

# Party preferences and prior expectations moderate voters' perceptions of winning and losing an election

*What is the relationship between who you vote for in an election and satisfaction with the outcome? Looking at evidence from four countries, which span both majoritarian and proportional systems, **Carolina Plescia** finds that, beyond objective measures of party outcome, public opinion on which party has won or lost is affected by a party's change in vote share, voters' expectations, existing party preferences and the electoral system under which it is contested.*



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Election results are almost always characterised by multiple interpretations, not only by political candidates, but also by the media, which tends to interpret the meaning of elections in search of the 'real' message that (they believe) the electorate intended to convey. Do voters also subjectively interpret election outcomes in terms of whether they have won or lost the elections?

In a [paper just published in Political Psychology](#) I examined when voters feel like winners of an election using panel data in four countries, namely [Austria](#), [Canada](#), [Germany](#) and [Spain](#). The aim was to determine whether objective party performance in terms of vote share explains whether individuals feel like winners of an election, or whether people's attitudes – including prior expectations about the election outcome and party preferences – moderate the effect of objective considerations. The four countries included majoritarian and proportional systems to check whether the meaning of winning an election is different under multi-party systems with coalition governments in comparison with single-party governments or majoritarian-style democracies.

The results indicate that objective indicators of party performance significantly impact feeling like an election winner. Specifically, a better performance by the party a voter supports in terms of vote share and changes in vote share from previous elections both have a positive impact on them feeling like a winner. It also seems that the strongest effect is played by vote change rather than vote share. If one focuses on gaining or losing representation instead of vote share, we see that supporters of parties that enter the government are more likely to feel like winners of the elections than those of parties that simply enter the parliament; similarly, winning the prime-ministership or entering the parliament compared to no change from the previous elections has the expected positive effect, whereas losing either the prime-ministership or representation has the expected negative impact.

The results also suggest, however, that objective party performance is only part of the story. In particular, prior expectations and party preferences moderate the relationship between party performance and feelings of winning. Looking at prior expectations, I tested the argument that 'pessimistic' voters are more satisfied than their optimistic counterparts following elections. Very much like bronze medallists that tend to look happier than silver medallists when standing on a podium, voters are more likely to feel that their party has won the elections when their expectations were lower compared to when they were higher. This argument holds only in the case of changes of party performance while the effect of vote share on feeling like a winner is not moderated by prior expectations. In other words, the higher the voters' expectations during the election campaign, the less likely they are to feel that the party they support won the election for any given level of change in vote share.

In terms of party preferences, the research tests the argument that the strength of attachment to the winning side tends to enhance the general effects of satisfaction with an election result. The findings indicate that this is the case when one considers actual vote share, and a party's performance is associated with its supporters feeling like winners at a much higher rate when voters' party allegiances are high than when they are low; conversely the effect of vote change on feelings of winning is not moderated by party preferences.

The findings also point to an important distinction between a more majoritarian-style democracy like Canada and more proportional-style systems with coalition governments, such as Austria and Germany: who lost and who won the elections seems to be much clearer in Canada and to some extent Spain than in Germany and Austria. In particular, relative to Austria and Germany, election results in Canada and to a lesser extent Spain provide a much more straightforward interpretation; moreover, the identification of winners and losers remains rather more ambiguous in proportional systems.

Broadly speaking, the evidence points to the conclusion that measuring those who feel like winners of an election using exclusively objective measures of party performance may underestimate the heterogeneity of citizens' feelings, and possibly produce a distorted view of public opinion immediately after elections. Uncovering this process of interpretation of election results by voters opens us the possibility of investigating the role of media, parties and leaders in influencing voters' views about election outcomes.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit.*

*It draws on the author's article ['On the Subjectivity of the Experience of Victory: Who Are the Election Winners?'](#), published in *Political Psychology*.*

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## About the author



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