

Subnational Consolidation in Dominant Party Regimes: Evidence from Hungarian Mayoral Elections

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Abstract

Democratic backsliding is widely studied at the national level, but subnational governments play a crucial and understudied role in dominant party regime consolidation. The evidence suggests that dominant parties strategically contest subnational elections to minimize potential threats to the regime, particularly focusing on cities of greater political importance. This allows an aspiring dominant party to strategically restrict opportunities for the opposition to build up an electoral base to challenge the regime and to better control administrative and economic resources, thereby controlling patronage possibilities. Using an original panel dataset of Hungarian mayoral election results from 2002 to 2019, this paper analyzes subnational politics under the Fidesz party, which is consolidating a dominant party regime. I find that Fidesz is more likely to win elections in subnational capitals, where it can better control administrative and economic resources, but local access to EU funds does not affect its likelihood of winning mayoral elections.

Key Words: Democratic Backsliding; Hungary; Mayoral Elections; Subnational Capitals; EU funding; Municipal politics

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, there has been an undeniable shift toward illiberalism in both advanced and developing democracies. Major countries like Russia, Turkey, the Philippines, and Poland are considered to have made illiberal and/or autocratic turns, while the world's largest democracies in India, Brazil, and the United States have elected leaders with varying degrees of authoritarian tendencies. This rise has often been accompanied by democratic backsliding, which weakens the rules, norms, and institutions associated with democracy (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). As it advances, backsliding can lead toward electorally dominant parties seeking to retain power through hybrid regimes that blend elements of authoritarianism and democracy, oftentimes at the expense of liberal democracy as traditionally conceived.

Backsliding generally has a purpose: to establish enduring regime dominance. Dominant party regimes are those where an incumbent political party can create virtuous cycles of policy implementation and institutional reform to minimize the likelihood of their being removed from office (Pempel 1990). In addition, dominant parties are able to accrue resource advantages and make it more difficult for opposition parties to effectively contest elections (Greene 2007). Despite the advantages held by the incumbent party, historical instances of party dominance have been occasionally interrupted by challenger parties, largely based in urban areas. Municipalities have formed the core of opposition to the regime and the basis of successful challenges to dominant parties, most notably in the paradigmatic cases of Mexico (Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001; Middlebrook 2001) and Japan (Scheiner 1999; 2006; Smith 2013).

I argue, however, that municipalities can be crucial for the *consolidation*, rather than erosion, of party dominance. Subnational control, with a special emphasis on district and regional capitals, is an important mechanism by which a party can sustain dominance, a phenomenon that remains understudied in the literature on democratic backsliding and regime

consolidation. However, we do not understand where and when autocratizers seek to consolidate power locally. This is important to understanding how the processes by which autocratizing parties build long-term dominance. By using local politics to reinforce national-level anti-democratic reforms, dominant parties consolidate control and minimize the efficacy of local politics for the opposition, reducing long-term threats to the regime. Understanding these tactics better can help illustrate which subnational units might be vulnerable to this type of strategy seeking establish regime dominance.

To explore these subnational autocratizing strategies, I use an original panel dataset of Hungarian mayoral elections from 2002 to 2019. By focusing on all municipalities with significant responsibilities in local administration instead of exclusively the largest cities, these data provide insight to a wide range of cities of different sizes and economic significance. These data allow us to not only understand why a dominant regime might focus on the subnational level but also which municipalities it is likely to contest – and win.

Hungary has advanced significantly in subnational regime consolidation and is a helpful guide for understanding dominant party incentives in subnational politics. Since taking power in 2010, the right-wing Fidesz party has embarked on a series of escalating reforms designed to ensure its continued electoral success. To that end, Fidesz has sought to extend its dominance to municipal politics, nationalizing local elections as part of a systematic party strategy to ensure local control to minimize the likelihood of the formation of a successful opposition. This strategy may prove an attractive template to other leaders pursuing an anti-democratic agenda, particularly consolidating control in subnational capitals, especially in contexts where maintaining the appearance of democracy is important.

I argue that intermunicipal variation is important for Fidesz's strategy. I hypothesize that Fidesz concentrates its efforts in municipalities where there are administrative or financial resources that can be used to further solidify regime control; Fidesz has demonstrated a clear strategy of using government resources for cronyism and rewarding allies. The results bear this out: subnational capital city status is associated with an increase in the probability that Fidesz wins an election, indicating that the administrative and economic resources at the district capital level may be important assets for regime consolidation.

This paper will first examine the literature on the importance of municipal politics in the context of democratic backsliding and party dominance. Subsequently, I will outline the argument and hypotheses of the paper: namely that local control is especially important for eliminating the opportunities for grassroots opposition to form and for maintaining key political relationships through cronyism. Then, I describe the case of Hungary, the data, and methods to be used in assessing local election results before discussing the results and implications of the model. Finally, I discuss the implications for cases beyond Hungary.

The Importance of Subnational Politics for Dominant Parties

Most studies of democratic backsliding examine troubling national trends in which institutional erosion occurs in many of the major areas undergirding liberal democracy: media freedom, judicial independence, the legitimate contestation of elections, and manipulation of public financing (Bermeo 2016; Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017). There have been backsliding trends among a range of liberal democracies, with changes in informal norms being the most persistent across cases (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Studies of backsliding, however, focus almost exclusively on national political dynamics, neglecting the important policy

formation and implementation, as well as political contestation, that happen at subnational tiers of government. The subnational dimension is typically only examined in the context of the recentralization of authority in the regime. While existing research, like Gel'man (2010), Reuter (2017), and Scheiner (1999; 2006), examines the role that subnational levels play in perpetuating established dominant party regimes, the role of municipal politics in actively facilitating democratic backsliding and regime *consolidation* remains understudied.

