

The Importance of Campaign Promises

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Book Description

Representation is essential to democratic government: elected officials respond to their constituents. There are many theories that investigate the types and processes of representation (Pitkin 1967, Mansbridge 2003, Disch 2011). An important aspect of representation that many study is responsiveness between voters and representatives, and resulting policy, often referred to as substantive representation (Miller and Stokes 1963; Erikson et al, 2002; Druckman and Jacobs 2015). One aspect of substantive representation is promissory representation: the idea that candidates issue promises to voters, hoping to attract supporters, and voters acting to use these promises to adjudicate the performance of elected officials. Responsiveness to promises has been studied largely to determine the frequency with which candidates keep their promises (Pétry and Collette 2009; Sulkin 2009; Naurin 2014). However, an important piece of this pathway is being ignored, particularly in the study of U. S. politics. What types of promises are being made to voters? How do promises affect voter decision-making, and what pathways and conditions influence how promises matter to voters? Finally, what happens to voter perceptions of politicians who break campaign promises? In this book, I examine these questions and find that not only are there important variations in campaign promises, but that these promises polarize voter opinions of politicians by attracting similarly-positioned voters and strongly repelling voters who disagree with a candidate's position. In addition, I find that broken promises have an incredibly strong negative effect on voter opinions of candidates: in part, because voters perceive promise breakers as less honest and less likely to follow through in the future than candidates who more weakly took the same position.

I begin by creating a theory of promises and how promises change perceptions of candidate commitment to issues. My theory is based on an important conceptual distinction in promises, and how voters use promises as proxy for candidate commitment to an issue. Here, I define campaign promises as a category of policy positions statements. In particular, those that a futuristic statement or expectation to a policy statement. (For instance, by saying "I will work to achieve stricter gun control when elected.") It is possible then for a candidate to indicate support for a policy position without indicating any future position on it. (For instance, by saying "I agree with stricter gun control.") I argue that through promises the candidate creates a greater commitment to her issue position: one that sends a stronger signal of the candidate's intentions if elected. While this conceptual distinction offers clarity on what campaign promises are, the more important contribution of the definition is what it means for how we understand promises to influence voter approval of candidates. Throughout the book, I demonstrate that making promises is an attempt by candidates to signal a stronger commitment to an issue---a step that helps emphasize what is important to the candidate, and that she is more likely to follow through on that issue than otherwise. The increased expectations for action mean that promises will have a different effect on voters based on whether they agree with the candidate's position or not. Voters who agree with the candidate will prefer a candidate who promises, while voters who disagree

with a candidate's position will prefer if when the candidate does not promise. Importantly, this signaling argument is dependent on expectations for what happens if the candidate does not follow through on his promise, and sends a signal to voters that he is untrustworthy and uncommitted to that issue. In this scenario, voters will be less likely to support him in future elections. Thus, by building a strong version of commitment to voters, the candidate increases the opportunity for voters to sanction the candidate in the future.

I use both observational investigations of candidate speech and original survey experiments as evidence in support of my theory. First, I provide observational support of my theory that candidate speech contains variety of promise and non-promise policy positions through an in-depth analysis of policy positions in presidential debates from 1960 to 2012. These data give a broad understanding of policy statements in context of each other, as well as give a picture of how frequency of promises has changed over time. The data also indicate under which circumstances we could expect promises to matter for electoral outcomes. I also demonstrate that presidential candidate use of promises has increased substantially since 1992.

Second, I conduct several original survey experiments to measure the effect of promising prospectively and show that candidate promises serve to polarize the public's opinion of candidates. Since no study I am aware of has experimentally measured the effect of promises on voter opinion formation in prospective (or upcoming) elections, the distinction allows me to investigate an important pathway in understanding promissory representation. I find that promises are preferred by voters who agree with a candidate's position, and non-promisers are preferred when voters disagree with a candidate's position. I also demonstrate two mechanisms important to this pathway: candidate promises increase voter predictions of candidate commitment and follow through, promises also decrease assessments of candidate character, and in particular, honesty. At first glance, candidates who are more likely to follow through might be considered more honest in that they reveal their intentions more clearly. However, this is not confused voters who are contradicting themselves. Instead, this point underlines real frustration from voters between political 'speak' and expectations of their candidates to act successfully in office.

