

Consensualism, democratic satisfaction, political trust and the winner–loser gap: State of the art of two decades of research

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Abstract

Lijphart (1999) argued that citizens tend to be more satisfied with democracy in consensual democracies than in majoritarian democracies and that the gap in democratic satisfaction between the winners and the losers of elections is smaller under consensualism. Twenty years on since then, this article takes stock of the literature on consensualism and political support. We find considerable ambiguity in the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence provided in this literature. Finally, we speculate on possible reasons for this ambiguity.

Key words: Consensualism, Majoritarianism, Satisfaction with democracy, Political trust, Winner–loser gap, Lijphart

1 Introduction

‘Does the type of democracy affect citizens’ satisfaction with democracy?’ With these words Arend Lijphart (1999, pp. 286-287) begins a short expedition into the effects that consensualism has on political support for the regime and its institutions. In a relatively brief passage – not much more than one and a half pages – he investigates two aspects that he considers signs of democratic quality: a high level of democratic satisfaction and a small gap in satisfaction between citizens who won the elections and those who lost.

The first of the two claims that Lijphart (1999, p. 286) makes in this passage, with reference

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to Klingemann (1999), is that ‘citizens in consensus democracies are significantly more satisfied with democratic performance in their countries than citizens of majoritarian democracies; the difference is approximately 17 percentage points.’ The second, with reference to the pioneering work by Anderson and Guillory (1997), is that ‘the difference in satisfaction [with democracy between winners and losers] is more than 16 percentage points smaller in the typical consensus than in the typical majoritarian democracy’ (Lijphart 1999, p. 287). Ultimately, Lijphart (1999, p. 300) concludes ‘consensus democracy – on the executives-parties dimension – makes a big difference with regard to almost all of the indicators of democratic quality’.

In the two decades since the publication of *Patterns of Democracy*, the literature on the consensualism–support relationship has vastly increased. Dozens of articles have been published on the impact of consensual democracy and proportionalism on democratic satisfaction and political support. The literature on the winner–loser gap has become even more elaborate. Rather than adding one more study to this bunch, we aim to take stock of the existing literature and look for theoretical and empirical patterns to answer the question that Lijphart raised: Does the type of democracy affect citizens’ satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions?

We divide this contribution into three sections. First, we briefly discuss the concept of political support, explaining why we study the effects of consensualism not only on democratic satisfaction but also on political trust. Second, we focus on the impact of consensualism on levels of political support (in methodological terms: the direct effect). Third, we look into the relevance of consensualism for the winner–loser gap (the moderating effect on the distribution of support). We explicate the theoretical arguments behind both effects as well as the empirical support for each.

2 Political support

Lijphart (1999) focuses exclusively on the relationship between consensualism and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. Yet satisfaction with democracy is only one measure of the broader, multilayered concept of political support. Building on typologies by Pippa Norris (1999; 2011) and Russell Dalton (2004), it has become rather common to distinguish between specific and diffuse support along five sets of objects. The most diffuse support is oriented towards the demos or people; the most specific support is oriented towards particular actors (politicians, parties) and policies. Between these extremes, political scientists have investigated the direct and conditional effects of consensualism on satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, and trust in political institutions.¹ This article focuses on both of these indicators, as it is hardly possible to disentangle the two in the theoretical and empirical literature following Lijphart (1999, pp. 268-269).

