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**“Orbánophobia” or the “Orbanization of America”?  
Partisan differences in US online news coverage of Orbán’s  
Hungary from 2011-2021**

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Declaration

I, Hannah Vos, hereby declare that this thesis, entitled “‘Orbánophobia’ or the ‘Orbanization of America’? Partisan differences in US online news coverage of Orbán’s Hungary from 2011-2021”, submitted as partial requirement for the MA Programme Euroculture, is my own original work and expressed in my own words. Any use made within this text of works of other authors in any form (e.g., ideas, figures, texts, tables, etc.) are properly acknowledged in the text as well as in the bibliography.

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## **Abstract and keywords**

Both conservative and progressive thinkers in the US have pondered if the future of the Republican Party will reflect the qualities of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The rapport between Orbán and certain Republicans likely began in 2016 when he, the sole EU head of state to do so, supported Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Since then, popular political commentator Tucker Carlson visited Orbán, and in 2022, the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) held its first Europe-based event in Hungary and has since invited Orbán to speak at another CPAC event. In April of 2022, concerns over Hungary's rule of law violations finally coalesced into the EU triggering its rule of law mechanism against Hungary. With allegations from scholars and political commentators over whether American conservatives will follow – or have already followed – in Orbán's footsteps, democratic backsliding in the US is a major concern. Due to the level of media coverage Orbán receives in the US, this thesis draws on qualitative content analysis and Framing Theory to analyze how online media coverage of Orbán's Hungary has developed since 2011, which is when Hungary's "Basic Law" was passed by the parliament, initiating charges of democratic backsliding. The research questions are as follows: What aspects of Hungarian politics have online media on the Left and Right focused on between 2011-2021 in the United States? Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán? Findings show the main themes relate to democracy, migration, and LGBTQI+ rights. Findings also suggest the coverage of LGBTQI+ rights is consistently partisan and coverage of migration issues has become increasingly partisan since 2018. Coverage of democracy is consistently critical on the Left, but on the Right there is debate over whether Orbán should be embraced due to his conservative policies, or if his consolidation of power and democratic backsliding are too omnipresent to forget.

Keywords: Viktor Orbán; Democracy; Democratic Backsliding; American Conservatives; Media Analysis; US Partisan Media.

Word count: 21,676

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## 1 Introduction

Both conservative and liberal thinkers in the US have pondered if the future of the Republican Party will reflect the qualities of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.<sup>1</sup> The rapport between Orbán and certain Republicans likely began in 2016 when he, the sole EU head of state to do so, supported Donald Trump's presidential campaign. In 2019, the prime minister received an invitation to meet President Trump, an invitation which no US president had extended toward Hungary since 2005.<sup>2</sup> This invitation only took place after an extensive lobbying campaign by former Republican Congressman Connie Mack and "a network of government offices, Washington lobbyists, Hungarian diaspora groups, educational institutions and government-funded foundations."<sup>3</sup> More recently, popular conservative commentator Tucker Carlson's trip to Hungary in 2021 caused a wave of speculation as to what the relationship between American conservatives and Orbán meant. In a *New York Times Opinion* article, Jamelle Bouie declared that Orbán was Carlson's "new hero" and that Carlson was only the latest in a string of conservatives who adopted this "transferred nationalism" toward Hungary.<sup>4</sup> Zeeshan Aleem, in an opinion piece for *MSNBC* lamented that "[t]he idea of Carlson's popularizing Orbán and his nationalist-authoritarian model is, well, disconcerting at the least."<sup>5</sup> In response to concerns over

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<sup>1</sup> When using the word "liberal" I am using the definition more synonymous with the term "progressive." Michael Goldfarb, "Liberal? Are We Talking about the Same Thing?," *BBC News*, July 20, 2010, sec. World, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-10658070>.; Zack Beauchamp, "Why Hungary's Viktor Orbán Is the American Right's Favorite Strongman," *Vox.com*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/21/21256324/viktor-orban-hungary-american-conservatives>.

<sup>2</sup> April H. Foley, "Viktor Orban Visit to Washington Could Be a New Chapter for Hungary," *The Washington Times*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/may/12/viktor-orban-visit-to-washington-could-be-a-new-ch/>. Mara Liasson, "Here's Why American Conservatives Are Heading to Hungary for a Big Conference," *NPR*, May 19, 2022, sec. Politics, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/18/1099680587/a-prominent-conference-of-american-conservatives-is-taking-place-in-hungary>.

<sup>3</sup> Lili Bayer, "Trump-Orbán Bromance Takes Off," *Politico*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-orban-bromance-takes-off/>.; Kenneth P. Vogel and Benjamin Novak, "Hungary's Leader Fights Criticism in U.S. via Vast Influence Campaign," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/04/us/politics/hungary-orban-lobbying.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jamelle Bouie, "Opinion | Tucker Carlson Has a New Hero," August 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/opinion/tucker-carlson-viktor-orban.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

<sup>5</sup> Zeeshan Aleem, "Opinion | Why Tucker Carlson's Budapest Adventure Is Cause for Concern," *MSNBC.com*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/why-tucker-carlson-s-trip-budapest-bad-news-america-n1275881>.

Carlson’s visit, Rod Dreher, senior editor of *The American Conservative*, argued that the controversy was “the usual bullsh\*t from the American media when it comes to Hungary,” and later continued:

“I’m telling you: do not believe a thing you read in the Western media about Hungary. It might actually be true... but the media bias against Hungary and its government is so overwhelming that you cannot be sure.”<sup>6</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Hungarian government is aware of how it is represented in the press. Zoltán Kovács, Hungary’s Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Relations, went so far as to coin the term “Orbánophobia,” which he says is “that strange condition that leads people to depart from reason and objectivity and discredit themselves by indulging in an irrational animosity toward Prime Minister Orbán.”<sup>7</sup> It is true that Hungary often receives negative attention in the Western press, as evidenced by the reoccurring reports commissioned by the Hungarian government and conducted by Nézőpont Institute – published only in Hungarian – that evaluate how Hungary is treated in the international press.<sup>8</sup> A prime example of the type of critical media coverage in the US comes from this year, when Ishaan Tharoor wrote a three-part series for *The Washington Post* titled “The Orbanization of American,” with the following sub-themes: “The U.S. right walks in Hungary’s past,” “Florida shadows Hungary’s war on LGBTQ rights,” and “How to capture democracy.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rod Dreher, “CNN Host Lies About Tucker Carlson & Hungary,” *The American Conservative*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/cnn-host-lies-tucker-carlson-hungary-mccfeszt/>.

<sup>7</sup> Zoltán Kovács, “What Do Globalists and Communist Collaborators Have in Common? Orbánophobia,” *About Hungary*, October 26, 2017, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/what-do-globalists-and-communist-collaborators-have-in-common-orbanophobia>.

<sup>8</sup> Nézőpont Institute, “Ki fújja az ellenszelet? Magyarország a nemzetközi sajtóban 2021-ben [Who Blows in the Headwind? – Hungary in the International Press in 2021]” (Nézőpont Institute, 2022), [https://nezopont.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Magyarország-nemzetkozi-mediakepe\\_2021.pdf](https://nezopont.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Magyarország-nemzetkozi-mediakepe_2021.pdf); Juli Boros, “Több Mint 30 Milliót Fizet a Fidesz Médiafigyelésért a Kormánybarát Cégnek,” *444*, August 17, 2018, <https://444.hu/2018/08/17/tobb-mint-30-milliot-fizet-a-fidesz-mediafigyelesert-a-kormanybarat-cegnek>.

<sup>9</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “The Orbanization of America: The U.S. Right Walks in Hungary’s Path,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/17/viktor-orban-american-right-illiberal-orbanization/>; Ishaan Tharoor, “The Orbanization of America: Florida Shadows Hungary’s War on LGBTQ Rights,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/18/cpac-hungary-lgbtq-orban-florida-desantis/>; Ishaan Tharoor, “The Orbanization of America: How to Capture a Democracy,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/18/orban-democracy-trump-united-states-elections-hungary/>.

Yet evidently not all suffer from this “Orbánophobia”. Following Tucker Carlson’s controversial visit the previous year, in May 2022 the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) hosted its conference in Europe for the first time. What was the city of choice? Budapest, Hungary. The organizers, recognizing Hungary as “one of the engines of Conservative resistance to the woke revolution,” invited Orbán to be the keynote speaker.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, it was recently announced that Orbán will make his first appearance in August at the CPAC event in Texas.<sup>11</sup>

### *1.1 The importance of Hungary: Democracy in decline*

Why has Hungary received such special attention in recent years by liberal and conservative media alike? According to Herbert J. Gans, American media outlets typically start to pay attention to other countries “with stories thought relevant to Americans or American interests; with the same themes and topics as domestic news; or when the topics are distinctive, with interpretations that apply to American values.”<sup>12</sup> In this case, both Hungarian and American politics are dominated with “cultural issues” including, but not limited to, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) rights and globalization/immigration.<sup>13</sup> Because mirrored discussions about values and culture have been discussed particularly since the US election cycle of 2016, Hungary’s similar cultural situation has spoken to American conservatives. Additionally, both Orbán and American conservatives rally against the “liberal elite,” whether they be in Washington or Brussels.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Home Page,” CPAC Hungary, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.cpachungary.com/en/>.

<sup>11</sup> “CPAC Texas 2022 | August 4-7 | Speakers,” CPAC, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://na.eventscld.com/website/34479/speakers/>.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, Visions of the American Press (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 37; Rod Dreher, “Why Hungary Matters To American Conservatives,” *The American Conservative*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/why-hungary-matters-to-american-conservatives-viktor-orban/>.

<sup>13</sup> Liasson, “Here’s Why American Conservatives Are Heading to Hungary for a Big Conference.”

<sup>14</sup> Viktor Orbán, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Hungary,” About Hungary, May 20, 2022, <https://abouthungary.hu//speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-of-cpac-hungary>.

The question remains – with all that is going on in the world, why should the average American concern themselves with the fact that Hungary hosted CPAC, that Orbán is invited to speak at CPAC in August, or that Orbán and his policies are debated in the media? If an influential group of conservatives continue to look up to a country with such deep democratic erosion as an example for the US and use the tactics that Orbán has himself used, the decline of democracy in the United States would impact everyone there. Democratic backsliding, as experts Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman put it, “is the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments.”<sup>15</sup> Although the United States has additional measures to protect itself against a replication of the backsliding in Hungary, it is not immune to all threats. In the words of far-right expert Cas Mudde:

“[T]he United States is not Hungary. It has a much longer and stronger democratic history and tradition as well as a highly complex political system, which makes the full capture and dismantling of U.S. democracy less likely. That said, neither a chauvinistic, idiosyncratic American exceptionalism nor a self-defeating, universal ‘end of democracy’ approach will save U.S. democracy from the current far-right threat.”<sup>16</sup>

Although the US has certain protections against similar democratic backsliding, one cannot assume that there is no threat. Yet, despite the heated debates occurring among liberal and conservative politicians, journalists, commentators, and academics about the connection between American conservatives and Orbán’s Hungary and whether Orbán’s politics are an example to follow, there is limited academic literature on the matter. While some researchers have begun looking at the relationship between Trump and/or the Republican Party and Viktor Orbán, there is little literature available that delves into how the media in the US regards the relatively famous – or infamous – prime minister, and the studies

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<sup>15</sup> Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0050>.

<sup>16</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Far-Right Threat in the United States: A European Perspective,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, no. 1 (January 2022): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070060>.

currently available on Hungary's portrayal in the international media are available only in Hungarian.<sup>17</sup>

## 1.2 Research questions and methods

Therefore, the research presented here seeks to fill this gap by asking the following questions:

RQ1: What aspects of Hungarian politics have online media on the Left and Right focused on between 2011-2021 in the United States?

RQ2: Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?

This thesis provides a qualitative content analysis of online written news media in the US by comparing media articles from the Left and Right that specifically reference Orbán and spend at least half of the article discussing Hungary. The years covered in this study are 2011-12, 2015-16, 2018, and 2020-21, because this timeframe encompasses several key developments within Hungary, which was reflected by an increase in media coverage in foreign nations, and which will be detailed in the following section.<sup>18</sup> After consulting two different media bias charts, three media outlets were chosen on either end of the political spectrum: *Fox News*, *The Washington Times*, *National Review*, *CNN*, *Vox*, and *The Atlantic*. To gather articles used in this study, I searched both the organizations' websites as well as Google News. Some articles were discarded because they only mentioned Hungary in passing, and this study specifically focuses on articles in which at least 50% of the

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<sup>17</sup> Kim Lane Scheppele, "Parallels Between Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump," accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.scribd.com/document/512835136/Parallels-Between-Viktor-Orban-and-Donald-Trump>; Mudde, "The Far-Right Threat in the United States"; Eve Cervenka, "Public Opinion in the United States and Hungary: How Trump and Orbán Have Manufactured the Debate over Refugees," *International ResearchScape Journal* 7, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.25035/irj.07.01.09>; Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar, "Populism as a Challenge to Legal-Rational Legitimacy: The Cases of Orbán and Trump," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2021): 827–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2021.0048>; Nézőpont Institute, "Ki fűjja az ellenszelet?"; Róbert Hermann, jr. et al., *Címlapon Magyarország: Hazánk története a nyugati sajtó tükrében 1848 - 2020 [Hungary on Front Pages – The history of Hungary from the perspective of the western media 1848-2020]* (Budapest, Hungary: TranzPress, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> András Nagy-Csomor, "A Nyugat Azt Méltatja, Ami Érdekeinek Megfelelő" - Interjú Szalay-Berzeviczy Andrással," *Ma* 7, January 23, 2022, <https://ma7.sk/hethatar/a-nyugat-azt-meltatja-ami-erdekeinek-megfelelo-interju-szalay-berzeviczy-andrassal>.

content focuses on Hungary. In total, 93 articles were included in this study, with 59 from news media on the Left of the political spectrum and 34 from the Right. The approved articles' text were then uploaded to MAXQDA, a qualitative and mixed-methods data analytics software. I coded the main themes of the articles as well as whether they spoke favorably, neutrally, or critically of Prime Minister Orbán. As is necessary in qualitative content analysis, I conducted a second round of coding to ensure accuracy of the codes.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.3 Brief background of 2011-2021 developments

On January 1, 2012, a new constitution came into force in Hungary. Because the Fidesz party held (and still holds) a 2/3rds majority in Hungary's unicameral parliament, it was able to adopt a new constitution the previous year even though "neither the opposition parties nor civil society organisations nor the general public had any influence in the constitutional process."<sup>20</sup> To make these changes legally, the Fidesz party first had to alter the old constitution in two significant ways. Although a previous law required there to be a 4/5<sup>th</sup>s majority before parliament could begin drafting a new constitution, they legally used their 2/3rds majority to remove this requirement just one month after they came into power in 2010.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, Fidesz dramatically altered the fabric of the Constitutional Court, created in 1989, which was the "constitutional guardian and primary check on the government." Previously, a majority of parliamentary parties had to come to an agreement on the Court nominations, which were then subject to a 2/3rds vote in parliament. But with their 2/3rds majority, Fidesz passed a law that required only a *nomination* from the governing party before moving to the parliament where, again, a 2/3rds vote was needed. This essentially meant the Fidesz party was able to fill the Constitutional Court without any support from

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<sup>19</sup> Uwe Flick, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014), 171, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>.

<sup>20</sup> Kim Lane Scheppele, "Understanding Hungary's Constitutional Revolution," in *Constitutional Crisis in the European Constitutional Area: Theory, Law and Politics in Hungary and Romania*, ed. Armin von Bogdandy and Pál Sonnevend, 1st ed. (London: Hart/Beck, 2015), 111, <http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book///>.

<sup>21</sup> Scheppele, 113.

other parties.<sup>22</sup> After further limiting the purview of the Court on fiscal matters, they were able to alter the constitution so the total number of judges increased, which of the 15 judges eventually allowed them to appoint seven over the following year and a half.<sup>23</sup> The constitution's adoption triggered the European Parliament to pass a resolution that noted concern over the constitution's "lack of transparency."<sup>24</sup>

In 2015, the Hungarian government received criticism for its approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis, partially because of its decision to erect a wall to keep out the refugees.<sup>25</sup> Guarding against unwanted immigrants was also a campaign staple during the election campaign of Donald Trump, although this was in reference to the Mexico-US border. "Build the Wall!" chants were repeated ad nauseam at Trump's campaign rallies, with promises that Mexico would pay for the wall.<sup>26</sup> Though in the end he could not bring this particular policy into fruition, through other policies and anti-immigrant rhetoric, Trump created "metaphorical borders" around the United States.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, a year not originally included in this study, a slew of articles made their way into American press, most of which related to the "Stop Soros" package campaign in the previous year by the Hungarian government. The campaign further restricted the ability of asylum seekers to qualify for asylum, criminalized organizations that assisted asylum seekers who did not qualify under Hungarian law, and "which provided for restrictions on freedom of movement on persons suspected of having committed such an offence." According to government spokesmen Zoltán Kovács, the law was:

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<sup>22</sup> Miklós Bánkuti, Gábor Halmai, and Kim Lane Scheppele, "Hungary's Illiberal Turn: Disabling the Constitution" 23, no. 3 (2012): 39–40, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1353/jod.2012.0054>.

<sup>23</sup> Miklós Bánkuti, Gábor Halmai, and Kim Lane Scheppele, 142.

