Political support among winners and losers:

Within- and between-country effects of structure, process and performance in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Why is the winner-loser gap in political support wider in some countries and narrower in others? Previous studies have focused on how the *input* side of political systems – the institutional structure – affects the winner-loser gap. This study suggests also considering the *output* side – the quality of political process and economic performance – and posits that two mechanisms – rational and psychological – can explain how output factors affect the gap. Going beyond previous research, this article also considers whether contextual characteristics explain the variation in the gap not only between countries, but also within them. Applying mixed models to survey data from thirty European countries between 2002 and 2015, the article finds that the differences in support between winners and losers across countries are smaller in consensual systems, as in these contexts the support among losers is higher. However, changes in the institutional structure do not explain the over-time variation in the winner-loser gap. Moreover, increasing quality of process and economic performance do not attenuate the gap across countries and over time, as they affect positively the political support of both winners and losers. The study shows which contextual factors explain the winner-loser gap, also pointing to the conditions increasing losers' consent, a crucial element of democratic legitimacy.

Key words: Political support; Winner-loser gap; Quality of government; Economic performance; Comparative-longitudinal survey data analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

In the analysis of political support, one influential explanation regards electoral outcomes. The democratic game is characterized by the pursuit of power through elections, which allow citizens to solve conflict by competing at the ballot box rather than by resorting to political violence (Przeworski 1991; Nadeau & Blais 1993; Anderson et al. 2005; Esaiasson 2011). This process is sustainable if the outcome is widely accepted by the public. However, it is found that losers express less satisfaction with democracy or trust in political institutions than winners, and that losers' consent is crucial for regime stability (Anderson et al. 2005). Therefore, our understanding of democratic legitimacy hinges on the investigation of the winner-loser gap in support across democratic contexts and the conditions under which we observe it or not. In other words, what contextual characteristics bridge the winner-loser gap in political support?

When considering the contextual conditions affecting the impact of election outcomes on support, research has dedicated attention almost exclusively to the importance of the *input* side of the political system − in terms of the institutional structure and mechanisms of political representation − finding the winner-loser gap to be more pronounced in majoritarian than in consensual systems. The logic is that the latter facilitate the inclusion of political minorities within decision-making procedures, allowing representation and reducing the impact of losing (Anderson & Guillory 1997; Anderson et al. 2005; Bernauer & Vatter 2012; Singh 2014).

However, the role of other contextual characteristics has not yet been taken into account. We argue that the *output* of the political system should also be considered. Research shows that the quality of the political process, in the form of the rule of law, control of corruption and government effectiveness, predicts levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust (Wagner et al. 2009; Dahlberg & Holmberg 2014; Donovan & Karp 2017; van der Meer & Hakhverdian 2017). Similarly, recent contributions point to a direct effect of macroeconomic conditions on support (Dotti Sani & Magistro 2016; Quaranta & Martini 2016; van Erkel & van der Meer 2016). Some studies argue that the quality of the institutional process might

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reduce the winner-loser gap (Dahlberg & Linde 2016), but none consider the effect of economic performance.

Building on existing approaches to public opinion formation (e.g. Gerber and Green 1999; Bartels 2002; Bullock 2009), we formulate potential mechanisms to explain the effects of the quality of the political process and economic performance on the gap between winners and losers considering how the two groups respond to contextual information related to the output. Following a rational approach (e.g. Healy & Malhotra 2013), such factors should narrow the gap between winners and losers, as they affect more strongly the support of the latter. Conversely, according to a psychological approach (e.g. Enns & McAvoy 2012), output factors should increase the gap because losers, trying to maintain consistency in their opinions, will not be affected by the quality of the democratic process and economic performance.

Going beyond most previous research, we also argue that political support among winners and losers varies not only *between* countries, but also *within* them (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005). Research on the input factors looks mostly at the winner-loser gap cross-sectionally, neglecting the fact that political support among winners and losers might vary over time. Instead, research on the output factors takes into account how these affect overall trends in political support but ignores whether they also explain changes in the winner-loser gap. Hence, we hypothesize that the gap may fluctuate over time and that such variation can be explained by changes in institutional arrangements, quality of process, and economic performance.

Applying mixed models to data from the European Social Survey for thirty countries between 2002 and 2015, we consider how both input and output factors predict the variation in political support among winners and losers within and between countries. The analysis shows that the difference in support between winners and losers across countries is smaller in consensual systems, as in these contexts the support among losers is higher. However, changes in the institutional structure do not explain the over-time variation in the winner-loser gap. Moreover, increasing quality of process and economic performance do not attenuate the

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distance between the two sides of the barricade across countries and over time, as they affect positively the political support of both winners and losers.

THE POLITICAL SUPPORT OF WINNERS AND LOSERS

Research often connects citizens' attitudes about the functioning of democratic institutions to the legitimacy of political systems. The idea is that if citizens have positive orientations, the political system will be more stable. Most research on the topic relies on the concept of political support, or the extent to which people orient favourable attitudes towards political objects. Scholars distinguish between types of objects, including the political community, the regime principles and procedures, the political institutions and the class of politicians. Moreover, citizens may express more diffuse support and affective attitudes referring to the general meaning given to an object. Finally, they may convey specific support in the form of evaluative judgments about the functioning of the system, its institutions and authorities (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011).

Regarding the origins of political support and attitudes towards democracy, there are two theoretical traditions (Mishler & Rose 2001). Cultural theories assume that supportive attitudes develop outside the political sphere and emerge from early-life processes of socialization, and that they are largely stable and immune from political experience. Institutional theories, instead, consider that attitudes are the result of an assessment of contextual characteristics in which citizens live and of the behaviour of political authorities. Among this latter research stream, studies have focused on how the experience of winning or losing the elections affects citizens' political attitudes and behaviours, including political support.

Anderson et al. (2005, 23-29) present three mechanisms that might explain lower (higher) political support among electoral losers (winners). The first is an instrumental mechanism and deals with the possibility that the results of elections decrease the expected benefits and utility. Losing an election may indeed decrease the chances of seeing one's own policy

preference satisfied. Next, losing an election may result in emotional effects, lowering self-confidence and positive views and states of mind with respect to the perceived social and political context and the individual capacity to influence it. Finally, election outcomes may bring people to express different evaluations of the political process to avoiding dissonance. Winning and losing affect individual cognitive consistency, altering citizens' opinions through the lens of the position they hold in the electoral process.

In recent years, these theoretical expectations have gradually been backed by empirical research on public opinion and behaviour. Electoral status is found to be associated with satisfaction with government performance, support for democracy as a political regime, trust in politicians, political efficacy, support for institutional reforms, political participation, opinions about fairness of elections, and evaluations of candidates' performance or economic situation (Anderson & Guillory 1997; Bowler & Donovan 2007; Curini & Jou 2016).

