

Wearing Rose-Coloured Glasses

The Happiness Effect of Party Attachments in Europe

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As related research in political psychology shows, election results affect the emotions of individuals, although most studies report about a short-term effect that disappears in one or two weeks. This paper investigates whether election results influence the general mood, the happiness of individuals in the long run. The analysis uses the European Social Survey data, including seven survey rounds from 30 European countries between 2002 and 2015. Regression models suggest that voting for and being attached to an incumbent party increases happiness, while ideological closeness to the government does not. Moreover, the interaction effects show that the closer people feel to their preferred party, the larger the happiness gap becomes between government and opposition supporters. This trend, however, does not hold in case of opposition supporters, whose happiness level is not alternated by the closeness of the attachment. These results prove that partisan motivations are in action in the non-political sphere of life too, and they complement former evidence about an intense short-term effect of winning the elections on voters' happiness. By testing and confirming the effects of the most widely used explanatory variables of happiness on a large cross-national sample, the paper contributes to general happiness research as well.

Keywords: happiness, partisan attachments, ideological closeness, partisan polarization, European Social Survey

Do government voters become happier than opposition voters after an election? Assuming this correlation as an ‘emotional externality’ of elections seems plausible at first sight, but raises several questions and concerns regarding reasons, implications, and the duration of this supposed effect. The fact that political events and campaign messages can influence the emotions of voters - so that they de facto cross the borders of rational politics - is shown by many empirical studies in political psychology. These findings establish the notion that consuming politics related news, voting and election results trigger emotional reactions, especially by those voters who are strong party identifiers. However, most of these studies focus on the short-term effects of elections and other political events on emotions and do not reflect on any long-term emotional consequences these events can cause. Also, while many related works in political psychology focus on emotions like anger, anxiety or hope, it is plausible to assume that election results also influence people’s general mood and well-being at a great extent (De Castella and McGarty 2011; Lerner et al. 2015; Small, Lerner, and Fischhoff 2006).

The results of elections separate voters in two groups basically: whether someone supported the government or an opposition party. Government party supporters will belong to the ‘winner group’, whose political and ideological preferences are expected to be most effectively represented in the following years, and who are most likely to benefit from government expenditures. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the winning position of government supporters results in attitude and thinking which is different from that of opposition supporters. Previous research found evidence that people perceive less corruption, have more trust in the national government, and are more satisfied with how political institutions and democracy work in their countries if their preferred party is in office (Blais, Gidengil, and Kilibarda 2015; Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013; Claassen and Ensley 2016; Jilke 2017; Daniller 2016).

As far as we know, this paper is the first attempt to directly investigate the relationship between individual happiness, ideological preferences and partisan attachments on a large cross-national sample. Although some research has been carried out in relation with happiness and ideological closeness to the incumbent, these papers do not address the role of partisan attachments directly. The ones that concentrate on the role of partisan attachments on happiness, do not include the ideological aspect, and they only rely on data from single country surveys (Patkós and Vay-Farkas 2012; Tsutsui, Yamane, and Ohtake 2017). Consequently, this paper offers an important advance compared to former works in two important aspects. First, it uses a uniquely large dataset covering 30 European countries between 2002 and 2015, including 130 country-years and almost 200 000 individual observations. This coverage strongly improves the generalizability of results compared to former single-country investigations. Second, it offers a more complex picture regarding underlying mechanisms by considering the importance of both rational and partisan explanations at the same time. That is, it investigates the effect of party attachment and ideological position on happiness simultaneously.

Controlling for a range of individual-level predictors of happiness and party preference tested earlier in the literature, our regression models show a moderate but robust increase in happiness when being a government supporter, while showing no such effect in the case of ideological closeness. The results of the analysis further reinforce the importance of partisan attachments in shaping people's identity, which can even exceed their political perceptions and influence their identity and emotions. They imply that partisan attachments are still important parts of people's identities, and that election results significantly contribute to their happiness in the long run.