Subnational politics are also intrinsically important. Significant policymaking, implementation, and politics happens at the subnational level (Hoffmann-Martinot and Sellers 2005; Trounstein 2009). This is especially true in Europe, where there has been a broad trend toward the direct election of mayors (Bäck, Heinelt, and Magnier 2006). As mayors gain more authority and legitimacy, the position increases in salience for party politics and becomes a site of greater political contestation. Moreover, besides simply providing control over subnational politics and resources, the local level can reinforce national control. Bottom-up politics in local elections can ultimately serve as an important means of affecting national-level campaigns (Bechtel 2012) and democratic institutions (Sellers, Lidström, and Bae 2019), indicating the importance of local politics for an aspiring dominant party regime. On the whole, the role of subnational electoral politics in furthering democratic backsliding to consolidate party dominance has not been sufficiently studied.

Cases where a dominant national party uses municipal politics to maintain control most closely resemble what Gel'man (2010) terms centralized subnational party authoritarianism, in which a dominant national party uses regional governments to maintain its control. Failure to maintain subnational dominance, once established, can be indicative of regime weakness (Gel'man 2010, 12). This type of motivation compels electoral authoritarian regimes to pursue

supermajorities through illicit means, even when not necessary to guarantee political control, to discourage rivals from even contesting elections (Geddes 2005; Magaloni 2006). Gel'man's theorization, however, mainly considers the means by which the national directly controls the subnational – especially at the *regional* level – and has not been empirically examined. Existing studies of hybrid regimes examine party strategy through subnational variation in national-level elections (Cinar 2016), or the decision to allow subnational elections at all (Reuter et al. 2016), instead of examining subnational politics as such. A focus on mayoral elections is an especially likely strategy in situations where maintaining the façade of democracy is crucial to maintaining legitimacy, rendering impossible options like replacing elected mayors with appointed administrators or ending subnational elections entirely. EU membership, which requires maintaining democratic procedures, is one such case.

Pursuing subnational dominance can coincide with democratic backsliding and the nationalization of local politics instead of relying on established authoritarian control or the power to appoint local officials. Thus, subnational democracy can push regime consolidation forward. Instead of undermining the existence of independent local elections, a dominant party can incorporate them into the virtuous cycles of reform that establish party dominance (Pempel 1990). Institutional reforms coupled with incumbency effects make it difficult to dislodge party-affiliated mayors. The literature on incumbency broadly suggests a substantively important advantage for mayoral incumbents (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014; Freier 2015), which could even be higher in a dominant party system where the regime sets the rules of the game.

Control of local governments is important to dominant parties seeking to reduce the ability for opposition parties to develop promising politicians at the grassroots level who might eventually pose a threat to the regime. Moreover, virtuous cycles in dominant party regimes,

which solidify ruling party incumbents and reduce the possibility of open seat elections, may further reinforce this advantage. Reducing opportunities for opposition parties to develop emerging politicians who could subsequently challenge the ruling party is an incentive for parties to pursue local control in a variety of settings across the world; however, it is especially salient in dominant party regimes, which Fidesz aspires to establish. In Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s, opposition party candidates used local offices as a springboard for higher office, and opposition parties themselves used subnational elections to gain credibility and legitimacy (Lucardi 2016). In Japan, the limited electoral breakthroughs of the opposition (1993–1994; 2009–2012) came when the opposition was able to recruit quality candidates who had often served in local government (Scheiner 1999; 2006; Smith 2013). Opposition parties in Japan have seen ‘local party building...[as] necessary for party success at the national level’ (Hijino 2015, 293). In post-Socialist contexts, ambitious politicians historically have used mayoralties as a step toward running for the national legislature (Jakli and Stenberg 2021; Papp 2018). These findings further underline the potential importance of local control for consolidating political dominance and indicate why dominant parties may choose to allocate significant resources to local politics after gaining national control. This is a powerful logic in more democratic dominant-party governments as well (such as Japan); however, the importance of local politics in backsliding regimes is heightened by manipulated electoral rules and restrictions on media freedom.

Despite the inherent importance of municipal elections, even large, electorally dominant parties make strategic choices about where to devote resources to subnational campaigning. While dominant parties have a structural advantage in that they are able to compete in most subnational units (Jones and Mainwaring 2003), municipal elections are often contested between candidates unaffiliated with national parties. Instead, the nationalization of party politics is

driven by a party's strategic choices (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen 2013; Hjellum 1967). Local politics are an important venue for incubating new parties and for helping parties that have been weakened nationally to survive (Kjær 2012). However, existing scholarship insufficiently examines the municipal targeting strategies of nationally dominant parties.

Hypotheses

Not all cities are equally desirable electoral prizes: in any country, certain cities are of a greater innate importance for economic, cultural, societal, or symbolic reasons. Subnational capitals are especially important, both for their access to resources and symbolic value. Rapoport describes the relationship between subnational capitals and other cities as part of a national hierarchy of municipalities (1993, 34), and the *South China Morning Post* considers political status as one of the three components of its interpretation of Chinese city tiers (Hernández 2016). City tiers can be a rough proxy for importance, in which district and county capitals are classified differently than towns without capital status.

Regional and district capitals are representative examples of state-anchored industrial districts, with a stable development structure dominated by government-sponsored institutions with relatively stable annual budgets (Markusen 1996). The expansion of government programs, regulations, and bureaucratic capacity within capital cities has increased the economic importance of government centers (Gottmann 1977, 242). Capital status serves as a differentiating function from neighbors, of otherwise similar political, economic, or demographic importance, as demonstrated by decentralization programs in France in the 1980s (Negrier 1994). Subnational capitals in other decentralized contexts were chosen based on their historical

political importance (Kim and Law 2016, 123), creating path dependence where decentralization ensures their continued relevance even in a nationalized political environment.

