

Election losers or society's losers?

How election result ambiguity can impact the relationship between feelings of control and perceptions of election fairness

Nicholas Sorak & Stephen Dawson

Abstract

Democratic elections around the world are increasingly marred by citizen skepticism regarding the fairness of their conduct. A growing body of research has established that the perceptions of elections are often influenced by the outcome of the election and partisanship. However, little attention has been paid to individual psychological factors such as feelings of low control, which have previously been linked to a greater inclination to endorse conspiracy theories. We investigate the impact of individual feelings of control and their interaction with election results using post-election surveys from the British 'Brexit' referendum of 2016 and the Swedish general election of 2018. Results suggest a robust relationship between feelings of low control and perceptions of electoral unfairness. While election victory can in some cases mitigate this effect, it appears only to be the case when election results – and the winners and losers – are clear.

Introduction

One of the key aspects of a functioning democracy is faith in electoral processes. Citizen perceptions of election fairness are not just important for the legitimacy of the process, but they also have far-reaching effects on political participation (Birch 2010; Carreras & Irepoglu 2013) and satisfaction with democracy (Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2018; Norris 2019). However, even in institutionalized liberal democracies such as Sweden, recent years have witnessed several instances

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of allegations and accusations of misconduct during campaigns and elections (Valmyndigheten 2015).

Often, the extent of the negative assessments of elections is not entirely reflective of reality. Evidence from the Swedish Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) post-election survey in 2018 shows that only 56% of respondents fully endorsed that Swedish elections were carried out in a fair way. While it is reassuring that more than half of the Swedish public have strong faith in the electoral system, nearly one in five respondents expressed moderate to strong doubts about electoral integrity. Yet according to the expert assessment-based Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) Index, Swedish elections continue to be ranked among the cleanest in the world. Similar skepticism is found in the United Kingdom, where over half the respondents of the British Election Study (BES) conducted following the 2016 Brexit referendum expressed moderate to strong doubts about the integrity of the process.

And while there were undoubtedly ways in which the conduct of these elections could have been improved from an administrative perspective, the extent of some of the negativity in citizen perceptions of fairness often tends to be disproportionate to the extent of actual foul play. A developing field of research has positioned suspicions about the integrity of elections among a broader set of conspiratorial beliefs that tap into an individual's need to make sense of the world and feel a sense of control (e.g. Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Bruder et al. 2013; Edelson et al. 2017). When individuals lack this sense of control, they are more susceptible to such unsubstantiated beliefs. Other developments in work considering the determinants of election perceptions have argued that one of the biggest factors in public assessments of elections is the result. In short, a predominantly US-centric vein of research has found consistent evidence of the so-called winner-loser 'gap', whereby election winners hold better ex post assessments of elections than losers, who look to the integrity of the process as an explanation of electoral defeat (Sances & Stewart 2015; Sinclair et al. 2018; Levy 2021; see also Lundmark & Weissenbilder in this volume).

Yet in many contexts, what constitutes a 'winner' or 'loser' is not always easy to define. In systems such as those where much of this research is conducted, the supporters of each party will inevitably find themselves on either side of the dividing line as winners or losers. However, when electoral stakes are more diffused and victory is subject to a series of post-election negotiations – as is the case in most multiparty democracies around the world – the winner-loser gap is murky and the election result that can condition citizen perceptions is ambiguous.

Given these factors, can it be that an individual's sense of personal control influences perceptions of elections? In this paper, we address this question, demonstrating that low feelings of control are related to more negative perceptions of election fairness, but election victory can mitigate this effect.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that this reduction is itself subject to the clarity of the election result. In elections where the result is clear-cut, and winners and losers are clearly identifiable, the effect of low feelings of control is expected to be contingent on electoral defeat. When the election result is ambiguous, the effect of low feelings of control is more similar across “winning” and “losing” groups and is subject to how these groups are defined. We find support for our expectations using post-election survey data in the context of the Swedish general election of 2018 and the UK referendum on EU membership in 2016. These results suggest that feelings of low control can affect perceptions of procedural fairness but have a stronger impact in systems with clear winner-loser outcomes.

Perceptions of electoral integrity

Citizen perceptions of elections can vary considerably in democracies. Perhaps the most well-established explanation of these perceptions is based on studies which argue that citizens infer a general perception of how the election has been conducted overall from their own experiences in the contemporaneous or previous voting processes. If an individual turns up to the ballot station and has a negative experience – such as being refused the ability to vote due to not being registered correctly – they are likely to view the election in a negative light. Similarly, if their experience with registering and voting is problem-free, they are likely to have positive reflections on the entire process. Upon aggregation, the experiential perspective implies that perceptions of election fairness are at least in part based on lived experiences of elections and their institutions.

The most influential factor associated with electoral quality tends to be regime type, although elections typically serve a very different function in autocracies vis-à-vis liberal democracies. In more democratic contexts, electoral quality is typically associated with the political independence of key media and judicial institutions (Birch & Van Ham 2017), electoral rules (Lehoucq & Kolev 2015; Ruiz-Rufino 2018), and electoral competition (Dawson 2022). While the range and magnitude of election-related problems is smaller, several studies have nevertheless identified ways in which the integrity of elections is compromised. Ultimately, the majority of these relate to administrative capacity or the quality of administration during the various phases of the election rather than any ill-intent (James 2012; Clark 2017; Lundmark et al. 2020). Several studies also discuss problematic incentives that exist with regard to electoral administration and political neutrality, for example (Alvarez & Hall 2006; Mozaffar & Schedler 2002).

Yet the conduct of elections and how they are perceived by citizens are not necessarily one and the same thing. Recent years have witnessed several high-profile examples of widespread and public accusations of election tampering.

However, negative public perceptions are often not reflected in the assessments of experts and election observers (Garnett & James 2021). Several different approaches have been taken to measure electoral integrity. Due to the clandestine nature of the dark side of elections, measures of election quality often rely on expert assessments. This is the approach taken by the majority of studies that consider the quality of elections in democratizing and autocratic contexts, or in cases of large-scale cross-national comparisons. In democratic contexts, an increasingly used indicator is based on the assessments of election administrators, who have extensive first-hand experience of election procedures to an arguably even greater extent than the public or experts (Karp et al. 2018).

The nature of the gaps between these measures raises the crucial question of what drives perceptions of election fairness. In line with the experiential perspective referred to above, there is some evidence that citizens base their electoral perceptions partially on administrative performance (Bowler et al. 2015). However, there is more evidence to suggest when and why these perceptions diverge. In a study conducted in Austria, for example, Partheymüller et al. (2022) found election workers to have significantly greater confidence in elections than the public. When comparing the perceptions between the public, election officials, and experts across countries, Garnett and James (2021) note a much more consistent association between the latter two. Specifically, public perceptions differed from expert and election officials' assessments precisely in questions with more partisan relevance such as suspected media bias in favor of the government, or whether opposition candidates were prevented from running.

