
Winning Isn't Everything: Losers' Consent and Democratic Legitimacy

Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing.

Vince Lombardi

The dynamics of politics is in the hands of the losers. It is they who decide when and how and whether to fight on.

William Riker (1983)

Maybe Vince Lombardi was right and Bill Riker's concern with political losers hopelessly romantic. After all, over the years, political scientists and football coaches alike have tended to pay more attention to the winners than the losers. It seems to be a natural impulse since humans compete to win and because the taste of victory is sweet. Given that winning and winners are almost universally celebrated in today's world, while losers are frequently forgotten, it is perhaps not surprising that football coaches in particular have long perceived the world around them through the lens of winning and losing. And it appears that many students of democratic politics would agree with Lombardi as well. Perhaps this is not unexpected either, given that, in the world of democratic politics, candidates and parties compete for votes, and elections determine who has the right to choose the country's direction and who has to await another day.

And where better to look for winners than on game day in the case of football or election-day in a democracy? And what better to explain than how the triumphant party won and, consequently, how winning can be achieved next time around? Perhaps because of this, political scientists have spent considerable energy trying to understand election outcomes—that is, how winners are produced. In fact, the study of why elections come out as they do and why voters make the choices they do is one of the great success stories in the modern history of political science, spawning a veritable industry of scholars, research institutes, poll takers, training programs, and, in recent years, even computer programmers (Scarborough 2003).

Yet, however interesting and exciting winners and winning are, they represent only one side of the coin when it comes to understanding political life. In fact, we contend that understanding winning is no more relevant than understanding losers insofar as the study of political systems is concerned, given

that the attitudes and behaviors of losers determine whether the game will go on in the first place and whether it will continue to be played in the long run. Put simply, then, given that the consent of the losers is one of the central, if not *the* central, requirements of the democratic bargain, Lombardi may have a point, but as Riker rightly observes, without the losers we do not get to play the game.

Political science has often overlooked the reactions and behavior of political losers in order to focus on the whos, whys, and hows of winning. To rectify this, and to put the proper emphasis on the importance of losers' behavior in producing stable and legitimate democratic rule, the central themes of this book focus on losing and its consequences—that is, how institutions shape losing, how losers respond to their loss, and how losers' consent affects the legitimacy and viability of democratic institutions. Because these are central questions in the study of democracy, we start by first explaining why we think losers matter; we then provide an overview of the investigation we undertake in this book.

ELECTION OUTCOMES AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

In what follows, we are primarily concerned with people's attitudes toward the functioning of government, also commonly referred to as political legitimacy. Citizen attitudes toward the political system have long played a central role in theories of political behavior, and they usually are viewed as important indicators of a healthy civic and democratic political culture (cf. Putnam 1993; see also Kornberg and Clarke 1992). And there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to support this view: throughout the twentieth century, examples abound of countries whose democratic political systems have faltered because they lacked the critical ingredient of a supportive citizenry. Put another way, political scientists care about citizens' attitudes toward government and political institutions because they have long suspected that low levels of citizen support pose a threat to democratic systems (Lipset 1959; Powell 1982). In fact, to say that both the functioning and the maintenance of democratic polities are intimately linked with what and how citizens think about democratic governance is perilously close to stating a tautology.

The assumption that democracies are more likely to last or function well if citizens have positive opinions about government is commonly made both for systems undergoing democratic transitions as well as presumably more stable democratic systems (though the latter have yet to see the actual breakdown of a long-standing democratic order; cf. Bermeo 2003). While questions of popular support for democratic governance are of practical and immediate relevance for the continued stability of emerging democratic institutions (Mishler and Rose 1997), citizens' approval of democratic governance is believed to be important for understanding challenges aimed at reforming mature democratic

institutions as well (Dalton 2004). Thus, what citizens think about democratic political institutions is important for theoreticians and policy-makers alike and relevant for both older and newer democracies.