<sup>24</sup> European Parliament, "European Parliament resolution of 5 July 2011 on the Revised Hungarian Constitution," July 2011, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2011-0315\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2011-0315_EN.html)

<sup>25</sup> Elżbieta M. Goździak, "Using Fear of the 'Other,' Orbán Reshapes Migration Policy in a Hungary Built on Cultural Diversity," [migrationpolicy.org](https://www.migrationpolicy.org), October 9, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/orban-reshapes-migration-policy-hungary>.

<sup>26</sup> Ernesto Sagás and Ediberto Román, "Build the Wall and Wreck the System: Immigration Policy in the Trump Administration," *Texas Hispanic Journal of Law & Policy* 25/26, no. 2/1 (2019): 21–56, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=asn&AN=144538039&authtype=shib&site=eds-live&scope=site&authtype=shib&custid=s7108593>.

<sup>27</sup> Sagás and Román.

“in response to a call for measures to safeguard Hungary’s security and tighten regulations to counter illegal migration. The new Stop Soros legislative package puts forth a more rigorous response by declaring illegal immigration a grave threat to Hungary’s national security. Anyone involved in aiding or abetting illegal migration would be committing a criminal offense.”<sup>28</sup>

This means that any organizations seeking to help migrants could be legally prosecuted, or as Kovács favorably put it, the package “attempts to close existing loopholes through which so-called civic organizations were aiding illegal migration and human trafficking under the name of humanitarian assistance.”<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the campaign’s hyper-focus on Soros led to it being categorized as antisemitic by Hungarian Jews and others.<sup>30</sup> In November 2021, the Court of Justice of the European Union concluded that in passing the “Stop Soros” package, Hungary “infringed EU Law”.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, the 2020-21 period of the study covers the Coronavirus pandemic developments, most of the campaign by Fidesz for the Spring 2022 elections, and the recently adopted law which bans trans and intersex people from changing their sex on legal documents.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, it is during this period that Tucker Carlson visited Hungary to interview Viktor Orbán, which as previously mentioned grabbed the attention of the press in the United States.

#### *1.4 Thesis structure*

Chapter 2. Literature Review contains an overview of the literature on Hungary in the EU; Hungary’s treatment by international media; the relationship between Orbán, Trump, and

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<sup>28</sup> Zoltán Kovács, “A Stronger, More Rigorous Stop Soros Bill Is Now in Front of the Parliament: Here’s a Look at the Details,” *About Hungary*, May 31, 2018, <https://abouthungary.hu//blog/a-stronger-more-rigorous-stop-soros-bill-is-now-in-front-of-the-parliament-heres-a-look-at-the-details>.

<sup>29</sup> Kovács.

<sup>30</sup> Marton Dunai, “Hungarian Jews Ask PM Orban to End ‘bad Dream’ of Anti-Semitism,” *Reuters*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-soros-orban-jews-idUSKBN19R24L>.

<sup>31</sup> “Press Release No 203/21, Judgment in Case C-821/19 ‘Commission v Hungary’” (Court of Justice of the European Union, November 16, 2021), <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2021-11/cp210203en.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Kyle Knight and Lydia Gall, “Hungary Ends Legal Recognition for Transgender and Intersex People,” *Human Rights Watch* (blog), May 21, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/21/hungary-ends-legal-recognition-transgender-and-intersex-people>.



American conservatives; previous studies which evaluate partisan media in the US; Framing Theory; and Agenda Setting Theory. Chapter 3. Methodology introduces qualitative content analysis; the timeframe of the study; the logic behind the media source selection; search terms used to find the articles; how the data (articles) were selected; and an overview of the coding process. Chapter 4. Results and Analysis presents and interprets the findings of the research, which are the themes covered in the media and analysis of the main topics covered in the articles, i.e., democracy, migration, and LGBTQI+ rights. Chapter 5: Conclusion summarizes the key findings; and makes a recommendation for future research.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

There is a plethora of research comparing and dissecting media coverage of notable events. Some studies focus on partisan media coverage in one country, while others undertake a cross-country or multi-country analysis, often choosing one main media source from each country. Additionally, there has been abundant research on Hungary's political situation (e.g., democratic backsliding, Orbán's form of nationalism, and Orbán's governing strategies). Yet, despite how the media has reacted to comments from former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon declaring that Orbán was "Trump before Trump," or from Trump himself saying "it felt like we were twins," after meeting with Orbán in 2019, there is no English-language research that covers in detail how media in the US has covered Orbán's Hungary.<sup>33</sup>

My research will begin to fill this gap, and if the Hungarian government continues to fund government-friendly thinktanks in the US while prominent conservative thinkers like Tucker Carlson visit Hungary for meetings with Orbán, then it is likely that scholarly research in this area will only increase.<sup>34</sup> This literature review first provides an overview of Hungary's relationship with the EU and how status as a Member State impacts Orbán's government. I continue with an overview of a report and book in Hungarian which research Hungary in the international press, but which are not currently available in English. I then examine existing research on the comparisons between Orbán and Trump. Work on this topic, typically done by journalists, academics, and political commentators, is difficult to

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<sup>33</sup> See: Ulrich Sedelmeier, "Anchoring Democracy from Above? The European Union and Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Romania after Accession: Anchoring Democracy from Above?," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 1 (January 2014): 105–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12082>; Liz Fekete, "Hungary: Power, Punishment and the 'Christian-National Idea,'" *Race & Class* 57, no. 4 (April 2016): 39–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396815624607>; Laura Ymayo Tartakoff, "Religion, Nationalism, History, and Politics in Hungary's New Constitution," *Society* 49, no. 4 (July 2012): 360–66, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-012-9553-9>; Gareth Browne, "Orban Is the Original Trump, Says Bannon in Budapest," *The National*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/orban-is-the-original-trump-says-bannon-in-budapest-1.733756>; "Trump to Orbán: 'It Felt like We Were Twins,'" *Hungary Today* (blog), May 15, 2019, <https://hungarytoday.hu/trump-to-orban-it-felt-like-we-were-twins/>.

<sup>34</sup> Vogel and Novak, "Hungary's Leader Fights Criticism in U.S. via Vast Influence Campaign."

find in peer-reviewed journals, but several individuals have broached the topic and it is worth exploring. Next, I delve into a variety of research that has focused on partisan media coverage in the United States. Finally, I conclude with an overview of the theoretical framework of this thesis: Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory.

## 2.2 *Hungary and the European Union*

To understand the actions of the Hungarian government that are often referenced in this thesis, and why they inspire coverage in the press, one must first examine the European context of democracy, LGBTQI+ rights, and migration. If all EU Member States criminalized organizations that helped feed and house migrants or restricted representation of LGBTQI+ people in schools, then it is unlikely that Hungary would have prominent news coverage on these topics.<sup>35</sup> The status of Hungary as an EU Member State and the actions that the EU bodies are taking against Hungary are frequently mentioned in the articles analyzed in this thesis. It is therefore worth providing a brief history of Hungary's relationship with the EU, particularly since parallels are drawn by Orbán between the "elites" in Brussels and Washington, such as when he accused them of meddling in the recent Hungarian elections.<sup>36</sup>

Hungary's status as an EU Member State has shaped the country's development since its accession in 2004.<sup>37</sup> Because of EU treaties, "Hungary cannot afford to disregard the decisions of the [European Court of Human Rights] frequently and systemically because that would unequivocally and undeniably mean that Hungary violates its obligation" under

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<sup>35</sup> Novak, Benjamin, "Hungary Adopts Child Sex Abuse Law That Also Targets LGBT Community - The New York Times," accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/15/world/europe/hungary-child-sex-lgbtq.html>; "On World Refugee Day, Hungary Makes It Illegal to Help Refugees and Migrants," Open Society Foundations, June 20, 2018, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/newsroom/world-refugee-day-hungary-makes-it-illegal-help-refugees-and-migrants>.

<sup>36</sup> Krisztina Than, "Hungary's Orban Accuses Brussels, Washington of Meddling as 2022 Election Race Heats Up," *Reuters*, October 23, 2021, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-politics-rally-orban-idAFKBN2HD091>.

<sup>37</sup> András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs, "An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime: Hungary in the European Union," *Democratization* 25, no. 7 (October 3, 2018): 1173–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664>.

such treaties.<sup>38</sup> Knowledge of how the EU would respond can also be used strategically. Some have argued that the Hungarian government’s attempt to reinstitute the death penalty, which was met with “unusually decisive action” by the EU, could have been strategically chosen by Orbán, as the issue of the death penalty is one topic that is considered non-negotiable by the EU.<sup>39</sup> By invoking such a strong response from Brussels, Orbán “most likely hoped that, as a result, the EU will be more permissive on other issues.”<sup>40</sup>

In 2021 the Court of Justice of the European Union concluded the passage of the “Stop Soros” package “infringed EU Law” because “[c]riminalising such activities impinges on the exercise of the rights safeguarded by the EU legislature in respect of the assistance of applicants for international protection.”<sup>41</sup> Despite reoccurring warnings from the EU over concerns about Hungary’s backsliding democracy and rule of law, it wasn’t until April 27, 2022, that the European Commission triggered the conditionality regulation that can “impose financial sanctions” on Hungary for fear that the country could “threaten the EU’s financial interests.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, on July 15, 2022, the EU Commission announced that because of Hungary’s most recent anti-LGBTQI+ law and its “refusal to renew the license of Klubradio, a broadcaster critical of the government,” it would be suing Hungary.<sup>43</sup> According to András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs, this continual conflict with the EU has created “an externally constrained hybrid regime” in Hungary.<sup>44</sup> Whether the conversation is about values or human rights, understanding EU law and values is necessary to understanding Hungary and interpreting American perceptions of these developments.

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<sup>38</sup> Bozóki and Hegedűs, 1179.

<sup>39</sup> Bozóki and Hegedűs, 1180.

<sup>40</sup> Bozóki and Hegedűs, 1180.

<sup>41</sup> “Press Release No 203/21, Judgment in Case C-821/19 ‘Commission v Hungary.’”

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Hegedűs, “The European Commission’s Latest Move Against Hungary Is Risky but Right,” GMFUS, accessed June 18, 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/european-commissions-latest-move-against-hungary-risky-right>.

<sup>43</sup> Gabriela Baczynska and Charlotte Campenhout, “EU Executive Will Sue Hungary over LGBT Law, Radio Broadcaster,” *Reuters*, July 15, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-commission-sue-hungary-over-anti-lgbt-law-politico-2022-07-15/>.

<sup>44</sup> Bozóki and Hegedűs, “An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime.”

### 2.3 *Studies of Hungary in international media*

Currently, there is one book which covers the history of Hungary in the cover pages of Western media from 1848-2020, as well as a recurring series of reports by the Nézőpont Institute, which analyzes how positive, negative, or neutral international media coverage is of Hungary. Regrettably, I have not identified any which are translated into English. Because I do not speak fluent Hungarian, the following information was retrieved via a brief summary on the book publisher's website, Google translations of interviews and news articles about the book, and a brief English-language report summary and Google translation of the most recent Nézőpont Institute study. Because of their clear relevance to this thesis, I discuss the general findings of the book and report even though the texts could not be explored in-depth because of the language barrier.

*Címlapon Magyarország: Hazánk története a nyugati sajtó tükrében 1848 - 2020* [Hungary on the Front Pages – The history of Hungary from the perspective of the western media 1848-2020], published in 2021, is a comprehensive review of approximately 400 cover-page stories and images in Western mainstream media.<sup>45</sup> When no cover page stories were identified, the researchers included articles (which they translated into Hungarian for the publication) and analyzed those as well. According to András Szalay-Berzeviczy, managing editor of the book's publishing company, they chose to conduct this project because Hungary's history has repeatedly been shaped by Western countries, and therefore how Westerners perceive Hungary is important.<sup>46</sup> Szalay-Berzeviczy noted that Hungary's prevalence in media was not because Hungary's events were notable of their own accord, but rather that they were utilized as examples in the media and were reflections of the internal politics of the publisher's country.<sup>47</sup> He also reflected that since the election of

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<sup>45</sup> "Case Studies," PressMonitor | Media Intelligence Platform, accessed July 17, 2022, <https://pressmonitor.hu/case-studies>.

<sup>46</sup> Cseri Péter, "Magyarország címlapmegjelenései alapján senkinek nem volt jobb nyugati sajtója, mint Kádár Jánosnak," News, *24.hu* (blog), December 15, 2021, <https://24.hu/belfold/2021/12/15/nemzetkozi-cimlapmegjeleneseink-nyugat-orban-horthy-kadar-gyurcsany-szalay-berzeviczy-andras-interju/>.

<sup>47</sup> Cseri.

Trump in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK, coverage of Orbán has increased to an amazing degree, and to the point that the word “Orbán” is no longer just a noun, but an adjective and a verb.<sup>48</sup> Finally, when asked about his findings on the last ten years of negative press coverage of Hungary, Szalay-Berzeviczy explained that the coverage can be divided into three parts. During 2010-2015 there were accusations of “fascism and antisemitism,” but they were “moderate and system-critical.”<sup>49</sup> In 2015, due to the migration crisis measures enacted by Orbán, there was a “stormy headwind” in coverage which continues to this day. The final part consists of the coverage since 2018, which he says is categorized by the “woke revolution” and “cancel culture”; he suggests, though, that Hungary’s prominence does not have as much to do with the V4 countries being opposed to the West, but rather that the increasing polarization in the West led to Western conservatives taking notice of Hungary’s position.<sup>50</sup> The characterization of Orbán’s critics as part of the “woke revolution” suggests that this text might be favorable towards Orbán’s undemocratic actions in recent years – indeed, not all of his critics could be characterized as “woke” – but unfortunately, again, due to language limitations a deep analysis of the text is not possible.

Nézőpont Institute is a government-friendly Hungarian think-tank that published seven reports on the subject of Hungary’s portrayal in international media, the latest of which examines 10,995 print and online articles from 18 countries and in 15 languages.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, they don’t break down the data by country but rather by language, so the US media is joined with the British media. In the English-language press, they found that 38% of the press was negative, 4% was positive, and 58% was neutral. In all Western coverage,

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<sup>48</sup> Szabolcs Vörös, “Az „Orbán” Szó Már Melléknév És Ige Is – Tölgyessy Péter a Rossz Sajtónk Veszélyeiről [HetiVálasz 102],” *Válasz Online* (blog), December 9, 2021, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2021/12/09/tolgyessy-peter-magyarország-nyugati-sajto-podcast-hetivalasz102/>.

<sup>49</sup> Nagy-Csomor, “‘A Nyugat Azt Méltatja, Ami Érdekeinek Megfelelő’ - Interjú Szalay-Berzeviczy Andrással.”

<sup>50</sup> Nagy-Csomor.

<sup>51</sup> Nézőpont Institute, “Ki fújja az ellenszelet?,” 2; Dániel Rényi Pál and Márk Herczeg, “Legyőzhetetlen Orbán Viktor Pártállami Kampánygépezete,” 444, April 25, 2022, <https://444.hu/tldr/2022/04/25/legyozhetetlen-orban-viktor-partallami-kampanygepezete>.

I identified reports published annually from 2012-2016, in 2018 and 2021.

they found that the most common themes were as follows: Covid-19, the “Child Protection Law” and its violations of LGBTQI+ rights, Orbán on the future of the European Union, Fidesz leaving the European People’s Party, the opening to the East, the debate of the rule of law, asylum measures, the regulation of Hungarian media, and the European Recovery Fund and use of EU funds.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, language limitations preclude me from obtaining a thorough understanding of their findings, and whether or not they themselves frame Orbán in a positive light.

#### 2.4 *Orbán, Trump and conservative Americans*

What draws Orbán to Americans, or rather to the American political sphere? This relatively small Central Eastern European country, approximately the size of Indiana by landmass and with a population of 10 million people, has come to play an interesting role in US politics.<sup>53</sup> Although studies about the political relationship between Hungary and the US in recent years do exist and will be discussed, the prevalence of this discussion in non-peer reviewed literature warrants a review, particularly because the recent developments of CPAC and the discussions that emerged from it have not allowed enough time for scholarly peer-reviewed studies to be conducted and published by journals. Therefore, this section mainly refers to non-Academic literature that specifically debates the relationship between Orbán and American conservatives.

As noted, American media outlets typically pay attention to other countries “with stories thought relevant to Americans or American interests; with the same themes and topics as domestic news; or when the topics are distinctive, with interpretations that apply to American values.”<sup>54</sup> With the election of Donald Trump, his key campaign promise being the construction of a massive wall on the border of Mexico, it’s not surprising that many

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<sup>52</sup> Again, this information was obtained using Google Translate, so the translation is not perfect. Nézőpont Institute, “Ki fűjja az ellenszét?,” 6.

<sup>53</sup> “Hungary - Country Profile,” Nations Online Project, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/hungary.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time, Visions of the American Press* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 37.

American conservatives support Orbán’s rejection of the “new European mission [of] complete openness.”<sup>55</sup> Rod Dreher noted he appreciates that Orbán “understands immigration as a potential threat to the stability and cultural continuity of the nation.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, both Orbán and American conservatives rally against the “liberal elite,” whether in reference to Washington or Brussels. Orbán ended his remarks at CPAC Hungary with a uniting call-to-action:

“We must take up the fight, and in this fight we can only succeed if we are together and organized. We must take back the institutions in Washington and Brussels. We must find friends and allies in one another. We must coordinate the movement of our troops, because we face a great challenge. The decisive year will be 2024: you will have presidential and congressional elections, and we will have elections to the European Parliament. These two locations will define the two fronts in the battle being fought for Western civilization. Today we hold neither of them. Yet we need both. We have two years to prepare.”

