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**The Diaspora Strategy: How Fidesz’s Competitive Authoritarian Regime Builds Support**

This paper examines the ways the Fidesz has continually established new bases of support for its authoritarian regime in Hungary. Beginning when it entered government in 2010, Fidesz has won Parliamentary supermajorities in every election. It has done so in the face of multiple opposition coalitions and large public protests against it. I make the case that Fidesz’s success comes from its skill in developing a variety of support bases, which are the Hungarian diaspora that it granted voting rights, cultural conservatives in Hungary that it took from another right-wing party, and normal citizens that have received patronage through government handouts and the Workfare employment program. Fidesz has also used corruption in public projects to build a network of business and party elites. This paper is comprised of 4 sections. The first is a literature review covering sources of authoritarian resilience and reasons for the granting of external voting rights. The second is an empirical section covering Fidesz’s exploitation of opposition weakness and co-optation of the Jobbik party. Third, it details the corruption of public projects to secure elite loyalty and use of patronage to secure goodwill across Hungarian society. Finally, it examines the tactic that has been key to Fidesz’s success, its engagement with the Hungarian diaspora. This paper contributes to the scholarly conversation by showing the various support bases Fidesz has courted to secure the narrow electoral victories needed to reshape Hungary.

Among post-communist countries in Eastern Europe, Hungary once stood out as a great example of how robust democracy could be built quickly. However, since the Fidesz party won a parliamentary supermajority in the 2010 Election, Hungary has seen its status retreat from liberal democracy to electoral autocracy (V-Dem Institute 2024). This decline has not been especially obvious, as the country still holds elections with real opposition parties and Prime Minister Viktor Orban has repeatedly faced public criticism. Instead, this decline in measures of democracy is the result of gerrymandering, limiting media access for opposition groups, and packing the Constitutional Court (Levitsky and Way 2020). The rapid descent here showcases just how fragile new democracies can be, even ones originally thought to be strong. As other post-Communist states grapple with the growing influence of would-be autocrats, the case of Hungary may provide lessons on authoritarian strategy for both sides of the struggle.

The case of Fidesz is of particular interest because it does not follow all of the common tenets of authoritarian resilience. Common sources of such resilience include repression, whether it be violence against opposition groups, restrictions on freedom of assembly, or the abuse of the legal system to weaken foes (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2019). This has not occurred in Hungary under Fidesz. They have instead employed other tools. Co-optation is another hallmark of authoritarian regimes (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2010, and it is one of the preferred strategies of the party. They have manipulated businesses, state employment programs, public works projects, and other right-wing political parties to entrench itself in Hungary (Scheppele 2022). Fidesz has also engaged strongly with the Hungarian diaspora that it granted voting rights to in 2012 to grow its constituency (Rutai 2022). This means that on election day Fidesz does not need to alter voting totals or otherwise interfere.

Indeed, Fidesz has managed to build a substantial electoral machine, winning enough seats in Parliament to hold a supermajority alone or in a coalition in 2010, 2014, 2018, and most recently in 2022. This has been done in spite of opposition coalitions in 2014 and 2022 (Scheppele 2022). Understanding how Fidesz has built such a broad and durable base of support is an important piece to understanding the nature of electoral autocracies today, as Hungary is among the most successful of them.

To show the full extent of Fidesz’s actions, this paper contains four sections. The first will examine the existing literature on the sources of durability for authoritarian regimes around the world and determine if they are tactics that Fidesz makes use of or not. It reviews the competing theories for why states, especially authoritarian ones, grant the right to vote to nonresident citizens. The empirical sections that come after show how Fidesz has managed to repeatedly generate the support needed to win on election day. The first empirical section shows the exploitation of the weak left-wing opposition following the 2008 Financial Crisis, and the ensuing strategy of co-optation towards Fidesz’s fellow right-wing party Jobbik to secure the support of Hungary’s culturally conservative voters. The next examines co-optation further by revealing the extent of the party’s direct patronage towards voters in the lead-up to elections through government handouts, in addition to the use of public employment to attract and discipline supporters. It also explores the system of corruption built by firms closely tied to the party, and the use of those firms to secure loyalty among political elites. The final empirical section explains the multi-year project that Fidesz undertook of advocating for the Hungarian diaspora’s citizenship and voting rights, eventually granting them, and then cultivating the diaspora into a fiercely loyal source of votes for the party.

