Trump has broken more promises than he's kept

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By Glenn Kessler

"I've completed more promises than I've made."

— President Trump, during a campaign rally in Toledo, Jan. 9, 2020

When The Fact Checker unveiled our Trump Promise Tracker in December 2016, we received a phone call from an anxious incoming White House official who demanded: "Where did you get this list?"

We got it from the president.

With Trump nearing the end of his third year as president, it's time for an update — and a reality check. Contrary to what he tells his fans, Trump has broken more key promises than he has kept. With our latest update, Trump has broken about 43 percent of 60 key promises — and kept about 35 percent. He settled for a compromise on 12 percent.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump made more than 280 promises, though many were contradictory or just uttered in a single campaign event. So that posed a conundrum: What would be a good list of promises to track that Trump was really serious about? We did not think it would be fair to rate a promise that might have been tossed out without much serious discussion by the candidate and his staff.

But Trump did issue a specific plan — what he called the "Contract with the American Voter." He even signed it with his distinctive signature and invited supporters to sign their own copies. That plan listed 60 promises, some of which he said he would fulfill on the day he took the oath of office. Others, he said, would be implemented or launched in his first 100 days.

Of course, no one really expected him to meet those timelines. But this list seemed so specific — and official — that we decided it represented the ideal platform to measure Trump's promises, even though it was perhaps a bit light on foreign policy.

Since The Fact Checker was relaunched in 2011, we had missed the start of President Barack Obama's term, and so it was too late to track his 2008 promises. By reference, PolitiFact's "Obameter" tracked 533 campaign promises and found that he kept 48 percent, broke 24 percent and compromised on 27 percent.

Here's a quick assessment of some of Trump's most significant promises. The full list can be seen on the Trump Promise Tracker landing page.

Kept

Announce the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Trump did this on his third day in office.

Announce the U.S. intention to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement or withdraw from the deal. A few months after taking office, Trump tweeted that he had spoken to the presidents of Mexico and Canada about renegotiating NAFTA. "I agreed, subject to the fact that if we do not reach a fair deal for all, we will then terminate NAFTA," he wrote. This appears to fulfill his promise to announce this threat. Eventually, the administration negotiated an updated version of the trade pact, relabeled the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

Provide veterans with the ability to receive public Department of Veterans Affairs treatment or attend the private doctor of their choice. In 2018, Trump signed the bipartisan VA Mission Act, which expanded access for veterans to VA-funded care in the private sector. (This built on a law passed under Obama.) Rules established under the law took effect in 2019, with VA paying veterans to see non-VA doctors if they have to wait longer than 20 days or drive more than 30 minutes for primary or mental health care at a VA facility. For specialty care, they can see private doctors at VA expense if they have to wait longer than 28 days or drive more than an hour to see a VA provider.

Direct the treasury secretary to label China a currency manipulator. This was a promise broken at first — and then suddenly kept. On April 12, 2017, Trump announced he would not label China a currency manipulator — something he had pledged to do on his first day in office. Trump told the Wall Street Journal that he had changed his mind because China was not currently manipulating its currency, though that was already apparent during the election season. But then, on Aug. 5, 2019, he tweeted that China was manipulating its currency after the yuan fell below seven to the dollar, following Trump's announcement of additional tariffs. The Treasury Department applied the largely symbolic label a few hours later. (This week, Trump dropped the designation ahead of a trade-deal signing, but we will note this as a promise kept.)

Require that for every new federal regulation, two existing regulations must be eliminated. There are various ways one could try to count whether this promise has been achieved, not all of which would support the administration, but there is little doubt that the president has attacked regulations. To achieve this ratio, the administration does not tally only "economically significant" items but includes minor deregulatory actions, such as allowing the importation of fresh pomelo fruit from Thailand and deregulation of the pine shoot beetle.

Change visa rules to enhance penalties for overstaying. Trump, in a 2019 presidential memo, declared visa overstay rates "unacceptably high" and called them a "widespread problem." On the basis of a Department of Homeland Security report, he instructed federal agencies to consider action against countries that have business and tourism travelers — using the popular B1 and B2 visas — who overstay in the United States at a rate higher than 10 percent. (Twenty countries have overstay rates higher than 10 percent, according to the DHS report. Except for Syria and Nigeria, these countries accounted for fewer than 1,000 overstayers each.)

Broken

Make Mexico reimburse the United States for the full cost of the border wall. In a phone conversation with Mexico's president on Jan. 27, 2017, a transcript of which was provided to The Washington Post and published Aug. 3, Trump indicated that he would not fulfill this promise but would not say so publicly, because it would hurt him politically. He pressed his Mexican counterpart to not raise the issue or suggest that he would not pursue his promise. "You cannot say that to the press," Trump said, according to the transcript. "The press is going to go with that, and I cannot live with that." Since that conversation, Trump has rarely raised the issue and made no move to force compliance by Mexico. Instead, he has seized billions of dollars from previously approved military construction projects and redirected the money to fund his border barrier. At a campaign rally on Tuesday, Trump asserted that "Mexico's paying for the wall, you know that, you will see that," but this remains one of his biggest broken promises.

Expand the economy 4 percent a year. In 2017, the gross domestic product grew at an annual rate of 2.3 percent, well short of Trump's promised target. In 2018, the GDP grew at an annual rate of 2.9 percent, still far short of Trump's 4 percent goal. For 2019, analysts estimate the GDP grew about 2.2 or 2.3 percent. Unless something dramatic happens in 2020 — the consensus is that annual growth will be 1.9 percent — Trump will never meet his goal, and so this is a promise broken. He never even achieved this goal on a quarterly basis.

Fully repeal and replace Obamacare. Trump's promise to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act backfired spectacularly in his first year in office, and the backlash over repeal votes taken by Republicans helped Democrats retake control of the House in the midterm elections. Trump had made other promises on health care, including letting states manage Medicaid funds and allowing for the purchase of health insurance across state lines, that also failed to be realized.

Reduce the number of tax brackets from seven to three and, likewise, greatly simplify tax forms. The tax bill signed into law by Trump left the number of tax brackets at seven and introduced new complexity. Trump regularly touts the tax-cut bill, but it also failed to

meet several other specific pledges, such as insuring the largest tax reductions were for the middle class and allowing Americans to deduct child care and elder care from their taxes.

Make sure the $1 trillion infrastructure plan will be revenue-neutral. Trump has made no progress on advancing an infrastructure bill, let alone one that is revenue-neutral.

End Common Core. In Trump's first three years, no serious action has been taken on this promise. (He ordered only a review of the federal government's education-related regulations to assess whether they unlawfully interfere with state and local decision-making.) As of Dec. 30, 39 states are implementing Common Core or a revised version of it, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Compromises

Cancel visas to countries that won't take back criminal immigrants in the United States illegally. Trump was slow to act on this pledge. In September 2017, the Trump administration announced visa restrictions against four relatively small countries — Cambodia, Eritrea, Guinea and Sierra Leone, followed by Myanmar and Laos in 2018 and Ghana and Pakistan in 2019. He has not targeted China, one of the biggest offenders, but eight of the 10 countries that have faced such sanctions have been named during the Trump administration. Given that Trump suggested during the campaign that he would target all countries, this will be considered a compromise.

Lower the business tax rate from 35 percent to 15 percent. On April 26, 2017, Trump unveiled a plan that would cut corporate taxes from 35 percent to 15 percent. But the conference report on the tax bill approved by House and Senate negotiators made the rate 21 percent. That's still a big cut, but less than what Trump had promised.