The idea that political identities such as partisan affiliation can condition perceptions of elections relates to two further explanations in addition to one's own experience. First, communicative explanations contend that citizens are influenced by others to believe that elections were conducted well or poorly. This can come from one or several sources, including family and friends from their own experiences or what they may have heard from elsewhere. Political elites may also broadcast their opinions about the conduct of an election, with losing candidates in particular having the opportunity to either accept defeat or cry foul. Indeed, referencing minor instances of 'second-order' integrity issues – such as small-scale maladministration or human error (Norris 2013) – often exaggerates the scale of problems in elections in the eyes of the public (Minnite 2010). Aside from undermining the legitimacy of elections in the eyes of many, this also deepens the gap between popular perceptions of electoral conduct and reality.

The way in which individuals process this information in many ways relates to psychological explanations of these perceptions. A growing literature contends with the ways citizens perceive and process politically relevant information, and how the political congeniality of this information and its sources can affect their attitudes and behaviors. In the context of elections, multiple studies

have provided evidence that expectations about the outcome of the election are largely driven by partisan bias (Dolan & Holbrook 2001).

Following the election, perceptions of the fairness of the process are said to be largely shaped by its outcome (Levy 2021). When the party that an individual supports comes out on top, their evaluation of the process improves. Similarly, election losers have a greater tendency or willingness to attribute the result to administrative error or misconduct (Sinclair et al. 2018). The effect of winning or losing an election on an individual's attitudes toward democracy and their own state has also been shown to consolidate and strengthen over time (Sances & Stewart 2015; Daniller & Mutz 2019). The strength of the effect of winning an election is such that in the context of the 2016 US presidential election it reduced the effect of elite messaging, in which Trump and other Republicans had preemptively alleged electoral fraud in anticipation of a potential loss.

While winner-loser effects dominate the debate of perceptions of electoral integrity particularly in the US case, several studies have gone beyond this factor to ask what other characteristics or psychological factors can explain perceptions of elections. Beliefs about election fraud have been found to correlate with anti-social personality traits and conspiratorial thinking, for example (Edelson et al. 2017). Mistrust in elections is also shared by those with populist values (Norris et al. 2020). One study that develops upon the winner-loser gap is the work of Flesken and Hartl (2018), who use cross-national survey data to show that it is rather those with anti-authoritarian values who often accentuate the winner-loser gap by reading up more on electoral processes and then processing this information in a politically biased way. It therefore appears that the winner-loser gap – although predominant in the field – tells only part of the story when explaining perceptions of electoral integrity.

Election perceptions and feelings of control

We contend that when individuals perceive heightened levels of electoral misconduct in environments where there is little-to-no evidence to support these beliefs, they resemble what we will call unsubstantiated political beliefs. Unsubstantiated beliefs (also called epistemically suspect or unwarranted beliefs) are beliefs that are not supported by available evidence or science (and their claims sometimes cannot be tested at all), covering a multitude of issues, often categorized as conspiracy, pseudoscientific, or supernatural beliefs (e.g., Šrol et al. 2021; Lobato et al. 2014). Despite perceptions that these beliefs are limited to the fringe of society, they are relatively common and global, although this varies depending on country, context, and type of belief (e.g., Walter & Drochon 2022). This prevalence is further underscored by the fact that these estimates are typically gathered through the measurement of clearly defined structured beliefs, leaving much less understood about the degree to which

people are prone to less-defined unsubstantiated beliefs that may underlie these more formal beliefs.

Seeking to explain why people turn to conspiratorial thinking, Douglas et al. (2017) provide evidence that these kinds of unsubstantiated beliefs satisfy epistemic, existential, and social motives. Of particular interest to our study are epistemic and existential motives, which address desires to understand the world and the human need for control, respectively. Our theoretical model takes this as a point of departure, framed within the large body of work that has demonstrated the fundamental importance for people to feel a sense of control over their lives (e.g., Rotter 1966; Sullivan & Lewis 2003). While feeling greater control over our lives increases our sense of happiness (Larson 1989), losing control leads to both more negative feelings and a reduction of positive ones (Kaufman et al. 2019), and even influencing how we experience physical pain (Vanceleef & Peters 2011). A sense of reduced control can result from a variety of life events, including health problems and existential worries (Newheiser et al. 2011), environmental factors and interpersonal struggles (Newcomb & Harlow 1986), and shifting societal norms and our position within social structures (Wheeler 2021). However, while a clear pattern of struggles has been identified that often fuels feelings of reduced control, this sense can also originate from our personality (Declerck et al. 2006; Xin et al. 2017).

Whatever the cause, the physical and emotional discomfort that arises from a lack of control drives us toward compensation strategies that provide relief. While each person and experience differ, motivating a variety of means for coping, experimental studies have demonstrated that increased perception of illusory patterns is a common compensatory mechanism that arises from feelings of low control (e.g., Brotherton & French 2014; Whitson & Galinsky 2008). These illusory patterns can manifest in a range of ways, from perceiving non-existent patterns in the stock market to seeing conspiracies where none exist (Ibid.). These patterns serve to create reassuring narratives that make sense of the individual's environment, reestablishing or explaining our perceived degree of personal control.

Exogenous explanations are especially appealing, as they create an understanding of the world that shifts the cause of problems away from the individual (Goertzel 1994). Additionally, when faced with feeling reduced influence in their lives, people often seek simple explanations for complex problems (Kossowska & Bukowski 2015; van Prooijen & Douglas 2017). The narratives that best satisfy these needs are those that can be applied broadly to a range of factors that influence feelings of control while also shifting the locus of responsibility elsewhere. This explains, for example, the appeal of conspiratorial themes that researchers have identified, which consistently feature powerful people manipulating the levers of society in secretive ways for their own personal gain.

In the case of elections, unsubstantiated beliefs offer a similar simple narrative for understanding the complexities of the world that serves as a challenge to the legitimacy of inputs to the system, the very institutions related to individual access to power and a convenient explanation for feelings of low control. Belief that elections are conducted unfairly or fraudulently is at its core a narrative in which the mechanisms that allow a person to help shape the structure and course of society are denied to them and are instead perceived to be manipulated by others who are in positions of power to do so. While the tangible consequences of elections can at times be difficult to assess, elections nonetheless determine who controls certain elements of society and often result in shifts in a wide range of socioeconomic factors, ultimately influencing how much individual control people feel. Critical perceptions of elections thereby offer an effective and efficient explanatory route through which a person can account for difficult circumstances while simultaneously shifting the locus of control to an external source, satisfying both the epistemic and existential motives behind these beliefs.

