

# Democracy Erodes From the Top Public Opinion and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe

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# Democracy Erodes From the Top

## Public Opinion and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe <sup>1</sup>

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An eminent scholar of comparative politics, Adam Przeworski, began a 2019 book on *Crises of Democracy* by declaring that “Something is happening. ‘Anti-establishment,’ ‘anti-system,’ ‘anti-elite,’ ‘populist’ sentiments are exploding in many mature democracies. ... Confidence in politicians, parties, parliaments, and governments is falling. Even the support for democracy as a system of government has weakened. Popular preferences about policies diverge sharply.”<sup>2</sup>

The 2016 Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, and the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe and elsewhere produced an explosion of commentary about the “populist explosion” agitating affluent democracies, a “global wave of populism.”<sup>3</sup> In Europe, at least, the forces

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>3</sup> John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (Columbia Global Reports, 2016). Adam Taylor, “The Global Wave of Populism

propelling this populist “wave” are widely agreed upon. “Two core issues lie at the root of today’s rising populism,” Michael Bröning wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “the challenge of migration and the lingering euro crisis.” Political theorist Jan-Werner Müller cited “a retrenchment of the welfare state, immigration, and, above all in recent years, the Eurocrisis.” Political scientist Benjamin Moffitt likewise argued that “A prolonged global financial downturn, rising unemployment in a number of areas and a loss of faith in perceived elite projects like the European Union are helping fuel the flames” of populism, threatening “a crisis of faith in democracy” in which citizens are “more and more disillusioned with mainstream politics.”<sup>4</sup>

All of this does sound portentous. But, at least insofar as the attitudes and preferences of ordinary Europeans are concerned, *virtually none of it is true*. On the whole, Europeans feel significantly warmer toward immigrants than they did 15 years ago. They are, if anything, slightly more enthusiastic about the project of European integration. Trust in national parliaments and politicians has remained virtually constant, as has public satisfaction with the working of democracy. In these and other respects, the conventional wisdom about a “crisis of democracy” in contemporary Europe is strikingly at odds with data from public opinion surveys.

That is not to say that there is no crisis. Rather, it is to say that political observers’ understanding of the nature of that crisis reflects a significant misunderstanding of the role of public opinion in democratic politics. The “folk theory” of democracy exalts “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” as Abraham Lincoln famously put it. Even if citizens’ preferences do not directly determine policy, they are

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that Turned 2016 Upside Down,” *Washington Post* WorldViews, 19 December 2016. Pippa Norris, “So Is the Wave of Populist Nationalism Finished? Hardly,” *Washington Post* Monkey Cage, 17 May 2017. Ian Bremmer, “The Wave to Come,” *Time*, 11 May 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Bröning, “The Rise of Populism in Europe: Can the Center Hold?” *Foreign Affairs* Snapshot, 3 June 2016. Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 96. Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 159-160, 1.

supposed to be the primary force animating democratic politics.<sup>5</sup> But if the people rule, however indirectly, then aberrations in the workings of democracy must somehow reflect the people's failings—bad attitudes, rash choices, or insufficient diligence in fulfilling the obligations of citizenship.

The alternative view propounded here might be termed an *elitist* account of democratic crisis. Of course, “elitist” has become a scornful term in modern discourse, and especially in the context of discussions of democracy.<sup>6</sup> My aim in employing it here is not to wade into normative debates regarding the appropriate roles of leaders and citizens in democratic political systems. It is simply to underscore the remarkable disconnection of ordinary public opinion from the developments that are commonly taken as indicative of a “crisis of democracy” in contemporary Europe. Nancy Bermeo, summarizing her examination of over a dozen full-blown breakdowns of democracy in 20th-century Europe and Latin America, wrote that “the culpability for democracy’s demise lay overwhelmingly with political elites.”<sup>7</sup> My argument here is that the

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<sup>5</sup> In a powerful scholarly statement of this view, James Stimson described shifts in public opinion as “the most important factor in American politics” and “the drive wheel” of policy change; “the public governs,” he wrote, “much more than most realize.” James A. Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2015), xix. On the “folk theory” of democracy, Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Jack L. Walker’s “A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy” and, in rejoinder, Robert A. Dahl’s “Further Reflections on ‘The Elitist Theory of Democracy,’” both in *American Political Science Review* 60 (1966). In a letter to the editor published in the same issue, Walker wrote, “After reading Professor Dahl’s rejoinder, I am convinced that it was a mistake to use the label ‘The Elitist Theory of Democracy’ (even though it came directly from Lipset) to describe the doctrines with which I tried to deal. ... The word ‘elitist’ apparently carries, at least in Dahl’s view, some objectionable anti-democratic connotations.” Despite Walker’s misgivings, a Google search for the exact phrase “elitist theory of democracy” returns almost 10,000 results.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 221.

culpability for Europe's current crisis of democracy likewise lies overwhelmingly with political elites.

My analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I summarize broad trends in European public opinion from 2002 through 2019, focusing particularly on attitudes commonly taken as symptomatic of a "wave" of populist sentiment or a "crisis of democracy," including antipathy to immigration and European integration, ideological polarization, distrust of political elites, and dissatisfaction with the workings of democracy. In Europe as a whole and in most countries considered separately, those attitudes turn out to be largely unchanged since the turn of the century.

If populist sentiment is essentially stable, how has support for populist parties "exploded"? Mostly, it hasn't. While several countries have seen flare-ups in voting for populist parties in recent years, the overall increase has been very modest—by one account, no more than a few percentage points.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there is virtually no correlation between support for populist parties at the polls in specific countries, or changes in that support over time, and the extent of populist sentiment in those countries.<sup>9</sup> Electoral support for populist parties seems to depend much more on the "supply" of populist mobilization, and on institutional rules that facilitate or inhibit that mobilization, than on citizens' demand for populism.

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<sup>8</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 9. By this tabulation, the average vote share for "populist" parties in 32 Western democracies increased from 10.9% in the 1980s and 9.9% in the 1990s to 11.4% in the 2000s and 12.4% in the 2010s.

<sup>9</sup> Of the eight countries with the highest levels of right-wing populist sentiment in 2014-17, only two (Hungary and France) had right-wing populist parties attracting as much as 10% of the vote. On the other hand, right-wing populist parties flourished in Switzerland, Denmark, and Norway, all of which were among the half-dozen European countries with the *lowest* levels of right-wing populist sentiment in 2014-17. As political scientist Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser observed, "populist radical right parties have shown a great success precisely in those regions of Europe where the structural prerequisites for their rise were hardly existent." "The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy," *Democratization* (2012), 188.

Second, I consider the two most prominent examples of democratic “backsliding” in contemporary Europe, tracing the bases of popular support for Fidesz in Hungary before and after its rise to power in 2010 and for the Law and Justice party in Poland before and after its rise to power in 2015. In both cases, I find surprisingly little evidence of public hankering for even “mildly authoritarian” rule.<sup>10</sup> Rather, these were apparently conventional conservative parties swept into office by discontent with unsuccessful incumbents, then maintained in office *despite* their autocratic actions because they presided over significant increases in prosperity and subjective well-being, bolstering trust in political elites and—ironically—satisfaction with the workings of democracy. While ordinary citizens in these cases may be guilty of prioritizing the quality of their day-to-day lives over democratic procedures, democracy has clearly eroded from the top down, not from the bottom up.

### **The extraordinary normalcy of European public opinion**

If Europe is experiencing a crisis of democracy, most Europeans seem not to have gotten the message. Over the past two decades, the key attitudes and values that Przeworski saw “exploding in many mature democracies” have, in fact, hardly budged. I focus here on a handful of attitudes that are commonly implicated in discussions of a democratic crisis in contemporary Europe, and that are indeed associated with support for right-wing populist parties in many countries.<sup>11</sup> These include attitudes toward immigration and European integration, ideological polarization, trust in parliament and politicians, and satisfaction with democracy.

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<sup>10</sup> The description of Hungary and Poland as “mildly authoritarian regimes” is borrowed from Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt’s best-selling account of *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018), 188.

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between these attitudes and support for right-wing populist parties, see Larry Bartels, “The ‘Wave’ of Right-Wing Populist Sentiment Is a Myth,” *Washington Post* Monkey Cage, 21 June 2017.

My analysis of trends in these attitudes is based on the single best collection of longitudinal data on contemporary European public opinion, the European Social Survey. The nine rounds of ESS, conducted biannually from 2002-03 through 2018-19, include almost 350,000 respondents in 23 countries, providing an unparalleled record of European public opinion in the 21st century.<sup>12</sup> Table 1 shows the ESS sample size in each country and round.<sup>13</sup>

\*\*\* **Table 1** \*\*\*

### **Support for Immigration**

Immigration has emerged as a momentous policy issue and a salient political flashpoint in many of the world's affluent democracies. A 2016 article in *Foreign Policy* warned that "The Immigration Crisis Is Tearing Europe Apart." Another in the *Washington Post* declared that, in light of demographic projections of "more and more immigrants for decades to come," Europeans' reactions to immigration "raise troubling questions about the ability of political institutions in the developed world to cope with their arrival." Friction between natives and immigrants often receives lavish attention

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<sup>12</sup> The 349,974 respondents represent 183 country-rounds; the country-round sample sizes range from 960 to 3,045 and average 1,912. Surveys were not conducted in the remaining 24 country-rounds (11.6%). My characterizations of European opinion are based on weighting each country-round in proportion to its adult population. The appendix details the composition of the weighted sample (Table A1) and provides a comparison of overall trends in the weighted and unweighted data (Table A2). My substantive conclusions remain essentially unchanged when each country-round is weighted equally.

