

How do you like me now?

Cognitive dissonance and adaptive attitude change in the post-election period

Sarah Virginia Abel



Master's thesis in political science, Institute for Political Science

University of Oslo

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Abstract

Through an analysis of survey data from six US Presidential elections, I examine attitude change among voters in the post-election period. I examine the impact of having voted for the losing candidate and establish whether this effect is different in cases of electoral inversion – where the election winner receives fewer votes than the runner-up. I find that in regular elections there is a consolidation phase where voters for the loser depolarize their view of the candidates. This is evidenced by the fact that they feel “warmer” towards the election winner and colder towards their chosen candidate in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey. They give more similar ratings on the “feeling thermometer” to the two candidates after the election. The supporters of the winning candidate do not depolarize their views in such cases but feel warmer towards both candidates. In cases of electoral inversion, this post-election moderation in attitudes among voters for the loser does not take place. They give a much smaller boost in support for the election winner and do not feel colder towards their own candidate. The voters for the winner in such cases polarize their opinion by feeling warmer about their own candidate and colder towards the loser. They rate the two candidates further apart on the “feeling thermometer” after the election. I show that these findings support the cognitive dissonance model of attitude change. In short, a typical election gives rise to a period of conflict reduction after the results are known. By contrast, cases of electoral inversion do not produce such a period and may increase the level of polarization in US politics.

Key words: Public Opinion, Cognitive Dissonance, Attitude Change, US elections, Conflict Reduction, electoral inversion

Foreword

American politics is the gift that keeps on giving. Even if it is studied more than any other regular political event, it continues to provide new avenues of fascinating research. American politics is especially interesting because everything in the institutional design has been carefully planned, and introduced as innovative ideas. These ideas often do not produce the intended results, however. The electoral system is in my opinion a great example of this phenomenon. US politics is divided, high paced, big-scale and full of unintended consequences.

The situation I, and many others, found ourselves in while writing this thesis was in many ways challenging and unexpected. Despite this, I found immense pleasure in discovering new ideas and seeing both expected and unexpected results.

Three people deserve a special thanks. First my supervisor, Dr. Hilde Restad, who helped and supported me throughout the process and was patient with all the delays that occurred. Second, Dr. Eviane Leidig, who shared beers and ideas with me at the beginning of the process and read through the finished product at the end. And finally, a very special thanks to Jørgen Eikvar Axelsen who has guided and helped me throughout the entire process and has read countless drafts.

Sarah Virginia Abel 21.06.2020

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Introduction

“I thought those grapes were ripe, but now I see they are sour”

- *The Fox and the Grapes, Aesop's Fables*

“There is a strong tendency to reconciliation [after the election]. People who opposed a candidate bitterly a few weeks earlier will now feel that, after all, he might be as good a choice as any other” (Lipset et al., 1954, p. 1164).

In a democracy, it is crucial that those who support candidates that do not win elections accept the outcome. A climate of bitter resentment and thoughts of wholesale reform or even rebellion can be detrimental to the degree of active participation in democracy or even the continued functioning of democratic institutions. Finding the factors that amplify or muffle the impact of losing an election on the attitudes of citizens is a worthwhile pursuit.

After American presidential elections, the loser usually congratulates the winner, and the winner commends the loser for a hard-fought campaign. It is considered good political sportsmanship. A prime example of a candidate losing with grace is John McCain in 2008 who opened his concession speech in the following way:

My friends, we have we have come to the end of a long journey. The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly. A little while ago, I had the honor of calling Senator Barack Obama to congratulate him.

(Crowd boos)

Please.

To congratulate him on being elected the next president of the country that we both love. In a contest as long and difficult as this campaign has been, his success alone commands my respect for his ability and perseverance. But that he managed to do so by inspiring the hopes of so many millions of Americans who had once wrongly believed that they

had little at stake or little influence in the election of an American president is something I deeply admire and commend him for achieving (McCain, 2008).

Generally, even losing candidates recognize the real democratic value inherent in accepting the outcome of an election. The booing crowds at the concession speech need to come to terms with the electoral outcome, lest an erosion of democratic institutions and legitimacy should take place. The winners of elections are greatly interested in the allegiance, or at least acceptance of the supporters of their opponent. Obama's acceptance speech in 2008 shows how good sportsmanship is expected and required of both parties:

Senator McCain fought long and hard in this campaign. And he's fought even longer and harder for the country that he loves. He has endured sacrifices for America that most of us cannot begin to imagine. We are better off for the service rendered by this brave and selfless leader.

I congratulate him; I congratulate Governor Palin for all that they've achieved. And I look forward to working with them to renew this nation's promise in the months ahead (Obama, 2008).

In fact, almost all concession and victory speeches in modern American political history contain some version of the statements made by Obama and McCain in the examples above. The winner congratulates the loser on a hard-fought campaign, often saying they should be honored for their service to the country. The victory speeches also usually contain some pledge to work together with the losing side to make the country better. The concession speeches contain congratulations and often compliments to the winner, as well as an insistence that "the American people have spoken" and that we must all accept the outcome.

Lack of legitimacy after the election results are revealed is viewed as detrimental by the candidates. The clearest are perhaps those instances where the winning candidate received fewer votes than their opponent. George W. Bush was seen by many as illegitimate after the 2000 election, because he received fewer votes than Al Gore and because the Supreme Court had to settle the outcome, which was too close to call outright. In the age of social media, lack of legitimacy has been expressed with the hashtag #NotMyPresident on Twitter, used widely against Donald Trump after he won the Electoral College, but lost the popular vote.

In the campaigns for reform of the US electoral system, minority winners have become a symbol of what needs to change. The state of Maine, has for instance, introduced a ranked choice voting system, in part to avoid such outcomes (Moretto, 2014). In modern democracies, a popular majority is a tremendous legitimating factor for an elected representative. Lack of such a majority means lack of legitimacy, not only for the election winner, but also for the system that produced them.

This thesis will distinguish between two possible outcomes of US presidential elections that are hypothesized to affect the feelings among voters for the two candidates. I test the intuition that receiving popular support in the form of a majority of votes is essential for the establishment of legitimacy and consolidation of authority among supporters for the losing candidate. As a majority in the Electoral College is what decides the outcome of the election, the two election types are (1) the winner has won both the popular vote and the Electoral College and (2) the winner has won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote (referred to as “electoral inversion” (Geruso et al., 2019)). The latter outcome has happened only five times in US electoral history, and the first three occurrences were in the 1800’s. This study will cover six elections, including the controversial elections of 2000 (when Bush won over Gore) and 2016 (when Trump beat Clinton).

The overarching research question in this thesis is the following:

How does electoral inversion impact the consolidation phase after American presidential elections?

Specifically, I ask the following set of questions: First, *do voters for the winner differ systematically from voters for the loser in the degree to which they change their feelings about the main candidates for president after an election?*¹

Second, *does this difference between winning voters and losing voters vary systematically depending on whether the winner lost the popular vote?*

¹ This is not the same as asking: do voters for the winner and voters for the loser feel differently about the respective candidates? The answer to that question is fairly obvious. This thesis is about voters *changing* their feelings once they become aware of the election results.

These questions are examined by means of two analyses. The first analysis explores the question of (de-)polarization of opinion following the election. It does this by using as a dependent variable the change in the “feeling gap” between the two candidates from the pre- to the post-election survey. If in the pre-election survey respondent R has given candidate A the score of 75 and candidate B a score of 25, their pre-election feeling gap is $75-25=50$. Should they change their mind in the post-election survey, so that A is given 100 and B is given 0, their post-election feeling-gap is $100-0=100$. The value on the dependent variable for respondent R is then $100-50=50$. This variable ranges from -100 (full depolarization) to 100 (full polarization). I see whether winning voters differ from losing voters in their propensity to depolarize their opinion of the candidates after knowing the election results. I also examine whether this effect varies depending on whether the winner lost the popular vote to another candidate.

The second analysis uses individual changes from the pre-election to the post-election waves of the American National Election Survey on the so-called “feeling thermometer” for each of the two main presidential candidates as the dependent variables. Using separate regression analyses (one for the election winner and one for the loser), it looks at average differences in feeling-change toward the respective candidates between voters for the winner and voters for the loser. It also establishes whether this effect varies depending on whether the winner lost the popular vote to another candidate.

I find that the degree to which you change your mind about the various candidates from the pre- to post-election period depends on whether you supported the winner or the loser. I also find that this effect is dependent on the popular vote-share obtained by the winner. In elections where the winner obtains a majority of the popular vote, those who cast their ballot for the loser tend to depolarize by feeling colder towards their own candidate and warmer towards the election winner. I also show that voters for the loser rate the two candidates closer together after the election, compared to before the election, in cases with no electoral inversion. Those who voted for the winner in such cases tend to feel warmer towards both candidates, and hence display little to no (de-)polarization to the post-election period. I explain these outcomes using the cognitive dissonance model. I argue that in these cases the outcome of the election leads those who voted for the loser to experience discomfort due to the discrepancy between their preferences and “the will of the people”, or otherwise between the idea that their candidate was the best candidate and yet lost the election.

Table 1: Findings summarized

	Voted for winner	Voted for loser
Regular election	Neither polarize nor depolarize	Depolarize
Electoral inversion	Polarize	Neither polarize nor depolarize

By contrast, in cases where the election winner obtained fewer votes than the runner-up (due to electoral inversion), those who voted for the winning candidate tend to polarize their opinion by feeling even warmer towards their own candidate and feeling colder towards the opponent. When it comes to feeling change towards the winning candidate, those who voted for the losing candidate exhibit less movement towards the warm end of the spectrum than they normally would. They also refrain from feeling colder towards their own candidate, which they tend to do under normal circumstances. I argue that these are differences of cognitive dissonance. The voters for the loser do not experience an uncomfortable discrepancy between their choice and the “will of the people” if their candidate won the popular vote. They therefore do not feel the need to adjust to the outcome in the way they would under normal circumstances. The voters for the winner, on the other hand, arguably do feel such an uncomfortable discrepancy. They believe their candidate is a good and legitimate president but are confronted with the fact that most of the ballots did not go to them. Therefore, they exaggerate the strengths of their own candidate and the poor qualities of the opponent. This is manifested in the post-election polarization displayed by such voters.

The context: what characterizes a US presidential election?

What characterizes the political context in which this study takes place? Let us first establish some broad characteristics of US politics. First is the fact that the United States is a very stable polity. It is, in fact, the country where a continuous democracy of some kind has existed the longest². Not since the Civil War (1861-1865) has the polity been seriously challenged with

² Although, note that for most of US history, only white, land-owning men could vote, and it can be argued that democracy in the US was limited. It was not until the 15th amendment was passed in 1870 that black men were

violent means. This is important, as the age of a democracy has been shown to mediate the way election losers deal with defeat (Anderson et al., 2005). In young democracies, losers are more likely to become disenchanted with democracy. Older democracies seem to be more robust, with losers being more accepting of the outcome. Losers consenting to being ruled by a person they did not vote for is an important foundation of political legitimacy.

Secondly, American politics is characterized by a two-party system with only two serious contenders for the presidency and for most congressional seats. This party system follows chiefly from the voting system in the US. The US follows a first-past-the-post procedure, where each district elects a single candidate. As famously established in Maurice Duverger's Law, such a procedure tends towards a two-party system. Third party votes are discouraged in such a system. Voters anticipate that if they do not vote for one of the major parties' candidates, their votes will be wasted (Duverger, 1963). New parties are unlikely to appear and survive in such a system unless there have been large changes in the electorate, whereby they may wedge themselves in-between the voters and an older party (Downs, 1957). This was, for instance, the case in the UK, when the working class was enfranchised and the Labour Party took the place of one of the dominant parties. Third parties and their candidates may however play an important indirect role in two-party systems. They do have blackmailing power if they threaten to split the vote. Anthony Downs gives the following definition of an "influence party":

When one of the parties in a two-party system has drifted away from the extreme nearest it, toward the moderate center, its extremist supporters may form a new party to pull the policies of the old one back toward them (1957, p. 131)

Such third-party interference has happened several times in US presidential elections. A prominent example is Ross Perot's campaign in the 1992 and 1996 elections, where he prevented either major party candidate from getting more than 50% of the popular vote (Clinton, the winner, received 43% in 1992 and 49,2% in 1996). In 2000, Ralph Nader's Green Party influence was arguably decisive for the election outcome. If his voters in Florida had instead voted for Al Gore (being the most likely alternative for these voters), the presidency would have gone to him. Voters take into account whether or not they believe the candidate can actually win and generally avoid candidates that do not have a real chance.

granted suffrage. In 1920 the 19th amendment that granted women the right to vote was passed. In 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed. This act suspended limitations to voting such as literacy tests (Kernell et al., 2016, p.153).

Furthermore, the US is characterized by symmetrical political campaigns and (approximate) resource parity between the two parties. This provides another distinction from multiparty systems where a few large parties may use their abundance of resources to dominate relatively small rivals in election campaigns. On this point, the US constitutes a simple context for study. We may assume that no one party dominates the national conversation in the run-up to the election for instance.

Compared to many other democracies, US elections have a low turnout. Relative to other developed democracies, even highly contested American elections are in the low end of the spectrum (Martinez, 2010). This fact is not mainly due to demographic characteristics of the American population, but rather the particular design of American political institutions which lead voters to believe (rightly) that their individual vote has a very low impact on the policy output. The number of “wasted votes” is very high in the US majoritarian system, compared to proportional representation or single transferable vote systems. A telling fact is that national election turnout is higher in battleground states than in “safe” Democratic or Republican states (ibid.). If you are a Republican in a safe Democratic state, your vote is almost certain to be “wasted”. In addition, there are voter registration laws in many states that intentionally suppress the vote, known as voter suppression (Kernell et al., 2016, p. 453).

In every US presidential election, each of the major parties chooses a single candidate to run. Grassroots members get to influence this decision by electing delegates to each party’s national convention. This happens in two main ways: by caucus or by primary. Caucuses are party meetings open to all members, where an open vote is taken to choose delegates for the national party convention, who in turn choose the party nominee. Primaries are by far the most common way of taking the wishes of ordinary party members into account. These are state-wide elections with secret ballots, where all party members are eligible to vote. Like the caucuses, these elections produce delegates to the national party convention to vote on which candidate should be the party nominee. Some of the delegates at the convention are not chosen by party members by caucus or primary. These so-called superdelegates are prominent party members, appointed to the convention by virtue of their positions as governors, senators and representatives. In contrast to ordinary delegates, superdelegates are not pledged to any single candidate before the convention starts. The Democratic and Republican party use different voting systems for

choosing regular delegates. While the Democrats use a proportional voting system for their primaries and caucuses, the Republicans use a majority winner-take-all voting system.

