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# Is a Promise a Promise? Election Pledge Fulfilment in Comparative Perspective Using Sweden as an Example

ELIN NAURIN

*The link between parties' campaign messages and government action is essential to theories of representative democracy. This article offers the first evaluation of how different empirical approaches alter results regarding the fulfilment of mandates by governments. Three commonly used operationalisations of the notion of election promise are applied to the case of Sweden. The conclusion is that results are not significantly altered depending on the approach that is taken. By studying only certain subsets of promises in election manifestos, overall government fulfilment of election promises can be estimated. By performing the analyses on the case of Sweden, the study also gives focus to two cabinet formations that have received little scholarly attention but are common in the European context – namely minority single-party cabinets and coalitions formed pre-election. The article argues that such cabinet situations are particularly efficient when it comes to election pledge fulfilment, no matter how the notion of election promise is defined.*

The saying 'A promise is a promise' is used all over the world and implies that there is a common understanding of what a promise is and when it is fulfilled. In the world of politics, promises are given a central role in the relationship between voters and democratic representatives. So-called election promises serve as statements of intent before elections and as tools that help voters hold governments to account for their actions after election. However, even if the meaning of election promises appears obvious in theory, empirical investigations into whether governments fulfil election promises use different approaches to the concept (Mansergh and Thomson 2007; Royed 1996). To understand why parties fulfil promises more often in some situations than in others, research needs to become more comparative. This article contributes by analysing the fulfilment of election promises in a case where all government

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promises can be studied and compared to the more restrictive definitions provided by three previous studies. The article thereby increases our understanding of the extent to which commonly used methodological approaches affect evaluations of pledge fulfilment.

The focus here is Sweden. Sweden is suitable for practical as well as substantive reasons. The former are connected to the availability of data. It is not a coincidence that all previous studies on election pledge fulfilment have been carried out by scholars operating in the system they investigate. In-depth knowledge about context is important in all research, but specifically so when policy decisions need to be studied in detail in the original language. Furthermore, previous studies restrict their operationalisation to certain subsets of promises for practical rather than theoretical reasons. It demands a lot of work to qualitatively evaluate policy decisions. By choosing a context that has already been partly analysed (Naurin 2011) it becomes possible to study *all* promises during the period.

The substantive argument for choosing Sweden has to do with the current state of the field of election pledge research. By focusing on Sweden, the article contributes to research on government efficiency in types of cabinet situations that deserve special attention, namely minority single-party governments and coalitions formed pre-election. Minority single-party governments have been found to be more efficient when it comes to fulfilling promises than is expected by common theoretical models. Artés (2013), Naurin (2011) and Mansergh (2004) used different methods in their research, but they show that minority single-party governments in proportional parliamentary systems fulfil as many, or even more, promises as do majority single-party cabinets in Westminster systems. In Sweden, such governments have been the rule rather than the exception, and in this article it is possible to analyse the extent to which the results can be explained by the fact that different studies use different operationalisations. Moreover, Sweden has recently seen a shift away from minority single-party cabinets, which opens the way for comparison within the same context. The article therefore also reports on the degree to which a pre-election formed centre-right majority coalition cabinet fulfilled the promises it made in its joint election manifesto in 2006. Joint election manifestos generally receive little scholarly attention. Only one previous study has evaluated how they affect the ability of coalition cabinets to fulfil election promises (Moury 2011), and none has used definitions designed to be comparable to studies of other cabinet situations.

The article thus has a dual focus. First, it contributes to making the growing field of election pledge research comparative by analysing one context using different methods. Second, it analyses a context with two cabinet situations that deserve more attention in the pledge literature.

## **Background**

Classical theories of party and voter rationality define parties as office seekers with incentives to make promises that attract many voters. Voters, for their

part, are driven by policy expectations and vote for the party that is most likely to implement their preferred policies. Governments therefore need to fulfil election promises in order to win the subsequent election (Downs 1957). This mandate model of representation is sometimes also called promissory representation (Mansbridge 2003) and is the most used model of democratic representation in empirical research (Esaïasson and Holmberg 1996: 3; Pierce 1999: 10).

Based on the mandate model of representation, scholars perform systematic comparisons between campaign promises and subsequent government behaviour. Put simply, such election pledge studies show that governments mostly fulfil their election promises, but that constitutional constraints complicate their work. For example, Royed (1996) finds that governing parties more often fulfil election promises in the Westminster system of the United Kingdom, where one party has a majority of the seats in Parliament, than in the United States, where parties share their power with the President and the Supreme Court. Other studies on the US (Fishel 1985; Pomper 1968; Pomper and Lederman 1980; Shaw 1998), the UK (Rallings 1987; Rose 1980), the Westminster system of Canada (Rallings 1987) and other majority single-party cabinets such as Greece (Kalogeropoulou 1989), Spain (Artés 2013) and Ireland (Mansergh 2004) support the conclusion about the efficiency of majority single-party cabinets. Artés' (2013) comparison between Spanish minority and majority single-party cabinets indicates that the single-party element is more important than the majority when it comes to fulfilling promises. Minority single-party cabinets in Spain manage to fulfil election promises at least as often as majority single-party cabinets do. Naurin (2011) studied two governments in Sweden and draws similar conclusions, as does Mansergh (2004), who looked at one Irish government. Studies also show that coalition cabinets fulfil fewer of their promises than single-party cabinets, no matter whether they are in a majority or a minority position (Costello and Thomson 2008; Kostadinova 2013; Mansergh and Thomson 2007; Moury 2011; Thomson 2001).

