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Winners, Losers, and Perceived Mandates: Voter Explanations  
of the 1998 Gubernatorial and 2000 Presidential Elections in Florida

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**Abstract:** Elections are sometimes seen as legitimizing institutions, promoting system-level support among citizens by providing them with input into the political process. However, prior research has found that is less true among the supporters of losing candidates, who often exhibit lower levels of political trust and satisfaction with democracy. We analyze two statewide surveys in Florida (following the gubernatorial and senatorial elections of 1998, and the controversial presidential election of 2000), and find that (1) losers do exhibit lower levels of political trust, satisfaction with democracy, and beliefs that government is responsive to citizens; (2) losers also are more likely to endorse "sour grapes" rationalizations of the election outcome, and less likely to accept "mandate" interpretations; (3) the meanings that voters ascribe to the election mediate the relationship between winning/losing and political trust, but have limited effects on other system support variables; and (4) perceptions of procedural fairness moderate the relationships between candidate support and system support. These findings suggest that the so-called legitimizing function of elections is far from a universal phenomenon.

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Elections are at the core of democratic politics. At least in principle if not always in fact, they provide citizens with a chance to express their policy views and priorities, to participate directly in the political process, and to hold elected leaders accountable for their actions (Kornberg and Clarke 1992; Katz 1997); as a result, elections are seen as legitimizing institutions that protect the system by generating popular support and by helping to "confine mass political action to routine, peaceful channels" (Ginsberg 1982: 7). There is, however, an important catch to the argument being made here: According to Ginsberg, "[t]he formal opportunity to participate in elections serves to convince citizens *that the government is responsive to their needs and wishes*" (p. 7, emphasis added).

The catch, of course, is that this probably does not happen as often as one might hope. In particular, it seems unlikely that voters who support the losing candidate(s) in an election will be as quick as those backing the winner to agree that their voices have been heard – especially if (a) as frequently happens, the winner has just spent much of the campaign depicting his or her opponent as a liar, a hypocrite, a scoundrel, an incompetent, and/or as someone who is utterly out of touch with the needs and wants of constituents; or (b) as happens less often, doubts are raised about whether the election itself was conducted in a fair and honest fashion. Prior research indicates that winners and losers do not always respond with equal enthusiasm either to the election outcome, or to the institutions and processes through which that outcome was rendered (Ginsberg and Weissberg 1978; Clarke and Acock 1989; Nadeau and Blais 1993; Anderson and Guillory 1997; Norris 1999; Nadeau, Blais, Neviite, and Gidengil 2000; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; but also see Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson 1997).<sup>1</sup>

In this study, we will explore the possibility that these differential responses are shaped in part by the *interpretations* that citizens give to an election. Specifically, do they believe that the winning side has earned a mandate from the public to pursue its stated policy objectives? Or, alternatively, are they convinced that the margin of victory was attained largely as a result of deception (in campaign communications, including paid ads), serendipity (the luck of unforeseen and uncontrollable events), the unwarranted influence of powerful special interests, or the inability of voters to make an intelligent and rational choice? Further, we want to know whether people's interpretations are grounded in beliefs about the *fairness* of the electoral process itself. It is relatively easy, for example, for winners to believe that the competition was fair, that the outcome was an accurate reflection of public preferences, and that the institutions headed by those who have recently been elected will govern wisely and well and in the best interests of all citizens.

But what about the losers, a number of whom may take campaign attacks against their favored candidate personally? (If I vote for someone who has been branded a scoundrel or a hypocrite, does that make me a scoundrel or a hypocrite as well?) Are they similarly inclined to accept the majority's verdict, and to assume that government officials will be technically competent and at the same time attentive – as the rules of democratic politics suggest that they should be – to the concerns of people like themselves? Even more dramatically, what happens when many on the losing side conclude that the selection process was tainted and that, had the votes been counted accurately, their candidate would have emerged victorious? We will attempt to answer these questions using data from the 1998 governor's race in Florida, and from a

statewide poll (also from Florida) conducted shortly after the contentious presidential election of 2000 finally came to a close. Our findings reveal that winners and losers frequently do have contrasting views about the elections in which they have just competed, and that these views play a significant role in shaping citizens' attitudes toward broader political institutions and processes.

### **Congratulation-Rationalization and Procedural Fairness**

Perhaps it is true that by effectively "co-opting" citizens, elections can "help to increase popular support for political leaders and for the regime itself" (Ginsberg 1982: 7). At the level of national policy, for example, governments over the years have frequently used the expansion of suffrage as a means for inducing people "to rally to the nation's defense and willingly bear the cost and sacrifice of war" (p. 16), or to accept an increase in the amount of taxes they must pay (p. 18). At the level of individual behavior, it appears that orientations such as trust, efficacy, and satisfaction with democracy tend to be at least somewhat more positive among those who vote or otherwise participate in the political process (Ginsberg and Weissberg 1978; Finkel 1985, 1987; Nadeau and Blais 1993; Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson 1997; Joslyn 1999; Joslyn and Cigler 2001; also see Cigler and Getter 1977).<sup>2</sup> Yet election campaigns are, in many instances, extremely competitive and hard-fought contests that produce winners, losers, and hard feelings on both sides.

One would expect hard feelings to be especially acute among those who end up on the short end of the stick; accordingly, insofar as the generation of political support is concerned, it is the

losers' reactions [that] are absolutely crucial. Winners are likely to be overwhelmingly satisfied with a process through which the party or candidate they voted for gets elected. Losers' support is less obvious. That support requires the recognition of the legitimacy of a procedure that has produced an outcome deemed to be undesirable (Nadeau and Blais 1993: 553).

