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**Cultural Backlash vs. Economic Self-Interest:
Democratic Backsliding in Hungary**

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Abstract

Jacques Rupnik, in his article about the crisis of liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe, writes that for Hungarians in 1989, “belief in an open society and a sense of reasserted national and indeed European identity seemed to go hand-in-hand.” Today, the combination of the rise of illiberal democracy and heightened concerns about identity in the face of the refugee crisis has deemed the two beliefs inconsistent, which, according to Rupnik, “draws to a close the post-1989 liberal cycle.” This essay attempts to explain the underlying reasons behind liberal democracy breaking down in wealthy countries of Central and Eastern Europe, despite early successful post-communist transitions. It distinguishes between demand- and supply-side explanations of democratic backsliding and conducts a quantitative analysis of public opinion in Hungary to test the validity of a popular demand-side explanation put forward by political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes. The results of this study show that the conventional wisdom about an anti-democratic, anti-migrant, anti-EU, and anti-liberal crisis in Hungary is strikingly at odds with public opinion. Using a logistic regression model, this study finds that economic self-interest is a far stronger predictor of anti-democratic voting than cultural or political attitudes proposed by Krastev and Holmes. Hungarian voters do not deliberately vote for authoritarianism. They reward their right-wing populist leader for economic growth, putting democracy in the backseat.

Introduction

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 marks the beginning of the post-communist countries' "return to Europe" through adopting Western-style values and institutions. The West has supported Central and Eastern Europe's transition by promoting the Western model of state formation, consisting of liberal democratic institutions, decentralized capitalist markets, and integration with the European Union and NATO. Today, the outcomes of the post-communist transitions vary. It is no longer appropriate to assume that Central and Eastern European countries are transitioning *to* democracy. Instead, they are undergoing transitions *from* communism to various hybrid regimes. In his *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, Thomas Carothers writes that while the transition paradigm has been "somewhat useful during a time of momentous and often surprising political upheaval in the world," the reality is no longer conforming to the model.¹ It is time to look for a better lens.

Currently, there are discussions among political scientists and EU leaders about ways to contain democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe, but these have not yet resulted in a coherent action plan. The United States' project to export democracy has failed in complicated societies of the Middle East, and China's economic growth in the absence of liberal democracy grants legitimacy to the modern quest for alternative systems of governance. The election of Donald Trump in the United States has raised further concerns about democratic erosion and put the future of the Western-led international order in question. Academic scholars have paid increasing attention to the dangers and implications of democratic backsliding, yet efforts to define the origins of this phenomenon remain inchoate.

¹ Carothers, Thomas. "The End of the Transition Paradigm." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2002, pp. 5-21, [doi:10.1353/jod.2002.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003), p. 6.

This essay will attempt to explain the underlying reasons behind liberal democracy breaking down in wealthy countries of Central and Eastern Europe, despite early successful post-communist transitions. It will distinguish between demand- and supply-side explanations of democratic backsliding and conduct a quantitative analysis of public opinion in Hungary to test the validity of a popular demand-side explanation put forward by political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes. The findings of this study will contribute to the ongoing discussion about the driving factors of post-communist democratic reversals and add to the broader debate about the role of ordinary people in precipitating democratic breakdowns.

The first chapter will review the academic literature on democratic transitions and backsliding, describe the recent political developments in Hungary using the given framework, and categorize the existing viewpoints that academic scholars have put forward to explain democratic backsliding in post-communist Europe. The second chapter will summarize the argument made by Krastev and Holmes and introduce the research design of this study. The third chapter, following the plan outlined in the methodology, will report the data collection process and set the stage for subsequent data analysis. The fourth chapter will present quantitative and qualitative findings, interpret the results, and discuss how these findings shed light on the questions guiding this study. The final chapter will briefly recap the study, reflect on what we have learned, and provide recommendations for further research.

Literature Review

The academic literature on democratic transition shows that economic development, low level of inequality, and the number of years with democratic experience are positively correlated to the consolidation of democracy. Once the poster child for democratization and now the primary case of democratic backsliding, Hungary is fairly wealthy, equal, and experienced with

the democratic system. The following literature review will provide a theoretical background on democratic transition and backsliding to bring clarity and focus to the specific case of democratic reversal in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. I will begin this chapter by summarizing the academic literature about democratization, particularly the roles that economic development, inequality, and experience with democracy play in a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic political system. I will then briefly review more specific literature on democratic backsliding, fit the case of Hungary to said literature, and present the two competing viewpoints that academic scholars have put forward to explain democratic backsliding in post-communist Europe.

Democratization

Economic Development

The positive relationship between economic development and democracy is one of the most well-established findings in political science. Seymour Martin Lipset, approaching the problem from a sociological and behavioral standpoint, put forward a hypothesis concerning economic growth as an important driver of democratic transition. Lipset claims that not only does higher income contribute to democratization, but “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy.”² Lipset's idea, subsequently referred to as modernization theory, was expanded by scholars like Dahl, who argues that the presence of a market economy creates favorable conditions for democratic institutions,³ and Treisman, who finds “a strong and consistent relationship between higher income and both democratization and democratic survival in the medium term (10–20 years), but not necessarily in shorter time

² Lipset, Seymour Martin. “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 1959, pp. 69-105, [doi:10.2307/1951731](https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731), p. 75.

³ Dahl, Robert A. *On Democracy*. Yale University Press, 1998.

windows.”⁴ Diamond and Linz claim that the economic growth rate, independent of the level of economic development, stimulates social changes, such as the organization of the middle class, that facilitate the democratic transition.⁵ Inglehart and Welzel account for cultural variables playing an important role in an admixture of factors contributing to democratization. Analyzing data from Large-N comparative survey projects, they find that certain mass attitudes linked to socioeconomic development could effectively predict democratization, and the previous literature has either ignored or been suspicious of factoring in aggregate attitudinal values as the sources of democratic transition. Their analysis shows that as a country advances from the industrial to post-industrial phase, the ideal social and cultural conditions for the foundation of democracy are born.⁶

Przeworski and Limongi question the validity of Lipset’s modernization theory. They distinguish between endogenous and exogenous models of a relationship between economic development and democracy. In their view, modernization theory represents an endogenous model, which states that democratic systems follow economic development. Przeworski and Limongi introduce an exogenous model, according to which modernization is not a causal factor in the process of democratization. Instead, democratic transitions occur independently from economic development. Once prosperous, however, democracies with higher GDP per capita are more likely to remain democratic, which leads to a false belief in the causal link between economic development and democracy.⁷ Epstein et al. retest the modernization hypothesis using a three-way rather than the binary classification of regimes. By classifying countries into

⁴ Treisman, Daniel. “Economic Development and Democracy: Predispositions and Triggers.” *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2020, pp. 241-257, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-043546>, p. 241.

⁵ Diamond, Larry, et al. *Democracy in Developing Countries: Latin America, 2nd Edition*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

⁶ Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. “Changing Mass Priorities: The Link between Modernization and Democracy.” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2010, pp. 551–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25698618>, p. 551.

⁷ Przeworski, Adam, and Fernando Limongi. “Modernization: Theories and Facts.” *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1997, pp. 155–83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25053996>.

autocracies, democracies, and partial democracies, they demonstrate that higher GDP per capita significantly increases the likelihood of democratic transitions, both by enhancing the consolidation of existing democracies and by preventing reversals to authoritarian systems.⁸

Income Inequality

There is, of course, no unified causal theory to explain the emergence of modern democracies. Boix, in his *Democracy and Redistribution*, concentrates on the domestic distribution of economic assets, that is, the degree of economic inequality, as a potential factor contributing to democratization. He argues that democracy prevails when economic equality is high. According to Boix, the redistributive demands of the voters on the elites are particularly intense in highly unequal societies. As a result, the elites have a strong incentive to oppose democracy, which would enable the majority of the population to impose heavy taxes on them. On the contrary, when domestic economic assets are balanced, the redistributive impact of democracy appears less threatening to the wealthy, as a result of which the probability of a peaceful transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime increases. In other words, Boix suggests that inequality harms democracy's prospects because, in intensifying voters' desire to redistribute authoritarian elites' wealth, it generates a similarly intense defensive reaction by the same elites, clinging stubbornly to the status quo.⁹

Ansell and Samuels oppose Boix, offering an alternative explanation of the relationship between inequality and democratization. They suggest that democracy is more likely to emerge when "rising yet politically disenfranchised groups demand greater voice in government affairs because *they* have more to lose," rather than when the redistributive impact is low. They flip

⁸ Epstein, David L., et al. "Democratic Transitions." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2006, pp. 551–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3694234>.

⁹ Boix, Carles. *Democracy and Redistribution*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Boix's theory, arguing instead that democratization is more likely to take place when the level of economic inequality is sufficiently high to mobilize political groups demanding political reform. In an equal society, there is less incentive for the voters to challenge the status quo, thus, democracy is less likely to emerge.¹⁰

Ansell and Samuels describe a thought experiment. Is democracy more likely to emerge from an autocracy with a Gini coefficient of income inequality of 0.24, or one with a Gini coefficient of 0.51? Gini coefficients can range from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality). 0.24 is among the lowest Gini coefficients ever recorded, while 0.51 represents a highly unequal society. According to Ansell and Samuels, Boix would respond that democracy is more likely to emerge in a more equal country. The lower Gini coefficient, however, stands for China in 1880, while the higher coefficient stands for the United Kingdom in 1867.¹¹

Acemoglu and Robinson, recognizing the complicated relationship between inequality and democracy, take a "middling" approach. They agree with Boix that redistributive demands in a democracy would pressure the elites to prevent democratization, but they also agree with Ansell and Samuels that people have less incentive to revolt in an equal society. They argue, in turn, that democratic transition is more likely to take place somewhere in between, in a country where the elites consider the threat of a revolution credible enough to offer concessions, and where the cost of these concessions is not too high.

Experience with Democracy

Finally, Milan Svoblik unpacks the factors that affect resilience against the risk of democratic breakdowns. In his article, Svoblik describes democratic consolidation as an event that

¹⁰ Ansell, Ben W., and David J. Samuels. *Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

takes place when “a large, durable, and statistically significant decline in the risk of authoritarian reversals occurs at a well-defined point during the lifetime of a democracy.” He begins by distinguishing between consolidated and transitional democracies and examines the effect of five factors, namely economic development, economic recessions, authoritarian neighbors, the Cold War, and a military authoritarian past, on the risk of authoritarian reversals in both types of democracies. We learn that these factors differ in their effect on the risk of reversals in two types of democracies. A high level of economic development reduces the risk of authoritarian reversals in both consolidated and transitional democracies, while economic recessions, authoritarian neighbors, the Cold War, and a military authoritarian past only threaten the survival of transitional democracies. As summarized by the author, “once democracies consolidate they gain resilience to the pernicious effects of economic recessions, an authoritarian neighborhood, or military past, but not to low levels of economic development.” The results of this study show that “a large and durable decline in the risk of authoritarian reversals” is estimated to take place between the seventeenth and twentieth years of a democracy’s existence. Once democracy has survived past that point, the annual risk of democratic breakdown decreases from 1 in 33 to 1 in 200. In other words, consolidation nearly eliminates the possibility of an authoritarian reversal.¹²

Once considered by political scientists a poster child of successful democratic transition, Hungary is now a leading model of democratic backsliding in post-communist Europe. Freedom House, the Washington-based democracy watchdog that publishes an annual report evaluating the state of democracy in the world, has categorized Hungary as “free” ever since it became a

¹² Svobik, Milan W. “Which Democracies Will Last? Coups, Incumbent Takeovers, and the Dynamic of Democratic Consolidation.” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 715–738, [doi:10.1017/S000712341300055](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712341300055).

democracy in 1990. Nine years after Viktor Orbán and his right-wing Fidesz party started to push constitutional and legal changes that have allowed it to consolidate control over the country's independent institutions, Hungary's status has been downgraded to "partly free," making it the first EU member state with such categorization.¹³ The organization's report states that "Orbán's government in Hungary has similarly dropped any pretense of respecting democratic institutions."¹⁴ In 2020, another highly-credible report by the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg had downgraded Hungary to an authoritarian regime.¹⁵

Hungary's slide is intentional. In his 2018 speech, Viktor Orbán has defined his project to remake Hungary into an illiberal state. Orbán, however, continues to maintain a superficial commitment to democracy, branding his ideology as Christian, or illiberal, democracy. Here is how Orbán defines the difference between illiberal (Christian) and liberal democracy:

Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal. And we can specifically say this in connection with a few important issues — say, three great issues. Liberal democracy is in favor of multiculturalism, while Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture; this is an illiberal concept. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal concept. And liberal democracy sides with adaptable family models, while Christian democracy rests

¹³ Kelemen, Daniel. R. "Hungary's democracy just got a failing grade." *The Washington Post*. February 7, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/07/hungarys-democracy-just-got-a-failing-grade/>.

¹⁴ Csaky, Zselyke. "Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Facade." *Freedom House*. 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>.

¹⁵ "Autocratization Surges-Resistance Grows: Democracy Report 2020." *V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg*. March 30, 2020.

on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept.¹⁶

The literature on democratic transition reviewed in the previous section fails to explain Hungary's democratic reversal. As we will observe in the discussion, Hungary boasts one of the fastest economic growth rates in Central and Eastern Europe, is relatively equal, and has remained democratic past Svobik's critical period, after which democratic regimes become resilient to authoritarian reversals. This study aims to learn why Hungary, despite checking all boxes, has backslid into a grey area. This remainder of this section will present a brief literature review about democratic backsliding, fit the case of Hungary to the said framework, and distinguish between two competing explanations of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe.

Democratic Backsliding

Before discussing democratic backsliding, we must interpret both *liberal* and *democracy* components of the term *liberal democracy*. Liberalism, a product of Western ideology, protects individual freedom, free speech, and minority rights. Democracy, on the other hand, is a much older concept open to various interpretations. In its most conservative definition, democracy assumes the existence of collective self-determination that could be translated into public policy through voting. Once in office, democratic leaders are constrained by institutions guaranteeing the separation of powers and checks and balances. Contemporary leaders akin to Viktor Orbán adopt a minimalist definition of democracy, reducing it to the presence of elections. According to

¹⁶ Plattner, Mark F. "Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2019, pp. 5-19, [doi:10.1353/jod.2019.0000](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0000), p. 10.

such a definition, what happens between elections is outside the reach of a democratic system. Orbán, for example, perceives his democratically elected status as consent from citizens to subvert democratic institutions, curtail civil liberty, and abuse state resources.

In her effort to define democratic backsliding, Nancy Bermeo writes that academic literature has largely been focused on explaining why democracies break down, but “systematic and explicitly comparative work on precisely how they break down has been less common.” Bermeo describes six types of democratic backsliding and claims that the most blatant forms of backsliding are being replaced by more vexing forms, which are often facilitated through the very institutions that democracy rests upon. In short, Bermeo argues that *open-ended coups d'état* are now outnumbered by *promissory coups*, the dramatic *executive coups* are being replaced by a process called *executive aggrandizement*, and the blatant *election-day vote fraud* is being replaced by longer-term *strategic harassment and manipulation*. Contrary to outright democratic breakdowns common in the past, modern democratic backsliding takes place gradually and leads to ambiguous, rather than authoritarian, political systems, making them particularly hard to define.¹⁷ Svobik adds that democratic breakdowns take place in the forms of *executive takeovers* or *military coups* and uses the Freedom House data to calculate the percentage of executive takeovers as a share of democratic breakdowns over the period 1973–2018. This exercise reveals that executive takeovers account for 88 out of 197 total downgrades and four out of every five democratic breakdowns since the 2000s.¹⁸

The efforts to measure democratic backsliding remain preliminary. The challenge of measuring democratic backsliding is to define changes within a political regime and quantify

¹⁷ Bermeo, Nancy. “On Democratic Backsliding.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27 no. 1, 2016, p. 5-19, [doi:10.1353/jod.2016.0012](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012).

¹⁸ Svobik, Milan W. “Polarization versus Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 30 no. 3, 2019, p. 20-32, [doi:10.1353/jod.2019.0039](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039).

them in a way that allows for comparisons on a standard scale. Freedom House, publishing arguably the most popular report on the state of democracy, evaluates each country based on questions associated with political rights and civil liberties. Their scores determine their status (free, partly free, not free), while the movement in status is measured by the changes in their scores year to year. V-Dem Institute relies on the judgment of country experts to make categorizations, while Levitsky and Ziblatt have developed four key indicators of authoritarian behavior, which they offer as a litmus test to help identify autocrats. These are the rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence, and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media.¹⁹ A standard focal point around which research can coalesce is yet to be established.

The Case of Hungary

Jacques Rupnik, in his article about the crisis of liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe, writes that for Hungarians in 1989, “belief in an open society and a sense of reasserted national and indeed European identity seemed to go hand-in-hand.”²⁰ Today, the combination of the rise of illiberal democracy and heightened concerns about identity in the face of the refugee crisis has deemed the two beliefs inconsistent, which, according to Rupnik, “draws to a close the post-1989 liberal cycle.”²¹

What happened in Hungary? This section will rely on the democratic backsliding framework established in the academic literature to shed light on Viktor Orbán’s post-2010 ideological battle against liberal democracy. Orbán first came to power as Hungary’s Prime

¹⁹ Ziblatt, Daniel, and Steven Levitsky. *How Democracies Die*. Penguin Random House, 2019.

²⁰ Rupnik, Jacques. “Explaining Eastern Europe: The Crisis of Liberalism.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29 no. 3, 2018, p. 24-38, [doi:10.1353/jod.2018.0042](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0042), p. 25.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 36.

Minister in 1998, when his centrist Fidesz party formed a coalition with Hungarian Democratic Forum. Orbán served as the opposition leader until 2010, when following the series of scandals associated with the incumbent Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), he was elected once again by 53% of the popular vote, claiming a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. Since his room to maneuver has significantly increased, Viktor Orbán began to dismantle three formal institutions of democracy, namely the rule of law, free speech, and civil society.

First, Orbán went after the judiciary. The constitutional courts have been the first targets of attack in Hungary. Being in charge of the two-thirds majority in the parliament meant that Orbán had almost total control over who got elected as a constitutional judge. He used this opportunity to increase the number of judges in the Constitutional Court, and by 2013, the ruling party had independently named eight out of fifteen constitutional judges. Effectively packing the Constitutional Court by loyalists, Orbán has weakened one of the primary checks on the powers of the parliamentary majority. According to the political scientist Kim Lane Scheppele, “since Fidesz acquired its secure majority, the Constitutional Court has issued no decisions seriously challenging the government.”²² The former Hungarian president László Sólyom, the founder of the country’s Constitutional Court, declared in 2013 that “the rule of law has ceased to exist” in Hungary.²³

Second, Orbán went after the independent media, weakening one of the central tenets of liberal democracy — the right to free speech. After coming to power in 2010, Orbán passed a repressive Media Act, allowing the government to fine media outlets for a number of offenses, including the failure to “‘provide balanced coverage,’ publishing news that is ‘insulting to

²² Scheppele, Kim Lane. “Hungary’s attacks on the rule of law and why they matter for business.” *Financial Times*. February 5, 2014. <https://www.ft.com/content/6e538e70-168f-3d1e-ba92-8a80790a6247>.

²³ Rupnik, Jacques. “Explaining Eastern Europe: The Crisis of Liberalism.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29 no. 3, 2018, p. 24-38, [doi:10.1353/jod.2018.0042](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0042), p. 25.

communities’ or acting in contempt of broad ideals such as ‘public morality.’”²⁴ The newly-created Media Council that made decisions on these transgressions was packed entirely by the members appointed by Fidesz. In 2013, Fidesz banned political advertising by private media outlets, leaving the right exclusively to Fidesz-owned media. As a result of Orbán’s pressures to sell independent media outlets to the state or to the Fidesz-aligned businessmen, by 2017, over 90% of media in Hungary “was owned by either the state or a Fidesz ally.”²⁵

Finally, Orbán has consistently attacked civil society in his ongoing effort to modify the Hungarian electorate. One of the first laws passed when Orbán was elected gave Hungarians in neighboring countries the right to vote and access Hungary’s social benefits. While Fidesz performs weakly in the metropolitan areas, over 95% of Hungarian immigrants (about 10% of the electorate) support Orbán.²⁶ Hungary’s independent civil society is also under attack. The series of measures shrinking the civil space that began in the early 2010s culminated in 2017 with the Anti-NGO Law, which forces every civil society organization with yearly funding above \$28,000 USD from foreign sources to register as an “organization receiving foreign funds.”²⁷ Otherwise, they are subject to be legally dissolved. Orbán’s efforts to suppress pro-democracy voices in Hungary make it nearly impossible for independent political organizations to do their work.

