

The Future of Promise Tracking

Why we need non-partisan Promise Tracking, how to Promise Track in the UK, and sparking a global conversation about Promise Tracking

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Please get in touch with us if you have any comments, questions, or observations about the report. Similarly, we would be delighted to talk to you if you are considering making a Promise Tracker in the UK. To contact us, send an email addressed to mevan@fullfact.org. We will get back to you.

*Jordan Urban and Adam Feldman
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Summary

- Promise tracking is a worthwhile endeavour that contributes to democracy in a number of ways.
- Promise Trackers can provide significant positive value to democracy as an educational tool, engaging and informing citizens.
- At its most effective, Promise Tracking is non-partisan.
- Using the blueprint set out in this paper, a high-quality Promise Tracker can be created in the UK.
- Many of the questions we raise and potential solutions we give are also applicable in an international context.

Introduction

This paper examines two key questions - why building a Promise Tracker is worthwhile, and how to build one in the UK.

Promise Tracking is a field still in its infancy. It is only recently that it has become a recognisable phenomenon with multiple sites tracking promises across the world.

The UK has seen at least four Promise Trackers since 2010. In this report, we lay out a blueprint for the creation of a high-quality, sustainable, non-partisan Promise Tracker in the UK, drawing on our experience as founders of GovTracker and our consultation with other Trackers, academics, and pollsters. The Promise Tracker that we provide a blueprint for in this report is one which would be of great use to ordinary citizens and academics alike, providing an easily accessible tool to measure overall government progress and track the status of individual promises.

This paper also aims to stimulate the global debate around Promise Tracking.

Our conversations with those overseas suggests that to an extent, Promise Trackers encounter similar problems no matter where they are. While we focus on the UK in this report, many of the questions raised and solutions we come up with are likely to be applicable to overseas Promise Trackers in various political contexts. We hope to spark debate about Promise Tracking in a global context.

Part One: What is a Promise Tracker?

A Promise Tracker is a website which tracks the progress of the government's promises.

Why is non-partisanship important?

For a Promise Tracker to be able to accurately track government progress, they must take an objective standpoint. If not, they risk making judgements not entirely backed up by facts, which can result in, for example, giving inaccurate statuses to promises and writing unfair descriptions of them.

Remaining non-partisan is difficult to do, and maintaining the perception of being non-partisan is even harder. This report emphasises that it is important to remain non-partisan and avoid making value judgements to a degree that some might consider impractical. But it is necessary if Promise Trackers are to provide a legitimate account of government progress that can be trusted by a wide audience. We have recommended steps to ensure that this is the case.

What is government progress?

Measuring progress in a non-partisan way is difficult. Judging the objective progress of the government towards their stated aims cannot be influenced in any way by subjective opinions about the quality of the government's agenda. We have, therefore, defined government progress as 'the extent to which the government has achieved its stated aims.' This does not require a subjective judgement about whether the government's agenda is 'good' or 'bad'.

International examples of Promise Trackers

Name	Country	Currently Active?	How many Promises Tracked?	Where were Promises extracted from?	How frequently updated?
Chequado Promesas Page	Argentina	Yes	20	18 from Presidential Debates, 2 from other sources	Annually
RMIT/ABC Fact Check	Australia	No	78	Various Sources	Real-time

Morsi Meter	Egypt	No	64	Manifesto, pre-election speeches, immediately post-election speeches.	Real-time
Rouhani Meter	Iran	Yes - in Farsi	100	Manifesto, pre-election speeches, post-election speeches	Real-time
GovTracker	UK	No	256	Manifesto	Every 2-3 months, most talked-about promises in real-time
BBC Manifesto Tracker	UK	No	161	Manifesto	Fixed Regular Updates
Trump-O-Meter	USA	Yes	101	Mostly Speeches	Real-time
Obameter	USA	No	533	Mostly Speeches	Real-time

Part Two: Why make a Promise Tracker?

Promise Trackers have a significant role to play in reducing the mistrust that exists between governments and their citizens in 21st century democracies. By providing a concise, objective, and accurate overview of the government's progress in fulfilling the mandate that it was elected on, they allow ordinary citizens to scrutinise the work of their government relative to the promises that have been made prior to an election.

In a democracy, it is accepted that the government should fulfil the promises they made to citizens in order to win an election. Often, however, it is hard to tell whether they are actually doing this. This is the reason why some of the most heated debate within politics surrounds the subject of broken promises. People care deeply about whether the government has followed through on what it originally promised, but can often find it difficult to determine whether they have or not. Promise Trackers tackle this problem head on.

As with any heated debate, the people debating the state of government promises can wilfully or unintentionally misinform or exaggerate in order to prove their point. Promise Trackers also tackle this issue. By providing a reliable, accurate, and non-partisan source of information that assesses the status of government promises, they give citizens the tools to cut through the misinformation that so often plagues political discourse surrounding the state of government promises.

Like all educational tools, the effectiveness and reach of a Promise Tracker depends on how widely and enthusiastically it is used, particularly by people who may not typically be very politically engaged.

I like the idea, but...

Promise Trackers educate citizens and allow them to hold the government to account and fight misinformation. In principle, any democrat should be in favour of them. However, there are some legitimate concerns that in practice they may hinder, not help, democracy.

While researching this project we spoke to Full Fact Director, Will Moy, who summed up these concerns perfectly. He outlined the argument that Promise Trackers may not be useful tools in a democracy because:

'They hold the government to promises that new (or even old) evidence suggests it would be best for them to change their mind on; they turn democracy into a purely contractual system of

government instead of one which recognises the importance of the government managing events; and they ignore the fact that voters can often vote on the basis of character because they understand the importance of managing events.'

