

**Sweet Victory, Bitter Defeat: The Amplifying Effects of Affective and Perceived
Ideological Polarization on the Winner-Loser Gap in Political Support.**

Abstract

Accepting defeat in the aftermath of elections is crucial for the stability of democracies. But in times of intense polarization, the voluntary consent of electoral losers seems less obvious. In this paper, I study whether affective and perceived ideological polarization amplify the winner-loser gap in political support. Using multilevel growth curve modelling on pre-and post-election panel data from the BESIP, collected during the 2015 and 2019 UK general elections, I show that the winner-loser gap is indeed more pronounced amongst voters with higher levels of affective and perceived ideological polarization. Moreover, the results illustrate that polarized voters experience a stark decrease in their support for the political system following their electoral loss. Given the high and, in some Western democracies, rising polarization levels, these findings have important implications for losers' consent and the stability of democracies in election times.

Keywords: Affective polarization; Ideological polarization; Political support; Winner-loser gap; Losers' consent; Multilevel growth curve model.

Introduction

A key element underlying healthy and stable democracies is losers' consent. Every election represents a potential test to losers' support for the political regime: Losers may be gracious about their electoral loss and uphold central democratic norms, or they may contest the election and undermine the system that – from their perspective – has produced undesirable outcomes. The importance of losers' consent for democratic stability has long been recognized by political scientists and has inspired a plethora of empirical research into the drivers of the structurally lower levels of perceived democratic legitimacy amongst electoral losers (i.e., the winner-loser gap in political support). Recently, political reality has added a frightening imagery to this theoretical debate: the storming of the US Capitol and the Brazil National Congress have illustrated – amongst other things – that the threat of losers' dissent is real and that political polarization has seemingly changed how citizens experience electoral defeat. Consequently, worries about losers' consent have been amplified and are increasingly voiced in conjunction with concerns over political polarization.¹

Various scholars have claimed that polarization potentially decreases losers' willingness to comply with the election outcome (e.g., Halliez and Thornton 2023; Spina 2021; Ward and Tavits 2019). That is because polarized voters arguably care more deeply about who wins or loses the election due to their affective and ideological ties (Ward and Tavits 2019). In addition, polarized voters typically view the political opponent in a negative light, thereby making it harder to accept each other's democratic claims (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Hence, Lelkes (2016, 525) argues that “polarization, in its various guises, has the potential to increase the legitimacy gap [between electoral winners and losers]”.

In light of the high and, in some Western democracies, increasing levels of polarization, (Boxell et al. 2022; Dalton 2021; Gidron et al. 2020), this trend is very worrisome since losers

¹ The term polarization can refer to a *state* of division or a *process* of increasing division (Rekker 2022). I use the word in the former sense, meaning that polarization can be increasing, stable, or decreasing.

who deny the legitimacy of the political system might not voluntarily adhere to the policies and laws of the new government (Kern and Kölln 2022). Moreover – when taken to their extremes – unsatisfied losers may refuse a peaceful transitioning of power and instead turn to rebellion, revolt, or violence (Fergusson et al. 2020), as we have also seen with the storming of the US Capitol and the National Congress in Brazil. Obtaining the consent of losers is therefore “one of the central, if not *the* central, requirement of the democratic bargain” (Anderson et al. 2005, 2).

Despite the importance that is widely attributed to losers’ consent and the claim amongst scholars that polarization makes it harder to obtain such consent, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the relationship between the two concepts, since these two strands of research have remained rather distinct. A limited number of studies do show indirect evidence by highlighting the moderating roles of related concepts, such as party identification (Spina 2021), negative partisanship (Ridge 2022), and extremism (Anderson et al. 2005). Nonetheless, to date, a fully integrated approach in which polarization and its varying manifestations are directly addressed in relation to the winner-loser gap is missing. As a consequence, we know little about how different types of polarization affect the winner-loser gap and losers’ consent.

In this paper, I address this crucial question with the use of panel data from the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) collected during the UK general election of 2015 and 2019. I employ multilevel growth curve modelling to infer whether polarization at the individual-level amplifies the effects of both winning and losing on ‘political support’ (i.e., an attitude by which a person orients him/herself in relation to the political system, either favourably or unfavourably) (Easton 1975). I distinguish between two different types of polarization: affective and perceived ideological polarization. I posit that affectively polarized voters respond more emotionally to the election outcome, thereby making them more inclined

to adjust their political support levels. Perceived ideological polarization is theorized to amplify the winner-loser gap by raising the utilitarian stakes associated with electoral victory and defeat.

In accordance with these expectations, the results of the multilevel growth curve models for both the 2015 and 2019 elections show strong evidence that the winner-loser gap is more pronounced amongst voters with higher levels of affective and perceived ideological polarization. Moreover, the results portray that polarized losers see a steep decrease in their support for the political system following their electoral loss. These findings have important implications for losers' consent and democratic stability, particularly in light of rising polarization levels in some countries (Boxell et al. 2022; Dalton 2021)

By integrating two fields of research, this study makes a double contribution to the academic literature. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on polarization, by shedding a light on the to-date understudied consequences of polarization on perceptions of democratic legitimacy, particularly outside of the US-context. Second, this study contributes to the literature on the winner-loser gap by providing insights into which citizens are more likely to develop (un)favourable orientations towards the political system following electoral defeat or victory.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I elaborate on the winner-loser gap and its theoretical explanations. Subsequently, I outline the theoretical expectations regarding the moderating role of both affective and perceived ideological polarization. Next, the data and estimation strategies are introduced, followed by a discussion of the results. Finally, the findings of the paper are summarized and the societal and academic implications are discussed.

The winner-loser gap in political support

One of the most robust findings in political science is the existence of a winner-loser gap in the aftermath of elections: those who supported a losing party generally view the political system

and its processes as less legitimate than those who supported a winning party (e.g., Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson et al. 2005; Moehler 2009; Werner and Marian 2020). Evidence for this winner-loser gap has been found in a wide range of empirical studies, covering old and new democracies (Anderson et al. 2005; Dahlberg and Linde 2016), as well as majoritarian and consensual political systems (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson et al. 2005). In accordance with most studies, I define winning as supporting a political party that has gained government access, yet similar findings have been reported defining winning in terms of increased vote share (Van der Meer and Steenvoorden 2018) or subjective feelings of victory (Singh et al. 2012).