Once the two candidates are chosen by the parties, they face each other in debates and use their campaigns to compete for votes in the general election. The party identification of the voter is a(n increasingly) strong predictor of which candidate will receive their vote. Many voters use the party affiliation of the candidate as a cognitive shortcut to decide whom to vote for. The democratic ideal is of course that the voter should carefully consider the whole platform of each candidate and choose the candidate that offers the platform that best coincides with his or her interests and ideological orientation. There are very few such voters, however (Lazarsfeld, 2020 [1944]). Most voters are either partisan with a fairly high level of political interest and knowledge, or swing voters with a low level of political interest or knowledge. The parties compete for the least interested voters because these are the ones that are likely to change their minds about the two candidates during the course of an election campaign³.

In *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. point to the relationship between partisan attitude consistency/conflict and how early in the campaign the voter decided on their party choice (Campbell et al., 1980 [1960]). The more consistently Democratic or Republican the voter was on the six relevant dimensions they identify, the earlier they decided whom to vote for. These are also the most “enthusiastic” voters and they care more about the outcome of the election. This is consistent with findings from Lazarsfeld (2020 [1944]). Voters who are interested in the election have a clear predisposition for one of the parties or candidates, and experience few “cross-pressures” decide early on. Uncertain, uninterested and conflicted voters decide late. These latter voters are the ones parties are competing over, because they are more likely to be persuaded.

During the course of an election campaign, the political parties spend considerable effort and resources on mobilizing voters to cast their ballots for their candidate. Studies have found that political polarization increases over the course of the campaign (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017). Iyengar et al. claim, for instance, that “exposure to messages attacking the out-group reinforces partisans’ biased view of their opponents” (2012, p. 405). During the course of an

³ It has been argued that the ignorance of the voter about the platforms of the candidates is rational, as the costs of obtaining this information is relatively high, and the gain – given that a single vote is practically never decisive – is small (Downs, 1957).

election campaign, partisans feel more strongly negative about their opponents. The presence of negative campaigning is especially impactful in this regard. This thesis thus looks at the transition from the high-animosity campaign period to the post-election consolidation phase, a gap identified in the literature below.

American elections are more candidate centered than elections in most other countries. Due to the nature of the electoral system and divisions of power, elections from local and state level, through congressional level to presidential elections give more attention to individual candidates than for instance in parliamentary systems and proportional voting systems. Rather than choosing a party list full of candidates, the American electorate cast their vote for an individual.

The American presidential election is not a direct vote. Rather, each state elects a number of pledged delegates to the Electoral College, which in turn elects the president. An absolute majority in this college (270 out of 538) is required to elect the president. Many have objected to this system, particularly because it provides a chance that a candidate wins the popular vote, but not the presidency. This has happened five times in US history, and only twice since 1888. The reason why a candidate might lose the popular vote, yet win the Electoral College, is not that the delegates stray from the candidate they have pledged to vote for. Rather, the winner-take-all rule used in most states means that whoever receives the most votes in a state, no matter how slight the margin, gains all the electors from that state. Furthermore, votes in sparsely populated states count for more than votes from the most populous states. In the 2000 election this system produced a winner with fewer votes than his rival for the first time since 1888. This provided the critics of the system with a new sense of urgency. This was also the case when Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016. In both instances, the runner up had more popular votes than the election winner.

In a 2019 study, Geruso et al. show that “electoral inversions” (where the winner loses the popular vote) are in fact ex ante rather probable in US presidential elections, at least in close elections. They find that “in elections decided by a percentage point or less (equal to 1,3 million votes by 2016 turnout), the probability of inversion is about 40%. For races decided by two percentage points or less, the probability of inversion is about 30%” (2019, p. 2). In a really close election, then, such as the 2000 election, an inversion is according to these authors “*more likely than not* for a generic Republican and Democrat candidate pair” (ibid). The probability

of an inversion is not symmetric between the parties, but have in different periods favored the different US parties. They write that “in the past 30 years, this has favored Republicans”.

This thesis investigates the possibility that this outcome changes the dynamics of public opinion in the post-election period.

The object of study: What is public opinion, and how well do surveys measure it?

This thesis concerns itself with public opinion. The following section will go through central understandings of the concept, as well as identify relevant key challenges and describe the approach employed in this study. The currently dominant understanding of “public opinion” can be traced back at least to Walter Lippmann’s classic *Public Opinion* (1920). In this model, man’s understanding of his environment is mediated by what Lippmann dubs a “pseudo-environment”. He writes that:

The real environment is altogether too big, too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations ... To traverse the world, men must have maps of the world (1997 [1920], p. 11).

Instead of directly perceiving and understanding the world, we rely on ‘fictions’ – man-made representations of our environment – and the way we act is determined by these fictions (ibid., p. 15-16). Public opinion, then, may be defined at the individual level as “the pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationships” (ibid., p. 18). When these images are “*acted upon by groups of people or by individuals acting in the name of groups*” we may speak of Public Opinion at the group-level, or “with capital letters” as Lippmann phrases it (ibid., p. 18).

As receivers of information, we are not given the full image of the world as it is. Even if we did, says Lippmann, this information is distorted through our preconceptions, preferences and stereotypes. In short, Lippmann is an early proponent of the idea that people are not consistent or rational in the way they perceive and act in the world. The result is that people do not directly acquire facts and understand the world. Public opinion is mostly constructed in our collective imagination. Lippmann’s model seems to describe in precise terms the concept of motivated

reasoning, *avant la lettre*: “For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see” (ibid., p.55). As far as there is a common will and shared stereotypes across the population, these are driven and constructed by the political elites.

A key disagreement concerning the definition of public opinion can be found between Herbert Blumer and Philip Converse. In *Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polls*, Blumer takes to task the notion that public opinion polls in fact measure public opinion (1948). The problem, he claims, is that society is not simply an aggregation of individuals: it has an organization. People operate in groups which, in turn, act through available channels to effect social change. Certain individuals are pivotal in this regard: they make important decisions and their opinions matter a lot. When we poll the opinions of individuals, we do not know their positions in this group structure, and we can therefore not say anything about effective public opinion based on such polls. Blumer describes such polls as a “referendum by an undifferentiated mass having great segments of indifference and non-participation” (ibid.,p. 548). Converse, by contrast, represents the long dominant position. In his conception, public opinion is precisely what opinion polls try to measure (see Converse, 1987). Looking at the history of American public opinion, however, it is clear that there is a gap between the opinions measured in polls and the opinion that becomes effective in the political arena. One prominent example is the “silent majority” in relation to the counter-culture on the issue of the Vietnam War (Kernell et al., 2016). The issue of gun control is another example showing that intensity of opinion matters a lot in terms of effect on politics. Schuman and Presser use intensity of opinion to explain why opponents of gun control prevail in politics despite their smaller number (1981).

John Zaller points out a fundamental challenge for the study of public opinion, namely that survey respondents do not exhibit stable attitudes between surveys:

Public opinion is obviously much more difficult to study if many survey respondents do not stand by what they say in surveys, either because they may be quick to change when leadership changes or do not know what they think until a triggering context occurs. But that may be the nature of public opinion, and if it is, analysts of public opinion need to accommodate it (2012, p. 626).

This thesis deals with this challenge of shifting public opinion explicitly. Here, it is precisely individual changes of opinion that are studied. I explore what structures opinion change in the context of a presidential election. Drawing upon the tradition of Lodge and Taber’s *The*

Rationalizing Voter, this thesis has the following points of departure. First, it concerns unconscious thinking and the influence of such processes on political attitudes and behavior. Second, it understands voters as fundamentally rationalizing, rather than rational in their thinking. Third, it studies affect-driven modes of thinking and reasoning. The thesis will depart markedly from rational choice models a la Anthony Downs (1957). In the words of Lodge and Taber:

When we limit ourselves to equating cognition with conscious awareness and the expression of preferences with the conscious integration of costs and benefits, as is the practice in political behavior research, it proves impossible to understand contemporary social, cognitive, and neuro-psychology, and consequently makes it impossible to understand how, when, and why citizens think, reason, and act as they do (2013, p. 26).

In their model, as in the one employed here, affect is argued to be fundamental to public opinion. Attitudes and cognitions about the political world are driven by unconscious processes. The purpose of the thesis is to map out one such process, namely, adjustments for cognitive dissonance in the context of presidential elections. In the next section I will review the literature this thesis informs and is informed by. I build mainly on two bodies of literature, one that deals with polarization, and one that concerns the psychology of winning and losing in the context of elections.

Literature review

Polarization

This thesis informs the literature on polarization in American politics. This has been the topic for an increasing number of studies over the past few decades. Among political commentators and news outlets there has been a growing concern with increasing polarization between the major parties. The American public, we are told, is more divided than ever (see for example Abramowitz and Webster, 2018; Desilver, 2013). Furthermore, this divide is detrimental to democracy. There is good reason for this concern. In a 2018 article, Jennifer McCoy et al. show that extreme polarization leads to democratic erosion (2018). As the political rival is increasingly viewed with hostility, fear and mistrust, and conflict becomes dominant as an operating procedure compared to cooperation, tolerance of illiberalism as a strategy to combat the advances of the opponent increases.

The classic notion of polarization centers around the idea of ideological distance on specific issues. This is evident for instance in the definition by Sartori:

The term is used first to denote an ideological distance, that is, the overall spread of the *ideological spectrum* of any given polity [...] (1976, p. 126).

In political science this conception of polarization, or very similar ones, were dominant until recently (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Polarization is defined as distinct from ideological unity, or agreement, on the one hand, and fragmentation (where the population is spread evenly across all positions on the spectrum, rather than being centered around the margins) on the other. This conception of polarization does not take into account identity. At the center of the increasingly popular concept of *affective polarization* is the idea of partisanship, defined as a positive and exclusive political identification with a single party. Iyengar and Westwood define affective polarization as:

The tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively (2015, p. 691).

In this definition, specific issues are less relevant and mutual distrust and dislike are believed to exist at least partly independently of positions on particular questions. Affective polarization implies stereotyping of the political other as morally deficient, stupid, irresponsible etc., while the political in-group is thought to exhibit positive qualities such as knowledgeability, empathy, altruism etc.

Both conceptions of polarization are apt to explain reductions in swing voters (those who alternate between elections in terms of party choice), split tickets (voting for different parties for different seats in the same election) and bipartisan collaboration. However, affective polarization can be viewed as a more durable form of voter separation, as it not only describes a situation of ideological distance, but one of direct emotional hostility towards the political rival. Iyengar and Westwood conclude their article by stating that:

Today, the sense of partisan identification is all encompassing and affects behavior in both political and nonpolitical contexts (2015, p. 705).

Iyengar et al. (2019) point to the far-reaching nonpolitical consequences of affective polarization. As affective polarization increases, people are less likely to date, befriend or hire opposing partisans. Democrats and Republicans are for instance also more likely to diverge in their perceptions of the state of the economy in the US.

The purported growth in this political divide is attributed in the literature to changes in the media environment and an increase in so-called partisan sorting. First, scholars have pointed to an increase in partisan news and the possibility for citizens to choose between a wide variety of outlets (Lelkes et al., 2017, p. 5). This media environment is thought to promote more extreme viewpoints, more intense partisanship and more hostility toward the opposing party among the viewing audience. Partisans “self-select into friendly news sources that present stories and editorials with a distinct ideological bent” (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018, p. 217). This is evidenced for instance by the fact that Democrats and Republicans increasingly get their news from different outlets. This separation has an impact on voting behavior as well. Fox News has for instance been shown to boost turnout among Republican voters (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007).

Secondly, there have been claims in the literature that “in the last 50 years, the percentage of sorted partisans, i.e., partisans who identify with the party most closely reflecting their ideology, has steadily increased” (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 134). In other words, the Democrats have become more exclusively comprised of liberals and the Republicans more dominated by conservatives. This is referred to as partisan or ideological sorting in the literature. It has been shown to lead to increased affective polarization, especially when we note that partisan and ideological identity increasingly coincides with other social identities such as race and religion (see for example Mason, 2015). Roccas and Brewer, for instance show that when multiple social identities overlap, tolerance of outgroup members goes down (2002). This sorting is at the macro-level described as a realignment of the American party system, which “transformed the racial, regional, and ideological bases of the two major parties” (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018, p. 123). Part of this realignment was the mass transition of southern Democrats to the Republican party. In addition, ethnic minorities have increasingly preferred the Democratic party over the Republican party. This has also increased the political saliency of divisive sociocultural issues, such as racial (in-)justice (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018).

There has also been some research showing that elections and election campaigns influence the level of affective polarization among the electorate (see Sood and Iyengar, 2016). In the campaign period, parties and candidates increase the salience of partisanship, and give a heightened sense of the disagreement between the parties by use of political advertising. This project gives attention to the post-election period. It looks at how positive feelings toward the voter’s own candidate and negative feelings toward the opposition candidate are affected by the election outcome. It also seeks to discover the impact of electoral inversion on this effect.

Winners, losers and the turning down of hostilities

This thesis follows in the footsteps of a series of studies on cognitive dissonance in the context of elections. It informs, in particular, the research on so-called outcome-based dissonance. In sum, this literature shows that members of the electorate “depolarize after the election, adjusting attitudes toward the candidates in a direction that diminishes feelings of sharp conflict that often characterize preelection orientations” (Joslyn and Cigler, 2001, p.361). In recent years, this strand of the literature has explored the extent to which aspects of the political context determine this post-election conflict reduction.

A foundational contribution to this literature is Cigler and Getter's: *Conflict Reduction in the Post-Election Period: A Test of the Depolarization Thesis* (1977). Studying a single election (1972), they test for the existence of depolarization of public opinion from before to after the election. They look specifically for a "bandwagon" effect for the winner and a "sympathy" effect for the loser, as well as whether or not the respondents rate the two candidates closer together after the election compared to the pre-election survey. A bandwagon effect occurs when voters for the loser increase their support of the winner after the election results become known. A sympathy effect is when voters for the winner feel "warmer" towards the losing candidate after they become aware of the outcome. They find no such patterns in the data, and find that depolarization is not a necessary result of an election. They conclude that the contradictions between their findings and those of previous studies may be due to a change in the political climate – more voter frustration and more radical party elites. Additionally, they focus on social factors such as education and social status to determine which groups are more likely to polarize or be convergence oriented. They find that strong party identifiers are in fact more likely to be convergence oriented. The present work employs some of the same theoretical and methodological elements as Cigler and Getter. Specifically, I look at the psychology of losing an election and compare voters in the pre- and post-survey waves to test my hypotheses.

