

# Timing Matters: The Impact of Regularity of Election Cycles on Autocratic Stability

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## **Abstract**

A large literature has examined the role of elections in autocratic politics. This literature has been particularly interested in the extent to which elections stabilize or destabilize autocratic regimes. One important aspect left unexplored in the research thus far is how the timing of such elections and the broader electoral cycle influence patterns of regime stability. This paper fills part of that gap and studies the regularity of elections in dictatorships. It argues that dictators that stage less regular elections may offset the destabilizing short-term effect of elections identified by the extant research. Dictators can take advantage of election timing to stymie challengers and hinder civil society collective action. Statistical analyses of all electoral autocratic regimes in the post-WWII period provides support for this proposition and suggests that regimes that hold less regular elections are more durable. This pattern holds in models which, partially, attempt to account for endogeneity.

On 20 May 2018 Venezuela staged a presidential election. The election was widely considered a ‘snap’ election, in that it was called months earlier than scheduled. The exact electoral date was hastily announced the month before the election. The incumbent Nicolas Maduro won the election with an impressive two thirds of the vote. The impact of the timing of elections or, more generally, the impact of the dynamic of the electoral cycle, on regime survival has received little attention in the literature on autocratic elections. ‘Election timing’ describes the strategy of either delaying elections or calling ‘snap’ elections in order to capitalize on political opportunity or to stymie challengers. I argue that by manipulating the timing of the electoral calendar in this way, incumbent autocrats can offset the negative impact elections have been found to have on regime survival.

The literature on how elections under authoritarian rule affect regime stability have produced mixed results. One part of the literature has argued that elections stabilize autocracies by increasing their legitimacy and aiding co-optation, as well as through revealing insights into the strengths and weaknesses of both the support of the incumbent regime and its challengers (Gandhi, 2008; Schedler, 2002b; Magaloni, 2006; Little, 2012). Another part of the literature has argued the opposite: following Huntington (1991), who asserted that staging elections undermined regime stability and increased the likelihood of democratization, this literature has found that elections reduce regime longevity and increase the risk of regime breakdown by acting as focal points for anti-regime protests that could topple the regime (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Beaulieu, 2014; Tucker, 2007).

One aspect of elections left largely unexplored in the literature on autocratic elections is the impact of electoral cycles on regime stability, per se. Research has been done more broadly on the electoral cycle. Magaloni (2006) shows that the Mexican economy under the PRE dictatorship moved in parallel with the electoral calendar even when elections were not competitive, and Pepinsky (2007) finds a similar dynamic in Malaysia. Similarly, Blaydes (2011) shows that the Egyptian regime used economic, budgetary, manipulation around

election time to improve income and living conditions for state employees, farmers, and the urban poor. Yet, these important streams of research focus mostly on vote buying and elite power sharing and have not addressed the issue of regime stability directly.

For democracies, in contrast, there is a large literature on the electoral cycle – especially related to the (endogenous) timing of elections (Lupia and Strøm, 1995; Kayser, 2005) and the impact of the electoral cycle on the economy (Nordhaus, 1975; Dahlberg and Mörk, 2011). Here, it is useful to differentiate between fixed-time systems, which follow a regular election cycle and include most presidential systems, and endogenous-time systems, where the government can call elections, which include many parliamentary systems. Kayser (2005) argues that economic manipulation is used by fixed-time (democratic) regimes to ensure favorable conditions when they run for election. Endogenous-time systems, in contrast, do not need to rely on economic manipulation and can instead attempt what is often labelled ‘surfing’ and take advantage of good times to call snap elections.

Overall, then, two sets of strategies have been developed by this literature: economic manipulation for fixed-system regimes and election timing for endogenous-system regimes. Economic manipulation has been explored in both autocratic (e.g. Blaydes, 2011) and democratic settings (e.g. Kayser, 2005). Election timing, in contrast, has thus far been argued to be a feature of developed democratic systems (Kayser, 2005). This implies a missing quadrant in the argument. In contrast to in democracies, both presidential and parliamentary autocratic regimes, at least to some extent, are endogenous-time systems. As I show below, very few autocratic regimes hold elections with regularity comparable to that of democratic presidential systems. More commonly, regimes can go 20 years without a single election until staging one a year for a brief period. Indeed, in some such regimes, it hardly makes sense to talk about an electoral ‘cycle’ at all. Even though in ‘the majority of the world’s democracies election dates are not fixed’ (Kayser, 2005), in non-democratic systems the extent to which regimes – presidential and parliamentary – can make use of election timing as a survival

strategy is even more pronounced. This suggests that election timing could be a particularly important mechanism to explore in autocratic settings.

I argue that regimes that stage elections following a more regular – and thus predictable – cycle are more vulnerable to many of the negative effects of elections for regime stability identified by the literature. In turn, regimes that do not follow a regular election schedule should be less susceptible to these consequences. My primary theoretical focus is on how the regularity of the electoral cycle affects dissident collective action, and how this in turn affects the likelihood of regime breakdown. I posit that for regime dissidents, coordinating activities around an election-day known years in advance is much easier than responding to a hastily called election with little time to plan for or prepare. Consequently for regimes, a regular electoral cycle increases the short-term destabilizing effect of elections without producing a corresponding offsetting increase in the long-term stabilizing effect of elections.

Regimes that do not adhere to a fixed electoral schedule but instead stage elections at more or less irregular intervals can make challenger collective action more difficult. These regimes can greatly reduce the short-term destabilizing effects of elections either by delaying elections to a ‘yet-to-be-disclosed’ future date or by calling ‘snap’ elections. The former appears to be more common (Bleck and van de Walle, 2019), but both tactics circumscribe potential challengers’ time to organize in opposition. In this, the focal-point effect of an election is diminished and the risk of the election to regime stability also therefore decreases. Regimes that hold elections in such an irregular fashion can do so without necessarily reducing the long-term beneficial effects of elections. Even irregular elections can be used for co-optation, increasing legitimacy, or learning about opposition strengths and your own weaknesses.

I analyze how the regularity of the regime’s election cycle affects the likelihood of regime failure. I use data for 259 autocratic regimes from 1946 to 2008 and show that the more regular an autocratic regime’s electoral cycle becomes, the higher the likelihood of regime

breakdown. The result is robust to attempts to deal with issues of endogeneity and selection effects. In the following, I first review existing literature on elections under authoritarian rule and the literature on election timing. Then, in Section 3 I present a theory of how the electoral cycle affects regime stability in authoritarian settings. Section 4 discusses how to operationalize electoral regularity and presents the data to be used and analyzed in Section 5. In Section 6, I discuss issues of endogeneity and robustness. Section 7 concludes.

