

Challenging the ruler by visiting the voter: Evidence from Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Do opposition rallies shift votes in electoral autocracies? We exploit a unique “greenfield” opposition campaign—the 2024 Country Tour of Péter Magyar, leader of TISZA, Hungary’s newly revived opposition party—to estimate the causal effect of campaign rallies on European Parliament election outcomes. Using settlement-level data, we combine a distance-based exposure design with fixed effects and coarsened exact matching to address non-random rally placement and spatial spillovers. Results show that TISZA’s vote share was 3.1–3.5 percentage points larger in visited settlements relative to unexposed ones, accounting for about 10% of their national result. Rallies simultaneously reduced the governing party’s (FIDESZ) support. Our findings suggest that out of 100 FIDESZ supporters, 11 changed their vote in response to rallies. Google Trends evidence and heterogeneous effects suggest an awareness-raising mechanism specific to autocracies. These findings demonstrate that personal campaigning can yield substantial electoral gains for an opposition operating under severe media bias and organizational constraints.

1. Introduction

Rallies are among the most visible and traditional campaign tools, enabling candidates to mobilize voters and signal momentum. While their effects have been widely studied in majoritarian democracies (Jones, 1998; Bartels, 1985), we know little about whether—and how—they matter in electoral autocracies.

Existing research on campaign rallies, largely from the U.S. and U.K., finds mixed and often localized effects (Johnston et al., 2004; King and Morehouse, 2004; Wood, 2016; Devine, 2018). These studies face two limitations: first, rallies are typically bundled with other mobilization tools, making their isolated impact hard to identify (Johnston et al., 2012); second, evidence comes almost exclusively from competitive democracies (Neuenschwander and Foos, 2021). Whether rallies can shape electoral outcomes under conditions of media capture, resource asymmetry, and high polarization—a salient characteristic of electoral autocracies—remains an open question. This gap matters because personal contact may be especially important where opposition actors face structural disadvantages in visibility and unbiased representation. In such settings, rallies could serve not only as mobilization tools but also as mechanisms for raising awareness. Understanding rally dynamics in

autocratic regimes is increasingly relevant as democratic institutions in the West face growing challenges from populist movements.

This paper presents an empirical analysis of the causal effects of opposition rallies on the European Parliamentary Elections of 2024 in Hungary. The political system of Viktor Orbán (Prime Minister of Hungary) is classified as an electoral autocracy, and viewed by Western populists as a blueprint for governance (Applebaum, 2025; Olsen, 2023; Douthat, 2021; Chotiner, 2021).¹ We exploit a series of nearly 200 rallies held by Péter Magyar (TISZA Party) across 185 settlements, known as the Country Tour, which took place within two months preceding the 2024 European Parliamentary (EP) elections.

We contribute to the literature in three ways. First, we provide the first causal estimates of rally effects in an electoral autocracy. Second, we isolate rally effects from other campaign instruments by leveraging the unique “greenfield” nature of the Country Tour. Péter Magyar relied exclusively on in-person rallies and social media. The absence of auxiliary campaign tools allows us to estimate rally effects with high internal validity. Third, we propose and provide empirical evidence for two unstudied mechanisms of rally effects: *raising awareness* of the opposition (candidate) and the *demobilizing effect* of the ruling party’s

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¹ Hungary has been ruled by a single political party led by Viktor Orbán since 2010. Holding an (almost) uninterrupted constitutional majority, Orbán has set out a political system with several autocratic traits, even though elections are regularly held (Ionszki and Lengyel, 2025).

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supporters. We argue that these channels are particularly relevant in autocracies where the opposition's access to media representation is systematically constrained, and the government is portrayed through a uniformly positive narrative.

Estimating causal rally effects is complicated by the non-random selection of rally locations and potential spillovers across settlements. Our design addresses these challenges using fixed-effects regressions, matching, and placebo estimations.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. After reviewing the relevant literature in Section 2, we discuss the Hungarian context in Section 4 with a special focus on the Country Tour of Péter Magyar. We present our dataset in Section 5 and our empirical strategy in Section 6. Results are discussed in Section 7, and conclusions are drawn in Section 8.

2. Literature review: rally effects on voting in autocracy

Our results contribute to studies of rally effects and campaigns under autocratic regimes, which we summarize in this section. By proposing a new mechanism—raising awareness—we also contribute to studies exploring the mechanisms of political rallies, which we discuss in the following section.

It is challenging to reach a consensus on the extensive literature on the effects of rallies on voting behavior. If any pattern emerges, the effects are weak or negligible, or if found to be strong, they are localized and short-lived. The earliest accounts, such as Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) and Campbell et al. (1960), were skeptical of their mobilization potential. Some studies have found a positive connection between campaign visits and changes in voting behavior at the state (Herr, 2002) and county (Heersink and Peterson, 2017) levels in the results of the US presidential election. According to their analysis, this effect is short-lived, suggesting that the passage of time diminishes it. Snyder and Yousaf (2020) connects stronger rally effects with the rise of populist candidates. Most studies however found weak or zero effects repeatedly in various contexts, such as Selb and Munzert (2018) in pre-War Germany, Johnston et al. (2012); Fieldhouse et al. (2013) in the UK, or in US presidential elections of 2000 (Johnston et al., 2004), of 2012 (Wood, 2016), of 2016 (Devine, 2018; Song and Beveridge, 2024), and the campaign trail stops of President Donald Trump during the 2018 mid-term election (Abramowitz and Panagopoulos, 2020). Our results extend the existing literature by identifying significant positive rally effects in an autocratic context.

Most of this evidence is produced in geographically limited spaces in countries with first-past-the-post systems (such as the UK) or the Electoral College (USA). As Langston and Rosas (2018) argues, campaign events and other personal voter interactions are overwhelmingly organized in more competitive locations only (within battleground states) in the US, and Johnston et al. (2012) has found the same in the case of multiple UK elections. Therefore, many parts of these countries remain largely untouched by personal campaign activities, such as campaign rallies and field canvassing. Our analysis extends the literature to proportional systems and electoral autocracies.

