

Negotiating under Political Uncertainty: National Elections and the Dynamics of International Co-operation

MAREIKE KLEINE AND CLEMENT MINAUDIER*

This article explores if (and how) national elections affect the chances of concluding an international agreement. Drawing on a literature about the informational efficiency of elections, it examines how political uncertainty in the run-up to an election impacts the dynamics of international negotiations. Using the case of decision making in the European Union (EU), it finds that (1) pending national elections significantly reduce the chances of reaching an agreement at the international level (2) this effect is strongest during close elections with uncertain outcomes and (3) the effect is particularly pronounced in the case of elections in larger member states. The findings highlight the fruitfulness of further research on the dynamics between national and international politics. The article has positive and normative implications for the literature on two-level games, international negotiations and legislative bargaining in the EU.

Keywords: elections; international negotiations; political uncertainty; ambiguity; two-level games; legislative bargaining; EU politics

Just ahead of the 2013 elections to the German Bundestag, the Irish presidency of the European Union (EU) Council of Ministers postponed the negotiation of new emission limits for cars only to adopt them soon after the re-election of Chancellor Merkel. According to the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, this decision, amongst others, resulted from a ‘systematic slowdown’ of EU negotiations as a consequence of the German federal elections.¹ Similar stories exist in other contexts as well. In the United States, presidential elections are said to have stalled progress in international peace talks and trade negotiations, while congressional midterm elections may have led to the postponement of important international climate deals.²

Do these anecdotes reflect a general phenomenon? Are the chances of reaching an international agreement significantly lower during national election campaigns? In view of the paramount importance of pending elections to the dynamics of national politics, as described in the comparative politics literature,³ there is surprisingly little theory and evidence of this phenomenon with respect to international politics. Whilst the relevance of domestic variables for international politics is hardly disputed, scholars predominantly look at national elections as static factors to explore, for example, the effect of different electoral systems on foreign policy preferences or the impact of leadership turnover on co-operation outcomes. The questions of if (and how) *pending* national elections impact the dynamics of international politics have yet to be answered.

* European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science (email: m.o.kleine@lse.ac.uk); Department of Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science (email: c.minaudier@lse.ac.uk). This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J500070/1]. Data replication sets are available at <http://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/BJPoIS> and online appendices are available at <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1017/S000712341600051X>

¹ *Der Spiegel* 2013.

² Goldenberg 2014.

³ Franzese 2002.

Judging from the studies (reviewed below) that exist on this topic, the causal effect of pending national elections on international politics is ambiguous at best. Following the logic of political budget cycle models, some scholars argue that elections create incentives for governments to advance international agreements that will allow them to appear competent to voters, and postpone agreements expected to have the opposite effect. Studies following the logic of two-level games suggest that incumbents have conflicting incentives to advance or stall international negotiations depending on the election's expected impact on their international bargaining power. Both models remain indeterminate insofar as a government's incentives to advance or postpone a decision depend on a variety of scope conditions. They are incomplete in that neither model explains the conditions under which the government's negotiating partners would allow the deliberations to be manipulated.

Although insightful, we suspect that a focus on voter preferences and the impending election outcome obfuscates a more systematic, and potentially more important, aspect of national elections. It is the defining feature of democracies as 'systems of organized uncertainty' that, at the point that parties announce their programs, nobody can know for sure whether or not there will be a change in leadership and policy.⁴ We conjecture that this political uncertainty, which we approximate with the closeness of an electoral race, impacts international negotiations by creating incentives for the incumbent to remain ambiguous even on seemingly innocuous topics. Negotiations get bogged down as growing political uncertainty makes incumbents increasingly unwilling to take a clear stance at the international level that might contradict their electoral stance at home. Given that large states tend to be more essential for the conclusion of most international agreements, we further conjecture that this effect is stronger in the case of elections in large states than in small states.

We explore these conjectures using the case of decision making in the EU. The EU is an ideal laboratory for our purpose. As a permanent negotiation forum, it produces a constant stream of independent decisions, which allows us to discern the effects of national elections on the dynamics of international negotiations statistically. At the core of this article is a survival analysis of more than 14,000 proposals for EU legislative acts that were introduced in the period 1976–2006. On the basis of these data, we evaluate the relationship between pending national elections and the chances of concluding a negotiation at the EU level. We find that the chances of reaching an agreement are significantly reduced when a national election is pending, and that this effect is especially pronounced in the case of close elections in large member states.

Our focus on EU politics has other significant advantages as well as some drawbacks. Because the dynamics of EU decision making are well scrutinized in international politics, this case permits us to control for a host of factors that have proved relevant in previous research, and to exclude confidently alternative explanations that would be more plausible in less formalized negotiation contexts. This last point, however, also limits the generalizability of some of our results. For example, given that the vast majority of EU legislative proposals do become law at some point, the inferences we draw are about the chances of concluding international agreements during a national election compared to a period of time with no elections, and are not about the chances of reaching an international agreement *per se*. More specifically, our dependent variable is the hazard of adoption, that is, the probability of a legislative proposal being adopted after a given number of days, conditional on it not having been adopted before.

⁴ Przeworski 1991, 13. This does not mean that candidates and voters are not aware of the probabilities of winning, but that they do not know if they *will* win or lose.

The conclusion discusses the generalizability of our results and potential avenues for future research in more detail. On a general level, we hope to demonstrate the fruitfulness of an important research agenda on the intersection of national and international politics. This study joins a nascent literature on the *dynamic* aspects of this interaction, focusing on its time-variant characteristics. With a specific focus on pending elections, it seeks to open the black box of domestic politics further in order to unpack the various ways in which national democratic politics affects international relations.

In substantive terms, a systematic decrease in the chances of adoption suggests a systematic slowdown in co-operation and, consequently, opportunity costs in the form of foregone economic growth or a delayed provision of international public goods. Our findings indicate that the magnitude of the effect of close national elections is, under certain conditions, greater than the effect of the formal decision rule (majority voting versus unanimity), which has featured prominently in previous studies. This suggests that carefully timing international negotiations outside of national election cycles could be as important for co-operation to succeed as is the setting in which these negotiations take place. At the same time, a better understanding of how international decisions respond to national elections also promises to advance normative debates about the legitimacy of international institutions and their responsiveness to national democratic politics.

The article begins with a review of the literature on the relationship between pending national elections and international politics. It subsequently proposes how political uncertainty during national elections can systematically affect the dynamics of international negotiations. Using a survival analysis of EU decision making, we then evaluate whether or not close elections reduce the chances of arriving at a decision at the international level. The conclusion discusses the implications of our findings, their generalizability and potential avenues for further research.

