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Political Attitudes of Defeated Candidates in an American State Election

Chong Lim Kim

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POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF DEFEATED CANDIDATES
IN AN AMERICAN STATE ELECTION*

Chong Lim Kim
The University of Iowa

Electoral victories and defeats occur repeatedly. This is especially true in democratic political systems where key governmental roles are filled through periodic elections. The attitude of defeated candidates toward the regime norms directly affects the system stability, because disaffected by defeat, these candidates may withdraw their support for the regime and may also translate such disaffection into radical political action. Despite the potential threat the defeated electoral candidates can pose to democratic stability, their political attitudes have rarely been investigated systematically in political science literature. Do defeated candidates exhibit an attitude toward the democratic rules and norms governing electoral competition significantly different from that of winning candidates? Do defeated candidates become politically less active after the election than they were before? Under what conditions do they become disaffected with the democratic rules and norms? This paper attempts, first, to compare the political attitudes of both winning and losing candidates, and second, to explore the variables which might account for differences in such attitudes.

The data used in this paper are derived from a larger study of political recruitment in Oregon. Structured interviews were conducted with both winning and losing candidates who ran for the Oregon House of Representatives in the 1966 election. The samples were interviewed at three different times: before and after the primary, and after the general election. This research strategy permits us to analyze the effect of the outcome of the election on the attitudes of the candidates. Data were collected on the candidates' degree of support for the democratic rules of competition, their expected changes in political activity as a result of participation in the election, their career ambitions, and the perceived reward-cost, i.e., the material and psychological gains or losses which accrue to the candidates as a direct result of their participation in the election.

I. DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT OF KEY VARIABLES

Dependent Variables

The candidates' support for the democratic rules and their expected changes in political activity are the two dependent variables used in this study. Support is defined in terms of the extent to which a candidate considers the formal and informal rules and procedures governing electoral competition as adequate. The operational measure of support is based on a candidate's feelings about the legal and practical requirements for getting elected, the degree of perceived fairness in the election outcome, and his feelings about the overall fairness in the political opportunity structure. Responses to these three election and 92 winners and 17 losers in the primary election. For further details on the samples and sampling procedures, see Lester G. Seligman, Michael R. King and Chong Lim Kim, Political Recruitment: Winning and Losing in American Politics (forthcoming).

The support items are (a) "In general, do you feel that the legal requirements in getting elected in the election give each candidate the same chance of winning or do some have an advantage?" (b) "In general, do you feel that the practical requirements in getting elected give each candidate the same chance of winning or do some candidates have an advantage?" (c) "In running for office in this district, do you believe that a person can succeed primarily on the basis of ability and initiative or are other things important for success in politics?" and "Is this the way it should be?"

I wish to express my gratitude to Professors Lester G. Seligman of the University of Oregon and Michael R. King of the Pennsylvania State University for their support and encouragement in this effort as well as the larger project of which it is a part; and also wish to thank my colleague, Vernon Van Dyke for his thoughtful reading of the manuscript.


2 This study includes three samples: (a) a quota sample of 68 candidates interviewed before the primary election, (b) a mixed-stratified sample of 109 post-primary election candidates, and (c) 77 completed interviews from a total population of 110 general election candidates. The present analysis is based on 46 winners and 31 losers in the general
interview items are cumulatively scaled and a single support scale is obtained (CR = .92). Our measure of expected changes in political activity is derived from a candidate's responses to three questions: does he intend to follow issues more than before the election? Does he intend to discuss politics more frequently than before the election? And, given the election outcome, does he still intend to continue a political career? Whenever a candidate gives a positive answer, a score is assigned and these scores are summed to form a simple index of expected changes in political activity.