Structured allegations of electoral misconduct are indeed a feature of some prominent and formal conspiracy theories, such as those pushed by Donald Trump and other elites in the wake of the 2020 US presidential election. These baseless beliefs ultimately contributed to a group of his supporters violently storming the US Capitol building in an attempt to overturn the results of what was otherwise an election revealed to have few technical problems, even after a series of post-election audits. While a multitude of factors contributed to these perceptions and actions, many of those individuals who espoused these false narratives explicitly linked these unsubstantiated perceptions to their feelings of control, exclaiming that they needed to “take back” their country and that the election had been “stolen” from them. This case offers a clear demonstration of potentially serious consequences of conspiratorial narratives tied to both feelings of control and the perception of elections, but not all related beliefs manifest in such extreme ways.

These beliefs may also manifest as statements or perceptions that elections are ‘unfair’ or ‘rigged’ or a sense that votes are not counted ‘properly,’ without clear detail about what exactly this means or which individuals are responsible (see Theorin et al. in this volume for evidence linking related perceptions with conspiracy thinking in Sweden).¹ Unsubstantiated beliefs in the form of height-

1 The boundaries that delineate which beliefs are warranted and those which are not shift with context. For example, using generic conspiracy belief scales poses challenges in post-Communist countries where endorsement of claims that the government was involved in secret surveillance and oppression measures may not be conspiratorial thinking but rather accurately based on lived experience (Mikušková, 2017). In countries where electoral misconduct is pervasive and brazen, perceptions that elections are conducted fairly would be unsubstantiated and not reflective of reality. Likewise, in settings such as Sweden where the available evidence instead demonstrates that elections are conducted freely and fairly, heightened perceptions of electoral unfairness are similarly unsubstantiated.

ened perceptions of electoral misconduct could therefore satisfy the epistemic and existential needs that arise when our sense of control feels challenged, while potentially offering the additional benefit of reduced social cost and stigma that is demonstrated to come with endorsement of more detailed conspiracy theories (Lantian et al. 2018; van Prooijen & Van Vugt 2018). The broad nature of these perceptions could also help to avoid the evidentiary burdens that may come with more detailed narratives, such as needing to defend stories describing who specifically committed the alleged election fraud and how they went about it.

Building on the evidence presented above, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1: Individuals who report feeling less control over their lives perceive elections to be conducted more unfairly.

Yet elections do have results, which create winners and losers, not all of whom could ultimately deem an election unfair. The US insurrection serves as a good illustration of the argument by Uscinski & Parent (2014) that “conspiracy theories are for losers.” By this, they mean that conspiratorial beliefs offer a comfort for individuals who represent the segments of society that are losing or being left out. Consistent with the findings about factors that reduce feelings of control, other work has demonstrated that those people who are on the (perceived or real) losing side of society – whether facing tougher economic conditions, feeling socially powerless, or even literally losing elections – are those people most likely to be drawn in by the explanatory power of these unsubstantiated beliefs, which provide a lens through which to understand their struggles (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Freeman & Bentall 2017; Hofstadter 1966). From this we derive our second hypothesis:

H2: The effect of feelings of control on perceptions of electoral conduct is reduced by winning elections, with the perceptions of election losers more influenced by feelings of low control.

However, the beneficial impact of winning on feelings of control and subsequent perceptions may be contingent upon the certainty and clarity of that victory, influenced by several psychological factors. First, in situations with non-binary electoral outcomes where voters cannot firmly situate themselves on the winning side or where post-electoral negotiations drag on, uncertainty is higher. Feelings of uncertainty are linked with a reduced sense of control and similarly drive compensatory unsubstantiated perceptions aimed at making sense of the world (van Prooijen 2016; van Prooijen & Jostmann 2013; Whitson et al. 2015). Second, winners in these situations (especially those who feel low individual control) may face a disconnect between their sense of presumed victory and their recognition of election results that seem impossibly close, continue to shift, or will likely result in some dissatisfactory sharing of power.

Ambivalence such as this, which is also associated with uncertainty, increases unsubstantiated beliefs as people struggle to reconcile strong contradictory attitudes they hold toward a situation (van Harrevald et al. 2014). Third, these circumstances drive an epistemic need for cognitive closure, which also increases endorsement of unsubstantiated beliefs (Marchlewska et al. 2018). Finally, the nature of unsubstantiated beliefs is one of adaptability. Holding one unsubstantiated belief increases the likelihood that you hold others and that those beliefs are related (Wood et al. 2012). Individuals also demonstrate the ability to hold contradictory unsubstantiated beliefs simultaneously due to a less-distinct shared core belief that drives them (Ibid.). Together, these traits allow opportunities for narrative flexibility in the face of conflicting evidence. This collection of psychological factors creates conditions where even being on the winning side of an election can allow for beliefs that call into question the legitimacy of that very outcome, such as an ambiguous post-election period when feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence are salient. On these grounds, we suggest our third hypothesis:

H3: The effect of winning elections is decreased when election results are ambiguous and winners and losers are not clear.

We thus predict that in settings with relatively high levels of electoral integrity, feelings of low control stimulate perceptions of electoral unfairness, and that this effect is more pronounced for individuals who lose an election or feel uncertain of results. Our proposed mechanism complements existing research that seeks to understand the conditions that drive political perceptions. Previous work has demonstrated that many of the same factors that influence both feelings of control and unsubstantiated beliefs are similarly related to more negative assessments of elections, including economic struggles (Birch 2008), education (Ibid.), partisanship (Sances & Stewart 2015), and political interest (McCann & Dominguez 1998). Building upon established findings regarding election perceptions, we suggest that there is a bridge between these separate bodies of work, one that expands our understanding of psychological mechanisms that influence these perceptions. We thus aim to demonstrate that while some critical assessments of elections are accurate, for some individuals heightened perceptions of misconduct are in part caused by narrative-seeking processes driven by feelings of low control.

Case selection

We test the above hypotheses using survey data from two settings. First, we analyze a case with an election in which there was no ambiguity regarding the winners and losers: the UK referendum on EU membership in 2016. The referendum – which was widely expected to be a victory for the remain

campaign – was eventually decided by a margin of 51.9% to 48.1% in favor of the leave campaign, equating to a difference of over a million votes. Due to the binary nature of the result (leave or remain), the outcome and policy direction that resulted from the referendum was immediately clear once the votes were tallied. This allows for testing of our first two hypotheses under conditions where winner-loser effects are most expected and easiest to observe.

