

# Opportunistic decision-making in government: concept formation, variety and explanation

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## Abstract

The notion of opportunism is too often used loosely in policy and administrative research on executive decision-making: its various meanings are too rarely clearly distinguished. To make it useful for explanation, this article presents fresh concept formation work, clarifying the concept to recognise different kinds and degrees of opportunism. To illustrate the use of the refined concept, the article examines key decisions by British cabinets and core executives between 1945 and 1990. It proposes that neo-Durkheimian institutional theory can help to explain why different kinds of opportunism are cultivated in differently ordered administrations, so providing new insight into decision-making.

## Keywords

Opportunism; risk; cost; planning horizon; short-termism; bias; decision-making; neo-Durkheimian institutional framework; thought style; political judgement.

## Key implications for practitioners

The article provides a framework by which public managers can identify degrees and types of opportunism among the elected politicians they serve. It will help public managers to identify risks associated with such decisions, when they are asked to execute them.

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## Biographical note

Perri 6 is Professor in Public Management in the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary, University of London. His recent books include *Explaining political judgement* (2011) and *Principles of methodology* (2012, with Christine Bellamy). His development of neo-Durkheimian institutional theory is widely cited. He is currently researching styles of political judgement and unintended consequences for policy, and executive decision-making after surprises.

‘Opportunism’ describes a stance in decision-making. Unfortunately the term is often used loosely (Das and Rahman, 2010). Its relationship with an ‘opportunity’ is rarely defined. To exhibit explanatory power, greater definitional rigour is needed; varieties must be distinguished. Concept formation is a necessary precursor to explanation (Sartori, 1970; Goertz, 2005; 6 and Bellamy, 2012). For this purpose, this article identifies the concept’s basic elements, using several bodies of literature. Examining difficulties in these literatures’ uses lights the way to a more refined conception. To illustrate the clarified concept’s usefulness, the article examines British governments’ key domestic, economic and foreign policy decisions between 1945 and 1990. The final section proposes a neo-Durkheimian institutional account of these decisions, providing new insights about distinct forms of opportunism.

### Concepts of opportunism and opportunity

Uses of the term, ‘opportunism’, can be distinguished by whether they define it by

- i. deficiencies in some normative, moral or ideological commitment;  
or stances toward
- ii. action in particular contingent situations,
- iii. time horizons, or
- iv. potential supporters.

Among ‘deficiency’ conceptions, Williamson’s (1985, 1993) definition is widely used in political economy and in strategic management studies (Besley *et al*, 2012). It was developed for transaction cost analysis of relationships between principals and agents. For Williamson, opportunism means self-interest with willingness to use guile, or deliberately giving ‘incomplete or distorted disclosure of information, especially [making] calculated efforts to mislead, distort, disguise, obfuscate, or otherwise confuse’ (1985, 17) in ‘expectation [of] individual advantage’ (1975, 26) at others’ expense (Das and Rahman, 2010, 57). Williamson regards opportunism as a constant disposition, not a variable, checked only by varying costs, moral education and institutions’ disciplinary effects. Some theorists narrow it to mean willingness to defect from agreements (Liu *et al*, 2010). Others emphasise guile so much that opportunism becomes a general disposition to engage in any unethical behaviour for gain (Vafai, 2010). Studying corporate behaviour, Gibbins *et al* (1990, 130), drop Williamson’s condition of guile, stretching opportunism to cover any gain-seeking whatsoever.

In studying whether governments manipulate economic policy before elections to enhance their chances of re-appointment, many political scientists use ‘opportunism’ to mean parties’ willingness to present policies as in wider public interests when (presumably knowing that) they

are mainly in the party's interest (Aidt *et al*, 2001; cf. Elster, 2007, 297). Some studies even allow decisions to be opportunistic if the actor cares both about policy outcomes or citizens' welfare *and* their own re-election (Rogoff, 1990; Walter, 2008, 372). Sometimes opportunism is used to describe decisionmaking deficient, not in altruistic or moral but in ideological principle (Brass, 1977; van Dalen and Swank, 1996).

Other political scientists use the term to mean merely being astute to contingencies, to take advantage of opportunities (Jasiewicz, 2008; Messina, 2001).

Developing Kingdon's (1995 [1984]) multiple streams framework, Weissert (1991) and Ugur and Yankaya (2008) distinguish persistent policy entrepreneurs prepared to wait for better opportunities from policy opportunists who do not persist beyond one political cycle (e.g., an administration). On this view, foreshortened time horizons are key.

Finally, some studies on populism use opportunism to mean '(quickly) pleasing the people/voters – and so 'buying' their support' (Mudde, 2004, 542).

Sometimes, these senses are combined. Thus Krause *et al* (2013, 275) combine deficiency in ideological principle with short-termism, defining opportunism as 'short-term political expediency at the expense of long-run sound policy judgment'. Nevertheless, lack of principled commitment, orientation to contingency, short time horizon and materially rewarding supporters with low cost but high profile measures vary independently of each other. Short-termists may be honest, even principled; rogues may be patient; measures chosen for short term considerations can be unpopular with potential supporters; rogues and short-termist but decent politicians alike may be poor opportunity-spotters.

