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Beyond First Elections: The Importance of Consistency in the Timing of Recurrent Elections*

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Abstract

Is the regularity of elections a requisite for political stability? Scholars have empirically examined a number of features regarding elections in new democracies, including frequency, alternation, and orderliness, but little work has considered the potential impacts of consistency in the intervals in which they occur. Notwithstanding, predominant conceptualizations of democracy require that governments hold elections at regular intervals. This study examines the extent to which the regularity of the intervals in which elections occur affects political stability. Using newly released data from the Varieties of Democracy project, we estimate a model predicting internal armed conflict based on the pattern of previous elections. We argue that consistent election intervals send a valuable signal of actors' commitment to regularly hold elections, in part by providing a focal point for coordinated actions in the future. By better specifying the multiple ways in which elections are time-dependent, the analysis contributes to a more robust consideration of the means by which elections promote power-sharing under tenuous circumstances.

1. Introduction

Is the regularity of elections a requisite for political stability? Definitions of democracy either explicitly require or implicitly assume that elections are held at regular intervals. Yet, in reality this is not often the case. From 1900 to 2012 only four of the 166 countries with records of repeated legislative elections have held them at regular intervals. Many of these electoral regimes have proven unstable—some experiencing military coups and even civil war—while others have turned into institutionalized democracies. Yet, no study has examined the systematic impact of ‘off-cycle’ elections on the prospects for domestic stability and political longevity. This study addresses that gap by seeking to answer the important question of whether elections must be held at regular intervals in order for political stability to persist.

We hypothesize that the consistency of elections—their occurrence at regular intervals—matters for perpetuation of stability. In short, the theory is that if elections represent “institutionalized uncertainty,” the consistency with which elections occur should affect actors’ perception of certainty that elections will continue to occur. More irregularity in terms of the intervals between elections should make actors’ less certain that another election will in fact be held at all. Electoral consistency should therefore increase actors’ incentives for accepting a current electoral loss, in anticipation of the next election. Where elections frequently deviate from normal intervals, actors should feel less certain and therefore be more willing to challenge the status quo through unconstitutional means, such as armed conflict. We also hypothesize that this effect should be stronger in new democracies and at lower levels. In countries with a high level of democracy that has persisted for a long time, actors’ trust that elections will reoccur should not be affected much by some variation in intervals between elections.

We test the argument with a model predicting the likelihood of internal armed conflict and civil war for countries coded as electoral regimes in the Varieties of Democracy dataset (Coppedge et al., 2015c) between 1900 and 2012. In support of the theory, the results show that a lack of consistency of legislative elections’ intervals is associated with a higher risk of internal armed conflict and civil war. This holds both when using a binary indicator

of whether each subsequent election was held at the same interval as the last, as well as when using a measure representing deviation from the average intervals between elections. The relationship is robust to a number of alternative specifications and the inclusion of controls. The analysis fails to find empirical support for the theoretical expectation that the effect diminishes at higher levels of democratic consolidation, however, as proxied for by an interaction term between the measure of deviation and an index of electoral democracy.

This study contributes to scholarship on elections in autocracies and new democracies, and their effects on conflict, by testing a key theoretical mechanism by which they may contribute to political stability (Fearon, 2011). Primarily, the finding that consistency in the intervals between legislative elections matters underscores the expectation that credibility problems persist beyond first elections among opposition actors. In the following sections, we discuss the role of elections in institutionalizing uncertainty and present the hypotheses regarding election regularity and political stability. We present an approach to measuring election consistency, and summarize the results of empirical models predicting internal armed conflict and civil war. The results encourage scholars to critically consider the different timing mechanisms involved in elections and their potential impacts on political transitions.

2. Theory

While multiparty elections do not equate democracy—an inference that would constitute a ‘fallacy of electoralism’ (Karl, 1986)—they are nonetheless necessary for it (Huntington, 1991 pg. 9; Linz and Stepan, 1996, pg.2). Critically, democracy is a system where losers accept their lot under conditions of “institutionalized uncertainty” (Przeworski, 1991, pg. 10). Yet, the trappings of democracy in the form of regularly held multiparty elections are now common also among electoral authoritarian regimes (Schedler, 2006). An extensive literature has emerged debating if repeated multiparty elections in these settings promote authoritarian stability (e.g. Greene, 2007; Lust, 2009; Magaloni, 2008; Malesky and

Schuler, 2011; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007), or rather further democratization (e.g. Beissinger, 2007; Di Palma, 1990, Edgell and Lindberg, 2015; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Lindberg, 2006, Lindberg, 2009; Miller, 2015; Schedler, 2009), and if holding elections “too early” increases the risk of conflict (e.g. Brancati and Snyder, 2011; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012; Reilly, 2002). One important aspect of repeated elections that the current literature is silent on, is the consequences of the potential uncertainty created by incumbents finding ways to alter *when* elections are held. While the literature has analyzed many aspects of the “menu of manipulation” (Schedler, 2002) the effect of varying intervals between elections on regime instability has not be scrutinized before to the best of our knowledge.

Yet, marshaling multiparty elections have increasingly been used as part and parcel of political transitions involving redistributive and other conflicts. As noted by Joshi et al. (2015), “[e]lections have become the primary mechanism since the Cold War for regulating political contestation among conflict parties emerging from civil war through a negotiated settlement” (pg. 2). At the heart of political transitions is uncertainty—politicians have a hard time committing to democracy, making elections both tenuous and vital (Brancati and Snyder, 2011, Flores and Nooruddin, 2012, Joshi et al., 2015). This is exemplified by the observation of countries returning to war after elections under weak institutions (Brancati and Snyder, 2011, Flores and Nooruddin, 2012). The credibility of elections presents a multifaceted problem that may depend on a number of factors—whether elections occur, how soon they occur, and if they occur on time (Bratton, 1998, Brancati and Snyder, 2011, Cederman et al., 2012, Cheibub and Hays, 2015, Flores and Nooruddin, 2012).

At their onset, elections can help temper actors’ preferences for armed conflict. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) argue that by sending a credible signal of elites’ willingness to commit to future redistribution, democratization can prevent armed revolt in the short term. Nevertheless, the potential for violence does not end with ‘founding elections’ (Schmitter, 1994). A series of “first election” failures in democratizing countries after 1974 underscores the vulnerability that continues despite elections (Huntington, 1991, Lindberg, 2006, Schmitter, 1994). To the extent that elections mark the

inauguration of a transition to democracy, they should only do so by *beginning* to place boundaries on uncertainty associated with the transition. Among the actors considering competing in future elections, it remains unclear whether each of the actors will abide by the results of the election and whether there will be subsequent contests for office (Bratton, 1998). Thus, while the initial turn to elections may prevent conflict by adding credibility to elites' promises, for representatives weighing armed conflict as an option, credibility issues should remain that continue to threaten political stability for some time.

Several questions persist regarding credibility problems beyond initial elections. The first and perhaps most important credibility problem that actors must contend with after initial elections concerns adherence to the rules. Why would actors continue to choose elections over violence when elections do not produce their desired outcomes? This reputational concern can be mitigated by repeated elections, which signal a "well-functioning" arrangement and serve as "confidence building measures" (Joshi et al., 2015, pg. 2). Consistent elections should contribute to renewing commitments to regime stability by guaranteeing that the interests of ruling elites and their opposition will be given a continued space for articulation and contest (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006, O'Donnell and Whitehead, 1986).

Subsequent to initial elections, the *consistency* of election intervals can provide a source of stability by establishing common expectations regarding the next opportunity to compete for office. Electoral 'losers' in the present round should be less likely to extra-constitutionally challenge the results if there are 'focal points' for legitimately winning in the next election. By lengthening elites' time-horizons, regularly occurring elections may be enough to convince dissatisfied participants that there will be another opportunity to pursue their goals. An election schedule can also enhance credibility by setting the dates for future elections. Creating and adhering to an electoral schedule signals at least minimal willingness to observe constitutional constraints and to accept the outcomes of the electoral process (Bratton, 1998, Joshi et al., 2015). Regularly occurring elections can thus encourage elites to accept current losses and continue to participate.