Scholars have proposed several explanations for why the winner/loser status impacts political support. The affective explanation posits that winning and losing generate an emotional response unrelated to policy considerations, which drives voters to adjust their support for the political system (Anderson et al. 2005). In line with this perspective, prior research shows that electoral loss triggers feelings of distress, anger, and frustration, whilst winning triggers positive feelings like happiness and enthusiasm (Kern et al. 2021; Stewart et al. 2020). Another theoretical perspective on the emergence of the winner-loser gap is the utilitarian explanation, which is based on the presumption that winning or losing grants different policy benefits and therefore produces asymmetry in political support levels. Winners are expected to see their views and interests represented in government, meaning that their preferred policies are more likely to be enacted (Daoust et al. 2021; Singh 2014). Conversely, losers are assumed to gain less utility from the political system and are therefore more likely to be dissatisfied with its workings (Curini et al. 2012).²

² In addition to the affective and utilitarian perspectives, the literature proposes other explanations for the winner-loser gap, such as cognitive dissonance (Anderson et al. 2005) and electoral fairness perceptions (Mauk

The affective and utilitarian perspectives serve as theoretical explanations for why polarization might exert an amplifying effect on the winner-loser gap. I theorize that the affective response to the election-outcome is dependent on citizens' level of affective polarization, whereas the utilitarian stakes are dependent on citizens' level of perceived ideological polarization. In other words, the effects of winning and losing on citizens' political support are argued to be conditional on these polarization-types.

Affective polarization: A stronger emotional response

Affective polarization consists of two crucial components: (1) an emotional attachment toward the in-group party and its supporters, as well as (2) hostility toward the out-group party and its supporters (Hobolt et al. 2021; Reiljan et al. 2023; Wagner 2021). The concept builds on Social Identity Theory, which postulates that people tend to classify the world into in- and out-groups (Tajfel 1982). People are inclined to internalize the identity of the group they have categorized themselves into (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This group membership is an important source of self-esteem and provides a sense of social identity (Hobolt et al. 2021). To maintain or enhance a positive self-concept, “people elevate their in-groups’ standings relative to competing out-groups, as reflected in both in-group favouritism and out-group animosity” (Dias and Lelkes 2021, 3). Politics offers a fertile ground for social identification, due to the clear distinction between in- and out-groups and the constant competition between these groups over government control (Ward and Tavits 2019). Consequently, affective polarization is prevalent in many countries across the globe (Gidron et al. 2020; Reiljan 2020).

The first component of affective polarization – an emotional attachment toward in-group partisans – potentially increases the importance citizens attribute to an electoral win (Huddy et

2022). I do not address these since I expect affective and perceived ideological polarization to moderate the winner-loser gap for affective and utilitarian reasons.

al. 2015; Ward and Tavits 2019). As people tie their self-concept to their social in-groups' reputation, people increasingly perceive this group's achievements and failures as 'personal' (Huddy et al. 2015). In other words, "for affectively polarized voters, their preferred party's electoral victory (and the despised party's loss) becomes their own personal triumph" (Ward and Tavits 2019, 3). Consequently, I expect affectively polarized voters to experience a stronger emotional response to the election outcome, making them more inclined to adjust their political support levels. Indeed, citizens with strong partisan attachments have been documented to feel angrier compared to weak partisans when threatened with electoral defeat, and more positive when assured of victory (Huddy et al. 2015). In line with this argument, research shows that the winner-loser gap is more pronounced amongst voters with stronger partisan attachments (Singh 2014; Spina 2021).

I expect the second component of affective polarization – hostility towards political opponents – to make the prospect of electoral defeat more appalling. Negative affect causes voters to view the out-party as untrustworthy and immoral (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). As these feelings of hostility grow stronger and the inter-group conflict deepens, it becomes more important for one's self-image not to be defeated by the out-party (Harteveld and Wagner 2021). Hence, losing to a party one despises is likely to be particularly painful. Conversely, winning against a despised opponent is found to be exceptionally satisfactory (Ridge 2022). This can partially be explained by partisan *Schadenfreude*, which occurs when partisans experience joy from the suffering of partisan others. Evidence for the existence of partisan *schadenfreude* has been found in a variety of contexts, ranging from citizens expressing joy over opposing partisans losing their health insurance (Webster et al. 2021) to citizens believing that the country is better off when large numbers of the opposing partisans 'just die' (Kalmoe and Mason 2019). When looking into the parallels with sports, evidence indeed shows that

strongly identified fans take pleasure from their rival team losing games, even if the game is lost to a team other than the one the fan is rooting for (Leach et al. 2003).

In sum, I expect affectively polarized individuals to adjust their political support levels more strongly following the election outcome due to a more intense emotional response. As such, affective polarization is argued to moderate the relationship between the winner/loser status and citizens' political support levels. This argument can be summarized into the following hypothesis:

***H1:** The effect of the winner/loser status on political support is stronger for citizens with higher levels of affective polarization.*

Perceived ideological polarization: Higher perceived utilitarian stakes

Whereas affective polarization revolves around identity divides, perceived ideological polarization revolves around ideological divides. Perceived ideological polarization is understood as the extent to which individuals observe differences between political opponents' ideological positions and policy preferences (Torcal and Magalhães 2022). The concept concerns the perceived dispersion of parties along an ideological continuum, which indicates the set of ideological choices that the parties represent to a voter (Dalton 2008). As a result of the heterogeneity in citizens' political demands and their varying levels of political sophistication, there exists individual-level variation in the observed ideological positions of parties (Moral 2017). That is to say, the magnitude of the ideological differences between parties is perceived differently across citizens: Where some see sharp partisan divides, others may observe closely aligned policy positions. These perceptions need not be, and often are not, accurate to the 'true' levels of party polarization in a country (Westfall et al. 2015).

Voters with high levels of perceived ideological polarization experience greater utilitarian stakes during the election, since from their perspective “a change of government may result in radically different, even completely opposing public policy” (Körösényi 2013, 24). In other words, the greater the perceived ideological range of parties, the more it matters for policy outcomes who wins or loses the election (Harteveld and Wagner 2021; Wagner 2021). Conversely, voters who regard the competing political parties as ideologically undifferentiated are unlikely to attribute much importance to the election outcome in terms of utility. That is because perceived party homogeneity lowers the utilitarian stakes by erasing the competitive element of democracy. In line with this reasoning, prior studies show that low levels of perceived ideological polarization are associated with a decreased belief that ‘who is in power’ or ‘who people vote for’ makes a difference (Kittilson and Anderson 2009; Wagner 2021).

