

Political Polarization in Hungary

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Abstract

This memo discusses two topics, hence it is structured in two parts. In the first part I discuss political polarization in Hungary. The section starts by presenting some recent descriptive statistics showing the extent of Hungarian political polarization compared to other European countries, then it provides a brief description of the recent political history of Hungary (from 1990), and finally it discusses the specific features of polarization in Hungarian politics. In the second part I make a more general point about the implications of the use of categorization in political rhetoric for citizens' perceptions. The section starts with a brief discussion of categorization as a general cognitive process, then it describes how a group-symbolic use of "left" and "right" categories can lead to an accentuated perception of polarization by the public. Together, these two parts offer an overview of a top-down process by which elite discourse converts into individual citizens' perceptions of a polarized political environment.

Part 1: Polarization in Hungary

Hungarian politics is one of the most polarized in Europe, and it has been so since the early 2000s. As shown in Figure 1, at the time of the European Parliamentary elections in 2014, Hungary was the second most polarized political system in the EU, preceded only by Cyprus. This is an advancement from a fourth position in 2009 and a fifth position in 2004, although in absolute terms the value of the index in Hungary is always around 0.5 (on a 0-1 scale). The scores in Figure 1 refer to *party polarization*, and are obtained taking into account both the party positions on the left-right (as perceived by survey respondents) and their relative vote share. Note that, because of the way the index is calculated, a political system with a few small extreme parties will not obtain a high polarization score. Instead, when the largest parties take extreme positions on the left and on the right, then the main actors in the political arena are polarized, hence the index will score a higher value.¹

¹The index is computed by adding up each party's distance from the center and weighted by the party's vote share. Party positions are the mean left-right party placements assessed by survey respondents. The center is the mean of all party positions. Vote shares are normalized to sum up to 1 in each country. The index

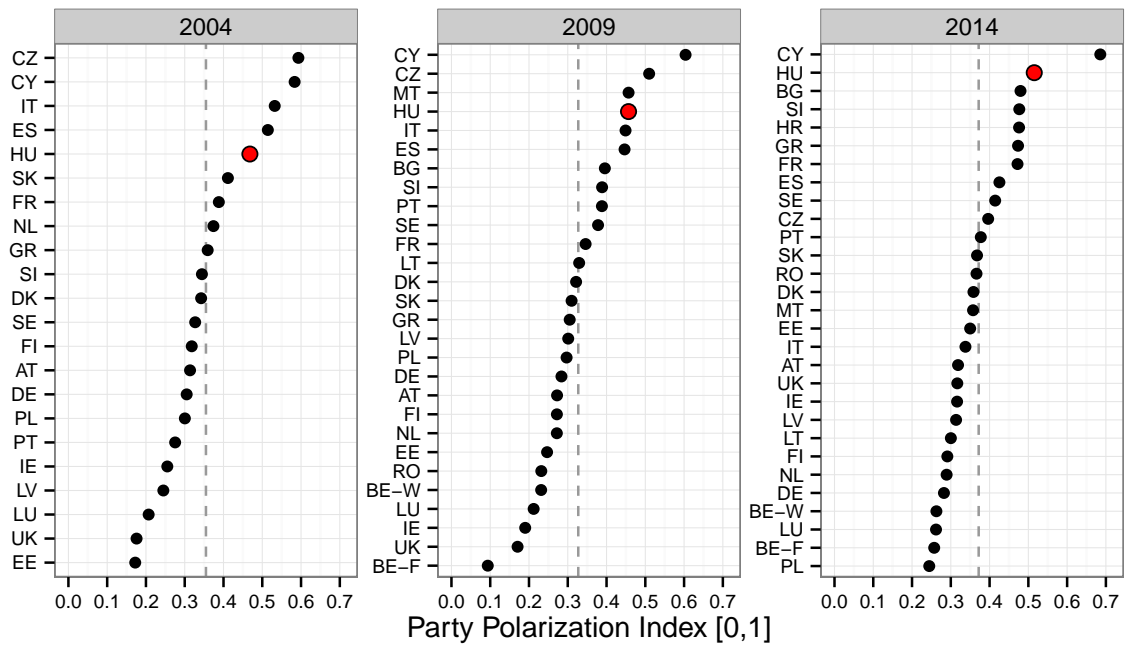


Figure 1: Left-right party polarization as perceived by the citizens among EU countries in 2004, 2009 and 2014. Dashed lines are the year means. Hungary is singled out in red. Source: European Election Studies.