Below, we examine how the experience of being among the winners and losers in electoral contests affects people's beliefs about the political system. Focusing on winning and losing in democratic elections is appropriate because democracy is, at its core, based on the idea that the political process ought to be routinely and necessarily responsive to what citizens want, and that elections are the principal vehicle for popular influence in government by determining who gets to rule: 'the essential democratic institution is the ballot box and all that goes with it' (Riker 1965: 25). It is thus no surprise that elections usually are a main ingredient in the definition of a democracy (Riker 1965; Dahl 1971; Huntington 1991) because they are the mechanism by which the power to determine the authoritative allocation of values (Easton 1953) is allocated or, to use Harold Lasswell's famous phrase, who gets to decide 'who gets what, when, and how' (Lasswell 1953).

However, although democracy strives for equality in opportunity to participate in electoral contests, it also is unavoidably unequal in the outcomes it produces. Elections reward or punish individual voters' choices through the much publicized consequences of the collective choice of all voters over competing political programs. That is, casting one's ballot for a party or candidate does not automatically turn voters into winners and losers; it is only through the compilation of all voters' choices on the basis of an agreed-upon formula that a president or legislators are elected and a government is thereafter formed, and that the electorate can be subsequently divided into those on the winning and those on the losing side.¹ Political winning and losing thus directly connects micro-decisions and macro-outcomes; wins and losses are individually experienced but collectively determined. As importantly, we argue that the experience of winning and losing and becoming part of the majority and minority leads people to adopt a lens through which they view political life.

If we consider, for a moment, reactions after an election, we should not be surprised to find the winners to be happy and content with the outcome. While becoming a winner may be difficult, being the winner, in fact, is easy. After all, the ideas and interests of the winners will now be reflected in policy outputs for the next few years (this assumes, of course, that the winners' preferences will be enacted). For citizens and elites alike, winning an election means getting a greater share of preferred policies, and there is no reason to expect many regrets about such an outcome or, more importantly, the process that produced it (see also Miller and Listhaug 1999).

¹ This rendering of the democratic process is necessarily incomplete, as a number of democratic systems manufacture winners and losers after an election has been held through elite bargaining. We will address these distinctions in a later chapter.

This is not the case for losers who could, quite reasonably, be expected to be discouraged and displeased both with the outcome of the election and the process that produced it. The morning after the ballots are tallied is not nearly so pleasant for the losers. In fact, we can expect the losers to work hard at using all legal and defensible means to thwart the efforts of the winners to pursue their desired policies. In a real way, then, democratic design envisions the losers' job to consist of making life difficult for the winners.

Yet, if democratic procedures are to continue in the long run, then the losers must, somehow, overcome any bitterness and resentment and be willing, first, to accept the decision of the election and, second, to play again next time. That they would do either is not altogether obvious. After all, 'Consenting to a process is not the same thing as consenting to the outcomes of the process.' (Coleman 1989: 197; cited in Przeworski 1991: 14; see also Lipset 1959; Habermas 1975). Thus, to use a memorable phrase of one of the more important studies of losing, the continuation of democratic systems depends, in part, on the 'losers' consent' (Nadeau and Blais 1993). As Nadeau and Blais note 'losers' reactions are absolutely critical' (p. 553). Winners are likely to be happy with the system but losers' support for the system 'is less obvious' since that support 'requires the recognition of the legitimacy of a procedure that has produced an outcome deemed to be undesirable. In the end, the viability of electoral democracy depends on its ability to secure the support of a substantial proportion of individuals who are displeased with the outcome of an election' (Nadeau and Blais 1993: 553).

And while losing once may not be so difficult, in some circumstances the question becomes whether the losers really are willing to compete in democratic elections next time but also, if they lose again, the time after that and the time after that. It is possible that, at some point, the losers could simply decide not to bother to play at all and stay at home on election-day. And there is plenty of evidence from around the globe that this is frequently what losers do. Other reactions could be a little less passive. Perhaps the losers could organize a boycott of a process they believe to be stacked against them or, more extreme still, could actively work to overthrow what they see as an unfair system. The central question concerning the durability of democracy thus is this: 'How does it happen that political forces that lose in contestation comply with the outcomes and continue to participate rather than subvert democratic institutions?' (Przeworski 1991: 15).

