



Democratic representation through the eyes of parliamentarians

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Introduction and purpose

Representative democracy is dependent on the idea that politicians are willing and able to fulfill the promises about policy change that they are elected to carry out. However, citizens in democratic states strikingly often refer to their political representatives as being untrustworthy. The image of the promise-breaking politician is common in all states where questions about election promises have been asked in national surveys. For example, in the latest Swedish National Election Study from the election 2010, as many as 66 percent of the respondents agreed with the harsh statement that “one can never trust any of the political parties to keep their promises” (Naurin 2011). Interestingly however, scholars in political science show that this negative expectation on parties’ willingness to fulfill election promises is exaggerated. When election manifestos are compared to what actual actions parties take, the opposite image emerges. In fact, scholars draw the conclusion that parties fulfill much more promises than the conventional wisdom leads us to expect (Thomson, Royed & Naurin 2011; Naurin 2011; Thomson 2001; Royed 1996).

Research on this “Pledge Puzzle” between scholars’ and citizens’ views on election promises shows that citizens and scholars do not talk about the same thing when they evaluate election promises. While scholars use parties’ pre-election programs to identify election promises, citizens seem to find election promises in any situation where interaction with politicians is at hand. Furthermore,

scholars evaluate parties’ actions, while citizens put emphasis on their own personal situation when they judge election promises. If the individual herself/himself does not feel a difference, the promise is not defined as fulfilled (Naurin 2011).

Since both theories of, and actual, democratic representation gives crucial weight to citizens’ perceptions of politics, this difference in definitions needs to be taken seriously. It leaves us with the important question of where in the process of representation politicians’ responsibility actually ends. The empirical research on parties’ election promises give us one normative standpoint: fulfilled election promise is something that is clearly stated by the political party before election and thereafter followed up by relevant political action. But, we get other normative standpoints from the citizenry.

The aim with the project *Representation through the eyes of parliamentarians* is to contribute to the theoretical question of when politicians’ responsibility actually ends by enlarging our empirical knowledge about how fulfilled election promises are defined by the individual representatives themselves. It is a striking fact that the so called election pledge research has not discussed definitions of election promises and fulfilled election promises with the actors who are actually giving the promises that are under investigation. We know far too little about how fulfilled election promises, and thereby political accountability in a more general sense, are defined in the eyes of the representatives.

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Why is it important to investigate representatives' views on election promises?

Election promises have important roles in most debates of democratic representation. The importance of investigating representatives' views on election promises can be described in both theoretical, normative and practical terms. The theoretical importance comes from the fact that election promises are given important roles in the relationship between citizens and representatives in commonly used theoretical models of representative democracy. Election promises specify parties' intentions for the future, they guide parties' actions between elections, and they serve as benchmarks at the end of the election period in the evaluations of how well parties are able to implement their decisions.¹

The difference between citizens' and scholars' definitions of election promise suggests that when these theoretical demands are empirically investigated, one can come to completely different conclusions. This indicates that notions like mandates and political accountability are differently defined in real life representation than they are in commonly used theoretical models. As scholars, we tend to agree that a good theory is also a useful theory in the sense that it is comparable to real life. A difference in definitions of fulfilled election promises between scholars and the actors of representative democracy should therefore be seen as an interesting critic of the theoretical models.

1 Put simply, the literature can be divided into theories of the mandate and theories of accountability. For literature focusing on mandates, see APSA 1950; Ranney 1954; Ranney 1975; Klingemann, Hofferbert & Budge 1994; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Schmitt & Thomassen 1999; Pierce 1999; Budge et al 2001 and all the pledge studies that are described in the text. A focus on democratic accountability is found in Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Manin 1997; Przeworski, Stokes & Manin 1999. An interesting summary and interpretation of the relationship between mandates and accountability is found for ex. in Stokes 2001: Chapter 6; see also Erikson, Mackuen & Stimson 2002.

