

Electoral incumbency advantages and the introduction of fixed parliamentary terms in the UK

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Can fixing the parliamentary term be expected to reduce electoral incumbency advantages? In September 2011, the UK's Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government, led by Prime Minister David Cameron, passed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. The Act constrains the prime minister's discretion to dissolve parliament with the express aim of curbing the "manipulation of election dates for political advantage" (HM Government 2011, Introduction). In the debate surrounding this reform, a central argument is that flexible election timing enables governments to realize an incumbency advantage by scheduling elections when conditions are favourable (House of Commons Library 2010, 10). Proponents of flexible election timing, however, argue that no such advantage accrues to incumbents, so that fixing the parliamentary term simply restricts the ability of leaders to test their democratic mandate and to consult the people more frequently than statutory election dates would allow (Edward Leigh MP, HC Deb. 23 October 2014, col. 1070).¹

The literature on opportunistic election calling – including the signalling effects of this strategy and the competence of governments that select it – lends support to both sides in this policy debate. The political economy literature provides evidence that incumbents employ their discretion to dissolve parliament by timing elections to favourable circumstances, such as a strong economy or opposition disarray, in order to maximize their support (Ito and Park 1988, Chowdhury 1993, Kayser 2006). Recent studies suggest that this strategy yields significant incumbency advantages in elections (Roy and Alcantara 2012; Schleiter and Tavits 2016). Others, however, doubt that governments derive electoral benefits from their ability to time elections strategically. One argument is that strategic election timing confers no electoral advantages because of its signalling effects (Smith 2004). According to this view, snap elections betray a government's lack of confidence in its ability to maintain high levels of popularity to the next regular election date. This signals that the incumbent is less competent than a government that confidently carries on to the next regular election,

which turns voters against the incumbent (Smith 2004). The alternative argument concedes that opportunistically scheduled elections may correlate with superior incumbent performance in elections, but attributes any such correlation to a selection effect: Only successful governments make use of the opportunity to call a premature poll for partisan benefit, hence the underlying competence of these governments, rather than the opportunity to time elections, accounts for their electoral performance (Leuprecht and McHugh 2008, 428). The debate revolves around three questions: (i) do the conditions under which governments call elections opportunistically signal reduced incumbent competence to voters, (ii) how do incumbents perform in elections that are scheduled for partisan benefit, and (iii) can incumbency advantages in opportunistic elections be attributed solely to a selection effect, which arises because competent governments are more likely to make use of opportunistic election timing?

To those engaged in the UK debate about fixed parliamentary terms, these questions are of material importance. While the House of Commons defeated a motion in October 2014 to bring forward a proposal to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the legislation remains controversial and Section 7 of the Act itself requires a review in 2020. The debate will therefore continue, and so will the need for a UK-specific evidentiary basis for the political discussions. In this paper, we examine the relevance of the perspectives outlined above to the particular case of the UK in order to better understand the likely effect of the fixed parliamentary term on future election outcomes.² Throughout, we rely on multiple tests and data: qualitative evidence, statistical analyses of observed UK election results, and an examination of potential outcomes using polling data together with a case study.

Our findings suggest that UK prime ministers made extensive use of their powers to time elections to favourable circumstances. Nearly 60 per cent of the UK's post-war elections up to 2015 were opportunistically timed, typically in circumstances that did not take voters

by surprise. Incumbents who used this strategy realized vote and seat shares that outstripped those of their peers in other elections by 3.5 and 11 per cent respectively on average. These differences in electoral performance cannot be explained as the result of a selection effect alone: Opinion polling data suggests that incumbents who called opportunistic elections would not have performed equally well, had the election not been called to coincide with favourable conditions. Indeed, a case study of Harold Wilson's choice to call the October 1974 election, and of the government's likely fate in the counterfactual scenario, indicates that a well-timed election can make the crucial difference between electoral victory and defeat. By abolishing this advantage, fixed parliamentary terms can be expected to change electoral competition significantly, levelling the playing field between the opposition and incumbents.³

Contrasting perspectives

Strategic election calling by governments in parliamentary democracies around the world is a well-documented phenomenon. One view in the debate about the electoral consequences of this strategy is that opportunistic election timing primarily occurs in response to favourable circumstances and benefits the incumbent, but not everyone concurs.

Incumbency advantages under flexible election timing

The argument that incumbents benefit from the discretion to call elections focuses on the strategic advantages that leaders can derive from scheduling elections to coincide with peaks of popularity. Such public opinion poll leads may arise under various conditions including good economic performance of the government and also opposition unpreparedness and weakness (Kayser 2006; Roy and Alcantara 2012).

As the literature on performance voting demonstrates, a strong economy exerts a powerful influence on vote choice and benefits the incumbent electorally (see Duch 2007 for an excellent overview). Hence, governments can expect to fare better when elections are held in the context of favourable economic conditions rather than at random times. This informs their election timing choices. The political economy literature on opportunistic election timing documents this phenomenon: Ito and Park (1988) find evidence that economic growth influences election timing in the case of Japan, Chowdhury (1993) demonstrates the same for India, and Voia and Ferris (2013) show that anticipated economic upturns are a trigger of election calls in Canada. Palmer and Whitten (2000) confirm these findings in a comparative context and find that strong economic growth, low inflation, and reduced unemployment raise the probability of an opportunistic election.

