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Strategic timing in politics and media  
attention: Evidence from Italy

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## Abstract

This dissertation investigates whether politicians strategically time the date of law approvals to avoid overlaps with other newsworthy events. The analysis focuses on the scheduling of confidence votes in the Italian parliament. I find evidence that confidence votes are less likely to be scheduled in days coinciding with predictable newsworthy events (e.g., major sport events). At the same time, there is no statistically significant correlation between the timing of the confidence votes and unpredictable newsworthy events (e.g., natural disasters). This suggests that the timing of confidence votes is the result of a forward-looking strategy by the government. The results are corroborated by a sensitivity analysis on the pool of events and a robustness check on a subsample of votes. Finally, I test whether the negative relation between confidence votes and predictable newsworthy events might be explained by politicians avoiding scheduling events in the presence of other events that attract their own attention ("lazy" politicians). By exploiting the differential scheduling hours of different newsworthy events (e.g., afternoon vs evening events), I provide evidence of a strategic timing of confidence votes also when the scheduling hours do not conflict with parliamentary activities. Moreover, even considering Parliament during its regular activity (i.e. taking all Parliamentary sittings), it is found no correlation. All in all, the evidence provided seem consistent with politicians strategically timing confidence vote to signal the government's cohesion ("signaling" politicians).

## 1 Introduction

The role of media in politics has been debated for several years. The first step in this sense is mainly pushed by psychologists and sociologists: the rise of mass media inspired many theories on the role of propaganda (Lazarsfeld et al. 1949, Berelson et al. 1954), and in

this first type of empirical research the main finding seems to suggest a sort of reinforcement role for the media. According to Klapper 1960 “mass communication far more frequently acted as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change”. In this sense few respondents change their voting behavior after media exposure. On the other hand, subsequent research tries to challenge this conventional view on the effect of media on voting. According to Noelle-Neumann 1973 the effect of propaganda can shape the idea of the majority according to her theory of “Spiral of Silence”. Mass media can isolate opposing ideas, reducing them to a silent minority for the whole population. More generally, this literature is still conflictual whether the media can influence politics through propaganda. In this sense, voters can be psychologically biased to support the ruling party. This debate can be seen in the later studies on behavioral effects, and more precisely on media agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw 1972) and framing (Kahneman & Tversky 1984).

Another channel of research lies in the rational learning models. According to this framework, voters are rational individuals who decide how to vote based on the information they have. In this sense, media are a crucial instrument to convey information to the public opinion. This class of models takes inspiration from the Downsian analysis (Downs 1957) and it is more developed in political economy and political science. In this set of models, voters elect politicians who maximize their utility, while politicians just want to get re-elected, and the mass media selects the news to maximize profits. The role of information in this setup is strongly advocated by Baron 1994, and Grossman & Helpman 1996. The first formalizations of the underlying mechanisms can be found in Strömberg 2001, and Besley & Prat 2006: starting from the canonical political agency model (Barro 1973, Ferejohn 1986), they tried to propose a setup where media, through the provision of specific news, have an impact on policies and the observance of public order. All those models seem to relate a positive effect of media on the quality of democracy, policies and debate. However, it is also highlighted by the same authors that such models can incorporate some degree of systematic biases, that can induce voters to have incorrect beliefs. In this sense, these biases can be exploited by the political agent in order to hide his accountability about specific policies. A more recent empirical research shows that a lower press coverage makes citizens less able to rate their local politicians (Snyder Jr & Strömberg 2010). This is what many new papers tried to evaluate: if politicians strategically schedule policies during important or newsworthy events that monopolize the media attention.

Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018 investigate this mechanism for the first time. They exploit previous literature on news pressure by Eisensee & Strömberg 2007 to detect patterns of strategic timing in politics. According to Eisensee & Strömberg 2007, the U. S. government response to approximately 5,000 natural disasters, occurring between 1968 and 2002, is very sensitive to the importance given to breaking news. During newsworthy events, like the

Olympic Games, the U. S. relief is less likely to be given than on an usual date. To detect this, a measure of news pressure is constructed. This measure quantifies the time dedicated to the three top breaking news by the most important TV news broadcast. When some news monopolizes the media attention (for example, during the Olympics) most of the news show is dedicated to such events. Hence, we can extrapolate a quantitative measure of the importance of news and try to estimate which event can be considered newsworthy. Lately Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018 show a relationship between the Israeli attacks against Palestinians and predictable newsworthy events in the U.S. . Assuming that the Israeli government has an interest in keeping a good opinion from the US population, the authors verify if war attacks to Palestinians are made during important events. It results that the 53,16% of days with a predictable newsworthy event presents an Israeli attack. This percentage drops to 38,67% during the days without events. Additionally, a similar effect cannot be detected for an unpredictable newsworthy event, like a natural disaster. The relation is robust and significant also when news pressure is considered. More generally, we can argue that politicians try to make unpopular policies when the world is not watching.

Djourelouva & Durante 2019 take another step in this field investigating the Executive Orders by the US Government. The authors find that their signing is strategically timed in case of a divided government. When the congress is dominated by the opposition, the President can be scrutinized and criticized by the Parliament much more. Furthermore, it turns out that EOs issued under a divided government are more likely to concern aspects on which the President's and Congress' views are not aligned. If the EO is used by the President to bypass the will of the Congress, this could be seriously contested by the Parliament. For this reason, the President has the interest to issue such policies when the public opinion is not watching. This relation is significant when we consider the news pressure and the usual classification of predictable and unpredictable newsworthy events. The last element of this literature is represented by Kaplan et al. 2019. In this case, there is no strategic scheduling, but a complementary mechanism: when newsworthy unpredicted events occur, the attention dedicated by the media to politics is reduced. Thus, the members of Congress become more likely to adopt the positions of special-interest donors as they vote on bills. Also in this case we can argue that politicians follow theories of political agency, because they act differently when they are less monitored.

Yet, politicians may also strategically time their policy to not coincide with newsworthy events. For example, they may want to signal the cohesion or the strength of the government. Moreover, their will could be to highlight the approval of a policy their constituency cares about. This channel has not been explored by the literature so far, and this is what I would like to inquire. In my analysis I want to apply to the Italian case the same methodology of some previous authors (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelouva & Durante 2019). More

specifically, I want to verify if a given policy or procedure seems to to be strategically timed, because of its correlation to predictable events. At the same time, we should see no link with the occurrence of unpredictable ones. In order to specify what is a newsworthy event, we can use the specification offered in the papers previously presented. The authors do not provide a complete list but their capacity to crowd out the news is consistent in many settings. The actual policy I want to study is the confidence vote. A confidence vote is a procedural tool, normed in Italy by the Art. 94 of the Italian Constitution, by the Art. 116 of the Statute of the Chamber of Deputies, and Art. 161 of the Statute of the Senate. We can have two types of confidence votes: “mozione” and “questione”. The “mozione” must be issued when a Government is formed or can be claimed by the opposition. It’s a scrutiny of the general political line of the Government and it’s present in many other countries. The “questione” is a vote on any act, usually a law, where the government commits its mandate. Due to this commitment by the Government, this vote is usually seen as a way to unify the majority on contentious acts. Especially in the juridical literature, this procedure is criticized and generally perceived as superseding the role of the parliament (Huber 1996, Lupo 2007). This may suggest that politicians might want to "hide" confidence votes. If this is true, a positive correlation with newsworthy events should emerge. On the other hand, we can reverse this concern, because this type of instrument can also be used by the government to show to the public opinion its activity. This might suggest that politicians might want to "highlight" confidence votes, and therefore we would see a negative correlation with newsworthy events. To investigate this empirically, in my study I analyze the timing of confidence votes in Italy during predictable newsworthy events, as previously mentioned. Then, a validation exercise with unpredictable events is made. For those events no significant correlation should be present. Finally, further validation with robustness checks and sensitivity analysis is needed, together with an empirical research on the underlying mechanism.

More specifically, section 2 is dedicated to the data and descriptive statistics. I explain which data are needed and how they are collected through scraping techniques, using official sites and reports from reliable sources. Finally, I present tables about some descriptive facts. Moreover, in Section 3 there are the empirical strategy and the main results on predictable events. Then, I introduce the sensitivity analysis and verify if the coefficient is not only significant, but also robust. This section ends with an additional robustness check, picking specific subsamples of confidence votes. In section 4 some hypotheses are proposed on the underlying mechanism in order to explain the results from the previous part. The main idea is to disentangle between two effects: on one side, the Members of the parliament (which is not the object of this research) may want to avoid sittings because interested in the important events; on the other side, the Government may want to avoid those days because the public attention is low. With simple econometric tools, can be established a real causation between strategic timing and confidence vote. In Section 5, there is a validation test on unpredicted

newsworthy events. Following the same methodology from Section 3, I verify no correlation with this type of events. Finally, a conclusion summarizes all the findings, wrapping up the main results and the methodology.

## 2 Data

In the following dissertation the main goal is to verify if confidence votes in Italy are strategically timed. Therefore, data on the occurrence of confidence votes, unpredictable and predictable events must be collected. Confidence votes are registered on a daily basis, with scraping techniques. Together with the overall report, all the events are divided on the topic of the law. Data on unpredictable events are mainly gotten from the EM-DAT database for natural disasters. It's possible to get the number of victims, the nature of the disaster (e.g. flood, earthquake or hurricane), the start and end date. The other type of source is the record of the deaths of famous people and it is obtained with the scraping technique. Finally, predictable events are collected from official reports on the internet. This is a wide collection of events obtained through a long exercise of scraping, which is explained later. I mainly use data on the World and Euro Cup, Olympic events, and major shows like the Oscars and the Sanremo festival. In the next paragraphs, a more complete description of how I collected the data and some descriptive statistics are provided.

The analysis is made within a timespan from 2001 to 2018. The possibility to collect all the data directly from the internet makes it possible to choose the timespan with complete freedom. The first reason is that the XIV Legislature started in 2001. The choice to start from the XIV Legislature is dictated by the use of confidence votes itself: before 2001 the use of this tool was quite rare, and it increased later during the following period. Moreover, the sample includes a wide range of different governments, all characterized by divergent political alignment. The sample starts, as we told previously, from 2001: during the XIV legislature (i.e. from 2001 to 2006) the political realm is dominated by a Centre-right government. More specifically, we are talking about the Second and the Third mandate by Silvio Berlusconi. The short-lived XV Legislature (2006-2008) is led by the opposite faction: in this period we have a Centre-left government chaired by Romano Prodi. The following XVI Legislature (2008-2013) sees two different governments, representing two different alignments: from 2008 to 2011 the Centre-Right led the country with Silvio Berlusconi as Prime Minister. Afterwards, we have the possibility to observe a so-called "governo tecnico", a sort of caretaker government led by academic figures and chaired by Mario Monti. The last Legislature (2013-2018) starts with a grand coalition government between the Centre-Left and the Centre-Right, led by Enrico Letta and continued with the Renzi Government (2014-2016), and the Gentiloni Government (2016-2018). Those last two mandates can be considered a Grand Coalition government,

even if a big part of the Right-wing does not participate.

The precise definition of “newsworthy event” is not trivial. A methodology used by the previous literature (Eisensee & Strömberg 2007, Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018) is to include all the events that monopolize the breaking news (i.e. that are correlated with an increase in news pressure). The list of such events is not comprehensive: the previous literature has not provided a complete one. On the other hand, there are some events which have a strong correlation with the news pressure. We can claim that, even if we don’t know all the events, we can rely on a bunch of them that monopolize the attention for sure. The precise selection of those events is related to Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, and in our case is presented in Table 1.

<b>Predictable Events</b>	
Baseline model:	
All matches played by Italy for World and Euro Cup Olympic medals won by Italy	
Sensitivity analysis:	
The Sanremo festival and The Oscars	
<b>Unpredictable events</b>	
Baseline model:	
Disasters w. > 50 victims or happened in Italy (lasted < 100 days)	
Sensitivity analysis:	
The deaths of famous people	

Table 1: Event specification

Those are the events that I choose for the baseline model and the sensitivity analysis that are presented in the next section. In the following paragraph some additional insight is given on how the data are collected and some descriptive statistics are provided. Moreover, there is information on the data used in the robustness check.

## 2.1 Predictable events

For predictable events there are two main sources of data: sport and show business. More precisely, I collect the data from the Euro and World cup, Olympic games, the Oscars, and

the Sanremo festival. All data are taken through scraping.<sup>1</sup>The Euro and World cup data include both preliminary and final tournament matches, while for the Olympic games I report only the day when a medal was won by Italy. The Oscars and The Sanremo festival are just plain collections of the dates when they occurred. The total amount of days interested by sport events is reported in the Table 2.

Sport events			
	Euro Cup	World Cup	Olympics
<i>N</i>	58	64	80

Table 2: Sport events occurrence

Globally 202 days have a newsworthy event related to sport. Those events are not concentrated during summer: 53% of them are in the other seasons. This happens because I included in the research also preliminaries of soccer cups and winter editions of the Olympic Games. The Oscars and the Sanremo Festival count for 111 days, and are concentrated between February and March. The occurrence of those events, and their distribution across years and months, is represented in the Appendix (Figure 10 and Figure 11).

## 2.2 Unpredictable events

For unpredictable events I collect two main types of data: natural disasters and the deaths of famous people. I find the data on natural disasters from the EM-DAT database and I get the data on dead VIPs with scraping technique using Scrapy on Python.

As previously mentioned, I decide to keep only disasters with more than 50 victims and all events occurred in Italy. Moreover, I exclude all the events that lasted more than 100 days, as suggested by Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018. The total amount of days interested is in the Table 3.

The occurrence of unpredicted events (considering both natural disasters and dead VIPs) is well distributed across the months and the years. Those two distributions are represented in the Appendix (Figure 12 and Figure 13).

<sup>1</sup>For the Euro Cup I used <https://www.uefa.com> and <https://en.wikipedia.org> . For the World Cup I used <https://www.fifa.com> and <https://en.wikipedia.org> where possibile. In order to get data on the local time in which those matches were played, I used <https://fbref.com> . For the Oscars and the Sanremo festival I used <https://en.wikipedia.org>. All data were scraped using bs4 and selenium through Python scripts.



