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Winners' Restraint or Affective Majoritarianism? Elections, Polarization and Political Support

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Abstract

Research on the impact of elections on attitudes toward democracy has focused primarily on satisfaction with democracy. Building on this, we analyze how winning and losing elections, along with affective polarization, shapes citizens' support for norms of democratic restraint and consent. We propose that partisan animus weakens the "reservoir of goodwill" that helps citizens accept democratic norms that may go against their self interest. Using a comparative study of 35 elections and two quasi-experimental case studies, we find that while differences between winners and losers in their support for norms of restraint and consent can be statistically significant, they are substantively small compared to several benchmarks, even in highly polarized contexts. Thus, while satisfaction with democracy is notably shaped by winner-loser dynamics, especially when polarization is high, the impact of those dynamics on support for core democratic principles is limited. These findings improve our understanding of the role of citizens in democratic processes.

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Introduction

There are several indications that liberal democracy is currently facing significant challenges (Plattner, 2020). Election losers have reacted violently and stormed the legislative chambers of consolidated democracies such as Brazil and the US. Meanwhile, the governments of some EU member states, like Poland or Hungary, have introduced illiberal reforms, while still enjoying broad public support in elections. In fact, in 2021 the world witnessed a record-high number of democracies autocratizing, as well as an upward trend in polarization (Boese et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, we propose that it is relevant to revisit the question of how winning and losing elections affects citizens' attitudes toward their political system, going beyond traditional measures of political support. Specifically, in light of recent developments, there are three aspects that warrant our attention: citizens' openness to exercise restraint and forbearance when they stand on the winning side of elections (see Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018); the willingness of election losers to accept or consent that in democracies the winning majority might ultimately rule (Nadeau & Blais, 1993; Schattschneider, 1975); and the extent to which these winner-loser dynamics might be influenced by heightened polarization.

Existing studies have extensively examined how being on the winning or losing side of elections affects political support. However, most previous work has focused on specific political support: most frequently satisfaction with democracy, alongside trust in political institutions (Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Blais & Gelineau, 2007; Campbell, 2015; Curini et al., 2012; Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Daoust et al., 2023; Esaiasson, 2011; Martini & Quaranta, 2019; Nemčok & Wass, 2021; Singh, 2023). One consistent finding from this vast body of literature is that winners tend to display higher levels of specific political support than losers.

When discussing the implications of the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy, many of these studies equate this gap with a lack of consent on the part of the losers (Curini et al., 2012; Dahlberg & Linde, 2016, 2017; Martini & Quaranta, 2019; Nemčok & Wass, 2021). We shall argue, however, that these indicators are not entirely adequate for such purposes, and that they overlook a key aspect of contemporary democracies: the willingness of citizens to exercise forbearance when they stand on the winning side of elections. While losers' consent is important, democracy today is often subverted by ruling coalitions that dismantle the liberal elements of this political system. The need for winners to exercise forbearance and not abuse

their position when in power has long been recognized (Linz & Stepan, 1978). However, only recently have empirical analyses of individual-level attitudes begun to focus explicitly on such "winners' restraint" alongside losers' consent (Werner et al., 2023). Focusing on the extent to which citizens accept the more granular rights and processes associated with democratic restraint and consent seems more appropriate in today's context of democratic backsliding (see Deglow & Fjelde, 2023; Ferrer et al., 2025; Mazepus & Toshkov, 2021; Moehler, 2009; Şaşmaz et al., 2022; Werner et al., 2023).

In addition, we propose that the implications of winning and losing, for the support that citizens extend to principles related to democratic restraint and consent, can be influenced by partisan animus. Heightened feelings of affection/disaffection towards one's political in-group/out-group are likely to exacerbate the winning and losing dynamics generated by electoral contests (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Hernández et al., 2021). Recent studies suggest that polarized environments can contribute to democratic instability by reducing individuals' willingness to hold co-partisans accountable for antidemocratic actions (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Saikkonen & Christensen, 2022). In a similar fashion, we propose that affective polarization can widen winner-loser gaps, not only in satisfaction with democracy, but also in their support for principles related to democratic restraint and consent (see Janssen, 2024).

Our analyses are based on the combination of an observational comparative study and two quasi-experimental case studies. In our first study, we draw on data for 30 countries and 35 elections from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). This dataset allows us to examine the impact of being a winner or loser on individuals' satisfaction with democracy (our benchmark), as well as citizens' support for the primacy of the will of the majority over the rights of minorities (unconstrained majoritarianism) and their opposition to strong political leaders who bend the rules. This observational evidence is complemented by two quasi-experimental case studies that we analyze through an unexpected event during survey design (Muñoz et al., 2020). In our second study, we exploit the unexpected shift in post-election coalitions during the CSES fieldwork corresponding to the 2017 New Zealand election to identify the effects of winning and losing on these attitudes. Similarly, in the third study, we exploit the victory of Gabriel Boric in the "knife-edge" run-off vote of the 2021 Chilean presidential election, which overlaps with the fieldwork of the second wave of the TRI-POL panel survey (Torcal et al., 2023).

Using the gap in satisfaction with democracy and trust in government as a benchmark, the three studies show that while winning or losing elections can affect individuals' support for norms of democratic restraint and consent, this effect remains substantively small. Moreover, our results show that while affective polarization substantially increases the gap in specific political

support (Janssen, 2024; Ridge, 2022), it has no effect on the winner-loser gap in support for norms of democratic restraint and consent.

In sum, our results suggest that winners, in general, are unlikely to tolerate an abusive exercise of their privileged position, while losers, on the whole, also appear open to agreeing that while minorities must be protected the majority can rule. Importantly, this seems to be the case even among highly polarized winners and losers. These findings add nuance to recent evidence on winners' limited commitment to horizontal accountability in European democracies (Mazepus & Toshkov, 2021), and findings that affective polarization in Turkey significantly exacerbates winner-loser differences in tolerance of executive aggrandizement (Şaşmaz et al., 2022). In contrast, they align with evidence on winners' restraint and losers' consent in Asian democracies (Wu & Wu, 2022), as well as with Broockman et al. (2022), who highlight the negligible impact of affective polarization in shaping democratic norms.

Theory

Elections and Political Support

Free and fair elections are an essential feature of democracy that inevitably produce winners and losers. This dynamic affects individuals' specific political support, mainly their satisfaction with democracy and their trust in political institutions, with winners being more supportive than losers. The winner-loser gap in specific political support is primarily driven by two mechanisms: one psychological and the other utilitarian.

Psychologically, winning—in any competitive activity—generates joy and happiness, while losing generates frustration and anger (Wilson & Kerr, 1999). Psychologists argue that such emotional responses evolved long ago in the context of ancestral competition pertaining to dominance hierarchies and mating dynamics (Mesterton-Gibbons et al., 2016). As such, winning and losing, as well as their respective emotional impacts, are instrinsic to modern social hierarchies.

Importantly, these same emotional experiences are easily transferred from participants to observers. Football and basketball fans experience the same joy and excitement when their team wins and the same frustration and anger when their team loses as the athletes themselves (Kerr et al., 2005). This is likely due to the central roles tribalism and conflict have played throughout human history (Clark et al., 2019). Historically, while only a few representatives may be involved in a tribal clash, victory and defeat affected all members of the tribe via resource gain or loss.

This mechanism is relevant given the inherent win-lose dynamics of democracies. After all, supporting a political party, like supporting a team or the

representatives of ancestral tribes, is rooted in social identity (Tajfel, 1982). Elections signal who the winning coalition in society is and the resulting social standing of citizens based on the party they support or identify with. In this vein, elections have been found to affect happiness, mental health and subjective personal well-being (Pierce et al., 2016; Toshkov & Mazepus, 2023; Yan et al., 2021).

