

Pledge-based accountability

Voter responses to fulfilled and broken election pledges

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DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Doctoral Dissertation in Political Science
Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
2021

To Ivan and Eva

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Printing: Stema Specialtryck AB, Borås, 2021
ISBN 978-91-8009-372-9 (print)
ISBN 978-91-8009-373-6 (PDF)
ISSN 0346-5942

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This study is included as number 165 in the series Göteborg Studies in Politics, edited by Bo Rothstein,
Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg.



Abstract

Political parties communicate their plans to voters via promises made during election campaigns. While it has been found that governments generally take these promises they make seriously, it has also been established that many voters believe otherwise. Less is known, however, about whether governments are held to account for the extent to which they fulfil their promises. This dissertation examines the effects of broken and fulfilled election pledges on voter evaluations of government performance. The findings challenge the idea that rewards and punishments for election pledge performance are straightforwardly administered by voters, instead emphasising that pledge-based accountability processes are asymmetric and affected by the biases of voters. The main conclusion is that pledge fulfilment is not the procedural value for voters suggested in some classical theoretical contributions. Instead, while most voters find it important that election promises are not broken, they find it even more important that the decisions that are taken align with their own preferences.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Politiska partier kommunicerar sina planer till väljare genom valkampanjs löften. Medan det har påvisats att regeringar i stor utsträckning tar dessa löften de gjort på allvar, så har det också påvisats att väljare inte uppfattar detta på samma vis. Dock vet vi mindre om regeringar hålls till ansvar för uppfyllelse av dessa löften. Denna avhandling undersöker effekterna av brutna och uppfyllda vallöften på väljarnas utvärderingar av regeringens prestation. Resultaten bestrider uppfattningen att belöningar och bestraffningar för prestation utförs av väljarna på ett linjärt och enkelt sätt. Istället betonas att dessa processer är asymmetriska och påverkas av väljarnas fördomar. Den huvudsakliga slutsatsen är att uppfyllandet av vallöften inte är det viktigaste för väljarna, vilket går emot det som föreslås i vissa klassiska teoretiska bidrag. Istället, medan de flesta väljare tycker att det är viktigt att vallöften inte bryts, tycker de att det är ännu viktigare att de beslut som fattas överensstämmer med deras egna preferenser.

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Acknowledgements

They sometimes say it takes a village to raise a child, but in my experience it takes at least a small city to complete a dissertation. While I am obviously grateful to each and everyone who has been part of that city's population, there are some people who deserve special recognition. First and foremost, I would like to express my immense gratitude to both supervisors, Elin Naurin and Maria Oskarson. You have brought an amazing amount of complementary expertise to this project – Elin mostly on election pledges and survey experiments, and Maria on voting behaviour and survey methodology. Similarly, your complementary characters have provided exactly the right support to get this project to its finish line. Thank you very much for all your help, dedication, encouragement and patience. You know I could not have done this without either of you.

None of this would have been possible without the support of the Department of Political Science and the SOM Institute, either. Thank you for all the support over the years and the excellent facilities you have provided for me to do my work. At the department, special thanks are due to both the former and current director of graduate studies, Carl Dahlström and Mikael Persson. I am also very grateful to the staff that was always there to help, but that has over the years also consisted of very friendly and capable people, that were always a pleasure to deal with. This list includes, but is not limited to: Karin Andersson, Susanne Bågenfelt, Anne-Marie Deresiewicz, Christin de Flon, Caroline Fällgren, Anna-Karin Ingelström, Alice Johansson, Maria Lilleste, Anna-Karin Lundell, Li Malmberg, Christina Petterson, and Dalila Sabanic. I am especially grateful to Karin Jorthé and Lena Caspers, who have not only been an amazing help to all PhD students at our department, but are also some of the nicest people around.

The SOM Institute has been instrumental in the completion of my project. In addition to the financial support to conduct my research, I am very grateful for the opportunities to attend courses abroad, and all the support in designing and implementing my experiments. I am indebted to everyone at SOM, but would like to extend a special thanks to both the current and former directors of the institute: Henrik Oscarsson and Johan Martinsson. I truly appreciate all that you, SOM, and LORE have done for me over the years. Special thanks are also due to Annika Bergström, Klara Bové, Josefin Bové, Jonas Hägglund, Lennart Nilsson, Jonas Ohlsson and Frida Vernersdotter. I am also immensely grateful to Maria Andreasson and Elina Lindgren for their invaluable help with my experiments over the years.

Many people have contributed to my thesis over the years. I am grateful to Stuart Soroka for the opportunity to work with, and learn from him, grateful to Dan Butler, Ruth Dassonneville, Michael Lewis-Beck, Mike Tomz, Endre Tvinneheim and Juha Ylisalo for valuable comments on my experiments and paper ideas in the past, and grateful to John Jennings for his excellent help finalising the manuscript. I would also like to extend a special thanks to those who have read and commented on my work over

the years, in particular Peter Esaiasson, both for the prospectus seminar in 2015 and now for the green light, Annika Fredén, Mikael Gilljam, Ann-Kristin Kölln, Jacob Sohlberg and Maria Solevid.

I have always enjoyed the working environment at the department. This was in no small part due to the presence of people such as, in addition to the afore-mentioned: Dennis Andersson, Sofia Axelsson, Linda Berg, Sofie Blombäck, Nicholas Charron, Stefan Dahlberg, Delia Dumitrescu, Göran Duus-Otterström, Ann-Marie Ekengren, Lina Eriksson, Henrik Friberg-Fernros, Niklas Harring, Jonas Hinnfors, Kristen Kao, Victor Lapuente, Kyle Marquardt, Marina Nistotskaya, Anna Persson, Jon Polk, Andrea Spehar, Anders Sundell, Aksel Sundström, Ann Towns, Lena Wängnerud and Georgios Xezonakis. In addition, I am also grateful to my fellow (former) PhD students for making my time at the department much more enjoyable, in addition to those already mentioned: Kety Bolkvadze, Peter Dahlgren, Stephen Dawson, Moa Frödin Gruneau, Felix Hartmann, Fredrik Hjorthen, Eva Hoxha, Ezgi Irgil, Prisca Jöst, Olof Larsson, Sebastian Lundmark, Elias Markstedt, Valeriya Mechkova, Gefjon Off, Petrus Olander, Marina Povitkina, Felicia Robertson, Marcus Tannenberg, Erik Vestin and Karin Zelano.

Even though we were often far apart, I enjoyed being a part of my PhD cohort consisting of Elin Bergman, Maciej Sychowiec and Aiysha Varraich. I fondly remember the dinner parties and trip to Uppsala during the first years. Maciej and Aiysha, I am very grateful to you for planning to travel all the way to, and to stay longer in Sweden to be present for my defence. I look forward to spend time with you, if Covid-restrictions in June will permit. I much enjoyed our comradery, help and support over the years, and hope we will manage to stay in touch in the future.

Finally, I am grateful for the support of my friends and family. Thanks are due to my friends Bjorn and Reinier, as well to my relatives in The Netherlands including Corné, Edwin and Leo. To my grandparents Nel, Jan and Truus, and of course my parents, Astrid and Dick – thank you for all your love, encouragement, help and support. I am also grateful to my parents in law Alexander and Tatiana for all their tireless help during this period. Most of all I am grateful to the love of my life, Ekaterina, and my wonderful children Ivan and Eva. Ekaterina – I literally could not have done this without you, nor would I have wanted to. Ivan and Eva – while I cannot say you have always been the greatest help with my work, you definitely made sure there was more to life for me than politics. Thank you for that essential contribution.

1

Introduction

Predictability is a classic virtue of government, as many classic philosophers have already described. Naturally, the inverse is also true – unpredictable governments are feared, and the stereotype of promise-breaking, lying politicians rests at the very core of the wide-spread political distrust that sometimes so appears to characterise our time. In the run up to the 2016 American presidential elections, the influential newspaper, the New York Post, summarised a prevalent sentiment in society with the following joke – ‘How do you know a politician is lying? His lips are moving’, in an article entitled ‘Finally, science shows that politicians are lying liars who lie’. Citing academic experts on lying from various disciplines such as political science and psychology, this article painted an unsettlingly cynical picture of office-seeking politicians that will promise anything to win an election and will do whatever they please afterward. While politicians are actually considerably more invested in fulfilling their promises than voters commonly believe (see Thomson et al, 2017; Naurin et al, 2019), we know much less about the political consequences of politicians keeping and breaking their promises. A central concept in influential accounts of representative democracy is that voters dispose of unreliable leaders through elections, but is this also a realistic threat for promise-breaking politicians? Do voters hold governments accountable for the promises they break?

The aim of this dissertation is to clarify how election pledges matter to voters’ retrospective evaluation of government performance. The question central to the aim is how broken and fulfilled election pledges affect voters. One cross-sectional and three experimental studies, conducted in the European Union and Sweden, respectively, address this universal theme as part of this thesis. The extent to which government performance on election pledges provides input into accountability processes through performance evaluations is one of the two most important ways in which election pledges can be theorised to matter to voters. The other is the communication of policy plans between political parties and voters prior to an election, to underlie prospective vote choices, which in itself could be an important first step in setting the scene for pledge-based accountability. The considerable degree of pledges that parties tend to fulfil suggests that parties do indeed take pledges seriously. Similarly, academia seems increasingly aware of this, with a growing number of studies considering election pledge performance as an indicator of government performance speaking to reliability and efficacy and possible grounds for informing accountability processes. For voters as political actors, two substantially contradictory perspec-

tives could be formulated based on the available theoretical insights. Critics of the study of representative democracy will say that voters do not know which policies are pledged, nor which pledges are fulfilled, and they do not care either; while in influential accounts of representative democracy, pledges, and voter responses to them, take on an important role.

