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Shackle or hammer? How polarisation influences political corruption

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how different forms of polarisation shape political corruption through a comparative case study of Hungary and Turkey between 2000 and 2022. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data sources, the analysis traces four theorised mechanisms linking elite and mass polarisation to political corruption. Findings indicate that elite ideological polarisation can modestly deter corruption, but mass polarisation undermines accountability and thereby facilitates corrupt practices. Crucially, these effects appear to be conditional on regime context: the anti-corruption effects of elite polarisation are only observed during relatively democratic periods, while the corruption-enhancing effects of mass polarisation intensify as democratic institutions erode.

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Mass polarisation; elite polarisation; affective polarisation; ideological polarisation; political corruption; accountability

1. Introduction

Certain politicians and regimes seem to make little to no effort to hide their corrupt affairs. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's son-in-law and former gas technician have consistently ranked among the richest persons in Hungary (Forbes 2025). American President Donald Trump habitually accepts extravagant gifts – such as a luxury Boeing 747 aircraft, a gold bar, and a golden iPhone – from business and political leaders seeking his favour, and engages in various transactions that qualify as corruption by almost any standards (The Economist 2025). Such acts are presumed to incur electoral retribution through core democratic mechanisms. These and other leaders, however, show little concern, and for good reason: in polities characterised by deep and antagonistic societal divisions – that is, high levels of mass (affective) polarisation – many voters are reluctant to punish their preferred politicians for corruption and other norm transgressions, as they deem almost any means justified to gain an upper hand in the political rivalry (Hajnal 2026; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Svulik 2019). However, although the positive link between mass polarisation and corruption (and more broadly, democratic erosion) has

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received extensive empirical support (Hajnal 2026; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Svolik 2019), evidence remains inconclusive (Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023).

Polarisation can also limit corruption. Elite ideological polarisation may reduce corruption by raising the stakes of political competition and incentivising norm adherence (Brown, Touchton, and Whitford 2011; Testa 2012). However, this link is also disputed: others proposed an opposite mechanism whereby elite polarisation increases the costs of crossing party lines, undermines accountability, and leads to more corruption (Eggers 2014). In sum, the polarisation-corruption nexus remains complex and little understood (Hajnal 2024), not least because existing research relies heavily on large-n approaches which are ill-suited to tracing complex causal mechanisms.

Moreover – and potentially dissolving some of the apparent contradictions in the literature – the mechanisms linking different forms of polarisation and corruption appear context-dependent. The moderating role of the regime context – understood as the broad formal and informal institutional framework in which political actors operate – seems particularly important: recent evidence suggests that countries with weakened democratic institutions may be more prone to the harmful effects of polarisation (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019; Hajnal 2026; McCoy and Somer 2019).

Addressing these gaps in the literature, the ambitions of the present research are to assess (i) the effect of different types of polarisation on political corruption; and (ii) how the regime context moderates the latter effect. To that end, we carried out a comparative case study of Hungary and Turkey between 2000 and 2022. While sharing many similarities, the two countries also display substantial within-case and cross-case variation in polarisation, corruption, and regime type over the observed period, making them well-suited to serve the study's aims. In addition, both experienced sharp increases in polarisation during this time, allowing for an assessment of its effects.

This research thus contributes to the literature on polarisation and its effects on democracy and accountability (Hajnal 2026; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Patkós and Plesz 2025) by disentangling the complex causal mechanisms involved through qualitative work. It also advances scholarship on the drivers of political corruption (Dimant and Tosato 2018) and, relatedly, on the methods that authoritarian and populist incumbents employ to seize public assets and consolidate their regimes (Diamond 2021; Soyaltin-Colella and Csehi 2026). Lastly, by explicitly investigating the moderating effect of regime context through the comparative research design, the research also contributes to the literature on political regimes and regime transformations, and in particular, on the effects of de-democratisation (Croissant and Tomini 2024).

2. Conceptual framework

Corruption – most commonly defined as the use of public office for private gain (Transparency International 2025) – encompasses a broad array of practices, ranging from bribing police officers to a mode of wealth redistribution within societies, with largely different factors and consequences. We delimit our inquiry to political corruption – a systematic and large-scale appropriation of public goods by state elites (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016) – as the mechanisms through which different types of polarisation may affect corruption apply to political, rather than other types of (e.g. petty) corruption. Political corruption leads to diverse socio-economic and political adverse effects:

it fuels anti-establishment sentiments (Engler 2020), weakens political legitimacy (Dimant and Tosato 2018), and – primarily in less democratic contexts – is utilised by the ruling elites as a tool to increase their power and eliminate the remaining democratic constraints (Hajnal 2025). Accountability mechanisms – whether vertical (citizens and their representatives holding governments to account) or horizontal (oversight by independent state institutions) – constrain governments' use of political power (Lührmann et al. 2020; O'Donnell 1998; Schedler 2022), and thus play a pivotal role limiting corruption, as well as in the theorised mechanisms linking polarisation and corruption.

Political polarisation refers to the extent of division in political attitudes within a political community. Early research on polarisation centred on the policy positions of political elites, particularly along the economic left–right dimension, building on Downs' (1957) spatial model of electoral competition. Empirically, elite polarisation has been measured primarily through roll-call votes (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), party manifestos (Budge 2001), and expert surveys (Dalton 2008). Consequently, elite polarisation has been conceptualised largely in ideological terms, as increasing distance between elites' issue positions. In line with this tradition, this research uses the term elite polarisation to refer specifically to elite ideological polarisation.

Scholarly attention has subsequently expanded to polarisation at the mass level. Early studies mirrored elite-focused research by examining ideological disagreement among citizens (e.g. Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Converse 1964). From the 2010s onward, however, research has increasingly emphasised affective polarisation, defined as the growing tendency of citizens to feel animosity towards supporters of opposing parties rather than merely holding divergent policy views (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021). While mass ideological and affective polarisation may have similar political consequences, this analysis focuses exclusively on mass affective polarisation for reasons of conceptual clarity. Hereafter, unless otherwise specified, the term mass polarisation refers specifically to mass affective polarisation.

3. Theoretical framework

Different types of polarisation¹ may affect political corruption in contrasting ways, with some forms deterring corrupt behaviour, while others incentivising or facilitating it (Hajnal 2024). Compelling qualitative (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018) and quantitative (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021; Orhan 2022; Patkós and Plesz 2025) evidence supports that mass polarisation can undermine accountability and democratic processes and lead to higher levels of political corruption (Hajnal 2026). However, some recent survey experiments found no evidence for the effect (Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023; Voelkel et al. 2023), whereas Janssen and Turkenburg (2025) argue that mass affective polarisation and democratic norms exhibit a negatively curvilinear effect. Based on these insights, we delineate the following mechanisms through which different types of polarisation may affect political corruption.

