The Strategy of Campaign Promises

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Abstract

Existing empirical work tells us that campaign promises are important for voter evaluations, both prospectively and retrospectively. Studies on campaign promises tell us that candidates make increasing numbers of promises to constituents, but the American public does not necessarily believe that candidates will follow through on their promises. What incentive do candidates have to continue to make campaign promises? First, I offer a conceptual distinction between promises and non-promise position statements: promises require that a candidate attach an explicit statement of action to a position statement. I argue that this distinction alters perceived commitment that the candidate makes to her position, and subsequently affects voter evaluations of candidates by changing expectations of candidate follow through and character. To test this theory, I use two experiments measuring the prospective and retrospective effects of promises on candidate evaluations. I find that promises polarize voter opinions of candidates. Voters who agree with the candidate's stance prefer that the candidate promise, but voters who disagree with the candidate's issue-position prefer a candidate who does not promise. Voters tend to view candidates who promise as more likely to act on their position than candidates who do not. However, promising comes at a cost to assessments of a candidate's character which results in an asymmetry between the gains and losses made from promising, and ultimately allows candidates to strategically employ promises.

Voters traditionally have low confidence in candidate ability to keep their campaign promises (Naurin 2014). Interestingly, many studies indicate that candidates and parties keep more promises than they break (Pétry and Collette 2009). At the very least, the contrast suggests that promises may be harmful to candidates. Yet, candidates continue to make promises; and the frequency of promising has increased over the last two decades (Håkansson and Naurin 2014; Bonilla 2014). Why do candidates make promises? Further, if voters are so skeptical about candidates' ability to keep their promises, what are the consequences of promise-making on electoral outcomes?

The answer to why candidates make promises is rooted in the lore of promissory representation. The traditional mechanism of representation involves voters selecting candidates based on promises candidates make during their campaigns (Mansbridge 2003). Promises act as signals to voters, who can discover the type of actors that candidates will be during their tenure in office (Banks 1990; Fearon 1999; Callander and Wilkie 2007). The promises combined with past actions work together as signals for subsequent elections as well. While the answer to the consequences of promise-making on prospective electoral outcomes is less explored. There is much work in European party pledges that underlines the ties between party pledges, policy outcomes, and voter selection (Thomson 2001; Mansergh and Thomson 2017). Dolezal et al. (2016) examines how platforms influence voter opinions prospectively, the focus is about how negative campaigning, pledge-making, and record-ownership are portrayed by parties and cannot answer the question of how the statements influence voters prospectively. Other literature that examines the function of promises is sparse: indeed, most literature considering individual candidates (or party pledges) focuses on whether or not candidates keep the promises that are made. (See Artes (2011) and Naurin (2014).)

Indeed, the question of how promises benefit campaigns is best answered by understanding how various candidate positions matter for vote choice. Downs (1965; 1957) (followed by many others) argues that candidate positions are the determinant of vote choice because voters want to choose candidates whose own policy positions most closely map on to their own. Much work follows up on this, demonstrating that policy statements act as signals of candidate intentions once in office (Banks 1990; Kartik and McAfee 2007; Asako 2015). Despite the classification of candidate positions as signals of what candidates will do in office, there is less attention to what might alter the strength of those signals, and the resulting effect of doing so. In this paper, I investigate how

promises might act as a mechanism that alters the strength of the signal candidates transmit to voters. Importantly, I define promises as a policy-statement that a candidate issues while also indicating they will act on that position in the future, distinct from other position-statements that candidates make without attaching plans for future action. I argue that in varying the strength of commitment candidates attach to a position, they alter voter expectations around policies, and can potentially increase support among constituents who are similarly interested in specific policies. It follows that candidates should then choose to deploy promises strategically.

In this paper, I consider how promises might impact candidate signals both prospectively and retrospectively. Though examples of promise and non-promise policy statements are frequent among candidates (Bonilla 2014), experiments are the best possible way to examine this question. Thouugh we observe candidate promises prospectively, it is not always possible to observe the retrospective impact of that same promise because we need data from both winners and losers. The two experiments focus on the issue of gun control—a popular issue that candidates speak about, and on which the public is relatively evenly split (ANES 2012; PollingReport.com 2014; Gallup 2014). These experiments then, give respondents information about two candidates who take the same position on gun control, but one promises and one does not. One experiment examines opinions of the candidates *before* the candidates have been elected to office and the other experiment measures opinions of the candidates *after* the candidates have served a term in office and had a chance to act on their promises. I also measure opinions about how promises change respondent expectations for candidate follow through and perceptions of candidate honesty. I demonstrate that voters recognize a distinction between statements made with promises and without promises, and that promises work to polarize voter opinions on a candidate. When respondents agree with the candidates, they prefer a candidate that promises, but when respondents disagree with the candidates, they prefer a candidate that does not promise. The results also support the claim that promises change perceptions of how committed a candidate is to following through on an issue position. I also demonstrate that promises simultaneously alter assessments of candidate character.

The conceptual distinction that I provide separating promises as a unique type of position statement allows for several discoveries that are relevant for understanding representation. This pa-

per contributes the first experimental evidence of how campaign promises matter to voters prospectively. And, because I measure the effect of promises retrospectively as well, I can use the results to create a strategic projection of how promises can affect strategic maneuvering of campaigns, similar to strategies of ambiguity. Second, this paper offers an important clarification to both the position-taking literature and the party-pledges literature investigating party pledges in European democracies. I focus exclusively on how the promises change voter assessments of the candidates from an experiment standpoint. My work then extends and enhances the field's understanding of campaign platforms while also providing evidence on how they effect voter behavior.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I expound on my theory by examining promises, what they are and what they mean for representation. Second, I describe and present the results of a prospective experiment, and indicate when promises could be a useful campaign strategy. Finally, I describe and present the results of a retrospective promise experiment that indicates that candidates must give thought to long-term consequences of the promises as well.

How Promises Signal a Commitment to Voters

Investigations into the effects of promise-making are a corner-stone of behavioral politics research. Promising is, after all, a common electoral event, and voters use campaign promises as means to assess the nature of the candidate and select the best representation (Mansbridge 2003; 2009; Fearon 1999). Definitions of promises vary widely across studies of representation, however (Pétry and Collette 2009). For instance, some studies examining promise fulfillment do not have a clear operational definition of promises—promises are identified from a set of platforms or speeches with no decision rule.[1] Several other studies do include a clear operational definition of campaign promises. First, these can be quite broad, and include any policy appeal, regardless of how it is made (Aragones, Postlewaite, and Palfrey 2007; Sulkin 2009). Or, despite more specific decision rules, studies use broad proxies. For instance, Ringquist and Dasse (2004) measure promises by observing support for various policies assessed by the National Political Awareness Test, a survey

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[1](See Fishel (1985); Krukones (1984), both studies of how American presidents keep their word. For further examples, refer to Pétry and Collette (2009), a meta-analysis of studies on promises that gives many more examples, including Bradley (1969) and Rallings (1987).)

where candidates indicate support or opposition on a variety of positions.[2]

For this study, I propose a definition of promising that distinguishes promises as a specific form of position-taking. I define a campaign promise as a position statement where the candidate attaches an expectation of action the candidate will perform in office, if that candidate is elected. (See Sulkin (2005).) For example, a candidate could state "I promise that I will not increase taxes", but could also say, "When I am in the White House, I will not increase taxes." A non-promise position statement reveals the candidate's stance on an issue without giving any expectation of action if elected. For instance, a candidate could say, "I am in favor of providing affordable health care." This definition is, consistent with colloquial use: Merriam-Webster (2014) defines promising as "a statement telling someone that you will definitely do something or that something will definitely happen in the future." More importantly, the definition is consistent with other operational definitions of promise-making. For instance, in studies examining the rates of promise fulfillment, scholars often offer a distinctive definition of promise-making, typically emphasizing a candidate's declaration of action upon election (Naurin 2014). Royed (1996) defines promising as "a commitment to carry out some action or produce some outcome.[3] While many others who follow this definition require that the promises be testable, I do not focus on that particular distinction here. The key difference I propose, is that instead of focusing on whether promises or pledges are testable or not, I focus on whether the candidate connects a promise to a future action or not.

