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**Emotions, Cognitions and Moderation:
Understanding Losers' Consent in the 2016 Brexit Referendum**

Abstract

Why do some voters accept their defeat and agree to a democratic verdict while some do not? This distinction between “graceful” and “sore” losers is essential for the stability of democratic regimes. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of losers’ consent in the 2016 Brexit referendum using original public opinion data. Extant studies suggest that post-electoral reactions are mainly outcome-driven, consider winners and losers as homogeneous groups, and neglect the individual-level profile and motivations of graceful losers. Using an innovative and direct question to measure losers’ consent, this research finds that voters’ reaction to the outcome is also process-driven. Graceful losers are politically involved and principled citizens who are more inclined to judge the merits of democracy in procedural terms. They are also more politically sophisticated, less emotionally engaged in the electoral decision, hold more moderate views on the object of the vote, and are torn between the options until the end of the campaign. These findings have important implications for democratic theory. The stability of democracies depends not only on sophisticated voters capable of prioritizing the benefits of the democratic process over disappointing outcomes but also on voters who are indecisive, hesitant, and above all, moderate.

In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, more than 4.1 million citizens of the United Kingdom (UK) signed a petition calling for a second referendum on European Union (EU) membership, this time based on new rules in terms of the majority (60%) and the turnout (75%) required to act on the result. Their hopes faded away when the UK government responded that the decision made by voters in the referendum held on 23 June 2016 “must be respected” (Harley 2016). This episode tells a lot about losers’ reactions after defeat. On the one hand, millions of citizens, most likely Remain supporters, refused to concede victory. On the other hand, the UK government ignored this request and made clear, especially to the Tory party base, that “Brexit was going to happen” and that those “who didn’t like the result [of the referendum] had to respect it” (Shipman 2017: 3).

Interest in the reaction of losers after elections is easily explained. As Nadeau and Blais (1993: 553) noted, the continued existence of democratic systems depends on “losers’ consent”. “Winners” will generally be satisfied with the system which has just produced a result that is favourable to them. Much less obvious is the reaction of the “losers”, since their support “requires the recognition of the legitimacy of a procedure that has produced an outcome deemed to be undesirable. In the end, the viability of electoral democracy depends on its ability to secure the support of a substantial proportion of individuals who are displeased with the outcome of an election.”

This paper analyzes the reaction of the losers in the aftermath of the referendum on the UK’s membership in the EU, also known as the “Brexit” referendum. It contributes to the current literature in several ways. Using opinion survey data collected right after the referendum, it first shows the importance of distinguishing between “graceful” and “sore” losers for a better understanding of the crucial phenomenon of losers’ consent. Second, it does so by looking at both the usual measure of satisfaction with democracy and a more direct measure of voters’ acceptance of the referendum’s outcome. Third, it examines and compares the distinct attitudinal profiles of these two groups of losers. This analysis shows that the consent of graceful losers depends on a balance between emotions, the moderation of their opinions, and political sophistication.

The role of graceful losers, important in general, is even more crucial in contexts where defeat is harder to accept, namely in emerging democracies (Anderson and Mendes 2006; Moehler 2009; Rich 2015) or after intensely fought and polarized elections or consultations where citizens faced decisions with important consequences (Nadeau and Blais 1993; Johnston et al. 1996; Atikcan 2015a; Bowler 2016). The Brexit referendum would fall in this category with its highly contentious consequences. That said, the issue of the consent of losers is a universal phenomenon in electoral democracies and is always an important concern regardless of the specific context (Anderson et al. 2005; Curini et al. 2011; Esaiasson 2011). Yet, we do not know much about the individual-level profile and motivations of graceful losers, and what distinguishes them from sore ones. This paper uses rare survey data that clearly distinguishes between graceful and sore losers. It thus offers useful insights for better understanding losers’ consent in the Brexit case and how it works more generally in electoral democracies.

Losers' Consent: What Do We Know Well and Less Well?

Work on losers' consent has led to important advances. First, these studies highlighted that this phenomenon expresses diffuse support for the electoral process and not for the winner of a particular election (Dahl 1989; Przeworski 1991; Esaiasson 2011). As Coleman (1988: 197) puts it, "Consenting to a process is not the same thing as consenting to the outcome of the process."