Perceived ideological polarization thus alters voters’ perceived utilitarian stakes of the election. Since voters with higher levels of perceived ideological polarization view the election as more consequential in terms of policy outcomes, I expect these citizens to adjust their political support levels more strongly in response to the election result. In other words, perceived ideological polarization is expected to moderate the winner/loser gap. Hence, I hypothesize:

***H2:** The effect of the winner/loser status on political support is stronger for citizens with higher levels of perceived ideological polarization.*

Design

Case selection

To put these hypotheses to an empirical test, I rely on pre- and post-election panel data from the BESIP collected during the UK general election of 2015. The UK has a majoritarian

electoral system which results in a low number of effective parties in parliament. Research shows that the UK is characterized by high levels of (affective) polarization along partisan lines, as well as around salient political issues such as Brexit (Gidron et al. 2020; Hobolt et al. 2021). The prevalence of highly polarized citizens in the UK ensures sufficient variation on the independent variable. Given the political system and the specific context of polarization in the UK, the generalisability of the results to other European countries with multi-party systems is limited. However, the 2015 general election and the BESIP dataset adhere to certain criteria that allow for the isolation of effects and thereby optimize the internal validity of the study.

First, the pre- and post-election waves include repeated measurements of political support, which is crucial to estimate the impact of the election outcome on political support levels. Many prior studies on the winner-loser gap have relied on post-election cross-sectional data (e.g., Anderson and Mendes 2005; Dahlberg and Linde 2016; Nadeau et al. 2021), which cannot rule out that the winner-loser gap in political support already existed before the election. By employing two-wave panel data, I am able to take into account the pre-existing differences in the political support levels of winners and losers, which improves the internal validity of the study. Second, the 2015 election campaign was characterized by unstable polls that did not forecast clear electoral winners and losers prior to election day. This is essential to isolate the timing of the winner-loser gap as a consequence of the election result, since elections for which the outcome is already fairly certain during the campaign may expedite the emergence of the winner-loser gap (Van der Meer and Steenvoorden 2018). Third, the 2015 general election produced fairly unambiguous results with regard to the winning/losing status of parties.³

³ The 2015 general election led to the Conservative's first outright win in 23 years with a net-increase of 24 seats as compared to the previous election (vote share increased by .8 percentage points). Labour incurred a net loss of 26 seats, which was its lowest seat tally since 1987. The SNP became the third-largest party in parliament with 56 seats (i.e., a net-increase of 50 seats) and an increase of 3.1 percentage points in vote share. The Liberal Democrats

Defining the electoral winners and losers is not always straightforward, since voters' perceived victory or defeat may be influenced by a variety of factors (e.g., vote share, seat share, pre-electoral expectations) (Stiers et al. 2018). Hence, in the absence of subjective winner/loser measures (i.e., questions on how much voters feel like they won or lost the election), these factors must coincide as much as possible in order to prevent conflicting definitions of the winning and losing parties. Relatedly, a fourth asset of the 2015 general election is that the winning party also gained power over the executive branch of government, which is a precondition to test the moderating effects of perceived ideological polarization as a reinforcement of the utilitarian explanation of the winner-loser gap. The utilitarian perspective posits that winners show more political support because the parties representing their views are in government. Hence, it is important that the effects of voting for an electorally successful party and voting for a party that entered government are not isolated.

I run an additional analysis on the BESIP pre- and post-election wave of the 2019 general election. This case and data adhere to the same criteria as the 2015 general election: it includes repeated measurements of political support, the election produced unambiguous winners and losers, and voting for an electorally successful party is not isolated from voting for a party that entered government. A drawback of this election, however, is that the Conservatives were shown to have a clear lead in the polls months before election day. Hence, I discuss the 2015 results in-depth throughout the article, whereas a detailed discussion of the data and results of the 2019 election is included in the online supplementary materials E.

Data

suffered their worst defeat since 1970, losing both in seat share (-49 seats) and vote share (-15.2 percentage points). Lastly, the perceptions of winning/losing may be most ambiguous for UKIP-voters, since the party had an electoral breakthrough in terms of vote share (+9.5 percentage points), but only managed to get one seat.

I use the pre- and post-election waves of the BESIP for the 2015 general election. The pre-election wave (n = 31,328) was collected between the 4th of March and the 30th of March, and the post-election wave (n = 30,027) was collected between the 8th of May and the 26th of May (election day was on the 7th of May). A number of 27,763 respondents participated in both waves (the retention rate between the waves is 88.0 percent), out of which a subset of 13,797 respondents received the required questionnaire on the like/dislike scores of the political parties. 4,592 respondents were excluded from the analysis (leaving a final sample of 9,205 respondents) due to missing values or ‘Don’t know’ responses on one of the central variables. These mostly concerned respondents who did not know where to position the political parties on a left/right scale.^{4,5}

To approximate the characteristics of the British population and to account for the oversampling of Welsh and Scottish respondents, the analyses are conducted on weighted data.⁶

Dependent variable

Political support is measured with two variables that are estimated separately. The first is *democratic satisfaction*, which taps into the middle level of the political support continuum as proposed by Norris (Norris 2017). This middle level is referred to as the ‘Evaluations of regime

⁴ To assure that the results are not driven by biases in the sample resulting from the ‘Don’t know’ responses, I rerun each model on an optimized sample in which only the necessary respondents are excluded (i.e., respondents with missing values on the variables that are included in that specific model). These findings lead to fundamentally similar results (see supplementary materials O and R).

⁵ Most respondents who were excluded from the sample originated from ‘Don’t know’ responses on the left-right positions of the political parties. The remaining ‘Don’t know’ responses were divided over the respondents’ like/dislike scores of the political parties, their political support levels, vote choice, and personal position on the left/right scale.

⁶ For more information on the data and sampling weights, see <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/>.

performance' (Norris 2017) and concerns citizens' generalized support for the state. *Democratic satisfaction* is measured in both waves with the question: "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way that democracy works in the UK as a whole?". The answer options range on a 4-point scale from 'very dissatisfied' (1) to 'very satisfied' (4). Democratic satisfaction is an imperfect measure with its limitations (for an overview see Canache et al. 2001). However, it is widely used in academia and generally recognized as a good indicator to tap into citizens' evaluations of the workings and general value of democracy (Daoust et al. 2021; Norris 2017).

The second variable is *political trust*, which falls under the second most specific level of political support labelled 'confidence in regime institutions' (Norris 2017). As a proxy for political trust, I tap into citizens' trust in the legislature with the question: "How much trust do you have in members of parliament in general?". Respondents answer the question on a 7-point scale (1 = No trust, 7 = A great deal of trust).

Both democratic satisfaction and political trust are standardised to facilitate the interpretation and comparison of the results.

Independent variable

The winner/loser status is defined by the respondent's vote choice during the election.⁷ Prior studies have found that perceptions of winning are mostly determined by voting for the largest party or voting for a party that entered government (Plescia 2019; Stiers et al. 2018). An increase in vote and seat share can also influence voters' perceptions of winning, but the effect sizes are generally small for voters in majoritarian-style democracies (Plescia 2019; Stiers et al. 2018). Following these considerations, the Conservative Party – which became the largest party of the election, the only party in government, and which increased in both vote and seat share

⁷ Respondents who did not cast a vote are excluded from the analysis.

