

Voter Reactions to Incumbent Opportunism

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Opportunistic incumbent behavior to gain electoral advantage flies in the face of democratic accountability and should elicit voter disapproval. Yet incumbents routinely behave opportunistically. This observation is puzzling. We address this puzzle by offering the first systematic, individual-level analysis of voter reactions to opportunism. We combine four original surveys with embedded experiments and focus on a common form of opportunism in parliamentary systems—opportunistic election timing to favorable economic conditions. We find that opportunism negatively affects support for the incumbent because it engenders voter concern about the incumbent’s future performance and raises significant concerns about procedural fairness. However, under 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.

Incumbents in modern democracies often engage in opportunistic behaviors—they manipulate the economy, gerrymander electoral districts, and change the timing of elections to help their reelection prospects. Such opportunism runs counter to the spirit of democratic accountability and can potentially distort the role of elections as instruments of democracy (Powell 2000). Incumbent opportunism should, therefore, generate resentment among voters and lead to anti-incumbent sentiment. If this is the case, why do incumbents engage in opportunism? This is an important puzzle. Solving it requires a better understanding of voter reactions to electoral opportunism—an area that has received very little systematic scholarly attention.

We study voter reactions to opportunism by focusing on opportunistic election timing. Much of the literature on democratic accountability assumes that elections occur at regular intervals and that their timing is fixed. However, in reality

most parliamentary democracies give governments some control over the timing of national elections. Among advanced democracies in the postwar period, all but nine out of 39 parliamentary constitutions include some such provision (Gople-
rud and Schleiter 2016, 435–36). Leaders in those democracies do not need to face voters at fixed times, when circumstances may be adverse. Instead, they are able to choose the timing of elections to correspond with conditions that are favorable to them. We define opportunistic elections as (i) incumbent triggered and (ii) aiming to improve the incumbent’s reelection chances by capitalizing on favorable circumstances.¹ Our specific focus is the well-documented phenomenon of opportunistic election timing to peaks in economic performance.²

Opportunistic elections are not just a theoretical possibility: several studies confirm that governments time elections this way (Chowdhury 1993; Ito 1990; Ito and Park 1988; Kayser 2006; Palmer and Whitten 2000; Smith 2004). In post-

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1. Incumbents can also call early elections for other, nonopportunistic reasons (e.g., in response to government failure or to manage other risks; see Schleiter and Tavits 2016). In this article, we are interested in opportunistic election calling only and do not consider other types of early elections.

2. Our approach can be extended to other, less systematically documented forms of electoral opportunism, e.g., the calling of elections to take advantage of unprepared opposition parties.

war Europe, every seventh election has been opportunistically timed (Schleiter and Tavits 2016). Among Westminster systems, strategically timed elections have been even more frequent: in Canada, for example, over the postconfederation time period after 1867, the expectation of a business cycle peak has regularly triggered election calls by governing parties (Voia and Ferris 2013), and about half of the country's postwar elections have been opportunistically timed. In short, the phenomenon that we study is not an anomaly but a significant feature of parliamentary government. Better understanding voter reactions to opportunistic timing not only lays the foundation for uncovering mass political behavior in response to government opportunism but also has relevance to current policy debates. Whether to adopt or keep fixed election dates is the subject of deeply contested reform debates in different countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (House of Commons 2010; Purser 2013; Roy and Alcantara 2012). These debates are nontrivial; they touch on fundamental issues of accountability because of the potential incumbency advantage that strategic election timing may generate.

Using four original surveys at different points in time together with embedded experiments, we explore whether, why, and to what extent voters react negatively to incumbent opportunism in election timing. Our research design offers a clear advantage over observational studies that make it hard, if not impossible, to identify the effect of opportunism independently of the effect of government performance because incumbents time elections at the peak of their performance. Our design holds economic performance constant and varies whether the election timing is regular or opportunistic. This allows us to isolate the effect of opportunism, which is in itself a significant contribution to the research on opportunistic election timing that has so far suffered from endogeneity and simultaneity problems.³

Our article uncovers that opportunistic election timing has a negative effect on support for the incumbent. That is, holding economic conditions constant at a high level, voter support for the incumbent is significantly lower in opportunistic than in regularly scheduled elections. We further demonstrate that opportunism decreases support for the incumbent because it signals an anticipated downturn in performance and because respondents perceive opportunistically timed elections to be procedurally unfair. At the same time,

3. Our aim is to provide a first estimate of the effect of opportunism net of all other influences. This opens opportunities for future research to explore whether voter reactions to opportunism are conditioned by other factors such as media attention to opportunism or the strength of the opposition.

the adverse response to incumbent opportunism has relatively little weight in shaping vote intentions. Specifically, our results show that economic performance affects vote intentions much more strongly than negative reactions to opportunistic election timing. Jointly, these findings suggest an answer to the question why incumbents still engage in opportunism despite some cost: while opportunistic election timing may lower the overall support for the incumbent, because of its low importance to voters, it is unlikely to reverse their predisposition to vote for the incumbent who has delivered good economic performance.

Our findings contribute to better understanding voter tolerance of incumbent opportunism more generally as well as to policy debates over the institution of flexible election timing. We detail these contributions in the conclusion.

VOTER RESPONSES TO OPPORTUNISTIC ELECTIONS: APPROVAL OR DISAPPROVAL?

Do voters punish incumbents for opportunistically timed elections? Such elections are typically scheduled at the height of the incumbent's performance. Do voter concerns over opportunism trump any voter approval of the incumbent's performance? These questions present an interesting puzzle made even more intriguing because, as we will discuss, convincing theoretical arguments can be presented supporting either side of the debate. We review three sets of studies that provide a basis for theorizing voter reactions to opportunism—(1) those discussing procedural fairness, (2) those that explore the signaling effect of opportunistic elections, and (3) those that focus on economic voting. On the basis of these three contrasting literatures, we develop and test, for the first time, individual-level expectations regarding voter responses to strategically timed elections.

Procedural fairness and adverse voter responses

A large body of research argues that procedural fairness significantly affects people's sense of legitimacy of the system and their willingness to accept and comply with the outcomes (see, e.g., Bohman 1996; Grimes 2006; Tyler, Casper, and Fisher 1989). That is, citizens evaluate any given decision process in terms of their own conceptualization of fairness. These evaluations then affect citizens' overall assessment of the decision makers and their own willingness to accept the decision (Grimes 2006). Fairness matters for the following reasons: (a) people consider fair process a moral right, (b) fairness indicates that one is respected, (c) fairness provides a reason to trust the decision makers, and (d) a fair process provides a way to assess the fairness of outcomes (Esaïsson 2010). Building on these insights, the political science literature has shown that

procedural fairness increases political trust (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001) and system support (Linde 2012) and that electoral fairness increases turnout (Birch 2010). Just as much as fairness generates positive responses from voters, unfairness leads to a negative response, that is, to a decreased sense of legitimacy, lower trust, and decreased turnout.

