Understanding election promise tracking as a form of fact-checking

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Abstract

Fact checking has gained prominence as a form of journalism for countering mis- and disinformation, however, little scholarly attention has been paid to the Campaign Promise Evaluation Tools (CPETs) operated by some fact checking outfits. Similarly, there has been little consideration given to the differences and similarities between CPETs operated by political science researchers and journalists. Taking Australia's RMIT ABC Fact Check's Promise Tracker as a case study, this article uses interviews to investigate approaches by fact checkers and political scientists involved in producing this tool. The resultant analysis finds two distinct but complementary approaches to election promise tracking: one that captures every possible political promise for tracking, fuelled by political science expertise and methodological approaches; and the other led by fact checkers and shaped by the logics of journalism. The case of a prominent Australian example where political science, digital journalism and fact-checking intersect, provides important and original insights into CPETs.

Introduction

During its 2022 Australian election campaign, the Labor Party announced it would establish 50 urgent care clinics to take the pressure off struggling emergency departments. Following Labor's victory at the polls, this high-profile promise was included as one of 66 ALP election pledges on the RMIT ABC Fact Check (RAFC) Promise Tracker (see: RMIT, 2025, np). When the clinics had not been delivered by the Government's stated deadline of mid-2023, the RAFC Promise Tracker declared the promise broken. Reporting on this for *The Guardian*'s Australian Politics podcast, then chief political correspondent Paul Karp described the Labor Government as having been "chipped" by the Promise Tracker for failing to deliver on a key election promise (Karp 2023). In an interview with Karp, Australian Health Minister Mark Butler denied his government had agreed to this timeline and claimed he was not aware of the Promise Tracker (Karp 2023). But as the team who produced the tracker later revealed, behind the scenes, the Government had been in contact with them pushing for a status change of this promise (Martino 2024).

This example demonstrates the role that election promise trackers, or Campaign Pledge Evaluation Tools (CPETs), can play in democratic life, influencing voters and governments alike. Since the 2009 launch of the Obameter, which was the world's first, CPETs have proliferated in liberal democracies and are run by non-government organisations, political scientists, as well as fact checking and journalism outlets (Tremblay-Antoine et al., 2020). The term 'Campaign Pledge Evaluation Tools' (CPETs) was coined by political scientists to describe

these digital platforms 'that allow for the systematic tracking, assessment and communication of political pledges and assessments of their fulfilment by governing parties' (Tremblay-Antoine et al., 2020: 304). CPETs are accessed via the internet and provide different types of visual information, from simple graphs showing the degree of election promise fulfilment to sophisticated data visualisations that are supplemented by feature-length journalistic narratives. Put simply: 'For a platform to be considered a CPET it must contain lists of election promises and judgements of their fulfilment.' (Tremblay-Antoine et al. 2020: 306)

Scholarly attention to CPETs has not kept pace with their growth and popularity. Political science scholars Tremblay-Antoine and colleagues (2020) undertook the first systematic review of the literature and found only three papers on the subject (Bigot, 2017, 2018; Jain and Begani, 2017 in Tremblay-Antoine, 2020). More recently, journalism scholars Waller and Morieson (2025) have argued that election promise tracking is a subset of fact-checking that remains committed to the normative values and traditions of public interest journalism through information provision with a clear democratic aim and outcome. This article addresses the need for further research through an examination of the RAFC Promise Tracker, which is a collaboration between the fact-checkers, web developers and political scientists involved in its research and production. The article proceeds with an analysis of relevant literature that sheds light on the differences and similarities between political science and journalism approaches to election promise tracking. The sections that follow investigate the journalistic methodology of promise tracking and its relationship to fact checking. Finally, the analysis points to two complementary approaches that have shaped the RAFC CPET: one that captures every possible political promise for tracking, fuelled by political science expertise and methodological approaches; and the selection and assessment of political promises for publication on the RAFC CPET, led by fact checkers and shaped by the logics of journalism. In mapping out these details, this paper addresses the argument from Tremblay-Antoine et al. (2020) that journalist-led CPETS do not represent scholarly research instruments or outputs. Our investigation shows such tools do not seek to represent political pledges in an exhaustive or quantitative manner, and are best understood through the journalism field's traditions, logics and practices, rather than political science perspectives (Waller and Morieson, 2025).

