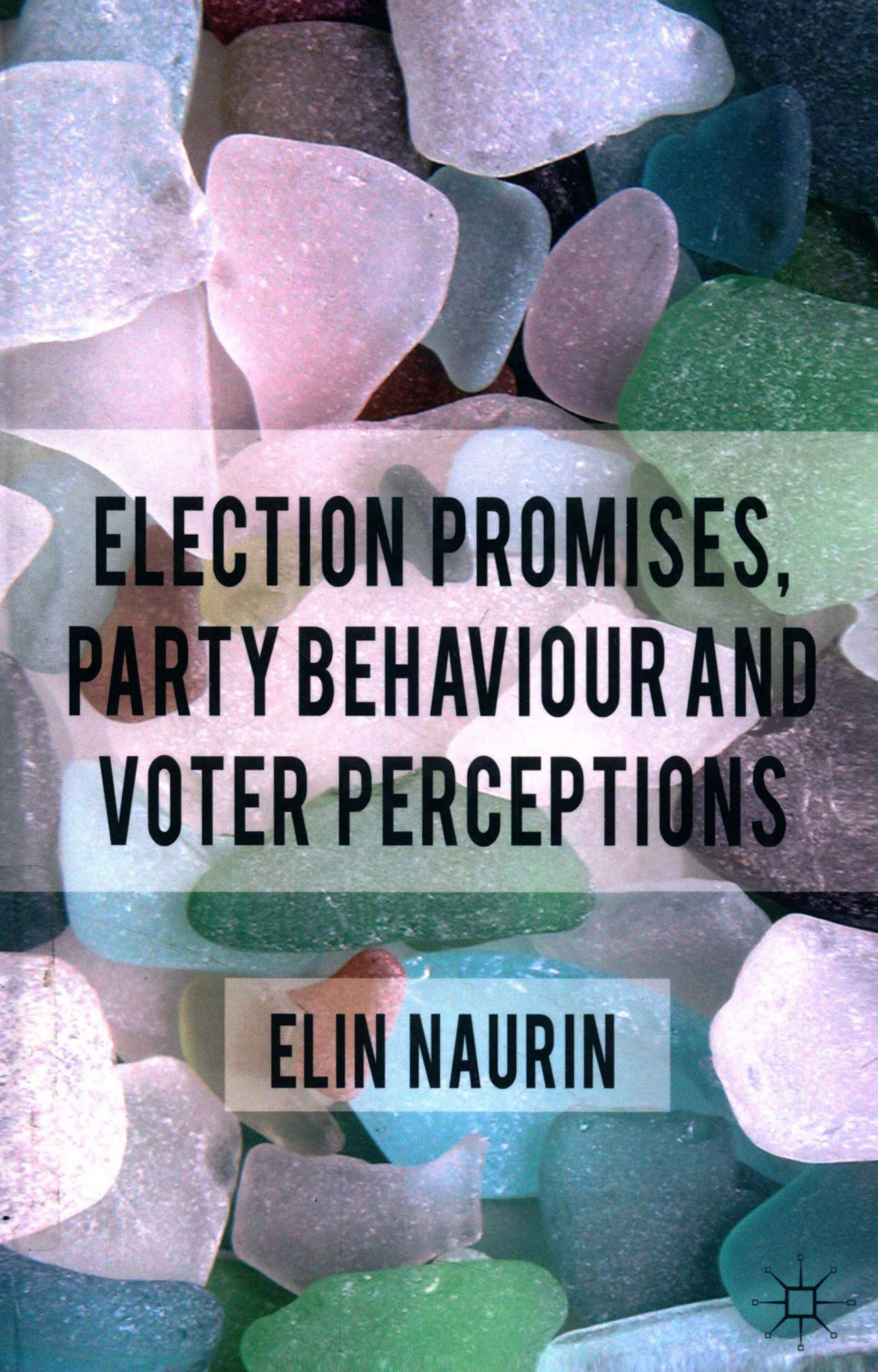
ELECTION PROMISES, PARTY BEHAVIOUR AND VOTER PERCEPTIONS
ELIN NAURIN

Election Promises, Party Behaviour and Voter Perceptions

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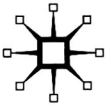

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Election Promises, Party Behaviour and Voter Perceptions

To the memory of my father, Torbjörn Naurin

Preface & Acknowledgements

Election promises are not just dirty tricks used by political parties to get votes. They give important information about how parties prioritize after winning elections. Citizens therefore have good reasons to read election manifestos and listen carefully to what parties pledge before they make their choice on election day. That was the conclusion drawn in my first, rather modest, study on election promises. I had entered the field of election pledge research with analyses of a long-lasting and strong minority government consisting of the Swedish Social Democratic party.

As I see it now, the attention and the comments that followed the publishing of the results in Sweden were more interesting than the study itself. The claim that the government had kept most of its pledges from its election manifesto actually made people angry with me. It seemed as though everybody knew that political parties do not keep their promises. At gatherings I became 'the one who claims that politicians fulfil their promises'. In the media debate that followed I was loudly accused of performing poor research and of running the government's errands. One of the editorials in the large conservative newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* suggested that the author of the study must be illiterate (Gür 1999). The paper even published an article with the headline 'A Meaningless Thesis' (Broberg 1999). A commentator on the online paper *Friktion* wondered whether 'the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg has any raison d'être whatsoever' (*Friktion* 1999). In contrast, the commentators of the government side saw the results as proof of the governing party's (unparalleled) moral behaviour. In his joy, the Social Democrats' party secretary even referred to me and Bruce Springsteen (the house good of the Social Democrats) in the same article: 'We made a promise we swore we'd always remember. No retreat, no surrender' (Stjernqvist 2003).

