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do elections (still) matter?

mandates, institutions, and policy in western europe

Emiliano **GROSSMAN**

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021937201

ISBN 978-0-19-284721-8

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780192847218.001.0001

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Foreword

This book was written in large parts during the 'first lockdown' that started in France and Germany in March 2020. While the lockdown was hard on everyone, this project kept us afloat amidst home schooling, the discovery of online teaching, and other difficulties. And while we were not able to meet in person, as we had intended to do, we ultimately found a way to work together very closely despite the distance between Paris and Stuttgart.

This project has benefited from the support of a host of people and institutions and is the result of long years of research and cooperation. It started with the French Agendas Project that was called into life in the mid-2000s, during the first of Frank Baumgartner's many stays at Sciences Po. The first coding operations were undertaken by Sylvain Brouard and Emiliano Grossman. The team soon expanded to include Isabelle Guinaudeau, Simon Persico, Caterina Froio, Tinette Schnatterer, Julien Navarro, and very many other RAs and coders. This was generously supported by a grant of the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (grant no. ANR-2008-Gouv-055). It is important to mention the very friendly working environment at the Centre d'études européennes and the highly efficient and permanent support of Linda Amrani and CEE's administrative staff.

The French group strongly benefited from the emergence of the *Comparative Agendas Project* (CAP) and its yearly conferences that have taken place since 2008. Many of the ideas put forth in this book have been presented at those conferences and related workshops and have been improved by the encouraging feedback obtained there.

The most obvious input from other national projects is of course the data. Most of the datasets used in this book are freely available on the CAP website (www.comparativeagendas.info) and have been used for numerous publications on specific countries or in comparative studies. Some of the data, however, is not yet publicly available as the national teams have only just started to exploit it. We are particularly grateful to Christian Breunig for providing us early access to the German legislative data and to Enrico Borghetto and Marcello Carammia for access to the Italian data. We also relied on the great work of the Danish and British teams.

During the writing process, we have also been able to count on the intellectual support and feedback of many colleagues. Our greatest debt is, no doubt, towards Christopher Green-Pedersen. His work is a central reference and inspiration throughout this book. Most importantly, however, Christopher agreed to read and provide feedback on early versions of the first six chapters. His advice and guidance were crucial in the final phase of the book. We are grateful as well to Benjamin Guinaudeau for regular and fruitful exchange on multiple aspects of the project. We are also in debt with Henrik Seeberg. His comments and suggestions helped improve the manuscript substantially. We would also like to thank Shane Martin and Richard Whitaker who kindly shared their expertise of British lawmaking with us.

Thanks to a fellowship of the Humboldt foundation, Isabelle Guinaudeau benefited from ideal working conditions at the University of Stuttgart. Parts of the manuscripts were presented there, as well as at the Centre Emile Durkheim at Sciences Po Bordeaux and the Centre d'études européennes et de politique comparée (CEE) at Sciences Po in Paris over the past few months. We are particularly grateful to André Bächtiger, Camille Bedock, Patrick Bernhagen, Olivier Costa, Elisa Deiss-Helbig, Anja Durovic, Ahmed El Haddad, Florence Ecormier-Nocca, Florence Faucher, Colin Hay, Johannes Lindvall, Olivier Rozenberg, Tinette Schnatterer, Vincent Tiberj, and Angelika Vetter for feedback and comments.

Finally, thanks to Dominic Byatt for being such a supportive and efficient editor and to Ildi Clark for swift and precise proofreading.

Emiliano Grossman & Isabelle Guinaudeau
Paris and Stuttgart, March 2021.

