

The politics of outrage: Anger and disgust in Hungarian party politics and public opinion*

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February 11, 2014

Abstract

The 2010 elections dramatically rearranged Hungary's party politics, with centrist parties disappearing and new fringe factions capturing a large portion of the vote. This instability coincided with a rising tide of extremism, polarization, and outright anti-political angst. What accounts for these reversals? My dissertation research addresses this question by analyzing the emotions underlying political learning. I argue that the logic of party competition in post-communist East Central Europe, including pervasive media technologies and constraint from the European Union, make appealing to citizens' sense of outrage a more attractive short-term strategy for parties in establishing political support than reliance upon ideological or programmatic appeals. Thus, political elites work to attract support and differentiate themselves by inspiring outrage against their rivals with attack politics. Such vitriol elicits anger and encourages citizens to act by casting their vote as a protest, driving volatility. Over time, however, the response to outrage evolves into disgust towards the political system, which decreases political efficacy and threatens support for the norms of participation, contestation, and tolerance underlying democratic governance. This paper provides a brief exposition of my dissertation theory and three related arms of the empirical analysis that I hope to undertake during my time in Hungary.

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1 Introduction

Accusations and scandals are increasingly the currency of political debate, and this is especially apparent in East Central Europe (ECE). A stream of vitriol in which all sides accuse political rivals of outrageous offenses is apparent, and these political antics coincide with unstable party politics, growing trends of xenophobia and extremism, and disdain for the process of democratic contestation. These patterns are particularly surprising in light of theories positing a steady increase in the consolidation of democracy and the stabilization of party politics from the time of democratic transition onward (Tavits and Annus, 2006). Moreover, although work in political psychology addresses the effects of political attacks, contradictory findings plague this literature. Some studies find that political negativity informs citizens and encourages them to participate (Geer and Lau, 2006; Mark, 2009), while others conclude that it causes disengagement and demobilization (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Kamber, 1997; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011). My dissertation helps us understand both non-linear democratic development in ECE and conflicting findings regarding the effects of political attacks by examining the emotional processes underlying political learning.

This study's main goal is to analyze Hungarian citizens' emotional reactions to politics in order to better understand how citizens in new democracies come to relate to their political systems. It is rooted in the tradition pointing to public orientations towards politics, or political culture, as a key determinant for the quality of democratic governance (De Tocqueville, 2004; Almond and Verba, 1963; Putnam, 1994), and is novel in basing the study of mass attitudes towards the polity in the psychology of emotional response. An understanding of citizens' political experiences is integral to explaining their political orientations, and emotional reactions drive the perception of these experiences. In fact, scholars in psychology increasingly see emotion as preceding and guiding cognition (Zajonc, 1980; Damasio, 2005), and the study of emotion has become an important area in political science as well (Marcus et al., 2000; Brader, 2006; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Lodge and Taber, 2013). Moreover, with scholars now talking in terms of an "outrage industry" in political coverage (Berry and Sobieraj, 2013), an understanding of the psychological effects of these tactics and the related implications for public opinion and political culture is increasingly necessary. I argue that elites leverage political outrage in an attempt to encourage action and attract support. This vitriol initially elicits anger and causes citizens to take action, namely through protest voting so evident throughout ECE (Pop-Eleches, 2010). However, over time the emotional reaction to a steady stream of outrage accusations evolves from anger at the specific targets of the accusations into disgust towards the process of democratic competition writ large, thereby decreasing feelings of political efficacy and threatening support for norm of participation.

2 Why so outraged?

Why are appeals to citizens' sense of outrage so common in ECE? I point to two unique technological and geopolitical processes that encourage their use over programmatic or ideological appeals: post-communist democratization in the contemporary media environment and intense policy constraint from the European Union (EU). These factors drastically influence the logic of political competition in the region, creating a situation in which it is far easier for parties to rely upon accusations of outrages to differentiate themselves than programmatic appeals.