A crucial aspect of legitimacy has to do with losers' acceptance of the election outcome as valid, and with their willingness to consent to the winners' rightful authority to implement policies advocated during the campaign – policies to which losers may be strongly opposed. In a broader sense, the persistence of democratic institutions would seem to depend on the acknowledgement by winners and losers alike that "the people" are capable of casting their ballots in a wise and thoughtful manner, i.e., that the decisions rendered at the polls are not frivolous, and that the idea of democracy itself is not a sham.

Many years ago, John Kingdon (1966: 23-34) discovered something that he called the *congratulation-rationalization* effect among winning and losing candidates: The former, as it happened, were much more likely than the latter to believe that voters were at least reasonably well informed, and that they usually made the "right" decision at the polls for the "right" reasons (especially in terms of voting for the better candidate rather than the party label). Winners were thus inclined to congratulate the electorate – and, indirectly, themselves – for its good judgment, while losers rationalized their defeat by assuming that voters had failed to meet their responsibilities as democratic citizens. In the present study, we will look for evidence of this

phenomenon not among candidates but at the mass level; that is, we will examine in some detail the *meaning* attached to two separate election outcomes by voters themselves. In other words, why was Jeb Bush elected governor of Florida in 1998? Was it because people were attracted to his conservative policy agenda, his commitment to dealing with the state's most serious problems, and his charismatic leadership? Or was it because of the support he received from special interests, the fact of his having a famous political name, and the sheer ignorance of voters who weren't smart enough to make the correct decision?

Similarly, what factors contributed to George W. Bush's presidential win in 2000? Did voters respond primarily to his conservative politics, his character (especially in contrast to that of his predecessor), and his promise to end the partisan conflict that characterized relations between Congress and the White House during the Clinton era? Or did Bush benefit more from Al Gore's lack of personal charisma, the gullibility of voters who were deceived into supporting someone who was more ideologically extreme than he claimed to be, and the failure of state and local officials to ensure an honest vote tally on election day? The surveys on which our analysis is based were conducted soon after the two elections in question,<sup>3</sup> so the impressions recorded then may have subsequently been modified by exposure to the interpretations offered by the media, political activists, and other opinion leaders (e.g., see Hershey 1992; Thomas and Baas 1996). Nevertheless, if the experience of winning or losing does influence citizens' beliefs about democracy and/or their willingness to accede to the wishes of the majority, then we will surely find evidence to that effect in the views expressed shortly after those wishes became known.

It is our belief that if winners are indeed more likely than losers to extend legitimacy to the victor (and feel positively toward government and the political process in general), this tendency is due in part to systematic differences in how the two groups construe the meaning of an election. The two hypotheses that form the core of our argument can be stated as follows:

*Hypothesis 1.* Citizens who support winning candidates are more likely than those who support losers to have a sense of trust in government, to believe that the system is responsive to people like themselves, to be satisfied with the democratic process as a whole, and to regard the election outcome as a legitimate expression of the public's will.

*Hypothesis 2.* The relationship between winning/losing and political evaluations is mediated by citizens' beliefs about whether or not the election outcome represented a true mandate, that is, whether the victorious candidate won *because* most voters genuinely preferred his or her policy positions, personal qualities, and/or governing style to those of the opponent. Winners will be more inclined to answer in the affirmative, losers in the negative, and such beliefs should help to account for disparities between the two groups with regard to the orientations outlined above.

The mere existence of a congratulation-rationalization effect among voters would not, of course, constitute a threat to democratic processes. If, however, the propensity for losers to rationalize were linked in turn to diminished support for the government, its leaders, or the political system in general, that would be (at least potentially<sup>4</sup>) a very different matter.

As noted earlier, we also want to determine whether supporters of losing candidates are

more inclined to view the outcome as a true mandate, and consequently less likely to be critical of the winners (and of the institutions winners will lead), when they believe the election has been fairly contested. There is considerable evidence indicating that Americans care about decision-making *processes* as well as outcomes and, specifically, that they will more readily accept "unpalatable binding decisions" made by others if they perceive that those decisions were made in an appropriate manner (Hibbing and Alford 2004: 62; also see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). What constitutes "appropriate" may vary from one situation to the next, but within the electoral context we take it to mean that, for example, there was an open and honest exchange of views during the campaign, that all sides had an opportunity to be heard, that debate centered more on policy than on personality, and that an accurate vote count was taken on election day (cf. Katz 1997).

What we are proposing, then, is that the attitudes of losers are linked to their perceptions of *procedural fairness* (e.g., see Rasinski and Tyler 1988; Tyler, Casper, and Fisher 1989; Weatherford 1992). To be more precise:

*Hypothesis 3*: Losers are more likely to interpret the election outcome as conveying a true mandate and, hence, more likely to trust government, to believe that the system is responsive to people like themselves, to be satisfied with the democratic process as a whole, and to extend a sense of legitimacy to the winner *when they believe that the contest has been fought fairly*. Using the same logic, winners should be less likely to see the election as a mandate, and should tend to exhibit lower levels of trust, efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, and legitimacy if they sense that the rules of competition were somehow rigged to favor one side over the other.

We naturally expect that winners will be more inclined than losers to judge the process in favorable terms. Nevertheless, in most elections there should be enough variance in both camps to permit a test of our argument.

In operational terms, we will look at procedural fairness in two very different ways. First, estimations of the honesty and negativity of the winning Bush campaign are used to tap beliefs about *campaign fairness* in the 1998 Florida governor's race. Although indirect, our approach is based upon the reasonable assumption that voters (especially those who support losers) will be unhappy with a process that forces them to listen to their favored candidate be repeatedly denounced by his or her opponent over a period of several weeks or months – especially if they also believe that the other side's attacks are less than truthful. Accordingly, we will seek to determine whether perceptions of Bush fairness in 1998 helped to condition (in line with Hypothesis 3) the relationships among winning and losing, congratulation-rationalization, and political support.<sup>5</sup> Second, respondents in the spring of 2001 were asked one question about the *conduct of elections* in general and two questions that tapped beliefs relating to the resolution of the Bush-Gore controversy. These items appear to measure perceived procedural fairness in a relatively straightforward fashion and, as a result, they provide us with an excellent opportunity to test Hypothesis 3 within the context of a presidential race.