The fact that studies use different methods to investigate fulfilment and different definitions to operationalise the notion of election promise reinforces the conclusion that parties generally take their election promises seriously. However, it also makes it difficult to explain more precisely the variation found between parties in different contexts. For example, empirical evaluations of campaign pledges often focus on pledges from certain *subject areas*. Artés and Bustos (2008) and Artés (2013) focused on economic and labour market promises. Thomson (2001), Mansergh and Thomson (2001), Mansergh and Thomson (2007) and Costello and Thomson (2008) chose socio-economic areas, and Royed (1996) chose all areas except foreign policy. Naurin (2011) included all issue areas.

Furthermore, extant research varies in terms of the *types of changes* that are studied. One frequent discussion is whether to study promises that pledge to maintain the *status quo*, to *review* policies or to achieve testable *outcomes* (as opposed to testable action). Royed (1996), Artés (2013), Artés and Bustos (2008) and Naurin (2011) tested all these types of promise, while Thomson

(2001) excluded outcome and review promises in his study of Dutch parties; Mansergh (2004) excluded outcome promises in analyses of Ireland.

Third, recent research has pointed out that different studies define testability in different ways (Thomson *et al.* 2012). Thomson (2001), Mansergh (2004); Mansergh and Thomson (2007) and Costello and Thomson (2008) study specific promises where ‘the criteria used to judge the fulfilment of pledges ... in principle [are] provided by the writers of election programmes, not by the researcher’ (Thomson 2001: 180). Royed (1996), Artés and Bustos (2008), Naurin (2011) and Artés (2013) also include more imprecise promises where the party has two or more ways of fulfilling the promise and where the scholar herself/himself therefore has to decide which actions are relevant to test (see Artés 2013: 7; Thomson *et al.* 2012).

Finally, studies also vary when it comes to how fulfilment is investigated. Most investigations of fulfilment rely mainly on official documents and written sources (see Artés 2013; Royed 1996; Thomson 2001), but Naurin’s (2011) study on Sweden has a different focus and relies on comparisons of interviews with party members from the government and the opposition.

Taken together, the different methods used by different studies raise questions about the comparability of the investigations. This article analyses all promises mentioned here and codes them separately. It is thereby possible to perform analyses based on different operationalisations of the notion of ‘election promise’.

When it comes to the case of Sweden, the article moves beyond previous analyses in two ways. First, it analyses fulfilment using official – rather than political – sources, which facilitates comparison between Sweden and other cases. Naurin (2011), who studied promises from the 1994 and 1998 elections, did not have access to the electronic sources that were available when this study was performed. Second, the article includes more than three times as many promises as Naurin’s (2011) study on Sweden, allowing for larger variation in the data. Apart from comparing promises from the elections of 1994 and 1998 to official rather than political sources of government decisions, the article includes the country’s two most recent election periods that have not yet been systematically studied; the minority single-party government of 2002 to 2006 and the majority coalition government of 2006 to 2010.

### *Swedish Elections 1994–2010*

Sweden is a stable democratic system with few veto players that can block the decisions of the unicameral Parliament. During the period under investigation, the country had seven parties in the Parliament that, according to surveys carried out by the Swedish National Election Studies (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2013: 225), were fairly easily placed on a left–right continuum by the electors at all four elections in the following way; the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Green Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the Moderates.

In 1994, the Social Democrats emerged from a period in opposition and formed a minority single-party cabinet during one of the country's worst economic crises. The party received 45.3 per cent of the vote with a programme that promised severe cuts in subsidies and higher taxes, but preservation of core welfare services. The government only needed the support of one other party in Parliament to command a majority. Systematic collaborations were formed with, first, the Centre Party and, later, the Left Party. In the 1998 and 2002 elections, the Social Democrats received considerably less support – 36.4 and 39.8 per cent of the vote respectively. However, they remained in power with the help of systematic parliamentary collaboration with the Left Party and the Green Party. Similar collaborations, where small parties negotiate agreements with bigger parties in return for policy outcomes, are common in European parliamentary states (Gallagher *et al.* 2006). Steiner and Crepaz (2007) use the term 'contract parliamentarism' to describe the post-election inter-party collaboration that takes place between governing and supporting parties in minority government situations. Via these 'contracts', governments provide veto power to the supporting party, which probably decreases the likelihood that promises that are not part of the 'contract' are fulfilled. At the same time, it seems likely that these contracts are favourable to the fulfilment of election promises compared to the implementation of other policies, simply because negotiations take place in connection to elections when election promises are still highly salient to the parties. There are also other arguments as to why we should expect single-party minority governments to focus on fulfilling promises, even though the minority situation in itself intuitively makes us expect lower pledge fulfilment (see Powell 2000: 77). Minority governments are arguably less sure of voter support compared to majority governments, which means they have greater incentives to act responsibly towards the voters. Furthermore, all promises are not fulfilled via parliamentary decisions. Government regulations do not necessarily have to pass through the Parliament, making a single-party government position useful both with and without a parliamentary majority (compare also with Artés and Bustos 2008; Artés 2013; Russell 2008: 48).

