

Good Losers in Democracy

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Losers have a key function in democracy. Each day democratic governments make a multitude of decisions that are unwelcome to many citizens. The long-term stability of democracies depends on the willingness of losing citizens to remain loyal to the state (e.g., Schattschneider 1960; Riker 1983; Przeworski 1991; Levi 1997). We know from experience that established democracies have earned the basic loyalty of both winners and losers (this is what makes them established). However, our knowledge on the processes involved is less well developed.

One reason for this neglect is that social scientists tend to dislike the coercive power of the state. Jane Mansbridge (1997) observes that political theorists are attracted to “non-coercive exercise of power,” that is to situations in which citizens will accept authoritative decisions on a voluntary basis. She argues that theorists would be more relevant if they studied “contestedly legitimate coercion”. By this she means situations in which government have reason to use its coercive power but in which affected individuals disagree (cf. Levi 1997). In a similar vein, most empirical studies on reactions towards governmental decision-making highlight citizen grievances. Research on political participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995); policy feed back-processes

(Metler and Soss 2004); and protest politics (Walgrave and Rucht 2009) are examples in kind. In these and associated lines of research, negative reactions towards unfavourable government decisions are the default expectation; the absence of protests indicates citizen apathy and lack of empowerment.

In contrast, this research will focus on citizens’ willingness to accept unfavourable decisions. The question is empirical; it is not assumed that citizens are morally obliged to comply with governments’ decision. However, it is maintained that prospects for long-term stability of democratic politics might be negatively affected by low levels of decision-acceptance.

Precisely, the research project “Good losers in Democracy” will ask two basic questions. The first relates to citizens’ reactions towards unfavourable authoritative decisions. How willing are affected citizens to accept various types of authoritative decisions in terms of retained loyalty towards the democratic state? The second question relates to the mechanisms that affect citizens’ reactions towards authoritative decisions. Which mechanisms help citizens to carry the burden of loss voluntarily? Specifically, to what extent are negative reactions mitigated by factors identified in democratic theory on legitimate authoritative decision-making? Or, with a slightly different twist, to what extent can democracy generate its own legitimacy by remaining true to its principles?

In what follows the project plan will first discuss various situations in which citizens experience loss in democracies. These situations can be described as the independent variables of the project. Attention thereafter turns to citizens’ reactions towards democratic loss. Reactions to loss are the dependent variables of the project. Following this the plan focuses

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on democratic theory and the factors that make authoritative decision-making at least contestedly legitimate. These factors can be conceived as interaction variables that potentially mitigate the effects of democratic loss. The final sections detail planning and motivate the costs for which the project seeks financial support.

The questions asked are broad and far-reaching. The ambition is to offer a reasonably coherent analytical framework, and to make relevant empirical observations. Even considering this disclaimer, the scope of the project is large. Nevertheless, the research plan is realistic. As discussed below, the main applicant has been researching these questions over a period of years. The project seeks financial support to bring together several scattered pieces of work, and to perform complementary empirical analyses of the complex social problem at hand. The end result will be an analysis which uses democratic theory to derive important questions and relies on a multi-method approach to answer them empirically.

While remaining open for alternative outcomes, the project expects support for three basic hypotheses: First, in many situations, losing will undermine citizens' loyalty to the democratic state. Second, democracy can indeed generate its own legitimacy by remaining true to its principles. Third, subjectivity on the part of citizens does seriously complicate the process.

Theory

Situations in which citizens experience loss

In general, people can be expected to dislike to lose. In a rare empirical analysis of citizens' experience of electoral loss,

Christopher Anderson and colleagues (2005:23-7) identifies three mechanisms through which electoral loss is associated with undermined system support: One is that losers will get less utility from the system than winners; another is that losing generates negative emotions; still another is that losers' drive for cognitive consistency motivates them to adjust legitimacy beliefs about the system that rejects their political views. Yet another individual level mechanism is that loss may violate individuals' beliefs about social justice (Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler et al., 1997).

Although citizens may want to govern themselves, there is no escape from the coercive power of the democratic state (e.g., Przeworski 2009). To conceptualize the multitude of situations in which citizens experience loss, the project departs from two dimensions. On the one hand it will look at the type of authority that makes the decision: Is it elected politicians, or government officials with delegated power, be they judges in court or street-level bureaucrats (e.g., Gibson, Caldeira and Kenyatta Spence 2005; Esaiasson, Gilljam and Persson 2010)? On the other hand it will look at the context in which citizens lose: Do they lose collectively, as members of a social group, or individually, as single persons (e.g. Leung, Tong and Lind 2007)?

