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From Pledge-Fulfilment to Mandate-Fulfilment: An  
Empirical Theory

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### Abstract

The article presents a theoretical synthesis that could serve as the conceptual framework for empirical studies of the fulfilment of electoral pledges in modern democracies. Studies related to the program-to-policy linkage derived their hypotheses, for the most part, from an implicit, common sense model of mandate theory. The article presents a realistic version of positive mandate theory, one that is stripped of its normative assumptions and is suitable for empirical testing. It is informed by five theoretical building blocks: the concept of the binding mandate, the party theory of representation, the doctrine of responsible party government, modern normative mandate theory and the conceptual pair of delegation and mandate. The resulting framework incorporates the information content of the campaigns, the definiteness of the authorization and the strength of pledge enactment as its core components.

*Keywords:* Mandate Theory, Electoral Pledges, Pledge Fulfilment, Saliency, Mandate Slippage.

In modern democracies politicians are criticized on a regular basis for breaking their campaign promises.<sup>1</sup> It is widely believed that the pledge ‘read my lips: no new taxes’ cost George H. W. Bush the 1992 US presidential elections. The trustworthiness of the sitting president was called into question, even as he had made a seemingly honest attempt at reconciling his policy differences with Democrats in order to bring down the budget deficit.

So why does the public sanction politicians set out to uphold the ‘public interest’? The answer lies in the role elections play in modern representative democracies. Elections provide a mandate (an at least partially bound authorization) to implement symbolic or policy-based pledges and act on salient issues. Any violation of this mandate may potentially backfire, even in cases where it is in line with some understanding of the public interest.

Nevertheless, extant literature assigns a more complex role to elections in representative democracy. Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999b: 16) consider elections to be the vehicle for both the (*ex ante*) expression of popular preferences and the (*ex post*) exercise of control over representatives (the mandate vs. the accountability role). Other approaches highlight the role of elections in selecting political leaders (Fearon, 1999). In a parallel, empirical literature (from Royed, 1996 to Thomson et al., 2017) the rate of pledge-fulfilment is investigated in a range of comparative and country studies. These studies related to the so-called program-to-policy linkage (Thomson, 2001) derived their hypotheses, for the most part, from an implicit, common sense model of mandate theory.

What is missing in the literature is an attempt to bridge these two separate strands of research in an empirically testable theory of mandate-fulfilment. Whereas in most of the empirical literature electoral pledges are used as the main proxies for mandates, there is more to mandate-fulfilment than sheer pledge-fulfilment. The information content of the campaigns, the definiteness of the authorization and the strength of mandate enactment should all be core components of a testable theory of mandate-fulfilment.

The article presents a theoretical synthesis (called a realistic version of positive mandate theory) that builds on these and other elements and could serve as the conceptual framework for empirical studies of the fulfilment of mandates in modern democracies. This allows not only for the combination of pledge-based (see: Royed, 1996) and saliency-based (as in Budge and Hofferbert, 1990) empirical approaches but their embedding in a theoretical framework that is both more complex than implicit mandate theory and is informed by the rich tradition of conceptual thinking on the role of elections in a democracy.

In the following we elaborate our model in four steps. First, we explore the five conceptual building blocks of our synthesis account. Second, we outline our proposed framework, the realistic version of positive mandate theory. Third, we discuss potential problems related to the internal and external validity of our theoretical framework. The final section summarizes our results and evaluates our contribution to the literature.

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<sup>1</sup> We are thankful for the comments of the anonymous reviewers. All remaining errors are ours.

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## 1. *Conceptual Origins*

Empirical studies of pledges-fulfilment that develop, or at least rely on an explicit theory of the mandate are few and far between. Indeed, the literature on mandate theory on the one hand, and empirical pledge research on the other hand have remained largely in their respective silos. A good example for this is an article by Thomson et al. (2017) which summarizes multiple decades of empirical work in the field. Its brief introduction only offers a few theoretical references and the rest of the text is consecrated to empirical research.

While the task of creating an empirical theory of mandate-fulfilment is far from straightforward, several strands in the representation and democratic theory literature offer clues for undertaking such a challenge of conceptualization and operationalization. Five approaches look particularly promising as potential building blocks for such an empirical framework: the theory of the bound and free mandate (Pitkin, 1967: 142–167), the party theory of representation (Judge, 1999: 70–71), the doctrine of responsible party government (Schattschneider, 1942), modern normative mandate theory (Manin, Przeworski and Stokes, 1999a) and the separation of delegation and mandate in the typology of political representation (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2005). In what follows, we provide a brief discussion of each of these building blocks.

