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How opposition parties politicize democracy during autocratization

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Abstract

How do democratic actors rhetorically politicize their own disempowerment? Autocratization as a gradual process not only erodes democracy, but also progressively reduces the power of domestic actors to oppose this erosion. Often, incumbent governments disable the institutions meant to hold them accountable, such as parliaments. Drawing on the case of Hungary, we study how (opposition) parties rhetorically politicize democracy within the institution of parliament. As a case of rapid autocratization, Hungary saw far-reaching changes, including the transformation or abolition of many democratic institutions over the past years. New laws also restricted the rights of parliament itself, thereby narrowing the opportunities for public debate around democratic procedures. We address two questions related to this: To which extent do opposition parties politicize democracy and its procedures in a context of autocratization? And how does the way they talk about democracy differ from that of the government? The paper uses text-as-data methods – namely a dictionary of democratic principles and a word-embedding-based analysis of democracy rhetoric – to study parliamentary debates between 2010 and 2022. We find that democracy is highly salient for both the government and the opposition, however, their understanding of democracy differs in substance.

Keywords: democracy; autocratization; parliament; opposition

1 Introduction

How do democratic actors oppose their own disempowerment? Autocratization as a gradual process not only disables democracy, but also progressively reduces the ability of domestic actors to oppose this erosion. That is, if we consider autocratization a political game for power, incumbent governments are rewriting the rules of the game while playing it. In a typical democratic game, opposition parties are a key player competing for power, holding unique legitimacy and many institutional tools in criticizing the government as elected representatives. However, the competition between the government and the opposition becomes increasingly rigged. We can imagine democratic institutions designed to ensure

horizontal and vertical accountability as game pieces that the government selectively weakens or removes, limiting the opposition's ability to counter moves or resist government actions. Opposition actors – who once possessed various opportunities to influence the game and compete for power by questioning the government, holding it accountable or proposing alternative policies – now find themselves with limited options, wondering whether the game still provides them enough opportunities for an unlikely victory or is already too rigged to continue playing.

So far, we know fairly little about the actions and strategies of opposition actors in (democratic) countries that experience autocratization. Most research on autocratization is focused on incumbent governments, neglecting domestic resistance against autocratization (Gamboa, 2022, p. 3), an omission that has recently come under growing scrutiny: Scholars have pointed out that the success and failure of autocratization attempts depend to a large extent on repeated interactions between government and opposition actors (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022). Moreover, Tomini et al. (2023) highlight that there is potentially a diversity of opposition actors, resistance strategies, as well as motivations that are important to analyze for a more thorough understanding of autocratization and its opponents. Thus, not all opposition is necessarily democratic in nature or primarily aimed at re-democratization.

Adding to this emerging strand of research, this manuscript focuses on the parliamentary opposition, specifically on the language used in parliamentary speeches by opposition parties when talking about democracy. At first sight, parliamentary speeches are a key arena for opposition parties to challenge autocratization as parliamentary debates offer an opportunity for the opposition to articulate criticism of undemocratic legislative proposals in a direct and public confrontation with the government. Such scrutiny activity is a key part of parliamentary opposition behavior in democracies (Ilonszki & Giorgi, 2018). However, parliamentary opposition does not come without costs as it may also be seen as giving a democratic veneer to an increasingly authoritarian regime. As modern ideas of democracy 'regard the existence of an opposition party as very nearly the most distinctive characteristic of democracy itself' (Dahl, 1966, p. xviii; also Biezen & Wallace, 2013), non-democratic systems 'strongly rely on the legitimacy that the facade of a quasi-functioning opposition provides them.' (Susánszky et al., 2020, p. 764). This poses a dilemma to opposition parties in deciding whether to withdraw from institutions or if and how to use the parliamentary stage as a highly visible place for opposition activities.

Whether and how opposition parties talk about democracy and democratic principles in this venue is a logical extension of this dilemma: On the one hand, emphasizing democracy may be a way to signal opposition to autocratization and scandalize changes. If the rules of the game are already up for debate, protesting their change highlights the riggedness of the game. On the other hand, opposing autocratization by democratic means may be ineffective for opposition parties if governments simply refuse to engage or to compromise. Then, criticizing the government in terms of democracy may render democracy itself an issue of partisan conflict and make the concept contentious for voters as well. Criticism of undemocratic policies can then be portrayed as merely a part of partisan politics.

This paper studies this broader dilemma in the case of Hungary. As one of the most drastic cases of autocratization in the European Union and worldwide (Boese et al., 2022)

but also as a country that had fairly well-established democratic institutions at the onset of autocratization, Hungary is a highly relevant case for assessing the opportunities and challenges for opposition parties in criticizing autocratization from within democratic institutions. Nevertheless, research on Hungary is limited: As a recent analysis of the Hungarian opposition's strategic dilemmas put it: 'there is hardly any systematic analysis grasping the impotence of opposition parties and their role in the new "illiberal" political system of Hungary.' (Susánszky et al., 2020, p. 762). Focusing on mentions of democratic principles and democracy rhetoric, this paper aims to contribute to addressing this gap with a largely exploratory analysis of opposition rhetoric.

The Hungarian case also highlights some of the key challenges to democratic actors: It is not only the opposition but also Fidesz that uses democracy rhetoric with prime minister Viktor Orbán famously introducing the terminology of 'illiberal democracy' for the country. That is, opposition parties have to distinguish their concept of democracy from that of Fidesz and struggles may well be over who gets to claim to be on the side of democracy, a label that commands support by a large share of citizens. Thus, rhetorical struggles about democracy also imply struggles about democracy's meaning and who gets to define it.

The paper proceeds by first outlining the theoretical background of a politicization of democracy. While it is difficult to study such long-term shifts in political debates, the present paper uses a text-as-data approach to summarize changes based on a large body of text. That is, this study builds on a corpus of plenary speeches, held in the Hungarian parliament between 2010 – when Fidesz entered into government – and 2022, at times looking at the pre-2010 period for comparison. It combines two different text-as-data methods to capture changes in the debate about democracy: First, it draws on a dictionary to study the salience of several democratic principles (rule of law, public sphere, individual liberties, separation of power, participation, free and fair election), as well as the word itself (democracy) and two key institutional structures of liberal democracy (courts and the constitution). Second, it studies democracy rhetoric, that is, the use of the label democracy, using word embedding techniques and presenting differences in and changes to the nearest neighbors of democracy for the government as well as the opposition. The results show that democracy is highly politicized in parliamentary discourse and this politicization increased with the Fidesz government. However, it also shows commonalities in parties' democracy rhetoric. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for the study of autocratization and democratic opposition.

2 Politicizing democratic procedures

Beyond the study of extreme parties (e.g., Sartori, 1976, pp. 117–118), where anti-democratic stances were always at the center of analysis, political scientists have only recently started to consider parties' stances toward democratic systems to be an important topic. However, instances of (attempted) autocratization in democratic countries have increased attention to the potential of elite rhetoric to undermine support for democratic norms (see e.g., Clayton et al., 2021; Kingzette et al., 2021). Parties' rhetoric can affect public opinion by cueing voters, especially strong partisans, to ignore or even endorse violations of democratic principles for policy gains. Thus, how parties speak about democracy and its institutions matters.

