

**Revisiting the Electoral Policy Mandate: An Examination of the Factors that
Contribute to Election Promise Fulfillment**

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Revisiting the Electoral Policy Mandate: An Examination of the Factors that Contribute to Election Promise Fulfillment

At the outset of his election victory speech on January 23, 2006, Prime Minister elect Stephen Harper stated “To Canadians I say this – we will honour your trust, and we will deliver on our commitments.” Furthermore, in speaking to the main commitments made by the Conservative Party during the course of the campaign, Harper stated:

Throughout this campaign, we were crystal clear about where we will lead. First and foremost, we will clean up Ottawa by proposing and passing the Federal Accountability Act. We will do this because shuffling the deck in Ottawa is not enough. We need to change the system. And we will change the system to strengthen our institutions and make them more accountable to you, the Canadian taxpayers. We will reduce your tax burden, starting by cutting the GST from seven to six percent immediately and to five percent over our mandate. We will reform our justice system to make it stronger and to ensure that we turn back the growing plague of guns, gangs, and drugs in our cities and communities. We will offer parents choice and results in child care. And we will work with our provinces to give Canadians the health care they’ve paid for by developing a patient wait times guarantee.

In listing his party’s election campaign promises, Harper justified pursuing these policy options in government on the basis that his party had been clear what it would do and that it had received sufficient support from the electorate to form government. In short, Harper claimed a “mandate” from the Canadian electorate to implement the five key priorities that were advanced by his party throughout the election campaign. However, in this context, the comments made by Prime Minister elect Harper following the 2006 election concerning the implementation of election campaign promises were hardly novel or earth-shattering. He was just one of a line of leaders from all Canadian parties, at both the federal and provincial levels, to claim a “mandate” to implement their campaign promises following their election victories.

However, despite these claims for a mandate, opposition parties and the media have often criticized governing parties for the perceived lack of promise fulfillment. In addition, the Canadian public has also come to doubt the ability of parties to fulfill their election campaign promises. A cynical electorate decried the lack of accountability with the major Canadian parties, proclaiming them all to be the same, self-interested and unconcerned with their commitments or the wishes of the public.¹ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, governing parties at the federal and provincial levels across the country sought reform of the economic and social welfare systems without significant public input and, in some cases, in direct contradiction of their election campaign promises. Of potentially greater significance to the state of Canadian democracy, politicians offered little in the way of justifications for their actions. In this context, the declaration by any politician of a mandate to pursue election campaign promises rang hollow as parties were perceived as having an inability to fulfill their election campaign promises, particularly in the context of the development and implementation of the twin processes of globalization and economic liberalization.

The perception that Canadian parties of all political stripes and at all levels of governance have failed to fulfill their election campaign promises raises questions as to whether parties actually possess an inherent capacity to both propose policies of their own choice and design and to fulfill those choices if elected or whether they are constrained by larger institutional and/or policy environmental factors that prevent the fulfillment of a mandate. This is an important question as it concerns the foundation of the Canadian system of representative democratic government and the theoretical concept

¹ See Clarke, Jenson, LeDuc and Pammett. Absent Mandate: Canadian Electoral Politics in an Era of Restructuring, 3rd ed. Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing Company, 1996, Chapter 8.

of an electoral mandate. If parties lack the capacity to fully explore policy debates and enact the results therefrom, then the electorate cannot have its policy wishes either represented or ultimately fulfilled by governing parties. This paper seeks to examine the second half of this policy capacity question: do parties have the ability to implement the policies that they have put before the electorate during the course of election campaigns. Put another way, are parties limited by particular factors in their ability to honour the commitments that they made to the electorate during the course of Canadian election campaigns. As such, the paper is concerned with the translation of campaign promises into government action by governing parties in Canada in each federal election from 1984 to 2004 in an attempt to further understand the role of parties in the Canadian policy-making process. It will focus on promise fulfillment and the factors that promote or inhibit the ability of parties to transform their policy commitments into government policy and honour the mandate given to them by the Canadian electorate.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section provides a brief theoretical review of the mandate concept and sets the stage for the empirical analysis in the following two sections. The second section examines the factors that were perceived by party members as limiting the ability of parties to enact the campaign promises contained in their election platforms. In this context, it considers the institutional, policy environmental and party behavioural factors that were understood by party members to have either inhibited or promoted the ability of parties to fulfill their campaign promises and is based on information obtained through interviews conducted with party elites in the autumn of 2007. The third section of the paper considers the policy implementation capacity of governing parties through a quantitative analysis of a sample of governing

party election campaign promises from each election and in relation to particular factors identified by party members or in the theoretical literature as influencing promise fulfillment. The final section of the paper draws together the observations from the preceding two sections and derives conclusions on the applicability of the mandate theory to Canadian parties and their ability to transform campaign promises into government action.

PART I – THE MANDATE THEORY

The basic premise of the mandate theory approach is that parties put forward plans for government to the electorate and that voters choose amongst the competing party policy platforms on the basis of which one will achieve the best mix of policies for each individual voter. In this regard, the mandate theory is viewed as being extremely important in that it is concerned with the primary foundations of representative democracy by exploring the link between the policy wishes of the electorate and the actions of government.² The theory holds that if governing parties are unable or unwilling to fulfill their mandates, then the democratic legitimacy of any ensuing government action becomes questionable. Governments that fail to fulfill their mandates lack legitimacy in their policy actions.

The application of the mandate theory is best considered as a two-part model consisting of both a voter mandate and a government mandate.³ The first branch of the model (voter mandate) is concerned with whether voters can and have provided a policy

² Budge, Ian and Hofferbert, Richard. "Mandates and Policy Outputs: U.S. Party Platforms and Federal Expenditures" in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 84(1), March 1990, at page 113.