The practical importance comes from the fact that election promises are central in actual political representation. Empirical evaluations of the fulfilment of election promises performed systematically by the so called Comparative Party Pledges Group (CPPG) show that election promises have an important role in democratic states. These scholars conclude that both the workings of parliament and the efficiency of government is effected by what promises parties make before election (see for example Thomson, Royed & Naurin 2011; Artes 2011; Artés & Bustos 2008; Mansergh & Thomson 2007; Thomson 2001; Royed 1996). Research also indicates that media give attention to election promises when they report on election campaigns (Krukones 1984; Costello & Thomson 2008). The Pulitzer Prize winning web site Politifact.com is one clear such example. Their "Obameter" lists president Barak Obama's election promises and investigates them one by one as the election period is progressing. Interestingly, there is research that indicates a disagreement between scholars' descriptions of how parties act and the individual representatives own descriptions of election promises. For example, politicians tend to accuse each other for breaking election promise. A study of Swedish political communication shows that the most used invective in political debates among parties in televised media during the 2000th century was that other parties are not trustworthy and do not honour their words (Esaiasson & Håkansson 2002; see also Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995; Lau & Pomper 2004). It is also interesting that as many as 81 percent of the Swedish MPs in the Riksdag Survey of 1996 answered that "Excessive promises from politicians" were "very important" or "some what important" as a factor that has had "a negative impact on voter trust in politicians and parties during the last 15 – 20 years". These investigations indicate that politicians themselves might have a role in creating the image of the promise-breaking politician. All in all, election promises and fulfilled election promises

are notions of importance in public debates, making investigations of what is actually meant by the same highly relevant.

The normative arguments for why we should investigate the definitions of election promises used by representatives have to do with scholars' responsibility to facilitate communication between citizens and representatives. Undoubtedly, voters face a difficult task on Election Day if they want to find out what has been done and what will be done by their political representatives. One important normative argument for investigating what representatives mean with election promises is therefore that political scientists should communicate the information that actually exists (i.e. what promises do politicians themselves perceive that they give?) so that citizens' votes stand the best chance of being as rational and efficient as possible. Inspiration comes from American political scientist Richard Fenno who expresses commonsensical ambitions to have people (including himself) understand how politicians work and think. One of his points is the importance of filling up the "knowledge gap" among citizens. If people do not know how politics works, it is difficult to improve the relationship between citizens and representatives, Fenno says (Fenno 1990:2).

In sum, election promises have a potential to facilitate the communication between citizens and representatives. However, to be able to push forward election promises as tools that can help citizens and representatives to a more comprehensible representative process, it is important to find out how the notion is interpreted by both actors.

Specific research questions and research design

The project studies three more specific questions: 1. What definitions of election promises and fulfilled election promises are found within the group of representatives? 2. What are the normative and practical arguments

behind the definitions of election promises and fulfilled election promises among representatives? 3. What are the main differences between representatives', citizens' and scholars' views of politicians' fulfillment of election promises?

To answer these questions, the project has access to, and gathers, both quantitative and qualitative data. The generosity of data comes from the fact that election pledge research has been an integrated part of the Swedish National Election Study Program for more than a decade now. Also, the newly initiated research network Multidisciplinary Opinion and Democracy Research (MOD) group at the University of Gothenburg presents great opportunities for innovative data collections through their Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORe). In this way, I have been able to add new survey questions about election promises in several of the latest surveys to politicians and citizens that are performed at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. Thanks to these newly asked survey questions, Sweden is without question the most interesting case to dig deeper into when it comes to the views that representatives have of election promises.

The project collaborates with scholars in the research network "the Comparative Party Pledge Group" (CPPG). In CPPG, scholars from different countries compare election promises that are found in election manifestos to parties' actual actions (see for ex. Thomson, Royed & Naurin 2011; 2010; Naurin 2009; 2011; Artés 2011; Artés & Bustos 2008; Costello & Thomson 2008; Mansergh & Thomson 2007; Thomson 2001; Royed 1996).