This body of work also showed in which contexts losers' consent would be easier to obtain (Anderson and Guillori 1997; Banducci and Karp 2003; Anderson et al. 2005; Curini et al. 2011; Howell and Justwan 2013; Rich and Treece 2018) or where the absence of certain conditions could lead to the challenge of the electoral practices in place (Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Anderson and Mendes 2006; Moehler 2009). This means that defeat and victory do not always have the same meaning and do not have the same effect on individuals' attitudes towards democratic institutions. These outcomes are experienced with varying degrees of intensity, most notably: (a) in proportional regimes as opposed to presidential or majority regimes with a "winner-takes-all" approach (Anderson and Guillori 1997; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Anderson et al. 2005), (b) in emerging democracies where the aftermath is sometimes uncertain as opposed to well-established ones where today's losers can be reasonably confident to be tomorrow's winners (Przeworski 1991; Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and Mendes 2006; Moehler 2009; Rich 2015; Rich and Treece 2018), (c) when the winner is narrowly decided versus having a decisive winner (Howell and Justwan 2013), and (d) if the victory or defeat is compensated for or amplified by a similar or different experience at the national or local/regional level (Loewen and Blais 2006; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Singh et al. 2012).

These studies also examined the motivations of winners and losers. A first approach explains the reaction of winners and losers in utilitarian terms. According to this logic, "winners are happier because the parties that represent their views and interests are now in government and their preferences are likely to be enacted" (Singh et al. 2012: 202). From this perspective, the intensity of an individual's post-election reaction is related to their ideological distance from the winner (Anderson et al. 2005; Brunell and Buchler 2009; Kim 2009; Curini et al. 2011, Esaiasson 2011; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Singh et al. 2012).

A second approach is inspired by work that is "grounded in people's well-documented motivation to maintain consistency in their beliefs and attitudes" (Anderson et al. 2005: 26-27; Festinger 1957; McGuire 1968; Funder and Colvin 1991; Granberg 1993; Beggan and Allison 1993). The losers, in a state of "post-election dissonance" (Frenkel and Doob 1976; Cigler and Getter 1977; Regan and Kilduff 1988; Joslyn 1998), re-establish this balance by devaluing the process that led to the rejection of their favorite candidate, while the winners find even more virtues in the process (Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Anderson et al. 2005; Craig et al. 2006).

A third approach is based on the emotions generated by the experiences of victory and defeat. The experience of victory generates positive feelings (Atkinson 1957; McClelland 1987; Thaler 1994) whereas defeat produces negative emotions such as anger and

frustration (Anderson et al. 2005: 23-26; Esaiasson 2011; Singh et al. 2012). Therefore, a victory produces psychological benefits unrelated to policy considerations, which induce winners to show increased support for democratic institutions, while defeat incites the opposite reaction among the losers.

This review of the literature highlights the progress made in the study of winners' and losers' reactions, but there are also some limitations to this body of research. The first is the tendency to consider winners and losers as homogeneous groups. This can be justified by arguing that the shared experience of defeat or victory is at the very core of this classification. However, this conceals the key phenomenon behind losers' consent. The fact that some studies have distinguished between different groups of winners and losers is a step in the right direction. As Singh et al. (2012: 202-203) state, "recent work in comparative politics has begun to differentiate between types of winners ... disaggregating winners and accounting for the specific vote they cast". Nonetheless, the main issue remains to distinguish between two groups of losers, those who recognize the legitimacy of an electoral decision and those who challenge it, and to examine the profile and motivations of each group. Even the literature looking at repeated EU referendums has only partially and indirectly brought up the question of losers' consent (e.g., Hobolt 2006; Rose and Borz 2013; Atikcan 2015a; Atikcan 2015b). In short, we must return to the spirit of the question raised by Anderson and Mendes (2006: 92): "why are some losers more discontented than others to the point of contesting the legitimacy of an electoral outcome?"

Another limitation with existing work, which relates to the first, is highlighted by Craig et al. (2006: 579) when they write that "progress still needs to be made in identifying the individual-level processes that account for graceful or *voluntarily accepted* losing". While important work has been done on this issue (Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and Mendes 2006; Moehler 2009; Curini et al. 2011), the focus remains on the study of contextual factors that may affect the magnitude of the winner-loser gap (see, for example, Esaiasson 2011; Singh et al. 2012; Howell and Justwan 2013; Rich 2015; Rich and Treece 2018). The systematic study of the individual-level correlates of losers' consent remains more limited. The effect of certain determinants, such as emotions, on how losers rally has been very rarely studied, although it is often cited as a factor that may facilitate or hinder consent (Anderson et al. 2005: 25-26; Esaiasson 2011: 102-103; Singh et al. 2012). In short, the effect of individual-level factors leading to losers' consent remains under-studied.