Independent Variables

(A) Perceived Reward-Cost

The conceptualization and measurement of rewards and costs attendant upon electoral victory and defeat present a complex problem. The term "reward-cost" will be defined in terms of both material and psychological gains or losses that result directly from election participation. The reward is great when a victory in political competition insures high prestige, wealth, influence, and opportunity for career advancement. Conversely, the cost is severe if a political defeat results in the loss of all these. Any attempt to measure the reward-cost of winning and losing confronts at least three kinds of measurement problem. First, the candidates may have different hierarchies of values, and may therefore estimate the reward-cost attendant upon electoral victory and defeat differently. Second, winning a public office does not necessarily mean a career advancement, for it is relative to one's previous social status. Candidates enter political competition from varying status positions, and it would seem possible that the outcome of an election produces varying degrees of satisfaction or deprivation for different individuals. Finally, measuring the reward-cost is further complicated by two types of incentive associated with public offices. One of these is the "extrinsic"

B Hereafter, the term 'reward-cost' will be used in the singular, for our concern is with the amount of perceived reward or cost. But, for some other purpose, we can presumably speak of rewards or costs since there may be different kinds of these.


8See James Q. Wilson, The Amateur Democrat (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 4; Peter B. Clark and James Q. Wilson, "Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organizations," Administrative Science Quarterly, 6 (September, 1961), 134–137; and John C. Wahlke et al. The Legislative System: Explorations in Legislative reward-cost, which may be defined in terms of the gains or losses in income, occupation, prestige, influence, and career opportunity. The other type is the "intrinsic" reward-cost that a candidate derives from participation itself, such as a sense of fulfillment of civic duties or community service.

Our operational measurement of reward-cost is based on a battery of questions designed to determine the effect of electoral victory and defeat on a candidate's social esteem, income, occupation, career opportunity and political influence. Obviously, some reward-costs are more important than others but for the purpose of this analysis each reward-cost item is assigned the same weight. Nine such items are used and the responses to these questions are coded into positive, neutral, and negative categories. For example, our respondents responded to: "As a consequence of the election, do you anticipate any change in your circle of close friends?" Responses are coded: (a) gained more friends, (b) no change, or (c) lost some friends. A summed scale of the reward-cost is constructed: each respondent who gives positive and/or negative response is assigned a score based on the arithmetic sum of his coded responses.

(B) Career Ambition and Expectation about the Election Outcome

Both Eulau and Schlesinger have argued that analysis of a politician's ambition illuminates his behavior because ambition "probably molds a behavior (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1962), pp. 113–119.

I am presently engaged in a more detailed analysis of the various types of reward-cost attendant upon electoral victories and defeats in order to determine their relative importance to candidates.

The following items are used to measure the reward-cost: (1) As a consequence of the election, do you anticipate any change in your job, (2) As a consequence of the election, do you anticipate any change in your circle of close friends, (3) Do you anticipate a change in your income as a consequence of the election, (4) Do you feel that your esteem among your colleagues in your occupation has gone up or down, (5) Do you feel that your esteem among members of your religion has gone up, (6) Do you feel that your esteem among your neighbors has gone up, (7) Do you feel that your esteem in your family has gone up, (8) Do you expect that your loss in the election will help or hinder your chances if you decide to run again for the House, and (9) Do you feel that your political influence has increased as a consequence of the election.
good deal of political behavior." Career ambition is defined by the level of office a candidate wishes to achieve in his career. It is accordingly measured by classifying level of office desired into four categories: national, state, local, and "no ambition." The measure of expectation about the election outcome is derived from a candidate's own assessment of his chance of winning at the beginning of the electoral campaign. For instance, a candidate might at the outset have described his chance of winning as "excellent," "good," "fair," or "poor." It might be expected that defeat would imply a serious career setback for an ambitious candidate—one who hopes to go a long way in politics—and that this might lead to attitudes significantly different from those of candidates with less ambition. By the same token, the differential assessment of chance of winning might also affect the attitudes of the candidates.

(C) Types of District and Election

Districts are classified into safe, competitive, or unsafe, given a candidate's party affiliation. The degree of party competitiveness (measured by the ratio of the registered Republican and Democratic voters and the percentage of time each party has been successful in electing its candidates) and each candidate's party label served as the basis of this classification. The types of election simply refer to the primary and general elections. Our assumption is that types of election and district might account for the variations in the attitudes of the defeated candidates because a candidate running in the safe district, and therefore relatively sure of his victory, may find it more difficult to face up to an unexpected defeat than others running in competitive or unsafe districts. In the same vein, a defeat in the primary election may be considered of less consequence than a defeat in the general election, and if this should be the case, we would then expect significant differences in the attitudes of the primary and general election losers.