## **2 Autocratic elections and regime stability**

The literature on autocratic elections has not reached a consensus on the effects of such elections. Several scholars have suggested that elections and electoral institutions can be used to neutralize and co-opt potential challengers (Geddes, 2006; Magaloni, 2010; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010; Svobik, 2010). Elections can be used as a mechanism to target opposition actors, to co-opt challengers directly by offering them benefits and access through seats in a legislature (Gandhi, 2008), or, in a more indirect fashion, by boosting the credibility of the incumbent regime (Magaloni and Wallace, 2008; Svobik, 2012; Boix and Svobik, 2013). Elections, regardless of whether they are free and fair, can also lend a non-democratic regime legitimacy both in the population and in the international community. Furthermore, election results provide important information to the regime about where their support is strong and weak, and where their local organizations and institutions are able to produce desired results (Zaslavsky and Brym, 1978; Karklins, 1986; Little, 2012; Miller, 2015).

A different strand of the literature, however, has identified several destabilizing effects of elections. First and foremost, elections act as powerful focal points for challenger and civil society collective action (Beissinger, 2002; Baev, 2011; Schedler, 2013). When dissidents are able to overcome the severe collective action problem they face in authoritarian settings, this can quickly jeopardize the future of the incumbent regime (Kuran, 1989). More long

term, repeated elections allow dissidents to acquire important experience and knowledge in how to organize and mobilize. At a more abstract level, repeated elections may induce democratic norms and learning that could undermine the legitimacy of the regime (Lindberg, 2006; Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, 2018; Knutsen and Nygård, 2015). Knutsen et al. (2017) attempt to directly address these somewhat contrary findings, and argue that elections are destabilizing in the short term but stabilizing in the long term.

### **3 Understanding election timing in non-democratic settings**

The *timing* of elections has received a great deal of attention in the literature on parliamentary democracies. In such systems, choosing the date of the election is often within the prerogatives of the prime minister, subject to requirements that it happens within  $x$  years since the last election. Indeed, the date of the election is routinely seen as being perhaps the ‘most important single decision taken by a British prime minister’ (Smith, 1996, 85). The British case is not exceptional, most parliamentary systems have rules that allow the dissolution of parliament and the calling of new elections (Strøm and Swindle, 2002).

This has engendered a literature attempting to explain why and under what conditions and circumstances incumbents call what is often labeled opportunistic elections. These are attempts by the incumbent to take advantage of favorable circumstances and call a an election that ensures the government a new period in office. The effect of such behavior, has received mixed findings.

Calling an election has costs and benefits. The potential cost is either to outright lose the election and be ousted from government or to emerge from the election with a smaller majority and therefore find yourself in a more vulnerable position. The potential benefit is a maintained or improved parliamentary position that allows the incumbent to govern for

another period (Balke, 1990). A challenge for this literature has been to adequately deal with endogeneity when empirically studying election timing. Schleiter and Tavits (2016) develop an instrumental variable model to deal with this and conduct a cross-national analysis where they find robust evidence showing that incumbents can surf and that they get a substantial ‘electoral bonus’ from opportunistically timing elections. They conclude that ‘endogenous election timing allows the incumbent to exploit not only their own strength but also the weakness of the opposition’ (Schleiter and Tavits, 2016, 848).

Here, I attempt to understand how election timing impacts regime stability in autocracies. With the exception of Morgenbesser (2016, 2017), who discusses the timing of elections in Singapore, to the best of my knowledge, no studies exist that examine effects of the electoral cycle on autocratic regime survival or, for that matter, that try to understand the determinants of the timing of elections in autocratic settings. The timing of elections is fundamentally different in democracies and non-democracies. Under authoritarian regimes, rules about when to call elections may very well be enshrined in a country’s constitution, but in many instances the decision is to a considerable extent in the hands of the ruling coalition.

Considerable variation notwithstanding, elections under autocratic rule are not free and fair. The outcome is often known in advance, and both the election campaign and the counting of ballots can be marked by irregularities and the use of violence. To some extent, the use of such tactics can be embarrassing for even a highly autocratic regime. It is preferable, I argue, for an autocrat to time an election, either by delaying an election or calling a snap election, to a period where the regime is relatively popular and thus safely can employ a minimum of violence and coercion to obtain the desired result.

There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that autocrats do take timing into consideration when they schedule election. Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan’s incumbent, surprised the opposition and called early elections in April 2015, more than a year and half before he was

constitutionally obligated to call one. Fully in line with the literature on election timing in democracies above, observers at the time speculated that the snap election was held because the government expected that economically leaner times were just around the corner. More specifically, the government was thought to believe that revenues from oil sales, on which Kazakhstan completely depends, would decrease substantially over the next years.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more tellingly, Nazarbayev himself is reported as saying that this was a good time for an election since ‘the people are happy’.<sup>2</sup> The government thus opted to strategically time the election to a period where they were still reasonably popular. A similarly plausible story could be told for the June 2018 presidential election in Turkey. This election was originally not scheduled until fall of 2019, but, taking advantage of challengers’ disarray, President Erdogan called a ‘snap’ election after having repeatedly stated that this would not happen.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Morgenbesser (2016, 148) examines all elections held in Singapore, and argues that ‘twelve of the thirteen [elections] held under authoritarian rule could be considered ‘snap’ elections’. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) in Singapore has consistently timed elections to take advantage of events they themselves have created (Morgenbesser, 2016, 150). Singapore under Lee sought to severely hamper the ability of the opposition to mount a credible campaign by combining snap elections with an unusually short campaign ‘season’.

Particular types of non-democratic regimes may be different in their ability to manipulate the electoral calendar. Roberts (2015) shows that parliamentary-based non-democracies endure longer than presidential ones. Elections in parliamentary-based non-democratic regimes are likely to, at least to some extent, be less fixed to a schedule than in presidential elections, although presidential-based authoritarian regimes also routinely do not stick to their own electoral calendar. On average, parliamentary-based non-democracies, e.g. Singapore, may also be more likely to resort to ‘snap’ elections, conceivably in many ways similar to the dynamic we observe in parliamentary democracies. Presidential non-democracies, or systems



such as (non-democratic) Botswana where the legislature selects the president but where the election period is, at least on paper, fixed to a five-year schedule, are more likely to delay elections (Bleck and van de Walle, 2019). This suggests that parliamentary-based non-democracies are similar to democratic parliamentary systems in that they take advantage of the electoral system to time elections to coincide with favorable times. Election regularity, as suggested by Roberts (2015), may indeed be one of the reasons parliamentary-based regimes endure longer than presidential ones.

The discussion so far points to two sets of mechanisms that could connect aspects of the electoral cycle with autocratic regime stability. First, a central reason for why elections are destabilizing – at least in the short term – is because they act as powerful focal points for challenger collective action. This effect is contingent on the presence of some level of opposition or opposition parties. The scope of my argument is thus largely restricted to more competitive states and not as applicable to hegemonic authoritarian states (Donno, 2013). These are regimes where the ability of the opposition to form pre-electoral coalitions for the purposes of winning elections have been found to be particularly important for achieving regime change and democratization (Donno, 2013; Wahman, 2013; Gandhi and Ong, 2019). At the same time, this literature has also argued that the factors that favor pre-electoral coalitions in democracies, especially electoral rules and ideological cleavages, are less important in autocracies where factors such as regime coercion appear to be more important (Gandhi and Reuter, 2013; Wahman, 2011). For such regimes, elections are an easily identifiable date and event around which various civil society actors – actors that often cannot communicate without fear of being repressed – can coordinate. Civil society collection action, however, does not just magically appear *because* actors have a focal points to coordinate around. The various actors still need to plan, mobilize, and execute demonstrations (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011).