³ McDonald, Michael D., Budge, Ian and Hofferbert, Richard I. "Party mandate theory and time series analysis: a theoretical and methodological response" in *Electoral Studies* vol. 18, 1999, 587-596 at page 589 set out four criterion for the establishment of the mandate. However, the first three criteria (party distinctiveness, voter information and voter motivation) are all concerned with the ability of voters to transmit their policy wishes to parties. The last of the criteria, party policy enactment, is concerned with the ability of parties to enact their stated policy choices.

message or “mandate” to the elected parties. This aspect of the mandate theory has been criticized as being inapplicable on the bases that the electorate cannot “convey a message” to parties due to the lack of policy distinctiveness between parties and a lack of policy emphasis during election campaigns.⁴ These criticisms, while important contributions to the overall applicability of the broader mandate theory and notable statements about the state of democracy in Canada, generally fail to consider the second aspect of the mandate model and overlook the fact that parties employ the notion of a having “received a mandate” from the electorate as a means of legitimizing their actions in government. Even in the absence of a direct correlation between party positions and voter intentions, politicians still treat elections as if they provide that link. To ignore this point overlooks the legitimization power that politicians construct from election results.⁵

In addition, the argument that parties do not have a mandate based on an inability of voters to transmit one to successful parties fails to provide an answer to the question of whether parties possess a relative degree of policy capacity. It simply does not consider whether parties are significant policy actors through their ability to fulfill their election campaign commitments or not. It also neglects the fact that voters generally accept that elections confer a mandate on governing parties, even in the absence of distinct policy differences or popular vote majorities. Even in situations where the outcome of an election has been highly contested, voters have acquiesced to government formation and

⁴ For instance, see Rose, Richard. Do Parties Make a Difference, 2nd ed. Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1984; Clarke, et al, Absent Mandate, 3rd ed.,; Goot, Murray. “Whose Mandate? Policy Promises, Strong Bicameralism and Polled Opinion” in *Australian Journal of Political Science* vol 34(3), 327-352, and Petry, Francois. “The Party Agenda Model: Election Programmes and Government Spending in Canada” in *Canadian Journal of Political Science* vol. 28(1), March 1995, 51-84.

⁵ The 1988 Canadian federal election is illustrative of this argument. Despite failing to win a majority of the popular vote and having lost upwards of fifty seats in an election that was widely considered to be a referendum on free trade with the U.S., the Progressive Conservatives proceeded to implement the free trade agreement on the basis that it won a majority of seats.

the policies subsequently enacted without breakdown in the democratic system.⁶ In addition, voters have been likely to complain of “broken promises” arising from governing parties, even from those parties that they did not support in the election campaign.

In contrast to the perceptions of the public, the academic literature has generally concluded that parties do enact their policy commitments, at least to some extent.⁷ While providing strong evidence that parties do possess a relative degree policy implementation capacity, the literature also confirms that governing parties are not able to fully implement all of their campaign promises. Simply put, while parties are significant policy actors in relation to the fulfillment of some campaign promises, there exists some circumstances that prohibit the complete translation of election platforms into government action. In this regard, the factors that have been identified as influencing party promise fulfillment include institutional and policy environmental sources.

From an institutional perspective, the ability of parties to fulfill their election campaign promises has been viewed as being dependent on both broad and narrow institutional factors. For example, broad institutional factors, such as government type (parliamentary versus presidential), unitary versus federal government structures and/or electoral system type, that concentrate power and limit veto points are more conducive to

⁶ For instance, in the 1979 Canadian election, the party with the highest level of popular support (Liberals) received fewer seats than the party that formed government (Progressive Conservatives). Despite this fact, there were no widespread protests concerning government formation or the right by the Progressive Conservatives to govern and pass laws accordingly.

⁷ For example, see Rallings, Colin. “The Influence of Election Programmes: Britain and Canada 1945-1979” in Budge, Ian, Robertson, David and Hearl, Derek, eds. Ideology, Strategy and Party Change: Spatial Analyses of Post-War Election Programmes in 19 Democracies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pages 11-13. In Canada, the average fulfillment rate of party promises was 71% while in Britain it was slightly lower, coming in at 63.7%. See also Royed, Terry J. “Testing the Mandate Model in Britain and the United States: Evidence from the Reagan and Thatcher Eras” in *British Journal of Political Science* vol. 26(1), Jan. 1996, 45-80, and Rose, Do Parties Make a Difference, 2nd ed, who finds a high rate of promise fulfillment, although he disputes the applicability of the mandate theory.

promise fulfillment than more diffuse institutional structures.⁸ More narrow or specific institutional factors that have been identified include the “strength of the mandate” given to a party as determined by the size of the majority won by the party and/or the majority or minority nature of the governing party.⁹

The policy environment perspective is addressed in a line of argument that is more directly associated with changes to the international economy, a lack of policy capacity on the part of political parties and the inapplicability of the mandate concept. The argument portends that parties are constrained in the choices that they can make and the policies that they can implement by the broader policy environment, and in particular, by reforms in the domestic and international economic systems that are associated with globalization and liberalization.¹⁰ In this regard, parties are perceived to be limited in the policies that they can implement in particular policy areas and by particular policy types.¹¹ This argument is contested by others who see parties and policy actors as significant players in the advancement of policy limiting policy structures and that any policy limitations are part of a broader political project. However, both lines of argument are open to contest in relation to the policy making capacity of parties in that both

⁸ Budge, Ian and Hofferbert, Richard. “Mandates and Policy Outputs: U.S. Party Platforms and Federal Expenditures” in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 84(1), March 1990; Hofferbert, Richard I. and Budge, Ian. “The Party Mandate and the Westminster Model: Election Programmes and Government Spending in Britain, 1948-85.” in *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 22, 151-182 and Royed, at page 46.

⁹ Mulgan, Richard. “The ‘Mandate’: A Response to Goot” in *Australian Journal of Political Science* vol. 35(2), 317-322 and Grossback, Lawrence J., Peterson, David A.M., and Stimson, James A. “Comparing Competing Theories on the Causes of Mandate Perceptions” in *American Journal of Political Science* vol. 49(2), April 2005, 406-19. Petry, while disputing the ability of parties to fulfill their campaign promises indicated that factors that limited promise fulfillment included both federalism and government status.