Whether the basic aim of politics should be to promote the happiness of citizens was discussed in earlier scientific works and happiness: the role of extreme political views (see e.g. Brülde 2010), though the body of literature investigating the links between party preferences and well-being is somewhat scarce. Even if we consider works concentrating either on short-term or on long-term effects; using either voting, party identification or ideological closeness as the main explanatory variable; and using either satisfaction or happiness as a dependent variable. Thus, we can rely only on a handful of empirical works (mainly single-country surveys and experiments) when formulating hypotheses between party choice and happiness.

The short term “honeymoon effect”

Part of the literature on partisan preferences and happiness focuses on the immediate, short-term effect of election results. Wilson and his co-authors (2003) investigated the question on a small sample of college students who reported a particular interest in politics. Although there was a difference between the happiness levels of election winners and losers, losers were not as unhappy as they had predicted to be before the election. Another small-sample survey produced similar results, where voters overestimated how unhappy they would be one month after their candidate lost the election (Gilbert et al. 1998). Pierce and his co-authors (2016) confirmed on a larger sample that the news of losing an election strongly affects partisans' happiness, however, respondents turned back to their baseline happiness levels within some days. A similar short-term happiness effect was reported with regards to

the 2009 Japanese elections (Kinari et al. 2015). These studies show that while election results make losers indeed less happy, they recover at most in a week. One purpose of our analysis is to show that elections influence the happiness level of people beyond the “winning” or “honeymoon” effect, and that government supporters remain happier during the whole electoral cycle. Details about this test are to find in the methodology section of our paper.

The role of ideology

Election results often cause significant and long-lasting changes in the political life of a country. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a politics-based happiness gap might be much more durable than we would expect based on the above listed (mostly experimental) evidence showing an intense short-term effect. According to the Downsian (1957) concept of party choice, people have policy preferences on their own and they support parties that are closest to these preferences. As the measures adopted by governing parties are plausibly closer to the preferences of their own supporters, government policies are expected to favour incumbent partisans on the long run. That is, people might be “happy because their ideal policies are implemented” (Tsutsui, Yamane, and Ohtake 2017, 5; Di Tella and MacCulloch 2005), as these policies (like same-sex marriage or abortion policies) are important for them and for their reference-groups. The role of ideological closeness seems especially important, as the results of Di Tella and MacCulloch (2005) and Kinari et al. (2015) suggest. They conclude that the happiness advantage of government supporters cannot be attributed to material gains. It is important to note that the *ideological closeness hypothesis* does not necessarily refer to partisans or voters, the only important thing is that one must be able to place him- or herself and political parties on an ideological scale.

According to the *ideological closeness hypothesis*, Di Tella and MacCulloch (2005) found on a sample of 10 European countries that voters are indeed happier during the electoral cycle if their ideological position is similar to that of the incumbent parties. Their results imply that party attachment might be an important predictor of happiness. However, the relationship they find between partisan choices and happiness remains somewhat unclear, as their primary concern was to test whether left-leaning people care more about unemployment relative to inflation than right-wingers, and not the relationship between partisan attachments and happiness. Moreover, in a recent study Jackson (2020, 390) demonstrates that “the effect on the happiness of an individual from congruence with the US president is larger for those with extreme political views” .

The role of ideology, however, is far from being clear. The results of Curini and his co-authors’ (2012) partially supports that ideological closeness affects happiness, while the effect in their case was specific to moderate parties and voters. In a cross-national panel data analysis Matsubayashi and Ueda found that the presence of left-leaning parties in government can lead to an increase in individual happiness level (2012). Lastly, the results of Dolan and his co-authors (2008) present a close-to-null effect of ideological closeness to the governing parties on a pooled sample of voters in the United Kingdom. To sum up, when trying to answer the question if ideology affects people’s happiness, we are still at the beginning of the road. Existing evidence is mixed and contrasting results might be affected by the specificities of the selected cases.