A second key contribution to this literature is Beasley and Joslyn's widely cited *Cognitive Dissonance and Post-Decision Attitude Change in Six Presidential Elections* (2001). The authors use cognitive dissonance theory to predict changes in attitudes among the electorate in six American elections (1972, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996). Compared to Cigler and Getter, they employ a more sophisticated theoretical scheme, as well as a larger empirical material. They find significant attitude change as a function of voting compared to non-voting (choice-based dissonance), as well as attitude change based on whether their preferred candidate won the election (outcome-based dissonance). Committing to a candidate and seeing your candidate lose the election are both potential sources of dissonance, which voters respond to by adjusting their feelings about the candidates. Once a candidate is definitively chosen, the respondent tends to highlight their candidate's strengths and ignore the strengths of the rival. Outcome-based dissonance is conceptualized as the uncomfortable feeling that follows from the inconsistency "of believing your candidate was the best but also denied victory, or more generally, the inconsistency of the losing voters' preference and that of the electorate" (2001, p. 524). While Beasley and Joslyn do find significant overall effects that fit their theory, they also find variation in their effects across elections. They state that "these differences suggest

that dissonance arousal and reduction may be sensitive to political context” (ibid., p. 533). While this thesis certainly does not factor in all the contextually specific variables that are unique to each election, it seeks to further develop this theory by taking one important contextual variable into account: the presence or absence of electoral inversion.

Another contribution that builds on the findings from Beasley and Joslyn’s article is Eubanks et al.’s study of the 2016 presidential election in *Outcome-Based Dissonance and Morton’s Fork: Evaluative Consequences of Unfavorable Alternatives in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (2020)*. The authors take as their point of departure that the 2016 election was one between two unfavorable alternatives. Using a fairly small sample (n = 247) they show that the reduction of “evaluative spread” (how far apart the candidates are rated) in the post-election period identified by Beasley and Joslyn only occurs for respondents with a favorable view of one candidate and an unfavorable view of the other (those for whom the decision is easy). If voters view both candidates unfavorably, this depolarization does not occur. This thesis will argue that the fact that the winning candidate receives fewer votes than their opponent has the decisive impact on whether, and to what degree, the respondent changes his/her feelings.

Joslyn and Cigler’s earlier article *Group Involvement and Democratic Orientations: Social Capital in the Postelection Context (2001)* similarly looks at individual-level determinants of post-election conflict reduction. They find that the citizens who are most involved in civil society groups are more likely to depolarize “comparative candidate evaluations” after an election (p. 366). These same respondents are also more likely to express increased trust in the government and improvements in their evaluations of democratic efficacy following the election.

Another strand of the literature dealing with the psychology of losing an election concerns “loser’s consent”. This literature may help us understand the implications of this thesis for studies of democratic stability. Specifically, it looks at the winner-loser gap in support for democratic institutions and attitudes towards authorities. A key contribution here is Anderson et al.’s *Losers’ Consent (2005)*. Depending on the institutional design and the age of the democracy in question, elections are shown to have a differential impact on winners and losers in terms of their support for the current system and its institutions. There are also individual differences between the loser’s voters, such as partisan attachment and ideological extremism, which determine their attitudes following defeat. This strand of the literature deals with

instances of legitimacy deficit for the *system* that brought the electoral defeat about. According to Nadeau and Blais:

Winners are likely to be overwhelmingly satisfied with a process through which the party or candidate they voted for gets elected. Loser' support is less obvious. That support requires the recognition of the legitimacy of a procedure that has produced an outcome deemed to be undesirable. In the end, the viability of electoral democracy depends on its ability to secure the support of a substantial proportion of individuals who are displeased with the outcome of an election (1993, p. 553).

A failed consolidation for the winner in the post-election period may entail not only a lack of legitimacy for the specific government over a single period, but decreased support for democracy in its current form and calls for wholesale reform. How defiant or indifferent the losers are is important for democratic legitimacy. Although they lost the election the losers are often a large group, especially in a two-party system. This stability and maintenance of the political system is often dependent on actors' incentives for institutional change (Anderson et al., 2005, p. 7). Thus, in order to maintain institutions and stability the winners must often appease the losers. Although democratic satisfaction and support for system reform are not directly examined empirically in this thesis, it figures in the discussion chapter.

Theory: Attitude change after the election - The cognitive dissonance model

In Aesop's children's fable *The Fox and the Grapes*, the fox scorns what he cannot have. It is, as the title suggests, about a fox attempting to eat some grapes. After repeated failed attempts to reach the tempting grapes, the fox concludes that they are sour and that he did not want them after all. Due to the constraints of the situation, the fox has adapted his preferences. He does so retroactively after realizing that his preference was not obtainable. Jon Elster uses this fable as an illustration of adaptive preference formation as a means of *cognitive dissonance reduction* (1983, p. 123). According to Elster, situations often induce a change in preferences. This chapter suggests a similar adaptive preference formation as the mechanism mediating the association between having one's candidate lose or win the election, and adjusting one's perception of the two main contenders for the presidency from the pre-election to the post-election period.

Cognitive dissonance is a term coined and first examined by Leon Festinger (2001 [1957], p. 1). According to Festinger the individual strives "toward consistency within himself". Cognitive dissonance occurs when this consistency is disrupted. Inconsistency between two cognitive elements (ideas, beliefs, attitudes) causes psychological discomfort and the individual is likely to employ one of several techniques for reducing it. The present study will build on Festinger's first basic hypothesis in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*:

The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance (ibid., p. 3).

When one's various cognitions, beliefs, opinions and knowledge about oneself or one's environment do not fit together, an individual is motivated to change this state of affairs because it is uncomfortable. Festinger compares it to hunger, in the sense that experiencing it implies a motivation to reduce or remedy it. One way of reducing cognitive dissonance, according to Festinger, is to dismiss or adjust one of the beliefs that is responsible for the inconsistency. An example he gives is a smoker who struggles with the inconsistency of the cognitions "smoking is bad for you" versus "I want to smoke". To reduce the dissonance, they might either quit smoking or convince themselves that the risks of smoking are greatly exaggerated or that they

do not apply to them (perhaps because they also live on a healthy diet and jog regularly, or because their grandfather smoked and lived to a ripe old age).

The cognitive dissonance that is experienced by a voter for the losing candidate is between a desire to change the outcome of the election according to their preference and the recognition that they cannot do so. In response, they adapt their preferences by scorning what they cannot have (their candidate in office) and improving their opinion of the situation at hand.

An election campaign is a period of increased political conflict. In the months leading up to the election, differences between the candidates and parties are emphasized, and hostility toward the rival is fostered in order to prevent people from jumping ship and to motivate voters to turn out to vote. In a presidential election in which I voted for the losing candidate, I may adapt my preferences either by stressing the defects of the losing candidate or by cultivating the strengths of the winning candidate (Stricker, 1964). Having spent the weeks in the run-up to the election doing precisely the opposite, the mental exercise described here may be crucial to remedy the discomfort of seeing my candidate (whom I believed to be terrific) lose to his/her rival (whom I believed to be terrible). Being stuck with this outcome I convince myself that my candidate is after all slightly less terrific (sour grapes) and that the rival is slightly less terrible (sweet lemons).

This thesis thus looks at discrepancies between undeniable events (election results) and prior beliefs (the candidate I support is the best candidate, and a lot better than the rival) leading to psychological tension and subsequent adjustment (there is not so much difference between the two candidates after all). This is referred to as “outcome-based dissonance” (see Beasley and Joslyn, 2001). Dissonance reduction may happen if the individual in question changes one of the cognitive elements that produced it. As knowledge of the outcome of the election is an element less amenable to change than an individual’s evaluation of the candidates, we may expect changes to the latter. Conversely, having your preferred candidate win the election is expected to produce an amplification of the initial evaluations. Winning voters should exhibit no reduction in support (or “warm feelings”) toward their preferred candidate. In the words of George Stricker:

Following election day, and the confirmation or repudiation of the judgement of the Ss [sic], divergent reactions should occur in the supporters of the two candidates.

Supporters of the winning candidate, having been granted social support for their judgement, should persist in their original attitudes, and, if change occurs, this should be in the direction of additional emphasis on already held views. Supporters of the losing candidate, having been denied social support, have recourse only to changing their opinion if they are to achieve consonance. This implies that the former group will see the candidates in the same relationship as previously, while the latter group will see the two men as increasingly similar (1964, pp. 111-112).

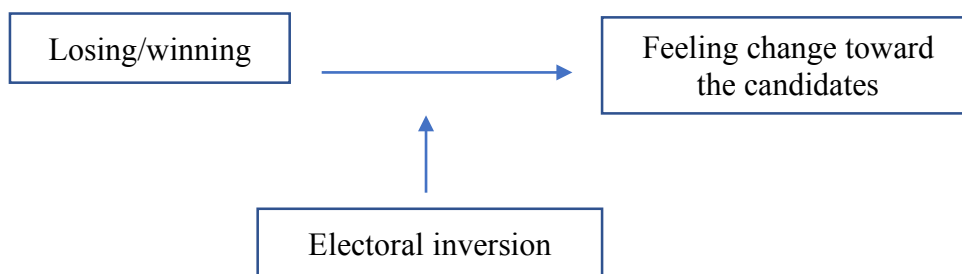
A widely discussed phenomenon in American politics is the existence of a consolidation phase after an election; a period of conflict reduction thought to be crucial for regime support and subsequent efficiency of decision making (Cigler and Getter, 1977). Such a phase is, for instance, evidenced by the extensively described “bandwagon effect” in post-election surveys, where votes to the winning candidate are significantly over-reported after elections. The reason for such an effect is that weak party identifiers change their preferences after the election according to who actually won. Their recall of the vote cast is then adjusted to fit the new preference (Weir, 1975). In the pre-election period, a voter’s opposition against a candidate they do not support is minimized as soon as the results are known. This same psychological adjustment can be observed in the greater likelihood to view the two candidates as similar among those who supported the losing candidate compared to those who supported the winner (Beasley and Joslyn, 2001). All these findings are theorized as instances of cognitive dissonance reduction. One interpretation is that voters seek to reduce the inconsistency (dissonance) between the ideas that their candidate was the best and that their candidate lost (*ibid.*, p. 524). As the question of who actually won the election is usually not up for discussion, it is the assessment of the respective candidates that is most likely to be adjusted. Saying that there is not much difference between the candidates after all is one such way of reducing this uncomfortable discrepancy.

This thesis contends that the effect of losing the election on assessment of the candidates interacts significantly with electoral inversion. In a situation where the election winner receives fewer votes than their opponent, the situation is arguably different. The voter for the loser should not experience the same level of cognitive dissonance. The people did not speak clearly against their candidate, so they should not feel the urge to lower their opinion of the politician. When the losing candidate is legitimized by a popular vote majority, a feeling of deprivation or bitter resentment, rather than adaptive preferences, is likely to result.

In this thesis I employ the concept of polarization. In particular, I study the impact of elections and electoral outcomes on this much-discussed phenomenon. I do not use the traditional conceptualization of polarization. According to the classic definition, a polity is polarized if most of its members are on the extreme ideological fringe, and few members are in the moderate middle. This is not what is meant by polarization in our context. Rather, I draw on conceptualizations of polarization from the social identity perspective (see e.g. Iyengar et al., 2012). Here, polarization may be studied at the individual level as positive feelings toward the political in-group and negative feelings toward the political out-group. An individual who increasingly believes their own party to be terrific and the opposing party to be terrible can be said to engage in “affective polarization” (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Affective polarization is focused on mutual dislike and distrust, rather than diverging positions on issues. Conversely, depolarization occurs when individuals refrain from idealizing their party or co-partisans. It also occurs when individuals refrain from demonizing the opposing party. A certain degree of such polarization can be viewed as necessary during an election campaign in order to motivate voters to turn out. On the other hand, a certain degree of depolarization can be viewed as crucial during the post-election period to consolidate the authority of the new incumbent.

I hypothesize that the presence of electoral inversion impacts the prevalence of the respective reactions. The following causal model is indicated:

Figure 1: Causal model



The first three hypotheses concern the degree to which various voter groups change their minds about their own candidate:

H1: In cases of no electoral inversion, voters for the loser feel colder towards their own candidate in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey.

H2: In cases of electoral inversion, voters for the loser do not feel colder towards their own candidate in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey.

H3: Voters for the winner do not feel colder toward their own candidate regardless of the popular vote share obtained by their candidate.

The next two hypotheses concern the degree to which voters for the loser change their minds about the election winner

H4: In cases of no electoral inversion, voters for the loser feel warmer towards the election winner in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey.

H5: In cases of electoral inversion, voters for the loser do not feel warmer towards the election winner in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey.

The final two hypotheses concern the degree to which various voter groups depolarize their opinions of the two candidates (rate them closer together on the feeling thermometer in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey)

H6: In cases of no electoral inversion, voters for the loser depolarize, while voters for the winner do not.

H7: In cases of electoral inversion, neither group depolarizes.

This thesis uses two different measures of feeling change from the pre- to the post-election period to test these hypotheses. The next section describes the foundations of the two analyses in detail.

Research design and data

This project uses a quantitative, correlational logic of causal inference. It follows the model of the experimental paradigm. The goal of such a design is to estimate the difference on the dependent variable for each individual in the presence of the treatment condition (independent variable) compared to in the control condition (absence of the independent variable). As such an estimate is impossible to observe directly (at least in our context), it is approximated as an average across a larger population (Mahoney and Goertz, 2006). In this case, the key counterfactuals are (1) what would be the degree of depolarization had the respondent voted for the winning candidate compared to the losing candidate? And (2) what would be the impact of voting for the loser on the outcome variables had the vote share been different? This can be estimated by comparing averages across segments of the population, divided according to the variables of interest.

The project is advantaged by the fact that each election survey contains a pre- election and a post-election round. I measure not the differences in averages between two populations (one before and one after the election) assumed to be equivalent, but rather movement on the variable of interest for each individual. This makes the design more similar to an experimental pre-test/post-test design than many non-panel time series studies. I combine surveys from multiple elections and analyze them using one OLS regression per analysis (so-called pooled analysis).

It is important to note that the thesis makes certain leaps of inference when it claims causality in the relationships it describes between variables. While the section that deals with the findings of the thesis attempts to isolate the effects of the key independent variables on the outcome, I cannot arguably make any credible claim of causality unless by reference to the mechanisms linking the two variables. Glennan, for instance, argues that mechanisms let us distinguish causal connections from “accidental conjunctions” (1996, p. 64). These mechanisms were established in the theory section above and will be further discussed and described in the discussion chapter.

