

Everyday Illiberalism: How Hungarian Subnational Politics Propel Single-Party Dominance

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Abstract: While numerous studies consider the roles that media consolidation, court-packing, and economic crises have played in Hungary's democratic decline since 2010, none have considered the subnational mechanisms driving illiberalism. This study examines the types of subnational procedural tinkering that propel illiberalism by reducing local capacity for institutional resilience. Specifically, we trace how the right-wing Fidesz-KDNP government implemented subnational constraints to prevent the reemergence of a viable political opposition by (1) limiting opportunities for political contestation and (2) reducing oversight of the governing coalition. We employ a multi-method approach, pairing systematic document analysis of city council rules and regulations in Hungary's 27 largest municipalities with 26 in-depth elite interviews across five Hungarian regional cities with mayors, councilmembers, and local leaders of each major political party. In contrast to a large literature on subnational democratic resilience, we examine how subnational maneuvers can enable single-party consolidation and exacerbate authoritarian tendencies in declining democracies.

Keywords: subnational governance; local elections; single-party dominance; democratic backsliding; city councils

Introduction

For the first time in the history of the European Union, a member state has been demoted from a Freedom House score of 'Free' to 'Partly Free' (2019), following a decade of troubling reforms to democratic governance in Hungary. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's illiberal rule serves as a looming illustration to neighboring states in Eastern Europe: democratic order can remain fragile, and democratic deficits can emerge and persist, even within the world's largest quasi-federal democratic union.

Scholars of democracy have long warned that there is method to the madness. When populist leaders with authoritarian inclinations consolidate their power, they typically dismantle the courts and weaken the rule of law (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012; Scheppele, 2005, 2015); encroach on freedom of the press and speech (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018); and limit the rights of opposition groups and minorities (Bíró-Nagy, 2017; Kover, 2015). Together, these changes undermine the institutional resilience of democratic governance. This pattern of power consolidation has proven effective at keeping illiberal rulers in power; for example, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has served as president since 2014 and was the prime minister for more than a decade prior to his presidency. Similarly, Hungary's Viktor Orbán is currently in his fourth term as prime minister, having previously served from 1998 to 2002 and 2010-2018.

Although it is clear how major political maneuvers help consolidate power, it is less clear why a competitive opposition fails to form and why citizens that have experienced decades of life under liberal democracy would express such limited public resilience. This article puts forth the following explanation for the opposition's muted response: illiberal leaders place numerous, systematic subnational constraints on local democratic bodies and institutions to protect against

the emergence of local political resilience. Without understanding this element of illiberal political strategy, the current body of scholarship lacks an important strategic component to regime survival. Moreover, we argue that one reason democratic decline in Eastern Europe has been difficult to predict is because the politics of democratic backsliding remains unexamined from an incrementalist viewpoint. While political scientists have been looking for macro-level indicators that major changes are afoot, democratic decline simultaneously takes shape in a more submerged fashion through gradual change. These submerged transformations have reinforced the longevity of macro-level illiberal institutions and are not just a byproduct of national institutional change. Instead, they are pivotal, largely independent processes in the solidification of backsliding democracies. Illiberal parties have important incentives to weaken subnational institutions; local policy changes can increase a party's organizational strength, which Tavits (2012) finds to be a key predictor of electoral success in post-Communist Europe. Corrupted local institutions can, in turn, promote one-party rule (Smith, 2005). Using procedural change at the local level to extend party loyalty may be especially important in European Union member states, where the EU maintains relatively strict *de jure* requirements on democracy but pays less attention to policy implementation and enforcement at the subnational level.

To examine this important subnational feedback loop of illiberalism, we employ an in-depth case study of Hungary because it is one of the most severe cases of democratic backsliding. Viktor Orbán's rule under the increasingly far-right Fidesz-KDNP coalition offers a unique opportunity to understand how technocratic rules and procedures can be corrupted to consolidate power and solidify an authoritarian political agenda in a previously democratic political space. Specifically, this article examines how changes to subnational democratic procedures alter electoral competition and democratic norms in ways that are largely absent from

academic discussion and less apparent to journalists and citizens. Our analysis focuses on how dominant parties' adjustments to subnational governing bodies constrain the emergence of bottom-up political pressure to challenge single-party dominance (Huntington, 1970; Pempel, 1990b). Using a combination of document analysis and in-depth elite interviews, we hone in on how dominant parties in illiberal regimes develop asymmetric bargaining power in local governance.

This paper proceeds in four sections. First, we provide a brief overview of the literature on Hungary's Fidesz and its solidification into a dominant party. More generally, we theorize why an illiberal dominant party would focus on achieving local-level dominance. Second, we discuss our methodology: document analysis of city council rules and regulations of the 27 largest cities in Hungary—changes that took effect over Fidesz's 2010–14 and 2014–18 terms in office. This analysis is supplemented by 26 in-depth interviews conducted in several Hungarian cities during the summer of 2016 with local political, bureaucratic, and economic elites from every major political party. The findings section offers a systematic account of subnational procedural changes that inhibit democratic participation and reduce government oversight. We then conclude and briefly assess underexamined vulnerabilities of liberal democracy.

Democracy and Single-Party Dominance in Hungary

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has set the stage for enduring political control in Hungary. This objective is not covert: Orbán has publicly stated that he envisions his political control of Hungary to last until at least 2030 (EurActiv, 2018). The party has gone to considerable lengths to alter constitutional and electoral rules to guarantee its continued success in that duration. Notably, Fidesz has simultaneously sought to emphasize the legality of its

illiberal reforms (Scheppelle, 2018); reforms that have been made by undermining—but not completely disregarding—democratic norms and procedures. While formal democratic institutions remain in place, they are undermined by informal institutions and rendered ineffective by procedural loopholes (Grzymała-Busse, 2010).

In most scholarly accounts of democratic transition, the competitiveness of the subnational political space has increased accountability, strengthened tools of governance, and improved democratic responsiveness (Beer, 2001). However, in the same vein that subnational politics may propel democratization, it is critical to consider how it may be used to further authoritarian encroachment. Subnational political changes may serve as particularly alluring tools to dominant parties within the EU, where subtle regional and local rules changes fall under limited scrutiny. As such, they are increasingly important to securing illiberal party dominance in the post-Communist context.