PENDING NATIONAL ELECTIONS AND THE DYNAMICS OF INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS IN THE LITERATURE

There is hardly any disagreement in the field of international relations about the importance of domestic factors for international politics. However, the majority of studies on the role of national elections for international politics are static in the sense that they probe the effect of time-invariant variables, such as different electoral systems.⁵ The nascent literature that adopts a more dynamic approach typically focuses on voter preferences and the domestic change that elections are expected to bring about.⁶ In this regard, we make a broad distinction between studies following models of political budget cycles and studies based on the logic of two-level bargaining. As we shall see, both models remain largely indeterminate, and therefore fail to render clear predictions about the chances of reaching international agreements during elections.

⁵ Grossman and Helpman 2005; Rickard 2010; Rogowski and Kayser 2002.

⁶ More dynamic approaches include studies on the relationship between the mobilization of domestic interests and the onset of trade disputes during election years (Chaudoin 2014; Pervez 2015). Other studies look at how regime type affects the stability of international commitments and the onset of trade disputes in response to changes in domestic coalitions and leadership turnover (see, e.g., Leeds, Mattes and Vogel 2009; Rosendorff and Smith 2015). Our study differs from this literature in at least three respects. First, we are more interested in the uncertainty surrounding elections than in the changes they are expected to bring about. Secondly, we are interested in the chances of entering commitments during election time, as opposed to keeping commitments. Thirdly, our focus is on different types of democratic elections (close races versus non-close races), not elections or regime types *per se*.

The literature on political budget cycles assumes that as elections approach, politicians become increasingly concerned about appearing competent to voters.⁷ On election day, however, voters have only limited information at hand to evaluate the incumbent's performance. The incumbent uses this temporary information advantage to manipulate easily observable performance indicators, such as taxes and government spending, in order to enhance her chances of re-election.⁸ The result is political budget cycles that distort government spending toward high visibility and popular projects. By implication, governments are said to be more likely to take less popular decisions in the period right after an election.⁹ Politicians with less discretion over easily manipulable economic variables have been found to time elections in such a way as to take advantage of high levels of political support during good economic times.¹⁰

The logic of the political budget cycle model potentially pertains to electorally salient international issues as well, although surprisingly few studies adopt such a dynamic approach compared to the wealth of theory and evidence in comparative politics. Applying the political budget cycle model to Latin American exchange rate regimes, Frieden, Ghezzi and Stein find that governments shy away from undertaking corrective but potentially unpopular devaluations right before national elections.¹¹ Similarly, Stone shows that governments facing elections prefer to wait until after election day to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to avoid electoral accountability for the short-term pain of reforms.¹²

A second way in which upcoming national elections potentially affect the dynamics of international negotiations is through their effect on the incumbent's bargaining power. As Putnam points out in his work on two-level games, constraints on what a government can reasonably be expected to push through at home (win-set) may strengthen its bargaining power at the international level.¹³ This implies that if a pending international agreement is deeply unpopular at home, a government facing re-election should gain in bargaining power compared to a situation in which the election takes place further in the future. Rickard and Caraway find supporting evidence for this proposition, showing that IMF loans negotiated with democratic countries facing imminent elections are less likely to contain stringent labor conditions than those negotiated with democratic governments facing elections further in the future.¹⁴ This can be expected to create incentives for incumbents to time international decisions carefully in order to maximize their international bargaining power. They accelerate decisions on issues that appear to be unpopular at home in order to exploit their boost in bargaining power during election time, and they postpone more popular decisions in order to avoid having to negotiate with diminished bargaining power.¹⁵

The two models of political budget cycles and two-level bargaining suggest two diametrical ways in which pending elections create incentives for incumbents to manipulate the timing of an international agreement. However, both models remain indeterminate insofar as the

⁷ Nordhaus 1975, 184.

⁸ Rogoff 1990, 24; Rogoff and Sibert 1988, 6.

⁹ Beckmann and Godfrey 2007. Cf. Martin 2004. A similar effect exists in federal systems (Seemann 2008, 263).

¹⁰ Kayser 2005, 23; Kayser 2006, 447.

¹¹ Frieden, Ghezzi and Stein 2000, 32–3. Similarly, Stein and Streb 2004, 133–4.

¹² Stone 2008, 607.

¹³ Putnam 1988, 440.

¹⁴ Rickard and Caraway 2014, 707, 710.

¹⁵ Putnam 1988, 452. Rickard and Caraway (2014, 712) find no evidence for strategic timing in the case of the IMF.

government's incentive to either postpone or advance an issue in both models depends on additional variables, such as the issue's electoral salience and its popularity among voters and the actors that make up the domestic win-set. Moreover, incentives alone cannot determine the timing of a decision, since the conclusion of international negotiations also depends on the government's interaction with its negotiating partners.

Under what conditions would negotiating governments alter the timing of an international agreement when one of them faces re-election? We can identify two types of arguments in the literature. The first and less systematic type of argument looks at the precise constellation of preferences at the national and international levels. It stands to reason that a negotiating partner who shares the preferences of the government facing election would support the timing of a decision that increases the incumbent's bargaining power. The same partner would seek a decision before election day when she suspects that a change in government will lead to a policy stance further from hers.¹⁶ Given that international agreements are ultimately collective decisions, the precise timing of their conclusion would therefore depend on a host of contingent factors, including the precise constellation of preferences at the national and international levels, as well as the decision rule and the governments' relative bargaining power. Consequently, this type of argument fails to generate clear predictions about how an incumbent's preference for a specific timing might translate into variation in the chances of concluding an international agreement during election time.

The second argument is more systematic and considers repeated rather than one-shot negotiations. Studying EU budget negotiations, Schneider shows that member governments undergoing election campaigns receive a disproportionate share of transfers compared to governments in normal (non-election) periods. She argues that this is because EU governments help each other appear competent to their national electorates with the expectation that the favor will be reciprocated when they come up for re-election.¹⁷ The same reciprocal logic can be expected to apply to an incumbent's preferences for a specific timing. The theory would predict that all governments facing elections are granted special discretion regarding the precise timing of an international decision.

In summary, the literature on the relationship between pending national elections and the chances of reaching an international agreement can be divided into classes of theories that either (1) seek to explain the incumbent's incentive to conclude an international agreement at a specific time (political budget cycle and two-level bargaining models) or (2) explain why the negotiating partners go along with the manipulation of the timing of a decision. They remain indeterminate insofar as the incentives to postpone or accelerate a decision depend on a host of scope conditions: both models about the incumbent's incentives presume that the issue is electorally salient, and the precise direction of the proposed effect depends on the popularity of the issue at home. Neither model explains how these incentives translate into variation in the chances of reaching an agreement in interaction with international partners. Judging from the state of the literature, the causal link between pending elections and the chances of reaching an international agreement therefore remains ambiguous.

The following section takes a step back from these models, which are based on tangible voter reactions and expected domestic changes in response to the election. Instead, we focus on a more fundamental aspect of democratic elections – the political uncertainty they induce in the period before election day. Our objective is to offer a more direct and systematic link between elections and international co-operation.