The role of partisan attachments

Another powerful explanation regarding the links between happiness and election results focuses on the role of partisan attachments, which we label as the *partisan hypothesis*. The partisan hypothesis relies on the notion that partisanship is an important element of people’s

identity that functions as a “prism through which individuals view the political world” (Lebo and Cassino 2007, 719). Election outcomes determine whether we are in the “winning team” or in the “losing team” for years and the feeling of being part of one of these two groups strongly shapes the attitude of people to political actions during the electoral cycle, which may significantly influence one’s happiness. As every domestic political event, decision and discourse is likely to be identity relevant, we can expect all related information to be assessed according to one’s partisan (group) identity (Jilke 2017; Edelson et al. 2017; Daniller 2016; Claassen and Ensley 2016). Government identifiers are plausibly optimistic and trustful about the political actions of “their own team”. Contrarily, election losers are likely to see the dark side of any political action. For example, they might easily be scandalized by the very same events – like corruption – that they would otherwise tolerate if these events involved their own party (Claassen and Ensley 2016; Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013; Blais, Gidengil, and Kilibarda 2015). If government supporters have systematically more optimistic evaluations and expectations about the present and future state of their countries, while opposition supporters are more pessimistic in this regard, these expectations and evaluations may enter directly into their happiness functions, resulting in higher and lower personal happiness scores respectively.

Consistently with the above assumptions, Patkós and Vay-Farkas (2012) reported an increasing gap between the happiness level of Hungarian government and opposition voters between 2002 and 2010, in a period characterized by changes in government and intensifying partisan polarization (Palonen 2009; Patkós 2017; Vegetti 2019), hence they explained their results with partisan attitudes. Tsutsui and his co-authors found that Japanese government supporters were significantly happier than those who had voted for opposition parties, even years after the elections, and individual differences in personality traits (namely, that “government supporters might have happier personalities” (2017, 3)) could not account for

this effect. Ward approached the interrelation from the other direction and confirmed that happier people are more likely to vote for incumbent parties, which he explained by economic voting theory (2015). Partisan attitudes and partisan rationalization, of course, are not equally strong across citizens, some voters are non-partisan or independent, while others are very strong identifiers, and the extent to what partisan attachments shape one's evaluations is a function of the strength of his or her party identification (Bisgaard 2015; Campbell et al. 1960).

To sum up, the review of the literature leads us to consider more carefully the importance of both party affiliation and ideological closeness, hence we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1. Those who are ideologically closer to the government are happier during the electoral cycle.

H2. Incumbent partisans are generally happier than opposition partisans during the electoral cycle.

H3. The happiness effect of being an incumbent partisan is stronger for strong identifiers.

DATA AND VARIABLES

The hypotheses were tested on the pooled sample of the first seven data rounds of the European Social Survey project (European Social Survey 2015), including data from 30 European countries (the United Kingdom, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and all the countries of the European Union except for Malta) queried between 2002 and 2015. Although in some of the ESS rounds data were also available for some other countries (namely for Albania, Kosovo, Israel, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine), we decided to leave them out of the analysis. Our main argument to do so is that most of these cases are characterized by non-liberal-democratic settings that might discourage supporters of opposition parties from

articulating their real party preferences, which would heavily distort our results. As not every country takes part in each wave, the pooled database includes altogether 140 country-years and more than 260 000 individuals. However, regression models include 130 country-years only, due to deviations from the main questionnaire in the measurement method of income in ten cases. Appendix 1 shows the country-years included in the analysis. We think that based on this set of data we are enabled to make inferences on the happiness effect of incumbent attachment in liberal democracies in general.

As Banducci and Stevens (2015) empirically proves, individuals are more likely to cooperate with survey companies as elections approach, especially politically interested people. Additionally, a recent study of Singh and Thornton (2019) found that election salience increases party attachment. Consequently, the time of interview conduction can have a significant effect both on our main explanatory variable, which is the party attachment of individuals, as well as on the reported happiness level. We suggest the following to eliminate these confounding effects. In our dataset, more than 99.5 percent of the interviews were conducted at least 30 days after the last national elections (the exact distribution of this variable see in Figure 2).