Subnational capitals in post-Communist Europe, where decentralization happened late, may have been selected to optimize the benefits of regional policy, providing additional resources to the capitals (Przybyła, Kulczyk-Dynowska, and Kachniarz 2014, 181–82). As Hungary underwent less territorial reorganization as other countries in the region, county capitals were able to benefit from the concentrated urban development of the socialist period. County seats retained their economic and political importance in the national hierarchy after the transition (Beluszky and Gyóri 2005, 391–93). Their continued economic importance is indicated by their serving as the basis for regional commuting sheds (Bihari and Kovács 2005, 371). In Russia, a similar case of dominant party consolidation, regional capitals amalgamated a large portion of the political resources available at that tier of government (Golosov, Gushchina, and Kononenko 2016, 510), indicating that these cities can likely be considered more politically important, *ceteris paribus*.

Capital cities also serve a symbolic function as representative institutions of democratic governance (Engstrom, Hammond, and Scott 2013), and Gibson (2012) finds that capital cities in particular have been centers of the opposition to dominant party regimes. While these symbolic functions are undeniably more powerful at the national level, we might expect small villages to think of the district seat as having the same effect on a much smaller scale. Thus, even aside from the control of resources that administering a district capital might allow, the symbolic impact of controlling a district capital may be representative of its greater political importance in the surrounding area.

Given the symbolic and practical importance of subnational capitals, I argue that a dominant party will strategically emphasize higher tier cities when allocating resources for electoral campaigns, thereby being more likely to field candidates.

Hypothesis 1: The ruling party is more likely to contest mayoral elections in cities with a higher tier of classification.

Another reason why dominant party regimes might value the local level is more particular to parties seeking to maintain control through cronyism. Blaydes' (2010) study of Egypt finds that localities supporting opposition parties generally received less investment in public services than those areas supporting the government. This finding is in line with findings that the provision of local public goods can be tied to party loyalty and rewarding subnational jurisdictions that support national parties (Joanis 2011; Sengupta 2011). This is particularly true in dominant party regimes, where political competition is often less focused on programmatic politics and more about the dominant party using its considerable resources to ensure electoral success (Costa-i-Font, Rodriguez-Oreggia, and Lunapla 2003; Scheiner 2005; Golden and Picci 2008).

The involvement of the EU brings a multilevel character to cronyism that could not be accomplished through control of the national level alone. EU grants are selected and managed by national ministries, which act as managing authorities. The national-level selection process would already allow a dominant party to claim credit for funds, indicating that the emphasis on local control is not simply about publicity. Kelemen (2020), among others, argues that such funding is critical for the establishment of undemocratic regimes within the EU.

While national governments select the projects that receive EU funding (as long as projects meet broad parameters set by the EU), implementation of local projects is typically handled at the municipal level. Thus, control of local governments is essential for controlling the disbursement of EU funds and serves as a key means of rewarding allies and courting new supporters. However, the involvement of the EU makes this not a simple case of clientelism, in the sense of increasing public goods provision just prior to an election or transactionally engaging with voters. The process of EU-sponsored regional development requires significant planning and is dictated by budget cycles that do not coincide with national elections.

Public tendering plays a significant role in rewarding supporters, and picking business partners based on political loyalty is a key political strategy of governments (Martin and Ligeti 2017). As such, given that municipalities are increasingly dependent on the national level for funding, that public tendering is a key means of rewarding political supporters, and that EU funds are especially well suited for manipulation (eg. Huliaras and Petropoulos 2016), we would expect dominant parties to prioritize those cities where EU funding allocations are larger. Gaining control of cities that had been allocated EU funding could be especially valuable to both reward supporters and maintain electoral control going forward. While courting votes is important, this system of allocation is more about cultivating and maintaining relationships with elites to solidify the party itself and to minimize opportunities for the development of an effective opposition. We might expect that, in addition to the carrot of cronyism, a dominant party may use the stick of disinvestment as another key reason for wanting to control the implementation of European regional funding. If a city does not elect a regime-affiliated mayor, it would presumably have a weaker claim on subsequent EU funding allocations, if they are determined nationally.

Hypothesis 2: The ruling party at the national level is more likely to contest cities with higher total allocation of EU funding.

Generally, I assume that the ruling party is more likely to win in elections that they strategically contest in a dominant party context, by tactically allocating scarce resources to mayoralties that have greater value. This strategic calculus is different than one that would purely maximize seats won, as in Snyder (1989). Instead, it would more resemble the party strategy for high-stakes seats, as described by Jeong and Shenoy (Forthcoming). Given this strategy, I expect that dominant parties are more likely to win more politically important cities and cities with greater EU funding. Given the opportunities for patronage, the stakes would be the highest in these mayoralties.

Hypothesis 3: Mayoral candidates affiliated with the ruling party at the national level are more likely to win in cities with a higher tier of classification.

Hypothesis 4: Mayoral candidates affiliated with the ruling party at the national level are more likely to win in cities with higher total allocation of EU funding.

The Case of Hungary

Hungary is a key case for examining these dynamics. It is a state in which the right-wing Fidesz party has sought to establish enduring party control while maintaining the façade of

procedural democracy.¹ Moreover, it is a case where the national government has made concrete reforms to local government, the decentralization of authority, and territorial reorganization, indicating a keen awareness of the importance of the subnational level to regime consolidation. As is typical for dominant parties, Fidesz certainly appeals to rural and periurban areas (Lubarda 2019; Mares and Young 2018; 2019), and Fidesz is very successful with rural voters (Kovács and Vida 2015). Yet Fidesz succeeds in larger cities, refusing to cede them to a more liberal opposition by nationalizing local politics. This is part of their strategy to nationalize local politics to remove the capacity for the opposition to make independent appeals. While nationalizing local politics may lead other parties to also contest elections, this will disproportionately advantage the dominant party when the ruling party holds all the levers of power.