Nowadays, political parties utilize various modern digital communication channels to engage with voters and encourage them to participate. Nevertheless, even at the advent of the internet, digital campaigns had already been blamed for the consistently decreasing voter turnouts in Western societies, claiming that the erosion in political participation since the 1960s was caused by the decline of personal mobilization efforts in the first place (Gerber and Green, 2000). Campaign rallies are one of those traditional forms of personal interaction, similar to field canvassing, door-to-door campaigns, phone banks, and direct mailing. In the UK, face-to-face methods have been proven effective at mobilizing voters; people contacted by a party are more likely to vote for it than those who are not (Johnston et al., 2012). Furthermore, the analysis provided significant evidence that impersonal methods (such as phone banking and social media targeting) are less effective than

face-to-face interactions, including door-to-door canvassing or campaign rallies (Fieldhouse et al., 2013). Although in the context of Hungarian electoral autocracy, Simonovits et al. (2025) and Drucker and Gáspár (2025) demonstrated that the door-to-door campaigning by the opposition parties during the 2019 EP or the 2022 parliamentary elections had a limited impact, not hurting the support of the governing parties, but rather that of the other opposition parties. Moreover, campaign events that attract limited public interest or occur too frequently can backfire, demobilizing the voters of the given party or counter-mobilizing the opponent's voters (Heersink et al., 2020). This is why Langston and Rosas (2018) classifies rallies as a high-risk campaign tool.

The broader literature on political demonstrations has also examined several aspects relevant to our analysis. A number of studies found policy (Branton et al., 2015) and attitudinal (Mazumder, 2018) shifts following protests organized by social movements. These investigations—employing spatial statistical data (Ellinas and Lamprianou, 2024) or survey data (Pop-Eleches et al., 2022)—report that protests exert a measurable influence on voters' behavior and policy attitudes. Moreover, several studies highlight that these protests have spatial and temporal exposure and proximity (Wallace et al., 2014; Branton et al., 2015; Morgan-Collins and Rueda, 2025). Ellinas and Lamprianou (2024) further show that demonstrations can diminish a political party's mobilization potential. Our analysis extends the existing literature by quantifying the geographical spillover and timing effects associated with party rallies, while refining the conceptual framework of demobilization (Zeller, 2021), as the functional inverse of counter-mobilization (Heersink et al., 2020).

Another body of literature examines the impact of campaigns in autocratic regimes Cunha et al. (2022). For example, Windecker et al. (2025) explores electoral integrity in Turkey, Peisakhin et al. (2020) information campaigns in Russia, Kramon (2023) presidential debates in Malawi, Letsa (2024) partisanship in Cameroon, Çelebi and Yilmaz (2025) narrative strategies in Turkey, or Grechanaya and Ceron (2024) national symbolism in Russia and Ukraine. We extend the studies of campaigning in autocracy by estimating the effects of opposition rallies on electoral outcomes.

3. Theory: mechanisms of rally effects

Rallies can influence elections through several different mechanisms, such as mobilization of their own voters (Jones, 1998) counter-mobilization (Heersink et al., 2020) or demobilization (Ellinas and Lamprianou, 2024) of opposing voters, persuasion (Neuenschwander and Foss, 2021), momentum and bandwagon effects — i.e., gaining support by being popular — (Bartels, 1985; Mutz, 1995; Turnbull-Dugarte and Rama, 2022; Barnfield, 2019), media amplification (Devine, 2018; Herr, 2002; King and Morehouse, 2004), psychological and emotional resonance (Marcus and Mackuen, 1993; Nai and Maier, 2021), and local spillover effects to unvisited sites.²

We argue that opposition rallies in autocratic settings have a different, and potentially larger impact, mainly through mobilization (counter- or demobilization), media amplification, and bandwagon effects. We avoid taking a stance in the debate about Viktor Orbán's system typology (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018; Körösenyi et al., 2020; Scheiring, 2020; Sebők et al., 2022). Instead, we highlight one documented autocratic aspect of the regime that we see as relevant for rally effects: media bias.³

² Even though persuasion effects are usually found to be weak, as in Neuenschwander and Foss (2021).

³ There are further, potentially relevant channels through which autocratic regimes might amplify the impact of opposition rallies. Affective polarization (emotional hostility toward political opponents) can amplify rally effects through stronger mobilization and emotional resonance. Affective polarization is large in Hungary as it is in autocratic regimes (Reiljan, 2024). Affective polarization is found to increase voter participation by Ellger (2023). Therefore,

Autocracies are characterized by extreme media bias, as seen in Hungary (Polyák and Szávai, 2022; Urbán et al., 2023), which likely interferes with the media's amplification of opposition campaign events. Amplification effects are therefore likely to be dampened (or absent) in the media under government control. With the emergence of social media, this dampening effect was somewhat counteracted by transferring attention to uncontrolled social media appearances.

We propose two additional mechanisms through which rallies may shape voting decisions, which are specific to autocratic settings: raising awareness and demobilization effects. Information about political opponents is often suppressed by an autocratic regime (Trejo, 2014), as is the case in Hungary, especially outside of Budapest and major cities (Hargitai, 2020). Therefore, campaign rallies and candidate visits play a crucial role in increasing public awareness and local spillover effects, for which we provide empirical evidence in this paper.

The awareness-raising effect of opposition rallies in autocracies is related to media amplification. One can think of these channels as the extensive and intensive margins of attracting voter attention. Media amplification intensifies attention toward an already known political candidate, while awareness-raising extends attention to a formerly unknown or unconsidered political option.

Furthermore, the mechanism of non-violent demobilization remains under-theorized within the scholarship on autocratic regimes. Existing studies predominantly conceptualize demobilization as a threat to contested democracy arising from voter intimidation (Daxecker et al., 2025). Targeted anti-party demonstrations can erode partisan support (Ellinas and Lamprianou, 2024), and campaign rallies may unintentionally induce counter-mobilization among opponents (Heersink et al., 2020). Our study contributes by examining how opposition rallies can discourage pro-government support, particularly in settlements previously neglected by the opposition. This is a strategic advantage through non-violent demobilization rather than intimidation.

In sum, autocratic regimes can impede the impact of opposition campaigns primarily through media oppression and manipulation (Benedek, 2024). But all these bending of voter perceptions also enhances the potential impact of an opposition campaign when the candidate(s) visit and rally voters in person on the field. Our empirical setup allows us to test raising awareness of the opposition, mobilization for the opposition, and the demobilization of government supporters. We also provide evidence on geographical spillovers, effect persistence, and counter mobilization.

