

## On the Subjectivity of the Experience of Victory: Who Are the Election Winners?

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*Elections represent key moments in democratic countries, and an established finding from the existing literature is that winners of elections display higher levels of satisfaction with democracy. Yet we know almost nothing about the times when voters feel like winners of an election. Using panel data in four countries, this article finds that while the objective performance of the supported party—measured using vote share and changes in vote share from the previous election—has a very important effect on feeling like an election winner, prior expectations regarding the election’s outcome as well as preferences for the supported party significantly moderate the effect of party performance on voter feelings. It seems also that the identification of the winners and losers of elections are clearer in majoritarian-style democracies than in proportional systems with coalition governments. Ultimately, the findings indicate that measuring who are the winners of an election using exclusively objective measures of party performance may provide a distorted view of public opinion following the elections.*

**KEY WORDS:** election winners, electoral systems, partisan rationalization, party preferences, vote choice, voter expectations

The importance of election outcomes often transcends the day of the election itself. In particular, extensive prior research indicates that in advanced industrial democracies, the supporters of winning parties display higher levels of satisfaction with democracy, system support, and perception of legitimacy of the voting rules than do those who support the losing parties (e.g., Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan & Listhaug, 2005; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Nadeau & Blais, 1993; Norris, 1999). In spite of the normative and theoretical importance of these findings, existing literature has devoted almost no attention to the question of when *voters* feel like they are either winners or losers of an election.

Winners have almost always been classified indirectly, as those individuals who voted for “the actual party in power” (Anderson & Guillory, 1997, p. 72). The “party in power” loosely translates as the party that took over the government following the election (or *parties* in the case of a coalition government). A recent line of literature has, however, started to cast doubts on the classification of winners as a homogeneous group. For example, Singh (2014) notes that the effect of winning on democratic satisfaction is particularly pronounced for voters who selected winning parties to which they have strong partisan attachments. Moreover, Blais, Morin-Chassé, and Singh (2017) find that the relationship between winning and satisfaction is moderated by the characteristics and performance of the party that one supports (see also Curini, Jou, & Memoli, 2015; Singh & Thornton, 2016).

These results open up the possibility that not everybody who voted for a party that now finds itself in government feels like equal winners (see also Stiers, Daoust, & Blais, 2018). It is also possible that not everyone who supported a party that failed to make it into the government considers themselves losers of the elections. More broadly speaking, election outcomes could be subject to interpretation by voters themselves. Voters' subjective interpretation of political facts has been uncovered in a variety of settings, spanning from interpretation of the economic well-being of a country (Lewis-Beck, 2006) to bias in perceptions of parties' policy positions (Krosnick, 2002). It is therefore possible that voters interpret the election outcomes differently and that the experience of victory may be subject to a process of *interpretation*, with different voters attaching various meanings to party performance. Winners might be those who voted for a party that has now successfully made it into the government, supporters of a party that received the most votes, parties that entered parliament for the first time, or more simply a party that increased its vote share from previous elections (see also Anderson et al., 2005).

In this article, we seek evidence of *interpretation* at the mass level of the election outcomes by the voters themselves. In other words, we seek 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 (and in particular their expectations and preferences for parties) moderate the effect of objective considerations.

To this end, we use panel data from four countries—Austria, Canada, Germany, and Spain—that span majoritarian and proportional systems. Such variation is important to generalize our results beyond a specific electoral setting and speculate as to whether the meaning of winning an election is different under multiparty systems with coalition governments in comparison with single-party governments or majoritarian-style democracies.

We find significant, systematic differences in the ways in which winners and losers construe the meaning of an election. In particular, the findings indicate that while a party entering the government unequivocally augments perceptions that the supported party has won the election, the performance of the party in terms of votes (and especially in comparison to the previous election) has an equally strong impact. The empirical findings also indicate that voters' prior expectations and their party preferences moderate the relationship between party performance and feelings of winning. However, the feeling of winning or losing an election appears to be different in different countries. 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.

This article's results provide important new findings regarding the winners and losers of elections, stressing both the heterogeneity of the winners as a group as well as the relevant role played by voters' psychology, as the experience of victory lies in the first instance in the eyes of the beholder. The findings also make two more general contributions. First, the results speak to the literature concerning winners and losers and people's satisfaction with democracy, shedding light on the possibility that measurements of election winners using exclusively objective criteria of party performance may provide a distorted view of public opinion following elections. Indeed, this article's findings point to the conclusion that the distinction between winners and losers of an election is not exclusively based on successfully entering the government after the election; while this may give voters a huge boost in terms of feeling like winners, a small increase in vote share as well as first-time entry into the parliament appears to have an equally important effect on voter feelings. Second, the country-level differences uncovered in this article speak more directly to the literature on political institutions and how institutions moderate voters' perceptions: Small parties' supporters are far more disappointed with election results in majoritarian systems than their counterparts in proportional systems, even after controlling for parties' objective performance, prior expectations, and party preferences. This consideration is especially important in the contemporary period, marked by growing polarization

between party elites and political discontent. We will discuss the implications of this dynamic for understanding voters' support for democratic institutions further in the article's concluding section.

### Interpretations of Election Outcomes

Election results are never just about the objective data, and they are commonly characterized by multiple interpretations by candidates, media, and voters as political competition and debates concerning the elections continue well beyond Election Day.

In this regard, early studies explored *party candidates'* interpretations of the results of the elections in which they participated. For example, Kingdon (1966, pp. 23–34) discovered a “congratulation-rationalization” effect among winning and losing candidates. Winning candidates are much more likely to congratulate the electorate by claiming—and/or believing—that voters were reasonably well-informed about the elections and that the electorate usually made the right decision at the polls. Conversely, losing candidates tend to rationalize their defeat by blaming the rules or assuming that voters had failed to meet their responsibilities as democratic citizens.