Put more concisely, Will outlined concerns that Promise Trackers could encourage governments to dogmatically pursue the policies on which they were elected, even when this was not in the best interests of the nation that they govern over.

The aim of this section is to address these concerns and argue that Promise Trackers can have tangible positive effects on democracy, indicating that **not only is a Promise Tracker a concept worth getting excited about in theory, but it is also one worth implementing in practice.**

Addressing the issues

The issues raised above can be addressed by a Promise Tracker acknowledging and communicating that the government does not need to keep *all* of its promises in order to fulfil its democratic mandate, and making this clear in the way that they present their promises.

This may seem counter-intuitive, given that a Promise Tracker is a tool designed to ensure that the government acts upon its mandate. However, as pointed out above, such a situation ignores some fundamental facts about the way democracy operates.

Governments ought to be able to make U-turns where necessary. They should be able to manage events. And if they have to break a promise to do so, it is *not necessarily bad*.

One of the core tenets of a democracy is that the government should follow through on the promises that it made in order to win power. However, they should also be able to deviate from these proposals where necessary to respond to the wishes of the people or safeguard the population's interests. For example, if a war were to break out, it could be considered reasonable for the government to increase defence spending in such a way that makes pledges about restricting government spending impossible to realise.

We must be clear - governments should not deviate too much from their policy pledges. To do so would neglect the mandate that they have received from the people. Overall a government should uphold the majority of their promises. However, a Promise Tracker must recognise that if the government breaks an individual promise, they have not necessarily acted in a way that betrays the people that put them in power.

A Promise Tracker should work to prevent the Government neglecting its mandate, while recognising that governments sometimes need to break individual promises.

This is not an easy thing to do, and Part Two lays out some ideas on how to do it. If a Promise Tracker is able to achieve this, it becomes an extremely positive democratic tool.

What impact can a Promise Tracker have?

Promise Trackers are primarily educational tools which give citizens access to factual information which can help them make evidence-based democratic decisions at the ballot box and beyond. More specifically, by informing citizens, Promise Trackers allow them to effectively hold the government to account for the promises they have been made, and give them the ability to cut through the misinformation which often surrounds the status of government promises.

It may be easiest to understand the impact Promise Trackers can have through what we have termed 'plausible connections'. These connections, which take the form of chains of reasoning, show how a Promise Tracker's work could reasonably be expected to impact upon the UK's democracy.

The three main plausible connections that illustrate the positive impact that a Promise Tracker could have are:

Promise Tracker tracks promises → Citizens have easier access to promises → More likely to become civically engaged → Become more informed about the government's actions → Able to make more informed decisions at the ballot box and as members of civic society.

The validity of this chain can be seen in the success of the RMIT ABC Promise Tracker in Australia. They found that when Malcolm Turnbull announced an election, their website soared in popularity. They could give final statuses to almost every promise. This meant that they gave a unique insight into the progress of government that was extensively used by voters in the run-up to the 2016 election.

Promise Tracker tracks promises → Citizens have access to promises → Become more informed about the government's actions → Able to track when the government breaks or completes promises → Holds the government to account → The government know this → Incentivises the government to break fewer promises and communicate what they have done more openly → Improves trust in politics and the state of democracy.

The validity of this chain can be seen in the success of Morsi Meter in Egypt. Morsi Meter garnered so much civic engagement that the President's office was in direct communication with its creator, Amr Sobhy. Amr described to us how at points in Morsi Meter's 100 day life, the government would contact him, argue that Morsi Meter provided an inaccurate account of Morsi's progress, and then provide an official release to show that this was the case. This is an incredible example of how, with citizen engagement, a Promise Tracker can effectively hold the

government to account for the promises it has made and pressure it into acting upon its mandate, while also helping to ensure that it communicates effectively with its people.

Promise Tracker track promises → Citizens have access to promises → Become more informed about the government's actions → Able to cut through misinformation surrounding government promises → Makes misinformation less effective and de-incentivises its production → Contributes to preventing people being misled into making democratic decisions.

The validity of this chain can be seen in the success of Trump-O-Meter, run by American organisation PolitiFact. Trump-O-Meter has been widely used since Trump's inauguration in January 2017, allowing Americans to view a factual account of what he actually promised and the status of these promises within a nationwide climate of misinformation.

All three plausible connections corroborate the experience of overseas Trackers. It is important to note that while a Promise Tracker is able to make an effective positive contribution to democracy, it is one of a number of tools that can do this. Whether it is the *most* effective tool that could be created is not for us to decide.

Part Three: A blueprint for the UK, and ideas for the world

Promise Tracking has four stages:



These four stages form the backbone of any Promise Tracker. Whilst the nature of the way they are implemented varies according to political context, as broad concepts they are the basis of all the shared thinking that Promise Trackers are built on.

Below, we have laid out a blueprint of how each stage can be done in the UK to lead to the creation of a high-quality, non-partisan Promise Tracker. We have also offered suggestions which may be applicable to an international audience.

Extraction

How many promises?

The process of extraction should begin with deciding exactly which promises you wish to track.

Every promise a government makes before an election forms part of the mandate that they should enact once in power. Therefore, in an ideal world, every promise made pre-election should be collected and tracked.