The present paper discusses this 'speaking about democracy' through the lens of a politicization of democracy and its procedures: Politicization refers to the expansion of (the scope of) conflict surrounding an issue (Kriesi et al., 2012; following Schattschneider, 1975), as well as the shaping of a topic into a political issue by transporting it into the field of political decision-making (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012). In this sense, a politicization of democracy may happen through increased emphasis on democracy, i.e., by a growing salience of the topic. Beyond salience, it may also happen when parties compete over the topic: As an issue moves from consensual to contentious, its scope of conflict grows. Thus, politicization of an issue can take different forms, being driven by salience or divergent positions. Below, we shall first discuss the relevance of the phenomenon before discussing existing literature on the politicization of democracy, the approach taken in this manuscript, and the Hungarian case which we study empirically.

2.1 Why politicization of democracy matters in contexts of autocratization

Traditionally, the literature on issue politicization has focused on contentious and politically divisive issues such as European integration (Green-Pedersen, 2012; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Hutter et al., 2016) or immigration (Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2017; Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). In these cases, literature posits that a 'permissive consensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) was disturbed by a politicization of the issue under study. Hence, literature on politicization sometimes implicitly portrays politicization as a disruption that makes compromise difficult amd may have negative consequences.

Similarly, a politicization of democracy in the sense of a challenge to established democratic norms may be seen as something negative in liberal democracies (which are the main focus in existing work on the topic such as Engler et al., 2022). However, in contexts of autocratization, a politicization of democracy may also be a sign of resistance to this autocratization: Clearly, democratic norms should be debated and become the focus of political conflicts when a government infringes on them. Hence, the present paper asks: To which extent do opposition parties politicize democracy and its procedures in contexts of autocratization? And how does the way they talk about democracy differ from the way the government talks about it?

While these questions are largely exploratory, we hold that they are important to investigate for three primary reasons: First, democracy or its absence has become an important lens through which researchers and the public view Hungary. Scholars have used terms such as 'electoral autocracy' (Hellmeier et al., 2021) and 'defective democracy' (Bogaards, 2018) to describe the state of democracy in the country, Hungarian prime Viktor Orbán himself famously declared the country an 'illiberal democracy' and later an 'illiberal state.' Democracy has also become a key focus of contention between the EU and its Eastern member states and Hungary in particular (Lorenz & Anders, 2021; Priebus & Anders, 2020). With the European Parliament designating Hungary a 'hybrid regime of electoral autocracy' (European Parliament, 2022) citing 'an increasing consensus among experts that Hungary is no longer a democracy' (European Parliament, 2022), democracy is also a prominent point of contention. How this lens on the country is reflected in domestic parliamentary debates is relevant in itself, as well as for the resonance of these

discourses among the Hungarian public. While there has been analysis of responses to democratic backsliding in the European parliament (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019), there is to this date no similar analysis for Hungary's own parliament.

Second, politicization may also influence whether citizens consider democracy in their electoral decisions: Research on issue ownership suggests that voters evaluate parties 'with respect to the issues that are included in the election agenda' (Holler & Skott, 2005, p. 216). That is, voters make choices depending on issue salience, rather than only on their general similarity to a party. This means voters may be more likely to consider a party's democratic credentials in their electoral choice when the topic is salient. Recent studies examining the connection of democracy attitudes and affective polarization also discuss whether elite-signals regarding the democratic credentials of other parties may play a role in how voters evaluate these parties in contexts of democratic backsliding (Gessler & Wunsch, forthcoming). In this situation, parties' stances toward democratic systems may become an electorally relevant issue. This also relates to democratic principles: Principles such as the rule of law matter for the integrity of democracy but are less salient for ordinary citizens. Here, a politicization may make voters aware of infringements by incumbent governments.

Third, a politicization of democracy may also have an impact on citizens' support for democracy and specific policies. A simple version of this argument holds that the propaganda of authoritarian regimes may redefine democracy, leaving citizens with a distorted notion of the concept (Kirsch & Welzel, 2019, p. 62). However, effects may also be more nuanced: Kingzette et al. (2021), Gidengil et al. (2021), and Clayton et al. (2021) argue that elite rhetoric which signals displeasure with democratic norms or doubts the integrity of institutions can erode support for or trust in democratic norms among affectively polarized partisans. However, Kingzette et al. (2021) also find increased support for democracy among opposition partisans: Such a partisan type of cue-taking means public support for democratic norms by opposition parties could actually increase support for democracy among their supporters. Relatedly, discussing party rhetoric on election reform and electoral fraud, McCarthy (2023) finds that the use of democratic principles can help political elites to justify particular policies regarding the democratic system and the use of even unrelated principles significantly increases support for these changes. Hence, incumbents' use of democratic principles may also serve to immunize undemocratic policies they pursue. In sum, how parties speak about democracy may shape public opinion, both in positive and negative ways.

2.2 Conceptualizing politicization of democracy:
Selective emphasis and democracy rhetoric

Empirically, our knowledge of how parties politicize democracy is limited. Two recent studies of mainstream parties have analyzed parties' positions on democratic performance (that is, how they evaluate the existing democratic system), as well as their general emphasis on democratic principles: Rohrschneider & Whitefield (2019) study how parties evaluate democratic performance. Their core emphasis is on strategic incentives, specifically the argument that regime access conditions parties' evaluations of democratic

performance. This makes parties with limited governing prospects and limited organizational capacity, as well as those not habituated into government, more likely to be critical of the democratic performance of a regime. Additionally, they also provide evidence that democratic quality matters for parties' evaluations of democracy. Thus, the political context is a key determinant of the politicization of democracy in their study.

A second study shows that ideological aspects may also play a role in the politicization of democracy: Engler et al. (2022) combine ideological and strategic factors in their analysis. They argue that in striving for a unique position in the political space, parties can either distinguish themselves by positional differentiation or by challenging the performance of the democratic process. That is, emphasizing democracy is a tool to carve out a unique position within the party system that relies on an alternative mechanism of differentiation than positional change. They argue that not just anti-system parties but all challenger parties have a 'strategic incentive' to politicize principles of (liberal) democracies. However, parties' ideology determines which aspects of democracy parties challenge and thus shapes their appeal.

What unites both approaches compared to other studies of issue politicization is that they explicitly or implicitly adjust their measurement to democracy's status as a 'valence issue' (Stokes, 1963): Given the overwhelming support for democracy among citizens (Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016), parties are unlikely to openly oppose democracy. Hence, Rohrschneider & Whitefield (2019) look at evaluations of democratic performance rather than democracy, whereas Engler et al. (2022) distinguish alternative principles of democracy that parties highlight. In both cases, rather than espousing different positions, the studies look at how parties try to prove their competence and shift the meaning of democracy to aspects where the public views them as competent.

The contribution of this manuscript is twofold: On the one hand, we repeat the analysis of the salience of democratic principles as studied by Engler et al. (2022) in a context where democracy is under attack. This provides important comparative evidence on the salience of an issue that is rarely studied. On the other hand, we introduce democracy rhetoric as an additional aspect of the politicization of democracy. Specifically, we argue that parties often strategically use the term democracy in ways that exclude or discredit their political opponent and that portray their own actions as democratic. Thus, the politicization of democracy also includes rhetorical competition over what democracy means.

In using 'democracy rhetoric,' parties can build on the diversity of meanings that democracy has both among researchers and in the public (see for a collection of over 3000 'democracies with adjectives': Gagnon, 2020). There is significant variation in what citizens understand as democracy and 'the immediate political context substantially determines what a person perceives as democratic' (Ulbricht, 2018, p. 1390). In the Hungarian context, Susánszky et al. (2021) have examined Hungarians' associations with democracy, who highlight equality, the people, political liberties, freedom and only in fifth place democratic institutions including elections (see also Messing et al., 2014).[1] This ambiguity in the meaning of democracy means different things might plausibly pass as democratic for citizens.