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Introduction: towards a new approach of the elections-to-policy nexus

The critique of liberal democracy has tended to focus on the same issues since the nineteenth century. Liberal democracy is denounced as an elitist project that deprives the vast majority of the people of any meaningful form of participation. Elites, once elected, will primarily respond to economic interests or serve themselves, rather than represent voters. They become increasingly disconnected from the rest of society and ordinary citizens' access to the sphere of political elites will become increasingly difficult over time. In the context of globalization, elites are, moreover, less and less connected to their countries of origin. The electoral supply is growing more and more similar, thereby limiting effective choice for voters. Political elites themselves, as well as the media, and scholars have voiced increasing concern about the shrinking leeway for elected governments to actively shape policies in times of growing international interdependence, regional integration, budget pressures, and political polarization (Boix, 2000; Mair, 2008). Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz has expressed concern about the fact that Europe had 'drawn up rules that people in the member States through elections no longer can change' and that voters 'could not anymore influence economic policy by casting their vote'.[1] Against this background, electoral promises are essentially cheap talk designed above all to win the election and then to be quickly forgotten. In most democracies, opinion polls reveal a climate of generalized and growing scepticism towards parties and their promises. Party programmes are often presented as a mere instrument of communication. In France, for example, one recent survey revealed that 'broken electoral promises' are among the reasons that are most often cited by interviewees for a loss of confidence in the executive.[2]

A non-trivial number of citizens and political actors in virtually all contemporary democracies shares parts or all of this non-exhaustive list of critiques. Many political challengers, especially on the far right, have built their political agenda and their electoral clientele around these arguments. Increasingly, even mainstream parties have taken up many of these points and there is a growing

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[1] http://en.protothema.gr/nobel-laureate-j-stiglitz-points-to-eu-deficit-in-democracy/

[2] This perception is also propagated by some analysts and commentators of political life. In the French context, examples include Cayrol (2012) and Fuligni (2017). For an account of the spread of stereotypical pledge-breaking politicians across several countries, see Naurin (2011).

Do Elections (Still) Matter?. Emiliano Grossman and Isabelle Guinaudeau, Oxford University Press.
© Emiliano Grossman and Isabelle Guinaudeau (2021). DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780192847218.002.0001

number of attempts to reform political systems to respond to their perceived or actual shortcomings. Many of the typical reforms of the past years, such as a reduction in the number of parliamentarians, the introduction of popular referenda, or instances of deliberative democracy are motivated by doubts about the functioning of representative democracy.

The present book investigates some of those claims with a focus on the policy relevance of elections. We want to examine whether liberal democracies have really become the deceptive machines that their opponents claim they are. These claims deserve an empirical investigation. *How relevant are democratic elections to public policy?* This topical question is mostly addressed through the lens of what has been called promissory representation, or mandate responsiveness. Yet, empirical work to date has frequently failed to take into account the relationship between party issue competition, on the one hand, and mandate responsiveness, on the other. The very notion of mandate responsiveness has often been defined only partially and requires further elaboration. Our central argument, based on a more comprehensive approach to mandates, is that there is empirical evidence for a significant connection between electoral supply and public policy. We will shed new light on the institutional determinants of mandate representation and show that the situation in most cases has not deteriorated as much as critics like to believe.

Before presenting an outline of the book, we will briefly introduce the central debates, challenges and puzzles that will be addressed in the rest of this volume.

1 From elections to policy

Elections are the backbone of representative democracy. They provide the link between voters and policy. The notion that government policy should be consistent with the electoral supply of the parties in office plays a central role in both democratic theory and lay thinking about representative democracies. Beyond their varieties, most models of liberal democracy emphasize two core requirements linked to its *liberal* and *democratic* dimensions (Herman, 2017): parties and their candidates at elections shall present voters with a *pluralist electoral supply* and stick to their policy proposals by *fulfilling their mandate* if elected. In a similar line of thinking, Robert Dahl emphasizes that 'popular sovereignty is satisfied if and only if policy choices are perceived to exist, the alternative selected and enforced as governmental policy is the alternative most preferred by the members' (Dahl 1956: 37; see also Thomassen 1994).

Admittedly, all of these implications have been disputed since the very origins of representative democracy (see Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion). First, parties have been seen to divide and polarize, rather than contribute to the common good. Early critics of representative democracy were very vocal about its limits (Müller, 2011). Some of the most important theoreticians of modern democracy, such as Rousseau or Madison, worried about the divisive effects of factions. Regarding the competence of voters, important doubts were voiced by early survey researchers (Converse et al., 1969) and recent contributions tend to confirm these worries (Achen and Bartels, 2016). Finally, there are a variety of reasons, especially in a more interdependent world, why governments may be unable to implement the policies they want.

