

The Electoral Benefits of Opportunistic Election Timing

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Abstract

In this paper, we present a comparative analysis of the effect of opportunistic elections on the incumbent's electoral performance. The existing literature on parliamentary dissolution and election timing generates contradictory expectations about the ability of incumbent governments to benefit from strategically timed elections. We evaluate these competing hypotheses, drawing on an original dataset of 321 parliamentary elections in 27 East and West European countries, observed from 1945 or democratization to the present. In order to causally identify the effect of opportunistic election calling on incumbent's electoral performance, we rely on instrumental variable regression. Our results reveal that opportunistic election calling generates a significant vote share bonus for the incumbent of as much as 5.5 percentage points. This finding suggests that by timing elections strategically, governments can significantly affect how voters vote. It therefore has powerful implications for our understanding the effectiveness of elections as instruments of democracy and accountability.

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Competitive elections, more than any other characteristic, are central to the definition of democracy. According to conventional models of democratic accountability, elections are the mechanism that ensures the systematic responsiveness of elected officials to voters. It is the electoral connection that is assumed to compel policy makers to pay attention to citizens' preferences. In trying to understand why accountability sometimes fails, most of the existing scholarly work focuses on how the elections are held – the role of electoral rules and the conduct of elections. In this study, we argue that the nature and effectiveness of democratic accountability is perhaps even more fundamentally affected by a different and often neglected aspect of elections – their timing.

Much of the literature on democratic accountability assumes that elections occur at regular intervals and their timing is fixed. However, the reality in most parliamentary democracies is very different: many incumbent governments in such systems have some control over the timing of national elections. These leaders do not need to face voters at fixed times, when circumstances may be adverse. They can choose the timing of elections to correspond with conditions that are favorable to them. Because the economic and political environment affects vote choice, by controlling *when* voters vote, incumbents can also affect *how* they vote. In this study, we show that the capacity of political leaders to decide on the timing of elections gives them the means to influence the outcome of electoral accountability. Specifically, we perform a comparative analysis of the effect of opportunistic elections on the incumbent's electoral performance drawing on an original dataset of 321 parliamentary elections in 27 East and West European countries, observed from 1945 or democratization to the present. In order to causally identify the effect of opportunistic election calling on incumbent's electoral performance, we rely on instrumental variable regression. This allows us to address the issues of reciprocal

causation and confounding. We instrument for early election calling by using an index of constitutional powers of the prime ministers (PM) to bring about early elections. Our results reveal that opportunistic election calling generates a significant incumbency advantage in terms of gaining seats and votes, and holding on to office. The vote share bonus that opportunistic election calling offers may be as large as 5.5 percentage points.

The results of this study alter our current understanding of democratic accountability. When opportunistic election timing allows governments to shape election outcomes and influence their own survival in office, the traditional model of electoral accountability no longer works as intended. Rather than operating as instruments of democracy, elections can become strategic tools in the hands of incumbents to control access to office. This suggests that the relationship between voters and representatives is not as unidirectional as the conventional model suggests and it casts electoral accountability in a completely different light. Elections cannot be adequately understood as occasions during which voters vote and officials respond – the active role played by politicians in shaping accountability has to be accounted for. Under opportunistic election timing, voters exert much less influence on the fate of the government, and incumbents have much greater opportunity to evade accountability than is conventionally assumed. This, in turn, implies that the presence or absence of such elections may profoundly affect the extent to which policies reflect citizens' preferences.

1. Theory

While recent research has paid considerable attention to the circumstances of strategic parliamentary dissolution,¹ much less is known about the capacity of incumbent governments to

¹ See Smith (2004), Strom and Swindle (2002). There is a large literature that considers election timing in the context of coalition politics (e.g., Diermeier and Stevenson 1999, 2000; Grofman and Roozendaal 1994, 1997; Huber 1996; Lupia and Strom 1995). Additionally, political

actually use election timing to their advantage. Do opportunistically timed elections help incumbents hold on to office and win (or avoid losing) votes and seats? Given the number of studies on parliamentary dissolution, election timing, and political business cycles, it is surprising that there is no systematic empirical study exploring this question. The fact that the existing literature gives rise to competing expectations about the electoral benefits of strategic election timing, further adds to the need for such a study.

Much of the existing work on parliamentary dissolution and election timing assumes that, whenever possible, incumbents attempt to time elections strategically to maximize the probability of winning. The consensus in this literature is that incumbents gain an advantage by opportunistic election calling. Other studies, however, challenge this expectation, arguing that voters are likely to recognize the blatant opportunism of incumbents and punish them at the ballot box instead. In what follows, we review both sides of the argument.

Opportunistic elections benefit incumbents

There is a relatively widespread consensus in the literature on the political economy of elections that parliamentary dissolution occurs endogenously for self-interested reasons (Smith 2004; Strom and Swindle 2002). Incumbent governments are expected to call elections at the peak of their popularity – a strategy referred to as “political surfing” (Chowdhury 1993; Ito 1990; Ito and Park 1998; Kayser 2005, 2006; Palmer and Whitten 2000; Roy and Alcantara 2012). This popularity is often reflected in a strong economy, given that the state of the economy strongly affects vote choice in a variety of national contexts (see Nadeau et al. 2012 for a recent review; see also Duch and Stevenson 2008). For example, Chowdhury (1993) finds significant evidence

economy literature includes a series of theoretical works and single country studies considering election timing and political business cycles (e.g., Cargill and Hutchison 1991; Chowdhury 1993; Ito 1990; Ito and Park 1988; Kayser 2005, 2006; Reid 1998).

for the case of India that economic growth influences election timing, and Palmer and Whitten (2000) confirm this finding cross-nationally (see also Kayser 2005, 2006). Government popularity can also be brought about by any other developments within or outside the government's control, and government can sometimes simply benefit from the unpopularity of the opposition (see Roy and Alcantara 2012 for examples).

Anecdotally, too, we see various instances of incumbent governments attempting to engage in political surfing. Roy and Alcantara (2012) describe how the Canadian Prime Minister Chretien called early elections opportunistically both in 1997 and 2000. In the former case, he was banking on a surge in the polls and disarray in the opposition Bloc Quebecois. In the latter case, the goal was to take advantage of the unpreparedness of the newly rearranged Canadian Alliance Party – the official opposition in the House of Commons. The party still lacked candidates, campaign structures and resources when the elections were called. In both cases, Chretien's party finished with a majority. In 2007, the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen took a similar gamble. He called elections two years early in the hope of capitalizing on economic growth and low unemployment.² In 1998, the Australian Prime Minister John Howard called early elections hoping to benefit from a proposed tax reform and income tax cuts (Warhurst 2000). Similarly, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher called elections ahead of schedule in 1983 and again in 1987. In the former case, while the economy was in disarray, Thatcher took advantage of the victory in the Falkland Wars, which boosted Tory popularity.³ In 1987, the unemployment was decreasing and inflation was steadily low, and the Conservatives were enjoying a significant public opinion lead over Labour – an opportune time for calling

² Traynor, Ian. 2007. "Danish PM wins gamble on early election." *The Guardian*, November 13.

³ Apple, R.W. 1983. "Elections called 11 months early by Mrs. Thatcher." *The New York Times*, May 10. "1983: Thatcher triumphs again." BBC election coverage, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/basics/4393313.stm

elections that were not due for almost a year. The expectations of all of these heads of government were that they would reap electoral benefits by opportunistic election calling.