In addition to formally dismantling the institutions of liberal democracy, Viktor Orbán has informally attacked the very idea of liberalism, dismissing opposition leaders as traitorous, labeling independent media as “fake news,” and promising to replace Western liberal democracy

²⁴ Shnier, Diane. “Slow and steady: Hungary’s media clampdown.” *OpenDemocracy*. August 1, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/slow-and-steady-hungarys-media-clampdown/>.

²⁵ Beauchamp, Zack. “It happened there: how democracy died in Hungary.” *Vox*. September 13, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Independent Civil Society Under Attack in Hungary.” *HCLU*. September 12, 2017. <https://hclu.hu/en/articles/independent-civil-society-under-attack-in-hungary-1>.

with a local alternative. The new constitution's preamble was loaded with Christian references to God, the fatherland, and traditional family values, which raised fears about the future of Hungary's religious and sexual minorities. As a populist strongman, Orbán has employed propaganda and fear-mongering to convince Hungarian citizens with his anti-Western, anti-Brussels, and anti-liberal agenda. Ever since he was elected, Orbán has accused George Soros, who has spent hundreds of millions of dollars funding human rights projects in Hungary, of being the mastermind behind the liberal conspiracy "to flood Hungary with migrants and destroy their nation."²⁸ Central European University, arguably one of the prestigious universities in the region funded by Soros, was forced to leave the country. Orbán's goal of using Soros for political gain relates directly to his anti-immigration campaign. More recently, Orbán has exploited the coronavirus pandemic to declare an emergency that grants him sweeping powers for an unlimited period. It is safe to say that Viktor Orbán has exploited the narrow definition of democracy as an electoral mechanism to allow total state capture while retaining a democratic façade to placate the West. After 1989, the West exported a liberal democratic model to aid Hungary's "return to Europe," but as Kim Lane Scheppele writes, they have created a "Frankenstate" — "an illiberal mutant composed of ingeniously stitched-together elements of Western liberal democracies."²⁹

Demand- vs. Supply-Side Explanations

In this essay, I will distinguish between two competing viewpoints that academic scholars have put forward to explain democratic backsliding in post-communist Europe. The first camp of researchers stands for demand-side explanations, arguing that cultural and political attitudes in

²⁸ "Why did Hungary's PM Viktor Orban turn on George Soros?" *BBC*. September 6, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-49600818>.

²⁹ Krastev, Ivan and Stephen Holmes. "Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29 no. 3, 2018, p. 117-128, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0049>, p. 117.

society determine the political choices at the top. Krastev and Holmes propose an imitation hypothesis, which considers the rise of illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe to be a backlash against the politics of imitation that emerged in post-Cold War Europe. According to Krastev and Holmes, the post-1989 imperative to acknowledge foreign cultures as superior to one's own has generated discontent among the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe. Their lack of satisfaction was further aggravated by looming demographic and financial challenges, provoking a crisis of faith in democracy and elite projects like the European Union.³⁰ Norris and Inglehart build on Inglehart's earlier concept of *the silent revolution* — a fundamental shift from materialist to post-materialist values in relatively high-income societies — to explain the rising support for right-wing populist parties. They argue that the gradual shift towards socially liberal attitudes, aggravated by the challenges of immigration and the global financial crisis, has reached a tipping point that broke down the balance between socially liberal and socially conservative attitudes. The structural shift in cultural and political attitudes has threatened the existence of once-dominant social conservative groups, triggering a cultural backlash against socially liberal values.³¹ The demand-side explanations, as the term suggests, emphasize the role of public opinion in democratic politics, holding the demands of ordinary people responsible for nationwide political events and processes.

The second camp supports supply-side explanations, offering an elite-driven understanding of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. Larry M. Bartels, in his *Democracy Erodes From the Top*, finds that the conventional wisdom about a crisis of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe is strikingly at odds with public opinion. In opposition

³⁰ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2019.

³¹ Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

to demand-side scholars, he argues that ordinary people do not deliberately choose authoritarianism at the ballot box. Instead, they vote for the most readily available alternatives to unsatisfactory incumbent governments. The leaders of these parties engineer the dismantling of democratic checks and balances not in response to public demand, but simply because they can. According to Bartels, the public's lack of choice but to support "mildly authoritarian" leaders leads to a false belief that voters, in truth, demand authoritarianism.³²

Methodology

The literature review established familiarity with existing research on democratic consolidation and backsliding, identifying two competing viewpoints on the democratic crisis in Central and Eastern Europe. This chapter will provide methodological details and highlight the specific research design choices of the study. I will begin this chapter by reiterating the purpose of the study and isolating a general inquiry. I will then summarize the argument made in the book by Krastev and Holmes, justify my decision to test their claims, and introduce the research design of this study.

In the previous section, we learned that the literature on democratic backsliding is balanced on the opinion that democracy is unlikely to break down in countries that are wealthy, equal, and experienced with democracy. The purpose of this study is to find out why Hungary, despite checking all boxes, is undergoing democratic backsliding. I have identified two competing viewpoints that academic scholars have put forward to explain the crisis of democracy in post-communist Europe. One sees the breakdown of democracy to be demand-driven. In this view, political decision-making corresponds to cultural and political

³² Bartels, Larry M. "Democracy Erodes From the Top Public Opinion and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe." *Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Vanderbilt University*, 2020. Working Paper.

attitudes in society, which tend to be shifting away from liberal democracy. The other suggests that demand-side explanations exaggerate the link between public opinion and political decision-making. In this view, democratic erosion is elite-driven. In order to focus my inquiry into democratic backsliding in Hungary, I will challenge a popular demand-side explanation put forward by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, widely known as the imitation hypothesis. I will begin with a brief summary of Krastev and Holmes' argument and explain why I believe it is worth putting under scrutiny.

Book Summary

In their timely and deeply thought-provoking book, political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes trace the origins of the worldwide anti-liberal revolt in liberalism's post-1989 global triumph. The elimination of the Marxist-Leninist alternative to liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe was followed by what Krastev and Holmes call "copycat Westernization," based on the premise that imitating the institutions, values, and ways of life of the West was the shortest path in their "return to Europe." The recognition of Western-style liberal democracy as the final stage of mankind's political development evoked a particularly strong emotional response from the citizens of post-communist Europe, who had just been released from the Soviet-era ideological and institutional constraints.³³ Instead of being encouraged to lead their own transitions towards democracy, they were told to shallowly mimic not only the West's proposed ends but also their means of getting to them.

Krastev and Holmes invoke the logic of a conservative Polish philosopher Ryszard Legutko, who writes that "the liberals and liberal democrats have managed to silence and

³³ Ikenberry, G. John. "A Review of 'The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy.'" *Foreign Affairs*. March/April 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2020-02-11/light-failed-why-west-losing-fight-democracy>.

marginalize nearly all alternatives and all nonliberal views of political order,”³⁴ effectively replacing the communist hegemony with a liberal democratic version. Adding fuel to the fire was Central and Eastern European countries’ sincere devotion to their path to normality. Unlike Russia, which was cynically *simulating* Western democracy, and China, which was voraciously *borrowing* Western technology to achieve the very same capitalist ends as the West, Central and Eastern European citizens voluntarily surrendered to liberal democratic ideology. In Krastev and Holmes’ words, they were “hopeful *converts* who wished to lust their societies into a collective *conversion experience*.”³⁵

Their faith in liberal democracy started to unravel as liberalism’s reputation was questioned during the global financial crisis. If, before 2008, Central and Eastern European political leaders were confident that Western elites “knew what they were doing,” they were no longer sure after the crisis.³⁶ The refugee crisis that struck Europe in 2015 has further aggravated liberalism’s fall from grace. Krastev and Holmes precede their analysis of immigration by emphasizing the underlying issues of emigration and population loss in Central and Eastern Europe. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern European citizens faced two choices to confront the undesirable status quo. They could either *exit* by emigrating or *voice* their concerns by choosing to resist from within. Unwilling to wait until their countries caught up to their Western neighbors, many citizens decamped. If Germany was the future of Poland, Krastev and Holmes write, “then the most heartfelt revolutionaries might just as well pack up and move to Germany.”³⁷ The EU’s quota system of distributing refugees across Europe further intimidated the societies of Central and Eastern Europe, already suffering from a debilitating brain drain. The

³⁴ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2019, p. 6.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 25.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 21.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 32.

fact that the model country representatives regularly judged the imitating countries for their failure to live up to Western standards has only added insult to their injuries.

Krastev and Holmes argue that for the leaders of Central and Eastern Europe, the refugee crisis served as conclusive evidence that liberal democracy, with its openness to the world, cultural diversity, and free movement of people across international borders, has “weakened the capacity of nations to defend themselves in a hostile world.”³⁸ The result was that less than thirty years after their hopeful surrender to liberal ideology, Central and Eastern Europeans had turned their backs against it. The fear-mongering populists exploited public opinion as an opportunity for political gain, declaring independence from Brussels and its politics of openness. Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has described the unfolding crisis in the following way:

This is one of history’s largest tides of people, and it brings with it the danger of tragic consequences. It is a modern-day global mass migration, which we cannot see the end of: economic migrants hoping for a better life, refugees and drifting masses mixed up together. This is an uncontrolled and unregulated process, and the most precise definition of this is invasion.³⁹

Having sensed the public sentiment, Orbán built a political platform offering Hungarians a break with liberalism in exchange for building their own identity, based on “the authentic past of the nation,” separate from the “contaminated” Western ideology.⁴⁰ The origins of Orbán’s rhetoric are rooted in the humiliation ingrained with a decades-long project of imitating foreign cultures acknowledged as superior to one’s own. Orbán’s ideology appeals mainly to an

³⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 74.

individual resentful for losing his original identity — the individual that thinks of himself as a copy. In Orbán’s reality, the open societies of Western Europe now represent a negative model, contrary to the culturally superior West that they once aspired to imitate.

Krastev and Holmes begin their book by contrasting Hungary’s transition to democracy to George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, in which a professor of phonetics succeeds in teaching a poor flower girl to speak like the Queen. Instead, Krastev and Holmes write that the transition resembles the story of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, an unorthodox scientific experiment that, envying the unattainable happiness of its creator, “turned violently against the latter’s friends and family, laying the world to waste, leaving only remorse and heartbreak as legacies of a misguided experiment in human self-duplication.”⁴¹

Rationale

Krastev and Holmes’ original paper was published in the *Journal of Democracy* and was later expanded into the book titled *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. *The Light that Failed* reads like a polemic intended to support a specific position occupied by Krastev and Holmes — the rise in populist xenophobia and reactionary nativism in Central and Eastern Europe, their case being Hungary, is a backlash against the politics of imitation that emerged in post-Cold War Europe. They begin by specifying the model, which holds that a democratic crisis is happening in Central and Eastern Europe, and define their inquiry into the possible causes and explanations of the given crisis. Their data strategy rests entirely on their experience as political scientists and regional experts — both Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes are well-established experts of Central and Eastern Europe and possess a cogent understanding of democracy as a concept. Krastev is the chairman of the Centre for Liberal

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 2.

Strategies, Sofia, a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna, and a contributing writer for the international *New York Times*, while Holmes is a Professor at the NYU School of Law. Their book is not a product of empirical research — it offers neither qualitative nor quantitative data that yields freely for an academic rebuttal. It offers, however, a litany of claims that an academic researcher could test if capable of obtaining an ideal dataset that answers their propositions. Unfortunately, we do not possess such a dataset; therefore, I will conduct a quantitative study that uses public opinion surveys to test Krastev and Holmes' hypothesis against the data in the best way possible. The sheer influence of their argument, demonstrated by the necessity to expand their article into a book, deems it worthy of deeper inquiry, which is what I hope to achieve in my study. In the next few paragraphs, I will introduce my research design.

Research Design

The initial component of my research design is to isolate the beliefs of an individual that Krastev and Holmes claim to vote for right-wing populist candidates. This exercise will help pin down the variables that the authors of this book propose to drive democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. While Krastev and Holmes mean to comprehend the experience of all Central and Eastern Europe, their primary case in point is Hungary. For that reason, this study will focus on the post-1989 experience of Hungary. The beliefs identified in the first step of the research design will be captured in six variables serving as the hypotheses used to test the validity of the authors' claims. Using public opinion surveys, I will organize a list of questions pertinent to each variable, which will lead to a final dataset used for this study. I will rely on three public opinion surveys, namely European Social Survey, World Values Survey/European Values Study, and Global Attitudes Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center.

I will begin with setting the context for data analysis by displaying actual, as well as attitudinal, data associated with the economic transition in Hungary. The central methodology for this study will consist of three levels. First, I will calculate the weighted average values within the general population for each survey item and compare their trends over time. European Social Survey provides nine consecutive databases from 2002 to 2018. Global Attitudes Survey has survey data from 2009 and 2019, although some questions are only present in the latter. World Values Survey/European Values Study cross-sectional dataset consists of seven and five waves, respectively, of which we will use two, WVS Wave 5 (2005-2009) and EVS Wave 5 (2017). The results will help determine whether Krastev and Holmes' claims hold in the attitudes among the general population.

Second, I will create a dummy variable that divides subjects into two groups, Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters, allowing us to distinguish between democratic and anti-democratic voters. I will compare, for each survey item, how the weighted average values over time are distributed between two groups. The fundamental goal of this exercise is to find whether political ideology, measured by survey items, is associated with anti-democratic voting, defined (after 2014) by the vote for Fidesz. I will plot the graphs starting from the closest year available before Fidesz's reelection in 2010 to the most recent year available. The results of this exercise will help observe how public opinion has shifted within democratic and anti-democratic segments of the general population and establish associations between subjects' political ideology and voting behavior. We are, however, still a step away from making claims about causality.

The final step is to learn if political ideology causes anti-democratic voting. In order to infer causality, I will build a logistic regression model using all European Social Survey survey

items to find which variables, from 2008 to 2018, best predict identification with Fidesz. A careful analysis of the model will lead to a decision about causality, followed by a discussion.

Data Collection

The methodology chapter dissected the argument made by Krastev and Holmes in their book and introduced the research design of this study. Following the plan outlined in the methodology, this chapter will report the data collection process and set the stage for subsequent data analysis. The first section will isolate the beliefs of an individual described by Krastev and Holmes. The second section will lay out six variables that, according to the authors, influence democratic backsliding and organize the list of questions associated with each variable that will be tested in the study.

Who votes for Viktor Orbán?

Krastev and Holmes put forward a psychological explanation of Hungary's retreat from democracy. They argue that the rise of authoritarian chauvinism and xenophobia has emotional, rather than intellectual, origins. The central proposition of this book is that cultural backlash against liberal democracy in Hungary is a reaction to the post-1989 imitation imperative. The authors describe a nativist, anti-liberal, anti-globalist, anti-migrant, and anti-EU individual in the midst of an identity crisis that fears the ethnic disappearance of its kin and looks for an alternative to the political and cultural status quo. This section will isolate the beliefs of individuals that Krastev and Holmes propose to vote for a right-wing populist leader in Hungary. While the past, the present, and the future are hardly independent, I will, in this section, follow a chronological analysis of public sentiment.

According to Krastev and Holmes, Hungarians in 1989 were optimistic, expecting to live like the Westerners at most within a decade. Twenty-five years later, the capitalist future has arrived, but its gains were unevenly distributed. Keeping in mind Krastev and Holmes' distinction introduced in the book summary, we have in mind *voicers*, individuals who stayed put but ended up feeling disappointed. The people that authors propose to vote for populist anti-democrats chose to fight for reform from within. Instead of leaving their country for the West, they waited patiently for their country to become like the West, only to watch the promised transition fail. Disillusioned by their expectations not being met, they think of democratization imposed on their country by foreign elites as a “misguided experiment” — something to be rectified.⁴²

At present, individuals described by Krastev and Holmes feel uncomfortable in the world they found themselves living in. They think that in the process of imitation, they have lost their original identity, and thus, they regard themselves as copies — second-class citizens “inside a single unipolar system.”⁴³ The borrowing of Western “principles of conduct and ethical values,”⁴⁴ which presupposes acknowledging the moral superiority of the imitated over their imitators, followed by the failure to reap the benefits of their self-sacrifice, has left Hungarians feeling disrespected, ashamed, and resentful. Sensing that their way of life is being destroyed, they feel obliged to act.

The logical consequence of a narrative chronicled in the previous two paragraphs is people that react against what they believe are the causes of their condition. First, they have negative views on the changes in society that they think most affect them. These begin with an attitude against immigration — the perception of refugees as foreigners who, in Orbán's words,

⁴² Ibid, p. 2.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

“do not respect our culture, our laws or our way of life: people who want to replace what is ours with what is theirs.”⁴⁵ They are culturally intolerant, drawn to xenophobic rhetoric, and favor politicians that propose heavily militarized borders. These people are against the politics of openness and globalization, which “suggests more grounds for anxiety than for hope.”⁴⁶ Broadly speaking, individuals described by Krastev and Holmes, in the throes of the demographic panic, stand against post-national identity, hoping to retain what remains of their nation’s culture. Second, these individuals exhibit a deep distrust in both physical and ideological agents underlying the cultural collapse imposed on their country. Krastev and Holmes hold that public faith in democracy in Central and Eastern Europe is plummeting. Moreover, they argue that people, as well as organized political forces, are less willing to defend democracy in times of crisis. Their analysis likewise implies a lack of faith in the Western democratic processes and institutions, which manifests itself in the diminishing support for European integration and the distrust of foreign elites operating from Brussels.

The lasting resentment from the past and an existing fear of cultural erasure yield people profoundly anxious about their identity and social status not only in the present but also in the future. Krastev and Holmes’ individuals are skeptical of their future prospects, afraid that tomorrow will be worse than the present. Hence, they believe that their children’s lives will be less prosperous and fulfilling than their own. While their anti-liberal attitude in the present represents a backlash against *who* and *what* they blame for their distress, their yearning impulse towards alternatives is a desire to reclaim agency over their destiny. Having been freed recently from the communist dictatorship, Hungarians are fearful of “catching the wrong train,” in this case liberal democratic, yet another time.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 68.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 21.

Survey Questions

Economic Transition

Prior to public opinion analysis, we must understand how Hungarian people have experienced economic transition. In order to learn that, I will explore both factual as well as attitudinal data indicating their post-communist experience. We need to find whether an economic transition in Hungary has actually taken place, whether Hungary has caught up to the model countries, and how the capitalist gains were distributed. These questions could be answered by measuring economic development indicators over time, while at once comparing the trends in Hungary to the trends in the region. Krastev and Holmes are decisive that thirty years after the end of communism, Hungary was “richer, but roiled by resentment.”⁴⁸ Therefore, we would expect to observe a steady improvement in GDP per capita and the unemployment rate, as well as an increase in the Gini coefficient, which indicates greater income inequality.

It is also important to understand how Hungarians perceive their path towards the capitalist market system. Here, I will rely on the list of questions asked in the Global Attitudes Survey. The following two questions ask subjects about their attitudes towards economic transition:

Thinking back to 1989, do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove or strongly disapprove that our country moved from having a state-controlled economy to having a market economy?	Global Attitudes Survey (2009, 2019)
Would you say that the economic situation for most Hungarian people today is better, worse, or about the same as it was under communism?	Global Attitudes Survey (2009, 2019)

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

The next question helps us determine how Hungarians feel the economic gains have been distributed:

<p>How much have _____ benefited from the changes since 1989 - a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or not at all?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ordinary people b. Business people c. Politicians 	<p>Global Attitudes Survey (2009, 2019)</p>
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Ideally, we would expect that Hungarian people's perception of economic transition would parallel the factual data obtained in the previous step, which means they would feel satisfied with the change in the economic situation and dissatisfied with how the gains have been distributed.