Interestingly, political scientist Cas Mudde argued that the asymmetrical bicameral system – the US Senate and House of Representatives – combined with the US federal system, which provides “constitutionally protected power to the states,” do provide additional protections against the all-out power grab that Orbán was able to attain in and since 2010, and for which Orbán advocated for in the quote above.<sup>57</sup> Still, Mudde cautioned that one should not assume the trope of “American exceptionalism” will protect democratic institutions in the US, particularly in the upcoming midterm and presidential elections.<sup>58</sup> Because mirrored discussions about values and culture have been discussed heavily since the election cycle of 2016, Hungary’s similar cultural situation has spoken to American conservatives.

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<sup>55</sup> Orbán continued, “the elimination of borders – or at most their existence as only a temporary, necessary evil; gender roles and family models that can be changed at will; and policy that sees the obligation to maintain our cultural heritage as a task that should rather be left to museologists.”

“To answer our calling – on the V4’s thirtieth birthday” About Hungary, February 17, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Dreher, “Why Hungary Matters To American Conservatives.”

<sup>57</sup> Mudde, “The Far-Right Threat in the United States,” 109–10.

<sup>58</sup> Cas Mudde, “Europe’s Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2016): 110, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43948378>.



Following Tucker Carlson’s trip to Hungary in 2021, a slew of articles from both sides of the political aisle were published on the connection between conservatives and Hungary. Michael Brendan Dougherty wrote an article for *National Review* wherein he opines, “[i]nto a void of ignorance about the country, liberals and conservatives project frightening or hopeful things,” after providing a brief look at the responses several Orbán critics had on Twitter to Carlson’s visit.<sup>59</sup> Rod Dreher argues that conservatives do not desire to “lift Orbanism, or whatever you call it, out of Hungary and implant it into American political life.”<sup>60</sup> He explained that the aspects he appreciates are, among others, that Orbán “values localism,” “defends the traditional family,” “grasps clearly the threats to social cohesion and societal thriving from racial and gender politics,” and “understands immigration as a potential threat to the stability and cultural continuity of the nation.” He explains that the US needs an “American version of Viktor Orbán,” and in a separate post he posited that “any comparison between [Trump and Orban] is superficial. Orban fights, but fights intelligently and strategically — and usually wins.”<sup>61</sup>

Anne Applebaum, a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, argued that the motivation behind Carlson’s visit was to “to annoy Americans and everybody else who believes in the ideals of America: the rule of law, a free press, free elections, the conviction that democracy is preferable to autocracy.”<sup>62</sup> In October, *The New York Times Magazine* published an article by Elisabeth Zerofsky titled “How the American Right Fell in Love with Hungary” wherein she notes that Carlson and Dreher’s motivations for admiring Orbán differ, but that in general, “For American conservatives, the appeal of Orban lies not so much in the details of his laws or policies as in his tactics and his advocacy, at least publicly, for Christianity.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Brendan Dougherty, “Hungary: An Overweighted Symbol,” *National Review*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/08/hungary-an-overweighted-symbol/>.

<sup>60</sup> Dreher, “Why Hungary Matters To American Conservatives.”

<sup>61</sup> Dreher; Rod Dreher, “Viktor Orban And The Future Of The West,” *The American Conservative*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/viktor-orban-future-of-the-west/>.

<sup>62</sup> Anne Applebaum, “Tucker Carlson’s Self-Loathing International Tourism,” *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/tucker-carlson-hungary-orban-fellow-travelers/619688/>.

<sup>63</sup> Elisabeth Zerofsky, “How the American Right Fell in Love With Hungary,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2021, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/19/magazine/viktor-orban-rod-dreher.html>.

Dr. Sumantra Maitra, a national-security fellow at The Center for the National Interest, posited, “Leftists have a curious obsession with Hungary,” in an article titled “Why Liberals Hate Hungary’s Viktor Orban So Much”.<sup>64</sup> Yet clearly it is not only “leftists” who take an interest in Hungary. In May of 2022 for the first time in history CPAC hosted its annual conference in Europe. According to the conference website, the only Political and Press events that rank higher in the United States are the annual State of the Union and the White House Correspondents’ Dinner.<sup>65</sup> The organizers held the conference in Budapest, recognizing Hungary as “one of the engines of Conservative resistance to the woke revolution,” and invited Orbán to be the keynote speaker. Not all conservatives supported this choice, though, and the former chairman of the American Conservative Union (the organizers of CPAC) noted the choice of Orbán was “troubling,” and added “Orban is no friend of democratic nations, and any gestures or cooperation with USA nonprofits sends the wrong signal to the rest of the world.”<sup>66</sup> Despite this divide amongst conservatives, Orbán is slated to speak in August at the CPAC Convention in Texas.<sup>67</sup>

Scholars and journalists who are critical of Trump and Orbán have also taken note of the direct parallels between the two politicians. Kim Lane Scheppele, Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Princeton, who has spent over a decade researching democratic decline in Hungary, provided an outline of the similarities and differences in “Hungary’s a Textbook Case for Democracy in Decline. Is America Next?”, an episode of *National Public Radio*’s On Point podcast.<sup>68</sup> Several of the similarities she outlined are as follows: both leaders have resorted to “distractions” in order to maintain control and attention

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<sup>64</sup> Sumantra Maitra, “Why Liberals Hate Hungary’s Viktor Orban So Much,” *The Federalist*, August 9, 2021, <https://thefederalist.com/2021/08/09/why-liberals-hate-hungarys-viktor-orban-so-much/>.

<sup>65</sup> “Home Page”; “CPAC Highlights,” CPAC Hungary, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.cpachungary.com/en/cpac-highlights>.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Eisler et al., “U.S. Conservative Conference with Hungary’s Hardline Leader Reflects Republican Divide,” *Reuters*, April 5, 2022, sec. United States, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-conservative-conference-with-hungarys-hardline-leader-reflects-republican-2022-04-05/>.

<sup>67</sup> “CPAC Texas 2022 | August 4-7 | Speakers.”

<sup>68</sup> Miklós Bánkuti, Gábor Halmai, and Kim Lane Scheppele, “Hungary’s Illiberal Turn: Disabling the Constitution.”; On Point, “Hungary’s A Textbook Case For Democracy In Decline. Is America Next?,” accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2021/06/23/viktor-orban-hungary-teach-america>.

(Orbán typically chooses George Soros or “gender ideology” whereas she said Trump relied on “daily outrage” on Twitter); both are opportunistic and have “no real ideology” but accuse their political opponents “of being motivated solely by ideology”; and they both put independent institutions in jeopardy to maintain control.<sup>69</sup>

Scheppele identified three differences between the leaders: they came to power in different ways (“Trump hijacked an existing party; Orbán built his own”); Orbán’s government is “an endless law-making machine” because he and his fellow inner-circle lawyers are capable of legally re-writing legislation to fit their needs, unlike Trump who “passed little legislation”; and finally, Hungary has to navigate life within the EU whereas Trump did not have similar restraints on his power, which doesn’t seem to align with Cas Mudde’s point that the American political system provides some extra protections against an Orbán-style takeover.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, Thomas M. Keck explores in an article whether Donald Trump is more similar to Franklin Pierce or Viktor Orbán.<sup>71</sup> During the comparison between Orbán and Trump, citing Scheppele’s work several times, Keck asserts that some of the events which mirror Hungary occurred before Trump became president and others occurred after:

“In the United States, the Republican Party has engaged in trench warfare against core institutions of constitutional democracy for years, and the Trump administration has threatened to escalate these attacks to Fidesz-style levels.”<sup>72</sup>

It is worth noting that Scheppele has received special attention from the Hungarian government on their English-language website [AboutHungary.hu](http://AboutHungary.hu). This website, which includes English translations of Hungarian political speeches and news, also contains English translations of blog posts by friends of the government such as Mária Schmidt, the director of the House of Terror Museum. In one such post, laced with sarcasm, Schmidt

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<sup>69</sup> On Point, “Hungary’s A Textbook Case For Democracy In Decline. Is America Next?”

<sup>70</sup> On Point.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas M. Keck, “Is President Trump More Like Viktor Orbán or Franklin Pierce?,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, February 18, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2950015>.

<sup>72</sup> Keck, 143.

lists Scheppele along with scholars Jan-Werner Müller and Gábor Halmai and explains: “They are the ones who, either being funded by Mr. Soros or by their own initiative, make statements without any arguments, evidence or proof – in a conclusive style of course. Being exceptional authorities in their fields, they can certainly afford to disregard the facts. They simply don’t need them.”<sup>73</sup> Other blog posts published there include criticisms of the International Press Institute for its review of press freedom in Hungary, individual rebuttals to articles in the *Washington Post*, and another post which specifically refused the legitimacy of a myriad of articles that expressed concerns about Hungary’s Coronavirus Protection Act, during which Orbán was able to rule by decree.<sup>74</sup> The scholars and journalists who choose to criticize Orbán’s government are often targeted by such direct criticisms on government websites and by government-friendly media.<sup>75</sup>

Based on the aforementioned articles and interview, we can see that many individuals have focused on the similarities between Orbán and Trump in recent years. The key difference is that some interpret the relationship as something positive and see Orbán as a somewhat aspirational figure (namely, a faction of conservative Republicans), whereas others see Hungary as a warning of what could come if the US continues down an undemocratic path.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Mária Schmidt, “That’s How You Write in the West – Oh, and on the Left,” *About Hungary*, April 27, 2018, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/thats-how-you-write-in-the-west-oh-and-on-the-left>.

<sup>74</sup> Zoltán Kovács, “Mainstream Media Reports vs. Reality: Coronavirus Protection Act,” *About Hungary*, May 27, 2020, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/mainstream-media-reports-vs-reality-coronavirus-protection-act>. Zoltán Kovács, “They Did It Again: International Media Watchdog Publishes Lopsided Report on Hungarian Media, Gets Facts Wrong,” *About Hungary*, May 20, 2020, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/they-did-it-again-international-media-watchdog-publishes-lopsided-report-on-hungarian-media-gets-facts-wrong>. Zoltán Kovács, “Here’s the Story about Hungary That the Washington Post Refused to Publish,” *About Hungary*, November 15, 2019, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/heres-the-story-about-hungary-that-the-washington-post-refused-to-publish>. Zoltán Kovács, “Liberal Media Reports vs. Reality, Part 2: Sanctions against Scaremongering and the Spreading of Fake News,” *About Hungary* (blog), May 30, 2020, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/liberal-media-reports-vs-reality-part-2-sanctions-against-scaremongering-and-the-spreading-of-fake-news>.

<sup>75</sup> International Press Institute, Article 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, the European Federation of Journalists, Free Press Unlimited, and Reporters Without Borders, *Conclusions of the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary*, (December 2019).

<sup>76</sup> Lee Cohen, “Welcome Prime Minister Orbán,” *The American Spectator*, May 13, 2019, <https://spectator.org/welcome-prime-minister-orban/>. Zack Beauchamp, “It Happened There: How Democracy Died in Hungary,” *Vox*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and->

## 2.5 Media coverage in the US

An abundance of research examines US media coverage, particularly which compares liberal news (such as *CNN*) and conservative news (such as *Fox News*). Unfortunately, this research typically focuses on internal, US-centered issues. When it comes to new international news stories, I have identified only a few articles that focus on the US partisan media divide (see Budak et. Al). Often, internationally oriented research compares the media coverage by major outlets in several countries.<sup>77</sup> A recent study by Ceren Budak et al. coded the US media coverage of the Coronavirus pandemic from January-June 2020 using video and articles on *CNN*, *Fox News*, *MSNBC*, *ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*. One of the most relevant findings was that their data suggested, “cable news networks are politicizing COVID-19,” and the amount of coverage varied by network, with *Fox* covering it the least. They noted differences between cable and broadcast news, as broadcast news was largely homogenous in its coverage whereas cable news had a more partisan divide.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, Thomas E. Patterson, an American political scientist, analyzed the 2020 US Presidential election by comparing *CBS* and *Fox News* coverage of the event.<sup>79</sup> He explained that mainstream media, in choosing to highlight Trump’s politics and agenda in a negative way, were positioning themselves against the current Republican Party and subsequently

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politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump; Benjamin Novak and Patrick Kingsley, “Trump Tries to Bring Hungary’s Orban in From the Cold,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/europe/orban-trump-hungary-white-house.html>.

<sup>77</sup> See: Annett Heft et al., “Beyond Breitbart: Comparing Right-Wing Digital News Infrastructures in Six Western Democracies,” *Policy & Internet* 12, no. 1 (March 2020): 20–45, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi.3.219>. Xu Zhang and Lea Hellmueller, “Visual Framing of the European Refugee Crisis in Der Spiegel and CNN International: Global Journalism in News Photographs,” *International Communication Gazette* 79, no. 5 (August 2017): 483–510, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048516688134>. Noam Tirosh et al., “Nationalizing the ‘Refugee Crisis’: A Comparative Analysis Exploring How Elite Newspapers in Four Countries Framed Forced Migration during World Refugee Day,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 43, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 47–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/073953292111050123>.

<sup>78</sup> Ceren Budak et al., “COVID-19 Coverage by Cable and Broadcast Networks” (Harvard Dataverse, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LWMYAD>, 953.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, “A Tale of Two Elections: CBS and Fox News’ Portrayal of the 2020 Presidential Campaign,” Shorenstein Center, December 17, 2020, <https://shorensteincenter.org/patterson-2020-election-coverage>.

reinforcing the repeated claims from the GOP that the mainstream media has a “liberal bias.”<sup>80</sup>

Amnon Cavari, Moran Yarchi, and Shira Pindyck conducted a longitudinal study of the US media coverage from 1981-2013 of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>81</sup> Following their computer-based content analysis of 56,490 news articles, they presented interesting findings. One of the findings, which confirmed the authors’ hypotheses, was that media coverage of the event increased dramatically during times of increased conflict in the region. Interestingly, they also found that significantly less press attention was given to Israel and Palestine during the peace discussions after conflicts occurred. Additionally, they found that the terminology used in the news articles varied depending on the current presidents’ foreign policy objectives.<sup>82</sup> In a separate but related study published by Amnon Cavari and Guy Freedman, they explored that topic further and analyze how elite discourse impacted the public’s perception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since, “Party elites provide the strongest and most accessible cues, especially when the parties are polarized on the issue.”<sup>83</sup> Their first hypothesis was that, “Parallel to the rise of party divide [following 9/11 and the war in Iraq] on foreign policy, party cues about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict will become more abundant and clearer.”<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, they found that by 2010 partisan language increased.<sup>85</sup>

While party elites do have an important hold over partisan foreign affairs issues, according to Herbert Gans in his book *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, until an event causes another country to be important

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<sup>80</sup> Patterson, “A Tale of Two Elections.”

<sup>81</sup> Amnon Cavari, Moran Yarchi, and Shira Pindyck, “Foreign News on US Media: A Longitudinal Analysis of News Coverage of Israel,” *Israel Studies* 22, no. 1 (2017): 24-49, <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.22.1.02>, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Cavari, “Foreign News on US Media,” 40.

<sup>83</sup> Amnon Cavari and Guy Freedman, “Partisan Cues and Opinion Formation on Foreign Policy,” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 29–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X17745632>, 29.

<sup>84</sup> Cavari and Freedman, 34.

<sup>85</sup> Cavari and Freedman, 45.

to either Americans or US interests, it will largely stay off the radar of our news coverage.<sup>86</sup> This is evidenced in a capstone project by Isabella N. Guerrero, who researched the “Shifting Media Representation of Ukraine After September 19, 2019.”<sup>87</sup> Guerrero found that although significant media attention was paid to Ukraine after *The Washington Times* received a whistleblower complaint which revealed that Donald Trump had placed pressure on Ukraine to “interfere” in the US election; according to the author the word occurrence analysis showed that “from the media’s point of view, [Ukraine] was simply a pawn used to advance a story about American politics”.<sup>88</sup> Because the American public relies so heavily on the news media coverage of international events, media framing of foreign affairs is particularly important. Since the media has taken an interest in Orbán’s Hungary, it is vital that researchers now begin to study how the US media chooses to cover Hungarian politics.

## 2.6 Agenda Setting

Although this thesis will not delve into quantifying how Americans are impacted by media representation of Viktor Orbán and his policies, Agenda Setting Theory is still an important part of this thesis because it shows that how an individual or event is spoken about by the media does impact the consumers, which means it is critical to evaluate the media itself. The key concept of this theory is that mass media, by choosing to write about certain topics, influences what consumers believe is important.<sup>89</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw explained in 1972 that voters “apparently learn... in direct proportion to the emphasis placed on the campaign issues by the mass media.”<sup>90</sup> Their well-known Chapel Hill Study in North Carolina showed strong evidence that their hypothesis, “mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues,” is true.

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<sup>86</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, Visions of the American Press (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>87</sup> Isabella N Guerrero, “Shifting Media Representation of Ukraine After September 18, 2019” (UC Riverside: University Honors, 2021), 23, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6651g0n5>.

<sup>88</sup> Guerrero, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176-187, <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>, 1.

