

Domestic elections and the timing of international decisions¹

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Abstract: This paper investigates the conditions under which domestic elections affect the timing of international decisions. Its central argument is that uncertainty regarding election outcomes has a systematic delaying effect on the timing of international decisions. Specifically, we argue that if the outcome of an election is predictable, and special interests consequently lean towards the winning candidate, governments engaged in international negotiations take a clear stance on the issue under discussion. If the outcome of an election is difficult to predict, however, special interests diversify their campaign contributions. Governments consequently cloud their stance on the issue under discussion, which prevents negotiations from being concluded before Election Day. One of the observable implications of our argument is that uncertain elections “freeze” international negotiations during that limited period of uncertainty. We test this implication on the timing of decision-making in the European Union. We find that electoral cycles exist in EU politics; EU acts are less likely to be adopted in the presence of pending elections with uncertain outcomes. This effect is particularly pronounced in the case of elections to the German Bundestag. Our theory and evidence have important implications for understanding the interaction between politics at the domestic and international levels, as well as for bargaining in the EU.

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Introduction

A wealth of theory and evidence from the study of comparative politics shows how the electoral cycle affects domestic policymaking. According to the literature on political business cycles, leaders seeking reelection take specific policy measures to appear competent in the eyes of voters (Nordhaus 1975; Rogoff 1990). As elections approach, governments use their discretion over fiscal and monetary policies in order to increase economic output. Incumbents with no such discretion have been found to manipulate the timing of elections so as to capitalize on high rates of approval associated with economic growth (Kayser 2005).

However, there is surprisingly little theory or evidence to suggest that electoral cycles have a similar impact on international politics (similarly, Rickard and Caraway forthcoming). Since international topics tend to play a minor role in citizens' voting decisions, it is common to overlook the relevance of national elections for international politics. Existing studies have found that time-invariant electoral factors, such as different electoral systems, affect foreign policy preferences (Grossman and Helpman 2005; Rogowski and Kayser 2002) and leaders' credibility (Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000, 2002; Martin 2000). There is little evidence, however, that domestic elections have a dynamic effect on international politics in the sense that the point in time during an electoral cycle matters for the realization and content of decisions (see, however, Schneider 2013).

We argue that electoral cycles have a systematic effect on international politics, and that this effect takes place through the interaction between governments and special interests, not through voters' preferences. As domestic elections approach, incumbents seeking reelection are increasingly dependent on contributions from special interests. If the election outcome is predictable, special interests concentrate their contributions on the candidate that appears to be winning. This makes it possible for incumbents to take clear stances on issues in international negotiations, regardless of whether or not they are winning. If the outcome of an election is less predictable, however, special interests diversify their campaign contributions across a broader range of candidates. Candidates consequently avoid taking clear stances on issues so as not to repel potential contributors. At the international level, this means that governments facing uncertain domestic elections are unable to take clear positions on the relevant issues under negotiation. Consequently, international negotiations become frozen during periods in which one or more negotiating partners face an election with an uncertain outcome.

We evaluate the theory using the case of decision-making in the European Union (EU). The EU is an ideal laboratory in which to explore the interaction between domestic elections and international negotiations. In contrast to many other international organizations, the EU is a permanent negotiation forum that produces a constant stream of independent decisions. This allows us to test the argument statistically on a large number of observations. Our analysis focuses on the timing of decision-making in more than 14,000 legislative proposals that were introduced in the period 1976-2006. It essentially replicates one of the most recent and comprehensive studies of the duration of EU decision-making (Hertz and Leuffen 2011). The advantage of this approach is that it enables us to demonstrate the new implications of our argument for a relatively well understood and researched phenomenon in international politics. It also allows us to

control for alternative explanations of timing while testing our argument. To foreshadow our findings: we find that electoral cycles exist in EU politics; EU acts are less likely to be adopted in the presence of pending elections with uncertain outcomes. This effect is particularly pronounced in the case of elections to the German Bundestag.

The article contributes to several bodies of literature. First, the finding that domestic elections have a systematic effect on EU negotiations ties the this article to a large literature on the nexus between domestic and international politics (Putnam 1988; Moravcsik 1997). To our knowledge, this is the first article to present a generalizable argument about the conditions under which pending elections affect international politics through the interactions between special interests and candidates. Second, we also contribute to the literature on legislative bargaining in the context of the EU. There are numerous analyses that have identified several factors that affect the duration of decision-making in the EU (Schulz and König 2000; Golub 1999, 2007; Golub and Steunenberg 2007; Hertz and Leuffen 2011). Surprisingly, none of them has examined the impact of domestic elections with uncertain outcomes on this process. Our findings indicate that the magnitude of the effect of uncertain elections is substantively important and far greater than the effect of the decision rule in the Council, which has featured prominently in previous explanations.

The next section reviews the literature on electoral dynamics in domestic and international politics. We then present our argument regarding the effect of domestic elections on the timing of international decisions and focus on one of its observable implications. In the next step, we demonstrate that governments not only have an incentive, but also the means to control the timing of decisions in the EU. We then turn to event-history analysis to investigate if the timing of legislative acts in the EU is affected by the presence of pending domestic elections with uncertain outcomes in one of the large member states. We conclude with a discussion of the next steps in this project as well as its implications for the literature.