[Figure 2]

Therefore, we decided to keep only this 99.5 percent of people in the analysis and we excluded those respondents from the regression analysis with whom the survey was filled out 30 days or less after the national elections, who could have attributed to a ‘honeymoon effect’ that is described by most of the related literature. In case of a positive result, this enables us to challenge the short-lasting finding of the happiness literature.

Dependent variable

Variables about life satisfaction and happiness are increasingly used by social scientists to capture overall well-being, or, as economists often conceptualize it, experienced utility. Respondents in the ESS surveys answered the question “*Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?*” on a 0-10 scale where 0 means “*extremely unhappy*” and 10 means “*extremely happy*”. The distribution of the variable is left-skewed with a mean of 7.23, thus the majority of people in the database can be considered rather happy than unhappy.

The accurate interpretation of the happiness scale is an object of scholarly debate because psychologists consider happiness more frequently as an ordinal variable and economists frequently interpret it assuming cardinality. Eventually, Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004) highlight that both practices produce very similar results. Although we consider the role of different perceptions to be very important, we are not to say that self-reported happiness is in any way unreal, or that it would result from biased answering. In our understanding, we have no reasons to doubt the reliability of happiness scores that respondents report and we can expect this variable to mirror real differences in experienced utility. This assumption is also underlined by the fact that related studies, which explore general explanatory factors of happiness show consistent results among widely used independent variables like income, health or social trust. The distribution of the dependent variable is reported in Figure 1.

[Figure 1]

Independent variables

Ideological closeness to the government. As we found no adequate yearly data about governments’ overall left-right ideological positions across Europe, departing from rational

theories, we proxied governments' ideological positions *with the ideological position of their median voters*. Ideological positions are measured on an eleven points left-right scale. As expected, the ideological distance variable is negatively correlated both to being a government partisan ($r=-0.313$; $p=0.000$) and to having voted for the government ($r=-0.301$; $p=0.000$).

Party attachment. Party attachment is measured with the variable indicating the *party that the respondent feels close to*. In order to make a clear distinction between government and opposition identifiers, we excluded the cases where the incumbent/opposition status of parties could not be completely clear for the respondents. Thus, we did not include the cases when the fieldwork period of a survey overlapped with either parliamentary elections or the period between elections and the investiture of the new government. We also excluded the respondents feeling close to two small parties, which left the government during the polling period (LPF supporters in the Netherlands in 2002 and NC supporters in France in 2010 were these cases), and the cases where the incumbent government was a technocratic one. Data about government composition have been borrowed from the Comparative Political Data Set project (Armingeon et al. 2016). After this process, we coded individuals as “government supporters”, “opposition supporters” and “non-identifiers” according to their survey response, while we excluded refusals.

Lastly, to measure *the strength of party attachment* we used answers about how close the respondent feels to the party she identifies with. The answers ranged from 1 *not at all close*” to 4 *“very close”*.

Control variables

Happiness studies showed that – besides genetic factors – happiness is strongly dependent on living conditions and socio-demographic aspects. Most of these factors are significant predictors of partisan preferences, too, as parties represent different social strata. Most importantly, members of more favoured social groups may be more likely to support the status

quo, that is, to be a supporter of the incumbents. Therefore, conditions that are conducive to elevated happiness may simultaneously contribute to higher support for certain parties, or, especially, for higher support for the government. To isolate the effect of partisanship on happiness, we included a set of control variables that can reasonably influence both happiness and partisan preferences.

The comprehensive review article of Dolan, Peasgood and White (2008) about the individual-level contributors to happiness highlights that the most powerful predictors with a consistent effect across countries that therefore need to be included in any model estimating happiness are the absolute and/or relative income of respondents, respondents' health, personal and community relationships, employment status and marital status. To better isolate the effect of government attachment on happiness, we also controlled for age, gender, education, and being a member of a discriminated social group. Including these variables ensures that an eventual happiness gap between governing and opposition party supporters is not caused by their different happiness attributes, e. g. higher income or better health conditions.

