



Narrow but underdetermined: interpretational issues considering the analysis of electoral pledges

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Abstract

The study of electoral pledges has become an increasingly influential approach to parties' programmatic commitments and their consequences. Researchers identify specific policies to which parties commit themselves in their electoral campaigns and examine whether these policies have subsequently been enacted. This approach relies on largely standardized methods and definitions, a central aim being the comparability of the results obtained in different contexts. Our article highlights methodological challenges related to the identification of pledges. Specifically, we are concerned with the narrow understanding of the concept of electoral pledge that is applied in several case studies, whereby a pledge is defined as a clear commitment to an action or an outcome whose occurrence can be verified. This operationalization appears to minimize discretion with respect to the contents of the pledges that parties have made, on one hand, and whether parties have carried out their pledges, on the other. However, this narrow understanding of electoral pledges is not as straightforward and simple as it appears. Building on the linguistic underdeterminacy thesis and using examples from a real coding process, we highlight several ways in which even this narrow operationalization leaves room for interpretation on behalf of researchers. Specifically, coders may attach differing weights to parts of a statement, concepts may have non-obvious meanings, and some words may mean different things to different audiences. We conclude that from the point of view of transparency, the field would benefit from observing the linguistic nature of electoral pledges in greater detail.

Keywords Electoral pledges · Electoral manifestos · Campaigns · Political science · Linguistic underdeterminacy

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1 Introduction

One of the underlying principles of democracy is the idea that policies should be responsive to citizens' preferences. In practice, the mechanism that is expected to bring that correspondence about is electoral competition between parties offering distinct policy packages. Parties' electoral success expectedly affects their ability to influence public policy, either by means of winning the election in the sense of becoming able to set policies unilaterally or by means of distributing bargaining weights in multiparty negotiations (see Powell 2000). Accordingly, how the programmatic aims that parties advocate in elections translate into policies continues to be one of the key problem fields in research on representative democracy (e.g. Klingemann et al. 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005; Naurin et al., eds. 2019).

The correspondence between parties' stated programmatic aims and policies can be approached from many different angles. One of the most established angles is the saliency approach that draws on the calculation of scores based on the emphases that parties give to different issues in their manifestos, which makes it possible to analyze the associations between those scores and indicators of policy outputs (e.g. Klingemann et al. 1994). This approach underlies the well-known Manifesto Project (MARPOR), whose data are extensively utilized in empirical political research to capture parties' programmatic emphases. A complementary approach that has become increasingly influential in recent years is based on identifying the specific policies to which parties commit themselves in their electoral campaigns and examining whether those policies have subsequently been enacted (e.g. Thomson et al. 2017). As parties' specific electoral commitments are typically called *electoral pledges* in the latter vein of research, for the sake of conciseness we call that approach 'pledge research'.

The underlying assumptions of the saliency approach, as well as the reliability of MARPOR scores, have been the topics of long and lively scholarly debates (e.g. Gemenis 2013). The same is currently not true for pledge research, although the number of studies drawing on an increasingly standardized methodological toolkit (Royed et al. 2019) has been growing steadily. Whereas early studies addressed pledge fulfillment in cases where a single party holds government power or a powerful president exists (Kalogeropoulou 1989; Royed 1996), the set of case studies applying similar definitions and analytical techniques currently covers a diverse range of political systems. Moreover, the results of such analyses have been used as independent variables in studies on, for example, parties' electoral success (Matthieß 2020). Another major development is the fact that the field has moved beyond establishing the extent to which pledges are fulfilled (for path breaking studies, see Rallings 1987; Kalogeropoulou 1989; Royed 1996; Thomson 2001). The themes addressed in recent research cover, among other issues, citizens' ex-post evaluations of pledge fulfillment (e.g. Thomson 2011), voters' expectations of pledge fulfillment (Heinisch and Werner 2022) and the effects of pledge breaking on vote choices and perceptions of government performance (Matthieß 2022; Naurin et al. 2019c).

Our emphasis here is on the first stage of any empirical analysis of electoral pledges and their consequences: the identification of campaign statements that count as "pledges". For the most part, we leave aside other challenges that researchers are likely to encounter at later stages, unless those challenges are directly related to the identification of pledges. Depending on the purpose of the study, those challenges may relate to the identification of factors that affect pledge fulfillment or deciding whether the evidence indeed suggests that a

pledge should be considered fulfilled. The identification of pledges is an essential prerequisite for studying their impact on policies and public opinion. Most of the present-day pledge research focuses on manifesto statements that commit a party to some action or outcome that is testable in the sense that, based on various source materials, scholars can evaluate whether the action has indeed been taken, or the outcome attained (Royed et al. 2019). While the definition is widely applied, the concept of “pledge” thusly defined has been operationalized in somewhat differing ways. Specifically, some authors accept that sometimes pledges can be fulfilled in several alternative ways or that there may be some room for discretion regarding the specific meaning of a pledge; this is referred to as being a *broad* operationalization. A *narrow* operationalization, in turn, builds on the idea that the “criteria used to judge the fulfilment of pledges are in principle provided by the writers of election programmes, not by the researcher” (Thomson 2001, p. 180). According to this view, a pledge is “*a statement committing a party to one specific action or outcome that can be clearly determined to have occurred or not*” (Royed et al. 2019, p. 24; original emphasis). A narrow operationalization is at the core of pledge research, as most studies apply some version of it and virtually all scholars working in the field agree that such statements are to be counted as pledges (Royed et al. 2019). Due to its precision, the operationalization expectedly contributes to both replicability and objectivity because there is a minimal amount of discretion involved in the identification of narrow pledges and the evaluation of their fulfilment.

