

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Winners and losers reconsidered: party support, character valence, and satisfaction with democracy†

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## Abstract

Studies of citizens' satisfaction with democracy have established a connection between satisfaction and how well those citizens' preferred parties perform in elections. Yet, the question remains whether 'winners' and 'losers' respond to the same system- and party-level factors when evaluating their political satisfaction. We build on extant literature to consider citizen satisfaction with democracy from the perspective of character valence. Using the Mannheim Eurobarometer trend file and content analysis-based data on parties' character valence, we find that both winners' and losers' satisfaction with the political system is affected by parties' character valence, but in differing (and somewhat surprising) ways. We find that winners respond to improvements in the character valence of opposition parties, whereas losers demonstrate greater concern with the valence of governing parties.

**Keywords:** valence; satisfaction with democracy; winners and losers

## Introduction

Political elites often find themselves unwittingly in the spotlight for both their personal and professional behaviour. Political coverage is full of examples where political representatives draw attention to themselves – and their parties – for all the wrong reasons. In recent years, politicians across Europe have been forced to resign or apologize following revelations about their conduct. Take, for example, the Swedish Minister who quit after driving while under the influence, the French Deputy Speaker who stepped down after facing sexual harassment charges, or the Polish ministers who resigned after leaks of recordings of private deals. These events, and others like them, raise the question: does the behaviour of political elites influence citizens' satisfaction with democracy (SWD)? Specifically, does elite behaviour that would be widely viewed as 'detrimental' translate into diminished support for democratic systems of government, and whom does this type of behaviour affect?

Motivated by a growing literature examining the impact of a range of individual, institutional, and economic factors on SWD, this study builds on an understudied variable – *character valence* – to address the questions posed earlier. By character valence, we refer to those party characteristics that voters intrinsically value, such as competence, integrity, and unity, as opposed to characteristics that parties value instrumentally in the pursuit of votes, such as fund-raising abilities, and the

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capacity to run effective campaigns (Stone and Simas, 2010; Adams *et al.*, 2011).<sup>1</sup> In doing so, we integrate two different strands of research – studies of citizen SWD, and studies exploring the behavioural importance of valence-related dimensions of party/candidate evaluation (Clark, 2009; Clark and Leiter, 2014). Building on recent analyses, our findings suggest that when the political elites of both governing and opposition parties engage in behaviour that would harm those parties' images with respect to character valence, then individuals' SWD will be affected. More specifically, the relationship between parties' character valence and SWD varies depending on whether we focus on winners (those who supported a party that took office in the most recent election) or on losers (those who supported a party that did not win office, or lost office). Furthermore, although SWD for both winners and losers is affected by parties' character valence, the relationship is moderated by government and opposition status, with winners' satisfaction being largely affected by opposition parties' valence, while losers' satisfaction is more sensitive to governing parties' valence.

There are several reasons why we believe examining the relationship between winners, losers, parties' character valence, and SWD is important. First, the focus of most scholars of 'democratic satisfaction' has primarily been on how institutional arrangements influence satisfaction (e.g. Lijphart, 1984, 1999; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Karp *et al.*, 2003; Matsubayashi, 2007; Aarts and Thomassen, 2008; Anderson and Singer, 2008; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Hobolt, 2012). To this end, other factors that would plausibly affect SWD, particularly valence-related dimensions of party evaluation, have been overlooked. Our study seeks to address this gap.

Second, our study aims to contribute to the 'winner-loser' debate within the 'SWD' literature. One of the most oft-cited works in this regard is Anderson and Guillory's (1997) award-winning investigation, which demonstrated that winners and losers shared differing attitudes regarding SWD, and that institutional arrangements affect this relationship. Since their seminal study, many related studies have emerged (e.g. Berggren *et al.*, 2004; Wells and Kriekhaus, 2006; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Curini *et al.*, 2012), but no study we are aware of has examined how winners' and losers' SWD is moderated by parties' character valence.

A third reason pertains to a growing body of literature that reports cross-national evidence of public attitudes that are broadly negative, and increasingly pessimistic, with regard to politicians and political parties in representative democracies (Poguntke and Scarrow, 1996; Pharr *et al.*, 2000; Webb *et al.*, 2002; Bowler and Karp, 2004; Dalton *et al.*, 2011). Less clearly addressed in this research, however, are the reasons why parties across representative democracies are regarded in such negative terms. We posit that one potential source of the observed public dissatisfaction with the political system is media coverage of the detrimental behaviour of politicians. The empirical analyses we present augment findings regarding public dissatisfaction investigating how individual-level attitudes towards democracy are affected by the behaviour of political elites.

Finally, our research also relates to the psychological motivation literature, and to theories of 'motivated reasoning' in particular. Simply put, this literature shows that '... humans are goal-directed information processors who tend to evaluate information with directional bias towards reinforcing their pre-existing views' (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010: 307). In this respect, individuals will likely show bias when evaluating political arguments and evidence, favouring those which reinforce their existing views, and disapproving of those which contradict them (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Claassen and Ensley, 2016).<sup>2</sup> We consider expectations drawn from this literature when we discuss our hypotheses below, but the essential point is that motivated reasoning suggests that individuals' SWD may be particularly responsive to the character valence of the parties they support, and largely unresponsive to the character valence of other parties in the political system.