The measurement of the controls and the correlations they are assumed to have with the dependent variable are summarized below.

Income. The literature offers extensive evidence that happiness and income are positively related, but relative income seems to be an even more important contributor of happiness than absolute income (Dolan, Peasgood, and White 2008; Easterlin 1995). Therefore, we used a 10-category variable indicating the *income decile* where the respondent belongs to. The income deciles are defined for country-years.

Health. Healthier people are expected to be happier. Our variable measures the subjective health of respondents on a scale ranging from 1 “*very bad*” to 5 “*very good*” health conditions.

Social life. People living a socially active life are expected to be happier. Social activity is measured with the amount of time the respondent takes part in social activities compared to other people of the same age. Answer options ranged from 1 “*much less*” to 5 “*much more*”.

Trust/social capital. As trust in other people results in a higher level of subjective well-being, the relationship with one’s community in a broader sense is also an important contributor to happiness. The independent variable indicating the level of social trust in our models ranges from 0 “*You can’t be too careful*” to 10 “*Most people can be trusted*”.

Unemployment. Unemployed people are expected to be less happy than those who own a job. Therefore, we included a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was unemployed in the last 7 days.

Discrimination against the respondent’s group. Along with the findings related to the social integration of respondents, we argue that being a member of discriminated groups can have a negative effect on individuals’ happiness levels. The related dummy variable is equal to 1 if the respondent indicated that she belongs to a group discriminated against in her country.

Marital status. The literature is somewhat contradictory regarding the links between marital status and happiness level of individuals, partly because coding categories and reference categories vary across studies (Dolan, Peasgood, and White 2008). However, most studies show that those living in a long-term partnership prove to be significantly happier than those who do not, and losing a partner significantly reduces the happiness level of individuals. To control for the marital status of respondents we apply three dummy variables: *married*, *divorced* and *widowed*, while the reference category applies to those who have never been married.

Education and education squared. The time spent in education is also an important predictor of happiness, although its effect is found to be more sensitive to the exact set of

control variables. Moreover, some scholars detected an inverse U-shaped relationship between education and happiness (Hartog and Oosterbeek 1998). Therefore, we controlled for the *number of years spent in education* and its squared term as well, assuming a positive effect for the number of years and a negative one for the squared term.

Religiousness. We expect the degree of religiousness to have a positive effect on respondents' happiness level, as more religious people report generally about greater happiness, although not in all related works (Lewis et al. 1997; Lewis, Maltby, and Burkinshaw 2000; Lewis, Maltby, and Day 2005). The variable we use measures the degree of religiousness of respondents on a scale ranging from 0 "*not at all religious*" to 10 "*very religious*".

Gender. The effect of gender on happiness is not straightforward, some works report that women are happier than men (Hartog and Oosterbeek 1998), while others highlight that there is a complex interaction between age, gender, and happiness (Inglehart 2002).

Age and age squared. An established evidence of the literature is that there is a U-shaped relationship between age and happiness. That is, happiness is decreasing with age on an average, but both the young and the elderly are happier compared to middle-aged people, even after controlling for other variables like income, education or health (see e. g. Blanchflower and Oswald 2008; Frijters and Beaton 2012; Lelkes 2007).

RESEARCH RESULTS - ARE GOVERNMENT PARTY IDENTIFIERS HAPPIER?

To test our hypotheses, we fit OLS regressions with robust standard errors clustered for country-years. Results are reported in Table 1.