Independent Variables

With the economic context for Hungary's present condition set, I will isolate six variables fundamental to Krastev and Holmes' discussion of democratic backsliding and test them against public opinion. The independent variables used for this analysis are *support for democracy*, *support for immigration*, *support for the European Union*, *attitude towards liberalism*, *identity crisis*, and *subjective well-being*. In the remainder of this section, I will design the list of questions relevant to each variable in public opinion surveys and discuss the results we would expect to find if Krastev and Holmes' claims were true.

The first variable concerns *support for democracy*. Krastev and Holmes are explicit in their claim that faith in democracy is plummeting and "long-established political parties are disintegrating or being crowded out by amorphous political movements and populist strongmen, putting into question the willingness of organized political forces to fight for democracy's

survival in times of crisis.”⁴⁹ In Hungary, a long-established political party was indeed replaced by the populist strongman, but the causal link between the voters’ lack of faith in democracy and their anti-democratic voting is unclear. If Krastev and Holmes’ claim were true, we would expect the average response to this question to reflect Hungarian voters’ lack of faith in democracy. Given that they compromise democratic principles, Fidesz voters are likely to be less supportive of democracy than their non-Fidesz counterparts.

How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?	World Values Survey/ European Values Study (2005-2009, 2017)
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The second variable, *support for immigration*, will test Krastev and Holmes’ fundamental claim that Hungarians are not only unwelcoming to refugees from the poorer countries outside Europe but also feel an existential threat emanating from mass migration, prompting them to vote for candidates with harsh anti-immigration politics. Therefore, we would expect their support for immigration to be low, reaching its lowest point during the refugee crisis. In addition, we would expect the support to be significantly lower among Fidesz voters, who vote for populists in large part due to their anti-immigration politics.

To what extent do you think Hungary should allow people from the poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?	European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)
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The third variable I will test is *support for the European Union*. Krastev and Holmes claim that the EU’s decision to embrace cultural diversity within its borders led to Hungary’s “declaration of independence” from Brussels and its “religion of openness to the world.” Viktor

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

Orbán constructs the political identity of his Fidesz party against the core principles of the EU, which leads us to expect the support for the EU and further European unification in Hungary to be low, with evidence of a sharp decrease during the refugee crisis. The level of support is expected to be lower among Fidesz voters. Some scholars argue that Orbán's antagonism is directed not at the EU and its financial benefits but at the politicians operating in Brussels. In order to identify the target of Orbán's opposition, I will look at the results of an additional question that asks subjects about their attitudes specifically towards the European Parliament.

Thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. What number on the scale best describes your position?	European Social Survey (2004, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)
Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. a. The European Parliament	European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)

The fourth variable concerns *attitude towards liberalism*. While the questions I have discussed so far capture the subjects' attitudes towards liberalism, I will now look at the matter through the lens of their self-placement on the left-right political spectrum. If Krastev and Holmes are correct, we would expect that their average position over time would have shifted towards the right, particularly among the Fidesz voter base. Krastev and Holmes speak extensively about an anti-liberal revolt taking place in Hungary. We would expect the results of this question to reflect their case.

In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?	European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)
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The overarching topic in Krastev and Holmes' book is that Central and Eastern European citizens are in the midst of an identity crisis, which prompts them to vote, often in exchange for democracy, for populist leaders that promise to rectify their condition. In view of the fact that public opinion surveys are not a reliable measure of an identity crisis, I will propose a list of additional questions that supply us with necessary cues to understand Hungarian people's psychological makeup. Since many, if not all, questions already introduced capture at least some aspect of an individual's identity, the current section will build on their results in addition to a set of specific questions that fill the gap in our probe into Hungarian citizens' identity. The following table lists the mix of additional questions:

Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of Germany?	Global Attitudes Survey (2009, 2019)
Think of the changes that have taken place in Hungary since 1989. Have those changes had a very good influence, a good influence, a bad influence, or a very bad influence on the following? a. Family values b. Spiritual values c. Pride in our country	Global Attitudes Survey (2019)
Thinking about the future of Hungary, please tell me whether you feel generally optimistic or pessimistic about the following areas: a. Our country's culture b. Our country's relations with other European countries	Global Attitudes Survey (2019)
When children today in Hungary grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off financially than their parents?	Global Attitudes Survey (2019)

First, Global Attitudes Survey conveniently asks their subjects about their opinion of Germany, a primary example of what Krastev and Holmes consider a model country being imitated by Central and Eastern European countries. We would expect the results for this question to reflect Hungarians' resentment towards Germany, the leading model country. Second, an individual going through an identity crisis will likely have negative views on what kind of influence the changes since 1989 have had on family values, spiritual values, and pride in their country, and will be pessimistic about their country's culture and its relations with other European countries. Finally, I will test how optimistic or pessimistic Hungarian citizens feel about the future. Krastev and Holmes are direct in their claim that voters in Hungary worry about their prospects, thinking that their children will be worse off financially than their parents. Understanding how Hungarian voters feel about the future will help us put our earlier analysis into a temporal perspective. While being optimistic about the changes that took place after 1989 does not imply that they are also optimistic about what the future holds, their attitude towards the future is a compelling indicator of where they stand today, which will guide our analysis of their voting patterns.

The final variable asks citizens about their subjective well-being. Krastev and Holmes describe a sincerely unhappy individual, dissatisfied with life as a whole and with the state of their country. I will begin with measuring subjective well-being in general and break the concept down into satisfaction with the economy, the state of education, and the state of health services. We would expect the average response to these questions to be negative, although it would be key to learn how results are distributed among different voters, as well as how their subjective well-being had changed from when populists were first elected.

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?	European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)
On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in Hungary?	European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)
Please say what you think overall about the state of education in Hungary nowadays?	European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)
Please say what you think overall about the state of health services in Hungary nowadays?	European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018)

Data Analysis

The data collection chapter has built an archetype of an individual that the authors of this book predict would vote for anti-democratic candidates in Hungary. It isolated six variables present in Krastev and Holmes' analysis of democratic backsliding and organized a list of questions relevant to each one of them. The data analysis chapter will present quantitative and qualitative research findings and discuss how these findings shed light on the questions guiding this study. The first section of this chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the economic background of Hungary's present political situation. The second section will present the main findings based on six variables identified in Krastev & Holmes' book. The third section will discuss and interpret the findings.

Economic Transition

The next few paragraphs will orient the reader by presenting useful statistics about Hungary's post-1989 transition towards capitalism and democracy. As we have established in the literature review, wealthy, equal countries with democratic experience must be less susceptible to the risk of democratic reversals. I will measure wealth and inequality in two ways. First, I will look at actual data by looking at trends in GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the Gini index, a statistical measurement that demonstrates a degree of inequality in the distribution of income. Second, I will supplement the actual data with people's perceptions about various matters pertaining to economic transition. This section aims to set the context for the bulk of data analysis about democratic backsliding in Hungary.

Using the Maddison Project Database to calculate GDP per capita (adjusted for price changes over time), we learn that Hungary's GDP per capita from 1989 to 2018 has increased from \$11,000 to \$25,623. While in 1989 Hungary stood at a virtually identical GDP per capita level as Eastern Europe and the former USSR, it now stands in between Western and Eastern Europe, although still far below Western Europe's \$39,790 per capita rate.

Figure 1.1.1

In terms of economic growth, Hungary's 133% relative change in GDP per capita is significantly higher than Western Europe's 56% and Eastern Europe's 100%, which makes Hungary one of the fastest-growing economies in post-1989 Europe.

Figure 1.1.2

Hungary's unemployment rate decreased steadily from the early years of the economic transition to 2004, when it stood at 5.83%. The unemployment rate began to increase again in the

period leading up to the global financial crisis and reached its pre-transition level in 2010, after which it has improved remarkably under Viktor Orbán's leadership.

Figure 1.2

In contrast with sharp movements in GDP per capita and unemployment rate, income inequality in Hungary has increased from 1989 to 2019 by 4.56 points in a Gini index, which amounts to an 18% rise. Hungary's current Gini index stands at 29.61, where 0 represents perfect equality, and 100 implies perfect inequality. While there has been a slight increase, Hungary's degree of income inequality is still lower than that of Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the United States, which has a Gini index of 41.41.

Figure 1.3

Starting from late 1989, Hungary underwent the transition from a state-controlled to a market economy. In the initial analysis, we learned that Hungary was one of the fastest-growing economies in the region, while its inequality has increased by 18%, making its income distribution relatively balanced compared to its Western European neighbors. In the following analysis, we will investigate how Hungarians feel about economic transition, as well as who they believe reaped the benefits.

When asked whether or not they approve of the transition from a state-controlled to a market economy, over 70% of Hungarians in 2019 either "approve" or "strongly approve" the changes, with a 24% improvement in the weighted average response over the past decade. There is no significant difference in the average responses of Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters.⁵⁰

Figure 1.4

The results of the question that asks whether they think that the economic situation for most Hungarians today is better, worse, or about the same as it was under communism show a

⁵⁰ See Appendix, Figure 1.4.app.

remarkable 64% improvement in the weighted average response from 2009 to 2019, although the mean value still sits slightly above “about the same.” We will explore economic satisfaction further in the data analysis.

Figure 1.5

While most Hungarians believe that their country is better off after the economic transition, they are less satisfied with how the gains have been distributed. When asked how much politicians, business people, and ordinary people have benefitted from the changes since 1989, Hungarians believe that politicians have benefitted “a great deal,” business people have benefitted “a fair amount,” and ordinary people have not benefitted too much. However, while their opinion about how much politicians have benefitted from the changes has remained steady over the past decade, their opinion about how much business and ordinary people have benefitted has improved by 15% and 32%, respectively.

Figure 1.6

These results show that economic growth has indeed taken place in Hungary. The public opinion about economic transition parallels the actual data. There is, however, a mismatch between the change in income inequality and people’s perception of the distribution of benefits brought by economic growth. Still, while we learn that people believe politicians and business people gained the most from the changes, their perception of their own benefits has been improving. Krastev and Holmes write that twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Hungary was “richer, but roiled with resentment.” The data only supports the first half of their claim. While they are correct that people think the “benefits and burdens were unevenly, even crassly distributed,” public opinion surveys indicate that “roiled by resentment” is likely an

overstatement. The following sections will delve deeper into Krastev and Holmes' proposed drivers of Hungary's democratic backsliding.

Findings

In the methodology section, I have identified six variables present in Krastev and Holmes' analysis of democratic backsliding in Hungary. I then designed a list of survey questions from public opinion datasets pertinent to each of these variables. In this section, I will present the findings, display visualizations, and provide analysis for each variable in the following order:

1. Support for democracy
2. Support for immigration
3. Support for the European Union
4. Attitude towards liberalism
5. Identity crisis
6. Subjective well-being

Support for Democracy

In the opening chapter of their book, Krastev and Holmes present their foundational claim that people are less supportive of democracy as a system of governance. They write that “public faith in democracy is plummeting and long-established political parties are disintegrating or being crowded out by amorphous political movements and populist strongmen, putting into question the willingness of organized political forces to fight for democracy’s survival in times of crisis.”⁵¹ Krastev and Holmes correctly identify the trend that traditional political parties yield

⁵¹ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2019, pp. 2-3.

to populist strongmen who propose replacing the established governance systems with ambiguous alternatives. At least in the case of Hungary, that is true. Krastev and Holmes argue that populist leaders, like Viktor Orbán, exploit illiberal, anti-democratic attitudes already present in society. The goal of this study, however, is to find whether anti-democratic attitudes are in fact linked to anti-democratic voting, or if there is something else in play. The findings for the first variable — *support for democracy* — suggest otherwise. When asked how important it is for them to live in a country that is governed democratically, where 1 means it is “not at all important” and 10 means “absolutely important,” Hungarian citizens demonstrate overwhelming, steady support for democracy as a system of governance. World Values Survey/European Values Survey includes this question in Wave 5 (2005-2009) and Wave 7 (2017-2020). We observe that the weighted average response in both waves stands and remains close to 9, while the difference in response among Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters is not statistically significant.⁵² We will see that neither variable analyzed in this study approaches consensus as much as the importance of democracy. In other words, contrary to Krastev and Holmes’ claim that “public faith in democracy is plummeting,” we find that democracy remains a highly held value in Hungary.

Figure 2.1

The high esteem for democracy as demonstrated by public opinion surveys may point to abstract support for democratic principles, but it fails to account for real-world voting behavior. After all, Hungarian citizens who uphold democracy as their highest value also vote for a leader that openly erodes the democratic system of governance. Milan Svobik, in his article about polarization and democracy, introduces the idea of support for democracy as “cheap talk,” showing that despite their overwhelming public support for democracy, voters in polarized societies are reluctant to punish anti-democratic behavior if it forces them to compromise their

⁵² See Appendix, Figure 2.1.app.

party affiliation. In other words, their support for democracy comes secondary to their partisan interests. Having established that lack of faith in democracy cannot explain anti-democratic voting in Hungary, I will examine other variables that Krastev and Holmes propose to play a role in democratic backsliding.

Support for Immigration

The second most important factor to which Krastev and Holmes attribute anti-democratic voting in Hungary is (the lack of) *support for immigration*. “Spooked by the phantom of large-scale migration, electorates in parts of Europe and America are increasingly drawn to xenophobic rhetoric, authoritarian leaders and militarized borders. Rather than believing that the future will be uplifted by the liberal ideas radiating out of the West, they fear that 21st-century history will be afflicted by the millions of people streaming into it,” write Krastev and Holmes.⁵³ Indeed, Hungary saw a sudden influx of over 390,000 asylum seekers, primarily Muslim, crossing the Serbian-Hungarian border during the 2015 refugee crisis. The European Union asked Hungary to find homes for 1,294. Instead of accepting the EU’s request, the Orbán government spent approximately €28 million on the anti-immigrant campaign framing the arrival of asylum seekers as “a Muslim invasion threatening the national security, social cohesion, and Christian identity of the Hungarian nation.” As of 2018, there were only 671 asylum seekers and 68 refugees present in Hungary.⁵⁴

Viktor Orbán is advancing his anti-immigrant agenda not just within the borders of Hungary but also in Brussels. He has branded the central tenets of illiberal democracy primarily

⁵³ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2019, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Goździak, Elżbieta M. “Using Fear of the “Other,” Orbán Reshapes Migration Policy in a Hungary Built on Cultural Diversity.” *Migration Policy Institute*. October 10, 2019. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/orban-reshapes-migration-policy-hungary>.

against the EU's pro-migrant policy and joined an anti-immigrant, nationalist bloc in the EU Parliament led by Italy's Matteo Salvini. While Hungarian civil society has attempted to receive newcomers, Orbán's latest anti-immigrant law has criminalized assisting unauthorized migrants by civil society organizations.⁵⁵

What are Hungarians' attitudes towards immigration? From 2002 to 2018, the European Social Survey has asked Europeans to what extent they think their country should allow people from poorer countries outside Europe. The results show that Hungary's support for immigration in the past two decades has been low, with the weighted average response approaching the value closest to the response of "allow a few." We observe a dip in support during the refugee crisis and a slight improvement after.

Figure 3.1.1

When subjects are grouped based on their party affiliation, they demonstrate a similar trend from the election of Fidesz until the refugee crisis, when Fidesz voters become approximately 18% less supportive of immigration than non-Fidesz voters. Interestingly, there was no dip in support among non-Fidesz voters during the refugee crisis.

Figure 3.1.2

These trends alone do not provide conclusive information about why attitudes towards immigration among Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters diverged during the refugee crisis. Since this pattern repeats with at least one other variable, the discussion is worth following through. The diverging trend suggests the possibility of at least two scenarios. First, it could be the case that Viktor Orbán's anti-immigrant rhetoric leading up to the refugee crisis convinced a group of Fidesz voters who were, prior to the crisis, culturally tolerant, to reduce their support for immigration, forcing down the average response among Fidesz voters. Orbán's anti-immigrant

⁵⁵ Ibid.

rhetoric may have also influenced culturally tolerant non-Fidesz voters to change their views and, thus, their party affiliation. In this scenario, Orbán proactively drives public opinion. In the second scenario, Orbán successfully exploits public opinion by drawing a group of voters that were, independent of Orbán's rhetoric, either already culturally intolerant prior to the crisis or became intolerant in response to the crisis. The potential alignment of culturally intolerant with Fidesz similarly drives down the average response among Fidesz voters. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive and could be in play at the same time. This discussion proves that until we determine the role that Fidesz plays in public opinion, we cannot conclude whether a given variable predicts individual support for their party. I will address causality later in the chapter.

Support for the European Union

Hungary's rapid economic growth is primarily a result of its EU membership and EU-funded projects, which means that Viktor Orbán's antagonism towards the EU is less likely to be directed against the financial benefits of Hungary's membership than towards the political obligations included in the package. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Orbán has spent the past decade steadily building his illiberal state as an antithesis of the politics formulated in Brussels. He has been offering Hungarian citizens a novel identity framed against the "contaminated" Western ideology embodied, first and foremost, by the European Union.

Krastev and Holmes' central argument states that Hungarians feel resentment towards the project of Europeanization implemented in Hungary by the West after 1989. They blame this lasting resentment for fueling the furies that led to the populist revolt. Their claim, however, does not hold against the public opinion data. When asked about their support for European unification, Hungarians placed consistently in the middle of "unification already gone too far" and "unification go further." Their attitude towards European integration has been steady since

2004, with a 12% dip in support due to the responsibility burdened by the EU during the refugee crisis. Their support rebounded to the pre-crisis level in 2018.

Figure 4.1.1

When grouped by party affiliation, Hungarians demonstrate a trend similar to their support for immigration. Fidesz voters became 23% less supportive of the EU during the refugee crisis than non-Fidesz voters, although the level of support has increased among both groups after 2016.

Figure 4.1.2

These findings suggest a lack of any crisis or evidence of resentment in Hungarians' attitudes towards the EU and European integration. Their level of support has remained steady in the middle, with no sharp dips present either when viewed through the lens of a general population or when grouped by party affiliation.

Some think that public resentment is not directed towards the European integration per se but against the politicians sitting in Brussels, who claim a right to “monitor and evaluate the progress of imitating countries on an ongoing basis.”⁵⁶ Here, we see an analogous lack of a crisis. The trust in the European parliament has remained steady in the middle of “no trust at all” and “complete trust” for two decades, with no statistically significant difference between the average responses of Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters.⁵⁷ While we do not observe a significant association between support for European integration and anti-democratic voting in these findings, we will explore causality further later in the chapter.

Figure 4.2

⁵⁶ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2019, p. 13.

⁵⁷ See Appendix, Figure 4.2.app.

Attitude towards Liberalism

The scholars supporting cultural explanations of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe are convinced that public opinion in the region has gradually shifted from liberal to right-wing conservative, leading to the growing support for populist politicians that erode contemporary liberal democracy. Krastev and Holmes write that a backlash provoked by the assumed normality of post-nationalism “gave birth, in formerly communist countries, to an anti-liberal, anti-globalist, anti-migrant, and anti-EU revolt, exploited and manipulated by populist demagogues who knew how to demonize ‘inner enemies’ to mobilize public support.”⁵⁸ In our analysis of public opinion, we found little to no evidence of anti-migrant and anti-EU revolt and questioned the influence of populist leaders over people’s political views. This section will test the validity of Krastev and Holmes’ claims concerning anti-liberal and anti-globalist sentiment in Hungary.