SOURCES OF DATA

The following sources of data are used in the project:

The Comparative Candidates Survey 2010 turning to all Swedish MP Candidates (a total of 4000). In this survey the candidates are asked to react to the same statement as citizens are in earlier SOM surveys ("Swedish

parties usually keep their election promises”, compare Naurin 2011). This question helps us to get estimates of degrees of criticism, and enables us to perform multivariate analyses of explanations of different opinions. However, the most interesting information in the Candidate Survey comes from an innovative survey question where the candidates are asked to judge actual election pledges for fulfillment. Seven promises are chosen from the manifesto of Alliansen in 2006 and the candidates are asked to state whether or not the promises are fully fulfilled, partially fulfilled or broken. The same question is asked to all Swedes in the Swedish National Election Study (SNES) of 2010. The promises have been evaluated for fulfillment by me and my colleagues Henrik Oscarsson and Nicklas Håkansson in the project “Att hålla ord” (financed by the Swedish Research Council). All in all, there are unique possibilities to compare actual definitions of fulfillment between scholars, politicians and voters thanks to this question. The first analyses of these questions are presented at the Midwestern Political Science Association in April 2012 (Naurin & Öhberg 2012).

The Riksdag Survey 2010, turning to all Swedish MPs. In this survey, the harsh statement presented in the beginning of this text is asked also to the representatives, i.e. “One can never trust any of the political parties to keep their promises”. Also this question opens up for comparisons between representatives and citizens since it is asked also in the SNES 2010. It helps us to get estimates of degrees of criticism, and enables us to perform multivariate analyses of explanations of different opinions.

Dataset on Swedish parties’ fulfillment of election promise. During the last three years, the project “Att hålla ord” financed by the Swedish Research Council has gathered data on Swedish parties’ giving and fulfillment of election promises for the purpose of including the case of Sweden in international comparison. The dataset contains all promises given in Swedish parliamentary parties’ election manifestos between 1991 and 2010, as

well as data on fulfillment of promises during four governments. During 2012, the Swedish data will be included in a large dataset with as many as ten other countries and presented in a comparative publication (Naurin, Royed & Thomson ed. forthcoming 2013).

Transcripts of already gathered interviews with 55 Swedish representatives and officials of government and parliament. The original purpose of these interviews was to gather information on how the Social Democrats had acted to fulfill their election promises during the period 1998-2002 (Naurin 2009). The original project searched for information from sources with different tendencies to lift forward positive vs negative information, and therefore interviewed both Social Democrats and Conservatives. The material includes elaborated discussions that enable me to analyze normative arguments that are used when defining promises as fulfilled or not.

In-depth research interviews with all party secretaries and group leaders for the parliamentary parties during the election period 2010 to 2014. The interviews described above (that were gathered for Naurin 2009) are combined with in-depth research interviews with all party secretaries and group leaders for the parliamentary parties during the election period 2010 to 2014. The field period for these interviews occurs when this is written (between December 2011-February 2012). These research interviews are hoped to shed light on both what normative definitions the representatives have of election promises and fulfilled election promises, and on what main practical obstacles that face someone who try to give or fulfill an election promise.

There is a large literature on the practical obstacles decision makers face when they create policy. Political parties in parliament or government do not have all the power to themselves. Democratic systems are instead designed to balance different sources of power against each other so that none of them can rule completely independent of the others.

Governing parties therefore share their power with other parties (in coalition governments and/or with the opposition in the parliament) and with other institutions (a president, a second chamber, a constitutional court, administrations, international organisations and nations-state cooperations). Furthermore, individual actors (street level bureaucrats, lobbyists) and force majeure (earthquakes, hurricanes, terrorism, economic recessions) have the power to alter policies. In the literature on political decision making processes, some of these obstacles to decision making are referred to as veto players or veto points, indicating that there are players (actors, institutions and sometimes events) that can stop or delay the decision making process (Tsebelis 2002; see also for example Royed 1996:47–49).

Other more country specific examples of practical obstacles that are relevant to discuss in the interviews with Swedish MPs are: our frequent minority governments, the force of EU legislation, the delegation of power to strong local municipalities, and changing relationships between the individual representative and the political party now that the rules for personal votes have been changed in the constitution.

Regarding the normative arguments behind the definition of election promises and fulfilled election promises, the project takes as its point of departure citizens' views. In my book *Election Promises, Party Behaviour and Voter Perceptions* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011), I investigate how citizens define the notions of broken and fulfilled election promises. The conclusion is that citizens do not define mandates and accountability in the same way as scholars do. Instead, I find a broader approach to mandates and accountability among citizens.