Elections and timing in the literature

Research on political business cycles demonstrates convincingly that policymaking depends to a considerable extent on the stage of the electoral cycle. When elections approach, incumbents with discretion over important macroeconomic decisions manipulate economic output so as to appear successful to voters (Nordhaus 1975; Frieden, Ghezzi, and Stein 2000; Bonomo and Terra 2005; Conconi, Facchini, and Zanardi 2012; Rogoff 1990). By implication, there are “electoral honeymoons” immediately after elections (Beckmann and Godfrey 2007) during which governments are more inclined to make necessary but unpopular decisions (Stein and Streb 2004). In a related area of research, scholars investigate how voter perceptions lead to the strategic timing of important decisions, such as elections (Smith 2003; Kayser 2005) or the breakup of coalition governments (Lupia and Strom 1995).²

² There is also a large literature on the timing of other important political actions, such as presidential speeches (Brace and Hinckley 1993), and even the retirement of judges (Hagle 1993; Fukumoto 2009).

In light of the fact that electoral dynamics are so important on the domestic level, there are relatively few studies that consider the effects of electoral dynamics on international politics. Even in studies on legislative bargaining in the EU—generally considered as the international organization that is most closely connected to domestic politics—the time until an election matters only insofar as actors discount future gains.³ Scholars consequently interpret quick decision-making as a sign of an efficient legislative process (Schulz and König 2000; Golub 1999, 2007; Golub and Steunenberg 2007; Hertz and Leuffen 2011), and investigate the factors that influence the duration of this process (Rasmussen 2011). Decision makers’ perceptions of time are also thought to influence decision outcomes. In this context, actors’ patience (Napel and Widgrén 2006) and control over the pace of negotiations (Tsebelis and Money 1997; Rittberger 2000) are considered invaluable sources of bargaining power (see already Rubinstein 1982, 108). Christina Schneider (2013) provides one of the few studies that focuses directly on the effect of domestic elections on international policy outcomes. She identifies “international political business cycles,” in which governments that face elections at home typically receive a disproportionate share of EU funds. She speculates that this is due to EU members’ governments helping one another look appear competent to their national electorates.

Beyond the EU, there is even less evidence that electoral dynamics affect international politics. Most studies on the nexus between domestic elections and international politics investigate time-invariant factors, such as the effect of electoral systems on foreign policy preferences (Grossman and Helpman 2005; Rogowski and Kayser 2002) and a leader’s credibility (Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000, 2002; Martin 2000). Those studies that do explore how pending elections affect international politics focus only on decisions with apparent electoral significance, such as negotiations over international loans (Stone 2008, 607; Rickard and Caraway forthcoming) or international treaties (Milner and Rosendorff 1997).

In short, there is little evidence that electoral cycles matter for international politics. Most studies on the interaction between domestic elections and international politics investigate the effect of time-invariant factors or on the relatively few international decisions that are electorally salient. However, most decisions in international politics, even in the EU, are issues of low salience that do not enter voters’ decisions (Moravcsik 2008; Mair 2000).⁴ Most of the existing literature suggests that domestic electoral cycles have no systematic impact on ordinary international politics. The following section questions this common wisdom by presenting a theory of how electoral cycles affect the

³ In other words, time is a scarce resource and its allocation generates conflict. Based on this assumption, Cox (2005 [1987], 52; Döring 1995) argues that if each legislator had equal access to the floor, legislators would block one another’s bills by taking up the floor for an indefinite amount of time (“filibuster”). He proposes a theory of legislative organization, in which the need to manage legislative time leads to the creation of offices endowed with agenda-setting powers, as well as parties to fill these offices.

⁴ There is some evidence that EU issues occasionally matter in domestic elections, although the effect seems to be more pronounced in countries in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe (de Vries 2007; de Vries and Tillmann 2011). These studies, however, focus on the effect of singular, salient issues, such as those that are the subject of referendums, and do not explore the effect of less salient day-to-day politics.

timing of decisions of low electoral salience through their effect on the dynamics between special interests and governments.

The effect of domestic elections on international politics

We posit that domestic electoral cycles have a systematic impact on international politics through their effect on the interaction between special interests and governments. Specifically, we argue that special interests' expectations about the outcome of an election affect how they allocate contributions across candidates running in an election. This allocation of contributions affects whether governing parties take clear policy stances on issues in international negotiations, which in turn can facilitate or prevent decisions from being taken.

In line with the political economy literature, we assume that governments seeking reelection choose policies that enhance their domestic political support, which is the weighted sum of electoral support for welfare gains and contributions from interest groups in exchange for protection (Grossman and Helpman 1994, 836).⁵ This opportunism subjects a government to constant varying pressure from social groups to pursue their various interests. As elections approach, governments increasingly position themselves so as to maximize their political support and, therefore, their chances of reelection. This positioning, however, is to some extent the result of what they believe voters and interest groups want.

