increased sense of commitment, and a new level of credibility. Politics may not only be about implementing coalition agreements, but these agreements are an important and promising instrument for commitment and accountability, also for voters. The SPD/Green/FDP exploratory paper argues that no one should "be left out in the cold." In the same vein, the trust which voters place in government pledges should not be left to wither away, but should ideally grow to reach new horizons.

The 2018 coalition agreement with 294 “real” government promises

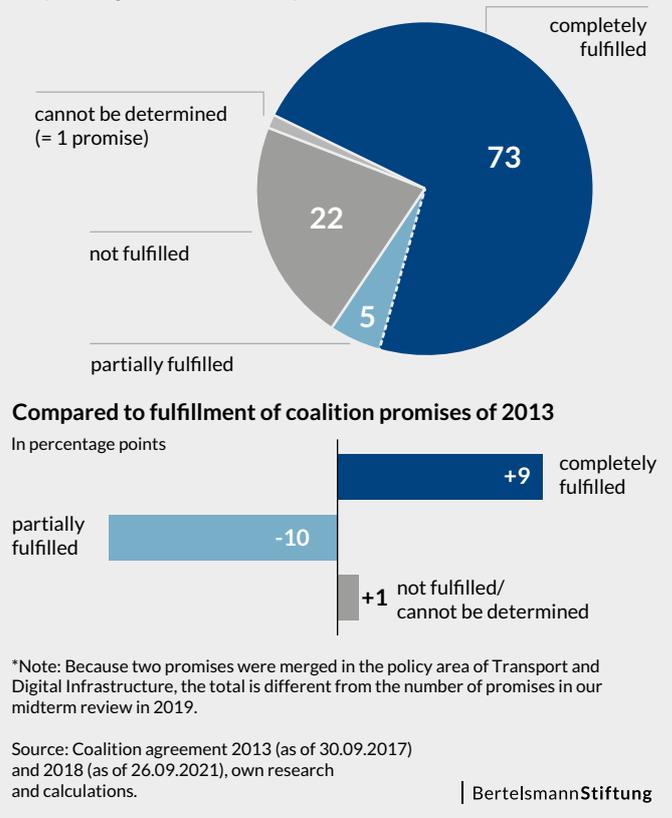
For our final review of the 2018 coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, we examined whether a total of 294 “real” government promises were fulfilled. This is two fewer than in the midterm review at the middle of the legislative period (Vehrkamp/Matthieß 2019a), because the final research led to the merging of two promises in the policy field of Transport and Digital Infrastructure. With a total of 294 promises, the 2018 coalition agreement contains almost 60 percent more than the 188 individual promises in the 2013 coalition agreement. The yardstick for classifying a promise as “real” is its verifiability: only if it is formulated in sufficiently concrete terms is its implementation verifiable. For example, the statement, “We want better climate protection,” is too vague to be a real promise, whereas „We promise to introduce a CO2 tax“ is sufficiently specific to verify (non)implementation. This means that in this study only those promises are examined that are sufficiently clearly formulated and contain an empirically verifiable fulfillment criterion against which their implementation can be measured. On the basis of legal texts, official statistics, and other sources, promises are then coded as “not fulfilled,” “partially fulfilled,” “completely fulfilled” or “cannot be determined.” A promise is considered to have been fulfilled in full only if the promised measure or the envisaged goal has also been realized in full. If it has not been implemented to the full extent promised, it is considered partially fulfilled. If the relevant legal situation has not changed, then the promise remains unfulfilled. The vast majority of individual promises are only mentioned once in the coalition agreement. However, some are mentioned several times, giving them more weight. These include many of the politically weightier individual pledges, such as the introduction of a basic pension (“completely fulfilled”), the creation of a skilled labor immigration law (“completely fulfilled”) and the limit on refugee numbers (“completely fulfilled”). The more “minor” promises include, for example, the introduction of a wilderness fund (“completely fulfilled”) lower taxation of electric cars as company cars (“completely fulfilled”) and testing new procedures against noise pollution (“completely fulfilled”).

Our research into fulfillment rates is not weighted according to more or less salient promises, but examines and evaluates all individual promises in the coalition agreement equally. However, a separate analysis

at the midpoint of the legislative period showed that in this respect there is no difference – or no significant difference – in implementation rates (Vehrkamp/Matthieß 2019b). This rules out the possibility that the balance sheet has been “massaged” so that the implementation of smaller projects outweighs the non-implementation of more ambitious projects.

