

The populist voter trap: why regime change may not end populism *Lessons from Hungary's electoral autocracy*

Andrea Szabó ^{a,b}, Annamária Sebestyén ^a and Balázs Böcskei ^c

^aELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, Budapest, Hungary; ^bInstitute of Political Sciences, Faculty of Law, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary; ^cDepartment of International and Political Studies, Milton Friedman University, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This article examines how demand-side populism evolves under populist incumbency in an electoral autocracy. Focusing on Hungary between 2010 and 2025, it asks whether prolonged exposure to a governing populist regime leads to the erosion, consolidation, or redistribution of populist attitudes among voters. Drawing on two surveys, the study combines harmonised longitudinal indicators with a contemporary ideational populism scale to capture change and continuity in populist-aligned attitudes. The findings reveal a pattern best described as persistence with recomposition. While aggregate endorsement of three comparable populist-aligned items – cultural protectionism, sovereigntist “own path versus the West” orientation, and leader-centred representation – declines over time, broader people – elite antagonistic and anti-compromise predispositions remain widely available in 2025. Populist attitudes do not shift uniformly across the electorate; instead, they re-sort across partisan publics and dimensions. By 2025, populist attitudes are no longer confined to the governing camp but are also present within the largest opposition electorate, including a new mass opposition challenger, structured by perceived regime disadvantage. Overall, the Hungarian case shows that demand-side populism can persist under populist incumbency while becoming cross-bloc as opposition realignment renders regime change electorally plausible.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 September 2025
Accepted 24 March 2026


KEYWORDS

Demand-side populism;
long-term incumbency;
electoral autocracy;
opposition realignment;
populist attitudes; Hungary

Introduction

How does demand-side populism evolve when populists govern for a long time – and democracy erodes while elections remain formally competitive? Comparative research has largely answered this question from the supply side, tracing how populist incumbents polarize societies, weaken checks, and justify power concentration in the name of “the people.” Yet electoral autocracies do not consolidate through elite strategy alone. They also rely on citizens’ willingness to interpret politics through populist frames: a moralized

CONTACT Annamária Sebestyén  annamaria.sebestyen@tk.elte.hu  ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, T Building, 2nd Floor, 4 Tóth Kálmán Street, Budapest 1097, Hungary

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2026.2652350>.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

people – elite divide, demands for popular sovereignty, and suspicion of pluralism and compromise. We still know too little about how these mass-level populist attitudes change over time under long-term populist rule, and whether they stay anchored in the governing camp or spread across government – opposition divides as political competition realigns.

Hungary is a critical case. Since 2010, the Fidesz – KDNP alliance has governed continuously, reshaping institutions and the media environment while sustaining a populist interpretive framework that claims exclusive representation of “ordinary Hungarians” and repeatedly relocates “the elite” to new targets – from post-communist networks and liberal critics to supranational actors and “Brussels.” At the same time, Hungary has moved toward entrenched electoral autocracy: elections remain meaningful, but the playing field is tilted, and democratic evaluations increasingly track partisan loyalties. Rather than treating Hungary as exceptional, we approach it as theoretically instructive for understanding how long-term populist governance reshapes demand-side populism under conditions of electoral competition.

We build on the ideational approach to populism and the “populist citizen” perspective (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019). We treat populist attitudes as a relatively general predisposition rather than a property of one-party family, and we expect party cues, democratic satisfaction, ideological location, and perceived regime advantage/disadvantage to shape how that predisposition is politically channelled. In highly polarised hybrid regimes, this perspective highlights how demand-side populism can become embedded in bloc identities, normalising democratic infractions by “our side” while delegitimising opponents as enemies.

We study Hungary between 2010 and 2025 using two surveys designed to approximate the Hungarian adult population, albeit through different sampling modes. The first is a probability face-to-face survey fielded in April 2010 ($N \approx 1,500$), shortly before Fidesz returned to power. The second is an original online survey conducted in June 2025 ($N \approx 2,207$) with post-stratification weights. This design lets us track both population-level change and bloc-level reconfiguration – particularly after the rise of TISZA as a major opposition force by 2025.

We use a dual measurement strategy. For longitudinal comparison, we analyse three harmonised items available in both waves: cultural protectionism, sovereigntist “own path vs. the West” orientation, and leader-centred populism. For the 2025 cross-section, we model an eight-item ideational populism battery (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019). To strengthen comparability, we present wave-representative estimates with wave-specific weights, probe compositional change with a 2010→2025 reweighting, and use wave-normalised weights in pooled models so the larger 2025 sample does not mechanically dominate results.

Building on this framework, we advance three expectations about how demand-side populism evolves under long-term populist governance. First, we expect demand-side populism to remain broadly available over time, with overall levels remaining relatively stable even as its substantive content and distribution across partisan publics shift between 2010 and 2025 (H1). Second, some dimensions of populist alignment should remain more closely tied to regime support, as governing populists can sustain the people – elite frame through the strategic redefinition of “the elite” (H2). Third, once opposition realignment makes regime change electorally plausible, populist-aligned

attitudes may extend beyond the governing camp and become cross-bloc rather than confined to regime supporters (H3).

Beyond Hungary, the argument offers analytically useful insights for other post-socialist electoral autocracies in which incumbents sustain anti-elitism by externalising the elite, opposition realignment reshapes perceptions of who constitutes “the elite,” and populist demand draws on layered grievances rooted in contested transition legacies.

The article proceeds as follows. After outlining the theoretical framework and research design, we first examine 2010–2025 change in the three harmonised items using pooled models with wavexbloc interactions. We then analyse the 2025 survey to show how party alignment, democratic satisfaction, ideology, political interest, and perceived regime advantage or disadvantage structure populist attitudes within the contemporary electorate.

Theoretical framework

Recent comparative research links democratic backsliding and the consolidation of electoral autocracies to the combined effects of populist governance and deep political polarization. Work on “pernicious polarization” – a durable, mutually hostile partisan divide – shows how antagonistic blocs undermine democratic accountability, weaken institutional checks, and normalise infringements of liberal principles (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy and Murat 2024; McCoy and Somer 2019, 2021; Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). In such contexts, elections remain formally competitive, but the playing field is tilted, opposition actors face structural disadvantages, and democratic evaluations increasingly follow partisan loyalties rather than institutional performance.

Within this literature, populism is understood as both a driver and a symptom of democratic erosion. Populist actors claim exclusive moral representation of “the people” against a corrupt “elite”, portray opponents as enemies rather than competitors, and justify power concentration in the name of popular sovereignty (Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Coman 2024; Mos and Macedo Piovezan 2024; Rooduijn 2018). Once in government, they often reframe constraints on executive authority as illegitimate impositions by remote elites (Batory 2016; Benedek 2025b; Pappas 2019), thereby legitimising the dismantling of liberal safeguards. In electoral autocracies, however, this process depends not only on elite strategies but also on citizens’ willingness to internalise and reproduce populist interpretative frames when evaluating institutions and norm violations.

While existing research has focused primarily on the supply side of populism – parties, leaders, and discourses (e.g. Engesser et al. 2017; Rooduijn, De Lange, and Van der Brug 2014) – the demand side has received less systematic attention in electoral autocracies. Studies of citizen attitudes in hybrid regimes have largely emphasised polarization, affective partisanship, and tolerance for democratic norm violations (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Littvay, McCoy, and Simonovits 2024; Patkós and Bendegúz 2025; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022), showing that highly polarised voters are more willing to condone democratic backsliding by their own camp. Yet we still know relatively little about how populist attitudes themselves evolve over time in these regimes, and how they are redistributed between government and opposition blocs as political competition changes.

This study addresses this gap by examining populist voter attitudes in Hungary between 2010 and 2025. Focusing on the core components of populism – anti-elitism, people-centrism, and support for popular sovereignty – we analyse how these orientations are embedded in citizens’ political culture in an established electoral autocracy and how they are reconfigured following opposition realignment. Rather than asking whether populism declines or persists under long-term incumbency, we examine how partisan realignment alters its political anchoring.

Populism as a thin-centred ideology and attitudinal orientation

This section clarifies the conceptual understanding of populism adopted in the study and delineates the theoretical framework through which mass-level populist attitudes are analysed under conditions of long-term populist governance. The concept of populism is subject to substantial theoretical contestation in the literature, making it necessary to specify the analytical perspective employed here. Populism has been approached as an ideology (Mudde 2004), a communication style (Knight 1998), or a political strategy or political logic (Weyland 2013). These approaches differ not only in their conceptual focus but also in their suitability for analysing demand-side phenomena at the mass level.

