

Elections and Satisfaction with Democracy

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Democracy consists of a set of principles and rules that allow collectivities to make decisions in an economical, predictable and peaceful manner. Voters' satisfaction with democracy should therefore normally peak in the post-electoral period, immediately after these principles have been successfully put to the test. But is this really the case? Does satisfaction with democracy increase in a significant manner after an election? And if it does, what factors lead individuals to express greater satisfaction with the workings of democracy after an election?

The notion of 'electoral cycles' is relatively widespread in the political science literature. Authors have suggested that government spending usually follows cyclical patterns, peaking around the time of elections (Tufte 1978 ; for a review, see Blais and Nadeau 1992). Likewise, important electoral cycles have been found to occur with respect to government popularity (Stimson 1976 ; Nadeau 1990 ; Johnston 1999). Substantial post-election changes in citizens' political attitudes have also been observed. Such a phenomenon seems to occur in the case of attitudes towards governments and authorities (Ginsberg and Weissberg 1978 ; Ginsberg 1982 ; Clarke and Kornberg 1992 ; Joslyn 1999), evaluations of the winning candidates (Thomsen 1938 ; Frenkel and Doob 1976 ; Nimmo and Savage 1976 ; Cigler and Getter 1977 ; Granberg and Nanneman 1986 ; Regan and Kilduff 1988), and diffuse support in general (Ginsberg 1982 ; Nadeau and Blais 1993). In the specific case of satisfaction with democracy however, the evidence is less overwhelming. The findings reported by Kuechler (1991) and especially by Holmberg (1999) bring some support to the idea that levels of satisfaction with democracy increase following an election, but the evidence is far from being clear-cut or convincing.

Verifying if satisfaction with democracy increases after an election, and why it does so, is a fundamental task, but it is also exacting in terms of constructing an adequate research design. The 1997 Canadian Election Study meets this challenge. The respondents to this study were surveyed on two occasions concerning their satisfaction with democracy, once during the campaign and once afterwards. The sample size (3949 respondents during the campaign, of whom 3170 were re-interviewed after the election), the rolling cross-section research design with more than 100 daily interviews during the campaign, and the length of the questionnaires (40 minutes during the campaign and 30 minutes after) allow us to undertake the most complete and rigorous examination to date of voters' perceptions of how democracy works during an election. In particular, the study allows for an examination of the dynamics of satisfaction with democracy during the campaign and enables us to determine not only how much the level of satisfaction changes before and after the announcement of election results, but why.

The interest in finding the answers to these questions is at least twofold. The first contribution is substantive in nature. Evaluating the impact of the electoral process on citizens' attitudes offers us a better understanding of the dynamics at work in democracies. The effective functioning and the very legitimacy and survival of a democratic regime rest on people's willing support and consent (Lipset 1959 ; Easton 1965 ; Powell 1982). In this sense, every election represents a test of democracy and a potential threat to support for the regime (Schattschneider 1960 ; Dennis 1970 ; Ginsberg and Weissberg 1978). But at the same time, the electoral mechanism of democracy actually may *in itself* play a significant role in reinforcing people's attitudes about the political system in which they live (Ginsberg 1982). In other words, the relationship between democratic processes and citizens is dynamic, and it is of crucial importance to understand how the relationship works both ways.

The second contribution is methodological. The finding of a significant electoral cycle with respect to levels of satisfaction with democracy among citizens might indicate that the campaign and the post-election periods constitute very different environments, a situation which researchers should bear in mind when using survey questions tapping people's political opinions. If the election has indeed an important impact on citizens' post-election attitudes, then survey measures taken after the election might be tainted by the experience of the electoral process. This may very well cause problems when trying to predict voting behavior with post-election measures of opinion, for example. The possible direct impact of election outcomes, or the electoral process itself, suggests that we must be careful when using pre/post measures of attitudes in survey research.

How and Why Elections May Affect Citizens' Attitudes

We generally assume that attitudes affect vote choice in elections. Searching for a possible electoral cycle in citizens' levels of satisfaction with democracy implies that we invert the causal link between attitudes and elections, and that we presuppose that the electoral process as such can, in return, affect opinions about the democratic regime.