Any researcher may define 'opportunism' as they require, provided their usage is consistent and exhibits construct validity – i.e., it should capture both underlying common meanings and the research purpose. Defining opportunism as ideologically unprincipled decisionmaking fails this standard. For example, the Bolshevik party was highly ideologically driven in 1917. Yet it made decisions readily described as opportunistic in respects of guile and astuteness to contingency, but which were neither wholly crowd-pleasing nor short termist even when rushed. In response to the Provisional Government's threat to suppress the party and to Kornilov's attempted military coup, Lenin used German (enemy) support to return to Russia; the party exploited strikes, which it had not stimulated, against the government; finally, it overthrew the weakened government in a *coup*. Thus, defining it by a focus on the immediate time horizon, although appropriate to Bolshevik decision-makers' assessment of the moment to strike, must be qualified to allow that seizing the day may be done opportunistically in pursuit of a principled goal and for longer term planning horizons.

Lacking orientation to contingent opportunities, Williamson's category of guile or other unethical behaviour is not appropriately described as opportunistic. This would leave spur-of-the-moment crime indistinguishable from careful long-term building of large criminal empires, as though the petty thief's decision-making, seeing an open window, were no different from the Godfather's. Likewise, seeking popularity by offering advantages is not distinctively opportunistic, without one or more of the other strands.

For the second strand to be helpful, then, a valid concept of opportunism must rest on a clear definition of an 'opportunity'. In Kingdon's (1995 [1984], 166-72) 'multiple streams' account of policymaking, opportunities are occasions in relationships among circumstances, advocates and policy proposals, when actors' difficulties in pressing proposals are reduced. Unfortunately, this lacks precision. Elster (2007, 165) defines an opportunity as any feasible action. But this takes no account of desires. Life is full of things we could do, but have no wish to. It is odd to describe as opportunities, circumstances which only provide chances for doing things in which we have no interest. Elster (2007, 170) claims, without evidence, that opportunities are easier to change than desires, despite defining opportunities as what remains after constraints filter infeasible actions. Many constraints on opportunities are very difficult to change. Yet he also acknowledges that opportunities endogenously influence desires. Defining opportunities as feasible sets of available actions makes them necessary but insufficient conditions for taking actions. But this is no explanation: it says only that if the thing was done, it must have been possible.

Some scholars draw upon an influential criminological theory for the opposite view of opportunity from Kingdon's. Clarke's and Mayhew's (1989) study of falling British suicide rates after conversion from coal gas to North Sea gas argued that closing an opportunity to kill themselves by one means led people to reappraise their desire to kill themselves at all. Generalising from this, 'routine activities' theory (e.g., Felson, 2002) claims that 'opportunity makes the criminal'. Dispositions are therefore endogenous to opportunities, objectively defined. Crimes are explained by coincidences of motivated offenders, suitable targets and the absence of capable guardians (in political decisions, perhaps motivated ministers, suitable policy targets and no capable opponents). That theory regards offenders' motivations as general dispositions, only converted into intentions to commit particular offences when opportunities arise. This returns us to Williamson's general disposition and willingness to breach norms. Opportunities consist in the absence of capable guardians and availability of suitable targets.

Sutton (2012ab) shows that as with Elster's account, the claim is true by definition, but it is not an explanation. If an offence has been committed, then the guardian (opponent) must have been incapable of preventing it, the target must have been available and the offender (ministers)

must have had motivation. Defining guardians' capabilities and targets' suitability by objective features alone is insufficient. The theory takes offenders' perception of guardians' capability and targets' suitability for granted or treats them as irrelevant. Endogeneity of intentions to objective opportunities is not explained. Objective features of targets and guardians can only be necessary, not sufficient conditions for explaining decisions to commit crimes. Without account of types of motivations and of perceptions, opportunism has no content. Opportunity alone provides no distinctive explanation for particular decisions.

This examination of influential frameworks suggests eight standards for a definition. Opportunism must be defined

- as a stance defined in relation to opportunities, meaning contingent events, not structural conditions;
- including actors' perceptions of circumstances;
- defined by stances toward relative gains and risks, to time discounting, and for a given actor's desires;
- as a variable not a constant;
- recognising that actors are differently biased in perceiving the presence, salience, relevance, probability and size of gains from circumstances;
- recognising a spectrum of willingness to search for and invest in creating opportunities;
- allowing for ideological motivations; and
- without assuming unethical behaviour.

The following definitions meet these standards. An *opportunity* is

a contingency  $C$  (an occasion, event or short term condition, relative to the actor's decision-making horizon) which raises the probability  $P$  for an actor  $A$ , in an action  $X$ , of securing a gain  $G$  which has some appeal for  $A$ 's desires, and which offers lower costs or risks  $R$  than the actor might envisage or expect in the absence of the type of contingency  $C$  is.

$A$ 's  $X$ -ing in  $C$  does not make  $A$  an opportunist, only an opportunity-taker in  $C$ . For someone's manner of taking opportunities to be genuinely *opportunistic*, the argument above implies, as well as

- perceiving and being willing to seize an opportunity, their decision-making must also exhibit

- discounting time to focus on the short term and
- preferring readily or cheaply available gains over potentially greater long term gains

are defining conditions.