¹⁶ Hawkins et al. 2006, 19–20; Moravcsik 2000, 225–9.

¹⁷ Schneider 2013, 471.

POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY AND THE DYNAMICS OF INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS

At their core, competitive elections create some positive probability that the incumbent will be voted out of office.¹⁸ In the following we argue that this political uncertainty, which we approximate with the closeness of an electoral race, systematically limits the chances of reaching an international agreement. Specifically, we suggest that close national elections create incentives for incumbents to remain ambiguous on a wide range of issues out of fear that their decision at the international level might contradict their electoral stance at the domestic level. This ambiguity, under certain circumstances, inhibits progress in international negotiations.¹⁹

Ideally, competitive elections serve to reveal information about the candidates' policy positions in order to allow voters to make an informed decision. In reality, as Downs observed, candidates often 'becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity'.²⁰ In a seminal contribution, Shepsle models this ambiguity as a lottery over a range of positions instead of a single point on a policy dimension. He shows formally that candidates may, under certain conditions, have an incentive to obfuscate their true positions.²¹ In the extreme case of ambiguity, a range of positions over the entire policy spectrum is equivalent to candidates taking no position at all. One might object that voters see through this strategy and are consequently repelled by it. However, a survey experiment by Tomz and Van Houweling finds that ambiguity does not repel – and may even attract – voters.²²

We assume that candidates face a trade-off between taking a position that maximizes their chances of getting re-elected and one that more closely matches their privately known true policy preference.²³ This trade-off may take various forms: the incumbent may be torn between the catch-all position of her party and the interests of her own constituency, or caught between the interests of the median voter and those of an important interest group. If voters knew the candidate's true position, they would not believe her pre-electoral policy announcements and she would be locked into a losing position.²⁴ Alesina and Cukierman model the consequences of this dilemma for the informational efficiency of electoral politics.²⁵ They demonstrate that incumbents facing this trade-off will tend to choose an ambiguous compromise between the ideal and the challenger's position in order to obscure their true preferences and thus avoid being locked into a position that weakens their chances of re-election.²⁶

This domestic electoral dynamic is the backdrop of international negotiations. An incumbent engaged in an international negotiation will seek to avoid signals that might counteract her electoral stance in the national election. For the sake of simplicity, we assume that agreeing to an international decision forces the incumbent to adopt a clear stance that is observable to everyone. As we shall see, this assumption is fully plausible in the case of the EU, where there

¹⁸ On political uncertainty as a defining feature of democracies, see, e.g., Przeworski (1991, 13), Roemer (2001, 38). On political uncertainty in the EU, see Kleine (2013).

¹⁹ We thank Jeff Frieden for a fruitful discussion of this idea.

²⁰ Downs 1957, 136.

²¹ Shepsle 1972, 565–7. See also, e.g., Glazer 1990, 240; Meirowitz 2005, 110.

²² Tomz and Van Houweling 2009, 94. Similarly, Box-Steffensmeier, Arnold and Zorn 1997.

²³ Alesina and Cukierman 1990, 831. By assuming that candidates are torn by different motivations at the same time, Alesina and Cukierman build on a wider literature in political economy (Strøm 1990) that distinguishes between parties seeking votes, office or policy.

²⁴ Alesina 1988, 796.

²⁵ Although they are interested in ambiguity in the choice of policy instruments, Alesina and Cukierman (1990, 831) regard their model as a modification and generalization of Shepsle's model of ambiguity in policy positions.

²⁶ Alesina and Cukierman 1990, 841, 845.

is little room for secrecy. Thus the decision not to veto an agreement on the liberalization of, say, wine could cast doubts on the incumbent's more general protectionist stance.

The fact that international decisions might counteract the incumbent's electoral strategy has consequences for the chances of reaching an agreement at the international level, even if the bulk of issues is of lesser salience and not immediately decisive for the election outcome. As the domestic electoral race gets closer and every single vote counts, it becomes more and more important for the incumbent to sacrifice the conclusion of international agreements on terms that more closely reflect her true preferences when this risks locking her into a losing position at home.²⁷ She therefore increasingly avoids taking a specific stance on an ever-larger number of mundane international agreements.

The lack of a clear stance on an international agreement matters for the conclusion of its negotiations, especially when the government in question is a large state. Large states represent larger economies and a greater number of sectors; consequently they are more essential to the conclusion of a multitude of international agreements. However, if the government of a large state is not ready to adopt a clear position on the issue under negotiation, the talks cannot proceed and have to be postponed until after the election.

Note that this argument differs from the political budget cycle model because it is about international issues that are not themselves subject to electoral competition. However, they matter for the election outcome insofar as they risk counteracting the candidate's domestic stance. Our argument is therefore more general in that it offers an explanation for why domestic elections matter even for more mundane issues that are not directly electorally decisive. It also differs from the standard two-level bargaining model: rather than placing the negotiating governments in a strategically advantageous position between two parallel games, the incumbent's position at the international level risks undermining her electoral strategy at home.

The empirical implications of our argument are twofold. First, the closer the electoral race at the national level, and the more incumbents are pushed toward avoiding a potentially contradictory stance on a wider range of international issues, the lower the chances of reaching an agreement at the international level. Secondly, the larger the country holding an election, the stronger the negative effect of close electoral races. Note that both implications stand in contrast to a pure reciprocity-based argument about governments helping one another appear competent to voters. Apart from the fact that reciprocity does not in itself predict whether the incumbent would prefer to accelerate or delay a decision, reciprocity would also not make this effect conditional on the size of the member state or the closeness of the electoral race.

Additional Explanations Outside the EU Context: Resources and Credible Commitment

The literature review already demonstrated that existing theories on pending domestic elections fail to generate clear predictions about the chances of reaching international agreements. However, there are two alternative explanations that, in some negotiation settings, could account for one or both of the observable implications outlined above. Because they do not apply in the EU context, we mention them here and then discuss in more detail in the conclusion how changes in the negotiation setting bring alternative arguments and promising paths for future research to the fore.

According to the resource-based argument, winning a close election crucially depends on a candidate's costly effort to mobilize support. Since time and budgets are limited, incumbents

²⁷ Similarly, Pervez (2015, 271) argues that leaders become more concerned about electoral margins when the ruling party controls a smaller share of the government than when they already dominate power.

engaged in a tight electoral race find it necessary to shift their time and attention from executive functions to campaigning.²⁸ Thus as the race narrows and the incumbent shifts all available resources to the campaign trail, negotiations get bogged down, especially if the government in question is crucial to the conclusion of the agreement. In the EU, however, the bulk of negotiating takes place among government officials, not politicians. Since their time and resources cannot be easily redirected to the campaign trail, we consider this argument more relevant in the context of high-level talks.²⁹

Another argument examines the credibility of commitments when the electoral race is tight. It appears reasonable that negotiating partners may hesitate to conclude an agreement with a government that might be voted out of office if the new government is expected to unravel the deal.³⁰ In the case of the EU, however, there is little risk that a decision, once adopted and published, will unravel. As discussed further below, this is because EU law has ‘direct effect’, meaning that decisions become the law of the land even before they are transposed into national law, and domestic courts can enforce them as such. In many other contexts, however, where international agreements require domestic ratification to become effective or are difficult to enforce on the ground, the argument about credible commitments would be a plausible alternative explanation.