Situating Campaign Pledge Evaluation Tools in their disciplinary traditions

Election pledge fulfilment is a well-established research focus within political science. This area of study centres upon the democratic function of election manifestos and is informed by the mandate model of democracy (Pétry & Collette, 2009). According to this theory, voters make informed decisions on distinct policy platforms with the political victors enacting their policy agendas (Downs & Downs, 1957). By evaluating the outcome of individual election promises, the research appears to support this hypothesis, thereby challenging widely held conceptions that politicians break more promises than they keep, and suggesting manifestos are a legitimate form

of democratic representation worthy of investigation by political scientists. Some political scientists produce CPETs, including the team at Canada's Polimeter, but most pledge fulfilment research is published in journals and books for academic audiences.

According to the mandate model of democracy, voters evaluate a party both prospectively and retrospectively based on the nature of future commitments and the delivery of previous promises (Naurin et al., 2019). The framing of a democratic legislative mandate serving as the core function of democracy therefore identifies the fulfilment (or lack thereof) of election pledges as a relevant and important area of investigation for political scientists.

The mandate model is not without its critics. The theory has been widely debated and scrutinised (see McMillan, 2020). Critiques include: concerns about whether political parties should be bound by their election promises (Naurin et al., 2019); whether the voting public holds a clear view of policy preferences (Pitkin, 1967); and whether governments should be guided by their view of the national interest, rather than the views of its citizens (Manin et al., 1999). Despite these critiques, researchers still widely recognise the electoral mandate as a legitimate form of democratic representation. As Körösényi and Sebők (2018: 115) have argued, the mandate model is a fundamental 'common sense' approach to democratic theory. For McMillian (2020: 354), the model represents the 'core normative demand of democracy that voters be given a meaningful choice between consequential alternatives'.

The 'programme to policy' linkage

If the mandate model is to be substantiated, there should be evidence of a strong 'programme-to-policy' linkage. Tremblay-Antoine et al. (2020) say this linkage is the key focus of all CPETs. It is understood as a strong correlation between the promises made by parties and their actions upon winning office (Mansergh & Thomson, 2007: 331). In a key study, Thomson et al. (2017) considered over 20,000 pledges made prior to the formation of 57 governments across 12 countries to assess the impact of coalition rule compared to single-party executives. The researchers found governing parties fulfilled a 'clear majority' (60%) of pledges – at least partially – and that single-party governments were more likely to fulfil pledges than those under coalition agreements. These findings appear to support Downs' theory of the mandate model. They also challenge the normative mainstream narrative that politicians rarely keep their promises (Thomson et al., 2017). So, in the context of declining trust in political institutions, it is also possible to see a real-world function of restoring public trust facilitated by pledge-tracking research that extends beyond an academic understanding of how democracy functions.

The journalism and democracy paradigm

In their examination of election pledge tracking tools, Tremblay-Antoine et al. (2020) found journalist-led platforms methodologically lacking:

> Tools developed by journalists … tend to be less transparent regarding their definitions and methodology, which suggests that there may be issues with their validity and reliability, especially regarding the approach to support an assessment about fulfillment. (Tremblay-Antoine et al., 2020: 309)

This poses a challenge for the consideration of journalist-led promise tracking tools within the methodologically rigorous and quantitative field of political science. In the sections that follow we argue journalist led CPETs are not scholarly research instruments or outputs and are best understood through the journalism field's traditions, logics and practices rather than a political science prism. This requires broader consideration of the role of the news media – and journalism – in the relationship between political parties, the perception of political promises, and voters' views and actions. Stefan Müller (2020) conducted a longitudinal study of media coverage of election pledges, using an original dataset of more than 400,0000 news articles about political promises across 33 electoral cycles in Australia, Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Unlike many political scientists, Müller considers more fully the role of the news media in mediating the relationship between political actors and citizens. He argues that rather than assessing political performance based on the fulfilment of manifesto promises, citizens are much more like to rely on reports on their performance from media outlets. Specifically, media perform a 'crucial gatekeeping function because journalists decide what decisions or opinions are newsworthy' (Müller, 2020: 698). This insight provides a useful departure point for considering journalistic CPETs.

The notion of journalism being a vital part of democracy can be traced to the Age of Enlightenment, with the concept of the press as a forum for contesting political demands during the Industrial Revolution cementing journalism's role 'as a source of information in a deliberative democracy' (McNair, 2009: 238). The relationship of news to public knowledge was most explicitly formulated in the mid 20th century through the 1947 US Hutchins Commission report titled *A Free and Responsible Press*, which advanced the idea of the quality press and its journalists as trusted avenues of information and in their informational and watchdog function as essential to the workings of democracy (Josephi, 2016:10). Siebert et al.'s landmark study, *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), further developed normative theories of journalism by establishing press-state relations as the measure for all media systems.