Leaders also seize opportunities to profit electorally from divides within the opposition and its unpopularity or unpreparedness. A classic example is the Canadian federal election in 2000, which was scheduled by Prime Minister Chretien only three years into his mandate, allowing his Liberal Party to “take advantage of the newly formed Canadian Alliance Party and its general unpreparedness for an election. Indeed, by the time the writ was dropped, the party had just chosen a new leader, Stockwell Day, and had only nominated candidates in 90 of the country’s 301 ridings” (Roy and Alcantara 2012, 775). Wrong-footing the opposition not only enables the government to exploit its opinion poll lead, it also allows the incumbent “to be better prepared for a general election than are the opposition parties” (Docherty 2010, 77).

In sum, this literature suggests that the choice to time elections strategically can be expected to benefit the government. Although predicting peaks of popularity and performance is a difficult task, and re-election is always uncertain, incumbents tend to possess better information than most other actors and schedule early elections only when they

expect to realize an advantage by doing so. Recent work has documented that incumbency advantage. A comprehensive comparative study finds that opportunistic election timing enables incumbents to realize a vote share bonus of up to 5 per cent (Schleiter and Tavits 2016). In the Canadian context, Roy and Alcantara (2012, 779) estimate an even bigger advantage of 8-11 per cent.

No incumbency advantage under flexible election timing

Others call into question the view that flexible election timing allows incumbents to realize electoral benefits. One view is that snap elections have *signaling* effects, which lower voter approval of the government, and negate the benefits of timing elections to favourable circumstances (Smith 2004). A second view accepts that incumbents perform better in opportunistic elections, but attributes that performance differential to a *selection* effect by which competent governments are more likely to choose strategic election timing (Leuprecht and McHugh 2008).

The signaling argument (Smith 2004) builds on an insight of the opportunistic election timing literature, which is that incumbents consider not only their favourable past performance in calling early elections, but also the expected value of their remaining current term. That value declines as a government's remaining days in office dwindle, and with factors that threaten its popularity and ability to survive (Balke 1990; Kayser 2005). For instance, minority governments and governments that anticipate a future decline in economic performance value their current term less (Balke 1990, 209-211). As Smith (2003, 403) argues “[o]n the whole, it is leaders who fear the future, not those who expect their fortunes to improve, who call early elections.”

According to Smith, leaders call snap elections to prevent voters from observing a decline in the government's fortunes by exploiting private information. At the same time,

however, such unanticipated snap elections are unlikely to benefit the incumbent because they signal to voters that the future will be less positive (Smith 2004, 7). Hence, governments that time elections early relative to expectations lose electoral support compared to pre-announcement levels (Smith 2003, 418). While incumbents may still call early elections if their opinion poll lead is large enough to render electoral victory likely, these electoral penalties make it “difficult to argue that endogenous timing privileges the incumbent” (Smith 2004, 241).

A second perspective accepts that incumbents achieve higher vote and seat shares in opportunistic elections compared to other polls, but attributes that electoral bonus to the competence of governments which choose to schedule elections early (Leuprecht and McHugh 2008). According to the selection argument, opportunistic elections are called by the most successful and competent incumbents, rather than by those who fear the future: If “a ministry is in decline it is far more likely to cling to power than risk a premature election” (Leuprecht and McHugh 2008, 428). Hence, the superior electoral performance of incumbents in opportunistically timed elections reflects underlying incumbent success, not advantages that arise from election timing *per se*.

The existing literature therefore gives rise to contradictory views about the conditions under which opportunistic elections are triggered and the electoral consequences of this strategy. In the sections that follow we examine how well these perspectives describe opportunistic election calling in the UK. First, we analyse whether opportunistic election calling reflected (i) favourable conditions *and* threats to the future popularity, performance and durability of the government (as would be consistent with the opportunistic election calling and signalling perspectives, but not with the selection argument), and (ii) the use of private information by politicians about such threats to schedule unexpected snap elections (as anticipated by the signalling perspective). Second, we ask whether the observed electoral

performance of incumbents in opportunistically timed elections outstrips that of their peers in other elections (as would be consistent with the opportunistic election calling and selection arguments, but not with the signalling perspective). Third, we apply a potential outcomes framework and examine, using polling data and a case study, whether opportunistic election timing is the preserve of successful governments that would have performed equally well in elections at virtually any date (as anticipated by the selection argument). This approach holds government competence constant and contrasts the electoral effect of opportunistic election timing with the relevant counterfactual scenario, in which these governments could not have called early elections when it was politically opportune.

Before we turn to the evidence, however, the following section clarifies the distinction between fixed and flexible parliamentary terms, as well as opportunistic and other types of elections.

Fixed and flexible parliamentary terms, opportunistic and other elections

The terminology of fixed and flexible parliamentary terms is used in the constitutional reform debate discussed above, and refers to the distinction between constitutions that restrict the discretion of the incumbent to schedule elections and those that impose no such restrictions. Fixed terms curb the ability of governments to freely choose election dates, but normally allow early elections in limited circumstances. In the case of the UK Fixed-term Parliaments Act, for instance, early elections are called under two conditions: (i) when a government has been defeated in a no-confidence vote and parliament has not expressed its confidence in a government within two weeks, or (ii) when *two-thirds* of the total membership of the House of Commons (including vacant seats), vote in favour. These provisions allow parliamentary dissolution in response to gridlock and crises, while aiming to restrict the incumbent's ability to call early elections for partisan benefit. To establish under which conditions and to what

effect incumbents use flexible election timing, then, we must focus on elections that (a) occur before the end of the parliamentary term and (b) are discretionarily timed by the incumbent for partisan advantage (rather than forced upon a government by failure, gridlock or crisis).