What do we know about citizens' post-election reactions ? As previously reported, the existing evidence strongly indicates that attitudes towards governments and authorities, evaluations of candidates, and measures of diffuse support all register significant shifts in a more favorable direction after an election. These shifts are usually said to be reflecting a phenomenon of post-election 'depolarization' (Cigler and Getter 1977). People tend to adopt less stubborn attitudes after the

outcome of an election is known, and voters who held marginal opinions before the election generally tend to reassess their attitudes afterwards and to “rally around the flag.” In other words, elections would bring voters closer in terms of their political attitudes.

Two lines of argument try to account for this effect. The first is linked to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957 ; Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999). Post-election changes in candidate evaluations, for example, are explained by voters’ supposed psychological propensity towards maintaining cognitive consistency and minimizing conflict among their beliefs and attitudes. Thus, losers would come to acknowledge more positive attributes for the winning candidate in an effort to minimize the fact that they did not vote for him in the first place. Hence the mobility in attitudes after an election.

The second line of argument has more to do with the legitimacy function of elections. Elections constitute a mechanism of peaceful resolution of political conflict in society. Seeing that the electoral contest has been effectively resolved in a peaceful and legitimate manner may prompt voters to be more supportive of the regime and to accept the election outcome. Nadeau and Blais (1993) found that no less than half of the losers in the 1988 Canadian federal election submitted to the outcome because like the winners, they tended to consider the election as a fair and legitimate process. This effect is stunning since in a majoritarian system like Canada, satisfaction with the election outcome and the workings of democracy is expected to be more polarized between winners and losers than in a consensual system where losers can still have a significant say in politics through proportional representation and multiparty government coalitions (Anderson and Guillory 1997).

This ‘demonstration’ effect of elections has also been suggested by Holmberg (1999) who argues that exposure to the electoral process can be a positive experience for voters, prompting them to view political actors and the institutions of democracy in a more favorable light immediately after an election. In other terms, if citizens like what they see, satisfaction goes up. As Evans and Whitefield (1995, 503) put it, “People support democracies because they are seen to work, reflecting respondents’ experience of the pay-offs from democracy itself.” Evidence for the demonstration effect of elections on satisfaction with democracy is nonetheless limited. The idea finds some support in Sweden (Holmberg 1999) and Great Britain (Kuechler 1991), but these results are far from conclusive in demonstrating the existence of a systematic post-election effect on levels of satisfaction with democracy.

Elections and Satisfaction with Democracy: The Canadian Case

In order to empirically assess the potential impact of elections on satisfaction with democracy, we rely on the 1997 Canadian Election Study.¹ The study consists of a three-wave survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University. For the purpose of the paper, we limit ourselves exclusively to the first two waves of the survey. A total of 3949 eligible voters were interviewed during the 36 days of the campaign (around 110 every day of the campaign). A total of 3170 persons (80% of the campaign survey respondents) were re-interviewed in the post-election

¹ The co-investigators of the study are André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau. The study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Further details on the sample and technical features of the CES can be found in Northrup (1998). The data are available at: www.isr.yorku.ca/ISR.

survey.² A rolling cross-section sample release was employed during the campaign. The campaign survey response rate was 59%. The respondents were asked about their satisfaction with democracy in each of the two first waves of the survey. The question asked each time was as follows : “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with the way democracy works in Canada ?”

Pre- and post-election answers to this question are summarized in Table 1. The answers reveal that satisfaction with democracy in Canada experienced an impressive aggregate shift of 15 percentage points after the 1997 federal election was held, going from 60% before the election to 75% after.³ We can see that this phenomenon is essentially due to the post-election movement of people reporting to be ‘unsatisfied’ prior to the election, half of whom (53%) *became satisfied with democracy after the election*. The reverse movement, satisfied people becoming unsatisfied after the election, is clearly more marginal.

If we look at various cross-sections of the Canadian population, we also see that this post-election attitude change occurs in all strata of the population. Table 2 shows evidence of this widespread phenomenon, and also shows that it is immigrants, and people with less education and less interest in politics who experience the largest positive shifts in levels of satisfaction with democracy. The

² All analyses in the paper bear on the 2612 people who responded to the first two waves of the survey (pre- and post-election) *and* for whom we had complete information with regards to all the variables used in the paper.