Coverage and rationale

The thesis covers the elections of 1980, 1988, 1992, 2000, 2008 and 2016. None of these elections produced a re-elected winner. Table 2 below covers some basic information on the respective elections:

Table 2: Elections covered

Election	Winner	Popular vote margin
1980	Reagan (R)	9,74 %
1988	Bush Sr.(R)	7,72 %
1992	Clinton (D)	5,56 %
2000	Bush Jr.(R)	-0,51 %
2008	Obama (D)	7,27 %
2016	Trump (R)	-2,09 %

Source: (Leip - US Election Atlas)

This selection of elections covers a span of thirty-six years and contains winners from both major parties. It also includes both instances of winners with a negative popular vote margin since the inception of the American National Election Survey. This allows for results that are as robust as possible given the data available and history of US elections.

In this project, the decision to include and exclude elections from the study are based on several criteria: 1) The election must be in the ANES database; 2) The ANES data must include the feeling thermometer in both the pre- and post-election survey for both major candidates, as well as the independent and control variables; 3) The election must be one where the winner is a first-time winner. Not many elections fulfill these criteria.

ANES was introduced as a pilot project in 1948. Since then, there have been eighteen presidential elections (see Table 3). The feeling thermometer was introduced in 1964, which leaves fourteen elections. It was not until 1972, however, that the feeling thermometer was conducted in both the pre- and post-election surveys (in 1976 it was only conducted in the post-election survey), leaving eleven elections. Given that the last criterion is that the winner must

be a first-time winner, we are left with six eligible elections, all of which are included in the present study:

Table 3: Criteria for inclusion

Year	Winner	All variables included	Winner was first-time president
1948	Truman	No	No
1952	Eisenhower	No	Yes
1956	Eisenhower	No	No
1960	Kennedy	No	Yes
1964	Johnson	No	No
1968	Nixon	No	Yes
1972	Nixon	Yes	No
1976	Carter	No	Yes
1980	Reagan	Yes	Yes
1984	Reagan	Yes	No
1988	G.H.W. Bush	Yes	Yes
1992	B. Clinton	Yes	Yes
1996	B. Clinton	Yes	No
2000	G.W. Bush	Yes	Yes
2004	G.W. Bush	Yes	No
2008	Obama	Yes	Yes
2012	Obama	Yes	No
2016	Trump	Yes	Yes

This study is interested in electoral inversion and both modern cases of electoral inversion produced first-term winners. To find elections that are comparable with these I include only elections where the winner goes on to serve their first term. I chose not to include reelections because the consolidation phase for a reelected president is arguably different to that of a first-time president. Two elections, 1980 and 1992, were incumbency elections where the incumbent president lost. The focus of the thesis is on the winner's consolidation period after the election. Including elections where the incumbent loses arguably does not skew the results of the study

in the same way, and excluding two out of six possible elections would have limited the robustness of the study.

Data

The main source of data is the American National Election Surveys (ANES). These surveys have been administered in connection with every American presidential election since 1948, as described above. Additionally, studies for midterm elections, occasional panel studies and surveys focusing on special topics (e.g. direct democracy, evaluations of government and society, Super Tuesday etc.) have been administered by the same organization since the 1960s. The surveys use samples that are representative of the American population of voting-age citizens. Topics covered include background variables (i.e. gender, education, income etc.), assessments about various groups, persons and public life in American politics and society, political identity (party, ideology, etc.), voting for public offices, campaign participation and impact of the campaign, and opinions on issues. In 1964, it first employed the “feeling thermometer,” a scale of 0-100 to measure how respondents feel about various groups, persons and institutions, which has been used by national election surveys all over the world and which is central to this thesis. The most common designs of these studies use cross-section, equal probability samples. The ANES has been used in several of the most famous and impactful studies in the field of political science, of which, the most famous and widely cited is Campbell et al.’s *The American Voter* (1960).

Limitations of reliability and validity

A limitation for the findings in this thesis concerns measurement validity, which is “when scores (...) meaningfully capture the ideas contained in the corresponding concept” (Adcock and Collier, 2001, p. 530). This challenge pertains particularly to the feeling thermometer which forms the basis of the study’s dependent variables. Asking people to put a single number (score) on their possibly complex feeling about a political figure (concept) might result in poor measurement validity. Capturing this concept in all its complexity might be better achieved, for instance, by conducting in depth interviews. Such an approach would, however, be much more limited in scope and external validity. The current study analyzes responses from thousands of respondents across six elections and thirty-six years. Although the approach here is limited in terms of measurement validity compared to qualitative “thick” data approaches, it is rather fine

grained and precise compared to other survey items that are often used in social science research. Alwin, for instance shows that the feeling thermometer, compared to a 5- or 7-point scale, offers more information and more precise measurements. He also rejects the notion that such scales are more “vulnerable to systematic measurement errors” (1997, p. 318). Compared to a survey question with few categories, the feeling thermometer gives the respondent the possibility to show their feelings with more nuance. It takes into account more incremental change that could be obscured in a scale with fewer categories. For example, the values 0 and 10 on the feeling thermometer would perhaps both be assigned to the category “strongly dislike” on a 5-point scale.

A second challenge to the validity of the thesis concerns contextual specificity. The United States is a big and diverse country and the time scope under study is fairly large. Individuals within this context might give identical answers to identical questions that have different meanings (see Adcock and Collier, 2001, p. 534). This is a problem for all survey research when attempts are made to generalize to a large and diverse population of cases. The questions used in the analyses are not fatally exposed to this vulnerability. I assume that questions such as “How would you rate candidate X on a scale from 0 to 100” and “Whom did you vote for in the Presidential election” are without heavy cultural connotations and that they do not vary much in meaning across contexts.

A potential source of bias for the analysis presented here is the over reporting of votes for the election winner. As Weir points out, some voters for the loser will claim that they in fact voted for the winner (1975). This is problematic because these voters who misreport who they voted for in the election are presumed to experience high levels of cognitive dissonance. There is no way to remove this bias. It would tend to skew the results towards a type II error, keeping a false null hypothesis. Some people with high levels of cognitive dissonance would be removed from the group that are coded as having voted for the loser. This means that the cognitive dissonance effects for that group are diminished. In the group that is coded as having voted for the winner some respondents who feel more negatively about the losing candidate and more positively about the winner are added. This would make it more likely to find no effect where there actually is one. I assume that there are few enough of these individuals not to produce results that are completely misleading.

A limitation of analysis 2 is that the residuals deviate somewhat from a normal distribution. This fact does not impact the size or direction of the coefficients. It does, however, violate one of the assumptions of OLS regression which means that we can be less confident that the p-values are correct. Analysis 1, however, has an almost perfectly normal distribution of residuals (see appendix). Taken together, then, analysis 1 and 2 can still provide good information about the topic at hand. I solved the problem of heteroscedasticity, which was present in all regressions, by employing robust standard errors. I found no evidence of multi-collinearity in any of the regressions.

Measurements

Analysis 1

A direct measure of depolarization in the post-election period is the difference between the two candidates in the mind of the individual voter. This measurement has been used in previous studies on the topic (see for example Beasley and Joslyn, 2001). If a respondent considers the two candidates to be more similar on the respective feeling thermometers after the election compared to before the election, they have depolarized their opinion. For this first analysis, I thus created such a measure based on the feeling thermometers for each candidate in the pre- and post-election surveys. This is the dependent variable in the analysis. If R has a positive value it means that they rate the candidates further apart in the post-condition compared to the pre-condition (they have polarized). If they have a negative value it means that they have depolarized and rate the candidates closer together after the election. This variable does not show the direction of feeling change toward each candidate, and so is well complimented by the measure in analysis 2.

Example A: If, in the 2016 election, R rates Donald Trump 100 and Hillary Clinton 0 before the election and gives each of them 50 after the election, R has the highest possible score for depolarization. The steps to calculate this are (1) pre-election difference: $100-0=100$, (2) post-election difference: $50-50=0$ (3) depolarization score: $0-100=-100$.

Example B: If the opposite is the case, i.e. R gives them each a score of 50 before the election and in the post-election survey gives Trump a score of 100 and Hillary a score of 0, R has the highest possible score for polarization. The steps to calculate this are (1) pre-election difference:

50-50=0, (2) post-election difference: 100-0=100, (3) (de)polarization score: 100-0=100. The theoretical range of the variable for a given observation is then -100 (maximum depolarization) to 100 (maximum polarization). In contrast to the dependent variable in analysis 2, this variable does not show in which direction R adjusts their feelings. All it measures is whether they rate them closer together or further apart after the election compared to before the election.

The first key independent variable is a dichotomous variable which takes the value 0 if the respondent voted for the winning candidate and 1 if they voted for the main losing candidate. Votes for third party candidates are coded as missing.

The second key independent variable is electoral inversion: a dichotomous variable showing whether the survey is taken for an election that produced a winner with a positive vote margin (coded 0) or a winner who lost the popular vote (coded 1).

Expectation: The literature on cognitive dissonance emphasizes the role of expectations. If your expectation about who will win an election is violated, this could be a source of dissonance. Expectations also correlate with support for a given candidate (i.e. people are more likely to believe their own candidate will win the election). This means the voters for the losing candidate are more likely to have their expectation about the outcome broken. A possible objection to any positive result on the association between vote and (de)polarization in the post-election period is that it is an artifact of the respondent having their expectations violated. This possibility should be controlled for. I have created a variable with value 1 if R had their expectations confirmed and 0 if their predictions about the election outcome were wrong.

Pre-election difference between the candidates: To control for regression toward the mean. If R reports an extreme difference between the two candidates in the pre-election survey, they are more likely to moderate in the post-election survey. They might also be less likely to correctly predict the outcome

Strength of party identity: A second control variable is strength of partisanship. Partisanship correlates strongly with vote-choice. In many ways, an election is all about turning out and persuading weak partisans and independents. Weak partisans and independents are also more likely than strong partisans to change their opinion of the candidate based on the outcome and the dissonance that follows from having supported the losing candidate. Strongly partisan voters

might then be less likely to pick a winner and less likely to change their mind about the two candidates. It may therefore be a confounder that should be controlled for. I construct a variable taking on the value 1 if R claims to be a strong partisan and 0 if they claim to be a weak partisan or independent.

Analysis 2

For the second analysis the dependent variables are measures of the extent to which the respondent (R) has changed their feelings toward the winning and losing candidates respectively. The variable is constructed by subtracting R's feeling toward the given candidate in the pre-election survey from that in the post-election survey. If R gives Trump a score of 100 in the pre-election survey and 50 in the post-election survey, the variable measuring feeling-change toward the winning candidate will take on the value $50-100 = -50$. The variable has a theoretical range from -100 (indicating a change from 100 to 0) to 100 (indicating a change from 0 to 100). This variable shows both direction and extent of feeling change toward the given candidate.

In addition to the key independent variables, whether or not R voted for the winner and whether the winner lost the popular vote, a set of control variables are introduced. I keep two of the same control variables as in analysis 1, namely expectations and strength of partisanship. They are believed to affect the relationship between independent and dependent variables in a similar way in this analysis. The design shows the difference between voters in the two conditions (having voted for a winner versus having voted for a loser) and whether these differences depend on the electoral context (election types).

Results

Analysis 1

In the first analysis, a measure of depolarization is employed as the dependent variable. The dependent variable in this case measures whether the discrepancy between the respondent's feelings about the respective candidates (feeling thermometer for candidate A minus feeling thermometer for candidate B) becomes larger or smaller from the pre- to the post-election survey. The analysis gives the output displayed in Table 4:

Table 4: Regression table analysis 1

```
Linear regression                Number of obs   =    7,084
                                F(6, 7077)     =    326.23
                                Prob > F           =    0.0000
                                R-squared         =    0.2441
                                Root MSE      =    20.699
```

	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
evalspread						
1.votedforloser	-9.099776	.7514397	-12.11	0.000	-10.57282	-7.626729
1.eleccollegeint	9.421938	.6812954	13.83	0.000	8.086395	10.75748
votedforloser#eleccollegeint						
1 1	3.305268	1.022393	3.23	0.001	1.301072	5.309464
candidatediffpre	-.4071967	.0097637	-41.71	0.000	-.4263365	-.3880568
expectations	-.2716322	.6441009	-0.42	0.673	-1.534263	.9909983
partisanstrong	4.492942	.5486803	8.19	0.000	3.417364	5.568519
_cons	16.37613	.7780703	21.05	0.000	14.85088	17.90138

In this analysis, negative values on the dependent variable indicate individual depolarization and positive numbers indicate polarization. We can see from the regression table that there is a significant and large effect of having voted for the losing candidate. This indicates that voters for the loser polarize less, or depolarize more, than voters for the winner. We also see significant interaction effects between the election winner losing the popular election and whether the respondent voted for the loser. The effect of voting on depolarization depends on the electoral context. This becomes clear when we examine the predicted margins displayed in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Evaluative spread



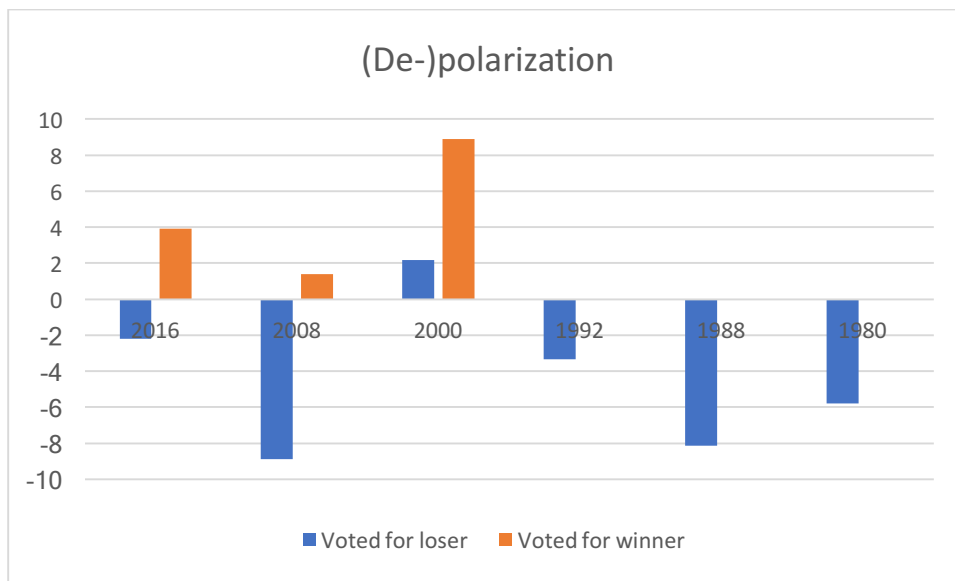
Here, we see that in cases where the election winner also won the popular vote, the voters for the losing candidate tend to depolarize by giving the two candidates more similar scores on the feeling thermometer after the election. The voters for the winner, by contrast, neither polarize nor depolarize in such cases (the 95% confidence interval for the predicted value contains 0). In cases where the election winner loses the popular vote, the voters for the winner tend to polarize their opinions after knowing the outcome of the election. In these cases, the voters for the loser neither polarize nor depolarize. These results indicate that election winners receiving more popular support than any other candidate is conducive to depolarized opinions among voters for the losing candidate. Furthermore, a lack of such popular support for the winner leads to polarization of opinion for supporters of the election winner. The experience of cognitive dissonance is clearly sensitive to the electoral context.