<sup>90</sup> McCombs and Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting”

Since then, in his 2014 work *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*, McComb explains that a plethora of studies show media impacts what issues the public believes is important. Which issues the media choose to highlight, and which side they portray as having the best solutions, results in a shift in public opinion. Essentially, when media highlights an issue over which a particular political party has issue ownership, the “the media’s agenda can at times advantage a particular political party”.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, there is a second level of agenda-setting, which is particularly relevant to this study. The “attribute agenda” that media have is made up of what the media chooses to highlight, mention in passing, or ignore.<sup>92</sup>

Many scholars have researched the agenda-setting function of media, and one study in particular examined the ability of US news outlets to influence American’s perception of foreign countries.<sup>93</sup> By calculating how many stories a particular country was featured in, and how negative or positive the stories were, Wanta, Golan, and Lee were able to compare the data with opinion surveys and found that the more negative attention a country received, the more negatively they were perceived by the public, though the inverse was not the case; even in cases where countries received positive coverage, public opinion did not reflect that.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, even though this study does not measure the media’s impact on the general public, based on this theory and subsequent studies it shows that media coverage does indeed impact that general public, and therefore is worthy of study.

## 2.7 Framing Theory

Though first coined by Erving Goffman, Robert Entman provided a detailed analysis of Framing Theory in 1993, which has its roots in psychology, and explained:

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<sup>91</sup> Maxwell E. McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*, Second edition (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA, USA: Polity, 2014), 165.

<sup>92</sup> Maxwell E. McCombs and Lei Guo, “The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory,” 2014, 254, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591178.ch14>.

<sup>93</sup> Wayne Wanta, Guy Golan, and Cheolhan Lee, “Agenda Setting and International News: Media Influence on Public Perceptions of Foreign Nations,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (June 2004): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900408100209>.

<sup>94</sup> Wanta, Golan, and Lee, 374.



“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe...”<sup>95</sup>

A key term in this theory is “salience” which Entman describes as:

“making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. An increase in salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and this process it, and store it in memory”.<sup>96</sup>

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky’s study “vividly” illustrates how framing and salience can impact which option participants choose in simulated life-or-deaths scenarios.<sup>97</sup> The study asked the participants to evaluate which program should be adopted in the theoretical situation where “the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people” and provided two scenarios from which the participants had to choose.<sup>98</sup> Kahneman and Tversky found the responses varied drastically depending on if the two scenarios were framed in terms of how many lives would be lost and how many lives would be saved, even though the concrete number of lives lost/saved did not change.

Problem 1: Framing in terms of lives saved (N = 152):

“If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. (72%)

If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved. (28%)”<sup>99</sup>

Problem 2: Framing in terms of lives lost (N = 155):

“If Program C is adopted, 400 people will die. (22%)

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<sup>95</sup> Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

<sup>96</sup> Entman, 53.

<sup>97</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Choices, Values, and Frames,” *American Psychologist* 39, no. 4 (April 1984): 341–50, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.39.4.341>.

<sup>98</sup> Kahneman and Tversky, 343.

<sup>99</sup> Kahneman and Tversky, 343.

If Program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die. (78%)”<sup>100</sup>

According to Kahneman and Tversky, in Problem 1 the respondents overwhelmingly chose the first option (72%) because Program A presented a scenario in which 200 people could be saved, whereas Program B was a gamble. Therefore, because they were risk averse, they chose the first program. Whereas in Problem 2, 78% of participants preferred the second option because it “assumes a reference state in which no one dies of the disease.”<sup>101</sup> This study shows that the framing of identical situations in the media can impact how the reader perceives the topic at hand. Therefore, exploring how the media frames certain topics, such as the “Stop Soros” package in Hungary, shows possible bias on their part.

David Tewksbury and Dietram A. Scheufele, who have written extensively on this theory, explain

“The most effective frames are those that build associative connections between an issue and particular considerations relevant to its definition, causes, implications, and treatment.”<sup>102</sup>

In communication research, this theory is divided into 1. Frame building and 2. Frame setting. The first is typically used when researchers examine framing as the dependent variable, as they are examining how particular frames are built in societal discourse. Frame setting, however, when researchers use Framing Theory as the independent variable. In these cases, scholars have looked into how framing impacts the audience’s reception of a particular piece of media.

How the media frames events is important, as researchers Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Teresa Correa and Sebastian Valenzuela found. In their study, they found that given the choice between the two options (as expected) the Republican test subjects preferred *Fox* while the

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<sup>100</sup> Kahneman and Tversky, 343.

<sup>101</sup> Kahneman and Tversky, 343.

<sup>102</sup> David A. Tewksbury and Dietram A. Scheufele, “News Framing Theory and Research” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Mary Beth Oliver, Arthur A. Raney, and Jennings Bryant, Fourth edition, Routledge Communication Series (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 58.

Democratic subjects typically opted for *CNN*.<sup>103</sup> The interesting finding is that, even when controlled for other factors, individuals who self-identified as liberals yet who regularly consumed *Fox* also “show less support for Mexican immigration” compared with the liberals who regularly consume *CNN*.<sup>104</sup> So while this thesis focuses on the content of the articles and not its impact on the public, there is research to show that partisan media coverage of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary could very well impact the audience’s perception of the Hungarian political landscape and everything related to it, such as democracy, migration, and LGBTQI+ issues.

Because of the global nature of the 2015 refugee crisis, there is interesting research that examines the frames that journalists use when writing about immigrants and refugees. Xu Zhang and Lea Hellmueller conducted a content analysis study of the visual framing of the refugee crisis by *CNN International* and *Der Spiegel*. Though this thesis does not include visual framing of the news articles, it’s still interesting to note Zhang and Hellmueller’s finding that, “The humanitarian rights aspects of the crisis were the central focus of *CNN International*’s visual coverage” whereas *Der Spiegel* highlighted both the humanitarian aspects and “how Germany and other affected European countries controlled their national borders and implemented laws” which the researchers called the “law and control” frame.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing of the *CEU Center for Media, Data, and Society* identified frames that Hungarian and Austrian media used during the Fall of 2015, which mirror the previous study’s focus on the humanitarian frame vs the securitization frame.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Teresa Correa, and Sebastian Valenzuela, “Selective Exposure to Cable News and Immigration in the U.S.: The Relationship Between FOX News, CNN, and Attitudes Toward Mexican Immigrants,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (October 2012): 610, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732138>.

<sup>104</sup> Gil de Zúñiga, Correa, and Valenzuela, 597.

<sup>105</sup> Zhang and Hellmueller, “Visual Framing of the European Refugee Crisis in *Der Spiegel* and *CNN International*,” 505.

<sup>106</sup> Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing, “Infiltration of Political Meaning- Production: Security Threat or Humanitarian Crisis?” (CEU Center for Media, Data and Society, 2016), <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmds.ceu.hu/files/attachment/article/1041/infiltrationofpoliticalmeaning.pdf>.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Hungary's status as an EU Member State as impacted its development, and Hungarian researchers have looked into what negative press Hungary receives from Western media, which often occurs when the EU bodies condemn undemocratic developments in Hungary. There is significant research covering partisan media in the United States, but more often than not these studies focus on events in the US rather than international events. While scholars *are* increasingly noting the relationship between Orbán and Trump or the Republican Party as a whole, there are limited peer-reviewed studies on the matter, and no research has been identified which specifically explores American media's treatment of Orbán and his policies in English. This type of research is valuable because studies have shown that how the media chooses to speak about an individual or event, and *if* they choose to speak about it in the first place, impacts not only how important the consumers believe the issue is but also what aspects of the issue they believe are most salient. Finally, Framing Theory is a vital part of political news media because frames "call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions [to a piece of political communication]." <sup>107</sup> American media has placed an interesting focus in recent years on Viktor Orbán; with the power media holds over agenda-setting both in the political parties and among voters, it is important to understand how they choose to frame Orbán and the political reality in Hungary.

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<sup>107</sup> Entman, "Framing," 55.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed outline of the methodological framework of this study. The goal of the methodology is to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What aspects of Hungarian politics have online media on the Left and Right focused on between 2011-2021 in the United States?

RQ2: Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?

First, I present an overview of qualitative content analysis, which is what I used to conduct the analysis of US online news media's coverage of Viktor Orbán's Hungary. After justifying the study's specific timeframe of 2011-12, 2015-16, 2018, and 2020-21, this chapter details how I selected the six news sites using All Sides Media and Ad Fontes Media, which are organizations dedicated to detecting media bias. The next two sections are an overview of the search terms used to find the articles and the additional criteria used to narrow down the articles that were eventually coded. Finally, I provide details on the coding process and how I labeled each article by its key themes. In total, 93 articles were included in this study, with 59 from media on the Left of the political spectrum and 34 from the Right.

#### 3.2 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis is “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data.”<sup>108</sup> The quantitative form of this method came into being specifically to study media during the first half of the 1900s, but during the 1950s and 60s, researchers began to advocate for a qualitative form of content analysis. Sigfried Kracauer, the first researcher to do so, noted that quantitative methods were inadequate in international communications research because

“rigidly atomistic data are likely to preclude inferences as to the way in which the data are interrelated. Significantly, it is this very interrelationship which often

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<sup>108</sup> Flick, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, 170.

contributes largely, and sometimes definitively, to determine the direction of the overall text.”<sup>109</sup>

Because of this method’s roots in international communication, it is a logical choice for this thesis, and importantly, qualitative content analysis does not mean a researcher must reject frequency counts; frequencies can be a part of the studies, though when they are, the line between qualitative and quantitative becomes blurred. Yet Kracauer argues that qualitative research, which requires that one comprehensively and repeatedly studies the media in question, is more likely to reap the “countable characteristics” because they have a greater holistic familiarity with the texts, whereas quantitative researchers do not engage as intimately, “as if fearful of drifting too far from the secure haven of statistics.”<sup>110</sup> The meaning within a piece of media can be labyrinthine and vary greatly depending on the context, and quantitative methods rarely capture all the nuances.<sup>111</sup>

The steps for conducting qualitative content analysis, as listed in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* and adhered to in this study, are as follows: 1. Decide on a research question; 2. Select material; 3. Build a coding frame; 4. Segmentation; 5. Trial code; 6. Evaluate and modify the coding frame; 7. Main analysis; 8. Present and interpret the findings.<sup>112</sup>

### 3.3 *Timeframe*

The original time frame of this study included 2011-12, 2015-16, and 2020-21. The first set of years covered the adoption of the Hungarian Basic Law i.e., its new constitution, which groups such as the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission critiqued because of the lowering of the retirement age of judges, the court administration changes, and the

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<sup>109</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1952): 632, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2746123>.

<sup>110</sup> Kracauer, 638–40.

<sup>111</sup> Flick, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, 171.

<sup>112</sup> Flick, 174.

alterations to Hungary's media laws.<sup>113</sup> The second set of dates includes both the migration crisis as well as the campaigning and election of Donald Trump, whom Viktor Orbán publicly supported and congratulated; notably, Orbán was the only EU head of state to do so.<sup>114</sup> The final set of dates, the most recent two full calendar years, was chosen because it includes the COVID-19 pandemic and the adoption of a law which removed “legal recognition for transgender and intersex people.”<sup>115</sup> Additionally, I gathered data from the gap years (2013, 2014, 2017, 2018, and 2019) to ensure there was no significant increase in publications during those times. While very few, if any, articles were published from 2013-14, during 2018 an influx of articles were published which covered Orbán's Hungary. Therefore, this year is included in the study as well.

### *3.4 Media outlet selection*

Several criteria were used in order to narrow down from which media outlets I gathered data. First, the sources had to be evaluated by media bias rating databases and listed as either “right,” “leans/skews right,” “left,” or “leans/skews left”. To establish the ideological trends of news organizations, I consulted two sources: All Sides Media and Ad Fontes Media. Both have their own methodology and slightly different outcomes of where a particular organization lies on the ideological scale, therefore I consulted them both. Additionally, Ad Fontes Media includes a source reliability rating, which is helpful because I did not want to gather data from sources with a low reliability rating.

All Sides Media continually analyses over 800 US-based media outlets using multiple methods such as multi-partisan editorial reviews, blind bias surveys, and independent research. Organizations are plotted as either left, lean left, center, lean right, or right.<sup>116</sup> Ad Fontes Media gathers a selection of articles from the relevant source (typically at least 15,

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<sup>113</sup> “Wrong Direction on Rights: Assessing the Impact of Hungary's New Constitution and Laws” (Human Rights Watch, May 16, 2013), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/05/16/wrong-direction-rights/assessing-impact-hungarys-new-constitution-and-laws>.

<sup>114</sup> Bayer, “Trump-Orbán Bromance Takes Off.”

<sup>115</sup> Knight and Gall, “Hungary Ends Legal Recognition for Transgender and Intersex People.”

<sup>116</sup> “About US” AllSides, September 14, 2021, <https://www.allsides.com/about>.

but for the most popular sources up to 200) which three researchers – one of each must self-identify as left-leaning, centrist, or right-leaning– then read and code for the articles for bias.<sup>117</sup> Their database has over 1,772 sources available to paying members, though there are still many news sources that one can look at for free.<sup>118</sup> Ad Fontes Media has an interactive media bias chart available for limited use for free which has an x-axis that shows the political leanings (most extreme left/right, hyper-partisan left/right, skews left/right, and middle or balanced) and a y-axis that shows how factual or misleading the sources are. I consulted both sources to establish a base of viable options.

After reviewing the databases, I individually searched left/left leaning and right/right leaning websites to narrow down which sites did not have functioning search bars. Because I did not have access to databases such as LexisNexis, and the Google News function is not completely reliable, each media outlet had to have a functioning search bar.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, websites with a very limited number of results when using the search term (Orbán) were not considered. Although the *New York Times* was initially included, due to its incredibly extensive reporting, nearly 80 articles matched the criteria; therefore, because the data from the *New York Times* would have completely dwarfed the other data, I set it aside. In the end, I identified three sources with paywalls (*The Atlantic*, *National Review*, and *The Washington Times*) and three freely available sources (*CNN*, *Vox*, and *Fox*) which matched the criteria. For this study, when I refer to sources on the “Left” or “Right” this includes the sources that “lean Left” or “lean Right” as well. Table 1 in the following section shows the political leanings of each news source.

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<sup>117</sup> Ad Fontes Media, “How Ad Fontes Ranks News Sources,” *Ad Fontes Media* (blog), accessed July 12, 2022, <https://3.143.62.133/how-ad-fontes-ranks-news-sources/>.

<sup>118</sup> “Interactive Media Chart,” Ad Fontes Media, accessed November 20, 2021, [https://adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/?utm\\_source=HomePage\\_IMBC\\_Video\\_Clip&utm\\_medium=OnWebSite\\_Link\\_and\\_Button](https://adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/?utm_source=HomePage_IMBC_Video_Clip&utm_medium=OnWebSite_Link_and_Button)

<sup>119</sup> Annie Blatchford, “Searching for Online News Content: The Challenges and Decisions,” *Communication Research and Practice* 6, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 143–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2019.1676864>.



### 3.5 Search terms

To identify relevant articles, I used the search terms “Hungary Orban” and “Hungary Orbán,” because some authors used the Hungarian spelling of “Orbán” while a majority used the Americanized spelling of “Orban.” Whether or not the search engine filtered the words differently varied. Additionally, I ran a search only using the search term “Orbán” or “Orban” because the search engines differed, and this occasionally provided more results depending on which site I was searching on. For the first round of searching, I utilized the search function available on the news sites’ websites, and I used the freely available Google News search engine as the secondary database in case the search engine was unreliable. Unfortunately, the database for *Fox* was inconsistent. Although I was able to gather a selection of articles, it proved difficult because one must narrow down the search to under 100 results if one wants to view all the hits, but as one narrows down the search to specific dates, an improbable number of articles seemed to be listed on one single day. Then, when refreshing the page and researching for the exact same day, sometimes no articles would appear.

This made it difficult to find the articles, and I concluded that the key issue was the “date range” function on the website. Unfortunately, this function was quite necessary because in cases where over 100 articles applied to the search criteria, only the top 15 hits could be seen and the “more articles” button vanished. Inconsistent search engines are a common occurrence in similar research.<sup>120</sup> In order to overcome this, I used Google News to do an additional search for articles for *Fox*, which allows for more results to be viewed. By using a combination of the two sources I am confident I gathered a representative sample of, if not all, the articles that were applicable to this research.

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<sup>120</sup> Blatchford.

### 3.6 Final article selection

To refine the data, I did not include articles that were originally published by other media agencies, such as *Associated Press* or *Reuters*. Because part of the purpose of this study is to see what wording the reports and authors use to talk about Orbán, the inclusion of articles which are widely re-published, and not specific to each outlet, would not have been as useful to my research. Though for *CNN* this was less relevant, as only a few articles originally came from *Reuters*, in the case of *Fox* most of the articles were from *Associated Press*, particularly before 2017. In 2017-18 a shift occurred and, rather than relying solely on *Associated Press* for articles, *Fox* began publishing articles by their own staff. This explains why an organization with such a large audience has a much lower number of articles in this study (13) as shown in Table 1, especially when set against a comparable outlet like *CNN* (which has 35).

