

POLITICAL TIMING

A THEORY OF POLITICIANS' TIMING OF EVENTS

John Gibson

ABSTRACT

This paper develops a theory of political timing. It argues that the timing of those political 'events' over which politicians have some discretion is non-random and that politicians attempt to influence the timing of events in such a way as to maximize the political benefits or minimize the political costs for themselves. In relation to 'good news', it is argued that politicians will attempt to increase the public attention given to it or the positive impact felt by electors and to reduce public attention, or the impact on welfare, of 'bad news'. Consideration of memory research, prospect theory and structural factors in the media suggests ways in which politicians can use their discretion over the timing of events to further these ends. Four specific behavioural hypotheses are advanced, regarding the way discretion will be exercised by politicians, according to whether the 'news' is, or is likely to be, good or bad, and the resulting patterns in the timing of events. The behaviours are labelled respectively as packaging, splitting, highlighting, and phasing. Data on the timing of three very different types of phenomenon – British parliamentary by-elections; the timing of announcements of increases in medical prescription charges in the British National Health Service; and the timing and nature of changes in official lending rates in the United Kingdom and the United States – are chosen to illustrate the hypotheses.

KEY WORDS • events • media • news • prospect theory • timing

1. Introduction: A Timing Problem in the UK, 1993

The untimely death in February 1993, at the age of only 48, of Mrs Judith Chaplin, who had only become Conservative Member of Parliament for Newbury at the general election 10 months earlier, required John Major's Conservative government to make an awkward political decision: *when* to hold the by-election for the vacated parliamentary seat. The decision was singularly awkward because of the unpopularity of Prime Minister Major,

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and his government. The most important reasons for this unpopularity were the apparent failure of the promised economic recovery to materialize, and the embarrassing collapse of the previous centrepiece of the Government's economic policy in the UK's ignominious departure from the ERM in September 1992; in addition, there were obvious public divisions within the party over Britain's relations with the European Community, which had recently been brought to the fore in the debate over ratification of the Maastricht treaty. John Major's leadership had been much criticized and with the Conservative Party and his own personal rating at such a low point in the opinion polls, his position was widely regarded as insecure. Margaret Thatcher had been overthrown largely because many Conservative MPs felt she could not win the next election and, pertinently, a number of extremely bad by-election results for the Conservatives in 1990 had played a role in weakening her position. Now, in 1993 it was widely anticipated that a by-election would again provide evidence of the unpopularity of a sitting Prime Minister. The Newbury by-election was likely to bring a bad result for the Conservatives, possibly bad enough to lose a previously safe seat. Certainly, it was most likely, according to a well-known British political commentator, Philip Stephens, in a brief article in the *Financial Times* (Stephens, 1993), to be 'politically wounding to the Prime Minister'.

The decision on the timing of the by-election was with the Prime Minister because in Britain the decision on the choice of date on which to hold a by-election is, by convention, in the hands of the Chief Whip of the party which won the seat at the previous general election. A large amount of discretion is given, and is often taken, in relation to the timing of by-elections.¹ Given the great danger of a bad result for the governing party, and referring to the possibility of holding the by-election on the same day as the annual set of local government elections mandatorily held on the first Thursday in May every year, Stephens reported:

The assumption is that it is better to get the bad news from both out of the way on the same day.

This was, in fact, only a majority view. There was also a minority view: with some in favour of waiting until late June in the hope that, by then, the Government would be more popular given the chances that the economy had more fully recovered from recession and conflicts over Maastricht had subsided. In the event, the majority view prevailed and it was decided to

1. There is no statutory limit to the time a seat may be left vacant – see Craig (1987). Despite the common view, professed even by a former Chairman of the Conservative Party (Baker, 1993: 374), that there is a strong convention that by-elections are held within three months of a vacancy occurring, the actual data show that many by-elections are still (in the 1990s) delayed beyond three months.

hold the by-election on the same day as the local elections and, as anticipated, the Conservatives did extremely badly in both the local government elections and the by-election. They recorded their worst ever performance in local elections and lost the by-election to the Liberal Democratic Party on a swing of 25 percent of the vote.

This is one example of a political timing problem: when to hold an 'event' with some political importance in its own right and which, because of this, is likely to receive some public attention. This decision is here linked to an event to differentiate it from other political decisions made by politicians which do not, in themselves (or are not intended to), lead to an event receiving public attention at a discrete point in time. For example, any decisions made by UK government ministers to change policy on the supply of arms to Iraq – later the subject of the Scott Inquiry – were taken privately and were certainly not intended to lead to any event receiving public attention. Similar remarks might be made about the famous Watergate burglary and the Iran(Contra)gate affair. As an event-timing problem, the by-election timing decision, which is the focus here, is only one from a vast number of possible examples because all political systems give rise to many occasions when politicians need to make decisions in which the choice with regard to timing of events is a consideration, and quite often, an important consideration. This article attempts to point out some largely neglected characteristics in the timing of such events.

As it is the timing of controlled events which concerns us, a helpful exercise in placing the work within a wider context is the construction of a basic taxonomy or categorization of possible types of event. The chosen point of departure here is the division of events into recurring and non-recurring (or 'one-off') categories. Recurring events can be further subdivided into regular and irregular events; an example of the former is the regular release of some economic statistic on, say, the fourth Wednesday of every calendar month. In addition, regular and irregular events can, in turn, be categorized according to their periodicity or frequency of occurrence. A further distinction can be made between whether political events are internally controlled or generated or whether they occur due to uncontrolled external forces. The last category will tend to include many 'one-off' events, such as an earthquake or an invasion or hostile action by a foreign power. Events can also be classified according to whether their timing is predictable or foreseeable. Foreseeability will tend to be associated with the regularity dimension, and many one-off events will be rather unpredictable. However, some one-off and irregular events will be foreseeable, such as the visit by a foreign head of state planned several months in advance. This leads to a distinction between the long and short term with the precise time of the occurrence of a number of events being unpredictable in the long term but, like the said visit, predictable within a shorter time interval,

once they have been arranged. (As well as changing its foreseeability aspect, once arranged, such a one-off event also changes in relation to its controllability characteristic, in that it changes from being an event with flexible and controlled timing to one which is now fixed or, at least, one whose timing is extremely difficult to change.) Figure 1 provides a simple illustration of the possible categories of events, as discussed thus far. A final possible aspect of events is the extent to which they are 'news' events or 'material' events, that is, affecting the material wellbeing of citizens. The definition of material here is very wide and includes things which affect citizens' welfare, more commonly classified as psychological or intangible, such as the way in which the legal framework affects the ability to smoke or play music in public places. However, it is not clear that this dimension has any special significance for timing and, indeed, it will be maintained later that this latter characteristic does not affect timing.

