

## **The Electoral Benefits of Opportunistic Election Timing**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the effect of opportunistic election timing on the incumbent's electoral performance. While the existing literature on parliamentary dissolution and election timing does not directly address this question, we show that the theoretical implications which derive from it lead to contradictory predictions about the ability of incumbent governments to benefit from strategically timed elections. We advance the theoretical debate by presenting the first cross-national comparative analysis of the electoral effects of opportunistic election timing, drawing on an original dataset of 318 parliamentary elections in 27 East and West European countries. In order to identify the effect of opportunistic election calling on incumbent's electoral performance, we rely on instrumental variable regression. The results demonstrate that opportunistic election calling generates a vote share bonus for the incumbent of as much as 5 percentage points, and is thereby likely to affect electoral accountability.

**Short title:** Opportunistic Election Timing

**Keywords:** opportunistic election timing; incumbency advantage; political surfing; parliamentary dissolution; electoral success

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Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop>)

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When incumbents control the timing of elections, can they also control their electoral fate? Many parliamentary systems give incumbent governments some choice over the timing of national elections. In fact, according to our data, in post-war Europe all but seven out of 35 constitutions include some such provisions and, as a result, every seventh election has been opportunistically timed. While powers to schedule elections are of crucial importance in any parliamentary democracy, their consequences for the incumbent's electoral fate remain poorly understood. The theoretical literature on election timing has focused on the question of *when* are incumbents likely to call opportunistic elections and not on whether incumbents can actually use such elections to their advantage (e.g., Smith 2004). What is more, the theoretical arguments that we derive from that literature lead to two *contradictory* predictions about the electoral benefits of opportunistic timing over regular timing. On the one hand, incumbents are expected to time elections to win (e.g., Chowdhury 1993; Ito 1990; Kayser 2005, 2006), and therefore, by assumption we should see them win opportunistic elections more often than regular elections. On the other hand, incumbents may be fallible and voters may punish opportunism (Blais et al, 2004; Smith 2004), which suggests that, on balance, opportunism may not actually pay. Empirical studies on the topic are few and present mixed results (Blais et al. 2004; Grofman and Roozendaal 1994; Roy and Alcantra 2012; and Smith 1996, 2003, 2004). Furthermore, all of these works focus on a single country and some do not directly address the question of interest.<sup>1</sup> While these studies make

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<sup>1</sup> Smith's work relies on a case study of the UK and focuses on the signaling effects of early elections by comparing election results to voter support for the incumbent before the elections were called. Grofman and Roozendaal (1994) focus on ten incumbent governments that orchestrated early elections in the Netherlands and describe that some of them gained while others lost votes. Blais et al. (2004) use survey data about the Canadian early elections of 2000 and find

important contributions to our understanding of early election timing in their own right, a generalizable answer to the above question has yet to be provided.

Better understanding the electoral consequences of opportunistic timing has high theoretical and practical relevance. The constitutional choice of how much control to grant incumbents over the timing of elections touches on fundamental issues of accountability because leaders who can control election timing do not need to face voters at fixed times, when circumstances may be adverse. Instead, 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, such incumbents may be able to affect *how* voters vote by controlling *when* they vote. Opportunistic election timing may therefore be comparable to other phenomena that feed into incumbency advantage and thereby affect (and sometimes distort) accountability, such as partisan gerrymandering. With no guidance from systematic empirical studies, these potential concerns keep fueling recurring debates about whether to adopt or keep fixed election dates among scholars and practitioners in different countries including the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.<sup>2</sup>

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that the early timing provoked resentment among some voters. Roy and Alcantara (2012) employ an internet-based voting experiment to study the effect of opportunistic election timing on electoral gains in the context of Canada. They report that electoral gains are measurable, but only if elections are timed immediately after heightened levels of positive media coverage of government.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Library. 2010. "Fixed-Term Parliaments." SN/PC/831; Parliamentary Service. 2013. *Parliamentary Terms: Fixed and Flexible*. New Zealand: Parliamentary Library Research Paper; Roy and Alcantara (2012).

Our results reveal that opportunistic election calling generates a significant incumbency advantage in terms of gaining votes and seats, and holding on to office. The vote share bonus that opportunistic elections offer over regularly scheduled elections may be as large as 5 percentage points. These results are based on a comparative analysis of an original dataset that includes 318 parliamentary elections in 27 East and West European countries, from 1945 to the present. We rely on instrumental variable regression as the identification strategy, and perform numerous robustness tests to demonstrate that the effect is unequivocal. That said, our results do not imply that opportunistic elections are costless to call. As we explain in more detail below, because of uncertainty about (perceived) government performance, opportunistic election timing is inherently risky. Some voters may punish incumbents for their opportunism or downward adjust their assessment of government performance. Our findings simply imply that the benefits generated by favorable conditions at the election time *on average* outweigh such costs.

### **Theory: Strategic Timing and Electoral Outcomes**

The existing literature on election timing focuses primarily on the conditions under which incumbents are likely to strategically dissolve the parliament and call new elections.<sup>3</sup> No fully

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<sup>3</sup> 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, the political economy literature includes a series of theoretical works and single country studies considering election

articulated argument exists on the electoral consequences of opportunistic timing. Here, we build such an argument on the basis of the implications drawn from the election timing and performance-based voting literatures. Much of the election timing literature assumes, but does not test, that if such elections are called, they must benefit the incumbent. However, this assumption downplays the uncertainty about their electoral prospects that the incumbents face when scheduling elections, and ignores a possible negative reaction from voters to the opportunism of incumbents. Accounting for these factors makes the incumbent's payoff from opportunistic elections much less clear. In what follows, we outline these competing arguments in more detail. We believe that, theoretically, both sides of the argument are equally compelling, which is why we need a systematic cross-national, comparative analysis of the electoral consequences of opportunistic election timing to move the debate forward.