## 2. *The Theory of the Bound and Free Mandate*

The concept of the mandate is closely related to both the theory of representative government and that of democracy. Classic accounts of the topic tend to draw a distinction between the binding (or ‘imperative’) and free mandates of the representatives. The binding mandate has traditionally provided *democratic* legitimacy to political institutions, while the free mandate has been a cornerstone of *representative* government.

A key theorist of the former approach was Rousseau. In his reform proposal for the Constitution of Poland he was not only intent on maintaining the institution of delegation but went as far as to propose that deviating from the instructions given by the principals should be sanctioned by capital punishment (Rousseau, 1985 [1772]: xxiv). Edmund Burke, for his part, is often referred to as the founding father of the modern theory of the free mandate (cf. for example: Urbinati, 2006: 22). In his letter in 1774 to the Bristol electors he expressed the view that he would render them the best service if he was to exercise freely his powers of deliberation as opposed to slavishly following the opinion of people who elected him (Pitkin, 1967: 171).

These two approaches had long existed in parallel in countries with a representative government. The turning point came on 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1789, when the French Constituent Assembly ‘banned’ the binding mandate in the heat of a stormy debate (Fitzsimmons, 2002: 49). The ban on binding mandates has been ‘one of the central tenets of modern representative government’ (Pasquino, 2001: 205) ever since. The liberal parliamentarism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century followed this tradition of the relative independence of representatives who enjoyed a mandate that was to free to at least some extent (Manin, 1997: 163). In practice, this was realized through rules explicitly

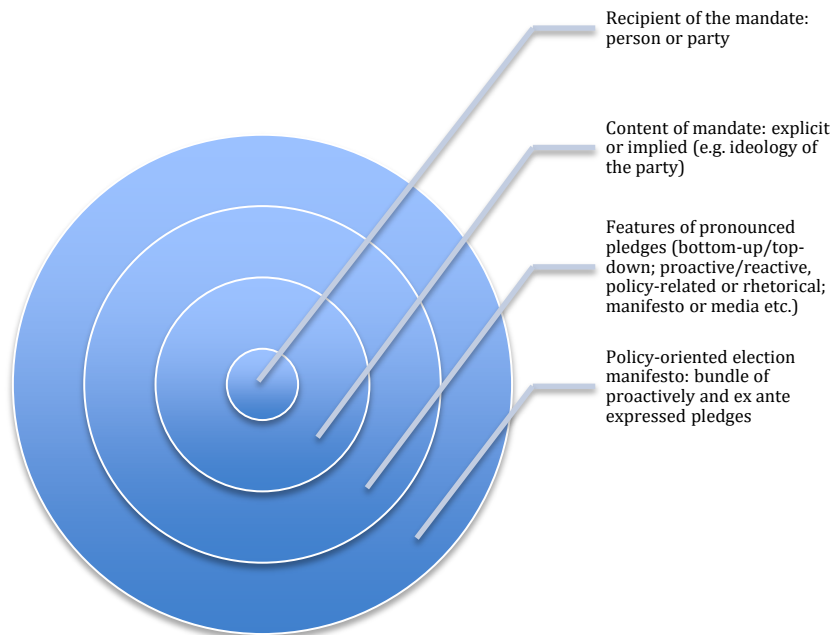
prohibiting fully binding mandates (which existed either in the form of legally binding instructions by the electorate or in the guise of the discretionary revocability of representatives).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century voters increasingly tended to vote for parties as party affiliation trumped candidates' personal qualities in electoral choice (even though this trend was less markedly manifest in the U.S. than in Europe). Instead of individual legislators, it was now the parties that increasingly became the subjects of representation. This process was captured in the theory of party representation (see: Judge, 1999: 71 and below). While representation had earlier been construed as a direct relationship of individuals (i.e. individual voters and individual representatives), when parties took center stage it was transformed into a relationship between aggregates of people (voters' groups) on the one hand and representatives' groups on the other. (We return to the more recent process of weakening party identification in the section on validity.)