– is labelled as the winner. Hence, those who voted for the Conservative Party are coded as the winners (0), whereas those who voted for the remaining parties are coded as the losers (1).

Moderating variables: Affective and perceived ideological polarization

The moderator central to the first hypothesis is *affective polarization*, for which I rely on the respondents' like-dislike scores of the leading political parties as measured by BESIP in the pre-election wave on a scale from 0 (dislike) to 10 (like).^{8,9} Concretely, I consider two different operationalizations. First, I use the general *spread* of affective polarization following Wagner (2021), which is the most commonly employed operationalization in the academic literature. This measure has specifically been designed for multi-party contexts and recognizes that individuals may feel positively (or negatively) towards more than one party simultaneously (Wagner 2021). Second, I use an *election-specific* measure of affective polarization, which captures the difference in voters' affect towards the party they voted for and the party(ies) on the other side of the winner-loser divide.

Following Wagner (2021), the spread of affective polarization is understood as the “average party like-dislike difference relative to each respondent’s average party like-dislike

⁸ This includes the like/dislike scores of the Conservative Party, Labour, UKIP, and the Liberal Democrats (these parties together had a vote share of 87.8 percent). The same parties are used in the calculation of all polarization measures.

⁹ This measure captures the evaluations of parties (i.e., vertical) instead of the evaluations of the supporters of these parties (i.e., horizontal). Vertical measures are commonly employed in the literature to deduce citizens' level of affective polarization (e.g., Gidron et al. 2020; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021). Moreover, prior studies indicate that vertical and horizontal measures of affective polarization are highly – though imperfectly – correlated (Harteveld 2021; Druckman & Levendusky 2019). Given the aim of this study, a vertical measure is deemed appropriate since it is the electoral performance of parties (and not supporters) that determines the winner/loser status.

score” (p. 4). This measure is independent of the specific election outcome and captures whether voters meaningfully differentiate in their affect-evaluations of the political parties. Using the spread of affective polarization, individuals who have similar levels of affect for all parties (be it positive or negative) and thus portray indifference or low variation, receive a low score on affective polarization. In turn, those with very diverging levels of affect for the different political parties are considered highly affectively polarized. The respondents’ affective polarization scores are calculated with the following equation:

$$Spread_i = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^P v_p (like_{ip} - \overline{like}_i)^2}$$

In this equation, p stands for parties, i for individuals, $like_{ip}$ is the like-dislike score assigned to a party, and v_p is the vote share of that party. The affective polarization scores are thus weighted by the parties’ vote share. The mean affect is calculated as follows:

$$\overline{like}_i = \sum_{p=1}^P (v_p * like_{ip})$$

The theoretical range of the resulting measure is between 0 (low affective polarization) and 5 (high affective polarization).

The election-specific measure of affective polarization is calculated for losers as the absolute difference in affect between one’s preferred party (i.e., the party one voted for) and the winning party. For winners, it is calculated as the absolute difference in affect between one’s preferred party and the mean-affect of the losing parties. The election-specific measure differs from the spread of affective polarization in that it explicitly incorporates the winning/losing status of the political parties and leaves out the affect-evaluations of fellow winners or losers.¹⁰ By incorporating the winner/loser status into the measure, all losing parties are grouped

¹⁰ These two operationalizations would be conflated in a *pure* two-party system.

together, which is an important difference as compared to the spread-measure from Wagner (2021). Moreover, the election-specific measure of affective polarization acknowledges that though one's preferred party might have lost the election, one can also harbour positive sentiments towards the winning party and therefore still be content with the election-outcome. To illustrate this with an example, it is plausible that UKIP-voters are pleased with the electoral win of the Conservative Party over Labour, despite UKIP's own electoral loss. This would be reflected in a lower score on the election-specific affective polarization measure. Therefore, this indicator is a more directed way to measure affective polarization in the context of the election-outcome.

The central moderator in the second hypothesis is *perceived ideological polarization*, which is based on the respondents' placements of the political parties on a 0-10 left-right scale in the pre-election wave. I again rely on two different operationalizations: (1) the *spread* of perceived ideological polarization and (2) the *election-specific* measure of perceived ideological polarization.

The spread of perceived ideological polarization captures the extent to which respondents observe differences in the left/right positions of the competing political parties. The equation is equivalent to the spread-measure of affective polarization, but $like_{ip}$ and \overline{like}_i are substituted in the formula with $position_{ip}$ (the ideological position assigned by a respondent to the party on the 0-10 left-right scale) and $\overline{position}_i$ (the weighted mean left-right position of all positioned parties). The theoretical range of the perceived ideological polarization index is between 0 (when all parties are perceived to occupy the exact same position on the left-right scale) and 5 (when all parties are divided between the extremes of the scale).

The election-specific measure of perceived ideological polarization is calculated for losers as the difference between the respondent's absolute ideological distance to their preferred party and the respondent's absolute ideological distance to the winning party. In turn, for

winners, this is calculated as the difference in the respondent's absolute ideological distance to their preferred party and the mean absolute ideological distance to the losing parties. While the spread of perceived ideological polarization is informative of how citizens perceive the ideological positions of parties in relation to each other, the election-specific measure of perceived ideological polarization also captures how individuals perceive their *own* ideological position in relation to these political parties. In other words, the spread of perceived ideological polarization is important for citizens' general perceived utilitarian stakes of the election, whereas the election-specific measure is important for how citizens perceive that their *personal* utility is affected by the election outcome. The election-specific measure is thus a more directed way to capture voters' perceived ideological polarization in the context of an election.

The supplementary materials A provide example calculations of the four polarization measures to further illustrate their differences and meaning.¹¹

Control variables

I control for a number of variables that have been found to be related to vote choice as well as political support, in order to prevent potential confounding of the results. These include the socio-demographics for age (measured in years), gender (1 = male), and education level (0 = No qualifications, 1 = Below GCSE, 2 = GCSE, 3 = A-level, 4 = Undergraduate, and 5 = Postgrad). In addition, I control for the respondent's political extremism, which is calculated by folding the 11-point left-right scale around the midpoint resulting in an extremism-measure ranging from 0 (moderate) to 5 (extreme). The online supplementary materials B and C provide descriptive statistics for all variables, as well as correlation matrices.

¹¹ The correlation between the spread-measures of affective and perceived ideological polarization is 0.429 in 2015 and 0.349 in 2019, whereas the correlation between the election-specific measures is 0.592 in 2015 and 0.609 in 2019. See supplementary materials C for a more detailed overview of the correlation matrices.