In line with the ideational tradition, this study conceptualises populism as a thin-centred ideology that juxtaposes a virtuous and homogeneous “people” with a corrupt “elite” and demands that politics express the general will of the people (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2004; Rueda 2020; Stanley 2008; Tarragoni 2021). Rather than constituting a comprehensive worldview, populism functions as an interpretative framework that can attach itself to diverse host ideologies while relying on a moralised people – elite distinction (Enyedi 2020).

Although the literature highlights populism’s ambivalent relationship with liberal democracy – variously understood as a democratic corrective or as a source of anti-pluralist and majoritarian tendencies (Canovan 1999; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Rummens 2017) – these normative debates do not alter the core conceptual structure of the ideational approach. This structure remains centred on people-centrism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty, which together constitute the minimal and analytically stable core of populism as a thin-centred ideology.

At the mass level, the ideational approach has become the dominant framework for measuring populism, as it captures these core components in a stable and comparable way across contexts and time (Bene and Boda 2023; Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019; Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016). Accordingly, populist attitudes are treated here as relatively stable predispositions that shape how citizens interpret political conflict, authority, and representation, rather than as short-term reactions to specific actors. This attitudinal understanding allows populism to be analysed independently of particular leaders or parties, making it especially suitable for longitudinal survey-based research.

Discursive and performative approaches, by contrast, focus primarily on the contextual enactment of populism and the strategic deployment of populist frames by political actors. While these perspectives offer valuable insights into the dynamics of populist mobilisation, they are less suited to survey-based longitudinal analysis, as they lack

standardised criteria for measuring citizen-level orientations over time (Aslanidis 2015; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012). Given the study's emphasis on demand-side populism and on attitudinal patterns that persist beyond short-term political events, the ideational approach is therefore privileged here as a conceptually coherent and methodologically tractable framework.

At the same time, applying ideational measures of populism in contexts of long-term populist governance raises specific analytical challenges. When populist actors enter and remain in government, the meaning, targets, and activation of populist beliefs may change: anti-elite orientations are not necessarily abandoned but are instead rearticulated through shifting constructions of "the elite" and through experiences of incumbency. Recognising this does not undermine the ideational approach; rather, it highlights the need for analytical sensitivity to how relatively stable populist predispositions are expressed under different regime conditions and over time. Taken together, this conceptualisation provides a stable foundation for analysing both persistence and reconfiguration in demand-side populism in an electoral-autocratic context.

Hungary as a critical case of long-term populist governance

Hungary offers a critical case for examining demand-side populism in an autocratizing context. Since 2010, the Fidesz – KDNP alliance has governed with successive constitutional majorities, transforming the institutional framework and reshaping the media landscape, while presenting itself as the sole authentic representative of "ordinary Hungarians" (Böcskei 2022; Coman 2024; Enyedi 2016). This trajectory is widely regarded as an instance of populist electoral autocracy, where formally competitive elections coexist with systematic advantages for the incumbents and the erosion of liberal checks (Batory 2016; Benedek 2025b; Pappas 2019).

Fidesz's populist project draws on longer-term tensions rooted in the post-communist transition. Earlier research has highlighted how large social groups experienced the 1990s' market reforms and subsequent austerity as unequal and politically unrepresented, yet these grievances remained under-mobilised for a time (Greskovits 1993, 1996; Scheiring 2020; Sebők 2019). From the early 2000s onwards, Fidesz increasingly articulated these frustrations through a frame of "plebeian anti-communism" (a discourse portraying "ordinary people" as victims of a self-serving post-communist elite) (Mike 2014), recasting the former communist elite and their liberal allies as a cohesive, self-serving bloc opposed to the interests and values of "ordinary people". This provided fertile ground for the emergence of a thin-centred populist ideology centred on popular sovereignty and national values (Enyedi 2016).

In opposition between 2002 and 2010, the party portrayed the Socialist – Liberal governments as prioritising foreign economic interests and international institutions over citizens' welfare and sovereignty. After its landslide victory in 2010, Fidesz retained this elite – people antagonism but expanded the category of "the elite" to include domestic critics, NGOs, liberal intellectuals and institutions of the European Union. At the same time, it systematically invoked abstract notions such as "the Hungarian national spirit", "common sense" and "Hungarian freedom" as attributes of a homogeneous people whose will must not be constrained by liberal checks and balances (Böcskei 2022; Palonen 2009; Szűcs 2019).

From the perspective of the ideational approach, these developments suggest that populist attitudes emphasising the moral superiority and sovereignty of “the people” became deeply embedded in Hungarian political culture both prior to and during the first decade of Fidesz’s rule. The theoretical expectation guiding this study is that prolonged exposure to a coherent and institutionally reinforced populist interpretative framework stabilises mass-level populist attitudes beyond short-term political or economic fluctuations. If this expectation holds, populist attitudes should remain high and relatively stable at the aggregate level throughout the 2010–2025 period, rather than fluctuating in direct response to changing governing performance or economic conditions.

H1. Overall levels of populist attitudes among Hungarian voters remain high and relatively stable between 2010 and 2025, reflecting deep-seated beliefs in popular sovereignty and the moral centrality of “ordinary people” rather than short-term reactions to specific governments.

Mechanisms sustaining populist attitudes among government supporters

While H1 concerns aggregate stability, our second expectation focuses on bloc-specific patterns. Many accounts of populism suggest that once populist parties enter government, their supporters may gradually lose anti-elite attitudes, as “their” party becomes the new establishment. The Hungarian case challenges this expectation by illustrating how long-term populist governance can actively prevent the depopulation of its own electorate.

Since 2010, the governing party has embedded its political project, the System of National Cooperation (NER), in a broader ideological framework that consistently rearticulates the divide between the people and the elite. Originally intended to symbolically reunite the Hungarian nation by transcending existing political divisions, this framework simultaneously institutionalised a worldview in which sovereignty and national unity are perpetually under threat from new adversaries. As Fidesz transitioned from the opposition to the government, the category of the hostile “elite” expanded to encompass not only the post-communist and liberal establishments, but also EU institutions, foreign-owned companies, NGOs, “Brussels”, the “Soros Empire” and various culturally coded groups. Through this continuous redefinition of antagonistic boundaries, the governing party avoids being perceived as part of the elite it denounces.

This strategy aligns with theories of elite cue-taking, partisan motivated reasoning and social identity, which emphasise how political leaders shape citizens’ interpretations of political events. By providing consistent interpretative cues, leaders help partisans navigate complex environments; when these cues frame criticism of the government as an attack on “the people”, supporters are inclined to reinterpret threatening information in ways that protect their group identity (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022). Fidesz’s narrative repertoire – invocations of “Hungarian freedom”, the “national spirit”, “common sense”, and repeated appeals to sovereignty – thus reinforces an emotionally charged collective identity. This identity is grounded less in material grievances than in symbolic constructions of threat, belonging, and moral superiority.

The continuous expansion and recalibration of the “enemy” category therefore enables government supporters to maintain high levels of anti-elite sentiment despite prolonged incumbency. Importantly, this mechanism suggests that demand-side populism under long-term populist governance should be understood not as a residual effect of partisan alignment, but as an identity-embedded orientation that is actively reproduced through elite cueing and symbolic boundary drawing. In this context, government supporters are not populist merely because their preferred party espouses populist views; rather, populist attitudes become deeply interwoven with their sense of political belonging and are repeatedly reaffirmed through the redefinition of who counts as “the real people”.

H2. Populist attitudes remain strongly associated with support for the governing Fidesz – KDNP alliance between 2010 and 2025, consistent with the party’s long-term strategy of expanding and redefining “the elite”, which offers identity-affirming cues that allow its voters to maintain an elite – people antagonism even while their camp is in power.

Opposition realignment, TISZA and the reorientation of populist demand

Comparative research shows that opposition strategies are crucial for understanding whether democratic backsliding stabilises into durable electoral autocracy or opens space for political renewal. Oppositions that remain fragmented, boycott parliamentary life or rely solely on protest-oriented mobilisation tend to entrench incumbents, whereas coordinated or strategically adaptive challengers can increase electoral uncertainty and mobilise discontent (Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Gamboa 2022; Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). In electoral autocracies, such realignments do not only reshape party competition; they may also reorient demand-side populism by shifting which political actors are perceived as “the elite” and which social groups experience political marginalisation.

