

What Tips the Scales?

Disentangling the Mechanisms Underlying Post-Electoral Gains and Losses in Democratic Support

Abstract

Prior research has shown that winning or losing elections matters. To account for this pattern, it is argued that winners can expect their preferred policies to be implemented and experience the psychological gratification of winning, whereas losers have to accept disliked policies in addition to the psychological distress of losing. In an attempt to better understand the mechanisms underlying the dynamics of winners' and losers' democratic support after elections, this study aims to separate the influence of policy performance and psychological gratification. Using panel data from the 2017 German federal election, we show that policy congruence with the government increases voters' democratic support whether they voted for the government or not, suggesting that policy congruence is more important than winning the government in securing losers' democratic support. We find no independent effect of psychological gratification; however, the evidence suggests that winning the government affected voters' democratic support independent of the two tested mechanisms.

Keywords: winner-loser dynamic, democratic support, policy performance, psychological gratification, multi-party system, panel data

1. Introduction

Winning or losing an election matters for voters – that much politicians, pundits and political scientists can agree on. In times of increasing political polarization, some experts fear that losing may matter so much that electoral losers turn their backs on liberal democracy (e.g., Caramani, 2017; Foa & Mounk, 2017; Wike & Fetterolf, 2018), a political system that critically depends on losers' tacit acceptance that disliked policies, implemented by a government they did not vote for, are still legitimate (cf. Anderson et al., 2005). To judge the extent of losers' dissatisfaction with the political system and identify factors that consolidate or mitigate this discontent, we first need to understand what drives the gap in democratic support between winners and losers.

The extensive literature addressing this gap suggests two distinct mechanisms how electoral outcomes may influence voters' levels of democratic support. First, electoral winners may be more supportive of the democratic system because they have the reasonable expectation

that their preferred policies will be implemented (policy performance). Second, winners' democratic support may increase in reaction to the simple psychological gratification of winning a competition (psychological gratification; e.g., Anderson et al., 2005; McAuley et al., 1983; McCaul et al., 1992; Oliveira et al., 2009; Wilson & Kerr, 1999). Losers, on the other hand, should have no expectation of policy performance and experience psychological distress.

While policy performance and psychological gratification effects often align, this is not always the case in multi-party systems with proportional representation. Here, winning parties may form coalition governments under agreements that greatly diminish any expectations of policy implementation, or implement preferred policies but lose substantial vote shares, nipping any psychological gratification in the bud. Protest voters may vote for a losing party but still have many of their preferred policies implemented by the established parties they intended to punish, and challenger parties may win large vote shares, making their voters feel like winners regardless of their opposition status. This non-alignment of mechanisms implies that it is important to understand their specific effects.

To address this gap and to separate the influence of policy performance and psychological gratification on voters' democratic support, we analytically and empirically distinguish three aspects of electoral winning and losing. Voters may be considered electoral winners if (1) their elected party enters the government, (2) their policy preferences align well with the government position, or (3) they perceive their parties as winners. Conversely, voters can be regarded as electoral losers if (1) their elected party does not enter the government or even the parliament, (2) their policy preferences diverge from the government position, or (3) they perceive their parties as losers. These aspects are measured independently, that is voters who would be considered winners according to the first definition may well be losers following the other definitions. Together, these three indicators allow us to estimate the individual impact of each mechanism on democratic support as well as their interplay.

Advancing prior studies on winner-loser effects, we use panel data from the German federal election in 2017 to explore how policy performance and psychological gratification interact to shape voters' satisfaction with democracy, external efficacy, and government satisfaction. This case is particularly suited to examine the mechanisms underlying winner-loser effects, as the unique constellation of electoral winners and losers enables us to differentiate policy performance from psychological gratification and to trace the democratic support of different types of winners and losers from a pre-election baseline to the election and the government formation six months later. In contrast to previous research, we also study electoral losers, who are the main group of interest with regard to eroding democratic support.

2. Different Pathways, Same Destination? The Mechanisms Underlying the Winner-Loser Dynamic

Researchers have shown time and again that electoral winners tend to be more satisfied with democracy (Blais et al., 2016; Curini et al., 2012; Han & Chang, 2016; Singh, 2014; Singh et al., 2012), to exhibit higher levels of external political efficacy (Anderson et al., 2005; Davis & Hitt, 2016), and to evaluate the government better than losers (Jeffery & Hough, 2001; Miller & Mackie, 1973; Mueller, 1970; Stimson, 1976). This divergence in the democratic support of winners and losers is theorized to have a rational and a psychological component: electoral winners have the rational expectation that their preferred policies will be implemented, which should boost their support for an electoral system that produces the desired outcome, enhance their perception that the political system is responsive to their voice, and improve their evaluation of the government (*policy performance mechanism*). Electoral winners also experience the joy of being on the winning team, which should boost their overall democratic support, whereas losers feel sullen and disillusioned, resulting in the opposite effect (*psychological gratification mechanism*).

The policy performance mechanism is well studied and empirically borne out by the often replicated finding that electoral winners whose ideological positions are close to and whose priorities match the government position experience larger increases in democratic support than winners with more distant positions, who either experience smaller increases or no increases at all (Brunell & Buchler, 2009; Curini et al., 2012; Reher, 2015; Singh, 2014). Studies examining the policy performance mechanism draw on the extensive literature investigating general policy performance effects, which has shown that ideological and issue-specific proximity to the government increase voters' democratic support independent of the electoral outcome (e.g., Citrin et al., 2014; Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Han & Chang, 2016; Kim, 2009). In other words, although electoral winners should be more likely to experience policy performance effects than losers, the policy performance mechanism does not exclusively affect winners. Instead, it should influence losing much as it does winning, by attenuating the loss for losers whose preferences align well with the government position and aggravating it for losers whose positions are at odds with the government. We therefore hypothesize that democratic support increases for voters whose policy positions are close to the (expected) government position, but not for voters with incongruent positions, resulting in a gap in democratic support between congruent and incongruent voters (*policy performance hypothesis*).

The psychological gratification mechanism, sometimes referred to as a ‘home team’ effect, is somewhat more elusive (e.g., Bol et al., 2018; Davis, 2014; Singh, 2014; Singh & Thornton, 2016; T. G. Van der Meer et al., 2014). From psychology, we know that winning generates positive emotions such as joy and pride, whereas losing evokes negative emotions such as anger, disillusionment, and depression (Anderson et al., 2005; McAuley et al., 1983; McCaul et al., 1992; Oliveira et al., 2009; Wilson & Kerr, 1999). This dynamic has been documented across a range of different contexts (for an overview, see Anderson et al., 2005) and is therefore expected to hold irrespective of the specific domain in which one wins or loses. With regard to elections, the psychological effects of winning or losing are thought to serve as an easily available cue for voters when evaluating whether or not the political system produced the desired outcome (e.g., Singh et al., 2011). To the best of our knowledge, Singh’s (2014) work on optimal and non-optimal winners is the only study attempting to empirically differentiate psychological and performance effects in the context of elections. His study offers an important step towards understanding the independent influence of psychological gratification; however, his empirical analysis relies on party affect and party identification to measure psychological winning. It thus runs the risk of conflating policy performance and psychological effects, as voters most likely consider parties’ policy positions alongside other factors when evaluating or identifying with parties. To avoid this risk, we draw on people’s subjective assessments whether their elected party has won or lost the election to capture psychological gratification (cf. Stiers et al., 2018). Hence, we hypothesize that democratic support increases for self-perceived winners, but not for self-perceived losers (*psychological gratification hypothesis*).

