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Endogenous and Exogenous Election Timing

Petra Schleiter

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the rules that govern election timing in democracies. It begins by distinguishing between constitutionally fixed (exogenous) and constitutionally flexible (endogenous) election timing, reviews which political actors can call early elections when endogenous election timing is permitted, and notes that early elections are heterogeneous and can be of two distinct types—either triggered by government failure or called for partisan advantage. Next, the chapter summarizes the current understanding of the consequences of election timing rules for four important political outcomes: gridlock resolution, the electoral performance of incumbents, the bargaining power of various political actors in negotiating governments and policy, and the rhythm of policy cycles. Together the findings reviewed in this chapter show that election timing rules are highly consequential: they shape election outcomes, accountability, and policy, with significant implications for governance and voter welfare.

Keywords: endogenous election timing, exogenous election timing, fixed term parliaments, opportunistic elections, failure elections, regular elections, political-economic cycles, incumbency advantages

Popular elections are a fundamental and constitutive aspect of democracy. They are the means by which voters select and empower incoming representatives. Simultaneously, they enable voters to hold their representatives to account and to reward or punish them for past performance. Democratic elections, in other words, are make-or-break moments for democratic politicians; they are the focus of the electoral ambitions of candidates and political parties, shape the work of incumbents, and influence the rhythm of policy cycles.

However, popular elections are not uniformly fixed and exogenous events in the democratic calendar. Many democracies give those same politicians whose fate may be decisively affected by the outcome of elections some influence over their timing. For instance, all but 7 out of 35 constitutions in postwar Europe enable incumbent

governments to influence the timing of elections and 42 percent of all elections are held before the end of the maximum interelectoral term (Schleiter and Tavits, 2016).

Powers to threaten or call early elections are some of the most consequential prerogatives in a democracy. Parliamentary dissolution offers a means to refer crises and gridlock in government and the assembly to the electorate for resolution. This has fundamental importance in those democracies in which the government depends on assembly confidence: Dissolution in this context is the ultimate safety mechanism that makes it possible to address situations in which parliament cannot agree to form a government or to lend it the support to govern. At the same time, discretion to dissolve parliament can also be employed by politicians for partisan advantage. Leaders who are empowered to dissolve parliament may “call elections at the most advantageous time for them—when they expect to win” (Smith, 2004, 1), which gives rise to incumbency advantages and shapes electoral accountability (Kayser, 2005, 2006; Palmer and Whitten, 2000; Roy and Alcantara, 2012; Strøm and Swindle, 2002; Schleiter and Tavits, 2016). Moreover, actors who have discretion to influence dissolution can ensure that parliamentary politics occur in the shadow of early elections. This has extensive implications for bargaining over the making and breaking of governments as well as public policy (Becher and Christiansen, 2015; Diermeier and Stevenson, 1999, 2000; Grofman and Roozendaal, 1994, 1997; Lupia and Strøm, 1995; Protsyk, 2005; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones, 2009; Shugart and Carey, 1992).

This chapter begins by defining exogenous and endogenous election timing, examines which institutional actors have power to influence election timing, explores the causes of early elections and discusses the heterogeneous nature of premature polls. It then turns to the consequences of different election timing rules for the management of gridlock and for a broad range of political outcomes including the incumbent’s re-election chances, parliamentary bargaining, and policy cycles. The concluding section highlights a range of important but as yet unanswered questions in the field.

Exogenous and Endogenous Election Timing

The exogenous or endogenous scheduling of national elections is a matter of constitutional provisions. Election timing is *exogenous* when it cannot constitutionally be affected by political choice, while *endogenous* election timing is constitutionally amenable to political influence.[1] For instance, in the United States of America, the timing of congressional and presidential elections is constitutionally fixed and therefore independent of the choices of political actors.[2] In the overwhelming majority of parliamentary democracies, however, endogenous election timing is the rule because actors inside or outside government are constitutionally empowered to trigger a premature dissolution of parliament and early elections.[3] Whenever this is the case, the scheduling of parliamentary elections, that is, whether an election is held early or at the end of the constitutional interelection period, is, to some extent, a political choice.

Whether a democracy gives political actors the scope to call early elections varies with the constitutional regime type. Endogenous election timing is permitted only in democracies in which the government depends on *assembly confidence*, that is, parliamentary and semipresidential systems, and applies exclusively to the *legislature*.[4] This is consistent with the view that the power to dissolve the legislature is a counterweight to the executive's dependence on parliamentary confidence (Cox, 1987; Linz, 1994).[5] Parliamentary dissolution, according to this account, is an essential gridlock resolution device designed to address crises of governability when the legislature is not able to form a government, keep it in power, or provide legislative support for its initiatives. In contrast, when the survival of the cabinet is independent of assembly confidence, as in presidential democracies, the legislature and the president serve constitutionally fixed terms.[6]

Among constitutions that permit early election calling, however, the level of discretion available to political actors in timing elections varies tremendously. While some parliamentary systems, such as Denmark, grant full discretion to the prime minister to call elections early, others severely constrain the circumstances under which early elections can be invoked. In Romania, for instance, parliament can only be dissolved in response to repeated failures to invest a government and not within the final six months of the president's term (Goplerud and Schleiter, 2016). Thus, in democracies that permit early elections, the extent to which election timing is flexible and dependent on political choices is a matter of degree.

