PART I

WHY AND HOW PROMISES MATTER
I

A Closer Look at Campaign Promises

Donald Trump may have been considered an unconventional candidate for president and his rhetoric unusual in many ways, but his candidacy clearly illustrates the nuances of how candidates take positions. Over the course of his campaign, he made several very clear promises that were strong statements about how he would act if elected. For example, “I will build a great wall,” he promised. “And nobody builds walls better than me, believe me – and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words” (Johnson, 2016). On getting rid of the Affordable Care Act, banning Syrian refugees, strengthening the military, and many more issues, Trump was firm and clear both on how he would act and that he would act on these issues as president. Not only did he address the public with right-leaning positions, but he attached an action (and sometimes an outcome) to them. Polls indicate that support for Trump rose quickly after he entered the presidential race and retained leadership throughout the Republican primaries (Craighill and Clement, 2015). Even if Trump supporters did not necessarily believe that he would exactly realize all of the promises he had made, some indicated belief that the status quo would shift toward Trump’s promised outcomes (Azevedo, Jost, and Rothmund, 2017).

While Trump made definitive stances on immigration policies and the Affordable Care Act, on other issues he showed less resolution.

Certainly elections are quite partisan and many Republicans supported the Republican nominee for partisan reasons. But many anecdotes tell of voters who thought that even if Trump's promises weren't realized, the status quo would more closely shift to their ideal policy outcome.
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For example, he demonstrated significant shape-shifting (Saward, 2014) in his stance on banning abortion. As a private citizen, Trump had long seemed to be pro-choice (Keneally, 2016). However, as a Republican candidate, Trump revealed that he was opposed to abortion but was inclined to maintain the status quo because, as he told a reporter, “[t]he laws are set now on abortion and that’s the way they’re going to remain until they’re changed” (Bump, 2016). Even when under fire from pro-life groups and amid accusations that he could not be an effective candidate for the GOP without a more decisive promise of action, Trump made no promises about abortion (DelReal, 2016). His statements suggested a changing position on abortion policy, but Trump never committed to any policy stands on abortion as a candidate. Whether it was because of his lack of credibility on the issue, personal convictions, or some other reason, Trump clearly avoided doing more than assuring voters that he was not pro-choice. He also refused to make any promises on social issues such as same-sex marriage and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, as did other GOP candidates (Eaton, 2016). He described his beliefs or general sentiments but refrained from bold assurances of what he would do in the future.

Trump’s campaign stances in 2016 exemplify the wide range of methods that many candidates use to introduce their positions to voters, and other contenders for public office make similar choices. In some cases, candidates illustrate positions and couple them with promises that they will act on those positions. In other circumstances, candidates take a position on an issue but refrain from indicating that they will do something because of that position. The public was responsive to the various ways Trump stated his positions – whether they were too strong or not strong enough – and it seems much of the public response was based on reactions to the strengths (or weaknesses) of his positions applied by his language. In general, how do these distinctions in describing positions affect the way that voters perceive candidates? In particular, how do promises affect voter evaluations? Because promissory representation is a basic conception of democratic representation, this is a critical question to understand,

2 At one point in the campaign, Trump stated that he “believed” women should be punished for getting abortions, but he did not follow through by suggesting that he would work to enact legislation that would do so. His campaign also quickly walked back those comments (Bump, 2016).
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and while there is work on understanding both how issues matter to voters and how promises are fulfilled, there is need to further investigate how promises affect voter decision-making.

This book extends our knowledge both of candidate communication and promises by considering what candidates communicate to voters beyond revealing their positions, and it deepens our understanding of how position-taking is more nuanced than candidates simply selecting an issue stance. The theory and the data presented here furthers our understanding of candidate positions and promissory representation by investigating what candidates communicate to voters by making a promise. Finally, the book also builds on an important literature on promise fulfillment to investigate how voters understand and use those promises to evaluate candidates.

To be sure, past research establishes that promises matter to voters (Naurin, 2014). That voters use promises to select and hold elected officials accountable is a central tenet of conceptions of the foundational theories of promissory representation (Mansbridge, 2003). Indeed, promises matter to voters both prospectively, for the campaigns in which candidates make promises, and retrospectively, for assessments of elected officials whose accountability can be appraised by fulfilled promises. While there is a decent understanding of portions of each of these representative pathways, the specific and particular effect of promises remains underexplored. Prospectively, much work has considered how candidate-positioning affects voter behavior, and candidate rhetoric is undeniably important to voter judgments of candidates (Vavreck, 2009; Riker, 1996). The specific role of promises has been heavily theorized, but the actual effect of promises themselves is yet to be empiricized. Retrospectively, much of the focus is on promise fulfillment and accountability (Mansbridge, 2009; Thomson et al., 2017) but not on how and why promises signal information that changes the retrospective judgments of candidates. When promises themselves are discussed, voters indeed view them as mechanisms to select and hold elected officials accountable but with a richer understanding of what that may mean and how voters view promises as fulfilled (Naurin, 2014).