We then retest these hypotheses, focusing on the Swedish general election of September 2018. Due to the tendency of Swedish elections to produce multi-party governments that are subject to a considerable degree of negotiation and bargaining prior to any coalition agreements, election results are often ambiguous prior to government formation. 2018 is a particularly acute example of this kind of post-election uncertainty, and the government coalition consisting of Socialdemokraterna, Miljöpartiet, Centerpartiet and Liberalerna was eventually agreed upon several months after the election in January 2019. While these parties may be considered the winners in one respect, the party that achieved the largest share – Socialdemokraterna – in fact lost vote share and parliamentary seats relative to the previous election and recorded their poorest results since 1911. In contrast, 2018 saw the rise of the populist radical right Sverigedemokraterna, who achieved a record high number of votes and seats in parliament. In the wake of the election, commentators debated the extent to which each party performed well or poorly relative to expectations, and who the winners of the election really were. There was therefore considerable ambiguity regarding the outcome, providing a setting that allows examination of our third hypothesis.

Besides the variation in the ambiguity of results, the similarities between the Swedish and British cases makes their comparison valid and useful for several reasons. Perhaps most notably, both countries are established institutionalized liberal democracies and have similarly clean and contested elections, as demonstrated by similar scores of around 0.9 in V-Dem's Clean Election Index in recent decades. At the same time, both countries experience similar issues regarding the conduct of their elections, and both have considerable internal variation in terms of how fair elections are perceived to be. Furthermore, despite these similarities, the relative breadth of choice in parties in Swedish elections and the rare nature of referendum elections in Sweden that could offer unambiguous binary outcomes underscores the value of examining this issue in an international comparative context.

Measurements

The data for the British case comes from the British Election Study (BES) Internet Panel (Fieldhouse et al. 2016). Specifically, we take data from Wave 9, which was conducted in the month following the UK referendum on EU membership which took place on June 23, 2016. For the Swedish case, the data

comes from the 2018 Swedish CSES election survey (Andersson et al. 2021). This survey was conducted as part of that year's wave of Swedish National Election Study's (SNES) surveys conducted throughout Sweden for every election on a range of opinions, attitudes, and personal details. The data in this wave was collected following the Swedish election on September 9, 2018, from September to November. Important to note for this study is that this survey was conducted prior to the formation of government in January 2019, after several months of negotiations between parties.

PERCEPTIONS OF ELECTION FAIRNESS

We measure how respondents perceive the fairness of electoral conduct using two questions that refer specifically to the election that respondents have just witnessed. In the British case, we utilize a question that asks, on a scale from 1-5, "how fairly do you think the EU referendum was conducted?" Likewise, in the Swedish case the outcome measure comes from a question that asks respondents to place the conduct of the Swedish national election on a scale of fairness from 1-5. Both scales are adapted such that higher scores indicate more unfair perceptions. Importantly, these items frame the issue of fairness in the context of *electoral conduct*, minimizing the risk that respondents give answers based on other aspects of the election.

FEELINGS OF CONTROL

To measure feelings of personal control, we rely on a question asked in both surveys that taps directly into this feeling. Specifically, the question asks respondents the extent to which they agree (on a scale from 1-5) with the statement that "many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me." This scale is reversed and matched across samples so that higher scores indicate a greater lack of personal control.

This item was developed for Rotter's internal-external control scale (1966), measuring whether individuals place the locus of control over their lives within themselves or externally. Since the development of the scale, this item has reliably measured how much personal control people feel (Lange & Tiggemann 1981) and higher scores on this item are linked with conspiracy thinking (Kofta et al. 2020; Whitson et al. 2019).

CONTROL VARIABLES

We include control variables that could influence feelings of control as well as perceptions of electoral fairness. Standard demographic variables control for age, education, gender, and marital status, while a measure of income controls for economic factors. These factors all directly impact the control a person feels over their life, influencing what opportunities are available to them and to what degree they can self-determine, even in advanced democracies. Previous

research has also consistently demonstrated an influence of these factors on political attitudes, including assessments of elections.

We also include level of political interest as a control variable, as this likely has a strong influence over how aware respondents are of election issues, the parties involved, and how elections are conducted, including the relative fairness of elections in their country. There is, however, the possibility that political interest could be influenced by feelings of control. We include this variable due to its high relevance to election perceptions, although it may lead to more conservative estimates for the effect of feelings of control.

Additionally, an individual's political alignment could affect both feelings of control and perceptions of electoral fairness. At the time of the surveys, Sweden had a left-leaning government while Britain had a right-leaning one. A respondent's political alignment within these environments could affect the degree to which they feel their interests are represented in government, thus influencing their sense of control. Furthermore, while the election results in neither case were strictly split along left-right lines, they nonetheless showed trends along this dimension relevant to the factors examined here. The Swedish results suggested a left-leaning governing coalition would again emerge, while those voting to leave the EU in the Brexit referendum were more likely to be on the political right than left, creating potential for a respondent's political alignment to influence perceptions of these election outcomes. Also relevant to these perceptions, previous research has found that unsubstantiated beliefs are more common among those on the right side of the political spectrum (e.g., Enders & Smallpage 2018; Oliver & Wood 2014), as well as the political extremes (Krouwel et al. 2017; van Prooijen et al. 2015). We therefore control for where respondents place themselves from left to right along the political spectrum.

ELECTION OUTCOMES

A key aspect of our empirical investigation concerns how the relationship between an individual's feeling of control and perceptions of elections can be conditioned by the result of that election (and where individuals find themselves relative to that). We therefore introduce election results relative to how one voted as moderating variables in the relationship. While this moderation effect is easy to estimate in the British case, we use multiple approaches in the ambiguous Swedish case.

The first variable breaks voters down into two sides: 'winners' and 'losers', using the eventual party support blocs as a proxy. On the winning side, we included those respondents who voted for the Red-Green bloc that won the most Riksdag seats in the election: Socialdemokraterna (S) and Miljöpartiet (MP) – the presumed (and eventual) ruling parties – as well as Vänsterpartiet (V). We also included Centerpartiet (C) and Liberalerna (L), who had made clear their unwillingness to form a right-leaning coalition that included

Sverigedemokraterna (SD) and had instead signaled their support of a Red-Green government. V, C, and L also all increased their number of Riksdag seats. On the losing side, we included Moderaterna (M), Kristdemokraterna (KD), and SD, the blocs that came in second and third in total Riksdag seats in the election. Furthermore, this election saw the center-right bloc Alliance fall apart and both M and KD lose seats in the Riksdag. Together, M, KD, and SD would attempt to secure the prime minister position for Moderat Ulf Kristersson in the election aftermath, but it seemed clear that they did not have a path toward forming a government. We did not include respondents who voted for parties other than these, including Feministiskt initiativ, as none of these parties won seats in the Riksdag and together made up only 0.89% of the total number of respondents. We also did not include respondents who voted blank or chose not to answer who they voted for.

