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Early Election Calling and Satisfaction with Democracy

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Abstract: Many countries have constitutional rules, granted to prime ministers, presidents, or cabinets, that govern early parliamentary dissolution. Although there are sharply divergent theoretical expectations about the consequences of such powers for both democratic representation and accountability, there have been no empirical examinations of these arguments. Using data from the European Social Survey (2002-2016) in 26 European countries, we test whether such provisions for early election calling affect citizens' satisfaction with democracy, and if so, which rules and how. While it appears that no form of constitutional rules for early election is directly related to citizen satisfaction with democracy, when early elections are called by prime ministers or presidents, democratic satisfaction drops significantly and this effect is more pronounced the later in the term the early election is called. These findings have important implications for academic and policy debates about the desirability of constitutional change designed to limit early election calling for opportunistic purposes.

Keywords: *Constitutional Rules, Parliamentary Early Elections, Satisfaction with Democracy*

Introduction

In representative democracies, competitive elections provide the most important instruments for citizens to select public officials that share their views. Elections are also the central opportunity citizens can use to hold their rulers accountable for their performance in office (Fearon: 1999: Powell 2004). Although, *when* citizens have access to these instruments varies across parliamentary and semi-presidential democracies. In such regimes, the timing of assembly elections is typically flexible rather than fixed. For example, in Europe's democracies, forty percent of elections are called early before the constitutionally mandated end of the parliamentary term (Schleiter and Tavits 2016: 841).

It is now well established that constitutional rules regulate the ease with which such early elections can be called. Early elections are more common when prime ministers and cabinets have constitutional discretion to call early elections (Strom and Swindle 2002: 587-588, Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009: 506-507). In these cases, prime ministers can choose to time elections so that voters' ballots are cast in conditions favorable to incumbent re-election (Chowdhury 1993, Ito 1990; Ito and Park 1988; Kayser 2005, 2006; Palmer and Whitten 2000). Carefully timing these elections enables incumbents to increase their parties' vote and seat share enhancing the likelihood they will retain the post of prime minister (Schleiter and Tavits 2016: 847). Presidents in parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes, if granted powers to call early elections, may also influence electoral timing to shape the electoral success of prime-ministerial incumbents to which they are allied (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2018) . However, as Schleiter and Tavit point out, "an incumbent's ability to control election timing can fundamentally affect the outcomes of democratic accountability...Because the economic and political environment influences vote choice, political leaders can affect how voters vote by controlling when they vote....opportunistically timed elections allow leaders to better secure their desired outcomes" (2016: 848). If citizens' abilities to use elections to secure

representation and accountability are moderated by constitutional rules that permit prime ministers, cabinets and presidents to call early elections this has an implication for the quality of democracy.

In the light of ongoing policy debates and contrasting practices in the constitutional rules that regulate the dissolution of parliament, we ask what does the degree of executive control over the timing of pre-term parliamentary elections called mean for citizens' subjective satisfaction with democracy? We first identify the divergent theoretical arguments in the literature about the way that constitutional rules governing early parliamentary dissolution may shape citizen experience and thus evaluations of democracy. One view implies that constraining the ability of prime ministers to call early elections should increase satisfaction with democracy, as opportunistic early election calling appears as a means for politicians to evade accountability. Another view suggests that constraining early elections decreases executive performance, making governments on average more unstable and less able to pass and sustain their policy agendas (Laver 2006: 124-5, Cheibub and Przeworski 1999: 236, Hellwig and Samuels 2008: 70-71) in turn reducing citizen democratic satisfaction. Either view would have implications for the impact of actual early election calling in the short term on democratic satisfaction as it sends a signal to the electorate about incumbent quality (Smith 2004).

Second, using data from Rounds 1 to 8 of the European Social Survey (2002-2016) in 26 European countries, we test whether such provisions for early election calling affect citizens' satisfaction with democracy, and if so, which ones and how. We find first that no evidence that the mere presence of constitutional rules for early election calling are directly related to citizen satisfaction with democracy. However, when early elections are called by prime ministers or presidents, democratic satisfaction drops significantly. This effect is pronounced the closer the early election is called to a regularly scheduled parliamentary election. These findings take the

study of the constitutional rules governing early election calling beyond a focus on the political processes they generate to consider their implications for citizens' attitudes towards democracy.

Changes in individuals' levels of satisfaction with the performance of democratic institutions has been a crucial indicator of national health (Anderson 2005; Claassen 2019) and has served as a key metric for democratic socialization in countries undergoing democratization (Rose and Mishler 1994; Evans and Whitefield 1995; Rohrschneider 1999). Specific to the cases under investigation here, individuals' satisfaction with democracy is not inconsequential in the current political and economic climate. The drive for Catalanian independence, Brexit, the rise of soft dictators in Eastern Europe, the migration question, regional autonomy movements, the rise of both extreme and new parties, and terrorism represent only the most visible contemporary and concurrent events that directly challenge nation states and the endurance of the European Union project. A project clearly legitimized only by the sufficient and continued popular support of its citizens (Loveless and Rohrschneider 2011).

Constitutional Rules, Early Elections and Accountability

Over the last twenty years, political scientists have established the central role that the constitutional rules governing early election calling play in democratic governance, identifying the effects of these institutional rules on key democratic processes: These include the timing of elections (Smith, 2004, Strom and Swindle 2005, Kayser 2005), the making and breaking of governments (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009), incumbent electoral success (Schleiter and Tavits 2016), the economic consequences of early election calling (Smith 2004) and the ability of the executive to achieve their legislative and public policy goals (Becher and Christiansen 2015). Thus, in the context of such observed effects, it is not unreasonable to expect meaningful differences in how citizens view these changes in governance processes when incumbents can

call elections freely compared with those in which they cannot. Yet, despite clear implications in the literature about the way that citizens' experience and thus evaluate the performance of democracy, there is a gap in our empirical knowledge in how the differences in the early elections capabilities potentially impact citizens' attitudes towards democracy.