Backsliding in Hungary at the national level has been widely studied by scholars (Enyedi 2016; Pech and Scheppele 2017, among many others). Since gaining a legislative supermajority in 2010, Fidesz has implemented a nationalist, illiberal project, undermining the fair conduct of elections and minimizing space for critical discussion in society to ensure it stays in power. However, Fidesz has also pursued backsliding subnationally, pursuing reforms to further solidify its political control by reducing the ability of the opposition to effectively contest local elections. Fidesz changed electoral rules before the 2010 local elections to be more majoritarian (Dobos and Várnagy 2017, 124–25). This change was part of a larger trend in the structural recentralization of power after it took control, where Fidesz used its two-thirds majority to alter the Cardinal Law of Local Government in 2011. This trend toward recentralization, bringing more local authority under national control, may be an enabling factor: Chhibber and Kollman (2004) find that party nationalization increases as national politics become more relevant for

¹ In May 2018, Orbán suggested that he would remain in power personally until at least 2030 (EurActiv 2018).

voters, and local parties are more successful when there is greater local autonomy. Fidesz consciously undermines municipal autonomy to strengthen its own control: nationally through reconsolidation and subnationally through manipulation.

Once in power locally, Fidesz uses municipal control to undergird their national regime. Fidesz altered local rules and regulations to undermine the formation or maintenance of local opposition parties and reduce public oversight, clear evidence of replicating Fidesz's national-level backsliding in subnational politics (Jakli and Stenberg 2021). This is accomplished through gradual institutional change at the subnational level, through replacing seemingly minor regulations, coopting existing structures of oversight, and, as previously discussed, abusing alternative funding sources for political means. These practices fall in what Whitehead and Behrend call the "intermediate zone," where elections remain nominally democratic but a variety of barriers to democracy impede genuine contestation and solidify regime control (2016, 292). In this case, anti-democratic subnational practices are a strategic tool of the national government to maintain dominant party control at all levels of government.

This strategy has been effective. Table 1 below illustrates Fidesz's success in municipal elections. When considering only municipalities with town (*város*) status or higher, Fidesz's rate of winning elections that it contests has increased from 32.7 percent in 2002 (in a race after it lost the national election) to 63.2 percent in 2010 (after several months in power and after instituting changes to subnational election procedure. The jump in the 2006 local elections can be explained by the September 2006 reveal of Socialist Party (MSZP) Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's speech to a party congress earlier that year, where he admitted the deception used to guarantee MSZP's national success and caused a major political crisis. This revelation happened two weeks before the October 1 local elections.

Table 1. Fidesz and local elections.

Year	Total Races ²	Fidesz contested	% Contested	Fidesz win	% Win
2002	276	159	57.6%	52	32.7%
2006	312	210	67.3%	113	53.8%
2010	351	304	86.6%	192	63.2%
2014	369	298	80.8%	207	69.5%
2019	369	275	74.5%	172	62.5%

In the 2014 local mayoral elections, Fidesz fielded candidates in the 298 races of municipalities with *város* status (or higher). Of these 298 candidates, 207, or 69.5 percent, were victorious. In 2019, Fidesz was less successful; pan-opposition coalition victories in several larger cities received a great deal of attention, and there may be an important symbolic role to the opposition victories (Hegedüs 2019; Novak 2019). At the same time, we can still see that on the whole, Fidesz remains quite successful in local politics, winning more than 60 percent of the mayoral races it contested.³ However, we can also see that Fidesz lacks the capacity (or strategic will) to field candidates in *all* municipal elections and makes strategic choices about where to best allocate resources to contesting local politics.

Even after the significant recentralization of power in Hungary stemming from the reforms of the Cardinal Law of Local Government, municipalities still have important functions in Hungarian policymaking. These include tasks like land use planning, budgetary authority, local property management, welfare state provision, transportation, housing, utilities, local taxation, and cultural and small business promotion (Temesi 2017), all of which offer a fair amount of discretion. Crucially, the majority of subnational TV and radio stations are run by

² Variation in total races is due to the increasing number of settlements granted *város* status. Towns promoted during the study period are listed in Appendix K.

³ *Város* is an administrative status assigned to municipalities. Another potentially relevant threshold is a city population of 10,000, above which the structure of local council elections changes. Cities over 10,000 incorporate compensatory lists in council elections instead of relying solely on single member districts, a reform designed promote the nationalization of local politics (Dobos 2016). To account for the importance of this threshold, models will be run on all towns with *város* status as well as only in those with a population above 10,000.

municipalities, allowing them to control messaging in many mid-sized municipalities (Vásárhelyi 2017). While the Cardinal Law reforms aggregated some policymaking tasks to the county level, administrative tasks were especially concentrated in district (*járás*) capitals (Pálné Kovács 2016), giving these specific municipalities additional importance.

Local politics in Hungary matter not only because of the importance of municipal control of policymaking responsibilities and for strengthening the regime; they are key to maintaining control over financial disbursement and implementation, which may be especially crucial in the context of the EU. In smaller municipalities, mayors have used access to public services for clientelistic purposes, taking advantage of local provision of public services to solidify political control (Szombati 2018; Mares and Young 2018; 2019). However, not only national funding is at stake. The local level is the primary implementing level of grants from the EU, allowing the party in control to use European resources for clientelistic purposes and/or material gain. This can also reinforce national politics; Papp (2019) finds that under MSZP administration prior to 2010, EU funding reinforced the electoral performance of national MPs in towns administered by government-affiliated mayors; Muraközy and Telegdy (2016) demonstrate that mayors affiliated with the government are associated with a 16-21 percent increase in EU grant value for visible projects and find a relationship between EU projects and the change in votes for an incumbent mayor; and Medve-Bálint (2016) argues that the national government's level of control over funds leads to bias in funding decisions. EU funding is essential to the functioning of the Hungarian economy. A KPMG report (2017) finds that although the national economy grew 4.6 percent between 2006 and 2015, it would have shrunk without EU regional funding.