### ***Opportunistic elections benefit incumbents***

A significant literature has shown that elections function as a sanctioning mechanism that voters use to reward or punish incumbent governments for past performance (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Powell 2000). The most important and most extensively studied performance measure is the functioning of the national economy. A vast literature consistently finds that incumbent governments are likely to be rewarded electorally when the economy is performing well and punished when the economic conditions decline (see Nadeau et al. 2012 for a recent review; see also Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Nannenstad and Paldam 1994). In a recent comprehensive cross-national study, Barreiro (2008) shows that economic growth is the single most significant and consistent predictor of incumbent's electoral performance timing and political business cycles (e.g., Cargill and Hutchison 1991; Chowdhury 1993; Ito 1990; Ito and Park 1988; Kayser 2005, 2006; Reid 1998).

regardless of the institutional structure, wealth of the country, or partisanship of the government.<sup>4</sup> Performance based voting extends beyond economic voting to other aspects of government performance as well (Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci 2013; Klasnja et al. 2014; Tavits 2007).

With this in mind, re-election oriented incumbents prefer that elections occur not at random times, but at the height of their performance. Indeed, a number of studies on the political economy of elections argue that for self-interested reasons, incumbent governments aim 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). For example, Chowdhury (1993) finds for India that economic growth influences election timing, and Palmer and Whitten (2000) confirm this finding cross-nationally (see also Kayser 2005, 2006). A government's popularity can also result from other developments within or outside their own control, and governments can sometimes simply benefit from the opposition's unpopularity (see Roy and Alcantara 2012 for examples).

While timing elections at the height of a government's popularity is tempting, it is not risk free. Even in the presence of performance-based retrospective voting, the incumbent's re-election prospect is inherently uncertain. Because of this, incumbents face opportunity costs. They can call

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure, several studies argue that electoral accountability for government performance is conditional on the institutional design of democracies, such as the level of clarity of responsibility (Powell and Whitten 1993; Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci 2013). Others claim that the type of government (single party vs. coalition) affects the electoral fate of the incumbents (Barreiro 2008). We explore the effects of these variables in the empirical section of the paper under robustness checks. Here, we focus on those explanations of electoral performance that election timing could possibly relate to.

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. Timing decisions are prone to error because they are based on the incumbent's best guesses rather than any certainty about their current and future comparative advantages (Balke 1990; Kayser 2005). Still, the incumbent does not operate in an information vacuum. They can assess their popularity using public opinion polls, as well as current and anticipated economic and other policy performance – an area where the incumbent enjoys clear informational advantages. 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 political surfing argument suggests that incumbents will only call early elections when they expect to benefit from them. If incumbents are capable of making these calculations, then they should do better in opportunistically timed elections compared to regularly scheduled ones.

Anecdotally, we see numerous instances of incumbent governments attempting to engage in political surfing. For example, the Canadian Prime Minister Chretien called early elections opportunistically both in 1997 and 2000 (Roy and Alcantara 2012). In the former case, he was banking on a surge in the polls and disarray in the opposition Bloc Quebecois. In the latter instance, the goal was to take advantage of the unpreparedness of the newly rearranged Canadian Alliance Party – the official opposition in the House of Commons. 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 ahead of time in the hope of capitalizing on economic growth and low unemployment.<sup>5</sup> John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister, timed the 1998 elections early to benefit from a proposed tax reform and income tax cuts (Warhurst 2000). Similarly, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher called elections before schedule in 1983 and again in 1987. In the former case she capitalized on the victory in the Falkland War,<sup>6</sup> and in the latter she seized on a strong economy and solid opinion poll lead over the opposition Labour Party to call elections that were not due for almost a year. The expectations of all of these leaders were that they would reap electoral benefits from opportunistic election calling.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Opportunistic elections provide no advantage***

Some studies, however, find no cross-national evidence of political surfing (Alesina and Roubini 1992; Alesina, Cohen and Roubini 1993). If incumbents do not time elections at the peak of their performance then it is also less clear that they gain any additional benefits from opportunistically timed elections compared to regular ones. While Palmer and Whitten (2000) attribute this non-finding to problems with the data and modeling, there are also convincing theoretical arguments

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<sup>5</sup> Traynor, Ian. 2007. "Danish PM wins gamble on early election." *The Guardian*, November 13.

<sup>6</sup> 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](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/basics/4393313.stm)

<sup>7</sup> To re-iterate, we do not claim that calling an election leads to governments being more popular. Our argument is that the ability to control election timing allows incumbents to benefit electorally from holding the elections under more favorable circumstances than might otherwise have obtained.

that question the ability of incumbents to realize systematic advantages through the opportunistic timing of elections (Smith 2004).

Specifically, Smith (2004) argues that 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 the 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 (i.e., economic decline).