Incumbent rulers can attempt to sabotage, or at least complicate, civil society collective

action by either delaying scheduled elections or calling snap elections. This strategy causes electoral unpredictability. Such manipulation of the electoral calendar gives civil society less time to mobilize and organize, and this in turn substantially reduces the threat of civil society collective action to regime survival. Note that some autocratic regimes, such as for instance Singapore, have held almost ‘regular’ snap elections. In such countries, it is plausible that the opposition over time will learn to anticipate snap elections and consequently adapt and prepare better for elections in off-election years. In such circumstances, the effect of election timing on the probability of regime breakdown is likely to be mediated.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, even if civil society is able to mobilize on extremely short notice, it is plausible that under such circumstances civil society mobilization will be less robust and harder to maintain for the duration needed in order to, for instance, force the incumbent to relinquish power.<sup>5</sup>

Second, as discussed above, a primary reason governments make use of their prerogative to time elections is either to take advantage of present favorable conditions, i.e. a position of strength, or to get out ahead of potential worse times down the road. This strategy can be termed opportunistic electoral surfing. For an authoritarian government, opportunistic electoral surfing can be used to offset the short-term risks of calling elections. By taking advantage of electoral surfing, for instance by timing an election to a period following its successful response to an event or execution of a popular policy – such as Morgenbesser (2017) finds that the PAP in Singapore routinely did – incumbents may hope to change individuals’ decisions about joining anti-regime protests. Joining civil society anti-regime protests in non-democratic settings can be costly. Authoritarian regimes routinely jail and even torture participants in anti-regime movements, and the regime may also use large-scale repressive violence against protesters (Dahl et al., 2014). Under such conditions, the regime may hope that favorable societal conditions, such as high levels of economic growth, may persuade enough people to stay home, thus affecting how many people challengers are able to mobilize. The size of the movement is directly related to the likelihood of seeing regime

defection (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011), the likelihood of the regime violently suppressing the movement (Dahl et al., 2014), and the likelihood of success in removing the regime (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011).

The regime may also surf by taking advantage of opposition weakness or their own organizational strength. In 2002, Robert Mugabe had to make use of massive electoral fraud to squeak out a relatively low margin of victory of 56 to 42% in the presidential election race against Morgan Tsvangirai (Kamete, 2002; ICG, 2002). This election followed the regular election schedule set out by the Zimbabwean constitution. In 2002, Mugabe appeared to have both overestimated his own level of support and underestimated the opposition's determination and level of preparedness (ICG, 2002). One plausible reading of history is that Mugabe learned from this. The next round of elections in Zimbabwe were planned for 2008 and 2010. Mugabe, however, changed the calendar so both parliamentary and presidential elections would be held at the same time in 2008 (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

The 2008 elections saw an unprepared and unorganized opposition faced with a determined and brutal incumbent. The Mugabe regime went to great lengths to ensure that people would vote for them. The role of violence was absolutely critical in this election. The Mugabe regime used violence effectively and efficiently to ensure election victory. The use of violence in and of itself might very well have been the most important mechanism in ensuring regime survival. By taking charge of the timing of the election, however, the regime was plausibly able to plan better for its use of violence and to ensure it was employed to maximum effect. In this, the role of violence and the timing of the election are not competing explanations; rather, strategic timing of the election allowed for more effective use of violence. This, moreover, came on top of an opposition that was already in disarray. Under these conditions, Mugabe coasted to a very comfortable 85.5% win. In the aftermath of the election Mugabe was forced into a unity government, but this unity government was never able to curtail Mugabe, who stayed in power for almost 10 more years.

The underlying mechanisms for such endogenous election timing are in many ways similar in democratic and non-democratic settings. Incumbents take advantage of favorable conditions or attempt to guard against future deteriorating conditions. Incumbents may also attempt to take advantage of opposition weakness, by timing an election to a period where the opposition is weak or disorganized. The tools used by democratic and non-democratic regimes, however, diverge sharply. For non-democracies, the opposition knows that the use of violence is never off the table; indeed, this is a defining characteristic of such regimes (Greitens, 2016). In contrast to in democracies, electoral timing as a tool is available for autocrats even in systems with fixed-term constitutions. Democracies and autocracies also break down differently. Democratic incumbents are of course regularly removed through elections. This is not supposed to happen in autocracies, though it does, for instance in Gambia following the electoral defeat of Yahya Jammeh in the 2016 elections. In contrast to in democracies, however, an electoral defeat in an autocracy is also a *regime* failure. More commonly, autocratic regimes are brought down through the use of violence, e.g. in coups d'état or large-scale uprisings (Svolik, 2012). It is precisely this kind of instability and risk to the regime that incumbents can use electoral timing to guard against. This risk is plausibly more pressing in non-democracies, but it may also be an important reason for why parliamentary democracies are more stable (Hiroi and Omori, 2009).

Election timing should thus be seen as part of what Schedler (2002a) calls a regime's 'menu of manipulation': the tools autocratic regimes use to circumscribe elections and render them meaningless. The menu consists of democratic electoral norms that autocrats violate, and Schedler (2002a, 43–45) lists seven 'courses' on this menu, ranging from outright killing of opposition candidates to control of information through restrictions on free press. The norm in question here is that regimes with fixed-term elections should have regular elections or that elections should not be unduly delayed. Manipulating the electoral calendar is an important item on the menu in itself, but it also facilitates other items on the menu, such

as fragmenting the opposition or engaging in repression. Indeed, regimes regularly pick and choose from the ‘menu’ – here, I seek to understand how important the technique of election timing is.<sup>6</sup>

The theoretical expectation and core hypothesis from this is that the *regularity* of the election cycle should matter for regime survival in non-democratic regimes. This occurs through the two mechanisms discussed. The first centers on ‘electoral unpredictability’: the use of elections timed to undermine opposition coordination. The second centers on ‘opportunistic surfing’ to take advantage of regime popularity or opposition weakness. These imply that regimes that, for various reasons, stick to a regular election cycle leave themselves open to vulnerabilities that regimes that do not stick to a prearranged schedule can avoid. The more regular the election cycle, the easier it will be for civil society to coordinate and challenge the regime, both legally through the ballot box and using more contentious tools such as mass demonstrations, riots, or, in some cases, violent rebellion. Moreover, regimes that stick to a regular cycle cannot take advantage of opposition weakness or own strength, or preempt future weakness when they time elections. In the analyses below, I focus on the level of regularity but also attempt to test the two mechanisms to see if one is more important than the other.

Some dictators may be forced to call elections at inopportune times or may be prevented from freely altering the election calendar. Other dictators, perhaps with a better foothold on power, may have more leeway. Below, I outline two empirical strategies to at least partially deal with this endogeneity. First, since defining the regularity of an election cycle is far from trivial, I opt to build a measure of *regularity* that should be less endogenous to these dynamics. Second, since this is not likely to fully guard against endogeneity, in Section 6 I run a set of instrumental variable regressions. Neither of these approaches are without issues. They both, however, point in the same direction, which I interpret as evidence supporting the hypothesis that the *regularity* of the election cycle matters for regime survival in non-

democratic regimes.