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[1] See also König et al. (2022) for a comparative methodological discussion of studies measuring citizens' conceptualization of democracy.

Relatedly, the above-mentioned dynamic of partisan motivated reasoning may also lead citizens to view certain things as democratic if party elites portray them as such: Simonovits et al. (2022) highlight 'partisan hypocrisy' in support for norm-eroding policies. Krishnarajan (2023) explains this phenomenon by arguing that voters are willing 'rationalize' undemocratic behavior as democratic if their policy preferences are at stake. He finds that citizens in Hungary are among those most likely to rationalize undemocratic behavior. Thus, citizens are often willing to take democracy rhetoric at face value if they agree with its goal.

Given the normative implications of calling something (un)democratic, democracy rhetoric can be part of a process of extreme political polarization that McCoy & Somer (2019) call 'pernicious polarization': parties pursue their objectives with polarizing strategies, including the demonization of their opponents. This idea can be found in similar terms in the distinction between tolerant and intolerant modes of engagement in the literature on responding to populist parties (Bourne, 2022). Using these categories, criticizing political opponents as anti-democratic can be categorized as an intolerant mode of engagement that delegitimizes the opponent. For Hungary specifically, Körösényi (2013, p. 16) has argued that questioning the national respectively democratic commitment of the other political camp has been a part of delegitimizing and polarizing strategies since the 1990s. Where the politicization of democracy becomes part of a polarization spiral, it may increase challenges to democracy: Cleary & Öztürk (2022) suggest that more moderate opposition responses to autocratization allow the opposition to compete in and win the next election, whereas irregular opposition responses may contribute to democratic breakdown.

2.3 The case: The disempowerment of the Hungarian parliament

Of course, in the face of ongoing autocratization, the Hungarian parliament has itself not remained isolated from this process. Ilonszki & Vajda (2021, p. 771) diagnose an 'unprecedented disempowerment of the Hungarian parliament, regarding parliament's legislative and scrutiny functions.' Similarly, Várnagy & Ilonszki (2018) speak of a 'de(con)struction of parliamentary opposition'. In this regard, we can distinguish several aspects: the legitimacy of the parliament, its procedural rights and the consequences for parliamentary debates.

First of all, Fidesz as a party and actors associated with it have diminished the legitimacy of parliament already before entering government in 2010. Most importantly, Fidesz supported protest actions staged in front of the parliament. This use of extra-parliamentary opposition tactics (see Várnagy & Ilonszki, 2018, p. 151) challenged the norms for opposition behavior that had become established after the transition. This was connected to the generally extreme pattern of political polarization where parties of both sides questioned the legitimacy of their competitors (Enyedi, 2016; Körösényi, 2013; Vegetti, 2019).

Regarding the procedural rights of parliament, after coming to power, Fidesz also proceeded to restrict the power of the parliament through legislation. Such changes include the formal powers of the parliament, increased thresholds for opposition activities in parliament, as well as new disciplinary powers of the speaker (Ilonszki & Vajda, 2021). For example, several key laws related to civil liberties (e.g., law on freedom of assembly, freedom of association, popular initiatives, legislative procedures) were exempted from the requirement of a two-thirds majority (Várnagy & Ilonszki, 2018, p. 156).

This has significant consequences for parliamentary debate: Generally, several analysts have pointed to the increasing speed of legislation, as well as the growing number of modifications made to new laws (Sebők et al., 2022; 2023; Várnagy & Ilonszki, 2018). The speed is often summarized in the word 'törvénygyár' ('legislation factory'). While the focus of many studies is on the declining legislative quality on several dimensions (which has been called 'legislative backsliding': Sebők et al., 2023), the growth in speed and volume has important implications for the ability of the opposition to contest these laws. For the current analysis, this means parliamentary debates on some of the key measures during this period was fairly short and important details may be hidden in numerous amendments. As an example, only few days were dedicated to discussing the new constitution in 2011 (Ilonszki & Vajda, 2021, p. 774).

Clearly, these processes diminish the possibility of opposition parties to politicize processes of autocratization with reference to democratic principles: The restrictions to their procedural rights, as well as the limited time allotted for parliamentary debate, make it difficult to contest autocratization and use parliament as a forum for debate. Given the decline in procedural rights and agenda-setting power, participation in parliament also becomes less attractive for opposition parties: without the potential for meaningful change, parliamentary activity may merely bolster the legitimacy of the government. Opposition parties face a fundamental dilemma: 'by taking part in the elections and taking the few seats they manage to secure in Parliament, they end up providing legitimacy to the regime they harshly criticize' (Susánszky et al., 2020, p. 765).

3 A text-as-data approach to opposition rhetoric in parliament

Since the politicization of democracy occurs through public discourse, parliamentary speeches and the language used in them are an ideal venue to study politicization. For this, we draw on natural language processing methods: There has been a recent growth in text-as-data studies in the social sciences (Grimmer et al., 2022), including in so-called 'low-resource' languages that receive less attention in the development of natural language processing techniques (cf. for a brief overview of work on Central-Eastern Europe: Németh & Koltai, 2023, p. 7). This includes a significant body of work on parliamentary text, e.g., Üveges & Ring (2023) on emotionality and Sebők et al., (2017) on the geographical and policy content of interpellations. Related work that uses text-as-data methods as well as handcoding is the Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project (Boda & Sebők, 2019; Sebők & Boda, 2021) which annotates the transcripts of the National Assembly, as well as other types of political documents, with policy categories. Most notable here is the work by Sebők & Boda (2021) on policy agendas across regime types. The present study builds on this work but focuses on the politicization of democracy through language, rather than policy content.

The analysis relies on parliamentary transcripts, which allow us to study the textual content of parliamentary speeches. We draw on the ParlText dataset (Sebők et al., 2024) which contains 487,877 speeches held in the Hungarian National Assembly between 1994 and 2022. We exclude all speeches by presidents of parliament (N=261,269) since these are often procedural. All other speeches (N=224,325) are used to estimate a word embedding

model (see below). For the detailed analysis, we restrict the sample in scope and time: Regarding time, most of the analysis focuses on the post-2010 period since Fidesz re-gained power. This includes three legislative periods (2010–2014, 2014–2018, 2018–2022). Regarding scope, we discuss the detailed selection and aggregation of parties in the next section but exclude speeches by independent MPs[2] and national minority representatives. This means that we focus on 47,455 speeches by the opposition and 40,607 speeches by Fidesz and the KDNP (which run with a joint list and govern together).

Figure A.1 in the Supplementary Material shows the distribution of all speeches by legislative period in the dataset for each party, offsetting those within the study period by color. We preprocess the texts by removing stopwords, punctuation, numbers, as well as words that occur less than 3 times in the dataset. We also replace party names that contain words related to democracy (e.g. the Christian Democratic People's Party and the Alliance of Free Democrats) as well as their derived forms to the respective abbreviations to avoid biasing estimates of references to democracy. More details on the period and average length of speeches are included in Table A.1 in the Supplementary Material.