A parallel gap in the literature on citizen satisfaction with democracy has also emerged. This has emphasized that citizen experience of democracy is mediated by institutions (Rohrschneider 1999, 2005; Aarts and Thomassen; 2008; Anderson and Guillory 1997). The main set of institutions that this literature has focused upon are electoral and party systems as well as government capacity to respond to citizen demands (Wagner *et al.* 2009), primarily because of effects these institutions are thought to have on citizen's experience of representation and accountability. If as Goplerud and Schleiter argue 'the political consequences of constitutional powers to call early elections... may be comparable with those of electoral rules' because they 'condition electoral accountability, incumbency advantages, governments, and policy' (Goplerud and Schleiter 2016: 428) this motivates a similar investigation into how constitutional rules shape citizen perceptions of the quality their democracy experiences. A natural question arising for the democratic satisfaction literature is therefore do parliamentary dissolution powers shape citizen satisfaction with democracy? In the next section of the paper, we ask whether these constitutional differences in the rules governing early election calling have the potential to shape citizens' evaluations democratic quality. And if so, how?

Constitutional Rules and Citizens' Perceptions of Democratic Quality

Below we develop theoretical arguments about the link between the rules governing early election calling and citizens' evaluation of democratic quality. To develop the theoretical links between constitutional rules governing early election calling and citizen satisfaction with

democracy we build on two sets of work with different focuses. The first set of work we discuss considers the systematic effects of rules governing early elections and their effects on democratic governance with implications for democratic quality. This set of literature identifies long term effect of the rules early election might have on individual democratic satisfaction across polities with different constitutional rules. The second set of literature focuses on the short term meaning and impact of calling early elections on citizens' incumbent evaluations which may have implications for individual evaluations of democratic performance at the time when early elections are called.

We start our discussion with the literature that focuses on the macro-effects of different constitutional rules on democratic performance and accountability. This literature's key insight is that that differences in the constitutional rules governing early elections promote different patterns of election calling and government termination. These patterns result from incentives and constraints that these rules provide to politicians and have consequences for the quality of democratic government. Extending these arguments to the individual level implies that these consequences have the potential to shape different experiences of democracy which shape individual orientations towards government (Rohrschneider 1999, 2005; Aarts and Thomassen; 2008; Anderson and Guillory 1997). The question that arises though is how precisely should these patterns of governance generated by different constitutional rules shape these experiences? There are contrasting logics implicit in the literature and we develop these into competing testable hypotheses in the discussion that follows.

The first argument we develop focuses on the possible accountability gap generated by constitutional rules granting prime ministers, cabinets' and presidents discretion to call early elections. The ability to call early elections at a time that suits them creates the opportunity and incentive for prime ministers to dissolve parliament when they are likely to win and for presidents to time parliamentary elections when their allies may do well. Smith's (2004)

important theoretical work highlights how incumbents have incentives to call early elections when they expected a downturn in policy performance and wish to bank current levels of support in expectation of electoral support declining in future periods. The empirical literature documents that that this is often a successful strategy. Incumbents receive an electoral bonus in votes, seats and the increased probability in prime ministerial survival in office as a result of carefully timing an election (Schleiter and Tavits 2016). The implication is that constitutional rules that permit the governments to call early elections will be used to increase incumbents' ability to secure advantageous electoral outcomes and as a result weaken the accountability link between politicians and citizens. This means, '[b]ecause leaders who can control election timing do not need to face the voters at fixed times...such incumbents may be able to affect how voters vote by controlling when they vote...and thereby affect (and sometimes distort, accountability)' (Schleiter and Tavits 2016: 837). Smith (2004) for instance finds, in the case of the UK, economic performance declines after early elections, something that incumbents who win elections have avoided taking responsibility for by calling early elections. Extending the implications of this argument to the democratic experience of citizens suggests that the more that constitutions permit early and opportunistic election calling the more likely that incumbent's evasion of electoral accountability would decrease satisfaction with democracy by those anticipating the opportunity to penalize them in the subsequent election. This leads to the first expectation that we test in this paper.

***H1:** Citizens will express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy in countries with constitutional rules that permit prime ministers, president, or cabinets to dissolve parliament compared with citizens of countries in which constitutional rules that constrain the early dissolution of parliament.*

The second argument we develop in contrast emphasizes that granting the prime minister or the cabinet the power to call early elections enhances the quality of democratic government.

These arguments can be traced as far back as Bagehot (1867) who noted both the power of the rule to facilitate the passage of legislation and government to attend to public opinion (Bagehot: 1867/2001: 16 and 163-179). In more recent work, Laver (2008) has argued that endogenous election timing, controlled by the executive, facilitates democratic responsiveness to changing (i.e.: more favorable) public opinion, which has an impact on policy making. This is because the power to threaten to call early elections gives the executive significant bargaining advantages in negotiations with the legislature ‘when the government is riding high in the polls and the parliamentary opposition fears an election, then the government's legislative business managers can adopt a “make my day” approach, staking the future of the administration on (quite possibly more extreme) legislative proposals’ (Laver 2006:124-125). Becher and Christiansen (2015) provide support to this argument, demonstrating the conditions that shape the capacity of prime ministers to use threat of early elections to extract policy concessions from parliament depends on their electoral popularity.

If granting early election calling powers to incumbents increases policy performance and government responsiveness constraining early election calling may erode these attributes. Scholars of parliamentary government suggest that political maneuvering in the assembly in the post-election period weakens the connection between governments and voters (Chieub and Prezworksi 1999; Mershson 2002; Maravall 2010). Restricting early election calling insulates politicians in parliament from the immediate threat of an election. In between elections the legislature has discretion to select and remove cabinets and less need to be immediately responsive to the concerns of the electorate as they do so: ‘Elites may co-ordinate with one another in ways that voters and theorists alike find troubling...The spectacle of newly elected office holders switching parties can undermine voter confidence and the links that ensure democratic responsiveness’ (Powell 2004: 98-99).