Although policy performance and psychological gratification refer to distinct theoretical arguments how election outcomes may influence voters’ democratic support, their observable effects align in many electoral contexts where government voters, who can expect policy implementation, feel like winners. Because the two mechanisms are observationally equivalent in these cases, researchers often rely on indicators that capture both policy performance and psychological gratification, such as voting for a party that enters the government or voting for the party that obtains the largest vote share.¹ However, in some contexts, policy performance and psychological gratification effects diverge, for instance because established parties return to government but perform poorly in historical comparison, making their voters feel like losers (e.g., in Slovakia 2016, Sweden 2018, and Estonia 2019). Therefore, some recent studies

¹ These definitions largely overlap empirically, as the party with the largest vote share usually enters the government, although it may have to share the power with a coalition partner in multi-party systems (for a detailed discussion, see Singh et al., 2012).

measure winning as voting for the party or parties that win the most compared to the previous election (e.g., Hooghe & Stiers, 2016; T. W. Van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018), focusing more on voters' psychological gratification and less on policy performance, as opposition parties hardly ever have the leverage to push their own policy proposals (Bräuninger & Debus, 2009). To capture and distinguish both mechanisms, we hence consider three aspects of winning (or losing): policy congruence, subjective winning, which refers to individuals' self-perceptions as electoral winners, and objective winning, defined as voting for a party that enters the government. Because we include objective winning alongside the more specific indicators for policy performance and psychological gratification, our analyses allow us to estimate the specific impact of the two mechanisms as well as any residual impact of winning the government.

Prolonged processes of government formation such as long coalition negotiations have the potential to further dealign the effects of psychological gratification and policy performance, both in terms of time and direction. The psychological impact of elections, in particular, may be short-lived and its effects may therefore pass long before the coalition negotiations are concluded and policy performance takes effect. However, even if psychological gratification is ephemeral, entering the government may feel like winning all over again, especially if the outcome of the coalition negotiations could not be foreseen immediately after the election. In fact, an unexpected government coalition may make an entirely different set of voters feel like winners or losers than the election, evoking psychological effects that run counter to the initial impact of the election outcome. Moreover, because policy performance effects are based on expectations rather than actual performance, voters' speculations which parties will form the government may influence their democratic support long before a coalition agreement is signed. Therefore, unexpected government coalitions may reverse boosts of democratic support among voters who expected the government to implement their preferred policies and increase democratic support among voters whose preferences suddenly align with the government position. To understand the timing and durability of psychological gratification and policy performance on voters' democratic support, we thus trace individual democratic support from before the election to after the government formation.

Previous research has seldom investigated the impact of losing an election on democratic support (for an exception, see Curini et al., 2012), yet understanding what aggravates or attenuates the impact of losing seems more relevant than ever given concerns about losers turning their backs on liberal democracy. Instead of focusing exclusively on

winners, our more nuanced understanding of electoral winning and losing allows us to estimate the impact of both mechanisms for different types of losers as well as winners. Separating the potentially opposed influences of policy performance and psychological gratification leaves us with four groups of voters to be examined immediately after the election and after government formation: (1) voters who feel like winners and whose policy preferences are congruent with the government position, for whom psychological gratification and performance effects concur, (2) voters who feel like winners, but whose preferences are incongruent with the government position, who only experience the psychological gratification of winning, (3) voters who feel like losers, but whose policy preferences are congruent with the government position, whose loss may be offset by policy performance effects, and (4) voters who feel like losers and whose preferences are incongruent with the government position, for whom the negative psychological impact of losing is compounded by the lack of policy congruence (Table 1).

Table 1: Expectations for Psychological and Performance Effects

	Psychological winner	Psychological loser
High policy congruence	Positive concurrence	Policy performance
Low policy congruence	Psychological gratification	Negative concurrence

To better understand the severity of losses in democratic support among losers, we examine the impact of electoral outcomes on three dimensions of democratic support, which differ with regard to their level of attribution of electoral outcomes. In consequence, they should be more or less resistant to the impact of election outcomes (cf. Singh et al., 2011). The dimension most closely linked to losing or winning an election is specific support for the incumbent government. Losers have every reason to dislike a government that they opposed at the polls, especially if their policy positions are distant from the government position. Yet, in a democracy, it is commonplace and perhaps even desirable that some citizens will be dissatisfied with the current government, making losses in specific government support the norm rather than an exception warranting concern (Schumpeter, 1947; Shapiro, 2003).

A second dimension that is closely linked to losing or winning is the perceived responsiveness of the political system, though it is not directly related to the election outcome and should therefore be less affected than government support (e.g., Balch, 1974; Craig, 1979; Finkel, 1985; Hansen & Pedersen, 2014). Losers may feel that their votes, and thus their preferences, are disregarded by the political system, whilst winners get to shape the political agenda for years to come. For democracies, such losses in external efficacy are more serious, especially if they prompt citizens to abstain from participating in democratic processes.

More diffuse forms of democratic support such as satisfaction with democracy are less closely linked to individual elections and should thus be less affected by their outcomes. Yet, if voters were considerably less satisfied with the working of democracy after an electoral loss, this would be an indication that concerns about a waning acceptance of democratic principles among losers in polarized democratic systems are indeed warranted. In short, we expect that electoral outcomes will affect specific forms of support more markedly than diffuse forms of support.² Hence, losing or winning an election should influence support for the incumbent government to a greater extent than external efficacy, and satisfaction with the working of democracy should be least affected.

3. The 2017 German Federal Election

The German federal election in 2017 offers an excellent test case to examine the differential impact of psychological gratification and policy performance on winners' and losers' democratic support. As a multi-party system with proportional representation, the German political system routinely produces all four types of winners and losers listed in Table 1, enabling us to distinguish psychological from performance effects. Moreover, the election was followed by prolonged coalition negotiations. The 2017 federal election is thus uniquely suited to analyze these differential effects for two reasons.

First, the incumbent government parties CDU/CSU and SPD both lost about a fifth of their votes compared to the previous election (Korte, 2019) and this historic defeat led many of their voters to perceive them as losers. As the results from the GLES campaign panel survey 2017 reported in Table 2 illustrate, only 19 percent of CDU/CSU voters and 4 percent of SPD voters felt that their elected party had clearly or rather won the election, despite winning the largest vote shares. This perception shifted somewhat after the government formed in March 2018, when the share of self-perceived winners increased to 32 percent among CDU/CSU voters and doubled to 8 percent among SPD voters. However, large sections of both parties' electorates still perceived the government as a coalition of losers.

Two smaller parties particularly profited from their loss. The FDP returned to parliament with its vote share raised from 4.8 to 10.7 percent and entered coalition negotiations with the CDU/CSU and the Greens immediately after the election (Korte, 2019; Siefken, 2018, p. 408),

² Despite the extensive debate about the exact placement of these three concepts on the continuum between diffuse and specific support (e.g., Booth & Seligson, 2009; Canache et al., 2001; Fuchs, 1993), most political scientists agree that incumbent government support is the most specific of the three concepts, while satisfaction with the working of democracy is the most diffuse in relative terms (e.g., Dalton, 2004; Linde & Ekman, 2003; Norris, 2011).

giving 89 percent of its voters reason to feel like winners (Table 2). After the renewal of the Grand coalition, only 49 percent of FDP voters still thought their party had won the election. The AfD entered parliament for the first time, increasing its vote share from 4.7 to 12.6 percent (Korte, 2019) and eliciting an even greater enthusiasm among its voters, 96 percent of whom felt that their party had won the election (Table 2; cf. Chang et al., 2014; Curini et al., 2012; Dahlberg & Linde, 2016). Government formation decreased the share of self-perceived winners among AfD voters by only 8 percentage points. Although the vote share for the Green party remained essentially unchanged compared to 2013, over half of the Green voters perceived their party as a winner immediately after the election, likely because the Greens were expected to enter the government. As with FDP voters, this share dropped to just 24 percent after the renewal of the Grand coalition (Table 2). Hence, many voters' perceptions were diametrically opposed to common definitions of winning as being in government or obtaining the largest vote share (e.g. Banducci & Karp, 2003; Blais et al., 2016; Dahlberg & Linde, 2016; Davis & Hitt, 2016; Han & Chang, 2016).

Table 2: Self-perceived winning in the 2017 federal election

	Post-election		Post-government formation	
	Overall	Party voters	Overall	Party voters
CDU/CSU	.11	.19	.22	.32
SPD	.03	.04	.08	.08
FDP	.78	.91	.36	.49
Greens	.43	.55	.16	.24
The Left	.33	.46	.17	.22
AfD	.90	.96	.77	.88

Note: Entries show the percentage of respondents who indicated that the respective political party clearly or rather won the election in response to the statement: “If you think about the outcome of the federal election, which parties do belong to the winners and which to the losers?” (Source: ZA6804; also see Table 3 and the Data and Methods section for detailed information on the GLES campaign panel survey 2017).