Alongside politicians, the media also interpret the meaning of elections in search of the real message that (they believe) the electorate intended to convey (Hershey, 1992). Thomas and Baas (1996) among others have famously discussed how in the aftermath of the 1980 U.S. elections, the mainstream media interpreted the results as citizens giving full support to Reagan's conservative agenda, yet this construction of meaning received little support in studies of public opinion following the elections. Such a “mandate electoral interpretation,” which may provide long-term empowerment to the newly elected government (Kelley, 1983), is often time-constructed rather than derived, because direct measurements from public opinion data are not typically available in the immediate aftermath of elections (Shamir, Shamir, & Sheaffer, 2008, p. 51). Different explanations of election outcomes are likely to become conventional wisdom, especially when they attain support among mainstream media or politicians.

Voters themselves tend to attach different “meanings” to election outcomes. Shamir and Shamir (2008) identified variation across six Israeli national elections among the general public regarding key issues, including the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, peace and security, and the performance of the incumbent Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. In analyzing data from elections in the United States, Craig, Martinez, Gainous, and Kane (2006) found systematic differences in the ways in which winners and losers accord legitimacy to the victorious candidate and that these considerations had an impact on political trust and satisfaction with democracy.

Do voters also subjectively interpret election outcomes in terms of who has won or lost the elections? Is it correct to assume that the election winners are (mostly) the supporters of the party that made it into the government? We discuss below several reasons why voters may feel like election winners.

### Who Are the Election Winners: Hypotheses

The feeling of winning or losing an election can have two principal sources, which we broadly categorize as either objective or subjective.

#### *The Role of Objective Party Performance*

First and foremost, objective election results should matter. The logic is rather straightforward: The larger the vote share of a party, the more likely it is that its supporters will feel that their party has won the election. Beyond a simple vote count, voters should also be mindful of their party

gaining political representation, that is, gaining enough seats to enter the parliament. Being part of the government is expected to matter the most in terms of representation, because this affords parties the power to enact their pledged policies (see Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012). Hence, in terms of objective party performance, we expect that:

*H1a:* The larger the vote share of the supported party, the more likely its supporters are to feel winners of the elections.

*H1b:* Supporters of parties that enter the government are more likely to feel like winners of the elections than those of parties that only enter the parliament or do not enter the parliament.

However, success must usually be measured relative to clear benchmarks. Of these possible benchmarks, party performance at the previous election is expected to be important to voters. Performance in previous elections is used by parties to measure the competitiveness of upcoming elections, as well as by the media which, during election campaigns, tend to compare the parties' prospects of gaining or losing relative to the previous election. In particular, we see that compared to opinion poll data, which are often subject to journalistic interpretation or media framing (e.g., Van der Meer, Hakhverdian, & Aaldering, 2016), previous election outcomes can provide voters with important objective information to be used in upcoming elections (Blais & Bodet, 2006). Thus, electoral gains and losses, that is, vote change since the previous election, should matter for supporters in perceiving whether or not their party has won (see also Delgado, 2016; Stiers et al., 2018). Specifically, supporters of parties that gained votes in the most recent election should be more likely to feel happy about the election outcome than those of parties that lost votes. Beyond increasing or decreasing vote shares, if voters use previous election results as a benchmark, then the feeling of winning should also depend on the performance of the party in terms of achieved representation compared to previous elections; achieving either the prime ministership or representation in the parliament should, in comparison to losing, increase the likelihood that voters feel like election winners. Hence, we expect that:

*H2a:* Supporters of parties that gained votes in the most recent election compared to the previous election are more likely to feel like winners of the elections than those of parties that lost votes.

*H2b:* Supporters of parties that won the prime ministership or entered the parliament compared to the previous election are more likely to feel like winners of the elections than those of parties that lost the prime ministership or representation altogether.

### *The Role of Subjective Prior Expectations and Party Preferences*

Moving to subjective sources, voter expectations regarding the outcome of the election may play an important role in the ways in which voters evaluate the election outcome itself. No matter how voters built up their expectations (whether using the previous elections as a benchmark or using information collected during the election campaign in terms of opinion polls), their expectations are likely to shape their feelings about the election's outcome. Existing literature on social perception teaches us that people's expectations do in fact color their interpretation of outcomes (Shepperd & McNulty, 2002). Winning no money in a gamble feels good when one expected to lose \$20, but it feels bad when one expected to win \$20 (Mellers, Schwartz, Ho, & Ritov, 1997). It is often acknowledged that bronze medallists tend to look happier than silver medallists when standing on a podium, presumably because whereas the former imagine the alternative outcome of receiving no medal,

the latter imagine the alternative outcome of receiving a gold medal (Medvec, Madley, & Gilovich, 1995).

The role of prior expectations has also been discussed in the context of election outcomes. For instance, Blais and Gélinau (2007) conjecture that “pessimistic” winners are more satisfied with democracy than their optimistic counterparts following elections, as they are favorably surprised by the outcome. Hence, we expect that the higher the expectations of the election outcome of the supported parties (whether defined in terms of winning seats, being part of the parliament, or even of the government), the lower the positive feelings about the election outcome itself. On the other hand, lower expectations should boost the effect of objective political fact. This suggests a conditional hypothesis in that for equal party performance, voters will be more likely to feel that their party has won the elections when their expectations were lower compared to when they were higher. Hence, we expect that:

*H3: Preelectoral expectations of the performance of the supported party moderate the impact of the election outcome: for equal party performance, the higher the expectations, the less likely voters are to feel like winners of the elections.*