4. Hungarian context

The Country Tour of Péter Magyar took place in a political system with serious democratic deficiencies. A single political party (FIDESZ led by Viktor Orbán) has held power in Hungary since 2010, winning four consecutive parliamentary elections and holding a two-thirds (constitutional) majority in the legislature throughout. Although there is no consensus in political science on Viktor Orbán's system typology (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018; Körösnéyi et al., 2020; Scheiring, 2020; Sebők et al.,

an opposition rally may strengthen local voter engagement by activating social identities and emphasizing locally important values (Wallace et al., 2014), especially in a polarized environment.

Rallies may also have a stronger psychological and emotional impact in rural areas under greater repression. In non-democratic settings, "state repression can lead to acute anger and fear [...] among citizens critical of the regime" (Young, 2021). Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) documents repressive tendencies against women in Hungary.

Successful opposition rallies can also exert a stronger bandwagon effect toward the opposition and demobilize the ruling party's supporters. In autocratic regimes, expectations of popularity are biased toward the government, consequently driving opposition support into latency. "Autocrats in the twenty-1st century are attuned to their image [...] they manipulate the informational environment to convince the masses that they are popular" Buckley et al. (2023). Masses gathering at an opposition rally reveal latent opposition support and may trigger a strong bandwagon effect in favor of the opposition.

2022). As a result of fundamental institutional adjustments by FIDESZ, in 2024, the opposition had to operate in a highly uneven political contest: an unbalanced electoral system (Várnagy and Ilonszki, 2017), state capture (Eltető and Martin, 2024; Rogers, 2024), a slanted media landscape (Benedek, 2024), and fear-mongering (Barna and Koltai, 2019; Dudlák, 2025) all served the rule of Viktor Orbán.

Péter Magyar entered a political vacuum. Following eight years of growth, the Hungarian economy entered a period of stagflation after 2020.⁴ This fueled public discontent as economic voting in Hungary is significant (Lippényi et al., 2013). This discontent was exacerbated by the pardon scandal on February 2, 2024, triggering a massive protest in Budapest.⁵ The opposition of the time, already distrusted by the public, was unable to harness this discontent.⁶ The protest was organized instead by civilians (YouTube influencers) demonstrating a huge demand for political change. On February 11, Péter Magyar, a FIDESZ member without a significant position but strong connections to the elite, publicly criticized the government in an interview that gained unprecedented attention.⁷

Péter Magyar became a political figure leading the opposition extremely quickly. In the early days, he gave more highly viewed interviews, consistently creating the most popular political content on Hungarian social media. Within the next two months, he organized two large-scale political demonstrations.⁸ On April 10, he announced taking over the formerly dormant TISZA Party (in Hungarian: Tisztelet és SZAbadság Párt) to run in the European Parliamentary Elections and the start of a long series of political rallies all over the country, called the Country Tour. On June 9, TISZA won 7 of 21 Hungarian seats in the European Parliament by gaining 29.6 percent of the votes. FIDESZ won 11 seats, the lowest number since Hungary joined the European Union.

The Country Tour can be considered a 'greenfield project'. When the Country Tour kicked off, the (formerly dormant) TISZA party had only a handful of members. It had no activists or prior political activity, and lacked even a formal organizational structure. Therefore, the rallies of the Country Tour did not interfere with other campaign instruments that usually accompany similar events, such as field canvassing, direct phone calls, or door-to-door campaigns by activists. During the Country Tour, Magyar visited 185 settlements (outside of Budapest) between April 17 and June 5, 2024, where he delivered approximately 200 speeches and met local voters in person.

The European Parliament election is considered a second-order election, in which opposition or new parties tend to perform better, especially if it is considered a mid-term election due to its timing (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Schakel (2015) criticized this framework in the Central and Eastern European context, emphasizing that the country's economic conditions have a greater influence on shaping voting behavior. His findings suggest that government parties receive significantly fewer votes during economic downturns, while support for the strongest opposition party increases. Due to the proportional electoral system, campaign rallies were not geographically constrained.

⁴ In 2023, the inflation rate reached 25%, leading to a ~20% decline in real net income.

⁵ The President of Hungary (Katalin Novák) had pardoned an accomplice of a convicted pedophile. As a consequence, Katalin Novák and former Minister of Justice Judit Varga—who countersigned the pardon—soon resigned as a result.

⁶ In the last national parliamentary election (2022), opposition parties achieved only 36.5 percent of the votes against FIDESZ's 52.5%. They attempted but failed to lead the protests.

⁷ Achieved two million views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cJulnczg2E>) on the Hungarian YouTube setting a record for political content.

⁸ His first mass demonstration on Andrassy Avenue in Budapest on March 15, 2024, was attended by nearly 50,000 people (<https://444.hu/2024/03/15/dronfelvetelen-az-andrassy-utat-megtolto-tuntetes>). Then, the Kossuth Square demonstration on April 6 attracted more than 100,000 people (<https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/04/06/magyar-peter-tuntetes-kossuth-ter-parlament-aprilis-6>).

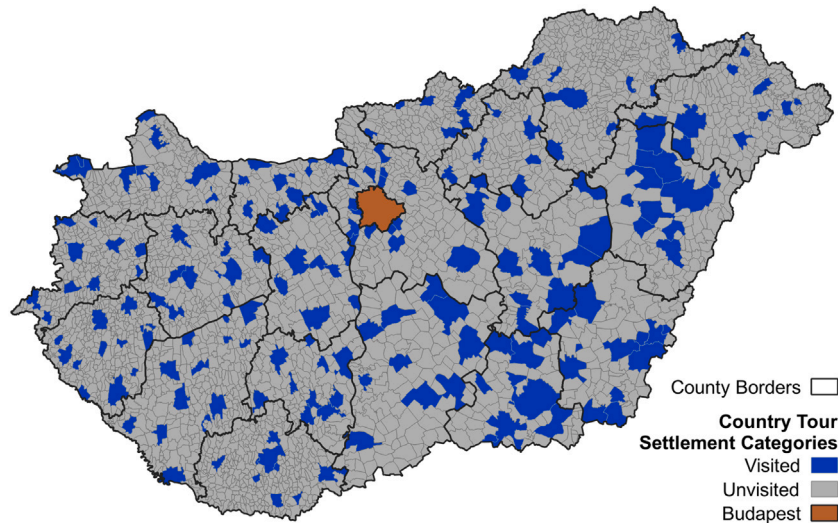


Fig. 1. The location of the visited settlements.

