Timing an Election:
The Impact on the Party in Government

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A commonly found feature in many parliamentary democracies is the power of the government to call elections before the completion of a full term of office. Based on an examination of British and Canadian general elections during the 1940 to 2000 period, we find that it is not a good decision for the governing parties to wait the full term allowable between elections. The general pattern is that the longer the government waits to call an election, the worse its chances for gaining seats. This is a parliamentary effect similar to the honeymoon period commonly associated with presidential regimes.

Introduction

With more than eighteen months left in his second term, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien called for new elections in October 2000. He was capitalizing on the strength of the Canadian economy, a large budget surplus and the fact that the four opposition parties were in disarray. Chrétien's calculation proved correct, and his Liberal Party was able to increase its parliamentary majority. While the timing of elections on government formation has emerged as a major area of study in the elections literature, much of the work in this area has focused on presidential regimes and the impact of concurrent and non-concurrent elections on government formation and durability (Scheve and Tomz 1999; Shugart and Carey 1992; Shugart 1995). The discussion on election timing in parliamentary regimes tends to focus on the use of no confidence votes to dissolve the government and the implications of the vote on economic policy-making (Huber 1996; Huber and McCarty 2001; Johnston 1999; Petry et al. 1999). There has been little discussion concerning the impact of the timing of parliamentary elections.

A common feature in parliamentary democracies is a limit on the maximum amount of time that can pass between elections while allowing the government the power to call elections before the completion of a specific time period. There are three choices facing these regimes: The government

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can choose to wait for the maximum allowable time; the government can call an early election, or it can be forced to hold an early election due to a no confidence vote. We analyze the impact of the timing of parliamentary elections through an examination of Canadian and British general elections during the period between 1940 and 2000. We test three hypotheses in regards to possible methods and consequences for calling an early election:

> **H1**: *If the maximum amount of time passes between elections, the government party entering the election will lose seats or at the most maintain their seat share.*

The fact that they waited the full term indicates that there was no surge in their popularity for them to capitalize on (or even a significant loss of popularity) and that they were attempting to maximize their time in power by holding office until the end.

> **H2**: *If the government calls an election early, it will increase its number of seats.*

The fact that the government has chosen to hold the election early indicates that it is attempting to capitalize on an increase in popularity in order to increase its seat share.

> **H3**: *If the election is held because of a no confidence vote, the result will be a loss of seats for the governing party.*

A no confidence vote sends a message to the electorate that the government is incapable of doing its job and can quite possibly lead to a change in the party in power.

There are several variables that we consider in order to test these hypotheses. In each case, the dependent variable is the change in number of seats after an election for the governing party entering the election. The independent variables include the reason that the election was called, the length of time between the elections and the type of government prior to the election. The reasons for calling an election have been outlined above and are fairly straightforward. An election can be the result of a decision by the government to hold early elections, can be forced by a no confidence vote or can be called in order to comply with the proscribed time limit. The time between elections is simply the time that has passed since the last general election. The type of government prior to the election can be either one formed by a party that holds a parliamentary majority or in the absence of a

majority, a minority government (a coalition of multiple parties is also a possibility but has not occurred in Canada or Britain since before World War II).

We chose to examine the issue of election timing using the cases of Canada and Britain for a number of reasons. From a general perspective, both countries utilize the same type of electoral system and possess the same type of regime. More specifically, both countries allow for the same waiting period between elections (five years) and allow the government to call for an early election generally at any time during this period. Because both countries allow for the same waiting period between elections, it allows us to consistently operationalize the dependent variable between the cases (although operationalizing this variable is problematic as discussed below).

Election Timing in Presidential Regimes

As stated above, one of the primary focuses of the timing of elections literature revolves around concurrent and non-concurrent elections in presidential regimes. Scheve and Tomz (1999) discuss the midterm loss typically observed by the party of the president in U.S. congressional elections. They argue that this loss can be attributed to the desire of moderate supporters of the president to maintain a balance between the executive and the legislature to ensure that they can provide effective checks on each other. Shugart (1995), in both his individual work and his work with Carey (1992), agrees with this assessment of non-concurrent elections relative to the desire of the electorate to maintain a balance of power. Shugart (1995) determines that concurrent elections in presidential regimes are more likely to produce a unified government. He also finds that the timing of non-concurrent elections has a significant impact on their outcomes. According to him, elections for other offices that follow closely the election of the president generally show a growth in support for the president's party, and this support decreases as the temporal distance from the presidential election increases.