Analysis strategy

I employ multilevel growth curve modelling to examine the data. Growth curve modelling is a statistical technique that can be used to explain interindividual differences in intra-individual change. This model allows me to analyse how variations in the change in political support between respondents can be explained by fixed individual-level characteristics of winning/losing and polarization. The growth curve models consist of two levels, with repeated observations (level 1) nested within respondents (level 2). ‘Wave’ is included in the models as an independent variable at level 1 to estimate the change in political support over the two waves. To separate the static correlates of political support from determinants of the dynamic winner-loser gap, I include a random slope for wave in the models in combination with cross-level interactions. A downside to growth curve models is that they may be too conservative when using less than three waves (Singer and Willett 2003). Moreover, the models and outcomes become rather complex due to the large number of (three-way) cross-level interactions and their resulting covariances.

Results

Since the results are largely similar over the two dependent variables (i.e., democratic satisfaction and political trust) as well as over both elections (i.e., 2015 and 2019), I only thoroughly discuss the results of the 2015 general election for democratic satisfaction in the main text. Subsequently, a concise overview of the findings in the 2019 general election is provided. The results for political trust are presented and discussed in supplementary materials D and E.

Table 1. Multilevel growth curve models for democratic satisfaction

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
<i>Level 1 effects (Within-respondents)</i>							
Wave	0.132*** (0.018)	0.011 (0.049)	0.014 (0.053)	0.073* (0.041)	0.066* (0.030)	-0.034 (0.059)	0.065 (0.041)
<i>Level 2 effects (Between-respondents)</i>							
Loser	-0.612*** (0.021)	-0.521*** (0.054)	-0.837*** (0.060)	-0.023 (0.042)	-0.405*** (0.033)	-0.715*** (0.066)	-0.033 (0.042)
Spread AP		0.124*** (0.015)				0.129*** (0.016)	
Spread PIP			0.050** (0.017)			-0.001 (0.018)	
Election-specific AP				0.065*** (0.007)			0.077*** (0.008)
Election-specific PIP					0.027*** (0.008)		-0.024** (0.009)
<i>Two-way interactions</i>							
Loser*Wave	-0.281*** (0.023)	-0.071 (0.061)	-0.136* (0.066)	-0.163*** (0.047)	-0.180*** (0.037)	-0.039 (0.073)	-0.150*** (0.048)
Wave*Spread AP		0.046** (0.016)				0.036* (0.019)	
Loser*Spread AP		-0.028 (0.018)				-0.073*** (0.020)	
Wave*Spread PIP			0.042** (0.018)			0.026 (0.020)	
Loser*Spread PIP			0.088*** (0.021)			0.118*** (0.023)	
Wave*Election-specific AP				0.014* (0.008)			0.002 (0.009)
Loser*Election-specific AP				-0.121*** (0.008)			-0.132*** (0.009)
Wave*Election-specific PIP					0.024** (0.008)		0.023** (0.010)
Loser*Election-specific PIP					-0.068*** (0.009)		0.022* (0.011)
<i>Three-way interactions</i>							
Loser*Wave*Spread AP		-0.079*** (0.021)				-0.069** (0.023)	
Loser*Wave*Spread PIP			-0.053* (0.023)			-0.022 (0.025)	
Loser*Wave*Election-specific AP				-0.029*** (0.009)			-0.014 (0.010)
Loser*Wave*Election-specific PIP					-0.038*** (0.010)		-0.030** (0.012)
Constant	0.472*** (0.059)	0.229*** (0.068)	0.443*** (0.070)	0.191** (0.063)	0.378*** (0.060)	0.272*** (0.073)	0.190** (0.063)
var(_Wave)	0.058*** (0.016)	0.062*** (0.016)	0.063*** (0.015)	0.056*** (0.015)	0.057*** (0.016)	0.064*** (0.015)	0.056*** (0.015)
var(_Cons)	0.406*** (0.010)	0.399*** (0.010)	0.401*** (0.010)	0.373*** (0.010)	0.396*** (0.010)	0.395*** (0.010)	0.373*** (0.010)
var(_Residual)	0.347*** (0.011)	0.343*** (0.010)	0.342*** (0.010)	0.342*** (0.010)	0.345*** (0.010)	0.340*** (0.010)	0.342*** (0.010)
Observations	18410	18410	18410	18410	18410	18410	18410

Source: BESIP 2015 (waves 4 & 6), own calculations.

Democratic satisfaction is standardised.

AP: Affective polarization; PIP: Perceived ideological polarization

Growth curve models control for age, gender, education level and extremism at the respondent-level.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed

2015 general election – Democratic satisfaction

Table 1 shows the results of the multilevel growth curve models for democratic satisfaction, conducted on the pre- and post-election wave of the 2015 general election.^{12, 13} In model 1, I estimate the coefficients of wave (which represents the change in political support between the pre- and post-election wave), winner/loser status, and a cross-level interaction term between these variables. The results of model 1 show that democratic satisfaction increases between the pre- and post-election waves amongst electoral winners ($b = 0.132$). This finding is in accordance with prior evidence that elections boost the political support levels of those who voted for a winning party or candidate (Marien and Kern 2018; Van der Meer and Steenvoorden 2018). The negative main effect of losing on democratic satisfaction implies that citizens who voted for a losing party are generally less satisfied than citizens who voted for a winning party. Yet, to appropriately test for a winner-loser gap as a consequence of the election outcome, we need to look at the difference in *change* in democratic satisfaction between electoral winners and losers. The interaction effect shows that the democratic satisfaction levels of losers deteriorate following their electoral defeat ($b = 0.132 - 0.281 = -0.149$). This finding contradicts cross-national evidence that the winner-loser gap originates from different rates of change between winners and losers in the same direction (Esaiasson 2011; Marien and Kern 2018; Van der Meer and Steenvoorden 2018). Rather, I find that the winner-loser gap is driven by both an increase in democratic satisfaction amongst winners as well as a decrease amongst losers. This

¹² The outcomes of the OLS and ordered logit models are substantively similar (see supplementary materials G). Hence, I present the estimates using OLS as it is easier to compare across models. See also supplementary materials F for the effects on unstandardized outcome variables.

¹³ The intercept-only model indicates that the proportion of variance at the respondent-level amounts to 56.2%.

result is in line with previous findings in the UK, as well as evidence from other countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the US (Anderson et al. 2005; Esaiasson 2011).