5. Data

Our dataset covers all Hungarian settlements (excluding Budapest) and combines multiple sources. We use settlement-level electoral results from the 2022 parliamentary and 2024 EP elections, and mayoral affiliations from the National Election Office. Rally locations and dates come from the TISZA Party’s official website and were cross-verified using Péter Magyar’s YouTube streams, participant posts, and local news reports. We collected data on rallies by the left-wing Democratic Coalition (Klára Dobrev and Ferenc Gyurcsány) from their official site. FIDESZ rallies, which were invitation-only, were reconstructed from reports by the news outlet Telex.hu.⁹ Settlement characteristics are drawn from the 2022 Hungarian Census (Central Statistical Office). Driving distances are calculated using OpenStreetMap. Hungary has 3155 settlements. We exclude Budapest due to its disproportionate size and political relevance. We also exclude 12 settlements that had their closest rally in Budapest, setting our sample size to 3142.

The country tour. Péter Magyar visited 186 settlements during the Country Tour (April 17–June 5, 2024).¹⁰ The Country Tour was highly efficient in covering the Hungarian electorate: it reached (the hometown of) 28.3% of voters (outside of Budapest) by rallying in only 5.9% of all Hungarian settlements. The visited settlements are relatively evenly distributed across the country (Fig. 1). Table 1 summarizes revealed political preferences in visited versus unvisited settlements, based on the 2022 and 2024 election results.¹¹ We report vote shares for TISZA (Péter Magyar’s party), FIDESZ (the ruling coalition), the Left (a group of opposition parties that ran jointly in 2022), and the Radical Right (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom). For consistency, we use the same labels across both elections.¹²

The numbers in the Table show that the visited settlements were significantly left-leaning in both 2022 and 2024. FIDESZ had on average

Table 1

Political preferences.

	(1) Unvisited	(2) Visited	(3) Difference	(4) Stand. Diff.
<i>A. EP Elections 2024</i>				
TISZA	21.493 (7.385)	30.634 (4.824)	9.141*** (0.549)	1.036
FIDESZ (ruling)	56.842 (11.200)	45.982 (6.962)	-10.859*** (0.831)	-0.823
Left	7.450 (3.265)	10.209 (2.871)	2.759*** (0.245)	0.635
Radical Right	7.828 (3.330)	7.012 (1.661)	-0.815*** (0.246)	-0.219
Turnout	63.642 (10.167)	57.749 (6.255)	-5.892*** (0.754)	-0.494
Registered Voters	1.086 (1.576)	16.605 (23.064)	15.519*** (0.439)	0.671
<i>B. Parliamentary Elections 2022</i>				
FIDESZ (ruling) '22	65.253 (10.904)	54.174 (7.665)	-11.079*** (0.812)	-0.831
Left '22	23.598 (8.065)	34.264 (6.879)	10.666*** (0.605)	1.006
Radical Right '22	5.897 (3.650)	5.924 (2.478)	0.027 (0.272)	0.006
Turnout '22	66.926 (7.870)	68.700 (5.580)	1.774*** (0.586)	0.184
<i>C. Reigning Mayor in 2024</i>				
FIDESZ Mayor	0.166 (0.372)	0.548 (0.499)	0.382*** (0.029)	0.614
Observations	2956	186	3142	

Notes: The table shows settlement-level outcomes of the 2024 EP elections and the 2022 national parliamentary elections broken down by visited (had a Péter Magyar rally) and unvisited settlements, compared by simple difference and standardized difference. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. All indicated political platforms are in opposition except for FIDESZ. FIDESZ Mayor is a binary variable indicating if the settlement had a FIDESZ (or KDNP) affiliated or supported Mayor during the rallies.

⁹ We sent an official data query to FIDESZ by email, which they have not replied to as of this day.

¹⁰ The Country Tour officially covered 185 settlements. A large rally was held, however, in Debrecen—Hungary’s second largest town—in the middle of the Tour. Therefore, we counted the Debrecen rally as part of the Country Tour.

¹¹ FIDESZ-supported means the mayor was supported by either FIDESZ or KDNP (FIDESZ’s all-time coalition partner) in any formation during his or her campaign.

¹² These parties together achieved a vote-share of only 13.6 percent in 2024, within which the largest share was 8.03 percent by DK. Treating them separately, therefore, lacks political relevance.

around a 10 percentage point smaller vote share in settlements where Péter Magyar held a rally in both elections, while the Radical Right also had a significantly weaker result in 2024 in visited settlements. The Left, on the other hand, had a significantly higher vote share in both elections in the visited settlements.

TISZA achieved a 9.08 percentage point higher vote-share in the visited settlements in 2024, which is almost a third of their final result

Table 2
Socioeconomic characteristics.

	(1) Unvisited	(2) Visited	(3) Difference	(4) Stand. Diff.
<i>A. Demography</i>				
Population	(7.782) 1.332 (1.974)	(7.958) 20.754 (29.475)	(0.589) 19.422*** (0.560)	0.657
Children (Age 15 –)	15.078 (5.054)	13.978 (2.156)	– 1.100*** (0.373)	– 0.200
Elderly (Age 65 +)	20.012 (5.668)	22.240 (3.526)	2.228*** (0.421)	0.334
Married	37.246 (6.041)	38.168 (3.138)	0.922** (0.447)	0.135
Single Mothers	9.983 (2.078)	11.027 (1.140)	1.044*** (0.154)	0.440
Mothers of 3 +	8.834 (2.526)	7.006 (1.390)	– 1.829*** (0.187)	– 0.634
Secondary Degree	22.583 (6.214)	28.696 (3.786)	6.113*** (0.461)	0.840
Tertiary Degree	9.111 (5.586)	15.993 (6.154)	6.882*** (0.425)	0.828
Digitally Inactive	21.967 (5.838)	18.304 (3.821)	– 3.663*** (0.434)	– 0.525
Christians	34.188 (26.795)	41.665 (14.497)	7.477*** (1.983)	0.245
Romani	4.627 (8.843)	1.889 (2.079)	– 2.739*** (0.650)	– 0.301
Immigrant	0.301 (0.939)	0.713 (0.861)	0.413*** (0.071)	0.324
<i>B. Economy</i>				
Average Income (M HUF)	236.118 (72.545)	283.555 (56.740)	47.437*** (5.421)	0.515
Employment Rate	70.207 (9.028)	75.363 (4.445)	5.156*** (0.667)	0.512
Unemployment Rate	6.183 (4.814)	4.738 (1.575)	– 1.445*** (0.354)	– 0.285
Labor Force	74.674 (7.597)	79.068 (3.681)	4.395*** (0.561)	0.521
Observations	2956	186	3142	

Notes: The table shows settlement-level demographic and economic characteristics broken down by visited (had a Péter Magyar rally) and unvisited settlements, compared by simple difference and standardized difference. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Demographic characteristics indicate population shares.

of 29.6 percent of total votes. While this difference may reflect rally effects, it is most likely driven by other confounding factors as well, which we aim to rule out using the empirical strategies presented in the next Section. The raw comparison of visited and unvisited settlements is useful to draw indicative conclusions about the sources of Tisza votes. While the vote-share difference of FIDESZ remained stable between 2022 and 2024, overall turnout declined. This might suggest the demobilization of FIDESZ voters in 2024, thereby indirectly increasing Tisza's vote share. The vote share difference of the left and the radical right opposition declined between 2022 and 2024, suggesting that the dominant source of Tisza votes was the voters of the former opposition.