In Hungary, opposition actors struggled for more than a decade to articulate a convincing alternative to Fidesz’s majoritarian project. This long-standing impasse began to shift with the emergence of the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) and the political rise of Péter Magyar. Recent analyses suggest that TISZA seeks to position itself as a pivotal challenger by combining anti-corruption and accountability frames with broader appeals to moral renewal and national interest, while distinguishing itself from both the traditional left – liberal establishment and the governing right (Benedek 2025a; Kovarek 2025). Rather than mobilising an entirely new ideological repertoire, the party appears to strategically repackage familiar themes of representation and sovereignty in a form that is compatible with widespread political disillusionment. Its strategic objective is to mobilise a broad coalition of citizens – including previously disengaged voters, long-standing opposition supporters, and potentially segments of those formerly aligned with the government – by presenting itself as a credible, reform-oriented alternative to an increasingly entrenched political order.

Understanding this development requires situating TISZA’s emergence within broader socioeconomic and political dynamics. In the 2022 parliamentary elections, Fidesz drew its strongest support from upwardly mobile groups who perceived themselves as beneficiaries of the economic growth that followed the 2008 global financial crisis (Huszár 2025), while individuals who experienced downward

mobility or felt excluded from the benefits of growth were more inclined to support opposition parties. By the mid-2020s, as the prospect of government change began to appear plausible for the first time in over a decade, questions emerged as to whether this shift reflected a renewed populist turn – namely, whether subjectively experienced vulnerability and intensified demands for popular sovereignty were increasingly linked to anti-elite sentiment across the electorate. These developments point to a gradual transformation in the meanings attached to both “the people” and “the elite” in Hungary’s political imagination: whereas earlier waves of populist discontent primarily targeted the post-communist establishment, by 2025 the governing right itself had increasingly come to be associated with elite dominance, political closure, and a perceived erosion of democratic accountability.

This transformation is exemplified by TISZA’s rapid ascent. Although the party distances itself from overt populism, it nevertheless draws selectively on populist themes – particularly moral renewal, elite accountability, and the restoration of genuine representation. In this sense, TISZA does not create populist demand but reorients existing populist attitudes by channelling frustrations related to corruption, political fatigue, and governance failures into a new oppositional direction. This reorientation also reflects broader experiences of marginalisation: while some citizens perceive themselves as disadvantaged by the post-communist transition, others increasingly view themselves as losers of the second regime transformation initiated by Fidesz after 2010. As the governing right becomes associated with an entrenched elite position, anti-elite populist sentiment no longer maps neatly onto government support alone but begins to characterise diverse segments of the electorate.

Consequently, Hungarian populist voters now constitute a two-sided group. On one side are Fidesz supporters who continue to endorse the party’s long-standing populist ideological framework and may have benefited from the sociopolitical and economic transformations of the past 15 years. On the other side are opposition and TISZA voters who, despite differing political backgrounds, share a sense of disillusionment and perceived marginalisation. Following Moffit and Tormey (2014), we argue that such voters’ populist attitudes are not mutually exclusive in ideological or socioeconomic terms. Rather, they can converge in novel ways, driven by overlapping experiences of vulnerability and demands for political renewal. These dynamics give rise to what we describe as a “hybrid populist electorate” (an electorate in which populist attitudes are distributed across both pro-incumbent and anti-incumbent blocs).

The theoretical mechanism underlying our final expectation is that party system realignment in an electoral autocracy, combined with shifting referents of “the elite” and widespread perceptions of vulnerability, redistributes populist attitudes across government and opposition camps.

H3. By 2025, populist attitudes are no longer confined to government supporters but are also prevalent among opposition and TISZA voters who perceive themselves as marginalised by either the post-communist transition or the second regime transformation after 2010. This yields a hybrid populist electorate in which anti-elite sentiments and demands for popular sovereignty are redistributed and reoriented across political blocs.

Data and methods

To test our expectations about the prevalence, distribution and determinants of populist attitudes among Hungarian voters – particularly the stability of aggregate levels (H1), their partisan anchoring among government supporters (H2), and their redistribution across political blocs (H3) – this study employs two nationwide survey datasets collected in 2010 and 2025, each weighted to align with the demographic structure of the Hungarian adult population. Combining these sources allows for both cross-sectional analysis and longitudinal comparison over a fifteen-year period characterised by democratic regression and party system transformation in an electoral-autocratic context.

Online survey data, 2025

The analysis is primarily based on an original online survey conducted by the IDEA Institute between 1 and 9 June 2025. Data were collected via a self-administered questionnaire using computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI). Respondents were recruited through targeted advertisements on social media and other online platforms, with algorithmic optimisation used to manage quotas and expand reach. Quotas targeted key sociodemographic margins (gender, age, education, and region), and fieldwork quality was monitored in real time; cases were removed during quality screening (e.g. duplicates and suspicious response patterns).

Participation was voluntary. The final dataset comprises 2,207 adult respondents (aged 18+). Post-stratification weights were constructed to align the sample with the Hungarian adult population on core sociodemographic margins (gender, age, education, and region; place of residence where available), using census benchmarks (2021). In addition, weights incorporate indicators of digital engagement to mitigate biases related to unequal online exposure, a salient concern in Hungary's hybrid media environment.

The questionnaire included a sixteen-item battery (four items per dimension) designed to capture the core dimensions of populist attitudes. Because this battery was placed in the final third of the questionnaire, completion dropped after the party preference section: on average, 1,507 respondents completed the full module out of 2,207 cases in the original sample. Non-response analysis shows no meaningful gender bias, but respondents under 39 and those without secondary education are underrepresented among completers, indicating non-random item non-response. Post-stratification weighting mitigates part of this imbalance but cannot fully eliminate the possibility of selective completion. We therefore treat estimates based on the full battery with appropriate caution and report additional robustness checks using indicators available for the larger, pre-attrition sample (see online Appendix Table A5).

Because the 2025 sample relies on targeted online recruitment rather than probability sampling, uncertainty is reported using robust standard errors rather than classical margins of sampling error.

Face-to-face survey data, 2010

To contextualise contemporary populist attitudes within a broader temporal framework, the analysis incorporates a nationally representative face-to-face survey conducted by

Medián Kft. and Ipsos Kft. in April 2010, shortly before Hungary's parliamentary elections (see Enyedi and Kenneth 2011). The sample comprised 1,500 respondents selected via national probability sampling from two identical subsamples of 750 respondents each. Post-stratification weighting was applied to reflect the demographic structure of the adult population at the time on key margins comparable to those used in 2025 (gender, age, education, and region/settlement structure as available).

Weighting strategy and comparability across years

We analyse each dataset with wave-specific post-stratification weights to recover wave-representative estimates. To assess whether demographic recomposition drives observed 2010–2025 differences, we additionally reweight the 2010 sample to 2025 margins (gender, age, education, region). For pooled models, we normalise weights within wave so that neither year mechanically dominates the estimates. Full weighting details and benchmarks are reported in online Appendix (Table A1A–A1B).

We measure demand-side populism primarily with the eight-item ideational scale in the 2025 survey (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019). For over-time comparison, we analyse three harmonised indicators available in both 2010 and 2025 capturing (i) cultural protectionism, (ii) sovereigntist “own path vs. the West” orientation, and (iii) leader-centred politics. We treat these indicators separately and focus on changes in their levels and partisan patterning between waves.

Dependent variables

In line with the theoretical framework outlined above, this study employs two dependent variables to capture both the current level and longer-term change of populist attitudes in Hungary.

Populist attitudes in 2025

The primary dependent variable measures contemporary populist attitudes using an eight-item, five-point Likert-type scale developed by Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2019) and adapted into Hungarian. The scale captures the ideational core of populism, including people-centrism, anti-elitism, and scepticism toward political compromise, and allows for indirect comparison with international datasets using the same instrument. Table 1 presents item wording and descriptive statistics.

The eight-item battery shows high internal consistency in 2025 (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$), and items are therefore combined into an additive index. Because one item (“politicians should follow the will of the people”) approaches near-consensus, we also report item-level patterns in online Appendix and interpret the index as capturing a broader people – elite/anti-compromise disposition rather than a single attitudinal dimension.

At the same time, item-level response patterns reveal important substantive differences within the scale. Agreement with the statement “*The politicians in Hungary need to follow the will of the people*” (Will of the people) is exceptionally high (mean = 4.41), with two-thirds of respondents fully agreeing. This item appears to function as a low-discrimination indicator, reflecting a broadly shared democratic norm of political accountability rather than a distinctly populist position. By contrast, support for anti-professional

Table 1. Question wording for populist items.

