

The Political Nature of Ideological Polarization: The Case of Hungary

By
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Polarization in Hungary is one of the most severe cases in Europe. It is predominantly elite-driven, and determined mostly by the antagonistic confrontation between the parties. Left and Right blocs oppose each other in a struggle where the loser is completely denied any influence on policymaking. The two blocs endorse opposing views on socio-cultural policies, but this division emerged as a consequence of the rhetoric and coalitional choices of parties, more than from the societal divisions that they ostensibly represent. Moreover, while the perceived ideological distance between party blocs is wide, the actual programmatic differences in the parties' economic and social policy stances are modest. This article draws on a broad range of sources to describe the process of polarization in Hungary after the fall of communism. I discuss how a polarizing style of political competition can lead to a politically divided society and, over the long run, to democratic erosion.

Keywords: Hungary; political polarization; Left–Right; ideology; illiberal democracy

Hungary transitioned to democracy in 1989, and by 1998 the cleavages that cut through the nascent multiparty political system had become perfectly bipolar, with all major parties belonging to either the “Left” or the “Right.” But the classic economic ideological measures, such as the role of the market versus government regulation in the economy, do not define the Left–Right scale in Hungary. Instead, Hungarian parties are polarized on cultural and symbolic issues, such as religion, nationalism–cosmopolitanism and, more recently, immigration, and they define Left–Right in those terms. The two party blocs emerged due to a

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consistent pattern of coalition formation among parties, which never bridged the Left–Right divide. Moreover, the perceived ideological distance between blocs is inflated by antagonistic and delegitimizing actions and rhetoric that characterize interaction between the opposing camps.

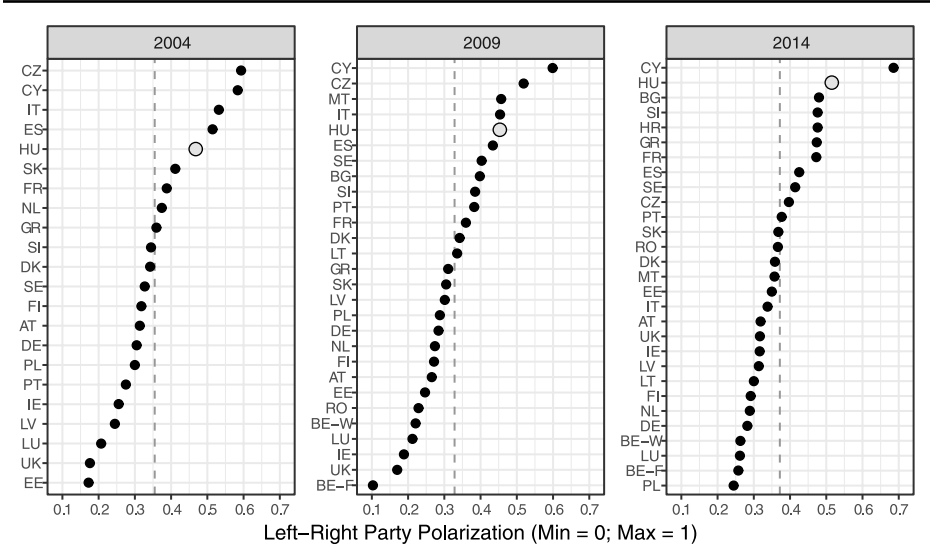
This article describes the contours of party politics in Hungary, focusing on the resurgence of polarization from 2002 to 2010 and its essential stability through 2018. It shows that the high degree of party ideological polarization perceived by Hungarian citizens does not correspond to large programmatic differences between parties. I argue that the perceived *ideological* conflict has *political* origins, and that the winner-take-all logic produced by institutional rules, combined with psychological elements of the us-versus-them discourse employed by the parties, provides perverse incentives for de-democratization.

According to Freedom House, Hungary is the only European Union (EU) member country that shows a significant decline in its aggregate Freedom Score over the past 10 years (see Freedom House 2017a). The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index for Hungary has been falling since 2010, and it is now the lowest among EU-member countries (see Coppedge et al. 2018). As the ruling party Fidesz further concentrates power, its leader, Viktor Orbán, is moving the country toward an openly illiberal democratic system, weakening checks and balances and press freedoms, and changing rules for electoral advantage—the early stages of what countries like Turkey and Venezuela have gone through.

The Nature of Polarization in Hungary

The extent of political polarization in any given country can be understood through either of two perspectives. The *wide range* view holds that polarization is a matter of differentiation of the policy supply: in this case, the choices offered to citizens are as wide as the policy ground covered by the political parties (Dalton 2008). This view tends to focus on positive implications of polarization, such as increased electoral competitiveness and mobilization. One example of this model is Switzerland, where Lachat (2011) shows that party polarization is associated with greater importance of substantive policy considerations for citizens' vote choice. The *entrenchment* view, on the other hand, argues that polarization implies concentration of the policy supply around two poles, with little room for a middle ground (McCarty et al. 2006; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Scholars taking this perspective have found that voters in polarized polities are more partisan, less likely to switch between parties over time, and more biased in their political evaluations and opinions (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Smidt 2017; Vegetti 2014). While the wide range view looks at the global divergence between actors and preferences, the entrenchment perspective emphasizes local convergence: namely the alignment of actors and preferences along a single conflict dimension. When polarization follows this pattern, between-group alienation and within-group concentration are likely to reinforce each other and lead to conflict (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). Hungarian politics is a textbook example of entrenched polarization.