³ The question on satisfaction with democracy offers 4 possible answers. For the purpose of Tables 1-3 and Figures 1 and 2, as well as for the discussion in the text, we collapse the answers into two categories : satisfied (‘very satisfied’ and ‘fairly satisfied’ answers) and not satisfied (‘not very satisfied’ and ‘not at all satisfied’ answers). Note however that the distinction between the four levels of satisfaction is used in the multivariate regressions presented in Tables 4-6. See the Appendix for more details regarding the coding of all the variables used in this paper.

shift is most impressive with respect to immigrants (20 percentage points higher after the election). Citizens born outside Canada are probably the most predisposed to respond to the demonstration effect of elections and to experience such an attitude change since some of them can be expected to express great enthusiasm for having discovered the virtues of electoral democracy in their new country (Black 1987) — just as people living in newly established democracies become more satisfied with democracy as they come directly into contact with its workings (Weil 1989 ; Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer 1998). As for the less educated and less interested individuals, they are generally considered as being less involved in politics and more alienated from it (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). The fact that these people experience even greater post-election attitude change than the less alienated ones is particularly telling, and stresses how much the very legitimacy of the electoral process as a fair and economical mechanism of conflict resolution can help citizens view democracy in a more favorable light (at least temporarily) even if some of them are not as close to the system or do not benefit from it as much as others.

Is this argument convincing ? Do politically alienated people really jump on the post-election bandwagon and reassess their evaluation of the workings of democracy in a more positive way as the more involved ones ? A more direct measure of citizens' alienation towards politics, namely their level of political cynicism, is used to verify this. Table 3 reveals that the overall pattern just described also holds with respect to cynical attitudes towards politics. The more cynical people are about politics before the election, the bigger the shift towards a more positive evaluation of democracy after the election. This important finding underlines the stunning force of elections as an independent variable on

citizens' political attitudes : even cynical people are caught up in this general post-election movement of opinion towards a more positive assessment of the democratic regime.

It is possible that the important changes in levels of satisfaction with democracy observed after the election might actually be the result of the electoral campaign itself, and that opinion movements would be initiated during the campaign and would result at the end in higher levels of support. People might thus be reassessing their attitudes as the campaign unfolds and as they come into daily contact with politicians and parties over the course of a month or so, either directly or via the media. This does not appear to be the case however. Figure 1 clearly shows that attitudes towards democracy remained relatively stable throughout the whole campaign. This pattern holds for the overall satisfaction level as well as for levels in each of the four groups of cynicism (from low to high). Figure 2 confirms the observation that the campaign did not affect perceptions of satisfaction with democracy in any significant way, and clearly establishes the strictly post-election character of the increase in support from the entire population and from each subgroups of political cynicism.

Table 4 summarizes the robustness of these overall cross-sectional patterns, and also enables us to precisely identify which people are more prone to change their opinion about democracy after an election. Two multivariate OLS regressions have been performed ; the two are entirely identical except for the dependent variable. In the first column, the equation predicts the pre-election level of satisfaction with democracy, whereas the post-election level is used in the second column. A simple comparison of the regression coefficients between the two columns confirms earlier results. The impact of gender, while not statistically significant, slightly diminishes after the election, reflecting women's increasing

support. The same happens for political interest : the gap between the most interested citizens and the less interested ones narrows a bit. Although still viewing democracy with skepticism, cynical people become less dissatisfied with the democratic regime after the election. The evidence is even more compelling with regards to education and immigration. The coefficient for schooling ceases to be statistically significant after the election, and the coefficient for foreign-born Canadians, while being negative and nonsignificant before the election, becomes *positive and significant* afterwards. What must be learned from these first findings is that the increase in support for democracy after an election is a significant phenomenon and constitutes a general trend clearly not accounted for by the campaign itself. Dissatisfied people tend to become more supportive of democracy after the election. Certain groups seem to experience a stronger conversion than others, and these are immigrants and people usually more distant from politics in general — and these include even the most cynical of citizens.