Democratic satisfaction and political trust are two ‘middle-range indicators’ (Zmerli, Newton, & Montero, 2009) between adherence to diffuse principles and support for specific politicians and policies. Although both have been argued to be essential to democracy – for the survival of democratic regimes (*e.g.* Crozier, Huntington, & Watanuki, 1975), for the resilience of institutional configurations (*e.g.* Fuchs & Klingemann, 1995, p. 6) or to prevent democratic atrophy (*e.g.* Hetherington, 1998, p. 804) – empirical tests illustrating these consequences are scarce at best. Yet one could also argue that democratic satisfaction and political trust need not be consequential to be relevant. Rather, they may be relevant democratic values in themselves (*though see* Rosanvallon, 2008 for a counterargument). Lijphart (1999) discusses

¹ The final mode of political support – support for the norms of the (democratic) regime, regardless of the actual performance of these regimes – has come under increased scrutiny over the last few years (*e.g.* Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016) but has not been a focal point in the debate on the effects of consensualism. Cross-national variation in support of these democratic norms is relatively small, which may serve as an explanation.

them in the scope of his elaboration on the quality of democracy, implying that he shares this latter position.

To explain variance in democratic satisfaction and political trust, political scientists looked at the influence of the ‘institutional arrangements on which democratic legitimacy rests’ (Scharpf, 2003). Three sets of state characteristics have been the primary focal points for scholarly inquiry. The most important and most consistent driver of political trust has been quality of government, or, inversely, corruption. The quality of government has proven to be a relevant cause for political trust at all levels of analysis. Individuals who perceive politics and politicians as corrupt are less likely to trust them (Uslaner, 2017), organizations that engage in more professional and impartial procedures are trusted more (Grimes, 2017; Kumlin, 2002), and the strongest explanation for the variation in political trust across democratic countries lies in the prevalence of systemic corruption and bureaucratic partiality (Van der Meer, 2017). Particularly at the macro level, the explanatory power of quality of government for the formation of democratic satisfaction and political trust is so strong that it tends to crowd out alternative explanations. Concurrently, its absence in explanatory models might suppress effects of secondary importance (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2016). Second, scholars have looked into the effects of macroeconomic performance. While performance rates do not tend to explain cross-national differences very well (at least, after taking the quality of government into account), it is an important driver of longitudinal changes within countries (*cf.* Bargsted, Somma, & Castillo, 2017; Han & Chang, 2016; Quaranta & Martini, 2016; Van Erkel & Van der Meer, 2016). Finally, the third set of potential contextual determinants has been the electoral system, which, in the words of Norris (2004, p. 209), ‘represent, perhaps, the most powerful instrument available for institutional engineering, with far-reaching consequences for party systems, the composition of legislatures, and the durability of democratic arrangements.’

Together, when these three sets of contextual characteristics – electoral institutions, quality of government and macroeconomic performance – are related to democratic satisfaction and political trust, they arguably cover input-, throughput- and output-oriented legitimacy, respectively.

3 Levels of democratic satisfaction and political trust

3.1 Why consensualism and majoritarianism would stimulate political support

Evidently, the concepts of consensualism and majoritarianism cover much more than the electoral system, which is one of ten of Lijphart's indicators. Yet its disproportionality is the one indicator that got the most attention in the literature. Effectively, therefore, scholars that related consensualism to political support predominantly focused on the executive-parties dimension (*cf.* Lijphart 1999, p. 300).² The entire federal–unitary dimension, emphasizing functional power distribution, received remarkably little attention in the political support literature. To the extent that they show up in empirical tests, the effects of federalism and decentralization on national democratic satisfaction and political trust are found to be non-significant (Bernauer & Vatter, 2012; Quaranta & Martini, 2016; Van der Meer, 2010; *see also* Marien, 2011, p. 722), whereas the effect of bicameralism remained contested (compare

² Some scholars measure consensualism in general (*e.g.* Anderson & Guillory, 1997), while others break it down by dimension (*e.g.* Bernauer & Vatter, 2012) or focus on one specific dimension (*e.g.* Oskarsson, 2010), specific indicators such as the electoral system (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2016), disproportionality as measured by the Gallagher index (*e.g.* Farrell & McAllister, 2006) or the effective number of parties in government (Quaranta & Martini, 2016). As these measures are related to one another (Lijphart, 1999), findings tend to be rather robust when exchanging one measure for another (Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014, p. 523; Han & Chang, 2016, p. 91; Van der Meer, 2010, note 7). Yet the use of multiple related measures might therefore also risk multicollinearity or type II errors.