Furthermore, Smith (2004) also assumes a savvy voter, one who not only cares about past performance but also can read signals about anticipated future performance. He argues that strategically timed elections, especially if they are unanticipated, 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. Smith goes on to suggest 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, in light of the penalties, it is “difficult to argue that endogenous timing privileges the incumbent” (Smith 2004, 241). Citing examples from the UK and France of opportunistically called elections, which resulted in significant downturns for the incumbent at the polls (Smith

2004, 178-199), he concludes that “[t]he flexibility to call elections when they are most advantageous is not the great incumbency advantage one might imagine” (Smith 2004, 241). 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. Proposals for calling early elections often receive high-profile discussion in the media because they are perceived as shrewd manipulations of the intent of the democratic process. 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 significant resentment among some voters of the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien’s decision to call early elections in 2000. They also noted measurable electoral costs to the incumbent Liberal Party as a result of this resentment.

In sum, we arrive at two contradictory predictions about the consequences of opportunistic elections:

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

Hypothesis 2: Opportunistic elections are *not* more likely to benefit and may hurt the incumbent compared to regularly timed elections because such elections send a negative signal to voters who may punish the incumbent for opportunism and/or an anticipated decline in performance.

Since both sets of predictions are backed by equally plausible theoretical arguments, adjudicating between the two requires a systematic comparative cross-national empirical study of

the electoral effects of opportunistic timing. By providing the first such analysis, this paper significantly advances the understanding of flexible election timing as an institution.

It is important to note that empirical support for one of the two hypotheses does not rule out that both theoretical dynamics could be at play. It may be true that strategic elites call elections opportunistically only when they expect to see electoral benefits. Yet it may be simultaneously true that at least *some* voters are sophisticated and anticipate an imminent downturn in performance when opportunistic elections are called or they may simply be put off by the opportunism. In both cases, they would seek to punish the incumbent. Our goal in this paper is to test the stated hypotheses and not the entire causal story. That is, we are interested in understanding which of these arguments, on balance, gives a more accurate prediction of the electoral consequences of opportunistic timing.

### **Data and Empirical Strategy**

We draw on an original dataset of 318 parliamentary elections held in 27 East and West European countries.<sup>8</sup> The data span 1945 (or democratization) to June 2013 and are organized as country-election panels.

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<sup>8</sup> The study includes data from the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK. See Supporting Information (SI) 1 for information about the specific time period covered for each country. An extension of the study to majoritarian parliamentary democracies outside Europe, such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand is beyond

Our empirical strategy is complicated by the fact that the relevant counterfactual – the outcome of an alternative election that did not occur – is not observable. That is, we cannot observe a regular election that did not transpire because the incumbent timed the election early, or an opportunistic election that was not called because the government went to full term. For this reason, to best approximate the relevant counterfactual comparison, our empirical analysis proceeds in two steps: We begin with a simple comparison of the elections that we can observe. This analysis juxtaposes the outcomes of opportunistic elections to alternative elections that occur (i) exogenously in contexts in which incumbents do not have the constitutional power to call elections early and (ii) endogenously when incumbents choose not to use their dissolution powers. Although this comparison may be biased by the endogeneity of strategically scheduled elections, it sheds some valuable preliminary light on the rival expectations. If hypothesis 1 is true, incumbents should perform significantly better in opportunistically called elections than in the other types of elections. If hypothesis 2 is true, no such advantage should be evident. Second, we address the challenges posed by the endogeneity of strategically called elections and adopt an instrumental variable strategy to identify the effect of opportunistic election timing. Our instrument is a measure of the incumbent's constitutional powers to bring about early elections. The instrument correlates directly with the treatment of interest – opportunistic election calling - without being linked to anticipated incumbent electoral performance. This analysis focuses as closely as possible on the relevant counterfactual by juxtaposing predicted opportunistic and regular elections. We discuss this instrumental variable strategy in more detail below. For now, we turn to the comparison of leaders' electoral performance in opportunistic and other elections.

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the scope of this paper but would likely strengthen the results given the regular occurrence of opportunistic elections in these countries.

### *Identifying opportunistic elections*

In order to make opportunistic elections observable, we disaggregate national elections in two steps.<sup>9</sup> First, we distinguish between regular and early elections. This is in principle simple to do – parliaments that end in regular elections run for their full constitutional term. In practice, however, the distinction is complicated by the fact that regular elections are frequently not held on the very last day of a parliament’s term. The Slovenian (2013, Art. 81) and German (Art. 38) constitutions, for instance, define a window for regular elections that opens two months before the expiry of parliament’s term. We use two methods to identify regular elections in our data. First, we apply Jenks’ (1967) natural breaks classification method to determine the most appropriate temporal cut-off for classifying regular elections. This method categorizes cases so as to minimize the variance within classes while maximizing the variance between them, and robustly identifies elections that occur up to 60 days prior to the expiry of the parliamentary term as a single group. Second, we conduct a qualitative analysis to determine the nature of all elections that occur within a year of the end of the parliamentary term. This identifies a second group of elections as regular: A range of countries schedule legislative (and other) elections during a specific month (for example, until late 1970s, assembly elections in Iceland were held in June). After early elections in such countries, the next regular elections occur in the month in which they are traditionally held. We record such elections as regular.