In sports, fans of teams that repeatedly lose can become disillusioned with the sport altogether (Hirt et al., 1992). Similarly, if one consistently supports a losing party, one may be more likely to question the fairness or legitimacy of the system due to a "face-saving attribution bias." It would only make sense that one would be less satisfied with a system that one views as unfair or illegitimate.

Complementing this psychological mechanism, the utilitarian perspective is based on the relevance of self-interest for the formation and change of political support (Ferrín & Hernández, 2021). Elections determine the composition of government and influence policy outcomes, presumably to the benefit of the winners. Hence, winners will be more satisfied with a political system led by co-partisans who can realize their policy preferences (Daoust et al., 2023). Conversely, losers are likely to be left with less or no representation, leading them to be less satisfied with a political system that overlooks their preferences. Overall, existing evidence consistently points to a substantial gap in specific political support between winners and losers, especially when it comes to their satisfaction with democracy (e.g., Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Daoust et al., 2023). Some have also shown that this gap in support may extend to more diffuse measures of generic support for democracy (Anderson et al., 2005; Singh et al., 2011).

Winners' Restraint and Losers' Consent

While we have come to learn a great deal about the impact of elections on satisfaction with democracy, we argue that it is fundamental to examine the democratic commitment of winners and losers beyond measures of specific support. Satisfaction with democracy, in particular, is a generic indicator that captures dimensions that are not necessarily relevant for our purposes, including economic performance, government evaluation, etc., (Linde & Ekman, 2003). As such, scholars have called for considering citizens' support for the core principles and norms that make up democracy when attempting to gauge citizens' support for this political system (Claassen et al., 2024; Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016). What is relevant to our purposes is that the persistent winner-loser gap in specific political support casts doubts about losers' consent and winners' restraint, which are crucial for democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Linz & Stepan, 1978). However, the literature has only recently begun to explicitly analyze citizens' willingness to comply with

these democratic norms. Losers' consent involves accepting the results of the election, recognizing the incumbent's right to implement the policies they deem appropriate, and abiding by those policies (Anderson et al., 2005). The alternative would be to rebuff the policies and laws of the majority-supported government, to refuse a peaceful transition of power, or to revolt—as recently witnessed in Brazil and the United States (Kern & Kolln, 2022). A lack of consent from losers would therefore undermine the principle of majority rule.

In line with its importance for the stability and functioning of democracy, losers' consent figures prominently in the literature on the winner-loser gap (see, e.g., Anderson et al., 2005; Martini & Quaranta, 2019). However, most previous research tends to equate the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy and political trust with a lack of losers' consent (Curini et al., 2012; Dahlberg & Linde, 2016, 2017; Martini & Quaranta, 2019; Nemčok & Wass, 2021). We would argue, however, that some disappointment on the part of the losers (and satisfaction on the part of the winners) is an inevitable feature of democracies. This should be especially so in established democracies, where power alternation is the norm, and if the gap in specific political support is not absolute (i.e., losers are not completely dissatisfied).

Some studies have instead examined the winner-loser gap in diffuse political support using indicators of generic support for democracy. That is, they focus on the extent to which support for democracy as the "best" or "preferred" political system is lower among those who find themselves on the losing side of elections. However, the results of these studies are mixed. In Asian countries, there is no gap in commitment to democratic norms between winners and losers (Jou, 2009). Conversely, the results of Singh et al. (2011) suggest that in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, election losers are slightly less supportive of democracy. While informative for our purposes, the findings of these studies are limited by the generic nature of their indicators of democratic support, which provide us with a partial view of winners' restraint and losers' consent. This is especially true since citizens may have different understandings and interpretations of what democracy is (Hernández, 2016; Kirsch & Welzel, 2019). We must therefore go beyond generic indicators of diffuse political support.

Even more relevant for our purposes is the limited attention paid to winners' restraint. When it comes to citizens on the winning side of elections, researchers have until recently paid little theoretical or empirical attention to their willingness to exercise and accept forbearance (c.f. Werner et al., 2023). The high level of political support observed among winners was implicitly assumed to be beneficial—or at least harmless—to the stability of political systems. In a democracy, however, it is crucial that governing majorities restrain themselves and do not dismantle the legal and constitutional provisions that constrain popular sovereignty (Linz & Stepan, 1978). The recent episodes of democratic backsliding experienced by several advanced

democracies highlight the importance of paying more attention to winners. In today's democracies, the willingness of winners to accept constraints on their in-group's ability to rule may be as important, if not more important, than the consent of losers. If winners tolerate the dismantling of the institutions that constrain the power of the rulers they support, those rulers may be tempted to expand their power. That is, a fragile commitment to democratic principles may pave the way for "executive aggrandizement" (Bermeo, 2016), tolerance of democratic backsliding (Ferrer et al., 2025), or the (re)election of leaders with authoritarian tendencies (Wunsch et al., 2025).

Inspired by current developments in liberal democracies, recent studies primarily concentrate on winners' restraint regarding aspects related to horizontal accountability and executive powers. For example, winners are more likely to defend incumbents who undermine the powers of parliament, to allow incumbents to bypass other branches of government, or to condone government attacks on judicial independence (Mazepus & Toshkov, 2021; Moehler, 2009; Singer, 2018). Recent evidence from case studies in Turkey, Nigeria, and the UK also suggests that winners are more accepting of power enhancements of the executive vis-à-vis other branches of the state and are more likely to accept procedural violations (Deglow & Fjelde, 2023; Şaşmaz et al., 2022; Werner et al., 2023).

In our case, we propose to focus on two aspects related to democratic restraint and consent that are at the heart of the win-lose dynamics of elections. First, citizens' support for majoritarianism over the protection of minority rights. That is, the extent to which individuals believe that the majority should have the ultimate authority to make decisions and shape policy, even at the expense of minorities. Or conversely, their support for the notion that the rights of minorities should be safeguarded and protected, even if their preferences differ from those of the majority. Majority rule and the protection of minority rights are key democratic principles that must be balanced in some way (Dahl, 1989). Losers must accept the ability of winners to rule, and winners must accept their responsibility to protect minorities—even if it is not in the best interest of either to do so. Thus, this is an aspect that taps directly into norms related to both winners' restraint and losers' consent in a relational way.

The second aspect we focus on is mostly related to winners' restraint. Specifically, the openness of winners to accept political leaders who disregard the constraints imposed by the legal order and bend the rules and constitutional provisions to achieve their goals. This is a distinctive feature of current processes of democratic backsliding, in which strong elected leaders bend the rules and constitutional provisions to maximize the power of the executive branch (Bermeo, 2016). These processes of executive aggrandizement lead to powerful executives and unfettered majoritarianism.

Building upon utilitarian or institutional theories of political support (Mishler & Rose, 2002), we expect that, based on risk and utility calculations, winners and losers will exhibit contrasting attitudes regarding the principles associated with democratic restraint and consent. Our starting point is that self-interested winners and losers will have different stakes when it comes to the powers of majorities and the executive branch vis-à-vis minorities (see also Deglow & Fjelde, 2023; Ferrín & Hernández, 2021; Mazepus & Toshkov, 2021).