Second, the prolonged coalition negotiations, first between CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens and later between CDU/CSU and SPD (Siefken, 2018) enable us to analyze the influence of policy expectations associated with different degrees of certainty, which changed over the course of the coalition negotiations. Immediately after the election the incumbent SPD vowed not to enter another Grand coalition with the CDU/CSU. The ensuing attempt of CDU/CSU, the Greens, and the FDP to form a so-called Jamaica coalition failed when the FDP withdrew from the negotiations in November 2017. In March 2018, CDU/CSU and SPD formed another Grand coalition, an outcome which was anything but expected. Hence, voters whose policy positions were close to those of the prospective Jamaica coalition should have been less certain

that their preferred policies would be implemented than voters whose policy positions were close to the Grand coalition after the coalition agreement was concluded. Therefore, we expect policy performance effects to be more marked after the government formation than immediately after the election.

While the German federal election in 2017 is particularly well suited to study the impact of different electoral outcomes on democratic support, none of its features are uncommon in multi-party democracies. In Estonia (2019), Sweden (2018) and Slovakia (2016), incumbent parties lost heavily to smaller or new parties, likely engendering perceptions of losing and winning that run counter to common definitions. In Austria, Israel, and Spain (2019), Italy (2018), the Netherlands (2017) and, often, Belgium, long-running coalition negotiations have detached the election from its outcome. Hence, the studied case offers a unique opportunity to analyze losers' and winners' democratic support but is not atypical, as its features appear to have become more prevalent in recent elections.

4. Data and Methods

We used data from the GLES campaign panel survey 2017 (Roßteutscher et al., 2018) to explore how losing or winning the election and the coalition negotiations influenced voters' democratic support. The panel consists of nine survey waves, including seven pre-election waves, collected between October 2016 and September 2017, and two post-election waves, collected immediately after the election in September 2017 and right after the government formation in March 2018. Our analysis draws on six of these waves, which are detailed in Table 3. Respondents were recruited from an online access panel using socio-demographic quotas (gender, age, education) and the sample is thus not representative of the German electorate. We discuss the implications in the conclusion.

Table 3: Overview of the panel waves

	Collection period	N (retention rate)	Variables used
Wave 1	10/06-11/10/2016	18,079 (1.00)	demographic measures
Wave 5	08/17-08/28/2017	13,114 (0.62) ⁺	baseline democratic support measures
Wave 6	09/04-09/13/2017	13,045 (0.59)	political sophistication, economic evaluations
Wave 7	09/18-09/23/2017	12,047 (0.55)	policy congruence measures
2017 federal election (09/24/2017)			
Wave 8	09/27-10/09/2017	13,014 (0.59)	post-election democratic support
Wave 9	03/15-03/26/2018	11,826 (0.54)	post-government formation democratic

Note: ⁺ Before wave 5, 3,128 new panelists were recruited to counter panel attrition effects. The reported retention rates thus refer to the enlarged sample of 21,207 respondents from wave 5 on.

The panel structure of the data has several advantages in analyzing the impact of losing and winning on democratic support. Most importantly, it allowed us to trace individuals' democratic support over time and thus to test if the election and the government formation were associated with intra-individual changes in democratic support. The availability of two post-election waves offered the rare opportunity to examine the durability of psychological and performance effects over several months. Moreover, the longitudinal perspective enabled us to include baseline levels of voters' democratic support from about one and a half months before the election in our models. This is crucial to correctly assess effect sizes, as Blais and Gélneau (2007) have demonstrated that eventual winners anticipate the outcome and are therefore already more satisfied with democracy in the days before the election. The commonly used pre-post-election panels cannot detect such anticipatory effects, and, hence, likely underestimate the impact of winning and, more importantly, losing on democratic support.

To test how psychological gratification and policy performance influence voters' democratic support, we included respondents' individual baseline measures of democratic support as a lagged dependent variable (LDV; Wooldridge, 2009, p. 310) in a cross-sectional model equation.³ The LDV model allowed us to estimate how well the two mechanisms account for changes in democratic support both between the baseline wave in August 2017 and the post-election wave in September 2017, and between the baseline wave and the post-government formation wave in March 2018, while controlling for unobservable covariates responsible for inertia of democratic support (Wooldridge, 2009, p. 311). The LDV approach thus enabled us to trace individual-level changes in democratic support despite the fact that many of the relevant concepts were not queried in regular intervals. Regarding problems arising from autocorrelation (Achen, 2000; Plümper et al., 2005), we followed Wilkins (2018) who found that including LDVs solves the problem of autocorrelation given proper model specification. Using Monte-Carlo simulations, he demonstrated that models including first-order lags were routinely less biased than models without LDVs, although the inclusion of second-order lags can be useful in capturing the full level of autocorrelation. We re-ran all analyses with second-order lags, with substantively equivalent results (see Appendix 3). The following equation formalizes the

³ Different empirical approaches are available to model panel data (Wooldridge, 2009). Because we are interested in general shifts in democratic satisfaction on the individual level, an LDV model is best suited to answer our research question. However, we re-ran the analysis using a diff-in-diff approach, which estimates the marginal effects of psychological gratification and policy performance before and after the time of interest, as a robustness check and the results do not differ in substantive terms (Appendix 4).

specification of the six models used to test our hypotheses for satisfaction with democracy, external efficacy, and satisfaction with the government immediately after the election and after government formation:

$$\begin{aligned} Supp_t = & Supp_{t-1} + Gov.Vote_t * Perceived Win_t + Gov.Vote_t * Close.Econ_{t-1} \\ & + Gov.Vote_t * Close.Mig_{t-1} + Perceived Win_t * Close.Econ_{t-1} \\ & + Perceived Win_t * Close.Mig_{t-1} + Controls \end{aligned}$$

In this setup, the level of democratic support at time t is explained by the respective baseline measure from August 2017 (LDV), a dummy variable indicating whether or not a respondent voted for any of the parties expected to form a coalition government (*government vote*)⁴, respondents' psychological gratification (*perceived win*) and expectations of policy performance (*close:economy* and *close:migration*), an interaction term between *government vote* and the respective measures for psychological gratification and policy performance, and an interaction term between psychological gratification and the two policy performance indicators. We included the first interaction to test whether the two mechanisms work differently for governments voters, often described as 'objective' winners, than for opposition voters, who might be described as 'objective' losers (cf. Bol et al., 2018). For instance, the boost in democratic support experienced by congruent government voters may be more marked than the increase among congruent voters of other parties. The second interaction allowed us to test our expectations regarding the interplay of the two mechanisms (Table 1). For the post-election model, t is September 2017 and *government vote* refers to the Jamaica coalition, for the post-government formation model, t is March 2018 and *government vote* refers to the Grand coalition.

To assess the severity of post-electoral losses in democratic support, the analysis includes three dependent variables capturing different dimensions of democratic support. We measured satisfaction with the working of democracy with the – often debated (e.g., Canache et al., 2001) – standard item asking respondents “On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Germany?” The indicator for external efficacy is a standardized additive index constructed from respondents' agreement with the statements that

⁴ German voters have two votes, the first to elect a candidate and the second to elect a party. In our analyses, we only consider the second vote because, first, the second vote is decisive for the seat share in the Bundestag; second, all other relevant variables are only available for parties, not candidates; and, third, previous research has shown that voters are not more satisfied when they voted for a district candidate compared to a list candidate (Bol et al., 2018).

“politicians care about what ordinary people think” and “politicians try to get in close contact with the population”. Measuring voters’ government satisfaction was somewhat more complex, as voters expected the formation of a Jamaica coalition immediately after the election and any effects of losing or winning should thus find expression in their satisfaction with this anticipated outcome. Obviously, voters’ satisfaction with this Jamaica coalition could not be queried before the election. Therefore, we aggregated the party evaluations for CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens to an unweighted mean coalition score for both the baseline and the post-election measures.⁵ After the Jamaica coalition had failed, the object of voters’ evaluations reverted to the Grand coalition, so that a direct measure of government satisfaction was available in the baseline wave. For the post-government formation wave, we again relied on an unweighted mean coalition score, this time for CDU/CSU and SPD. All indicators were recoded to range between 0 and 1, where 1 denotes a high level of democratic support (see Appendix 1 for question wording and coding).