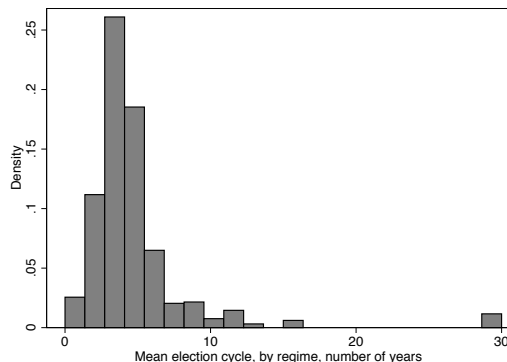
## 4 Data and methods

In order to measure the regularity of the election cycle in an authoritarian state, I use the list of authoritarian states compiled by Geddes et al. (2014) as a starting point. This implies that all the regimes included in my analysis are, per definition, regimes that do not hold *truly* contested elections where the opposition has a fair chance of winning. All in all, more than 80% of autocratic regimes do, more or less regularly, hold elections, but since non-electoral regimes fall outside the scope of the theory outlined here, regimes that never hold elections are excluded from the analysis. Moreover, as discussed above, primarily presidential- and parliamentary-based systems differ systematically in the extent to which they allow the incumbent to manipulate the electoral calendar; to guard against this, the models add a variable measuring whether the regime is parliamentary- or presidential-based (Coppedge et al., 2016). Below, in Table 2, I also run a model on only executive elections.

Importantly, the Geddes et al. coding of *regime failure*, which I use as the measure of stability and the main dependent variable in this paper, captures failures resulting not just in democratization, but also changes between different *types* of autocracies, *and* changes between regimes of the same ‘autocracy type’ but with different ruling coalitions.

To measure the degree of irregularity of the election cycle, the core explanatory variable, I start with the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). The NELDA data include all national legislative and executive elections globally in the 1945–2011 period. To construct the measure of electoral regularity, I follow two approaches. First, I simply use the variable included in the NELDA dataset that codes whether regular elections were suspended before the present election. According to this measure, 20% of elections included in the study happen either before or after they were

Figure 1: Distribution of mean election cycle, average years between elections at the regime level



originally scheduled. This variable by itself is not sufficient to study the effect of irregularity, however. It will not adequately capture the effect of electoral timing in regimes that are not fixed-time systems and where the incumbent is therefore allowed to change the electoral date, and it will not adequately capture regimes that follow a completely irregular schedule and thus never really suspend an election. I therefore start with the dates of elections as coded in NELDA. Then I measure the time between the last to the next election,  $\delta_{a,b}$ , where  $a, b$  indexes the last and the next election and  $\delta$  is the time between elections  $a$  and  $b$ . To do this, I need a regime to have carried out at least two elections. Dropping all regimes that have only staged one election means I further eliminate a total of 23 distinct regimes, as coded by (Geddes et al., 2014), or a little less than 7% of all regime-years.

Next, I calculate the average of the times between elections at the regime level:  $\mu_i = \sum_1^n \frac{\delta_{a,b}}{n}$ , where  $\mu$  is the average and  $i$  indexes the regimes for all pairs of elections  $(1, \dots, n)$ .  $\mu_i$  is a time-invariant mean estimate of the waiting time between elections for each regime as defined by Geddes et al. (2014). Figure 1 shows the distribution of mean election times,  $\mu$ , across all regimes in the dataset.

The last step is to account for the regularity of a given election to this mean, simply  $x_{i,j} = |\delta_{a,b} - \mu_i|$ , for election  $j$  in regime-year  $i$ , this  $x_{i,j}$  is the focus variable below. The result is a time-variant measure that is sensitive to how regular *two consecutive elections*

*are relative to the average electoral schedule of a given regime.* This means that within its lifespan a regime can stage elections that are more or less regular.<sup>7</sup> This measure cannot be used to say definitely that a given election is delayed or rushed; rather, it should be thought of as a measure of irregularity. Using this definition, however, we find that a much higher percentage of autocratic elections appear irregular than the ones that are strictly defined as delayed by NELDA. If we define delayed or early, for the purposes of comparison to NELDA, as  $\pm 2$  years different from the cycle between the last two elections, 53% of autocratic elections are irregular by this measure compared to 20% by NELDA. Of these 53%, about 60% are delayed and 40% are rushed. These figures also indicate that 60% of all autocratic regimes at some point held an irregular election.

Two examples may help illustrate how this measure works. Mexico under the PRI staged regular presidential elections every six years from 1934 to its transition to democracy according to Geddes et al. (2014) in 2000. Mexico thus gets a 0, since no election deviates from the electoral cycle up until that point. Contrast this with the 1991 and 1997 elections in Singapore. Up until 1991, Singapore had been on a fairly but not perfectly regular 4-year schedule, giving it a score close to 0. The 1991 election, however, was staged 3 years after the immediate last election and then it took 6 years until the next election was staged in 1997. The 1991 election is 1 year from the average cycle, so the regime gets a score of 1 on the measure that year; the 1997 election is an additional 3 years of the cycle, giving it a score of 4. My hypothesis is that the effect of this variable is negative: the more regular an election is, the higher the likelihood of regime failure. Singapore, however, resembles a parliamentary democracy in that the constitution allows for some degree of electoral surfing. Another example is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which formally follows a fixed-term calendar for its presidential elections. For presidential elections, DRC followed its 7-year schedule for its first three elections, then, following the 1984 election, it took 22 years until the next election. Even though DRC became considerably more democratic after



the introduction of multi-party elections in 2006, the regime is still not fully democratic and in 2016 it delayed the scheduled presidential elections – elections that in the end were conducted more than two years late.

This discussion also points towards important different endogenous aspects of the different types of systems. In Singapore, as noted, some electoral surfing is permitted under the constitution. The delayed elections in DRC, in contrast, were clearly unconstitutional. Some regimes, moreover, will change the electoral calendar following legal procedures, such as Vladimir Putin’s change of the constitution that increased his term from 5 to 7 years. Both the DRC and the Russia case would result in a penalty on the purely empirical measure of election irregularity used here, but it is plausible that the more legal type of irregularity seen in Russia will result in less of a loss of legitimacy for the regime than the blatantly illegal acts of the DRC regime.

Knutsen et al. (2017) show that on and around election day, the risk of regime failure is substantially elevated, i.e. the short-term risk of elections is great, but in the long-term elections stabilize regimes. I model the short- and long-term effects of elections using two decay functions, following Knutsen et al. (2017). Both decay functions register the proximity of an election, in years, but the effects *halve* at different speeds.