In the remainder of this chapter, I clarify what I mean when I refer to campaign promises and give a rationale for this definition. I then explain why it is important to reconsider promise-making and the implications of considering a more nuanced definition of promises in voter selection path-
ways. Finally, I detail how the rest of this book demonstrates the importance of campaign promises and why understanding them yields crucial implications for normative formulations of promissory representation.

1.1 WHAT ARE CAMPAIGN PROMISES?

As a starting point to understanding promise-making, in terms of both how candidates use promises and how voters perceive promises, I propose a clear definition of campaign promises that is critical to the argument of this book. In step with other investigators of campaign promises, I define a promise as a position statement on a policy issue that explicitly indicates an action a candidate will take if elected to office or identifies a political outcome as a result of the candidate’s election.3 This means that I ignore candidate statements about their own character or non-policy actions. I also ignore the statements of elected officials serving in office unless they are seeking an office they do not currently hold. Of course, since most politicians aim to run for reelection, elected officials who are currently serving a term could also be considered candidates running for office. However, they have already had a chance to fulfill campaign promises and voter calculations reflect that, making campaign promises less important. Thus all candidate discussions in this book pertain to the unknown possibility of what might happen if a candidate is elected to a new position.

Candidate promises can take a wide variety of forms. For instance, they might make promises to enact specific policies when entering office, as Bill Clinton did in announcing his candidacy for the presidential primaries in 1991, when he “pledged” to the American people that in the first year of a Clinton Administration, [he would] present a plan to Congress and the American people to provide affordable, quality health care for all

3 This definition is quite similar to the ones that scholars from Royed (1996) to Thomson et al. (2017) have used. Because I am primarily interested in the subjective opinions associated with prospective promise-making and less concerned with establishing an objective task of promise fulfillment, I have not referenced the ability to measure the outcome of a promise. Key differences between the different definitions are detailed in Chapter 2.
Americans” (Clinton, 1991). The use of the term “pledge,” as promissory language, may have strengthened the weight of the promise in swaying voters. But candidates can promise without using words such as promise, pledge, guarantee, or “to read my lips.” For instance, Democratic Senate candidate Thomas Dixon told voters, “The first thing that I would do [about gun violence] is pushing to close those loopholes that allow [guns] to get into hands that they’re not supposed to” (Dixon, 2016). Candidates also use promises to emphasize their commitment to toeing a party line as Republican presidential contender Senator Marco Rubio did, saying “we will protect the Second Amendment when I’m president of the United States” (Rubio, 2015).

On the other hand, when candidates take positions on issues without making assurances about how they will act in the future, I treat these as non-promise policy statements rather than promises. For example, candidates may give their opinion but refrain from suggesting that they themselves might act on it. For example, presidential candidate John Kasich said, “I’m in favor of [defining] marriage between … a man and a woman” (Kasich, 2015). Similarly, in the 2002 Texas Senatorial debates, candidate John Cornyn suggested he was broadly supportive of the war on drugs, but only offered that “maybe we need to do more surveillance … to make sure that kids don’t come into contact with drug dealers” (Cornyn, 2002). As with promises, non-promise statements

4 Along with a plan to fix the economy and close the budget deficit, providing universal health care to the American public was a key tenet of Clinton’s campaign (Matalin, Carville, and Knobler, 1994). At the time, 79 percent of Americans wanted to see drastic change in the health-care system and over half wanted a government insurance plan (Miller, Kinder, and Rosenstone, 1999), but there was no clear indication that Clinton’s plan could come to fruition if he was elected. Indeed, the public was widely divided on how best to fix health care. Yet, the voting public understood from this promise that Clinton cared about health care and would act on it in office. According to Clinton’s campaign manager, James Carville, the emphasis on health care was an important strategic move in order to indicate to voters that Clinton was addressing their concerns in a real and tangible way, and it helped Clinton win the election (Matalin, Carville, and Knobler, 1994).

5 Candidates also make promises about outcomes that are not necessarily relevant from a policy standpoint. For instance, promises to uphold particular values (honesty or fidelity) have little relevance to policy discussions. While perhaps all types of promises matter to voter evaluations in some way, in this book I focus on how policy-relevant campaign promises sway voter opinions. Since it is a novel contribution to consider how promises differentiate from other types of policy statements, I leave room to consider more variations on promises to future work.
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can reflect values candidates seek to project and beliefs that are not necessarily relevant from a policy standpoint. In the same Senatorial debate, candidate John Cornyn said, “I believe we ought to do better” at reaching across the aisle. Other candidates have indicated values, such as honesty, that they believe to be important but that are not directly tied to policy stances. While these types of value statements may also cause voters to react differently to candidates, they are also beyond the scope of this book.