To measure psychological gratification, we combined an item asking respondents to indicate whether a party won or lost the election with information about respondents’ vote choice to obtain an indicator which is 1 if the respondent believed their elected party has clearly or rather won the election and 0 if the respondent indicated that their elected party had neither won nor lost, or rather or clearly lost the election.⁶ This measure relies on individual perceptions and thus detaches psychological winning from any static categorizations applied in previous research, helping us to differentiate psychological gratification and policy performance.

The policy performance mechanism assumes that policy congruence with the (prospective) government influences the effects of losing or winning an election. As empirical evidence suggests that the general left-right dimension has a different meaning over time and even between respondents in the same country (Bauer et al., 2017; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016), we measured policy congruence with the government on two major issue dimensions, which structure the German policy space: the socio-economic dimension and immigration. The latter is considered an indicator of the cultural divide (Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012) and has been particularly salient since the European refugee crisis in 2015 (Mader & Schoen, 2019). Because

⁵ We considered weighting the party scores by vote shares but decided against this because voters may or may not take the relative strength of the coalition parties into account when forming an overall evaluation of the government, yet it seems unlikely that they do so using the same calculus implied in a weighted coalition score. However, we also re-ran the analyses with weighted coalition scores as a robustness check and the results remain substantively unchanged (Appendix 5). As an additional robustness check, we constructed an unweighted mean coalition score for the Grand coalition in wave 5 and compared it to the direct measure of government satisfaction from the same wave. The correlation between the two measures is 0.77, speaking to the validity of the constructed coalition scores and their comparability with the direct measures.

⁶ We re-ran the analyses excluding respondents who chose the neutral category. The results do not change substantially (Appendix 6).

the policy performance mechanism is based on voters' subjective expectation that their preferred policies will be implemented, we measured congruence as the distance between respondents' own policy position and the perceived position of the (again, prospective) government parties. For each dimension, respondents were considered congruent if their positions differed less than two points from the party position on a seven-point scale. To capture policy congruence with the two relevant coalitions (CDU/CSU, FDP, and Greens in September 2017 and CDU/CSU and SPD in March 2018), we constructed a count variable for each policy dimension, which indicates the total numbers of coalition partners with whom respondents are congruent. Implicitly, we thus assume that respondents' policy performance expectations rise with the number of coalition partners who share their policy preferences. To prevent capturing post-election policy shifts by the respondents, all policy positions were measured immediately before the election.

In addition, our analyses include controls for political sophistication, measured as an additive index of political interest and political knowledge; party identification; individual and general assessments of the economy, interacted with the perceived responsibility of the government for the state of the economy; as well as gender and age, each of which has been shown to influence democratic support in prior research and may therefore confound our results if omitted (e.g., Blais et al., 2016; Han & Chang, 2016; see Appendix 1 for question wording and coding).

5. Results

How did the different dimensions of democratic support change over time on the aggregate level? Figure 1 traces the mean levels of satisfaction with democracy, external efficacy, and government satisfaction from the baseline wave in August 2017 over the post-election wave in late September 2017 to the post-government formation wave in March 2018. Satisfaction with democracy (top panel) increases slightly right after the election, which supports the expectation that elections boost satisfaction with the working of democracy. However, this small increase is short-lived and has already vanished six months later. The mean level of external efficacy (center panel) remains constant in the post-election wave and actually drops below the – already quite low – baseline level after six long months of coalition negotiations. Satisfaction with the prospective Jamaica coalition rises immediately after the election, but satisfaction with the ultimately renewed Grand coalition after government formation does not differ from the pre-election levels (bottom panel).

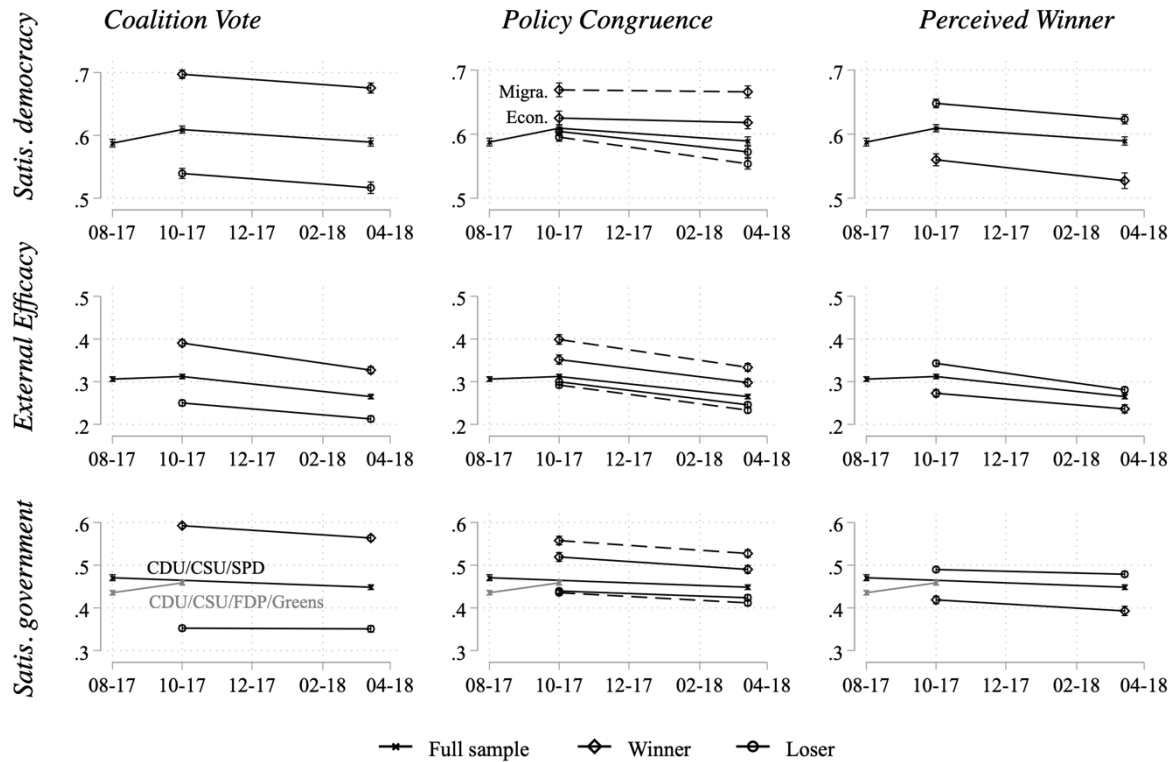


Figure 1: Winner-loser trends between August 2017 and March 2018. *Note:* Depicted are mean values of the three dependent variables (satisfaction with democracy, external efficacy, and government satisfaction) with 95% confidence intervals for voters who won or lost according to their government vote, their policy congruence, and their self-perception. The number of observations varies between 6,109 and 7,236 (see Appendix 2 for more details).

Disaggregating the democratic support of different types of winners and losers, we find that prospective government voters (CDU/CSU, FDP, and Green voters in September 2017, CDU/CSU and SPD voters in March 2018) are far more supportive than expected opposition voters across all three dimensions of democratic support, reconfirming the classic divide between winners and losers (left panel). Similarly, voters whose policy preferences match the government position exhibit higher levels of democratic support than incongruent voters, especially on the immigration dimension (center panel). This difference can already be observed immediately after the election, suggesting that voters compare their policy positions to the prospective government coalition long before the government is formed. Surprisingly, voters who perceived their elected parties as electoral winners were less supportive than self-perceived losers across all levels of democratic support, casting doubt on the psychological gratification hypothesis.

Overall, the descriptive results illustrate that there are considerable differences between winners and losers for all dimensions of democratic support. However, the descriptive results cannot differentiate policy performance and psychological gratification and may thus conceal

contrary effects. We hence ran lagged dependent variable regressions to separate the impact of the two mechanisms on winners and losers.

