Voters who support under-represented parties are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the political system

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How does over and under-representation of political parties affect voter satisfaction with democracy? **André Blais**, **Alexandre Morin-Chassé,** *and* **Shane P. Singh** *share research which shows that voters who support parties such as UKIP and the Green Party are less likely to express satisfaction with the political system as a whole, however voters who see their parties overrepresented by the system are likely to approve.*

A second bite of the cake? (Credit: CaptainOates, CC BY 2.0)

The act of voting is central in a democracy. Although each election is unique, one can easily think of a general time frame that is common to most of them. Throughout a campaign, parties and candidates try to persuade voters to support them. Voters make up their mind and cast their ballots. On Election Day, vote shares translate into seats and power in accordance with the electoral rules. In the end, some parties perform well, others do more poorly, and a new government is formed. In the days or weeks following the election, it is not uncommon to see supporters of the parties in power express satisfaction with the democratic process, while those whose voices remain unrepresented in government manifest their disappointment.

In a paper forthcoming in Party Politics, we examine how the performance of the party one voted for affects his or her degree of satisfaction with the way democracy works. We use 13 panel election studies that were conducted for the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project. Each study was run between 2011 and 2013, and the surveys encompass ten regions within five countries: Canada, France, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland. The surveys each include two waves, usually with about 1,000 persons responding to the pre-election questionnaire in the last two weeks of the campaign and about 800 of them responding to the post-election questionnaire immediately after the election. Both waves include a question asking respondents how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in their region or country (depending on the type of election). Since we have measures of satisfaction just before and after the election, we are quite confident that any changes observed between the two

waves can be attributed to the election outcome rather than some other unobserved factor(s).

Our goals are;

> *(a) to determine whether those whose party performed well in the election become more satisfied with democracy after the election and*
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> *(b) to shed light on which aspects of party performance matter most.*

To do so, we initially look at three indicators of party performance: votes received, seats won in the legislature, and seats obtained in the cabinet. We find, without much surprise, that people who voted for parties that were more successful in terms of votes or legislative seats became more satisfied with democracy. But, taking our analyses a step further, we also observe that those who voted for parties that received many votes but few seats—that is, parties that were underrepresented in parliament—became more dissatisfied. This is not all. Having voted for a party that is represented in the cabinet also boosts satisfaction, even after accounting for vote and seat performance, especially if that party has a majority of cabinet seats. In short, voters' views about whether democracy is working well or not are partly affected by the performance of the party they voted for, and that performance is judged on the basis of how good the party was at winning votes, winning seats in the legislature, and winning cabinet positions—and on whether the electoral system was fair with that party.

We also show that individual- and party-level characteristics condition the degree to which election outcomes affect satisfaction with democracy. In particular, those who are more invested in "their" party (they were active in the campaign or they did not ever consider voting for another party) become especially disheartened with democracy when their party's seat share does not fairly reflect its vote share. Further, for individuals who perceive the election as fair and for those whose parties garner a high proportion of legislative seats, the link between a party's vote share and seat share has relatively little impact on satisfaction with democracy.

A number of interpretations and predictions can be drawn from our results. For example, we find that satisfaction with democracy is sensitive to representation biases introduced by the electoral system. Indeed, satisfaction with democracy decreases when a voter supports a party that turns out to be underrepresented in the legislature, as compared to the proportion of votes it obtained. This suggests that voters are more satisfied—or at least less dissatisfied—when seats are proportional to votes. Yet, our findings also present a challenge to this interpretation. Our analyses show that voters do not show the same dissatisfaction when representation biases lean in their favor. On the contrary, our models suggest that, if two parties were to obtain the same share of votes but a different share of seats, those voters who supported the advantaged party would experience a bigger increase in satisfaction.

In short, voters' reactions to representation biases depend on whether their party is advantaged or disadvantaged in a quite predictable way.

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The citation for the full study is: André Blais, Alexandre Morin-Chassé, and Shane P. Singh. Forthcoming. Election outcomes, legislative representation, and satisfaction with democracy. Party Politics. The article is accessible here: For more information about the Making Electoral Democracy Work project, see: www.electoraldemocracy.com.

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