Next, I consider to what extent the winner-loser gap is moderated by the spread of affective polarization. For that purpose, I built on model 1 by adding direct effects with this moderator, as well as two- and three-way cross-level interactions (with wave and winner/loser status). The three-way interaction with the spread of affective polarization is negative and statistically significant. The effects are displayed graphically in figure 1a, which shows the marginal effects of wave on democratic satisfaction for winners and losers (represented by the two separate lines) depending on their spread of affective polarization (x-axis). The graph illustrates that winners and losers who are not affectively polarized do not differ significantly in their change in democratic satisfaction over the pre- and post-election waves. Yet, as voters become more affectively polarized, the gap between winners and losers widens, which is evident by the expanding vertical distance between the lines as we move from left to right. In terms of effect sizes, going from 0 to 5 on the spread of affective polarization is related to a decrease in between-wave change in democratic satisfaction of -0.167 standard deviation amongst losers, and an increase of 0.230 standard deviation among winners. In other words, the effect of winning/losing on political support is stronger for citizens with a higher spread of affective polarization. The data thus lend initial support for the first hypothesis.

In the third model, I test for the moderating effect of the spread of perceived ideological polarization. The three-way interaction is shown to be significant and in the expected direction. The effects are again visualized in figure 1b. In support of the second hypothesis, the figure depicts that the winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction is more pronounced amongst citizens who perceive higher variation in the left/right positions of the political parties.

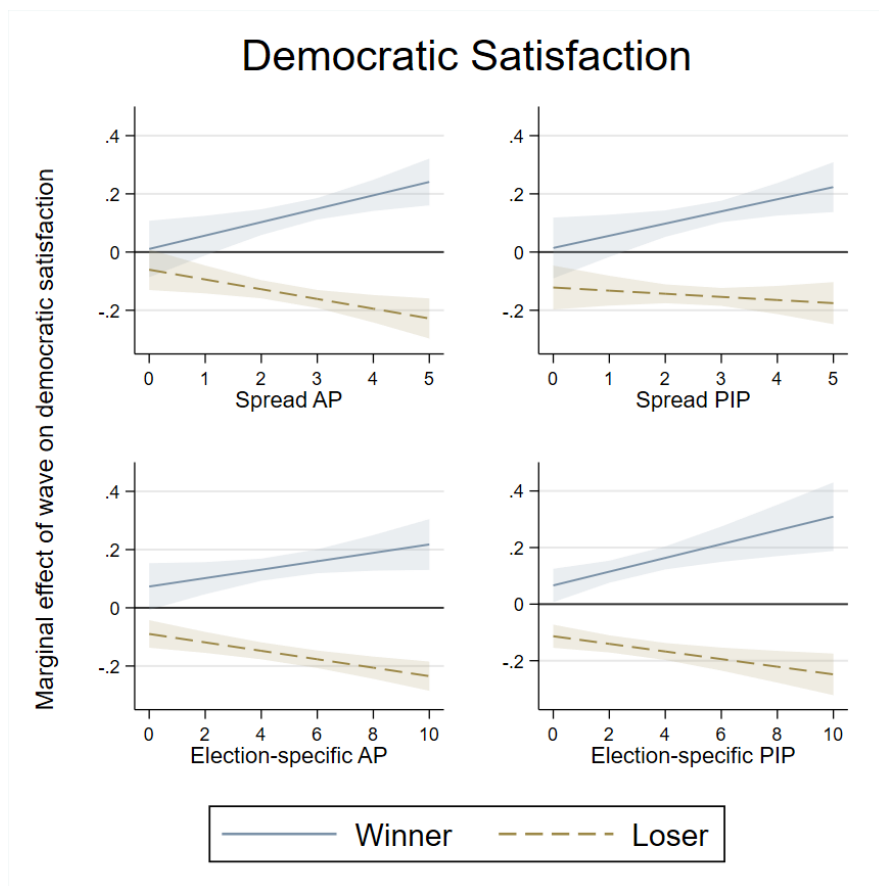


Fig. 1. Marginal effect of wave on democratic satisfaction for winners and losers depending on the level of polarization, 2015

Next, I repeat the same models using the election-specific measures of affective and perceived ideological polarization. The results of the fourth and fifth models portray that the three-way interactions with election-specific affective perceived ideological polarization are negative and statistically significant (see figures 1c & 1d). In support of the hypotheses, these results again show that the winner-loser gap in political support is amplified by both affective (H1) and perceived ideological polarization (H2).

In model 6, I include both the spread of affective and perceived ideological polarization to test whether one of the polarization types is more relevant as a moderator on the winner-loser gap. Notably, the results depict that the three-way interaction with the spread of perceived ideological polarization decreases substantially in effect size and no longer reaches statistical

significance when it is included in the model with the spread of affective polarization. However, the 7th model –which includes both election-specific polarization indicators – portrays the opposite: the moderating effect of election-specific affective polarization is no longer significant when included in the model with election-specific perceived ideological polarization (though it should be noted that the three-way interaction with election-specific affective polarization remains significant in the ordered logit model). The results thus do not show conclusive evidence that one type of polarization is structurally more important in moderating the winner-loser gap than the other.

2019 general election

To test if the moderating effects of affective and perceived ideological polarization also apply to a different election, I repeat the same analysis on both dependent variables for the general election of 2019 (see supplementary materials E for a detailed discussion of the results).

Overall, the results of the multilevel growth curve models provide evidence for the moderating effects of all four polarization-measures for both democratic satisfaction and political trust, thereby again showing strong support for H1 and H2. Moreover, all three-way interactions remain significant and in the expected direction when included together in the sixth and seventh models. Notably, the effect sizes of the three-way interactions are much larger in 2019 as compared to 2015, in particular for affective polarization. To illustrate this: Going from 0 to 5 on the spread of affective polarization in 2019 is related to a decrease in democratic satisfaction over the waves of -0.409 standard deviation among losers, and an increase of 0.412 standard deviation among winners (in 2015 this added up to -.167 and .230, respectively). A possible explanation for the larger effect sizes is the increased centrality of identity divides in UK politics following the Brexit-referendum. As a consequence, the political debate has

become more emotionally heated, and political identities have become more salient to voters (Sobolewska and Ford 2020).

Table 3. Overview of the findings in relation to the first and second hypotheses

	2015				2019			
	Spread		Election specif.		Spread		Election specif.	
	Individually (M2-M3)	Together (M6)	Individually (M4-M5)	Together (M7)	Individually (M2-M3)	Together (M6)	Individually (M4-M5)	Together (M7)
<i>Democratic satisfaction</i>								
Affective polarization (H1)	supported	supported	supported	<i>Mixed sign.</i>	supported	supported	supported	supported
Perceived ideological polarization (H2)	supported	Insignificant	supported	supported	supported	supported	supported	supported
<i>Political trust</i>								
Affective polarization (H1)	supported	supported	Insignificant	Insignificant	supported	supported	supported	supported
Perceived ideological polarization (H2)	supported	supported	supported	supported	supported	<i>Mixed sign.</i>	supported	supported

Hypotheses for which there is conflicting evidence between the ordinary least square and ordered logit models are labelled ‘mixed significance’.

