I

Promises to Keep?

Do members of Congress follow through on the appeals they make in campaigns? In other words, do they keep their promises? These questions may be simple, but their answers lie at the heart of assessments of democratic legitimacy. In representative democracies, election campaigns are intended to serve as the central linchpin, providing a venue for debate about issues, educating citizens about the activities of their elected representatives, and informing legislators about the interests of their constituents. Campaigns are, as Riker (1996) argued, “a main point – perhaps the main point – of contact between officials and the populace over matters of public policy” (3). The existence of strong links between elections and governing is therefore one of the most fundamental prerequisites for accountability. In short, in healthy democracies, candidates in campaigns should provide voters with information about the issues and policies they will pursue in Congress, and, once in office, should follow through on these appeals.

The prevailing view among the public and many pundits, though, is that politics in the United States falls far short of this ideal. Instead, many believe that campaigns have little issue content and have devolved into nothing more than opportunities for candidates to launch personal attacks at one another. Moreover, the advantages of incumbency seem to free legislators from any pressures to be accountable for their past records or sincere about their future plans. Candidates’ campaign appeals are therefore often accused of being just “cheap talk,” designed to sway voters and maximize vote shares on Election Day, but with little connection to what the candidates actually plan to do once in office. For instance, in the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study, only one-third of respondents
said they thought candidates even try to keep their promises “always” or “most of the time,” and only about one in six respondents to the 2006 Congressional Elections Study reported that they felt that their member of Congress had done “very well” in keeping his or her campaign promises.

To the extent that these accusations are true, they raise serious questions about the legitimacy of the American democratic process. It comes as somewhat of a surprise, then, that there has been very little scholarly attention to the linkages between legislators’ behavior as candidates in campaigns and their activities as policy makers in office. Although evaluations of the quality of campaigns and the nature and strength of representation are central to research on American politics, the study of promise keeping has been largely peripheral to work in these fields. As such, while scholars are typically more sanguine than the public and punditry about the prospect that campaigns can successfully fulfill their role as a linking mechanism between elected officials and the public, we simply do not have answers to a number of crucial questions about promise keeping, including the frequency with which campaign promises are kept, the relationship between the rhetoric that candidates use and the sincerity of their claims, the characteristics of those legislators who follow through most faithfully on their appeals, and the factors that encourage such responsiveness. Even more fundamentally, we lack agreement on a meaningful and workable definition of what it means for a candidate to make a promise and a legislator to keep one. The result is a large gap in our understanding of one of the most important mechanisms underlying representative democracy.

This book is intended to fill this gap. I explore the dynamics of promise making and promise keeping for a large sample of representatives and senators elected or reelected in the 1998, 2000, and 2002 elections, analyzing both their campaign appeals and the content of their subsequent legislative activity. I define promise keeping as occurring when legislators are active in Congress on the issues they prioritized in their campaigns. In this agenda-based conception, responsive legislators are those whose campaign appeals serve as strong and accurate signals about the issues they will pursue in office, through their introduction and cosponsorship of

---

1 These findings are line with earlier polls as well. In a 1999 survey by the Project on Campaign Conduct, nearly three-fourths of respondents reported that they were “very” concerned about candidates saying one thing and doing another once elected (Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002), and, in a 1988 ABC/Washington Post poll, 71 percent agreed that “most members of Congress make campaign promises that they have no intention of fulfilling” (Ringquist and Dasse 2004), down from 81 percent who agreed with a similar statement in a 1971 Harris Survey.
Promises to Keep?

legislation. My findings reveal that campaign appeals are indeed meaningful, although not always in the manner predicted by the conventional wisdom; that promise keeping varies in a systematic fashion across legislators, across types of legislative activities, across time, and, perhaps most notably, across chambers of Congress; that it is affected by legislators’ relative vulnerability and in turn shapes their future electoral fortunes; and that legislators’ follow-through on their appeals leaves a tangible trace in public policy.

