To What Extent Do Political Parties Fulfill Their Campaign Promises?

François Pétry, Ph.D.[*]
Dominic Duval[**]

ABSTRACT

Do Canadian parties keep the promises they make during election campaigns? To address this question, this paper studies the fulfillment of over 600 campaign pledges made by successive governing parties between 2000 and 2014. We find that, contrary to conventional wisdom, Canadian parties keep many of their campaign promises. We also find variation in the rate of fulfillment of pledges from one government to the next. We examine whether this variation can be explained by changes in the institutional structure (majority vs. minority) of government, which party controls government (Liberal vs. Conservative), and the characteristics of individual pledges (pledges to change or to keep the status quo?).

1. INTRODUCTION

The fulfillment of election pledges is at the heart of democratic accountability. If parties are responsive to societal demands, there should be a substantial level of congruence between their policies in government and the promises found in their election programs. A strong program-to-policy linkage is central to the mandate theory of democracy and the responsible party model (Downs 1957; Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge 1994). Whether parties keep their campaign promises is not only a theoretical issue. The question has become an important aspect of the political debate both during and between elections. Canadian political leaders often claim to hold a mandate to carry out their election programs. Party programs, and the specific pledges that are written in them, receive considerable media attention during and between election campaigns. There is even a website to track election promises at the federal level and in Quebec (Harper polimeter).

The fulfillment of election pledges by Canadian parties has been the subject of scholarly inquiry in the past. Rallings (1987) found that Canadian governments kept their campaign promises 72% of the time between 1945 and 1979, and Monière (1988) found that the Progressive-Conservative government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney kept 74% of its promises between 1984 and 1988. These results date back several decades and are from majority governments essentially. There is a need for an up-to-date assessment given the recent transformation of the Canadian party system into a multiparty system, and the subsequent appearance of three consecutive minority governments (Bittner and Koop 2013). The paper closes this research gap by analyzing the fulfillment of election pledges by the Liberal

---

[*]   Professor and Director, Political Science Department, Université Laval
[**]   Doctoral candidate, Political Science Department, Université Laval.

Party in power between 2000 and 2006, and by the Conservative Party in power since 2006.

The recent occurrence of minority governments raises the question of whether they are able to fulfill as many pledges as majority governments. In addition to the institutional structure in which pledges are made, we examine whether the characteristics of the pledges themselves affect their likelihood of being redeemed. All things being the same, given the incrementalism of large governments in general, it is expected that pledges to maintain the status-quo are easier to keep than pledges to change policy. It is also expected that pledges to raise taxes might be difficult to keep, given the unpopularity of taxes in general. The paper also examines the relations among pledges made by different parties during the same election, and how this affects pledge fulfillment. We expect agreement among parties on an election pledge to increase the likelihood of that pledge being fulfilled. A final question addressed in this paper is whether the types of pledges fulfilled by the governing Conservatives after the 2006, 2008 and 2011elections are distinct from the types of pledges fulfilled by the governing Liberals in previous years.

The paper is organized in four parts. Part One explains the method used to record party pledges and pledge fulfillment. Part Two starts with a quantitative description of pledges and pledge fulfillment between 2000 and September 2014, and then examines the difference in pledge fulfillment between majority and minority governments. Part Three analyzes the extent of agreement between the pledges by different parties and what impact this has on pledge fulfillment. Part Four looks at the effect of pledge type on pledge fulfillment. The conclusion highlights the main findings for Canada and proposes some avenues for future research.

2. METHOD

Our analysis involves counting specific promises in the parties' campaign programs and then determining how many of them have been acted upon by the party which has been elected in office. With this type of analysis, there is a risk that subjective interpretation of what constitutes a pledge — and of what action is required to declare that a pledge has been kept — may undermine the reliability and validity of the data. Therefore it is important to clarify where we find our election pledges and what qualifies as a pledge.[1]

The documentary sources from which pledges are extracted are the party programs that are put out during election campaigns. There are a variety of documents containing party promises: party leader speeches, party pamphlets and leaflets, advertisements in newspapers, party congress speeches, which are not always comparable or representative of official party policy. The use of party programs has the advantage of providing a well-defined and coherent body of officially sanctioned party documents. It also has the disadvantage of ignoring election promises not in the party program.