ANALYSIS

The EU is an ideal laboratory in which to explore the relationship between pending national elections and the dynamics of international negotiations. As a permanent negotiation forum, it produces a constant stream of independent decisions that allows us to evaluate our conjectures about the importance of electoral uncertainty statistically. For that purpose, we build on previous analyses of the duration of legislative decision making in the EU, in particular an excellent (and so far the most comprehensive) study by Hertz and Leuffen (henceforth HL).³¹ Before we turn to the statistical analysis, however, we provide a brief stylized description of the EU’s legislative process and discuss how it compares to other international negotiation settings.

A Stylized Description of the EU’s Legislative Process

The European Commission, the EU’s principal supranational bureaucracy, has the exclusive right to set the agenda with a legislative proposal. The legislative process is therefore exogenously initiated with the publication of the commission’s proposal of an EU law.³² The Council of Ministers, which is composed of representatives from all member governments,

²⁸ In a version of this argument, Page (1976, 748) suggests that ambiguity reflects the fact that candidates devote their attention to issues that will get the most votes. In times of highly professional electoral campaigns, however, we find it implausible that candidates would be too busy to form and voice an informed opinion about an issue.

²⁹ Kleine 2013, 89–99. The involvement of elected national politicians in EU legislation is mainly limited to the formulation of guidelines and the official adoption of agreements. Ministers who are unavailable may also ask the country’s permanent representative, a cabinet colleague or a minister from a different country to act as their proxy (Council of the EU, Rules of Procedure, Article 4).

³⁰ However, there is evidence that the effect of leadership turnover on commitments is lower in democracies than in autocracies (Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009).

³¹ Hertz and Leuffen 2011.

³² It might be argued that the commission times the introduction of proposals strategically, not independently of national elections. If it did, this effect would work against our argument (if the commission introduced fewer proposals ahead of an election) and reduce the magnitude of our results. We tested this proposition empirically in a model presented in Appendix Table A17.

may then adopt the commission's proposal with a majority or unanimity, depending on the legal base of the proposal. It may reject or change it only if it is able to achieve unanimity. In reality, the council typically refers the legislative proposal to government officials in permanent committees and working groups in order to resolve as many controversies as possible before the text is discussed among the ministers. As in other international negotiation settings, the pace and duration of these deliberations is under the control of the member governments.

Another difference between decentralized bargaining and the EU's legislative process is the involvement of the European Parliament (EP). In many of the earlier observations in our dataset, the EP was merely consulted in this process. Over time, however, the member states promoted the now directly elected assembly to a legislative actor on a formally equal footing with the Council of Ministers. In contrast to the discussions in the council and its substructure, deliberations in the EP are officially subject to strict deadlines within which it has to come up with a position. The EP therefore has little discretion over the pace and duration of the negotiations, although it is worth noting that the legislative actors typically conclude their deliberation without exhausting all legislative stages.³³

Compared to decentralized bargaining settings, EU negotiations are therefore highly formalized and involve supranational actors with power over the legislative agenda and the final outcome. Nevertheless, the authority over the conclusion of the legislative process lies largely in the hands of the member governments and their officials. The involvement of these many actors means that it is notoriously difficult to keep secrets in the EU. Although arguably less common in international bargaining,³⁴ complete information is therefore a standard assumption in this context. In contrast to some international law, EU law, once adopted, has direct effect and bestows rights and obligations on EU governments and citizens at the moment of publication.³⁵

The Dependent Variable: Adoption Hazard

We want to know if pending close national elections systematically decrease the chances of reaching an agreement in the EU. Thus although we essentially replicate previous analyses of the length of EU decision making, our focus differs from this work in that we are more interested in how certain periods in time alter the chances of a conclusion, rather than the total duration, of international negotiations. Despite our distinct focus on the timing of decisions, our analysis must also consider the main explanations of the duration of the EU's legislative process.

We add new variables capturing periods of time immediately preceding national elections in the EU member states to a model of decision-making duration, along with other variables that influence the timing of decisions. The main advantage of this research approach is that it demonstrates that our argument has important and previously unrecognized implications for a relatively well-scrutinized phenomenon in international politics.

Identifying the Time Period before Close Elections

To test our argument, we identify close and non-close elections in EU member states. We gathered data on all national elections in twenty-seven EU member states in the period 1976–2009. Of all the

³³ Kleine 2013, 79–84, 103–5. Garrett and Tsebelis 1996, 280.

³⁴ Cf. Evans 1993.

³⁵ Domestic courts can enforce EU law even if it is not transposed into national law due to the cumulative effect of two doctrines, the doctrine of 'direct effect' and the doctrine of 'supremacy'. For a discussion of the EU's legal regime and a comparison with other dispute resolution settings, see Keohane, Moravcsik, and Slaughter (2000, 467).

current member states, only Croatia is excluded from the analysis, as it did not become a member until 2013. During this thirty-three-year period, there were 139 national elections in the remaining twenty-seven EU member states between their respective accessions (or January 1976, if earlier) and July 2009. We collected election dates and results from the ministries of interior websites of the respective countries when available and cross-checked this data against the Parliament and government composition database (ParlGov).³⁶

We are interested in the behavior of candidates and negotiating partners when they are uncertain about the outcome of an upcoming national election. Our key variable of electoral uncertainty is distinct from the competitiveness of electoral systems, in that it refers more narrowly to the closeness of each race than the system as such. We define a close election as one in which the largest party's popular vote share was less than five points ahead of the second-largest party. Fifty-eight of the 139 elections fall under this definition of close elections. We take the two months (sixty days) prior to the date of these narrowly won elections as our measure of the period before close elections. The results are likely to be affected somewhat by our operationalization of this period. Below we consider the robustness of our results to different lengths of time prior to elections.

Our measure of closeness requires further justification. One might object that a retrospective measure does not quite capture the uncertainty before an election. While we agree that a prospective measure would be preferable, we believe that our measure is appropriate for empirical and theoretical reasons. The empirical reason is that we ran a regression with a continuous variable based on the most recent and complete poll dataset available.³⁷ Our measure captures the fact that there is no uncertainty in periods of time long before electoral campaigns start, and that electoral uncertainty then varies continuously over time, as the date of the election draws nearer. The results, presented in Appendix Table A1, confirm the findings in our main regression.³⁸

The theoretical reason has to do with the fact that it is common knowledge, among academics and politicians, that polls are highly volatile.³⁹ In this light, it seems implausible that politicians would update their beliefs about their electoral fortunes with every new poll that is published. Instead, it is plausible to assume that politicians enter the race with a fixed expectation about their chances and signal their position accordingly. Considering in addition that the analysis using a continuous measure based on polls did not yield substantially different results, it seems reasonable to assume with Cox that a measure based on actual election results does estimate pre-election beliefs correctly, on average.⁴⁰ Given the lack of consistent voting intention data available for all countries, we prefer using this more complete measure, based on actual election results, to an incomplete measure based on poll data.