Finally, I consider the consequences of these expectations on voter evaluations of office holders, based on promises made and actions taken by considering how promises matter after candidates assume office. Looking at the influence of promises retrospectively underlines that acting in step with prior commitments matter a great deal to voters. In addition to demonstrating how voter perceptions strongly decrease based on the level of commitment that candidates put into their policy platforms, voters are not easily convinced that candidates have good reason not to follow through on their commitments. As partisan divides encompass retrospective considerations by voters, this book highlights the ways in which a unifying feature across partisans is blanket disregard for candidates who do not keep their word. In particular, regardless of agreement on a position: voters more negatively assess candidate honesty and future follow through when candidates do not keep their promises.

Chapter Outline

Part 1: Promises and Why They Matter

Chapter 1: Introduction

As part of Down's Median Voter Theory, the notion that candidate positions matter to voters' decision making has been underscored over decades of political science research. Policy positions matter both prospectively, as voters decide which candidate deserves their vote, and retrospectively, as voters decide if an incumbent should be re-elected. This basic story is the one told about representation, and as political scientists have investigated it over time, it has developed more nuance, including investigations into what positions suggest about actions in office and how voters may sanction politicians who depart from campaign statements. It is within this framework that I propose a novel theory of how campaign promises and distinctions within campaign statements are of critical importance to voter judgements. In particular, I argue that understanding how campaign promises function and the effect promises have on voters is an important missing piece to our understanding of representation. In context of campaigns, I offer an important conceptual clarification to the theory of promises by defining promises operationally as policy statements that indicate an action the candidate intends to carry out if elected. Thus, policy statements can be issued without promising, indicating a candidate's stance on an issue. This critical distinction, I argue, leads to several important contributions to our understanding for how promises matter to voters both prospectively and retrospectively that I test observationally and experimentally throughout the book.

The remainder of the chapter outlines the goals for the book and the evidence I present. I expound upon my theory in the following chapter, but then spend the next two chapters examining distinctions in policy statements as they occur in presidential election debates, demonstrating that my experimental data is rooted firmly in real campaign speech. The next three chapters experimentally measure how promises matter to voters through a series of experiments that feature promises on gun control. Importantly, I measure the effect of the distinction in promises both prospectively and retrospectively, to highlight that promises reflect a candidate's commitment to an issue. The subject of gun control is a useful issue to use as a test case because it is frequently discussed during campaigns, legislation frequently features gun control, it is salient beyond campaign discussions, and the population is relatively equally divided on gun control. The final chapters use measurements from the experimental portion of the work to thoughtfully project in which situations promises might have more critical effects on election outcomes.

Chapter 2: Theory: Promises as Commitment

I begin by developing a theoretical framework to examine how a new distinction in campaign promises might matter. First, I argue that promising increases a candidate's appeared commitment on an issue. Second, because campaign promises serve as a signal for what candidates will do if elected, by increasing commitment to an issue,

candidates are sending a stronger signal about their intended actions in office. Because voters tend to punish candidates who act out of step with their policy platforms, there can be relative confidence in a candidate's increasing commitment to a position. It follows then that this stronger signal will be preferred by individuals who hold the same position on the issue, and will more strongly repulse individuals who disagree with the candidate. In essence, the result of this argument is that promises should serve to polarize voter opinions of candidates.

Part 2: Promises in Context: When and Where We Find Promises

Chapter 3: Promises in Primary and General Election Debates

After defining the role that policy statements play in voter decision-making, I confirm that distinctions in policy statements exist not only in theory, but in practice as well. To do this, I examine presidential election debates from 1960 (when they were first televised) through 2012. In the debates, I isolate each policy statement, and determine which are promises, and which are non-promise position statements. In this analysis, I am able to demonstrate that there are many examples of each type of position statement. While both types of statements are represented frequently throughout the period, promises increase at a greater rate than non-promise policy statements, sharply increasing in 1992. I also look at candidate characteristics to better understand the context in which promises are delivered. While I find no critical difference between the numbers of promises made by winners and losers, I do find that challengers are more likely to make promises than incumbents.