A third limitation of the existing work is the variable used to study the rallying of losers. As we have just argued, the central phenomenon that needs to be assessed is the rallying of "graceful" losers, which is crucial to ensuring the stability of democratic institutions. Yet, as Rich (2015: 245) points out: "there remains little consensus on how just to measure losers' consent other than the expectation of a divergence of opinion on democratic institutions between winners and losers" (see also Rich and Treece 2018: 418). Measures such as satisfaction with democracy or confidence in institutions are useful because they are commonplace and they thus enable comparative studies to be carried out (see, in particular, Anderson et al. 2005). But they remain indirect measures of voters' rallying to an actual electoral outcome. More direct measures of this rallying

ought to be used if one is to shed light on this crucial phenomenon in a democratic system.

Who Are the “Graceful” Losers and Why Do They Gracefully Accept their Defeat?

This study aims at filling an important gap in the literature by providing a deeper understanding of the winner-loser gap with the use of a direct measure of losers’ consent, and with a specific attention given to the individual characteristics and motivations of the “graceful losers”. In determining the key characteristics that distinguish graceful losers from sore ones, our main interest lies in the impact of attitudinal and behavioral variables on losers’ consent. Our expectations are that graceful losers are less emotionally engaged in the electoral decision made, are more politically sophisticated, and hold more moderate (or less intense) views about the object of the decision. These hypotheses are derived from some of the conclusions from the literature on the winner-loser gap, and from the broader literature on the political psychology of voter behavior.

Many studies have highlighted the impact of *emotions* on political behaviour (Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Nadeau et al. 1995; Marcus et al. 2000; Neuman et al. 2007). Furthermore, emotions caused by defeat are often presented as an important factor explaining voters’ reactions after an election (Anderson et al. 2005: 25-26; Esaiasson 2011: 101; Singh et al. 2012: 202). Still, the link between emotions and losers’ consent has not been clearly established to date. Following Anderson and colleagues (2005: 25), we agree that “losing leads to anger” and we expect that graceful losers’ emotional reaction to their defeat will be less intense than it is the case for sore losers.

Previous work has also shown that losers’ consent rests on individuals’ ability to make a distinction between the electoral process and the specific outcomes it produced (Coleman 1988; Dahl 1989; Przeworski 1991; Esaiasson 2011). Empirical work has shown that *more sophisticated* citizens are more apt to handle the kind of distinction between abstract concepts (or general principles) like procedural fairness and concrete electoral outcomes (Sniderman et al. 1991; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). The firmness and accessibility of sophisticated losers’ views about democratic principles should facilitate their rallying after a defeat and contribute to maintaining their faith in democratic principles. We thus expect that more politically cognizant losers will be better able to master the principles that drive the democratic process and hence more likely to accept defeat.

Finally, it seems reasonable to expect that graceful losers hold *more moderate views* (or less intense preferences vis-à-vis the object of the vote decision) than sore losers (Anderson et al. 2005; Brunell and Buchler 2009; Kim 2009; Curini et al. 2011, Esaiasson 2011; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Singh et al. 2012). Less intense or less passionate preferences should make consent easier and lead to higher levels of political support since post-electoral dissonance is less pronounced among voters experiencing a lower loss of utility. Consequently, voters with moderate views or sharing some of the opinions of their opponents will more easily recognize their defeat, as they will suffer a smaller loss of utility and find it easier to hold cognitive consonance; such voters could

be viewed as being less “cross-pressured” than others (Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002). Another useful indicator of voters’ moderation and ambivalence is likely to be the moment when they made their voting decision. A late voting decision is often related to an inability to decide between options that seem equally acceptable and thus remain in the balance until the very end of the campaign (Lavine 2001; Willocq 2019), something that is likely to make post-election rallying easier. It can also reflect lesser interest vis-à-vis the electoral campaign and the issues being debated (Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous 1994). These two possible states of mind – ambivalence or indifference – can each explain why “late deciders” may be more inclined to accept defeat.

Data and Measurements

Most of the studies focusing on winners’ and losers’ reactions examine the attitudes of both groups towards the democratic process and institutions following an election (Anderson et al. 2005). A second approach, much less used, is to ask respondents directly about the legitimacy of the victory of the winning camp and then to examine the profile of “graceful losers”.¹ For the reasons mentioned above, we adopt this second approach by proposing a detailed analysis of a specific case, namely the Brexit referendum.