FIGURE 1
Perceived Left–Right Party Polarization in European Countries, 2004–2014



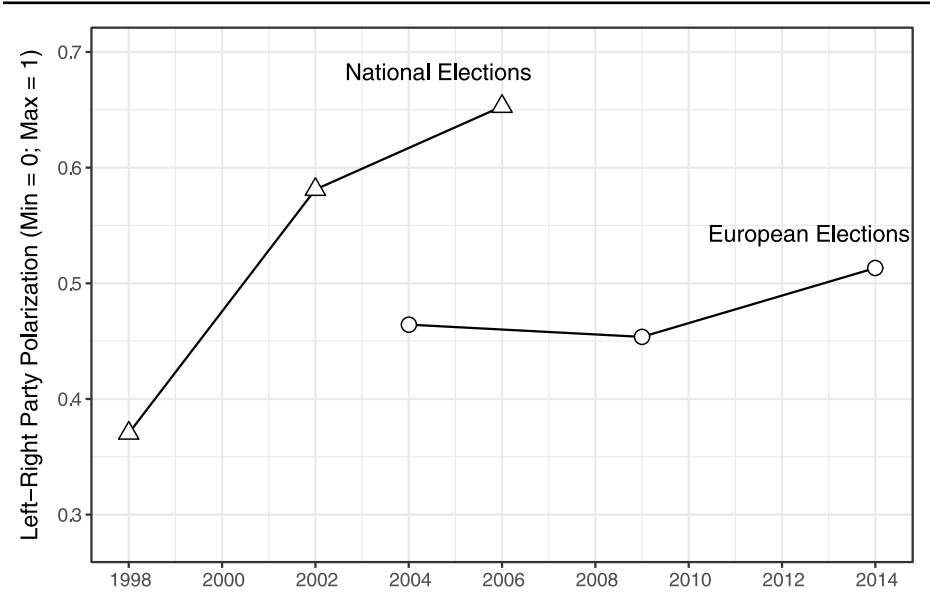
SOURCE: European Elections Studies (Egmond et al. 2009; Schmitt et al. 2009, 2016).
NOTE: Dashed lines are the year means.

The structure of political divisions in Hungary is summarized by a single, dominant Left–Right divide (Körösényi 1999; Palonen 2009; Todosijević 2004). Looking at that indicator with the available data, it is evident that (1) Hungary is one of the most polarized polities in Europe, and (2) the ideological polarization of Hungarian parties has been growing since the late 1990s. Figure 1 shows how polarized Hungarian citizens perceived their own party system to be, compared with other European citizens, in 2004, 2009, and 2014.¹

Since it joined the EU, Hungary has climbed the ladder from the fifth to the second most polarized political system in the union, behind only Cyprus; although the absolute value and distance from the average in each year have not changed over time. Figure 2 offers a wider time perspective, including three observations made around national elections in 1998, 2002, and 2006.² As the figure shows, there is a substantial difference between national and European parliamentary elections with respect to party polarization. In national elections, party polarization has grown about 0.28 points between 1998 and 2006, more than a quarter of the entire scale. In European elections, polarization is lower on average and remains fairly stable over time.

The observed difference between national and European elections comes mostly from different distributions of votes. Between 1990 and 2010, Hungarian parliamentary elections were contested with a two-round dual-ballot system, where 176 members of the national assembly were elected through district ballots, 152 members were seated from party lists in 20 territorial units through

FIGURE 2
Perceived Left–Right Party Polarization in Hungary in National
and European Elections, 1998–2014

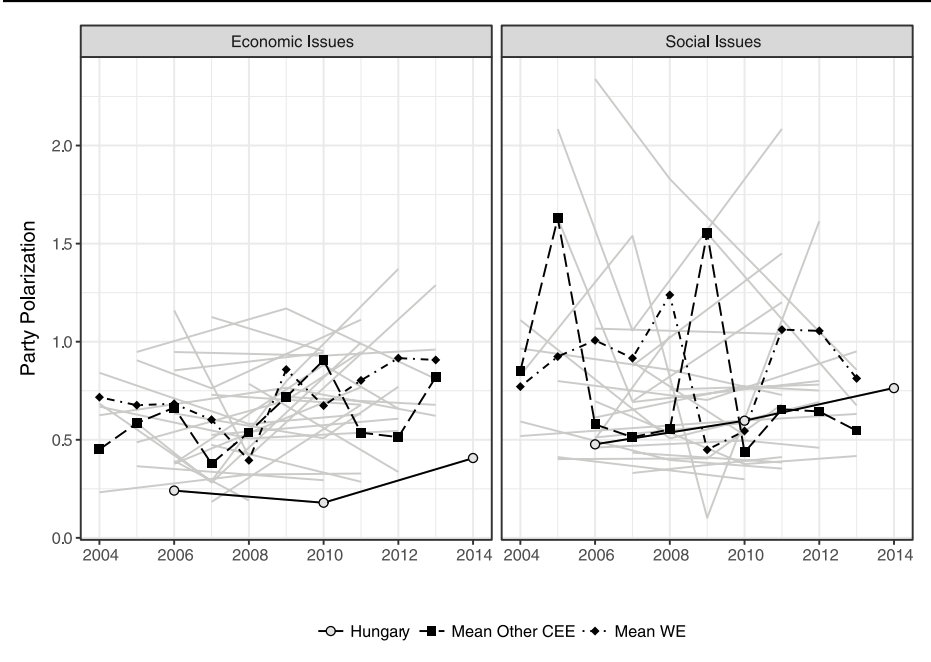


SOURCE: CSES (2015a, 2015b); Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP), <https://u.osu.edu/cnep>.

proportional rule, and 58 seats were allocated from national compensation lists (see Benoit 1996).³ While European elections are held under a pure proportional rule, the majoritarian component of the Hungarian electoral system is likely to have affected both party competition, by providing incentives for smaller parties to merge or form alliances with larger parties (Tóka 1995), and voting behavior, by causing voters to concentrate in larger parties (Blais and Carty 1991). In fact, scholars tend to agree that the mechanics of the electoral system, and the incentives they provide to party competition, played an important role in reducing the number of parties and promoting a bipolar structure of competition over the first decade after democratization (see Enyedi 2006; Tóka and Popa 2013). In Hungary, two party blocs, one on the Left and one on the Right, have dominated the political arena since the end of the 1990s. However, whereas parties in two-party systems are commonly expected to converge toward the center (see Downs 1957), the ideological distance between the Left and Right parties is high and growing.