Non-elites' preferences for elections may be conditioned by their expectations

regarding the prospects for collective action, which is in turn affected by the regularity of elections (Przeworski, 1991). Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) argue that the temporary threat of collective action by non-elites induces elites to offer elections as a way of institutionalizing citizen power in order to prevent revolution. After forgoing action in the present, however, it can become exceedingly difficult to organize in the future. Svolik (2013) and Meiowitz and Tucker (2013) demonstrate that repeatedly poor performance under “democratic” practices can undermine citizens’ willingness to organize. If choosing to accept elections over revolution renders citizens vulnerable to exacerbated collective action problems in the future, non-elites may only be willing to accept elections if there are mechanisms that help to lower the threshold for action in the future. Regular election intervals do this by providing clearly defined opportunities for organizing in the future.

By stipulating when future elections ought to occur, opposing actors can anticipate opportunities in which coordination would be easier and may thus be more willing to forego present action. As Fearon (2011) argued, “it is the commonly understood convention of holding elections at particular times according to known rules, not the electoral outcome itself, that provides a public signal for coordinating rebellion in the event that elections are suspended or blatantly rigged” (pg. 1676). The timing mechanism provided by regular election intervals for citizens to hold their government accountable is considered a critical feature that makes democracy “self-enforcing” (Fearon, 2011, Weingast, 1997). As a result, citizens’ preferences for elections over revolution may stem in part from the expectation that there are *regularized* opportunities for future action.

There are some additional ways in which consistently occurring elections may enhance political stability, especially where other critical aspects—such as the actors and their agendas—are in flux. Regular intervals between elections may support the need to aggregate information about, and to adjust, macroeconomic and political performance in between elections. Several studies consider this by looking at the relationship between election cycles and international war (Gaubatz, 1991) and economic fluctuations surrounding the timing of elections (Blaydes, 2006, Remmer, 1993). The consistency provided by a regular election schedule should also be expected to moderate negative

effects of highly volatile elections and political extremism (Epperly, 2011). Given a higher degree of certainty associated with the expectation of a forthcoming election, an actor may be more willing to moderate their behavior in order to win legitimately because they foresee the possibility of a future electoral victory. Moreover, a regular electoral schedule may matter for evening the playing field. Off-cycle elections attract lower voter turnout, which has the capacity to privilege some interest groups over others (Anzia, 2011; 2012).

In sum, in order to initially deter the threat of opposition violence, rulers may offer elections to signal their commitment to allowing the articulation of interests and space for contestation. Yet, while initial elections may add credibility to promises and prompt a political transition, additional credibility mechanisms are probably necessary to keep the momentum going. The consistency of regular intervals between elections provides greater certainty about the institutionalized opportunities for future contestation and collective action, helping to provide such credibility. Due to the role of elections in institutionalizing uncertainty, especially in new or fragile democracies, we argue that they should be more effective in terms of providing political stability when they occur at regular intervals. The first theoretical expectation can therefore be expressed in the following hypothesis:

H₁: Consistent elections are associated with greater political stability.

‘Consistent’ may admittedly have two connotations. As the quality of not deviating from individuals’ expectations, consistent elections can refer to elections that adhere to formal requirements of terms. Elections may not need to occur at strict intervals, so long as there are commonly held beliefs about their timing. In multiparty parliamentary democracies such as Britain for example, legislative majorities can sometimes force early elections, which is consistent with voters’ expectations (Lupia and Strøm, 1995). More strictly speaking, electoral consistency means that they occur at equal intervals in accordance with a known schedule. The theory above suggests that adherence to a repetitive electoral schedule should provide a higher degree of certainty for actors and thus lower the incentives for the use of alternative means such as violence. This effect should be mostly visible in young democracies and countries transitioning toward democracy,

precisely because of a lack of assuring experience of when elections should re-occur.

The violence-reducing impacts of electoral regularity need not depend on a formal schedule, however; the certainty with which actors continue to participate in elections should be largely based on iterative practice. If asymmetric information disposes one to resort to violence, then each subsequent election should lessen the preference for conflict by providing incrementally more information about the likelihood that another election would occur within the same time frame. This hearkens to classic games in which individuals update their beliefs based on iterative play (Axelrod, 1984). In transitional situations characterized by high uncertainty, therefore, actors may rely on the *timing* of elections as an indicator of reliability. As a result, elections that are held at consistent intervals should constitute an important source of reputational credibility. “When a critical mass of citizens has reason to believe that other citizens and key elites expect democratic rules to stay in place and electoral politics to prevail, such a belief is likely to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Lindberg, 2009, pg. 91).

Among countries transitioning to democracy, the consistent timing of repeated elections should be particularly important due to its formative ability to institutionalize a reassuring level of certainty about the likelihood of the next election. All the same, the credibility of elections is also at stake in electoral authoritarian regimes, which regularly hold scheduled elections and resort to subtle electoral fraud (Levitsky and Way, 2010, Morse, 2012, Schedler, 2002). The difficulties associated with regularizing participation by political opponents and governing the masses should be greater where elections are newer or the legitimacy of the regime is in question. As a result, the gray zone that has been referred to as ‘illiberal democracy’ and ‘semi-democracy’ may be where consistent elections matter most. The theoretical expectations of a socialization effect, whereby repeated elections lead to greater political stability, should have limited explanatory power in more consolidated democracies. As a result, we expect that the stabilizing effect of regular election intervals is diminished in more democratic countries:

H₂: Consistent elections are associated with greater political stability in less democratic countries.

3. Research Design

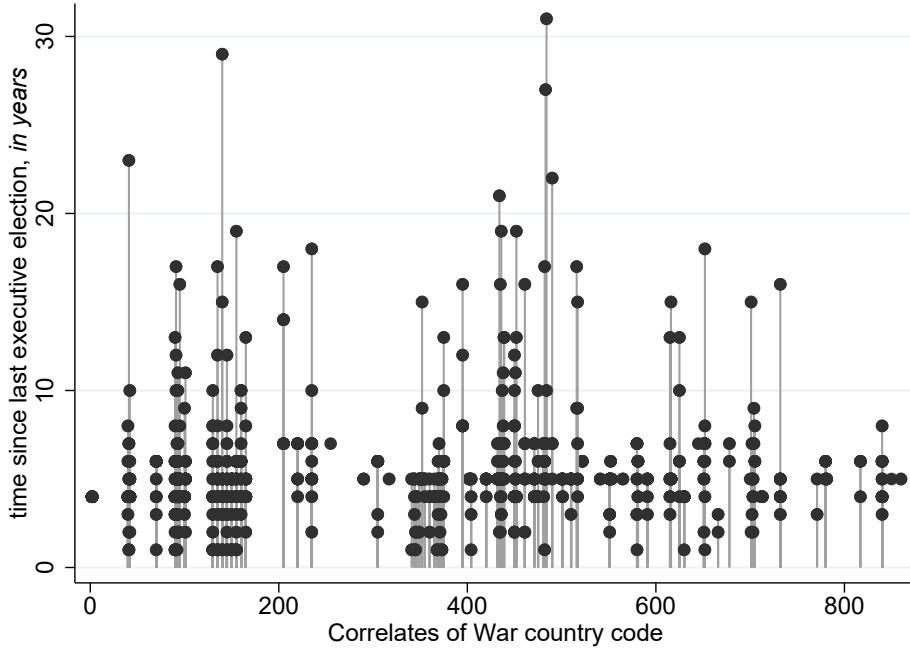
We expect regular election intervals to augment political stability, primarily so in transitioning and new democracies, and in electoral authoritarian regimes. More specifically, we expect that consistency in the timing of elections is negatively associated with political instability—and, conversely, that greater irregularity in the intervals between elections makes political instability more likely. The null hypothesis is that the time between elections does not make a country more politically stable. At the same time, we expect that this effect is moderated by the extent to which the country is democratic, such that changes in the election cycle should have a greater effect in less democratic countries.