Currently, extraction can only be done manually. With enough human resources, a Promise Tracker could both extract promises from the manifesto of the governing party, and collate the individual policy announcements not present in the manifesto that this party made during the

election campaign. This would result in the production of a comprehensive account of the government's pre-election promises.

If a Promise Tracker lacks the resources to do this, simply tracking the promises made in the governing party's manifesto is still extremely valuable. Manifestos are parties' main statement of pre-election policy, and in the UK have contained over 200 verifiable promises (more on 'verifiability' later). Tracking the progress of these promises alone provides positive value in a democracy.

Some overseas Promise Trackers have only tracked a small number of the government's headline policies. This has been primarily in order to make their internal updating processes more sustainable. We understand why they have chosen to do this, but strongly believe that as many promises as possible should be tracked. This is primarily to ensure that the government is held to account for as much of its mandate as possible. It is also because even the seemingly less important promises that a government makes are important to someone, and a Promise Tracker can provide an extremely positive service by providing accurate information on these promises to people who care about their progress.

In the future, automated factchecking technologies have the potential to identify and track when a relevant promise is made in the public domain, and collate these promises into a database for use by a Promise Tracker. Full Fact is identifying a taxonomy of claims, of which 'a promise' is a type, and are researching whether they can automatically detect these in the near future. However this doesn't fit into any of the products they are currently building. Of these products, 'Trends' seems likeliest to be of use to a Promise Tracker, but it is designed to track the spread of factual claims as opposed to newly made promises. At the moment this idea is more of a speculative one.

If a Promise Tracker felt that they had the resources, they could publish data on the promises of the major parties during the election campaign. They could do so in any format they chose, but the most value would come from machine readable formats like json or xml. This data could be offered to voter advice services (a UK-based example being Votes for Policies) to help avoid the unnecessary duplication of work that currently occurs within the field of civic tech. Currently, multiple services independently extract major parties' manifesto promises, making everyone's lives harder.

Whose promises?

Difficulties with tracking the government

There are three main problems that a Promise Tracker may encounter while tracking election promises in the UK:

- 1) **Which promises can be considered official party policy?** Candidates at elections often make promises. It can be hard to gauge whether they are doing so in a personal capacity or in their capacity as an official representative of their party announcing party policy. This is particularly the case with frontbench MPs.
- 2) **What do you do when two statements of official party policy contradict?** Sometimes different sources of party policy can explicitly contradict each other. For example, in a radio interview during the 2017 General Election campaign, Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, while representing Labour, stated that her party would introduce up to 250,000 new police officers. This contradicted her own manifesto which stated that 10,000 new police officers would be hired.
- 3) **What do you do if a promise is made by someone who doesn't get elected?** It is possible for someone who makes promises on behalf of the incoming government to fail to get elected to Parliament themselves. For example, in 2015, Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls lost his seat of Morley and Outwood. If Labour had come to power, it would have begged the question as to whether they could have been made to fulfil promises made by someone not part of their current government.

These problems can be easily solved by asking political parties for an official clarification on their policy where necessary. In our experience, this is not difficult to do. The UK has fairly transparent political dialogue, with parties having an official stance on most issues that they are usually happy to share when asked. This solution may not be as appropriate for other countries, where the political culture is not one that lends itself to a transparent or receptive government.

To track or not to track (the opposition)

We believe it is important that Promise Trackers only collect and track promises made by governments. We believe they should not track promises made by opposition parties - an idea that has gained some traction, often in the name of non-partisan balance. This is for two key reasons:

- 1) Opposition parties have no power to direct the agenda of government. Their role is to scrutinise the government and oppose its measures where necessary. This means that they would never be able to 'complete' any of their promises, which were proposed under the assumption that they would be in government and therefore able to direct its agenda.
- 2) By consigning a party to opposition after an election, the electorate is rejecting the overall package presented to them by this party. Opposition parties must be free to respond to this rejection and attempt to better reflect the wishes of the people. This includes being able to change their policy proposals.

Which promises?

Promises that are extracted for tracking must be 'verifiable'. By this, we mean that they must be promises that contain something concrete by which success, failure, or progress can be indisputably measured.

For example, a promise to 'deliver three million apprenticeships by 2020' can be tracked using official statistics. If the government delivers three million apprenticeships by 2020 it has completed its promise. If it has delivered two million by 2020, it has not. If it has delivered one million apprenticeships by 2019, it is progressing towards its aim. If it has delivered no apprenticeships by 2019, it is not. The progress of this promise can be empirically measured, and so it is verifiable.

In contrast, a promise like 'we will reduce loneliness' is not verifiable. There is no single empirical measure that can measure this promises' progress or success. Judging whether it has been completed or not involves the use of a personal opinion or judgement about which proxies most effectively reflect the status of this promise. If a Promise Tracker were to track this promise, they would not be able to make a truly objective judgement on its status. Not only would it mean that their measure of government progress was not objective, but it would open them up to allegations of partisanship.

Sometimes a promise can seem verifiable, but on closer inspection is not. An example of this is the 2017 Conservative Party promise to maintain 'a strong economy'. Undoubtedly, there are measures by which the strength of an economy can be measured. These include a country's credit rating and the rate of inflation. However, this promise is not verifiable, because there is no single, clearly superior measure by which it can be measured. How important each measure of economic progress is can only be determined by an interpretation of what 'a strong economy' actually means, and what measures best determine this. This errs into subjectivity.

Description

Promise Tracking is not just for the Westminster bubble. It should have an audience wider than the heavily politically engaged. Millions of people vote in elections, and it is clear that whether or not the government has followed through on what they initially promised can influence their decisions at the ballot box. For Promise Trackers to be successful, they have to be accessible to these people.