Second, since early parliamentary dissolutions can occur either because of need or political opportunity (Strom and Swindle 2002, 575), we distinguish between elections that are caused by incumbent opportunism and those that occur in the context of incumbent failure. The features of

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

the elections are determined through a qualitative content analysis of news reports (Lexis Nexis and Keesing's Record of World Events), the annual reports in *European Journal of Political Research*, election reports in *Electoral Studies*, websites, the secondary literature and the biographies of Prime Ministers. We code elections as opportunistic when they are (i) triggered by the incumbent government and (ii) there is evidence of opportunism by the incumbent, defined as capitalizing on public opinion support, strong performance of the government, or opposition weakness (unpopularity, divisions, leaderlessness). When incumbents are additionally aiming to manage difficulties and risks (e.g. coalition tensions, anticipated electoral losses, or policy conflicts), we code opportunistic elections only when there is no evidence of actual or imminent government failure (see definition below). In contrast, failure elections are coded when early elections are (i) triggered by the opposition, or (ii) triggered by the incumbent to manage actual or imminent government failure (defined as the loss of support for the government's legislative program, loss of parliamentary confidence, withdrawal of a coalition partner, resignation of the PM, or the imminent occurrence of any of these events). When incumbents additionally have opportunistic motivations (for instance limiting electoral losses, taking advantage of opposition disarray, or resolving leadership challenges), we code failure elections only when government failure has occurred or when it is imminent and the predominant cause of the termination.

As these definitions indicate, a sub-group of early elections can simultaneously feature attributes of incumbent opportunism and failure. The potentially ambiguous cases are failure elections called by incumbent governments that aim to minimize their losses, and opportunistic elections where the incumbent is in some difficulty. This group amounts to 43 cases, which we coded on the basis of whether the failure or the opportunistic attributes predominated. These judgments are made on the basis of content analysis (using the primary and secondary sources

detailed above). To probe the robustness of these classifications, we conducted inter-coder reliability tests. Three coders independently classified 53 cases – 10 unambiguous cases and all of the 43 potentially ambiguous ones. This resulted in two groups of cases: One group was classified by coders with 100 per cent reliability and included all unambiguous cases as well as 30 of the potentially ambiguous ones. The second group included 11 highly ambiguous cases in which some coders deviated from our classification and inter-coder reliability was lower (81.23 per cent) precisely because both failure and opportunistic attributes were strongly in evidence.<sup>10</sup> These cases account for only 3.5 per cent of the elections in our data. The results of the analyses that follow are robust to excluding them.<sup>11</sup> SI2 gives examples of how the coding rules were applied.

Our data include 44 opportunistic elections, 186 regular elections and 88 failure elections. Opportunistic elections account for every seventh election in Europe since 1945, and occur in very diverse constitutional settings ranging from complete prime ministerial discretion (as in Denmark, the UK up to 2011, and Ireland) to much more restrictive constitutional frameworks such as those of Greece or Germany. This diversity reflects the fact that nearly all European constitutions allow governments a degree of influence on election timing.

The differentiation between the three types of elections is an important contribution, because the existing literature on endogenous elections has largely overlooked these distinctions.

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<sup>10</sup> These highly ambiguous terminations include: Austria: Kreisky III 1979, Vranitzky I 1986; Denmark: Schlüter III 1988, Schlüter IV 1990; Greece: Karamanlis II 2009; Iceland: Thoroddsen 1983; Ireland: Costello I 1951, de Valera VII 1954, Lynch II 1973; the Netherlands: Balkenende I 2002; UK: Heath February 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Because opportunistic elections are instrumented in the analysis that follows, our coding of election types only influences the set of elections that are included in the analysis.

Some treat all early elections as opportunistic (Alesina et al. 1993). Palmer and Whitten (2000) recognize the difference between opportunistic and failure elections, but group the latter together with regular elections. Neither strategy allows for an adequate test of the electoral consequences of opportunistic elections.

Both regular and failure elections are relevant comparison groups in an analysis of opportunistic election calling. The more conservative approach, of course, is to compare opportunistic elections to regular elections alone, because incumbent electoral performance can be expected to suffer when government failure is the cause of an early election. Table 1 takes a first glance at the correlation between opportunistic election calling and the incumbent's electoral performance using three different indicators: (i) the vote share for the PM's party (variable name *PM party vote share*), (ii) the seat share for the PM's party (*PM party seat share*), and (iii) the PM's survival in office (*PM survival*). The table reports means and difference-of-means tests, comparing opportunistic elections to two reference groups, (1) regular and failure elections, and (2) regular elections.

[Table 1]

On all three indicators, incumbents perform better on opportunistically called elections: the vote share bonus for the PM's party is around 8 percentage points, the seat share bonus is around 10.5 percentage points, and the proportion of PMs surviving in office is 0.75 (compared to 0.45 in all other elections and 0.49 in regular elections). These differences are sizable and statistically significant, which is consistent with hypothesis 1. As anticipated, they are larger when we compare opportunistic elections to a control group that includes failure elections in addition to regular ones.

***Addressing the inferential challenges***

While these differences are suggestive, testing our two rival hypotheses poses significant inferential challenges, as noted above. Incumbents can be expected to time opportunistic elections strategically to exploit favorable conditions. Opportunistic election calling is therefore 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, then, are concerns that pose problems for inference. The challenge is to identify the effect of opportunistic elections independently of the economy and anticipated electoral performance.

To address this challenge we instrument for opportunistic election calling by using an index of the constitutional powers of PMs and governments to bring about early elections (Goplerud and Schleiter forthcoming). An instrumental variable approach makes identification possible when the instrument is correlated with the independent variable (opportunistic election calling) but could not be influenced by the dependent variable (electoral performance of the incumbent) or correlated with its other causes (Dunning 2012, 87-88). Constitutional powers to call elections satisfy both of these criteria. First, the significant variation among European constitutions in government discretion to dissolve parliament is directly correlated with the treatment: incumbents with greater constitutional powers are more likely to time elections opportunistically.