The by-election, the focus of the problem and decision discussed in the introduction, could be classified, on this basis, as irregular, recurring and of moderate frequency, as a number of parliamentary seats will be vacated, at irregular unpredictable intervals, due to the death of the sitting member or other causes, during the life of a Parliament. It is an event whose timing is obviously unpredictable in the long term – that is, before the vacancy arises – but it then becomes controllable and, therefore, predictable – to insiders, at least – in the shorter term because it is the result of politicians' own decisions. (This categorization is noted and marked out in Figure 1.) This article focuses mainly on the decisions taken by politicians on the timing of irregular, recurring events but the same hypotheses developed here also apply to one-off events², and it is suggested later, and evidence is brought to bear, that the timing of some irregular recurring events is also linked to the occurrence of one-off events.

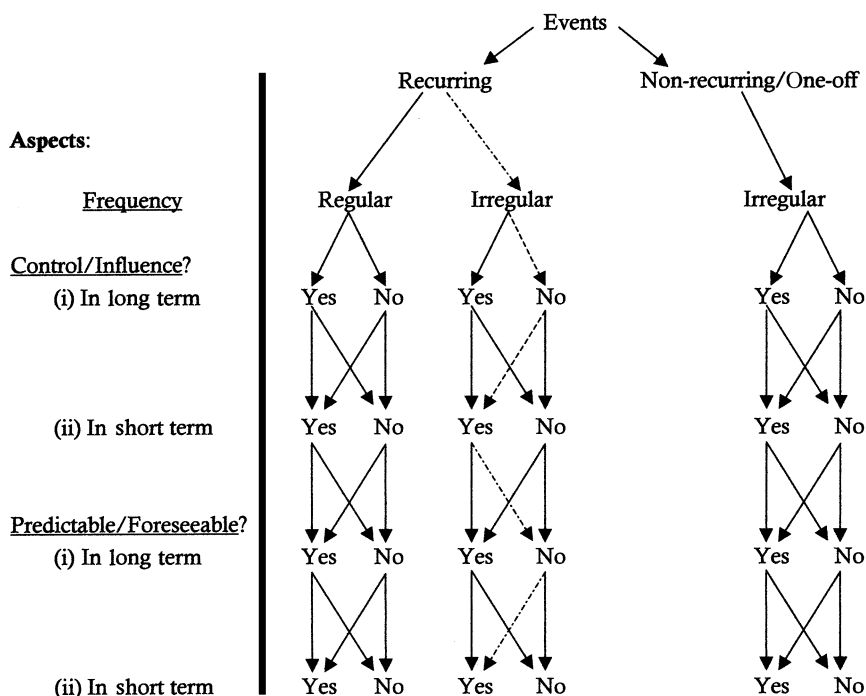
2. Elements of a Theory of Political Timing

It is helpful first to return to Mr Major's by-election timing decision. The working assumption referred to, in the earlier quotation, is that minimizing the amount or duration of negative media attention is better than dragging it out or having it repeated with greater frequency. This assumption may be part of the folk wisdom of politics – an assumption which practising

2. In the timing of some internally controlled or influenced 'one-off' major decisions such as the timing of revolutions or general elections, the attention of the media is either inevitable or a relatively small part of the calculation. Little attention will be given to some one-off decisions such as when to release information or a single report embarrassing to the government, where news considerations are important, but the timing of their release – for example, late on Friday or at the start of the summer holidays – is rather obvious.

politicians readily use. But it seems to be something which has not been given deeper examination in its own right, nor stimulated any attempt to construct a wider or more general theory of political timing (certainly not of the aggregation or separation of events which is a key concern here) – although timing, in relation to elections, is a key consideration in the large literature on political business cycles (Mueller, 1989: 277–86; Frey, 1997). There have also been a number of interesting studies by Scandinavian scholars on aspects of political timing relating both to the electoral cycle (two novel papers by Matti Wiberg bring to light electoral cycles in both parliamentary questioning and in law-making [Wiberg, 1991; 1994]) and the ordering of events (Hovi and Hellevik, 1996).

As part of an attempt to construct a wider theory which throws light on aggregation/separation effects in political timing, it is worthwhile examining the by-election decision in more detail. In this particular context it involved a decision that two political ‘events’, both of which would bring ‘bad news’ to the Conservative government, one of which was regular,



Note: Broken arrows indicate the common characteristics in the example of a by-election caused by a vacancy in a governing-party seat.

Figure 1. A Categorization of Events

predictable and externally controlled, the other internally controlled, would occur on the same day, rather than on separate days – and to do this by the timing decision on the internally-controlled event. Both events would give rise to negative coverage in the media, reminding not only the public, but also Conservative backbenchers of their government's and leader's unpopularity. Presumably it was anticipated that having the two events on the same day would reduce the *amount* of negative media attention which the two events would receive in aggregate, and that this reduction would be helpful (less damaging) to the leader.