This book is the result of my curiosity about why I stirred up so much feeling when I claimed that political parties usually fulfil their election promises. My conclusion seemed to follow rather basic assumptions from theories of representative democracy – that parties

act to fulfil mandates that they perceive have been given to them by citizens. I started to ask myself whether I, and my fellow pledge scholars, should have done our studies differently, or whether everyone else simply was wrong. Or whether it was impossible to study election promises without provoking anyone.

Quite a few years later I still claim that parties take their election promises seriously, and that citizens should do so too. However, it is obvious that citizens do not mean the same thing as scholars when they dismiss election promises. Election promises can in fact be given quite different meanings. It is not so simple in the world of politics that 'a promise is a promise'.

The journey towards this book has been long and winding. I want to direct my gratitude to all of you who have contributed to making it possible for me to finish the project. Some should be highlighted specifically for commenting on the whole manuscript: Andreas Bågenholm, Peter Esaiasson, Sören Holmberg, Mikael Gilljam, Daniel Naurin, Lena Wängnerud and Patrik Öhberg. Thank you also Henrik Oscarsson and Nicklas Håkansson for being my companions in our nice Swedish pledge-project. Terry Royed and Robert Thomson in the early Comparative Party Pledges Group (CPPG) have been an important source of support and inspiration for me. The research field that analyzes political parties' giving and fulfilling of election promises is a growing field. New data is continuously being presented, making summaries of the field quickly outdated. I have had the great opportunity to regularly discuss election promises with several skilled election pledge scholars. A special thanks to Joaquín Artés, Petia Kostadinova, Nathan McCluskey and Catherine Moury.

Valuable funding from the Swedish Research Council, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, the TMR network and Wilhelm & Martina Lundgren's Vetenskapsfond 1 has covered expenses associated with the project, and the SOM Institute and the Swedish National Election Study Program have generously let me include questions in their surveys. Furthermore, my workplace – the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg – *does* have a raison d'être. It is a very friendly, ambitious and highly creative place to be. A special thanks to Peter Esaiasson and Mikael Gilljam as well as to Jon Pierre and Bo Rothstein. I also wish to direct my gratitude towards the Department of Political Science at Amsterdam University for showing such generosity during my stay there.

Finally, I am blessed with a family who takes interest in what I do. Both my brother and my sister have commented on my manuscript. My mother and father created the perfect setting for my becoming a passionate political scientist. And most importantly, I share my great interest for political science with my husband, Patrik Öhberg. Thanks again, and again. To Miranda and William: my book is finished! Thanks for putting it in the proper perspective, and for letting me be your loving mom.

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Part I
Introduction

1
The Pledge Puzzle

Everyone knows a promise is a promise. It is hard to imagine any serious relationship that would go unaffected if promises were broken. This book deals with promises of a controversial kind, namely those that political representatives give to citizens before elections: election promises. The focus is what seems to be a puzzling difference of opinion between scholars and ordinary citizens concerning whether or not politicians actually keep their promises. While research presents an image of political parties acting on most of their election promises, citizens are presumed to hold the opposite view – that parties usually break their promises. Because election promises are central to representative democratic theory and practice, this divergence raises important questions about how good democratic representation is defined and achieved.

Election pledge research, in which parties' pre-election statements are compared to governments' actions, has been carried out to examine different periods in the recent history of many countries (see e.g. Pomper 1968; Royed 1996; Thomson 2001; Mansergh & Thomson 2007; Artés & Bustos 2008). The levels of congruence between promises and actions differ among the different systems that are studied, but there is a clear common denominator in the conclusions that are drawn: promises given in election manifestos are taken seriously by the governing political parties. Even in systems in which parties are found to fulfil just over half of their election promises, scholars' conclusions are mainly optimistic. In one of the earliest studies on election promises, American parties were shown to fulfil around 60 per cent of the promises they gave in their

national platforms during the period 1944–1978. The authors of the study drew the conclusion that, in comparison to what would have been expected had citizens been asked to make the same judgement, 60 per cent fulfilled election promises was an encouraging result: 'contrary to the conventional wisdom, these platform pledges are redeemed/ ... /The vote for party is also a vote for policy' (Pomper & Lederman 1980:174; see also Pomper 1968).

Later studies have come to similarly positive conclusions. Parties in the United Kingdom, Canada, Greece and, during some periods, Ireland have been found to fulfil between 70 and 80 per cent of the promises they make in their election manifestos (Royed 1996; Rose 1980; Rallings 1987; Kalogeropoulou 1989). Under the rule of coalition governments in the Netherlands and in Ireland, the average rate of fulfilment is lower, around 50–60 per cent. Nevertheless, as for example Robert Thomson says, also in such systems 'there is a stronger programme to policy linkage than the conventional wisdom would lead us to suspect' (Thomson 1999:223; see also Thomson 2001; Mansergh & Thomson 2007; Costello & Thomson 2008; Thomson 2011).

The point of comparison in all these studies, or the reason for the positive conclusions, is that the conventional wisdom about election promises makes us expect most pledges would go *unfulfilled*. It is even an often-repeated assumption in research on election promises that most citizens hold the belief that parties usually *break* their promises (see e.g. Mansergh & Thomson 2007:324; Artés & Bustos 2007:23; Pomper & Lederman 1980:174–6).

However, even though it serves as the most important point of comparison, the conventional wisdom about election promises has not been empirically investigated. It is therefore difficult to say more specifically what this apparently puzzling situation actually consists of, or how great the difference in opinion between citizens and researchers really is.

With this book I wish to shed light on this possible 'pledge puzzle'. I want to clarify how common the image of the promise-breaking politician really is. I also want to investigate what it is citizens mean when they claim that politicians usually break their promises. Are citizens simply misinformed, or do they in fact think of something else than we scholars do when they evaluate fulfilment of election promises?