Each party program is divided into distinct statements coinciding each with a unit of sense. Following the guidelines referred to in footnote 1, an election pledge

---

[1]   The method of identifying and then scoring pledges follows the guidelines of the Comparative Party Pledge Group (Naurin, Hakansson and Werner 2012, see also Thomson et al. 2014).

is defined as "a statement that contains unequivocal support for a specific action that is testable." Unequivocal support requires that the program writer use verbs such as "we will" or "we will carry out". Statements to the effect that a party "will consider" or "should" implement an action are not considered pledges. Unequivocal support also means that the promised action must be realized in the next government period. To say that a pledge is specific and testable means that the testability criteria on the basis of which the researcher decides whether a pledge is fulfilled or not must be set up by the program writers, not by the researcher. In this paper, pledges which are not specific and unequivocal are excluded from the analysis.

One special kind of excluded pledges are "outcome" pledges, defined as promises where only the result is measurable, and which do not specify what the party will do in order to achieve that result (e.g. If elected, we will reduce unemployment). Most outcome pledges clearly do not satisfy our testability criteria. They are therefore excluded from the analysis, unless of course they specify the action a government will undertake to achieve the stated result, in which case, they are considered as "output" pledges.

Pledges are divided into "pledges fulfilled", "pledges not fulfilled", and "pledges partly fulfilled". Whether election pledges have been fulfilled is assessed based on content analyses of government press releases, laws and regulations, throne speeches and budget speeches, annual reports and budget plans from government ministries and agencies.

To be classified as "fulfilled", a pledge has to be followed by a subsequent government action (a law, a regulation, a treaty or an agreement) that has been passed before the next election. For example, the 2000 Liberal pledge to "reduce the top tax rate for incomes from 60,000$ to 100,000$" is classified as "fulfilled" because the tax deduction was implemented before the end of the third mandate of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. Similarly, the 2008 Conservative pledge to "give first-time homebuyers a tax credit of up to $5,000 of eligible closing costs on the purchase of a new home" is classified as "fulfilled" because the tax credit was implemented in the 2010 budget before the end of the second mandate of Prime Minister Stephen Harper. A pledge is rated "partly fulfilled" when the corresponding action is a compromise or the action is completed but it does not go as far as what was promised. For example, the 2006 CPC pledge to "implement the Information Commissioner's recommendations for reform of the *Access to Information Act*" is classified as partly fulfilled because some, but not all the Information Commissioner's recommendations were implemented by the Conservative government between 2006 and 2008. A pledge is classified as "not fulfilled" when it is not followed by a government action. For example, the 2004 Liberal pledge to extend Access to information legislation to Crown Corporations is classified as "not fulfilled" because the legislation was not passed before the next election.[2] Another example is the 2008 Conservative pledge to introduce "a new Charter of Open Federalism" (aimed at restricting federal spending power) which is classified as "not

---

[2]   The promise was implemented by the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper as part of the 2006 *Federal Accountability Act*.

fulfilled" because the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper did not attempt to introduce this initiative before the next election.

3. PLEDGE FULFILLMENT

Table 1 displays the number and proportion (in parentheses) of statements that qualify as pledges in the programs of the governing Liberals in 2000 and 2004, and in the programs of the governing Conservatives in 2006, 2008, and 2011. Overall, there are 604 pledges included in the analysis, representing 17% of all program statements. 77 pledges (15% of all statements) satisfy our definition in the 2000 Liberal program, and 84 (10%) in their 2004 program. The pledges retained for analysis represent on average 13% of the total number of statements in the Liberal programs of 2000 and 2004. Turning to the Conservative programs of 2006, 2008 and 2011, we see that they contained 202, 101, and 143 pledges, respectively. The governing Conservatives have devoted on average 20% of the space in their election programs to pledges, a significantly larger percentage than for the governing Liberals. This may be part of a general trend to accentuate pledges at the expense of rhetorical statements in the election programs of all the parties. In this respect, it should be noted that the trend is not limited to Conservative programs; the percentage of pledges has increased as well in recent Liberal and NDP programs.

Table 1 — Number of pledges and rhetorical statements in the manifestos of governing parties 2000-2011 (column % in parentheses)

	Liberal 2000	Liberal 2004	Conservative 2006	Conservative 2008	Conservative 2011	All
Pledges	77(15)	84(10)	202(23)	101(23)	140(15)	604(17)
Rhetorical statements	456(85)	788(90)	651(77)	337(77)	786(85)	3018(83)
Total	533(100)	872(100)	853(100)	438(100)	926(100)	3622(100)

In any case, the question is raised whether the governing Conservatives, with significantly more pledges written in their programs than the governing Liberals before them, have fulfilled more of those pledges than the Liberals in power. In response to this question, Table 2 displays the number and proportion (in parentheses) of pledges fulfilled by each successive governing party between 2000 and September 2014.[3] Of particular interest is the proportion of pledges at least partly fulfilled (a + b) in the third row from the top. This proportion averages 73% over the entire period, as the last column of the Table shows, similar to the proportions of

---

3   The data for the third government of Stephen Harper are included in the analysis up to and including pledges fulfilled in September 2014. Although the data for the third Harper government are incomplete, excluding them from the analysis would have affected the validity and generality of our conclusions in several important ways. Moreover, due to the high rate of pledge fulfillment by the third government of Stephen Harper, our results would not be significantly altered even if 100% of its pledges were fulfilled by the time of the next election.

pledges fulfilled found by Monière (1988) and by Rallings (1987) for Canadian governments of the past (74% and 72% respectively).