FIGURE 1 Coalition promises of 2018

As a percentage of the 294* coalition promises in 2018



According to these criteria, the incumbent federal government had already fully implemented almost half (48 percent) of its promises by the midpoint of the legislative period in September 2019. In addition to this, just under one fifth (18 percent) had already been partially fulfilled or were in the process of being implemented. As of the cut-off date of September 30, 2019, this resulted in a midterm balance sheet which looked like the grand coalition could break records: in its first 18 months in office, the federal government had already realized or at least set about realizing two thirds of its promises. Only about one third of the promises had not been tackled at all by the halfway point. But how does the final balance sheet of the grand coalition 2018–2021 look, following the Bundestag elections on September 26, 2021?

Almost 80 percent of all promises kept in full or in part

Of the 294 individual promises made in the coalition agreement, the grand coalition completely fulfilled 214 (73 percent) by the end of the legislative period, while a further 15 promises (5 percent) were partially implemented. Sixty-four promises (22 percent) were not implemented. In only one case, it proved impossible to determine whether a promise had been fulfilled. Compared to the implementation record of the previous government (2013–2017), the incumbent government has thus kept significantly more of its promises in full, in terms of number and proportion: it fulfilled 214 promises completely, compared with the 120 promises kept by the previous government. Proportionally, too, its performance was better: almost a seventh more promises were fulfilled (9 percentage points) than in the previous legislative period. At the same time, the ruling grand coalition has left 15 of its promises partially fulfilled, and 64 have not been fulfilled at all. The proportion of only partially fulfilled promises was thus ten percentage points lower, and the proportion of unfulfilled or indeterminable promises was one percentage point higher than the corresponding figure for the previous government. When it comes to assessing this final balance, two aspects are particularly important: on the one hand, the proportion of completely fulfilled promises is significantly higher than under the previous government. While just under two thirds of the promises in the coalition agreement of 2013 were fulfilled, the proportion of completely fulfilled promises from the 2018 coalition agreement is almost three quarters (73 percent). In addition to this, the current government made significantly more promises in the first place, meaning that when it comes to compliance, the final balance turns out even better for the current government, than for the previous government, which already kept a large proportion of its promises.

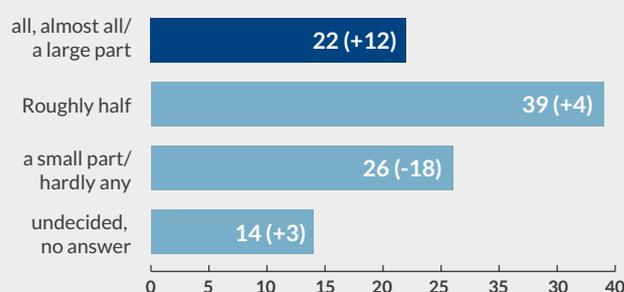
The second important aspect is the proportion of promises which were not fulfilled or which could not be determined; at 22 percent, this remains roughly the same as it was for the previous government. The higher proportion of completely fulfilled promises has therefore not reduced the proportion of unfulfilled promises, but only the proportion of partly fulfilled promises. The current government has therefore succeeded in realizing the vast majority of the projects which it began by the end of its time in

office. What it has not done is reduce the proportion of unfulfilled promises: if we include promises with an indeterminable status (five in the 2013 coalition agreement and one in the 2018 coalition agreement), the shares of unfulfilled or indeterminable promises are almost the same at 21 respectively 22 percent, respectively. This means that around one fifth of each coalition agreement was not implemented.

FIGURE 2 Perceived implementation of coalition promises

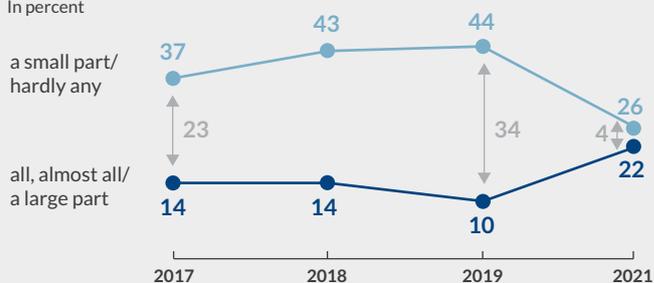
“How many of its projects from the coalition agreement did the grand coalition enact?”

