Justifying Defeat: Party Leader Framing of Electoral Losses
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Motivation and research question

Democratic elections, by definition, create winners and losers. In doing so, they become a vital part of political parties' histories, as they have consequences both for parties' short and long term survival, and for party leadership. Severe losses may force party leaders to resign from their position, and create divisions within parties (Bille 1997; Duncan 2007; Moshkovich 2011; Panebianco 1988; Van Nijnanten 2019: 104). Shaping the story of the election outcome is therefore of key interest to party leaders and top candidates who want to maintain power. Such stories are also crucial to democracy, as questions about the legitimacy of an election may increase political polarization and lessen trust in democracy, as suggested by the run on the US Capitol in 2020.

After a 50 percent reduction in public support in the 2019 Danish parliamentary election, the leader of the Danish People's Party argued that massive media attention to climate policy made it impossible for the party to direct public attention to its core issues (Berlingske 2019). In the 2021 Canadian federal election, Erin O'Toole had to accept a loss of two parliamentary seats and remain in opposition, but called attention to the fact that popular support of the party had grown (TCN 2021). After his defeat in the 2020 US presidential election, Donald Trump claimed electoral fraud and insisted that he was the actual winner (Arceneaux and Truex 2022). In the 2022 French presidential election, Marine Le Pen accepted her defeat but also argued that the result was in fact a shining victory for the party (France24 2022).

These examples illustrate that party leaders use different types of explanations when facing electoral defeat. Some leaders seek to attribute responsibility to others, other leaders call attention to aspects of the election where they were successful, while yet others completely deny defeat. Still, we know little about how party leaders *explain* election losses, and how such explanations shape their partisan's perceptions of party leaders and election results. The project therefore asks: *How do party leaders explain electoral defeats, under what conditions are different types of explanations used, and with what effects for partisan perceptions of electoral success and party leadership approval?*

We categorize parties that experienced a decline in voter support, or officially aspired for but did not win office, as losers. Coding and categorizing post-election statements by party leaders from countries across the globe, we develop a typology of electoral loss explanations. Drawing on public opinion research (e.g. Chong and Druckman 2007; 2010; McGraw et al. 1995), we develop and test hypotheses about when the most prevalent types of justifications are used, and with what effects for partisan perceptions of electoral success and party leadership approval. The project goes beyond state-of-the-art by attending to a hitherto neglected component of electoral effects. In doing so, the project

contributes to prominent literatures on how elections (Anderson et al. 2005; Hansen et al. 2019) and parties (Druckman et al. 2013; McGraw et al. 1995) shape public opinion, and to the literature on party leadership stability (Harmel and Janda 1994; Cross and Pilet 2015; So 2021).

State-of-the-art: Consequences of elections for parties and public opinion

While research has not yet attended to the question of how party leaders explain election outcomes, several prominent literatures deal with related questions such as how election outcomes influence parties and public opinion, and how parties shape public opinion by means of framing.

First, the impact of election outcomes on public trust in democracy is heavily researched in political science. Numerous studies document that people who voted for losing parties at elections express less satisfaction with democracy (Anderson et al. 2005) and government services (Jilke and Baekgaard 2020), and exhibit less trust in government (Anderson and LoTempio 2002. More recently, this literature has studied how voters evaluate the electoral outcomes of parties (Baekgaard 2023; Blais et al. 2022; Plescia 2019). A key lesson from these studies is that electoral outcomes are ambiguous and that evaluations of elections are in the eye of the beholder. However, this research is blind to the role of parties in general, and party leadership specifically, in shaping public perceptions of election outcomes.

Second, research on consequences of elections for party change (Harmel and Janda 1994; Janda et al. 1995; Langston 2003) and party leadership selection (Cross and Blais 2012; Cross and Pilet 2015) emphasize the conditions under which elections and other external shocks may bring about change in party leadership, organization, and strategies. Comparative studies find that parties are more likely to democratize internally when they are electorally unsuccessful (e.g., Cross and Blais 2012). Others find that elections tend to bring about only modest change to party image, internal power balance, and party organization (Janda et al. 1995; Norris and Lovenduski 2004; Pacześniak et al. 2020) and thus electoral performance alone is not sufficient to explain party change (Harmel et al. 2007). However, while studying whether elections induce changes in parties, this literature does little to account for how party leaders communicate election defeat to avoid replacement.