For losers, the protection of the rights of minorities can insulate them from decisions by the majority (i.e., winners) that may run counter to their interests. Akin to the role of consensual institutions in making losses more palatable by channeling the preferences of losers into the system, strong protection of minority rights can make the system less antagonistic to the demands of this group. In other words, losers are much more vulnerable to the potentially harmful consequences of unrestrained majoritarianism. We therefore expect losers to favor the protection of minority rights as well as limits on unrestrained executive power, precisely because these principles are crucial to protecting minorities from the potential risks associated with the abuse of the majoritarian principle.

Winners, instead, have more to gain from limiting those elements of democracy that constrain the realization of the demands of the majority. Since the executive will be aligned with the preferences of this group, unconstrained majoritarianism and a powerful executive are likely to be more appealing for self-interested winners (see also Deglow & Fjelde, 2023). Moreover, in most cases, this group will also hold a majority in other branches of the state (e.g., legislative chambers) and will probably be a numerical majority in society.[1] Hence, winners will have little to gain from a greater protection of minorities. In fact, this key democratic principle might, in some cases, stand in the way of the realization of the preferences of this group. We, therefore, expect that election winners will be more open to accept different forms of unconstrained majoritarianism and less favorable towards the protection of the rights of minorities.

Affective Polarization, Winners' Restraint and Losers' Consent

While we expect that winning and losing will generally affect political support and preferences for democratic restraint and consent, the extent to which they do might depend on partisan animus. Heightened feelings of affection/disaffection towards one's political in-group/out-group are likely to exacerbate the winning and losing dynamics generated by elections (Hernández et al., 2021).

Animosity toward political rivals is a key emotional response that should be incorporated into the psychological underpinnings of the winner-loser

gap. Returning to the sports context, not all wins and losses are the same. While losing is never the desired outcome, losing to a longtime rival is particularly painful. Conversely, while a win is always satisfying, the most valuable victories come from defeating adversaries in grudge matches (Kilduff et al., 2016). This is because the more a fan identifies with their team, the more the win or lose is perceived as impacting their personal social status, and a rise or fall in status vis-à-vis a rival is particularly consequential to one's esteem. In fact, fans who identify strongly with their home team have even been found to watch a rival play other neutral teams when the rival is expected to lose (Mahony & Moorman, 1999). Thus, when in-group affinity and out-group animosity are high, fans may derive satisfaction from the rival's loss and subsequent drop in status (Leach et al., 2003).

We expect a similar logic to apply among those who have stronger affective feelings toward in- and out-parties. Recent studies show that partisan animus can widen the gap between winners and losers in specific political support. For example, in the United States, strong partisans feel more angry than weak partisans when threatened with electoral defeat (Huddy et al., 2015). Furthermore, Janssen (2024) finds that in the UK the effect of winner-loser status on political support is stronger among affectively polarized individuals. This evidence suggests that affective feelings toward parties may moderate the effects of being an election winner or loser.[2]

We would argue, however, that partisan animus may be even more relevant when it comes to norms related to democratic consent and restraint (see also Şaşmaz et al., 2022). As Easton (1975) proposed, diffuse political support is based on a "reservoir of goodwill." This reservoir of goodwill, nurtured through democratic experience, helps individuals to accept outcomes and procedures that may not be in their own interest. For example, accepting constraints among winners or consenting to be ruled by the majority among losers. However, heightened affective polarization could deplete this reservoir of goodwill, leaving support for these democratic norms vulnerable to the effects of winning and losing elections.

Goodwill is likely to weaken in the presence of divisive political cleavages and high levels of out-party animus that heighten the utility and risks associated with being on the winning and losing sides of elections (Deglow & Fjelde, 2023). If losers perceive the "others" as existential enemies, or even as a threat, they will have more reasons to be hesitant in the granting of consent. In this case, the stakes will be higher, and losers will have greater incentives to mistrust winners and oppose or restrict, as much as possible, the capacity of the majority to rule in an unfettered fashion. Similarly, when animosity towards losers runs high among winners, the latter group will have greater incentives to support different forms of unconstrained majoritarianism, as well as limitations on the rights and influence of minorities in policy-making. This can allow the winners to block

"undesirable" partisan opponents from influencing political decisions (see Şaşmaz et al., 2022).

Furthermore, psychological theories posit that people act in dishonest or unethical ways to the extent to which they can justify or rationalize such behavior so as not to violate their perception of themselves as honest and moral (Mazar et al., 2008; Schurr et al., 2012; Shalvi, 2012; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015). In this vein, feelings of entitlement or perceived superiority have been linked to dishonest or unethical behavior (Cherry et al., 2002; Poon et al., 2013; Vincent & Kouchaki, 2016; Zitek et al., 2010). Furthermore, affective polarization seems to be associated with a perceived moral superiority of the in-group relative to the out-group (Garrett, 2009; Okoroafor & Kommers, 2022; Skitka, 2010). Combining these insights, we argue that highly polarized environments with differences in the perceived morality of in- and out-groups activate tribal cognitive biases that provide individuals with a rationalization for breaking the democratic norms of consent and restraint. Thus, losers who suspect rival winners as immoral and prone to abusing their power would be justified in abandoning norms pertaining to consent. Conversely, winners who already view their ingroup as morally superior and who feel even more entitled following an election win could easily rationalize a departure from norms pertaining to restraint.

In sum, while winning and losing elections might have minimal impact on individuals' commitment to democratic norms of restraint and consent when the reservoir of goodwill is full and good sportsmanship characterizes political competition, this may rapidly change as affective polarization increases.

Study 1: Comparative Study of 35 Elections

Data and Methods

In our first study, we draw on data from the fifth module of the CSES between 2016 and 2021.[3] CSES surveys are administered after national elections, making them particularly suitable for studying winner-loser dynamics. Furthermore, together with measures of in- and out-party affection, the fifth module includes items measuring satisfaction with democracy, as well as support for unconstrained majoritarianism and minorities' rights.[4]

Given that our theoretical arguments are based on the premise that elections are at least reasonably free and fair and regular alterations of power are feasible, we focus on democratic countries. As such, we exclude countries with V-DEM electoral democracy indices and corresponding confidence intervals below 0.5 at the time of their elections.[5]

Beginning with our outcome variables, we measure satisfaction with democracy, which we use as an informative benchmark for the winner-loser gap, using an item asking to what extent respondents are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. This variable is measured on a 1-5 scale

ranging from "not at all satisfied (1)" to "very satisfied (5)," with a sample average of 3.06.[6]

Next, we measure citizens' attitudes towards norms of democratic restraint and consent through two variables. Both variables are measured on a 1-5 agree-disagree scale ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)." First, we measure individuals' generic commitment to restraints on the executive's power. For this, we rely on an item that asks respondents to what extent they agree that having a strong leader is good, even if this leader "bends the rules to get things done." The sample average for this variable is 2.82. As we point out above, this could be considered an extreme manifestation of majoritarianism that is closely related to current processes of democratic backsliding. Hence, this item taps into citizens' lack of support for norms of forbearance and restraint. Second, we rely on an item that taps directly into the tension between majoritarianism vis-à-vis the protection of the rights of minorities. This question asks respondents to what degree they believe that the will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities. The item taps support for the majoritarian democratic principle, while simultaneously highlighting that this particular principle might come into tension with the protection of minority rights—thus tapping the opposing "minoritarian" democratic principle. The sample average for this variable is 2.98, indicating roughly equal support for the realization of the will of the majority and protecting the rights of minorities.[7]