<sup>1</sup>In this study, *character valence* refers to an overall measure (discussed later) of parties' combined 'competence', 'integrity', and 'unity'.

<sup>2</sup>It is beyond the scope of our paper to offer an extensive account of this vast literature here. However, see Kunda (1990), Molden and Higgins (2005) and Leeper and Slothuus (2014) for reviews.

### Prior studies of SWD

Scholars argue that public support for democratic systems of government is critical, because broad satisfaction is associated with system stability, and its absence linked with problems for both the functioning and maintenance of democracy (Powell, 1982; Anderson and Guillory, 1997). Simply put, 'if citizens have positive attitudes towards the political system they live in, they are less likely to push for radical changes' (Bernauer and Vatter, 2012: 435). Academic studies have identified several factors that influence SWD, including political culture (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 1999), and critically, institutional arrangements (e.g. Karp and Bowler, 2001; Berggren *et al.*, 2004; Matsubayashi, 2007; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012). Lijphart (1984, 1999) finds that citizens in consensual democracies tend to be more satisfied than those living in majoritarian systems, while Anderson and Guillory (1997) investigate whether the nature of democratic institutions impacts attitudes towards the political system. Importantly, they find that the difference in satisfaction between winners and losers tends to vary across political systems: losers in consensual systems are more satisfied than losers in majoritarian systems because safeguards exist to ensure their voices will still be heard, whereas winners in majoritarian systems are more satisfied than their counterparts in consensual systems (see also Anderson *et al.*, 2005). More recently, Berggren *et al.* have extended Anderson and Guillory's findings by noting that different measures of institutional context (e.g. electoral district size, degree of unicameralism, electoral system disproportionality) affect the attitudes of winners and losers differentially (Berggren *et al.*, 2004: 88; see also Bernauer and Vatter, 2012).

A related strand of literature analyzes the linkages between parties and citizens, emphasizing that enhancing the representational connection between the two should increase citizens' SWD. Ezrow and Xezonakis (2011) find that citizens are more supportive of democracy when the ideological dispersion of parties in a given party system more closely approximates the mean voter's ideological position, while Curini *et al.* (2012) demonstrate that, at the individual level, winners become more satisfied the more ideologically proximate to the government they are.

### Valence-related studies

The focus on character valence and its potential ramifications for political behaviour ties into a growing body of research examining 'valence' dimensions of candidate/party evaluation. Developed by Stokes (1963, 1992), who famously critiqued spatial models of party competition, there are two approaches to valence, derived from Stokes' discussions. In the first, most prominently associated with scholarship emphasizing 'issue ownership' or 'issue competence', valence issues were a dimension of party/candidate evaluation along which all voters hold identical positions such as wanting economic growth (see Lewis-Beck, 1990; Anderson, 2000; Palmer and Whitten, 2000). Accordingly, voters evaluate parties/candidates on the basis of which party/candidate is the 'most capable' at handling a given issue, rather than which has presented the policy position most proximate to their own preferred position (e.g. Petrocik, 1996; Green, 2007; Belanger and Meguid, 2008; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Pardos-Prado, 2012; Green and Jennings, 2012, 2017).

In the second school, Stokes defined valence as issues, 'on which parties or leaders are differentiated not by what they advocate but by the degree to which they are linked in the public's mind with conditions or goals or symbols of which almost everyone approves or disapproves' (Stokes, 1992: 143). In other words, valence could refer to desirable 'non-policy' related characteristics such as honesty, trustworthiness, unity, competence etc. (Stokes, 1992). Thus, a second group of valence-related studies can be identified, which treat valence as a dimension of evaluation orthogonal to policy positions. Although this may include factors related to incumbent or campaigning advantage (Fiorina, 1974; Burden, 2004), of greater interest here are those studies which highlight the importance of party/candidate characteristics that would be intrinsically valued by the electorate. Several studies have robustly demonstrated the impact of valence-based attributes,

including competence, integrity, and diligence, in U.S. Congressional elections (McCurley and Mondak, 1995; Mondak, 1995; Stone and Simas, 2010; Adams *et al.*, 2011; Buttice and Stone, 2012; Butler and Powell, 2014). Similarly, in a West European context, research has demonstrated the influence of parties' character valence on political attitudes and behaviour (Clark, 2009; Clark and Leiter, 2014; Zakharova and Warwick, 2014; Curini and Martelli, 2015; Leiter and Clark, 2015; Curini, 2017). In sum, there is ample evidence that character valence can exert an important influence on individuals' attitudes.

### A conditional valence-related theory of SWD

The extant literature exploring SWD has strongly emphasized the role played by individual preferences. Perhaps, best known in this regard is Anderson and Guillory's (1997) study, which first suggested that SWD should vary between those individuals who were winners (those who voted for a party that won or maintained its place in government) and losers (those who voted for a party that did not win, or lost, office). Scholars have further investigated and refined the winner–loser dichotomy, while also paying closer attention to how different types of institutions influence individuals' SWD (e.g. Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Singh *et al.*, 2012; Howell and Justwan, 2013; Ruiz-Rufino, 2013; Singh, 2014; Dahlberg and Linde, 2016; Singh and Thornton, 2016). In addition to this research, recent studies at both the individual and aggregate levels have drawn attention to how ideological positioning can play a role in influencing SWD (Henderson, 2008; Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011) especially in regard to the winner–loser dichotomy, where ideological proximity reduces the negative attitudes induced by electoral loss (Curini *et al.*, 2012, 2015).