The legacy of post-communism produced highly atomized societies (Przeworski, 1991), and civil society in post-communist states remained extremely difficult for political parties to penetrate well into the democratic period (Howard, 2003). Additionally, in our media-saturated age, parties in ECE worked to penetrate society from above by appealing to an undifferentiated "people" instead of developing from the bottom up from social groups such as unions and clerical organizations (Mair, 1996; Innes, 2002). While increasingly pervasive media, the shift towards catch-all parties, and the associated trends of lowered party identification and partisan dealignment are evident in advanced industrial democracies as well (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000), this trend is doubly powerful in young democracies. In these circumstances, parties cannot rely upon their ownership of particular issues or reputations for representing certain segments of society to differentiate themselves from competitors. As Innes argues, "for all New Labour's entrepreneurialism, Western Europe's mainstream parties continue to carry far more historical baggage than successful parties in Eastern Europe" (Innes, 2002, p. 100). Finally, in the fragmented contemporary media environment in which advertising revenue often dictates programming decisions, outrageous political coverage is more profitable (Berry and Sobieraj, 2013), and political attacks attract more attention from news outlets (Geer, 2012).

Concurrently, international constraints, primarily from the EU, place boundaries on the policies parties can offer. The EU has developed great authority in a number of issue areas that typically make up the axes of party competition. Thus, domestic parties have often been unable to offer policy alternatives on crucial issues, and in many key domains their positions have become indistinguishable from both the positions of the EU and their competitors (Mair, 2013; Nanou and Dorussen, 2013). This makes it difficult for parties to attract support by offering programmatically distinct platforms (Innes, 2002), and explains why parties in post-communist Europe are ideologically inconsistent in terms of policy output (Tavits and Letki, 2009) and "vacuous and fickle when it comes to policy content" (Carey and Reynolds, 2007, p. 271).

3 Psychological reactions: from anger to disgust

These factors leave party leaders with a dilemma: they must find a way to attract support without relying upon programmatic or ideological appeals. Stoking outrage is an enticing means of doing so. Moral anger, or outrage, is the result of a violation of morality or justice (Haidt, 2003; Batson et al., 2007, p. 1,272). It is the emotion of “how dare they” so often employed by politicians, and for good reason. It “fires up the base,” encouraging action through passion (Brader, 2006; Carver and Harmon-Jones, 2009; Valentino et al., 2011). Thus, moral anger towards a political actor is likely to result in a vote against them. Moreover, it provides a solution to the problem of differentiation from competitors by activating notions of group boundaries (Haidt, 2003; Tooby et al., 2006). Thus, political elites can leverage outrage in a process of “emotional entrepreneurship” yielding political support by defining a group of morally upright patriots and their opponents without reliance upon programmatic or ideological substance (McDermott, 2010). The increasing propensity of both new and conventional media to cover outrageous accusations over other types of appeals (Geer, 2012), and the well-documented negativity bias that people tend to notice and remember the negative over the positive (Rozin and Royzman, 2001; Ito et al., 1998) both increase the potency of these incentives.

In contrast to the short-term effects of moral anger, over time an outrage-saturated political information environment has a different, demobilizing effect. Constant exposure to outrageous appeals transforms moral anger at specific actors into disgust at political parties, social groups, and the very practice of competitive politics. Indeed, there is evidence that political scandals cause many citizens to feel that, as opposed to the disgraced politicians accused of outrageous transgressions being exceptions, they are just the tip of the iceberg of a system that is rotten to the core (Sabato, 1991; Patterson, 2009) Anger and disgust are elicited through different processes; anger typically involves an appraisal of threat, wrongdoing, or blame, while disgust is the result of repeated associations of an object with something nasty (Giner-Sorolla, 2012). The appraisals that elicit anger and the associations leading to disgust are, however, closely linked: a common route to associating an object with disgust is repeatedly feeling unresolved anger towards it (Fischer and Roseman, 2007). These emotions have very different action tendencies: *moral anger* is associated with the urge to confront while *disgust* leads to avoidance (Roseman et al., 1994; Haidt et al., 1997; Carver and Harmon-Jones, 2009). In other words, we want to fix a situation that angers us, but we just want to distance ourselves from objects of disgust.