Turning now to our main independent variable, we create a dummy variable in which 0 corresponds to being a loser and 1 corresponds to being a winner. This is based on the party the respondent voted for in the election preceding CSES fieldwork and the party (or parties) that formed the government following that election. To do so, we follow a set of predetermined rules that aim to capture the winner-loser status of respondents at the time of their interview. Presidential systems (10 country elections) are straightforward to code. If someone voted for the party of the candidate that won the election, they are coded as winners, irrespective of when the president-elect assumed office. All other voters are coded as losers.[8] In parliamentary systems, the coding is more intricate as it is influenced by the government formation process and the timing of the CSES fieldwork. If the government was announced before the fieldwork (10 country elections), we code all voters who voted for parties that are set to be part of the cabinet as winners. If the government was announced while the CSES was in the field (6 country elections), the sample is split into two groups. For those who were interviewed after the government was announced, they are coded according to the aforementioned rule. For those who were interviewed before the government was announced, we code as winners those who voted for the parties set to form the government according to our analysis of coalition talks. In certain instances, coalition talks fail at a given moment and new talks begin with other

potential coalition members. In such instances, we take into account the day when the respondent was interviewed to code them as winners if the party they voted for is explicitly included in the coalition talks at the time of the interview—regardless of the final composition of the government. We use this same approach for the final category of cases—when the government is announced after fieldwork has taken place (9 country elections). Lastly, we remove from the dataset those cases in which it was either unclear who the winner of the election was or which parties were likely to form the government at the time of the fieldwork (11 country elections). See Appendix A for details about the coding of each country-election.

We measure affective polarization through the like-dislike scores that respondents assign to the parties in their party system. Specifically, we implement Wagner's (2021) distance measure, which measures the average affective distance of other parties from one's most liked party (weighting each party by its vote share in the lower house of each country).

Given the observational nature of our data, all our analyses control for aspects that may be related to the probability of being a winner or loser and to individuals' attitudes towards democracy. Hence, in all our models, we control for ideological extremity (in the left-right dimension), age, gender, and education. Moreover, all our analyses are based on ordinary least squares estimations that include county-election fixed-effects to account for unobserved cross-election and cross-country heterogeneity.

In using coalition talks to code winners and losers in certain instances (e.g., in which interviews are conducted prior to government announcement), we necessarily assume a certain degree of awareness of such happenings. As such, we also control for political interest in all our analyses as a way of capturing potentially relevant variation in political sophistication across the sample.

Finally, our analyses include a control for the size (vote share) of the party respondents voted for. We expect that winner and loser status influence attitudes related to democratic restraint and consent for both psychological and utilitarian reasons. However, individuals' perceptions of their political standing are shaped not only by whether their party enters government, but also by the size of their political in-group. Larger parties are more likely to enter government (i.e., more likely to be winners), but party size itself may also affect political attitudes independently of winner status—for instance, by fostering a sense of group dominance or greater influence in the political system (Ferrín & Hernández, 2021). Crucially, because vote share is determined at the time of the election and precedes parties' winner or loser status, we treat party size as a pre-treatment variable. As such, controlling for it helps us isolate the net effect of being a winner or loser on attitudes toward democratic norms, and prevents a spurious association that could arise from conflating winner status with party size. We therefore believe that including

this control strengthens our inferences. In all our main models, we include the lower house vote share of the party the respondent voted for.

Results

We begin by examining the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy and in attitudes toward norms of democratic consent and restraint. Figure 1 summarizes these results. In line with previous literature, the results show a substantial satisfaction gap, with winners being 0.33 points more satisfied with the way democracy works in their country (on a five-point scale). However, when we control for the size of one's political in-group (i.e., the vote share of the party one voted for), the size of the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy shrinks to 0.19 points.

This first set of results has two important implications. First, the effect of winning and losing on satisfaction with democracy identified in the previous literature appears to be partly driven by the size of one's political in-group. When controlling for the size (vote share) of the party for which respondents voted, the gap in satisfaction with democracy diminishes substantially. Indeed, the additional analyses summarized in Figure B3 in Appendix B show that the vote share of the party one voted for has a substantial impact on individuals' satisfaction with democracy. The second key implication of these

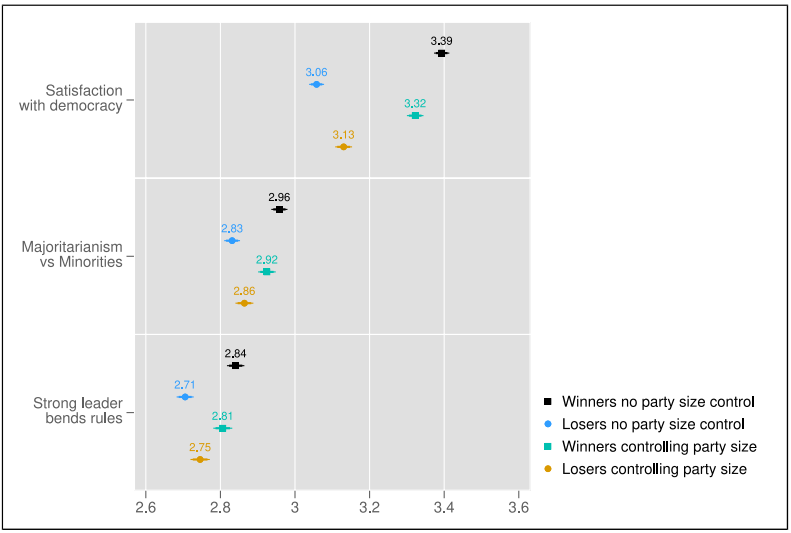


Figure 1. Winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy and support for norms of democratic restraint and consent

Note. OLS estimation. Thick and thin lines are 95 and 99% confidence intervals, respectively. Based on Table B2 summarized in Appendix B.

findings, however, is that even when controlling for the size of one's political in-group, there is still a moderate gap in satisfaction between winners and losers. It is this gap that we use as a benchmark for assessing the significance of a potential winner-loser gap in support for norms related to democratic restraint and consent.

The second and third rows of Figure 1 summarize the winner-loser gap in citizens' support for majoritarianism versus the protection of minority rights, and in their support for strong leaders who bend the rules, respectively.[9] The differences between winners and losers are statistically significant in all cases and in the expected direction: winners are more likely than losers to support following the will of the majority at the potential expense of protecting minority rights and having a strong leader willing to bend the rules. However, these differences are relatively small in substantive terms, especially when controlling for the size of one's political in-group. The difference between winners and losers in supporting the will of the majority and having a leader above the law is approximately one-third the difference in satisfaction with democracy (our benchmark). This is true whether or not we control for party size. In fact, when the size of one's political in-group is taken into account, the differences between winners and losers on majoritarianism versus minority rights and support for a strong leader who bends the rules are only 0.06 on a five-point scale. These differences correspond to about 5-10% of the standard deviation of each outcome variable (depending on whether we control for party size or not). Thus, it appears that being a winner or loser makes a significant difference for specific support, but much less so for diffuse manifestations of political support related to democratic restraint and consent.[10]

The previous results do not take into account that winning and losing may have different implications depending on partisan animus. Figure 2 summarizes the gap between winners and losers as a function of their levels of affective polarization, with higher values indicating higher levels of affective polarization (when controlling for party size).[11] The first panel of Figure 2 shows that affective polarization significantly moderates the effect of winning or losing elections on satisfaction with democracy. When affective polarization is low, there is no substantial gap in satisfaction with democracy between winners and losers. A gap emerges at moderate levels of affective polarization and it widens as affective polarization increases. At the peak of affective polarization, the gap between winners and losers is about 0.5 points on the five-point scale—a difference that is both statistically and substantively significant. We also see that the moderating capacity of affective polarization acts disproportionately on losers. As affective polarization increases, losers become increasingly dissatisfied with democracy, while winners become only marginally more satisfied with democracy. Thus, affective polarization has an effect on specific support for democracy that is particularly driven by losers. This is an important result in itself, highlighting