Third, framing research (Chong and Druckman 2007; 2010; Sniderman and Theriault 2004) suggests that parties can shape public opinion by framing messages. Key themes in this literature are how parties may win support for specific policies by emphasizing aspects of policy proposals at the expense of others (Aarøe 2011; Slothuus 2007; Aarøe og Petersen 2014), how parties avoid blame for unpopular actions and decisions (McGraw 1990), and how they may successfully tailor explanations of policy positions to their audiences (Grose et al. 2015). However, this literature does not consider how the framing of electoral results affects public and partisan perceptions of electoral outcomes. A recent study finds that good loser messages from politicians can boost evaluations of

the election process (Esaiasson et al. 2023), but the study neither uses actual statements from politicians in the experimental treatments nor does it examine how such messages influence evaluations of political leaders. This project draws on insights from public opinion literature to suggest that party leaders strategically communicate about election outcomes to shape partisan perceptions of election outcomes.

Research team and project organization

The research team consists of four persons. *Martin Bækgaard* (MB), PI and professor (Aarhus University), has led several research projects including one funded by an ERC Starting Grant. He has extensive experience with quantitative and experimental research on elections and public opinion (e.g., Baekgaard et al. 2019; Jilke and Baekgaard 2020; Baekgaard 2023). *Helene Helboe Pedersen* (*HP*) and *Henrik Bech Seeberg* (HS) are experts on party strategies, elite interviews, and cross-national comparative analysis. *A postdoc* (PD) with strong qualifications in qualitative methods, will be recruited for two years through an open international call. The project is organized into three interdependent work packages. Each WP will be a team effort with MB as the cross-cutting participant to maximize synergies. All team members will be based in Aarhus, greatly easing daily coordination. International cooperation will be facilitated by a research stay abroad for the PI and an international advisory board composed of: Gijs Schumacher, Ann Kristin Kölln; Miguel Pereira, Lior Sheffer, Carolina Plescia, William Cross, and Benny Geys. The budget includes funding for two meetings with the advisory board.

WP1: Categorizing explanations (Participants: WP1a: MB; HP; PD. WP1b: PD)

Assuming that party leaders want to keep their position to maximize personal power and status, we should expect them to try to minimize election-induced damage to their career (Krisagbedo et al. 2021). Therefore, the project argues that party leaders will react purposefully to reduce potential blame for poor election outcomes. McGraw (1990) distinguishes conceptually between justifications where politicians take responsibility for outcomes but reframe the standards of the evaluation, and excuses where responsibility is fully or partially denied. This is a useful starting point for theorizing political explanations of electoral defeats.

Looking first at justifications, framing of election results is a promising strategy because of the fundamental ambiguity of electoral success (Baekgaard 2023). Success may be framed in relation to office, votes, prior election results, or polls. By directing partisan attention to those evaluation criteria where the party was more successful, party leaders may create more positive evaluations of election outcomes and party leadership performance. This leads to the first hypothesis of the project: *H1: Party leaders direct attention to those aspects of election results where they were more successful.*

Moving to excuses, research on responsibility attribution and blame avoidance (McGraw 1990; 1995; McGraw et al. 1995; Tromborg et al. 2019) argues that political actors may seek to avoid blame by arguing that others are responsible for the outcome (Esaiasson et al. 2023). As illustrated by the Danish example in the introduction, party leaders may seek to attribute responsibility for poor election outcomes to external actors such as the media, or intergovernmental organizations such as the EU. Responsibility neglect may also take place by arguing that the outcome is caused by extra-ordinary events, such as a sudden financial crisis, or of internal conflict in the party. *H2: Party leaders attribute responsibility for poor election results to other actors than the party leadership.*