Let us first consider the case of salient issues that directly affect voting decisions. If politicians are fully informed about voters' preferences on these matters, they will take clear positions that sway the maximum number of voters in their direction. In most political economy models, this means that candidates adopt a clear position as close as possible to the median voter's ideal point. If, however, ambiguity surrounds elections in the sense that candidates are not fully informed about the median voter's bliss point, it is no longer in their interest to adopt a clear stance. Instead, they avoid taking a clear position, since ambiguous statements increase the probability that they appeal to the median voter's interest (Shepsle 1972; Glazer 1990).

A similar dynamic is at play regarding issues of low electoral salience that are typically the subject of international economic negotiations, such as tariffs or specific domestic regulations. Since these issues tend to escape the public's attention, politicians that stand in an election will seek to appeal to special interests so as to "sell" policies in return for campaign contributions or any other form of political support that they may use to sway even more voters in their direction (Baron 1994, 44).⁶ As before, this interaction between special interests and candidates depends on expectations about voter preferences. If

⁵ Thus, we assume, for simplicity, that governments strongly prefer reelection to pursuing their personal policy preferences.

⁶ The literature on the US case focuses on campaign contributions that may be used to pay for advertisements. These models apply more generally in other contexts if we acknowledge that politicians may exchange favors for all kinds of political support that may be used to sway undecided voters, including illegal bribes, legal campaign contributions, or public endorsements. We assume that all these types of political support have a positive (direct or indirect) effect on the probability of reelection.

voters are known to favor one candidate over another, special interests will concentrate their contributions on the politician they perceive to be winning (Baron 1989, 62; Morton and Myerson 2012, 580-581). This allows negotiating governments to adopt clear policy positions. An example from the EU illustrates this point. A few months prior to the 2013 elections to the German Bundestag, there was little doubt that the governing Christian Democrats would be confirmed in office. At the same time, the German delegation took a clear stance against a directive on the regulation of CO2 emissions for cars. Its position, which contradicts the German commitment to the EU's environment goals, can be attributed to the lobbying activity of the German car industry, not least a substantial donation of the car maker BMW to the ruling Christian Democrats (euobserver 16 October 2013).

If, however, the outcome of an election is uncertain, a different dynamic ensues. In this case, special interests have no taste for gambling by concentrating their contributions on one candidate. Instead, they diversify their contributions across a larger range of equally promising candidates.⁷ Candidates consequently cloud their stance on an issue in order to attract contributions from a larger number of interests.

The proposition that elections with uncertain outcomes lead politicians to adopt ambiguous positions has consequences for the dynamics of international negotiations. If taking an international decision requires that incumbents and their governments adopt clear stances on the issue being decided on, then both special interests and incumbents have an incentive to hold out until they receive a clearer signal about the likely outcome of the election (similarly, Box-Steffensmeier, Arnold, and Zorn 1997). If the government facing the election is essential for the realization of an international decision, negotiations become "frozen" until the election outcome is clear, which is possibly after the election itself in the case of the closest elections.

Consequently, international politics feature electoral cycles, and these electoral cycles depend on the domestic election being uncertain. The following hypothesis distills one of the observable implications of our argument:

Hypothesis: Intergovernmental negotiations are less likely to be concluded if one or more of the main negotiating governments face an uncertain domestic election.

The remainder of this article tests this hypothesis using the case of decision-making in the EU. The EU is an ideal laboratory to investigate our theory. It constitutes a permanent negotiation forum that produces a large number of largely independent decisions. At the same time, all of its twenty-eight members are democracies that hold elections every few years. Before we proceed to testing our hypothesis, the following section shows how despite the involvement of other supranational actors in the decision-making process, EU governments control, formally and informally, the pace and timing of decisions (Kleine 2013).

⁷ Some models find that uncertainty about voters' preferences might also lead to greater polarization (Herrera, Levine, and Martinelli 2008). However, this result hinges on the assumption that candidates have both policy preferences and an interest in winning per se. Although this might be the case on issues of high salience, it is less plausible with regard to issues of lower salience.

The control over timing in EU decision-making

As with other international organizations, the member states of the EU delegated authority to supranational institutions to help them implement their common objectives. In the case of the EU, however, the common objective is arguably more ambitious than elsewhere; its members pledged to establish a genuine internal market, one in which trade across countries was as easy as trade within countries. Since it was impossible to spell out in detail every single step that was necessary to build a single market, the EU member states set up a legislative procedure that would allow them to adopt a constant stream of individual decisions that would bring them closer to this goal. Thus, in contrast to other international organizations, the decision-making process in the EU is highly formalized and includes other supranational actors with power over the agenda and the final decision. The following section shows that the member states nevertheless have considerable discretion regarding the initiation, pace and conclusion of the legislative process.

The initiation of the legislative process

The EU's legislative procedure starts with a proposal by the Commission, the EU's principal supranational bureaucracy. In most areas, the Commission has the exclusive right to initiate legislative proposals. This broad discretion notwithstanding, the member states have gained some formal and informal control over the initiation of legislative process. An informal norm emerged early on not to present the member states with a *fait accompli*. The norm was put into writing in the so-called "Luxembourg compromise," in which the member states agreed that proposals "are not to be made public until the recipients have had formal notice of them and are in possession of the text (European Communities 1966)." The norm still exists today, not least because the Commission depends on member states' expertise when it prepares legislative proposals (Kleine 2013, chapter 3).