We rely for this purpose on an online survey conducted by Survation between July 1 to 5 2016 under the scientific supervision of the authors. This survey used a representative quota-based sampling approach using Survation’s online panel. The questionnaire, which includes about 100 items mostly related to the Brexit campaign, was put to 1514 UK individuals who were targeted according to their age, sex and region of residence (the weighting targets used are based on mid-year estimates for 2015 of the 2011 census). More details concerning the survey, the coding, and the wording of the questions are presented in the online appendix.

The survey question we use to measure respondents’ perception of the legitimacy of the electoral outcome is the following: “Do you think that the government should accept the result of the referendum and that the UK should leave the European Union or do you think that the government should not accept the result of the referendum and that a second referendum should be held on this question?” The Brexit referendum was not legally binding. While it is very likely that most voters were unaware of this constitutional nuance², some of our survey respondents may nonetheless have been aware

¹ Nadeau and Blais (1993) measured the legitimacy of the victory of the winning party in the 1988 Canadian federal election using the question: “As a result of this election, did the Canadian people give the Conservative government the right to implement the Free Trade Agreement?” Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the winners (93%) responded in the affirmative, whereas only 58% of the losers did.

² The question of the non-binding character of the referendum was virtually absent in the campaign according to the extensive media content analysis published by the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture at Loughborough University (Jackson et al. 2016). Beyond media coverage, one may find several references to political arguments on how the referendum was perceived as politically binding even though it was not legally binding. For example:

of it and therefore answered this question on the basis of the fact that the UK government was under no obligation to leave the EU following the referendum, which would make them wrongly categorized in our analysis as sore losers. Although we recognize that this represents a potential limitation to the validity of our dependent variable and that the reader ought to keep this in mind while assessing our results, we believe that it is unlikely to have affected a significant number of losers in their decision to accept the outcome or not.

We make use of five variables to measure the various attitudes that we expect to be central in defining the distinct profile of graceful losers. Respondents' emotional reaction to the outcome of the referendum is measured on a five-point scale where the minimum value means being very angry about the result and the maximum score means being very happy with the victory of the Leave option. To verify if graceful losers are more sophisticated than sore losers, we use a factual knowledge scale (see Zaller 1992; Price and Zaller 1993; Nadeau et al. 2008) made up of four items about the European Union.³ Individuals' attitudes toward the EU are tapped using their relative level of attachment to the UK and the EU, as well as their opinion on whether too many issues are decided on by the European Union. Finally, we consider the moment of decision to be "late" if the vote decision was taken in the final week of the referendum campaign (coded .67) or on polling day (coded 1). These last three variables are aimed at capturing some aspects of graceful losers' opinion moderation.

We also make use of the more traditional indicator of "satisfaction with democracy" as a dependent variable to further illustrate the usefulness of distinguishing between two groups of losers. Satisfaction with democracy is measured on a five-point scale where 1 means being very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the UK and 5 being very satisfied (rescaled 0-1).

Findings

We begin the empirical analysis by examining the results obtained when we measure losers' consent directly, via our question that asked about whether the UK government should accept the result of the Brexit referendum. Unsurprisingly, no less than 93% of

— "The prime minister has said he would have to trigger it [Article 50] immediately after a vote, although this might have been a way of emphasising that there would be no going back, to people thinking of voting leave." (Siddique 2016).

— During one of the debates on the referendum bill on 9 June 2015, the then Foreign Secretary said, "decision about our membership should be taken by the British people, not by Whitehall bureaucrats, certainly not by Brussels Eurocrats; not even by Government Ministers or parliamentarians in this Chamber" (Hansard 2015).

— The government leaflet sent to all households advocating a Remain vote told voters that it would implement the result.

³ The battery is formed of the following four statements to which respondents were asked to answer true or false: 1) Switzerland is a member of the EU (false); 2) Every country in the EU elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament (false); 3) The Netherlands hold at the moment the presidency of the Council of the European Union (true); 4) The European Union has 15 Member States (false).

“Leave” supporters responded that the government should accept that verdict (Table 1). The most important result given our theoretical concern lies in the reaction of the losers (the “Remain” supporters). The figures indicate that 37% of losers believed, in the days that followed the Brexit referendum, that the government had to accept the result and that the UK therefore had to leave the European Union (Table 1). This means that almost 2 out of 3 losers refused to endorse the result either because they objected to it (53%) or were undecided (10%) about it.⁴

[Table 1 about here]

The rallying of losers in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum was crucial. Leave’s support was only slightly higher (51.9%) than the required (or procedural) majority (50% + 1) to win. However, a second, much larger, majority emerges in the survey data being examined here. This democratic majority – in favor of accepting the result – reaches 65% (Table 1) and far exceeds the procedural majority. This massive majority is comprised of a coalition of winners (who make up 73% of this democratic majority) and of a significant number of losers, who make up more than a quarter (27%) of this democratic majority. It is clear that the stability of the UK’s democratic regime is based much more on the expression of this majority and not just on the support expressed by the winners of the Brexit referendum, who are only slightly more numerous than its losers.