Why should we expect opportunistic election calling to benefit incumbents? The logic of the political surfing argument relies on a relatively standard assumption that incumbents derive utility from holding on to office. However, the incumbent's re-election prospect is inherently uncertain. Because of this, the incumbent faces opportunity costs. They can call an election now and risk losing the rest of their term in office if they get defeated. Or they can delay the election and wait until the end of their term but risk facing unfavorable conditions that undermine their electoral performance. Because of the opportunity costs involved, incumbents are likely to call early elections only if the expected electoral benefit exceeds the potential cost of losing office for the remainder of the term.

This cost-benefit calculation is not trivial because it is based on the incumbent's best guesses rather than any certainty about their current and future comparative advantages. As Kayser (2005, 19) notes, "election timing is quintessentially a problem of optimization under uncertainty" (see also Balke 1990). Still, the incumbent does not operate in an information vacuum. Clearly, the expected benefits are likely to be larger when the incumbent is popular among the electorate and/or when the opposition is particularly weak. Assessments of popularity can be based on public opinion polls, as well as current and anticipated economic and other policy performance – an area where the incumbent enjoys clear informational advantage. Furthermore, because incumbents determine the timing of elections, they are better prepared for the campaign than their opponents. This also enables incumbents to better control the overall tone and direction of the electoral campaign. The short notice of opportunistic elections can catch even a strong opposition off guard. Given the informational and campaign advantages,

while miscalculations on the part of the incumbent are certainly possible, the general expectation is that incumbents will only call elections when they expect to benefit from them. If this is true, then opportunistic elections should result in an electoral benefit almost by definition.

Notice that the assumption about holding on to office may, but does not need to, presume vote or seat gains. In some instances, holding on to office may require simply minimizing losses rather than gaining new votes or seats. In operational terms, of course, minimizing electoral losses is similar to vote/seat maximization. Consider, for example, the case of the German elections of 2005. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder orchestrated a failure of a confidence vote in the Bundestag in order to be able to call early elections with the goal of minimizing electoral losses for his Social Democratic Party, which had been losing ground to the rival Christian Democratic Union in *Land* elections (Helms 2007).

Opportunistic elections provide no advantage

Not all studies agree that incumbents benefit when they can control election timing. For example, Alesina, Cohen and Roubini (1993) find no evidence of political surfing in a cross-national sample of advanced democracies (see also Alesina and Roubini 1992). While Palmer and Whitten (2000) attribute this non-finding to problems with the data and modeling, there are also convincing theoretical arguments that question the ability of incumbents to realize systematic advantages through the opportunistic timing of elections. For example, Smith (2004) points out an intriguing puzzle: if governments can control the timing of elections, why are early elections not more frequent with more incumbents taking advantage of their popularity? He then goes on to provide a thorough theoretical account of why we should not necessarily expect opportunistic elections to pay off for the incumbent.

Consider the incumbent's optimization problem under considerable uncertainty laid out previously. Because the incumbent incurs a loss for giving up what remains of the current term in office, it is not necessarily rational for the government to call elections *any time* when it is popular. Rather, to maximize the time in office in the current term, the best strategy is for the incumbent to call elections in the *last best possible* period, i.e., the last time before the regularly scheduled elections when the incumbent is popular. This makes for a much more difficult (and therefore more error prone) calculation than simply deciding based on current level of popularity. According to Smith (2004, 2003), incumbents call elections not just when they are popular but when they anticipate a future downturn in their popularity (as reflected, according to Smith's argument, in the economic decline).

Furthermore, Smith (2004) draws attention to the role of voters. Strategically timed elections themselves may send a signal to voters of impending decline in economic (or other government) performance. Rather than rewarding the incumbent, voters are likely to react negatively to the expected bad times ahead. As Smith (1996, 99) notes, "[u]pon seeing an early election, voters realize that future outcomes will be poor." This makes them discount the government's previous successes, and withdraw their support for the incumbent. If this is true, incumbents should never benefit from opportunistic elections. Smith goes on to argue that incumbents may still call early elections in anticipation of a decline in popularity if their current popularity is so high that electoral victory remains likely. However, there may not necessarily be a systematic positive effect of opportunistic elections on the incumbent's electoral performance. In fact, according to one of Smith's central hypotheses, incumbents may even systematically lose as a result of opportunistic elections. Smith (2003, 399) cites examples from the UK and France of opportunistically called elections, which resulted in significant downturns for the incumbent at

the polls. Similarly, Grofman and Roozendaal (1994) show with data from the Netherlands that parties which precipitate government termination and new elections may not yield any electoral benefit.

In addition to the negative consequences of an anticipated downturn in performance, voters may also react adversely to the incumbent's opportunism itself. This is more likely in contexts where – unlike in the UK, which is the locus of Smith's study – PMs do not have full discretion on timing elections. For example, the German Chancellor Schröder's provoking of early elections described above brought about a lot of negative publicity.⁴ In other settings too, proposals for calling early elections receive significant high-profile discussion in the media because they are perceived as shrewd manipulations of the intent of the democratic process.⁵ Opposition parties in particular have an incentive to portray such attempts as unnecessary and purely self-interested. Blais et al. (2004) found there to be a significant amount of resentment among some voters on the decision of the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien to call early election in 2000. They also noted measurable electoral costs to the incumbent Liberal Party as a result of this resentment.

Hypotheses

In sum, the existing literature proposes two conflicting hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1(a): Opportunistic elections are likely to benefit the incumbent because these elections are called at the peak of incumbent's popularity (as at least partially reflected in high levels of economic performance).

⁴ Bernstein, Richard. 2005. "German President dissolves parliament and calls early elections." *New York Times*, July 22; *The Economist*. 2005. "Schröder's surprise." May 26.

⁵ Ideon, Argo. 2014. "Ilves publicly bemoans capitulation of Kallas." *Postimees in English*, March 14.

Hypothesis 1(b): Opportunistic elections are not likely to benefit and may hurt the incumbent because such elections send a negative signal to voters who are likely to punish the incumbent for opportunism and/or an anticipated decline in performance.

Differentiating between these competing expectations is an empirical question – one that has not been addressed systematically and with cross-national data in the existing literature. This is the task to which we now turn.

2. Data and Empirical Strategy

To probe our hypotheses, we draw on an original dataset of 321 parliamentary elections held in 27 East and West European countries (see Appendix 1). The data span the entire post-war period from 1945, or democratization for countries that became democracies after World War II, to June 2013 and are organized as country-election panels.

Identifying opportunistic elections

Because our hypotheses focus on the effect of opportunistic election calling, we disaggregate national elections in two steps. First we distinguish between regular and early elections. Second, we disaggregate early elections further into two groups - opportunistic early elections and early elections that are triggered by government failure. The distinction between early and regular elections is in principle simple to draw – parliaments that end in regular elections run for their full constitutional term. In practice, however, this distinction is complicated by the fact that regular elections are frequently not held on the very last day of a government’s term. Often regular elections are scheduled with some flexibility – to coincide with a particular weekday, to avoid public holidays, etc. We follow Schleiter and Morgan-Jones’ coding scheme and “treat those elections that are held within a month of the expiry of a government’s term as regular

elections and those that are held before this threshold as early” (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009: 503).