The mechanisms described in the literature on the links between polarisation and corruption can be roughly sorted based on the type of polarisation they involve and the academic field they stem from. Rooted in economics and political economy, one set of mechanisms focuses on *elite ideological* polarisation; another set of mechanisms, primarily discussed in political science, focuses on *mass affective* polarisation. Theories rooted in

economics and political economy suggest that elite ideological polarisation can have beneficial effects on corruption (Brown, Touchton, and Whitford 2011; Melki and Pickering 2020; Testa 2012). According to this line of the literature, polarisation is thought to enhance political accountability through two main channels.

Mechanism (i): Elite polarisation reduces the likelihood of future coalitions among competing parties, which incentivises politicians to expose the corrupt practices of their opponents. This fosters both vertical and horizontal accountability as the exposure of corrupt actions provides information for both anti-corruption agencies and citizens, which, in turn, decreases corruption.

Mechanism (ii): Elite polarisation – in particular, programmatic differences – increases the stakes of elections; as parties become more ideologically distant from one another, the relative cost of electoral defeat grows. Because voters generally disapprove of corruption, engaging in corrupt behaviour reduces electoral prospects. As a result, when the stakes of losing office are higher, parties and candidates have stronger incentives to avoid actions – such as corruption – that could jeopardise their chances of winning. That is, polarisation makes corruption more politically costly and therefore less attractive to parties and politicians. From this perspective, greater polarisation can be expected to discourage engagement in corrupt behaviour (Melki and Pickering 2020; Testa 2012).

Quantitative analyses, focusing either on countries (Brown, Touchton, and Whitford 2011; Testa 2010) or states in the US (Melki and Pickering 2020), found evidence that elite ideological polarisation can limit corruption. Notably, the negative effect of competition on corruption – a critical assumption in the above mechanisms – is not unequivocal: as Kopecký (2011) argues, more intense party competition may incentivize clientelistic behaviour by incumbents in new democracies.

In contrast, theories grounded in political science focus on mass polarisation and its corrosive effect on accountability. Polarisation weakens accountability, primarily by undermining vertical accountability mechanisms: citizens become less willing to punish corrupt co-partisans, either because switching allegiances is too costly (an *instrumental* effect, see Eggers (2014)) or because partisan bias leads them to excuse norm violations (a *perceptual* effect).

Mechanism (iii): First, *instrumentally*, mass polarisation may raise the psychological and social costs of abandoning one's preferred party and switching allegiances (Svolik 2019). Even if they do care about corruption (and in a broader sense, democratic norms), the weight they dedicate to their party label outweighs other factors as they apply a "lesser evil" logic. This creates a partisan space of impunity, which reduces the electoral costs of norm transgression for politicians, subverts vertical accountability, and leads to more corruption.

Mechanism (iv): *Perceptually*, polarisation may increase political corruption by heightening partisan motivations in political judgment (Claassen & Ensley 2016; Druckman et al. 2013; Kunda 1990). As politics is seen as a high-stakes, zero-sum conflict, voters may justify corruption as a means to defeat opponents. This weakens vertical accountability and can lead not only to tolerance of corruption but, in extreme cases, to its acceptance as legitimate.

These effects are reinforced by patronage: polarisation encourages the appointment of loyalists (Kopecký, Meyer-Sahling, and Spirova 2022), expanding patronage networks (Spirova et al. 2012) and political control over state institutions and limiting both

accountability and access to information. When such institutions are captured, they can either help justify corruption for partisan voters – by offering narratives like “no prosecution means no corruption” – or prevent the public from accessing the information needed to hold politicians accountable.

The complexity of the above mechanisms – in particular, the fact that certain types of polarisation may affect political corruption with opposing signs – on the one hand, and the contradictory nature of empirical evidence regarding the presence or absence of these mechanisms across different samples on the other (Hajnal 2024) imply that contextual factors likely play an important role. Focusing on the polarisation-democracy nexus, a few analyses have considered regime characteristics that may influence whether/the extent to which polarisation leads to democratic erosion, including electoral and government systems, party system institutionalisation, and accountability mechanisms (McCoy and Somer 2019), and compared how the former mechanisms evolve across different institutional contexts (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Svolik 2019). Case-based evidence also suggests that the negative effect of intense competition on corruption – a critical link in mechanisms 1 and 2 – may be weak in non-established democracies (Kopecký 2011).

When it comes to the role of moderating factors of the polarisation-corruption nexus specifically, research is even more limited. A recent analysis showed that regime type moderates the effect of mass (affective) polarisation on political corruption (Hajnal 2026) and found that the effect was the strongest in hybrid regimes; weaker, but significant in democracies; and insignificant in authoritarian contexts. Applying large-*n* quantitative methods, however, the analysis could not consider intricate mechanisms through distinct institutional features that moderate the effect of polarisation on corruption.

4. Research design and research questions

In the empirical analysis, we focus on Hungary and Turkey between 2000 and 2022. They were both emerging democracies that, around 2000, appeared to be consolidating, yet they soon faced intensifying polarisation and corruption, eventually undergoing severe autocratisation under populist “strongman” leaders. These similarities allow us to hold constant a range of contextual factors – most importantly, democratic fragility and decline and populist leadership – while examining how variation in the type and trajectory of polarisation shaped corruption outcomes. Conversely, the two countries also exhibit significant within-case and between-case variation in terms of the key variables, which makes them suitable for both confirmatory and exploratory purposes (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

Moreover, the sharp increase in both types of polarisation in both countries and the relatively sudden and pronounced changes in mass polarisation and corruption in Hungary (and to a lesser extent in Turkey; see next section) make the two cases suitable to assess the effects of polarisation.

Starting the analysis in 2000 allows us to capture turning points of the dynamics of polarisation and corruption that form the core of this study. The endpoint, 2022, provides more than two decades of observation, including the consolidation of competitive authoritarian regimes in both countries. This period is therefore analytically appropriate to trace the emergence and consolidation of the mechanisms under investigation.

The research questions are thus formulated as follows:

RQ1: How did polarisation² influence political corruption in Hungary and Turkey between 2000 and 2022?

RQ2: How did the regime context moderate these effects?