(D) Occupation, Income and Education

These stratification variables are included primarily because of two theoretical considerations. The first stems from the general findings of research on the effects of stratification on political

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. POLITICAL SUPPORT OF WINNER AND LOSER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*8 cases are excluded because of the lack of information on their support.

opinions, voting behavior, political participation, and support. Similarly, as Seligman has succinctly stated: "the ousted politician cannot fall below the level his skills and training ensures." Therefore, a candidate's occupation, income, and education may cushion the cost of defeat.

In addition to the eight variables cited above, the incumbent status of candidates at the time of the election may influence subsequent attitudes, for the adverse effects of defeat may be greater for incumbents than for others. We cannot take this potentially important variable into account, however, for lack of data. Out of 60 possible winners for election to the Oregon House in 1966, 47 were incumbent winners and the remaining thirteen were nonincumbents. There were a total of four defeated incumbents and all refused to be interviewed.

II. FINDINGS

Support and Activity of Winners and Losers

Table 1 shows the level of support that the candidates accord the democratic rules of competition after having participated in the primary and general elections. Winners in both primary and general elections exhibited a greater degree of support than did the losers. The difference is not as pronounced for the primary election as for the general election, which suggests that the outcomes of the primary election probably do not change the supportive attitude of the candidates as much as the outcomes of the general election. This point is reinforced when we confine our comparison to the losers. Note that 59


percent of the primary election losers reported high support, as compared to only 26 percent of the general election losers ($X^2 = 6.01, p < .05$).

Of course, such a difference in support for the democratic rules of the game between the winners and losers may not result from the election itself. It is possible that a greater percentage of the winners might have been supportive from the outset. Since we repeated the support items at various times of the election, we can determine whether this was the case by comparing a candidate's support over time. Table 2 shows that almost one half of the losers, in contrast to only 14 percent of the winners, reported a decrease in support. And this difference is statistically significant ($X^2 = 9.03, p < .01$). Thus, it seems safe to conclude that the losers are more likely to be less supportive of the democratic rules than the winners, and that the former are more likely than the latter to reduce their support as a result of participation in elections.

Equally significant is the finding that only a small number of the candidates manifested low support for the democratic rules of the game, regardless of the outcome of the election. Roughly 10 percent of the losers in the general election and none of the losers in the primary election registered low support. It thus appears that winning or losing does effect some changes in support, but does not produce enough disaffection to induce low support for the democratic rules among the losers.

With respect to the expected changes in political activity, Table 3 shows that the winners indicated a significantly higher intention to remain politically active than did the losers. Almost 83 percent of the winners, as compared to only 39 percent of the losers, said that they would spend more time following issues after the general election than before it ($X^2 = 14.3, p < .001$). Similarly, over one half of the winners expected that they would discuss politics more frequently after the general election than before it, while only one-third of the losers reported the same intention. The difference between winners and losers in their intention to continue a political career after the general election is not statistically significant, even though the winners tended to give positive responses slightly more than the losers.

### Factors Influencing the Supportive Attitude and Intention for Future Political Activity of the Defeated Candidates

The analysis in this section is confined to some selected variables which affect political attitudes of the defeated candidates. Table 4 summarizes relationships between the dependent and independent variables discussed earlier. The level of political ambition of the defeated candidates is very strongly associated with their intention for political activity. This evidence suggests that the losers with high political ambition are more likely than the less ambitious losers to exhibit a high intention for political activity ($\Gamma = .75$). The candidates' expectation about the election outcome correlates negatively with support and intention to continue political activity. Those candidates who initially gave an optimistic assessment of their chances of winning seem to manifest a less supportive attitude toward the rules of the game and are less likely to continue political activity than are the other losers who went into the election with less optimism.

Whether a loser ran in a safe or unsafe district appears to make a difference in terms of how politically active he would be after the election.  

### Table 2. Change in Support of the General Election Winner and Loser

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Change</th>
<th>Winner</th>
<th>Loser</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Change</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N$ includes only those interviewed twice. $X^2=9.03, p < .01$.