Second, early parliamentary dissolutions can occur because of need or political opportunity (Strom and Swindle 2002: 575). We follow Schleiter and Issar (2014) and disaggregate early elections by the role of the incumbent, distinguishing between cases that are caused by incumbent opportunism and incumbent failure. Opportunistic elections are recorded when the cabinet, PM, or the governing parties in the legislature call an election in the expectation of securing electoral gains, or when they manufacture defeat with the same goal. In contrast, failure elections are triggered by conflicts and crises including the loss of legislative support for the cabinet, a major legislative defeat, conflict between coalition partners, intra-party conflict, conflict between the president and the government or assembly, or opposition protests and media pressure.⁶

Our data include 46 opportunistic elections, 191 regular elections and 84 failure elections. Both regular and failure elections are relevant control groups for an analysis of the effects of early election calling. If early election calling pays, it should do so in comparison to both control groups. The more stringent test, of course, is whether early election calling benefits the incumbent compared to regular elections alone, because incumbent electoral performance should be expected to suffer when government failure is the cause of an early election.⁷ Differentiating between the three types of elections is an important contribution to the existing literature on endogenous elections, which has largely overlooked these distinctions. Some treat all early

⁶ Since our focus is on the electoral accountability of regular governments we exclude technical and caretaker cabinets from this study. When previously scheduled elections terminate caretakers, we assign the election to the last properly constituted government.

⁷ Failure elections make up identical proportions (0.26) of the elections that terminate governments eligible for treatment and governments that are not eligible for treatment because the PM has no dissolution powers.

elections as opportunistic (Alesina et al. 1993); Palmer and Whitten (2000) recognize the difference between opportunistic and failure type elections, but group the latter together with regular elections. Neither strategy adequately tests the electoral consequences of opportunistic elections.

Table 1 takes a first glance at the correlation between early election calling and the incumbent's electoral performance using three different indicators of incumbent performance: the vote share won by the PM's party (variable name *PM party vote share*), the seat share won by the PM's party (*PM party seat share*), and the PM's survival in office (*PM survival*). The table reports the means and the difference-of-means between opportunistic elections and our two comparison groups – (1) regular and failure elections, and (2) regular elections only – as well as the *p*-values for the difference-of-means tests.

[Table 1 about here]

On all three indicators, opportunistically called elections correlate with substantively significantly better outcomes for the incumbent: in opportunistically timed elections the vote share secured by the PM's party is over 7 percentage points larger than in other elections, the seat share bonus is over 9.5 percentage points, and the proportion of PMs surviving in office is 0.70 (compared to 0.45 all other elections and 0.50 in regular elections). These differences are large and statistically highly significant. As anticipated, the differences are larger, especially with respect to PM survival, when we compare opportunistic elections to a control group that includes failure elections in addition to regular ones.

Addressing inferential challenges

These differences are suggestive, but testing the two competing hypotheses outlined above poses significant inferential challenges. Both the literature on opportunistic election calling and case

studies of individual elections in different countries suggest that incumbents tend to time opportunistic elections strategically to exploit favorable conditions and to avoid electoral risks. This strategic timing is designed to ensure that the circumstances in which opportunistically called elections are held differ from regular and failure elections in ways that matter for the incumbent's electoral performance. Governments can be expected to call opportunistic elections only when they anticipate that they will perform well. Early election calling, then, is endogenous to anticipated performance and anticipated performance is in part driven by a strong economy, which in turn conditions election outcomes. Both reciprocal causation and confounding are therefore key concerns that pose problems for causal inference. The challenge is to identify the effect of early election calling independently of the economy and anticipated electoral performance.

To address this challenge we follow the logic of the *intention to treat* principle (Dunning 2012: 87-88) and instrument for early election calling by using an index of the constitutional powers of PMs and governments to bring about early elections. The index allows us to compare the electoral performance of incumbents according to their constitutional powers to precipitate early elections, regardless of whether they have actually made use of their powers. This instrument is correlated with the treatment (early election calling), but given the supermajorities, veto gates and time delays that are typically built into procedures for constitutional changes, could not feasibly be influenced by incumbents in the short term for partisan political ends. We discuss this instrument, its validity and strength below.

3. The Instrument:

Constitutional Powers to Schedule Early Elections

In order to be able to schedule early elections opportunistically either the PM or the government collectively must have constitutional powers to precipitate early elections. An analysis of European constitutions reveals that powers to dissolve parliament and force early elections, vary tremendously. We exploit this constitutional variation to gauge the varying degree to which governments are eligible for the treatment of interest to us - opportunistic election calling. This inferential strategy depends on the assumption that constitutional powers to call elections are exogenous, i.e., unrelated to our dependent variable (incumbent electoral performance) in any way other than through their effect on opportunistic election calling.

The exogeneity of constitutional dissolution powers

An instrument is truly exogenous when there is no possibility of reverse causation – in our case anticipated electoral performance should not be able to trigger constitutional change – and when it is independent of all other causes of the dependent variable (electoral performance).

We can rule out reverse causation on empirical and theoretical grounds. In our sample of countries, with the sole exception of UK, dissolution rules are part of codified constitutions which are entrenched – that is protected against changes for partisan benefit by the incumbent government through supermajority requirements, veto gates and time delays. A change to the Danish constitution (1953, Art 88), for instance, requires a majority in two consecutive Parliaments: before and after a general election. In addition, the change must be endorsed by 40 percent of all registered voters in a referendum. Similarly, the German Basic Law (1949, Art 79) requires an absolute two-thirds majority of the Bundestag (lower house of parliament) along with a two-thirds majority of those present and voting in the Bundesrat (upper house). In 16 out of the 27 countries that we study, we can rule out any concern about reverse causation with certainty

because the constitutional rules which govern assembly dissolution remain unchanged for the entire period that we observe.

Of the 11 countries in which the constitution or dissolution rules change, three require intervening elections for a constitutional change to take effect, which prevents the use of constitutional change by an incumbent government as a means to achieve an opportunistic election. Moreover, the Swedish constitution (which changes twice) precludes opportunism by limiting the term of parliaments that result from early elections to the remainder of their predecessor's constitutional term. Of the remaining seven countries six impose super-majority requirements on constitutional changes ($3/5$, $2/3$, or $3/4$ typically in both houses of parliament) that require a level of cross-partisan support, which rules out the manipulation of dissolution rules for partisan advantage. Only in the UK – which lacks a codified, entrenched constitution – can changes to the dissolution rules for partisan advantage feasibly be achieved. However, the only change to the UK dissolution rules since 1945 was made in 2011 by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. Critically, for our purposes, the Act does not increase executive discretion to call elections, but constrains it by making parliamentary dissolution conditional on a successful no-confidence vote in the government (followed by the failure to form a replacement cabinet), or a $2/3$ majority in the assembly in favor of dissolution.

For the same reasons noted above, constitutional dissolution powers are also independent of other causes of electoral performance. Given the entrenchment of constitutions, there appears to be no plausible mechanism that could systematically link dissolution rules to the state of the economy, scandals, policy success or failure, or other factors that might influence an incumbent's electoral performance. In sum, constitutional dissolution rules can plausibly be conceived as exogenous in the countries that we observe. Changes to the dissolution rules are

extremely rare (we observe 13 new constitutions or changes to the dissolution rules in over 1186 country-years) and lack any discernible causal connection to incumbent electoral performance other than through early election calling. This makes constitutional dissolution powers an ideal instrument for opportunistic election calling.