We applied a comparative case study design combining within-case and cross-case analysis and relied on a broad array of quantitative (polarisation and corruption datasets) and qualitative (e.g. reports) data sources and insights from academic research. As for RQ1, we carried out within-case analyses and employed insights from process tracing and pattern matching (George and Bennett 2005) to ascertain the presence or absence of the four theorised mechanisms in the two countries throughout the observed period. Specifically, we first described how polarisation and political corruption evolved. We relied on both survey-based quantitative indices and qualitative evidence to track polarisation and political corruption, as recent contributions have emphasised the multi-faceted nature of corruption and the concomitant limitations of unidimensional corruption indices (Hajnal, Bartha, and Martin 2026; Jancsics 2024). Qualitative changes in *how* political corruption typically occurs – e.g. whether it is primarily hidden or overt – are particularly important for this research, since such changes may serve as cues for ascertaining the presence or absence of certain mechanisms (see next paragraph).

Next, focusing on trends of polarisation, corruption, and mechanism variables – elements of the causal chains linking the former two – we assessed the degree to which the empirically observed processes conform to theoretical expectations derived from the four mechanisms. For instance, one segment of mechanism (i) posits that corruption exposure leads to legal and electoral retribution. In practical terms, this implies that corruption scandals should be followed by legal consequences and/or electoral backlash. Empirical evidence of such consequences would provide support for this segment of the mechanism. Conversely, large-scale corruption revelations without tangible consequences would falsify the presence of the mechanism. To grasp mechanism variables, we relied on metrics of the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-dem; Coppedge et al., 2025) and qualitative evidence, depending on availability. Further details on the data sources are provided in the appendix.

As per RQ2, we refrained from forming explicit hypotheses and employed an exploratory perspective instead. To study the mechanisms across regime context, we delineated two periods – cases – in the two countries: a relatively democratic one in which democratic institutions were functional to some extent, and a competitive authoritarian one, characterised by competitive elections but a tilted playing field, hollowed-out democratic institutions, and captured media. Although the political regimes' transformations were gradual, there are relatively clear turning points that marked qualitative changes in both countries.

In Hungary, 2011 is widely considered the beginning of the decline of democratic quality: after securing a constitutional majority in 2010, Viktor Orbán began building his self-proclaimed “illiberal democracy”, systematically weakening checks and balances and the rule of law (Bogaards 2018; Kornai 2015). In Turkey, 2013 is generally considered a turning point in the country's visible democratic decline, marked by the government's harsh response to the Gezi protests and subsequent repression of fundamental rights (Somer 2019; see V-Dem electoral democracy index; Coppedge et al., 2025).³ Next,

based on a comparison of the four mechanisms' prevalence across the two periods in the two countries and additional pieces of evidence and theoretical considerations, we proposed a broad framework to account for the moderating role of the regime context.

5. Hungary

5.1. Polarisation and corruption

After a peaceful regime change in 1989, Hungary was widely regarded as a frontrunner of democratisation in the post-socialist region (Merkel 2010). Its political system was characterised by powerful checks and balances, an institutionalised party system, and intensive political competition (Enyedi 2016). However, by the early 2000s, the political landscape underwent significant transformations, with important consequences for different forms of polarisation. Most prominently, the multiparty system, where political parties originally represented a diverse range of ideologies and interests, was increasingly organised into two blocs, simplifying vote choice more or less to a binary competition.

In 2002, when the right-conservative coalition led by Fidesz – Viktor Orbán's party – lost the election to the Socialist-Liberal coalition by a narrow margin, it refused to concede, called into question the legitimacy of the new government, and began to apply hostile rhetoric and a polarising political strategy. While ideological distances between parties in cultural and social issues increased, differences in economic issues remained relatively stable (Enyedi 2006). At the same time, polarisation spread into society as cross-cutting cleavages aligned (Enyedi 2005), intensifying hostility between blocs, with mass polarisation increasing more sharply than elite-level ideological differences. In 2006, Fidesz lost again to the Left block, which was followed by a series of critical events, including a leaked tape in which the socialist prime minister admitted severe mismanagement and lying, followed by large-scale protests, the financial crisis, and

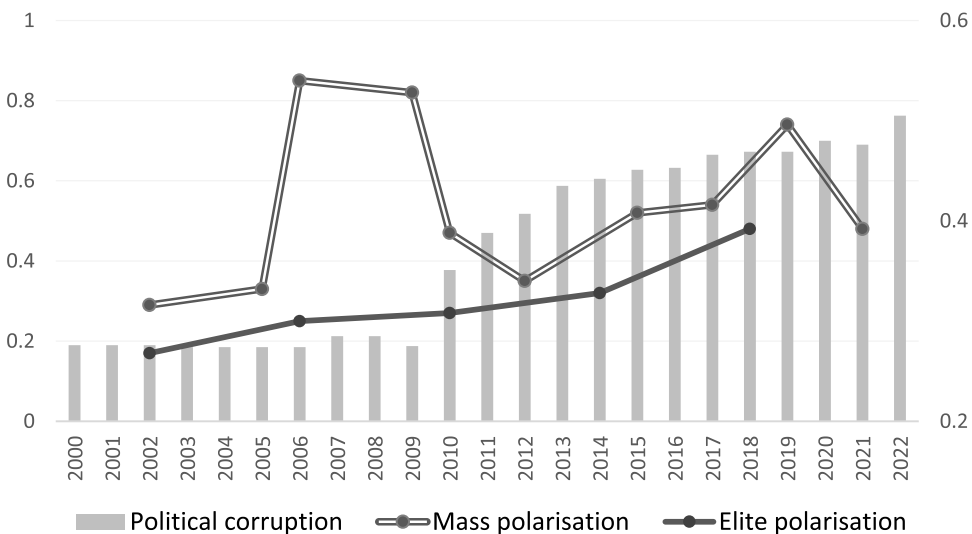


Figure 1. Trends of political corruption and different types of polarisation in Hungary. Source: compiled by the Authors based on various data sources, see details in the Appendix.

subsequent austerity measures. Skilfully applied by Fidesz, these events further exacerbated discontent with the socialist government and boosted mass polarisation (Figure 1). Fidesz won a constitutional two-thirds majority in 2010 and began to dismantle democratic institutions (for detailed descriptions of the process, see Bogaards 2018; Kornai 2015).

Following the 2010 election victory, a brief period of relative consensus emerged, reducing mass polarisation as many centre-left voters became disillusioned with the Socialist government and viewed Fidesz more neutrally. However, driven by the government's controversial anti-democratic reforms and toughening populist rhetoric, the decrease in mass polarisation was soon offset. Government narratives framed political competition as a battle between virtuous patriots and dangerous, even treasonous, adversaries, often scapegoating opposition parties, foreign actors, and minorities (Batory 2016). The hostility of the discourse is well exemplified by the statement of László Kövér, the president of the Parliament, who said in 2018 that whoever did not vote for Fidesz was "either intellectually hollow or morally worthless". During the 2010s, elite polarisation also increased as government and opposition blocs became more homogeneous and more distant from one another.