Despite these critiques, during the heyday of electoral democracy, all of these conditions appeared to be met (Crouch, 2004; Mair, 2013). As democracy consolidated, the virtue of debate, conflict, and opposition and their possible contribution to democracy and representation came to be accepted (Coser, 1998; Honneth, 1996). A differentiated electoral supply is today valued by most democratic conceptions as an important vector of representation of the broadest possible range of social interests (Dahl, 1961). Differentiation helps to articulate the diversity of societal demands, delineate relevant lines of division, and pacify tensions between different sectors of the electorate (Rosenblum, 2008). A clear distinction between the policies advocated and adopted by the different parties in a country is also considered essential for issue voting. Without clear signals about parties' respective positions and priorities, voters will not be able to motivate their vote choice based on policy considerations; this, in turn, limits incentives for the adoption of policies reflecting the public will (e.g. Dahlberg, 2009; de Vries and Tillman, 2011; Gerber et al., 2015; Key, 1966). Relatedly, elections may not exert their authorizing function if the policy alternatives are not sufficiently distinct.

Second, the question of whether electoral platforms matter to public policy is one of the most disputed in political science. Parties that win power are expected to implement their programmes through concrete policy reforms—and are provided with the institutional capacity to do so, especially under majoritarian systems (Mansbridge, 2003; Thomson, 2001). Elections can be understood as an authorization process from this point of view. Models of promissory representation, or mandate responsiveness, conceive parties' electoral programmes as a tool enabling citizens to effectively shape future policies through their representatives (Mansbridge, 2003). They generate expectations among voters—and disappointment when the policies are not implemented

(Thomson, 2011; Naurin et al., 2019b). At the same time, elections are meant to provide representatives with a legitimation in carrying out some of the policies promised to voters. Parties, at the same time, being elected on the basis of a particular programme, engage with their voters on this programme and can be held accountable for its implementation. Voters, opponents, or media may monitor this process. The literature provides contrasted evidence on the policy relevance of mandates: policy outputs and outcomes do not seem to vary systematically depending on the party in office (Imbeau et al., 2001), although elected parties tend to fulfil their campaign promises better than the conventional wisdom would expect, with important variations nonetheless across political systems (Thomson et al., 2017; Naurin et al. 2019a).

In a nutshell, democratic elections serve to *select* and *authorize* a set of policies. Both of these conditions are then necessary for democratic elections to provide voters with an opportunity to shape government policy. Mandate responsiveness, at least implicitly, implies that parties put forward distinct policies: governing parties may fulfil an important proportion of their manifesto, but this does not necessarily result in elections influencing policy if there is 'not a dime's worth of difference'[3] between those running. Similarly, the policy relevance of party competition is, of course, limited if the pledges are distinct, but remain unfulfilled after elections or if an important share of the policies implemented are unrelated to electoral pledges. Whether explicitly or implicitly, scholars therefore tend to approach policy differentiation at elections and pledge fulfilment as two sides of the coin of representative democracy. The substance of the electoral supply and the extent to which it is reflected in adopted policy need to be considered jointly and are likely, as we will argue, to shed light on each other. Yet, they tend to be examined in separate strands of research, assuming the other condition to be met, although differentiation of the electoral supply as well as mandate responsiveness are subject to empirical debate.

2 From theory to reality

This research takes as its starting point the observation that empirical assessments of how mandate responsiveness works tend to suffer from several fundamental misconceptions. Classical academic and popular representations of party mandates raise hopes and expectations, making unrealistic assumptions about how representative democracy works. We will review several potential pitfalls in turn.

---

[3] In the famous words of US 1968 presidential candidate George Wallace.

The literature tends to assume mandates are the combined creation of parties (their constitutive issues, ideology) and their voters. Manifestos can thus be conceived of as alternative sets of specific policies attached to parties (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Klingemann et al., 1994). Yet, empirical research casts serious doubts on assumptions that voters exogenously impose policy preferences on parties: voters have strong and solid opinions on only a few issues: they are moved by group identity, rather than cost–benefit calculus (Achen and Bartels, 2016). In addition, parties do not write their electoral programmes in a vacuum: they compete with each other and each party responds to and anticipates the strategies of its rivals. The Comparative Pledge Project Group (CPPG) has documented considerable overlap in parties' pledges (Naurin et al., 2019a). Overall, mandates may not be the sharp alternatives from which voters can select their preferred option by voting; rather, they result from political competition upstream of manifesto formulation, whereby each party tries to bring its competitors to its electoral topics of predilection—but at the same time has to respond to them.