5.1. Winning or losing the election⁷

To understand the impact of policy performance and psychological effects on democratic support, we interacted indicators for both mechanisms with the *government vote* variable in a lagged dependent variable regression. In other words, we explored how different degrees of policy congruence and psychological winning relate to changes in the levels of democratic support from before to after the election, controlling for the respective other mechanism. In doing so, we distinguished the impact of policy performance for government voters and opposition voters. Immediately after the election, CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens were expected to form a coalition government and, thus, both *government vote* and *policy congruence* were measured in reference to this prospective coalition. Because this Jamaica coalition as well as the ultimately renewed Grand coalition were ideologically diverse, which likely increased ambivalence for voters, the observed effects may be relatively modest in size (cf. Singh & Thornton, 2016).

Figure 2 displays the predicted levels of satisfaction with democracy immediately after the election. While government voters are not generally more satisfied with the working of democracy, they are slightly more satisfied than opposition voters when their immigration preferences match the agenda of two government parties (upper right panel) and when both government and opposition voters feel that their party has won the election (bottom left panel). Importantly, this gap in satisfaction with democracy vanishes for voters who are congruent with all three government parties on the immigration dimension, and congruent opposition voters are significantly more satisfied with democracy than their incongruent counterparts. This finding tentatively supports the notion that policy congruence may offset the negative experience of objective losing (upper right panel). There is no evidence that psychological gratification influences voters' satisfaction with democracy (bottom left panel), but the predicted levels of satisfaction with democracy for the four groups specified in Table 1 suggest that voters experiencing policy congruence are minimally more satisfied with democracy than incongruent self-perceived winners (bottom right panel). All observed effects are substantively small and thus in line with our expectation that winning or losing an election should affect voters' diffuse democratic support least.

⁷ We report full regression tables for all analyses in Appendix 2.

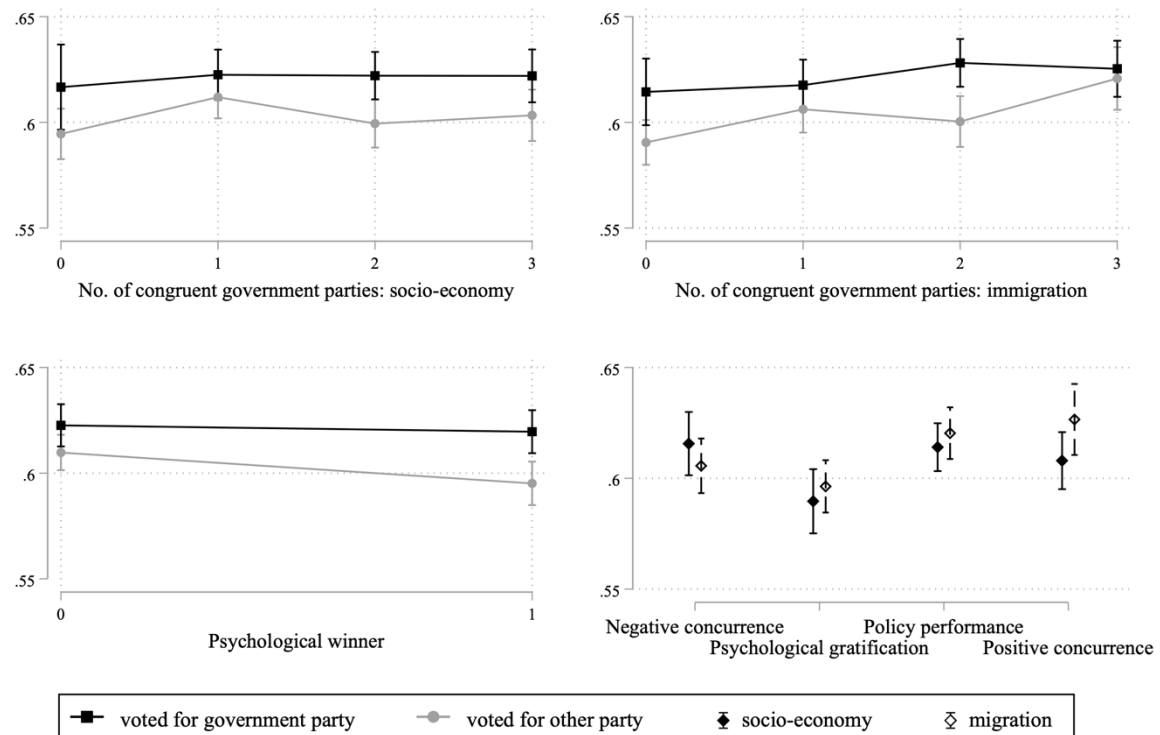


Figure 2: Winner-loser effects on satisfaction with democracy immediately after the election. *Note:* Depicted are predicted levels of satisfaction with democracy in September 2017 with 95% confidence intervals ($N = 6,681$).

Figure 3 displays the results of the analyses for external efficacy, confirming that both policy performance and psychological gratification are more relevant for more specific democratic support. The upper left panel illustrates that voters whose socio-economic policy preferences do not align with the government position exhibit the same low level of external efficacy as opposition voters. However, government voters who are congruent with at least one government party feel significantly more efficacious than equally congruent opposition voters and external efficacy does not rise among more congruent opposition voters. This suggests that socio-economic congruence with the government coalition cannot offset the negative impact of objective losing on external efficacy. The same is not true for congruence on immigration policy (upper right panel), which was the most salient policy dimension in the 2017 federal election. Although government voters tend to feel more efficacious than opposition voters, opposition voters whose immigration preferences align well with all government parties feel significantly more efficacious than their incongruent counterparts and as efficacious as government voters. With regard to external efficacy, high policy congruence on the immigration dimension thus offsets objective losing, whereas it does not affect government voters' levels of external efficacy. Hence, the results offer tentative support for the policy performance hypothesis, though the mechanism seems to be more relevant for opposition voters.

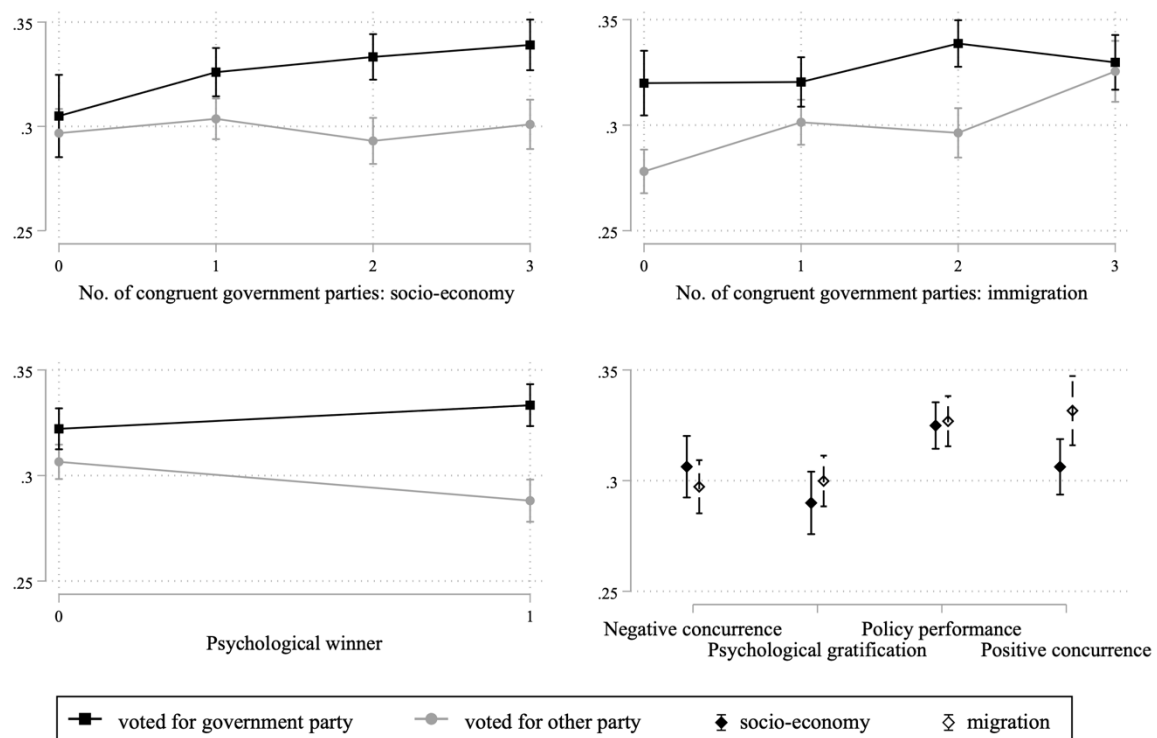


Figure 3: Winner-loser effects on external efficacy immediately after the election. *Note:* Depicted are predicted levels of external efficacy in September 2017 with 95% confidence intervals (N = 6,645).