I follow the literature and control for a number of variables that also affect regime durability and correlate with elections. These include log GDP per capita from Maddison (2007), as income level may impact on autocratic regime survival (Kennedy, 2010), but also the capacity to organize elections. I also include the one-year (lagged) GDP per capita growth. Natural resource revenues are particularly helpful for autocrats that want to stay in power; they are more easily monopolized than other revenues, and can be utilized for co-optation or for investing in repressive capacity, and I therefore include  $\frac{\text{Oil+gas+coal+metals revenues}}{GDP}$  from Haber and Menaldo (2011). Military size is a traditional proxy for repressive capacity. I control for  $\frac{\text{military personnel}}{\text{population}}$  from Singer (1988). Autocracies likely survive for shorter periods

in neighborhoods dominated by democracies, and I control for average regional Polity score (Gleditsch, 2002). I account for time dependence following Carter and Signorino (2010), and control for regime age – younger regimes are typically more fragile (Svolik, 2012) – by including *regime duration*, *regime duration*<sup>2</sup> and *regime duration*<sup>3</sup>. Since my focus variable is time variant, I also run some models with country-level fixed effects.<sup>8</sup>

## 5 Analyses and results

Results are shown in Table 1. Column 1 reports the simple bivariate results, but controlling for country fixed effects using dummy variables for each country. The results show a substantial and clear negative effect of election regularity on regime survival: as elections become *less* regular, the likelihood of seeing a regime breakdown decreases. This estimation, however, does not control for any non-constant country-level variables. Column 2 therefore implements a conditional fixed effects logit model (Allison, 2009) with the control variables listed above.

The estimates from the conditional fixed effects model in Column 2 show a negative estimate of election regularity on the likelihood of regime survival, an effect that is clearly different from 0. The effect is somewhat stronger than in Column 1. Column 3 implements a random effects logistic model. The fixed effects model discards 30 countries because of lack of variation. The random effects model keeps these, although it does not guard as efficiently against omitted variable bias. The estimate for regularity of election cycle remains negative and clearly different from 0. Lastly, Column 4 reports estimates from a standard logistic regression that controls for unit level heterogeneity following (Carter and Signorino, 2010). The effect size for regularity of election cycle is somewhat smaller in this model, but still negative and clearly different from 0.

The four different specifications all indicate a negative effect of election regularity on

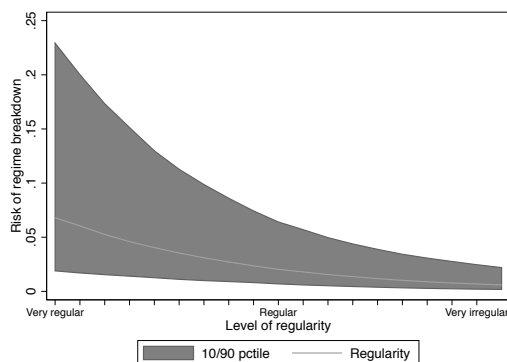
Table 1: Effect of election regularity on regime survival, all non-democracies, 1946–2007

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Bivariate	Fixed	Random	Full
Regime failure				
Irregularity	-0.194** (0.0674)	-0.199** (0.0767)	-0.160** (0.0583)	-0.141** (0.0533)
Proximity to election / 1		1.648* (0.662)	2.151*** (0.578)	2.641*** (0.601)
Proximity to election / 8		-1.195 (1.650)	-1.122 (1.383)	-1.259 (1.311)
Region polity		6.584*** (0.933)	3.890*** (0.654)	3.479*** (0.534)
ln(GDP per captia)		0.421 (0.398)	-0.154 (0.136)	-0.183 (0.120)
GDP growth		-0.0267* (0.0132)	-0.0320** (0.0120)	-0.0326** (0.0118)
Military size		-0.713* (0.346)	-0.267 (0.164)	-0.288 (0.149)
Resource dependence		0.0292* (0.0143)	0.000632 (0.0103)	-0.00150 (0.00970)
Presidential		0.747* (0.341)	0.562* (0.240)	0.758* (0.336)
Duration				0.0298 (0.0191)
Duration <sup>2</sup>				-0.000428 (0.000364)
Duration <sup>3</sup>				0.00000126 (0.00000137)
Intercept	-2.029 (1.074)		-2.906* (1.373)	-2.847* (1.247)
aic	1180.2	653.0	1011.0	1014.3
ll	-504.1	-318.5	-495.5	-495.2
N	3190	2762	3190	3190

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

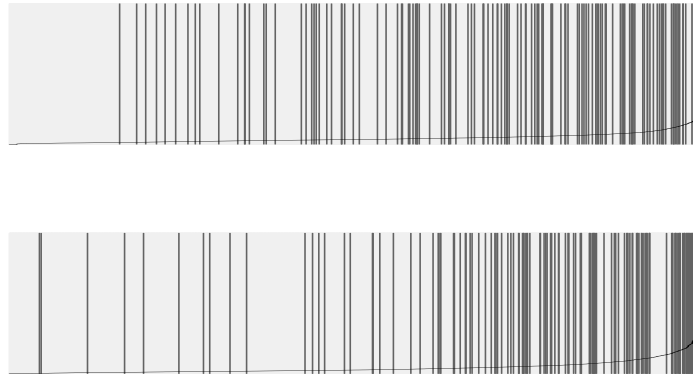
Figure 2: Predicted probability of regime breakdown across levels regularity of electoral cycle



regime survival. In line with the hypothesis proposed above, non-democratic regimes that stick to a more regular election cycle are more likely to fail. One important counter-argument here relates to the role of election timing as a signal of regime weakness or strength. If the regime is strong, why would it need to alter election dates in order to defuse opposition collective action? In such a case, the announcement of an early or a postponed election could instead serve as a focal point for collective action for challengers who, based on this signal, have now updated their beliefs about regime strength. Such dynamics might absolutely occur; my analyses, however, indicate that such an effect is dominated by the theorized relationship.

Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of regime breakdown as election regularity increases (following King et al., 2000).<sup>9</sup> The x-axis on the figure plots the level of regularity, with the regimes with the most regular electoral cycle on the left-hand side. Regime breakdown in itself is a rare event, so the probability of regime breakdown at any given point in time is very low, less than 2%. Regimes with the most regular electoral cycles have around 5 times higher probability of regime failure compared to an average regime. As the regularity of the electoral cycle decreases, the probability of regime breakdown also decreases rapidly. From the high point at one end of the spectrum to the other end of the scale, the probability decreases by a factor of almost 4. For regimes with very regular cycles in contrast, there

Figure 3: In-sample predicted regime breakdowns, models without (top) and with (bottom) regular election variable, Separation plots



are a lot of regimes that appear to exhibit *much higher* rates of regime breakdown than the average estimates, but very few that appear to be more stable.

Focusing solely on statistical significance may lead to models that fail to explain much of the observed variation in dependent variable (Ward et al., 2010). To that end, Figure 3 shows a set of separation plots for the two models with and without the electoral regularity variable. The separation plot is a visual method for assessing the predictive power of models with binary outcomes (Greenhill et al., 2011). In the figure, the predicted probabilities of regime breakdown are sorted from the lowest to the highest probability from the left to right. All positive events, i.e. observed regime breakdowns, are marked with a black vertical bar. The lines running through the plots show the predicted probability of regime breakdown. A perfect model would cluster all actual regime breakdowns to the right of the graph. The top panel in the figure shows the model without the electoral-regularity variable while the bottom one shows the model with this variable. The bottom panel exhibits much higher rates of clustering of regime breakdowns to the right. That is, when I account for the regularity of the electoral cycle, the overall ability of the model to classify regime breakdowns correctly increases.