<sup>13</sup> Data and documentation are available from the ESS website (<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). My analysis generally includes EU countries as of 2006 and those in the Schengen area. It excludes countries admitted to the EU after 2006 (Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania), some small countries with little or no ESS data (Cyprus, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Malta), and several other countries represented sporadically in the ESS dataset (Albania, Israel, Kosovo, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine).

from the media, even in places where public opinion is generally quite favorable toward immigration.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1 tracks responses to a series of six questions on immigration included consistently in European Social Surveys.<sup>15</sup> The heavy line in the figure shows the average response to these six questions in each ESS round for Europe as a whole, while the lighter lines show the corresponding averages for each of the 15 countries represented in all nine rounds.<sup>16</sup>

\*\*\* *Figure 1* \*\*\*

While some of Europe's party systems and political institutions have indeed been rattled by anti-immigrant mobilizations, ordinary Europeans became significantly *more sanguine* about immigration over this period: the average response on the zero-to-ten

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Stokes, "The Immigration Crisis Is Tearing Europe Apart," *Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2016 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/22/the-immigration-crisis-is-tearing-europe-apart/>). Max Ehrenfreund, "Europe's Immigration Crisis Is Just Beginning," *Washington Post* Wonkblog, 1 July 2016. Peter S. Goodman, "The Nordic Model May Be the Best Cushion Against Capitalism. Can It Survive Immigration?" *New York Times*, 11 July 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Three questions asked how willing the respondents' country should be to allow immigrants (1) "of the same race or ethnic group as most [country]'s people," (2) "of a different race or ethnic group," and (3) "from the poorer countries outside Europe." Responses to these three questions were recoded to range from zero (for "allow none") to ten (for "allow many"). The other three questions asked (4) whether immigration is good or bad for the country's economy, (5) whether the country's cultural life "is generally undermined or enriched" by immigration, and (6) whether immigration makes the country "a worse or a better place to live." The correlations between responses to the six questions range from .46 to .80, and their loadings on a common factor range from .72 to .85. I included respondents who answered at least five of the six questions, imputing neutral values for the sixth when necessary.

<sup>16</sup> Because the set of countries represented in each ESS round varies, the European averages are derived from a statistical analysis including country fixed effects for the whole period. The countries accounting for most of the missing observations—Italy, Greece, and Lithuania—are in some respects unrepresentative, though only Italy is populous enough to have much impact on the European averages. More elaborate statistical procedures designed to account for sample selection produce little evidence of bias due to correlations between countries' opinion climates and their participation in specific ESS waves.



scale gradually increased from 5.3 in 2002-03 to 5.7 in 2018-19.<sup>17</sup> Of the 15 countries represented in all nine ESS rounds, 13 became warmer toward immigrants, with the average responses in nine of these countries increasing by a half-point or more on the ten-point scale. Only two countries, Hungary and Poland, experienced declines in average ratings.

Even Europe's refugee crisis, which brought hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq to Europe in 2015 and early 2016, made no perceptible dent in public support for immigration—except in Hungary, which saw the largest and most sudden influx of asylum-seekers, as well as a vigorous anti-immigrant campaign by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel's "fierce determination to maintain open borders for the refugees" was hailed internationally as a remarkable act of political courage, public support for immigration held absolutely steady at 6.2 on the ten-point scale through four ESS rounds fielded between late 2012 and early 2019. And Sweden, which has had a high rate of net immigration for more than a decade and the second-largest influx of asylum-seekers in 2015, has consistently had the most favorable attitudes toward immigration in Europe by far.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The estimated increase is .42 (with a clustered standard error of .17). The corresponding estimated increases for the six separate items range from .05 (for enriching cultural life) to .63 (for allowing more immigrants of the same race or ethnic group). All of my longitudinal cross-national analyses allow for disturbances in individual survey responses to be correlated within country-waves.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Nolan, "Hungary Government Condemned Over Anti-Immigration Drive," *The Guardian*, 2 July 2015. Kim Lane Scheppele, "Orban's Police State: Hungary's Crackdown on Refugees is Shredding the Values of Democracy," *Politico*, 14 September 2015. William Drozdiak, *Fractured Continent: Europe's Crises and the Fate of the West* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 3-4. E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Germany's Political Crisis," *Washington Post*, 2 December 2015. Melissa Eddy, "A Year After the Berlin Market Attack, Germany Admits Mistakes," *New York Times*, 19 December 2017. Data on immigration and asylum-seeking are recorded in the OECD's International Migration Database (<http://stats.oecd.org/>).

The social tensions associated with immigration, especially immigration from outside the relatively homogenous societies of Europe, are quite real. Political entrepreneurs exploiting those tensions have produced a good deal of ugly rhetoric and even spurred the adoption of some ugly policies. But European public opinion has been remarkably immune to the immigration crisis that is “tearing Europe apart.”

### **Support for European integration**

The European Union is an unlovable institution under the best of circumstances, a supranational conglomerate operating “by elite consensus and an irritating sort of mild bureaucratic snuffling,” as one observer put it. “Up to the early 2000s,” historian Adam Tooze has written, “the EU operated against a backdrop of what political scientists called a ‘permissive consensus.’ Europe’s population accepted the gradual push for ever closer union without enthusiasm but also without protest.” But that changed, the story goes, as the EU was paralyzed by rigidity and infighting in the wake of the Great Recession and the European sovereign debt crisis. According to political scientist Sheri Berman, “The EU’s technocratic rather than democratic nature generated a backlash against the EU as it became associated with economic problems rather than prosperity.” Yanis Varoufakis, an economist-turned-politician on the receiving end of EU rigidity, put it more colorfully: “when a technocracy harboring a deep, Platonic contempt for democracy attains inordinate power, we end up with an antisocial, dispirited, mindless autocracy. Europeans recognize this in today’s Brussels-based bureaucracy.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> James Wood, “Can You Forgive Her? How Margaret Thatcher Ruled,” *The New Yorker*, 2 December 2019, 63. Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (Viking, 2018), 112. Sheri Berman, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 402. Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must? Europe’s Crisis and America’s Economic Future* (Nation Books, 2016), 48-49.

If we turn to the ESS data to gauge the depth of this public backlash against the EU, we find another anomaly. Seven of the nine ESS waves included a question tapping attitudes toward European integration. Respondents were asked whether “European unification should go further” or whether “it has already gone too far.” Response options ranged from zero (for “already gone too far”) to ten (“unification should go further”). The average responses for Europe as a whole and 15 separate countries, which are plotted in Figure 2, suggest that support for further unification is neither particularly low nor declining.<sup>20</sup>

**\*\*\* Figure 2 \*\*\***

For Europe as a whole, the trend in public attitudes toward European integration is mostly flat, with support for further unification having declined slightly in 2006-07 (a period of EU expansion) and again in 2014-15, then increased in the two most recent rounds of surveys. The average level of support in 2018-19 (5.5) was slightly higher than when the question was first asked in 2004-05 (5.3).<sup>21</sup> Support for further European integration increased substantially over this period in Portugal (1.4 points), Germany (1.0 points), Finland, Belgium, and Sweden. Declines in support were both smaller and rarer. The largest overall decline (0.6 points) was in Switzerland, which has long maintained a determined independence from the EU in any case. Support also declined by about half a point in Poland and Ireland—two countries on the periphery of the EU that have seen much higher rates of economic growth than other parts of Europe.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A separate item tapped trust in the European Parliament on a zero-to-ten scale. The average level of trust in 2018-19, 4.4, was only slightly lower than the average level in 2002-07 (4.5), and only slightly lower than the average level of trust in the respondents’ national parliaments (4.6).

<sup>21</sup> The estimated increase is .18 (with a clustered standard error of .15).

<sup>22</sup> From 2002 to 2019, the average annual growth rate of real GDP per capita was 4.0% in Poland and, despite a sustained downturn in the wake of the Great Recession, 3.1% in Ireland. The corresponding growth rate for the 19-country Euro area as a whole was 0.8%.

Nor is there any support in these data for the notion that “Growing disaffection with Europe has become particularly acute among young people, who in the past embraced a borderless Europe.”<sup>23</sup> Young Europeans have generally been more supportive of further European integration than their elders—and that is true to about the same extent in recent years as it was before the economic crisis. The average level of support among people born since 1980 has not varied by as much as half a point over the whole period, and in 2018-19 it was probably higher than at any previous time.<sup>24</sup> The *only* country in which the overall balance of opinion among young people in 2018-19 was tilted against further European integration was the steadfast outsider Switzerland. Even in Great Britain, where antipathy to the EU among older voters propelled the “leave” side to a stunning victory in the Brexit referendum, the balance of opinion among young people has remained slightly positive. There is simply no evidence here of a generational turn—or, for that matter, any turn at all—away from the project of European integration.

### **Ideological polarization**

Scholars of comparative politics are haunted by the collapse of democracy in Weimar Germany, where economic distress and social disorder fueled the simultaneous rise of violent extremist elements on both ends of the ideological spectrum, a centrifugal force that tore apart a fragile democratic system. In her broader survey of democratic breakdowns, Bermeo found that the Weimar case is historically exceptional: “ordinary people generally did not polarize and mobilize in support of dictatorship.” Nonetheless, the specter of polarization looms large in thinking about contemporary crises of democracy. After all, it stands to reason that

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<sup>23</sup> Drozdiak, *Fractured Continent*, xvii.

<sup>24</sup> The estimated increase in support for further integration in this cohort from 2004-05 to 2018-19 is .14 (with a clustered standard error of .13).

“When conflicts are intense and a society is highly polarized, finding policies acceptable to all major political forces is difficult and may be impossible.” Thus, “severe polarization threatens both governability and social cohesion, and in turn, support for democracy in advanced and developing democracies alike.”<sup>25</sup>

Survey data are of little help in gauging the intensity of political conflicts or the depth of social divisions, but they can tell us something about the sheer extent of disagreement in a political system. Figure 3 tracks ideological polarization in Europe, as measured by the standard deviation within each country and ESS round of citizens’ self-placements on a zero-to-ten left-right scale. For the continent as a whole, the level of polarization increased by about 10% in 2012-13, at the height of the sovereign debt crisis, then immediately began to recede again; by 2018-19 it was less than 2% higher than it had been in 2002-03.

\*\*\* *Figure 3* \*\*\*

The country with the largest increase in ideological polarization (from 2.0 points to 2.4 points) was Norway, hardly an imperiled democracy by most accounts. Polarization increased by lesser amount in Slovenia, Great Britain, Hungary, and Spain. The country with the highest level of polarization in the first ESS round, France, saw the largest decrease by the end of this period (from 2.5 points to 2.2 points).

More generally, there is little evidence of an increase in extremism in European publics, and even less evidence of an increase in right-wing populist extremism. The proportion of people who placed themselves at the endpoints of the left-right scale increased from 6.4% in 2002-03 to 8.8% in 2012-13, at the height of the sovereign debt crisis, but receded to 6.9% by 2018-19; most of the increase, such as it was, was on the

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<sup>25</sup> Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, 235. Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, 9. Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (2018), 17.