This suggests that a theory of political timing must pay considerable attention to the role of the media in political life. It is fairly well established that media coverage, and the amount of repetition of particular themes or issues, contributes to 'setting the agenda' (Erbring et al., 1980; McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and, according to most analysts this repetition has an independent influence on opinion polls: the more often the media repeats and reinforces the message that the government *is* unpopular, then the greater the proportion of the public who will, in turn, believe that this unpopularity is deserved (McCombs, 1977; Newton, 1992; Watt et al., 1993). However, although related to agenda-setting, political timing can be seen as a distinct and different problem. Even if the main concern is agenda-setting, timing is the more fundamental task for politicians and, in particular, how to time events in such a way that they might then, or later, influence the news and political agenda. In other words, the ability to time is, in effect, a resource in order to maximize desired political outputs (Curry and Wade, 1968) or minimize political costs, in terms of news effects or agenda setting.

There are three inter-related elements or building blocks which should be relevant to timing. The first of these is the way in which electors form their impressions of political parties. This must involve some consideration of human memory and attitude formation. This is certainly relevant to opinion and reactions to news events. The second is the weighting that individuals give to 'good news' and 'bad news' and, here, work on prospect theory will prove germane. The final element is consideration of the main channel by which news is conveyed to the public and 'opinion-formers' amongst the public, which is largely through the media.

With respect to human memory processes, it might be thought that there was some rich seam of extremely relevant psychological research which could readily be mined to throw light on the question in hand. But this is not so. As one political scientist has put it in relation to psychologists' work on attitude change, usually based on laboratory experiments, it has 'not been particularly useful in extending our knowledge of human behaviour' (Qualter, 1985: 74). Similar conclusions on the relevance of memory research have been drawn by Neisser, an acknowledged leader in the field

of cognitive psychology, who states: 'If X is an interesting or socially significant aspect of memory, then psychologists have hardly ever studied it' (Neisser, 1982: 4). Most of the 'findings' are based on artificial laboratory experiments involving tests on memory timespans on a handful of items over a period of a few minutes, leading Neisser to conclude that 'modern theories of memory have ... little relevance to everyday memory' (Neisser, 1982: 11).

However, the findings of one careful study of memory of everyday life events over a six-year period suggests that some extrapolation from these laboratory experiments may be safe (Linton, 1982). The laboratory results which are relevant are: firstly, there is a tendency to remember best the first item in a list and the last few items, especially the last – interior or middle items are subject to much more forgetting or incorrect recall; second, the more items there are to remember the greater the proportion which are forgotten and incorrectly recalled; third, remembering is reduced both by time itself, and the amount of 'interference' which occurs before recall is tested. However, the Linton study suggests some relevant additional points. First, when emotionality is a variable, as it often is with real events, increased emotionality augments recall. Second, the emotionality ratings attached to particular events change as time passes. Finally, the time decay function in recall is linear, rather than the typical laboratory result of rapid early forgetting followed by increasingly slow forgetting. Another finding relevant to the impact of media coverage emerged from research by Goethals and Reckman (1982), who found that people cannot remember previously held attitudes or, at least, they reported them incorrectly when their attitudes on particular issues had changed. This tends to support the position of those communications analysts who believe that there is some malleability in public attitudes in the face of media reporting and opinion.

Nevertheless, none of these findings is either greatly surprising or counter-intuitive. Researchers in the field of agenda-setting commonly do not seem to acknowledge much direct influence from the memory research work of cognitive psychologists: this despite the fact that research on the agenda-setting effects of the mass media have, commonly, used models in which human memory decays exponentially and which also have a parallel to the interference process of the laboratory experiments, in presuming that cognition is affected by the number of issues competing for attention (Watt et al., 1993; Zhu, 1993) – a dimension which is likely to be relevant to political timing.

Items studied in the laboratory have little intrinsic interest but in the real world news is often interesting in itself and may report changes in 'material' wellbeing. So opinions may be formed about whether the news is 'good' or 'bad'. Here, work on prospect theory (see Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) has established results which a number of researchers have

shown to have powerful applications to political choice (Levy, 1992; Quattrone and Tversky, 1988) and the response of individuals to multiple utility-affecting events or multiple news events.

An important basic finding established by prospect theory is the shape of the value function for gains and losses. In contrast to the standard concave utility function derived from rational choice expected utility theory where the subjective value of an additional dollar diminishes as income and wealth change (that is, decreasing sensitivity to additional gains and increasing sensitivity to additional losses), research on prospect theory has found diminishing sensitivity not only to additional gains, but also to additional losses. The value function in prospect theory is, thus, in the form of a tilted 'S' (see Figure 2), centred on a reference point – usually the present. Another important feature of prospect theory is that there is a rapid revision of the reference point following any change. All this brings a number of behavioural implications significantly different from the traditional expected utility theory. Prospect theory suggests in the domain of losses that there will be risk-seeking rather than risk-aversion: whereas diminishing marginal utility implies that a loss of \$200 is felt to be more than twice as bad as a loss of \$100 or that the loss of a second \$100 bill is felt more intensely than the loss of a first \$100 bill, prospect theory suggests the

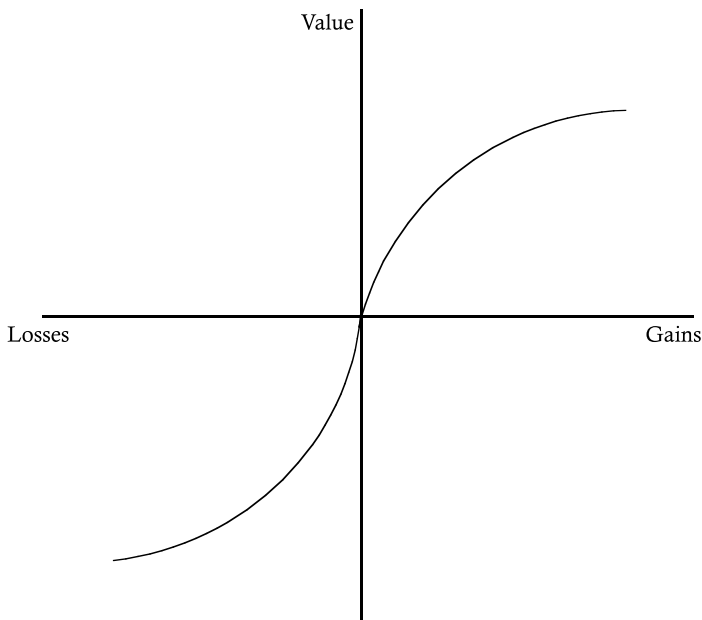


Figure 2. The Value Function in Prospect Theory and the Diminishing Impact of Increasing Losses