Promises Increase Perceptions of Candidate Commitment to an Issue

Given this distinction between promises and non-promised candidate positions, what resulting effect might we see in voter preferences? More specifically, does the distinction between combining or not combining a position statement with expectation for action alter how voters perceive candidates? Theoretical research demonstrates that voters pay attention to signals candidates send to them

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[2] The authors acknowledge this is not an ideal way to distinguish promises, and draw awareness to the difficulties of measuring campaign promises. They also indicate that the support is a likely indicator of candidate intent to perform an action when in office.

[3] Royed (1996) also distinguishes between hard promises, where a candidate links herself to a policy action, and a soft promise, where a candidate only states agreement with an action. The definition here correlates to the distinction I draw between promises and non-promise position-taking, but implications of the distinction is not explored in Royed (1996) who focuses more on whether the promise is measurable or not. See also Royed and Borrelli (1997), Thomson (2001), and Thomson et al. (2012) who follow this definition.

when making voting decisions (Banks 1990; Kartik and McAfee 2007; Asako 2015). In particular, this research has largely centered around signals that candidates send based on where their position is located in the policy space (Downs 1965; 1957; Grofman 2004; Tomz and Houweling 2008), and whether or not the candidate intends to keep her promise, or not (Callander and Wilkie 2007; Huang 2010). Promising may be a way to for candidates to send a strong signal to voters that the candidate is committed to a particular position. Callander (2008) argues that promises serve "as commitments to particular policy instruments" and that more committed candidates "exert more effort if elected to office" (p.672). Here, I further investigate this claim to say that variation in the strength of commitment can be observed in the distinction between position-taking with promising and without promising.

Indeed, all of these features appear to alter the strength of the signal candidates are sending to voters about what that candidate will do when elected. According to Mansbridge (2003), this is a critical feature of the promissory representation model, and underlines the notion that candidates need to be strategic in their communications to attract a dominant vote share. I argue that promises similarly change the candidate's perceived commitment to an issue, thereby strengthening the signal that candidates are sending to voters about their post-election intentions. First, since promises attribute a future action to messages, it gives voters an expectation that the candidate will act on his stance. Coupling a position with action moves clearly places it in agenda setting territory. Although campaign discourse has been linked to agenda setting (Lenz 2013), promising may underscore that link and increase appearance of the candidate's attention to it. Second, voters want assurance that their candidates are committed to act in their best interest Barker and Carman (2012). Thus, connecting the promise to a position, candidates are indicating that they are acting in the best interest of those constituents who agree with them on that issue. In contrast, voters with whom the candidate disagrees are more likely to think that the candidate is not acting in their best interest, and would be deterred by a promise on that issue.

That distinctions in language should have an effect on voter behavior is well demonstrated in other veins of research. First, there is a long literature about candidate ambiguity—that is, the specificity with which a candidate details the specifics of their position on an issue. If a candidate declares their position on gun control, they could simply state whether they are in favor of stricter

gun control measures, or they could detail if they prefer stronger background checks, require longer waiting periods for guns, or some other detailed aspect of a plan. There have been arguments both saying that ambiguity increases general appeal of candidates, and that ambiguity decreases evaluations of candidates (Shepsle 1972; Page 1976; Campbell 1983; Callander and Wilson 2008; Page 1978); and, Tomz and Houweling (2009) use a survey experiment to show that ambiguity can help candidates win elections. But the present argument diverges from ambiguity in that candidates need not reveal further aspects of their position while promising, except that they plan to act on the position. Second, there has been investigation into how the content of messages works to sway voters to prefer candidates. For instance, as with the positioning literature, we know that the content of the messaging matters. Vavreck (2009) demonstrates that economic messaging is needed for successful presidential candidates, but depends on the status of the economy and whether the candidate's party is incumbent to the White House or not. Generally, this past work focuses on adding or omitting details of plans and attention to the economy. This work contributes an additional way in which candidate rhetoric maybe strategic: by altering perceived levels of commitment. Elsewhere, it is demonstrated that candidates use their records to assure voters about their intentions in up-coming elections (Burden 2007; Hall 1996; Koger 2003; Sellers 1998; Schiller 1995; Sulkin 2009; 2005; Sides 2006). Whether candidates do so because they themselves have acted on policy issues or because their party is seen as more competent on that issue, past-records may help assuage doubts that the candidate is simply embracing a position to attract votes, and not because the candidate will act on that position in the future. Promises may be an alternative tool through which candidates may assure voters of their intents in office.

Even as we consider promises as greater signals of intent, there is potential for promises to alter signals of candidate character as well (Kartik and McAfee 2007). There are a number of studies that indicate that candidate traits matter to voter perceptions of candidates, and that look at which traits matter (Kinder et al. 1980; Kinder 1986). Here, I focus on how perceptions of honesty might change as candidates promise. There are two potential directions in which promises might affect perceptions of candidate character. First, candidates may be perceived as more honest: candidates who promise are necessarily revealing a greater commitment to their position. The increase in honesty should render more positive ratings among candidates, regardless of voter agreement with

the candidate's position. However, voters are notoriously skeptical of pandering: candidate rhetoric that is empty talk focused only at getting votes not changing policy (Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts 2001). In particular, Sulkin (2005) indicates that most of Americans believe that candidates are unlikely to keep their word in office. As a result if voters connect promises to pandering more than non-promise policy statements, promises may in fact induce negative perceptions of candidate honesty (McGraw, Lodge, and Jones 2002). It is possible that candidates who promise are seen as having less character than candidates who do not promise.

Promises and Fulfillment

In addition to affecting voter behavior prospectively, the distinction between promises and positions should also matter retrospectively, and importantly, allows for a signal of commitment to be tangible (Fearon 1999). Economic behavior theory indicates that elected officials are tied to campaign statements and that there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding whether candidates are the type of actor that follows through on their promises or not (Harrington 1993; Grossman and Helpman 2005; Callander and Wilkie 2007; Huang 2010; Asako 2015). This also reinforces why promises affect voter opinions prospectively, and the degree to which the emphasis of commitment that candidates put on their initial position matters to voters (Fiorina 1974). Because of the strong possibility of sanctions in the future, candidates have motivation not to issue cheap talk simply for the sake of a few votes in the current election Jacobs and Shapiro (2000). And, if candidates are aware the voters do pay attention to their successes and failures in office, it allows the promise to serve as a signal of commitment: a future cost for defaulting allows for the possibility of credibility in the present.