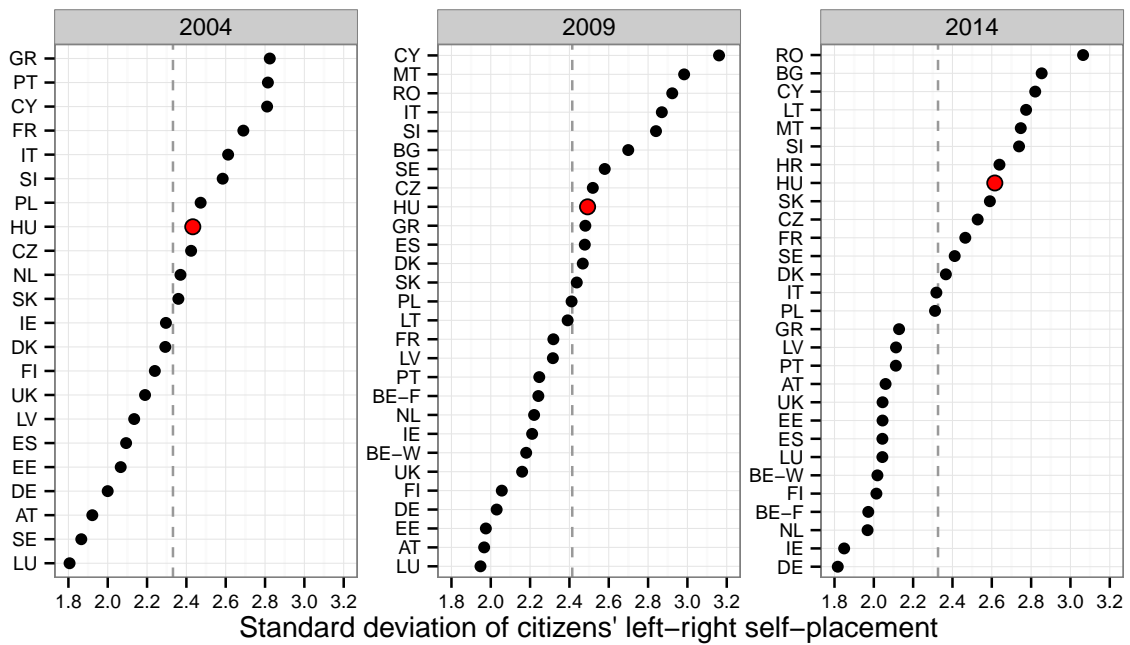


Figure 2: Left-right dispersion among EU citizens in 2004, 2009 and 2014. All self-placement scales are normalized from 1 to 10. Dashed lines are the year means. Hungary is singled out in red. Source: European Election Studies.

Looking at the political polarization of the Hungarian citizens, the picture is only slightly different. Figure 2 reports a rough measure of political disagreement among the mass public: the standard deviation of survey respondents' self-placement on a left-right scale. A higher standard deviation implies more dispersion along the ideological spectrum, while a lower standard deviation implies more homogeneity among the public's ideological self-identifications. Here Hungary is consistently positioned around the 8th/9th position, lower than in Figure 1, but always above the mean. Moreover, in absolute terms, the dispersion grew slightly between 2009 and 2014. Looking at the two figures we can draw the first tentative conclusions. First, if we compare Hungary to other European countries, both the political parties and the mass public are fairly polarized on the left-right. Second, the political parties are relatively more polarized than the mass public. Third, polarization seems to have grown from 2004 to 2014.

While these figures capture only recent developments, they follow up consistently what reported by other scholars. Angelusz and Tardos (2011) show that the left-right polarization of the Hungarian public became about five times larger between 1994 and 2009, with one great leap between 1998 and 2003, and one between 2003 and 2009. Körösenyi (2013) shows that the left-right polarization among the political elites roughly doubled between 2001 and 2009. Enyedi and Benoit (2011) show that party polarization as perceived by the citizens grew substantially between 2003 and 2009, despite a relatively stable degree of fragmentation (which nevertheless had dropped substantially during the 1990s, see also Tóka and Popa, 2013). In the next section I provide a brief narration of the events leading to the current situation.

Politics of Hungary, 1990-2014

The transition to democracy after the communist rule happened peacefully in October 1989, following one of the less rigid regimes in the region (see Enyedi, 2016; Herman, 2015; Palonen, 2009). The first two elections, held in 1990 and 1994, brought the same six parties to the parliament: the left-wing Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), heir of the Hungarian communist party turned social-democrat; the right-wing conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF); the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ); the agrarian nationalist Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP); the then liberal youth-party Fidesz; and the christian conservative Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). The election of 1990 produced a right-wing conservative government coalition consisting of MDF, FKGP and KDNP. At that time, competition was structured around three poles: the right, the left (the socialists) and the liberals (SZDSZ and Fidesz). However, mass electoral preferences did not reflect any underlying cleavage structure (Tóka, 1998). By 1994 the scenario had changed. The election resulted in a landslide victory of MSZP, which formed a left-wing/liberal government with SZDSZ. Fidesz remained in opposition, and joined the conservative nationalist bloc. This was a turning point to a bipolar structure of competition: on the one side, the ex-communists together with the cosmopolitan liberals; on the other, the anti-communists and the nationalists (Enyedi, 2005).

The following election in 1998 was won by Fidesz, and its leader Viktor Orbán became prime minister of a right-wing government together with MDF and FKGP. In 2002 it was

is weighted by the theoretical maximum polarization, i.e. two equally sized parties placed at the opposite extremes of the left-right.

again the turn of MSZP to win the election, this time by a very small margin over Fidesz (1%), resulting in another left-liberal government with SZDSZ. On that year, the parliament shrank to four parties, two for each camp: MSZP and SZDSZ on the left, Fidesz and MDF on the right. Moreover, in that period, Fidesz changed its strategy to a more aggressive one. On the one hand, it initiated a network of organizations called “Civic Circles”, which started organizing several political and non-political activities, like mass demonstrations, petitions, blood donations, fund raising campaigns, and so on (Enyedi, 2005). On the other hand, its rhetoric became more distinctively populist, with attacks to the elites, the banks and the multinationals, combined with a strong emphasis on national symbols (Enyedi, 2016; Palonen, 2009).