Table 5 reports the predicted values on the dependent variable for those who voted for the winner and those who supported the loser in each year:

Table 5: Predicted values per year⁴

(De-) polarization						
Prediction/year	2016	2008	2000	1992	1988	1980
Voted for loser	-2,21*	-8,87*	2,17*	-3,35*	-8,13*	-5,77*
Voted for winner	3,93*	1,41*	8,88*	-0,29	-1,37	1,97

Figure 3: Graph predicted values per year



We see that among voters for the loser, the years they depolarized least/polarized most were the electoral inversion years. Voters for the winner also significantly polarize their views of the candidates in those same years. In fact, apart from the 2008 election, there is no significant average (de-) polarization among voters for the winner in regular elections.

Analysis 2⁵

Based on a cumulative dataset containing pre- and post-election waves in the surveys from 1980, 1988, 1992, 2000, 2008 and 2016, I ran a regression with the variables described in the research design and data chapter. First, I examined adjustments of the respondent's feeling toward the *winner* from the pre- to the post-election survey. Table 6 shows the output of that regression:

⁴ Asterisk in table 5 indicate that the predicted value is significantly different from 0 at the 0,05 level.

⁵ Please note that the residuals for this analysis do not have a perfectly normal distribution. The significance levels of the coefficients should therefore be interpreted with some caution (see appendix).

Table 6: Regression table feeling change winner

Linear regression

Number of obs	=	7,125
F(5, 7119)	=	20.54
Prob > F	=	0.0000
R-squared	=	0.0180
Root MSE	=	17.745

winnerfeelingchange	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
1.votedforloser	-2.623284	.7104309	-3.69	0.000	-4.01594	-1.230628
1.eleccollegeint	.1388444	.517369	0.27	0.788	-.8753527	1.153041
votedforloser#eleccollegeint 1 1	-4.262137	.905487	-4.71	0.000	-6.037161	-2.487114
expectations	-5.180679	.6018699	-8.61	0.000	-6.360523	-4.000836
partisanstrong	.4030243	.4233433	0.95	0.341	-.4268544	1.232903
_cons	8.830745	.6369201	13.86	0.000	7.582192	10.0793

A few observations can be made from the results in Table 6. First, there is a clear and statistically significant overall difference between voters for the winner and voters for the loser when it comes to how much they adjust their feelings toward the winning candidate. The table shows that when all variables are set to 0 (R voted for winner, there was no electoral inversion, R was a weak partisan/independent and R did have their expectations about the outcome broken), the predicted feeling change is 8,8. If we set the value of “votedforloser” to 1 (the respondent voted for the losing candidate), the prediction drops by 2,6 points. In other words, voters for the winner and voters for the loser generally increase their support for the winning candidate after the election, but voters for the loser do so less.

The model also gives us a significant interaction term. This indicates that the difference between winning and losing when it comes to feeling change toward the winner is moderated by whether the winner has a vote-margin below 0 (fewer votes than their opponent). This result becomes a bit clearer if we look at the predicted margins of the model in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Feeling change toward winner



As is apparent from the graph, both election types produce positive feeling change toward the winning candidate, both among voters for the loser and voters for the winner. If the President Elect also won more votes among the public than their opponent, the voters for the winner are indistinguishable from the voters for the loser in this regard. The confidence intervals overlap, which means we cannot conclude that the two voter groups react differently to the outcome when it comes to their feelings toward the winning candidate. When the election winner loses the popular vote, however, there is a clear gap between voters for the winner and voters for the loser. Voters for the winner feel on average 5,3 points warmer toward the winning candidate after the election. Voters for the loser feel only 1,8 points warmer. This supports the theory that having the backing of a popular majority really does impact the consolidation phase after the election. Voters for the loser are less prone to fall in line behind the new President if the candidate won the election but not the popular vote.

Here, it is evident that the impact of the election outcome on one's feelings toward the winning candidate depends on electoral context. Voters for the winner and the loser, who in most elections are indistinguishable in terms of their predicted values on the dependent variable, diverge significantly in cases of electoral inversion.

For a more detailed account of how the model looks for each election, Table 7 shows the coefficients for each year:

Table 7: Analysis 2 per year feeling change winner

Feeling change toward winner ⁶						
Coefficient/year	2016	2008	2000	1992	1988	1980
Voted for loser	-6,73*	-1,80	-10,38*	-2,92	2,39	-3,44*
Expectations broken	-6,94*	3,73*	-5,60*	-3,26	0,60	-6,98*
Strong partisan	0,90	-0,88	0,63	-1,34	1,33	-1,41
Constant	10,54*	11,17*	8,03*	9,83*	-2,06	9,26*

Here, the largest differences between winners and losers are in the electoral inversion years (2016 and 2000). In fact, apart from 1980, all the regular elections produce non-significant coefficients for having voted for the loser. This means that in those years, winners and losers react in the same way on average in terms of their feelings toward the winning candidate.

Next, I run the same model with a new independent variable, i.e. feeling change toward the losing candidate. The following output was produced (Table 8):

⁶ Each coefficient that is significant at at least the 0,05-level has been marked with an asterisk.

Table 8: Regression table feeling change loser

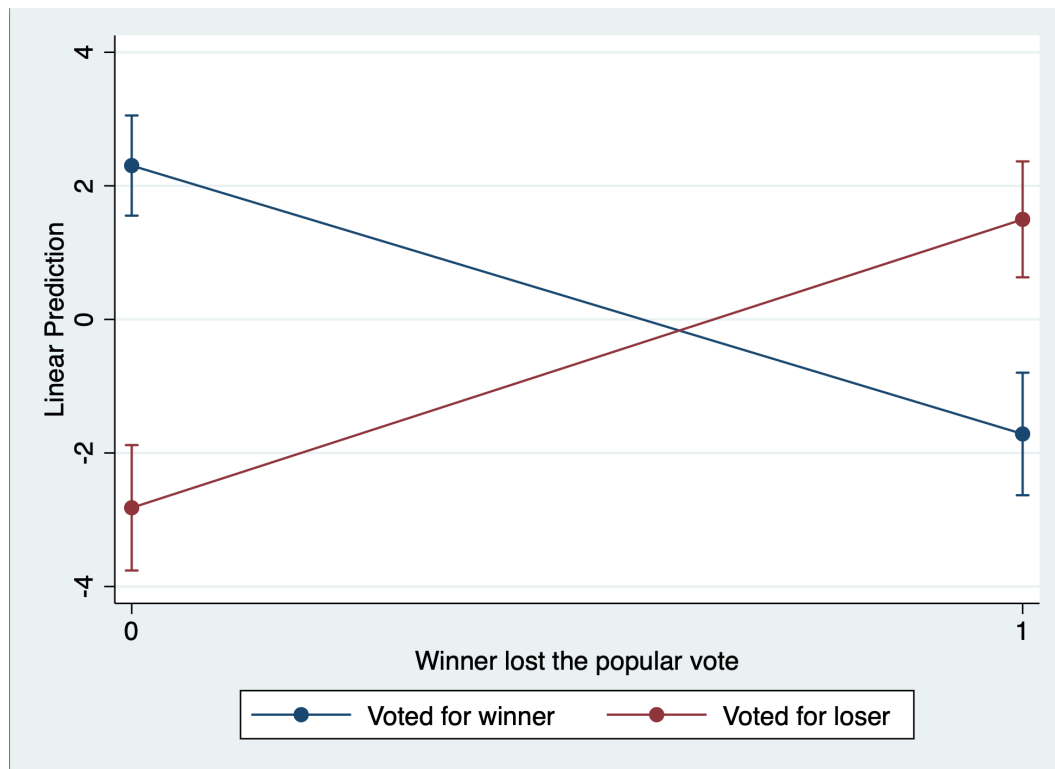
Linear regression

Number of obs	=	7,127
F(5, 7121)	=	30.07
Prob > F	=	0.0000
R-squared	=	0.0216
Root MSE	=	18.485

loserfeelingchange	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
1.votedforloser	-3.116203	.6941231	-4.49	0.000	-4.476891	-1.755516
1.eleccollegeint	-3.509272	.6148198	-5.71	0.000	-4.714501	-2.304042
votedforloser#eleccollegeint 1 1	8.932967	.8676967	10.30	0.000	7.232024	10.63391
expectations	4.144451	.5822131	7.12	0.000	3.00314	5.285762
partisanstrong	1.169125	.4444862	2.63	0.009	.2978001	2.04045
_cons	-1.741914	.6905247	-2.52	0.012	-3.095548	-.3882805

In this model, all the independent variables are significant at the 0,05 level. First, we see a significant negative effect of voting for the losing candidate on the degree to which one changes one's mind about the losing candidate from the pre- to the post-election survey. We also see that this difference between voters for the winner and voters for the loser depends on the electoral context, with a fairly large positive interaction effect. This is again much clearer when we look at the predicted margins for the model in Figure 5:

Figure 5: Feeling change toward loser



In this case, voters for the winner are clearly distinguishable from voters for the loser in terms of predicted values on the dependent variable, both when the elected candidate loses the popular election and when they do not. In elections where the winner has a larger share of the popular vote than the runner-up, the voters for the winner view the losing candidate more positively after the election than they did before with an average feeling-change score of 2,3. The voters for the loser view the losing candidate more negatively in elections with an unambiguous victor, with an average score of -2,8. This means that these voters moved on average 2,8 points closer to 0 on the scale from 0 to 100. In cases where the winner lost the popular vote, the predictions go in the opposite direction compared to unambiguous victories. The voters for the loser feel warmer toward their own candidate after knowing the outcome of the election, while voters for the winner feel colder toward the losing candidate.

Again, I run the regression model for each year and display the coefficients in Table 9.

Table 9: Analysis 2 per year feeling change loser

Feeling change toward loser						
Coefficient/year	2016	2008	2000	1992	1988	1980
Voted for loser	3,09*	-4,35*	11,79*	-1,68	-3,17*	1,87
Expectations broken	3,06*	3,63*	6,61*	2,82	9,44*	4,16*
Strong partisan	0,29	1,80	-0,38	-1,26	2,11	3,73*
Constant	-1,57	0,87	-12,17*	2,86	-10,20*	-5,68*

Here again, the electoral inversion years stand out. Those who voted for the losing candidate in 2016 and 2000 have less negative movement/more positive movement towards the losing candidate compared to those who voted for the election winners. In the other years, the coefficients are either insignificant (1992 and 1980), thus indicating no difference between those who voted for the winner and those who supported the loser, or negative (2008 and 1988), indicating that those who voted for the loser exhibit more negative movement/less positive movement towards the losing candidate compared to those who voted for the winner.

To see how the regression results bear on the theoretical expectations presented above, Table 10 displays the predicted margins from the cumulative model of each type of voter (winner/loser) in each type of election⁷. This is further visualized in Figures 6 and 7.

Table 10: Predicted margins analysis 2

	Winner also won popular vote	Winner did not win popular vote
Voted for winner	Feeling-change winner: 4,52 Feeling-change loser: 2,30	Feeling-change winner: 5,34 Feeling-change loser: -1,71
Voted for loser	Feeling-change winner: 4,38 Feeling-change loser: -2,82	Feeling-change winner: 1,80 Feeling-change loser: 1,50

⁷ All predictions reported in table 10 are significantly different from 0 at 0,05-level

Figure 6: feeling change without electoral inversion

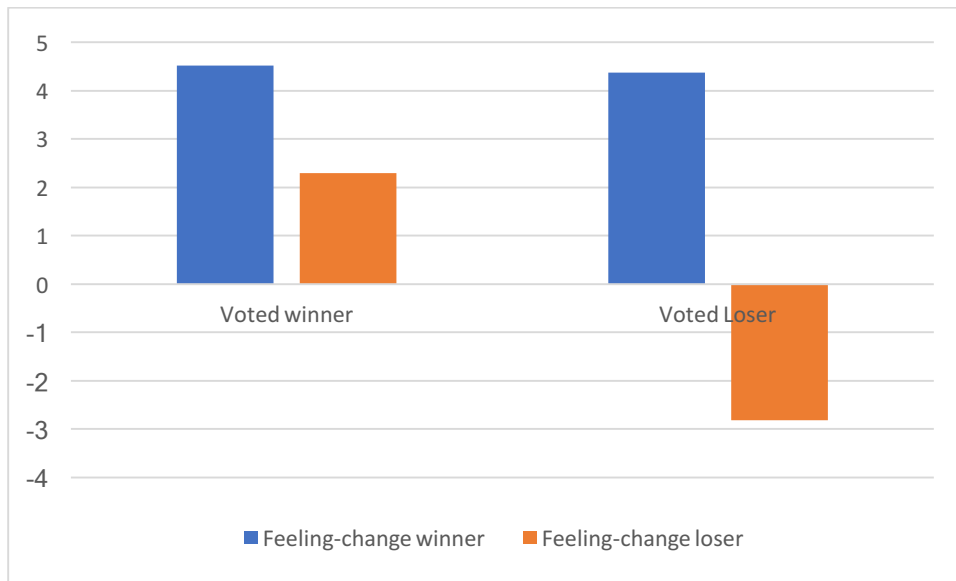
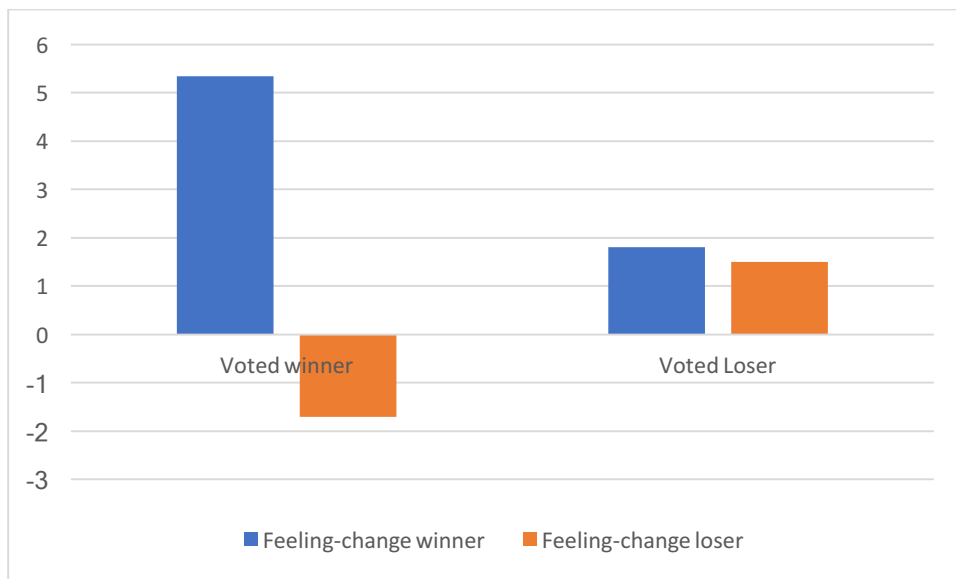


Figure 7: feeling change with electoral inversion



Now we may say something about whether and how the two voter groups react differently to the outcome of an election, and the degree to which this reaction is moderated by whether the winner received more votes than the loser. First, I find that in elections with an unambiguous victory those who voted for the loser react in accordance with the depolarization thesis: they adjust to the outcome by feeling colder toward their own candidate and warmer toward the winner. The voters for the winner feel warmer toward both candidates after the election compared to before. Such cases show both a bandwagon-effect (voters for the loser feeling

warmer about the election winner) *and* a sympathy effect (voters for the winner feeling warmer about the losing candidate). The bandwagon effect is present across both election types. In each case, the winner boosts his support among both his own voters and among voters for the opposition once the outcome becomes known to the electorate. This effect is weaker, however, in cases where the election winner lost the popular vote.