In 2006, the coalition 'Alliance for Sweden' broke the dominance of the Social Democratic party with the help of a joint coalition manifesto. The four centre-right parties – the Moderates, the Liberal Party, the Centre Party and the Christian Democratic Party – together obtained a majority of the seats in Parliament and 48.2 per cent of the votes. The election period was characterised by close collaboration between the parties. Internal government institutions such as the 'Political Coordination Secretariat' (*samordningskansliet*) in the Prime Minister's Office were created and made sure that joint obligations were respected and that few new ones were brought forward. The government was strong also in the sense that the severe economic crises that struck the world in 2008 left Sweden relatively unscathed.

Jointly made election manifestos have received little scholarly attention (cf. Moury 2011). However, the expectation of the fulfilment of promises from a

joint manifesto should be higher than that for individual coalition parties' manifestos. We know that coalition agreements in general provide reciprocal control to the collaborating parties and that such control helps ensure that agreements are carried out. This is shown, for example, in the way that promises that are supported in post-election coalition agreements are more likely to be fulfilled (Mansergh and Thomson 2007: 320–21). Research has also highlighted how the promises that coalition parties agree upon are more often fulfilled than are other promises (Thomson 2001: 187–88). Furthermore, other studies on pre-electoral agreements between coalition parties show that those agreements should be seen as potentially important determinants of policy (Golder 2005; 2006; cf. Strøm and Müller 1999; Strøm *et al.* 2008).

## **Method**

The article defines election promises as commitments about the future that are found in election manifestos and that satisfy the condition that 'an objective estimation can be made as to whether or not the action was indeed taken or the outcome produced' (Royed 1996: 79; cf. for example, Thomson 2001: 180; Artés and Bustos 2008: 310). Unlike previous studies, all promises found in the studied election manifestos that satisfy this condition (rather than specific subsets of promises) are included. The unit of analysis is the promise. Promises are identified via a process where manifestos are read and all statements about the future are singled out. Thereafter, these statements, or the 'potential pledges' (cf. Royed 1996: 79), are evaluated according to whether or not they are testable.<sup>1</sup>

If a promise appears several times in different ways in the manifesto, it is the most specific formulation about the future that is tested. Attention is paid first and foremost to the meaning of the statement, rather than to the choice of words with which the expected direction of the future is formulated. As in other recent pledge studies, no specific restriction was imposed as to how the promises were formulated, as long as their purpose was clear (Royed 1996: 79) and the article therefore includes soft ('we want to') as well as hard ('we promise', 'we will') promises.

Three categories are used to describe the fulfilment of election promises: fulfilled, partially fulfilled and not fulfilled. Information about fulfilment was looked for in the Yearbook of the Parliament (*Riksdagens årsbok*), the Yearbook of the Government (*Regeringskansliets årsbok*) and the document 'Important Laws and Regulations' that is presented every six months by the government (*Viktiga lagar och förordnanden*). Summaries of decisions are also found in *Riksdag och Departement*, a weekly independent newspaper that aims to cover all major decisions made by Parliament and government. Moreover, press releases from the government have been drawn on where available. Written sources have often been combined with interviews carried out by e-mail or telephone with responsible ministries, institutions and subject experts.



Statistical overviews from Statistics Sweden or other relevant sources have also been consulted.

A promise is fulfilled if there is an action or outcome that corresponds to the action or outcome expected from the promise. Evaluations of specific promises are fairly straightforward, since they describe exactly what to look for.<sup>2</sup> Vague promises can be fulfilled in more than one way. The coding of these promises requires the coder to evaluate whether the action that corresponds to the promise is relevant for fulfilment. In a normative sense, the inclusion of vague promises in a study of election pledge fulfilment is uncomplicated: parties should be held accountable for promises which allow for more than one course of action. Such promises make up a substantial proportion of election manifestos and researchers risk overlooking an important part of how parties formulate pledges if they only evaluate promises that are easily evaluated and where there is only one possible outcome. However, judging vague promises demands more of the coder than does the evaluation of specific promises. All pledges have therefore been coded by at least two coders and all difficult cases have been subjected to discussion.<sup>3</sup>

A promise to act is unfulfilled if no significant action has taken place. The notion of 'significant action' is used to illustrate that symbolic or minor action is not considered enough for fulfilment. Symbolic or minor action can consist of government investigations ('*utredningar*'), and statements of intent by the government (sometimes called '*skrivelser*'). 'Minor action' can also be pilot projects that are not followed up by permanent policies.

Partial fulfilment is an important category because the practice of politics does not always allow parties to reach their outcome goals or act exactly as intended when the promise was made. It is therefore argued that by separating partially fulfilled from other promises, scholars can contribute more fully to the understanding of governments' pledge fulfilment (Thomson 2001: 180). Partially fulfilled election promises are those where the party made obvious efforts or achieved obvious outcomes, but where it did not fully succeed. However, this distinction has taken various forms in previous studies, which often leads to the collapsing of categories into 'at least partial fulfilment' (cf. Mansergh and Thomson 2007). Three examples of situations where partial fulfilment is applied in this study are:

- (1) *Late fulfilment within the election period*: promises that are decided upon after a specified date, but still within the election period, are defined as partially fulfilled. The promise of the Alliance for Sweden to introduce a cost ceiling for dental care costs by 1 July 2007 is coded as partially fulfilled, since the proposition was accepted by the Riksdag on 2 April 2008 – one year after the target date, but still within the election term.
- (2) *Obvious changes along the lines of the promise that do not 'go all the way'*: in some outcome promises, a party mentions specific numbers, levels or amounts that should be reached. The approach here is that all

these promises should be judged individually and coded according to reasonable, transparent arguments. It is worth noting that such promises are relatively rare: 16 out of the 445 promises investigated in this study are defined as outcome promises and of these only two demanded further discussion.