In this study, we problematize some issues related to the identification of electoral pledges in parties’ campaign manifestos. Due to its centrality, our discussion focuses primarily on narrow operationalization. Our analysis draws on previous work on linguistics and language philosophy, especially Carston’s (2002) *underdeterminacy thesis*. Generally speaking, the said work highlights the fact that, in theory, every sequence of spoken or written words (i.e. a linguistic string) needs some complementation and inferential work. Because some kind of inferential work is always necessary, we thusly claim that the researcher will always play at least some part when sorting out the content of a promissory message and its fulfilment conditions. Using real coding decisions as examples, we demonstrate that the distinction between narrow and broad understandings is in several respects fuzzy and open to interpretation. As we discuss in the concluding section, standard practices such as the calculation of intercoder reliability do not necessarily erase this problem (albeit being an important part of high-quality content analysis).

Electoral manifestos are typically used in pledge research when the purpose is to establish parties’ programmatic commitments (Royed et al. 2019). Our empirical discussion draws on electoral manifestos issued by Finnish parties. As is the case in many other democracies, almost every party in Finland publishes an extensive electoral manifesto, covering virtually all policy fields, before a parliamentary election. Finland is in many ways a typical parliamentary system. A list system of proportional representation is in use, no party can realistically expect to win a parliamentary majority, and multiparty governments are formed in post-electoral negotiations. Moreover, Finnish parties have extensive experience of programmatic work (Mickelsson 2021). We are therefore confident that the issues we raise bear relevance beyond one case.

We have no reason to suspect that the main empirical findings of pledge research are unreliable. We do believe, however, that the points that we raise below have implications for the ways in which such results are interpreted. While we do not claim that this article provides an exhaustive catalogue of challenges related to the scholarly analysis of electoral

pledges, our aim is to initiate discussions about the limits of current operationalizations and their connections with the role of pledges in political communication and competition more generally.

2 Background

The theoretical background of modern-day pledge research is the mandate model (Royed 1996). The model holds that citizens vote in elections based on parties' programmatic platforms and the winners enact the policies that they advocated. In the absence of justifiable reasons to act otherwise, the winners can moreover be said to be morally obliged to act according to their promises (Schedler 1998). Citizens' assessments of the extent to which parties do so tend to deviate from the recurring result that once they are in government, parties fulfill a large share of their pledges. There are plausibly many reasons for this. To begin with, members of the general public understand a broad and heterogeneous set of messages as electoral pledges (Dupont et al. 2019; Krishnarajan and Jensen 2022; Naurin 2011), implying that scholars and citizens may address different things when they address pledge fulfillment. According to survey-based studies, citizens' perceptions of the extent to which parties fulfill their pledges depend, moreover, not only on actual policy outputs but also on subjective factors including party identification and trust (e.g. Belchior 2019; Thomson 2011; Duval and Pétry 2020).

The need to operationalize the notion of an electoral pledge narrowly enough was already acknowledged in Colin Rallings's (1987) analysis of the pledge fulfilment of British and Canadian governments. Rallings characterizes the manifesto passages in which he is interested as specific commitments to act, excluding "vague general policy statements" as well as "regular and formalistic announcements" (Rallings 1987, p. 3). Foreshadowing the results from several subsequent analyses (e.g. Thomson et al. 2017), Rallings (1987, 9) notes that "[t]here is certainly no evidence of governments in either Canada or Britain stating their intentions as a mere cosmetic measure and then letting them drop". In a similar vein, Kalogeropoulou (1989, 291) identifies "a pledge as a specific commitment on behalf of the party to act in a certain area". Kalogeropoulou's analysis of Greek elections that took place soon after democratization produced results that echoed those that Rallings obtained; the single-party governments that Kalogeropoulou analyzed had fulfilled a large share of their pledges.

As alluded to in the introductory section, at the heart of comparative electoral pledge analysis is the *narrow electoral pledge*. Different authors have labelled the narrow conceptualization in somewhat different ways. For example, Royed (1996) uses the term "real pledges" while Håkansson and Naurin (2016) use the term "specific promise" and Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik (2014) the notion of "definitive pledge". The idea is nonetheless the same: a statement is a pledge if it verbally commits a party (or a person) to some specific (unequivocal) action or outcome, whose occurrence can afterwards be verified. The definition hence compounds two things: commitment to some policy and testability.

As mentioned above, pledge research also recognizes so-called *broad pledges*. Again, specific labels vary to some extent; for example, Håkansson and Naurin (2016) use the term "vague pledge". Nonetheless, broad pledges could be fulfilled with multiple courses of action and the researcher's interpretation is possibly required in determining either the meaning of the pledge or the outcomes that fulfil the pledge (Royed et al. 2019). As we point

out, the line between narrow and broad pledges is much more nuanced and less self-evident than these characterizations suggest.