The election of 2006 was the first one to break the steady alternation between left and right governments, keeping the left-liberal MSZP/SZDSZ coalition in power. The campaign was characterized by a somewhat less populist climate, with a strong focus on economic issues and the convergence with the Maastricht criteria after the recent accession of Hungary in the EU (Korkut, 2007; Sitter and Batory, 2006). However, that was only the calm before the storm. On September 17 of that year, the recording of a speech given by the socialist prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány to other party members a few months before leaked on the national radio. During the speech, filled with swear words and strong language, the PM admitted to have “lied in the morning, at noon and at night” about the true state of the Hungarian economy, in order to win the elections². This sparked a wave of riots, which were suppressed by the police, and dropped the popularity of the left-wing government to an all time low. Moreover, the actual consequences of the economic mismanagements arrived soon, brought by the economic crisis. In 2008 the government accepted a “humiliating” rescue package from IMF, and initiated a number of harsh austerity measures, cutting social and unemployment benefits. In early 2009 Gyurcsány eventually stepped down as prime minister.

The following election in 2010 resulted in a landslide victory of Fidesz, which obtained 53% of the votes (MSZP got 19%, SZDSZ and MDF disappeared from the parliament). The election brought two new parties to the political arena: the green LMP, and the far-right Jobbik. While the former got just enough votes to pass the threshold for getting seats at the parliament, the latter got so much as 17% of the vote share. In fact, Jobbik had already scored a good result at the previous European elections, in 2009, obtaining 15% of the votes. The party, founded in 2002, gained momentum after 2006. The repression of the anti-government protests, the corruption scandals, and the consequences of the economic crisis, had increased the public’s sensitivity to anti-establishment right-wing propaganda (Enyedi, 2015). However, the party built most of his consensus over the Roma issue, which had been largely overlooked by the other major parties (Enyedi, 2016; Tóka and Popa, 2013). In October 2006, in a region in the north of the country, a Hungarian biology teacher was beaten up and killed in front of his two little daughters by a group of Roma villagers.³ The episode sparked outrage, and facilitated the party’s framing of the poor integration of Roma people in the country as a law-and-order issue. The poles of the political competition in Hungary were now three again: the left, the right, and the extreme right (Enyedi, 2016).

Fidesz’ decisive victory in 2010, combined with a fairly disproportionate electoral law, gave the party a “supermajority” of more than two thirds of the parliamentary seats. This gave the

²An English translation of the speech can be found [here](#) (accessed on February 26, 2016).

³See [here](#) and [here](#) for a narration of the episode (accessed on February 26, 2016).

party the power of make a number of important institutional changes, including the Hungarian constitution. During the first two years of activity, the party undermined substantially the system of checks and balances designed to limit the government's power. This implied neutralizing the Constitutional Court, eliminating the possibility for citizens to challenge a law's constitutionality (a mechanism called *actio popularis*), appointing Fidesz' members to the Election Commission, electing a new president, and setting the media under government's control by appointing loyalists to the newly established Media Authority and Media Council (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Herman, 2015). Moreover, the party gerrymandered electoral districts, making it harder for other parties to win elections in the future, and changed the electoral law to an even more disproportionate one.⁴

By the time of the following elections in 2014 another overwhelming victory by Fidesz was expected, if nothing else for the perfect machine that the party had built during the previous legislature. Moreover, the left bloc was highly fragmented. After leaving the leadership of MSZP, the former PM and author of the infamous speech Ferenc Gyurcsány had founded a faction called Democratic Coalition (DK), which became an independent party in 2011. Gordon Bajnai, the left-wing PM between 2009 and 2010, had founded the party Together (Együtt) in 2012. The two parties, together with other two small parties founded by former members of SZDSZ and LMP, joined forces with MSZP in a coalition aimed at contrasting Fidesz within the new highly majoritarian system. However, the alliance did not reach its goal. While Fidesz did not obtain the absolute majority of the votes (but "only" 45%) it could still get two thirds of the parliamentary seats thanks to the redesigned electoral law. The liberal-left coalition obtained almost 26% of the votes, Jobbik 20%, and LMP 5%. At the European elections, held only one month later, the parties of the left-wing coalition ran separately. This time, with the lowest turnout on record (slightly less than 29%), Fidesz obtained 51% of the votes, Jobbik 15%, MSZP 11%, DK 10%, Együtt 7%, and LMP 5%.

This is the scenario at the time of the most recent elections. Currently, party competition in Hungary remains highly bipolar, with the "left" and "right" blocs deeply divided from one another. However, both camps are also divided internally, to a lesser but significant extent. On the left, the MSZP/DK/Együtt coalition did not (yet) join forces with LMP, in spite of the strong majoritarian incentives of the new electoral system. On the right, Fidesz' government is opposed by Jobbik as much as it is by the left. However, the left-right categorization is still strong in Hungarian political rhetorics, and this is likely to make the between-bloc differences more salient to the eyes of the public than the within-bloc ones. Yet, such differences are not much dictated by substantive policies, but rather by the structure of alliances between parties, as well as by the way parties interact with each other. This peculiar type of polarization characterizing Hungarian politics is discussed in the next section.

Agency and the nationalist-cosmopolitan divide

The most important feature of political polarization in Hungary is the *central role of agency*: in Hungarian politics, polarization is rooted in elite discourse, rather than socio-structural cleavages. In general terms, cleavage politics refers to the politicization of social divisions. Parties can choose which social conflicts to bring into the political arena, and which conflicts to leave dormant. In Western democracies, class interests have been one of the crucial

⁴See Kim Lane Scheppele, "Legal But Not Fair" (2014), available here (accessed on February 26, 2016).

factors shaping partisan divisions since the industrial revolution. Although one may argue that this is less and less the case, divisions over economic interests still constrain party politics to a great extent in the West, providing a powerful source of meaning for political identities. Likewise, left and right often signal different preferences for redistribution, state regulation of the economy, taxes and social investments, and other economic concerns.