Original variable	Construct label	Item wording*	1–5 scale mean	Not at all agree	Totally agree	NA* %	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
POLK1_1	Will of the people	The politicians in Hungary need to follow the will of the people	4.41	3	66	4	.861
POLK1_2	Direct popular decision-making	The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions	3.59	12	36	4	.848
POLK1_3	People–elite antagonism	The political differences between the people and the elite are larger than the differences among the people	3.70	13	43	7	.834
POLK1_4	Anti-professional representation	I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than an experienced politician	2.77	32	18	5	.839
POLK1_5	Elite inaction	Politicians (elected officials) talk too much and take too little action	3.76	11	43	3	.834
POLK1_6	Anti-compromise politics	What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles	3.05	20	21	6	.855
POLK1_7	Elite self-interest	The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people	3.67	14	44	4	.833
POLK1_8	Protection of elite privilege	Politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges	3.96	9	53	5	.836

*Survey questions

Notes: Weighted 2025 item-level descriptives (w2025). Means are reported on the original 1–5 scale, with higher values indicating stronger agreement. "Not at all" and "Totally agree" report the share of respondents in the lowest and highest response categories. "NA (%)" denotes item non-response. Scale mean: 3.59; range: 1.62; variance: 0.25; Cronbach's α : 0.86; Hotelling's T^2 : 2230.31 ($p < .001$).

representation – “*I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than an experienced politician*” (Anti-professional representation) – is markedly lower (mean = 2.77). This item more clearly discriminates between respondents with stronger and weaker anti-elitist and anti-expertise orientations.

Overall, seven of the eight items score above the scale midpoint, indicating widespread endorsement of people-centric and elite-sceptical attitudes in Hungarian society. Respondents express strong expectations that politics should reflect the will of a unified and morally defined “people”, alongside dissatisfaction with perceived political ineffectiveness and elite self-interest. However, comparatively low support for replacing professional politicians with ordinary citizens suggests that the institutionalised and professionalised nature of representative politics remains broadly accepted, even among respondents expressing populist orientations.

Item non-response ranges between 3 and 7% across the eight indicators, which falls within acceptable limits for attitudinal survey research. Missing data are treated as item-level non-response and handled through listwise deletion in multivariate analyses.

Taken together, these item-level patterns are reported descriptively to contextualise the populism index and to inform the interpretation of subsequent analyses.

Change in selected populist attitudes between 2010 and 2025

To capture longitudinal change in key components commonly associated with populist orientations, the study examines three attitudinal items included in both the April 2010 and June 2025 survey waves. Respondents evaluated each statement on a five-point scale. Rather than constituting a unified index, the items are explicitly treated as separate longitudinal indicators, each capturing a distinct dimension frequently linked to populist discourse and attitudes:

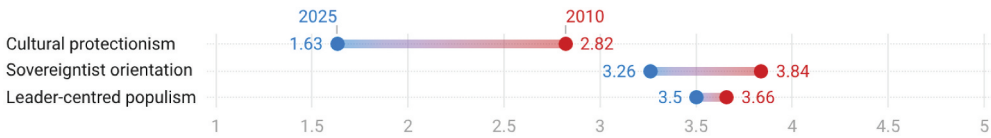
POLK2_1 (cultural protectionism): “The spread of foreign films, pop music, etc. should be restricted because they threaten Hungarian culture.”

POLK2_2 (sovereigntist orientation): “The country should not concern itself with the expectations of the West but should follow its own path.”

POLK2_3 (leader-centred populism): “The country does not need new laws and political programmes as much as it needs a few courageous, tireless and dedicated leaders whom the people trust.”

The three items available in both 2010 and 2025 tap conceptually related but not necessarily unidimensional facets (cultural protectionism, sovereigntist orientation, and leader-centred politics). Internal consistency is therefore modest, and we do not interpret them as a reflective scale. Instead, we report item-level results and, as a descriptive summary, an endorsement count capturing how many of the three statements each respondent supports. We first present weighted means by year; statistical inference is based on pooled regression models including a 2025 indicator (and covariates), using normalised weights and robust standard errors.

Across the full sample, agreement with the three comparable items declined between 2010 and 2025 (Figure 1). The sharpest decrease is observed for cultural protectionism, followed by a more moderate decline in sovereigntist orientation, while leader-centred populism shows only a slight decrease.



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Change in populist attitudes between 2010 and 2025. Notes: Points show weighted mean values for the three harmonised indicators in 2010 and 2025 using wave-specific post-stratification weights (2010: w_{2010} ; 2025: w_{2025}). The accompanying standardised 2010 estimates reweight the 2010 sample to 2025 population margins (w_{2010_to2025}) as a robustness check for demographic recomposition. Higher values indicate stronger endorsement of the item. After standardisation (2010→2025; w_{2010_to2025}), mean levels remain largely unchanged: cultural protectionism ($M = 2.82$), sovereigntist orientation ($M = 3.81$ vs. 3.84), and leader-centred populism ($M = 3.61$ vs. 3.66).

Composition-standardised comparisons – reweighting the 2010 sample to 2025 population margins on age, gender, education, and region – yield nearly identical estimates, indicating that demographic recomposition explains little of the observed change.

Pooled regression models with a 2025 indicator confirm these patterns, showing large negative coefficients for cultural protectionism ($B = -1.269$, $SE = 0.051$, $p < .001$) and sovereigntist orientation ($B = -0.595$, $SE = 0.054$, $p < .001$), and a smaller but statistically significant negative coefficient for leader-centred populism ($B = -0.117$, $SE = 0.054$, $p = 0.030$).

The data suggest that meaningful attitudinal shifts have occurred in Hungarian society over the past 15 years. This raises important questions regarding Fidesz voters: has the observed decline in these populist-aligned attitudes extended to this group, traditionally considered paradigmatically populist? If so, to what extent? Alternatively, has Fidesz's transformation into an incumbent governing party over 15 years in office attenuated anti-elite orientations among its supporters, despite the continued use of populist rhetoric?

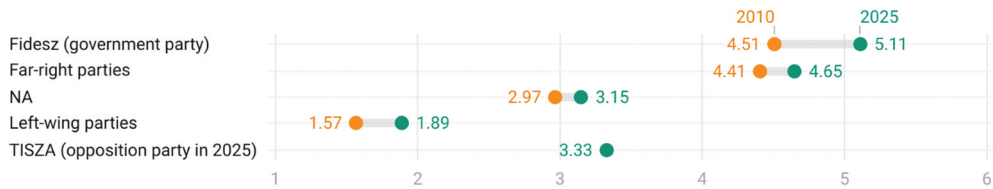
Independent variables

Following the framework outlined by Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2019), the independent and explanatory variables are categorized into three groups (for a detailed description, see online Appendix Table A2).

The first group comprises socio-demographic variables, including gender, age, age squared, geographic distance from the political and economic centre (Budapest), educational attainment, economic activity, and social status. These variables allow us to examine the social correlates of populist attitudes and to test expectations derived from prior research that older, less educated men living further from the centre tend to exhibit stronger populist predispositions (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019, 10).

The second group comprises political variables: political interest, party preference, ideological orientation and satisfaction with democracy (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019, 10). These variables capture political orientations commonly associated with ideological populism.

Following the literature on governing populism, party affiliation and ideological self-placement are included to test whether support for the incumbent populist regime and



Self-definition on 1-6 scales.
Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2. Left – right self-placement by partisan public, 2010 and 2025 (1–6 scale, weighted means). Notes: Weighted mean left – right self-placement by partisan public and survey wave. Descriptive estimates use wave-specific post-stratification weights (2010: w_{2010} ; 2025: w_{2025}). Statistical tests are based on pooled UNIANOVA models weighted with w_wave_norm .

right-leaning ideology is associated with higher levels of populist attitudes. At the same time, sustained anti-elite rhetoric under long-term populist rule may decouple ideological positioning from evaluations of democratic performance, making democratic dissatisfaction observable even among right-leaning government supporters.

Across the full sample, mean left – right self-placement shifts slightly to the right between 2010 and 2025 (see [Figure 2](#); UNIANOVA, year effect: $F = 18.77$, $p < .001$). Differences between partisan groups are substantial ($F = 256.03$, $p < .001$), and the year-by-partisanship interaction is also statistically significant ($F = 3.63$, $p = 0.006$), indicating non-uniform ideological repositioning across political groups.