Despite the monitorial power of the press waning from the 1960s and Sibert et al.'s theory being rigorously critiqued, Zelizer (2013: 467) observes the democracy-journalism paradigm remains the steadfast core of journalism scholarship in nations that rely on the 'presumption of democracy'. Schudson (2017) outlines seven democratic functions of journalism in liberal democracies, including its part in providing a forum for dialogue among citizens, to mobilising audiences for political outcomes; and the opportunity for democratic education. Davis et al.

(2017:12) also position the generation and circulation of public knowledge as a foundational element of democracies, markets and societies saying: 'Without it, there is no social contract, no political legitimacy, no market transactions, and no basis for common decision-making.' However, the relationship between citizens and public knowledge has long been problematic and is even more so in our information saturated age.

Media change and the rise of fact-checking

Political fact-checking can be understood as a journalistic response to the problems of information pollution, collapse of the legacy media business model and the relentless demands of the 24/7 news cycle. Fact-checking uses new styles of journalism and employs online tools as well as traditional methods, to check the accuracy of political claims made by public figures and to debunk viral mis- and disinformation, fulfilling a democratic accountability role on behalf of citizens. Scholars including Graves (2016) and Amazeen (2020) have observed that, increasingly, media organisations encourage their audiences to leisurely and uncritically consume content in the service of the industrial marketplace. Furthermore, a breakdown in the tradition of objective reporting, fragmentation of the media landscape and the demise of journalists fulfilling a gatekeeper role of moderating information disseminated to the public are causes of loss of public trust in the institutions of journalism and the state. In this changed media and political environment, fact checking becomes a way to expertly assess public claims. While journalists traditionally focus on accurately reporting what was said, according to Singer (2021) fact-checkers are more interested in 'judging the veracity of the statement': 'In taking on an adjudication role, they thus go beyond objectivity as traditionally understood in order to explicitly and overtly weigh evidence, claims and counter-claims'. This shift is extended further in what is described as the 'debunking turn' in fact checking practice. This form of fact-checking focuses not on the statements of politicians, but on the varieties of 'fake news', including mis and disinformation and conspiracy theories circulated on social media. Fact checkers then work to assess these posts, and where appropriate, recommend they are labelled as 'debunked' by social media platforms (see Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Graves, Bélair-Gagnon and Larsen, 2023; Westlund et al. 2024). Against the wider backdrop of the still developing field of professional fact checking, CPETs represent one very specific form of a wider practice, bringing journalism and political science approaches together.

Research approach

We conducted a study of the RAFC CPET to explore how the team behind it conceive of their role in tracking political promises. The aim here is to conceptualise the methodology that underpins the CPET, its purpose, and its relationship to fact-checking. The research was guided by the following questions:
1. What are the purposes of political promise tracking in political science and journalism?
2. How do their different missions inform the resultant methodologies?

3. Is journalistic promise tracking a sub-field of fact checking?

A purposive sample of seven interview participants was recruited in October 2023 (Table 1), in line with the project's approved scholarly research ethics through Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 28469). At the time the interviews were conducted the Promise Tracker was a project of RMIT ABC Fact Check, which was a partnership between RMIT University and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation from 2017 to July 2024 (see Brookes & Waller, 2022). The interviewees were approached to participate in the study because of their involvement in producing the promise tracker.

Participant	Role and organisation
Russell Skelton	Director, RMIT ABC Fact Check
Ellen McCutchan	Senior Researcher, RMIT ABC Fact Check
David Campbell	Senior Researcher, RMIT ABC Fact Check
Matt Martino	Managing Editor, RMIT ABC Fact Check
Frank Algra-Machio	Monash University PhD researcher
Lis Sexton	Former Chief Fact Checker, RMIT ABC Fact Check
Greg More	OOM Creative

Table 1: Research participants

Semi-structured questions were used to explore the participants' professional knowledge, experiences and perspectives. Those from RMIT ABC Fact Check provided detailed accounts and reflections about developing and managing the CPET, while the other participants discussed their related activities, interactions, and views. The interviews were conducted via synchronous audio-visual software technologies and were not anonymised at the request of the participants. While seven interviews may seem a small sample, in the literature there is little consistency between the recommended sample sizes for qualitative interviews. Guidelines suggest any number between five and 60 can be needed to reach saturation (Mason 2010). Malterud et al. (2016) offer an alternative to saturation in the form of 'information power'. This notion contends that the richer and more relevant an information source is for a study, the less of it is needed. In this case, all members of the small team who worked on the promise tracker in 2023 were interviewed. The interview transcripts were subjected to textual analysis, a research approach for investigating the ways in which people express and interpret lived experience, which in turn is influenced by wider cultures (Hawkins, 2017). The topics of disciplinary perspectives, missions and methodologies articulated through the research questions served as an over-arching framework for this analysis.