The systematic study of promise keeping thus has the potential to make a number of contributions to our understanding of the dynamics of representation and the electoral connection. At the aggregate level, promise keeping serves as an important indicator of collective responsiveness in Congress – the extent to which the issues and concerns raised in elections are reflected in the legislative policy-making process. At the level of individual legislators, it provides new insight into dyadic representation (i.e., between each legislator and his or her district or state), as well as how representatives and senators negotiate the dual demands of campaigning and lawmaking. Most generally, a focus on the linkages between campaign and legislative agendas yields a more nuanced view of responsiveness and the role of campaigns in promoting it.

An interest in the relationships between elected officials’ campaign behavior and their governing behavior may seem natural and intuitive. As Fenno notes, election campaigns are the place where representation begins and where it is sustained (1996, 9), and classic “mandate” models of democracy depend upon elections as the mechanism that links the governed with their representatives and ensures accountability. Mansbridge (2003), for example, identifies promissory representation, focused on “the idea that during campaigns representatives made promises to constituents, which they then kept or failed to keep” as the “traditional” model of representation (515).

However, empirical research on legislative representation and responsiveness, at least in the American context, has only rarely given a central place to campaigns (but see Sulkin 2005). Instead, virtually all of the extensive literature on the topic has revolved around Miller and Stokes’ (1963) concept of “policy congruence” – the correlation between the issue positions of legislators (as expressed through their roll call votes) and those of their constituents (as expressed in opinion polls). My conception of promise keeping departs from this traditional approach in two ways. First, by targeting the relationship between the content of campaign appeals and the content of legislative action, it offers a new locus for representation.
Second, and equally important, it shifts the focus from a sole focus on candidates’ and legislators’ issue *positions* to include their issue *priorities*. In so doing, it also highlights the process of responsiveness, as legislators raise issues in their campaigns and address them in office. Thus, this conception of representation is less about the alignment of positions between representatives and the represented and more about the transmission of information between different stages of the political process. Representation “works” when candidates’ campaigns serve as accurate predictors of how they will behave as policy makers.

Assessing the linkages between the electoral and legislative arenas also enables me to put critiques about campaign discourse into context. The frequent laments in both scholarly and journalistic circles about the vague and general nature of candidates’ appeals are rooted in the assumption that such appeals are uninformative and insincere. Similarly, a common argument in the debates about negativity in campaigns is that time candidates spend attacking their opponents is time taken away from serious attention to policy problems (but see Geer 2006). Importantly, though, these intuitions have never actually been tested, so we do not know whether certain types of appeals serve as stronger signals about legislators’ intentions than others. A rigorous investigation may provide empirical support for the conventional wisdom, but it may also call into question some of the criticisms commonly leveled at candidates and at the broader electoral system.

**WHY SO LITTLE ATTENTION TO PROMISE KEEPING?**

The connections between campaigns and governing thus have clear normative, theoretical, and practical implications for a variety of audiences, including political scientists interested in explaining the dynamics of representation; citizens, interest groups, and policy specialists seeking to predict how vigorously a candidate will advocate for a particular issue once in Congress; and reformers wishing to promote higher-quality campaigns. Why, then, have scholars of electoral politics and Congress devoted so little attention to them? A variety of methodological and conceptual constraints, discussed in more detail in this section, have contributed to the relative neglect. However, I attribute it mostly to the fact that promise keeping falls between or outside the traditional lines of inquiry in research on American politics. The increasing specialization of the field along a variety of dimensions (the study of institutions versus behavior, elites versus masses, elections versus policy making) has brought about
many benefits, most obviously the development of theoretically rich and empirically nuanced literatures on a number of important questions. The major disadvantage, though, is that it discourages attention to phenomena that sit astride the lines that separate the subfields and even to those that differentiate research areas within a single subfield.