Berggren, Fugate, Preuhs, & Still, 2004; Magelhães, 2006).

Theoretically, both extremes on the executive-parties dimension have been argued to stimulate democratic satisfaction and political trust. This expectation stems from the fact that consensual and majoritarian systems are founded on fundamentally different principles. Whereas consensual systems emphasize inclusiveness via the dispersion of power over political groups, majoritarian systems lay strong emphasis on majority rule and accountability by bundling power as much as possible in a single group (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Lijphart, 1999). Both inclusiveness and accountability are conceptually related to political support (Van der Meer, 2010).

Inclusiveness is likely to stimulate the feeling that members of parliament – and, by extension, government and the democratic system – are intrinsically committed to the benefit of the people. Theoretically, the degree of inclusiveness should particularly matter to political minority groups, who are likely to feel better represented in the system as a whole under proportional than under majoritarian rules. One may, for instance, consider the likely response of the voters for the United Kingdom Independence Party, which in the general elections of 2015 obtained 12.6% of the votes but received less than 0.2% of the seats in the British Parliament. At least on paper, such experiences are likely to induce the feeling that their voice does not matter. Compare that with voters of similar parties in proportional, inclusive systems, such as the Sweden Democrats in 2014 (12.8% of the votes, 14.0% of the seats) or the Dutch Freedom Party in 2017 (13.1% of the votes, 13.3% of the seats). Even though neither party would gain access to government, both groups of voters would see their concerns voiced and their parties represented in parliament. Their distrust is canalized within the system. Even in the rational choice approach inclusiveness may be understood beneficially as interest alignment (*cf.* Hardin, 2000).

Concurrently, accountability is likely to stimulate democratic satisfaction and political trust as

well. Enforced commitment, a consequence of the power that the subject (truster) can hold over the object (trustee), is an inherent aspect of any trust relationship (Kasperson, Golding, & Tuler, 1992). Majoritarian systems give shape to this power because it clearly assigns political responsibilities (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008), which in turn allows the electorate to enforce politicians' commitment to their interests: The power held over politicians in power is the option to 'throw the rascals out' (Norris, 2011). Governments in consensual systems, by contrast, are more likely to be founded on coalitions and less likely to alternate fully.

3.2 Empirical assessments of the consensualism–support relationship

Theoretically, the literature thus developed rival hypotheses. Empirically, neither finds consistent support in the literature, although there is considerably more evidence that consensualism is beneficial to political support than majoritarianism. A first set of studies find that consensualism stimulates democratic satisfaction and/or political trust (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Banducci, Donovan, & Karp, 1999; Farrell & McAllister 2006; Lijphart, 1999; Van der Meer, 2010; Marien, 2011; *cf.* Blais, Morin-Chassé, & Singh, 2017). Others find evidence but not for all objects of support (*cf.* Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2016; Van der Meer, 2017; who find that proportional systems stimulate democratic satisfaction but not political trust) or for all measures of consensualism (Berggren et al., 2004; Bernauer & Vatter, 2012; Magalhães, 2006; Quaranta & Martini, 2016; Sanders, Clarke, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2014). A third group finds no significant effect whatsoever (Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Listhaug, Aardal, & Ellis, 2009; Magalhães, 2017; Norris, 2011, p. 212; Oskarsson, 2010; Wagner, Schneider, & Halla, 2009). Finally, merely two studies find the inverse, i.e. that majoritarianism stimulates democratic satisfaction or political trust (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Norris, 1999).

