



Differentiating winners: How elections affect satisfaction with democracy

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ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates that supporting a winning party in an election boosts satisfaction with democracy, but does not fully or adequately test the mechanisms behind this relationship. Using original survey data, we make a contribution on three fronts. First, we inquire what winning (or losing) an election really means in terms of the performance of one's preferred party. Second, we employ panel data, which helps to determine whether an election outcome truly impacts satisfaction levels. Third, we examine the breadth of electoral victory, testing whether the satisfaction boost from a regional victory extends to the national and supranational levels. Findings indicate that the inclusion of one's selected party in government is the most important factor for satisfaction with democracy, which attests to the importance of policy considerations in engendering satisfaction. In addition, winning a regional election strengthens satisfaction beyond the regional level, which indicates that the mere experience of being a "winner" also works to increase satisfaction.

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Does an election increase satisfaction with democracy? Do the results of an election impact all individuals in the same manner, or does this impact vary depending on the party one supported? Is satisfaction with democracy all about winning and losing? What does winning and losing mean? Answering such questions carries a significant importance for scholars of democracy, as the accommodation of losers is crucial to the survival and consolidation of democracy.

Previous research finds that those who vote for the parties forming the government express higher satisfaction with democracy compared to those who supported a non-victorious party (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Clarke and Kornberg, 1992; Henderson, 2008; Listhaug et al., 2009; Singh et al., 2011). However, this does not square with the reality that small

parties which make gains in an election while remaining out of government often celebrate their "victory." Does a seat gain without a seat in government boost supporters of small parties' satisfaction with democracy? This study aims to fill these and other gaps that previous studies have overlooked, which we elaborate upon below.

We make a contribution on three fronts: First, previous research has equated winning with being in government. This makes much sense. After all, the ultimate goal of an election is to decide who will form the government. Yet, as acknowledged by Anderson et al. (2005, 34, note 1), this definition is far from exhausting the possible universe of meanings. For instance, winning could be about having many votes or seats, or 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. We investigate in this study what winning and losing mean to voters.

Second, the overwhelming majority of previous studies use post-election surveys. Such surveys are necessarily limited when it comes to ascertaining the impact of the election on evaluations of democratic performance. That is,

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the bulk of research is static¹ and shows that those who voted for the winning parties are more satisfied with how democracy works in their country. However, logically, the best way to determine whether an election affects voters' opinions is to compare these opinions before and after the election, and this is precisely what we do in this study; it could be that satisfaction among winners was high in the pre-election period, eliminating the election as a possible cause of satisfaction.

Third, we wish to ascertain the breadth of the changes produced by an election. As explained below, we examine a regional election in Germany. The question is whether the election modified how people evaluated the functioning of democracy in the region specifically, or whether this had larger repercussions on citizens' evaluations of the state of democracy in the country as a whole or even in the European Union (EU).

We use an original internet panel survey data conducted in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) before and after the May 2010 election to test a series of hypotheses about electoral outcomes and satisfaction with democracy, explicitly accounting for the relative performance of the party one supported. We show that the inclusion of one's selected party in government is the most important factor for satisfaction with democracy; policy expectancy most forcefully drives satisfaction with democracy. Yet, we also find that winning a regional election strengthens how people evaluate democratic performance beyond the borders of the specific region, which indicates that the mere experience of being a "winner" also boosts citizens' judgments, independent of policy considerations.

1. Previous research and theoretical framework

Despite the fact that elections create losers and winners, we do not see attempts among the former to overthrow governments they do not support (Anderson et al., 2005). The legitimacy of democracies has not been seriously questioned, as citizens in general positively assess the performance of democratic regimes. Previous studies confirm that after an election overall satisfaction with democracy rises (Anderson et al., 2005; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; 430), and it is essential to analyze where increases or declines in satisfaction emanate from.

From a policy standpoint, winners are happier because the parties that represent their views and interests are now in government and their policy preferences are likely to be enacted. Conversely, losers will be less trustful of governments that do not represent their preferences and thus more critical about the way democracy works. Empirical support for the link between voting for a party in power and democratic satisfaction is abundant (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Clarke and Kornberg, 1992; Henderson, 2008; Listhaug et al., 2009; Singh et al., 2011).

Previous research indicates that the importance of policy considerations is vast in terms of attitudes toward

democracy. For example, it is shown that satisfaction arises from ideological proximity to the government, independent of winner or loser status (e.g. Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011; Kim, 2009). In addition, Brunell and Buchler (2009) demonstrate that a good part of the force behind winning's positive impact on satisfaction in the American setting derives from ideological proximity to one's representative in the House. Indeed, Powell (2000) gauges the quality of democracy by comparing the government's position to that of the median voter.

In addition, the psychological effect of being a winner can boost satisfaction. Being a part of the political majority provides psychological benefits that may be unrelated to policy considerations. Winning can produce a range of positive emotions in individuals, while losing can bring about anger, sullenness, and disillusionment (Anderson et al., 2005; 23–26; McCaul et al., 1992; Willson and Kerr, 1999). Moreover, individuals may choose a party due to a psychological attachment (Campbell et al., 1960), leader characteristics (Blais et al., 2003; Clarke et al., 2004), or other, unknown idiosyncratic considerations. Thus, a boost in satisfaction is not necessarily due to policy considerations, but can stem from simply being on the winning side. In sports, the winners of a match tend to enjoy the sport more and attend future games when their team does well, while those on the losing side become embittered and discontented with their team and even the entire sport (see Dalton, 2008; chapter 12). Because the positive effect of winning has a psychological component, prior expectations about the outcome of election may also work to shape satisfaction (Blais and Gélinau, 2007).

Beyond the individual, institutional factors are linked to democratic satisfaction. Most notably, consensual electoral systems are associated with higher satisfaction levels, as they strengthen perceived fairness and feelings of representation (Listhaug et al., 2009; 318). Empirical support for this contention is found in several cross national studies (Anderson et al., 2005; Banducci and Karp, 2003; Birch, 2008), and case studies have uncovered a positive relationship between satisfaction or perceptions of legitimacy and proportionality in countries that experienced electoral change (Banducci et al., 1999; Fox and Southall, 2004; 546). But, note that not all studies find support for such a link. Rohrschneider (2005), for example, finds that majoritarianism is unrelated to feelings of representation.

Other work shows that winning and institutional factors conditionally affect satisfaction. Anderson and Guillory (1997) argue that majoritarian institutions magnify the policy-based boost in satisfaction, as winning parties under such rules face fewer obstacles to formulating legislation in such systems. Specifically, they show that winners in majoritarian systems are more satisfied than winners in consensual systems (as classified by Lijphart (1984, 1994)), while losers in majoritarian systems are less satisfied than their counterparts in consensus systems. Wells and Kriekhaus (2006) demonstrate the robustness of the Anderson and Guillory thesis, revisiting the study with multilevel models and finding that results persevere with the introduction of this more sophisticated modeling strategy.

Recent work in comparative politics has begun to differentiate between types of winners. For example, Chang

¹ The two exceptions we know of are Banducci and Karp (2003) and Blais and Gélinau (2007).

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