Among many others, Shugart and Carey (1992) discuss the president's "honeymoon period." They determine that elections during the first year of the president's term are the most beneficial for his/her party. As a final note on the honeymoon period, they contend that elections held during that time frame tend to benefit third parties as well as the president's party at the expense of the second largest party. These findings have an important implication for parliamentary regimes that are not present in presidential ones. Since the government controls the timing of the next election in many parliamentary regimes, they can use the honeymoon period to their advantage by calling an early election to capitalize on their support.

Electoral Cycles and Parliamentary Regimes

As for as the research on electoral cycles and parliamentary governments, there is a diverse range of topics but not a significant amount of literature specifically addressing the institutional rules and constraints covering election timing. Huber (1996) identifies the need for more empirical research in the area of election timing, status of the government (majority versus coalition) and governmental popularity among other areas. He emphasizes that the presence of the confidence vote in parliamentary regimes is an important element that deserves to be a larger focus of the study of parliamentarism. Huber and McCarty (2001) examine the confidence vote by analyzing the differences between regimes in which the prime minister has unilateral power to call the vote and those in which the cabinet must approve such a decision. They determine that both circumstances can result in the inefficient termination of a cabinet and possibly inefficient dissolution of the government.

Much of the research on parliamentary electoral cycles involves financial policy (e.g., budgeting and taxing power) and the impact of economic events on the outcomes of elections (Johnston 1999; Petry et al. 1999). In a study of Canadian provincial governments, Petry et al. (1999) argue that economic policy is coordinated with predicted election timing in order to maximize the potential benefits from positive economic outlooks. They argue that the direction of causality is important. They find that the government's perceptions about the possibility of calling a new election dictate its fiscal policy instead of policy driving the timing of the election. In a study of the political business cycle and government popularity in Canadian elections, Johnston (1999) argues that there is a popularity cycle for the government party that exists between elections regardless of the economic conditions. He finds that the government's popularity rises substantially close to an election, and then he maintains a small variation near that peak until the next election when it diminishes to, or below, the level of the previous election. This finding for parliamentary regimes is very similar to the findings of both Shugart (1995) and Shugart and Carey (1992) for presidential regimes.

Lupia and Strøm (1995) contend that the two games that are constantly occurring in parliamentary governments involve coalition-building based on past results and an effort to predict the results of the next election and plan accordingly. They conclude that the anticipation of the behavior of the electorate plays a critical role in determining the stability of both the cabinet and the government (Lupia and Strøm 1995). Diermeier and Stevenson's (200) work builds on Lupia and Strøm's findings. They argue that as a government approaches its maximum allowable time without an election, the benefits from staying in office decrease and thereby lead to more minor events being

capable of leading to the dissolution of parliament. Baron (1998) concludes that the length of the constitutionally allowed period between elections as well as the argument about minor events becoming more critical as the end of that period nears are the important factors contributing to the possibility of government termination. He argues that the proper way to study the longevity of parliamentary governments would be a combination of those two factors with an analysis of the political attributes of the state and society focusing on cleavages, institutions and party structure.

On a related issue, Weller (1994) argues that Canadian prime ministers have never been expressly forced out by their party even in times when they possessed very low popularity; instead, they make the choice to step aside on their own terms, very likely under pressure to resign, but never expressly removed from the position by their own party. For example, the 1968 Canadian election was called in an effort to consolidate the leadership following the resignation of a prime minister (Feigert 1989). The case of Britain is slightly different. The first round of the Conservative leadership election in 1990 forced Margaret Thatcher's resignation (Cowley and Garry 1998). However, the elevation of John Major following the second round vote did not result in elections being called immediately (they were not held until 1992).

Data and Methodology

The electoral cycle and the timing of elections are important areas of study with implications for the party system, government formation and government dissolution as well as policy-making. However, there is little in the area of election timing and its effects on parties in parliamentary regimes. The research that does exist is mostly theoretical and anecdotal based on either opinion polls (Johnston 1999) or evidence from presidential regimes (Shugart and Carey 1992; Shugart 1995). We take a different approach and examine the reason that an election was called and the resulting effect on the seat total of the party that held the position of government prior to the election in order to determine if patterns observed in presidential regimes are also found in parliamentary ones.

We calculate the change in the number of seats for the government party by subtracting the number of seats that that party received in the previous election from the number that they earned in the election in question. The same method was used to determine the change in seats for the principle opposition party which was identified as the party with the largest number of seats prior to the election that did not form the government. Time between elections is also a basic calculation with all numbers rounded-off using six months as the cut-off. The type of government and the reason for calling the

election have been determined from an examination of seat shares and the brief descriptions about each election provided in the data sources.