In keeping with subjective sources, previous literature has uncovered extensive partisan rationalization, with partisans more likely to interpret politically relevant information in line with their party preferences (e.g., Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). To alleviate the psychological discomfort of a loss, people might implement a dissonance-reduction strategy such that a party supporter might interpret the electoral results in a rosier fashion compared to nonparty supporters. The available evidence indicates, however, that the strength of attachment to the winning side tends to enhance the more general effects of an election result (Anderson et al., 2005; Singh et al., 2012): “For example, a strong partisan identifier is likely to experience a steeper decrease in support for the political system when his preferred party loses a national election than a weak partisan identifier on the same side of the election” (Daniller, 2016, p. 152). In this regard, Singh (2014) differentiates between “non-optimal winners” and “optimal winners”: The former are those selecting an alternative party to the most popular but with a more realistic chance of winning (e.g., Cox, 1997). Singh (2014) finds that “non-optimal winners” usually display very similar levels of satisfaction with democracy than losers: Only optimal winners in fact receive the added benefit of truly supporting their first choice and accompanying that party to victory. Such “investment” in a specific election (supporting the favorite party) is likely to boost the feeling of winning owing to the importance that party preferences play when it comes to voter choice. Hence, we expect that the higher the preferences for the voted party, the more sensitive voters are in considering themselves winners of the election, keeping the electoral performance of the supported party constant. In summary, we expect that:

*H4: Party preferences of the supported party moderate the impact of the election outcome: for equal party performance, the higher the preferences, the more likely voters are to feel winners of the elections.*

## **Data and Methods**

We test our hypotheses using panel election studies conducted for the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project (Blais, 2010), as well as data from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) project (Wagner et al., 2018). The elections covered comprise: the 2015 national elections in Canada (three samples, one from Ontario, one from British Columbia, and one from Quebec); the 2013 federal election in Germany (sample from Lower Saxony and Bavaria); the 2011

general election in Spain (sample from Madrid and Catalonia); and the 2017 Austrian national elections.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the MEDW surveys includes two waves, generally with approximately 1,000 persons responding to a preselection questionnaire in the final two weeks of a campaign, of whom approximately 800 respond to the postelection questionnaire immediately following the election (see also Stephenson, Blais, Bol, & Kostelka, 2017). The surveys were conducted online among recruited panel members, with quotas that guarantee that the samples were representative of the population under study in regard to age, gender, education, and region. The AUTNES 2017 Online Panel Study surveyed Austrian citizens eligible to vote on Election Day 2017. Respondents were selected (quota sample) based on the following key demographics: age, gender, gender  $\times$  age, region (province), educational level, household size, and population size based on census data. Hence, the quota sample was structured to closely represent the Austrian population. While the AUTNES panel includes six waves in order to correspond as possible with the design of the MEDW data, we only use the two survey waves conducted immediately before and after the election.

The sample of the countries included in this article enables us to cover a varied set of party systems and electoral rules, a feature that enhances the generalisability of our findings. In fact, while Canada employs a single-member plurality (SMP) system, Austria, Germany and Spain use varying types of proportional systems. Indeed, Germany is characterized by a mixed-member proportional system that renders mostly proportional outcomes with coalition governments inevitable after elections, akin to the proportional system used in Austria. In contrast, Spain uses an almost pure proportional system, characterized by a more majoritarian-style of politics, similar to the situation in Canada, with coalition governments at the national level in Spain only being a recent, rare experience. This diversity is very important as the meaning of winning and losing will tend to be much clearer under majoritarian outcomes whereby only one party forms a government and the others can at best sit in the opposition benches. Conversely, the multiparty governments typical of Austria and Germany may afford more than one party an opportunity to consider itself an election winner; moreover, shifts in votes are much more consequential in terms of political representation in Canada than they are in other countries.

Given that we are interested in measuring feelings of victory, our dependent variable simply measures whether voters felt like election winners (or not) using the question: “Would you say that the party you voted for won the election or lost the election?” Given the binary nature of our variables, we present below logit models in which “0” means that the respondent chose the loser option and “1” the winner (winner = 1, 57.30%). The remaining answer options are slightly different in the AUTNES and the MEDW data, and given that they are not directly related to our hypotheses, we exclude them altogether from the main analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding our independent variables, and starting with electoral performance, in order to test the first set of hypotheses we use two variables: one is party vote share (H1a) (from 0 to 100%;  $M = 26.88$ ,  $SD = 13.08$ ); the second is a categorical variable for whether the party has entered the parliament but not the government after the elections (coded 0), made it into the government (coded 1) or did not make it into the parliament (coded 2) (H1b) (respectively 39.27%, 54.64%, and 6.09%). In order to measure the impact of party performance relative to the last election, we use changes in vote share (H2a) (from 0 to 100%;  $M = 53.65$ ,  $SD = 3.82$ ) plus a categorical variable measuring whether the party has won the prime ministership or parliamentary representation (coded 1), no

<sup>1</sup>While the MEDW data also include France and Switzerland, we cannot use them in this article because the respective questionnaire did not ask a question about feelings of winning.

<sup>2</sup>AUTNES includes “neither win nor lose” and “Don’t know” options while MEDW only the latter. Additional analyses in the online supporting information show that the article’s findings are robust to an alternative three-category dependent variable.



change (coded 0), or lost the prime ministership or representation (coded 2) compared to the previous elections (H2b) (respectively 57.30%, 21.60%, and 21.10%).

Regarding the moderating variables, measuring expectations built by voters during election campaigns is not easy, and ideally one would differentiate between small and big parties' supporters. For small parties in political systems with minimum-vote thresholds, a meaningful question asks respondents about the likelihood that a party will be able to pass the minimum-vote threshold and gain representation in the parliament. For larger parties, however, such questions are largely void of meaning since for large parties that usually gain more than 15–20%, representation in parliament is usually beyond doubt to the average voter. In this case, in order to measure expectations, we measure performance relative to other parties in winning the election, that is, leading the government. Hence, for large parties, the expectation measure is the probability that the perceived most-likely coalition led by the supported party will be formed after the election.<sup>3</sup> For Canada, we are unable to distinguish between small and big parties since respondents were only asked about party performance at the local level using the question "Please rate the chances of each party's candidate winning the seat in your local riding;" and we rely on this question for all parties.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for both large and smaller parties, supporters' expectations are measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 means higher expectations (H3) ( $M = 6.59$ ,  $SD = 2.66$ ).

