



Elections as a democratic linkage mechanism: How elections boost political trust in a proportional system



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ABSTRACT

Elections offer a privileged moment in representative democracy, when citizens have the opportunity to express their views, both on the track record of the incumbent government, as on the way the country should be governed in the future. Procedural fairness theory assumes that taking part in a decision making procedure that is perceived to be fair, strengthens the legitimacy of the entire process. Most of the empirical research assumes that the attitudinal effects of elections are mainly due to the fact that one's preferred party wins the elections. In multi-party systems, however, such a clear distinction is not always possible and therefore it is hypothesized that the winner-loser-logic is weaker in this kind of party system. In this study we rely on a unique Belgian panel study to ascertain how electoral participation has an effect on political trust. The results show that in a proportional system *all* voters rise in political trust following their participation in elections. The winner-loser effect is not significant. Furthermore, the analyses suggest that especially the respondents with the initially lowest trust levels gain most by participating in elections. The theoretical implication of this finding is that apparently elections are still considered to be an important and legitimate linkage mechanism between citizens and the political system.

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1. Introduction

There is little doubt that free and fair elections are being considered by a vast majority of citizens as the most quintessential characteristic of democracy (Powell, 2000; Norris, 2014). Despite a trend towards a stronger emphasis on non-institutionalized forms of political participation, citizens still assume that taking part in elections is the single most effective tool they have available to exert influence on political decision making (Hooghe and Marien, 2014). Both in the literature as in public opinion, there seems to be a consensus that free and fair elections are an absolute minimum requirement in order to qualify as a democracy. If this is correct, one could assume that elections play a crucial role in the current debate on democratic legitimacy (Dahl, 1989; Thomassen, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is striking that research on the question how elections contribute to democratic legitimacy is very scattered (Finkel, 1985). Most of the available research focuses on the question how citizens respond when their preferred party or candidate loses the election (Anderson et al., 2005). In this line of research, authors routinely depart from a dichotomous view, whereby

parties and voters can be divided in 'winners' and 'losers'. In this winner-loser debate, the focus is not on elections as such, but rather on the effect of winning or losing elections, which is something altogether different. Within the winner-loser debate, the focus is no longer on the effects of procedures, but rather on the effects of the *outcomes* of these procedures. The idea that everyone could have a positive view on the democratic merits of free and fair elections, rather remarkably, is almost completely missing in this literature (Esaïasson, 2011). This is a peculiar omission in the literature, because in consociational democracies the goal is exactly to try to avoid that specific groups of the population will be perennial losers in the struggle for power (Lijphart, 2012). By focusing on political trust as a form of diffuse support for the political system and its fundamental values, our claim is that the legitimacy effect of elections should not be limited to supporters of the winning party. We investigate this by using unique panel data from Belgium that enables us to investigate how elections influence political trust, and show that in the short run elections do lead to a general rise of the level of political trust, independent of the winner-loser-effect. Elections apparently boost political trust, among all voters.

The question on how elections contribute to democratic legitimacy is relevant, first of all because there is a clear concern about low or even eroding levels of democratic legitimacy. Secondly, however, it is stressed quite frequently that elections have lost most

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of their effectiveness in connecting citizens to the democratic decision making process. Because of electoral dealignment, fewer citizens express a stable party preference and therefore it is often assumed that they have only a weaker interest in the electoral process itself (Dassonneville, 2012). If that would be the case, the obvious consequence should be that elections do not contribute all that much to democratic legitimacy, and maybe there should be more attention for alternative forms of participation like deliberative or direct democracy. The challenge for the alternative forms of participation however is quite steep, as they have to outperform elections. The current practice of electoral democracy, however, embodies a very basic democratic principle that was already present in the work of Bentham: 'Everybody is to count for one, nobody for more than one'. Earlier research indeed shows that fairness, stability and proportionality are considered by public opinion as important qualities of an electoral system (Curtis and Seyd, 2011). If a rather traditional and tested procedure like free and fair elections would contribute to democratic legitimacy, the challenge for democratic innovation efforts is to contribute at least as strong to democratic legitimacy.

Furthermore, elections stand out as the most visible manifestation of politics within society. One of the merits of elections is that they render visible (and sometimes even attractive) the often abstract struggle on procedures, principles and ideological preferences. Partly because of the contest and the theatrical elements involved with elections, mass media devote a disproportional amount of time to electoral campaigns, Election Day itself, and the reaction of leading politicians. This peak attention could imply that even for groups who usually do not pay any attention at all to politics, it becomes almost impossible to avoid being exposed to political news. Zaller (1992) assumes that most citizens are not that strongly interested in politics on a day to day basis. Only exceptionally they will be exposed to all the drama that is associated with elections (Chou et al., 2016). However, exactly because they do not have a routine involvement in politics, this peak exposure should have the strongest impact (Zaller, 1992). Because of this massive exposure, one could assume that any attitudinal effects elections might have, will not remain limited to a small group of the population.

