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Are People More Satisfied with Democracy When They Feel They Won the Election? No

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Abstract

Citizens who voted for a party ending up in government are more satisfied with democracy than those who supported a party that ends up in the opposition. The assumption is that voting for a party that is included in the government produces a perception of having won the election, which increases one's level of satisfaction with democracy. This (assumed) mediation has never been directly tested. In this research note, we provide the first empirical test of this mediation using data from the Making Electoral Democracy Work project, which includes a question tapping whether the respondent perceives the party she voted for won or lost the election. We do not find support for the mediation hypothesis. We conclude that the meaning of the higher (lower) satisfaction observed among those who voted for a party included in the government (or in the opposition) remains ambiguous. Our research has important implications for the conceptualization of what it means to win or lose an election.

Keywords

democracy, elections, winner–loser gap, satisfaction with democracy, party performance

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After an election, citizens who supported a party ending up in government are more satisfied with democracy than those who supported a party that ends up in the opposition. This is one of the most robust findings in political science (Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson and LoTempio, 2002; Berggren et al., 2008; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Craig et al., 2006; Curini et al., 2012; Dahlberg and Linde, 2017; Delgado, 2016; Ferland, 2015; Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017; Han and Chang, 2016; Hollander,

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2014; Nemčok and Wass, 2020; Singh and Thornton, 2016; Wagner et al., 2009).¹ This pattern, whereby those who voted for a party that forms the government are more satisfied than those who voted for an opposition party, is usually interpreted as the “winner–loser gap.” People who voted for parties that end up forming the government (the opposition) feel that they won the election, and this feeling makes them feel good (bad) about how the democratic regime is working in their country.

There are different mechanisms by which citizens who supported a party making it to the government could be more satisfied with the way democracy works. First, they may expect the party to implement “good” policies, and this makes them more positive about the state of democracy (Best and Seyis, 2021). Second, this can generate positive emotions associated with perceptions of victory, as in other domains such as sports (Tesler and Alker, 1983; Thaler, 1994). Winning can influence our mood, self-esteem, and even physiological reactions (Bernhardt et al., 1998). Both utilitarian and emotional mechanisms are plausible. The role of winning is central in the emotional account but not in the utilitarian perspective. In the latter case, having one’s party in government may well produce a feeling of winning but what really matters is the perception that the government that is formed after the election will adopt “good” policies.

In this article, we focus on how feelings of winning contribute to satisfaction with democracy (SWD). More specifically, we test two hypotheses about the causes and consequences of such feelings. First, we examine to what extent having one’s party (i.e. the party one voted for) in the government that is formed after the election produces the feeling that they won the election. The first hypothesis is thus that voters who supported a party that makes it to the government will believe that they won while supporters of opposition parties will feel that they lost the election.

This interpretation is clearly illustrated in Anderson et al.’s (2005: 34) seminal book *Losers’ Consent*:

If the respondent’s reported vote choice matches the party or parties not currently in power—that is, if the person was among those who voted or would vote for parties not in government—she or he is scored as a member of the minority (loser). Those whose vote choice matches parties in power are categorized as being in the majority (winner).

In other words, seeing one’s party in (or out of) government leads one to believe that she won (or lost) the election. Note that the authors do not explicitly test that proposition. We do in this research note.

The second hypothesis is that feelings of winning produce, in turn, higher SWD. Those who feel they won (lost) the election become more (less) satisfied with the way democracy works, and it is at least partly because of such feelings that those who voted for the parties that end up in government become more satisfied with how democracy works. Feelings of winning mediate the impact of having one’s party in government on SWD. Note again that this hypothesis has never been tested explicitly.

Our goal in this research is to provide empirical tests of these two hypotheses. The claim to be tested is straightforward: supporters of parties that end up in government believe that they won the election, and as a consequence they become more satisfied with the way democracy works.

