

An Index of Assembly Dissolution Powers

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Abstract

Assembly dissolution is a key dimension of constitutional variation in parliamentary democracies. It conditions the timing of elections, influences electoral accountability, and shapes how politicians bargain about government formation, termination, and policy. Yet, despite the importance of dissolution rules, no measure exists that applies to the different actors involved in dissolutions and records the complexity of the rules sufficiently accurately to capture their substantive implications. This paper develops, operationalizes and tests a detailed index of parliamentary dissolution powers that generalizes to all relevant actors. We demonstrate the substantive utility of the index by examining how election timing powers modify electoral accountability.

The power of assembly dissolution is one of the most consequential yet poorly measured aspects of constitutional variation among parliamentary democracies. The overwhelming ma-

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jority of parliamentary systems do not fix legislative election dates, and the constitutional rules which regulate early election calling vary tremendously.¹

Powers to threaten or call assembly elections have far-reaching implications. They can be employed by leaders “to call elections at the most advantageous time for them—when they expect to win” (Smith, 2004, p. 1), which can be expected to give rise to incumbency advantages and to shape electoral accountability (Palmer & Whitten, 2000; Strøm & Swindle, 2002; Kayser, 2005, 2006; Roy & Alcantara, 2012). Moreover, actors who have discretion to time elections can ensure that parliamentary politics occur in the shadow of early elections. This has extensive implications for bargaining over parliamentary outcomes such as the making and breaking of governments as well as public policy (Shugart and Carey, 1992, p. 126; Grofman and Roozendaal, 1994; Lupia and Strøm, 1995; Grofman and Roozendaal, 1997; Diermeier and Stevenson, 1999, 2000; Protsyk, 2005; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones, 2009; Becher and Christiansen, 2014). The political consequences of constitutional powers to call early elections, then, may be comparable to those of electoral rules, which also condition electoral accountability, incumbency advantages, governments and policy.

The constitutional provisions that regulate parliamentary dissolution often involve multiple actors, including the prime minister, the government collectively, the legislature, or the head of state. These actors can be engaged in various capacities at different stages of the process and subject to a range of constraints. An extensive literature examines the constitutional prerogatives of presidents (Shugart & Carey, 1992; Metcalf, 2000), assemblies (Fish & Kroenig, 2009),

¹Parliamentary regimes are defined by the cabinet’s accountability to parliament Strøm, Müller, and Bergman (2003, p. 13). We include in this study parliamentary democracies with or without presidential heads of state (whether indirectly or directly elected) because all conceptual arguments about the importance of dissolution powers generalize to them. For simplicity, we refer to all of these democracies as parliamentary although the latter type of regime is often termed semi-presidential (Duverger, 1980).

and governments (Bergman, Müller, Strøm, & Blomgren, 2003, pp. 160-162), but this work has two limitations. First, it does not provide measures that make it possible to compare the influence of these different actors on dissolution. Instead, these works use divergent conceptualizations of dissolution powers and some code *de facto* preogatives, while others record *de jure* powers. Shugart and Carey's (1992) Presidential Powers Index, for instance, measures the *de jure* powers of presidents, while Fish and Kroenig's Parliamentary Powers Index (2006), is a *de facto* measure of legislative power, based on expert codings, which renders comparisons impossible. We are aware of only one two studies that examine assembly dissolution comparatively and explore how different actors affect the frequency of early elections and premature government terminations respectively (Strøm & Swindle, 2002; Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2009). While these two studies mark a major advance on previous work, their measures remain coarse. Strøm and Swindle classify the *main actors* involved in different dissolution paths (Strøm & Swindle, 2002). Schleiter and Morgan-Jones distinguish constitutions which give presidents or prime ministers discretion to dissolve the assembly from those under which parliamentary dissolution is constrained (Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2009). Neither study further differentiates the scope of an actor's influence.

The imprecision of the measures is the second, general and troubling feature of the literature. Often, the prerogative of assembly dissolution is only coded as one component of broader constitutional powers indices and simply measured with an indicator variable. Only two studies record dissolution powers on a 0-4 ordinal scale (Shugart & Carey, 1992; Metcalf, 2000). The absence of sufficiently nuanced and comparable measures has caused scholars to restrict their attention to questions that can be answered using binary classifications, or to resort to empirically untested assumptions instead. Much of the political economy literature on endogenous election calling and pre-election economic manipulation, for instance, does not account at all for differential election timing powers and relies instead on the untested and incorrect assumption that all governments in parliamentary democracies are equally able to time early elections

for self-interested purposes (Alesina and Roubini, 1992; Alesina, Cohen, and Roubini, 1993; Brender and Drazen, 2005; see Palmer and Whitten, 2000, for an exception).

The shortcomings of existing dissolution power measures have made it impossible to answer consequential questions in comparative politics that require a comparative or more nuanced measure. For instance: Do incumbents with the power to time elections for partisan advantage draw electoral benefits from doing so as the literature on opportunistic election calling suggests (Ito & Park, 1988; Ito, 1990; Chowdhury, 1993; Palmer & Whitten, 2000; Kayser, 2005, 2006)? And if so, are the prime minister's powers or the collective control of early election calling by the government (or both) decisive? This unresolved question has not just theoretical relevance, it has also contributed to the recurring political debates in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada about adopting or keeping fixed election dates (House of Commons Library, 2010; Roy & Alcantara, 2012; Parliamentary Service, 2013). The lack of a sufficiently detailed, comparative dissolution powers measure, then, remains a major obstacle in understanding the implications of powers to call elections in parliamentary democracies.

This paper develops an index of assembly dissolution powers, which advances the conceptualization of a central dimension of institutional variation among parliamentary regimes and improves measurement. Our index is the first that spans the full range of political actors involved in parliamentary dissolution—including prime ministers, governments, legislatures and presidents. We operationalize the index for 39 parliamentary OECD and EU member states, covering 56 distinct constitutional regimes and explore its validity through convergent validation and by examining its performance in relation to a substantive hypothesis (Adcock & Collier, 2001). Specifically, we employ the index to probe a crucial and untested assumption in the literature on opportunistic election timing—that incumbents with discretion to dissolve parliament derive electoral benefits from their powers.² We offer a first systematic, compar-

²Country-specific studies of the UK and Canada have engaged with this question (Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte, & Nadeau, 2004; Smith, 2004; Roy & Alcantara, 2012), but strikingly, no

ative test of that assumption by applying our index of dissolution powers to a replication of Kayser and Peress's (2012) work on economic voting. The results indicate that governments, and in particular prime ministers with the power to call early elections, realize a significant vote share bonus and can also condition the extent to which they are held accountable for poor economic performance. These findings provide evidence of the substantive utility of the index and illustrate the advances that it makes possible in the literatures on electoral accountability, economic voting and endogenous election timing.

The potential contributions of the new index to the field of comparative politics also extend to other literatures. As noted above, powers of assembly dissolution can be expected to have far-reaching effects on patterns of government formation, cabinet termination and the negotiation of public policy. By offering a nuanced and comparative measure of dissolution powers, our index opens up opportunities to develop a better understanding of bargaining outcomes in all of these fields.