Party preferences are measured slightly differently in the AUTNES compared to the MEDW data; we use a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "do not like the party at all" in MEDW and "would never vote for this party" in AUTNES and 10 means "like the party very much" and "would certainly vote for this party" in AUTNES (H4) ( $M = 7.84$ ,  $SD = 2.10$ ).

We also control for standard demographic variables such as gender (female = 1, 51.39%), age ( $M = 44.90$ ,  $SD = 14.86$ ) and education ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 2.92$ ), and political interest ( $M = 6.1$ ,  $SD = 3.24$ ) in our regression models to take into account potential individual-level differences in the propensity to feel like an election winner. All independent variables have been measured at the preelectoral stage to avoid contamination of feelings with the election results at the postelectoral stage.

### Empirical Findings: Variation on the Experience of Victory

Table 1 shows the distribution of feelings of victory across party voters for each country separately. The table also shows the percentage of respondents excluded from the empirical analysis for choosing the "Don't know" answer in Canada, Germany, and Spain or the "Don't know" and "neither" in Austria.

Starting with Austria, the Austrian Peoples' Party (ÖVP) won a clear victory in the 2017 Austrian parliamentary election, obtaining 31.5% of the vote share (+7.5 percentage points compared to 2013). Table 1 shows that all respondents who voted for the ÖVP thought that their party was an election winner, with none choosing the loser option. The same percentage was found for the voters of the Green spin-off party, Liste Peter Pilz that managed to gather just enough votes to enter the parliament (Bodlos & Plescia, 2018). Similarly, a high percentage (98.7%) of supporters of the right-wing populist party, Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), thought that their party (gaining 26% of the votes, about 5.5 percentage points more than in 2013) won the election. Of the voters of the incumbent chancellor party, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), which ranked second with 26.9% of the votes, an almost identical vote share as in 2013, more than 82% thought that the party lost the election. Table 1 shows that none of the Green voters (which for the first time since 1986

<sup>3</sup>Government status is, of course, not irrelevant for small parties, but the literature on strategic voting teaches us that small parties' supporters are primarily interested in their party making it into the parliament (see, for example, Gschwend, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>There is a question that might better measure expectations about large parties in Canada—"Which party do you think will win the most seats in this election?"—but it cannot be used in this article since the answers are coded categorically and are not comparable to the 0–10-point scale used in other countries and for smaller parties in Canada.

**Table 1.** The Distribution of Winner and Loser Feelings Among Party Supporters (column %)

<b>2017 AUSTRIA</b>						
	<i>ÖVP</i>	<i>SPÖ</i>	<i>FPÖ</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>NEOS</i>	<i>Liste PILZ</i>
Loser	0.0	82.8	1.3	100.0	10.8	0.0
Winner	100.0	17.2	98.7	0.0	89.2	100.0
Tot (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
Tot (N)	426	236	610	78	74	159
% Excluded DK-neither loser nor winner	4.9	57.5	15.5	7.1	53.2	9.4
<b>2015 CANADA</b>						
	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>NDP</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>Bloc Quebecois</i>	
Loser	1.3	96.9	95.2	96.7	86.8	
Winner	98.7	3.1	4.8	3.3	13.2	
Tot (%)	100	100	100	100	100	
Tot (N)	1302	891	859	151	220	
% Excluded DK	0.4	1.4	3.6	8.5	6.8	
<b>2013 GERMANY</b>						
	<i>CDU+CSU</i>	<i>SPD</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>FDP</i>	<i>Left Party</i>	<i>AfD</i>
Loser	2.9	54.8	92.4	97.4	36.4	16.3
Winner	98.1	45.2	7.6	2.6	63.9	83.7
Tot (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
Tot (N)	1606	743	314	233	172	264
% Excluded DK	2.0	19.9	8.7	1.7	21.5	13.7
<b>2011 SPAIN</b>						
	<i>PP</i>	<i>PSOE</i>	<i>IU</i>	<i>UPyD</i>		
Loser	98.6	0.00	56.41	58.25		
Winner	1.38	100.0	43.59	41.75		
Tot (%)	100	100	100	100		
Tot (N)	289	398	117	103		
% Excluded DK	0.3	0.3	22.5	19.5		

Note. Data unweighted.

failed to reach the 4% threshold to enter the parliament) thought that their party won the election. Lastly, for NEOS (New Austria and Liberal Forum), which barely made it into the parliament, a very high proportion of its voters (89.2%) thought that the party represented a winner, yet its voters were almost equally split between winners and the “neither” option.

In the 2013 elections in Germany, voters of the CDU and its Bavarian sister, the CSU, were most likely to consider their party an election winner. The CDU won the election with a vote share of 41.5%, almost 8% higher than in the previous election. Another party with a rather (surprisingly) high percentage of supporters feeling like election winners is the Alternative for Germany (AfD). This party participated in its first ever appearance in a German federal election and won 4.7 percentage points, narrowly below the 5% electoral threshold. The Liberal Party (FDP) was unable to make it into the Bundestag for the first time in postwar political history, and accordingly, the party had the highest percentage of those who thought that their party lost the election. Interestingly,



while the Left Party and the Greens in Germany obtained an almost equal percentage of votes and seats, the Left Party's top candidate, Gregor Gysi, sold the third place as a huge success for the party (Faas, 2015), and we see that more than 63% of the Left Party's supporters (compared to 7.6% of the Greens) felt that their party won the election. The Social Democrats received 25.7% of the vote (+2.7 percentage points) and ranked second, but a relatively far larger share of its supporters considered themselves losers in the elections.

