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Opposition electoral strategies against democratic backsliding: the United for Hungary coalition and its 2022 primaries

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ABSTRACT

How do opposition actors react to democratic backsliding? Using interviews with party elites and nationally representative survey data, this article explores the motivations behind the formation of the six-party “United for Hungary” coalition and the selection of candidates through primaries open to the whole Hungarian electorate, in the run-up of the 2022 general elections. We find that democratic erosion is at the core of opposition parties’ decision to run under the United for Hungary banner and one of the most important drivers of individuals’ participation in the United for Hungary primaries. Our interviews with opposition party elites show that the decision to run in a coalition was guided by pragmatic reasons originating in the electoral constraints they face after years of democratic backsliding in Hungary. Furthermore, participation in the primaries and electoral support for the coalition is associated with pro-democratic attitudes, dissatisfaction with democracy and experiences of non-electoral participation. Based on our analysis, we argue that democratic erosion leads opposition parties in two directions. First, they are encouraged to run together in ideologically diverse coalitions. Second, they are more likely to incorporate social movement-like characteristics. Furthermore, we argue that these changes go in line with the preferences of their electorates.

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KEYWORDS Democracy; backsliding; coalition; primaries; Hungary

Introduction

Hungarian democracy has been backsliding since Viktor Orbán’s return to power in 2010. Major democracy ranking institutions stopped categorizing Hungary as a full democracy and now consider it an “electoral autocracy”¹ and a “partly free”

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“transitional/hybrid regime.”² The opposition can still compete in elections, but the electoral arena is so tilted in favour of the government that the capacity of challengers to replace the incumbent Fidesz party is significantly hampered. Against this backdrop, opposition parties have engaged in various strategies, seeking to overcome the obstacles they face and maximize their chances to win the election. This article analyses their strategy towards the 2022 general elections, which consisted in uniting ideologically diverse parties under the United for Hungary ticket and selecting their leader through open primaries. These primaries had an impressive turnout. According to the organizers, around 853,000 people participated,³ representing more than 10% of the Hungarian electorate.

We use a rich set of data to analyse the primaries, including 31 interviews with party elites and a nationally representative survey. Through this multipronged approach we explore opposition party motivations to engage in primaries and whether they matched popular attitudes. While the electoral system may incentivize broad electoral coalitions among ideologically diverse parties, we argue that this choice is less than obvious under systems similar to the Hungarian case. Cross-national studies highlight that ideological affinity is a key driver of electoral coalitions in democratic settings.⁴ Even in cases optimized for two parties, such as the first-past-the-post UK system, ideologically distinct parties rarely run together under the same ticket.⁵ In the Hungarian case, we see that coordination originates from parties, and it takes place across ideological lines, ranging from pro-EU left-liberal parties to far-right Eurosceptics. This makes the case of the Hungarian opposition primaries an empirical puzzle whereby ideologically heterogeneous parties cooperate on a joint platform, seeking to win the support of voters with often diametrically opposed value dispositions. We suggest that this is only possible due to the influence of the non-democratic setting which places concerns with democracy on top of the political agenda, driving institutional elites to prioritize this over other issues. Moreover, the non-democratic context influences voting behaviour through making concerns with democracy prevail over ideological considerations, as also suggested by recent research.⁶ The combination of institutional incentives and democratic backsliding aligns opposition leaders’ and voters’ interests, who both leave ideological considerations aside in favour of a common pro-democracy frame.

To test these assumptions, we rely on both supply and demand side information in the form of elite interviews and mass-level survey data. First, through our interview data, we find that the constraints placed by the democratic erosion were major drivers of opposition parties’ decision to run together. Moreover, the difficulties to channel conflicts of candidate selection through other procedures led opposition parties to select the leader of the coalition through open primaries, organized in collaboration with civil society actors. Based on these findings, we conclude that democratic backsliding has a twofold effect on opposition parties. First, we argue that democratic backsliding leads opposition parties to unite their forces under ideologically diverse coalitions. Second, we defend that democratic backsliding leads opposition parties to place greater emphasis on non-electoral politics and incorporate social movement-like characteristics. Subsequently, through a series of binary logistic regressions, we find that pro-democratic attitudes, dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in Hungary, and experiences of participation in non-electoral politics are associated with having voted in the primaries. Therefore, we also contend that the party incentives to cooperate through social movement-like actions go in line with

the attitudes of opposition supporters, who stand out by their pro-democratic preferences and engagement in non-electoral activities. Hence, we conclude that democratic backsliding places unique incentives among party elites and voters that favour pre-electoral coalitions among diverse actors and incorporating social movement-like features in the repertoire of political parties.

In the rest of the article, we first provide an overview of the literature on democratic backsliding and how opposition parties react to this dynamic in different countries. Second, we focus on the process of democratic backsliding in Hungary. Third, we provide an overview of the context in which the United for Hungary coalition was created. Fourth, we present our data and analytical approach, to then continue with the analysis. We conclude with the implications of our study for the understanding of democratic backsliding and how different actors react to it.

Opposition parties' strategies against democratic backsliding

Democratic backsliding refers to a state-led systematic erosion of democratic institutions and practices.⁷ While resulting in an overall decline in the quality of democracy of a country, democratic backsliding notably manifests in the concentration of power in the hands of illiberal leaders, the dismantling of checks and balances and the manipulation of electoral processes.⁸ These developments result in the weakening of civil society, suppression of political pluralism, and the silencing of dissenting voices.⁹ In consequence, the possibilities for opposition voices to stand a chance in elections become thinner as democratic backsliding develops.

Prior to the elections, illiberal leaders may seek to block their opponents' electoral chances in a number of ways.¹⁰ First, they may limit opposition parties' ability to access resources and run for elections through bureaucratic impediments that disqualify opponents on supposedly technical grounds. Second, authoritarian-leaning leaders may redraw electoral districts with the objective of providing the ruling party with an unfair advantage and dilute the voter support of opposition groups, in a process known as "gerrymandering."¹¹ Third, they may manipulate the media landscape to spread government propaganda and block the appearance of critical voices, including opposition leaders.

Despite these unfavourable conditions, opposition parties in illiberal regimes still run for elections as they may benefit from their participation. First, elections may still offer an opportunity to replace incumbents.¹² Even in competitive authoritarian systems or illiberal democracies, there have been instances in which elections have led to the replacement of the government, as it was the case during the flower revolutions in Georgia in 2003¹³ and Ukraine in 2004,¹⁴ as well as during the Polish elections of 2023.¹⁵ Second, elections represent an opportunity for opposition parties to show their commitment to democratic principles, publicize their demands, and maintain their connection with their supporters.¹⁶

Opposition parties in illiberal regimes may engage in a series of strategies to maximize their chances and connect with the electorate. One such tactic may consist in forming electoral coalitions.¹⁷ Electoral coalitions foster opposition unity, increase the chances of electoral success, and promote political reform. By forming a united front, opposition groups can pool resources and support, increase their legitimacy, and better challenge incumbent regimes.¹⁸ Pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to take place in ideologically polarized countries with disproportional electoral rules.¹⁹