Empirical work gives significant attention to how voters sanction public officials who do not follow through on their stated positions. There are arguments that candidates will lose votes, funding for future campaigns, or party support (Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1974; Baron 1989; Dahlberg and Johansson 2002). In conjunction with these investigations, there has been some discussions of how departures from positions affect public opinion. First, switching positions matters to voters: they much prefer candidate who follow through on their position to candidates who do not (Tomz and Houweling 2010). Second, in a more rigid sense, political actors who break a signed pledge

7

are harshly judged by voters (Tomz and Houweling 2012). If promises increase voter expectations of action, promises should also increase sanctions on candidates who break their word when in office. Conversely, promises should strengthen the rewards that candidates get for keeping their word.

This logic is consistent with what we know about the frequency of candidate follow through, and motivations scholars have identified for candidates to keep promise. Candidates typically keep the bulk of their promises, whether they are in legislative or executive leadership, or the style of government (Krukones 1984; Fishel 1985; Royed 1996; Thomson 2001; Naurin 2013; 2014). According to Pétry and Collette (2009) who perform a meta analysis of the promise keeping literature, between parties and individual actors, promises are kept about 67% of the time. Sulkin (2009) investigates the propensity of members of congress to follow through on their campaign promises, demonstrating that even when no legislative action is taken, candidates spend a large portion of their time focusing on issues that they campaigned about. Thus, by acting in accordance with a promise, and not just a policy statement, a candidate is casting a still stronger signal about the candidate's position on that issue or ability to keep future promises. If voters agree with a candidate on an issue, they will prefer a candidate who promises and keeps her word to a candidate who takes the same stance without promising and keeps her word. The converse has two possibilities. Where voters disagree with the candidate's position, they may prefer a candidate who promises because they value honesty more than the position taken *or* the voters may prefer a candidate who breaks her word because they value the position taken more than the candidate's honesty.

I expect to see distinctions in candidate promises have an impact on perceptions of future candidate follow through and candidate honesty in retrospectively as well. Because candidate records are important to emphasizing what candidates will do in the future, I anticipate that evidence of kept promises will increase beliefs that candidates will continue to follow through on issues in the future over actions in accordance with weaker position statements (Sulkin 2005). Evidence of broken promises should also serve as evidence that candidates will continue to not keep that word in the future, over weaker position statements. Similarly, promise fulfillment should change perceptions of candidate honesty. Kept promises should increase perceptions of honesty over non-promise position statements, and broken promises should decrease perceptions of honesty

over non-promise position statements.

Estimating the Effect of Promises on Gun Control

To test these hypotheses, I develop two survey experiments: one that focuses on measuring the effect of promises prospectively and a second that focuses on measuring the effect of promises retrospectively. Experiments have been instrumental in studying effects of candidate positions and actions on voter evaluations (McGraw 2011). Because the goal here is to study the differing effects of promises and non-promise policy positions, a survey experiment using hypothetical candidate speech is important. First, this design allows me to carefully control each statement so that the level of ambiguity is exactly the same; no candidate will be furthering detailing their precise platform *except* by indicating that they will act on it in the future. Second, my design gives me careful control in matching both the prospective and retrospective statements. And, since I argue that these statements are used strategically, it would be difficult to cull enough data from statements actual candidates use. Thus, I carefully craft statements based on statements made in actual debates, and contend that the sacrifice in external validity yields a design that is strong in internal validity (**?**).

The experiments both use gun control as the issue that candidates discuss. First, using gun control allows me to be strategic in moderating the sample based on respondent agreement with gun control. In general, the public is evenly divided on the issue of gun control. In the 2012 American National Election Studies survey, about 45% of Americans wanted to increase gun control, 49% of Americans wanted to keep gun control the same, and about 6% wanted to decrease gun control (ANES 2012). A Quinnipiac University Poll asks respondents if they support or oppose gun control. It shows that 53% of respondents support stricter gun control, and 42% of respondents oppose stricter gun control in late March 2014 (PollingReport.com 2014).

Second, the issue of gun control is one that is talked about by candidates who make both promises and non-promise policy statements. This condition helps ground the experiment and makes the context of the candidate rhetoric more relevant. Gun control is an issue that has been mentioned in context of campaign promises over the course of several different elections. It is also

an issue where candidates make promise and non-promise statements *in context of one another*. For instance, during a televised debate in 2001, George W. Bush responds to a voter question about gun control without making a promise, saying: "I believe law-abiding citizens ought to be allowed to protect themselves and their families. I believe that we ought to keep guns out of the hands of people that shouldn't have them." That same debate, Al Gore responded to Bush's position with a promise "to not do anything to affect the rights of hunters or sportsmen" (Gore 2000). Gun control is also discussed in several elections. For example, in 1992 Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, and Ross Perot discuss gun control in the context of the Brady bill (Debate 1992). In 1976 and 2012, guns are discussed more generally (Debate 1976; 2012). Additionally, gun control is something that is discussed both in primary election contexts, where candidates in the same party offer competing platforms, but it is also discussed in general elections across party platforms.

Third, the discussion of gun control is a matter that is consistently addressed in public discourse. A movie theater shooting and an elementary school shooting in 2012 increased the prevalence of gun control discussions in America (House 2013). Gabriel Gifford's ensuing gun control campaign and the NRA responses helped keep the conversation alive for quite some time following (BBC 2013; Keen 2012). Yet, public policy on gun control rarely changes. In fact, in the year the survey was fielded, only a handful of the many gun control bills have actually passed (Smart Gun Laws 2014). Thus, in studying an issue that is difficult on which to change policy, I also create a difficult test for candidate rhetoric. If something is not expected to change, rhetoric should matter less than if the policy has more chance of moving.

The Prospective Effect of Promises

The first aspect of promises that I consider is the effect of promising prospectively. That is, what effect do candidate promises have on voters who are determining whether to vote the candidate into an office for the first time?

Measurement

The experiment presents two candidates' statements on their position on gun control, and asks respondents to determine which candidate is preferred: the candidate that promises or the candidate that takes the same position, but does not promise. The two within the survey experiment are similar in every respect, except that one promises on gun control and the other does not. The survey experiment contains three parts: measurement of respondents opinions on gun control, measurement of candidate preference, and measurement of expectations for candidate follow through and candidate honesty.

First, I measure respondent opinion of gun control prior using the binary question format, to create two groups: respondents who want stricter gun control and respondents who do not want stricter gun control.[4] To measure opinions on gun control, I ask: "Do you favor or oppose stricter gun control?" I give the respondents the options of "Favor" and "Oppose".

Immediately following the gun control question, the respondents are asked to choose between two candidates. They are given a table with information for two candidates, Candidate A and Candidate B. The table includes the candidate's experience or how many years they had been in office. This number is drawn without replacement from the set $Experience = [7, 8, 9, 11]$. For half of the respondents, the table also the candidates' party.[5] The party is kept constant between the two candidates and is randomly and independently drawn from the set $Party = [Republican, Democrat]$. The other half of the candidates do not have any party information listed. The final row in the table displays a statement made by each of the candidates on gun control. The position on gun control is randomized independently so that both the candidates either want to increase gun control or both the candidates do not want to increase gun control, regardless of their party affiliation. One of the candidate statements is made so that the candidate makes a promise and the other candidate statement is made so that the candidate does not make a promise. For example, a promising candidate might say, "I give you my word, I promise to make it harder to get guns". A non-promising

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[4]I refrain from using the three choice question from the ANES because the percentage of people who want to decrease gun control is so small. Given my sample size, I want to avoid having a candidate specifically appeal to this group, which would not yield statistically reliable results without an unrealistically large sample.

[5]The results with and without the candidate's party have the same results that I describe here, though the effects are larger when I indicate candidate party. I merge the surveys together and ignore candidate party in this discussion. For full results, contact the author.