In percent (change since 2019 in brackets)



Changed perceptions over time

In percent



Basic population: German population aged 16 and older.

Source: Allensbach Institute Survey conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (May 2017, February 2018, June 2019, September 2021). | BertelsmannStiftung

A very good final balance for the grand coalition...

Overall, this means that the current federal government has realized almost 80 percent of the promises from the coalition agreement, either in full or in part. Such a high level of implementation allows us to give it an overall rating of “Promises kept”, resulting in a very good final balance sheet. This does not yet constitute an assessment of “good” or “bad” government policy, but it does demonstrate great reliability and fidelity when it comes to realizing plans.

Once again, the current government has to a large extent done as it promised to do. It has distinguished itself through its reliability, predictability and credibility. At a time of dwindling trust in politicians, parties and governments, these qualities are of great intrinsic value. They show that politicians do not simply do what they want, but follow defined goals, and that they do implement a large proportion of the measures agreed upon. In two-party systems, in which one party usually has a governing majority, it is not unusual to see governing parties implementing such a high proportion of the promises made in their election manifestos. In Great Britain, the implementation rate of election promises is as high as 80 to 90 percent on average (Royed 1996). In multi-party systems such as Germany, where governments are usually formed by several parties, the average implementation of election promises is significantly lower, at only slightly over 60 percent (Ferguson 2012). Thus, the high implementation rates of coalition pledges in Germany almost reach the very high compliance levels of single-party governments. In multi-party systems, election promises and election programs can only be faithfully implemented and fulfilled at a lower rate because they are always “filtered” or “negotiated,” translated into compromises which become part of the government program in a coalition agreement. Whereas in two-party systems there is a process of balancing interests and building compromise within each party, in multi-party systems this process only takes place once the negotiations begin between the parties while building a government, and above all during the brokering of the coalition agreement. The implementation of that agreement then leads, at least in Germany, to implementation rates which are certainly comparable to those of single-party governments. All in all, this is a very good testimony to the effectiveness of coalition management in Germany and of the incumbent government in particular.

Sources:

The survey data cited in the text was collected by the Allensbach Institute from September 11 to 23, 2021, on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. A total of 1,553 respondents aged 16 and older were interviewed face-to-face. The results are representative of the German population. The coding of the 2018 coalition agreement and the research on fulfillment were conducted by a team led by Theres Matthieß (Mannheim Center for European Social Research) and Lars Bischoff (Bertelsmann Stiftung), with contributions from Luise Martha Anter, Nico Eschkötter, Carlo Greß, Robin Groß, Pauline Kleinschlömer, Svea Komm and Lisa Zehnter. For more methodological details, see the study (in German) “Besser als ihr Ruf – Halbzweibilanz der Großen Koalition zur Umsetzung des Koalitionsvertrages 2018” by Robert Vehrkamp and Theres Matthieß, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, November 2019. Cover image: © Roman - stock.adobe.com

... dampened by the Corona effect?

Nevertheless, the unchanged and not insignificant proportion of unfulfilled promises slightly clouds the overall very positive assessment of the implementation of the 2018 coalition agreement, especially since the unfulfilled promises also include some of the more important coalition projects. The coalition did not keep its promise to anchor children’s rights in the constitution; it did not succeed in restricting the use of fixed-term contracts without material grounds in labor law; it was frustrated in its attempt to declare further safe countries of origin in refugee policy, and it failed to adopt a federal budget without new debt. Overall, the proportion of unimplemented and not even partially fulfilled promises is not insignificant, at around one fifth. Why is that?

In some cases, it is clear that the coalition parties deliberately chose not to implement their promises. But this can have very good and understandable reasons, as shown, for example, by the borrowing in the federal budget. Circumstances can change during a legislative period and relativize agreed goals, render them obsolete or even reduce them to absurdity. In the Corona pandemic, government borrowing suddenly became an existential necessity for many businesses and for the people affected by the pandemic. In this case, no one would dispute the “good” reasons for not keeping a promise made under different conditions. Still, even if there are good reasons in some cases, the stagnant rate of one fifth of promises not even partially fulfilled cannot be seen as satisfactory. Particularly since the midterm review suggested that a much better figure would also be achieved in the final review. By the middle of the legislative period, the government had already made a start on fulfilling two thirds (66 percent) of its promises, leaving only just over a third (34 percent) of promises which had not yet begun to be implemented. This was a very good interim result: the previous government had yet to make a start on almost half of its promises (49 percent) by the halfway point. Yet the rates of unfulfilled promises end up similarly high for both coalition agreements. How can this be explained?