Estimated marginal means show that Fidesz supporters place themselves firmly on the right in both years and move further right by 2025 (2010: 4.48; 2025: 5.12 on the 1–6 scale; $R^2 \approx 0.42$). Partisan differences are pronounced: Fidesz voters remain consistently right-leaning and shift further right over time, TISZA voters cluster closer to the ideological centre, while the traditional left bloc remains left-of-centre.

We use left – right self-placement primarily as a control variable to distinguish ideological positioning from populist predispositions in the 2025 models.

The third group of independent variables captures perceptions related to satisfaction with democracy and experiences of regime change and modernisation. These variables focus on whether individuals identify themselves as winners or losers of the political transitions of 1989–1990 and the period after 2010. Drawing on existing scholarship (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019) populist attitudes are expected to be more prevalent among individuals who perceive themselves as disadvantaged by processes of political and economic transformation.

Democratic dissatisfaction is widespread in both survey waves, but its partisan structure changes markedly over time. In 2010, dissatisfaction (coded as 1–2 on the 1–5 scale) is high across partisan groups, including among Fidesz supporters (61.7%), while it is comparatively lower among supporters of left-wing parties (41.6%). By 2025, dissatisfaction becomes strongly polarised: opposition and non-aligned publics report extremely high levels (left-wing parties: 96.0%, other parties: 97.4%, TISZA: 99.0%, non-partisans: 86.0%), whereas Fidesz supporters stand out as markedly less dissatisfied (7.1%).

The full response distribution confirms this pattern, with Fidesz supporters concentrated in the satisfied categories (4–5). In pooled models controlling for

age, gender, education, and residence in the capital region, the year-by-partisanship interaction is large and highly significant ($F(4, 2277) = 71.71$, $p < .001$), confirming sharply diverging trajectories of democratic dissatisfaction across partisan publics.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that by 2025 evaluations of democratic performance are closely aligned with regime support versus opposition, rather than reflecting a shared assessment across the electorate.

We structure the analysis in two stages. First, we use UNIANOVA models to track changes between 2010 and 2025 in the three harmonised populist-aligned items, both in the electorate as a whole and across partisan publics. Second, we turn to the 2025 survey and estimate OLS models to examine the correlates of populism as a composite outcome.

OLS provides an adequate fit for the 2025 composite scale (an eight-item index), as the distribution shows only mild departures from normality (skewness = -0.59 ; kurtosis = -0.47). For these models, we standardise both the dependent variable and all predictors prior to estimation.

To ensure comparability across descriptive, composition-standardised, and pooled analyses, different weights are applied for different purposes. Wave-specific post-stratification weights are used for descriptive analyses (2010: w_{2010} ; 2025: w_{2025}). As a robustness check, the 2010 sample is recalibrated to 2025 population margins using raking (w_{2010_to2025}).

For pooled models testing wave differences and wave-by-group interactions, wave-normalised pooled weights (w_{wave_norm}) are applied to ensure that the larger 2025 sample does not mechanically dominate the estimates.

Results

Persistence and reconfiguration of populist-aligned attitudes (2010–2025)

To test H1, we analyse three populist-aligned attitudinal indicators available in both survey waves: cultural protectionism, a sovereigntist “own path versus the West” orientation, and preferences for leader-centred representation. We pool the two surveys, apply wave-normalised post-stratification weights, and estimate UNIANOVA models controlling for age group, gender, educational attainment, and residence in the capital region. Table A4 reports adjusted marginal means with 95% confidence intervals by partisan public and survey wave, while [Figure 3](#) provides a visual representation of these patterns. The underlying adjusted means and confidence intervals are reported in online Appendix Table A4.

It is important to note that the three harmonised indicators capture specific and analytically distinct dimensions of populist alignment – namely cultural protectionism, sovereignty orientation, and leader-centred representation – whereas the eight-item ideational battery used in the 2025 survey captures a broader people – elite antagonistic and anti-compromise disposition. Consequently, temporal trends in the harmonised indicators and in the 2025 populism index should not be expected to move in parallel.

No single “more or less populist” trend – populist alignment re-sorts across dimensions and blocs

Across the three indicators, we do not observe a single national trajectory in which Hungarian society becomes uniformly more or less populist over time. Instead, populist-aligned attitudes evolve both in their substantive content and in their distribution across partisan publics.

For each of the three items, the interaction between survey wave and partisan affiliation is statistically significant (cultural protectionism: $F(4, 2302) = 9.78, p < .001$; sovereigntist orientation: $F(4, 2321) = 49.88, p < .001$; leader-centred populism: $F(4, 2306) = 9.90, p < .001$), indicating that partisan groups do not move in parallel over time. Some publics undergo pronounced shifts, while others remain relatively stable, and the dimensions that most strongly differentiate partisan groups also change between 2010 and 2025 (see Appendix Table A4; Figure 3).

Fidesz: persistence with dimension-specific change

Fidesz supporters retain a clearly populist-aligned profile, but the direction and magnitude of change vary across dimensions.

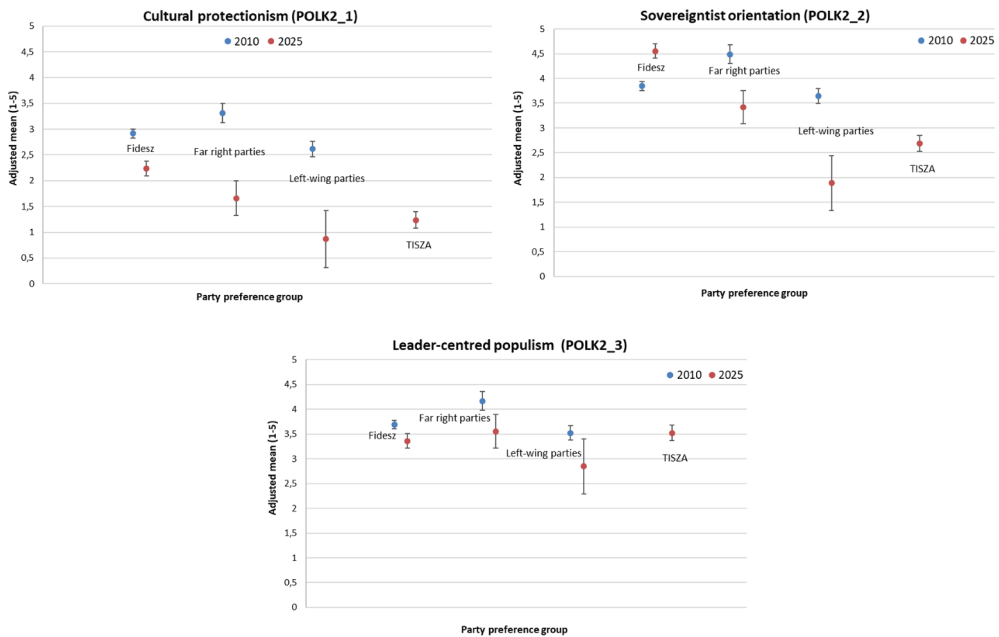


Figure 3. Populist-aligned attitudes by partisan public, 2010 vs 2025 (adjusted means with 95% CIs). (A) cultural protectionism (POLK2_1). (B) sovereigntist/anti-West orientation (POLK2_2). (C) leader-centred populism (POLK2_3). Notes: Points show adjusted marginal means by partisan public and survey wave from pooled UNIANOVA models weighted with wave-normalised pooled weights (w_wave_norm). Models control for age group, gender, education, and residence in the capital region. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. TISZA is not observed in 2010; therefore, its 2010 mean is not estimable.

Cultural protectionism (Figure 3(A)) declines sharply across the electorate, including among Fidesz supporters. Their adjusted mean falls from 2.92 [2.83, 3.01] in 2010 to 2.24 [2.09, 2.38] in 2025 ($\Delta = -0.68$). Despite this general decline, partisan differentiation persists. In 2025, Fidesz supporters still score higher than every other public analysed – above non-aligned respondents (1.54 [1.37, 1.72]), TISZA voters (1.24 [1.08, 1.40]), and the left-liberal opposition (0.87 [0.31, 1.42]). Figure 3(A) thus captures a pattern of simultaneous change and continuity: overall levels decrease, yet Fidesz remains the most protectionist-aligned bloc. The binary contrast model again confirms a significant change in the Fidesz – non-Fidesz gap over time ($F(1, 2309) = 46.14, p < .001$). (Adjusted marginal means are reported visually in Figure 3 and numerically in online Appendix Table A4.)