The index of dissolution powers

The constitutional provisions that regulate parliamentary dissolution are often complex. They typically involve multiple actors in different capacities and a sizable minority of constitutions defines multiple different paths to dissolution. Our focus is on the powers available to governments to precipitate dissolution, which we measure in two ways. First, we distinguish the PM's prerogatives, and second, we use the powers available to the government as a whole to bring about dissolution through the PM's prerogatives, the government's collective powers, or the powers of its backbenchers in the assembly. We use an index recording these powers developed by Schleiter and Goplerud (2014), which applies uniform coding rules to all actors. The index is anchored at one end by a minimum value of 0, denoting the absence of any constitutional power to trigger dissolution (e.g., Norway), and at the other end by a maximum value of 10, which records complete discretion of a singular actor to dissolve the assembly (e.g., the British PMs 1945-2011). It proceeds from this maximum value, to which it applies a series of penalties. The penalties reflect: (i) constraints on an actor's ability to place dissolution on the agenda or advance the dissolution process (agenda setting role); (ii) constraints on their ability to take the final decision that triggers dissolution (trigger); (iii) collective action constraints which apply to collective actors – such as governments and legislatures – who must achieve internal consensus before they can use their institutional powers (collective); (iv) time barriers on dissolution - for instance bans on dissolution during the last part of the parliamentary or

presidential term (barriers); and (v) conditionality of the agenda setting role or the trigger powers of an actor on the binding consent of another actor or on non-binding consultation (conditionality). The index combines these penalties by applying them multiplicatively to the maximum score of 10 for each actor, which yields an actor-specific score on a continuous scale between 0 and 10. The precise scoring of each of these penalties is detailed in Appendix 2; Appendix 3 provides the index scores for the countries and time periods in our data.

Strength of the instruments

We are now in a position to test the strength of our instruments. Valid instruments must be strongly correlated with the endogenous treatment variable, in our case early election calling. Table 2 examines those correlations and suggests that the *PM's dissolution power* correlates more strongly with early election calling (0.52, 0.66, p -value: 0.000) than the joint *Government dissolution power* (0.35, 0.45, p -value: 0.000). This is consistent with the fact that PMs are most often policy dictators when they have a role in the dissolution process, whereas joint government powers are more frequently subject to complex conditions and checks that make opportunistic election calling more difficult as Appendix 3 illustrates.

The correlation between opportunistic election calling and dissolution powers is strongest in our restricted sample, which comprises just opportunistic and regular elections (excluding failure elections). Again, this is consistent with the nature of the constitutional provisions: while constrained dissolution powers are intended to enable politicians to resolve situations of government failure and crisis, they can often be manipulated to trigger elections opportunistically. Hence dissolution powers discriminate less clearly between opportunistic and other elections when these include failure elections in addition to the regular ones.

To summarize, all of the correlations reported in Table 2 are statistically highly significant indicating that our instruments for opportunistic election calling are strong. This is particularly true for the PM's dissolution power. In the analysis that follows, we use this stronger instrument and focus on the sample of elections that offers the most stringent test of our hypotheses: opportunistic and regular elections.

[Table 2 about here]

4. Opportunistic Election Calling and Electoral Performance

Strong and valid instruments, which ensure that treatment assignment is independent of other factors that influence outcomes should, as Dunning notes, produce clear results, even in unadjusted difference-of-means tests (Dunning 2012: 278-285). We therefore begin by presenting simple difference-of-means tests for incumbent advantage by PM powers to time early elections. For this purpose we dichotomize the PM's powers in two ways. First, we create an indicator variable that records PMs with the greatest discretion to call early elections (*PM dissolution power* ≥ 8). Second, we use an indicator for PMs who possess any institutional power at all to influence early election calling (*PM dissolution power* > 0). Between them, these two indicators cover the full institutional power scale. To the extent they yield similar results, we can have confidence that our results are independent of our dichotomization choices.

[Table 3 about here]

As in Table 1, we use three different indicators of incumbent performance: *PM party vote share*, *PM party seat share*, and *PM survival*. Table 3 shows that the PM's power to call elections opportunistically correlates with substantial incumbency advantages as captured by all three measures. On average, the party of a PM who has influence on early election timing secures a vote share that is 7 percentage points higher, and a seat-share that is 8-10 percentage

points higher than the parties of PMs who lack such powers. Consistent with these patterns, a PM with dissolution powers is about 20 percent more likely to hold on to office than one without such powers. All of these differences are statistically highly significant. Note that their magnitude corresponds very closely to the magnitude of the incumbency advantage in actual opportunistic elections (see Table 1). These substantively large, and statistically significant effects in the absence of controls give us confidence that any effects, which the more sophisticated instrumental variables analysis may uncover do not depend on ex post modeling adjustments or exacting assumptions about the underlying data-generating processes.

Instrumental variable models

Turning to the instrumental variable analysis we focus on the PM party's vote share as our main dependent variable because it offers the most direct test of our hypotheses concerning the link between opportunistic election calling and voter reactions. Neither seat shares nor re-election speak as clearly to hypothesis 1b (that voters are likely to punish the incumbent for opportunism or an anticipated downturn in performance), since these dependent variables only record the mediated effect of the electoral verdict as conditioned by the electoral system and coalition negotiations.

A brief comment is in order regarding one of the control variables. Since the size of a PM's party in the last election (our lagged dependent variable) influences the vote share the party is likely to win in the next election, it is one of our central controls. As our lagged dependent variable, it is affected by opportunistic election calling in exactly the same way as our dependent variable and instrumenting for opportunistic elections with the institutional power to time elections addresses the endogeneity concerns. To confront any lingering suspicion that this may a second endogenous variable in the models through which dissolution powers and opportunistic

election calling might influence the PMs' vote share in the next election we also replicate the entire analysis, instrumenting for this variable. We detail the results of this analysis in a separate section on robustness checks below.

Our main analysis is presented in Table 4. We begin by examining the first stage relationship between our instrument (the *PM's dissolution power*), and the event for which we are instrumenting (early election calling). If the instrument is valid, it should have a strong effect in predicting early election calling, irrespective of the inclusion of control variables. All coefficient estimates are reported with heteroscedasticity-robust country-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Note that the first-stage estimates of our two-stage models are OLS estimates (Models 1-4, Table 4) even though our dependent variable is dichotomous. We use OLS because it is the only estimation method that ensures consistency at the first stage. Unlike logistic regression, OLS estimation is guaranteed to produce first stage residuals that are uncorrelated with covariates and fitted values, and their consistency does not depend on the correct specification of the first stage functional form. To show that our conclusions do not depend on the use of OLS, we also perform a logistic regression analysis of the first stage relationship and report odds ratios with country-clustered standard errors (Models 1a-4a). The results are substantively very similar, irrespective of the functional form that is used.

Panel A of Table 4 reports the first-stage analysis of the instrumental variable regressions. It examines how well our instrument (*PM's dissolution power*) predicts early election calling and shows that the effect is strongly positive. The logistic regression models suggest that each one-step increase on the 10-point scale of PM's dissolution power raises the odds of early election calling by about 50 to 58 percent (p -value: 0.000) (Models 1a-4a). According to Model 1, the PM's dissolution power alone accounts for about 44 percent of the

variation in early election calling. This effect is robust to the inclusion of controls for time trends (*Decade*), the size of the PM's party (*PM vote share*), and the state of the economy (*GDP growth* and level of *Inflation*, lagged six months).⁸

[Table 4 about here]

Turning to the second stage of the analysis, Panel B reports the IV 2SLS estimates of the effect of opportunistic elections on the PM's vote share. We begin with a reduced form regression (Model 1), which suggests that the vote share bonus of opportunistic election calling may be as large as 11 percentage points. In subsequent models, we include controls for the effect that de-alignment has had since 1945 in depleting the vote share of prime ministerial parties as captured by decade dummies (Model 2), the vote share of the PM's party in the previous election (Model 3), and the state of the economy as measured by growth and inflation, six months lagged (Model 4). Of these controls, the size of the PM's party always correlates strongly and significantly with the vote share won by the PM in the next election, as expected. The economic controls – net of opportunistic election calling – have no statically significant effect. The full model (Model 4) suggests that incumbents realize a vote share bonus from opportunistic election calling of around 5.5 percent. This effect is large and substantively meaningful.

