

RESEARCH NOTE

Winning, Losing, and the Dynamics of External Political Efficacy

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Elections are commonly framed as game-like competitions (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004; Lawrence, 2000), where partisans identify with, root for, and participate in the success or defeat of their political team (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). Unlike mere games, however, the stakes of election contests are particularly high because winning parties dictate public policy outputs (Castles, 1982). For these reasons, the outcomes of elections—and the subsequent designation of voters as “winners” or “losers”—are routinely linked to the character of political attitudes. Casting a vote for a winning candidate, for example, engenders positive support for democratic governance (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012), while electoral defeat disenchants losing participants (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005; Davis, 2014; Howell & Justwan, 2013).

Because such representation is critically related to perceptions of responsiveness (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990), a person’s status as an electoral “winner” or “loser” also affects perceptions of external political efficacy. Indeed, prior research demonstrates that an individual’s sense of external efficacy is sensitive to both partisan (Merolla, Sellers, & Fowler, 2013) and electoral representation (Davis, 2014; Karp & Banducci, 2007). “Losers” are unlikely to say that their voices have been heard or that government officials care what they think, while “winners” are more likely to perceive that government will respond to their preferences (Nadeau & Blais, 1993).

Yet, for how long do losers’ disenchantment and winners’ euphoria last? Does the winner–loser framework have lasting ramifications for a citizen’s external efficacy, or do these effects attenuate as the next electoral contest nears? Clarke and Acock (1989, p. 562) speculate, for example, that “[t]he impact of candidate preferences on efficacy may often be transient, with the heightened efficacy of those favoring ‘winners’ being eroded by negative evaluations of winning candidates’ (or their party’s) behavior in office.” However, most research about the degree to which election outcomes drive

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perceptions of external efficacy cannot address this speculation due to a reliance on cross-sectional data.¹

This article addresses the question of temporal stability in the attitudes of winners and losers by studying the *duration* of election-related influences on efficacy. Specifically, we investigate the extent to which variation in perceptions of external efficacy can be explained by a winner–loser framework in both the immediate aftermath of an election and the long months following it. Using American National Election Studies (ANES) panel data that span from September 2008 to June 2010, our results corroborate previous findings by showing that significant variation among voters' perceptions of government responsiveness can be attributed to a winner–loser dynamic during the immediate election period. Importantly, however, these differences between winners and losers are not static. Over time, winners become less enthusiastic about the degree to which they perceive government is responsive, while losers' external efficacy begins to rebound. As experience with systemic checks and balances increases, the fortunes of the in- and out-parties rise and fall, and the opportunity to begin the electoral game anew draws near, the connection between winner–loser status and external efficacy fades. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings.

The Winner–Loser Framework

The notion that electoral outcomes shape political attitudes relies on intuitions developed from the study of intergroup relations. As Tajfel & Turner's (1986) early research indicates, even the most benign contests can produce group coherence and, by extension, biased attitudes. For individuals that categorize themselves as members of a particular group—however minimal or arbitrary—behavior and attitudes often become consistent with and favorable toward a group's goals. Thus, individuals are sensitized to maintaining positive in-group relative to out-group status.

This has a natural analog in political contests. If we conceive of elections as competitions and political parties as the teams, then voters ostensibly play the role of fans (group members), pulling “for their team and the social groups that it symbolizes, while at the same time rooting against the other party and its allied social groups” (Green et al., 2002, p. 202). Voters may be as unrelenting as their athletic counterparts, positively distinguishing their team by extolling their party's virtues, while denigrating their opponents. Thus, when their candidate wins an election, it may feel like a personal victory, and when they lose, like a personal loss.