Political preferences are influenced by demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors.¹³ FIDESZ tends to be more popular among older, less educated, and poorer voters, as well as in smaller settlements. Their policies usually favor families, high earners, and the church, and they have run political campaigns against different minorities, such as immigrants and members of the LGBT community.

Table 2 compares the socioeconomic characteristics of visited and unvisited settlements based on the 2022 Census. Although Péter Magyar visited a number of smaller towns and villages, his Country Tour, on

¹³ See Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980); Rosenstone (1982); Sondheimer and Green (2010); Charles and Stephens (2013); Hill and Leighley (1999) or Gerber et al. (2015)

average, prioritized rallying in larger settlements, not missing any of the largest towns and county capitals. The first row of the table illustrates this, as the average population of visited settlements is 20.8 thousand people, an order of magnitude larger than that of an average unvisited settlement.

Visited settlements have an older population on average, as the average share of children (age 15 –) is significantly smaller, and the average share of elderly people (age 65 +) is significantly larger among them. There are slightly more married people and single mothers in visited settlements, while larger families are more common in unvisited villages. People living in the visited settlements are substantially more educated and less religious. The Country Tour reached settlements with a significantly lower share of Roma people and a slightly higher share of immigrants. Economic welfare, measured by average income, employment rate, unemployment rate, and labor force participation, is significantly stronger in visited settlements.

All these demographic and economic imbalances between visited and unvisited settlements are most likely driven by differences in settlement size, as it is unlikely that the selection strategy of the TISZA party planning the Tour was driven by anything other than settlement size.

The Country Tour had a good geographical coverage, reaching almost every corner of the country. Fig. 2 shows the distribution of unvisited settlements by driving distance in minutes to the closest rally. The figure shows that the bulk of the distribution is below a twenty-minute drive. The average driving distance was approximately 12.5 min (6.5 weighted by registered voters), while the 90th percentile was 21 min. The few settlements farther than a 30-min drive from the closest rally are situated mostly in the northeastern periphery of the country, an area characterized by small villages, a scattered settlement network, low incomes, high unemployment, and an overrepresented Roma minority, which tends to lean politically towards FIDESZ or the Radical Right.

Rallies of others. Other major parties have also rallied in various settlements, with a significant overlap with the Country Tour. We tracked the leading politicians of three other parties: Viktor Orbán and Tamás Deutsch (lead candidate) of FIDESZ, Ferenc Gyurcsány (party leader) and Klára Dobrev (lead candidate) of the Demokratikus Koalíció (left), and László Toroczkai (party leader) and Előd Novák (MP) of the Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (radical right).¹⁴ FIDESZ rallied in 48 settlements of all different sizes, 32 of which were visited by Péter Magyar's Country Tour. The left (Demokratikus Koalíció) rallied in 49, mostly in the largest towns and county capitals, 40 of which were also visited by the Country Tour. Politicians of the radical right (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom) rallied only in 18 settlements, 14 of which were also covered by the Country Tour. Out of the 186 rallies of Péter Magyar, 123 (66.1%) happened in settlements that no other parties visited during the Country Tour.

6. Empirical strategy

We anticipate two major challenges to the causal identification of rally effects: (i) non-random rally placement, and (ii) geographical spillovers. Identification must build on a comparison of visited and unvisited settlements. However, unvisited settlements were likely affected by traveling attendees and local news diffusion. Furthermore, the selection of rally locations was clearly strategic, favoring larger, opposition-leaning settlements as we have shown in Section 5.¹⁵

To account for spillovers, we use a continuous treatment design, approximating treatment intensity by the geographical closeness to the closest rally. This idea leverages the fact that TISZA's vote shares decay

¹⁴ Only these parties gained any seats in the EP in 2024: FIDESZ 11, Demokratikus Koalíció 2, Mi Hazánk Mozgalom 1.

¹⁵ It is a general pattern that politicians choose rally locations strategically to maximize their impact on elections (Cann and Cole, 2011; Cutts and Middleton, 2024; Davis and McAllister, 2024; Devine and Kopko, 2018; Luke et al., 2025)

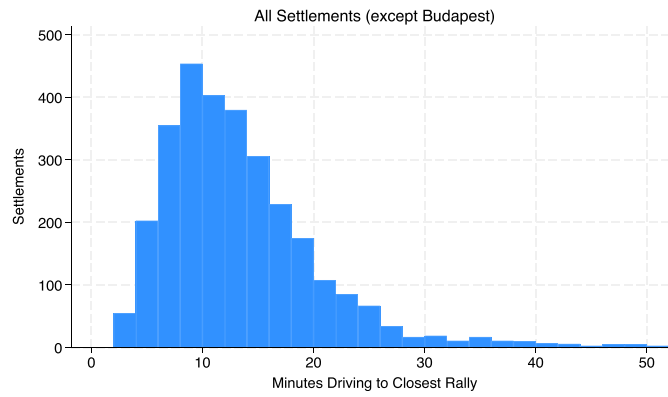


Fig. 2. Distribution of settlements by distance to rallies. Notes: Frequency distribution of 2956 unvisited settlements by their driving distance to the closest rally of Péter Magyar’s Country Tour happening right before the 2024 EP elections.