One point, far less investigated, is the *dynamic* nature of the winner-loser gap, thus its variation over time. At the individual-level, it is shown that a change in winner-loser status before and after an election has a direct impact on political satisfaction (Blais & Gélineau 2007; Curini et al. 2012; Singh et al. 2012). When considering the problem at the country-level, the gap seems to last for long periods of time during the electoral cycle and even beyond it. The size of the gap may depend on the time span considered and on the context under study, which in turn points to the possibility that individual evaluations among the two groups of citizens considered change because of both individual and contextual factors (Anderson et al. 2005). Therefore, an empirical assessment of the between and within-country variation in the gap would allow testing whether factors considered by cross-sectional research also work over time, as mechanisms are expected to be quite similar.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AND THE WINNER-LOSER GAP IN POLITICAL SUPPORT

Contextual factors play a prominent role in the analysis of political support (Zmerli & Hooghe 2011). While several studies have looked at how the *input* side of systems – how citizens'

demands and interests are articulated through mechanisms of institutional representation –
affect the winner-loser gap, the features of the *output* side – how the political process is
implemented and its performance, have not given sufficient recognition. We argue that both
sides should be considered.

Input side factors

Research on the factors influencing political support among winners and losers mostly deal
with the structure of the democratic system, i.e. the set of constitutional arrangements and
legal norms constituting its minimum characteristics (Roller 2005, 20-22). According to
Lijphart (1999) and Powell (2000), democracies may be examined looking at how
majoritarian or consensual their rules are. The majoritarian model promotes accountability by
reducing political fragmentation and concentrates power in the hands of a majority with
scarce room for a minority veto. The consensual model makes it difficult to aggregate various
interests into stable majority coalitions, although it is better suited to restraining majority rule
by sharing power among political actors.

Coming to political support among winners and losers, research shows that inclusive
institutions may reduce the negative effect of losing elections. In contrast, majoritarian rules
amplify differences in support as they reduce the chances of losers to influence majorities.
Thus, the structure of political systems – measured using indicators as the number of parties,
the disproportionality of electoral rule, and coalition cabinets – mediates the effect of electoral
results on support among winner and losers (Anderson & Guillory 1997; Anderson et al.
2005; Bernauer & Vatter 2012; Singh 2014).

While research shows that changes in institutional arrangements affect the trends in political
support (Banducci et al. 1999; Martini & Quaranta 2015), little is known on how such
changes attenuate the winner-loser gap over time. Evidence based on a single-country study
shows that the consent of losers increases after a transition from a majoritarian system to
proportional representation (Karp & Bowler 2001). Thus, it is worth assessing whether the

gap between the two electoral groups becomes smaller as a political system approximates the ideal-type of a consensual democracy in a large pool of countries across several years, since the logic should be similar as that proposed by cross-sectional empirical research. Thus, the first expectation is:

H1: Increasing levels of consensualism as opposed to majoritarianism will narrow the winner-loser gap in political support a) over time and b) across countries, as they will have stronger effects on the political support among losers than among winners.

Output side factors

A broad evaluation of the contextual factors explaining levels of political support among winners and losers should also include aspects of the output of the system (Roller 2005, 20-22). The idea is that losers do not simply marginally improve their evaluations because of the degree of inclusiveness of the political system and institutions, but they might do so also because democracy ensures some standard of quality in the form of fair and impartial procedures. Research shows in fact that citizens consider the quality of the democratic process – i.e. the level of rule of law, control of corruption and the effectiveness of institutions – and that this affects the overall level of political support (Dahlberg & Holmberg 2014; Donovan & Karp 2017; van der Meer & Hakhverdian 2017).

There is a further element concerning the performance of the political system. Economic performance is an important factor affecting regime legitimacy, as the concept of democracy is often associated with a system that ensures wealth and economic security (Dahl 1971; McAllister 1999). Recently, in Europe, attention to this link has increased because of the financial crisis, with negative implications for the relationship between citizens and state institutions. Research shows that overall levels of democratic satisfaction and political trust run parallel to macroeconomic indicators (Dotti Sani & Magistro 2016; Quaranta & Martini 2016; van Erkel & van der Meer 2016).

While economic performance has never been included as an alternative contextual factor mediating the impact of election outcomes on political support, the role of the quality of process is shown to decrease the distance between the two groups (Dahlberg & Linde 2016). However, the logic behind this argument has not yet been spelled out clearly.

To do so, we refer to existing approaches to opinion formation (e.g. Gerber and Green 1999; Bartels 2002; Bullock 2009). Following a rational view, a better output might narrow the gap because voters are interested in achieving accuracy in their judgments, and are thus able to evaluate the system's quality and performance. Supportive attitudes would be the result of a continuous retrospective assessment of the ability of the political authorities to govern and achieve certain policy goals, and not the consequence of bonds with specific political groups (Fiorina 1981; Healy & Malhotra 2013). Hence, if what matters to encourage citizens to support political institutions is what they deliver in terms of goods and how they do it according to utility maximization, losing at the elections would not be so bad, in so far as citizens obtain wealth and affluence through a well-functioning democracy.

An implication of this approach is that voters should also revise their prior beliefs and evaluations by averaging them with evidence received from the political environment about the state of the country in which they live (i.e. the quality of the democratic process or the macroeconomic situation). As far as evidence can produce agreement across people belonging to different political groups, voters will *converge* in their opinions regarding changes in contextual conditions, learning from new information and coming to see the political world in a similar way (Bartels 2002; Enns & McAvoy 2012). Following this reasoning, the effect of output factors on support would be marginally stronger for losers than for winners, as the last are those already expecting good results and expressing higher political support. Thus, our next expectation is that:

H2: Increasing levels of the quality of democratic processes and economic performance will narrow the winner-loser gap a) over time and b) across countries, as such contextual

conditions will have a stronger effect on the political support among losers than among winners.

However, this approach can be criticized for not considering that winners and losers might be biased in how they process contextual information. An alternative argument suggests that political attitudes develop mainly from early childhood through psychological attachment to parties (Gerber & Green 2002). These attitudes are connected to specific social groups, values and norms, providing a perceptual screen through which people filter political information, favouring what agrees with their orientation. Moreover, people tend to self-categorize as rival group members, sharing positive and negative experiences connected to winning or losing elections. Voters act as partisan reasoners and follow directional goals, trying to maintain consistency between beliefs and their electoral status (Kunda 1990; Taber & Lodge 2006).