¹⁰ McBride, Stephen. “Quiet Constitutionalism in Canada: The International Political Economy of Domestic Institutional Change” in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol 36(2), June, 2003, 251-273, at 255-56. See also Clarkson, Stephen. Uncle Sam and Us: Globalization, Neoconservatism and the Canadian State. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

¹¹ Rallings, at page 13; Emy, Hugh. “The Mandate and Responsible Government” in *Australian Journal of Political Science* vol. 32, no. 1, pages 65-78 at page 69; and Royed, at page 47.

approaches used to measure this influence have tended to focus solely on the economic policy sphere and have not considered the policy capacity of parties in relation to other policy areas. Accordingly, even if the economic policy environmental constraint argument is applicable, it still leaves room for the mandate concept to apply in other policy areas or in relation to other policy types.

There is however two additional difficulties associated with both the institutional and policy environment arguments in identifying potential constraints on party policy capacity and the inapplicability of the mandate theory. First, both strands of the literature do not fully address or explore the factors that promote or inhibit the policy-making capacity of parties in a systematic and inter-related fashion. Instead, they tend to focus on institutional or policy environmental constraints in isolation without considering the multitude of factors that may influence the ability of parties to impact policy-making. Second, the existing literature treats the policy-making function of political parties as separate and distinct from the other roles that parties play. It does not explore or demonstrate the potential for inter-relationship and inter-connectedness that may exist between the multiple purposes that parties play and that particular functions, such as electioneering, may also have an impact on other functions, such as policy-making, or that particular behaviours by parties in some functions, drafting of campaign promises, may also influence their ability to undertake the functions in others, such as promise fulfillment. These criticisms suggest that a further examination of the policy capacity of parties needs to consider the influence of all three types of factors in order to fully understand the influence that parties have on policy-making in Canada.

PART II – PARTY MEMBER PERCEPTIONS

i. 1984 to 1993 - The Progressive Conservative Government under Mulroney and Campbell

During the early part of its first term in government, the Mulroney government went to great lengths to create the perception that it was a governing party that kept its election promises. The Progressive Conservative government published three different documents during its first three years in office detailing the policy changes that it had put in place since taking power. However, two factors, the continued inability of the government to address the negative fiscal situation and the unpopularity of Mulroney, led to the perception in the electorate by the beginning of 1993 that the Progressive Conservative government under Mulroney could not be trusted and was not likely to honour its election commitments. In this context, party members identified institutional and policy environmental factors as constraining the ability of the Progressive Conservative government to fulfill its election promises and environmental factors as promoting its ability to do so.

Impediments to Promise Fulfillment

In terms of the institutional constraints facing the Progressive Conservative government, party members perceived the primary limitation on its policy implementation capacity as its lack of experience in governing. In particular, whether it was due to a change in circumstances that were not anticipated prior to the election or the day-to-day requirements of governing, the party found that it could not fulfill some of its promises and that this inability was related to a lack of knowledge or understanding that came with governing.¹² Coinciding with the lack of experience was the second

¹² Interview with Harry Near.

institutional impediment of the party's interaction with the civil service, and in particular, that it was strongly resistant to the changes sought by the Progressive Conservatives.¹³

Overall, however, the factor that was perceived as having the strongest negative impact on the ability of the Mulroney government to fulfill its election campaign promises was the fiscal and economic policy environment it inherited from the previous Liberal government.¹⁴ This factor incorporated two elements. First, the negative fiscal situation required the government to reduce its spending in order to curtail the size of the federal budgetary deficit and thereby necessitated that the party to prioritize its spending commitments in some areas and forego others. Second, and perceived as more difficult than the actual fiscal situation, was the belief in both the civil service and the broader public that, after years of “virtually unrestrained government spending” by previous governments, deficit financing was acceptable and could continue without repercussion.¹⁵ As a result, attempts to restrain public spending were ridiculed by the media and the public was not initially prepared to accept fiscal restraint by the government.¹⁶ This intransigence in the policy environment also manifested itself in attempts by the Progressive Conservatives to enact social policy change. The government found it difficult to enact positive social policy change (ie. the expansion of existing or introduction of new social welfare benefits) due to inherent biases that existed in the social policy community against the party. In particular, there was a perception that a

¹³ Interviews with Harry Near and Geoff Norquay. For example, Norquay noted that the Mulroney government was met with immediate resistance from all the institutions of the state, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation which threatened to close the local television station in Mulroney's riding if the plans to limit the growth in its budget were carried forward. However, the civil service was noted to also have positive influences on the policies advanced by the Mulroney government and that it often “saved the party from itself”.

¹⁴ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

¹⁵ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

¹⁶ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

Progressive Conservative government could not be genuine in its desire to create positive change in the social policy sphere or establish a national and universal social policy.¹⁷

Promotion of Promise Fulfillment

In contrast to its experiences in the fiscal and social policy environments, the Progressive Conservatives found that it was able to pursue its chosen policy preferences in the foreign affairs policy sphere due to the influences of the broader and more supportive policy environment. In particular, the Progressive Conservative made significant progress in managing Canada's relationship with the United States by simply not insulting the U.S. government and due to the perceived popularity of U.S. President Reagan in Canada.¹⁸

ii. 1993 to 2004 - The Liberal Government under Chretien

The Liberal government that took power in 1993 under the leadership of Jean Chretien also quickly established a reputation as being rather non-committal towards the fulfillment of its election promises. For example, during the course of its first term, while the Liberal government honoured several of its election promises, it also violated the spirit, if not the letter, of some its key campaign commitments, including the failure to replace the G.S.T. with any meaningfully different form of tax and little, if any, changes to the North American Free Trade Agreement. In this regard, the Liberal government was initially concerned with the perception that it did not fulfill its election promises,

¹⁷ Interview with Geoff Norquay. For example, Norquay noted that in 1987 there was huge pressure on the government to create a national child care program and that the Mulroney government put together a \$5.4 billion dollar policy on the table in order to meet these demands. The government's plan was immediately denounced by interest groups and social policy lobbyists who conspired with the Senate to delay the passage of the program and that it died when the session ended by the election call. After the 1988 election, but this did not change the fact that the Mulroney government would have established a national child care program, but for the instinctive bias in the policy community with the idea that a Conservative government could not create a positive national social program.