*left*. The proportion of people who placed themselves at the endpoints of the European unification scale increased from 13.6% in 2004-05 to just 14.0% in 2018-19; most of the increase was in “extreme” *pro*-integration views. The proportion of people who expressed comparably extreme views on immigration increased from 3.9% in 2002-03 to 8.1% in 2018-19; but four-fifths of that increase represented more extreme *favorable* attitudes.<sup>26</sup> In each of these domains, European public opinion as a whole has been and remains decidedly moderate.

### **Political trust and satisfaction with democracy**

One of the most worrisome aspects of contemporary European politics, by many accounts, is a profound dissatisfaction among ordinary citizens with their political leaders and institutions, and even with democracy itself. In an attention-getting diagnosis by Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, for example, “Approval ratings for the continent’s leading politicians stand at record lows, and citizens have grown deeply mistrustful of their political institutions. ... Even as democracy has come to be the only form of government widely viewed as legitimate, it has lost the trust of many citizens who no longer believe that democracy can deliver on their most pressing needs and preferences.”<sup>27</sup>

The ESS questionnaires have consistently included items tapping trust in politicians and in the respondent’s country’s parliament using zero-to-ten scales ranging from “no trust at all” to “complete trust.” Figure 4 shows the estimated level of political trust, based on averaging responses to these two items, for Europe as a whole

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<sup>26</sup> Only the last of these estimated shifts is larger than its standard error.

<sup>27</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* 27 (2016), 15-16.

and for individual countries.<sup>28</sup> For the continent as a whole and for most individual countries, the average response is closer to “no trust at all” than to “complete trust.” However, there is no evidence here that “citizens have grown deeply mistrustful of their political institutions” in recent years, or even that “Confidence in politicians, parties, parliaments, and governments is falling.” The overall level of trust declined by about half a point on the ten-point scale between 2002-03 and 2012-13, at the height of the sovereign debt crisis, but has subsequently rebounded almost entirely.<sup>29</sup>

**\*\*\* Figure 4 \*\*\***

As Tolstoy might have said, trusting countries are all alike, while every distrustful country is distrustful in its own way. Five of the 15 countries tracked in Figure 4—Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands—exhibited consistently high and gradually increasing levels of trust in their parliaments and politicians.<sup>30</sup> The countries with roughly average levels of political trust—Germany, France, Great Britain, Belgium, and Ireland—were also fairly consistent, with the average level of trust in each country fluctuating within a band of one point or less on the ten-point scale.

Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Hungary were less trusting and also more volatile. However, their several tribulations do not amount to anything like a unified crisis of political distrust. Trust in parliament and politicians reached its nadir in 2004 in Poland, in 2009 in Hungary, in 2012-13 in Portugal, and in 2014 in Slovenia. In each of these cases there was a subsequent rebound in trust. Some of the countries less

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<sup>28</sup> Another item tapping trust in political parties did not appear in the first ESS round, but has produced generally similar responses in subsequent rounds. Additional questions regarding trust in the legal system and the police have produced higher ratings and are less strongly correlated with the more specifically political trust ratings.

<sup>29</sup> The cumulative decline amounts to just .05 points (with a clustered standard error of .16 points) on the ten-point scale.

<sup>30</sup> Denmark, not shown in Figure 4, exhibited an even higher but generally declining level of trust.

consistently represented in the ESS also had low average levels of political trust—Lithuania, Italy, Greece, Czechia, and Slovakia.<sup>31</sup> But here, too, there is a good deal of heterogeneity in trajectories.

As for democracy itself, the ESS questionnaires have also consistently included an item gauging satisfaction “with the way democracy works” in each respondent’s own country. The responses, summarized in Figure 5, are even more stable than those for trust in parliament and politicians. At its lowest point, in 2010-11, the average level of satisfaction with democracy in Europe as a whole was 5.0 on the zero-to-ten scale, two-tenths of a point below its level in 2002-03. By the following wave it had reached a new high, and in 2018-19 it stood at 5.4, another 21st-century record. While there are certainly “many citizens” dissatisfied with the workings of democracy, there is no evidence here that Europeans’ “support for democracy as a system of government has weakened” over the first two decades of the 21st century.

\*\*\* *Figure 5* \*\*\*

Only two countries, Spain and France, saw declines of as much as half a point in satisfaction with democracy between 2002-03 and 2018-19. Norway, Switzerland, Ireland, Portugal, Germany, and the Netherlands all saw increases at least that large. But the largest improvement of all—1.3 points on the ten-point scale—came in one of the least likely places imaginable, Poland. When the first ESS wave was conducted in autumn 2002, Poles expressed the lowest average level of satisfaction with “the way democracy works” of the 20 countries in the survey, 4.1. (Next lowest was Slovenia at

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<sup>31</sup> Although some of these countries are missing from as many as four or five ESS rounds, the statistical analysis generating the estimated average levels of political trust for Europe as a whole shown in Figure 4 takes them into account by including country fixed effects for the entire period. Tests for selection bias based on relating survey participation to population, economic conditions, protest activity, and immigration rates reveal little evidence of correlation between non-participation and opinion climates within countries over time.



4.4, and the European average was 5.2.) By 2018-19, the average level of satisfaction with democracy in Poland was 5.4, exactly matching the European average.

What makes this increase so perplexing, of course, is that outside observers have been distinctly *dissatisfied* with “the way democracy works in Poland” in recent years. Since the election of the Law and Justice party in 2015, Poland has engaged in democratic backsliding reminiscent of—and, indeed, modeled on—the earlier entrenchment of “illiberal” democracy in Hungary, complete with efforts to pack the courts with party loyalists, stifle the press, and resist the authority of the EU. As one recent report for American readers put it, “If You Think the U.S. is Having a Constitutional Crisis, You Should See What is Happening in Poland.”<sup>32</sup>

The juxtaposition of democratic backsliding and public satisfaction with democracy in Poland raises a broader set of questions about the relationship between public opinion and democratic politics. When democratic institutions and procedures do erode, what role do ordinary citizens play in the process, and how do they respond?

### **Public opinion and the erosion of democracy in Hungary and Poland**

Concerns about a “crisis of democracy” in contemporary Europe rest in significant part on the illusion of an “explosion” of populist sentiment—growing antipathy to immigrants and the EU, declining trust in politicians, and declining popular attachment to democracy as a political system. But even if these shifts in public opinion were real, the notion that they posed a threat to democracy would hinge on a web of implicit assumptions linking public disaffection to toxic party politics and the breakdown of democratic institutions.

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<sup>32</sup> Laurent Perch and R. Daniel Kelemen, “If You Think the U.S. is Having a Constitutional Crisis, You Should See What is Happening in Poland,” *Washington Post* Monkey Cage, 25 January 2020.

Foa and Mounk's influential account of "deconsolidation" illustrates this quasi-logic. The authors "suspect" that public opinion is "one of the most important factors in determining the likelihood of democratic breakdown." But the path they trace from bad attitudes to autocracy consists of a series of quick jump-cuts:

Approval ratings for the continent's leading politicians stand at record lows, and citizens have grown deeply mistrustful of their political institutions. Far-right populist parties, such as France's National Front or the Sweden Democrats, have risen from obscurity to transform the party system of virtually every Western European country. Meanwhile, parts of Central and Eastern Europe bear witness to the institutional and ideological transformations that might be afoot: In Poland and Hungary, populist strongmen have begun to put pressure on critical media, to violate minority rights, and to undermine key institutions such as independent courts.<sup>33</sup>

A subsequent book-length analysis by Mounk runs the same movie in reverse, from electoral dictatorships back to populist backsliding stemming from electoral support for "extremists":

In Russia and Turkey, elected strongmen have succeeded in turning fledgling democracies into electoral dictatorships. In Poland and Hungary, populist leaders are using that same playbook to destroy the free media, to undermine independent institutions, and to muzzle the opposition. More countries may soon follow. In Austria, a far-right candidate nearly won the country's presidency. In France, a rapidly changing political landscape is providing new openings for both the far left and the far right. In Spain and Greece, established party systems are disintegrating with breathtaking speed. Even in

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<sup>33</sup> Foa and Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," 15-16.

the supposedly stable and tolerant democracies of Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands, extremists are celebrating unprecedented successes.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of whether the path is traced forward or backward, the frightening route from “supposedly stable and tolerant democracies” to “electoral dictatorships” runs squarely through Hungary and Poland, where “populist leaders” have indeed worked “to destroy the free media, to undermine independent institutions, and to muzzle the opposition.” Thus, any assessment of the nature and magnitude of Europe’s crisis of democracy must carefully consider how and why these apparently democratic systems have suffered significant erosion.

One problem here is that the term “populist” has varied connotations in different settings. Are “populist leaders” in Hungary and Poland interchangeable with “the far right” in Austria or France or the “extremists” gaining electoral footholds in Sweden and Germany? Is populism itself a threat to democracy? In the course of a broader study of populism in contemporary Europe, political scientists Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin cited Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán’s attacks on democratic institutions as grounds for worry that populism “may presage the collapse of liberal-democratic freedoms and rights.” But they also noted that, contrary to some expectations, supporters of populist parties “are generally not anti-democrats who want to tear down our political institutions. ... In several of these democracies national populist voters are actually *more* supportive of representative democracy than the general population.”<sup>35</sup>

Further complicating matters, the rhetoric and behavior of leaders and parties can change over time. The Global Populism Database, which provides content-analysis of

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<sup>34</sup> Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (Pelican Books, 2018), 72, 117-120.

speeches by political leaders in many countries, characterized Orbán's rhetoric as "somewhat populist" in 2010-14 and 2014-18, but "not populist" in his previous stint as prime minister in 1998-2002. Polish strongman Jaroslaw Kaczynski's rhetoric was likewise classified as "not populist" when he served as prime minister in 2006-07.<sup>36</sup> These assessments raise the question of whether ordinary Hungarians and Poles were really voting for populism, much less for autocracy, when they handed power to their "populist leaders."

Notwithstanding these complexities, Hungary and Poland provide the best leverage we have for understanding the connection between right-wing populist sentiment, populist leadership, and the erosion of contemporary liberal democracy. By sketching the evolution of public opinion, electoral politics, and government in these countries in the first decades of the 21st century, I hope to shed light on the nature of threats to liberal democracy elsewhere in Europe.

## **Hungary**

A decade after the fall of communism, Hungary came closer than any other formerly communist country to having a stable two-party system. In 2002 the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) won a narrow plurality over the conservative Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz), 41.4% to 39.8%. In 2006 the Socialists managed to win a narrow plurality of seats, and to continue their governing coalition with the smaller Alliance of Free Democrats, despite trailing narrowly in the popular vote (41.4% to 41.6%).