opposite. But there are also important contrasts in the domain of gains: whereas marginal utility implies that finding two \$100 bills on successive days is (almost) equivalent to finding a \$200 bill on either day, prospect theory implies that, due to the combined effects of the upper half of the S-shaped value function (which accords in that section with expected utility theory) *and* the rapid revision of the reference point, the separate finds have a greater effect on wellbeing. Thus, the S-shaped value function has powerful implications for the aggregation or disaggregation of gains and losses. Those with the clearest message in relation to timing are: disaggregate multiple gains, and integrate/aggregate multiple losses.

Having had recourse to prospect theory for its relevance to 'material' events, one convenient, and reasonable, assumption will now be made: that the value, or impact, function of news has the same S-shape as the value function of prospect theory. Using this eliminates the need to make any further distinction between the timing of pure news events and material-affecting events.

Memory research and prospect theory thus suggest one reason why politicians might choose to aggregate or concentrate bad news in time and separate good news, and also provides a rationale for phasing: arranging for bad news to precede good news and, especially, attempting to contrive that in the period preceding elections there is a flow of good news, unbroken by bad news. With a given aggregate of bad and good news, the analysis implies that the more bad news events can be aggregated and concentrated and the more that good news events can be disaggregated and separated, the more likely it is that a (lengthy) sequence of good news events can be arranged or released in a pre-election period.

Other reinforcing factors are the structural characteristics of the media industry and the fact that the majority of electors maintain a rational ignorance in relation to most political issues (Schumpeter, 1950). Competition both within and across types of media contains many elements, but a primary area of competition is on 'news'. Television audience figures are, on average, much larger for news than for other programmes (Emmett, 1972; Tunstall, 1983), whilst a majority of newspapers' readerships concentrate on the news page. Television allocates many of its prime-time slots to news programmes; newspapers allocate much of their prime space, the front page, to news.

Although there has been much controversy over the values and biases of media staff in choosing which news events to give time or space to, the two most distinctive characteristics of news events which are given prominence on a particular day are their intrinsic 'importance', including here their 'closeness' to the audience or readership and their 'newness' (Gans, 1979; Reisner, 1992). One particular feature of newness is worth bringing out: a new event today will tend to displace, in today's news, a more important

event yesterday, which will have received its coverage yesterday. In addition, because the supply of prime news time or space slots is limited, the amount of attention given to any item will depend upon the supply of other events on any day. This suggests that politicians can reduce the attention given to bad news events if they can arrange them to occur on days when there is strong competition from other important stories, and increase attention for good news events if they can be made to occur on days when competition from other stories is weak.

It is also helpful to create a general distinction between 'description' and 'analysis'. Scarcity of time and space tends to lead news programmes and front pages to emphasize description rather than analysis and opinion: the tighter the time or space constraints are, the greater the relative prominence given to description and the less to analysis and opinion. These latter are relegated to secondary time slots or inside pages, for the much smaller audience or readership willing to allocate time to them.³ Presumably behind all this lies the sovereignty of consumers, rationally ignorant of politics, many of whom may prefer stories about showbusiness, politicians' personal lives or (as in Britain in recent years) royalty scandals to stories of a burgeoning budget or trade deficit or other significant domestic political events.

These features of the media have relevance for the timing choices made by politicians. In effect, they make the prime news programmes and front pages the 'slaves' of events – today's event will get prime news coverage if it is among today's most important items – the precise number of items depending on today's precise pattern of events and the time or space available. The implication for governing politicians is that if two bad news events can be made to occur on the same day, the amount of damaging news coverage can be reduced; and if one good news event can be split into two occurrences on two different days good news coverage can be increased.⁴ Such gains cannot, of course, be attained with respect to news analysis and opinion where the weighting and evaluation of bad and good news will tend to be more considered. However, even here there may be net gains for at least two reasons. First, analysis and opinion tend to receive less attention than prime-time or front-page news. Second, analysis itself is subject to the buffeting of events – either it moves on to give attention to

3. The audience figures for news analysis programmes are markedly lower than for briefer descriptive, news headline programmes. Of course, this decay in interest is exaggerated by analysis programmes being given secondary time slots, but the effect is confirmed when one examines the relative audience for simultaneous programmes on other channels for news and analysis programmes.

4. This possibility is enhanced by any latitude to steer bad (good) news to times when it receives less (more) attention due to the weekly or annual cycle or the presence (absence) of other important news stories.

the latest event or those supplying analysis and opinion are themselves not immune to the psychological factors drawn out previously or they may wish, to some extent, to reflect the interests of the public, and so they gear their comments towards more recent events.

3. Some Behavioural Hypotheses

Four behavioural hypotheses can now be quickly assembled and the implications they have for the behaviour of governing politicians and for opposition politicians be drawn out. The hypotheses are:

1. *Packaging*. Politicians will attempt, with events whose timing they can influence or control, to arrange that bad news events occur simultaneously.
2. *Splitting*. Politicians will, to the extent it is technically possible, attempt to divide the stock of good news into a larger number of good news items. This will not be attempted with the stock of bad news, which will, if it is possible, be subject to 'aggregating'/packaging.
3. *Highlighting*. If there is heterogeneity in the importance of particular times during the course of, say, each week or year, politicians will attempt, in so far as it is possible, to steer the bad news into the times when they will receive less attention and the good news into the times when they receive more attention.
4. *Phasing*. Politicians will attempt to manipulate the timing of news so that the ratio of good news to bad news is relatively higher close to election campaigns.