This party-centered form of representation sent the pendulum back from the free (personal) mandate towards a partial realization of a binding mandate. In 20<sup>th</sup> century politics (at least in Western Europe), parties' election programs played a significant and empirically demonstrated role in shaping government policy (see the results of the Manifesto Research Group – McDonald and Budge (2005: 19). In this respect, and despite de jure prohibition, a de facto constraint for parties – the so-called 'outline-mandate' (Frognier, 2000: 29) – was very much in effect.

Despite these historical fluctuations of the dominant understanding of the mandate (both in theory and practice), it has been a relatively stable point of reference in representative government as an authorization that is binding to at least some extent. This generic mandate concept is content-specific and concrete, that is, it limits the scope of the strategic options available to the representative. This collective representative does not enjoy a blank check authorization – it does not become a 'trustee'. Figure 1 presents a conceptual of the partially binding mandate.

Figure 1. Conceptual levels of the electoral mandate



Source: The authors.

At the core we find the recipient of the mandate: a person or a party. As for its content, this mandate could be either implicitly or manifestly present in political debates. In the case of an explicit presentation of the mandate, its overall genre (an oral presentation, with a general approach focusing on symbolic proclamations as opposed to a written manifesto containing specific policy pledges) offers a further level of differentiation. Finally, the nature and structure of the written manifesto (such as the concreteness of the pledges and ‘testability’ of their fulfilment) allows for an even more detailed analysis (we will return to this figure in more detail). With the concept of the mandate briefly described, we now move on to the role of parties in representation theory as the ‘owners’ of this mandate.

### ***3. The Party Theory of Representation***

The historical process described above was characterized by an increasingly group-based representation. As political parties emerged as central players in the representative relationship the corresponding ‘party theory of representation’ was also developed in British political thought and elsewhere. According to Judge (1999: 71), it was born simply as a rationalization of existing practice, that of parties competing in elections on their respective electoral programs (‘manifestos’). This served a dual function. First, manifestos provide a common platform for the candidates of a party

and a distinguishing feature from the candidates of rival parties. Second, public policy pledges proved effective in mobilizing voters.

According to this theory, the winning party receives an (at least partly) concrete authorization, or mandate to, implement the election program. This is the electoral mandate, a concept which – in Judge’s view – primarily served as a justification for the party discipline needed for governing in Parliament. This narrative also resolved a central problem of representation, i.e. that public representatives have a free mandate, while they also have a ‘natural’ yet legally non-enforceable duty to their constituency.

Since party discipline regularly overwrote this relationship (and the personal judgement of the representative), the resulting tension had to be released by a reference to an alternative justification: the electoral mandate (Birch, 1964: 115-118; Judge, 1999: 70-71). In a corresponding development the electoral mandate has also been used to justify the policies of the (party) government for the electorate. Based on these considerations – and building on those of the previous section – the concept of the electoral mandate can be defined as an authorization by voters granted to parties to implement a specific set of policy pledges and other pre-established criteria once in government.

#### ***4. The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government***

In 20<sup>th</sup> century political science the idea of the electoral mandate was not only developed in the context of the Westminster model but also in the American ‘doctrine of responsible party government’ (APSA, 1950; Ranney, 1954; Schattschneider, 1942; Sundquist, 1988). Along with the party theory of representation this became the dominant empirical paradigm for understanding modern democracy from the 1940s to the 1970s. Both approaches sought to make sense of the principle of the sovereignty of the people and that of majority rule in modern states with extended populations. In this line of thought people’s sovereignty was interpreted not as the direct participation of the people, but as popular control over the government through the institution of the majority principle, and indirectly, through the role of the parties.

Based on Ranney (1954: 12) and Judge (1999: 71) the ideal type of responsible party government can be summarized as follows. At least (and preferably, not more than) two politically consistent and disciplined parties have clear and definite political programs to put the popular will into action. During the election campaign each party tries to convince the majority of electors that its program is more congruent with the preferences or interests of the voters. The electorate votes not on the basis of individual qualities but according to the party affiliation of candidates. The party winning the most seats in the legislation gains complete control over government power and thus bears exclusive responsibility for policy-making. If the translation of its electoral manifesto into political practice is judged in a positive light, it will be re-elected. If not, the opposition party will come into power at the next election.

This doctrine of responsible party government can both be interpreted as a normative and as a gradually evolving positive (descriptive) framework of modern democracy. As an empirical theory it showed mixed results at best (e.g. Birch, 1964: 119-120). In fact, Schattschneider (1942: 131-132) argued that the single most

important fact about American parties is that the ideal of responsible party government is not realized in practice. This criticism led to the development of a second-generation model of responsible party government. ‘Conditional party government’, as the new theory was called, highlighted a new precondition: the consistency of the preferences of the deputies of the same party.