Creating and maintaining the CPET

The ABC launched Australia's first Campaign Pledge Election Tool (CPET) on its website in the lead-up to the 2013 federal election as a project of its recently formed ABC Fact Check outfit. Its director Russell Skelton said Politifact's Obameter (Drobnic Holan, 2017) was the inspiration for creating the tracker, but it was 'a very different beast' to the Obameter which 'just kept track of a number of promises':

> What we built at the ABC was an interactive, so you could click on to see the reasons why [an election promise] was stalled and you could monitor the progress of it as the promise progressed. It was a very intensive piece of work.

Ahead of the next federal election in 2016, the ABC Promise Tracker reported that of the 78 promises it tracked, the conservative Liberal-National Party government had delivered 30 and broken 19, while 21 remained in progress and eight were stalled (ABC Fact Check, 2016). The same year, the ABC's funding was cut by the re-elected government, and the fact-checking unit was disbanded as part of its savings measures (Middleton, 2016). In 2017, RMIT University and the ABC entered a partnership to revive the unit as RMIT ABC Fact Check (Waller & Brookes, 2022). Following the re-election of the Coalition government in 2019, the unit had compiled a set of election promises it planned to follow on a new CPET platform but the COVID-19 pandemic prevented it going ahead. Skelton said: 'We thought it was unfair during COVID to hold [the Government] to their promises because the budget obviously became quite meaningless'. Ten years passed before the fact-checking team would create another CPET.

Australia's second CPET was launched by RMIT ABC Fact Check on the first anniversary of the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) federal election victory in May 2023, combining in-depth reports on 66 key policy commitments made by the ALP and innovative data visualisation. The tracker recorded which of the selected ALP promises have since been 'delivered', 'thwarted', 'stalled' or 'broken' in the political process. A final accounting of the promises was made when 2025 federal election was called (see RMIT Promise Tracker, np). The RMIT-ABC partnership ended in 2024 and the unit was closed. RMIT's Information Integrity Hub (RMIT, 2026) has continued to update and publish the CPET, which is housed on its website as the RMIT Promise Tracker. It is important to note that the research interviews were conducted before the RMIT-ABC partnership ended.

The Promise Tracker is supported by an academic research project funded by the Australian Research Council that has brought together the resources of the ABC with political scientists and media scholars from RMIT University, Monash University and the Australian National University (ANU). Data collected for the research project informs the Promise Tracker as well as traditional academic outputs tracing election promises in Australia since 2013, comparing them to the international experience (see eg.: Algra-Maschio, Thomas & Thomson, 2025). The research is also generating scholarly learnings on election promise tracking as a distinct genre of digital journalism (Waller & Morieson, 2025).

Election promise tracking in political science and journalism

Political science and RAFC participants discussed the histories and purposes of election promise tracking within the context of their respective fields. While they approach the practice from different knowledge bases and their work has different impacts (see Tremblay-Antoine et al., 2020), there is a significant overlap in their missions. Tremblay-Antoine et al. (2020: 206) have argued that the 'programme to policy linkage' is the background concept that best reflects the central focus of CPETs. However, an analysis of the literature and interviews suggests their missions centre more broadly on the concept of democratic accountability. This shared commitment recognises the level of political knowledge among ordinary citizens is an important factor in determining how, and how well, elected officials are held accountable. Furthermore, for a citizenry to be informed, information about government and elected officials must be available (Prior, 2017). Two critical sources of such information are news media and election campaigns.

Political science scholar Frank Algra-Maschio was interviewed because of his involvement in collecting election promises and assessing their fulfilment as part of the federally funded research project on which Monash University is a partner investigator. He said academic research on pledge fulfilment 'is very interested in investigating the idea that by making promises and the public voting on them [creates] this connection between the public and the government, which is core to the classic democratic ideal'.

While comparative pledge tracking research was new in Australia, Algra-Maschio said the first recorded reference to studying election promises was a 1959 Australian study by a US researcher (see Barrett, 1959). The first contemporary Australian study of pledge fulfilment found the Gillard Government (2010-13) fulfilled most of its promises (see: Carson et al., 2019). Following Pomper's often cited study of US elections (1968) further US studies were published before research on the UK, Canada and some European countries emerged in the 1980s. Algra-Maschio said the field moved forward in the early 2000s through the development of a comparative research methodology for studying election promises in Western Europe (eg: Thomson, 2011) and has continued to grow throughout the world (see Naurin et al., 2019). He said this body of literature did not conceptualise the news media as an active participant in the democratic process but more so as a 'mediating actor':

> It's vital that the public – or citizens –– [can] understand promises that are made and are able to assess their fulfilment during the term so that they can either give approval or kick the government out based on their record. The media is usually framed as a mediating actor … on the understanding that the public are … unlikely to read a manifesto, or to even be cognisant of a large range of promises, and so it is incumbent on the media to do that job.