Unpredictable events		
	Natural Disasters	Dead VIPs
$N$	4,375	394

Table 3: Unpredictable events occurrence

## 2.3 Confidence votes and sittings

For the first part of my analysis, only a daily report on when a confidence vote was issued is needed. In order to do that, I used both a scraping library and a Natural Language Toolkit to get the necessary data from the official sites of the two Chambers (Deputy and Senate).<sup>2</sup> After that, another check is made, date by date, to verify if those votes are for a “mozione” or a “questione”. As explained in the introduction, the “mozione” must be issued when a Government is formed or can be claimed by the opposition. It’s a scrutiny about the general political line of the Government and it’s present in many other countries. The “questione” is a vote on any act, usually a law, where the government commits its mandate. My analysis focuses only on “questione” votes. In Table 4 are reported some descriptive on the occurrence of this type of vote.

Confidence votes				
	Only “mozione”	Only “questione” (Deputy)	Only “questione” (Senate)	All confidence votes (No “mozione”)
$N$	40	110	125	227

Table 4: Confidence vote occurrence

My analysis for the baseline model is on the 227 confidence votes observed in the table. We can also see that the sum of the Senate and the Deputy votes is more than the total amount, because sometimes both Chambers have a confidence vote on the same day. In the Appendix (Figure 14 and Figure 15) can be seen that the distribution of confidence votes is quite uniform, both over the years and the months. The low numbers in January and September could be probably because of the presence of holidays right before these months, which makes it difficult to prepare laws.

<sup>2</sup>Source: <https://storia.camera.it/> for confidence votes of Chamber of Deputy. <http://www.senato.it/> for the Senate. I used bs4 and NLTK on Python in order to process the raw data.

Beyond the baseline model, a sensitivity analysis is subsequently done on a different subset of votes. There are 4 categories: the first one counts all the confidence votes which translate a Decree-law to law. A Decree-law is an emergency tool that the government can use to issue an order. In this way the government can make a decision without a vote from the Parliament, but with a short validity. It is not rare that laws are previously implemented by a Decree-Law and then translated into an ordinary one voted by the Parliament. It is not unusual that the law as well is approved with a confidence vote. For what concerns the second categorization, in Italy a law must be approved by both Chambers in the same form, in order to be adopted. Hence, we should exclude all the confidence votes that need to be revised by the other Chamber, counting only the ones that mean a final approval. The last 2 categories regard the content of the law: I divide all laws that have some economic value from the other ones, which usually are on justice, School, National Health Service. The occurrence of those subsets is specified in Table 5, while further information about their distribution is illustrated in the Appendix ( Figure 16, Figure 17 and Figure 18)

Confidence votes				
	Decree conversion	Final approval	Economic Issue	No Economic Issue
<i>N</i>	159	101	158	69

Table 5: Confidence vote occurrence by category

In order to analyze the mechanism, reports on sittings are needed. For this reason I collect each sitting of the two Chambers from 2001 to 2018, registering in which day every session occurred. Also, in this case, all data are collected with the scraping technique.<sup>3</sup> In the Appendix (Table 6) is presented the total amount of sittings, also divided for each Chamber.

The total amount of observations is 6,574, which is the number of days from the 1st of January 2001 to the 31st of December 2018. The 40% of this amount holds a parliamentary session (2,616 days). It is obvious to observe that this event is more likely than a confidence vote. Also in this case, we can see the distribution of sittings over the years and months in the Appendix (Figure 19 and Figure 20). Further information can be found in the Appendix “Additional info on data collection”. In the next Section, I am about to present the econometric model and the main results of this research.

<sup>3</sup>I used bs4 on <https://storia.camera.it/> and <http://www.senato.it>

### 3 Econometric model and results

#### 3.1 Econometric model

For what concerns the econometric model, I implement a methodology that, as written before, is taken from previous literature on strategic timing (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelova & Durante 2019). I consider every day from 2001 to 2018 as an observation (the total amount is 6,574). For each day we can express an event with a dummy variable. For example, if a confidence vote occurs on that exact day, this variable for that observation takes a value of 1. Then, I simply run a regression between confidence votes, and other dummies and controls. The specific regression is:

$$A_t = \sum_{\tau=-7}^{\tau=7} \alpha_{\tau} E_{t+\tau} + \gamma W_t + \eta_d + \psi_m + \vartheta_y + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

In this setting  $E_t$  is the dummy variable for a newsworthy event on day  $t$  (predictable or unpredictable). I insert 7 lags and 7 leads to verify if there is some systematic effect on a specific date, not exactly matching with an event. Moreover,  $A_t$  is the dummy indicating a confidence vote on day  $t$ ,  $W_t$  is the number of weeks from the start of the legislature, while  $\eta, \psi$ , and  $\vartheta$  are respectively day, month, and year fixed effect. I use SE clustered at the year-month level, as indicated by the previous literature. Two types of regression are run: one in which confidence votes are correlated to predictable events, and one in which the independent variable is the dummy on unpredictable ones. In this sense, only predictable events may be strategically used to sway public opinion. Hence, we can find some evidence about a strategical timing when the coefficient of the first regression only results significant. If the coefficient is significantly negative, we can argue that the politician tries to avoid newsworthy events, when they are predictable. This happens in order to not crowd out the attention on his policy. Otherwise, if the coefficient is positive, he strategically times the adoption of such measures, when the attention of the public opinion is captured by other events.

In order to make my analysis more robust, I implement two additional elements. The first element changes the design of the independent variable: more events are added to the total pool to do a sensitivity analysis. More specifically, the occurrence of the Sanremo Festival and the Oscars is added to the group of predicted events. In this sense, if the sensitivity analysis maintains a significant coefficient of interest, we can argue that the result is not sensitive to the way we designed the independent variable. The second element is to subject the dependent variable to a robustness check. Using some qualitative variables, collected with the confidence votes, I confirm the same effect for every category. As previously mentioned,

the four categories are: laws related or not to economic issues, laws converting executive orders, and sittings where laws are finally approved. If coefficients remain significant, it is possible to prove that the effect should not be related to specific features of the law. On the contrary, the method of approval, which is the object of our analysis, is the real source of variation. I repeat the same checks for unpredictable news in Section 5. In the following

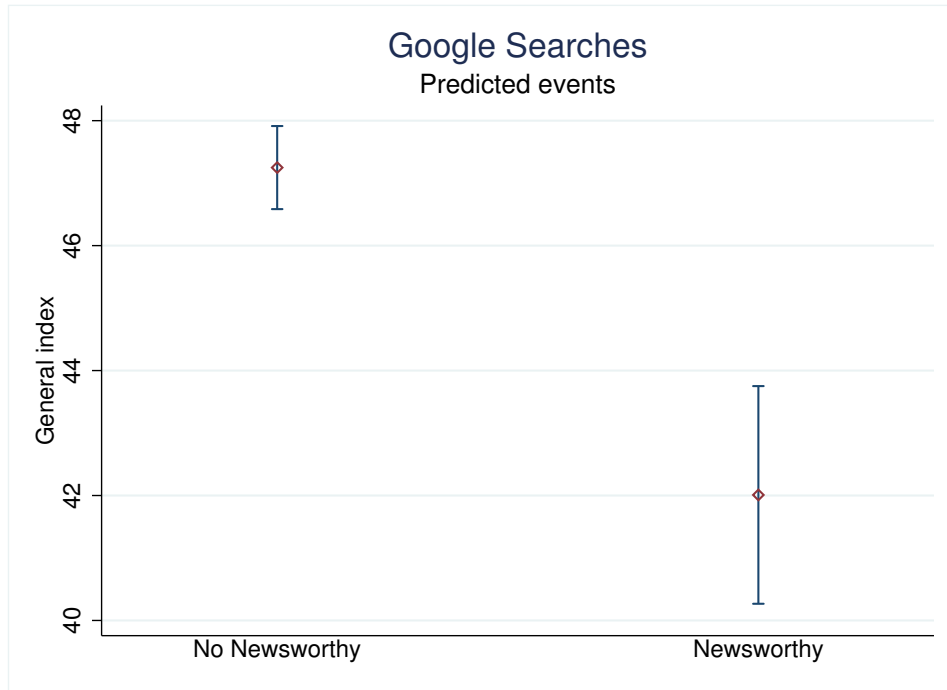


Figure 1: Google searches on politics

paragraphs, the main results on predictable events are presented. We are expecting in this Section to find a significant correlation between confidence votes and predicted newsworthy events. In order to verify if those events really monopolize the media attention, I present some evidence from an analysis on Google Trends. I constructed a general index of “interest in politics”, taking the average of the daily search trends of 5 specific words on Google. Those words are: “government”, “law”, “decree”, “vote”, “parliament”. From Figure 1 can be clearly seen that the index is lower during the days with a newsworthy event. Generally, there is a decrease of 8% of Google searches on words related to politics w.r.t a normal day. Also, if we consider unpredictable newsworthy events, the effect is substantial (Figure 21 in the Appendix). Those evidences suggest that our specification for the newsworthy events is well constructed. I am now presenting the baseline model and sensitivity analysis for predicted events; then, the robustness check with the same news. Regression on unpredictable events will be shown in Section 5 for a Validation test.

### 3.2 Results on the baseline model and the sensitivity analysis

As reminded in the previous section, in case of strategic timing we expect a significant relationship between predictable events and confidence votes. I verify later if there is no relation with respect to unpredictable ones (Section 5). The coefficients that are presented in the next figures are the betas from leads, lags, and exact dates of the predictable events, as specified in the regression from equation (1). For the baseline model, the results are in Figure 2.

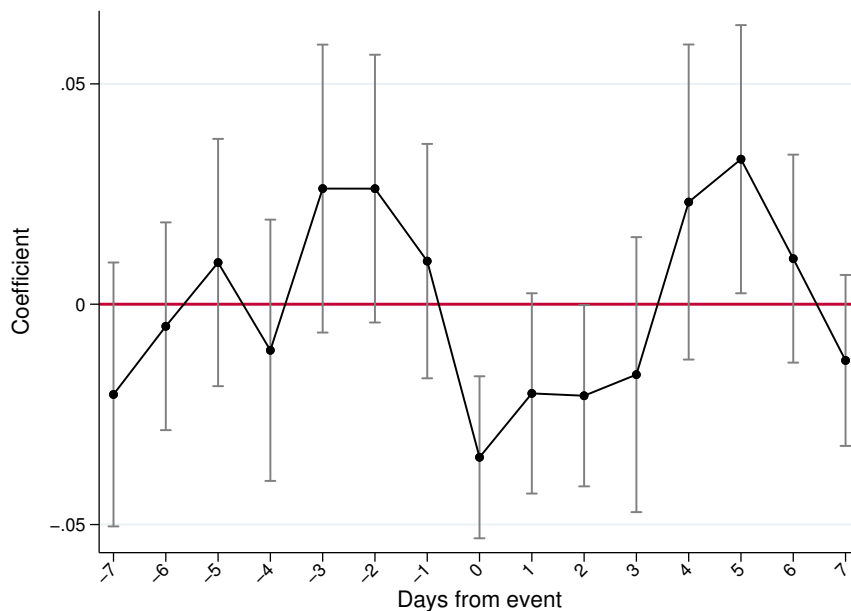


Figure 2: Baseline model - Predicted events

We can clearly see that the confidence votes tend to be avoided in conjunction with the exact date of a newsworthy event. Quantitatively, there is a decrease of 3% in the probability to schedule such type of voting. Moreover, the coefficient remains significant also if we include a wider pool of events (Figure 3), as explained in the model for sensitivity analysis in the previous paragraph.

Also in this case, the coefficient coinciding with newsworthy events remains significant; the effect is approximately 2% negative. We verify the presence of a negative effect, that could reveal a strategic timing. Differently from the research made by Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018 and Djourelouva & Durante 2019, in this case the effect is not positive. This means that the politician tries to avoid important newsworthy events to schedule a confidence vote. As explained, in order to be sure about strategic timing, I need to analyze the effect of unpredictable news, presented in Section 5.

Summing up the first important results, we see that for predictable newsworthy events, there is a negative relation between those and confidence votes. The sensitivity analysis seems

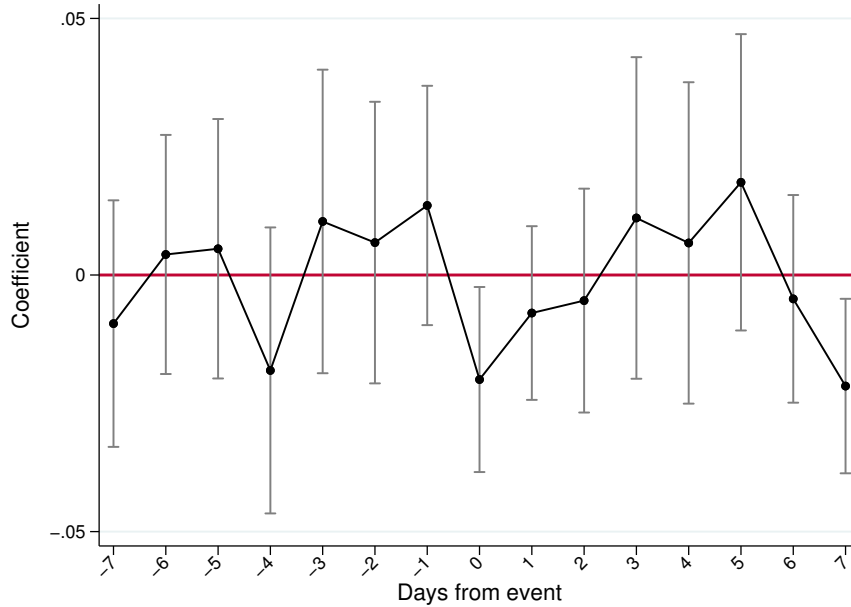


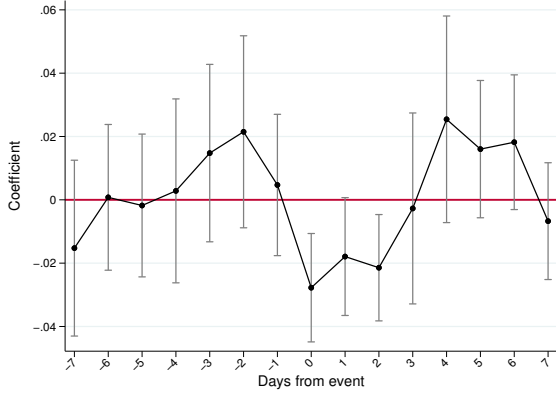
Figure 3: Sensitivity analysis - Predicted events

to confirm this aspect: it is about 2-3% less likely to have a confidence vote in conjunction with those news. This seems to suggest strategic timing: politicians try to avoid important newsworthy events in order to schedule a confidence vote. It's important to notice that even if I include in the regressions the unpredictable events, results are the same. In the next Section, I will hypothesize two underlying mechanisms related to these statistical facts, and I will try to present further research to see which hypothesis is more realistic. Meanwhile, in the next part, I present the study on the robustness check.