Moreover, local politics has a symbiotic relationship with national politics. While local elections are often less salient to voters (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), a considerable share of policy-making in decentralized states takes place at the subnational level, and local politics shape campaigns and policy agendas at the national level (Trounstine, 2009). The types of procedural changes pursued by the governing coalition in Hungary are seemingly minor administrative details unlikely to be of interest to voters on election day, meaning that a governing coalition can help solidify long-term control without generating significant backlash (Moe, 1989).

Our study focuses on the party furthest along in Europe in implementing illiberal reforms. Soon after taking power in 2010, Fidesz reformed the electoral system to consolidate state power. Under the reformed electoral system, a single round replaced Hungary's traditionally two round elections, and the electoral threshold for parties was eliminated. Partisan gerrymandering

has exacerbated this winner-takes-all system (Bozóki, 2013, p. 4). Political Capital's (2012) data indicates that traditionally right-wing districts now consist of 6,000 fewer people on average than left-wing districts, giving asymmetric weight to each right-wing vote.

These reforms have had a chilling effect on subnational political contestation. Data from the Hungarian National Election Office demonstrate a clear trend toward reduced local electoral competition among major parties associated with the chronological rise of Fidesz (Nemzeti Választási Iroda, n.d.). Table 1 indicates the number of candidates for city council seats nationally; the decline in number indicates a decision by opposition parties not to contest elections. The data are especially striking considering that the party running the second most candidates in the 2010 and 2014 elections, KDNP, is a coalition partner of Fidesz and is regarded as a satellite party without functional independence (Enyedi & Tóka, 2007).¹ Moreover, the data show that Fidesz-KDNP ran 12,230 (53.3%) of the 22,949 major national party candidates in the 2014 city council elections. Figure 1 shows the percentage of candidates run by Fidesz (and from 2006 onward its KDNP coalition partner) as a share of the total city council candidates put forth by the major parties.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

The electoral data demonstrate that left-leaning national parties consider so few seats contestable that they invest in running candidates at significantly lower rates than they did in the mid-2000s. Some left-leaning parties, including Centrum and SZDSZ, have functionally died out, and the newer left-leaning parties (LMP and DK) remain very weak. The primary opposition party, MSZP, ran less than half as many candidates for local office (3,108 vs. 8,016) in 2014 as it did in 2002. These broad aggregate trends in city council candidacy are also evident in mayoral

racers. Fidesz has increased the percentage of mayoral races it contests from 57% in 2002 to over 80% in 2010 and 2014. Even more strikingly, their rate of winning these races has increased from 32.7% in 2002 to 69.5% in 2014, after achieving national dominance (Stenberg, 2018). Table 2 shows Fidesz's electoral dominance in the 27 cities in our sample, where they won both the 2010 and 2014 mayoralities in 24 cases.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

While some decline in contestation can be attributed to a weakening of the left-wing MSZP party following the 2008 EU-IMF bailout as well as a series of high-profile corruption scandals in its 2002-2010 governing period, this is not a stand-alone explanation. First, there has been no comprehensive rise of another center-left party to capture previous MSZP voters, even with the sizeable showing of former MSZP-splinter party DK in its initial election. Other leftist parties declined over the same period, and although a center-left anti-corruption party, LMP (Politics Can Be Different), emerged in 2009, it has gained little electoral traction since. In fact, LMP had more success in the national assembly in 2010 (7.5% of votes) and 2014 (5.3% of votes) than in contesting local elections—accounting for just 5.0% and 4.6% of city council candidates in 2010 and 2014, respectively. Second, the decision not to contest is a product of more than just being in the Hungarian opposition; as Table 1 demonstrates, the number of candidates run by Fidesz remained relatively stable even when it was in the opposition. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of city council candidates run by major national parties by grouping along the left-right political spectrum.² It indicates that the left now fields candidates in numbers closer to the extreme right than at the rate of the Fidesz-led coalition. Third, during our interviews, far-right Jobbik elites noted the same subnational constraints to party growth and local influence as did leftist elites (Local politician, 2016k, 2016l). If subnational single-party

dominance was due to MSZP's earlier scandals, we would expect to see the development of a stronger capacity for local contestation in the far-right and the anti-corruption left by 2014.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

No scholarship to date has considered Hungarian subnational politics as a central mechanism for the crystallization of single-party dominance. However, beyond Fidesz's strategic emphasis on local control, the two levels of governance are increasingly amalgamated. It is now common to take leadership positions in local administrative divisions as a stepping-stone to higher-level party positions. Joining the local Fidesz party apparatus creates opportunity for career-minded politicians, further starving the opposition of potential candidates. Many Fidesz interviewees anticipated serving as higher-ranked, national party representatives in the near future (Interviews with Local politician, 2016a, 2016b, 2016g, 2016h, 2016i, 2016j). The capture of ambitious local politicians is an important strategy in establishing long-term control, given that the rise of local-level opposition has proven crucial in eroding other cases of single-party dominance (Diaz-Cayeros & Magaloni, 2001; Lucardi, 2016).

We use document and interview analysis to demonstrate that democratic backsliding in Hungary is, in part, driven by subnational strategies to (1) reduce the opposition's capacity to contest local elections and (2) neuter oversight of Fidesz through external structures like the media or ombudsman but also through legislative means. The subnational political landscape in Hungary exhibits the form and content of a diminished democracy (Collier & Levitsky, 1997), in which the strategic calculus of both voters and the opposition is altered to make the policies favored by the governing coalition appear inevitable. Elections are free, but no longer completely fair, and procedural changes undermine the possibility of any effective policymaking or governance by the opposition. To a substantial extent, it also limits voters' capacity to gain

critical information about Fidesz's policies and decision-making, thereby diminishing public outrage and voter backlash.

Methodology

Document analysis.

In political science, document analysis often involves the systematic analysis of running records that are created in administrative and political contexts (Flick, 2014, p. 353). These texts can be analyzed for a variety of purposes: (1) to provide background context or historical insight; (2) to generate new questions and hypotheses; (3) to produce supplementary data and triangulate or verify other sources; or (4) to track political development over time (Bowen, 2009, p. 30). By treating official documents as these types of analytical sources, researchers are, in effect, “facilitating a mapping and comparison of policy developments” (Karppinen & Moe, 2012, p. 189).