In cases of electoral inversion, the voters for the winner tend to feel more positive about their chosen candidate and more negative about the opponent in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey. In other words, the sympathy effect disappears if an election winner loses the popular election. This might be indicative of some cognitive dissonance on the part of the voters for the winner, who need to convince themselves that their candidate is the best and most legitimate candidate even if they do not have the backing of a popular majority. These contradictory feelings are resolved by emphasizing the poor qualities of the opponent and playing up the good qualities of the election winner. The voters for the loser do not adjust to the election outcome in the same way as they do in cases of clear victory. Since the candidate they chose does have the backing of a popular majority, even though they did not become president, the cognitive dissonance and discomfort of having supported the least popular candidate is not present. Therefore, they do not feel any colder toward the runner-up.

Comparing the coefficients and predictions for each year, some general trends emerge. First, the 2000 and 2016 elections stand out from the rest in every analysis, but the 2000 election stands out most. This was for instance the only year where the average voter for the loser polarized their opinions by rating the two candidates further apart on the feeling thermometer after, compared to before the election. There are several possible reasons for this. First, the 2000 election was a closer call than the 2016 election. In fact, the Supreme Court had to adjudicate the outcome because it was too close to call outright. This may have damaged the ability of the newly elected president to garner acceptance among his opponents beyond the fact that he lost the popular vote. Second, 2000 was the first instance of electoral inversion since 1888. This arguably added to the impact of the outcome. The 2016 voters, by contrast, had a recent precedent which may somehow have normalized the election outcome.

Discussion

Clearly, whether you support a winner has an impact on how you adjust to the election outcome. In regular elections, voters for the loser depolarize their views after knowing the outcome by feeling colder toward their own candidate and warmer toward the election winner (as was shown in analysis 2). This is in line with previous research on the topic. In technical terms, voters for the losing candidate reduce their evaluative spread of the contenders (as was shown in analysis 1). Voters for the winner generally improve their opinion of both candidates once they become aware of the outcome of the election. This is not an act of depolarization per se, as they did not change the distance between the two candidate evaluations, but it fits with the cognitive dissonance model. These voters have had their opinions supported by popular majority and may let go of any lingering misgivings they might have had about their choice. Furthermore, they may allow themselves to perceive the attractive qualities of the opponent, who no longer constitutes a threat.

It also matters whether the runner-up received more votes than the winner. While the unambiguous victories lay the foundations for a prototypical consolidation phase and depolarization among voters for the loser, elections where the winner loses the popular vote lack these qualities. When the election winner does not manage to win a majority of the popular vote, voters for the loser generally exhibit a weaker bandwagon effect. They also feel slightly warmer towards their own candidate after the election. They refrain from the depolarization exercise that would normally follow an election loss. The voters for the winner, on their part, do have to struggle with the uncomfortable fact that their candidate was less popular than the opponent, and yet won the election. Instead of graciously warming up to the beaten rival in the post-election period these voters experience a stronger dislike toward the opponent. In the absence of the comforting legitimation that comes from a popular majority for their choice, they emphasize the strong points of their own candidate and the weak points of the opponent. In short, the post-election period, which is usually a time of reconciliation, looks rather different when the winner has lost the popular vote. Supporters of the loser do not depolarize as they usually would. Supporters of the winner polarize their opinions.

The mechanism governing the impact of having supported the loser, as well as the impact of electoral context, is cognitive dissonance reduction. The feelings of the winners are usually not complicated. They had their preferences supported by the people. For supporters of the loser,

however, the story is different. In a typical election, where the winner has a clear majority of the popular vote behind them, the voter for the loser experiences an uncomfortable dissonance between their own preference and the general will of the people. The voters for Carter in 1980, Dukakis in 1988, Bush in 1992 and McCain in 2008 have been told in no uncertain terms that most voters disagree with them. These voters seek to reduce this dissonance by changing their attitudes toward the respective candidates. This is evidenced by their propensity to report warmer feelings toward the election winner after the election compared to before, as well as colder feelings toward their own candidate, which was shown to be the case in analysis 2. It is also evidenced by their propensity to rate the candidates closer together in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey, which was the outcome of the first analysis.

The analyses also show that voters for the loser depolarize less in cases of electoral inversion. The Gore-voters in 2000 and Clinton-voters in 2016 received a message that was different from that received by losing voters in other years. They may cling to the notion that most voters were on their side and blame the system for producing an unfair outcome. There is no longer an uncomfortable discrepancy between their preferences and those of the electorate. Rather, there is a discrepancy between the wishes of most voters and the outcome of the election. To the supporters of the losers, this entails a decreased cognitive dissonance, and less need to adjust their opinions of the respective candidates. Bush-voters in 2000 and Trump-voters in 2016 have also received an ambiguous message. They have been crowned winners, while being told that most voters did not share their views. To lessen the impact of this discrepant piece of information, they feel colder toward the loser and warmer toward their own choice.

An alternative explanation of the findings presented here comes from the “John Q. Public” model of public opinion formation (Lodge and Taber, 2013). In this model, an individual’s attitude towards some object (person, group, institution etc.) changes “moment-by-moment in response to ‘priming’ events that spontaneously link changes in the environment to changes in beliefs, attitudes, and behavior” (ibid., p. 28). In this model, attitude is an “evaluative tally” where the individual has tied positively or negatively charged associations to the object of interest. The individual does not keep each of these associations in their working memory but keeps an unconscious tally which is updated each time some new characteristic, emotion or event becomes associated with the object. In this model, an election victory, as well as an election loss, is likely to factor into each voter’s feeling about the candidate in question. When the victory is unambiguous, it is likely to translate into more positive feelings about the winner

for all voters, regardless of whom they voted for. When the result is ambiguous (such as in cases of electoral inversion), we can expect citizens to engage in motivated reasoning. In the latter case voters for the winner should update their evaluation of the winner in a positive direction, whereas voters for the loser are likely to reject the positive association that follows from victory by arguing to themselves that the victory is not legitimate. In other words, how much attention is given to the popular vote margin is determined by whom the voter supported. While this model would explain a lot of the findings in this thesis, it falls short on at least one count. It does not explain why voters for the winner polarize their views of the candidates in cases of electoral inversion. The John Q. Public model would predict that voters for the winner in cases of electoral inversion react precisely as they would in a regular election.

In Beasley and Joslyn's study of post-election attitude adjustment they conclude that:

The psychological propensity to experience and reduce dissonance thus seems to be consistent with, if not fundamental to, maintaining a stable and thriving democratic system. Such psychological adjustment of citizens to the result of the election arguably represents an enduring quality of democratic institutions, providing some form of reconciliation in the aftermath of political contention. Indeed, in many ways the masses become citizens when they are embroiled in the electoral frenzy, but it is not until these citizens have returned to their pre-election routines that the true measure of a democracy is revealed. The capacities of a political system to weather the tempestuous exercise of democracy may involve the subsequent calm as much as the preceding storm (2001, p. 538).

If this is indeed the case, the findings in this thesis are a cause for concern. At the individual level, and in the short term, an adaptive preference adjustment is beneficial as it prevents psychological discomfort. For political elites, it is beneficial because it helps to return the political climate back to a state of normalcy. It helps produce stability and legitimacy for the ruler (for a full review of this see Anderson et al., 2005). Twice in the past two decades there has been an election outcome that is not conducive to reconciliation. If it is also true, as was claimed by Geruso et al., that this outcome is not a statistical anomaly, but rather a constant danger in the Electoral College system, redesigning the electoral institutions of the US might be the only way to ensure a return to business as usual after the high conflict level of the campaign period.

The literature on loser's consent tells us that the ultimate consequences of a failed consolidation phase, beyond the short-term lack of legitimacy for a specific ruler, may be a deficit in democratic legitimacy (Anderson et al., 2005). In fact, the stability of the democratic system depends on how voters for the loser react to the outcome of the election. In a healthy democracy losers consent to being ruled by someone they did not vote for. This consolidation is not uniform across time and space. Identifying the factors that regularly produce unhappy losers will be an important part of studies that deal with change and instability in democratic systems. Clearly elections affect the attitudes of citizens and this deserves more attention in future research.

It should be noted that most of the elections included in this study can be said to have happened in a time characterized by candidate centered politics. As established, many believe that polarization is higher than it has been in decades, or ever. It can be argued that polarization now is at least on par with the levels of polarization in the 1960's and 1970's (Mann & Ornstein, 2016; McVeigh et al., 2014; Poole & Rosenthal, 1984). A shift to candidate centered politics started to emerge in the 1980's (see (Barker et al., 2006; Wattenberg, 1991)). This means that prior to this, the party had a higher influence on people's vote. This seems to be the case again today. In such a political climate, a candidate could possibly be seen as a mere image of the party. It is not possible yet to know if this will structure the impact of elections on voter perceptions. This will be an interesting development to follow, and a possible study for the future.

Conclusions

This thesis makes three main contributions. First, it further supports theories of outcome-based dissonance by showing that in ordinary elections, voters for the loser reduce their evaluative spread of the candidates, and that they feel warmer toward the election winner and colder toward their own candidate. Second, it importantly develops the theory further by showing that its normal predictions fail in cases of electoral inversion. In such elections, voters for the loser do not depolarize their views of the candidates. The voters for the winner by contrast polarize their view of the candidates. They feel warmer toward their own choice and colder toward the opposing candidate. It seems electoral inversion changes the meaning of winning and losing. It alters voters' reactions because the institution of the electoral college usually produces a winner with more votes than the runner-up. There is an ambiguity to the situation. On the one hand, we have a winner who lost the vote, and on the other, a loser who won the vote. This allows the voters for the loser to separate the idea of the legitimate winner from the actual winner and means they do not depolarize their views as they ordinarily would. Third, it informs the scholarly debate on polarization in American politics. It shows that in ordinary circumstances an election will reduce the high conflict level that usually characterizes the election campaign. It also tells us that this is not the case when electoral inversion occurs. Such an outcome tends to exacerbate the division of the American public.

Based on the findings, I draw the following conclusions about the hypotheses displayed in table 11.

Table 11: Hypotheses results⁸

Hypothesis no.	Content	Status
H1	In cases of no electoral inversion voters for the loser feel colder towards their own candidate in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey	Supported
H2	In cases of electoral inversion voters for the loser do not feel colder towards their own candidate in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey	Supported
H3	Voters for the winner do not feel colder toward their own candidate regardless of the popular vote share obtained by their candidate	Supported
H4	In cases of no electoral inversion voters for the loser feel warmer towards the election winner in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey	Supported
H5	In cases of electoral inversion voters for the loser do not feel warmer towards the election winner in the post-election survey compared to the pre-election survey	Rejected
H6	In cases of no electoral inversion voters for the loser depolarize, while voters for the winner do not	Supported
H7	In cases of electoral inversion neither group depolarizes	Supported

All hypotheses, apart from H5 received support from the data. For H5 I found that voters for the losers in cases of electoral inversion do feel warmer towards the election winner, although,

⁸ Again, we should note that we can have less confidence in the results of the hypothesis tests in analysis 2, due to the fact that the residuals deviate somewhat from a normal distribution (see appendix).

less so than they normally would. In addition to these findings, the analyses show that in cases of electoral inversion the voters for the winner polarize their views by feeling more negatively toward the losing candidate and warmer toward their own candidate. In a typical election, the supporters of the winner do not experience serious cognitive dissonance based on the outcome. There is consonance between their preferences and the ones of the electorate. The candidate they believed to be the best went on to triumph. Their attitudes are supported by the current state of affairs. When the winning candidate has less popular support than their main opponent (cases of electoral inversion), the supporters of the winner arguably experience cognitive dissonance. In such instances there is an uncomfortable discrepancy between their preferences and those of a majority of voters. This prompts them to focus on the positive qualities of their own choice and on the negative aspects of the more popular (and electorally unsuccessful) opponent.

A regular election produces a post-election period of conflict reduction. Voters increase their support of the winner, regardless of whom they voted for. The voters for the loser also feel more negatively about their chosen candidate. In their study of attitude change in the post-election period Beasley and Joslyn conclude that:

[O]utcome-based dissonance tends to moderate evaluations among those who had supported the losing candidate. Hence, division may actually be induced by selection but reduced by election, and thus a political process that tends to agitate existing cleavages ends in an outcome that returns the electorate to a more moderate state of mind (2001, p. 538).