On the basis of these dimensions, the project will highlight five types of situations in which citizens experience democratic loss: (1) elections; (2) policy decisions; (3) localization of public facilities; (4) contacts with government officials (law enforcement, welfare state services, tax authorities, planning and building authorities); and (5) every day-life. Although not complete, the list of situations represents experiences of loss that are shared by most adult citizens in most democra-

cies. Each situation has generated large and important literatures. The contribution of the project is to seek communalities between these subfields of political science. For one thing, by looking systematically at losers reactions in all of these situations, the research project will aim to study both the input side and output side of politics (e.g., Rothstein 2009).

Electoral loss (1) is experienced collectively; all who voted for parties that lost the struggle over governmental power can foresee a period of unfavourable authoritative decisions. Electoral loss is well researched from the perspective of losers (see first and foremost Anderson et al. 2005). Research on the so called winner-loser gap has demonstrated that winning and losing elections creates differential incentives for citizens to remain supportive of their political system. Nevertheless, it will be argued that this research does not accurately conceptualize reactions of winners and losers. Because it looks at the relative level of support among winners and losers, it fails to recognize that losers often become more politically supportive after elections, only less so than winners (Esaiasson 2006a; 2010a). Consequently, defeat at the ballot-box appears to be less demanding for citizens.

One reason for this is that consequences of the election outcome are felt in the long-term as governmental power transforms into public policies (in the short-term, election outcomes are much more consequential for politicians, Esaiasson 2009). We can thus expect stronger reactions among citizens who experience loss with regard to policy decisions which will actually affect their life. "Policy decisions" (2) is a broad category. In principle it involves reactions to the decision to invade Iraq as well as decisions to raise taxes and cut down on local welfare state services.

Like electoral loss it is experienced collectively, and most often (but not exclusively) decisions are taken by elected representatives.

Likewise, loss with regard to localization of public facilities (3) is experienced collectively. However, the decision-making authority is typically governmental agencies and not elected assemblies. As illustrated by the concept "Nimby" (Not in my back-yard), public facility siting is an area of governmental decision-making associated with strong propensity for citizen protest. Field specialists question the relevance of this way to conceptualize citizens' reactions (e.g., Wolsink 2000), but its prevalence in our common parlance suggests that affected individuals will react strongly.

Experiences of loss following contacts with governmental officials (4) are felt individually (see Esaiasson 2010a for a review of the literature). Recent research by Leung, Tong and Lind (2007) suggests that people may react differently (less self-interestedly) in these type of situations compared to collective losses, in which various group-serving tendencies are evoked.

Finally, loss in every-day life (5) is experienced individually. The many types of losses that we experience – some of which are deeply personal – are not necessarily the result of government decisions. However, as feelings of loyalty towards the democratic state are by definition subjective, it is up to individual citizens to attribute responsibility for shortcomings in one's personal life to the political system (however defined). Indeed, controlling for a host of variables, an analysis of the Swedish case finds that citizens who are dissatisfied with one or more aspect of their daily life express substantially lower level of loyalty towards the state than

more fortunate citizens (Esaiasson 2006b). More generally, performance theories assess the extent to which citizens' support of their political system is affected by political outcomes with regard to the economy (e.g. McAllister 1999), and welfare state services (Kumlin 2004).

Reactions of losers

Reactions of losers – the dependent variable – concern the relationship between the individual and the state. This is a classic problem in political science. Theorists typically approach the topic with concepts like “consent”, “compliance”, “legitimacy”, and “political obligations” (e.g., Lessnoff 1986; Beetham 1991; Horton 1992). Corresponding concepts for empirically oriented scholars are “system support” and “political trust” (Easton 1975; Norris 1999; Levi and Stoker 2000; Dalton 2004).

An overall aim of the project is to contribute to our common understanding of the mechanisms that help to build a stable democracy (Elster 1989). Because of this the prime interest is directed towards citizens' behavioral reactions to loss (Levi 1997). For practical reasons the project will rely on attitudinal measures, but these should preferably be closely related to behavioral intentions. Specifically, I will study willingness to accept a particular unfavorable decision, and, even more important, willingness to remain loyal towards the democratic state following loss.