This definition recognises degrees of discounting and differences in perceptions of probabilities, costs and gains. Thus, a scalar concept of opportunism is more appropriate than a classical one (Goertz, 2005; 6 and Bellamy, 2012) for explaining executive decision-making. This suggests that four cognitive and conative dimensions of depth of opportunism are required. Decision-makers' opportunism may vary with respect to their

- *time* horizon and discounting the future;
- the *costs* which they are willing to bear in finding or creating opportunities;
- willingness to accept different *kinds of gains* because they are available in the short term, cheaply or with high probability, and in their
- biased perceptions of *probabilities and sizes of gains*.

Nonetheless, many imperatives and relationships affecting one dimension would likely affect others too.

Opportunism is *deeper* where actors are oriented to the short term, discount heavily, will bear few costs, and/or exaggerate probabilities and sizes of gains. Opportunism with respect to probability of gains could be argued to be deeper than opportunism with respect to their size. Someone prepared to forego chances of great gain for certainty of modest gain could be described as more deeply opportunistic than someone whose biases merely misled them into supposing that a modest gain is bigger than it really is. In stances toward cost, we can distinguish three degrees:

- a. *Casual opportunism* by encounter without search or investment: *deep* opportunism with respect to cost – the opportunity arises from causes largely independent of the actor's previous decisions, and actors can recognise the opportunity without having sought it out (e.g., an unexpected economic windfall or electoral success);
- b. *Search opportunism*: *moderately deep* opportunism with respect to cost – the opportunity arises from causes largely independent of the actor's previous decisions, but the actor had invested resources in putting herself / himself in a position to recognise opportunities if they arose (e.g., some resources were fortunately available; some monitoring capability was maintained, even if inadvertently); and

- c. *Limited investment opportunism: shallow* opportunism with respect to cost – the opportunity arises from causes to which the actor’s previous decisions made a significant causal contribution (e.g., deliberately maintaining contacts).

Opportunism is not the only case of over-perceiving probabilities or sizes of gains from opportunities. People who eschew opportunism may exhibit highly tuned appreciation of the presence of opportunities they reject. Principled free marketeers may be fastidious in recognising even hints of non-tariff barriers; the virtuous may measure their performance by their sensitivity to temptations for vices they shun. Finally, opportunists may be disappointed, because they may err about costs, sizes or probabilities of gain. No assumption is implied about whether, typically, opportunistic decisions are normatively right or wrong, or adroitly chosen or competently executed.

### Illustration

To illustrate the argument for theory development only, we consider how far British postwar governments have exhibited these degrees of opportunism, in domestic economic policy – such as short term expansion when opportunities seemed to permit, but risking longer term inflation – and in foreign policy – such as seizing opportunities for high profile and dramatic initiatives with hope (not necessarily achieved) of short term success but risking longer term failure. (Excluded, because the present study concerns substantive policy decisions, are prime ministers’ decisions on timings of general elections.)

Taken from a much larger study of political judgement in the period, Table 1 has been constructed by coding decisions using diaries, memoirs, biographies and secondary historical works, archived ministerial private papers and official papers in the National Archives. There is not space to present coding for all major decisions taken by each government. However, the table identifies key economic, foreign and other political decisions which can be regarded as opportunistic as defined above.

At this stage, we focus on the third column, showing how the scalar concept can be used to distinguish absence of opportunism and its three degrees. For example, there is little evidence in the Attlee administration of decisions showing economic short-termism. On the contrary, the welfare state programmes were expensive to establish and would not yield major gains for years, while the major foreign policy initiatives in decolonisation were unpopular at home and risky in the middle east and subcontinent, but undertaken in significant part for principled reasons. By contrast, Eden’s government clearly exhibited significant casual opportunism. Chancellor Macmillan’s premium bond initiative was a headline-catching way of raising cash and involved

little search. Eden's decision to leap upon the secret Israeli offer to assist with the Suez crisis again involved little search and showed – for an experienced former foreign secretary – astonishingly little concern for possible medium term consequences. Longer lasting governments exhibited either significant changes in degree of opportunism or differences in the distribution of degrees of opportunism among policy fields. Before 1961, for example, (despite claiming in his memoirs always to have been an expansionist) Macmillan's own administration showed little opportunism in economic policy: ministers undertook unpopular deflation for longer term gains and faced down major strikes which had significant public support. Yet there is evidence of searching for opportunities for short-term grandstanding in areas of foreign affairs in Macmillan's own preserve, as shown in his Moscow visit and his shameless exploitation of Eisenhower's state visit in 1959. Macmillan's hopes of finding an early opportunity to impress the newly elected US President Kennedy before his foreign policy became settled show all the features of limited investment opportunism. By contrast, after 1961-2, opportunistic economic short-termism began to grow, shown not only in Maudling's 'dash for growth' but in Macmillan's guileful manipulation of pay negotiations, his failure to back junior ministers who executed his own policies, and pressing for a chance to be present at what was really a US achievement in the partial test ban treaty (6, 2015b).

The table summarises changes and contrasts for the full set of governments in the period.

[Table 1]

### Toward theory-based explanation

What might explain these differences in degrees to which these governments exhibit different kinds of opportunism in particular policy fields? When might decision-makers regard it as intelligent to value short term or readily available gains above longer term or chancier ones? When might they persuade themselves that available gains are greater or more likely than more dispassionate observers might believe?