What is the nature of the observed polarization? According to Fortunato, Stevenson, and Vonnahme (2016), the Left–Right schema helps citizens to deal with the complexity of politics by providing information both about parties’ policy positions and about probable patterns of coalition formation. In other words, next to a substantive policy content, ideological labels contain a relational component

FIGURE 3
Polarization of the Party Platforms on Economic and Socio-Cultural Issues in Hungary and EU Countries, 2004–2014



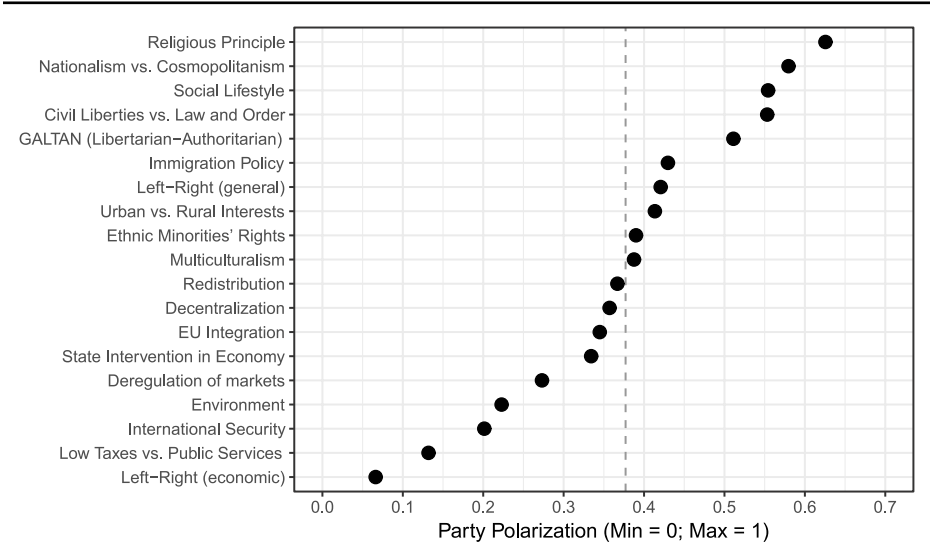
SOURCE: Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2015).

that tells citizens about which political groups the different parties belong to (see also Arian and Shamir 1983).

In Hungary, socio-structural cleavages such as class have had little bearing on political divisions (Enyedi 2005, 2006; Tóka 1998; Tóka and Popa 2013). Likewise, the striking perceived party differences on the Left–Right scale are not reflected in equally large policy differences. This can be seen by looking at party platforms coded by the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2015). Figure 3 shows the level of polarization between party programs on economic and socio-cultural issues.⁴

The figure focuses on the same time period and compares the same countries as Figure 1. However, it tells a different story. First, Hungarian parties are the least polarized in Europe with respect to economic policies. This is explained by the highly reformist consensus of the postcommunist parties in Hungary, which promptly embraced market capitalism right after the transition (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Markowski 1997). Second, Figure 3 shows that on the socio-cultural policy dimension, which includes law and order, multiculturalism, and national way of life, Hungarian parties are slightly more polarized than they are on economic issues. In fact, scholars have repeatedly stressed that the relevant dimension of substantive political conflict in Hungary is cultural (Enyedi 2006; Körösenyi 1999; Markowski 1997; Tóka and Popa 2013). This can also be seen by looking at

FIGURE 4
Party Polarization on Economic, Social, and Cultural Issues as Assessed by
Country Experts in Hungary 2014



SOURCE: Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al. 2017).
NOTE: Dashed line is the grand mean.

political experts’ ratings of the parties on different policy issues (Polk et al. 2017). Figure 4 shows party polarization in Hungary, as computed in the usual way, on a wide range of policies. It is clear from the figure that experts perceive Hungarian parties to be very much divided on cultural and symbolic matters, most notably on religion and national versus cosmopolitan views, and very little on economic ones.

But if parties’ programmatic differences are limited, why is the socio-cultural dimension regarded as so important? This division may be rooted in the clash between *urbánus* (urban) and *népi* (folk) ideologies, which emerged in the period between world wars as a controversy among intellectuals and resurfaced among dissidents in communist times (Nagy 2017). However, two other underlying cleavages are equally represented in the cultural divide among Hungarian parties. One is the *religious-secular* cleavage, the most relevant in Figure 4. The other is the *political class* cleavage, a postcommunist version of the class cleavage dividing workers and members of the *nomenklatura* (Körösényi 1999). These cleavages did not overlap initially. Their activation, overlap, and mapping onto the Left–Right divide followed from a process of simplification of the political system that was determined by party agency.

As mentioned earlier, an important function of Left–Right labels is to help citizens form expectations about which parties are likely to form coalitions together (Fortunato, Stevenson, and Vonnahme 2016). This function, often overlooked by

scholars of politics, is made possible by the Left–Right labels’ relatively abstract nature. According to Arian and Shamir (1983), these are just “cues” used by parties to discuss political matters. They may be filled with policy content if they are used to define policy alternatives, or with relational content if they are used to define political groups and relations. When parties emphasize or downplay their differences with other parties over the issues, these will be captured by Left–Right distinctions. Likewise, if the interaction between parties is characterized by aggressiveness and unwillingness to cooperate, the perception of Left–Right polarization will be heightened.