“Loyalty towards the state” refers to the obligations that come with democratic citizenship. Basic obligations include willingness to abide by current laws and rules, to refrain from abusing social welfare systems, and to voluntarily pay one's taxes (e.g., van Deth, Montero and Westholm 2007). While operational indicators will

vary between particular studies, the project will strive to find measures that capture loyalty towards the state thus defined.

Requirements of democratic decision-making

The third and final component in the theoretical model – the interaction variables – relates to the mechanisms that affect citizens' reactions towards authoritative decisions. To what extent are the negatives associated with loss mitigated by factors identified in democratic theory on legitimate decision-making? To derive relevant questions for empirical research, the discussion will move gradually down a ladder of abstraction.

At core, representative democracy is a mechanism for the peaceful solution of social conflict. Rather than surrendering to physical force, individuals agree to be ruled by governors whose power rests on the consent of citizens as expressed in political elections, and on the rulers' commitment to rule by law and regulations (citizens thus know what to expect). The stability of this system of government rests on the assumption that citizens view it as morally justifiable (e.g. Dahl 1989).

The driving forces behind voluntary acceptance of decisions made by this system can be described at different levels of abstraction. In the abstract terms of normative theory, moral agency ascribes individuals a natural duty to defend just institutions (Rawls 1971:99; cf. Dahl 1956). In the concrete terms of positive theory, system supportive reactions among losers are produced by similar mechanisms that produce system undermining reactions: Losers react well because they gain utility from a peaceful solution of social conflict (but less so than winners); because they

experience positive emotions from their personal involvement in the decision-making process (they get to vote on their rulers); because their drive for cognitive consistency motivates them to make a positive evaluation of an outcome produced by a legitimate system of government, and because their demand for social justice is fulfilled.

However, to confer legitimacy government decisions must concur with certain criteria. Democratic justification theory specifies the conditions under which principled democrats are motivated to accept defeat (Dahl 1989). Acknowledging the burdens that come with defeat, justification theory prescribes that losers shall be treated respectfully. Specifically, both procedural and consequential requirements must be fulfilled before unfavourable outcomes are deemed morally justifiable (e.g., Beitz 1989; Hermansson 2003). On one hand this means that losers cannot be expected to remain supportive come what so ever, but on other hand it means that principled democrats have reason to accept defeat once the requirements are fulfilled.

Any list of democratic requirements will draw criticism, but the following four specifications of consequential and procedural requirements have been given serious attention in the literature (e.g., Beitz 1989; Hermansson 2003): Coercive authoritative decisions must not (1) inflict on the deeply felt values of individuals; (2) systematically disfavour one group over others; (3) unnecessarily restrict possibilities for individuals to pursue their happiness; and (4) be the result of a flawed decision-making process. To the extent these requirements are fulfilled, individuals are morally obliged to accept loss voluntarily.

However, when democratic requirements (however defined) are confronted

with the complications of real-world democracies, a problem of implementation emerges. What makes democratic decision-making contestedly legitimate (and not the exercise of non-coercive power preferred by political theorists) is that a person so inclined will identify violations of the requirements in practically all real-world situations. In large part this is due to the complications of social life. For instance, in all known societies of some complexity the distribution of resources are skewed across social groups. For this reason alone, individuals of low resources have a reason to react negatively to unfavourable decisions. Moreover, subjectivity adds another dimension to the problem. What appears fair to one person is unfair to another, and subjective perceptions about the fairness of procedural arrangements do not necessarily coincide with actual conditions. For reasons like these, good losers in democracy must be prepared to oversee with at least some violations of the requirements for legitimate democratic decision-making (Esaiasson 2006a).

The empirical analyses of the project will be designed to capture as closely as possible the complications of real-world democratic decision-making. First, they will strive to capture the subjective dimension of the legitimacy problem. Specifically, empirical analyses will strive to measure affected individuals' perceptions of the fulfilment of consequential and procedural requirements. To exemplify: According to the beliefs of affected individuals, is an authoritative decision unjustifiably disadvantageous for his or her social group, and is it preceded by a flawed decision-making process? And to what extent do these legitimacy beliefs affect reactions to loss?

