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Policy Paper

by ASSEDEL

Elections in Times of Crisis
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1. Introduction

In times of crisis, the democratic process becomes both more vital and more vulnerable. Political competition, which ideally serves to align governance with public interest, may instead generate perverse incentives under conditions of heightened uncertainty and instability.

This paper examines how crises distort electoral dynamics, particularly through the strategic behaviour of political parties, the psychological effects of perceived competitiveness on voter turnout, and the structural fragility of voting systems under stress. It highlights the deliberate manipulation of close contests by parties to mobilize voters, the paradoxes of ranked-choice and multi-winner systems, as well as the role of non-party actors in shaping public opinion. Drawing from empirical cases in Europe, south America and North America, this analysis reveals how elections, held under conditions of political instability, often produce outcomes that defy conventional political logic.

From grassroots upsets in New York's mayoral primary to the growing legitimacy of Eurosceptic actors in European Parliament elections, this study underscores how institutional fragility, electoral reforms, and shifting public discourse can fundamentally reshape democratic outcomes. Ultimately, this paper contends that understanding the interplay between political competition and public interest during crises is essential to preserving democratic legitimacy, and it further asserts that the structural features of electoral systems and media environments play a decisive role in either mitigating or amplifying these tensions.

2. Political competition and public interest: a difficult balance

Among various circumstances, particularly relevant within crisis-affected political landscapes is the phenomenon described as the "curse of ambition,"[1] whereby even politicians whose preferences are congruent with those of the electorate may implement harmful or suboptimal policies to increase their chances of retaining office. This strategic distortion is exacerbated during crises, when political competition intensifies and the perceived costs of losing power rise. This leads to incumbents prioritizing their electoral prospects over sound policy choices, even at the expense of both their own preferences and voter welfare.

A compelling example of this dynamic can be observed in Israel's ongoing political crisis surrounding the proposed dispersal of the Knesset. In June 2025, opposition leaders, including Benny Gantz, Yair Lapid, Avigdor Liberman, and Yair Golan, moved forward with a preliminary vote to dissolve the Parliament[2]. This action came amid intense political manoeuvring and uncertainty over whether they could secure the necessary majority.
Despite public statements of support for the mentioned proposal, hesitation emerged among key Haredi politicians following pressure from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who reportedly urged a delay. These conflicting signals reflect not only internal party tensions but also the strategic calculus typical of actors navigating high-stakes political crises. Netanyahu, meanwhile, employed a range of delay tactics, such as overloading the legislative agenda and prolonging speeches, in an apparent attempt to buy time for negotiations and secure political leverage.

This specific case aligns closely with the theoretical concept of 'ambition-driven strategic distortion'. Political actors on both sides appeared to subordinate substantive governance concerns to electoral positioning. The opposition's willingness to proceed with a risky dispersal

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[1] JOHN DUGGAN, JEAN GUILLAUME FORAND (2025)
[2] ELIAV BREUER (2025)

vote, which could block similar legislation for six months if unsuccessful, exemplifies the extent to which electoral incentives can override deliberative caution. At the same time, the Prime Minister's behind-the-scenes efforts to delay proceedings underscore how incumbents may seek to prolong their hold on power, even in the face of mounting political fragmentation.

Ultimately, the Israeli example demonstrates how crisis conditions and intensifying competition can incentivize political behaviour that departs from stable, welfare-oriented governance. Even when actors rhetorically affirm their commitment to the public good, their strategic decisions often reveal deeper concerns about political survival. This appears to be precisely the kind of misalignment theorized in the concept of the *curse of ambition*.

3. The controversial role of parties in "crisis elections"

Often, political instability might be showed through the fact that elections, such as the local ones in France[3], are most of the time won by a short margin. However, recent theoretical contributions suggest that close electoral outcomes may, in certain contexts, be the result of deliberate strategic behavior by political parties rather than mere coincidence. Researchers[4] argue that parties might intentionally foster tight races as a mechanism to mobilize voters. Their model demonstrates that when elections are perceived as highly competitive, the likelihood of individual votes being pivotal increases, which in turn incentivizes voter participation without the need for costly monitoring or coercive mobilization efforts. This dynamic is particularly relevant in politically polarized environments or moments of institutional fragility, where parties may prefer to maintain uncertainty in the electoral outcome to maximize turnout and consolidate support.

Within such environment, smaller parties are deemed[5] to possess strong incentives to actively pursue electoral strategies that ensure close contests. In doing so, they increase the perceived pivotality of each vote, which not only boosts overall turnout but also levels the playing field against larger, more resourceful opponents. This mechanism becomes especially relevant in environments marked by political volatility or crisis, where conventional advantages of incumbency may erode, and voter dissatisfaction fuels heightened competition.