As formal features compatible with various substantive ideologies, stances toward cost, risk, time and contingent events are parts of 'thought style' (Douglas, 1986) – or, in government, of style in political judgement (6, 2011, 2014a). Therefore, neo-Durkheimian institutional theory of stylistic features of judgement, (Douglas 1982; Thompson *et al*, 1990; Hood, 1998; 6, 2011, 2014ab) is an especially promising source of hypotheses: the present argument comprehensively recasts Douglas' (1992, 198-204) suggested explanation for variations in degrees and forms of opportunism.

Durkheimian approaches argue that thought styles should be explained, not by personality, but by informal institutions governing patterns of social relations (Durkheim 1995, Durkheim and Mauss, 1963; 6, 2011, 2014a). People project formal features of their institutions onto their

problems, preferences, etc. We order our world as we ourselves are socially ordered. Explaining opportunistic decision-making in governments therefore requires attention to informal institutions shaping relations among ministers, advisers and senior civil servants within core executives.

The framework derives its typology of informal institutions by cross-tabulating (Douglas, 1982) Durkheim's (1951) two universal dimensions of variation in elementary forms of institutions. 'Social regulation' measures the extent to which life within (here) a governing executive (ministers and their closest political and civil service advisers) is ordered by informal institutions of constraint, imperative, and control of authorisations to act, or conversely by discretion and scope for choice. With weak social regulation, discretion is considerable; arrangements are open to fluid negotiation. 'Social integration' measures the degree to which arrangements are ordered by a bounded group, clearly distinguishing members from the detached. Cross-tabulating these dimensions yields four elementary forms of institutions (Douglas, 1982) – hierarchical (strong social regulation and integration), individualistic (weak social regulation and integration), enclaved (strong social integration, weak external regulation and internal regulation only as strong as can be accepted without weakening integration or requiring external institutional buttress: Rayner, 1988); and isolate ordering (strong social regulation, weak social integration). The neo-Durkheimian argument is that biases in thought styles will exhibit as much or as little regulation and integration as people are subject to social regulation and social integration in relations with those with whom they deal most intensely in that part of their life or work (Douglas, 1982; 6, 2011, 2014a).

The framework predicts that most empirical settings will exhibit a mix of these elementary forms, because each develops in positive feedback, as people react with countervailing or negative feedback to assertions in other forms (Thompson, 2008; 6, 2003). When positive feedback in one form produces institutional disorganisation or disadvantage, losers can only reach for another form by which to organise. Both provisional settlements and conflicts among elementary forms are expected, depending on their relative weight and the depth of positive and negative feedback among them. The framework therefore predicts dynamic institutional disequilibrium (Thompson, 2008). In cross-sectional studies, though, shifting patterns of settlement and tension show up only as weighted mixes of forms, in which one or two are dominant when data are collected.

The remainder of this section summarises hypotheses derived from the framework about forms of opportunism.

Thought styles are sensitive to risks threatening their peculiar institutions (Douglas, 1992). Therefore, where they cultivate types of opportunism, institutional forms selectively preserve their own structures at the expense of others' (Douglas, 1982).

When strong integration accompanies strong regulation, opportunism is not cultivated in any dimension. Strong bonds and marking of boundaries are sustained between those within the zone of social integration and those outside it, together with rule-based systems of authorisation to act. This is hierarchy, but in not the common usage of the word, where it typically means just any inequality or simple command. Simple authoritarian command is inconsistent with the legitimation and rule-based authorisation which sustain strong integration: 6, 2015a. Moreover, each of the four elementary forms generates its peculiar pattern of inequality.

Irrespective of whether or not more opportunities arise than adversities, heavy discounting of future gains makes little sense in hierarchy. This is because rule-based authorisation and constraint reduce perceptions of uncertainty among both superiors and subalterns, and institutions prescribe actions to sustain the integrated community into a future conceived in long time horizons.

Where social integration is strong but prescribed regulation is weak, leaving only such regulation as can be collectively, voluntarily agreed, a strong sense of accountability to the past is cultivated within the enclaved group (Rayner, 1982, 1988). Lacking authority and individual incentive, only shared beliefs on heavily bounded matters of principle can sustain cohesion. Therefore, a heavily marked boundary is cultivated around believing group members. Yet current dependence on collective agreement for action leads to an open sense of the future, if people act together. Great urgency is cultivated to reinforce it (Rayner, 1982; Peck and 6, 2006). The impact upon opportunism is therefore conflicted. Principled commitment excludes most kinds of opportunism. The drastic action to which enclaves are committed is usually driven by the opposite of opportunism – a willingness to accept short term losses in pursuit of long term gains. Indeed in deep positive feedback, members of enclaved groups may prefer to sacrifice their own lives together than to surrender principle (Douglas, 1982; Durkheim, 1951). However, in moderate positive feedback but still in perceived adversity or crisis – a frequently perceived condition because crisis reinforces solidarity – justification is readily found for drastic action to secure the enclaved group's survival, as necessary to ensure that its principles endure. Opportunistic action may be justified by arguments that different principles are appropriate for imposing costs and losses on non-members than would be acceptable for members themselves. This was the case for the embattled Bolsheviks facing suppression, had the Provisional Government regrouped. Needing to justify action by principle can limit the scope for opportunism without a current existential threat. Where opportunism arises in an enclave under perceived existential threat, we expect exaggerated perception of the size of gains, rather than of their probability. For when group survival is important only as a way of securing survival for its principles, probabilities of gains to the group matter less than faith in those principles. In enclaved settings, we expect shallower

opportunism with respect to cost than elsewhere, because when survival of group principles is key, limited investment opportunism might be justified but casual opportunism is insufficient to meet standards of principled action. Here, therefore, a limited style of opportunism arises, not when events deliver objective opportunities but instead when the worst adversities arise.