1 The Index of Dissolution Powers

The utility of any measure of dissolution powers hinges on its conceptual clarity, replicable operationalization, generalizability to all actors involved in the process, and ability to reflect the complexity of dissolution rules with sufficient accuracy to capture their substantive implications. In developing an index characterized by these four properties, we are guided by the methodological literature on conceptualization and measurement.

systematic comparative study testing the assumption that incumbents benefit from opportunistic election timing has been conducted to date.

1.1 Definition and Conceptualization

We define dissolution powers as the constitutional prerogatives of a political actor to (i) initiate or (ii) advance a political process that can result in early elections, or to (iii) decide the early dissolution of parliament. This definition captures constitutional rules of major importance to political actors in parliamentary democracies. Higher levels of control over the dissolution of parliament enable politicians, whose careers and political goals are at stake, to influence or threaten the calling of elections for their own political advantage.

In conceptualizing dissolution powers, we focus on five dimensions of variation which jointly define the scope of an actor's power. These dimensions map the degree to which the constitution imposes (i) constraints on an actor's ability to place dissolution on the agenda or advance the dissolution process (referred to below as *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*). This conceptualization captures the central constitutive and cross-nationally comparable dimensions of variation in dissolution powers as recommended by the methodological literature (Adcock & Collier, 2001; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002).³

Our index focuses on all actors involved in the dissolution process—including prime min-

³We omit rare features of dissolution regimes that detract from the cross-national comparability, such as provisions concerning the dissolution of legislatures which are themselves the result of early elections, or provisions that expose presidents who use their power to dissolve the assembly to the risk of early presidential elections.

isters (PMs), governments, parliaments and presidents.⁴ In recording the scope of their influence, we rely on the *de jure* powers of these actors for the simple reason that constitutional powers are in most countries entrenched through super-majority requirements and time-delays that are designed to protect constitutional provisions from short-term change for partisan advantage.⁵ Where constitutions are entrenched, *de jure* dissolution powers (in contrast to the *de facto* behaviour of political actors) therefore have the merit of being exogenous to many of the electoral-, government- and policy-centred dependent variables that are potentially of interest.

⁴In some of the older European democracies, the monarch constitutionally still has a role in the dissolution process. Monarchs differ from all other political actors with a role in parliamentary dissolution, however, because they are constrained by the universal norm that the dissolution of a popularly elected parliament by a hereditary monarch is impermissible. This norm applies in all OECD countries throughout the period under consideration (since 1945). As a result, the monarch's powers are exercised on the advice of the PM or the government in all of the countries concerned. Correspondingly, we code their powers as powers of the government or the PM. This coding is appropriate for the purposes of the research questions that we sketch in the introduction to this article but may not be appropriate for other questions. In order to enable researchers to make coding decisions appropriate to their research question, we indicate in the Supporting Information (SI 1), to which actor we assigned the monarch's powers under each constitution.

⁵Note, however, our treatment of monarchs as discussed in footnote 4 above. Among the countries for which we code the index, three—the UK, New Zealand and Israel—lack entrenched constitutions.

1.2 Data and Operationalization

We record dissolution powers in 39 OECD and EU parliamentary democracies from 1945 (or democratization) to present. Parliamentary democracies are defined by the cabinet's accountability to parliament Strøm et al. (2003, p. 13). We include parliamentary regimes with and without presidential heads of state (whether indirectly or directly elected).⁶ While this paper applies the index to the standard set of developed regimes, our measure of dissolution powers can, in principle, be applied to all parliamentary democracies around the world.

We operationalize the index by applying 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 PM 1945-2011).⁷ We proceed from this maximum value and penalize it in accordance with the constraints on dissolution that arise in each of the five dimensions described above. The index combines these penalties by applying them multiplicatively to the maximum score of 10 for

⁶Regimes with popularly elected heads of state are often referred to semi-presidential (Duverger, 1980). We include these regimes in our study. Like other political actors, presidents may use their constitutional dissolution powers for political advantage. An important debate focuses on the question whether direct election gives presidents greater legitimacy to employ their powers (Duverger, 1980; Tavits, 2009). We reserve judgment on this question and note simply that our index can be interacted with an indicator for direct election, enabling scholars to test this proposition in a more nuanced way than has been possible to date.

⁷We follow Munck and Verkuilen's (2002, p.17) recommendation that the measurement level should be chosen to yield the maximum number of homogenous classes with the minimum number of necessary distinctions (see also Jacoby, 1999). Below we cross-validate our index with a coarser measure and explain the value added by our more nuanced coding scheme.

each country (i) and actor (j) as follows:

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

This yields an actor-specific score on a continuous scale between 0 and 10. As recommended by Munck and Verkuilen (2002, p. 24), the use of a multiplicative aggregation rule formalizes our understanding of the theoretical link between the different dimensions of dissolution powers: A constraint on an actor's power to dissolve parliament on any one dimension conditions and limits that actor's ability to bring about dissolution through their powers in all other dimensions. For instance, a constitutional prohibition of early elections during the first year of a parliament's term (time barrier) prevents an actor from exercising any other power that they may have to trigger, advance or decide parliamentary dissolutions during that time period.

The severity of constitutional constraints on dissolution in each of the five dimensions may vary and our coding scheme records these variations using weights. The following sections provide justifications for the weights that we apply along with the corresponding formulae (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002, p. 26).

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 can advance the dissolution process, but cannot not directly trigger early elections. In some cases the initial and final actor are the same—for instance the Danish PM can unilaterally dissolve parliament.

Initial actors receive an “agenda setting role” score. The magnitude of this score depends on how they begin the dissolution process. Actors in the executive (presidents, prime ministers, and governments) who can simply and directly place dissolution on the political agenda (by requesting dissolution or designating a motion as a vote of confidence) are not penalized (score 1). Legislatures who can pass a motion declaring their own dissolution are similarly not penalised. Some legislatures, however, have a more “indirect” way of placing dissolution on the

agenda and thus are penalised. The penalty depends on the severity of the constraint: an ability to place dissolution on the political agenda through choices that are part of “normal” politics (e.g. rejecting a budget or voting no-confidence in the government) is penalized by a factor of 0.5; the ability to invoke dissolution only in the event of political “crisis” (e.g. an assembly remains inquorate for too long, prolonged or repeated investiture failure, repeated government failure) is penalized by a factor of 0.25.⁸ The key distinction between “normal” and “crisis” actions is their restrictiveness in enabling access to early elections. The calling of an election as a result of “crisis” actions typically requires persistent or repeated failures that fall outside normal parliamentary politics. Hence, we double the penalty that they incur. 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 respectively that depends on the score of the initial actor, because their ability to advance or trigger dissolution is limited to those circumstances in which the initial actor can set in motion a dissolution process. If the initial actor’s 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 a 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).

⁸“Investiture failure” refers to cases where dissolution may be triggered because of an inability for a government to be “invested”, i.e. receive the necessary votes of support from the legislature—either immediately or on policy statements—to enter or remain in office after its nomination. Most provisions for investiture failure require repeated failures to occur before dissolution can be triggered (e.g. two or three proposed governments must fail to receive support). Some constitutions also state that if no government can be successfully invested over a reasonably long period, e.g. over a month, early elections may be called.