The question arising from the distinction between promises and non-promise policy statements is how voters react to divergences between the language shaping positions. In discussing how voters choose representation based on a candidate’s position, political scientists conventionally view any type of position statement as an equal indicator of what candidates will do in office. The result is the, perhaps unintentional, normative assumption that any position statement on policy is equivalent, whether it is a promise or not. I argue that voters nonetheless react differently to promises and non-promises, and that these affect evaluations of candidates differently. I base this in part on the research of linguist John Austin, who demonstrates in his theory of performative utterances that promise statements indicate sentiments on a topic (for instance commitment), but they cannot be proven true or false in the moment (Austin, 1975). As performative utterances, promises are the principal-agent problem theorists have long used to define how voters choose representatives of democracy (Mansbridge, 2003). Candidates make a statement to express where they stand on a particular issue, but voters cannot weight the veracity of a candidate’s statement until the voter sees the candidate act. But linguist Paul Grice (1991) demonstrates that people distinguish between promises and non-promises – between “what is said, what is conventionally implicated, and what is nonconventionally implicated” (p. 41). In this book, I consider what is “nonconventionally implicated” when candidates promise, and demonstrate that voters view candidates differently based on the type of statement they make. As Chong and Druckman (2011) note, “When speakers choose their words strategically … recipients of such information may have an incentive to process it differently” (p. 17). I demonstrate that even the subtle distinction between promise and non-promise

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6 If Cornyn had explicitly linked this to a policy, it would be part of a promise statement; generally, however, reaching across the aisle does not explain what a candidate will do on policy.
statements conveys important information to voters about the candidate and how the candidate will represent their constituents.

The difference between promises and non-promises, I argue, is that promises imply a stronger commitment to an issue than a non-promise statement. Because of this, promises yield a difference in voter opinions of the candidate who makes them. Voters can never be sure how candidates will act once elected. In many situations, individuals reduce uncertainty about future events by creating larger costs for acting out of character (Vanberg, 2008; Charness and Dufwenberg, 2006). Promises should increase candidate likelihood of adhering to a position because they increase costs of shifting to a new position (Saward, 2014). Ultimately, candidates who promise should be much more attractive to like-minded voters.

1.2 UNDERSTANDING HOW PROMISES AFFECTS VOTERS MATTERS FOR UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION

The primary contribution of this book is to clarify the conceptualization of promissory representation and provide empirics to a long-theorized process. This contribution takes four distinct forms. First, I offer an important clarification that is empirically relevant for how candidates act and deliver their positions. Though many researchers have examined how candidate’s positions affect voting, much of this work disregards distinctions in how candidates represent their positions to voters (e.g., Downs, 1965[1957]; Grofman, 2004). This book builds on studies of positioning by examining how candidate rhetoric surrounding policies affects voter perceptions of those policies. Since this study is among the first to consider how candidates carefully construct their positions as promises or not, I catalog promise and position statements in order to document the distinction between types of statements. For this data, I use statements made by US presidential candidates made in debates from 1960 through 2012, as a sample of visible appeals that cover a wide range of policy spheres, over a wide range of time. The collection of these statements allows me to observe that the distinctions in language exist in practice and not just in theory or the confines of the imagined candidates in experiments.

Second, this work yields empirical evidence that the distinction between promises and positions has ramifications for how voters understand candidates, and that voters notice the distinction between candidates who promise and those who do not. Candidates who make promises polarize
voter evaluations based on whether or not voters desire the promised outcome. Because I also find that the rate of promise-making increases over the study period, this finding has implications for our understanding of how rhetoric reflects and reinforces current levels of elite polarization, and potentially for partisan sorting. Voters’ attention to the conceptual distinction between promise and non-promise position statements clarifies a reality that voters encounter when they listen to candidate statements, and provides a critical piece of the promissory representation story that has been absent. This book yields important empirical evidence that voters perceive differences between policy statements and that those differences affect understanding of how committed and effective candidates will be on the promised issue. Perhaps more importantly, differences in campaign statements affect whether candidates are more likely to follow through and have the surprising effect of diminishing evaluations of candidate character as well. The work here demonstrates that promises clearly matter to voters and have an important effect on voter evaluations of candidates.

Third, this book demonstrates that the distinction between promises and non-promise policy statements has ramifications for how voters evaluate candidates who have held office. I find that voters differentiate between elected officials who made campaign promises and those who did not. Voters prefer candidates who made a promise and kept it to those who make no promises but more strongly oppose candidates who broke a promise than those who acted out of step with a position on which they never made a promise. Additionally, this data indicates that in some cases, keeping a promise may matter more to voters than the actual position that the candidate took when promising. Both of these findings have important implications for normative theory around representation, accountability, and democracy.

Fourth, this book extends and complements our current understanding of campaign promises, and the ways that campaign promises matter to voters. Currently, much work concludes that candidates keep promises more often than they break them. (I more fully review this literature in Chapter 2, but see Pétry and Collette (2009) and Thomson et al. (2017) for emblematic examples.) Ultimately, there are important distinctions between how institutions and party control can influence which promises are kept and which are broken (Royed, 1996; Artes,