Figure 1: Prospective Experiment Example

Now, we would like to ask you about two candidates, whose names will be kept confidential. We will call them Candidate A and Candidate B.

Here is some information about them:

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Experience	8 years	9 years
Party	Republican	Republican
Statement on Gun Control	"I assure you, if I am elected, I pledge not to make it harder to obtain guns."	"I do not approve of making it harder to get guns."

On this issue, do you prefer Candidate A or Candidate B?

◯ Candidate A

◯ Candidate B

candidate might say, "I do not approve of making it harder to obtain guns."[6],[7] After the candidate information is presented, the respondents are asked which candidate is preferred. I assume that respondents would always choose the candidate that takes their same position over candidates who take the opposite position, regardless of promise or non-promise. Thus, I include only candidates that both favor or both oppose stricter gun control. An example is shown in Figure 1.

As proposed before, I expect that candidate promises will alter respondent opinions of candidate's likelihood to act and perceptions of candidate traits. After the candidate pairings are presented, respondents are asked how likely the candidate is to act in the manner that is consistent with her initial position. The respondents are then asked to compare the candidates' honesty. Specifically, they are asked "Which candidate is more likely to make gun laws stricter?"[8] and "Which candidate is more honest?". The respondent is given the options "Candidate A is much more [likely/honest]", "Candidate A is slightly more [likely/honest]", "Candidate B is slightly more

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[6]The complete list of candidate statements are available upon request.

[7]While each of the promises contains both an action statement and promissory language, in other experiments I have demonstrated that is the action statement rather than the promissory language that causes voters to perceive the statement as a promise.

[8]The survey coding was such that all respondents were asked the question in the "stricter" format, regardless of candidate position. The results for the candidates who asked to make gun laws less strict are reverse coded as a result. Because the effect of this question format serves to work against my theory, I include this result. If the question were asked differently, I would expect to see a stronger result.

[likely/honest]", and "Candidate B is much more [likely/honest]".

One critique of this design is that candidates often do not so cleanly offer contrasting statements to candidates during the course of the campaign, and thereby this set up yields no real gains in understanding the effect of promises on voters. The argument at hand is that candidates deploy promises strategically. If my hypothesis is correct, could be difficult (though not impossible) to observe both types of statements with sufficient regularity to perform an observational study. As such, the emphasis on determining *if* and *to what extent* promises can be differentiated from non-promise statements by voters is an important and unique contribution.[9]

Results

These questions were placed on two omnibus surveys conducted by YouGov. The surveys were fielded in January 2000 to two groups of 1000. YouGov maintains an internet sample of American adults from which it selects a target population using a stratified random sample (Rivers 2007). The efficacy of this technique has been shown to match that of other well respected sampling methods (Rivers 2008). Because the surveys were fielded to two representative samples of the American public, I pool the data.

In this sample, 55.2% of respondents prefer stricter gun control while 44.8% do not prefer stricter gun control. These figures are similar to those found in the polls listed above which confirms that the sample matches other well known samples in their opinions on gun control. I moderate the sample by both the candidate's position and the respondent's position. I divide the respondents into two groups: those who favor stricter gun control (R_F) and those who oppose stricter gun control (R_O). Based on the candidates' position on gun control (C_F and C_O), this yields two conditions to observe the effect of promises when candidates and respondents agree on position ($C_F R_F$ and $C_O R_O$) and two positions to observe the effect of promises when candidates and respondents disagree on position ($C_F R_O$ and $C_O R_F$). This allows me to demonstrate that promises have a divergent effect based on the position of both voters and candidates. It also helps later as I consider how promises can be used as strategic, rhetorical devices.

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[9]I have similar results from judgements of candidate statements when the candidates are presented one at a time. The formulation here allows for clearer claims in the following analysis.

Table 1: Prospective Effect of Promising

	Candidate Favors Gun Control	Candidate Opposes Gun Control
Respondent Favors	8.51 (5.65, 11.3)	-13.69 (-16.60,-10.78)
Respondent Opposes	-32.03 (-34.55, -29.52)	0.56 (-2.73,3.86)

Note: This table contains the difference of respondents who prefer the candidate who promises from those who prefer the candidate that does not promise, for the same category. The table is divided also by both the candidate and respondent positions on gun control. The 95% confidence interval is given in parentheses.

Table 1 presents the difference between the percent of the sample that prefers a promiser $V(C_P)$ and the percent of the sample that prefers a non-promiser $V(C_N)$. A positive number indicates that the promiser is preferred to the candidate who takes the same position, but does not promise. Conversely, a negative number indicates that a promiser is not preferred to the candidate who does not promise. First, I find that respondents preferred promisers to non-promisers when the candidates and the respondents took the same position. As the top left and bottom right quadrant show, more than half of the respondents preferred the promiser. Where candidates and respondents favor stricter gun control, respondents prefer the promiser 58.5% of the time. Where candidates and respondents oppose stricter gun control, respondents prefer the promiser slightly more, 50.6% of the time. Second, note that in the conditions in which the candidates differed from the respondent positions, the non-promising candidate is preferred to the promising candidate. As the top right and bottom left quadrants show, less than half of the respondents prefer the promiser. Where the candidates oppose stricter gun control, but respondents favor it, only 18.0% of respondents prefer the promiser. Where the candidates favor stricter gun control, but respondents oppose it, 36.3% of respondents prefer the promiser.

These findings confirm what I would expect from my theory, but also yield two interesting asymmetries. First, there is a drastic difference between whether the candidates favored or opposed stricter gun control. The promising candidate both gains more and loses less where he promises stricter gun control than where he promises less strict gun control. It is likely that the candidate

Table 2: Effect of Expected Candidate Follow Through

	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes
Respondent Favors	0.24 (0.20, 0.27)	0.04 (0.01, 0.08)
Respondent Opposes	0.07 (0.04, 0.11)	0.31 (0.27, 0.35)

Note: This table contains the rating of which candidate respondents believe is more likely to follow through. The numbers were transformed so that a candidate who is seen as much more likely to follow through are scored as a 1, and if the other candidate is more likely to follow through, a -1. The table is divided also by both the candidate and respondent positions on gun control. The 95% confidence interval is given in parentheses.

who promises to make gun control stricter is promising something tangible and is seen as less likely to be pandering. Promising not to make gun control stricter, which is technically all someone that opposes making gun control stricter is doing, is at its minimum promising to keep the status quo. Second, there is a drastic difference between how much candidates gain by promising verses how much they stand to lose by promising. Regardless of candidate position, there is a much smaller positive effect of promising than there is a negative effect of promising. This asymmetry can be explained by examining the mechanisms through which promising works.

Looking at how promises change expectations of candidate follow through and perceptions of candidate traits both confirms that promises have an impact on voter behavior, but also helps to explain how promises work. Table 2 shows the results for which candidate is seen as more likely to follow through in the prospective study. The scale has been transformed so that 1 indicates the promiser is much more likely to follow through, and -1 indicates that the candidate who does not promise is much more likely to follow through. In each pairing, the candidate who promises is seen as more likely to follow through on their position.

Table 3 shows the results for which candidate is seen as more honest. In each pairing, the candidate that promises is seen as much less honest than the candidate who promises. As argued before, most voters in the United States think that candidates are unlikely to follow through on their promises. It would appear that respondents here are equating promising with pandering.