Table 2 — Number of pledges fulfilled 2000-september 2014 (column % in parentheses)

	Liberal 2000	Liberal 2004	Conservative 2006	Conservative 2008	Conservative 2011	All
Fully (a)	59(77)	54(64)	127(63)	53(53)	95(68)	388(64)
Partly (b)	1(1)	6(7)	16(8)	9(9)	20(14)	52(9)
At Least Partly (a+b)	60(78)	60(71)	143(71)	63(62)	115(82)	441(73)
Not (c)	17(22)	24(29)	59(29)	38(38)	25(18)	163(27)
Total (a+b+c)	77(100)	84(100)	202(100)	101(100)	140(100)	604(100)

The rates of pledge fulfillment vary from a low of 62% (after the 2008 election) to a high of 82% (after the 2011 election).[4] In the pages that follow, we examine possible explanations for this variation. The first explanatory factor that we examine is institutional variation between majority and minority governments, the expectation being that the majority status of a governing party positively affects the likelihood that its campaign pledges are fulfilled. This expectation is based on the notion that minority governments must reach policy compromise with one or more opposition parties in order to govern, something that is not required of majority governments. The need to compromise may force the party in the executive to forego the fulfillment of some of its promises which are not to the taste of opposition parties. Compromise may also lead the party in the executive to accommodate opposition parties by fulfilling some of their pledges.

The percentages of pledge fulfilled at least partly by the Liberal majority government of 2000 (78%) and by the Conservative majority government of 2011 (82% so far) are significantly higher than the percentages of pledges fulfilled by the minority governments elected in 2004, 2006 and 2008, which vary between 62% and 71%. This appears to support the hypothesis that majority governments fulfill larger proportions of their campaign pledges than minority governments. However the Liberal majority government elected in 2000 lasted 40 months, and by the end of September 2014, the Conservative majority government elected in 2011 had also been in power 40 months, considerably longer than the duration of the minority governments elected in 2004, 2006 and 2008 (14, 28, and 29 months, respectively). This raises the question of whether the comparatively smaller percentages of pledges fulfilled by the governments elected in 2004, 2006 and 2008 are due to their shorter duration more than their minority status.

Table 3 provides the answer. The Table gives the average percentage of pledges fulfilled by each successive government, adjusted to its duration in months.

---

4   These percentages, and the ones referred to in the rest of the paper, are for pledges which are fulfilled at least in part unless otherwise specified.

Setting aside the 2008 Conservative minority government (2.1 pledges fulfilled per month on average) the 2004 and 2006 minority governments have fulfilled significantly more pledges on a monthly basis (4.3 and 5.1, respectively) than the 2000 and 2011 majority governments (1.5 and 2.7, respectively) contrary to expectation. Regressing the number of pledges fulfilled by each government against its duration and against a binary coded 1 for majority governments and zero for minority governments produces a highly significant and positive coefficient for duration, and a non-significant negative coefficient for institutional structure. Other things remaining the same (one of those things being the duration of each government) it is clear that recent Canadian minority governments have fulfilled more rather than less pledges than majority governments on average.[5] The exception to the rule is the low percentage of pledges fulfilled by the governing Conservatives after the 2008 election (62%), due in large part to the hyper-partisanship in Parliament which made it difficult for the minority government to find support for its legislative agenda among opposition benches.[6]

Table 3 — Average number of pledges fulfilled per month by each government, 2000-september 2014

|	Majority Liberal 2000	Minority Liberal 2004	Minority Conservative 2006	Minority Conservative 2008	Majority Conservative 2011	All
At Least Partly Fulfilled	1.5	4.3	5.1	2.1	2.7	3.0

The puzzle behind the comparatively high rates of pledge fulfillment by minority governments disappears when it is acknowledged that these high rates happen not in spite of, but because of the short duration of those governments. The rate of pledge fulfillment is not uniformly distributed over time. Governments generally fulfill a much larger number of pledges in the first year of their mandate than during any subsequent year. This may be explained by a "honeymoon" effect whereby opposition parties abstain from actively rejecting policies of any government, including minority governments, in the early stages of a new legislature. Another factor is the tendency to sprinkle party programs with pledges to fulfill particular promises "within 100 days" if they get elected. A final explanation has to do with the fact that a new legislature is never a blank sheet. It is often the case that some

---

[5]   This finding is consistent with evidence from other studies of party pledge fulfillment which show that single party minority governments do not fulfill fewer pledges than single party majority governments (Artés and Bustos 2008, Mansbergh and Thomson 2007).