Algra-Maschio observed it was easier for political scientists to collect promises in Western Europe than Australia because most parties release an official election manifesto 'so it's fairly simple to go straight to that sort of document and pull out the promises'. In contrast, Australian parties release detailed policy documents throughout the campaign period, but these do not capture all election promises made. Researchers must therefore look to other sources, including speeches, official websites, press releases and media reporting, to identify and collect pledges (eg: Carson et al., 2019).

Royed (1996) provided the first refined operational definition of a promise. However, a more specific understanding of the difference between narrow and broad pledges underpins the comparative research methodology used by Algra-Maschio and his colleagues. Narrow promises are fulfilled in one way, whereas assessing broad promises involves more judgement by the researcher assessing whether the pledge has been fulfilled, because it could be fulfilled in multiple ways (see: Naurin et al., 2019). Algra-Maschio said the qualitative assessment of pledge fulfilment involves 'going through budgets and legislation and things like that'. At the headline level, political science research makes a comprehensive analysis of the total number of promises made and their fulfilment. The comparative research approach also emphasises the importance of qualitative exploration on selected promises to shed light on the factors that determine the conditions in which promises may or may not be fulfilled. However, he noted these academic case studies did not investigate individual election promises in the same depth that the RAFC fact checkers provided for the promises they track. For example, political science CPETs such as Canada's Polimeter include only short summaries on pledge fulfilment on their platform at the end of the election cycle.

'Evidentiary narratives' for engaging media audiences

RAFC chief fact-checker Lis Sexton was a key contributor to the 2013 CPET and an editorial decision maker on which Albanese Government promises would be tracked from 2023. While she emphasised 'part of RMIT ABC Fact Check's role was holding public figures to account', she distinguished journalistic CPETs from her understanding of the political science approach being one that collects all promises made and is only interested in whether they are fulfilled: 'I think from our point of view, as journalists, it matters *why* (author italics) a promise was broken or delivered'. Sexton's observation highlights the importance of the 'evidentiary narratives' (Donald and Graves, 2025) that are linked to each promise on the tracker data visualisation and updated throughout the term of the government. Donald and Graves's (2025) concept of 'evidentiary narratives' refers to forms of fact-based media including documentaries and fact-checking that make it easier for audiences to understand an issue, develop well-informed opinions and arrive at accurate attributions of responsibility. In doing so, 'evidentiary narratives' fulfil some of the journalism field's highest professional ideals.

The RAFC fact checkers who participated in the study stressed that engaging a wide audience in public discussion of election promise fulfilment was a key purpose and that this directly informed editorial decision-making. RAFC Managing Editor Matt Martino said: 'We are trying to write it for all Australians, which is why we want a good cross-section of promises.' There was also wide acknowledgement among the interviewees that certain groups were more interested in the Promise Tracker than others, especially 'the kind of people who are very politically engaged and want to make a political point about what the Government is doing in one way or another'. However, through the interviews a more nuanced understanding of audience engagement emerged that highlighted its temporal dimension, with one participant explaining while the political class might watch the tracker over the life of the government:

> At the end, we will probably see another quite large upswing of general public interest because … we will have a final tally that will show how the government has gone over their term and we hope that will be used by people to evaluate the Government's progress over the electoral term and inform their vote in the next election.

The accountability role of the promise tracker also came through in participants' comments on its value as a resource for other journalists, and in the way it informed and contributed to wider journalism outputs at the national broadcaster. One participant said ABC journalists were often 'hungry for the little bells and whistles for their articles and for further context, and for recirculation'. He said the Promise Tracker had been designed to provide 'a seamless way for them to engage with our content and provide that context to readers'.

Sexton linked the CPET's rigour and accuracy to the unit's expertise in fact-checking and said it would be interesting to see if it has an impact in the wider journalism field as a tool for 'being able to push back' against the Government's 'political line: 'It should inform other journalists about how a given promise is tracking, despite what the Government might say about it'.