Therefore, once the promises suitable for extraction have been compiled, they should be given descriptions. Politicians and political parties tend to speak or write in complex, jargon-heavy language. This should be simplified as much as possible.

For example, a government promise like ‘create a Blue Belt of marine protection around overseas territories’ may not be widely understood. In this case, a description would be necessary to explain what a ‘Blue Belt’ and an ‘Overseas Territory’ is. We would write a description as follows:

‘A ‘Blue Belt’ is an area of marine conservation with strict restrictions on the activities that can occur there. For example, fishing may be banned, or heavily regulated. Here, the government is promising to introduce these areas around all relevant ‘Overseas Territories’, which are territories across the world under the UK’s jurisdiction like Gibraltar or Bermuda.’

Descriptions make the content of promises more accessible to the public. This allows Promise Tracking to have an impact outside of the Westminster bubble. Ideally, every promise should have a description.

Researching statuses

In the UK

At the time of writing, the status of a promise can only be determined through manual research. This generally involves simply looking at reliable online sources of information.

Some seemingly reliable sources of information may in fact contain misinformation. At GovTracker, we developed a method to combat this. We called it the UK Pyramid of Sources.



At the top of the Pyramid are primary sources which are produced by the government. They include independent government bodies like the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that collate data for public use, and organisations like Hansard that keep a record of everything said in the Houses of Parliament. These can be relied upon to provide accurate information, and so should

be used as frequently as possible to inform the statuses given to promises. Where possible, legislation itself should be referenced.

At GovTracker we used primary sources to reference 75% of our statuses in 2017.

Below official government sources are non-partisan sources. They usually provide reliable information about government activities. However, this is not the case in all circumstances. As such, at least two of these sources should be consulted to determine the status of a promise in order to ensure that accurate information is being gathered. We referenced secondary sources 5% of the time at GovTracker.

Below non-partisan sources sit partisan media outlets. These can often contain misinformation, and should only be used if no information about a promise is available from either government sources or non-partisan sources. At least three such sources should be consulted to determine the status of a promise in order to ensure the information collected is accurate. We referenced partisan sources 2% of the time at GovTracker.

Partisan sources are most useful when they provide a 'scoop' of some sort. For example, a newspaper interview with a government minister may be valuable because it reveals the progress of a promise not mentioned by official government sources.

Most of the time, when a media outlet reports on a promise, they cite their information as coming from either primary sources or non-partisan sources. This means that even if a Promise Tracker initially discovers the status of a promise from a partisan source, they can research further and cite better sources, rather than simply viewing and citing partisan sources.

We could find no evidence of progress for 18% of the promises we collected. Therefore, we did not reference anything and gave these promises the status of 'pending' at the time. Under the system of statuses discussed later, we would now give these promises a status of 'No Evidence'.

Often, if there is little information about a promise, it can be worth emailing the relevant government department or submitting a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to learn more. FOIs in the UK can be submitted through websites like WhatDoTheyKnow.com. You can even run your own FOI website using Alaveteli.org.

We hope that using the ideas set out in the pyramid will dramatically reduce the chances of misinformation causing a Promise Tracker to give a status incorrectly.

For obvious reasons, the most recent information about a promise should be used. A non-exhaustive list of where to find information about promises in the UK can be found in an addendum.

In other political contexts

While our pyramid worked effectively for the UK, the ideas within it will not be appropriate for every political context. For example, government statistics in some countries cannot always be trusted, and may have to be cross-referenced with non-partisan or partisan sources, or be ignored entirely.

Greece offers a high-profile example of how government statistics can sometimes be untrustworthy. There, the government-run budgetary statistics agency falsified government spending data to ensure that Greece could join the Euro in 2000.

Decisions internationally on which sources should be used and how heavily they should be scrutinised must be taken according to knowledge of the individual political context.

Definition changes

Sometimes the government can change the definition of one of the components of a promise after an election.

For example, a government could promise prior to an election to 'halve child poverty', and then after the election change the definition of child poverty to make this target easier to hit. In this case, a Promise Tracker should ignore the government's new definition and judge their progress against the definition used when their promise was made. This was the definition that the government was understood to be using when they were given a mandate to enact this promise at an election. Therefore, in order to properly scrutinise the government and hold it to its democratic mandate, this should be the definition that a Promise Tracker uses.

In such a circumstance it may be helpful to public debate to track the new definition as well, if the resources allow. However, this would not form a core part of a Promise Tracker's operation.

Which statuses?

Currently, publically available Promise Trackers in the UK and across the world assign their promises a status. However, there is little agreement as to what these statuses should actually be. Numerous systems exist across the Trackers in the public domain. These can be seen in the table overleaf:

Status System	Promise Trackers which use this
'Achieved', 'Not Rated', and 'Ongoing'	BuhariMeter
'Not Yet Started', 'In Progress', 'Achieved' and 'Broken'	AndrewMeter, MorsiMeter, TrudeauMeter, PolicyPromises, MacriMetro
'Achieved', and 'In Progress'	Morsi Meter
'Achieved', 'In Progress', and 'Not Achieved'	Jomaa Meter
Traffic Light System (Red, Yellow, Green)	BBC Manifesto Tracker
'Promise Kept', 'Compromise', 'Promise Broken', 'Stalled', 'In the Works', and 'Not Yet Rated'	PolitiFact's Trump-O-Meter
'Achieved', 'Compromised', 'In Progress', 'Not Achieved', 'Stalled', and 'Inactive'	Rouhani Meter
'Kept', 'In Progress', 'Wait and See', 'In Trouble', 'Not Kept', 'Hard to Track', and 'Broken in Spirit'	Guardian Pledge Tracker
'Completed', 'Completed (Maintaining)', 'Pending' and 'Broken'	GovTracker
'Fulfilled', 'Adequate Progress', 'Inadequate Progress', 'Yet to Start', 'Stalled', and 'Broken'	Election Promises Tracker (India)
'Achieved', 'In Progress', and 'Not Achieved'	Africa Check Article

Promise Trackers broadly encounter common problems when deciding on a system of statuses.