These procedural fairness arguments can be applied to electoral opportunism because, by their nature, opportunistically timed elections can trigger fairness concerns among voters. Elections can be seen as unfair attempts at deception when incumbents are perceived to “cut and run” before the adverse effects of their policies fully unfold. Voters may equally disapprove of incumbent tactics to skew the electoral playing field and unfairly disadvantage the opposition by springing a surprise election or by exploiting the unpreparedness of opposition parties. Proposals for calling early elections often receive high-profile discussion in the media, precisely because they are perceived as shrewd manipulations of the intent of the democratic process (Blais et al. 2004, 309–10; Smith 2004, 23–25). Opposition parties in particular have an incentive to portray such attempts as unnecessary and purely self-interested. Given this level of negative attention to opportunistic elections questioning their fairness, voters may react with aversion to the incumbent’s opportunism. That is, they may disapprove of the incumbent who initiated the unfair procedure and vote against them in the polling booth. Blais et al. (2004) found there to be significant resentment among some voters of the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien’s decision to call opportunistic elections in 2000. They also noted measurable electoral costs to the incumbent Liberal Party as a result of this resentment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that politicians fear the potential electoral punishment for being seen to “cut and run” in order to escape their responsibilities when calling elections opportunistically (see, e.g., Attlee 1954, 206–7; Eden 1960, 270; Thatcher 1995, 288–89).

In sum, the procedural fairness argument suggests that voters are likely to react adversely to opportunistically timed elections. That is, voters are less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistic than in regularly scheduled elections. The causal mechanism producing this negative response is a reaction to the opportunism itself rather than to the performance of the incumbent.

Signaling and voter assessments of incumbent competence

Other research, specifically focused on opportunistic elections, also suggests that voters react negatively to incumbent opportunism, but for rational performance-related reasons and not out of fairness concerns. Smith (2004) provides the

most thorough theoretical treatment of opportunistic election timing and argues that incumbents call elections not just when they are popular but when they anticipate a future downturn in their popularity (e.g., economic decline). Hence, strategically timed elections, especially if they are unanticipated, may send a signal to voters of an impending downturn in the state of the economy (or other area), leading them to downgrade their perception of incumbent competence and anticipated future performance. In line with his argument, Smith (2004) shows with data from Britain that government support declines compared to preelection levels if the election is perceived to be opportunistic. He similarly shows that opportunistic elections are associated with negative stock market reactions and downturns in economic performance after the election. We extend his aggregate-level analysis by focusing on individual voters and employing a causal identification strategy to uncover the effects of opportunism on voter behavior.

In terms of individual voter behavior, Smith’s (2004) argument suggests that voters use both past performance and the timing of elections in forming their evaluation of the government. Voters, in general, prefer a competent government over an incompetent one. While strong performance alone signals competence, strong performance together with opportunistically timed elections signals that the government is of a less competent type because such elections indicate an imminent downturn in performance.⁴ In other words, opportunistically timed elections reveal hidden information about future performance, which leads voters to reevaluate and downgrade their assessment of the incumbent. Rather than rewarding the incumbent for good performance, voters discount the government’s previous successes and withdraw their support for the government.⁵

In sum, similar to the procedural fairness argument, the signaling argument leads us to expect that voters are less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistic than in regularly scheduled elections, all else (including observed performance) equal. However, the causal mechanism is different: the anti-incumbent vote results from updated eval-

4. Smith’s argument that vote choice is shaped by a combination of retrospective assessments and future expectations of incumbent performance is consistent with other contributions to the economic voting literature, which suggest that both types of evaluations shape voter behavior (see Lewis-Beck and Paldam [2000] for an overview).

5. Our argument focuses on voters’ concern over government (economic) performance, i.e., their sociotropic concern over the state of the economy rather than their egotropic concern of their personal economic situations (although the two might be related). Established arguments and theoretical models in the economic voting literature suggest that voters relate sociotropic considerations to their vote choice out of rational self-interest (see Duch and Stevenson [2008] for a review).

uations of incumbent competence and anticipated future performance rather than from the negative reaction to the opportunism itself.

Retrospective voting trumps other concerns

Despite these convincing arguments about the negative reactions of voters to incumbent opportunism, incumbents still call elections strategically. Indeed, there is robust evidence that governments time elections to coincide with peaks in economic performance (Chowdhury 1993; Ito 1990; Ito and Park 1988; Kayser 2006; Palmer and Whitten 2000; Smith 2004; Voia and Ferris 2013). If voters punish opportunism, why do incumbents keep timing elections opportunistically?

A large literature in political science argues that performance evaluations trump all other voter concerns during elections (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Powell 2000). The most important and extensively studied performance measure is the functioning of the national economy. Previous work consistently finds that incumbent governments are likely to be rewarded electorally when the economy is performing well and punished when economic conditions deteriorate (see Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Belanger [2012] for a recent review; see also Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Nannestad and Paldam 1994). In a recent comprehensive cross-national study, Barreiro (2008) shows that economic growth is the single most significant and consistent predictor of incumbents' electoral performance, regardless of the institutional structure, wealth of the country, or partisanship of the government. Performance-based voting also extends beyond economic voting to other aspects of government performance (Hobolt, Tilley, and Banducci 2013; Klačnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause 2016; Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits 2016; Tavits 2007).

Most studies of opportunistic election timing take these findings for granted and assume that voters care about the performance indicators rather than whether the elections are opportunistically timed or regular. According to this literature, incumbent governments aim to call elections at the peak of their popularity—a strategy referred to as “political surfing”—and expect to reap electoral benefits as a result (Chowdhury 1993; Ito 1990; Ito and Park 1988; Kayser 2005, 2006; Palmer and Whitten 2000; Roy and Alcantara 2012).

The expectations about voter-level behavior are not always explicitly stated in this literature, which is why two different interpretations are possible. First, voter support for the incumbent might be entirely unaffected by opportunistic election timing. If the economy is strong, voters are likely to positively evaluate the competence of the incumbent government and support it at the polls. Since voting decisions are solely based on performance evaluations, holding per-

formance constant, voters may be no less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistic than in regular elections.

An alternative, and perhaps more realistic, interpretation of the political surfing and the economic voting literature would suggest that economic performance strongly dominates election timing as a consideration in shaping voter support for a government. While opportunism may cause some negative reactions from some voters, on average, voters will still weight performance more heavily than opportunism when casting their vote. Put differently, voters are likely to consider performance evaluations as the most important factor when casting their vote, regardless of the type of the election, opportunistic or regular. Both expectations derive from a simple argument that is compelling because of the overwhelming empirical support for retrospective performance-based voting.