Taking the first two hypotheses, packaging and splitting will be used by politicians to attempt to ensure that, with any given stock or supply of news, the number of good news episodes is as large as possible and the number of bad news episodes is as small as possible. The highlighting hypothesis is linked to the packaging one in that the presence of other important events, whether internally or externally controlled, may provide the opportunity to reduce the attention given to a bad news event by packaging them with such an event.

The objective of opposition politicians is also to arrange events in a way maximally advantageous to their party and maximally disadvantageous to the governing party,⁵ although the number and range of such events tends to be much more limited than those available to the government.

Although none of the hypotheses is particularly startling, they carry

5. This statement presumes a two-party system. Where there are more than two parties, opposition parties may be as much or more concerned about arranging news events to the disadvantage of competing opposition parties.

some implications which have not previously been drawn out and the task of the applications which form the rest of the paper is to demonstrate these implications.

4. Some Applications

Three applications of the theory which display all the hypotheses relating to the timing of events set out earlier will now be examined. These applications are by-elections, raising National Health Service prescription charges and the timing of changes in the official monetary discount rate.

By-elections

The hypotheses suggest that the party in government would tend to hold their by-elections 'together', that is, when more than one seat is contested at the same time or when a by-election is held simultaneously with another set of elections; and the opposition party would tend to hold their by-elections 'separately', that is when only one seat is contested. Table 1 presents the data on British by-elections over the period 1955–97.

Taking the period as a whole, there is a marked contrast between the timing behaviour of governments and oppositions, and between the behaviour of each party when in government and when in opposition. The Conservative Party held 55.6 percent of by-elections in their seats together whilst in government, compared with 46.4 percent together when in

Table 1. The Timing of British Parliamentary By-elections, Overall Data, 1955–97

	Number of By-elections	By-elections in Government Party Vacancies		By-elections in Opposition Party Vacancies	
		Held Together	Held Separately	Held Together	Held Separately
<i>Number</i>					
ALL	283	94	65	45	79
Conservative Seats	136	64	44	15	13
Labour Seats	147	30	21	30	66
<i>Percentage</i>					
ALL		56.0	44.0	30.2	69.8
Conservative Seats		55.6	44.4	46.4	53.6
Labour Seats		56.9	43.1	25.0	75.0

Note: The 'held together' classification includes six 'separate' by-elections held alongside another set of elections and six held during summer or Christmas holiday periods.

opposition. The difference was larger for the Labour Party, which held 56.9 percent of by-elections in their seats together whilst in government but only 25 percent together when in opposition. The data support the hypotheses regarding separating good news and packaging bad news.

It should be added that this is not, nor does it claim to be, a complete theory of the timing of by-elections – indeed, in itself, it relates only to the extent to which by-elections are aggregated or separated and neglects the speed aspect of timing. It would be an oversimplification of complex reality to regard this news effect as the only important influence on timing. Other additional forces were at work during this period, most notably the concern of Labour with the threat posed by third parties. Interviews with Labour Party officials have confirmed the importance of third-party considerations. A fuller treatment is given by Gibson and Hall (1998), who suggest that timing decisions involve the weighting of a number of other strategic factors, in addition to the news impact. These other factors are, briefly:

- result considerations – when timing might, because of other developments, affect the result;
- resources considerations – when simultaneous timing might stretch the resources of a competing smaller party or economize on party workers' efforts;
- external result effects – when a by-election might be delayed to postpone the acquisition by victorious opponents of political momentum, which they might then exploit to their advantage;⁶ and,
- parliamentary arithmetic and timetable – which can obviously encourage speed or delay in holding a by-election.

One obvious constraint to aggregation in the holding of by-elections in Britain in recent years has been the declining frequency of by-elections; itself partly as a result of the increasing reluctance of governments to avoid unnecessary by-elections because of the increasingly poor results and the rise in the proportion of contested governing-party seats lost. For example, data for the 1980s and 1990s show a markedly reduced tendency of the Labour opposition to hold their by-elections separately (Gibson and Hall, 1998). Thus, in the 18 years of Conservative rule from 1979 to 1997 there were only 34 by-elections in Conservative seats, an average of less than two per year, and a great constraint on the ability to hold their own elections together. In contrast, in the nine years of Conservative rule from

6. This consideration meant that the February 1994 vacancy caused by the death of the Conservative Member for Eastleigh was not held simultaneously with the May local elections, as initially expected, but delayed so as to avoid a bandwagon effect for the certain Liberal Democrat victors in the June 1994 European elections (see Riddell, 1994).

Table 2. The Timing of Increases in National Health Service Prescription Charges, 1990–95

Date of Increase	Day of Week Announced	Size of Increase Compared to (rate of inflation) %	Dominant Other News Event?	Other News Event	Classification of Other News Event		
					Recurring or One-off	Internally Controlled	Anticipated or Unanticipated?
1 Mar. 1990	Thursday	8.9 (7.5)	Yes	Opposition Poll Tax debate	One-off	No	Anticipated
13 Feb. 1992	Thursday	7.5 (3.7)	Yes	Release of worst jobless figures for four years	Recurring	Yes	Anticipated
3 Mar. 1993	Tuesday	13.3 (1.7)	?	Return of detention centres	One-off	Yes	Anticipated
7 Feb. 1994	Thursday	10.0 (2.4)	Yes	John Major's meeting with Yeltsin in Moscow	One-off	Yes	Anticipated
23 Feb. 1995	Thursday	10.5 (3.3)	Yes	Release of Northern Ireland peace proposals	One-off	Yes	Anticipated

1955 to 1964, there were 61 by-elections in Conservative seats. This obvious difference in the ability to hold by-elections together is reflected in the 'together-separate' ratio: whereas, in the earlier period, the Conservatives held 72 percent of their by-elections together, in the later period they held only 32 percent together – although this latter figure was still higher than the 25 percent held together by the Labour opposition in the same period.⁷ Indeed, there could hardly be more potent documentation of the continuing importance of the news effect highlighted here than this quotation from the memoirs of former senior Conservative minister and party chairman, Norman Tebbit, covering the period in 1986 when he was party chairman:

Just before the Libyan raids we had lost the Fulham by-election and in early May we did poorly in the local elections and in the two more by-elections *which were held on the same day to avoid two days of bad news rather than one*. (Tebbit, 1989: 316–7; my emphasis)

National Health Service Prescription Charges

Conservative governments attempted throughout their long period of office between 1979 and 1997 to increase the direct financial contribution of patients to financing the National Health Service. However, the only means available to them, whilst preserving the inherited, and popular, principle that services should be free at point of use, has been to increase charges for medical prescriptions at a rate well above inflation. Our hypotheses imply that politicians will attempt to arrange that each increase is substantial and occurs relatively infrequently and to time the announcements precisely so that the attention they receive is as small as possible. The timing and main features of all increases in charges made by Conservative governments in the 1990s, including the competition for news attention from other events, is set out in Table 2.

It can be seen from Table 2 that the timing of the announcement of increases on at least four of the five occasions took place when another unusually salient or important event which was bound to dominate the news was also occurring. Respectively, these were an opposition day debate in the House of Commons on the poll tax at the height of its unpopularity; the release of the jobless figures when they showed their

7. During the period after 1979, the Labour Party had an unusually strong incentive – for an opposition – to hold their by-elections together, due to the often potent threat from third parties. That this encouraged a greater 'togetherness' in their by-elections is confirmed by interviews with Labour Party officials reported in Gibson and Hall (1998).

highest level for four years; the Prime Minister's talks with President Yeltsin in Moscow; and the release of the government's 'Strategy for Peace' proposals for Northern Ireland. The fifth event, the Home Secretary's announcement of the return of detention centres, was the only one whose importance may be doubtful, though this story received a high proportion of the front-page coverage in all the major broadsheets, probably due to the great public concern about crime in March 1993. In only one of these cases was the timing of the other event, which dominated the headlines and reduced the amount of media attention on the increase in charges, not controlled or influenced by the government. But even in this case, where the timing of the dominating event was not controlled by the government, its occurrence could, as with all the others, be readily anticipated in advance and, therefore, taken full advantage of by a government seeking to reduce the attention paid to its announcement of bad news. Certainly, the opposition parties, on all these occasions, felt that the announcements had been deliberately timed to reduce public attention. Typical are the statements reported in *The Daily Telegraph* on the day after the increase announcement in February 1995, when the Liberal Democrats health spokesman declared that the Government had slipped out its statement 'like a thief in the night', and the Labour party's spokesman said it had been 'sneaked out under cover of the Northern Ireland statement'.

These data reflect three of the four timing hypotheses. With regard to 'splitting', the increases were concentrated into relatively heavy annual increases, rather than split into (say) six-monthly increases. The timing also reflects the expected packaging and highlighting characteristics, with the announcements coinciding with other important news events which, on at least two occasions, happened to be anticipated bad news events for the government.

Official Money Market Rates

The sensitivity of governments to the level of interest and lending rates in the economy, especially in the British context, because of their effect on mortgage lending rates, is a commonly accepted phenomenon. The rationality of this perception has been backed up by recent analyses of the determinants of party support in the United Kingdom, which found that the level of interest rates, through its effect on economic optimism, was the most important economic influence on public support for the Conservative governments during the 1980s (Sanders, 1991). There are, of course, a number of long-term and external influences on the level of interest rates in the economy but, in the short term at least, governments (or central banks, if they have independent control) have some discretion in the setting of the

official market discount or lending rate, provided they are willing to accept the consequences this might have in the financial and other markets.

Interest rates have, of course, long been an important instrument of monetary policy in the United Kingdom, even before the growth of the money supply came to be seen by an increasing number of economists during the course of the 1970s as a (or the) key determinant of the rate of inflation (although there have always remained a large number of sceptics, especially in Britain). This increased the perceived importance of interest rates because, for those who supported monetary targeting, they were seen as the key short-term instrument that could be used to influence monetary growth. But this faith in the efficacy of monetary targeting and the ability to use interest rates to adjust money supply growth lasted but a few years in the early 1980s (Goodhart, 1989). Given the sensitivity of governments to levels of interest rates, we might expect to be able to observe some political influence on interest rate movements,⁸ with perhaps the exception of the early years of Thatcher's first administration when belief in the efficacy of monetary targeting had its brief heyday.⁹ Throughout most of the post-war period the strength and importance of the link between interest rates and government popularity was believed more solidly by governments than any possible links between money supply and the rate of inflation. Certainly many analysts and scholars, and a sacked Chancellor of the Exchequer,¹⁰ have, on a number of occasions, maintained that political influences, rather than economic policy requirements, have explained changes in the official

8. There have been a small number of studies of the UK monetary authorities' 'reaction function' (Fisher, 1970; Nobay, 1974; Dua, 1988) but they did not directly include any 'political' determinants. In any case, there is an inherent difficulty in the obvious instability of the monetary authorities' objective function during recent decades. This instability is not just the result of changes in governments or Chancellors of the Exchequer, or even of fairly rapidly changing perspectives of the efficacy of monetary policy (see Goodhart, 1989). For example, the objective function of the monetary authorities with respect to the exchange rate shifted markedly after the United Kingdom left the ERM in September 1992 and certainly gave immediate rise to a greater freedom and willingness to reduce interest rates.

9. Johnson (1991), and Goodhart (1989), both describe how belief in monetary targets quickly faded from 1982 onwards to be followed by a more eclectic approach, in which short-term interest rates, largely because of their perceived influence on the exchange rate, and, to a lesser extent, on the marketing of government debt, nevertheless continued to play an important role.