While corruption was already endemic before 2010, it was relatively hidden, dispersed and functioned through a variety of petty and grand channels. As the autocratic turn began in 2010, the nature of corruption changed substantially as it became a pivotal tool in the maintenance and consolidation of the regime (Hajnal 2025). Through a largely centralised informal network, corruption was applied as an instrument to funnel public assets – primarily, but not exclusively, from public procurement contracts – to members of the ruling elite and their family members (Fazekas and Tóth 2016; Magyar 2016). The growth of political corruption is also visible in country-level indices (such as V-Dem's; Figure 1). The regime made little effort to hide corruption. Rather, it sought to blur the boundaries of corruption, framing it as a legitimate effort to build a patriotic business elite⁴ and making political corruption institutionalised and often legal (Fazekas and Tóth 2016). Arguably, political corruption became even more prevalent, centralised and overt following a rift in 2015 between Orbán and Lajos Simicska, the most important businessman behind Fidesz, after which Simicska left the public space and most of his business empire was transferred to the nearest circles of Orbán, including his childhood friend and former gas technician Lőrinc Mészáros – the richest person in the country – and his son-in-law István Tiborcz.

5.2. Presence of the mechanisms

There is some support for the **mechanism (i)** before 2010, in particular in the first half of the 2000s. Although the party system was relatively stable, it was not without recent precedents that new coalitions emerged. Conversely, from 2002, as elite polarisation started to increase, and parties' rhetoric toughened, coalitions between major parties were no longer conceivable (Enyedi 2006). This likely incentivised parties to expose their opponents' corrupt practices, as underpinned by the slightly increasing levels of both vertical and horizontal accountability in the 2000s (Figure A1 in the Appendix) and the increasing importance of corruption scandals: from 2002, several influential cases of political corruption were exposed (mainly in public procurement) which were extensively

covered by the media and became one of the most salient topics, especially in the second half of the 2000s (Pápay et al. 2016; Szántó et al. 2011). This, to some extent, might have disincentivised political corruption. Conversely, we found no evidence for the presence of the mechanism after 2010. Given that coalition formation between parties of the opposing blocks had already been unthinkable in the mid-2000s, the increase in elite polarisation did not provide additional incentives for politicians to expose corruption. More than that, the potential of corruption exposure in limiting corruption became increasingly limited. Even though opposition politicians and independent media shed light on many unambiguous cases of large-scale corruption involving close allies and family members of the government, these resulted in neither criminal investigations (Freedom House 2022) nor in a significant loss of popularity. The absence of the mechanism is further corroborated by quantitative metrics: vertical and horizontal accountability decreased sharply in the 2010s in spite of increasing elite polarisation.

While it is empirically challenging to rule out the presence of **mechanism (ii)** in Hungary, it is arguably either completely absent or largely limited. While deepening polarisation did intensify the political competition, this appears to have led to the opposite outcome, prompting parties, in particular Fidesz, to engage in more norm transgressions, rather than to refrain from them (Kopecký, Meyer-Sahling, and Spirova 2022). That is, increasing elite polarisation may have incentivised, rather than constrained, corruption. Data on elite polarisation and corruption (Figure 1), following similar patterns throughout most of the observed period, also corroborate this account.

Until 2010, **mechanisms (iii) and (iv)** were not significant. Although mass polarisation increased significantly from 2006, it did not undermine vertical accountability (Figure A1 in the Appendix) and eliminate voters' concerns about corruption: neither did voters believe it was acceptable, as suggested by mechanism (iv), nor did they prioritise their partisan loyalty (at least in decisive numbers) over their concerns about corruption, as predicted by mechanism (iii). On the contrary, corruption was one of the central themes both in news media (Pápay et al. 2016) and the communication of Fidesz (then in opposition) between 2006 and 2010, and voters cared about it too: in 2008, 95% believed it was a major problem in the country, the second largest share in the EU (European Commission 2008). The broad dissatisfaction with the government, the large-scale protest (often focusing on corruption), and the decisive victory of Fidesz in the 2010 elections – characterised by the highest electoral volatility between 2006 and 2018 (Vegetti 2019) – also suggest that polarisation did not prevent voters from penalising corrupt behaviour. The absence of mechanism (iv) is further corroborated by a 2009 survey,⁵ which showed that government and opposition supporters perceived corruption similarly in spite of growing mass polarisation.

After 2010, this changed significantly. As mass polarisation grew steadily in the 2010s, vertical and horizontal accountability decreased, and political corruption became more widespread (Figure 1; Fazekas and Tóth 2016). Compelling arguments underpin that these trends not only coincided, but that mass polarisation led to more corruption through the causal chain of **mechanism (iv)**. From 2010, and especially from 2015, the government combined an extremely polarising communication strategy – depicting nearly all domestic and international conflicts as an “us-or-them” battle for survival (Vegetti 2019) – with reframing corruption as a legitimate tool in this battle to (re)instate a patriotic business elite.⁴ At least partially driven by these efforts, partisanship began to

influence citizens' judgment of corrupt practices (Márton and Mikola 2020), and Hungary emerged as the most corruption-tolerant EU country (European Commission 2020). Relatedly, vertical accountability decreased sharply throughout the 2010s (Figure A1 in the Appendix), and electoral volatility remained remarkably low in the parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2018 (Vegetti 2019) as Fidesz secured relatively comfortable victories, even as it increasingly engaged in large-scale and overt political corruption (see Civitas Institute 2021 for influential cases of political corruption). Based on a representative survey conducted before the 2018 elections, perceptions at that time already reflected a widening partisan divide: opposition voters rated Fidesz as highly corrupt, with an average score of 8.4 on a 0–10 scale, while its own supporters evaluated it more moderately, at 4.5.⁶

While evidence pertaining to **mechanism (iii)** is somewhat less compelling, it was arguably present in the 2010s, especially in the first half of the decade, supported by three key observations. First, the observed patterns of the main variables (Figure 1) are also congruent with this mechanism. Second, much of the electorate held deeply negative views of the opposition, dominated by the discredited parties and politicians of the previous government until roughly 2018. Arguably, crossing party lines was too costly for many, even if they disapproved of corrupt practices. Third, the government had not made systematic efforts to reframe corruption as a legitimate practice before 2015,⁶ which suggests that it trusted and anticipated that polarised voters' dislike for corruption would not result in electoral punishment and that they would still support the government following a "lesser evil" logic, as suggested by mechanism (iii).