This seeming normalcy was thrown out of kilter five months after the 2006 election with the leak of an audio recording of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány addressing a private meeting of MSZP officials. "We screwed up," Gyurcsány told his

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<sup>36</sup> Kirk A. Hawkins et al., The Global Populism Database (<https://populism.byu.edu/Pages/Data>).

comrades. “Not a little, a lot. No European country has done something as boneheaded as we have. Evidently, we lied throughout the last year-and-a-half, two years. ... We lied in the morning, we lied in the evening.”<sup>37</sup> Gyurcsány’s obscenity-laced admission of deceit and manifest contempt for the electorate triggered a wave of anti-government protests lasting more than a month. Clashes between protesters and police resulted in hundreds of injuries. Opposition leaders called for Gyurcsány’s resignation, but he survived a public vote of confidence by a 207-165 margin.<sup>38</sup>

The next parliamentary election, in 2010, was dominated by popular disaffection stemming from the Gyurcsány scandal. The governing MSZP lost more than half its popular support (winning just 20.3% of the vote) and more than two-thirds of its seats in the National Assembly. The big winners were the right-wing parties that had spearheaded the protests of 2006 and subsequent opposition efforts. The radical nationalist party Jobbik (the Movement for a Better Hungary), won 16.5% of the vote, making it a not-so-distant third in strength behind the faltering MSZP. Meanwhile, the largest opposition party, Fidesz, won 53.1% of the vote (up from 41.6% in 2006) and, importantly, 263 seats—a bare two-thirds majority—in the National Assembly.

In May 2007, a member of the European parliament affiliated with Fidesz had ascribed the political crisis stemming from Prime Minister Gyurcsány’s leaked audio recording to the fact that “a Hungarian prime minister with a parliamentary majority is utterly secure in power; there is no way of removing him or her as long as that majority remains in place. This effectively relieves the prime minister of all

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<sup>37</sup> “We Lied to Win, Says Hungary PM,” BBC News, 18 September 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel McLaughlin, “150 Injured as Hungarians Riot over PM’s Lies,” *The Guardian*, 19 September 2006. Craig S. Smith, “Clashes Disrupt Hungary’s Celebration of Anti-Soviet Revolt,” *New York Times*, 24 October 2006.

responsibility towards society; it is for all practical purposes a semi-democratic system.”<sup>39</sup>

When Hungarian voters replaced the discredited MSZP with Fidesz in 2010 the shoe was on the other foot—it was Fidesz’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán, who was “utterly secure in power” and effectively relieved “of all responsibility towards society.” Orbán’s room to maneuver was significantly increased by the fact that Fidesz’s slim two-thirds majority in the National Assembly allowed him to amend the constitution. According to Hungarian political scientist Béla Greskovits,

FIDESZ’s landslide victory at the 2010 parliamentary elections was a foregone conclusion, whereas the fact that the party acquired two-thirds of the mandate was accidental and is best explained by the Hungarian electoral system. However, it is partly due to this accident that the FIDESZ government could move ahead so fast in rolling back Hungarian democracy by using its overwhelming legislative power to infuse all the democratic institutions with authoritarian and illiberal ‘checks and balances’.<sup>40</sup>

The new government engineered the adoption of a declaration retroactively designating the election outcome as a “voting booth revolution” and the beginning of a new political community: “The National Assembly declares that a new social contract was laid down in the April general elections through which the Hungarians decided to create a new system: the National Cooperation System.” As Hungarian legal scholar András Pap noted,

the idea of creating a new political community (or even the adoption of a new constitution) was not part of the political campaign in the elections .... The

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<sup>39</sup> György Schöpflin, “Democracy, Populism, and the Political Crisis in Hungary,” *Eurozine*, 7 May 2007. Of course, by this standard almost every parliamentary democracy is “a semi-democratic system.”

<sup>40</sup> Béla Greskovits, “The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe,” *Global Policy* 6 (2015), 34.

ideological declarations in the new Constitution create the impression that these values were actually expressed in the ‘voting-booth revolution.’ This retroactive argument logically cannot hold water, due to the very fact that the campaign did not include it.<sup>41</sup>

The next major step in the erosion of Hungarian democracy likewise came after, not before, an election. The first election conducted under the new constitution and electoral law stemming from the mythical “new social contract” of 2010 was held in April 2014. An international election-monitoring group reported that it was “efficiently administered and offered voters a diverse choice following an inclusive candidate registration process,” but that Fidesz “enjoyed an undue advantage because of restrictive campaign regulations, biased media coverage and campaign activities that blurred the separation between political party and the State.”<sup>42</sup> Despite this “undue advantage,” Fidesz’s vote share declined from 53.1% in 2010 to 44.5% in 2014—just a few points higher than before the Gyurcsány scandal, and hardly a rousing popular endorsement of Hungary’s “new social contract.” Nonetheless, a few months after the election, Orbán took further steps to consolidate what he now famously referred to as an “illiberal” democracy in Hungary.

The statistical analyses reported in Table 2 shed light on the changing bases of support for Fidesz before and after its authoritarian turn. The analysis reported in the first column of the table is based on data from the 2009 ESS, more than two years into the anti-Gyurcsány mobilization but a year before the crucial 2010 election. At that point, there is no indication at all that support for Fidesz was grounded in anti-

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<sup>41</sup> András L. Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary: Law and Society in an Illiberal Democracy* (Routledge, 2018), 50-51, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report, 11 July 2014 ([https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/hungary/session\\_25\\_-\\_may\\_2016/osce-odihr\\_upr25\\_hun\\_e\\_annexe1.pdf](https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/hungary/session_25_-_may_2016/osce-odihr_upr25_hun_e_annexe1.pdf)).

democratic sentiment, or even in “populist” attitudes more generally. The most important predictor by far of identification with Fidesz was conservative ideology. Dissatisfaction with democracy had little or no effect, while trust in parliament and politicians was, if anything, positively related to identification with the party. The other factors generally associated with support for Europe’s right-wing populist parties—opposition to immigration and to the EU, and conservative worldviews—were equally irrelevant.

By late 2012, more than two years after the beginning of Hungary’s democratic “backsliding,” conservative worldviews had emerged as a significant predictor of identification with Fidesz, but opposition to immigration and to European integration were still irrelevant.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament and politicians were now strongly positively associated with support for Fidesz—an indication that the party was increasingly seen, at least by its supporters, as Hungary’s political establishment. Only in 2015—five years after Orbán came to power, and as Europe’s refugee crisis began to overwhelm Hungary—did opposition to immigration and to the EU begin to register as significant factors in support for Fidesz.

## Poland

The erosion of democracy in Poland reveals some striking similarities to events in Hungary. As in Hungary, Poland had a relatively stable two-plus party system, with the

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<sup>43</sup> My measure of conservative worldviews is based on responses to ten ESS items tapping the importance of security, tradition, creativity, diversity, and the like. It is only modestly correlated with left-right ideology ( $R=.15$ ). The scale runs from zero (for people who ascribed maximal importance to liberal values and minimal importance to conservative values) to ten (for those who ascribed maximal importance to conservative values and minimal importance to liberal values). I included respondents who answered at least nine of the ten questions, imputing neutral values for the tenth when necessary. On the political relevance of these attitudes, see Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, *Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America’s Great Divide* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).



combined vote share of the center-right Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice party (PiS) increasing from 51% in 2005 to 74% in 2007 and 69% in 2011. Civic Platform garnered 41.5% of the vote in 2007 and 39.2% in 2011, in each case forming a governing coalition with the smaller Polish People's Party. It was the first time in the history of modern Polish democracy that a prime minister served two successive terms.

In the run-up to the next election in 2015, it looked like Civic Platform might win a third consecutive term. But support for the party dropped precipitously that summer “when several government officials were caught making profane and impolitic comments on illegal wiretaps”—a striking echo of the events leading to the demise of MSZP in Hungary. On Election Day in late October, Civic Platform's vote share fell precipitously to 24.1%, while the Law and Justice party's share surged to 37.6%. The latter figure was enough to secure 235 of 460 seats in the Sejm, making Law and Justice the first party in Poland's post-communist era to win an absolute majority of seats.<sup>44</sup>

In light of subsequent developments, it is essential to note that the 2015 election outcome was by no means a popular ratification of even a mildly authoritarian program. According to a BBC News analysis,

Law and Justice won big because they offered simple, concrete policies for the many in Poland that feel untouched by the country's impressive economic growth. It offered higher child care benefits and tax breaks for the less well-off. After eight years in office many Poles had grown weary of the governing centrist Civic Platform's unfulfilled promises, scandals and what was perceived by some to be an aloof attitude. Law and Justice also stuck with its winning formula of presenting a more moderate face than its rather combative leader

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<sup>44</sup> Rick Lyman, “Right-Wing Party Roars Back in Polish Elections,” *New York Times*, 25 October 2015. Dorota Bartyzel and Piotr Skolimowski, “Poland Hands Unprecedented Ballot Win to Conservative Party,” *Bloomberg*, 25 October 2015.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski. That moderate face belongs to Beata Szydlo, a 52-year-old miner's daughter and avid reader, who will become the country's next prime minister.<sup>45</sup>

A subsequent scholarly assessment echoed this account, noting that the Law and Justice party “softened its image. It placed signs of authoritarian leanings as well as controversial personalities (including Jaroslaw Kaczynski himself) out of public view. Running on the slogan ‘Good Change,’ PiS leaders called for compassionate conservatism, and sought to offer undecided voters an alternative to the ‘boring’ PO.”<sup>46</sup>

The Poles who supported the Law and Justice party in 2015 were hardly unusual in preferring “good change” to “boring” incumbency; there is a strong tendency in democratic politics for incumbent parties to lose support over time. Perhaps Poles should have been wary of the party's authoritarian proclivities in light of some of the initiatives it had pursued the last time it held power, in 2006-07, including attempts to ban marches by pro-gay activists and to bolster its control over journalists and prosecutors. But that had been eight years earlier, with a mostly different cast of characters, and in the context of a coalition government with two socially conservative parties whose “democratic credentials” were “very much in doubt.”<sup>47</sup>

The seventh round of ESS interviews in Poland, conducted in the spring of 2015, provides a snapshot of popular support for the Law and Justice party on the eve of its

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<sup>45</sup> Adam Easton, “Poland Elections: Conservatives Secure Decisive Win,” BBC News, 26 October 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Joanna Fomina and Jacek Kucharczyk, “Populism and Protest in Poland,” *Journal of Democracy* 27 (2016), 60-61.