The second moderating variable breaks down into what we call *losing-winners* (V), *winners* (S, MP, C, and L), *losers* (M and KD), and *winning-losers* (SD). The *winners* are comprised of voters for those parties who became the ruling coalition and supporting parties, which was a likely outcome of the election based on messaging during the campaigns and immediately following the election. V is classified a *losing-winner* because they secured a sizable percentage of the electorate and were on the “winning” side but were excluded from the governing coalition in the previous election and were likely to be excluded again, which was indeed what happened. They ultimately abstained rather than vote for Socialdemokrat Stefan Löfven as prime minister yet were nonetheless part of the winning Red-Green bloc and held some influence. M and KD were the *losers* in the election in that they could not secure the support of C and L to form a right-leaning government. And SD fall into what we call the *winning-loser* category as they were on the losing side and were not brought into discussions about forming a government, yet they emerged as a clear winner in terms of growth. The 2018 election marked their third consecutive term holding seats in the Riksdag, after winning seats for the first time in 2010, as well as becoming the third-largest party in Sweden behind only S and M.

Results

This section presents the results of tests of three hypotheses regarding the relationship between individual feelings of control, perceptions of election fairness, and electoral outcomes. A series of OLS regression analyses test the direct effects of feelings of personal control on perceptions of the fairness of electoral conduct (H1), as well as indirect effects based on the outcome of the election and how individuals voted (H2). We then introduce the Swedish case to investigate how election result ambiguity (or a lack therefore) can affect this relationship (H3).

THE UK REFERENDUM ON EU MEMBERSHIP 2016

The first arm of the analysis considers how feelings of control contribute to perceptions of election fairness in a context where the result was unambiguous: the Brexit referendum. Being an election ‘winner’ is more easily defined in this case as corresponding to whether an individual reported voting either “leave” or “remain” in the referendum. Those who reported having not voted are excluded from the analysis.

Table 1. Regression analysis using British Election Study (BES) Data

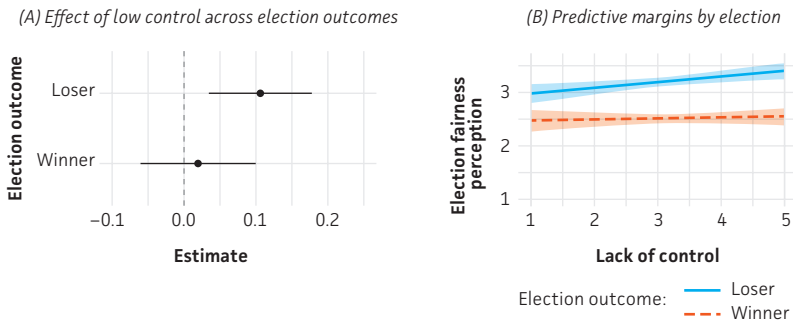
	<i>DV: Election perceived to be conducted unfairly</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Lack of control	.073 (.027) [‡]	.068 (.027) [†]	.106 (.037) [‡]
Election win	-.806 (.054) [‡]	-.702 (.062) [‡]	-.419 (.189) [†]
Lack of control* election win			-.087 (.054)
<i>Controls</i>			
Age		.0004 (.002)	.0004 (.002)
Education		-.019 (.022)	-.02 (.022)
Female		-.021 (.056)	-.021 (.056)
Married		.001 (.011)	.001 (.011)
Income		.01 (.008)	.01 (.008)
Political interest		.035 (.015) [†]	.035 (.015) [†]
Left/right placement		-.063 (.012) [‡]	-.062 (.012) [‡]
Constant	3.030 (.095) [‡]	3.047 (.238) [‡]	2.923 (.25) [‡]
R ²	.074	.084	.085
N	2826	2826	2826

Notes: Positive values indicate more unfair perceptions of elections. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.01$, ‡ $p < 0.001$ in Table 1.

Models 1 and 2 demonstrate a statistically significant positive direct effect of low feelings of personal control on the belief that elections are conducted unfairly, even when controlling for how the individual voted in the referendum, providing support for H1. The result remains consistent across these two models when demographic and other individual-level controls are introduced, suggesting robustness to the association. To probe this further and test H2, model 3 introduces an interaction term that assesses the effect of feelings of control for both Brexit winners and losers. The results of this analysis are illustrated in Figure 1, which shows that this overall positive effect appears to be driven primarily by referendum losers (those who voted to remain). As predicted by H2, winning an election helps to reduce the effect of low feelings of control on perceptions of electoral fairness. While it may be the result of random statistical noise, Panel

A in Figure 1 suggests that even these clear winners showed a tendency toward perceiving the election as being conducted unfairly when feeling reduced control.

Figure 1. Marginal and predicted effects of referendum vote on the relationship between feelings of low control and perceptions of electoral unfairness. The Y-axis in Panel B indicates perceived election fairness on a scale from 1 (most fair) to 5 (most unfair)



However, given that both perceptions of election fairness and feelings of control were measured ex post, it is plausible that both could be the result of the election result. To allay such fears, we run a robustness test (Appendix A1) which regresses ex post perceptions of election fairness on a measure of feelings of control collected in the BES panel wave prior to the election (wave 8). The results of this test indicate that both winners' and losers' feelings of control shifted slightly toward the extremes post-referendum, suggesting that winning helps mitigate this effect or reduces the feeling of low control, losing increases these a bit, but the relationship is largely robust and exists independent of the referendum results, further supporting both H1 and H2.

THE SWEDISH GENERAL ELECTION 2018

We then turn to H3 by introducing a case of a more ambiguous election outcome: Sweden in 2018. In Table 2, we replicate the above analysis using data from the Swedish National Election Study. This analysis uses the same survey questions for focal variables, as well as the same battery of controls. We replicate this approach using two different specifications of election “winners” for models 4-6 and models 7-9, which are elaborated below.

The results presented in models 4-5 are very similar to those in the British case: low feelings of control are consistently associated with perceptions of electoral unfairness, again supporting H1. The direct effect of the election result is also in the same direction, such that winners view elections more positively, providing additional support for H2. Consistent with previous research on unsubstantiated beliefs (e.g., Oliver & Wood 2014), we also find that lower education, lower income, and greater political interest increase beliefs that the election was conducted unfairly.