In post-communist countries, on the other hand, party initiative with respect to which social divisions to politicize was much less constrained at the moment of democratic transition. In Hungary, the actors chose not to emphasize economic or class conflicts, and to focus on cultural issues. The “nationalist-cosmopolitan” dimension has dominated Hungarian politics since the early 1990s, assimilating each time rural-urban, religious-secular and libertarian-authoritarian divisions (Tóka and Popa, 2013). This can be explained in part by the highly-reformist nature of the ex-communist party in Hungary. As Kitschelt et al. (1999) maintain «[b]ecause Polish and Hungarian politicians cannot polarize electoral competition around economic issues in the face of reformist post-communist parties that embrace essentials of market capitalism, they have sufficient incentives to construct a single powerful socio-cultural divide on which to display meaningful programmatic differences and employ those to attract voters» (p. 267). In addition, the institutional framework certainly played a role. The highly majoritarian nature of the Hungarian electoral system (even before the recent reform) provides strong incentives for parties to form coalitions, hence contributing to “squeezing” the space of competition into a bipolar-unidimensional structure (Tóka and Popa, 2013). While this does not account for why such a single dimension has to be cultural, it does explain why, once the first alliances along this dimension happened, it was very hard for other parties to emphasize alternative divisions.

The steady alliance between MSZP and SZDSZ since 1990, at the time of their opposition to the first MDF government, might have initiated this process. However, Fidesz was the actor perfecting it, unifying the fragmented interests of the right against the liberal-left camp. The first iteration of Fidesz was a radical, “alternative” youth party with a liberal platform. Its natural home would have been in a coalition with MSZP and SZDSZ. However, «[g]overnmental cooperation with the MSZP would have required from Fidesz the suspension of its anti-Communist rhetoric and the acceptance of a junior position in the government. Choosing the right-wing parties required toning down its liberalism, but this formula also promised much more weight for Fidesz in the alliance.» (Enyedi, 2005, pp. 703-704) Hence, from the early 90s the party started building a new identity, emphasizing its anti-Communist and anti-left rhetoric, establishing a pattern of alliances with MDF and other parties of the right camp, and steadily changing its ideological identity into a national conservative movement. It adopted a very aggressive organizational strategy, wooing the church and other right-wing organizations, and eventually formed its own organizational network, the “Civic Circles”, in 2002. These moves had the result to affirm the clear membership of Fidesz in the right camp and its categorical opposition to the left, and to aggregate a multitude of special interests and preferences within the same ideological identity.

As Figure 3 shows, still in 2014, Hungarian parties are very much divided on cultural and symbolic matters, and very little on economic issues. The polarization index on the economic left-right (as perceived by country experts) is proximate to zero, and the most strictly economic domains (redistribution, state intervention in economy, market regulation, taxes and public services) are the ones where parties are polarized the least. On the other hand, at the top positions we find all issues expressing different preferences on the cultural di-

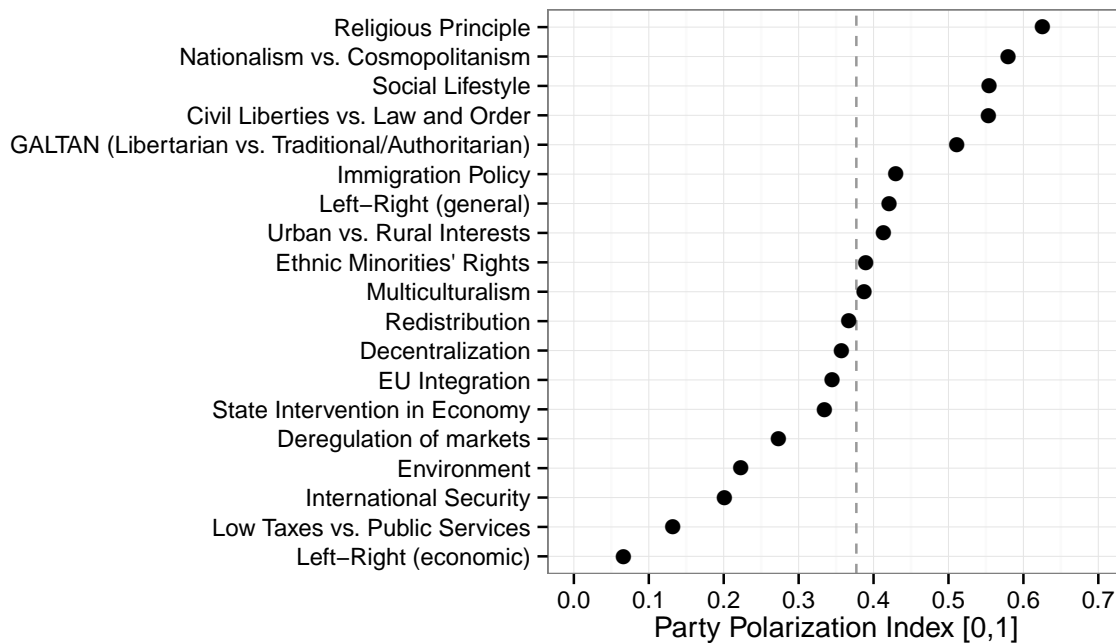


Figure 3: Party polarization on several policy issues as assessed by country experts in Hungary. Dashed line is the grand mean. Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2014.

mension of “individualism” versus “collectivism” (Hui and Triandis, 1986). Parties on the right strongly support religious principles in politics, emphasize nationalist symbols, advocate greater government authority on individuals’ lifestyles, and in general value order and stability. Parties on the left are cosmopolitan, support a secular state, and advocate greater individual freedoms and civil liberties.