For example, work on legislative studies has long been marked by a division of labor between scholars of congressional campaigns and elections and those of legislative behavior and organization. In fact, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that the “Two Congresses” distinction – that legislators “spend their time moving between two contexts, Washington and home, and between two activities, governing and campaigning” (Fenno 1989, 19) – has been felt more acutely by scholars of Congress than by members of Congress. While there is considerable evidence that representatives and senators see these two contexts as tightly intertwined, the literatures on legislators’ behavior in Washington, D.C., and their activities at home on the campaign trail have developed along largely separate lines.

The depth of this division might not be immediately obvious to a casual observer. After all, following on Mayhew (1974), the idea of the “electoral connection” has been central to theorizing about congressional behavior. However, most research conceives of this connection in a fairly narrow way, as synonymous with the “reelection imperative” – that, as Mayhew described it, members of Congress “think they can affect their own percentages, that in fact they can affect their own percentages, and furthermore that there is reason for them to try to do so” (33). Indeed, in the thirty-five years since Mayhew wrote these words, nearly all work on the topic has focused on testing these three assertions, either by exploring the relationship between electoral vulnerability and legislative behavior or by estimating the effects of legislators’ activity in office on their future electoral fortunes.

More often than not, then, the “electoral” component of the electoral connection has been reduced to vote shares, either past or future. This approach has yielded a great deal of leverage into a variety of phenomena of interest to legislative scholars, including committee requests and participation (Fowler, Douglass, and Clark 1980; Frisch and Kelly 2006; Hall

---

* This division is manifested in the content of most “state of the field” review articles, which have focused on one dimension or the other (see, for example, Polsby and Schickler 2002; Squire 1995). Along the same lines, the Midwest Political Science Association maintains two separate divisions for work on Congress: “Legislative Politics: Institutions” and “Legislative Politics: Campaigns and Elections.”
1996); introduction and cosponsorship of legislation (Harward and Moffett 2010; Kessler and Krehbiel 1996; Koger 2003; Ragsdale and Cook 1987; Schiller 1995; Wawro 2000); casework and constituency service (Bond 1985; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Johannes 1984; Parker 1980); and, perhaps most prominently, roll call voting patterns (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Bovitz and Carson 2006; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Erikson 1971; Fiorina 1974; Kuklinski 1977).

At the same time, though, it is clear that electoral margins are not the whole of the story. In fact, evidence of a relationship between legislative behavior and vote shares (and vice versa) is mixed at best. Some work finds that more vulnerable legislators are more active and responsive, some finds that the safest are, and some finds no relationship at all. Of course, the lack of consistent correlations between vulnerability and behavior does not mean that legislators do not take electoral considerations into account. As Arnold (1990) points out, perhaps the best explanation for this result is that legislators are so concerned about reelection that they become adept at anticipating constituency concerns and avoiding behavior that would provoke a reaction (see also Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). What these findings do mean, though, is that if we want to gain insight into the ways in which particular electoral experiences are related to legislative activity, we are more likely to do so by targeting other dimensions of the electoral connection.

These other dimensions become clearer when we shift the focus slightly to think not only of an electoral connection, but also of a “campaign connection.” In short, legislators’ behavior in office is likely shaped not only by how well they performed in the previous election, but also by what actually transpired during that campaign. The process of campaigning teaches candidates about the interests of their districts or states, about the issues that resonate with their supporters (as well as those that do not), and about their perceived strengths and weaknesses. If legislators are indeed reelection-oriented, these lessons should affect their subsequent behavior. Accordingly, Fenno argues that “it is through the interpretation of a campaign that the winning candidate derives some of the impulses, interests, and instructions that shape his or her legislative behavior” (1996, 75; see also Hershey 1984 and Kingdon 1968).