To summarize, our theoretical discussion provides the following set of expectations about voter reactions to opportunism. The procedural fairness and signaling arguments both persuasively suggest that holding government performance constant, voters are less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistic than in regularly scheduled elections (**H1a**). However, these arguments disagree about the causal mechanism producing this relationship. The signaling argument posits that it results from voters lowering their evaluations of incumbent competence and anticipated economic performance (**H2a**), while the procedural fairness argument suggests that the effect results from voter disapproval of opportunism (**H2b**). Finally, the economic voting and political surfing literatures provide a rationale for the null hypothesis and its weaker alternative: holding government performance constant, voters are not less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistic than in regularly scheduled elections (**H1b**); economic performance dominates election timing in shaping voter support for the government in elections (**H1c**).

RESEARCH DESIGN

To ascertain how voters respond to opportunistic election timing, we conducted four surveys together with embedded experiments in February 2015 (study 1, $N = 1,772$), November 2015 (study 2, $N = 1,678$), February 2017 (study 3, $N = 2,132$), and March 2017 (study 4, $N = 2,109$), using nationally representative samples of the UK voting-age population. The four studies were implemented using the online platform of the United Kingdom's leading Internet survey company, YouGov.⁶ The United Kingdom is an ideal

6. The online appendix sec. 1 (OA.1) provides further details on the surveys.

setting for testing our argument because voters are familiar with the practice of opportunistic elections as opposed to early elections that occur for other reasons (see data in Schleiter and Tavits 2016), which minimizes measurement error. At the same time, we believe that a study on UK voters is generalizable to other parliamentary systems with constitutional provisions that allow opportunistic election timing because there is nothing inherently unique about the way such elections have been used in the United Kingdom as opposed to other countries. Furthermore, the implementation of four studies conducted over a period of two years in widely differing political contexts (in February 2015, the United Kingdom was governed by a Conservative-Liberal coalition government; in November 2015 it had a Conservative single-party government led by David Cameron; and in 2017, a new Conservative government under Theresa May had taken over following the Brexit referendum) enables us to assess the cross-temporal robustness of our central findings.

Embedded in each survey is an experiment, which employs a posttest design with random assignment of respondents to the control and treatment groups. The experimental approach is appropriate for testing our hypotheses. It allows us to identify causal relationships in the context of a problem that is otherwise fraught with complex confounding and endogeneity. Random assignment of respondents to experimental subgroups makes exposure to opportunistically timed elections (i.e., the treatment) exogenous to other outcomes such as vote intentions and government competence evaluations. It also ensures that treatment status is independent of other observable and unobservable variables that can interfere with measuring the effect of the treatment (Gerber and Green 2012; Morton and Williams 2010, 141–42; Mutz 2011). Hence, any differences across the experimental subgroups in response to outcome questions—the dependent variables—can be causally attributed to the treatment (i.e., electoral opportunism). In sum, our design allows for the cleanest test of the effect of opportunism net of all other influences including potential contextual and institutional confounders or mediators. Because of the novelty of this area of research, it is necessary to establish a baseline result—the way we do—on which future studies can build.

We designed the experiments to maximize external validity. Specifically, we formulated the vignettes to be similar to the behavior and information that voters would be able to observe in reality (Morton and Williams 2010): in the United Kingdom, incumbents regularly time elections early when they expect that they can win (Smith 2004), and for voters and the media, the state of the national economy is a central benchmark in evaluating government performance (Johnston et al. 2000; Van der Brug, Van der Eijk, and Franklin

2007).⁷ We ensured that our description of the economic situation was a realistic reflection of the information that voters were receiving at the time of the surveys. To secure high levels of survey engagement and to minimize the impact of satisficing on outcomes, we provide a “don’t know” response option to every question.⁸ Validation studies show that stated preference experiments such as ours predict real-world voter behavior remarkably well and that response biases do not undermine the validity of survey experimental measures (Chang, Lusk, and Norwood 2009; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015).

Description of the four studies

The implementation of four studies at different points in time, using different samples of the UK voting-age population, allows us to examine the robustness of the findings from various different angles. All four studies allow us to test hypotheses 1a and 1b, that is, whether voters are less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistically called elections. Studies 1 and 2, holding constant everything except the nature of the election (opportunistic or regular), provide the most straightforward tests of this hypothesis. Study 3 complicates this basic design by adding two additional experimental conditions: whether or not the incumbent is a party that the respondent normally supports. This allows us to examine whether the effect of opportunism is robust to partisan bias. Study 4 extends the basic design in a different way: by varying opportunism together with the level of economic performance. This allows us to explore the scope conditions for the strategic use of opportunistic election timing. Taken together, the four studies provide a comprehensive assessment of hypotheses 1a and 1b. We then use studies 2 and 3 to test hypothesis 2a (i.e., that opportunism lowers voter evaluations of incumbent competence and expectations about future performance). Study 3 further allows us to test hypothesis 2b (i.e., that voters consider opportunism as procedurally unfair). Finally, study 4 allows us to directly test hypothesis 1c (i.e., that economic performance dominates election timing in shaping voter support for the incumbent). We begin with a description of study 2 and then outline how the other three studies differ.

7. The Conservative-Liberal coalition government under David Cameron introduced the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act in 2011, which aims to restrict the conditions under which early elections can be called. In 2015 there was little public awareness of the act, which had not yet been tested. Leading politicians were asserting that the restrictions of this act could easily be circumvented.

8. In addition, studies 2–4 gave respondents the option of skipping each item individually.

Study 2 (November 2015) employs a between-subjects design with two experimental subgroups, which are provided with distinct informational vignettes to alter their decision-making context. Following the random assignment of respondents to experimental subgroups, one group is exposed to an opportunistic election treatment, the other serves as the control group. The purpose of the control group is to establish the baseline level of vote intention in the absence of opportunistic election timing. Since our aim is to isolate the effect of opportunism in election timing, we hold constant the information about the state of the economy across both experimental subgroups. The treatments are administered using the following informational vignette, which is explicitly designed to avoid cuing partisan reactions:

The following paragraph describes the economic and political situation in another country that is similar to yours and has a single party government in office. Please read the following information about that government carefully. You will then be asked some questions about it. *Please focus only on the features of the scenario described here in answering the questions that follow.*

Over the past year, the country has come out of recession and the economy is now performing well: the country is experiencing economic growth and the unemployment level is low. [Insert.]