Asking people directly about their attitudes towards liberalism does not necessarily yield an honest response. The study subjects may falsely register the most politically correct opinion, based on where they believe public opinion is balanced. Attitudes towards democracy, immigration, and European integration discussed so far are chief constituents of a contemporary liberal ideology. Many questions that I will discuss in this paper also capture the public sentiment towards liberalism. This section will demonstrate the results of a question that asks subjects in Hungary to place themselves on the left-right scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right. If Krastev and Holmes’ claim about anti-liberal revolt is accurate, we would expect to observe a gradual shift towards a conservative ideology, at least among Fidesz voters. The results show that the general public's weighted average response from 2002 to 2018 has remained in the

⁵⁸ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2019, pp. 22-23.

center, close to 5. We observe a steady, although not sharp, rise in average response from 2002 to 2008, a decrease from 2010 to 2014, and a slight increase during the refugee crisis that returned to the center after the crisis. There is no evidence of an anti-liberal revolt.

Figure 5.1.1

When grouped by party affiliation, Fidesz voters demonstrate a considerably higher weighted average response than non-Fidesz voters, which indicates their conservative ideology. Given that Fidesz is a national-conservative political party, this is expected.

Figure 5.1.2

These results, however, strengthen the evidence against the supposed anti-liberal revolt. Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters have maintained steady, if different, positions on the left-right scale. If anything, there has been a slight convergence between two groups towards the center over the past decade. The results obtained in this section fail to confirm Krastev and Holmes' claim that there has been a shift to right-wing populist extremism in Hungary, let alone an anti-liberal revolt.

Identity Crisis

One of Krastev and Holmes' original ideas in their book is that a cultural conversion of Hungarian people to "values, habits, and attitudes considered 'normal' in the West" has put their very identity at risk.⁵⁹ With their identity under crisis, Hungarian citizens fall for Viktor Orbán's ploy to recover their authentic national past, even if it costs them their long-held values. Krastev and Holmes write that anti-liberal sentiment among Hungarian people originates from their disappointment with the imitation imperative. As discussed earlier, the authors of this book

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

believe that Hungarians fear cultural erasure and ethnic disappearance. In addition, they feel pessimistic about their future.

Unfortunately, public opinion surveys cannot directly measure the state of their subjects' identity. Again, many questions already discussed capture at least some aspect of an individual's identity. So far, we did not observe any significant deviations. With the help of additional questions, this section will take a holistic approach towards measuring one of Krastev and Holmes' foundational claims that Hungarians are going through an identity crisis, which prompts them to vote for xenophobic, authoritarian leaders.

First, if the imitation hypothesis were correct, we would observe among Hungarians a categorically negative attitude towards the model countries in the West. We have already seen that their attitude towards the European Union, as well as their trust in the European parliament, is satisfactory and steady. We do not own data that speaks of Hungarians' attitudes about each country in Western Europe. We do, however, know about their opinion of Germany, a country to which Krastev and Holmes dedicate an entire chapter of their book. In their view, Germany represents "the implicit model for post-communist political reform," embodying the "superior post-ethnic identity" that Central and Eastern Europeans were forced to imitate.⁶⁰ According to the Global Attitudes Survey, 78% and 63% of Hungarians in 2009 and 2019 had a "favorable" or "somewhat favorable" opinion of Germany. The decrease in their weighted mean response is not statistically significant. The data does not support Krastev and Holmes' proposition of the revolt against the New German Ideology.

Figure 6.1

Second, the identity crisis experienced by Hungarians is described by Krastev and Holmes in personal terms. The authors write about the cultural, moral, and spiritual crisis that

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 56.

affects how subjects perceive their identity both at present and in the future. Global Attitudes Survey conveniently asks several questions that closely reflect Krastev and Holmes' language. When asked what they think of the changes that have taken place in Hungary since 1989, most people in 2019 responded that the past three decades had a good influence on their country's pride, spiritual values, and family values. Additionally, they feel optimistic about their country's culture, as well as its relations with other European countries.

Figure 6.2

Figure 6.3

Finally, Krastev and Holmes claim that people in Hungary are pessimistic about their economic prospects and believe their children will grow up in financial hardship. When asked whether they think their children will be better off or worse off financially than their parents, not all Hungarians consense. 37% of subjects in 2019 responded with "better off," 40% with "worse off," and 14% with "same." 9% refused to answer.⁶¹ While Hungarians seem to be uncertain about economic prospects, the data obtained from this question fails to confirm their unified pessimism that their children's lives will be less prosperous than their own.

As a whole, these results do not provide strong evidence that Hungarians find their identity, culture, and spiritual values under threat, much less due to the changes that took place after 1989. They are also comfortable with the model countries' influence on Hungary and positively view their relations with these countries. The initial section setting the context for data analysis established that most Hungarians approve of political and economic changes since 1989, and the questions directly asking about the effects that these changes have had on their values further strengthen the evidence that they are comfortable with their personal, as well as national, identity.

⁶¹ See Appendix, Figure.6.app.

Subjective Well-Being

Krastev and Holmes’ analysis emphasizes the role of demand-side factors in Hungary’s contemporary democratic crisis. Our findings show that the conventional wisdom about an anti-democratic, anti-migrant, anti-EU, and anti-liberal crisis in Hungary is strikingly at odds with public opinion. The authors’ analysis of political attitudes in Hungary also implies low subjective well-being — collective dissatisfaction with life as a whole. This is particularly true for Fidesz voters, who express their dissatisfaction by voting for populist leaders that stand for “the pure people” and against “the corrupt elite.”⁶² The data for subjective well-being, however, shows that Hungarians’ satisfaction with life as a whole is neither low nor decreasing. The weighted average response for life satisfaction among all subjects in Hungary stands consistently between 5 and 6.5, where 0 stands for “extremely dissatisfied” and 10 stands for “extremely satisfied.” We observe a gradual, although slight, increase in average life satisfaction after 2008, with the time period of the refugee crisis being positively associated with people’s subjective well-being.

Figure 7.1.1

Interestingly, Fidesz voters demonstrate improvement in life satisfaction starting approximately from when Viktor Orbán began his illiberal reforms. Their subjective well-being has increased by 19%, while their non-Fidesz counterparts stayed at the same level. The direction of this association serves as evidence against our expectation that Fidesz voters’ support for a right-wing populist leader is a reaction to their low subjective well-being.

Figure 7.1.2

⁶² Mudde, Cas, and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Subjective well-being is a broad measurement influenced by a variety of factors, some of which may have little to do with politics. The previous findings of life satisfaction in Hungary do not provide strong conclusive evidence about the role of subjective well-being in democratic backsliding. Therefore, it will be useful to unpack what the concept implies. Arguably the most important constituent of subjective well-being is economic satisfaction. When choosing their favorite candidate, voters often respond to their economic self-interest, which is closely linked to how they perceive the state of the economy. When asked to evaluate the present state of the economy in their country, Hungarians demonstrate a 58% decrease in their average level of satisfaction from 2002 to 2008, and a remarkable 179% increase over the following decade. While further analysis will be dedicated to the events leading up to 2008, it must be noted that 2008 is associated with the global economic crisis and also happens to be the last survey year before Fidesz was elected with a majority in the Hungarian parliament.

Figure 7.2.1

The findings in the area of economic satisfaction lead to key suggestions when grouped by party affiliation. As seen in the general population, both groups were close to being “extremely dissatisfied” with Hungary’s economy during the global economic crisis. In 2010, we observe an initial spike in economic satisfaction among both groups, with Fidesz voters placing slightly above non-Fidesz voters. The spike could be attributed to the “bandwagon effect” of Fidesz voters increasing the value of their responses as a result of their favored party gaining office. However, the growth in their level of satisfaction with the economy did not end in 2010. The gap between the average level of economic satisfaction among the two groups has become wider every survey year, with Fidesz voters demonstrating a 77% higher mean response in 2018 than their non-Fidesz counterparts.

Figure 7.2.2

Fidesz voters are not more satisfied with the state of their country's economy because they are simply richer. The average income level of Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters has followed a similar pattern over the past two decades, with the mean distribution of income fluctuating close to the fifth decile.⁶³ Their perception is likely higher due to their economic expectations being met by the ruling party. Additionally, Fidesz voters tend to be more satisfied with the state of the education⁶⁴ and the state of the health services⁶⁵ in their country, strengthening the evidence for our finding that contrary to Krastev and Holmes' claim, Orbán supporters demonstrate a higher absolute and relative level of subjective well-being than the rest. The next section will explore a causal link between political attitudes and identification with Fidesz.

Discussion

The previous section established associations between demand-side variables proposed by Krastev and Holmes and anti-democratic voting behavior. While some attitudes among Fidesz voters turned marginally illiberal during the refugee crisis, there is no evidence of anti-liberal, anti-globalist, anti-migrant, and anti-EU revolt proclaimed by Krastev and Holmes. The timing of Fidesz voters' shift in attitudes accompanies Viktor Orbán's illiberal reforms, although we cannot conclude whether Orbán's populist rhetoric drives or exploits public opinion. The most critical finding so far suggests a strong correlation between economic satisfaction and identification with Fidesz. Although both Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters show improvement in their perceptions of the economy, Fidesz voters demonstrate much higher growth in economic satisfaction than their non-Fidesz counterparts. This finding goes against Krastev and Holmes'

⁶³ See Appendix, Figure 7.app.1.

⁶⁴ See Appendix, Figure 7.app.2.

⁶⁵ See Appendix, Figure 7.app.3.

proposition that Fidesz voters express their economic dissatisfaction by voting for right-wing populist leaders that promise to rectify their situation.

The correlations, however, cannot confirm a causal link between public attitudes and anti-democratic voting. This section will build a logistic regression model using five variables from the correlation analysis to learn which ones best predict identification with Fidesz. The variables used for the model are *support for immigration*, *support for the European Union*, *conservative ideology* (left-right scale), *life satisfaction*, and *economic satisfaction*, all present in the European Social Survey. The model will begin with 2008, the last survey year before Fidesz was elected, and end with 2018, the latest survey year. The coefficients for each variable predict the vote for Fidesz. The goal of regression analysis is to learn how the predictive value of each base of identification with Fidesz has evolved from before and after the 2010 Hungarian election. The following table displays the results of the logistic regression model:

	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Support for immigration	-0.023 (0.035)	-0.013 (0.031)	-0.011 (0.023)	-0.021 (0.036)	-0.091. (0.047)	-0.158*** (0.040)
Support for the European Union	-0.023 (0.033)	N/A	0.013 (0.033)	0.025 (0.035)	-0.013 (0.041)	-0.152*** (0.042)
Conservative ideology	0.786*** (0.065)	0.447*** (0.039)	0.426*** (0.041)	0.238*** (0.034)	0.287*** (0.039)	0.269*** (0.039)
Life satisfaction	-0.032 (0.034)	-0.085* (0.039)	-0.116** (0.039)	0.062 (0.042)	-0.122* (0.053)	-0.020 (0.054)
Economic satisfaction	-0.013 (0.063)	0.123* (0.051)	0.121** (0.042)	0.261*** (0.041)	0.495*** (0.058)	0.609*** (0.060)

Significance codes: 0.001 (***), 0.01 (**), 0.05 (*), 0.1 (.), 1 ()

N	682	793	817	752	767	808
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Source: European Social Survey

The results of the model demand a careful interpretation. It must first be established that identification with Fidesz became anti-democratic only after 2014, when Viktor Orbán first outlined his vision of building an illiberal democracy. In 2010, Orbán was elected as a leader of a national-conservative political party, without indication that his future reforms would imperil the state of democracy in Hungary. The logistic regression coefficients show that leading up to the 2010 Hungarian election, *conservative ideology*, measured by the left-right scale, was the only statistically significant predictor of identification with Fidesz, a conservative party. *Conservative ideology* retains its significance as a predictor every survey year, although it loses its strength considerably from 2008 to 2018.

Support for immigration begins to pick up significance following the refugee crisis and becomes a statistically significant predictor in 2018, with higher support for immigration negatively predicting identification for Fidesz. In 2018, *support for the EU* joins *support for immigration* as the second statistically significant predictor with a negative sign. Neither *support for immigration* nor *support for the EU* is relevant until Orbán's rhetoric shifts decidedly towards illiberalism. While we are still not certain whether Orbán drives or exploits public opinion, we learn that in 2018, the lack of support for immigration and the EU is causally, although mildly, linked to identification with Fidesz.

As seen in the correlation analysis, the coefficients for the variable as broad as *life satisfaction* do not tell a coherent story. *Life satisfaction* gains significance in some waves and is irrelevant in others. The coefficients for *economic satisfaction*, however, follow an indicative trend. Figure 7.2.1 from the previous section shows that the weighted average response for economic satisfaction among the general population reached its lowest point in 2008. Fidesz was widely seen as propelled to a sweeping victory in large part due to the dissatisfaction with the

ruling political establishment, which was plagued by corruption scandals and suffered a further blow by the global financial crisis. The governing MSZP lost over half of its popular support and over two-thirds of its seats, giving way to a Fidesz supermajority. The period leading up to the 2010 election represents a critical juncture for Hungarians looking to replace an unpopular incumbent in the midst of a global financial crisis. During this period, *economic satisfaction* is not a relevant predictor of identification with Fidesz. In 2008, Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters alike were close to “extremely dissatisfied” with the state of the economy in their country. In other words, they were looking for a change.

The progression of *economic satisfaction* as the basis for identification with Fidesz points towards important findings. The global financial crisis has hit Hungary hardest of all among the EU newcomers.⁶⁶ We saw previously that the unemployment rate reached its peak level of 11.17% in 2010, the year Fidesz was elected. The economy showed signs of recovery following Fidesz’s election with decreasing tax rates and moderate GDP growth.⁶⁷ Crucially, Hungary’s high unemployment rate decreased by 3.44 percentage points from 2010 to the next parliamentary elections in 2014, and decreased by another 3.02 percentage points during Orbán’s term. As the economy recovered from the financial crisis, the average level of economic satisfaction among Hungarians grew rapidly. Figure 7.2.2 shows that during this period, satisfaction with the state of the economy was higher and grew faster among Fidesz voters than among non-Fidesz voters. This could be the case because those with growing economic satisfaction began to align with Fidesz or existing Fidesz voters simply overestimate their chosen party’s economic performance. The logistic regression model reflects the divergence among

⁶⁶ Darvas, Zsolt. “The rise and fall of Hungary.” *The Guardian*. October 29, 2008.
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/blog/2008/oct/29/hungary-imf>.

⁶⁷ “Hungary GDP grows 1.4% yr/yr in Q4, up 1.7% in 2011.” *Budapest Business Journal*. February 15, 2012.
https://web.archive.org/web/20120329062656/http://www.bbj.hu/economy/hungary-gdp-grows-14percent-yr-yr-in-q4-up-17percent-in-2011_62619.

Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters. *Economic satisfaction* becomes statistically significant in 2010 and remains significant in 2012, with coefficients of 0.123 and 0.121, respectively. As already mentioned, identification with Fidesz is not yet associated with anti-democratic behavior. Neither cultural/political bases of support for Fidesz, with the exception of *conservative ideology*, is relevant during the nationwide parliamentary election in 2014. Moreover, the strength of a coefficient doubles in value for *economic satisfaction* and decreases markedly for *conservative ideology*. As a result, Fidesz managed to secure a second supermajority in the parliamentary election. These findings suggest that more than anything else, Fidesz is being rewarded for its economic performance.

Viktor Orbán began using right-wing populist and anti-immigrant rhetoric after his reelection and following the escalation of the refugee crisis. In the survey years following 2014, Fidesz is positioned as a right-wing or far-right party, and voting for them is considered anti-democratic behavior. The correlation analysis showed that the associations between cultural and political variables and the support for Fidesz started to appear after 2016. However, the logistic regression model provides a weak ground to conclude that associations are causal. Viktor Orbán's anti-liberal rhetoric does not influence people's voting behavior until 2018, when *support for immigration* and *support for the EU* become statistically significant predictors of identification with Fidesz, although the strengths of their coefficients are relatively mild. The strength of a coefficient for *conservative ideology* increases during the refugee crisis and returns to the pre-crisis level in 2018. On the other hand, the strength of a coefficient for *economic satisfaction* doubles as Viktor Orbán begins to roll out illiberal reforms and, at the same time, leads economic growth and recovery in the country. In 2018, *economic satisfaction* is a far stronger predictor for identification with Fidesz than *conservative ideology* (0.269), *support for*

immigration (-0.158), and *support for the EU* (-0.152). It appears that while cultural and political variables mildly influence anti-democratic voting after Viktor Orbán began his illiberal reforms, they yield to economic self-interest as the strongest predictor for identification with Fidesz. In contrast with cultural and political variables, *economic satisfaction* demonstrates a continuity seemingly independent of cultural and political changes in the country.

What do these findings mean? In his article mentioned earlier in the paper, Milan Svobik points to political polarization as a culprit responsible for anti-democratic behavior, despite abstract support for democracy.⁶⁸ Democracy remains a highly-esteemed value in Hungarian society, yet the majority still support an authoritarian leader that erodes democracy piece by piece. The data shows that Hungarian society is not politically polarized to a higher degree than usual. The standard deviations of self-placements on a left-right scale remain steady between 2 and 3,⁶⁹ and subjective closeness to their political party of choice remains “not close.”⁷⁰ Krastev and Holmes’ variables constituting cultural and political attitudes, while mildly involved, do not fully explain why Hungarian democracy has found itself under threat. As per Bartels, public opinion surveys provide little to no evidence for attitudes against liberalism or democracy.⁷¹ The results obtained from this study show that economic self-interest is a far stronger predictor of anti-democratic voting than cultural and political factors such as *support for immigration*, *support for the European Union*, and *conservative ideology*.

These findings provide support to supply-side explanations of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. Bartels, in his paper, writes that Hungarian citizens are neither against democracy nor for authoritarianism. They are not purposefully voting for illiberal

⁶⁸ Svobik, Milan W. “Polarization versus Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 30 no. 3, 2019, p. 20-32, [doi:10.1353/jod.2019.0039](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039).

⁶⁹ See Appendix, Figure 8.app.1.

⁷⁰ See Appendix, Figure 8.app.2.

⁷¹ Bartels, Larry M. “Democracy Erodes From the Top Public Opinion and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe.” *Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Vanderbilt University*, 2020. Working Paper.

democracy. Instead, they vote for the only readily available alternatives to unsatisfactory incumbent governments.⁷² This study adds that illiberal candidates earn their support not because they correctly gauge public sentiment but because people tend to prioritize economic self-interest over their cultural/political beliefs. In other words, voters confront a choice between a party that dismantles democracy but at the same time meets people's economic expectations and a democratic opposition that cannot claim such achievements.⁷³

The consistent public support at the ballot box gives Viktor Orbán the freedom to advance his preferred political agenda. Orbán's political outlook, however, is not what keeps him in power. This study finds that economic self-interest guides voting behavior, and as long as *most* people expect to be relatively better off under Orbán than under anyone else, they tolerate a step-by-step dismantling of democratic institutions. When democratic backsliding occurs synchronously with economic growth, tangible outcomes, in this case financial, precede the public's deference to abstract procedures, putting democracy in the backseat. With this logic, democracy is good only if it delivers prosperity, and if it does not, then alternatives abound.

Summary, Conclusion, and Further Research

In her paper about post-communist identity, Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper writes that the commonly-used term “return to Europe” indicates that the countries East of the Iron Curtain “were outside Europe and now [needed] to make an effort to be back in it. Thus, Western Europe [was] the model of a “proper” European identity, and Russia, by continuing the Soviet Union, [was] its opposite.”⁷⁴ Thirty years after Central and Eastern Europeans have embraced liberal

⁷² Ibid, p. 30.

⁷³ Svobik, Milan W. “Polarization versus Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 30 no. 3, 2019, p. 20-32, [doi:10.1353/jod.2019.0039](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039), p. 29.