There are two possible reasons why some candidates wish to continue a political career in spite of electoral defeat. One reason is their belief that they would have a better chance of winning in the next election because they have gained some name familiarity in their districts as a result of the unsuccessful campaign. Another reason is that many of our candidates are what Barber might call "advertisers." Their main motive for running for an office is not because they want to win it but to promote private interests such as legal practice through electoral participation. See Barber, op. cit., pp. 67-115.

Both cross-tabulations and between item rank-order intercorrelations are also examined. Although tau values are generally smaller than Gammass presented in Table 4, basically the same pattern is observed.
The Perceived Reward-Cost and the Attitudes of the Defeated Candidates

The data in Table 4 reveal that the amount of perceived reward-cost is very strongly associated with both support for the rules of the game and intention for future political activity (Gamma = .56 and .61). The analysis also shows that ambition, expectation, type of district and type of election affect the attitudes of

TABLE 4. SOME CORRELATES OF SUPPORT AND ACTIVITY

(Gamma)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of Ambition: national, state, local</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of Election Outcome: excellent, good, poor</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>-.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of District: safe, competitive, unsafe</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Election: primary, general</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation: prestige ranking</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward-Cost Score</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the defeated candidates. Therefore, it seems appropriate to control their effects before we proceed to interpret the observed relations between the perceived reward-cost and the attitudes of defeated candidates.

Due to the small sample size \( (N = 48) \), we cannot opt for the conventional partia lling technique. Instead, an index formation technique is employed to control simultaneously for political ambition, expectation about the election outcome, type of district, and type of election. The method is "based on the relation of each control classification to the dependent variable. On the basis of these relationships, weights are assigned to each category in control classification and each individual in each category receives the designated weight. These weights are summed for each individual to yield an index based on all of the controls. Finally, the index is used as a control classification in the usual sense."

Treat ing the amount of perceived reward-cost as the independent variable and level of support for the rules of the game as the dependent variable, an index score for each candidate is computed based on four controls (ambition, expectation, type of district and type of election). Then, these index scores are dichotomized to form support control group I and II respectively. Finally, the relationship between the perceived reward-cost and support is examined within each control group. Again, a similar procedure is used to yield control groups for political activity.

Table 5 shows the relationships between the perceived reward-cost and the attitudes of the defeated candidates within each of these control groups. The data clearly indicate that the amount of reward-cost perceived by the defeated candidates as a result of their participation in elections strongly correlates with both support for the rules of the game and intention for future political participation, even after controlling for the effects of their ambitions, expectations, type of district, and type of election.

It is evident from the above analysis that the amount of reward-cost perceived by a defeated candidate is a powerful predictor of his supportive attitude toward the democratic rules and his intention for future political activity. The higher the perceived reward, the more likely is a defeated candidate to become supportive of the rules and active in politics after the election. Conversely, the higher the perceived cost of defeat, the more likely he is to become disaffected with the accepted rules of the game and further political participation.

The Reward-Cost Attendant Upon Electoral Victory and Defeat

What difference does it make to win or lose an election in terms of the reward-cost? Table 6 presents the data on the reward-cost as perceived by the winning and losing candidates. It is quite apparent that the losing candidates in both primary and general elections perceived a significantly lower reward than the winning candidates. This leads us to believe that the winners and losers are rewarded differently by their respective participation in the election. It is, however, important to underscore the fact that most of our respondents, regardless of the election outcome, are found on the positive side of the reward-cost scale. Among the losers, roughly 82 percent of the primary and 81 percent of the general election candidates reported some rewards. This evidence clearly suggests that the electoral competition analyzed in the present paper is not a winner-take-all type of contest. In spite of electoral defeat, a predominant majority of the losing candidates gained in their social esteem, occupation, career opportunity or political influence.