As the definition offered here makes clear, endogenous election timing is a constitutional feature of the political system. Hence, under constitutions that permit early elections, *even the timing of regular elections*, that is, elections that are held at the end of the constitutionally defined parliamentary term, is not exogenous. The reason for this is that a decision by politicians to allow parliament (and the government) to complete the full interelectoral term is as much a political choice as calling an election early. Put differently, when politicians have discretion to call early elections, the choice to proceed to regular elections instead is not exogenous to political considerations and should not be treated as such.[7]

Who Has Power to Influence Election Timing?

The constitutional provisions that regulate parliamentary dissolution and early election calling may involve multiple actors, including the prime minister (PM), the government collectively (Bergman et al., 2003), the legislature (Fish and Kroenig, 2009), and the head of state (Metcalf, 2000; Shugart and Carey, 1992). These actors can be engaged in various capacities at different stages of the process and subject to a range of constraints (Strøm and Swindle, 2002; Goplerud and Schleiter, 2016).

Recent studies differ in their conceptualization and measurement of these actors' influence on the dissolution process. Strøm and Swindle (2002), for instance, distinguish between powerless actors, actors with prerogatives to veto parliamentary dissolution, and

actors who can dissolve parliament unilaterally. The most comprehensive attempt to measure assembly dissolution powers constructs a 10-point scale that records each political actor's power to (1) initiate the dissolution process, (2) advance it, and (3) decide the early dissolution of parliament, taking account of the political and temporal constraints that constitutions may impose on the use of these powers (Goplerud and Schleiter, 2016). When a constitution foresees multiple paths to dissolution, as is often the case, the index focuses on the maximum score for each actor across any of the paths available to them.

Conceptually, this index captures the level of discretionary influence by different politicians on parliamentary dissolution. Table 1 summarizes the scores by actor and shows that, in cross-national comparison, prime ministers and governments collectively are the actors who most often have extensive discretion to dissolve parliament. In addition, however, presidents play an important (and, as we shall see, much less studied) role in parliamentary dissolutions. The legislature itself is involved in the overwhelming majority of dissolution processes, most often because some decision, omission, or dysfunction on its part—such as government dismissal, the failure to pass a budget, or inability to invest a government—is required to open the path to dissolution.

Fundamentally, greater discretion to dissolve gives rise to greater opportunities for a political actor to call or threaten an early election for political advantage. Constitutional constraints and checks on such discretion are typically intended to curb the opportunities to derive partisan gain from dissolution powers while preserving the option of early elections as a gridlock resolution device to address political crises. Broadly speaking, constitutional constraints on early election calling are effective. The more limited the discretion of political actors to invoke early elections, the lower the frequency of early elections (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones, 2009; Schleiter and Tavits, 2016).

Table 1: Country Scores

Actor				
Country	**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
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.

Source: Goplerud and Schleiter (2016).

The Causes of Early Elections

Two literatures analyze the causes of election timing: The political economy literature on opportunistic election timing assumes that early elections in parliamentary democracies are timed for partisan advantage by self-interested incumbents to coincide with favorable circumstances (Balke, 1990; Baron, 1998; Kayser, 2005)—a strategy that is also known as "political surfing" (Ito, 1990; Kayser, 2005). Empirical work in this tradition provides extensive evidence that peaks in economic performance and popularity trigger early elections as incumbents strive to exploit advantageous conditions (Chowdhury, 1993; Ito and Park, 1988; Ito, 1990; Kayser, 2006; Palmer and Whitten, 2000).[8]

In contrast, theoretical work on government terminations highlights that popular parties with the power to call early elections do not necessarily do so. Instead they may choose to shore up the status quo government or form a replacement cabinet without intervening elections by using the threat of a parliamentary dissolution to extract concessions from other parties that fear electoral losses (Lupia and Strøm, 1995; Diermeier and Stevenson, 2000). According to these accounts, early election timing is driven not only by constitutional powers and popularity (i.e., favorable conditions) but also by the payoffs from these alternative choices. Unlike the literature on political surfing, these models also assume that the power to dissolve lies with a parliamentary majority, which implies that it can be used to topple the incumbent government. For instance, a popular minor coalition party governing with an unpopular but dominant partner may choose to join the opposition to trigger an early election that seals the fate of its former partner.