[Table 1]

Five regression models test the hypotheses of our study. Model 1 and Model 5 include the variable that measures ideological distance from the government and thus allow us to test Hypothesis 1, namely, whether those respondents who are ideologically closer to the government feel happier during the electoral cycle. Model 5 supplements Model 1 by including a dummy variable that indicates whether the respondents feel closer to any political parties. Besides the set of control variables, Model 2 includes a dummy variable that tests whether respondents report about higher happiness level if they feel close to an incumbent party. Consequently, Model 2 and Model 5 are to test Hypothesis 2 that claims that incumbent partisans are generally happier than opposition partisans during the electoral cycle. Model 3 compares government, opposition supporters and non-voters in this regard. Model 4 also tests the extent of closeness with an interaction term and thus will give an answer to Hypothesis 3, according to which the happiness effect of being an incumbent partisan is stronger for strong identifiers.

As for our first hypothesis about the happiness effect of ideological closeness, the results are negative. Those who place themselves closer to the ideological position of the government are not significantly happier than those with more distant ideological positions. This result contradicts both to our expectations and to the former results of Di Tella and McCulloch (2005) who found a significant positive relationship. Here we can conclude that based on these results, being close to the ideological position of the government does not lead to elevated happiness, therefore we reject the ideological closeness hypothesis.

When testing the partisan hypothesis, our primary interest is to compare *incumbent party identifiers* to *opposition party identifiers* (Model 2); however, considering that this way we would lose thousands of observations - as many people did not report about feeling close to any of the parties - in Model 3 we also included the group of non-identifiers. In both cases, government identifiers prove to be significantly happier than opposition identifiers. Holding

constant the effect of the other factors, feeling close to the incumbent party results in an average of 0.084 point increase in happiness compared to opposition supporters (in Model 2). The partisan hypothesis is also supported by Model 4, which shows that the extent of the happiness effect of being a government or opposition supporter is a function of the strength of partisanship. That is, the happiness of weak identifiers is less strongly influenced by their government attachment than that of strong identifiers.

Marginal effects are reported in Figure 3. As it can be seen, there is no significant difference between the happiness of those government and opposition supporters who do not feel close to their parties¹. At the same time, the closer a respondent feels to the governing party, the happier she proves to be compared to her opposition voter counterpart. After controlling for a wide set of important socio-economic predictors, the gap between the estimated happiness of strong opposition and government identifiers rises to approximately 0.3 points. However, it is important to note the asymmetric relationship between party attachment and happiness level. Contrary to government identifiers, strong emotional attachment does not alter the happiness level of opposition identifiers – that is, strong identifiers are not significantly unhappier under the rule of opposition parties than weak identifiers.

[Figure 3]

The coefficients of the control variables are significant, and the direction of the effects are in line with the expectations in all models. Thus, increase in income, trust, social activity, health, religiousness, being a woman and being married result in a higher level of happiness, while being unemployed, discriminated, divorced or widowed result in lower happiness. Moreover,

¹ This group of respondents is somewhat special in the sense that they first declared to feeling close to a party, than they named their party, and finally claimed to feel „not at all close” to it.

we can also confirm the supposed U-shaped and inverse U-shaped relationship of age and education with happiness.

DISCUSSION

Political scientists have been reporting about a tendency of partisan dealignment and the declining importance of political parties for more than three decades (Dalton 2002; Mair 2013; Wattenberg 1981). Another body of literature, however, suggests that partisan attachments are still important parts of people's identities. This line of literature claims that even if the links between voters and parties have changed in the last decades, people's evaluation of political information is strongly dependent upon which party is involved and what the individual's relation to that party is. To list some examples, recent studies concerning partisan motivated reasoning showed that people downplay the seriousness of corruption cases (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013) and electoral manipulations or other "dirty tricks" (Claassen and Ensley 2016) if their preferred party is involved. Partisans of the incumbent parties perceive less corruption (Blais, Gidengil, and Kilibarda 2015) and are more satisfied with how political institutions and democracy work in their countries (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Curini, Jou, and Memoli 2012; Jilke 2017). On the other hand, opposition voters are much more likely to believe that election results are the consequence of electoral fraud (Edelson et al. 2017), or to have decreased overall perceptions of electoral legitimacy (Daniller 2016).