This focus on moral anger’s transition into disgust over time is completely novel in political psychology, and it helps us understand a paradox pertaining to negativity in politics:

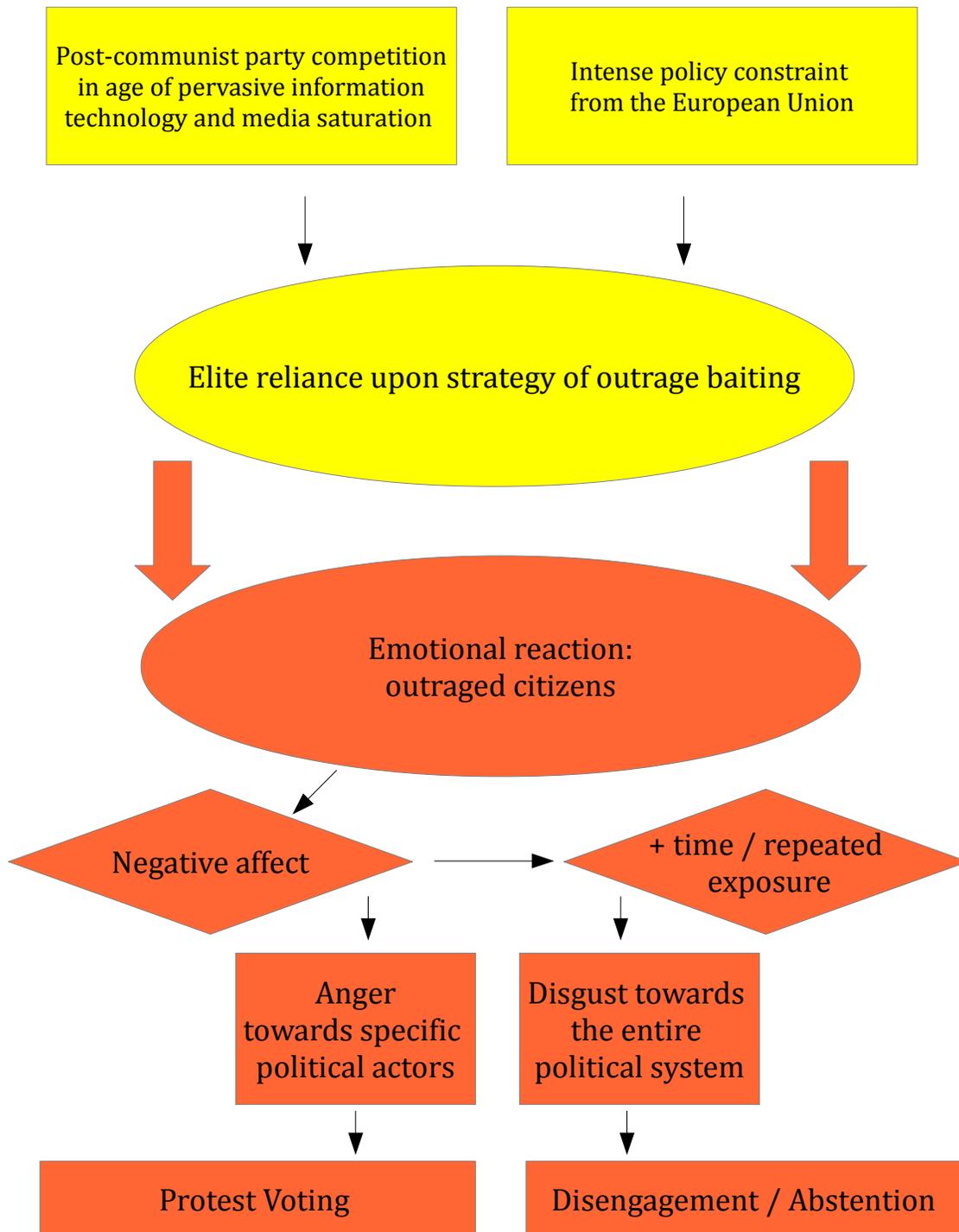


Figure 1: Sketch of the theory

it typically increases political action but sometimes stymies it. Indeed, research shows that in some circumstances political attacks arouse action (Geer and Lau, 2006; Mark, 2009), whereas in others they lead to withdrawal (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Kamber, 1997; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011). On the one hand is *outrage motivation*, which can inspire a citizen to vote for a party or take part in a rally, but on the other is *outrage exhaustion*, or the transition of moral anger into disgust, which causes disengagement and deep cynicism towards politics writ large.

