Good loser messages support democracy

September 5 2022, by Ulrika Lundin

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Citizens sometimes just have to live with political decisions they dislike or think are unfair. But if their preferred party leaders communicate that

the decisions have been made properly, the feeling of unfairness can diminish according to research from the University of Gothenburg.

Accepting political losses is crucial for democracy. But it's also challenging to be a good loser. A good loser has to accept that the other side has got what they want and that it's their rules that apply.

"Accepting a political loss is, however, predicated on the game having been played by the rules without cheating," says political scientist Peter Esaiasson.

There is a difference between losing an election and losing when concrete decisions are made between elections. Contested elections can lead to conflicts over the control of state power, like when the losing side refuses to accept the outcome of elections. Concrete decisions on, for example, higher fuel taxes, the closure of schools and the expansion of wind power affect people more directly. Over time, a feeling that decisions are unfair can lead to citizens losing faith in the legitimacy of the democratic system.

"Losers in politics easily get prejudiced. The loser might feel that the decision-making process was flawed. But if the loser side routinely blames the other side for winning unfairly, the incumbent government's ability to deal with societal challenges will be undermined," say the researchers.

In the study, Peter Esaiasson, together with two researchers from the universities in Bergen Norway and Leuven in Belgium, explored how citizens on the losing side react to concrete political decisions made between elections. It's been known for some time that people on the political losing side are inclined to find more shortcomings in decision-making processes than those on the winning side. This theory was confirmed in the study's three survey experiments involving a total of

4,700 adult citizens in Sweden and Norway.

What's new about this study is that the researchers investigated whether politicians on the losing side can help motivate their voters to be good losers. On election night, the losing party leaders usually hold speeches for their sympathizers with the message that they lost in a fair fight and that they accept the outcome of the election—"the voters have spoken, and we have taken that on board." In the experiments, the researchers transferred these good loser messages to controversial political decisions between elections, and allowed participants in the experiments to react under different sets of conditions.

In the three experiments, participants were asked to respond to a proposal to introduce a local ban on begging in public places. The third experiment also added a question about road user charges for diesel cars, which was being widely discussed in Norway at the time of the experiment.

"The results show that voters on the losing side who received a good loser message from their political leaders were less inclined to find fault with the political decision-making process than the losers who did not receive this kind of message," say the researchers.

The perceived sense of unfairness among the political losers is thus reduced if party leaders on the losing side simply remind their supporters of the rules of democracy and that the procedure that led to the decision was, after all, not flawed.

"Good loser messages must confirm that the losing camp has a point before the party leader reminds them of the rules of the game. Party leaders should therefore confirm that it is wrong to raise the retirement age for public sector employees, to close the local school or whatever, and only then remind their sympathizers of the obligations entailed in a

democracy, just as they do on election night," says Peter Esaiasson.

The results of the study suggest that political leaders can help to maintain respect between political camps in the context of political controversies between elections. The proposed measure of good loser messages requires no more from party leaders than acting between the elections in the way that they usually do on the night of the elections by publicly acknowledging the rules of the game in a democracy.

Published in *Comparative Political Studies*, the study was based on three research experiments involving a total of 4,700 adult citizens in Sweden and Norway.

In the experiments, participants were asked to imagine that politicians in their municipality were discussing a local ban on begging in public places and in one of the experiments also road user charges for diesel cars. The participants were asked whether they wanted these proposals to be approved or rejected and how important the issue was to them personally. They were asked to indicate on a scale of four how they felt about the decision from "not fair at all" to "very fair."

Some of the participants were told that the leader of the main opposition party thought that the decision was bad. Other participants received the same message, but with an added message where the party leader expressed their confidence in the fairness of the decision-making process.

More information: Peter Esaiasson et al, How to be Gracious about Political Loss—The Importance of Good Loser Messages in Policy Controversies, *Comparative Political Studies* (2022). DOI: 10.1177/00104140221109433

Provided by Swedish Research Council

Citation: Good loser messages support democracy (2022, September 5) retrieved 16 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2022-09-good-loser-messages-democracy.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.