3.1 Parties

Throughout the manuscript, we at times use a binary distinction between the government and what we consider the left-liberal opposition. This decision is partly a methodological one – some of the methods we apply are specifically built to compare two groups – but is also motivated by the polarization of the Hungarian party system which has consolidated into camps. To explain this, we shall briefly consider the relevant parties: Since the transition to democracy, Hungary has been characterized by a multi-party system that consolidated earlier than in other countries in the region (Enyedi, 2016). The system has also been marked by considerable programmatic stability (Borbáth, 2021). Nevertheless, numerous opposition parties have emerged and disappeared over the years, facing an electoral system that favors big parties and joint lists (Tóka, 2014) and a dominant government party (Enyedi, 2016). In the following, we shall briefly discuss the right and left side of the party spectrum to the extent that they were represented in parliament during the period of study.

The largest right-wing party in parliament is the governing Fidesz, which runs in an alliance with the Hungarian Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). Other conservative parties included the MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum) which was in government in the first phase after the transition but has since successively lost relevance and missed re-entry into parliament in 2010. Similarly, the FKgP (the Independent Smallholders' Party) was historically important but lost parliamentary representation in 2002. MDNP (the Hungarian Democratic People's Party) was a short-lived conservative split from MDF that was important primarily before the period we study. Mostly, the consolidation of the right was the result of a strategy of unification pursued by Fidesz (Enyedi, 2005).

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[2] We use party affiliation as listed on the official webpage of the parliament for the speech date. Exceptions are MPs from DK, Együtt, LMP and Párbeszéd which were listed as independent because of party splits or because of the size of their party. In these cases, party affiliations were manually added.

On the far-right,[3] MIÉP (Hungarian Justice and Life Party) had parliamentary representation between 1998 and 2002. It later joined forces with Jobbik (the Movement for a Better Hungary), which first entered into parliament in 2010, winning almost 17 per cent of the popular vote. While Jobbik was a right-wing competitor to Fidesz for the longest period, it joined an opposition alliance in 2022 in a bid to oust Fidesz and later lost much of its support to a new radical right competitor (Mi Hazánk / Our Home Movement). That is, while Jobbik can clearly be associated with the extreme right of the political spectrum at the beginning of the period (Pirro, 2018; Róna, 2016), its place becomes less clear later (Borbáth & Gessler, 2023). For this reason, we do not include Jobbik in the analysis whenever we use methods to draw binary contrasts but discuss it in the analysis of individual parties.

Competitors on the left traditionally included the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), as well as the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). Both parties had formed a coalition in 2002, governing the country with changing prime ministers (including a SZDSZ-supported minority government after the 2006 political crisis) for eight years prior to the election of Fidesz. During this period, an economic crisis and mayor protests contributed to the decline of both parties (Gessler & Kyriazi, 2019; Várnagy & Ilonszki, 2018). At the end of their government, SZDSZ won only 0.25 per cent of votes in the 2010 election while MSZP suffered a historic loss of votes, winning only 19.3 per cent of the vote. Since then, MSZP has been in opposition.

Numerous other left and liberal parties emerged over the years: Already during the MSZP government, LMP (Politics Can Be Different) was founded as a green-liberal party. While the party was ideologically closer to other left-liberal parties than to the right-wing parties, the party describes itself as centrist and has maintained distance from MSZP and SZDSZ, as well as from other left-liberal parties that emerged later. The Democratic Coalition (DK) split from MSZP under the leadership of former MSZP prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány in 2011. Együtt (Together) is a left-liberal coalition of civil organizations that was originally headed by Gordon Bajnai, another former prime minister who led a caretaker government between 2009 and 2010. Another party, Párbeszéd / PM (Dialogue for Hungary) split from LMP when there was an attempt to establish a joint left-liberal list for the 2014 election when LMP refused to support the united list. Ultimately, MSZP, Együtt, Párbeszéd, DK and the small Liberal Party MLP formed a joint electoral list in 2014, with only LMP running on its own. In 2018, LMP, Együtt and DK ran separately from the joint list of MSZP and Párbeszéd, with Együtt dissolving after it did not receive representation. 2022 saw a unity list with DK, Jobbik, LMP, MSZP, Párbeszéd and the new Momentum Mozgalom.

While these left and liberal parties are organizationally distinct, their ideological profile is overlapping (Gessler & Kyriazi, 2019), especially with regard to democracy, and many of them – for example Együtt – were fairly short-lived. Hence, in the interest of studying opposition to Fidesz rather than the rhetoric of specific parties, we group MSZP, Együtt, Párbeszéd, DK and LMP together as left-liberal opposition.

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[3] We consider Fidesz as right-wing and MIÉP, Jobbik and Mi Hazánk as far right parties based on their origin, notwithstanding the overlaps between their policy programs that have been pointed out in previous research: Böcskei & Molnár (2019) and Kreko & Mayer (2015).

3.2 Analysis

We use the corpus of parliamentary speeches for several types of analysis: First, we measure the frequency of three-word clusters: democracy and two of its core institutions (courts, the constitution). For these, we do not compile comprehensive dictionaries but merely include the word stem (for democracy) respectively the Hungarian word(s) for the institution (courts, constitution).

Next, for measuring the salience of democratic principles, we follow Engler et al. (2022) and adapt their dictionary of democratic principles to the Hungarian context, making several modifications: Adapting the dictionary to the context, we slightly adapt the selected principles. Given the important role of liberal principles in the institutional defense to autocratization, we include the four liberal principles they study: The separation of powers, the rule of law, public sphere, as well as individual rights. We slightly adapt the participatory principles. Of their original principles (competition, participation, representation), we include only participation as competition and representation are fairly abstract and of limited salience in the original study. Instead, we add the principle of free elections: this principle overlaps with the principle of competition outlined by Engler but separating it allows us to explicitly measure a topic that we expect to be highly salient in our case. Instead of literally translating the dictionary, we try to include equivalent words for each category. As the original dictionary listed institutions specific to the countries under study, this necessarily comes with deviations. We include the Hungarian language dictionary in Table A.3, as well as an automated English translation in Table A.4. To allow readers to assess the validity of the dictionary, we also include the most frequent (Hungarian) terms picked up by the dictionary in Figures A.2 and A.3.

Finally, to study democracy rhetoric, we estimate a GloVe word embedding model on all speeches. Such word embedding models represent words as vectors in a high-dimensional space, where the distance between words is a proxy for their semantic similarity (Rodriguez & Spirling, 2022). For example, Szabó et al. (2021) use word embeddings to study the distance between words and their contextual shift over time in issues of the communist Pártélet journal in Hungary. We estimate the word embedding model on the full dataset (here including the period before Fidesz came to power to maximize the corpus, removing only the speeches of the president of parliament).[4] We follow the suggestions outlined in Rodriguez et al. (2024): We remove words occurring fewer than three times and use a window size of 6 with a vector size of 300. To show the face-validity of the embedding model, we include a list of nearest neighbors for some key terms in Table A.15 in the Supplementary Material which can be compared to the respective nearest neighbors of the pretrained model in Table A.16. These nearest neighbors are words with the most similar embedding to the word prompted. While the pretrained model recovers mostly variations of the same word in different cases, the local model has a smaller vocabulary but still recovers substantively meaningful nearest neighbors that are semantically highly related to the concepts.

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[4] Given the corpus size is still not large for a word embedding model, an alternative specification using a pretrained model is discussed in the Supplementary Material.