[6]   It has been claimed that the hyper-partisan parliamentary environment was largely of Prime Minister Harper's own doing (Martin 2010). The Conservatives' first act after winning the 2008 election was to eliminate the government subsidy to political parties, a measure intended to cripple their opponents' party machine. The government prorogued Parliament twice during the period, before it was toppled by a non-confidence vote in March 2011.

pledges that were in the legislative "pipe-line" at the end of the previous legislature will be ready to be fulfilled at the beginning of the next legislature.

For all these reasons, many more pledges will be fulfilled in the early stages of a government mandate than in its later stages. This is illustrated by the diagram of Figure 1 which shows the chronology of the fulfillment of campaign promises by the third government of Prime Minster Stephen Harper between June 2011 and September 2014. The data are reported on a quarterly basis. For any given quarter, the length of the bar represents the promises that were fulfilled at least in part. The average number of pledges fulfilled was 14 per quarter during the first year, six per quarter in the second year, and eight per quarter in the third. If the trend continues, there will be two pledges fulfilled per quarter in the fourth year.[7]
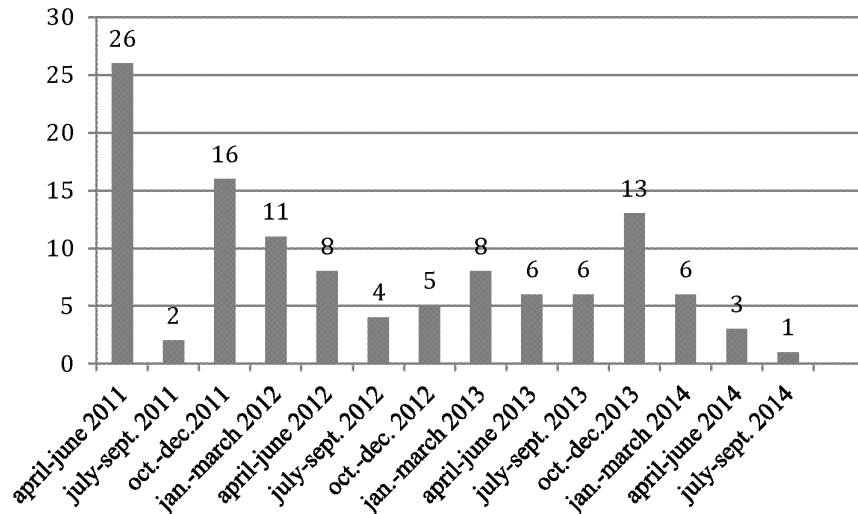
4. PLEDGE AGREEMENT ACROSS PARTY PROGRAMS

How distinct are the election pledges by the party elected to power from those of the parties in opposition? This question touches a major theoretical debate among scholars of political parties. According to the traditional rational choice interpretation of competitive elections (Downs 1957), political parties seek to attract voters' attention by advertising opposite positions on the big issues of the day (for or against intervention in Iraq, for or against the long gun registry). However, this "direct confrontation" interpretation has been challenged by Budge and Farlie

---

[7]   Note the high number of fulfilled promises in the first quarter of 2011 (26). Many government bills had been blocked by the opposition in the previous Parliament; other bills were in the legislative pipe-line when Stephen Harper's minority government was defeated in a non-confidence vote in March 2011. Many of those bills were reintroduced and passed by the newly elected Conservative majority in the weeks that followed the 2011 election. Note also that a fulfilled promise is reported only once in the diagram, whether it is fulfilled entirely or in part. Promises reported as fulfilled in part are not repeated if and when they become entirely fulfilled.

(1983) who proposed a theory in which parties compete for voters' attention by selectively emphasizing particular sets of issues (e.g. the environment and social welfare) entirely unrelated to the issues emphasized by other parties (e.g. free enterprise and military strength abroad). Issue ownership theory (Petrocick 1996) makes a similar prediction.[8] Content analyses of Canadian party programs appear to support the selective emphasis/issue ownership interpretation (Irvine 1987; Bittner and Koop 2013; Pétry et al. n.d.). Although the theories make predictions which apply to all the statements in party programs, not just their pledges, it is interesting to ask whether Canadian party pledges behave more in a "direct confrontation" or in a "selective emphasis" mode.