While it is common that political parties in democracies also adapt their strategies to institutional incentives and that single-member districts encourage pre-electoral coalition formation,²⁰ studies analysing twenty industrialized parliamentary democracies during the second half of the twentieth century concluded that this form of cooperation commonly takes place among ideologically similar parties.²¹ Indeed, not even in the face of a major political change such as Brexit, and in a country with strong institutional incentives to pre-electoral cooperation such as the UK, did pro-EU parties or voters increase pre-electoral coordination.²² Moreover, institutional factors were found to have “very modest effects” on coalition formation in non-democratic elections,²³ which is rather incentivized by weakening governments during economic downturns²⁴ or by party patronage.²⁵

We propose that democratic backsliding leads opposition parties to unite. Many of the countries that undergo democratic recession are led by populist illiberal leaders who seek to polarize political debates²⁶ and experience electoral reforms that seek to reduce the proportionality of the electoral system.²⁷ Pre-electoral coalitions in non-democratic settings can take different forms, both in terms of their composition and durability. Historical examples of opposition coalitions to face authoritarian and illiberal leaders include Serbia’s *Democratic Opposition*, who defeated Milošević in the 2000 general election;²⁸ the 2004 Ukrainian *Force of the People* coalition that united Yulia Tymoshenko’s Bloc and Viktor Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine (*Ibid.*); and Georgia’s *United National Movement*, created in 2003 and led by Mikheil Saakashvili.²⁹ More recently, notable cases of opposition coalitions under illiberal regimes include the Polish Civic Coalition, which, in 2019, united parties from diverse ideologies to challenge the hegemony of the Law and Justice Party.³⁰ Furthermore, a variety of Turkish parties have united under the Nation Alliance, in the 2023 elections,³¹ in an attempt to oust Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – under whose rule Turkey has experienced severe democratic backsliding.³² Similarly, one of the main reasons that led Hungarian opposition parties to unite under the United for Hungary banner in the 2022 Hungarian national elections had to do with changes to the electoral law.³³ While pre-electoral coalitions may also be negotiated at the party elite level, the emergence of democratic innovations have also brought about the increasingly common use of open primaries as a candidate selection method.³⁴ However, they have mostly been used at the municipal,³⁵ state³⁶ or presidential level,³⁷ within single parties as in the case of the Italian Five Star Movement³⁸ or LIVRE in Portugal,³⁹ or within the framework of ideologically coherent coalitions led by a dominant party, as in the case of Spanish. Podemos.⁴⁰ However, organizing inter-party primaries in ideologically heterogeneous national coalitions is a unique constellation whose implications the Hungarian context allows us to explore.

We also suggest that democratic backsliding leads opposition parties to increase the prominence of non-electoral actions and social movement-like features in their organizational and tactical repertoires during and beyond election periods. Political parties may engage in street protests in order to advocate for policies they are unable to approve through institutional channels or gather support and attempt to translate it into electoral strength.⁴¹ Furthermore, opposition parties may strategically employ social media and information campaigns to navigate the limited political space within institutions and government control of mass media.⁴² Moreover, alliances with civil society organizations may boost opposition parties’ chances to defeat illiberal leaders during elections.⁴³ Protest engagement was found to be an important factor for

the evolution of some Hungarian political parties opposing Fidesz, such as far-right Jobbik and green LMP.⁴⁴ Other studies have pointed at the increasing presence of political parties in civil society mobilizations in Poland, during the last years of democratic backsliding under the governments led by PiS.⁴⁵ Furthermore, research on “movement parties” points that one of the distinctive features these parties incorporate from social movements is the elimination of the clear boundaries differentiating who is a member and who is not.⁴⁶ This was also the case of the 2021 Hungarian opposition’s primaries, which allowed the participation of all voting-age Hungarians, regardless of their party affiliation.

As the sections below show, the 2021 Hungarian opposition’s primaries represent a “crucial case”⁴⁷ of how democratic backsliding leads opposition parties to join forces in a coalition and to increase the importance of non-electoral tactics in their political repertoires. Even though multiparty open primaries have also been used by political parties in other political contexts,⁴⁸ these emerged in response to the internal fragmentation of specific parties or coalitions rather than as a consequence of democratic backsliding. As we argue below, Hungarian opposition parties had divergent views about the desirability of joining forces in an electoral coalition and using primaries to elect its leader. However, regardless of their normative support of this option, all actors felt that the democratic limitations in Hungary’s illiberal democracy forced them to do so. Moreover, despite the parties that joined the United for Hungary coalition were a combination of conventional and so-called “movement parties,”⁴⁹ the way primaries were organized included many movement-like characteristics.⁵⁰ For instance, political parties collaborated with civil society actors in the organization of the primaries, and participation was open to the whole Hungarian electorate and not only to party members. Prior to our analysis, we provide an overview of the process of democratic backsliding in Hungary, we introduce the United for Hungary coalition, and the primaries to select its leader.

Democratic backsliding in Hungary

During the past one and a half decade, Hungary has turned into a paradigmatic case of democratic backsliding⁵¹ and illiberal democracy.⁵² Since the conservative Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbán gained a two-thirds supermajority in parliament at the 2010 general elections, it has gradually weakened checks-and-balances and engaged in electoral engineering to increase its chances of re-election.⁵³ This process started with the single-party adoption of new constitution (Fundamental Law) in 2011 that curtailed the functions of the Constitutional Court. A new electoral law followed in the same year which strengthened the majoritarian elements of the mixed electoral system, providing Fidesz with greater chances of success against a fragmented opposition through increasing the share of mandates distributed through single-member districts, and introducing a new compensation mechanism known as the “winner’s bonus” in which excess votes given to the winning candidate are transferred to their party list.⁵⁴ Moreover, the new electoral system abolished the previous second round which provided parties with a chance to readjust their strategies and withdraw candidates if needed.⁵⁵ With the introduction of the single-round system, opposition parties are forced to make such decisions in the form of pre-electoral agreements, which drastically limits their room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis a two-round system.⁵⁶ Changes in media regulation have led to the centralization of the media landscape with a

growing share of pro-government outlets and a strongly partisan public media.⁵⁷ The reform of campaign regulations introduced in 2013 lowered entry barriers for new parties to contest elections, leading to the emergence of “fake parties” which further increased the already high fragmentation of the opposition landscape.⁵⁸ At the same time, the fact that parties receive the majority of their funding from state subventions⁵⁹ serves as a disincentive against joint party lists, consolidating a fragmented party structure. Further political reforms, including last minute changes in the electoral law before the 2022 general elections, have tightened Fidesz’ grip on power.