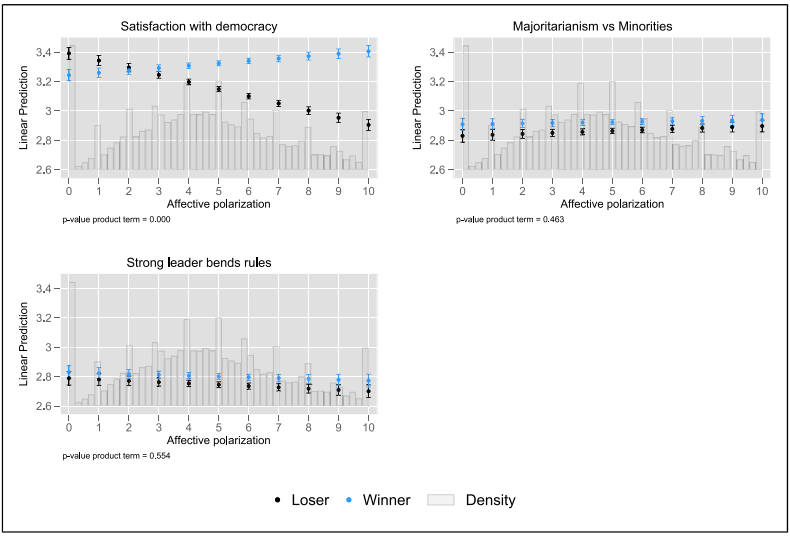


Figure 2. Predicted satisfaction with democracy and support for norms of democratic restraint and consent as a function of winner-loser status and affective polarization
Note. Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals around the linear prediction. Based on Table B3 summarized in Appendix B. The histogram in the background summarizes the distribution of affective polarization.

another pernicious effect of affective polarization and complementing the recent findings of Janssen (2024) for the British case. Moreover, this result provides us with an informative benchmark against which we can assess the importance of this moderation for democratic restraint and consent.

Turning now to the remaining panels of Figure 2, it appears that affective polarization does not moderate the impact of winning or losing elections on support for democratic restraint and consent. As Table B3 in Appendix B confirms, the interaction between affective polarization and winner/loser status is not statistically significant for either of these outcomes. Indeed, the most polarized winners and losers are about as supportive of democratic norms related to restraint and consent as the least polarized winners and losers.

While not in line with our theoretical arguments, these results offer some initial optimism about citizens' commitment to diffuse democratic principles related to democratic restraint and consent. We proposed that affective polarization would deplete the reservoir of goodwill that helps citizens accept outcomes and procedures that may go against their self-interest. This does not appear to be the case. Winners' commitment to democratic restraint and losers' consent appears solid since they are not swayed by their affective polarization. We would argue that this is particularly positive in a context of increasing polarization.

Robustness Checks

Some of the results summarized above do not align with our expectations about the divergence in support for norms of democratic restraint and consent between winners and losers, particularly in how affective polarization moderates these differences. In this section, we further probe the robustness of these findings.

We begin by considering the potential influence of controlling for the size of the party one voted for. As noted above, this control is necessary to isolate the net effect of being a winner or loser from the size of one's political in-group. Nonetheless, it is worth examining the impact of these variables without this control. When it comes to the main effects described above (see Table B2), we observe a slight reduction in the winner-loser gap when the party size control is introduced. This aligns with the expectation that omitting the size of one's political in-group could spuriously increase the estimated effect of being an electoral winner or loser. In any case, if we use the gap in satisfaction with democracy as a benchmark for the potential gap in support for norms of democratic restraint and consent, the relative size of the gap remains very similar regardless of whether the control is included. Moreover, the winner-loser gap in support for these norms is substantively small both with and without the party size control. Turning to the role of affective polarization, Table B3 and Figure B4 in Appendix B replicate all interaction models without controlling for the vote share of the party one voted for. The results for this interaction, presented in Models 2, 4, and 6, are nearly identical to those of our main specification, which includes the party size control (Models 1, 3, and 5 of the same table).

To further assess the robustness of our results, in the Appendix we test whether our main results hold when using alternative variables and model specifications. First, as noted above, our coding of winners and losers assumes a certain degree of awareness of political events such as coalition negotiations, which we address by including political interest as a control. Yet, to further probe whether the lack of awareness of such events may bias our results, in Figure B11 and Table B7 in Appendix B we replicate our main analyses by restricting the sample to cases in which respondents were interviewed after the government or coalition had been officially announced. As the Appendix shows, the results do not differ significantly from those in the main analysis. Second, given that affective polarization can be operationalized in different ways (Wagner, 2021), we also replicate our models using Wagner's (2021) spread index. The results from this alternative specification closely mirror those obtained with the distance index. As in our original estimation, the interaction between winner-loser status and affective polarization is statistically significant for satisfaction with democracy, but not for the items measuring preferences about "majoritarianism vs. minorities" or a "strong leader who bends the rules"

(see Figure B6 and Table B4 in Appendix B). Third, the limited number of units at the country level led us to prioritize fixed effects models over hierarchical models. However, since the latter are widely used to analyze multilevel data in which lower-level units are nested in upper-level units, we replicate our analyses using multilevel models (see Appendix B). Given the limited number of country level units, we follow Elff et al. (2021) advice and specify mixed effects linear models with restricted maximum likelihood estimators and the Satterthwaite approximation for computing p-values. Again, Tables B9 and B10 show that the results are nearly identical when using these models.

Leveraging multilevel models, we additionally check if the size of the winner-loser gaps in satisfaction with democracy and in support for norms of restraint and consent vary depending on the form of government, the democratic quality of the country and having experienced an episode of democratic backsliding. These results are summarized in Tables B12, B13 and B14, respectively. Overall the main findings of our study remain robust given these analyses. More specifically, we find no differences in parliamentary systems compared to presidential systems. Also, while we see that the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy is larger in lower quality democracies, as shown by Nadeau et al. (2021) and Wu and Wu (2022), and that winners and (especially) losers are less satisfied with democracy in countries experiencing backsliding (as we would expect), neither of these characteristics condition winners' constraint or losers' consent.

Additionally, we explore the attitudes of strategic voters and non-voters. Previous research has shown that "non-optimal winners" (i.e., strategic voters who voted for a winning party but deviated from their ideal choice) differ from "optimal winners" in terms of specific support, as the boost in satisfaction engendered by winning may be less intense among the former (Singh, 2014). Following Hale (2022), strategic winners are defined here as individuals who, at the district level, voted for the party that made it into government, even though it was not their most liked party. Table B8 and Figure B12 in Appendix B show that "strategic winners" are more satisfied with democracy than losers, but less so than other winners. However, they are no more or less supportive of majoritarianism and a strong leader than either optimal winners or losers. Similarly, Figure B10 in Appendix B shows that non-voters are about as dissatisfied with democracy as losers but as supportive of following the will of the majority at the potential expense of protecting minority rights and having a strong leader willing to bend the rules as winners. In sum, these profiles resemble winners in some respects and losers and others, but are no more extreme than either.