There are many examples of leaders and citizens who refuse to accept loss, even in countries whose similarly situated neighbors have successfully made the democratic transition. In fact, in extreme cases losers' reactions may also lead to conditions that contribute to civil war. In the case of Spain, for example, the narrow victory of the Popular Front in the election of February 1936 started a series of events leading to the civil war that broke out in July the same year. But there are just as many examples of leaders who simply concede and get on

with life. Richard Nixon in 1960 and Al Gore in 2000 are two famous examples of American leaders who arguably lost by the narrowest of margins and quite possibly in a less than fair way. Yet both peacefully and gracefully conceded defeat. On December 13, 2000, after the United States Supreme Court had, in effect, ruled that George W. Bush was the rightful winner of the presidential election, Gore said in a nationally televised address:

Now the U.S. Supreme Court has spoken. Let there be no doubt: While I strongly disagree with the court's decision, I accept it. I accept the finality of this outcome, which will be ratified next Monday in the Electoral College. And tonight, for the sake of our unity of the people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession. I also accept my responsibility, which I will discharge unconditionally, to honor the new president-elect and do everything possible to help him bring Americans together in fulfillment of the great vision that our Declaration of Independence defines and that our Constitution affirms and defends.

What was astounding to many about Gore's gracious concession was his willingness to accept the outcome given that, according to Gallup polls taken at the time, 97 percent of those who had voted for him believed that he was the rightful President of the United States.

Some might argue that this is only what one would expect from a politician who knows he may get another chance to play the game and in a country with the longest-functioning system of electoral democracy. After all, it is a well-known fact that winning is the precursor of losing and losing the precursor of winning, as parties that win an election tend to lose votes already at the next election (Paldam and Skott 1995). But this is not necessarily what one would expect in countries like Ghana and Senegal. Yet there, too, the losers of the 2000 presidential elections bowed out gracefully. This was particularly remarkable in Senegal, where Abdou Diouf, who had been President for nineteen years, lost to Abdoulaye Wade, who had been the opposition leader for twenty-six years. On March 19, 2000, Diouf conceded gracefully, saying

I am full of vigor to continue, but if the people decide otherwise, I will thank the Senegalese people for having placed their faith in me for so many years and I will congratulate the winner. The most important thing for me is that Senegal shows the world it is a democratic country, a country where the law is upheld and human rights are respected.

Such sentiments and the behavior that goes with it are clearly different from the behavior we frequently observe around the world, where losers are unwilling to admit defeat. Robert Mugabe's behavior in Zimbabwe after the March 2002 election, for example, stands in stark contrast to de Klerk in South Africa. Similarly, Ukraine and Belorussia provide different examples to the Baltic states and even that of Russia. We also see examples of countries where people refuse to participate in elections or referendums because to do so

(in an election they know they would lose) would give legitimacy to what they see as an objectionable process. Some of the religious parties in Pakistan, for example, boycotted the 2002 referendum called by President Musharaff, Northern Irish Catholics have periodically boycotted elections in Northern Ireland as have people in Central America in the immediate period of transition.

To be sure, sometimes losers refuse to concede for good reason, in particular when the election turns out to be less than fair. Thus, following the October 2003 Azerbaijan election in which the son of the ailing President Geidar Aliev won election to succeed his father, opposition leaders and observers from the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe charged that there had been widespread violations during the balloting. In the election's aftermath, 174 people were arrested and at least one person died after police clashed with protesters.