Chapter 4: Looking at Rhetorical Distinctions and Candidate Use of Promises

It is nearly impossible to demonstrate how promises matter to voters with observed, real-world data: it is too noisy and often, there are no counterfactuals to observed promises (or non-promise statements). However, in this chapter I am able to trace distinctions in how public opinion on an issue changes and how opinions generally moves after candidates make strong announcements on an issue as an approximation of how promises may move public opinion. Perhaps more importantly I am able to capture distinctions between issue-areas on which promises are routinely made (and not made) by the two major political parties. This study observationally suggests that promises are strategically motivated.

Part 3: Effect of Campaign Promises on Voter Behavior

Chapter 5: How Voters Perceive Promises

Next, I examine whether the two-way distinction in policy statements is warranted from the perspective of those whom it is intended to sway and what the resulting impact is on vote choice. First, I implement a coding task for survey respondents, asking them to

rate candidate statements on how much of a promise the respondent believes the statement to be, and how committed the candidate appears to be to his position. Responses overwhelmingly emphasize promises and commitment in candidate statements that included actions the candidate intended on performing if elected. Interestingly, the role of promissory language (phrases such as “I promise”, “I guarantee”, or “I pledge”) played very little role in respondent ratings. Indeed, voters appear not to distinguish between policy statements that contain promissory language if they are both made in active voice. Second, I conduct an experiment to examine the effect of promises on vote choice, and further test the veracity of the definition of promises as commitments to action. In this experiment, I manipulate the promise or non-promise aspect of a policy statement (keeping the general sentiment of the statement the same), and ask respondents how strongly they approve or disapprove of the candidate. I find that candidates that promise are polarizing. Namely, promises garner stronger approval and disapproval ratings than do non-promise policy statements.

Chapter 6: How Promises Matter Prospectively

Next, I consider the mechanisms at work in outlining this process. In the first experiment, I use a conjoint-style pairing of two candidates who differ largely because one makes a statement on gun control using a promise, and the other makes a non-promise position statement on gun control. First, I confirm the findings in Chapter 3: the respondent sample is split on their position on gun control, respondents who agree with the candidate’s statements prefer promisers and those who disagree with the candidate’s statement prefer non-promisers. Next, I use a mediation analysis that demonstrates that respondent expectations for candidate action lead to respondent support of a candidate. This analysis also highlights another factor in the pathway: assessments of candidate character (here measured as honesty and open-mindedness). While promises increase a candidate’s likelihood to follow through on an issue, they also decrease assessments of candidate character. In addition to confirming my theory, there are two significant findings. Because respondents rank promising candidates with lower character, there is an important asymmetry in vote share: candidates stand more to lose from promising than they do from gaining. Second, while candidates who promise are viewed as more likely to act on an issue, they are also perceived as less honest, a distinction that indicates voter skepticism of candidate’s potential for success in the policy process.

Chapter 7: Situating Campaign Promises

The final step in this analysis is consider the strategic implications of my findings for candidates and campaigns, particularly by examining the role of promising in context of other signals of expected candidate behavior. First, I use the results from Chapters 6 to project in which situations candidates should promise or refrain from promising. Using the results from these experiments to describe candidate support, I calculate that

candidates need a slight majority in support when promising to increase gun control, but almost universal support to expect to gain from promising not to increase gun control. Second, I use an additional feature of the conjoint experiment to examine the effect of parties on statements about partisan issues. I find that candidates promising against their party type gain more from promising than candidates promising in accordance with party type. Finally, I examine the question of how promises matter in context of other promises: specifically, can voters be oversaturated with promises? And if so, do the effects of promises decrease if candidates make more promises? A final survey experiment that manipulates the number of promises a candidate makes in addition to gun control suggests that the answer to both questions is yes. Candidates who promise on several issues are viewed as less likely to act on their promises. While the difference in the number of promises significantly reduces candidate likelihood to follow through, candidates who promise are *still* seen as more likely than non-promisers to follow through on their action.

This chapter then helps translate promises from an isolated experimental strategy to an event that occurs as one feature of others in the campaign context. Importantly, the results from the experiments discussed in this chapter highlight when promises will make a larger difference to voter opinion and when those differences matter less. In each scenario though, the resounding finding is that the distinction between promise and non-promise policy statements is that they continue to divide voter opinion on candidates.