## **Data and Measures**

The present study is based on two telephone polls conducted from November 10-22, 1998 and March 24-April 5, 2001 by the *Florida Voter* survey organization. Both designs were statewide cross-sectional surveys, with respondents being chosen randomly from a list of all registered voters; only those whose names were chosen from the list were actually interviewed. Up to four call backs were attempted on all working numbers and initial refusals. The margin of error in each instance is plus or minus four percentage points.<sup>6</sup>

The principal dependent variables that we will be examining in our analysis are as follows (see the appendix for complete question wordings):

Political Trust (1998, 2001): (1) how often people who run government can be trusted to do the right thing; (2) is government is run by a few big interests or for benefit of all the people?

External Efficacy (1998): (1) do people have final say about how the country is run? (2) can public officials be made to listen to what the people think?<sup>7</sup>

Responsiveness of Government (2001): (1) how much attention government pays to what people think; (2) how much elections make government pay attention.

Satisfaction with Democracy (2001): respondent's satisfaction with how democracy works in the United States.

Bush Legitimacy (2001): whether respondent sees George W. Bush as legitimate president of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Although political trust is the only variable that is equivalent in both surveys, we see external efficacy and responsiveness as tapping essentially the same thing, i.e., beliefs about whether the political system allows for ordinary citizens to be heard by, and to exert influence on the actions of, governmental decision makers (see Craig et al. 1990: 293).

The central independent (dummy) variable is operationalized in terms of a respondent's support for the winning (Jeb Bush, George W. Bush) or losing (Buddy MacKay, Al Gore) candidate in the 1998 Florida governor's and 2000 U. S. presidential elections, respectively, regardless of whether that person actually reported having voted on election day.<sup>9</sup> Congratulation-rationalization is measured by respondents' assessment of how well several statements (see appendix) applied to the two races. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that most of the 1998 statements load on one of two dimensions, which we call (1) *sour grapes*, reflecting a belief that the outcome turned on factors other than a genuine preference among voters for the winning candidate's policy views, character, and/or leadership skills; and (2) *campaign/strategy*, reflecting a more or less objective assessment of some of the elements that seemed to play a role in shaping the Bush-MacKay contest. Thus, people with high scores on the sour grapes dimension in 1998 believed that Jeb Bush was elected because of his famous name, disarray among the Democrats, help from special interests, and voter ignorance; they tended to reject the notion that Bush's victory was attributable either to his conservative philosophy (smaller government/lower taxes) or to voters' perceptions that he was better able than his opponent to deal with the state's problems. Those who scored high on campaign/strategy felt the outcome hinged on Bush's charisma, his reaching out to minorities, his post-1994 movement toward the ideological center, and his opponent's unrelenting negativism. Because all four of these accounts

reflect a presumed Bush strength or MacKay weakness, we expect supporters of the Republican candidate to score at least somewhat higher than those backing the Democrat.

Factor analysis of the 2001 data also yielded two dimensions, except this time the distinction between them is more easily interpretable than was the case in 1998. Once again, we have (1) *sour grapes*, which reflects the belief that voters were either misled or manipulated into making a poor decision; and (2) *true mandate*, which involves an acceptance that the electorate's choice conveyed a genuine preference for the winner in one or more key areas. Individuals who scored high on sour grapes indicated that George W. Bush won because of his backing from special interests, voters' lack of intelligence, their failure to reward properly the Democrats for its strong economic performance during the Clinton years, and Bush's ability to fool people into thinking he was less right-wing than he actually was. In contrast, high scores on the true mandate dimension reflected a belief that voters chose Bush because of his conservative views, his commitment to improving the working relationship between White House and Capitol Hill, his ability to handle the nation's important problems, and the expectation that he would be honest and not embarrass the office of the presidency as had his predecessor.

As noted earlier, we tried to capture the notion of procedural fairness in a couple of ways. First, in 1998, we reasoned that people (especially losers) would not conclude that the process was unfair simply because the other side went negative during the campaign; however, if they were believed to have been less than honest (relying on distortion and innuendo, if not outright lies) in doing so, that might be a different story. Following this logic, we included dummy variables reflecting respondents' beliefs about whether Bush's ads were untruthful, beliefs about whether the tone of the Bush campaign was negative, and an interaction between the two. Our measure of procedural (un)fairness in 2001 is more direct: a three-item *unfair elections* index based upon beliefs about the fairness of campaigns generally, whether Bush won only because the votes in Florida were not counted properly (a question that was originally included in our congratulation-rationalization battery, but did not load clearly on either factor), and whether the Supreme Court decision in *Bush vs. Gore* was based on political considerations.<sup>10</sup> Although these two indicators are not strictly comparable, we believe that each reflects an aspect of the process concerns that are so important in shaping citizens' opinions about government and politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).<sup>11</sup>

## Results

Our first hypothesis states that citizens who favor winners are more likely than those who prefer losers to express positive orientations toward the government, its leaders, and the political system in general. Results from the left-hand portion of table 1 are mixed: Supporters of 1998 gubernatorial winner Jeb Bush were indeed less trustful of government than respondents who backed loser Buddy MacKay, though there are no significant differences between the two groups in terms of their feelings of external efficacy. The pattern for 2000, however, is entirely in line with our predications: Those who preferred George W. Bush for president were significantly more trustful, more likely to believe that the system is responsive, more satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States, and more likely to accept Bush as legitimate even in light

of the ongoing controversy over the Florida vote count. Under the circumstances (including the 2000 figures for governmental responsiveness), we are inclined to believe that the null results for efficacy in 1998 are less an exception to the general rule than a reflection of measurement unreliability (see note 8). Overall, hypothesis 1 is handsomely confirmed.