We disaggregate UK elections in two steps. The first step distinguishes between regular and early elections. Regular elections occur at the end of a parliament's statutory term, or close to it. In practice, governments schedule elections with some flexibility and some constitutions explicitly specify a window within which regular elections must be held. While the UK constitution offers no explicit guidance, scholars typically classify elections that occur close to parliament's statutory end as regular (King et al.1990; Schleiter and Tavits 2016). This reflects a recognition that discretionary election timing close to the end of a parliamentary term offers no significant strategic advantage because (i) all parties anticipate and prepare for an election close to the end of the parliamentary term, and (ii) voter perceptions of a government's economic performance are shaped by the average state of the economy in the recent past, typically a period of approximately 12 months prior to an election, rather than short-term economic volatility. We apply a six-month threshold that identifies six regular elections, which terminated the following governments: Attlee (in 1950), Douglas-Home (in 1964), Major (in 1992, 1997), Brown (in 2010) and Cameron (in 2015) (Butler and Kavanagh 1992, 100; Butler 1995, 75; Butler and Kavanagh 1997, 23; Nicholas 1999, 76; Kavanagh and Cowley 2010, 17; Cowley and Kavanagh 2016). Elections that take place before this threshold are classified as early (additional analyses of this coding choice in SI.2, SI.3 and SI.4 show that all findings are robust to a broad range of alternative classifications).

In a second step, we distinguish early elections that are forced upon governments by crises and defeat from those that are discretionarily timed by the incumbent for partisan advantage. To identify these features of early elections, we draw on primary and secondary

sources, including news reports (Lexis Nexis and Keesing's Record of World Events), the analysis generated by the British Election Studies, the secondary literature and the biographies of ministers and prime ministers. These sources identify only two of the UK post-war elections as forced upon governments: (i) The February 1974 election was called when multiple policy failures and the imminent threat of a miners' strike in the context of severe energy shortages made it impossible for Heath's government to pursue the pay restraint policies on which it had staked its credibility (Butler 1995, 75; Heath 1998, 509-11), leaving Heath "no further room for manoeuvre" (Heath 1998, 511). This made the election exceptional – "[i]t was unprecedented for an outside challenge to government policy to force a dissolution" (Butler and Kavanagh 1975a, 44). (ii) In 1979 Callaghan's Labour government lost a no-confidence vote tabled by Margaret Thatcher (Butler and Kavanagh 1980, 127), so that once again the government had "no control over the decision to dissolve" (Butler and Kavanagh 1980, 127). The remaining ten UK post-war elections, nearly 60 per cent, were early and opportunistically timed for partisan advantage.

Favourable conditions, anticipated threats and signalling effects

Do the competing accounts accurately characterize the conditions under which governments call opportunistic elections? To address this question, we analyse whether opportunistic election calling reflected (i) not just favourable conditions (i.e., public opinion poll leads, a strong economy and opposition weakness) as anticipated by all three perspectives, but also threats to the future popularity, performance and durability of the government (which would contrast with the selection argument), and (ii) the use of private information by politicians about such threats to schedule unexpected snap elections (as anticipated by the signalling perspective).

Table 1 summarizes the results of a qualitative analysis of discretionary election timing choices, using the primary and secondary sources described above. Columns three to five report the evidence regarding the importance of *favourable circumstances*, which are stressed by all three accounts, and play a major role in the calling of these elections, as anticipated:

Nine of the ten elections were called to exploit a significant *public opinion poll lead* over the opposition (column 3, Attlee II in 1951 was the exception) and for the prime ministers "... the overriding consideration in choosing an election date is whether or not you think you are going to win" (Thatcher 1995, 288). Often governments waited for local election results (see Thatcher 1995, 574) and combined them with polling information and focus groups to guide "a most careful analysis of every constituency in the country" (MacMillan 1971, 744; see also Thatcher 1995, 574; Blair 2010, 287). The overall aim of these analyses was to determine whether "... a dissolution *now* would give us a majority ... in the House of Commons" (MacMillan 1971, 744, emphasis in original).

Prime ministers paid equally close attention to *economic performance* (column four): A favourable balance of payments (Attlee 1954, 207; Wilson 1971, 776; Eden 1960, 270), high levels of employment (Eden 1960, 270), low inflation, growth (Thatcher 1995, 289), and the flow of money into public services such as schools and hospitals (Blair 2010, 317), proved critical to election timing decisions. Favourable economic conditions played a central role in the timing of nearly all (nine out of ten) of these elections, exactly as the literature on opportunistic election calling anticipates.

In addition incumbents sought to exploit *opposition unpreparedness and weakness* (column five). Prime ministers surprised the opposition with unexpected election calls (for instance, in 1955 and 1970, see Smith 2004, 61; Haines 2003), timed elections in 1955 and

1983 to benefit from opposition divides (i.e., the rift between the Bevanite and Gaitskellite wings of Labour, and the defection of the Social Democrats from Labour respectively, Cook and Stevenson 2000, 57; Lawson 1992, 246), and to exploit the unpopularity of the opposition party or its leader (i.e., Heath's unpopularity in 1966 and the Conservative party's unpopularity in 2001, Butler and King 1966, 266; Blair 2010, 322). As column five shows, opposition weakness and unpreparedness played a role in the timing of six out of ten opportunistic elections.