6. Turkey

6.1. Polarisation and corruption

Following the short-lived and tumultuous coalition governments characterising the 1990s of Turkish politics, a new era seemed to begin in 2002 when the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) came to power with majoritarian support and a reformist agenda (Müftüler-Baç and Fuat Keyman 2015). In the early 2000s, AKP was praised for implementing much-needed democratic reforms following decades of military dominance over civilian politics. During this period, elite polarisation was slightly increasing but there was broad consensus among parties on European membership and the necessity of democratising reforms, and AKP's liberalisation agenda drew support from various groups (Mete-Dokucu and Just 2022). Nevertheless, its political Islamist roots were controversial for the secular republican elite and some segments of society (Somer 2019, 2020). To avoid backlash, AKP initially sought to appease different groups, portraying itself as a party with "moderate" Islamist values that did not necessarily contradict a secular way of life (Özbudun 2006). However, in informal settings, it questioned secularism more openly (Somer 2020). The secular–religious divide became more pronounced by the late 2000s, fuelled by a series of critical events (Somer 2019, 2020). In 2007, AKP's nomination of a presidential candidate with an Islamist background triggered mass "Republican Rallies", opposing the prospect of an Islamist holding an office seen as the guardian of secular values (Somer 2019, 2020). In 2008, AKP faced a closure trial on charges of being a centre of anti-secular activity (Tait 2008, July 31). The party reacted to these events by employing an increasingly divisive rhetoric, portraying politics

as a struggle between the old, privileged elite and the justice-seeking marginalized people (Somer 2020, 310). Moreover, Erdoğan used these incidents as a pretext to introduce a series of undemocratic measures aimed at consolidating his power.

Another series of pivotal events in the 2010s accelerated Turkey's democratic backsliding (for a detailed account, see Esen and Gumuscu 2016, 2021) and heightened both elite and mass polarisation (Aydın-Düzgüt 2019; Somer 2019, 2020). In 2013, the government responded to the Gezi protests⁷ with excessive use of police force. Erdoğan framed the protests as a foreign plot, calling the protestors a bunch of "looters" and "drunkards" (Açıksöz and Korkman 2013). By 2015, polarisation had peaked (Figure 2), and society was divided into pro- and anti-Erdoğan camps (Selçuk 2024). With the state of emergency declared after the 2016 coup attempt, government repression against all forms of dissent intensified. Political rhetoric became increasingly nationalistic and securitised, drawing on neo-Ottoman and Islamic narratives that portrayed Erdoğan as the guardian of national security (Demir 2025). At the same time, the opposition was systematically vilified and delegitimised, often accused of being foreign agents and traitors (Gultasli 2014, 13 June). In-group loyalty and out-group hostility deepened and, with the transition to the presidential system after the 2017 referendum, became further entrenched as polarisation was institutionalised under a highly centralised system of power concentrated around Erdoğan (Somer 2019, 2020).

While corruption had been pervasive prior to the AKP's ascent to power, its nature subsequently changed. In the 1990s, it was relatively dispersed, operating through fragmented channels of both petty and grand corruption (Bektas 2025). While AKP's initial policies were successful in reducing petty corruption and red tape, it did not address grand corruption as the party refrained from undertaking structural reforms (Kimya 2019). Despite presenting itself as a clean alternative to the previous governments, the party gradually cultivated its own business elite, which benefited from favourable government policies,

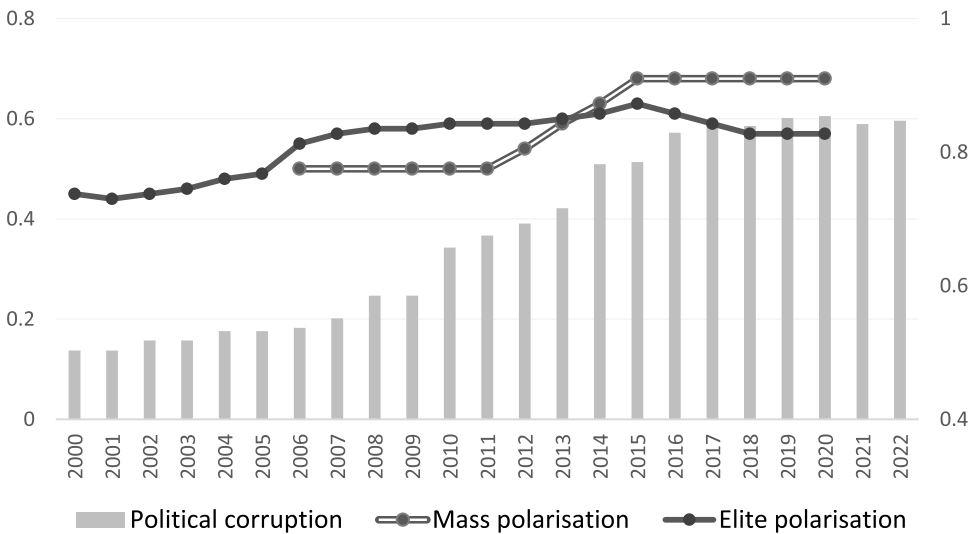


Figure 2. Trends of political corruption and different types of polarisation in Turkey. Source: compiled by the Authors based on various data sources, see details in the Appendix.

particularly in the construction, energy, and media sectors (Esen and Gumuscu 2018; Kimya 2019; Pamuk 2024). With the country's autocratic turn from the early 2010s, corruption became deeply systemic and centralised, serving as a crucial tool for partisan rent distribution and the maintenance of the regime. Meanwhile, the government leveraged its control over the mainstream media to hide its corrupt practices (Freedom House 2014).

6.2. Presence of the mechanisms

Mechanism (i) was largely absent throughout the observed period.⁸ Even though a number of cases involving AKP-affiliated figures⁹ were exposed between 2007 and 2013, and, in some instances, triggered judicial investigations, they resulted in neither meaningful legal nor electoral repercussions and thus failed to deter the government from engaging in further corrupt practices. In subsequent years, prosecutors investigating these cases were reassigned or dismissed, and their successors declined to pursue them, even as three individuals were convicted of fraud in German courts in one of the cases (Soyaltin-Colella and Csehi 2026). The gradual capture of the judiciary ensured that subsequent corruption cases did not lead to investigations, while the capture of the media prevented these cases from reaching the broader public (OCCRP 2025). However, despite the relatively wide media coverage of the alleged corruption cases during Turkey's relatively democratic phase, AKP's popularity continued to grow without any significant public backlash, and electoral retribution did not occur.