We do find a strong relationship between voting for a party making it to the government and feelings of winning the election, which supports the view that supporters of parties that form the government perceive themselves as winners. That relationship is far

from perfect, however, and this is key. Some supporters of the opposition parties believe they won the election too, especially if their vote or seat share improved relative to the previous election (Plescia, 2019; Stiers et al., 2018). The question becomes whether those who believe they won the election even if their party is not in government become more satisfied. We find that they do not. A feeling of having won the election does *not* produce a boost in satisfaction among those who voted for a party ending up in the opposition. What matters is simply whether one's party is in or out of government. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

Data and Indicators

We make use of the publicly available Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) dataset (Stephenson et al., 2017), which provides measures of our three key concepts: SWD, having voted for a party making it to the government, and perceptions of winning the election. The full dataset covers 27 single-election surveys in Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. We aimed to include as many elections as possible. However, the required indicators for our inquiry were included in seven elections held in three different countries: Canada, Germany, and Spain. These are the elections we can study, and we should note that they are all well-established democracies. The elections are either national or regional and were held between 2011 and 2015. Each electoral inquiry is based on an online quota-based panel survey where about 1000 respondents were asked to answer the pre-election survey and about 70% respondents answered the post-electoral surveys (for a summary of the project's approach, see Blais, 2010, and see Laslier and Van der Straeten, 2016, for an example of research using the dataset).² The timeline of the fieldwork was about 2 weeks before Election Day and 2 weeks after. We include Table SM.1 in the Supplementary Material—an overview of the data as well as question wording for all the variables. It also details whether the incumbent government was re-elected or replaced, and whether the incumbent (and the new government when it applied) was formed by a single party or a coalition government.

SWD is measured by a widely used item that reads as follows: “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with the way democracy works in [COUNTRY or REGION]?” where the country was mentioned if the election was national and the region if it was a regional election. As any single item, it provides an imperfect measure and has limitations (for a discussion, see especially Linde and Ekman, 2003), but it is recognized as a good indicator of citizens' assessments of how well a democracy works in practice (Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Mattes and Bratton, 2007: note 3). In other words, this indicator should be understood a measure of citizens' evaluations of the performance of the democratic system *as a whole*. The question was asked in both the pre- and post-election survey, which is ideal to examine the effect of election outcomes. As pointed out by Singh et al. (2012: 202), “logically, the best way to determine whether an election affects voters' opinions is to compare these opinions before and after the election.” This is what we do by using the post-electoral measure of SWD controlling for the pre-level of SWD (see also Blais et al., 2017: 87). It is the only variable taken from the pre-electoral survey. As for all other variables, it is rescaled on a 0 to 1 interval. Figure SM.1 in the Supplementary Material shows the distribution of post-electoral SWD for each election. The mean of this variable ranges from 0.44 (standard deviation of 0.27) in the Catalonia national election to 0.66 (standard deviation of 0.25) in Canada.

Table 1. Subjective Feelings of Winning or Losing and Vote Choice.

	Government party voter	Opposition party voter
Won the election feeling	92.6%	15.6%
Lost the election feeling	5%	77.5%
Don't know	2.4%	7%
n	2841	4263

The first independent variable of interest is party performance, that is, whether the respondent voted for a party that ended up in government or not; on this operationalization, see Anderson et al. (2005), Nadeau et al. (2021), and Stiers et al. (2018), among others.³ As for all the independent variables, it is taken from the post-electoral survey. This variable includes a third category, that is, whether the respondent abstained. The second independent variable of interest is an individual-level measure of citizens' perception of whether they feel that they won or lost the election. The survey question reads as follows: "Would you say that the party you voted for . . ." with "Won the election," "Lost the election," and "I don't know" as answer choices. This is a simple and direct measure of respondents' subjective assessment of whether their party won or lost the election. We make use of all categories in order not to lose any information. Detailed distributions for our two key independent variables are shown in Table SM.2 of the Supplementary Material.

Results

The first step in the analysis is to examine the bivariate relationship between having voted for a party in government and feelings of winning. Table 1 provides the information. Clearly, voting for a party ending up in the government is strongly associated with perceptions of having won the election (92.6%). The relationship between voting for a party in opposition and feeling of having lost the election is, however, less straightforward. A majority of those voters think they lost (78%), but 15% believe that their party won and an additional 7% don't know.

On one hand, Table 1 provides evidence that the expected relationship between party performance and citizens' feeling of victory or defeat is strong. That is, having voted for a party making it to the government almost always produces feelings of winning. On the other hand, the correlation is far from perfect, and this is clear in the case of opposition voters. There is a non-negligible minority of opposition party voters who believe that they did not lose. Do they become more satisfied with the state of democracy? Table 2 provides the information by displaying the change in levels of SWD (post- minus pre-election survey) among different groups.