- (3) *Fulfilment that is similar to what was promised, but not precisely the same*: election promises may be carried out almost as promised but not exactly. For example, the government sometimes comes up with slightly different technical solutions for social benefits than those described in their manifesto. If the general idea of the promise is respected, even though policy does not exactly follow the design laid out in the promises, the promise is coded as partially fulfilled.

## Results

Table 1 shows that between 76 and 86 per cent of the promises made in the election manifestos are fulfilled during the four periods. When we collapse the fulfilled and the partially fulfilled promises, the at-least-partial fulfilment rate is between 79 and 90 per cent of the promises. The lowest percentage is found for the 2006 majority coalition government. The overall conclusion is that these four Swedish governments have kept a clear majority of the promises they made in their manifestos.

Table 2 presents the results in a way that enables readers to compare Swedish pledge fulfilment with Artés' (2013) study of Spain, Mansergh and Thomson's (2007) report on Ireland and the Netherlands and Royed's (1996) analyses of parties in the UK and the US. Only the types of promises studied by each author are shown. The coding has been carried out as per the instructions from the respective studies.

TABLE 1  
FOUR SWEDISH GOVERNMENTS' FULFILMENT OF ELECTION PROMISES; ELECTION PROMISES BY FULFILMENT

	Soc Dem 1994		Soc Dem 1998		Soc Dem 2002		Alliance 2006		All	
	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%
Fulfilled	51	86	60	83	91	81	153	76	355	80
Partly	1	2	5	7	2	2	6	3	14	3
Not fulfilled	7	12	6	8	17	15	41	20	71	16
No measurements currently available	0	0	1	1	2	2	2	1	5	1
TOTAL	59	100	72	100	112	100	202	100	445	100

*Note*: 'No measurements currently available' are promises where current information is not enough to judge the promise, even though the promise is specific enough to be defined as a promise. In two promises, the relevant statistics were not yet available at the time of writing, and in three cases there was no common understanding of what statistics should be used among the sources. The percentages are rounded.

TABLE 2  
ESTIMATIONS OF SWEDISH GOVERNMENTS' ELECTION PLEDGE FULFILMENT USING  
PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED STUDIES' OPERATIONALISATIONS OF THE NOTION OF  
ELECTION PROMISE; PERCENTAGE AT LEAST PARTIALLY FULFILLED ELECTION  
PROMISES ( $N$  = TOTAL NUMBER OF PROMISES ACCORDING TO THE DEFINITION)

	Domestic pledges (Royed 1996)	Specific socio-economic action promises (Mansergh and Thomson 2007)	Economic and labour market promises (Artés 2013)	All promises
<b>Soc Dem 1994</b>	87 (54)	93 (28)	87 (31)	88 (59)
<b>Soc Dem 1998</b>	91 (67)	89 (28)	87 (31)	90 (71)
<b>Soc Dem 2002</b>	84 (108)	79 (44)	77 (31)	83 (110)
<b>Alliance 2006</b>	79 (199)	70 (80)	78 (51)	79 (200)
<b>TOTAL</b>	85 (428)	83 (180)	82 (144)	85 (440)

*Note:* The five promises that are coded as 'no measurements currently available' (see Table 1) are not included here. Royed (1996): Foreign policy, including policies towards the UN, foreign aid and defence policies, are excluded from the dataset. EU promises are coded as domestic promises. The coding of foreign promises was tested for reliability together with the coding of the rest of the subject areas (see note under Table 3). Mansergh and Thomson (2007): The authors use the same operationalisation as Thomson (2001), namely specific socio-economic action promises. Socio-economic promises according to Thomson's definition are found in the following subject areas: economics, enterprise, employment and labour market, social welfare and education. The excluded Swedish promises in the table are thus agriculture, migration, infrastructure, legal matters, EU promises, environment, culture, foreign promises and the category 'other promises'. 'Specific action promises' means that only promises where the party describes exactly what to do are included. For definition of 'specific and vague promises' and 'action and thecome promises' and reliability analyses, see note under Table 3 and the text. Thomson (2001) excludes review pledges, but Mansergh (2004) does not (cf. Mansergh and Thomson 2007). The review pledges are very few and do not alter the result of the comparison. The analysis follows Thomson (2001) and excludes review promises in the comparison in the table. Artés (2013): Only economic and labour market promises according to Artés' rather inclusive definition of economic pledges are included (see also Artés and Bustos 2008: 4) More specifically, the following areas are included in 'economic pledges' according to Artés' definition: agriculture, labour market, fiscal policy, industry, energy, tourism, transportation, economic policy, financial system, telecommunications, commerce, housing and competition policy. Since this division of subject areas differs from the one in this, Royed's (1996), and Mansergh and Thomson's (2007) studies, an extra reliability test was performed on the coding. A randomly selected manifesto (the Social Democrats 2006) was coded by an external coder based on instructions describing Artés' definition. Of 106 promises, only 2 were coded using different codes, which means a 98.1 per cent agreement (Cohen's kappa 0.955).