In contrast, little attention has been paid to how valence-related dimensions of party/candidate evaluation – what we simply refer to as 'character valence' – impact political satisfaction. Given prior empirical research demonstrating the impact of character valence on various forms of political behaviour, we posit that parties' character valence will impact SWD. More specifically, we argue that when political elites engage in behaviour that would detrimentally affect themselves and the parties to which they belong, then individuals' assessments of their political system will be affected. From a normative perspective, one would expect that when political elites get into trouble and violate either formal or informal norms of conduct, this would impact how individuals assess their political system, plausibly contributing to feelings of animosity and cynicism. Our theoretical expectations in this respect are supported by a recent study in which the authors find that individuals' political satisfaction is affected by the character valence of political parties (Leiter and Clark, 2015). In particular, the study finds that as the character valence of governing parties improves, respondents become more satisfied with democracy (and vice versa), but that this relationship is conditional on the character valence of opposition parties. In sum, empirical evidence suggests that the valence-related behaviour of parties provides individuals with cues as to how they should assess political parties and candidates, as well as the performance of their political system.

In the research presented here, we seek to build on the findings of the aforementioned studies in two ways. First, we focus more directly on the 'winner–loser' dichotomy featured so prominently in the SWD literature by examining whether an individual's status as either a winner or a loser moderates how they evaluate system performance. Second, and related, we evaluate how winners and losers respond to the character valence of both the parties they support and those they do not. Ultimately, we seek further to refine our understanding of the various political forces that condition how winners differ from losers in their attitudes towards the political system – as expressed in terms of SWD.

Extant studies of SWD tend to assume that 'winners' and 'losers' only care about their preferred parties, and in this respect the 'winner–loser' dichotomy is construed narrowly (e.g. Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Aarts and Thomassen, 2008; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Howell and Justwan, 2013). To an extent, we agree with this assumption – we expect winners to be primarily concerned with, and more satisfied when, the character valence of winning/governing parties improves, and

less satisfied when their character valence worsens. The same goes for losers and losing/opposition parties. But beyond this, we consider what happens when we relax these basic assumptions and contend that, given previous findings regarding the influence of both governing and opposition parties on individuals' political attitudes, it is somewhat short-sighted to assume that winners only focus on the character valence of the government, and perhaps more importantly, that losers only focus on their preferred parties. Similarly, in their examination of what kinds of electoral victories most engender political satisfaction Singh *et al.* note that it is essential to consider all political parties and how voters react to all election results (2012: 203).

By way of example, one could conceive of losers becoming increasingly satisfied (or at least, less dissatisfied) with the political system when the character valence of winning (governing) parties improves. Although their preferred parties may not be in power, losers could still take solace from the fact that the party or parties doing the actual governing are doing so with greater competence, integrity, unity, and so forth. They may not have backed a party now in government, but their focus shifts to hoping that the governing party or parties will do so in a credible fashion. High levels of character valence by these parties could plausibly send such a signal. A business-related analogy is perhaps helpful here – certain party supporters may not have gotten their preferred choice for CEO to run the company, but once he or she has taken the position they hope the new boss delivers the leadership the company requires and brings the returns those supporters ultimately hope for. Alternately, one could argue that the improved character valence of governing parties may only serve to alienate losers, because they have already suffered the ignominy of supporting parties that have failed to take office. Accordingly, good performance by governing parties in valence-related terms may only serve to lower the political satisfaction of losers (Buchler 2008). In line with existing studies, the focus on how losers respond to the performance of both governing and opposition parties is crucial, because, as noted 'Only when losers overcome their negative experiences and consent to being governed by those they disagree with does democracy endure and flourish' (Anderson *et al.*, 2005: 13). As such, any evidence that losers' attitudes towards the political system are positively affected by the character valence of governing parties will be an encouraging finding.

Thinking about the supporters of winning/governing parties specifically, our expectations are somewhat different. As noted earlier, the basic assumption is that winners will respond positively to the character valence of their preferred parties. However, it is also possible that because these individuals have already 'won' in that their preferred party or parties are in government then the character valence of these parties will not detract from this, and their political satisfaction will be unmoved accordingly. Further, there is no strong theoretical or normative expectation that winners' political satisfaction will be affected by the character valence of losing/opposition parties. Again, because these individuals are the most satisfied, improved character valence by losing/opposition parties is unlikely to affect their political satisfaction in any great sense. After all, why should they care what parties outside of government are doing? Nonetheless, it is plausible that the political satisfaction of winners may be affected by the character valence of losing/opposition parties, particularly if it improves at a time when governing parties are struggling.

Accordingly, we test several hypotheses, which are detailed below. The intent behind these hypotheses is first to explore if winners and losers' attitudes towards the political system are affected by parties' character valence, and to what extent. Second, and more specifically, we seek to investigate if and how winners and losers' political satisfaction responds to the character valence of their preferred parties, as well as in response to parties they did not support (i.e. winners responding to losing/opposition parties' valence, and losers responding to winning/governing parties' valence). Our first hypothesis is as follows:

**HYPOTHESIS 1:** *Winners will be more satisfied with democracy than losers.*

The logic behind Hypothesis 1 is straightforward enough, and similar to myriad arguments made elsewhere (e.g. Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Curini *et al.*, 2012). Winners, having seen their



preferred party win office, will be more satisfied with current governing configurations than losers who supported a party that was removed from, or did not win, public office.