When we compare the mean level of SWD before and after the election among voters who supported an opposition party but perceive that party to have won the election, the difference is +.017;⁴ the overall level of satisfaction does not substantially increase after the election. This is counterintuitive: people who perceive their party to have won the election are supposed to enjoy a boost of satisfaction. We do not find such a boost among those who felt that their party won the election despite not being in government. To the contrary, we do find such a substantial increase among those who voted for a party in

Table 2. Change in Satisfaction with Democracy (Pre- and Post-Election Survey).

	Government party voter	Opposition party voter
Won the election feeling	.091 (n = 2632)	.017 (n = 664)
Lost the election feeling	.052 (n = 141)	.015 (n = 3302)
Don't know	.018 (n = 68)	.059 (n = 297)

government and feel that they won the election (+.091), although it is also worth noting that this positive effect is also present among those few respondents who voted for a party in government and feel that their party lost the election (+.052). All in all, what seems to matter is whether one voted for a party that is in government after the election or not, not whether one *thinks* that the party won or lost the election.

For a more direct and detailed estimation of the effect of the perception of being a winner or loser, we make use of the *mediation* package in R developed by Tingley et al. (2014).⁵ This allows us to ascertain the proportion of the total effect of having voted for a party making it to the government on SWD that is mediated by feelings of winning. The mediation analysis is based on two regression models. In our case, the first predicts the subjective feeling of being a winner versus a loser (excluding don't know and abstainers). The second model predicts citizens' level of SWD after the election, controlling for pre-electoral level of SWD to neutralize floor and ceiling effects (Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Singh et al., 2012). In both models, we also control for age (in years), education (1 = at least some post-secondary education), and gender (1 = female).

In Table 3, we present the average causal mediation effect (ACME) of respondents' perception of winning on SWD, the average direct effect (ADE) and the total effect of having voted for a party in government (i.e. the direct and indirect effects combined), as well as the proportion of mediated effect (i.e. the ratio of ACME on the total effect). In our case, the ACME is the indirect effect of having voted for a party in government on SWD that goes through subjective feelings of winning. According to prior work, much of the total effect of having voted for a party making it to the government is indirect, that is, it is mediated by feelings of winning.

The ACME values do not reach the conventional level of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) in any of the elections. We thus find no support for the mediation hypothesis. There is a (total) effect of supporting a party that makes it to the government, but the mechanism behind this effect is *not* the perception of being a winner. The latter variable is systematically not significant; it has no independent impact on SWD.

Moreover, the effects do not substantially vary across levels of elections. The findings are similar for the four national and three regional elections included in our analyses. In Table 3, the mean total effect for national elections is of .077 while it is of .065 for regional ones. Most importantly for our contribution, there is no difference regarding the proportion of mediated variance, which systematically fails to reach statistical significance in every election regardless of the level of the election.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that these findings are robust to different operationalizations. First, we performed additional analyses with different operationalizations of subjective feelings, contrasting winners or losers against everyone else. Doing so does not alter our findings, as shown in Tables SM.3 and SM.4. Second, in our mediation analysis from Table 3, we predicted respondents' post-level of SWD controlling for their baseline

Table 3. Mediation Analysis: The Proportion of the Total Effect of Having Voted for a Party Included in the Government That Is Mediated by Perceptions of Being a Winner.

	Estimate	95% CI (lower, upper)	p value	N
(Spain) Catalonia national				
ACME	0.003	-0.021, 0.03	0.81	549
ADE	0.085	0.034, 0.14	0.000	
Total effect	0.088	0.039, 0.14	0.000	
Proportion of mediated effect	0.037	-0.288, 0.37	0.81	
(Spain) Madrid national				
ACME	-0.007	-0.05, 0.04	0.736	598
ADE	0.073	0.018, 0.13	0.012	
Total effect	0.067	0.028, 0.10	0.002	
Proportion of mediated effect	-0.115	-0.924, 0.66	0.738	
(Germany) Lower Saxony national				
ACME	0.005	-0.004, 0.01	0.25	520
ADE	0.073	0.033, 0.11	0.000	
Total effect	0.078	0.038, 0.12	0.000	
Proportion of mediated effect	0.054	0.052, 0.20	0.25	
(Germany) Lower Saxony regional				
ACME	0.02	-0.011, 0.05	0.228	547
ADE	0.023	-0.024, 0.07	0.318	
Total effect	0.043	0.011, 0.07	0.008	
Proportion of mediated effect	0.459	-0.324, 2.06	0.232	
(Canada) Ontario regional				
ACME	0.005	-0.046, 0.05	0.97	662
ADE	0.080	0.024, 0.14	0.000	
Total effect	0.080	0.049, 0.11	0.000	
Proportion of mediated effect	0.008	-0.614, 0.65	0.97	
(Canada) Quebec regional				
ACME	0.010	-0.022, 0.04	0.554	572
ADE	0.063	0.013, 0.11	0.008	
Total effect	0.072	0.034, 0.11	0.000	
Proportion of mediated effect	0.129	-0.351, 0.73	0.554	
Canada national				
ACME	-0.016	-0.052, 0.02	0.37	3291
ADE	0.115	0.075, 0.15	0.000	
Total effect	0.099	0.086, 0.11	0.000	
Proportion of mediated effect	-0.156	-0.52, 0.21	0.37	