In sum, the theory explained above and presented in Figure 1 produces five central hypotheses. First, politicians resort to attack tactics to overcome the problem they have distinguishing themselves programmatically because of international constraint and the unique challenges facing new political parties in the information age (H1). Initially, this outrage baiting does provoke anger (H2), and thus in the short-term this antipathy towards the specific targets of the attacks encourages protest voting to punish them (H3). Over time, however, constant and unresolved outrage at politics causes citizens to feel generalized disgust towards all political actors and the political system writ large (H4), leading to political disengagement and undermining support for democratic norms of contestation and participation (H5).

4 Research Design

Testing the hypotheses presented above requires a multi-methods research design employing a variety of strategies to understand the causes and consequences of the use of outrage baiting in politics. While the analysis of extant survey data and a content analysis of Hungarian media make up important parts of the dissertation, in this section I will focus primarily on three related arms of the research that directly relate to my current fieldwork. The first is an experiment to document the immediate emotional reactions citizens have to politics in general and political attacks from the left and right specifically. The second branch consists of interviews and focus groups to allow people to explain their emotional reactions towards politics in their own words and to pre-test future survey indicators. The third is an original survey that I hope to conduct later in the year in an attempt to leverage multiple original indicators to pick up on the over-time transition of anger into disgust.

4.1 Experimental Studies

As with many research agendas in political psychology, experimental studies form a critical foundation of the present research. To date, an online experiment run in March of 2013

with participants from the Hungarian general population demonstrated the initial emotional reaction to appeals to outrage, serving as a first look at H2 and H3. Participants in a treatment condition who read a fictional news story involving an accusation of outrageous misconduct did report being very angry, providing initial confirmation of H2. Moreover, angry participants rated the target of the outrage accusation (Fidesz) lower on a feeling thermometer and were slightly more likely to want to take action, providing suggestive evidence for H3. I included two control conditions in this experiment — one covering political events with no outrageous accusations and another having nothing to do with politics — and the mere mention of politics in the political control also elicited a significant amount of anger. This is suggestive of long-term negative affect such as disgust towards politics.

There were, however, many shortcomings with this experiment, mainly having to do with my focus at the time purely on outrage and anger at the expense of looking for signs of disgust. First, there was a strong backlash in the treatment condition subjecting participants to the outrageous accusation against the accuser as well. In retrospect, I believe this has to do with the reaction of disgust and related attributions of blame for the situation and/or credibility of the accusations. However, measures that would have allowed me to analyze for these possibilities were missing. Another key issue was failure to treat. There was a high rate of participants who did not spend adequate time on the manipulation article and thus could not be included in the analysis. However, the drop-out rate was not even across conditions, with those in the outrage condition being less likely to read the entire manipulation than those in the political control, and those in the political control being less likely to complete the article than those in the non-political control. This in and of itself is suggestive that the mere mention of politics is a turn off for many participants, and that outrageous accusations are even more of a turn off. However, it does complicate the ability to look for differences between subjects in experimental conditions.

During my time in Budapest I will run a second experimental study in which I hope to leverage the lessons of last year's study to provide a more rigorous analysis of the immediate emotional reaction to outrage baiting. This study's main goal is to examine the emotional reactions Hungarian citizens of different ideological orientations have towards politics in general and towards outrage appeals from the left and right specifically. It builds upon the findings from the first study but improves upon it, mainly in terms of a more controlled stimulus that will combat the dropout rate and better measurement. The study is a collaboration with the Political Ideology Lab at ELTE, a large Budapest university. Participants will be recruited from ELTE undergraduate courses in the social sciences. The study will take part in two waves in order to measure key variables in advance without priming political considerations in the control group immediately before the manipulation. About a week before the main

section of the study, participants will fill out a brief online pre-test with numerous potential moderating variables such as the moral foundations battery, moral traditionalism, political knowledge, ideology, and affect towards parties. Participants will then take the rest of the study in person in a classroom at ELTE about a week later. This second wave of the study will immediately begin with the manipulation. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of four conditions and told they are about to read an op-ed piece about a current topic, divided into small pieces so we can measure their reactions to each statement. Again, there will be two controls, one having nothing to do with politics and another that primes political themes and actors but does not include outrageous accusations. Because the student sample allows the recruitment of a larger pool of participants I will be able to include two treatment conditions — one in which the left attacks the right and another in which the right attacks the left. This will make it possible to analyze how participants' ideological orientations moderate their emotional reactions to outrageous accusations from each side of the political spectrum.