This has important potential implications for mandate responsiveness because incentives to stick to the mandate are likely to be different depending on whether it reflects a genuine partisan ideology, identity, and constituency, or whether it also derives from policy proposals put forward by competitors. Classic party government models assume that governing parties will use their capacity to deliver on their mandate because they want to. More sceptical views expect programmes to have little relevance to policy, because these are seen as opportunistic cheap talk. We argue that political competition results in considerable overlap in the electoral supply, but that this may not necessarily limit governing parties' incentives to respond to their mandate. After the campaign, opposition parties will continue to raise the public's and thus the government's awareness of problems. Incumbents may or may not respond to opposition cues, but they certainly do not always have a choice. This may explain the important agenda-setting power of opposition parties in some countries (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). If verified, this would mean that mandate representation through elections may require a different interpretation—not only as a *selection* of a set of policies, but also and above all as an *aggregation* of popular problems and positions.

A second problem concerns the *selection* and *authorization* functions of mandates (Louwerse, 2011): should manifestos be conceived of as a commitment to carry out the pledged policy, leaving options open for

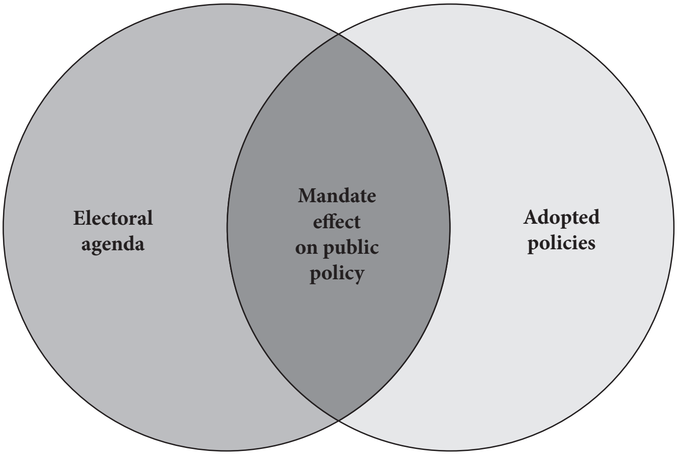

Fig. I.1 Electoral agenda, policy agenda, pledge fulfilment, and mandate responsiveness

decisions in all domains they do not address? Or do manifestos delineate a set of authorized policies in the sense that voters authorize their elected representatives to act on their behalf? This would imply that in principle, governments are expected to stick to this delineated perimeter and not to adopt significant 'non-authorized' policies. In Figure I.1, this would only concern the left-hand circle (Electoral agenda). To put it bluntly, pledge fulfilment is an essential aspect of mandate responsiveness, but it covers only part of the story. Governments may stick to their promises, but still pass policies for which they have no mandate. This amounts to circumventing voters' authorization, and therefore limiting the policy relevance of mandates. The limits of mandates are at the heart of the classic delegate–trustee debate (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 2003; Rehfeld, 2009). And like Pitkin, we assume that governments have to find some kind of middle way to be able to tackle all the problems that confront them.

Research on mandate responsiveness tends to focus on pledge fulfilment—and therefore implicitly focuses on the 'selection' function of mandates, to the detriment of 'authorization'. It therefore, ultimately, explains only a portion of the policies that are effectively implemented, those included in governing parties' manifestos. These policies are significant because, usually, they are particularly important and salient; a failure to implement them may have long-term effects and harm incumbents. Yet, they only represent a fraction of implemented public policies.