The separation plots are especially useful as they allow a more in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of a model. More precisely, by examining the correct and wrong classifications of the model, we can potentially learn a lot about the performance of the model and of the importance of, in this case, electoral regularity (Colaresi and Mahmood, 2017). Two cases of regime failure that fit the theory laid out above are the regime failures in Indonesia in 1999 and Panama in 1989. Both these regimes experienced a regime failure immediately following an election that saw widespread civil society mobilization, and in both cases the model predicted these regime failures with a relatively high level of probability, respectively 19% and 15%. Indonesia under Suharto followed a regular schedule of (clearly fraudulent) elections for several decades. The elections in 1997, which that could have been anticipated many years in advance, saw large-scale civil society mobilization, starting with student protests and culminating in general strikes and mass riots (Hadiz, 1998). Suharto eventually bowed to pressure. In May 1998, he stepped down and following a brief interregnum the country's first democratic elections were staged. A similar, but reverse, example of a case that appears to fit the model quite well is the already mentioned non-regime-failure in Zimbabwe in 2008. Zimbabwe in 2008 had abandoned the regular election schedule and was following a much more irregular cycle. The model as such gives the probability of regime failure in Zimbabwe in 2008 as quite low, 6%. In the model that does not account for the regularity of the election cycle, the probability of regime failure in 2008 is, in contrast, predicted to be 18.7%, three times higher.

The cases the model fails to account for may, however, be even more useful for understanding the dynamics of regime failure. Regimes in Gambia, or for that matter the more totalitarian North Korean regime, for instance, have kept to a highly regular election cycle for decades. These regimes, especially in election years, are also predicted to have a non-trivial probability of regime failure – in election year the predicted probability of regime failure typically hovers around 8 to 10%.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, these regimes have endured. This

underscores that even though civil society mobilization is an important factor for explaining authoritarian regime failure, and that regularly occurring elections greatly aid such civil society mobilization, regular elections in themselves are, obviously, not sufficient. Regimes such as North Korea have built a repression and control system that is robust enough to withstand the risk of regularly occurring elections. This points to important limitations, or maybe even scope conditions, of the theory laid out above.

## 5.1 Robustness

Table 2 shows a core set of robustness tests that probe the sensitivity of the results. Column 1 adds the level of democracy as measured by the Scalar Index of Polities (SIP) (Gates et al., 2006).<sup>11</sup> Non-democratic regimes vary in how democratic they are. Plausibly, authoritarian states that exhibit more democratic traits could, for various reasons, stick to a more regular election schedule. Adding this reduces the estimated effect of regularity somewhat but the effect remains negative and statistically significant.

Specific types of authoritarian regimes systematically differ in their longevity (Geddes, 1999). Column 2 adds the autocratic regime type dummies from Geddes et al. (2014), keeping dominant party regimes out as the reference category. Again, adding these do not substantially alter the effect the regularity of the election cycle has on the likelihood of regime breakdown.

Columns 3 and 4 add controls for two important mechanisms discussed above. The extent to which an incumbent is able to manipulate the electoral calendar is likely to depend on their hold on power and degree of control. Column 3 adds the executive constraints variable from Polity IV Marshall et al. (2013). Adding this does reduce the estimated effect of regularity but it is still negative and clearly different from 0. Similarly, Column 4 probes the robustness of the results to inclusion of more fine-grained information about civil society. I add the core civil society index from the *Varieties of democracy* project (Coppedge et al., 2016) to ensure

Table 2: Robustness tests, logit models, 1946–2007

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
	(Democ- racy)	(Geddes) (types)	(Exec.) (only)	(Civil.) (soc.)	(Repre- session.)	(Alt.) (regular)	(Local) (regular)	(Exec) (Exec)	(Delayed v.) (snap)	(Int.) (Int.)	(Int.) (Int.)
Irregularity	-0.154** (-0.0463)	-0.141* (-0.0558)	-0.114* (-0.0503)	-0.112* (-0.05)	-0.145** (-0.045)	-0.158** (-0.047)		-0.120* (-0.0763)		-0.137* (-0.070)	-0.118* (-0.056)
Alt. irregularity											
Local irregularity											
Level of democracy	3.075*** (-0.37)						-0.109* (-0.0498)				
Monarchy		0.108 (-0.43)									0.169 (-0.427)
Military		2.133*** (-0.277)									1.587*** (0.240)
Personalist		0.639* (-0.265)									0.303 (0.250)
Presidential		0.765* (-0.357)								0.748* (-0.328)	
Executive constraints			-0.0229*** (-0.00312)								
Civil society				0.00210*** (-0.00027)							
Repression					2.350*** (-0.623)						
Media freedom					-0.23 (-0.178)						
Delayed irregular									-0.201** (-0.0372)		
Snap irregular									-0.148** (-0.0365)		
Irregular * presidential											
Irregular * regime age											
Irregular * Monarchy											
Irregular * Military											
Irregular * Personalist											
Proximity to election / 1	2.831*** (-0.739)	2.902*** (-0.624)	1.923** (-0.655)	1.846** (-0.662)	1.989** (-0.634)	2.031** (-0.612)	2.111** (-0.657)	2.777*** (-0.712)	1.420** (-0.623)	1.443* (-0.617)	1.205** (0.590)
Proximity to election / 8	-1.111 (-1.749)	-1.58 (-1.321)	0.513 (-1.479)	0.732 (-1.506)	-1.031 (-1.479)	0.473 (-1.23)	0.23 (-1.011)	-1.987*** (-1.123)	0.838 (-1.526)	0.787 (-1.514)	0.571 (-1.518)
Region polity	2.571*** (-0.661)	2.970*** (-0.587)	3.453*** (-0.548)	3.439*** (-0.55)	3.421*** (-0.589)	3.067*** (-0.566)	3.200*** (-0.541)	2.389*** (-0.654)	3.451*** (-0.553)	3.546*** (0.54)	3.285 (0.598)
ln(GDP per capita)	-0.378** (-0.143)	-0.191 (-0.125)	-0.148 (-0.122)	-0.148 (-0.122)	-0.201 (-0.121)	-0.178 (-0.113)	-0.161 (-0.101)	-0.365** (-0.138)	-0.121 (-0.121)	-0.117 (-0.115)	-0.084 (0.124)
GDP growth	-0.0282 (-0.0145)	-0.0322** (-0.0122)	-0.0273* (-0.0118)	-0.0261* (-0.0118)	-0.0298* (-0.0115)	-0.0300** (-0.0121)	-0.0281* (-0.0119)	-0.0265 (-0.0136)	-0.0264 (-0.011)	-0.0259** (-0.011)	-0.029* (0.012)
Military size	-0.226 (-0.182)	-0.311 (-0.16)	-0.312* (-0.157)	-0.305 (-0.157)	-0.299 (-0.18)	-0.313* (-0.148)	-0.215 (-0.171)	-0.209 (-0.172)	-0.262** (-0.155)	-0.319** (-0.14)	-0.354* (0.142)
Resource dependence	0.00553 (-0.0104)	0.00247 (-0.00964)	-0.00097 (-0.00989)	-0.00143 (-0.00998)	0.00301 (-0.0113)	0.00268 (-0.00988)	-0.00003 (-0.00961)	0.00048 (-0.00987)	-0.001 (-0.009)	0.006 (-0.004)	-0.0241*** (0.003)
Intercept	-2.449 (-1.618)	-3.588** (-1.304)	-4.515*** (-1.326)	-4.742*** (-1.34)	-3.900*** (-1.326)	-4.641*** (-1.319)	-3.768*** (-1.297)	-2.987*** (-1.342)	-4.542*** (-1.347)	-2.575** (-1.329)	-4.829*** (-1.385)
Region controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Duration controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
aic	771	956.8	971.2	965.5	973.2	905.1	837.5	968.7	900	963	921
ll	-372.5	-463.4	-472.6	-469.8	-462.1	-403.1	-400.7	-370.5	-372.5	-478.03	-456.5
N	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$