Table 2. Regression analysis using Swedish National Election Study (SNES) Data

	<i>DV: Election perceived to be conducted unfairly</i>		
	(4)	(5)	(6)
Lack of control	.101 (.016) [‡]	.075 (.016) [‡]	.119 (.025) [‡]
<i>Election result</i>			
(Support ruling coalition)	-0.391 (.036) [‡]	-0.341 (.045) [‡]	-0.120 (.106)
Winner [S + MP + C + L]			
Loser [M + KD]			
Outsider [SD]			
<i>Interactions</i>			
Lack of control* Election result			-0.073 (.032) [†]
Lack of control*Winner			
Lack of control*Loser			
Lack of control*Outsider			
<i>Controls</i>			
Age		-0.012 (.001) [‡]	-0.012 (.001) [‡]
Education		-0.077 (.011) [‡]	-0.077 (.011) [‡]
Female		.114 (.035) [‡]	.113 (.035) [‡]
Married		.050 (.044)	.051 (.044)
Income		-0.048 (.007) [‡]	-0.048 (.007) [‡]
Political interest		.067 (.023) [†]	.066 (.025) [‡]
Left/right placement		.016 (.008) [*]	.016 (.008) [*]
Constant	1.580 (.58) [‡]	2.55 (.13) [‡]	2.422 (.141)
R ²	.06	.131	.133
N	2730	2730	2730

DV: Election perceived to be conducted unfairly

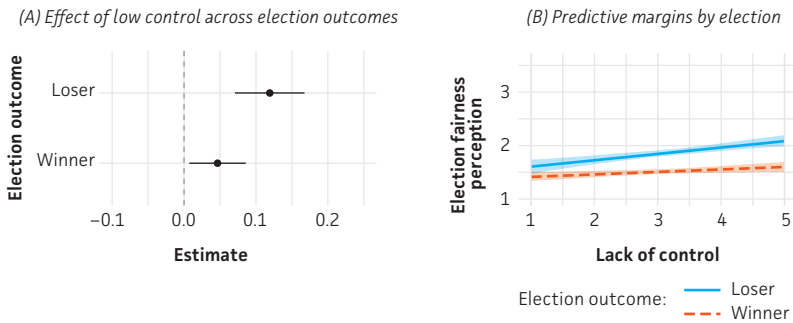
	(7)	(8)	(9)
Lack of control	.079 (.015) [‡]	.064 (.015) [‡]	.101 (.048) [†]
<i>Election result</i>			
(Support ruling coalition)			
Winner [S + MP + C + L]	-.164 (.059) [‡]	-.134 (.063) [†]	.054 (.175)
Loser [M + KD]	-.032 (.064)	-.058 (.079)	.045 (.195)
Outsider [SD]	.839 (.072) [‡]	.762 (.086) [‡]	.719 (.22) [‡]
<i>Interactions</i>			
Lack of control* Election result			
Lack of control*Winner			-.061 (.052)
Lack of control*Loser			-.032 (.056)
Lack of control*Outsider			.011 (.061)
<i>Controls</i>			
Age		-.012 (.001) [‡]	-.012 (.001) [‡]
Education		-.059 (.011) [‡]	-.06 (.011) [‡]
Female		.134 (.034) [‡]	.132 (.034) [‡]
Married		.044 (.042)	.046 (.042)
Income		-.039 (.007) [‡]	-.039 (.007) [‡]
Political interest		.038 (.024)	.038 (.024)
Left/right placement		.023 (.009) [‡]	.023 (.009) [‡]
Constant	1.389 (.073) [‡]	2.259 (.126) [‡]	2.147 (.193) [‡]
R ²	.133	.193	.194
N	2730	2730	2730

Notes: Positive values indicate more unfair perceptions of elections. The reference category for election outcomes in models 7-9 is Vänsterpartiet. Standard errors in parentheses.

* p<0.05, † p<0.01, ‡ p<0.001

Figure 2 presents the results of the first interaction model (model 6), comparing the effect of supporting the winning coalition on the relationship between feelings of control and perceptions of the election. While the effect of low feelings of control on election perceptions for winners is less than half that for losers, supporting H2, the effect nonetheless remains positive and significant for both winners and losers in this ambiguous setting, in line with our predictions from H3. Even those voters who have “won” the election but feel low personal control still exhibit a propensity to believe that the election was conducted unfairly. Panel B in Figure 2, however, demonstrates that there is a clear difference between these two groups when it comes to relative ratings of electoral fairness. Winners clearly perceive the election to be fairer than losers.

Figure 2. Marginal and predicted effects of party bloc support on the relationship between feelings of low control and perceptions of electoral unfairness. The Y-axis in Panel B indicates perceived election fairness on a scale from 1 (most fair) to 5 (most unfair)

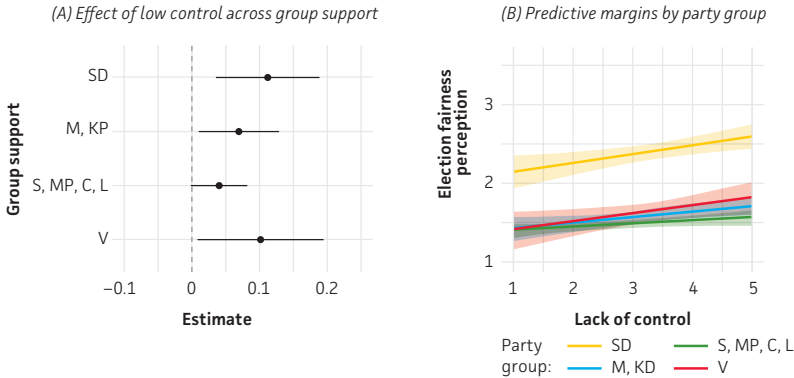


Models 7-9 in Table 2 present results for an alternative operationalization of election “winners.” We take this approach for several reasons. First, it is likely that both V and SD voters’ perceptions to be influenced by the exclusion of those parties from possible governing coalitions not just following this election, but also the previous one. Splitting those parties allows for both measuring the effect of low control on these outsider respondents, but also how effects then change for the remaining parties in the winner and loser blocs. Second, these outsider populist parties represent the cultural extremes of the political spectrum (V leaning furthest to the left, while SD leans furthest to the right), which likely contributes to their feelings of control. Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated that individuals who lie on the extreme ends of the political spectrum are more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, driven by factors such as a similar epistemology shared by both extreme political views and conspiracy theories (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008; Swami et al., 2013), belief in simple solutions to complex problems that is similarly offered in the range of unsubstantiated beliefs (van Prooijen et al., 2015), and the tendency for both

populist and conspiracy discourses to target the establishment (Castanho Silva et al. 2017). These previous findings suggest that these groups of respondents may be more prone to unsubstantiated perceptions about electoral unfairness, although this effect is more prevalent on the right side of the spectrum (Krouwel et al. 2017; van Prooijen et al. 2015).

Figure 3 presents the results of the interaction model with this four-category variable. In Panel A, we see that the average effect of personal control on perceptions of electoral conduct is significant and strongest among respondents supporting these outside parties, yet this effect is still observed in the remaining more mainstream blocs, supporting H1. Consistent with H2, having supported the winning coalition appears to reduce the effect of feeling low control, but the tendency for low-control winners to perceive unfairness remains, a pattern observed across all models for both cases. While a pattern in these blocs emerges and supports our hypotheses, the wide confidence intervals nonetheless demonstrate that there is considerable variation in this effect within blocs and overlap between them.

Figure 3. Marginal and predicted effects of party bloc support on the relationship between feelings of low control and perceptions of electoral unfairness. The Y-axis in Panel B indicates perceived election fairness on a scale from 1 (most fair) to 5 (most unfair).