Table 4 classifies each pledge by a governing party as being either in agreement, in disagreement or unrelated to the pledges of opposition parties. Each column in the Table coincides with an election, and the numbers in that column refer to the pledges made by the party which was elected at that election. The rows provide the data on the relationship between these pledges and the pledges of the other parties. The coding rule is as follows: Party A's pledge is in agreement with a pledge by party B if the complete fulfilment of party B's pledge means that A's is at least partly fulfilled. Party A's pledge is in disagreement with a pledge by party B if the complete fulfilment of party B's pledge means by definition that party A's pledge is not fulfilled. Each pledge by the governing party is recorded twice, one time for agreement with the first opposition party, and another for agreement with the second opposition party. The coding also takes into account cases in which pledges by the governing party are unrelated (neither agree nor disagree) with pledges by opposition parties. Based on previous results about the content of whole party programs (see above paragraph) it is expected that the pledges of the governing party tend to selectively emphasize issues that the party owns, and are therefore more often unrelated than in agreement or in disagreement with those of opposition parties.

Table 4 — Agreement between governing and opposition parties' pledges(column % in parentheses)

	Governing Party				
	Liberal 2000	Liberal 2004	Conserva-tive 2006	Conserva-tive 2008	Conserva-tive 2011
% Agreed with CPC (PCPC in 2000)	21(27)	20(24)	–	–	–
% Disagreed with CPC	1(2)	1(1)	–	–	–
% Unrelated with CPC	55(71)	63(75)	–	–	–

---

8   Issue ownership theory holds that parties and candidates emphasize issues on which they have an advantage and their opponents have a disadvantage.

Total	77(100)	84(100)	–	–	–
% Agreed with NDP	32(42)	31(37)	57(28)	21(21)	15(11)
% Disagreed with NDP	1(1)	4(5)	6(3)	4(4)	2(1)
% Unrelated with NDP	44(57)	49(58)	139(69)	76(75)	123(88)
Total	77(100)	84(100)	202(100)	101(100)	140(100)
% Agreed with LPC	–	–	61(30)	5(5)	11(8)
% Disagreed with LPC	–	–	4(2)	1(1)	4(3)
% Unrelated with LPC	–	–	137(68)	94(95)	125(89)
Total	–	–	202(100)	101(100)	140(100)

In 2000, the relations between the pledges by the governing Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives were as follows: 27% agreement, 2% disagreement, and 71% unrelated. And the relations with the pledges of the NDP were: 42% agreement, 1% disagreement, 57% unrelated. The results in 2004 are similar. In 2000 and in 2004, the pledges of the governing Liberals were more often unrelated than in agreement or in disagreement with the pledges of both opposition parties, as hypothesized.

The pledges of the governing Conservatives are even more often unrelated to the pledges of opposition parties than those of the governing Liberals. This is true of the relations with Liberal pledges, which are unrelated to Conservative pledges 68% of the time in 2006, 94% in 2008, and 89% in 2011. It is also true of the relations with NDP pledges (69% unrelated in 2006, 75% in 2008, 88% in 2011).

A corollary of this is the small percentage of governing party pledges in agreement or disagreement with pledges by the parties in opposition. The fact that most pledges by the governing parties are unrelated to pledges by opposition parties clearly suggests that the pledge portion of Canadian parties' programs are written in the selective emphasis mode, as are the non-pledge statements in those programs.

What is the expected impact of the level of agreement across parties on pledge fulfilment? It is hypothesized that pledges by a governing party in direct agreement with pledges by opposition parties are more likely to be fulfilled than governing parties' pledges unrelated to, or in disagreement with opposition parties' pledges.

Table 5 displays the percentage of pledges fulfilled by each successive governing party depending on whether they agree, disagree, or are unrelated to the pledges by the parties in opposition. Overall, pledges in agreement (78%) are significantly more likely to be fulfilled than unrelated pledges (67%) as hypothesized; but the relevance of this is not entirely clear since pledges in agreement are not statistically more likely to be fulfilled than pledges in disagreement (75%). Among pledges by the governing party in agreement with opposition pledges, pledges by the governing Liberals were more likely to be fulfilled (84% fulfilled on average) than pledges by the governing Conservatives (75% on average). By contrast,

among pledges by the governing party unrelated to opposition pledges, pledges by the governing Liberals were less likely to be fulfilled (60% fulfilled on average) than pledges by the governing Conservatives (71% fulfilled on average). One noticeable result is the high percentage of fulfillment of pledges unrelated to opposition pledges by the current Conservative government (82%).