**Sources of Authoritarian Resilience**

Substantial amounts of research have been poured into understanding the durability of authoritarian regimes in the 21st century. In recent years, Hungary has been a key area of study due to its previous status as a liberal democracy and quick decent into an authoritarian regime (V-Dem Institute 2024). Since entering government, Fidesz has used its power to drastically alter the country’s constitution, restrict opposition access to media, and crack down on the activities of non-governmental organizations (Scheppele 2022). Due to this, it is of great importance to scholars to understand why Fidesz has managed to hold onto power and do these things in the face of a united opposition.

Traditional explanations of authoritarian resilience prominently feature the use of repression by dictators and their security forces. Different perspectives exist on the varieties of repression. Kendall-Taylor et al. (2019) separates it into two varieties, repression of civil liberty and empowerment rights, and repression of physical integrity rights. The former encompasses restrictions on assembly and other forms of censorship, while the latter covers violent forms including political imprisonment and disappearances.

A different perspective on repression defines the varieties based on their visibility to the wider public. Levitsky and Way (2002; cited in cited in Kendall-Taylor et al. 2019, 108) describe repression in terms of low intensity and high intensity. Low intensity repression includes surveillance and the use of the legal system to go after opponents of the regime. High intensity, on the other hand, describes the use of obvious violence against the opposition or blatant election tampering.

Regardless of its conceptual framework, repression has been observed to be effective. Kendall-Taylor et al. (2019) explains that repression can raise the cost of opposing the regime, preemptively removing potential adversaries through the fear of retaliation at the hands of the regime. Interestingly, repression does not appear to be a tactic that Fidesz has made use of. The party seems to value the appearance of a normally functioning democratic state, because the large uprisings against the party have not been met with the types of crackdowns observed in countries such as Russia (Levitsky and Way 2010). Fidesz has, however, made use of other common strategies.

Another tool often utilized by authoritarian regimes is co-optation. Kendall-Taylor et al. (2019) defines this as generating loyalty by tying groups or individual actors to the regime itself. One common target of this tactic is political parties. Ruling parties can weaken their opposition by convincing small parties to join their majority coalition (Levitsky and Way 2010), or to act as compliant parties that offer rhetoric against the dictator but are ineffective in all other ways. These are also referred to as pseudo-opposition parties (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2019).

Co-optation is considered effective because those that are co-opted become invested in the regime’s survival through their reliance on the benefits. The decision of whether or not to go along with co-optation can create schisms in the opposition groups (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2019). In Hungary, co-optation appears to be present. Jobbik, a right-wing party, saw Fidesz take many similar policy positions on topics such as immigration. When Jobbik splintered in 2022, creating the far-right Mi Hazank, some Jobbik supporters entered the opposition coalition (Scheppele 2022). This crippled the support for the Jobbik name and can be seen as an example of party co-optation.

A key component of Fidesz’s base of support is the Hungarian diaspora, which it granted citizenship in 2011 and the right to vote in 2012 (Rutai 2022). The question of why states grant nonresidents voting rights has been the topic of intense study for many years. One of the most common explanations is the “window of opportunity hypothesis,” which argues that states are likely to grant nonresident voting rights at a time when the state in question is transitioning to democracy, among other policies such as allowing dual citizenship (Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg, and Cartagena 2021).

Diasporas may also be granted voting rights due to diffusion. Kendall-Taylor et al. (2019) describes this phenomenon as the spread of innovative ideas and policies across state borders. The role of diffusion is closely related to the window of opportunity hypothesis. Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg, and Cartagena (2021) explain that states have learned over time from each other about the benefits of external voting rights and dual citizenship specifically, and it has led to those policies being adopted in waves alongside democratization itself.

A variety of regime types have advocated for and implemented nonresident voting rights. In South America, emigrants voting rights were the preference of right-wing leaders decades ago, but more recently have been championed by left-wing parties. In Europe, it is a goal of the Italian party National Alliance (Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg, and Cartagena 2021) and has been implemented by Fidesz in Hungary (Scheppele 2022), both right-wing parties.

Diaspora enfranchisement usually occurs when the incumbent coalition is confident that they will benefit electorally (Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg, and Cartagena 2021), though this is not always the case. Fliess, Kiani, and Østergaard-Nielsen (2024) observe that enfranchisement can also occur in the period of time following a successful coup, as was the case in Bahrain in 2002. They argue that in this situation, allowing nonresidents to vote is not a tactic to increase their constituency, but instead a method of increasing legitimacy among other states in the international community or among citizens of the country.

Others make the case that authoritarian regimes expand voting rights as a way of repressing citizens who live abroad. Voter registration can be an avenue for states to collect information on politically engaged expatriates and emigrants. Campaign events for the regime and the opposition can serve a similar function (Fliess, Kiani, and Østergaard-Nielsen 2024). While many Hungarians who opposed Fidesz do not live within the state’s borders, this particular tactic also does not seem to be in use.