Perhaps among the more spectacular examples in recent memory of losers' unwillingness to consent to a process they found objectionable were the presidential elections in Peru in 2000 and 2001, when the incumbent President Fujimori ran for a (contested) third term in office. In the 2000 election, the main challenger Alejandro Toledo withdrew from the May 28 run-off and urged electoral officials to postpone the election to ensure the fairness of the electoral process. He also urged his supporters to boycott the election. By virtue of Toledo's boycott of the run-off, Fujimori won a third term. Yet, on September 16, 2000, the incumbent president announced early elections in which he would not take part, leading to the election of Toledo in June 2001.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOSERS' CONSENT FOR DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

What is key, then, is how people react to loss; in particular, how rebellious or how apathetic a reaction is invoked. In part, losers' consent is critical for democratic systems to function because losers are numerous; in part, it is important because of the incentives that losing creates. Fundamentally, people prefer winning over losing, and losses tend to weigh more heavily than gains (Tversky and Kahneman 1992). Positive political theorists have long recognized this insight and built their theoretical apparatus around the notion that players will employ a variety of strategies (such as strategic voting, agenda manipulation, or vote trading, for example) that maximize gains and avoid losses (Riker 1982, 1983). As a result, the optimal strategic choice usually is the one that provides the highest probability that losses are avoided and, conversely, that wins are achieved.

Winning and losing are not simply conditions. Associated with those conditions are differing incentives and of particular importance are incentives in relation to the status quo. Current institutions result from distributional conflicts in society—that is, the result of bargains over acceptable wins and losses.

These also will change when such wins and losses are no longer socially acceptable (Knight 1992). Winning and losing thus matter because the stability and continued functioning of political systems depend on actors' incentives for institutional change. As William Riker pointed out some twenty years ago, today's losers thus are the 'instigators of political change' (Riker 1983: 64), and today's winners have the greatest incentive to avoid such change (see also Shepsle 2003).²

In this way, then, the winner–loser distinction not only provides a general framework that is consistent with understanding political behavior more generally, it also has implications for the long-run stability and longevity of a political system. Specifically, the continued existence of the system depends to a larger extent on the consent of the losers than the consent of the winners. And if system stability and maintenance are important long-run goals for democratically organized polities—as, we would argue, they should be—losers are the crucial veto players of democratic governance. Studying winners and losers thus provides theoretical leverage for understanding the behaviors and attitudes of individuals, but also provides insight into the resilience and fragility of the political system as a whole.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

Traditionally, scholars of political behavior have focused on understanding and explaining the outcomes of elections rather than how these outcomes affect political behavior. Such an approach carries with it an unstated, but important assumption, namely that it is the winners of elections that are worthy of study because winners have the power to make policy. While this approach is indispensable for understanding the nature of voters' choices in democratic systems, it is of limited use for understanding how democracies come to be and remain stable in the first place. That is, it has little to say about the question of what leads to conditions that allow for elections to be held in the first place, and held on a regular basis.

In fact, the real-life examples cited earlier in this chapter point to a real tension inherent in democracy's central mechanism of collective decision-making, resulting from the intentional inequality in outcomes elections produce by turning some voters into winners and others into losers at election time. Because '[d]emocracy is a system in which parties lose elections' (Przeworski 1991: 10), it produces conflict that, in turn, requires peaceful resolution for the political system to endure. What is more, this conflict is based on numeric

² Though it should be added that, on occasion, electoral democracy is undermined by the winners rather than the losers, especially in situations where the current winners anticipate becoming losers. In historical perspective, however, the odds of democracy being undermined by the losers is much higher than the odds of it being undermined by the winners (Przeworski 2001).

TABLE 1.1. *The incidence of majority rule in contemporary democracies (percent of votes cast)*

<i>Of all governments formed, 1950–95^a</i>	
Popular majority governments	47.1
Popular minority governments	52.9
<i>Of all first post-election governments formed, 1950–95^b</i>	
Popular majority governments	43.8
Popular minority governments	56.2
<i>Of all first post-election governments formed, 1970–95^c</i>	
Popular majority governments	43.0
Popular minority governments	57.0

^a $N = 456$.

^b $N = 265$.

^c $N = 158$.