Where both social regulation and integration are weak, discretion and weak bonds allow individuals to secure organisation, using negotiations involving incentive, exchange and reward. No stable boundary marks any fixed identities. Some readers might expect individualistic institutions to cultivate deep opportunism, but careful reasoning shows that this expectation requires heavy qualification. True, under individualistic institutions it is difficult to negotiate arrangements for such long periods as can be achieved with authoritative legitimation under hierarchical ones. Yet structures of offsetting incentives can be assembled and negotiated (Stinchcombe and Heimer, 1985) to cultivate medium-term planning horizons sufficient for willingness to invest and to bear short term costs for medium term gain. A common form of individualistic ordering, especially important in governments, is the patron-client relation. An independent patron gathers a 'claque' of dependent followers (by contrast with enclaved 'cliques') by offering expectation of future reward under generalised exchange. Those forms of opportunism which risk a patron's base of support by demonstrating untrustworthiness are less likely than those which enhance it, casually or by search. These capacities cultivate a thought style biased to exaggerate probabilities of gains more than their size, because successfully preserving an independent patron's position over the medium term depends on cultivating shrewd assessments of sizes of gains, although each individual will learn from mistakes. Because relations are negotiated among rival patrons (e.g., powerful ministers) from unequal power bases and also between patrons and clients, individualistic institutions allow search and limited investment opportunism, not only exploitation of found opportunities. When events deliver few opportunities but many adversities to individualistically ordered decision-makers, their scope for discretion exaggerates perceived probabilities of future opportunities, so cultivating a resilient thought style.

Where social regulation is strong but integration is weak, thin bonds to others and lack of articulated capacity or incentive for agreement make collective action difficult. Whatever resources they hold, strong constraint without integrated legitimation leaves people coping with adversities by power rather than authority or exchange, and in deep uncertainty about the future. This context is therefore described as isolate ordering (Douglas, 1996). Individuals who can hold onto resources or high office for a period might cope by passing on constraints to others by imposition; this position is known as structurally despotic (Coyle, 1994; 6, 2011, 2014ab, 2015b). Those who cannot pass on constraints must either evade them (perhaps violating norms), or else accept them and any

consequent losses. When frustrated by failures to impose or pass on constraints, those in structurally despotic positions will lapse into these structural serf positions.

Under isolate ordering, we therefore expect opportunism, where it arises, to be deepest with respect to time and cost. For weak bonds and strong constraints leave people able only to work with very short term horizons, and unwilling to take great investment for a future over which prevailing institutions afford limited control. Deep opportunism in time and cost therefore appears reasonable. Deep uncertainty about the future, however, mitigates against exaggerated perception of probability of gains, for similar reasons to those exhibited under individualistic institutions. Instead isolate ordering is likely to cultivate exaggerated perception of the sizes of gains. This motivates improvising coping action under strong constraint, together with a shrewd recognition that big chances may have to be taken. Therefore in this setting, the expectation generated by prospect theory, of great risk taking in the domain of losses, is most likely to be exhibited, but it is not a general phenomenon, irrespective of institutional forms.

Two important qualifications arise to the hypothesis about isolate ordering. For all its vulnerability to being reduced to the structural serf position (because fallback options are limited: 6, 2015b), a structurally despotic position is nevertheless a more advantageous position than that of a structural serf. Someone trying to maintain a despotic position must consider how far, if constraints and weak bonds allow, to devote resources to searching for, or putting investment into creating opportunities. However, strong constraints limit both levels of investment and numbers of policy fields in which structural despots will find search or investment worthwhile. In the domain of gains, this may curb opportunism with respect to cost, and cultivate shrewd assessments of expected gains from imposition and confrontation (6, 2011).

The second qualification arises where isolates face few objective opportunities but experience many adversities. Sustaining exaggerated perception of the probability of opportunities (the '*Jacques le fataliste*' or 'Mr Micawber' mode) requires some objective opportunities. Even in isolate ordering, it is hard to sustain when experience delivers adversities more consistently than opportunities (Thompson *et al*, 1990). Lacking strong bonds or strong discretion to sustain optimism, the opposite bias can arise, whereby opportunities are under-perceived. In either isolate register, decision-making is based on coping and improvisation. But improvisation does not consist in search for opportunities, but in coping despite their perceived unavailability.

Table Two summarises the hypotheses. It shows that the deepest opportunism is expected in weak social integration, but acknowledges the special conditions of perceived existential threat in which particular kinds of opportunism can be cultivated in moderately strong enclaving.

[Table Two]

## Illustrative evidence for the theory

Table One's final column shows each administration's informal social organisation in each period. Dates defining rows reflect times when informal institutional forms shifted, not general election years.