The possibilities of corruption in resource distribution at the local level give Fidesz an important incentive to control local politics beyond the pure policymaking potential of the

municipal level. A recent examination of local level tenders in Sweden suggests that local party dominance can lead to a greater propensity for single-bid contracts and allows elected officials more political control of resource distribution to perpetuate their political control (Broms, Dahlström, and Fazekas 2019). EU funded contracts can be especially vulnerable to corruption, and Fazekas and Tóth (2016) argue that the additional risk associated with European funds may be exacerbated in regions already prone to corruption. Hungary would qualify as such a region;⁴ corruption is seen as a driving force of the Fidesz government and a clear motivation for maintaining its national control (Magyar 2016). Local opposition politicians emphasize the importance of contracting for Fidesz to reward allies and disincentivize local businesses from making important alliances and connections with opposition politicians, who have no similar largesse to share (Jakli and Stenberg 2021).

Data and Method

To examine which elections that Fidesz, the dominant party in Hungary, contests and wins, I compile an original panel dataset comprising the results of the 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2019 municipal elections for each of the 346 towns (*város*) in Hungary. Data on districts in Budapest are included when available, resulting in 369 entries and a total N of 1,845. This dataset includes candidate names, parties, and electoral results for each participant. This has been augmented with information about the demographics and economic circumstances of towns in election years, as well as data regarding EU funding projects in each municipality. Table 2 briefly outlines the variables in the model; see Appendix A for elaboration and information about alternative specifications.

⁴ Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perception Index rates Hungary as tied for the most corrupt EU member and argues that it has become considerably more corrupt in recent years (2021).

Table 2. Variable Specifications

Variable	Type	Possible Values	Source
Fidesz Candidate	DV	1 if candidate, 0 if none	National Election Office (NVI)
Fidesz Winner	DV	1 if winner, 0 if loser	NVI
Higher Tier City	IV	1 if district capital, county capital, or city with county rights; else 0	Central Statistics Office (KSH)
EU Grant Value	IV	Monetary grant value in three-year period	Hungarian Prime Minister's Office
Population	Control	Logged municipal population	KSH
Opposition Incumbent	Control	1 if yes, 0 if no	NVI
Library Books per Capita	Control	Number of books per resident	KSH
Unemployment	Control	Percentage of population seeking jobs	KSH
Number of Candidates	Control	Total candidates seeking election	NVI

The dichotomous dependent variable *Fidesz Candidate* indicates that an officially Fidesz-affiliated candidate contested a municipal mayoral election. The dichotomous dependent variable *Fidesz Winner* indicates if an officially Fidesz-affiliated candidate won the mayoral election; 0 indicates that an otherwise-affiliated (or unaffiliated) candidate won. Neither captures if independent candidates that are likely aligned with Fidesz win an election, so may understate the effect.

There are two main independent variables of interest. *EU Grant Value* calculates the total value of EU Structural Fund grants issued to Hungarian municipalities in a three-year electoral cycle (for example, 2004-2006), measured in millions of Hungarian Forint. *Higher Tier City* is a dummy variable measuring city tier. Cities are classified categorically with seven options: (1) village, (2) city, (3) district capital, (4) city with county rights, (5) city with county rights that is also a county capital, (6) electoral district, and (7) capital city. Electoral districts apply only to Budapest's 23 districts, while Budapest itself is the only capital city. Higher Tier City is coded as 1 to indicate the city is a district capital, city with county rights, or city with

county rights that is a county capital, or 0, indicating that has no special political status or is a district within Budapest.

Five potentially confounding variables are also included. *Population* is the logged election year municipal population;⁵ city population is a primary determinant of the involvement of national political parties in local elections (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Kjær and Elklit 2010; Soós 2015). *Opposition Incumbent* captures if an incumbent mayor, not affiliated with Fidesz in the election in question,⁶ runs in the mayoral election. *Library books per capita* is included as a control for local public goods provision, often cited as a clientelistic voting motive in local elections (Wantchekon 2003). *Unemployment*, though associated with ambiguous findings, is also an important control for local election analysis (Maškarinec and Klimovský 2016). *Number of Candidates* states the total number of candidates that ran in an election. If an election is uncontested, this value is 1; the highest value in the dataset is 9. In line with O'Dwyer and Stenberg (2021), I assume Fidesz is less likely to win elections with fewer candidates, with the implication being that the opposition might coalesce around a compromise candidate. Additionally, Appendix E shows controls for Fidesz's national vote share in the most recent national election prior to the municipal election. While Fidesz's vote share is highly significant and predictive of its decision to run a candidate, it does not affect the significance of variables of interest.

These data can be most effectively analyzed using a panel logit random effects model with yearly fixed effects, which reduce omitted variable bias. Random effects are necessary to

⁵ Multicollinearity tests between population and the dependent variables are in Appendix C. Population data distributions are in Appendix H. Appendix L replicates models for MSZP, which is the only other Hungarian party to contest elections continuously during the study period. Appendix M groups cities into within-panel population quintiles to examine if impacts from population are driven by cities under a certain population threshold.

⁶ There is non-zero party switching, so someone classified as an opposition incumbent in the present election may have previously been affiliated with Fidesz.

account for the fact that one of our independent variables (higher tier city) is unchanging for the study period for a majority of cases. Yearly fixed effects, not city fixed effects, are used, because the lack of change on the dependent variable in many cities over the period, either by Fidesz winning all elections or none of them, resulted in their being dropped from the dataset. The inclusion of yearly fixed effects captures the general economic conditions at the national level, as well as important national political trends (such as the broad decline in MSZP following its corruption scandals). Sensitivity tests are available in Appendix B.

Models are run for two separate time periods: the complete dataset and then for only the post-2010 elections: the subset of the panel after Fidesz established its supermajority national control. Those hypotheses pertaining to contestation DV (1 and 2) are run on the entire dataset, while hypotheses about the likelihood of Fidesz's winning elections (3 and 4) are tested on only those municipality-years in which Fidesz contested an election. This subset of the data includes 1286 observations, considering the likelihood of Fidesz winning those elections in which it chooses to compete, as opposed to likelihood of winning elections altogether.