This evidence supports the expectation of all approaches that some combination of favourable conditions is *necessary* in order for incumbents to have the opportunity to time elections strategically for partisan benefit. Absent favourable circumstances, such as policy success, opposition weakness, and a public opinion poll lead, an early election cannot be expected to deliver electoral victory.

Columns six to eight report the evidence regarding the impact on election timing decisions of factors that reduce the value of the incumbent's remaining term including the elapsing parliamentary term and threats to the government's ability to muster legislative majorities. While the literature on opportunistic elections and the signalling perspective would expect governments to resort to opportunistic election timing more readily as the value of their current term declines, the selection hypothesis would not expect governments that are at high risk of defeat and failure to invoke opportunistic elections. The evidence suggests that not only the *elapsing parliamentary term* (column 6), but also threats to the government's success, played an important role: *Minority status* was a central consideration in Wilson's decision to call the October 1974 election (columns seven and eight), and *fears about the fragility of the government's majority* played a role in the calling of elections in 1951, 1955, and 1966. In three cases the concern about inadequate legislative support for the government was so pressing that it triggered an election call less than two years into a new parliament's

term (1951, 1966 and October 1974), which contradicts the expectation that only successful governments choose to call opportunistic elections.

Columns nine and ten speak to the signalling perspective and report two measures, calculated by Smith (2004, 140-150), which indicate whether governments exploited their informational advantages concerning future threats to their performance when calling snap elections. The *ratio of cumulative hazards* captures the change in objective conditions that shape the risk of an early election (i.e., two-party vote intentions, two-party measure of government seat share, and time to the next regular election) 30 days prior to the election compared to the previous 183 days. The *ratio of newspaper stories* calculates the increase in newspaper speculation about an early election in the 30 days prior to the election compared to the previous 183 days. There is a fair degree of divergence between these two measures and jointly they identify only one of the ten opportunistic elections as unambiguously early relative to public expectations – the election called by Harold Wilson in 1970.⁴ Private information about future risks to the government's economic performance played a role in the decision to schedule the poll prematurely. Although economic conditions were good, their sustainability was questionable. As organised labour pressed wage claims and inflationary pressures were threatening to mount, the government surprised the media and the electorate by calling a snap election (Smith 2004, 182-189).

According to the signalling perspective, this type of election would be expected to turn voters against the incumbent, because the act of calling an unanticipated election indicates that the government is trying to prevent voters from observing the decline in performance that it privately anticipates and fears. Yet, as Smith's own work and the evidence presented in Table 1 indicate, this election is the exception. The other opportunistically scheduled polls were widely anticipated given the media coverage and publicly available information about the approaching end of the parliamentary term or the

government's precarious legislative support. The act of scheduling these early polls should therefore not have caused voters to lower their evaluation of government competence or reduced their willingness to vote for that government.

[Table 1 about here]

In sum, UK prime ministers made systematic use of their flexible election timing powers to schedule elections for partisan electoral advantage. Fully 10 (out of a total of 17) elections held in the UK between 1945 and 2015 were called early for the incumbent's political benefit, which makes this the modal type of election throughout the post-war era. The conditions under which these early elections were triggered reflected not only favourable circumstances (i.e., opinion poll leads, strong economy, opposition weakness), but also risks to government success, which contradicts the expectations generated by the selection argument that only successful governments choose to hold opportunistic elections. Moreover, politicians did not generally call snap elections that took voters by surprise. In contrast with the expectations of the signalling account, nine out of ten of these elections were widely anticipated and should therefore not have reduced voters' assessments of government competence. As a result, the incumbents should have realized the full electoral benefit of holding these elections in the context of favourable circumstances.

Voter support and opportunistic election timing by the incumbent

While the literature on opportunistic election timing expects incumbents to benefit electorally from strategically scheduled elections, the signalling perspective anticipates that adverse voter reactions to snap elections negate such benefits. This section examines whether the *observed results* of opportunistically timed elections correlate with better electoral outcomes for incumbents than other types of elections, as should be the case if they generate an electoral bonus. The next section then examines whether any bonus can be attributed to a

selection effect. We begin with a simple unadjusted difference-of-means comparison, and then distinguish the effect of opportunistic election timing from the impact of the incumbent's success by controlling for the governing party's electoral success in the previous election and its policy success as measured by the state of the economy. To the extent that both analyses produce similar findings, we can have greater confidence in the results.

Incumbent electoral performance in opportunistic elections

Table 2 reports the difference-of-means tests that examine the vote and seat shares of the incumbent and the probability of survival in opportunistically timed polls compared to other elections.

[Table 2 about here]

The results show that opportunistically timed elections correlate with significantly larger average vote and seat shares for the prime minister's party of 5.9 and 12 per cent respectively, compared to other elections. Opportunistic election timing also correlates with a 50 per cent better chance that the incumbent prime minister survives in office. These differences are large, statistically significant (p -values < 0.05), and robust to a series of alternative coding choices.⁵

Next, we take account of the fact that these incumbents differed in their success, by controlling for the electoral success of the prime minister's party in the previous election (*PM party previous vote share*, *PM party previous seat share*), and its policy success in managing the economy, i.e., *growth* and *unemployment (1 year lagged)* (see Appendix for information on the coding of all variables and data sources). The independent variable of interest is a prime minister's choice to call an *opportunistic election*. We employ two dependent variables

in alternative analyses – the *vote share* and the *seat share won by a prime minister's party* in the election that terminates its period in office and model them using OLS regression.