In table 3, I present a comprehensive overview of the findings in relation to the first and second hypotheses. The table illustrates that there is strong support for the amplifying effects of affective and perceived ideological polarization on the winner-loser gap for both dependent variables (i.e., democratic satisfaction and political trust), over both elections (i.e., 2015 and 2019), and for both measurements of polarization (spread versus election-specific). It should, however, be noted that certain three-way interactions lose significance when the measures of affective and perceived ideological polarization are incorporated simultaneously in the 6th and 7th models. While these models do not serve as the primary test of the hypotheses, they can offer insights into which polarization type acts as the strongest moderator on the winner-loser gap. Though the three-way interactions in these models stay in the expected direction, they sometimes lose significance due to the moderate to high correlation between affective and perceived ideological polarization (e.g., in 2015, $r = 0.429$ between the spread-measures and r

= 0.592 between the election-specific measures). Furthermore, the models do not provide conclusive evidence that one polarization type is structurally more important in moderating the winner-loser gap than the other.

Robustness checks I: Partisan attachments and extremism

Prior studies have shown that the winner-loser gap in political support is more pronounced amongst voters with stronger partisan attachments (Singh 2014; Spina 2021) and amongst voters with more extreme ideological views (Anderson et al. 2005). To ensure that partisan attachments and extremism are not fully driving the moderating effects of polarization, I include three-way interactions with these variables in the multilevel growth curve models (see supplementary materials H and I).¹⁴

In line with prior evidence, the results show that the effects of winning and losing on political support are indeed significantly stronger for voters with stronger partisan attachments and voters with more extreme views. Next, I add three-way interactions with the different polarization indicators to these models. The results show that the three-way cross-level interactions with the polarization measures remain statistically significant when controlling for partisan attachments and extremism. This implies that the amplifying effects of affective and perceived ideological polarization on the winner-loser gap are not fully driven by partisan attachments or extremism. Moreover, the moderating effects of partisan attachments and extremism decrease substantively in effect size and lose significance when included together in the models with certain polarization indicators, particularly when included with the spread of affective polarization. This suggests that the moderating effects of partisan attachments and extremism that have been documented in prior studies may in fact be driven by (affective)

¹⁴ Partisan attachment is measured on a four-point scale ranging from ‘No partisan attachments’ to ‘Very strong partisan attachments’.

polarization. Moreover, since affective polarization consists of both partisan attachments and out-party animosity, these findings suggest that voters' negative sentiments towards opposing parties play a relevant role in moderating the relationship between the winner/loser status and political support, which is also underlined by prior evidence (Ridge 2022).

Robustness checks II: Alternative model specifications

To ensure the robustness of the previous findings, I re-estimate the original models on a sample restricted to England (see supplementary materials J). England offers a more defined case where the regional dynamics of Wales and Scotland do not play a role. Additionally, there is less ambiguity about the winner/loser status due to the exclusion of regional parties. The outcomes of the multilevel growth curve models are fundamentally similar to the previously discussed results, though the effect sizes decrease slightly for most three-way interactions.

To further address the ambiguity in the winner/loser status of SNP voters, I run an additional robustness check in which SNP-voters are coded as the winners of the election together with voters of the Conservative Party (see supplementary materials K). The results show significant three-way interactions for the spread of affective polarization, election-specific affective polarization, and election-specific perceived ideological polarization. However, contrary to the main models, the three-way interactions with the spread of perceived ideological polarization become borderline insignificant in 2015 ($p = 0.051$ for democratic satisfaction and $p = 0.055$ for political trust). This finding is consistent with the theoretical arguments presented in the paper, since perceived ideological polarization is expected to moderate the winner-loser gap for utilitarian reasons. The utilitarian perspective posits that winners show more political support because their views are represented in government. Since the SNP did not enter government, it makes theoretical sense that the spread of perceived ideological polarization matters less as a moderator for this specific voter-base.

Additionally, I check the robustness of the findings using autoregressive models. Multilevel growth curve models are more fitting for the research question at hand, but nonetheless suffer from certain limitations (i.e., they are conservative when using less than three waves and complex due to the many cross-level interactions). The results of the autoregressive models for democratic satisfaction are substantively similar to the multilevel growth curve models, though the third model for democratic satisfaction in the 2015 election does not show evidence that the winner-loser gap is wider amongst voters with a higher spread of perceived ideological polarization. For political trust, the autoregressive models portray significant moderating effects for all polarization measures across all models. In contrast to the multilevel growth curve models, the autoregressive models thus *do* show evidence that the effect of winning/losing on political support is stronger for voters with higher levels of election-specific affective polarization.

Subsequently, I re-estimate the models (1) controlling for political interest, (2) using polarization indicators from the post-election wave, (3) retaining a larger sample size by not excluding respondents who do not rate UKIP and the Liberal Democrats on the like/dislike and left/right scale, as well as (4) excluding respondents who report to like the party they voted for the least (see supplementary materials M, N, O, and P, respectively). The results of all four additional analyses are meaningfully similar – both in terms of significance and effect size – to the results presented in the main models. This holds true for both elections (i.e., 2015 and 2019), as well as for both dependent variables (i.e., democratic satisfaction and political trust).¹⁵

¹⁵ Prior research has shown that affective polarization tends to increase when elections are more salient (Hernández et al. 2021). Though outside the scope of this paper, I test with an exploratory analysis whether the polarization-levels of electoral winners and losers are affected differently over the waves. The results of the multilevel growth curve models (presented in supplementary materials Q) do not provide any indication that elections have a stronger impact on the polarization levels of winners or losers, with the exception of the spread of affective polarization which increases slightly more amongst electoral winners over the waves.

Conclusion & Discussion

While various scholars claim that polarization might have detrimental consequences for losers' consent, evidence for this relationship has remained scarce, if not absent. Hence, in this paper, I studied the extent to which the effect of the winner/loser status on political support is conditional on citizens' affective and perceived ideological polarization. Using multilevel growth curve modelling, I analysed pre- and post-election panel data from the BESIP collected during the UK general elections of 2015 and 2019.

Theoretically, I argue that affective polarization exacerbates the winner-loser gap by intensifying voters' emotional response to the election outcome. In turn, perceived ideological polarization is theorized to amplify the winner-loser gap by raising the utilitarian stakes of the election. I test these expectations over two different elections (i.e., 2015 and 2019), using two different dependent variables (i.e., democratic satisfaction and political trust), as well as relying on two different measures of affective and perceived ideological polarization (i.e., spread and election-specific). The results of these multilevel growth curve models show strong and robust support that the effects of winning and losing on political support are stronger for voters with higher levels of affective and perceived ideological polarization.