Two elements of party behavior in Hungary contributed over time to the definition of Left–Right conflict in cultural terms and to the perception of polarization. One is the *coalitional behavior* of the parties, and the other is the *style of interaction* among them. The following fact illustrates the first element: from 1994 until at least 2018, Hungary has never had a coalition at the national level bridging the Left–Right divide. In other words, in Fortunato, Stevenson, and Vonnahme (2016)’s language, the Left–Right divide predicts perfectly which coalitions are likely to be formed. Second, the two blocs interact with each other in a fairly aggressive way, a style that Enyedi (2016b) calls “populist polarization.” In general, populist rhetoric involves (1) a Manichean worldview, where politics is a struggle between good and evil; (2) a view of the people as homogeneous and fundamentally good; and (3) a view of the elites as the cause of all evils (see Mudde 2004). In Hungary, these elements are central to party rhetoric (Enyedi 2016b; Palonen 2009), especially on the Right (Enyedi 2016a). However, this state of affairs did not come about immediately after the democratic transition; it took about a decade to emerge.

The Boiling Frog: Dynamics of Polarization in Hungary

Hungary’s transition to democracy from communist rule happened peacefully in October 1989, following one of the less rigid regimes in the region (Herman 2016). The first two elections brought the same six parties to parliament: the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), heir of the Hungarian communist party; the national-conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF); the Independent Smallholders’ Party (FKGP); the Christian-conservative Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP); the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ); and the liberal youth party FIDESZ led by Viktor Orbán.

In the first election, in 1990, party competition was structured around three poles: socialists, Christian-nationalists, and liberals (Körösényi 1999). This structure derived from two cross-cutting cleavages among parties. One was the religious-cultural divide, with the socialists on one side, the Christians and nationalists on the other, and the liberals in the middle. The other was the divide over anticommunism, which had the socialists on one side, the liberals with the smallholders on the other, and the Christians and nationalists spread in the middle (Enyedi 2006; Körösényi 1999). Mass electoral preferences did not reflect

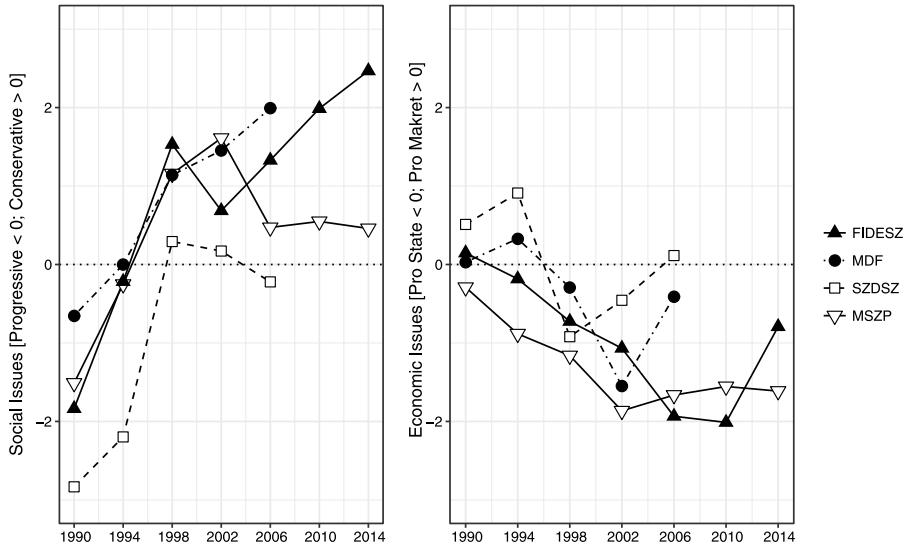
any strong socio-structural pattern (Tóka 1998). The election was won by the conservative MDF, which chose to form a Christian-nationalist government with FKGP and KDNP. This coalition was neither the only one possible nor the most obvious (Tóka and Popa 2013): MDF could have formed a government with SZDSZ and FIDESZ, to emphasize promarket policies and discontinuity from the communist past; or with MSZP, to emphasize continuity and social responsibility. Instead, by allying with KDNP and FKGP, the party gave the coalition a traditionalist identity, emphasizing the primacy of that religious-cultural cleavage over the others.

The election of 1994 completed the process of simplification of the political conflict space. The Christian-nationalist coalition experienced a dramatic loss of popularity over the previous legislature, leading to a victory of the communist-successor party MSZP. This result split the liberal camp in two. While SZDSZ joined the socialists in government, FIDESZ refused to cooperate with the ex-communists and remained in the opposition. Both parties were arguably motivated by opportunities within the Left and Right camps, as well as by the majoritarian incentives provided by the electoral system. SZDSZ agreed with MSZP on promarket reforms and privatization, and seized the opportunity to influence policymaking from within the Left bloc (Grzymala-Busse 2001). FIDESZ, on the other hand, took the opportunity offered by the Right bloc's weakness and began moving decisively rightward, changing its image from a liberal youth party to a conservative people's party (Enyedi 2005; Körösnéyi 1999). Consequently, FIDESZ began adopting language and symbols typical of the traditionalist Right, while becoming increasingly pro-state on economics (Enyedi 2006). By 1998, FIDESZ was the Right-bloc frontrunner and managed to win the election, forming a right-wing government together with FKGP and MDF.

Though the socio-cultural dimension had emerged as the most important determinant of the party blocs' ideological identity, the actual party platforms were not very polarized in terms of their socio-cultural positions. As Figure 5 shows, the FIDESZ's policy platform became more socially conservative between 1998 and 2002, but all parties made a similar shift, including MSZP, which in 2002 appeared to be even more conservative than FIDESZ on social issues. Indeed, as Figure 6 shows, between 1990 and 1998 polarization on social issues reflected in party manifestos dropped greatly. It started growing again in 2002, and by 2014 had almost reached the peak of the early 1990s. A similar party system-wide shift occurred on economic policies, although in this case from Right to Left, but economic polarization never reached the heights of the 1990s.