We analyzed documents from the local Szervezeti és Működési Szabályzat (SZMSZ), which are the organizational and operational rules that govern Hungarian city councils. Such rules are set at the local level in each city. Documents are analyzed for the twenty-seven largest cities in Hungary, which represent all cities with more than 35,000 inhabitants. In total, the SZMSZ versions, modifications, and amendments we examined amount to 2,071 pages of documents. We expect that the developments we find extend to smaller cities as well, provided that national parties are involved in municipal politics; however, there is likely population threshold below which party politics become irrelevant.

At the start of a city council term, setting up a new SZMSZ with minor changes is common. Therefore, the mere presence of new documents and amendments is not treated as

indicative of anything pernicious in our analysis. Moreover, we limit our analysis to *changes* made to *local* rules and regulations. As such, our analysis does not capture 1) document features that may have already been undemocratic prior to the study period, or 2) knock-on effects of changes made at the national level (most notably, the banning of local public initiatives that counter the legality of national legislation). The public initiative ban led to the loss of democratic capacity in several cities that had previously used local initiatives as a means for the public to demand a response from the government on issues.³ For these reasons, our findings in Table 3 understate the challenges Fidesz has posed to local democracy in Hungary.

We use these documents to track changes and developments in local democratic policies and procedures throughout Fidesz-KDNP's 2010–2014 and 2014–18 governing terms. At the city level, we identify and analyze amendments and revisions to local governance that reduce the opposition's capacity for meaningful political contestation. Moreover, we use document analysis as a form of corroboration for our elite interviews.

Triangulation is critical to the internal validity of our findings because there are a number of shortcomings to employing document analysis as a stand-alone method. Namely, running records are created independent of a research agenda, which means that they sometimes contain insufficient data to contextualize policy changes and their effects on local power dynamics and procedural norms. Low retrievability of chronological records is another concern. The issue of retrievability is exacerbated by biased selectivity, meaning that missingness in document series suggests bias in the content of what is available (Yin, 1994, p. 80). In the context of our analysis, however, data availability is typically a function of local-level documentation and data availability standards rather than an issue of selective bias. Throughout the document retrieval process, we made every effort to obtain multiple editions of each local SZMSZ (often, by

contacting local web administrators and other administrative personnel), to capture changes made by amendments to a governing document as well as by newly issued governing documents throughout the study period.

Elite interviews.

Our document analysis is augmented by 26 elite interviews, which present a number of unique benefits and challenges. For our purposes, the primary benefit emerges from the research objective—understanding the basis for one-party consolidation and the subnational strategies that help it endure. We leverage these interviews to gauge patterns in party elites’ conceptualizations about the workings of the governing coalition. Furthermore, because there is limited literature on the subnational forces behind authoritarian encroachment in contemporary Hungary, we believe that such a preliminary theory-building fieldwork is necessary.

Our foremost challenge was one of building trust and rapport with interviewees. It is often difficult to interview political elites because they may be accustomed to public scrutiny from the media, and therefore feel a sense of unease or threat when preparing for a ‘less straightforward’ academic interview (Harvey, 2011, p. 433). For example, on multiple occasions, political elites and their assistants asked for a full set of interview questions in advance and even notified us if a certain political topic was off limits. A handful of interview subjects also ‘passed’ on responding to a number of questions in person.

To limit discomfort, hesitation, and distrust, we provided respondents with a degree of transparency: information on who we were, where we are working, how long the interview would take, how the data would be used and disseminated, and that their interview information would be anonymous. Since the interview process was conducted in Hungarian, trust was built on the basis of ethno-linguistic commonality with the investigator.

Respondents were recruited either through co-authors' personal contacts or from publicly available e-mail contacts on local government websites. In total, interview requests were sent in May 2016 to 90 public officials across five mid-to-large sized cities.⁴ These public officials included elected officials and bureaucratic, managerial, and professional support staff, party members, and prominent local business owners engaged in public contracting. These local officials play a unique role in ensuring government accountability, and interviews offer a means of understanding the formal and informal institutions of power in local government (Aars & Fimreite, 2005).

In total, 26 in-depth in-person interviews were conducted in June and July 2016.⁵ Six additional potential subjects responded but interviews could not be conducted for scheduling reasons, so our response rate was 36 percent and our interview rate was 29 percent. The party breakdown of interviewees was roughly equivalent to their share of parliamentary seats—fourteen Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Union), five MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party), three Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), two DK (Democratic Coalition), and two unaffiliated public officials. We did not interview any members of the anti-corruption LMP (Politics Can Be Different), because the party has limited representation at the local level. Fidesz is classified as right-wing, Jobbik as far-right, and MSZP and DK as left-wing.⁶

Our sample is small and non-random and, as such, our interviewees do not properly represent the population of interest (i.e., local party officials). However, we received responses to our interview requests that appear approximately proportional to their representation in parliament. This lends our sample a degree of limited validity. Furthermore, all claims made in the findings were fact-checked across multiple interviews. We also drew on relevant legal material and local administrative documents that validate the formal procedures referenced by

our interviewees. If an interviewee's reference to a procedural change could not be verified, it was excluded from our analysis. In the following section, we discuss our findings on the operations and infrastructure of subnational illiberalism.

Findings

During our elite interviews, numerous council members and district representatives across five large Hungarian municipalities noted that the rules and procedures of city council, and of local governance more broadly, had been heavily revised since 2010. Across opposition parties, interviewees unanimously claimed that these revisions were designed to limit opportunities for legitimate policy contestation. The running records we analyzed corroborate our interviews on this important point.

While we identified a large number of changes made to local government regulations over the course of our study period, we saw trends in two key areas of local governance that facilitate the consolidation of Orbán's illiberal regime: changes designed to (1) limit opportunities for political contestation; or (2) reduce oversight of the governing coalition. We describe and analyze these trends, arguing that each type of procedural change erodes subnational democracy by reducing local autonomy and resilience vis-à-vis the governing coalition.