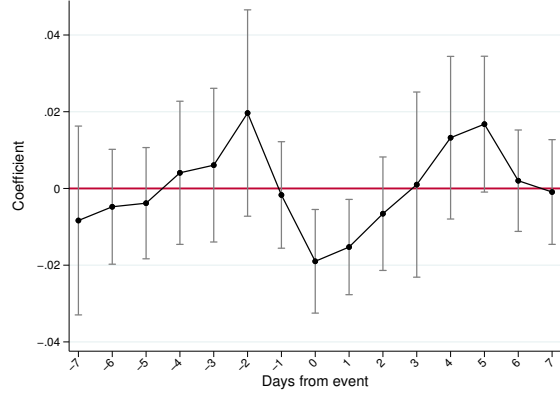
### 3.3 Results on the robustness check

The last part about the results is dedicated to a robustness check that I anticipated in the previous section. For confidence votes some qualitative variables are collected. More precisely, I distinguish them on 4 characteristics: votes approving laws related or not to economic issues, laws converting executive orders, and sittings where laws are finally approved. I use each subset as a dependent variable in different regressions. Hence, if coefficients remain significant when regressed on predictable events, the effect should not be related to specific features of the law. It would be realistic to think that the method of approval, which is the object of our analysis, is crucial. The coefficients for predictable events are in Figure 4.

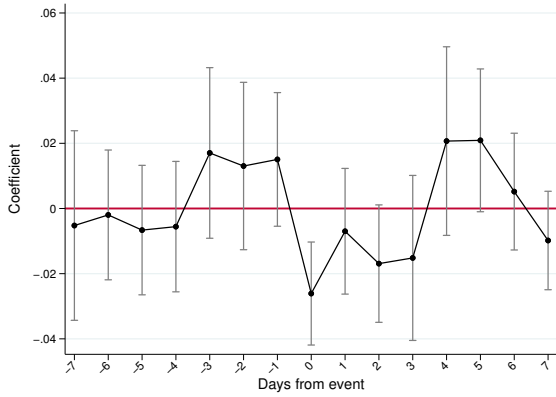
It can be observed that the coefficient corresponding to the exact date of predictable events remains significant in almost all specifications. For economic issues it is also the only significant one. The quantitative effect can be estimated between 3 and 2% less. Confidence votes on laws not related to economic issues do not present a significant coefficient at  $t = 0$ ,



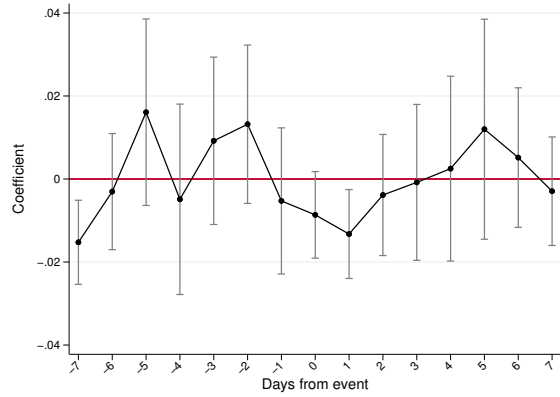
(a) Decree conversion



(b) Final Approval



(c) Economic Issues



(d) Non economic issues

Figure 4: Robustness check - Predicted events

but it can be due to the few observations in the subsample. More generally, it's clear that coefficients remain significant. Therefore, the effect should not be related to specific features of the law. The method of approval, which is the object of our analysis, seems to be the key feature. Unpredictable events are inquired for a validation test in Section 5. Following the methodology introduced by Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, I prove that politicians seem to strategically time a confidence vote, avoiding newsworthy predictable events. This is what emerged from the baseline model, a subsequent sensitivity analysis, and a further robustness check. In order to make my findings stronger, it is useful to inquire about the underlying mechanism. In the next section, I try to present two hypotheses, and I use some further quantitative research to verify which one is more credible.

## 4 Mechanism

In the previous section a clear pattern emerged: politicians strategically time confidence votes to avoid newsworthy events. This effect is supported by the regression analysis exposed previously: the presence of a predictable newsworthy event has a negative correlation with the use of a confidence vote on that specific day. This effect remains significant even if we restrict the sample of votes, or if we increase the pool of possible events. On the other hand, in order to confirm this result, I must prove that politicians can strategically time this type of policy only when they know which day needs to be avoided. For this reason, I include a validation test for unpredictable newsworthy events in Section 5.

Before the Validation test, this effect must be explained. I present two different hypotheses, which I call here “lazy” and “signaling” politician. The first explanation (“lazy politician”) could be related to the activity of the two Chambers: more generally, the Italian members of the parliament do not want to schedule sittings during an important predictable event. I set as predictable newsworthy event mainly important sport matches: that type of matches is widely seen, and it is culturally considered very important. For these reason, the Members of the Parliament can impose their will on the Government and avoid a sitting on those specific days. If this is the underlying mechanism, we cannot link the previous results to a strategic timing by the government. The other effect, called “signaling politician”, is more related to the activity of the Executive. According to this hypothesis, a confidence vote is not considered as a negative tool to approve a law (differently from Huber 1996, Lupo 2007). Instead, the use of confidence votes, and then the increased speed for a law approval, can be a signal of an active and pragmatic government. In this sense, the politician wants to avoid special days when the attention of the public opinion is diverted, and concentrate confidence votes when he can show off its activity. A piece of evidence can be represented by the approval of the so-called “Legge Cirinnà”. “Legge Cirinnà”, or Law n. 76/2016, provides for a homosexual and heterosexual couple to enjoy a new legal status: “unione civile” or civil union. Being marriage prohibited for same-sex couples in Italy, this legislation now grants more rights given only to married people before. This law passed with the use of “questione di fiducia” on May 11th 2016, in order to speed up and secure the approval. Later, Maria Elena Boschi, the Minister responsible for asking confidence votes to the Parliament, made explicit that “imposing ‘questione di fiducia’ had a political value because our government considered the law on civil unions a fundamental element of the political agenda”.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the political agent wants to be sure to inform its constituency about its achievement.

My aim in this section is to disentangle those two effects. In order to do that, I use two different identification strategies. For the first one, I use the exact time in which the Euro

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<sup>4</sup>Source: <https://www.la7.it/coffee-break/video/boschi-ecco-perch%C3%A9-il-governo-pone-la-fiducia-su-legge-cirinn%C3%A0-11-05-2016-183592>



and World Cup matches occurred. I hypothesize that, if the “lazy politician” is the strongest mechanism, we would see a negative effect only for matches happening before prime time (i.e. 8 PM). For this reason, I only consider soccer matches as newsworthy events, and I divide them based on their timing. For both subsamples, I run the same regression analysis presented in Equation (1). If we can see a negative significant coefficient only for the first subsample, we can claim that the effect is largely dictated by the “lazy politician”. Furthermore, I use all the sittings of the Parliament to prove if the coefficient remains significant also when we consider “business as usual”. If we see that the effect persists, also when all the sittings are considered, we can claim as well that we are dealing with the mechanism recalled before.

#### 4.1 Exact timing for soccer matches

In the following section, I try to disentangle between the two hypotheses explaining the coefficients found in Section 3. Those hypotheses are the “lazy politician” vs. the “signaling politician”, and they are explained in the previous paragraph. In the first identification strategy the exact time of football matches is considered. Therefore, I take only soccer matches and I divide them by their timing. In this way there are two subsamples: matches that took place during prime time and matches which did not. I run the baseline model, as presented in Equation (1), using both subsamples. If the “lazy politician” is the dominant mechanism, there would be a negative effect only for matches during the afternoon. This happens because the Members of the Parliament are more interested in following those matches than the sittings. Finally, the same strategy will be applied to the different categorization of confidence votes, presented in the robustness check in Section 3. The first results in Figure 5 seem to suggest the opposite.

If we consider only the exact coefficient of the two regressions (on the two different subsamples), we see that there is an effect with respect to prime time matches only. This is the opposite effect that would be expected in the case of the “lazy politician”. The explanation can be found in the structure of the data: the main part of matches is played on prime time (about two thirds). This would mean that the power of the sample is stronger in the second regression. We can also find a political explanation for these results. Usually, matches during prime time are more relevant than the other ones for the public opinion. For this reason, the “signaling politician” is mainly interested in avoiding this kind of events. On the other hand, the “lazy politician” wants to follow every match. Hence, the “lazy politician” is the one more prone to avoid sittings overlapping with afternoon events. More generally, the “lazy politician” hypothesis cannot be excluded from those results. However, they suggest that the dominant effect could be the “signaling politician” hypothesis. From further studies, we can also claim that half of the confidence votes are passed during the morning, decreasing even more the strength of the sample. There are similar effects if we study each category

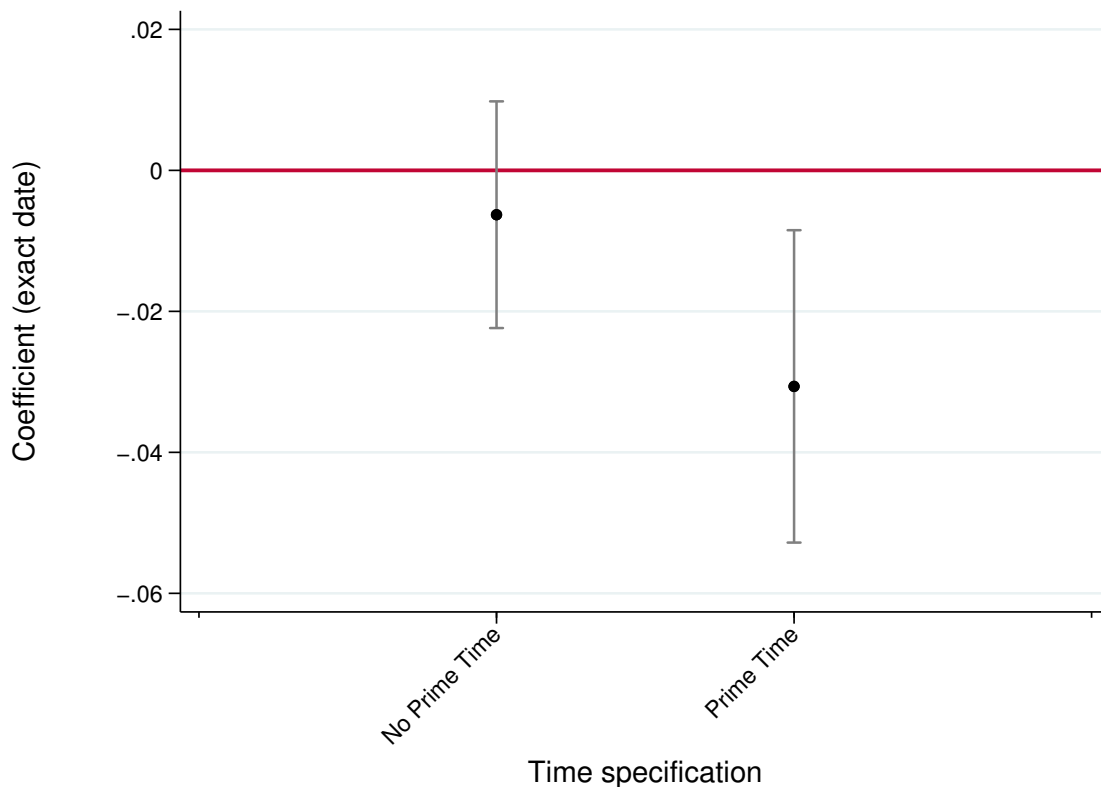


Figure 5: Exact date coefficients on two subsamples

of confidence votes (final approval, decree conversion, economic and non-economic issue) on the two subsamples of matches (during prime time and not), as presented in the Appendix (Figure 22).

Also in this case, the coefficient for matches not aired during prime time is always statistically not significant. In some cases, the result for matches played during prime time is not significant as well. Both those cases coincide with the subsamples that have the least observations. Moreover, we need to notice that the mean value for the coefficient is always lower in the second category of events. Summing up the results, this type of analysis is really sensitive to how powerful the sample is, therefore we cannot form a clear conclusion. Anyway, the fact that all the coefficients are stronger considering prime time events, would suggest that the prevailing effect is the “signaling politician”.

## 4.2 Confidence vote vs. business as usual

In the previous paragraph, the results suggest the dominance of the “signaling politician” hypothesis. It is clear, though, that the design is really sensitive to the number of observations of the different subsamples. Another methodology can involve the dependent variable, instead

of the independent one. In the previous section, I divided the pool of the newsworthy events; in this one, I change the shape of the variable on the left-hand side. Instead of using confidence votes, I run the same regression using a different dummy variable. This dummy takes 1 if a sitting of one of the two Chambers happened. I aim to compare the correlation emerged in part 3, with what we can find when the parliament works like “business as usual”. More generally, if the correlation remains negative and significant, even when we consider all the sittings of the Parliament, we can argue that the dominant effect is the “lazy politician”. On the other hand, if the coefficients become statistically 0, this suggests the prevalence of the “signaling politician”. As reported in Section 2, the data on the sittings are collected with the scraping technique. They are denser than the data on the confidence votes: 2,616 days out of 6,574 have a Parliamentary sitting, accounting for about 40% of all observations. The regression is the same used in all other specifications and presented in Equation (1). We can now consider the results of the baseline model and the sensitivity analysis for predictable newsworthy events (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

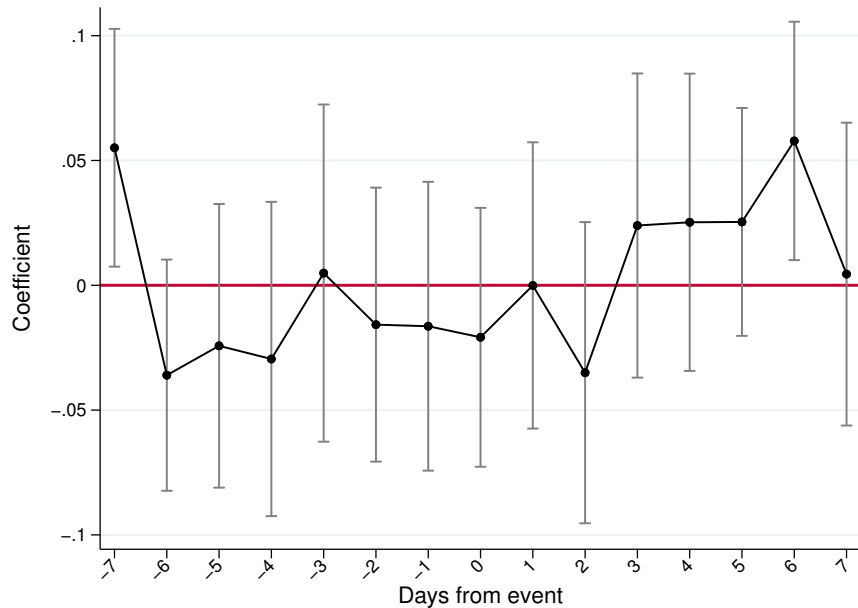


Figure 6: Baseline model - Predicted events

The results are clear: there is no significant coefficient when we consider all the sittings of the parliament. This, especially if we look at the exact day coefficient, that in the previous Sections was the coefficient of interest. This means that there is no correlation between the scheduling of a generic Parliamentary session and the presence of a newsworthy event. It’s important to recall that, in this case, the specification of a newsworthy event is the same used in Section 3 (Euro cup, World cup, and the Olympics for the baseline model; Sanremo and the Oscars added in the sensitivity analysis). The absence of significant coefficients should suggest that strategic timing is active only if we consider the confidence votes. Thus, this