Just what might these “impulses, interests, and instructions” be? In previous work, I demonstrated one way in which campaigns shape legislators’ governing activity: “issue uptake,” wherein winning legislators take up and pursue in office the issue themes highlighted by their challengers.
Legislators are motivated to engage in this behavior for electoral reasons; because challengers tend to focus their campaigns on their opponents’ weaknesses (Arnold 1990, 2004; Bailey 2001), savvy winners should act in office to remedy these weaknesses and shore up their records before the next campaign. Thus, in the process of looking out for their own electoral interests, legislators also demonstrate responsiveness to the issues on which they are critiqued, and this shift in their agendas leaves a legacy in congressional politics and public policy.

In studying promise keeping, the focus is on legislators’ own campaign themes rather than those of their challengers. Since they select these themselves, it is less likely that their campaigns will exert an independent effect on their activity in office. However, the content and circumstances of their campaigns should be manifested in observable ways in their subsequent governing behavior. For example, if candidates use voters’ reactions to their campaigns as indicators of their level of interest in and concern about particular issues, this feedback should help them decide whether and how to pursue that issue in Congress. More generally, as I discuss in the next chapter, electoral and policy considerations should lead to linkages between the content of representatives’ and senators’ campaign and legislative agendas, and the strength of these linkages should vary with features of the legislator, his or her campaign, and the institutional context.

Thus, I argue that there are clear advantages to bridging the gap between the “Two Congresses” and extending work on the electoral connection to include the relationship between the content of campaign and legislative behavior. We gain similar leverage by crossing traditional boundaries in the literature on electoral politics. A longstanding division in this subfield has been between research on the behavior of candidates and research on the behavior of voters, with much more attention to the latter. Indeed, the vast majority of the literature on electoral politics has been devoted to explaining voting decisions and election outcomes. As a result, a number of scholars have noted that, while we know a great deal about elections, we know comparatively little about campaigns (Fenno 1996; Franklin 1991; Riker 1996). Riker (1996) argued that this lack of attention to candidates and their appeals was particularly problematic because it rendered us unable to answer one of the most fundamental questions about representation: how policies are “presented, discussed, and decided upon” in a democracy (4).

Over the past ten to fifteen years, much has been done to fill this gap, with the development of a growing research agenda on candidates’ issue selection strategies (see, for example, Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994;
Importantly, though, given the divisions of labor in political science research, much of this work has been undertaken by specialists in campaigns and political communication, who have focused primarily on explaining the dynamics of campaigns themselves. This orientation is entirely understandable, and has yielded substantial new insight into campaign messages. From the perspective of promise keeping, though, it has two shortcomings. First, it means that the search for how campaigns matter typically ends when campaigns end—on Election Day. The large literature on campaign effects thus focuses almost entirely on the ways in which campaigns do (or do not) affect voters, which leaves out a number of other ways in which campaigns might be important.

Second, the focus on Election Day as the end game leads to potentially incomplete theories of candidate behavior. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, most models of how candidates select campaign issues seek to identify strategies that will maximize vote shares. When candidates deviate from the patterns predicted by these strategies (i.e., if a Democrat highlights a “Republican” issue), there is no clear explanation that can be offered for this behavior. One possibility, of course, is that candidates’ agendas are driven by their policy intentions. However, explanations of campaign behavior that do not consider legislative politics will not be able to capture these dynamics.

In sum, then, the primary obstacle to the development of an empirical literature on congressional promise keeping has been the prevalence of approaches to the analysis of campaigns and legislative behavior that treat the two as separate. Election Day is seen as the dividing line, and, depending on what side of the line they are on, scholars offer nuanced explanations of one or the other, but not both. Phenomena such as promise keeping thus often fail to receive attention, not because they are uninteresting or unimportant, but because they do not fit easily into existing lines of research.

CAMPAIGNS AND POLICY MAKING

This is not to say that no efforts have been made to link campaigns and policy making. In fact, several studies of presidential promise keeping undertaken in the 1980s found fairly high levels of responsiveness (Fishel 1985; Krukones 1984; see also Jamieson 2000). This finding is echoed in a
number of investigations of more aggregate-level phenomena such as the ability of parties to implement their platforms (Aldrich 1995; Budge and Hofferbert 1990; King and Laver 1993; Pomper 1968); presidential and congressional responses to perceived mandates (Conley 2001; Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2006); and the role of electoral realignments in producing policy change (Brady 1988; Sinclair 1977).