The bottom rows of Panel B report key test statistics. A Durbin-Wu-Hausman test suggests that econometrically, endogeneity bias is not a concern in these Models. The *F*-statistics show that our instrument for opportunistic election calling is strong (*F*-statistics: 51.90-80.99, $p = 0.000$). Its contribution to the explained variance in all four models is sizable as the partial R^2 statistics document (0.41-0.45).

⁸ The sample size decreases for the analyses that include the economic controls due to missing data. Data sources for all variables are detailed in Appendix 5.

Panel C reports the coefficient estimates for actual opportunistic election calling from the equivalent OLS specifications of Models 1-4, which differ from the instrumented results that estimate the effect of a PM's institutional powers to schedule opportunistic elections. The OLS estimates of the incumbent's advantage are consistently smaller than these instrumental variable estimates. A likely explanation for this difference is measurement error in our index of the PM's control over early election calling, broadly construed. As we noted above, constitutional provisions on early election calling are complex, and in a significant minority of European constitutions there are multiple parallel paths to dissolution involving different actors. Hence an index that records the PM's dissolution powers only gives a partial picture of the level of institutional control that this actor actually has over early election calling. As a result, our instrumental variable may exaggerate the impact of the PM's dissolution powers on the incumbent's vote share. Therefore, the average 5.5 percent vote share bonus for incumbents from opportunistic election calling should be interpreted as an upper bound.

Examining the causal chain

The instrumental variable analysis is predicated on the assumption that the causal mechanism by which constitutional dissolution powers shape an incumbent's electoral advantage runs through opportunistic election calling. This assumption remains untested in the instrumental variable models but has an observable implication that we can probe. Not only should our instrument be a powerful and statistically significant predictor of opportunistic election calling, but if included in a model of incumbent electoral advantage conditional on *actual* opportunistic election calling, it should have no effect on the incumbent's vote share bonus. Put differently, the causal effect in the conditional model should operate entirely through opportunistically called elections. We test this expectation by estimating separate models of the marginal effect of constitutional dissolution

powers on early elections, and the conditional effect of dissolution powers on incumbent electoral advantage, which guarantees that the error terms of the two equations are independent.

[Table 5 about here]

Limited variation of PM dissolution powers and their high correlation with opportunistic election calling give rise to collinearity problems in estimating the conditional model. For this reason we use our more continuous (though weaker) instrument in this analysis – the index of the *Government's dissolution power*. Table 5 reports the results of the analysis, using our full model specification, which includes a time trend, the lagged vote share of the PM's party, and controls for the state of the economy. The first two models report the marginal effect of government dissolution powers on early election calling using a logistic regression specification (Model 1), and for comparison to the instrumental variable analysis an OLS specification (Model 2). Both models suggest that the index of governmental dissolution power is a highly significant predictor of early election calling. A one-step increase on the 10-point scale of governmental dissolution powers raises the odds of early election calling by 55 percent. However, as Model 2 makes clear, governmental dissolution powers account for a much smaller proportion of the variance in early election calling ($R^2 = 0.261$) than PM dissolution powers (cf. panel A, Table 4). Model 3 then shows that government dissolution powers have no statistically significant effect on the incumbent's electoral advantage, conditional on *actual* early election calling. This demonstrates that the causal effect of constitutional dissolution powers runs through early election calling, as it should if our assumptions are correct.

5. Robustness

We probe the robustness of the results in two ways. First, we further test our identification strategy. Second, we explore how far the results are robust to an exacting series of alternative specifications including changes of the dependent variable, the sample of elections, the economic indicators, and additional controls. Appendix 4 presents the results of the additional tests.

As noted above, we confront any lingering suspicion that the size of the PM's party in the previous election (our lagged dependent variable) may be a second endogenous variable in the analysis by replicating models 3 and 4 from Table 4, this time instrumenting for this variable by the status of the PM's party as the median party in the legislature. Median party status is recorded on the basis of manifesto data (Volkens et al. 2013). As is well established, median parties win on average significantly larger vote shares than parties that do not control the median position in the policy space. This variable offers a strong instrument for the PM's current vote share and is uncorrelated with the dissolution index and any of the other controls. Table A4.1 presents the results of the analysis. The test statistics at the bottom of Panel B suggest that the median status of the PM's party is a strong instrument for the party's vote share (F -statistics: 30.48 and 24.41, $p = 0.000$) and the partial R^2 statistics show that this second instrument, too, makes a strong contribution to the explained variance in the models (0.25 and 0.26). Overall, this analysis reinforces the conclusion that opportunistic election calling secures incumbents a sizable vote share bonus. In fact, instrumenting for the vote share of the prime minister's party in the last election estimates an even larger magnitude of that effect at around 7 percent.

Next we examine how far clarity of responsibility may be an alternative explanation for the patterns that we find. How clearly voters can identify the politicians who are responsible for political and economic outcomes varies across political systems and countries that allow prime ministers to dissolve the assembly discretionarily also tend to feature higher clarity of

responsibility. This is especially true of political systems characterized by single party government, which also tend to be Europe's constitutional monarchies, and do not involve the head of state in parliamentary dissolution, but give these powers to the government (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009). A large literature has examined the effects of clarity of responsibility on voting behavior and a central finding of this work is that higher clarity strengthens the economic vote (Powell and Whitten 1993). To examine how far the vote share gap that we find can be attributed to clarity, which may allow incumbents to reap better rewards for economic performance, we test the role of clarity in our causal chain. Recent work suggests that the political cohesion of the government rather than institutional aspects of clarity of responsibility condition voter choices (Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci 2013). A central indicator of political cohesion is single party government. We therefore re-run the separate regressions that we used to test our causal chain (cf. table 5), inserting an indicator of single party government. We then add interactions of single party government with the state of the economy (measured by GDP growth and inflation) to capture the incentives of incumbents in high-clarity systems to capitalize on their economic performance. The results of the analysis are presented in table A4.2 and suggest that clarity of responsibility plays no role in the causal chain. Put differently, it is not high clarity, but opportunistic election timing that accounts for the vote share gains.

Finally, we test the robustness of the results to an exacting range of alternative specifications. Models 1-3 in Table A4.3 explore the robustness of the findings from our full model (model 4, Table 4) to alternative choices of the dependent variable using the *PM party's seat share*, and *PM survival* instead of *PM party vote share*. As a dichotomous dependent variable, the survival of the PM poses special modeling challenges in an instrumental variable framework. We employ two estimation strategies. First, we use bivariate probit regression for

endogenous regressors (Rivers and Vuong 1988; Wooldridge 2010). Because this approach requires strong specification assumptions, IV-2SLS is often preferred even when the dependent variable is dichotomous (see Angrist and Krueger 2001; Wooldridge 2010). We therefore also report a second, IV-2SLS estimate. As models 1-3 suggest, opportunistic election calling has a powerful effect on incumbent advantage measured in all of these different ways.

Next, we test the robustness of our results to changes in the sample of elections. First, we include failure elections in the analysis – which raises the number of observations in the full model to 262 (model 4). Second, we explore whether the results that we observe are driven by hyper-accountability in the new democracies of Eastern Europe (Roberts 2008). Specifically, the dual transitions to democracy and the market after 1989 in post-communist Europe affected the re-election probability of the governments that managed those transitions, which is likely to impact our estimates of incumbent advantage. We therefore re-estimate our full model excluding these new democracies from the analysis (model 5).