Since the electoral system favours competition among two blocs of comparable size, opposition parties have been forced to cooperate at the elections. In 2014, they tried to consolidate an all-encompassing coalition led by former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai which culminated in a partial left-wing-liberal alliance that failed to secure a majority of votes. Due to inter-party conflicts, the electoral coalition was finally led by the candidate for Prime Minister of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and incorporated Democratic Coalition (DK), Dialogue for Hungary (PM), and the Hungarian Liberal Party (MLP) whose joint list managed to secure only 26.21 percent of the vote (as opposed to 43.55 percent won by Fidesz). During the subsequent, 2018 general elections, opposition parties ran on independent party lists, with coordination in the single-member districts. This entailed identifying the strongest opposition candidates in each of the electoral districts through polls. However, since opposition parties did not engage in a formal electoral coalition, these efforts were taken up by ad hoc non-partisan organizations and often led to contradictory suggestions.⁶⁰ In terms of national party lists, only the Hungarian Socialist Party and Párbeszéd agreed on a joint list headed by Párbeszéd’s candidate Gergely Karácsony. Nevertheless, due to the lack of coordination, this strategy likewise secured a two-thirds majority for Fidesz with 49.17 percent of the national vote and 91 out of the 106 single member district mandates. This failure has led to a growing pressure from opposition voters and intellectuals towards increased cooperation between opposition parties. At the 2019 municipal elections, opposition parties agreed to back the strongest candidate in most electoral districts, regardless of their party affiliation, and selected the candidate for the mayoral position of the capital city, Budapest, through open primaries. The broad electoral coalition of the opposition parties won the mayoral seat not only in the capital, but also in 14 out of 23 districts of Budapest, as well as 56 large municipalities, while government candidates mostly prevailed in small municipalities and villages.⁶¹ This experience strengthened popular demand towards an opposition coalition that transgressed ideological cleavages, as well as the use of primaries as a candidate selection method.⁶²

Beyond their electoral cooperation, opposition parties have also regularly engaged in non-electoral actions, mostly in the form of street demonstrations that bridged ideological gaps. During certain periods, these protest events evolved simultaneously with electoral coalitions, just like before the 2014 general elections that were preceded by a wave of demonstrations aimed at unifying the democratic opposition under the banner of former PM Gordon Bajnai. However, more typically, non-electoral mobilizations peaked in the middle of electoral cycles and remained detached from electoral coalitions, as seen during the 2014 protests against the so called “Internet tax,” the 2015–2016 and 2022–2023 demonstrations against education reforms, the 2017 protests against “Lex CEU,”⁶³ and the 2018 manifestations against labour code reform.⁶⁴ Even though these events mobilized significant crowds from across

ideological camps, opposition parties could not channel them into the consolidation of a joint pre-electoral platform – something they only managed to create through the primaries before the 2022 general elections.

The United for Hungary coalition

As the main parties of the Hungarian opposition, i.e. the social-democratic Magyar Szocialista Párt (MSZP – Hungarian Socialist Party), left-liberal Demokratikus Koalíció (DK – Democratic Coalition), green party LMP – Magyarország Zöld Pártja (LMP – Green Party of Hungary), centrist-liberal Momentum, radical right Jobbik, and green-left Párbeszéd (P – Dialogue) already exhausted alternative cooperation strategies in 2014 and 2018, before the 2022 general elections, there was a strengthening consensus among them that beyond agreements at the single-member district (SMD) level, coordination was also needed in the proportional representation (PR) channel of the electoral system, in the form of a joint national party list. As the 2019 municipal election demonstrated the feasibility of multiparty open primaries, parties that had first been sceptical towards the instrument also showed increasing willingness to engage in them. Moreover, since the elite negotiations of the two preceding elections triggered interparty conflicts that overshadowed the electoral campaigns⁶⁵, party elites saw primaries as the only viable means to avoid friction among opposition parties.

The impetus was further strengthened by a last-minute change in the electoral system adopted in late 2020, which raised the minimum number of SMD candidates to be eligible for a national party list from 27 to 71 (from a total of 106 electoral districts). This implied that opposition parties could not coordinate their SMD candidates through dividing districts among themselves without losing eligibility for a national party list and the corresponding campaign funds⁶⁶ since through having only one joint candidate in each SMD, they would not have reached the necessary limit of 71 candidates per party. Therefore, opposition parties decided to field a joint national list and agree on candidates at the SMD level. While more established parties such as DK and MSZP were unconvinced about selecting the coalition leader through open primaries, pressure from opposition media, intellectuals, and think-tanks, as well as some of the smaller parties (most notably Momentum and Párbeszéd) also steered them towards open primaries.

The decision about how to select a coalition forerunner was especially important since opposition were ideologically heterogenous and lacked a clear leader. The two most likely candidates for this role were Gergely Karácsony – the mayor of Budapest, with one of the highest approval ratings among opposition voters despite being a failed election as candidate for PM in 2018 –, and Vice-President of the European Parliament Klára Dobrev. Beyond her political career, Dobrev is the wife of ex-PM and DK party leader Ferenc Gyurcsány, a charismatic but divisive figure among anti-government voters. This was often used by Fidesz and its media ecosystem in a smear campaign strategy to present opposition parties as Gyurcsány's puppets displayed on propaganda billboards across the country. Jobbik and Momentum also fielded their own party leaders for this role (Péter Jakab and András Fekete-Győr, respectively), and a non-partisan independent candidate, Péter Márki-Zay – who became the mayor of Hódmezővásárhely in 2019, after defeating a Fidesz incumbent with the support of all major opposition parties – likewise joined the contest.

Primaries were organized in two rounds during the fall of 2021: the first round held in September 2021 aimed at selecting candidates in each of the 106 SMDs plus served as a first screening of candidates for PM of whom the three most popular candidates would pass to the second, decisive round. Participation in the primaries was possible both offline, in voting booths arranged on busy squares in major cities and towns, and online, via a web infrastructure developed by independent NGO aHang. Eligibility requirements were identical to those at the general elections, i.e. all Hungarian citizens with voting rights could participate, regardless of their party affiliation. Moreover, the electorate was extended to citizens who did not reach the official voting age (18 years) by the time of the primaries, but who would become eligible to vote by the April 2022 general elections. Volunteers checked the identity documents of participants in voting booths, while the identity of online voters was verified through a video conversation. Participation levels exceeded expectations: the first round of the primaries attracted 633 thousand, while the second involved 662 thousand participants (approximately 8% of the electorate each time⁶⁷), which was regarded as an outstanding success both by independent media and the parties involved, especially due to the novelty of such participatory practices.⁶⁸

The contest ended with an unexpected outcome that raised new dilemmas for the opposition. After the first round of the primaries, three candidates passed to the second round: DK's Klára Dobrev (with 34.84% of the vote), Párbeszéd's Gergely Karácsony (27.3%), and the independent Péter Márki-Zay (20.4%). Concerned about the potential victory of DK's candidate Klára Dobrev, whose popularity did not expand beyond DK's core voters, Budapest mayor Gergely Karácsony withdrew from the race and announced his support for Márki-Zay, a conservative candidate ideologically more distant from Karácsony's supporters than Dobrev. This led to the unexpected victory of non-partisan candidate Péter Márki-Zay, who became the opposition's joint candidate for PM with 56.69% of the votes.

