

Time to hold our political leaders accountable for their promises

If a life-long friend promised you he would support you in a legal dispute, and then proceeded to side with your opponent at the last minute, would you accept as an excuse that he did not feel he had sufficient allies on his side to ensure victory? On the contrary, you would feel indignant and betrayed, and would probably wonder how you could have been so naive as to consider him your friend for all those years. He would probably have to work hard to win back your friendship.

We intuitively understand the importance of promise keeping in relations between friends, and yet we seem to tolerate empty promises from our political leaders, promises they cannot possibly keep, promises they are in no position to guarantee, promises that have more basis in imagination and marketing than reality, promises that seem feasible but are quickly abandoned in the face of unexpected difficulties. In extraordinary circumstances such as deep economic crises, people's political loyalties may shift dramatically. Indeed, that seems to be happening, to a certain extent, already. However, in general the same old political parties get elected and re-elected in spite of a well-established record of false, empty, irresponsible, and broken promises. This naturally raises the question, why do voters appear to tolerate promise-breaking in their political leaders, while they would not tolerate the same behaviour in their relatives and friends?

It may be that we have become accustomed to empty and broken promises in the political arena, and therefore discount much of what we hear when a politician says "I promise," or "I commit to..." Having discounted the weight of the promise, we may be less shocked and disappointed when it is broken or forgotten about. The more we discount the value of political promises, the less it hurts a politician to make and break promises lightly, and the less it hurts a politician to make and break promises lightly, the more he will do so, confirming the voter's conviction that political promises are meaningless. In this way, political cynicism feeds on itself.

Indeed, we have reached a point when people in this country almost *expect* their politicians to lie to them. The level of disillusionment and distrust among Spanish citizens toward the political establishment (not unlike other European countries) is palpable. It is doubtful that Spain's political system can survive this level of public cynicism for long. Trust, as many sociologists have observed, is the very glue of social order. Trust in other people's word is what enables us to enter contracts in good faith, to build communities, to develop friendships, to collaborate in projects, to pay our taxes, to obey the law even when it hurts, to accept the judgments of courts of law, and so forth. If we cannot trust our politicians to tell the truth about public affairs, to present their intentions to the electorate in an honest and forthright manner, and to hold fast to those intentions once elected, then the whole electoral system is converted into an empty charade, in which criteria of substance are replaced with empty rhetoric and emotional manipulation. If the politician's word cannot be trusted, then the rational basis for voting for a candidate or party – some coherent sense of its present commitments and future actions – collapses.

The consequences of a political culture of promise-breaking should not be underestimated. Pervasive distrust in the political class is likely to breed widespread apathy and disaffection on the part of ordinary citizens from political institutions,

jeopardizing the future of the democratic political order, and the legitimacy of the modern nation-state. This sort of delegitimation of the regnant political order may create dangerous vacuums of power and legitimacy, which may be filled by systemic tax evasion, vigilante justice, and the growth of criminality. Lest this seem far-fetched, consider how quickly Germany descended from a constitutional political order to an oppressive fascist regime. In that case, an entire generation of citizens who felt abandoned and betrayed by their political leaders fell under the spell of a populist leader who made and broke his promises lightly, who used the procedures of a democratic order to turn the values of democracy and rule of law on their head.

The slide toward a culture of distrust is not unstoppable, but it will require a fundamental shift, both in the values of our political culture, and in the sensibilities of voters. This transformation has many aspects, including the need for courageous moral leadership and a variety of reforms of the electoral and parliamentary system to ensure institutional transparency and to free individual politicians from the suffocating choke-hold of “party unity,” so that they can vote according to their conscience rather than mindlessly aping the “party line” on every issue that comes before them.

These sorts of reforms in the leadership, ethos, and structure of our political institutions will require careful planning and oversight, and will not happen overnight. In the meantime, individual politicians and voters can each play their part in restoring a culture of trust. Politicians, for their part, can communicate the difference between long-term hopes or aspirations, causes they will fight for against all odds, and projects they have a good chance of delivering on in a specific time-frame. If a politician is careful not to promise what he knows he cannot (or does not intend to) deliver on, then he will demonstrate to voters that his word actually means something more than a cheap campaign slogan. Voters, for their part, need to break the habit of discounting the weight of political promises, and turning a blind eye to empty and broken promises. Each one of us must demonstrate, when he casts his vote, that he owes no loyalty to politicians who play fast and loose with their words.