The evidence we found when testing the partisan hypotheses (H2 and H3) is fully in line with the results of this field of literature. The regression models showed that being attached to a governing party in Europe contributes to higher happiness during the electoral cycle, and the strength of the effect is dependent on the strength of partisanship. These results show that the effect of partisan attachments in European countries extends over the boundaries of

politics, entering the sphere of subjective personal well-being. This supports the notion that even if the links between voters and parties have changed during the last decades, partisan attachments still influence powerfully how people process information.

Contrarily to the partisan hypotheses, we did not find support for theories suggesting that ideological closeness to the government could increase one's happiness. Controlling for a set of important factors, the effect of closeness is insignificant, meaning that those being ideologically closer to the government are not significantly happier. Nevertheless, the negative results regarding the links between happiness and ideological closeness further reinforce partisan explanations as they show that the explanation of more elevated happiness of government identifiers is in no way that of seeing their preferred policies implemented.

Similarly to former works on the role of partisan motivations in information processing (Bisgaard 2015; Jilke 2017; Claassen and Ensley 2016; Taber and Lodge 2006), the results give credit to the notion that points to the role of partisanship in hindering accountability. If people are happier when their party is in office just because it is *their* party, then the first criterion of democratic accountability – namely, that citizens are “able to pin credit or blame on the correct set of officials for their policy choices” (Grynaviski 2010, 1) – is challenged. This potential harm, however, is relative, as based on the same results one might interpret the role of partisanship in democratic functioning as a useful mechanism that favours stability. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that accountability decreases if the happiness gap between the two sides widens. Future research can explore whether specific political or economic conditions, such as bipartisan competition, closely contested elections, single-party governments, economic downturns contribute to a wider happiness gap between incumbent and opposition partisans.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we hypothesized that (H1) being ideologically close to the government and (H2) feeling close to an incumbent party contributes to higher individual happiness, and we expected (H3) stronger effect for strong identifiers than for weak identifiers. The results clearly reject the ideological closeness hypothesis, while they support the other two hypotheses, showing that feeling close to the incumbent contributes to significantly higher happiness scores, even if we control for a range of important individual predictors, and the happiness gap between the two groups widens with increasing levels of attachment. The correlation we found is significant and robust to a set of additional tests with different independent variables and model specifications.

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first attempts to directly investigate the well-being effect of party attachments on a large cross-national sample, which has been theorized in former works. The results contribute to our understanding about the role of partisan attachments on a domain outside the world of politics, further reinforcing the centrality of partisan attachments in how we perceive and process information. They show that elections have important happiness consequences, and these consequences are quite substantial in the case of strong identifiers. They also imply a long-term happiness deficit for supporters of parties that hardly enter in governing position, such as supporters of radical or minority parties. While European societies might experience a decline in party membership rates, self-reported closeness to a certain party or electoral turnout, the positive effect of being attached to an incumbent party on happiness suggests that during the last decade party attachments have indeed been important elements of Europeans' identities.

The results are in line with former evidence on government supporters found in single-country surveys (Patkós and Vay-Farkas 2012; Tsutsui, Yamane, and Ohtake 2017), while they partly contradict to the evidence about a notable short-term effect which disappears

at most in a week after elections (Gilbert et al. 1998; Kinari et al. 2015; Wilson, Meyers, and Gilbert 2003; Pierce, Rogers, and Snyder 2016). The findings are also slightly different to the ones suggesting that macro-events (like elections, terrorist attacks or natural catastrophes) are not that important in people's lives and that they induce only a short-term modification in people's mood (Kimball et al. 2006; Pierce, Rogers, and Snyder 2016). Lastly, the paper contributes also to the dynamically growing literature on happiness in two ways. First, it tests and confirms the effect of the most widely used individual-level predictors of happiness (such as age, gender, education, health, religiousness, income, unemployment, marital status, suffering discrimination, being socially active, and trusting other people) on a large cross-national sample of European countries. Second, it shows that politics enter into the happiness function of people, and political macro-events do affect voters' happiness levels in the long run.

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