This large variation in the literature cannot be relegated to several potential methodological

artefacts, such as covered regions (most notably, Europe vs a globe spanning set of countries), the dependent variable (trust vs satisfaction) or method (i.e. the use of multilevel modelling or the inclusion of crucial control variables such as quality of government). Yet there is one peculiar pattern: We find a distinct effect once we focus on variation across data sets. The most used data sets are the Comparative Survey of Electoral Systems (CSES), Eurobarometer, European Social Survey and World/European Values Survey. The studies that rely on the CSES tend to find no effect or an inverse effect of consensualism (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Listhaug et al., 2009; to a lesser extent Bernauer & Vatter, 2012; Sanders et al., 2014). This does not suggest any issue related to data quality, as the CSES modules are embedded in national election surveys. Rather, there may be a substantive reason why the CSES stands out: Unlike the other data sets, CSES data is, by definition, collected directly before or directly after national elections. Elections have an important, albeit temporary, positive impact on democratic satisfaction and political trust (Blais & Gélinau 2007; Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Blais et al. 2017; Essaiasson. 2011; Hooghe & Stiers, 2016; Van Erkel & Van der Meer, 2016), raising the electorate's opinions on politicians' responsiveness, competence and general trustworthiness (Van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). Hence, voters' judgments of the political system might simply be different during elections than during the governmental period.

An important caveat, finally, is the limitation that few countries experienced substantial changes to their electoral system. Although the factual disproportionality of the post-election conversion of votes to seats varies somewhat over time within each country, structural differences between countries are much larger. It is therefore no surprise that most studies employed cross-national comparisons as the basis of their empirical models. There are some exceptions. Banducci et al. (1999) used the institutional change from majoritarianism to proportionalism in New Zealand in the 1990s as leverage to test the effect of both systems.

They find that voters had been more positive on the political system's responsiveness in 1996 (after the reforms) than in 1993 (before the reforms). Yet they did not find a similar change of trust in government. Whereas Banducci et al. (1999) focused on a specific case of institutional change, Quaranta and Martini (2016) employed a large-N approach, aiming to explain cross-national differences and longitudinal changes in democratic satisfaction across Europe between 1973 and 2013. They found no effect of proportionalism and party fragmentation. Yet as their explanatory model includes a dummy for regions (among which one for Anglo-Saxon countries), a large part of the already rather scarce cross-national variation is eliminated. Hence, it is hardly surprising that no effects of proportionalism and party fragmentation were found, particularly as longitudinal changes are small.

3.3 Unwrapping the consensualism–support relationship

Even if consensualism stimulates democratic satisfaction and political trust, it is remarkably difficult to isolate the underlying mechanisms. The theoretical and empirical literature have contributed an abundance of reasons (*see also* Dahlberg & Linde, 2017, p. 21). Yet even the most basic expectations do not find unequivocal support. Aarts and Thomassen (2008), for instance, analysed the CSES data to find that perceptions of accountability were less favourable in majoritarian systems than in proportional systems and that perceptions of responsiveness did not significantly or substantially vary across the two types – even though the former is commonly understood to be superior in terms of accountability and the latter in terms of responsiveness (*e.g.* Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000).³ Moreover, these findings are

³ That consensual systems are not very responsive echoes the criticisms on consociationalism by Van Schendelen (1984, p. 167), who argued that as early as in 1967 Dutch voters considered that MPs do not bother very much about what the people demand, albeit without a comparison with other countries.

hard to resonate with their third finding, namely that satisfaction with democracy is lower in consensual systems, despite its better performance on accountability.

Nevertheless, various scholars have attempted to unwrap this relationship by studying the effects of multiple aspects of consensualism simultaneously. Yet conclusions are not uniform. Magalhães (2006, p. 212) concludes

Electoral systems that reduce disproportionality when converting votes into seats, and legislative rules that foster power-sharing within legislatures seem to result in lower levels of institutional disaffection. (...) However, the positive impact on confidence of institutional rules that spread power and foster negotiation may be undermined if power-sharing between parties turns into fully fledged collusion that stops alternation in power from operating as a mechanism of electoral accountability. The same occurs in political systems where legislative policies may be vetoed by strong second chambers and constitutional courts with abstract powers of review.