I draw several conclusions that are important in a comparison with representatives' views. Firstly, it is suggested that there is a story, or a narrative, about the promise-breaking politician that needs to be taken into consideration when citizens' criticism

is to be explained. It is obvious that all rejections of election promises are not based on actual evaluations of politicians "said" and "done". It seems like it is a demanding task to make evaluations of parties' intentions and actions. The narrative is used as a shortcut when citizens form their judgment of election promises. It seems as though the image of politicians as promise-breakers prevents people from making actual comparisons, even when they have the capacity to do so. As I see it, the tough tone in political debates (Esaiasson & Håkansson 2002) indicates that politicians are a part of this narrative.

Secondly, in my discussions with citizens, the notion of election promises does not have to represent specific statements made by specified senders in exact situations in the way that they do in scholars' evaluations. Instead, unspoken promises, where citizens assume what has been promised, are also important when politicians' abilities to fulfill election promises are dismissed. I therefore claim that the notion of election promise can be used to denote a broader kind of responsibility of the representatives. Common visions or goals of society can also be defined as election promises. In these evaluations, the respondents base their judgment on what they expect representatives to promise rather than on exact formulations actually uttered by the representatives. What should have been promised has an important role in this way of arguing. These expectations are high and come either from the respondents' normative reasoning about the responsibility of representatives or from what I call the respondents own "policy wishes". In the same way that representatives sometimes base their perceptions of the will of the people on their own wishful thinking about what citizens want rather than on actual dialogue, citizens can obviously use similar wishful thinking when they decide what parties actually promise.

"The done" is also widely defined in these comparisons. The respondents describe how they look around and see that society is not

as good as it ought to be, and draw the conclusion that promises must have been broken. In this way, it seems that, when they accept being a representative, politicians somehow also accept carrying the unrealized wishes and hopes for all society, and that these unrealized wishes and hopes can be summarized under the expression “broken election promises” when citizens give words to them.

Thirdly, citizens are also found to make comparisons that follow the same logic as scholars’ comparisons follow. Even though there is a narrative of the promise-breaking politician, and even though unspoken promises have a role in citizens’ views of election promises, I also find clearly specified comparisons of politicians’ said and done in citizens’ definitions. In these comparisons, both the sender of the promise and the situation in which it is given are specified. However, the respondents refer to considerably more senders than scholars do, and they find election promises in completely other situations than scholars do. Scholars’ focus on written pre-election messages made by the whole party should therefore be compared to citizens’ definitions of election promises as something that can also be given by individual party spokesmen in situations that have little to do with elections.

Fourthly, citizens generally emphasize the outcome of politics when they evaluate election promises. It is obvious that scholars’ focus on action is narrow in citizens’ perceptions. However, it is interesting to note that the importance of reaching all the way down to the individual is motivated both by normative and practical arguments in the interviews. The normative arguments focus on the representative process as something that is incomplete unless citizens feel the effect of decisions. The practical reasoning focuses on the fact that the only thing citizens are experts on is the immediate state of things around themselves. When they make enlightened evaluations of parties’ election promises, citizens use the information found closest to

them. In this way, the practical reasoning that scholars use when they focus on action and easily calculated output can be compared to citizens’ practical arguments about why they use outcome as source of information in their evaluation of election promises. To some extent, both use the information that they can most easily come across.

All in all, I see two tendencies in the data that give interesting clues about a possible citizen’s views of representation that should be compared to a possible understanding as expressed by the representatives. Firstly, the analyses indicate that citizens see democratic representation as a continuous process rather than as separate election periods linked together in a chain. Secondly, when my respondents describe broken election promises, the process of political representation reaches all the way down to the individual. Parties are held accountable for outcomes in individuals’ personal situations rather than for specific actions. Both these tendencies can be put in contrast to the theories that are developed by scholars who are interested in the relationship between voters and elected. Those theories tend to be both election focused and focused on the first part of the policy process. Mandates are given and accountability is demanded in elections. Notions like “issue congruence” (Holmberg 1999; 1997) and “program-to-policy-linkage” (Thomson, Royed & Naurin 2011) illustrate that scholars stop high up the chain or representation when they evaluate how well democracy works (compare Winter 2003).

Summing up, we should be humble about the fact that it is not obvious how we decide if democracy has had its intended effects. In the project I here describe, I wish to take a straight forward approach to the task and I ask: What views on the “end” of politicians’ responsibility are expressed within the group of representatives?

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