CI: confidence interval; ACME: average causal mediation effect; ADE: average direct effect.

in the pre-election survey, in line with several studies. We also used the difference between the post- and the pre-level SWD as the dependent variable. The results are the same. See Table SM.5 for details. Finally, our findings are robust to the inclusion of several covariates that one might view as important to control for political efficacy and economic perceptions (Anderson et al., 2005; Daoust and Nadeau, 2020; Plesecia et al., 2021), as well as ideological congruence and partisanship (Curini et al., 2012; Kim, 2009). Table SM.6 replicates Table 3 with these additional controls and shows that our findings are robust.⁶

Discussion

The assessment of citizens' degree of satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country represents a well-researched avenue in political science. In this research, we tested the hypotheses according to which those who voted for a party making it to the government feel they won the election, and that this makes them more satisfied with the state of democracy.

We were able to test the validity of such a conceptualization thanks to the inclusion in the MEDW dataset of a simple and direct question capturing citizens' feelings about being a winner or loser. This is a crucial indicator as voters' perceptions of being a winner or loser are assumed to mediate the impact of the objective performance of the party that the voter supported (whether it makes it to the government or not) on SWD.

The descriptive results and the findings from the mediation analysis are clear. We confirm existing work in two respects: Yes, having voted for a party making it to the government produces a feeling of winning, and yes, it leads to greater satisfaction with the state of democracy. However, and this is our main contribution, we do not find support for one crucial hypothesis: there is no evidence that the perception of being a winner, as such, contributes to greater satisfaction. We failed to find a significant (and/or substantial) proportion of explained variance by perceptions of being a winner. In other words, feelings of winning or losing are correlated with voting or not for a party included in the government, but they have no independent impact on satisfaction. This suggests that the utilitarian/policy mechanism matters more than the emotional one in explaining the boost in satisfaction that we observe among those who vote for parties that form the government (Best and Seyis, 2021; Curini et al., 2012; Gärtner et al., 2020). It is possible, however, that some contextual effects are at play, notably based on whether the incumbent government was re-elected or replaced, and whether the incumbent was formed by a single party or a coalition government. While we managed to include seven elections in this study, we do not have enough variance on these features to provide such tests, which would be insightful to conduct in future research.

All in all, does it make sense to talk of a winner–loser gap in SWD? In one sense, it does since voting for a party ending up in the government boosts satisfaction and those voters feel they won the election. In another sense, it does not make much sense to talk of a winner–loser gap since feelings of winning or losing per se do not affect satisfaction. At the very least, we would argue for caution in the use of the “winner–loser” gap label.

Author note

Carolina Plescia is now affiliated to University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

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Notes

1. Previous research also points to within-group differences showing, for example, that those voting for the party in government when this is *not* their preferred party have lower levels of satisfaction than those voting for the party in government when this is their preferred party (Singh, 2014).
2. The exception is the Canadian 2015 election for which we have about 3500 respondents.
3. In every election included in the dataset, it was clear which parties were in government and which were in opposition when respondents were surveyed. There was more than one party forming the government in the two elections in Germany; differentiating major versus junior coalition partners does not change our conclusions. Moreover, the largest party was always included in the government.
4. More specifically, mean satisfaction was 0.543 (standard deviation of 0.282) after the election, compared to 0.526 before the election (standard deviation of 0.286).
5. We used the default Quasi-Bayesian Confidence Intervals with 1000 simulations. Results do not change if we use nonparametric bootstrap.
6. See the Supplementary Material for the exact question wordings and operationalizations. Moreover, it is worth to note that we could not include ideological congruence for Spain (the question was not asked).

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