Articles that merely mentioned Hungary in passing or for a limited section of the article, for example in a multi-country list of where refugees were heading or how many coronavirus cases there were, were not included. I solely included articles which dedicated at least 50% of the content to Hungary. Additionally, if the same author published multiple articles about the same topic (such as before, during, and after a controversial law passed through parliament) only the final article was included in the coding process. Blog posts – which are informal and often consist of large block quotes with little analysis – and opinion pieces were not included.<sup>121</sup>

It's important to note that, because this thesis examines articles and no other forms of media such as images or videos, the popular “Tucker Carlson Tonight” videos/transcripts were not included in this study either, unless journalists reported separately about the multiple interviews that Carlson held with Orbán in 2021. Carlson’s coverage of Orbán could likely warrant its own thesis; were transcripts included in this thesis, the rate of news that portrays

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<sup>121</sup> Rich Lowry, “We’re All Orban Now,” *National Review* (blog), March 17, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/were-all-orban-now/>.

Orbán in a favorable fashion would have increased significantly. In fact, during Orbán’s address to the CPAC Hungary event, he recommended that Carlson be broadcast “24/7” in the US because his “friend Tucker Carlson stands alone and immovable” against “the liberals’ dominance of the media.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, although studying the relationship between Carlson and Orbán would be an intriguing topic, it likely deserves an independent study. Table 1 shows the political leanings of each news source according to both media charts, their audience size according to the Ad Fontes 2022 media chart, and the total number of articles gathered from each source.<sup>123</sup>

Table 1. Media leaning, audience size, and total articles coded (Table by author)

Media Outlet	Left	Right	Audience Size in 2022	Articles Coded
<i>CNN</i>	X		79.9 million	35
<i>The Atlantic</i>	X		16 million	13
<i>Vox</i>	X		13.9 million	11
<i>Fox News</i>		X	133 million	13
<i>National Review</i>		X	4 million	14
<i>The Washington Times</i>		X	3.5 million	7

Figure 1 shows the number of articles which fit within the purview of this study organized by year and political leaning of the media organization. While the low number of articles may be surprising, it is understandable due to the parameters of this study. Very few

<sup>122</sup> Orbán, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Hungary.”

<sup>123</sup> “Interactive Media Bias Chart Public,” *Ad Fontes Media* (blog), accessed December 1, 2021, <https://adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/>; AllSides Media, “CNN (Online News) Media Bias Rating,” June 1, 2021, <https://www.allsides.com/news-source/cnn-media-bias>; AllSides Media, “The Atlantic Media Bias Rating,” August 1, 2018, <https://www.allsides.com/news-source/atlantic>; AllSides Media, “Vox Media Bias Rating,” April 1, 2022, <https://www.allsides.com/news-source/vox-news-media-bias>; AllSides Media, “Fox News (Online News) Media Bias Rating,” November 1, 2020, <https://www.allsides.com/news-source/fox-news-media-bias>; AllSides Media, “National Review Media Bias Rating,” June 1, 2021, <https://www.allsides.com/news-source/national-review>; AllSides Media, “Washington Times Media Bias Rating,” April 24, 2017, <https://www.allsides.com/news-source/washington-times-bias>.

articles from 2015 are in this study because, due to the influx of information about the migration crisis, sites often published articles which had an overview of the migration crisis country-by-country, and therefore the content was not mainly related to Hungary.<sup>124</sup> Figure 2 displays how many articles were collected by each organization by year of collection.

Figure 1. Yearly distribution by political leaning (Figure by author)

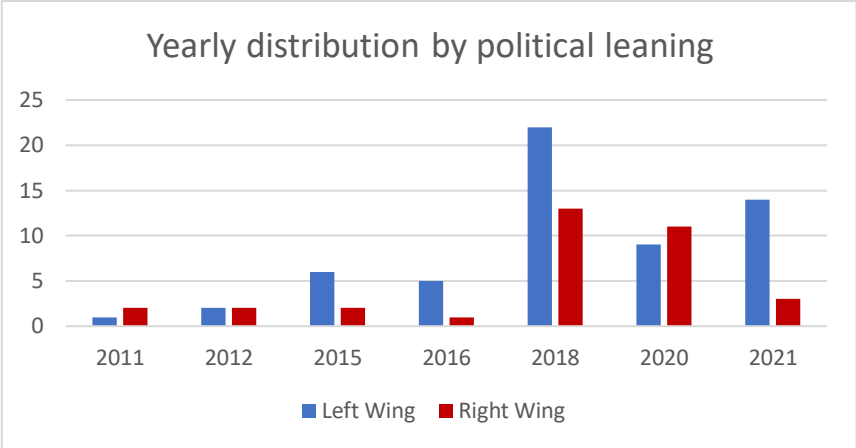
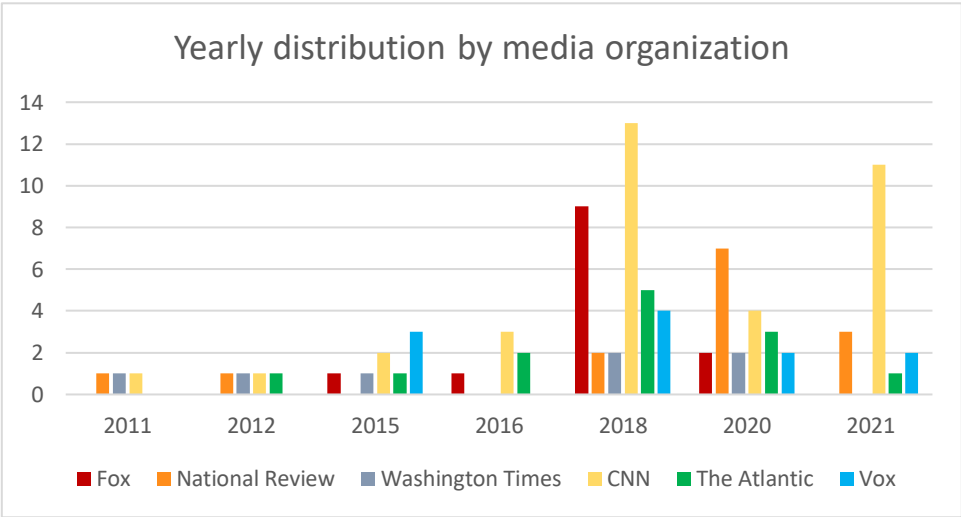


Figure 2. Yearly distribution by media organization (Figure by author)



<sup>124</sup> For example, see: Michael Pearson, Holly Yan, and Arwa Damon, “European Migrant Crisis: More Refugees, More Troubles,” CNN, accessed July 17, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/09/07/europe/europe-migrant-crisis/index.html>.

### 3.7 Coding process

To answer the research questions:

RQ1. What aspects of Hungarian politics have online media on the Left and Right focused on between 2011-2021 in the United States?

RQ2. Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?

I utilized qualitative content analyses with an inductive coding approach to a total of 93 articles. MAXQDA Analytics Pro is a software for qualitative and mixed-methods research that provides a generous discount to enrolled students while still offering the same quality product, which includes data analytics.<sup>125</sup>

#### 3.7.1 Identifying primary and secondary themes in the articles

During the first coding stage, I noted the specific topics of each article which could typically easily be established by the article titles and section headings (eg. "Coronavirus measures, concern for democracy"), which was key to answering the first research question. After the first round of coding was completed, I reviewed the topics and from them established the primary and secondary themes covered in the articles, based on what Hungarian policy they were referring to. I then selected the top three themes for analyzing in-depth in the following chapter, since only a handful did not fit into these main three options. Certain long-form articles covered a number of topics, but in that case the main theme was still fairly evident by what the author was attempting to prove. For example, in Zack Beauchamp's article "It Happened Here: How democracy died in Hungary," he covers a plethora of topics to prove the claim that democracy has died, but the fourth and final section of the article is fully dedicated to the consideration of "An American Orbán?"<sup>126</sup> Therefore, this article is listed under the primary theme of "democracy" and the secondary theme of "relationship with the US". Table 2 offers an example for each of

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<sup>125</sup> "MAXQDA | All-In-One Qualitative & Mixed Methods Data Analysis Tool," MAXQDA, accessed July 12, 2022, <https://www.maxqda.com/>.

<sup>126</sup> Beauchamp, "It Happened There."

the top three themes by showing their headlines. The most general topic is “democracy” because it includes articles which specifically cover democratic backsliding in Hungary, such as a lack of media pluralism and the COVID-19 “rule by decree” measures, or articles dedicated to election results.

Table 2. Main primary themes and examples (Table by author)

<b>Main Primary Themes</b>	<b>Headline Example from Left</b>	<b>Headline Example from Right</b>
Democracy	“Hungary’s prime minister stole the country’s democracy. Now Hungarians are rising up” <sup>127</sup>	“Hungary's new constitution seen as threat to democracy” <sup>128</sup>
Migration	“Hungary’s ‘Stop Soros’ law makes it illegal to help migrants” <sup>129</sup>	“Hungary, in latest ‘Stop Soros’ laws, wants to criminalize migrant helpers” <sup>130</sup>
LGBTQI+ rights	“Eastern Europe was once a world leader on gay rights. Then it ran out of scapegoats” <sup>131</sup>	“Hungary bans gender studies because it is ‘an ideology not a science’” <sup>132</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Hungary’s Prime Minister Stole the Country’s Democracy. Now Hungarians Are Rising Up.,” Vox, December 17, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/12/17/18144648/hungary-protest-orban-labor-democracy>.

<sup>128</sup> Petra Hajdu and Charles McPhedran, “Hungary’s New Constitution Seen as Threat to Democracy,” Washington Times, January 17, 2012, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/jan/17/hungarys-new-constitution-seen-as-threat-to-democr/>.

<sup>129</sup> Judith Vonberg and Hilary Clarke, “Hungary’s ‘Stop Soros’ Law Makes It Illegal to Help Migrants,” CNN, June 20, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/20/europe/hungary-law-immigrants-crackdown-intl/index.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Greg Norman, “Hungary, in Latest ‘Stop Soros’ Laws, Wants to Criminalize Migrant Helpers,” Fox News (Fox News, May 29, 2018), <https://www.foxnews.com/world/hungary-in-latest-stop-soros-laws-wants-to-criminalize-migrant-helpers>.

<sup>131</sup> Ivana Kottasová, “Eastern Europe Was Once a World Leader on Gay Rights. Then It Ran out of Scapegoats,” CNN, July 1, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/01/europe/lgbtq-rights-hungary-eastern-europe-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>132</sup> Caleb Parke, “Hungary Bans Gender Studies Because It Is ‘an Ideology Not a Science,’” Fox News, October 17, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/hungary-bans-gender-studies>.

### 3.7.2 Coding the articles

To find the answers to the second research question, I coded each article using the MAXQDA software to establish if the authors spoke favorably, neutrally, or critically about Viktor Orbán, Fidesz, or the causes which they champion or fight against. Because of the interconnectivity of Orbán, Fidesz and their policies, criticism toward one is coded as criticism towards Orbán, and favorability toward one is also coded as favorability toward Orbán. To establish if the articles spoke favorably, neutrally, or critically about Orbán and his politics, I wanted to discover what salient details the authors mentioned when discussing him. Thus, I asked the following questions while analyzing the texts: 1. When Orbán or his policies are mentioned, what adjectives are used and are they framed in a positive, negative, or neutral way? 2. When quoting those critical of Orbán, how are those criticisms framed? And conversely, 3. When quoting those defending Orbán, how are those defenses framed?

After coding each article, I then noted whether the article's overall coverage of Orbán was favorable, neutral, or critical. The following quote is an example of the first question I asked when analyzing the articles. In this excerpt, the author explains that Orbán is skeptical of immigration, which is a favorable phrase compared with the frequently used phrasing like "xenophobic" or "racist," and the author highlighted that these opinions were not "fringe" or "far-right":

"Orban's government welcomed President Trump's victory in 2016, meaning the White House now shared Hungary's skepticism on immigration that European leaders had tried to dismiss as fringe and far-right."<sup>133</sup>

That is an example of a positive frame, whereas a negative frame casts doubt on the legitimacy of Orbán's government, as an author does here:

"Under his right-wing, populist leadership, Hungary has seen the return of many past demons, including ethnic nationalism and deep-rooted corruption. Orbán has

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<sup>133</sup> Adam Shaw, "Hungary's Viktor Orban, Running on Anti-Mass Migration Platform, Eyes Fourth Term," Fox News, April 6, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/hungarys-viktor-orban-running-on-anti-mass-migration-platform-eyes-fourth-term>.

embarked on a sweeping concentration of power, eliminating constitutional safeguards, successfully reshaping the state in his own image, and posing a potential threat to even the future of the European Union...”<sup>134</sup>

As mentioned before, after coding all 93 articles once I returned and conducted a second round of coding to make any necessary edits.

### 3.8 Conclusion

To gain a fuller picture of how Orbán and his policies are represented in American media online, I have chosen a total of six media outlets. *Fox News*, *The Washington Times*, and *National Review* are all sources on the Right, while *CNN*, *Vox*, and *The Atlantic* are sources on the Left. To analyze the contents of the articles, I utilized a qualitative content analysis of all 93 articles published in 2011-12, 2015-16, 2018, and 2020-2021, after refining the article selection somewhat. During the coding process, I identified the primary themes of the article based on what Hungarian policy they referred to, as well as a secondary theme when applicable. To conduct the qualitative content analysis, a methodology developed specifically for media analysis, I coded the articles via the MAXQDA software. The results from the 59 articles from sources on the Left and 34 from sources on the Right are explored in the following chapter.

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<sup>134</sup> Paul Lendvai, “Viktor Orbán Has Transformed Himself—and Hungary,” *The Atlantic*, April 7, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/viktor-orban-hungary/557246/>.



## 4 Results and Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

Orbán's increased presence in American media and his growing admirers among American conservatives, combined with concerns about the state of democracy in the United States presents a concerning trend.<sup>135</sup> In order to better understand how the media frames Orbán and his policies and who views him negatively or positively, I sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What aspects of Hungarian politics have online media on the Left and Right focused on between 2011-2021 in the United States?

RQ2: Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative content analysis of 93 articles. As shown in Figure 3, the coverage of Orbán's Hungary on the Left is consistently critical and occasionally neutral, whereas coverage on the Right ranges from critical to neutral to favorable. Without separating the coverage by theme, it is unclear as to why this coverage varies. Thus, to answer RQ1, in the first section I review the main primary themes of the articles by year, which are democracy, migration, and LGBTQI+ rights. How the authors of these 93 articles choose to describe the events, politicians, and institutions that are critical or favorable of Orbán reveals what information they believe is most important. As Robert Entman explained:

“Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience. The word salience... means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. An increase in salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory”.<sup>136</sup>

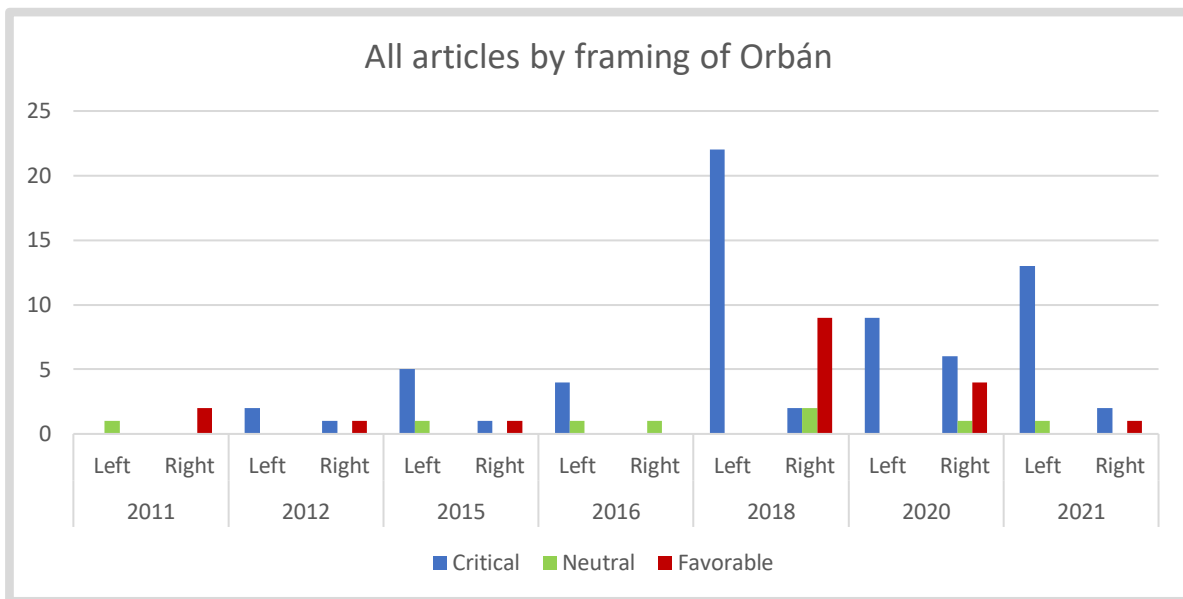
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<sup>135</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), “The Global State of Democracy 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era” (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, November 14, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2021.91>.

<sup>136</sup> Entman, “Framing,” 53.

As such, to answer RQ2 I review in-depth each of the aforementioned themes. Each review is an analysis of how the theme is framed in the Left sources vs the Right sources (i.e., how the salient details differ across political boundaries), if there is conflicting framing within one political group, and if the findings suggest that the coverage has indeed become more partisan over time. In the conclusion I present how the findings answer the research questions and what greater impact these findings suggest for US politics.