The utility of this analogy is predicated on the way in which elections, like their sporting counterparts, sort participants into competing groups. As Greene (2004, p. 138) writes, “the group nature of partisanship should naturally create a bipolar partisanship where individuals characterize the political parties into us and them and exaggerate perceived differences to favor their own group.” This bias, in turn, has meaningful consequences for the character of political attitudes: Research establishes

¹Although research occasionally considers how individuals' attitudes change from the periods immediately before and after an election (Craig et al. 2006), virtually no research has considered whether the winner–loser framework is salient beyond this timeframe.

that the degree to which a group achieves meaningful representation—that is, whether they are *winners* or *losers*—is critical to its attendant members' outlook on politics (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990, Ginsberg & Weissberg, 1978).

Theoretical Expectations

If elections are the primary vehicle for keeping government responsive to citizen demands (Dahl, 1971; Riker, 1965), then it would seem unlikely that persons who supported a losing candidate would readily agree that government is responsive to their demands or that their voices have been heard (Craig, Martinez, Gainous, & Kane, 2006, p. 579). Indeed, there are both rational and psychological reasons why winners and losers should perceive external efficacy differently. First, research in behavioral economics conveys that individuals are sensitive to utility (or lack thereof [Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997]). If intergroup competition facilitates the distribution of goods—here, elected officials—then election outcomes should sensitize individuals to their group's tangible gains and losses in the aftermath of an election contest (Bobo, 1983; Sears & Funk, 1991). Second, not only does a loss of political representation by electoral losers negatively alter those individuals' expectations that their preferred policies will be enacted (Anderson et al., 2005), but losing is psychologically related to negative emotional responses (Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Wilson & Kerr, 1999). McAuley, Russell, and Gross (1983) demonstrate that not only are winners more satisfied, proud, and confident and losers angry and depressed, but such outcomes can shape how individuals perceive the competition itself.

Drawing on this research, we begin with the basic premise that winners should be more likely to perceive that government is responsive, while those who cast a vote for a losing candidate should be less likely to believe that government will cater to their preferences (Craig et al., 2006; Davis, 2014).² Electoral winners should possess more positive perceptions of external efficacy than electoral losers in the postelection period (H1). But do these attitudes change over time? That is, does this winner–loser framework persist in the months following the election? Although external efficacy is generally higher in the immediate aftermath of an election relative the preelection period (Banducci & Karp, 2003; Clarke & Acock, 1989; Finkel, 1985), the duration of these effects is not clear.

Why should the relevance of electoral outcomes / group status diminish over time? We posit a variety of potential mechanisms. In his work on public opinion, Zaller (1992, p. 118) acknowledges, for example, the connection between experience and the character of attitudes. He writes that “attitude change cannot be understood . . . as a

²The usage of vote-choice to demarcate winners from losers follows previous research strategies (Craig et al. 2006; Davis 2014). Party affiliation and party voting are highly correlated (about 0.93 in our data), so the two effects are essentially indistinguishable. Spearman rank correlations of the relationship between being either a Republican Obama voter or a nonvoting Democrat and efficacy fail to show any difference between these two groups (confidence intervals for the rank correlation coefficient, based on 10,000 bootstrap replications, overlap at every wave). The relationship between voting for a winner, as a member of the out-party, and efficacy is statistically indistinguishable from the relationship of efficacy and being a nonvoting in-party member. We favor the vote choice coding method for its tighter theoretical connection to electoral outcomes.

conversion experience, the replacement of one crystallized opinion structure by another. It must instead be understood as a change in the balance of positive and negative considerations relating to a given issue.” Similar to a Bayesian approach where individuals adjust their preexisting evaluations as new information is procured (Gerber & Green, 1999), the running tally of an individual’s perceptions of external efficacy should be adjusted as a function of their experience with both prevailing political figures and environmental context—an experience that cyclically produces less positive attitudes over the course of an elected official’s term (what Sigelman & Knight, 1983, term an “unpopularity cycle”). Thus, given the gridlock that characterizes modern politics—which complicates blame attributions and obscures culpability—and the mass public’s notoriously fickle memory, our expectation is that the winner–loser framework simply becomes less relevant as the distance between the election event and the survey instrument grows, especially as the opportunity to compete again in the electoral game draws near. Specifically, as the period of time from the election increases, we expect that the effect of vote choice will fade as memories of satisfaction and disappointment over the election outcome dissipate. Therefore, increases in efficacy among winners will fade over time (H₂) and decreases in efficacy among losers will rebound as the next election approaches (H₃).