Another potential objection to our measure of closeness is that it is difficult to compare across electoral systems. One might argue, for example, that the margin between the first and second party is more appropriate in majoritarian two-party systems than in multiparty systems of proportional representation where elections often result in coalition governments. While we readily concede that detailed analyses of each party's coalition prospects and pledges might offer a more accurate measure, it is not obvious that this problem creates systematic bias. First, there is little evidence that pre-electoral alliances are credible, common and decisive. Given that

³⁶ Döring and Manow 2012.

³⁷ Jennings and Wlezien 2016.

³⁸ We also ran regressions using a binary variable based on poll data (Appendix Tables A2 and A3).

³⁹ Gelman and King 1993.

⁴⁰ Cox 1988, 769.

multiparty systems typically offer more than one potential alliance between ideologically adjacent parties, all parties have an incentive 'to keep their options open'.⁴¹ Secondly, Kayser and Lindstädt show that when a plurality party is replaced in parliament it is almost always by the (formerly) second-biggest party.⁴² The margin between the two biggest parties is therefore an appropriate indicator of the closeness of the electoral race, even in proportional representation systems.

With respect to two-round elections (including France, Hungary and Lithuania), we take the results of the final second round. However, there may be considerable uncertainty regarding the outcome of the first round and less uncertainty in the second round. This was the case, for instance, in the 2002 French election, which ended in a resounding second-round victory for Chirac over Le Pen after a narrow first-round outcome in favor of Chirac. Cases like this create bias against our argument, since they limit variation on our independent variable and may therefore lead us to underestimate the magnitude of the proposed causal effect. The opposite is true for cases in majoritarian systems where, depending on the geographical distribution of votes, a narrow margin in the popular vote can turn into a large parliamentary majority. This was the case in the 2005 UK election, the only UK election in the 30-year period of our dataset we describe as close. This discussion highlights the importance of considering the effects of close elections in different countries separately. Appendix Table A4 shows the effect of close and non-close elections for each country. Additional robustness checks consider different country-specific measures of closeness.

Our main analysis groups elections according to the population size of the state in which they took place. In particular, we distinguish between elections in large states, which include Germany, France, the UK, Italy and Spain, and elections in smaller states, which include all twenty-two other EU members. This approach makes the results easier to interpret and allows for a straightforward test of our conjecture that electoral uncertainty matters more in large than small states. Robustness checks presented in Appendix Tables A5 and A6 also consider different measures of country size and bargaining power.

Control Variables

Existing explanations of the duration of EU decision making have considered the effects of variables relating to the general context in which decision making took place, as well as variables relating to the specific legislative proposals under investigation.

Contextual variables account for variation in the duration of decision making over time. Existing research arrives at different conclusions regarding the impact of EU enlargement on the speed of decision making. While Golub argues that enlargement accelerates decision making by creating more potential winning coalitions,⁴³ König and HL object to this analysis, arguing instead that the addition of more states increases transaction costs and therefore produces the opposite effect.⁴⁴

Another relevant contextual variable is the size of the backlog of pending proposals.⁴⁵ The reasoning is that a large backlog of proposals leads to pressure on decision makers to reduce the duration of decision making in order to decrease the size of the backlog.

⁴¹ Golder (2005, 657) shows that only a fraction of pre-electoral alliances in proportional representation systems ever materialize.

⁴² Kayser and Lindstädt 2015, fn 12.

⁴³ Golub 2007.

⁴⁴ König 2007.

⁴⁵ Golub 1999, 2007.

Business in Brussels grinds to a halt in August, and we therefore expect few proposals to be adopted in this month. It is particularly important to control for this peculiarity of EU politics since thirteen of the fifty-eight close national elections we identified were held in September or October (German Bundestag elections are usually held in September). Without controlling for the August effect, we would not know if our findings are the result of electoral uncertainty or due to the fact that a considerable part of the election campaigns fell in the month of August.

Proposal characteristics account for variation in the duration of decision making among legislative proposals that are pending at any given point in time. Among the relevant proposal characteristics, we expect proposals subject to the qualified majority voting (QMV) rule to be decided on more quickly than those subject to unanimity. With regard to the involvement of the EP, existing research generally agrees that expanding the powers of the EP beyond mere consultation increases the duration of decision making, and we therefore control for this too.⁴⁶

In line with existing research, we also control for the type of instrument proposed by including a dichotomous variable that distinguishes directives from regulations and decisions. Directives are generally more politically salient proposals that involve higher domestic adjustment costs than regulations or decisions, notwithstanding the importance of many regulations and decisions. Existing studies generally find that directives take longer to process than regulations and decisions.⁴⁷

Analysis

We base our analysis on a dataset assembled by HL, which they collated using the main databases for monitoring EU legislative procedures, PreLex and EUR-Lex. The dataset we use contains information on 14,396 legislative proposals that were introduced in the period 1976–2006, including directives, regulations and decisions. It also contains information on the key explanatory variables from the existing literature relating to the legislative procedures and numbers of member states involved. This long time period makes it possible to test the effects of close elections, while controlling for the other factors we know are relevant. After recoding for time-varying covariates, we have 326,458 episodes: periods of time within the duration of a proposal separated by changes in the values of some independent variables. Our main explanatory variables are time-varying covariates that take a value of 1 during periods of sixty days prior to an election and 0 during any other period. We created four such variables corresponding to close elections in large states, close elections in small states, non-close elections in large states and non-close elections in small states. A new episode is created every time these variables change value.

Our dependent variable is the hazard of adoption: the probability of a proposal being adopted (or rejected or withdrawn) after a given number of days, conditional on not having been adopted up to that point. The number of days between the introduction of the proposal and the adoption (or, in a few cases, the rejection or withdrawal) of the legislative proposal is what is referred to as ‘time at risk’. The start of a period of interest corresponds to the date of adoption of a proposal by the commission and its transmission to the council or the EP, as recorded in the EUR-Lex webpage. The total number of days in our analysis is 5,936,931.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Golub 1999, 743; Schulz and König 2000, 657.

⁴⁷ Schulz and König 2000, 657.