However, two important constraints have limited the applicability of these approaches to modeling and measuring promise keeping by individual members of Congress. The first is the disjuncture that exists between most normative and formal theories of the elections–policy linkage and the realities of contemporary congressional politics. The second is the predominant focus on issue positions in the literatures on candidate strategy and legislative representation and responsiveness, which results in an overly restrictive definition of what it means for a candidate to make a promise and a legislator to keep one.

Theories of the role of campaigns in the policy-making process generally rely on some variant of textbook “responsible party government” models of representative democracy, presuming that during campaigns, parties make promises about what policies they will enact if voted into office; on Election Day, voters select candidates from the party whose policy positions and priorities most closely approximate their own; in office, winners do or do not implement their promises; and, in the next election, voters decide whether or not to reelect them (Harrington 1993; Schattschneider 1942; Schedler 1998).

This perspective may provide a fairly accurate depiction of parliamentary systems where parties are the central focus (see, for example, Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994), but it captures less adequately the dynamics of most U.S. congressional elections. Because policy making in Congress is necessarily a collective enterprise and because few, if any, individual members can speak authoritatively for their parties, no single representative or senator can meaningfully promise to bring about a specific outcome, nor is it reasonable to blame a legislator if his or her preferred policies fail to become law. As such, congressional candidates make explicit promises more rarely than one might expect, and models of promise keeping based on policy outcomes make little sense at the individual level.

The response to this situation among students of legislative behavior has been to retain traditional conceptions of promise keeping, but to shift the focus from policy outcomes to issue positions. In particular, scholars have adapted Miller and Stokes’ (1963) policy congruence criterion to ask
whether the positions legislators take on issues in office align with their stated positions from the campaign (Ringquist and Dasse 2004). By this definition, a candidate who declared her support for “No Child Left Behind” in the 2002 election would be credited for keeping this promise if she voted in favor of it in the 108th Congress.

This conceptualization undoubtedly provides a meaningful and useful way of thinking about promise keeping. If candidates tell us they will vote a particular way on an issue, then whether or not they actually do so is clearly relevant for understanding responsiveness. The problem, however, is that this standard can be applied in only a very narrowly circumscribed set of situations. One important limitation is that we can only determine whether a promise on an issue is kept if that issue comes up for a roll call vote in the next Congress (and, equally important, if the framing of the choice in the roll call corresponds to the framing of the choice from the campaign). However, whether or not this occurs is largely outside of the control of individual legislators. This is unlikely to pose a problem for salient issues, but it is quite possible that candidates at least occasionally take positions on more obscure issues that never make it to the floor of the House or Senate.

More consequential, though, is the second constraint presented by position-based conceptions of promise keeping: they require that candidates actually stake out clear positions on a variety of issues in their campaigns. In reality, relatively few candidates make statements of the type that would enable us to connect a campaign appeal to a later roll call vote, and those who do so are not necessarily representative of the population of candidates as a whole. When discussing an issue like education, rather than offering a position on a policy like No Child Left Behind, many candidates make valence claims along the lines that they are “champions for education” or “want to improve our schools” (Sides 2006; Stokes 1992; Sulkin, Moriarty, and Hefner 2007; Vavreck 2001). Because there can be considerable disagreement about what types of policies would best support these general goals (i.e., both a yea vote or a nay vote on No Child Left Behind could be framed as pro-education), it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to assess meaningfully legislators’ responsiveness to their vague appeals by examining their roll call voting decisions.

Scholars have attempted to get around this problem by using surveys of candidates taken before the election or during the campaign itself as the source of information about their positions (see, for example, Ringquist and Dasse 2004; Sullivan and O’Connor 1972; Wright and Berkman 1986). An obvious concern about this solution, and one that is