Model 6 uses alternative economic data and estimates our full model using quarterly data with one-quarter lags (instead of 6 month lags) to account for the possibility that politicians may schedule elections on the basis of very short-term results. In model 7 we include an additional control for the length of the parliamentary term in our analysis to address the concern that short terms (3 years in particular) may be too short as to allow politicians to derive significant benefits from opportunistic election calling.

As Table A4.3 shows, the finding that opportunistic elections result in a large incumbent advantage is robust to all of these alternative specifications.

6. Conclusion

Conventional models of accountability assume that elections serve as the primary instrument for voters to hold governments accountable. Voters are expected to exert significant influence on the political fate of their representatives. Our analysis has shown that the relationship between voters and representatives is not necessarily as unidirectional as the conventional model suggests. The capacity of some political leaders to decide on the timing of elections gives them direct influence on the outcome of electoral accountability. These leaders are likely to time elections not at random, but to correspond with conditions that are favorable to them electorally. Because the economic and political environment affect vote choice, political leaders can affect *how* voters vote by controlling *when* they vote. Unlike exogenous elections, where the fate of the politicians is at the mercy of the circumstances at the time of the election, opportunistically timed elections allow leaders to better secure their desired outcome. As a result, rather than functioning as instruments of democracy, elections become powerful political instruments for leaders. An incumbent's ability to control election timing can, therefore, fundamentally affect the nature and effectiveness of democratic accountability. That is, if accountability is a concern, election timing might be as important to consider as election conduct and voting rules – the main variables in the existing studies of accountability.

This is the central implication of our finding that opportunistic elections generate a significant electoral bonus for the incumbent PM compared to regularly scheduled and other types of elections. We have shown, with a keen eye on proper causal identification, that opportunistic elections help incumbent PMs to gain votes and seats, and to hold on to office. Using cross-sectional time-series data from Europe, we find that compared to regular elections, opportunistic elections secure for PMs a vote share bonus of about 7 percent and a 8-10 percent seat share bonus. Such elections also increase the PMs' odds of survival by about 20%. In our

most complete instrumental variable regression that accounts for reciprocal causation, confounding and alternative explanations (such as economic performance), we still find that opportunistic elections carry a vote share bonus of up to 5.5 percentage points. This is a very large effect and amounts to a vote share of a successful small party in the countries under study.

The size of the effect is substantial but not unrealistic considering the multiple advantages that incumbents enjoy due to their ability to strategically time elections. After all, they can ask voters to assess their performance at the most favorable time as far as the incumbents can forecast. This prediction is made much easier by the real informational advantage that the incumbents enjoy about current and future (economic) policy performance. No less importantly, endogenous election timing allows the incumbent to exploit not only their own strength, but also the weakness of the opposition. The element of surprise and short notice of opportunistic (as opposed to fixed) elections further plays into the hands of the incumbents and undermines the effectiveness of opponents' electoral campaigns. Each of these factors alone can be successfully employed for electoral gain; their cumulative effect is formidable.

In addition to the central theoretical contribution to the literature on democratic accountability, the empirical contributions of our paper are also significant. First, we offer a systematic empirical assessment of conflicting predictions about the consequences of opportunistic election timing. The existing literature provided two competing expectations about the effect of opportunistic election calling on incumbent's electoral performance. On the one hand, opportunistic elections were presumed to have a high payoff for the incumbent since incumbents were expected only to call elections when circumstances were favorable. On the other hand, scholars have argued that opportunistic elections may not necessarily benefit and in some cases may even harm incumbents, because early election calling might signal bad times

ahead to voters or voters might have a negative reaction to blatant opportunism. The evidence that we presented here supports the first line of reasoning. This suggests a simpler and perhaps more realistic calculation on the part of voters. But it also calls into question voters' ability to hold their political leaders accountable as discussed above.

Second, our study is innovative in terms of measurement and modeling. Ours is the first study to account for the considerable variation in the constitutional constraints on opportunistic election calling by using an index of incumbent's dissolution powers. We are also the first to explicitly differentiate between different types of early elections: those that are truly opportunistic vs. those that were precipitated by government failure. The latter are not strategic or opportunistic and should, therefore, not be treated as such. Finally, we take seriously the inferential challenges posed by reverse causation and confounding, and use instrumental variable analysis to identify the effect of opportunistic election timing on incumbent's electoral performance.

Table 1: Opportunistic elections and incumbent electoral performance (difference-of-means tests)

Dependent variable	Groups	Obs	Mean	Difference-of-means	Significance (<i>p</i> - value)
PM party vote share	opportunistic election	46	38.27		
	regular and failure elections	275	30.81	7.46	0.000
	regular elections	191	31.14	7.13	0.000
PM party seat share	opportunistic election	46	43.12		
	regular and failure elections	275	33.25	9.88	0.000
	regular elections	191	33.43	9.69	0.000
PM survival	opportunistic election	46	0.70		
	regular and failure elections	275	0.45	0.24	0.002
	regular elections	191	0.50	0.20	0.015

Table 2: Instrument strength - correlation of dissolution powers with opportunistic elections

Instrument	Sample	Obs	Correlation	<i>p</i> - value
PM dissolution power	all elections	321	0.521	0.000
	opportunistic and regular elections	237	0.665	0.000
Govt dissolution power	all elections	321	0.354	0.000
	opportunistic and regular elections	237	0.451	0.000

Table 3: PM dissolution powers and incumbent electoral performance (difference-of-means tests)

Dependent variable	Instrument	Obs	Mean	Difference of means	Significance (<i>p</i> -value)
PM party vote share	PM dissolution power ≥ 8	47	38.59		
		190	31.02	7.57	0.000
		72	37.22		
PM party seat share	PM dissolution power > 0	165	30.47	6.75	0.000
		47	43.52		
		190	33.28	10.24	0.000
PM survival	PM dissolution power ≥ 8	72	41.09		
		165	32.79	8.30	0.000
		47	0.70		
PM survival	PM dissolution power > 0	190	0.49	0.21	0.011
		72	0.68		
		165	0.47	0.21	0.003

Table 4: Instrumental Variable Regressions

Panel A: First Stage		Dependent variable: Opportunistic election							
	OLS	Logit	OLS	Logit	OLS	Logit	OLS	Logit	
	(1)	(1a)	(2)	(2a)	(3)	(3a)	(4)	(4a)	
PM dissolution power	0.067***	1.499***	0.068***	1.576***	0.067***	1.564***	0.065***	1.518***	
	(0.007)	(0.109)	(0.007)	(0.134)	(0.009)	(0.148)	(0.009)	(0.141)	
PM Party vote share					0.001	1.019	0.001	1.025	
					(0.003)	(0.040)	(0.003)	(0.042)	
GDP Growth (6m lagged)							-0.005	0.891	
							(0.007)	(0.086)	
Inflation (6m lagged)							-0.001	0.993	
							(0.001)	(0.012)	
Decade dummies	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Dummies for time series breaks	-	-	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	
Observations	237	237	237	237	237	237	198	190†	
R ²	0.443		0.472		0.473		0.460		

Panel B: Two Stage Least Squares		Dependent Variable: PM Party Vote Share (nxt election)			
		IV: Opportunistic election = PM dissolution power			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
Opportunistic election	10.929**	9.621**	4.620***	5.449**	
	(4.891)	(4.631)	(1.669)	(2.203)	
PM Party vote share			0.728***	0.707***	
			(0.065)	(0.073)	
GDP Growth (6m lagged)				-0.050	
				(0.257)	
Inflation (6m lagged)				-0.008	
				(0.049)	
Decade dummies	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Dummies for time series breaks	-	-	-	Yes	
R ²	0.043	0.195	0.614	0.646	
Durbin-Wu-Hausman test (p-value)	0.172	0.175	0.109	0.156	
F (opportunistic election)	80.99	73.98	53.64	51.90	
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	
partial R ² opportunistic election	0.442	0.452	0.440	0.408	