⁴⁸ Because our independent variables can vary over a more regular basis in response to different dates of elections in different countries, we prefer an analysis using days as the unit of analysis in order to capture these finer variations and make the most complete use of available variation in the data. However, we also ran a

We implement a Cox regression incorporating time-varying covariates. We first ran a Cox model without interactions between our explanatory variables and time, thereby assuming that the effects of these variables are proportional over time. We then ran the Grambsch and Therneau test, which assesses whether the proportional hazards assumption holds on each of our independent variables.⁴⁹ We introduced interactions with the log of time for the variables for which the proportional hazards assumption could be rejected ($p < 0.05$).

Formally, we run the following regression:

$$h(t) = h_0(t) \exp[(\beta_1 CELS(t) + \beta_2 CESS(t) + \beta_3 NCELS(t) + \beta_4 NCESS(t) \mathbf{X} \beta_5) + (\ln(t)(\gamma_1 CELS(t) + \gamma_2 CESS(t) + \gamma_3 NCELS(t) + \gamma_4 NCESS(t) + \mathbf{X} \gamma_5))],$$

where:

- t : is the time in days that has elapsed since the introduction of the proposal by the commission.
- $h(t)$: is the hazard of adoption at time t , the probability that the proposal is adopted (or the negotiation terminated) at time t conditional on still being negotiated up until t . The dataset comprises a variable equal to 1 at the time the proposal is adopted.
- $h_0(t)$: is the baseline hazard rate, which is potentially time varying in a Cox model.
- $CELS(t)$, $CESS(t)$, $NCELS(t)$ and $NCESS(t)$: are dummy variables equal to 1 if t falls during a period of sixty days before an election, and 0 otherwise. The four different variables distinguish between close and non-close elections in large and small member states (with close versus non-close and large versus small defined as in the previous section). Note that these variables are time-varying and normally change value during the time that a proposal is under consideration, since the duration of most proposals is longer than sixty days, and since there are periods of time with no elections.
- \mathbf{X} : is a vector of control variables, including the decision rule, the involvement of the EP through co-operation or co-decision, whether the proposal was for a directive, the number of member states in the EU during the episode considered, the backlog of proposals at the time of the episode and whether the episode is during the month of August. Both the number of member states and the indicator variable for August are time varying, while the other variables are constant within a given proposal.

Table 1 shows the repartition of the elections we consider between close and non-close elections and between large and small states, in terms of both the number of elections and the number of episodes they cover. All categories have a reasonable number of elections and a fairly balanced coverage of the periods of analysis in terms of the number of episodes. There is therefore no reason to expect the results to be driven by some outliers in some categories. Table 2 summarizes different percentiles of the total duration of proposals, for different types of proposals, which can be used as reference points when looking at the value of the coefficients at different points in time.

All these variables (except for QMV) are interacted with a function of time ($\ln(t)$) in order to measure the change in the coefficients over time. We therefore report the coefficients' values at

(*Note continued*)

regression using months instead of days as the unit of analysis. The results confirm the statistically significant negative effect of close elections in large countries on the duration of decision making.

⁴⁹ Grambsch and Therneau 1994.

TABLE 1 *Summary Statistics on Main Variables*

Total number of elections	139
Close elections in a large state	17
Close elections in a small state	41
Non-close election in a large state	29
Non-close election in a small state	52
Total number of episodes	332,666
Number of episodes within 60 days of an election	
Close elections in a large state	39,983
Close elections in a small state	91,925
Non-close election in a large state	69,220
Non-close election in a small state	115,019
Any election	224,252

TABLE 2 *Summary Statistics on Non-censored Proposals*

Type	Number	Duration (days)			
		Median	Standard deviation	10 th percentile	90 th percentile
Directives	1,774	597	1,009	106	2,266
Regulation	8,290	90	577	16	589
Decision	4,129	141	646	26	790
All	14,193	118	698	20	902

Note: Total number of proposal including censored and non-censored is 14,396.

different points in time. These coefficients and the hazard ratio they imply are discussed in the text below.

RESULTS

The results of our main regression are given in Table 3. The main inference we draw from this model is that legislative proposals are significantly less likely to be adopted in the EU in the months prior to national elections with close outcomes in all member states.⁵⁰ Each of the coefficients is negative and highly significant ($p = 0.01$) at the time a proposal is introduced. The data thus support our main intuition. Even after up to 500 days following the introduction of a proposal, the effect of close national elections remains negative and significantly different from 0 for large countries. This indicates that the presence of a pending close election in these countries has a negative effect on the hazard of legislative proposals being adopted, even after controlling for other variables that have previously been found to explain variation in the speed of decision making.

The exponentiated coefficients express the effects in terms of odds ratios, which are more intuitive. The coefficient for close elections in large states (-0.895 ; $\exp(-0.895) = 0.409$) indicates that the odds of a proposal being adopted are 59 per cent lower if a close national election is pending in a large state than when there is no election. This effect is stronger than for elections in smaller states, for which the odds of a legislative proposal being adopted are 33 per

⁵⁰ Table A7 in the appendix presents the coefficients for all elections (close and non-close) and all countries (large and small).

TABLE 3 The Effect of Uncertain Elections on the Duration of Decision Making

	Coefficients			
	At time of introduction	After 100 days	After 300 days	After 500 days
Close elections				
In large member states (1)	-0.895*** (0.180)	-0.441*** (0.042)	-0.333*** (0.053)	-0.283*** (0.066)
In small member states (2)	-0.404*** (0.100)	-0.072*** (0.026)	0.007 (0.033)	0.044 (0.041)
Non-close elections				
In large member states (3)	-0.324*** (0.108)	-0.159*** (0.029)	-0.119*** (0.040)	-0.101** (0.049)
In small member states (4)	-0.290*** (0.101)	-0.212*** (0.025)	-0.194*** (0.034)	-0.185*** (0.042)
Test of conjecture about size: (1)–(2)	-0.491** (0.200)	-0.369*** (0.049)	-0.340*** (0.063)	-0.326*** (0.077)
Observations	14,396			
Decision days	5,936,931			
Controls	Yes			
Wald χ^2	3,121.10			
Log pseudolikelihood	-104,961.86			

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Cox regression with time-varying covariates interacted with natural logarithm of time. Controls include dummy for qualified majority voting (QMV), number of EU members, dummy for co-operation procedure with parliament (co-operation and codecision), dummy for directive, size of backlog, dummy for month of August. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

cent ($\exp(-0.404) = 0.668$) lower, and stronger than for elections that are not close, for which odds are reduced by 28 per cent ($\exp(-0.324) = 0.723$).