15

Table 3: Candidate Honesty

	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes
Respondent Favor	-0.05 (-0.09, -0.01)	-0.15 (-0.19, -0.11)
Respondent Opposes	-0.17 (-0.21, -0.13)	-0.07 (-0.12, -0.03)

Note: This table contains the rating of which candidate respondents believe is more honest. The numbers were transformed so that a candidate who is seen as much more honest are scored as a 1, and if the other candidate is more honest, a -1.The table is divided also by both the candidate and respondent positions on gun control. The 95% confidence interval is given in parentheses.

However, in conjunction with which candidate is more likely to follow through, this result seems a bit strange. How can a candidate be at the same time more likely to act on a policy, but also less honest? I would argue that voters are differentiating between realized outcomes and candidate efforts. Just because a voter expects a candidate to work toward a promise, does not mean that they expect the candidate to realize that goal. Respondents may expect candidates to act toward achieving a goal, producing higher expectations of action among promisers, but not actually realize an outcome, producing higher levels of dishonesty about achieving that outcome. Thus, a candidate who is more likely to work toward a policy goal, also has to face projections about failure, and the measurement of honesty seems to reflect this.

Importantly, honesty and expectations for action work in different directions from each other when candidates and respondents agree, and in the same direction where candidates and respondents disagree. This helps to explain the effect size asymmetry between the pairings that agree with the candidate and those that disagree with the candidate. Candidates that respondents disagree with are seen as both dishonest and more likely to follow through on a policy position that the respondent does not agree with. Ultimately, this leads to a larger preference for the candidate who does not promise. On the other hand, candidates that respondents agree with are seen as more likely to follow through on a policy position the respondent agrees with, but at the same time more dishonest. Thus, the two factors working against each other means fewer respondents, in aggregate, are willing to support the candidate that promises even when the respondents agree

with the candidates. Where the respondents and candidates and respondents disagree, the two concepts both work against the candidate who promises so that more respondents, are willing to say they prefer the non-promiser.

## Strategic Implications of Promises, Prospectively

The above results suggest that promising not only alters perceptions of candidate commitment to a position, but indicates that it does so by changing opinions on both the likelihood a candidate has to follow through and candidate honesty. Interestingly, the combination of these results indicates that promising should be less frequent than not promising. In fact, the large asymmetry between potential benefits and potential costs of promising is great enough that it seems that promising may occur rarely. However, this asymmetry provides an intriguing opportunity for strategic use for the rhetorical device. Candidates could take advantage of positions their their constituents are not evenly divided on policies. If candidates promise on an issue where there is an overwhelming majority of the population that shares the same position, the candidate stands to gain more support than she might lose from voters that disagree with her. Since not every district shares the same proportional division on gun control, it is possible to consider the impact that a districts with varying support for gun control has on strategic use of promises. If districts are skewed in one direction or the other, promises may have a much stronger positive or negative effect.

First, recall that the effect of promising above was calculated by subtracting the percentage of respondents who preferred the non-promising candidate from $(V(C_N))$ from the percentage of respondents who preferred the promiser $(V(C_P))$ to determine a candidate's net gain from promising (E_p). The effects of promising was calculated calculated ignoring differences in preference for and against stricter gun control. However, districts are often not split to have proportional preferences for stricter gun control. Here, I modify the calculation to represent different preferences for gun control using n to represent the percentage of the population that prefers gun control:

$$E_p = nV(C_P) + (1-n)V(C_N) \qquad (1)$$

Using the sample estimates for gun control preference that were obtained through this survey

Figure 2: Projected Candidate Preferences Based on District Size, Candidates Favor Gun Control
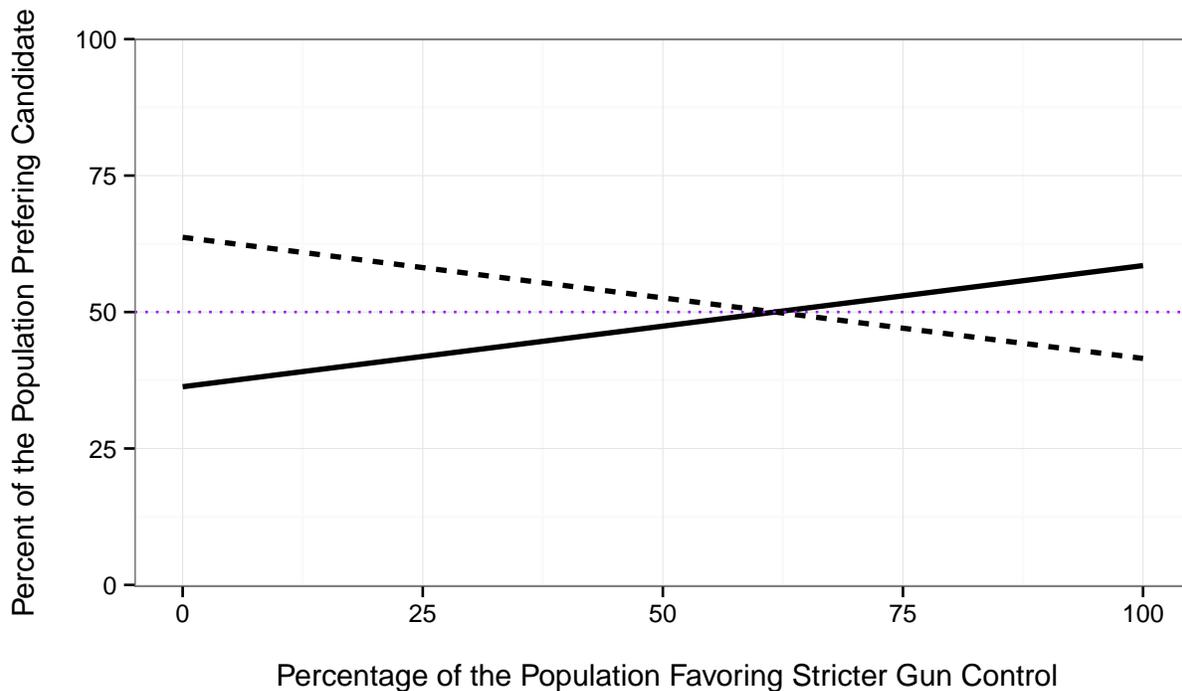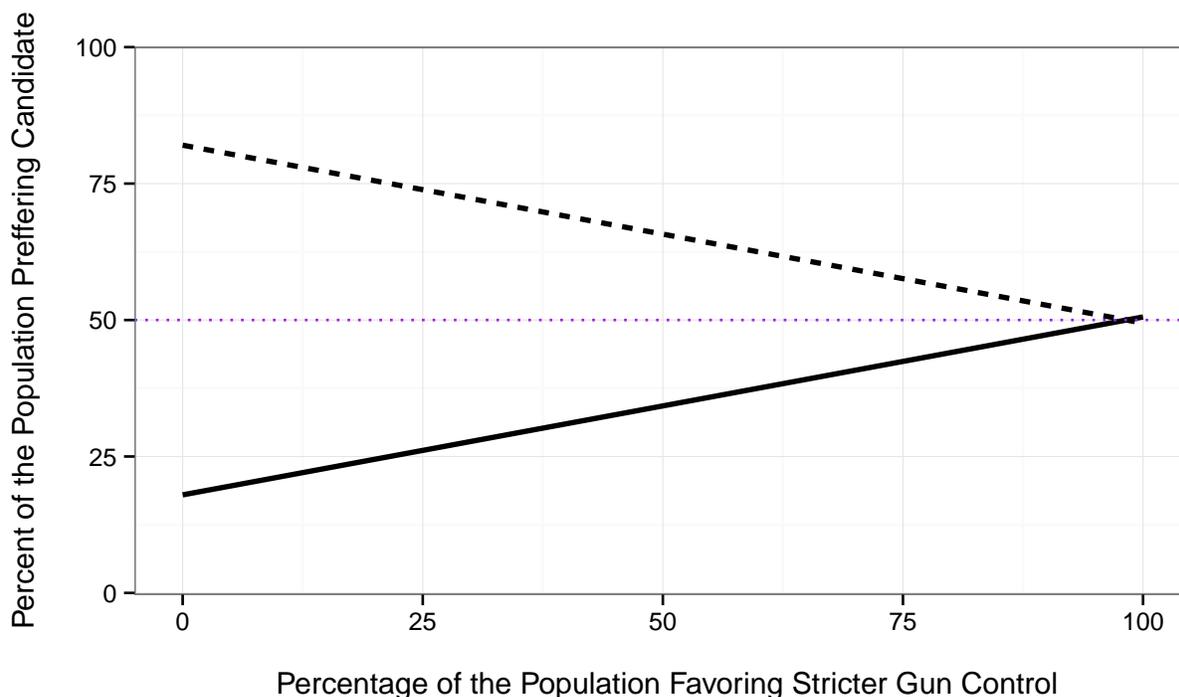