In addition, in line with our arguments explicated earlier, and to expand further on the research of Leiter and Clark (2015) and Singh *et al.* (2012), we examine the following four hypotheses that analyze how the satisfaction of winners and losers is moderated by the character valence of winning/governing and losing/opposition parties:

**HYPOTHESIS 2a:** *Winners' satisfaction with democracy will not be affected by the character valence of governing parties or opposition parties.*

**HYPOTHESIS 2b:** *Winners' satisfaction with democracy will be positively affected by character valence of governing parties, but not opposition parties.*

**HYPOTHESIS 2c:** *Losers' satisfaction with democracy will be positively affected by character valence of both governing parties and opposition parties.*

**HYPOTHESIS 2d:** *Losers' satisfaction with democracy will be negatively affected by character valence of governing parties, but positively affected by the valence-related performance of opposition parties.*

In Hypothesis 2a, we assume that winners do not care about either the character valence of either governing or opposition parties, and so we expect parties' character valence to have negligible effects on winners' levels of satisfaction. As noted earlier, the reasoning here is that, having supported a winning party, these individuals are satisfied regardless of the character valence of either governing or opposition parties. Alternatively, Hypothesis 2b presents a differing expectation in that winners' levels of satisfaction are assumed to be motivated by the character valence of the parties they backed – parties that won office and entered into government in the most recent election. So, if governing parties supported by winners perform well in valence-related terms then winners' levels of satisfaction will increase (and vice versa). Not caring for the opposition, winners' levels of satisfaction will not be affected by the character valence of those opposition parties. Hypotheses 2c and 2d outline similar expectations, but with regard to losers, that is, those who supported a party that did not enter into government. Hypothesis 2c assumes that losers' satisfaction will be positively affected by improvements in the character valence of both governing and opposition parties. The logic behind Hypothesis 2c is that losers' dissatisfaction can potentially be lessened by the high character valence of either governing or opposition parties. As discussed in the prior section, higher character valence of governing parties at least signals to losers that they will be getting a government that is relatively more honest, competent, and unified (or some combination thereof), whereas an improvement in the character valence of opposition parties signals to losers that the parties they care about most have at least made gains along an important dimension of evaluation. At last, Hypothesis 2d takes the alternate perspective – given that losers must accept a party (or parties) taking office that they do not support, the expectation is that governing parties' character valence will lower losers' levels of satisfaction, but opposition parties' character valence (including their preferred parties) will lead to increases in levels of satisfaction. The reasoning here is that losers will not take any comfort from improvements in performance – valence or otherwise – of parties in government, and parties they did not willingly advocate for with their votes. On the other hand, as in Hypothesis 2c, higher character valence of opposition parties signals to losers that the parties they care about most have at least made gains in one important respect, and this should improve losers' outlooks regarding political satisfaction.

Taken together, these hypotheses provide a stern test of the importance of valence dimensions of evaluation. In particular, if losers' satisfaction responds to the character valence of governing parties, this would provide further empirical evidence of the significance of valence dimensions of evaluation on political behaviour. In line with the arguments put forth by Anderson *et al.* (2005)

and others regarding the significant role played by electoral losers in the democratic process, this would be an important finding. In addition, the expectations outlined previously dovetail with theoretical and empirical predictions drawn from the psychological motivation literature discussed earlier, which argues that individuals show bias when processing information related to their preferred parties/candidates, responding positively to evidence and information that fits with, or reinforces, their existing views, and rejecting or ignoring that which does not (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Claassen and Ensley, 2016).

Applied here, motivated reasoning would predict that supporters of winning/governing parties would process positive valence-related information about these parties by becoming increasingly satisfied with democracy, while dismissing negative valence-related information, and thus not similarly updating their views on the political system. In a similar vein to how party supporters respond to scandal, motivated reasoning would also suggest that supporters of winning/governing parties would discount positive valence-related information in relation to losing/opposition parties, while reacting positively (reporting greater SWD) to negative valence-related information linked to these parties, because it would essentially confirm pre-existing notions regarding these parties. Government supporters may not, for example, respond to poor valence of the opposition because they cannot lower their opinion any further (Vonnahme, 2014). A similar logic holds for supporters of losing/opposition parties. In the next section, we present the results of statistical analyses designed to test our hypotheses and to consider predictions associated with motivated reasoning.

## Data and measurement

To examine the relationship between winners and losers, and parties' character valence, we rely on the 'Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970–2003', which captures consistent survey items across the Eurobarometer surveys. For parties' character valence, we use an original data set created using content analysis of Keesing's Records of World Events, which provides us with measures of parties' character valence for nine European countries (Clark, 2009; Abney *et al.*, 2011; Clark and Leiter, 2014).