Populist polarization

While cultural issues represent the raw material of political conflict in Hungary, the extent of the conflict is a function of the *antagonistic relationship* between the parties. The specifically elite-driven and rhetorical nature of polarization in Hungary has led several scholars to talk about “populism”. In general, scholars point out three main features of populist rhetoric: (1) it depicts politics and society as divided between two antagonistic and homogeneous groups; (2) such groups are “the people” and “the elites”; (3) the government should be the expression of the people’s will (see Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). Based on this conceptualization, Zsolt Enyedi called the specific type of polarization affecting Hungarian politics “*populist polarization*”, that is «the combination of the intense and aggressive competition between party blocs, the concomitant rejection of the division of power, the focus on the question of who the “people” are, and the central role of relatively stable and strong parties» (Enyedi, 2016, p. 8). Similarly, Palonen (2009) describes a «division of the political spectrum into two camps that continuously produce themselves as a political unit through the construction of the other camp as their counterpart» (p. 320). These camps, identified by the labels “left” and “right”, or “liberal” and “conservative”, are «constructed around tendentially empty and merely relational concepts of nationhood and the people» (Palonen, 2009, p. 320).

Again, the role of the agency is central to this definition. The depth of political divisions is not a function of the depth of social divisions. However, what makes it characteristic is also the centrality of rhetoric, understood as what parties talk about, the way they present themselves to their public, and the way they depict their adversaries. The first element emerging is the *lack of consensus*. In Hungary, losing the elections means being excluded not only from office, but from the entire political regime (Enyedi, 2016). Government and opposition disagree by default, and systematically refuse to support each other's legislative initiatives (Lengyel and Ilonszki, 2010). This is partially due to the way the electoral system converts votes into seats, but it is also a feature of the uncompromising relationship between parties belonging to different camps. Such a pure "winner-takes-all" logic implies that parties are generally more anxious about the idea of an electoral defeat, as it would involve being taken away any chance to influence decision making for a potentially long period of time. As a consequence, parties systematically exploit any possible mean to secure their own victory. One example is the diffuse tendency to outbid the opponents on fiscal issues during electoral campaigns, making promises that can not be kept. This practice has inflated government spending over time, increasing state indebtedness and producing large budget deficits (Lengyel and Ilonszki, 2010). Moreover, parties in Hungary continuously question each other's legitimacy, refusing to speak with the political rivals, denying the integrity of the elections in case of defeat, accusing the rivals of the most disparate wickednesses, and so on. Of course, the focus of the delegitimizing efforts changes between blocs. As Körösényi (2013) notes, «the Hungarian right has called into question the *national* commitment of the left and the left the *democratic* commitment of the right» (p. 16, emphasis in original). This kind of behavior, which has been always characteristic of the political confrontation, has been increasing in intensity over time. For instance, the new constitution written by Fidesz in 2011 explicitly states that MSZP, as legal successor of the communist party, shares responsibility of the "crimes" committed by the party during the regime (Herman, 2015).

A second and related element is the strong "*us versus them*" rhetoric, where the most distinctively populist feature is the use of the "people" to qualify the in-group, as opposed to the out-group "elites". This rhetoric matches well with the refusal to accept the opponent's legitimacy. As (Herman, 2015) points out «[t]he populist speaker claims to act in the name of the 'People', and yet denies the legitimacy of alternative claims to citizen representation» (p. 23). In other words, if there is only one people, there can be only one party representing them, and all the others are obviously acting for their own restricted group interest. However, central to this point is the *focus* of the discourse, i.e. defines the differences between groups. In a very populist fashion, such a focus is on the "who" of politics (Stanley, 2008). In this rhetoric, what most essentially defines the "us", is that it is not "them". The content of the difference is of secondary importance. While people disagreeing about politics in Hungary may be talking about cultural issues, the disagreement on such issues is just a way to justify why one's own group is better than the other (and therefore, rationalize the belief that a good citizen should not vote for a party of the "other" bloc). This emphasis on groups has led to the expansion of partisan rivalry to many other spheres of social life. As Lengyel and Ilonszki (2010) describe, «there are magazines for dog-keepers, bird-watchers, fishing anglers and many other hobbies that voice right-wing or left-wing political views. It has been found that instead of discussing their monthly rents and other housing issues, tenants and owners of condominiums use political labels to denounce each other in meetings» (p. 165).

Left and Right in Hungarian political discourse

This distinction between in-group and out-group is expressed through the labels “left” and “right”. In fact, according to some scholars, left and right in Hungarian political discourse may signify *only* that (see Palonen, 2009). Hungary is a quintessential case where ideological labels have a very strong *symbolic* content, and a very weak *operational* one. This distinction is well-established in political-psychological literature, and it is very useful to understand the Hungarian case. As Jost et al. (2009) report, «“symbolic” refers to general, abstract ideological labels, images, and categories, including acts of self-identification with the left or right. “Operational” ideology, by contrast, refers to more specific, concrete, issue-based opinions that may also be classified by observers as either left or right» (p. 312). While the difference seems to be nuanced, it regards the very ontological nature of ideological labels: in the operational meaning, they reflect different *beliefs* about policies, whereas in the symbolic meaning they reflect *attachments* towards different sources of policies (Popp and Rudolph, 2011). Such sources are political groups, like parties, factions, camps, and so on.