Beyond being an independent candidate, Márki-Zay used fierce anti-party rhetoric, claiming that the opposition needed a drastic renewal, and that corruption was to be eradicated from their own ranks. This led to an uneasy cooperation between the six parties and their joint candidate for PM during the electoral campaign, which implied parties' reluctance to dedicate resources to their joint efforts, and a candidate who often talked to media without coordinating with his allies. Therefore, the "United for Hungary" banner was not uniformly used, and the opposition coalition failed to solidify a common identity or a comprehensive political programme that could appeal to undecided voters. A particularly unfortunate statement made by Márki-Zay about the war in Ukraine (which erupted during the campaign) was exploited by Fidesz to suggest that the opposition would send Hungarian troops to Ukraine.⁶⁹ A series of similar mistakes and weakening interparty solidarity led to a meagre electoral result for the opposition: Fidesz won 54.13% of the popular vote (as opposed to 34.44% by the United for Hungary Coalition) which implied an even more pronounced supermajority in parliament. The opposition coalition dispersed immediately in the aftermath of the elections, with most parties blaming Márki-Zay for their failure.

Data and analytical approach

To cover all sets of actors involved in the primaries, we use a two-pronged approach. First, to understand the "supply side" of the primaries (i.e. parties' involvement and

goals) we use 31 semi-structured interviews with party representatives. Most interviews (26) were conducted before the primaries (March-August 2020), while the remaining interviews were recorded by one of the authors after the event (in January-May 2023), which allows us to see how party elite attitudes towards the primaries changes over time. The sample represents all six parties (DK, Párbeszéd, Jobbik, LMP, Momentum, MSZP) and the NGO (aHang) that took part in the opposition coalition for the 2022 elections, as well as the governing parties (Fidesz-KDNP), and two other opposition parties that ran independently (Mi Hazánk and MKKP). The interviews followed a semi-structured questionnaire that explored various aspects of intra-party democracy and democratic innovations in political parties, with a focus on the opposition primaries. The list of interviewees and their party positions, as well as the interview questionnaires are available in the Appendix. Interview transcripts were inductively coded by the researchers using data-driven thematic analysis.⁷⁰ This first set of data allowed us to explore the motivations of party elites to engage in open primaries. Despite the methodological challenges associated with interviewing political elites, including deceptive, inaccurate or highly personalized recollection of facts, the interviews produced “immense amounts of information that could not be gleaned from official published documents or contemporary media accounts.”⁷¹ At the same time, the politically diverse composition of our interview sample, and triangulating the information from other sources⁷² has helped us corroborate these findings.

Second, to study the “demand side” of the primaries (i.e. citizens’ participation in them), we use original, nationally representative survey data collected by the public opinion company YouGov from their online panel in Hungary. Fieldwork took place between 21 February 2022 and 3 March 2022, and the achieved sample size was 2,051 observations. Therefore, we collected our data one month prior to the general elections of 3 April 2022 and less than five months after the second round of the opposition primaries. We asked respondents about their participation in the primaries, voting history and intention, besides a number of common predictors of political participation.⁷³ After applying post-stratification weights in relation to region, age by gender, educational level and past vote during the 2018 general elections, we analyse this data using descriptive statistics, overall and grouped by vote recall in the 2018 elections, as well as inferential statistics to study the main correlates with primary participation. In the regressions, we include predictors of electoral behaviour commonly used in other survey-based studies, such as age, gender, urban/rural settlement, formal education, income, support and satisfaction with democracy, political interest, media consumption, ideology, as well as party and organizational membership.⁷⁴ Prior to our regressions, we standardized to a 0–1 range all predictors besides those that were binaries already, so we could compare the size of coefficients within each model. We also replaced some missing data through multiple imputation.⁷⁵ We employed the “mice”⁷⁶ to generate five datasets using a probabilistic model that relied on the variables considered in our analysis. Each imputed value incorporates a random component to consider a degree of uncertainty in the predictions. Subsequently, separate estimates are computed for each dataset, which are later aggregated. After imputing the data, we built a series of binary logistic regression models to explore how some of the major variables used to study voting behaviour correlate with primary participation, as well as opposition vote in 2018. This way, we can

explore some of the potential drivers of participation in the United for Hungary primaries and test whether the motivations from political leaders reflected the attitudes of opposition voters. We also present the results of models regressing previous vote for opposition parties in the 2018 general election, as well as vote intention for the 2022 general election. This allows us to compare the variables associated with participation in the primaries and those related to having voted for opposition parties in the past, as well as intending to vote for the United for Hungary ticket.

Interviews

Starting with the elite perspective, our interviews have shown that even though the joint primaries were considered a successful coordination attempt of the democratic opposition, there were strong disagreements between the party elites involved regarding their desirability, which most of them understood as a necessity imposed upon them by the electoral system and the unequal allocation of resources between Fidesz and the opposition. While each party had different expectations regarding the potential impact of primaries, a more general cleavage may also be identified that clustered opposition parties into two groups: new vs. established parties. Since many of the new parties became relevant players of the Hungarian party system after 2010, these parties have typically had a younger electorate, at times coupled with a generational (Momentum) or anti-establishment (Jobbik) appeal. This stood in stark contrast with the older, less tech-savvy constituencies of MSZP and DK who were therefore more reluctant towards open primaries, and perceived technological risks as more severe.

The following sections present party elite perspectives that clustered into three main categories: sceptical views, pragmatism, and pro-democracy arguments. The first group encompasses views that questioned the democratic value of primaries, their normative desirability, or feasibility. The second set of interviewees raised pragmatic arguments that focused on the organizational or material implications of primaries, and the extent to which they facilitated coordination among parties. The third group of interlocutors used pro-democracy arguments that stressed the participatory nature of the process.

All these narratives are evaluated from the perspective of whether the parties involved conceived of the opposition primaries as a potential corrective to Hungary's democratic backsliding, or what alternative interpretations they offered. The following paragraphs use original quotes from the interviews to illustrate each of these narratives, preceded by a summary table which lists recurring arguments and their relative salience within the corpus across party types.

Party motivations for the primaries

Sceptical views – primaries as a “last resort”

Support for the primaries was not universally shared among opposition party elites. Before negotiations among opposition parties started, only Párbeszéd and Momentum representatives had explicitly endorsed this tool to offer new participatory opportunities. Other party leaders, such as representatives of DK, had explicitly opposed the idea of primaries altogether.

Arguments put forward by this first group of interlocutors opposed the system of primaries as a principle but accepted them as a “last resort” to resolve coordination problems and the interparty conflicts that would arise in the selection of candidates through other means. This line of argumentation was more prominent among established parties, and was most explicitly expressed in the quote below:⁷⁷

DK did not think of selecting candidates in this way in the first place, and this was clearly represented in the negotiations between the parties. We thought that the parties could choose the best candidate in each district. (...) The evaluation of the primaries in our ranks is still that it can be a very last resort, that if there is a real deadlock and the parties cannot agree on a candidate or candidates, then it is good to have this method, but we think that this primary election has shown that it has very serious limitations or downsides. (Interviewee 31 – DK; Q11)

One, milder, set of concerns, focused on the feasibility of the primaries. Without questioning their desirability, some actors questioned whether the parties involved had sufficient resources to implement them. As one of the interviewees explained:

If there is a common opposition candidate for prime minister, it should be chosen by primary election, but in the case of the SMDs, some of them should be decided in a negotiated way, because it is not sure that an opposition with so few resources will have the energy to [organize the primaries]. (Interviewee 21 – Momentum; Q20)