Studies on the fulfillment of parties' electoral pledges typically pay little or no attention to the specific formulation of statements about policy intentions (Naurin 2014, 1051; Royed 1996, p. 79). That is, the emphasis is on the content rather than the strength of commitments. Consequently, a statement may contain "hard commitment language" (Royed et al. 2019, p. 24) such as "we will" without satisfying the testability criterion, while statements formulated more softly (e.g., "we want to") may point to testable policy decisions and therefore count as pledges. Bonilla (2022), however, examines electoral promises as speech acts and ponders on what kind of language usage can be considered promissory. She uses the work of philosopher J. L. Austin as her starting point and distinguishes between promises and non-promissory policy statements. The latter are statements where support or opposition for a policy issue is stated, but without any explicit commitment for action ("I oppose abortion"). The former statement type, in contrast, includes formulations that commit the speaker to act on this policy position ("If get elected, I will ban abortion"). Drawing on survey-experimental evidence, Bonilla shows that this divide is not only a theoretical one as it also has empirical implications. The way in which candidates display their position (promise versus non-promise) affects voters' perceptions of candidates. For example, voters distinguish between promissory and non-promise policy statements and consider that the former commit the candidates more. Promises also increase voters' expectations of action more than just plain policy statements.

Bonilla's (2022) account essentially focusses on the performative side of electoral promising: what kinds of speech acts can be considered electoral pledges and what are the implications of this conceptual review. Our study tackles the other side of this equation, as we focus on the semantic and pragmatic sides of electoral promising. Instead of pondering when a policy statement commits the politician to act (what *constitutes* a promise), our attention is on the encoded content of the electoral pledges (*what* is promised). As pointed out above, this content is what the empirical research on pledge fulfilment tends to emphasize.

It has long been acknowledged that when people use verbal communication, the encoded content itself (that is, words, characters, sounds etc.) is often only part of the meaning that the speaker intends to convey to the hearer.¹ The speaker might want the hearer to interpret something non-literal or something more than just the encoded content (e.g. in the case of metaphorical or indirect language) and sometimes maybe even something entirely different, as in the case of irony (Grice 1989: 34). In addition to this, it has been argued that the plain encoded content itself seldom, if ever, denotes the meaning that the speaker wants to convey in a full propositional (i.e. in truth evaluable) form (see Carston 2002: 28–30, for a discussion of whether this is due to necessity or convenience).

The phenomenon where the encoded message does not convey the speaker's intended meaning is known as the *underdeterminacy* of language. To summarize, this underdeterminacy of language means that the linguistic content (encoded message) formulated by the speaker does not form a full truth-evaluable proposition. Therefore, when the hearer wants to sort out the proposition that the speaker is expressing (i.e. what is said), the hearer must conduct some inferential work. It also means that even when the hearer has worked out the proposition that the speaker is expressing, this does not necessarily tell what the speaker

¹ We use the terms "speaker" and "hearer" to refer to the crafter and the receiver of any communication, not just those of a spoken word.

intends to convey with the proposition (see Carston 2002: 19–21, for a more thorough discussion of the underdeterminacy thesis). Irony is a textbook example of this, as the speaker says one thing and means something else, and when using metaphorical expressions, the speaker usually does not literally mean everything they say, like in “Our president is a raging inferno” (Carston 2002: 15–17, example modified by authors). There are also cases where the proposition expressed is intended to be part of the speaker’s meaning, but in addition to that, the speaker wants to implicate something more with their message (like in the case of indirect answers, see *Ibid.*). In other words, each verbal message leaves some inferential work for the receiver, or as Ariel (2008: 2) puts it, “our coded messages never exhaust the meaning we intend to convey”.

There are many sources for this underdeterminacy. Before we have a full truth-evaluable proposition, we need to solve linguistic ambiguities (e.g. whether the word “bank” is used in reference to a financial institution or an embankment), assign referents to indexical expressions (e.g. personal pronouns or adverbs like “now”, “today”, “here”, “there” etc.), and figure out the referential relationships within the utterance (e.g. when the utterance contains a negation, what is the scope of this negation). In addition, the utterance might not form a complete sentence (“The left one.”) or it might have a missing constituent (“Political science is better” [better than what?]). There are also many context-sensitive expressions whose truth-conditions vary across different situations and speakers (Carston 2002: 23–24; Egré and Icard 2018). For example, many adjectives are vague in the sense that they have no stable truth-conditions that stay constant from one context to another.

To conclude, each linguistic message needs some inferential work from the part of the receiver. Typically, this process is automatic and straightforward (Macagno & Capone 2016: 404; Sperber and Wilson 1986), and thus our everyday conversations usually work out smoothly. However, occasionally we encounter situations where determining the communicative intention of the speaker is not so easy: the speaker and the hearer (or different hearers) could have differing views of how the message should be interpreted in the current context, without a possibility of judging either of them to be absolutely wrong (see Carston 2002: 41). While we have means for reflective interpretative work (see e.g. Grice 1989: 22–40, Sperber and Wilson 1986; Macagno and Capone 2016), there is no guarantee that all interpretational disputes could always be unequivocally solved.

Due to this possibility of justifiable interpretation differences, the underdeterminacy of language has implications for the concept of narrow electoral pledges as a coding unit. In principle, the underdeterminacy thesis in itself poses a challenge to the notion of a narrow pledge. As promissory messages are obviously language, underdeterminacy makes some inferential work necessary when analyzing pledges. Even in the case of narrow pledges, one needs some form of complementation and interpretation (e.g. reference assignments, determining the exact meaning of context-sensitive terms etc.) in order to form a propositionally complete pledge. Therefore, whether a statement commits “*a party to one specific action or outcome*” (Royed et al. 2019: 24) is dependent not only on the message encoded by the manifesto writers, but also on the inferential and interpretative work of the reader— in this case, the researcher. In other words, the researcher will always play a part when sorting out the content of a promissory message and thus in determining whether there is commitment to one specific action, what this specific action is and what counts as the “clear” occurrence of this outcome or action. If the underdeterminacy thesis is applied to electoral pledge analysis in the strictest sense possible, there would be no narrow pledges; only pledges that

the researcher complements to be narrow. This would make every pledge “broad” as interpretation is required for sorting out the meaning of the pledge.