Table 2 shows that analyses of subsets of promises provide a less precise measurement of pledge fulfilment than when all promises are studied. However, the differences are small. The biggest difference between the overall measure and the restricted operationalisations is nine percentage points for the Alliance government in 2006 following Mansergh and Thomson's (2007) operationalization, where only specific action promises in socio-economic areas are investigated (the analysis is based on 180 of 440 promises). Since fulfilment rates are so high in the Swedish case (hence variation in the data is low), it is less likely that this difference is caused by random variation, even though it is small. However, the other differences using Mansergh and Thomson's opera-

tionalisation are only between one and five percentage points and they are not systematically biased towards lower fulfilment rates in all four governments.

The bias created by investigating these subsets of promises is not systematic for any of the operationalisations. We cannot conclude that by focusing on specific socio-economic promises, domestic promises, or economic and labour market promises, we over- or underestimate the results. Royed's (1996) focus on domestic pledges leads to more or less the same results as when we also include promises about foreign policy. When using Artés' (2013) operationalisation that focuses on economic and labour market promises, we analyse only 144 of 440 promises and the biggest difference is six percentage points (for the Social Democrats in 2002 when fewer such promises were given).

Moving on to what the analysis tells us about the case of Sweden and the types of cabinet that are common there, Table 2 shows that different operationalisations of the notion pledge in the Swedish case do not challenge the conclusion that minority single-party governments fulfil a comparably high percentage of their promises. In fact, the Social Democratic cabinets show the highest average fulfilment rates compared with all previously studied governments in the UK, the US, Spain, the Netherlands and Ireland. When including only domestic pledges, as Royed (1996) does, Swedish governments fulfil between 84 and 91 per cent of their election promises, which is about the same as, or even higher than, UK parties and clearly higher than the US parties. Majority single-party governments in the UK fulfilled, at least partially, between 81 and 89 per cent of their promises in 1979 and 1983 (Royed 1996: 61). In roughly the same period, pledge fulfilment by governing parties in the US was on average 60 per cent (Royed 1996: 62).

In Ireland, the highest fulfilment rates were found for Fianna Fáil during its majority single-party governments (79 per cent), as well as during its participation in three coalition governments (68 per cent) (Mansergh and Thomson 2007: 316–18). The Swedish Social Democrats fulfil, at least partially, between 79 and 93 per cent of promises using the same operationalisation, leading to a higher average.

Artés (2013: 10) finds that Spanish single-party cabinets fulfil, at least partially, between 69 and 80 per cent of their economic promises during the period 1989 to 2000. He does not find a significant difference between majority and minority single-party cabinets. Using Artés' operationalisation of the notion of election promise, the Swedish minority single-party cabinets fulfil on average more of their promises – between 77 and 87 per cent.

Furthermore, Table 2 supports the claim that a joint manifesto increases pledge fulfilment for coalition governments. Governmental coalition parties in the Netherlands at least partially fulfil, on average, 57 per cent of their specific socio-economic action promises. In Ireland, the average for fulfilment of specific socio-economic action promises was 50 per cent between 1977 and 2002, which hides a higher average for the single-party government during the period (Mansergh and Thomson 2007: 318; Thomson 2001: 184). Using the same interpretation of election promises in the Swedish case, we see that as many as

70 per cent of promises are at least partially fulfilled by the Alliance for Sweden.

To come to firm conclusions regarding the relative efficiency of minority single-party and pre-election formed coalition governments, we need to analyse the extent to which Swedish parties give promises that are particularly easy to fulfil or are less substantial. The rest of the analyses will therefore focus on what types of promises are given during the period studied and its implications for fulfilment rates. Tables 3 and 4 divide promises into subject areas, types of change and degrees of specificity, as well as whether they pledge outcomes or actions. Table 5 presents a logistic regression analysis of what affects pledge fulfilment in the Swedish case, which is useful when tying the discussion back to the methodological question concerning the implications of the types of pledges studied. All analyses are based on the full sample of promises.

Table 3 supports the conclusion of previous research (i.e., Mansergh and Thomson 2007: 323; Pomper 1968: 162–64; Rose 1980: 62–64; Royed 1996: 55) that promises are made in a wide range of areas covering subjects of importance for both parties and voters, such as health care, employment rights, social benefits, environmental regulations, education and taxes. The Social Democrats dedicated, on average, 25 per cent of their promises to social welfare during the period studied. The centre-right Alliance for Sweden made most of its promises in the area of social welfare in the 2006 manifesto: 23 per cent. Promises about national finances and taxation (economic promises) were

TABLE 3  
FOUR SWEDISH GOVERNMENTS' ELECTION PROMISES BY SUBJECT AREA

	Soc Dem 1994		Soc Dem 1998		Soc Dem 2002		Alliance 2006		All	
	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%
Agriculture	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Economics	10	17	8	11	4	4	15	7	37	8
Enterprise	5	8	6	8	8	7	13	6	32	7
Labour market	9	15	13	18	11	10	6	3	39	9
Social welfare	12	20	14	19	28	25	46	23	100	23
Migration	0	0	0	0	4	4	11	5	15	3
Education	5	8	11	15	22	20	32	16	70	16
Infrastructure	2	3	0	0	1	1	1	0.5	4	1
Legal matters	2	3	4	6	14	12	33	16	53	12
EU	2	3	8	11	1	1	13	6	24	5
Environment	5	8	1	1	6	5	29	14	41	9
Culture	0	0	0	0	9	8	0	0	9	2
Foreign policy	5	8	4	6	2	2	1	0.5	12	3
Other	1	2	3	4	2	2	2	1	8	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>100</b>

*Note:* Percentage agreement (and Cohen's kappa) in reliability analyses using an extra coder on a subset of the promises: 90.0 (0.887). The percentages have been rounded.