The problem of 'pending'

At GovTracker, we categorised any promise that had not been definitively 'completed' or 'broken' as 'pending'. We now believe that was a mistake. We feel that 'pending' is too broad as a category to accurately and fairly reflect the status of a promise. To give every promise that has not been completed or broken the same status can be misleading. For example, in September 2017 we classed the government's promise to 'Enact a Great Repeal Bill' as pending while the EU (Withdrawal) Bill (commonly known as the 'Repeal Bill') was passing through Parliament, at the same time as classing their promise to 'launch a major review of funding in tertiary education' as 'pending' when we could find no evidence of progress towards its completion.

The solution of some Promise Trackers to this problem is to split the category of 'pending' into different categories. For example, the BBC Manifesto Tracker, using a traffic light system, gave promises a yellow light if 'some progress' had been made, but a red light if 'little or no progress was made'. Deciding whether 'some progress' or 'little progress' has been made on a pledge is a subjective judgement that can easily and understandably vary from person to person. We believe that Promise Trackers should avoid these kinds of value judgements in order to retain legitimacy as an objective source.

Often Trackers also include statuses like 'shelved' or 'stalled' in an attempt to solve the problem of 'Pending'. These can be useful, because they provide more detail to users. However, deciding whether something has been 'shelved' - implying the government is at fault for not enacting it - or 'stalled' - implying other factors are at fault - can be a subjective decision. It would be reasonable for people to disagree whether a promise is 'stalled' or 'shelved', and this damages the extent to which a Promise Tracker simply provides an objective overview of government progress.

Sites such as TrudeauMetre have addressed the problem of 'pending' well. TrudeauMetre split 'pending' into two categories - 'Not Yet Started' and 'In Progress'. The phrasing of 'Not Yet Started' does make a small assumption. Just because there is no evidence publically available that a government has made progress towards achieving a promise does not mean that they have not done so. Therefore, we think this category should be renamed as 'No Evidence of Progress', or simply 'No Evidence'. However, we believe the idea of splitting pending into two categories - one for where progress can be found in the public domain, and one for where it cannot - is an extremely effective solution to the problem of the 'pending' category being too broad. It solves the issue of promises that are at vastly different stages of progress being given the same status, while maintaining a purely factual position.

When does a promise become 'broken'?

A common difficulty encountered by Promise Trackers is how to determine when a promise is 'broken'.

We believe that the only way in which a promise can be definitively called 'broken' is when the government confirms that it has no plans to implement it, or acts in a way that conflicts with the content of a promise. It is incorrect to use a lack of evidence of progress as evidence that no progress will ever be made.

A good example of this comes from a piece written by the Labour Party in September 2017 which tracked the promises made in the Conservatives' 2017 manifesto. They argued that the Conservative Party had 'broken' their promise to introduce a general energy price cap for 17 million households. Their justification was that the Conservatives had introduced a less consequential policy and that there was no evidence that a general cap was going to be introduced. The week after, Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May announced in her Conservative Conference speech that she would introduce a bill implementing this general price cap. This promise is therefore likely to be completed in the future. This is a great example of why a promise should not be called broken until there is explicit confirmation that the policy is no longer being pursued by the government. Incidentally, it also shows the dangers of approaching promise tracking from a partisan position.

A government acts in conflict with the content of a promise if they act in a way that means they can no longer complete it. An example of this could be seen in the UK in 2017. As part of its confidence and supply agreement with the DUP, the Conservative government accepted that there would be 'no change to the universal nature of winter fuel payments' as part of a number of concessions made to allow them to form a government. This was an explicit statement that they would not be following through on their manifesto pledge to means-test winter fuel payments. As such, their manifesto promise to means-test could be given a broken status.

When does a promise become 'complete'?

A promise becomes complete when the government achieves exactly what they said they were going to do. There is sometimes the temptation to mark a promise complete if it looks almost certain that it will be completed. However, unforeseen events can and do happen which result in a promise seemingly on track for completion not being fulfilled. It is not sufficient to assume that something will be completed just because it looks like it will.

For example, a promise to 'legislate for votes for life for British citizens overseas' is only complete when the legislation that grants votes for life passes. It is not enough to announce plans to pass this legislation, or merely introduce it into Parliament.

Similarly, a promise to 'spend £1.1 billion on improving local transport by the end of 2020' is only complete when the £1.1 billion has been spent. It is not complete when the government announces how they plan to do this, or if they have spent £1 billion on improvements by 2018 and look likely to complete their pledge.

Some Promise Trackers include a ‘compromise’ status when a similar policy to one promised pre-election is implemented. This carries similar benefits and pitfalls to the statuses of ‘shelved’ and ‘stalled’. ‘Compromise’ provides a greater depth of information to users, but it is a very subjective decision to determine if a compromise has been made, or merely a new but related policy has been enacted. Therefore, we would suggest avoiding this status.