Promise tracking as a specific practice: a further development of fact checking journalism

In political science, the media is positioned as a mediating actor, between politicians and their constituents. In journalism, the media is a key democratic institution, providing information to citizens as part of democratic decision-making, and to ensure accountability of politicians and other political elites (Schudson, 2008; McNair, 2009). This is a key difference in the conceptualisation of the role of media in society and it also impacts the methodological approach taken in the selection and tracking of promises by political scientists and fact-checkers/journalists. While political scientists will collect all promises and measure their

fulfilment to assess democratic function, Algra-Maschio helpfully expressed the way this might not fully measure the operation of democracy from a broader, journalistic perspective:

> There was a particular government way back in Austria that was, you know, very far right and they promised to do a lot of bad things *but they fulfilled those promises and that essentially is a good thing for democracy* [according to the political science approach]. But that's not how potentially the general public would feel and *I think that comes through in the journalistic work* as well. It's more so about important promises. Promises that are salient… (author emphasis added).

The fact checkers who were interviewed discussed promise saliency in terms of editorial decision-making, with one drawing a broad comparison between the political scientists' study of 338 Albanese Government promises with their selection of 66 of those: 'So we are trying to go for quality over quantity'.

Saliency, or newsworthiness were not the only criteria RAFC fact-checkers applied in selecting the promises to follow on the tracker. Participants cited a central dictum of their fact-checking methodology – Is it important? And is it checkable? – to outline the selection of promises to be tracked. These two questions, central to the development of fact-checking at RMIT ABC Fact Check (Brookes & Waller, 2022) provide a clear view of the unit's editorial drivers. Sexton reflected:

> We had a meeting on the first day and [Bruce Belsham former head of current affairs at the ABC] said: 'Well, this is a new thing for the ABC and you know, go for it'. And he said there are two rules. One of them is does it matter? And the other is, is it checkable?

Asked whether promise tracking is a sub field of fact-checking, several participants said it clearly was. For instance, Martino stated: '… promise checks are essentially mini fact-checks. The claim is: have we complied with this promise and the verdict is a determination that we make'. Similarly, senior fact-checker Dave Campbell said that promise tracking is like fact checking in terms of the depth of research required, the deferral to independent expert opinion, and importantly, in the way that it frames information in terms of a verdict or clear position at the end of the discussion.

Another element that situates election promise tracking within the fact checking methodology is the format. Pledges are tracked around a central question: has this promise been fulfilled? The Promise Tracker then responds with a 'delivered', 'stalled', 'thwarted' or 'broken' verdict. Campbell reflected on the way the central question shapes the practice in comparison to journalistic norms:

> The other difference between our journalism and a lot of other types is that there is a clear question and you need an answer for it. We don't just present both sides … we are expected to actually weigh those sides up and then go and talk to other people and you know, really get to the bottom of it. So yeah, I think that it's that whole question of the verdict and making an assessment and particularly in our case … boiling it down to that one word or phrase.

The process Campbell outlines above can also be encapsulated by the core fact-checking practice of transparency (Graves, 2016; Graves and Lauer, 2020; Humprecht, 2020; IFCN, 2023; Ye, 2023). According to Kumar (2022: 15), transparency is a normative journalistic value, one that is subsuming objectivity as a guiding norm for the professional practice, a 'new norm of journalism in the digital age'. Kim & Buzzelli (2022: 2) argue that when a fact-checking operation is staffed by journalists and/or embedded within a traditional journalism organisation, 'actors are likely to adopt the symbolic structures and practices that are legitimated by a professional journalistic logic, such as detached transparency in reporting and particular types of sources and topics'.

Campbell outlined how the principle of transparency informs the writing up of the evidentiary narratives on each of the election promises being tracked:

> I think a lot of it is in the presentation of it in that we need to be very transparent about our sources and we try very hard as well to lay out if there are any sort of assumptions that have been made… it's for full disclosure so that people can reach their own conclusion about, you know, the verdict and they can see that it's reasonable for us to have reached that verdict, even if they may disagree.

That verdict makes the question of defensibility particularly prescient, compared to mainstream journalism. Campbell described fact-checking as an 'antagonistic' form of journalism … 'where you're kind of … wagging your finger in someone's face. You know, we're putting their name on it and saying they are wrong'. He said this meant the accuracy of the reporting had to meet the profession's highest standards.

While none of the fact-checkers used the term 'evidentiary narrative' (Donald and Graves, 2025) or 'data journalism' to define their election promise tracking reports or the data visualisation, their accounts touched on aspects of these formats that inform fact-checking as a distinct set of practices. For example, Martino conceived the RAFC Promise Tracker as a form of journalistic analysis, aided by a different timeline, outside of the news cycle, that provided an ability to return to the promise (or 'story') at multiple points over its lifetime:

> I guess it kind of fits into the analysis space – it is a kind of analysis which is aided by visual data. So, a regular journalist can go out there and kind of analyse whether or not

this promise has been delivered. But a regular journalist generally doesn't have time to sit there and think about the timeline and how it got there and really kind of drill down into the details… what our promise tracker will do is each promise will have a timeline that will show at each stage how it went, statuses can change within that timeline.