To measure the intervals between elections, we rely on data provided by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al., 2015*b*). The V-Dem data are the culmination of a collaborative effort of more than 50 scholars, employing over 2,500 country experts, to accurately document attributes of democracy for 173 countries from 1900 to the present.¹ For each year, the data denote whether an executive election occurred, as well as whether an election occurred for the legislative or constituent assembly. Based on these binary indicators, we calculated the number of years that transpired between each type of election.

Figure 1 depicts the variation in the timing of executive elections. In the figure, vertical lines denote countries that had elections at more than one interval. Interestingly, of the 115 countries that have had executive-electoral regimes—holding regularly scheduled direct elections for the executive—only 21 countries appeared to have no variation in the time between executive elections. The most consistent is the United States, which has held 29 executive elections at the same interval. However, executive elections have been held at up to nine different intervals in the same country. The two

¹The V-Dem dataset includes data on over 350 indicators of democracy in 173 countries around the world from 1900 until 2012 (for 60 countries also 2013-2014), engaging over 2,600 country experts worldwide to collect data. The country-expert data is combined into country-year estimates using a state-of-the-art Bayesian ordinal item-response theory model developed by a set of specialized methodologists (Pemstein et al., 2015; see also Coppedge et al., 2015*a*. For more information about the project, codebook and data, see: <https://v-dem.net/>.)

Figure 1. Intervals between executive elections, by country

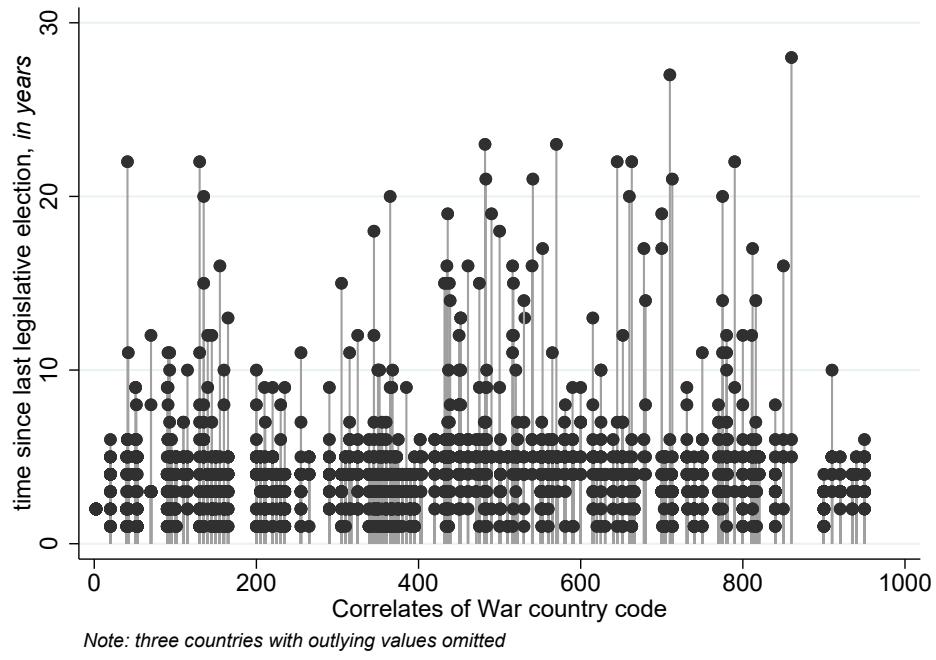


most unstable are Bolivia and Ecuador. Figure 2 shows the extent to which countries vary in the consistency of intervals between legislative elections. Among the 166 countries with legislative-electoral regimes, only *four* had no variation in the timing of legislative elections. Three of the four countries had only limited experience with legislative elections—Eritrea (two), Kosovo (four), and Tajikistan (five). In contrast, the United States held 57 legislative elections at regular intervals over this period.

Figures 1 and 2 underscore an important observation regarding the consistency of elections. Many have not occurred at regular intervals across countries' electoral histories. It seems that this in itself is an important fact to highlight, as all prominent definitions of democracy require as one of their criteria that elections occur at known and regular intervals (Cheibub et al., 2010, Przeworski et al., 2000). While it is outside the scope of this paper to investigate the formal schedule by which executive and legislative elections were supposed to occur—if they were formalized at all—it is plausible to assume that actors develop an expectation based on the (in-)consistency of observed elections.

To indicate political stability, we primarily rely on data on internal unrest and civil war as dependent variables. First, we examine whether a country experienced an internal

Figure 2. Intervals between legislative elections, by country



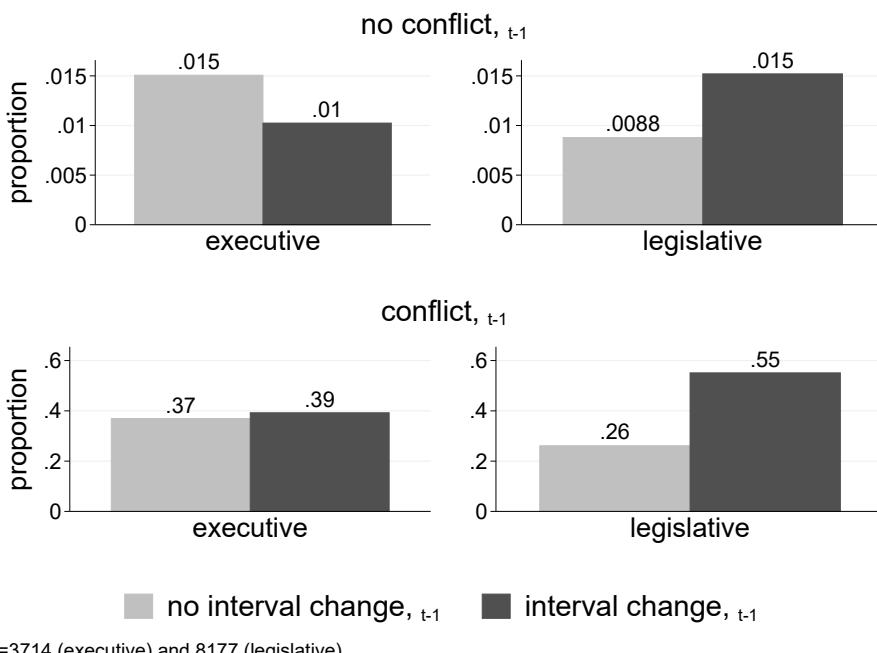
armed conflict in a given year, which is coded as a binary variable (Clio-Infra, N.d.). To discern the extent to which it is associated with escalated violence, we also restrict the analysis to civil war in a separate specification. This is defined as an intra-state war that incurs at least 1,000 battle deaths in each country-year (Haber and Menaldo, 2011).² The variable is coded as 1 if an armed conflict occurred that reached the battle-death threshold in a given year, and 0 otherwise. Because conflict may be an indirect measure of underlying sources of political instability, we also estimated the impact of election irregularity on strikes, riots, and anti-government protests (Banks, 2011), government crisis (Banks, 2011), military coups (Powell and Thyne, 2011), and irregular leader exit (Goemans et al., 2009).

To determine whether the consistency of elections matters for democratic stability, we began by regressing the outcome on a binary indicator of whether the last election occurred at the same interval as the one before it. The variable thus takes a value of one if the two intervals of time occurring between the last three elections were the same, and zero when that was not the case. For missing data or years before the third election,

²We accessed the data created by Clio-Infra (N.d.) and Haber and Menaldo (2011) from the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2015b).

this variable takes on no value but is instead coded as missing. Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of observations in which there was internal armed conflict, divided into whether or not a change in the interval between elections had occurred the year prior, and whether there was conflict in the previous year. As the figure shows, the number of observations of internal armed conflict were nearly twice as much after a change in the interval between legislative elections than when no change was observed. This is true for observations in which there was not conflict in the year prior, as well as when there was ongoing conflict. Executive elections do not appear to produce conflict when there are changes in the intervals between them. Figure 8 in the Appendix shows a tabulation in the other direction, confirming that changes in the intervals between elections were not more likely to occur following conflict in the previous year, whether or not the intervals had also changed in the year prior. The figures suggest that endogeneity does not pose a major problem.