The Effect of Election Outcome

So far, we have assumed that this phenomenon of post-election depolarization among particular groups of voters was the result of a ‘demonstration’ effect. Citizens, and especially the ones not naturally drawn to the political system and the institutions of democracy, come to appreciate the fact that the democratic process of elections actually succeeded once again in resolving political tensions and conflicts by enabling the people to collectively choose a government in a fair and legitimate manner.

But it is also entirely conceivable that this post-election attitude change could be due, at least in part, to the actual outcome of the election. Indeed, elections produce winners and losers, and being

part of the political majority or minority may affect attitudes about the general workings of democracy (Anderson and Guillory 1997). Voters prefer winning over losing (Tversky and Kahneman 1992) and certainly hope the democratic contest turns out to be in their favor. Cognitive dissonance theory would thus predict that once the election outcome is known, people who effectively lost the election should be disappointed with the result and should therefore come to conceive the democratic process less favorably than before the election.

Table 5 presents results from multivariate regressions using the same two equations as in the previous table but with a new independent variable added, namely the status of loser.⁴ Predictably, losers are significantly less prone to rally to the pack and view democracy with a more favorable eye after the election outcome is known : the regression coefficient (-.12) is negative and larger than the pre-election coefficient. But also notice that the pre-election coefficient for the loser variable (-.03) *is already negative and statistically significant*. This particular result strongly suggests that voters who expected to lose in the coming election were already significantly dissatisfied with democracy from the beginning. In a way then, the very outcome of the election appears to be largely anticipated and already internalized in citizens' evaluation of democracy, thus affecting attitudes well before Election Day.

Maybe not all voters anticipated the election outcome, and it is possible that some of them were actually surprised with the final result. Table 6 refines our analysis by adding the element of surprise

⁴ The number of cases in Tables 5-6 is reduced to 1343 respondents due to missing information in coding the loser variable. See the Appendix for the specific coding of this variable, as it differs for the pre- and post-election periods.

with regards to the outcome.⁵ We now distinguish not only between winners and losers, but also between people who were surprised with the election result and people who were not. The second column of Table 6 indicates that surprised and non-surprised winners' levels of democratic satisfaction after the election were not significantly different from one another (non-surprised winners are the reference category here), but that losers were significantly more dissatisfied than winners (two significant negative signs) and surprised losers constitute the category of people most prone to express dissatisfaction with democracy (-.18). This last group's overall level of satisfaction after the election was 57%, whereas for the other groups the level is greater : 72% for the non-surprised losers, 92% for the non-surprised winners, and as much as 97% for surprised winners. But it is worth noting again that the election outcome appears to be somewhat expected and already integrated before Election Day in people's feelings towards the democratic system. As the first column of Table 6 shows, pre-election satisfaction levels for Liberal voters who were (wrongly) expecting to lose the coming election were not statistically different from those of voters who thought they would win the electoral contest (the reference category). But as with post-election evaluations, voters who intended to vote for a party other than the Liberals and who thought they would lose the election appear already resigned to the anticipated outcome since they expressed a slightly but significantly lower pre-election level of support for democracy (-.04). In sum, the election outcome and the various reactions to it have a differential impact on post-election attitudes as cognitive dissonance theory would predict, but at least part of this effect on attitudes is already observable before the election. This last result somewhat questions the idea of a totally post-election readjustment of attitudes to fit with the known result of the election and

⁵ See also the Appendix for the specific coding of these variables, as they significantly but necessarily differ for the pre- and post-election periods.

suggests that the effect of election outcome, while undeniable, is nonetheless more limited than what one could have expected.

Conclusion: Honeymooning with Democracy

The 1997 Canadian Election Study allow us to draw specific conclusions concerning the relationship between elections and satisfaction with democracy, and the possible ‘demonstration’ effect elections can have on citizens’ post-election attitudes towards the workings of democracy. Our findings show that the level of satisfaction with democracy increases in a noticeable manner after an election, but apparently not during the campaign. Moreover, this increase appears linked less to the election specific result (the re-election of the incumbent government) than to its general result of electing a legitimate government.