Cheibub and Przeworski (1999) chart nearly half of heads of government leave office without voters being asked to vote on their performance. They note that inter-party disputes end almost two thirds of all prime ministers' careers during the parliamentary term rather than at election time (Cheibub and Przeworski 1999: 236). Maravall argues it is precisely these kind of non-electoral government terminations that mean 'that coalitions can limit the democratic accountability of governments.' (Maravall 2010:98 see also Hellwig and Samuels 2007: 70-71). It is these replacement governments that will be more likely under constrained dissolution (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009).

The argument is that constrained dissolution increases the capacity of members of parliament to overturn cabinets because members of the legislature do not face the immediate threat of pre-term dissolution. As it is easier for governments to be removed in the inter-election term the less likely that governments can be held accountable at election time for their actions taken earlier in the term. This in turn reduces the incentive that elections provide to govern in the interests of the electorate increasing the chance that these rules will reduce the quality of democratic government. Thus, the effect of constitutional rules that constrain early election on increasing the rate of non-electoral replacements government calling may cause citizens to negatively evaluate their experience of democracy. In contrast governments can be expected to be more responsive and policy effective when prime ministers and cabinets have discretion about when to dissolve the parliament which should improve perceptions of democratic quality at the individual level compared with constrained dissolution. This leads us to our second hypotheses.

H2: Citizens will express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy under constitutional rules that constrain the early dissolution of parliament compared to citizens of countries that permit prime ministers, presidents, or cabinets to dissolve parliament.

Thus, we have two competing arguments which are the direct inverse of each other about the effect of constitutional rules governing early election calling on citizen satisfaction with democracy.

A second set of literature enables us to develop insights that enable us to theorize about differences in the effect of calling early elections on citizen evaluations of incumbent performance with implications for democratic quality at the time early elections are called. Whereas the previous discussion focused on expected differences between average levels of democratic satisfaction between countries with different constitutional rules here we consider the short run effects of early election calling compared to regular elections in countries with permissive early election calling rules (prime ministerial initiated, presidentially controlled or agreed by the cabinet).

This literature starts from the observation that the act of calling early elections sends a signal to voters about incumbent quality (Smith 2004) and this signal is negative. Smith argues that governments call early elections in economic good times because they anticipate a future decline in economic performance. Importantly the earlier the election is called in this argument the stronger the signal of negative outcomes. This negative signal causes citizens to update their perception of government performance, leading to a decline in incumbent electoral support. A range of evidence supports this argument. Smith (2004) provides evidence at the aggregate level in the UK that when early elections are called early incumbents lose support over the course of the campaign, though they usually win. Blais et al. 2004 Daoust and Pélouin-Skulski (2020) both provide individual observational evidence from Canada a portion of voters punish incumbents more when elections are called early. Schleiter and Tavits (2018) provide individual-level survey-experimental evidence that when incumbents call early elections that are perceived as an opportunistic unfair use of their powers then voter support for incumbents declines. They find that though voter concerns about electoral opportunism do

have some electoral costs for incumbents, concerns about ‘economic performance strongly dominates any concern about opportunism in structuring vote choice’ (Schleiter and Tavits, 2018:1193). This means we can expect that opportunistic elections calling to be a successful strategy for incumbents; yet it may not be a strategy that makes, at least some, voters happy with the quality of democracy. Calling elections opportunistically then in this view can heighten voter perceptions of procedural unfairness leading perceptions of democratic quality to decline.

This literature focuses entirely on the case of opportunistic early elections defined as elections procedurally triggered by incumbents to maximize chances of re-election, but early elections can also result from governance failure. Parliamentary dissolutions can be triggered either by opposition action (such as a no confidence vote) or by the government calling early election in response to governance failures such as ‘loss of support for the government’s legislative program, loss of parliamentary confidence, withdraw of a coalition partner, resignation of the PM, or the imminent occurrence of any of these events’ (Schleiter and Tavits: 842). Though voter responses to these types of early elections are comparatively understudied, it is reasonable to expect that voters can also expect to become more democratically dissatisfied when elections are early compared with regular elections. In addition, we can expect this dissatisfaction to be more prevalent when it is individual figures such as prime ministers or presidents are responsible for these decisions as they will be seen to be acting in a more partisan way or associated more clearly with governance failure.

Finally, we can draw on Smith’s arguments that the negative signal about incumbent expectations of future performance is stronger the earlier elections are called relative to expectations. ‘If elections are announced out of the blue – when other factors predict and election to be unlikely - then the timing decision indicates that the leader anticipates a drastic decline in future performance. Voters can use this new information to reassess their evaluation

of the government' (Smith 2004:5). If we assume that such out of the blue early elections, signaling poor incumbent quality are more likely earlier in the parliamentary term then we might expect these elections to be related to lower levels of democratic satisfaction. These considerations lead to our final hypotheses.

H3: Citizens will express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy when early elections are called compared with regular elections.

H4: Citizens will express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy when early elections are called by Presidents and Prime Ministers compared with both regular elections as well as early election called by cabinets.

H5: Citizens will express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy when early elections are called by Presidents and Prime Ministers particularly for those called farther away from regularly scheduled parliamentary elections.

This completes our theoretical discussion that identified our expectations for how constitutional rules governing early election calling may shape democratic satisfaction across polities in different ways and suggesting democratic satisfaction will decline specifically after early elections, called by prime ministers and presidents, and those called earlier in the parliamentary term.