Here, too, the Corona pandemic could be an important explanatory factor: the government has evidently succeeded much better in continuing to work on established projects than in setting up new projects that had not yet been broached at all at the halfway

point. The enormous burden of the Corona pandemic obviously did not allow this, and in the second half of the legislative period it almost completely absorbed the energy needed to tackle new projects. At any rate, the government was only able to initiate about a quarter as many new projects in the second half of the legislative term as in its first half. Without the Corona pandemic, the very good final balance might really have become “record-breaking.” As it is, the overall assessment remains “very good.”

Increased confidence in governments to keep promises

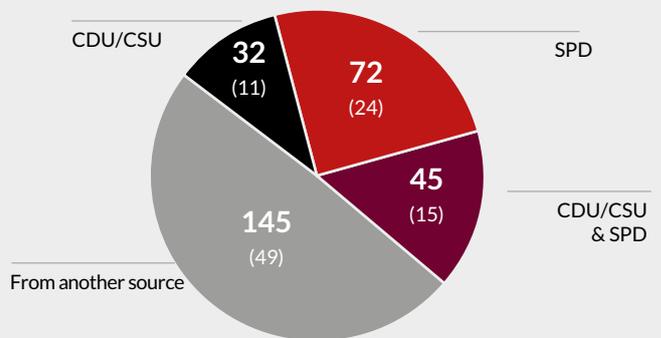
The fact that the last two governments have generally remained highly faithful to their promises may also have led to a clear improvement in citizens’ confidence that plans will be put into action. The good rate of implementation at the midpoint of the legislative period may also have contributed to this. There is at least a noticeable change in public opinion on this subject: when asked whether and to what extent the promises made in coalition agreements are generally realized, only ten percent of respondents in 2019 said that either “all, almost all,” or at least “a large part” of all promises were actually kept. Forty-four percent assumed that only “a small part” or “roughly half” were kept. With this, the disparity between actual and perceived compliance with coalition agreements had even worsened over time. The gap between optimists and skeptics had widened from 23 percentage points in 2017 to 34 percentage points in 2019.

In contrast, current figures from a representative survey conducted in September 2021 show a much more positive picture: as many as 22 percent now believe that “all, almost all” or “a large part” of promises are put into action, and a further 39 percent at least believe that “roughly half” are fulfilled. Conversely, only 26 percent believe that only “a small proportion” or “hardly any” of the promises are kept. The changes compared with 2019 show the extent of the shift in opinion: while twelve percentage points more respondents than in 2019 believe that a relatively large proportion of promises are kept, the number of people who believe that little or nothing will be implemented has gone down by almost a fifth (18 percentage points). The gap between compliance optimists and skeptics has thus almost closed. Only four percentage points more of those surveyed are still skeptical (26 percent), while almost as many are now optimistic (22 percent).

Based on our research, we cannot be sure to what extent the good result of the grand coalition has contributed to the significantly improved climate of public opinion on the implementation of coalition agreements. Nevertheless, a connection seems plausible. After refusals to cooperate and very public disputes at the beginning of the legislative period, the end of 2018 brought a much calmer and more

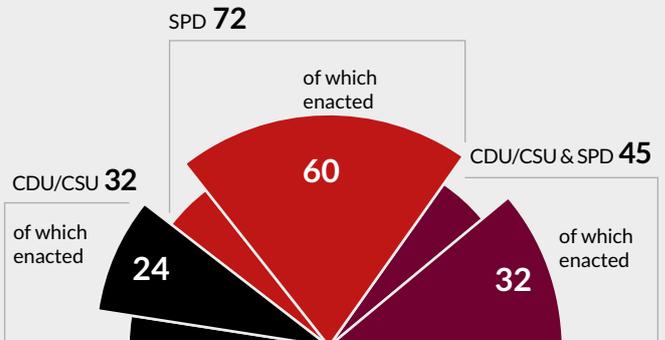
FIGURE 3 From which election platform did the 294* coalition promises of 2018 come?