Theoretical insights on this topic tend to be of a general nature – and often rely on a sense of ‘obviousness’ that is not always supported by empirical results. The theoretical contribution here lies in an elaboration of these theoretical insights, striving to add important detail and nuance to the placement of pledge performance in the context of wider accountability processes. The findings speak predominantly to two important themes. First, to the study of retrospective voting and political accountability, they provide an extensive account of another form of government performance on which voters may base their retrospective evaluations, rather than the more commonly considered criteria of economic performance or (specific) policy outcomes (see for overviews De Vries and Giger, 2014; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Despite the relevance that important theoretical work has assigned to pledge performance, not many empirical studies on retrospective voting have focused on pledge performance. To address this, a straightforward model of accountability in the form of a reward-punishment hypothesis was formulated and applied to the relationship between pledge performance and evaluations of government performance, positing that voters reward pledge-keepers and punish pledge-breakers. The primary results provided pertain to the degree to which voters do so and under which conditions. Second, to the study of election pledges, these results contribute empirical evidence that pledge performance matters to how voters hold their government accountable. While many studies on election pledge fulfilment have convincingly argued for the importance of pledge performance for accountability processes, providing empirical evidence for this importance has not typically been their primary focus.

Five specific aims elaborate in more depth the details of the relationship between pledge performance and political accountability. First, challenging the implicit assumption of symmetry in the formulated reward-punishment hypothesis, a comparison is made of the effects of broken and fulfilled pledges on voters’ evaluation of government performance. Second, challenging the implicit assumption that voters want all pledges to be fulfilled, the influence of pledge content on reward and punishment for fulfilled and broken pledges is assessed. Third, challenging the implicit assumption that voters always want pledges to be fulfilled, the role of pledge context and voters’ performance expectations in the effects of broken and fulfilled pledges is examined. Fourth, the effects of pledge performance are placed in the wider context of retrospective government evaluations, to determine how important broken and fulfilled pledges are to voters in comparison to other types of government performance. Fifth, and finally, measurement of voter perceptions of election pledge fulfilment is discussed focusing on the presence of an opposition-government derived partisan bias in forming opinions of pledge performance and the susceptibility to partisan cheerleading of survey questions in general.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In the following sections, the concepts of retrospective voting, accountability, and election pledges are united and built

upon to formulate the central reward-punishment hypothesis. The sections after that discuss this hypothesis in more detail, following the specific aims set out above. These sections address normative aspects pertaining to pledge performance, negativity bias and asymmetry in pledge-based accountability, the influence of pledge content and context on the effects of broken and fulfilled pledges on voters, and measurement of pledge fulfilment perceptions in the light of partisan bias, opposition-government perceptual divides, and partisan cheerleading. After a summation of the hypotheses, the overall methodological considerations of this study are summarised. Finally, the results of the empirical studies are placed back into their theoretical context and their implications and potential for future research explored.

Pledge-based accountability

‘Voting the rascals out’

Retrospective voting entails that voters reward political actors that perform well and punish political actors that perform poorly (Healy and Malhotra, 2013). This reward-punishment hypothesis, dating back to the classics (Key and Cummings, 1966; Fiorina, 1981), has found support in a large number of empirical studies spanning many different contexts (Wilkin et al, 1997; see for overviews Ashworth, 2012; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). As an accountability mechanism, the reward-punishment hypothesis fulfils two important roles in a representative democracy. In a retributionist sense, elections allow voters to express their discontent with the performance of their government and ‘send them home’ – while well performing governments can be rewarded with re-election. Importantly, this can incentivise good government throughout the term of office (e.g., Barro, 1973; Ferejohn, 1986). In addition, elections provide voters with the possibility of extending the term of governments that served them well and to avoid extended exposure to governments perceived as inadequate or undesirable (see Downs, 1957; Malhotra and Krosnick, 2007). In that latter sense, retrospective evaluations can also impact prospective voting decisions (see e.g., Downs, 1957; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; 2013).

The basis of retrospective voting can be dissected into two parts. Voting based on prior performance requires some sort of evaluation on the voters’ part of the said performance – before the prior performance can be used for accountability purposes. While ample evidence is available that voters do at least to a certain extent vote retrospectively (see Ashworth, 2012; Healy and Malhotra, 2013), few would argue that evaluations of prior performance are the sole basis for voting decisions – in which many other factors can play a role. That said, since voters’ retrospective evaluations of government performance matter to their decisions at the ballot box, it is, from an accountability perspective, relevant to study how evaluations are formed and what they are based on.

In principle, evaluations of government performance can be based on almost anything. This was evidenced by the study of Healy *et al* (2010), which showed that even irrelevant events such as college basketball results can affect voters’ evaluations of government performance. In practice, the predominant theme in the retrospective voting literature has been the economy (see Healy and Malhotra, 2013).

Many studies on economic voting have used both objective and subjective indicators of economic development, on societal and personal levels, to explain how voters form evaluations of governments' tenure in office (see e.g., Anderson, 2007; Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2011).

However, in recent years the field of retrospective voting has started to move towards incorporating other grounds for government evaluations. Concrete non-economic outcomes and performance, such as school test scores, response to natural disasters, and war casualties (see for an overview Healy and Malhotra, 2013:295; see also James and John, 2007) have been considered as input for the reward-punishment model of retrospective voting. Other studies have examined the effects of policy responsiveness of the government (e.g., Canes-Wrone et al, 2002; Hogan, 2008), corruption (e.g., Ecker et al, 2016), and the level of competency displayed (e.g., Fearon, 1999) on evaluations of government performance. In addition, it should be noted that not all policy outcomes pertain to the economy and that a wide range of outcomes, from the construction of a bridge to the provision of clean drinking water, could be considered. A range of such non-economic policy outcomes has been considered in recent work (e.g., De Vries et al, 2011; Giger and Nelson, 2011; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; De Vries and Giger, 2014; Gidengil and Karakoç, 2016). The degree to which a political actor fulfils election pledges has long not received similar attention in *empirical* retrospective voting studies (see Corrazzini et al, 2014), but does retrospective voting based on pledge performance also occur?

Election pledges and voters

Election pledges occupy an important place in influential *theoretical* accounts of representative democracy (e.g., Downs, 1957; Miller and Stokes, 1963). Starting with the publication of the APSA report 'Toward a more responsible two party system' in 1950, scholars have emphasised the importance of election pledges to representative democracy – which has even led some to coin and utilise the term 'promissory representation' for the most prominent form of political representation (Mansbridge, 2003; 2011; Rehfeld, 2009; 2011). Proponents of the mandate model of political representation have argued over the years that elections provide elected political actors with mandates from the electorate to govern as they proposed prior to the elections (e.g., Klingemann et al, 1994; Schedler, 1998; McDonald et al, 2004; Valen and Narud, 2007; Louwse, 2011) – and election pledges find a natural, important role in these conceptions of political representation. Empirical support for this view has been found and is still actively growing (e.g., Hofferbert and Budge, 1992; Louwse, 2011; Thomson et al, 2017; Kolpinskaya et al, 2020; Naurin et al, 2019). There is also empirical evidence that election pledges matter prospectively to voters – making the right pledges can attract voters (Elinder et al, 2015; Born et al, 2018)¹.

¹ See also studies on the effects of election campaigns on voters (e.g., Finkel, 1993; Druckman, 2004).

From an accountability perspective, what matters is the degree to which leaders honour their commitments and provide the policies that they promised to implement (pledge performance). The way Downs (1957) saw it, if political actors are inherently office-seekers, and voters are policy-seekers, pledges should serve two important functions. First, pledges reveal important information on the policy plans of the political actor making them, therewith allowing voters to select the candidate that will provide the policies they seek. This allows political actors to seek office by promising those voters the appropriate policies. Second, political actors need to fulfil their pledges if they want to win re-election from voters responding to implemented policies. Otherwise, they risk losing re-election from voters seeking to obtain their desired policies from political actors that either have delivered or provide a more credible promise of delivering such policies in the subsequent governing term (see also Stokes, 2001 and Erikson et al, 2002) – a prospective implication of retrospective voting. Pledge performance tells voters about the integrity and honesty of political parties, as well as about their competence and decision-making capacity (Naurin, 2011). From this perspective, punishing pledge-breakers is not merely punitive or an incentive for parties to fulfil their pledges. Not re-electing dishonest and incompetent parties also serves the voters in their desire for an honest and competent government that delivers (a similar prospective component of retrospective voting to that described in accounts of economic voting; see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000).

While an important role of pledge performance in accountability processes could be presumed, not many studies have empirically addressed the importance of election pledges to voters (see also Corazzini et al, 2014; Matthieß, 2020). Rather, most empirical studies on election pledges have focused on the degree to which pledges are fulfilled. A consistent finding is that while political parties have been found to take their pledges seriously – and generally act on most of them – voters generally do not believe this to be true (Naurin, 2011; Thomson, 2011; Thomson and Brandenburg, 2019; see for overviews Thomson et al, 2017; Naurin et al, 2019). Another question that has received attention recently is to what degree voters are aware of which pledges are made, and which ones are fulfilled – and why (Naurin and Oscarsson, 2017; Pétry and Duval, 2017; Thomson and Brandenburg, 2019; see also Thomson, 2011).