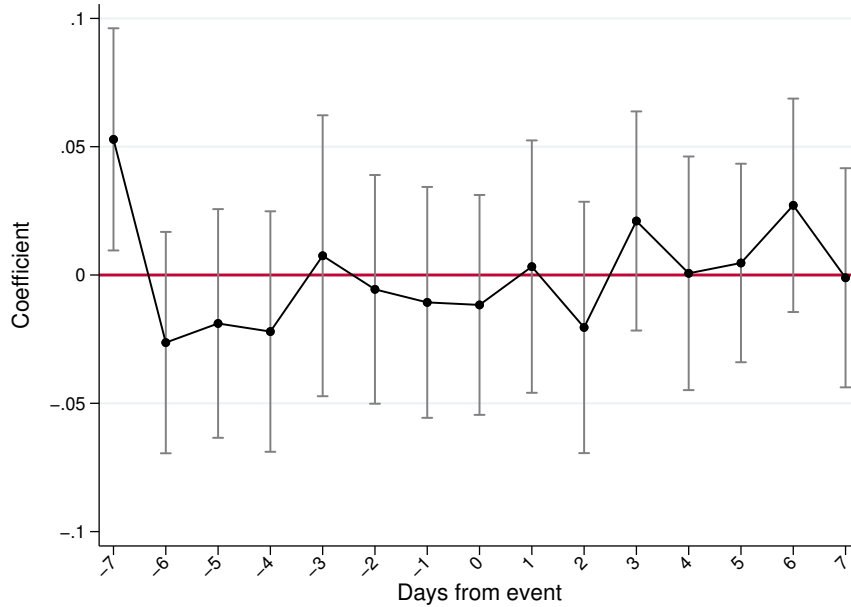


Figure 7: Sensitivity analysis - Predicted events

would be an element in favor of the “signaling politician” hypothesis.

Summing up, the results from Section 3 highlight a strategic timing for confidence votes to avoid predictable newsworthy events. In this section, I present two possible explanations. The first one is that the government wants to enjoy the maximum amount of public attention when a confidence vote is issued. The second one is that this correlation could be simply dictated by the intention of the Members of Parliament not to have sittings during those important events. In order to see which one is the real mechanism in place, I use two different identification strategies. The first one acts on the independent variable: I divide the sample of sport matches based on their timing, and I see that the preliminary results suggest the dominance of the “signaling politician”. Anyway, the results are also very sensitive to the design of the subsamples. For this reason I cannot exclude the “lazy politician” hypothesis. Then, the second strategy concerns the dependent variable: I regress the presence of predictable newsworthy events on the overall amount of Parliamentary sittings, finding no correlation under any specification. Even if we cannot exclude the presence of the “lazy politician” hypothesis yet, this result is a piece of additional evidence in favor to the “signaling politician”.

## 5 Validation test

Before concluding the study, a final validation is needed. I show in Section 3 the presence of a negative and significant effect of predictable newsworthy events on the scheduling of a confidence vote. Furthermore, in Section 4 I try to explain this result with two possible hy-

potheses, and I use some additional empirical research to disentangle them. All the empirical evidences suggest strategic timing on confidence votes. More specifically, the government monopolizes the attention to inform about some policy adoption and present itself as united. This process cannot be extended to those events that monopolize the public attention but cannot be predicted. I must prove that politicians do not strategically time this type of policy when they don't know which day needs to be avoided. For this reason, in this section, I include a validation test for unpredictable newsworthy events. This type of events is previously specified and listed in Section 2. These unexpected news should not present significant evidence of strategic timing. If this is the case, our result is in line with the methodology used in the previous literature of this field (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelouva & Durante 2019). The coefficients that are presented in the next figures are the betas from leads, lags, and exact dates of the unpredictable events, as specified in the regression from equation (1), Section 3. For the baseline model, the results are in Figure 8:

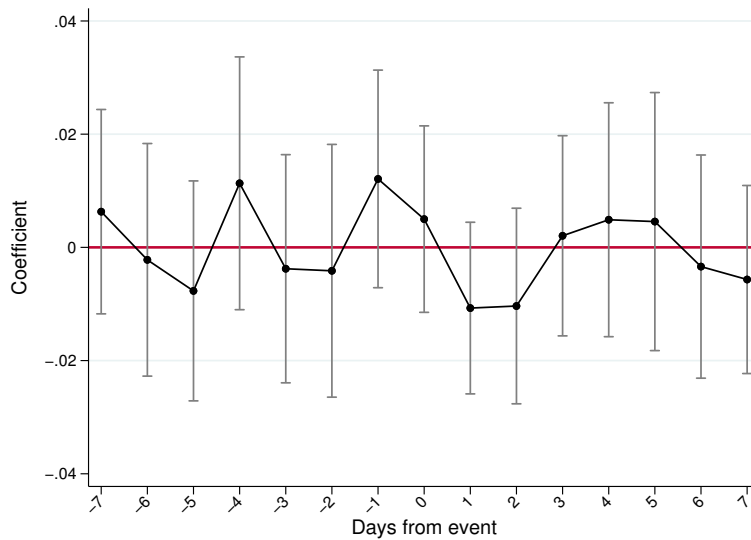


Figure 8: Baseline model - Unpredicted events

We can clearly see that, in this case, there seems to be no significant effect. Moreover, no lags or leads have a clear relation either, suggesting no strategic timing also for specific dates close to that type of news. If we consider the case for a wider pool of events (Figure 9), as dictated by the sensitivity analysis, we don't see any effect. Like in Section 3, I want to verify the robustness of the analysis with an heterogeneity test. Also in this case, I used 4 subsamples of confidence votes, based on some features previously cited. Each subsample is used as dependent variable, regressed as in Equation (1). If the result is similar to the one found in the baseline model, we can claim that the effect should not be related to specific

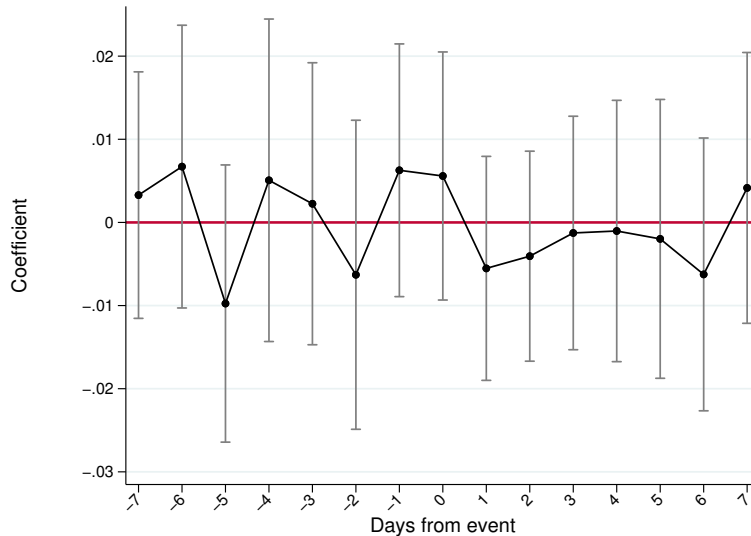


Figure 9: Sensitivity analysis - Unpredicted events

features of the law. In this case, the coefficient should maintain no significant value. The results are presented in the Appendix (Figure 23). Also for heterogeneity test, there is no significant coefficient that can be explained. Hence, those evidences are in line with Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018.

I prove in Section 3 the correlation between confidence votes and predictable newsworthy events. From this section can be argued that, on the other hand, there is no effect considering unpredictable news. This is in line with the methodology used in the literature, even if in this case we can see an opposite effect with respect to Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018. For completeness, the second identification strategy used in Section 4 can be applied also on unpredictable newsworthy events. In paragraph 4.2 I test the correlation between predictable events and all the sittings of the parliament, in order to strenghten the “signaling politician” hypothesis. The lack of correlation can be also found with unpredictable events, as showed in the Appendix (Figure 24). We can interpret some findings from this research: Section 3 suggests strategic timing of confidence votes, and the Validation test from this section confirms it. Moreover, in Section 4 the empirical research suggests the dominance of the “Signaling politician” hypothesis, even if we cannot exclude the presence of the “lazy politician” hypothesis yet.

## Conclusion

In the previous pages, I investigated the use of strategic timing in politics in Italy, exploit-

ing the same methodology of some previous studies (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelouva & Durante 2019). The actual policy I wanted to study is the confidence vote: if it is correlated with predictable events, while it has no links with the occurrence of unpredictable ones, we can claim that it is strategically scheduled. I've chosen this tool because it's a distinctive feature of the Italian legislation, and it's still very debated. This procedure is criticized by the juridical literature, because it is generally perceived as superseding the role of the parliament (Huber 1996, Lupo 2007). On the other hand, we can reverse this concern, arguing that this type of instrument can be used by the government to show off its activity. Moreover, this research is interesting for its links with the more general literature on the political agency.

The data are collected almost entirely with the scraping technique and can be categorized into 6 groups. Those groups are: confidence votes, sports matches, big show business events, Olympic medals, Natural disasters, and deaths of VIPs. The period I wanted to analyze is the one from 2001 to 2018. I covered 227 confidences votes, 2,616 parliamentary sittings, and 4 Legislatures. In order to choose which event could be considered newsworthy, I followed the previously cited literature (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018). I included for predictable newsworthy events all the matches played by Italy during the Euro and the World Cup, and the Olympic medals won by Italy. In the sensitivity analysis I added the Sanremo Festivals and the Oscars. For what concerns the unpredictable newsworthy events, I used natural disasters, lasted less than 100 days, with either more than 50 victims or happened in Italy. All the events were reported by the EM-DAT database. In order to study the underlying mechanism related to the strategic timing, I collected the exact time of every Euro and World Cup match, together with the exact date of all Parliamentary sittings. Finally, in order to make a robustness check I divided all the confidence votes into 4 subsamples: definitive approvals, decree conversions, and those related to economic and non-economic issues.

In Section 3 I presented the econometric model. Furthermore, I verified that under the events I selected, there is a sensitive decrease on Google Searches for specific words related to politics. Then, the results show that concerning predictable newsworthy events, there is a negative relation between those and confidence votes. The sensitivity analysis seems to confirm this aspect: it is about 2-3% less likely to have a confidence vote in conjunction with those news. This seems to suggest strategic timing: politicians try to avoid important newsworthy events, in order to schedule a confidence vote. Moreover, under the robustness check, the coefficient of interest remains significant in almost all specifications and subsamples.

In Section 4 I tried to present two different explanations, which I called the "lazy" and the "signaling" politician. The first explanation ("lazy politician") could be related to the activity of the two Chambers: more generally, the Italian members of the parliament do not want to schedule sittings during an important predictable event. The other effect, called the "signaling politician", is more related to the activity of the Executive. According to this

hypothesis, the confidence votes are not to be considered as a negative tool, but as a signal of an active and unified government. In this sense, the political agent wants to be sure to inform the constituency about his achievements. In order to verify which one is the dominant hypothesis, I used two different identification strategies. For the first one, I used the exact time in which the Euro and the World Cup matches occurred. I hypothesized that, if the “lazy politician” is the strongest mechanism, we would have seen a negative effect only for the matches happening before prime time (i.e. 8 PM). On the contrary, results suggest another layout. Differently from our guess, the coefficients are significant only considering prime time matches. This cannot exclude the “lazy politician” hypothesis, but it suggests that the dominant effect is the “signaling” one. More generally, this type of analysis is really sensitive to how powerful the sample is, and then we cannot have a clear answer. In the second method, I compared the results obtained in the previous Section with the normal activity of the parliament. More specifically, I used the same econometric strategy for all the sittings of the Parliament and found no correlation under any specification. Even if we cannot eliminate the “lazy politician” hypothesis yet, this result is a shred of additional evidence in favor of the “signaling politician”.

In Section 5 I presented a Validation test, using unpredictable newsworthy events. Replicating the same framework from Section 3, I proved that in this case there is no effect considering this new class of events. This confirms strategic timing because politicians avoid predictable newsworthy events, but they are not able to do the same with unpredictable ones. It’s important to highlight that also under the heterogeneity test, the coefficient of interest is still not significant. This is in line with Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, but in this case the effect has the opposite sign, a case not explored by the literature so far.

Further research could be made on additional identification strategies or through the formalization of a game theory model, in order to prove which hypothesis is the predominant one.