With regard to psychological gratification, voting for the government or opposition does not matter for psychological losers' levels of external efficacy but government voters who feel like winners exhibit considerably higher levels of external efficacy than opposition voters experiencing the same psychological gratification (bottom left panel). Surprisingly, this is not because psychological winners feel more efficacious than other government voters. Instead, self-perceived winners who voted for the opposition feel even less efficacious than self-perceived losers. This may be because self-perceived winners feel that their (winning) vote should have been more decisive and thus lose rather than gain confidence in the responsiveness of the system. The predicted levels of external efficacy in the bottom right panel show no difference between negative concurrence and psychological gratification, but voters who experience policy performance generally feel more efficacious than incongruent voters, corroborating the policy performance hypothesis.

Although the government had yet to be formed in September 2017, we expect that policy performance and psychological winning influenced evaluations of the prospective Jamaica coalition. Figure 4 confirms this expectation, as both policy congruence and psychological winning affected voters' satisfaction with the expected government. Unsurprisingly, voters of

the prospective Jamaica coalition were more satisfied with the government than opposition voters. Policy congruence on the socio-economic dimension did not affect voters' government satisfaction, but opposition voters were more satisfied with the Jamaica coalition when their immigration preferences matched the positions of at least two government parties (top panels). This finding emphasizes the importance of policy performance in raising the support of objective losers.

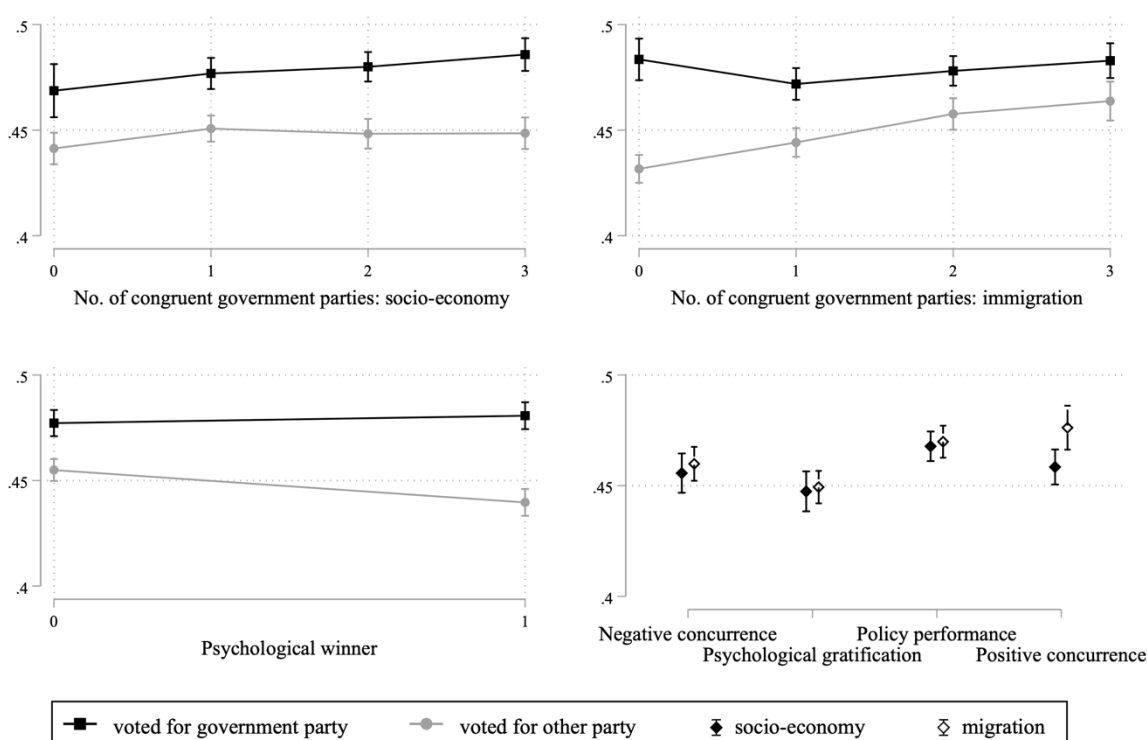


Figure 4: Winner-loser effects on satisfaction with the prospective government immediately after the election. *Note:* Depicted are predicted levels of satisfaction with the Jamaica coalition government in September 2017 with 95% confidence intervals (N = 6,581).

The results for psychological gratification follow the same pattern as for external efficacy (bottom left panel): while government voters who feel like winners are not more satisfied with the Jamaica coalition than government voters who feel like losers, opposition voters who feel like winners are even less satisfied with the prospective government than opposition voters who feel like losers. This result contradicts the psychological gratification hypothesis and suggests that voters who feel that their party has won the election may resent the governing parties even more for taking their parties' rightful place. The predicted levels of government satisfaction in the bottom right panel show that psychological winners are not more

satisfied with the prospective government than voters experiencing negative concurrence and confirm the importance of policy congruence.

Overall, the results support the policy performance hypothesis with regard to the most salient policy dimension at the time, i.e. immigration. However, policy performance seems more relevant for opposition voters' than for government voters' democratic support, at least directly after the election and before a coalition agreement has been reached. Psychological winning does not have the expected effect and opposition voters' levels of external efficacy and government satisfaction are even lower if they feel that their party has won the election, perhaps because these voters feel that their party has been denied its rightful place. On the bright side, the impact of winning or losing on voters' satisfaction with democracy is minimal and, hence, losers do not routinely seem to question the working of democracy as such.

5.2. Winning or losing the government

The coalition negotiations for the fourth Merkel cabinet lasted six months, temporally detaching the government formation from the election and shifting the object of voters' evaluations. To examine the durability of winner-loser effects and explore the impact of government formation largely independent of the actual election, we re-ran all lagged dependent variable regressions with levels of democratic support in March 2018 as the dependent variable. As Figure 5 shows, voters of the renewed Grand coalition were not more satisfied with democracy than opposition voters. Although opposition voters are tendentially more satisfied with democracy when their policy preferences match the position of the CDU/CSU or the SPD, the difference misses conventional levels of significance (top panels). After the government was formed, policy performance became more relevant for government voters, as CDU/CSU and SPD voters whose immigration preferences align well with both government parties are significantly more satisfied with democracy than incongruent government voters, offering further support for the policy performance hypothesis.