As a result, voters would process new information and form opinions about their country's conditions, by selecting political facts in line with their prior beliefs and arguing against incongruent information. Biased voters might even tend to *diverge* in their opinions (Bartels 2002; Enns & McAvoy 2012), as citizens will evaluate contextual conditions avoiding cognitive dissonance. Given this adjustment, losers might ignore or might not recognize within-country improvements in the democratic process or economic performance, whereas they might overemphasize negative elements. Winners, instead, should see an increase in support as they might over-appreciate improving contextual conditions, while they might ignore deteriorating process quality and performance. Because of this process, we should find a growth in the gap between winners and losers. Thus, our final expectation is that:

H3: Increasing levels of the quality of democratic processes and economic performance will widen the winner-loser gap a) over time and b) across countries, as such contextual conditions will have a weaker effect on the political support among losers than among winners.

DATA

We test our expectations using the European Social Survey (2016). This is a repeated cross-sectional survey held roughly every two years in several European countries. It includes measures of political support and voting choices, along with relevant factors, allowing for the study of the effect of the structure of the institutional system, its processes and performance on the support of winners and losers, both cross-country and over time.

We use all the available surveys from rounds 1 to 7 for 30 stable and consolidated European democracies. The dataset includes 162 surveys distributed between 2002 and 2015. The dataset is unbalanced, i.e. it does not include the same number of surveys for each country. However, keeping all the countries allows extending the sample and the time range analysed.[1] The sample size of the dataset, limiting it to respondents between 18 and 85 years old, is 294,647.

Dependent variables

Political support is multidimensional in nature, as it may apply to several political objects and include both specific evaluations and more diffuse affective attitudes (Dalton 2004; Torcal & Montero 2006). To provide a better test of our argument, we analyse two indicators referring to different objects and orientations: satisfaction with democracy and trust in the national parliament. Both variables are measured on an 11-point scale. The first is probably the most widely-used indicator to gauge support for regime norms and procedures. We use it as a measure eliciting citizens' evaluations of regime procedures in practice (Linde & Ekman 2003; Dalton 2004; Norris 2011).

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[1] The countries are: Austria (6 rounds), Belgium (7), Bulgaria (4), Croatia (2), Cyprus (4), the Czech Republic (6), Denmark (7), Estonia (6), Finland (7), France (5), Germany (7), Greece (4), Hungary (7), Iceland (2), Ireland (7), Italy (3), Latvia (2), Lithuania (4), Luxembourg (2), the Netherlands (7), Norway (7), Poland (7), Portugal (7), Romania (2), Slovakia (5), Slovenia (7), Spain (7), Sweden (7), Switzerland (7) and the United Kingdom (7). For details see Table B3 in the Appendix.

Given that the above indicator measures an evaluation of the system in general, we also study trust in national parliaments. This allows for a broader view of support, as it captures an orientation not towards the system in general but towards a core institution of political representation in democracies. While some authors look at trust in political institutions as an affective orientation towards the basic pillars of a democratic system (Dalton 2004), others consider it an evaluation of the merits of specific organizations against an ideal benchmark (Levi and Stoker 2000). We lean towards the latter approach, as it allows for a more grounded view of support referring to precise political authorities (van der Meer & Hakhverdian 2017).

Individual-level independent variables

The variable of interest classifies respondents according to their voting choices to identify their winner (majority) vs. loser (minority) status. If the respondent declared a voting choice for a party that was in office (i.e. part of the ruling cabinet), she is classified as a "winner"; while if the respondent declared a voting choice for a party that was not in office (i.e. not part of the ruling cabinet) before the beginning of the survey data collection, she is classified as a "loser".[2] Respondents are also included in two residual categories to avoid loss of information. They are classified as "non-identified voters" if they have cast a spoilt vote; or as "non-identified non-voters" if they have abstained from voting, refused to answer or forgotten their voting choice.

We consider other relevant factors for political support (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). We control for socio-demographic factors such as gender, age in categories, and employment status. Next, we control for years of completed education and for an egotropic evaluation of the economy using an indicator measuring feelings about household income (Dalton 2004). Party identification may hinder the role of the electoral status for support (Anderson et al. 2005). Therefore, we use an indicator capturing whether respondents are close to any political

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[2] Information on cabinets comes from the ParlGov dataset (Doering & Manow 2016). Table B4 in the Appendix lists parties used to classify the respondents.

party. Then, we include a measure of political interest, as this might enable citizens to retrieve political information favouring the evaluation of the political system and its institutions (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). We also adopt a measure of media use, i.e. time spent watching news or programmes about politics on an average day, as the effect of political information is debated in the literature on political support (Dalton 2004). Finally, we control for ideology. Citizens positioned at the extremes of the left-right scale have lower levels of support compared to those leaning towards the centre (Anderson et al. 2005). Tables A1 and B1 in the Appendix report summary statistics and describe the individual-level independent variables.

Contextual-level independent variables

At the survey-level (time-varying) and country-level we include three indices for each dimension analysed. To analyse the effect of the structure of the political system we build an index measuring the degree of majoritarianism vs. consensualism of political systems, capturing the "executives-parties" dimension (Lijphart 1999). The index summarizes how the political system has a two-party vs. multi-party system; single-party vs. multi-party cabinets; a dominant executive vs. a balanced executive-parliament relationship; a disproportional vs. proportional electoral law; and a pluralist vs. corporatist model of interest groups. The index uses factor scores from a factor analysis of five indicators: the "effective number of parties" (seats); the absolute number of parties in the cabinet; the disproportionality of the electoral law (Doering & Manow 2016); a measure capturing the balance between executive and legislative powers (Bühlmann et al. 2012); and a measure capturing the extent to which major civil society organizations are consulted by policymakers on policies relevant to their members (Coppedge et al. 2016).[3]

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[3] We do not consider the "federal-unitary" dimension as it is largely stable over time (Lijphart 1999, 254; Vatter et al. 2013). Models including a measure of vertical dispersion of power were tested (Appendix, section F).

To measure the process of political systems, we build an index using three indicators drawn from the WorldWide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann et al. 2009):[4] "government effectiveness", measuring the quality of public and civil services, their independence from politics, and their credibility in committing to policies; "rule of law", measuring compliance with the rules of society, the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, police and courts, and crime and violence; and "control of corruption", measuring whether public power is used for private or personal profit, accounting for petty and large-scale forms of corruption. Factor analysis tests that the indicators underlie a latent dimension measuring "quality of government", understood as "impartiality" in the way institutions exercise government authority (Rothstein & Teorell 2008), and provides the factors scores to measure it.[5]

To measure the performance of the political system, we look at the status of the economy. One of the problems with the measurement of macroeconomic conditions is that it is seldom clear which factor is the most relevant. A solution is using an index accounting for multiple elements that matter to the main actors in an economic system: citizens, firms and governments. This summary measure is the "economic performance index" (Khramov & Lee 2013), a weighted index using macroeconomic indicators such as growth, unemployment, deficit and inflation (International Monetary Fund 2016), capturing the economy's monetary, production, fiscal, and general status. Tables A2 and B2 in the Appendix report summary statistics and details on the context-level variables.[6]

MODEL

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[4] The WGIs have been the subject of criticism, one of which relates to their application to the European context (Kaufmann et al. 2007). However, tests on 27 European countries indicate that WGIs are consistent and robust, in particular "control of corruption" and "government effectiveness" (Charron 2010).