Party manifestos do not necessarily reflect the policies that parties will implement in practice. However, they are supposed to capture the policy content that parties use to campaign, in terms of both constraining the candidates and shaping the branding material supplied to voters (Eder, Jenny, and Müller 2017). In this respect, the official policy positions that Hungarian parties express in the economic and social domains are not severely polarized. However, from the end of the 1990s, parties' *rhetoric* became increasingly combative, starting from the Right camp.

FIGURE 5
Positions of Four Hungarian Parties on Economic and Social Issues, 1990–2014

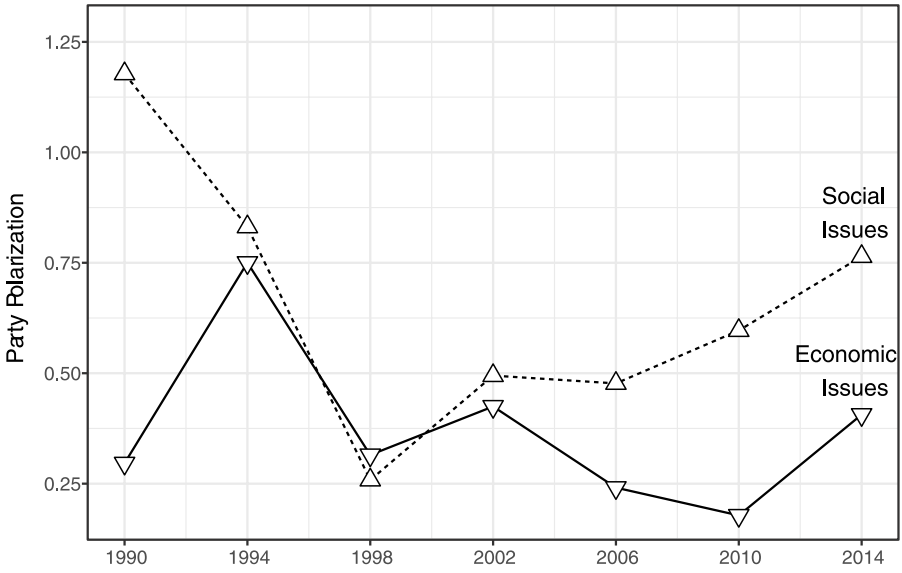


NOTE: From 2006 the positions of FIDESZ refer to the FIDESZ/KNDP coalition.
SOURCE: Volkens et al. (2015).

The Left-liberal coalition won the 2002 election. FIDESZ, under Viktor Orbán's leadership, strongly condemned the result, accusing MSZP of rigging the vote and denying the legitimacy of a "state" that had left the "nation" (i.e., the people) in the opposition (Müller 2011). The party also initiated a network of civil organizations, called "civic circles," that started coordinating both political and nonpolitical activities, such as mass demonstrations, petitions, blood donations, and fundraising campaigns (Enyedi 2005). Finally, its rhetoric became distinctly more populist, attacking political elites, banks, and multinationals, and taking on an even stronger emphasis on national symbols (Palonen 2009).

Political parties commonly try to distinguish themselves from one another with some degree of "us-versus-them" rhetoric. But in a polarized context, discourse tends to focus on the *who* rather than the *what* of politics (Stanley 2008). In this type of discourse, what most essentially defines *us* is that we are *not them* (Palonen 2009; McCoy, Rahman, Somer 2018). In Hungary, this is reflected in the way citizens place parties on the Left–Right dimension. As Figure 7 shows, between 1998 and 2002, Hungarian voters perceived a radical shift of all parties toward the extremes of the Left–Right scale, even though, as Figure 5 shows, MSZP's 2002 program on social issues was even more conservative than FIDESZ's, and the distance of the two parties on economic issues had not grown substantially. However, as the symbolic conflict between the Left and Right blocs grew, the divide between the Left and Right parties became more prominent. This was perceived by the citizens as a rise in ideological polarization.

FIGURE 6
Polarization of Hungarian Parties' Platforms on Economic and Social Issues, 1990–2014



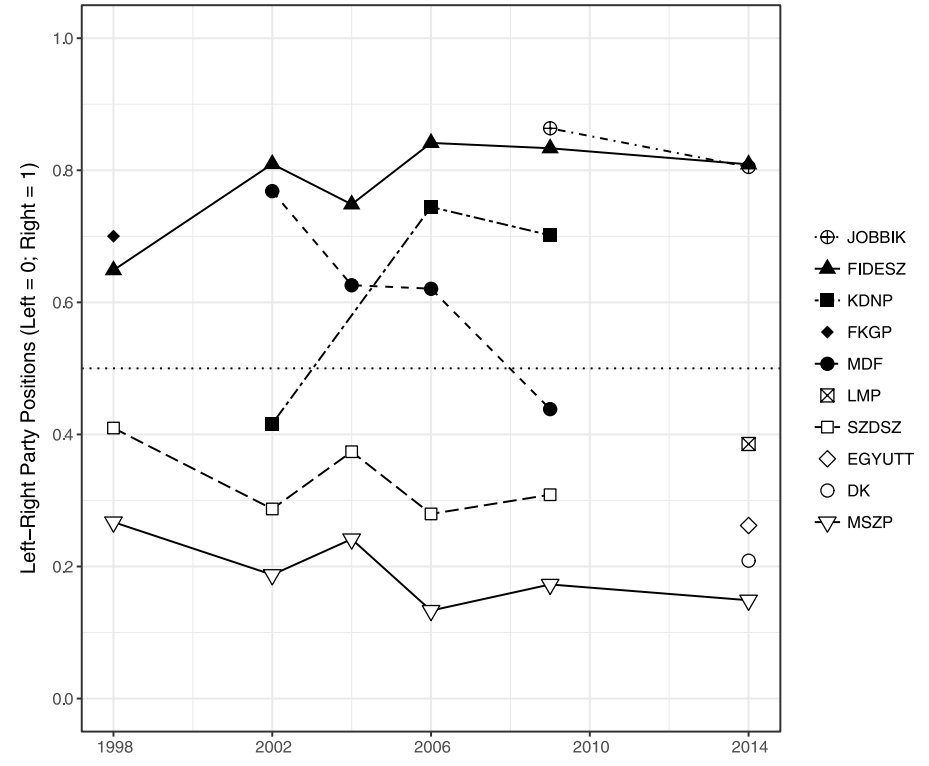
SOURCE: Volkens et al. (2015).