The preceding figures emphasize that there are not just two key groups after an election (i.e. “winners” and “losers”), but rather three: “winners”, overwhelmingly satisfied with the result; “sore losers”, who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the outcome; and “graceful losers”, who comply with the procedural rules.⁵ The existence of these three groups nuances the consensual interpretation about the emergence of a post-electoral winner-loser gap according to which: “Across a large number of established, newly established and non-established democracies, citizens who voted for a party out of power report lower levels of system support than those who elect for a party in power” (Esaïasson 2011: 102).

The data in Tables 2 and 3, which look at satisfaction with democracy as a dependent variable, further show the importance of distinguishing between these three groups. Grouping respondents into homogeneous blocks in Table 2 leads to the usual conclusion that satisfaction with democracy is higher among winners (52%) than among losers (45%).⁶ The results of Table 3 change this interpretation by showing that the level of satisfaction with democracy among graceful losers (57%) is not smaller, but in fact

⁴ The 37% rallying figure in the case of the Brexit referendum is lower than that of the 1988 “free trade election” in Canada (Nadeau and Blais 1993). This is not surprising given the different scope of the two plebiscites. The 1988 Canadian election was about joining an economic free trade agreement while the 2016 UK referendum was about withdrawing from a much larger economic and political partnership.

⁵ It may be possible to think of abstainers as having been the real losers of Brexit. Yet, as much as 46% of the abstainers we surveyed expressed a neutral position on our Emotion scale (online appendix Table A1) and about half of them said that the UK government should accept the referendum’s result (online appendix Table A2). These figures do not lend much support to the idea of abstainers having been deeply disappointed with the outcome.

⁶ The figures in this paragraph combine “satisfied” and “very satisfied” answers.

slightly higher than that of winners (52%). The 20-point gap for the same variable (57% vs. 37%) between “sore” and “graceful” losers is striking and clearly reminds us that the crucial distinction after an election is perhaps not between winners and losers, but between “sore” and “graceful” losers, with the latter being a group that adds to the democratic majority, which provides greater legitimacy to a given political outcome.

[Tables 2 and 3 about here]

To better assess these previous findings, it is important to establish if the observed differences in Table 3 hold when tested with a multivariate model. The literature on the determinants of satisfaction with democracy offers good insights about the specification of an adequate model for this variable. Besides the winning/losing experience, previous works have shown that satisfaction with democracy is linked to citizens’ socio-demographic characteristics as well as to their evaluations of politicians’ responsiveness and perceptions of the ability of the authorities to deliver favorable outcomes, particularly on the economic front (Nadeau and Blais 1993; Anderson and Guillori 1997; Anderson et al. 2005; Curini et al. 2011; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Singh et al. 2012; Howell and Justwan 2013; Blais et al. 2017). Based on these previous studies, we devise the following explanatory model:

(1) Satisfaction with democracy = $f(\text{age, gender, education, income, external efficacy, economic perceptions, winning/losing})$.⁷

Results from this regression model are presented in Table 4. We report OLS results for the sake of simplicity but using more complex methods leaves our main findings intact. The results in column 1 are in line with current work on the determinants of satisfaction with democracy. Political support is higher among better educated respondents and those expressing higher levels of external efficacy and economic optimism. Also consistent with previous research, the results show that being on the losing camp’s side reduces the expressed level of satisfaction with democracy. The most revealing results are displayed in column 2. They show that the difference between graceful losers and winners is not statistically significant (coefficient = .01, $t = .40$). The opposite is true for winners and sore losers. In this case, the difference in the level of satisfaction with democracy is noticeable (-.08) and easily statistically significant ($t = 4.1$). The magnitude of this impact is twice as large as for the traditional winner-loser gap (-.08 vs. -.04; compare columns 1 and 2). This result underlines the importance of graceful losers for the stability of democratic institutions. Contrary to sore losers, graceful losers accept electoral outcomes and keep a high level of confidence in the democratic process. It is thus important to better understand who the graceful losers are and why do they comply gracefully with the democratic will after the voting act.