Similarly, the participants reflected on the range of journalistic professional skills and values that came into play in the tracker. For example, the selection of promises to include is shaped by the idea of editorial balance across a range of policy portfolios, as well as responding to promises that are prominent in policy and public debate. Sexton described the decision-making process around selecting promises and the spread of promises as a 'newsroom process': 'we want to apply a journalistic filter and editorial filter and say, yes, this promise was clearly made. But does it matter enough to enough people? In our judgement, does it matter enough to warrant inclusion on the tracker?'

The editorial selection of promises and ongoing investigation and reporting is understood as a strength rather than a methodological limitation from the journalistic side (Waller & Morieson, 2025). Comparing these aspects of the RAFC CPET with political science election pledge tracking, Algra-Maschio reflected:

> … It's exploring in greater quality depth than maybe the academic work can sometimes do with the promise tracker with 40 or 50 promises. And you can continually update it and have rolling article pieces on it.

It's not scientific …

The RAFC team expressed a clear understanding that their CPET is guided by editorial judgement, so unlike political science researchers who measure election promise fulfilment, they stop short of measuring overall government performance. RMIT ABC Fact Check researcher Ellen McCutchan reflected:

> There's so much selection that goes into which [promise] checks we choose to do… you can't make a call about their performance as a government based on this. You know, it's interesting, but it's not indicative of their performance.

However, Sexton said she realised the data visualisation 'scorecard' could tempt the audience to assess the Government's performance based on how many promises on the Promise Tracker had been broken or fulfilled:

… the danger of presenting it that way is – that it might to some people look like a chart or something that has in some way been scientifically put together, but actually, it's editorial.

As 'there's nothing scientific' about the selection of promises, Martino emphasised it was not possible to 'draw a really concrete conclusion' about the Government's performance 'at any given point in time, in a very scientific manner':

But we are choosing the most – we think – the most impactful and important promises. And so it should give a good editorial snapshot of we how we think the Government has gone. You know, we're not academic, so the kind of more scientific analysis is really for them.

Temporality

One key difference between political fact-checking and CPETs is their relationships to time. Political fact-checking is by nature, retrospective, hence it is sometimes called '*post-hoc* fact checking' (eg: Williams et al., 2020). However, the fact checkers working on the CPET identify the temporal dimension of promise tracking as altogether different. According to Ellen McCutcheon it is as 'future focused as we can ever get'. Dave Campbell expresses it thus:

One thing that might make it a little bit different relative to fact-checking or other types of journalism is you're effectively starting the story, but you don't know how it's going to end, but you do still have to finish that story later and you are doing all your working in public, so … you hope your first draft is accurate by the time you reach the conclusion. So I think that's probably something that's a little bit unique to promise trackers.

This is a key consideration for the handling of the data, according to website developer Greg Moore. He said the project might start with 66 promises, or in his words '66 bits of information' but after two years of updates there might be '1200 bits of information that can paint a really interesting picture':

… It's the waiting to see how the data plays out [that's] the interesting part, and whereas with some other projects you might start with all the data and try and work out a way to visualise that data. So, this one's much more like a system that needs to change over time.

While each promise is dynamic and updated over time, a promise check still needs to end with a final determination or verdict. Matt Martino said a promise check could be defined as a series of

fact checks along a timeline that constantly asks the question 'have they delivered this promise?' at a point in time:

> And the answer can be – and is most of the time – no. But 'no' is split up into 'well, not yet', which is 'in progress', 'well, probably they're not going to', which is 'stalled', [which is] a new determination … for promises where perhaps the Senate might be obstructionist or outside factors mean that they can't. Or, there is, you know, 'no, they haven't done the promise' and it's broken and we have to ask that question every time we do an update: what is the status of the promise now?

Here Martino is referring to the CPET categories developed by the RAFC team that move beyond the consideration of whether or not a promise was kept, to include promises 'in progress', 'stalled' and 'thwarted'. The 'thwarted' category is important to consider for the way it affords nuance to the audience's understanding of political promises – as well as its capacity to recognise the agency of political actors. The recognition of political agency via these categories highlights a key difference with political science CPETs that do not venture into such territory. For example, the political scientists behind Canada's Polimeter classify pledges as either 'kept', 'partially kept', 'in progress', 'broken' or 'not yet rated'. The 'not yet rated' category disappears at the end of the political term as all promises are classified definitively as 'kept', 'partially kept' or 'broken'.