⁷⁴ Głowacka-Grajper, Małgorzata. “Memory in Post-Communist Europe: Controversies over Identity, Conflicts, and Nostalgia.” *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2018, pp. 924–935, [doi:10.1177/0888325418757891](https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418757891), p. 925.

democracy as the core of a “proper” European identity, they seem to be turning their backs against it. The mildly-authoritarian populist leaders, like Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, offer to trade cosmopolitan European values for a nationalist identity, based on “the authentic past of the nation.” As of today, Orbán’s right-wing Fidesz party has won three consecutive parliamentary elections. Addressing his supporters following the most recent elections, Orbán said: “We won a victory so big that you can see it from the moon, and you can certainly see it from Brussels.”⁷⁵

This study set out to explore the underlying reasons for democratic backsliding in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. The academic literature on democratic transitions suggests that economic development, low level of inequality, and experience with democracy are positively correlated to a successful transition to democracy. Our analysis showed that Hungary, once a poster child for democratization and now the primary case of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe, is fairly wealthy, equal, and experienced with democracy. In order to better understand recent political shifts in the region, Central and Eastern Europe experts have proposed demand- and supply-side explanations of democratic backsliding. The demand-side explanations emphasize the role of ordinary people in driving democratic politics, while the supply-side scholars consider democratic backsliding an elite-driven process, independent of public opinion.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe, this essay has challenged an influential demand-side explanation advanced by political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, widely known as the imitation hypothesis. Krastev and Holmes argue that a hostile sentiment towards liberal democracy in Central and Eastern

⁷⁵ Gosling, Tim. “Hungary’s Orban set for tricky term after landslide election win.” *Al Jazeera*. April 4, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/4/hungarys-orban-set-for-tricky-term-after-landslide-election-win>.

Europe represents a backlash against the politics of imitation that emerged in post-Cold War Europe. They describe a nation that consists of individuals profoundly worried about malign outside influence, determined to fight against *who* and *what* they blame for their fear. The first step of this study isolated six variables based on Krastev and Holmes' propositions about the individuals mentioned above. The central methodological component tested these variables against public opinion to find out whether or not they hold against the data. Using correlation analysis and a logistic regression model, we learn that there is little to no evidence of anti-liberal, anti-globalist, anti-migrant, and anti-EU revolt foundational to Krastev and Holmes' claims. Over the last two decades, public opinion in Hungary has remained relatively steady. Instead, this study finds that economic self-interest is a far stronger predictor of identification with Fidesz than any cultural or political beliefs Hungarian voters hold. While it is true that Hungarians consistently elect a populist candidate, they reward his economic performance, not his political agenda. This leads to a false belief that Hungarian voters demand authoritarianism.

The findings of this study contribute to the debate between demand- and supply-side explanations of democratic backsliding. In her historical review of the role of ordinary people in breakdowns of democracy, Nancy Bermeo writes that breakdowns were precipitated mostly by political elites, and that "citizens were less culpable than the common wisdom has led us to believe."⁷⁶ Using the case of Hungary, this study confirms Bermeo's argument that ordinary people do not choose authoritarian leaders at the ballot box. Instead, they vote for a leader that has guided the country through economic recovery and used that as an opportunity to push his political agenda. Hungarian voters sacrifice their ideological commitments for economic

⁷⁶ Bermeo, Nancy. *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2020, p. 63.

self-interest, and in a country just freed from the ideological shackles of the Soviet era, this may not come as a surprise.

Finally, *The Light that Failed*, making an effort to comprehend the political climate of Central and Eastern Europe, is primarily a book about Hungary. Further research is warranted in post-communist transitions of the region, given that not all countries have experienced democratic backsliding, despite being characteristically similar to Hungary. Although Viktor Orbán's political adventurousness has influenced other leaders in the region to rock the liberal democratic boat, what happens in Hungary does not reflect what happens everywhere else in the world.

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Figures

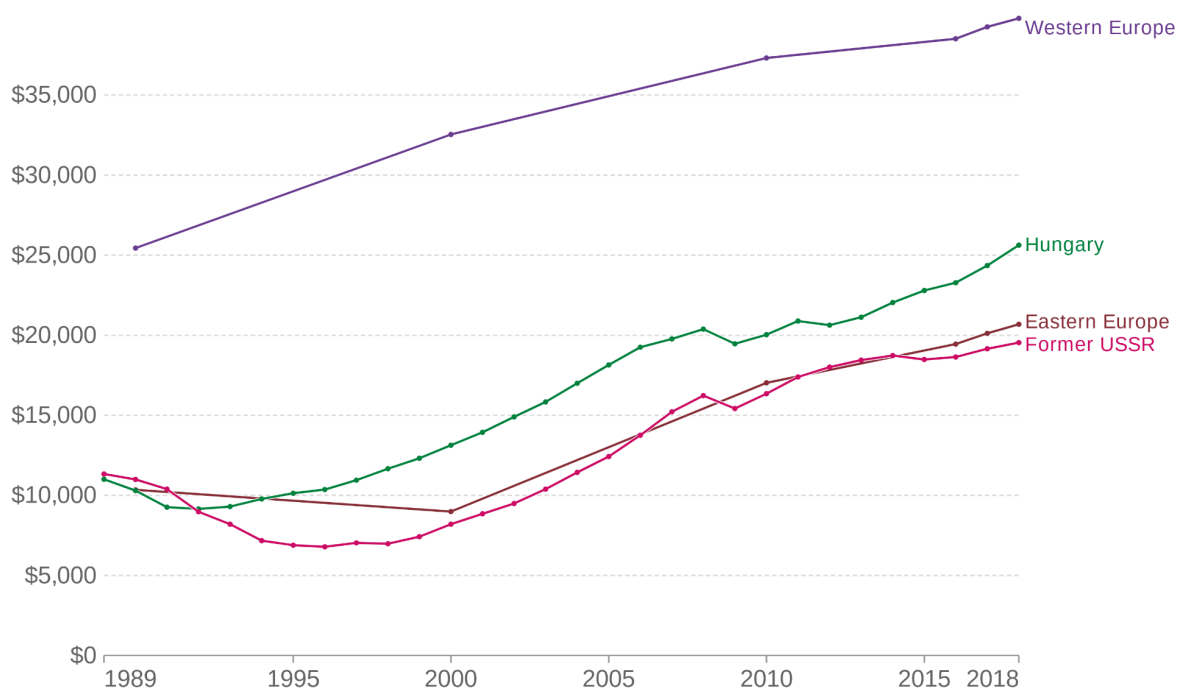
Economic Transition

Figure 1.1.1

GDP per capita, 1989 to 2018

GDP per capita adjusted for price changes over time (inflation) and price differences between countries – it is measured in international-\$ in 2011 prices.

Our World
in Data



Source: Maddison Project Database 2020 (Bolt and van Zanden (2020))

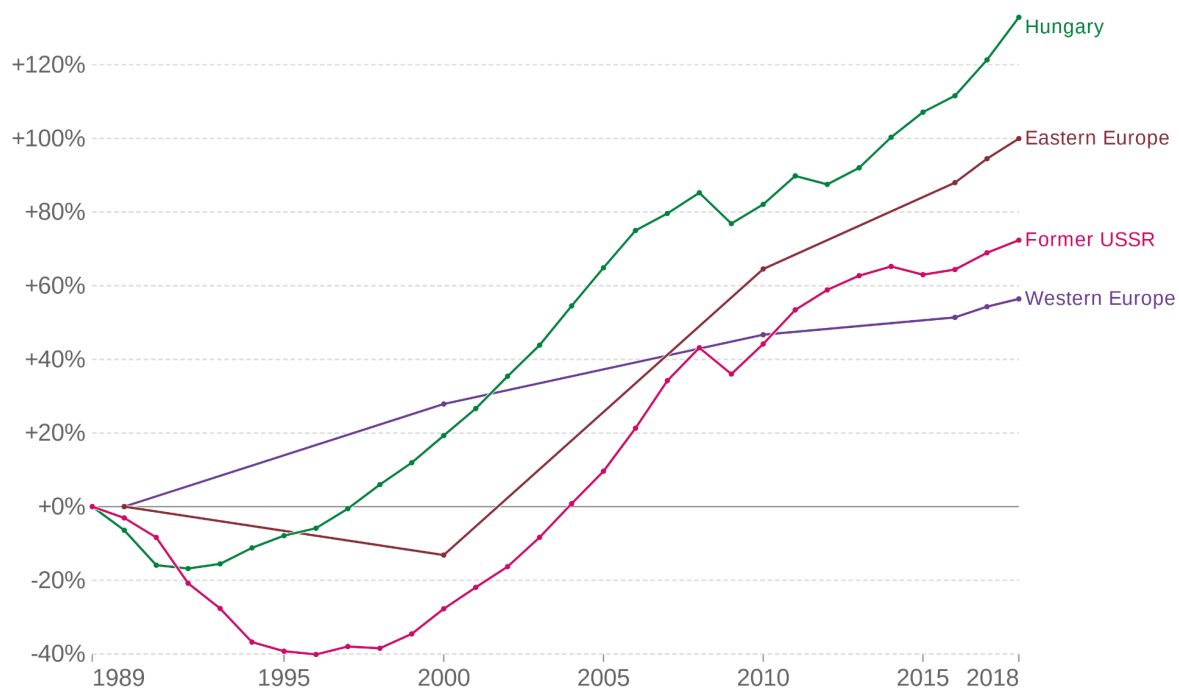
OurWorldInData.org/economic-growth • CC BY

Figure 1.1.2

Change in GDP per capita, 1989 to 2018

GDP per capita adjusted for price changes over time (inflation) and price differences between countries – it is measured in international-\$ in 2011 prices.

Our World
in Data



Source: Maddison Project Database 2020 (Bolt and van Zanden (2020))

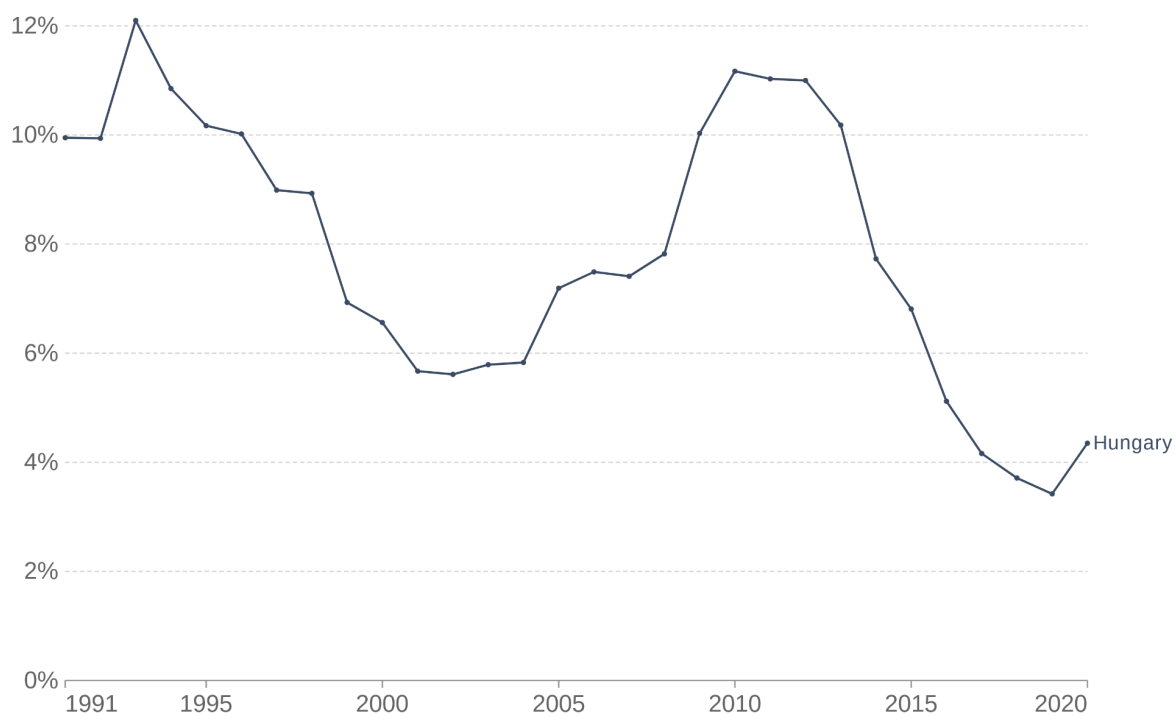
OurWorldInData.org/economic-growth • CC BY

Figure 1.2

Unemployment rate, 1991 to 2020

Unemployment refers to the share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment.

Our World
in Data



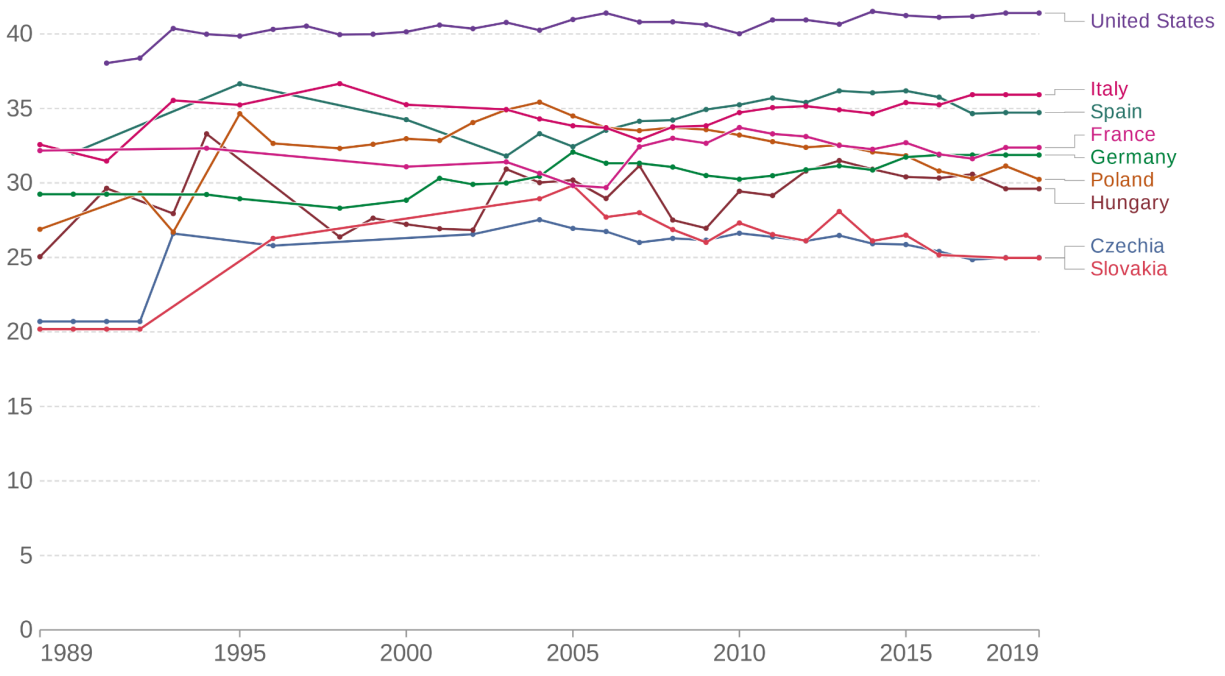
Source: International Labour Organization (via World Bank)

CC BY

Figure 1.3

Income inequality – Gini Index, 1989 to 2019

A higher Gini index indicates higher inequality.

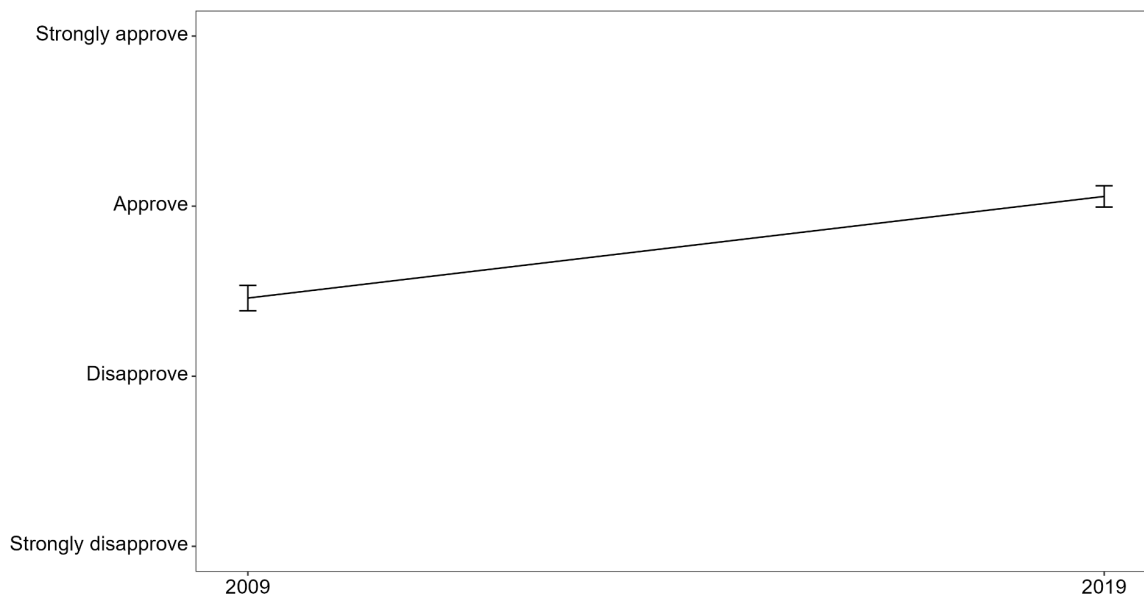


Source: PovCal (2021) OurWorldInData.org/income-inequality/ • CC BY
Note: Shown is the World Bank (Povcal) inequality data. This data includes both income and consumption measures and comparability across countries is therefore limited.

Figure 1.4

Thinking back to 1989, do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove or strongly disapprove that our country moved from having a state-controlled economy to having a market economy?