Governments have to take care of innumerable other problems, many of which were not addressed in their manifestos—and, therefore, not 'authorized'. Some of these decisions may not necessarily seem problematic from the perspective of mandate responsiveness, in particular when they occur in response to unforeseeable problems or focusing events. This is the case, for instance, for German Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to abandon her party's pledge to re-launch nuclear energy after the Fukushima disaster. Other problems may seem to have too little salience to deserve discussion during campaigns. Most policies carry long-established legacies, with specific constituencies and 'policy subsystems' (Pierson, 2004a). These are resilient and often hostile to change. The actors in those policy subsystems may deliberately hide policies from public scrutiny, possibly questioning democratic legitimacy (Culpepper, 2012). Moreover, there are many examples of executives passing unauthorized policies that neither correspond to low-salience areas, nor respond to a changing context. One example, in France, is President François Hollande's 2016 reform of the labour market that triggered considerable criticism as it had not been announced in his electoral programme and was seen as being at odds with its general policy message. Public dissatisfaction towards unauthorized policy can be highly relevant, notably when attempting to explain a mismatch between the high pledge fulfilment rates measured by research from the CPPG and public scepticism towards pledges.

Finally, empirical assessments of how normative democratic models work in practice have tended to focus on the demand side, examining issue voting and preference aggregation (see Achen and Bartels, 2016, for an important recent contribution). Assessing the other side of the electoral connection by analysing causal effects from the electoral supply to policy choice is perhaps even more difficult. It follows from the previous discussion that this requires bridging the analysis of electoral competition with accounts of pledge fulfilment and public policy. Pledge fulfilment rates are very high across liberal democracies (Thomson et al., 2017), but we have emphasized that this does not necessarily mean that democratic mandates are a significant determinant of public policy. To account for how mandates work in their *selection* and *authorization* functions, it seems necessary to work in a direction diametrically opposed to that of pledge research, that is, to examine total policy outputs and assess the extent to which they are determined by the content of executives' electoral manifestos. The agenda-setting perspective makes this possible. The last section of this introduction will briefly introduce our own approach.

3 Towards an agenda-setting theory of democratic mandates

The reality of governing and policymaking appears to only partially overlap with many normative assumptions on party government and responsiveness.

This leaves challenging questions open that are at the core of the present book: are elections and programmes relevant at all to policymaking? What are the conditions enhancing the linkage? Has the policy relevance of programmes decreased over time? If so, is this due to decreasing differentiation in the electoral supply, and/or to a lack of relevance to actual policymaking? Are there any differences across governments and political systems, and if so, why?

This book sheds new light on these questions, based on an original comparative approach taking advantage of the agenda-setting perspective and of the data collected by the *Comparative Agendas Project* (CAP) on electoral and legislative priorities in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and the UK. To achieve these goals, we develop an original and innovative theoretical framework that combines agenda-setting theory with work on representation and political institutions. We rely on an agenda-setting theory of democratic mandates, which is based on four crucial elements: a 'realistic' vision of democracy and mandate representation, a focus on agenda-setting, a consideration of the collective pressure to implement the mandate and an empirical focus covering five contrasted political systems.

A first central assumption concerns the origins of party mandates: the content of party programmes is first and foremost the result of inter- and intraparty competition. In line with the seminal work of Christopher Green-Pedersen (2007, 2019), we assume that parties have little certainty as to which issues will tilt the balance in favour of one candidate or another. Voters matter in the sense that their (expected) vote choice shapes parties' incentives as to which policies to include in their platform. The vote thus constrains the parties that have elaborated the agenda, as Lisa Disch (2011, 2012) has convincingly shown. Nonetheless, parties' main source of information regarding the electoral outcome is the strategies of rivals and their perceived success. The 'conflict of conflicts' (Green-Pedersen, 2007) is thus the main focus of attention for parties.