Over recent years, the number of empirical studies explicitly addressing the role of pledge performance in accountability processes has grown. In laboratory experiments, punishment and reward for broken and fulfilled election pledges have been convincingly established (Corazzini et al, 2014; Born et al, 2018). Johnson and Ryu (2010) found support in Latin American politics for broken pledges functioning as a magnifier of economic performance. On the macro-level, the analysis of Matthieß (2020) on data from 69 elections in 14 countries shows that government parties that fulfil more pledges present better results in subsequent elections. In addition, results from studying the effects of post-election policy shifts in 23 countries over 40 years imply conditional electoral punishment for broken election pledges (Tavits, 2007). In Sweden, however, the findings of Elinder *et al* (2015) did not provide evidence of

retrospective voting based on pledge performance – rather highlighting the important prospective effects of pledges on voting behaviour.

The main take-away is that even if pledge performance matters to voters' evaluations of government performance, the central reward-punishment hypothesis may not address the relationship in sufficient detail for all intents and purposes. More closely examined, the basic hypothesis of pledge-based accountability, that approval of pledge-breaking parties will be lower than that of pledge-fulfilling parties, relies on a number of assumptions that need to be addressed. In its most basic form, this hypothesis would pre-suppose that voters are aware of which pledges are made, fulfilled, and broken – and are correct in their assessment (i); that the mechanism applies equally to any combination of political actor and voter (ii); that all voters see fulfilled pledges as good performance and broken pledges as poor performance (iii); that voters want all pledges to be fulfilled, irrespective of what was promised (iv); and that voters expect all pledges to be fulfilled, irrespective of circumstances (v). In other words, the specific hypotheses for the empirical part need to at least account for the following five nuances – voter awareness; partisanship; normative voter expectations of pledge fulfilment; pledge *content* and its consistency with voter preferences; and pledge *context* – surrounding factors that may alter voters' performance expectations.

Work on economic voting provides further support for these notions. Indeed, for voters to base their retrospective evaluations of government performance on economic indicators – they need to be aware of them (e.g., Gomez and Wilson, 2001; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; see also Healy and Malhotra, 2013). In addition, voters need to agree with definitions of good and bad performance (e.g., Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Economic voting studies also reference unequal responses to negative and positive economic performance (e.g., Bloom and Price, 1975; Hansen et al, 2015; Kappe, 2018); partisan bias in evaluating economic performance (e.g., Rudolph, 2006; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; see also Healy and Malhotra, 2013); and contextual factors that may condition the economic vote (e.g., Rudolph, 2006; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Singer and Carlin, 2013) – also with respect to voters' expectations of (economic) government performance (Palmer and Whitten, 1999; Malhotra and Margalit, 2014).

Voter perceptions of pledge fulfilment

As a somewhat pragmatic concern, for pledge performance to matter to voters, voters need to some degree to be aware of what pledges are made, by whom, and what their fulfilment status is. While academic definitions of what constitutes a pledge are clear and have received a lot of attention (see Thomson et al, 2017; Naurin et al, 2019) – it is also known that voters have different and broader definitions of what constitutes a pledge (Naurin, 2011; Thomson, 2011; Dupont et al, 2019). This in part explains why voters' perceptions of pledge fulfilment in general do not correspond to the positive academic findings of pledge fulfilment by government parties. In

addition, voter myopia, misinformation, and political disinterest could be expected to affect voter awareness of election pledges and the degree to which they are fulfilled (e.g., Carrubba, 2001; Hellwig and Marinova, 2015).

However, studies that have addressed the extent to which voters are aware of individual pledges and their fulfilment status have found evidence of voter awareness. Naurin and Oscarsson (2017) found that Swedish voters are quite able to assess whether specific pledges have been fulfilled (see also Thomson, 2011), more so if they possess higher levels of political knowledge. Personal heuristics were found to play a lesser role in the degree to which voters are correct about the fulfilment of specific election pledges. Pétry and Duval (2017) presented similar findings, reserving a more important role for heuristics and motivated reasoning; and a slightly different role for political knowledge. They found voters' political knowledge to matter to fulfilment evaluations of fulfilled pledges but not to fulfilment evaluations of unfulfilled pledges. Thomson and Brandenburg (2019) found that voters' trust affects the accuracy of their fulfilment evaluations, and the extent to which they rely on heuristic thinking. Overall, voters are quite able to assess whether a given pledge has been fulfilled or not – but some biases may impact the accuracy of their fulfilment evaluations.

Other accounts of retrospective voting have found that attribution of reward and blame is affected by partisan bias (e.g., Rudolph, 2006; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; see also Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Therefore, when it comes to assigning broken and fulfilled pledges to parties, partisan preferences can also be expected to play a role. It is reasonable to assume that voters are less inclined to assign pledges known to have been broken to the parties they support and more inclined to credit them with fulfilled pledges. This may also impact the accuracy of voter assessments of pledge fulfilment status – with voters more likely to view pledges made by preferred parties as fulfilled and more likely to view pledges made by non-preferred parties as broken. Recent findings in Portugal (Belchior, 2019) further support this notion. For voters' general assessment of the extent to which pledges are fulfilled, some indications of such partisan bias have been observed. Indeed, comparing data from two different waves of the Swedish national SOM survey (2000; 2012) on voters' pledge fulfilment perceptions for all Swedish parties (Markwat, 2015) suggests that voters reason from a government vs. opposition perspective when assessing pledge fulfilment. An important implication of this would be that excluding party labels from the equation does not fully immunise the measurement of pledge fulfilment perceptions against partisan bias. This notion resonates with previous research – that even non-partisan questions can incite partisan behaviour (e.g., Chia et al, 2007; Feldman, 2011). This entails that when voters are asked to assess the extent to which political actors in general fulfil their pledges, the answers provided are not just impacted by potential voter unawareness and different definitions on the voters' part (Naurin, 2011; Thomson, 2011; Dupont et al, 2019). Different voters may have a different subset of parties in mind and may treat the question as a means to express their like or dislike for this subset of parties. In which case, both often-used measures of voters' general pledge fulfilment perceptions, that is, including and excluding partisan references, may be affected by partisan bias. It is hypothesised that voters respond

more positively to survey questions when their preferred party is in government, even if the survey question does not ask them to assess a topic related to national, partisan politics. This partisan cheerleading theory hypothesis is tested in *paper 4*, the results of which provide strong support for the occurrence of partisan cheerleading to the vast majority of survey questions in a political survey.

In summary, not everything points to a strong influence of partisan bias. Despite the empirical indications mentioned above, that partisan heuristics to a large degree drive voters' general assessment of the extent of pledge fulfilment (Markwat, 2015), recent empirical studies addressing more specific voter assessments of the fulfilment of individual pledges indicate considerable levels of voter awareness (Naurin and Oscarsson, 2017; Pétry and Duval, 2017; Thomson and Brandenburg, 2019). In addition, if voters are confronted with concise messages about election pledges, their fulfilment status, and the political actor responsible – the problems of voter unawareness and partisan bias for the accuracy of voter assessment of pledge fulfilment would arguably be of lesser importance to the mechanism of pledge-based accountability. To that point, it is known that the media report on the pledges that are made and the degree to which governments manage to uphold them (Krukones, 1984; Costello and Thomson, 2008; Kostadinova, 2017), and that these reports can be quite explicit.²

That said, partisan bias can also impact how voters respond to pledge performance. If voters are less likely to punish preferred parties and more likely to punish non-preferred parties for poor performance (see e.g., Fiorina, 1981; Lebo and Cassino, 2007; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011) – voter responses to fulfilled and broken pledges can be expected to depend on the level of affinity between the voter and the pledge-maker. This effect can stem either from disbelief on the voter's part that their preferred party would break a pledge or that a non-preferred party would fulfil a pledge; as from an unwillingness to punish a party that the voter feels sympathy for or to reward a party that the voter dislikes (see Fiorina, 1981). This warrants the hypothesis that broken pledges are more likely to lead opposition supporters to more negative evaluations of government performance than government supporters, and vice versa. The influence of partisanship on rewards and punishments for broken and fulfilled pledges is tested in *paper 1*. While partisanship has a strong direct effect on voters' evaluations of government performance – partisanship – as such – was not found to moderate the effects of broken and fulfilled pledges on these performance evaluations.

² For example, article headers found during the study period have included: '[The Liberals] honor their election promise on teaching assistants' (SVT - Swedish National Broadcaster); 'The Social Democrats promise an extra week of parental leave' (Aftonbladet); and 'The Alliance breaks election promise: sneakily raised petrol excise' (Aftonbladet).

Good and poor performance

For any hypothesis indicating that voters are affected by performance, it is important to establish what voters perceive to be good and poor performance. While the common conception is that broken pledges count as poor performance and fulfilled pledges constitute good performance – certain caveats can be identified. Is it truly without question that broken pledges are always a sign of poor performance and fulfilled pledges are a sign of good performance? While the pejorative accusation of 'promise-breaker' often thrown around in political debates (see Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2002; see also Benoit, 2013) carries an unmistakably negative connotation, conditions can be envisioned under which breaking a pledge may be perceived as favourable by voters (see e.g., Schedler, 1998; Stokes, 2001).