Sovereignist orientation (Figure 3(B)) shows the clearest regime-specific consolidation. Among Fidesz supporters, the adjusted mean rises from 3.84 [3.76, 3.93] in 2010 to 4.55 [4.42, 4.69] in 2025 ($\Delta = +0.71$). By contrast, sovereignist orientations decline markedly across all major non-Fidesz publics, including the far right (from 4.49 to 3.42), the non-aligned (from 3.83 to 3.30), and the left-wing opposition (from 3.64 to 1.89). In 2025, Fidesz also stands well above TISZA voters on this dimension (4.55 vs. 2.69). Figure 3(B) therefore captures the strongest partisan divergence across the three indicators and suggests that sovereignism is the dimension most firmly anchored in regime support (see online Appendix Table A4 for adjusted marginal means).

Leader-centred populism (Figure 3(C)) follows a different pattern. Among Fidesz supporters, the adjusted mean declines modestly from 3.69 [3.60, 3.78] in 2010 to 3.36 [3.21, 3.51] in 2025 ($\Delta = -0.33$), indicating that leader-centred attitudes remain present but are no longer intensifying within the governing camp. By contrast, this dimension becomes more broadly distributed across the electorate. In 2025, TISZA voters score 3.52 [3.36, 3.68], slightly above Fidesz supporters, while non-aligned respondents also register a comparatively high mean of 4.09 [3.91, 4.27]. Figure 3(C) therefore points less to regime-specific consolidation than to diffusion: support for personalised, leader-centred representation remains widespread, but it is no longer uniquely diagnostic of regime loyalty (see online Appendix Table A4 for adjusted marginal means).

Taken together, these results point to persistence with reconfiguration rather than simple continuity or decline. Fidesz supporters remain distinctively populist-aligned, especially through strong and increasingly differentiated sovereignist orientations and through their persistently higher position on cultural protectionism despite overall decline. At the same time, leader-centred populism remains widespread but becomes less uniquely tied to regime support by 2025.

Because TISZA constitutes the largest partisan public in 2025, we interpret its attitudinal profile by comparing it directly with both Fidesz supporters and the electorate as a whole. Rather than being classified as anti-populist, the TISZA electorate displays a selective configuration of populist-aligned attitudes: low levels of cultural protectionism, moderate sovereignist orientations, and comparatively high endorsement of leader-centred representation. Its location within the populist space is therefore differentiated rather than uniformly external, combining low scores on cultural protectionism and sovereignism with elevated support for leader-centred politics (Figure 3(C); see online Appendix Table A4 for adjusted marginal means).

Fidesz support anchors sovereigntism and protectionism, but not leader-centred populism

To test Hypothesis 2, we collapse party preference into a binary regime-support indicator (Fidesz vs. non-Fidesz) and estimate pooled UNIANOVA models including survey wave, regime support, and their interaction (controls: age group, gender, education, and residence in the capital region; weights: *w_wave_norm*).

The results indicate strong regime anchoring for the sovereigntist and cultural protectionist dimensions. Between 2010 and 2025, the regime – opposition gap widens markedly, with Fidesz supporters increasingly clustered at higher levels of endorsement while non-Fidesz publics shift downward (see online Appendix Table A4 and Figure 3).

By contrast, leader-centred populism does not conform to a one-dimensional “populism equals regime support” pattern. By 2025, leader-focused statements are no longer distinctive of the governing camp, and endorsement is widely shared across partisan publics.

This pattern anticipates the multi-party redistribution documented in Figure 3 and online Appendix Table A4. Most notably, the TISZA electorate combines low cultural protectionism and moderate sovereigntism with comparatively high levels of leader-centred endorsement, motivating the H3 analysis of cross-bloc diffusion and the reconfiguration of populist demand across partisan publics.

Who holds populist attitudes in 2025? Weighted OLS models

We model populist attitudes in 2025, measured by the eight-item ideational index, using weighted OLS regression in two steps: (1) a baseline model including individual-level controls, and (2) a main-effects model adding democratic satisfaction, partisan alignment, and perceived regime disadvantage (Table 2).

Continuous predictors enter the models as standardised z-scores, while party variables are included as standardised binary comparisons capturing the two major 2025 partisan electorates, Fidesz and TISZA. To align the specification with the article’s substantive focus on perceived disadvantage, self-placement as a “loser,” “neither” or “winner” in the 1989–90 transition and under the post-2010 regime was recoded into binary indicators of regime disadvantage, where 1 denotes perceived loser status and 0 denotes neither/winner. Full variable coding is reported in the Table 2 note and online Appendix Table A3_A.

Model 1 has limited but non-trivial explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.063$). In this baseline specification, populist attitudes are higher among younger and somewhat less educated respondents, and they are also associated with lower political interest. Gender and residence in the central region are not statistically significant.

Model 2 substantially improves model fit ($R^2 = 0.421$; Adj. $R^2 = 0.415$) and provides the main substantive result. The strongest predictor is democratic satisfaction, which is negatively associated with the populism index ($\beta = -0.308$, $p < .001$), indicating that populist attitudes are higher among respondents dissatisfied with how democracy works in Hungary. Net of controls, Fidesz support is strongly negatively associated with populist attitudes ($\beta = -0.225$, $p < .001$), while TISZA support is positively associated with them ($\beta = 0.072$, $p = 0.016$). This pattern indicates that, by 2025, populist attitudes are no

longer concentrated within the governing camp but are also meaningfully present in the new opposition electorate.

Perceived regime disadvantage also matters, although unevenly across the two historical periods. Respondents who consider themselves losers of the 1989–90 transition report significantly higher levels of populist attitudes ($\beta = 0.076$, $p = .003$), whereas perceived disadvantage under the post-2010 regime is positive but only marginally significant ($\beta = 0.051$, $p = 0.076$). Taken together, the results suggest that populist attitudes in the 2025 electorate are structured above all by democratic discontent, opposition alignment, and retrospective perceptions of political disadvantage.

As an additional robustness check, we estimated party-specific supplementary models for the major partisan electorates where subgroup size permitted informative estimation (reported in the online Appendix). These qualify the pooled pattern by showing that the strongest predictors differ across partisan electorates.¹

Discussion and conclusion

This study examines how demand-side populism evolves under long-term populist incumbency in an electoral-autocratic context. Focusing on Hungary between 2010 and 2025, the analysis reveals a pattern best characterised as persistence with recomposition. While the specific attitudinal cues through which populism is expressed – cultural protectionism, sovereigntist orientation, and leader-centred representation – shift over time in both content and partisan distribution, the 2025 ideational battery suggests that broader people – elite and anti-compromise predispositions remain widely available. Opposition realignment, most notably the rise of TISZA, redistributes this demand across

Table 2. Weighted OLS models of populist attitudes in 2025 panel a standardised variables.

Variable	Model 1 Baseline model			Model 2 Main-effects model		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Constant	−0.142			−0.021		
Gender	0.034	0.034	0.029	0.05	0.029	0.041
Age	−0.159***	0.046	−0.128	−0.146***	0.039	−0.116
Age squared	−0.117***	0.036	−0.108	−0.132***	0.03	−0.121
Education	−0.070*	0.033	−0.062	−0.059*	0.028	−0.052
Central region residence	−0.027	0.034	−0.023	0.039	0.029	0.033
Main occupational status	0.189***	0.04	0.163	0.185***	0.035	0.159
Political interest	−0.232***	0.04	−0.172	−0.154***	0.039	−0.098
Democratic satisfaction				−0.322***	0.051	−0.308
Fidesz supporter				−0.169***	0.036	−0.225
TISZA supporter				0.083*	0.035	0.072
1989–90 regime disadvantage				0.093**	0.031	0.076
Post-2010 regime disadvantage				0.065†	0.036	0.051
N (listwise)	1257			1126		
R ²	0.063			0.421		
Adjusted R ²	0.058			0.415		
SEE	1.151			0.923		
Model F (df1, df2)		11.960*** (7, 1249)			67.527*** (12, 1113)	
Durbin–Watson	–			–		

Notes: Dependent variable: eight-item populism index in 2025, standardised (mean = 0, SD = 1). Continuous predictors are entered as z-scores. Party variables are entered as standardised binary comparisons capturing the main 2025 partisan blocs. Models are estimated by weighted OLS using the 2025 post-stratification weight (w2025). Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. Full variable coding is reported in online Appendix Table A3_A.

partisan blocs rather than producing a uniform national increase or decline in populist attitudes.