The pace of the legislative process

Once the Commission has officially submitted its legislative proposal, the EU's Council of Ministers, composed of representatives of the EU governments, and the European Parliament, composed of directly elected members, have to agree on it. Despite the involvement of supranational actors, the Council has always had the upper hand when it comes to the pace of the legislative process due to the fact that the Ministers immediately refer legislative proposals to their own government experts in the Council's substructure before dealing with them officially. This substructure consists of the Ministers at the top, the ambassadorial *Comité des Représentants Permanents* (COREPER) in-between, and permanent and ad-hoc working groups at the bottom. Consequently, governments can control the pace of the legislative process by allowing legislative proposals to linger in the substructure until Ministers decide to deal with it officially. Although the fact that states control the pace of decision-making might be the norm in other international organizations, this development was unexpected by practitioners and close observers of the EU. In the early 1970s, after a decade of experience in decision-making, a senior Commission official notes with bemusement that "if an when the Council deals with

them [legislative proposals] lies only to a very little extent in the Commission's sphere of influence. The work rhythm is thus not dependent on the Commission's splendid programs, but contingent on the progress made by national bureaucracies and the permanent representatives (Sasse 1972, 88).” In other words, by referring Commission proposals to a large substructure of government experts, the member states in the Council may stall the legislative process even against the will of supranational actors.

The conclusion of the legislative process

The member states have also substantial discretion over the timing of the conclusion of legal acts despite the involvement of the Commission and EP. With respect to the Commission, formal procedural changes abolished the Commission's right to withdraw its proposal in a later stage of the legislative process. Thus, once Parliament and Council have reached the conciliation stage, the Commission can no longer halt a negotiation.⁸

Although the EP can delay decisions somewhat, it cannot compel a recalcitrant Council to adopt an act, which means that member states retain considerable control over the timing of the conclusion of the legislative process. This is the case both for procedures in which the Council is obliged to consult the EP, as well as for procedures in which the EP has formal decision power. In 1980 the European Court of Justice annulled a legal act when the Council failed to consult the Parliament (European Court of Justice 1980). The ruling consequently turned the Council's consultation of the Parliament from informal complaisance into a right for the Parliament to veto decisions by delaying them indefinitely. Suddenly, the Council was no longer able to determine the timing of the conclusion of the legislative process. When the member states codified this new legislative procedure in the 1986 Single European Act, they consequently obliged the European Parliament to conclude its deliberation within a specific time frame. Thus, the Parliament's *veto by delay* was turned into a *veto by rejection* that still permitted the Council to time the conclusion of the legislative process (Bieber, Pantalis, and Schoo 1986, 779). Despite strengthening the Parliament's bargaining power, subsequent changes to this legislative procedure never did away with the fact that the Council decides when to conclude the legislative process (Bieber 1995, 62). Under the co-decision procedure, which was rebranded the ordinary legislative procedure by the Lisbon Treaty, the EP formally has equal power to the Council. The EP may delay the adoption of an act by extending its deliberations and proposing extensive amendments to the proposal and to the Council's common position. Notwithstanding the EP's considerable power under the OLP, the Council can effectively delay the adoption of an act as long as it wants by allowing the act to languish in its committees' deliberations.

⁸ There is also a general scholarly agreement that changes to the EU's legislative procedures have substantially weakened the Commission's power, since the Parliament and the Council can agree on a joint text regardless of the Commission's approval (Crombez 1997, 113).

Domestic elections and the timing of decisions in the EU

Although the EU's legislative process is highly formalized, the member states have considerable discretion over the timing of EU decisions through their control of the initiation, pace and conclusion of the legislative process. This section now focuses on what the EU member states use this discretion for by testing one of the main implications of our theory, that uncertain domestic elections reduce the likelihood of the adoption of legislative proposals.

The analysis in this section is essentially a replication of previous analyses of the duration of legislative decision-making in the EU (Schulz and König 2000; Golub 1999, 2007; Golub and Steunenbergh 2007; Hertz and Leuffen 2011; König 2007; Best and Settembri 2008). In particular, we build on the latest and most comprehensive study of decision-making speed to date (Hertz and Leuffen 2011). We add new variables referring to uncertain domestic elections in the largest member states to a model of decision-making duration, along with other variables that influence the timing of EU decision-making. The main advantage of this research approach is that it demonstrates our argument has important and previously unrecognized implications for a relatively well-scrutinized phenomenon in international politics, by demonstrating that our variables of interest add to existing explanations.

Although we essentially replicate previous analyses of the duration of EU decision-making, our focus differs from that of scholars who examined this topic previously. Our interest lies in whether or not EU decisions are less likely prior to uncertain domestic elections. By contrast, previous research was concerned with variation in the absolute duration of the decision-making process, which many researchers view as an indication of efficiency in the decision-making process. In other words, we are interested in *timing*, rather than total *duration*. Our argument does not necessarily imply that the total length of the decision-making process will be longer if there is an uncertain election between the introduction and adoption of a legislative act. It simply implies that the adoption of an act is less likely in the run-up to an uncertain election, compared to the period (long) before or after the uncertain election. Despite our distinct focus on timing, our analysis must also consider the main explanations of the duration of the EU's legislative process.