The trajectories of MDF and KDNP in Figure 7 also support this argument. The respondents' perception of a switch between ideological Left and Right of the two parties is more determined by being part of the in-group or out-group with respect to FIDESZ, than by actual policy shifts. MDF had a more socially conservative platform than FIDESZ in all years except 1998. However, Figure 7 shows, starting in 2004, Hungarian citizens began placing the party further and further to the Left until the last observed election in 2009 (the party was dissolved in 2011), when they placed it directly to the Left of center. In fact, in 2002 MDF ran a joint electoral list with FIDESZ, but refused to do so in the following elections. Though MDF never identified itself as a Left-wing party, its interaction with FIDESZ became increasingly adversarial.

KDNP's trajectory was just the opposite. In every election since 2006, the party has run in a joint list with FIDESZ. However, in 2002 the party ran in a list with other centrist parties, called *Centrum párt*. KDNP was not on the Left in 2002, but the fact that it was out of the Right-wing bloc was enough for respondents to place it there.

The parties' "us-versus-them" logic, combined with symbolic use of Left–Right labels, created an informational environment where perceived party ideological distances are a function of the degree of their membership in the same group. Parties belonging to different blocs are assumed to be very distant to each other ideologically, even when their policy differences are not so great. Moreover, a very stable pattern of coalition formation, without any party ever bridging the

FIGURE 7
Left-Right Positions of Parties in Hungary as Perceived by the Citizens, 1998–2014



SOURCE: CSES (2015a, 2015b), CNEP, Schmitt et al. (2009, 2016).

Left-Right divide, contributed to the definition of the party system’s two-bloc configuration.

A crucial feature of the interaction between blocs that keeps this narrative going is a lack of *institutional consensus*; that is, the failure of one bloc to accept the other as a legitimate political interlocutor (Baylis 2012). This can be partly explained by the all-or-nothing nature of majoritarian parliamentary systems, where broad agreement and compromise are not needed for effective governance. In Hungary, elections had become high-stakes affairs: losing the elections means being excluded not only from office, but from the entire political regime (Enyedi 2016b). Government and opposition disagree by default and systematically refuse to support each other’s legislative initiatives (Lengyel and Ilonszki 2010), mostly because governments do not need the opposition to pass legislation.

Such winner-take-all logic implies that parties are generally more anxious about the possibility of electoral defeat, since defeat implies losing any chance to influence decision-making. As a consequence, parties exploit all means to secure their

own victory. One example is the diffuse tendency to outbid opponents on fiscal issues during electoral campaigns. This practice has inflated government spending over time, increasing state indebtedness and producing large budget deficits (Lengyel and Ilonszki 2010). Additionally, parties in Hungary persistently question each other's legitimacy, refuse to speak with political rivals, and deny the integrity of the elections they lose. The accusations differ between blocs. As Körösenyi (2013) notes, "The Hungarian right has called into question the *national* commitment of the left and the left the *democratic* commitment of the right" (p. 16, emphasis in original). As FIDESZ accuses MSZP governments of serving the international elites against the interests of the Hungarian people, MSZP accuses FIDESZ governments of failing to respect democratic pluralism. This rhetoric fits well with the populism-elitism divide and has little to do with policy differences.

All these elements came together in 2006. After four years of MSZP government, and after a campaign very much focused on fiscal outbidding, voters kept the Left-liberal coalition in power. However, events that occurred in the years following the election undermined the Left bloc's popularity for many years afterward. First, the government introduced harsh austerity measures to tackle large state deficits that had been accumulating since the previous legislature (Sitter and Batory 2006; Tóka and Popa 2013). Second, the press brought to public attention several corruption scandals involving MSZP and SZDSZ officials over the entire term. (Bíró Nagy, and Róna 2012; Müller 2011). Finally, in a country where symbols are central to politics, one particular event had a strong impact on the government's perceived legitimacy. A few months after the election, a recording of a speech given by socialist prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, to his own party members leaked on the national radio. Using strong language, the PM admitted to having "lied in the morning, at noon and at night" about the true state of the Hungarian economy to win the elections.⁵ The rationale of Gyurcsány's speech was to persuade his own party's delegates that the government had to deal with state finances and introduce policies to correct past misdoings. But the speech was received as a betrayal of the Hungarian people perpetrated by a government whose priority was to serve private interests (Müller 2011). Over the following weeks, FIDESZ, as well as other extreme Right-wing groups, organized demonstrations and other protest events in Budapest, some of which were harshly suppressed by the police (Harper 2006). Despite repeated demands by the opposition, Gyurcsány refused to resign. But soon, with the global economic crisis, the consequences of economic mismanagement arrived. In 2008 the government accepted a rescue package from the IMF and initiated cuts to social and unemployment benefits. Gyurcsány eventually stepped down in 2009, leaving the lead to a caretaker government under which both austerity measures and corruption scandals continued.

The next election in 2010 yielded a landslide victory for FIDESZ, which obtained 53 percent of the votes. MSZP's support dropped by more than half, and SZDSZ and MDF disappeared from parliament. The election also brought two new parties into the political arena: the green "politics can be different" (LMP) party and the far-Right Jobbik. This reshuffling increased the overall fragmentation of the party system. LMP and Jobbik's unwillingness to enter a

coalition with the largest parties in their respective blocs introduced within-bloc competition that disrupted the trend of previous years toward a two-party system. However, it did not undermine the existing cleavage structure, which remained centered on the conservative and liberal camps (Tóka and Popa 2013).