The finding that the difference between winning and losing is rather moderate in terms of reward-cost (no one reporting "great cost") points to what is probably a significant feature of competition in the American political system. Given the relatively small differences perceived by the winning and losing candidates, the system can be described as a "low risk system." A low risk system exists where the reward of political victories is modest and the cost of defeats minimal. By contrast, a high risk system is


\[15\] For an elaboration of the concept of low risk system, see Seligman, *Political Recruitment* and also my "Some Effects of Political Status Loss: A Comparative Approach," The Laboratory for Political Research, Report No. 17 (The University of Iowa, 1968).
TABLE 6. PERCEIVED REWARD-COST AS A RESULT OF WINNING AND LOSING
(In Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Reward-Cost</th>
<th>Primary Election</th>
<th>General Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Winner</td>
<td>Loser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=92)</td>
<td>(N=17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Reward</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Reward</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or No Reward</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Cost</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Cost</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The political competitions which result in immense gains for winners in status, wealth and influence, and in extremely severe deprivations for losers.

Speculatively, many new states of Asia and Africa appear to be high risk systems. The potential rewards for victory are immense, for political positions traditionally confer high social prestige and give control over access to wealth. The ladder for upward social mobility is therefore often concentrated in political offices. The cost of political defeat in many of these states is devastating, for political competition tends to be very much warlike and often results in a total victory or defeat. Various factors account for such warlike competition. Among them are the deep cleavages between elites concerning the system goals and the methods of their implementation, a set of mutually reinforcing antagonisms that run along ethnic, tribal, religious, or regional lines, and widespread anti-governmental reflex which Shils has aptly described as an "oppositional syndrome." Moreover, the dominance of a single authoritarian party in many new states makes the emergence of political opposition constitutionally and practically impossible and thereby increases the potential cost of being a member of a counter-elite.

The high cost of political defeat in some of the new states may also be attributed to the fact that many of the political leaders have only limited occupational skills. What little evidence there is indicates that these leaders are "professionals" in the sense that they have no occupation other than politics. Therefore, as Apter has put it, "for them to go out of office is, in effect, to be unemployed." And sometimes going out of office means going into exile as well. Because of the great reward associated with political victory.

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**Note:** The author's exploratory study of the defeated candidates in Korea revealed that 37% of the sample interviewed were unemployed at the time, which was two years after their electoral defeats. This appears to suggest that the defeated candidates had neither other occupational skills to return nor the wish to pursue non-political occupations. See my "Some Effects of Political Status Loss."

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**References:**

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5. The author's exploratory study of the defeated candidates in Korea revealed that 37% of the sample interviewed were unemployed at the time, which was two years after their electoral defeats. This appears to suggest that the defeated candidates had neither other occupational skills to return nor the wish to pursue non-political occupations. See my "Some Effects of Political Status Loss."

tory and the severe deprivations inflicted by def
feat, political competition in these new political
systems tends to be less constrained by the ac
cepted rules of the game than in low risk sys
tems such as the United States.

III. SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this paper has been to inves
tigate the attitude of the defeated candidates to
ward the democratic norms of competition and
their inclination to future political activity. An
other research objective was to explore the vari
ables which might account for the differences in
such attitudes. Major findings and their theore
tical implications are discussed as follows.

1. The evidence presented indicates that the
defeated candidates in both the primary and
general election exhibit a lower support for the
democratic rules of competition than do the win
ning candidates after the election. With respect
to their inclination to political activity, the losers
showed significantly less enthusiasm than did
the winners. It seems, then, quite clear that the
winners and losers differ significantly in their
supportive attitude and inclination to political
activity.

2. However, it is highly important to note
that despite the differences between the winners
and losers, very few respondents reported low
support for the democratic rules of competition
after the election. In fact, differentials in sup
port were not between high and low support but
between high and medium support categories.
This evidence strongly suggests that the losers
do reduce somewhat their level of support as a
result of defeat and yet remain basically suppor
tive of the democratic rules governing electoral
competition.

3. The result of primary elections appears to
have less impact than general elections on the
attitudes of candidates. Defeat in the primary
election discouraged less candidates than defeat
in the general election to continue political ac
tivity. Similarly, the candidates defeated in the
primary election did not reduce their supportive
attitude as much as those candidates defeated in
the general election. Where a competitive party
system is operative, thereby making general elec
tions meaningful contests, the outcome of gen
eral elections is therefore likely to have a
greater effect on the attitudes of candidates than
that of primary elections.