Ongoing promises

These promises can only be ‘completed’ or ‘broken’. They are promises to continue to do something, and either the ‘something’ is continuing to be done - and therefore the promise is complete - or it is not, and the promise is broken.

An example of this can be seen in the Conservative promise to ‘keep the NHS free at point of use’. This is complete as long as the government maintains the position it has promised to keep. If a charge was introduced for the NHS at point of use, this promise would be broken. Of course there is a wider narrative around such a policy, but we believe that is the role of factchecking organisations and the media, rather than a Promise Tracker, to unweave.

Giving a status

Our suggested statuses

Given what has been argued above, we believe that the best set of statuses for a Promise Tracker is:

Status	Explanation
Broken	The government has confirmed it does not intend to complete a promise or acts in conflict with the content of a promise.
No Evidence	No evidence of progress towards completion can be found.
In Progress	Evidence of progress towards completion can be found. The promise is not yet completed.
Completed	The promise has been, or is being, fulfilled.

There are other systems of statuses that can be effective for a Promise Tracker. For example, Promise Trackers less committed to remaining completely non-partisan could include statuses

such as 'stalled', 'shelved', or 'compromise' in order to give more information to their users. As we argue throughout this section, these types of statuses involve a level of editorial decision that we are not comfortable with. However, another Promise Tracker with a slightly different approach or political context may deem this acceptable.

Ideas for updating statuses sustainably

Sustainably updating content is one of the most significant challenges facing a Promise Tracker. A large number of Trackers in the public domain have started strong, but eventually ceased functioning. Our experiences with GovTracker suggests that one of the reasons for this is that the work of updating promises' statuses became unsustainable.

Therefore, a Promise Tracker must settle upon a sustainable strategy for updating their content. Different Promise Trackers will have different capabilities. We have currently identified three different strategies that are possible right now for any Promise Tracker looking to sustainably manage their content:

- 1) Updating promises in real-time:** This option involves regularly monitoring for new information about each promise and reacting as soon as possible to status-changing information. This is ideal, because it ensures a Promise Tracker presents accurate, real-time information about the current progress of government. However, it requires committing a lot of resources.
- 2) Updating the most salient promises in real-time and the rest regularly:** This option is the one we pursued at GovTracker. At GovTracker, two researchers would spend 2 to 3 days every quarter updating all of our promises and announcing to users when we had done so. As well as this, we would note major policy announcements and u-turns in real-time to see if they were pertinent to pre-election manifesto promises. This meant that we updated the government's supposed 'headline promises' in real-time, and updated promises widely considered less important on a regular time scale. This ensured that a rough account of the government's progress was available at all times. We were conscious that this created a double standard within our data, with some promises being more frequently updated than others, but we believed that the closer we could get to real-time information, the better. Option One was not sustainable for us.
- 3) Updating on a regular, but infrequent, basis:** This is the option that was implemented by the BBC's manifesto tracker, which updated all of their promises every 3 months. While this is more sustainable, it means that the electorate cannot use the Promise Tracker to hold the government to account in real-time. It is more of a reflective tool. This still possesses value.

When updating promises in real-time, it can be extremely difficult to track changes in the status of individual promises, particularly less attention-grabbing ones, using just primary sources. It is very hard to tell when progress has been made, or a pledge has been broken.

One way of solving this problem is signing up for updates on the passage of individual pieces of legislation on parliament.uk. These updates signal when a piece of legislation has been passed, which is often the determining factor in whether a legislation-based promise has been completed. The lack of an update may be a signal that a particular promise remains 'In Progress'.

Another way of solving this problem is to frequently view updates about specific promises from partisan sources, and in particular campaign groups. These campaign groups have a vested interest in the passage of certain promises, and so often provide updates on them which could alert a Promise Tracker if a status displayed on their site needs to change.

Setting up a direct line to these partisan sources would make it even easier for a Promise Tracker to become alerted when a change in status is necessary. For example, a partisan source could tip-off a Promise Tracker when they think the status of a promise has changed. The Promise Tracker could then use the usual impartial process to determine whether this is actually the case. It seems most feasible that this sort of relationship could be established with an issue-based campaign group.

This relationship could also be established with non-partisan sources. A UK-based example would be the Institute for Government, who have expertise and interest in certain promises.

Presenting and publishing

Making sure we aren't misinforming

As discussed in Part One, Promise Trackers need to be able to communicate that breaking individual promises is not always a bad thing, while still maintaining the overall stance that the government should complete the majority of their pledges.

If Promise Trackers do not take this stance, they risk hindering democracy rather than enhancing it. Suggesting that the government should uphold every individual pledge they are elected on risks encouraging dogmatic pursuit of policies that are widely considered unpopular, ineffective, or inappropriate.

Currently, Promise Trackers in the public domain do not take this stance. They use a variation of a basic 'red, yellow, green' colour scheme when assigning statuses to individual promises. This gives the impression that completing a promise is inherently good, and breaking one is

inherently bad. This can be misleading. As discussed previously, the reality is individual promises can be broken for valid reasons, and sometimes even completed for the wrong ones.

An example of how not to do it can be seen in our own GovTracker. In 2015, the Conservatives' manifesto promised to 'run a surplus by 2019/20'. This was officially abandoned in the wake of the Leave vote in the EU referendum, because the government claimed that changed economic circumstances meant that the target was no longer feasible.