Table 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) [†]	0.55
Legislature (2/3rds Majority)	0.40
Legislature (3/5ths Majority)	0.25

[†] Following Shugart and Carey, 1992, this includes other super-majorities with a threshold lower than two-thirds.

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 1 reports the penalties applied. Each increase in the threshold for collective action is penalized by a further 0.15.

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 any actor in the process are applied to all scores. Time barriers to dissolution are scored as:

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

$$b_{Time} = 0.10$$

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:

Table 2: German (1949-) Dissolution Rules

Actor	Path	Role	Trigger	Collective	Barrier	Conditionality	Overall
PM	Confidence	1		1	1	0.25	2.5
Legislature	Confidence	0.5		0.7	1	0.50	1.75
President	Confidence		0.5	1	1	1	5
Legislature	Investiture	0.25		0.7	1	0.5	0.88
President	Investiture		0.25	1	1	1	2.5

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

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

Table 2 presents the scores for Germany (1949-present) as an illustrative example. The German constitution envisages two paths to dissolution: a failed confidence motion and investiture failure. For the purposes of illustrating the coding we focus on the PM's influence on dissolution, which only arises from the latter path. The PM can request dissolution if the government is defeated in a confidence motion, which the PM can initiate. No role, collective action or time barrier penalties apply to this choice. Whether or not dissolution occurs is conditional upon the assembly's defeat of the confidence motion and the president's choice to dissolve. This results in the following coding:

$$\alpha_{Role} = 1; \quad \alpha_{Collective} = 1; \quad \alpha_{Barriers} = 1;$$

$$\alpha_{Conditionality} = 0.5 \cdot 0.5 = 0.25 \quad (\text{Assembly Consent and Presidential Consent})$$

$$I_{\text{Germany, PM}} = 10 \cdot 1 \cdot 1 \cdot 1 \cdot 0.25 = 2.5$$

Like Germany, many other constitutions, too, provide for multiple paths to dissolution. In reporting the influence of an actor on parliamentary dissolution in Table 3, we focus on

the maximum score for each actor across *any* of the paths available to them. For instance, the German PM has no influence on dissolutions that result from investiture failures. Thus, the PM's score results entirely from the dissolution path that involves a failed motion of confidence in the government. In recording an actor's maximum score, we rely on the assumption that actors with a role in multiple paths will tend use the path they can most easily influence.

Table 3 reports dissolution power scores for the relevant actors in all OECD and EU member states with parliamentary constitutions from 1945 to present and makes clear that powers to call early elections vary tremendously across actors and parliamentary democracies. We follow best practice and report the disaggregated scores and coding explanations for each actor and dissolution path in the Supporting Information (SI 1) (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002, p. 19). The relevant constitutional provisions are reported in SI 2 to aid replication.

Table 3: Country Scores

Country	Actor			
	PM	Government	Legislature	President
Australia	10.00		1.66	
Austria			7.00	10.00
Belgium (1831)		8.50		
Belgium (1995)		4.25	5.50	
Bulgaria (1990)			7.00	
Bulgaria (1991)			1.71	
Canada	10.00			
Croatia (2000)		2.13	5.50	2.61
Czech Republic (1992)			1.05	3.17
Czech Republic (2009)			2.44	3.17
Denmark	10.00			
Estonia		2.13	3.85	5.00
Finland (1919)				10.00
Finland (1991)	5.00			4.75
France (1946)		1.81	0.58	
France (1958)				9.03
Germany	2.50		1.75	5.00
Greece (1975)		2.13	1.84	9.50
Greece (1986)		4.25	3.50	2.50
Hungary (1989)			7.00	2.48
Hungary (2011)			7.00	4.74

Table 3: Country Scores

Country	Actor			
	PM	Government	Legislature	President
Iceland				10.00
Ireland	10.00		0.88	5.00
Israel (1958)			7.00	
Israel (1996)	5.00		5.50	5.00
Israel (2003)	2.50		5.50	2.50
Italy				9.03
Japan		8.50		
Latvia				5.00
Lithuania		2.02	2.50	4.75
Luxembourg		8.50		
Macedonia			5.50	
Malta	5.00		0.69	5.00
Moldova			0.82	2.28
Netherlands		8.50		
New Zealand	10.00			
Norway				
Poland (1989)			4.00	5.23
Poland (1992)			4.00	5.23
Poland (1997)			4.00	4.75
Portugal (1976)			1.56	9.50
Portugal (1982)				8.10
Romania			0.58	2.02
Russia	2.13		1.31	4.25
Slovakia (1992)			0.69	2.38
Slovakia (1999)		2.02	1.02	3.09
Slovenia	5.00		2.75	
Spain	8.55		1.75	
Sweden (1809)		8.22		
Sweden (1971)	10.00			
Sweden (1975)		8.29	1.38	
Turkey (1982)	2.38		7.00	4.99
UK (1945)	10.00			
UK (2011)			4.00	
Ukraine (1996/2010)			0.83	2.38
Ukraine (2004)			0.91	2.61

Note: A blank cell indicates that the actor has a score of zero. All values are rounded to two decimal places.

The central merits of this index are that it generalizes to all actors involved in the dissolution

process and accounts for the complexity of dissolution rules with sufficient accuracy to capture their substantive implications. The index can be used flexibly to suit a variety of specific research agendas in politics with potential applications in fields as diverse as political economy, comparative institutions, legislative bargaining and political behaviour, including studies of political accountability and economic voting (as we will illustrate below). Scholars can employ the index to classify parliamentary democracies into different groups, as an independent, or dependent variable. They may be interested in the “strongest” actor in the dissolution process, the power of some specific actor or subset of actors, the overall number of actors involved in dissolution processes, the number of dissolution paths, or the overall ease of dissolution (e.g. the maximum score of any actor). The index also lends itself to extensions. For example it is easy to move beyond the institutionalist framework adopted here by incorporating the partisan affiliation of actors—such as presidents and PMs—into the index. From a veto players perspective (Tsebelis, 2002), for instance, co-partisanship of a president and PM might lead to the “absorption” of a president’s institutional role as an institutional veto player in parliamentary dissolution.

The remainder of this paper examines the validity of the index. The extent to which a measure captures a concept is ultimately an empirical question open to testing (Adcock and Collier, 2001, p. 530; see also Jacoby, 1999). We provide evidence of the validity of our index as a measure by subjecting it to convergent validation and by exploring its performance in relation to the substantive hypothesis that the power to time elections enables leaders to realize an electoral incumbency advantage.