Limitations

As this research is based on observational data, it is likely subject to omitted variable bias. The inclusion of yearly fixed effects will reduce, though not eliminate, this bias. Another key limitation of this data is that it will systematically undercount the potential influence of Fidesz in local politics. This data cannot capture those officially independent candidates who nevertheless ally with the ruling party. Party switching is not altogether uncommon in Hungarian municipal politics, and the 'official' switching of affiliation may be used to mask relationships with Fidesz when it might be politically unpalatable. Some cases clearly lend themselves to this

interpretation, where a Fidesz-affiliated candidate ‘leaves’ the party to run for reelection as an independent, but Fidesz does not field its own candidate to run against her. However, this analysis only considers candidates officially affiliated with Fidesz and not candidates who may be formally independent but inclined to support Fidesz initiatives. This limitation systematically biases the results against the tested hypotheses and can only understate the influence of Fidesz in local politics.

The data includes all municipalities at the *város* level and higher; however, 94 towns gained this status (through promotion from village status) during the study period. As such, although they are included in the data to complete the panel, dynamics may have differed in earlier elections. A complete list of cases is available in Appendix K.⁷

We lack data for EU local funding allocations in the pre-accession period, where project-level data are not publicly available and thus variables cannot be calculated for 2002. The nature of cross-sectional time-series analysis ends up dropping cases with omitted variables for the analysis. In practice, this means that when variables pertaining to EU funding at the local level are included, Budapest and its 23 districts are dropped from the dataset, as we lack data on EU funding variation by district within Budapest.⁸ Additional models will be run on only those cities above 10,000 people, to account for the importance of the compensatory list in nationalizing local politics in cities above that threshold (Soós 2015). I also specifically examine elections since 2010, to analyze only those elections after Fidesz’s national project began.

⁷ Pre-promotion data (before gaining *város* status) are included but may systematically differ, as villages that never are promoted are excluded from the dataset.

⁸ Losing these datapoints has the unfortunate side effect of removing jurisdictions where Fidesz is disproportionately likely to do worse.

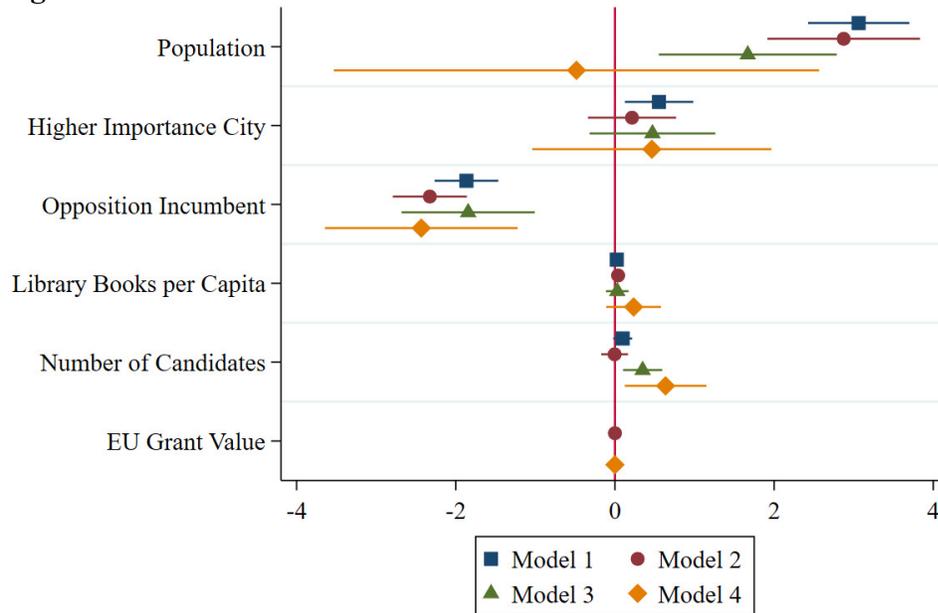
Results and Discussion

The models are first run on the dependent variable *Fidesz Contest*, a dichotomous variable measuring if Fidesz fields a candidate in the local election, to test hypotheses 1 and 2. Marginal effects are shown below in Table 3,⁹ with confidence intervals shown in Figure 1. Standard regression coefficients are available in Appendix D.

The models provide little support for Hypothesis 1, which addressed the political importance of the city. In the complete dataset, the variable is significant at the .01 level. However, when considering only elections after Fidesz took power nationally, the variable loses its significance, and it does not matter in any models that exclusively examine larger towns. There is also no support for Hypothesis 2, regarding the importance of EU funding for determining which elections to contest. These are both surprising findings, as they suggest that resource allocation may not strongly motivate Fidesz's strategic decisions of where to *contest* mayoral elections.

Unsurprisingly, the presence of an opposition-affiliated incumbent is associated with a 23.6–25.6 percent reduction in the probability that Fidesz fields a candidate in the whole sample, and even a 9.3–13.0 percent reduction in the larger cities. Of the other control variables included – a measure of public goods provision, the number of candidates, and local unemployment – only number of candidates seems to have any association with a change in Fidesz's likelihood of contestation, but its size is small.

⁹ These are calculated assuming the marginal effect of the random effects is 0.