The prominence of symbolic ideology does not necessarily imply that Hungarians do not have a common understanding of what substantive policy preferences being left or right entails. In fact they do, focusing on cultural issues. It is the *source* of self-identification that differs between symbolic and operational ideology, the former being “evaluative” while the latter “cognitive” (Conover and Feldman, 1981). In other words, the primary piece of information that identifying oneself as left or right conveys is not much a bundle of policy preferences but rather a positive disposition towards one of the two groups and a negative disposition towards the other. Policy preferences may then be only a rationalization of group preferences, elaborated to justify one’s aversion for the out-group. Again, the key actors determining what left and right mean in a certain context, that is whether they refer to groups or policies and which ones, are the political elites. With their usage of left and right in a certain context and associated with certain other elements, elites create meaning and affect what citizens think of when they hear or use them. And in Hungarian political discourse, symbolic postures are way more common than substantive discussions on concrete issues (Lengyel and Ilonszki, 2010).

In sum, scholars tend to agree that polarization in Hungary, which is currently among the most severe in Europe, is predominantly elite-driven, and mostly determined by the antagonistic confrontation between the parties. Two blocs, the left and the right, are up against each other in a struggle where the loser is completely denied any influence on policy making. In substantive terms, the the two blocs endorse opposing views on a cultural, “nationalist-cosmopolitan” dimension. However, this cleavage became salient mostly as a consequence of party agency, with a long and meticulous work of aggregation and mobilization. As a consequence of elites’ efforts, the Hungarian society is deeply divided based on political group membership too.

Part 2: Implications for political perceptions

In this section I propose a simple argument: that the continuous associations of “left” and “right” labels with political groups whose relationship is antagonistic and mutually exclusive

has prompted Hungarian citizens to see the left-right as a discrete, categorical distinction (as opposed to a continuum where nuanced positions are allowed). This has an impact on the way citizens position parties and themselves on left-right scales in surveys. Specifically, individuals will be likely to *accentuate* perceived within-group similarities and between-group differences of policy positions. This effect will produce a heightened perception of polarization, both at the elite and at the public level. Hence, I argue that a perceived high polarization among the mass public can be produced by party rhetorics, rather than actual policy differences. In the first part of this section I briefly go through the literature on categorization and its effect on perception. Then, I describe the design of a simple experiment conducted to test this mechanism, and show some preliminary results.

Categorization

Categorization is one of the most basic cognitive processes used by individuals to organize information. In very simplistic terms, categorization consists of «understanding things by knowing what other things they are equivalent to and different from» (McGarty et al., 2010, p. 67). When people categorize, they simply classify objects into groups, assessing which ones should be together and which should be separate. Like heuristics, categories allow individuals to limit cognitive efforts when processing information. For instance, categorization allows people to infer unknown information about individual stimuli based on their category membership, a process called “stereotyping”. However, categorization differs from heuristics in that individuals categorize themselves as well as others, and so they classify objects (e.g. other individuals or symbols) as *in-group* or *out-group*. Moreover, while categorization is a general automatic process that applies every time people are exposed to new information, different categories are activated at different times depending on their *contextual salience*. Hungarian citizens may categorize parties as left or right, government or opposition, in favor or against tax cuts, and so on. However, not all categories are salient all the time. Two crucial factors determining categories’ salience are their *accessibility* (how often certain categories are used in a given context) and their *fit* (how well they define observable clusters in a given set of stimuli) (see McGarty, 1999). In Hungary, the categories “left” and “right” are highly accessible, i.e. they are used a lot within the political discourse, and they fit very well the structure of alliances (i.e. the party blocs) as well as the patterns of interaction between parties (i.e. with which tone party elites address one another).

Categorization plays a central role in perception, in particular when group processes and intergroup relations are concerned. The better known and most well-established effect of categorization on perception is *accentuation*. Simply put, this mechanism produces a distorted perception of similarities and differences between stimuli, by which stimuli belonging to the same category are perceived as more similar than they actually are, and stimuli belonging to different categories are perceived more different than they actually are. To give an example, in a famous experiment Tajfel and Wilkes (1963) asked subjects to evaluate the length of a set of lines. For one group, all the shorter lines were given an arbitrary label (the letter A) and all the longer lines were given a different label (the letter B). For a second group the lines were still labeled, but the letters A and B were assigned to the lines randomly, without any systematic association to their length. Finally, for a third group, the lines were shown unlabeled. As a result, subjects in the first group perceived the difference between the lines with the A label and the lines with the B label as much larger than the subjects in the two other groups. In other words, when the arbitrary classification had a

good fit on the set of lines, categorization entered into play, and subject accentuated the difference between groups in their perception. Further studies have shown that this effect can work for similarities as well: when stimuli are believed to belong to the same category, they will be perceived as less different from one another than they really are (see Hogg and Abrams, 1998). This mechanism satisfies two functions of categorization: *discrimination*, i.e. the need to differentiate between stimuli belonging to different categories, and *generalization*, i.e. the need to infer new information about individual stimuli based on their category membership. When it is important not to put stimuli that do not belong together in the same group, discrimination is a salient need, and people will accentuate between-group differences. When it is important to learn something new about individual stimuli, and all that is known is which category they belong to, then generalization is required, and people will accentuate within-group similarities.