10. Most recently, Norman Lamont in his resignation speech in the House of Commons on 9 June 1993 strongly implied that the base rate reduction of January 1993 had been forced through, against his own and officials' advice, by the Prime Minister, worried about a run of bad economic news, stating that '[W]hile my Right Honourable friend and I have been in general agreement on interest rate policy, I do not believe that even the timing of interest rate changes should ever be affected by political considerations ... Far too many important decisions are made for 36 hours' publicity.'

Table 3. Number and Average Size of Upward and Downward Changes in Official Minimum Lending Rates, Successive UK Governments, 1951–92

Prime Minister(s)	Governing Party	Years	Number of		Average Size (%) of		Net Nominal Change During Period (%)
			Upward Changes	Downward Changes	Upward Changes	Downward Changes	
Churchill, Eden	Conservative	1951–55	4	2	0.875	0.5	2.5
Eden, Macmillan	Conservative	1955–59	2	6	1.5	0.58	–0.5
Macmillan, Hume	Conservative	1959–64	4	7	1.25	0.57	1.0
Wilson	Labour	1964–66	1	1	2.0	1.0	1.0
Wilson	Labour	1966–70	5	7	0.9	0.5	1.0
Heath	Conservative	1970–74	10	11	1.0	0.41	5.5
Wilson	Labour	1974–74	–	2	–	0.25	–1.0
Wilson, Callaghan	Labour	1974–79	15	42	1.28	0.46	0.5
Thatcher	Conservative	1979–83	6	19	1.83	0.68	–2.0
Thatcher	Conservative	1983–87	10	29	1.0	0.38	–1.0
Thatcher, Major	Conservative	1987–92	13	15	0.69	0.54	1.5
Overall		1951–92	70	142	1.10	0.49	8.5

lending rate.¹¹ Official interest rates in Britain at this time were much more under the control and influence of governing politicians than in systems with an independent or semi-independent central bank. Goodhart (1986), a long-serving senior economist at the Bank of England, has underlined both the Bank's subordinate advisory role to the government of the day and the limited role of technical considerations:

The crucial policy steps taken while I have been at the Bank (e.g., the application to the IMF and the tightening of policies in 1968/69; the go-for-growth in 1972/73; the abandonment of the pegged exchange rate in 1972; the reliance on incomes policies and the disinclination to adopt quantitative monetary targets, 1974/76; the second application to the IMF and the adoption of quantitative monetary targets in 1975; the abolition of exchange control in 1979; the adoption of the Medium Term Financial Strategy in 1980, etc., etc.) have all been essentially major political decisions, in which technical market conditions have played a rather minor role. (Italics added)

It has also been found that, even in the United States, where changes in official interest rates are voted by the members of the Federal Reserve Board and politicians have no direct control, there is evidence of a political interest rate cycle, with reductions in the official discount rate tending to precede elections (Willett with Keen, 1990). But given that interest rate decisions have until 1997 been under the direct control of politicians in the United Kingdom, other things being equal, it would therefore be expected that political influences on the interest rate cycle would be more pronounced in the United Kingdom than in the United States.

We ask two main questions on the setting of official lending/discount rates. First, do changes in official lending rates in Britain show evidence of political timing? Second, how do these compare with the timing patterns of changes in United States official lending rates? The second question may provide a comparison of the behaviour of governing politicians with an appointed 'independent' expert board of governors.

Table 3 examines the packaging aspect of changes in interest rates, covering all 11 British governments from 1951 until 1992. These data give strong evidence that under all 11 governments the average size of upward movements in interest rates was much larger than the average size of downward movements in interest rates – and this was also reflected in the tendency, within nearly all periods of government, for the number of downward changes to be larger than the number of upward changes. Table 4

11. Sometimes, British governments have attempted to keep the officially controlled lending rates in the money market at unrealistically low levels, by imposing various types of credit rationing and controls on the banking and financial system. Where these latter were ineffective or not fully operative, this led to a weakening of control over the growth of the money supply. The most notable instance of this outcome was after the introduction of the Competition and Credit Control Reforms in the UK in the early 1970s, when the Heath Government resisted increases in the official minimum lending rate because of its reluctance to see double-digit mortgage lending rates (Goodhart, 1984; Moran, 1987).

Table 4. Number and Average Size of Upward and Downward Changes in Official Minimum Lending Rates, Successive US Presidencies, 1952–92

President(s)	President's Party	Years	Number of		Average Size (%) of		Net Nominal Change During Period (%)
			Upward Changes	Downward Changes	Upward Changes	Downward Changes	
Eisenhower	Republican	1952–56	7	2	0.25	0.25	1.25
Eisenhower	Republican	1956–60	6	6	0.475	0.475	0
Kennedy, Johnson	Democrat	1960–64	1	–	0.5	–	0.5
Johnson	Democrat	1964–68	5	2	0.5	0.375	1.75
Nixon	Republican	1968–72	4	6	0.31	0.33	–0.75
Nixon, Ford	Republican	1972–76	7	7	0.71	0.57	1.0
Carter	Democrat	1976–80	15	4	0.58	0.81	5.5
Reagan	Republican	1980–84	7	12	0.875	0.5	–2.0
Reagan	Republican	1984–88	2	7	0.5	0.5	–2.5
Bush	Republican	1988–92	1	7	0.5	0.57	–3.5
Overall		1952–92	55	142	0.56	0.55	1.25

provides comparable data for the United States. Here, there is no such difference between the average size of upward and downward movements in interest rates. The final row of both tables provides an overall summary. The ratios between the sizes and the number of upward and downward movements are very dissimilar: even though there was very little difference in the overall nominal change in interest rate levels during the periods, the ratio of downwards to upwards changes was twice as large in the United Kingdom (142 to 70) as in the United States (53 to 55). The difference between the ratio of the average size of upward and downward movements is even larger: 1.1 to 0.49 in the United Kingdom compared with 0.55 to 0.56 in the United States. These figures present clear evidence of strong political timing elements behind interest rate decisions in the United Kingdom, not present in the United States. The data support the view that both packaging and splitting behaviour is present in decisions made by politicians in the United Kingdom.¹²

Now let us compare the phasing aspect of the timing of interest rate changes. Here, for the United States we set out in Table 6 the changes in the first two years with the last two years of each presidency, and for the eight administrations in the United Kingdom with terms longer than three years, in Table 5, the changes in the first two years with the changes in the remainder of the period of government. (The British time split is made in this way in order to try and minimize any possible distortion caused by the fact that parliamentary elections can be held opportunistically in response to positive economic trends and unadjusted data might reflect a tendency for low interest rates to cause elections rather than vice versa – see Ito and Park, 1988).