Identifying the time period before uncertain elections

To test our argument, we identify uncertain elections in the EU's largest member states. We consider all national elections in the EU's three largest and most powerful member states—Germany, France and the United Kingdom—in the period 1976-2009 (Table 1). As described in more detail below, the data we use on the duration of EU decision-making refers to this 33-year period. There were 30 national elections in these three countries, 10 in Germany, 13 in France and seven in the UK. We define an uncertain election as an election in which the largest party's popular vote share was less than five points ahead of the second largest party. Eight of the 30 elections fall under this definition of uncertain elections: three in Germany, four in France and one in the UK. We take the two months prior to the date of these narrowly won elections as our measure of the period before uncertain elections.

Table 1 about here

The results are likely to be affected somewhat by our operationalization of the period before uncertain elections in terms of the countries included, measure of closeness of election results used, and the length of time prior to the dates of elections considered. So far, our robustness tests with different measures of closeness and the length of time prior to elections (see below) indicate that the substantive findings are robust to different operationalizations.

With respect to the countries considered, we argue that timing is affected by uncertain elections in the large member states that are the most powerful actors in the Council, not necessarily by uncertain elections in small and medium-sized member states. The support of these large member states is usually essential to forming winning coalitions in the Council. Even when these countries could technically be outvoted in the Council according to the qualified majority voting procedure, the prevailing norm is that the Council negotiators would persevere until an agreement acceptable to them is found (e.g. Lewis 2008; Mattila 2009). Moreover, from a transaction-costs perspective, winning coalitions with fewer member states, which by definition include large member states that have more votes, can be assembled more efficiently.

Regarding the measure of closeness used, a five percent difference between the first and second most popular parties in the popular vote is a reasonable way of categorizing certain and uncertain elections. An alternative measure based on the difference in seat shares between the first and second most popular party yielded substantively similar results. In future iterations we will explore the full variation in uncertainty more systematically. Alternative measures of uncertainty, for instance based on data from polls held prior to elections, are also worth considering. With respect to French two-round elections, we take the results of the final second round. However, there may be considerable uncertainty regarding the outcome of the first round, but 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. The effect of this is likely to be to limit variation on our independent variable, which may lead us to underestimate the magnitude of the causal effect. Moreover, in disproportional systems, depending on the geographical distribution of votes, a narrow margin in the popular vote can turn into a large parliamentary majority, which may be an indication of lack of uncertainty. This was the case, for instance, regarding the UK election of 2005, the only UK election in the 30-year period we describe as uncertain. Note that if we were to take a five percent margin of seats rather than popular votes, none of the UK elections would be classed as uncertain. This discussion also highlights the importance of considering the effects of uncertain elections in different countries separately, as we do in the following analysis.

Existing explanations of the duration of EU decision-making

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 include the number of member states and the backlog of pending proposals at

any given point in time, while proposal characteristics include the Council voting rule (unanimity or qualified majority voting, QMV) that applies and the involvement of the European Parliament (consultation or codecision compared to other legislative procedures). Contextual variables account for variation in the duration of decision-making over time. Proposal characteristics account for variation in the duration of decision-making among legislative proposals that are pending at any given point in time, as well as variation in duration over time as, for instance, the use of QMV and involvement of the EP have increased in more recent periods. Our variables relating to pending uncertain elections are short-lived contextual variables. We find lower rates of adoption in all types of proposals in the period prior to uncertain elections, controlling for other relevant explanations of duration.

The existing research on this topic arrives at different conclusions regarding the impact of EU enlargement on the speed of decision-making. Golub's (2007) hypothesis and findings suggest that enlargement speeds up decision making since it makes a larger number of winning coalitions possible. By contrast König (2007) and Hertz and Leuffen (2011) expect and find that enlargement causes longer decision-making processes. Hertz and Leuffen's analysis is arguably the most sophisticated in that it uses the largest dataset and introduces time-varying covariates to examine enlargement effects. Our analysis follows Hertz and Leuffen's design most closely by using the same dataset and statistical model. So unsurprisingly we replicate their results in this respect.

Another relevant contextual variables is the size of the backlog of pending proposals (Golub 1999, 2007). The reasoning behind the inclusion of this variable is that a large backlog of proposals leads to pressure on decision makers to reduce the duration of decision-making so as to decrease the size of the backlog. The evidence from existing research tends to support this conjecture.

Given our interest in the impact of uncertain domestic elections, we add a new contextual variable: namely, the month of August. EU business in Brussels grinds to a halt in this summer month and we therefore expect few proposals to be adopted in August. It is particularly important to control for this peculiarity of EU politics since four of the eight uncertain national elections we identified were held in September or October (German Bundestag elections are usually held in September). So without controlling for August effect, we would not know if the significant effect of pending close elections was due to the fact that that a considerable part of this time fell in August or was due to the domestic elections with which we are concerned.

