



What makes people believe that their party won the election?

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses an original question to investigate voters' own evaluations of whether the party they voted for won or lost the election. We examine which aspect of the party's electoral performance has the strongest impact on voters' perceptions. The results reveal that supporters of the largest party – the party with most votes and seats in both Parliament and government – almost unanimously believe that their party won the election. But we find that some supporters of smaller parties also feel their party won, when and if their party gained votes and seats compared to the previous election. Moreover, we test whether it is the party's performance at the district or national level that matters most. We find that voters' judgments are shaped mostly by electoral performance at the national level, but having the local candidate elected in the district can partially compensate for a national defeat.

Free and fair elections constitute a basic ingredient of the democratic process. Much research has been devoted to examining the effect of participating in this democratic event on satisfaction with democracy and political trust. These studies have revealed that although democratic participation can increase these feelings of support for the system, it does not do so for all voters alike. More specifically, stark differences have been found between 'winners' and 'losers' (Anderson et al., 2005).

This literature investigates whether winners and losers differ in their attitudes towards the democratic system after an election (Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Blais et al., 2017; Hooghe and Stiers, 2016; Ferland, 2015; Singh et al., 2011). Time and again, research shows that electoral winners display significantly higher satisfaction with the democratic process (Anderson et al., 2005; Esaiasson, 2011).¹ However, we do not know which aspects of party performance most strongly affect voters' perceptions of whether they won or lost the election. How do voters construe winning and losing? Do they see elections first and foremost as a contest for obtaining as many votes as possible, for getting as many representatives as possible in Parliament, or for maximising control of government?

Indeed, while some studies explicitly acknowledge that voters might understand winning and losing differently (Blais et al., 2017; Hooghe and Stiers, 2016; Singh et al., 2012), no research has related these measures to voters' own perceptions (for the single exception, see Singh

et al., 2012). Usually, these studies assume that feelings of winning and losing are in line with how 'winning' is commonly perceived – i.e., being the 'first' or 'largest'. However, for some voters – especially supporters of small parties – 'winning' could mean that they obtain Parliamentary seats and hence have their voice heard in the political process or that they were able to send a signal through their votes. In this paper, we investigate what determines citizens' feelings of winning an election. We pay particular attention to what causes voters to deviate from the most common view of winning and losing – that is, why some voters feel like a winner even if their party did not become the largest party in the election.

Furthermore, it remains unclear whether voters distinguish the performance of their party at different levels. For instance, we do not know whether people attach more importance to winning in their own constituency or at the national level. The few studies that have looked at whether the electoral outcomes at the district level have a significant impact on voters' level of satisfaction with democracy have come up with inconsistent findings (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Henderson, 2008).

This paper fills these gaps in the literature by investigating what makes a voter feel she has won or lost the election, using data of the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project. These data include an original question in which voters were asked whether they believe that the party they voted for had won or lost the election. We find that

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¹ Kostelka and Blais (2018) provide more insight in the casual direction of this effect. Using panel data, they demonstrate that turning out increases voters' level of satisfaction and not the reverse (i.e. people would turn out because they are more satisfied and not vice-versa).

supporters of the largest party almost unequivocally feel that their party won the election, which is consistent with conventional wisdom. Then, we investigate the factors that cause voters to deviate from the commonly assumed definition of winning. Finally, we examine whether voters think they lost the election even if their preferred party was elected in their district, or whether this small electoral success can soften the effect of an electoral defeat at the national level.

1. What makes people think that their party won or lost an election?

The existence of a winner/loser-gap in attitudes towards the political system after an election is widely supported by previous research and has proven to be very robust (Anderson et al., 2005; Blais et al., 2017; Ferland, 2015; Singh et al., 2011). However, no study so far has examined voters' *subjective* assessments of electoral performance. This shows the lack of understanding of how voters themselves construe 'winning' or 'losing' an election. Do voters care most about their party being in government, or do they want first and foremost their views to be represented in the political debate – i.e., gaining votes so that their party is represented in Parliament? This distinction is grafted on a fundamental opposition between two contrasting views about democracy and elections (Thomassen, 2014, p. 2). While in majoritarian systems elections are mostly about selecting a government that represents the majority, in a consensus model of democracy the focus is on the election of a Parliament that is representative of the whole electorate (Lijphart, 2012; Powell, 2000; Thomassen, 2014).