2 Convergent Validation

An important test of the reliability of the index is its correlation with other measures of the same underlying concept, which have well-established empirical value (Adcock and Collier, 2001, p. 540; Munck and Verkuilen, 2002, p. 29). We test our index by examining its correlation with

the most nuanced and widely used alternative *de jure* measure of dissolution powers available, Shugart and Carey's (1992) Presidential Powers Index, which was later refined by Metcalf (2000).⁹ While Metcalf (2000) proposes several influential revisions of parts of the index, both sets of authors use the same rules for assessing the dissolution powers of the president. Both indices score presidential dissolution powers on an ordinal scale that ranges from 0 to 4, where 0 indicates no power to call an early election and 4 indicates unconstrained ability to dissolve. For the 23 mutually coded countries, the correlation between this measure of dissolution powers and our index is high ($\rho = 0.81, p\text{-value} < 0.01$).¹⁰

An inspection of the data suggests that our index's value lies in differentiating better between the dissolution powers of presidents whose influence on dissolution is very constrained such that they attain a score of 0 or 1 on Shugart and Carey's index. Shugart and Carey define these categories as presidents who lack dissolution powers (score of 0) or who can invoke dissolution only in response to censure or after "a certain number of censures by the assembly" (score of 1) (1992, p. 154). These are by far the most common scores of the countries that are

⁹While Fish and Kroenig's measure of legislative dissolution powers is also available for sizable number of mutually coded countries, it is not an appropriate benchmark to assess the validity of our index of *de jure* powers because it is a measure of *de facto* dissolution strength.

¹⁰The data for this comparison are drawn from a number of sources; we first examined the original scores reported by Shugart and Carey 1992 and Metcalf 2000. Next, we added scores from studies that use this coding scheme, notably Frye et al. 2000, reported in the replication data in Fortin 2013. The single discrepancy across these sources concerns Bulgaria. Shugart and Carey code the Bulgarian president as having no power to dissolve the legislature; this is consistent with our coding. However, Metcalf, codes the Bulgarian president's powers as 1. The correlation reported above is based on Metcalf's coding. If we use Shugart and Carey's coding of the Bulgarian case the correlation rises to 0.83.

mutually coded (15 out of 23) and our index makes it possible to differentiate among this quite heterogeneous set of institutions.

The difference between the role of the Irish and Romanian presidents in parliamentary dissolution illustrates the precision added by our index. The Irish and Romanian presidents receive scores of 0 and 1 respectively on Shugart and Carey's index, whereas they score 5 and 2.02 on our index. Ireland's constitutional rules envisage a dissolution path that engages the president, the PM and the legislature, which Shugart and Carey's coding scheme fails to capture. The score of 0 given by Shugart and Carey arises from the first provision in Article 13.2 of the Irish constitution, which states that the president shall dissolve the legislature on the "advice of the [PM]", seemingly implying that the president has no discretionary role. However, the next clause states that the president may "in his absolute discretion" refuse to dissolve the legislature if the PM has "ceased to retain the support of a majority in the [legislature]". These provisions outline two paths to dissolution in Ireland; first, a PM who retains the confidence of the legislature has the unrestricted power to call new elections (a score of 10) and the president plays no role in this path. But the caveat to the PM's power creates a second path to dissolution in which the legislature is the initial actor. It may initiate the process by expressing its lack of majority support in the PM (a normal action). The PM may then ask for a dissolution that the president, as the final actor in the procedure, may reject. This results in a score of 5 for the president, equivalent to the score of the German president discussed above. No time barriers on dissolution apply in Ireland and the president's decision to dissolve is not conditional on agreement or consultation with any further actors.

The Romanian president is significantly more constrained because dissolution can only occur in response to repeated investiture failures (a crisis action)—"if no vote of confidence has been obtained to form a government within 60 days after the first request was made, and only after rejection of at least two requests for investiture" (Art 89.1). Time barriers also apply. In addition to a ban on dissolutions within the final six months of the presidential term, the

legislature may only be dissolved once during the same year. Finally, the Romanian president must consult with the Presidents of both Houses of Parliament and the leaders of parliamentary groups before calling early elections. On each of the salient dimensions of dissolution powers (*trigger*, *time barriers*, and *conditionality*), Romanian presidents are more constrained than their Irish counterparts which results in greater penalties and a lower overall score. Our index, then, serves to appropriately differentiate the level of influence of a large class of presidents who have some constrained role in the dissolution procedure.

In sum, high convergent validity with Shugart and Carey's (1992) widely used and extensively validated measure of presidential dissolution powers is suggestive of the reliability of our index. Moreover, an analysis of specific scores indicates that our index records dissolution powers with a higher level of precision than the alternative measure.

3 Validation through Substantive Hypothesis Testing: Dissolution Powers and Electoral Accountability

Substantively, the utility of our index is best explored by testing its association with theoretically anticipated political outcomes (Adcock & Collier, 2001, p. 542). For this purpose, we examine how an incumbent government's power to call early elections affects electoral accountability—a question that lies at the intersection of the political economy literature on opportunistic election timing and work on economic voting.

The political economy literature on opportunistic election timing shows that incumbents use their discretion to dissolve parliament for partisan advantage by calling elections in periods of strong performance (often reflected in a strong economy) (Ito & Park, 1988; Ito, 1990; Chowdhury, 1993; Palmer & Whitten, 2000; Smith, 2004; Kayser, 2006). This power to time elections is expected to benefit incumbents electorally for two reasons. First, leaders do not need to face the electorate at the end of a fixed electoral term, when economic conditions

may be poor. Instead they can time elections flexibly to coincide with peaks in economic performance. Incumbents with discretion to time elections should therefore, on average, *outperform* their fixed-term peers electorally. Second, in periods of poor economic performance, too, control over election timing gives governments strategic advantages. It enables them to *attenuate* their electoral accountability for a poorly performing economy by timing elections to (a) favourable developments in other policy areas and (b) periods in which the opposition is unpopular or unprepared, for instance after splits or mergers among opposition parties (Roy & Alcantara, 2012). The British PM Margaret Thatcher employed the latter strategy when she capitalized on the recovery of her popularity in the aftermath of the Falklands War and the split of the opposition Labour party, to call (and win) an early election in 1983, despite the fact that unemployment had more than doubled over her term. Note, that incumbents have no incentive to use election timing strategies to moderate their accountability for the economy when their performance is good, but should make use of them to evade responsibility for weak performance. Studies of opportunistic election timing assume that governments reap these benefits from the power to time elections, but offer no direct comparative empirical test of these effects on electoral accountability.¹¹

The question whether strategic election timing generates electoral advantages intersects with the extensive economic voting literature, which musters strong evidence that voters hold governments accountable for their performance (see Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Bélanger 2013 for a recent review; see also Nannestad and Paldam 1994; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000;

¹¹An important and unresolved question in the literature on opportunistic election calling is how voters weigh observed performance against evidence of opportunism, and how far they downgrade their performance evaluations, or approval of the government (Blais et al., 2004; Smith, 2004; Roy & Alcantara, 2012). In testing the expectation that the power of opportunistic election calling benefits incumbents, we note that aggregate electoral results may reflect both rewards for observed performance and punishment for opportunism.

Duch and Stevenson 2008; see Anderson 2007 for a dissenting view). A recent comprehensive cross-national study by Barreiro (2008) finds that economic growth is the single most significant and consistent predictor of an incumbent's electoral performance regardless of the institutional structure, wealth of the country, or partisanship of the government. Kayser and Peress (2012) add further nuance to the evidence for economic voting by showing that voters punish or reward incumbents for local under- or outperformance relative to the international context. While this literature has explored a range of factors that can moderate the strength of accountability, there is to date no study that examines whether a government's powers to control election timing yield an incumbency advantage and attenuate accountability for the state of the economy, as the work on opportunistic election timing assumes.¹² Our index enables us to explore not only whether these effects obtain, but also whether PMs who control dissolution unilaterally can achieve better results for their party than governments collectively.