Table 5 — % of governing party pledges fulfilled depending upon whether they agree with, disagree with or are unrelated to pledges by opposition parties

	Liberal 2000	Liberal 2004	Conserva- tive 2006	Conserva- tive 2008	Conserva- tive 2011	All
% Agree	84	83	72	70	81	78
% Disagree	100	88	44	75	67	75
% Unrelat- ed	68	55	72	59	82	67
% Column	78	71	71	62	73	71

5. PLEDGE TYPE

Table 6 classifies the pledges of governing parties according to whether they promise to keep the status-quo or to change policy. Pledges to change policy are further subdivided into pledges which propose to "cut government spending" (or increase taxes), to "expand government spending," to "cut tax," and to make policy changes not associated with government spending and taxation ("other change"). Overall, only 5% of pledges are about keeping the status-quo, with the remaining 95% advocating some kind of policy change. Pledges to change policy are predominantly about changes that do not affect spending and taxation (58%). Pledges to expand government spending (29%) are much more frequent than pledges to cut government spending (1% of the total).

Table 6 — Type of pledge(column % in parentheses)

	Liberal 2000	Liberal 2004	Conserva- tive 2006	Conserva- tive 2008	Conserva- tive 2011	All
Status Quo	9(12)	2(2)	11(5)	4(4)	3(2)	29(5)
Cut gov. spending	1(1)	1(1)	0	3(3)	1(1)	6(1)
Expand gov. spend- ing	41(53)	38(45)	28(14)	31(31)	40(29)	178(29)
Tax cut	10(13)	1(1)	16(8)	5(5)	6(4)	38(6)
Other change	16(21)	42(50)	147(73)	58(58)	90(64)	353(58)
Column Total	77(100)	84(100)	202(100)	101(100)	140(100)	604(100)

There is a decrease over time in the proportion of pledges to expand government spending, and an increase in the proportion of pledges to implement other changes. These trends uncover a clear partisan pattern: The governing Liberals gave significantly more space in their election programs to pledges in the "expand" category in their 2000 and 2004 programs than did the governing Conservatives in their 2006, 2008 and 2011 programs. By contrast, the governing Conservatives gave significantly more program space to pledges in the "other change" category than the governing Liberals before them. In this respect, the contrast between the 2000 LPC program and the 2006 CPC program is especially striking.

The pledges by the governing Conservatives in the "other change" category are remarkable by their very high number, especially in the 2006 election, when the CPC program contained 147 pledges in that category. The unusually high number of "other change" pledges in the CPC program of 2006 reflects the "new Conservative" agenda, centered on an ambitious program to undo several Liberal policies of the past, and replace them by new policies intended to "stand up for Canada."[9]

The variation in the distribution of governing parties' pledges according to their type clearly reflects ideological differences between the Liberals in power before 2006 and Stephen Harper's Conservatives in government since 2006. The programs of the LPC emphasized pledges to expand government spending, while the programs of the CPC emphasized pledges in the "other change" category aimed at changing, sometimes transforming the Canadian social and political landscapes.

What is the expected correlation between pledge type and pledge fulfilment? Are the percentages of pledges written in party programs within a given pledge type category related to the percentages of pledge fulfilled in that category? Earlier in the paper, we argue that, all things remaining the same, pledges to maintain the status-quo are more likely to be fulfilled than pledges to change things. This argument is supported by previous pledge fulfilment studies (Costello and Thomson 2008, Artés and Bustos 2008, Naurin 2011). Therefore, it is expected that the percentage of pledges fulfilled in the status-quo category will be higher than the percentage written in party programs in that category.

Assuming that all pledges to change policies are equally difficult (or easy) to fulfill, we should expect the proportion of pledges written in party programs in a particular pledge type category to be a good predictor of the proportion of pledges fulfilled in that category. In particular, we expect the Liberals in power to have fulfilled a large proportion of the pledges they wrote into their programs in the "expand government spending" category, in any case a larger proportion than the Conservatives in power. By the same logic, we expect the Conservatives in power to have fulfilled a larger proportion of the pledges they wrote into their programs in the "other change" category than the Liberals in power before them.