Figure 3. Tabulation of conflict observations associated with changes in election intervals



As a way of going beyond the last two intervals between elections, we calculated the absolute difference between the last election interval and the average period between past

elections. The calculation of this measure can be given by

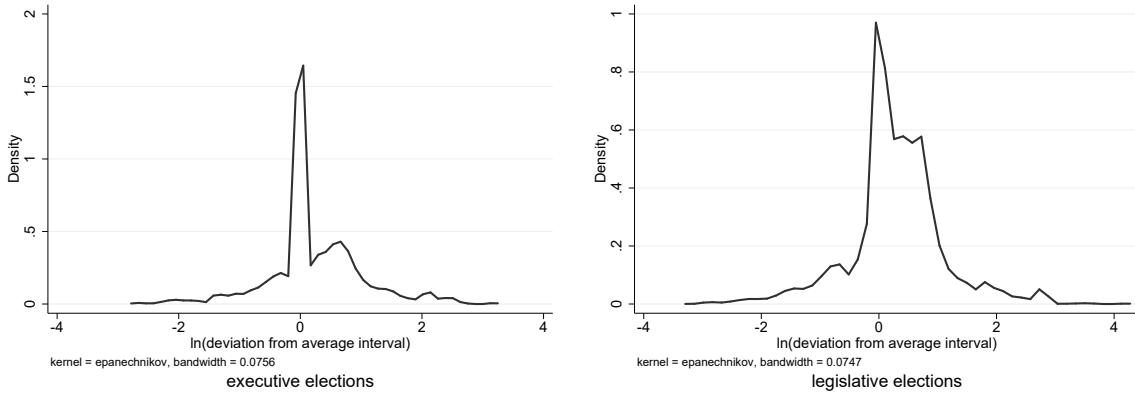
$$\left| \frac{\sum(x_{i,1} \dots x_{i,t-1})}{n - 1} - x_{i,t} \right| \quad (1)$$

where $x_{i,t}$ represents the number of years that have transpired between a current election and the last election in a country. Each subsequent executive or legislative election is compared using a greater amount of information than the previous election, as the sequence of elections becomes progressively longer. The resulting value, however, is a weighted measure of the consistency of elections over time; it imposes a higher penalty on countries that have had a long period of consistent elections followed by a deviation, and it moderately reflects previous digressions, even as elections stabilize.

We compared this approach to other algorithms that might represent electoral consistency. The result is nearly identical to assuming, after each election, that the country had always had elections at the previous interval and calculating the average difference in years between the observed intervals and the hypothetical, constant intervals. The two measures are correlated at a value of 0.97. Using the difference between the last period between elections and the average interval between elections thus represents the extent to which each country deviated from an individual's expectation of consistent elections. Because many elections were consistent with prior intervals, the distribution of this measure is highly positively skewed. We therefore used log-transformed values as the primary independent variables, the distributions of which are shown in Figure 4.³ In the interpretation of the distance from average intervals, higher values indicate a greater discrepancy between the last election and the previous average interval between elections.

³To apply a logarithmic transformation to the distance values and maintain observations with a zero, we first added one to each observation. Nevertheless, the results remain robust to the inclusion of a control for zero values.

Figure 4. Logged distance from average intervals



The left figure shows values associated with executive elections, while the right figure shows the values for legislative elections.

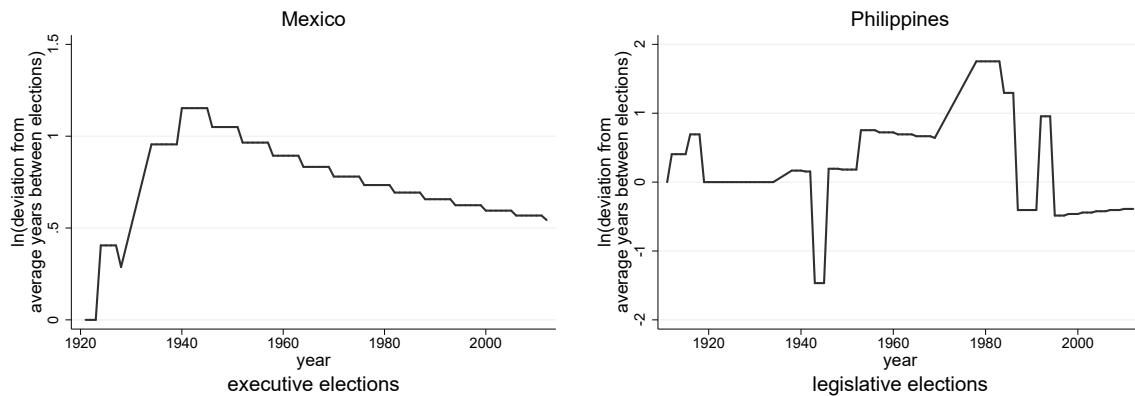
Regressing conflict occurrence on deviations from the average interval between elections presents a potential issue, which is that it may reflect increasing conflict likelihood as a result of the executive (or congress) holding onto power for a longer period of time. To account for this, we therefore include as a control variable the number of years since the last election. In testing the potential impact of electoral inconsistency on domestic instability, we examine executive elections and legislative elections separately. Nearly 96 percent of country-year observations that constituted executive electoral regimes were also considered legislative electoral regimes (4,594 and 4,397 respectively), but only about 57 percent of observations in legislative electoral regimes were considered executive electoral regimes (10,248 and 4,397 respectively). As a result, we consider the impacts of electoral consistency for each type of election and combine them as a robustness test.

Figure 3 provides two examples that illustrate how the measure accounts for changes in the intervals between elections. The left panel illustrates changes in the timing of executive elections in Mexico. Following the widespread series of uprisings against Porfirio Díaz that constituted the Mexican Revolution, a new constitution was promulgated in 1917 and executive elections were held (Benjamin, 1985). Álvaro Obregón won the presidential election in 1920 and Plutarco Calles succeeded him in 1924. Obregón was subsequently reelected in 1928, but was assassinated shortly thereafter.

Calles' response was to establish a political party to depersonalize disagreements among revolutionary elites, which took the form of the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, PNR) (Benjamin, 1985). In 1934 Lázaro Cárdenas assumed the presidency, after which the presidential term was fixed at six years (Kaufman and Purcell, 1980, Weldon, 1997). Since 1940, presidential elections have been consistent in Mexico, which is reflected in decreasing values of electoral discrepancy. Notably, however, the consistent elections that occurred between 1940 and 2000 constitute a period of nondemocratic rule (Magaloni, 2008).

The right panel shows values associated with legislative elections in the Philippines. The first legislative election was held in 1907 under the first General Election Law of the Philippines (Teehankee, 2002). The second legislative election occurred two years later in 1909. Elections at this time were not consistent, however; the third legislative election came after three years, and the fourth after four years. As a result, the measure of electoral consistency increases. Subsequently, legislative elections in the Philippine Commonwealth occurred every three years until 1934 (Teehankee, 2002). In 1935 a constitution was established, which was followed by a new set of elections. A constitutional amendment passed in 1947 that extended the term of Representatives to four years, which became effective in 1949. The measure of deviation thus increases with the next election in 1953 and gradually decreases until the 1971 mid-term senatorial election (Choi, 2001). The following year, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law, after which elections did not occur until 1978. The next *Batasang Pambansa* election occurred in 1984. After Marcos was ousted in 1986, a new constitution was promulgated. However, the election in 1992 was the first election that was synchronized under the 1987 constitution (Choi, 2001, Teehankee, 2002).

Figure 5. Examples, deviations from electoral consistency



The left figure shows values associated with executive elections in Mexico, while the right figure shows the values for legislative elections in the Philippines.

The second hypothesis is that the impact of electoral consistency on domestic stability is moderated by the extent to which a country is a consolidated democracy.⁴ Although the countries in the sample all held elections, some more closely embodied the ideal of electoral democracy.⁵ We therefore controlled for electoral democracy by including an index based on freedom of association, suffrage, clean elections, elected executives, and freedom of expression (Coppedge et al. 2015).⁶ As a test for hypothesis 2, we included an interaction term combining the electoral democracy index and the measure of deviation from electoral consistency. Our expectation is that higher values of the interaction term should be negatively associated with democratic instability.