Note: This graph presents the projected level of support candidates would find in a district if they promised or not. The solid line represents the candidate who promises; the dashed line presents a candidate who does not.

(55.2% in favor of stricter gun control), I can calculate the precise advantage that a candidate would have in a district with this make-up. First, for a candidate promising on stricter gun control, there is a 13-point advantage for the candidate not to promise. For a candidate determining whether or not to promise against making gun control stricter, there is a negative impact of promising: they stand to lose 5-points and would also be harmed by promising, but by a smaller margin.

To generally predict how gun control may matter for districts with different splits of preferences on gun control, I use the established preferences for candidates on gun control from the above survey experiment to determine the point at which candidates who prefer and do not prefer stricter gun control. Figures 2 and 3 depict the percentage of the vote that the candidate can expect to receive if the candidate were to promise for where candidates favor stricter gun control and oppose stricter gun control, respectively. In each graph, the candidate who promises is depicted with a solid line, and the candidate who does not promise is represented with a dashed line. For candidates who prefer stricter gun control, if a district contains more than 61.7% of constituents that prefer gun control, a promise will help them more than hurt them. Candidates who do not

Figure 3: Projected Candidate Preferences Based on District Size, Candidates Oppose Gun Control

Note: This graph presents the projected level of support candidates would find in a district if they promised or not. The solid line represents the candidate who promises; the dashed line presents a candidate who does not.

prefer gun control stand much more to lose: they need to have a district with 98.3% in order to gain by promising on that issue. Ultimately, it seems that only candidates taking the stance of stricter gun control would likely find an opportune district in which to promise.

The Retrospective Effects of Promising

While there has been more attention to impacts of changing positions on future political prospects, none of the previous research has differentiated promises from non-promises. The following study extends tests of the above theory by continuing the experiment to the next stage in a governing official's career: a subsequent election that occurs after a candidate has a chance to act on his promise.

Figure 4: Retrospective Experiment Example

Measurement

As before, I maintain the same questionnaire format. I first ask the respondents about gun control. I then give the respondents information about two different candidates, one who promises and one who does not. This time, the chart also gives information about how the candidate has acted while in office, giving the candidate the opportunity to break or keep his word. Finally, I ask respondents about perceptions of candidate honesty and candidate follow through. While there are many similarities with the above experiment, there are a few key differences in how I measure retrospective effects of promises. First, in this rendition of the experiment, I use a bullet pointed format instead of a chart.[10] The second main difference is that the respondents are given information not only about what the candidates said about gun control while campaigning, but they are also given information about how the candidates voted on gun control while in office.

As shown in Figure 4, respondents are told that they will be shown information for two candidates, Candidate A and Candidate B. The first bullet point indicates whether or not the candidates promised or merely stated their position on gun control. As before, the candidates

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[10]The general results of the experiment remain unchanged regardless of the format. The main difference between the two formats is the length of time that it takes respondents to read through the content. Because the content was included on an omnibus survey, I chose the shorter version of the experiment in order to maximize the questions that I could ask respondents.

both take the same position on gun control, but that position is randomly chosen to support or not support an increase in gun control. The second bullet point indicates whether or not the candidate acted in accordance with his position on gun control while in office. Both candidates act in accordance with their stated position on gun control (follow through) or both candidates act differently from their stated position on gun control (act inconsistently). This feature is randomized independently from the candidates' position on gun control.

Finally, I again ask respondents about future follow through of the candidate on the issue of gun control and how honest the respondent thinks the candidate is. In this iteration, I repeat the portion of the text about each candidate individually, and ask the respondents to rate the candidates on a 7-point scale.

Retrospective Results

The survey experiment was embedded in an omnibus survey by the American Laboratory for Democratic Values and launched through YouGov in April 2014. The respondents are composed of 2000 American adults that form a nationally representative sample. Due to the length of the experiment, the mechanism questions are not included on the YouGov version of the survey. Instead, the full version of the survey experiment was launched through Amazon's Mechanical Turk to 660 respondents in March 2014. As before, respondents were asked about 2 sets of candidates. The Mechanical Turk sample is a convenience sample, but research has indicated that experimental results are largely consistent with what we would expect from a representative sample. (See Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) and Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis (2010).) I conducted the entire experiment on Mechanical Turk in order to confirm the results from the YouGov sample and to measure the mechanisms. Because the results are consistent with the YouGov sample, I report only the YouGov results on the main effects of retrospective promises here, and the Mechanical Turk results on future follow through and honesty.

Opinions on gun control in this sample are consistent with both the prospective sample as well as the nationally representative sample mentioned previous. Here, 54.0% of the respondents favored stricter gun control and 46.0% of the respondents opposed stricter gun control. As before,

Table 4: Effect of Promising Retrospectively

| | Candidate Follows Through | | Candidate Acts Inconsistently | |
	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes
Respondent Favors	43.57 (35.83, 51.31)	10.29 (1.93, 18.66)	-71.69 (-77.60, -65.79)	-62.50 (-69.16, -55.84)
Respondent Opposes	11.44 (2.47, 20.41)	51.95 (43.92, 59.97)	-74.25 (-80.34, -68.16)	-70.20 (-76.84, -63.56)

Note: This table contains the difference of respondents who prefer the candidate who promises from those who prefer the candidate that does not promise, for the same category. The table is divided also by both the candidate and respondent positions on gun control. The 95% confidence interval is given in parentheses.

the sample is divided among the different positions candidates take and respondent opinions on gun control (F and O). In addition, I also divide the sample based on whether the candidates keep their word (K), or break their word (B). This leaves 8 groups of interest: $C_{FK}R_F$, $C_{FK}R_O$, $C_{FK}R_F$, $C_{OK}R_O$, $C_{FB}R_F$, $C_{FB}R_O$, $C_{OB}R_F$, and $C_{OB}R_O$.

Again, I examine the results the difference between the mean support for the promiser and non-promiser. A positive number indicates greater levels of support for the promiser, and a negative number indicates lesser levels of support for the promiser than the non-promiser. The results are displayed in Table 4. For candidates who follow through, there is a strong positive effect for promising. For candidates who do not follow through, there is a much stronger negative effect for promising.