Table 7 tests these expectations. The Table displays the percentages of fulfilled pledges by pledge type during each successive legislature. These percentages

---

9   This was the title of the CPC 2006 election program. Its main priorities in domains not involving government spending and taxation were: changing the rules of administrative accountability, cracking down on violent crime, and reforming health care. Other priorities were: providing tax relief for small businesses, cutting the sales tax, and providing tax breaks for families with children.

can be compared with the overall average percentage of pledges fulfilled of each type in the right-hand column of the Table. The data in the right-hand column indicate that pledges to keep the status-quo are fulfilled 93% of the time, significantly more often than average (73%) as hypothesized. However, the small number of pledges to keep the status-quo (27 in total) undermines the significance of this finding.

Among pledges to change policy, those to cut taxes are also fulfilled significantly more often than average (82% of the time). Note that the Conservatives in power have fulfilled a smaller percentage of their pledges to cut taxes than the Liberals in power, especially the second government of Stephen Harper which only managed to fulfill 60% of its pledges to cut taxes.

Pledges to expand government spending and taxation are also fulfilled more frequently than average (81%). Note that the Conservatives in power have fulfilled a larger percentage of their pledges to expand government spending than did the Liberals in power in contradiction with expectation. The difference is even more marked if we ignore the unusually low rate of fulfillment of pledges to expand government spending during the second Harper government (67%).

Pledges to change policies not associated with government spending and taxation have been fulfilled at a lower rate than the average rate of pledge fulfillment overall (66%). This result suggests that Canadian parties are more eager to write pledges to change policies not related to government spending and taxation in their programs than they are to fulfill those pledges. Note finally that, overall, the Conservatives in power did not fulfilled a significantly larger percentage of their pledges in the "other change" category than the Liberals in power before them, in contradiction with expectation.[10] This is due in part to the low rate of fulfillment of Conservative pledges in that category during the second government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper (57%). Among recent pledges in the "other change" category that the minority government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper failed to fulfill after the 2008 election were several bills to reform the Senate and expand the House, the plan to purchase F-35 jet fighters, and the motion to reopen the same-sex marriage debate.

Table 7 — *Type of pledge and pledge fulfillment (% fulfillment in each type in parentheses)*

Number of pledges of each type	Liberal 2000	Liberal 2004	Conserva-tive 2006	Conserva-tive 2008	Conserva-tive 2011	All
Status Quo	8(89)	2(100)	10(91)	4(100)	3(100)	27(93)
Cut gov. spending	1(100)	1(100)	–	1(33)	1(100)	4(80)

---

[10]   The average rate of fulfillment of pledges in the "other change" category is the same (66%) for the Liberals and for the Conservatives in power.

Expand gov. spending	31(76)	30(79)	27(96)	21(67)	36(90)	145(81)
Tax cut	9(90)	1(100)	14(88)	3(60)	4(67)	31(82)
Other change	11(69)	26(62)	92(63)	33(57)	71(79)	233(66)
Column Total	60(78)	60(71)	143(71)	62(62)	115(82)	440(73)

6. CONCLUSION

The paper asked whether recent Canadian minority governments, have fulfilled as many pledges as majority governments. The evidence indicates that although minority governments have fulfilled smaller percentages of pledges than majority governments, the difference has more to do with the shorter duration of minority governments than with their structure. That said, as the experience of the second minority government of Stephen Harper suggests, the inability to bargain and negotiate with opposition parties severely limits the capacity of a minority government to fulfill its campaign pledges.

Another question was whether the governing Conservatives differ from the governing Liberals in the way they make and fulfill election pledges. The data show that both parties wrote many more pledges to change policy than to keep the status quo. But their pledges differ in the type of change they advocate. In its 2000 and 2004 programs the LPC devoted more space to pledges to expand government spending and taxation than the CPC in its 2006, 2008 and 2011programs. On the other hand, the CPC gave more program space than the LPC before it to pledges to change policies unrelated to government spending and taxation. As expected, we find that pledges to keep the status-quo are fulfilled more often than pledges to initiate change. Contrary to expectation, the Conservatives in government have not fulfilled larger percentages of pledges to change policies unrelated to government spending and taxation than the Liberals in power before them. Furthermore, the governing Conservatives fulfilled a larger proportion of pledges to increase government spending than the Liberals before them. This runs against our expectation that the Conservatives would seek to expand government spending and taxation less than the Liberals before them.