Both literatures make critical contributions to understanding the considerations that cause parties to time elections early but they also leave important gaps. Most notably, neither literature adequately captures the heterogeneous nature of early elections and their causes. For instance, the literature on opportunistic election timing describes early elections as instances of political surfing by self-interested incumbents. Yet, this description is not appropriate to the majority of early elections. As country-specific studies and comparative work documents, early polls are most often forced on incumbents by defeat and political failure (Hickson and Seldon, 2004; Bergman et al., 2003, Müller and Sieberer, 2014).[9] That makes the lack of differentiation between the different types of early elections in most empirical studies of political surfing particularly problematic.

Empirical work on government terminations, too, is characterized by an unresolved struggle to address the underlying heterogeneity among early elections. Although several coding schemes for government terminations distinguish early elections that are voluntarily called by the government from elections triggered by conflict and government failure (see, for instance, Warwick, 1994, 29; Strøm et al. 2003, 117–118), the corresponding empirical analyses have consistently failed to explore how the causes of these elections differ. King et al. (1990) first recognized the need to take account of this heterogeneity in empirical modeling, noting, "political systems generate two distinctly

different types of observed durations. In the first and largest group are those cabinets that merely break apart due to some combination of critical events. The other group includes governments that come near the CIEP [(i.e., constitutional interelection period)] maximum [and] … dissolve … to seek electoral advantage, no doubt recognizing that the 'end of the game' is at hand" (King et al., 1990, 852–853). Instead of disaggregating and explicitly modeling these two types of elections, however, scholars have censored terminations in the second group of observations, treating them as if the true durations of these governments were unobserved on the grounds that had they not "come near the CIEP, this latter group of governments would probably have lasted longer" (King et al., 1990, 853; Warwick and Easton, 1992, share this approach). Yet, as Diermeier and Stevenson (2000, 635–636) note, the calling of an early election for partisan advantage—not only in the final year of the parliamentary term but also at any point of a cabinet's term—is clearly a political form of government termination that demands an explanation as much as cabinet failure and collapse. In spite of this, scholars have continued to pool all early elections, modeling them as a single undifferentiated type of outcome. Thus, the heterogeneity of early elections presents significant challenges for both literatures.

The Heterogeneous Nature of Early Elections

For the purposes of understanding why early elections occur in reality, and what their consequences may be, it is useful to consider what is at stake in these elections. When an early election is called, the future of the incumbent hangs in the balance. Pundits, voters, and politicians agree that the main prize in such elections is the position of the dominant governing party, led by the prime minister. That party may use early elections to consolidate its position, or it can be the target of early elections called with the goal of weakening or removing it from office when its hold on power slips.[10] This divides early elections into two distinct types (Schleiter and Issar, forthcoming; Schleiter and Tavits, 2016): The first of these is political surfing—a strategy by which the incumbent prime minister's party, with or without coalition partner consent, makes use of favorable circumstances to raise its chances of re-election. Prime ministers have a central and privileged role in calling surfing elections because their constitutional prerogatives and their agenda-setting powers within government make them either the sole or the dominant actor in triggering parliamentary dissolutions for the purpose of political surfing. This first type of early election, then, can be defined as (1) triggered by the incumbent prime minister (with or without coalition partner consent), (2) to capitalize on favorable circumstances such as public opinion support or opposition weakness (i.e., poor opposition poll ratings, divisions, leaderlessness, or opposition unpreparedness for an election) (Schleiter and Tavits, 2016, 840; Schleiter and Issar, forthcoming).[11]

The second type of early election is directed against a dominant (or sole) governing party whose hold on political power has slipped through loss of political support or the collapse of its government. For the dominant governing party, this type of election is the result of political failure. Failure elections can be defined as triggered by the (1) loss of support for a government's legislative program, (2) loss of parliamentary confidence, (3) withdrawal

of a minor coalition partner, or (4) forced resignation of the prime minister—or the imminent occurrence of any of these events (Schleiter and Tavits, 2016, 840; Schleiter and Issar, forthcoming). According to the extensive literature on government terminations, the choice to hold such elections may be precipitated by a broad range of events, including political scandals, economic downturns, policy failures, protests, international crises, and intra- or interparty conflicts (Browne et al., 1986; Lupia and Strøm, 1995). Unlike surfing elections, premature elections that arise from incumbent failure can be, and often are, initiated by actors other than the dominant governing party, including the parliamentary opposition, a president or a minor coalition partner.

Schleiter and Issar (forthcoming) offer a first empirical analysis of both types of elections and find that they have distinct, and to some extent diametrically opposed predictors. Thus, the probability of political surfing rises in a prime minister's constitutional discretion to call an election early, the elapsing parliamentary term (which reduces the opportunity cost that a prime minister incurs in terms of sacrificing the remaining term in office) and, conditionally on these two factors, in economic growth, but are unaffected by the existence of institutional or political veto players (i.e., bicameralism, minority government status, and parliamentary fragmentation). The probability of failure elections, in contrast, rises with the influence of institutional and political veto players, is reduced by economic growth, and remains unaffected by a prime minister's discretion to dissolve and the elapsing interelectoral term. These findings suggest that early elections are not a single homogeneous type of event.