Finally, according to research on partisan motivated reasoning, emotional attachment to a given party colors how partisans perceive political issues (Campbell et al. 1960; Taber and Lodge 2006). For people who are strongly attached to a party, it is emotionally unpleasant to accept that they have voted for a party that did not perform well. In support of this proposition, Young et al. (2009) find that voters who support a losing candidate even tend to perceive the electoral defeat as a personal rejection. Party leaders may exploit the emotional discomfort arising from poor election results to question the legitimacy of the election to maintain support for their leadership. Indeed, the case of the 2020 US presidential election suggests that this may be a viable strategy for leaders in highly politically polarized environments (Arceneaux and Truex 2022). Accordingly, we expect that *H3: Party leaders question the legitimacy of the election.*

WP1 lays the foundation for the remainder of the project by creating a typology of election loss explanations. Since we know little about what kind of explanations are used in practice, the project aims to keep an open eye also for explanations other than those hypothesized. To build a large-N dataset which can be used for further analyses of when particular explanations are used (see WP2), we will collect post-electoral statements from leaders of losing parties across countries, parties, and time. Post-electoral statements are the first signals to partisans about how party leaders perceive the election outcome and hence constitute a valuable source of information about how party leaders explain, take responsibility for, and justify election outcomes. Due to their public nature, statements are generally accessible through online media.

Electoral loss explanations are mainly of substantive interest in systems where basic democratic principles are upheld. Therefore, the project demarcates the population of interest to electoral losing parties taking part in either a parlimentary or presidential national election in countries where elections are free and fair and where democratic rules broadly defined are respected. To this end, the project uses the v-dem dataset v13 (Coppedge et al. 2023). 64 countries have scores above 0.60 on both the Electoral Democracy and the Clean Election indices in at least an uninterrupted ten-year period prior to 2020/2021. These countries cover all populated continents, established democracies like the Scandinavian countries as well as newer democracies such as Ghana and Indonesia, and a

range of different party and electoral systems. The project uses this set of countries as a starting point from which the sample will be drawn.

To obtain within and between country variation, and a sample that covers all relevant types of explanations, we will use a stratified random sampling strategy. The pool of 64 countries will be divided into strata depending on their electoral and party systems, and a random sample will be selected from each stratum proportional to its size. From selected countries, election statements from leaders of electoral losers in each of the five most recent elections will be subject to scrutiny. To obtain sufficient statistical power and variation in explanations, this process will continue until at least 300 post-electoral statements are collected (WP1a). Data will be analyzed using a grounded theory approach relying on open coding to allow unexpected categories of explanations to emerge (Charmaz 2006). This will be followed by focused coding (Miles et al. 2020) and development of a typology of explanations.

To establish the importance of election loss explanations to leaders, elite interviews will be conducted with 20 previous and current party leaders (WP1b). Based on the dataset of explanations, the project selects ten leaders who have used either of the five most used explanations, and ten who have used either of five seldomly used explanations. The interviews will focus on how the leaders perceived the election outcome, why they made the statements about the election outcome that they did, and what role they believe such statements have in shaping public opinion of election results. A post doc will be recruited to work on WP1b in particular. The post doc will be guided by and closely collaborate with Bækgaard and Pedersen. Student assistants with the necessary language skills will be hired to support the labor intensive collection of explanations.

WP2: When are different explanations used? (Participants: MB; HS)

WP2 will test hypotheses about the conditions under which specific explanations are likely to be used. While of general relevance, we expect cross-party, -election, and -system variation in the use of the explanations outlined in H1-H3. Assuming that parties may pursue success both in terms of office, seats, and votes, we expect that the use of explanations varies depending on clarity of correspondance between these different success criteria. This may vary across political regimes (Dassonneville & Lewis-Beck 2018) and elections. The stronger the correspondance the less likely it is for party leaders to direct attention towards more successful election results (Baekgaard 2023; Gatterman et al. 2022; Stiers et al. 2018). We therefore expect that: *Party leaders are more likely to direct attention to those aspects of election results where they were more successful in: H4a: parliamentary compared to presidential systems, and H4b: elections where election outcomes on votes and office diverge.*