To obtain the typical use of democracy for Fidesz and the opposition from the word embedding model, we estimate an à la carte (ALC) embedding (Rodriguez et al., 2023) for Fidesz and the joint left-liberal opposition. Such ALC embeddings combine a small number of example uses of a word (here: references to democracy) with the pretrained embedding to produce a context-specific embedding for the concept. This allows comparing the context of use for words, both for describing differences and quantifying them. Here, we use ALC embeddings to compare the context of use for democracy-related words between Fidesz and the left-liberal opposition. Specifically, we use the 10 nearest neighbors of the respective ALC embedding and compare the overlap between the sets of nearest neighbors for the two groups. We also calculate the similarity between the nearest neighbors and the group embedding. The ratio of these two similarities provides a measure of how discriminant each neighbor is for the respective group (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

As an alternative measurement that emphasizes contrast between groups rather than frequent concepts, we also replicate keyness plots used by Engler et al. (2022) for all democratic principles in the Supplementary Material and discuss the results for 'democracy' in the main text. That is, we analyze a window of six words[5] around uses of the wordstem 'demokr*' in the original corpus and calculate a -test to find significant differences between the frequency of context words among the governing parties and the left-liberal opposition.

4 Results

4.1 Word frequencies and the salience of democratic principles

In a first step, we shall look at the frequency of the word clusters and the salience of democratic principles for the different parties during the Fidesz government. Here, salience designates the share of speeches which mention the respective principle. Figure 1 shows the salience of different democratic principles, using the values for the government as a reference and indicating the difference by an arrow where it is greater than one percentage point on the original scale of emphasis (with orange signalling a higher emphasis by Fidesz/KDNP and turquoise signalling a higher opposition emphasis). We shall first look at the three word clusters: These are democracy, courts and the constitution. Notably, democracy tends to be more salient for the opposition with all parties emphasizing democracy more (with the exception of Jobbik) and emphasizing courts more (with the exception of the MSZP and Párbeszéd). The constitution is emphasized less than or roughly equally to the joint Fidesz/KDNP group. This may be a consequence of the 2011 constitution which was deprived of many of the provisions that opposition parties would have referenced to: Fidesz made it impossible for the opposition to insist on the rules of the game while changing them. While many of the differences in emphasis are marginal, the difference in the frequency of references to democracy is sizable for Párbeszéd, DK, Együtt and LMP, as well as in references to courts for DK, Együtt and Jobbik. For the constitution, there is no in-

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[5] Engler et al. (2022) use a ten-word window which we have adapted for consistency with our word embedding.

creased emphasis by the opposition. All in all, at least rhetorically, the opposition parties seem to discuss democracy more and, to some extent, mention a key institution of democracy (namely courts) more frequently.

This picture of a higher emphasis receives mixed support when looking at the democratic principles: Here, several opposition parties emphasize the rule of law more than Fidesz/KDNP. The separation of power is not discussed to any large extent by any of the actors, similar to the public sphere (where, however, differences exist for DK and Párbeszéd that emphasize the topic more). Free elections are only mentioned more by DK and roughly equally by all other parties. Participation is generally more salient and differences in emphasis compared to Fidesz are notable for Együtt, Jobbik and LMP. Recapitulating party differences across word frequency and principles, it is clear that MSZP, Jobbik and LMP differ only marginally from Fidesz/KDNP, while it is mostly DK, Együtt and Párbeszéd that emphasize words or principles more than Fidesz/KDNP.

One should keep in mind that these parties differ with regard to the time they spent in parliament as only MSZP and LMP existed for the whole period since Fidesz/KDNP took office (see Table A.2 in the Supplementary Material). As the parliamentary agenda introduces boundaries on the salience of specific principles – for example with specific bills being tabled – parties only included for a shorter period may show biased and more extreme values: Együtt is a good example here with only 196 speeches included in the dataset. A closer look at the different legislative periods (see Figure A.4 and Table A.5 in the Supplementary Material) shows significant variation over time. For example, LMP sees a significant decline in emphasis both related to the word clusters and the democratic principles. For other parties, for example DK, the picture is more mixed across principles. The detailed visualization also shows that emphasis on the constitution is highest for all parties in the 2010–2014 electoral cycle which was the period in which Fidesz passed a new constitution (see Halmai, 2023). We shall return to this below, detailing the annual development.

Generally, it is notable that the salience of the three-word clusters, as well as the principles, is remarkably high. While Engler et al., (2022) analyze party press releases, the salience of no principle even reaches 1 per cent and the liberal principles mostly hover around 0.1 per cent. While this is not surprising given the crisis of democracy and ensuing autocratization in Hungary, it is still worth noting. Although we cannot distinguish whether this salience is a consequence of polarization, specific autocratization measures or other influences, it seems that autocratization and a rhetorical politicization of democracy do go hand in hand in this case. Nevertheless, the longitudinal picture (see again Figure A.4 and Table A.5 in the Supplementary Material) also shows that the salience was high even before Fidesz (re-)entered government.

Looking at the annual development, Figure 2 shows the use of the different categories over time for the left-liberal opposition (as an aggregated mean of the different parties) and the two governing parties, as well as the trend across the whole parliament (in black). Given the high salience established in the first analysis, we now also include the period before Fidesz took office again to allow a comparison with the extent this politicization was related to the Fidesz government or is a broader characteristic of the public debate in Hungary.
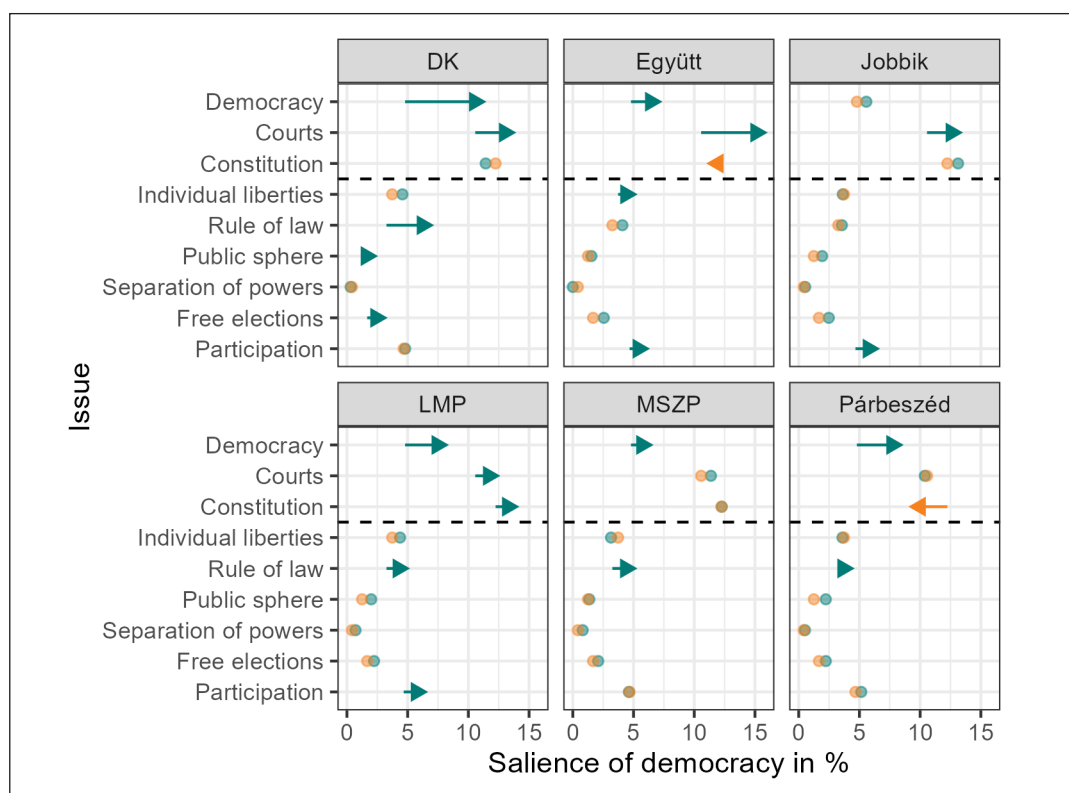
Figure 1 Average salience of democracy by party. Values are shown in comparison to Fidesz with arrows indicating a difference larger than one percentage point on the original scale.