Most of these rule changes challenge the viability of subnational democracy on their own; however, the accumulation of similar borderline reforms nationwide across different municipalities creates a more severe subnational threat that propels illiberalism. Table 3 summarizes our findings from the twenty-seven largest Hungarian municipalities. 19 of the 27 cities initiated changes to regulations that reduced either popular participation or the role of

elected opposition representatives in the political process. Additionally, 12 cities introduced rule changes that undermined the oversight of local government activities in some form. A full explication of the specific rule changes can be found in the supporting information.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

The reduction of political contestation.

The more frequent changes to SZMSZs (organizational rules governing city councils) pursued by local governments were measures designed to make it difficult for the political opposition to participate in the legitimate conduct of their office as local representatives. A smaller number of procedural changes were designed to prevent residents and civic organizations from engaging in the local democratic process. After describing these changes, we provide an example of how, in the aggregate, reduced contestation weakens organizations' and residents' autonomy over party affiliation and vote choice.

One simple way Fidesz reduces the opposition's capacity to represent their constituents' interests is to limit the number of opportunities they have to speak, debate, and propose local legislative actions. For example, amendment 3/2012(II.29) §2(2) outlined in the city of Miskolc regional governance procedures, alter the previous election cycle's local council meeting procedures by decreasing the opposition's time for discussion to three minutes in the first round of debate and two minutes in the second round (Miskolc Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2011). In Baja, amendments 3/2016(I.29) §1(2) and 3/2016(I.29) §4(2) place new restrictions on the types of comments that can be made before the council agenda and grant discretionary power to the council chair to determine the length of time speakers have to deliver their comments (Baja Város Önkormányzat Képviselő-testülete, 2014). In Dunaújváros, the 2017 SZMSZ restricts

comments to two per agenda item in most cases (section §24(2)) and removes proposal submitters' ability to request a two-turn debate on an item (Dunaújváros Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2013).⁷

A more severe set of procedural changes directly remove the opposition's capacity to participate in local democratic decision-making. For example, in Pécs, a 2014 amendment (40/2014(XI.14) §9(d)) stipulates that the mayor may now permanently suspend the implementation of a decision made by any city council subcommittee if its implementation would hold "contrary to the interest of the governing coalition" (Pécs Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata Közgyűlése, 2013). In Békéscsaba, a 2017 change (13/2017(IV.6) §1)) to §23 of the SZMSZ modified the process of questioning during sessions of the General Assembly. Previously, if a council member found a response from a high-level local official inadequate during questioning, they would automatically be part of a more detailed investigation (if a detailed inquiry was ordered). The stipulation requiring the questioner's participation in the investigation was removed (Békéscsaba Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzat Közgyűlése, 2014). In Eger, a 2016 change (27/2016(VIII.26) §4(1)) updated the approval of modifications to the SZMSZ from a two-round vote to a one-round vote, removing an additional opportunity by which the opposition could 'check' the governing coalition's political agenda (Eger Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata, 2011). A more egregious example comes from Nyíregyháza, where a 2017 change 27/2017(IX.29) §8 allows the mayor to revoke the floor from a speaker if they decide that their comment is irrelevant to the proceedings (Nyíregyháza Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata Közgyűlése, 2011).

These amendments are indicative of the small institutional changes that a dominant party can execute to undermine the opposition's rule without drawing considerable public scrutiny.

While Fidesz elites considered many of these reforms necessary to reduce local bureaucratic inefficiency (Interviews with Local politician, 2016b, 2016j, 2016p), opposition party representatives noted that these often ambiguously worded procedural constraints act as obstacles to the representation of their constituents' interests. They serve to limit their voice on the council and their influence in government procedures. They also give the governing coalition more power to hinder or otherwise block the opposition's agenda. In most Hungarian cities, once the council meeting's agenda points have been discussed, the meeting can be adjourned with the vote of a simple majority—which the governing coalition typically possesses.

There are more insidious procedural loopholes leveraged by the governing party as well. During our interviews, the most prevalent example concerned the preparation, distribution, and amendment of the council meeting agenda. By the codified rules of the council meeting, the agenda for the meeting (set forth by the mayor and the governing coalition) must be distributed to council members at least seven to fifteen days prior, depending on the city's procedural stipulations. This is so that each council member has adequate time to familiarize herself with the appropriate material and formulate a counterargument. However, one critical caveat is that, in many cities, amendments to the agenda can be submitted until just a day prior to the meeting (See, for example, 5. melléklet of Győr Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata, n.d.). In Eger, amendment 44/2012(VIII. 31) §1(1) was made to allow that motions submitted after 11:00AM the day before a meeting can be still voted on with a majority council vote, while in 2017 the SZMSZ was further modified (19/2017(IX.01) §1(1)) to specify that any late issues added to the agenda should “foster the solidarity of the city and have a positive message” (Eger Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata Közgyűlése, 2017, pp. 4). According to opposition party members, over the years, this amendment process has been exploited by council members of the governing

coalition by distributing a short, general agenda (perhaps, 10–30 pages in length, with six primary ‘agenda points’) one week prior to the council meeting, with an additional amendment section distributed one day before, which might double or triple the length and complexity of the original document.

This creates numerous conflicts for the opposition. For one, interview subjects from opposition parties remarked that, at best, they could skim this new document, and that preparing a counter position was difficult under these time constraints. Second, this system does not allow for coordination among opposition parties. Although Hungary’s oppositional factions are ideologically diverse, they are not always altogether resistant to cooperation (as to gain strength in numbers against Fidesz). However, on short time horizons, they cannot establish common approaches to the slew of new amendments. Third, opposition party members simply do not possess the same resources (support staff, analysts, lawyers, consultants), as do the governing coalition elites in mid-to-large sized Hungarian cities. Fidesz politicians maintain large offices and staffs at city hall—hiring multiple legal experts to help draft and oversee policies. Meanwhile, opposition members have limited access to physical office space in official government buildings and maintain much smaller staffs, meaning that the legalities and technicalities built into the agenda are difficult to address from a resource constraint standpoint.

The engrained, illiberal practices of sending out lengthy amendments and reducing institutional opportunities for contestation were often discussed on a symbolic level as well. Opposition party council members perceived their own role, the role of the council, and the degree of democratization to be quite limited. They understood the misuse of the agenda amendment system and of other majority powers as credible signals that the governing coalition had no intention of cooperating, creating transparency, or maintaining democratic procedures

(Local politician, 2016c, 2016d, 2016k). Although it is common for opposition parties to wage these types of critiques against the ruling party, the threat has institutionally and politically matured since the left-wing MSZP was last in power due to Fidesz's continued yield of the supermajority in parliament.