¹⁸ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

publishing a comprehensive review of the commitments in the 1993 platform and indicating that it had fulfilled upwards of seventy-five percent of the promises contained therein.¹⁹ However, given the success that the Liberal government achieved in balancing the budget and a strengthening economy, it remained a relatively popular government, as evidenced by its three terms in office. In terms of the ability of the party to fulfill its election promises, members of the party identified both institutional and environmental constraints on promise realization and institutional, environmental and behavioural conditions as factors that increased the ability of the party to execute on its campaign commitments.

Impediments to Promise Fulfillment

In terms of the institutional factors that limited the ability of the party to fulfill the election commitments, the Liberals also encountered difficulties with a lack of experience in government during its first term in relation to the receipt of advice from the civil service that was contrary to their election promises. In particular, the party had developed and campaigned on policies that they were subsequently advised in government as being unworkable or inappropriate given the other pressures facing the government.²⁰ Coinciding with the constraint imposed by the unanticipated and contrary advice from the civil service was the day-to-day operations of governing that tended to distract attention and priorities away from election commitments.²¹ The experience in governing also demonstrated to the party that some of its policies may have been poorly

¹⁹ Liberal Party of Canada. "A Record of Achievement: A Report on the Liberal Government's 36 Months in Office" Liberal Party of Canada: Ottawa, 1996.

²⁰ Interview with Edward Goldenberg. For example, the civil service was strongly opposed to the elimination of the G.S.T. commitment and strongly influenced the eventual fulfillment of the promise of the creation of an independent ethics counselor.

²¹ Interview with Chaviva Hosek.

conceived, inappropriate or not fully thought out when in opposition or in preparation for the election campaign and should not be fulfilled.²² Accordingly, the lack of experience in governing was perceived as having had a multi-faceted impact on the ability of the Liberals to translate their election campaign commitments into concrete government action.

A second institutional factor that was perceived as influencing the policy implementation capacity of the party was the federal nature of the Canadian system of government. In particular, the Liberals sought to implement certain social policy commitments that were contained in its platforms, but were unable to obtain the assistance or cooperation of provincial governments.²³ As a result, the party learned after the difficulties in its initial term in government to phrase promises as being dependent upon provincial government support and participation.

The broader policy environment was perceived as creating limitations on the ability of the party to fulfill its commitments from four perspectives. First, as with the Mulroney Progressive Conservative government, the fiscal and economic policy environments inherited by the Liberal government were perceived as presenting limits on the ability of the party to fulfill its election commitments. In particular, the size of the deficit and the amount of money being directed towards interest payments on the debt imposed particular policy and spending choices on the government and consequently

²² Interview with Chaviva Hosek.

²³ Interviews with Chaviva Hosek, Peter Donolo and Edward Goldenberg. For example, the Red Book included a promise that the party would create 50,000 new daycare spaces if economic growth exceeded 3%. However, as this was an area of provincial jurisdiction, the federal government required cooperation with the provincial governments to fulfill this commitment and the provinces were simply not interested in pursuing the policy. A similar result occurred following the 1997 election and the Liberals commitment to create a new national “pharmacare” program.

interfered with the ability to fulfill election commitments.²⁴ The fiscal and economic policy environments were perceived as dictating the need to reduce the deficit and that promises contained in the election platform subsequently became too expensive to carry out in government.²⁵

Second, the policy environment was also affected by the intensity of competition in the altered party system of five major contending parties and between parties and the media for campaign coverage and exposure. In particular, the increased competition for media attention necessitated the “sound-biting” of policies, with the result that the public and/or media did not necessarily comprehend the full or accurate “text” of a promise, but rather that promises tended to be reduced to simplified and potentially inaccurate versions. For example, during the course of the 1993 campaign, the Liberal election platform committed the party to both studying and enacting a replacement tax for the G.S.T., however, the media, and thereby the electorate, took it as though the party was promising to eliminate the G.S.T. entirely and without recourse to another tax to make up for the lost revenue.²⁶

The third aspect of the policy environment that was perceived as playing an influence was the possibility of unanticipated events interfering with a government’s plans. For example, the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 had an immediate and dramatic impact on the world, both politically and economically, and necessitated policy responses from the Liberal government that were not part of its

²⁴ Interviews with Peter Donolo and Edward Goldenberg. For example, the promise to replace the GST became untenable once the “true” size of the government’s deficit became known.

²⁵ Interview with Chaviva Hosek.

²⁶ Interview with Chaviva Hosek.

consideration during the 2000 campaign or in the days immediately preceding the event.²⁷

The fourth and last policy environmental factor that was perceived as limiting promise fulfillment was the existing legacy of a policy option that had been previously ensconced in government policy.²⁸ For example, despite “sincere” intentions by the Liberals in the 1993 campaign to renegotiate the specifics of the trading relationship with the United States, the subsequently unsuccessful Liberal government could not abrogate the U.S. and North American free trade agreements without causing significant repercussions to the economy and the country’s relationship with the United States. While the government continued to have the technical choice to pursue a policy regardless of the existing policy history, the reality was that, in some cases, it would have been too difficult or caused too much damage to try to “unscramble the egg”.²⁹

Promotion of Promise Fulfillment

The factors that were perceived as positively impacting on the ability of the Liberals to fulfill their commitments included institutional, environmental and behavioural considerations. In terms of the institutional effects, governing parties had a greater understanding of whether they could achieve their commitments in relation to the resources available and the priorities of government and what was necessary to ensure that its commitments were feasible.³⁰ The experience in government also served to discipline the party to understand that it can only achieve so many accomplishments during its term in office. At some point, governing parties had to focus on building on

²⁷ Interviews with Peter Donolo and Edward Goldenberg.