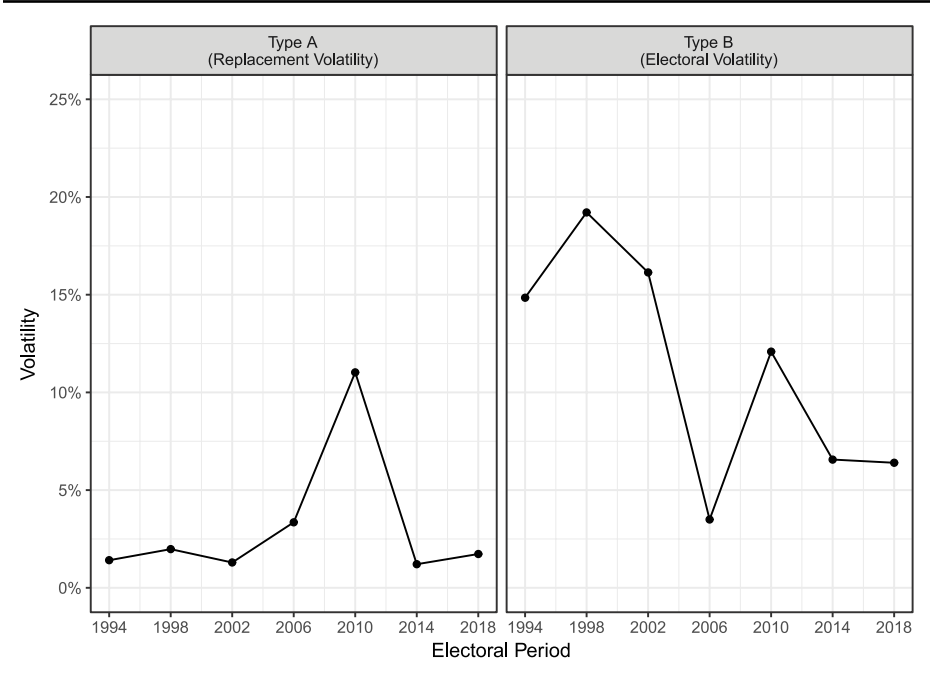
Because Hungary's electoral system gives disproportionate representation to the majority party, FIDESZ's 53 percent of the vote translated into a supermajority of more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament. This granted FIDESZ the power to make a number of important institutional changes, including amending the Hungarian constitution. During its first two years in power, the government made several changes to the system of checks and balances with the aim of enhancing its own power. These included neutralizing the Constitutional Court, appointing FIDESZ members to the Election Commission, electing a new president, and putting the media under government control by appointing loyalists to the newly established Media Authority and Media Council (Bánkuti Halmai, and Scheppele 2012; Herman 2016; Müller 2011). Indeed, following the regulatory changes initiated in 2010, Hungary now falls among the most restrictive in Europe in terms of freedom of press (Freedom House 2017b). Additionally, the government made two critical changes to electoral law. First, it increased the share of parliamentary seats elected in single-member districts, making the system even more disproportional. Second, it changed the boundaries of the electoral districts to FIDESZ's advantage (see Scheppele 2014; Szigetvári, Tordai, and Vető 2011).

In the elections of 2014, the opposition was highly fragmented. On the Right, Jobbik presented itself as an alternative to FIDESZ, offering a more extreme version of the same rhetoric (Bartlett et al. 2012). On the Left, MSZP and other smaller parties (two of which, Együtt and DK, splintered from MSZP after 2010) formed the coalition Unity, hoping to be competitive against FIDESZ in the new single-member districts, while LMP ran independently. FIDESZ still won the election, again obtaining two-thirds of parliamentary seats. Jobbik became the second largest party in the country. The entire Left camp obtained only slightly more than 30 percent of the votes, scattered among four parties. The situation remained much the same in the 2018 election, with FIDESZ increasing its support even further, and the Left-wing opposition becoming weaker and more fragmented than it had been.

Consequences for Democracy: Electorate Immobilism and Illiberal State

Though the party landscape has changed dramatically since the 1990s, electoral politics in Hungary seems to be constantly moving toward a state of affairs in which elections are a mere count of who is willing to turn out to support their own in-group. This process was in place until 2006, took a temporary pause with the demise of the Left camp, and started again afterward. We can see this process by looking at aggregate electoral volatility over time. Figure 8 shows two types of volatility, as proposed by Powell and Tucker (2014).⁶

FIGURE 8
Aggregate Electoral Volatility in Hungary, 1994–2018



NOTE: Party vote shares in each year are weighted for turnout.

Type A, or *replacement* volatility, is the variability produced by the disappearance of old parties and the appearance of new ones. The peak in 2010 reflects the shakeup of the party system caused by the arrival of Jobbik and LMP. Before and after that, the system looks remarkably stable, with less than 5 percent of votes being moved from old to new parties.⁷ Type B volatility is the *change in vote shares* of existing parties, and reflects the variability in aggregate support among stable parties from one election to another. This trend matches the events described in the previous section fairly well. The rise of FIDESZ as the frontrunner of the Right bloc between 1994 and 1998 produced an all-time high in volatility in 1998, with almost 20 percent of aggregate vote share changing among existing parties. The entrenchment of the conflict after 2002’s reorganization of FIDESZ’s civic base is reflected in an entrenchment of party support in 2006, which changed less than 5 percent on aggregate. The spectacular collapse of the Left after the 2006–2010 legislature, which produced a decrease of almost 25 percent of the vote share for MSZP and a 10 percent rise for FIDESZ, is captured by a peak of volatility in 2010. However, from 2014, with the new system of electoral constraints in place for the opposition, the gerrymandering of districts, and the increased disproportionality of the system, party support seems to be headed toward another period of entrenchment.