Consequences of Endogenous Election Timing

A better and more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity and causes of early elections is central to an appreciation of the consequences which fixed and flexible electoral terms have for gridlock resolution in a political system, the incumbent's re-election chances, legislative bargaining, and policy cycles.

Gridlock Resolution

The majority of elections called under flexible election timing are failure elections. In these cases, dissolution is used by political actors as a means to refer disagreement, crises, and gridlock in government or the assembly to the electorate for resolution. Many of these early elections may well result from strategic choices, that is, they may be chosen as one of several feasible ways of addressing a governance problem. For instance, instead of dissolving the assembly, the existing government might have been replaced with an alternative administration formed by the same parliament. In a small number of other cases, however, the alternative to dissolution would have been gridlock triggered by the assembly's inability to form any government, to support any government office, or to legislate any coherent budget or policy program. Under most constitutions, the consequence in such circumstances would be gridlock or the formation of a caretaker administration with restricted powers to initiate new policies. Dissolution is a mechanism

to address this cause of deadlock by giving voters the opportunity to replace the existing parliament.

This insight lies at the heart of one of the most prominent arguments concerning the effects of fixed and flexible election timing. According to Linz (1990, 54), the central disadvantage of fixed electoral terms is that they leave "no room for the continuous readjustments that events may demand." Linz applies this argument exclusively to presidential democracies that feature fixed electoral terms, and proposes that, consequently, "[r]eplacing a president who has lost the confidence of his party or the people is an extremely difficult proposition" (Linz 1990, 54–55). In contrast, endogenously timed elections featured by most parliamentary democracies impart flexibility to the political process because they enable political actors to respond to a loss of confidence in the prime minister or government, scandals, policy failures, and popularity shocks by dissolving parliament and scheduling new elections (Linz 1990, 55).

This argument has inspired debate and challenge, most notably because flexible election timing is only one mechanism among many that politicians can use to make the kinds of continuous readjustments Linz has in mind (Horowitz, 1990; Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997; Cheibub, 2007). Hence, presidential democracies have proven to be significantly more resilient to gridlock than Linz (1990) anticipated. Nonetheless, the argument has proven influential in shaping the discussion about fixed and flexible electoral terms in general under *any* constitutional format. Among other things, it influenced political debates about removing prime ministerial discretion to time elections in a range of parliamentary democracies such as the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.[12] While a goal of these reform initiatives is to reduce the scope for opportunistic election calling by the incumbent government, a prominent concern is that abolishing the prime minister's dissolution power may render situations of political crisis and paralysis intractable. This concern reflects two assumptions: (1) that removing a prime minister's discretion to time elections is tantamount to fixing the parliamentary term entirely, and (2) that removing constitutional opportunities to surf also constrains opportunities to call failure elections.

However, as we have seen, both of these concerns can be addressed. Parliamentary constitutions can permit early election calling to resolve crises and gridlock without granting the prime minister or government full discretion to dissolve parliament (Strøm and Swindle, 2002; Goplerud and Schleiter, 2016). For this reason, institutional rules that remove a prime minister's discretion to time elections reduce political surfing, but need not affect the resort to early elections as a means to address situations of government failure and political crisis (Schleiter and Issar, forthcoming). Hence, it is possible to curb the incumbency advantages conferred by prime ministerial election timing without compromising the capacity of a political system to process conflicts and government failure through early elections.[13]

The Use of Dissolution Powers for Partisan Advantage

In addition to gridlock resolution, early election timing can be used by political actors for partisan advantage, which has implications for the incumbent's re-election chances, parliamentary bargaining (over cabinets and policy), and the cyclicality of policymaking. The vast majority of work in each of these areas has focused on the use of dissolution powers by incumbents for partisan advantage. How other political actors, most notably presidents, may use their influence on parliamentary dissolution for political gain is much less well understood.

The Incumbent's Re-election Chances

Given the extensive literature on the economic conditions that trigger political surfing, studies of the *electoral consequences* of endogenously timed elections are surprisingly rare. Only a handful of studies address the question whether incumbents who control the timing of elections can also, to some extent, control their electoral fate.

Extant work generates two contradictory predictions about the electoral benefits of political surfing. On the one hand, the literature on political surfing anticipates that incumbents time elections when they expect to win (e.g., Chowdhury, 1993; Ito, 1990; Kayser, 2005, 2006), and therefore, by assumption, we should see them win opportunistic elections more often than regular elections. On the other hand, incumbents may be fallible and voters may punish opportunism (Blais et al., 2004; Smith, 2004), so that, on balance, opportunism may not actually pay: First, incumbents may make poor election timing choices because the decision they face is complex. To maximize the benefits of an early election call they must time the election in the last best period, that is, the last time before regularly scheduled elections when they are popular, taking account of potential future downturns in their popularity (Smith, 2004, 2003). These timing choices are ultimately based on best guesses rather than certainty, which makes for a difficult (and error-prone) calculation. Second, voters may react adversely to opportunistic election calls either because such elections signal an impending decline in economic (or other government) performance (Smith, 1996, 99), or because voters perceive early elections as a procedurally unfair attempt by the incumbent to skew the electoral playing field (Blais et al., 2004). Both concerns may cause voters to withdraw their support for the government.