Perceptions of electoral competitiveness play a pivotal role in shaping voter behaviour, particularly under conditions of heightened uncertainty. When elections are expected to be closely contested, individuals may view their participation as more consequential, increasing the likelihood of turnout. This effect is especially pronounced among voters who identify with the side perceived to be trailing, as the possibility of influencing the outcome becomes more salient. Evidence from Switzerland[6], a country with a long-standing tradition of direct democracy and regular federal referenda, offers a clear illustration of this mechanism. Following the introduction of nationally broadcast pre-election polls in the late 1990s, researchers observed significant increases in voter turnout immediately after the release of polls indicating a close contest. This effect was particularly strong in municipalities that were politically unrepresentative of national trends, where voters previously lacked reliable cues about the broader electoral landscape. Moreover, regions with greater newspaper coverage of polling results exhibited even higher increases in turnout, underscoring the importance of media as a conduit for political engagement.

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[3] CAMILLE URVOY (2025)
[4] LEVINE AND MARTINELLI (2024)
[5] LEVINE AND MARTINELLI (2024)
[6] LEONARDO BURSZTYN, DAVIDE CANTONI, PATRICIA FUNK, FELIX SCHÖNENBERGER, NOAM YUCHTMAN (2024)

However, this does not always appear to be a winning strategy. Electoral processes, in fact, often exhibit momentum effects[7], whereby certain candidates experience sudden and rapid increases in public support following unexpected surges in visibility. Such patterns are frequently triggered by external events, intense media focus, or abrupt shifts in public discourse. These factors then tend to be amplified during periods of political instability or societal crisis. However, these momentum effects are typically fragile; unless sustained by underlying voter preferences, candidates propelled into prominence by such dynamics may quickly lose support as voter impressions evolve or competing narratives emerge.

More generally, when elections take place under conditions marked by heightened uncertainty, fragmented information environments, and impression-driven decision-making, electoral outcomes may deviate significantly from the expectations of rational-choice models. In these contexts, voters' capacity to consistently support preferred or substantively qualified candidates is diminished, increasing the potential for volatile, unpredictable, or even counterintuitive election results.

The complex outcome of the recent New York City Democratic mayoral primary illustrates how crisis conditions, heightened political polarization, and institutional reforms can produce electoral results that appear counterintuitive or destabilizing from the perspective of established political actors. Despite facing a coordinated opposition from influential political elites, business interests, and segments of his own party, Zohran Mamdani, a democratic socialist and outspoken critic of the status quo, secured the Democratic nomination through New York's ranked-choice voting system.[8]

This outcome reflects broader patterns observed in elections held under crisis-like conditions, where institutional uncertainty, social fragmentation, and voter dissatisfaction erode traditional predictors of electoral success. Established figures such as former governor Andrew Cuomo, who commanded significant financial resources and institutional backing, were unable to overcome grassroots momentum mobilized around issues such as affordability crises, inequality, and political disenchantment. From the standpoint of conventional electoral models that emphasize elite endorsements, financial capacity, and historical political capital, Mamdani's victory represents a counterintuitive outcome that nonetheless reflects deeper structural tensions within the electorate.

In such environments, the absence of credible commitment mechanisms between voters and politicians undermines the ability of elections to ensure representative governance. Specifically, when neither politicians nor voters can credibly commit to future policy behavior or electoral standards, the incentives designed to align political action with public welfare are significantly weakened.[9]

Empirical examples from recent elections illustrate how close electoral outcomes with high turnout often coincide with periods of heightened political instability or polarization, conditions frequently characteristic of broader societal crises. Cases such as the Peruvian presidential elections of 2016 and 2021[10] might be good examples to demonstrate how tightly contested races emerge in environments where democratic institutions face significant public scrutiny. These elections, decided by extremely narrow margins despite mass participation, reflect not only the strategic behavior of political parties but also the underlying social fragmentation that often accompanies political crises. Similar patterns are observed in the United States, where

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[7] ANDONIE AND DIERMEIER (2024)
[8] SARAH ELLISON (2025)
[9] JOHN DUGGAN, JEAN GUILLAUME FORAND (2025)
[10] LEVINE AND MARTINELLI (2024)

gubernatorial and senatorial elections, such as Washington's 2004 governor's race and Minnesota's 2008 senate contest, produced razor-thin results against the backdrop of increasing partisan polarization. While not always labeled explicitly as "crisis elections," these cases underscore how institutional uncertainty and political fragmentation create conditions conducive to both heightened voter mobilization and narrow electoral outcomes.

Parties, however, are not the only key players in this context. In relation to the role played by other public interest stakeholders, such as civil society actors, a study showed how the public funding given to NGO's directly influenced local elections in France[11], with more than 1.3 million registered networks influencing the public and political life of the country.

