

Election Timing during an Ongoing Crisis

William Zhu

07 June 2022

Introduction

A Crisis exogenous to the political-economic system, though scary at first, presents incumbents with a perfect chance to showcase their leadership without the risk of shouldering too much blame since they didn't start the crisis, thus boosting their popularity. Naturally, incumbents in democracies would attempt to translate such popularity into electoral advantage. Under the parliamentary system, one way for the prime minister (PM) to do so is to call a snap election to cash in his/her party's high approval rate, thereby allowing the party (and perhaps its coalition partners) to cruise to a poll victory.

Of course, the outcome of such political calculus remain uncertain when voters think the PM calls an election solely to make electoral gains. In the fall of 2021, when Canadian PM Justin Trudeau was leading the poll, he called a snap election ostensibly to make the voters decide which party will lead them to "finish the fight against covid-19".¹ Other major parties see it as electoral opportunism. In the end, it did not turn out so well for Trudeau and his Liberal Party which saw its vote share fall even further from the last election. Though the Liberal Party managed to grab a few seats, it remained stuck in the minority government limbo as it did before the snap election. It seems that taking advantage of a crisis for electoral gains is not such a straightforward affair.

This puzzle immediately raises two questions:

1. What makes PMs more likely to call snap elections in response to exogenous crises?
2. Does calling snap elections in response to exogenous crises decrease the support for PM's party?
3. When do these snap elections reward PM's party?

Answers to these questions may also interest scholars and political advisors working on politicians serving fixed terms of offices as to when exogenous shocks stop paying electoral dividends since snap elections represent

¹See the Washington Post report by Coletta (2021)

hard tests for observing the efficacy of turning approval rates into seats/margins.

Brief Literature Review

The predominant theory on snap elections, a.k.a. opportunistic election timing, is built on the theory that voters retrospectively assess the performance of the incumbents (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966), especially in terms of economic indicators (Barreiro 2007). Incumbents, also operating under this assumption, try to call elections when the economy is doing (Chowdhury 1993; Ito and Park 1988) well or manipulate the economy (Kayser 2005) before the election to make electoral gains. Beckman and Schleiter (2020) find that PMs who are allowed to call elections are less likely to manipulate economy. Systematic studies of calling snap elections for non-economic reasons are few and far between (McClean 2021; Morgan-Jones and Schleiter 2018) since most of the time they are a result of the threat of snap elections which usually suffice to maintain party discipline without actually following through with it (Roy and Alcantara 2012). The author is not aware of any studies concerning snap elections called in response to exogenous shocks (natural disasters, pandemic) or endogenous ones (wars) possibly because these events are so idiosyncratic.

Electorate, perceiving such attempts as opportunistic, may accordingly punish the incumbents (Smith 2004), but whether it is harsh enough to remain debatable (Blais et al. 2004; Daoust and Pélouin-Skulski 2021; Schleiter and Tavits 2016, 2018) Roy and Alcantara (2012) simulated an election where incumbents gain an advantage only when they call an election immediately after they received positive coverage. It suggests that in the case of exogenous shocks, the incumbents would reap the most electoral advantage when they received the most amount of positive coverage for managing the exogenous shocks. Nevertheless, the incumbent still faces uncertainty as to when the approval rate would peak and how it would last. It is unclear whether opportunistic incumbents would wait for better coverage to boost their popularity, take advantage of it as soon as possible or somewhere in between.

Research Questions

1. What factors make PMs more likely to call snap elections in response to COVID-19?
2. Do snap elections in response to COVID-19 pay off?

Hypotheses

1. The following factors make PMs more likely to call snap elections by increasing the electoral dividends of the snap elections:
 - a. Popularity indicators: Rising approval rate, better media coverage;

- b. Crisis management indicators: Falling COVID-19 death rate/Rising vaccination rate;
 - c. Economic indicators: GDP growth/interest rate/inflation.
- 2. The following factors make PMs less likely to call snap elections:
 - a. imminent expiration date of parliamentary term: capturing electoral advantage without seeming opportunistic
 - b. High proportion of seats in the parliaments: little need to risk any loss
- 3. The following factors decrease the electoral dividends of the snap elections:
 - a. Voters' concern about incumbent opportunism;
 - b. Voters' concern that elections are inappropriate due to the exogenous shock;

Empirical Strategy

I propose to use COVID-19 as a natural experiment since it is an exogenous shock to all countries around roughly the same time and present a similar set of challenges to all countries. No countries dodged the scourge of COVID-19. I am hoping that important variables mentioned in Hypotheses are random enough. I wonder if it is okay to use data from both state and national elections in democratic countries to test the claim.