Although most local procedural tinkering is aimed at reducing the capacity of the political opposition, some changes also limit the capacity of local residents and civil society organizations to participate in the democratic process. In the city of Székesfehérvár, two procedural revisions have eroded participation in local politics. First, a late 2013 law (43/2013 (X.29) §3(2)) repealed §16(2) of the SZMSZ, which required the city council to consult a variety of local democratic institutions before preparing a plan of work, giving the mayor sole prerogative over city planning (Székesfehérvár Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2013). Second, a 2014 law (41/2014(XI.21) §6(2) repealed §111 of the SZMSZ, which had previously required the local government to respond to petitions from 10% or more of residents within a thirty-day deadline (Székesfehérvár Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2013). In the city of Szolnok, amendment 22/2017(VI.30) §4 changed §61 of the SZMSZ, raising the percentage of the city's population needed to call for a referendum to 20% (Szolnok Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2014). In Veszprém, amendment 6/2017(II.23) §2 changed §12(7) of the SZMSZ, giving the General Assembly authority over any potential public education agreements with civil society organizations (Veszprém Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata Közgyűlése, 2014). Finally, in Szombathely, amendments 29/2015(X.28) §1, 29/2015(X.28) §2(2) , and 29/2015(X.28) §3(2) placed caps on citizen participation in assembly meetings, stipulated that questions from civilian organizations must be screened by the General Assembly before being posed at a council meeting, and further stipulated where citizens and civil society organizations could be located

during General Assembly sessions (Szombathely Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata Közgyűlése, 2014). Fidesz elites considered these limitations on local involvement necessary for crafting legislation that is (1) technical and expert-driven and (2) consistent with EU development initiatives as well as national development objectives (Interviews with Local politician, 2016a, 2016b, 2016i, 2016j, 2016p).

We found evidence that, in the aggregate, these tools of reduced contestation provide important openings for Fidesz to weaken constituent autonomy over party affiliation and vote choice. Most prominently, reduced contestation allows the governing coalition to exert control over the local use of EU development funds, indirectly linking business and individual economic success to party affiliation. Creating this patronage linkage is a common strategy of dominant parties, especially when the opposition is divided (O’Dwyer, 2006; Reuter & Remington, 2009). This relationship differs in one key aspect from cases like Japan, where the nexus between business and the dominant party was also crucial in sustaining regime politics (Scheiner, 2005). In the Hungarian case, funding is guaranteed by the EU—an external largesse that the national party can use to build support without the requirement of an effective return on investment.

Various regions of Hungary receive between 20 and 38 billion HUF in development funding per cycle, based on per capita GDP (Local politician, 2016a, 2016b, 2016j, 2016n, 2016o). Although coordination on the local implementation of these funds should be non-partisan, all interviewed opposition district representatives expressed serious concern over the limited power they had in deciding how these funds were used for local transit development and other large infrastructural projects. As their power in the council eroded, the governing coalition gained greater autonomy in designing development projects—employing their own local business connections to carry out funding initiatives. As a result, they received all of the credit

for the economic, infrastructural, and cultural development in their districts. Beyond credit taking, opposition interviewees pointed out that this control of access reduced the incentives of business interests to develop political associations with their parties, in turn, deepening clientelism with Fidesz (Local politician, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2016f, 2016k; see also Rogers, 2020). This interview finding complements current evidence in the literature on the widely reported practice of local Fidesz mayors using their control over jobs programs, such as the ‘workfare program,’ to control local economies and deepen clientelist linkages between individuals and the state (Kingsley & Novak, 2018; Mares & Young, 2019, p. 452).

Furthermore, we find that reduced political contestation simultaneously erodes trust between constituents and opposition representatives. Often, this is due to a lack of cross-party coordination in local development initiatives. For example, in one interview location, when a cultural site was being expanded, entire neighborhoods were forced into a buyout. The mayor called an emergency town hall meeting with the constituents of that district to explain the infrastructural project and the neighborhoods it would affect. However, the opposition party member that represented this district was never notified about the emergency meeting. He then feared his constituents’ backlash over an expansion project in which he appeared complicit (Interview with Local politician, 2016c). These types of political phenomena at best make opposition representatives appear incapable of meeting the needs of constituents and at worst incompetent or even untrustworthy. This often results in constituents punishing opposition representatives in upcoming elections—conflating political bottlenecking with incompetence.

The reduction of oversight mechanisms.

We find that the governing coalition also strategically reduces local oversight mechanisms to limit public awareness and avoid political scrutiny and pushback. By weakening oversight, Fidesz decreases the already limited attention paid to most local government activities, which empowers them to act with impunity—for example, by enriching party allies through corrupt EU funding allocation practices. The erosion of oversight takes several forms; however, many are concentrated in fiscal oversight, political checks and balances, and media access.

One critical type of reduced oversight concerns local fiscal matters and budgets. For example, in Budapest, amendment 48/2015(XII.23) §2(1) to the 2014 SZMSZ increased the financial threshold necessary for committee review of the transactions of the Public Domain Utilization Committee (Budapest Főváros Önkormányzata Közgyűlése, 2014). The threshold increased from 50 million forints (~\$176,000 USD) to a whopping 5 billion forints (~\$17,600,000 USD), placing a large majority of financial transactions outside the purview of the capital's general assembly and its 13 opposition party members. Given that Budapest is an opposition stronghold, it is strategically important for Fidesz to remove a majority of its transactions from the public domain. Similarly, in the city of Debrecen, a 2015 amendment (5/2015(II.26) §11) to section §62(2) of the SZMSZ reduced the number of fiscal committee reports produced from three to two annually, while an amendment (5/2015(II.26) §8(1)) to section §57(2) removes the committee oversight of the local government budget (Debrecen Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzat Közgyűlése, 2013). These changes to financial oversight may appear politically benign, but in the aggregate, they allow Fidesz to handle major transactions with greater autonomy and discretion. Moreover, the ambiguities built into these amendments work in Fidesz's favor, because the ruling majority gets to determine what is under the purview of a governing body.