H1: stability as persistence with re-sorting

H1 is best interpreted as stability in the availability of populist predispositions rather than stability in specific item content. Across the three harmonised indicators, populist-aligned attitudes do not display uniform temporal stability: cultural protectionism declines markedly, while sovereigntist and leader-centred cues evolve in more contingent and group-specific ways. At the same time, the eight-item ideational battery measured in 2025 reveals a high and internally consistent people – elite and anti-compromise disposition. Taken together, these findings support the interpretation of persistence with re-sorting: the core predisposition endures, but the dimensions through which it is expressed and the partisan publics that mobilise it change as Hungary's conflict structure evolves.

H2: selective consolidation among regime supporters

H2 receives selective rather than comprehensive support, pointing to dimension-specific consolidation among regime supporters. Among regime supporters, protectionist and “own path” sovereigntist orientations consolidate over time, consistent with the idea that incumbency relocates the definition of “the elite” toward external and supranational actors (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Pappas 2019). By contrast, leader-centred populism becomes less diagnostic of regime loyalty. By 2025, preferences for strong, personalised leadership are broadly shared across partisan publics, including among voters who disagree fundamentally over which leader should govern. The demand-side imprint of long-term populist incumbency is therefore dimension-specific, not a blanket intensification of populist attitudes. H2 should thus be read not as evidence that Fidesz uniformly preserves a populist electorate, but as showing that it selectively consolidates those populist-aligned dimensions that fit its long-standing sovereignty- and culture-centred repertoire, while leaderism diffuses across blocs.

H3: a hybrid populist electorate beyond the governing camp

H3 is supported in a qualified sense. In 2025, populist attitudes are most clearly associated with dissatisfaction with democracy, perceived regime disadvantage, and support within the new mass opposition electorate, especially among TISZA voters. This indicates that populist demand is not confined to regime supporters but extends across partisan blocs once opposition realignment creates a credible anti-incumbent pole.

This pattern fits closely with Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert's (2019) view of the “populist citizen”, according to which populist attitudes operate as a relatively broad demand-side predisposition that can be mobilised and channelled in different partisan directions. In the Hungarian case, however, that predisposition is channelled through a markedly polarised and asymmetrical regime context. Rather than being anchored in a single partisan constituency, populist attitudes appear to be organised by how citizens relate to the regime, evaluate the democratic order, and locate themselves within the political realignment of the 2020s. In that sense, the evidence is most consistent with a hybrid

populist electorate in which demand-side populist predispositions are distributed across blocs but are politically expressed in different ways depending on partisan alignment, evaluations of the democratic order, and perceived regime disadvantage. While this interaction helps refine our interpretation of how different attitudinal dimensions and political experiences combine, its empirical contribution is modest in magnitude ($\Delta R^2 \approx .005$). It should therefore be interpreted as a refinement of the broader pattern rather than as a substantively large effect.

What Hungary adds to comparative debates

The Hungarian case contributes to three broader debates in the study of post-socialist politics and electoral autocracy.

First, it advances understanding of demand-side populism under long-term populist incumbency. Prolonged exposure to a governing populist interpretive framework does not lead to a straightforward decline in populist orientations among loyalists. Instead, it produces selective consolidation – most clearly in sovereigntist and protectionist dimensions – alongside cross-bloc diffusion of other elements, such as leaderism. This pattern supports the view that populist incumbents can remain “anti-elite” by continuously redefining the elite and recoding institutional constraints as forms of external domination.

Second, the findings speak to debates on realignment and the redistribution of populist demand. The emergence of TISZA matters not only electorally but also attitudinally. Once a credible challenger appears in an electoral-autocratic setting, populist predispositions can be redirected toward anti-incumbent mobilisation rather than remaining anchored in regime support. This insight complements existing work on opposition adaptation under competitive authoritarianism by showing that realignment reshapes not only vote choice but also citizens’ perceptions of who constitutes “the elite.”

Third, the analysis links populist attitudes to regime settlements and their perceived distributive consequences. By operationalising perceived regime disadvantage in relation to both the 1989–90 transition and the post-2010 period, the study connects demand-side populism to positional disadvantage across successive political orders. This represents a distinctly post-socialist mechanism, tying populist demand to the long shadow of transition and the contested legitimacy of the post-2010 transformation, rather than to generic accounts of globalisation backlash.

Limitations and how we read the evidence

Three limitations qualify how we interpret the evidence.

First, the 2010–2025 comparison relies on three harmonised indicators rather than an identical attitudinal battery, and the two surveys also differ in sampling mode: the 2010 data come from a probability-based face-to-face survey, whereas the 2025 data come from an online CAWI survey based on targeted recruitment. These design differences may affect absolute attitudinal levels. Differences in survey mode may also shape responses to attitudinal items: face-to-face interviews can amplify social desirability pressures, whereas self-administered online surveys reduce interviewer effects but may increase acquiescence or more polarised response patterns (Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau 2008). As a result, such mode-

related effects may influence observed levels of agreement across waves, even though relative differences between partisan groups are likely to be more robust. Accordingly, the longitudinal comparison is best read as evidence of relative re-sorting across dimensions and partisan publics rather than as a mode-free estimate of national trend change.

Second, the full 2025 populism battery was placed in the final third of the questionnaire, resulting in selective completion of the module. Although weighting partly mitigates this imbalance, additional item-level checks suggest that the broader substantive picture is dimension-specific rather than identical across all indicators. This does not overturn the main index-based result, but it does indicate that selective completion interacts with the fact that the harmonised items capture politically distinct components of populist-aligned attitudes. Estimates based on the full battery should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Third, the 2025 evidence is cross-sectional, so the associations we identify are best understood as structuring relationships rather than causal effects. Taken together, these limitations do not negate the persistence-with-recomposition conclusion, but they do suggest caution in interpreting absolute levels and point to the value of future research using harmonised panels and more fully comparable batteries.

Conclusion

This article traced the evolution of demand-side populism under long-term populist governance in Hungary between 2010 and 2025. Three conclusions stand out. First, Hungary does not follow a single national trajectory of becoming either more or less populist; instead, populist-aligned attitudes reconfigure across dimensions and re-sort across partisan publics. While aggregate endorsement of the three comparable items generally declines, the central evidence lies in the differentiated trajectories of partisan blocs and in the changing content of the cues that separate them over time.

Second, the governing camp exhibits persistence in a selective form. Fidesz supporters remain strongly aligned with sovereigntist “own path” cues and relatively more protectionist than other publics, consistent with accounts of governing populism that emphasise the strategic relocation of elite blame toward external and supranational actors (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Pappas 2019). Leader-centred preferences, however, are no longer distinctive of regime support by 2025; they appear widely shared, suggesting that leaderism can diffuse as a general solution template in a low-trust, institutionally contested environment.

Third, by 2025, Hungary displays a hybrid populist electorate. Populist attitudes are not confined to the incumbent’s supporters but are clearly present within the largest opposition public, TISZA. In line with the “populist citizen” framework, party alignments channel a broader predisposition rather than fully constituting it (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2019): populist attitudes are associated with democratic dissatisfaction, are lower among Fidesz supporters and higher among TISZA supporters, and are also linked to perceived regime disadvantage, especially in relation to the 1989–90 transition. TISZA’s electorate appears selectively populist – low on protectionism and sovereigntist cues, but comparatively high on leader-centred claims and moralised representation.

While the Hungarian case provides analytically useful insights into the evolution of demand-side populism under long-term populist incumbency, the findings should not be treated as automatically generalisable across all post-socialist contexts, which differ substantially in institutional trajectories and patterns of political competition. What the Hungarian case demonstrates is that long-term populist rule does not exhaust populist demand; rather, it reshapes and redistributes it across competing political camps as new challengers emerge.

Note

1. The party-specific supplementary models qualify the pooled results in an important way. Within the Fidesz electorate, populist attitudes are more strongly associated with perceived regime disadvantage across both periods than with democratic satisfaction. Within the TISZA electorate, by contrast, democratic satisfaction is not a significant within-group predictor; instead, variation in populist attitudes is more strongly associated with age, education, occupational status, and political interest. Taken together, these findings suggest that the strong role of democratic satisfaction in the pooled model reflects, at least in part, differences between partisan electorates rather than uniform within-group dynamics.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Post-Soviet Affairs* for their insightful comments and constructive feedback, which significantly improved the manuscript.