1. Most variables mentioned in Hypothesis 1 would be available through public opinion polls and statistical bureaux in those countries. Although I am not sure if poll data are comparable across countries. Because of this there may be a good argument to restrict the range of data to European elections/Canadian federal and provincial elections/Australian federal and state elections.
2. Identifying snap elections in response to COVID-19. One could go through the news reports to see if commentators think they fit the bill. There may be other more objective methods like measuring the length of time between the last election and the time they called the election. Beyond that the rest of the variables mentioned in Hypothesis 2 are easy to come by by consulting the legislatures' official records on their websites.
3. Hypotheses 1 and 2 together answer RQ 1 which concerns the likelihood of calling snap elections. I am hoping that logistic/probit regression should do the trick of estimating the effect of all the factors mentioned in the two hypotheses.
4. Hypothesis 3 concerns the extent to which voters punish electoral opportunism, which I will measure by calculating the difference between the voting intention poll on the date the election was called and the actual vote share. I think it suffices to test whether the difference is significant enough, but I am going to think harder about how to expand on this hypothesis and RQ2.

Data Collection

To begin with, we consider elections held between 2020 and now in countries which, at the time of the election, were graded as “liberal democracies” or “electoral democracies” by V-Dem.

country_name

Mexico

Suriname

Sweden

Switzerland

Ghana

South Africa

Japan

Colombia

Poland

Brazil

United States of America

Portugal

El Salvador

Bolivia

Peru

Senegal

Argentina

South Korea

Kosovo

Nigeria

Taiwan

Bhutan

Burkina Faso

Indonesia

Nepal

Niger

Canada

country__name

Australia

Botswana

Cape Verde

Chile

Costa Rica

Timor-Leste

Ecuador

France

Germany

Guatemala

Ireland

Italy

Latvia

Lesotho

Liberia

Malawi

Maldives

Mongolia

Netherlands

Panama

Sierra Leone

Spain

Tunisia

Ukraine

United Kingdom

Uruguay

Armenia

Dominican Republic

Georgia

Guinea-Bissau

Jamaica

country__name

Moldova

Namibia

Sri Lanka

Trinidad and Tobago

Austria

Barbados

Belgium

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bulgaria

Croatia

Cyprus

Czech Republic

Denmark

Estonia

Finland

Greece

Guyana

Iceland

Israel

Lithuania

Luxembourg

North Macedonia

Malta

Mauritius

New Zealand

Norway

Paraguay

Romania

Sao Tome and Principe

Seychelles

Slovakia

country__name

Slovenia

Solomon Islands

Vanuatu

Bibliography

- Barreiro, Belén. 2007. "Explaining the electoral performance of incumbents in democracies." In *Cambridge studies in the theory of democracy*, eds. Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca and José María Maravall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 17–44. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/controlling-governments/explaining-the-electoral-performance-of-incumbents-in-democracies/D07974819640DAD91ED1CA7A24D0F21A>.
- Beckman, Tristin, and Petra Schleiter. 2020. "Opportunistic election timing, a complement or substitute for economic manipulation?" *The Journal of Politics* 82(3): 1127–1141. <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/707794>.
- Blais, André et al. 2004. "Do (some) canadian voters punish a prime minister for calling a snap election?" *Political Studies* 52(2): 307–323. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=poh&AN=13246253&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Chowdhury, Abdur R. 1993. "Political surfing over economic waves: Parliamentary election timing in india." *American Journal of Political Science* 37(4): 1100–1118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2111545>.
- Coletta, Amanda. 2021. "Canada's trudeau calls snap election in bid to regain parliamentary majority." *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/15/canada-trudeau-election/>.
- Daoust, Jean-François, and Gabrielle Péloquin-Skulski. 2021. "What are the consequences of snap elections on citizens' voting behavior?" *Representation* 57(1): 95–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2020.1804440>.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. *Retrospective voting in american national elections*. New Haven: Yale Univ Pr.
- Ito, Takatoshi, and Jin Hyuk Park. 1988. "Political business cycles in the parliamentary system." *Economics Letters* 27(3): 233–238. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0165176588901760>.
- Kayser, Mark Andreas. 2005. "Who Surfs, Who Manipulates? The Determinants of Opportunistic Election Timing and Electorally Motivated Economic Intervention." *American Political Science Review* 99(1): 17–27. <http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/who-surfs-who-manipulates-the-determinants-of-opportunistic-election-timing-and-electorally-motivated-economic-intervention/14A7F14F4FC7EB769DA5BDB9D16D4E88>.
- Key, V. O. 1966. *The responsible electorate : Rationality in presidential voting, 1936-1960*. New York: Random House.
- McClean, Charles T. 2021. "The Element of Surprise: Election Timing and Opposition Preparedness." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(11): 1984–2018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414021997172>.
- Morgan-Jones, Edward, and Petra Schleiter. 2018. "Presidential influence on parliamentary election timing and the electoral fate of prime ministers." *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 24(2): 211–226.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2018.1477273>.

- Roy, Jason, and Christopher Alcantara. 2012. "The election timing advantage: Empirical fact or fiction?" *Electoral Studies* 31(4): 774–781. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379412000807>.
- Schleiter, Petra, and Margit Tavits. 2016. "The electoral benefits of opportunistic election timing." *The Journal of Politics* 78(3): 836–850. <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/685447>.
- Schleiter, Petra, and Margit Tavits. 2018. "Voter reactions to incumbent opportunism." *The Journal of Politics* 80(4): 1183–1196. <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/698758>.
- Smith, Alastair. 2004. *Election timing*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York : Cambridge, 2004. <https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE003373499>.

Appendix

Data Collection