In addition to the primary independent variables, we introduced several factors representing other domestic features that should influence the likelihood of domestic conflict. To control for economic development, we included logged values of per capita Gross Domestic Product (Coppedge et al. 2015). A country can be economically wealthy due to rents not tied to the populace, which can negatively affect state capacity (Haber and Menaldo, 2011, Ross, 2001, Wright, 2008). As a result, in alternative specification tests we also accounted for the logged real value of a country's petroleum, coal, and natural

⁴For a discussion of definitional issues related to the concept of democratic consolidation, see Schedler (1998).

⁵The ideal of electoral democracy, according to Coppedge et al. (2015c), is one in which decision makers are held responsible to citizens through fair elections in a society in which political and civic organizations can operate freely.

⁶For more information on the construction of the electoral democracy index and other variables, refer to the codebook.

gas production, given by Haber and Menaldo (2011).⁷ To represent social pressures, we added a logged estimate of the total population, in millions, and in alternative specifications we included the average number of years of education among citizens older than 15 (Coppedge et al. 2015). What is more, due to the possibility that internal conflict dynamics differ by region, we denoted the geographic region in which each country is located (Haber and Menaldo, 2011). Finally, to isolate other temporal effects from electoral consistency, we included a count of the number of years between each election and the number of prior elections that had taken place, as well as an interaction of the two variables.

Although the V-Dem dataset contains 19,549 country-year observations representing 173 countries, the sample is substantially reduced because it is necessarily restricted to electoral regimes that held more than two elections. We lose some additional observations by starting with the second election, along with some missing values associated with the dependent variables. The starting sample is thus restricted to roughly 3,715 country-year observations regarding executive elections, representing 75 countries and 109 years. For legislative elections, the sample size is 8,178 observations, which represent 112 countries and 111 years. Summary statistics are provided in the Appendix (Table 3).

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results of a logistic regression predicting internal armed conflict, expressed as odds ratios. In the interpretation of the results, coefficients greater than one indicate an increased likelihood of domestic conflict, while values less than one indicate a decreased likelihood associated with each one-unit increase in the independent variable. To mitigate further endogeneity concerns, we lagged all of the independent variables by one year. Additionally, we included a count of the number of years since the last conflict event, as well as its squared value, to account for the time dependent nature of conflict likelihood (Beck and Tucker, 1998). In robustness tests, we also interpret the

⁷To apply a logarithmic transformation to the resource data and maintain observations with a zero, we first added one to each observation.

results against a lag of the dependent variable as a more conservative control for time dependence.

Along with regions of the developing world, the coefficients associated with income and population suggest that countries with higher levels of per capita GDP and larger populations are at greater risk of internal armed conflict, the estimates for which are significant above a 95-percent level of confidence. When we include squared values of logged GDP per capita and population, both logged GDP and its square cease to significantly predict internal unrest. Similarly, both logged population and its squared values are not robustly associated with a decreased likelihood of internal armed conflict. Accounting for democratic consolidation, in the form of higher values of an index of electoral democracy, shows that there is a strong, negative relationship between level of democracy and internal conflict. As might be expected, conflict risk exhibits a positive quadratic relationship with the time since last conflict—it decreases as time passes, then becomes more likely.

By itself, deviation from consistent executive elections is positively associated with internal armed conflict below a five-percent probability of error. With the addition of covariates beyond the time since the last conflict, however, the measure loses any significance. What is more, deviation from the average interval between executive elections does not appear to be strongly associated with internal armed conflict even according to the simplest specifications. Whether measured in terms of immediate or long-term change, therefore, the irregularity of executive elections does not appear to exert a noteworthy influence on the likelihood of internal armed conflict.

Whereas the first two models in Table 1 suggest that changes in the timing of *executive* elections may not matter for domestic instability, the latter two models point to different conclusions concerning legislative elections. In the third model, the results suggest that a change in the timing of legislative elections is associated with an increase in the odds of conflict of about 0.455. Similarly, a one-unit deviation from the average interval between legislative elections is associated with roughly a 25 percent increase in the probability of internal armed conflict. The standard errors around this estimate are

small enough to support rejecting the null hypothesis below a one-percent probability of error. The estimates are robust to the inclusion of controls for natural resources and the level of education as well.⁸ When the model is restricted to civil war (Table 4 in the Appendix), a similar relationship exists but only the binary indicator of a difference in the intervals of legislative elections is statistically significant.

As a test of the second hypothesis, we specified the same set of models as Table 1 but included interaction terms between the electoral democracy index and the measures of deviation from election intervals. The coefficients associated with the interaction terms are shown in Table 2. In either the fully specified model or more simplified specifications, there is little confidence in an interactive effect between level of electoral democracy and election inconsistency on internal armed conflict. Although the coefficient is in the expected direction in models based on the binary indicator of changes in the interval between elections, the standard errors around the estimate are much too large to assign meaning to the relationship. Interestingly, estimating domestic conflict based on the amount of deviation from the average intervals between executive elections and its interaction with the electoral democracy index suggests that deviation is associated with a decreased likelihood of conflict but that the relationship is negatively related to the level of democracy. The relationship is highly sensitive to the exclusion of countries in Latin America, from which we conclude that it is characterizing the efforts by incumbent presidents in the region to extend their tenure.

In testing the relationship between electoral consistency and domestic stability, we subjected the analyses to a number of robustness tests. A regular finding is that changes in the consistency of executive elections do not matter for predicting domestic stability. However, accounting for the number of elections that had occurred and the length of time since the last election shows that a higher number of executive elections is significantly associated with both internal armed conflict and civil war. The time since the last

⁸When we estimate both a linear and quadratic relationship between internal armed conflict and natural resources the squared term is negatively associated with internal armed conflict below a five-percent probability of error; on its own, however the logged value of total resources does not significantly predict internal unrest. Additionally, a higher number of average years of education among citizens is significantly associated with a decreased likelihood of internal armed conflict.

executive election does not appear to matter, nor does an interaction term between the two. As it pertains to legislative elections, the time since the last legislative elections is positively associated with conflict risk, but not the number of elections. In a model predicting civil

Table 1. Logistic regression predicting internal armed conflict

	1.243	(0.190)	executive elections	1.455	(0.150) **	legislative elections
difference from last interval	1.243		0.884 (0.081)	1.042 (0.019) **	1.245 (0.087) ***	
time since last election	1.002	(0.028)	1.003 (0.030)	2.545 (0.564) ***	1.032 (0.021)	
L.America	6.985	(3.788) ***	6.627 (3.615) ***	2.546 (0.640) ***	8.137 (3.511) ***	
N.Africa/M.East	3.200	(1.904) *	3.442 (2.062) **	2.546 (0.602) ***	6.936 (3.179) ***	
S.S.Africa	4.193	(2.585) **	3.267 (2.041) *	2.389 (0.602) ***	6.960 (3.186) ***	
W.Europe/N.America	2.176	(1.360)	2.546 (1.600)	2.088 (0.489) ***	6.925 (3.045) ***	
E.Asia	31.252	(19.608) ***	22.341 (5.058) ***	0.128 (0.132) **	0.550 (0.604)	
S.E.Asia	8.771	(6.418) ***	6.902 (5.058) ***	4.627 (1.185) ***	21.940 (10.138) ***	
S.Asia	1.555	(1.828)		3.497 (1.115) ***	16.564 (8.704) ***	
Caribbean	2.075	(0.318) ***	1.648 (0.262) ***	0.592 (0.457)		
ln(GDPpc)	1.292	(0.085) ***	1.260 (0.086) ***	1.311 (0.116) ***	1.417 (0.146) ***	
ln(population)	0.033	(0.018) ***	0.033 (0.020) ***	1.094 (0.042) **	0.974 (0.046)	
electoral democracy index	0.861	(0.011) ***	0.861 (0.011) ***	0.259 (0.007) ***	0.266 (0.008) ***	
time since last conflict	1.001	(0.000) ***	1.001 (0.000) ***	0.850 (0.000) ***	0.845 (0.000) ***	
time since last conflict ²	0.000	(0.000) ***	0.000 (0.000) ***	1.001 (0.008) ***	1.001 (0.013) ***	
Intercept						
N	2496		1975	5561	4345	
log-likelihood	-638.882		-546.737	-1431.335	-1028.247	

standard errors in parentheses; $p < 0.01^{***}$, $p < 0.05^{**}$, $p < 0.10^*$

all independent variables lagged by one year

Table 2. Coefficients associated with interaction term

	executive elections	legislative elections
different from last interval	1.384 (0.476)	1.607 (0.352) **
difference from avg. interval	0.645 (0.125) **	1.060 (0.261) **
electoral democracy index	0.038 (0.027) ***	0.299 (0.157) ***
interaction term	0.766 (0.584)	2.148 (0.867) *
	0.794 (0.355)	1.525 (0.509)

*standard errors in parentheses;
p<0.01***, p<0.05**, p<0.10**
all independent variables lagged by one year*

war, both the number of legislative elections that have occurred and the time since the last legislative election positively and significantly predict conflict occurrence.