The insert differs for the experimental subgroups in the following way:

Treatment: “Given the strength of the economy, the governing party has decided to dissolve the parliament early and call elections two years ahead of schedule.”

Control: “Parliament’s term has come to an end and regular elections are held this week.”

In this design, the treatment condition conveys incumbent opportunism by establishing the link between the state of the economy and early election timing but still requires respondents to draw their own autonomous inferences about the incumbent’s motivations, as is the case in real-world instances of early election timing.

Posttreatment, respondents first answered a manipulation check question (discussed in OA.3) and then a range of items that we use as outcome variables for testing the hypotheses developed above. In order to minimize consistency bias across items, we presented each question on a separate screen and redisplayed the vignettes together with the ques-

tions.⁹ Specifically, the survey included the following questions (full item wording is available in OA.2).¹⁰

Vote intention (hypotheses 1a and 1b) records whether the information in the vignette would make the respondent more or less likely to vote for the governing party described in the scenario if an election were held tomorrow, with 5 = “much more likely” and 1 = “much less likely.”

Competence evaluation (hypothesis 2a) measures, on a five-point scale, how competent or incompetent a respondent would describe the governing party in the scenario (5 = “very competent”; 1 = “very incompetent”).

Anticipated economic performance (hypothesis 2a) establishes whether respondents would expect economic conditions in the country described above over the next 12 months to be better or worse than in the past year (5 = “much better than in the past year”; 1 = “much worse than in the past year”).

Study 1 (February 2015) differs from study 2 in two respects. First, it employs a two-treatment, between-subjects design distinguishing between elections that are held one year early (treatment 1) and two years early (treatment 2). For the purposes of the analyses presented in this article, we collapse the two treatment groups into one.¹¹ Second, we use vote intention as the only outcome variable (OA.2.2 provides the exact wording of the vignette and question).¹²

9. Minimizing consistency bias is important because in all four studies, the vote choice question testing hypotheses 1a and 1b precedes the outcome measures that are designed to test the mechanisms (hypotheses 2a and 2b). While it might have been desirable for the mechanism tests to include the vote choice question last or omit it altogether, we decided against such a strategy because (a) we cannot credibly claim support for a mechanism without demonstrating, as part of the same study, that the main treatment effect actually holds, and (b) if we probe the mechanism before looking at the main treatment effect, we may prime respondents and induce bias in the vote choice question.

10. We treat “don’t know” responses as missing data. In addition to the questions described below, study 2 includes two questions that extend the analysis presented in this article: a test of a conditional version of the fairness hypothesis and a final question that moves away from the experimental setting and asks respondents to rate the importance to their vote choice of election timing and economic conditions. These extensions are reported below (see nn. 18 and 20; question wording and full results available in OA.4.3 and OA.4.5, respectively).

11. Whenever relevant, we report the results separately for both treatment groups in the footnotes or in the OA. We also conducted a pilot study in November 2014 to pretest the survey instrument using a sample of 148 respondents drawn from the UK online panel of the Centre of Experimental Social Sciences at the University of Oxford. The pilot study provided suggestive evidence that is consistent with the results of our main studies reported here, including the fact that no reliable differences in responses arise from the timing of the election (one or two years early).

12. Similar to study 2 (see n. 10), study 1 asked respondents to rate the importance of election timing and economic conditions to their vote

Study 3 (February 2017) differs from study 2 by including four instead of just two experimental groups. In addition to varying whether the election is opportunistically called, we varied whether the governing party is one that the respondent “would normally support” (see OA.2.3 for the exact wording of the vignette and questions).¹³ The four experimental conditions are (1) regular elections with an incumbent that the respondent supports, (2) opportunistic elections with an incumbent that the respondent supports, (3) regular elections with an incumbent that the respondent does not support, and (4) opportunistic election with an incumbent that the respondent does not support. Study 3 includes the same set of outcome variables as study 2, plus an additional question about the fairness of the elections in order to test hypothesis 2b. Specifically, *Fairness of the election* asks respondents to indicate how fair or unfair they think the election described in the vignette is (a) to voters and (b) to other parties (5 = “very fair”; 1 = “very unfair”).

Study 4 (March 2017), again, differs from study 2 in that it includes four experimental groups: in addition to varying opportunism, study 4 varies the level of economic performance (see OA.2.4 for the exact wording of the vignette and questions). Because calling opportunistic elections under poor economic conditions is not realistic, we focus on the difference between strong and mixed economic performance. As a result, the four experimental conditions in study 4 are (1) regular elections under strong economic performance, (2) opportunistic elections under strong economic performance, (3) regular elections under mixed economic performance, and (4) opportunistic election under mixed economic performance. In terms of outcome measures, study 4 includes the question about vote intention described above.

The experimental group sizes across the four studies were as follows: study 1: 584 (control), 1,188 (treatment); study 2: 842 (control), 836 (treatment); study 3: 535 (control, support incumbent), 538 (treatment, support incumbent), 516 (control, oppose incumbent), 520 (treatment, oppose incumbent); study 4: 567 (control, strong economy), 511 (treatment, strong economy), 524 (control, mixed economy), 516 (treatment, mixed economy). With these experimental group sizes, all studies are highly powered and binary hypothesis tests are sensitive even to small differences. Randomization, balance, and manipulation checks are presented in OA.3 and show that there is balance in covariates, randomization was successful, and the subjects responded to treatment.

choice. This extension is reported in the discussion below (question wording and full results available in OA.4.5).

13. The strength of such a design is simplicity, but the drawback is that it may be too abstracted from an individual’s own partisan identity.

RESULTS

We perform three sets of analyses. First, we are interested in establishing whether opportunistic election timing decreases voter support for the incumbent. Second, we explore the possible mechanisms behind negative voter reactions to opportunism. Finally, we consider the relative importance that voters assign to election timing and economic performance in their vote choice. We will discuss each of these analyses in turn.

Does opportunistic election timing generate negative voter reactions?

To examine our first two hypotheses—whether voters are less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistically scheduled elections (hypothesis 1a) or not (hypothesis 1b)—we focus on vote intention. All analyses presented in this article follow the convention of using difference-of-means tests to measure average treatment effects.¹⁴ We use figures to present the results and report full tables with difference-of-means tests in OA.4. Studies 1 and 2 examine the treatment effect without varying partisanship. Study 3 examines a more realistic setting, differentiating between situations in which the party normally supported by the respondent is in or out of government. Study 4 examines the scope conditions of this treatment effect, by varying the strength of the economic conditions. We begin with an examination of the treatment effects in studies 1–3 (fig. 1) before turning to study 4 and exploring the scope conditions.