Quantitative metrics also corroborate the absence of mechanism (i). Despite growing elite polarisation, both forms of accountability declined, and political corruption increased throughout almost the entire observed period, but especially after 2013 (Figure 2 and Figure A2 in the Appendix).

Similarly, **mechanism (ii)** was either absent or its impact was minimal throughout the observed period. Like in Hungary, key variables do not match the mechanism's predictions: despite increasing elite polarisation, political corruption rose consistently (Figure 2). While increased elite polarisation arguably raised the cost of electoral defeat (Somer 2019), this did not translate into a constraint on corruption. On the contrary, and similarly to the Hungarian case, an opposite mechanism seems more plausible whereby AKP actively expanded its patronage networks and clientelist rent distribution to maintain its popularity, making corruption a structural feature of its political economy (Esen and Gumuscu 2021; Esen and Gumuscu 2018).

Assessing the presence of **mechanism (iii)** prior to 2012 is empirically challenging as data on mass polarisation are unavailable before 2006 and remain stable thereafter until 2012 (Figure 2). Conversely, the significance of the mechanism after 2013 becomes quite clear. As mass polarisation deepened, crossing party lines became increasingly costly, fostering a perception among voters that their political representation, civil liberties, and economic welfare depended on their preferred party remaining in power (Laebens and Öztürk 2021). For this reason, many government supporters, who were more hostile towards outpartisans than supporters of most other parties in Turkey (Aytaç, Irmak, and Söylemez-Karakoç 2025), were unwilling to sanction the government's democratic norm violations when doing so would have meant leaving their political camp (Somer 2019; Svoblik 2019).

This is best illustrated by the lack of electoral retribution following the 2013 corruption allegations, the largest corruption scandal involving the AKP. Despite these cases being known to the wider public, AKP secured the highest vote share in local elections in 2014, and a few months after, Erdoğan won the presidential election by a clear majority. While several factors contributed to this outcome, heightened mass polarisation played a pivotal role (Euronews 2014). The weak electoral punishment of corruption among the Turkish electorate is further illustrated by Transparency International's 2016 survey, which shows 42% of respondents to be unwilling to change their voting preferences by corruption allegations concerning their preferred parties, with this figure rising to 61% among AKP voters (Transparency International 2016). Key variables of the mechanism also confirm its presence during this phase: mass polarisation increased alongside political corruption (Figure 2), while both forms of accountability declined (Figure A1 in the Appendix).

While mass polarisation raised the stakes of losing elections, it did not lead political elites or voters to openly justify corruption as a necessary or legitimate tool for winning elections, contrary to what **mechanism (iv)** suggests. Unlike in Hungary, corruption is never publicly acknowledged (even under a different label). Instead, the government conceals how its politics is financed (Yıldız 2021, February 10) and strictly censors media coverage of corruption (Aydın 2018; Esen and Gumuscu 2018).

7. The moderating role of the regime context

Now we turn to synthesising the findings regarding the four mechanisms and proposing a framework to account for the moderating role of the regime context. We found limited support for the mechanisms linking elite polarisation to reduced corruption: while mechanism (i) was present in Hungary during the democratic period, it was not observed in Turkey at any point. We found no evidence for mechanism (ii) across the cases. An opposite mechanism seems more plausible, whereby large programmatic differences incentivise parties to divert public funds to gain an upper hand in the elections. Conversely, mass polarisation appears to eliminate constraints on political corruption in competitive authoritarian contexts: we found strong support for the presence of both mechanism (iii) and (iv).¹⁰

When comparing the findings across regime types, a clear pattern emerges: elite polarisation can, to a limited extent, constrain corruption in contexts where democratic institutions are relatively functional, but this effect disappears as regimes descend to competitive authoritarianism. By contrast, mass polarisation tends not to affect corruption in democratic contexts but yields a strong positive effect in declining or competitive authoritarian settings (Table 1).

Thus, regime context appears to play an important moderating role: democratic institutions enable the (limited) beneficial effects of elite polarisation and offset the harmful effects of mass polarisation. Put differently, a descent to competitive authoritarianism can offset the beneficial effects of elite polarisation and exacerbate the harmful effects of mass polarisation. In addition to the clear pattern observed across the cases, these claims are also substantiated by theoretical considerations and empirical cues. We present these below, proceeding by the mechanisms.

Table 1. Summary of the empirical evidence pertaining to the four mechanisms across countries and regime contexts.

			Democracy	Comp. auth.
Elite polarisation	<i>Mechanism (i)</i>	HUN	+	0
		TUR	0	0
	<i>Mechanism (ii)</i>	HUN	0	0
		TUR	0	0
Mass polarisation	<i>Mechanism (iii)</i>	HUN	0	+
		TUR	0	++
	<i>Mechanism (iv)</i>	HUN	0	++
		TUR	0	0

Source: Authors’ work. Notes: “0”: no evidence; “+”: some evidence; “++”: strong evidence.

Mechanism (i): The analysis confirms that the mechanism can be observed when core democratic institutions are in place. In Hungary, elite polarisation during the relatively democratic phase incentivised corruption exposures, which, in turn, likely fostered both vertical and horizontal accountability. In Turkey, while some exposed cases initially triggered judicial investigations, this partial accountability was progressively undermined as democratic erosion accelerated. In both countries, the regime change prevented subsequent corruption cases from having meaningful consequences as in a competitive authoritarian context, corruption exposure does not necessarily lead to any kind of retribution, since the legal system is co-opted and the captured media does not report corruption cases.

Our findings indicate that **mechanism (ii)** is not observed even in (relatively) democratic settings; hence, regime context is not a relevant moderating factor. In both countries and in both periods, while deepening elite polarisation and the heightening stakes of elections may have incentivised competition, this appears to have incentivised incumbents to expand rather than constrain corrupt practices.

Mechanism (iii) is likely to be present when the cost of crossing party lines outweighs voters’ dislike for corruption or, more generally, their preference for public integrity. The norm of public integrity, in turn, tends to be stronger in democracies than in non-democratic regimes (Hajnal, Bartha, and Martin 2026), which explains why non-democracies are more prone to the mechanism.