[5] We use Bayesian factor analysis. Estimates are reported in the Appendix, section C.

[6] We ran additional models including: a dummy variable for Central-Eastern Europe to control for political and historical legacies affecting the winner-loser gap in support (Anderson et al. 2005); time passed from elections, to account for the potential recalling bias; and time to election, to account for the potential effect of election closeness to the voting choice (Appendix, section F).

Our dataset consists of repeated cross-sectional surveys. Respondents, the level-1 observations, are nested in surveys, which is level-2. The latter, in turn, are nested in countries, which constitute level-3. This implies that we deal with different types of variation in political support: longitudinal, that is *within*-country variation, and cross-sectional, that is *between*-country variation. To explore and explain these variations, we estimate the following three-level linear mixed model with random-intercepts and slopes including both survey- and country-level variables (Fairbrother 2014; Bell & Jones 2015):

$$y_{ijc} \sim N(\alpha_j + \beta_j x_{ijc} + \beta_1 x_{ijc} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{ijc}, \sigma_y) \tag{1}$$

$$\begin{bmatrix} \alpha_j \\ \beta_j \end{bmatrix} \sim N \left(\begin{bmatrix} \delta_c + \gamma_1 z_{1j} + \gamma_2 z_{2j} + \gamma_3 z_{3j} \\ \omega_c + \nu_1 z_{1j} + \nu_2 z_{2j} + \nu_3 z_{3j} \end{bmatrix}, \Sigma \right) \tag{2}$$

$$\begin{bmatrix} \delta_c \\ \omega_c \end{bmatrix} \sim N \left(\begin{bmatrix} \mu_\alpha + \theta_1 w_{1c} + \theta_2 w_{2c} + \theta_3 w_{3c} \\ \mu_\beta + \lambda_1 w_{1c} + \lambda_2 w_{2c} + \lambda_3 w_{3c} \end{bmatrix}, \Phi \right) \tag{3}$$

Equation (1) represents the individual-level. The term y_{ijc} indicates the dependent variable, where *i* indexes the $i = 1, \ldots, N$ respondents in $j = 1, \ldots, 162$ surveys in $c = 1, \ldots, 30$ countries. The random intercepts α_j and slopes β_j respectively capture the political support among electoral winners and the difference in support between winners and losers across the *j*-th surveys. The *x*'s indicate the *k* individual-level variables, and the fixed β's their coefficients. The term σ_y indicates the standard deviation of the responses.

Equation (2) represents the survey-level. The variation in the levels of political support among winners, α_j, and the difference among winners and losers, β_j, across surveys follow a common normal distribution. Its mean is a linear combination of the random terms, δ_c and ω_c, capturing the political support among electoral winners and the difference in support between winners and losers across the *c*-th countries; the 3 survey-level variables z_j (executives-parties, quality of government and economic performance index) and their coefficients γ and ν. The γ coefficients capture the effect of survey-level variables on the political support of winners,

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while the ν coefficients capture the effect of survey-level variables on the winner-loser gap in support. At the survey-level, the predictors are entered in the equation as group-mean centred to capture the effect of *within*-country varying characteristics.

Equation (3) represents the country-level. The country-specific random effects follow a common normal distribution with the mean being a linear combination of μ_α, i.e. the overall level of political support for the winners; μ_β, i.e. the overall offset of electoral losers from the winners' baseline level of support (i.e. the effect of being an electoral loser); the 3 country-level variables w_c (executives-parties, quality of government and economic performance index) and their coefficients. The θ coefficients capture the effect of country-level variables on the political support of winners, while the λ coefficients capture the effect of country-level variables on the winner-loser gap and, as before, represent the offset in the effect of these variables for the groups of losers. The predictors enter the equation as country-means to capture the effect of country characteristics *between* the countries.[7] Finally, Σ and Φ are the variance-covariance matrices of the common multivariate normal distributions of intercepts and slopes varying among surveys and countries.

The models are estimated in the Bayesian framework. This is done for the following reasons. The surveys in our dataset, i.e. country-years, are not drawn randomly from a larger population. Maximum Likelihood estimation is based on asymptotic and sampling assumptions that are difficult to meet when using such data. Bayesian analysis, instead, is based on the available data, making inference on what is observed. This means that it allows finding the uncertainties, in terms of probability, of the estimates without any reference to the population, in our case, of countries over time. Moreover, this estimation method is well suited to model complex data structures and to achieve more conservative estimates (Gelman & Hill 2006; Jackman 2009).

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[7] To estimate their coefficients separately, survey and country-level variables are orthogonal.

The prior for μ_α and μ_β, the individual-, survey-, country-level coefficients is $N(0,1000)$, for the individual-level variance is $U(0,10)$, and for the variance-covariance matrices is an inverse-Wishart distribution with 3 degrees of freedom and a diagonal scale matrix.[8]

FINDINGS

Table 1 reports the estimates of the models predicting the variation between and within countries in satisfaction with democracy and trust in the parliament among winners, as well as in the winner-loser gap in the two indicators.

The table shows that electoral winners have, on average, a score for satisfaction with democracy equal to 4.55 and trust in parliament of 3.65 (intercept). Democracy as a system enjoys a substantially higher evaluation compared to national parliaments in Europe between 2002 and 2015. Below these coefficients we report the overall gap in support between winners and losers. The intercept is the difference in the level of satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament between winners and losers. Holding constant the other predictors, electoral losers have scores for the two dependent variables respectively of 0.701 and 0.637 points lower than electoral winners.[9] This is unsurprising, although it is worth noting that the winner-loser gap is similar in magnitude even though we employ two indicators that are considered to measure different aspects of political support.

TABLE 1 HERE

Within-country analysis

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[8] The models are estimated using Gibbs sampling run for 150,000 iterations with a burn-in period of 50,000 iterations and one chain. Section E in the Appendix reports the diagnostics.
[9] Predicted differences at the means of the continuous variables and at the reference of categorical variables.

Political support among winners and losers and the resulting gap between the two groups might be present not only between countries but also within them. We begin from the within-country analysis, following the model set-up. The standard deviation of the survey-level random effects for the effect of being a loser, reported at the bottom of Table 1, indicates that substantial variation exists across surveys. Figure 1 illustrates the trends in the winner-loser gap, i.e. the within-country variation.