The results from the three studies in figure 1 indicate that opportunistic election timing makes it significantly less likely that respondents will vote for the incumbent, as anticipated under hypothesis 1a.¹⁵ As figure 1A indicates, the magnitude of the average treatment effect (ATE) is identical across the three experiments (ATE = -0.21 , $p < .00$, two-tailed) and represents a reduction of 4.2% on our five-point measure of vote intention. Specifically, the average control group (regular elections) response is closest to the response option of being “a little more likely” to vote for the incumbent, given the information in the vignette. Exposure to the opportunistic

14. We report two-tailed tests using Welch’s approximation to account for unequal variances between groups. The results are robust to a Wilcoxon rank sum (Mann-Whitney) test (not reported; Keele, McConaughy, and White 2012). Corroborating ordinary least squares and ordinal logistic regression analyses with experimental treatment as the explanatory variable are available in OA.5.

15. The results are corroborated when the two treatment groups in study 1 are disaggregated: regardless of whether the election is called one or two years early, opportunistic election timing makes voting for the incumbent less likely as hypothesis 1a anticipates (differences of means compared to the control group are -0.29 , $p = .00$, and -0.14 , $p = .03$, respectively).

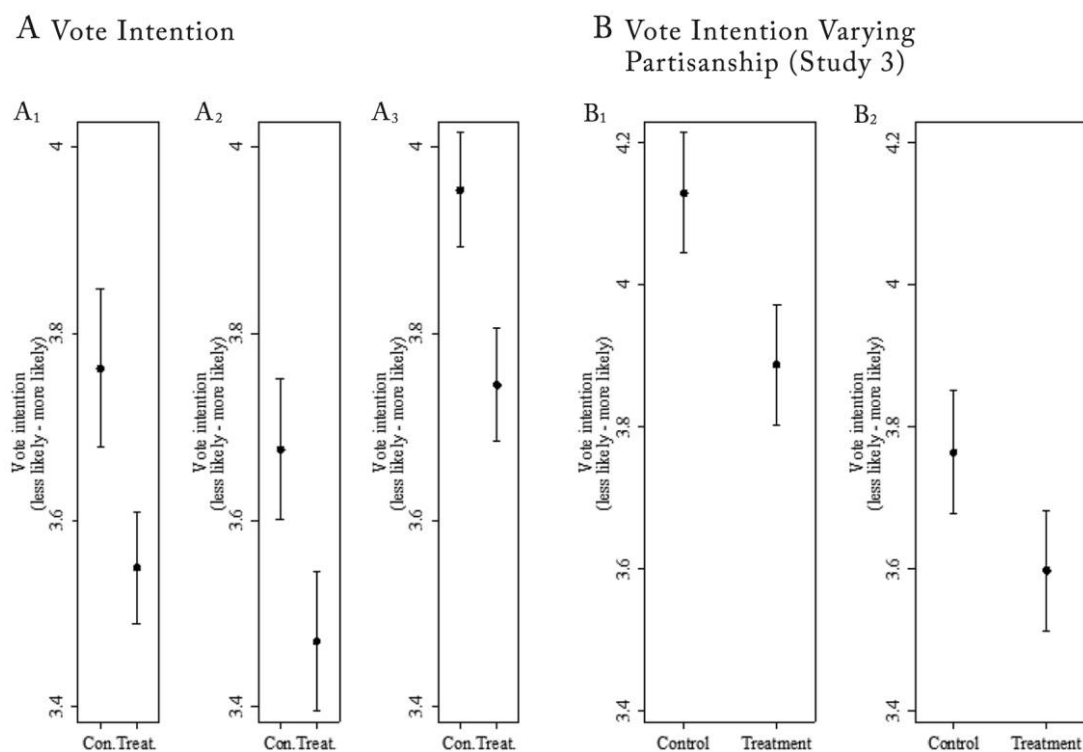


Figure 1. Effect of opportunistic election timing on vote intention, studies 1–3 (A_1 , A_2 , and A_3 , respectively), and varying partisanship, study 3 (preferred party in government, B_1 ; preferred party not in government, B_2). Points represent control (con.) and treatment (treat.) group means; vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Response scale: 5 = much more likely, 4 = a little more likely, 3 = neither more nor less likely, 2 = a little less likely, 1 = much less likely. Results of difference-of-means test available in tables OA.4.1.1 and OA.4.1.2.

election treatment moves the average response in the three studies significantly closer to being “neither more likely nor less likely” to vote for the incumbent.

Study 3 enables us to further disaggregate this treatment effect by government partisanship. Because partisanship is an unavoidable feature of real-world electoral choice, this experiment adds further realism to the choice situation. Figure 1B presents the effect of opportunistic election calling on vote intentions when respondents are told that “a party that you would normally support is in charge of the government” (B_1) and when respondents are informed that “a party that you would normally NOT support is in charge of the government” (B_2 ; difference-of-means tests available in table OA.4.1.2). In both contexts, opportunistic election timing significantly diminishes voter enthusiasm for the government (preferred party in government: ATE = -0.24 , $p < .00$; preferred party not in government: ATE = -0.17 , $p < .00$). Moreover, these analyses suggest that the electoral penalty for opportunistic election calling is greater when the preferred party governs, that is, when respondents are otherwise more inclined to support the incumbent. This indicates that reactions to opportunistic election timing cannot be interpreted as endogenous to the opinion that respondents form of an incumbent on the basis of government partisanship or economic per-

formance. Rather, opportunism appears to disrupt the trust between respondents and their preferred party, which prevents them from interpreting this type of incumbent behavior in a manner that is consistent with their partisan and economic preferences.¹⁶

Study 4 further explores the scope conditions for the strategic use of opportunistic election timing by examining how variations in the strength of the economy affect the incumbent’s ability to benefit. According to the political surfing literature, opportunistic election timing is a strategy available to governments in the context of strong economic performance only. Study 4 tests that assumption with a 2×2 design that examines the effect of opportunistic election calling on vote intentions under incumbents who deliver strong

16. These results are orthogonal to the findings of the sizable literature on motivated reasoning in voter behavior, which regards voter perceptions of economic performance and other objective conditions as endogenous to party preferences (Bartels 2002; Gaines et al. 2007; Taber and Lodge 2006). Our work has interesting implications for this literature because it highlights potential scope conditions for motivated reasoning: when opportunism disrupts trust in the preferred party, it appears to render less effective the “perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell et al. 1960, 133). We leave the exploration of this implication to future research.

economic performance (unemployment at 11 year low; growth better than official projections) and mixed performance (number of people on unemployment benefits has risen; growth, although weak, better than official projections; see OA.2.4 for exact wording).