It was reasonable to consider that the breaking of this promise may have been a good thing, because from a certain point of view it showed that the government was able to be flexible and react to changing political circumstances. Therefore, to place it in red oversimplified the issue and portrayed breaking this promise as something that was inherently wrong.

Raise the 40% Income Tax threshold to £50,000	Economic	Pending	↗
Run a surplus by 2019/20	Economic	Broken	↗
Set a higher and permanent level for Annual Investment Allowance	Economic	Completed	↗

To ensure that Promise Trackers effectively communicate that breaking individual promises is not necessarily bad, we suggest a simple solution. Instead of red, yellow and green being used to denote the status of individual promises, less obviously judgemental colours could be used. This would dramatically reduce the extent to which Promise Trackers make inherent judgements on individual promises, and thus stop them from being misleading. A key should be prominently displayed, informing users of what each colour signifies. Statuses should still be assigned, because they are valuable information to visitors to the site seeking information about the progress of specific promises.

An example of how this could look is below:

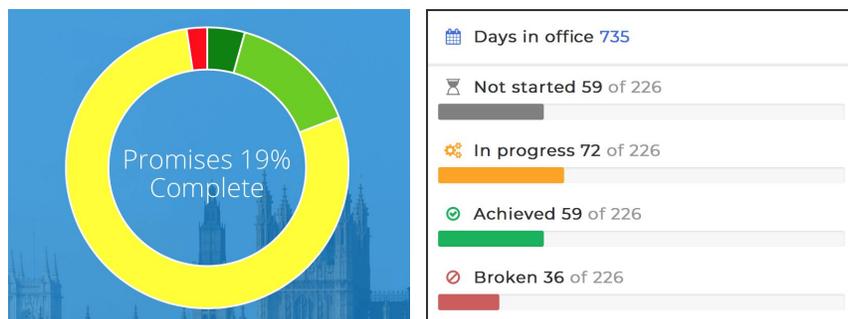
Raise the 40% Income Tax threshold to £50,000	Economic	Pending	↗
Run a surplus by 2019/20	Economic	Broken	↗
Set a higher and permanent level for Annual Investment Allowance	Economic	Completed	↗

In this example, the colours remain close enough to the traffic light colours for most readers to infer what each means.

While we concluded that the introduction of 'non-judgemental' colours would work best, there are other potential solutions to this issue. We would welcome any other suggestions from around the world.

It is still important for a Promise Tracker to communicate to its viewership that overall the government should keep most of its promises. A way of achieving this is to maintain the format currently adopted by a majority of Promise Trackers of a summary chart in traffic light colours at

the top of the webpage, displaying the cumulative status of all tracked government promises, split by their constituent statuses.



It is possible to make a judgement on the overall body of the government's work (because it is good for democracy that in general they should uphold most of their promises), whilst withholding judgement on whether the relative statuses of individual promises are 'good' or 'bad' (because the idea that the government should always uphold each individual promise is damaging to democracy).

Again, each individual design process will address this issue from a different perspective. This is currently our best suggestion.

Weighting promises to accurately track government progress

Perhaps the central flaw of Promise Trackers in the public domain is that when measuring the overall progress of the government, they do not consider the relative importance of different promises.

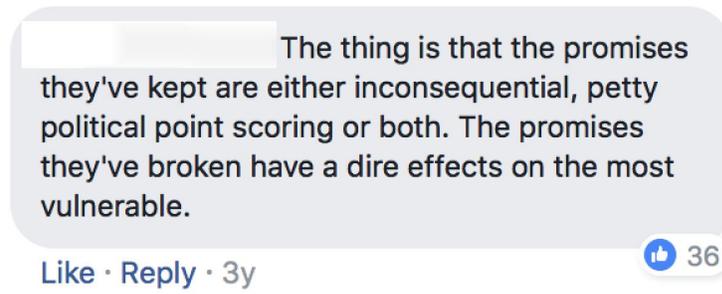
To take an example from GovTracker, a promise to 'Conduct a review of the design of government buildings' was given the same weighting as a promise that 'No school budget will be cut during the next parliament'. Clearly, the latter is more important to more people than the former, yet Promise Trackers class them both as equally important to the government's mandate.

Under the system used by current Trackers, the chart of overall progress at the top of the site could show that the government has completed 50% of its manifesto promises and broken 33%, implying that they have not upheld their mandate very well. However, the 33% broken promises could have been promises that few people cared about, while the 50% that were completed could have been extremely important to the majority of people.

If this were the case, then the government would have actually upheld their mandate relatively effectively, despite the graphical and numerical presentation of the Promise Tracker seeming to

suggest otherwise. Therefore, when Promise Trackers come up with a measure of the government's overall progress, it is fundamentally flawed.

This is an issue that has been spotted by users of some Promise Tracking sites. As one Facebook user commenting on the ABC/RMIT Facebook page put it:



In order to rectify this issue, therefore, a Promise Tracker should weight the promises it collects by importance, and take this into account when graphically displaying its chart of overall progress.

One inexpensive and simple way to do this would be to produce a subjective ranking of their potential impact. However, as consistently mentioned earlier, to maintain legitimacy a Promise Tracker should avoid subjectivity. Therefore, this solution is far from ideal.

Another solution is to poll a representative sample of the population to find out what they consider to be important, and weight each promise according to this data. This would be expensive, but has the potential to be highly effective.

We are exploring the latter option, and are planning to run a poll on the UK government's promises in 2018 as a proof of concept. The data and methodology from this poll will be made publically available, allowing it to be used by anyone interested in creating a Promise Tracker in the UK in the future, as well as academics and others who are interested in such research. We are excited to share the results soon.