Table 1 about here

We should point out, by the way, that Bush-MacKay was not the only major statewide election on Florida's ballot in 1998. In addition to various Cabinet offices that were up for grabs, there was a relatively high-visibility U. S. Senate contest between Democratic incumbent Bob Graham and Republican challenger Charlie Crist – and in this instance, the Democrat won by roughly the same margin as did Bush in the governor's race. Although one might imagine that half a loaf would be better than none, and that the negative effects of backing MacKay would be ameliorated by being a Senate winner, the reality is that Bush-MacKay was clearly the glamour matchup of 1998 in terms of media coverage (both national and statewide); it also was a contest that each side felt it had a chance to win, and one that each wanted badly. At the same time, it may be that gubernatorial (executive) elections are *typically* viewed by voters as more important than legislative contests, even when the latter involves one of a mere hundred Senate seats in Washington. Whatever the explanation, our data (not shown here, but see table 2 below) reveal that it was Senate losers, i.e., those who backed Crist (and, most of the time, Jeb Bush as well), who came away from the election with a more positive attitude toward government.<sup>12</sup>

Our second hypothesis asserts that winners and losers tend to offer different explanations for why the victorious candidate won, and that these explanations mediate the relationship between election outcome and political evaluations. The first part of the argument is confirmed by results presented in the bottom portion of table 1. In 1998, MacKay supporters scored, on average (1) substantially higher on the sour grapes index, that is, they were more likely to believe that Bush won because of his famous name, discord among the Democrats, help from the special interests, and voters' failure to understand the issues, and less likely to accept that Bush was preferred because of his conservative views and perceived competence; and (2) slightly (but significantly) lower on the campaign/strategy index, that is, they were less likely to attribute the election outcome to Bush's personal (charisma) and strategic (reaching out to minorities, running toward the center, finding the right balance of positive and negative messages) effectiveness as a campaigner. Similarly, Gore supporters in 2000 scored (1) much higher on sour grapes, that is, they felt the presidential election turned on such factors as the influence of special interests and the shortcomings of ordinary voters (not giving Democrats enough credit for a strong economy, letting themselves be misled about Bush's ideological leanings, and their inability to understand the issues); and (2) considerably lower on the true mandate index, that is, they were less likely to believe that Bush won because of his conservative policies, perceived competence, honesty, and pledge to work more effectively with Congress. All of these differences are as expected.

In order to verify that the patterns here are not simply a product of partisanship, we estimated multivariate logit models with controls for party identification, interest in politics, and beliefs about campaign fairness.<sup>13</sup> As shown in table 2, support for the gubernatorial winner (and

for the same-party senatorial loser) remains strongly and negatively associated with a sour grapes interpretation of the election outcome in 1998, even with the effects of these other variables taken into account. However, while Bush (but not Graham) supporters also tend to score higher on the campaign/strategy index, the coefficient is only marginally significant ( $p = 0.06$ ). Results are more clear-cut in 2000, with supporters of George W. Bush being much more likely both to reject a sour grapes explanation of the election, and to endorse the idea that Bush's victory represented a true mandate from voters. It is noteworthy that winning/losing has an impact on congratulation/rationalization even with party identification (significant on its own in 2000 but not in 1998) held constant. We also are struck by the role played by our procedural fairness variables. In 1998, beliefs about the relative negativity of Jeb Bush's campaign ads are associated with both congratulation/rationalization indices; further, the Bush unfairness interaction term (untruthful \* negativity) exerts an independent effect in the first equation, i.e., respondents who felt that Bush's ads were both untruthful and negative tended to reject a sour grapes explanation. In 2000, those who scored high on the unfair elections index were more likely to endorse sour grapes and less likely to believe that the outcome represented a genuine mandate for the new president. We will return to the matter of procedural fairness momentarily.

Table 2 about here

Hypothesis 2 suggests not only that supporters of winning and losing candidates tend to view the outcome in different ways, but that interpretations of what the election "means" serve to *mediate* the relationship between candidate preference and political evaluations such as trust, external efficacy, governmental responsiveness, satisfaction with democracy, and legitimacy (see table 1). The evidence for this argument is mixed, especially in 1998 where the relationship to be mediated is quite weak (or nonexistent) to start with. We saw earlier that Jeb Bush supporters were more trustful, but no more externally efficacious, than those who backed Buddy MacKay for governor. The initial multivariate results (model 1) shown in table 3 confirm that winning/losing has no discernible effect on external efficacy and only a modest impact ( $p = .07$  for the gubernatorial variable) on trust. Consistent with our second hypothesis, the latter relationship disappears altogether when congratulation/rationalization factors are added to the equation (model 2); specifically, people who offered a sour grapes interpretation of the Bush-MacKay race were, regardless of which candidate they supported in the election (or their party affiliation for that matter), significantly less trustful than those who rejected such an explanation. The campaign/strategy variable is unrelated to either trust or efficacy.