<sup>47</sup> Daniele Albertazzi and Sean Mueller, “Populism and Liberal Democracy: Populists in Government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland,” *Government and Opposition* 48 (2013). According to Albertazzi and Mueller (358-361), the League of Polish Families' youth wing “was staffed by large numbers of skinheads, quite open about their Nazi sympathies and responsible for attacks against gay and feminist groups, members of ethnic minorities and others,” while Self-Defence had been organized in the early 1990s “as a militia aimed at defending farmers from debt collectors and it had not been a stranger to violence in the past.”

return to power five months later. The statistical analysis of these data presented in the first column of Table 3 provides little evidence of popular enthusiasm for an authoritarian turn. Perhaps most obviously, only 11% of Poles (43% of those who chose a party) reported feeling close to the Law and Justice party in spring 2015.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Law and Justice identifiers were distinguished overwhelmingly by conservative ideology and worldviews—the same factors that had predicted identification with the party for almost a decade, although both relationships were stronger in 2015 than previously. Dissatisfaction with democracy was modestly related to identification with Law and Justice. However, the main drivers of support for populist parties elsewhere in Europe seem to have had remarkably little traction. Neither anti-EU sentiment nor anti-immigrant sentiment seemed to matter, while distrust of political elites was, if anything, probably *negatively* related to identification with the Law and Justice party.

\*\*\* *Table 3* \*\*\*

Notwithstanding the limited breadth of popular support for the Law and Justice party, Poland's new leaders did not hesitate to translate their parliamentary majority into an assault on checks and balances comparable to Orbán's in Hungary. Indeed, party chair Jaroslaw Kaczynski said of Orbán, "You have given an example, and we are learning from your example." Within two months of the election, the Sejm passed a law reorganizing the Constitutional Court, and early the next year it passed a law initiating the process of giving the government full control of state radio and television. Later, the formerly independent National Council of the Judiciary was packed with party

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<sup>48</sup> Weighting all countries and ESS rounds by population, 4.5% of the respondents said they were "very close" to some party, 27.3% "quite close," 14.8% "not close" or unspecified, and 1.3% "not at all close"; the remaining 52.1% said they did not feel closer to any particular party.

loyalists, and Polish judges were prohibited from implementing rulings by the European Court of Justice.<sup>49</sup>

As in Hungary, popular reaction to the Law and Justice party's power grab has been mixed. In 2019 parliamentary elections, Law and Justice's vote share increased by six percentage points, but the party lost seats and control of the Senate. In the 2020 presidential election, incumbent Andrzej Duda won 51% of the runoff vote—virtually identical to the 51.5% he had won five years earlier.

In the ESS data, the proportion of Poles who said they felt close to the Law and Justice party gradually increased from 11% in 2015 to 14% in 2016-17 and 16% in 2018-19. Perhaps more importantly, the bases of that support (summarized in the second and third columns of Table 3) shifted in ways that parallel the shift in support for Fidesz in Hungary. Although conservative ideology and worldviews remained the most important bases of identification with the Law and Justice party, support for the party began to be associated with opposition to immigration and, to a lesser extent, with opposition to European integration. In addition, Poles who felt close to the Law and Justice party reported significantly greater levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament and politicians. Whether these attitudes were a cause or an effect of identification with the Law and Justice party is, of course, unclear.

### **Public opinion and democratic “backsliding”**

Hungary and Poland fit few of the stereotypes often associated with the “crisis of democracy” in contemporary Europe. In stark contrast to the familiar notion of economic crisis or social stagnation pushing disgruntled masses into the arms of authoritarian leaders, these were among the more stable and prosperous places in

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<sup>49</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “As West Fears the Rise of Autocrats, Hungary Shows What’s Possible,” *New York Times*, 10 February 2018. Perch and Kelemen, “If You Think the U.S. is Having a Constitutional Crisis, You Should See What is Happening in Poland.”

Central and Eastern Europe. Despite some egregious mismanagement, the economy of Hungary (as measured by real GDP per capita) grew by 25% in the decade leading up to the election of Viktor Orbán in 2010, while Poland's economy grew by a spectacular 45% in the decade leading up to the Law and Justice party's election in 2015. While both countries were rocked by significant political scandals, the "mildly authoritarian regimes" that emerged from those disruptions were not in any obvious sense products of economic or social distress.<sup>50</sup>

Some scholars of Western European politics have focused on the "hollowing-out" of civil society as a worrisome indicator of democratic decline. However, that line of analysis seems to be similarly unhelpful in accounting for developments in Hungary and Poland. Indeed, applying a variety of indicators of "hollowing-out" to ten East Central European democracies in the first decade of the 21st century, Greskovits ranked Hungary as the *least* "hollowed" among them, with "a vibrant and mobilized civil society." He concluded that "what really matters for the solidity or backsliding of democracy is not the vibrancy vs hollowness of the system, or the strength vs weakness of civil society per se," but "the *liberal/democratic rather than illiberal/authoritarian ideology and purpose of the actors* who mobilize civil society organizations and their members for political participation."<sup>51</sup>

It is true that citizens' trust in political leaders and institutions in these countries was quite low, and with good reason. In Hungary, the rise of Fidesz to majority status

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<sup>50</sup> Analyzing the success of populist parties in 27 countries in Europe and the Americas, Bruno Castanho Silva concluded that "elite collusion and corrupt governments are the most important factors behind the rise of populists." "Populist Success: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis," in Kirk A. Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, Levente Littvay, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis* (Routledge, 2019), 280.

<sup>51</sup> Greskovits, "The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe," 32-35. Here, too, there is a strong parallel with Bermeo's conclusion that democratic breakdowns in 20th-century Europe and Latin America often occurred "where civil society was relatively *dense*" (*Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, 232). On "hollowing out," Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing-Out of Western Democracy* (Verso, 2013).

was certainly facilitated by Prime Minister Gyurcsány's remarkable 2006 admission of persistent deceit and bad faith. In Poland, governments of the center, left, and right successively got bogged down in major corruption scandals. Yet there is remarkably little evidence in the ESS data that political distrust *produced* support for Fidesz or for the Law and Justice party. Indeed, the statistical analyses reported in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that identification with both parties was, if anything, *positively* related to trust in parliament and politicians on the eve of their electoral breakthroughs, and (less surprisingly) even more strongly positively related thereafter.

Nor is there much support for the notion that these democracies succumbed to political polarization. In a comparative analysis of democratic decline in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela, political scientists Robert Kaufman and Stephan Haggard argued that all three countries “experienced reinforcing cycles of democratic dysfunction, social polarization, and declining support for moderate, democratic political forces and institutions. These stresses on democratic rule were compounded by polarizing political appeals that cast competitors as enemies and even existential threats to the nation and the people. ... Once in office, Orbán's effort to further polarize the electorate continued, with attacks on the EU, on outsiders such as George Soros, and a full-throated exploitation of the European migrant crisis to stoke racial and ethnic anxiety.”<sup>52</sup>

Contemporaneous evidence from public opinion surveys in Hungary provides little support for this account. In 2009, on the eve of the election that propelled Orbán to power, ideological polarization was higher than in most other European countries, but comparable to levels in France and Sweden, and significantly lower than in Czechia and Slovenia. The level of ideological polarization in Hungary has subsequently increased by about 11%, but that increase mostly reflects shifts to the political left, not the right,

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<sup>52</sup> Robert R. Kaufman and Stephan Haggard, “Democratic Decline in the United States: What Can We Learn from Middle-Income Backsliding?” *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (2019), 419-420.

in response to Orbán's rule.<sup>53</sup> Similarly in Poland, ideological polarization was only moderately high on the eve of the Law and Justice party's election in 2015, though it subsequently increased (by about 7%, reflecting slight shifts to both the left and the right on the ideological spectrum).<sup>54</sup>

In her historical survey of breakdowns of democracy, Nancy Bermeo argued that political elites rather than ordinary people were generally “the key actors” in precipitating these breakdowns. “There were a few cases where anti-democratic movements became electorally successful political parties,” Bermeo wrote, “but in the vast majority of our cases, voters did not choose dictatorship at the ballot box.”<sup>55</sup> With due allowance for the significant distinction between “dictatorship” and the “mildly authoritarian regimes” considered here, the same might be said of contemporary Hungary and Poland. Voters in these countries did not choose authoritarians at the ballot box. Rather, they chose the only readily available alternatives to unsatisfactory incumbent governments, only to have their votes rather transparently trumped up by the winners into a “voting booth revolution” justifying “a new social contract” expanding the power of the ruling party at the expense of the courts, the media, and other political actors.

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<sup>53</sup> The standard deviation of left-right placements in Hungary increased from 2.29 in 2009 to 2.55 by 2019. The proportion of respondents placing themselves at 0, 1, or 2 on the zero-to-ten left-right scale increased from 8.7% to 13.4% (an estimated 4.7% increase with a standard error of 1.3), while the proportion placing themselves at 8, 9, or 10 *decreased* from 21.5% to 20.5% (an estimated 1.0% decrease with a standard error of 1.8).

<sup>54</sup> The standard deviation of left-right placements in Poland increased from 2.32 in 2015 to 2.42 in 2016-17 and 2.47 in 2018-19. The proportion of respondents placing themselves at 0, 1, or 2 on the zero-to-ten scale increased from 7.9% to 9.3% (an estimated 1.4% increase with a standard error of 1.1), while the proportion placing themselves at 8, 9, or 10 increased from 24.3% to 25.5% (an estimated 1.2% increase with a standard error of 1.7).

<sup>55</sup> Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, 234.

These developments call to mind Susan Stokes's account of "neoliberalism by surprise" in late-20th-century Latin America.<sup>56</sup> However, in that context supposedly left-wing governments faced significant economic and political pressures to pursue neoliberal policies once in office. The "illiberalism by surprise" pursued by Orbán in Hungary beginning in 2010 and by Kaczynski in Poland beginning in 2015 seems to have been much more a matter of choice than of duress. They engineered the dismantling of democratic checks and balances not in response to any overwhelming external or internal pressures, but simply because they could.

Popular responses to this democratic backsliding provide a final parallel to Bermeo's account of breakdowns of democracy. "Ordinary people generally were guilty of remaining passive when dictators actually attempted to seize power," she wrote. While they "generally did not polarize and mobilize in support of dictatorship, they did not immediately mobilize in defense of democracy either."<sup>57</sup> There has certainly been some mobilization of opposition to the ruling parties in Hungary and Poland. However, neither has faced massive resistance; indeed both have enjoyed substantial public support. The ESS survey data shed some light on the bases of that support.