Despite the inclusion of the number of elections and the time since last election, the estimate associated with changes in the intervals between legislative elections remains significant below a one-percent probability of error. Moreover, changes in the intervals between legislative elections—as measured by either a binary indicator representing any change, or the amount of change—remains positively and significantly related to internal armed conflict when we account for the date of independence, term limits, civil society participation, years of democracy, ethnic fractionalization, and Polity score. The results are also robust to country- and year-clustered standard errors. They are also largely robust to the inclusion of country- and year-fixed effects, although the estimate associated with the amount of deviation from the average intervals between legislative elections ceases to be statistically significant.

When we separate nondemocracies from democracies, and between types of democracies, we see notable differences. For comparison, Figure 6 shows the results of a model that includes only the binary indicator of difference in the intervals between legislative elections and the lagged dependent variable. The coefficients are shown with their associated 90-percent confidence intervals. The relationship that we identified between the consistency of legislative elections and armed conflict seems to pertain to nondemocracies. Within democracies, however, the relationship is also statistically

significant in presidential democracies. In additional specifications, we estimated the same set of independent variables on alternative dependent variables that are indicative of different forms of political unrest. Interestingly, the results suggest that while inconsistent legislative elections increase the likelihood of armed conflict in nondemocracies more than in democracies, they make demonstrations, government crises, and coups more likely in democracies but not in nondemocracies. The effect differs between parliamentary and presidential democracies, however, and in all cases deviation from the prior interval between legislative elections increases the likelihood of irregular leader exit.

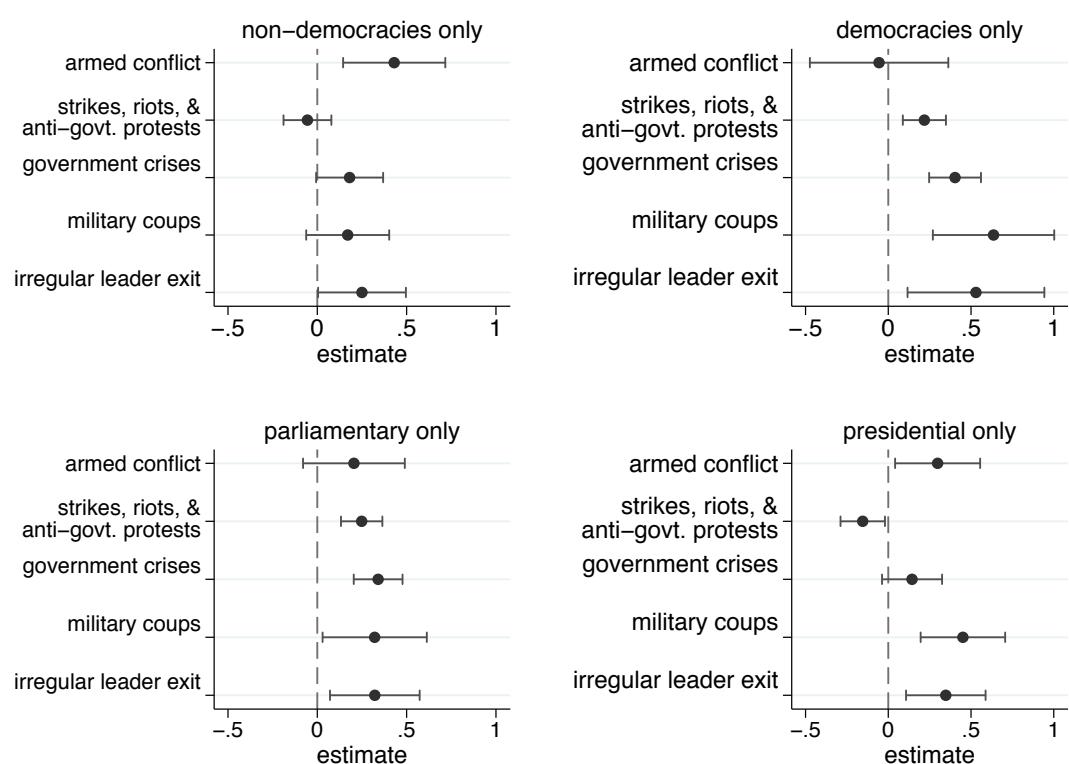
5. Discussion

Despite scholars' interest in the viability of elections in new democracies and the extent to which the timing of elections may affect the prospects for peaceful transitions, scholars have primarily been concerned with the timing of the first election. We argue, however, that the timing of elections may matter well beyond the first election. Insofar as elections represent "institutionalized uncertainty," subsequent elections may need to be consistent in interval to alleviate opponents' concern regarding the likelihood of an election in the future (Alexander, 2002, Fearon, 2011, Lupu and Riedl, 2012, Przeworski, 1991, Schedler, 2013). Formal election schedules may help to add credibility to the guarantees worked out as part of a transitional arrangement, but the first-hand observation that elections regularly occur should provide greater certainty and promote political stability in tenuous circumstances. To demonstrate whether this may be the case, we regressed the likelihood of domestic instability on a measure

of the extent to which there were deviations in the timing of each subsequent election varied from prior executive and legislative elections. In doing so, we provided a more direct test regarding the manner in which elections contribute to 'self-enforcing democracy' (Fearon, 2011).

The results of the empirical models provide several noteworthy conclusions regarding the relationship between election regularity and democratic stability. First, we found

Figure 6. Alternative specification tests



Figures show the coefficient associated with difference in intervals between legislative elections, with 90-percent confidence intervals