²⁸ Interview with Peter Donolo.

²⁹ Interview with Peter Donolo.

³⁰ Interview with Edward Goldenberg.

their policy successes and/or existing foundations, thereby leading to an incremental policy process.³¹ As a result of these factors, incumbency was considered a positive factor both in understanding the constraints imposed on governing parties as well as regulating the type of commitments that were made during the course of election campaigns.

In terms of the policy environment, the economic and fiscal situation served to be a double-edged sword in terms of impacting the policy implementation capacity of the party. In particular, given that the fiscal situation was much more grave than anticipated before taking office, the Liberals were forced to take immediate action in order to remedy the situation. However, the party “over delivered” on its ability to reduce the deficit, leading to a surplus budget position much more quickly than anticipated and providing the government with a substantial ability to “reinvest” in the state and pursue more activist policies during subsequent campaigns.³²

Party behaviour also played a role in increasing the perception of the likelihood that promises could be fulfilled. Part of the strategic choices that were made by the party in advance of the 1993 campaign in an attempt to counter electoral cynicism dealt with the manner or nature of the election promises that were made by the party. Party officials demonstrated an understanding that the ability to fulfill election commitments depended to a large extent on the “achievable” nature of the promise itself.³³ For example, Chretien refused to include a blanket commitment to eliminate the deficit in the 1993 campaign because the public and the media would view it as unachievable, particularly in light of the Mulroney and Campbell governments’ failures to do so over the course of their nine-

³¹ Interview with Edward Goldenberg.

³² Interviews with Peter Donolo and Edward Goldenberg.

³³ Interview with Edward Goldenberg.

year reign. In contrast, the promise to reduce the deficit to three percent of G.D.P. over the course of its first term in office was viewed as being much more realistic and achievable by the party.³⁴ In subsequent campaigns the party learned that it had to phrase its promises carefully and in relation to possible constraints on fulfillment. For example, the commitments that required provincial cooperation or participation were subsequently repackaged to either include language in the promise that it was subject to provincial approval or by avoiding the provinces altogether by pursuing unilateral social policy action through the taxation system.³⁵ These changes were explicit attempts by the party to address the perceptions that the party could not fulfill its commitments.

The party also learned that in some policy areas it was necessary to be less precise in the election platform on the specifics of implementation unless those details had been fully determined in advance. Accordingly, while the party employed more specific and achievable commitments, the specific nature of these promises tended to refer to the goals to be achieved while the methods of implementation were left more vague and dependent upon advice from the civil service.³⁶ The result of these two developments has been that platforms are now more fully thought out and parties are more cautious in terms of the promises that they make. This has also tended to lead to “nickel and dime” promises, ones that are packaged to the electorate as key commitments of the party that are easy and quick to implement once elected, with a corresponding reduction in larger political projects or broader based perspectives on how parties will deal with unforeseen events or issues.³⁷

³⁴ Interview with Peter Donolo.

³⁵ Interviews with Chaviva Hosek and Edward Goldenberg.

³⁶ Interview with Edward Goldenberg.

³⁷ Interview with Peter Donolo.

The last party behavioural factor that was identified as influencing the probability of promise implementation was the attitude of senior party officials, and the leader/Prime Minister in particular. In this regard, Chretien was fairly strongly committed to fulfilling the promises contained in the election platforms wherever possible and gave specific responsibility to senior personal in the Prime Minister's Office to pursue Cabinet Ministers with respect to their plans to fulfill the commitments.³⁸

iii. 2004 to 2006 - The Liberal Government under Martin

The Martin Liberal government, while obviously being closely linked to the Chretien government, attempted to demonstrate that it was significantly different in terms of action and ambition. The first section of the Liberal's 2004 election platform was dedicated to detailing of the steps that the "new" government had taken following the change in leadership and in relation to the commitments Martin had advocated during the preceding leadership campaign. However, the Martin government developed a reputation of being unfocussed and lacking in execution of its commitments. In terms of the factors that were perceived as impeding the ability of the party to fulfill its election commitments, both institutional and party behavioural factors were identified as key contributors. In contrast, environmental and behavioural factors were viewed as promoting its policy implementation capacity.

Impediments to Promise Fulfillment

The primary limitation facing the Martin government following the 2004 election campaign was the institutional factor of government status. The minority government situation was viewed as severely constraining the capacity of the Liberals to fully pursue

³⁸ Interview with Chaviva Hosek.

and implement the agenda set out in the 2004 election platform.³⁹ A second institutional factor identified as constraining the party resulted from reforms by the Martin government to the operating procedures of the House of Commons in order to enhance the ability of Members of Parliament to participate in government policy decisions. As a result, there was a lessening of the level of party discipline in the House, which had the corresponding effect on the control that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet had over its own members and thereby reduced the ability of the government to pursue its election commitments.⁴⁰

The party was also a victim of its own success in terms of the manner in which it approached the framing of its election commitments and the perceptions of its ability to fulfill its election commitments. Having established the new electoral environment during the course of the 1990s in relation to the need to present more focused election promises to the electorate, the Martin Liberals campaigned on abstract policy goals or goals that were significant in scope and were too large or vague to be seen by the electorate or the media as having been accomplished.⁴¹ Accordingly, while the Martin Liberals were successful to some degree in fulfilling their commitments, the media or the public did not perceive the government as having accomplished many of its goals.

Promotion of Promise Fulfillment

The policy environmental factors that promoted the ability of the Martin Liberals to fulfill its commitments included the surplus budgetary position of the government, which enabled the party to financially commit to high-cost policy options.⁴² The

³⁹ Interview with Tim Murphy.

⁴⁰ Interview with Tim Murphy.

⁴¹ Interview with Tim Murphy.