Table 3 reports the results of the analysis. Model 1 focuses on the PM party's vote share, model 2 on the PM party's seat share. Both analyses indicate that incumbents perform better when an election is opportunistically called, although the seat share advantage is more precisely estimated than the vote share benefit. The difference – net of the government's success in the previous election and its performance in managing the economy – amounts to just under 4 per cent of the vote share and 12 per cent of the seat share on average. This is a substantively large difference in performance if we keep in mind that of the seventeen UK elections since 1945, eight were won by a vote-share margin of less than 4 per cent. The control variables show the anticipated correlations. The PM party's size in the previous election is positively and significantly related to its vote share in the following election; previous seat share too, has a positive sign, but does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Growth always positively correlates with the incumbent's electoral performance, although the effect is not precisely estimated. Unemployment has no consistent effect. SI.5 shows that these results are robust to alternative specifications, including the use of 6 month lagged economic indicators, the inclusion of an additional control for the PM party's tenure in office, and jackknife estimation, which omits each election in turn.

[Table 3 about here]

These findings are consistent with the conclusions of comparative work on the benefits of opportunistic election calling, but contradict the signalling perspective. To the extent that voters punish the act of opportunistic election calling, that penalty does not appear to overwhelm the sizable electoral advantage that governments realize when elections are timed to favourable circumstances. However, this contrast between incumbent performance

in opportunistic and other elections raises the question whether competent governments select themselves into opportunistic election timing,⁶ so that unobserved aspects of government competence, rather than election timing, account for the difference in electoral performance.

Government competence and the selection of opportunistic election timing

To establish whether opportunistic election calling confers an advantage that differs from a pure selection effect, we employ a *potential outcomes approach*. Here the relevant counterfactual is whether governments which called opportunistic elections would have performed differently had no election been called (Rubin 1974). Instead of comparing the difference in the *observed* electoral performance of governments that did and did not select opportunistic election calling, as in the previous section, we now focus solely on governments that selected early elections. This approach holds government competence constant and asks how these same governments would have performed, had they not had discretion to call elections when they looked their best.

We explore this question in two steps. First, we examine the underlying competence and success of these governments over time, as perceived by voters and measured in public opinion polls. Based on this evidence, we ask whether governments that called opportunistic elections were inherently so successful that it is plausible they would have performed *equally well* even if the election had not been timed to favourable circumstances. Second, we turn to a case study to establish whether election timing can plausibly make *the crucial difference* between electoral victory and defeat when government competence is held constant.

Opportunistic election calling and incumbent competence

We turn first to the underlying competence of governing parties, as summarized by their opinion poll ratings. Figure 1 compares vote intentions for the government and the main

opposition party, throughout the incumbent's term. As the individual plots demonstrate, eight of the 10 opportunistic elections held in the UK since 1945 were called by prime ministers whose parties led in public opinion polls for parts of their term in office, while lagging behind the main opposition party at other times. These cabinets were not inherently successful or unsuccessful in a way that would have guaranteed equally strong electoral performance at *any point* in time. Instead, these governments faced changing probabilities of electoral victory or defeat over their term in office. In that context, the importance of election timing decisions becomes evident – good timing decisions, which ensure that the elections coincide with periods in which the government leads in the polls, may make the difference between probable defeat and a good chance of victory. Indeed, as we saw above (cf. table 1), the prime ministers leading these governments deliberately and carefully picked a time for the election in order to maximize their chance of victory precisely because they did not expect to achieve an equally good electoral performance at other points in time.

Moreover, had these incumbents not been able to call early elections, there is no reason to believe the positive factors which influenced their timing choices and contributed to their vote-share bonuses would necessarily have persisted: the opposition would have had more time to resolve its disarray (cf. table 1: 1955, 1966, Oct. 1974, 1983, 1987); recent or precarious opinion poll leads could just as quickly have evaporated (cf. figure 1: 1955, 1959, Oct. 1974); and minority government or fragile majorities might have resulted in legislative defeats, undermining voters' impression of the governments' competence (cf. table 1: 1951, 1955, 1966, Oct. 1974). In sum, the public opinion poll record of governments that called opportunistic elections does not support the contention that these incumbents' underlying success was such that they would have performed equally well without scheduling the election to coincide with favourable circumstances.

[Figure 1 about here]

There are also theoretical reasons to doubt that opportunistic elections are the termination mode of choice of successful and competent governments. As we have seen above, there is a consensus in the literature on opportunistic election calling that incumbents schedule elections for partisan benefit not only to capitalize on successes, but also *because they fear the future* (Balke 1990, Kayser 2005). This theoretical consensus is supported by the evidence available for the UK (cf. table 1). Indeed, incumbents who are confident of their ability to retain high levels of popular support to the next regular election have no reason to curtail their current term in office for the opportunity of holding an early election; rather they should serve out their maximum term.⁷

For empirical and theoretical reasons, then, the argument that the electoral bonuses realized by incumbents in opportunistic elections can be attributed solely to a selection effect is implausible. Had these governments not had the option of calling elections at peaks in their popularity, they would likely have performed significantly worse at the polls.