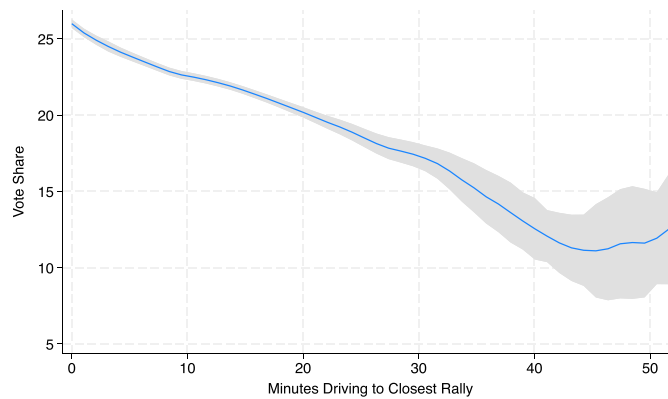


Fig. 3. TISZA vote share by distance to rallies. Notes: Local Polynomial Regression (bandwidth = 4) of TISZA’s vote shares in 3154 Hungarian settlements based on their distance to the closest rally of Péter Magyar’s Country Tour.

continuously with increasing distance, as is demonstrated by Fig. 3. The figure shows this decay through a local polynomial regression (bandwidth = 4). A similar tendency can be detected for FIDESZ vote shares, which increase continuously with distance to the closest rally.

To capture continuous treatment effects, we define rally exposure by a decreasing function of distance to the nearest rally:

$$\text{exposure}_i = \max \left[1 - \frac{\text{distance}_i}{45}, 0 \right], \tag{1}$$

such that distance_i is driving distance measured in minutes. Our function defines rally exposure so that visited settlements receive full exposure ($\text{exposure}_i = 1$ when $\text{distance}_i = 0$). Exposure declines linearly to 0 at 45 min, beyond which it remains constant at 0. The 45-min cutoff is motivated by Fig. 3, which shows the flattening of the vote share decline between 40 and 50 min driving distances.¹⁶ Fig. 4 shows rally exposure by settlement, such that visited settlements are highlighted in blue, and zero exposure settlements are in white. Lines indicate the borders of rally catchment areas.

We address non-random rally placement by adjusting our estimates for settlement-level results from the 2022 national elections and the social and economic characteristics of settlements.¹⁷ The 2022 election results are used as an approximation of the settlement-level political

¹⁶ Further empirical support for the zero exposure cutoff is presented in B.2. Estimates are found to be robust to the cutoff: B.4.

¹⁷ A seemingly reasonable alternative strategy could be a difference-in-differences estimation using settlement fixed effects to account for any unobservable drivers of rally placement. This, however, is not feasible for at least

preferences preceding the Country Tour. This approximation is validated by the relatively stable electoral preferences at the settlement level in Hungary. FIDESZ vote shares in 2024 can be predicted from 2022 vote shares with a precise slope parameter of 0.88 (s.e. = 0.009) and an R-squared of 0.75. Similarly precise predictions are feasible for the left and the radical right opposition, even though their voters were mostly affected by the entrance of TISZA.¹⁸

Political preference fixed effects (FE) are used to adjust for the 2022 election results. We classify settlements into 62 political preference groups with relatively stable 2022 vote shares for FIDESZ, the left, and the radical right. The 62 cells are obtained from the non-empty interactions of the 4, 11, and 2 quantiles of the 2022 vote shares for FIDESZ, the left, and the radical right.¹⁹ The average and median cell sizes of the remaining 55 cells are 57 and 28. These 62 groups define the basis for our political preference FEs. With political preference fixed effects, we are trading off within-group variation in political preferences for functional form flexibility. Therefore, we test the robustness of this choice in a design that includes 2022 election results as linear controls.

two reasons. First, TISZA votes are only observed in 2024. Second, while votes for the other parties are observable across multiple elections, the treatment is continuous due to geographical spillovers. Simple fixed-effects estimations of continuous treatment difference-in-differences are only valid under extremely strong assumptions (Callaway et al., 2024), which can be relaxed by similar strategies we employ in this analysis.

¹⁸ For the persistence of opposition preferences see Appendix A.

¹⁹ This coarsening procedure results in 7 singleton groups, which are omitted.

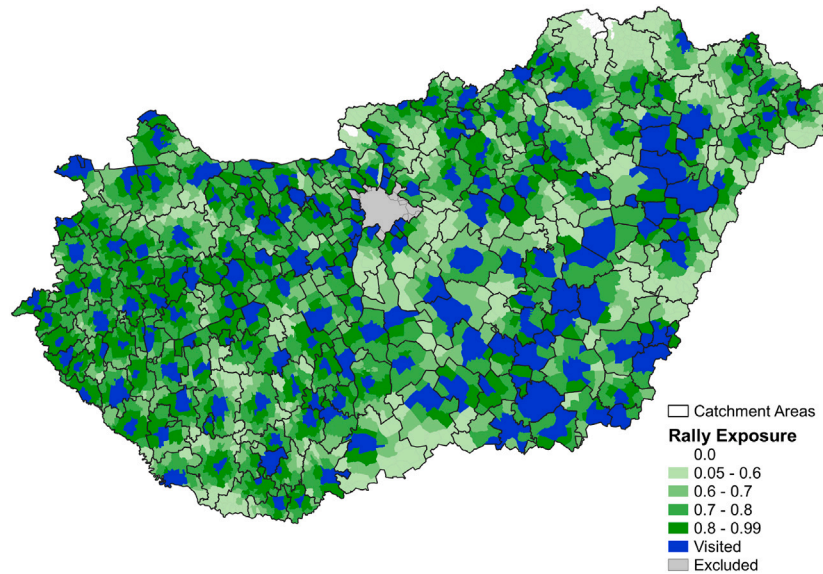


Fig. 4. Rally exposure and catchment by settlement.

We complement these designs with a coarsened exact matching (CEM) estimation, which has greater power to balance visited and unvisited settlements. We exclude unvisited settlements within 13 min of a rally—a threshold to account for strong spillovers at the closest settlements.²⁰ This sample restriction leaves 185 visited and 1669 potential controls. CEM is carried out on the 2022 vote share quantiles—used for generating political preference FEs—and population size, and education categories.²¹ The final matched sample includes 72 visited and 262 unvisited settlements. Remaining imbalances (e.g., age structure, district status) are addressed by including linear controls in post-matching regressions.²²

Finally, as all of the above-described empirical strategies address selection on observables, we validate our results with placebo estimations. We test our fixed-effects estimates using the 2022 election results, expecting zero effects in the absence of selection on unobservables.