FIGURE 1 HERE

The two trends are not very different and the gaps are not stable in European countries. For instance, in Austria there is a worsening of the gap in 2010, and a reduction in later years; in Estonia, Finland and France, the trend seems to be negative overall; Germany has few ups and downs over the period analysed; in Norway or Portugal the negative trend that can be seen up to 2008/10 and is reversed afterwards; and in other countries such as Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom the trends are more rigid. In the end, the analysis shows that the winner-loser gap does not stay still over time, extending this finding to a larger pool of countries (Anderson et al. 2005).

Given that variation in the winner-loser gap in support is found within countries, do time-varying survey-level variables explain it? The structure of the political system, its processes and performance measured as group-mean centred scores are used to capture within-country effects on the winner-loser gap in support. The coefficients (v) in Table 1 indicate that within-country changes in the executives-parties, quality of government and economic performance do not matter. Indeed, the three indices are not associated with a reduction or an enlargement in the winner-loser gap within countries, either for satisfaction with democracy or trust in parliament. This finding does not support our expectations regarding the effects of contextual conditions on the gap, when considering longitudinal variation. In fact, we find neither an increase nor a decrease in the distance between the two groups. Figure 2 illustrates the lack of association between survey-level factors and the winner-loser gap in support. The lines

indicate that as the values of the three within-country variables increase, the gap between winners and losers neither narrows nor widens.

FIGURE 2 HERE

This does not imply that the factors considered are completely irrelevant for the political support expressed by the two groups. Figure 3 illustrates the effects for the two groups.[10] The panels reveal that two survey-level predictors have an association with political support among losers as well as winners. While improving quality of government and economic performance variables do not reduce the tension among winners and losers, in any case they favour political support in both groups.

FIGURE 3 HERE

This is in line with previous research showing an overall positive effect of the quality of institutions and macro-economic conditions on political support over time (Quaranta & Martini 2016; van Erkel & van der Meer 2016; Wagner et al. 2009). In addition, while losers still filter the political realm according to their electoral status (Gerber & Green 1999; Bartels 2002; Green et al. 2002), they let conflicting information through; when contextual conditions improve, their political support also grows on average, in line with the studies, mostly on the United States, showing parallelism of opinions among voters (Enns & McAvoy 2012). Indeed, the lack of effect of contextual conditions on the winner-loser gap is because they have a similar impact on support on the two groups of respondents, not because they do not have any.

Overall, these findings suggest that an over-time effect of the input factor on the winner-loser gap in support is not present, so H1a is not supported by data. Similar conclusions may be

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[10] Tables D2 and D3 in the Appendix report the estimates for the two groups.

drawn for the effects output factors. They do not attenuate or widen the gap on a longitudinal level, contrasting with H2a and H3a. This is not the result of a null effect but of a similar reaction in terms of direction and rate of the two groups to changing conditions in contextual output.

Between-country analysis

We now look at the between-country variation in political support among winners and losers. The bottom of Table 1 reports the standard deviation of the country-level random effect of being an electoral loser. This shows that considerable variation can be found between countries. Figure 4 shows the winner-loser gap across countries. As before, it seems that there are no marked differences between the two indicators of political support among the countries analysed. The figure indicates that across all countries the gap between winners and losers is consistently distant from the zero line, pointing to the fact that these two groups have clearly distinguishable levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament. Nevertheless, countries do not have similar gaps. Indeed, the gaps in satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament range from maximums of -0.22 and -0.33 to minimums of -1.28 and -1.07 respectively. The countries with narrower gaps between winners and losers seem to be the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland and Belgium. At the bottom of the distribution we see Cyprus, Hungary, Croatia, France and Spain.

FIGURE 4 HERE

Thus, we assess whether the country-averaged scores measuring the institutional structure, quality of government and economic performance explain the winner-loser gaps in both satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament across countries. The coefficients (λ) show that the executives-parties index predicts the variation in the winner-loser gaps in both satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament, while those of the other two variables do not. In other words, an increase of one point in the executives-parties index across countries corresponds to a reduction of the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy of about

0.168, and of trust in parliament of about 0.158, confirming our expectation regarding the role of structure between countries, as suggested by H1b.

Figure 5 illustrates the association between the three country-level variables and the winner-loser gap. When power is more concentrated in the executive, the winner-loser gap tends to be more pronounced across countries. Instead, more consensual democracies, where power is more dispersed among parties and other actors, have a narrower gap between winners and losers.[11] Last, Figure 5 clearly illustrates that the quality of the processes and the performance of the political system do not bridge the gap in political support and neither do they increase it, not supporting H2b and H3b.

FIGURE 5 HERE

Although the quality of government and economic performance do not account for the winner-loser gap between countries, this does not imply that these variables do not matter for political support among losers and winners. Figure 6 illustrates how support among winners and losers changes along the scores of the three country-level variables. Variation in the structure of the system does not affect the level of support among winners but it is associated with an increase in support among losers, which is about one point across the range of the contextual independent variable. A stronger effect on losers is, thus, the source of a reduction in the gap, as anticipated by H1b. Instead, the effect of the quality of government increases political support of both losers and winners significantly. In addition, cross-country differences in economic performance correspond to greater support among losers and winners, although the associations are not sufficiently precise. Therefore, although output factors do not narrow the gap, they improve the support of both groups.

FIGURE 6 HERE

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[11] Belgium has a higher score on the executives-parties index than other countries. No differences were found if it is excluded from the analysis.

To sum up, the structure of the political system seems to narrow the gap between winners and losers, as it has a more marked effect on political support among losers than that among winners (Anderson et al. 2005). The other contextual conditions affect political support among winners and losers to the same extent, leaving the distance unaltered. The quality of the political process and economic performance do not seem to have a converging effect on the winner-loser gap (e.g. Dahlberg & Linde 2016). At the same time, the filter due to electoral status does not enlarge the gap either, so that the consent of losers and winners remains unchanged (Gerber & Green 1999; Bartels 2002; Green et al. 2002), and is higher where quality of government and, to some extent, economic performance are better.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Democratic consolidation and stability may depend on the level of consent expressed by electoral losers and their willingness to accept the election outcome. Thus, it is fundamental to understand which contextual factors narrows the winner-loser gap in political support.

Our results show that the winner-loser gap is present over a relatively long period and in a fairly large number of countries. This extends previous research on the topic and provides evidence of a variation in support across the two groups over time, and not only across countries. Moreover, results indicate which contextual factors capturing the input and the output side of political systems predict the winner-loser gap.