Governments of the late 1940s and early 1950s were predominantly hierarchical; this form was less heavily marked after 1953. Many governments shifted from their initial ordering toward isolate institutions either quickly (Eden's almost immediately in 1955, Heath's markedly after February 1972) or in their later years (Macmillan's from 1961-2, Callaghan's from 1978 and Thatcher's by 1985). Most governments which moved into isolate ordering did not exit from it. Only Wilson's second 1960s administration moved back, after a brief and shallow 'isolation dynamic' (November 1967-April 1968) to its initially predominantly individualistic form (6, 2015b).

The findings provide considerable support for the hypotheses. Space permits examination of only a selection of decisions identified in Table One.

As predicted, the largely hierarchical governments of the 1940s and early 1950s exhibit little opportunism. On the contrary, Attlee's first government shows the most extreme cases of willingness to bear short and medium term costs in pursuit of long term construction of formal institutions to stabilise the domestic economy through the welfare state, land use planning and housing investment and the international order through NATO and decolonisation. Churchill's only slightly less hierarchical administration shows the first signs of opportunism in the individualistic register from ministers on the hierarchy's periphery, such as housing minister Harold Macmillan who personalised his spending programme, as a negotiating stratagem with the Treasury (and for career building).

The one case of significant enclaving is the monetarist circle around Mrs Thatcher in her first government and in the first half of her second administration (Campbell, 2003), although this was moderated by some hierarchical ordering in the rest of the administration. Because the enclave neither faced nor perceived any existential threat, that type of opportunism was not cultivated. There is little evidence of opportunism in economic policy during the early to mid-1980s. Indeed, commitment to principle led ministers to bear huge short term costs in unemployment and unpopularity especially after the pro-cyclical 1981 budget during the downturn. The combination of enclaved and hierarchical cohesion enabled the government to make costly short term concessions to the National Union of Miners in 1980-1 while making medium term preparations for a full confrontation a few years later.

The framework expects that in individualistically ordered governments opportunism will focus most on opportunities for personal glory or on negotiating opportunities. Macmillan operated as

sole patron in a zone of individualistic ordering in superpower relations in 1957-1963. As we expect, this sustained grandstanding and negotiation-oriented over-estimation of gains in his Moscow trip in 1959, in capitalising on public outrage about South African repression in 1960, in opportunistic personal publicity seeking in globe-trotting summitry and in pursuing a presence at superpower conferences. Wilson's strongly individualistic 1960s administrations show significantly personalised, grandstanding and negotiation-based opportunism. This can be seen in Wilson's 1965 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' mission, which sought to bring about negotiations for de-escalation in the Vietnam war. Wilson seized on circumstances to act for short term political advantage, without expecting the mission to succeed in its overt aim. By contrast, in 1967 his hopes for success in securing a breakthrough over Vietnam were sincerely held. When Soviet Premier Kosygin visited London in February, Wilson – believing his own negotiating skills sufficient – exaggerated estimations of the chances of a breakthrough. This led him opportunistically to act without full clearance from the White House: opportunistic action is not necessarily adroitly chosen. In competition with other ministerial patrons, Wilson often used crises for personal grandstanding, as when he dramatically used secret intelligence to name individual shop stewards in the striking seamen's union as communists in 1966.

As the framework predicts, governments under isolate ordering exhibit the greatest variety of types of opportunism. Where a premier achieves a structurally despotic position, he or she would use imposition opportunistically. Thus, Eden exhibited a coercive style of opportunism in seizing on the secret French plan for an Israeli feint into Sinai as an excuse for Anglo-French intervention around the Suez Canal and then misled the Commons about it. In domestic policy, by contrast, where Eden did not dominate his own government, the administration's concessions in 1955 to several trades unions show the loss acceptance expected of an isolate government in structural self ordering.

The Heath government shows another category of bias about opportunity predicted in isolate ordering. That administration tended to respond to adversities by seeking first to impose rules such as the Industrial Relations Act control, the 'N minus one' incomes policy in 1971-2 and then the Phase III scheme in 1973-4. Yet, by the time it had slipped deeply into isolate ordering, when faced with confrontation powerful by enclaved groups including trades unions and when moving from despotic to structural self position, the government combined *under*-perceiving opportunities with opportunistic coping in accepting losses. For example, during the second miners' strike, the government rejected a TUC offer out of hand which could have provided a settlement which might have saved the government's face more effectively than, in desperation, establishing an inquiry which was sure to grant a generous pay increase and also announcing a general election.

Wilson's 1974-6 government provides a distinctive configuration, in which an increasingly isolate premier sought to hold together a government divided into two enclaves engaged in a standoff over Europe. The decision to announce a referendum on remaining in the European 'common market' provided a stopgap solution and perhaps more. To both enclaves, it carried appeal to democratic principle, although it offended purist allegiance to representative democracy and parliamentary sovereignty. The decision first to re-negotiate the terms of Britain's membership showed Wilson adroitly searching for short term opportunities from a position of considerable weakness within the government, because it enabled modest changes secured by Callaghan to be presented as major achievements. Callaghan's own government was initially hierarchically ordered in 1976 (Morgan, 1997, 485-522). Yet by 1978, Callaghan's over-riding of his chancellor's policy to demand an unattainable 5% wage norm showed the extent to which an increasingly isolated premier now sought a more structurally despotic role. The 1978 gamble of postponing the election reflected, not shallow opportunism (which would have suggested calling an election on short term currents in public opinion) but limited investment opportunism gambling on a policy success, from a position in the domain of losses identified by prospect theory and from the isolate institutional location which that framework describes (but does not explain *variation* in stances in the domain of losses as the neo-Durkheimian argument seeks to do).