Data, Measurement and Methods

In order to test the theory as set out in this paper, we use every wave of the European Social Survey from 2002-2016 (Rounds 1-8). This allows us to control for the theorized determinants of satisfaction with democracy at the individual-level. We merged these data with information on constitutional rules on early election calling, including when early elections were called. Using the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al. 2018), we identify the winners and

losers of each election and include a control variable for the effective number of parties. We additionally include yearly data from the World Bank for GDP per capita growth, unemployment, and inflation, as well as the Gini Index of income inequality (Solt 2019). We included an additive variable for government performance from the World Governance Indicators. Finally, we added an age of democracy (from 2016) and dummy variables for both semi-presidentialism and post-Communism. A full description of all variables and measurements can be found in the online appendix.

For the dependent variable – satisfaction with democracy – we use the survey question, ‘And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?’ (Anderson 2005). For the sample used here: range 0-10; mean: 5.59; std. dev.: 2.41; $N=161,694$. Citizens’ satisfaction with democracy is an important measure of national-level democracy. While some have argued that citizens’ satisfaction with democracy problematically takes on several facets of the relationship between citizens and government (Linde and Ekman 2003; also Canache et al. 2001), Anderson (2005) emphasizes how citizens’ orientations to and subsequent evaluations of their (own) democracy must correspond to what they consider to be ‘democratic’ (Easton 1975). This includes, in Eastonian language, both diffuse (what an object is or represents) and specific (what a system produces) support. The former is the generic and positive orientation to the democratic process (i.e. ‘I like democracy’), whereas specific support is an ‘experiential’, performance assessment (i.e. ‘I like my democracy’). Both are meaningful and very often correlated and, as Anderson points out, ‘the object of a citizen’s support does not have to be—and probably cannot be—reliably separated in terms of the system and the system’s outputs’ (2005, 4; emphasis ours). Thus, our use of ‘...citizens’ own assessments of their democracy as a measuring rod’ (Powell 2004:102) is appropriate as an assessment of the performance of democracy.

Our main (independent) variable of interest requires us to code constitutions with respect to the degree that they permit or constraining early parliamentary dissolution and the main actors that have some say over this decision. To measure the constitutional rules governing early election calling we follow we follow Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2009) typology¹ which classifies countries according to the extent that the constitutionally dominant actor in early election calling is either the prime minister, the cabinet, the president - or early election calling is constrained. It is important to point out that parliamentary dissolutions are part of constitutions general chosen when counties democratize and supermajority requirements nearly make these rules extremely difficult to change (the UK is an exception). It is therefore reasonable to regard these rules as exogenously determined.

<<TABLE 1 about here>>

Table 1 provides an overview of the countries in our sample and the rules under which they are governed. In Tables 2a and 2b we also provide descriptive information about the relationship of these rules to patterns of government early election calling and cabinet termination.² In the data that we use early elections are counted purely in terms of the number of days before constitutional mandated elections are expected to be held. These elections vary between 40 to 1253 days before the month in which next election could expect to be scheduled according to the constitutional requirements that limit the parliaments term. Median early election fall 12.1 month before next regular election could expect to be scheduled (mean: 14.2; sd=11.5). Opportunistic elections are coded as such when ‘they are (i) triggered by the incumbent government and (ii) there is evidence of opportunism by the incumbent, defined as

¹ An alternative coding scheme would be to use the Goplerud and Schleiter (2016) index of parliamentary power, which provides finer grained measure of each individuals’ actors constitutional influence over the dissolution of parliament than our theory specifics and does not provide a measure of constrained dissolution.

² Data sources for Tables 2a and 2b are Schleiter & Morgan-Jones (2009) augmented using Andersson, Bergman, and Ersson (2012), The European Representative Democracy Data Archive (www.erdda.se); Keesings; and the EJPR Political Data Yearbook.

capitalizing on public opinion support, strong performance of the government, or opposition weakness (unpopularity, divisions, leaderlessness)' Schleiter and Tavits (2016:840).

Note that both early elections and opportunistic elections³ are as anticipated much more frequent under constitutional rules where prime ministers can time elections and non-electoral replacements much less frequent (columns 4 and 5 in Table 2a). The table also displays data demonstrating that when early election calling is constrained both early elections and opportunistic elections are much lower and also the rate of non-electoral replacement is much higher (compare results along columns 3 and 4, Table 2b). These data serve to confirm that there is a potential link between the constitutional rules and patterns of early election calling.

<<Table 2a 2b about here>>

The standard model for individuals' satisfaction with democracy is a multi-level model with both individual- and macro-level variables playing important roles in determining individual satisfaction levels. To address the wide range of control variables that the existing literature identifies as significant correlates of democratic satisfaction we include measures for the following concepts. For 'experiences with democratic institutions' (Rohrschneider 1999, 2005), we use an additive indicator of the number of 'democratic activities' including saying 'yes' to contacting a politician or government official last 12 months; working in political party or action group last 12 months; working in another organization or association last 12 months; wearing or displaying campaign badge/sticker last 12 months; signing petitions last 12 months; or taking part in lawful public demonstration last 12 months (N=6; alpha: 0.630). For 'outputs of democratic institutions' such as its capacity for managing both the national economy and its effects on personal economic conditions (Lewis-Beck 1986; also Finkel, Muller, and Seligson 1989; Listhaug and Wiberg 1995; Anderson 1998; Wagner et al. 2009); and 'the problem-

³ These data cover patterns of government early elections and cabinet termination from 1945 or the first democratic election held in a country.

solving capabilities of democracy’ (Sarsfield and Echegaray 2005, 169), we use the question, ‘On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in [country]?’⁴

For ‘winners and losers’ (Anderson and Guillory 1997; see also Blais and Gélinau 2007; Singh et al., 2012), we matched individuals’ most recent vote with current party composition in government (Comparative Political Data Set). Winners are those who voted for parties in the governing coalition, losers were those who voted but not for winning parties. We also keep with the literature by including ‘ideological’ winners (also referred to as ‘quasi-winners’). These are voters who did not vote for a winning party but have ideological proximity to the current government. Matching these provides some ideological congruence between voters and current government composition as well as policy positions (Kim 2009). Individuals’ self-reported ideological positions were grouped into 3 categories (0-3: Left; 4-6: Center; 7-10: Right) and matched them to CPDS ‘Government Position: ‘Hegemony of left parties’ & ‘Dominance of left parties’; ‘Balance of power between left and right’; and ‘Dominance of right/center parties’ & ‘Hegemony of right/center parties’.