Figure 1. Confidence intervals for Contestation models.**Table 3. Marginal Effects on Fidesz contesting**

	<i>All cities and towns</i>		<i>Cities over 10,000 population</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Population	0.385 ^{***} (0.035)	0.313 ^{***} (0.049)	0.119 ^{**} (0.041)	-0.025 (0.057)
Higher Tier City	0.071 ^{**} (0.027)	0.024 (0.031)	0.032 (0.029)	0.015 (0.029)
Non Fidesz Incumbent	-0.236 ^{***} (0.025)	-0.256 ^{***} (0.024)	-0.130 ^{***} (0.034)	-0.093 ^{***} (0.031)
Library Books per Capita	0.003 (0.004)	0.004 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)	0.009 (0.007)
Unemployment Rate	0.027 (0.425)	0.305 (0.440)	0.156 (0.603)	-0.571 (.532)
Number of Candidates	0.013 (0.008)	-0.0001 (0.009)	0.025 [*] (0.009)	0.024 [*] (0.011)
Year=2006	0.363 ^{***} (0.031)		0.268 ^{***} (0.051)	
Year=2010	0.544 ^{***} (0.027)		0.324 ^{***} (0.048)	
Year=2014	0.480 ^{***} (0.027)	-0.067 [*] (0.026)	0.305 ^{***} (0.048)	-0.029 (0.021)
Year=2019	0.408 ^{***} (0.029)	-0.142 ^{***} (0.033)	0.254 ^{***} (0.047)	-0.089 ^{**} (0.034)
EU Grant Value		-6.56e-08 (1.23e-07)		7.42e-09 (3.95e-08)
Observations	1835	1034	824	425

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4 shows the results of the model run on all Fidesz-contested elections for the dichotomous dependent variable *Fidesz Winner*. Figure 2 shows the confidence intervals. These models differ in important ways from the results in Table 3 and point to two key factors: incumbency and city classification. If an opposition candidate runs as an incumbent, Fidesz is associated with a 28.2 to a 37.6 percent reduction in the likelihood of winning the election, significant at the .001 level, as we might expect. City classification is also substantially important, associated with a 21.1–25.9 percent increase in the probability that Fidesz wins an election in a higher tier city. In most models is significant at the .001 level; when subsetting to local elections in the largest municipalities after regime establishment, it remains significant at the .01 level. Together, these results offer support for Hypothesis 3, that a ruling party is more likely to win in higher tier cities.

Figure 2. Confidence intervals for Victory models.

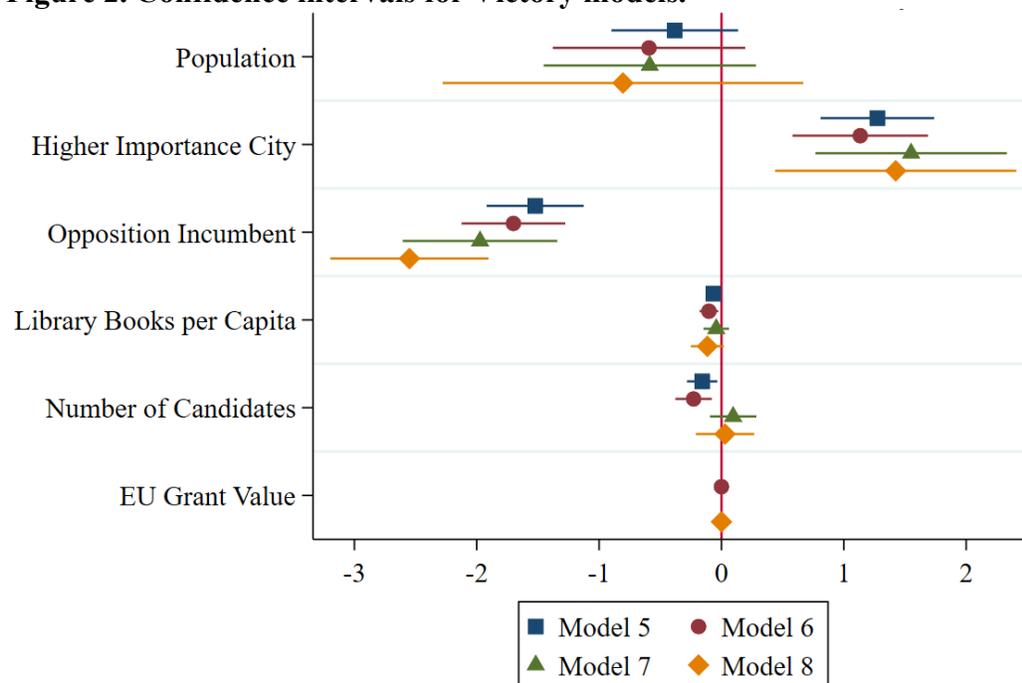


Table 4. Marginal effects on Fidesz victory

	<i>All cities and towns</i>		<i>Cities over 10,000 population</i>	
	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>	<i>Model 7</i>	<i>Model 8</i>
Population	-0.080 (0.048)	-0.071 (0.068)	-0.109 (0.071)	-0.059 (0.102)
Higher Tier City	0.241*** (0.041)	0.211*** (0.050)	0.258*** (0.060)	0.223** (0.072)
Non Fidesz Incumbent	-0.282*** (0.034)	-0.304*** (0.034)	-0.328*** (0.050)	-0.376*** (0.038)
Library Books per Capita	-0.013* (0.006)	-0.018* (0.007)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.015 (0.010)
Unemployment Rate	-1.365 (0.716)	-0.274 (0.707)	-3.461** (1.189)	-1.739 (1.105)
Number of Candidates	-0.029* (0.012)	-0.040** (0.014)	0.016 (0.016)	0.006 (0.018)
Year=2006	0.437*** (0.045)		0.556*** (0.048)	
Year=2010	0.527*** (0.042)		0.665*** (0.047)	
Year=2014	0.505*** (0.041)	0.007 (0.040)	0.506*** (0.052)	-0.120* (0.049)
Year=2019	0.324*** (0.044)	-0.122* (0.048)	0.317*** (0.055)	-0.213*** (0.060)
EU Grant Value		-6.13e-12 (7.31e-08)		-1.75e-08 (7.28e-08)
Observations	1286	817	731	397

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As in the contestation models, there is no evidence that voters reward Fidesz for these transfer payments at the municipal level, as the value of grants does not impact Fidesz's likelihood of winning elections.¹⁰ The utility of EU funding for maintaining subnational political control may still exist; however, it may be more important for maintaining economic relationships with key supporters, as found by several scholars examining the wider process, than for directly engaging with voters. Nevertheless, we fail to reject the null for hypothesis 4 and should interpret increased EU funding in a municipality as having no direct impact on the likelihood of Fidesz winning a mayoralty.

