

POST-SOCIALIST DEMOCRACY:

NATIONAL JUDGEMENTS AND VOTING PATTERNS ON THE VALUE OF DEMOCRACY IN HUNGARY

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper aims to look at how voters in Hungary prioritize or deprioritize certain issues when voting. Specifically, the way democracy may be viewed as an inherent value, and how important voters find a certain political party's dedication to upholding democratic principles. This research was conducted in Győr. It has had a Fidesz mayor until 2024, when it elected an independent/green mayor. Both of Győr's parliamentary representatives have been Fidesz-affiliated since 2014, with the most recent parliamentary election being in 2022. Fidesz, Hungary's governing party, has been in power since, and have been proven to be prone to democratic backsliding. Currently, around 90% of all media is owned by Fidesz. Fidesz also holds a constitution-making two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, with 135 out of 199 seats. Concerns have also been raised from a civil rights perspective due to Fidesz's exclusionary populist rhetoric, with campaign slogans such as 'NO GENDER! NO WAR! NO MIGRATION!' and limiting to right of assembly by attempting to ban Budapest Pride in 2025. With much of academic literature focusing on the clash between economic and social policy in terms of whether stances on these issues help Fidesz get reelected, this research aims to show the intersection of judgements of the abstract value of democracy with other, more material issues, and uncover the level of awareness and the judgements voters have of democratic backsliding

METHODOLOGY

- 7 semi-structured interviews, recruited through snowball sampling,
- selection criteria: residents of Győr, voted for Fidesz in at least one election, does not hold governmental office,
- a consent form was signed,
- each interview was conducted in Hungarian and lasted about 45 minutes,
- participants were asked to detail their votes in 2022 and 2024, to explain their stance on 7 main issues (economic policy, proximity to the European Union, the war in Russia-Ukraine, change and continuity in the Hungarian constitution and electoral laws, social issues such as LGBTQ+ and women's position in Hungary, and immigration), to explain their provisional votes for 2026, and to talk about how they consume news,
- each interview was recorded, and later translated and transcribed full verbatim by software and manually edited for accuracy,
- interviews were then analysed through thematic analysis to provide the conclusions of the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Out of seven interviewees, four intended to vote for Fidesz again in 2026, while three expressed doubts or shifts in loyalty. This variation allowed for insights from both critics and supporters of the party. Across all interviews, democracy was rarely the primary concern, often framed instead through material or identity-based issues. When asked to detail their reasoning for their votes, none of the participant expressed that changes in constitutional laws or other undemocratic policies were deciding factors, unless specifically prompted to by the question. None of the participants mentioned democracy in an explicit way, only implied through phrases such as *'an uneven playing field.'* This means that discussion on whether democratic dedication is important as a value for a party to have was always used as secondary analysis in contrast with more material issues.

1) Participants with doubts

Three participants reported declining trust in Fidesz since 2022, citing constitutional changes, unfair elections, and aggressive communication. Two were undecided voters, and one planned to support Tisza, a new opposition party led by Péter Magyar, whose anti-corruption, centre-right stance appealed to former Fidesz voters. However, concerns about democracy were typically secondary to issues like corruption and the economy, suggesting democratic decline alone did not trigger political realignment.

2) Committed Fidesz voters

Four participants expressed continued or probable support, though two voiced some doubts. Supporters often framed democratic criticisms as partisan bias, arguing that opposition complaints stemmed from losing elections. Even among sceptics, democracy was a secondary analytical lens, reinforcing broader judgments about party competence rather than forming a standalone critique.

3) Unawareness and media

All participants were aware of at least some anti-democratic actions by Fidesz. Media consumption shaped their perspectives: readers of Telex and 444 were more critical, while Mandiner and Origó readers were more supportive. However, information alone did not determine scepticism—participants' broader experiences and priorities were more decisive.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that while participants generally recognise elements of democratic erosion, this awareness seldom determines their vote.

Democracy was frequently regarded as secondary to more immediate issues such as the economy, corruption, or social policy. Even participants critical of Fidesz rarely framed democratic decline as their main grievance, instead viewing it as one of several interrelated concerns. This suggests that democracy functions as a background consideration rather than a decisive electoral factor.

The study also revealed how media consumption shape perceptions of democracy. Those engaging with independent or critical outlets expressed stronger concern over undemocratic practices, while others consuming pro-government media often reframed such critiques as politically motivated attacks. Crucially, none of the participants were entirely unaware of democratic decline; rather, their interpretations depended on the narratives through which they understood political developments.