I find this to be a truth in need of modification. Under specific circumstances, namely when the election winner loses the popular election, the post-election return “to a more moderate state of mind” does not happen. The consolidation phase does not take place. Voters for the loser give a significantly smaller boost of support to the election winner, and they do not feel more negatively about their own candidate. Voters for the winner feel colder toward the losing candidate. There is less depolarization, bandwagoning, sympathy and consolidation in the post-election period compared to other elections. It is as if the polarized feelings that have been cultivated over the course of the election campaign are carried forth into the post-election period. The voters for the winner even polarize their views further after knowing the outcome. In fact, situations where candidates win the election without the support of most voters have

been used as persuasive arguments for electoral reform in the United States. In the campaign to introduce Ranked Choice Voting in Maine, Senator Dick Woodbury was, for instance, quoted as saying:

All we're talking about this cycle is results, spoilers, strategic voting, minority winners. All these things we see as problems with the current system are problems that are fixed by an instant-runoff system (Moretto, 2014).

Furthermore, abolishing or changing the Electoral College has been brought up several times in the most recent Democratic primary election campaigns (Law, 2019). A Gallup poll published in December 2016 (Swift, 2016) shows that this has become an issue which divides the two parties. In 2012, 54 % of Republicans and 69 % percent of Democrats wanted to amend “the constitution in favor of the popular vote to determine presidential elections”. Whereas, in 2016, 19 % of Republicans and 81 % of Democrats wanted to do the same (ibid.). Similarly, according to an article published by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University, the 2000 election caused a similar partisan split over the support for abolishment of the Electoral College (Roper Center, 2014). They cite a poll taken before the election in 2000, where 56 % of Republicans and 50 % of Democrats said they favor the “candidate who wins the popular vote serving as next US president”. In the post-election poll that year, 41% of Republicans and 75% of Democrats said we “should amend the Constitution and elect as president whoever gets the most votes in the whole country”. In the space of just a few months, support for system reform had dropped among Republicans by 15 percentage points and increased among Democrats by 25 percentage points.

A popular minority winner, in short, is missing out on not only the support of the majority that they lacked in the first place, but also on the added boost in support that is usually enjoyed by the election winner. Additionally, such a winner has to deal with enhanced calls for system reform, and a general legitimacy deficit. Future research should examine the association between minority winners and democratic dissatisfaction or support for system reform.

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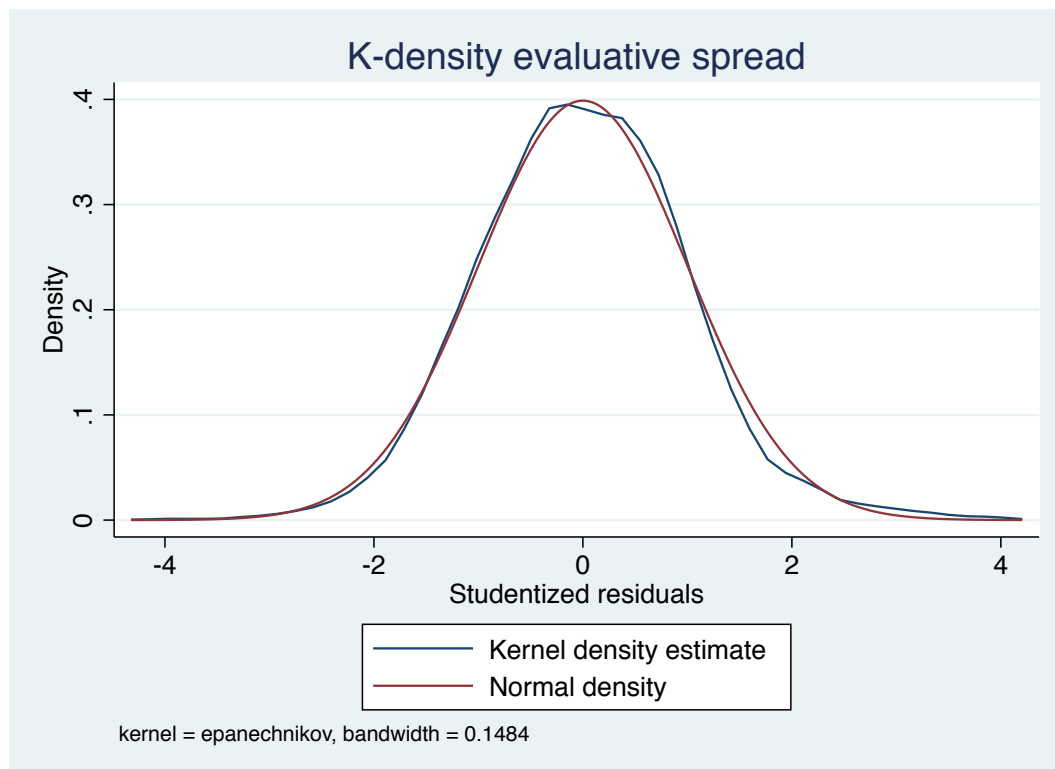
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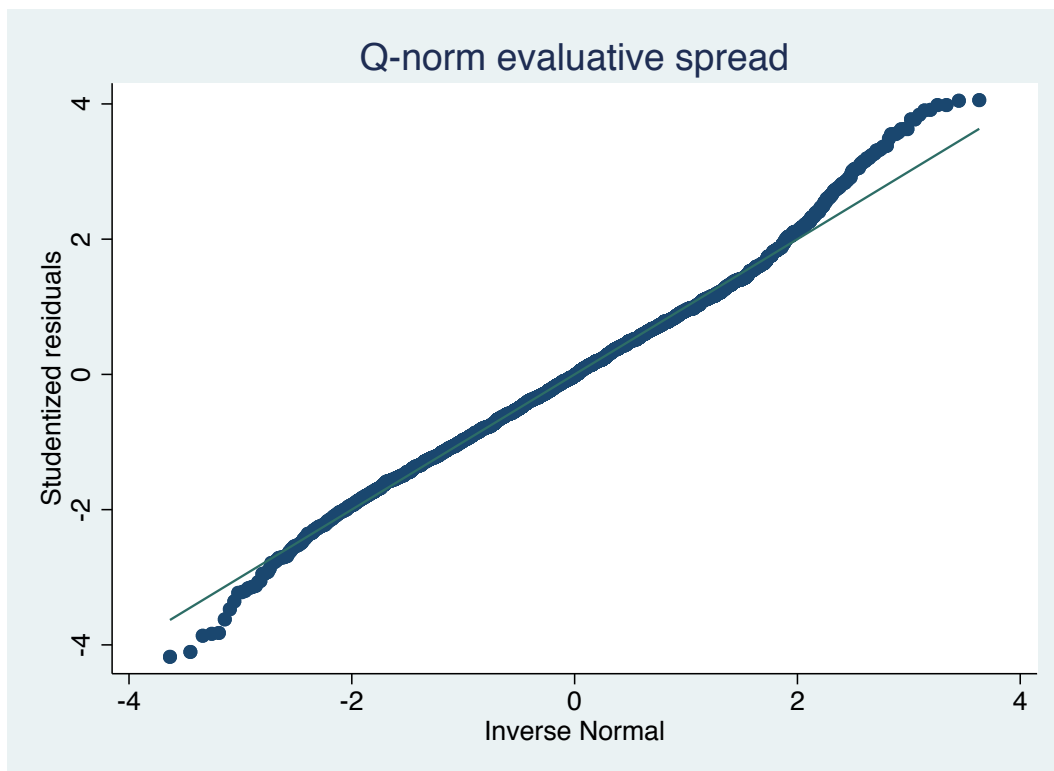
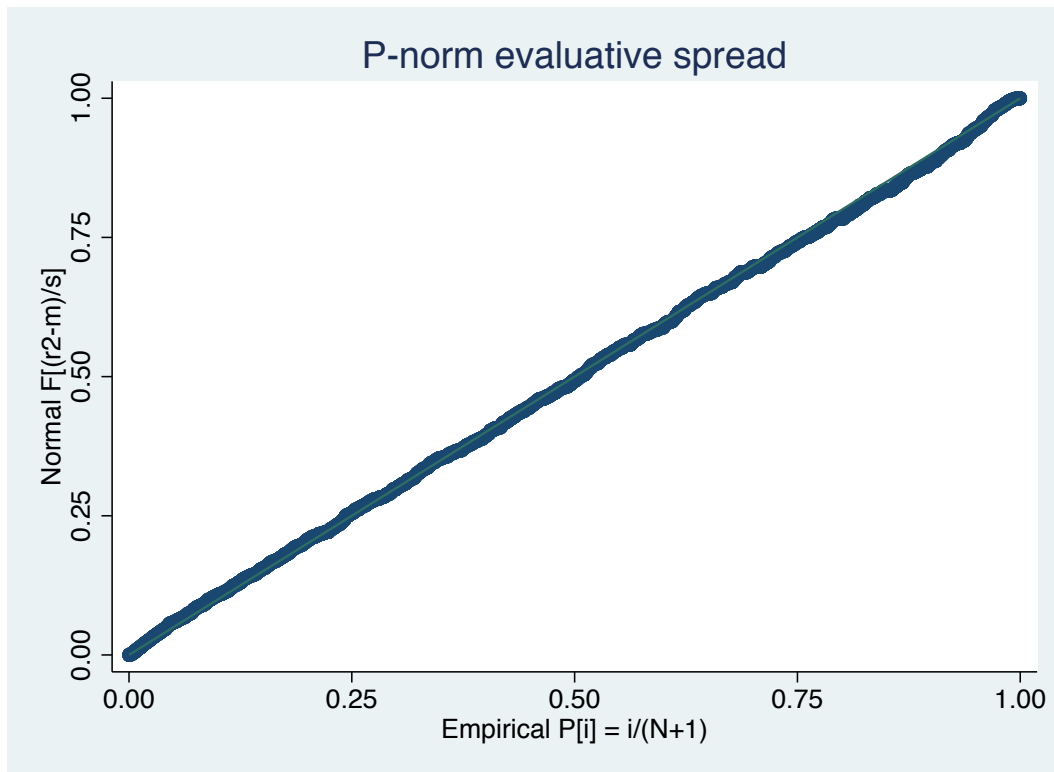
Appendix

Diagnostics

Checking for normality of errors

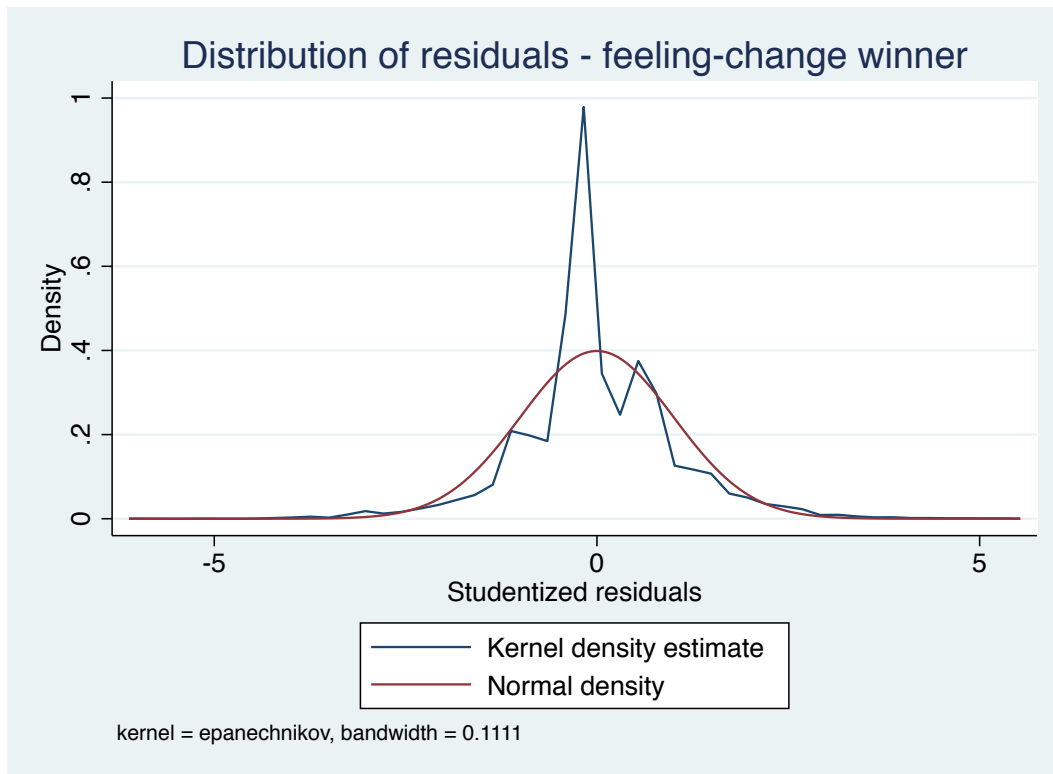
1: individual (de-polarization)