[Table 4 about here]

Based on the general hypotheses we expressed earlier, we expect that, compared to sore losers, graceful losers will be less emotionally engaged in the Brexit debate, more politically sophisticated, more critical of the EU and more inclined to make their voting

⁷ All variable codings are provided in the online appendix.

decision closer to polling day. The results presented in Table 5, which offers descriptive information about the characteristics of winners, graceful losers and sore losers, seem to corroborate these expectations. The results in the first row of Table 5 (Happy (Leave)) show the intense satisfaction and the profound anger of winners and sore losers. The results also reflect graceful losers' obvious disappointment after the defeat of the Remain option, but they do indicate that the intensity of their emotional reaction was less pronounced than for sore losers. The results in the second row of Table 5 (Information) show that graceful losers indeed stand out as more politically cognizant than sore losers (and slightly more so than winners). The results in the third (Attach UK-EU) and fourth (Centralization) rows show that graceful losers express more moderate opinions on these questions than sore losers. Finally, the higher score found in the last row (late deciders) confirms that graceful losers were more numerous to make their decision later (in the final week or on polling day) than winners and sore losers.

[Table 5 about here]

The results in Table 5 offer a first look at winners and losers' profiles. To arrive at firmer conclusions, we ran a multinomial regression, the most appropriate method to use with a categorical dependant variable (Greene 2003). Extant studies on the reactions of winners and losers offer some clues on how to model the decision-making process of graceful losers. Socioeconomic variables are commonly found in models of losers' consent and are included here as controls (see, for example, Curini et al. 2011; Singh et al. 2012; Howell and Justwan 2013; Rich 2015; Rich and Treece 2018). The multivariate model estimated also includes the attitudinal and behavioral variables (Emotion, Information, Centralization, Attachment (UK-EU) and Moment of decision) that we just looked at in Table 5. Given that our main interest lies in the comparison of the two groups of losers, the category "sore losers" forms the omitted category in the estimation. The overall explanatory model can be expressed in equation form as follows:

(2) Graceful losing = f (age, gender, education, income, emotion, information, centralization, attachment, late decision)

The results of this regression analysis are presented in Table 6. The value of the pseudo- R^2 (.74) points to the good overall performance of the model. The results in column 1 are based on the contrast between winners and sore losers whereas those in column 2 compare graceful and sore losers. The results indicate that socioeconomic variables are not very useful at discriminating between our three groups of voters.⁸ Such is not the case for the other five variables. Not surprisingly, the strongest contrast is observed in column 1 which compares winners to sore losers. The distance between both groups is noticeable both regarding their positions on the EU as well as in terms of their emotional reaction following the victory of the Leave option (see the coefficients for the variables Emotion, Attachment and Centralization).

[Table 6 about here]

⁸ Table A3 in the online appendix, which adds regional dummy variables to this model, further indicates that there is no significant relationship between an individual's region of residence and the likelihood to accept the referendum's outcome.

The previous results have shown the importance of distinguishing between graceful and sore losers to better understand the distribution of political support among various groups of voters after Brexit. The results in column 2 offer interesting indications as to the reasons why graceful losers were more willing than sore losers to accept this outcome. The positive sign of the Emotion variable first suggests that graceful losers' emotional reaction to their defeat was less intense than for sore losers. Furthermore, the significant result for the Information variable signals that graceful losers' higher level of sophistication may have propelled them to use democratic principles in forming their opinion about the legitimacy of the referendum's outcome and hence be more likely to accept their defeat.

The last three variables show that graceful losers were driven by contradictory feelings when faced with the options on the table. These variables may be interpreted as reflecting the state of mind of "cross-pressured voters", who are either ambivalent about the different options or simply have a moderate opinion about the issue of the UK's membership in the EU. The positive coefficient for the Attachment and Centralization variables signal for instance that graceful losers were less attached to the European Union and more prone to think that it decides on too many issues than sore losers. Holding these mixed, more moderate views about the British membership to the European Union may explain why graceful losers have made up their mind on this question later than sore losers have.

The average marginal effects displayed in the online appendix (Table A4) round out the picture. These results neatly suggest that graceful losers expressed more moderate and informed views than sore losers. In fact, on all five of our attitudinal variables of interest, the average marginal effect is negative and statistically significant for sore losers, with effects ranging from -.08 for the late decision variable to -.34 for the emotion variable. Average marginal effect values are all positive for winners, whereas for graceful losers they are typically in-between the more extreme values found for the other two groups. Overall, the moderate profile of the crucial group of graceful losers once more stands out.