### **Dependent variable: SWD**

To capture support for the political system, we rely on respondents' reported SWD. SWD has commonly been used to capture support of the political system and government performance (e.g. Curini *et al.*, 2012).<sup>3</sup> We use the following question: 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied in the way democracy works in [country]?' Respondents' answers for this question range from 1 ('not at all satisfied') to 4 ('very satisfied'). The dependent variable has been collapsed and takes a value of 1 if respondents answered that they were either 'very satisfied' or 'fairly satisfied' (with democracy), and a value of 0 if respondents stated that they were either 'not very satisfied' or 'not at all satisfied'.<sup>4</sup>

### **Key independent variable: winners and losers**

Of primary interest in this paper are the effects of party affiliation (whether one supports a winning/governing party or a losing/opposition party), and the success of those parties in elections,

<sup>3</sup>A healthy debate exists about what the survey item regarding 'satisfaction with democracy' (SWD) is actually measuring (e.g. Canache *et al.*, 2001). Following Linde and Ekman (2003), the question may not actually measure the legitimacy of the democratic system, but rather support for the performance of the system. We are primarily interested in this support for the performance of the system, and incorporate control variables into our analyses, such as economic indicators, that help account for the 'performance' related variation in the dependent variable (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011: 1173) unaccounted for by our main variable of interest, character valence.

<sup>4</sup>We collapsed this variable primarily due to the low-response rates at the highest and lowest levels of SWD in many country years.

especially over time. To capture electoral ‘winners’, that is, respondents whose preferred party is currently in government, we create a dummy variable based on whether the party that the respondent states she supports is in government. To measure party support, we rely on the following question from the Eurobarometer trend file: ‘If there were a “general election” tomorrow, which party would you support?’<sup>5</sup> If the respondent’s party was in government at the time of the question, based on the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow, 2019), we coded him/her as a ‘winner’. If the respondent supported an opposition party, we coded him/her as a ‘loser’.<sup>6</sup>

### **Key independent variables: parties’ character valence**

To capture parties’ character valence, we rely on an original data set created using content analysis of the media coverage of parties’ valence events.<sup>7</sup> We do so because very few surveys offer consistent cross-national measures of parties’ character valence. In addition, it can be challenging to separate out other important political evaluations, such as party identification or issue proximity, from valence evaluations using survey items. As such, we use an exogenous measure of parties’ character-related valence attributes constructed from content analysis of media-based news reports (Clark, 2009). The source of these data is Keesing’s Record of World Events, which records global events by drawing on international news and internet sources.

There are nine countries covered in this data set, including: Britain, France, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain. Each party-related news report in Keesing’s was content-analyzed for events that reflected on parties’ competence, integrity, or unity. These events included political scandals, abuse of official powers, various forms of misconduct, reports discussing poor performance in office (e.g. the handling of some kind of crisis or emergency), and intra-party divisions. In theory, the scores assigned to valence-related events appearing in Keesing’s news reports could range from +2 (for reported events that reflected very positively on parties’ competence, integrity, or unity) to –2 (for reported events that reflected very negatively on the party). However, it was extremely rare for the reported events appearing in Keesing’s to cast political elites in a positive light, so the scores that were awarded were virtually always negative.

Parties’ valence scores were created by adding together the scores awarded to each party for each valence event covered in Keesing’s for the entire inter-electoral period, defined as the period following the previous election up until the day before the current election. We take the total valence score from the inter-electoral period for each party. From this measure, we created character-valence scores for both government and opposition parties. For each party  $i$  in government (or opposition), we weight their valence score for a given inter-electoral period by their proportion of the popular vote received in the previous election ( $t - 1$ ) as follows:

$$\text{Weighted government valence} = \sum_{i=1}^{n_g} \left( \frac{\text{Valence}_i \times \text{Voteshare}_i}{n_g} \right).$$

<sup>5</sup>Although the Eurobarometer has asked a more traditional party identification question, it has been asked much less frequently and consistently across waves.

<sup>6</sup>An anonymous reviewer notes that voters might shift their vote intention to, or away from, the governing party based on their valence performance, and thus we are potentially measuring on a post-treatment variable (Montgomery *et al.*, 2018). Although we cannot fully account for this due to data limitations, we note that our measure of contemporary party support is highly predicted by self-reported previous vote choice (85% of respondents) and self-reported party identification (92%). However, we acknowledge that there may be a difference between a ‘true’ winner and a person who says they would vote for a party in government to indicate support for a party in government with high valence. Future research should aim to parse out these distinctions more clearly.

<sup>7</sup>Please see the online appendix for further details on the construction of this measure.



$$\text{Weighted opposition valence} = \sum_{j=1}^{n_o} \left( \frac{\text{Valence}_j \times \text{Voteshare}_j}{n_o} \right).$$

Our justification for relying on weighted valence scores by the size of the parties in government or opposition turns on the fact that larger parties are more likely to attract public/media attention and blame than smaller parties are. A government where one small niche party engages in poor behaviour is quite different from a government where the party of the prime minister is a lightning rod for scandal, and we expect the same is true for parties in opposition. By weighting the parties' valence scores by size, we ensure they reflect this emphasis. However, the results of our analyses are substantively and significantly robust to the use of non-weighted government valence.