However, much of this interpretative work is automatic, straightforward and relatively self-evident. For example, if a Finnish party pledged to create 60,000 new jobs, we would naturally interpret that these jobs are created in Finland, that they are jobs for adults and not child labor, and that the jobs in question are not first terminated and then recreated under a different title. Nonetheless, it is not guaranteed that this is the case with every promissory message. Therefore, below we present and discuss multiple examples in which underdeterminacy-related issues complicate the interpretation of seemingly straightforward electoral pledges and the line between unequivocal, narrow pledges and more ambiguous broad pledges becomes blurred.

3 Method

The discussion and the examples we are about to display below are based on a content analysis of three Finnish electoral manifestos regarding the 2019 parliamentary election (manifestos from the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party and the Social Democratic Party). A research group member and a trained research assistant assessed the testability of 486 statements that (i) mentioned some policy or outcome and (ii) contained some kind of verbal commitment to this policy or outcome (both conditions needed to be satisfied).

The testability variable drew on existing electoral pledge research (Royed et al. 2019) and it had three categories: narrow pledge, broad pledge and pledge that is difficult to verify. The categories were mutually exclusive. Below we describe each category informally; exact definitions can be found in Appendix 1 in the Supplementary Material.

1) Narrow pledge: A pledge whose fulfilment could be evaluated afterwards without (notable) room for interpretation about whether the pledge is fulfilled or not.

2) Broad pledge: A pledge whose fulfilment could be evaluated afterwards, but the evaluator would need to use some discretion when determining whether some outcome fulfils the pledge or not.

3) Pledge that is difficult to verify: A pledge whose fulfilment evaluation would mostly be a viewpoint or opinion dependent process.

As one can see, this wording of the narrow category differs slightly from the one described in the “Background” section. However, we construct our argument in a way that the examples and phenomena we ponder conform with both definitions.

After a training session and two test analyses, a research group member and the research assistant independently coded the 486 statements with respect to testability. This happened in two parts. Firstly, the research group member and the research assistant analyzed the statements from the manifestos of the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party (319 statements total) and determined intercoder reliability for the coding of these two manifestos. Then they analyzed the statements from the Social Democratic Party’s manifesto (167 statements) and again determined intercoder reliability for this set of codes. For both times, the formal indicator of reliability (nominal Krippendorff’s alpha) as well as the overall agreement percentage were parallel: alpha=0.63 (79% agreement) for the first coding and alpha=0.61 (77% agreement) for the second one.

While different decision rules have been proposed regarding the acceptability of different reliability levels (see e.g. Krippendorff 2004; Fleiss 1981: 218, Schreier 2012: 173), we considered these levels reasonable. To see whether the dissension was just accidental noise or whether disagreements followed some patterns, the coders discussed all the cases where they had disagreed. Both also had a chance to discuss any cases where they felt uncertain about their interpretation, irrespective of agreement or disagreement. These two discussions offered us examples and insight into situations where justifiable opinion differences about the narrowness of a pledge existed.

4 Results

Based on the cited literature, we know that (1) various sources of ambiguity and vagueness, as well as (2) the possibility of various implicit and non-literal meanings, can make the interpretation of statements that are potentially narrow electoral pledges a more complex task. We also found examples of these in the manifestos that we analyzed. However, in the discussions between the research group member and the research assistant, we also found that (3) the possibility to emphasize the elements of the pledge differently can make it more difficult to determine whether a particular statement is a narrow pledge or not. Below we offer examples from each of these cases, starting from ambiguity and vagueness, then moving on to the differing emphasis of elements, and closing with the non-literal and implicit dimension. All passages were translated by the authors (see Appendix 2 in the Supplementary Material for the original Finnish formulations). As information about the identity of the interpreter is not necessary for our argument, we do not differentiate between the interpretations made by the research assistant and by the research group member. Instead, we denote them as Research Group Member 1 and Research Group Member 2.

4.1 Ambiguity and vagueness

One thing that could perplex analyses of statements is the ambiguity and vagueness of different terms and phrases. An example of this is an extract from the Social Democratic Party's (2019) manifesto, considering unfounded salary differences: "Let's reduce unfounded salary differences between men and women." Research Group Member 1 interpreted the "unfounded salary differences" as "inexplicable salary differences", in which case evidence considering the statement could be gathered, for example, from official Finnish salary structure statistics (THL 2023; OSF 2020). From this perspective, the utterance is a straightforward, testable pledge. Research Group Member 2, however, took a more literal approach and interpreted the unfoundedness to mean unjustified differences in salary. As the question of whether some salary difference is justified or not could be somewhat opinion based (for example, whether there is a justification for raising salary based on performance in some particular case could be arguable), Research Group Member 2 considered the statement to be about viewpoint dependent issues and thus not a narrow pledge.

Another example comes from the manifesto of the Finns Party: "The oil heating prices of apartments should not be artificially increased." This time the disagreement was due to the word "artificially". Research Group Member 1 interpreted this statement to be a narrow pledge, which states that the government will not actively enact any policies that would

increase the price of oil heating (as opposed to developments that are beyond the government's control, such as price spikes in international oil markets). However, Research Group Member 2 considered the word "artificially" to be a vague concept in this context, as it would be up to everyone's interpretation whether a policy that increases the price of oil heating would do so "artificially". Thus, Research Group Member 2 regarded it as a statement that would be difficult to verify.