The manipulations themselves will take the form of argumentative op-ed pieces, all with the same basic structure: “The five lies of” Thus, each will be an argument against something, and the syntactic structures of each statement will remain consistent across conditions. During the manipulation, participants will be presented with each “lie” one at a time, and they will immediately be asked to rate what emotion each statement makes them feel and whether they think this accusation is credible or not. The targets of the treatment conditions are quite clear - the “Orbán Government” and the “Bajnai-Gyurcsány union” will be the targets and specific accusations have been taken from the current coverage of the campaign and altered in a way to mirror one another as closely as possible. The control conditions have proven to be more challenging. Tentatively the control condition is “The 5 lies of the Paleo diet” and the political control condition is “The 5 lies of EU agricultural policy.” This condition in particular has proven difficult to design. The goal is to have something that allows for the mention of both political parties and individual politicians without significant valence in either direction towards them, so any better ideas for this manipulation (or the others) would be greatly appreciated. Following these manipulations, participants will complete a second short questionnaire containing many dependent variables, ranging from affect towards each political party and politician (feeling thermometers), to measures of partisan stereotyping, evaluations of the state of politics in Hungary, intended vote choice, external and internal political efficacy, social trust, and measures of social distance from those on the other side of the political spectrum.

4.2 Qualitative Investigation

One major goal during my time in Hungary is to gather more detailed, context-laden evidence as to how people feel about politics, why they feel the way they do, and, most importantly, how these reactions have evolved over time. This is primarily to get a first cut look at the over time transition of anger into disgust (H4) and the differences in the ways anger and disgust affect public opinion and political behavior (H3 and H5). This is vital given the limitations of experimental data in testing my hypotheses. Indeed, lab experiments are too artificial in terms of both elicitation of the emotion and the short time frame to get at more than the very initial psychological reaction to outrage baiting. Thus, interviews and focus groups probing the dynamics of emotional response to political appeals and events in greater detail provide the most direct and accessible way to collect data on the way emotional reactions to politics have evolved over time

I will employ snowball-sampling in order to recruit interviewees, meaning that I am beginning with an initial group of interviewees primarily consisting of my own acquaintances and former students from two years of working as an English teacher in Szentes. I will work to build a broader sample of interviewees by asking those in my first round of interviews whether they know anybody who would be willing to participate in future interviews. As my starting sample is very young, I will be particularly interested in interviewing older family members and acquaintances. Naturally, this method of sampling will not provide a representative sample, but I will work to get the needed variation in terms of background, age, and ideological orientation. A dense network of connections in Szentes, a small town, and the surrounding villages as well as the nearest city (Szeged) is proving very useful in this respect. My semi-structured interviews begin with a general discussion of how participants feel about their political actors and systems and why they feel this way. I then ask detailed questions about specific past and current political appeals and events, encouraging interviewees to think back upon how they felt about these occurrences at first, how these feelings evolved over time, and how they contribute to their current political attitudes and behavioral intentions. For example, we discuss the Gyurcsány scandal of 2006 in which he was recorded at a private party meeting saying they had lied before the election about the state of the economy. I inquire as to how this made participants feel at first, how it changed their opinions of MSZP, how it affected their decisions to vote (or not), and the implications of these events for their attitudes towards the current leftist union.