¹⁰ My findings differ from Muraközy and Telegdy (2016); however, their research is specifically on the effect on incumbent vote share, not on partisan vote share in a dominant party context.

Implications

These findings have two key implications for the Fidesz's attempts to solidify its emerging dominant party regime at the subnational level and more broadly for our understanding of the circumstances under which dominant parties attempt to secure control at the local level. The significant and substantively large effect of incumbency suggests two things. First, there is an opportunity for anti-Fidesz parties in those areas where an independent/opposition incumbent has survived Fidesz's consolidation of power. If opposition forces coalesce around an *incumbent*, the advantages of incumbency may allow for mayors to survive Fidesz's attempts to dislodge them, even if the results offer little support for the popular wisdom that Fidesz is less likely to win if there are fewer candidates in the race. Second, as Fidesz gains incumbency advantages in more towns, as it did with its gains in the 2014 local elections, it will be harder to dislodge, given the substantial size and significant effects of incumbency in the models. The limited, albeit highly publicized, successes of the unified opposition coalition in the 2019 demonstrate the power of this entrenchment: a pan-opposition coalition, pairing the left and far right, was necessary to dislodge Fidesz from a limited number of cities. Moreover, in most cases the coalition won only narrowly.

Fidesz's structural advantages build off its increasing incumbency advantage. Fidesz also benefits from gaining control of both policymaking and public administration at the district and county levels, where there is no elected self-government to contend with. As such, these factors may combine to solidify Fidesz's electoral gains over the long term, creating, as Pempel (1990) puts it, a "virtuous cycle" for the party in which it becomes difficult to dislodge. Contesting elections at the local level does not intrinsically make a dominant party antidemocratic, but can

be a powerful force for undergirding democratic backsliding when it has already been occurring nationally.

The findings also suggest that concerns about the *direct* influence of EU funding on local elections in backsliding regimes may be misplaced. While these funds are undoubtedly used by dominant parties to reward supporters and develop capacity in other ways, there is little evidence that bringing EU funds to a municipality motivates voters to reward the ruling party in local elections. Indeed, it is possible that given the virulence of Fidesz's attacks on the EU, awareness of European funding could make the regime look hypocritical to voters. The utility of EU funding for maintaining subnational political control may still exist; however, it may be far more important for maintaining economic relationships with key supporters, as has been found by scholars examining the bid process, than directly engaging with voters.

Finally, the findings suggest that scholars should take both intermunicipal variation and the role of subnational capitals more seriously. Fidesz is shown in nearly all model specifications to be more likely to win mayoral elections in cities of greater political importance – namely district and county capitals. This suggests that Fidesz 1) may use resources from other tiers of government to campaign in these municipalities where they would stand to gain further control of local government resources and policymaking capacity, and 2) may have used the 2013 territorial reorganization to transfer subnational capital status to cities where it believed the party to be more electorally viable, to improve its odds of controlling such resources. The advantages of controlling administrative and financial resources are heightened by Fidesz's consolidation of the broad media environment both nationally and subnationally, giving them real communication monopolies in many cities. Overall, this finding suggests that district capitals in Hungary are worthy of further study. While these findings demonstrate the role that subnational politics can

play in solidifying backsliding in less democratic or hybrid regimes, they suggest that subnational capitals might be understudied prizes in more democratic systems as well. Scholars of decentralization and urban politics might study intermunicipal variation, including capital status in lower tiers of government, more systematically in the future.

Conclusion

In the context of de-democratization, it is increasingly important to consider subnational politics. While conventional narratives of backsliding focus on important changes to constitutional law, judicial independence, and media and electoral rules, subnational politics can also be used to consolidate dominant party control. Subnational consolidation can be an especially viable strategy for countries wanting to undermine the ability of opposition parties to organize and compete in politics while maintaining a democratic façade, as subnational politics draw less attention to international critics. These strategies may be generalizable to other regional regimes exhibiting characteristics of backsliding within the EU, as Hungary may demonstrate the limits of acceptable behavior before incurring significant sanctioning from the supranational level.

The case of Hungary offers a guide to understanding where and when autocratizers seek to consolidate power locally. The ruling Fidesz party has made a concerted, strategic effort to stabilize its rule and to deny the opposition a chance to use municipal politics for building credibility, legitimacy, and organizational capacity. Fidesz has undeniably had success with its focus on local elections, contesting and winning an increasing number of mayoralties to solidify its efforts to establish enduring party control in a dominant party electoral regime. There is

strong evidence that Fidesz strategically targets subnational capitals, benefitting from the virtuous cycles created by the administrative resources in these municipalities.

These findings challenge some conventional wisdom around Fidesz's local electoral success. There are common perceptions of Fidesz using EU grants as a means to reward supporters and solidify control, and substantial evidence of corruption. Despite all this, there is no evidence of a correlation between cities receiving large EU regional policy grants and the municipal electoral goals of Fidesz. This finding has no bearing on the argument that Fidesz misuses European funds, as has been argued by many, but suggests that the presence of such funds is inessential to Fidesz's electoral strategy. Future research may further examine municipal resource allocation and its relationship to local elections, to determine which types of resources prove most desirable to a dominant party strategically considering where to contest elections.

Subnational politics represent a clear path for a dominant party to seek to consolidate regime control. A significant amount of policy making occurs at the local level, including the implementation and disbursement of some intergovernmental grants. Moreover, cities and municipal politics have historically offered one avenue for opposition parties to build up candidates and support to eventually oppose the regime at the national level. International institutions like the EU too often focus only on national politics and miss attempts to consolidate backsliding regimes subnationally. These can create powerful incentives for parties pursuing an anti-democratic agenda to strategically use municipal politics to ensure regime survival while maintaining a democratic façade, and we should consider the avenues that subnational politics offer for democratic backsliding.

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