These effects diminish over time for all variables. In particular, while the coefficients for close elections in large states remain negative and significant, the coefficients for close elections in small states become insignificantly different from 0, 300 days after the introduction of a proposal. However, at 100 days, which is approximately the median decision-making time, all the effects are still negative and significant. These results are depicted graphically in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows how the relative hazard rate of passing a proposal when a certain type of election is about to take place (compared to having no such election) differs over time for close versus non-close elections, holding all other variables constant, in large states. Figure 2 shows the same relative hazard rates for small states. The dashed lines indicate the 95 per cent confidence interval around these relative hazard rates.⁵¹ As suggested by the coefficients shown in Table 3, these relative hazard rates are significantly less than 1 for large states over all relevant durations in large states, and close elections reduce the hazard of adoption by more than non-close elections. These effects diminish over time, but remain negative and significant. For small states, the effect of close elections is initially larger than for non-close elections, but

⁵¹ Note that the null hypothesis with relative hazard rates is 1, not 0. The relative hazard rates are equal to the exponential of the combined coefficient $\alpha_i = \beta_i + \gamma_i \ln(t)$. The bounds of the confidence intervals are calculated as the exponential of the bounds of the confidence interval on the combined coefficients, which are themselves based on the standard errors calculated as described in note 52 (see Licht 2011 for justification).

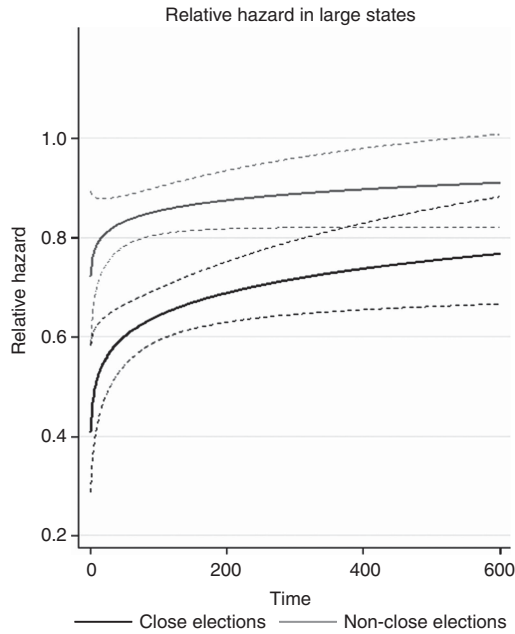


Fig. 1. Relative hazard of proposal adoption when elections are held in large states. The dashed lines show 95 per cent confidence intervals

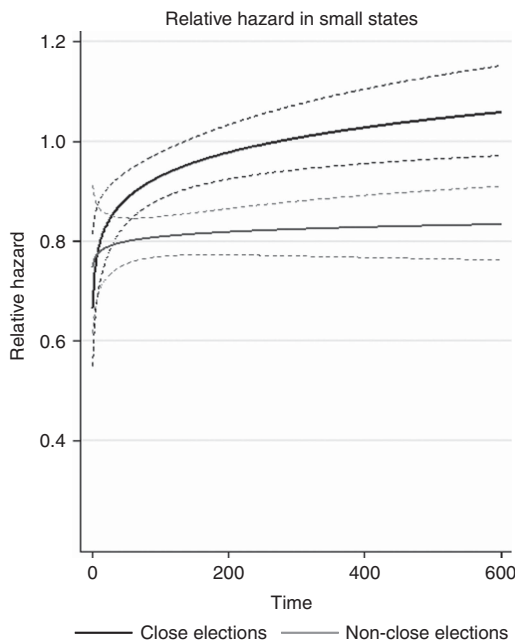


Fig. 2. Relative hazard of proposal adoption when elections are held in small states. The dashed lines show 95 per cent confidence intervals

this difference reverses after a few days into the negotiation process and the effect of close elections becomes insignificant.

What is the difference between elections that were close and those that were not close? The evidence indicates that close elections in large member states have more significant and consistently negative effects on the hazard of adoption than those that were not close. However, for proposals introduced much earlier than the start of these election campaigns, the difference in effects becomes smaller. For elections in small states, close elections also have a stronger effect than non-close elections when the proposal is introduced, but this difference is reversed after 100 days, and non-close elections have a larger effect than close elections. Both these effects are smaller in any case than the effect of close elections in large member states. All in all, the results regarding the effects of elections that were not close in large and small member states are more equivocal than those regarding the effects of close elections in those countries.

The specification presented in Table 3 also allows us to assess differences in effect between large and small states. The difference in the coefficients on close elections in large and small countries is negative and significantly different from 0.⁵² Although this difference diminishes over time, it is still statistically significant even 500 days after the introduction of a proposal. This indicates that our conjecture is strongly supported by the data.

The effects of the control variables (presented in Appendix Table A8) are not our primary concern. However, they are consistent with previous findings, and as these studies recognize the role of these variables in the duration of proposal negotiation, not including them could lead to omitted variable bias. The use of QMV in the council significantly expedites decision making, as does a larger backlog of pending proposals, in the early days of a proposal's negotiation. Consistent with the argument that enlargement increases the transaction costs of decision making, we find that the addition of more member states lengthens the decision-making process at the start of a proposal. Similarly, involving the EP in a more meaningful way generally lengthens the duration of decision making. As expected, proposals are unlikely to be adopted in the month of August.

Robustness Checks

Because our results could be somewhat affected by the operationalization of the period before close elections, we ran our regression using different lengths of this period. The results remain substantively unchanged with these alternative measures. The regression analysis using one month (thirty days) prior to election day is presented in Appendix Table A9. We find similar results using three months (ninety days).

We also constructed different country-specific measures of closeness. Appendix Tables A10 and A11 show the result of regressions in which we defined closeness as the margin in vote shares between the top two political parties relative to the country's historical average margins between the top two contenders. One of these measures was based on the average of all elections in a given country and another was based on the average of all elections prior to the election for which we calculate closeness. In addition, we ran regressions using a three-point vote difference as the criterion for closeness (Appendix Table A12) or using a seven-point vote difference. The results of these robustness checks are qualitatively similar to our main regression.

⁵² The standard errors are calculated as a linear combination of the standard errors and covariance of the two coefficients, and the significance results are obtained by using a χ^2 distribution.

Politicians have been found to time elections strategically in order to capitalize on higher levels of political support during good economic times.⁵³ Although very few EU laws have the capacity to prompt the dissolution of national governments, snap elections that are called before the end of the normal length of the parliamentary term could shorten the length of the election campaign and, therefore, the period of electoral uncertainty.⁵⁴ During the time period considered in this article, sixty-eight of the 139 elections (49 per cent) were early elections. We ran our main regression after excluding early elections, and thus kept only elections whose timing can be considered exogenous (as fixed by constitutional rules). The results from this regression are presented in Appendix Table A13. The coefficients on our main variables are comparable to the ones obtained using all elections. Specifically, it remains the case that all elections delay the conclusion of EU negotiations, and that close elections in large member states delay decisions by more than non-close elections, at the average duration of a proposal, and after excluding early elections.