Notes: This excludes caretaker, transition, and nonpartisan governments.

Source: Michael D. McDonald and Silvia M. Mendes. Data on twenty-one democracies, 1950–95. Binghamton, NY: Department of Political Science, Binghamton University.

inequalities in the distribution of winners and losers in the population as a whole that are little known and seldom stated. While democracy is, for example, commonly conceived as involving elements of majority rule (Dahl 2002), a look at democratic practices around the world reveals several facts that stand in contrast to this assumption. To summarize briefly, it turns out that democracies on the whole are only infrequently ruled by popular majorities; this implies that the share of citizens who did not vote for the incumbent government commonly outnumbers the share of citizens who did.

Some figures may help make the point more forcefully: of all governments formed in the twenty-one most stable contemporary democracies around the world between 1950 and 1995, only around 45 percent were actually elected by popular majorities; that is, in fewer than half of all elections held did the parties that formed the government after the election obtain more than 50 percent of the vote (Table 1.1).³ This number shrinks even further when we take into account the level of turnout in each country and calculate the percentage of the vote the government received based on the number of eligible voters (Table 1.2). Based on this calculation, the actual number of times that a majority of eligible voters elected a majority government turns out to be even lower

³ Governments are defined as the party or parties controlling the executive branch. The list of countries includes Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States. When the presidential systems of France and the United States are excluded, the figures change only marginally.

TABLE 1.2. *The incidence of majority rule in contemporary democracies (percent of eligible voters)*

<i>Of all governments formed, 1950–95^a</i>	
Popular majority governments	20.8
Popular minority governments	79.2
<i>Of all first post-election governments formed, 1950–95^b</i>	
Popular majority governments	18.9
Popular minority governments	81.1
<i>Of all first post-election governments formed, 1970–95^c</i>	
Popular majority governments	13.9
Popular minority governments	86.1

^a *N* = 456.

^b *N* = 265.

^c *N* = 158.

Notes: This excludes caretaker, transition, and nonpartisan governments.

Source: Michael D. McDonald and Silvia M. Mendes. Data on twenty-one democracies, 1950–95. Binghamton, NY: Department of Political Science, Binghamton University.

at about 20 percent when all governments in office since 1950 are considered, and as low as 14 percent when only governments formed as a result of an election since 1970 are included. This means, simply, that plurality rule, and not uncommonly minority rule, are the norm in contemporary democracies (see also Strom 1984). This also means that, at the level of individual citizens, being on the losing side is a more common occurrence than being among the winners.

Ultimately, this suggests that democracy can be viewed as a system of government by changing minorities. If this is a proper characterization, then, in the end, what the losers think about such a system is crucial to its maintenance. This does not, of course, mean that losers have to be happy with a political system whose levers of power are pushed by those they did not support. But at the very least they have to accept defeat for the system to continue. What makes democracy work and persist, then, is not so much the success of the winners but the restraint of the losers. Losers must accept both a distasteful outcome and the process that produced it. Given the obvious importance of whether and how losers do restrain themselves, it is surprising how poorly understood their behavior and attitudes are.

Outline of the Book

In studying losers' restraint, we proceed, first, by developing a model of losers' consent, which posits that losers' motivations to be disenchanting with the political system are significantly affected by their own characteristics as well as the political context they find themselves in. We then take stock of the behavioral

and attitudinal consequences of losing. Our first broad look at the topic is to examine what we label the ‘winner–loser gap’: that is, the difference in opinions and attitudes between winners and losers at the individual level. We return to the winner–loser gap at several points in this volume, examining differences across a range of attitudes and behaviors and across a range of countries. A direct comparison of the effects of winner and loser status across different kinds of attitudes or behaviors toward government allows us to establish whether the winner–loser effect is of similar magnitude for different kinds of attitudes and behaviors or whether some are more strongly affected by political majority and minority status than others. At the moment, this is an open empirical question, given that much of the existing research on the majority–minority effect has focused on explaining a relatively narrow set of attitudes toward performance of the political regime such as satisfaction with the way democracy works (e.g. Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995; Anderson and Guillory 1997) or confidence and trust in political institutions (e.g. Gabriel 1989; Listhaug 1995; Norris 1999; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Bowler and Donovan 2002).