A third set of arguments specifically addressed the participation of NGOs in the process and the extent to which this facilitated bottom-up participation. These concerns addressed organizational capacities and argued that parties had more resources to implement such complex tasks, however, they also questioned the role of civil society organizations in the process in general. Some parties considered NGOs as a liability whose involvement was meant to provide additional legitimacy but ended up making parties’ work more difficult:

Involving NGOs in project management, operational tasks did not work. Practically all the NGOs except for aHang and the vote counters were just interfering and not meaningfully taking part in the work. (Interviewee 4 – Momentum; Q8)

Beyond commenting on civil society participation in general, several interviewees also raised scepticism regarding the role that aHang, the NGO commissioned to develop and operate the online platform of the primaries played in the process, particularly regarding the extent to which their expertise and their resources matched the magnitude and complexity of the tasks they were assigned:

There were problems with the technology aHang developed, the system failed on the very first day, but at the same time I think because there was a distrust on the part of the opposition parties, they fulfilled the function that here is an NGO that can be trusted and then they are the ones who developed the infrastructure for the election. So, in that sense they were important. (Interviewee 27 – Momentum; Q15)

Pragmatism – primaries as a “problem-solving exercise”

The largest share of our respondents approached primaries through more pragmatic lenses, viewing them as a “necessary evil” or the only viable solution to solve coordination dilemmas. Representatives of this approach typically assessed primaries considering the resources invested in their implementation versus the expected gains in terms

of recruiting candidates within a highly fragmented opposition landscape and managing interparty conflicts. Advocates of this interpretation focused on the practical aspects of organizing primaries from a purely pragmatic perspective, as the quote below illustrates:

Where there is a clear candidate, it is totally unnecessary to have primaries, because you waste your time and decimate your resources. On the other hand, if there is no suitable person who can challenge Fidesz in the constituency, then a primary can be a very good tool, because it is a completely new campaign, which can bring awareness to the winning candidate. (Interviewee 13 – Jobbik; Q8)

The same pragmatism may also be detected in the views of established party representatives, too:

I see the institution of primary elections basically as a problem-solving exercise, rather than as a way of broadening democracy, because we are in a very acute political situation where there is no room for that. (Interviewee 15 – MSZP; Q8)

Those of us who were involved in the process always say that the primaries are not a panacea. If you use it at the right time, with the right candidates and in a real contest, it works. But you can't solve your problem of not having a meaningful candidate in any constituency with it. (Interviewee 1 – MSZP; Q8)

Beyond praising primaries' potential to recruit candidates and solve coordination dilemmas, several interviewees highlighted their resource-intensive nature and suggested that there was a tradeoff between the resources parties could dedicate to primaries vis-à-vis the electoral campaign. As one interlocutor put it, "there is not only a material cost but also a human cost to organise this" (Interviewee 20 – Momentum). One aspect that took an especially heavy toll on parties was running the offline voting booths that were installed in public squares in the capital and larger municipalities. As one interviewee complained:

In a very large part of the districts, the DK people were on duty in the tents. Almost entire days were allocated to DK and then there was a tiny little time slot left for this and that (...) This was a problem for me, but in the meantime, we knew that if we had not invested these resources, then in many places the primaries could not have been implemented. (Interviewee 31 – DK; Q15)

Despite these tradeoffs and the significant investment required, several party representatives still agreed that holding primaries was the best technical solution to coordinate their coalition, as well as to recruit new candidates not affiliated with any of the parties before. Moreover, party elites portrayed primaries not only as a "necessary evil," but also as an inevitable outcome of the democratic backsliding context, which left the democratic opposition with no other viable alternative. As explained by an interlocutor who advocated in favour of primaries:

Since the opposition starts from an extremely resource-poor condition, they simply cannot afford not to choose the best candidates. Fidesz can afford to do that, since it is embedded in society, it has money, media, and resources. Whoever they field is almost indifferent. For the opposition, it is not all the same at all, because it does not have the same resources, and it cannot waste the little that it has. (Interviewee 22 – Párbeszéd; Q8)

In sum, opposition parties' decision to jointly organize open primaries was overwhelmingly justified by pragmatic considerations to overcome their coordination problems and recruit the most suitable candidates in each SMD. Nevertheless, as the subsequent

section shows, normative commitments towards reverting democratic backsliding and promoting participatory democracy also factored into their decisions.

Pro-democracy arguments – primaries as “a boost to participatory democracy”

Whereas the fact that six opposition parties could organize joint primaries before the 2022 general elections was heralded as a major achievement, it was not unprecedented. Beyond the experience of the 2019 municipal primaries, some parties have advocated for the use of primaries for almost a decade, arguing that the use of such participatory instruments would reinvigorate democracy in Hungary.⁷⁸ Chief among the proponents of primaries was Gergely Karácsony, who has lobbied for their introduction since 2014, well before he was elected as the Mayor of Budapest, as well as Momentum, which entered the political arena in 2017 as a generational party and therefore had a vested interest in introducing new instruments that challenged the status quo. Such normative commitments typically emerged from the narratives of new party representatives, as the quote below demonstrates:

I consider it an absolutely good instrument, because I think that the local government election of 2019 was a watershed in Hungarian politics. (...) It was a tool that mobilised voters in a crazy way. It was a really good tool to keep the voter base, to increase the perception that I made the decision, that I was there, I participated, I had a say, I'm the one who made it happen. (Interviewee 14 – LMP; Q8)

This positive interpretation of primaries' participatory potential was also used as a justification for their use before the 2022 general elections:

I think it makes sense to use it in 2022, because although it slows down processes and brings in candidates that the local body doesn't want, it activates citizens. It's important to have active citizens, whatever they think about the world (...) I think it's in our fundamental interest to make participatory citizenship available to people. (Interviewee 1 – MSZP; Q8)

Beyond normative commitments, it was the turnout of the primaries that convinced party representatives *a posteriori* that the use of the instrument was not only desirable, but also underpinned by significant popular demand:

More than 70,000 people participated in the second round, which convinced us that this is a major political innovation. The final result proved that there is a demand for it. The fact that voters can participate in the selection process is a major boost to participatory democracy. (Interviewee 26 – MSZP; Q17)

Several interviewees also stressed primaries' potential to compensate for the deficiencies of representative democracy:

In Hungary, it [the primary election] is important because it is a fine-tuning of two beautiful traditions, participatory and representative democracy, so it appeals to me ideologically. (Interviewee 22 – Párbeszéd; Q4)

Even more specifically, some interlocutors stressed that opposition parties' cooperation was made necessary by the increasingly undemocratic electoral context, which is in line with the core argument of this article. As one of our interviewees expressed:

These parties work together not because they think one thing about the world, but because they are forced to do so by an otherwise undemocratic system. (Interviewee 28 – Momentum; Q19)

In contrast with the pragmatic arguments presented above, some interviewees specifically argued for primaries being a safeguard against the power politics played by established parties:

Within opposition parties, the negotiation process overemphasises organisational power and financial functions that are not linked to real political performance and in fact prunes out good candidates by the undemocratic nature of the process. (Interviewee 22 – Párbeszéd; Q7.1)