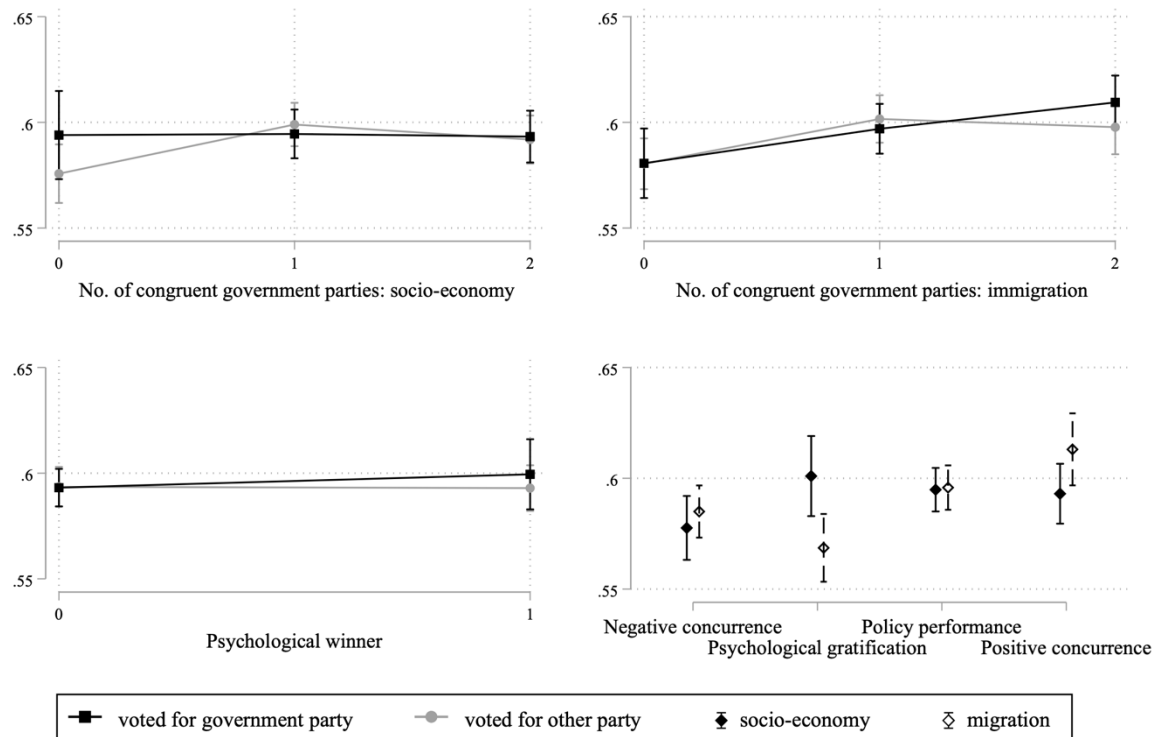


Figure 5: Winner-loser effects on satisfaction with democracy after government formation. *Note:* Depicted are predicted levels of satisfaction with democracy in March 2018 with 95% confidence intervals (N = 6,112).

Psychological gratification, on the other hand, does not affect voters' satisfaction with democracy at all (bottom left panel), substantiating the notion that psychological winner and loser effects may be ephemeral. The predicted levels of satisfaction with democracy in the bottom right panel once again illustrate that voters who feel like winners but whose positions on immigration policy do not match the government position are less satisfied than voters with congruent immigration preferences. The same is not true for socio-economic congruence, suggesting that the observed negative influence of psychological winning on democratic support is mainly driven by voters supporting the far-right.

Looking at the predicted levels of external efficacy in Figure 6, we see no differences between winners and losers six months after the election. Whether someone voted for the government or the opposition, is congruent or incongruent with the government on both policy dimensions, or perceives themselves as a winner or loser does not affect the universally low level of external efficacy. As the bottom right panel shows, only voters who felt like winners and whose immigration preferences matched the government position still felt slightly more efficacious than voters experiencing negative concurrence. This finding suggests that the long and arduous coalition negotiations generally decreased voters' feeling that their vote has an impact, even compared to pre-election levels of external efficacy.

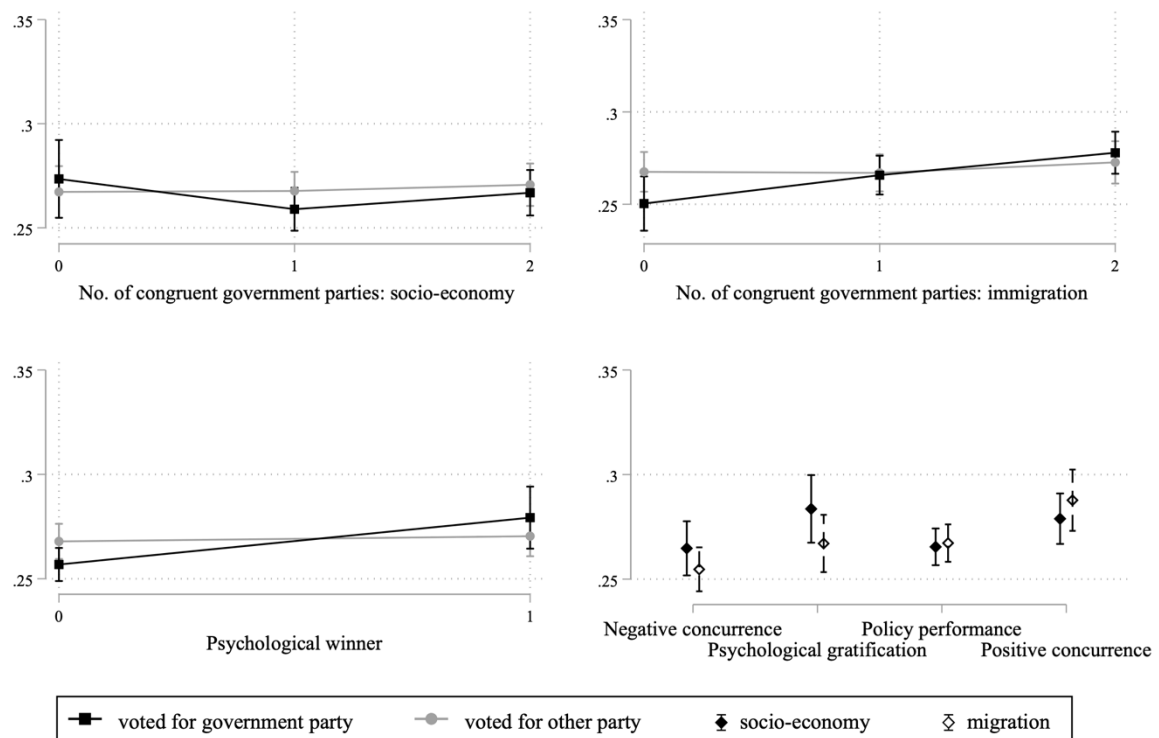


Figure 6: Winner-loser effects on external efficacy after government formation. *Note:* Depicted are predicted levels of external efficacy March 2018 with 95% confidence intervals (N = 6,049).

Lastly, we examined how the formation of the government affected voters' satisfaction with the renewed Grand coalition. The top panels in Figure 7 show that government voters are more satisfied with the Grand coalition than opposition voters only if neither is congruent with the government on socio-economic and immigration policies. Opposition voters whose policy preferences match the position of at least one government party are as satisfied with the Grand coalition as government voters and significantly more satisfied than their incongruent counterparts, further reaffirming the importance of policy performance effects in mitigating the impact of objective losing. Government voters whose immigration preferences are congruent with both government parties are also more satisfied with the Grand coalition than their incongruent counterparts. Hence, it seems that agreement with government policies is far more important for voters' specific democratic support than having voted for the government, at least in multi-party systems with coalition governments. However, the observed differences between incongruent government and opposition voters once again confirm that winning the government influences more specific forms of democratic support independent of policy performance and

psychological gratification, suggesting a third mechanism behind winner-loser effects which has yet to be theoretically explained.