Data

To consider the duration of election-related effects on efficacy, we use data from the 2008–2009 ANES Panel and 2010 Internet Re-contact Studies, which covers the period of time ranging from September 2008 to June 2010. We analyze each wave of this study that included questions measuring external efficacy. Our data are therefore composed of five waves: September 2008, October 2008, November 2008, May 2009, and June 2010. The panel design we leverage offers the advantage of measuring changes in efficacy as a function of vote choice for a winner or loser within respondents. Further, using panel data allows us to estimate the durability of the effect of winner/loser status on efficacy as elections become temporally distant.³

Dependent Variable: External Political Efficacy

External efficacy comprises appraisals of the extent to which an individual can affect government and the perceived degree to which public officials will respond to citizen demands.⁴ Two questions are used to create a continuous external efficacy index that reflects this definition: (1) “How much can people affect government?” and (2) “How often does government do what most people want?” Responses to both questions are coded 0 for “not a lot,” coded 1 for “a little,” coded 2 for “a moderate amount,”

³To be sure, no design is perfect, and a drawback of our study is that we analyze a historically unique election; that of the first African American to the presidency in American history. We contend that the inferential advantages conveyed by a panel approach outweigh this disadvantage, however. As panel data on efficacy is exceedingly sparse, we hope our results inspire researchers to include these items on future nationally representative panel studies to explore this question in the context of other elections.

⁴The degree to which an individual might affect government is considered an element of external efficacy because it conveys attitudes about how malleable institutions are to personal action, which is decidedly different than the “personal competency” character of internal efficacy. For a larger discussion of the difference between *internal* and *external* efficacy, see Craig et al. (1990).

coded 3 for “a lot,” and coded 4 for “a great deal.” These two items are added together, averaged, and then rescaled to range from 0, which denotes a complete absence of external efficacy, to 1, which denotes very high, positive feelings of efficacy.⁵ Exploratory factor analysis shows that these items load onto a single factor with an eigenvalue of 1.15.⁶

Independent Variables

Casting a vote for a winning presidential candidate is coded 1, while casting a vote for a losing candidate is coded 0.⁷ We invert this coding in one specification to test Hypothesis 3. We control for a standard slate of independent variables; these are also rescaled to range from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. We control for respondent’s level of ideology, scaled such that 0 corresponds to *very liberal* and 1 corresponds to *very conservative*, on a 7-point scale.⁸ We code the level of education an individual possesses as a six-part variable ranging from 0 (*some grade school*) to 1 (*post-graduate degree*). Gender is coded 1 for men and 0 for women. Household income is measured in quintiles and rescaled to run from 0 to 1. We account for Black respondents with a binary variable, where identifying as an African American is coded 1 and otherwise 0. We control for respondent age, again scaled from 0 to 1, with lower values corresponding to younger respondents. Finally, a political knowledge scale is created by averaging the correct number of answers to six substantive questions about politics.⁹ We control for political knowledge to account for the possibility that more knowledgeable respondents might feel more efficacious in politics, by virtue of the fact that they likely expend more time and resources consuming information about politics.

Method

Our data exhibit a multilevel structure: Individuals are nested within survey waves.¹⁰ We therefore estimate multilevel models composed of a mix of fixed effects at the

⁵The correlation between these variables is high, ranging from 0.51 to 0.61, across waves.

⁶Factors estimated using the iterated principal factor method, as applied to the polychoric correlation matrix of the two survey items. Results are robust to using the factor score as the dependent variable. Results are also generally robust to considering the items separately. The only difference is that the positive fixed effect of voting for the winner on the “people affect government” item in postelection waves is no longer significant ($p = .110$). The dynamic results are unchanged when considering the items separately.