Arguably, the way in which prior performance, including pledge performance, matters most to voters, is related to voters' representational preferences (e.g., Carman, 2007; Werner, 2019), or as Schedler (1998) argued on the question of whether election pledges *should* be fulfilled: in the end, it is up to the voters. In the model of mandate representation, pledges are commonly allotted a prominent role. From this perspective, if the mandates that political actors receive from their electorate during elections are clear,³ violating them would constitute a violation of the voters' trust in the political actor. Reasoning from an accountability perspective of representation, broken pledges can affect voters' views of political actors' competency and reliability. An extension of these perspectives would suggest consequences for the political actor's prospects of re-election if pledges are broken.

However, central to the idea of representational preferences is the notion that various models of representational preferences imply that various levels of discretionary freedom are available to representatives (see e.g., Pitkin, 1967; Fox and Shotts, 2009; Bengtsson and Wass, 2010). From this perspective, it can be presumed that voters may have different desires when it comes to the fulfilment of election pledges. If voters impose strict demands on their representatives and expect the representatives to act according to the voters' desires – not implementing the policies that were implicitly agreed upon before the election should be seen as poor performance. However, if voters entrust representatives with their effective power to govern by electing them and allow representatives to serve the voters' interests the way they see fit – a certain degree of discretionary freedom should be expected for the representatives to break at least certain pledges under certain conditions. Indeed, from that latter perspective, punishment for broken pledges could be substantially less probable. Recent empirical studies confirm this notion, finding that voters actually have different representational preferences – and that while some prefer representatives to always fulfil their pledges, others prioritise enactment of the common good or responsiveness to public opinion (Werner, 2019).

³ Which they are not necessarily (see Pennock, 1979; Riker, 1982; Kelley, 1983; Powell, 2000; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Franklin et al, 2014).

Whether a trust or mandate is violated could be considered a matter of subjective interpretation on the voter's part. Indeed, if the voter supports that the promised policy action is not enforced, it would be hard to argue that that voter feels the political actor in question deserves punishment. Those vehemently opposed to Donald Trump building a wall on the Mexican border will have hoped he did not fulfil his promise. Following the same logic, if breaking the pledge is considered *good* performance – for whatever reason it may be – then this should not tarnish the voter's confidence in that actor's capacity to perform in the future either. In fact, the anticipated effect might be quite the opposite in such cases.

Three survey items were developed and fielded in the Swedish national SOM-survey of 2017, exclusively for this thesis, to provide essential empirical background information on voters' representational preferences in the context of political parties' pledge fulfilment. These survey items were presented to a representative sample of the Swedish population (1,755 respondents). On a scale from 1-5, where 1 is 'fully disagree' and 5 is 'fully agree', respondents were asked to which extent they agreed with the following statements: 'Parties are better suited than voters to assess which election promises should be kept' (i); 'Parties' election promises represent contracts that should never be broken' (ii); and 'Parties should always be held accountable for broken election promises' (iii).

As anticipated, the results indicate that representational preferences vary among voters (see also Carman, 2007; Von Schoultz and Wass, 2017; Werner, 2019). While for all statements, the largest share of respondents indicated 'low discretionary freedom' for their representational preferences of pledge fulfilment, for two out of three statements there is a substantial minority sympathising with 'high discretionary freedom' representation as well. The only exception is the statement that political parties should always be held accountable for the pledges they break, which got an overwhelming support of 65% of the respondents that answered the question – while only 12% disagrees to some extent. An OLS regression analysis revealed that while varying representational preferences with regard to discretionary freedom are found across Swedish society, politically interested voters were slightly more likely to allot the government more discretionary freedom.

On the one hand, the views of the respondents on whether parties should be held accountable for breaking their pledges corresponds largely to the observation that the general norm that political parties should fulfil their pledges is quite uncontroversial (Schedler, 1998). At the same time, the variation that was found for the perceptions that pledges are contracts that should not be broken; and that political parties are better suited than voters to assess which pledges should and should not be fulfilled, implies that different voters may have different representational desires. In that case, it is arguably overly simplistic for the reward-punishment hypothesis to assume broken pledges are perceived by all voters as poor performance and fulfilled pledges as good performance.

In addition, it should be restated here that pledge performance is not the only form of government performance voters might consider in their retrospective government evaluation. A number of valid performance indicators that voters can use as shortcuts to evaluate government performance can be thought of (see also Healy and

Malhotra, 2013) but their relative importance to voters does not appear to have been systematically studied (see Werner, 2019). If voters have different desires of political representation (Carman, 2007; Von Schoultz and Wass, 2017; Werner, 2019), it can be presumed that different forms of government performance are of differing importance to different voters. Indeed, for voters expecting political actors to act (almost) exactly according to the voters' desires, it would make sense that more weight is attached to the congruence of the policies implemented with their policy preferences and policies pledged prior to the election. Conversely, for voters that expect their representatives to act with a higher degree of discretionary freedom, policy and economic outcomes would more likely serve as the primary evaluation criteria.

For the effects of pledge performance on evaluations of government performance, this implies that other modes of government performance moderate these effects. For example, if the economy is doing well, and/or favourable policy outcomes are obtained, and/or the produced public policy is in line with public opinion or voter preferences – broken pledges are expected to induce in voters lesser effects on the perceived credibility and, especially, decision-making capacity and competency of a political actor. This in turn means that voters can then be expected to attach less weight to a political actor breaking the pledges they made to the electorate. The hypothesis is that the effect of broken pledges on voter evaluations of government performance is weaker when other aspects of government performance are perceived as more positive, and vice versa. *Paper 3* evaluates the relative importance of pledge performance for voters. It found a clear contribution of pledge performance to overall voter evaluations of government performance. However, the contributions of both a government's policy congruence with voters and obtained economic outcomes were found to be substantially larger.

Pledge content and policy consistency

The content of election pledges constitutes another important complication for the perception of fulfilled pledges as good performance and broken pledges as poor performance. If voters are policy-seekers (Downs, 1957), then they should not reward political actors that implement undesirable policies. Applied to pledge performance, this entails that fulfilled pledges should be perceived as good performance only by those that support the policy action contained in that pledge. Vice versa, voters that perceive the policy action contained in a pledge as undesirable should probably not consider the breaking of that pledge poor performance. Indeed, the breaking of that pledge would then serve the policy agenda of those voters. In these cases, the voter could still punish the political actor for breaking an implied trust by going back on their word, but the perception of their future capacity and competency to govern might remain untarnished, and, under certain circumstances, maybe even improve.

A large body of literature exists that deals with the question as to which degree voters' policy preferences correspond to the policy positions of their representatives – and the degree to which this issue congruence is supposed to matter (e.g., Thomasen and Schmitt, 1999; Mattila and Raunio, 2006; Golder and Stramski, 2010; Arnold and Franklin, 2012; Dassonneville et al., 2020; see also Esaiasson & Holmberg, 2017; Perreira, 2020). In addition to studies on the prospective effects of election campaigns and pledges (Finkel, 1993; Druckman, 2004; Elinder et al, 2015; Born et al, 2018), there are studies on issue voting in general (e.g., Bartels, 1986; Ansolabehere et al, 2008) – affirming to a degree that policy positions and policy preferences should matter to voters. Of particular interest is the study by Fournier *et al* (2003), focusing on the mediating influence of issue importance on the effect of policy issues on voting behaviour. Their findings entail that when voters consider an issue important enough – because they support either side of the cause to a large degree – it will impact how voters use policy to make electoral decisions. In conjunction with the findings in the field of issue voting, this implies that voters actually find policy issues important enough to consider them when assessing government performance and even when holding parties accountable in elections.

Of course, voters do not construct policy preferences and issue positions free from outside interference. Indeed, both the media and prominent political actors have been found to drive, to a large degree, what voters think they want their government to do (e.g., Jordan, 1993; Kleijnehuis and Rietberg, 1995). As for policy preferences in general, the assessment of the policy content of an election pledge is therewith almost inevitably a complex combination of attachment to the pledge-making actor (i.e., partisan bias), ideological features, as well as a range of biases, and sociotropic or egotropic interest in the issue at hand (e.g., O'Rourke and Sinnott, 2006; Walgrave and Lefevere, 2013). The well-documented partisan bias in political attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011) prescribes that voters should be more inclined to like the policy proposals made by their preferred party, even if the congruence between their preferences and the proposal is not optimal (Carsey and Layman, 2006). With respect to the content of election pledges, this would imply that voters would put higher demands on the pledge performance of their preferred parties, as they are more likely to want the policy proposed by them to actually be implemented. However, as hypothesised earlier, it is entirely possible that the same partisan bias underlying that mechanism also moderates the punishments awarded to parties for breaking election pledges; additionally, it has a direct, positive impact on the overall evaluation of the said parties' performance.⁴

Considering the above, it can be hypothesised that fulfilled election pledges are less likely to positively affect voter evaluations of government performance if the proposed policy action in the pledge does not correspond to voter preferences, and vice versa. The importance of pledge content for voter responses to fulfilled and broken election pledges is evaluated in *paper 1*. The affinity of a voter with the content of a pledge has an important impact on fulfilled pledges. Fulfilling a pledge

⁴ *Paper 1* found no evidence for the former but clear evidence for the latter.

containing policy action inconsistent with a voter's preferences was found to have a negative effect on that voter's evaluation of government performance.