Conclusion

The rallying of a significantly large group of "losers" after an election is crucial to ensuring the stability of a democratic system. Therefore, it is essential to explain why "graceful losers" overcome their disappointment and help consolidate the democratic majority that confers legitimacy upon the winner. We thus need to better understand the profile and the motivations of these "graceful losers" and see in which ways they differ from "sore losers", who refuse to recognize their opponent's victory.

This paper examined the distinct profiles of "graceful" and "sore" losers by studying them in the context of the "Leave" victory in the June 2016 Brexit referendum. In the aftermath of this referendum, narrowly won by the "Leave" side with 51.9% of the votes, more than one third (37%) of the losers recognized the legitimacy of this result and believed that the government had to respect the will of the people and negotiate the UK's withdrawal from the EU. What is essential for the continued stability of the democratic

process is not the slim majority of the winning side, but the broad coalition of those who recognize the legitimacy of the “Leave” camp’s victory. As we noted earlier, while some of our survey respondents may have been aware that the Brexit referendum was not legally binding, we do not think that there were many of them or that this issue affected their view about the legitimacy of the outcome in a way that would significantly undermine our interpretation of the results.

The findings presented in this paper first cast a new look on the traditional winner-loser gap examined in the literature. This gap is theorized as representing the expression of post-electoral attitudes of winners and losers towards the democratic process. The expectation is that winners’ and losers’ views about this process after elections will evolve in opposite directions because of the happiness of the former and the disappointment of the latter. This perspective clearly suggests that post-electoral reactions are mainly outcome-driven. Our findings indicate that these reactions are also motivated by individuals’ views on democratic principles and that this mode of reasoning is, hopefully from a democratic standpoint, central to the reactions of a significant group of losers after a voting decision. The fact that the level of satisfaction with democracy for graceful losers is at par with the level observed for winners is revealing and illuminates a central mechanism ensuring the stability of democratic regimes. This stability seems to depend on the crucial expression of a process-driven reservoir of support for political institutions by graceful losers after elections.

Therefore, this study focused on the motivations of the losers who nonetheless recognized the legitimacy of the “Leave” victory. We showed that graceful losers are politically involved and principled citizens who are more inclined to judge the merits of democracy in procedural terms. They will accept the result of an election unless they have strong reasons to believe that the process that has produced this outcome was flawed. Losers’ reactions also depend on the specificities of the debate. Consent was easier for the “soft” Remain supporters who were more critical of the EU, less emotionally engaged in the debate, more optimistic about the consequences of a Leave victory, and torn between the two options until the end of the campaign.

The results ultimately show that the rallying of losers is rooted in a tension between frustration and reason. Emotion can drive some losers to refuse to accept defeat whereas reason brings an essential minority of losers to muzzle their anger out of respect for the rules of the game in a democracy. This tension between emotion and reason, often hinted at but seldom studied, refers to the two sides of the democratic dynamic. Conflicts could leave a certain number of losers unwilling to lay down their arms in the aftermath of defeat. But democracy is also a mechanism for the peaceful resolution of these conflicts, a valuable collective asset that a sufficient number of losers support by accepting their personal defeat.

While the context of a referendum, plebiscite or initiative may be particular in the sense that it creates definite losers who cannot hope to have a next chance to become winners, we have no reason to believe that our core findings about the general profile and motivations of graceful losers would be that much different in another voting context. That said, an obvious next research step would be to do something similar to what the Brexit survey used here has allowed us to do, which is to directly ask losers of national

elections whether they think that the government just elected has legitimately won and has now the right to adopt the integrality of its election platform. Such a survey question would have the potential to deepen our knowledge about the profile and motivations of sore and graceful losers and to show more directly whether the distinctions between both groups brought to light in this study extend to other contexts.

This study's findings regarding the equilibrium between emotion and reason provide the image of the ideal citizen: informed, sophisticated, committed, and able to overcome their frustrations after a defeat. However, some of our other findings bring more nuances to this idyllic portrait. The stability of democracies also seems to depend on another group of voters who are rarely celebrated by analysts. Our results show that late deciders and voters torn between contradicting considerations are an indispensable component of the democratic majority in the aftermath of an electoral campaign. That a group of voters such as late deciders, who have a reputation for being uneducated and emotional, contribute to the stability of democratic regimes seems counter-intuitive. Also surprising is the idea that voters who are split between contradictory considerations and less likely to exhibit consistency and stability in their opinions may be more inclined to gracefully accept defeat.