Two case-oriented studies address these divergent expectations in part: Blais et al. (2004) use survey data about the Canadian early elections of 2000 and find that the early timing provoked resentment among some voters. Roy and Alcantara (2012) employ an internet-based voting experiment to study the effect of opportunistic election timing on electoral gains in the context of Canada. They report that electoral gains are measurable, but only if elections are timed immediately after heightened levels of positive media coverage of the government.[14] Schleiter and Tavits (2016) advance the debate by offering the first cross-national comparative analysis of the electoral effects of opportunistic election timing in 27 eastern and western European countries. They find that opportunistic election calling generates a vote share bonus for the incumbent of as much as 5 percentage points, a large effect that amounts to the vote share of a successful small party in many of the countries included in the study. Building on this work, Schleiter and

Tavits (2018) shed light on the mechanisms that drive voter reactions to opportunistic election timing using survey experiments. The findings suggest that opportunism negatively affects support for the incumbent because it engenders voter concern about the incumbent's future performance and about procedural fairness. However, against a background of good economic performance, which often triggers electoral opportunism, voters are still more likely to support than oppose the incumbent despite their negative reaction to opportunism. Jointly, these results explain why incumbents engage in opportunism despite the cost and why they are able to derive a net electoral benefit from it in the context of favorable circumstances.

The conclusion that incumbents are able to use endogenous election timing for political advantage raises the broader question whether other political actors, too, are able to employ their assembly dissolution powers for partisan gain. This question is most pertinent to presidents, who, like incumbent governments, often have significant influence on early election calling in parliamentary and semipresidential democracies. To presidents, a parliamentary dissolution that benefits their political allies can have numerous benefits—it may return the presidential party to office, give the president influence on ministerial selection, and open up opportunities to advance policies that reflect presidential preferences (O'Neil, 1993; Millard, 2000; Amorim Neto and Costa Lobo, 2009; van Ooyen, 2015). Judicious influence on assembly dissolution can therefore be expected to aid presidents in building their own and their party's political reputation. To date, the only comparative study to examine this type of presidential activism in the electoral arena is Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2018). Focusing on directly and indirectly elected presidents in European democracies, the study asks whether these heads of state use their influence on election calling for the advantage of their political allies in government. The findings suggest that presidents with extensive dissolution powers are able to shape the electoral success of incumbents: prime ministers whose governments are allied to such presidents realize a significant vote and seat share bonus.

Parliamentary Bargaining

The power to time elections affects not just how parties fare in elections but also how they bargain with each other in the legislature. Simply put, discretion to schedule early elections enables parties with favorable electoral prospects to extract concessions from their peers who fear losing votes and seats. The threat of an early election, then, is a bargaining tool with consequences for governments and policy.

Turning first to bargaining about governments, in most parliamentary (and semipresidential) democracies, governments are made and broken as a result of legislative negotiations rather than elections alone, because single-party parliamentary majorities are rare (Gallagher et al., 2011, 401). Moreover, in the context of discretionary election timing, these negotiations inevitably occur in the shadow of elections so that popular parties enjoy bargaining power. As noted previously, Lupia and Strøm's (1995) seminal paper lays the theoretical basis for understanding bargaining about executive power and highlights that popular parties do not inevitably call premature elections. Instead, they may use the threat of a dissolution to extract—in office currency—the cost

of early elections from other, electorally vulnerable parties (Lupia and Strøm, 1995; see also Diermeier and Stevenson, 2000).

Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2009) offer a first study of the effects of election timing powers on the twin risks of early government termination—early elections and nonelectoral replacements. Their results corroborate the finding that prime ministers who can time elections unilaterally surf, which raises the risk of early elections.[15] Interestingly, the study also reveals that the frequency of nonelectoral terminations is not reduced when prime ministers have powers to time early elections. This suggests that these premiers are no less likely to renegotiate coalitions during the interelectoral term. Constitutional constraints on discretionary dissolution, in contrast, lower the early election risk and cause parties to resolve their differences through interelectoral government changes instead. Finally, presidents with discretion to dissolve appear to employ this power to influence parliamentary bargaining about nonelectoral replacements rather than early election calling. In sum, the study provides extensive evidence that different political actors employ both *early election calls* and the *threat of such a call* to achieve office-related goals in parliamentary bargaining.