Table 4 summarizes public opinion in Hungary in four distinct periods: (1) from 2002 through 2007, under the MSZP (Socialist) government; (2) in 2009, on the eve of Fidesz's electoral breakthrough; (3) in the first five years of democratic backsliding under Orbán; and (4) in the two most recent ESS rounds, in 2017 and 2019. The entries are average responses for the entire population, not just Fidesz supporters. The final column shows changes in public sentiment from 2009, the year before Orbán's election, to the most recent reading in 2019.

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<sup>56</sup> Susan C. Stokes, *Mandates and Democracy: Neoliberalism by Surprise in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, 222, 235.



\*\*\* *Table 4* \*\*\*

These data document a remarkable transformation of the social and political climate of Hungary. Average satisfaction with the economy increased by three points on the ten-point scale between 2009 and 2019, a massive improvement. Satisfaction with the national government improved almost as much. Trust in parliament and politicians nearly doubled, and even satisfaction with “the way democracy works in Hungary” increased dramatically. Perhaps most impressively, the average level of satisfaction with “life as a whole nowadays” increased by almost a full point on the ten-point scale. Moreover, by every one of these indicators, life in Hungary has continued to improve over the course of Orbán’s tenure.<sup>58</sup>

Hungarians’ subjective well-being was at a low ebb in 2009, more than two years into the crisis set off by the Gyurcsány scandal and just months after the government accepted a humiliating €15 billion bailout from the EU, IMF, and World Bank.<sup>59</sup> But even if they took the earlier, less dire years of MSZP rule as a baseline, Hungarians would have considered themselves significantly better off—economically, socially, and politically—under Fidesz, especially in recent years.

Poland in the spring of 2015, five months before the election that brought the Law and Justice party to power, was not in a crisis comparable to Hungary’s in 2009. The various indicators of subjective well-being in the 2015 ESS data, reported in the second column of Table 5, are roughly comparable to the average levels from the previous decade in the first column of the table. Nonetheless, the two surveys conducted since

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<sup>58</sup> The rates of improvement under Fidesz range from .02 points per year for satisfaction with democracy to .20 points per year for satisfaction with the economy.

<sup>59</sup> Kate Connolly and Ian Traynor, “Hungary Receives Rescue Package, With Strings Attached,” *The Guardian*, 29 October 2008 (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2008/oct/29/hungary-economy-imf-eu-world-bank>). “Hungary Offered A Tripartite Bailout—With Strings,” *Forbes*, 29 October 2008 ([https://www.forbes.com/2008/10/29/hungary-imf-aid-markets-economy-cx\\_vr\\_1029markets7.html#4ae90d1c3404](https://www.forbes.com/2008/10/29/hungary-imf-aid-markets-economy-cx_vr_1029markets7.html#4ae90d1c3404)).

Jaroslaw Kaczynski began to follow Viktor Orbán's example of "illiberal" entrenchment show improvements in well-being similar in flavor, if smaller in magnitude than those under Orbán in Hungary. Here, too, the most striking improvement—1.7 points on the ten-point scale from 2015 to 2019—has been in satisfaction with the economy. Here, too, satisfaction with the government increased almost as much, while trust in parliament and politicians and satisfaction with democracy also increased substantially. Unlike in Hungary, ratings of the state of health services and education also improved markedly, though satisfaction with life as a whole remained essentially unchanged.

\*\*\* *Table 5* \*\*\*

By these measures, at least, ordinary Hungarians and Poles have flourished even as outside observers have recorded substantial declines in the quality of their democracies.<sup>60</sup> Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that many seem to have accommodated themselves—after the fact—to Orbán's and Kaczynski's "illiberal" entrenchments. And even if they have been less troubled by the erosion of checks and balances than democratic theorists might wish, it is very hard to see them as active proponents of authoritarianism, much less as its primary agents. They have gone about their political lives in much the way that democratic citizens generally do.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> In the V-Dem project's annual assessments of "Liberal Democracy," Hungary's rating fell from .726 in 2009 to .522 in 2017 (the most recent year for which data have been released). Poland's rating fell from .796 in 2014 to .596 in 2017. By way of comparison, France and Germany's ratings in 2017 were .812 and .809; Bulgaria and Croatia's were .593 and .553.

<sup>61</sup> According to Achen and Bartels (*Democracy for Realists*, 200-205), even in the fraught political climate of the Great Depression, "When voters got a chicken in every pot at election time, they usually liked the incumbent party's ideology just fine, whatever it happened to be. But when incomes eroded and unemployment escalated, they became ripe for defection to anyone who promised to bring home the poultry."

## Public opinion as it is

Why have so many well-informed observers been so wrong about the basic contours of public opinion in contemporary Europe? In *The Phantom Public*, Walter Lippmann wrote of

immense confusions in the current theory of democracy which frustrate and pervert its action. I have attacked certain of the confusions with no conviction except that a false philosophy tends to stereotype thought against the lessons of experience. I do not know what the lessons will be when we have learned to think of public opinion as it is, and not as the fictitious power we have assumed it to be.<sup>62</sup>

Almost a century later, we are still struggling to learn to “think of public opinion as it is.” Much writing about democratic politics remains, as E. E. Schattschneider put it 60 years ago, “essentially simplistic, based on a tremendously exaggerated notion of the immediacy and urgency of the connection of public opinion and events.”<sup>63</sup> If right-wing populist parties are gaining footholds in European parliaments, it must be because “populist’ sentiments are exploding.” If immigration is “tearing Europe apart,” it must be because anti-immigrant attitudes are on the rise. If political elites are embroiled in squabbles about European integration, there must be “a backlash against the EU.” And if democratic systems succumb to backsliding, it must be because “support for democracy as a system of government has weakened.”

The evidence presented here casts considerable doubt on “the immediacy and urgency of the connection of public opinion and events” in contemporary Europe. Significant developments are afoot, ranging from increased electoral support for populist parties in some countries to social frictions stemming from immigration to

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<sup>62</sup> Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), 200.

<sup>63</sup> E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (Dryden Press, 1960), 130.

isolated instances of real, disturbing erosion of democratic checks and balances. But none of these developments seems to be immediately or urgently connected to shifts in public opinion, either in Europe as a whole or in specific countries.

In the most influential essay ever written about public opinion, Philip Converse claimed that “The broad contours of elite decisions over time can depend in a vital way upon currents in what is loosely called ‘the history of ideas.’ These decisions in turn have effects upon the mass of more common citizens. But, of any direct participation in this history of ideas and the behavior it shapes, the mass is remarkably innocent.”<sup>64</sup> This characterization has sometimes been criticized as belittling the democratic capacity of ordinary citizens. But when the currents of ideas in play involve anti-immigrant agitation and other manifestations of “populist” extremism, the word “innocent” has a rather different connotation.

Developments in Hungary and Poland underline another respect in which democratic theory has tended “to stereotype thought against the lessons of experience.” As John Zaller has argued, public opinion “is capable of recognizing and focusing on its own conception of what matters.”<sup>65</sup> But “what matters” to ordinary citizens may not be what matters to democratic theorists. For more than half a century, empirical research has found citizens expressing allegiance to high-minded

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<sup>64</sup> Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (Free Press, 1964), 255.

<sup>65</sup> Zaller interpreted President Bill Clinton’s popularity in the wake of a major scandal as demonstrating “just how relentlessly the majority of voters can stay focused on the bottom line,” meaning not just prosperity but, more broadly, “political substance.” He noted that the public might not be “either wise or virtuous. For one thing, its sense of substance seems, in the aggregate, rather amoral—usually more like ‘what have you done for me lately’ than ‘social justice.’” John Zaller, “Monica Lewinsky’s Contribution to Political Science,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31 (1998), 186.

democratic values in the abstract while often flouting those values in specific cases.<sup>66</sup> In Hungary and Poland, citizens experiencing substantial improvements in subjective well-being under “mildly authoritarian” regimes have registered significant increases not only in political trust and approval, but also in satisfaction with “how democracy works,” demonstrating a good deal of willingness to overlook some “cracking down on judges and the news media, refusing to take in migrants and lashing out at the European Union” in exchange for prosperity, order, and validation of their national identities.<sup>67</sup> That willingness may be egregious from the standpoint of democratic theory; but when theory and political behavior collide, “it is at least as likely that the ideal is wrong as it is that the reality is bad.”<sup>68</sup>

Even if the public’s “own conception of what matters” in these instances is considered “bad,” it can hardly be considered surprising. One of the primary lessons of experience in democratic systems is that citizens care much more about outcomes than about procedures. When the corruption or incompetence of political leaders seems to impinge on their well-being, they will register their disapproval through whatever channels are most readily available to them. When they experience peace and prosperity, they will mostly be happy to let the people in charge carry on. If the results in either case amount to a “crisis of democracy,” that is first and foremost a crisis of political leadership, not a crisis of public opinion.

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<sup>66</sup> Important early works include James W. Prothro and Charles M. Grigg, “Fundamental Principles of Democracy: Bases of Agreement and Disagreement,” *Journal of Politics* 22 (1960) and Herbert McClosky, “Consensus and Ideology in American Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 58 (1964). A recent example is Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svobik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 114 (2020).

<sup>67</sup> Palko Karasz, “Leaders of Hungary and Poland Chafe at E.U., but How Do Their People Feel?” *New York Times*, 6 September 2017. Gergely Szakacs, “Hungary Could Resume Anti-EU Campaigns, Says PM Orban,” *Reuters*, 24 March 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 128.

## Appendix

The samples for each country in each wave of the European Social Survey range in size from 960 to 3,045. But the populations of these countries range from just over 1 million in Estonia to more than 70 million in Germany. To provide a trustworthy summary of public opinion in Europe as a whole, I further weight the data from each country in each wave in proportion to the size of the adult population (age 15 and older). The resulting weights for each country in each ESS round, expressed as percentages of the total weighted sample, appear in Table A1. Germany accounts for almost 20% of the weighted sample, while the six most populous countries (Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, and Poland) combined account for 74%.