It is notable that for several aspects, emphasis among the opposition peaks in 2010 or 2011 – the first years of the second Fidesz government – and declines over time. Most drastically, this is visible for the already mentioned constitution – where the peak in salience is likely a consequence of the adoption of the new constitution in April 2011. However, emphasis declines more profoundly for the opposition than for Fidesz later, which may lend credibility to the idea that the opposition could no longer use the constitution as a reference point. A closer look at the specific laws in connection to which the different principles were mentioned (see section in the Supplementary material) shows that in fact the new constitution was among the most relevant laws for all principles discussed here. For some principles, a second peak occurs around 2018. Remarkable is also the pattern for democracy where we see a re-emergence toward the end of the period of observation. Detailed Figures for the individual parties (in Figure A.7 in the Supplementary Material) mostly conform to the general trend but show that the second peak for democracy is most pronounced for DK but also occurs for Jobbik and is re-enforced by a high salience for Párbeszéd.

The comparison with salience values from the 1990s and 2000s also allows us to speak to the exceptionality of the current Fidesz government: For several of the principles, we see similar levels of salience at some point in the 1990s or early 2000s. Thus, the salience of democratic principles is high but not unprecedented. The pattern of an early peak during

Fidesz' reign or in some cases of a bimodal development is also a result of the low salience of all principles in the period right before Fidesz took office again. This is surprising, given Hungarian democracy already experienced severe challenges before the election with the resignation of prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány after a leaked internal speech in 2006 had led to several years of harsh anti-governmental protests that were framed either as an attack on democracy or a defense of democracy against the socialist-liberal government (Ágh, 2013; Gessler & Kyriazi, 2019). One potential explanation for this pattern is that the opposition tried to 'sound the alarm' early on during the first year of the Fidesz government and ceased to do so later on. Once certain democratic principles have been violated, it may seem in vain to continuously call for the referee: the political game may now be too rigged to even complain about the government bending or changing the rules.
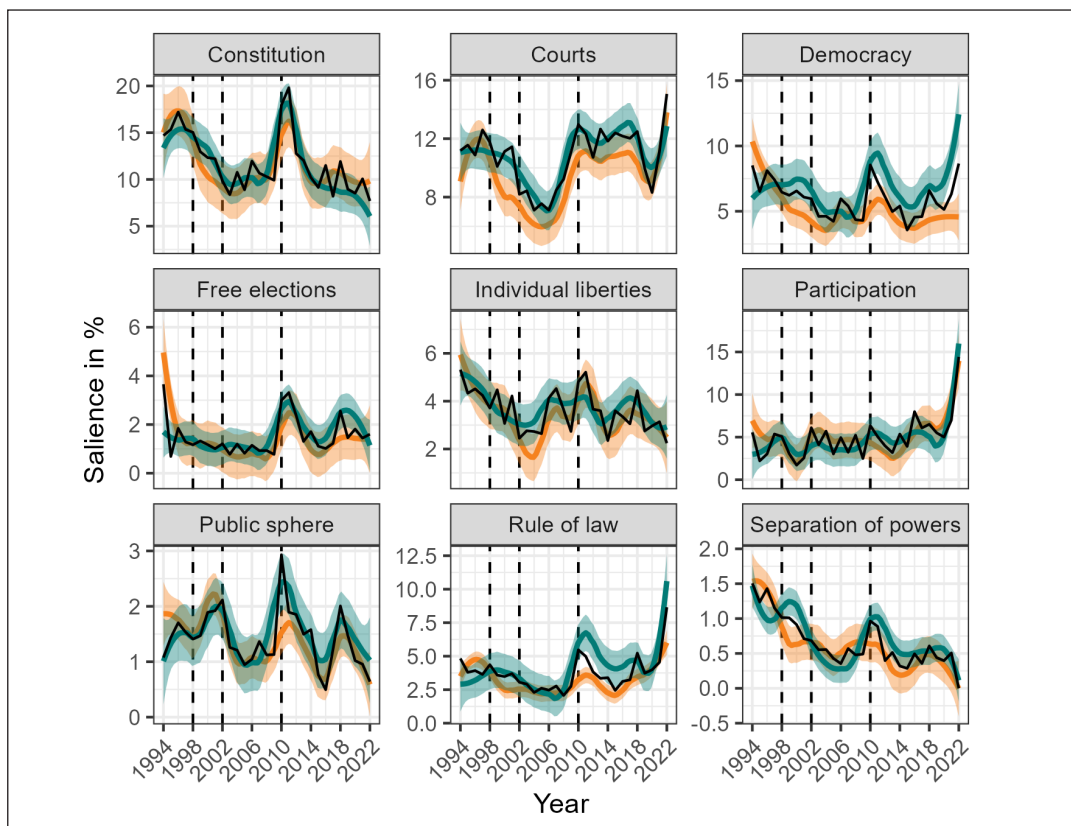

Figure 2 Salience of democracy over time. The colored lines show
a smoothed average of all parties within each group. The solid black line shows the
monthly moving averages of the whole parliament, irrespective of party affiliation.

4.2 Democracy rhetoric

Next, we proceed to analyze differences in the use of democracy rhetoric, that is, in which contexts the word 'democracy' and other forms of it are mentioned by both political camps. To ensure that speeches are substantively about democracy, we first hand-coded a

sample of ten opposition speeches per year mentioning the word stem 'democra*' to see whether they refer to domestic or international topics (a problem highlighted by Engler et al., 2022). From the coding, it is notable that almost all of these speeches concern domestic rather than international politics, although there are some instances of international topics brought forward by Jobbik in the first years of the Fidesz government.[6] Based on this, we can reasonably assume that a systematic investigation of the context surrounding democracy should allow us to judge how the concept of democracy is used. Hence, we proceed to investigate differences in the context of 'democracy' between Fidesz and the left-liberal opposition.[7]
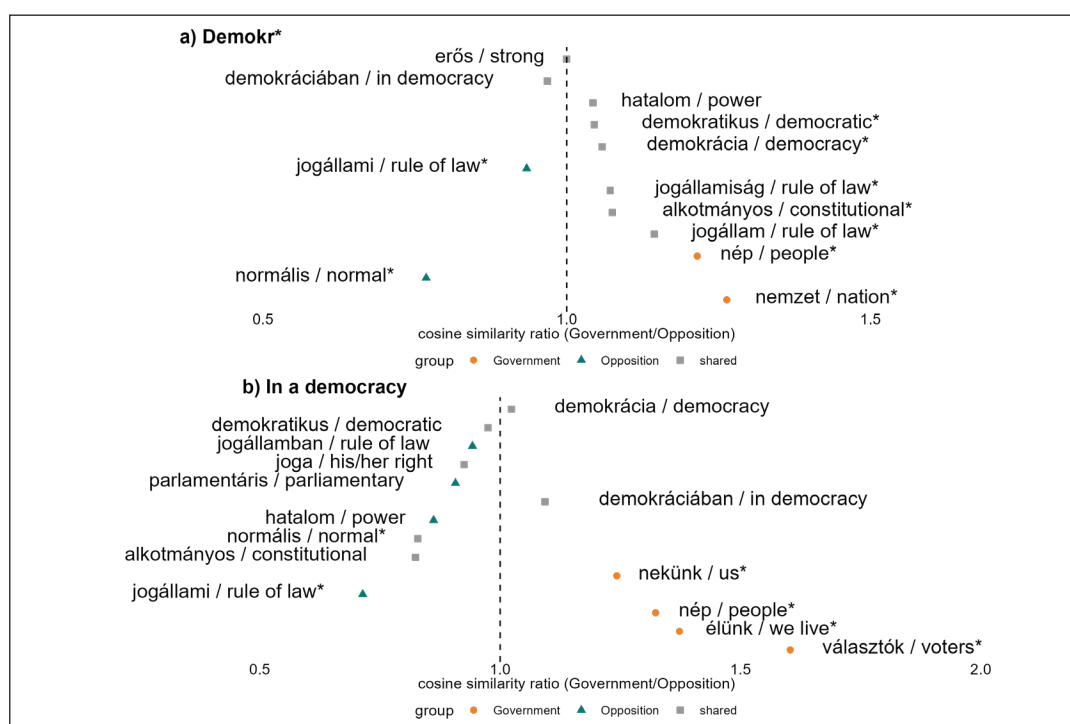