Oversight between different local governing bodies has been reduced significantly as well. Although Fidesz interviewees frame these changes as necessary for bureaucratic streamlining and efficient policymaking, the reduction of oversight implies a clear erosion of checks and balances. For example, in Székesfehérvár, a 2015 amendment (14/2015(IV.20) §15) repealed the previous requirement under §107(4) for the notarys to report to the General Assembly, Committee, and Mayor if a rule violation was discovered (Székesfehérvár Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2013). According to an amendment (5/2015(II.26) §4) to §23(4) of the Debrecen SZMSZ, the General Assembly no longer needs to report on matters on which it is briefed (Debrecen Megyei Jogú Város Örkormányzat Közgyűlése, 2013). In Hódmezővásárhely, amendment 10/2018(III.21) §2 removed the position of City Strategy Advisor—the political figure previously responsible for overseeing financial, fiscal, and economic matters in the city (Hódmezővásárhely Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2014). In Kecskemét, a 2014 amendment (23/2014(XII.18) §5(1)) removed an institutional layer of city district governments that had served both neighborhood governance and oversight functions and as the mode of communication between the city and its residents about ongoing local initiatives (Kecskemét Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata Közgyűlése, 2013).

Finally, oversight by the local media, non-governmental organizations, and local citizens has been reduced. For example, in Dunaújváros, instead of requiring all media institutions in the city to be invited to council meetings, section §15(2) of the 2017 SZMSZ now only requires the invitation of media institutions funded by the local government (Dunaújváros Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2017). In Eger, amendment 44/2012(VIII.31) §5 repealed the capacity for local residents to ask questions of the General Assembly, Mayoral Office, or Public Service Providers (Eger Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata, 2011). In Hódmezővásárhely, while

recordings and transcripts were previously mandated for city council meetings, they are now only required ‘when possible’ (20/2015(IX.15) §1) (Hódmezővásárhely Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2014). Finally, in the town of Salgótarján, amendment 3/2017(I.26) §11 reduced the need for coordination with civil society regarding the workings of a local government institution (Salgótarján Megyei Jogú Város Közgyűlése, 2013).

These types of procedural adjustments affect how and when cases of corruption are prosecuted, laws are enforced, and policy is crafted. By eroding mechanisms of mutual oversight, Fidesz has reduced the scope of democratic governing bodies and made local policy-making opaque. In reducing checks and balances between local institutions, they have also made political information more asymmetric vis-à-vis their opposition and constituents.

According to opposition elites, one prominent way in which reduced oversight allows Fidesz to act with impunity is by enriching their business allies. At all five interview sites, opposition members noted that EU funding opportunities are often ‘bottlenecked’ in their application period. Interviewees provided nearly a dozen examples wherein EU-funded projects were publicly posted and opened for applications within two to four weeks of the deadline, whereas private Fidesz business partners had prior warning about the project’s existence. On a procedural and functional level, these artificially tight deadlines were hard to meet for opposition party members. The issue of resources (lack of lawyers, grant writers) was critical. The opposition also faced difficulty in forming business partnerships in time to deliver on the proof-of-concept necessary to win these large project grants.

Opposition members also discussed the issue of the project deadlines in symbolic terms. When they would see a particularly tight deadline, it was perceived as a credible signal from the governing coalition that Fidesz had already predetermined the award recipient informally. In a

handful of interviews, even Fidesz's party elite acknowledge the informal practices of (1) giving business partners and networks an early 'heads up' about funding opportunities; and (2) providing local business networks with consulting and expertise on these applications (Local politician, 2016a, 2016b, 2016m, 2016o). The logic provided by these elites was almost always related to the demonstrated expertise of these businesses. Fidesz elites also emphasized that politicians have a responsibility to 'promote business interests' whenever possible (Local politician, 2016a, 2016j, 2016p). These informal and corrupt funding practices have given Fidesz asymmetric bargaining power with the country's businesses—limiting future electoral opportunities for political contestation.

Concluding Remarks

Pempel (1990a, p. 334) argues that “the weightiest political consequence of long-term dominance lies in the ability of the dominant party to shape, over time, the nation's nexus of public policies, its rules of political conflict.” This suggests that Hungarian illiberalism starts—but does not end—with the chipping away of democratic laws, procedures, regulations, and institutions. Procedural tweaks enable larger structural adjustments to the country's political space over time. When the opposition is functionally neutered from responding to its constituency, voters have reduced incentives to vote for candidates whose electoral platforms they may otherwise prefer. By reducing the political space for subnational policy contestation and removing oversight mechanisms on the governing coalition, the Hungarian government structurally undermines democratic policymaking and political competition.

This study contributes to our understanding of democratic backsliding in Hungary by analyzing the subnational procedural changes that make political competition less viable. We started this analysis by highlighting the idea that successful opposition to a dominant party often

emerges at the grassroots level, but that local procedural mechanisms can also constrain the reemergence of political contenders by undermining democratic governance. Whereas major structural reforms to media freedom, the constitution, and the judiciary have been discussed in the democratic backsliding literature, we bring attention to a less prominent mechanism of institutional change that supports illiberalization.

For Fidesz, maintaining a guise of democratic conformity is necessary—in consideration of both national audiences (i.e., voters) and supranational ones (i.e., the European People’s Party). Therefore, the party is often willing to work within internal channels to enact subtler reforms that can ensure their continued electoral success without arousing too much backlash. They also seek to balance long-term power consolidation objectives within the confines of EU membership, having been able to use discretion at the local level to put forth policies that clearly violate both the spirit and letter of the *acquis communautaire*, directives, and regulations coming from Brussels. By carefully balancing audience costs through subnational procedural changes, the party has created an opportunity structure for future, more fundamental changes to democratic institutions while maintaining a semblance of democracy.

More importantly, we believe Fidesz’s subnational strategies may be used by other regional regimes with illiberal tendencies. Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) has echoed Fidesz’s strategy at the national level, and it may seek to implement subnational strategic variants to deepen the party’s dominance. These changes began relatively early in the process of Fidesz’s regime consolidation, suggesting that subnational rule changes can also be a warning sign for a de-democratization process and represent a pattern that extends across backsliding democracies, single-party dominant regimes, and electoral autocracies. They also may be an important indicator in contexts like the European Union, where the guise of procedural

democracy must be maintained. These types of changes are less likely to be found in an established single-party autocratic regime. Our document analysis and interviews demonstrate how local developments can play a key role in the establishment of an enduring illiberal regime, enabling further changes to solidify long-term control in a ‘virtuous cycle’ of reform.