Mechanism (iv) holds that antagonistic voters approve of corruption as they deem any means justified to prevail. Reframing corruption as legitimate is difficult when democratic institutions are in place. It requires control over the media to shape narratives and an aligned judiciary to prevent politically costly investigations. This helps explain why mechanism (iv) was absent in Hungary’s democratic phase: despite rising polarisation, the government lacked the means to relabel corruption. By contrast, once Orbán’s government captured the media and prosecution, it could recast large-scale nepotism as a legitimate effort to build a patriotic business elite (see Sections 5.1 and 5.2). Importantly, however, our findings also indicate that mass polarisation does not necessarily trigger mechanism (iv) in non-democratic contexts, as exemplified by the Turkish case. Weak democratic institutions and high mass polarisation notwithstanding, Erdoğan’s government did not try to reshape voters’ beliefs about corruption. Rather, it relied on media dominance to hide it, and on partisan loyalty to avoid electoral retribution (mechanism (iii)).

Moreover, mass polarisation and democratic backsliding exhibit a reciprocal causal relationship: polarisation enables democratic norm transgressions and fuels democratic backsliding on the one hand; on the other, incumbents’ anti-democratic acts fuel yet more polarisation (Frantz et al. 2025). This reciprocal link further substantiates that hybrid regimes are more prone to mechanism (iii) and (iv) than democratic ones.

The framework about the moderating role of regime context is presented in Table 2. We (re) emphasise that its propositions should be viewed as theoretically and empirically substantiated hypotheses of broad mechanisms, rather than law-like universal rules supported by strong evidence.

8. Concluding remarks

Polarisation and corruption are both closely related to the crisis of democracy and constitute fundamental challenges in many countries worldwide. Different forms of polarisation have been shown to affect political corruption through several mechanisms with opposing outcomes (Hajnal 2024), but it remains unclear why certain mechanisms are present in some contexts but not others. Against this background, we assessed whether, and the extent to which, four polarisation-political corruption mechanisms outlined in previous contributions were present in Hungary and Turkey between 2000 and 2022 and explored the moderating role of the political regime context.

We found that elite polarisation may, to a limited extent, constrain political corruption by incentivising corruption exposure. Conversely, mass polarisation can also prevent voters from punishing corrupt politicians by increasing the costs of crossing party lines and rendering voters lenient regarding corruption. The analysis suggests that the regime context plays an important moderating role. Democracy seems to enable the positive effects of elite polarisation and mitigate the harmful effects of mass polarisation. Vice versa, formal and informal institutions in competitive authoritarian settings limit the effects of elite polarisation while enhancing the corrosive influence of mass polarisation.

This suggests an alarming pattern. Incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes often wilfully heighten polarisation to get away with corruption and other norm transgressions. The more authoritarian their country has become, the more they may succeed in doing so. They apply corruption, in turn, to further consolidate their grip on power and eliminate (remaining) democratic constraints, thereby creating a vicious circle.

Our findings are thus in line with extant research on the erosive effect of mass (affective) polarisation on political corruption (Hajnal 2026) and other socioeconomic and political outcomes (Kopecký, Meyer-Sahling, and Spirova 2022; McCoy and Somer

Table 2. The moderating influence of regime type on the effect of elite and mass polarisation on political corruption.

		Democratic context		Competitive authoritarian context	
Elite (ideological) polarisation ...	(–)	... constrains political corruption to a limited extent by incentivising exposure.	0	... does not influence corruption, as exposure has limited consequences.	
Mass (affective) polarisation ...	0	... does not influence corruption as democratic institutions and processes limit the harmful effects of polarisation.	(++)	... significantly increases corruption by creating a partisan space of impunity.	

Source: Authors’ work.

2019; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Orhan 2022; Patkós 2022; Patkós and Plesz 2025), but also offer a theoretical extension by identifying regime context as a key moderating condition. The findings also support extant evidence showing that elite (ideological) polarisation may incentivise corruption exposure and limit corruption (Brown, Touchton, and Whitford 2011), albeit to a limited extent. Conversely, we found no evidence across our cases for a mechanism whereby polarisation increases the ideological stakes of elections for politicians who, in turn, refrain from corruption (Testa 2012). The findings also relate to research on authoritarian (populist) regimes' tactics to grab and maintain power (Diamond 2021; Soyaltin-Colella and Csehi 2026) by disentangling specific mechanisms they apply to pre-empt retribution for corruption.

The analysis has two main limitations. First, admittedly, the empirical approach does not enable making unequivocal causal claims. However, we argue that breaking down the mechanisms into more tangible sequences and assessing their presence or absence by scrutinising these segments still allows for fairly robust findings. Second, the generalisability of findings drawn from two countries warrants caution. These findings are, however, framed as emerging hypotheses rather than solid evidence. Moreover, the analysis explicitly considers the role of the regime context, which enables fine-grained generalisations. Future analyses could validate these propositions and investigate the causal structures through which different types of polarisation affect corruption across diverse regime contexts in a larger set of countries, potentially also considering further intervening factors. Set-theoretic methods seem particularly fit for such purposes.

Lastly, during the review process of the manuscript in early 2026, the Orbán regime was ousted with a landslide victory by Péter Magyar's Tisza party, whose main campaign promise was an anti-corruption crackdown on the corrupt incumbents. While it remains to be seen how this effort will unfold, the success of the campaign suggests that certain combinations of factors may offset the harmful effect of mass polarisation on voters' indulgence towards corruption, leading to less accountability and more corruption (mechanism iv), even in a competitive authoritarian context. Notably, this does not mean that there is no such effect; only that other factors may outweigh it in certain – presumably special – historical instances. Future analyses will certainly address this puzzle.

Notes

1. While the mechanisms could, in principle, refer to the effects of polarisation as a *state*, they primarily relate to polarisation as a *process*. The underlying studies often measure polarisation at a given point in time – that is, as a *state* – and then estimate the marginal effect of a change in this state. In practice, such marginal effects are interpreted as the impact of changes over time; thus, the studies effectively investigate the effects of polarisation *as a process*.
2. *Polarisation* here denotes a process, that is, a change in the degree of dividedness over time (see previous Note).
3. Admittedly, the cases' temporal delineation and the regime labels are debateable: one might argue that Turkey was not "democratic" prior to 2013, or that Hungary did not become a competitive autocracy immediately after 2010. We argue, nonetheless, that the turning points are fairly clear and allow for a useful comparative framework.
4. András Láncki, president of the pro-government Századvég foundations famously said that "What is called corruption is actually Fidesz's supreme policy. What I mean by this is that

the government has set for itself goals such as the establishment of a group of domestic entrepreneurs, the building of the pillars of a strong Hungary” (Norberg 2015, 14).