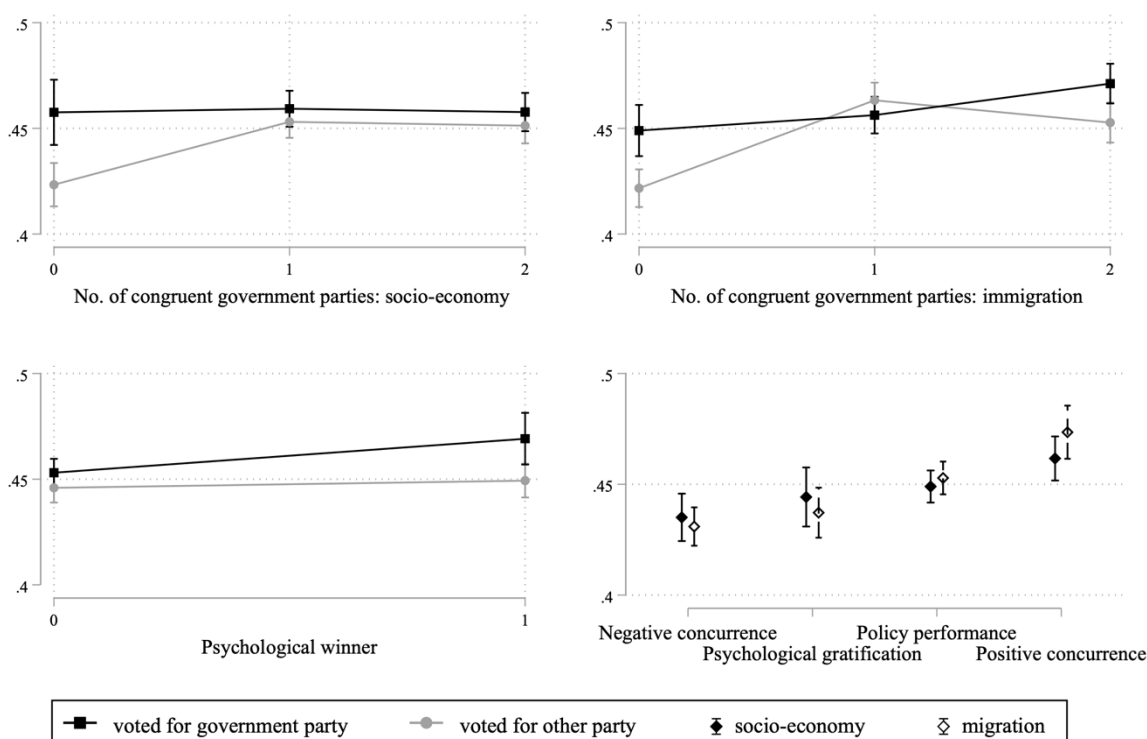


Figure 7: Winner-loser effects on government satisfaction after government formation. *Note:* Depicted are predicted levels of satisfaction with the Grand coalition government in March 2018 with 95% confidence intervals (N = 6,078).

In line with our expectations that psychological gratification is short-lived, self-perceived winning or losing does not seem to affect voters' democratic support six months after the election. Figure 7 shows neither a direct effect (bottom left panel), nor an indirect effect of psychological gratification on the predicted levels of government satisfaction (bottom right panel). Self-perceived winners are not more satisfied with the Grand coalition than self-perceived loser or voters experiencing negative concurrence. However, congruent immigration positions once again significantly raise voters' government satisfaction, offering additional support for the policy performance hypothesis.

Altogether, the results show that policy performance effects were the most important drivers of increases in democratic support after government formation. Whereas policy congruence mainly raised the democratic support of objective losers after the election, policy performance effects increased all voters' democratic support once the coalition agreement was signed. Psychological winner effects, on the other hand, prove to be ephemeral and do not affect

voters' democratic support six months after the election. For external efficacy, neither mechanism can offset the decline that most likely follows from the prolonged coalition negotiations.

6. Conclusion

Winning or losing an election matters for voters, perhaps enough for losers to turn their backs on liberal democracy. Although the extensive literature addressing the gap in democratic support between winners and losers offers several explanations why losers should be less supportive of the political system than winners, the specific contributions of these proposed mechanisms in explaining the winner-loser dynamic and their interaction were something of a black box. Drawing on panel data from the 2017 German federal election, we attempted to analytically and empirically separate the influence of policy performance and psychological gratification on democratic support.

Our results support the expectation that policy performance has an independent positive influence on democratic support, which is especially relevant for boosting opposition voters' democratic support. Although both government and opposition voters experienced policy performance effects, opposition voters' democratic support started to rise immediately after the election and increased more markedly than government voters' democratic support after government formation. Unlike previous studies, we thus find a consistent positive influence of policy congruence on the democratic support of (objective) losers, which is large enough that congruent opposition voters' levels of democratic support cannot be distinguished from government voters' democratic support. This finding suggests that many voters assess the political system by its policy output, alleviating concerns that opposition voters will oppose any government policy, irrespective of its substance (e.g., Jost, 2006). In short, policy congruence seems to matter much more for voters' democratic support in multi-party systems than winning the government.

Conversely, we find no empirical evidence confirming an independent positive influence of psychological gratification on voters' democratic support. This could imply at least two things: the psychological gratification mechanism may not be as relevant for the electoral context as previous literature anticipated or psychological gratification may be even more short-lived than expected. Given that most empirical tests of psychological gratification have been conducted in the context of sports events and assess effects hours or even minutes after winning (McAuley et al., 1983; McCaul et al., 1992; Oliveira et al., 2009; Wilson & Kerr, 1999), neither seems implausible. In both cases, psychological winning seems largely irrelevant for voters' democratic support. However, immediately after the election, opposition voters who felt that

their party had won the election were even less supportive of the political system than opposition voters who felt like losers, inverting the psychological gratification hypothesis. This unexpected effect is driven mainly by voters of the right-wing AfD, who may feel that their party was unjustly excluded from government power after receiving the third-largest vote share. In line with the argument recently made by Hooghe & Dassonneville (2018), our findings hence offer some indication that winner-loser effects might work differently for voters of anti-systemic parties.

This interpretation of the (absent) psychological gratification effects assumes that voters who felt that their party won or lost the election experienced an according emotional reaction. Although individual perceptions of winning and losing approximate voters' psychological reactions more closely than measures based on 'objective' criteria such as winning the government, they are a necessary rather than a sufficient condition for psychological gratification or distress to occur. Hence, we cannot preclude that self-perceived winning and losing only induce the assumed psychological reaction for some voters, for instance those who are particularly invested in the election outcome (cf. Daniller, 2016). In the absence of more direct measures of emotional reactions, exploring such most-likely cases may be useful to further refine our understanding of psychological gratification in the context of political competitions.

In addition, our results show that, even when controlling for policy performance and psychological gratification, government voters were generally more supportive of the democratic system than opposition voters. Though we cannot rule out that this effect reflects an insufficient identification strategy, this independent effect may capture additional factors such as gratification from seeing well-liked politicians in public office, which may also be more pronounced among voters with certain personality traits. In any case, this finding implies that future research may be well-advised to rigorously investigate whether winning or losing the government per se makes a difference and whether this effect is subject to conditioning by contextual features or voter characteristics.

In line with our expectations, the election outcome affected specific democratic support more than diffuse democratic support immediately after the election. However, this was not the case after government formation, as objective winning and policy performance impacted satisfaction with the Grand coalition more than satisfaction with democracy, but did not affect external efficacy at all. This suggests that the prolonged coalition negotiations impacted external efficacy more than the other two dimensions of democratic support, diminishing voters' belief that their vote counts even in comparison to the pre-election baseline. Considering

that coalition negotiations have tended to become longer rather than shorter over the last few years, this finding may not bode well for voters' permanent levels of external efficacy. Importantly, objective losers were never substantially less satisfied with democracy than objective winners, assuaging some of the concerns regarding losers' support for liberal democracy as such.

Using panel data allowed us to trace changes in democratic support for different types of winners and losers, but the panel sample differs from a random probability sample of the German electorate in several ways (cf. Roßteutscher et al., 2019). On average, panel respondents are more likely to have voted and to identify with a party and more interested in politics than the average German. In consequence, panel respondents tend to have relatively stable, well-developed attitudes and policy positions, increasing the probability that panel respondents were able to indicate their own policy position in relation to parties' positions on the same issue. Since our analyses only consider voters for whom policy performance and psychological gratification indicators could be constructed, this bias should not influence our results. However, the panel also overrepresents opposition voters, resulting in lower average levels of democratic support⁸ and raising the question whether diverging baseline levels imply diverging rates of change over time. The comparatively high level of political involvement among panel respondents suggests that over-time changes in democratic support would be smaller rather than larger compared to a random probability sample. From this perspective, the analysis may provide conservative estimates of the quantities of interest.

Although we consider one specific case in our empirical analysis, we expect that our conclusions regarding the underlying mechanisms of winner-loser effects are generalizable to other multi-party parliamentary systems. However, our results illustrate that the political context and the duration of coalition negotiations can influence how winner-loser effects unfold. For instance, policy performance effects are not uniform but vary with regard to the relevant policy dimension, as well as the dimension of democratic support. Although we included the two main dimensions shaping the German policy space, there may be other relevant dimensions. Further research is also needed to understand how persistent the observed winner-loser effects are over the election cycle and whether other political events may trigger the same dynamic we have shown for elections and government formation. These avenues of

⁸ In the post-election surveys, the mean scores for panel respondents/random probability respondents were 0.56/0.65 for satisfaction with democracy, 0.29/0.50 for external efficacy, and 0.44/0.56 for government satisfaction. For external efficacy we were only able to compare the item "politicians care about what ordinary people think", as the second item was not available for the random probability sample.

future research may contribute to a better understanding of how, why, and under what conditions winning and losing matter for democratic support.

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