This leads to our second major choice regarding our theoretical framework. Rather than focusing on 'positional' issue competition, we focus on issue attention. Candidates commit, through the formulation of electoral pledges, to place certain issues on the agenda and voters expect them to follow through on this agenda by adopting policies.[4] This focus is consistent with the well-established observation that political parties compete not only by shifting positions, but also by seeking to put on the agenda the issues they would most care about (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Riker, 1996). In this view, political competition is at least as much about selective emphasis on issues as it is about conflict. Electoral manifestos, along with media coverage of campaigns, contribute to build parties' profiles and reputations, in particular through associations with particular issues (Walgrave et al., 2012). How much attention is devoted to minority rights, social protection, energy, or crime has consequences for both public policy and for how voters see and judge political parties. Admittedly, mandate responsiveness cannot be reduced to issue attention alone. Sticking to the priorities outlined during a campaign certainly does not mean that the mandate is implemented, since policy decisions may be more modest—or even go in a direction different from the one promised. However, and as represented in Figure 1.1, the dimension of agenda-setting is crucial to pledge fulfilment. Attention to the policies on which action has been promised is an absolute requirement for any strong programme-to-policy linkage. Put differently, pledge fulfilment as represented in the middle area of Figure 1.1 can only occur within the context of political issues addressed both at elections and in policymaking. Several decades of public policy research have identified agenda-setting, that is, the way governments prioritize between the many problems demanding public intervention, as a decisive stage of policymaking—and a major source of bias in the representation of social groups with different resources that should not be underestimated (Schattschneider, 1960; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, 2005).

---

[4] This agenda-setting dimension might even have gained relevance over time (Thomson et al., 2017). Curtin and colleagues (2010, p. 930) observe that the fragmentation of societies and electorates makes it increasingly difficult for parties to aggregate sets of policies fostering solid support and therefore to act as authorized agents when in office: 'The result is the promotion of a party policy in election programs that is often less a mandate for action and more a symbolic signalling of priorities and core concerns.'

A third element of our theoretical framework concerns the apparent problem of a lack of pluralism or diversity of political supply. This is often considered a central problem of contemporary democracies and is at the heart of the populist critique of democracy. We argue that it is attention to the same issues across the political spectrum that is the best guarantee of mandate responsiveness. Our theoretical framework calls this shared focus the 'tunnel of attention': it creates momentum and oversight in favour of programme implementation and limitations of unauthorized policy.

We take seriously Hanna Pitkin's work, which argues that:

> Political representation is primarily a public, institutionalized arrangement involving many people and groups, and operating in the complex ways of large-scale social arrangements. What makes it representation is not any single action by any one participant, but the

> overall structure and functioning of the system, the patterns emerging from the multiple activities of many people.
>
> (Pitkin, 1967, 221–2)

Louwerse (2012) makes a similar argument, using the notion of 'parliamentary mandate'. Opposition or minority parties, even if they have not won the election, have nevertheless been given a mandate by their voters. In parliament they will naturally direct attention to the issues their voters care about. This will be all the more efficient if government parties' voters care about similar issues. Likewise, Weissberg (1978) distinguished 'dyadic' and 'collective' representation, where dyadic representation looks at the relationship between a representative and its constituents and collective representation studies the relationship between the whole representative assembly and all citizens. Similarly, we are interested in the extent to which parties share their interest for and focus on specific problems, as this will tend to facilitate collective attention and oversight of implementation. The precise conditions under which this mechanism will be efficient is likely to depend on the political system (cf. Golder and Stramski, 2010; Louwerse, 2012).

To implement and test our approach, we focus on five different political systems. These are representative of a variety of liberal democracies. Several key elements are likely to vary, including the institutional incentives for policy differentiation in the electoral arena, governing parties' capacity to pass the policies promised in their manifesto, or opposition parties' propensity to put the government under pressure. Our cases cover a wide range of systems from the most majoritarian (UK, France to a lesser extent) to the most consensual (Germany, Denmark, Italy). They also feature various institutional specificities, such as semi-presidentialism (France), symmetric bicameralism (Italy), federalism (Germany) or the prevalence of minority governments (Denmark). This contrasting selection will, on the one hand, provide a strong basis for generalization with respect to common outcomes and, on the other hand, allow us to explore several forms of institutional conditionality.

Our agenda-setting theory of partisan policymaking thus makes a number of strong and original assumptions regarding the way in which elections determine policy priorities. We argue that the content of campaign promises is mainly determined by party competition, rather than a one-way street from voters to parties. Once elected, however, parties are constrained by their commitments to voters. This will result in a set of issue priorities. Due to the way in which they emerge, these priorities tend to be shared across parties. Even if this