5. Data sourced from a survey conducted by Median Polling Company in June 2009, involving 1200 respondents. The sample is representative of the population based on age, gender, settlement type, and education.
6. Data sourced from a survey conducted by Závecz Research in January 2018 on a representative sample of 1016 respondents.
7. The Gezi protests initially began as small-scale environmental demonstrations in response to the government’s proposed mall construction project on a public park in central Istanbul. However, it soon evolved into nationwide protests against increasing authoritarianism and restrictions on civil liberties, which lasted for approximately a month.
8. Available evidence seems to suggest that higher ideological differences do not make coalitions between opposing camps unthinkable; therefore, coalition likelihood is not a relevant factor in (dis)incentivizing corruption exposure in Turkey. This largely stems from the country’s high electoral threshold – 10% until 2022, later lowered to 7% – and the subsequent shift to a presidential system requiring an outright majority, which incentivised even ideologically distant parties to form alliances when strategically advantageous. That said, regardless of coalition prospects, major competitors did expose one another’s corruption.
9. The major cases of this period include the 2008 Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse) scandal, where funds donated to a Turkish-German charity were allegedly embezzled and transferred to AKP-connected media groups in Turkey; the 2008 TESCO case, where AKP deputy chairman allegedly received bribes to rezone Istanbul land for commercial development; and the December 2013 probe, where senior politicians and businessmen were accused of accepting bribes for construction permits and facilitating illicit money transfers to Iran to circumvent international sanctions (see Soyaltin-Colella and Csehi 2026).
10. We cannot rule out the presence of reverse causation concerning the four mechanisms, and in particular mechanisms (iii) and (iv). That is, political corruption may undermine democratic norms, fuel anti-establishment sentiments, and lead to a fragmented political environment, thereby increasing all types of polarisation (Hajnal 2026). Nonetheless, we argue that our empirical analysis, considering the evidence pertaining to specific causal links and the sequencing of related events, supports that causation runs in the direction described by the mechanisms. In effect, it is plausible that causation runs both ways and that polarisation and corruption exhibit a mutually reinforcing relationship.

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Appendix

Notes on the data sources used to measure corruption and polarisation (Figures 1 and 2)

In case of Hungary, elite ideological polarisation was assessed using Manifesto data (Leininger, Grünewald, and Buntfuß 2023). Given the extensive missing values for mass affective polarisation in Hungary during the period, we approximated it using partisan polarisation at the voters' level (Patkós 2023). Partisan polarisation indices are conceptually and empirically similar to vertical mass-affective polarisation, measuring differences in satisfaction with or approval of executives, such as governments in European countries (Patkós 2023) or the U.S. President (Jacobson 2013).

In case of Turkey, data on polarisation comes from van der Veen (2023). To assess mass affective polarisation, this paper uses CSES data following the method of Lauka et al. (2018). To measure ideological elite polarisation, it uses data from two expert surveys, CHES and CSES, and estimates based on the Manifesto Project.

Political corruption was measured by V-Dem's (Coppedge et al., 2025) index with the same name in both countries.

Additional figures

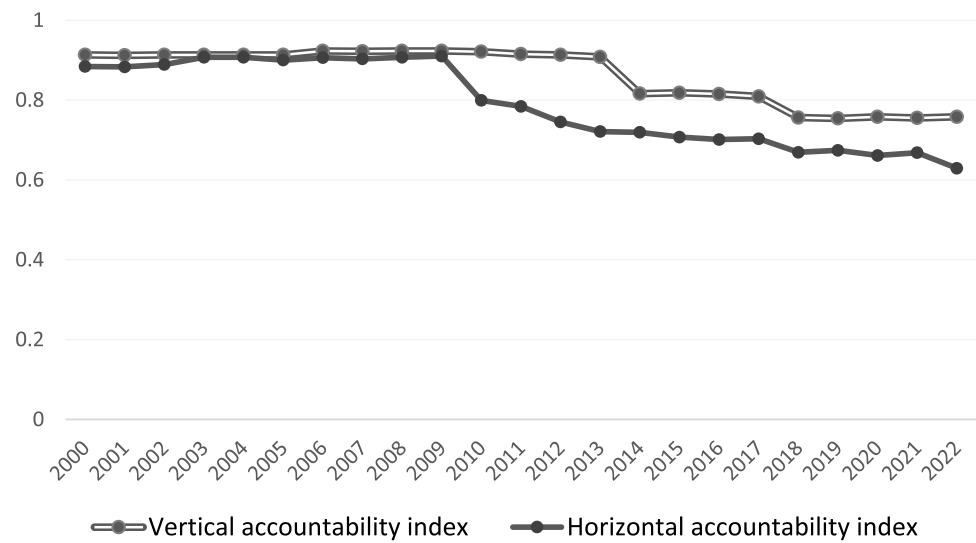


Figure A1. Trends of vertical and horizontal accountability in Hungary. Source: V-Dem Dataset, Coppedge et al. (2025).

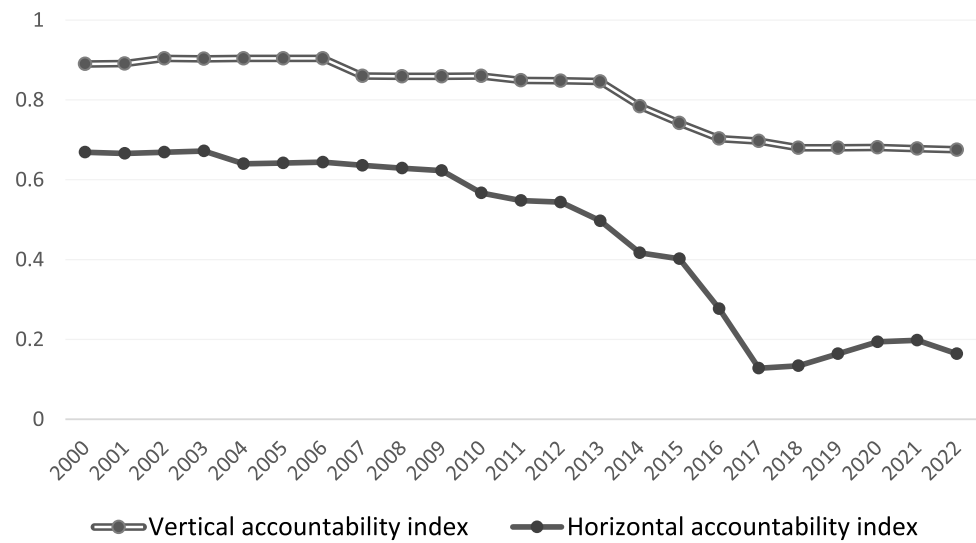


Figure A2. Trends of vertical and horizontal accountability in Turkey. Source: V-Dem Dataset, Coppedge et al. (2025).