Panel C: Ordinary Least Squares		Dependent Variable: PM Party Vote Share (nxt election)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
Opportunistic election	7.134**	5.713**	2.732***	3.187***	
	(2.834)	(2.557)	(0.894)	(1.018)	
Observations	237	237	237	198	

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

† Eight observations dropped because decade 2010 predicts failure perfectly

Table 5: Examining the causal chain (separate regressions)

	DV: Opportunistic election		DV: PM party vote share (nxt)
	Logit (1)	OLS (2)	OLS (3)
Opportunistic election			2.543** (1.105)
Govt dissolution power	1.553*** (0.200)	0.047*** (0.016)	0.159 (0.170)
PM party vote share	1.042 (0.033)	0.004 (0.004)	0.716*** (0.072)
GDP growth (6m lagged)	0.871 (0.097)	-0.008 (0.010)	-0.069 (0.272)
Inflation (6m lagged)	1.000 (0.010)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.008 (0.050)
Decade dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.003*** (0.004)	-0.148 (0.207)	11.890*** (3.391)
Observations	190 [†]	198	198
R-squared		0.261	0.653

Country-clustered robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

[†] Eight observations dropped because decade 2010 predicts failure perfectly

Appendix 1: Countries and Elections Analysed

Country	Elections
Austria	1949 - 2008
Belgium	1949 - 2010
Bulgaria	1996 - 2009
Czech Rep	1996 - 2006 [†]
Denmark	1947 - 2011
Estonia	1999 - 2011
Finland	1948 - 2011
France	1962 - 2012
Germany	1953 - 2009
Greece	1981 - 2009
Hungary	1994 - 2010
Iceland	1946 - 2013
Ireland	1948 - 2011
Italy	1948 - 2008
Latvia	1995 - 2011
Lithuania	1996 - 2012
Luxemburg	1948 - 2009
Netherlands	1948 - 2012
Norway	1949 - 2009
Poland	1993 - 2011
Portugal	1980 - 2011
Romania	1991 - 2012
Slovakia	1994 - 2011
Slovenia	1992 - 2011
Spain	1979 - 2011
Sweden	1948 - 2010
United Kingdom	1950 - 2010

[†] The Czech Fischer government, which ended in the 2010 election was dropped from the sample because it is a technical government.

Appendix 2: Coding of the dissolution powers index (Schleiter and Goplerud 2014)

The index is based on a maximum score of 10, to which penalties are applied for constraints on the agenda setting role, power to trigger dissolution, collective action requirements, time barriers and conditionality requirements that apply to each country (*i*) and actor (*j*).

$$I_{i,j} = 10 * \alpha_{Role_{ij}} * \alpha_{Trigger_{ij}} * \alpha_{Collective_{ij}} * \alpha_{Barriers_{ij}} * \alpha_{Conditionality_{ij}}$$

Dissolution processes typically have multiple steps. An *initial* actor begins the process by placing dissolution on the political agenda and a *final* actor directly triggers the assembly's termination. There may also be *intermediate* actors who advance dissolution but do not directly trigger it. In some cases the initial and final actor are the same—for instance the Danish prime minister can unilaterally dissolve parliament.

Initial actors receive an agenda setting “role” score. The magnitude of this score depends on whether they have direct or only indirect ability to begin the dissolution process. Actors who can place dissolution *directly* on the political agenda (by requesting dissolution, designating of a confidence vote, or voting or deciding to dissolve) are not penalized (score 1). Actors whose ability to begin the dissolution process is *indirect* – through actions that can have the consequence of dissolution, but do not place it on the agenda directly – are penalized. The penalty depends on the severity of the constraint: an indirect ability to place dissolution on the political agenda through normal political actions (e.g., rejecting a government's legislative program, rejecting a budget, voting no-confidence) is penalized by a factor of 0.5; the ability to make dissolution available indirectly through crisis actions (e.g., an assembly that remains inquorate for too long, investiture failure) is penalized by a factor of 0.25. In those cases, where an actor can begin the dissolution process by multiple different actions, a small benefit is added for each additional action (0.05 for a normal action, 0.025 for each crisis action).

Intermediate and final actors receive a “role” or “trigger” score that depends on the role score of the initial actor, because their ability to advance or trigger dissolution is limited to those circumstances in which the initial actor can put dissolution on the table. Thus, if the initial actor's role score is less than 1, the subsequent actor's score is penalized equivalently. If the previous actor's score is 1, intermediate and final actors receive score that is penalized by 0.50 since they can only advance or effect dissolution conditional on the choice of the initial actor. Actors who can advance or trigger dissolution in multiple different ways secure a small benefit for each additional path (0.05 for a normal action, 0.025 for each crisis action).

Collective actors incur a penalty to reflect the fact that they must achieve a degree of internal consensus in order to make use of their constitutional powers. Table A1.1 below shows the penalties applied. Each increase in the threshold for collective action is penalized by a further 0.15.

Table A2.1: Collective action penalties

Type of Actor	$\alpha_{Collective}$
President or Prime Minister	1.00
Government	0.85
Legislature (Simple Majority)	0.70
Legislature (Absolute Majority) ⁹	0.55
Legislature (2/3rds Majority)	0.40
Legislature (3/5ths Majority)	0.25

Barriers to dissolution during particular time periods are imposed by a number of constitutions (for instance dissolution may be ruled out in the last 6 months of parliament's term, or in the last year of a president's term). We count each time restriction in terms of fractions of a year. Time restrictions that affect all actors in the process are applied to all scores. Time barriers to dissolution are scored as:

$$\alpha_{Barriers} = 1 - b_{Time}(N_{Years})$$

$$b_{Time} = 0.10$$

Conditionality penalties are imposed when an actor's decision is *conditional* on the (binding) agreement, or (non-binding) consultation with other actors. Where multiple actors must agree or be consulted, each constitutes a distinct hurdle and the score is penalized correspondingly. The formula applied is:

$$\alpha_{Conditionality} = (1 - b_{Consent})^{N_{Consent}} * (1 - b_{Consult})^{N_{Consult}}$$

$$b_{Consult} = 0.05; b_{Consent} = 0.50$$

Table A1.2 presents the scores for Germany (1949-present) as an illustrative example. The German constitution envisages two paths to dissolution: investiture failure and a failed confidence motion (or no-confidence vote). The PM can only influence the latter path. The PM's score, which is of interest for the purposes of this article, is highlighted. S/he can initiate the dissolution process by asking for a vote of confidence, a choice to which no role, collective action or time barrier penalties apply. However, whether or not dissolution occurs is conditional upon the assembly's defeat of the confidence motion and the president's choice to dissolve ($10 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 = 2.5$).

Table A2.2: Coding of the dissolution powers for Germany

Germany							
Actor	Path	Role	Trigger	Collective	Barrier	Conditionality	Overall
PM	Failed Confidence	1		1	1	0.25	2.5
Legislature	Failed Confidence	0.5		0.7	1	0.50	1.75
President	Failed Confidence		0.5	1	1	1	5

⁹ Following Shugart and Carey (1992), this includes other super-majorities that require less than a two-thirds vote.