The picture looks rather different in Canada, whose results are rather more straightforward. We see from Table 1 that almost all party supporters of the Liberals felt that their party won the election (98.7%). Both the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Conservatives were crushed, respectively losing 51 and 60 seats. A similarly high percentage of their supporters felt that their party lost the election. The Green party did not increase or decrease their number of votes, but they lost one of the two seats they controlled in the parliament, and we can see from Table 1 that almost 97% of its voters felt that the party lost the elections. Finally, the separatist Bloc Quebecois, previously written off for dead, went from two to 10 seats, yet only about 13% of its supporters thought that the party won the elections, a very low percentage in comparison to the smaller parties in Germany and in Austria.

Finally, in Spain the distribution of feelings of victory are more similar to those in Canada when one considers the largest parties—the People's Party (PP) and the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)—but more similar to Austria and Germany when considering the smaller parties: Plural Left (IU) and Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD). The voters of the incumbent Prime Minister's party all believe that their party lost the election, with an almost converse situation for the PP party, which obtained the prime ministership. For the smaller parties, which slightly increased their vote share from the 2008 elections, the feelings are almost split between winning and losing the elections.<sup>5</sup>

As far as the "Don't know" answers, Table 1 shows that this option is chosen more often by supporters of small compared to larger parties; the percentage of "Don't know" answers is also much higher for both types of parties in Austria and Germany in comparison to Spain and especially Canada. All in all, while the objective performance seems to be very important to explain feelings of victory (H1a–2b), the considerable variation in Table 1 indicates that there are other factors at play that might distort or enhance these feelings.

### **Empirical Findings: Explaining Variation in the Experience of Victory**

Moving to the multivariate analysis, Model 1 in Table 2 shows that in line with Hypothesis 1a, vote share has a positive and significant effect on feelings of victory, since the larger the vote share of the supported party, the more likely the supporters are to feel like winners of the elections. Increasing vote share by one percentage point on average increases the probability of feeling like a winner by 1.7 percentage points. Model 2 in Table 2 shows 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 (reference category) in line with Hypothesis 1b. However, the results show that making it into the parliament but not into the government feels like less of a victory than not making it into the parliament. Table 2, Model 2, shows that this difference is significant at  $p < 0.001$  level.

Moving to a comparison with the party results at the previous elections, the findings from Model 3 in Table 2 show that an increase in the vote share has a positive impact on feeling like a winner, providing support for Hypotheses 2a. In terms of Hypothesis 2b, Model 4 shows that 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. Yet the results also document an interesting asymmetric effect: The positive effect of winning the prime ministership or representation compared to no change is larger

<sup>5</sup>Chi-square tests run separately by country suggest that none of the patterns displayed in Table 1 are due to chance.

**Table 2.** Election Performance and Winner Status: Logit Models

	Dependent Variable: Feeling That Voted Party Has Won the Election					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Vote share	0.112*** (0.003)				0.018*** (0.004)	
Vote change			0.994*** (0.022)		0.931*** (0.025)	
Ref: in parliament but not in government						
In government		2.474*** (0.062)				1.790*** (0.083)
Not in parliament		0.412*** (0.112)				−0.031 (0.118)
Ref: no change						
Won PM or seats				2.575*** (0.089)		1.376*** (0.105)
Lost PM or seats				−0.795*** (0.077)		0.074 (0.088)
Prior expectations	0.063*** (0.012)	0.010 (0.011)	0.024 (0.015)	0.096*** (0.011)	0.029 (0.015)	0.032** (0.012)
Party preferences	−0.042** (0.015)	0.035* (0.014)	0.077*** (0.019)	0.050*** (0.014)	0.061** (0.019)	0.044** (0.015)
Political interest	−0.008 (0.015)	0.026 (0.015)	−0.000 (0.021)	0.005 (0.014)	−0.005 (0.021)	0.015 (0.015)
Age	−0.006** (0.002)	−0.004 (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	−0.005* (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	−0.005* (0.002)
Gender	−0.110 (0.057)	−0.151** (0.055)	−0.073 (0.078)	−0.134* (0.053)	−0.078 (0.078)	−0.158** (0.056)
Education	0.020 (0.023)	0.005 (0.023)	−0.033 (0.030)	−0.064** (0.023)	−0.026 (0.030)	−0.025 (0.023)
Ref: Canada						
Austria	2.879*** (0.200)	1.813*** (0.197)	7.234*** (0.284)	2.951*** (0.194)	6.933*** (0.285)	2.126*** (0.200)
Germany	1.865*** (0.073)	0.448*** (0.070)	6.418*** (0.150)	2.050*** (0.074)	6.173*** (0.155)	1.256*** (0.094)
Spain	0.553*** (0.104)	0.239* (0.101)	6.833*** (0.179)	1.447*** (0.107)	6.536*** (0.187)	0.599*** (0.110)
(Intercept)	−3.521*** (0.201)	−1.692*** (0.184)	−57.72*** (1.297)	−1.908*** (0.184)	−54.484*** (1.432)	−2.018*** (0.193)
Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)	7713.5	8303.1	4605.1	8661.5	4583.5	8120.6
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	7790.7	8387.4	4682.4	8745.8	4667.8	8219.0
Log Likelihood	−3845.7	−4139.6	−2291.6	−4318.7	−2279.8	−4046.3
Deviance	7691.4	8279.2	4583.1	8637.5	4559.5	8092.6
<i>N</i>	8320	8320	8320	8320	8320	8320
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.32	0.27	0.59	0.23	0.60	0.28

Note. Standard errors in parenthesis: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

than the negative effect of losing the prime ministership or representation. Table 2 also indicates that changes from previous elections (Model 3) are much more important than present performance (Model 1), with one percentage point increase in the vote-change variable leading on average to an increase in the probability of feeling like a winner by 8 percentage points compared to the 1.7 of the vote-share variable. In fact, if we run an additional model that simultaneously uses vote share and changes in vote share (Model 5), we see that the strongest effect is played by vote change with the coefficient of the variable measuring vote-share dropping substantially. A similar analysis can also be conducted in terms of winning or losing parliamentary representation: In Model 6, we see that when running a model including both present performance and changes from previous elections in terms of representation, the size of the variables' coefficient for entering the government or winning the prime ministership decreases, but both remain significant. In terms of representation, the current performance—that is, entering the government—is slightly more important than changes from the previous elections, an opposite conclusion we would reach looking at vote share where changes are more important than current performance.