This argument was particularly appealing to new parties like Momentum that could have been marginalized in conventional interparty negotiations due to their lack of experience:

I think it was clear that the primaries are good because, on the one hand, it's the voters who decide, and on the other hand, we're not having politicians with 30 or 40 years of experience around a negotiating table deciding what's not going to be in favour of a new party, which is less experienced in this area. (Interviewee 27 – Momentum; Q21)

At the same time, democratic competition has also been described as an inherent feature of opposition parties vis-à-vis Fidesz whose organizational culture did not promote internal democracy:

There is a democratic deficit, which is the case with Fidesz that is built around strongman politics, so it doesn't have a democratic problem with a strong leader who tells what is right. The opposition, being democratic, is therefore divided. (Interviewee 22 – Párbeszéd; Q7.1)

In sum, even though pro-democracy arguments emerged from the interviews, interlocutors from most parties offered mixed interpretations regarding the desirability and potential added value of primaries. Pragmatic arguments dominated their discourse, with most interviewees highlighting primaries as a tool to overcome coordination problems within the fragmented opposition bloc that could not be resolved by other means due to the context of democratic backsliding and the uneven electoral playing field it created. Scepticism was mostly expressed by established parties, especially DK, which was in line with our expectations as well as these parties' public discourse. Pro-democracy arguments mostly focused on the participatory aspects of primaries as a corrective to the deficiencies of representative democracy.

The findings presented in this section suggest that party elites had mixed motivations to engage in multiparty open primaries. Among such motivations, pro-democratic and participatory commitments played a secondary role, overshadowed by considerations related to coordination mechanisms and tradeoffs regarding the use of party resources. Moreover, as [Table 1](#) above shows, the findings revealed a theoretically relevant divide between the arguments used by established vs new parties, with the former emphasising pragmatic aspects, while the latter showing a more profound commitment towards the democratic potential of participatory innovations. Moreover, even though pragmatic arguments dominated the discourse of most interviewees, they have often been intertwined with viewing primaries as a “necessary evil,” i.e. a tool that was indispensable for a fragmented opposition under the context of electoral engineering. This finding suggests that even though pro-democratic commitments were not predominantly salient among opposition party elites, democratic backsliding steered them towards solutions that also addressed democratic concerns. The following section explores how salient such concerns with democratic backsliding were among the electorate, and whether they managed to outweigh ideological considerations on the demand side.

Table 1. Main opposition party narratives on primary elections.

| Attitude towards primaries | Main arguments* | Representation in the corpus | Party type (established/new party) |
|----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Scepticism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not the best method to choose candidates – Triggers additional conflicts – Resource-intensive – NGO participation hinders the process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salience: low • Main proponents: established parties, mostly Democratic Coalition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established parties (DK, MSZP) |
| Pragmatism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Good way to solve coordination problems + Helps with recruitment of suitable candidates + Effective mobilisation tool + Only viable solution in the context of democratic backsliding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salience: high • Main proponents: all opposition parties | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established parties (DK, MSZP) • New parties (Jobbik, Momentum, Párbeszéd) |
| Pro-democracy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Participatory corrective of representative democracy + Empowers citizens + Legitimizes outcome of candidate selection + Meets popular demand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salience: moderate • Main proponents: new parties (Dialogue and Momentum), to a lesser extent, MSZP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New parties (mostly Momentum, Párbeszéd, to a lesser extent, LMP and Jobbik) |

* + and – signs before each of the arguments indicate whether they are generally in favour or against organizing primaries.

Drivers of participation in the primaries and support for the coalition

In our survey, we asked Hungarians about their participation in the opposition primaries of 2021, distinguishing between their level of involvement (voting in each of the two rounds, donation, volunteering, or none). Table 2 displays the percentage of the population that participated in the primaries. Comparing our survey data with data from the organizers of the primaries, we have an oversample of primary participants. While, according to the organizers, 7.71% voted in the first round, and 8.06% in the second, our data indicates that 26.23% participated in the first round and 20.19% in the second, while 31.06% of the population voted in any of the rounds. Moreover, 2.63% of our sample declared to have donated money for the organization of the primaries, and 1.76% had contributed to its organization. The numbers show the impressive mobilization that the primaries encouraged, particularly considering that they were organized without any state support.

Table 2. Participation in the United for Hungary Primaries.

| | N | % of population |
|-----------------|-----|-----------------|
| Voted 1st round | 538 | 26.23% |
| Voted 2nd round | 414 | 20.19% |
| Voted any round | 637 | 31.06% |
| Donated money | 54 | 2.63% |
| Organized | 36 | 1.76% |



Table 3. Participation in the United for Hungary Primaries by 2018 vote.

| | Fidesz-KDNP | | Jobbik | | DK | | MSZP- Párbeszéd | | Momentum | | LMP | | Abstention/Other | |
|-----------------|-------------|--------|--------|--------|-----|--------|--------------------|--------|----------|--------|-----|--------|------------------|--------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Voted 1st round | 93 | 15.76% | 111 | 39.78% | 85 | 62.50% | 52 | 62.65% | 42 | 47.19% | 29 | 38.16% | 126 | 15.79% |
| Voted 2nd round | 48 | 8.14% | 77 | 27.60% | 85 | 62.50% | 43 | 51.81% | 29 | 32.58% | 35 | 46.05% | 97 | 12.16% |
| Voted any round | 113 | 19.15% | 124 | 44.44% | 102 | 75.00% | 56 | 67.47% | 45 | 50.56% | 42 | 55.26% | 155 | 19.42% |
| Donated money | 14 | 2.37% | 6 | 2.15% | 8 | 5.88% | 5 | 6.02% | 4 | 4.49% | 3 | 3.95% | 14 | 1.75% |
| Organized | 4 | 0.68% | 5 | 1.79% | 13 | 9.56% | 3 | 3.61% | 1 | 1.12% | 3 | 3.95% | 7 | 0.88% |

Table 3 presents participation statistics grouped by individuals' vote in the 2018 general elections. The percentage figures are calculated as a proportion of the total voters of each party. Interestingly, we can observe that, in addition to opposition voters, 19% of those who voted for Fidesz in 2018 declared having participated in the united opposition primaries, and above 2% of them said they donated money to the initiative. We can also see similar figures among those who abstained or voted for other options. Among opposition voters, DK and MSZP-Párbeszéd voters were most mobilized, as 75% and 67.47% of them declared having voted in the primaries. Around half of the electorate of Momentum and LMP participated in the primaries. Finally, Jobbik voters seem to have been the least motivated by the primaries, and only 44.44% cast their vote to elect the opposition's candidate for PM in the 2022 general elections.