⁷The decision to use the presidential vote is generally made for two reasons: (1) presidential elections are salient insofar as “virtually everyone is aware of their outcome” (Clarke & Acock 1989: p. 553), and (2) individuals routinely participate in these events with greater frequency than nonpresidential elections (Jacobson 2013). Further, Supplementary Table S2 shows that our results are robust to including abstainers in the analysis. Both winners and losers exhibit significantly higher efficacy than abstainers, and the effect of voting for a winner is nearly twice as large as that of voting for a loser.

⁸We do not control for respondents’ party ID as partisanship correlates almost perfectly with vote choice. Ideology is also correlated with vote choice, but the relationship is weaker.

⁹For the Panel Study, the ANES implemented a new series of political knowledge items that improves on the “identification” questions usually posed in the Time-Series surveys that ask respondents to correctly identify political figures.

¹⁰One could also use panel methods (Beck and Katz 1995) to analyze these data. We are interested, however, in the variable effect of winner/loser status across waves, rather than treating these dynamic and heterogeneous effects as a nuisance to be fixed.

individual level, random intercepts, and a random coefficient on “winner” (or “loser” in one specification) vote choice, varying by wave (Gelman & Hill, 2007, pp. 280–283). The random coefficient approach allows us to directly estimate the variable effects of winner/loser status over time. This approach is more efficient than estimating separate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions for each wave (Beck & Katz, 2007). Further, the random intercept term accounts for temporal dependencies in our data. In short, our empirical specification is appropriate for the testing of our hypotheses, while accounting for the dynamic nature of our data. Additionally, Supplementary Table S1 reports the results of a fixed-effects model of within-person change to ensure that our inferences are robust to unmodeled heterogeneity by subject (Allison, 2009; Goldman, 2012). Supplementary Table S1 shows that subjects who voted for the winner directly experienced a positive change in efficacy, while losers directly experienced a decline.

Hypothesis 1 suggests an aggregate effect; “winners” should exhibit higher efficacy than “losers,” *ceteris paribus*. Thus, Hypothesis 1 predicts that the coefficient on a fixed effect on voting for Obama in 2008 should be positively and significantly associated with efficacy, but only after the election has occurred (that is, the final three waves of our data).

Conversely, Hypothesis 2 (which predicted a decaying effect of voting for a winner) and Hypothesis 3 (which predicts a rebound in efficacy among losers as the next election approaches) require a test not of a static effect, but of the dynamic effect of Obama/McCain vote choice on efficacy across waves. That is, the quantity of interest is the estimated random coefficient in each wave. Therefore, the evidence for Hypotheses 2 and 3 is the behavior of this random coefficient. Hypothesis 2 predicts that the effect of voting for Obama on efficacy should be strongest in the waves right after the election, decaying toward 0 in the final wave. Hypothesis 3 predicts that the effect of voting for McCain on efficacy should be most negative in the waves right after the election, while rebounding in the positive direction in the final wave.