Democratic purpose

Several of the respondents explicitly connected the promise tracker's broader social purpose to its democratic function. Political scientist Algra-Maschio commented that '[the promise tracker] would help people to inform themselves and hopefully inform their vote in some way'. Similarly, fact checker Campbell saw it as a tool for voters to use in the immediate context of an election, to survey the actions of the incumbent government and to inform their voting behaviour:

> I'm hoping that this is a sort of an objective resource where you can … travel back in time a little bit, remind yourself what was actually said, and perhaps go in with a slightly more… I guess it's like having a more data-driven sort of decision-making tool available to you when you go to make your voting choice.

These participants' comments underline the 'programme to policy linkage' and like Müller (2020), they emphasise that voters rely on media accounts of political performance. But unlike the thousands of standalone traditional news reports that Müller studied, the RAFC Promise Tracker offers a consolidated, real-time account of promise fulfillment accompanied by evidentiary narratives that has the potential to make a meaningful impact on opinion formation and voting behaviour. This accords with Kyriakidou et al.'s (2023) UK study that argues the

adoption of fact checking practices into mainstream political journalism can restore audience trust and, 'by extension, improv[e] political dialogue and the public sphere' (2023: 2136). However, the authors also caution that fact-checking cannot be seen as a cure-all for restoring public trust in journalism.

Conclusion

In 2020, political scientists Tremblay-Antoine and colleagues assessed all Campaign Promise Evaluation Tools (CPETs) according to political science measures and methodologies and found journalistic CPETs were not reliable because they did not evaluate every promise or comply with social science standards, including academic definitions of election promises and publication of coding manuals. In response to their call for further research, this article has argued that political science and journalism CPETs serve different purposes and should be understood within the context of their disciplinary traditions and imperatives. The participants interviewed for this study have provided nuanced understandings of the two approaches to tracking election pledge fulfilment. They defined the RAFC Promise Tracker as a future focused form of political fact checking that informs media audiences about the fulfilment of a select group of political campaign promises along a timeline. The fact checkers who work on the project acknowledged their promise tracker is 'not scientific' and also the important role of editorial judgement in deciding which promises matter to their audience. Participants also emphasised the in-depth storytelling dimension of the tracker via dynamic 'evidentiary narratives' was a key difference to political science CPETs that did not provide ongoing commentary on every promise tracked. Furthermore, they noted some of their categories, such as 'stalled' and thwarted' acknowledged political agency where political science CPETs did not. They insisted fact-checking methodologies ensure journalistic rigour, which includes adhering to journalistic standards of transparency and verification.

The RAFC Promise Tracker involves a rare collaboration between political scientists and fact-checkers that offers a model for CPETs in other liberal democracies. The relationship is underpinned by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project that has funded the political scientists' time-consuming and fine-grained work in identifying and coding 338 of the Albanese Government's election promises. Their research has been a valuable resource for the fact checkers working on the promise tracker, ensuring scientific rigour in election pledge identification, saving time and resources, and directly informing their decisions on which promises to include on the tracker. For the political scientists, the RAFC Promise Tracker is a powerful vehicle for research impact by engaging millions of ABC audience members (the public) in evaluating the 'programme to policy linkage'.

This study has a clear limitation: We have investigated the methodology of just one CPET operated by a fact checking organisation in Australia and considered it in relation to political science approaches to tracking and evaluating election pledge fulfilment. In 2025, the British fact checking outfit Full Fact launched its first election promise tracker (see: Full Fact, 2026), so there are growing opportunities for comparative studies. As Tremblay et al. argued in 2020, there remains a clear need for international research to deepen and extend understanding of election promise tracking and CPETs. While much attention is currently on the 'debunking turn' (Graves et al., 2023) in fact checking, Campaign Promise Evaluation Tools (CPETs) created by fact-checkers are another important development in practice that makes a direct intervention in public discourse and deserve further scholarly attention.

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Ethical approval

All research carried out for this study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, as expressed through Australia's National Statement and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. Approval was granted by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) (Project ID: 28469) on 19/04/2021.

Informed Consent Statement

The lead author of the article contacted all the participants who took part in the study via email on 03/10/2023, inviting them to be involved. In that email they were provided with a written copy of the Explanatory Statement about the research project as well as the Consent Form. By signing and returning the Consent form via email before participating in their interview, all participants agreed to the conversation being recorded and transcribed; that they could chose to remain anonymous; that they had the opportunity to review the transcript and request any changes within a month of the interview; that they could withdraw from the project at any time and that they consented to the authors publishing their comments.

Data Availability

The interview data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.