A subtler example of ambiguity is a statement from the manifesto of the Social Democratic party, where the party states that its aim is to "strengthen primary healthcare by hiring 1,000 new doctors or nurses." Research Group Member 1 considered this a narrow pledge, which obligates the party to hire either 1,000 new medical doctors or 1,000 new nurses, or some combination of doctors and nurses that adds up to 1,000. However, Research Group Member 2 considered this a broad pledge, as there are multiple ways to interpret its fulfillment conditions. Because the combination option is not explicitly expressed, one could argue that there are only two ways of fulfilling the pledge: the hiring of 1,000 new doctors or 1,000 new nurses (while a combination of nurses and doctors would not fulfill the pledge). However, one could argue that it would be unreasonable not to include the combination option in the fulfillment conditions; because the reason why the Social Democratic Party wants more nurses or doctors is to "strengthen primary healthcare", e.g. a combination of 400 new doctors and 600 nurses would be a meaningful fulfillment condition. In addition, it is up to interpretation whether the statement is inclusive or exclusive, i.e., if a hiring of both 1,000 new doctors and 1,000 new nurses would fulfill the pledge, or whether it must be either 1,000 doctors or 1,000 nurses.

These examples highlight the fact that statements that appear self-evidently as narrow pledges to some could also be considered interpretatively broader by others. It is not just a few carefully selected cases by us; studies and theories of language offer many examples of people approaching linguistic structures with slightly divergent ways. People occasionally interpret words and phrases differently (for example, what are acceptable values for the terms "*most*" and "*more than half*", see Ariel 2004: 685); people can have differing intuitions considering the language (for example, whether someone can be considered to be lying or not, see Ariel 2002: 1037–38), and people differ on how literally they understand language (Ibid.). Therefore, a statement that for one citizen is clear and simple could very well have multiple meanings for another. People can reasonably have opinion differences on how to interpret particular words and concepts, therefore also on how to interpret policy statements that contain these words and concepts. Thus, even when one's intention is to focus the analysis only on statements that include the conditions for their own fulfilment, i.e. narrow pledges, others could still reasonably understand these statements in an interpretatively broader way.

4.2 Loosely used terms

In addition to outright ambiguity and vagueness, the interpretation of a particular word or phrase could depend on whether the term is used loosely or according to some clear category borders. Everyday language is full of communication situations where the speaker uses terms in a way that stretches the meaning of them beyond their actual definition. For example, the sentence "This steak is raw" (taken from Carston 2002: 328–329) uttered in a restaurant does not usually mean that the steak in question is uncooked (which is what we

usually understood the term “raw” to mean), but that it is not cooked properly. The term “raw” is therefore used loosely. In our ordinary conversations, background knowledge and contextual factors direct our interpretative process, and we typically come up with the right meaning quite naturally and with little effort. However, when analyzing electoral pledges, the issue is more complex. As electoral manifestos are not instances of normal face-to-face conversation, nor a particularly interactive way of communication, the right contextual factors for the interpretation of electoral pledges are not necessarily obvious or undisputable. This, in turn, can lead to situations where the policy content of a statement can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on whether one chooses to approach the statement according to a strict or loose conceptual understanding.

As an example of this, consider statements about road maintenance. It is not unusual for Finnish electoral manifestos to contain excerpts about keeping roads in good condition or maintaining or increasing road repair resources (in our data, statements like this could be found in the manifestos of the National Coalition Party and the Social Democratic Party). How we should understand these condition and maintenance requirements, however, is not self-evident. One way to approach the issue is from the perspective of a lay person. Each of us can form a mental conception of a road in need of maintenance. There might be opinion differences on whether a particular road needs maintenance; we might not be able to verbalize our intuitions about the concept, but we still have a general understanding of what one means when talking about roads in good or bad condition. Let us call this *the loose understanding* of road maintenance.

However, there is a more official way of approaching the issue. The Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency (FTIA 2020) has a condition classification for paved roads with five categories (Very bad, Poor, Satisfactory, Good, Very Good) which is used to assess the conditions of Finnish roads. They also have a map service (FTIA 2021) where one can find the assessments of different roads according to this condition classification. Accordingly, it is possible that roads that are in poor or good condition could refer to roads that are in good or poor condition according to the FTIA. Let us call this *the official understanding* of road maintenance. This dual understanding complicates the analysis of road maintenance statements as there is no guarantee that the official and loose understandings coincide. All the roads that the FTIA considers to be in need of repair might not be so in the view of some citizens and vice versa. The implication of this for pledge analysis is that it is quite possible that the loose understanding and the official understanding result in different fulfilment conditions. Under the official understanding, a promissory message to repair 100 km of poor road would be quite straightforward. Under the loose understanding, in contrast, one could argue about whether the road repaired actually was in poor condition. Therefore, the interpretation of a statement could sometimes vary based on how strict or loose an approach one chooses to apply.