4. The influence of voting systems

Elections held during times of crisis face unique challenges that can affect the fairness and legitimacy of outcomes. One critical aspect often overlooked is the vulnerability of voting systems to paradoxes such as monotonicity anomalies[12], where increased voter support can paradoxically harm a candidate's chances. Recent empirical research analyzing 1079 Scottish local government elections under the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system reveals that while these anomalies are rare, they do manifest in real-world multiwinner elections. In times of crisis, when voter behavior may be more volatile or voter turnout unpredictable, the presence of such anomalies could exacerbate mistrust or confusion about election results. This highlights the importance of understanding the structural properties and limitations of voting methods, especially when elections are conducted under stressful or unstable conditions. Ensuring transparent, robust electoral systems capable of withstanding such anomalies is crucial to maintaining democratic legitimacy in crisis contexts.

Within the cited New York Democratic Party primary elections[13], the ranked-choice system itself, while designed to enhance electoral legitimacy, introduced a layer of complexity that delayed the final outcome and allowed for voter behavior driven by secondary preferences. These circumstances further complicated predictive expectations. In times of political or societal crisis, such mechanisms can amplify electoral unpredictability, as voters seek alternatives to entrenched elites, and institutional reforms interact with volatility to produce surprising, and at times destabilizing, results.

Periods of political or societal crisis often intensify the pressures on electoral candidates to project competence and decisiveness, yet these same conditions can produce structural distortions in the electoral process. Recent theoretical models suggest that in competitive elections, candidates face strong incentives to signal their governing ability through increasingly ambitious campaign promises, even when those promises exceed their actual capacity to deliver.

Importantly, mechanisms designed to refine candidate selection, such as primary elections or large candidate pools, can amplify this dynamic by encouraging even more extreme campaign commitments. While such mechanisms may be intended to filter for competence, they often escalate the strategic overstatement of candidates' governing capacity, increasing the likelihood of policy failure in the aftermath of electoral victory.[14]

[11] CAMILLE URVOY (2025)
[12] DAVID MCCUNE, ADAM GRAHAM-SQUIRE (2024)
[13] SARAH ELLISON (2025)
[14] MARCO A. HAAN, SANDER ONDERSTAL, YOHANES E. RIYANTO (2024)

5. Case: The politicization of the EU integration process

European Parliament (EP) elections play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse on the European Union (EU), often shifting the focus from specific policy debates to fundamental questions about the EU's nature and future.

Analyzing the 2009, 2014, and 2019 EP elections in the Netherlands reveals that media debates predominantly centered on the EU's legitimacy with policy discussions comprising only a minority of discourse (18.5% to 22.1%). These crisis-driven elections have contributed to the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism, which now dominates public debate in various forms: hard Euroscepticism advocating principled opposition and withdrawal, soft Euroscepticism supporting limited integration, and euroalternativism, which criticizes specific EU elements while remaining broadly supportive. When euroalternative claims are included, Euroscepticism was present in over 69% of media debates across all three elections. However, the media often presents Euroscepticism with conceptual vagueness, using interchangeable and oversimplified labels that obscure the nuance within public opinion. Importantly, these elections illustrate a transformation of Eurosceptic actors from marginal outsiders in 2009 to influential insiders by 2019, reflecting their growing legitimacy and centrality in EU politics.

This evolution, exemplified by high-profile debates and shifting party strategies post-Brexit, highlights the increasing politicization of European integration during crises. Nevertheless, the persistent fuzziness in public discourse surrounding Euroscepticism risks oversimplifying complex EU debates, even as it opens space for more constructive and policy-focused dialogue in the post-Brexit era.

6. Conclusion

Elections held during times of crisis expose the underlying tensions between political ambition, institutional integrity, and the public interest. While democratic competition is essential for accountability, in unstable or polarized contexts, it can trigger a range of strategic behaviours that distort both policy outcomes and voter expectations. Politicians may overpromise, parties may deliberately foster tight contests to stimulate turnout, and voters may be swayed more by perception and emotion than by substantive evaluation of policy or competence.

This analysis has shown that the dynamics of "crisis elections" challenge many assumptions of conventional democratic theory. From the manipulation of electoral competitiveness to the unintended consequences of voting system design, crisis conditions often amplify volatility, fragility, and unpredictability in electoral outcomes.

Moreover, the increasing politicization of issues such as EU integration, and the evolving role of civil society actors and media framing, further complicate the relationship between elections and representative governance. As traditional predictors of electoral success lose traction, and as political systems become more fragmented, it becomes more difficult for voters to hold leaders accountable or for elections to yield stable, broadly legitimate outcomes.

To safeguard democratic legitimacy in crisis-prone contexts, ASSEDEL suggests to the Council of Europe, The European Union and all interested States reforms which should focus on reinforcing institutional resilience, improving electoral transparency, and fostering a more informed and engaged electorate. This would require not only technical improvements to voting systems, but also broader efforts to rebuild trust, reduce polarization, and ensure that political competition genuinely serves the public good rather than undermining it.

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