With respect to the impact of the input side of the system, the results confirm that the institutional structure is the only factor to have a role in mitigating the gap across countries. While lower gaps are present in more consensual arrangements, an increase over time in the degree of institutional inclusiveness does not necessarily lead to a reduction of the gap in the same country. In this respect, the effect of winning and losing an election is the result of regular experience with the democratic game, so it is possible that a change in the structure of

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the system may take some time to translate into a change in the distance between the two groups. All in all, our findings provide further support for explanations emphasizing the contingent effect of consensual institutions in reducing differences between winners and losers (Anderson & Guillory 1997; Bernauer & Vatter 2012; Singh 2014), but we recommend that future investigations also consider the temporal dimension.

When considering the role of output, we do not find either an increase or a decrease in the gap in political support between winners and losers. On the contrary, we find a positive effect of the quality of government and economic performance on the two groups both across countries and over time. This is very interesting because, while we confirm that losers are less supportive than winners, on average they are more satisfied with democracy and more trustful of national parliaments in periods and countries in which the political process and performance are better. This suggests that, despite the bias due to their electoral status, winners and losers are not indifferent to current information, nor do they necessarily favour what agrees with their orientations, reacting in a similar way to changing contexts (e.g. Gerber & Green 1999; Bartels 2002; Green et al. 2002). In this respect, our research contrasts with recent work showing that output factors contribute to a reduction in the gap in support (Dahlberg & Linde 2016). This might be due to the use of different data sources and indicators measuring the quality of the democratic process, but also to the varying number of countries and years selected. Thus, future research should consider measurement and design issues when investigating the winner-loser gap. In short, our findings suggest that the gap remains stable in contexts and periods, regardless of the quality of the political process and economic performance, as the consent of losers increases at the same rate and magnitude as that of winners.

Taken together, this article suggests some important points. When studying the factors that attenuate the impact of election outcomes on political support, we should not restrict our attention to factors related to the institutional structure alone. Indeed, if we look at the conditions reducing the gap, the input factors have a prominent role. However, when focusing on the consent of losers, the output factors turn out to be at least as important as the input. To do this, we need to consider what contextual factors narrow the gap, while also investigating their heterogeneous effects on each group. This allows us to study the sources of the gap and

the potential mechanisms through which the groups react to different contextual conditions. Last, it is important to study not only the contextual conditions affecting the gap across countries, but also how changes in such conditions affect the variation in the gap over time.

All in all, our findings imply that a cognitive and emotional effect of losing may exist. People are biased in the support they express towards the system, depending on their electoral status. However, they are not averse to changes in the context and, particularly, good output records. Therefore, the good news is that attitudes towards democratic institutions depend not only on which group the voters belong to but also on whether the system is able to deliver economic wealth and affluence through a fair democratic process.

This article has studied the effects of input and output contextual factors on the winner-loser gap in support, taking into consideration both spatial and temporal variation. Future research could pursue a similar strategy by differentiating between types of winners and losers. We assumed that winners and losers are all the same, yet they could perceive changes in contextual conditions differently because of other personal characteristics. This would allow us to explore further the connections between micro and macro-level conditions when studying political legitimacy among different groups of citizens.

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Table 1. Linear random-intercepts and slopes three-level models predicting satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament among winners, and the winner-loser gap (the effect of being an electoral loser) in satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament between and within countries in Europe, 2012-2015.

	Satisfaction with democracy (1)		Trust in parliament (2)	
	est.	95% c.i.	est.	95% c.i.
Political support among winners				
Intercept, μ_α	4.553	[4.512; 4.595]	3.649	[3.608; 3.690]
Survey-level				
Executives-parties index, γ_1	-0.001	[-0.200; 0.199]	0.141	[-0.038; 0.316]
Quality of government index, γ_2	0.660	[0.184; 1.141]	0.975	[0.548; 1.402]
Economic performance index, γ_3	0.029	[0.017; 0.040]	0.034	[0.024; 0.044]
Country-level				
Executives-parties index, θ_1	0.025	[-0.232; 0.278]	-0.037	[-0.270; 0.195]
Quality of government index, θ_2	0.587	[0.305; 0.867]	0.526	[0.261; 0.788]
Economic performance index, θ_3	0.023	[-0.024; 0.071]	0.035	[-0.008; 0.078]
Winner-loser gap in political				
Intercept, μ_β	-0.703	[-0.753; -0.653]	-0.638	[-0.688; -0.588]
Survey-level				
Executives-parties index, ν_1	0.055	[-0.084; 0.194]	-0.029	[-0.165; 0.108]
Quality of government index, ν_2	0.038	[-0.291; 0.371]	0.152	[-0.171; 0.479]
Economic performance index, ν_3	0.002	[-0.006; 0.010]	-0.002	[-0.010; 0.006]
Country-level				
Executives-parties index, λ_1	0.168	[0.017; 0.321]	0.158	[0.027; 0.295]
Quality of government index, λ_2	0.002	[-0.172; 0.172]	0.009	[-0.142; 0.159]
Economic performance index, λ_1	0.012	[-0.017; 0.041]	0.013	[-0.012; 0.038]
Variance components				
Response, σ_y	2.141	[2.135; 2.147]	2.202	[2.196; 2.208]
Political support among winners				
Survey-level, σ_α	0.411	[0.365; 0.467]	0.369	[0.327; 0.420]
Country-level, σ_δ	0.534	[0.406; 0.733]	0.486	[0.366; 0.671]
Winner-loser gap in political support				
Survey-level, σ_β	0.260	[0.226; 0.301]	0.254	[0.221; 0.293]
Country-level, σ_ω	0.312	[0.235; 0.432]	0.262	[0.199; 0.360]
Correlations				
Survey-level, $\rho_{\alpha\beta}$	-0.129	[-0.307; 0.064]	-0.066	[-0.254; 0.130]
Country-level, $\rho_{\delta\omega}$	-0.215	[-0.563; 0.201]	-0.053	[-0.449; 0.363]
Deviance	1108933.629		1108933.629	

Note: based on 10,000 MCMC draws. Respondents for model (1): 248,238; respondents for model (2): 251,093. Number of surveys: 162. Number of countries: 30. Entries are posterior medians and posterior 95% intervals (in brackets). The models include the following individual-level variables: non-identified voter, non-identified non-voter, gender, age, employment status, feeling about income, education, party identification, political interest, tv usage, and ideology. Full models are shown in Table D1 in the Appendix. Continuous variables are mean-centred.