Case study: the effect of election timing decisions

To examine whether the advantage, which can be realized by timing elections to a peak in incumbent support, can make the crucial *difference between electoral victory and defeat*, we turn to a case study of Prime Ministers Harold Wilson's choice to call an opportunistic election in October 1974 and scrutinize the counterfactual, i.e., the likely fate of that government, had the election not been called (an additional case study of Attlee's 1955 election call is available in SI.7).

Labour took office in March 1974 without a legislative majority, and none of the small parties could by themselves provide the 17 seats the party needed (Butler and Kavanagh 1975, 18). According to Wilson, "no one could possibly believe that our minority Government would last anything like five years. Few expected it to survive [...] to the end of

the year” (Wilson 1979, 13). To make matters worse, “no post-war Prime Minister took office in more difficult circumstances” (Holmes 1985, 3): labour relations were strained; inflation and the trade deficit were rising; and living standards were lagging behind the rest of Europe. Labour successfully negotiated an end to the miners' strike that had contributed to the defeat of the previous Conservative government within days of taking office (Wilson 1979, 12), but without improved legislative support, Wilson had little chance of addressing the daunting policy challenges.

Initially the defeated Conservatives held off on challenging the government, but by June their reticence faded. Over the course of the parliament, the government passed 38 bills but suffered 20 defeats. The government's early success at ending the State of Emergency buoyed its support, enabling it to open up a significant lead in the opinion polls (Butler and Kavangh 1975, 41-2, 52-3). Nonetheless, its position remained precarious: by September, its approval rating was eroding and “Wilson's own popularity had fallen too” (Pimlott 1992, 645). This was not an inherently successful government: Without the ability to schedule an early election, its fate would likely have been sealed by parliamentary defeat, and given its dwindling public support, the electoral consequences of a later election appeared deeply unfavourable. Instead, the early election in October 1974, after just eight months in office, was instrumental in allowing the government to win a narrow parliamentary majority. This case and its counterfactual show that in a context of fluctuating public support, flexible election timing can enable incumbents to turn a likely defeat into electoral victory. Although miscalculation is certainly possible, manipulation of the election date is in itself a powerful tool through which incumbents can improve their chances of re-election.

In sum, an examination of the potential election outcomes that incumbents would have experienced had opportunistic elections not been called, suggest that strategic election timing contributes crucially to the electoral bonuses uncovered by the statistical analysis

presented above: In the UK context, flexible election timing has benefitted incumbents. Moreover, the difference that a well-timed election can make to a government's chances of re-election captures only part of the benefits. Even governments that are consistently successful and popular are able to raise their vote share further by scheduling the election to coincide with peaks in their support, strong policy performance or opposition weakness. Politically, these benefits are highly consequential and have implications for the size of the government's majority as well as its ability to implement its agenda.

Conclusion

The political economy literature's contrasting perspectives on the incumbency advantage generated by opportunistic election timing are not only of theoretical importance, they are also relevant to the UK's constitutional reform debate concerning the merits of fixed election dates. In this paper, we have examined which of the competing perspectives best describes the consequences of flexible election timing in the UK, to clarify the probable future effects of fixing the parliamentary term. Our conclusions build on a variety of data about the conditions under which these elections were called, their observed outcomes, and the potential outcomes that governments would have realized, had they not been able to schedule elections at the peak of their popularity.

In the UK, nearly 60 per cent of all elections between 1945 and 2015 were timed by the incumbent government for partisan advantage. By calling elections that coincided with peaks in their popularity, opposition weakness and a strong economy, incumbents were able to derive significant electoral advantages. Voters anticipated the vast majority of these elections (nine out of 10) and so had no reason to reduce their evaluation of the government's competence. As a result, the average vote share and seat share bonuses realized by governments in these elections amounted to 3.5 and 11 per cent respectively. An examination

of these results in a potential outcomes framework suggests that these bonuses cannot solely be attributed to the underlying competence of these governments. Opinion poll data shows that governments which timed elections for partisan benefit would not have performed equally well without being able to take advantage of peaks in popularity. Moreover, the counterfactual case study underscores this finding by showing that judicious election timing can make the crucial difference between electoral victory and defeat. These results are consistent with the incumbency bonuses found in comparative work on opportunistic election timing (Schleiter and Tavits 2016), and simultaneously contradict the signalling perspective: Any electoral penalties that the act of opportunistic election timing engenders do not appear to overwhelm the electoral benefits that incumbents can realize by timing elections when they are popular, the economy is performing well, and the opposition is divided.⁸

These findings are relevant to the political debate about the constitutional reform that introduced fixed parliamentary terms in the UK. Our results suggest that concerns about the unfair electoral advantage that discretionary election timing affords to the incumbent are justified. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act (2011) can be expected to level the electoral playing field between the prime minister's party and other political parties.