Finally, our findings about the limited differences between winners and losers in their support for norms of democratic restraint and consent may be driven by social desirability biases in survey responses. Respondents may falsify their true preferences for prioritizing the will of the majority at the

expense of minority rights, or for a strong leader willing to bend the rules to gain social approval, and this may be especially true for winners (Harkness et al., 2003). To assess the threat this might pose to our conclusions, we capitalize on the fact that in five countries the CSES fieldwork was conducted in a multi-mode format, with some modes being public (face-to-face or telephone) and others private (online).[12] If social desirability biases the results, respondents should be more likely to support unconstrained types of majoritarianism in these private modes. These additional analyses are summarized in Appendix B. Overall, we find no systematic evidence that social desirability is a potential source of downward bias in our results. Differences between those interviews conducted in person (or by telephone) and those conducted in private are either statistically insignificant, substantively negligible, or in the opposite direction to that expected from a social desirability bias. This is the case when looking at the entire sample without distinguishing between winners and losers (Figure B8 and Appendix B), and when distinguishing between winners and losers (Figure B9 and Appendix B).

Study 2: New Zealand 2017 Election Coalition Negotiations

Case Description and Methods

Following the 2017 New Zealand general election, no party had enough seats to form a government, leaving the two largest parties (Labour and National) vying for a coalition with the party New Zealand First. The National party, the incumbent at the time, had won the election and was expected to form a coalition government with New Zealand First (Vowles, 2018). However, an unexpected decision by New Zealand First in the midst of coalition negotiations resulted in Labour ultimately leading the government. On October 19, 2017, New Zealand First announced the formation of a minority coalition government with the Labour Party, along with a confidence and supply agreement with the Green Party. The announcement marked one of the greatest electoral upsets in New Zealand's democratic history and led to the election of Jacinda Ardern as Prime Minister. As we describe in detail in Appendix C, this was an unexpected outcome. Until 2017, the party that had won the election had always been part of the government since New Zealand adopted mixed-member proportional representation.

Given that this unexpected government announcement occurred while the CSES was in the field, we can compare the democratic support of Labour (the initial losers, but then unexpected winners) and National voters (the initial winners, but then unexpected losers) before and after the change in their status as winners and losers through an unexpected event during survey design (Muñoz et al., 2020). During the CSES fieldwork, 56% of the sample

(1019 respondents) were interviewed before the coalition announcement and 44% (789 respondents) were interviewed after that date. Assuming that the day on which respondents were interviewed is as if random, this allows us to estimate the effect of being a winner or loser through an identification strategy that ameliorates some of the potential biases of Study 1. However, given differences in the survey reachability of respondents this might only be the case after accounting for characteristics that are related to such reachability (Muñoz et al., 2020). As such, our models control for age, education, sex, and political interest.

Results

Figure 3 summarizes the impact of the coalition announcement on our variables of interest among Labour and National voters.[13] The results first show that, consistent with our observational evidence, the unexpected change in voters' winner-loser status has a significant impact on their level of satisfaction with democracy. As a difference from Study 1, this case study also allows us to disentangle the extent to which the observed increase in the gap in satisfaction with democracy after the election is driven by changes in the attitudes of either winners or losers. Figure C2 in Appendix C shows that

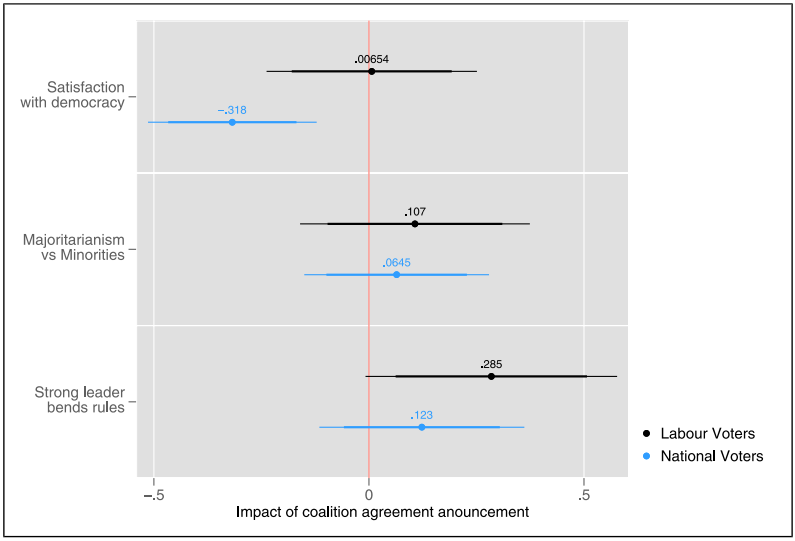


Figure 3. Effect of coalition announcement on satisfaction with democracy and support for norms of democratic restraint and consent among voters of the Labour and National parties

Note. OLS estimation. Thick and thin lines are 95 and 99% confidence intervals, respectively. Based on Table C1 summarized in Appendix C.

before the coalition was announced, Labour and National supporters were about equally satisfied with the way democracy works (3.56 and 3.54 respectively). By contrast, while we observe no change among Labour supporters after the coalition announcement, we do find a significant drop of 0.304 points in satisfaction with democracy among National supporters—an effect equivalent to one quarter of the standard deviation of this outcome variable.

When it comes to support for norms of democratic restraint and consent, the results summarized in Figure 3 generally show limited variation in these attitudes as a result of changes in winner-loser status. In the case of majoritarianism over minority rights, we see no change in these attitudes among either the winners (Labour) or the losers (National). Similarly, there is no change in support for a strong leader who bends the rules among National supporters. However, there is a positive change in the extent to which Labour voters support a strong leader who bends the rules. This change is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. While the size of this change is smaller than the decline in satisfaction with democracy among National voters (our benchmark), it is not negligible, as it represents one-fifth of the standard deviation of this outcome variable. It seems that after the sudden coalition agreement that turned Labour voters into winners, these voters became less favorable to some norms of democratic restraint that could limit the power of the new government led by their preferred party.

Overall, these results extend the findings of Study 1. Using an identification strategy based on an unexpected coalition change, we find that winning and losing appear to have substantial effects on satisfaction with democracy, but more limited effects on individuals' support for norms related to democratic restraint and consent. The only exception is that, in this particular case, election winners seem to be less open to accepting the legal constraints that their leaders may face.

Study 3: Chile 2021 Presidential Election

A key tenet of our theoretical framework is that the effects of winning and losing elections may be moderated by affective polarization. The observational results of Study 1 suggest that this is the case for satisfaction with democracy, but not for individuals' support for norms of democratic restraint and consent. Unfortunately, in Study 2 we were unable to take affective polarization into account. Being the winner or loser of an election may affect the affinity one feels towards parties (Hernández et al., 2021). Therefore, in Study 2 the levels of affective polarization are not comparable between those in the treatment and control groups within each partisan camp (National and Labour). In other words, these variables are measured before treatment for some respondents and after treatment for others, which is likely to lead to post-

treatment bias in our estimates (see Muñoz et al., 2020). To overcome this limitation, in Study 3 we exploit Gabriel Boric's victory in the "knife-edge" run-off vote of the 2021 Chilean presidential election, alongside the data collected by the TRI-POL panel survey project (Torcal et al., 2023).

Case Description and Methods

In the second round of the 2021 presidential election that took place on December 19th, Gabriel Boric narrowly defeated Antonio Kast (see Appendix D for a detailed description of the case). At the same time, the second wave of the TRI-POL project was in the field. As with the New Zealand case, this feature of the 2021 Chilean presidential election is relevant because it allows us to implement an unexpected event during survey design to identify the impact of winning and losing in this election. Moreover, unlike Study 2, in this case we can also assess how these effects are moderated by affective polarization by combining data from the first two waves of the TRI-POL online panel. The first wave ($N = 1337$) was conducted between September 23 and November 18, 2021, while the second wave ($N = 1084$) began on December 1 and ended on January 8, 2022. We rely on questions asked during the first wave, fielded before the first round of the election, to measure affective polarization without the threat of post-treatment bias induced by the election results (as is done with political interest). We then use data from the second wave to identify the effects of winning or losing that election.