We build on Kayser and Peress's work to examine how dissolution powers affect electoral accountability. Their study focuses on local economic performance—defined as the deviation from international trends—and uses a series of benchmarked economic indicators to demonstrate that local growth has a powerful influence on the vote share of the leader's party.¹³ Critically, the research shows that these results are consistent over time, evident in different subsam-

¹²A range of studies draws attention to other factors that can moderate the strength of electoral accountability for government performance, such as the level of clarity of responsibility (Powell & Whitten, 1993; Hobolt, Tilley, & Banducci, 2013), and the type of government (single party vs. coalition) (Barreiro, 2008).

¹³An important question in the literature on economic voting is how voters acquire accurate information about the state of the economy. Tests, which Kayser and Peress conduct as part of their study, suggest that the effect arises not from highly informed voters making direct comparisons but from pre-benchmarking by the media when reporting on the economy.

ples (differentiated by clarity of responsibility, the government's majority and coalition status), and robust to the addition of controls for a wide range of alternative explanations. Our analysis employs Kayser and Peress's aggregate country-election data and exact model specifications to ensure direct comparability.¹⁴ The dataset covers 22 OECD countries and 385 elections ranging from 1948 to the present.¹⁵ To explore how voters benchmark, Kayser and Peress calculate three different measures of local economic performance relative to (i) the international median, (ii) the international economies with which a country is most integrated (principal components decomposition), and (iii) the trade-weighted mean of a country's top five export partners. In their analysis the principal components decomposition yields the most consistent results, and is their preferred measure throughout the paper.¹⁶

To examine how incumbent powers to time early elections affect electoral accountability and whether the moderating effect changes when different actors within government control dissolution, we make full use of the flexibility afforded by the index: We employ it in dichotomized form and in its continuous version, and compare the impact of PM powers with those of the cabinet collectively. We begin by focussing on the dissolution powers configuration that is most likely to benefit the leader's party—extensive PM discretion to time elections. PMs who are unencumbered by co-decision powers of their coalition partners should be most

¹⁴Kayser and Peress (2012) provide aggregate and individual level tests of the economic voting hypothesis. We focus on the aggregate level tests. Their replication materials enable us to reproduce their results exactly.

¹⁵The sample includes Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

¹⁶For detailed discussion of each measure, we refer the reader to the original paper.

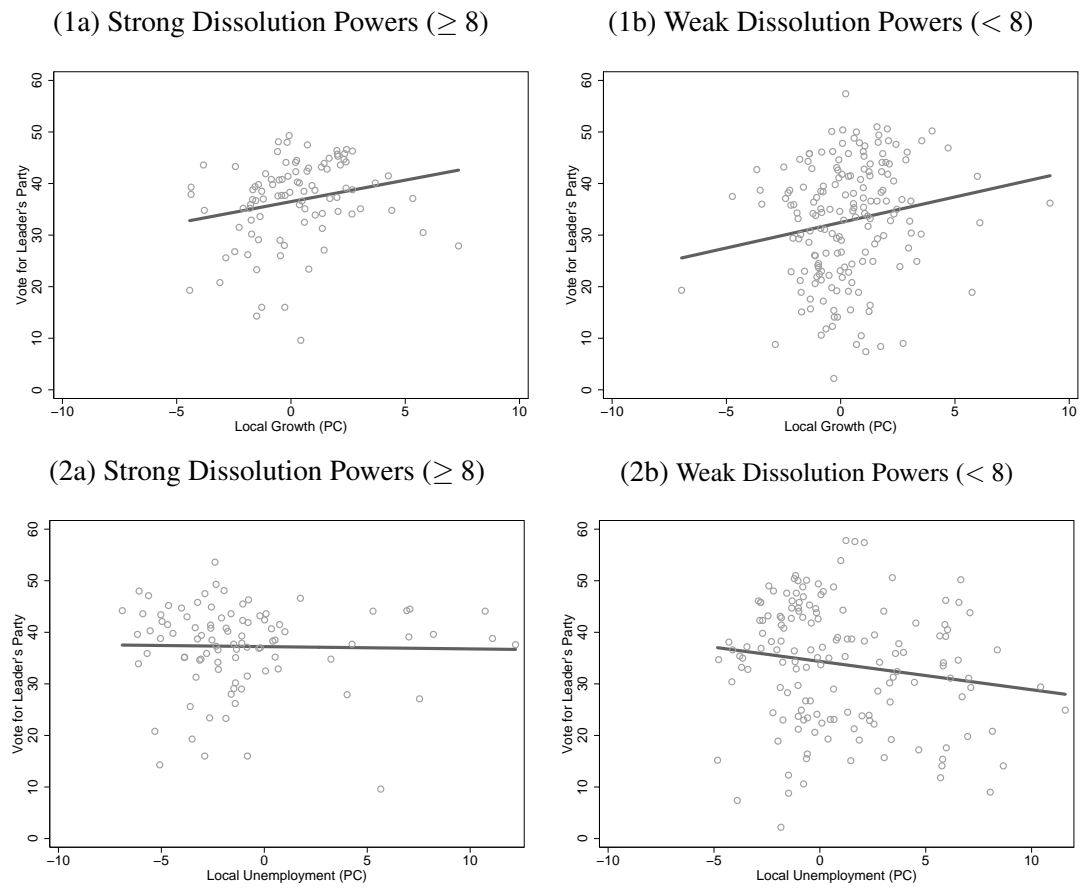
able to employ their prerogatives for the benefit of their own party.¹⁷ To examine this expectation, we turn first to a visual inspection in Figure 1 of the relationship between local economic performance (based on the principal components decomposition) and the vote share of the leader's party. The upper part of the figure focuses on local growth, the lower part on local unemployment, and we stratify the sample into constitutions which do (panels on the left hand side of Figure 1), and do not (right hand side panels) grant the PM high levels of discretion to dissolve the assembly (i.e. PM dissolution powers ≥ 8).¹⁸ The figure shows that the difference in dissolution powers between these two groups of countries maps onto a discontinuity in the data. As anticipated, the relationship of the PM party's vote share with local growth and unemployment is flatter (and therefore weaker) when PMs have extensive discretion to dissolve than when they lack such powers. In particular, weak economic performance (i.e., poor local growth and high local unemployment) seem to affect the vote share of the leader's party less when PMs can choose the timing of elections.

Next, we directly replicate Kayser and Peress's main multivariate aggregate-level analysis,

¹⁷Given the prevalence of dichotomous measures in the literature on dissolution powers to date, we build on this type of approach and begin by employing a dichotomized version of the index to give a first visual impression of the data (Figure 1) and to perform the split-sample analysis presented below (Table 4). The main multivariate analysis presented in Table 5 then introduces the continuous index and the comparison of the effects of prime ministerial control over dissolution as opposed to control by the cabinet collectively.