Pledge context and performance expectations

Not just the *content* of election pledges has the potential to affect how pledge performance impacts voter evaluations of government performance. A number of *contextual* factors can be specified as well that should create, lower, or increase voter expectations of pledge fulfilment – which in turn could cushion the blow in the case of broken pledges, as well as increase the rewards when pledges are fulfilled against all odds. For example, if economic conditions are evidently poor, voters may have more understanding for a political actor being unable to allocate the necessary budget to implement a pledged policy change. Similarly, demands may be higher on a party governing on a single party majority, than one engaged in a complex, or minority coalition government.

While few studies have addressed the role of performance expectations in accountability processes and retrospective voting, large bodies of literature on similar topics have been built up in other academic fields over the years. When Richard L. Oliver (1977; 1980) documented the expectation confirmation theory (ECT) in the late 1970s,⁵ its main focus lay on consumers evaluating the performance of private goods, and – later – services. Consequently, the academic disciplines that took a first interest in testing the theory of expectation confirmation were marketing, retailing, and economics, in addition to psychology. The rationale of the theory was that when the performance of a consumer good exceeded the consumer's expectation, this led to a higher level of customer satisfaction with the product and its supplier – whereas products failing to meet the consumer's expectation were associated with lower levels of customer satisfaction. In addition to studies emphasising the importance of the ECT in evaluations of consumer goods (e.g., Swan and Combs, 1976), the role of expectation disconfirmation has also been established in evaluations of private services (e.g., Cadotte et al, 1987; Tse and Wilson, 1988).

In more recent years, the ECT has also appeared in studies interested in citizen evaluations of public goods and services, in the field of public administration (e.g., Chandek and Porter, 1998; James, 2009; Morgeson, 2013). These studies used the expectation confirmation theory – often referred to as Expectancy Disconfirmation Models (EDM) in public administration research – to study how citizens evaluate the services provided by their (local) administrations. In addition to, and in line with this, studies on specific public service providers and local governments, Morgeson (2013), found support for the ECT in the formation of citizen attitudes toward federal government services in the US as well.

⁵ But note that parallels can be observed with the work on 'rising expectations' in sociological studies relating the concept of relative deprivation to the arising of, and participation in, social movements in the late 1960s (see for overviews Gurney and Tierney, 1982; Smith and Pettigrew, 2015).

Despite its success and popularity in other fields, the ECT – and performance expectations in general – have not taken a prominent role in many political science studies. That said, some overlap can be found between the roots of the ECT and early contributions on the ‘honeymoon effect’ (Mueller, 1970; Stimson, 1976), as well as the concept of benchmarking in retrospective voting (e.g., Kayser and Peress, 2012; Arel-Bundock et al, 2019; see also Healy and Malhotra, 2013)⁶. In addition, a small number of studies have underlined the importance of the expectation confirmation theory to the understanding of political attitude formation and political behaviour (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2005; Kimball and Paterson, 1997; Malhotra and Margalit, 2014; Waterman et al, 1999; 2014).

On the other hand, Seyd (2015) – combining survey data from the UK on respondents’ prior, existing expectations regarding politicians’ performance, actual performance, and respondent levels of political trust – concluded that lower expectations do not lead to a milder response to poor government performance, and that governments seeking to increase political trust should rather aim for better performance than for lower expectations. Nevertheless, Malhotra and Margalit (2014) – using vignette experimental treatments, including information to respectively raise or lower voters’ expectations of government performance, and information to respectively confirm or disconfirm these manipulated expectations – concluded that voters punished their leaders for underperformance when they felt that the government could be held responsible for this poor performance. However, if such attributable authority was lacking, voters were found to reward leaders for setting high expectations, irrespective of the results, leading Malhotra and Margalit (2014) to conclude that in general, optimism is rewarded by voters as a character trait.⁷

In addition, frequently cited accounts of retrospective voting (e.g., Fiorina, 1981) have touched upon a mechanism in which voters’ prior experience affects their expectations of future performance, and therewith their perception of that performance (see Erikson et al, 2002). Recent empirical findings have also underlined that performance expectations are formed by voters, and that these are to an extent the product of external factors (Kolpinskaya et al, 2020) – implying they can be manipulated. This was also shown to be true for expectations of pledge fulfilment, which can, at least, be altered by certain rhetoric – or ‘persuasive words’ (Lindgren, 2017).

In the Swedish national SOM-survey of 2016, a survey question exclusively developed for the purposes of this thesis was posed to a representative sample of the Swedish population. The question contained five election pledges – three of which were made by the Social Democrats and two by the Green Party – which together formed the Swedish government at the time. On a scale of 1-4, where 1 is ‘very improbable’ and 4 is ‘very probable’, the respondents were asked how probable they found it that each of these pledges would be fulfilled.

⁶ An interesting comparison of the electoral effects of expected and unexpected economic change is also provided by Palmer and Whitten (1999).

⁷ Indeed, a surprising finding in the light of the well-established negativity bias in political impressions, attitudes, and behaviour.

The results illustrate that there is indeed variation in voter performance expectations of pledge performance. Not only do the expectations vary per voter, but they also vary substantially by pledge and by political party responsible for making the pledge. The perceptions of the respondents are generally negative, in line with the findings on general pledge fulfilment perceptions (Belchior, 2019). However, the respondents are a lot more optimistic about the pledges made by the Social Democrats than those made by the Green Party. Of one Social Democrat pledge (to make pre-schools mandatory for 6-year olds), a narrow majority even has high fulfilment expectations. Analysis performed on the same data revealed that while expectations are generally low, they are somewhat higher among supporters of, and those respondents that consider themselves ideologically closer to, the party that made them. This partly explains the higher average expectations reported for pledges made by the much larger Social Democrats than for the much smaller Green Party.

It is to be expected that rewards and punishments for fulfilled and broken election pledges are conditional upon the fulfilment expectations that a voter may have. Therefore, the hypothesis is that broken election pledges are more likely to negatively affect voter evaluations of government performance if voter fulfilment expectations of pledges are higher, and vice versa. Concretely, this means that voters with high expectations are more likely to be disappointed in a government party that breaks its election pledges and thus more likely to lower their approval of this party’s performance – i.e., administer more severe political punishment (*negative disconfirmation / underperformance hypothesis*). Vice versa, voters with low expectations are presumed to be more positively surprised by a government party fulfilling their election pledges and therefore to increase their approval of this party’s performance – i.e., administer higher political reward (*positive disconfirmation / outperformance hypothesis*). The importance of pledge context and voter fulfilment expectations is addressed in *paper 2*. The findings did not support the hypothesised disconfirmation effects – but rather suggested the presence of a confirmation bias.

Negativity bias: asymmetric accountability

From any reward-punishment hypothesis, the implicit assumption could be extracted that rewards and punishments for good and poor behaviour are supposed to be equal. However, it is well-documented that voters have a tendency to process negative information differently from positive information (see for an overview Soroka, 2014) and to attach more weight to negative than to positive information. There are many cognitive biases that guide human psychology and behaviour – and it is well-established that the political realm is far from an exception to this rule (e.g., Kunda, 1990; Zaller, 1992; Arceneaux, 2012; Huber et al, 2012). Negativity bias is a prominent example of this. In psychology, it entails that negative information affects a person’s psyche more strongly than neutral or positive things. The general focus of psychological research on negativity biases has been on impression and attitude formation (e.g., Feldman, 1966; Fiske, 1980; Skowronski and Carlston, 1989), and

the same applies to early contributions in political science (e.g., Lau, 1982). Negativity effects were also found in the study of political leaders (e.g., Lau, 1985; Klein, 1991; Goren, 2007). Overall, in politics, negativity biases have been found to be relevant for, among other things, reactions to news, political campaigns, and in ratings of elected officials (see Soroka, 2014).

An asymmetry between rewards and punishments in accountability processes has also long been suggested – starting with the classic contributions by Campbell *et al* (1960) and Key and Cummings (1966), asserting that electoral punishment should be more probable than reward. In empirical economic voting studies, support for such an asymmetry has not been consistently found (see for an overview Radcliffe, 1994). Nevertheless, several studies on economic voting have underlined unequal voter responses to poor and good economic conditions (e.g., Bloom and Price, 1975; Claggett, 1986; Hansen *et al*, 2015; Kappe, 2018). In addition, strong support was found for the existence of an asymmetry in the way voters hold local officials accountable in England (James and John, 2007; Boyne *et al*, 2009).

If indeed negative information is to have a stronger effect on voters than positive information, and voters hold governments accountable in an asymmetric way, this implies that broken pledges should matter more to voters' evaluations of government performance than fulfilled pledges. Since voters hold parties' pledge performance in a particularly low regard, it is plausible that a negativity bias exists in the way voters respond to information about election pledges – and probably also about pledge performance. It is hypothesised that broken pledges have a stronger effect on voter evaluations of government performance than do fulfilled pledges. This hypothesis is tested in *paper 1* – which findings confirm the existence of a negativity bias in pledge performance effects on voter evaluations of government performance. The existence of this asymmetry in pledge-based accountability – punishment for broken pledges, but virtually no reward for fulfilled pledges⁸ – further provides an important explanation for why government approval has been found to almost inevitably decrease over time – the well-documented 'cost of ruling' (see e.g., Paldam, 1986; Paldam and Skott, 1995; Nannestad and Paldam, 2002; Palmer and Whitten, 2002; Wlezien, 2016).

