ARTICLE 4

The Evaporated Promise

Grégoire Falque · 29 July 2026

We believe democracy rests on truth.

On informed citizens, shared facts, a public space where the best arguments eventually prevail.

It is a fine idea. It forgets something.

Democracy also rests, and perhaps first of all, on the promise. On commitment. On words that create obligations.

An electoral promise is neither true nor false at the moment it is made. It is an act. It takes place, or it does not.

And what the evaporation of the real does to the promise, it does, slowly, to democracy itself.

I. What a promise really is

A promise does not say how the world is. It commits the one who makes it to what the world will be.

In the vocabulary of Austin, met in the previous article, a promise is a performative: a word that brings something into existence by being uttered. Promising creates an obligation that did not exist. An oath creates a bond. A commitment creates a responsibility.

These acts are neither true nor false. They hold or they collapse. They weigh or they evaporate.

> A promise is an act, not a statement. It commits a body, a time, a word in a direction that cannot be taken back without it showing.

When someone truly promises you something, something changes. A debt is contracted. A bond is established, which constrains what is to come.

A real promise resists. It creates a friction between the word given and the temptations to take it back, between the commitment and the circumstances that invite one to escape it. It costs something to keep. That is why it is worth something.

WHEN A PROMISE COST SOMETHING

There was a time when promising cost something. Not necessarily money: reputation, honour, in the most concrete sense. In communities on a human scale, a broken promise could be seen. It changed the way others looked at you.

An oath was sealed by a gesture: a hand laid on an object, a wax seal, a signature before witnesses. These gestures were not empty rituals. They put friction into the very act of promising. They made abandoning the promise costly.

II. The formula applied to the political promise

Let us apply the formula to today's political promise.

A candidate promises to reduce unemployment, reform healthcare, restore trust. Let us look at this promise one variable at a time.

EFFORT

A few hours of preparation, a presence on a stage, a speech delivered with conviction. It is not nothing. But it is tiny compared with what is promised.

FRICTION

Promising meets almost no resistance. Nothing is required beforehand, no guarantee is lodged, no price is paid for outbidding.

MATTER

A speech filmed, broadcast, archived. Erasable, open to recontextualisation, its exact wording disputed six months later. It is not that nothing is recorded. It is that nothing is irreversible. Nothing that time or rhetoric cannot take back.

Little effort, almost no friction, almost no matter. In the sense of the formula, the promise has been uttered. It has not taken place.

This is not a question of sincerity. A candidate can promise with complete conviction, and the promise can weigh nothing. Sincerity is not a variable in the formula.

That may be why broken promises no longer produce lasting indignation. People are surprised, briefly, then move on. As if everyone already knew the promise had not really taken place. One cannot betray what has not taken place.

III. Two symptoms

If commitments are made without effort, without friction and without matter, it should show. At least two signs read differently in the light of the formula.

ABSTENTION

Abstention is often read as apathy, lack of interest, resignation.

It can be read otherwise. Whoever no longer votes may have understood, without putting it into words, that their vote is no longer connected to commitments that weigh. Voting still produces something. But that something no longer binds anyone.

DISTRUST

Distrust of institutions is often read as a pathology.

In its ordinary form, it can also be something learned. Those who distrust have observed, for years, that commitments made did not become acts. They have drawn a conclusion.

Trust is not restored with words. It is restored with acts that weigh.

IV. The contract without weight

A contract, in the legal as in the political sense, assumes that each party puts something at stake in the act of committing. That each risks something.

If committing no longer costs anything, the contract itself grows lighter. Not because the parties act in bad faith. Because commitment has lost its density.

Without an act of commitment, there is no contract. There is a declaration of intent. That is not the same thing.

This is not nostalgia. Founding commitments, in their densest forms, were made under conditions of extreme friction: constitutions written after wars, treaties signed under the constraint of the real. Reality imposed its resistance, and that resistance made the commitment heavy.

Today, one can commit without anything irreversible being at stake.

V. What this demands

The democratic crisis is read as a crisis of truth: fake news, disinformation. We think that by restoring shared facts, we would restore democracy.

That is not wrong. It is incomplete. Truth matters. But what has evaporated is not only truth. It is the weight of the promise.

No verification gives a promise back its weight, because that weight does not come from content. It comes from the friction passed through in order to commit, from the effort consented to, from what remains.

What democracy lacks is not only fact-checkers. It is forms that make promises costly to make, and therefore precious to keep.

The Bureau des Protocoles does not claim to solve the democratic crisis. That would be out of all proportion. It does something smaller: it shows that an act can still weigh. That a decision can still leave something in the world.

It is modest. It is stubborn.

In the next article, I leave politics to return to a simpler gesture: lifting a stone.

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