Chapter 8: Retrospective Promises, and Excuses

To follow the prospective analyses of promises, I confirm that distinctions in promise v. non-promise statements matter retrospectively. Here, I investigate if voters react more negatively to candidates whose actions do not match signals of intent during campaigns, and more positively to candidates whose actions match signals of intent during campaigns. This analysis features an experiment similar to that of Chapter 6, but now includes information about whether the candidates act in accordance with their campaign statements or not. Respondents confirm that the distinction between promises and non-promise policy statements matters retrospectively as well. Candidates who promise and act differently than their word are viewed more negatively than candidates who take the same position without promising. Importantly, promise-breakers are perceived as less honest and less likely to act in accordance with their word in the future. Additionally, I experimentally manipulate four different excuses that elected officials have used in office and demonstrate that confidence lost in elected officials who act out of step is not easily regained. In contrast, candidates who promise to voters and follow through on their campaign statements are preferred to candidates who do not promise to voters. This chapter enhances the findings from Chapter 4 because it underlines the idea that candidates have good reason to issue promises with

chances of future failure in mined *and* reinforces the fundamental distinction that exists between types of policy statements.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This book set out to continue the examination of an important question in the study of representation: how do candidate's signal their intended actions while campaigning? Specifically, it identified promises as a mechanism that candidates use to solidify voter's understanding of a candidate's commitment to act on an issue. Both experimental and observational data underlines the idea that the distinctions between promise and non-promise policy statements are real and have an effect on voter opinions. As a result, the premise in this book has important implications for how we understand position-taking, and how scholars consider voter opinions. First, I provide strong evidence that rhetorical strategy can have important consequences for how voters understand positions. The distinction between promises and non-promises is subtle in my experiments: actual position on an issue does not change, but the expressed intention on that commitment does change, and subsequently alters voter preferences. These findings also lead to interesting questions about the relationship between voter expectations and candidate performance. Second, further evidence that promises serve to polarize the electorate is of particular interest to scholars investigating polarization. The experiments presented here provide evidence of how elite rhetoric does influence the intensity of voter opinions. Finally, this analysis provides an in-depth study of presidential debates that both serves to verify distinctions in position-taking as well as understand the changes in position-taking over the last 50 years.

Audience and Place in the Literature

This book is placed at the intersection of two literatures that investigate how voters are represented in democracy: candidate position-taking and promise-keeping. While work has been done to understand how candidate positions matter prospectively, and the rate at which elected officials fulfill promises, there is room for improvement in both literatures for understanding how rhetoric around candidate positions differs. And, in particular, how those differences inform decision-making, a matter that I argue depends on commitment that voters understand from how policy positions are phrased.

Under the promissory model of representation outlined by Pitkin (1967), candidate campaign platforms are important features voters use to select candidates. And much work since Downs (1965) has argued precisely how voters determine which candidate's ideology is most similar to their own. This book is relevant to several critical discussions in this context. First, this work extends the theoretical literature examining the effect of promises as signals of future candidate action to voters, and how promises affect assessments of candidate valence (Banks 1990; Kartik and McAfee 2007; Asako 2015). By highlighting a critical distinction between promise and non-promises statements and by providing

measurement of theoretical outcomes, this book provides an important continuation of the theory and necessary measurement.

Second, my work asks a critical question in the study of candidate positioning and ambiguity. These are long literatures that include many important scholars and work. What I add to this work is a more nuanced definition of position-taking, and a consideration of how rhetoric used in position-taking changes voter perceptions of candidate credibility. Attention to the prospective half of the promissory representation model mainly focuses on how voters choose candidates based on promises or positions. This work largely concentrates on a single element: how voters tend to align themselves with candidates who are closest to their positions. The simplest argument proximity voting stems from Downs (1957) who argues that voters choose candidates whose positions are most closely aligned with their own. Other theories modify proximity voting to incorporate voter projections of changes to the status quo (Grofman 1985) and voter strategy to change status quo by voting for extreme positions (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989). Types of voting have recently been addressed through similar methodology as I propose in the book by Tomz and Van Houweling (2008, 2009), who also analyze candidate positions and voter responses through experiments. Some scholars have considered how candidates might strategically use policy statements to sway voter opinion prospectively, but these scholars focus largely on what effects judgements of candidate valence (McGraw, Lodge, and Jones 2002). The questions of how candidates might assure voters of their intentions once in office, and how campaign promises affect voters is largely ignored.