Figure 3. All articles by framing of Orbán (Figure by author)



#### 4.2 Main themes in articles

What aspects of Hungarian politics did US online media on the Left and Right focus on between 2011-2021? As noted in the methodology, to answer this question I evaluated the primary themes of the articles after the first round of coding. Table 3 displays the most popular theme by year. Because the timeline was specifically chosen based on notable events, it is thus logical that the main theme in 2011-12, during which time the new Hungarian constitution was drafted and adopted, is democracy, and that in 2015-16 migration is the most common theme. With the rise in coverage in 2018 came an increase in the diversity of coverage, though the “Stop Soros” package, which falls under the migration theme, still received the most attention. The restrictions on civil society – mainly

the “Stop Soros” package – and a push against “gender ideology” meant an increase in articles about LGBTQI+ rights and a persistence of articles about migration policy.

Within the articles about COVID-19 in 2020 was a more general concern: what did Orbán’s “rule by decree” measure mean for democracy? Additionally, the Hungarian parliament passed an anti-trans law that banned the alteration of sex on official government documents, which is reflected in the coverage. This is also the year following Orbán’s coveted invitation to meet with Trump, and while in previous years there was only one article which explicitly covered the comparisons between Trump and Orbán, in 2020 there were five which drew the comparison. Finally, in 2021 there is nearly no coverage about the pandemic, but there is an influx of articles about LGBTQI+ rights and democracy and what that could mean for the growing relationship between American conservatives and Orbán’s Hungary.

Table 3. Most popular topic by year of publication (Table by author)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Most common primary theme(s)</b>	<b>Main cause(s) of primary theme</b>	<b>Number of articles</b>
2011	Democracy	2012 Constitution	3 of 3
2012	Democracy	2012 Constitution	4 of 4
2015	Migration	Refugee crisis measures	8 of 8
2016	Migration	Refugee crisis measures	6 of 6
2018	Democracy	EU measures due to concerns over democracy	18 of 35
2020	Democracy	COVID-19 measures, American conservative’s relationship with Orbán	16 of 20
2021	LGBTQI+ rights & democracy	EU measures due to rollback of LGBTQI+ rights, Hungary’s relationship with China and American conservative’s	7 & 8 of 17

### 4.3 *Democracy*

Democracy is a reoccurring theme throughout the timeframe in this study. While it's frequently mentioned in most articles, Figure 4 and Figure 5 present results from the 49 articles wherein democracy is the primary focus, which is why there is no data in the charts from 2015 and 2016 as the refugee crisis completely dominated coverage at that time. Figure 5 indicates that when discussing democracy in Hungary articles published by organizations on the Left almost exclusively spoke critically about Orbán and his policies, whereas those from the Right range from critical, neutral, to favorable. Additionally, even though the adoption of Hungary's new constitution happened in 2011 and came into force in 2012, it was in 2018 and 2020 that the media on the Left and Right (respectively) increased their coverage of the democratic situation in Hungary.

In 2011-12 the coverage about democracy focused on the new constitution, but in 2018 the coverage varied from the Slave Law protests, to how the EU was responding to Hungary's media landscape, to the law which forced Central European University (CEU) to eventually move to Vienna. Then, as mentioned in the introduction in 2020 the coverage focused mainly on what Hungary's COVID-19 "Rule by decree" measures meant for Hungary, and some focused on the relationship between American conservatives and Hungary. Finally, in 2021 the coverage relating to democracy was varied, though several articles spoke about Hungary's relationship with China and the US. Next, I will present an analysis of how the critical articles on the Left frame Orbán, his policies, and his most referenced critic (various bodies of the European Union) and follow this with an analysis of the articles on the Right, and how the different factions which have arisen frame Orbán, his policies, and his critics. I conclude with a comparison between the Left and Right and how this analysis helps answer RQ2.

Figure 4. Democracy coverage by media leaning (Figure by author)

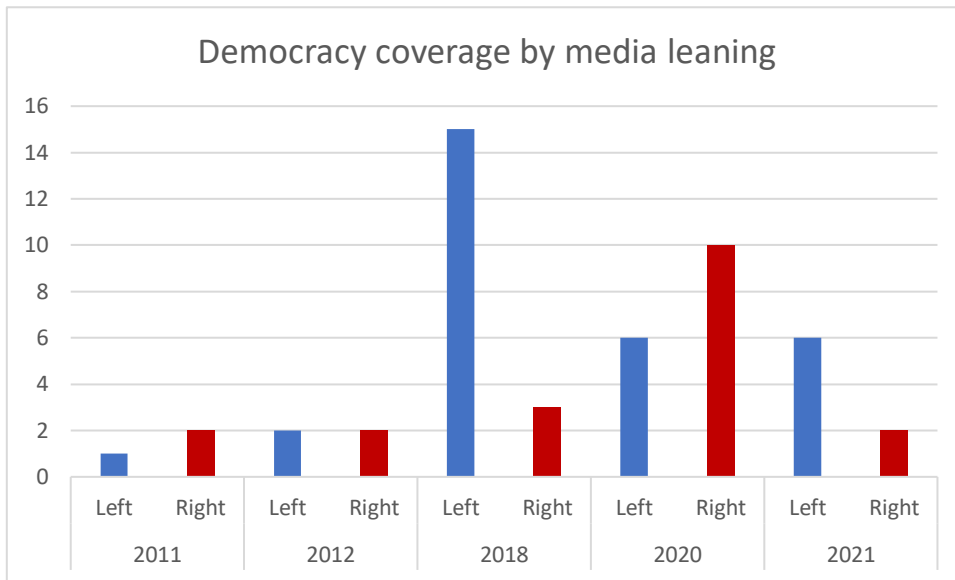
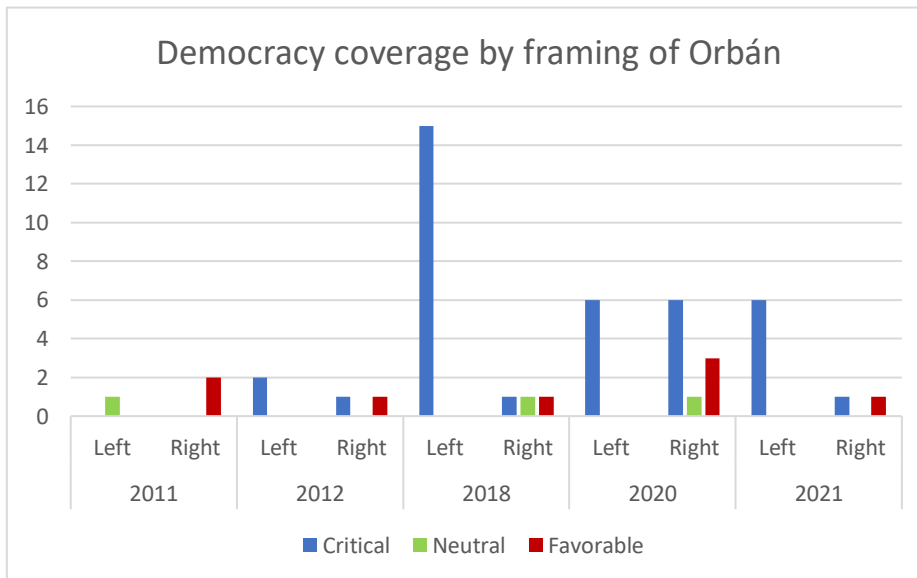


Figure 5. Democracy coverage by framing of Orbán (Figure by author)



#### 4.3.1 Framing on the Left

On the Left, the authors of the 2011 articles are neutral; since then, they have been consistently critical of Orbán and his policies, with a growing concern about what Hungary’s backsliding means in relation to the United States. The coverage is consistently

negative as the authors reference issues such as how Orbán controls the media and restricts civil society, and other measures which offer evidence of democratic backsliding and autocracy, “soft fascism,” and growing authoritarianism.<sup>137</sup> Essentially, they adopt a thematic frame, suggesting that whatever policy they are speaking about is only one example of the continuous backsliding in Hungary.<sup>138</sup> Already in 2012, one author explains that how Fidesz drafted and passed new constitution showed “worrying signs of straying again from democracy,” and draws direct parallels to prominent American Republicans:

“What is going on in Hungary suggests that we should not be so smug. Some of what is involved in Hungary's creeping authoritarianism has echoes in American politics. There is the use of brute legislative force or outright coercion to get one's way, even if this in effect means a compromise of democratic values. And there is a hubristic belief that it is so important for one's own party or movement to be in power that this takes precedence over all other interpretations of the national interest. Viktor Orban has a soulmate of sorts in Mitch McConnell when the latter says his top priority is to defeat the president of the opposing party.”<sup>139</sup>

As evidenced in the introduction and literature review, concern on the Left over the growing relationship between Orbán and the American Right has only grown since then. In one article titled “American Orbanism” by Ben Rhodes, an advisor to former President Barack Obama, he draws comparisons between Trump and Orbán’s tactics:

“Similarly, in the United States, Donald Trump provided the illiberal, nationalist bow that tied his party’s efforts together and consolidated an authoritarian direction. Like Orbán, he melds grievances with a rotating cast of villains in a form of ethno-nationalist us-versus-them politics.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Beauchamp, “It Happened There.”

<sup>138</sup> “Episodic vs. Thematic Stories,” Frame Works, June 2, 2017, <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/article/episodic-vs-thematic-stories/>.

<sup>139</sup> Paul R. Pillar, “What America Can Learn From Hungary’s Backsliding Democracy,” The Atlantic, January 20, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/what-america-can-learn-from-hungarys-backsliding-democracy/251701/>.

<sup>140</sup> Ben Rhodes, “The Path to Autocracy,” The Atlantic, June 15, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/american-orbanism/612658/>.

Rhodes explained the situation in Hungary and the comparisons with the US Republican party in further detail in his book: Ben Rhodes, *After the Fall: The Rise of Authoritarianism in the World We’ve Made*, 2022 Random House trade paperback edition (New York: Random House, 2022).

While the specific subject of the articles varies, the takeaway from articles that draw the comparison is that the affinity between Republican and/or conservative Americans is a negative phenomenon that threatens the state of democracy in the United States. Zack Beauchamp, an author at *Vox*, even expressed:

“I find Orban’s attack on trans rights and treatment of migrants reprehensible, but I don’t expect those on the broader right to agree with me. I do, however, believe they ought to have a baseline commitment to democratic norms: a sense that disagreement itself is not illegitimate, and that governments that use their powers to crush their opponents can never be fundamentally admirable.”<sup>141</sup>

As is presented in the following section, there are indeed some authors from the Right that agree with Beauchamp’s assessment that Hungary’s democracy is cause for concern and not admiration. Interestingly, the most-referenced entities that offer criticism of Hungary’s democracy are various EU bodies, such as the European Parliament or the European Commission. They are not described as unfairly biased political organizations, as they occasionally are in media from the Right, but rather as authoritative figures attempting to reign in a defiant member state. For example:

“Earlier this year, the European Parliament took the unprecedented decision to trigger Article 7 – a disciplinary process – against Hungary, a rarely invoked process designed to prevent member states from breaching the EU’s ‘core values.’”<sup>142</sup>

While this may seem irrelevant to highlight at first, the importance of this neutrality becomes clear below when I contrast this with the favorable coverage on the Right. For coverage on the Left, though, the greatest critique an EU body receives is that they’re not doing enough to curb the backsliding. In one article titled “The EU watches as Hungary Kills Democracy” the author explains “The bloc’s failure to curb the country’s democratic

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<sup>141</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Why Hungary’s Viktor Orbán Is the American Right’s Favorite Strongman,” *Vox.com*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/21/21256324/viktor-orban-hungary-american-conservatives>.

<sup>142</sup> McKenzie Sheena and Mallory Gafas, “Hungary ‘slave Law’ Protests Turn Violent in Budapest,” *CNN*, December 17, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/16/europe/hungary-protests-intl/index.html>.

decline suggests that it may not have much power at all.”<sup>143</sup> Although the EU does not escape criticism in the articles, it differs sharply from what the favorable Right says in the following sections. Thus, an analysis of the articles suggests that the media on the Left consistently express concern over the state of democracy in Hungary and are unfavorable towards Orbán’s policies in general. Importantly, they also are distressed over the relationship between the American Right/conservatives and what this could mean for the future of American democracy.

#### 4.3.2 Framing on the Right

As illustrated in Figure 5, the critical consensus on the Left is not present on the Right for the theme of democracy, as there are several articles which favorably frame Orbán and his policies. In the nine critical articles on the Right, the critiques of Orbán’s policies relate to the 2012 Constitution, the COVID-19 measures, general democratic backsliding, and Hungary’s deepening relationship with China. The following quote by Dalibor Rohac, from *National Review*, exemplifies the concern:

“Hungary remains an ally of the United States. But the notion that the perceived ideological overlap between America’s ‘national conservatives’ and Orbán’s political project is a solid foundation for the alliance is mistaken. Throughout his tenure, Orbán has cultivated ties to both Russia and China and has acted repeatedly against U.S. interests in the region...

“The impulse that has brought conservatives in the West to embrace Orbán and Orbánism is understandable. The Left’s excesses and hypocrisy are real. But authoritarianism, corruption, and grievance-driven revisionism do not become any more justifiable just because they are practiced by someone whom the Left sees as its nemesis.”<sup>144</sup>

The sentiment in the penultimate sentence is shared in other critical articles on the Right as well. Even when condemning Orbán’s policies, these authors specifically explain that they

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<sup>143</sup> Yasmeen Serhan, “The EU Watches as Hungary Kills Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/europe-hungary-viktor-orban-coronavirus-covid19-democracy/609313/>.

<sup>144</sup> Dalibor Rohac, “The Conservative Embrace of Hungary’s Viktor Orbán Is Misguided,” *National Review*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2020/08/24/the-conservative-embrace-of-hungarys-viktor-orban-is-misguided/>.



still disagree on some level with the Left. Democratic erosion is one matter, but concerns about gender equality and same-sex marriage are another:

“In recent years the EU’s response to Orbán has been either too weak or too broad. In 2018 the much-heralded Sargentini report on Hungary was presented to the European Parliament. The report, authored by a Dutch Green Party MP, included many legitimate complaints about the erosion of civil liberties and corruption, but it also took Hungary to task for its gender inequality, the inadequacy of its old-age pensions, and its failure to adopt same-sex marriage. It is hardly surprising that Hungarians were not interested in being lectured by a left-wing EU functionary about gender roles.”<sup>145</sup>

These findings suggest that, even when the articles published on the Right critique Orbán, it is not with quite the fervor that one finds in articles on the Left. Interestingly, even the authors who are favorable toward Orbán still include some sort of criticism, such as that his natalist policies haven’t succeeded or that the coronavirus measures are “flawed,” but they specifically reject the broader concerns for democracy the Left has regarding Hungary.<sup>146</sup> By defending Hungary in general and critiquing specific policies, authors like this adopt an episodic frame.<sup>147</sup> In doing so, they reject the concept that democracy has died in Hungary or that Orbán is a dictator, and argue that whatever policy they speak critically about can be solved. For example, the author in the following quote acknowledges that Hungary’s new constitution should be amended in various ways, such as to amend its “inadequate separation of powers,” but he devotes the rest of the article to how Hungary is unfairly treated abroad:

“Hungary’s conservative government has become a whipping boy for the international liberal punditocracy, which sees a fascist tyrant lurking underneath every coffee table with a Bible on top.

Yes, Hungary’s constitution has embraced the country’s heritage of Christianity, defined marriage in a traditional way, and proclaimed that life begins at conception. Hungary’s constitution also introduced a debt cap and reaffirmed Hungary’s 700-

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<sup>145</sup> Will Collins, “Soft Authoritarianism Comes to Hungary,” *National Review*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/04/soft-authoritarianism-comes-to-hungary/>.

<sup>146</sup> John O’Sullivan, “Hungary’s Emergency Law Is Flawed — But It Doesn’t Herald a Dictatorship,” *National Review*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/04/yes-hungarys-emergency-law-is-flawed/>.

<sup>147</sup> “Episodic vs. Thematic Stories.”

year-old forint as the national currency, to the chagrin of Brussels. These provisions reflect values held by most Hungarians and are therefore appropriately secured in their fundamental law. That Hungarians have decided to protect their traditional values unsurprisingly rankles the sensibilities of liberal pundits and bureaucrats in Europe and America, but it is hardly cause for crying ‘Dictatorship!’”<sup>148</sup>

Similar language arises in an article that criticizes the “overblown” concerns about Hungary’s COVID-19 “Rule by Decree” measure. By defending Hungary in general but critiquing specific policies, authors such as this adopt an episodic frame. In doing so, they reject the concept that democracy has completely died in Hungary, and that Orbán is a dictator, and argue that whatever policy they speak critically about can be solved. The following quote refers to how the people who expressed concerns about the state of democracy in Hungary because of the measure would respond after it was announced that the emergency powers were to be returned by Orbán:

“They will not be troubled by the failure of their certain predictions. Their opposition will just be repackaged in in some new theory. Well of course, Orbán can return the powers, they’ll say, he has a rubber stamp in Parliament. And besides, he’ll want those subsidies from Brussels. But then why did they believe it was the advent of dictatorship when they mistakenly thought Parliament was suspended? The same game is played with Hungary’s constitution. A rumor of a forthcoming transgression of that constitution is evidence of illiberal democracy run amok, but the evidence of following it interpreted as an empty gesture. Heads, tails. Etc.