We also find differences in the way pledges written in the programs of the LPC and the CPC in power are related to opposition pledges, and how these differences affect pledge fulfillment. The pledges of the governing CPC are more often unrelated to the pledges of opposition parties than those of the governing LPC. The effect on pledge fulfillment by the governing Liberals is clear: LPC pledges were fulfilled significantly less often when they were unrelated than when they were in agreement (or in disagreement) with opposition parties' pledges. But there is no effect on pledge fulfillment by the CPC. Putting aside the second mandate of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the Conservatives in power fulfilled the same proportion

of pledges whether they were in agreement or unrelated to pledges by opposition parties.[11]

Further research will tell whether our findings are confirmed by Canadian pledge fulfillment data from the 1990s and the 1980s, and whether party promises not written in the party programs are fulfilled differently. Also our conclusions regarding the distinct character of the governing Conservatives must be considered tentative until we are able to compute the final results on pledge fulfillment by the Conservative majority government elected in 2011.[12]

It has been pointed out that recent Canadian minority governments and the frequent elections associated with them have provided parties with incentives to focus on promises which can be fulfilled in small size consumable portions over a relatively short time (Delacourt 2013, Esselment 2012). The occurrence of what could be labeled "transactional" pledges, targeted appeals to specific groups of voters who are treated more as consumers than citizens, constitutes a new research direction that we are currently investigating. In particular, we are interested in the empirical question of whether these transactional pledges have a higher likelihood of being fulfilled than other pledges. If so, the normative question is raised of knowing whether increased party emphasis on transactional pledges occurs at the expense of long-term promises which are more risky for the parties.

---

[11]   The governing Conservatives fulfilled significantly less pledges after the 2008 election than they did after the 2006 and the 2011 elections. It is not easy to find an explanation for this in the quantitative factors that have been discussed in this paper. A more qualitative explanation lies with the hyper-partisan nature of the Parliament elected in 2008.

[12]   According to the fixed election dates Act (a pledge by the current governing CPC), the next election will occur in October 2015.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Artés J. and A. Bustos. 2008. "Electoral Promises and Minority Governments" *European Journal of Political Research* 47, 307–333.

Bittner, A. and R. Koop, eds. 2013. *Parties, Elections, and the Future of Canadian Politics*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Budge, I. and D. Farlie. 1983. "Party Competition — Selective Emphasis or Direct Confrontation? An Alternative View with Data." *Western European Party Systems. Continuity and Change*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 267-305

Costello, R. and R. Thomson. 2008. Election Pledges and their Enactment in Coalition Governments: A Comparative Analysis of Ireland. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Policy* 18: 239–56.

Delacourt, S. 2013. *Shopping for Votes. How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them*. Madeira Park, BC: Douglass & McIntyre.

Downs, A. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.

Esselment, A. 2012. "Market Orientation in a Minority Government: The Challenges of Product Delivery. In *Political Marketing in Canada*. A. Marland, T. Giasson and J. Lees-Marshment (eds.) Vancouver: UBC Press: 123–138.

"Harper polimeter." Poltext. Textual data for policy analysis. Laval University. Accessed Oct. 23, 2014. https://www.poltext.org/en/polimeter/harper

Irvine, W. 1987. "Canada 1945–1980 party platforms and campaign strategies." In *Ideology, Strategy, and Party Change: Spatial Analysis of Post-War Elections Programmes in Nineteen Democracies*. I. Budge, D. Robertson and D. Hearl (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Klingemann, H-D., R. Hofferbert, I. Budge et al. 1994. *Parties, Policies and Democracy*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Mansergh, L. and R. Thomson. 2007. Election Pledges, Party Competition, and Policymaking." *Comparative Politics* 39 (3) 311–329.

Martin, L. 2010. *Harperland: The Politics of Control*. Toronto: Penguin.

Monière, D. 1988. *Le discours électoral. Les politiciens sont-ils fiables*? Montréal: Québec/Amérique.

Naurin, E. 2011. *Election Promises, Party Behavior and Voter Perceptions*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Naurin, E., N. Hakansson and B. Werner. 2012. *Technical Report. Do Swedish Parties Give and Fulfill Election Promises*?

Petrocick, J. 1996. "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections With a 1980 Case Study." *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (3): 825–850.

Pétry, F., B. Collette and H-D. Klingemann. N.d. "Left-Right in Canada: Comparing Data from Party Program Content and Expert Surveys." Forthcoming in *Comparing Party Policy Preferences*. In A. Volkens (ed.). Berlin: DeGruyter.

Rallings, C. 1987. "The Influence of Election Programmes: Britain and Canada 1945–79." In *Ideology, Strategy, and Party Change: Spatial Analysis of Post-War Elections Programmes in Nineteen Democracies*. Ian Budge, David Robertson and Derek Hearl (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomson, R., J. Artés, L. Ennser, M. Ferguson, C. Moury, E. Naurin, F. Pétry, T. Royed and K Schermann. August 2014. "The Program-to-Policy Linkage: A

Comparative Study of Election Pledges and Government Policies." Congress of the American Political Science Association. Washington DC.