These findings then seem to indicate that pre- and post-election periods constitute very different environments for the citizens. Voters appear to be in a more positive and favorable mood with respect to democracy after witnessing once again the effectiveness of the electoral process in allowing them to collectively choose a government in a peaceful, predictable and economical way. The post-election period might thus be characterized as a honeymoon of sorts between democracy and its citizens : exposure to the democratic process seems to be a positive experience for many individuals. Although our study is centered around a single election and therefore does not offer direct evidence for a cyclical pattern over time in levels of satisfaction with democracy, it would certainly be unrealistic to expect that democratic satisfaction increases in an incremental manner election after election. As the party

legitimately elected begins to govern and enacts policies obviously not endorsed at election time by all of the electorate, and as media coverage of government activity becomes more negative and critical in between elections, democracy is bound to disappoint some people. And these people are more likely than not to be the most politically alienated and cynical citizens. But one of our main conclusions is also that the electoral process, at least for a short period of time, succeeds at galvanizing the support of these citizens and at bringing them closer to the system. While it is temporary, consent among these individuals appears nevertheless cyclical, and democratic regimes certainly benefit in the long term from this fundamental depolarization effect of elections.

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APPENDIX : Variables description

The dependent variable used in Tables 4-6 is a four-point positive scale constructed using the following question asked both in the campaign survey and the post-election survey: “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not satisfied at all with the way democracy works in Canada ?” The four resulting categories are ‘not satisfied at all’ (0), ‘not very satisfied’ (.33), ‘fairly satisfied’ (.67) and ‘very satisfied’ (1).

The independent variables were coded as follows:

- Age: actual age of respondent (continuous variable divided by 100).
- Male: a dichotomous gender variable coded 1 for male, and zero for female.
- School: a 11-point scale running from zero (no schooling) to 1 (master degree or doctorate).
- Income: a 10-point scale running from zero (less than \$20,000) to 1 (more than \$100,000).
- Foreign-born: coded zero if respondent was born in Canada, coded 1 otherwise.
- Political interest: a 11-point scale running from zero (not at all interested) to 1 (very interested) using a question measuring respondent’s “interest in politics generally.”
- Cynicism: a 17-point scale running from zero (not at all cynical) to 1 (very cynical) constructed from an additive index made up of the four following questions: “For each of the following statements, please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree: a) Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with people? b) I don’t think the government cares much what people like me think? c) Politicians are ready to lie to get elected?” “Do political parties keep their election promises most of the time, some of the time, or hardly ever?”
- Think will lose (all parties): coded 1 if respondent considers that at least one party has better chances of winning the election than the party for which he/she intends to vote, coded zero otherwise.
- Think will lose (Liberal/other parties): the ‘think will lose’ variable was recoded into two dichotomous variables distinguishing eventual winners (respondents intending to vote for the Liberals) from eventual losers (respondents intending to vote for one of the other four parties).
- Loser: coded zero if respondent voted for the winning party in the 1997 federal election (Liberals), coded 1 otherwise.

- Winner/surprised, Loser/not surprised, Loser/surprised: the 'loser' variable was recoded into three dichotomous variables distinguishing between respondents surprised and not surprised with the election outcome. A respondent was identified as 'surprised' if he/she voted for the Liberals but considered that at least one party had better chances of winning the election than the Liberals, or if he/she voted for one of the other four parties but considered that its party had better chances of winning the election than the Liberals.

Table 1. Levels of Satisfaction with Democracy, 1997

		<u>Campaign Period</u>		<i>Total :</i>
		Not satisfied	Satisfied	
<u>Post-election Period</u>	Not satisfied	47 %	10 %	25 %
	Satisfied	53 %	90 %	75 %
	<i>Total :</i>	40 %	60 %	

N = 2612

Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*

**Table 2. Changing Levels of Satisfaction with Democracy
Among Socio-Demographic Groups**

		% Satisfied	
		Before election	After election
<i>Gender</i>	Men	61	76
	Women	59	75
<i>Schooling</i>	Low	55	72
	High	66	79
<i>Origins</i>	Canadian-born	60	74
	Foreign-born	63	83
<i>Interest</i>	Low	56	74
	High	64	77

N = 2612

Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*

Table 3. Cynicism and Changing Levels of Satisfaction with Democracy

		% Satisfied	
		Before election	After election
<i>Level of cynicism</i> <i>(quartiles)</i>	Very low	82	88
	Low	66	80
	High	55	76
	Very high	36	59