This would suggest consensual electoral institutions but majoritarian parliamentary practices. Bernauer and Vatter (2012) break down the executive-parties dimension of consensualism into two components – one around oversized government coalitions and direct democracy and the other around the other characteristics, including electoral proportionalism. Their findings suggest that the former stimulates democratic satisfaction but that the latter does not. Sanders et al. (2014) find no overall effects of Lijphart's consensualism dimensions on democratic satisfaction, but find effects when they break it down into governmental clarity of responsibility and electoral proportionalism. Both stimulate democratic satisfaction. Finally, Quaranta and Martini (2016, pp. 169-170) find a significant effect of the effective number of parties but not for proportionalism, bicameralism or federalism. As is often the case in this literature, it seems hardly possible to reconcile the outcomes of these studies.

Another suggestion is proposed by Marien (2011), who proposed non-linearity as a solution to the deadlock in the literature. She finds that among European countries proportional and majoritarian electoral systems may stimulate political trust, compared with systems that attempt to mix these principles via, for instance, reinforced proportionalism (which gives a bonus to the largest party or coalition, as in Greece and Italy) or a high electoral threshold (*cf.* Norris, 2011, p. 212). Yet further analysis is needed, particularly to cover more countries with mixed and majoritarian electoral systems.

4 The winner–loser gap

4.1 Why the gap in support between winners and losers should be smaller in consensual systems

The second theme that Lijphart (1999, pp. 286-287) addresses is the effect of consensualism on the gap in political support between winners and losers of elections. While elections boost political support among the electorate as a whole, a fairly large body of literature documents a gap in political support between electoral winners and electoral losers (*e.g.* Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Curini, Jou, & Memoli, 2012; Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Essaiasson, 2011; Marien & Kern, 2018; Martini & Quaranta, 2018; Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012; Stiers, Daoust, & Blais, 2018; Van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). Most of these studies define winning as supporting a candidate or party that gained access to government after the elections. Yet it may also be defined in other ways, such as policy distance to government (*cf.* Curini et al., 2012) or gaining representation in parliament (*cf.* Van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018).

Lijphart attaches much importance to this winner–loser gap in political support. He even argues that the size of this gap represents ‘a more sensitive measure of the *breadth* of satisfaction than

simply the number of people who say they are very or fairly satisfied' (1999, p. 287, emphasis in original).

In line with Anderson and Guillory (1997), Lijphart theorizes and tests the hypothesis that the difference in satisfaction with democracy between winners and losers is smaller in consensus democracies as compared with majoritarian democracies. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is the power-sharing character of the institutional setup of consensus democracies that would reduce the differences between winners and losers. Compared with losing in majoritarian democracies, losing in consensus democracies should be less severe, given the system's provisions to ensure representation for societal minorities and the protection of their interests. Compromises are made between government and opposition parties, if only because both need to consider that they might need to rely on each other for a future government coalition in a different configuration. Moreover, voters in consensual systems might have multiple party attachments, making it more likely that there is at least one party in government that comes somewhat closer to representing their preferences. In sum, losers' chances of being represented in the political arena and seeing their policy preferences being implemented should be higher in those systems.

However, let us take this reasoning a step further. The nature of a democracy's institutional setup should not affect only the size of the support gap between winners and losers. It presumably also affects the very definition of *who* is an electoral winner and who an electoral loser.

The defining criterion of gaining government access seems straightforward in majoritarian systems, where gains in parliamentary power and access to government are closely associated, given that the largest party is likely to take office (*cf.* Howell & Justwan, 2013). However, in consensual systems that are characterized by proportional representation, multiparty systems and coalition governments, this association is far less strong. In these systems it is possible that

a voter who voted for a future government party does not consider that a win, because her preferred party lost in terms of parliamentary power or because it had to strike a coalition deal that no longer reflects this voter's policy preferences (*see* Campbell, 2015). On the other hand, a voter for a small party – understanding that the chances of gaining access to government are miniscule – might still be pleased with the outcome of the election because her party gained in vote shares or seats in parliament.