Among the relevant proposal characteristics, legislative procedures relating to the Council voting rule and EP involvement must be considered. We expect proposals subject to the qualified majority voting rule to be decided on more quickly than those subject to unanimity. Even though formal votes are seldom held in the Council, the possibility of a vote in which a dissenting minority could be outvoted may act as an encouragement to accelerate decision-making. This effect of QMV was referred to as deciding "in the shadow of the vote" by Golub (1999). With regard to the involvement of the EP, existing research generally agrees that expanding the powers of the EP beyond consultation increase the duration of decision-making (Golub 1999, 743; Schulz and König 2000, 657). Consequently, these authors suggest there is a tradeoff between representation and efficiency in the EU.

Finally, in line with existing research, we 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. Directives often have substantial distributional consequences and need to be transposed into national laws in the process of application, which can give rise to substantial domestic and European-level debates (Schulz and König 2000, 657). Existing studies generally find that directives take longer to process than regulations and decisions.

Analysis

We base our analysis on a dataset assembled by Hertz and Leuffen (2011), which they collated using the main databases for monitoring EU legislative procedures, PreLex and EURLex. The dataset we use contains information on 14,396 legislative proposals that were introduced in the period 1976-2006, including directives, regulations and decisions. Crucially, the dataset 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 uncertain elections, while controlling for the other factors we know are relevant. After recoding for time-varying covariates, we have 70,285 “episodes,” or periods of time within which all our independent variables have the same values. Our dependent variable “time at risk” is the number of days between the introduction of the proposal (or start of the episode) and the adoption (or in a few cases rejection or withdrawal) of the legislative proposal (or the end of the episode). The total number of days in our analysis is 5,936,931.

Following the advice of Golub (2007) and Hertz and Leuffen (2011) we implement 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 (1994) test, which assesses whether the proportional hazards assumption holds, on each of our independent variables. We introduced interactions with the log of time for the variables for which the proportional hazards assumption could be rejected ($p < .05$). This involved introducing interactions for all of our control variables, with the exception of QMV. The proportional hazards assumption could not be rejected for any of our three variables of interest, which refer to uncertain elections. This is fortunate since it makes the interpretation of our main findings more straightforward. The resulting model is given in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

The main inference we draw from the model in Table 2 is that proposals are significantly less likely to be adopted in the EU in the months prior to national elections with uncertain outcomes in Germany, France and the UK. The effect of uncertain elections in Germany is particularly strong. The three relevant coefficients are all negative and significant. The exponents of the coefficients are the hazard ratios, which have a more intuitive interpretation. The exponent of the coefficient for Germany is .40, which means that the hazard (or more loosely the chance) of a proposal being adopted is 60 percent lower than

the baseline hazard function in the two months before uncertain German elections. Similarly, the exponent of the coefficient for France is .60, which signifies a 40 percent reduction in the hazard of adoption. The exponent of the coefficient for the UK, .70, indicates a 30 percent reduction in the hazard of adoption.

The effects of the other variables are in line with those Hertz and Leuffen's (2011) study and several other studies. The use of QMV in the Council significantly expedites decision-making. The exponentiated coefficient indicates that the hazard of adoption is 55 percent higher when QMV rather than the unanimity rule applies in the Council.

The remaining variables have more complex effects since the magnitude and direction of their effects vary over the lifetime of a proposal. With respect to enlargement, in line with Herz and Leuffen's (2011) results, we find that the effect of adding more member states is generally to lengthen the decision making process. The coefficient associated with the direct effect, $-.08$ ($\text{Exp}(b)=.93$), indicates that on the first day after the introduction of a proposal, each additional member state reduces the hazard of adoption by 7 percent. Even after 300 days, the effect of additional member states is still to lengthen the duration of decision making ($-.08 + (.01 * \ln(300)) = -.02$). Only towards the end of very long decision-making processes do additional member states expedite the decision-making process. Similarly, involving the EP more meaningfully by applying the cooperation or co-decision procedures generally lengthens the duration of decision-making. At 100 days, which is approximately the median decision-making time, the effect of co-decision is ($-6.13 + (.97 * \ln(100)) = -1.66$). However, toward the end of long pending proposals, EP involvement speeds up decision-making. Proposals for directives take longer to decide than proposals for decisions and regulations. At 100 days in the lifetime of a legislative proposal, the effect is -1.18 , the exponent of which (.31) indicates that the hazard of adoption is 69 percent lower for directives than decisions and regulations. A larger backlog of proposals is associated with quicker decision-making; at 100 days, a greater backlog of pending proposals is associated with a higher hazard of adoption. Acts are very unlikely to be adopted in August; at 100 days, the hazard of adoption in August is 94 percent lower than in other months ($b=1.83 + (-1.00)\ln(100)=-2.78$; $\text{Exp}(2.78)=.06$).⁹ The effects of these variables are not our primary concern. However, the fact that they are consistent with previous findings and that our analysis controls for them strengthens our confidence in our findings regarding the effects of uncertain elections in large member states.