Figure 1. The winner-loser gap (the effect of being an electoral loser) in satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament within European countries, with 95% intervals.
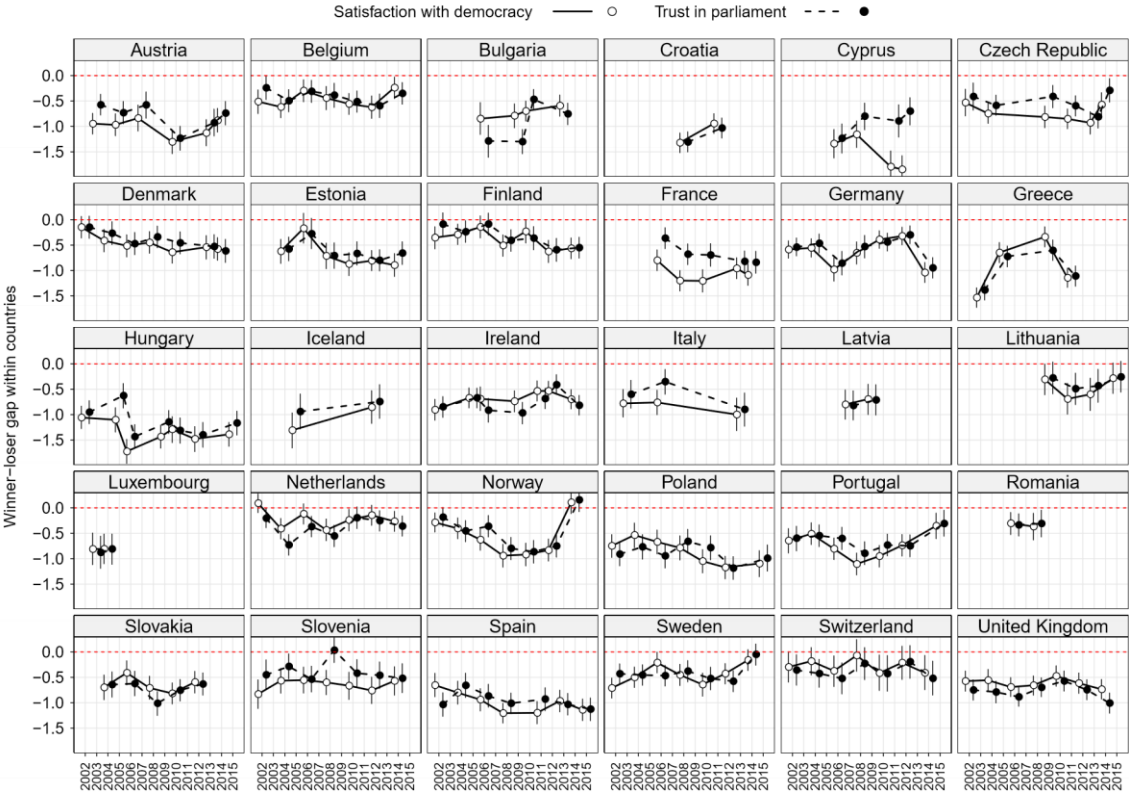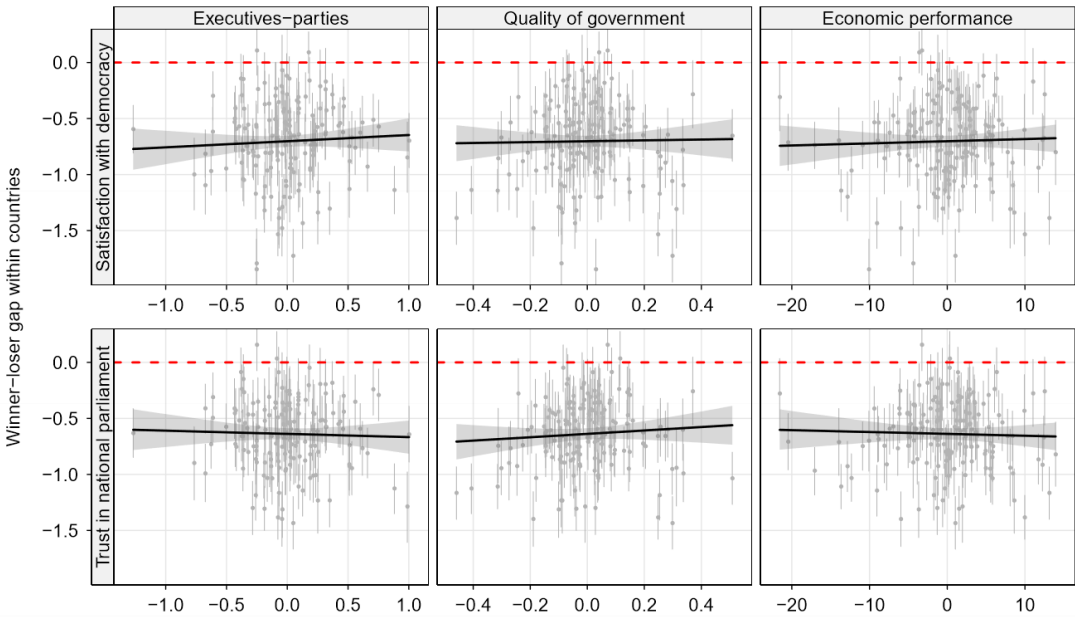

Figure 2. The effect of the executives-parties index, quality of government index and economic performance index on the winner-loser gap (the effect of being an electoral loser) in satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament within European countries, with 95% intervals.

Figure 3. The effect of the executives-parties index, quality of government index and economic performance index on the level of satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament among winners and losers within European countries, with 95% intervals.
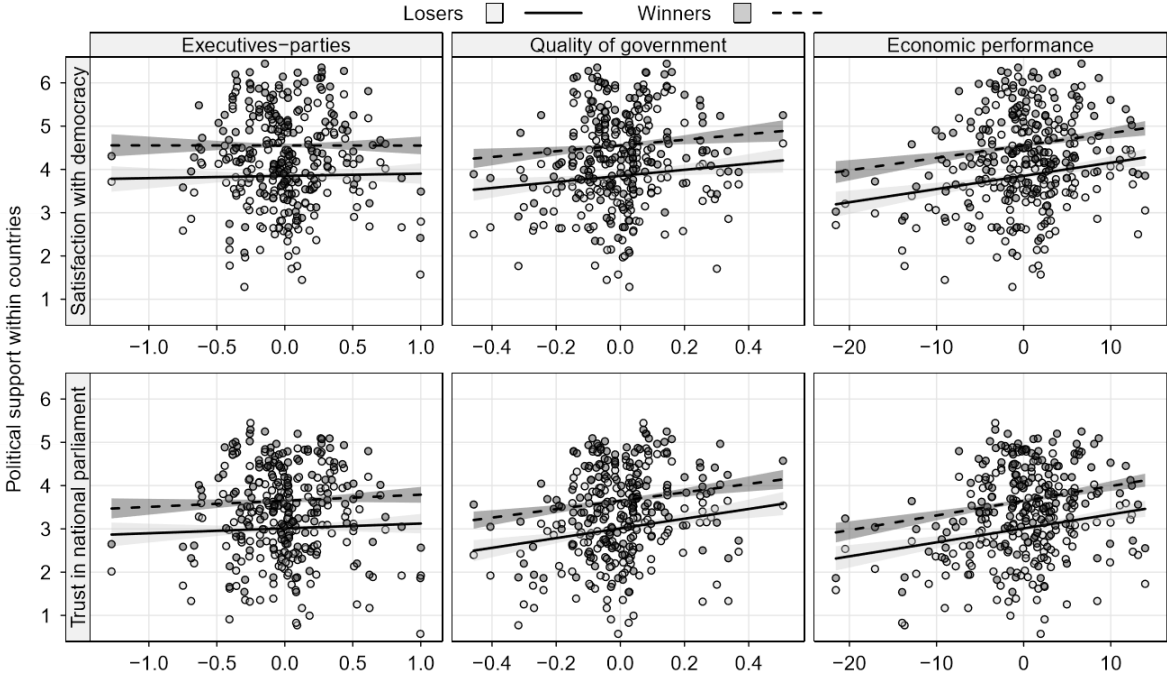