Second, there is unlikely to be a systematic link between anticipated incumbent electoral performance and constitutional powers to schedule early elections.<sup>12</sup> Dissolution regimes were typically forged as part of a constitutional settlement in moments of crisis, revolution, regime collapse, defeat in war, or independence (Elster 1995, 371). For example, in several constitutional

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<sup>12</sup> The validity of this assumption is ultimately untestable and remains a matter of argument.

Below we therefore discuss in detail why the instrument satisfies the exclusion restriction.

monarchies, the dissolution regimes originated from conventions aimed at constraining sovereigns who overreached themselves (often long before full democratization) (Brock 2004, Elster 1995). In other cases, these regimes were shaped by actors other than governments, such as constituent assemblies, or the World War II Allies (e.g., Germany). In addition, European constitutions are entrenched precisely in order to forestall change by the incumbent government for its own benefit. As a result, we can rule out concerns about reverse causation in 25 of our countries because (i) the constitutional dissolution rules remain unchanged throughout the period that we study, or (ii) intervening elections are required for a constitutional change to take effect so that incumbents cannot use constitutional change to achieve an opportunistic election, or (iii) the super-majorities required for constitutional change demand a level of cross-partisan support that rules out changes in the dissolution rules for partisan advantage. In addition, Sweden precludes opportunism because early elections do not begin a new parliamentary term. Only in the UK – which lacks an 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 is the 2011 Fixed-term Parliaments Act, which in fact *removes* the prime minister’s discretion to call elections.<sup>13</sup>

Constitutional dissolution powers are also likely to be independent of other causes of electoral performance. We examine explicitly whether party system fragmentation gives rise to a potential link between dissolution powers and the electoral performance of the incumbent and find

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<sup>13</sup> The reform occurred because the prime minister prioritized coalition formation, policy and office goals over his party’s electoral interests, which were compromised. This makes the Act controversial within the Conservative Party.

no evidence of such a linkage.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, 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 powers can plausibly be conceived as exogenous in the countries that we observe, which makes them a good 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. We measure incumbent dissolution powers in two different ways: (i) *PM's dissolution powers* records the PM's prerogatives, and (ii) *Government dissolution powers* records the powers available to the government as a whole to bring about dissolution. Both measures are based on an original index that we constructed for the purposes of this study (Goplerud and Schleiter forthcoming develop this index further). The index ranges from 0 (the absence of any constitutional power to trigger dissolution (e.g., Norway)) to 10 (complete discretion of a singular actor to dissolve the assembly (e.g., the British PMs 1945-2011)). SI3 provides a detailed description of how we created the index. Appendix 1 lists the index scores for PMs and governments in the countries and time periods covered by our data. While PM dissolution powers identifies cases in which incumbents have complete or near total discretion to

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<sup>14</sup> We examine this possibility in two ways – first we explore whether party system fragmentation functions as a substitute for our instrument, PM dissolution powers. Second, we test whether party system fragmentation is a potential confounder in the analysis. These analyses are discussed in more detail in the section on robustness test below and the results are reported in SI6.

time elections, government dissolution powers give a more nuanced picture of a government's overall powers to influence early election calling. Both indices reveal significant variation in the constitutional powers of European governments to bring about early elections.

### ***Strength of the instruments***

Valid instruments must be strongly correlated with the endogenous treatment variable, in our case opportunistic election calling. The *PM's dissolution power* correlates strongly with opportunistic election calling (0.48 in the sample of all elections, 0.63 in the sample restricted to opportunistic and regular elections,  $p$ -value: 0.000). The correlation with the joint *Government dissolution power* is somewhat weaker: 0.37 (all elections), 0.48 (opportunistic and regular elections only),  $p$ -value: 0.000.<sup>15</sup> 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 conditions and checks that can make opportunistic election calling more difficult. The fact that the correlation is stronger in our restricted sample (i.e., excluding failure elections) is not surprising, given the nature of the constitutional rules. While constrained dissolution powers are intended to enable politicians to resolve situations of government failure and crisis, they can be manipulated to trigger elections opportunistically.

In sum, all of the correlations reported above are sizable and statistically significant, which indicates that our instrument for opportunistic election calling is strong. This is particularly true for the PM's dissolution power. Our main analyses in the following sections use this stronger instrument and focus on the sample of elections that offers the most stringent test of our hypotheses: opportunistic and regular elections. The robustness tests then present further results

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<sup>15</sup> The table of correlations is presented in SI4.

using our second instrument, government dissolution power, and the larger control group that also includes failure elections (see SI6.4).

### **Results: Opportunistic Election Calling and Electoral Performance**

Research designs that use strong and valid instruments should 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's powers. For this purpose, we dichotomize the powers measure at two alternative cut-points: (1) at *PM dissolution power*  $\geq 8$  (i.e., PMs with strong dissolution powers vs. those with weak or none) and (2) at *PM dissolution power*  $> 0$  (i.e., PMs with any powers vs. those with none). If the indicators yield similar results, we can be confident that our results are independent of our dichotomization choices.