For the purposes of determining if an election was called early or called because of the five-year time limit, we establish a cut-off point at nine months before the term's expiration. Any election called with more than nine months remaining was coded as an early call by the government. This was the hardest of the variables to operationalize because of the arbitrary nature of the decision and the lack of literature to use as a guide. We choose nine months because we felt that a full-year might be too long to consider early while six months was too limited. This decision will be revisited below in the discussion of the results.

A strength of these data is that there were nineteen Canadian and fifteen British elections during the period of 1940 to 2000 providing a good sample size. In addition because the electoral system, the regime type and the waiting period between elections are the same, we were able to control for numerous independent variables. The most significant weakness that we see in these data is in the calculation of the change in number of seats. Since

**Table 1. Canadian Government, Opposition,
and Government Type, 1940 to 2000**

Year	Government Party	Opposition Party	Type of Government
1940	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1945	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1949	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1953	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1957	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1958	Conservative	Liberal	Minority
1962	Conservative	Liberal	Majority
1963	Conservative	Liberal	Minority
1965	Liberal	Conservative	Minority
1968	Liberal	Conservative	Minority
1972	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1974	Liberal	Conservative	Minority
1979	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1980	Conservative	Liberal	Minority
1984	Liberal	Conservative	Majority
1988	Conservative	Liberal	Majority
1993	Conservative	Liberal	Majority
1997	Liberal	Bloc Quebecois	Majority
2000	Liberal	Reform/Alliance	Majority

Sources: Eagles et al. (1995); Feigert (1989); *Thirty-Seventh General Election 2000 Official Voting Results Synopsis* (2001); *Thirty-Sixth General Election 1997 Official Voting Results Synopsis* (1997).

the base number used for the calculation is the seat total resulting from the previous election, any by-elections to fill vacated seats that occurred in the intervening period are not factored into the calculation. We anticipate that accounting for the changes in seat total between elections would have some effect on the magnitude of the seat change. However, we expect that change would be minimal since the number of by-elections is generally very small and due to the magnitudes that were observed it is unlikely that this inclusion would have an effect of the direction of the seat change, which is the critical component of our analysis.

Discussion

In both the Canadian and the British cases, there is an alternation of power exhibited in some these elections. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, both the Canadian Liberal and Conservative and British Labour and Conservative parties spend time as the government party and as the major opposition (in the case of Canada, both parties also presided over three minority governments during their terms in office). This reduces the possibility that our conclusions are party specific. If the results are not party specific, then it becomes increasingly likely that they are a product of systemic features in both countries. While a party specific outcome would have limited any findings

**Table 2. British Government, Opposition,
and Government Type, 1945 to 1997**

Year	Government Party	Opposition Party	Type of Government
1945	Labour	Conservative	Majority
1950	Labour	Conservative	Majority
1951	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1955	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1959	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1964	Labour	Conservative	Majority
1966	Labour	Conservative	Majority
1970	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1974	Labour	Conservative	Majority
1974	Labour	Conservative	Majority
1979	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1983	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1987	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1992	Conservative	Labour	Majority
1997	Labour	Conservative	Majority

Source: Rallings and Thrasher (2000).

**Table 3. Party Seat Change and the Reason for
and Timing of Canadian Elections, 1940 to 2000**

Year	Government Party Seat Change	Opposition Party Seat Change	Reason for Election	Years Since Previous Election
1940	8	0	Five Year Limit	5
1945	-56	27	Five Year Limit	5
1949	65	26	Govt. Called Early	4
1953	-19	10	Govt. Called Early	4
1957	-66	61	Govt. Called Early	4
1958	96	-56	Forced	1
1962	-92	50	Govt. Called Early	4
1963	-21	30	Forced	1
1965	2	2	Govt. Called Early	2
1968	14	-25	Govt. Called Early	3
1972	-46	35	Five Year Limit	5
1974	32	-12	Govt. Called Early	2
1979	-27	41	Five Year Limit	5
1980	-33	33	Forced	1
1984	-107	108	Five Year Limit	5
1988	-42	43	Govt. Called Early	4
1993	-167	94	Five Year Limit	5
1997	-22	-10	Govt. Called Early	4
2000	17	6	Govt. Called Early	3

Source: See source note for Table 1.

to the specific case of Canada and Britain, a systemic effect should also be seen in other parliamentary regimes with a similar electoral system and method for calling elections.