We include measures for consensual vs. majoritarian systems; age of democracy; political institutions’ capabilities; as well as dummies for both post-Communism and semi-presidentialism. For the perception of ‘representativeness’ in consensual systems and ‘accountability’ in majoritarian systems (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Aarts and Thomassen 2008), according to the theory, the proportionality of the electoral system should effect the

⁴ We found no satisfactory measure in the ESS for individuals’ normative or ideological attachments to democracy as a *system of governance* (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Seligson 2002). Several proxies were tried and ultimately excluded as the final results were substantively indifferent to their inclusion. We also originally included ‘trust in democratic institutions’ (Zmerli and Newton 2008) using an additive trust variable from questions about two key political institutions, namely, parliament and parties: ‘how much do you trust: ... [country]’s parliament? [and] ... political parties?’ (N=2, alpha= 0.810). However, these variables are missing from ESS Round 1. Their inclusion had no effect on the substantive output and are excluded so that we can include all 8 rounds of the ESS.

identifiability and representative of governments and therefore perceptions of representation and accountability that feed into satisfaction with democracy. As a measure of the variation between consensual vs. majoritarian systems, we include a measure of the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979).

To account for cross-national variation, we include determinants of variation in satisfaction with democracy at the macro-level model. The model is a random intercept/fixed slope model. Individual-level variation is fixed across countries (i.e.: slopes are not allowed to vary across countries) but country means are allowed to vary cross-nationally by the included macro-level variables. We do not consider the case in which macro-level variation may shape cross-national variation of individual-level variables as there is no theoretical impetus at this stage to do so. The variables specifically theorized to impact SWD are included in Level-1.

Results

The central research question is whether provisions for early election calling affect citizens' satisfaction with democracy, and if so, which rules and how. Thus, we must answer two questions: one, does having constitutional rules for early elections change individuals' satisfaction with democracy, and if so, are any particular types implicated? And two, is having such rules sufficient or do they need to be used to affect satisfaction levels?

<<Table 3 about here>>

In Table 3, we can see the results of our analysis (regression coefficients and t-scores). Model 1 includes on the key variables of interest, namely, the constitutional rules for early election calling by type and the actual calling of election by type. Model 2 presents a model without these variables and the standard model of satisfaction with democracy including both individual- and macro-level determinants from the literature. Model 3 re-introduces the constitutional rules for early election calling by type to the fully specified standard model. This

allows us to test both Hypothesis 1 and 2 derived from unresolved questions in the literature about the role of early election rule and legitimacy.

We find evidence that citizens in countries in which there are constitutional rules for early election calling by cabinets appear to have lower levels of satisfaction than citizens of countries that constrain such dissolution (confidence level 95%). Both countries with constitutional rules by prime ministers and presidents do not have different levels than countries that constrain such dissolution. Neither finding provides definitive support for either hypothesis.

In Model 4, we introduce whether an early election was called by any time. The presence of constitutional provision for early election does not continue to shape satisfaction level. While called early elections undifferentiated by constitutional rules do appear to lower satisfaction levels. This is strong support for Hypothesis 3.

Further delineating across type (Model 5), we find lower satisfaction levels are driven primarily by Prime Ministers and Presidents' actual early election calling. As theorized above, this may have to do with the 'one above all' appearance of a singular person – in the form of Prime Minister and President - calling early elections. This offers strong support for Hypothesis 4.

To understand the substantive impact of these variables, we can exploit the fact that the marginal effect of dummy variables are the same as the regression coefficients for dummy variables. Thus, the amount by which satisfaction levels drop on the satisfaction with democracy scale or 0-10; the levels drop -0.385 for Prime Ministers calling elections and -0.298 for Presidents calling elections. These results are significant at 99.9% and 95% confidence, respectively.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 5, Model 6 includes an interaction on the months early that each type of constitutional rule country called early elections. The interaction makes clear that while there continues to be a negative and statistically significant effect of prime minister and

presidential actual early election calling, the time between when this early election is called and the scheduled parliamentary election shapes the intensity of this. In Figure 1, a graphical representation of the interaction between early elections called by prime ministers and president and the time between the early and scheduled elections. In contrast to our expectation of Hypothesis 5, we find that the closer the early election is called in relation to the scheduled one the lower satisfaction with democracy becomes. This is particularly evident for prime ministerial called early elections, less than one year away from the regularly scheduled elections.

Satisfaction with the performance of the economy, having voted for the winning party, greater age, education, and income all positively correlated with individuals' satisfaction levels (De Vries and Giger 2014). The negative democratic experiences effect a surprising but not unprecedented finding (Singh *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, we can see that both greater inflation and unemployment are correlated with increasing satisfaction. This is not an uncommon finding (Singh *et al.*, 2012; Ansolabehere *et al.* 2014) but one that lacks an explanation. We also find, consistent with the literature, that post-Communist countries tend to have lower aggregate satisfaction levels.

The results of the model are robust to different model specifications. We estimated the model using a country*year dummy sometimes found in this, and similar, literatures. However, given the large number of theoretically demonstrated macro-level variables the final model was hard to compare given the issue of collinearity and cases dropped by the estimating software. Likewise, substituting the set of important macro-level variables with a series of dummy variables is not theoretically tenable. We re-estimated the final model with an interaction on the winner/loser variable with no substantive change to the final model.⁵ We re-estimated the

⁵ There was a small positive effect that is only just statistically significant on Presidential constitutional rules for early election calling (not the actual calling by the president). In an analysis with more than 160,000 observations, we are reluctant to include the test of this interaction for this

final model dropping each country to check for the over-reliance on the performance of a single country and there are no obvious issues. We re-estimated the final model replacing the effective number of parties with type of electoral system. We additionally found no meaningful difference by using dummies for both single-member, simple plurality system and modified proportional representation, with proportional representation systems as the reference category. Finally, tests of multi-collinearity indicate insubstantial variance inflation. We also treated satisfaction with democracy, the dependent variable with the range 0-10, as an ordinal dependent variable. The results are unchanged and available from the authors.