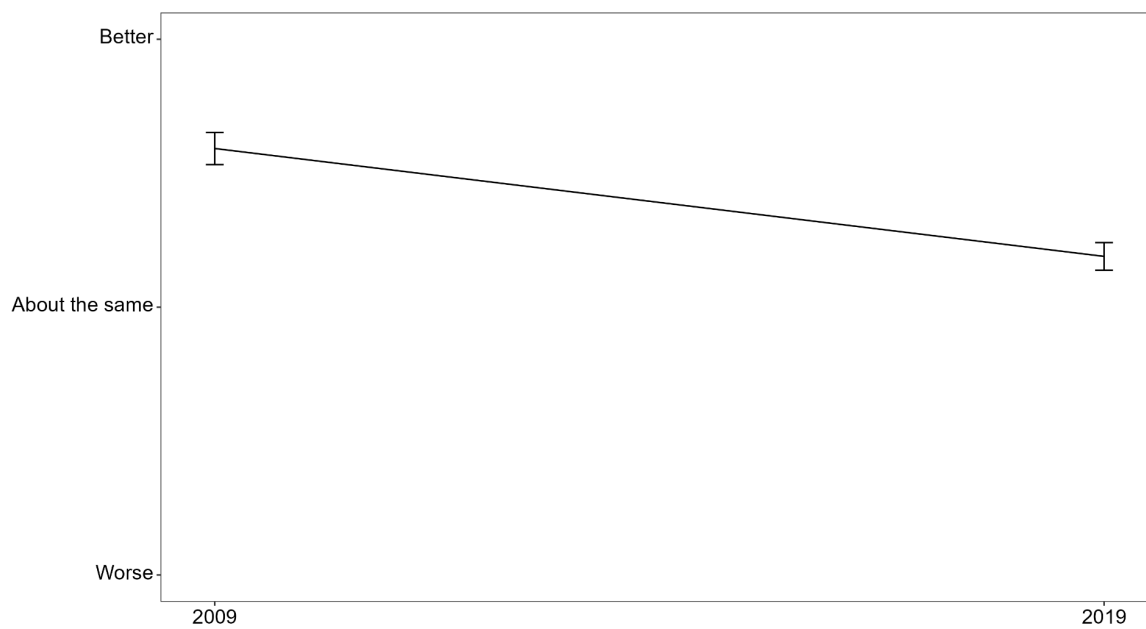
Estimated weighted average values, 2009-2019



Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Figure 1.5

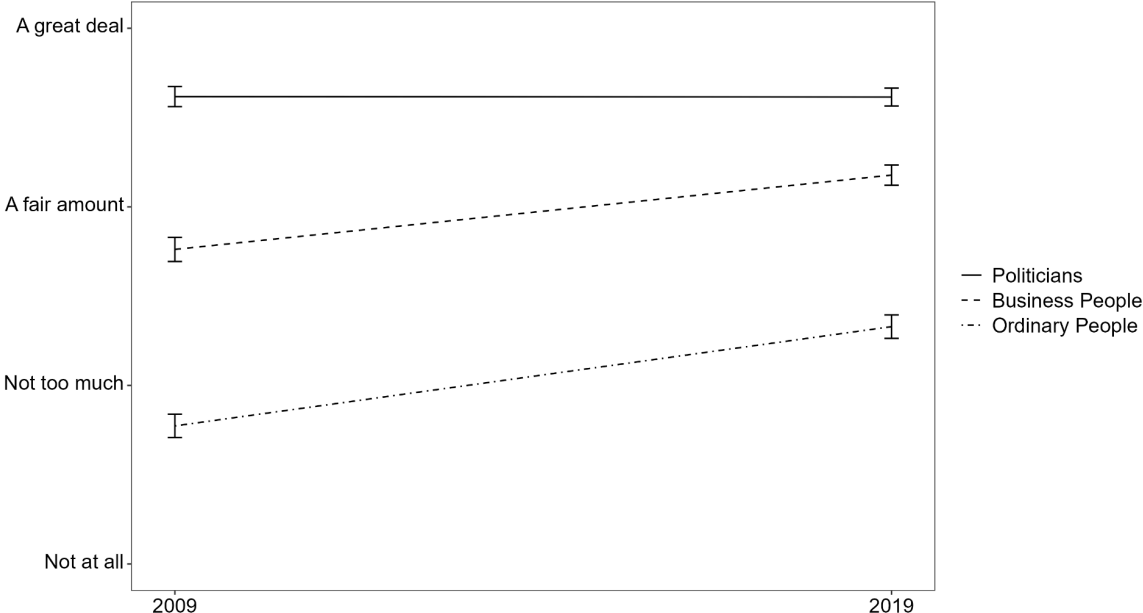
Would you say that the economic situation for most Hungarian people today is better, worse, or about the same as it was under communism?
Estimated weighted average values, 2009-2019



Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Figure 1.6

How much have _____ benefited from the changes since 1989 - a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or not at all?
Estimated weighted average values, 2009-2019



Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Support for Democracy

Figure 2.1

How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?
Estimated weighted average values, 2005-2017

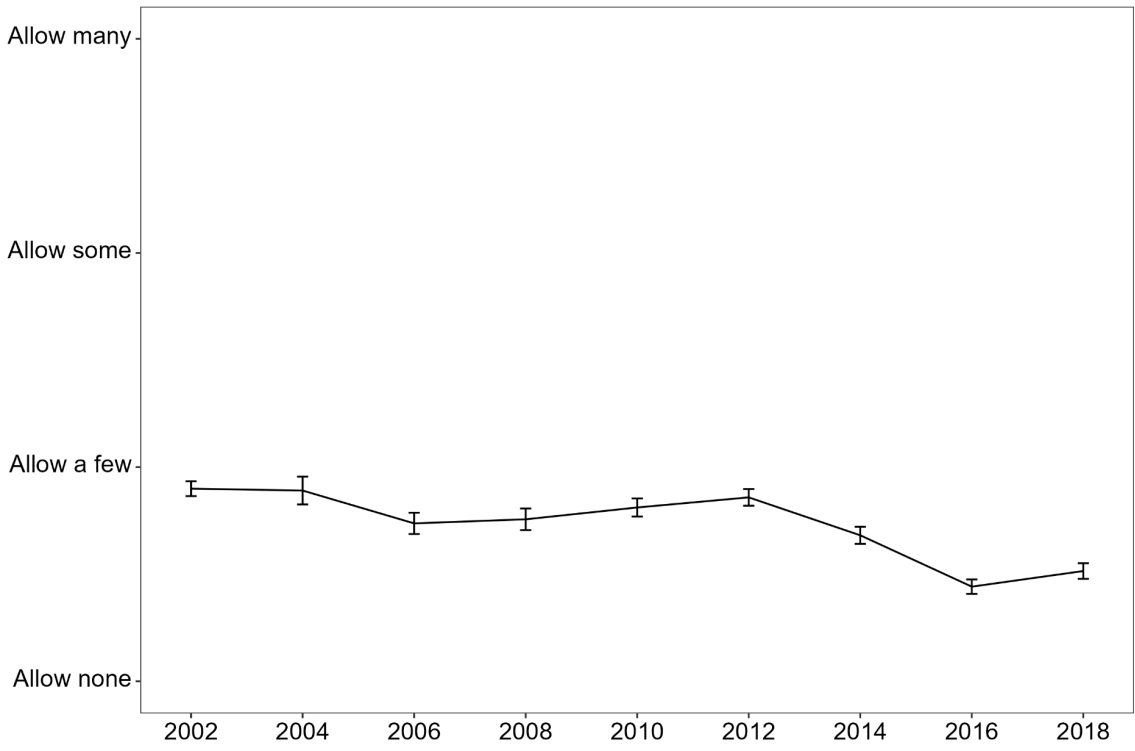


Source: World Values Survey/European Values Study

Support for Immigration

Figure 3.1.1

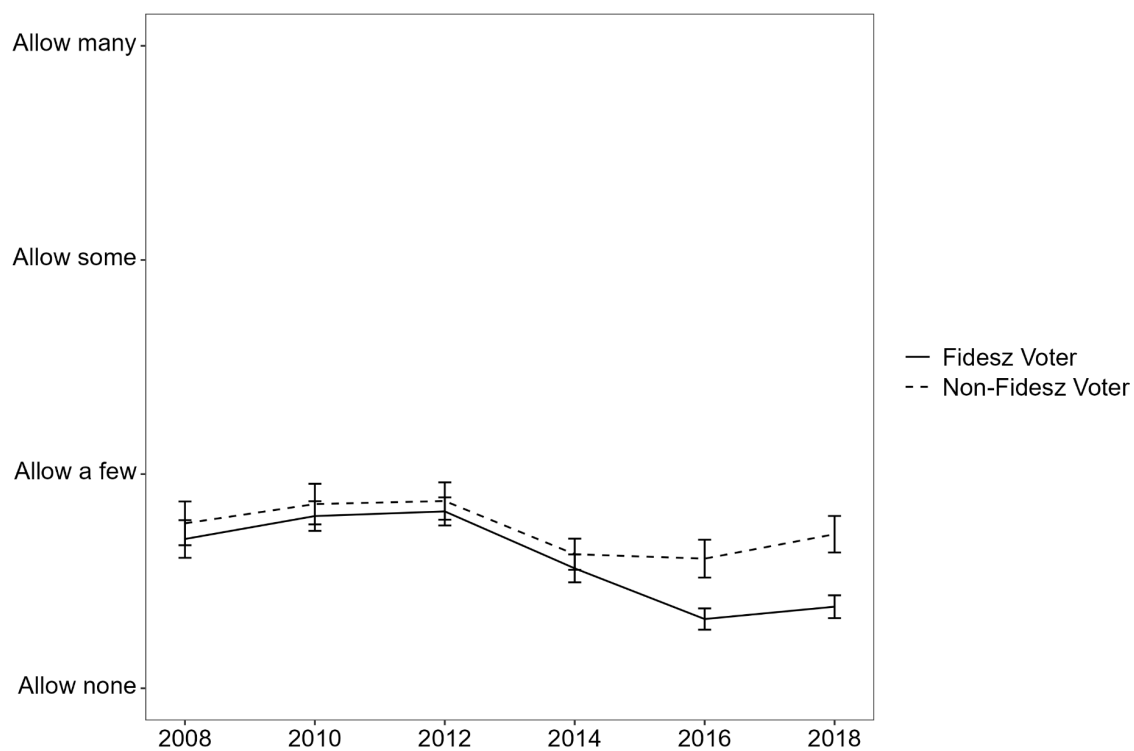
To what extent do you think Hungary should allow people from the poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?
Estimated weighted average values, 2002-2018



Source: European Social Survey

Figure 3.1.2**To what extent do you think Hungary should allow people from the poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?**

Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018



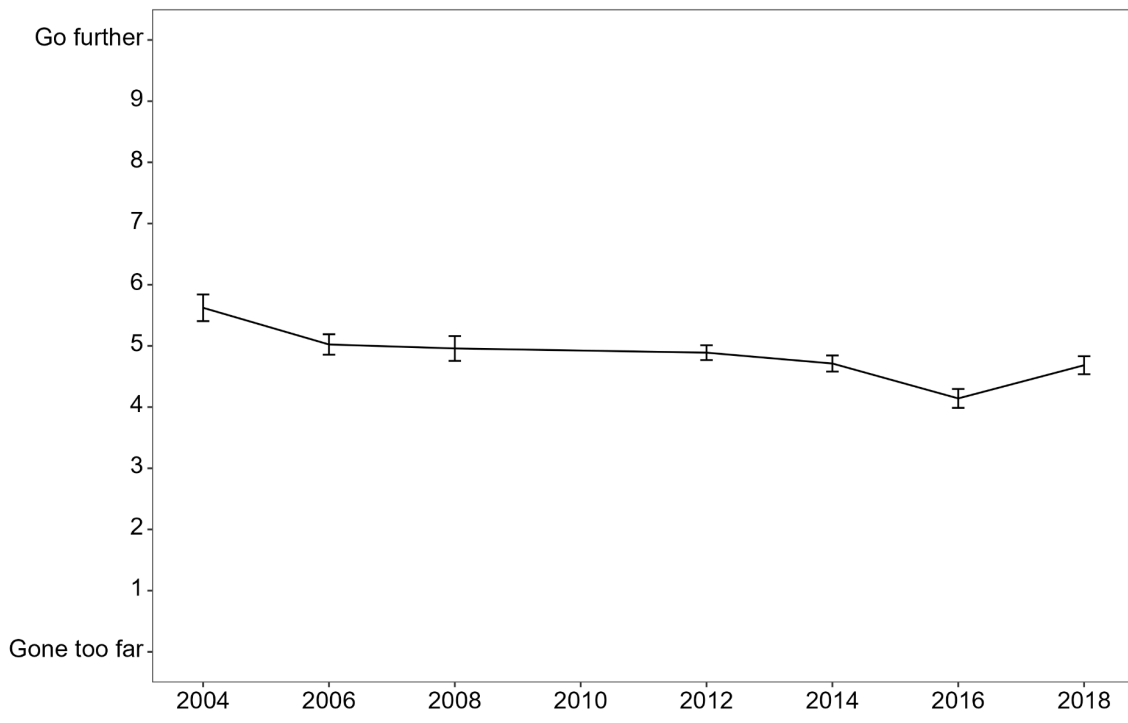
Source: European Social Survey

Support for the European Union

Figure 4.1.1

Thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. What number on the scale best describes your position?

Estimated weighted average values, 2004-2018

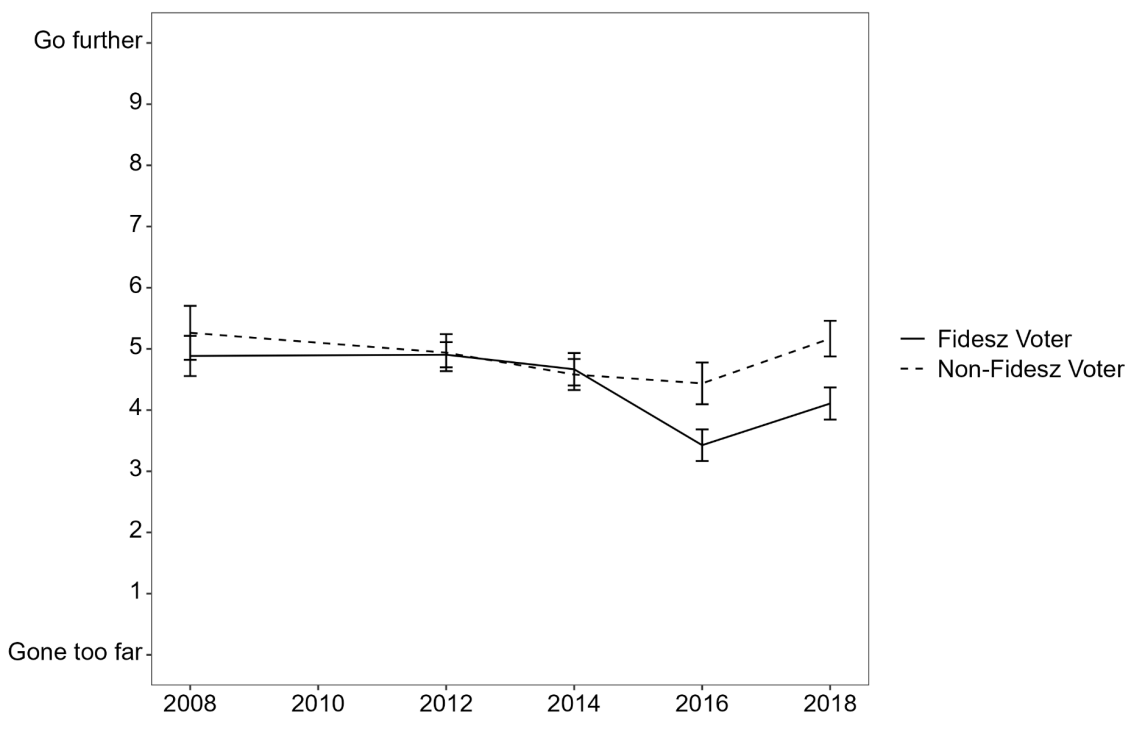


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 4.1.2

Thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. What number on the scale best describes your position?

Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018

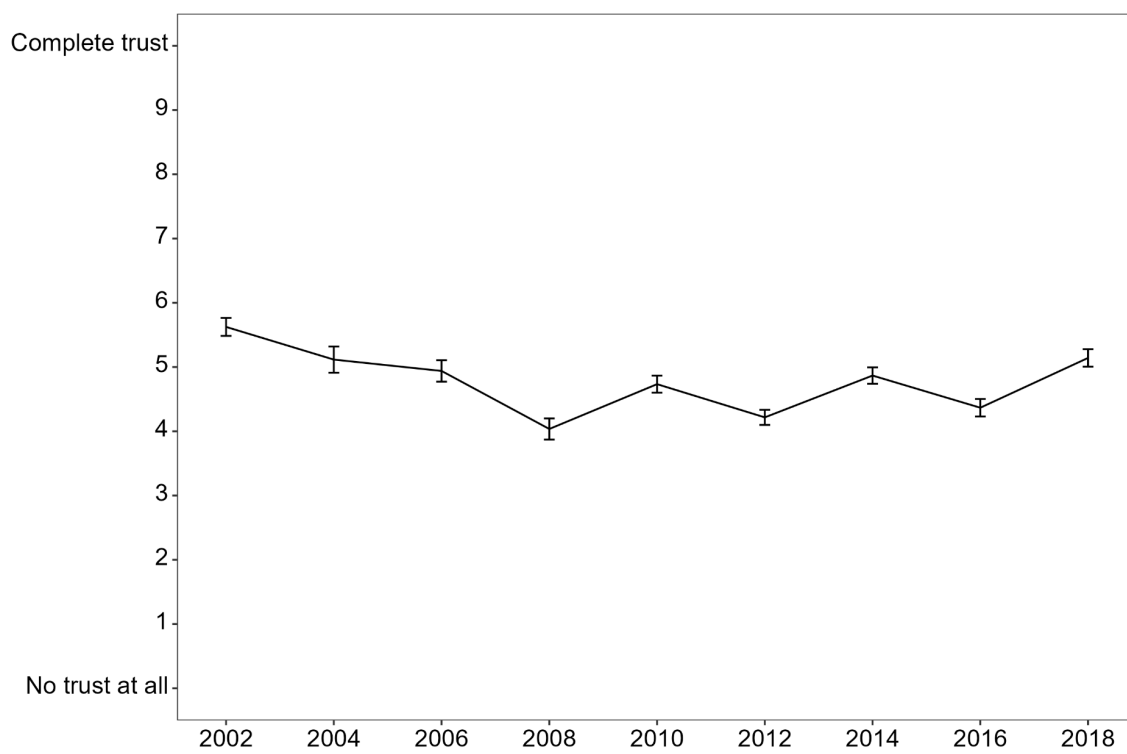


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 4.2

Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust the European parliament?

Estimated weighted average values, 2002-2018

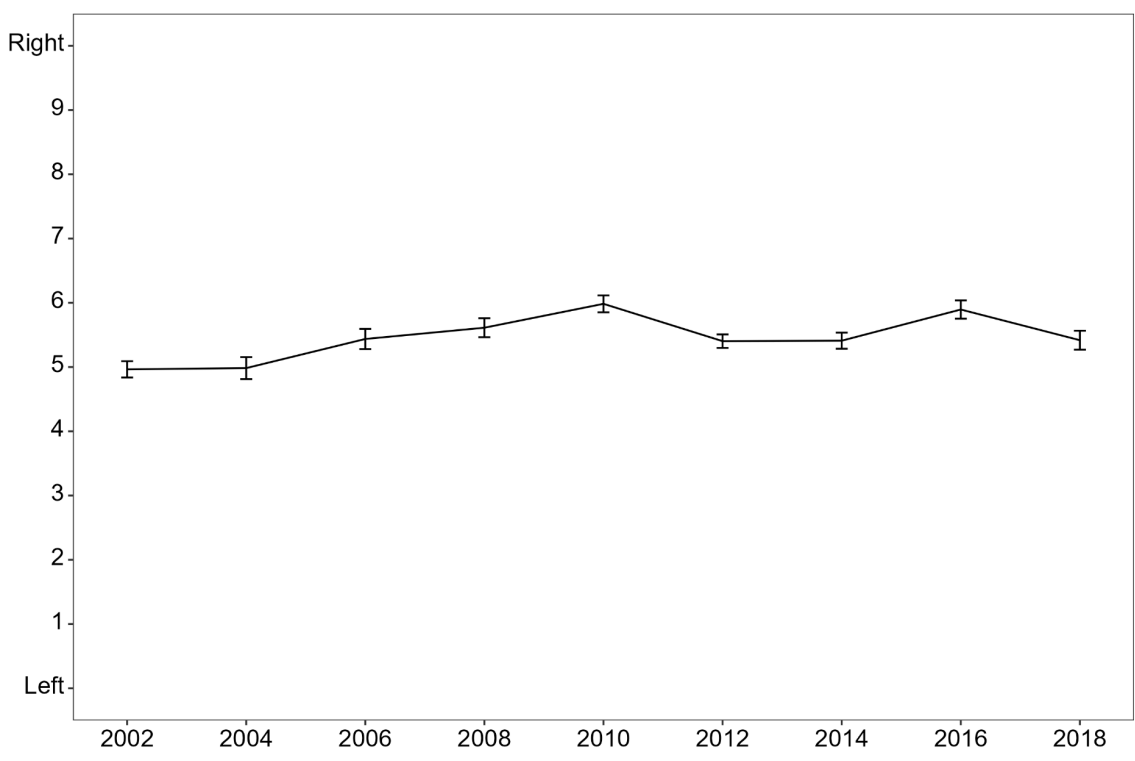


Source: European Social Survey

Attitudes towards Liberalism

Figure 5.1.1

In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?
Estimated weighted average values, 2002-2018