Hypotheses

To sum up, the aim of this thesis is to clarify how election pledges matter to voters' retrospective evaluation of government performance – and for that purpose seven hypotheses were developed. The overarching hypothesis is the *reward-punishment hypothesis* central to retrospective voting, adapted to the context of pledge performance (H1). Its central rationale is that voters reward for fulfilled pledges and punish for broken pledges – where rewards and punishments are observed in voters' evaluations of government performance. The validity of this hypothesis finds con-

⁸ If the pledge content is incongruent with voter preferences, punishments may even be observed for fulfilled pledges – see *paper 1*.

siderable support in theoretical elaborations of the role of pledge performance in a representative democracy (see for an overview Naurin *et al*, 2019) and, to a degree, also in contemporary empirical studies (Johnson and Ryu, 2010; Corrazini *et al*, 2014; Born *et al*, 2018; Matthieß, 2020).

H1: *A political actor breaking an election pledge leads voters to more negatively evaluate this actor's performance, whereas a political actor fulfilling an election pledge leads voters to more positively evaluate this actor's performance in government.*

Based on insights from work on partisan cheerleading and opposition-government divides and partisan bias, it is theorised that voters' perceptions of general pledge performance are affected by partisan bias, which can be incited even without explicit partisan references. The *partisan cheerleading hypothesis* (H2) pertaining to this notion is studied in *paper 4* and is formulated as follows:

H2: *Voters provide more negative responses to survey questions when a political actor that the voter does not support is in government, and more positive responses when a political actor that the voter supports is in government.*

In addition, borrowing from work on partisanship and partisan bias, it is theorised that partisan bias moderates the effects of broken and fulfilled election pledges on voter evaluations of government performance. More specifically, it is expected that voters are less likely to punish preferred parties and less likely to reward non-preferred parties. This *partisan bias hypothesis* (H3) is addressed empirically in *paper 1* and formulated as follows:

H3: *A broken pledge leads voters to more negative performance evaluations of a political actor, if it was made by a political actor that the voter does not support, whereas a fulfilled pledge leads voters to more positive performance evaluations of a political actor, if it was made by a political actor that the voter supports.*

Evaluating the notion that voters perceive broken pledges to constitute poor performance and fulfilled pledges to constitute good performance – the existence of varying representational preferences in voters is used to theorise that voters generally find it important that pledges are fulfilled but are typically more concerned with delivered economic outcomes. The accompanying *relative importance hypothesis* (H4) is addressed in *paper 3* and formulated as follows:

H4: *The effect of a broken election pledge on voter evaluations of a political actor's performance is weaker when other indicators of government performance are perceived as more positive, whereas the effect of a fulfilled election pledge on voter evaluations of a political actor's performance is weaker when other indicators of government performance are perceived as more negative.*

Further nuance of the notion that voters perceive broken pledges to constitute poor performance and fulfilled pledges to constitute to good performance is sought in the proposed policy action contained in pledges. It is theorised that if voters do not support this proposed policy action, they will be less inclined to administer rewards for its fulfilment. Vice versa, it can be expected that punishment is moderated by the consistency of the pledged policy action with a voter's preferences. This *pledge content hypothesis* (H5) is empirically addressed in *paper 1*.

H5: *A broken election pledge is more likely to negatively affect a voter's evaluation of a political actor's performance if the proposed policy action in the pledge corresponds to that voter's preferences, whereas a fulfilled election pledge is more likely to positively affect a voter's evaluation of a political actor's performance if the proposed policy action in the pledge does not correspond to that voter's preferences*

Departing from the notion that circumstantial factors are likely to impact voter expectations of pledge performance – and therewith the effects of pledge performance on voter evaluations of government performance – insights from the expectation confirmation theory are borrowed to theorise that punishment and reward for pledge performance is contingent upon voters' fulfilment expectations. The accompanying *expectation disconfirmation* hypothesis of outperformance and underperformance is tested in *paper 2*, and formulated as follows:

H6: *A broken election pledge is more likely to negatively affect a voter's evaluation of a political actor's performance if the voter's fulfilment expectations of this pledge were higher, whereas a fulfilled election pledge is more likely to positively affect a voter's evaluation of a political actor's performance if the voter's fulfilment expectations of this pledge were lower.*

Building upon the work on negativity bias and retrospective voting addressing asymmetry in accountability processes, it was theorised that voters are more affected by broken pledges than by fulfilled pledges. This *negativity bias* hypothesis is empirically addressed in *paper 1* and formulated as follows:

H7: *The negative effect of a broken election pledge on a voter's evaluation of a political actor's performance is greater in magnitude than the positive effect of a fulfilled pledge on a voter's evaluation of that political actor's performance.*

The formulated hypotheses are primarily tested through survey experiments – a common method for political science studies aiming to make causal claims about topics pertaining to political psychology, political behaviour, and public opinion (see e.g., Mullinix et al, 2016). The most important benefits of using survey experiments for this thesis are the possibility to isolate the effects of a particular intervention on voter evaluations and the ability to control for the direction of the measured effects. By eliminating the risk of confounding variables and/or reversed causality affecting the causal relations between the key variables of this study – survey experiments make correct empirical inferences more probable.

Four experiments were used to test the hypotheses set out in *papers 1-3* and were fielded in Spring 2015; Fall 2016 (replication); Winter 2017; and Spring 2019. The respondent samples used for the experiments varied in terms of size (2,000-13,000) and composition for different experiments. Part of the samples came from population-based recruitment, but self-recruited respondents were also part of the samples. In each experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to treatment conditions, with pre-stratification on key demographic variables where applicable (experiments for *papers 1 and 2*). All four experiments were implemented by the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE)⁹ in their Citizen Panel. LORE is an organisation within the University of Gothenburg devoted to conducting data collection through web questionnaires. Collection of data in collaboration with LORE is performed through a number of web panels, of which the Citizen Panel is the largest with over 60,000 active respondents in Sweden. The panel component of the Citizen Panel and their accommodation of survey experiments provided a very suitable environment to test most of the hypotheses developed in this dissertation. Measures from previous panel waves were used to allow for prior vote choice, party preferences, and political interest to be incorporated into the statistical analyses.

The experimental results are further supported by data obtained from original survey items fielded in national SOM surveys in Sweden, using population-based samples. The results were used as important input for the development of the theoretical model, empirical evidence for *paper 3*, and corroboration of the external validity of the experimental results. The survey questions were fielded in the national SOM surveys of 2016 and 2017, with sample sizes of 1,580 and 1,755, respective-

⁹ See <https://lore.gu.se> for more information.

ly. The Society, Opinion, and Media (SOM) Institute¹⁰ has conducted surveys to collect research data and presented annual trend analyses on public opinion and media habits in Sweden since 1986. Every year, the SOM Institute conducts a number of independent studies – nationally, regionally and locally, for which more than 30 000 people living in Sweden, between the ages 16 to 85 years, are randomly selected to participate in the SOM surveys.

In addition, for *paper 4*, data gathered in two large international surveys were analysed. Both of these were standard Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the European Commission and fielded in 2009 (71.1) and 2019 (91.5). These Eurobarometer surveys were chosen for a number of reasons specific to paper 4, including the high quality of the data, the wide range of included indicators, and importantly, the inclusion of a party choice variable. For the dissertation as a whole, the methodology of paper 4 offers an added international perspective. Eurobarometer surveys are fielded in a large number of countries – and for all of these countries sizable samples of respondents are available. Moreover, together with the analyses of SOM data presented earlier in this chapter, the analyses of the likewise cross-sectional Eurobarometer data provide a non-experimental context for the primary experimental results presented in this dissertation.

One important consideration for all experiments has been the trade-off between the internal and external validity of the experimental results. Confronting respondents with real-world pledges and accurate information about their fulfilment status, as well as the pledge-maker, can be expected to render more reliable responses than presenting them with information about fictive parties and pledges. At the same time, since accurate real-world information cannot be adjusted to fit a treatment condition, this gain in external validity comes at a cost to internal validity. Indeed, the same pledge cannot be both fulfilled and broken, and the same government party cannot both break and fulfil the majority of its pledges. Therefore, in the experiments in which accurate real-world information was used (for *papers 1 and 2*), efforts had to be made to mitigate the looming loss of internal validity by selecting highly comparable (groups of) pledges and performance information for the different treatment and control groups. For the discrete choice experiment designed for paper 3, it was not possible to use real-world information. Indeed, for this type of experiment to function the *same* attributes have to be assigned different values for different respondents. The inevitable hit to external validity this results in limits the degree to which the acquired knowledge can be applied to understanding real-world accountability processes. For those processes, many factors pertaining to the political context, voter and government party identity, and performance are likely to affect voter perceptions and decisions. However, for evaluating political behaviour and psychology outside of a national setting, and with a lesser burden of contextual factors, this type of experiment offers great advantages (Hainmueller et al, 2015).

All four experiments were conducted in Sweden, and for all but the discrete choice experiment information about Swedish parties, pledges, and performances was used. It is hard to estimate how this affects the generalisability of the results

¹⁰ See <https://som.gu.se> for more information.

found in this thesis. However, theories of democratic accountability and retrospective voting tend to be viewed as universal theories, and comparative empirical studies on these topics do not typically reveal large regional differences (e.g., Lohmann et al, 1997; Wilkin et al, 1997; Jhee, 2006; Healy et al, 2017; see for overviews Berry and Howell, 2007; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). For the kind of psychological processes concerned here, in general, it is difficult to imagine that voters living in comparable conditions would respond fundamentally differently to the same treatments. The perception that politicians do not even try to keep their pledges, for example, also seems quite consistent across countries (ISSP, 2006). For the individual papers, subgroup analyses also did not support the notion that certain groups of respondents, who could potentially be more or less prevalent in other countries, responded in a considerably different way to the experimental treatments. The separate papers (1-3) provide detailed descriptions of the design and analytical strategy of the experiments.