In order to examine the moderating role of expectations and party preferences on feeling like a winner for diverse levels of party performance, we add interactions to our models. Starting with Hypothesis 3, we expect a negative interaction term, that is, the greater the party performance, the less likely one is to feel like a winner if expectations were high prior to the elections. Table 3 shows a positive, albeit nonsignificant, interaction between vote share and prior expectations and a negative interaction between changes in vote share and prior expectations. Figure 1 illustrates the marginal effects of prior expectations on feeling like a winner for varying levels of vote share (left plot in Figure 1) and changes in vote share (right plot in Figure 1), with all other variables in the model holding constant (package *interplot* in R; Solt, Hu, & Kenke, 2015). Figure 1 indicates that the effect of vote share on feeling like a winner is not moderated by prior expectations. Conversely, the negative slope of the plot on the right indicates that the impact of a vote-share increase on feelings decreases as prior expectations increase. In other words, the higher the voter expectations during the election campaign, the less likely one is to feel that the party won the election, in line with Hypothesis 3.

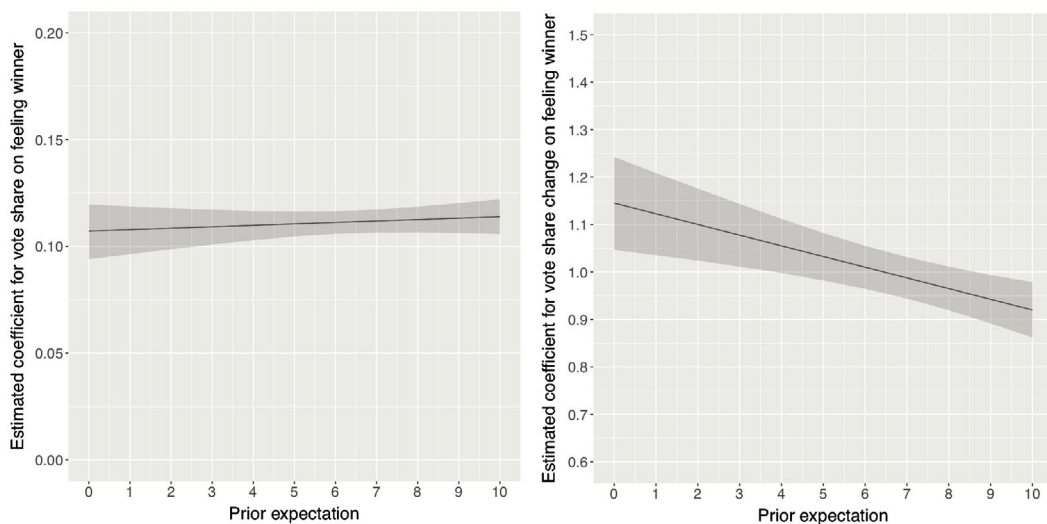
Moving to Hypothesis 4, we expect a positive interaction effect, that is, the higher the performance the more likely one is to feel like a winner if preferences for the supported party are high. Model 3 shows a positive interaction between party preferences and performance, while the interaction between party preferences and changes in party performance is negative but nonsignificant. Figure 2 illustrates the marginal effects of party preferences on feeling like a winner for varying levels of vote share (left plot in Figure 2) and changes in vote share (right plot in Figure 2), holding constant all other variables in the model. The positive slope in the plot on the left indicates that an increase in vote share since the previous election is associated with feeling like a winner at a much higher rate when party preferences are high than when they are low. This provides support for Hypothesis 4. The plot on the right of Figure 2 indicates that the effect of vote change on feeling like a winner is not moderated by party preferences. The additional findings using indicators of party representation (presented in Table S2 in the online supporting information) provide somewhat similar results when it comes to party preferences (Figure S2 in the online supporting information): the higher the party preferences, the more likely one is to feel like an election winner for any given party performance. Yet, the results for the interaction of party performance and prior expectations (Figure S1 in the online supporting information) tells us that prior expectations diminish the effect of party performance only when the party loses representation or the prime ministership while prior expectations enhances the effects of entering the government and winning the prime ministership.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Conclusions remain unchanged when using seat share instead of or in addition to vote share as the two variables are strongly correlated.

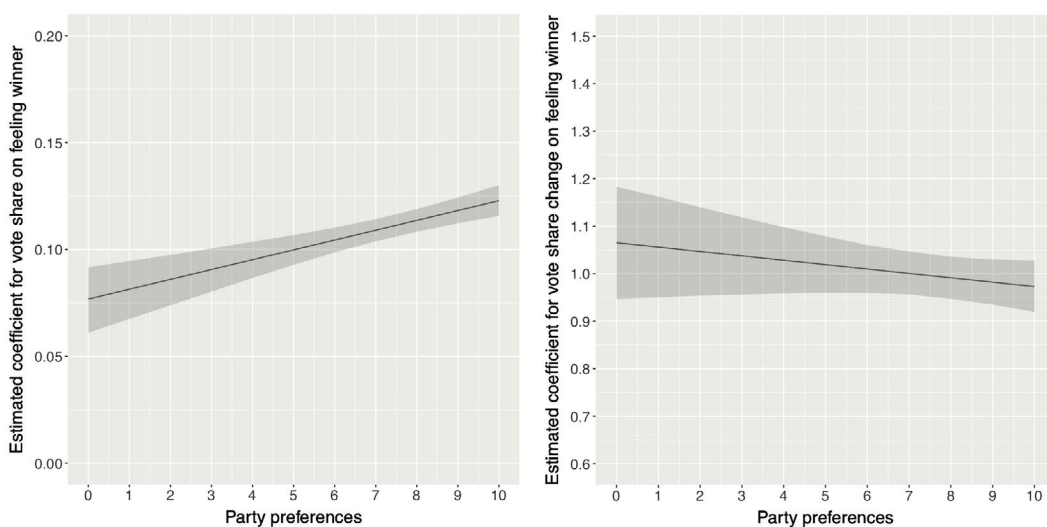
**Table 3.** Election Performance and Winner Status Moderated by Expectations and Preferences: Logit Models