Table 3 about here

Results for 2000 are closer to what we anticipated, at least for political trust. While the first model presented in table 4 shows higher trust among Bush supporters (and Republicans), that relationship disappears in model 2, where the impact of trust appears to be entirely mediated by congratulation/rationalization factors; in other words, individuals who expressed a sour grapes interpretation of Bush's victory were significantly less trusting of government, and those who felt that voters had given the new president a true mandate were significantly more so. Turning to the Bush legitimacy variable, coefficients for winning/losing and party identification are once again

in the expected direction (Bush supporters and Republicans being more likely to view the new president as legitimate); these coefficients are strong and significant, however, not only in model 1 but also (contrary to our second hypothesis) in model 2, when congratulation/rationalization indices are added to the equation. In this case, sour grapes drops by the wayside and beliefs about Bush's mandate emerges as the dominant lens through which citizens ascribe meaning to the election outcome.<sup>14</sup>

Table 4 about here

Neither responsiveness nor satisfaction with democracy follows the expected pattern. The former, which is conceptually very close to external efficacy (Craig et al. 1990) is associated with party identification (Republicans believing government to be more responsive) but not with winning/losing either before or after the introduction of congratulation/rationalization factors. The latter, which on its face appears to be tapping a broader orientation toward the regime rather than attitudes about specific governmental leaders and institutions (but see Canache, Mondak, and Seligson 2001), turns out to be, *ceteris paribus*, unrelated to either winning/losing or partisan affiliation. As we saw with trust and Bush legitimacy, explanations for the election outcome matter more: Both sour grapes and true mandate are significant in the model 2 equation for responsiveness, while true mandate is significant in the model 2 equation for satisfaction with democracy.

What, then, about procedural fairness? Adding the Bush unfairness measures, either singly or interactively, to the 1998 equations (see model 3 in table 3) does not change our results in any meaningful way: Sour grapes remains the only variable that is significantly associated with either political trust or external efficacy. As before, the patterns in 2000 are more complex (see model 3 in table 4): (1) The relationships between both winning/losing and party identification on the one hand, and *political trust* on the other, appear to be moderated by beliefs about the fairness of elections in general, and about the fairness of the 2000 election in particular, as well as by beliefs about whether George W. Bush was given a mandate by voters in that election. The coefficient for sour grapes is no longer significant. (2) The unfair elections index has a strong impact on *Bush legitimacy*, but one that is in addition to the effects registered by winning/losing, partisanship, and beliefs about a true mandate; no mediating effect is evident here. (3) Procedural (un)fairness is negatively associated with *governmental responsiveness* and *satisfaction with democracy*. What is curious in each of these cases is that with beliefs about unfair elections taken into account, the coefficient for winning/losing becomes significant or nearly so ( $p = .05$  and  $.06$ , respectively) – and negative, that is, losers (Gore supporters) more than winners are the ones who feel that government pays attention to its citizens and who feel that democracy is working well in the United States.

### Conclusion

Elections are often characterized as legitimating institutions, especially for citizens who supported the losing candidate and whose willingness to accept the final verdict is supposedly enhanced by the sense that their views have been given a fair and proper hearing during the

course of the campaign. Consistent with prior research, however, our analysis of survey data from the 1998 gubernatorial and 2000 presidential elections in Florida uncovered some fairly substantial differences between winners and losers. Specifically, the latter tend to be less trustful, less certain of the responsiveness of government to popular concerns, less satisfied with the way democracy is working in the United States, and less inclined to extend legitimacy to the winner; they also are less likely to believe that the election outcome represented a genuine mandate from voters, and less generous in their assessments of the fairness of the selection process itself.

Not all of these relationships are strong, and some become weaker or disappear altogether when partisan loyalties are taken into account. Yet neither partisanship, candidate preference, nor the two taken together tell the entire story. First, our results suggest that some elections are more important than others (president more than governor, governor more than senator) in terms of their potential to generate negative sentiments toward governmental leaders and institutions among supporters of the losing candidate. Second, not all evaluative orientations are significantly affected by the outcome of an election (trust and legitimacy appear to be more susceptible than the others considered here, though future research may indicate differently). Third, to the extent that there *is* a relationship between winning/losing and political evaluations, it is sometimes mediated (consistent with our second and third hypotheses) by beliefs about (1) the meaning of the election, or what we refer to as congratulation/rationalization factors; and (2) the fundamental fairness of the process by which the decision was reached. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, congratulation/rationalization and procedural fairness assessments (especially the latter) clearly have impacts of their own, independent of winning/losing and partisanship, on the way citizens feel about government and the political process in general. Overall, our findings confirm that the so-called legitimizing function of elections is far from a universal phenomenon.

### Notes

1. The analysis by Anderson and Guillory suggests that this relationship will vary across contexts, for example, depending upon the degree to which a political system is majoritarian or consensual (Lijphart 1984; also see Norris 1999).

2. A markedly different perspective is offered by Brehm and Rahn (1997; also see Clarke and Acock 1989; Freie 1997).

3. The 1998 survey was done immediately following the election, while in 2000 there was a lag of roughly 3-4 months. If anything, longer interval between the 2000 election and the survey probably makes it less likely that we will find empirical support for our hypothesized differences between winners and losers (see below).

4. The behavioral and systemic consequences of popular discontent are uncertain, though there is evidence to suggest that political trust, efficacy, and support are associated with such things as policy preferences (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Hetherington and Globetti 2002), voting for third-party candidates (Hetherington 1999), support for government-limiting ballot measures (including tax restrictions and term limits; Sears and Citrin 1985; Karp 1995), and compliance with the law (Scholz and Lubell 1998).

5. In the interest of parsimony, we will not examine perceptions of MacKay fairness. Our assumption is that such perceptions were not terribly relevant either for voters who supported MacKay (since any disaffection they felt should depend mainly on whether they believed that the other side had played fair) or for those who supported Bush (since winning the election should override other considerations).

6. The 2001 data have been weighted to correct for a slight imbalance in the distribution of party registrants. Additional information about these polls can be obtained from *Florida Voter* directly (954-584-0204), or from the Graduate Program in Political Campaigning in the Political Science Department at the University of Florida (352-392-0262).