TABLE 4  
FOUR SWEDISH GOVERNMENTS' ELECTION PROMISES BY TYPE OF CHANGE,  
DEGREE OF SPECIFICITY AND ACTION/OUTCOME

	Soc Dem 1994		Soc Dem 1998		Soc Dem 2002		Alliance 2006		All	
	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%
<b>Type of change</b>										
Status quo	1	2	2	3	4	4	7	3	14	3
Cuts	10	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	2
Expenses	20	34	34	47	71	63	77	38	202	45
Tax cuts	3	5	2	3	2	2	16	8	23	5
Tax increase	3	5	0	0	0	0	2	1	5	1
Other change	20	34	34	47	34	30	97	48	185	42
Review	2	3	0	0	1	1	3	2	6	1
<b>Specificity</b>										
Specific	36	61	33	46	63	56	115	57	247	56
Vague	23	39	39	54	49	44	87	43	198	45
<b>Action/outcome</b>										
Action	56	95	66	92	106	95	201	99	429	96
Outcome	3	5	6	8	6	5	1	1	16	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>100</b>

Note: The percentages are rounded. Percentage agreement (and Cohen's kappa) in reliability analyses using an extra coder on a subset of the promises: Degree of specificity: 93.1 (0.859), Type of change: 94.0 (0.889), Action/Outcome: 98.0 (0.658).

TABLE 5  
WHAT EXPLAINS PLEDGE FULFILMENT IN SWEDEN?

		Odds ratios (s.e.)	p-value	z-scores
<b>Type of change</b>	Cuts (incl. tax increase)	0.91 (1.36)	0.95	-0.06
	Expenses	0.46 (0.50)	0.47	-72
	Tax cuts	0.26 (1.36)	0.27	-1.11
	Other change	0.25 (0.28)	0.21	-1.25
	Review	0.34 (0.53)	0.49	-69
<b>Degree of specificity</b>	Specific	0.68 (0.21)	0.22	-1.23
	Vague	0.49 (0.17)	0.04	-2.10
<b>Issue area</b>	Employment and labour market	0.38 (0.17)	0.04	-2.11
	EU and foreign	5.13 (5.35)	0.12	1.57
	Outcome	1.21 (0.93)	0.25	0.93
<b>Action/outcome</b>	1994	1.76 (0.92)	0.28	1.08
	1998	2.71 (1.34)	0.04	2.01
	2002	1.41 (0.46)	0.29	1.06
<b>Constant (B)</b>		14.25 (19.26)	0.05	1.97
<b>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> (McFadden's)</b>		0.0755		

Note: Logistic regression analysis of the fulfilment of election promises by the governments of 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006. Reference category for type of change is 'status quo', for specific: 'vague promises', for issue area: 'all other categories', for outcome: 'action', for election year: 2006. There is no variation in the variable 'tax increase' (all five promises pledging tax increase were at least partially fulfilled) which motivates its inclusion in 'cuts'. The binary dependent variable is 'at least partially fulfilled' (1) and 'not fulfilled' (0). The five promises that are coded as 'no measurements currently available' (see Table 1) are not included here.  $N = 440$ .

most frequent during the economic crisis in 1994 (17 per cent). Labour market promises were the second most common category of promise made in Social Democratic manifestos (together with education and research: 14 per cent). The Alliance for Sweden focused on legal matters (including, for example, police, crime prevention and punishment) and education (16 per cent). Environmental promises were more common in the Alliance manifesto than in Social Democratic manifestos (14 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively).

Table 4 shows that specific promises are more common than vague promises in three of the four manifestos. On average, 54 per cent of promises are so specific that they do not leave the government any room for manoeuvre when it comes to fulfilment. Analyses not reported in the table show that the parties make a higher proportion of specific promises in those areas where they make more promises. If we interpret many promises in a specific area as a sign of the party giving priority to that area, parties are more specific in the areas they prioritise.<sup>4</sup> We can also see that the four governments analysed did not primarily promise to preserve the status quo or to review policies, as is sometimes claimed in public debates. They promised change. Review pledges and status quo pledges were rare under all governments (between 0 and 3 per cent of promises, respectively). Rather, promises are coded as 'other change', which is a category that collapses quite diverse promises about issues such as changes in school curricula, changed punishments for crimes, changed priorities in foreign policies and privatisation of health care. The second most common change that is pledged is 'expense', where a party promises, for example, higher foreign aid, more funding for the municipalities, more generous subsidies or other expansions of the welfare state. The number of expense pledges seems to vary depending on the economic situation facing the country; the crisis election of 1994 had the fewest expense promises. In the same way, most of the promises pledging decreased state spending (cuts and pledges about higher taxes) were made in 1994. Expenses were more often promised by the Social Democrats (on average 15 per cent) than by the Alliance (11 per cent), and tax cuts were promised more often by the Alliance (8 per cent) than by the Social Democrats (on average 2 per cent).