As part of this ‘mapping’ of the winner–loser gap, our goal also is to go beyond David Easton’s (1965) distinction between diffuse and specific support for the political system by defining democratic legitimacy in various different ways, and by examining political behaviors of various kinds. For example, as part of this investigation, we seek to establish whether an individual’s status as a supporter of the government or opposition affects her evaluations of the fairness of the electoral process and her confidence that individual political action can have an impact on the political process. Losing an election and being in the minority means that one’s political preferences were outvoted or at least failed to translate into political power. Because of this, it is plausible to postulate that the winner–loser distinction affects people’s sense of whether they have a say in the political system and whether the political system is responsive to their needs. If losing reduces citizens’ efficacy, then losers may become less willing to pay attention to or participate in regular political events, and they may withdraw from the political process altogether (exit). Alternatively, they may become politicized and willing to engage in protest behavior and nontraditional or even socially less acceptable forms of protest (voice).

As part of this initial investigation, the following chapter examines the impact of the winner–loser variable as an individual-level factor that shapes political legitimacy by examining the short and long-term dynamics of losers’ consent. Specifically, we examine what happens to voters right before and right after an election has been held and different camps of winners and losers are produced. Moreover, we scrutinize the long-run trajectories of winners and losers’ attitudes toward the political system. Only if the winner–loser gap changes following a change in government and only if it is sustained over time are we on solid footing in arguing that our focus on losers has both theoretical and empirical merit.

Next, we focus on the individual-level attitudes that may exacerbate or attenuate the negative effect that being on the losing side may have on beliefs about the legitimacy of the political system. Specifically, we concentrate on ideology and partisan attachment as factors that could frustrate some losers more than others or make some losers feel more sanguine about the political process. From this individual-level analysis we move to consider the linkage between losing and political context. Although there is a growing, cumulative body of evidence demonstrating that those in the majority have more positive attitudes toward politics, these results are open to qualification, extension and possibly challenge on at least two fronts: because the rise of democratic systems and the experience of regular elections is a recent phenomenon in many countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America, much of the theorizing and most of the empirical studies about system support in democracies have occurred with western systems and experiences in mind. This means that scholars have examined explanations of system support mostly on the basis of theories generated about, and data collected in, the democracies of Western Europe and North America—that is, a particular and possibly biased sample of contemporary democracies. This means that it is important to examine systematically differences across mature and newly emerging democracies in the extent to which losing matters for system support. Because having experience with democracy is likely to accustom citizens to the idea that sometimes losses happen, we may see fiercer reactions to losing among new and emerging democracies.

From here we move to consider the impact of political institutions on how losers perceive the functioning of the political system. While political institutions may be the object of citizen trust, they also have a causal impact on citizen attitudes and behaviors. How, then, do institutions matter such that institutional design can help losers accept their loss? To answer this question, we investigate the institutional features that may relieve or exacerbate some of the negative impact of losing on citizens' attitudes and behaviors. We can see this in the way in which institutions shape responses to wins and losses. Different institutions shape how much people lose: specifically, some institutions limit the possible downside and hence limit the likely losses. We focus on two features of the democratic process that are particularly relevant in the experience of loss: first, the impact of electoral mechanisms that bring about winning and losing in the first place; second, the effect of policy-making institutions on losers' consent—that is, the mechanisms of how power is exercised once winners and losers have been determined.