Mrs Thatcher's government exhibited limited opportunism, even after the monetarist enclave declined (but some cases of *force majeure* and many of populism). However, relations between isolate and enclaved ordering became important in the late 1980s. In these later years, as she came to occupy a structurally isolate position, Mrs Thatcher's Bruges speech and other increasingly Eurosceptic interventions capitalised on currents in Conservative opinion, appealing to an enclave which had grown within the party since Heath's time. Weak cohesion between the PM and Chancellor Lawson left Lawson accepting international pressure to accept constraint in shadowing the Deutschmark. What appeared initially to be hierarchical principle soon turned out to be a short term coping measure: as inflation soared, the brief boom ended. These interventions further weakened cohesion among ministers, already at odds over macro-economic policy, local government taxation and other issues.

## Conclusion

Although too often used loosely and carrying too much accusatory freight to sustain explanation, the notion of opportunism can be rigorously redefined, used for coding cases and for supporting explanatory theories of executive decision-making. The framework offered here presents clear relationships between opportunism and contingent events and testable hypotheses about the variation expected in styles and dimensions. It defines opportunism on dimensions of time

discounting, costs and biased perceptions of probability and size of gains. The article argues for using a scalar rather than a classical concept to capture differences in degree that matter for explanation. Three degrees of opportunism – casual, search and investment – have been distinguished by differences on dimensions of stances toward cost and gain. The argument shows that greater explanatory power is achieved by treating opportunism as a variable rather than as a constant.

This article uses data from a study of political judgement in postwar British governments to illustrate how theory development can use the refined concept of opportunism. To develop plausible explanations of variation in opportunism which are worth examining in future research, we need theories specifying conditions for cultivating contrasting biases. The neo-Durkheimian institutional framework argues that actors' contrasting stances toward short term opportunities, potential future gains and losses, styles of rationality and risk appetite are endogenous to informal institutions of their social organisation. Each stance exhibits an intelligent strategy under peculiar institutions. Although the theory weights and explains perceptions, it is no subjectivist account. Contingent events create and destroy opportunities, irrespective of actors' biased perceptions. Moreover, responses from media, interest and pressure groups and wider publics shape the adversities and anomalies that governments experience when they seek to take, or eschew, what they regard as opportunities.

Opportunism is too rich and valuable an idea to be left as a vague accusation. This article argues that it can be rescued and used in powerful explanatory work to yield new insights about subtly important differences in styles of executive decision-making.

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**Table One. Degrees of opportunism and informal institutions in British governments, 1945-1990**

<i>Period</i>	<i>Prime minister and party in government</i>	<i>Cases showing evidence of degrees of opportunism</i>	<i>Informal institutions of social organisation in cabinet and core executive</i>
1945-49	Attlee, Labour	None. Major domestic decisions were long term ones in welfare, or emergency responses driven by pursuit of stabilisation (December 1945 loans, Marshall Aid, fuel rationing in 1947 crisis, 1949 devaluation). Foreign policy driven by long term aims of settlement in India and Israel-Palestine, institution building for western alliance.	Hierarchical; shallow isolate phase in 1947 when weak oversight of Ministry of Fuel and Power shows hierarchy temporarily weakening; then recrudescent afterward
1949-51	Attlee, Labour	Few in government policy, though Bevan's grandstanding could be individual (not yet a faction) <i>search</i> opportunism, looking for occasion on which to make a stand against Treasury policy	Hierarchical, but weakening in favour of individualism / isolate
1951-53	Churchill, Conservative	Few significant cases Macmillan, on periphery of hierarchical system in cabinet, as housing minister engaged in some personal <i>search</i> opportunism, grandstanding over housing expenditure, initially as investment to create opportunities in budget negotiations with Butler but also with medium term aspirations for his career	Hierarchical: some individualistic ordering among less senior ministers
1953-55	Churchill, Conservative	Butler's expansionist budgets show some evidence of <i>casual</i> electoral opportunism, and inference from short-term economic trends	Isolate increasingly significant; no structural despot

1955-57	Eden, Conservative	<p>Significant <i>casual</i> opportunism</p> <p>Macmillan's 'premium bonds' scheme</p> <p>Eden and Monckton's rapid settlement with striking unions to secure industrial peace in 55-6, even at price of inflationary pressures and encouraging unions to press demands in future</p> <p>Casual / search opportunism over Suez:</p> <p>Eden seizing upon French-Israeli plan</p>	<p>Isolate very significant;</p> <p>Eden as structurally despotic figure, especially in foreign policy;</p>
1957-61/2	Macmillan, Conservative	<p>Little evidence in domestic policy</p> <p>Foreign affairs: <i>Search</i> opportunism in 1959 visit to Moscow, <i>casual</i> opportunism exploiting Eisenhower's state visit for election campaign 1959; <i>search and limited investment</i> opportunism in looking for negotiating opportunity with Kennedy quickly after arrival in White House</p>	<p>Hierarchical, with zone of individualistic organisation in foreign affairs, with reserved zone for PM</p>
1961/2-63	Macmillan, Conservative	<p>More significant <i>casual</i> opportunism</p> <p>1962: Failure to back blameless junior minister and prosecution of journalists for refusing to reveal sources about Vassall spy case, secured short term popularity with Tory right at expense longer term goodwill from press for government</p> <p>1962-3 Maudling 'dash for growth' justified on basis of short-term economic figures</p> <p>1963 government support for law to allow peers to disclaim and seek election in Commons, initially to benefit Hailsham</p> <p>1963 Polaris deal to exploit Kennedy's goodwill after Skybolt debacle; then riding on tail of US to secure place at Partial Test Ban Treaty</p>	<p>Isolate increasingly significant; Macmillan's drift toward structurally despotic figure checked and reversed by reception of July 1962 reshuffle</p>