7. These questions represent the regime-based dimension of external efficacy. See Craig, Niemi, and Silver (1990).

8. Each of these concepts were measured on a scale that was recoded to range from 0 to 1, with the latter signifying more positive feelings. For trust, efficacy, and responsiveness, responses were given the mean score based on their answers to the two questions comprising the index. Reliability estimates (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) are as follows: trust 1998 = .670, trust 2001 = .596, efficacy = .250 ( $r = .14$  between the two component items, which probably reflects the severe response set biases that typically plague agree-disagree questions; see Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990), and responsiveness = .654.

9. Almost everyone did (87 percent in 1998, 95 percent in 2000), which is not surprising considering that our sampling frame was registered voters. Nevertheless, when we replicated our using self-reported voters only, the findings reported below were not altered in any meaningful way. In both elections, those who supported the winner received a score of 1, others a score of 0.

10. As with our dependent variables (see note 8), both congratulation-rationalization and procedural fairness were measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 1; higher values indicate (a) a belief that the factors in question contributed to the election of Jeb Bush in 1998 and George W. Bush in 2000; and (b) greater perceived fairness. Reliability estimates (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) are as follows: sour grapes 1998 = .725, sour grapes 2001 = .694, campaign/strategy 1998 = .515, true

mandate 2001 = .784, and procedural fairness 2001 = .757. In order to preserve cases for analysis, we calculated scores based on the mean of at least three non-missing component variables for each of the rationalization-congratulation indices in 1998 and 2001, and the mean of at least two non-missing component variables for the procedural fairness index in 2001.

11. Not surprisingly, Gore supporters in 2001 scored substantially higher on the unfair elections index than did Bush supporters (a mean of 0.62 to 0.11,  $t = 26.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In 1998, those who favored MacKay were much more likely than those backing Bush to believe that the Republican candidate's campaign was negative (54 to 17 percent,  $t = 9.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ), untruthful (44 to 7 percent,  $t = 10.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), or both (31 to 3 percent,  $t = 8.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

12. As with Bush-MacKay, this was true for political trust but not external efficacy. The possibility that some elections are more important than others in shaping people's attitudes also is examined by Anderson and LoTempio (2002).

13. Party identification was measured as the standard seven-point scale ranging from strong Republican to strong Democrat. Interest was measured by asking respondents whether they follow "what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all." In our preliminary analyses, we also controlled for several demographic variables, including age, gender, and education, as well as political interest (see Anderson and LoTempio 2002). Only the latter showed any effects in our most basic models and so, for the sake of parsimony, we removed the others from further consideration.

14. Reasoning that the effects of procedural fairness might be different for Bush and Gore supporters, we also ran these analyses with a (candidate preference \* unfair elections) interaction term; its effect on the dependent variables in Table 4 was negligible. A three-way interaction (candidate support \* Bush untruthful \* Bush negativity) had no effect on trust in 1998 but, for reasons that we are at a loss to explain, did have a statistically significant impact on external efficacy.

## Appendix

Question wordings for the variables employed in our analysis are provided below. Higher scores reflect more positive feelings on political trust, external efficacy, responsiveness, satisfaction with democracy, Bush legitimacy, and procedural fairness (Bush fairness in 1998, fair elections in 2001). See text and note 10 for interpretation of congratulation/rationalization measures.

Political Trust (1998, 2001). (1) How much of the time do you think you can trust the people who run our government to do what is right – just about always, most of the time, only some of the time or almost never? (2) Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people? (Note: The "almost never" option was a volunteered response in 1998.)

External Efficacy (1998). Strongly agree to strongly disagree (5-point scale) with the following statements: (1) Under our form of government the people have the final say about how the country is run, no matter who is in office. (2) If public officials are not interested in hearing what the people think, there is really no way to make them listen.

Responsiveness of Government (2001). (1) Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do – a good deal, some, or not much? (2) And how much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think – a good deal, some, or not much?

Satisfaction with Democracy (2001). On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the United States – satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied?

Bush Legitimacy (2001). People have different views about whether or not George W. Bush is the legitimate president of the United States. Do you accept him as entirely legitimate, accept him as somewhat legitimate, or do you not accept him as legitimate at all?

Congratulation/Rationalization (1998). In talking about the governor's race, people have expressed different opinions about *why* it turned out the way it did. What I'd like to do next is read you a series of statements, and have you tell me how much you think each one applies to the Bush-MacKay campaign for governor. The first statement is. . . . Do you think this statement describes what happened in the governor's race extremely well, fairly well, only slightly, or not at all? (a) Voters preferred the candidate with the most personal charisma – that is, Jeb Bush won because he was a fresh face with new ideas. (b) Voters chose Jeb Bush because of his commitment to smaller government and lower taxes. (c) Buddy MacKay's problem was that his party never got its act together – a better-organized campaign by the Democrats would have made a big difference. (d) Jeb Bush's victory had a lot to do with his willingness to reach out to certain groups – for example, African-Americans and other minorities – that Democrats usually take for granted. (e) Jeb Bush would never have won except for the fact that he is the son of a former president. (f) Voters rejected Buddy MacKay because his campaign was too negative –

all he ever did was attack Jeb Bush without ever giving people a positive program of his own to support. (g) Jeb Bush did better in 1998 than when he ran for governor four years ago [and lost to incumbent Democrat Lawton Chiles] because his campaign this time was less right-wing and more middle-of-the-road. (h) Jeb Bush won because the powerful special interests in Florida wanted him to win. (i) Voters preferred Jeb Bush because they felt he would do a better job of dealing with Florida's most important problems, such as education and crime. (j) Buddy MacKay lost because too many voters just don't understand the issues well enough to make an intelligent choice.