Results

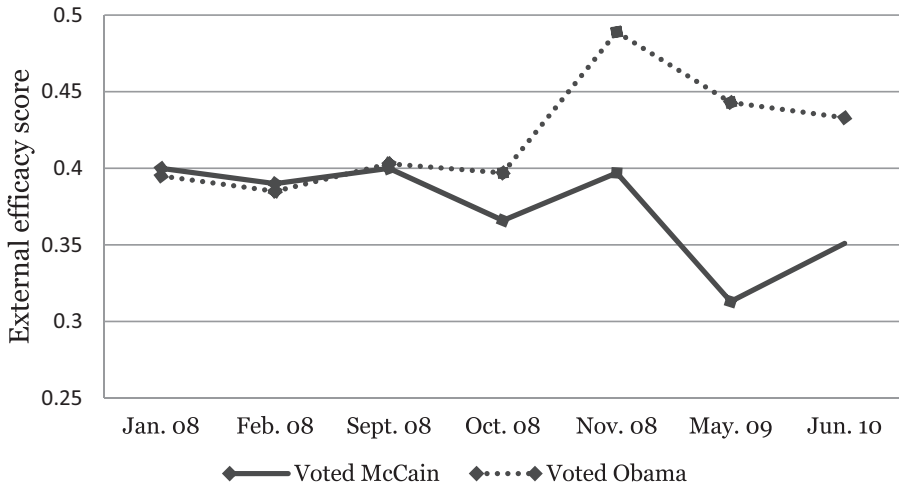
Figure 1 shows the mean levels of efficacy among Obama voters (winners) and McCain voters (losers) across the waves of our data. We consider voter intent to be fungible with vote choice for the preelection waves of our survey. Results are robust to the inclusion of nonvoting members of the in-party in postelection wave; our findings are not sensitive to this coding choice.

Figure 1 reveals two patterns: First, Obama voters exhibit higher levels of efficacy than McCain voters, but only after Obama wins the election. In the preelection waves, levels of efficacy among intended Obama and intended McCain voters are nearly identical. Second, levels of efficacy among Obama voters recede as the election victory fades into the past, while levels of efficacy among McCain voters rebound as the presidential election fades into memory and the midterm election cycle ramps up. Note, however, that even in the last wave in our data before the November 2010 midterms, efficacy among Obama voters remains higher than that among McCain voters. These dynamics indicate that the winner/loser effect is more than ephemeral, though the effect shows signs of decay over time. The dynamics shown in Figure 1

Figure 1

Mean efficacy values for voters, 2008–2010

Source: 2008–2009 panel and 2010 internet re-contact studies.



indicate the importance of moving beyond static data for studying the relationship of winner/loser status and external efficacy.

Table 1 presents the results of three multilevel models that analyze these levels of external efficacy over time. Model 1, in the first column of Table 1, includes only those panel waves following Obama's election. In Model 1, the quantity of interest is the fixed effect on voting for the winner. Table 1 shows that there is a positive and significant association between voting for the winner and perceptions of external efficacy. In general, winners are predicted to report about half of a standard deviation more perceived efficacy than losers.

Models 2 and 3 use all five survey waves. Model 2 includes a random coefficient on voting for the winner, while Model 3 inverts this specification by including a random coefficient on voting for the loser. The quantity of interest from Models 2 and 3 is the estimated random slope on voting for either a winner or a loser across time. The standard deviation of the random component of the winner-vote slope is larger than the fixed effect coefficient in Models 2 and 3, indicating considerable between-wave heterogeneity in the overall effect. That is, the standard deviation from the fixed effect across waves exceeds the magnitude of the fixed effect.

Note that we analyze only those who cast a vote, meaning that the estimates for casting a losing vote mirror those for casting a winning vote. We present both models to present direct evidence for the alternative Hypothesis 3, which deals with the effect of voting for a loser.

Figure 2 shows that the estimated effect of voting for a winner or loser on efficacy is strongest during the May 2009 wave of the data; this estimate is based on Models 2 and 3 in Table 1.¹¹ The confidence intervals on the winner random effect cross zero

¹¹Estimates in Figure 2 are the Best Linear Unbiased Prediction (BLUP) of the random component of the slope coefficient at each wave. See Beck and Katz (2007) for an explication of BLUPs in political science.