Our empirical design is formalized by the following model:

$$y_i = \beta \text{exposure}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i + \text{political preference}_p + \text{rally}_r + \epsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where y_i is the 2024 outcome (vote shares or turnout) in settlement i , and \mathbf{X}_i is a set of socio-economic controls. Political preference $_p$ is political preference fixed effects, where p represents the 62 predefined political preference groups.

Rally specifics are absorbed by rally fixed effects: rally $_r$, where r denotes the 186 rally locations with their catchment areas, the set of settlements closest to that rally. By adjusting for rally fixed effects, identification leverages exposure variation only within each rally's catchment area. In other words, identification only compares settlements that were exposed to the same rally. Rally fixed effects rule out geographical selection, unevenly distributed exposure (e.g., higher average exposure in opposition-leaning areas), and variation in the quality of rallies (e.g., attendance or the power of the speech).

²⁰ This is an optimized threshold that retains a sufficiently large unvisited pool for matching. Main estimates were found to be robust to variations in the threshold. See B.5.

²¹ Population, population shares of secondary and tertiary degrees (highest) are coarsened into 7, 3, and 3 categories.

²² Balance table is included in B.1. Post matching controls are mayoral affiliation, an indicator of district centers, and the population shares of the young (age 15-), the old (age 65+), and mothers of 3+.

Rally effects are captured by the coefficient of exposure, β , which is interpreted as the difference between zero exposure (beyond 45 min) and rallied settlements. This is the best feasible approximation of a clean visited-unvisited comparison in our setup.

7. Results

This section presents the empirical analysis of rally effects in three parts. First, we present rally effects on TISZA vote shares and discuss robustness. In the second part, we analyze the effects of rallies on other parties, i.e., the conversion and demobilization of other voters. Finally, we present evidence for the awareness mechanism: rallies attracted attention and exerted their largest impact on TISZA and FIDESZ voters.

7.1. Mobilization of TISZA voters

We find strong rally effects on TISZA results consistently across six different specifications. Column 1 of Table 3 shows estimates of a fixed effects only model. Rally effects are moderately smaller, at 3.422, when controlled for 12 important socio-economic controls (column 2). This result is unchanged when adjusted for concurrent rallies of FIDESZ, the left, and the radical right opposition (3). These fixed effects estimates are consistent with the CEM estimate (4), when distance is measured in kilometers rather than minutes (5), or when underlying political preferences (proxied by 2022 electoral results) are controlled for linearly rather than using fixed effects in discretized cells (6).

TISZA's vote shares are found to be about 3.1–3.5 percentage points larger in visited settlements relative to unexposed (45+ min away) settlements. Weighted by the number of votes, rallies account for 2.6–2.96 percentage points—roughly 8.7–10% of TISZA's total vote share of 29.6%. Because spillovers and live broadcasts likely amplified the effects, this is a lower-bound estimate. Polls suggest TISZA's support rose by 15–17 points during the tour, implying rallies explain at least about a fifth of this surge.

Rallies attracted almost 10 percent of TISZA voters relative to unexposed settlements. Rally exposure effects are positive and significant (1.819) when estimated per eligible voter. This effect (1.55 by weights) accounts for about 9.23 percent of TISZA's total votes. The ratio of votes per eligible voter is independent of rally effects on other parties, thereby capturing the extension of TISZA's voter base in response to the Country Tour. The strong rally effects we identified are in stark contrast to most earlier studies, which found weak or zero effects. We argue that

Table 3
Rally effects of TISZA results.

	(1) FE only	(2) Controls	(3) Concurrent	(4) CEM	(5) km dist.	(6) Linear	(7) per Voter
Rally Exposure	5.530*** (0.819)	3.422*** (0.575)	3.412*** (0.572)	3.875*** (1.432)	3.048*** (0.534)	3.448*** (0.587)	1.819*** (0.567)
Observations	3131	3131	3131	334	3131	3131	3131
Treated Units	186	186	186	72	186	186	186
R-squared	0.716	0.758	0.759	0.434	0.759	0.756	0.679
Controls	◦	•	•	•	•	•	•
Concurrent Rallies	◦	◦	•	•	•	•	•
Rally FE	•	•	•	◦	•	•	•
Preference FE	•	•	•	◦	•	◦	•

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered within rallies. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1, ◦ – not included, • – included. The dependent variable: TISZA’s vote shares in 2024 by settlement, except in column (6). Rally exposure is 1 if Péter Magyar visited, and declines linearly with driving distance to the closest rally, reaching zero at 45 min, beyond which it stays zero. Exception: in column 4, distance is measured in kilometers, reaching zero exposure at 45 km. FE only: only rally and political preference (PP) FEs; Controls: socio-economic controls included; Concurrent: adjusted for rallies of FIDESZ, the left, and the radical right opposition; CEM: coarsened exact matching model of visited and at least a 13-min distant settlements matched on political preferences and other variables (see Section 6); km dist.: exposure measured in km distance; Linear: 2022 election results are controlled for linearly; Per Votes: dependent variable is TISZA’s votes per eligible voters. Controls include 12 socio-economic characteristics: settlement size (4 categories), share of children (under 15- years), elderly (65+), married, single mothers, mothers of 3+, secondary and tertiary degrees (highest attained), digitally illiterate, Romani and immigrants, and log of the average income (details in Section 5), for estimates see B.8. Controls included in CEM are indicators of a government-supported mayor, being a district (county subdivision) center, population shares of young (<15 yrs), old (>65), and the driving distance from Budapest.

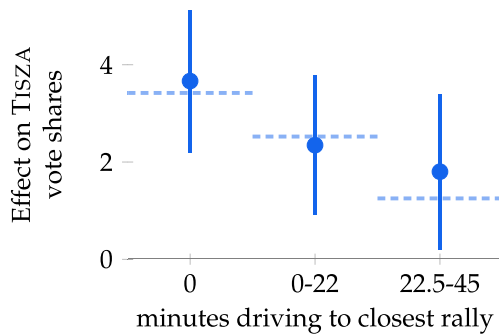


Fig. 5. Nonlinear Rally Effects. Notes: Point estimates (circles) and 95% confidence intervals (solid lines, based on clustered s.e.’s within rallies) of driving distances to the closest rally to TISZA vote shares. The empirical model is exactly equivalent to Eq. (2) except that rally exposure is replaced by the three distance bracket identifiers. Distance effects are measured in discrete brackets—0 min (visited settlements, n = 186), 0-22.5 min (n = 2,682), 22.5-45 min (n = 260)—relative to settlements 45+ min away from the closest rally (n = 14). Dependent variable: TISZA vote shares. The dashed lines represent the baseline (linear) point estimate (3.422) scaled to the average exposure to each bracket: 1, .73, and 0.36.

this contrast can be explained by the amplifying effect of autocracies and by the Country Tour’s isolation from other confounding campaign interventions.