### \*\*\* Table A1 \*\*\*

Table A2 summarizes the main trends in European public opinion over the period covered by the ESS data with and without population-weighting.<sup>69</sup> In the first column, the weighted data show a significant increase in support for immigration between 2002-03 and 2018-19, with smaller (and statistically imprecise) estimated increases in support for further European unification and in satisfaction with democracy. The estimates derived from weighting each country-round equally appear in the second column of the table. Here, the estimated increase in support for immigration is somewhat smaller, the estimated increase in satisfaction with democracy is somewhat larger, the small estimated changes in support for further European integration and trust in parliament and politicians are reversed, and the slight estimated increase in ideological polarization is slightly larger.<sup>70</sup> In neither case is there evidence of any significant deterioration of public opinion in Europe as a whole over this period.

### \*\*\* Table A2 \*\*\*

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<sup>69</sup> In both cases, the analyses incorporate weights provided by the ESS staff to reflect features of the sampling design in specific country-rounds and post-stratification on the basis of age-group, gender, education, and region to mitigate differences in non-response.

<sup>70</sup> The estimates in the second column are more precise, reflecting the greater statistical efficiency of less extreme weighting of the raw data. The standard deviation of the weights reflecting design factors and post-stratification only is .54; the standard deviation of the weights incorporating differences in population as well is 1.28.

**Table 1: European Social Survey, 2002-2019**

Sample size by country and ESS round.

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>
Austria (AT)	2,257	2,256	2,405	---	---	---	1,795	2,010	2,499
Belgium (BE)	1,899	1,778	1,798	1,760	1,704	1,869	1,769	1,766	1,767
Czechia (CZ)	1,360	3,026	---	2,018	2,386	2,009	2,148	2,269	2,398
Denmark (DK)	1,506	1,487	1,505	1,610	1,576	1,650	1,502	---	---
Estonia (EE)	---	1,989	1,517	1,661	1,793	2,380	2,051	2,019	1,904
Finland (FI)	2,000	2,022	1,896	2,195	1,878	2,197	2,087	1,925	1,755
France (FR)	1,503	1,806	1,986	2,073	1,728	1,968	1,917	2,070	2,010
Germany (DE)	2,919	2,870	2,916	2,751	3,031	2,958	3,045	2,852	2,358
Great Britain (GB)	2,052	1,897	2,394	2,352	2,422	2,286	2,264	1,959	2,204
Greece (GR)	2,566	2,406	---	2,072	2,715	---	---	---	---
Hungary (HU)	1,685	1,498	1,518	1,544	1,561	2,014	1,698	1,614	1,661
Ireland (IE)	2,046	2,286	1,800	1,764	2,576	2,628	2,390	2,757	2,216
Italy (IT)	1,207	---	---	---	---	960	---	2,626	2,745
Lithuania (LT)	---	---	---	---	1,677	2,109	2,250	2,122	1,835
Netherlands (NL)	2,364	1,881	1,889	1,778	1,829	1,845	1,919	1,681	1,673
Norway (NO)	2,036	1,760	1,750	1,549	1,548	1,624	1,436	1,545	1,406
Poland (PL)	2,110	1,716	1,721	1,619	1,751	1,898	1,615	1,694	1,500
Portugal (PT)	1,511	2,052	2,222	2,367	2,150	2,151	1,265	1,270	1,055
Slovakia (SK)	---	1,512	1,766	1,810	1,856	1,847	---	---	1,083
Slovenia (SI)	1,519	1,442	1,476	1,286	1,403	1,257	1,224	1,307	1,318
Spain (ES)	1,729	1,663	1,876	2,576	1,885	1,889	1,925	1,958	1,668
Sweden (SE)	1,999	1,948	1,927	1,830	1,497	1,847	1,791	1,551	1,539
Switzerland (CH)	2,040	2,141	1,804	1,819	1,506	1,493	1,532	1,525	1,542

**Table 2: Bases of identification with Fidesz before and after the 2010 Hungarian election**

Ordered probit regression coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses). Estimated response thresholds not shown.

	<i>2009</i>	<i>2012-13</i>	<i>2015-19</i>
Conservative ideology	.449 (.033)	.344 (.038)	.147 (.016)
Conservative worldview	-.036 (.064)	.255 (.055)	.097 (.033)
Support for immigration	-.003 (.032)	.015 (.030)	-.060 (.019)
Support for further European unification	.025 (.023)	-.012 (.025)	-.078 (.014)
Satisfaction with the economy	-.036 (.036)	-.044 (.033)	.095 (.022)
Satisfaction with democracy	-.027 (.033)	.189 (.037)	.186 (.019)
Trust of parliament and politicians	.044 (.038)	.101 (.030)	.132 (.017)
2017 wave	---	---	-.114 (.074)
2019 wave	---	---	-.048 (.073)
% close	22.8%	14.6%	19.6%
<i>N</i>	920	1,324	3,371
Log likelihood	-542.1	-557.9	-1,760.7
Pseudo R-squared	.25	.30	.30



**Table 3: Bases of identification with Poland's Law and Justice Party before and after the 2015 election**

Ordered probit regression coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses). Estimated response thresholds not shown.

	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016-17</i>	<i>2018-19</i>
Conservative ideology	.284 (.027)	.236 (.035)	.324 (.033)
Conservative worldview	.176 (.055)	.271 (.052)	.229 (.058)
Support for immigration	-.035 (.033)	-.076 (.030)	-.073 (.030)
Support for further European unification	.009 (.022)	-.036 (.020)	-.018 (.023)
Satisfaction with the economy	-.032 (.033)	.022 (.029)	.049 (.043)
Satisfaction with democracy	-.085 (.030)	.124 (.033)	.100 (.035)
Trust of parliament and politicians	.053 (.032)	.137 (.026)	.148 (.033)
% close	11.0	14.3	16.4
<i>N</i>	1,142	1,219	1,040
Log likelihood	-467.0	-513.4	-470.6
Pseudo R-squared	.18	.29	.32

**Table 4: Subjective well-being in Hungary before and after the 2010 election of Fidesz**

Average values (with standard errors in parentheses).

	<i>2002-07</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010-15</i>	<i>2017-19</i>	<i>Δ 2009 to 2019</i>
Satisfaction with the economy	3.37 (.04)	1.70 (.05)	3.45 (.03)	4.78 (.04)	+3.04 (.08)
Satisfaction with the national government	3.53 (.05)	1.81 (.07)	3.84 (.04)	4.54 (.05)	+2.70 (.10)
Trust in parliament and politicians	3.47 (.04)	2.19 (.06)	3.56 (.03)	4.19 (.05)	+2.10 (.09)
Satisfaction with democracy	4.15 (.04)	2.89 (.08)	4.35 (.04)	4.68 (.05)	+1.64 (.11)
State of health services	3.43 (.04)	3.78 (.08)	3.75 (.04)	3.85 (.05)	-.03 (.10)
State of education	4.70 (.04)	4.50 (.07)	4.76 (.03)	4.87 (.05)	+.34 (.10)
Satisfaction with life as a whole	5.56 (.05)	5.23 (.08)	5.76 (.03)	6.29 (.04)	+.95 (.10)

**Table 5: Subjective well-being in Poland before and after the 2015 election of the Law and Justice Party**

Average values (with standard errors in parentheses).

	<i>2002-13</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016-17</i>	<i>2018-19</i>	<i>Δ 2015 to 2019</i>
Satisfaction with the economy	3.86 (.02)	4.08 (.06)	4.84 (.05)	5.76 (.06)	+1.69 (.08)
Satisfaction with the national government	3.21 (.02)	3.07 (.06)	4.06 (.07)	4.64 (.07)	+1.57 (.09)
Trust in parliament and politicians	2.63 (.02)	2.39 (.05)	2.94 (.05)	3.43 (.06)	+1.04 (.08)
Satisfaction with democracy	4.48 (.02)	4.38 (.06)	4.68 (.06)	5.41 (.07)	+1.03 (.09)
State of health services	3.64 (.02)	3.47 (.06)	3.91 (.06)	4.25 (.06)	+.78 (.09)
State of education	5.35 (.02)	5.42 (.06)	5.70 (.06)	6.03 (.06)	+.61 (.09)
Satisfaction with life as a whole	6.62 (.02)	6.95 (.06)	7.14 (.05)	7.06 (.05)	+.11 (.08)

**Table A1: Population-weighted European Social Survey, 2002-2019**

Share of weighted sample (%) by country and ESS round.

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>
Austria (AT)	0.21	0.21	0.21	---	---	---	0.22	0.23	0.23
Belgium (BE)	0.26	0.26	0.27	0.27	0.28	0.28	0.28	0.29	0.29
Czechia (CZ)	0.26	0.27	---	0.27	0.28	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27
Denmark (DK)	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	---	---
Estonia (EE)	---	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
Finland (FI)	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14
France (FR)	1.53	1.56	1.58	1.60	1.62	1.63	1.65	1.67	1.68
Germany (DE)	2.14	2.16	2.17	2.17	2.17	2.14	2.16	2.19	2.20
Great Britain (GB)	1.48	1.50	1.53	1.56	1.58	1.61	1.63	1.65	1.67
Greece (GR)	0.28	0.28	---	0.29	0.29	---	---	---	---
Hungary (HU)	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.26
Ireland (IE)	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.12
Italy (IT)	1.50	---	---	---	---	1.57	---	1.61	1.61
Lithuania (LT)	---	---	---	---	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.07
Netherlands (NL)	0.40	0.41	0.41	0.41	0.42	0.43	0.43	0.44	0.44
Norway (NO)	0.11	0.11	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13
Poland (PL)	0.96	0.97	0.98	0.99	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Portugal (PT)	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27
Slovakia (SK)	---	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	---	---	0.14
Slovenia (SI)	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05
Spain (ES)	1.09	1.12	1.16	1.20	1.21	1.22	1.21	1.21	1.22
Sweden (SE)	0.22	0.23	0.23	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.25	0.25	0.26
Switzerland (CH)	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.20	0.20	0.21	0.21	0.22	0.22