Taken together, status quo promises, review promises and promises pledging decreased costs for the state – which are promises that can be assumed to be easier to fulfil – are relatively uncommon. Swedish governments make few such promises in comparison to governments in other states. The four Swedish manifestos include, on average, three status quo pledges per manifesto. Thomson (2001: 187) finds, on average, 13 specific socio-economic status quo pledges per manifesto in the Netherlands, and Royed (1996: 61–62) finds, on average, 12 domestic status quo promises in UK programmes and 23 in US programmes. Pledges to cut spending and review policies are not coded in all previous studies, but are about as uncommon in the UK and the US as they are in the Swedish case (cf. Royed 1996: 61–62).

Next, a multivariate logistic regression on what determines pledge fulfilment in Sweden is presented. The analysis provides an estimate of what differ-

ence it makes in the case of Sweden to exclude vague promises – as do Mansergh and Thomson (2007) – or foreign pledges – as does Royed (1996). The model also considers the type of change that is being pledged. Previous studies of fulfilment of election promises find that status quo promises are more often fulfilled than change promises (Costello and Thomson 2008: 10; Mansergh and Thomson 2007: 319).

Moreover, taking into account previous conclusions about the relative efficiency of minority single-party cabinets, the analysis is valuable in evaluating whether the majority coalition formed pre-election differs from the single-party minority governments when holding constant the kinds of promise governments make.

The analysis also contributes to explaining the Swedish case by including factors that appear important in binary comparisons between type of pledge and fulfilment in the Swedish data. Social welfare promises and employment and labour market promises are the least often fulfilled in such binary comparisons. Promises on EU policies and foreign policies are the most often fulfilled.

Table 5 shows three significant effects. First, promises given by the Social Democrats in the 1998 election have an odds ratio of 2.71, meaning that the odds that a promise made by the 1998 government was fulfilled is almost three times the odds that a promise made by the 2006 coalition was fulfilled. The other differences between the coalition government and the two single-party minority governments are not significant. However, even though the coalition government had a majority in the Parliament and even though the investigation focuses solely on the promises the coalition parties agreed upon before the election, the government did not fulfil more promises than minority single-party governments do.

The other two significant differences concern social welfare and labour market promises. Social welfare promises and labour market promises have values below 1, indicating that the odds are significantly lower that these promises will be fulfilled. To some extent, this contradicts the conclusion of Table 2, that a focus on socio-economic issues would not significantly underestimate pledge fulfilment in the Swedish case. However, the definition of socio-economic issues used includes areas other than social welfare and employment (see comment under Table 2). Moreover, the unfulfilled labour market promises found were all unfulfilled by the Social Democrats (all in all, 10 promises). The Alliance for Sweden did not break any of its six labour market promises. Similarly, 15 of the 22 unfulfilled social welfare promises were unfulfilled under the Alliance for Sweden government. The Social Democrats did not break their social welfare promises particularly often (seven were unfulfilled during three election periods).

These results are interesting in themselves, since the Social Democratic focus on labour market policies. And even though breaking social welfare promises would fit a cliché of centre-right parties, it is a fact that the Alliance for Sweden gave priority to the area in 2006, at least by giving more of its promises in that area than in any other.



One interpretation of the lower fulfilment rate of Social Democratic labour market promises is that some of these face more veto players than others. Fulfilment of labour market promises are complicated by the so-called ‘Swedish model’, where power over labour market regulations is given to stakeholders in the labour market – unions and the employers’ organisations. It is likely that the Social Democrats are more influenced by this complex relationship than are centre-right governments when promises are to be fulfilled, since the party has strong bonds with the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO). This is evident in an unfulfilled promise about implementing a system of individual savings accounts for the training of workers (*‘individuellt kompetenssparande’*). The promise appeared in different forms in the 1994, 1998 and the 2002 manifestos of the Social Democrats and had support in the Parliament. However, the LO did not fully support its implementation.

It is also possible that the Social Democrats included the LO when writing the manifesto. Some formulations on labour market policy seem to reflect what the union would emphasise in negotiations with the employers’ organisation, rather than what the Social Democrats would emphasise in negotiations with the other parties in the Parliament. One such example is a pledge from 1998 where the party promises to increase employees’ rights to influence their workplace. The government launched investigations and presented reviews but did not manage to design measures that could find support.

One possible explanation of the Alliance’s unfulfilled social welfare promises is that some of them pledged large system change. When the Alliance for Sweden broke the dominance of the Social Democrats in 2006, it made several promises pledging system change. Some of these were fulfilled (significant income tax cuts, for example), but several within the areas of social welfare and education were not. Those promises were not necessarily expensive, but demanded reviews of and changes to complicated welfare systems. When we look at the present election period – 2010 to 2014 – it seems that some of the promises in the areas of the welfare state and education that are here judged as unfulfilled might be fulfilled at a later date. When governments are given a second chance to deliver on complex promises, these are probably more likely to be fulfilled. The coding of changes in the above analyses focuses on differences between no change at all, expenditures, cuts, tax issues and other changes. We can therefore say that such differences matter little to pledge fulfilment. However, an analysis of different kinds of changes might reveal that a promise that pledges to change things profoundly takes more time and effort to implement than do other changes.

The other differences reported in Table 5 are not significant. Taken together, the regression therefore strengthens the conclusion from Table 2 that previously used operationalisations that include only subsets of promises capture pledge fulfilment fairly well in the Swedish case. There is a tendency in the Swedish data that specific promises are less likely to be fulfilled, but the difference is not significant. This is interesting, since the specificity of the

promise had been thought to be one of the more important differences between definitions (compare Artés 2013; Thomson *et al.* 2012).