1963-64	Douglas-Home, Conservative	Home's misjudged <i>search</i> opportunism in talks with Johnson Maudling continued <i>search</i> opportunism in 'dash for growth'	Individualism more significant: PM needs to negotiate to secure ministers willing to serve
1964-67	Wilson, Labour	Limited opportunism in economic policy as deal among leading figures held to discipline policy around dollar exchange rate Series of cases of <i>casual</i> opportunism especially associated with PM individually 1965 Vietnam initiatives 1966 Seamen's strike, use in House of Commons of intelligence information to name communists in NUS D Notice affair <i>Tiger</i> talks	Individualistic, with tight voluntary alliance among leading patrons voluntarily to accept external constraint
November 1967- April 68	Wilson, Labour	More cases of <i>casual</i> opportunism, after devaluation setback Response to King 'coup' Accepting Brown's resignation	Short, shallow, mild period of isolate ordering; dissipated March-April 1968
1968-70	Wilson, Labour	Less significant opportunism in government policy generally as deal among leading figures sustained tight Treasury discipline from January 1968 budget Search opportunism: <i>Fearless</i> talks Casual opportunism: Anguilla operation	Individualistic, with tight voluntary alliance among leading patrons voluntarily to accept external constraint
1970-1/2	Heath, Conservative	Very limited number of cases of opportunism, and mainly search or limited investment: East Asia and Five Power Defence Agreement showed tokenism	Hierarchical but growing isolate ordering
1972-4	Heath, Conservative	More improvisation than opportunism, because government faced more adversities than opportunities – 'U turns' in prices and	Very strongly isolate, and becoming more so;

		incomes policy, rescue nationalisation and industry policy	Heath as structurally despotic figure
1974-6	Wilson, Labour	Bias: reduced perception of opportunity Strong <i>casual</i> opportunism: referendum decision, as solution to a dilemma created by need to contain conflict between rival enclaved groups in government	Isolate PM and chancellor; cabinet otherwise split in two or more enclaves
1976-79	Callaghan, Labour	<i>Search</i> opportunism: Callaghan's 1978 gamble on late election together with a final over-ambitious attempt to seek a 5% wage increase norm rejected one potential opportunity perceived by others, not by Callaghan, in favour of another (mis)perceived one for a possible agreement with the trades unions which was unattainable.	Initial hierarchy, giving way to isolate PM and chancellor; cabinet otherwise split in two or more enclaves; tension between Healey and Callaghan for structurally despotic position, with increasing difficulty vis-a-vis enclaves
1979-84	Thatcher, Conservative	None	Enclave around PM and, initially, Chancellor
1984-90	Thatcher, Conservative	Growing <i>search</i> opportunism in PM's own involvement in foreign affairs with, after 1987, <i>casual</i> opportunism in macro-economic policy Bruges speech and other anti-European initiatives capitalised on currents in Conservative public opinion, at increasing cost in negotiation capital in EEC relations Short term macro-economic policy: disguise of coping measure of shadowing Deutschmark as counter-inflation principle exposed when policy failed	Declining enclaving but also increasingly isolate, with PM in structurally despotic position

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**Table Two. Hypotheses: styles of opportunism expected in decision-making by elementary form of informal organisation among policymakers**

↑ Social regulation		
<p><i>Isolate institutions</i></p> <p>Deep opportunism with respect to time and cost</p> <p>Shallow opportunism with respect to bias about probability of gains</p> <p>Some opportunism with respect to bias about size of gains</p> <p>Structural despot position: greater willingness than those in structural serf positions to engage in search or even in limited investment opportunism</p> <p>When objective adversities are more frequent or important than objective opportunities: may shift from over- to under-perceiving opportunities</p>	<p><i>Hierarchical institutions</i></p> <p>Little opportunism</p> <p>When objective adversities are more frequent or important than objective opportunities: no adjustment of bias</p>	<p>→ <b>Social integration</b></p>
<p><i>Individualistic institutions</i></p> <p>Moderate opportunism only with respect to time and cost</p> <p>Where opportunism is cultivated, more likely to show depth with respect to bias about probability of gains than about size of gains</p> <p>Opportunism in context of negotiating opportunities</p> <p>When objective adversities are more frequent or important than objective opportunities: no impact on bias, remains resilient</p>	<p><i>Enclaved institutions</i></p> <p>Normally, a principled rejection of opportunism.</p> <p>In moderately strong positive feedback and under perceived existential threat, may be deep opportunism with respect to time, shallow opportunism with respect to cost and deep opportunism with respect to bias about probability of gains</p> <p>When objective adversities are more frequent or important than objective opportunities: more likely to perceive existential threat and show opportunism</p>	