In addition to interviews, I will also rely upon a handful of focus groups to provide valuable data as well as to pretest new indicators for future survey investigation. Focus groups will analyze political sentiments in a common way people form political opinions: in groups that replicate and react to public discourse. This is critical to provide external validity,

supplementing experiments and interviews with data from a context in which participants interact with, influence, and are influenced by those around them as they are in the real world (Morgan, 1996). Focus groups are uniquely able to gauge how people form opinions and react to stimuli (Glynn et al., 1999), making them particularly useful for analyzing how political views evolve over time. I am working with Ipsos as one potential way to handle the moderation and recruitment for these groups, but as I have a limited budget for this arm of research, I would also be eager to find more cost efficient ways to compensate a high-quality moderator and to recruit focus group participants.

4.3 Quantitative Test of the transition of outrage into disgust

The transition of moral anger into disgust provides unique challenges for empirical evaluation, as the process takes place over a longer period of time than can be ascertained by the lab experiments used in most studies of emotional response. Thus, another goal of my fieldwork in Hungary is to design an original survey instrument aimed at providing data on the transition of outrage into disgust among the population, a project for which I have applied for several grants. As I hypothesize that repeated exposure to outrage baiting, alongside repeated disappointment when the action taken to remedy the situations results in more of the same, is a key contributor to feeling disgusted, the amount of “treatment” — or exposure to outrageous politics — is the key independent variable. Finding variation on this is the main goal of the survey.

In order to test the theory that over time the dominant reaction to political outrage morphs from moral anger into disgust, the best possibility I have arrived at to date is to look at age as a proxy for exposure to political outrage. Indeed, in his analysis of disgust and abstention in the United States, Vandebroek found age to be a powerful predictor of disgust with politics, which he concluded “suggests a cumulative effect of experience with negative political events” in cultivating disgust towards the practice of politics (Vandebroek, 2012, p. 128). Additionally, it may be possible to take advantage of differential effects of political experiences at different stages in individuals’ life cycle. Scholars studying political socialization argue that the most important orientations towards politics form during adolescence and early adulthood (Campbell et al., 1960; Jennings and Niemi, 1974; Plutzer, 2002). Interviews and preliminary results from my own content analysis of Hungarian political news suggest that parties in Hungary opted for increased intensity and negativity starting around the middle of the last decade, which coincides with accession into the EU. Thus, it would be the individuals who were young adults at that time who would by now be the most disgusted. On average, the young people being socialized now would be more likely to be angry

at specific actors, but not yet feeling disgusted towards politics writ large. An analysis of political attitudes of various age cohorts using data from the European Social Survey provides suggestive evidence for these claims, but to this point there are no survey measures picking up on specific emotional reactions or their associated political ramifications.

Given the goal of the survey to track the transition of anger into disgust and analyze the political implications of both emotions, two types of measures will be of primary importance: the indicators of emotional reactions to political stimuli and measures of political ramifications. The key measures of outrage and disgust towards politics will consist of two batteries aimed at measuring emotional response. The first is a self-reported measure asking participants to rate how politics in general and specific political parties/politicians make them feel, a measure which is commonly used in political psychology studies on emotions (Valentino et al., 2011). These items ask participants to “focus on feelings rather than thoughts,” listing a range of emotions and providing a Likert scale response for each emotion. The second battery again asks participants how various objects make them feel, but this time the response options are pictures of a person making facial expressions. This facial expression endorsement measure is based upon Ekman’s findings that distinct facial expressions are related to discrete emotions and that these expressions are recognized cross-culturally (Ekman, 1993). This is the measure employed in psychological studies attempting to distinguish closely related emotions from one another (Gutierrez et al., 2012).

Attitudes towards democracy and democratic norms are also important variables. First, external efficacy, or the belief that one can effectively influence politics, will be measured by asking participants the extent to which they agree or disagree with indicators such as “People like me can make a difference in politics”, and “Who citizens vote for matters for the country.” The questionnaire will also measure perceptions of Hungarian democracy by asking participants to respond to a battery of democratic satisfaction items. Participation will be measured by asking respondents to indicate whether they would vote or be willing to take a series of other actions, such as protesting and or posting on social media about an issue. Another important dependent variable will be negative partisanship, or the extent to which participants would absolutely refuse to vote for a party. This will be measured by asking “Would you ever consider voting for [party]?” about each party, as used by Rose and Mishler (1998) in their study of negative partisanship in Eastern Europe. This will give an indicator of how each age group views political parties. Participants will also be tested on how much they adhere to norms of clean political competition with a scale I developed tapping endorsement of Machiavellian, ends-justify-the-means political strategies. This scale, validated in several prior studies, contains four indicators asking participants the extent to which they would endorse a favored party using dishonest or unfair tactics to gain

an advantage. It includes indicators like “Using misleading talking points to gain an upper hand in a debate” and “Pretending to be from another party to make them look worse,” and typically receives a Chronbach’s alpha reliability score of around .8