Number of promises (percentages in brackets)



Which party fulfilled more promises?

Number of fully or partially enacted coalition promises from the election platform



*Note: Because two promises were merged in the policy area of Transport and Digital Infrastructure, the total is different from the number of promises in our midterm review in 2019.

Source: Coalition agreement 2018 and election manifestoes of the SPD and CDU/CSU 2017, own research and calculations.

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constructive phase of cooperation in the grand coalition. The government established an image which was closer to its actual performance in implementing the coalition agreement (in fact, its implementation rate had been good from the start), and already before the Corona pandemic began, the verdict was widespread that the incumbent grand coalition was “better than its reputation.” Increased levels of trust in politics

and government, especially during the first phase of the pandemic, then additionally strengthened and corroborated this impression, without becoming euphoria or reversing the profound and fundamental desire for change before the 2021 federal election. Nevertheless, the fact that the incumbent government has remained highly faithful to the coalition agreement seems to have played its part in improving confidence levels and trust in government policy. And this shows that good coalition agreements are worthwhile. When they are implemented, they create a sense of commitment and build trust in the transparent, binding and reliable implementation of policy promises: an opportunity, also for future governments!

Comparing the balance sheets of the coalition partners

This is an opportunity for multi-party governments in particular, in a system which seems to make it difficult for a party to implement a large proportion of its own program. Either the necessary compromises water down each party's ideas so that they become less recognizable in government policy, or the proportion of perfectly implemented election promises is too small to create a positive perception among voters of the party's faithfulness to its own promises. Good coalition agreements are therefore a double opportunity for all parties involved. On the one hand, elements of a party's own election program can be negotiated into them, and on the other, parties can profit from the faithful implementation of the government as a whole, of which they are a part. Judging by its consistently poor poll ratings for a long time before the election, the SPD did not seem to be able to do this in the current government, even though more of the projects anchored in the coalition agreement can be traced back to its election program: as many as 117 (40 percent) of the 294 individual promises in the coalition agreement can be found in the SPD's election program, and 72 are exclusively found there. In contrast, only 77 (26 percent) can be traced back to the election program of the CDU/CSU parties and only 32 of those exclusively. The SPD was thus able to incorporate noticeably more of its own program into the coalition agreement than the CDU/CSU.

But what about the implementation of these election promises? Here, too, the SPD tends to do better than its coalition partner: of the 72 exclusive SPD promises, 60 (83 percent) were implemented, while of the 32 exclusive CDU/CSU projects, only 24 (75 percent)

were put into action. So even though the CDU/CSU had incorporated fewer of its promises into the coalition agreement in the first place, its implementation rate was still slightly lower than that of the SPD. It is worth noting that 145 (49 percent) of the promises in the coalition agreement were not included in either of the two election programs.

On the one hand, this may be a consequence of the extraordinarily long and arduous process of forming a government. But it also shows that election programs are written within the logic of party competition, setting priorities in the election campaign. The actual legislative agenda is only defined after the election. Government policy does not only consist of implementing election programs, and additional, new content and goals are also generated in the negotiation process of forming a government. Coalition negotiations are therefore not simply for bringing together the election programs of individual parties. Of course, governance is also not just about implementing coalition agreements. Nevertheless, both election programs and coalition agreements are important instruments of communication, transparency and commitment, and when they are handled wisely and put into action, they create more space for trust between politicians and citizens. When it comes to stabilizing trust and attributing legitimacy in democracy, this is no small feat.

Comparing implementation records by department

Comparing different departments' implementation rates also reveals differences. The first aspect that stands out is the very different number of pledges: almost 70 percent of all promises in the coalition agreement are distributed among only six out of 15 government departments. In absolute terms, most of the promises fall to the Federal Ministry of Interior, Building and Community (49), followed by Labor and Social Affairs (33), Health (32), Justice and Consumer Protection (29), Transport and Digital Infrastructure (28) and Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (27). The fewest coalition pledges were made in the areas of Culture (7), Economic Affairs and Energy (7), Economic Cooperation and Development (5) and Foreign Affairs (2).