Congratulation-Rationalization (2001). People have expressed different opinions about *why* last year's election turned out the way it did. What I'd like to do next is read you a series of statements, and have you tell me how much you think each one applies to the Bush-Gore campaign for president. The first statement is. . . . Do you think this statement describes what happened in the president's race extremely well, fairly well, only slightly, or not at all? (a) Voters chose George Bush because of his commitment to smaller government and lower taxes. (b) Voters preferred George Bush because they were tired of all the partisan bickering that took place between Congress and the White House during the Clinton years. (c) George Bush won because the powerful special interests in this country wanted him to win. (d) Voters preferred George Bush because they felt he would do a better job of dealing with the nation's most important problems, such as education, crime, and national defense. (e) Al Gore lost because too many voters just don't understand the issues well enough to make an intelligent choice. (f) Al Gore's problem was that he wasn't able to persuade voters to give Democrats the credit they deserved for getting the nation's economy back on its feet in the 1990s. (g) George Bush won because, after eight years of Bill Clinton, voters wanted someone who would be honest and who could be trusted not to embarrass the office of the presidency. (h) George Bush won because he fooled people into believing that he was a different kind of conservative – one who was less right-wing and more middle-of-the-road than he really is.

Bush Unfairness (1998). (1) Over the past few months, do you recall seeing or hearing any Jeb Bush for governor campaign ads on TV or radio? [If yes] Did you think the Bush campaign ads were truthful or not very truthful? (2) As you know, some campaigns are mostly positive – that is, candidates talking about their own record and qualifications – but others are mostly negative – that is, candidates criticizing something about their opponent. Overall, would you say the Bush campaign for governor this year was very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or very negative? (Scores on the latter question were recoded so that 0 = positive and 1 = negative.)

Unfair Elections (2001). (1) In some countries, people believe their elections are conducted fairly. In other countries, people believe that their elections are conducted unfairly. Overall, do you believe that elections in the United States are very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair? (2) George Bush really didn't win the election at all – the only reason he is president today is because the votes in Florida weren't counted properly. [The preceding question was part of the 2001 congratulation-rationalization battery described above: How well does this statement describe what happened in the 2000 presidential election?] (3) As you know, last December, a majority of justices on the U. S. Supreme Court decided that the state of Florida could *not* have a

hand recount of the votes in the presidential election. As a result, Al Gore conceded the election and George W. Bush became president. Do you think that the justices on the Supreme Court who voted to end the recount in Florida did so based mostly on the legal merits of the case, or based mostly on their own desire to have Bush as the next president?

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Table 1

## Candidate Choice and Political Evaluations in Florida, 1998 and 2000

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	<u>1998 Gubernatorial</u>				<u>2000 Presidential</u>			
	MacKay <u>Mean</u>	Bush <u>Mean</u>	t	sig (t)	Gore <u>Mean</u>	Bush <u>Mean</u>	t	sig (t)
Political Trust	0.34	0.41	-3.18	0.00	0.28	0.49	9.25	0.00
External Efficacy	0.49	0.52	-1.11	0.27	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Governmental Responsiveness	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.49	0.64	5.47	0.00
Satisfaction with Democracy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.68	0.77	3.82	0.00
Bush Legitimacy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.49	0.97	19.66	0.00
Sour Grapes Index	0.61	0.27	21.28	0.00	0.63	0.27	-18.37	0.00
Campaign/Strategy Index	0.53	0.61	-3.86	0.00	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
True Mandate Index	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.35	0.76	23.36	0.00

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Note: Data are from post-election 1998 and 2001 *Florida Voter* surveys of registered voters (the latter weighted for party registration). Results are presented for actual voters as well as for nonvoters who supported one of the major-party candidates for governor/president (see note 9).

Table 2  
Explaining Rationalization/Congratulation, 1998 and 2000

<u>Sour Grapes Index</u>	1998 Gubernatorial		2000 Presidential	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>S.E.</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
Winner/Loser (Governor)	-2.20**	0.24	n/a	n/a
Winner/Loser (Senate)	1.10**	0.21	n/a	n/a
Winner/Loser (President)	n/a	n/a	-1.41**	0.28
Party Identification	0.07	0.05	-0.10*	0.05
Interest in Politics	-0.58†	0.32	-0.18	0.26
Bush Untruthful	0.39	0.31	n/a	n/a
Bush Negativity	0.45*	0.22	n/a	n/a
Bush Unfairness	0.80*	0.40	n/a	n/a
(Untruthful * Negativity)				
Unfair Elections	n/a	n/a	1.93**	0.37
-2 log likelihood =	1869.19		1623.54	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.53		0.41	
Number of cases =	508		526	
<u>Campaign/Strategy Index (1998)</u>				
<u>True Mandate Index (2000)</u>				
Winner/Loser (Governor)	0.41†	0.22	n/a	n/a
Winner/Loser (Senate)	0.12	0.21	n/a	n/a
Winner/Loser (President)	n/a	n/a	1.69**	0.28
Party Identification	0.04	0.05	0.16**	0.05
Interest in Politics	-0.17	0.33	0.37	0.26
Bush Untruthful	-0.08	0.31	n/a	n/a
Bush Negativity	-0.58**	0.23	n/a	n/a
Bush Unfairness	-0.44	0.40	n/a	n/a
(Untruthful * Negativity)				
Unfair Elections	n/a	n/a	-2.53**	0.38
-2 log likelihood =	1607.37		1465.43	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.07		0.53	
Number of cases =	494		531	
** p ≤ .01    * p ≤ .05    † p ≤ .10				

Note: Data are from post-election 1998 and 2001 *Florida Voter* surveys of registered voters (the latter weighted for party registration). Table entries are ordered logit coefficients and associated standard errors (listwise deletion for missing data; threshold levels not shown). High scores indicate a vote for the winning candidate (Bush, Graham in 1998; Bush in 2000), Republican identification, greater interest, perceived untruthfulness/negativity/unfairness, and a belief that the election outcome was shaped by factors defining a given congratulation/rationalization index.