One suspects it’s just simple hatred of Christian conservatism, a fanatical projection of culture war antipathies to the near abroad.”<sup>149</sup>

The analysis and examples above suggest that there are disagreements on the American Right about how to regard Hungary’s democracy. Some authors are gravely concerned about the state of democratic backsliding and Hungary’s relationship with China, and caution against American conservatives’ admiration of Orbán, and others blame the criticism on anti-Christian left-wing hate. Interestingly, those who opine that criticisms of

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<sup>148</sup> Marion Smith, “Crusade against Hungary,” National Review, March 5, 2012, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2012/03/crusade-against-hungary-marion-smith/>.

<sup>149</sup> Michael Brendan Dougherty, “Coronavirus Pandemic: Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán Is Not a Dictator,” National Review, May 26, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/05/coronavirus-pandemic-hungary-prime-minister-viktor-orban-not-a-dictator/>.

Hungary are completely overblown always take the time to note that they disagree with one or another of Orbán's policies.

#### 4.3.3 Interpretation of democracy findings

To answer the question of if American media's coverage of Hungary has become more partisan over time is complicated in this case. The Left adopts a thematic frame, suggesting that the events in Hungary are symptoms of continual democratic backsliding.<sup>150</sup>

Additionally, the Left is clearly very critical of the state of democracy in Hungary, uses negative language when introducing Orbán and his policies, and is generally concerned that the American Republicans will continue to see him as an example and erode democracy in the US. Conversely, the Right does not provide one perspective nor framing of Hungary. There are continued concerns over Orbán's relationship with China and the past 10 years of rule of law violations and democratic backsliding, which adopt a more thematic frame, but those who defend Orbán adopt an episodic frame, by suggesting that while there may be specific issues with Orbán's policies they are not suggestive of an erosion of democracy.<sup>151</sup> While articles from the Left reference LGBTQI+ rights, concerns about Orbán's xenophobia, and consistently cover the developments between the EU and Hungary, this was rarely a concern in the articles from the Right. Notably, had articles that are cross-published from media outlets like *Associated Press* been included then this would have increased the coverage from *Fox News* on EU-related matters, but as states in the methodology this would have brought in intentionally non-partisan language since *Associated Press* is a non-partisan organizations. As such, the findings suggest that coverage of this theme has become more partisan overtime on the Left, but that the health Hungary's democracy is still hotly debated on the Right, and therefore as a whole not strictly cut down partisan lines. Yes, the coverage has become more partisan, but the debate on the Right continues.

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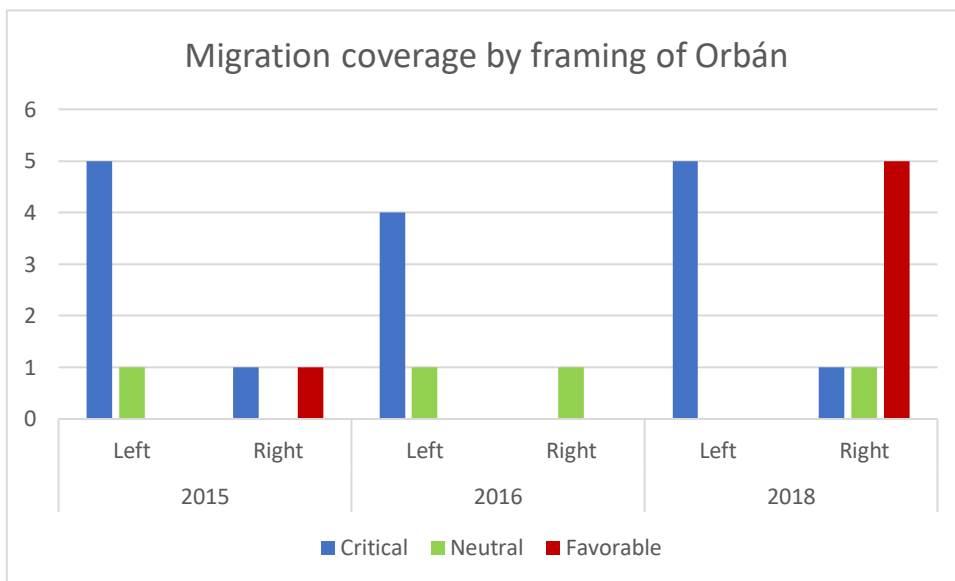
<sup>150</sup> "Episodic vs. Thematic Stories."

<sup>151</sup> "Episodic vs. Thematic Stories."

#### 4.4 Migration/refugee crisis

To answer RQ2: “Has coverage of Orbán’s Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?” I discuss how the articles on the Left and the Right frame Orbán and his policies on migration and the refugee crisis, as well as how they portray his critics, specifically George Soros. After exploring this, I conclude with a summary of how these findings answer RQ2. From 2015-2018, the topic of migration and the Refugee Crisis in Hungary dominated 24 articles. Figure 6 illustrates that in 2015 and 2016, all articles were either critical or neutral about Viktor Orbán and his immigration policies. Yet, in 2018, a shift occurred in which some of the coverage on the Right became more favorable towards Orbán’s policies – namely, the “Stop Soros” law package.

Figure 6. Migration coverage by framing of Orbán (Figure by author)



##### 4.4.1 Framing of Orbán’s policies

A predictable pattern emerges in the articles here. Authors of the critical articles critical highlight criticisms of Orbán’s policies, such as how they go against EU values. Authors of neutral articles present a relatively even distribution of criticism and defense of Orbán’s

policies. Finally, authors of favorable articles primarily highlight the Hungarian government’s own reasoning for anti-migration policies. In the example below, the authors mainly highlight critics of the “Stop Soros” legislation throughout the article, and in the very beginning they introduce the topic with a negative frame:

“Hungary’s parliament is set to debate draft legislation Tuesday that would shut down organizations and even imprison people who help illegal immigrants, in a move that has alarmed human rights groups as well as the European Union, of which Hungary is a member.”<sup>152</sup>

Additionally, critical authors sometimes draw on a thematic frame or draw comparisons with countries like Russia. The following example comes from 2018, during which a Pew Research Center survey found only 27% of Americans who identified as Republican/lean Republican held a favorable view of Orbán, and that number fell to 16% for those who identified as Democrat/lean Democrat.<sup>153</sup> Thus, it is safe to say that comparisons highlighting the relationship between Putin and Orbán is not meant to compliment Orbán’s political savvy:

“Orban, who won a third consecutive term in power this year, has locked horns with EU leaders in recent years over his country’s hardline immigration policies and for clamping down on democratic institutions – including civic organizations, the media and academic institutions – as he consolidated his power.

He has also openly criticized the EU’s sanctions against Russia over Moscow’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and has met regularly with Russian President Vladimir Putin.”<sup>154</sup>

Similarly, the neutral articles also bring up how Orbán’s policies could reflect a more concerning streak of undemocratic practices, but they also include more substantial

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<sup>152</sup> Hilary Clarke and Stephanie Halasz, “Hungary to Debate Law That Would Criminalize Helping Illegal Immigrants,” CNN, June 4, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/04/europe/hungary-immigrants-crackdown-intl/index.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Jacob Poushter, “6 Charts on How Russians, Americans See Each Other,” Pew Research Center, October 4, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/04/6-charts-on-how-russians-and-americans-see-each-other/>.

<sup>154</sup> Angela Dewan, “Hungary’s Orban Warns of Backlash against Immigration in European Parliament Vote,” CNN, July 28, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/28/europe/viktor-orban-hungary-european-parliament-intl/index.html>.

defenses from the government. For example, one *Fox News* article presented the “Stop Soros” package, introduced Soros’ arguments against the campaign and Orbán's politics, and then concluded with a government spokesperson’s accusations against Soros.<sup>155</sup>

Alternatively, some of the neutral articles did not reflect any larger debates about democracy, instead straightforwardly presenting the updates on the refugee crisis.

The favorable articles, as shown in Figure 6, are solely from sources on the Right. These articles prioritize the perspective of the Hungarian government and pay little attention to accusations of systemic democracy-related issues in the country. The following example shows a positive framing of Orbán’s party after the election:

“Hungary’s populist government is brimming with confidence after a comfortable election win in April, and is pushing ahead with tough policies on immigration and combating the influence of left-wing Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros. President Trump spoke with Prime Minister Viktor Orban last week, congratulating him on the formation of the new government.

According to a readout from the White House, the two ‘agreed on the need for strong national borders’ and pledged to keep relations between the two countries strong.”

#### 4.4.2 Framing of Orbán’s critics

The main critics cited within the articles are the European Union, various human rights organizations, and George Soros (starting in 2018). As with the framing of Orbán and his policies, the neutral articles do not frame the critics of Orbán in a particularly harsh or favorable way (otherwise they would not be neutral). Articles that are critical of Orbán provide more favorable descriptions of individuals like George Soros and the European Union, whereas the articles favorable towards Orbán highlight other descriptors. Consider the following to description of Soros, the first from a source on the Left and the second from sources on the Right:

“The legislation... is known informally as the ‘Stop Soros’ law, a reference to Hungarian-born billionaire investor George Soros, whose support for refugees

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<sup>155</sup> Norman, “Hungary, in Latest ‘Stop Soros’ Laws, Wants to Criminalize Migrant Helpers.”

fleeing Africa and the Middle East in recent years has made him a frequent target for Orbán’s right-wing coalition.”<sup>156</sup>

“Soros has used his financial muscle for years to push left-wing causes across the globe... Soros said his Open Society Foundations is funding more institutions in the U.S. to ensure a Democratic victory in November. It was revealed in February that he had pumped hundreds of thousands of dollars into a UK group that looked to thwart the implementation of the 2016 decision to leave the European Union.”<sup>157</sup>

Before the shift in 2018, the EU and groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were the critics the articles talked about, and they were referred to with a matter-of-fact framing, without using positive or negative tones. Thus, the critic that inspires the most partisan divide is George Soros. With the “Stop Soros” package, articles from sources on the Right shift to exclusively framing Orbán’s critics in unfavorable ways in 2018, whereas before the coverage was not so cohesive. Articles that quoted Orbán’s critics during 2015-16, whether favorable, critical, or neutral of Orbán, did not frame them with the fervor that occurred in 2018 with George Soros.

#### 4.4.3 Interpretation of migration/refugee crisis findings

Migration, immigration, and policies about refugees are partisan issues in the United States. In a 2019 poll, when asked if the respondents opposed a ban on refugee resettlement, 77% of Democrats answered positively while only 42% of Republicans answered positively.<sup>158</sup> When asked if they opposed a ban on people coming to the US from majority Muslim countries, 72% of Democrats said they opposed while only 25% of Republicans opposed.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, it is unsurprising that articles in this study published by sources on the Left that focus on migration are generally critical of Orbán’s policies and that articles published by organizations on the Right were mostly neutral or positive towards Orbán’s policies (save

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<sup>156</sup> Vonberg and Clarke, “Hungary’s ‘Stop Soros’ Law Makes It Illegal to Help Migrants.”

<sup>157</sup> Adam Shaw, “Soros Group Pulls out of Hungary as Orbán Government Floats ‘Stop Soros’ Package,” Fox News, May 15, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/soros-group-pulls-out-of-hungary-as-orban-government-floats-stop-soros-package>.

<sup>158</sup> PRRI Staff, “A Nation of Immigrants? Diverging Perceptions of Immigrants Increasingly Marking Partisan Divides” (Public Religion Research Institute, March 12, 2020), <https://www.prri.org/research/a-nation-of-immigrants-diverging-perceptions-of-immigrants-increasingly-marking-partisan-divides/>.

<sup>159</sup> PRRI Staff.

one). The shift that occurred from 2016 to 2018 is notable, though, as an analysis of the articles suggests that during this time the coverage of Orbán's migration policies became increasingly partisan, yet the partisan divide over migration already existed in 2015-16.<sup>160</sup> Although this study is limited in terms of the number of articles, in response to RQ2 the data suggests that from 2015-2018 the coverage of Orbán's migration/refugee crisis related policies does indeed increasingly follow the American migration policy partisan divide.

#### 4.5 *LGBTQI+ rights*

Of the 93 articles covered in this study, 14 specifically are dedicated to the topic of LGBTQI+ rights. This includes articles that cover the 2018 decree that banned gender studies from the list of recognized majors in Hungarian state universities, which happened because the Hungarian government did not deem it a valuable program and did not "consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially-constructed genders, rather than biological sexes".<sup>161</sup> Before 2018 no articles covered under the search parameters of this thesis focused on LGBTQI+ rights, therefore Figure 7 covers only 2018-2021.

Interestingly, all articles that focused on LGBTQI+ rights also corresponded with the political leanings of the media sources; the articles from sources on the Left are critical of Orbán and all of the articles from sources on the Right are favorable towards him. While both the critical and the favorable articles cite the government's justifications and those who disagree with Orbán, the different perspectives are introduced in ways that could influence the reader's perceptions of the topic. Therefore, to answer RQ2: "Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?" I first analyze the framing of Orbán/his policies and then that of critics, concluding with how the findings help answer the research question.

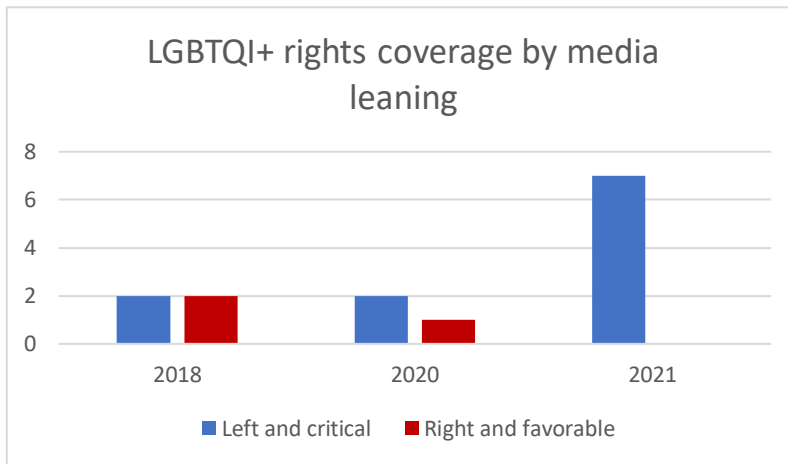
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<sup>160</sup> Bradley Jones, "Americans' Views of Immigrants Marked by Widening Partisan, Generational Divides," *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 15, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/15/americans-views-of-immigrants-marked-by-widening-partisan-generational-divides/>.

<sup>161</sup> Lydia Gall, "Hungary's Hypocritical War on Universities," *Human Rights Watch*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/06/hungarys-hypocritical-war-universities>.



Figure 7. LGBTQI+ rights coverage by media leaning (Figure by author)



#### 4.5.1 Coverage of Orbán’s policies

The image of Orbán and his supporters provided in the sources on the Left tends to be critical and often references a thematic frame, suggesting that the developments covered in the article are part of a larger undemocratic trend in Orbán’s Fidesz party:

“... the ban is seen by many as the latest attack on democracy in Hungary. Last month, the European Parliament voted to punish Prime Minister Orban for cracking down on democratic institutions in Hungary, including the press and academia.

In a statement released before the gender studies ban went into effect, the Political Studies Association, an organization supporting social science research, said the decree ‘calls into question the Hungarian government’s commitment to the principles of democracy which are the bedrock of European states.’<sup>162</sup>

In an article covering the Budapest Pride celebration in 2021, the author explained:

“this year, Pride is also a protest, as LGBTQ people and their allies rally against the country's increasingly hostile policy towards their communities -- punctuated by a new, homophobic law recently passed by Hungary's hardline government.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Lauren Kent and Samantha Tapfumaneyi, “Hungary’s Viktor Orban Bans Gender Study at Colleges,” CNN, October 19, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/19/europe/hungary-bans-gender-study-at-colleges-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Saskya Vandoorne, Melissa Bell, and Kara Fox, “Hungary Pride: Thousands Join Event as LGBTQ People Face Growing Hostility,” CNN, July 25, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/24/europe/budapest-hungary-pride-protest-intl/index.html>.

Finally, a *Vox* article explicitly states “Viktor Orbán’s war on LGBTQ identities is a war on democracy.”<sup>164</sup> The articles from sources on the Left consistently connect the anti-LGBTQI+ policies of Orbán’s government to other un-democratic practices, highlighting and extremely critical framing of Orbán. Thus, when the authors do shift to quoting statements released by Orbán’s government, the policies and government are already framed in a negative light. Conversely, sources on the Right offer a more favorable depiction of Orbán and his politics. These articles often apply the term “populist” to Orbán, but they use less critical language in general. For example, after gender study programs were abolished, one author introduced Orbán’s government as follows:

“...Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s government won a comfortable majority in April after an election focused primarily on immigration. Since then his Fidesz Party has been implementing key parts of its election manifesto.”<sup>165</sup>

The author offers the perspective of the government’s spokesman, but in terms of thematic framing he notes:

“Critics of the nationalist government say that Orban has been engaging in authoritarian tactics and this move is likely only to fuel such claims.”<sup>166</sup>

The specific phrasing of “fuel such claims” is interesting, as it provides no hint as to the validity of such claims. Without offering the specific concerns that the critics have of Orbán and his government, the author does not place significance on the concerns over Orbán’s authoritarian tactics.