Moreover, we expect it to be a more viable strategy for party leaders to question the legitimacy of the election (H3) whenever this explanation aligns with the perceptions of their partisans, such as in

many right-wing populist parties, with a general mistrust about democratic legitimacy in society (Bowler et al. 2017), or in highly polarized elections. We therefore hypothesize, that: *Party leaders are more likely to question the legitimacy of elections in H5a: less established democracies, H5b: highly polarized elections; and H5c: right-wing populist parties.*

In addition to these hypotheses, we will draw on framing and public opinion literature to develop further expectations about other explanations arising in WP1. Empirically, WP2 uses the post-electoral statements that were collected in WP1 to measure the dependent variables. Country, election, and party variables will be collected to test the hypotheses and control for confounders. At the country and election levels, we will include variables to measure such aspects as electoral systems and political polarization. At the party level, we will include information such as party ideology, and prior and current election results of the party to control for how reference points matter to the use of explanations.

WP3: Effects of explanations on public opinion (Participants: MB, HP; HS)

WP3 builds on framing research (Chong and Druckman 2007; 2010; Grose et al. 2015) to argue that party leader explanations are instruments used purposefully by party leaders to reduce internal opposition in the party. If successful, we should therefore expect that *explanations cause partisans to have a more favorable view of: H6a: the election result, and H6b: the electoral effort of the party leadership*. Moreover, previous research has found that so-called good loser messages from party leaders can improve people's trust in democracy (Esaiasson et al. 2023). Parallel to this finding, we expect that: *H7: Questioning the legitimacy of elections will lead to less public trust in democracy*. In contrast to H6, H7 only concerns the one particular election loss explanation mentioned in H3.

To deal with endogeneity, we will test H6 and H7 using randomized survey experiments. Prioritizing ecological validity and non-defection, the manipulations will be based on actual statements from party leaders. The impact of these statements on partisan perceptions of the election result and party leadership approval will be measured relative to a control group receiving no such statement, and experimental effects will be compared with those of non-partisans to test whether party frames influence partisans and non-partisans differently as suggested by framing research (Baekgaard 2023; Leeper and Slothuus 2014).

The surveys will be conducted less than six months after actual elections that take place during the project period to ensure that election outcomes are still salient and accessible to partisans. A total of five explanations will be tested experimentally. In addition to the three explanations theorized in H1-H3 we will test two prominent types of explanations uncovered in WP1. We have no a priori expectation that some explanations are more successful in creating more favorable views of the election results and the electoral effort of party leaders than others. Rather, we expect that this

depends on how well they fit with reality and partisan beliefs. For instance, we expect that calling attention to alternative criteria of success (H1) is a more successful strategy the more ambiguos the election outcome, that responsibility attribution (H2) is more successful when other actors and events can credibly be blamed for election outcomes, and that questioning electoral legitimacy (H3) is more successful when this strategy aligns with the beliefs of partisans.

To put the results to a strong test, we will obtain data on the impact of each of the five explanations from two elections, one where the expectation has a strong fit and one where the fit is comparatively weak, meaning that data will be collected from a total of ten survey experiments (five explanations x two elections each). To test whether 'questioning legitimacy' has detrimental consequences for trust in democracy as suggested in H7 – and more so than other explanations – we will add trust in democracy as an outcome variable to all surveys. To allow us to compare people with strong partisan beliefs with the general public, we will survey nationally representative samples of the voting eligible population using the online panels of companies such as Yougov (N=1,500 for each experiment).

Timeline and publication plan

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
WP1						
Collect and code data	■	■				
Develop typology		■	■			
Interviews	■	■	■			
Write papers		■	■	■		
Prepare book manuscript					■	■
WP2						
Develop hypotheses		■	■			
Construct data set		■	■			
Analysis			■	■		
Write papers				■	■	
WP3						
Further develop hypotheses		■	■			
Design and run experiments		■	■	■	■	
Write papers				■	■	■

The project spans 4.5 years from September 1, 2024. Each WP will lead to 2-3 journal articles aimed at top political science and area journals such as *APSR, Political Behavior,* and *Electoral Studies*. We will frequently present papers from the project at leading international conferences like APSA, MPSA, and ECPR. A book manuscript cutting across work packages will be submitted to an international university press.