4. Focusing on the variation in the attitudes
of the defeated candidates, we found that their
career ambition, expectation about the election
outcome, types of district and election in which
they ran have some effects on their post-election
attitudes. Those defeated candidates who had ini
tially a high ambition showed a higher inclina
tion to continue political activity after the elec
tion than did others who had a low or no ambi
tion. The candidates’ expectation about the elec
tion outcome is also strongly associated with
their supportive attitude toward the democratic
rules and inclination to political activity. Those
who made an optimistic assessment of their
chances of winning before the election, reacted
to defeat by decreasing their level of support
and their inclination to political activity, while
others who assessed their chances of winning less
favorably did not react in this manner. Our
data also indicate that the type of district in
which a candidate is defeated is related to his
post-election attitudes. For example, the can
didates who were defeated in safe districts mani
fested considerably lower inclination to political
activity than did others defeated in competitive
and unsafe districts.

5. The most important finding is perhaps the
direct association that we discovered between
the amount of reward-cost perceived by the de
feated candidates and the manner in which they
adjust to the election outcome. The losing can
didates who perceived a high reward indicated a
visibly higher support for the democratic rules
of competition and a higher inclination to politi
cal activity than did others who perceived a low
reward. This relationship is sustained even when
the effects of other variables such as career am
bition, expectation about the election outcome,
types of district and election are accounted for.
Thus it seems quite reasonable to assert that the
amount of reward-cost perceived by the de
feated candidates is one of the key determinants
of their supportive attitude toward the demo
cratic rules and inclination to political activity
after the election.

6. The analysis of the amount of reward-cost
as perceived by both the winning and losing can
didates makes it evident that (1) the winners
gain higher rewards than the losers in terms of
occupation, social prestige, influence, and career
opportunity as we would expect, but (2) a pre
ponderant number of the losers also gain consid
erable rewards. This clearly suggests that the
political competition analyzed in the present pa
per is a low risk system because the winners did
not take all the rewards and the losers did not
lose too much.

The findings summarized above have impor
tant theoretical implications. Because the with
drawal of support by defeated candidates can be
one possible source of political instability, their
adherence to the accepted rules of the game is a
critical variable for the system maintenance. If
a large proportion of the defeated candidates become disaffected as a direct result of their participation in electoral competition and decide to challenge the legitimacy of the accepted rules, stability will obviously be weakened to that extent. As our evidence indicates, the losers accorded less support as a result of electoral defeat than they did before the election and also exhibited lower support than the winners, and yet, they remained basically satisfied with the rules of the game. Although our data were gathered in one state election, there is reason to believe that the defeated candidates rarely become totally disillusioned with the democratic rules in American political system. Thus, political competition in the United States, unlike that in the high risk systems of Asia and Africa, does not appear to produce many disenchanted losers who can threaten system stability.

Knowledge about why defeated candidates in one political system remain largely supportive of the rules of the game while defeated candidates in another become disaffected can add to existing theories of democratic stability.21 Easton has suggested: “Since today’s loser in an electoral campaign or policy has an opportunity to become tomorrow’s victor [in a stable democracy], differences do not have to be fought out to the knife, unlike those systems where the winner takes all.”22 The essence of this argument is that the maintenance of the democratic norms of temperance and moderation in political competition depends in a large measure upon a modest difference between the reward of political victory and the cost of defeat, that is, a low risk system. Where the reward of winning is immensely great and the cost of losing exorbitantly high, political competition tends to be warlike and, therefore, is disruptive of stability.

The direct relationship that we discovered between the amount of perceived reward-cost and the manner in which the defeated candidates adjust to the election outcome is entirely consistent with Easton’s contention. The higher the cost of defeat, the greater the likelihood that a losing candidate withdraws his support for the democratic rules of the game and shows a low inclination to political activity. Because a moderate difference between the reward of winning and the cost of losing induces favorable attitude toward the rules of the game among defeated candidates and thereby eliminates one potential source of instability, a low risk system is one important condition of democratic stability.