The results confirm the assumption of the political surfing literature that opportunistic election timing is a strategy available to incumbents in the context of strong economic performance only, when the control and treatment groups are on average “a little more likely” to support the government. In the mixed economy condition, by contrast, the average respondent in the control and treatment groups is indifferent between the government and the opposition (results available in fig. OA.4.1.1 and table OA.4.1.3). These findings clarify the scope conditions for political surfing: incumbents can benefit from opportunistic election timing when a strong economy generates voter support but not when mixed economic conditions leave voters indifferent between the incumbent and the opposition.

Turning to the magnitude of the treatment effects, opportunistic election timing always tends to diminish support for the incumbent, but the effect is sizable and statistically significant in the strong economy condition only ($ATE = -0.16$, $p < .05$). In the mixed economy condition, the treatment effect is substantively small and statistically not significant ($ATE = -0.05$, $p = .424$).¹⁷

In sum, holding economic performance constant at a high level, opportunistic election timing significantly decreases voter enthusiasm for the incumbent and turns some voters against the government who would otherwise have supported it. This decrease is attributable only to opportunistic timing, and it is reliable and robust: it holds equally across all of our studies and obtains whether the election is one or two years early and whether or not the party in government is one that respondents would normally support. This evidence in support of hypothesis 1a simultaneously negates hypothesis 1b: timing elections opportunistically to favorable circumstances is not costless for the incumbent, as hypothesis 1b suggests. Unless mixed economic performance depletes voter enthusiasm to the point where the average voter is indifferent about supporting the government, incumbents must anticipate an electoral penalty for taking advantage of favorable circumstances to time elections for partisan electoral gain.

17. This is consistent with our findings above regarding partisanship: the electoral penalty for incumbent opportunism rises in voter support for the incumbent.

What produces the negative voter reaction?

The evidence that opportunistic election timing reduces voter support for the incumbent raises the question why the electoral punishment occurs. Do the signaling effects of opportunistic election timing cause voters to lower their evaluations of incumbent competence and expectations about future economic performance (hypothesis 2a)? Do voters regard opportunism as procedurally unfair (hypothesis 2b)? In order to test these explanations, we hold economic performance constant at a high level, that is, in the strong economy condition under which incumbents can be expected to benefit from opportunistic election timing.

Studies 2 and 3 test the signaling explanation and examine whether the signaling effect of opportunistic election timing leads voters to downgrade their assessment of the incumbent's competence (*Competence*) and future economic performance (*Anticipated economic performance*). Figure 2 reports the effects of opportunistic election timing on these two outcomes. As anticipated by hypothesis 2a, in both studies opportunistic election timing has a negative impact on the treatment groups' evaluation of incumbent competence compared to the control group (2A; $ATE_{\text{study 2}} = -0.15$, $p = .003$; $ATE_{\text{study 3}} = -0.24$, $p = .000$) and on their assessment of future economic performance (2B; $ATE_{\text{study 2}} = -0.13$, $p = .005$; $ATE_{\text{study 3}} = -0.12$, $p = .005$). These results indicate that voters interpret early election timing as a signal that the incumbent government is less competent and that its economic performance is on a less positive trajectory. The effects are highly reliable and, as above, attributable solely to incumbent opportunism. A disaggregation of the responses in study 3 by government partisanship shows that the adverse effect of opportunistic election timing is, as above, largest and most precisely estimated when voters are otherwise more inclined to support the incumbent, that is, when their preferred party is in government (results available in table OA.4.2.2).

The second mechanism by which election timing may affect voter reactions is the concern about procedural fairness (hypothesis 2b). According to hypothesis 2b, respondents who are exposed to the opportunistic election treatment should perceive the election as less fair than the control group. We rely on study 3 to test this hypothesis.¹⁸ Figure 3 reports the effects of opportunistic election timing on the perceived fairness of the election to voters (fig. 3A) and other parties (fig. 3B).

The results indicate that opportunistic election timing strongly and adversely affects the respondents' perception of the

18. Study 2 includes an extension of this test of the fairness hypothesis. Results are available in OA.4.3.

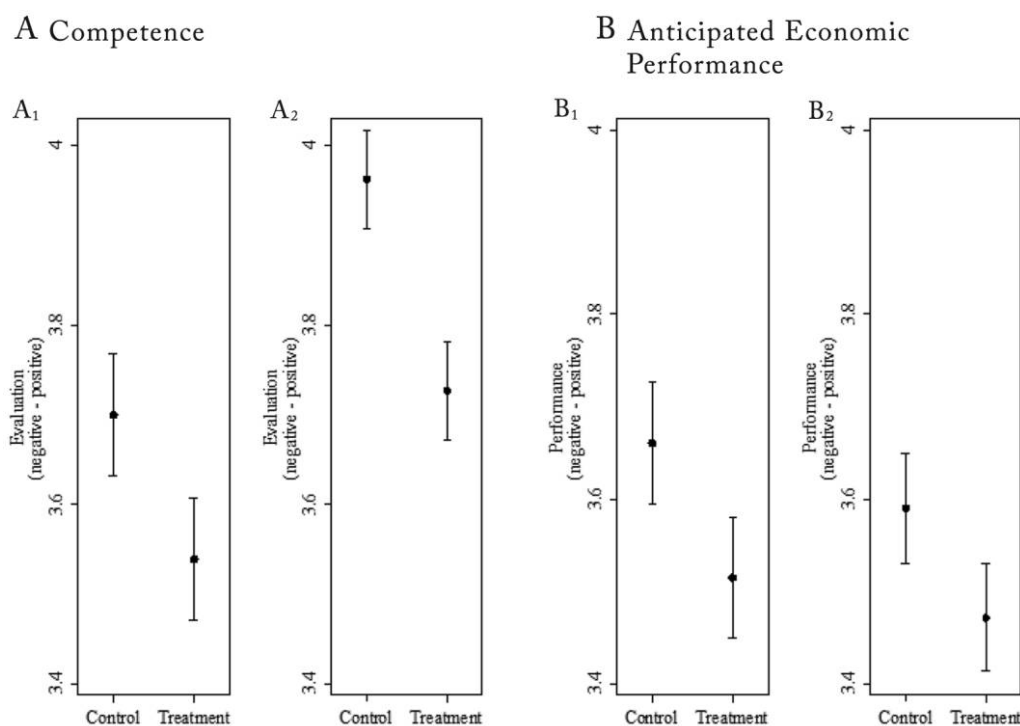


Figure 2. Effect of opportunistic election timing on competence evaluations (A) and expectations of future economic performance (B), studies 2 (A_1 , B_1) and 3 (A_2 , B_2). Points represent control and treatment group means; vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Response scale (competence evaluations, A): 5 = strongly positively, 4 = quite positively, 3 = neither positively nor negatively, 2 = quite negatively, 1 = strongly negatively. Response scale (expected future economic performance, B): 5 = much better than in the past year, 4 = a little better than in the past year, 3 = neither better nor worse than in the past year, 2 = a little worse than in the past year, 1 = much worse than in the past year. Results of difference-of-means test available in table OA.4.2.1.