Conclusions

There are two central findings. Firstly, constitutional rules that permit or constrain governments from calling early election calling do not correlate significantly with democratic satisfaction. Some voices in this debate have pointed to the potential for opportunism and the evasion of accountability that may result from permitting early and opportunistic election calling others have worried about the governance failures and the potential for parliamentary games rather than the electorate to shape government composition that constraining early election calling can bring. Yet, in terms of potential effects of early election calling on subjective perceptions of the quality of governance, the evidence provided here does not provide a case for the advantages of one or other configuration of early election calling constitutional rules.

This paper's second key finding is that when incumbent prime ministers and presidents call early elections, we find a subsequent and statistically significant decrease in democratic satisfaction in the period after the election is called. This finding is consistent with the

marginal significance (versus the vastly more substantial statistical significance of the other findings). Given that we have seen here that such rules are unlikely candidates to explain this difference in satisfaction levels, the small statistical and substantive significance the limited space to drill down on this finding, we leave this for future research to engage and address.

literature that suggests early election calling does send a negative signal about incumbent quality even though incumbents may benefit electorally from calling early elections. This lowered satisfaction is more pronounced the closer to regularly scheduled parliamentary elections the early elections are called. This finding ran counter to the expectation that the earlier the term elections are called the worse democratic satisfaction might be. We speculate here that early elections held relatively late in the term may heighten dissatisfaction as it appears to be not just a strategic or opportunistic maneuver, but a successful one. Smith (2004) finds for UK data, that incumbents are more likely to lose the earlier in the term they call early elections, whereas they are more likely to win early elections called later in the term. Schleiter and Tavits (2018) suggest that voters are still likely to vote for governments even if they are perceived as opportunistic. If it is the case that prime ministers or presidents calling early elections late in the term are perceived as opportunistic, but win elections nevertheless, this might, we speculate, explain our finding of a higher level of democratic dissatisfaction for early elections later in the term. Voters can observe incumbents violating procedural fairness but nevertheless winning. Teasing this issue out is something that we leave to future research.

While this analysis provides both initial empirical evidence and an open agenda to explore whether calling early elections has any effect at all on voters' perceptions of democratic quality, there are several additional and promising areas for future research. As mentioned above, further attention could be given to unilateral presidential control of parliamentary dissolution for citizen satisfaction for which there are few but potentially informative empirical cases. Another potential avenue for future research can draw on the larger empirical literature on the gap in satisfaction in democracy between 'winners' and 'losers'. Early elections, by abruptly re-arranging who are the 'winners' and 'losers', may offer sufficiently radical change of contexts to probe the impact of how changes in electoral fortune affect the differential 'winning'/'losing' effect on voters' satisfaction levels (although see Loveless 2020; Nemčok

and Wass 2020). Third, more attention can be given to the testing potential causal mechanisms in addition to the identification of the presence of such relationships. Our initial theorizing on the calling of early election by Prime Ministers and Presidents suggest something akin to an anti-democratic ‘one above all’ dimension. That is, in contrast to cabinets, early elections called by Prime Ministers and Presidents could be perceived as either one person at the very border of democratic practice, straining democratic norms or as acting in a too overtly self-interested partisan matter. Such perceptions or change in perceptions by voters require deeper investigation. Finally, at the broadest level, given the relatively limited set of cases to investigate this process, finding means to extend the range of countries and time periods examined and more deeply interrogate the hypothesized mechanisms behind these patterns would advance this budding literature.

In any case, this is a debate that has had – and continues to have - real world consequences for on-going academic and policy debate about the consequences of constraining or permitting incumbents to call early elections. While the first democratic parliamentary constitutions transferred the power to dissolve the parliament from the monarch to the prime minister or cabinet, over time nearly all constitutional designers have sought to limit executive discretion (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009: 497): The constitutions of newer parliamentary and semi-presidential republics either restrict when early election can be called to particular contingencies, (such as repeated failures to invest a new government after a vote of no confidence), which require multiple veto players to consent before early elections can be called, or exclusively grant the power to call early elections to a directly or indirectly elected president. A desire to limit the potential prime ministerial opportunism when calling early elections motivate calls to restrict the prime minister’s discretion to call early elections in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Roy and Alcantara 2012). In the UK, such calls led to constitutional change: The ‘Fixed Term Parliament Act 2011’ now limits the prime minister’s ability to call

early elections in the UK to periods of government formation failure or to occasions when two-thirds of MPs can agree to the dissolution of parliament. Though at the time of writing in 2021 the government is proposing to overturn this legislation and once again give the prime minister in effect sole discretion to call early elections.

Taken together all these findings complement and extend our existing understanding of the effects of the constitutional regulation of early election calling on democratic processes, by identifying their effects not just on key political processes such as elections, cabinet termination and policy making, but also on citizen attitudes. The evidence provided here suggest that the use of these rules can shape of democratic satisfaction in the short term and can be at least as important as some of the institutional and economic factors that that the literature has already identified.