Table 4. Participation in the United for Hungary Primaries by vote intention one month prior to the 2022 elections.

| | Fidesz-KDNP | | United for Hungary | | Our Homeland | | Two-Tailed Dog | | Abstention/ Other | |
|-----------------|-------------|--------|--------------------|--------|--------------|--------|----------------|--------|-------------------|--------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Voted 1st round | 80 | 14.08% | 323 | 56.67% | 21 | 15.56% | 20 | 23.81% | 82 | 12.37% |
| Voted 2nd round | 30 | 5.28% | 295 | 51.75% | 15 | 11.11% | 17 | 20.24% | 50 | 7.54% |
| Voted any round | 92 | 16.20% | 369 | 64.74% | 29 | 21.48% | 30 | 35.71% | 103 | 15.54% |
| Donated money | 8 | 1.41% | 18 | 3.16% | 6 | 4.44% | 7 | 8.33% | 13 | 1.96% |
| Organized | 3 | 0.53% | 23 | 4.04% | 2 | 1.48% | 0 | 0.00% | 7 | 1.06% |

Table 4 explores voting intention one month prior to the general elections. Unsurprisingly, participation in the primaries was more salient among those who intended to vote for the united opposition ticket. Nonetheless, 16.20% of those who intended to vote for Fidesz partook in the primaries, which underlines that opposition parties concerns regarding the infiltration of the process by pro-government voters were substantiated. We can also observe that, among other opposition parties that did not join the coalition, 21.48% of those who intended to vote for the far-right Our Homeland party (which originated from a split from Jobbik) also cast a vote to select the leader of the united opposition. Furthermore, 35.71% of those who intended to vote for the Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP) voted in the primaries. Finally, a non-negligible 15.54% of those who planned to abstain or vote for other minor parties also voted.

Moving to our inferential analysis, Table 5 displays a series of binary logistic regression models, in which the reference category of each outcome variable is the rest of the population. In the Appendix, we present the original survey items, as well as how each variable was constructed. Model 1 presents the correlates of having voted in any of the two rounds of the primaries. Attitudes towards democracy seem to have played a relevant role in individuals' decision to participate. Thinking that democracy is the best system of government is positively correlated with having voted, just like dissatisfaction with democracy. Moreover, espousing culturally liberal values displays the greatest statistically significant and positive coefficient among all predictors. Political interest is also positively related to participation in the primaries, and so is frequency of consumption of online media for political information. Predictably, having voted in 2018 for any of the parties that joined the United for Hungary coalition is also positively related with primary participation.

Table 5. Regression analyses of participation in the opposition primaries, intention to vote for the United for Hungary coalition, and 2018 vote recall (N = 2,051).

| | Binary logistic regression (odds ratios) | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| | 1 Participation in primaries | 2 Intends to vote for United for Hungary | 3 Voted for opposition parties in 2018 |
| Age | 1 | 0.58 | 1.59 |
| Female | 0.8 | 0.62 * | 0.56 *** |
| Urban | 0.79 | 1.06 | 0.77 |
| Formal education | 1.01 | 1.28 | 0.82 |
| Income | 0.82 | 1.46 | 1.12 |
| Democracy is best system of government | 1.44 ** | 2.62 *** | 1.67 *** |
| Dissatisfaction with democracy | 2.42 * | 12.40 *** | 12.17 *** |
| Liberal | 7.79 *** | 4.55 *** | 3.46 *** |
| Political interest | 4.22 *** | 5.53 *** | 2.54 *** |
| Media frequency (conventional) | 1.2 | 0.55 | 1.3 |
| Media frequency (online) | 1.97 ** | 1.19 | 0.73 |
| Party member | 1.57 | 2.1 | 1.42 |
| Civil society organization member | 1.16 | 0.96 | 1.07 |
| Participation in non-electoral activities | 1.79 *** | 1.35 * | 1.91 *** |
| Fidesz voter | 0.96 | 0.22 *** | |
| Jobbik voter | 2.28 *** | 3.32 *** | |
| MSZP-Párbeszéd voter | 3.54 *** | 7.28 *** | |
| LMP voter | 2.57 *** | 2.23 * | |
| DK voter | 4.86 *** | 12.28 *** | |
| Momentum voter | 1.96 *** | 4.51 *** | |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Models 2 and 3, which regress, respectively, vote intention for the United for Hungary coalition and having voted for the parties involved in the coalition in 2018, display similar coefficients to Model 1. A notable difference is that, when it comes to vote intention and recall, the greatest coefficient across predictors is dissatisfaction with democracy. Moreover, thinking that democracy is the best system of government is also positively related both with intending to vote and having voted for the opposition. Being socially liberal is also positively correlated with being an opposition voter, in both models. Furthermore, participation in non-electoral activities is also positively associated with the outcome variable in both models. Finally, we note that being a man increases the likelihood of supporting the opposition.

A birds' eye view of these three models indicates that the primaries and the coalition mobilized the same sectors of the Hungarian population that already supported opposition parties in the past and did not significantly manage to engage sectors beyond their electorate. Another common feature across models is the importance of democratic attitudes in driving both participation in the primaries as well as supporting the opposition during elections. Support for democracy and dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in Hungary are significant predictors across models. At the same time, socially liberal values – which include support for now fundamental rights such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights – and participation in non-electoral activities – an important channel of political participation beyond election cycles – are also significant predictors across all three models.

Conclusion

This article has delved into how democratic backsliding affects the electoral strategies of opposition parties and the attitudes of their voters, focusing on the strategy adopted

by Hungarian opposition parties in the run-up of the 2022 general elections, and in response to the democratic backsliding witnessed since Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010. As Hungary's democracy transitioned from a full democracy to an electoral autocracy, opposition parties faced significant challenges in competing against the incumbent. To maximize their chances of success, they formed a coalition under the United for Hungary ticket and utilized open primaries to select their candidates.

Despite extensive literature on democratic backsliding and its implications for democratic institutions,⁷⁹ few studies have empirically examined the specific mechanisms through which opposition parties adapt their strategies in response to the erosion of democratic norms. Through a combination of interviews with party elites and a nationally representative survey, this study addresses this gap by deciphering how opposition parties' strategic decisions are influenced by the broader political context of democratic backsliding. Previous research has often focused on the outcomes of opposition strategies in semi-authoritarian regimes without a thorough analysis of the internal decision-making processes and voter behaviour that accompany these strategies.⁸⁰ By exploring these dimensions, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the adaptive strategies of opposition parties under increasingly authoritarian pressures, adding to the body of knowledge on political resilience and resistance in contexts of declining democratic standards.

Our findings suggest that democratic backsliding leads ideologically-diverse opposition parties to form pre-electoral coalitions and incorporate non-institutional actions in their repertoires. Moreover, democratic decline also leads voters to unite around shared democratic concerns, prioritizing them over ideological issues. Our findings also show that opposition party elites' support towards primaries as an instrument was driven by democratic backsliding and a shared concern with the state of Hungarian democracy among opposition voters. As our interviews indicate, opposition party elites gave more importance to pragmatic reasons, such as the need to overcome electoral constraints while mitigating internal conflicts within the coalition, as well as providing the future leader of the coalition with the legitimacy of primaries while mobilizing opposition supporters, than to normative considerations, even though they saw primaries as indispensable under the context of democratic backsliding. Furthermore, among Hungarian citizens, pro-democratic attitudes, dissatisfaction with democracy, and engagement in non-electoral politics emerged as significant predictors of both primary participation and intention to vote for the United for Hungary coalition. Therefore, democratic values and non-electoral engagement stand out as prominent drivers of support for opposition parties and involvement in their activities, in the Hungarian context of democratic backsliding.