that the results of electoral regularity are not simply driven by whether the country allows civil society some autonomy. Adding this factor reduces the effect of regularity at a similar scale as adding executive constraints, but the effect of regularity remains negative and clearly different from 0. Column 5 focuses more specifically on the menu of manipulation. It includes a measure of repression in the year prior to the election, taken from the Political Terror Scale index (Wood and Kathman, 2015), and a measure of media freedom from VDEM (Coppedge et al., 2016). Adding these two measures does not substantively affect the results.

Columns 6 and 7 test two additional measures of how regularly a regime holds elections. One potential concern is related to a regime which, for instance, does not hold elections during its first twenty years, but then decides that it should institutionalize multi-party elections. In this case, the regularity measure would suggest quite large irregularities, even though the lack of elections and later the four-year cycles are perfectly regular. To ensure results are not driven by such a dynamic, Column 6 tests a regularity measure (Alt. regularity in the table) which runs from the first year in which the regime holds an election and not from the regime's inception. This somewhat increases the effect of regularity but does not make a substantive difference.

A more general concern is that the proposed measure is too global, in that it focuses on the entire lifespan of a regime, although it does vary across this lifespan. An alternative measure would filter out these broader trends and instead focus on local differences – on how the regularity of elections may change rapidly from one period to the next. To this end, Column 7 considers a measure that takes the average difference between the absolute value of  $(election_{t+1} - election_t) - (election_t - election_{t-1})$ . Here, if a country held elections in 2000, 2003, and 2008, this would contribute to the measure with  $(2008-2003) - (2003-2000) = 2$ . This measure (Local irregularity in the table) does not compare each difference between elections with the entire electoral history, as does the main measure. It thus loses some important information, but focuses more squarely on short-term variation in the electoral

cycle. The estimated effect of this measure is lower than the main measure but still negative and significant.

Parliamentary-based and presidential systems differ systematically in the ways in which they allow the incumbent to, legally, manipulate the electoral calendar. To further ensure results are not driven by only one of these systems, Column 8 estimates the baseline model on only presidential elections; this does not substantively change the results. Column 9, moreover, distinguishes between elections that are delayed and elections that are rushed. Estimated effects are similar, but the effect of delayed elections is stronger. Lastly, Columns 10 and 11 probe a set of important possible interaction effects. Column 10 includes interactions between the irregularity measure and the presidential dummy and between irregularity and the age of the regime. Column 11 includes an interaction between irregularity and autocratic regime type. None of these measures substantively change the estimated relationship, but I do find that the effect is stronger both for younger regimes and for parliamentary-based regimes.

## 6 Dealing (partially) with endogeneity

The election schedule of a given regime may very well be endogenous to the risk of regime failure (see e.g. Pepinsky, 2014). Incumbents that are weak may be forced to stick to a regular schedule, while incumbents that are more secure in their position may be able to postpone elections to fend off potential challengers. To attempt to account for this, I estimate an instrumental variable regression, more specifically an Instrumental Variables Probit (IV-probit) model that treats the regularity of elections as endogenous.

I follow existing literature (see Knutsen et al., 2017) and exploit the fact that holding elections, and therefore also the timing of elections, can be partly driven by outside (international) forces to identify valid instruments of elections. Variation in the electoral schedule

Table 3: IV Probit regressions, first and second stage regressions, 1946–2007

	(1)	(2)
	Regime failure	Regime failure
Regularity	-0.0502* (0.0199)	-0.0578* (0.0207)
Proximity to election / 1	1.308*** (0.293)	1.299*** (0.273)
Proximity to election / 8	-0.616 (0.593)	-0.590 (0.578)
Region polity	1.644*** (0.259)	1.738*** (0.268)
ln(GDP per captia)	-0.0864 (0.0559)	-0.0793 (0.0469)
GDP growth	-0.0167** (0.00579)	-0.0158** (0.00550)
Military size	-0.139 (0.0734)	-0.152 (0.0764)
Resource dependence	-0.000750 (0.00429)	-0.000680 (0.00390)
Duration	0.0143 (0.00922)	0.0168 (0.01002)
Duration <sup>2</sup>	-0.000204 (0.000173)	-0.000315 (0.000205)
Duration <sup>3</sup>	0.000000593 (0.000000612)	0.000000463 (0.000000723)
_cons	-1.604** (0.579)	-1.586** (0.568)
Regularity		
Proximity to election / 1	1.166 (1.384)	1.178 (1.400)
Proximity to election / 8	-9.137*** (2.089)	-8.691*** (2.112)
Region polity	-1.498 (1.311)	-1.479 (1.348)
ln(GDP per captia)	-1.755*** (0.256)	-1.801*** (0.278)
GDP growth	-0.0169 (0.0295)	-0.0172 (0.0312)
Military size	3.599*** (0.244)	2.898*** (0.305)
Resource dependence	-0.0221 (0.0185)	-0.0211 (0.0200)
Duration	-0.348*** (0.0409)	-0.365*** (0.0389)
Duration <sup>2</sup>	0.00420*** (0.000764)	0.00438*** (0.000716)
Duration <sup>3</sup>	-0.0000117*** (0.00000250)	-0.0000178*** (0.00000308)
Neighboring cycle	0.910*** (0.0176)	
Past cycle		1.103*** (0.0245)
_cons	23.02*** (2.325)	20.20*** (3.178)
aic	25990.8	25790.3
ll	-12969.4	-11548.4
N	3190	2780

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

of neighboring autocracies relates to the electoral schedule that a given autocracy will stick to and can therefore be used as an instrument. Crucially, international sources of variation in election regularity should not impact directly on the domestic regime's durability, once controlling for the other covariates. This approach is implemented in Column 1 in Table 3. However, Betz et al. (2018) have shown that such spatial instruments can be problematic, since spillovers and interdependence very likely exist that could violate the exclusion restriction. In an attempt to deal with this, Column 2 uses as an instrument for the current regularity the level of regularity of the regime in power in that country immediately prior to the current regime, as defined by Geddes et al. (2014). My assumption is that a regime that comes into power will, at least to some extent, be bound by the norms and customs of a country as defined by previous regimes. This approach reduces the  $N$  and the instrument is not perfect, but the two approaches together should at least be seen as indicative.