We can also see that the foreign policy promises excluded by Royed (1996), and that are often fulfilled in Sweden when binary comparisons are made, are not significantly different from other promises in the data when we hold other factors constant. Nor are EU promises, which are collapsed within the category of foreign promises in the model. Furthermore, promises that pledge the status quo are not fulfilled more often than other pledges in the Swedish case. Status quo pledges are few in the data. No significant variation is found when using other reference categories for the variable 'type of change'.

## **Conclusions**

By coding Swedish governments' election promises according to three often-used definitions of the notion, this article offers the first evaluation of how different methods alter analyses of government pledge fulfilment. The conclusion is that even when studying only certain subsets of promises in election manifestos, we can capture governments' fulfilment of election promises well. Concerns about how to compare previously studied contexts are therefore mitigated by this article. The results support an interpretation that institutional factors such as cabinet type matter more to a government's ability to fulfil election promises than the types of promises that are given within any particular context. However, the restricted definition does not give precisely the same results and it is not obvious how these differences should be explained. The task of performing exact comparisons between several contexts using the same methods remains.

The article also shows that essential political decision-making can occur under a party without a majority in Parliament. The minority single-party governments studied fulfil a higher proportion of their election promises than found in any previous context, independent of how the notion of election promise is operationalised. Moreover, despite its majority position and the joint election manifesto, the 2006 coalition did not fulfil a higher percentage of its promises than did the minority single-party Social Democratic cabinets. Future research should therefore examine minority single-party cabinets as the special constitutional situation they are and separate them from minority multi-party cabinets and majority single-party cabinets (compare Cody 2008; Strøm 1985).

Furthermore, the analysis supports the conclusion that a joint election manifesto facilitates the fulfilment of the pledges of coalition cabinets. In comparison with coalition parties that use their own manifestos in other contexts, the Alliance for Sweden fulfilled a larger proportion of its promises. Taken together, therefore, the lesson from the Swedish case is that parties in similar situations benefit from staying single in the cabinet or teaming up in advance if they want to fulfil their election promises.

The article also reminds us that we know little about how manifestos are created and which actors influence specific formulations of promises (Däubler

2012; Scarrow *et al.* 2000: 144). Since research so clearly shows that what is promised in election manifestos affects government behaviour, future research needs to widen our understanding about why certain policy suggestions and formulations end up in the manifestos while others do not.

Finally, this article, together with other studies of election promises, point to the differences between actual government behaviour and how citizens perceive that behaviour. Swedish National Election Studies have shown that Swedes have been critical of the ability of parties to fulfil promises at least since the 1950s (Naurin 2011: 75). We know that the definition of election promises used in this article would seem narrow to citizens (Naurin 2011), even though it is wide in comparison with what has been used in similar studies of party pledges. Voters do not see election manifestos as the tool that they are. With this said, we should emphasise that, even though this and other election pledge studies claim that promises are made in areas of great importance for the citizen, the extent to which the exact promises made in election manifestos mirror the policy priorities of citizens remains to be studied.

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### Notes

1. Election promises can be contrasted with rhetorical statements about the future that are not testable. Examples of statements that are excluded in this study as not testable are 'We want to recreate a spirit of community and belief in the future', 'We must end the feelings of powerlessness, belief in the future must be regained and people's responsibility and influence – the fundamentals of democracy – must be reinforced' and 'We want to save the most where the right-wing government has squandered the worst'. Similar rhetorical statements appear in most manifestos, but are excluded in all studies of election pledge fulfilment (see the early, influential discussion by Pomper 1968: 276). The identification of promises has been subjected to reliability tests by letting an external coder code an election manifesto. The external coder was asked to identify every promise in every second page of a manifesto using coding instructions in a technical report. In total, 62 promises were identified by the external coder, out of which 58 were matched with the original coding. None of the pledges were missing in the external coder's coding, but he identified three more promises and divided one promise into two. The results correspond to a 93.6 per cent compliance, which is satisfactory taking the complexity of the task into consideration. The manifestos studied are: 1994: 'Sverige kan bättre. Socialdemokraternas valmanifest'. 1998: 'Med omtanke om framtiden – Socialdemokraternas politik inför 2000-talet'. 2002: 'Valmanifest: Tillsammans för trygghet och utveckling'. 2006: 'Fler i arbete – mer att dela på. Valmanifest 2006'.

2. Examples of specific promises that leave the party with no room for discretion when choosing actions are: 'Research on nuclear power will not be given state funding', 'We will say no to a bridge over Öresund' and 'Small businesses with up to 10 employees will not have to pay sick leave costs for their employees'. Examples of vague promises where the party can choose between more than one course of action are: 'We will actively work to promote women's opportunities in the labour market', 'We will prioritise the need for specialised teachers in pre-school' and 'We want to encourage the development that municipalities organise citizenship ceremonies for new Swedes'.
3. Summaries of the arguments and sources of information for the evaluations of the promises are written down in specific documents and are available upon request. However, since all sources are in Swedish, so are these documents. Examples translated into English are available in a technical report (Naurin *et al.* 2013).
4. Specific promises are most common among promises about the economy (92 per cent), social and welfare issues (72 per cent), education (64 per cent), and labour market and employment (59 per cent). Vague promises are most common among the EU promises (96 per cent), which probably also illustrates that national parties have difficulties in foreseeing exactly how they will be able to act on the EU level. Vague promises are also more common among promises about enterprises (66 per cent), the environment (59 per cent) and foreign policy (58 per cent).

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