In the case of Chile, the wording of the outcome variables is slightly different from those used in Study 1 and Study 2. First, to measure citizens' attitudes toward norms of democratic restraint and consent, we rely on an item that asks respondents to what extent aspects such as "Majority rule" and "The protection of the rights of minorities" are important for a society to be called democratic. Second, to gauge to what extent respondents think that winners' restraint is relevant, we rely on an item that asks respondents if they believe that abolishing the National Assembly and having a strong leader running the country is a good way to govern the country. We would argue that these items still capture the essence of winners' restraint and losers consent. Moreover, the survey does not include an item asking about satisfaction with democracy. Therefore, we use trust in the Chilean government as our measure of specific political support (i.e., our benchmark). The first three variables are measured using a four-point scale that ranges from "Not important" to "Very important." Trust in the Government is measured using a 0-10 scale.

As for the main independent variables, we treat as winners those respondents who voted for Gabriel Boric in the second round of the presidential election and as losers those who voted for Jose Antonio Kast. To measure affective polarization, we use Wagner's (2021) distance measure.

Results

In line with Study 1, the results in Figure 4 indicate that winning the election increased Boric voters' trust in government (our specific political support benchmark in this study) by 0.631 points (on a scale from 0 to 10), which represents one quarter of the standard deviation of this variable. We also see that Kast voters remained stable in their trust in government despite losing the election.[14] However, Figure 4 clearly shows that when it comes to supporting norms of democratic restraint or consent, becoming a winner or loser following the 2017 Chilean presidential election did not have a significant effect on any one of our indicators.

We now turn to examining how affective polarization may moderate the effect of winning and losing elections on support for norms of democratic restraint and consent. Figure 5 depicts the effect of winning (among Boric's voters) and losing (among Kast's voters) at different levels of affective polarization. In line with Study 1, the first panel reveals that, among losers, the effect of losing on specific political support (trust in government in this case) intensifies as affective polarization increases. However, the effect of winning on trust is similar independent of one's levels of affective polarization.[15] In contrast, the effect of winning and losing on citizens' support for norms of democratic restraint and consent does not vary as a function of how affectively

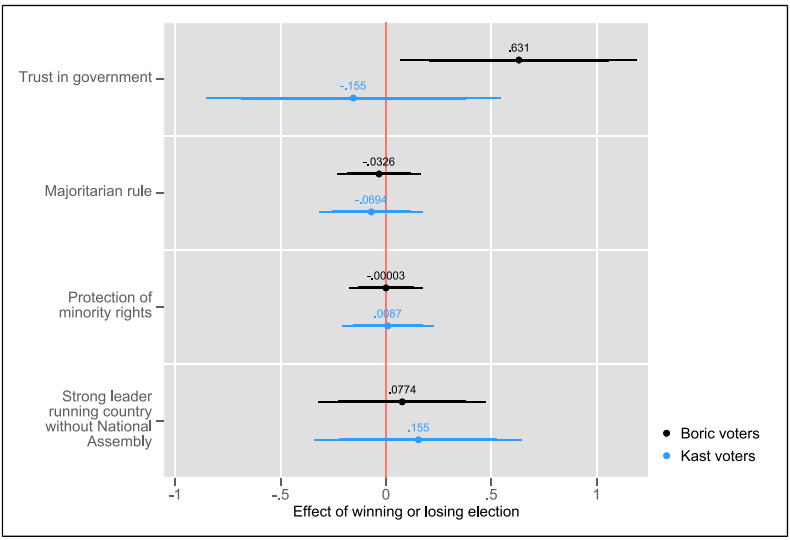


Figure 4. Effect of Boric's victory on trust in government and support for norms of democratic restraint and consent among Boric's voters and Kast's voters.
Note. OLS estimation. Thick and thin lines are 95 and 99% confidence intervals, respectively. Based on Table D1 summarized in subsection in Appendix D.

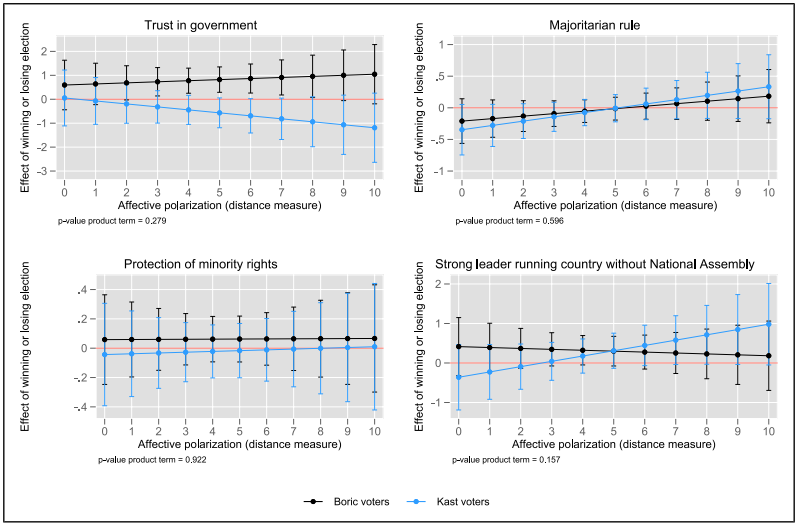


Figure 5. Effects of Boric's victory on trust in government and support for norms of democratic restraint and consent as a function of winner-loser status and affective polarization

Note. *Y*-axes differ. OLS estimation. Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. Based on Table D2 in Appendix D.

polarized they are.[16] All in all, the results from the Chilean case provide further evidence in line with the idea that while winning and losing is consequential for specific political support, its effect on citizens' support for norms of democratic restraint and consent is much more limited, even at high levels of affective polarization.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have theorized and analyzed how winning and losing elections, along with affective polarization, affects citizens' support for norms of democratic restraint and consent. We did so by examining citizens' attitudes toward the equilibrium between majority rule vs. the protection of minority rights and their support for a strong leader who bends the rules or governs ignoring the national assembly. To assess the significance of the winner-loser gap on these attitudes, we used the well-documented winner-loser gap in specific political support (satisfaction with democracy and trust in government) as an informative benchmark.

Drawing on utilitarian and psychological arguments, we expected that winning and losing would affect citizens' support for norms of democratic restraint and consent, and that these winner-loser dynamics would be

amplified by affective polarization. To test this argument, we combined observational data from 35 national elections in 30 countries with quasi-experimental data from two case studies.

We find some evidence in line with of our theoretical argument. Winners do seem to endorse majoritarian rule over protecting the rights of minorities and having a strong leader willing to bend rules to a greater degree than electoral losers. However, these differences—albeit statistically significant—are substantively quite small (e.g., in absolute and relative terms). Specifically, the difference between winners and losers in their commitment to democratic norms of restraint and consent are relatively small on five-point scales, relative to each variable's standard deviation and compared to satisfaction with democracy—our benchmark. These differences, in turn, further decrease when controlling for party size. Moreover, these results do not consistently appear across our three studies. Finally, commitment to democratic norms and principles among winners and losers is not influenced by affective polarization—even in contexts of high polarization. Across various studies and robustness checks, the general picture suggests that although winners and losers are likely to differ markedly in their satisfaction with democracy, especially in polarized contexts, they diverge to a much lesser degree when it comes to their commitment to key norms that underpin democratic governance.