¹⁸The countries which grant high levels of discretion to the PM include Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand, Spain, and the United Kingdom. One election in Sweden (1973) is also included because of a transitional constitutional regime in place from 1971 to 1975. See the Supporting Information (SI 1) for details.

Figure 1: Vote Share of the Leader's Party by PM Dissolution Power



Note: The figure plots the vote share of the PM's party against the local economic indicators (Panels 1a and 1b focus on growth, Panels 2a and 2b on unemployment), and stratifies the data by whether the PM has strong dissolution powers (i.e., index score ≥ 8 , Panels 1a and 2a) or not (Panels 1b and 2b). In each panel the line of best fit is overlaid.

stratifying by the level of PM discretion to dissolve (PM dissolution powers ≥ 8 , < 8).¹⁹ The analysis examines how the local growth and unemployment measures used in the original paper (non-benchmarked, and the three benchmarked measures using the global median, a principal components decomposition, and the trade-weighted mean, respectively) affect the vote share of the leader's party. Effective accountability in these models is evidenced by significant and stable effects of the local economic variables in the presence of controls for the international benchmark. Table 4 reports the results.

Models 1-4 focus on countries in which the PM commands weak or no dissolution powers (i.e., PM dissolution powers < 8) and in that part of the sample economic accountability functions as demonstrated by Kayser and Peress.²⁰ Model 1 reports the effects of non-benchmarked growth and unemployment for comparison, Models 2-4 examine the effect of local economic performance (benchmarking in the three different ways discussed above), on the vote share of the leader's party. The models indicate that local economic performance strongly affects the incumbent's electoral fortunes. Indeed, the results in this subsample strengthen Kayser and Peress's argument by showing that local unemployment conditions the leader's electoral performance significantly and consistently (Models 2-4). Although the effect of local growth is less stable in these split-sample regressions with a relatively small number of observations, Model 3, which employs Kayser and Peress's preferred principal components decomposition, still indicates that the effect of local growth is statistically significant and very similar in magnitude to the effect reported in the original paper. A 1% increase in local growth raises the vote share of the leader's party by 1.3% while a 1% increase in local unemployment reduces the vote share by 0.7%.

¹⁹Missingness reduces the number of elections in this analysis to 213.

²⁰As in Kayser and Peress's analysis, all regression results reported here are based on heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

A very different picture emerges from Models 5-8, which focus on accountability in democracies that give the PM extensive control over election timing (i.e., PM dissolution powers ≥ 8). Evidence of the local economy's effect on the incumbent's electoral fortunes is significantly weaker and inconsistent in this sample. Even in the principal components decomposition (Model 7), local growth is only marginally significant (at the 10% level); and local unemployment always has the “wrong” sign—indicating that incumbents perform well in elections, even when unemployment rises. These results suggest that PMs who can time elections strategically are able to mitigate electoral sanctioning for weak economic performance as we anticipated. Moreover, the intercepts in Models 6-8 are systematically larger than those in Models 2-4, suggesting that the power to time elections not only weakens accountability for the economy but is also, as expected, associated with a significant vote share bonus for the leader's party overall.

Kayser and Peress carefully probe the robustness of their findings across different time periods, examining the magnitude of the benchmarked economic effects in moving 10 year sub-samples of the data. We follow the same approach and run simplified regressions with only two regressors (local growth and local unemployment, employing the principal components decomposition) for a rolling ten-year window of the data starting from 1979. In this analysis, economic accountability is evidenced by relatively stable coefficients that retain significance across time. Figure 2 plots the coefficients for our split sample. The solid line tracks coefficients for the sample in which incumbents lack extensive dissolution powers, the dashed line refers to the sample in which PMs have discretion to time elections. The figure confirms that the effect of the local economy on the electoral performance of the leader's party is robust across time in those democracies in which the incumbent lacks extensive dissolution powers. The coefficients on local growth and local unemployment always have the expected sign and are fairly stable.

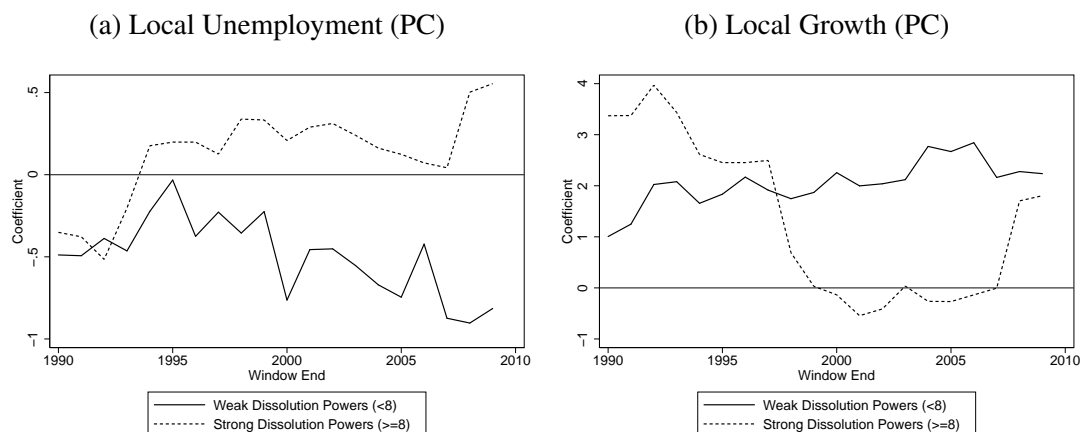
In parliamentary democracies that allow the incumbent PM to control dissolution, however, a starkly different picture emerges. Neither the effect of local unemployment, nor that of local growth is consistently different from zero. Moreover, for some of the time period covered, the

Table 4: Split-Sample Regressions—Vote Share of Leader’s Party by PM Dissolution Power

	Weak Dissolution Powers (< 8)				Strong Dissolution Powers (≥ 8)			
	No Benchmark (1)	Median (2)	PC (3)	Trade (4)	No Benchmark (5)	Median (6)	PC (7)	Trade (8)
Growth	0.39 (1.07)				0.54 (1.27)			
Unemployment	-0.79** (-2.36)				-0.01 (-0.05)			
Local Growth		0.74 (1.48)	1.31** (2.49)	0.27 (0.44)		0.73 (1.59)	1.01* (1.80)	0.85 (1.32)
Global Growth		0.16 (0.28)	-0.29 (-0.66)	0.91 (1.12)		0.16 (0.19)	-0.26 (-0.42)	1.31* (1.78)
Local Unemp.		-0.85*** (-2.62)	-0.73** (-2.10)	-0.99** (-2.06)		0.16 (0.61)	0.08 (0.34)	0.51** (2.11)
Global Unemp.		-0.40 (-0.50)	-0.74 (-1.62)	-0.00 (-0.00)		-0.85 (-1.35)	-0.46 (-1.23)	-0.32 (-0.55)
Constant	36.43*** (14.14)	34.57*** (5.84)	37.60*** (12.76)	28.29*** (4.05)	34.76*** (15.12)	40.37*** (8.52)	41.03*** (12.55)	32.47*** (7.42)
Number of Elections	134	134	134	93	79	79	79	53
Number of Countries	15	15	15	15	8	8	8	8

Note: Dependent variable is vote share of the leader’s party; t statistics in parentheses calculated using heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors; * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. ‘No Benchmark’ refers to unbenchmark data; ‘Median’ uses the median global economy as the benchmark; ‘PC’ relies on the principal components decomposition; ‘Trade’ calculates the benchmark using the top-five trading partners of the specific country.