### Control variables

To control for anti-system attitudes, we create a measure of so-called 'niche' party supporters, for example, those who prefer Green, Communist, or Nationalist parties (Adams *et al.*, 2006; Meguid, 2008), based on the party family identified by Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge *et al.*, 2001). Previous studies have found evidence that niche party supporters appear to be fundamentally different from mainstream party supporters (e.g. Ezrow *et al.*, 2011; Adams *et al.*, 2012), and given that niche parties are often regarded as 'anti-system', we expect their supporters to display less SWD.

We control for individuals' political interest using the 'Opinion Leader' index, which asks respondents how frequently they discuss political matters and how frequently they try to influence others. Opinion leadership is a dummy variable, in which those who reported the highest level of interest were coded as 1. We focus on opinion leaders because studies have shown they are significantly different from other types of respondents and are more likely to learn about valence-related events (Adams and Ezrow, 2009). We also include several individual-level control variables including the respondent's age, gender, education, and income.

To account for between-country variation, we include two institutional controls from Lijphart (1984, 1999). The executive-parties dimension, constructed from measures of the effective number of political parties, minimal winning one-party cabinets, executive dominance, and electoral disproportionality, where higher values indicate a more consensus-based democracy. The 'federal-unity' dimension, constructed from an index of federalism–decentralism, degree of bicameralism, constitutional rigidity, judicial review, and central bank independence, where higher values indicate a more federal system. To capture the prevailing economic climate, we include the level of unemployment for the inter-electoral period (Armingeon *et al.*, 2011).

### Evaluating the winners and losers hypotheses

We present two logit analyses, with country-fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country, on more than 37,000 respondents across nine countries, including Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain, with an average of 4.6 election cycles, and 4184 respondents per country in Table 1. We rely on logit models as we have collapsed 'SWD' into a dichotomous measure. In model 1, we examine the effect of simple winner status (supporters of parties in the current government), and government and opposition valence, as measured by media coverage of the party, on SWD. In model 2, we interact the basic 'winner–loser' dummy variable with both government and opposition parties' valence scores.<sup>8</sup>

In column 1, we examine the effect of being an electoral winner (a supporter of a party currently in government) on SWD. As predicted in Hypothesis 1, respondents who state they currently support a party in government are significantly more likely to be satisfied with

<sup>8</sup>In each model, country dummies are suppressed. The dependent variable is SWD, in which 1 = satisfied or highly satisfied.

**Table 1.** Logit Analysis of Valence and Winners–Losers on Satisfaction with Democracy (SWD)

	SWD	SWD interactive
Winner	0.76*** (0.16)	0.54** (0.18)
Government valence	0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Opposition valence	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.02)
Winner × government valence		−0.03 (0.02)
Winner × opposition valence		−0.05*** (0.01)
Opinion leader	−0.19 (0.11)	−0.19 (0.10)
Education	0.03** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)
Age	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Female	−0.06*** (0.02)	−0.06*** (0.02)
Income	0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Executive parties	0.74*** (0.07)	0.78*** (0.08)
Federal unitary	1.86*** (0.44)	1.86*** (0.43)
Unemployment rate	−0.14*** (0.03)	−0.14*** (0.03)
Niche party supporter	−0.53*** (0.13)	−0.59*** (0.12)
Intercept	2.25*** (0.52)	2.38*** (0.52)
<i>N</i>	36,783	36,783

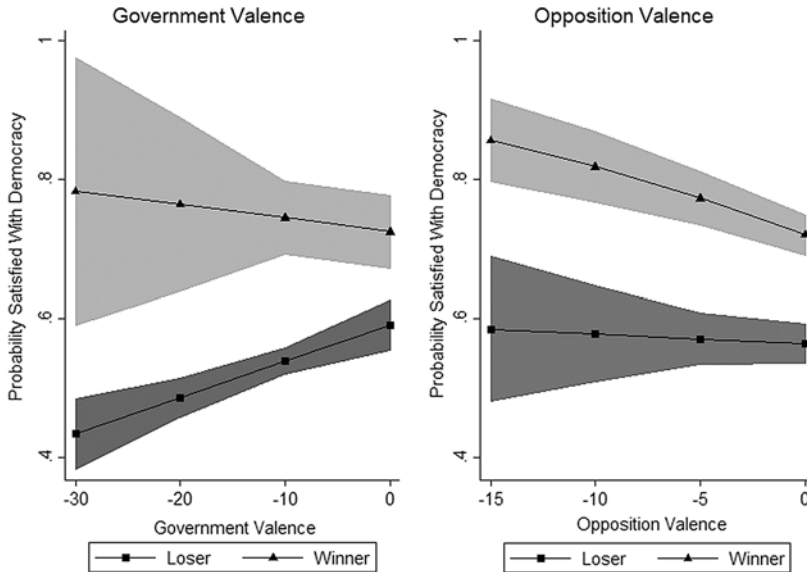
Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by country. \* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ . Country-fixed effects suppressed for space.

democracy than those respondents who support parties in opposition ( $P < 0.01$ ). In addition, and in line with findings reported in Leiter and Clark (2015), as the parties in government improve in terms of their character valence, respondents' SWD increases, while an increase in opposition parties' character valence decreases satisfaction. Taken together, these results strongly suggest that both political affiliation (being a winner or a loser), and the character valence of political parties impact individuals' overall satisfaction with the political system.