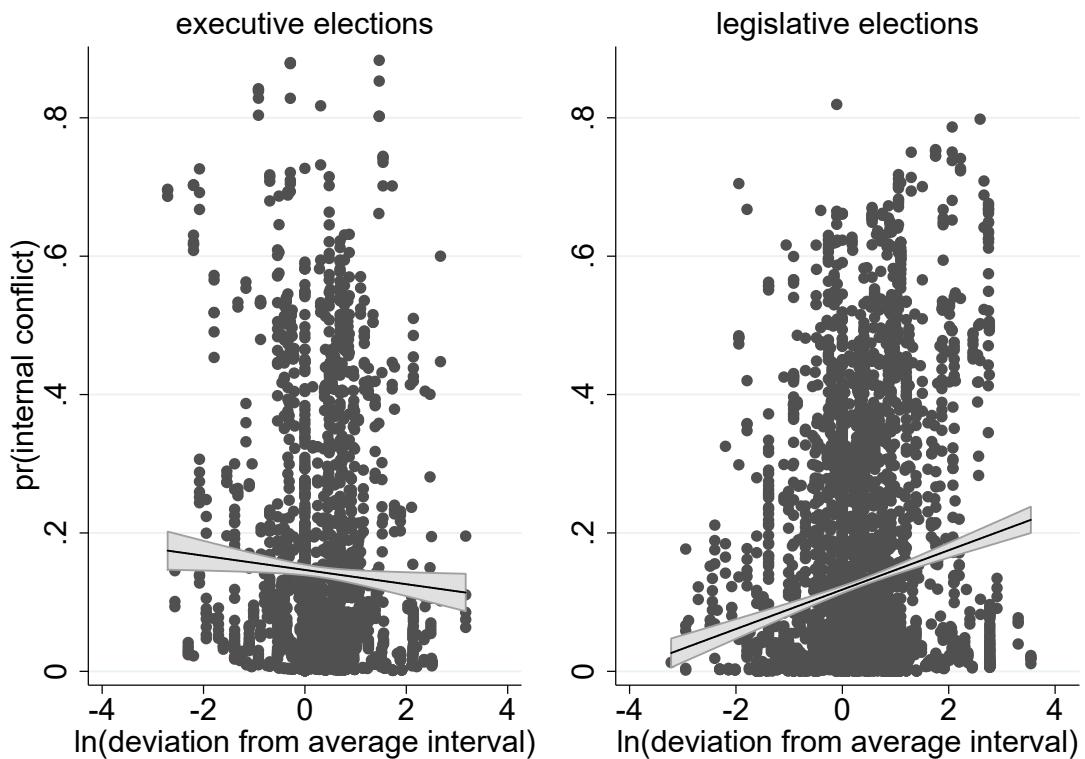
that the regularity of executive elections—as measured by deviation from the last election interval or from past intervals between elections—is not a dependable predictor of either internal armed conflict or civil war. Despite assessing the predictive ability of the measure in a variety of model specifications, the inconsistency of executive elections is not significantly related to the likelihood of domestic unrest. At present, the only stylized facts that we can report about executive elections is that a greater number of executive elections is associated with a higher risk of either internal armed conflict or civil war, and that the regularity of executive elections seems most important in presidential democracies. Specifically, the empirical relationship between regular intervals of executive elections and government crises and coups in presidential democracies contributes to extant work regarding the fragility of presidential democracy (Cheibub, 2006, Linz, 1990).

Second, in contrast to the finding that consistency in the intervals between executive elections does not statistically predict domestic instability, we found that the regularity of legislative elections is a robust predictor of both internal armed conflict and civil war. Deviation from the average number of years between legislative elections is positively associated with domestic conflict at both levels, and the relationship holds to a number of specification tests. In particular, the relationship remains a robust predictor of domestic instability several years prior to the event, thereby helping to alleviate concerns about the possible endogeneity of instability and the timing of elections. As it regards the first hypothesis, therefore, we found support for the expectation that electoral inconsistency is associated with an increased risk of domestic instability, but only for legislative elections. Figure 7 shows the predicted values estimated from the models shown in Table 1. While deviations from the average interval between executive elections do not strongly effect the likelihood of either internal conflict or civil war, the impact is more pronounced for legislative elections.

The finding that the regularity of legislative elections matters, most prominently in nondemocratic regimes but also in presidential democracies, is consistent with the theory and with the broader literature on power sharing. It provides empirical support

for the notion that the regularity of legislative elections provides a source of credible commitment to actors who may otherwise oppose the leader (Svolik, 2009). In contrast to the executive office, the legislature provides seats that can be used to co-opt and mollify opponents of the

Figure 7. Predicted probabilities of internal armed conflict associated with election irregularity



regime (Gandhi, 2008, Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007). In the negotiation of power sharing between the executive and his or her ruling coalition, therefore, consistent intervals in the elections by which legislative seats are distributed may be an important indicator of the executive's commitment to working with opponents. Their inconsistency may also deprive coalition members the expectation that there will be future opportunities to update their beliefs about the executive, making present action against the regime more likely (Svolik, 2009). To this end, the finding points to the value of better understanding how the timing of legislative elections impacts the willingness of outside actors to participate in the electoral process (Lemarchand, 2007, Lustick, 1979). An important qualifier for

gauging the effectiveness of consociational democracy may be to consider how *consistent* the intervals between elections have been.

A noteworthy qualification is that while there appears to be a relationship between election intervals and armed conflict in nondemocracies and presidential democracies, this is not true of parliamentary democracies. In contrast, the consistency of intervals between executive or legislative elections increases the likelihood of government crises and coups in democracies, and irregular legislative elections increase the likelihood of demonstrations. Our interpretation for why there is a difference between forms of political instability with regard to election regularity in democracies and nondemocracies concerns the executive's control over peripheral state institutions. To the extent that the executive is able to exert control over public demonstrations, labor unions, her cabinet, and the armed forces, armed conflict should be the more likely recourse.

Third, we found no support for the second hypothesis, which was that changes in the timing of elections are likely to unleash destabilizing forces in less democratic countries. In alternative specification tests, we interacted deviations from past elections with the years of democracy, the level of civil society participation, and the Polity score. All the same, we only found statistical significance to support the second hypothesis in a model that interacted the dummy variable for differences in the intervals between legislative elections and Polity. Though it may be theoretically intuitive that deviations from consistent elections should matter more for newer and less-consolidated democracies, this expectation found little empirical support despite operationalizing democratic consolidation in different ways.

The results of the analysis thus highlight the importance of focusing not just on when first elections should be implemented in post-conflict societies and in countries transitioning to democracy, but also on the maintenance of a regular pattern of elections during the process of institutionalizing uncertainty among actors. A valuable next step is for additional research on the topic to further elucidate on the extent to which this matters, and in which contexts. An important future extension of this research question is to apply it to subnational elections. In part, this may require more qualitative depictions

of the electoral process, or a reappraisal of existing case studies. The dataset that we drew on to answer this question is one of the largest and most complete projects to date, but the sample size was constrained by the need to restrict the analysis to countries that had had more than two elections, after the second election. To better discern the role of election *timing* in promoting domestic stability, a more nuanced empirical model may also be needed, though estimating a more sophisticated model such as a multi-stage regression further limits the number of observations that would be available. Nevertheless, we found strong support for the theoretical argument that warrants further investigation.

The finding that there is a relationship between election regularity and democratic stability has implications for election advisers in the developing world, insofar as it encourages a renewed focus on ongoing election activity. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of planning of subsequent elections to be consistent with actors' expectations. As we showed, despite the conventional definition of democratic elections as being regular in their occurrence, many elections in democracies do not occur in consistent intervals. In this regard, the United States is a notable exception to many other established democracies. Moreover, the importance of considering separately the impacts of the *time to* elections and those of the *time between* elections hearkens to existing conversations about the nature of time dependence. Several political scientists have called for researchers to theoretically unpack different forms of time dependence to better understand how causal processes unfold (Grzymala-Busse, 2011, Pierson, 2004). This constitutes several avenues for future research on the stability-promoting effect of elections.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to existing discussions on the relative importance of election timing by focusing on a different aspect than has previously been empirically examined. While many scholars have been interested in the relevance of the timing of *first* elections in post-conflict societies and in the initial stages of democratization, we argue that

the regularity of subsequent elections are also important. Using a binary indicator of consistency in the intervals between elections and a measure of the deviation of elections from the average interval between past elections, we found that the regularity of executive elections does not have much of an impact on domestic stability. In contrast, we found that inconsistent legislative elections are positively associated with internal armed conflict and civil war. The relationship exhibits considerable robustness, encouraging future research to consider the importance of holding legislative elections at consistent intervals to promote the institutionalization of uncertainty.

In spite of some existing limitations that hamper the ability to more fully explore the dynamic between the tempo of elections and political stability—namely, the presence of a formal schedule and data on subnational elections—we found evidence that encourages scholars to think beyond the timing of the first election and to more seriously consider the process of implementing elections in developing democracies. Our theoretical argument helps to explain why consistent elections may matter for shaping actors' incentives to participate in an uncertain electoral climate. What is more, it meshes well with research on the strategic use of elections in nondemocracies and dynamics involving the ruling coalition in authoritarian (and semi-authoritarian) regimes. This supports future research on the topic of election regularity and political stability that can yield insights for both academic and policy considerations.