Despite its limitations, the descriptive model of responsible party government can be seen as a suitable empirical approximation of ideal typical mandate theory. This more realistic mandate framework is located between a *strong* theory of the mandate (one that is based on a binding mandate) on the one hand, and trusteeship, the other extreme position on the palette of principal-agent relationships (see: Table 1 below).

Table 1. The binding character of representative relationships

Binding mandate -		Partially binding mandate -		Free mandate	
Delegation	Constant responsiveness	Mandate		Ex post accountability	Trusteeship
		Strong	Weak		

Source: The authors.

The doctrine of responsible party government, therefore, could serve as a natural starting point for an empirically relevant theory of the mandate. Its greatest added value lies in the adoption of ‘weak mandate’, which fills the theoretical gap between the all-encompassing ex ante mandate and the lack of any ex ante constraints (ex post accountability and trusteeship – see: Table 1). Nevertheless, it also has two deficiencies, which make its further elaboration necessary. One is related to the complexity of voting decisions and the corresponding ambivalence surrounding the role of the elections. The other concerns the source of mandate content. We address these issues with a discussion of our two remaining theoretical building blocks.

### ***5. Modern Normative Mandate Theory***

The fourth theoretical source of our synthesis account is a modern normative version of mandate theory as presented by Manin et al. (1999a). One of the merits of this approach is that it embeds static representation theory in a dynamic framework by stressing the process-like nature of the mandate. Within this dynamic framework the moment of the elections is both the starting and closing point of the political process. Besides selecting representatives and offering the electorate a chance to ‘depose’ unworthy leaders, elections provide a chance to identify the public policies to be followed. Representative government is realized if the government pursues policies in line with the mandate received – if government policy is sensitive, or ‘responsive’ to the will of the electorate. Here, the will of the people is essentially equated with the public policy content of the authorization act (see: Figure 1).

This framework effectively addresses the abovementioned requirement of the consistency of voting decisions over time. Representative government is not a synonym of responsive government: government policy is not a derivative of the changes in public opinion or popular preferences. This rendering of mandate theory places most of the emphasis on the role of elections. For better or worse, there are

further similarities with the party theory of representation and the doctrine of responsible party government. They all claim that fulfilling the mandate should go hand-in-hand with realizing the public interest. It is a normative prescription which does not logically follow from the assumptions of the models. In fact, it introduces an element of tension into the theoretical framework.

This problem is also acknowledged by Manin et al. (1999b: 2-3): ‘From a normative standpoint, the question is why exactly would the institutions characteristic of representative democracy be conducive to’ the common good? The authors sketch four potential reasons: 1) Those who enter politics do so with the intention of serving the public good; 2) voters can effectively select these candidates; 3) voters can effectively threaten those who would stray from the path of virtue by throwing them out of office; 4) the institutional separation of powers limits deviations from acting in people’s best interests.

It remains questionable how these conditions can be reconciled with an empirical mandate model of strong explanatory capacity. In fact, a number of theoretical approaches put a dent in this reasoning. These include studies on rational ignorance, political manipulation, as well as various public choice theories from rent-seeking through the asymmetries of information all the way to Schumpeter’s asymmetric competence (‘infantilism’) and to political shirking. These considerations show that the unification of the notion of the public interest and that of the electoral mandate in a single logical framework may be unfeasible. While the dynamic aspects and the conceptualization of electoral choice of modern normative mandate theory may be useful additions to an empirical mandate theory, its normative aspects make it unsuitable for serving as the conceptual core for such an endeavor.

## *6. Delegation and the Mandate in Representation Theory*

Another residual issue from our discussion of the doctrine of responsible party government concerned the source of mandate content (this issue was also raised implicitly with regards to the tension between sensitivity to public opinion and the electoral mandate). This conflict is explicit in the contrast between the responsiveness and mandate approaches as they imply different assumptions on the relationship between the electorate and its representatives. In the case of responsiveness, the content of the ‘contract’ is derived bottom-up from voters’ preferences (‘What do the people demand?’). In the case of mandate theory, the pivotal role of the electoral program signals a top-down relationship.