Figure 2: Accountability for Local Economic Conditions over Time by PM Dissolution Power



Note: The figure plots the regression coefficients for local unemployment (Panel a) and growth (Panel b), for rolling ten-year windows of the data. The solid lines refer to the sample with weak PM dissolution powers (i.e., index score < 8), the dashed lines refers to the sample in which PM's have extensive election timing powers (i.e., index score ≥ 8).

coefficients for unemployment and growth have the “wrong” sign, indicating that incumbents were able to secure vote share gains despite poor local economic performance compared to the international benchmark. As we anticipated, then, electoral accountability for poor local economic performance is attenuated when the PM can control the timing of elections.

To assess the magnitude of the effect of dissolution powers and to explore how the effect of dissolution powers changes when the government rather than the PM alone controls dissolution, we turn to Kayser and Peress' full data and estimate a model that interacts incumbent dissolution powers with local economic conditions. To recapitulate, if our index has the substantive effects that the literature on opportunistic election timing anticipates, we would expect to see that incumbents' dissolution powers not only give rise to a vote share bonus for the leader's party, but also weaken accountability for *poor* (but not strong) economic performance. These expectations can be summarized in two hypotheses:²¹

²¹We follow Berry, Golder, and Milton's (2012) recommendations in specifying and testing

Hypothesis 1: An increase in dissolution powers raises the vote share of the leader's party at all values of local growth. This effect is strongest when local growth is weak, declines as local growth increases, and ceases to have an effect when local growth is strong.

Hypothesis 2: An increase in dissolution powers raises the vote share of the leader's party at all values of local unemployment. This effect is strongest when local unemployment is high, declines as local unemployment decreases, and ceases to have an effect when local unemployment is low.

In addition, the magnitude of these effects can be expected to vary with the actor who controls dissolution. The comparative coding of our index enables us to assess this hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Unilateral prime ministerial control over dissolution benefits the PM party's vote share more extensively than collective government control (which enables coalition partners to act as veto players).

Table 5 examines these expectations by interacting our index with both measures of local economic performance. We employ two alternative measures of incumbent dissolution power—the PM's powers (Models 1a and 2a) and the government's collective ability to control dissolution (i.e., either the PM or the government collectively, Models 1b and 2b). To preserve comparability with the results presented above, Models 1a and 1b dichotomize the indices and create an indicator variable that identifies PMs (Model 1a) or the entire governments (Model 1b) with *strong* dissolution powers, applying a threshold of eight on both indices. Models 2a

our hypotheses about the interactions between dissolution powers and economic conditions. Berry et al. urge researchers to test their expectations about the marginal effects of *all* variables associated with an interaction term and we present additional hypotheses and tests concerning the marginal effects of growth and unemployment in the supporting information SI 3.

and 2b, employ the indices as continuous variables. All of these analyses are based on the principal components decomposition of economic performance preferred by Kayser and Peress, which sets a demanding threshold for testing the effect of our dissolution powers measure.²²

Table 5: The Effect of Dissolution Powers on the Vote Share of the Leader's Party

	Strong Dissolution		Continuous Interactions	
	PM (1a)	Executive (1b)	PM (2a)	Executive (2b)
Dissolution Powers	5.74*** (3.47)	4.11** (2.49)	0.58*** (3.20)	0.51*** (2.73)
Local Growth (PC)	1.20** (2.43)	1.38** (2.38)	1.33*** (2.64)	1.53*** (2.67)
Powers X Local Growth	-0.25 (-0.39)	-0.29 (-0.43)	-0.05 (-0.74)	-0.05 (-0.69)
Local Unem. (PC)	-0.79** (-2.50)	-0.42 (-1.08)	-0.73** (-2.07)	-0.46 (-0.94)
Powers X Local Unemp.	0.93** (2.45)	0.14 (0.32)	0.08* (1.72)	0.02 (0.27)
Growth X Loc. Unemp	0.14 (0.70)	0.16 (0.60)	0.17 (0.85)	0.17 (0.60)
Power X Loc. Growth X Loc. Unemp	-0.50** (-2.20)	-0.36 (-1.23)	-0.06** (-2.54)	-0.04 (-1.19)
Glob. Growth (PC)	-0.25 (-0.69)	-0.22 (-0.58)	-0.28 (-0.78)	-0.25 (-0.67)
Glob. Unemp. (PC)	-0.66** (-2.08)	-0.30 (-1.11)	-0.60* (-1.81)	-0.32 (-1.15)
Constant	37.16*** (17.68)	34.32*** (16.59)	36.60*** (16.99)	33.89*** (16.58)
N			213	

Note: Dependent variable is vote share of the leader's party; *t* statistics in parentheses calculated using heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors; * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. 'Strong Dissolution' is an indicator that identifies incumbents with extensive discretion to dissolve (≥ 8); 'Continuous Interactions' uses the values of the index itself.

Table 5 reports the results. As anticipated, dissolution powers in all of these operationaliza-

²²We include all constitutive terms of our interactions, including the three-way interaction term, in the analysis in order to ensure that the model is accurately specified and to avoid inferential errors (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006).

tions are an important omitted variable in the literature on economic voting. Incumbents who have discretion to time elections achieve systematically better election results than their peers who lack such powers, and garner a vote-share bonus of between 4.1-5.8% for their party.²³

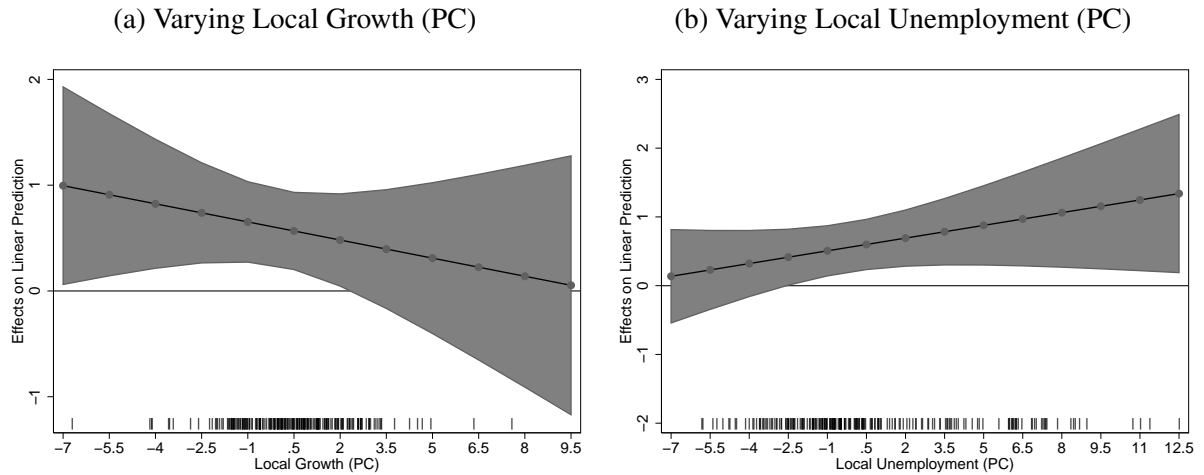
The results also support the economic voting argument—voters clearly reward incumbents for local economic growth, although local unemployment most often fails to reach statistical significance in this pooled sample. Yet, accountability for the state of the economy is weaker when incumbents, especially PMs, possess powers to manage election timing, as is consistent with the assumptions that underpin the literature on opportunistic election timing. Note that the two-way interaction term between local economic growth and dissolution powers always has a negative sign, indicating that the interaction detracts from the effect of local growth, which always has a positive coefficient. The two-way interaction between local unemployment and dissolution powers displays an equivalent pattern. Dissolution powers, then, weaken economic accountability.