We ran two additional robustness tests. The first one controls for economic conditions: it could be the case that bad economic conditions lead to closer electoral races.⁵⁵ It is also plausible that bad economic times make it harder to reach an agreement at the international level when there is more support for protectionism⁵⁶ and fewer resources available to pay off obstinate negotiating partners. The combination of these effects could exaggerate the effect of close elections on duration that we find. We ran robustness tests using two different measures for economic conditions: (1) a dummy variable that equals 1 during periods of time when the Eurozone was officially in a recession and (2) the rate of GDP growth across the EU in a given year. In both cases, the coefficients of our main explanatory variable are scarcely lower after the inclusion of these variables at all relevant points in time. This suggests that, while recessions and slower growth do decelerate the process of proposal adoption, they do not explain away the effect of elections. The results and precise descriptions of the measures can be found in Appendix Tables A14 and A15. We decided not to include these control variables in our main regression to make it directly comparable to existing findings.

The second test controls for potential ideological conflict among the negotiating partners. Such conflicts might slow down the decision-making process, and also be related to the closeness of electoral races. We therefore included a variable measuring the range of ideological positions between the two most extreme national governments represented in the council. Ideological positions are measured using the so-called RILE index (right–left ideological position), based on manifesto analysis. As Appendix Table A16 shows, adding the variable does not significantly alter the coefficients on our key explanatory variables.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

It is far more difficult to reach a decision in the EU in the run-up to a close national election than when no such national election is pending. For example, prior to a hard-fought race for the German Bundestag, the chances of adoption are 59 per cent lower than at other times. Notably,

⁵³ Kayser 2005, 23.

⁵⁴ Schleiter and Tavits 2014. Early elections in our analysis include both opportunistic and failed elections.

⁵⁵ Besley, Persson, and Sturm (2010) explore the link between bad economic times and close elections, although they find the reverse effect: that close elections may adversely affect economic outcomes.

⁵⁶ Chadoin 2014, 878.

⁵⁷ The results are not surprising in light of the fact that existing empirical research indicates that there is virtually no relationship between governments' general ideological positions and their positions on specific EU issues. Instead, their positions seem to be motivated by specific national and sectoral interests (Thomson 2011).

this effect is greater than the effect of the decision rule in the council – that is, the difference between unanimity and majority voting, which has featured prominently in previous explanations of the dynamics of EU negotiations.⁵⁸ These reduced chances of adoption translate into massive opportunity costs, for example, in the form of foregone economic growth or a delay in the provision of international public goods. In fact, pending national elections may in the past have delayed the adoption of the total of all EU laws for more than 6,000 years.⁵⁹

With this study, we hope to have highlighted the fruitfulness of further research into the nexus between national and international politics. Although the significance of domestic variables for the international level is hardly disputed, the dynamics of this relationship have attracted comparatively little attention. Investigating the time-varying effect of pending national elections gave us an opportunity to utilize insights from the comparative politics literature in order to open up the black box of the relationship between domestic and international politics yet further. We discussed how existing arguments about this relationship in the domestic context often fail to predict any systematic effect for the international level. Against this background, we drew on a debate in American politics about the informational efficiency of elections in order to propose a novel argument about the role of ambiguity and the conditions under which it affects the chances of reaching international agreements.

We emphasize that there are limits to the generalizability of our results beyond the EU context – limits that open up opportunities for further research into the scope conditions of the various ways in which the domestic level affects international politics. First, the EU is a permanent negotiation forum that produces several hundred decisions per year. The bulk of negotiating in the EU therefore takes place among various actors, including parliamentarians and numerous national and EU officials. Because of the involvement of so many actors, scholars typically assume a situation of complete information during the EU's legislative process. In negotiation settings (where secrets are easier to keep), however, we would expect incumbents to feel less compelled to remain ambiguous about their true position and enter agreements even in the face of a close election. The involvement of officials, in contrast to elected politicians in the decision-making process, also means that EU negotiators are not easily co-opted for election campaigning. We would expect a diversion of resources from international negotiations to the campaign trail to matter more in high-level talks that include elected politicians and political appointees rather than regular bureaucrats. In this regard, research could exploit cross-country variation in political appointees who are more easily swayed from their public position to the campaign trail.⁶⁰

Secondly, EU law is highly binding compared to most international law in the sense that it does not require additional domestic ratification to become effective and enforceable. This makes it highly unlikely that negotiating partners would be reluctant to adopt decisions out of fear that a new government might unravel it. We would expect such hesitancy to matter more in

⁵⁸ It is common in EU and legislative studies to treat actors' positions and levels of salience as exogenous variables that define the possibilities for package deals and logrolling (see, e.g., Dijkstra, Van Assen, and Stokman 2008; Kardasheva 2013), and to interpret the absence of a clear policy position as indifference or measurement error. Our argument about ambiguity implies that indifference is really endogenous to the point in time at which the position was measured.

⁵⁹ Calculated as the difference between the inverse of the hazard rate (time to failure, or number of days until the proposal is accepted) with close elections in large member states and the inverse of the hazard rate with no elections in any state, multiplied by the number of proposals during which there was a close national election (4,731 out of a total of 14,396 proposals). The exact number is 6,937 years, to be compared with the 16,265 years of analysis time in our dataset.

⁶⁰ Gualmini (2008, 87) finds that the US public service system features many more political appointments and public/private sector mobility than its European counterparts.

the case of negotiations of international agreements that are less binding. Interestingly, despite its bindingness, our results indicate that EU law is not generally used to lock domestic opponents into an international agreement, in which case we would have observed an increase in the chances of reaching agreements during close national election campaigns. The likely reason is that commitments to EU law are created through a collective decision at the EU level, not unilaterally, and therefore require the co-operation of other governments.

As this discussion of scope conditions and the potential for further research in and outside of the EU context indicates, our contribution ought to be understood as the first step of a research program about the dynamics between national and international politics. Additional steps, most notably the disentanglement of different mechanisms and the gauging of their effect in different contexts, are necessary in order to push this agenda further. We believe this is an important endeavor for two main reasons.

First, a better understanding of the ways in which pending elections impair the adoption of international agreements could allow decision makers to time negotiations with a view to increasing their efficiency. As the EU example suggests, the cumulative effects of such an exercise could be massive.

Secondly, a better understanding of the factors that make the international level more responsive to national politics are of utmost importance to debates about the legitimacy of global governance. Skeptics demur that the international level lacks responsiveness, arguing that international organizations allow executives to circumvent national democratic politics.⁶¹ Thus they might interpret our finding regarding the slowdown of decision making in the period prior to close national elections as good news. However, if our argument is correct and this responsiveness is a function of ambiguity on the part of the candidates, our findings also imply that citizens miss an opportunity to deliberate international matters in situations of heightened political attention and are consequently unable to endow their government with a meaningful mandate. Ironically, national democratic politics is itself a formidable obstacle for the democratic contestation of international politics, which some scholars consider to be a prerequisite for its democratic legitimacy.⁶²

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⁶¹ For a conservative version of this argument, see, e.g., Rabkin (2005).

⁶² Follesdal and Hix 2006, 13; Zürn 2004.

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