Figure 3 Nearest neighbor comparison for democracy word stem (including e.g., 'democracy' and 'democratic') and 'in a democracy'. The empirical p-values of words marked with an asterisk are significant at a 0.95 confidence level.

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[6] In terms of substance, the majority of the speeches uses democracy to criticize Fidesz and the changes it has made to the democratic process. Especially in the first years, this includes criticisms of Fidesz' disregard for the parliamentary process. EU criticism of Fidesz is taken up – as suggested in the theoretical section – however, it constitutes a minority of the instances. In contrast, Fidesz also yields democracy as a criticism of the opposition – both criticizing past governments and the alleged unwillingness of the opposition to participate e.g. in the process of constitutional reform.

[7] For this analysis, we remove the speeches by Jobbik given the differences observed in the qualitative coding, as well as given that the party exhibits anti-democratic tendencies (Borbáth & Gessler, 2023; Pirro, 2018; Róna, 2016) that may make it not directly comparable to the other parties.
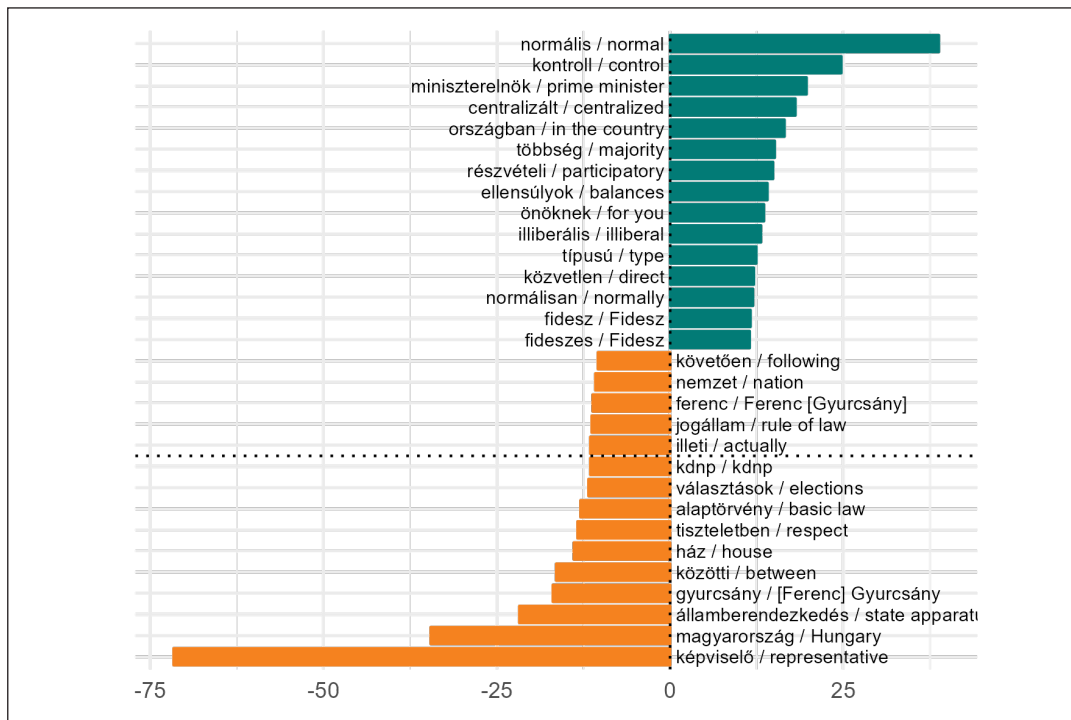
Figure 4 Contrast in contexts of word stem 'democr*'
between the left-liberal opposition (turquoise) and Fidesz (orange).

Figure 3 plots the ten nearest neighbors each for the wordstem of democracy (demokr*), as well as for the more specific 'in a democracy' (*demokráciában*) for Fidesz respectively the left-liberal opposition parties. The horizontal position of each label indicates the ratio of similarity to the government over the similarity to the opposition. That is, a word on the left side of the plot is more similar to the opposition embedding of democracy, while a label on the right side is more similar to the government embedding. The colors and symbols mark whether the word is among the nearest neighbors for the government (orange), the opposition (turquoise) or both (gray). Detailed nearest neighbors for each party from the ALC-embedding – disaggregating the opposition group – are included in Table A.20 in the Supplementary Material.

Substantively, both Figures contain similar words, and the two groups share most of the nearest neighbors: for democracy, it is only 'the people' and 'nation' (Fidesz) respectively 'normal' and 'rule of law' (opposition) which are not shared, however, other word forms of the rule of law are nearest neighbors for both groups. For in a democracy there are 'us,' 'voters,' 'the people,' and 'we live' (Fidesz) respectively 'power,' 'rule of law' (in two forms) and 'parliamentary' (opposition). Hence, both embeddings show a similar picture: Democracy rhetoric is fairly similar for both sides with some differences along predictable lines: Democracy is equated with the rule of law more by the opposition who also uses 'normal' to contrast Hungary to 'normal democracies,' while Fidesz endorses a more populist version (the people, voters, nations, us). The slight differences we find are also

supported by the cosine similarity ratio which places aspects related to the nation and 'the people' closer to Fidesz but the word 'normal' and most words related to the rule of law closer to the opposition. This suggests that as expected, the opposition uses the concept of democracy to criticize the government, while the government uses it to legitimize its own power.[8]

The similarities in the nearest neighbors do not mean that democracy rhetoric across the two sides can be equated: Figure 4 replicates the analysis by Engler which contrasts words most typically used in the context around democracy for the government and the left-liberal opposition parties (see also Figure A.5 in the Supplementary Material for other dictionary categories). This analysis is conceptually slightly different from the nearest neighbors in Figure 3: Although context is also used for the estimation of word embeddings, nearest neighbors represent words with the most similar embedding to the word prompted. That is, the analysis identifies words used in a similar context. Differing from that, Figure 4 analyzes the context in which the word is used. That is, it shows words that cannot necessarily be used in place of the original word but accompany it (see e.g. the word 'highest' / *legfőbb* in the results for courts in the Supplementary Material). This summarizes the context in which the word is used with a different lens and allows us to identify additional differences in the use of the word. Moreover, in their comparisons, Figure 3 analyzes the nearest neighbors of democracy for each group separately and then compares these sets while Figure A.5 only highlights differences in the use based on a chi-square comparison of the two groups. Hence, the latter type of analysis will always return differences, regardless of existing similarities.