Of the ministries with a large number of projects, the Federal Ministry of the Environment leads the way

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with an implementation rate of 85 percent, alongside the Federal Ministry of the Interior with a rate of 80 percent. In the second half of the government's term in office, the front runner was the Federal Ministry of the Environment. Of the departments with fewer promises, the Federal Ministry of Defence (92 percent) and the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs (89 percent) were ahead. When it comes to unfulfilled promises, the Federal Ministry of Finance has the highest proportion of projects which were not

put into action, though the unforeseen financial burdens of the Corona pandemic put it somewhat outside the competition. Apart from the Federal Foreign Office, which is also out of the running since it only has two promises partially fulfilled, the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture has the worst implementation record, with only four (36 percent) of a total of just eleven (4 percent) promises fully implemented and another four (36 percent) remaining unfulfilled.

TABLE 1 Fulfillment rates of the grand coalition 2018 to September 2021

POLICY AREAS	NUMBER OF PROMISES		COMPLETELY FULFILLED		PARTIALLY FULFILLED		NOT FULFILLED	
	abs. and in %		abs. and in %		abs. and in %		abs. and in %	
Interior*	49	17 %	39	80 %	2	4 %	7	14 %
Labor and Social Affairs	33	11 %	21	64 %	3	9 %	9	27 %
Health	32	11 %	24	75 %	1	3 %	7	22 %
Justice and Consumer Protection	29	10 %	21	72 %	1	3 %	7	24 %
Transport and Digital Infrastructure	28	10 %	19	68 %	2	7 %	7	25 %
Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety	27	9 %	23	85 %	0	0 %	4	15 %
Finance	19	6 %	11	58 %	0	0 %	8	42 %
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth	18	6 %	16	89 %	0	0 %	2	11 %
Education and Research	13	4 %	10	77 %	0	0 %	3	23 %
Defense	13	4 %	12	92 %	0	0 %	1	8 %
Food and Agriculture	11	4 %	4	36 %	3	27 %	4	36 %
Culture and Media	7	2 %	5	71 %	0	0 %	2	29 %
Economic Affairs and Energy	7	2 %	6	86 %	0	0 %	1	14 %
Economic Cooperation and Development	5	2 %	3	60 %	1	20 %	1	20 %
Foreign Office	2	1 %	0	0 %	2	100 %	0	0 %
Other/not assignable	1	0 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	1	100 %
Totals*	294**	100 %	214	73 %	15	5 %	64	22 %

* In the case of one promise, fulfillment could not be determined.

**Note: Because two promises were merged in the policy area of Transport and Digital Infrastructure, the total is different from the number of promises in our midterm review in 2019.

Source: Coalition agreement 2018 (as of 26.09.2021), own research and calculations.

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Outlook: The ‘traffic light’ negotiations in 2021

As shown by the rising levels of confidence in the government to carry out its plans, it is possible to create trust, and good coalition agreements with verifiable and fulfilled promises can contribute to this. With a view to the current coalition negotiations between the SPD, the Greens and the FDP, this means that while coalition negotiations may be difficult and strenuous, they are worth it. The results of this study give rise to the following three exemplary recommendations:

1. Agreements can and should be concrete and binding. The coalition’s goals and plans should be verifiable, and rhetoric and vague promises should be avoided as far as possible. This creates commitment and is the only way to determine whether implementation has been successful. What cannot be agreed does not belong in an “agreement.” Platitudes are distracting, obscuring the essentials and leading to disputes further down the road, which then dominate perceptions of implementation.
2. Despite this need for policy promises with concrete intentions, an overall narrative is also necessary. The individual promises in the agreement should be elucidated by a focused overarching narrative including

clear core messages and guiding principles. These do not arise automatically but are a task and an achievement in themselves. This requires a separate working group to accompany, reflect on and explain the entire negotiation process. The exploratory paper by the SPD, Greens and FDP was a good first step in this direction. But more is needed for the coalition agreement.

3. Transparency generates trust. When promises are put into action, this should therefore be documented, published and explained transparently. That also – and especially – applies to individual cases in which non-fulfillment may be justified by “good” reasons. These reasons must be stated and explained so that they can be accepted and believed. An interim balance sheet at the halfway point of the legislative period has proven its worth. Ongoing coalition tracking that citizens can access at any time would be desirable. In politics as in accountancy, profits and losses can only be accounted for credibly through transparent and honest bookkeeping of promises.

And so we wish the parties good luck with the difficult negotiations. Let’s hope they generate a coalition agreement that surprises us all and meets the challenges of the times. We await the results with eagerness and anticipation.

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Vi.S.d.P.

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