4

Papers in summary

Four papers constitute this dissertation. The first paper addresses the overarching hypothesis that information about broken and fulfilled election pledges should lead voters to punish and reward their government, respectively (H1). More specifically, it also addresses the negativity bias (H7), the pledge content hypothesis (H5), and the partisanship hypotheses (H3). The second paper focuses on the effects of pledge context on the assessment of pledge performance – testing the ECT hypotheses (H6) of outperformance and underperformance. The hypothesis addressed in the third paper is the relative importance hypothesis (H4); evaluating the importance of pledge performance to voters under the conditionality of other important modes of government performance. The final paper addresses the partisanship hypotheses (H2; H3); exploring the extent to which partisan cheerleading occurs in political surveys and to what degree this is dependent on the distance from the national, partisan politics of the survey question.

Paper 1: ‘Asymmetric Accountability: An Experimental Investigation of Biases in Evaluations of Governments’ Election Pledges’ (with Elin Naurin and Stuart Soroka)

The first paper is co-authored with Elin Naurin and Stuart Soroka. In this paper, the notion that – in a similar fashion to all retrospective voting – voters should administer electoral rewards to government parties that fulfil their pledges and punish those that break their pledges was put to an empirical test. Following accounts of negativity bias, it was further hypothesised that voters should attach more weight to broken than to fulfilled pledges, and hence that punishment should be observed more prominently than reward. Finally, it was theorised that the relationship of the voter to the pledge content, and the pledge maker, should provide at least a partial explanation as to why certain voters may reward parties for good pledge performance and others may not.

Two large-scale survey experiments were implemented in the Citizen Panel of LORE. Both the original experiment and the replication experiment designed for *paper 1* contribute in three important ways to gathering the necessary empirical evidence to answer the questions posed in this thesis and to test its hypotheses. The experiment provided an important empirical test of the overarching reward-punishment hypothesis (H1) for pledge performance (i). In addition, the conditional-

ity of this main effect was tested in two important ways. By comparing the effects of broken and fulfilled pledges on voters, the negativity bias hypothesis (H7) was put to an empirical test (ii). Finally, by accounting for the consistency of the policy action contained in the presented pledges with the respondents' policy preferences and partisan identity, the pledge content hypothesis (H5) was also subjected to an empirical test (iii).

The original experiment, implemented in the spring of 2015, divided 13,000 respondents over ten treatment groups (approximately 1,000 respondents per group) and one control group (approximately 3,000 respondents). Five of the ten treatment groups all received one fulfilled pledge made by the Social Democrats prior to the 2014 parliamentary election in Sweden – a different pledge for each group. The other five treatment groups were presented with one broken pledge made by the Social Democrats prior to the 2014 parliamentary election in Sweden – again a different pledge for each group. The control group received a null treatment carefully matching the actionable language of the treatments administered to the other ten groups, only omitting all pledge-related information. To account for the varying saliency and policy area in which pledges were made, ten different pledges were used for the treatments – paired up to represent the same policy areas across treatment conditions. Respondents were not explicitly told that the pledge they had received was broken or fulfilled, but rather they were asked: *'Are you aware that the Social Democrats will break/have fulfilled this promise?'*. The control group was asked: *'Do you know that the Social Democrats have been in government since the election of 2014?'*. These questions were not asked for the purpose of analysis of its responses, but rather to reinforce the treatment information for the respondent. Both response possibilities (dichotomous) repeated the same information again, so that respondents could read the vital and distinctive parts of the treatment information no less than three times. Immediately after the treatment, all respondents were asked to answer the following dependent variable question on a seven point scale: *'How well do you think that the Social Democrats have performed in government?'*.

The replication experiment, fielded in the fall of 2016, had almost entirely the same design. The main differences were that it utilised slightly fewer respondents (approximately 10,000), had eight instead of ten treatment groups (approximately 1,000 respondents per treatment group), and included a measure to account for respondents' policy preferences prior to the experimental treatment. The findings were in a sense remarkable, but at the same time in line with expectations. Pledge-based accountability was indeed found to be asymmetrical – with voters administering clear punishments for broken pledges and much weaker rewards, if any, for fulfilled pledges. Thus, partial support was provided for the reward-punishment hypothesis (H1) and strong support for the negativity bias hypothesis (H7). It was also found that voters with lesser affinity with the pledge content or maker (i.e., for whom the pledge was not policy or partisan consistent) may even punish a government party for fulfilling a pledge. Thus, the findings supported the pledge content hypothesis (H5) more than the partisanship hypothesis (H3). If parties are punished for poor performance, and by some even for supposedly good performance, then the net result is a loss of support almost irrespective of how well they perform. This leads to

the conclusion that asymmetrical accountability processes may well provide an important, partial explanation for the 'cost of ruling', the seemingly inevitable tendency for governments to lose approval over their tenure in office.

Paper 2: 'Not as expected: The role of performance expectations in voter responses to election pledge fulfilment'

For *paper 2*, a survey experiment was designed that first aimed to raise and lower respondents' expectations of pledge fulfilment and thereafter to confirm or disconfirm these expectations with information about fulfilled or broken pledges. It explores the notion that not only the content, but also the context of election pledges should matter for how voters deal with political parties fulfilling and breaking them. It studies the influence of contextual factors surrounding election pledges on voter responses to pledge performance. Borrowing insights on the expectation confirmation theory (ECT) from other disciplines, such as psychology, marketing, and public administration studies, it is hypothesised that voters with lower expectations would be more rewarding when pledges are fulfilled, and that voters with higher expectations would punish pledge-breaking parties more severely. The experiment designed for this paper, thus, aimed to test the ECT hypotheses of outperformance and underperformance (H6).

The experiment designed to test these hypotheses empirically is an innovative large-scale survey experiment, in which the respondents' expectations of pledge fulfilment were first raised and lowered prior to them receiving information about real-world broken and fulfilled pledges. First, for all respondents (2,465 in total), a pre-measure of the focal dependent variable (evaluation of the Social Democrats' performance in government) was recorded through a survey question that separately measured the respondents' opinion about the performance of both current government parties (Social Democrats and Green Party) and the current opposition parties (Alliance parties; Sweden Democrats; Left Party). Then, 40% of the respondents (groups 1 & 2; 988 respondents) received a treatment text intended to raise their pledge fulfilment expectations – telling them that research has shown that Social Democrat governments keep most of their promises (which is true, see Naurin, 2011). Another 40% (groups 3 & 4; 967 respondents) received a treatment text intended to lower their fulfilment expectations – telling them that research has shown that minority coalition governments, which the Social Democrats were at the time a part of, usually find it more difficult to uphold their promises (which is also true, see Thomson et al, 2017). The remaining 20%, in the control group, received a null treatment text utilising the same key words. Immediately after these expectation treatments, as a manipulation check, all respondents were asked to state their expectations regarding the Social Democrats' fulfilment of election pledges for this governing term. In the third step, 40% of the respondents (groups 1 & 3) received a treatment text confronting the respondents with pledge fulfilment by the Social Democrats, including three examples of fulfilled pledges. The other 40% (groups 2 & 4) received a treatment text confronting the respondents with the Social Demo-

crats' breaking of election pledges, including three examples. The remaining 20%, in the control group, received a null treatment text containing the same key words but merely mentioning that the Social Democrats make election pledges and three examples – with no mention of their fulfilment status (which was still undecided for these pledges at the time of the survey). Now, for group 1, the raised fulfilment expectations should have been positively confirmed; for group 2, the raised fulfilment expectations should have been negatively disconfirmed; for group 3, the lowered fulfilment expectations should have been positively disconfirmed, and for group 4, the lowered fulfilment expectations should have been negatively confirmed. Subsequently, all groups were again asked for their evaluation of the Social Democrats' performance in government so that confirmation and disconfirmation effects could be recorded and the ECT hypotheses of underperformance and outperformance tested. The design of this experiment was pre-registered with EGAP.

In the experiment, it proved possible to considerably raise and lower respondents' performance expectations, and these expectations were found to matter a great deal to how voters use pledge performance to hold their government accountable. No support for the outperformance and underperformance hypothesis (H6) was found. Interestingly, findings from interacting the manipulated performance expectations and pledge performance information support the presence of a confirmation, rather than a disconfirmation, bias. In line with some other studies that have applied the expectation disconfirmation theory to political processes (most prominently Seyd, 2015), this study finds that attitudes about pledge performance are formed more similarly to other political attitudes than evaluations of private/public goods or services. The found confirmation bias in combination with a negativity bias in the media, provides a partial explanation of the low esteem voters hold of election pledge fulfilment in general, which is well-documented (see ISSP, 2006).

Paper 3: 'The policy-seeking voter: Evaluations of government performance beyond the economy'

In *paper 3*, the relative importance of pledge performance to evaluations of government performance and party choice are examined in comparison to commonly used criteria of government performance. Theoretical insights and analysis of survey data on representational preferences are used to construct the argument that while pledge performance matters to voters, it does not matter to all voters equally and is conditional upon other indicators of government performance. The discrete-choice experiment designed addresses voter perceptions of pledge fulfilment as good performance and broken pledges as poor performance; and the relative importance of pledge performance versus other important indicators of government performance (H4). The aim of the experiment was to elicit an estimate of the relative importance of pledge performance through conjoint analysis of varying discrete-choice tasks that the respondents were confronted with. The basic arrangement was that respondents were asked to choose between two fictional, unlabelled political parties, based on a set of five attributes with randomly assigned values. Each of these five attrib-

utes could take on three values – positive, neutral, or negative. In total, 243 unique party profiles were available. As it would be unfeasible to have all possible pairs of profiles assessed by at least one respondent, a fractional factorial design was elected (see Hainmueller et al, 2014).