Second, the analyses will strive to take account of objective conditions. Because of its importance for many conceptualizations of democracy, the analysis will primarily focus on the procedural requirement. Since it first emerged in the 1970s, procedural fairness theory has been remarkably successful in explaining citizens' reactions towards authoritative decisions (see Tyler 2006 for a literature review). The project will however draw attention to two boundary conditions that might apply in real-world situations. First, social psychologists Leung, Tong and Lind (2007) have recently argued that most procedural fairness studies deals with individual-level decisions in which the outcome will mainly affect the individual him- or herself. In group-level decisions, when affected individuals are concerned about consequences for a collective of people, group-serving social-identity mechanisms will likely undermine procedural effects (for empirical illustrations, see Esaiasson, Gilljam and Lindholm 2007; Esaiasson 2010a; Esaiasson, Gilljam and Persson 2010). Second, almost all experimental studies in the field are laboratory and deal with decision-making situations which are artificial for participants.

A proposition to be evaluated empirically is that citizens who react negatively towards unfavorable decision use procedural arguments to motivate their stance rather than the other way around. In other words, perceptions of procedural fairness are endogenous and not exogenous to citizens' reactions to democratic loss (see Esaiasson 2010a for an initial illustration). If this is confirmed, it suggests that substantial qualities about government decisions are more central for citizens' reactions than assumed by the large literatures on procedural fairness.

How to proceed

To answer the empirical questions raised above, the project will proceed in four analytical steps. Each step is to be repeated in each of the five situations of democratic loss (elections; policy decisions; facility sitings; contacts with government officials; every-day life).

Step 1. Establish whether the relationship between unfavourable outcomes and negative reactions is causal. Most importantly, do unfavourable outcomes undermine long-term loyalty towards the state?

Step 2. Map typical reactions of citizens following loss. Given that the relationship between loss and reaction is causal, how strong is it in real-world situations as reflected in large-n citizen surveys?

Step 3. Estimate the extent to which reactions towards loss are mitigated by subjective perceptions of the degree to which consequential and procedural requirements of democratic decision-making has been fulfilled. In technical terms, to what extent do fairness perceptions interact with individuals' status as winner or loser to produce weak or strong reactions?

Step 4. Estimate the relationship between actual characteristics of the decision-making process and perceptions about the fairness of procedures. If the relationship is strong – if perceptions are highly influenced by variations in actual conditions – this indicates that actual procedures are indeed exogenous to citizens' procedural considerations.

In Step 1, targeted field experiments are the preferred method. To illustrate, imagine an individual who gets his/her application for a building permit denied. Assuming that government official grant permission to only some applications, the project will survey applicants in a given (Swedish) municipality before and after they learn about the outcome. Differen-

es in reactions with regard to expressed loyalty towards the state will be taken as evidence for a causal relationship. In these field experiments, all necessary steps will be taken to follow the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council.

In Step 2 and 3, the project will mainly rely on secondary analysis of survey data, preferably of a comparative character. To illustrate, the CID-data set (Citizen Involvement Democracy) contains information on respondents' experiences of loss in their every day-life during the past year, on attitudinal loyalty towards the state, on perceptions about procedures involved and on relevant control variables (van Deth, Montero and Westholm 2007). Where such data are missing, the project will collect targeted information through the well established SOM-survey and the newly established LORe-citizen panel at University of Gothenburg (Laboratory of Opinion Research). For practical reasons, these latter analyses will focus on the Swedish case.

In Step 4, a mix between post hoc-analysis and experiments are warranted. With regard to variations in actual conditions leading to collectively experienced losses (elections, policy decisions and facility sitings), there is relatively easily accessible information on variations in natural settings. For instance, various international organizations assess the fairness of recently held elections, and the CSES-data base (the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) provides information on citizens' fairness perceptions. With regard to variations in actual conditions of decisions made by government officials and in every day life, experiments is the preferred method. For instance, using video-recordings of staged encounters between a government official from the Swedish employment agency and a support-seek-

ing citizen, an experimental study evaluates the extent to which actual treatment affect perceived fairness of treatment (Esaiasson 2010a).

In previous research by the main applicant, all of these steps have been conducted for at least some of the five situations of loss. Elections have been most thoroughly studied (Esaiasson 2006a; 2010b), but also facility sitings (Esaiasson and Johansson 2007; Esaiasson 2010c), government officials (Esaiasson 2007; 2010a), and every-day life (Esaiasson 2006b) have been examined. It is the task of this research project to fill in remaining gaps and to conclude from the comparison of losing within five distinct but related types of situations.

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