Categorising promises

We believe that the promises collected should be sorted into categories for ease of viewing. This is very much an individual design issue, and can be moulded to suit different sites with different audiences. However, we have here presented our suggestions.

Categorising promises is something that every Promise Tracker in the public domain does fairly effectively. These categories need to be sensible according to the judgement of those compiling the promises and the public. They should be appropriate to the individual sets of promises collected by each Tracker. For example, Morsi Meter included a category on promises relating to 'Bread' after thirteen bread-related promises were made. No bread category has been similarly necessary for other Promise Trackers.

Each category should not be too large; this reduces how user-friendly the website is. At GovTracker we aimed to make categories no larger than 30 promises. Although we were sometimes unsuccessful, this was our general aim. Very basic feedback from a small sample of people should be enough to give a rough idea of the maximum size a category should be.

Transparent Promise Tracking

The material used to determine a status should be referenced on the website, so that viewers can scrutinise the evidence. This gives them the ability to spot mistakes or raise valid objections. Remaining transparent as to how you came to decide each status also helps guard against allegations of partisanship.

Statuses, descriptions, explanations, the source of the promise (i.e. where you found it), and references as to how you got your status should all be displayed clearly. Furthermore, the date at which the last update to the promise was made should be displayed. This again increases the transparency of the website, and offers the opportunity for users to contact the site if they believe that new information about a promise has emerged since the last update.

Furthermore, the criteria by which promises are measured should also be included. For most promises this will be self explanatory, but it is not always. This idea is one that the ABC RMIT Promise Tracker in Australia suggested to us. They said:

'A controversial issue in Australia for years has been the arrival of asylum seekers by boat, usually from Indonesia. Before the 2013 election, one of Tony Abbott's most repeated promises was "we will stop the boats".

When it came to deciding when that promise had been delivered, we kept debating among ourselves what yardstick we should use. Eventually we found a TV interview Abbott gave shortly before the election. He referred to the track record of the Howard government and said: "I will regard myself as having succeeded very well if we can get back to a situation of having three boats a year. Obviously our ideal is to have zero boats."

We would have made our own lives much easier if we had decided to use this as a yardstick from the beginning.'

Not only does a Promise Tracker's internal processes become easier when they clearly state what would have to happen for a promise to be completed, but by making this yardstick publicly available, a Promise Tracker is more transparent to its users.

We wouldn't recommend any specific way to present the information discussed here. That is for each Promise Tracker to decide.

At GovTracker, we made a flashcard that opened in a new tab for each promise, but also considered using drop down menus. An example can be seen below. We did not include all the information suggested above, which we now believe was a mistake.

Deliver the reforms proposed in the Housing White Paper: Pending

A White Paper is a paper that concisely sets out the government's position on a specific issue. Part of this white paper includes, as mentioned in the manifesto, a promise to give councils powers to intervene where developers do not act on their planning permissions.

The entirety of the reforms have not yet been implemented. Theresa May did commit, in her 2017 Conference Speech, that councils would receive powers to ensure that developers build on lands they have won planning permission for.

Category: Social and Welfare
Source: *Manifesto - Page 70*
Reference 1: [Housing White Paper](#)
Reference 2: [Housing consultation](#)
Reference 3: [Conference Speech](#)

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Communication of methodology

The site should discuss why the work it does is important. We also suggest the presence of an FAQ and About page to explain some of the concepts discussed in this paper to users. This increases the extent to which a Promise Tracker is an educational tool through explaining concepts such as the weighting of promises. It also aids the transparency of the site by explaining how you came to the measure of government progress that you did.

Conclusion

When done thoughtfully, Promise Tracking provides a valuable service in a democracy. It is a positive resource for educating citizens, encouraging them to scrutinise their government's progress and allowing them to access accurate, non-partisan information about the state of government promises.

This report puts forward a blueprint for the creation of an effective and accurate Promise Tracker in the UK. This blueprint is not the finished article, and we actively encourage others to engage in a dialogue about its contents.

Internationally, we hope the lessons contained in this report are of use in contexts diverse from the UK's own. While there are undoubtedly complexities that exist when tracking promises in Iran, Nigeria or Argentina that do not exist in the UK, a number of the ideas in this report remain applicable. There remains a lot to learn from others around the world, and we hope that we can share these stories with each other in the near future.

What is perhaps most exciting from an academic perspective is that by tracking the government's progress on its stated aims and weighting these aims for their importance, we believe we have found a relatively simple way to measure overall government progress.

Most of all, we are convinced that it is important to create a high-quality Promise Tracker in the UK right now, and hope that this report inspires its creation. It is a concrete step towards improving our democracy.

Addendum

These are some examples of sources that may be of use to a non-partisan Promise Tracker in the UK as they attempt to track the status of promises in real-time.

Government Sources:

Gov.UK

Hansard

House of Commons Library

FOI Requests to the Government

Office for Budget Responsibility - Government budget promises

Office for National Statistics - Statistically-based promises

Low Pay Commission - Wage-related promises

OfGem - Energy-related promises

OfCom - Media-related promises

OfSted - Schools-related promises

Non-Partisan Groups:

BBC

Full Fact

Institute for Government

IFS - Public finance promises

The Migration Observatory - Migration promises

Partisan Sources:

Newspapers:

The Sun

The Guardian

The Daily Telegraph

Campaign Groups:

National Farmers Union

The National BAME Transplant Alliance

Greenpeace - Environmental promises

Confederation of British Industry