This result may be a lesson in humility and realism for democratic theorists. It is clear that the stability of democracies depends on a solid cohort of sophisticated voters among the losers, capable of prioritizing the benefits of the democratic process over sometimes disappointing outcomes. It is also true that the strongest rallying within the losing camp occurs amongst those individuals who, while having firm opinions on a question, accept the democratic verdict. But it is no less true that the stability of a democracy also partly depends on voters who are indecisive, hesitant, torn, and above all, moderate. This moderation constitutes an essential barrier to the emotions that prevent the rallying of losers.

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Table 1. Winning and democratic majorities in the 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union

	Vote	Government should accept the result?			
		Yes	All	Winners	Losers
Leave	52	65	93	37	
Remain	48	No/DK	35	7	63

Notes: The vote column represents the official results (rounded) of the 2016 referendum on British Membership of the European Union. The legitimacy question reads as follow: “Do you think that the government should accept the result of the referendum and that the UK should leave the European Union or do you think that the government should not accept the result of the referendum and that a second referendum should be held on this question?”.

Table 2. Satisfaction with democracy in the UK and vote about the UK leaving: bivariate relationship

	Losers	Winners
Very satisfied	7	10
Satisfied	38	42
Neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied	16	16
Dissatisfied	29	22
Very dissatisfied	10	10
N	573	684
Pearson χ^2	12.33 (.015)	
Gamma	.13 (.003)	

Notes: Entries are column percentages. **Satisfaction with democracy:** On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents say that how satisfied they are with the way that democracy works in the UK (1=Very dissatisfied to 5=Very satisfied). **Winners** correspond to respondents who voted for Leave, **Losers** to respondents vote for Remain and agree that government should accept the result of the referendum or to those who voted for the Remain option and agree that government should hold a second referendum or don't know.

Table 3. Satisfaction with democracy in the UK and reaction to vote about the UK leaving: bivariate relationship

	Sore losers	Graceful losers	Winners
Very satisfied	6	7	10
Satisfied	30	50	42
Neither dissatisfied, nor satisfied	16	16	16
Dissatisfied	34	21	22
Very dissatisfied	13	6	10
N	341	232	684
Pearson χ^2	39.95 (.000)		
Gamma	.15 (.000)		

Notes: Entries are column percentages. **Winners** correspond to respondents who voted for Leave, **Graceful Losers** to respondents vote for Remain and agree that government should accept the result of the referendum and **Sore Losers** to those who voted for the Remain option and agree that government should hold a second referendum or don't know.

Table 4. Linear regression models for satisfaction with democracy in the UK

	(1)	(2)
Age	.05 (.03)	.05 (.03)
Gender (male)	-.002 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
Education	.06* (.03)	.06* (.03)
Income	-.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)
External efficacy	.18** (.03)	.18** (.03)
Economic perceptions	.24** (.02)	.24** (.02)
Losers	-.04* (.02)	--
Sore losers	--	-.08** (.02)
Graceful losers	--	.01 (.02)
Constant	.33** (.02)	.34** (.02)
N	1,195	1,195
R ²	.14	.15

Notes: Entries are linear regression coefficients with error standard deviations in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests). For more details about variables in the model, see the appendix.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for winners, graceful losers and sore losers

	Winners	Graceful losers	Sore losers
Happy (Leave)	.78 (.21)	.34 (.26)	.18 (.24)
Information (EU)	.56 (.27)	.57 (.28)	.50 (.28)
Attach (UK-EU)	.83 (.17)	.60 (.17)	.50 (.17)
EU too centralized	.96 (.14)	.74 (.29)	.56 (.28)
Late deciders	.30 (.29)	.35 (.30)	.25 (.26)
N	684	232	341

Notes: Entries are means with standard errors in parentheses. See the appendix for more details about the coding of the variable.

Table 6. Multinomial regression model of winners, sore losers and graceful losers

	Winners (1)	Graceful losers (2)
Age	-.67 (.56)	.16 (.40)
Gender (male)	.29 (.29)	.34 (.21)
Education	-1.17** (.45)	-.41 (.32)
Income	-1.29* (.59)	.43 (.41)
Happy (Leave)	8.07** (.63)	2.18** (.43)
Information (EU)	1.26* (.54)	1.11** (.41)
EU too centralized	4.26** (.66)	1.09** (.39)
Attach (UK-EU)	7.50** (.96)	2.11** (.72)
Late deciders	.97* (.49)	.82* (.38)
Constant	-11.57** (.95)	-3.85** (.51)
N	1,032	
Nagelkerke pseudo-R ²	.74	

Notes: Entries are multinomial regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The reference category is Sore losers. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).