Left-right, categorization, and political perceptions in Hungary: an experimental study

What does this have to do with political polarization in Hungary? First of all, left and right are a salient categorization when it gets to classify political actors in Hungary. As previously discussed, left and right in Hungary are mainly understood in group-symbolic terms, i.e. they are more likely to be used to define the “who” of politics rather than the “what”. Because of this, Hungarian citizens are probably quite proficient to classify political actors as left or right, while they should struggle a bit more when it gets to classify policies. As a consequence, they should be likely to use categorical information to infer characteristics of individual policies, i.e. to make generalizations based on information about the ideological category to which the source of a policy belongs. Secondly, given the importance of the left-right divide for any type of political consideration, let alone all the aspects of social life that have been penetrated by politics, the need to correctly discriminate between political stimuli belonging to different categories is high in Hungary. Hence, Hungarian citizens are likely to overemphasize policy differences between left and right. This implies that Hungarian citizens are likely to overestimate the degree to which the two camps are internally homogeneous and distant from one another in terms of policy preferences. In other words, they should perceive the political environment as more polarized than it is.

To test for this effect, we conducted a survey experiment on an online sample of the Hungarian population right after the European elections in 2014. The task was simple: every respondent was asked to read two policy statements from two different parties, and rate the policy position of each party based on the information contained in the statement. One statement was about multinational companies, and one about same-sex marriages. Besides the two policy dimensions (i.e. in favor or against multinationals investing in Hungary, in favor or against same-sex marriages), respondents were also asked to rate the two parties on the left-right. The statements that we showed to the respondents were *actual* statements made by the parties (slightly modified, but still reflecting the view of the parties)⁵. Three groups of respondents received three different party pairs: a third of respondents was given statements from two parties belonging to the left camp (MSZP and LMP); a third of respondents was given statements from two parties belonging to the right camp (Fidesz and Jobbik); and a third of respondents was given statements from two parties belonging to

⁵The statements were prepared by Gergő Závecz, coauthor of this study.

opposite camps (MSZP and Fidesz). Moreover, a second treatment manipulated the *labels* attached to the statements: a third of respondents was given the statements without further information (control group); a third of respondents was given the statements together with information about the ideological camp to which the parties belonged (i.e. left-left, right-right, left-right); and a third of respondents was given the statements together with the names of the parties that made them⁶. Afterwards, we calculated the absolute distance between the two parties, and compared the means across treatment groups.

Our expectations were straightforward: respondents who were given the statements together with the *ideological labels* should have perceived the parties as *closer* to one another than in the control group *when the parties belonged to the same camp* (MSZP-LMP, Fidesz-Jobbik), and *further* to one another than in the control group *when the parties belonged to different camp* (MSZP, Fidesz). We had the same expectations regarding the *party names*, although in a less straightforward way. On the one hand, both LMP and Jobbik can be defined as, respectively, left and right. On the other hand, neither of the parties has ever been in the same coalition: Jobbik has been always in opposition to Fidesz' government, and voted against the new constitution; similarly MSZP and LMP never ran in a coalition together. Hence, we had less clear expectations regarding the expected result in this condition. As Figure 4 shows, all results go in the expected direction although in some cases they do not reach statistical significance. In some cases there is no difference between different control and treatment group. Interestingly, this happens mostly when the treatment is about the party names. In the condition where statements are presented together with ideological labels the accentuation effect is sharper.

This experiment shows that, in the context of Hungarian politics, the use of left and right labels associated to policy statements has the effect of making citizens perceive parties as more polarized than they are. In other words, Hungarian citizens use categorical information to assess party policy differences, and by doing this tend to exaggerate the extent to which the two blocs are distant from one another, and the extent to which blocs are homogeneous. What does this imply for our understanding of polarization in Hungary? First of all, it has been recently shown that misperceptions of (greater) polarization can prompt citizens to take more extreme positions themselves, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ahler, 2014). Hence, categorization may actually *increase* societal polarization in the long run, next to affecting perceptions. Secondly, a lot of studies focusing on party polarization use survey items measuring perceptions of party placements on the left-right by survey respondents (as done for instance in Figure 1 in this report). While such studies rarely have the presumption to capture “actual” polarization (but rather “perceived” polarization) they end up picking up the bias that citizens' perceptions may have due to the categorical nature of left and right (see Vegetti and Sirinic, 2016). Yet, this is more a problem of measurement equivalence across countries. Going back to Hungary, these findings show that in many cases policy polarization as perceived by the voters is exaggerated, and this is due to the way policies are labeled in interaction with a context where the labels have a strong group-categorical meaning. In other words, even if parties might not be so divided in terms of policies (though they often are), once policies are labeled as left or right, citizens will assume that the positions endorsed by different groups are very different.

To conclude, this study is an attempt to show how “populist” polarization, that is group polarization at the level of the elites, translates into a general perception of wide policy dis-

⁶An additional treatment manipulated the *tone* of the statements, but this will not be discussed here.