This static distinction regarding the source of the mandate introduced by Andeweg and Thomassen (2005) is a useful addition to the dynamic approach put forward by Manin and his co-authors. The authors tackle the complex relationship between the electorate and its representatives in an idiosyncratic classification of representation-types (see: Table 2, which may be considered to be an elaboration on the concepts presented in Table 1).

Table 2. Modes of political representation

		Control by voters	
		Ex ante	Ex post
Defining the content of representation	From the top	Mandate	Accountability
	From the bottom	Delegation	Responsiveness

Source: Andeweg and Thomassen 2005: 512, as modified by the authors.

The two dimensions of the conceptual matrix are related to controlling mechanisms and the definition of mandate content (here we only focus on the *ex ante* side of the table). We modified the table in one aspect: although Andeweg and Thomassen associate the upper left cell with ‘authorization’, we refer to it as the electoral mandate. We consider this term to be more accurate as the act of authorization also includes instances of blank check authorization, which is clearly inapplicable for an analysis of the *content* of representation.

As is manifested in this presentation, the mandate approach to representation is characterized by a top-down approach to creating the content of the principal-agent understanding. Delegation, on the other hand, realizes representation from the bottom up, as the government process takes its cues from detailed, binding expressions of the popular will. It is important to note, however, that delegation can only be realized when a number of very strict conditions are met: voters must have exogenous and stable preferences and the political agenda must be predictable. In this sense, the more flexible framework of the mandate relationship is also more realistic.

## 7. *An Empirical Theory of Mandate-fulfilment*

In this article, we argued that there is a missing link between various theories of the mandate and empirical pledge-research. An empirically testable theory of mandate-fulfilment remains elusive even as a number of its potential components are well exposed in the conceptual literature. The previous section enumerated five such building blocks and in this section, we discuss these approaches with a view towards constructing a synthesis framework that is in direct conversation with empirical studies of pledge-fulfilment.

Our proposition takes away five key elements – five major criticisms – from the analysis so far. It builds on the ‘weak’ concept of the mandate. It treats parties as the main agents of representation. It makes use of the realistic tendencies of party government (without its reliance on its most prohibitive preconditions). It sets up a positive framework for studying representative government (doing away with normative elements). And finally, it relies on a top-down approach to *ex ante* authorization. We call this synthesis the realistic version of positive mandate theory. Table 3 provides a summary of its major aspects.

Table 3. The strong and realistic versions of mandate theory

	Subject	Feature	Strong version	Realistic version
1	Mandate	Binding character of the mandate	Strong	Weak
2	Mandate	Scope of the public policy content	Complete	Reduced
4	Mandate	Source of manifesto policy content	Bottom-up (sensitivity to public preferences)	Top-down (formulated by party elite)
5	Authorization	Strength of authorization	Majority	Majority or plurality
6	Authorization	Agents of mandate-fulfilment	Clear responsibility (two-party system)	Potentially blurred responsibilities (e.g. coalition government)
3	Implementation	Policy change in the wake of government defeat	Radical	Not necessarily radical
7	Implementation	Role of the public interest	Incorporated (normative approach)	No public interest condition (positive approach)

Source: The authors.

The first feature is the acknowledgment of the fact that for any mandate theory there should be a clearly defined concept of the mandate. Here, the mandate is an electoral authorization that is binding to some extent. The free ‘mandate’ (a blank authorization for the representative using elections as an *ex post* control mechanism) is an authorization only in a purely formal sense. The weak version of mandate theory puts the emphasis on the under-defined character of any real-life mandate as opposed to stronger versions of an all-encompassing character.

The weak version of mandate theory disposes of the notion of a binding mandate-fulfilment that covers the totality of policy issues. This weak mandate *as binding to some extent* is content-based and specific: it delineates the scope of action. On the one hand, the various conceptual levels of the mandate (see: Figure 1) create ample space for ambiguity and missing information. On the other hand, the partially binding character of the weak mandate also means that the ends – the perceived public interest – may not fully, and in all cases, justify the means.

For the problem of the source of the mandate we rely on the representation typology of Andeweg and Thomassen. In our modified presentation, we equated the *ex ante* top-down approach with the mandate. In this case, the content of representation (e.g., in the form of an election program) is defined by the political/party elites, as opposed to the exogenous preferences of the voters. This lends strategic room for maneuver for party leaders as they decide on the structural aspects and key pledges of the manifesto.