¹ Additionally, the Manifesto Project data (2016) merges Fidesz and KDNP as parties from 2006 onward due to their shared political manifesto.

² The grouping of parties onto a loose left-right spectrum is as follows. 1) Left parties: Centrum, DK, LMP, MSZP, SZDSZ, and WP; 2) Right parties: Fidesz, FKGP, KDNP, and MDF; 3) Radical Right parties: Jobbik and MIÉP. Specific data for all included parties can be found in Table 1. These groups may not be universally accepted, but they illustrate trends in party candidacies that are corroborated by the more precise numbers for individual parties. These groupings do differ from some major party-sorting datasets, notably the Manifesto Project (2016) and the Comparative Political Data Set (2016). We believe that these datasets do not accurately capture the importance of nationalism and social policies in Hungarian politics and do not reflect the character of the relative positions of Hungarian parties.

³ For example, due to the public initiative ban, cities like Zalaegerszeg, Érd, and Nagykanizsa appear as cities with no rules change in Table 3.

⁴ Specific interview locations are withheld to protect the anonymity of interview subjects.

⁵ Please see Appendix S2 for direct interview quotes corresponding to their citation in the text.

⁶ One could define Fidesz as a far-right party, given their current policy positions and efforts to co-opt Jobbik support. We code Fidesz as a right-wing party to differentiate from Jobbik, to place them relatively within the Hungarian political system, and to account for their continued membership in the center-right European People’s Party, which serves to mainstream Fidesz’s political agenda.

⁷ Provision removed from 37/2017(XII.15) (vs. 39/2013(XII.20) §37(2).

⁸ Under the Hungarian public administration system, the notary is the head local government administrator. Notaries typically direct the work of the mayor's office.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. City Council Candidates by National Party.

PARTY	2002	2006	2010	2014
Centrum	1518	585	0	0
DK	0	0	0	2469
Fidesz	6600	8149	7670	6269
FKGP	1091	325	0	0
Jobbik	0	585	3999	4062
KDNP	454	5559	5720	5961
LMP	0	0	1107	1059
MDF	5238	3595	186	0
MIÉP	2633	1187	12	21
MSZP	8016	7508	3496	3108
SZDSZ	4426	4150	1	0
WP	1963	0	0	0
Total	31939	31643	22191	22949

Table 2. Mayoral election results.

City	Population (2018)	Fidesz 2010 Win	Fidesz 2014 win
Budapest	1,749,734	X	X
Debrecen	202,214	X	X
Szeged	161,122		
Miskolc	155,650	X	X
Pécs	144,188	X	X
Győr	130,094	X	X
Nyíregyháza	117,121	X	X
Kecskemét	110,638	X	X
Székesfehérvár	97,382	X	X
Szombathely	77,984	X	X
Szolnok	71,521	X	X
Érd	66,892	X	X
Tatabánya	65,633	X	X
Sopron	62,454	X	X
Kaposvár	61,920	X	X
Veszprém	59,754	X	X
Békéscsaba	59,357	X	
Zalaegerszeg	57,780	X	X
Eger	53,436	X	X
Nagykanizsa	46,866	X	X
Dunaújváros	44,358	X	X
Hódmezővásárhely ⁹	43,700	X	X
Dunakeszi	43,490	X	X
Szigetszentmiklós	38,591	X	X
Cegléd	35,523	X	X
Baja	34,788	X	X
Salgótarján	34,124	X	

Table 3. Types of Rule Changes to City Council Documents.

City	Reduced Democratic Participation	Reduced Oversight
Budapest	X	X
Debrecen	X	X
Szeged		
Miskolc	X	
Pécs	X	
Győr	X	X
Nyíregyháza	X	
Kecskemét	X	X
Székesfehérvár	X	X
Szombathely	X	
Szolnok	X	
Érd		
Tatabánya		
Sopron	X	
Kaposvár		
Veszprém	X	
Békéscsaba	X	X
Zalaegerszeg		
Eger	X	X
Nagykanizsa		
Dunaújváros	X	X
Hódmezővásárhely		X
Dunakeszi		
Szigetszentmiklós	X	X
Cegléd	X	X
Baja	X	
Salgótarján	X	X

Figure 1. Percentage of Major Party Candidates for City Council run by Fidesz or Fidesz-KDNP.