A fundamentally similar logic applies to parliamentary bargaining about policy and legislation. Popular incumbents with the power to dissolve parliament can make clear that early elections will be called unless parliament accedes to a particular outcome, such as passing a legislative decision or desisting from doing so (Becher and Christiansen, 2015). Hence, credible dissolution threats can be expected to enable executives who might otherwise struggle to achieve parliamentary agreement to secure legislative concessions from unpopular parties. Becher and Christiansen's (2015) findings support these expectations and suggest that favorable public opinion is most useful to, and most likely to be exploited by, chief executives with weak parliamentary support when an early election would be most costly to unpopular parties, that is, long before a new election must be held.

Policy Cycles

Election timing rules affect not just policy bargaining but also the rhythm of policy cycles. The reason for this is that politicians are acutely aware that voters reward or punish governments for their record in office (Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Powell, 2000). When voters evaluate their government, moreover, they do not weigh performance across its term equally. Instead, the evidence suggests that the electorate prioritizes recent government performance, while discounting the more distant past (Bartels, 2008; Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011). With that in mind, governments moderate their policy choices with an eye to the next election. Specifically, they aim to achieve outcomes that are closer to the preferences of the electorate as elections approach while postponing outcomes that diverge from those preferences to times when no election is looming. As a result, elections tend to give rise to policy cycles with consequences for domestic (in particular economic) and foreign policy.

The electoral cycle also gives politicians incentives to pay careful attention to time inconsistencies in the effects of policies. Many policies generate costs and benefits on different time scales. A tax cut, for instance, may improve voter welfare in the short term while imposing costs in the form of cuts to government-funded services in the long term. In contrast, austerity measures reduce government services (e.g., education, transportation, security and defense, health and social services) in the short term in order to improve macroeconomic credibility among private investors and to enable borrowing from capital markets in the longer run (Hallerberg and Wolff, 2008).

Given these time inconsistencies, leaders can opportunistically choose to implement electorally beneficial policies prior to elections with long-run costs that will only become evident after polling day. In addition they may prefer to enact policies with significant short run costs at points in time when elections are distant. Election timing rules condition these policy cycles: Endogenous election timing tends to attenuate electorally motivated policy cycles to a degree because it allows incumbents to substitute the surfing of waves of support for costly economic manipulation as a means to improve their re-election chances (Kayser, 2005).

Economic Policy Cycles

Models of political-economic cycles originally assumed fixed electoral terms, during which incumbents use macroeconomic, that is, monetary (Nordhaus, 1975) or fiscal (Drazen, 2001), policy tools, to boost their re-election chances by improving voter welfare prior to elections. According to these models, governments manipulate the economy for electoral benefit by shifting economic resources from the future to the pre-election present, which imposes a hidden, distortionary tax on the economy after the election (Nordhaus, 1975; Rogoff and Sibert, 1988; Rogoff, 1990).

Scholars soon adapted these models to a more realistic institutional setting by accounting for the ability of governments in most parliamentary democracies to influence the timing of elections (Chappell and Peel, 1979; Lächler, 1982; Kayser, 2005). A prominent theoretical argument in this literature is that politicians can be expected to substitute opportunistic election timing for costly and distortionary attempts to manipulate the economy (Kayser, 2005; see also Franzese and Jusko, 2006).

Empirically, there is some support for this argument from case-oriented studies of Japan and India, which suggests that politicians substitute election timing for the opportunistic use of economic policy, so that economic manipulation prior to elections is muted or absent (Ito and Park, 1988; Ito, 1990; Chowdhury, 1993).[16] Likewise, a cross-national study by Efthyvoulou (2012) reports manipulation prior to regular but not early elections.[17] Perhaps the most compelling evidence is mustered by a comparative study that focuses on the strategic timing of austerity measures. According to Hübscher and Sattler (2017), decisions to implement austerity measures are conditioned by the electoral cycle in conjunction with the incumbent’s electoral vulnerability. Electorally vulnerable governments time fiscal cuts early in their term, and take particular care to avoid the implementation of such measures prior to elections. Moreover, election timing

substitutes, in part, for the strategic implementation of economic policy: Leaders with great discretion to time elections pay less careful attention to the timing of austerity measures (Hübscher and Sattler, 2017, 162). These electoral effects on austerity policy are substantively large.

Foreign Policy Cycles

Students of international relations provide similarly compelling evidence that executives choose their policies with an eye to the next election. The literature on international conflict draws attention to the potentially high costs of international conflict in terms of human lives and financial resources, which generate incentives for governments to avoid aggressive behavior as democratic elections approach. Thus, Gaubatz (1991) finds that the prospect of losses in democratic elections induces pacific behavior in the executive (see also Huth and Allee, 2002). Yet, this evidence appears to be contradicted by other cross-national studies that have failed to identify a systematic relationship between foreign policy aggression and elections (Lian and Oneal, 1993; DeRouen, 1995; Leeds and Davis, 1997; Meernik and Waterman, 1996).