As in Table 1, we use three different measures of incumbent performance: *PM party vote share*, *PM party seat share*, and *PM survival*. Table 2 shows that the PM's power to call elections opportunistically correlates with substantial incumbency advantages as captured by all three measures as hypothesis 1 anticipates. On average, the party of a PM who has influence on early election timing enjoys a vote-share advantage of around 7 percent, a seat-share advantage of 8-10 percent, and the PM is about 20 percent more likely to hold on to office than PMs who lack such powers. These substantively large and statistically significant effects in the absence of controls give us confidence that any effects, which the more sophisticated instrumental variable analysis may uncover do not depend on *ex post* modeling adjustments or exacting assumptions about the underlying data-generating processes.

[Table 2]

### ***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 speaks directly to the two rival expectations that voters on average reward the incumbent for opportunism (hypothesis 1) or fail to do so (hypothesis 2). In contrast, seat shares and re-election only record the mediated effect of the electoral verdict as conditioned by the electoral system and coalition negotiations. This analysis juxtaposes predicted opportunistic and regular elections (i.e., elections held when the parliamentary term expires); the robustness tests discussed below extend the analysis to include elections triggered by government failure. If hypothesis 1 is true, we would expect that opportunistically timed elections produce significantly better election results for incumbents than the counterfactual scenario. Under hypothesis 2, we would expect to observe no such effect.

Our main analysis is presented in Table 3. We begin by examining the first stage relationship between the *PM's dissolution power* and opportunistic election calling (Panel A). All analyses use heteroscedasticity-robust country-clustered standard errors. Models 1-4 employ OLS in the first-stage even though our dependent variable is dichotomous because this method ensures consistency of the second stage estimates (Angrist and Krueger 2001, 80). Models 1a-4a make clear that the conclusions are very similar when logistic regression analysis is used. The results show that our instrument (*PM's dissolution power*) is a strong predictor of opportunistic election calling. According to Model 1, the PM's dissolution power alone accounts for about 40 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 party vote share*), and the state of the economy (*GDP growth*, level of *Inflation*, and *Dummies for time series breaks*, lagged one year).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The sample size decreases for the analyses that include the economic controls due to missing data. Data sources for all variables are detailed in SI5.

[Table 3]

Turning to the second stage of the analysis, Panel B reports the instrumental variable two stage least squares 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 decade dummies (Model 2),<sup>17</sup> 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, one year 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 significant effect. The full model (Model 4) suggests that incumbents realize a vote share bonus from opportunistic election calling of around 5 percent. This effect is sizable and supports hypothesis 1 - on balance, opportunistic elections produce a net benefit to the incumbent.

The bottom rows of Panel B report the main 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: 57.19 to 98.94,  $p = 0.000$ ). Its contribution to the explained variance in all four models is sizable as the partial  $R^2$  statistics document (0.37 to 0.40).

For the sake of comparison, panel C reports the coefficient estimates for *actual* opportunistic election calling from the equivalent OLS specifications of Models 1-4, which are

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<sup>17</sup> Decade dummies account for the potential secular effects of partisan de-alignment in reducing the vote share of the PM's party.

equally consistent with hypothesis 1 that opportunistic elections correlate with vote-share benefits for the incumbent.<sup>18</sup>

### ***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 (see discussions of super exogeneity in Engle, Hendry and Richard 1983; Hendry and Nielsen 2007, 168; Bazinas and Nielsen 2015).

[Table 4]

In order to test this expectation, we use our more nuanced instrument – the index of the *Government's dissolution power*. This allows us to overcome collinearity problems that arise in the conditional model because of the high correlation between *PM dissolution powers* and opportunistic election calling. Table 4 reports the results of the analysis, using our full model specification (cf. Model 4, Table 3). The first two models report the marginal effect of government dissolution powers on opportunistic election calling using a logistic regression specification (Model 1, odds ratios reported), and for comparison to the instrumental variable analysis an OLS

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<sup>18</sup> Estimating the OLS regressions with country-level random effects yields substantively very similar results.

specification (Model 2). Both models suggest that the index of governmental dissolution power is a significant predictor of early election calling. A one-step increase on the 10-point scale of governmental dissolution powers raises the odds of opportunistic election calling by 69 percent. Model 3 then examines the second part of the causal chain and shows that government dissolution powers have no significant effect on the incumbent's electoral advantage, conditional on *actual* opportunistic election calling. These results indicate that the effect of constitutional dissolution powers runs through the calling of opportunistic elections, as it should if our assumptions are correct.

### **Robustness**

We probe the robustness of the results in four ways (for a more detailed discussion and the output tables please see SI6). First, we examine how far the basic effect that we uncover obtains across alternative instruments (i.e., *PM's dissolution powers* and *Government's dissolution powers*) and dependent variables (i.e., *PM party's vote share*, *PM party's seat share*, and *PM survival*). The results show that the basic effect of opportunistic election calling on incumbent advantage is evident no matter which instrument we use or how we measure the electoral benefit to the incumbent (Table SI 6.1).

Second, we further test the robustness of our identification strategy. One potential concern relates to our control for the size of a PM's party (our lagged dependent variable), which is affected by opportunistic election calling in exactly the same way as our dependent variable. To confront any lingering suspicion that this may be a second endogenous variable in the analysis, we replicate Models 3 and 4 from Table 3, this time instrumenting for this variable by whether or not the PM's party is the median party in the legislature. The results of the analysis (Table SI 6.2) reinforce the conclusion that opportunistic election calling secures a sizable vote share bonus.