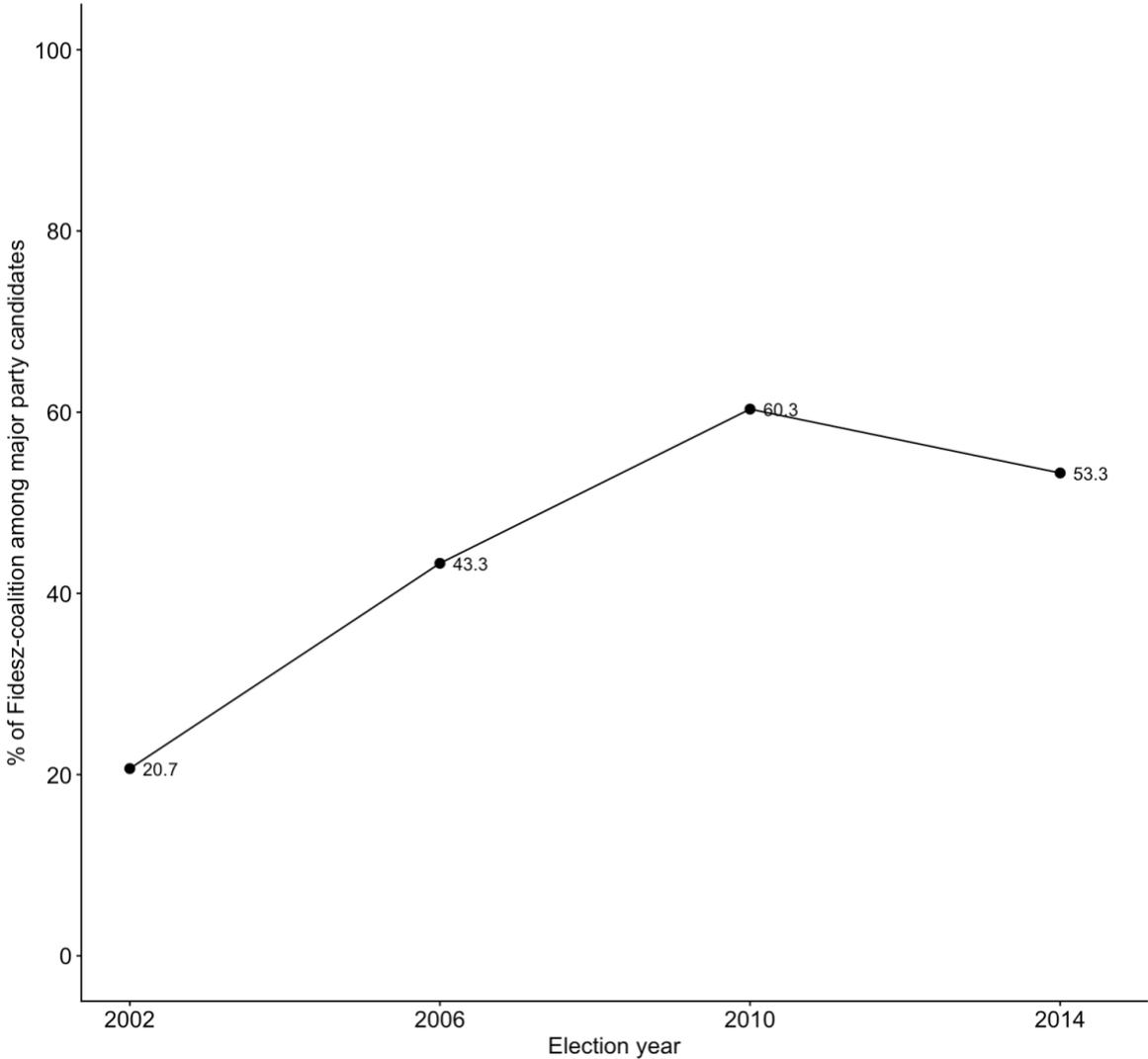
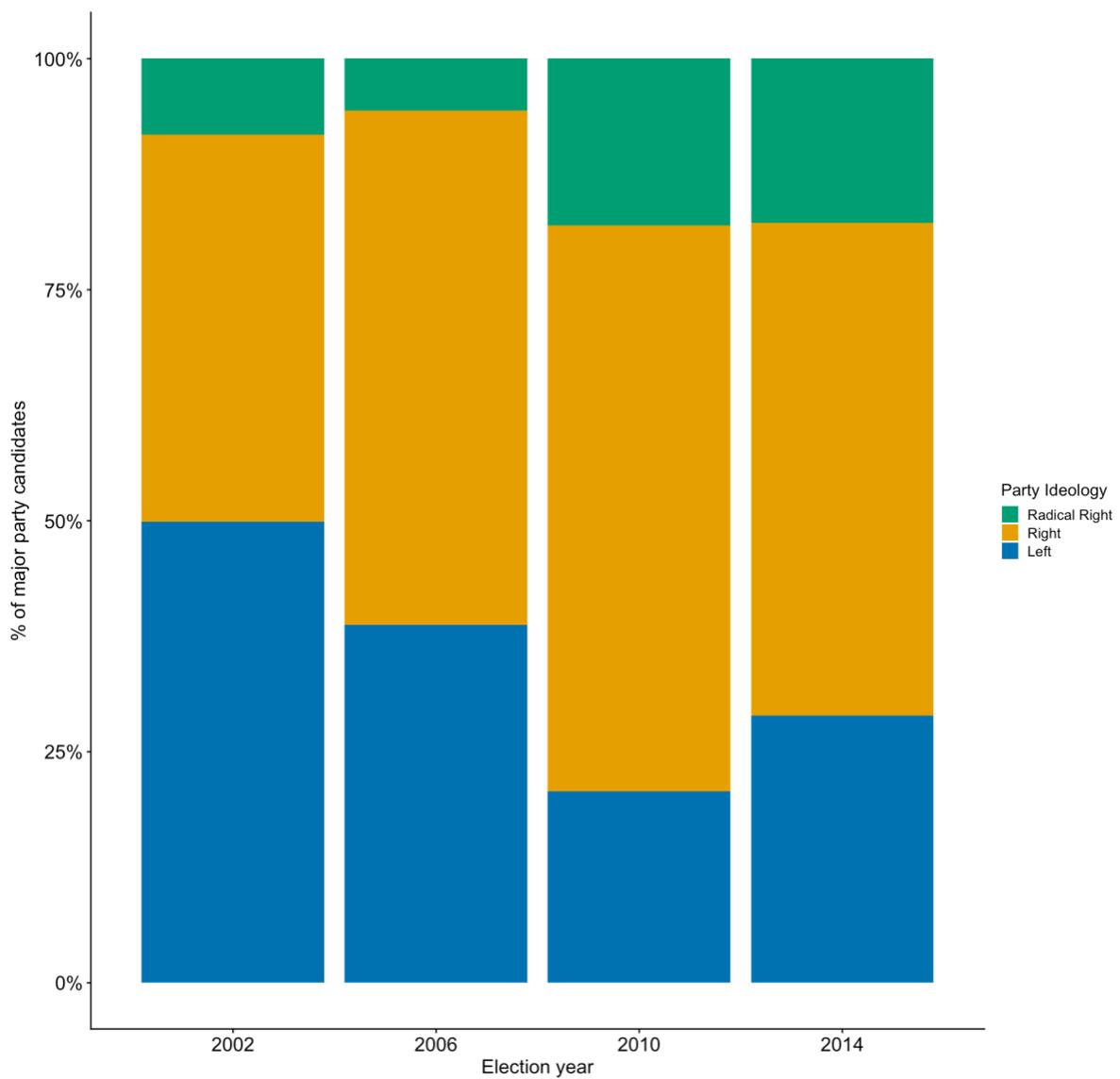


Figure 2. Percentage of Major Party Candidates for City Council by position on the Left-Right Ideological Spectrum.



9 The unified opposition won a 2018 special election in Hódmezővásárhely.