Our study contributes to a better understanding of how opposition parties respond to democratic challenges and mobilize support in the backdrop of democratic backsliding. As Hungary grapples with ongoing democratic erosion, the strategies employed by opposition parties offer insights into the possibilities and limitations of opposition to non-democratic politics. While our research has focused on non-fully democratic countries in which competitive elections are still regularly held, and there is more than one party that may pose a credible electoral threat to the incumbent, further research could explore how these strategies evolve in settings in which one party is hegemonic in the opposition, such as it currently seems to be the case with the Tisza Party in Hungary. Further research is needed to explore the long-term implications these strategies have on the composition of the opposition and its electorate, as well as the effectiveness of

these tactics in building sustainable strategies to counter democratic backsliding, not only in Hungary but also in other contexts facing similar challenges.

Notes

1. Papada et al., “Defiance in the Face of Autocratization.”
2. Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2024.”
3. <https://elovalasztas.hu/>.
4. Golder, “Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation in Parliamentary Democracies.”
5. Nicholls and Hayton, “Splitting the Tactical Vote?”
6. Wunsch and Gessler, “Who Tolerates Democratic Backsliding?”
7. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”
8. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.
9. Waldner and Lust, “Unwelcome Change.”
10. Schedler, “Elections Without Democracy.”
11. Gelman and King, “Enhancing Democracy Through Legislative Redistricting.”
12. Howard and Roessler, “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes.”
13. Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution*.
14. Kuzio, “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution.”
15. Markowski, “The Polish Election of 2023.”
16. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
17. Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*.
18. Bunce and Wolchik.
19. Golder, “Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation in Parliamentary Democracies.”
20. Fiva and Hix, “Electoral Reform and Strategic Coordination.”
21. Golder, “Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation in Parliamentary Democracies.”
22. Mellon, “Tactical Voting and Electoral Pacts in the 2019 UK General Election.”
23. Gandhi and Reuter, “The Incentives for Pre-Electoral Coalitions in Non-Democratic Elections.”
24. Wahman, “Opposition Coalitions and Democratization by Election.”
25. Hendrawan, Berenschot, and Aspinall, “Parties as Pay-off Seekers.”
26. Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.
27. Gelman and King, “Enhancing Democracy Through Legislative Redistricting”; Schedler, “Elections Without Democracy.”
28. Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*.
29. Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution*.
30. Markowski, “The Polish Election of 2023.”
31. Yıldırım, “Ideological Linkages and Party Competition in the 2023 Turkish General Elections.”
32. Tansel, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey.”
33. see Scheppele, “How Viktor Orbán Wins.”
34. Pamies and Cordero, “Choosing among the Chosen?”
35. Sandri and Venturino, “Primaries at the Municipal Level.”
36. Sinclair et al., “Crashing the Party.”
37. Bendjaballah and Sauger, “France.”
38. Lanzone and Rombi, “Who Did Participate in the Online Primary Elections of the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy?”; Mikola, “Online Primaries and Intra-Party Democracy.”
39. Cancela, Dias, and Lisi, “The Impact of Endorsements in Intra-Party Elections.”
40. Pérez-Nievas, Rama-Caamaño, and Fernández-Esquer, “New Wine in Old Bottles?”
41. Borbáth and Hutter, “Protesting Parties in Europe: A Comparative Analysis.”
42. Howard and Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave?*
43. Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*.
44. Borbáth and Susánszky, “Party System Transformation from Below.”
45. Karolewski, “Protest and Participation in Post-Transformation Poland”; Platek, “Towards Pillarisation?”
46. Della Porta et al., *Movement Parties against Austerity*.
47. cf. Seawright and Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options.”

48. e.g., in Italy Sandri and Venturino, “Primaries at the Municipal Level”; Seddone and Sandri, “Primary Elections and Party Grassroots”; Vassallo and Passarelli, “Centre-Left Prime Ministerial Primaries in Italy.”
49. For a categorization of each party along this dimension, see Santos and Mercea, “Young Democrats, Critical Citizens and Protest Voters”; Mercea and Santos, “Policy over Protest.”
50. cf. Kitschelt, “Movement Parties.”
51. Bogaards, “De-Democratization in Hungary”; Bozóki and Hegedűs, “An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime”; Krekó and Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe.”
52. Buzogány, “Illiberal Democracy in Hungary.”
53. Papp and Zorigt, “Political Constraints and the Limited Effect of Electoral System Change on Personal Vote-Seeking in Hungary.”
54. Tóka, “The 2018 Hungarian National Elections”; also see Scheppele, “How Viktor Orbán Wins.”
55. Papp and Zorigt, “Political Constraints and the Limited Effect of Electoral System Change on Personal Vote-Seeking in Hungary.”
56. O’Dwyer and Stenberg, “Local-Level Democratic Backsliding?”
57. Bátorfy and Urbán, “State Advertising as an Instrument of Transformation of the Media Market in Hungary”; Polyák, “Media in Hungary.”
58. Batory, “Populists in Government?”; Enyedi, “Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization.”
59. Enyedi, “The Survival of the Fittest.”
60. Tóka, “The 2018 Hungarian National Elections.”
61. Kovarek and Littvay, “Greater than the Sum of its Part(Ie)s.”
62. Pamies and Cordero, “Choosing among the Chosen?”
63. Enyedi, “Democratic Backsliding and Academic Freedom in Hungary.”
64. Ilonszki and Dudzińska, “Opposition Behaviour against the Third Wave of Autocratisation.”
65. Várnagy, “Hungary.”
66. All independent SMD candidates and party lists are eligible for a set amount of campaign subventions covered by the state. Therefore, thanks to the joint list and the coordination of SMD candidates, the six parties deprived themselves of approximately 5/6 of the total subventions they could have received.
67. The number of Hungarian citizens eligible to vote at the time of the 2022 general elections was 8,221,065, of which 425,956 could only vote for the national party lists in the absence of a Hungarian address, see: <https://vtr.valasztas.hu/ogy2022/valasztasi-informaciok/valasztopolgarok-szama>
68. Oross and Gherghina, “Closer to Citizens or Ticking Boxes?”
69. Krekó, “The Birth of an Illiberal Informational Autocracy in Europe.”
70. Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.”
71. Lilleker, “Interviewing the Political Elite.”
72. Davies, “Spies as Informants.”
73. The Appendix contains the survey questions used, as well as how they were coded for the purpose of this paper.
74. For studies using similar variables, see: Kovarek, “Elite Defection and Opposition Realignment in Hungary”; Santos and Mercea. “Young Democrats, Critical Citizens and Protest Voters”; Tworzecki and Semetko, “Media Use and Political Engagement in Three New Democracies.”
75. Rubin, *Multiple Imputation for Nonresponse in Surveys*.
76. Buuren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn, “Mice.”
77. The numbers in brackets after each of the interview quotes represent the specific respondent, and the relevant questionnaire item, respectively. References to each are included in the Appendix.
78. Kovarek and Oross, “Charter–Manifesto Congruence as a Signal for Issue Salience.”
79. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”; Bogaards, “De-Democratization in Hungary.”
80. Howard and Roessler, “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes”; Schedler, “Elections Without Democracy.”

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