Can leaders motivate citizens to be good losers?  
A de-biasing experiment

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Democracy requires good losers who “accept with good grace and no loss of commitment to the polity that the democratic game will not always go their way” (Sabl 2005). However, while the good loser norm is widely supported, people struggle to reconcile two contradictory impulses: the ambition to be good losers who willingly accept unwelcome authoritative decision if the game has been fairly played, and the drive for having ones’ substantial preferences fulfilled. To solve this dilemma, people commonly engage in motivated reasoning so that they condition their procedural fairness perceptions upon outcome favorability: a procedure that generated a favorable outcome is likely to be perceived as fair, whereas a procedure that produced an outcome to ones dislike is viewed upon as flawed (Doherty and Wolak 2012; Esaiasson et al. 2016).

In this paper, we explore experimentally whether this self-serving perceptual bias can be reduced by political leaders who remind people about the importance of accepting loss. We run vignette experiments with representative samples of Norwegian and Swedish citizens in which subjects learn that local politicians has made a policy decision they dislike (to ban or not ban begging in their municipality, the outcome matches subjects'). The treatment consists of primes from political leaders who remind people about the rules of the democratic game. Findings indicate that a good loser prime reduces bias in procedural fairness assessments but does not affect decision acceptance.

Peter Esaiasson is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. He has published several books on political representation, election campaigning and empirical democratic theory.