	Dependent Variable: Feeling That Voted Party Has Won the Election			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Vote share	0.107*** (0.006)		0.077*** (0.008)	
Vote change		1.145*** (0.050)		1.065*** (0.061)
Vote share × Prior expectations	0.001 (0.001)			
Vote change × Prior expectations		−0.023*** (0.006)		
Vote share × Party preferences			0.005*** (0.001)	
Vote change × Party preferences				−0.009 (0.007)
Prior expectations	0.044 (0.027)	1.207*** (0.335)	0.063*** (0.012)	0.025 (0.015)
Party preferences	−0.041** (0.015)	0.083*** (0.019)	−0.150*** (0.027)	0.561 (0.383)
Political interest	−0.008 (0.015)	0.001 (0.021)	−0.016 (0.015)	0.001 (0.021)
Age	−0.006** (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	−0.006** (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)
Gender	−0.112* (0.057)	−0.069 (0.078)	−0.112 (0.057)	−0.070 (0.078)
Education	0.021 (0.023)	−0.032 (0.030)	0.022 (0.023)	−0.033 (0.030)
Ref: Canada				
Austria	2.883*** (0.200)	7.227*** (0.285)	2.800*** (0.200)	7.238*** (0.284)
Germany	1.860*** (0.074)	6.385*** (0.149)	1.856*** (0.074)	6.411*** (0.150)
Spain	0.567*** (0.105)	6.794*** (0.179)	0.540*** (0.103)	6.840*** (0.180)
(Intercept)	−3.407*** (0.250)	−65.647*** (2.686)	−2.632*** (0.271)	−61.466*** (3.270)
Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)	7714.9	4594.2	7693.5	4605.5
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	7799.2	4678.5	7777.8	4689.8
Log Likelihood	−3845.4	−2285.1	−3834.7	−2290.7
Deviance	7690.9	4570.2	7669.5	4581.5
<i>N</i>	8320	8320	8320	8320
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.32	0.60	0.32	0.59

Note. Standard errors in parenthesis: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .



**Figure 1.** The moderating role of prior expectations on vote share and change from previous elections. Based on Models 1 and 2 in Table 3. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



**Figure 2.** The moderating role of party preferences on vote share and change from previous elections. Based on Models 3 and 4 in Table 3. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

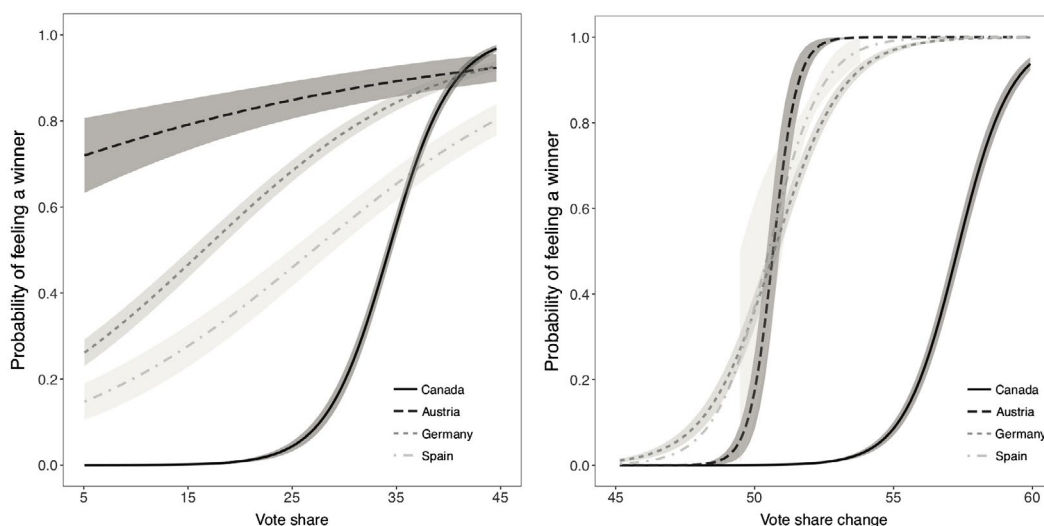
When considered overall, these results point to two main conclusions. First, we see that entering the government provides the greatest boost in feeling like an election winner but also a differentiated effect of party performance, with changes in vote share playing a much more important role than actual vote share. The interpretation of the results concerning Hypotheses 2 and 3 suggests that subjectivity both in terms of prior expectations and party performance significantly moderates party objective performance. Yet the effect of the two moderating variables depends on the performance variable considered: Prior expectations negatively moderate the impact of party performance in

terms of vote-share changes from the previous election while having no effect on actual party performance; these results are exactly the opposite in terms of party preferences. This indicates that voters who attempt to assign meaning to the election outcome are moderated by expectations built from previous election outcomes. Second, we note the opposite finding in terms of party preferences. This suggests that the effect of party preferences is more temporary, and supporters tend to consider the present performance of their own party more than its previous performance. Nevertheless, evidence exists that feelings of either winning or losing are determined by the party's performance as well as by prior expectations and party preferences.