N = 2612

Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*

**Table 4. Impact of Socio-Demographic Characteristics
on Satisfaction with Democracy**

	Level of satisfaction	
	Before election	After election
Constant	.76 (.03)***	.80 (.03)***
Age	-.07 (.04)**	-.08 (.03)**
Male	.02 (.01)	.00 (.01)
School	.12 (.03)***	.03 (.03)
Income	.08 (.02)***	.08 (.02)***
Foreign-born	-.01 (.02)	.06 (.01)***
Political interest	.05 (.02)***	.04 (.02)**
Cynicism	-.47 (.02)***	-.32 (.02)***
Adj. R ²	.17	.10
N =	2612	2612

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$

Notes : Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

The dependent variable has four categories : not satisfied at all (0), not very satisfied (.33), fairly satisfied (.67) and very satisfied (1).

Don't knows, refusals, and non-voters are excluded for all variables.

See the Appendix for details on variable codings.

Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*

Table 5. Losing the Election: Pre- and Post-Effect

	Level of satisfaction	
	Before election	After election
Constant	.82 (.04)***	.82 (.04)***
Age	-.05 (.05)	-.02 (.04)
Male	.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)
School	.07 (.04)**	.03 (.03)
Income	.06 (.02)**	.07 (.02)***
Foreign-born	-.01 (.02)	.05 (.02)***
Political interest	.06 (.03)**	.02 (.03)
Cynicism	-.49 (.03)***	-.24 (.03)***
Think will lose	-.03 (.01)**	
Loser		-.12 (.01)***
Adj. R ²	.19	.15
N =	1343	1343

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$

Notes : Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

The dependent variable has four categories : not satisfied at all (0), not very satisfied (.33), fairly satisfied (.67) and very satisfied (1).

Don't knows, refusals, and non-voters are excluded for all variables.

See the Appendix for details on variable codings.

Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*

Table 6. Distinguishing Between Losers

	Level of satisfaction	
	Before election	After election
Constant	.81 (.04)***	.84 (.04)***
Age	-.04 (.05)	-.02 (.04)
Male	.02 (.01)*	.01 (.01)
School	.08 (.04)**	.02 (.03)
Income	.06 (.02)**	.07 (.02)***
Foreign-born	-.01 (.02)	.05 (.02)**
Political interest	.07 (.03)**	.01 (.03)
Cynicism	-.48 (.03)***	-.24 (.03)***
Think will lose / Liberal	.02 (.04)	
Think will lose / Others	-.04 (.02)**	
Winner / surprised		-.01 (.03)
Loser / not surprised		-.11 (.02)***
Loser / surprised		-.18 (.02)***
Adj. R ²	.19	.16
N =	1343	1343

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$

Notes : Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

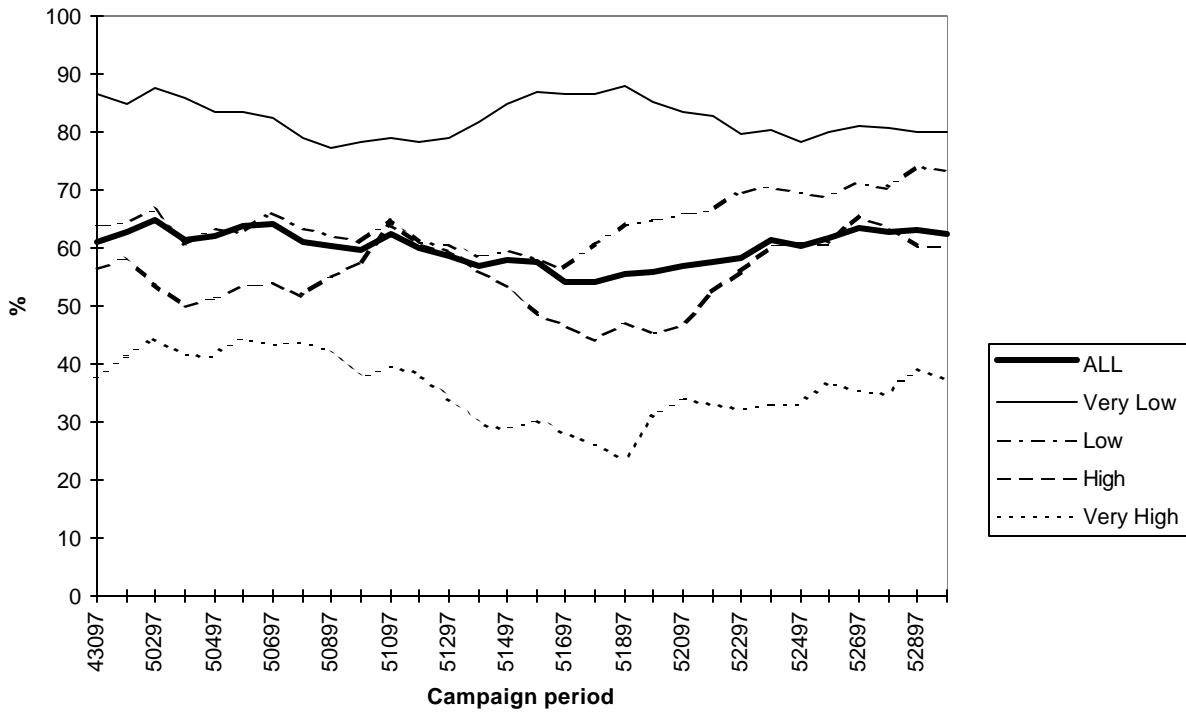
The dependent variable has four categories : not satisfied at all (0), not very satisfied (.33), fairly satisfied (.67) and very satisfied (1).