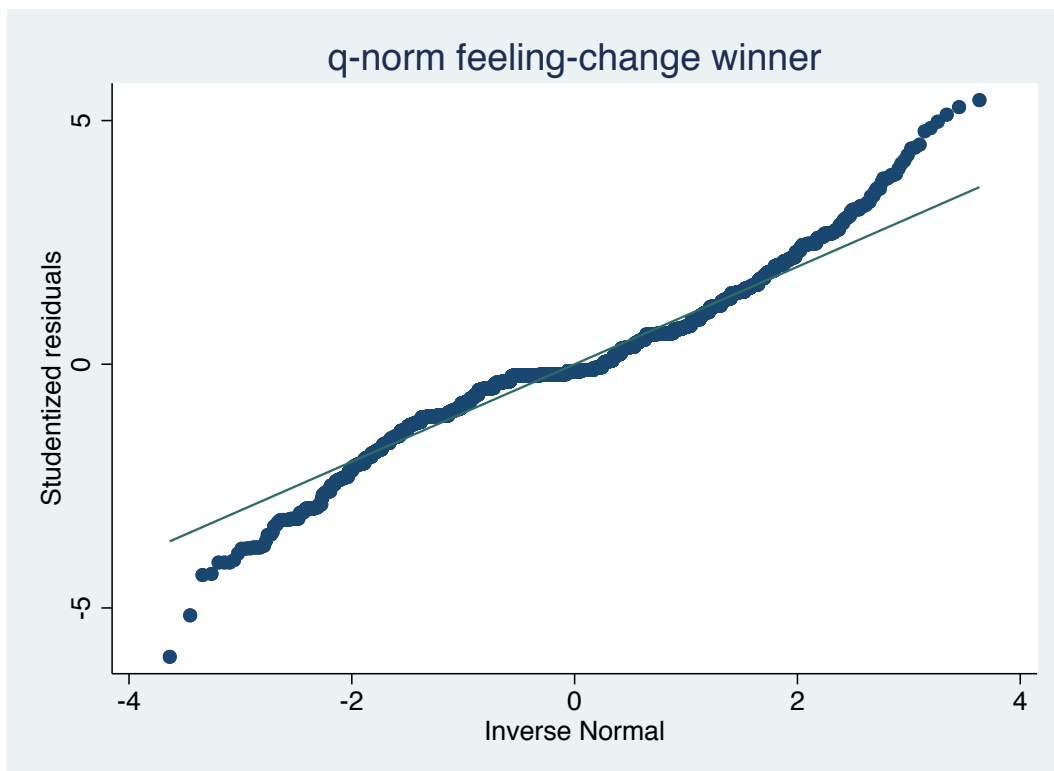
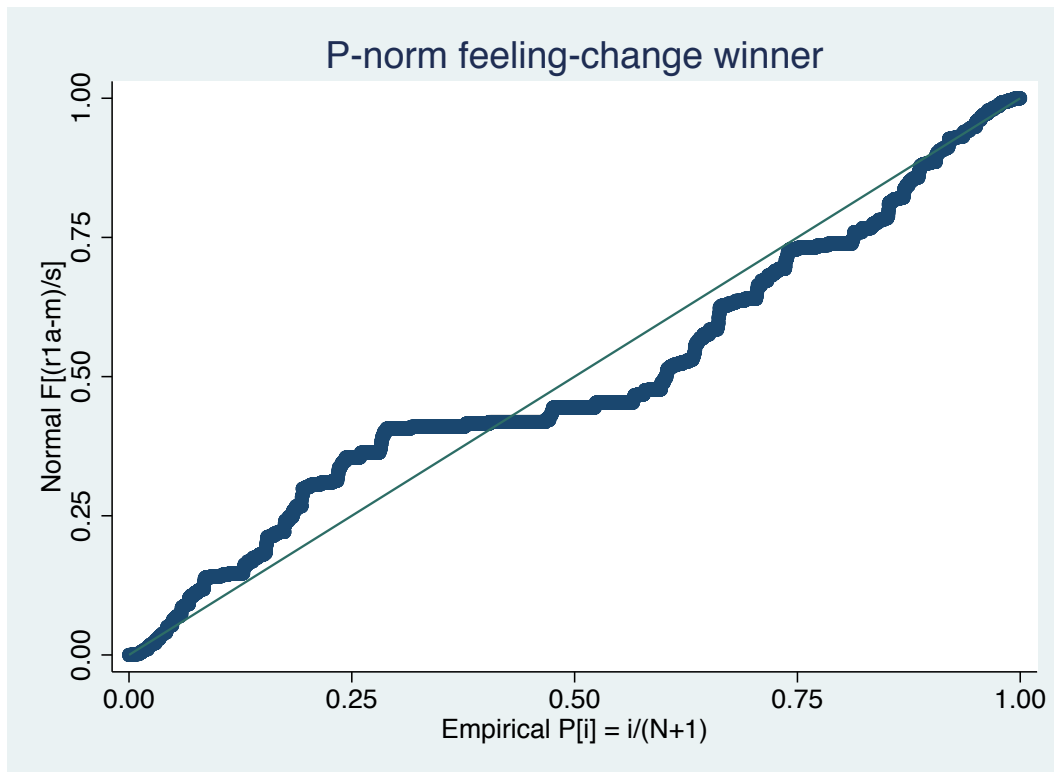


Here, we see a distribution of residuals that is very close to normal. We can move forward with analysis 1 and use the p-values without concern.

2A: Feeling-change winner. I run a kernel-density plot with a line added showing normal distribution:

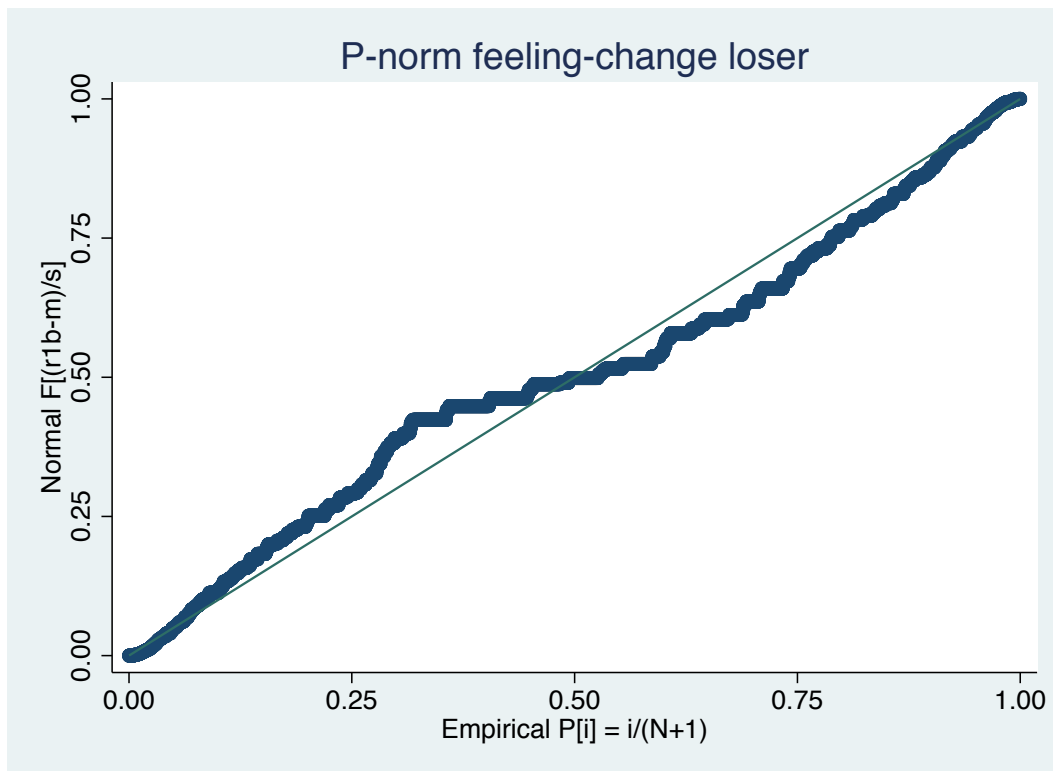
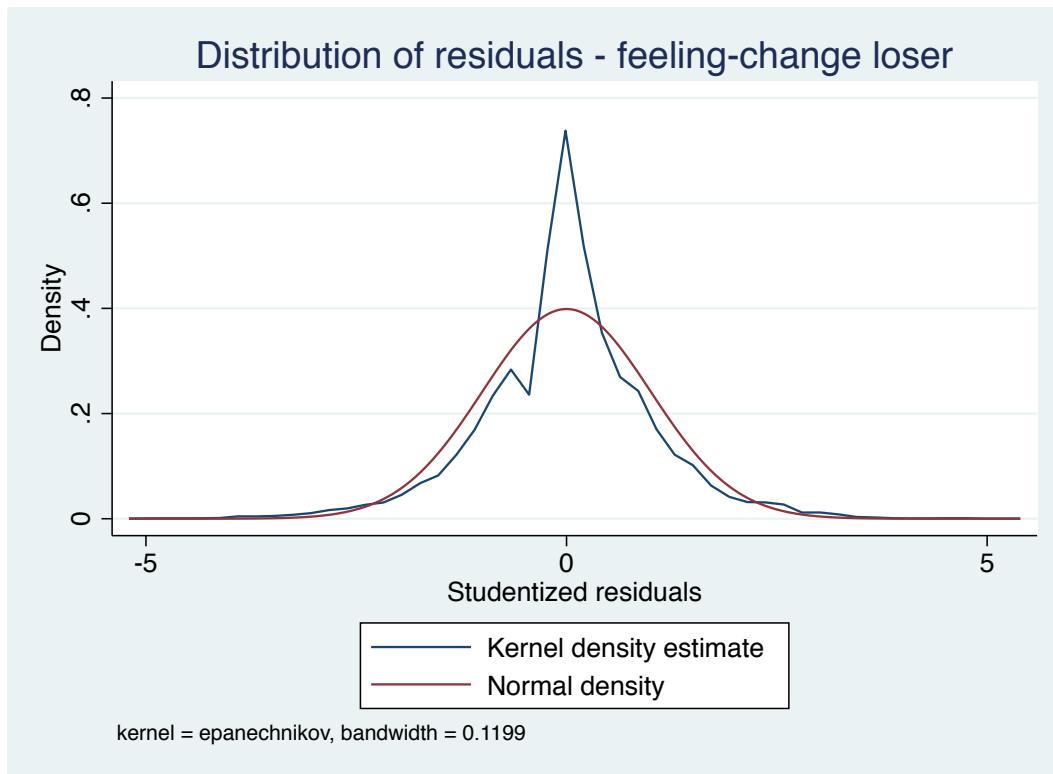


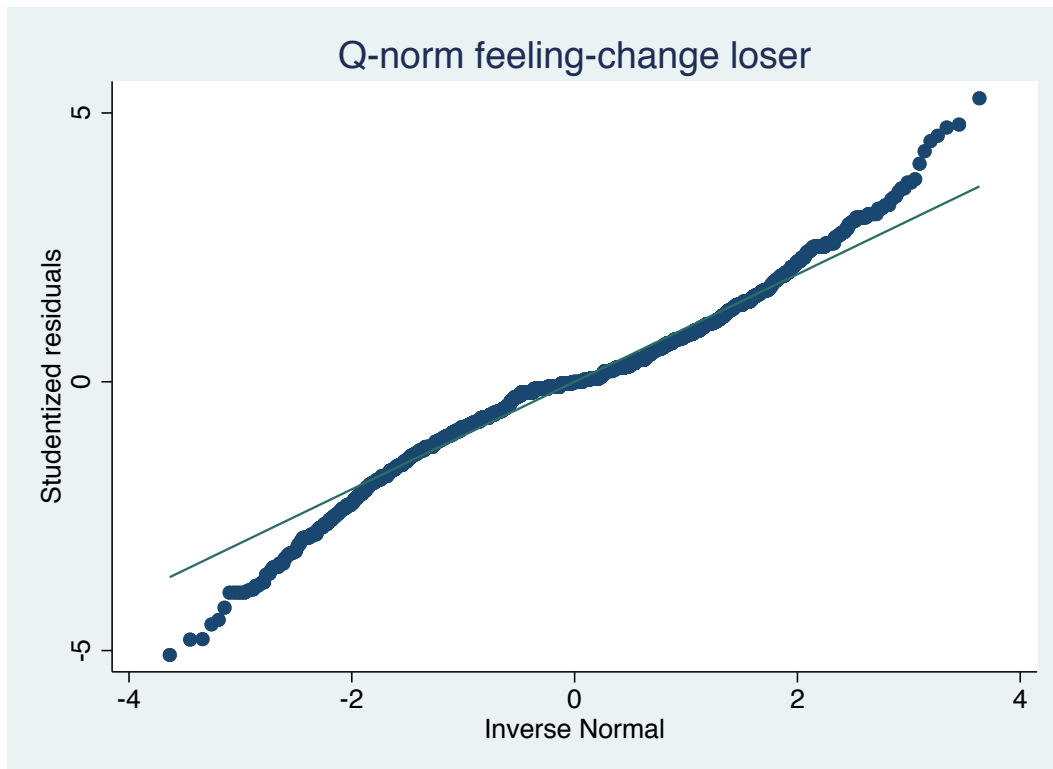
The distribution is roughly bell-shaped but with a very sharp peak in the middle. To investigate further I run a p-norm and q-norm plot to look at deviations from normal distribution at the middle and tail ends of the distribution:



As we see, the studentized residuals roughly follow the normal distribution, but with some deviation, especially at the edges. I choose to go forward with the analysis, but to be careful in my interpretations of the p-values.

2B: feeling-change loser. I run all the same diagnostics for this regression:





Again, we see some deviation from normality at the edges of the distribution, but it is less pronounced this time. We can be more confident in our interpretation of the p-values this time.

Checking for heteroskedasticity

For analysis 1 the outcome of the Breusch-Pagan test for heteroscedasticity gave the following output:

1 (evaluative spread):

Breusch-Pagan / Cook-Weisberg test for heteroskedasticity

Ho: Constant variance

Variables: fitted values of evalspread

chi2(1) = 4.13

Prob > chi2 = 0.0422

The null-hypothesis here is homoscedasticity. The significant outcome of the test therefore indicates that the model has problems with heteroscedasticity, and I decide to use a model with robust standard errors. I run the same test for the two other regressions:

2A (feeling-change winner):

Breusch-Pagan / Cook-Weisberg test for heteroskedasticity

Ho: Constant variance

Variables: fitted values of winnerfeelingchange

chi2(1) = 6.79

Prob > chi2 = 0.0092

2B (feeling-change loser):

Breusch-Pagan / Cook-Weisberg test for heteroskedasticity

Ho: Constant variance

Variables: fitted values of loserfeelingchange

chi2(1) = 50.23

Prob > chi2 = 0.0000

All tests for heteroscedasticity are significant at the 0,05-level, so I choose to use robust standard errors for all the analyses.

Checking for multicollinearity:

I run the variance inflation factor for each analysis, using the rule of thumb that VIF should be below 10^9 :

1 (evaluative spread):

⁹ See: <https://stats.idre.ucla.edu/stata/webbooks/reg/chapter2/stata-webbooksregressionwith-statachapter-2-regression-diagnostics/>

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
1.votedfor~r	2.33	0.429366
1.eleccoll~t	1.96	0.510101
votedforlo~r# eleccolleg~t 1 1	3.09	0.323687
candidated~e	1.19	0.842444
expectations	1.64	0.608495
partisanst~g	1.12	0.892498
Mean VIF	1.89	

2A (feeling-change winner):

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
1.votedfor~r	2.33	0.429197
1.eleccoll~t	1.92	0.521850
votedforlo~r# eleccolleg~t 1 1	3.09	0.323701
expectations	1.64	0.609493
partisanst~g	1.00	0.995905
Mean VIF	2.00	

2B (feeling-change loser):

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
1.votedfor~r	2.33	0.429761
1.eleccoll~t	1.92	0.520004
votedforlo~r#		
eleccolleg~t		
1 1	3.08	0.324488
expectations	1.64	0.608064
partisanst~g	1.00	0.995654
Mean VIF	2.00	

As the highest VIF registered across the models is 3,09, I conclude that my models do not have problems of multicollinearity.