Williams (2013) hypothesizes that these inconsistent findings are, at least in part, attributable to the preponderance of endogenous election timing in many developed democracies. This renders the precise timing of the elections—and thus the public's opportunity to hold the government accountable—largely uncertain. Hence, in the context of endogenous election timing, strategic conflict behavior on the part of politicians ought to be guided by *leader's vulnerability to an early election* rather than the next regular election date alone. Studying conflict behavior by executives in 17 developed parliamentary democracies, Williams (2013) finds support for that theory. Leaders who face a high *risk* of an election in the immediate future, that is, those who lack majority support and are near the end of their constitutional term, are significantly less likely to initiate international conflict. Conversely, executives who face a low election risk are most likely to engage in conflict abroad. Moreover, the results of the study suggest that these electoral effects on foreign policy behavior are large. They rival, and occasionally exceed, the magnitude of some of the most important predictors of international conflict, including major power status and geographical contiguity (Williams, 2013, 10).

In sum, the literatures on economic and foreign policy cycles provide compelling evidence that all elections—whether endogenously or exogenously timed—engender policy cycles. However, endogenous election timing tends to attenuate this cyclicality to a degree because it enables incumbents to substitute political surfing for opportunistic policy manipulation as a means to improve their re-election chances.

Lacunae and Avenues for Future Research

While existing scholarship has significantly expanded the understanding of dissolution powers, the nature of early elections, their causes and consequences over the last 30

years, it has also left a range of important questions unresolved. This final section focuses on gaps in three broad areas:

First, as noted previously, election timing rules vary extensively across democratic constitutions, yet the origins of these constitutional rules remain remarkably poorly understood. A quick survey of this variation suggests some correlations. For instance, older constitutional monarchies are more likely to give greater powers to dissolve to a prime minister and government than newer republics, which typically restrain the incumbent to a greater extent. Clearly, these choices, are, at least in part, shaped by a historically contingent understanding of how best to secure democracy. Given the fact that constitutional dissolution regimes were typically forged as a part of a wider constitutional settlement, dissolution powers are also likely to reflect a wider understanding of competing models of democracy. In addition, the crises that triggered these constitutional settlements, such as revolutions, regime collapse, defeat in war, or independence (Elster, 1995, 371), and experience with previous constitutional rules regulating dissolution, is likely to have shaped the choices that parties and constitutional assemblies made. To date, however, our understanding of the influence of these different factors on the choice of dissolution regimes remains underdeveloped.

Second, scholars have focused overwhelmingly on election timing at the national rather than the subnational level. Yet, the question of election timing is also relevant to subnational politics, and multilevel polities may choose various combinations of flexible and fixed election timing at national and subnational levels. This has implications for the synchronization of electoral cycles and policy across different tiers of government. For instance, the UK (until 2011) combined full prime ministerial discretion to time elections flexibly at the national level with very restricted opportunities to schedule early elections for the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the Northern Ireland Assembly. When the prime minister’s discretion to time elections flexibly at the national level was curbed by the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act (2011), adjustments were made to the terms of the devolved assemblies in order to avoid a synchronization of national and devolved policy and electoral cycles. Clearly, then, to politicians the relative timing of national and subnational elections is an important concern. However, the implications of different election timing rules for election outcomes, policy cycles, policy collaboration, and coordination across different tiers of government remains poorly understood.

Third, the extant literature has only just begun to explore the political implications of investing actors other than the incumbent, most notably presidents, with extensive discretion to dissolve the assembly. If these powers can be used by presidents to affect the electoral fate of the incumbent government, as Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2018) suggest, then they can almost certainly also be deployed to influence legislative bargaining about governments and policy. To date, these implications remain completely unexplored.

In sum, election timing rules are some of the most fundamental and consequential prerogatives in a democracy because they have major repercussions in the electoral and

legislative arena. They condition the nature and frequency of early elections, shape the mechanisms that are available for gridlock resolution, the electoral prospects of governments, legislative bargaining, and policy cycles. As this survey of the literature has shown, the last 15 years have seen a fundamental transformation in the study of these rules. We now better understand how they vary, why they give rise to different types of early elections, and how they shape the power of various political actors in bargaining over government and policy. Together these results imply that election timing rules may be as consequential as electoral systems in shaping democratic representation and accountability as well as political outcomes that affect voter welfare. Yet, present research has only begun to scratch the surface of these implications.

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Notes:

(1.) Note that scholars and politicians employ two distinct types of terminology to discuss endogenous and exogenous elections. Electoral terms and election dates are often referred to as *fixed* in political systems with exogenous election timing because they are determined by law. In contrast, systems that employ endogenous elections have *flexible* interelectoral terms, which are determined, to some extent, by political choice.

(2.) Common and legal language using the notion of “fixed” and “flexible” electoral terms in some instances departs from this definition. For instance, legislation that reduces, but does not abolish, the dependence of election timing on political choice occasionally claims to introduce “fixed terms.” Two cases in point are Canada’s Act to Amend the Canada Elections Act (2007) and the UK’s Fixed-Term Parliaments Act (2011). In both instances the reference to fixed terms is erroneous because political choices can still bring about early elections: In Canada the governor general retains discretionary power to dissolve Parliament at the request of the prime minister; in the UK, parliament can dissolve itself prematurely by a vote of a two-thirds majority of its total membership (including vacant

seats) or when parliament votes no confidence in a government and then fails to express confidence in a government within 14 days.