In this paper, we first review the literature on the winner-loser debate, before developing the argument why elections do not always fit this logic. Subsequently we present data and methods, before we present some conclusions on the attitudinal consequences of elections in a proportional electoral system.

2. Beyond winners and losers

Within the literature on the attitudinal consequences of electoral participation, the guiding assumption is that these effects are ultimately dependent on the results of the elections. To summarize it all too crudely: those who win the elections will be satisfied, and those who lose will be dissatisfied (Clarke and Acock, 1989). Theoretically, two fundamental objections can be made against this assumption. First, it is assumed that elections usually lead to clearly identifiable winners and losers, which is not always the case, especially in proportional electoral systems. Second, this line of research remains oblivious to the fact that the procedure by itself might have an effect on the perceived trustworthiness of the political system. If voters have sufficient reason to believe in the integrity and the fairness of the electoral system, this should trump their potential disappointment about the results of the elections. Finkel (1985, 1987), then, finds that participating in elections increases the support for the regime and the external efficacy of voters – without distinguishing between winners and losers. Before we develop these two arguments further, we first provide a brief overview of the literature on attitudinal effects of electoral participation.

The dominant tradition in this line of research assumes that if elections would produce any changes in the level of political trust, these are mainly due to the results of the elections, with winners becoming more trusting in the system, and losers becoming more distrustful (Anderson and Tverdova, 2001). A recurring expectation in the literature is that only voters who are in favour of the winning party would have a reason to become more trusting as a direct consequence of the election result (Singh et al., 2011). For Germany, it was shown that the better the party performed, the stronger the positive effect on political trust (Singh et al., 2012). Ugues and Medina Vidal (2015) even go a step further by suggesting that supporting a winning political party determines the perception of fairness of the electoral system. It has to be noted, however, that their study was conducted in Mexico, a political system that obtains relatively low scores on perceptions of political integrity. For the United States, Craig et al. (2006) have shown that supporters of the losing party actually lose trust in the political system. Here too, however, the analysis dealt with very exceptional circumstances, i.e., the heavily contested 2000 presidential elections, where ultimately the Supreme Court had to decide on the validity of the votes that had been casted. In that specific case, the US voters indeed had very good reasons to doubt the integrity of the electoral process.

Two observations stand out after this review. First, most of the analyses on the winner-loser effect have been conducted in two-party systems, where there usually are clearly identifiable 'winners' and 'losers' (Beaudonnet et al., 2014). If the Democrats gain control of the White House, this automatically implies that the Republicans lose control of the highest office. It would be wrong, however, to assume that this zero-sum logic can be generalized toward all electoral contexts. In multi-party systems it might be more cumbersome to determine who is 'winning' and who is 'losing'. It is, e.g., perfectly possible that a party gains votes and seats, but in the end does not enter the governing coalition. Thus far, there is very little research on countries with a proportional electoral system and an accompanying multi-party system. Quite often, this kind of electoral system will result in government coalitions, which again makes it harder to identify clearly who wins and who loses. To summarize it: these kind of political systems should be seen as 'kinder and gentler' (Lijphart, 2012), and with regard to electoral results this means that often there will not be clear losers. Given the overall context of power sharing, changes most likely will be incremental. While the Westminster model departs from a clear antagonism between the main political groups, in a consociational regime, there is no reason to assume this antagonism would be equally strong. Esaiasson (2011) argues that supporters of a losing party will only lose trust in the political system if the electoral defeat could lead to negative consequences for their legitimate interests. In a consociational system, most likely this will not be the case, as even losing parties remain involved in power-sharing schemes.

A second observation is that in this literature, there is hardly any attention for the effect of the electoral procedure as such: 'While there have been numerous empirical studies of the causal determinants of voting behavior and other acts of political participation, political scientists have virtually ignored the consequences of such activity for the individual' (Finkel, 1985, p. 891). Procedural fairness theory, however, would allow us to predict that taking part in a fair procedure consolidates trust, no matter what the outcomes of the procedure will be (Tyler, 2011). In this case, it is clear that the status of elections is almost sacrosanct. Opinion research shows time and again that free and fair elections are being considered as the single most important defining element of what a democracy is all about (Hooghe et al., 2016). Furthermore, if the electoral process is seen as fair and neutral, this leads to a higher propensity to voter turnout (Birch, 2010). When this electoral integrity is in doubt, this usually leads to massive protest in public opinion (Norris, 2011).

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