Table 1: Opportunism in UK election timing

Election Year	Prime Minister	Public Opinion Poll Lead	State of the economy	Opposition disarray	Years of parl. term elapsed	Majority/Minority (at election)	Minority/fragile majority	Ratio of News Stories	Ratio of Cumul. Hazards
1951	Attlee II (Labour)	The polls did not show Labour in the lead. Attlee relied on the government's strengths in campaigning and its "... record in having never lost a by-election despite the fact that some of these had occurred in marginal constituencies and in two instances, owing to the behaviour of retiring Members, in very unfavourable conditions" (Attlee 1954: 193).	The balance of payments was favourable in 1951 (Attlee 1954: 207).		1.67	2	"We had carried on now for eighteen months with an exiguous majority. The strain on our Members, some of whom were in indifferent health, was very great. ... We required more adequate support in the House " (Attlee 1954: 206-7).	0.182	0.136
1955	Eden I (Conservative)	In April, after Eden assumed the party leadership, the Conservatives widened their opinion poll lead from 1-2 percent to 4 percent. As Eden remarks, "... e lectorally, so far as one could judge, the tide appeared to be with us" (Eden 1960: 270).	"[I]n 1955 employment was at a very high level, the balance of payments for once was giving no trouble" (Eden 1960: 270).	Labour was suffering from the split between the left (Bevanites) and the right (Gaitskellites). Eden, taking "advantage of ... splits in the Labour party, decided to dissolve" (Cook and Stevenson 2000: 57).	3.58	8	"I became convinced that, if we were to continue to hold office with such a narrow majority as seventeen without an appeal to the country, we should be living in an election atmosphere until the event took place. This was thoroughly unhealthy ... " (Eden 1960: 272)	0.231	0.417
1959	Macmillan I (Conservative)	Macmillan called early election to exploit improved approval ratings (Evans 1996). " A most careful analysis of every constituency in the country had been made and ... Ce ntral Office says that a dissolution now would give us a majority of thirteen in the House of Commons" (Macmillan 1971: 744).	Macmillan's decision to call an early election was designed to exploit an improved economy (Evans 1996).		4.33	29		0.222	0.718
1966	Wilson I (Labour)	"Wilson and his party decided to take the opportunity of an upswing in popularity, reflected in the Hull North by-election, to dissolve... " (Cook and Stevenson 2000: 58). "The polls moved our way " (Wilson 1971: 174).		Edward Heath, the leader of the opposition was unpopular, even among partisans of his own party and consistently trailed Wilson in the polls (Butler and Kavanagh 1985: 266).	1.50	1	Wilson called early election to shore up his narrow majority (Cook and Stevenson 2000: 58). By 1966, hi s legislative support had been so eroded that he worked "with majority of, at most, three," (Wilson 1971: 199) and anticipated difficulties in passing legislation.	0.714	0.199
1970	Wilson II (Labour)	Gallup released poll in May 1970, which showed that Labour had opened up a lead of 7.5 percent over the Conservatives. Wilson announced the election days later, on May 18. "The public opinion polls [...] were moving steadily in our favour [...] the Harris poll showed a Labour lead" (Wilson 1971: 778-9).	"The balance of payments was showing unprecedented strength" (Wilson 1971: 776), but privately, the government judged continued economic performance at this level as unsustainable given the demands of organised labour and anticipated inflation (Smith 2004: 186).		4.25	95		0.709	1.635

... table continued on next page

Election Year	Prime Minister	Public Opinion Poll Lead	State of the economy	Opposition disarray	Years of parl. term elapsed	Majority/Minority (at election)	Minority/fragile majority	Ratio of News Stories	Ratio of Cumul. Hazards
1974 (Oct.)	Wilson III (Labour)	Opinion polls showed Labour up to 10 points ahead of the Conservatives and Wilson called a snap election to exploit the lead (Cook and Stevenson 2014).	Labour ended the miners' strike which had dogged Heath's premiership (Cook and Stevenson 2014), improving assessments of the government's economic competence despite the difficult context, characterized by rising inflation and a trade deficit, that it had inherited from its predecessor.	The Conservatives' chances of being able to form a government were remote because of the Ulster Unionist Party's refusal to take the conservative whip at Westminster.	0.42	-17	Wilson was seeking to shore up his mandate and parliamentary base (Cook and Stevenson 2000). The position of the government was precarious and by October it had been defeated in parliament 17 times (Norton 1980: 491, see also Heath 1998: 523). "The question was simply how soon it would be tactically expedient to dissolve" (Butler and Kavanagh 1975: 20).	0.686	0.485
1983	Thatcher I (Conservative)	Thatcher had a commanding lead in the polls following the Falklands war and when the government's popularity was confirmed in the municipal elections in May, she called a snap poll on 9 June (Cook and Stevenson 2000: 61).	Unemployment had doubled, but growth had resumed and inflation was declining. "I was convinced that we were now seeing sustainable economic recovery, which would continue to strengthen ... clearly, the more solid economic good news we could show the better" (Thatcher 1993: 289).	The election caught the opposition in disarray. Michael Foot and Roy Jenkins, the leaders of Labour and the SDP were deeply unpopular. Thatcher was more popular among Labour supporters than their own leader (Graetz and McAllister 1987: 490).	4.08	21		missing	0.475
1987	Thatcher II (Conservative)	"Favourable local election results led to the announcement of polling day as 11th June" (Cook and Stevenson 2000: 61)	Strong economic performance enables the government to introduce tax concessions before the election while remaining within its financial strategy (Cook and Stevenson 2000: 61, Evans 2013).	Labour weakened by scandal and by-election loss. Gallup polls indicate voters see the opposition as too extreme and divided, its leaders as poor, and its economic competence as low (Butler and Kavanagh 1988).	4.00	71		0.180	0.804
2001	Blair I (Labour)	"... the polls were showing us anywhere between ten and twenty points ahead" (Blair 2010: 315)	"the economy was strong and the money was now beginning to flow into schools and hospitals" (Blair 2010: 317)	"the Opposition is useless" (Blair 2010: 322)	4.08	88		0.193	0.502
2005	Blair II (Labour)	"A couple of days later, we launched the bid for the historic third term. We started as favourites, the polls showing us with a five-point lead or thereabouts, despite having had a difficult few months" (Blair 2010: 521)	Blair called elections to exploit strong economic performance, making economic stability and investment in public services a centrepiece of the campaign. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4508459.stm		4.08	83		missing	missing