There are, however, a few caveats that ought to be underscored. First, while we find that the *effect* of winning or losing elections is relatively minor on citizens' support for norms of constraint and consent, this is not to say that winners and losers cannot markedly differ in their support for these norms. Indeed, there may be countries in which electoral winners either actively endorse or passively tolerate undemocratic acts by the executive. Our findings suggest that in such cases, these winners were less supportive of democratic norms to begin with (i.e., before they became winners in the first place). This interpretation aligns with the results of Svolik et al.'s (2023) democratic stress test across seven European countries. The authors find that supporters of populist, radical or nationalist right parties are least likely to punish their preferred party or candidate for undermining democratic principles—both in countries where such parties had come to power (and democratic decline ensued) and those in which they had not. Thus, it is not so much that elections pose a threat to democracy because they make winners undemocratic, but rather that undemocratic citizens may become particularly threatening to democracy when they win elections.

Second, we must also keep in mind that even small changes in citizens' commitment to core democratic principles might be consequential—particularly among those who are less supportive of these principles to begin with and if these changes compound over time. While we do not find that the impact of winning or losing on our measures of restraint and consent are

affected by how democratic a country is or if it has undergone backsliding, this may not apply to extreme cases of autocratization.

Finally, given that the countries included in our analyses tend to have relatively high levels of democratic quality, and some regions (such as Asia and Africa) are under-represented, we must be careful with generalizing our findings to other contexts besides Europe and the Americas. Not only may winner-loser dynamics differ in such contexts, their citizens might also have different interpretations of democracy (Oser & Hooghe, 2018; Ridge, 2024; Wu & Wu, 2022).

At least when it comes to established democracies, we propose two potential interpretations for our findings. First, and more optimistically, citizens in general may be more principled than expected. They may uphold democratic norms even when it is not in their best (immediate) interest to do so. Indeed, in light of our findings, it appears that polarization does not (sufficiently) deplete the "reservoir of goodwill" that protects citizens' commitment to democratic norms for them to turn their backs on these norms following an electoral win or loss. Thus, no matter how much citizens may dislike their political rivals or hate losing, they prefer the democratic game to any alternative—as indicated by their willingness to continue playing by the rules. This interpretation would add nuance to studies suggesting that polarization may contribute to democratic instability by increasing the likelihood of winners to tolerate anti-democratic candidates and behavior (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Saikkonen & Christensen, 2022; Şaşmaz et al., 2022). Conversely, it is consistent with the more optimistic findings about winners' restraint and losers' consent in East Asia (Wu & Wu, 2022), and with findings from the US highlighting that affective polarization does not seem to undermine commitment to democratic norms (Broockman et al., 2022). In any case, given growing discrepancies between analyses that focus on citizens' overt support for democratic norms and analyses that focus on citizens' support for undemocratic candidates, future work should combine both (see e.g., Kaftan & Gessler, 2024; Wunsch et al., 2025).

A second and less optimistic interpretation would be that citizens may simply be more shrewd than expected. After all, winners inevitably become losers at some point. Perceiving political rivals as existential enemies may increase the risks associated with granting greater powers to both majorities and the executive, as they may act against their preferences and violate their rights when the government eventually changes. As such, free, fair, and regular elections serve as a kind of democratic insurance policy that protects against abuses of power by the current majority out of fear of future retribution. For this mechanism to apply, however, citizens must have faith in elections and believe that their status, as either a winner or loser, could change in the near future.

To further investigate these caveats and interpretations, we call on future research to employ longitudinal studies, particularly with panel designs that track within-individual change across various measures of

specific and diffuse democratic support over the course of several elections (see e.g., Torcal et al., 2023). This may be particularly relevant for countries that have experienced episodes of radical or sustained democratic backsliding in which citizens no longer view the political playing field as level. Similarly, younger democracies present interesting cases as citizens who were socialized in the absence of democratic norms and institutions may not have internalized their commitment to them and the "reservoir of goodwill" may not be deep enough to protect this commitment from the impact of elections and the draw of in-group self-interest.

Regardless of why citizens uphold democratic norms of restraint and consent, these findings contribute to our current understanding of processes of democratic erosion, at least from the demand side (Wunsch et al., 2025). It appears that election-induced changes in specific political support (satisfaction and trust) do not permeate into more fundamental attitudes about key democratic norms. This suggests a degree of resilience in democratic attitudes (or diffuse political support) that may be stronger than previously assumed. This robust political support may help offset concerns about democratic backsliding. While something may be amiss with the current state of liberal democracy (Plattner, 2020), it does not seem to be electoral winners and losers diverging in their commitment to democratic norms of restraint and consent because they won or lost a given election. Nor for that matter should we be too concerned about affective polarization when it comes to commitment to these norms. Even if affective polarization may be a negative byproduct of elections (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Fasching et al., 2024; Hernández et al., 2021), these polarization dynamics do not necessarily translate into an erosion of the norms of democratic restraint and consent among the winners and losers of those elections.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Data Availability Statement

The data and code to replicate the findings are publicly available in the Harvard Dataverse at: "Replication Data for: Winners' Restraint or Affective Majoritarianism? Elections, Polarization and Political Support": https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZFTBGH (Tomic et al. 2025).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We discuss the relevance of being a numerical political majority or minority and the importance of controlling for this in the Data and Methods section of Study 1.
2. See Ridge (2022) for a related argument based on "negative partisanship".
3. Replication materials and code for the three studies can be found at Tomic et al. (2025). DOI: 10.7910/DVN/ZFTBGH.
4. Since the questions used to operationalize our outcomes were not asked in Greece (2015), Taiwan (2016, 2020) and Finland (2019), these country-elections are excluded from the analyses.
5. The country elections excluded for not complying with our criterion are Hong Kong (2016), India (2019), Thailand (2019) and Turkey (2018).
6. Figure B1 in Appendix B summarizes the distribution of all the outcome variables.
7. Table B1 in Appendix B displays the degree to which our outcome variables are correlated. The correlations between satisfaction with democracy (SWD) and support for a strong leader, and SWD and unconstrained majoritarianism are negative and substantively negligible. The correlation between support for majoritarianism and a strong leader is statistically positive and moderate in magnitude. This suggests that our measures of diffuse support are capturing different, although complementary, dimensions of democratic commitment.
8. Abstainers are excluded from the main analyses in the paper but are analyzed in the Robustness checks section and Appendix B.
9. Figure B2 in the Appendix presents the same results as marginal effects.

10. Figure B3 in Appendix B reveals that respondents who voted for bigger parties (with a larger share of votes) tend to support following the will of the majority at the potential expense of protecting minority rights and having a strong leader willing to bypass the rules more so than voters of small parties. However, again the differences between voters of small and large parties are substantially smaller than those of satisfaction with democracy.
11. Table B3 in Appendix B contains coefficients of models with and without party size and indicates that the moderating capacity of affective polarization is the same across model specifications.
12. The assignment to private or public modes of interviewing is not random. Therefore, the models in which we assess social desirability include the following control variables: age, gender, education, ideology, internal political efficacy, and political interest.
13. The full set of analyses for this case study can be found in Appendix C.
14. A noteworthy peculiarity of the Chilean case is that the size of the winner-loser gap in political trust decreased following elections. This is because Kast voters displayed higher trust in government prior to the elections. See Figure D1 in Appendix D.
15. Among winners, the effect is not always significant due to different numbers of cases at different points of the affective polarization distribution. Among losers, even if the negative effect intensifies at higher levels of polarization the effect is not significant at any point of the affective polarization scale.
16. As in Study 1, using Wagner's spread measure of affective polarization only provides further support for the findings outlined above (see Figure D2 in Appendix D).

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