Candidate ambiguity, which considers prospective voter considerations, is another long literature to which my research is closely related. The concept of promises as commitments stands orthogonal to candidate ambiguity because it measures commitments of candidates to actions, rather than specificity of a candidate's plan. The general premise of ambiguity is that candidates who are less than forthcoming with the entirety of their action plan will be rewarded at the ballot box because more voters are likely to think that the candidate's position maps onto a voter's issue space (Shepsle, 1972; Page, 1976; Campbell 1983). But this has been a hotly contested idea, with many arguing that candidates who are ambiguous in their campaign platforms also leave room for more voters to doubt their sincerity (Bartels, 1986; Callander and Wilson, 2008). Promises, I argue, operate on a separate dimension. While it is possible that connection a platform to a future action increases specificity, it does not have to. Saying that one supports gun-restrictions, indicates a position, but gives no indication that the candidate plans to follow through on that commitment. In contrast, saying that one will vote for gun-restrictions gives voters no more specific information about what types of gun-legislation the candidate supports, but does indicate that the candidate will *act* on gun legislation if elected. Work that investigates how voters distinguish between campaign statements—promises and non-promises—is lacking. Thus, this book advances our knowledge of how policy platforms affect citizen representation in demonstrating that promise statements do affect vote choice *and* that voters do expect candidates to be dissuaded from acting out of step with firmer policy statements because of repercussions for future support. And, as I demonstrate throughout the book, candidate language around positions does vary, and voters do react differently to perceptions of commitment in candidate statements.

Finally, this book is also relevant to a distinct literature that thinks about the post-electoral yield of promissory representation: the frequency of promise fulfillment. These studies typically examine the frequency with which candidates keep their promises (Pétry and Collette 2009; Sulkin 2009) and how voters judge candidates who break or keep their promises (Fiorina 1974; Fearon 1999). Elsewhere, Royed (1996), Pétry and Collette (2009), and Naurin (2014) have fostered a conversation about how most promises made by representatives are fulfilled, but low expectations of voters for candidates to do so. Even though this work has developed clear definitions of promise-making, there is still room for further research. First, my book adds an understanding of how promise statements influence voter thinking prospectively, something this work does not address. Second, there is room for clarification of non-promise policy statements and an understanding for how the fulfillment of promises versus non-promises would influence voters retrospective judgements of politicians.

I would expect the book to be of interest to scholars broadly interested in the theory and measurement of representation. This book will be of particular interest to scholars who study American politics, voting behavior, political communication, and campaigns. Although the primary audience will be other scholars (ranging from senior scholars to graduate and undergraduate students) interested in understanding political communication and election campaigns, the book also has a general appeal to individuals trying to understand the importance and function of issue appeals. Additionally, because many scholars focusing on promise-keeping do so in the European context, the audience will not be limited to scholars who study American democracy, but will include any scholars who examine democratic processes.

Timeline

The entire book is in draft form, and I am currently revising the contents to produce a cleanly edited version throughout this spring. I aim to have a completed version of the manuscript by the end of July 2017. Several chapters will be ready for review by the end of May 2017. These chapters will include Chapter 2 and Chapters 6-7, the theory and the core of the experimental chapters. I will also be doing a mini-book conference in early May 2017.

Author Biography

I am a Research Assistant Professor at the Institute of Policy Research and Political Science (by courtesy) at Northwestern University. My research focuses broadly on how messaging affects individual support for political candidates and public policy. One arm of my research investigates how candidate statements affect voter behavior. In addition to this book project, I have a paper that investigates the strategic nature of campaign promises. In another paper, I examine appeals to Latino and African American voters, and how those appeals influence support of candidates in the presence and absence of policies that are linked to larger-group concerns. Finally, I also investigate the role of framing in influencing voter support for various public policies, including human trafficking and immigration.

I graduated from MIT in 2007 with bachelor's degrees in political science and biology. In 2015, I earned a Masters and PhD in political science from Stanford University. I then spent two years as a Post-doctoral Scholar and Teaching Fellow at the University of Southern California where I taught undergraduate courses on political behavior and research methodology. Further information can be found on my website, TabithaBonilla.com.

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