⁴² Interview with Tim Murphy.

financial position also had a coincidental impact on the institutional factor of incumbency in that the party had a budget surplus and also an accurate reflection of the financial pressures facing the government as it came into office. In contrast to the Mulroney and Chretien governments that faced more difficult financial circumstances than they had anticipated upon coming to power, the positive budget position did not pose any negative surprises to the Martin Liberals.⁴³ Accordingly, the party was able to pursue the policies in its manifesto with full knowledge of the financial circumstances of the government and was not forced to forego any of its commitments.

The nature of election commitments was also identified as having a significant influence on the ability of a government to fulfill its commitments. In particular, the keeping of promises was more easily accomplished when there were a small number of easily fulfilled commitments that dealt with problems at the policy margins, rather than comprehensive and complex approaches to governance.⁴⁴ Party leadership was also identified as a key element in ensuring that election promises were recognized as important and that effort was dedicated to fulfilling those commitments. In this regard, Prime Minister Martin was a key facilitator through the creation of environments that made promise fulfillment more achievable and by committing the Prime Minister's Office and administration to the keeping of election commitments.⁴⁵

⁴³ Interview with Tim Murphy.

⁴⁴ Interview with Tim Murphy.

⁴⁵ Interview with Tim Murphy. For example, Martin forced the Treasury Board to change the bias in its economic forecasts, from optimistic to pessimistic, when he was Minister of Finance, thereby making it more likely that commitments based on this perception could be achieved. This approach was carried through to Martin's reign as Prime Minister, and implemented across all of the Cabinet departments. In addition, the PMO under Martin was also charged with pursuing individual departments to ensure that their actions were consistent with or advanced the commitments that were contained in the Liberal election platforms.

iv. 2006 to present - The Conservative Government under Harper

Upon assuming office in February 2006, the Harper Conservative government moved quickly to try to fulfill the five main priorities it enunciated during the course of the election campaign, and thereby generated a reputation as a competent and responsive government that fulfilled its election promises in the short term. In this regard, however, the Harper government perceived itself as constrained in its ability to fulfill those commitments by institutional and environmental factors. At the same time, environmental and behavioural factors were also viewed as promoting the ability of the party to keep its election promises.

Impediments to Promise Fulfillment

As with the Martin Liberal government, the primary limitation facing the Harper Conservative government was the institutional constraint of the party's government status. The minority government situation was perceived as influencing the ability of the Conservatives to fulfill its promises in two different and self-reinforcing ways. First, the government lacked the requisite support in the House of Commons to pursue the full extent of the agenda detailed in its election campaign platform, including commitments that were agreed upon by all of the parties during the course of the election. The lack of a natural coalition partner that it could rely upon on a consistent basis meant that the Conservatives had difficulty in attempting to fulfill the more controversial of its commitments.⁴⁶ Second, the minority government situation also contributed to a dynamic in the House of Commons in which the opposition parties sought to deny progress to the government on its commitments, not due to disagreement with the content

⁴⁶ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

of the policies, but rather solely as a partisan attempt to deny a political advantage to the government.⁴⁷

The broader policy environment has also served to constrain the policy implementation capacity of the Conservative government. In particular, a majority of Canadians held relatively deeply ingrained opinions on certain subjects, as determined by the party's public opinion polling data, which ran contrary to the government's position. As such, the Conservatives concluded that they could not pursue those issues without running the risk of losing significant public support. For example, the preference of the Conservative government was to align itself more closely to the United States on its foreign policy positions. However, given the level of animosity demonstrated by the Canadian public toward the policies of U.S. President Bush, the government had to moderate its foreign policy positions to a more centrist and publicly popular position.⁴⁸

Promotion of Promise Fulfillment

In terms of factors that promoted the policy implementation capacity of the Conservatives, there were three identified factors, one environmental and two behavioural. The policy environment was viewed as presenting both limits, as discussed above, and opportunities for the party to fulfill its election commitments. In this regard, the positive fiscal and economic environment meant that the party could focus on issues that were part of its core belief structure, such as tax cuts, and structure the debate around the both the need and affordability of these proposals in light of the large budgetary surplus.⁴⁹ In addition, there were highly emotionally charged issues in the policy

⁴⁷ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

⁴⁸ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

⁴⁹ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

environment, such as crime and justice issues, that played to the policy strengths of the party and enabled the party to more aggressively pursue its election commitments.⁵⁰

The first behavioural factor that was perceived as increasing the fulfillment capacity of the Conservative party was the prioritization of its election commitments and the specific focus on five key commitments. Having campaigned in the final weeks of the campaign specifically on these five issues, the Conservative government could claim a “mandate” from the electorate to enact those commitments and thereby increase the likelihood of being able to do so.⁵¹ The second behavioural characteristic was the leadership provided by the Prime Minister. In particular, the desire of Prime Minister Harper to demonstrate to the Canadian public that the Conservatives could operate a scandal free, competent and capable government necessitated, as part of this strategy, that the party fulfill its election campaign commitments and the Prime Minister was instrumental in ensuring that Cabinet Ministers understood this imperative.⁵²

v. Conclusions

Party officials from the major governing parties in Canada identified institutional, policy environmental and party behavioural factors as influencing the policy implementation capacity of parties from both positive and negative perspectives. In terms of the features that impede promise fulfillment, party officials indicated that there were at least eight obstacles to promise fulfillment. The three institutional constraints were the parties’ lack of experience in governing, the minority government situation facing the Martin Liberals and the Harper Conservatives and the broader Canadian federal system. There were four policy environmental impediments including the

⁵⁰ Interview with Geoff Norquay.

⁵¹ Election night speech of Stephen Harper.

⁵² Interview with Geoff Norquay.

presence of budget deficits, negative public opinion of proposed policy choices, policy legacies of existing government policies and unanticipated events, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. There was also one party behavioural factor identified, that being the vague and broad nature of some of the election promises advanced by the Martin Liberals in 2004. Party officials also identified six factors that promoted promise fulfillment by governing parties. From an institutional perspective, the primary factor leading to increased policy implementation capacity was incumbency. The two policy environment factors were the presence of a budget surplus and broader public opinion that was supportive of the proposed policy changes. Lastly, Canadian party officials identified three party behavioural factors that assisted promise fulfillment, with those being specific and achievable election promises, party leadership that was focused on promise fulfillment, and the prioritization of key promises.