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# Appendix - Additional Tables and Figures

## Data

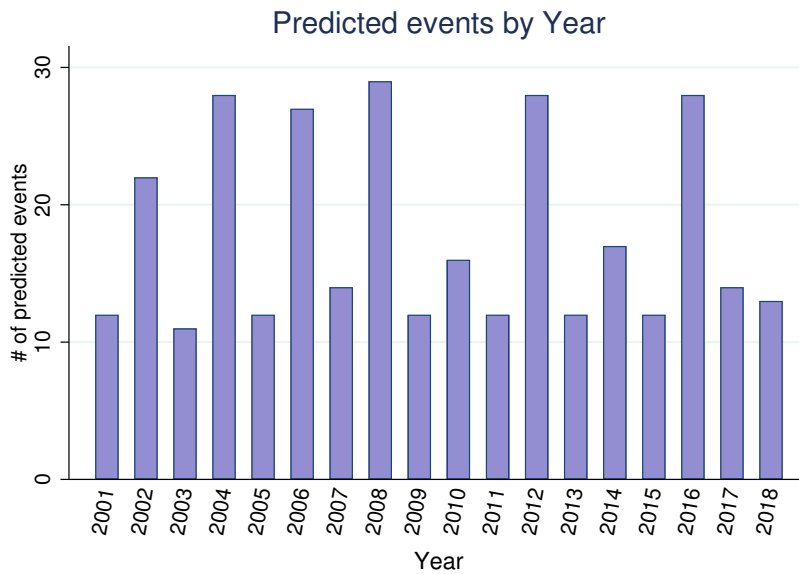


Figure 10: Predictable newsworthy event by Year

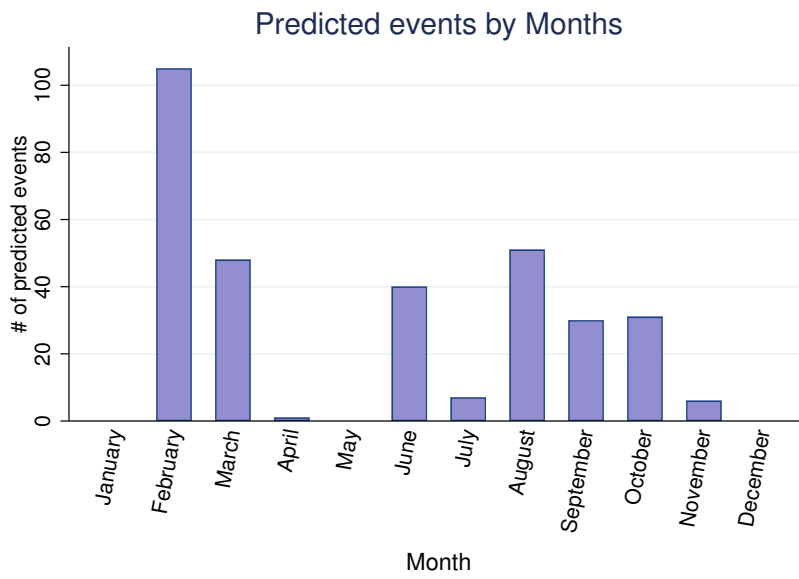


Figure 11: Predictable newsworthy event by Months

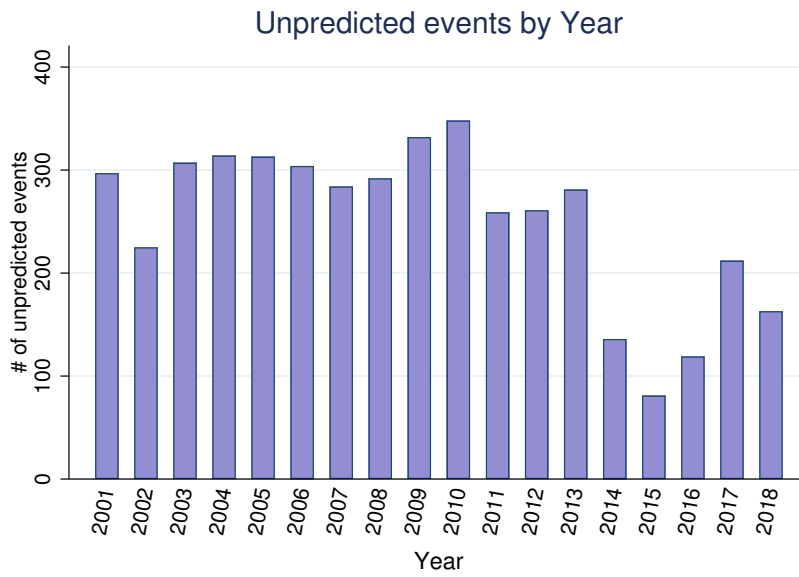


Figure 12: Unpredictable newsworthy event by Year

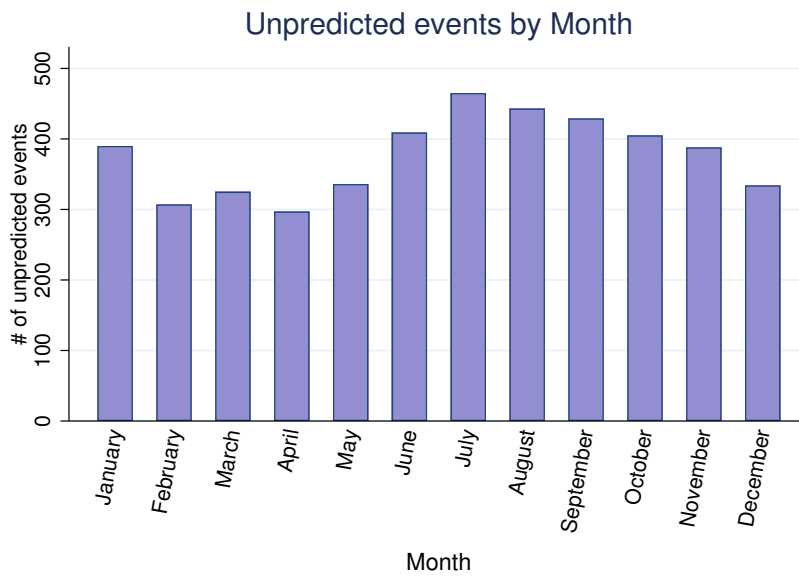


Figure 13: Unpredictable newsworthy event by Month

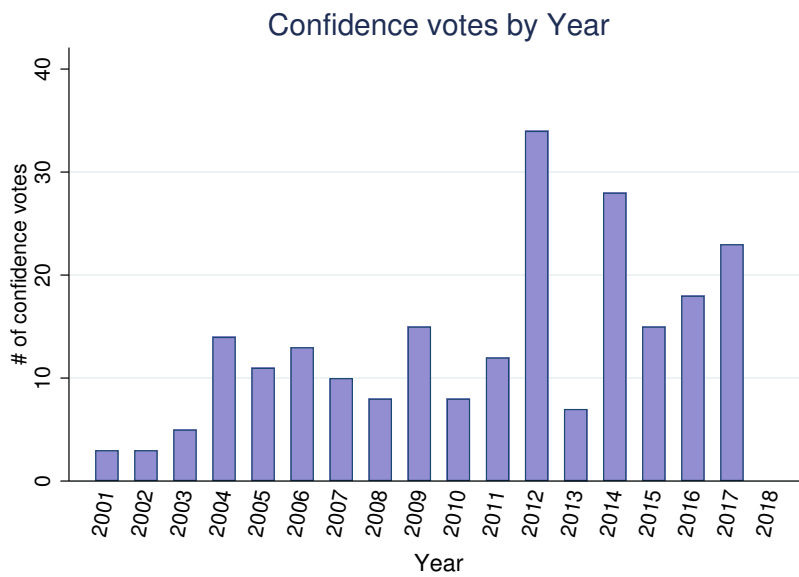


Figure 14: Confidence votes by Year

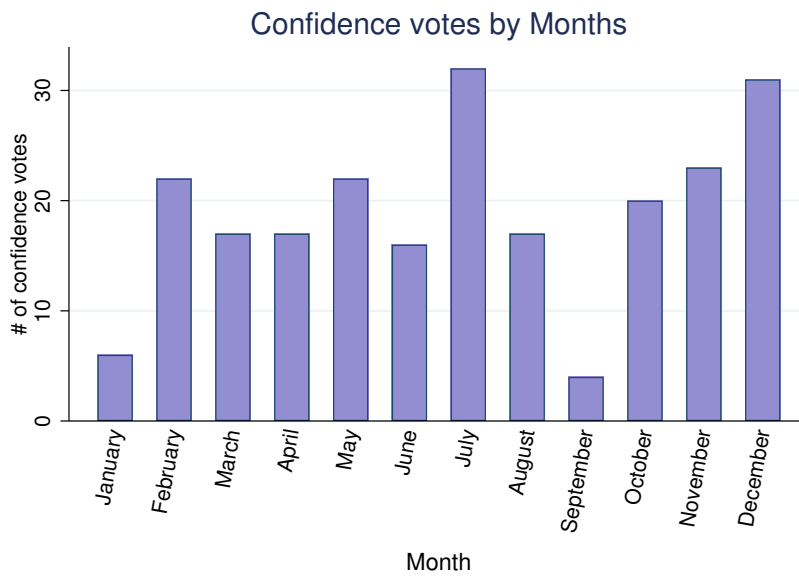


Figure 15: Confidence votes by Months

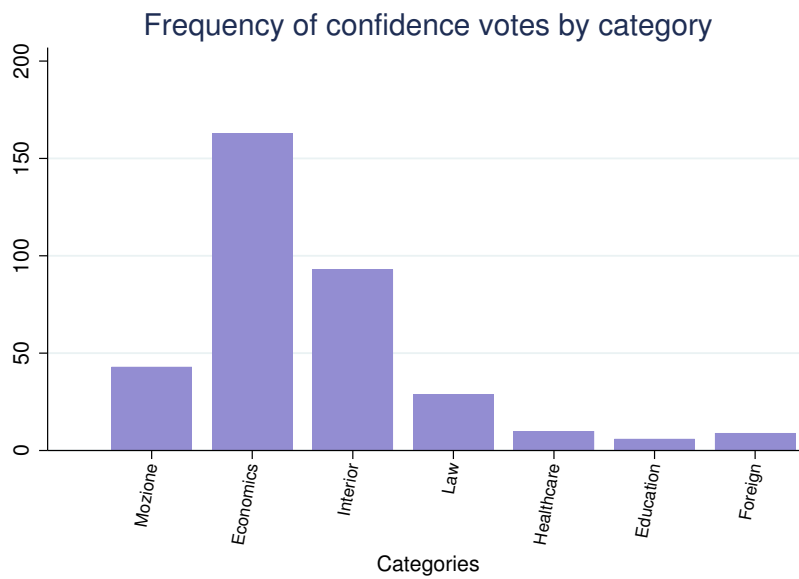


Figure 16: Confidence votes by category

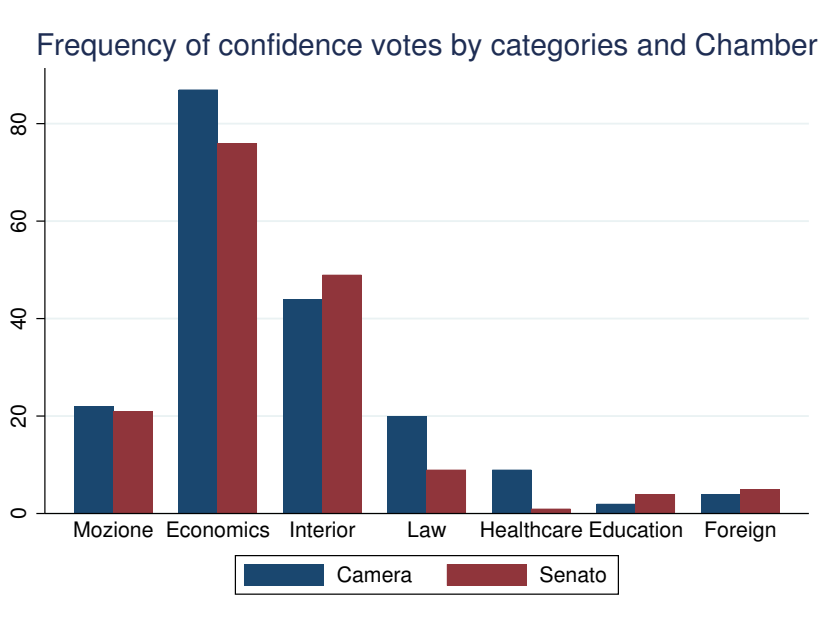


Figure 17: Confidence votes by categories and Chamber

# Categories of confidence votes by year

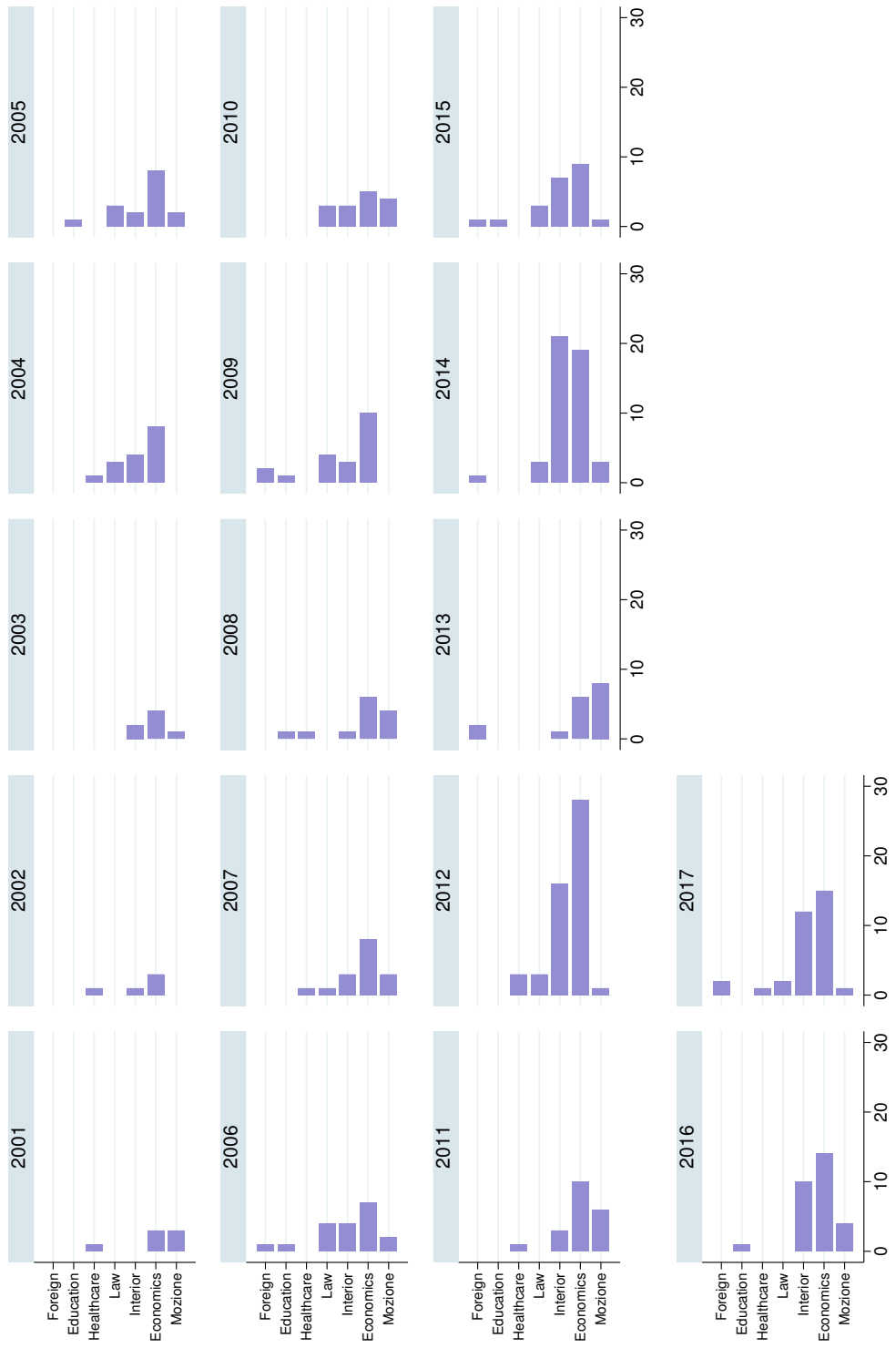


Figure 18: Confidence votes by categories and years



Parliamentary sessions			
	All	Senate	Chamber
$N$	2,616	1,935	1,921

Table 6: Parliamentary session occurrence

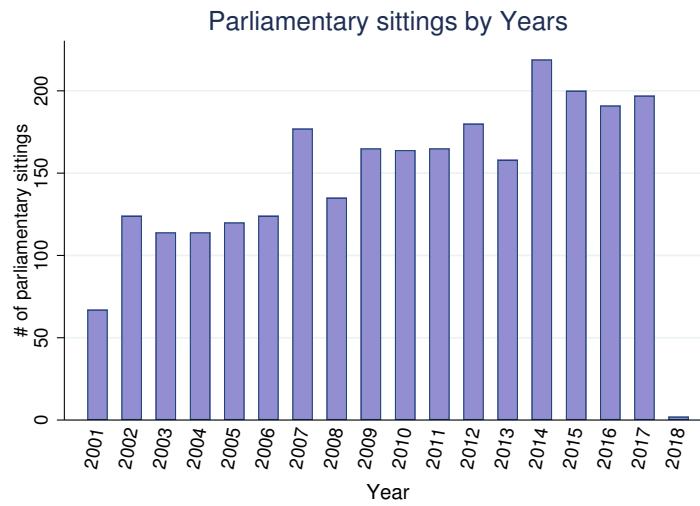


Figure 19: Parliamentary sittings by Years

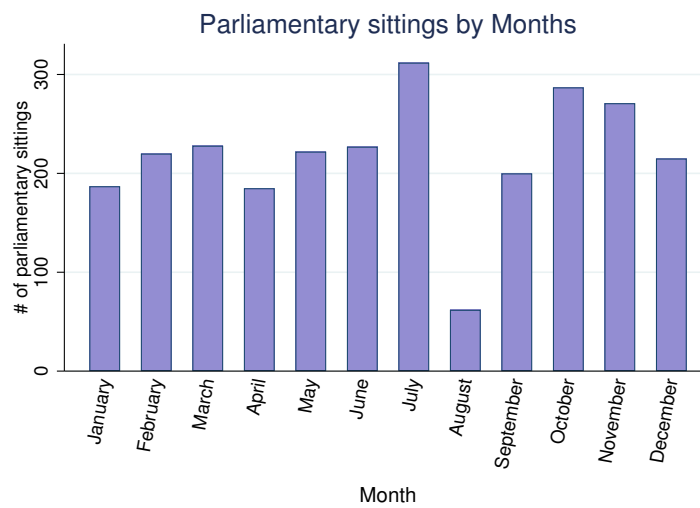