These examples show that defining winners and losers in consensual systems is rather controversial. Unlike majoritarian democracies, where bundling legislative and executive power is a founding principle, representation is a particularly relevant principle in consensual democracies. This complexity in defining winners and losers stems from the validity of both principles: winning and losing is not merely the consequence of access to government power, but also of getting representation in parliament and a voice in political debates.

Extending this fundamental difference, there are more reasons why the definition of winning and losing differs across systems. First, in consensual systems parliamentary power and access to government are less clearly linked than in majoritarian systems. Party size is always a relevant but not a necessary condition to enter government. It is even possible in consensual systems that the largest party does not take office. This happened, for instance, in the Netherlands in 1977 and 1982, when Labour was the largest party but a government coalition was formed by Christian Democrats and Conservatives. Second, the likelihood of losing repeatedly is arguably less likely in consensual systems. Lijphart (1968) argued that losing is especially harmful for political support if there is a permanent pattern of full exclusion. This logic can arguably also apply to repeatedly losing in elections. Anderson and colleagues (2005) reach the conclusion that repeatedly losing elections deteriorates political support and that the drop in support is particularly strong after the second consecutive electoral defeat. These authors therefore suggest that 'long periods without alternation in power lead to progressively

less positive views about the political system among the losers' (Anderson et al., 2005, p. 68).

The considerations for voters to define themselves as winners or losers has remained remarkably understudied empirically. Recently, Stiers et al. (2018) aimed to explain why some voters define themselves as the winner of elections in Canada, Germany and Spain. Having voted for the largest party is consistently the most important explanation.

Additionally, access to government as a junior partner and winning votes (Germany), seats (Canada) or either (Spain) also define winners. However, as the authors themselves acknowledge, two caveats apply, as the elections under study hardly produced ambiguous outcomes. First, the largest party entered government in all three countries – in Canada and Spain even in single-party government. Being largest can thus not be seen in isolation from government status. Second, in all countries the largest party was indeed large: at the national level they obtained 34% of the votes or more and 40% of the seats or more. Whether this effect can be extended to more fragmented consensual democracies – such as the Netherlands, where the largest party obtained 21% of the votes and 22% of the seats in 2017, or Belgium, where the largest party obtained 20% of the votes and 22% of the seats in 2014 – is unclear.

4.2 Empirical assessment of the winner–loser gap in different institutional contexts

Empirical evidence for the effect of consensualism is rather ambivalent. Various scholars, including Lijphart himself, find supporting evidence (Anderson & Guillory 1997; Anderson et al., 2005; Bernauer & Vatter, 2012; Lijphart, 1999, p. 287; Martini & Quaranta, 2018). Yet other studies reach the conclusion that the winner–loser gap is not moderated by regime type (Curini et al., 2014; Marien, 2011), or not when rival explanations such as inequality are taken into account (Han & Chang, 2016).

These studies vary with respect to the type of consensualism they focus on. Similar to Lijphart

(1999), Martini and Quaranta (2018) operationalize the moderating institution as the overarching executive-parties dimension. Anderson et al. (2005) focus on a range of institutions, finding moderating effects of the proportionality of the electoral system, the number of veto players in the political system and federalism. Bernauer and Vatter (2012) find supporting evidence when they operationalize consensualism as oversized cabinets and direct democracy, but not when they focus on electoral proportionality. By contrast, Marien (2011) and Curini and colleagues (2014) focus on the proportionality of the political system and find that it does not affect the gap in political support between winners and losers. These findings thus suggest that the real bone of contention in the literature is the specific effect of electoral proportionality.

Why might that be the case? For an answer to this question we need to go back to the dominant definition of electoral winners and losers, namely by their status as government party (i.e. coalition partner in most systems with electoral proportionality). This definition presupposes that access to government power is the relevant criterion in various contexts. Yet that is something to reconsider.