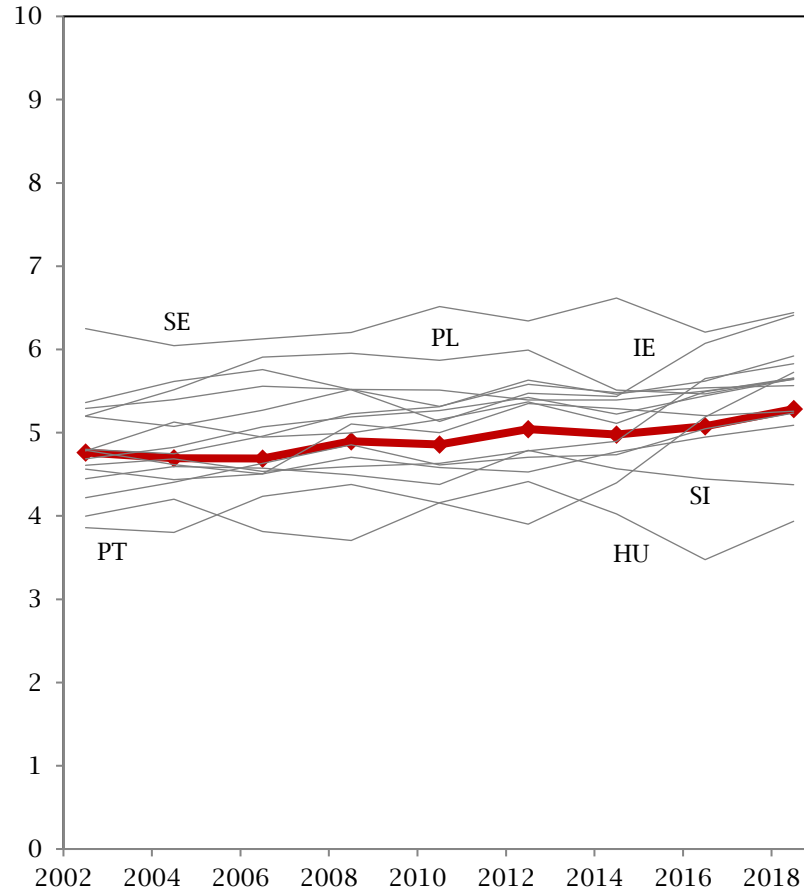
**Table A.2: Shifts in European public opinion, comparing population-weighted and unweighted samples**

Estimated changes from 2002-03 to 2018-19 (with standard errors clustered by country-wave in parentheses). Fixed effects for countries and ESS waves are included but not shown.

	Country-waves weighted by population	Country-waves weighted equally
Support for immigration	+0.42 (.17)	+0.30 (.13)
Support for further European unification (beginning in 2004-05)	+0.18 (.15)	-0.03 (.12)
Ideological polarization (standard deviation of placements on left-right scale)	+0.04	+0.07
Trust in parliament and politicians	-0.05 (.16)	+0.07 (.10)
Satisfaction with democracy	+0.13 (.17)	+0.25 (.12)

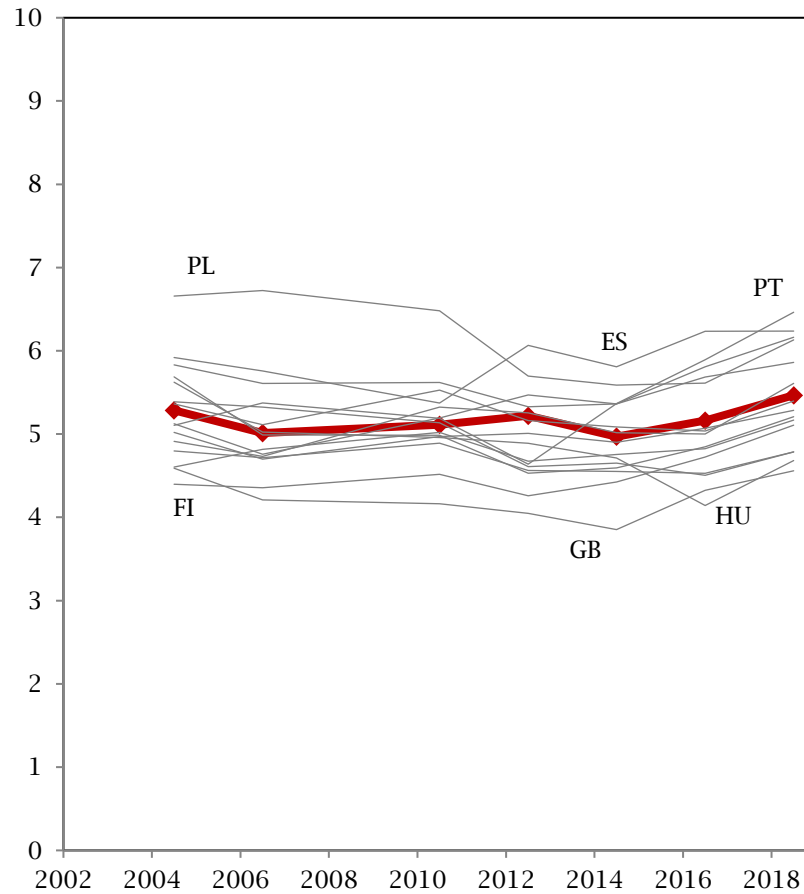
**Figure 1: Attitudes toward immigration, 2002-2019**

Index based on six survey items tapping attitudes toward immigrants and support for immigration. Estimated average values for Europe (23 countries weighted by population) and 15 countries represented in all nine ESS waves.



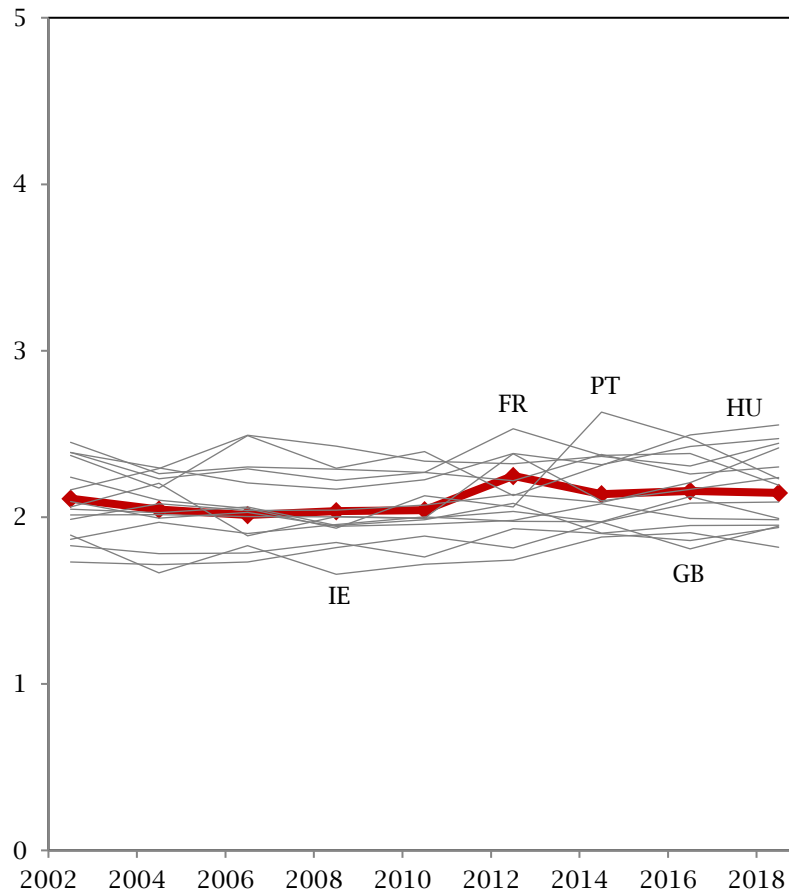
**Figure 2: Support for further European unification, 2004-2019**

“Now thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. Using this card, what number on the scale best describes your position?” Estimated average values for Europe (23 countries weighted by population) and 15 countries represented in all nine ESS waves.



**Figure 3: Ideological polarization, 2002-2019**

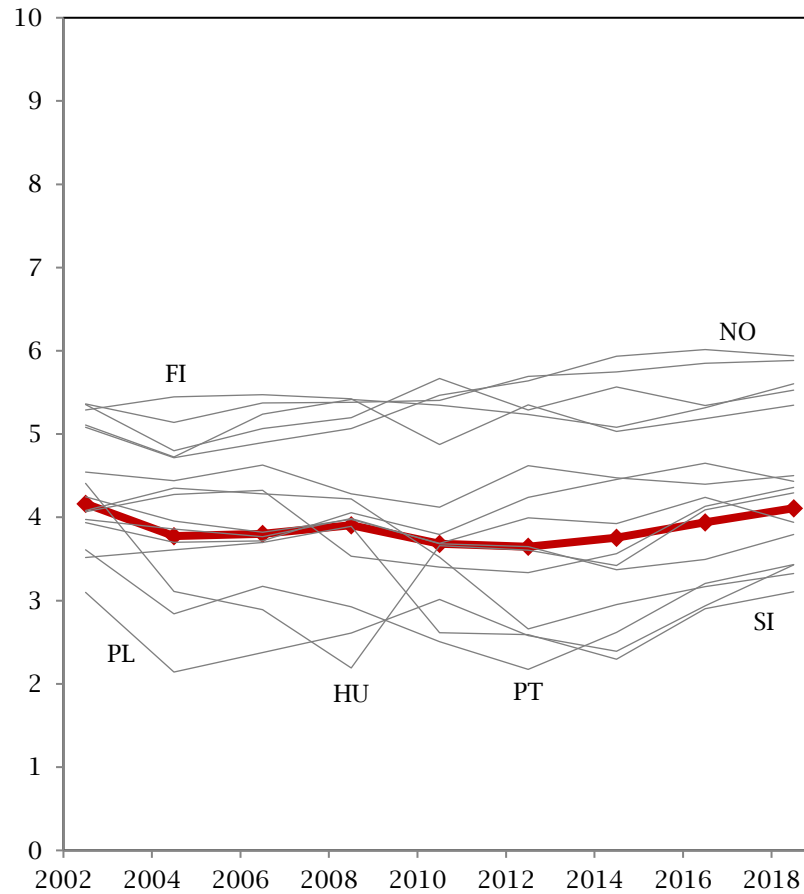
Standard deviations of self-placements on a zero-to-ten left-right scale (excluding 11.8% of respondents who declined to place themselves on the scale). Values for Europe (standard deviations around separate country-wave mean values, with countries weighted by population) and 15 countries represented in all nine ESS waves.





**Figure 4: Trust in parliament and politicians, 2002-2019**

“Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. ... [country]’s parliament? ... politicians?” Estimated average values for Europe (23 countries weighted by population) and 15 countries represented in all nine ESS waves.



**Figure 5: Satisfaction with democracy, 2002-2019**

“And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?”  
 Estimated average values for Europe (23 countries weighted by population) and 15 countries  
 represented in all nine ESS waves.