Moving on to consider Hypotheses 2a–2d, a respondent's party affiliation may also have an *indirect effect* on SWD by moderating the impact of parties' valence as reflected in media coverage. In column 2, we interact the winner–loser dummy variable with both governing and opposition parties' character-valence scores, and these interactions are visually presented in Figure 1. Two patterns emerge from our analysis. First, and perhaps unsurprisingly, regardless of the character valence of government or opposition parties, winners are much more likely to be satisfied with democracy than losers. The predicted probability that winners will be satisfied never falls below 70% in the range of observed valence values, whereas the highest predicted probability of satisfaction for losers is just over 60%. Although this gap persists across government and opposition performance, this does not mean that parties' character valence do not moderate political satisfaction.

The second pattern that emerges from these results is that, in general, individuals are not responding to media coverage of the character valence of the parties they support; instead, they are responding to the character valence of the parties they do not. The substantive meaning of this pattern is clearer when we examine the differences between winners and losers. Somewhat in line with our prediction in Hypothesis 2a, winners' SWD is not statistically significantly affected by the character valence of governing parties. However, counter to the expectations of Hypothesis 2a, our results do show that winners respond to the character valence of opposition parties. Thus, the empirical support for Hypothesis 2a is somewhat mixed. Of particular note here is that our findings show that winners are significantly less likely to be satisfied with democracy as the character valence of opposition parties improves, although the substantive effect is relatively small (about 13% lower probability of being satisfied between the minimum and maximum values of opposition parties' character valence).

These findings also bear on Hypothesis 2b, which states that winners should be positively affected by improvements in the character valence of governing parties, but not opposition parties.



**Figure 1.** Predicted probability of satisfaction with democracy (SWD) by level of valence and party support. Note: Figure presents predicted probability of SWD over values of Government Valence (left-hand figure) and opposition valence (right-hand figure), with all other variables set to their means or medians.

We do not find empirical support for the hypothesis, as winners' reported SWD does not change substantively as a result of improvements in the character valence of governing parties, and indeed the effect is not statistically significant. Counter to Hypothesis 2b, and as noted previously, winners do respond to the character valence of opposition parties, becoming increasingly less satisfied with democracy as opposition character valence improves. Essentially, winners are largely unmoved by the character valence of either governing or opposition parties, but when they do respond the effects are far more notable with respect to opposition parties.

Although the evidence in support of our hypotheses is mixed so far, taken together these empirical findings fit closely with predictions drawn from theories of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Claassen and Ensley, 2016). First, motivated reasoning would suggest we should not see winners responding to any negative information regarding the character valence of governing parties, because the cognitive dissonance caused by this information would lead to its dismissal (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Winners are those who support governing parties, and information that runs counter to their pre-existing views of their preferred parties will be rejected. That winners do not become increasingly satisfied in response to information suggesting positive character valence by governing parties is a little surprising. However, this is likely indicative of a 'ceiling effect' – winners have essentially 'maxed out' in terms of satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Second, motivational reasoning would suggest that winners should become increasingly satisfied as the character valence of opposition parties worsens, and this is indeed what we see. Winners do not support these parties, and affirmation of their pre-existing biases against these parties increases satisfaction. In other words, winners appear to be taking pleasure (or 'schadenfreude' as an anonymous reviewer aptly stated) from the valence-related failings of these parties.

When we examine the relationship between 'losers' and the valence-related performances of governing and opposition parties drawn from media reports, we basically see the reverse pattern.

<sup>9</sup>This is akin to the notion of diminishing marginal returns whereby more positive valence-related news about party performance does not correspondingly result in increasing levels of SWD, and we are basically seeing a 'saturation effect'. See Clark (2009).

Hypothesis 2c states that losers will be positively affected (in terms of their SWD) by improvements in the character valence of both governing and opposition parties, and as before, we find mixed support for the hypothesis. Figure 1 shows that improvements in opposition parties' character valence does not lead to any discernible increase in losers' probabilities of being satisfied with democracy (the 'predicted' line is virtually flat). On the other hand, Figure 1 also shows that losers clearly respond to improvements in the character valence of governing parties, and this effect is character valence both significant and substantively strong. Our model predicts that as governing parties' character valence improve from the minimum value to the maximum value, the probability that an individual who supported an opposition party will be satisfied increases by almost 20% – coming close to the predicted levels of satisfaction of winners. Finally, Hypothesis 2d stated that losers' satisfaction would be negatively affected by improvements in the character valence of governing parties, but positively affected by opposition parties. Losers are basically unresponsive to the character valence of their preferred parties in any direction, whereas intriguingly they respond strongly to the character valence of governing parties. In light of these findings, we find no support for Hypothesis 2d.

With respect to theories of motivated reasoning, these findings also broadly fit with expectations. Losers, like winners, appear unresponsive to either positive or negative media coverage of their preferred parties. That losers do not appear to update their views towards the political system in response to positive valence-related information is, again, suggestive of a ceiling effect, with levels of satisfaction appearing to hit an upper boundary. Similarly, as with winners, the notion of cognitive dissonance likely accounts for why losers do not respond to negative character valence, because this information is predicted to be dismissed as inconsistent with losers' pre-conceived notions regarding their preferred parties. At last, motivated reasoning would predict that losers should become increasingly satisfied as the character valence of governing parties worsens, while being unresponsive to positive valence-related information, which would be dismissed. But our empirical findings do not fit with these predictions. As noted, losers become increasingly satisfied when the character valence of governing parties improves, and less satisfied when it worsens. Moreover, the effect is the strongest for all the relationships we examine. This result highlights something important – although partisanship may filter information and attitudes, once in government, these parties may be viewed differently, even by those voters who did not initially support them.