Most commonly, 'winning' means being 'first'. Hence, it is assumed that winning an election is mostly about being the largest party in terms of votes and seats in Parliament and government.² This conception accords with the majoritarian view of elections. The assumption is, then, that voters construe winning as being the largest party:

Hypothesis 1. Voters of the largest party are likely to feel that their party won the election.

However, voters of a small party may still feel they are winners if their party was 'successful' in some respects. First, in a consensual view of democracy, elections are held to assemble a Parliament in which the different opinions of voters are represented (Lijphart, 2012; Thomassen, 2014). Hence, supporters of small parties may attach importance to (gaining or losing) votes and hence representation in Parliament. Second, voters might vote for small parties to send a signal to the larger parties, and this signal becomes more effective if the party they turn to receives a substantial proportion of the votes (Kselman and Niou, 2011). For these reasons, we expect that not all voters follow the most common understanding of 'winning', i.e. being the largest party. These considerations may be particularly relevant if and when voters view elections as a way to bring together different opinions and interests in society (Powell, 2000). Hence, we investigate whether voters attach importance to Parliamentary representation as well:

Hypothesis 2a. Voters of smaller parties that gained votes in the election are more likely to feel that their party won the election.

Hypothesis 2b. Voters of smaller parties that gained seats in the election are more likely to feel that their party won the election.

Our first goal in this study is to investigate which aspect of a party's electoral performance most strongly shapes voters' subjective evaluations of whether their party won or lost the election. Our data also allow us to go a step further, and to examine individual-level heterogeneity in voters' perceptions. More specifically, we identify two

²Note that, as will be explained below, we cannot distinguish being the 'largest party' from being 'in government'. However, in the one case under investigation where this is possible (Germany), we do distinguish dominant incumbent parties from junior coalition parties."

characteristics of voters that can be expected to influence their feelings of winning and losing.

First, voters who identify with a party are more optimistic with regard to the performance of the party (Stiers and Dassonneville, 2018). On the other hand, partisanship has been argued to work as a 'perceptual screen', biasing perceptions of political facts (Campbell et al., 1960). Hence, partisan identifiers are likely to be less affected by a party's gains or losses in votes or seats, as their subjective perceptions might be biased upward. Both the direct effect of partisanship as well as its interaction with a party's electoral performance will be investigated.

Hypothesis 3. While partisanship increases feelings of winning, party identification decreases the impact of a party's performance on voters' feelings of winning

Another individual-level factor is political information. Blais and Bodet (2006, p. 488) show that more informed voters are more prone to use 'objective' contextual information (e.g. polls, outcome of previous elections) when they are asked about their parties' chances of winning the election. Hence, we expect a stronger link between the electoral performance of a party and perceptions of winning among better-informed citizens.

Hypothesis 4. Political information increases the impact of a party's performance on voters' feelings of winning

1.1. Electoral performance at the local and national level

Another question that remains unanswered in the literature is whether electoral outcomes at the district level matter. Contradictory results have emerged in this regard. Using data from the United States, Anderson and LoTempio (2002) show that the electoral outcomes of 1972 and 1996 at the presidential (national) level affect citizens' level of satisfaction, but that the results at the congressional level do not. Henderson (2008) replicates this finding in parliamentary systems and demonstrates that the electoral results at the district level are not a significant predictor of satisfaction with democracy in Canada, the UK, and Australia. Contrarily, Blais and Gélinau (2007) show that during the 1997 Canadian election, performance at the district level had a significant positive impact on voters' satisfaction with democracy.

Given these conflicting findings, we have no clear expectation about whether the outcome at the district level does or does not matter in constructing voters' opinion about their status of winner or loser, and we hence do not formulate specific hypotheses. Previous studies already convincingly showed the impact of election results at the national level on voters' support for the democratic system. Using our original measure of voters' own perceptions, we are able to test in a more direct way whether or not voters also consider the local level as an additional factor when they come to the conclusion that the party they voted for won or lost the election. Finally, while previous studies were concerned with the effects of winning and losing on voters' satisfaction with democracy, we are dealing with how voters themselves define winning and losing.

2. Data and methods

The data in this study come from the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project (Blais, 2010; Stephenson et al., 2017). The project includes 27 electoral surveys in 5 different countries. The new question tapping individual perceptions of the winner or loser status of the party the voter voted for is available only for Canada, Spain, and Germany. Hence, we focus on these countries, for which we have 11 election studies conducted in the context of seven national or regional elections. The MEDW data are based on online quota-based surveys that guarantee the representativeness of the sample according to gender, age, education and region. For each election, there was a pre and a post-electoral panel survey. The control variables come from the pre-

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