election's fairness to voters and other parties ($ATE_{\text{voters}} = -0.66$, $p < .000$; $ATE_{\text{parties}} = -0.76$, $p < .000$). Substantively, the treatment turns the average perception of the elections as “quite fair” in the control group into a much less favorable view of the election as “neither fair nor unfair” in the treatment group. Incumbent opportunism, in other words, generates considerable doubt in the treatment group about the fairness of otherwise fully democratic elections. As before, the disaggregation of responses in study 3 by government partisanship shows that the adverse effect of incumbent opportunism is largest when voters are otherwise more inclined to support the incumbent, that is, when their preferred party is in government (results available in table OA.4.2.4).

These results support hypothesis 2b that opportunistic election timing lowers respondents' evaluations of the election's fairness. The effects are large, highly reliable, and attributable solely to incumbent opportunism. They apply to the election's perceived fairness to voters and other political parties and obtain whether or not the respondent's preferred party is in government.

In sum, our analysis of the mechanisms by which opportunistic election timing affects the vote shows that participants clearly perceive the strategic aspect of early election calling. Voters respond negatively not only to the signals con-

cerning incumbent competence and future economic performance, as is consistent with hypothesis 2a, but also to the procedural fairness concerns aroused by the practice, as anticipated by hypothesis 2b. These effects are consistently largest when respondents are otherwise more inclined to support the incumbent, that is, when their preferred party is in government.

How important is election timing relative to economic performance?

While opportunism clearly diminishes support for the incumbent, what is its relative importance in structuring vote choice? Specifically, how does it compare to the importance of economic performance, and does the economy dominate the effects of opportunism in shaping vote choice, as the economic voting and political surfing arguments (hypothesis 1c) imply? We rely on study 4, which simultaneously varies the strength of the economy and the incumbent's use of opportunistic election timing, to address this question. Figure 4 contrasts the effect on vote intentions of varying the incumbent's economic performance from strong to mixed (fig. 4A) with the effect of timing an election opportunistically as opposed to holding it at the regular date (fig. 4B).

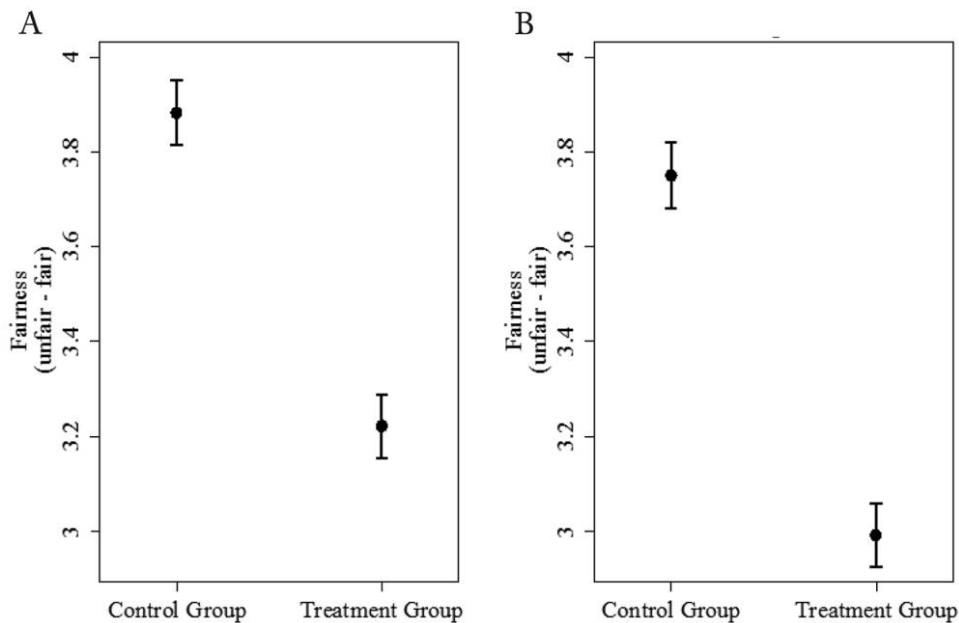


Figure 3. Effect of opportunistic election timing on perceived procedural fairness to voters (A) and other parties (B), study 3. Points represent control and treatment group means; vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Response scale: 5 = very fair, 4 = quite fair, 3 = neither fair nor unfair, 2 = fairly unfair, 1 = very unfair. Results of difference-of-means test available in table OA.4.2.3.

Figure 4 shows that, on average, the effect of a change from strong to mixed economic performance on vote intentions is around six times as large as the effect of changing the timing of an election from regular to opportunistic ($ATE_{\text{economy}} = -0.71, p = .000$; $ATE_{\text{elec.timing}} = -0.12, p = .014$).¹⁹ On a scale from 5 (much more likely to vote for the incumbent) to 1 (much less likely), the effect of the change in economic conditions amounts to a reduction of 14.2% on our measure of vote intention compared to the 2.4% reduction caused by opportunistic election timing. This suggests that economic performance strongly dominates any concern about opportunism in structuring vote choice, as anticipated by hypothesis 1c.²⁰

The relatively high importance that voters assign to current economic conditions and the low importance they assign to election timing might explain why it is still rational for incumbents to engage in opportunism, even despite the costs that we uncovered in our previous analyses. Under the

same economic conditions, the support for the incumbent may be lower in opportunistic elections compared to the regular ones, but if the overall level of support is still high enough to win, opportunism has paid off for the incumbent. A closer look at the results from the earlier analyses suggests exactly this dynamic. Recall from figure 1 that under regular elections an average respondent is “a little more likely” to vote for the incumbent, and under opportunistic elections the average respondent is still positive, although somewhat closer to being “neither more nor less likely” to vote for the incumbent. Therefore, while relative to regular elections opportunistic election timing reduces the support for the incumbent, when the economy is performing well (which is by definition the case under opportunistic elections) it does not change the average voter disposition from pro- to anti-incumbent; that is, the overall support for the incumbent remains positive despite opportunism.