Note: Ratio of cumulative hazards and ratio of news stories are measures calculated by Smith (2004), italics indicate values which are at least one standard deviation above the measure's mean.

Table 2: Opportunistic elections and incumbent electoral performance in the UK since 1945 (difference-of-means tests)

Dependent variable	Election type	N	Mean	Difference-of-means	Significance (<i>p</i> -value)
PM Party Vote Share	opportunistic election	10	43.86	5.90	0.048
	other elections	7	37.96		
PM Party Seat Share	opportunistic election	10	55.07	11.62	0.006
	other elections	7	43.45		
PM Survival	opportunistic election	10	0.80	0.51	0.035
	other elections	7	0.29		

Note: Similar results obtain when the comparison is restricted to regular elections: the PM vote share bonus is 5.68 per cent, the seat share bonus 12.07 per cent and the difference in the probability of survival is .40.

Table 3: Incumbent electoral benefits from opportunistic election timing

	(1) PM Vote Share	(2) PM Seat Share
Opportunistic Election	3.464* (1.895)	11.30*** (3.626)
PM Vote Share (lagged)	0.869*** (0.239)	
PM Seat Share (lagged)		0.644 (0.378)
Growth (annual, lagged)	0.136 (0.359)	0.353 (0.696)
Unemployment	-0.372 (0.306)	-0.0945 (0.570)
Constant	3.105 (11.00)	7.743 (20.53)
<i>N</i>	17	17
<i>R</i> ²	0.732	0.533

Note: Table entries are regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

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

Appendix: Data Sources

Government data	Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2009) augmented using country specific sources.
Opportunistic election	Coded by the authors using country specific sources.
PM party vote share	<i>Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive</i> ; Andersson, Staffan; Bergman, Torbjörn & Ersson, Svante (2012). “The European Representative Democracy Data Archive” (www.erdda.se); augmented using country specific sources.
PM party seat share	<i>Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive</i> ; Andersson, Staffan; Bergman, Torbjörn & Ersson, Svante (2012). “The European Representative Democracy Data Archive” (www.erdda.se); augmented using country specific sources.
GDP growth	Maddison Project Database (2013 version), Bolt, J. and J. L. van Zanden (2013). The First Update of the Maddison Project; Re-Estimating Growth Before 1820. Maddison Project Working Paper 4.
Unemployment	OECD Annual Labour Force Statistics, complemented by Labour Statistics Yearbooks, World Bank WDI, IMFs.

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Endnotes

¹ Theresa May's early election call in 2017 has led some to question whether the Fixed-term Parliaments Act imposes any material constraints on a prime minister's ability to time elections for partisan advantage. However, the 2017 election was called in accordance with the Act by a two-thirds majority vote of all MPs in parliament, not by the prime minister. Had Labour abstained, as the Scottish National Party did, the Act would have led to a different outcome. In the context of a more confident parliamentary opposition or a different parliamentary arithmetic, the Act will therefore impose significant constraints on the government. A fuller discussion is available in the supplementary information (SI.1).

² While the 2015 general election was held under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, no inferences can be drawn from a single observation.

³ To reiterate, this paper focuses solely on the effect of opportunistic election timing. Other strategies to generate incumbency advantages such as gerrymandering electoral districts or manipulating the economy lie beyond the scope of this paper. Case studies show that such strategies are used in the context of fixed and flexible elections. This paper's distinctive contribution is to establish that fixed parliamentary terms in the UK restrict *one* crucial tool that has allowed incumbents to realize an electoral advantage.

⁴ Note that Smith also categorizes the February 1974 election, which the miners forced on the conservative prime minister Edward Heath, as unanticipated. However, as we discuss above, this was not an opportunistic election called by the government for partisan benefit.

⁵ The supplementary information shows that these performance differences are robust to (i) alternative temporal thresholds for classifying early and regular elections (SI.2); (ii) the recoding

of all discretionarily classified elections (SI.3); and (iii) the differentiation between opportunistic elections called in the final year of parliament and earlier in the electoral term (SI.4).

⁶ Public opinion poll evidence suggests that UK incumbents who are unable to establish a public opinion poll lead in their final year may be more likely to continue to regular elections (see SI.6).

⁷ The literature on opportunistic election calling highlights that two types of governments serve their full term: those who are successful and confident of their ability to maintain a high level of performance and popularity to the next regular election and those that find no opportunity to schedule an early election to favourable circumstances.

⁸ We do not dispute Smith's (2004) argument that unexpected snap elections can generate a drop in electoral support. However, our findings show that (i) the majority of the UK's opportunistic elections were not unexpected and (ii) that any loss of support engendered by these election calls did not outweigh the benefits of holding the poll in favourable circumstances.