Moving on from the mandate formulation to the authorization phase of the political process, the realism of our approach is also highlighted by the fact that it does not assume that only overwhelming election victories provide a workable mandate. In

fact, it treats all party configurations capable of forming a government as ‘winners’ and expects them to fulfil their collection of pledges.

In modern mass democracies, authorization is not conferred by individual voters, but by a plurality or majority of voters. Similarly, the beneficiaries of authorization are also collective actors (in most cases: parties). The realistic approach to responsible party government renders the complexity inherent in ‘strong’ versions of mandate theory manageable. In the ‘strong’ ideal type of responsible party government only two parties compete. This setting mobilizes the electorate by providing the simplest choice possible: one between two clearly defined alternatives.

Multiparty systems defy these preconditions just as party platforms are incomplete or ill-defined. The mandate may be implicit (with party ideology used as a pointer) or explicit, and even in the explicit case it may be devoid of content on most policy domains. Similarly, the realistic version of mandate theory, as opposed to the strong one, does not require a radical change of direction in terms of public policy compared to the previous government led by the other competing party. As manifesto content may overlap, pledges and saliency may be shared between parties; thus this unrealistic requirement is omitted.

Besides realism, the positive-empirical ambition of our proposed synthesis is also in stark contrast with extant mandate theories. This approach circumvents the problem of normativity that upsets the logical structure of stronger versions of mandate theory. To illuminate the necessity of this adjustment, we briefly revisit the key features of modern normative mandate theory.

In the footsteps of the doctrine of responsible party government, the most salient feature of normative mandate theory is that representative government also entails governing in the public interest (Manin et al., 1999a; Pitkin, 1967). For this to happen, three descriptive (1-3) and two normative (4-5) assumptions should be met (Manin et al., 1999a: 30-33):

- 1) Election campaigns provide relevant information about the policies to be pursued (‘informativity’);
- 2) Voters expect that the government policy will be identical to election pledges – politicians will adhere to and fulfil their promises;
- 3) Voters are steadfast, i.e. that they will stand by their preferences (expressed through the elections) throughout the political cycle;
- 4) Pursuing the successful election program, i.e. the ‘mandate’, always serves the best interests of the electorate;
- 5) The interests of elected representatives coincide with those of the voters.

For our present purposes, the most important normative assumption is related to the correspondence of the mandate and the public interest (4). This postulate introduces an external element into the original theoretical framework which upsets its logical coherence. The theoretical basis for this correspondence is the utilitarian understanding of the public interest: the common good is what is good for the ‘public’, ‘for the people’ (in a technical sense: the median voter). And what is good for the people can be learned from their revealed preferences, from the choices people make. This utilitarian interpretation of the common good is questionable in itself.

From our perspective, however, the key objection is that preferences are not set over time and, therefore, the positions expressed earlier will not represent ‘the best interests of the people’ in the period following the election (cf. condition 3). Given that elections are held every few years, the explicit content of the mandate and the voters’ revealed preferences (cf. responsiveness) can soon get into conflict, which upsets the internal structure of the five conditions.

At this point, theorists face two imperfect options to choose from. The first option is to dissolve the concept of the mandate – interpreted as an electoral authorization with a partially developed content – in the more general notion of responsiveness. This negates the pivotal role of elections in representative democracy. The other option is to separate the positive-descriptive elements (‘Was the pledge fulfilled?’) from the normative and prescriptive elements (‘Does [meeting] the promise serve the public interest?’). As our aim was to build an empirically testable theory of mandate fulfilment, we opted for the second alternative. This choice was also supported by considerations related to research methodology (cf. the problems inherent in operationalizing the concept of the public interest).

### *Operationalization and validity*

Our final task in the process of formulating the empirical theory of mandate fulfilment is the operationalization of the realistic version of positive mandate theory. This realistic version simplifies the all-encompassing character of the strong ideal type by means of a series of compromises. What is gained in the process is a compact, yet empirically relevant theoretical framework. Its main components are not only theoretically informed but they are also in direct conversation with multiple empirical research agendas.

The operationalized rendition of the empirical theory of mandate fulfilment consists of three main research topics and the related research questions and empirical indicators. These are the information content of the mandate and campaigns; the definiteness of the authorization; and the strength of mandate implementation. Taken together, the three related theory-research question-measurement bundles provide an empirically testable theory of mandate-fulfilment. Table 4 provides an overview of the structure of this synthesis framework.