Figure 20: Parliamentary sittings by Months

# Econometric model and results

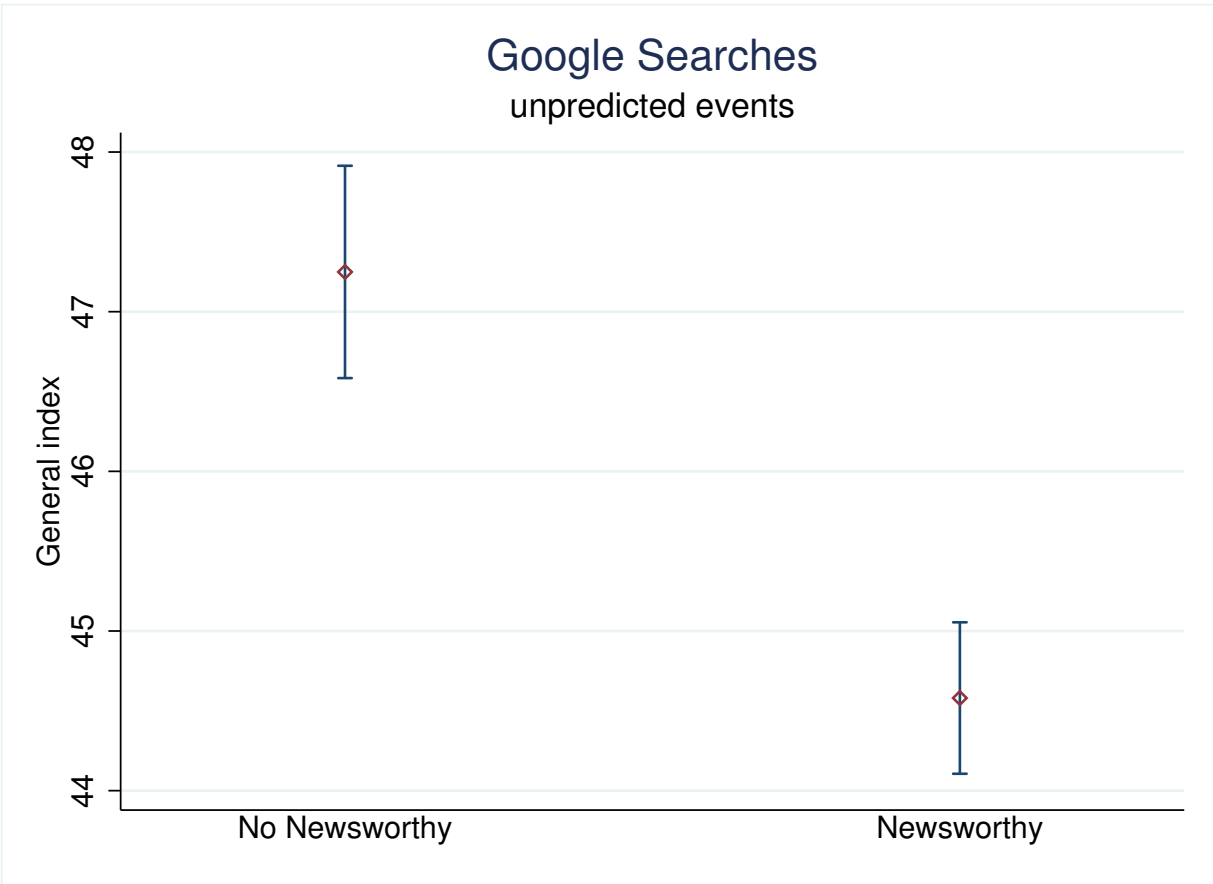
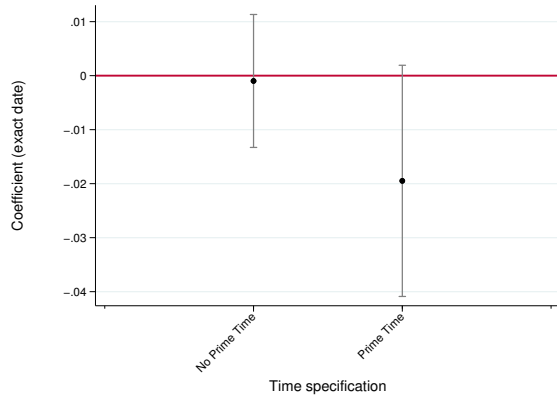
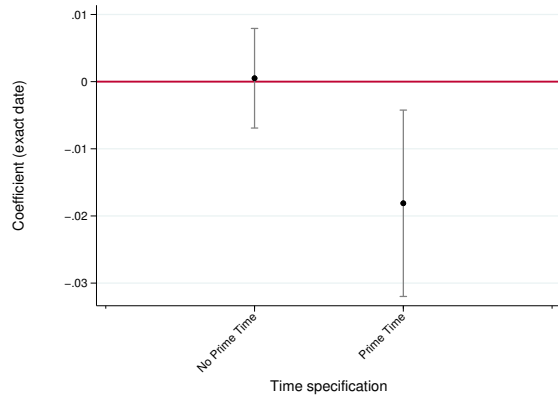


Figure 21: Google Searches on politics during unpredicted events

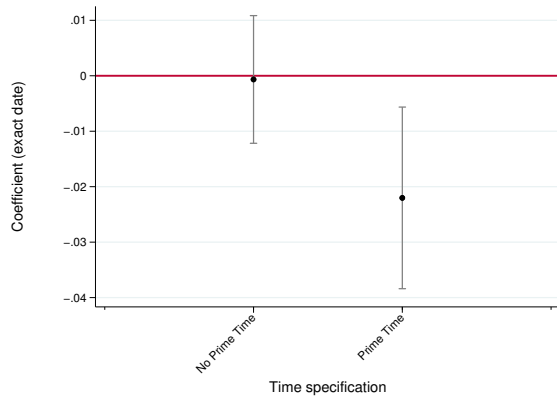
# Mechanism



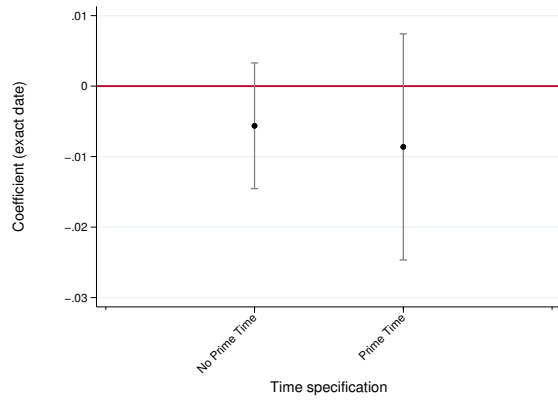
(a) Decree conversion



(b) Final Approval



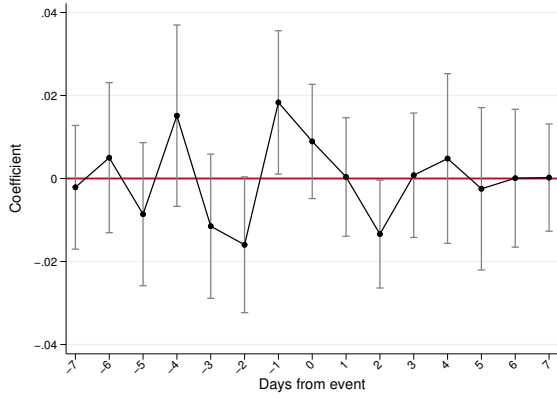
(c) Economic Issues



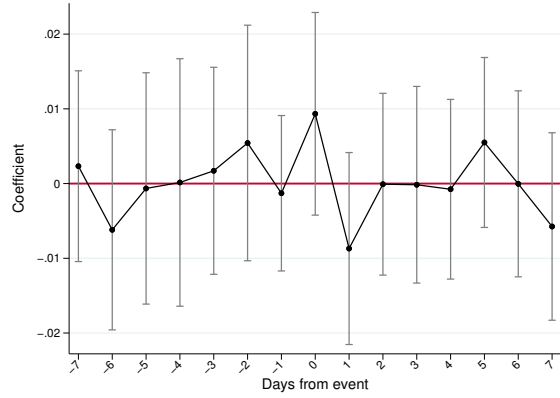
(d) Non economic issues

Figure 22: Robustness check - exact date coefficients from the two subsamples

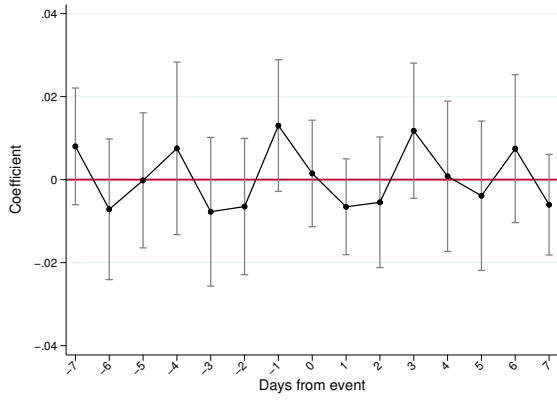
# Validation test



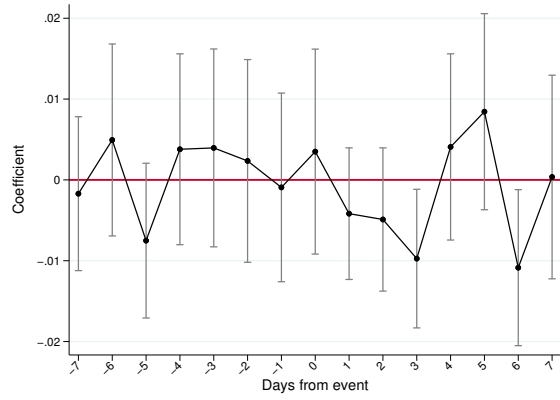
(a) Decree conversion



(b) Final Approval



(c) Economic Issues



(d) Non economic issues

Figure 23: Robustness check - Unpredicted events

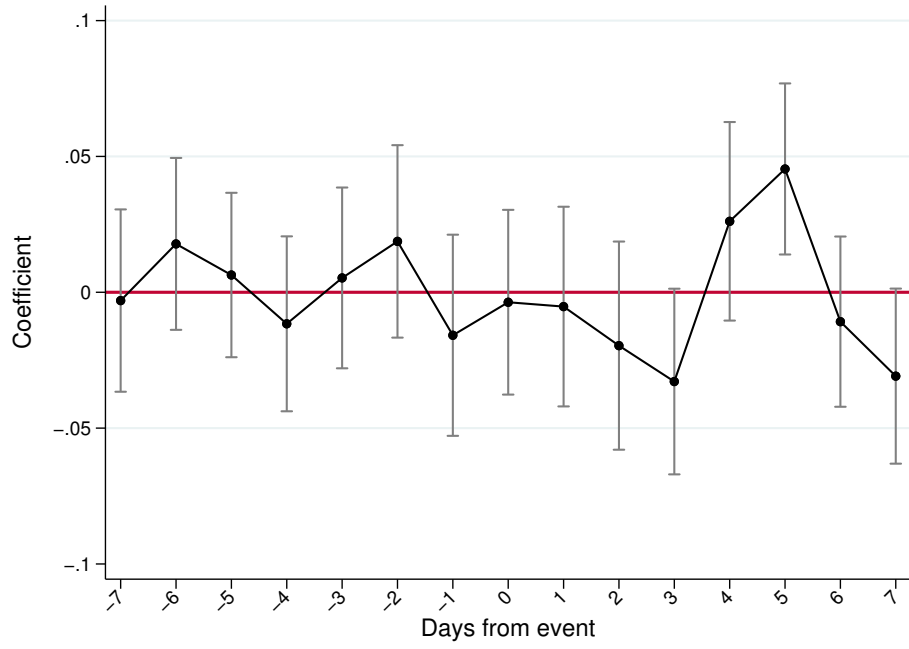


Figure 24: Baseline model - Unpredicted events

# Appendix - Additional info on data collection

As described in Section 2, most of the data are collected through the scraping technique. More specifically, in the following table are presented the main libraries and sites I used in order to get all the data.