⁹ In supplementary robustness tests not presented here, we also controlled for the range of ideological positions of member states' governments using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project compiled by Herz and Leuffen (2011). This did not change the significance or substance of the findings reported here. We did not present the model with that variable since we are not convinced of the theoretical or empirical rationale for including the ideological positions of member states' governments. On the contrary, existing empirical research indicates that there is virtually no relationship between governments' general ideological positions and their positions on specific issues in EU legislative decision-making. Rather their positions are motivated by specific national and sectoral interests (Thomson 2011).

Conclusions

While it is well known that the timing of national elections affects national policies, there has been little theory or empirical evidence to suggest that national elections affect international politics. We develop a theoretical argument and present quantitative evidence that supports one of its important observable implications. Our argument highlights the role of candidates' use of ambiguity in the face of uncertain election outcomes. When these candidates are incumbents involved in international negotiations, such ambiguity in position taking stalls progress at the international level. The mechanism to which we refer is relevant to issues of relatively low electoral salience, such as the regulatory issues that dominate the European Union's agenda. Here, interest groups and their campaign contributions play an important role. In accordance with existing studies, we make the plausible assumption that interest groups wish to support the party or parties that are likely to be in government after elections (Baron 1989, 62; Morton and Myerson 2012, 580-581). In close elections, it is unclear which parties these are, and consequently interest groups may withhold or spread their campaign contributions. Candidates, including the incumbents involved in international negotiations, respond to interest groups behavior by taking ambiguous positions. Even on issues of high electoral salience, it may also be rational for parties to take ambiguous positions to appeal to the median voter (Shepsle 1972; Glazer 1990).

This theoretical argument has several observable implications, one of which is examined in the present study: that legislative proposals in the EU are significantly less likely to be adopted in the run-up to national elections of which the outcomes are uncertain in large member states. The advantage of selecting this observable implication is that the duration of lawmaking in the EU has been the subject of several previous studies that did not consider the impact of domestic elections in this way. This previous research examined duration as an important indication of the efficiency of the EU's system of legislative decision-making. Consequently, we were able to demonstrate that our theory adds to existing explanations of a relatively well-documented phenomenon that is widely recognized to be a relevant indicator of efficiency. We find that uncertain national elections significantly reduce the likelihood of proposals being adopted. The magnitudes of the effects are substantively important. Prior to uncertain elections to the German Bundestag, for instance, the risk of adoption is 60 percent lower than at other times. This effect is greater than the effect of the decision rule in the Council, which has featured prominently in previous explanations.

The relevance of our argument is not limited to the timing of decision-making or to EU politics. Several of the existing studies we discussed above find that electoral systems and pending elections affect the timing and substance of negotiations on regional trade agreements or in the context of the International Monetary Fund. Future research could examine if these effects are stronger in electoral systems that tend to produce closer outcomes and in specific elections that are particularly close.

Future research could also examine alternative explanations for our key finding. The first alternative explanation refers to the behavior of actors other than the state in which the uncertain election is pending. These actors may wish to avoid investing time and effort in reaching a political agreement with a government facing an uncertain election since they may have to renegotiate when a new government comes to power. Although it is

prohibitively difficult for individual EU governments to unravel decisions once they are adopted,¹⁰ this alternative explanation is relevant in other contexts where, to enter into effect, international agreements still have to be ratified at the national level. If concerns about the time-inconsistent preferences rather than the uncertainty of an election outcome affect the timing of decisions, we should find that national elections with uncertain outcomes have an effect only for issues on which the main national parties hold differing positions.

The second alternative explanation refers to the behavior of governments that face domestic elections. Prior to an election, national politicians may simply be more occupied with national affairs and have less time to devote to EU decision-making. In this case, we should find an effect for all national elections, although the effect may well be stronger in the event of a close election. A related argument refers to national politicians' belief that they have a mandate to govern (Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2005). This belief is renewed after each election and becomes weakest just prior to an election. It is common practice for governments to suspend politically sensitive decisions until after the election. In this case, the effect of uncertain elections should depend on the salience of an issue.

Notwithstanding the substantive importance of timing as a relevant and readily quantifiable implication of our argument, there are also other parts of and implications of the argument worth examining. Although previous studies have established the importance of campaign contributions for trade policy (see, e.g., Gawande and Magee 2012), there are few empirical tests of the argument that the closeness of an election alters the dynamic between candidates and special interests. Our assumption that in the face of uncertain elections, interest groups spread their campaign contributions could be tested with data on campaign contributions made by major interest groups at the domestic level that are also important lobbyists of national governments in relation to EU policymaking. There is a substantial literature on lobbying by interest groups in the EU (Coen and Richardson 2009). Despite the widely shared view that the process of interest intermediation is an exchange of resources between special interests and policymakers (Bouwen 2004; Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007, 206-11), studies based on the resource exchange model have focused mainly on the receipt of access, voice and policy influence by interest groups and the receipt of expert knowledge and input legitimacy by policymakers. The literature has devoted less attention to explaining variation in the allocation of campaign contributions by special interests.