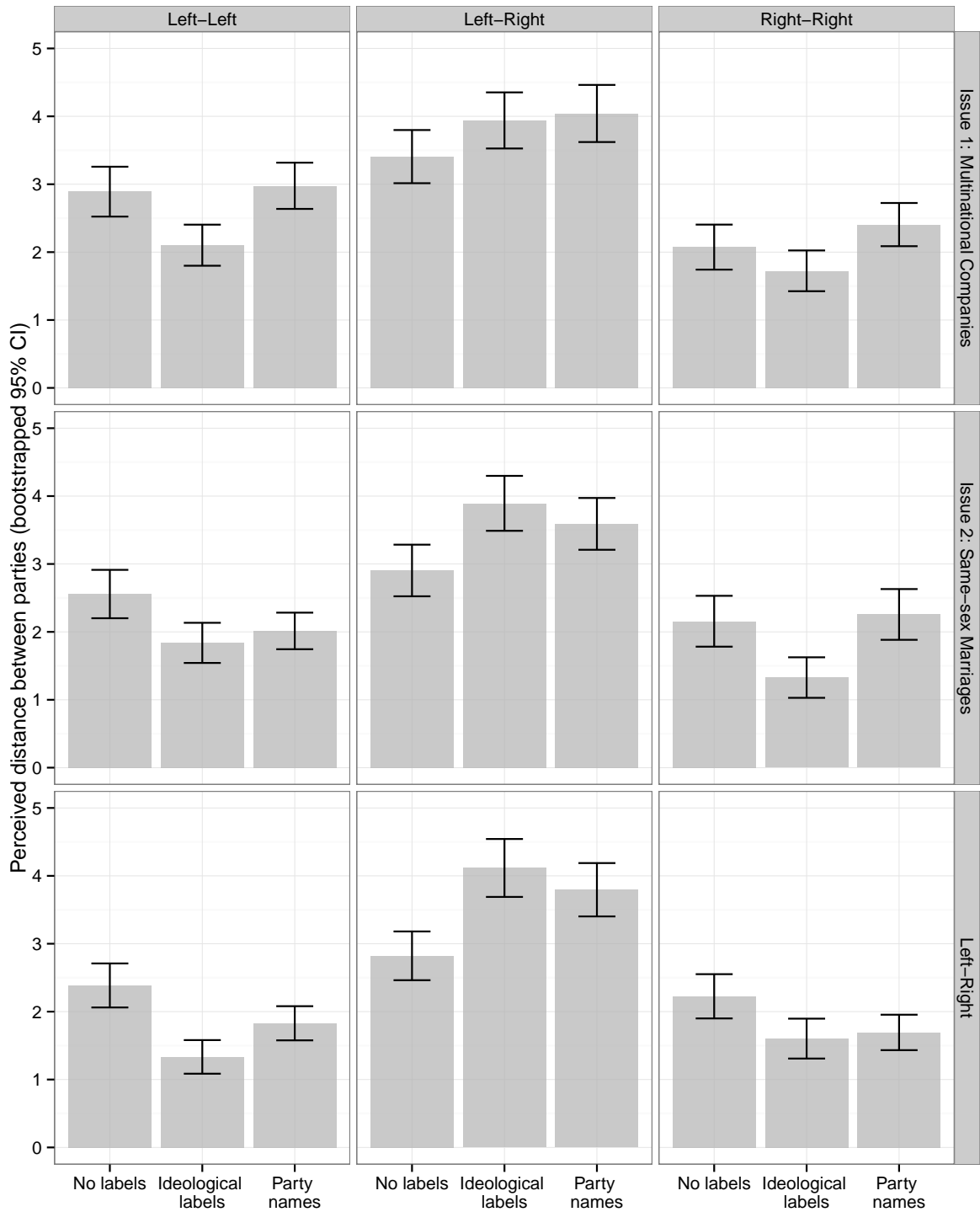


Figure 4: Experimental results. $N = 1291$. Source: Own data.

agreement at the level of the mass public. Hungary is a good place to conduct such a study, given the particularly strong elite-driven nature of political polarization. Of course, this is not to say that there are no policy differences between Hungarian parties – in fact, there are many. However, the mechanism discussed here suggests that, once a salient categorization is built, it is not so necessary to provide the public with polarized policy content to justify the differentiation between parties belonging to different categories. This implies that, first, it is rather difficult for parties to differentiate themselves from other parties belonging to the same group. One way to do it would be to claim to be “neither left nor right”, a strategy adopted for instance by the populist Five Star Movement in Italy. Secondly, it is difficult for a party belonging to one bloc to appeal to voters of the opposite bloc, or in general to claim to be “moderate”. Indeed categorization impairs moderation, as moderation does not fit with the discrete nature of categories.

Conclusions: solutions?

What are the solutions to polarization, when polarization has penetrated politics and society at such a deep level? The most obvious answer is: Hungary needs *responsible* political elites. However, this is tantamount to say that to stop violent crime we need less violent people. Political scientists often think in terms of incentives: how institutions can incentivize elites to behave responsibly? As some scholars pointed out, liberal democratic institutions in Hungary were all in place and all seemed to be working fairly well, just except they did until party elites did not seize the opportunity to neutralize them (Enyedi, 2016; Herman, 2015). One could argue that the highly majoritarian incentives of the electoral system played a role in this (e.g. Tóka and Pópa (2013) seem to make this argument). Yet, even in such a case, the system could only be changed by the elites themselves, who surely have no incentives to do it. An alternative would be, given the irresponsibility of the elites, to concentrate on building a more responsible electorate. However, given the embeddedness of political divisions in the Hungarian society, that would imply building new collective identities that are “orthogonal”, and therefore not easy to be superimposed, to the old, politicized ones. Moreover, such identities should not take into account only the preferences and possibilities of the urban population, but aim at convincing also the rural population, less flexible and generally more conservative. However, given the source of polarization at the elite level, the most successful solution should also be somewhere there.

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