The first hypothesis was in regards to the effect of waiting the maximum allowable time (five years in the case of both countries) to call an election and its impact on the government party's seat change. We posited that the maximum length represented a lack of opportunity for the government to gain seats (and an indication of a loss in popularity) that would result in a negative seat change or no change at all. The seat change for both the government and the major opposition party as well as the reason for calling the election and the time between elections can be seen in Tables 3 and 4. In the case of Canada, the government waited the full five years in six of the nineteen cases under analysis. In five of those six instances the government party lost seats, with the exception being 1940, the first election in the study. The five losses were substantial as well. The smallest total of seats lost was twenty-seven in 1979. In the case of Britain, the results also seem to confirm that waiting the full five years is not a good strategy for a

**Table 4. Party Seat Change and the Reason for
and Timing of British Elections, 1945 to 1997**

Year	Government Party Seat Change	Opposition Party Seat Change	Reason for Election	Years Since Previous Election
1950	-78	85	Five year limit	5
1951	-20	-20	Govt. called early	1
1955	23	-18	Govt. called early	4
1959	21	-19	Govt. called early	4
1964	-61	-61	Five year limit	5
1966	46	-51	Govt. called early	2
1970	-85	-75	Govt. called early	4
1974	-29	-3	Govt. called early	4
1974	18	-20	Govt. called early	0
1979	-50	-50	Forced	5
1983	58	-60	Govt. called early	4
1987	-22	20	Govt. called early	4
1992	-39	42	Five year limit	5
1997	83	-106	Five year limit	5

Source: See source note for Table 2.

governing party. There were four elections that were called in the fifth year, and in all but one of these cases (1997) did the government party experience a decrease its seat totals after waiting the full term.

The second hypothesis involves elections that are called early by the government. The anticipated result in this case would be a gain in seats for the government party. In the case of Canada, 10 of the 19 cases, elections were the result of an early call by the government. In Britain, the government called nine of the fourteen elections early. In both the Canadian and British cases, the government party increased its seat total approximately 50 percent of the time. While the picture appears to be mixed, a re-operationalization of the early election call variable presents a slightly different conclusion for each of the first two hypotheses. If the limit for inclusion as a full five-year election cycle is extended to include all elections called within the final twelve months, four Canadian and four British elections would be reclassified from early elections to full term elections.

The results of this change can be seen in Tables 5 and 6. In the case of Canada, this change in the operationalization of the variable would adjust the breakdown of full term cases to a total of ten, with two cases in which the government party gained seats and eight instances in which they lost seats. In the British case, the results are a bit more ambiguous. The change in

**Table 5. Re-operationalization of Canadian Early Elections
from Nine Months to Twelve Months**

Year	Government Party Seat Change	12-Month Cut-Off Limit
1949	65	Full term
1953	-19	Full term
1957	-66	Govt. called early
1962	-92	Full term
1965	2	Govt. called early
1968	14	Govt. called early
1974	32	Govt. called early
1988	-42	Full term
1997	-22	Govt. called early
2000	17	Govt. called early

Source: See source note for Table 1.

**Table 6. Re-operationalization of British Early Elections
from Nine Months to Twelve Months**

Year	Government Party Seat Change	12-Month Cut-Off Limit
1951	-20	Govt. called early
1955	23	Govt. called early
1959	21	Full Term
1966	46	Govt. called early
1970	-85	Full Term
1974	-29	Govt. called early
1974	18	Govt. called early
1983	58	Full Term
1987	-22	Full Term

Source: See source note for Table 2.

the variable yields eight full term elections with five in which the government party lost seats (approximately 63%). In the case of Britain, this change in the variable significantly diminishes the difference between the early call and the full term seat loss. This demonstrates that these timing variables are highly sensitive to operationalization—this is an area that needs to be addressed in any further investigation.

After the re-classification, six Canadian elections are still considered to be early calls by the government. Of those six elections, four times the

government party gained seats. Coincidentally, the two elections that represent government losses in this category are 1957 and 1997 which also happen to represent the two longest durations between elections among these six cases. After the re-operationalization of the variable, three British elections were called early and in two of the elections the government party gained seats. Only in 1951 did the party lose seats (indeed, Labour lost the election). This certainly seems to suggest that the government benefits the most from calling an election early in their mandate. However, the results remain ambiguous due to the operational sensitivity of the independent variable as well as the small number of cases. However, this finding is interesting in that it relates to the presidential honeymoon period. The main difference in this instance is that rather than capitalizing on the honeymoon period through party gains in municipal or other lower level elections, the government party is able to turn their honeymoon into more seats in parliament and a stronger position in government.