We draw a similar conclusion when looking at the evaluations of incumbent competence and future economic performance and the procedural fairness of the election (see figs. 2 and 3). The average score on these three variables for the treated groups is always on the positive side of the scale or at its midpoint. The averages represent values between “quite positive” and “neither positive nor negative” on respondents’ evaluation of incumbent competence, between “a little better than in the past year” and “neither better nor worse than in the past year” on future economic performance, and between “quite fair” and “neither fair nor unfair” on procedural fair-

19. Recall that we find a somewhat larger treatment effect of opportunistic election timing in studies 1–3 ($ATE = -0.21$; see fig. 1). Caution has to be applied in comparing effects, which stem from different experiments. Nonetheless, even these larger effects in studies 1–3 amount to no more than a fraction (less than a third) of the effect of a change in economic conditions in study 4.

20. Studies 1 and 2 corroborate this experimental finding with observational evidence from a survey question that asks respondents to rate the importance of election timing and economic conditions to their vote choice (results available in OA.4.5).

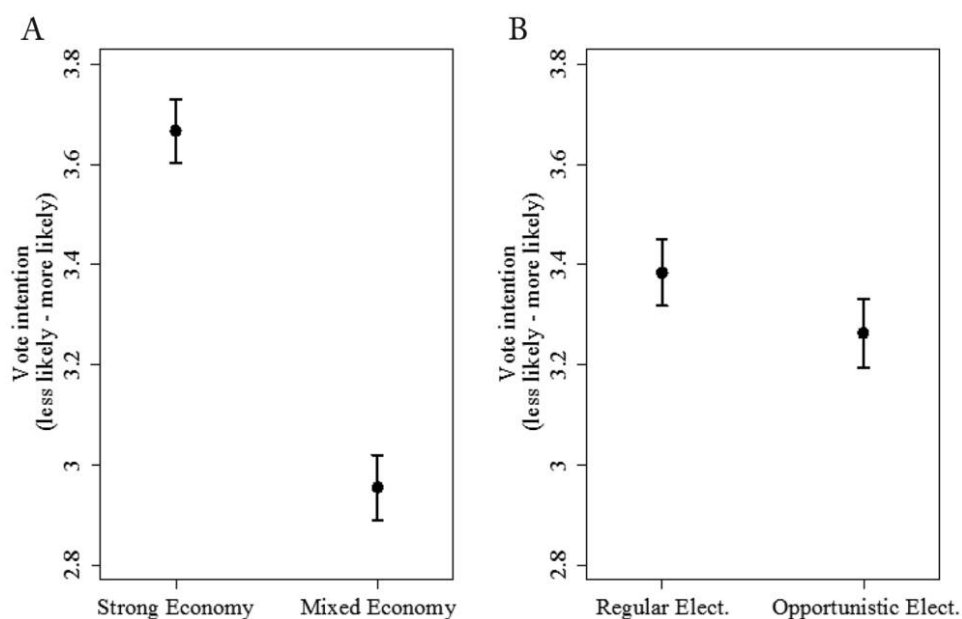


Figure 4. Effect of economic variation (A) and election timing (B) on vote intention, study 4. Points represent control and treatment group means; vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Response scale: 5 = much more likely, 4 = a little more likely, 3 = neither more nor less likely, 2 = a little less likely, 1 = much less likely. Results of difference-of-means test available in table OA.4.4.1.

ness. That is, while in the presence of opportunism voters evaluate incumbent performance and the fairness of the election less positively than in the absence of opportunism, on average, these evaluations still remain positive or neutral rather than becoming negative.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, while opportunism lowers the level of voter support for the incumbent, incumbent competence evaluations, and perceived electoral fairness, in the context of high economic performance, this decline does not turn the average voter against the incumbent. The presence or absence of opportunism does not alter the underlying positive predisposition that voters have toward an incumbent who delivers high economic performance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our study is the first to adjudicate between the competing expectations generated by the literature on opportunistic election timing about (a) the overall electoral effects of government opportunism and (b) the mechanisms by which voters respond to this strategy. Because governments frequently behave opportunistically, the question of how voters respond to opportunism is central to a better understanding of electoral accountability.

To summarize, our results paint the following picture of voter reactions to opportunism. We find that, other things equal, voters are significantly less likely to support the incumbent in opportunistically timed elections than in regular

ones. This decreased support emerges because opportunistic elections lower voter evaluations of incumbent competence and expected future economic performance and give rise to concerns over procedural fairness. Yet despite the decreased support, in the context of high economic performance (i.e., when opportunistic elections are called), an average voter is still more likely to support than oppose the incumbent. We also find that voters assign significantly higher importance to economic performance than to election timing in their vote choice. Jointly, these findings suggest an answer to the question why incumbents still engage in opportunism despite the cost: because of its low importance to voters, opportunistic election timing may lower the overall support for the incumbent, but it is unlikely to reverse the underlying positive predisposition of voters to vote for the incumbent who has delivered good economic performance.

These results are reliable and robust. The findings hold across four studies, which are conducted across a two-year time frame, in different political contexts, using slightly different question wording and experimental groups. By identifying the effect of opportunism net of all other influences, our study provides a baseline result on which future work can build. Interesting extensions of our research might, for instance, examine whether a government's coalition status, the strength of the opposition, or media framing of the government's election timing choice moderates voter reactions. While these questions merit investigation, they exceed the scope of the current study.

Beyond constituting an important contribution to the literature on opportunistic election timing, our findings have implications for several additional literatures. First, they lay the foundation for work on voter reactions to other types of government opportunism. For studies of economic manipulation (political business cycles), targeted spending (partisan engineering), and gerrymandering, our results suggest that voters are likely to perceive such opportunism and respond to it.²¹ This implies that incumbent opportunism in general is likely to entail complex strategic interactions between governments and the electorate. At the same time, though, voters may not attribute as much importance to opportunistic interventions as to retrospective performance. As a result, these opportunistic strategies may represent clever tools for incumbents to generate an electoral advantage.

For the literature on democratic electoral accountability, our findings are somewhat unsettling. Our main result is that while voters perceive opportunism and respond to it, they tend to treat it as a secondary concern. It is precisely this nature of voter reactions that allows governments to behave opportunistically and to draw partisan benefit from doing so. Voter reactions alone, then, cannot be expected to curb government opportunism. This highlights the need for political reforms to tackle opportunism and underlines the relevance of our findings in the context of ongoing debates about such reforms. As noted earlier, reforms of election timing are currently debated in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, and gerrymandering is a frequent target of reform proposals in the United States. In sum, this article is rich in implications not just for the study of opportunistic election timing but also for scholars working in a series of related fields and for practitioners engaged in political reform debates.

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21. A further question is how voters weigh the relative merits of different types of opportunism with which they may be confronted. For instance, opportunistic election timing can be combined with or traded off against economic manipulation (Chowdhury 1993; Kayser 2005). Voter responses may shape the attractiveness of these different options to politicians.

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