The overall narrative emerging from these results is that winners, regardless of the character valence of the political parties in the system, are more satisfied than losers – a finding in line with existing research on this topic. Importantly, however, this does not imply that parties' character valence are irrelevant to individuals' political satisfaction. When the media reports the highest levels of governing parties' character valence, the difference in the probability of being satisfied with democracy reduces to only a 12% difference between winners and losers, compared to a more than 35% difference in probability at the lowest levels of governing parties' character valence. However, it is not just governing parties' character valence that is important, because neither winners nor losers appear to react to their preferred parties' character valence. Our predictions were confounded with regard to how winners would respond to the character valence of opposition parties, and in terms of how losers responded to the character valence of governing parties. In these respects, however, we could look to expectations drawn from theories of motivated reasoning, and in this light our finding that winners' probabilities of being satisfied with democracy decrease as a result of a decline in opposition parties' character valence makes a lot of sense. Indeed, our results in this respect allow us to make an empirical contribution to this body of literature because winners display the 'cognitive dissonance' theorized by scholars working in the psychological motivation literature (e.g. Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Finally, we come back to the findings with regard to losers and governing parties – there is a clear relationship between losers' reported levels of SWD and improvements in the character valence of governing parties. This finding is not only interesting in of itself (because it ran counter to both our

hypotheses and the predictions of motivated reasoning), it is also important in the context of concerns over losers' relationships to the political system and its legitimacy. Referenced earlier, Anderson *et al.* (2005) make a strong case that losers are a kind of 'linchpin', and 'only when losers consent to being governed by those they disagree with does democracy endure and flourish' (2005: 13). Our empirical findings with regard to losers and governing parties' character valence suggest that we should not simply focus on ideological factors (Anderson *et al.*, 2005; Henderson, 2008; Curini *et al.*, 2012), institutions (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Aarts and Thomassen, 2008; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012), or even the closeness of elections (Howell and Justwan, 2013). Indeed, although satisfaction is often assumed to stem from concerns over the likelihood of having more of one's preferred policies implemented by government, our findings suggest that valence-related dimensions of evaluation may provide one plausible pathway for losers to move beyond their electoral and policy-related disappointments and express their consent for governing parties. After all, it is perhaps easier to warm to a government consisting of a party or parties that are acting more competently, more honestly, and in a more unified fashion. Parties' character valence may also serve to counter any policy-related consequences losers experience as a result of seeing their preferred parties left out of government. In this regard, our findings with respect to losers and governing parties' character valence are supported by recent research by Dahlberg and Linde (2016) who find that 'high quality of government' narrows the gap between electoral winners and losers in European democracies. Their results suggest that losers will be far less dissatisfied if they regard government as performing well, and broadly speaking, in their interests.

### Concluding remarks

We embarked on this study with the goal of contributing to the literature examining factors which affect SWD. Extant studies have already shown a bright spotlight on how being a 'winner' or a 'loser' affects attitudes towards satisfaction (Anderson and Guillory, 1997), and scholars have also begun to examine how parties' character valence can affect individuals' political attitudes (Leiter and Clark, 2015), but no study to date examines how these two factors interact. Generally speaking, we find empirical support for a relationship but not always in the manner expected.

As with prior studies, the results of our statistical analyses confirm that winners and losers have differing attitudes regarding SWD, with winners being far more satisfied. When we add parties' character valence into the equation we find that individuals' satisfaction does not respond to the character valence of their preferred parties but to the character valence of parties that they do not. Winners are relatively unresponsive to character valence in general, but do report less SWD when opposition parties' valence improves. Taken together, these observations would perhaps suggest that winners are much less concerned with parties' character valence, which makes intuitive sense – their party has won office after all. As for losers, we find their satisfaction is affected by the character valence of governing parties quite dramatically. This may seem odd at first blush, and unexpected in light of motivated reasoning considerations. But having seen their preferred party lose it is reasonable to assume that losers would become more satisfied when evaluating parties they had previously dismissed, and have no choice but to live with, improve their character valence. As such, governing parties can make important steps to improve overall citizen satisfaction, and not just among their supporters, by improving their own valence-related behaviour in office. The results of our analyses suggest that the 'consent of losers' can be at least partially won by avoiding the kinds of actions and behaviours that so often places political elites in the headlines. Of course, this is easier said than done.

One final point to note relates to the work of Singh (2014) who draw attention to the fact that winners and losers should not be viewed in such absolute terms, differentiating instead between 'optimal winners' and 'non-optimal winners' as well as 'optimal losers' and 'non-optimal losers'. Arguably, our empirical findings with respect to winners and losers could also be motivated, in part, by this notion of optimality. For example, with regard to losers and their responsiveness to

governing parties' valence, our findings could be as a result of the fact that many of those losers may have been 'non-optimal losers' and therefore far less 'offended' by the parties who ultimately formed the government. Because of both data and space limitations, it remains a task for future studies to be able to more directly explore and test these assumptions.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000122>

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