### *Country-Level Differences*

The descriptive statistics revealed that the perceived winners and losers of elections were much clearer in Canada than in proportional-style systems with coalition governments: Austria and Germany. The country dummies in Table 2 show that in general terms, voters are more likely to feel like winners in proportional systems than they are in Canada (reference category). This is because smaller parties' supporters tend to be more likely to feel like losers in Canada than they are in the other countries (see Table 1), but also because coalition governments comprising more parties enable more than one party's supporters to feel like election winners. In fact, as a proportional system with no coalition governments, Spain behaves much more similarly to Canada in this regard than to Austria and Germany.

But what happens when we control for party performance? Is it that for any level of party performance, voters feel less like winners in Canada than they do in the other countries? In order to answer these questions, we run models with interaction terms between, on the one hand, vote share and vote-share change, and the country dummies on the other hand. Starting with vote share, the plot on the left of Figure 3 shows that for any level of party performance (x-axis), the probability of feeling like a winner is much higher in Austria, followed by Germany and Spain, and lastly Canada. Indeed, the gap between Canada and the other countries shrinks at higher levels of vote share up until very high levels of party performance when the differences between Canada, Germany, and Austria are



**Figure 3.** The moderating role of country-level rules on vote share and change from previous elections. Based on Table S3 in the online supporting information. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



no longer significant. In terms of vote-share change, the right-hand plot in Figure 3 again indicates that the probability of feeling like a winner is much lower in Canada than it is in the other countries for any level of party performance. In particular, we see that differences across countries are nonsignificant for the low to medium level of party performance, although it seems that in Austria voters experience a slightly sharper increase in the probability at higher levels of party performance. In Canada, a much greater party performance is necessary for people to feel like winners of the election (see the full results in Table S3 in the online supporting information). However, because there are only a handful of countries in the sample, conclusions about system-specific findings should be taken with a grain of salt.

## Conclusion

Existing research demonstrates that losing elections weakens voters' perceptions of the legitimacy of these systems and diminishes their faith in the rules by which their elected representatives are chosen. While the literature has predominantly focused on the consequences of winning and losing an election, the definitions of winners and losers have remained rather vague. In fact, voters have rarely (if ever) been asked whether they feel like winners or losers of elections (for a recent exception, see Stiers et al., 2018). In this article, we aimed to fill this gap in the literature by investigating when voters feel like winners.

The results suggest that objective party performance—both in terms of vote share and government versus parliamentary representation—plays an essential role in explaining feelings of victory, yet we also uncover significant variation among voters in terms of subjectivity of winning elections. In particular, the empirical findings indicate that prior expectations and party preferences moderate the relationship between party performance and feelings of winning, with prior expectations having a limiting effect on feeling like a winner, whereas party preferences enhance the perceived performance of the supported party. This indicates that election outcomes ultimately represent political facts that voters not only interpret in line with processes of partisan rationalization, but also in terms of expectations that color their interpretations of election outcomes.

The findings from this article also point to an important distinction between a more majoritarian-style democracy like Canada and more proportional-style systems with coalition governments like Austria and Germany. The descriptive statistics as well as the subsequent analysis revealed that who lost and who won the elections were much clearer in Canada and to some extent Spain than in Germany and Austria. This finding necessitates future research with large-*N* studies capable of uncovering convincingly the different impacts of election rules on feelings of winning. This is especially true when considering the large body of “Don't know” answers uncovered in all countries in the descriptive analysis, as the meaning of winning and losing elections appears to be far more elusive than that considered in the literature to date. In terms of this specific literature, the findings from this article indicate that measuring who are the 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.

The findings from this article also have important implications in terms of the literature on party strategies and strategic voting. On the former, this article uncovered the consequences of the interpretation of election outcomes of party leaders on voters: For instance, we saw that in the case of Germany, many supporters of the Left Party considered themselves winners relative to the Green Party, in spite of the fact that the two parties fared almost equally in terms of vote share and seat share. This example indicates that major parties' and leaders' interpretations of election outcomes influences voters' views, as explained by the party leader of the Left Party who insisted that his party performed well. In terms of strategic voting, the literature has stressed that small parties may suffer less from strategic defection under proportional systems compared to majoritarian systems,

for the principal reason that these parties have a better chance of gaining representation in proportional than in majoritarian systems (e.g., Cox, 1997). We could speculate that this may also occur because in proportional systems election results provide greater levels of satisfaction to supporters of small parties than their counterparts in majoritarian elections, thus there is less incentive for small parties' supporters to abandon their favorite party.

While we have only explored the relatively short-term consequences of election outcomes, it is undoubtedly important to investigate the long-term consequences of feelings of victory on relevant variables such as satisfaction with democracy and satisfaction with the political institutions of a country. As noted in the descriptive part of this article, the supporters of the three populist parties—the FPÖ and the Liste Peter Pilz in Austria and the AfD in Germany—all show remarkable levels of feeling victorious seemingly regardless of their own party election performance. In fact, while the Liste Pilz only marginally made it into the parliament, the AfD failed to even gain parliamentary representation in 2013, while the FPÖ ranked third despite good election results. It is thus worth investigating the ways in which the characteristics of the parties themselves and of their supporters mediate the effects uncovered in this article. It is possible that certain parties are simply less interested in “winning” the elections than others, with clear impacts on voters' levels of satisfaction with the election results. In summary, the findings of this study reinforce the notion that not all winners and losers are equal and that having successfully supported a party in attaining a place in government is only one of the many instances people may feel like election winners.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Figure S1.** The Moderating Role of Prior Expectations on Actual and Changed Political Representation

**Figure S2.** The Moderating Role of Party Preferences on Actual and Changed Political Representation

**Table S1.** Election Performance and Winner Status: Multinomial Logit Models

**Table S2.** Election Performance and Winner Status Moderated by Expectations and Preferences: Logit Models

**Table S3.** Election Performance and Winner Status: Interaction for Countries