Looking at Figure 4, we indeed note contrasts that support the small differences already identified in the word embedding analysis. The opposition uses words like 'normal', 'control' and (checks and) 'balances' more in the context of democracy. The opposition also picked up the 'illiberal democracy' phrase introduced by Orbán but also highlights alternative forms of democracy, namely direct and participatory democracy. In contrast, most typical for the government's democracy rhetoric are words associated with governing (e.g., 'Hungary', 'state apparatus'). In fourth rank is the name of the head of the previous government, Ferenc Gyurcsány, which speaks for the use of democracy rhetoric when directly confronting the opposition that Fidesz often equates with Gyurcsány personally.[9] In the Supplementary Material, we additionally visualize the most frequent context words for democracy for each individual party in Figure A.9, as well as for democratic principles in the subsequent figures, however, party heterogeneity is again difficult to analyze as some of the opposition parties had limited speaking time in parliament.

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[8] While differences of course exist, the general pattern is similar when using a pretrained model (see Figure A.8 in the Supplementary Material).

[9] Replicating the analysis with larger window sizes supports this interpretation with 'Ferenc' also becoming a key term. For some window sizes, 'Viktor' and 'Orbán' are also key terms for the opposition, providing evidence for the use of democracy rhetoric connected to the political opponent.

5 Conclusion

As Dahl has contended powerfully, 'a political party is the most visible manifestation and surely one of the most effective forms of opposition in a democratic country' (Dahl, 1966, p. 333). Hence, opposition parties are front and center when we think about opposing challenges to democracy by incumbent governments. However, the effectiveness of any opposition is diminished once opposition activity takes place outside of a democratic context. Changing the rules of the game by diminishing the opportunities of the parliamentary opposition to question the government or to shape the political agenda are a key challenge for opposing autocratization. This manuscript has provided a first cut at parliamentary rhetoric on democracy in a context of autocratization, focussing on the left-liberal opposition in the Hungarian parliament.

Several limitations of this manuscript may be relevant to consider for future work: First, the analysis of democracy rhetoric has mostly treated the left-liberal opposition as a unitary actor. Despite the differences that were revealed by the dictionary analysis and that we discussed in outlining the case, this was a methodological decision, as well as a compromise considering the short life span of some parties. While such a simplifying assumption allows clarifying broad discursive lines, future qualitative work could consider the differences between the parties in more detail as the ideological heterogeneity within the opposition camp may hide nuances. Moreover, the analysis has focused on the left-liberal opposition, often leaving out Jobbik as one of the most prominent opposition parties during that period.

Second, by focussing on the aggregate picture, the analysis could not discuss the specific contexts of each speech in detail. A particularly promising avenue here is a focus on the debates surrounding specific laws that can be reconstructed from the ParlText dataset used in the analysis. In this regard, we have listed laws in relation to which democratic principles were particularly frequently discussed in the Supplementary Material section. Particularly the debates around the new constitution stand out and provide ample material for a more in-depth analysis.

There are also methodological limitations: While the analysis used word embeddings to overcome some of the limitations of bag-of-words approaches, it still relies on a fairly simple model of word meaning. Future work could consider more advanced models of word meaning, including for the analysis of salience. Relatedly, the inclusion of policy content – e.g., from the Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project Dataset (Boda & Sebők, 2019) – may be useful to gain more detailed insights into the distribution of democracy appeals across issues and understand which laws are routinely criticized as anti-democratic. They may also help to differentiate further between how parties use democracy in their rhetoric ('democracy rhetoric') and the realities to which they refer.

Nevertheless, there are also already some important take-aways: Studying a case in which democracy is under attack, we have shown that democracy and democratic principles are a highly salient topic in the Hungarian parliament. In terms of opposition responses to autocratization, we have highlighted that on many dimensions, the opposition's emphasis exceeded that of Fidesz. This emphasis by the opposition could be evidence of a politicization of democracy. However, the high salience of the topic also for Fidesz and the similarity of both groups regarding democracy rhetoric suggest a different pattern of

politicization than for example on the immigration issue where challengers drive the salience of an issue and where parties take contrasting views. Instead, we show that democracy is discussed frequently, also to a lesser extent in the pre-Fidesz period, and by all actors.

Substantively, we observe some differences in 'democracy rhetoric' and small differences in the emphasis on principles. For rhetoric, they match the pattern outlined by Engler et al. (2022) of right-wing populist emphasis on participatory and left-liberal emphasis on liberal visions of democracy, however, this is not so clear for principles. Generally, differences are fairly nuanced with word embeddings of democracy for the government and the opposition showing significant overlap.

This also holds potential for conceptual and methodological reflection beyond the present study: In work on the politicization of democracy, democracy is often discussed as a valence issue that all parties support. The assumption that goes with this in previous literature is that politicization may not happen by actors openly opposing democracy, instead they may espouse different variants of democracy. We have addressed this assumption more head-on than previous research by explicitly analyzing 'democracy rhetoric,' namely the use of the word democracy, potentially for partisan purposes. Moreover, while the understanding of democracy as a valence issue is widely shared in the literature, many of the analysis tools used—such as the keyness statistics used by Engler et al. (2022) —focus on differences. Although differences between government and opposition do exist in the present study, a nuanced perspective shows that much of the use of democracy is shared between the two groups and concepts such as the rule of law are deeply engraved even into the discourse of Fidesz.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that overlap in the use of the concept does of course not mean Fidesz and the left-liberal opposition refer to the same ideas when referring to democracy or the rule of law. Referring to the rule of law more often does not make a government respect the rule of law more. Instead, this similar language use underscores that any critique of Fidesz' undemocratic policies needs to reference specific policies and be explicit in its criticism if it wants to counter Fidesz' democracy rhetoric and its wielding of democratic principles. That is, the vocabulary of democracy is highly codified, even in contexts where democracy itself is under attack.

Although the value of democracy is rhetorically undisputed, the concept seems to be caught in a general pattern of polarization in Hungary with parties using the word to criticize their opponent. The analysis over time has shown that the high salience of democracy is nothing new and democracy rhetoric was wielded in political debates – potentially as a tool for partisan polarization – long before Fidesz started dismantling political institutions. While we have not analyzed specific instances of democracy rhetoric, it is evident that its (de)legitimizing function may wear off if it is used too often or for transparently partisan purposes. In the present political situation, polarization proceeds with a highly unbalanced distribution of power: In a parliament where Fidesz can pass even those laws requiring a two-third majority without a single vote of the opposition, calling out undemocratic behavior is often in vain. This holds especially as opposition rights are curtailed and the parliament becomes less of a public stage: In a rigged game, crying foul is of no help when there is no impartial referee to heed these calls. Relating this to the warning of Cleary & Öztürk (2022) that escalating tactics may not pay off for democratic oppositions,

it seems plausible that the strong connection between debates around democracy and polarization in Hungary had diminished democracy's legitimacy as a tool for critiquing autocratization even before Fidesz (re-)took power.

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