Data	Program	Library	Site
Euro Cup	PyCharm (Python)	Selenium	<a href="https://www.uefa.com/">https://www.uefa.com/</a>
World Cup	PyCharm + Jupyter (Python)	Selenium + BeautifulSoup	<a href="https://www.fifa.com/">https://www.fifa.com/</a> <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/">https://en.wikipedia.org/</a>
Olympic medals	PyCharm (Python)	Selenium	<a href="https://www.sports-reference.com/">https://www.sports-reference.com/</a>
Sanremo & The Oscars	Jupyter (Python)	BeautifulSoup	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/">https://en.wikipedia.org/</a>
Natural Disasters	Stata	#	<a href="https://www.emdat.be/">https://www.emdat.be/</a>
Death of VIPs	Pycharm (Python)	Scrapy	<a href="https://biografieonline.it/">https://biografieonline.it/</a>
Confidence votes (Senate)	Jupyter (Python)	BeautifulSoup	<a href="http://www.senato.it/">http://www.senato.it/</a>
Confidence votes (Ch. of Deputy)	Jupyter (Python)	BeautifulSoup + NLTK	<a href="https://storia.camera.it/">https://storia.camera.it/</a>
Parliamentary sittings	Jupyter (Python)	BeautifulSoup + NLTK	<a href="http://www.senato.it/">http://www.senato.it/</a> <a href="https://www.camera.it/">https://www.camera.it/</a>

For a more detailed description of my collection work:

- **Euro Cup** matches are collected using Selenium from official reports on <https://www.uefa.com/>. **World Cup** matches have a mixed source. Most of the data I collected from the archive on <https://www.fifa.com/>. This archive was shut down during my research and this made necessary to find further data on <https://en.wikipedia.org/>. I collected teams, dates, results and role of the matches (Preliminaries, Final Tournament etc.). For the **exact timing** of the matches I used <https://fbref.com/>. All the data were organized in a dataset with Pandas and exported as a file .dta.
- **Olympic medals** are collected using Selenium on <https://www.sports-reference.com/>. I collected only medals won by Italy, with the date and the value (Gold, Silver or Bronze). Also in this case, the data were organized in datasets with Pandas and exported as files .dta.
- **Sanremo and The Oscars** are collected using BeautifulSoup on <https://en.wikipedia.org/>. I just collected the start and the end date for the Sanremo Festival and the date of the Oscars.
- **Confidence votes** are collected with BeautifulSoup and NLTK from the official sites of the two Chambers. For the Deputy Chamber I used a chronological list, I searched for all the dates where is present the word “fiducia”, and then I checked date by date. The same for the Senate, but in this case I used date by date reports. I also collected the law discussed, and then I divided them in the categories exposed in the main body. For the total number of **parliamentary sittings** I just recorded all the day by day reports from the site of the two Chambers.

# Strategic timing in politics and media attention: Evidence from Italy - Summary

## 1 Introduction

The role of media in politics has been debated for several years. A great part of this literature lies in the rational learning models. According to this framework, voters are rational individuals who decide how to vote based on the information they have. In this sense, media are a crucial instrument to convey information to the public opinion. This class of models takes inspiration from the Downsian analysis (Downs 1957) and it is more developed in political economy and political science. In this set of models, voters elect politicians who maximize their utility, while politicians just want to get re-elected, and the mass media selects the news to maximize profits. The role of information in this setup is strongly advocated by Baron 1994, and Grossman & Helpman 1996. The first formalizations of the underlying mechanisms can be found in Strömberg 2001, and Besley & Prat 2006: starting from the canonical political agency model (Barro 1973, Ferejohn 1986), they tried to propose a setup where media, through the provision of specific news, have an impact on policies and the observance of public order. All those models seem to relate a positive effect of media on the quality of democracy, policies and debate. However, it is also highlighted by the same authors that such models can incorporate some degree of systematic biases, that can induce voters to have incorrect beliefs. In this sense, these biases can be exploited by the political agent in order to hide his accountability about specific policies. A more recent empirical research shows that a lower press coverage makes citizens less able to rate their local politicians (Snyder Jr & Strömberg 2010). This is what many new papers tried to evaluate: if politicians strategically schedule policies during important or newsworthy events that monopolize the media attention.

Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018 investigate this mechanism for the first time. They exploit previous literature on news pressure by Eisensee & Strömberg 2007 to detect patterns of strategic timing in politics. According to Eisensee & Strömberg 2007, the U. S. government response to approximately 5,000 natural disasters, occurring between 1968 and 2002, is very sensitive to the importance given to breaking news. During newsworthy events, like the Olympic Games, the U. S. relief is less likely to be given than on an usual date. To detect this, a measure of news pressure is constructed. Lately Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018 show a relationship between the Israeli attacks against Palestinians and predictable newsworthy events in the U.S. Assuming that the Israeli government has an interest in keeping a good opinion from the US population, the authors verify if war attacks to Palestinians are made during important events. It results that the 53,16% of days with a predictable newsworthy event presents an Israeli attack. This percentage drops to 38,67% during the days without events. Additionally, a similar effect cannot be detected

for an unpredictable newsworthy event, like a natural disaster. Djourelova & Durante 2019 take another step in this field investigating the Executive Orders by the US Government. The authors find that their signing is strategically timed in case of a divided government. When the congress is dominated by the opposition, the President can be scrutinized and criticized by the Parliament much more. Furthermore, it turns out that EOs issued under a divided government are more likely to concern aspects on which the President's and Congress' views are not aligned. If the EO is used by the President to bypass the will of the Congress, this could be seriously contested by the Parliament. For this reason, the President has the interest to issue such policies when the public opinion is not watching. This relation is significant when we consider the news pressure and the usual classification of predictable and unpredictable newsworthy events. The last element of this literature is represented by Kaplan et al. 2019. In this case, there is no strategic scheduling, but a complementary mechanism: when newsworthy unpredicted events occur, the attention dedicated by the media to politics is reduced. Thus, the members of Congress become more likely to adopt the positions of special-interest donors as they vote on bills. Also in this case we can argue that politicians follow theories of political agency, because they act differently when they are less monitored.

Yet, politicians may also strategically time their policy to not coincide with newsworthy events. For example, they may want to signal the cohesion or the strength of the government. Moreover, their will could be to highlight the approval of a policy their constituency cares about. This channel has not been explored by the literature so far, and this is what I would like to inquire. In my analysis I want to apply to the Italian case the same methodology of some previous authors (Duranter & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelova & Durante 2019). More specifically, I want to verify if a given policy or procedure seems to be strategically timed, because of its correlation to predictable events. At the same time, we should see no link with the occurrence of unpredictable ones. In order to specify what is a newsworthy event, we can use the specification offered in the papers previously presented. The authors do not provide a complete list but their capacity to crowd out the news is consistent in many settings. The actual policy I want to study is the confidence vote. We can have two types of confidence votes: "mozione" and "questione". The "mozione" must be issued when a Government is formed or can be claimed by the opposition. It's a scrutiny of the general political line of the Government and it's present in many other countries. The "questione" is a vote on any act, usually a law, where the government commits its mandate, and it's the inquired tool. Due to this commitment by the Government, this vote is usually seen as a way to unify the majority on contentious acts. Especially in the juridical literature, this procedure is criticized and generally perceived as superseding the role of the parliament (Huber 1996, Lupo 2007). This may suggest that politicians might want to "hide" confidence votes. If this is true, a positive correlation with newsworthy events should emerge. On the other hand, we can reverse this concern, because this type of instrument can also be used by the government to show to the public opinion its activity. This might suggest that politicians might want to "highlight" confidence votes, and therefore we would see a negative correlation with newsworthy events. To investigate this empirically, in my study I analyze the timing of confidence votes in Italy during predictable newsworthy events, as previously mentioned. Then, a validation exercise with unpredictable events is made. For those events no significant correlation should be present. Finally, further validation with robustness checks and sensitivity analysis is needed, together with an empirical research on the underlying mechanism.

More specifically, section 2 is dedicated to the data and descriptive statistics. Moreover, in Section 3 there are the empirical strategy and the main results on predictable events. In section 4 some hypotheses are proposed on the underlying mechanism in order to explain the



results from the previous part. In Section 5, there is a validation test on unpredicted newsworthy events. Finally, a conclusion summarizes all the findings, wrapping up the main results and the methodology.

## 2 Data

In the following dissertation the main goal is to verify if confidence votes in Italy are strategically timed. Therefore, data on the occurrence of confidence votes, unpredictable and predictable events must be collected. Confidence votes are registered on a daily basis, with scraping techniques. Together with the overall report, all the events are divided on the topic of the law. Data on unpredictable events are mainly gotten from the EM-DAT database for natural disasters. It's possible to get the number of victims, the nature of the disaster (e.g. flood, earthquake or hurricane), the start and end date. The other type of source is the record of the deaths of famous people and it is obtained with the scraping technique. Finally, predictable events are collected from official reports on the internet. This is a wide collection of events obtained through a long exercise of scraping, which is explained later. I mainly use data on the World and Euro Cup, Olympic events, and major shows like the Oscars and the Sanremo festival. In the next paragraphs, a more complete description of how I collected the data and some descriptive statistics are provided.

The analysis is made within a timespan from 2001 to 2018. The possibility to collect all the data directly from the internet makes it possible to choose the timespan with complete freedom. The first reason is that the XIV Legislature started in 2001. The choice to start from the XIV Legislature is dictated by the use of confidence votes itself: before 2001 the use of this tool was quite rare, and it increased later during the following period. Moreover, the sample includes a wide range of different governments, all characterized by divergent political alignment. The precise definition of “newsworthy event” is not trivial. A methodology used by the previous literature (Eisensee & Strömberg 2007, Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018) is to include all the events that monopolize the breaking news (i.e. that are correlated with an increase in news pressure). The list of such events is not comprehensive: the previous literature has not provided a complete one. On the other hand, there are some events which have a strong correlation with the news pressure. We can claim that, even if we don't know all the events, we can rely on a bunch of them that monopolize the attention for sure. The precise selection of those events is related to Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, and in our case is presented in Table 1.

Those are the events that I choose for the baseline model and the sensitivity analysis that are presented in the next section. In the following paragraph some additional insight is given on how the data are collected and some descriptive statistics are provided. Moreover, there is information on the data used in the robustness check.

### 2.1 Predictable events

For predictable events there are two main sources of data: sport and show business. More precisely, I collect the data from the Euro and World cup, Olympic games, the Oscars, and the Sanremo festival. All data are taken through scraping. The Euro and World cup data include both preliminary and final tournament matches, while for the Olympic games I report

<b>Predictable Events</b>	
Baseline model:	All matches played by Italy for World and Euro Cup Olympic medals won by Italy
Sensitivity analysis:	The Sanremo festival and The Oscars
<b>Unpredictable events</b>	
Baseline model:	Disasters w. $> 50$ victims or happened in Italy (lasted $< 100$ days)
Sensitivity analysis:	The deaths of famous people

Table 1: Event specification

only the day when a medal was won by Italy. The Oscars and The Sanremo festival are just plain collections of the dates when they occurred. Globally 202 days have a newsworthy event related to sport. Those events are not concentrated during summer: 53% of them are in the other seasons. This happens because I included in the research also preliminaries of soccer cups and winter editions of the Olympic Games. The Oscars and the Sanremo Festival count for 111 days, and are concentrated between February and March.

## 2.2 Unpredictable events

For unpredictable events I collect two main types of data: natural disasters and the deaths of famous people. I find the data on natural disasters from the EM-DAT database and I get the data on dead VIPs with scraping technique using Scrapy on Python. As previously mentioned, I decide to keep only disasters with more than 50 victims and all events occurred in Italy. Moreover, I exclude all the events that lasted more than 100 days, as suggested by Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018. The total amount of days interested is 4,375 for natural disasters and 394 for deaths of VIPs. The occurrence of unpredicted events (considering both natural disasters and dead VIPs) is well distributed across the months and the years.

## 2.3 Confidence votes and sittings

For the first part of my analysis, only a daily report on when a confidence vote was issued is needed. In order to do that, I used both a scraping library and a Natural Language Toolkit to get the necessary data from the official sites of the two Chambers (Deputy and Senate). After that, another check is made, date by date, to verify if those votes are for a “mozione” or a “questione”. As explained in the introduction, the “mozione” must be issued when a Government is formed or can be claimed by the opposition. It’s a scrutiny about the general political line of the Government and it’s present in many other countries. The “questione” is a vote on any act, usually a law, where the government commits its mandate. My analysis focuses only on “questione” votes. My analysis for the baseline model is on the 227 confidence votes between 2001 and 2018.

Beyond the baseline model, a sensitivity analysis is subsequently done on a different subset of votes. There are 4 categories: the first one counts all the confidence votes which translate a Decree-law to law. For what concerns the second categorization, in Italy a law must be approved by both Chambers in the same form, in order to be adopted. Hence, we should exclude all the confidence votes that need to be revised by the other Chamber, counting only the ones that mean a final approval. The last 2 categories regard the content of the law: I divide all laws that have some economic value from the other ones, which usually are on justice, School, National Health Service.

In order to analyze the mechanism, reports on sittings are needed. For this reason I collect each sitting of the two Chambers from 2001 to 2018, registering in which day every session occurred. Also, in this case, all data are collected with the scraping technique. The total amount of observations is 6,574, which is the number of days from the 1st of January 2001 to the 31st of December 2018. The 40% of this amount holds a parliamentary session (2,616 days).