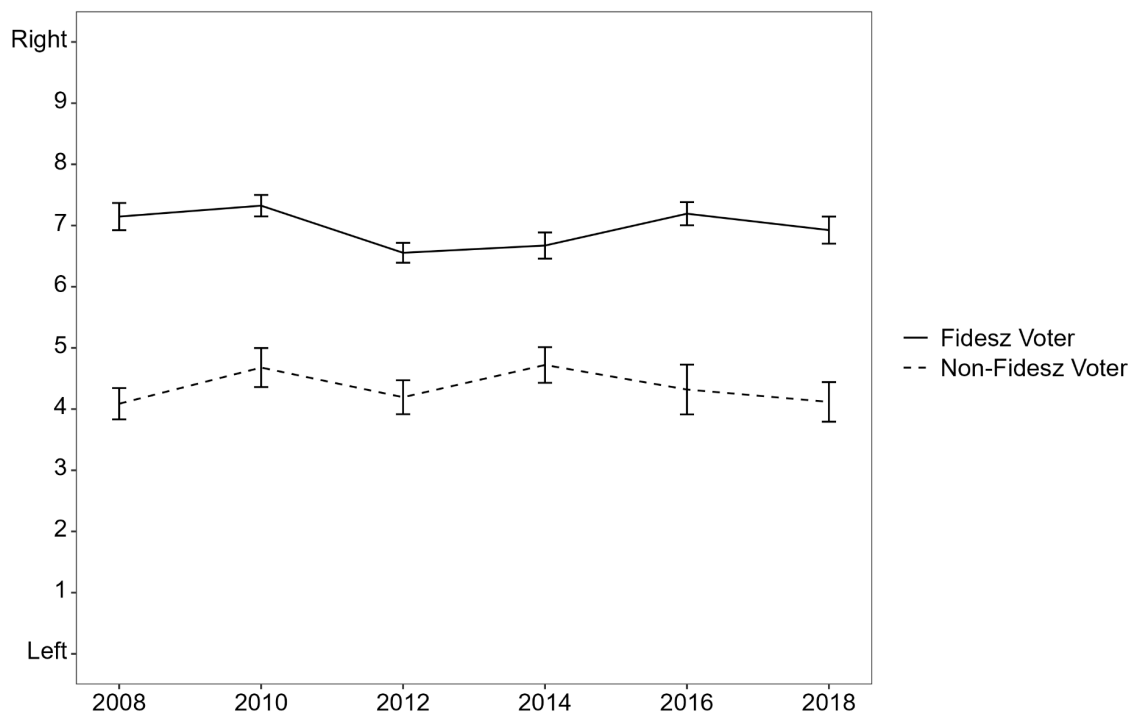


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 5.1.2

In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018

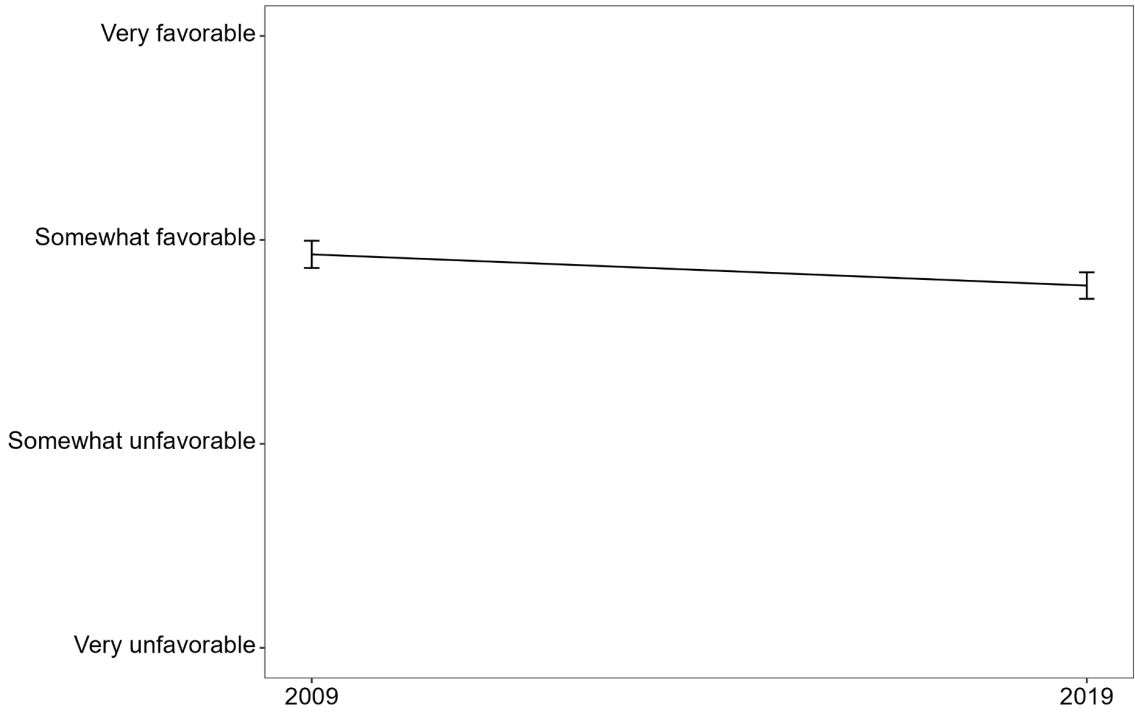


Source: European Social Survey

Identity Crisis

Figure 6.1

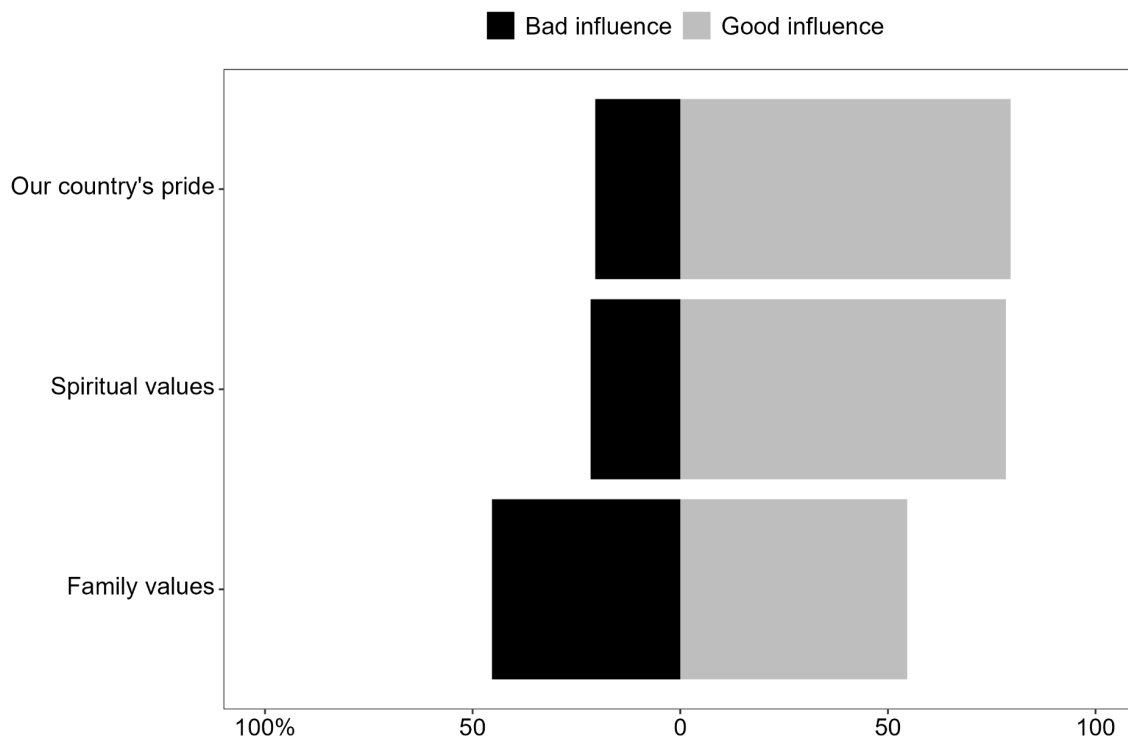
Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of Germany?
Estimated weighted average values, 2009-2019



Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Figure 6.2

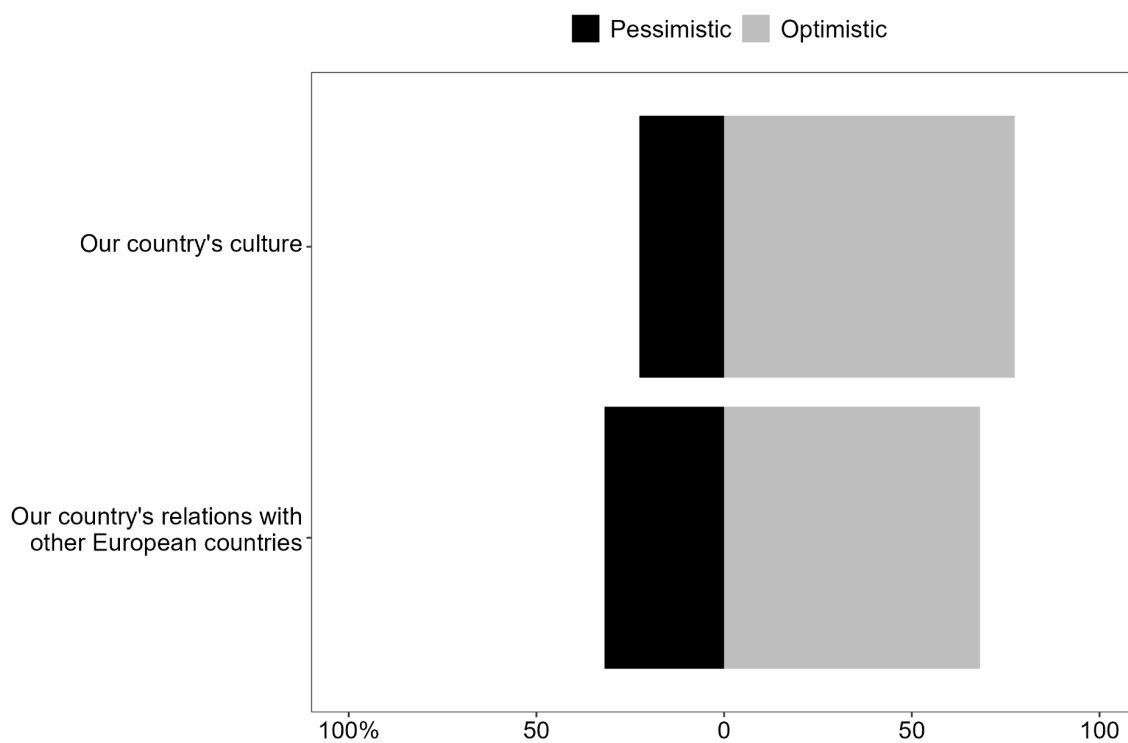
Think of the changes that have taken place in Hungary since 1989. Have those changes had a good influence or a bad influence on the following?



Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Figure 6.3

Thinking about the future of Hungary, please tell me whether you feel generally optimistic or generally pessimistic about the following areas:



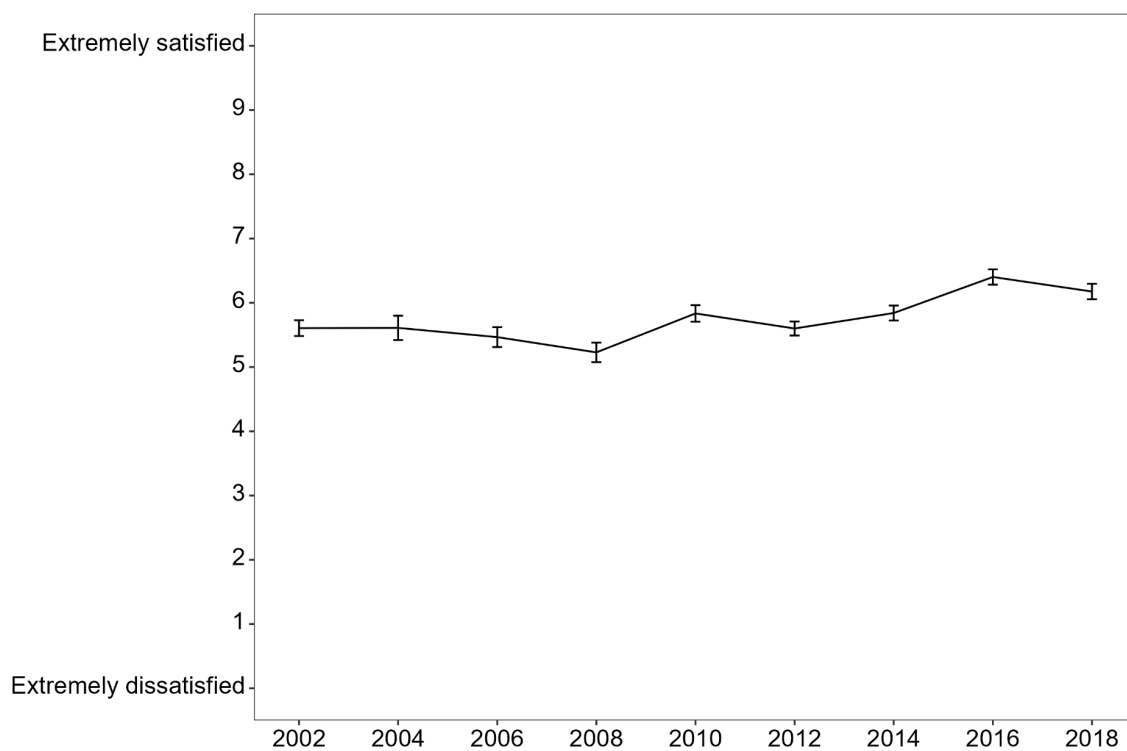
Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Subjective Well-Being

Figure 7.1.1

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?

Estimated weighted average values, 2002-2018

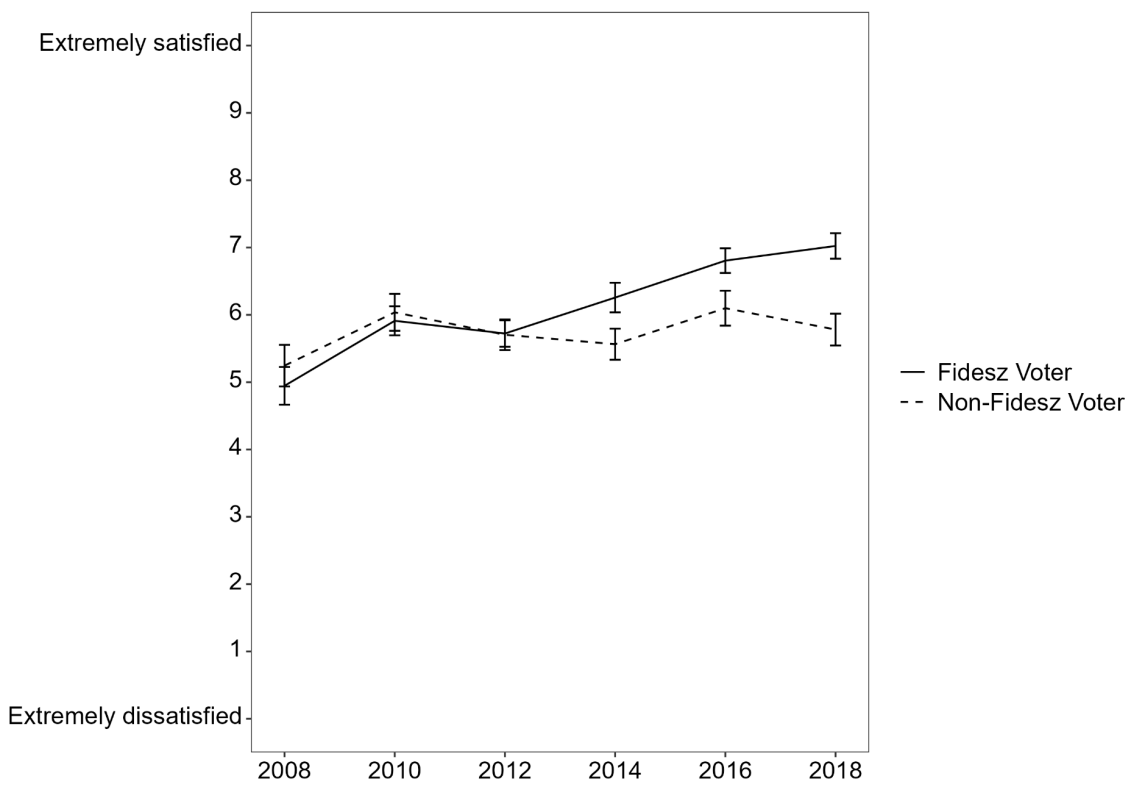


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 7.1.2

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?

Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018

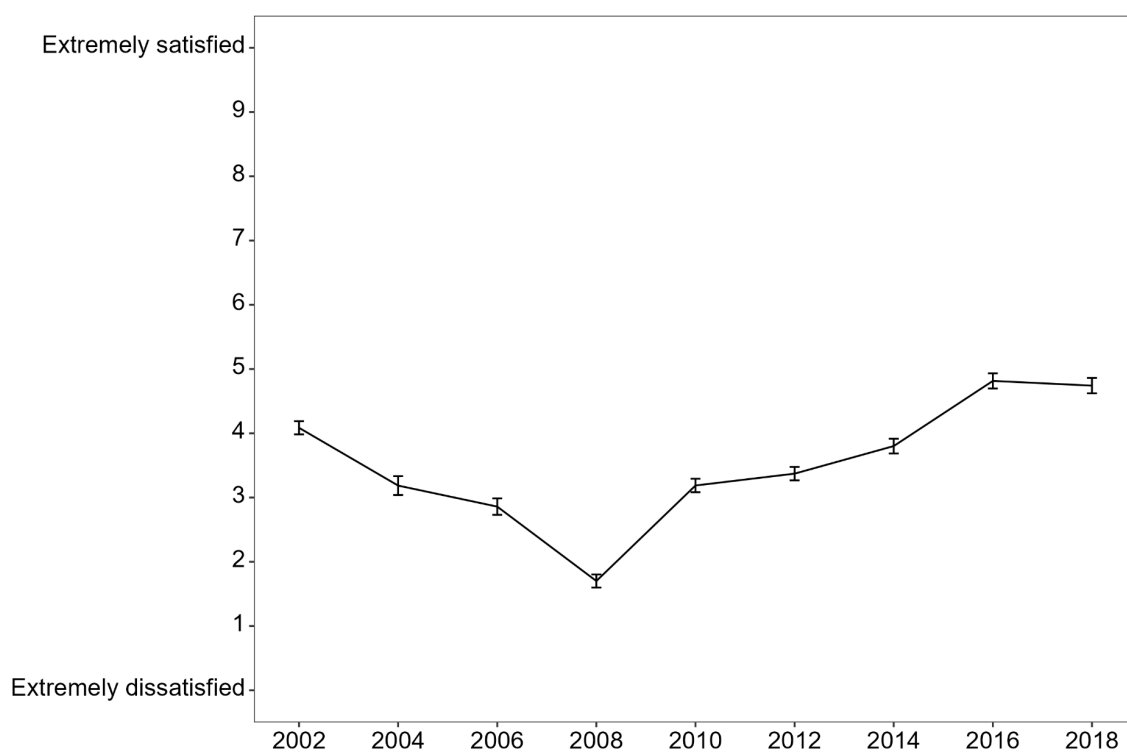


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 7.2.1

**On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state
of the economy in Hungary?**

Estimated weighted average values, 2002-2018

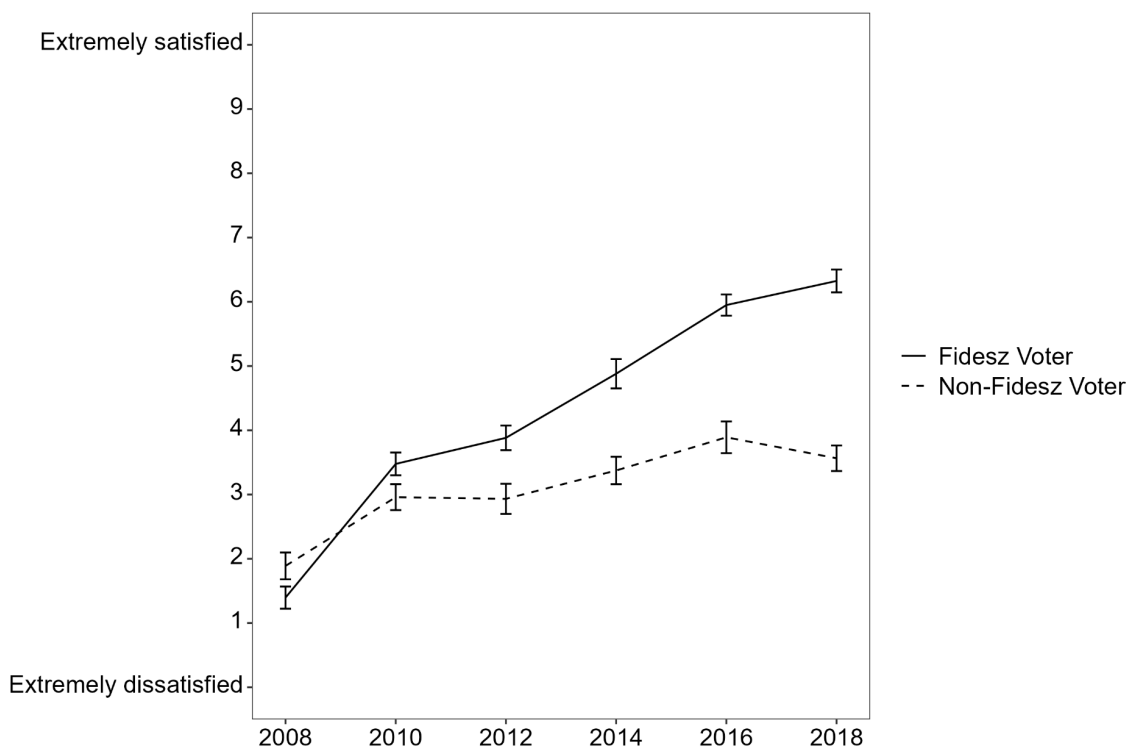


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 7.2.2

On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in Hungary?

Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018



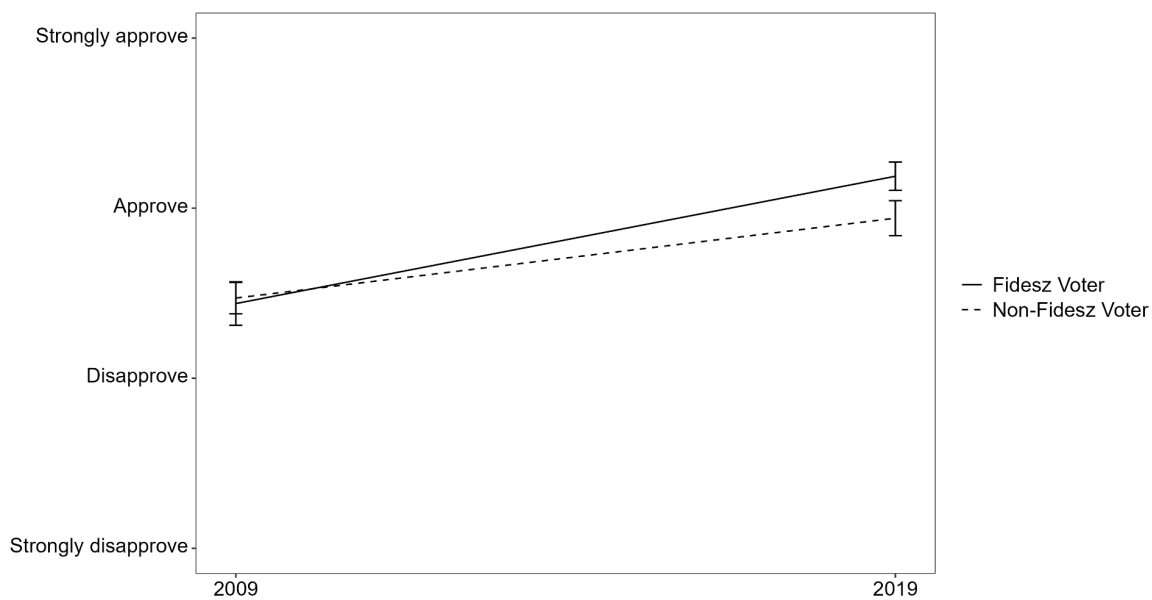
Source: European Social Survey

Appendix

Figure 1.4.app

Thinking back to 1989, do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove or strongly disapprove that our country moved from having a state-controlled economy to having a market economy?

Estimated weighted average values, 2009-2019



Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Figure 2.1.app

	Year	Importance of democracy	Lower bound	Upper bound
Fidesz Voter	2017	8.812 (0.095)	8.625	8.999
Non-Fidesz Voter		8.887 (0.070)	8.751	9.024

Source: World Values Survey/European Values Study

Figure 4.2.app

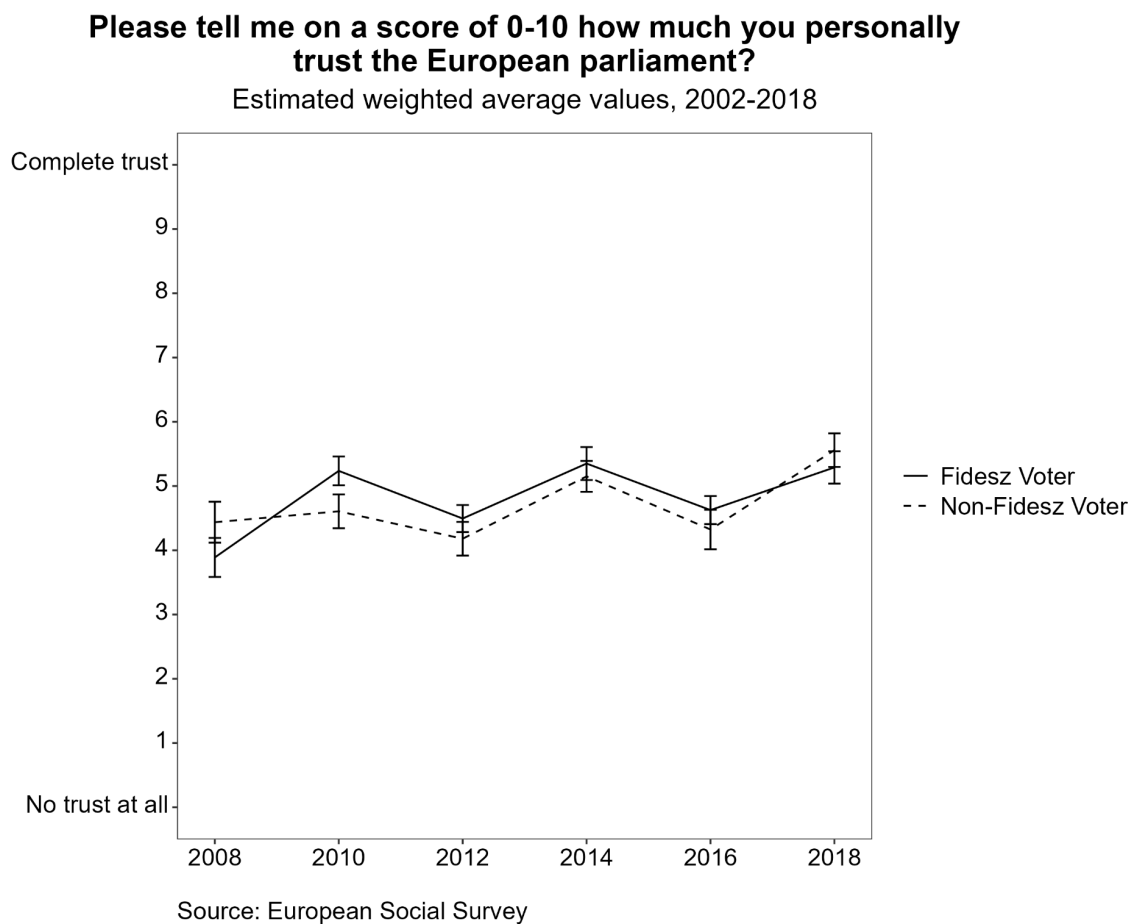


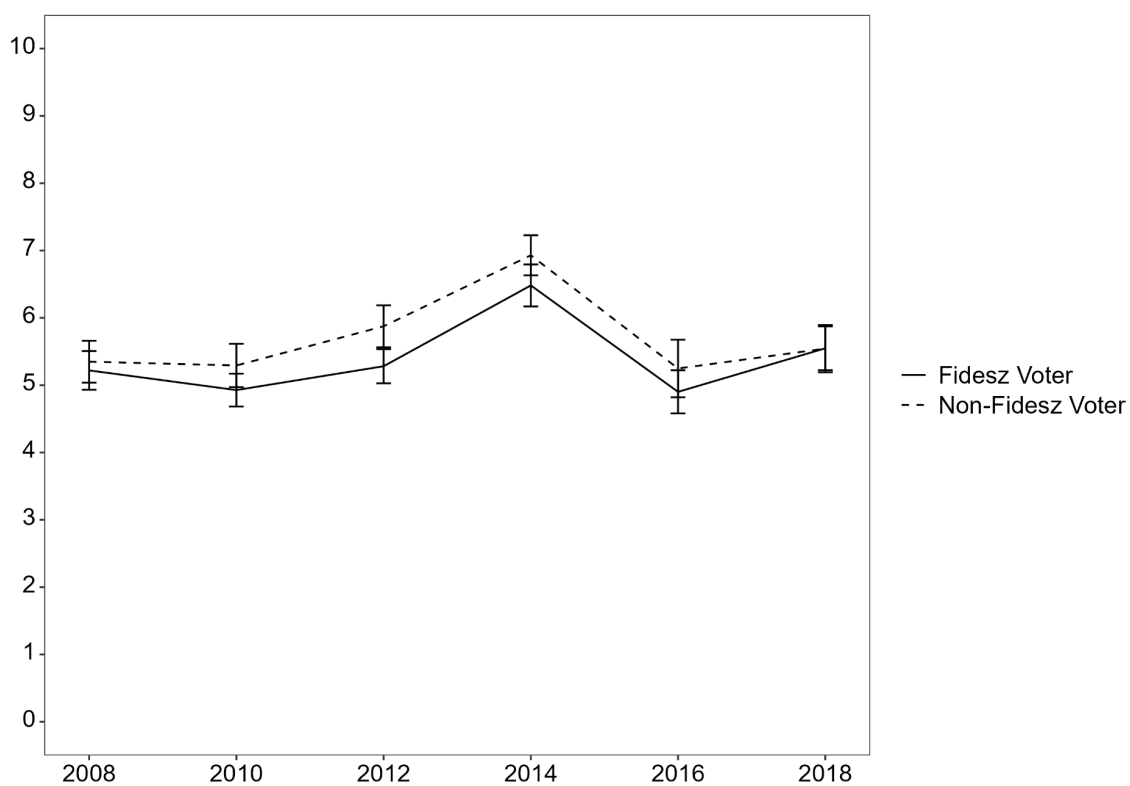
Figure 6.app

	Better off	Worse off	Same	Refused	Total
When children in Hungary grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off financially than their parents?	37%	40%	14%	9%	100%

Source: Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Center

Figure 7.app.1

Household's Average Total Net Income Distribution
Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018

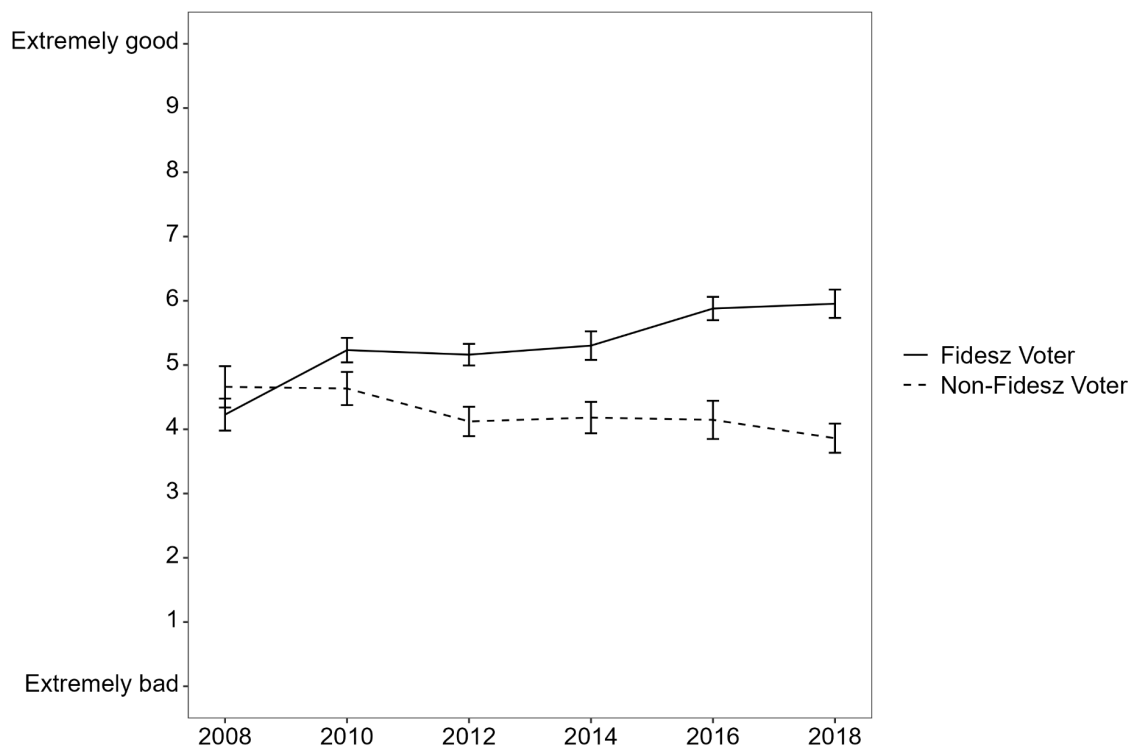


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 7.app.2

On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the education in Hungary?

Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018

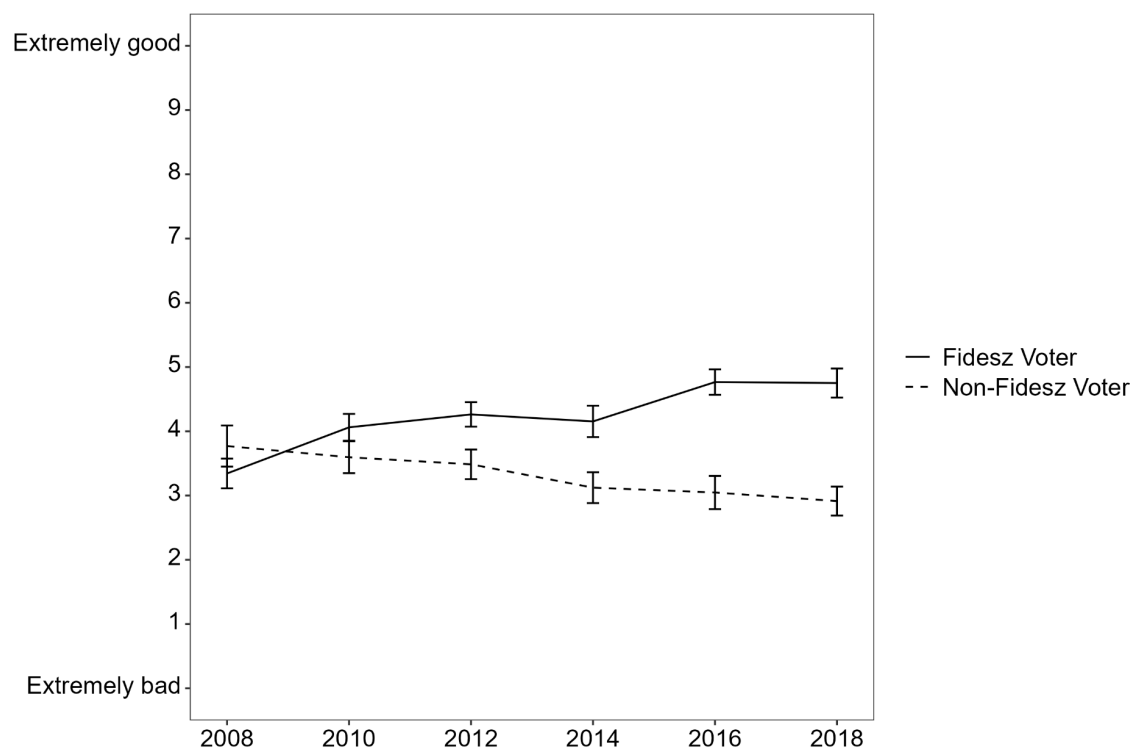


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 7.app.3

On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the health services in Hungary?

Estimated weighted average values (grouped by party identification), 2008-2018

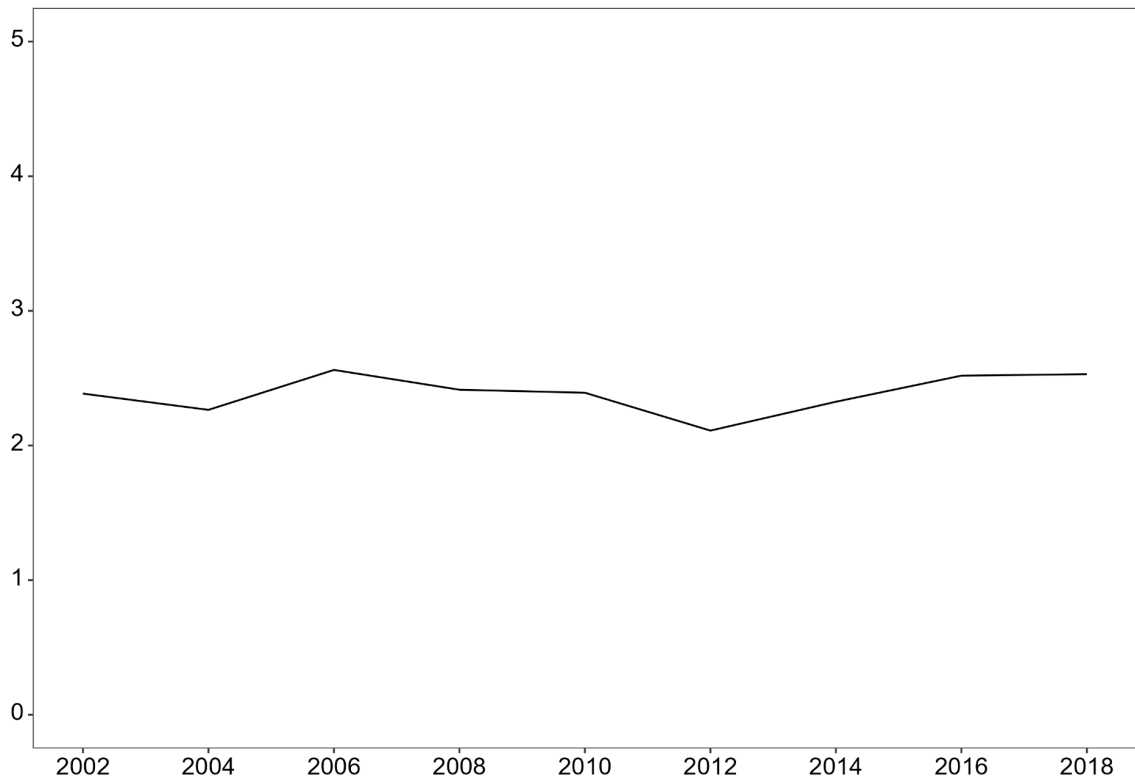


Source: European Social Survey

Figure 8.app.1

Political Polarization

Standard deviations of self-placements on a zero-to-ten left-right scale, 2002-2018



Source: European Social Survey

Figure 8.app.2