One could of course argue that if there exists an official definition for a particular concept, then researchers (and citizens) should use this as the interpretational framework for statements about the issue. This is especially so when a researcher is trying to establish whether a promissory message has been fulfilled; this guideline would thus appear to be useful when choosing the data sources. The approach is seemingly reasonable but perplexed by the information asymmetry between citizens and the authors of electoral manifestos. The group of potential voters is heterogeneous and all of them do not have the same knowledge and background information of policy issues that the manifesto authors have. Thus, they

might not be aware of whether there exists an official way to measure or implement a particular issue. If the manifesto authors are aware of this, it could very well be the case that sometimes the parties themselves intend a statement to be interpreted with a loose understanding, instead of the official one. As one of the functions of manifestos and pledges is to provide cues to voters about what the parties will do if they obtain the power to govern (so-called electoral function, see Harmel 2018; Naurin et al., 2019b), it seems reasonable to assume that either of the proposed understandings (loose or official) could be the meaning intended by the manifesto authors.

4.3 Emphasizing pledge elements dissimilarly

In our discussions, we discovered that sometimes the choice of whether to consider a statement to be a narrow pledge or not was based on what the coder judges to be the essential content of the statement, i.e. what element of the promissory message one emphasizes the most. As an example, let us consider the following statement from the manifesto of the National Coalition Party (2019): “Let’s create a credible road map for increasing the development aid’s share of GDP to 0.7%.” Research Group Member 1 considered this a narrow pledge: it is possible to check afterwards whether the government has produced a document outlining the process, with which the objective will be attained. Research Group Member 2, however, considered the adjective “credible” as an essential element of the statement, and as the credibility of something is typically viewpoint dependent, Research Group Member 2 concluded that this is not a narrow pledge. The disagreement sums up whether the credibility requirement should be treated as an essential part of the promissory message. Research Group Member 1 considered it merely a rhetorical device that does not contribute anything important to the content of the statement (why would anyone pledge to create an unconvincing road map?) and thought that the main point of the statement was the act of creating the roadmap. In the reasoning of Research Group Member 2, the credibility nonetheless played an essential role. Research Group Member 2 reasoned that the issue of credibility should not be distinguished from the contents of the policy. As a credible road map is mentioned, only a plan that could somehow be considered credible (as opposed to an ordinary or unconvincing plan) would be sufficient to satisfy the fulfilment conditions of this promissory message.

Another example of this issue is again from the manifesto of the National Coalition Party (2019), this time considering national defense: “Let’s maintain a credible conscription-based national defense.” Research Group Member 1 interpreted this as a narrow status quo pledge: the current Finnish system, where in principle all 18–60-year-old males are liable for military service (with a large majority of each male cohort performing military service), is preserved. However, Research Group Member 2 interpreted this as a commitment only to a conscription-based system, but not necessarily to the current one, and thus it is not a narrow pledge. According to this interpretation, the statement would allow changes to the nature of conscription (e.g. extending liability for military service to women, or a system where conscripts obligated to the actual military service are determined by a lottery), as long as it still exists as a baseline. The interpretation difference originates from varied emphasizing. For Research Group Member 1, the pertinent part of the statement was the word “maintain”, which in their thinking directs one to the status quo interpretation. Nevertheless, according to the viewpoint of Research Group Member 2, the absence of the word “current” is an essential element that guides the interpretation. If the authors wanted to be

more unambiguous, they could have excluded all these competing possibilities by inclusion of only one word (“Let’s maintain the *current* system”). As the commitment to the current system is not explicitly stated, and there would be multiple ways to fulfil this promissory message, Research Group Member 2 thought that the statement should not be interpreted as either a narrow pledge or a status quo pledge.

4.4 Possibility of implicit meanings

As our final point, we raise an issue that concerns the implicit elements of verbal messages. In some instances, a statement does not appear to be a narrow pledge on the linguistic level (the linguistic string does not offer non-vague fulfilment conditions), but the statement could be interpreted to implicate a narrow pledge (or multiple pledges). An example of this is a statement by the National Coalition Party (2019): “Let’s reform transgender legislation and give public recognition to everyone’s inalienable human dignity and right to openly be themselves as unique individuals.” Due to the encoded content this could hardly be classified as a narrow pledge. Whether there prevails a public recognition of inalienable human dignity and whether everybody’s right to openly be themselves is achieved are viewpoint dependent questions. The statement about transgender legislation reform is neither a narrow pledge in our view, as reforming without any details mentioned could be achieved by anything that changes the status quo.

However, when the statement is analyzed in the context of Finnish transgender legislation discussions of the time, the demands for reform combined with the highlighting of human dignity could reasonably be interpreted to implicate many narrow policy actions, such as the removal of the infertility requirement when confirming one’s judicial gender. Thus, even if the linguistic string of promissory language could not be considered a narrow pledge, it could still be possible to justifiably deduce narrow implications from its content. Such inferences, however, require contextual knowledge.

4.5 Quantifying coding disagreements

To evaluate the magnitude of the linguistic challenges, we present numerical information about our coding differences in Table 1. The agreement percentage for statements that at least one research group member considered a narrow pledge was much lower (44%) than the agreement percentage for statements that at least one research group member regarded as a broad pledge (68%) or a pledge that is difficult to verify (65%)². Therefore, it was easier to agree that a statement is too interpretative to be a narrow pledge than it was to agree that a statement is clearly and unequivocally a narrow pledge. However, the number of cases where either coder considered a statement to be a narrow pledge was scarce.

In Appendix 4 in the Supplementary Material, we analyze the extent to which the probability of disagreement between coders depends on variables that are not directly associated with the substance of the statements: the number of words in a statement and the average length of those words. The results suggest that the coders were to some extent more likely to disagree on the classification of longer statements, that is, those that contain a larger number of words. However, we have no reason to assume that this diminishes our argument. Firstly,

²Notice that these percentages are not directly comparable with the agreement percentages reported in the Method section.