**The Rise of the Hungarian Right and Fidesz’s Expansion**

The ascendence of Fidesz into government in 2010 can be attributed in large part to the collapse of support for left-wing parties in Hungary. When the 2008 Financial Crisis occurred, the Hungarian Socialist Party was in government. The crisis hit Hungary particularly hard, and the Socialists and their allies were held responsible by the public for the near bankruptcy that the country experienced (Scheppele 2022). The impact of the crisis was felt for years, as right-wing parties came to dominate Parliamentary elections.

In 2010, Fidesz and Jobbik, a far-right party, combined for 69% of the vote while the Hungarian Socialist Party received 19% (NEO 2010). In 2014, Fidesz and Jobbik combined for 65% of the votes, and the left-wing opposition coalition named Unity received 25% (NEO 2014). The decline of left-wing parties became even more severe in 2018, when Jobbik received more votes individually than the Hungarian Socialist Party. Fidesz and Jobbik combined for 68% and the Socialists received 11% (NEO 2018). In 2022, Fidesz received 55% of the vote and the opposition coalition which now included Jobbik, named United for Hungary, received 34% (NEO 2022). While the anti-Fidesz sentiment held by many Hungarians is shown in the performance of the opposition coalition, United for Hungary’s performance fell well short of expectations. Much of this underperformance is attributed to the decision of many former Jobbik supporters to turn their support towards Fidesz (Scheppele 2022). This was the result of years of preparation on the part of Fidesz.

Beginning in 2015, Fidesz began a strategy of co-optation towards Jobbik through the theft of many of Jobbik’s priorities, which were immigration and LGBTQ+ issues (Scheppele 2022). This is intertwined with a decision at that same time to make immigration the center of Fidesz’s platform. After the 2014 Parliamentary election saw the defeat of the left-wing opposition coalition Unity, anti-Fidesz sentiment spread, culminating in large protests and a drop in the polls for the party.

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Fidesz also directed a large amount of attention towards gay and transgender people. They passed a law in 2021 that equated transgender information with pornography, and effectively banned such messaging from schools, television, and other places through the veil of protecting children. They then created a referendum for a redundant law on the same topic in order to mobilize anti-LGBTQ+ voters in the 2022 Parliamentary election (Scheppele 2022). Sexual and gender minorities would not be the only shared targets of Fidesz and Jobbik.

For years Jobbik spread antisemitic messages in media, and Fidesz gestured toward those same themes in some public forums as well. On Holocaust Remembrance Day 2018, the party planned a mass to honor a World War II-era Hungarian leader who surrendered hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews to the Nazis. Prime Minister Viktor Orban has also regularly demonized George Soros, a Hungarian-American progressive philanthropist, suggesting that he is influencing world politics, a sentiment that echoes a long-repeated Jewish stereotype (Reuters 2018). Through this messaging on immigration, LGBTQ+ people, and Jews, Fidesz worked to make itself indistinguishable from Jobbik to culturally conservative voters. This strategy appears to have paid off when Jobbik splintered in 2022. The Jobbik name moved to join the opposition coalition, while the far-right true believers formed a new party, Mi Hazank (Scheppele 2022). Fidesz’s co-optation project managed to undercut this tactic severely.

Analysis of the performance of the 2022 opposition coalition shows that their share of the votes underperformed expectations the most in areas where Jobbik support was highest in the 2018 Parliamentary Election, when Jobbik was still an ally of Fidesz (Political Capital 2022). It appears that Fidesz’s years of copying Jobbik’s values was enough to sway a sizable portion of cultural conservatives to choose them over Jobbik.

**Handouts and Intimidation**

A more direct method that Fidesz has employed to expand its base of support is direct voter patronage. This tactic is most often used in the period of time directly proceeding parliamentary elections. In the lead up to 2022’s election, Hungary instituted an additional payment to senior citizen pensions they labeled the “thirteenth month” (Scheppele 2022), which benefits approximately 2 million people (Ministry of Finance 2020). They also exempted citizens under 25 from paying the 15% income tax, which mimics a similar policy implemented prior to the 2014 Parliamentary Election. This impacted up to 460 thousand people (Ivan Gal 2021). Additionally, Hungary instituted price controls on food between February 2022 and July 2023. (Agence France Presse 2024). Taken together, these state actions directly benefit the finances of everyone of voting age in Hungary. Young people are able to avoid income tax, which benefits them in starting adulthood. Pension-age people are given money directly. Middle aged people benefit the most from the food price caps, as they are more likely to buy for young children in addition to themselves. By hiding this patronage behind a veil of useful public goods, the Fidesz government is able to portray its handouts as positive policy.