Table 1
Multilevel Estimates of Winner/Loser Status on Efficacy

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Winner vote (postelection waves)	Winner vote (all waves)	Loser vote (all waves)
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)
Winner vote	0.062* (0.019)	0.037 (0.023)	
Loser vote			-0.037 (0.023)
Ideology	-0.045* (0.017)	-0.028* (0.014)	-0.028* (0.014)
Political knowledge	0.020 (0.020)	0.014 (0.016)	0.014 (0.016)
Education	0.042* (0.016)	0.039* (0.013)	0.039* (0.013)
Male	-0.028* (0.009)	-0.033* (0.007)	-0.033* (0.007)
Black	0.069* (0.018)	0.064* (0.015)	0.064* (0.015)
Income	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.034 (0.018)	-0.034 (0.018)
Age	0.001 (0.024)	-0.012 (0.020)	-0.012 (0.020)
Constant	0.373 (0.028)	0.397 (0.024)	0.434 (0.022)
Variance Components			
σ (Winner vote)	0.027 (0.014)	0.047 (0.016)	-
σ (Loser vote)	-	-	0.047 (0.016)
σ (Constant)	0.027 (0.012)	0.032 (0.011)	0.032 (0.011)
σ (Residual)	0.194 (0.003)	0.197 (0.002)	0.197 (0.002)
<i>N</i> observations	2,480	3,922	3,922
<i>N</i> waves	3	5	5

Note. Coefficients are maximum likelihood estimates derived via the xtmixed command in STATA 13.1. Dependent variable in each model is the index of reported external efficacy.

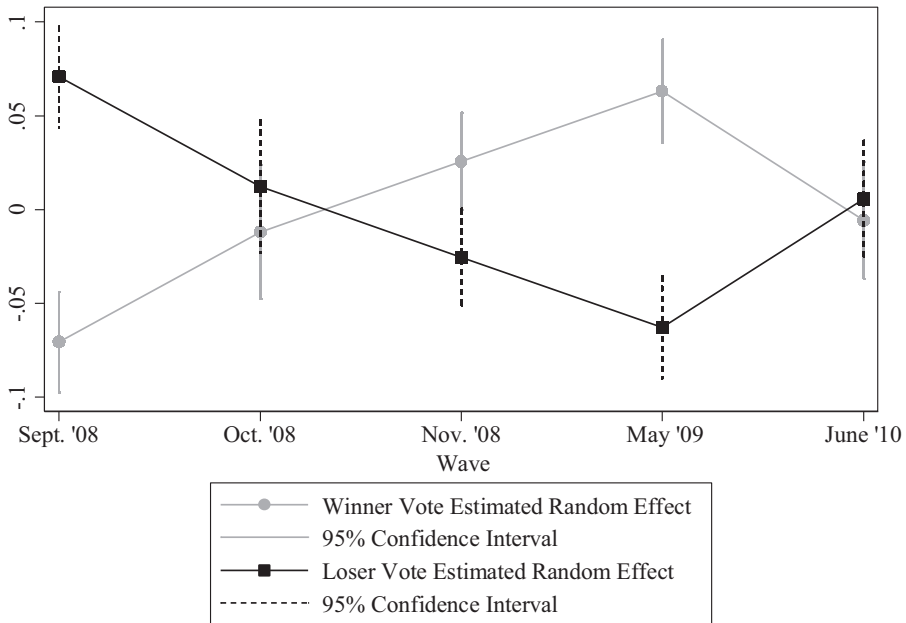
Source: ANES 2008–2009 panel and 2010 Internet re-contact studies.

* $p < .05$.

for the June 2010 wave, indicating a decay in the effect of voting for a winner on efficacy. Conversely, efficacy rebounds in the June 2010 wave among McCain voters, as hypothesized.

Figure 2

Random effect component of winner/loser vote slope, by wave.



Across all the multilevel models in Table 1, several results for our control variables are worth noting. Conservative ideology is negatively and significantly associated with efficacy in every specification, as is being male. Conversely, being African American or more highly educated is positively and significantly associated with efficacy. Given that conservatives and males were less likely to vote for Obama, and African Americans and the well-educated were more likely to vote for Obama, these results appear consistent with the winner/loser framework we test directly with our vote choice variables.