TABLE 1: Countries and Constitutional Rules

Prime Ministerial Dissolution	Cabinet/Majority Dissolution	Presidential Unilateral Dissolution	Constrained Dissolution
Denmark Finland (from 1991) Ireland Spain United Kingdom	Austria Belgium Greece (from 1986) Hungary Luxemburg The Netherlands	France Iceland Italy Portugal	Bulgaria Czech Republic Germany Estonia Latvia Lithuania Moldova Poland Romania Russia Slovakia Slovenia Ukraine

Table 2a: Constitutional Rules and Early Elections					
Constitutional Rules					
Prime Minister Power to Initiate Parliamentary Dissolution	Frequency Regular Election	Frequency Early Election	Frequency of Opportunistic Elections	Early Elections as a Proportion of all elections	Opportunistic Elections as a proportion of all Elections
Denmark	2	20	10	0.91	0.45
Ireland	2	17	8	0.89	0.42
Spain	3	6	3	0.67	0.33
UK	3	12	10	0.80	0.67
Finland since 1991	5	0	0	0.00	0.00
Total	15	55	31	0.79	0.44
Cabinet or Parliamentary Majority Timing					
Austria	9	5	2	0.36	0.14
Belgium	8	12	2	0.60	0.10
Hungary	5	0	0	0.00	0.00
The Netherlands	9	8	3	0.47	0.18
Sweden	18	1	0	0.05	0.00
Total	49	26	7	0.53	0.09
President Timing					
France	9	5	0	0.36	0.00

Portugal	5	8	0	0.62	0.00
Total	14	13	0	0.48	0.00
Constrained Dissolution					
Bulgaria	3	2	0	0.40	0.00
Estonia	4	0	0	0.00	0.00
Germany	13	3	2	0.19	0.13
Poland	4	2	0	0.33	0.00
Slovakia	3	3	0	0.50	0.00
Slovenia	5	1	0	0.17	0.00
Total	29	11	2	0.28	0.05

Table 2b: Constitutional Rules and Discretionary Government Terminations				
Constitutional Rules				
Prime Minister Power to Initiate Parliamentary Dissolution	Frequency Early Election	Frequency Non-Electoral Replacements	Early Elections as a Proportion of all Discretionary Government Terminations.	Non-Electoral Replacements as a Proportion of all Discretionary Government Terminations
Denmark	20	4	0.83	0.17
Ireland	17	4	0.81	0.19
Spain	6	1	0.86	0.14
UK	12	4	0.75	0.25
Finland since 1991	0	4	0.00	1.00
Total	55	17	0.76	0.24
Cabinet or Parliamentary Majority Timing				
Austria	5	5	0.50	0.50
Belgium	12	16	0.43	0.57
Hungary	0	3	0.00	1.00
The Netherlands	8	5	0.62	0.38
Sweden	1	4	0.20	0.80
Total	26	33	0.44	0.56
President Timing				
France	5	10	0.33	0.67
Portugal	8	3	0.73	0.27
Total	13	13	0.50	0.50

Constrained Dissolution				
Bulgaria	2	3	0.40	0.60
Estonia	0	7	0.00	1.00
Germany	3	12	0.20	0.80
Poland	2	9	0.18	0.82
Slovakia	3	2	0.60	0.40
Slovenia	1	5	0.17	0.83
Total	11	38	0.22	0.78

TABLE 3: Satisfaction with Democracy & Constitutional Rules for Early Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Satisfaction w Democracy						
Prime Minister	1.084*		0.0334	0.116	0.129	0.102
	(1.98)		(0.11)	(0.45)	(0.50)	(0.38)
Cabinet	0.581		-0.453*	-0.283	-0.281	-0.292
	(1.23)		(-2.17)	(-1.31)	(-1.25)	(-1.30)
President	-0.106		-0.276	-0.306	-0.320	-0.352
	(-0.20)		(-0.93)	(-1.22)	(-1.23)	(-1.29)
Early Election Called				-0.354***		
				(-4.67)		
Early Election Called: <i>Prime Minister</i>	-0.713				-0.385***	-0.726***
	(-1.76)				(-3.96)	(-4.67)
Early Election Called: <i>President</i>	-0.808***				-0.298*	-0.409***
	(-6.88)				(-2.53)	(-3.53)
Early Election Called: <i>Cabinet</i>	-0.324				-0.318	-0.150
	(-1.45)				(-1.67)	(-0.51)
Months Early						-0.00727
						(-1.89)
Early Elec. Called: PM*Months Early						0.0422**
						(2.77)
Early Elec. Called: Pres*Months Early						0.0390**
						(2.81)
Early Elec. Called: Cab*Months Early						-0.000470
						(-0.04)
<i>Micro-level variables</i>						
Satisfaction w Econ		0.477***	0.477***	0.476***	0.477***	0.477***
		(34.51)	(34.50)	(34.26)	(34.33)	(34.29)