Fidesz has utilized co-optation to draw in more voters as well. One key example is Workfare, a Hungarian state employment program that they have morphed into a tool for gaining and disciplining supporters of the party. There have been numerous documented examples of Workfare jobs being offered in exchange for support for Fidesz. Research into this produced witness testimonials such as one person who said, “people who wanted to take part in the workfare program were promised employment in exchange for political support. They were told that they would receive support, but then the X on the ballot should be placed in the right spot” (Mares and Young 2019). This is an example of positive benefit clientelism, one that is quite effective in this case due to the attractive pay of Workfare jobs. They also found reports of town mayors calling meetings of Workfare employees and informing the workers that they would need to support certain candidates in the upcoming election lest they lose their jobs (Mares and Young 2019). It appears these workers often conveyed this threat to their families, in effect multiplying the support for Fidesz in that individual household. This is an example of negative threat clientelism, and this also seems to be effective due to the influence it has on the decision-making of an entire household. Workfare co-optation serves to bolster support for Fidesz among the working class in Hungary, and its impact is considerable. In 2016 Workfare accounted for 5% of the labor force, totaling over 220,000 jobs (Scheppele 2022), but the true scope is difficult to measure due to the effect it on the relatives of employees whose voting behavior is impacted by the benefits and threats.

Non-state actors also work to increase support for Fidesz on election day. There is evidence that illegal moneylenders have threatened their loan recipients with worse terms if they do not support Fidesz-aligned candidates in local elections. In return for this service, the lenders receive lenience or favors from local officials, or even direct payment (Mares and Young 2019). Fidesz’s strategy of eliciting support through financial benefits permeates additional income levels beyond just the working class.

Since coming to power in 2010 Fidesz has managed to build a powerful network of close connections with many of the richest people in Hungary. These Fidesz allies often have ties to multiple businesses across a variety of sectors, and these businesses are regularly given special treatment. One such case is that of a group of children’s vacation camps on Lake Balaton. Management of these camps was granted to an organization called Erzsébet Foundation for Children in the Carpathian Basin, which is a charity closely tied to Fidesz. Maintenance of the camps is paid for by the Ministry of Human Resources. Much of the food served there is produced by companies belonging to Lőrinc Mészáros, a businessperson closely allied with Fidesz. Renovations for the camps, paid for by the state, are being done by a firm also belonging to Mészáros. Camp security is provided by a contractor also connected to Fidesz (Csanadi et al. 2022). This example shows the complexity of the corruption network, and enough other cases exist to draw serious conclusions.

Analysis of Hungarian public contracts has shown that firms with ties to the Fidesz party have a systematic advantage in obtaining public contracts, and that these companies also hold greater risk of corruption and lower state observation of corruption. Overall, state control over corruption decreased once Fidesz entered government (Csanadi et al. 2022). This pattern of behavior has allowed Fidesz to use state contracts to shore up support from both business elites and groups, in particular the party’s own political elite.

Large state initiatives have systematically been turned into pet projects for high ranking Fidesz officials to ensure their loyalty to Prime Minister Orban. One such member of Orban’s inner circle is László Palkovics, Hungary’s Minister of Innovation and Technology. Once his position as Minister was secure, his hometown saw the construction of a test track for self-driving cars. Mihály Varga, the Minister of Finance, saw a university whose foundation he leads accept nearly $400 million to collaborate with a state-owned fund management firm that he oversaw in his role of Minister of Finance (Csanadi et al. 2022). By granting these projects, among many others, Orban has ensured that his inner circle of Fidesz government ministers remains loyal to the party, a key element of authoritarian resilience.

**How to Win with the Diaspora**

Another tool that has helped Fidesz maintain its Parliamentary supermajority during times of high internal opposition is its relationship with the Hungarian diaspora. The diaspora is composed of two groups, the first of which is made up of the approximately 2 million ethnic Hungarians who reside in Croatia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Ukraine as a result of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon which redrew Hungary’s borders. In 2011, shortly after Fidesz entered government, they granted Hungarian citizenship to this group and enfranchised them in 2012, allowing them to vote in Parliamentary elections beginning in 2014 (Rutai 2022). The other piece of the diaspora is comprised of just under 400 thousand people who fled Hungary during its communist period or currently reside outside the country for employment. It is estimated that roughly 450,000 Hungarians abroad in total vote in Parliamentary elections (Scheppele 2022). Beyond just expanding voting capabilities of the diaspora, Fidesz also worked to engage with the diaspora and turn them into an entirely new constituency, one fully outside the country’s borders.