Next, we examine whether and to what extent clarity of responsibility may be an alternative explanation for the patterns that we find. How clearly voters can identify the politicians responsible for economic outcomes affects the strength of the economic vote (Powell and Whitten 1993), which may allow incumbents to reap better rewards for economic performance. A test of the role of clarity of responsibility in the causal chain suggests that it has no effect (Table SI 6.3).

Third, we explore how far our results are robust to a series of alternative specifications including changes to the sample of elections (dropping ambiguous elections that have both failure and opportunistic attributes, and restricting the sample to Western Europe), an alternative 6-month lag of the economic indicators, an additional control for short, 3-year parliamentary terms, controls for a series of government characteristics,<sup>19</sup> and electoral system characteristics (see Table SI 6.4). The finding that opportunistic elections result in a large incumbent advantage is robust to all of these alternative specifications. Moreover, these additional tests estimate the magnitude of the vote share bonus with remarkable consistency at around 5 percent in the full sample of elections, and 2 to 2.25 percent if the analysis is restricted to Western Europe.

Fourth, we investigate whether the differences in electoral outcomes between governments that do and do not operate with strong dissolution powers arise in reality from differences in the party system. To that end we examine (i) whether it is possible to substitute the effective number of parliamentary parties for our dissolution powers index as the instrument in our main analysis

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<sup>19</sup> We control for whether the government is formed by a single majority party, a majority coalition, or a minority party/coalition, and find that the results are unaltered. It would also be interesting to work out the details of election calling in multiparty governments, including the bargaining process over dissolution among the coalition partners. Detailing and testing such an argument remains beyond the scope of this paper.

(cf. Table 3) and (ii) whether party system fragmentation is a potential confounder in those same instrumental variable models. The additional analyses are reported in tables SI 6.5 and SI 6.6, which show that the effects of opportunistic election calling do not arise from differences in the party system and controlling for the potential confounding influence of this variable does not change our findings.

These results unequivocally support hypothesis 1: compared to regular elections, incumbents are more likely to reap electoral benefits from opportunistically timed ones. However, it is important to remember that the results do not imply that *any* government can *always* realize partisan gains by calling early elections. Election timing decisions are subject to uncertainty; they carry a risk of electoral defeat and may cost a government the remainder of its current term. Only governments that can establish a sufficiently strong lead over their opponents can expect to benefit from calling opportunistic elections. For these reasons, we do not see opportunistic elections more frequently.

### **Conclusion**

Our central finding is that opportunistic elections generate a significant electoral bonus for the incumbent PM compared to regularly scheduled and failure elections. We have shown, with a keen eye on the challenges of 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 correlate with an 8 percentage point vote share bonus and a 10 percentage point seat share bonus for PMs. Such elections are also associated with 26 to 30 percent greater odds of survival for the PMs (cf. Table 1). In our most complete instrumental variable regression that aims to address concerns of 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 percentage points. This is a large effect that amounts to the vote share of a successful small party in many of 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 can be formidable.

The contributions of this paper are threefold. First, it advances the debate about the electoral consequences of opportunistic election timing, both theoretically and empirically. We offer the first systematic cross-national comparative evidence to show that opportunistic election timing pays. This does not suggest that no voter ever punishes incumbents for their opportunism, or that voters do not downgrade their assessments of incumbent performance when elections are opportunistically called. But it does suggest that on average the benefits of opportunistic election timing, net of these penalties, outweigh the costs.

Second, our work 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 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 the incumbent's electoral performance.

Third, our findings contribute new insights to the literature on electoral accountability. Conventional models of accountability view elections primarily as an 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 over 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 influences vote choice, political leaders can affect *how* voters vote by controlling *when* they vote. Unlike exogenous elections, where the fate of 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. Of course, one has to keep in mind that opportunistic timing implies a difficult task of optimization under uncertainty. The anticipation of a potential backlash or simply the uncertainty itself can prevent incumbents from always calling opportunistic elections even if the rules allow them to do so. It is, therefore, not surprising, even in the light of our findings, that opportunistic elections remain relatively rare (Smith 2004). Still, an incumbent's ability to control election timing can fundamentally affect the outcomes 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.

Finally, our findings open up a range of questions for future work: How do voters perceive opportunistically timed elections, and how far is their willingness to reward governments for existing conditions tempered by the expectation of an imminent downturn or disapproval of opportunism? How do campaign length, the maturity of the parliamentary term and cabinet partisanship affect the benefits of opportunistic election timing? While the questions go beyond the scope of this study, they deserve investigation in future research.

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

<b>Dependent variable</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Difference-of-means</b>	<b>Significance (<i>p</i>-value)</b>
PM party vote share	opportunistic election	44	39.03		
	regular and failure elections	274	30.90	-8.13	0.000
	regular elections	186	31.26	-7.77	0.000
PM party seat share	opportunistic election	44	43.94		
	regular and failure elections	274	33.18	-10.76	0.000
	regular elections	186	33.46	-10.48	0.000
PM survival	opportunistic election	44	0.75		
	regular and failure elections	274	0.45	-0.30	0.000
	regular elections	186	0.49	-0.26	0.002