#### 4.5.2 Coverage of Orbán’s critics

An analysis of the articles reveals that sources on the Left favorably introduced the critics of the Orbán governments policies by using positive terminology to refer to them, while the sources on the Right introduced the critics in favorable ways, which might cause right/right

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<sup>164</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Hungary’s New Anti-LGBTQ Law Shows How Culture War Hurts Democracy,” *Vox*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22547228/hungary-orban-lgbt-law-pedophilia-authoritarian>.

<sup>165</sup> Adam Shaw, “Hungary’s Populist Government Abolishes Gender Studies Courses,” *Fox News*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/hungarys-populist-government-abolishes-gender-studies-courses>.

<sup>166</sup> Shaw.

leaning readers to place less credence in the Orbán critics. In the case of LGBTQI+ rights, the Orbán critics typically range from LGBTQI+ rights groups, to the European Union, to Central European University (CEU), which was one of two universities that had gender studies program during the time when the Hungarian government stopped recognizing its validity as a degree.<sup>167</sup>

In one article favorable towards Orbán published by *Fox News*, CEU is described as a university “founded by Hungarian-American liberal billionaire George Soros” and later the author adds:

“Seen as a hostile bastion of liberalism by Orban’s administration, CEU students have participated in the ‘Vagina Monologues’ and the ‘Hate Speech Monologues,’ describing the program as being a part of ‘social change.’”<sup>168</sup>

Conversely, an article on *CNN* covering the exact same subject – the removal of gender studies as an officially recognized program – only briefly describes CEU as a “prestigious” university before quoting the university.<sup>169</sup> Although both articles provided the perspectives that are critical of the Hungarian policy, the first specifically frames dissenting opinion with the political leanings of CEU’s founder and notes the Orbán administration’s negative opinion of the university, whereas the second article framed CEU as a university with a great reputation.

Similarly, the terminology about organizations which support trans rights vary as well. In an article published by *The Washington Times*, the author first introduces the law that removed trans and intersex individuals from changing their sex on official government documents and then notes that “transgender groups cried foul,” even though Amnesty International, the group quoted later in the article, is far more comprehensive than a “transgender group”. Later the author calls Orbán’s critics “liberal activists” and EU

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<sup>167</sup> Gall, “Hungary’s Hypocritical War on Universities.”

<sup>168</sup> Parke, “Hungary Bans Gender Studies Because It Is ‘an Ideology Not a Science.’”

<sup>169</sup> Kent and Tapfumaneyi, “Hungary’s Viktor Orban Bans Gender Study at Colleges.”

officials, and then cherry-picks part of Amnesty International’s mission by writing that Orbán’s government:

“has been criticized by liberal activists and European Union officials for its path in rejecting, and even acting contrary to, their prescriptions on such matters as immigration, national sovereignty and religious freedom.

Amnesty International and other trans-rights groups asked that the Hungarian Constitutional Court review the law.”<sup>170</sup>

Comparatively, in an article published in *CNN*, Transgender Europe, an organization dedicated to the human rights of transgender individuals, is described as a “human rights organization” and Amnesty Hungary is described more broadly as a “rights group”.<sup>171</sup> While Amnesty International and Amnesty Hungary certainly do promote the rights of transgender people, they are dedicated to human rights in general.<sup>172</sup> By rejecting the frame of human rights in the *Fox news* article, the author reduces the credibility of the organizations who criticize Orbán as “liberal activists,” whereas the author from *CNN* more generally describes the organizations as falling within “human rights”, which is a less politically-loaded term.

#### 4.5.3 Interpretation of LGBTQI+ findings

The examples from sources on the Left and Right illustrate how different authors frame Orbán and his government’s policies. While general acceptance of homosexuality has increased across political boundaries in the US, it still remains a partisan issue as Democrats are more accepting than Republicans on the topic of acceptance of

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<sup>170</sup> Victor Morton, “Hungary Bans Transgender Birth Certificate Changes,” *The Washington Times*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/may/19/hungary-bans-transgender-birth-certificate-changes/>.

<sup>171</sup> Lindsay Isaac and Sharon Braithwaite, “Hungary Passes Law Effectively barring Same-Sex Couples from Adopting,” *CNN*, December 15, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/15/europe/hungary-lgbtq-adoption-ban-intl/index.html>.

<sup>172</sup> “Amnesty International,” Amnesty International, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/>; Amnesty International, “Hungary: Decision to Strip Trans People of the Right to Legal Gender Recognition Is ‘Step Back into the Dark Ages,’” Amnesty International, May 19, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/05/hungary/>.

homosexuality.<sup>173</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that the articles from Left news sources are consistently critical of the policies, include thematic frames by suggesting that this is only part of a larger trend of homophobia and undemocratic practices, and frame Orbán's critics in a positive, respectful manner. Further, it is characteristic that the Right news sources provide a less critical description of Orbán and his policies which restrict LGBTQI+ freedoms and education.

Returning to RQ2: Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán? Yes, the data suggests that this is a theme in which Orbán's policies align with American media on the Right of the political spectrum and conflicts with media on the Left, and which rose in importance around 2018. Further, the data suggest that articles from the Left prefer to link Orbán's LGBTQI+ and gender studies policies as being connected to a larger trend of democratic backsliding and homophobia, whereas articles from the Right pay less attention to such interpretations, and generally don't offer as much coverage to LGBTQI+ rights issues in relation to Orbán.

#### 4.6 *Discussion & summary*

This chapter has presented the findings based on a qualitative content analysis of 93 articles, with the goal of answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What aspects of Hungarian politics have online media on the Left and Right focused on between 2011-2021 in the United States?

RQ2: Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?

Based on the results from section 4.2, the answer to RQ1 is that the main aspects of Hungarian politics covered in American media are democracy, migration, and LGBTQI+ rights. The response to RQ2 arises by analyzing the main themes individually: coverage of

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<sup>173</sup> Ted G. Jelen, "Public Attitudes Toward Abortion and LGBTQ Issues: A Dynamic Analysis of Region and Partisanship," *SAGE Open* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 2158244017697362, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697362>.

migration has indeed become more partisan over time since the “Stop Soros” package came into law; coverage of LGBTQI+ rights has remained consistently partisan; and coverage of democracy has somewhat become more partisan, as there is debate on the Right over whether or not Orbán is an acceptable bedfellow, while on the Left the response is consistent criticism.

Returning to the suggestion by András Szalay-Berzeviczy, in his summary of the book *Hungary on the Front Pages – The history of Hungary from the perspective of the western media 1848-2020* that Hungary’s prominence in negative Western press is characterized by “wokeness” or “cancel culture,” we see similar accusations on the Right among those who write favorably of Orbán.<sup>174</sup> This is a very common script repeated by Orbán and his political allies.<sup>175</sup> Yet, authors on the Right who spoke quite critically of Orbán did so because of his ties with China or erosion of democratic norms, not because of his anti-LGBTQI+ or xenophobic policies. Thus, even if one reduces concerns such as the rolling back of LGBTQI+ rights as “Eurobabble, liberal grandstanding and ‘PC’ platitudes,” the results of this research indicate that there is concern on both the Left and the Right over Hungary’s democracy and relationship with China, though admittedly the concern is greater on the Left.<sup>176</sup>

Discussions regarding Hungary’s democracy reveals a deeper conflict on the Right. Although articles published in sources on the Left are generally critical toward Orbán and his policies and support more EU-level action to curb democratic backsliding, articles from the Right are more divided. For certain authors, although they appreciate that Orbán supports conservative values and agree he is treated unfairly in Western media, they also warn that he has systematically eroded democracy in Hungary and that he has,

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<sup>174</sup> Nagy-Csomor, “‘A Nyugat Azt Méltatja, Ami Érdekeinek Megfelelő’ - Interjú Szalay-Berzeviczy Andrással.”

<sup>175</sup> Viktor Orbán, “Viktor Orbán’s ‘State of the Nation’ Address,” About Hungary, February 20, 2018, <https://abouthungary.hu/prime-minister/viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address>; Kovács, “What Do Globalists and Communist Collaborators Have in Common?”

<sup>176</sup> Orbán, “Viktor Orbán’s ‘State of the Nation’ Address.”

unfortunately, strengthened ties with China despite their human rights abuses. Conversely, the other authors on the Right that support Orbán do not pretend as if he is the pinnacle of democratic leadership. They admit that Orbán has flaws, such as some level of corruption, but they use an episodic frame to explain that whatever issue they're referencing is not indicative of a failing democracy. They opine that tales of democratic backsliding are unfairly overblown in Left-wing Western media.

It's concerning that a section of the articles from the Right dismiss the issue of democratic backsliding in Hungary. Despite repeated concerns on the American Left and the Right, Hungarians themselves, and numerous others over the state of democracy Hungary, CPAC still chose to hold its conference in Budapest because of Orbán's conservative values and invite him to speak at its conference in August. Currently in the US, there is a split among Republicans who continue to support Trump, even after the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, and those who do not. Despite the checks and balances that exist in the US government system, it is not immune to democratic backsliding, and democratic erosion has already occurred.<sup>177</sup>

Returning to Cas Mudde, whose work is discussed in the literature review, he suggests there are several lessons that supporters of democracy should learn from Hungary to help prevent similar events from happening in the US.<sup>178</sup> 1. Trying to appease the far-right, as Obama and Biden attempted, does not work; 2. Building state-wide and investing in grassroots "progressive circles" should be a priority, since the civil-society landscape in the US is dominated by the "(far) Right", as it is in Hungary; 3. Progressive Democrats should form broader alliances with other small-d democrats, even if they are conservative, because a "without a (liberal) democratic system, the progressive struggle stands no chance"; 4. Finally, referencing the concept coined by Kim Lane Scheppele, Mudde concurs that rather than military coups, we should be more cautious about a Frankenstate developing in the

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<sup>177</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), "The Global State of Democracy 2021."

<sup>178</sup> Mudde, "The Far-Right Threat in the United States," 110.

US, which is “an authoritarian regime created by a specific combination of individually democratic laws.” He specifically advises:

“instead of discussing the specific problems of individual electoral laws that Republicans have submitted and passed in state legislatures, we should look at the way all the laws together affect the right and opportunity to vote for both the whole electorate and specific (targeted) groups within it.”<sup>179</sup>

The findings from this research suggest that the formation of broader alliances between small-d democrats on the Right and progressive Democrats in the US could be possible, since there are those on the Right who criticize Orbán, despite certain shared values with American conservatives, because of his erosion of democracy and deepening ties with China. Yet, perhaps because of the continued and unified criticism of Orbán on the Left, particularly about his relationship with the American Right, there is a disturbing trend on the Right by those who dismiss concerns about human rights and democratic backsliding.

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<sup>179</sup> Mudde, 110–13.



## 5 Conclusion

The relationship between Orbán and American partisan politics is curious. Even if one discards concerns over the roll back on LGBTQI+ rights and his Islamophobic rhetoric, there is still ample evidence of systemic erosion of democracy and corruption in Hungary, promoted by Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party. Based on a qualitative content analysis of 93 articles from media on the Right and Left, several findings arose which provided some answers to the research questions:

RQ1: What aspects of Hungarian politics have online media on the Left and Right focused on between 2011-2021 in the United States?

RQ2: Has coverage of Orbán's Hungary become more partisan in this period, in terms of how it is covered and how favorable or critical the media is toward Orbán?

When writing about Orbán's Hungary in online media during 2011-2021, American media generally focused on three themes: democracy, LGBTQI+ rights, and migration. While the American Left continues to generally provide critical reports on Orbán's anti-LGBTQI+ policies, anti-migrant policies, and undemocratic practices, the American Right is more of a mixed bag. Evidently, the "Stop Soros" package ignited something on the Right, because they adopted Orbán's framing of Soros as a sinister left-wing billionaire. Unsurprisingly, the Right also was not as concerned about the state of LGBTQI+ rights in Hungary, which makes sense considering that in general that is not something they campaign for.

Yet, the most disconcerting trend is the debate about the state of democracy in Hungary. Rather than appreciating Orbán's conservative values from afar while condemning Orbán's consolidation of power, several authors took the time to draw up detailed and lengthy defenses of Orbán. Thus, while the results of this study suggest that coverage of the state of Hungary's LGBTQI+ rights has remained partisan and that migration has become increasingly polarized, the theme of democracy in Hungary is more complicated. It has become a partisan debate in some ways, with the American Left accusing the Right of embracing Orbán's tactics and some on the American Right accusing the Left of engaging in a woke culture war. Yet, on the Right there are still those who refuse to defend Orbán, even if they agree with certain parts of his ideology, because of his disrespect for democratic standards.

While a few articles debating Hungary might not inspire fear, this is indicative of a larger trend. In 2020, Tucker Carlson’s nightly program broke the US record for the “most-watched cable news program.”<sup>180</sup> The next year, he ventured to Budapest to interview Orbán and share Orbán’s particular form of conservatism. As Dalibor Rohac lamented in *National Review*, “authoritarianism, corruption, and grievance-driven revisionism do not become any more justifiable just because they are practiced by someone whom the Left sees as its nemesis.”<sup>181</sup> While there are some voices of reason, the growing bifurcation on the Right between those who support Trump, even after the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, and those who do not shows that there is deep-seated conflict already, which will likely be reflected in the upcoming elections.<sup>182</sup>

### 5.1 *Limitations and further research*

One of the limitations of this study relates to the secondary research. While the primary research itself could easily be conducted without knowledge of Hungarian, the reports and book that so similarly replicate this study are only available in Hungarian. Even if the reports by Nézőpont Institute present the results in ways that are favorable toward Orbán and his policies, I’m sure they nevertheless contain insights about Hungary’s place in Western media in general, which a crude Google translation does not properly interpret.

In case there was any question before, the analysis in this thesis shows that the cynicism toward Orbán is fairly cohesive on the Left. Thus, first of all, future research could dive specifically into how those on the Right of the political spectrum differ in their framing of Orbán and his policies, or specifically on Tucker Carlson’s extensive coverage of Orbán. Second of all, long form articles, normally from *Vox*, *National Review*, and *The Atlantic*, had much stronger language towards Orbán or his critics, depending on who they

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<sup>180</sup> Jake Lahut, “Tucker Carlson, the Most Popular Cable News Host in US History, Claims He Has No Idea What His Ratings Are: ‘I Don’t Know How to Read a Ratings Chart,’” *Business Insider*, accessed July 31, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/tucker-carlson-ratings-claim-fox-news-semafor-ben-smith-interview-2022-7>.

<sup>181</sup> Rohac, “The Conservative Embrace of Hungary’s Viktor Orban Is Misguided.”

<sup>182</sup> Anthony Zurcher, “New Republican Splits over Trump and Riot,” *BBC News*, February 11, 2022, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60311985>.

supported, when compared with *CNN*, *Fox*, and *The Washington Times*. Future research should probably isolate one grouping or the other on the Right and focus on one, to attain a more in-depth study.

According to a YouGov poll conducted in 2022 when Americans were asked if they had a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Viktor Orbán, 62% said they didn't know, 6% said very favorable, 9% favorable, 8% somewhat unfavorable, and 14% very unfavorable.<sup>183</sup> Comparatively, 32% selected "don't know" for Boris Johnson and 66% did so for Olaf Scholz.<sup>184</sup> With the frequency that Hungary appears in the press in the US, it is interesting that more individuals do not have a strong opinion on Orbán. For this reason, future research in this topic could research the relationship between the media's portrayal of Orbán's Hungary, and how much it impacts every-day American citizens.

Finally, this thesis did not seek to examine whether or not American media is *unfairly* biased toward Orbán. Due to accusations from Orbán's government that the mainstream media spreads fake news about Hungary, future research could look into how much fake news there truly is.<sup>185</sup> Whether this study is focused on the US or Western media in general, it would be interestingly to delve into this and see how much veracity these statements have.

## 5.2 *Final remarks*

While continually searching new sites, it became evident that coverage of Orbán has continued into this year. Especially with the reprimands from the EU and the upcoming CPAC conference in August, Orbán's appearance in discussions about American democracy are likely to continue for quite some time. As Cas Mudde advised, drawing

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<sup>183</sup> "The Economist/YouGov Poll: April 9 - 12, 2022 - 1500 U.S. Adult Citizens" (YouGov, 2022), <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/3gmmhwtyj0/econToplines.pdf>.

<sup>184</sup> "The Economist/YouGov Poll: April 9 - 12, 2022 - 1500 U.S. Adult Citizens."

<sup>185</sup> Zoltán Kovács, "Fake News Alert: They Just Can't Stop Twisting My Words, Can They," *About Hungary*, May 5, 2022, <https://abouthungary.hu//blog/fake-news-alert-they-just-cant-stop-twisting-my-words-can-they>.

from the framework of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatts book *How Democracies Die*, coalition-building is crucial:

“[W]hen push comes to shove, Democrats should be willing to work with all democrats, including those that support pro-rich economic policies (like the American Enterprise Institute) or “pro-life” sociocultural policies (like certain Christian groups). Obviously, both will be adversaries in the struggle for progressive politics, but without a (liberal) democratic system, the progressive struggle stands no chance.”<sup>186</sup>

Hopefully, those invested in American democracy from all political backgrounds will be able to put aside partisan issues, important as they are, and agree that mirroring the centralized system Orbán has crafted should be avoided at all costs.

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<sup>186</sup> Mudde, “The Far-Right Threat in the United States,” 112; Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, First edition (New York: Crown, 2018).

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