



# How governing experience conditions winner-loser effects. An empirical analysis of the satisfaction with democracy in Spain after 2011 elections



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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that those who win an election are more satisfied with democracy than those who lost. The current study explores this winner/loser gap using survey data from the 2011 Spanish general election. The study assumes that there are different losers. The results indicate that citizen satisfaction with democracy shows a negative relationship with parties that are consistently unable to obtain office. The implication is that the effects of the winner-loser effects are much smaller within the group of parties that have previous experience in government. Finally, I report and independent effect that citizen-government policy proximity boosts satisfaction with democracy.

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The decline in satisfaction with democracy has been heavily studied and discussed in the field of political science in recent years. Analysis of data from several projects has provided a useful tool to extend comparative studies based on public opinion from different perspectives and focusing on diverse aspects. Among these studies, some have addressed the gap between electoral winners and losers on dimensions related to the political support from specific institutions to more diffuse aspects concerning democratic governance. All have found that winners express significantly greater support for democracy than losers. However, these works define winners and losers in a static manner and do not capture possible variations within each group or within the country. This study aims to fill this gap by taking into consideration both the impact of the recent history of winning or losing parties on government expertise and the impact of the parties that gain votes (and seats) in elections on the level of satisfaction with democracy in Spain. Moreover, this case study holds constant contextual factors such as electoral rules and the number of political parties, providing additional benefits for understanding this topic (Sing et al., 2012: 204).

After more than thirty years of democracy, surprisingly little is known about the factors associated with the satisfaction with

democracy in Spain. Spain has recently witnessed a huge decline in support for democracy. Although Spaniards still hold that satisfaction with democracy is essential to the functioning of representative democracy, the data decline is alarming. Thus, Spain provides a useful laboratory in which to test previous findings regarding what winning and losing means for the satisfaction with democracy.

I analyse individual-level attitudes toward satisfaction with democracy in a comprehensive overview of the field from a survey of a representative sample of Spanish citizens conducted in 2011 and executed by *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS).<sup>1</sup> I study the effects of different sets of variables highly relevant in explaining individual attitudes toward this specific support. In this article, I argue that satisfaction with democracy in Spain is determined by a combination of institutional and ambiance-related factors linked by the circumstances in which the electoral process is held. I suggest a new way of adaptation to conceptualize reactions of winners and losers within the Spanish political scenario.

Over the following pages, I outline the theoretical significance of each of these factors and the different instruments through which they are likely to have an impact on satisfaction with democracy. The paper proceeds as follows: I first review the existing literature

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<sup>1</sup> More information available at [www.cis.es](http://www.cis.es).

and its most significant findings. Following a description of the hypotheses and the models, I then discuss the validity of the results and their implications for the Spanish political system.

## 1. Theoretical framework

The extant literature has provided ample empirical evidence that the support for democratic institutions in liberal democracies varies among citizens. In many studies it has been shown that citizens express strong support for the principles of democracy while at the same time being discontent with the way the system works in practice (Klingemann, 1999; Lagos, 2003; Norris, 2010; Rose et al., 1998). Although there is significant cross-national variation in support for democratic governance, the legitimacy of democracies has not been seriously questioned, as citizens in general positively assess the performance of democratic regimes (Fuchs et al., 1995).

Several determinants of citizens' satisfaction with democracy have sought to explain some differences concentrating on either personal attributes or broad contextual effects. Proponents of the former have focused on the ways in which different democratic experiences and political values affect support for the political system (Almond and Verba, 1963; Lipset, 1959). System support is related mainly to beliefs and national heritages that are prevalent in a country and are transmitted through socialisation (Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 1999). In contrast, there are scholars who have argued that differences in citizen satisfaction with democratic system can be explained by focusing on system outputs. A number of studies have found that both trust in government and satisfaction with democracy are related to economic performance. In their study based on eight Western European countries, Clarke et al. (1993) discover that the effects of economic conditions extend beyond their impact on governing party support to influence feelings of satisfaction with democracy. Economic circumstances are regarded as a major concern of citizens; poor economic performance of a government negatively affects people's perception of their governmental institutions. According to this explanation, citizens' satisfaction with the way democracy works varies with objective economic indicators or their subjective evaluation of an economic situation, either prospectively or retrospectively (Dalton, 2002: 210–213).