In sum, there exists support in our data for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, and we reject the null for these hypotheses. Voting for a winner is associated with greater perceived efficacy. This effect peaks immediately after an election, and decays in a matter of months. Voting for a loser has a negative association with efficacy, but this effect rebounds as the next election cycle nears, the fortunes of the in- and out-party wax and wane, and other events exceed the past election in proximity and salience in the minds of individuals.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although a rich literature demonstrates that political attitudes diverge among electoral winners and losers, extant research has produced competing narratives about whether external efficacy is sensitive to prevailing political conditions. While Iyengar (1980) and others (Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Chamberlain, 2012; Ginsberg & Weissberg, 1978) find that external efficacy is unresponsive to various political factors, Craig et al. (2006) and Merolla et al. (2013) offer qualified, though conflicting, evidence that

external efficacy is affected by vote choice or partisan affiliation. The results presented here offer some clarity by providing evidence that vote choice affects perceptions of external efficacy, and that this effect has dynamic properties.

Vicariously experiencing the outcome of the election through the candidate they supported, individuals who cast a vote for the winning presidential candidate experience a positive change in external efficacy in the immediate aftermath of the election. This finding fits within a robust literature about the positive social, psychological, and biological consequences of winning contests (Bernhardt, Dabbs, Fielden, & Lutter, 1998; Nadeau & Blais, 1993; Stanton, Beehner, Saini, Kuhn, & LaBar, 2010; Wilson & Kerr, 1999) and provides evidence for the representation-responsiveness dynamic. Simply, individuals who cast a vote for a winning candidate perceive that government is responsive, while those who cast a vote for a losing candidate sour in their belief that government heeds their expectations.

This effect, however, has a discernible half-life: As the election become less temporally proximate, the effect of vote choice on external efficacy fades. Our analysis points to a dynamism in perceptions of external efficacy where attitudes diverge prominently at the time of the election and then begin converging on one another as time passes. Although the election drives winners and losers apart in their perceptions of external efficacy, not only do losers' sour grapes tend to become tempered over time, but the euphoria or sense that government is responsive to winners actually *decreases* as well.

By June 2010, losers' perceptions of external efficacy become more positive, while election winners become less efficacious than their postelection high. While the 2008–2010 ANES Panel Data do not extend through and past the 2010 mid-term elections, these changes in efficacy suggest that perceptions of government responsiveness may converge near previous levels as formal electoral competition begins anew.¹²

Taken collectively, these findings not only contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic nature of external political efficacy, but they offer clarity on the role that election outcomes play. Although winners and losers diverge in the positivity of their perceptions of external efficacy, the identities that structure these changes vary prominently over time. In the immediate aftermath of the election, vote choice most clearly differentiates perceptions of external efficacy.

We hope these results inspire researchers to continue including questions related to efficacy on future panel designs, given the paucity of dynamic data in this area. Future work should explore this relationship in other contexts, and probe the psychological mechanism behind these findings. Perhaps rising anxiety or cynicism among winners, or the decay of the warm feeling of “winning” might be the mechanism behind the dynamics we observe—such a mechanism strikes us as more plausible than one that

¹²This rebound in the positivity of losers' perceptions of external efficacy comports with research that argues that legitimate elections can build system support even in the face of electoral loss (Nadeau and Blais 1993). However, while it is encouraging that these attitudes may converge on each other in the pre-presidential election period—which suggests that losers' sour grapes do not bias them against system responsiveness for the next election cycle—external efficacy in the aggregate has significantly decreased over time (Chamberlain 2012).

relies on respondents' fading memories of the election, for example.¹³ Further, rising optimism among those who back losing candidates as the next opportunity to compete might explain the rebound effect we observe.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at IJPOR online.

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¹³Certain theories of emotion suggest that fear may cause individuals to reconsider their standing evaluations. Unfortunately, the panel data did not include sufficient questions to consider whether these dynamics were related to emotional experiences with Obama.

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