### 3 Econometric model and results

#### 3.1 Econometric model

For what concerns the econometric model, I implement a methodology that, as written before, is taken from previous literature on strategic timing (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelouva & Durante 2019). I consider every day from 2001 to 2018 as an observation (the total amount is 6,574). For each day we can express an event with a dummy variable. For example, if a confidence vote occurs on that exact day, this variable for that observation takes a value of 1. Then, I simply run a regression between confidence votes, and other dummies and controls. The specific regression is:

$$A_t = \sum_{\tau=-7}^7 \alpha_{\tau} E_{t+\tau} + \gamma W_t + \eta_d + \psi_m + \vartheta_y + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

In this setting  $E_t$  is the dummy variable for a newsworthy event on day  $t$  (predictable or unpredictable). I insert 7 lags and 7 leads to verify if there is some systematic effect on a specific date, not exactly matching with an event. Moreover,  $A_t$  is the dummy indicating a confidence vote on day  $t$ ,  $W_t$  is the number of weeks from the start of the legislature, while  $\eta, \psi$ , and  $\vartheta$  are respectively day, month, and year fixed effect. I use SE clustered at the year-month level, as indicated by the previous literature. Two types of regression are run: one in which confidence votes are correlated to predictable events, and one in which the independent variable is the dummy on unpredictable ones. In this sense, only predictable events may be strategically used to sway public opinion. Hence, we can find some evidence about a strategical timing when the coefficient of the first regression only results significant. If the coefficient is significantly negative, we can argue that the politician tries to avoid newsworthy events, when they are predictable. This happens in order to not crowd out the attention on his policy. Otherwise, if the coefficient is positive, he strategically times the adoption of such measures, when the attention of the public opinion is captured by other events.

In order to make my analysis more robust, I implement two additional elements. The first element changes the design of the independent variable: more events are added to the total pool to do a sensitivity analysis. In this sense, if the sensitivity analysis maintains a significant

coefficient of interest, we can argue that the result is not sensitive to the way we designed the independent variable. The second element is to subject the dependent variable to a robustness check. Using some qualitative variables, collected with the confidence votes, I confirm the same effect for every category. If coefficients remain significant, it is possible to prove that the effect should not be related to specific features of the law. On the contrary, the method of approval, which is the object of our analysis, is the real source of variation. I repeat the same checks for unpredictable news in Section 5. In the following paragraphs, the main results on predictable events are presented. Regression on unpredictable events will be shown in Section 5 for a Validation test.

### 3.2 Results on the baseline model and the sensitivity analysis

As reminded in the previous section, in case of strategic timing we expect a significant relationship between predictable events and confidence votes. I verify later if there is no relation with respect to unpredictable ones (Section 5). The coefficients that are presented in the next figure are the betas from leads, lags, and exact dates of the predictable events, as specified in the regression from equation (1). For the baseline model, the results are in Figure 1.

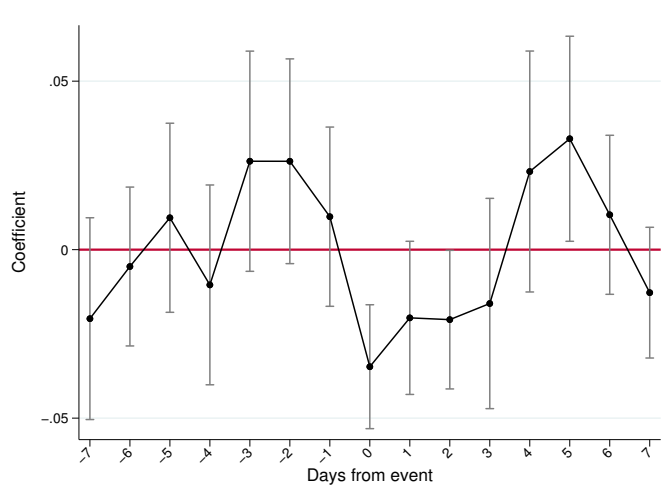


Figure 1: Baseline model - Predicted events

We can clearly see that the confidence votes tend to be avoided in conjunction with the exact date of a newsworthy event. Moreover, the coefficient remains significant also if we include a wider pool of events, as explained in the model for sensitivity analysis in the previous paragraph. Also in this case, the coefficient coinciding with newsworthy events remains significant. We verify the presence of a negative effect, that could reveal a strategic timing. Differently from the research made by Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018 and Djourelova & Durante 2019, in this case the effect is not positive. This means that the politician tries to avoid important newsworthy events to schedule a confidence vote. As explained, in order to be sure about strategic timing, I need to analyze the effect of unpredictable news, presented in Section 5.

Summing up the first important results, we see that for predictable newsworthy events, there is a negative relation between those and confidence votes. This seems to suggest strategic timing: politicians try to avoid important newsworthy events in order to schedule a confidence vote. In the next Section, I will hypothesize two underlying mechanisms related to these statistical facts. Meanwhile, in the next part, I present the study on the robustness check.

### 3.3 Results on the robustness check

The last part about the results is dedicated to a robustness check that I anticipated in the previous section. For confidence votes some qualitative variables are collected. More precisely, I distinguish them on 4 characteristics: votes approving laws related or not to economic issues, laws converting executive orders, and sittings where laws are finally approved. I use each subset as a dependent variable in different regressions. Hence, if coefficients remain significant when regressed on predictable events, the effect should not be related to specific features of the law. It would be realistic to think that the method of approval, which is the object of our analysis, is crucial.

It can be observed that the coefficient corresponding to the exact date of predictable events remains significant in almost all specifications. For economic issues it is also the only significant one. Therefore, the effect should not be related to specific features of the law. The method of approval, which is the object of our analysis, seems to be the key feature. Unpredictable events are inquired for a validation test in Section 5. In order to make my findings stronger, it is useful to inquire about the underlying mechanism. In the next section, I try to present two hypotheses, and I use some further quantitative research to verify which one is more credible.

## 4 Mechanism

In the previous section a clear pattern emerged: politicians strategically time confidence votes to avoid newsworthy events. This effect is supported by the regression analysis exposed previously: the presence of a predictable newsworthy event has a negative correlation with the use of a confidence vote on that specific day. This effect remains significant even if we restrict the sample of votes, or if we increase the pool of possible events. On the other hand, in order to confirm this result, I must prove that politicians can strategically time this type of policy only when they know which day needs to be avoided. For this reason, I include a validation test for unpredictable newsworthy events in Section 5.

Before the Validation test, this effect must be explained. I present two different hypotheses, which I call here “lazy” and “signaling” politician. The first explanation (“lazy politician”) could be related to the activity of the two Chambers: more generally, the Italian members of the parliament do not want to schedule sittings during an important predictable event. I set as predictable newsworthy event mainly important sport matches: that type of matches is widely seen, and it is culturally considered very important. For these reasons, the Members of the Parliament can impose their will on the Government and avoid a sitting on those specific days. The other effect, called “signaling politician”, is more related to the activity of the Executive. According to this hypothesis, the use of confidence votes, and then the increased speed for a law approval, can be a signal of an active and pragmatic government. In this sense, the politician wants to avoid special days when the attention of the public opinion is diverted, and concentrate confidence votes when he can show off its activity.

My aim in this section is to disentangle those two effects. In order to do that, I use two different identification strategies. For the first one, I use the exact time in which the Euro and World Cup matches occurred. I hypothesize that, if the “lazy politician” is the strongest mechanism, we would see a negative effect only for matches happening before prime time (i.e. 8 PM). Furthermore, I use all the sittings of the Parliament to prove if the coefficient remains significant also when we consider “business as usual”. If we see that the effect persists, also when

all the sittings are considered, we can claim as well that we are dealing with the mechanism recalled before.

#### 4.1 Exact timing for soccer matches

In the first identification strategy the exact time of football matches is considered. Therefore, I take only soccer matches and I divide them by their timing. In this way there are two subsamples: matches that took place during prime time and matches which did not. I run the baseline model, as presented in Equation (1), using both subsamples. If the “lazy politician” is the dominant mechanism, there would be a negative effect only for matches during the afternoon. If we consider only the exact coefficient of the two regressions (on the two different subsamples), we see that there is an effect with respect to prime time matches only. This is the opposite effect that would be expected in the case of the “lazy politician”. The explanation can be found in the structure of the data: the main part of matches is played on prime time (about two thirds). This would mean that the power of the sample is stronger in the second regression. More generally, the “lazy politician” hypothesis cannot be excluded from those results. However, they suggest that the dominant effect could be the “signaling politician” hypothesis.

#### 4.2 Confidence vote vs. business as usual

In the previous paragraph, the results suggest the dominance of the “signaling politician” hypothesis. It is clear, though, that the design is really sensitive to the number of observations of the different subsamples. Another methodology can involve the dependent variable, instead of the independent one. Instead of using confidence votes, I run the same regression using a different dummy variable. This dummy takes 1 if a sitting of one of the two Chambers happened. More generally, if the correlation remains negative and significant, even when we consider all the sittings of the Parliament, we can argue that the dominant effect is the “lazy politician”. On the other hand, if the coefficients become statistically 0, this suggests the prevalence of the “signaling politician”. As reported in Section 2, the data on the sittings are collected with the scraping technique. The regression is the same used in all other specifications and presented in Equation (1). The results are clear: there is no significant coefficient when we consider all the sittings of the parliament. This means that there is no correlation between the scheduling of a generic Parliamentary session and the presence of a newsworthy event. The absence of significant coefficients should suggest that strategic timing is active only if we consider the confidence votes. Thus, this would be an element in favor of the “signaling politician” hypothesis.

Summing up, the results from Section 3 highlight a strategic timing for confidence votes to avoid predictable newsworthy events. In this section, I present two possible explanations. The first one is that the government wants to enjoy the maximum amount of public attention when a confidence vote is issued. The second one is that this correlation could be simply dictated by the intention of the Members of Parliament not to have sittings during those important events. In order to see which one is the real mechanism in place, I use two different identification strategies. Even if we cannot exclude the presence of the “lazy politician” hypothesis yet, this results are a piece of additional evidence in favor to the “signaling politician”.

## 5 Validation test

Before concluding the study, a final validation is needed. I show in Section 3 the presence of a negative and significant effect of predictable newsworthy events on the scheduling of a confidence vote. Furthermore, in Section 4 I try to explain this result with two possible hypotheses, and I use some additional empirical research to disentangle them. All the empirical evidences suggest strategic timing on confidence votes. More specifically, the government monopolizes the attention to inform about some policy adoption and present itself as united. This process cannot be extended to those events that monopolize the public attention but cannot be predicted. I must prove that politicians do not strategically time this type of policy when they don't know which day needs to be avoided. For this reason, in this section, I include a validation test for unpredictable newsworthy events. This type of events is previously specified and listed in Section 2. These unexpected news should not present significant evidence of strategic timing. If this is the case, our result is in line with the methodology used in the previous literature of this field (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelouva & Durante 2019). The coefficients that are presented in the next figure are the betas from leads, lags, and exact dates of the unpredictable events, as specified in the regression from equation (1), Section 3. We can clearly see that, in

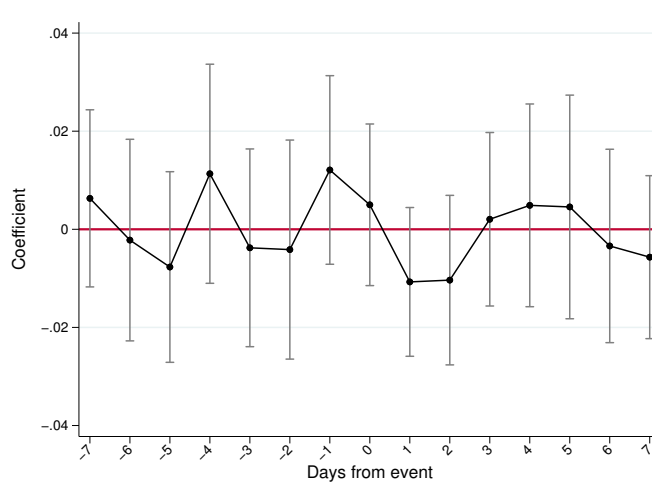


Figure 2: Baseline model - Unpredicted events

this case, there seems to be no significant effect. If we consider the case for a wider pool of events, as dictated by the sensitivity analysis, we don't see any effect. Also for heterogeneity test, there is no significant coefficient that can be explained. Hence, those evidences are in line with Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018. I prove in Section 3 the correlation between confidence votes and predictable newsworthy events. From this section can be argued that, on the other hand, there is no effect considering unpredictable news. We can interpret some findings from this research: Section 3 suggests strategic timing of confidence votes, and the Validation test from this section confirms it. Moreover, in Section 4 the empirical research suggests the dominance of the "Signaling politician" hypothesis, even if we cannot exclude the presence of the "lazy politician" hypothesis yet.

## Conclusion

In the previous pages, I investigated the use of strategic timing in politics in Italy, exploiting the same methodology of some previous studies (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, Djourelouva & Durante 2019). The actual policy I wanted to study is the confidence vote: if it is correlated with predictable events, while it has no links with the occurrence of unpredictable ones, we can claim that it is strategically scheduled. I've chosen this tool because it's a distinctive feature of the Italian legislation, and it's still very debated. The data are collected almost entirely with the scraping technique and can be categorized into 6 groups. Those groups are: confidence votes, sports matches, big show business events, Olympic medals, Natural disasters, and deaths of VIPs. The period I wanted to analyze is the one from 2001 to 2018. I covered 227 confidences votes, 2,616 parliamentary sittings, and 4 Legislatures. In order to choose which event could be considered newsworthy, I followed the previously cited literature (Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018). Finally, in order to make a robustness check I divided all the confidence votes into 4 subsamples.

In Section 3 I presented the econometric model. Then, the results show that concerning predictable newsworthy events, there is a negative relation between those and confidence votes. The sensitivity analysis seems to confirm this aspect. This seems to suggest strategic timing: politicians try to avoid important newsworthy events, in order to schedule a confidence vote. Moreover, under the robustness check, the coefficient of interest remains significant in almost all specifications and subsamples. In Section 4 I tried to present two different explanations, which I called the "lazy" and the "signaling" politician. In order to verify which one is the dominant hypothesis, I used two different identification strategies. Even if we cannot eliminate the "lazy politician" hypothesis yet, this result is a shred of additional evidence in favor to the "signaling politician".

In Section 5 I presented a Validation test, using unpredictable newsworthy events. Replicating the same framework from Section 3, I proved that in this case there is no effect considering this new class of events. This confirms strategic timing because politicians avoid predictable newsworthy events, but they are not able to do the same with unpredictable ones. It's important to highlight that also under the heterogeneity test, the coefficient of interest is still not significant. This is in line with Durante & Zhuravskaya 2018, but in this case the effect has the opposite sign, a case not explored by the literature so far.