We then turn our spotlight exclusively on losers and consider whether and how citizens learn to lose as well as the factors—individual and societal—that help people to accept losing: some might be simple—such as having had a history of winning in the not too distant past. This suggests a central role for expectations. If citizens expect to keep losing—as ethnic minorities do

in many US states, for example—then this might well generate long-term and deep-rooted disaffection from politics (Guinier 1998). It may be that, over time, the cumulative impact of losing generates deeper dissatisfaction with the political system. Overall declines in the levels of trust in government, for example, may be driven by the mounting dissatisfaction of an excluded and passionate minority. In looking just at losers we find that losing is experienced differently and engenders predictably more negative responses in different contexts.

Our results show, for example, that losers are more positive in established democracies than in non-established democracies. Moreover, losers' evaluations are more positive in countries with more proportional electoral rules. Also, we find that supporters of losing parties that have never been in government are the most critical of representative democracy, and supporters of the major losing party that formed the government prior to the election feel most positive. Consistent with our findings reported in our chapter on old and new democracies, we find that differences between types of losing parties are more pronounced in less developed countries. In addition, the better educated losers are more satisfied with the functioning of democracy, more positive about the fairness of the election in less developed democracies, and more sanguine about responsiveness in more developed countries.

Finally, we consider the behavioral responses of losers. Specifically, we investigate the question of whether losing means that citizens will either try to change the rules of the game or will stop playing the game altogether. Drawing on examples from democracies around the globe, we observe that voters on the losing side of a political contest are willing to consider quite sweeping changes and do so in pretty much the same terms as elites who consider rule changes in terms of partisan self-interest.

One Final Note

Winning and losing, as well as the relationships of political majorities and minorities that result from them, have time and again drawn the attention of political commentators going back to the ancient political philosophers and, more recently, liberal thinkers like Locke and Mill. Similarly, the framers of the American Constitution were expressly concerned with the possibility of tyranny by the majority (Dahl 1971) or, to put it another way, the consequences of absolute winning. Modern political theorists have recognized the explanatory power of winning and losing as organizing concepts for understanding political life as well, and much of current political science scholarship can be organized around the theme of understanding human conflict over the power to rule and thus, conflict between (potential and real) winners and losers (cf. Riker 1983; Shepsle 2003).

In this book, we seek to make a contribution to this body of knowledge by making one simple point that we believe to be fundamental to the study

of politics: namely, that the consent of political losers is essential to the maintenance of any political system. And because this is so, the study of what motivates losers to accept their loss is fundamental to understanding what makes political systems function the way they do. In fact, on the face of it, it is surprising that political systems achieve any semblance of stability and predictability, given the strong incentives losers have to deny the winners their right to rule. What makes losers give in and even affirm their allegiance to the political system is the question that drives the investigation we undertake in this book.

To understand the contours and structure of losers' consent and subsequently to answer the question of why losers consent, we focus on people—voters—who, when they experience defeat at the ballot box, react to this loss in various ways. To understand their reactions, we rely on a wealth of data collected across the contemporary democracies in the form of public opinion surveys administered in countries as different as the United States, Japan, and Ukraine. We examine what we will call the 'winner–loser gap' in attitudes toward the political system, and we trace the dynamics of what happens to losers' reactions over the course of time—before and after elections, over the course of electoral cycles, and over long periods of historical time. We also probe the influence of individual motivations to perceive loss in particular ways and ask whether some people take losing an election particularly hard, while others are more sanguine about their loss. As importantly, we examine the contexts in which losing is experienced—be they institutional or historical in nature. In the end, we paint a picture of losers' consent that views losers as repeat players in the political game, and whose experience of loss is shaped by who they are as individuals as well as the environment in which loss is given meaning. This means that, ultimately, there is wide variation in how people express their reaction to being on the losing side in politics, both across individuals and across countries, and that losers' consent is best understood when we try to understand both people and the political environment in which they live.

We also paint a picture of democratic legitimacy in which losers are the crucial players in the democratic game. Only when losers overcome their negative experiences and consent to being governed by those they disagree with does democracy endure and flourish. Winning is easy, we would argue. But, to quote that keen observer of human emotion and behavior, Vince Lombardi, once more: 'It does not matter how many times you get knocked down, but how many times you get up.'