Table 3

## A Multivariate Model of Political Evaluations in Florida, 1998

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.
<u>Political Trust</u>						
Winner/Loser (Governor)	0.39†	0.21	-0.25	0.25	-0.29	0.25
Winner/Loser (Senate)	-0.13	0.21	0.12	0.22	0.13	0.22
Party Identification	-0.02	0.05	0.00	0.05	0.01	0.05
Interest in Politics	-0.11	0.32	-0.23	0.35	-0.26	0.35
Sour Grapes Index	n/a	n/a	-2.25**	0.48	-2.19**	0.49
Campaign/Strategy Index	n/a	n/a	-0.02	0.37	-0.03	0.38
Bush Untruthful	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-0.46	0.33
Bush Negativity	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-0.02	0.24
Bush Unfairness (Untruthful * Negativity)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.35	0.43
-2 log likelihood =	787.67		1728.87		1740.82	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.02		0.07		0.07	
Number of cases =	511		494		494	
<u>External Efficacy</u>						
Winner/Loser (Governor)	0.22	0.20	-0.18	0.24	-0.17	0.24
Winner/Loser (Senate)	0.20	0.21	0.34	0.22	0.35	0.22
Party Identification	-0.01	0.05	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.05
Interest in Politics	-0.06	0.31	-0.05	0.33	-0.05	0.33
Sour Grapes Index	n/a	n/a	-1.45**	0.45	-1.44**	0.47
Campaign/Strategy Index	n/a	n/a	-0.02	0.36	-0.03	0.37
Bush Untruthful	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.04	0.31
Bush Negativity	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-0.18	0.23
Bush Unfairness (Untruthful * Negativity)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.16	0.41

continued

Table 3, continued (p. 2)

-2 log likelihood =	862.06	2017.91	2031.96
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.00	0.02	0.03
Number of cases =	510	494	494

\*\* p ≤ .01    \* p ≤ .05    † p ≤ .10

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Note: Data are from the post-election 1998 *Florida Voter* survey of registered voters (the latter weighted for party registration). Table entries are ordered logit coefficients and associated standard errors (listwise deletion for missing data; threshold levels not shown). High scores indicate a vote for the winning candidate (Bush, Graham), Republican identification, greater interest, perceived unfairness, and a belief that the election outcome was shaped by factors defining a given congratulation/rationalization index.

Table 4

## A Multivariate Model of Political Evaluations in Florida, 2000

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.
<u>Political Trust</u>						
Winner/Loser (President)	0.70**	0.24	-0.09	0.29	-0.57†	0.31
Party Identification	0.18**	0.05	0.12*	0.05	0.06	0.05
Interest in Politics	0.36	0.27	0.19	0.47	0.23	0.28
Sour Grapes Index	n/a	n/a	-1.02**	0.35	-0.48	0.37
True Mandate Index	n/a	n/a	1.92**	0.41	1.03*	0.43
Unfair Elections Index	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-2.64**	0.44
-2 log likelihood =	562.51		1691.08		1727.56	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.15		0.22		0.27	
Number of cases =	538		524		521	
<u>Governmental Responsiveness</u>						
Winner/Loser (Governor)	0.29	0.23	-0.25	0.28	-0.60*	0.30
Party Identification	0.17**	0.05	0.15**	0.05	0.11*	0.05
Interest in Politics	0.46†	0.26	0.36	0.27	0.40	0.27
Sour Grapes Index	n/a	n/a	-0.93**	0.35	-0.48	0.36
True Mandate Index	n/a	n/a	0.81*	0.39	0.11	0.42
Unfair Elections	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-1.92**	0.43
-2 log likelihood =	383.98		1370.87		1433.35	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.09		0.12		0.15	
Number of cases =	539		525		522	

continued

Table 4, continued (p. 2)

<u>Satisfaction with Democracy</u>						
Winner/Loser (President)	0.30	0.25	-0.16	0.30	-0.61†	0.32
Party Identification	0.08	0.05	0.04	0.05	-0.01	0.06
Interest in Politics	0.49†	0.28	0.47†	0.28	0.46	0.29
Sour Grapes Index	n/a	n/a	-0.33	0.37	0.20	0.38
True Mandate Index	n/a	n/a	1.37**	0.42	0.65	0.44
Unfair Elections Index	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-2.16**	0.45
-2 log likelihood =	270.15		1004.03		1052.52	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.04		0.06		0.11	
Number of cases =	534		520		517	
<u>Bush Legitimacy</u>						
Winner/Loser (President)	2.69**	0.35	1.92**	0.41	1.45**	0.43
Party Identification	0.41**	0.07	0.34**	0.08	0.29**	0.08
Interest in Politics	0.69†	0.36	0.81*	0.38	0.72†	0.40
Sour Grapes Index	n/a	n/a	-0.28	0.50	0.58	0.54
True Mandate Index	n/a	n/a	3.38**	0.54	2.33**	0.58
Unfair Elections Index	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-3.08**	0.54
-2 log likelihood =	140.76		529.22		520.89	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.54		0.60		0.64	
Number of cases =	535		522		519	
** p ≤ .01    * p ≤ .05    † p ≤ .10						

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Note: Data are from the post-election 2001 *Florida Voter* survey of registered voters (the latter weighted for party registration). Table entries are ordered logit coefficients and associated standard errors (listwise deletion for missing data; threshold levels not shown). High scores indicate a vote for the winning candidate (Bush), Republican identification, greater interest, perceived unfairness, and a belief that the election outcome was shaped by factors defining a given congratulation/rationalization index.