PART III - STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

(a) General Policy Capacity

The purpose of the quantitative analysis in relation to the policy implementation capacity of parties is to test some of these perceptions in relation to government action in the fulfillment of election campaign commitments. The initial finding of the quantitative assessment is that governing parties in Canada over the period of 1984 to 2007 have fulfilled or partially fulfilled their election commitments at a significant level, thereby confirming that governing parties in Canada possess a high degree of general policy implementation capacity.⁵³ As Table 1 reveals, governing parties in Canada have either fulfilled or partially fulfilled their election promises at a rate of just over seventy-five

⁵³ The quantitative analysis is premised on a sample of twelve election commitments from each election divided into one of three categories: fulfilled, partially fulfilled or not fulfilled. Fulfilled commitments are

	Not Fulfilled	Partially Fulfilled	Fulfilled	Total
P.C. (1984)	5	4	14	23
Liberal (1993)	10	2	23	35
Liberal (2004)	1	2	9	12
Conservative (2006)	4	1	7	12
Total	20	9	53	82
Percentage	24.4	11.0	64.6	

Table 1 - Promise Fulfillment by Major Governing Party in Canada

percent.⁵⁴ In terms of the Canadian major party governments, the one-term minority Martin Liberal government (91.2%) achieved the highest level of partial or complete promise fulfillment, followed by the Mulroney Progressive Conservatives (78.2%), the Chretien Liberals (71.4%) and the Harper Conservatives (66.7%). In total, the four different governments since 1984 have demonstrated a significant ability to translate election promises into government policies or programs and thereby justify the conclusion that major parties in Canada possess a significant degree of policy implementation capacity and thereby substantiate the primary premise of the government mandate approach. However, the data, as in previous studies, also demonstrates that each of the governing parties under consideration was not to fully enact all of their proposed agendas, thereby giving cause to also examine the potential factors that have either impeded upon or contributed to the policy implementation capacity of parties in Canada.

those promises where the governing party achieved its stated policy goal or policy action. Promises that were considered “Not Fulfilled” were those where the party did not achieve its stated policy goal or did not undertake the stated action. Any promises that did not fall within these two absolute categories were coded as “Partially Fulfilled”. The overall sample was reduced by two commitments where it was determined, after selection of the commitments, that the “fulfillment” of those two specific commitments could not be ascertained.

⁵⁴ This value roughly corresponds with the level of promise fulfillment found by Rallings in relation to the Canadian government over the period of 1945 to 1979.

(b) Restrictions on Policy Capacity

The statistical analyses considered eleven variables arising out of the three broad factors identified by party officials or the theoretical literature as having an impact on the policy capacity of parties in Canada. The four institutional factors examined consisted of government status (majority versus minority), strength of opposition parties, incumbency at time of the election, and length of term in government.⁵⁵ The policy environmental variables examined were policy area (economic, social welfare, and social cultural), policy type (first, second, third order policy levels), government budget status (deficit versus surplus) and economic growth.⁵⁶ The three party behavioural variables examined were election platform complexity, election platform specificity and party membership input into the platform drafting process.⁵⁷

The statistical analyses of the institutional variables in relation to the ability of the governing parties in Canada to fulfill their election campaign commitments demonstrate that incumbency was the only institutional variable that approached a reliable degree of statistical significance.⁵⁸ Table 2 demonstrates that incumbent governing parties in Canada fulfill or partially fulfill their election commitments at a significantly higher rate

⁵⁵ The government status and incumbency variables were tested on a cross-tabular analysis while the strength of opposition parties and length of term in government variables were tested by way of a bivariate regression analysis.

⁵⁶ The policy area, policy type and government budget status variables were all tested using the cross-tabular method while the economic growth variable was tested using a bivariate regression analysis.

⁵⁷ The party membership variable was tested using a cross-tabular analysis while the complexity and specificity variables were tested using a bivariate regression analysis. The party membership variable was also coded on the basis of a four level typology of party member input into the policy drafting process and was based on information provided by party officials from interviews conducted in the autumn of 2007. The processes employed by parties were defined as drafting (party membership drafted platform), approval (party membership required to formally approve platform), consultative (party membership consulted in drafting platform) and elite (no or minimal input into drafting of platform). Based on the information provided, all of the Canadian governing parties fell into either the consultative or elite approaches.

⁵⁸ The Pearson Chi-Square test score for the incumbency variable measured at .110, falling just shy of the 90% confidence level of statistical significance.

	First Term	Percent	Incumbent	Percent	Total
Not Fulfilled	12	33.3%	7	15.2%	19
Partially	5	13.9%	5	10.9%	10
Fulfilled	19	52.8%	34	73.9%	53
Total	36	100%	46	100%	82

Table 2 Promise Fulfillment by Incumbency Status in Canada

(84.8%) than first-term governing parties (66.7%). The other three institutional variables did not present as statistically significant in terms of a correlation with party promise fulfillment.