Don't knows, refusals, and non-voters are excluded for all variables.

See the Appendix for details on variable codings.

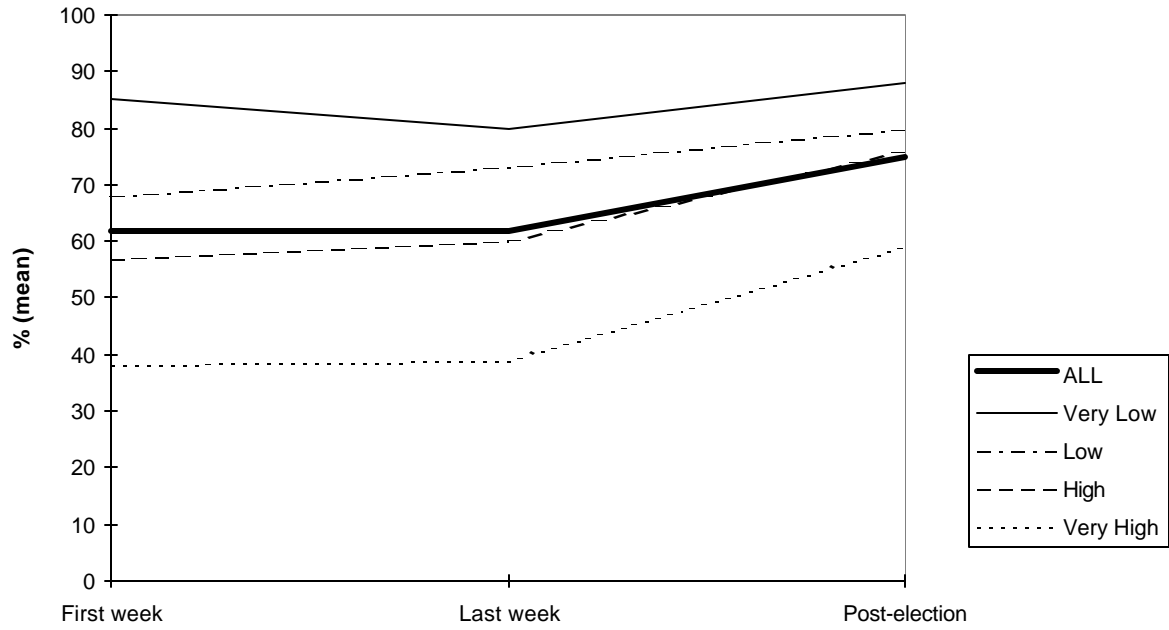
Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*

**Figure 1. Satisfaction with Democracy by Levels of Cynicism
(Seven-day moving averages)**



Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*

Figure 2. Satisfaction with Democracy by Levels of Cynicism During and After the Campaign



Source : *Canadian Election Study, 1997*