Their engagement begins before the party entered government. In 2004 Fidesz, then a minority party, created a referendum that would have enfranchised ethnic Hungarians even earlier. Although the referendum was unsuccessful, it managed to endear the party in the minds of Hungarians abroad. Once they did gain power, they poured money into Hungarian communities in neighboring countries with projects such as community center renovations, education programs, Hungarian-language media, and other initiatives. In 2018 alone this totaled $435 million (Rutai 2022). The investment has been large, and the results have seemingly been worth it for Fidesz.

As a result of the community investments and the enfranchisement, the ethnic Hungarians in the “near abroad” are fiercely loyal to Fidesz in Parliamentary elections. Diaspora vote proportions in favor of Fidesz were 95% in 2014, 96% in 2018, and 94% in 2022. In a country the size of Hungary, with less than 6 million voters, the influence of the diaspora is certainly felt. The votes granted Fidesz an additional seat in 2014 and 2018, and two seats in 2022. In the tightly contested elections of 2014 and 2018, the additional seats granted by the diaspora were just enough to secure Fidesz’s supermajority (Sheppele 2022). While it is often the case that non-residents granted voting rights are friendly towards the parties that enfranchise them (Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg, and Cartagena 2021), there are additional factors that contribute to Fidesz’s dominance of their vote share in Hungary.

While the ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries were granted voting rights in 2012, citizens who simply moved out of the country had been able to vote previously. Since that year, however, it has been comparatively difficult for them to cast their ballots compared to the newly enfranchised. Individuals without an address inside the country’s borders are able to vote via normal mail from wherever they reside. Those that do still have a Hungarian address, as most expatriates and emigrants do, must vote in-person one of few official polling places (Rutai 2022). This is a significant burden, and those that must handle this are also much less likely to support Fidesz, as they do not have to directly thank the party for being able to vote in the first place. Additionally, the Hungarian state keeps secret the list of voters in the diaspora, as some neighboring countries do not allow for dual citizenship. As a result, it is extremely difficult for opposition parties to reach out to these ethnic Hungarians to campaign (Scheppele 2022). Through engagement and then enfranchisement, Fidesz has managed to build a close bond with the Hungarian diaspora, and it has resulted in the votes needed for the party to secure its parliamentary supermajority in the closest elections it faced, 2014 and 2018.

**Conclusion**

Fidesz has employed many strategies to construct a base of electoral support that is both durable and highly loyal. The party has faced united opposition coalitions in two separate Parliamentary elections and has defeated them both times. Interestingly, the party has shown that it is able to be mobile, creating new sources of votes when others begin to wane. In 2010, the opposition was severely weakened and Fidesz was able to win by being the largest center-right party. In the following years it worked to expand the voting rights of the diaspora, which it needed to secure another supermajority in 2014. After that it began to chip away at the identity of its ally Jobbik, and slowly established itself as a home for cultural conservatives through its focus on immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, and antisemitism. This culminated in 2022 when it showed it no longer needed the support of Jobbik to secure its biggest victory to date.

Along the way it created a network of elites in both business and politics that grew to become dependent on the corruption of public projects that Fidesz has allowed since entering government in 2010. This corruption extends down to the working class as well, due to the co-optation of Workfare into a source of votes and the widespread voter patronage with pensions, income tax, and food price controls.

This is relevant to advocates of human rights due to the degradation of immigrants, sexual and gender minorities, and ethnic groups such as Jews in the rhetoric and policies of Fidesz and its leaders. These actions have set the set stage for possible abuse at the hand of the Hungarian state. In order for such abuse to be prevented, and for autocrats like Prime Minister Viktor Orban to be kept out of power, advocates for democracy must shine light on the illegal actions taken by those in power. Exposing the level of corruption in state projects and in programs like Workfare would turn heads across society and could severely weaken the ability for Fidesz to keep its circle of elites satisfied. This could weaken the regime due to the ability of elite defection to weaken autocracies (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2019). Actors in the European Union could also come down harder on Fidesz’s abuses of EU law. The European Court of Justice has already found policies such as the food price controls to be illegal (Csonka 2024). If the EU were to withhold the benefits it provides members, especially agricultural subsidies, Hungary could be forced to change its policies. Economic crises are a key source of regime instability (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2019), and the EU has the means to pressure Hungary due to that.

The success of Fidesz in constructing an electoral authoritarian regime in Hungary has shown the world how quickly a democracy can fall and how difficult it is to unseat a party once it has established a loyal electoral base. The amount of attention directed towards Hungary can hopefully guide others around the world towards resisting imitators in the future.

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