As before, there are two interesting asymmetries in the effect sizes of promising. First, the negative effect for acting inconsistently is much stronger than the positive effect for following through on a promise. Candidates gain a lot less for following through on a promise than they lose for breaking their word. The second asymmetry is found in the effect sizes between when candidates and respondents agree on the issue of gun control verses when they do not agree. There is a stronger effect of following through on a promise among candidates who agree with the position. However, where they disagree, there is still a distinct advantage to promising, but with a much smaller effect than where the respondents agree. Similarly, candidates who do not follow through and promise receive slightly harsher treatment if the respondents agree with their position. However, while this

Table 5: Ratings of Expected Candidate Follow Through

| | Candidate Follows Through | | Candidate Acts Inconsistently | |
	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes
Respondent Favors	0.13 (0.08, 0.17)	0.21 (0.16, 0.27)	-0.11 (-0.15, -0.06)	0.06 (-0.01, 0.13)
Respondent Opposes	0.08 (0.03, 0.13)	0.23 (0.17, 0.28)	-0.04 (-0.09, 0.01)	-0.04 (-0.10, 0.02)

Note: This table contains the ratings of the candidate's likelihood to follow through on their initial position in the future. The scale has been transformed to a 0-1 scale, where 0 indicates the candidate is not at all likely to follow through in the future and 1 indicates the candidate is extremely likely to follow through in the future. The table is divided also by both the candidate and respondent positions on gun control. The 95% confidence interval is given in parentheses.

difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), it is substantively small.

Now consider the retrospective implications of promising on expectations for future follow through and honesty. Table 5 shows the results for expectations of future action when the candidate keeps his word. The scales have been transformed so that a 0 means that the candidate is "Not at all likely to follow through in the future" and a 1 means that the candidate is "Very likely to follow through in the future". Each candidate, regardless of whether he promises or not, is rated above the mid-point of the scale, indicating that they are perceived as likely to act in the same manner in the future. Within each candidate pair, the promiser is seen as more likely to act on his initial position in the future than the non-promiser. For candidates who do not follow through on their word, the mean assessment of all candidates is below the mid-point—each of these candidates is seen as unlikely to follow through in the future. The promisers, however, are rated lower than the non-promising candidates.

Table 6 shows the results for candidate honesty among candidates who kept their word. Each candidate who kept his word is rated above the mid-point of the scale, indicating the that they are seen as honest. But, as expected, candidates who promised on their initial position are viewed as more honest than candidates who took the same position without promising. The mean rating for each candidate who breaks their word is below the mid-point as expected. And, in every candidate pairing, the candidate who promises is viewed as less honest than the candidate who does not

Table 6: Ratings of Candidate Honesty for Candidates who Follow Through

| | Candidate Follows Through | | Candidate Acts Inconsistently | |
	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes	Candidate Favors	Candidate Opposes
Respondent Favors	0.13 (0.09, 0.18)	0.20 (0.13, 0.27)	-0.21 (-0.28, -0.15)	-0.20 (-0.27, -0.13)
Respondent Opposes	0.10 (0.05, 0.14)	0.16 (0.10, 0.22)	-0.19 (-0.24, -0.14)	-0.20 (-0.28, -0.12)

Note: This table contains the ratings of the candidate's honesty, for candidates who follow through. The scale has been transformed to a 0-1 scale, where 0 indicates the candidate is not at all honest and 1 indicates the candidate is extremely honest. The table is divided also by both the candidate and respondent positions on gun control. The 95% confidence interval is given in parentheses.

promise on the same position.

In the retrospective case, the data again confirms my theory: promisres are more greatly rewarded when candidates follow through, and promisers are more harshly judged when they do not follow through. Candidates who follow through on their position are seen as both more likely to follow through on their initial position in the future *and* more honest if they promise than if they do not promise. Candidates who break from their position are seen as both less honest *and* less likely to follow through on their initial position if they promise. Overall, these show that the mechanism continues through to retrospective judgments of candidates. A recorded promise on a stance enhances the effects of a demonstrated record on a position. These results also help to underline how promises can function as a signal in the prospective sense: because candidates stand to lose much more from a promise broken than simply taking a position without promising, it can act as a signal that they are committed to their position rather than simply act as cheap talk.

Strategic Implications When Considering the Future

Because candidates are likely to calculate decide promises based on the future outcomes, there is another opportunity for understanding how promises might be strategically deployed. A candidate may be more inclined to make a promise if they can expect a large gain in the future from following through on their promise. Unlike the prospective case, the retrospective gains from promising are

Figure 5: Projected Candidate Preferences Based on Probability of Not Following Through, Candidates Favor Gun Control
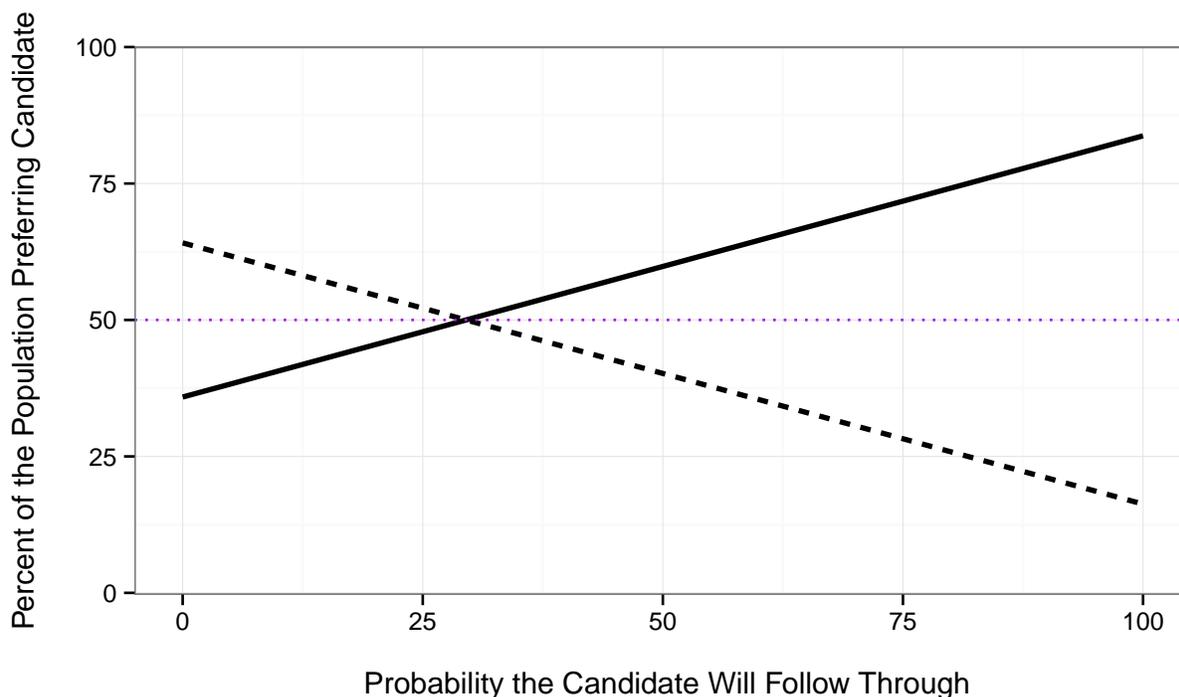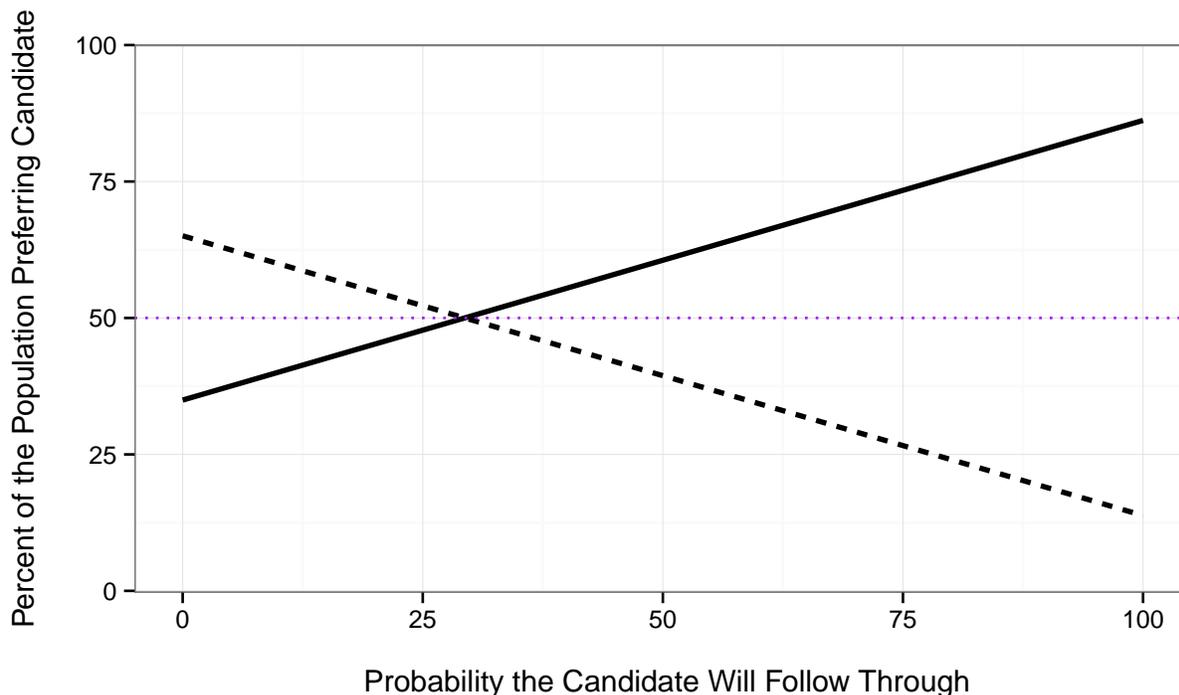