These results provide a novel contribution to various bodies of literature. First, it contributes to the literature on polarization by empirically examining its effects on the political support levels of electoral winners and losers. Research on the political consequences of affective polarization, and to a lesser extent perceived ideological polarization, is relatively scarce (Iyengar et al. 2019), especially outside of the US context. Given the high and, in some countries, growing levels of polarization (Boxell et al. 2022; Dalton 2021; Gidron et al. 2020), it is paramount to increase our awareness of the potential challenges this phenomenon poses to the stability of electoral democracies. Moreover, this study contributes to the literatures on the winner-loser gap and political support by showcasing that polarized losers are more likely to

evaluate the political system negatively following their electoral defeat. By looking into the effects of polarization at the micro-level, this study overcomes a limitation within the winner-loser gap literature, which is that there is still a lot of progress to be made in identifying individual-level factors that influence the winner-loser gap since most studies have focused on contextual determinants (Nadeau et al. 2021).

This study also reveals a paradox within the affective polarization literature. On the one hand, I find that affectively polarized voters who win the election become more supportive of the political system. On the other hand, prior studies have shown that affectively polarized voters are less supportive of democratic norms when their preferred party is in power (Kingzette et al. 2021; McCoy et al. 2020). Bringing these studies together uncovers an important insight: affectively polarized voters become more supportive of the political system when it has produced their desired outcome and they subsequently approve of democratic-norm-violations when it benefits their party in power. This might suggest that the political support of affectively polarized voters is not necessarily rooted in a principled belief in the value of the political system and its processes, but that it is rather fundamentally instrumental and largely dependent on how the system and its institutions serve their favoured party. In other words, affectively polarized citizens seem to prioritize the status of their party (or the demise of the opposing party) over their commitment to the political system and democracy.

This also has important implications for the stability of the electorate's political support. There is a merit in fairly stable political support levels amongst the citizenry since it makes democracies resilient to short-term fluctuations following, for instance, political scandals (Mauk 2021). When the political support of citizens is rooted in instrumental considerations instead of a firm belief in the system and its institutions, it becomes unstable and more prone to change. This study reveals the volatility in the political support levels of polarized citizens: Their support may easily thrive or crumble depending on the outcome of the election. Given

the rising polarization levels in the UK and beyond (Gidron et al. 2020; Marchal and Watson 2019), these findings indicate that the political support levels of substantial proportions of the population may become more fragile, particularly in the direct aftermath of elections.

Lastly, the outcomes of this study have important implications for the winner-loser gap and losers' consent. There is a widespread conviction in the academic literature that wide winner-loser gaps are inherently harmful to the stability of democracies. It is, however, disputable whether the absolute size of the gap truly matters as it can also be driven by an increase in the support of winners. Yet, few would disagree that a steep decrease in the support of electoral losers is undesirable, since the democratic regime is dependent for consolidation on the consent of not only the electoral winners but also of those on the losing side. This study reveals that affective and perceived ideological polarization widen the winner-loser gap in political support. More importantly, however, I show that polarized voters experience a stark decrease in their political support following electoral defeat. This suggests that affectively polarized losers, and losers who perceive higher levels of ideological polarization, are less likely to voluntarily comply with the election outcome. Ultimately, this study thus raises serious concerns for losers' consent and the stability of democracies at election time.

Despite these relevant insights, this study does not come without its limitations. By employing panel data, I am able to track the changes in respondents' political support levels over the waves, which strengthens the internal validity of the study. Nonetheless, when compared to experiments, causal inferences drawn from panel data demand more caution since the winner/loser status of respondents is not randomly attributed. As a result, respondents' winner/loser status is conflated with their vote choice. Moreover, this research design builds on the assumption that observed changes in the political support levels of winners and losers can be ascribed to the election result. I am, however, unable to rule out the occurrence of unknown external events in-between the waves that might have also influenced citizens' political support

levels. Notwithstanding these limitations, it is important to highlight that examining the winner-loser gap within the context of an actual election using panel data offers crucial advantages for the ecological and overall external validity of the results.

A second limitation concerns the scope conditions of the study. I have focused on the UK general elections of 2015 and 2019 as ideal cases to isolate the effects due to the alignment of the various determinants of electoral victory (i.e., government access, largest party, increase in vote and seat-share) and the resulting unambiguity in the winner/loser status of voters. In principal, the theoretical arguments as outlined in this study can reasonably be applied to different contexts. Yet, in more proportional political systems, the moderating effects are more complex and potentially less pronounced due to the less easily defined winner/loser status of voters (Van der Meer and Kern 2019). Generalizations to second-order elections (e.g., local elections) are also restricted, since the stakes of these elections are generally perceived as lower and partisan attachments may play a lesser role (Heath et al. 1999). Future studies should thus establish whether the winner-loser gap is similarly affected by polarization in more proportional-style political systems as well as in second-order elections.

Lastly, within this study, the winner/loser status of respondents was determined using objective indicators of electoral performance. This operationalization, however, does not recognize that citizens' perceptions of winning and losing are subjective and may be influenced by a variety of factors, such as pre-electoral expectations or framing of the election outcome by the media (Plescia 2019; Stiers et al. 2018; Van der Meer and Steenvoorden 2018). Therefore, one would ideally also employ subjective measures of winning and losing to test the robustness of the findings. Moreover, it is important to note that the employed outcome variables, namely democratic satisfaction and political trust, tap into the more specific levels of the political support continuum following Norris (2017). Future studies should establish whether citizens' more diffuse *regime support*, such as citizens' support for key democratic norms and principles,

are affected similarly by the winner/loser status and polarization. Indeed, democratic satisfaction and political trust are arguably more dependent on the composition of the government and subsequently, more strongly affected by the winner/loser status. As such, the winner/loser gap might be less pronounced when relying on more diffuse measures. Another avenue for future research is to empirically examine the theoretical explanations behind the moderating effects of polarization on the winner-loser gap. Though I theoretically suggest that citizens' affective response to the election depends on their level of affective polarization, while citizens' observed utilitarian stakes depend on their level of perceived ideological polarization, I could not empirically test these claims.

Besides the additional insights these future studies could offer, the present study already provides a novel contribution to the academic literature on polarization and the winner-loser gap, by shedding a light on how polarization shapes citizens' experience of electoral victory and defeat and subsequently alters how citizens evaluate their political system. The findings reveal important insights about the instrumental nature of the political support of polarized citizens, as well as the potential challenges this poses to democratic stability.

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