Table 4. Empirical research questions derived from the theoretical framework

<b>Theoretical problems</b>	<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Empirical indicators</b>
I. Information content of the mandate (campaigns)	(1) How informed are voters of the mandate proposals?	The depth of the factual knowledge of voters of party manifestos
	(2) How comprehensive and concrete is the mandate?	The length and comprehensiveness of election program The specificity of the pledges
II. Definiteness of the authorization	(3) How strong is the authorization?	Activity rate of voters (election turnout) Vote share of winning program(s) (the degree of victory)
	(4) How unique is the authorization?	Differences between the two election program
III. The strength of mandate implementation	(5) How clear is the responsibility for implementation?	The extent of the constitutional separation of powers The strength of party discipline Other formal constraints (e.g. the electoral system) and informal constraints
	(6) What is the rate of mandate fulfilment?	Pledge enactment in terms of percentages ('pledge approach') Enactment of the major, recurring provisions of the programme ('saliency approach')

Source: The authors.

The first pillar in the framework concerns the information content of the mandate. In democratic countries with free and fair elections campaigns offer a wide variety of information sources for the electorate on the possible content of representation relationships. Parties often publish explicit manifestos revealing their ideological orientations and policy intentions. Even in cases where a written program is missing, oral statements may effectively provide a substitute. Proactive communications may be supplemented by reactions to proposals by other parties. This issue may be further divided into two parts with each of its empirical research questions: the knowledge of the electorate of the proposals on offer and the information content of the mandate proper. The former may be investigated in research designs aimed at the depth of the factual knowledge of voters. The latter can be investigated by an analysis of the comprehensiveness and concreteness of manifestos as well as by the specificity of individual pledges.

The second pillar of the framework is related to the definiteness of the authorization. This both concerns the strength of authorization and its uniqueness. The strength of authorization is measurable in a direct manner with turnout and electoral results while uniqueness is a function of the differences between party manifestos. This latter could be measured by the share of overlapping and idiosyncratic pledges of the total.

The third pillar of the framework concerns the strength of mandate implementation. This is the topic that is at the forefront of most of empirical pledge research. Yet even this aspect requires a more complex empirical research agenda in

order to elevate the level of abstraction from pledge to mandate fulfilment. The clarity of responsibility when it comes to implementing the mandate is both a function of formal and informal constraints. Prime examples of the former are constitutional rules regarding the separation of powers. Informal constraints may include cultural norms which often contribute to the strength or weakness of party discipline. Finally, the rate of mandate fulfilment may be calculated by analyzing the rate of pledge fulfilment (in percentages of the total) or the enactment of major legislation regarding recurring provisions of electoral programs (see: the ‘saliency approach’).

The empirical theory of mandate fulfilment – as defined by the pillars of Table 4 and the related discussion – needs further refinements before it can be directly applied to country case studies or comparative work. These mostly concern the institutional variety of electoral systems and the distinctive characteristics of party systems of various advanced democracies. In our presentation of the theoretical framework above we argued that the enforcement of the authorization (i.e. representation) is realized by collective actors, in most cases parties. We also contended that whichever party ‘wins’ the election should be held accountable according to its pledges and other mandate-relevant proclamations.

Needless to say, the notion of ‘winning’ does not adequately prepare our theoretical framework for empirical application. A general discussion of the effect on mandate-fulfilment of major regime types (presidential vs. parliamentary), electoral systems (majority vs. proportional) and party systems (two-party vs. multi-party systems) is therefore in order. We simplify this complexity to four models: the baseline scenario of the Westminster system, the plurality of European proportional systems (here approximated by the Dutch case), minority governments in parliamentary systems and U.S. presidentialism.

The Westminster model (here proxied by the political system of the United Kingdom) can be considered the baseline case for the empirical application of the proposed framework. Single-party governments are common (it is important to note that the proposed framework does not rely on any notion of the ‘majority of the popular vote’, which is not a precondition of forming a government in most countries anyway). As a general rule, manifestos are a must – and they have a real effect on both electoral results (see: the election of 2017) and government policy (as was the case with the election of 1997). Pledges and issue emphases tend to be party-specific and their implementation is frequently fodder for political debate.