Electoral immobilism is matched at the societal level by the penetration of political “bloc identity” in several aspects of social life. As Lengyel and Ilonszki (2010) describe it, “there are magazines for dog-keepers, bird-watchers, fishing anglers and many other hobbies that voice Right-wing or Left-wing political views. It has been found that instead of discussing their monthly rents and other housing issues, tenants and owners of condominiums use political labels to denounce each other in meetings” (p. 165). This resembles what Iyengar and Westwood (2015) observe in the United States, another well-known case of entrenched political polarization, and the process of political polarization extending into social relations as political identity becomes social identity, described by McCoy, Rahmin, and Somer (2018).

This type of severe political and societal polarization has pernicious consequences for democracy. In the Hungarian case, the governing party FIDESZ, with the apparent support of its voters, appears to have moved from viewing competitors as normal electoral adversaries to seeing them as enemies to be eliminated from the political scene—the type of pernicious outcome described by McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018). When political differences turn into a Manichean conflict between good and evil, it is common to see the winner excluding the loser from any position of power and using every possible means to prevent it from being a threat in the future. In this situation, it is not unlikely that the loser will start questioning the legitimacy of the institutions that allow the winner to win and stay in power. As a result, citizens may grow increasingly cynical about official politics, which they see as a self-referential power game that has nothing to do with the actual problems of the country.

In July 2014, Viktor Orbán gave a speech in front of an audience of ethnic Hungarians in Băile Tușnad, Romania, which generated a stir among the international press. In the speech, the prime minister clearly stated his goal to turn Hungary into an “illiberal state,” a system that “does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom ... but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization, but instead includes a different, special, national approach.”⁸ While these words leave a lot of room for interpretation, the actions that the FIDESZ government has been taking have indeed undermined the liberal-democratic features of the Hungarian political regime. The reforms begun by Orbán’s FIDESZ government in 2010, and continued after 2014, appear to be engineered to give it a strong electoral advantage over its competitors in a nonlevel playing field, in a way that increasingly resembles “competitive authoritarian” regimes rather than electoral democracies (Levitsky and Way 2010). Hungary has a strong governing party holding two-thirds of parliamentary seats, a media environment hostile to voices that are not progovernment, and a political discourse heavily focused on topics like immigration and national identity, where opposition forces are often accused of pursuing foreign interests. All of this is tied to the specific polarizing rhetoric that Hungarian parties, more notably on the Right, have been using since the turn of the century in 2000. The current disproportionate electoral system produces results that are even more unrepresentative than the previous one, increasing

the gap between winners and losers, and thus actually increasing the incentives for the incumbent to stay in power.

The opposition, on the other hand, has failed as of 2018 to coalesce into a strong counter-mobilization capable of challenging FIDESZ's grip on power. In the April 2018 elections, the opposition split and FIDESZ won 49.3 percent of the votes and 133 seats in parliament, giving Orbán his third term as prime minister since 2010, and his fourth overall, with another supermajority of two-thirds of parliament. Moreover, with a 70 percent turnout, the government can claim full electoral legitimacy. These results are due at least in part to FIDESZ's management of the immigration issue, which became visible in Hungary in summer 2015, at the peak of the refugee crisis, when thousands of asylum-seekers entering Hungary from the Balkans flocked together around the Budapest central train station for several days. Since then, Orbán's discourse has increasingly focused on immigration, in a trend that appears to be increasingly common among European Right-wing parties. However, while anti-immigration positions are gaining momentum all over Europe only recently, the success of FIDESZ's nationalist rhetoric has its roots in a process of successful management of political polarization that has lasted for two decades.

Notes

1. Following a conventional approach in the literature (e.g., Dalton 2008), party polarization is calculated by weighting each party's ideological extremity by its relative vote share. The measure is further normalized to range between 0 and 1. See the online appendix for a description of the data and the formula used to compute polarization.

2. As of early 2018, 2006 is the last year where national electoral data are available for Hungary.

3. The compensation mechanism is a complex system aimed at increasing the proportionality of the seat distribution by employing surplus votes for candidates in single member districts that did not win the contest. See Benoit (1996) for a detailed description of the system. In 2012, the electoral law was changed to a one-round mixed system with a prevalence of single-member districts, still proving largely majoritarian. See Nagy (2015).

4. The choice of categories corresponding to economic Left and Right is based on Benoit and Laver (2007). The categories included in the social dimension have been modified to cover issues that are more relevant for the cultural cleavage in Hungary, like multiculturalism, internationalism, and traditional morality. See the online appendix for the list of categories that have been used. Party positions have been obtained using Lowe et al. (2011)'s method, and have no theoretical end points, hence the values of polarization in Figure 3 are not normalized between 0 and 1.

5. An English translation of the speech is available from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Őszöd_speech.

6. See the online appendix for the results of all elections from 1990 to 2014. To limit the distortions produced by different voting populations between different years, vote shares have been normalized by the year turnout.

7. Replacement volatility is supposed to be the most prevalent among new democracies in Central-Eastern Europe, although in Hungary this does not seem to be the case. Note that the values displayed here, albeit based on the same formula proposed by Powell and Tucker (2014), are different from the values in the data provided by the authors (which end in 2006). However, Powell and Tucker (2014)'s data appear problematic at face value: between 1994 and 2006, Type B volatility is constantly declining, although the surge in FIDESZ' support and drop in SZDSZ' and MDF's support in 1998 should be reflected in higher volatility on that year compared with 1994. Moreover, Type A volatility in Powell and Tucker (2014)'s data has a peak of about 16 percent in 2002, double as much as in 1998 and 2006, despite no large parties appearing or disappearing in that year.

8. See the full English translation of the speech on the official website of the Hungarian Government: <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp> (retrieved on July 16, 2018).

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