Table 3 shows the results of the IV-probit regressions where the regularity of election cycle is treated as endogenous, and the neighboring electoral cycles and past electoral cycle are treated as instruments. The table shows both the first and second stage of IV regressions. From the first stage, at the bottom part of the table, we see that the neighboring electoral cycle is a significant predictor of the country's own electoral cycle. The top part of the table shows the second stage where we instrument for the endogenous variable. The instrumented variables are negative and significant at conventional levels, for both proposed instruments. This lends strength to the hypothesis that the regularity of the electoral cycle matters for explaining regime failure. These IV regressions take into account – at least partially – that the electoral cycle can be endogenous to regime failure.

## 7 Conclusion

Around 80% of all non-democratic regimes in the post-WWII period have, more or less regularly, staged elections. These elections are rarely truly contested elections in the democratic sense of the word, and results are often pre-ordained, though – as mentioned and exemplified with the case of Gambia – sometimes regimes do lose even such elections. Nonetheless, elections are a hallmark of democracies, and the fact that so many non-democratic regimes regularly hold elections has produced a rich literature on the reasons for why dictators would stage sham elections, and how such elections impact regime durability. So far, this literature has paid little attention to how the dynamic of the electoral cycle affects regime durability. This is somewhat puzzling. In the study of democracies, the timing of elections and of the electoral cycle more generally is a major field of study. The tendency towards such siloing of research on democracies and non-democracies is somewhat worrisome. Obviously, democracies and non-democracies, both in their various shades, have some particular dynamics that are unique to the specific types. Nonetheless, some knowledge could very well transfer from the democratic end of the spectrum to the less democratic end. Since democracies remain much more studied than non-democracies, especially when we look at the more fine-grained and bureaucratic aspects of the regime, spending some time thinking about what knowledge would transfer seems worthwhile.

More specifically, I have analyzed how the electoral cycle of an autocratic regime impacts regime stability. For democratic regimes, and especially for the large sub-set of democracies that leave it up to the incumbent to decide on the exact timing of an election, a large literature has shown that the electoral cycle is a crucial aspect of the political economy of these regimes. The literature has focused in particular on the role and impact of ‘electoral surfing’. So far, we know relatively little about the importance of such more dynamic factors in autocratic settings. This paper builds on the burgeoning literature on elections under au-

thoritarian rule and adds to this by looking at the role of the electoral cycle for determining autocratic regime survival. The extant literature has in particular pointed to the importance of elections as focal points for challenger mobilization to explain the (short-term) risk associated with elections for dictators. I show that there are indeed short-term risks associated with staging elections, but that incumbent autocrats can to a large extent manage such risks by manipulating the electoral cycle. Autocrats who are able to time elections can exploit two strategies. First, they can create ‘electoral unpredictability’ through calling ‘snap’ elections or by delaying scheduled ones, which can serve to thwart potentially dangerous collective action. Second, they can engage in opportunistic ‘electoral surfing’ to capitalize on the weakness of the opposition or their own present strengths. In this, I also show the utility of using the more general political economy literature to shed light on important dynamics in autocratic settings.

This also points to some potentially important policy recommendations. In many cases, it may seem innocuous for NGOs and the international community to argue that regimes should stick to a regular election cycle. I show, however, that even when these elections are clearly fraudulent, the *regularity* of the electoral cycle by itself enables challenger and civil society collective action. Such collective action can, of course, be an important factor in fostering more democratic regimes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See reporting in The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/11/kazakhstan-president-early-e>

<sup>2</sup>See reporting by Radio Free Europe: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-brief-history-of-presidential-election-26890275.html>

<sup>3</sup>See: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/erdogandan-erken-secim-icin-son-dakika-aciklamasi-40809175>

<sup>4</sup>In the empirical analyses I attempt to test and account for this by including a measure of the age of the regime.

<sup>5</sup>Note that in democracies governments may of course also attempt something similar and call an early election to prevent opposition parties from coordinating or uniting against them.

<sup>6</sup>In the empirical analyses below I control for some of the items on the menu, but because including some of them would introduce post-treatment bias, however, I can not include all.

<sup>7</sup>In the robustness section below, section 5.1, I explore alternative operationalizations of regularity, these all yield similar results.

<sup>8</sup>Again following Knutsen et al. (2017) I do not control for level of democracy. The level of democracy arguably affects regime durability, (Knutsen et al., 2017), however, democracy measures are endogenous to holding (even autocratic) elections meaning that controlling for democracy risks inducing post-treatment bias.

<sup>9</sup>For the simulations all other variables are set at their mean for non-democratic electoral regimes.

<sup>10</sup>Note that the regime in Gambia did lose an election in 2016 leading to a regime failure, this example is outside of the time-frame for the empirical analyses here.

<sup>11</sup>The SIP index is a continuous measure of democracy ranging from 0 to 1, where 1 represent and ideal democracy.

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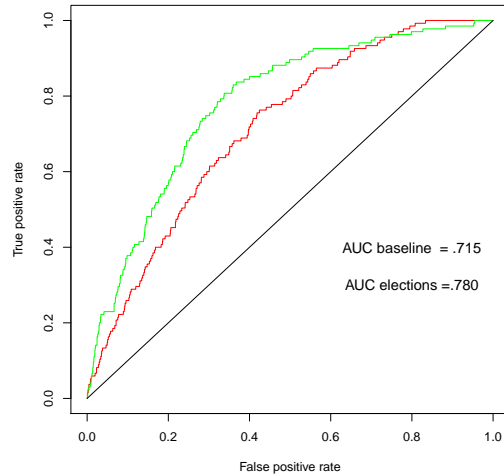
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Figure A-1: In-sample predicted regime breakdown, Receiver Operator Curve plots, models with and without election regularity variable



## A Appendix

Figure A-1 shows Receiver Operator Curve (ROC) plots for two versions of Column 2 in Table 1 above, one with the election regularity variable and one without. The ROC plots the true positive rate (TP) against the false positive rate (FP). A perfect model would produce a ROC line that moves from the left lower corner to the left upper corner and then stays at the top of the plot as the FP rate increases. We can then calculate the Area Under the Curve (AUC), which for a perfect model would yield a value of 1.

The two lines in the figure correspond to the two models with and without the electoral regularity variable. Overall the AUC for the model with electoral regularity variables is considerably better than a model without – the AUCs are respectively .780 and .715. The difference between the two is also statistically significant at the 5 % level. The two lines illustrate the same tendency. Overall, the model that accounts for electoral regularity performs much better in classifying regime breakdowns than a similar model that does not account for this.