In terms of the policy environment, and despite suggestions by party officials and the theoretical literature to the contrary, the statistical analyses did not demonstrate any reliable level of statistical significance for each of the policy area, policy type and economic growth variables in relation to the policy fulfillment capacity of governing parties in Canada. The last variable, budgetary status of the government in terms of the presence of a budgetary deficit or surplus, also did not approach a reliable degree of statistical significance in relation to overall promise fulfillment in the Canadian context.⁵⁹

The application of the statistical analyses to the party behavioural factors of Canadian parties demonstrated that there was a statistically significant and negative relationship between platform complexity and the fulfillment of promise by governing

⁵⁹ Given the likelihood that promises in certain policy areas, such as social cultural policies, may have no relation to promise fulfillment based on budgetary considerations, the budgetary surplus variable was also considered in relation to promise fulfillment and policy area. While the revised crosstabular analysis did not demonstrate any reliable degree of statistical significance, the size of the sample limited the applicability of the analysis. However, when considered in a broader comparative study during the same time frame involving New Zealand, the Chi-square test for promise fulfillment and policy area in relation to budget surpluses was .058, falling just short of the 95% confidence level, meaning that there was a statistically significant relationship between the ability of parties to fulfill promises during periods of budgetary surplus when policy area was also taken into account. Not surprisingly, governing parties in New Zealand and Canada fulfilled promises in the economic and social welfare policy areas during periods of budgetary surplus at a rate of 77.5 percent and 90.6 percent respectively. In contrast, the same analysis during periods of budgetary deficit provided results that were not statistically significant.

parties in Canada at a ninety-five percent confidence level.⁶⁰ This finding supports the conclusion that the greater the number of election commitments contained in a party's election platform, and therefore the more complex the platform, the greater the difficulty the party has in fulfilling its promises.

The statistical analysis also revealed that the party input variable approached statistical significance at the ninety percent confidence level.⁶¹ Table 3 confirms that parties that employed less participatory platform drafting processes (elite) had a higher

	Consultative	Percent	Elite	Percent	Total
Not Fulfilled	12	34.3%	7	14.9%	19
Partially	3	8.6%	7	14.9%	10
Fulfilled	20	57.1%	33	70.2%	53
Total	35	100%	47	100%	82

Table 3 - Promise Fulfillment by Party Input in Canada

degree of partial or complete promise fulfillment (85.1%) than those elections in which the process (consultative) involved a greater level of input from party members (65.7%).

The quantitative analysis demonstrated that parties fulfilled election campaign commitments at a fairly significant level. In addition, it also identified the incumbency, platform complexity and party membership input variables, and to a lesser extent the budgetary surplus variable, as being close to or being indicative of statistically significant relationship with the ability of governing parties to fulfill the promises they presented to the electorate during the course of Canadian election campaigns.

⁶⁰ The bi-variate regression analysis generated a significance correlation figure of .024.

⁶¹ The Pearson Chi-Square test score was .108.

PART IV – CONCLUSION

Newly elected and re-elected parties claim mandates arising out of the election results to justify and legitimize their subsequent policy action in government. The subsequent ability of parties to fulfill those mandates is of significant concern in understanding the policy role of parties and the proper functioning of a democratic government. In this regard, political parties in Canada appear to possess a high degree of policy implementation capacity, fulfilling roughly three out of every four of their election commitments. While this fact indicates a relatively robust efficiency in terms of converting commitments into action and stands for substantial support of the government mandate theory, at the same time, it also demonstrates that parties appear to have their policy implementation capacity restricted to some extent, given their inability to fulfill all of their election promises. In this regard, both the existing theoretical literature and party officials identified a number of factors that influence promise fulfillment, including institutional, policy environment and party behavioural dynamics. To an extent, some of these observations were confirmed by the quantitative analyses.

In terms of the institutional influences on the policy implementation capacity of parties in Canada, party officials identified lack of experience in government as playing a key role in the inability of parties to fulfill their commitments. A corresponding effect was statistically demonstrated in Canada where government incumbency was positively related to promise fulfillment. As such, the claims for mandates are more likely to be fulfilled by parties with experience in government rather than newly elected governing parties. Minority government status was also recognized as negatively influencing promise fulfillment, although this was not demonstrated from a statistical perspective.

The case studies of the Martin Liberal and Harper Conservative minority governments provide conflicting evidence, one government achieving the highest level of promise fulfillment in the sample and the other achieving the lowest. The strength of opposition parties and length of term in government did not demonstrate a significant relationship to promise fulfillment, although party officials or the theoretical literature identified them as important factors. Accordingly, the primary influence on promise fulfillment, from an institutional perspective is the experience that the party in question has had with the day-to-day operations of governing and the immediate concerns facing the government and the benefit of the advice from the civil service in the drafting of its campaign platform.

Party officials identified the principal limitation arising out of the policy environment as the government's budgetary status. In particular, they associated an inability to fulfill election promises with the presence of budgetary deficits. An opposite effect was also noted to occur during periods of budget surplus. While overall budgetary status did not demonstrate a correlation with promise fulfillment at the general level, there is some limited evidence that the presence of budget surpluses may have a positive impact on promise fulfillment in the economic and social welfare policy areas. Other limitations identified in the policy environment were concerned with policy area, policy type and economic growth, none of which tested positively for a correlation with promise fulfillment, as well as general public opinion, both positive and negative, unanticipated events and existing policy legacies.

The actions taken by parties to address the cynicism of the electorate and attempt to increase the efficiency of their policy processes were also seen as impacting on the policy implementation capacity of parties in Canada. In particular, the shift to more

complex election platforms to demonstrate a readiness to govern was inversely related to promise fulfillment, meaning that parties stood less of a chance of keeping their commitments if they employed high numbers of them. In addition, changes by parties in the manner in which they drafted their election platforms, shifting away from broad participatory processes to more elite and professionally driven policy development approaches, was also seen as improving the promise fulfilling capacity of parties due to the fact that governing parties possessed and campaigned upon more achievable commitments. The change in the policy development processes of parties was positively correlated to promise fulfillment for the more elite processes, thereby raising a paradox of parties employing less democratic means of determining their election promises to achieve a more democratic outcome in fulfilling their election promises.

Governing parties are likely to continue to make election campaign promises, claim a mandate to fulfill those commitments and legitimize their policy actions on the basis of the election results. In order to do so, parties must have the ability to translate its election commitments into government policy. In other words, governing parties must possess a policy implementation capacity in order to fulfill their democratically ideal role of translating election promises into government action. To a large extent, Canadian parties do possess and fulfill this capacity, although they have been somewhat constrained by institutional, environmental and behavioural factors. However, their policy implementation capacity, and thereby their ability to fulfill the mandate, can also be enhanced by differing aspects of these categories, including experience in government, professionally developed and prioritized election campaign promises and government budgetary surpluses.