Note: This graph presents the projected level of support candidates would find in a district if they promised or not. The solid line represents the candidate who promises; the dashed line presents a candidate who does not.

uniform if the promise is kept, even if respondents disagree with the candidates. And, the losses from promising depend on whether or not candidates are able to keep their word. In this sense, there would be no sample population where a candidate could promise, break her word, and gain even when not promising. Instead, I consider how a candidate can gain in the long-term based on expectations of her ability to follow through on the promise.

Candidates are not simply considering their ability to gain votes in the current election; they also need to consider their future prospects through their ability to keep the promise. While there is a evidence that candidates attempt to keep their word in office, there is no absolutely certainty that they will be able to do so (Fishel 1985). Thus, I consider the full range of probabilities that candidates will follow through on their word, p), in addition to gains from promising among those they agree with and disagree with. The difference between promising can be calculated using the following:

Figure 6: Projected Candidate Preferences Based on Probability of Not Following Through, Candidates Oppose Gun Control

Note: This graph presents the projected level of support candidates would find in a district if they promised or not. The solid line represents the candidate who promises; the dashed line presents a candidate who does not.

$$E_r = p(nV(C_KP) + (1-n)V(C_KN)) + (1-p)(nV(C_BP) + (1-n)V(C_BN)) \qquad (2)$$

I calculate the expected value of promising for each probability of following through and change in support for gun control. The results of this calculation yield a comparison of the gains verses the losses between a candidate promising and not-promising on each side of the issue. Figures 5 and 6 display the results graphically for the expected percentage of the vote the candidate should expect to receive. Overall, for stricter candidates, when the candidates have a 32% chance of keeping their word, they should promise on the issue of gun control. When candidates take the stance to not make gun control stricter, they need about a 33% chance of following through on their word to benefit from promising. This indicates, that for candidates who are dependent on long term affects of promising, there needs to be a relatively high amount of certainty in fulfilling

26

their promise.

Conclusion

This article presented an experimental investigation into how promises affect vote choice. This study is the first to distinguish promises as unique policy statements and measure the differential effects directly. Importantly, I show that not only can voters distinguish between different ways to take a position, there is consistent evidence that making a promise indicates that the candidate has a greater commitment to the position than if they take the same position without promising. The data here indicates how this matters as well: increasing commitments to a position is a good thing for those constituents who take the same position as the candidate. The retrospective experiment underlines why this works: candidates who promised and kept their word are judged more favorably than candidates who do not promise and do not keep their word. For both processes, promises alter both expectations of candidate follow through and perceptions of honesty. That promises change expectations for action, underlines the work of promises as commitment devices.

While the data invariably supports the idea of promises as specific policy statements that polarize opinion of candidates, there are several asymmetries in this study that highlight important aspects of the pathway from candidate promises to voter evaluations that are important to highlight. First, there is a much smaller gain from from promising to individuals who agree with candidates than the potential loss from promising to individuals who disagree with candidates. I argue this is because promises negatively impact assessments of candidate honesty and it highlights an important problem: promises come with a cost in the present and means that candidates should be strategic in deploying promises. As such, candidates who want to enact legislation on stricter gun control are the most likely to gain from promising, when the district is disproportionately in agreement with them. A second asymmetry stems from the larger effect sizes between the two sides of the gun control: candidates promising stricter gun control moves prospective opinions more than promising not to increase restrictions on guns. This maybe because these candidates are promising to keep the status quo, which in the case of gun control is not necessarily a hard task (Smart Gun Laws 2014). However, when combined with the modest gains from keeping a promise in the long-term,

this maybe an important way for candidates to enhance their credibility.

The data collected here, is the beginning of exploration on candidate messaging and commitments, and demonstrates the need for future work to continue to explore these distinctions. First, it is important to consider promises as an emphasis on policy that matters across a range of issues. Candidates juggle several issues at one time, and it is possible that a strong advantage on one issue could suggest the benefit of a long-term strategy on an issue where there is very little short-term gain. This is especially important in helping to ascertain which issues candidates decide to promote over the course of their campaigns. As Milita, Ryan, and Simas (2014) demonstrate, candidates often talk about different issues from each other. Both work highlights the strategic benefit of candidates to draw attention to certain aspects of their campaign. This extends that work by suggesting that it may also be of benefit to highlight promises on policy that stand to gain candidates in subsequent elections as well.

Another important avenue for future research is the way in which voters seem to distinguish between candidate honesty and the expected outcomes is of significance. This may in part stem from lack of trust for representatives, which has been shown to be low (Hetherington and Husser 2012), but it is not clear from this research. Importantly, the experiments featured gun control, a highly polarized, highly publicized issue area. It is possible that promises might affect honesty less on a less polarized, less publicized issue area, and future work can investigate how the issue importance and polarization shifts distinctions in the findings. However, with a public where elites are polarized (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006), and trust among voters is also polarized (Hetherington 2015), it is important to understand how rhetoric on these issues affects voters' perceptions of candidate honesty. Here, the data undeniably indicates that when candidates promise on a salient issue, those promises can further polarize voter opinions of those candidates.

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