Figure 4. The winner-loser gap (the effect of being an electoral loser) in satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament between European countries, with 95% intervals (sorted).
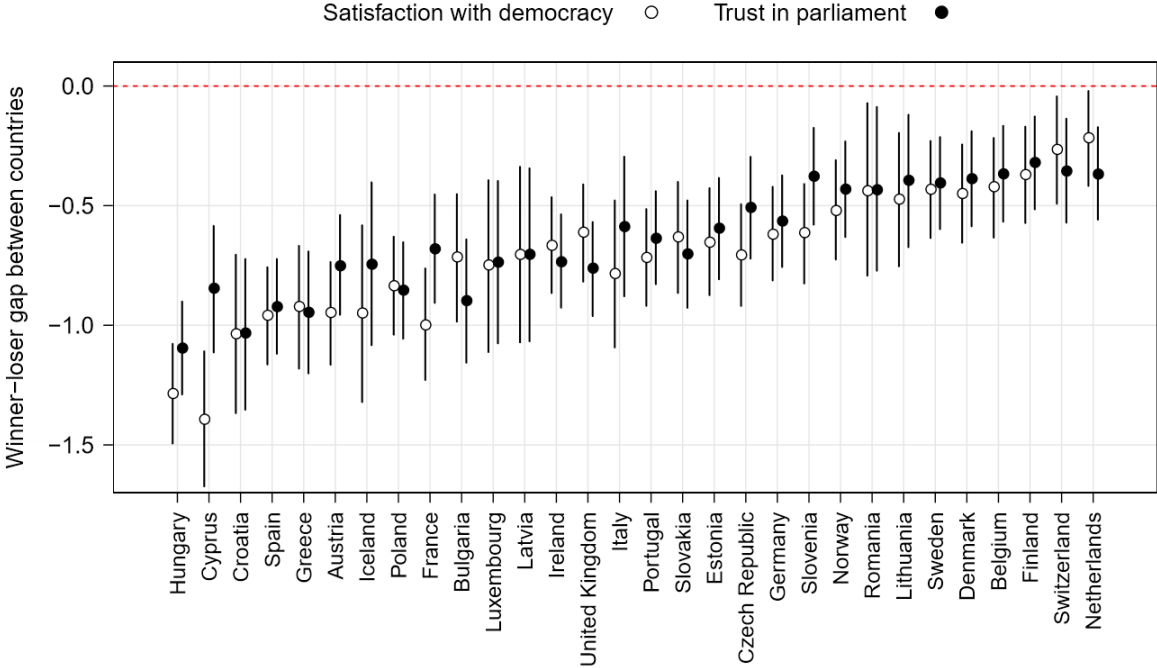
Figure 5. The effect of the executives-parties index, quality of government index and economic performance index on the winner-loser gap (the effect of being an electoral loser) in satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament between European countries, with 95% intervals.
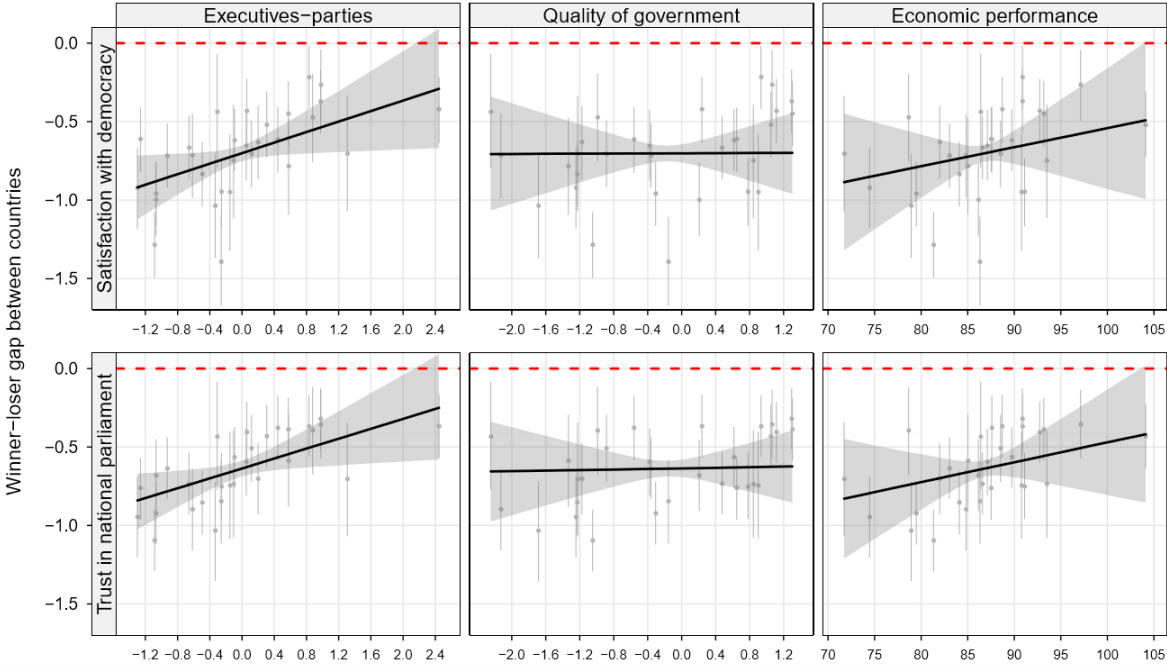

Figure 6. The effect of the executives-parties index, quality of government index and economic performance index on the level of satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament among winners and losers between European countries, with 95% intervals.