To shed light on these interactions, Figure 3 plots the marginal effect of the PM's election timing powers based on Model 2a (Table 5), across the full range of variation in local growth (Panel a) and local unemployment (Panel b) respectively, which enables us to assess hypotheses 1 and 2. In each case, we hold the other economic indicator at its mean to simplify the presentation. Both graphs show that the effect of an increase in a PM's dissolution powers on the electoral performance of their party is positive for all values of local growth and local unemployment, as anticipated. This effect is strongest when either aspect of the economy is performing poorly, diminishes as economic performance strengthens, and becomes statistically

²³As noted above, a number of studies draw attention to other factors that can moderate the strength of electoral accountability for government performance, such as the level of clarity of responsibility (single party vs. coalition) (Powell & Whitten, 1993; Hobolt et al., 2013), and the type of government (minority vs. majority) (Barreiro, 2008). The results presented in Table 5 remain robust when these factors are controlled for.

non-significant at high levels of economic performance (i.e., strong local growth and low local unemployment). This matches the expectations summarized in hypotheses 1 and 2 precisely.

Figure 3: Marginal Effects of Dissolution Power over the Range of the Economic Indicators



Note: Each panel shows the marginal effect of dissolution power (with 95% confidence intervals) while varying one local economic indicator—holding the other constant at its mean. A rug plot depicting the frequency distribution of the observed values of each economic indicator is superimposed on each graph. Note that the vertical axes of Panels (a) and (b) differ.

Finally, the results make clear that prime ministerial discretion to dissolve benefits the leader's party more extensively than collective government control, as is consistent with hypothesis 3: The marginal effect of dissolution power on the vote share of the PM's party is around 1.8% smaller when control over dissolution lies with the cabinet (Model 1b) than when discretion lies exclusively with the PM (Model 1a).²⁴ Note also that the accountability of the PM's party for weak economic performance is moderated less when the cabinet as a whole (i.e., PM and the government) controls dissolution: None of the interactions with local economic performance are significant when the entire government controls dissolution (Models 1b and 2b), in contrast to the models that focus on PM dissolution powers alone (Models 1a

²⁴This calculation is based on the marginal effect of dissolution power when local economic variables are held at their means.

and 2a). As hypothesis 3 suggests, then, dissolution powers, which rest with the government collectively, benefit the PM's party less than discretion of the PM to bring about early elections.

These findings provide a number of helpful clarifications. As is consistent with our expectations, dissolution powers condition electoral accountability, which makes them an important omitted variable in the literature on economic voting. On the one hand, these powers correlate with a significant incumbency advantage. Incumbents with discretion to dissolve parliament are able to time elections to strong public opinion leads, periods of strong economic (and other) policy performance and opposition crises, and achieve a vote-share bonus of 4.1-5.8% on average. On the other hand, dissolution powers mediate electoral accountability for the state of the economy. Our results suggest that local economic performance—both growth and unemployment—has an even more powerful and systematic impact on electoral results than Kayser and Peress found when governments lack dissolution powers. In contrast, PMs with discretion to dissolve are able to limit their accountability for economic performance. As anticipated, this modifying effect is statistically significant when PMs have incentives to deploy it—e. g. when economic performance is weak. Put differently, PMs seem to deploy the advantages that discretionary election timing confers precisely as expected, to improve their electoral performance in general and to moderate the electoral repercussions of a mediocre or weak economy.

These results do not imply that *any* incumbent 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. Discretion to time elections only gives governments *that can establish a sufficiently strong lead over their opponents* the opportunity to capitalize on their lead in order to win a new term in office and to pre-empt a poll under less favourable circumstances. A strong lead either requires strong performance in some policy area (though not necessarily the economy), or a much weakened opposition. Generating such favourable conditions is beyond the capabilities of many govern-

ments. For these reasons, we do not see opportunistic elections more often.

In sum, these results demonstrate the utility of our index in substantive terms and add to the evidence of its validity as a measure. Moreover, by providing the first systematic comparative evidence that dissolution rules affect electoral accountability in a manner that is consistent with the theoretical assumptions in the literature on opportunistic election timing, they also give an indication of the advances that the new index makes possible in comparative politics.

4 Conclusion

The index of parliamentary dissolution powers that we develop, operationalize and test in this paper contributes to a better understanding of parliamentary democracies in two respects. It conceptualizes a central dimension of institutional variation among parliamentary regimes, providing a first overview of the complexity of the different dissolution regimes and the relevant dimensions of variation that characterize them. It also improves measurement in two respects—it generalizes across different actors and records the complexity of the rules with sufficient accuracy to capture their substantive implications. In addition, the index is coded on the basis of *de jure* powers. As a result it is exogenous to many of the electoral-, government- and policy-centred dependent variables that are potentially of interest.

Our application of this new dissolution powers measure to electoral accountability illustrates its substantive utility. Employing the index, we provide a first systematic comparative test of a crucial assumption in the literature on opportunistic election timing—that incumbents with discretion to dissolve derive electoral benefits from their powers. The results suggest that influence on election timing enables incumbents to structure the central electoral nexus between voters and their representatives and to shape the outcomes of electoral accountability. Governments, and in particular PMs, who can dissolve parliament, employ these powers for partisan gain, which correlates with significant incumbency advantages and moderated accountability for weak performance. These findings close an important gap in the literature on opportunistic

election timing and provide a bridge to current practitioner debates: It is precisely this type of political advantage that fuels the current debates about curbing electoral opportunism by introducing or keeping fixed parliamentary terms among scholars and practitioners in the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

The potential contributions of this new index of dissolution powers stretch well beyond the literatures on electoral accountability, economic voting and opportunistic election timing. Dissolution powers identify a dimension of institutional variation among parliamentary regimes that has far-reaching implications also for legislative bargaining. Actors with discretion to dissolve can bring the threat or use of early elections to bear on negotiations between parliamentary parties about government formation, cabinet termination and policy, with extensive implications for political outcomes. All of these areas are central to comparative politics. Our index makes possible advances in knowledge in each of them by providing a more accurate and nuanced measure of the power of assembly dissolution, which enables scholars to compare the influence of different actors who play a role in the process.

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