Again there is a marked contrast between the two countries: the net difference in nominal interest rate movements is 28 percent in the United Kingdom (+18.25 percent in the first two years and –9.75 percent in the remaining period) and 6.75 percent in the United States (+4.0 percent in the first two years, –2.75 percent in the final two years). There seems to be clear evidence from the data that phasing in the timing of changes is much stronger in the United Kingdom than in the United States.

12. It should be pointed out that there is a competing technical explanation of the phenomena observed in the United Kingdom. This is that the official lending rate has this characteristic – known as the ‘Duke of York’ phenomenon – of sudden large increases followed by a longer period of gradual decreases, in order to enable the authorities to market large amounts of government debt more easily. See Dennis (1984), who states that the authorities began this behaviour from the mid-1970s onwards. However, there are a number of problems with this interpretation. First, the Duke of York pattern applies throughout the period since 1951. Second, it is by no means clear that such behaviour, once learnt by the financial markets, will enable the authorities to market government debt more easily or more cheaply. Finally, the pattern also seems to apply to periods when the government borrowing requirement was small or even, as in the late 1980s, negative.

Table 5. Changes in Official Lending Rate During First Two Years Compared to Remainder of Period of Office: Successive UK Governments, 1951–92

Prime Minister(s)	Governing Party	Years	Net Nominal Change (%) During	
			First Two Years	Remainder of Period of Office
Churchill, Eden	Conservative	1951–55	+2.0	+0.5
Eden, Macmillan	Conservative	1955–59	+2.5	–3.0
Macmillan, Hume	Conservative	1959–64	+3.0	–2.0
Wilson	Labour	1966–70	+1.5	–0.5
Heath	Conservative	1970–74	–2.0	+7.5
Wilson, Callaghan	Labour	1974–79	+3.5	–3.0
Thatcher	Conservative	1979–83	0	–2.0
Thatcher	Conservative	1983–87	+2.75	–3.75
Thatcher, Major	Conservative	1987–92	+5.0	–3.5
Overall		1951–92	+18.25	–9.75

Table 6. Changes in Official Lending Rate During First Two Years Compared to Last Two Years: Successive US Presidencies, 1952–92

President(s)	President's Party	Years	Net Nominal Change (%) During	
			First Two Years	Remainder of Period of Office
Eisenhower	Republican	1952–56	–0.25	+1.5
Eisenhower	Republican	1956–60	–1.0	+1.0
Kennedy, Johnson	Democrat	1960–64	+0.5	0
Johnson	Democrat	1964–68	+1.0	+0.75
Nixon	Republican	1968–72	+0.75	–1.5
Nixon, Ford	Republican	1972–76	+3.5	–2.5
Carter	Democrat	1976–80	+4.0	+1.5
Reagan	Republican	1980–84	–1.5	–0.5
Reagan	Republican	1984–88	–3.5	+1.0
Bush	Republican	1988–92	+0.5	–4.0
Overall		1952–92	+4.0	–2.75

5. Summary

The timing of political ‘events’ over which politicians have some discretion is non-random and politicians attempt to influence the timing of such events so as to maximize the political benefits or minimize the political costs for themselves. It was argued that politicians will attempt to increase

the public attention given to good news or the positive impact felt by electors; and to reduce public attention or the impact on welfare of 'bad news'. Memory research, prospect theory and structural factors in the media suggest ways in which politicians could best use their discretion over the timing of events to further these ends.¹³ Four specific behavioural hypotheses were advanced, regarding the way discretion would be exercised by politicians, according to whether the news was, or was likely to be, good or bad, and the resulting patterns in the timing of events. The behaviours were labelled respectively as (1) packaging, (2) splitting, (3) highlighting and (4) phasing. Data on the timing of three very different types of phenomenon – British parliamentary by-elections; the timing of announcements of increases in medical prescription charges in the British National Health Service; and the timing and nature of changes in official lending rates in the United Kingdom and the United States – were chosen to illustrate the behaviours. Governing parties, who tend to suffer worse results at by-elections than the main opposition party, show a greater tendency throughout the period since 1995 to hold their by-elections together or simultaneously with other elections, such as the annual local elections or the occasional European elections. News of increases in National Health Service prescription charges seems to be released to coincide with anticipated heavy media attention to other foreseeable important one-off events, in order to minimize media attention to the increases. Interest rate changes in Britain, where they have been subject to much greater political control than in the United States, appear to exhibit not only a much stronger electoral cycle, but also a much more pronounced tendency to aggregating increases and splitting reductions. All of the evidence appears to offer support for the behavioural hypotheses.

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13. At the PSA seminar it was asked whether these three 'variables' were rival or complementary explanations of the timing patterns observed. The view taken here is that they are complementary and that all three variables contribute to the observed patterns.

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JOHN GIBSON teaches in the School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham and is a Partner at EFG Research. His main research field is UK central-local relations and local government finance, but he has also worked on democratization and economic reform in Poland and on electoral systems. He is the author of *The Politics and Economics of the Poll Tax: Mrs Thatcher's Downfall* (Warley: EMAS, 1990), and joint editor (with Philip Hanson) of *Transformation from Below* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996). In 1997 he was the recipient of the Leon Weaver Award for the best paper on Representation and Electoral Systems given at the American Political Science Association (APSA) Annual Meeting in San Francisco in 1996. ADDRESS: School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.
[email: J.G.Gibson@bham.ac.uk and JGGibson@ukgateway.net]

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