To avoid primacy and ordering effects, the order of the attributes was randomised per respondent. Before the experiment commenced, the respondents were shown a screen with a short introduction to the experiment telling them about the study, what sort of task to expect, and what they should do. On the next screen, respondents were then shown two competing profiles (Party A and Party B) containing randomly-assigned values for these five attributes, per screen. They were then shown three questions that formed the dependent variables of this study. First, the respondents were asked which of these two parties they would choose if they had to vote for either. Then, they were asked to evaluate each party's time in office, based on the descriptions provided, on a scale ranging from very bad (1) to very good (7). On the final screen, after the experiment was concluded, the respondents were asked how important they found each separate attribute. All five attributes were simultaneously regressed on the dependent variables (see Hainmueller, 2014). For the discrete choice data, the dependent variable is the estimated probability of choosing a party profile (0-1). For the ranking data, the dependent variable is the average rating of a party profile by the respondents (1-7). To avoid problems with degrees of freedom in the final models, the respondents were asked to complete only one task each – eliminating the need to cluster the standard errors at the respondent level, and thereby associated concerns over degrees of freedom (see Franchino and Zucchini, 2015). Attribute orthogonality is achieved by design in this study. The design of this experiment was pre-registered with EGAP.

The findings indicate that voters are policy-seekers, to whom policy output matters even beyond policy outcomes; but also that voters are egotropic in their evaluation of implemented policy and attach more weight to implemented policy corresponding to their personal preferences than to majority preferences in public opinion, and election pledges. Thus, strong support was provided for the relative importance hypothesis (H4).

Paper 4: 'Partisan cheerleading outside a partisan context: Biased responses to political survey questions'

Paper 4 addresses the influence of partisan cheerleading and the government-opposition divide among survey respondents on responses to commonly used survey questions (H2). It argues that survey respondents engage in partisan 'cheerleading' even when responding to survey questions that have little to no connection with national, partisan politics. One observation made about these survey questions is that even when they are formulated without explicit party references, such as labels or operative words, respondents seem to understand the question as a reflection on the incumbent government's performance. This, in turn, leads respondents to tap into their partisan preferences and answer more positively if their preferred party is part

of the government and more negatively if their preferred party is not part of the government.

The data used for this study were obtained from two standard Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the European Commission in 2009 and 2019. 171 questions were deemed suitable for analysis and coded based on their formulation into three categories. The first category is that of formulations containing no explicit party references, with a national topic. The second category is that of formulations containing no explicit party references, on an international topic. Finally, the third category is that of formulations containing explicit non-party references. This means that the formulation, for example, explicitly mentioned an international institution, such as the European Central Bank or the United Nations. Summated rating scales were constructed for these three categories, and respondents were coded into supporters of the largest government party and largest opposition party in all included countries to analyse whether partisans provide significantly different answers to these survey questions. The analyses make clear that they do. Even to questions far away from national, partisan politics, such partisans provide partisan responses, with government supporters providing more positive responses to virtually all survey questions and opposition supporters providing more negative responses. These results were validated through a series of robustness checks. Strong support is provided for the partisanship hypothesis (H2).

Findings and implications

The empirical studies find overwhelming support for the notion that the overarching *reward-punishment hypothesis* formulated for this dissertation is too simplistic to fully inform understanding of pledge-based accountability. At the same time, the results do not support either a completely cynical view of the degree to which voters consider policy pledges and decisions when evaluating governments. *Papers 1 and 4* jointly disavow the notion that partisanship may hold an undue influence over pledge-based accountability processes. Moreover, all experiments conducted for *papers 1-3* provide strong evidence of rewards and punishments for fulfilled and broken election pledges, observed in voters' evaluations of government performance.

There are important nuances to note, though. *Paper 1* also provides strong support for the *negativity bias* hypothesis (H7), revealing that voters hold governments to account for broken pledges – which can result in considerable punishment – but may not reward them for fulfilled pledges. The paper also provides support for the *pledge content* hypothesis (H5), showing that the fulfilment of unwanted pledges can cause severe punishment for governments. While not supporting the *expectation disconfirmation* hypothesis (H6), *paper 2* still finds strong support for the notion that voters' expectations of pledge fulfilment interfere with the rewards and punishments they allot for fulfilled and broken pledges. When pledge performance is in line with voters' expectations, they provide considerably stronger punishments for broken pledges or considerably stronger rewards for fulfilled pledges, respectively. *Paper 3*, then, provides strong evidence that voters find policy *output* important when evaluating governments, even more so than (economic) *outcomes*, but also makes clear that the content of the implemented policies is considered much more important than the fact that the implementation of such a policy fulfils an election pledge.

In summation, the empirical findings show that in evaluating their governments voters find pledge performance important, but less so than policy congruence. The most important implication of this is that voters do not regard pledge fulfilment as an important procedural value. While voters punish incumbents for breaking their pledges, they do not administer rewards for pledge fulfilment on its own - especially not if the content of the fulfilled pledges does not correspond to the voters' preferences. Indeed, the findings suggest that voters are more policy-seeking than often presumed and that the procedures through which these preferred policies are obtained is of secondary importance to voters. Whether the implemented policy corre-

sponds to public opinion and election pledges appears to matter little beyond individual policy satisfaction.

Since voters attach more weight to broken than to fulfilled election pledges, and any further positive effects of pledge fulfilment are hindered by the degree to which the policy action contained in a pledge corresponds to a voter's preferences, pledge-based accountability is asymmetrical. This means that political parties may suffer a decrease in voter approval even when they fulfil their pledges. This provides an important account of the 'cost of ruling' – the widely-observed tendency of governments to suffer decreasing approval over the course of their governmental tenure.

Not only the *content*, but also the *context* of election pledges was found to affect pledge-based accountability processes. Contextual factors can affect voter expectations of pledge fulfilment, and these fulfilment expectations can be assigned an important role in how voters respond to broken and fulfilled pledges. However, the observed influence of fulfilment expectations does not correspond to the expectation disconfirmation hypotheses of outperformance and underperformance. Instead, a *confirmation* bias appears to impact how voters respond to pledge performance – meaning that fulfilled pledges have a stronger positive effect on high expectation voters and broken pledges have a stronger negative effect on low expectation voters. This means that if parties want to gain voter approval, they should aim for better performance rather than lowering voter expectations. Placed back into context, the findings imply that attitudes about pledge performance are formed in a similar way to other political attitudes. This notion combined with the presence of negativity biases in both voters and media may provide an interesting partial explanation of the low esteem in which voters generally hold pledge fulfilment.

In conjunction, these preliminary findings warrant the conclusion that the reality of pledge-based accountability, despite its apparent straightforwardness, is indeed considerably more complex than could be inferred from the overarching reward-punishment hypothesis or from a perspective of cynicism. Broken and fulfilled pledges do matter to voters, and voters may be more policy-seeking than often presumed, but that does not mean that all voters reward every fulfilled or punish every broken pledge. Biases affect this process, sometimes in expected ways such as through negativity bias; sometimes in unexpected ways, through, for example, confirmation bias; and sometimes less so than anticipated, as through partisan bias. The main take away for accountability processes in general, other than that they can be expected to be complex, is that voters appear to want to get their way (see also Esaiasson et al, 2016). They want to obtain the policy that they prefer (e.g., Elinder et al, 2015), and they respond to confirmation of their political expectations (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). Indeed, this fits into a wider global trend of perceived digital echo chambers and their very real political consequences (see e.g., Brugnoli et al, 2019). In combination with the negativity bias found in this dissertation, as well as in many other parts of political life and the media (see Soroka, 2014), this may have led and continue to lead to political cynicism among voters. Indeed, if voters respond strongest to information that is in line with their expectations, as well as to negative information such as the media might overly supply, then accountabil-

ity processes may very well not function in the way that society needs them to in turbulent times as these.

Suggestions for future research

The aim of this dissertation was to clarify how election pledges matter to voters' retrospective evaluation of government performance. Evaluations of government performance were used as a precursor to retrospective vote choice in this study of accountability processes. A logical next step would be to investigate in a real-world setting to what extent policy output influences re-election decisions in individual voters. While the impacts on evaluations of government performance and simulated party choice were substantial, the degree to which such evaluations are taken to the ballot box may vary, and in a full model of vote choice the impacts could be substantially weaker.

It could already be an interesting addition to replicate the results obtained in the discrete choice experiment designed for *paper 3*, using more realistic and less descriptive scenarios. Similarly, it would be interesting to study the themes of this dissertation in a more comparative setting, for example how pledge performance is evaluated for different types of governments. Finally, a considerable contribution to the understanding of partisan cheerleading could be made if the analysis used in *paper 4* were to be implemented in a comparable, but non-political survey. If indeed it is the political nature of a survey that persuades partisan respondents to provide partisan responses (see Bullock and Lenz, 2019) to virtually all questions, such a finding could have important repercussions for the analysis of political surveys everywhere.

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