Panel B in Figure 3, however, offers a clearer picture of election perceptions by bloc, relative to one another. SD voters perceived the conduct of the election as significantly less fair. While an increasing sense of control over their lives pushed respondents in all other blocs toward varying (yet statistically similar) perceptions of misconduct, consistent with H1, the average perception for high-control respondents was virtually identical across these groups. Yet for individuals supporting SD, even the average high-control respondent perceived higher levels of electoral misconduct than the average low-control respondent supporting any other parties, including V. The average low-control SD voter leaned toward the moderate electoral misconduct perception score

of 3, nearly one point higher than all other groups. Furthermore, more than 13% of respondents supporting SD fully endorsed the belief that the conduct of the election was unfair, a higher rate than any other bloc. Given the level of electoral integrity in Sweden, scores in these ranges are clearly at odds with the overwhelming body of evidence.

These results are consistent with the other findings on these beliefs. Individuals on the fringes of the political spectrum feel less personal control and demonstrate an increased susceptibility to unsubstantiated beliefs (Uscinksi & Parent 2014; Walter & Drochon 2022). But this susceptibility is asymmetric and individuals on the right side of the spectrum engage in more conspiracy thinking, for example (Enders & Smallpage 2018; Oliver & Wood 2014). Additionally, having authoritarian attitudes (Dyrendal et al. 2021) and rejecting the political system (Walter & Drochon 2022) increases unsubstantiated beliefs, characteristics more common with SD voters (Oskarson & Demker 2015). The data unfortunately does not allow for clearer answers to some of these questions. This could be a matter of self-selection, where people who feel less control and those who endorse other unsubstantiated beliefs are drawn to SD. Perhaps the messaging SD uses taps into these beliefs and feelings, something that they engaged in during the 2022 campaign, though was less prevalent in 2018.

As a robustness check and to analyze the effect of various voting blocs in more detail, Appendix A2 presents the results of two alternative operationalizations of election winners and losers. First, these respondents are broken down into five voting blocs, allowing us to observe any potential differences between respondents who supported SD and MP compared to those who supported C and L. Ideologically, these blocs are quite different on many issues. Furthermore, some C and L voters likely would have preferred that those parties instead aligned with the right-leaning parties to form a government. Yet the results are largely consistent with the previous analysis and demonstrate that feeling less control in one's life leads voters of all party blocs – both winners and losers – to trend toward believing the election was not conducted fairly. In the second test, we judge respondents to be an election 'winner' if they voted for a party that had a net gain of parliamentary seats relative to the previous election, regardless of whether they became part of the governing coalition. In this formulation, the effect of low feelings of control is stronger rather in the case of election winners, who consist of the supporters of all smaller parties (minus MP) as well as the *Sverigedemokraterna*.

Conclusions

While a large body of work has identified certain factors that influence political perceptions, much less attention has been paid to psychological roots of these perceptions. The aim of this paper was to bridge these separate bodies

of work as well as expand the understanding of unsubstantiated beliefs in order to bring more clarity to this broader subject. We hypothesize that feelings of control influence perceptions of electoral fairness, but this effect can be reduced by electoral victory and certainty. We situate this work outside the US-centric settings that have shaped much of our current understanding in these separate bodies of research, investigating this matter in the contexts of the British 'Brexit' referendum and the 2018 Swedish election.

More specifically, we test three hypotheses and our findings overall support these. We find a robust effect of low feelings of control on perceptions of election fairness, confirming H1. The effect of this sense of control on these perceptions, though, is to some extent reduced by an individual's side winning the election, providing modest support for H2. However, the effect of winning was limited in the case where election results were not absolutely clear, as predicted by H3.

This study therefore offers several contributions. The results demonstrate the importance of continued investigation into the roots of political perceptions and provides evidence that feelings of personal control may be another mechanism driving them. We also extend the work on unsubstantiated beliefs and their foundations to political beliefs and perceptions that may reflect the core of more structured unsubstantiated narratives in the political realm. This extension also offers insights into factors that may condition winner-loser effects, which can ultimately contribute to better understanding and anticipating behaviors in the wake of contested electoral battles. Moreover, this study shows the importance of giving careful consideration to how we conceive of winners and losers in multi-party systems, which has considerable implications for the investigation of winner-loser gaps regarding various aspects of political attitudes and behavior.

The results from the Swedish case are also consistent with prior research demonstrating a propensity for those on the right end of the spectrum – particularly at the extremes – to endorse conspiratorial beliefs. While both the right and left extremes of the political spectrum in Sweden demonstrated a stronger relationship between feelings of low control and unsubstantiated perceptions of electoral conduct, those supporting SD had significantly more critical and unrealistic perceptions. This finding is consistent with other work in this volume, which demonstrates that SD voters were prone to conspiracy thinking about the conduct of the 2022 election (Theorin et al.) and were more critical of election authorities (Lundmark & Weissenbilder). However, our finding was limited to the Swedish case. Furthermore, the election results in the Swedish case were more clearly drawn along left-right political lines than the British case, which could have contributed to some of these relationships on the right side of the spectrum. More definitive conclusions cannot be drawn from this analysis, leaving questions for future research about whether this

stark contrast in perceptions of the election is due to specific voter characteristics, party and elite messaging, or numerous others contributing factors. The results nonetheless highlight the importance of continued work focused on disentangling the relationship between far-right ideology and unsubstantiated beliefs, particularly considering recent incidents of similar voters in a number of countries actively and sometimes violently contesting the results of elections.

However, our results should not be overstated. While the patterns observed here fit our expectations and are supported by related research in a number of fields, these results concern two specific cases. The results could be a product of an unexpected result, particularly in the UK case. The results may also be a product of the longer-term losing context, rather than these specific elections. Furthermore, while the variation in ambiguity between these cases offered a means for exploring H₃, we were not able to formally test this hypothesis.

Future work should address other factors that may influence the relationship between these feelings of control and perceptions of elections. While our findings are robust, there are cases where the observed relationships could have alternative explanations. Perhaps some individuals report “unfair conduct” due to perceived structural imbalances, such as media bias or uneven coverage time, rather than issues with electoral integrity or voter fraud. This effect is likely minimized in Sweden, where there are relatively good protections that maintain roughly equal time in media, including representation during electoral debates. Nonetheless, further study is warranted.