Blais and colleagues (2017, p. 89) conclude

there is no statistical difference in the predicted change in satisfaction between supporting a party represented in the legislature but not in government and supporting a party that is in government but not in control of the government. It seems that having one's party in government is nice—provided that the party is in charge. (...) The two things that really matter are, on the one hand, whether one's party is in the legislature or not and, on the other hand, whether one's party controls the government or not.

Having voted for a junior partner in government leads voters to define themselves as winners (Stiers et al., 2018) but need not have an effect on their democratic satisfaction or political

trust. Singh and Thornton (2016) offer a tentative explanation: Independent of whether they voted for the largest coalition partner or not, winners are less likely to experience a boost in democratic satisfaction when the coalition is ambivalent. Hence, Singh and Thornton (2016, p. 123) conclude:

our findings quite provocatively suggest that, in terms of engendering support for democracy and its processes, parliamentary democracies may be best served with institutions that encourage single-party government, or at least governments of likeminded parties.

This suggests that we need to distinguish consistently between access to government power and representation in parliament (*cf.* Van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). Government power and parliamentary representation are fundamentally different principles to define winning and losing. Moreover, the weight placed on these principles differs quite systematically between proportional and majoritarian systems (Thomassen, 2014). Consequently, it is likely that voters in different democratic regimes define themselves as winners and losers at least in part along these rival principles. Finally, the effect of consensualism on the winner–loser gap in political support is likely to differ from these principles (Bernauer & Vatter, 2012). To the extent that winning and losing is defined by gains and losses in parliamentary representation, we would expect the election system to matter. Yet when winners and losers are defined by the government status of the party they voted for, we should not expect consensualism in the electoral realm to matter as much as consensualism in government composition.

5 Conclusion

In 1999 Arend Lijphart concluded that consensualism simultaneously raises the levels of

democratic satisfaction and limits the gap in democratic satisfaction between the winners and the losers of elections. Since then, the literature has expanded considerably, and conclusions are more ambiguous than they might have seemed 20 years ago.

With regard to the direct effect of consensualism (or often more specifically, proportionalism) on democratic satisfaction and political trust, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions from the literature. Theoretically, both consensualism and majoritarianism might be argued to stimulate political support, the former because of intrinsic care (representation), the latter because of accountability. Empirically, findings are mixed. Either there is a positive effect of consensualism or there is no effect; majoritarianism generally does not seem to stimulate political support. Perhaps rival effects cancel each other out, as Sanders et al. (2014, p. 171) conclude:

The key macro drivers of democracy satisfaction appear to revolve around the practical consequences of electoral rules (disproportionality and clarity) rather than the rules themselves (consensualism or plurality elections).

Regardless, if consensualism matters to democratic satisfaction and political trust, the net effect is surely modest, particularly in comparison with, for instance, quality of government.

Intriguingly, the small, inconsistent difference in political support between consensual and majoritarian regimes might disappear altogether during national elections. Cross-national studies that rely on national election surveys are less likely to find a positive effect of consensualism on political support. This could indicate that elections function as a celebration of democracy that reinvigorates citizens' support, regardless of the democratic regime. A more systematic analysis, employing data that is cross-national as well as longitudinal, might test this possibility.

With regard to the indirect effect of consensualism on the winner–loser gap, conclusions are

equally ambiguous. While the theoretical debate is quite one-sided, empirical evidence is similarly inconclusive. Consensualism might work as a general explanation of the winner–loser gap, but when scholars zoom into the specific institutional configurations that matter most – be it government composition, federalism, veto powers or the proportionality of the election system – the conditional effect tends to fall apart.

Anderson and colleagues already argued in 2005 ‘specific institutions, and not just combinations of institutions help to shape the response of losers’ (p. 139). That logic requires specific theoretical arguments and empirical tests for why specific institutional configurations simultaneously define principles behind winning and losing and explain the differential impact of these specific types of winning and losing on political support.

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