Following correspondence with numerous survey firms, I have tentatively decided to go with Szonda-Ipsos polling. Ipsos runs a monthly computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) survey and sells question space within this survey for a reasonable price. Cluster sampling is used to identify participants, resulting in a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Hungarian citizens who are interviewed in their homes by researchers with laptops. Moreover, because the omnibus survey includes extensive demographic information on each participant, the combination of this information with the unique measures of political opinion and emotional reactions embedded in my own module will provide ample data to examine the characteristics of citizens who feel various ways towards politics, helping us to better understand who is likely to take political action and who to withdrawal from politics completely. The beauty of this omnibus survey is the affordability, but it is still a significant expenditure. Depending on the level of funding, I may have as little as 3 to 5 minutes worth of time in the study or as much as 12-15 minutes of time. Thus, one of my main goals is to identify the indicators that are absolutely critical to testing my theory and to hone them as much as possible in the focus groups and interviews described above.

5 Challenges and Contributions

The most significant challenge in conducting this research is also its greatest potential contribution to the literature: tracing emotional reactions over time. Most studies of emotional reactions in both psychology and political science rely exclusively upon experimental studies to analyze emotional reactions. These studies can be highly efficacious in providing a snapshot of the initial emotional reaction, but so often the process that actually matters for real world cognition and behavior is the result of long-term, cumulative reactions. As Brader noted in a critique of his own landmark study of emotional reactions to advertisements, “elections are not won or lost on the basis of an effective campaign ad, but may be won or lost with an effective ad campaign” (Brader, 2005, p. 402). Indeed, the same message might elicit different emotions over time, or chronic activation of an emotion might mean different effects in the short and long terms. Without taking such over time dynamics into account we cannot understand the long-term processes that shape political behavior. This transition is of particular importance here, where the emotion that eventually results from the hypothesized process — disgust — is central to understanding both political disengagement (Vandenbroek, 2012) and the dehumanization at the root of intergroup hostility (Allport,

1954; Fiske, 2009). Current trends in Hungary, where general anti-Semitic and anti-Roma attitudes run rampant¹, and where the far right enjoys great political sway, add even greater urgency to the need to understand and address this disgust. The interviews and focus groups that I am currently conducting and the survey proposed above are attempts to get at this critical transition in emotional response, but they are both highly limited and the search for a better way to examine the over-time element of the theory continues.

In conclusion, both the challenges facing this research and its potential contributions are significant. First, by drawing attention to the divergent emotions that mediate the process of reacting to political attacks, this work will provide a better understanding of when political attacks motivate and when they demobilize, a question that has generated great confusion within the literature on negative campaigning and political incivility. This study will also help understand the unique challenges facing democratic consolidation in ECE, where extremely high levels of international constraint and unanchored parties competing for power in an era of mass media make appeals to outrage exceptionally common. However, this study of Hungarian politics will generate knowledge reaching far beyond that state's borders. The pervasive media technologies and strengthening international constraint that encourage the use of outrage in politics are global phenomena (Mair, 2013), but they are uniquely acute in ECE (Innes, 2002). This situation gives us a chance to study these cases in order to better understand the future of democratic governance in numerous states, and to confront creeping dealignment and perceptions of divisiveness, hopelessness, and paralysis in democratic politics.

¹A 2012 report by the Anti-Defamation League found the country to have both the highest absolute level of anti-Semitic sentiment and the greatest increase in such sentiment over recent years in the European Union (http://archive.adl.org/anti_semitism/adl_anti-semitism_presentation_february_2012.pdf).

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