Table 1 Coding frequencies and agreement across different categories

| | Narrow pledge | Broad pledge | Pledge that would be difficult to verify |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------------|--|
| RGM1 | 44 | 228 | 214 |
| RGM2 | 41 | 236 | 209 |
| Cases of agreement | 26 | 187 | 167 |
| Cases of disagreement | 33 | 90 | 89 |
| Agreement percentage* | 44% | 68% | 65% |

RGM1=Research Group Member 1; RGM2=Research Group Member 2

*Agreement percentage is calculated by dividing the cases of agreement by the total number of cases where at least one research group member coded the pledge to the given category. Therefore, it is not directly comparable with the agreement percentages reported in the Method section

the phenomena that we have highlighted and the challenges that they pose to analyses of electoral pledges do not depend on whether coders agree or disagree. A statement can be ambiguous even if coders do not notice this and regard the statement as unambiguous. In addition, a statement can have multiple elements that one could emphasize, even if coders end up emphasizing the pledge elements similarly. Secondly, the connection between the word count and coder disagreement makes intuitive sense from the point of view of our observations. When the word count of the statement increases, so increases the possibility of disagreement, as there are more different elements that one could emphasize and more terms and phrases that could be interpreted ambiguously.

4.6 Examples from a different institutional context

The examples reviewed above originate from one country, Finland, where the party system is highly fragmented and coalition governments are the norm. This implies that when parties design their campaigns, they must simultaneously prepare for negotiations on the composition and program of the next government (see Harmel 2018). Nonetheless, given the virtually unavoidable underdeterminacy of language, we believe that the issues we raised are relevant independently of context. To illustrate this, we reviewed the 2024 electoral manifesto of the British Labour Party, in order to see whether it contains extracts similar to the ones presented above. Whereas the structure of the Finnish political system in many ways reflects a “proportional” vision of democracy where power is diffused and policy making involves constant interparty negotiation, the United Kingdom is often cited as a textbook example of a “majoritarian” system where strong single-party governments face few constraints on their ability to set policies (Powell 2000). Institutional features plausibly discourage Finnish parties from using “hard” diction and instead create incentives to formulate pledges in softer, more ambiguous ways. However, a manifesto drafted in a different institutional environment, and in a language that is grammatically very different from Finnish, exhibits many of the phenomena that were identified above.

As in our Finnish data, we identified many statements that could or could not be considered a narrow pledge, depending on which element of the statement one emphasizes. One example is a commitment to “fix an additional one million potholes across England...”.

The “fixing one million potholes” part of the statement could be interpreted as a narrow pledge, as it contains an unambiguous and verifiable numerical goal. However, the “across England” part of the statement leaves room for interpretation, because there are many ways in which one could approach the issue (such as a certain number of potholes fixed in every region, every county or every district; a certain number of potholes fixed per every square kilometer etc.). Thus, the room for discretion that the statement leaves considering its fulfillment conditions varies depending on the element of the statement that one emphasizes.

Another example is a statement that comes close to one of the previous passages from our Finnish data. The party states that “Labour will... [mandate] UK-regulated financial institutions... to develop and implement credible transition plans that align with the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement”. As in the Finnish example, the creation (and maybe even the implementation) of such a plan could later be verified without too much discretion and thus the statement would be a narrow pledge. Nevertheless, the credibility of such plans would be an opinion dependent issue, which would not be compatible with the definition of the narrow pledge. So, yet again, the testability of the statement depends on the element that one emphasizes. Examples like this make us more confident that our previous examples are not only due to the Finnish language or a product of the Finnish political system.

5 Conclusion

In this article, we discussed how even narrow-looking electoral pledges can allow reasonable interpretational disagreements, either about precise policy content or proper fulfilment conditions. In addition, we reviewed situations where apparently vague content can imply or convey unequivocal policy positions. While we do not claim that the issues we highlighted constitute a comprehensive list of possibilities, we believe that our analysis still brings valuable insight to the current electoral pledge analysis. However, more reflective conceptual analyses could find even more nuances in the concept of the narrow pledge.

As our analysis shows, the “narrow” electoral pledge as an analysis unit is not as rigorous and obvious as it might appear at first glance, and many of the points that we raised also apply to the “broad” understanding of pledges. If one focuses on encoded messages alone, one might miss several implicit pledges that could be inferred with the right set of background information and contextual premises. Moreover, even narrow-looking encoded messages could, upon closer inspection, turn out to be richer in nuance or more interpretative than one might have originally thought. In the previous section, we reviewed many examples of cases where one research group member considered a statement to be a self-evident narrow pledge, while another member who took a different viewpoint on the issue disagreed with this status. As we discussed mostly cases where coders have different opinions about this “narrow pledge” status of a statement, there might very well be some unnoticed cases where both coders considered a statement to be a narrow pledge but made a dissenting interpretation of its exact policy content. This possibility is one of the issues that should be more thoroughly addressed in future works on the methodology of pledge research.