Attitudes toward democracy also respond to important political events, such as the occurrence of national elections. The literature has convincingly demonstrated that those who vote for the winning party in electoral contests are generally more satisfied with democracy than those who vote for the losing parties; furthermore, the difference in satisfaction between winners and losers varies across political systems (Lijphart, 1999). In consensual systems, citizens tend to be more satisfied than in majoritarian systems, mainly because they strengthen perceived fairness and feelings of representation (Listhaug et al., 2009: 318), but also because they are safeguards for the protection of democratic minorities, minimising utility losses for those group (Banducci and Karp, 2003).

Expectations about the outcome of an election also play an important role. Anderson and Guillory (1997) argue that winners are more likely to be satisfied with democracy because it produced a result that they support. This result would be exacerbated by the time elections were held and confirms that after an election overall satisfaction with democracy rises. More precisely, Anderson et al. (2005) observe the dynamic of losers' and winners' attitudes about the political system over time along three dimensions: immediately before and after an election, over the course of electoral cycles, and over long periods of time. The results show that winning and losing, once it occurs, has both immediate and lasting effects. When elections reshuffle the cards of the political game, the

new losers become less content with the political system. Conversely, the new winners who used to be the losers become significantly more positive about the political system that produced a favorable outcome. But in the end, the election itself would have made people more satisfied with the democracy (Blais and Gélinau, 2007: 429). Some scientists find that those who vote for the parties forming the government express higher satisfaction with democracy. When comparing mature and newly established democracies Anderson and Tverdova (2001) found significant differences across countries. Specifically the data show that being in the political majority or minority has the strongest effects on perceptions of government on power in countries such as the Czech Republic and Great Britain but fairly weak effects in Ireland, Slovenia and Sweden. Moreover, in situations where one government loses power and is replaced by another, the winner-loser gap alternates as well. Those who supported an incumbent government that lost an election go from more positive attitudes toward the system. So, cabinet alternation helps to boost the overall level of satisfaction with democracy by expanding the proportion of voters who have experienced winning at least once in recent elections, either in the past or in the present (Curini et al., 2011: 261).

From a policy standpoint, the victory of an ideologically close party will boost citizen's satisfaction level by making the enactment of the preferred legislation more likely. A range of studies suggest that citizens whose policy preferences are shared by representatives tend to be more satisfied with democracy. These studies take into account the proximity of citizens' ideological positions to those of the (government) parties. A strong relationship between ideological proximity and the citizens' satisfaction occurs when an individual is closely attached to the policy position of a political party and when the ideologically congruent party holds the central policymaking position. Kim (2009) measures the ideological proximity between citizens and the policymaking position of a government and she shows that as the congruence between voter and policy positions rises, satisfaction with democracy also increases. In fact, the congruence between voter and policy positions provides an improved interpretation about association among voters' choice, party position, and, ultimately, satisfaction with democracy. It is not only important that policies are reflective of citizens' opinions, but also that they solve those problems which citizens consider important (Spoon and Klüver, 2014). If parties fail to do so, citizens will feel that they do not pay attention to citizen needs. As a result, their satisfaction with democracy should decline (Reher, 2015: 161). Other studies emphasize the diversity of party alternatives instead of government citizen congruence. They support that when party systems offer more policy choices that are proximate to the mean voter position, satisfaction with democracy increases (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011). It is clear that winning can engender satisfaction, whether via policy-oriented considerations or the simple pleasure of being on the winning side, but it should be also considered the fact that many who voted for the winning party are not necessarily ideologically similar to this party, and they may not even like or identify with the party (Singh, 2014:310).

Several works on comparative politics have begun to differentiate between types of winners. Winning matters, but not all winners are equal. Winning could be about having more votes or seats than in the previous election. It could also be about gaining representation (perhaps for the first time) in the legislature. Anderson and LoTempio (2002), in their study on presidential and congressional elections in USA, distinguish between different winner's experiences combining both types of electoral results. Thus, they create "double winners" — those who vote for the winner party in both elections; "clear losers" — those who were presidential and congressional losers; and a middle category, composed of those who supported one of the winning options and one of the losing

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