Author contributions

CRedit: **Andrea Szabó**: Investigation, Methodology, Resources; **Annamária Sebestyén**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Balázs Böcskei**: Conceptualization.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Andrea Szabó  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7181-287X>
Annamária Sebestyén  <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-3163-9573>
Balázs Böcskei  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7524-2720>

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to data protection restrictions but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

- Ádám, Zoltán, and András Bozóki. 2016. "State and Faith: Right-Wing Populism and Nationalized Religion in Hungary. Intersections." *East European Journal of Society and Politics* 2 (1). Apr. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v2i1.143>
- Aslanidis, Paris. 2015. "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective." *Political Studies* 64 (1): 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12224>
- Batory, Agnes. 2016. "Populists in Government? Hungary's "System of National Cooperation"." *Democratization* 23 (2): 283–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1076214>
- Bene, Márton, and Z. Boda. 2023. "A Safety Net Against Populism? An Investigation of the Interaction Effect of Political Efficacy and Democratic Capacities on Populist Attitudes." *Political Research Exchange* 5 (1): 2220385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2220385>
- Benedek, István. 2025a. "Polarizing Transition? Opposition Strategies and the Rise of Péter Magyar and the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) in Hungary." *Comparative European Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-026-00460-z>
- Benedek, István. 2025b. "Populist Autocratization and Populist Electoral Autocracies: Towards a Unified Conceptual Framework." *Comparative European Politics* 23 (3): 331–352. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00401-8>
- Böcskei, Balázs. 2022. "Governing Populism – The Discursive Populism of Fidesz." *Aufstand der Außenseiter*: 385–400. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845297996-385>
- Canovan, Margaret. 1999. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47 (1): 2–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184>
- Cleary, Matthew R., and Aykut Öztürk. 2022. "When Does Backsliding Lead to Breakdown? Uncertainty and Opposition Strategies in Democracies at Risk." *Perspectives on Politics* 20 (1): 205–221. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720003667>
- Coman, Ramona. 2024. "Backsliding Populist Governments in the Council: The Case of the Hungarian Fidesz." *Politics & Governance* 12:12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8161>
- Engesser, Sven, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser, and Florin Büchel. 2017. "Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology." *Information Communication & Society* 20 (8): 1109–1126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2016.1207697>
- Enyedi, Zsolt. 2016. "Paternalist Populism and Illiberal Elitism in Central Europe." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21 (1): 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1105402>
- Enyedi, Zsolt. 2020. "Right-Wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe." *East European Politics* 36 (3): 363–377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787162>
- Enyedi, Zsolt, and Benoit Kenneth. 2011. "Kritikus választásA magyar pártrendszer átrendeződése a bal-jobb dimenzióban. [Critical Election 2010: The Realignment of the Hungarian Party System Along the Left-Right Axis]." In *Új képlet. A 2010-es választások Magyarországon*, edited by Zsolt Enyedi, Andrea Szabó, and Róbert Tardos, 17–42. Budapest, DKMKA.
- Gamboa, Laura. 2022. *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greskovits, Béla. 1993. "A gazdasági alkalmazkodás vesztesei és a kompenzáció." [Losers of economic adjustment and compensation]. *Európa Fórum* 3 (3): 57–79.
- Greskovits, Béla. 1996. "A tiltakozás és a türelem politikai gazdaságtanáról [On the political economy of protest and patience]." *Külgazdaság* 40 (7–8): 78–88.
- Hawkins, Kirk A., Scott Riding, and Cas Mudde. 2012. "Measuring Populist Attitudes." *Working Paper Series on Political Concepts*, ECPR Committee on Concepts and Methods.
- Hawkins, Kirk A., and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. "What the (Ideational) Study of Populism Can Teach Us, and What It Can't." *Swiss Political Science Review* 23 (4): 526–542. Portico. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12281>
- Huszár, Ákos. 2025. "Class Voting in Illiberal Hungary." *Europe-Asia Studies* 77 (5): 750–772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2511055>
- Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yptach Lelkes. 2012. "Affect, Not Ideology." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76 (3): 405–431. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038>

- Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, and Steven M. Van Hauwaert. 2019. "The Populist Citizen: Empirical Evidence from Europe and Latin America." *European Political Science Review* 12 (1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773919000262>
- Knight, Alan. 1998. "Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (2): 223–248. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022216x98005033>
- Kovarek, Dániel. 2025. "Elite Defection and Opposition Realignment in Hungary: Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) in the 2024 European Parliamentary Elections." *East European Politics*, online first. 41 (2): 263–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2025.2468693>
- Kreuter, Frauke, Stanley Presser, and Roger Tourangeau. 2008. "Social Desirability Bias in CATI, IVR, and Web Surveys: The Effects of Mode and Question Sensitivity." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72 (5): 847–865. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfn063>
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Littvay, Levente, Jennifer McCoy, and Gábor Simonovits. 2024. "It's Not Just Trump: Americans of Both Parties Support Liberal Democratic Norm Violations More Under Their Own President." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 88 (3): 1044–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfae042>
- McCoy, Jennifer, and Somer. Murat. 2024. "Polarization and Autocratization." In *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*, edited by A. Croissant and L. Tomini, 134–153. Abingdon, Oxon (UK): Routledge.
- McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. 2019. "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (1): 234–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782>
- McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. 2021. "Overcoming Polarization." *Journal of Democracy* 32 (1): 6–21.
- Mike, Károly. 2014. "Az antikommunizmuson túl [Beyond anti-communism]." *Kommentár* 8 (3): 3–14.
- Moffit, Benjamin., and Simon Tormey. 2014. "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style." *Political Studies* 62 (2): 381–397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12032>
- Mos, Martijn, and Igor Macedo Piovezan. 2024. "Leadership in International Populism: How Viktor Orbán's Hungary Shows the Way." *New Perspectives* 32 (4): 329–346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825x241282599>
- Mudde, Cas. 2004. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39 (4): 541–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2012. "Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis." In *Populism in Europe and the Americas. Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* edited by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 1–26. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Palonen, Emilia. 2009. "Political Polarisation and Populism in Contemporary Hungary." *Parliamentary Affairs* 62 (2): 318–334. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsn048>
- Pappas, S. Takis. 2019. "Populist in Power." *Journal of Democracy* 30 (2): 70–84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0026>
- Patkós, Veronika, and Plesz Bendegúz. 2025. "Does Political Polarisation Undermine Democratic Accountability? Evidence from 28 European Democracies." *West European Politics* 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2025.2543600>
- Rooduijn, Matthijs. 2018. "State of the Field: How to Study Populism and Adjacent Topics? A Plea for Both More and Less Focus." *European Journal of Political Research* 58 (1): 362–372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12314>
- Rooduijn, Matthijs, Sarah L. De Lange, and Wouter Van der Brug. 2014. "A Populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic Contagion by Populist Parties in Western Europe." *Party Politics* 20 (4): 563–575. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811436065>
- Rueda, Daniel. 2020. "Is Populism a Political Strategy? A Critique of an Enduring Approach." *Political Studies* 69 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720962355>
- Rummens, Stefan. 2017. "Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, edited by C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy, 554–570. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Scheiring, Gábor. 2020. *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy: Authoritarian Capitalism Class, State, and Dependency in the European Semi-Periphery: And the Accumulative State in Hungary*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sebők, Miklós. 2019. *Paradigmák fogságában: elitek és ideológiák a magyar pénzügyi kapitalizmusban*. [Captive to paradigms: elites and ideologies in hungarian financial capitalism]. Budapest: Napvilág.
- Simonovits, Gábor, Jennifer McCoy, and Levente Littvay. 2022. "Democratic Hypocrisy and Out-Group Threat: Explaining Citizen Support for Democratic Erosion." *Journal of Politics* 84 (3): 1806–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1086/719009>
- Somer, Murat, Jennifer McCoy, and Russel E. Luke. 2021. "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies." *Democratization* 28 (5): 929–948. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316>
- Spruyt, Bram., Gil Keppens, and Filip Van Droogenbroeck. 2016. "Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?" *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (2): 335–346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916639138>
- Stanley, Ben. 2008. "The Thin Ideology of Populism." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13 (1): 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310701822289>
- Szűcs, Z. Gábor. 2019. "Democracy in Hungary? The Orbán Regime is Clearly Not Democratic." Publicseminar. Democracy in Hungary? - Public Seminar Accessed August 12, 2025.
- Tarragoni, Federico. 2021. "Populism, an Ideology Without History? A New Genetic Approach." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 29 (1): 42–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1979130>
- Weyland, Kurt. 2013. "Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left." *Journal of Democracy* 24 (3): 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0045>