(3.) Out of 39 OECD and EU parliamentary democracies studied by Goplerud and Schleiter (2016), only one, Norway, does not permit early parliamentary elections.

(4.) Parliamentary and semipresidential regimes are defined by the cabinet's accountability to parliament (Strøm et al., 2003), semipresidential democracies additionally feature a directly elected presidential head of state. In parliamentary democracies with presidential heads of state, the president is indirectly elected (Elgie, 1999).

(5.) Note that assembly confidence systems may also permit a degree of endogenous election timing at the subnational level. In Germany, for example, *Land*-level parliaments can be prematurely dissolved. However, the research available to date has focused overwhelmingly on endogenous election timing at the national level.

(6.) While presidential constitutions do not permit the removal of a president from office as part of normal politics, these constitutions do envisage impeachment procedures to address serious abuses of presidential office including treason, the violation of the constitution, or involvement in criminal activity.

(7.) Surprisingly, this distinction is often ignored. For instance, in the literature on political business cycles, regular elections in parliamentary democracies are often equated with exogenous elections (Brender and Drazen, 2005; Vergne, 2009; Katsimi and Sarantides, 2012; Ehrhart, 2013).

(8.) However, two studies find no cross-national evidence of political surfing (Alesina et al., 1993; Alesina and Roubini, 1992). Palmer and Whitten (2000) attribute this null finding to problems with the data and modeling.

(9.) Empirical work on political surfing typically proceeds as if all early elections can be attributed to surfing and takes no account of that heterogeneity (Alesina et al., 1993; Alesina and Roubini, 1992; Chowdhury, 1993; Ito, 1990). Only one study, Palmer and Whitten (2000) seeks to establish, at the level of the individual election, whether the dissolution of parliament was in fact due to the incumbent government's choice.

(10.) Incumbents may react strategically to anticipated risks and difficulties by choosing early elections to minimize their electoral losses and hold on to office. Theoretically and empirically, it is possible to distinguish such cases, in which a prime minister exercises discretion for partisan benefit, from situations in which the dominant governing party's political defeat triggers an election without leaving a prime minister room for discretion.

(11.) Note, this definition also accommodates situations in which incumbent prime ministers call early elections to consolidate their position in order to sidestep anticipated difficulties or challenges to their hold on power.

(12.) House of Commons Library, “Fixed-Term Parliaments” (2010), SN/PC/831; Parliamentary Service, *Parliamentary Terms: Fixed and Flexible* (2013), New Zealand: Parliamentary Library Research Paper; *Whitaker Report (Art. 28)* (1996), Report of the Constitution Review Group, Republic of Ireland; Roy and Alcantara (2012).

(13.) As the literature on political business cycles notes, politicians may additionally make use of economic manipulation to influence their re-election chances. This strategy may be used in conjunction with election timing or as a substitute (Chowdhury, 1993; Ito, 1990; Kayser, 2005). In political reform debates, the potential link between election timing and economic manipulation is a further factor that deserves attention.

(14.) Empirical studies on the topic overwhelmingly focus on a single country and some do not directly address the question of interest or present mixed results (Grofman and Roozendaal, 1994; Smith, 1996, 2003, 2004). Smith’s work relies on a case study of the UK and focuses on the signaling effects of early elections by comparing election results to voter support for the incumbent before the elections were called. Grofman and Roozendaal (1994) focus on ten incumbent governments that orchestrated early elections in the Netherlands and describe that some of them gained while others lost votes.

(15.) This corroborates Strøm and Swindle’s (2002) finding that early elections are more frequent when a prime minister’s power to dissolve is not checked by the head of state, cabinet, or parliament, as is consistent with political surfing.

(16.) Note, however, that other case studies suggest no such substitution effect. Cargill and Hutchinson (1991), for instance, find that Japanese governments manipulate the economy for electoral purposes while also triggering early elections during periods of real output growth (see also Heckelman and Berument, 1998).

(17.) However, Katsimi and Sarantides (2012) find cycles in the run-up to regular elections as well as unexpected deficit cycles prior to early elections. A concern regarding both of these comparative studies is that they treat regular elections as exogenous. However, as we have seen previously, in constitutional contexts in which election timing is to some degree discretionary, even the timing of regular elections is the result of a political decision. Hence these studies are unable to address concerns about endogeneity. Endogeneity arises because both political surfing and economic manipulation are jointly conditioned by observable and unobservable factors such as incumbent competence and popularity. For example, competent governments may have little incentive to make use of either strategy while incompetent governments may seek to use both extensively. Similarly, positive shocks to the incumbent’s popularity may allow incompetent governments to surf while refraining from manipulation of the economy.

Petra Schleiter

University of Oxford