Another interesting result from these elections concerns minority governments. By comparing Table 1 to Table 5, it can be seen that in Canada three of the six early call decisions (1965, 1968 and 1974) were made by minority governments. All three of those early elections resulted in a seat gain for the government party. In two out of the three instances, the seat gain was enough for the party to establish a majority government. The possibility of gaining enough seats to form a majority is a very good incentive for minority governments to call early elections. In Britain, every government since the post-World War II period has been a majority except for the 1974 Labour government. After a February 1974 election in which Labour received a plurality but not a majority of seats, the Party called a new election in October which resulted in an increase of eighteen seats allowing it to form a majority government.

The third hypothesis was that elections forced by a vote of no confidence would result in a decrease in seats for the government party and most likely their defeat. As Table 3 shows, there were only three cases in Canada, and the results are mixed. In two of the three cases, the government party lost seats and their position. However in 1958, the Conservatives not only gained seats, but they were able to switch from a minority to a majority party government. In Britain, the only election required by a no confidence vote was held in 1979. In this election, the governing Labour Party lost to Thatcher and the Conservative Party. Because the sample size for both countries is so small, it is difficult to determine any significant trend. However generally speaking, elections that arise from a vote of no confidence lead to a loss of seats for the governing party.

There is one other extremely important variable that could possibly have had an impact on the seat gain that we have not included in the

discussion so far and that is the size of the parliament. The number of members of the Canadian and British parliament changed six times in both countries during the period under investigation. The first year in which each new assembly size was used and the change from the previous size can be seen in Tables 7 and 8. While it is undeniable that the number of seats available will have some effect on the number of seats that a party wins, an examination of the elections that coincided with the changes in parliament's size demonstrates that this does not present a significant challenge to our findings.

In six of the seven Canadian cases in which the parliament's size changed, the government party's number of seats moved in the opposite direction. When the assembly size increased, the government party lost seats, and in the one instance that the number of seats decreased, the government party gained seats. The exception to this rule occurred in 1949 and

Table 7. Change in the Total Number of Canadian Members of Parliament, 1940 to 1997

Year	Number of Seats	Change
1940	245	—
1949	262	17
1953	265	3
1968	264	-1
1979	282	18
1988	295	13
1997	301	6

Source: See source note for Table 1.

Table 8. Change in the Total Number of Canadian Members of Parliament, 1940 to 1997

Year	Number of Seats	Change
1945	601	—
1950	625	24
1955	630	5
1974	635	5
1983	650	15
1992	651	1
1997	659	8

Source: See source note for Table 2.

does not present a challenge to our findings. The number of seats increased by 17 that year, but the government party gained 65 seats. While the additional available seats may have played a role in that increase, there was still clearly something else at work driving the Liberal's seat increase as it was substantially larger than could be accounted for by those seats added to the parliament. In Britain, there is no apparent pattern. In only 50 percent of the elections in which the size of the parliament increased, the governing party increased its share of the seats. This means that the change in the size of the parliament had no real effect on the relative success or failure of the governing and opposition party.

Conclusions

Exercising the full term allowable between elections is not a good decision for governing parties. The general pattern observed in both the case of Canada and Britain is that the longer the government waits to call the election, the worse their chances for gaining seats. Conversely, the odds for success increase if the government calls the election early, especially in the case of Canada. This may be a parliamentary effect similar to the honeymoon period commonly associated with lower level elections in presidential regimes and the governmental popularity cycle identified in parliamentary regimes (Johnston 1999; Shugart and Carey 1992).

There may also be a relationship between waiting the full five-year period and the mid-term backlash phenomenon often observed in presidential regimes (Scheve and Tomz 1999; Shugart and Carey 1992; Shugart 1995). For example while the Canadian government party lost seats in eight of the ten cases in which it waited near the maximum allowable time to call the election, they only lost their position as the governing party three of those times. This could be a demonstration of some level of frustration with the government from the electorate and a desire to send a message without removing them from power. Another manifestation of this phenomenon can be seen in the fact that in 15 of the 19 Canadian elections under consideration, the opposition party heading into the election either gained seats or maintained their pre-election level of representation. However in the case of Britain, the governing party lost their position in four of the seven elections that went full term, indicating a desire not only to send a message but actually remove the governing party from power.

Our findings would benefit from more country cases and election observations. However, the timing of an election is a fundamental dynamic in many parliamentary regimes. Implicit in our findings is that the timing of an election represents an underlying political reality that faces a governing party. While "time may heal all wounds," waiting to call an election is a generally inferior strategy for governing parties. However it may be argued

that these governing parties that wait the full term would have lost seats (and possibly the election) even in election cycle year two or three. These parties waited the full term maybe because of poor policy or personnel decisions made early in their tenure. The intersection between policy-making and calling an election is an interesting area that deserves greater attention. Election timing in parliamentary regimes is an area worthy of further scholarly inquiry.

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