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Why it's so hard to pick a conclave date

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In light of Monday's move by Benedict XVI to empower the College of Cardinals to set the date for the conclave that will elect his successor, an obvious question presents itself: Why is this taking so long? Why not just pick a date and get on with it?

That's an especially agonizing question for anybody with an investment in when the curtain goes up, such as cardinals who want to know how long they have to be in Rome, not to mention journalists who need to make airline and hotel reservations.

The answer is one part political and one part historical.

Let's do the politics first.

To begin with, the Vatican really does not want Benedict XVI's fingerprints on this process. They're well aware there's already speculation in some quarters that Benedict is trying in occult fashion to shape the selection of his successor, and if he were to establish the actual date, those conspiracy theories might go viral.

In fact, that's likely one of the reasons it took as long as it did even to arrive at *today's motu proprio [1]*, which allows cardinals to set aside the 15- to 20-day waiting period from the beginning of the *sede vacante* to begin electing the next pope if they so choose. Even that simple act, which many see as a concession to common sense -- the cardinals will already be in Rome by Thursday, and there's no nine days of mourning or funeral Mass to slow things down -- could be spun as an untoward intervention by Benedict designed to stack the deck.

Politics also help explain why it's not quite a slam dunk that the date of the conclave will be moved up by the cardinals once they start assembling for their General Congregation meetings Friday.

While many cardinals are in favor of the idea, others worry it might provide a built-in advantage to power brokers already in Rome because they work for the Vatican. If cardinals from other parts of the world are to be equal players in the process, so this theory goes, they may need some extra time to get organized.

Now for the historical piece of the puzzle.

The Vatican is legendary for thinking in centuries, and for some cardinals, the prospect of changing the rules on the fly runs the risk of the outcome being perceived as illegitimate, a response to popular pressure rather than a truly free vote.

As a precedent, one cardinal speaking on background cited the famous conclave of 1378 that elected Urban VI. (Coincidentally, this was the last time a pope was elected from outside the College of Cardinals. Prior to his election, Bartolomeo Prignano had been the archbishop of Bari.)

The context is this. The papacy had taken up residence in Avignon, France, for almost 70 years prior to that conclave, returning to Rome only in 1377 when Pope Gregory XI was convinced to come back by St. Catherine of Siena. When Gregory died, the Roman people were terrified that a French majority in the College of Cardinals might take the papacy back to Avignon again, thereby depriving Roman shops, restaurants and lodges of their best revenue stream.

When the cardinals gathered to elect Gregory's successor, a mob stormed the conclave and demanded the election of an Italian to ensure that the papacy would stay put. They got one in Urban VI, but afterward, one of the cardinals announced he had voted for the new pope under pressure and was withdrawing his support. The result was the election of an anti-pope and what's now known as the Western Schism, splitting the church in half for two generations.

For some cardinals, the moral of the story is that the procedures for a conclave, including its start date, should never be revised in response to popular demand. If you do that, they worry, somebody unhappy with the result could cry foul.

For an institution with 2,000 years of history, where, as Cardinal Francis George of Chicago has put it, "Everything has happened at least once," even the most seemingly casual decisions are invested with unusual significance.

If you're wondering why it's taking so long just to pick a day, in other words, perhaps this helps put things in perspective.

The implication of Monday's *motu proprio* is that the earliest we could theoretically have a start date for the conclave is Friday, though some believe the cardinals won't make a firm decision that day. One Vatican-watcher today offered the guess that the date will be announced on Sunday, March 3, after the cardinals' second day of deliberations Saturday.

Despite the complexities I've sketched here, many in Rome still believe the conclave will occur earlier than March 15, which would be the earliest it could begin under the old rules established by John Paul II in 1996. The most common hypothesis puts the start date around March 9, 10 or 11.

As a footnote, the Vatican did set the date for something today: The World Meeting of Families will take place in Philadelphia Sept. 22-27, 2015.

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