Appendix 3: Dissolution Power Scores

Country	Period	PM dissolution power	Govt. dissolution power
Austria	1945 – 2013	0	7
Belgium	1946	0	8.5
	1995 - 2013	0	5.5
Bulgaria	1991 – 2013	0	1.71
Czech Republic	1993	0	1.11
	2009 – 2013	0	2.44
Denmark	1945 – 2013	10	10
Estonia	1992 – 2013	0	3.85
Finland	1945	0	0
	1991 – 2013	5	5
France	1959 – 2013	0	0
Germany	1949 – 2013	2.5	2.5
Greece	1977 – 2013	0	4.25
Hungary	1990 – 2013	0	7
Iceland	1944 – 2013	0	0
Ireland	1944 – 2013	10	10
Italy	1946	NA	NA
	1947 – 2013	0	0
Latvia	1993 – 2013	0	0
Lithuania	1992 – 2013	0	2.5
Luxemburg	1945 – 2013	0	8.5
Netherlands	1946 – 2013	0	8.5
Norway	1945	0	0
Poland	1992 – 2013	0	4
Portugal	1976	0	3.44
	1982- 2013	0	0
Romania	1990	NA	NA
	1991 – 2013	0	0.88
Slovakia	1993	0	1.75
	1999 – 2013	0	2.02
Slovenia	1992 – 2013	5	5
Spain	1977 – 2013	8.55	8.55
Sweden	1945	0	8.5
	1971	9.58	9.58
	1975 – 2013	0	8.29
UK	1945	10	10
	2010 – 2013	0	7

Note: “NA” denotes lack of information on the transitional provisions that governed dissolution before ‘founding’ elections (Italy) and the adoption of the first democratic constitution in Romania.

Appendix 4: Robustness Tests

Table A4.1: Instrumental variable regressions (two instruments)

Panel A: First Stage	Dependent variable: Opportunistic election	
	OLS	OLS
	(1)	(2)
PM dissolution power	0.068*** (0.008)	0.066*** (0.008)
PM party vote share	0.020 (0.047)	0.015 (0.776)
GDP growth (6m lagged)		-0.004 (0.007)
Inflation (6m lagged)		-0.001 (0.001)
Decade dummies	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks	Yes	Yes
Observations	231	195
R ²	0.481	0.478
<hr/>		
Panel B: Two Stage Least Squares	Dependent Variable: PM Party Vote Share (nxt election)	
	IV1: Opportunistic election = PM dissolution power	
	IV2: PM Pty previous vote share = PM median party	
	(1)	(2)
Opportunistic election	6.764** (3.014)	7.027** (3.171)
PM party vote share	0.489*** (0.140)	0.516*** (0.145)
GDP growth (6m lagged)		-0.046 (0.270)
Inflation (6m lagged)		-0.022 (0.049)
Decade dummies	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks	Yes	Yes
Observations	231	195
R ²	0.564	0.617
Durbin-Wu-Hausman test (p-value)	0.026	0.069
F (opportunistic election)	44.68 (0.000)	65.02 (0.000)
partial R ² opportunistic election	0.461	0.439
F (PM pty vote share)	30.48 (0.000)	24.41 (0.000)
partial R ² PM pty vote share	0.250	0.257

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A4.2: Robustness of causal chain to clarity of responsibility (separate regressions)

	DV: Opportunistic election			DV: PM party vote share (nxt)		
	Logit			OLS		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Opportunistic election				2.600** (1.131)	2.522** (1.146)	2.748** (1.133)
Govt dissolution power	1.525*** (0.203)	1.535*** (0.212)	1.560*** (0.220)	0.160 (0.170)	0.168 (0.170)	0.140 (0.165)
Single party government	2.548 (1.811)	1.577 (1.330)	1.631 (1.357)	-0.341 (1.560)	-1.606 (2.092)	1.160 (1.928)
PM party vote share	1.014 (0.022)	1.014 (0.020)	1.016 (0.022)	0.725*** (0.080)	0.721*** (0.081)	0.718*** (0.082)
GDP growth (6m lagged)	0.872 (0.097)	0.782*** (0.066)	0.882 (0.100)	-0.069 (0.272)	-0.208 (0.311)	-0.047 (0.260)
Inflation (6m lagged)	0.997 (0.009)	0.995 (0.009)	0.985 (0.039)	-0.008 (0.050)	-0.012 (0.050)	0.005 (0.040)
SP government*GDP growth		1.219 (0.179)			0.459 (0.489)	
SP government*Inflation			1.075 (0.076)			-0.223 (0.185)
Decade dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.006*** (0.006)	0.007*** (0.007)	0.005*** (0.005)	11.694*** (3.185)	12.242*** (3.328)	11.486*** (3.082)
Observations	190 [†]	190 [†]	190 [†]	198	198	198
R-squared				0.654	0.656	0.659

Country-clustered robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

[†] Eight observations dropped because decade 2010 predicts failure perfectly

Table A4.3: Alternative specifications (instrumental variable regression second stage results)

	Alternative Dependent Variables:			IV: PM Dissolution Power		Quart. Econ. Data:	Additional control:
	PM Seat Share (nxt)		PM Survival	All elections (including failure elections)	Western Europe only	Lagged by one quarter	Length of parliamentary term
	(IV 2SLS)	(IV 2SLS)	(bivariate probit)				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Opportunistic election	9.399** (4.528)	0.383*** (0.118)	0.070*** (0.024)	5.394** (2.234)	2.648*** (0.997)	6.287** (2.983)	6.137** (2.494)
PM party vote share	0.751*** (0.096)	0.005 (0.004)	0.014 (0.011)	0.674*** (0.070)	0.830*** (0.044)	0.675*** (0.086)	0.709*** (0.074)
GDP growth (6m lagged)	-0.109 (0.349)	0.001 (0.012)	-0.001 (0.031)	0.028 (0.224)	0.238 (0.167)	0.148 (0.155)	-0.043 (0.259)
Inflation (6m lagged)	-0.016 (0.056)	0.001 (0.003)	0.000 (0.006)	-0.040 (0.060)	0.018 (0.136)	-1.220* (0.655)	-0.008 (0.049)
Parliamentary term (yrs)							-0.959 (0.886)
Decade dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.514	0.094		0.581	0.820	0.530	0.643
Constant	8.034 (5.557)	0.248 (0.182)	-0.030 (0.406)	4.698 (3.953)	-0.935 (2.620)	8.099** (3.931)	10.468* (5.804)
Observations	198	198	198	262	158	155	198

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Appendix 5: Data Sources

Government data	Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2009), augmented using Andersson, Staffan; Bergman, Torbjörn & Ersson, Svante (2012). “The European Representative Democracy Data Archive” (www.erdda.se); Keesings; EJPR and country specific sources.
PM party vote share	<i>Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive</i> ; Andersson, Staffan; Bergman, Torbjörn & Ersson, Svante (2012). “The European Representative Democracy Data Archive” (www.erdda.se); augmented using http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/countries.html as well as country specific sources.
PM party seat share	<i>Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive</i> ; Andersson, Staffan; Bergman, Torbjörn & Ersson, Svante (2012). “The European Representative Democracy Data Archive” (www.erdda.se); augmented using http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/countries.html as well as country specific sources.
PM party median status	Volkens, Andrea, Pola Lehmann, Nicolas Merz, Sven Regel, Annika Werner, with Onawa Promise Lacewell, and Henrike Schultze. 2013. <i>The Manifesto Data Collection. Manifesto Project (MRG/CMP/MARPOR). Version 2013b</i> . Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB).
Constitutional dissolution powers	International Constitutional Law Project (http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/) as well as country specific sources.
GDP growth	Maddison Project Database (2013 version), Bolt, J. and J. L. van Zanden (2013). The First Update of the Maddison Project; Re-Estimating Growth Before 1820. Maddison Project Working Paper 4.
Inflation	Eurostat, OECD.

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