**Table 2: PM dissolution powers and incumbent electoral performance (difference-of-means tests)**

<b>Dependent variable</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Difference-of-means</b>	<b>Significance (<i>p</i>-value)</b>
PM party vote share	PM dissolution power $\geq 8$	42	38.83		
	PM dissolution power $< 8$	188	31.38	-7.45	0.000
	PM dissolution power $> 0$	67	37.28		
	PM dissolution power = 0	163	30.88	-6.39	0.000
PM party seat share	PM dissolution power $\geq 8$	42	43.64		
	PM dissolution power $< 8$	188	33.64	-9.99	0.000
	PM dissolution power $> 0$	67	40.98		
	PM dissolution power = 0	163	33.21	-7.77	0.000
PM survival	PM dissolution power $\geq 8$	42	0.69		
	PM dissolution power $< 8$	188	0.51	-0.19	0.029
	PM dissolution power $> 0$	67	0.67		
	PM dissolution power = 0	163	0.48	-0.19	0.009

**Table 3: Instrumental variable regression**

	<b>Dependent variable: Opportunistic election</b>							
	<b>OLS</b>		<b>Logit</b>		<b>OLS</b>		<b>Logit</b>	
	<b>(1)</b>	<b>(1a)</b>	<b>(2)</b>	<b>(2a)</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(3a)</b>	<b>(4)</b>	<b>(4a)</b>
PM dissolution power	0.065***	1.456***	0.065***	1.508***	0.064***	1.495***	0.062***	1.469***
	(0.007)	(0.087)	(0.007)	(0.112)	(0.008)	(0.120)	(0.008)	(0.120)
PM Party vote share					0.002	1.021	0.002	1.017
					(0.003)	(0.038)	(0.003)	(0.041)
GDP Growth (1yr lagged)							-0.004	0.967
							(0.005)	(0.076)
Inflation (1yr lagged)							-0.002	0.975
							(0.001)	(0.026)
Decade dummies			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks							Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.395		0.427		0.429		0.428	
N	230	230	230	217†	230	217†	191	182††

  

	<b>Dependent variable: PM Party Vote Share (next election)</b>			
	<b>IV: Opportunistic election = PM dissolution power</b>			
	<b>(1)</b>	<b>(2)</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(4)</b>
Opportunistic election	10.891**	9.705**	4.382**	5.028**
	(4.325)	(4.094)	(1.808)	(2.425)
PM Party vote share			0.733***	0.705***
			(0.071)	(0.078)
GDP Growth (1yr lagged)				-0.189
				(0.189)
Inflation (1yr lagged)				-0.086
				(0.103)
Decade dummies		Yes	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks				Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.060	0.229	0.618	0.650
Durbin-Wu-Hausman test ( <i>p</i> -value)	0.295	0.247	0.320	0.333
F (opportunistic election)	98.94***	96.05***	71.64***	57.19***
Partial R <sup>2</sup> opportunistic election	0.396	0.401	0.386	0.374
N	230	230	230	191

  

	<b>Dependent Variable: PM Party Vote Share (next election)</b>			
	<b>(1)</b>	<b>(2)</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(4)</b>
	Opportunistic election	7.767***	5.969**	2.895***
	(2.535)	(2.213)	(0.958)	(1.037)
N	230	230	230	191

Note: Table entries are regression coefficients (models 1-4) and odds ratios (models 1a-4a) with country-clustered standard errors in parentheses. †Thirteen observations dropped because decade 2010 predicts failure perfectly. ††Nine observations dropped because decade 2010 predicts failure perfectly. \*\*\**p*<0.01, \*\**p*<0.05, \**p*<0.1

**Table 4: Examining the causal chain (separate regressions)**

	DV: Opportunistic election		DV: PM party vote share (next)
	Logit (1)	OLS (2)	OLS (3)
Opportunistic election			2.568** (1.216)
Govt dissolution power	1.686*** (0.299)	0.051*** (0.014)	0.117 (0.168)
PM party vote share	1.039 (0.032)	0.003 (0.003)	0.713*** (0.078)
GDP growth (1yr lagged)	0.999 (0.119)	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.199 (0.196)
Inflation (1yr lagged)	0.983 (0.029)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.089 (0.108)
Decade dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dummies for time series breaks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.001*** (0.002)	-0.191 (0.160)	13.664*** (3.714)
R <sup>2</sup>		0.288	0.655
N	182 <sup>†</sup>	191	191

*Note:* Table entries are odds ratios (model 1) and regression coefficients (models 2 and 3) with country-clustered robust standard errors in parentheses. <sup>†</sup> Nine observations dropped because decade 2010 predicts failure perfectly. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

### Appendix 1: Dissolution Power Scores

Country	Period	PM dissolution power	Govt. dissolution power
Austria	1945 – 2013	0	7
Belgium	1946 – 1995	0	8.5
	1995 – 2013	0	5.5
Bulgaria	1991 – 2013	0	1.71
Czech Republic	1993 – 2009	0	1.11
	2009 – 2013	0	2.44
Denmark	1945 – 2013	10	10
Estonia	1992 – 2013	0	3.85
Finland	1945 – 1991	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 – 2013	0	0
Poland	1992 – 2013	0	4
Portugal	1976 – 1982	0	3.44
	1982 – 2013	0	0
Romania	1990	NA	NA
	1991 – 2013	0	0.88
Slovakia	1993 – 1999	0	1.75
	1999 – 2013	0	2.02
Slovenia	1992 – 2013	5	5
Spain	1977 – 2013	8.55	8.55
Sweden	1945 – 1971	0	8.5
	1971 – 1975	9.58	9.58
	1975 – 2013	0	8.29
UK	1945 – 2010	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.