Proportional electoral systems are a harder nut to crack (not counting single-party majority governments or coalition governments where one party has a majority on its own). As a general rule, the respective mandate content associated with participant parties adds up to form the government program. This is a relatively clear-cut solution for empirical research whenever pledges and issue emphases are not antagonistic (not to mention the cases where there is a clear overlap between coalition partners). In fact, coalition agreements can be understood as joint efforts of coalition participants to reconstruct the mandate (e.g. pledges that both parties share or at least no party objects to).

The empirical framework addresses these problems under the heading of the uniqueness of authorization and the clarity of responsibility (see: Table 4, research questions 4 and 5). In cases where conflicting mandate proposals are retained even

after forming a coalition the corresponding scores for uniqueness and clarity will decrease. As for minority governments in parliamentary systems, they need other parties' votes for passing legislation. In this respect they behave similarly to proportional systems from the perspective of our theoretical framework with one exception: the mandate proposal of 'supporting' opposition parties will not be considered the way those of junior coalition partners would as they do not take part formally ('responsibly') in party government.

Finally, the case of U.S. presidentialism, with its elaborate separation of powers structure, and other federal states necessitate further refinements of our theoretical framework. Once again, when both houses and the presidency are under one-party control (as in 2008-2010 and 2016-2018, for instance) the only difference with the one-party Westminster-type government lies in the fragmented sources of the mandate. Recent political history points towards the pre-eminence of presidential campaigns as agenda-setters in the political process and, therefore, a realistic mandate theory would primarily rely on the explicit or implicit manifestos of major presidential contenders. As for the cases of divided government (Congress vs. the presidency or when the two houses are divided in terms of party control) they once again restrict the validity of an empirical mandate theory (see: 'clear responsibility' in Table 4).

Certainly, this brief discussion of real-life political systems does not offer a point-by-point solution to all potential problems of the operationalization of a framework for specific research questions, countries and periods. Nevertheless, it also shows that the proposed realistic mandate framework is flexible enough to accommodate designs related to at least a fair share of electoral, party and constitutional system constellations of advanced representative democracies, if not all.

## *Conclusion*

In this article, we have presented an empirical theory of mandate-fulfilment in advanced representative democracies. In creating what we called the realistic version of positive mandate theory we started our discussion with the notion of the partially binding mandate, as contrasted with the free mandate approach to representation. In the next step, we defined the representation relationship as one established between collective actors and where the subjects of representation are parties. We also added the core concepts of responsible party government and modern normative mandate theory to our analysis. However, we proposed a number of adjustments to these frameworks in order to arrive at a realistic and positive version of mandate theory.

Most importantly, the proposed framework breaks with both normative and 'strong' renderings of mandate theory, for both theoretical and practical reasons (plausibility, internal validity and suitability for operationalization – see Table 3 for a summary of these adjustments). The result of this theoretical survey is a conceptual framework that is both logically coherent and empirically plausible, and which can be verified or refuted by the tools of positive political science (as indicated in Table 4).

We conclude our analysis by highlighting the contributions of this empirical mandate theory to the extant literature. First, in this article we argued that there has been no attempt to bridge theoretical accounts of the mandate with the empirical research agenda of pledge-fulfilment. We also contended that there is more to

mandate-fulfilment than sheer pledge-fulfilment – and that a theoretically relevant empirical research agenda should concern the former, not the latter. Furthermore, we stipulated that the three main components of our empirical model (information, definiteness and strength of implementation) are not only theoretically informed but are also in direct conversation with multiple empirical research agendas.

The most compelling example for this is the isolation of the saliency- and pledge-oriented approaches to studying mandate-fulfilment even as these clearly represent two sides of the same coin. There is also an abundance of examples as to how variables from empirical pledge research could fit seamlessly into our framework. In his review of the pledge literature of the preceding two decades, Sebők (2016: 149) provides a comprehensive list of the variables used in these studies.

Information on the mandate are regularly described by their policy content ('context area'), their direction ('expand or cut taxes') or the groups favored by the policy. The role of citizens' evaluations has also been studied recently (Thomson, 2011). A number of other variables – such as legislative majority and consensus between manifestos – are related to the second pillar concepts of authorization and uniqueness. Finally, the analysis of the strength of mandate-fulfilment went beyond counting pledge-fulfilment to include various institutional features (e.g. ministerial control) as control factors. The fact that these variables are regularly used in pledge research without invoking their roots in mandate theory is a reminder that an empirical theory of mandate-fulfilment could fill an important void in the literature.

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