These feelings of control can be a target of political actors, which further demonstrates the relevance of these results as well as the importance of accounting for information environments in future work. Both the Brexit campaign and ongoing SD campaigns made use of messaging that specifically targeted feelings of control. The Leave campaign’s narrative focused heavily on how citizens needed to reclaim control of their lives from the EU and take back their country, while SD has had a similar focus on how the country has been taken away from the people of Sweden. In light of our findings, targeting these feelings likely worked to these actors’ advantages. However, while messaging targeted feelings of control, these groups did not and have not made systematic use of more explicit conspiratorial narratives that promote ideas about electoral fraud as was the case in the US example. While this is a positive sign that political parties and figures in both the UK and Sweden did not explicitly turn to this kind of messaging in those elections, we cannot assume that a willingness to do so is nonexistent. In both these cases, the groups using language targeting feelings of control emerged as real or perceived winners in their respective campaigns. Given the effectiveness of this rhetoric in mobilizing supporters to political action in the US case, actors in other settings may choose to exploit this vulnerability in the future. Indeed, several *Sverigedemokraterna*

party members have invoked the specter of electoral fraud (Söderström 2021). Considering the serious consequences of heightened perceptions of electoral unfairness, this warrants further investigation as individuals feeling they are not in control of their lives are likely vulnerable targets of mis- and disinformation from other entities as well, including foreign actors.

The positive takeaway from these results is that the effects measured in these two cases are modest. While it is troubling that substantial portions of these populations feel they have little control over their lives, this has not resulted in remarkably high perceptions of electoral unfairness. Nonetheless, this effect is still distinct in settings where elections are conducted very openly and seemingly fairly, where elections are made accessible to the entirety of the public, and where election fraud has not been raised in the political discourse. While most political parties and elites in these countries have not explicitly promoted these perceptions, this could change in the future. Greater understanding of this issue would not only provide insights into other factors exacerbating these beliefs, but also allow for the development of strategies to address the loss of control experienced by parts of the population.

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Appendix A1.

BES Analysis with pre-election influence measure

DV: Election perceived to be conducted unfairly

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Lack of control	0.059 (.014) [‡]	0.053 (.014) [†]	0.074 (.019) [‡]
Election win	-0.881 (.027) [‡]	-0.749 (.031) [‡]	-0.589 (.01) [‡]
Lack of control* election win			-0.047 (.028)
<i>Controls</i>			
Age		0.002 (.001) [†]	0.002 (.001) [†]
Education		-0.005 (.011)	-0.005 (.011)
Female		0.02 (.028)	0.02 (.028)
Married		-0.005 (.006)	-0.005 (.006)
Income		0.001 (.004)	0.001 (.004)
Political interest		0.042 (.007) [‡]	0.042 (.007) [‡]
Left/right placement		-0.074 (.006) [‡]	-0.074 (.006) [‡]
Constant	3.105 (.05) [‡]	2.997 (.117) [‡]	2.922 (.125) [‡]
R ²	0.086	0.102	0.102
N	10,992	10,992	10,992

Notes: Positive values indicate more unfair perceptions of elections. Standard errors in parentheses. * p<0.05, † p<0.01, ‡ p<0.001

Appendix A2. Analysis of alternative operationalizations of winner/loser groups in Sweden 2018

MEASUREMENT

A third moderating variable breaks apart the winning group, so we have five groups that represent the general party blocs from before the election: V; S and MP; C and L; M and KD; and SD. This allows us to step away from the winner/loser perspective and instead look more closely at how ideology and partisanship might influence the relationship between feelings of control and election perceptions. Fourth, we estimate election winners simply as those who support parties that improved their election results relative to the election in 2014. Specifically, we split parties into two groups: those who made net gains in terms of parliamentary seats (V, C, L, KD, SD), and those who made net losses (S, MP, M).

Figure A2a. Marginal and predicted effects of party bloc support on the relationship between feelings of low control and perceptions of electoral unfairness. The Y-axis in Panel B indicates perceived election fairness on a scale from 1 (most fair) to 5 (most unfair)

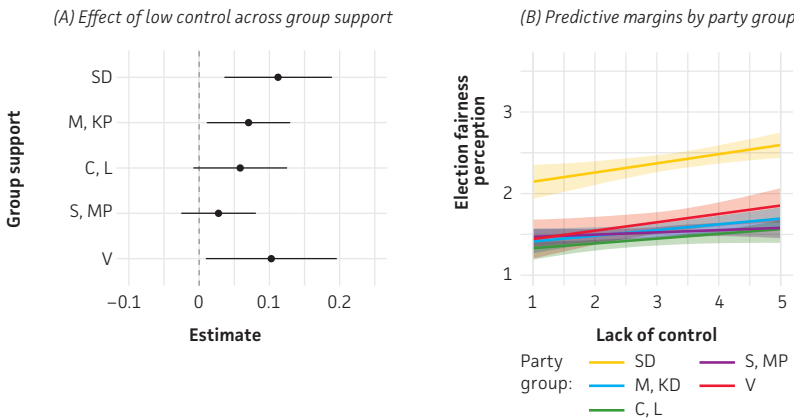
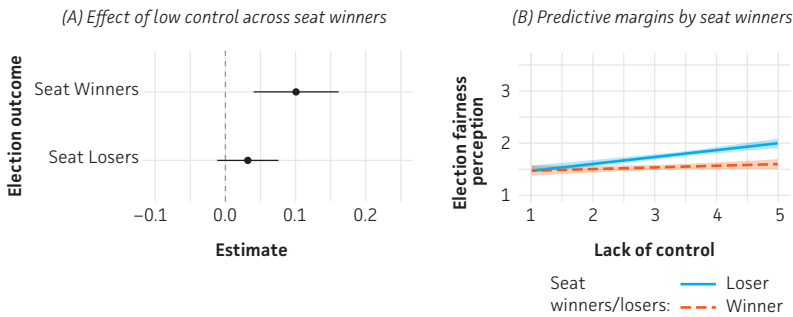


Figure A2b. Marginal and predicted effects party bloc support on the relationship between feelings of low control and perceptions of electoral unfairness, based on net seat gain (winners) or loss (losers). The Y-axis in Panel B indicates perceived election fairness on a scale from 1 (most fair) to 5 (most unfair)



RESULTS

Consistent with Panel A in Figure 3, the effect of feelings of control on perceptions of election fairness for both the Socialdemokraterna and Miljöpartiet voter bloc and the Centerpartiet and Liberalerna voter bloc – the actual winners of the election and the parties that supported them – fell below significance. The S&MP bloc shows a slightly weaker marginal effect relative to the analysis where these parties were grouped together, while the C&L bloc shows a slightly stronger marginal effect, which again fit our expectations. However, the decreasing sample sizes for the two groups likely contributes to the widening of confidence intervals.

Other than these small changes, results for the other voter blocs remain the same. As with the other analyses, despite effects for the winning blocs not being significant, voters across the spectrum – winner and losers – appear predisposed toward negative beliefs about the election when they feel low control. Figure A2b in particular demonstrates the importance of how we perceive election winners and losers in more ambiguous contexts. When this determination is based on net seat gains/losses rather than government formation (which may be particularly relevant to voters), we rather see an effect opposite of that in the British case: low feelings of control are associated with more unfair election perceptions among election winners rather than losers.