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Appendix

Figure 8. Tabulation of changes in election intervals associated with conflict observations

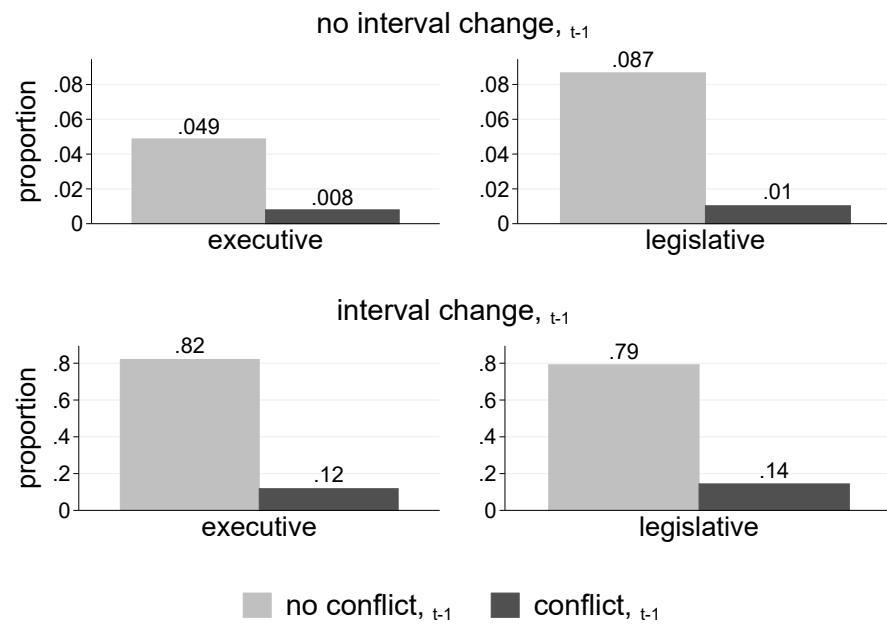


Table 3. Summary statistics

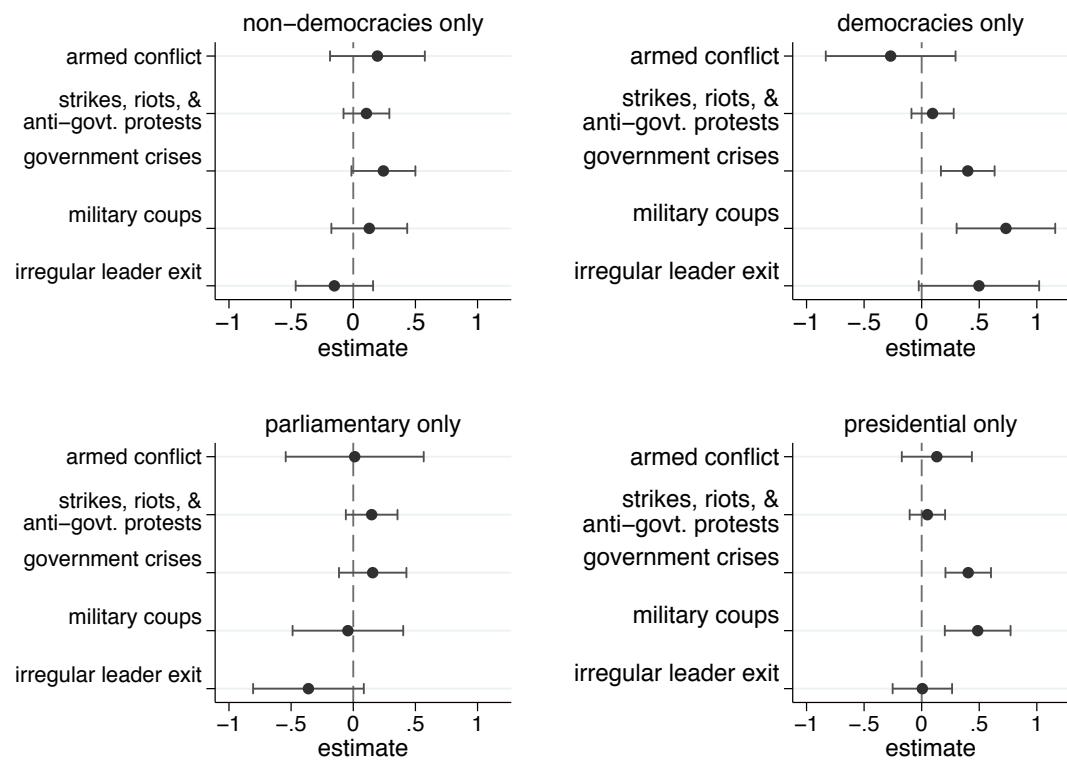
variable	N	mean	std. dev.	min.	max.
internal armed conflict	12706	0.097	0.295	0	1
civil war	10149	0.065	0.247	0	1
different from last interval, executive	4686	0.404	0.491	0	1
ln(difference) from avg. interval, executive	3745	0.215	0.756	-2.708	3.172
different from last interval, legislative	10963	0.554	0.497	0	1
ln(difference) from avg. interval, legislative	9081	0.289	0.807	-3.219	4.199
E.Europe	10303	0.114	0.318	0	1
L.America	10303	0.197	0.398	0	1
M.East/N.Africa	10303	0.097	0.296	0	1
S.S.Africa	10303	0.198	0.399	0	1
W.Europe/N.America	10303	0.214	0.410	0	1
E.Asia	10303	0.038	0.191	0	1
S.E.Asia	10303	0.050	0.218	0	1
S.Asia	10303	0.051	0.220	0	1
Pacific	10303	0.010	0.097	0	1
Caribbean	10303	0.030	0.172	0	1
ln(GDPpc)	10403	7.813	1.025	5.315	10.667
ln(population)	17545	15.159	1.852	7.224	21.009
executive electoral regime	16168	0.284	0.451	0	1
legislative electoral regime	16168	0.634	0.482	0	1
ln(resources)	10239	3.170	2.478	0	11.304
education, 15+	14377	4.496	3.274	0.004	17.646
time since last election, executive	5355	5.082	7.236	1	80
time since last election, legislative	11548	3.781	4.909	1	84
electoral democracy index	15657	0.333	0.281	0.008	0.961

Table 4. Logistic regression predicting civil war

	executive elections		legislative elections	
	1.190 (0.244)	1.503 (0.225) ***	1.146 (0.102)	1.042 (0.025) *
difference from last interval				
time since last election	1.006 (0.042)	0.907 (0.104)	1.061 (0.045)	(0.023) ***
L.America	3.554 (1.215) ***	4.606 (1.598) ***	5.786 (1.813) ***	12.324 (6.540) ***
N.Africa/M.East	0.765 (0.411)	0.667 (0.400)	4.609 (1.564) ***	10.183 (5.596) ***
S.S.Africa	3.049 (1.447) **	3.238 (1.584) *	2.738 (0.971) ***	5.463 (3.064) ***
W.Europe/N.America				
E.Asia	4.238 (2.048) ***	4.001 (1.983) ***	5.981 (2.106) ***	16.307 (9.127) ***
S.E.Asia	4.795 (2.697) ***	5.058 (2.902) ***	4.006 (1.620) ***	10.857 (6.833) ***
S.Asia				
Caribbean				
ln(GDPpc)	1.729 (0.366) ***	1.796 (0.398) ***	1.211 (0.169)	1.241 (0.212)
ln(population)	1.673 (0.166) ***	1.604 (0.166) ***	1.483 (0.082) ***	1.324 (0.089) ***
electoral democracy index	0.072 (0.053) ***	0.052 (0.041) ***	0.155 (0.071) ***	0.066 (0.037) ***
time since last conflict	0.825 (0.013) ***	0.815 (0.014) ***	0.824 (0.009) ***	0.810 (0.011) ***
time since last conflict ²	1.002 (0.000) ***	1.002 (0.000) ***	1.002 (0.000) ***	1.002 (0.000) ***
Intercept	0.000 (0.000) ***	0.000 (0.000) ***	0.000 (0.000) ***	0.000 (0.000) ***
N	2047	1972	6049	4799
log-likelihood	-375.922	-327.722	-783.415	-567.279

standard errors in parentheses; $p < 0.01^{***}$, $p < 0.05^{**}$, $p < 0.10^*$

Figure 9. Alternative specification tests



Figures show the coefficient associated with difference in intervals between executive elections, with 90-percent confidence intervals