The concept of narrow pledge falls short on two dimensions. Due to the underdetermined nature of language, it can occasionally be difficult to determine whether a statement is indeed a narrow pledge, that is, whether the linguistic string commits a party to one specific action and whether there is a clear-cut way to determine the occurrence of the

pledged outcome. In other words, a statement that one considers a narrow pledge could, from another perspective, be considered a broad pledge, or alternatively, a narrow pledge with different fulfillment conditions. Thus, depending on the hearer, narrow-looking pledges could convey multiple propositions or policy commitments. The promissory messages can, for example, be subtly ambiguous, their policy contents could be interpreted in differing ways due to semantically vague words and phrases, or their fulfillment conditions could vary based on the elements one emphasizes. Moreover, even the most equivocal messages, sometimes called *rhetorical statements* in electoral pledge research (Naurin 2014: 1062), could implicate or hint to specific policy contents. While it might not be easy to demonstrate that an indisputable commitment exists in such cases, these implicit messages could still be of crucial importance when a party communicates its intentions. It seems that sometimes the concept of a narrow pledge oversimplifies some of the coding units, while at other times it ignores other potential (implicit) coding units.

While practices such as the usage of multiple coders and the measuring of intercoder reliability could be used to mitigate these linguistic challenges, it does not necessarily erase them. An agreement between coders does not automatically mean that the results are valid (Gaskell and Bauer 2000: 341), as this agreement may result from, for example, collective idiosyncrasies (Cornish et al. 2014: 82). Even a sizeable consensus does not mean that an interpretation is a correct one, and the minority interpretation may turn out to be right (Gaskell and Bauer 2000: 341). Consequently, even if two people agree that a statement is a narrow pledge, a third (or fourth or fifth) person could emphasize a different element of the statement or understand some crucial term differently, leading to dissenting interpretations regarding testability.

The extent to which parties fulfill their pledges, and the conditions under which they are likely to do so, is a central topic in pledge research. Systematic evaluations of how different interpretations of seemingly “narrow” pledges would affect observed pledge fulfillment rates are outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, as stated in the Introduction, we have no reason to suspect that the results of existing analyses of pledge fulfillment are erroneous. At the very least, such results can be regarded as *justifiable* interpretations of the extent to which parties have carried out their pledges, and the systematic nature of scholarly analyses means that the results are defensible. It is, however, possible that the results are not *replicable* in the strictest sense of the word. Reassuringly, Naurin’s (2014) analysis suggests that the overall conclusions about the extent to which government parties have carried out their pledges remain largely unaltered even if one operationalizes pledges in different ways. Therefore, while we do not wish to exaggerate the problems that underdeterminacy poses to empirical analyses, its implications are an important topic for further research. Moreover, future research would benefit from addressing the implications of underdeterminacy for public opinion and electoral behavior. For example, do citizens recognize the multiple various nuances that provide different ways for interpreting some of the pledges, and does this affect their evaluation of the party in question? Could various underdeterminacy-related issues (like ambiguous pledges) explain part of the seemingly paradoxical situation, whereby so many people find electoral pledges untrustworthy although parties fulfill them with a laudable volume?

In terms of transparency, the field would benefit from observing the linguistic nature of electoral pledges in greater detail, as the concept of a narrow pledge is not as simple and straightforward as the established definition suggests. The said issues also have normative

implications. If the propositional content of the pledges is interpreted too negligently without proper reflection, the analyst runs the risk of misinterpretation of the party's message, i.e. misrepresenting the actual communicative intention behind the pledge. We might, for example, consider the party to be making commitments that they do not intend to make, or judge them to be pledge breakers in cases where they could have in their own view, and in the view of some audiences, fulfilled their particular promise.

When differing interpretations are acknowledged, an important question is how to proceed with analyses. One possibility is to simply remove these cases from the data and accept the decreased scope or, in the case of ambiguous cases, allow multiple differing fulfilment conditions. One could also try to reduce the number of potential interpretations afterwards by discussions between coders (a typical procedure in qualitative content analysis, Schreier 2012: 205), giving each coder a chance to argue why their interpretation is more meaningful than another. This approach has its limits, even on top of the additional resources that it requires, as sometimes people stick with their interpretations even after discussions, and even a convincing argument does not necessarily mean that the conclusion is right.

There are also more formal ways of approaching the issue, like using different models designed for speaker meaning reconstruction and interpretative dispute solving (see e.g. Macagno and Capone 2016). However, using models like this in the case of data that has hundreds or thousands of pledges would be very labor intensive and time consuming and there is still no guarantee that the "right" interpretation could be reconstructed in an undisputable manner in every case.

Our purpose was to shed the light on the interpretational aspects of electoral pledge research, and especially the concept of "narrow pledge". Given the virtually unavoidable underdeterminacy of language, we believe that the issues we raised are relevant independently of context. However, it is possible that there are some systematic differences between countries when it comes to the relative weights of those issues. Addressing this possibility will most likely be resource intensive and require collaboration between scholars working in different countries. Nonetheless, we encourage scholars to comparatively approach the ways in which parties formulate their programmatic statements. Moreover, the classification of narrow pledges, broad pledges and pledges that are difficult to verify could be used for the analysis of the vagueness and clarity of electoral pledges in general, for example to see whether right-wing or left-wing parties make more precise pledges. Indeed, it has recently been suggested that the testability of a statement could be used as a measure of strategic vagueness (Praprotnik and Ennsner-Jedenastik 2023). This kind of research could also offer a basis for analyses of whether vague policy commitments contribute to electoral absenteeism.

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Declarations

Ethical approval The study complies with “The ethical principles of research with human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland”, set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK. According to the said guideline, an ethical review was not needed.

Consent to participate Informed consent to participate was obtained from both coders.

Consent to publish Informed consent to publish was obtained from both coders.

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