Our argument also has implications for the extent to which governments and the main national political parties take clear policy positions on issues in international negotiations. Rational choice explanations typically treat actors' policy positions and the levels of salience they attach to the relevant issues as exogenous variables that define the possibilities for package deals and logrolling (see, e.g., Dijkstra, Van Assen, and Stokman 2008; Kardasheva 2013). However, researchers have devoted less attention to the causes of variation in governments and parties' position taking and issue salience. While some consider the absence of a policy position to mean that an actor is indifferent to an outcome, our argument implies that this may also be the result of deliberate

¹⁰ According to the European Court of Justice, EU law has "direct effect" (it is the law of the land) the moment it is adopted. Thus, citizens can sue their government for the failure to implement EU law.

ambiguity in the sense that actors temporarily refrain from adopting a clear position. This topic is of broader concern to the study of international bargaining. Many analyses of international bargaining are static in that they assume states' interests are given and fixed. By contrast, our argument implies that states' interests are subject to changing interpretations by governments over time, as special interests reallocate their investments in campaign contributions in response to changes in parties' electoral fortunes.

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Tables

Table 1: Elections in Germany, France, UK, 1976-2009

Country	Date	Final outcome, 1 st and 2 nd largest parties/candidates (vote share)	Final outcome, 1 st and 2 nd largest parties/candidates (seat share)	Close election
Germany	10/03/1976	CDU (48.6), SPD (42.6)	CDU (49), SPD (43.2)	No
	10/05/1980	CDU (44.5), SPD (42.9)	CDU (45.6), SPD (43.9)	Yes
	03/06/1983	CDU (49), SPD (38)	CDU (49), SPD (39)	No
	01/25/1987	CDU (44.2), SPD (37)	CDU (45), SPD (37)	No
	09/02/1990	CDU (44), SPD (34)	CDU (48), SPD (36)	No
	10/16/1994	CDU (41.5), SPD (36.4)	CDU (43.7), SPD (37.5)	No
	09/27/1998	SPD (40.9), CDU (35.2)	SPD (44.5), CDU (36.6)	No
	09/22/2002	SPD (36), CDU (36)	SPD (42), CDU (41)	Yes
	09/18/2005	CDU (35), SPD (34)	CDU (37), SPD (36)	Yes
	09/27/2009	CDU (34), SPD (23)	CDU (38), SPD (23)	No
France	05/10/1981	Mit (51.7), GDE (48.2)		Yes
Presidential	05/08/1988	Mit (54), Ch (46)		No
	05/07/1995	Ch (52.6), Jos (47.3)		No
	05/05/2002	Ch (82), LP (18)		No
	05/06/2007	Sar (53), Roy (47)		No
Assemblée Nationale	03/19/1978	RPR (26), PS (28)	RPR (30.5), UDF (24.6)	Yes
	06/21/1981	PS (49), RPR (22)	PS (54.7), PRP (17)	No
	03/16/1986	PS (31), RPR (21)	PS (36), RPR (26)	No
	06/12/1988	PS (45), RPR (23)	PS (45), UDF (22.3)	No
	03/28/1993	RPR (29), UDF (26)	RPR (41.9), UDF (35.8)	Yes
	05/25/1997	PS (38), RPR (22)	PS (44), RPR (24)	No
	06/16/2002	UMP (47), PS (35)	UMP (69), PS (24)	No
	06/17/2007	UMP (46), PS (42)	UMP (54.2), PS (32)	Yes
UK	05/03/1979	C (44), L (37)	C (53.4), L (42.4)	No
	06/09/1983	C (42), L (28)	C (61), L (32)	No
	06/11/1987	C (42), L (31)	C (57.8), L (35.2)	No
	04/09/1992	C (42), L (34)	C (51.7), L (41.6)	No
	05/01/1997	L (43), C (31)	L (63.4), C (25)	No
	06/07/2001	L (41), C (32)	L (62.5), C (25.2)	No
	05/05/2005	L (35), C (32)	L (55.2), C (30.7)	Yes

Note: Elections classified as close if the lead of the first party was less than five percent of the popular vote. Dates of French two-round elections refer to the date of the second vote.

Table 2 The effect of close elections in large member states on the duration of decision-making

	b	Exp(b)	s.e.	p
60 days before close elections in:				
Germany	-.92	.40	.16	.00
France	-.52	.60	.08	.00
UK	-.36	.70	.16	.02
<i>Controls</i>				
QMV in Council	.44	1.55	.02	.00
Number of EU member states	-.08	.93	.01	.00
EP involvement				
Cooperation	-7.74	<.01	.39	.00
Co-decision	-6.13	<.01	.39	.00
Directive	-3.90	.02	.21	.00
Backlog	.71	2.03	.04	.00
Month (August)	1.83	6.23	.29	.00
<i>Time varying covariates</i>				
Number of EU member states*ln(t)	.01	1.01	.00	.00
Cooperation*ln(t)	1.22	3.38	.07	.00
Co-decision*ln(t)	.97	2.63	.07	.00
Directive*ln(t)	.59	1.80	.04	.00
Backlog*ln(t)	-.12	.89	.01	.00
Month (August)*ln(t)	-1.00	.37	.08	.00
n	14,396			
Decision days	5,936,931			
Log pseudolikelihood	-105048.25			
Wald chi2 (p)	2929.24 (.00)			

Note: Backlog is the number of pending legislative acts divided by 100 to ensure that the coefficients are not rounded of to .00.