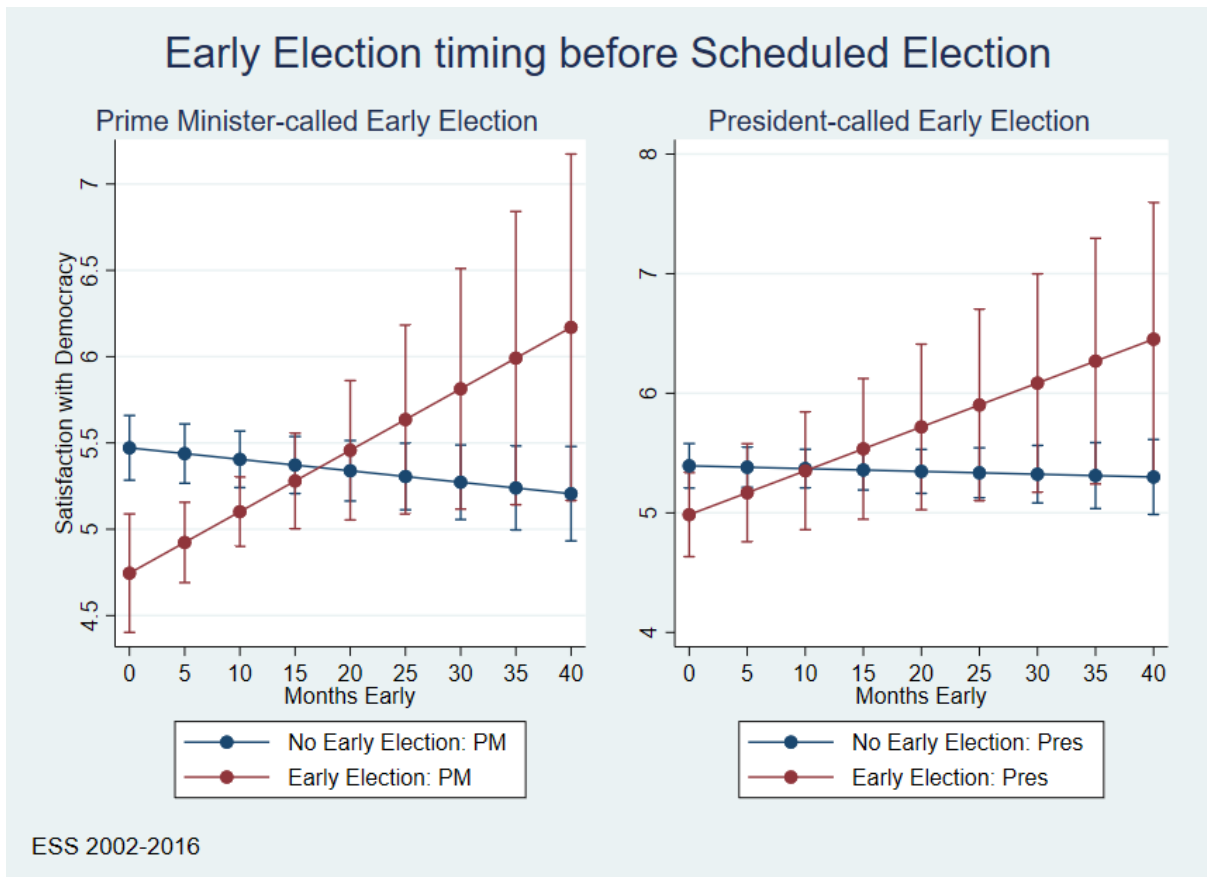
Experience w Dem	-0.0350** (-2.68)	-0.0350** (-2.69)	-0.0317* (-2.57)	-0.0314* (-2.56)	-0.0316** (-2.58)
Voted for Winner	0.523*** (7.98)	0.523*** (7.98)	0.523*** (8.03)	0.523*** (8.06)	0.521*** (8.09)
Quasi-/Ideological Winners	0.0469	0.0468	0.0538	0.0540	0.0485
	(0.57)	(0.57)	(0.62)	(0.62)	(0.55)
Male	0.0299 (1.33)	0.0299 (1.33)	0.0306 (1.40)	0.0306 (1.40)	0.0304 (1.40)
R's Age	0.00302* (2.29)	0.00302* (2.29)	0.00290* (2.32)	0.00289* (2.32)	0.00291* (2.31)
R's Education Level	0.0678*** (5.77)	0.0677*** (5.76)	0.0595*** (5.28)	0.0583*** (5.03)	0.0594*** (5.26)
R's HH Income	0.0436*** (4.46)	0.0436*** (4.46)	0.0466*** (5.00)	0.0470*** (5.28)	0.0471*** (5.38)
<i>Macro-level variables</i>					
Age of Democracy in 2016	-0.00250 (-1.01)	-0.00366 (-1.41)	-0.00223 (-0.85)	-0.00216 (-0.82)	-0.00212 (-0.87)
GDP per capita growth	-0.0494 (-1.68)	-0.0495 (-1.68)	-0.0544 (-1.87)	-0.0545 (-1.88)	-0.0511 (-1.78)
GINI	-0.152* (-2.55)	-0.151* (-2.54)	-0.0921 (-1.92)	-0.0862 (-1.60)	-0.0892 (-1.71)
Inflation	0.0977** (2.93)	0.0977** (2.93)	0.0776** (2.69)	0.0764** (2.60)	0.0664* (2.21)
Unemployment	0.0167 (1.24)	0.0165 (1.24)	0.0184 (1.78)	0.0187 (1.82)	0.0249* (2.20)
Government Performance Index	-0.0151 (-0.12)	-0.0170 (-0.14)	-0.00834 (-0.08)	0.0000406 (0.00)	-0.00989 (-0.08)
Post-Communist country	-0.944** (-3.25)	-1.144*** (-4.32)	-1.075*** (-4.64)	-1.049*** (-4.67)	-1.062*** (-4.64)
Eff No. of Parties: L/T 2006	-0.0119 (-0.26)	-0.0119 (-0.26)	-0.0133 (-0.30)	-0.0109 (-0.24)	-0.0201 (-0.43)

Semi-Presidential		-0.221 (-0.99)	-0.252 (-1.26)	-0.184 (-1.19)	-0.183 (-1.22)	-0.243 (-1.54)
Year of Survey		0.000226 (0.02)	0.000155 (0.02)	-0.00834 (-1.13)	-0.00906 (-1.14)	-0.00654 (-0.77)
Constant	5.096^{***}	6.680 (0.35)	7.124 (0.37)	22.35 (1.49)	23.57 (1.48)	18.66 (1.10)
Var(SWD)	-0.0286 (-0.22)	-0.733^{***} (-4.89)	-0.820^{***} (-4.78)	-1.046^{***} (-6.86)	-1.070^{***} (-7.14)	-1.073^{***} (-6.89)
Var(Intercept)	0.831^{***} (47.30)	0.696^{***} (46.31)	0.696^{***} (46.32)	0.695^{***} (45.96)	0.695^{***} (45.93)	0.694^{***} (45.91)
Observations	161694	161694	161694	161694	161694	161694
Wald Chi-2	5162.89	11530.57	12996.13	43823.34	34126.60	.
prob.	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	.

t statistics in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: *European Social Surveys 2002-2016*

Figure 1: Early Election timing before Scheduled Election



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