Results are found to be robust to the zero exposure cutoff in B.4, and to the closeness threshold chosen for matching in B.5. Results are also robust to relaxing the assumption that rally exposure declines linearly with driving distance. Fig. 5 shows the point estimates of the main specification, where exposure is replaced by discrete driving distance brackets, allowing for a nonlinear decline. These estimates (circles) are consistent with the linear estimates (dashed lines) mapped onto the distance brackets based on their average exposure levels. Placebo estimates addressing selection by leveraging the 2022 election results are presented in the next section.

7.2. Demobilization of FIDESZ voters

Besides its intended impact of raising TISZA votes, the Country Tour could also demobilize or convert voters from other parties. We estimated our baseline model on seven further outcomes: the vote shares and votes per eligible voter ratios of FIDESZ, the Left, and the Radical Right, as well as the overall turnout of the 2024 EP elections.²³ Point estimates of rally exposure effects for these seven outcomes plus four placebo tests are shown in Fig. 6. A significant decline in the vote share of another party indicates voter conversion (voting for TISZA). However, when such a decline is paired with a significant drop in votes per eligible voter, it suggests that a significant fraction of voters, rather than converting, simply opted out of voting, i.e., demobilized. The demobilization of supporters of larger parties—like FIDESZ—can be further confirmed by a significant decline in overall turnout in response to the TISZA rallies.

As a response to the Country Tour, out of 100 fully exposed FIDESZ voters, 11 were demobilized relative to unexposed settlements. Rallies significantly reduced FIDESZ’s—Viktor Orban’s party in government—vote share by about 2.2 points, which is a 1.9 points voter-weighted decline, about 4 percent of their total votes. This vote share decline was mostly driven by voters turning away from FIDESZ mostly to abstention. FIDESZ votes per eligible voter declined by 2.9 percent as a response to rally exposure. This is a substantial 11 percent voter-weighted decline because about 26.2 percent of eligible voters voted for FIDESZ. The abstention of Fidesz voters in response to rallies is mirrored by a statistically insignificant but substantial decline in voter turnout.²⁴ This result

²³ Detailed results are presented in Table B.8 of Appendix B.6.

²⁴ The change in votes per voter of party i (VV_i) can be decomposed into changes in their vote shares (V_i) and in voter turnout (T) by the following formula:

$$\Delta VV_i = \Delta V_i T + V_i \Delta T.$$

Applying this formula to FIDESZ’s vote share (44.5%), voter turnout (59.5%), and the 2.2 and 2.9 percentage point declines in vote shares and votes per voter implies a 3.6 point decline in voter turnout, which is larger than the point estimate of the turnout effect but stays within its confidence interval.

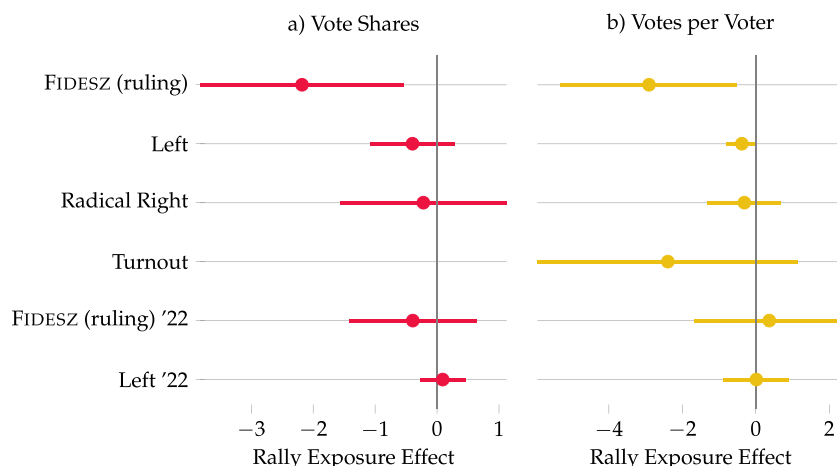


Fig. 6. Effects on Other Results. *Notes:* Point estimates (circles) and 95% confidence intervals (lines, based on clustered s.e.'s within rallies) of the coefficient of exposure of Eq. (2) measuring the difference between zero exposure (beyond 45 min) and rallied settlements. Dependent variables are indicated by the rows (FIDESZ, opposition parties, and turnout) and the columns: (a) vote shares (b) votes per eligible voter. Detailed results are presented in Table B.8 of Appendix B.6.

suggests that Péter Magyar's personal presence and speeches not only attracted new voters to his platform but also sowed the seeds of skepticism among government supporters, demobilizing them at the 2024 EP elections.

TISZA gained one EP seat from the government party FIDESZ with the Country Tour. 21 seats are allocated to Hungary in the EP, thus one seat represents about 4.7 percent of the total votes. Our results suggest that vote shares shifted about 4.8 percentage points ($2.9 + 1.9$) from FIDESZ to TISZA due to rally exposure.

Effects on the other opposition parties (the left and the radical right) were negligible. This is in contrast with the findings of Simonovits et al. (2025) and Drucker and Gáspár (2025), who found that door-to-door campaigning by the opposition during Hungarian elections in 2019 and 2022 was only impactful on opposition voters but left the camp of FIDESZ unscratched. The observed differences stem from variations in campaign techniques, leading to differences in awareness and distinct geographic distributions across spatial and settlement-hierarchy dimensions. Overall, the door-to-door campaigns analyzed in these studies likely reached fewer people than the rallies organized by Péter Magyar; therefore, raising awareness can be achieved much more effectively through a mass street demonstration. In addition, the door-to-door campaign of 2019 took place in fewer locations and in towns at a higher level of the settlement hierarchy. Our empirical results, on the other hand, indicate (in the next section) that the events of the TISZA had a more significant impact in the countryside. While the 2022 door-to-door campaign had extensive geographic coverage, it was purely informational, highlighting the importance of opposition figures' personal presence.

Placebo effects on the 2022 election outcomes validate the causal interpretation of our rally effects. We estimated the effects of the 2024 Country Tour rallies on 2022 vote shares and votes to voter ratios of FIDESZ and the Left opposition to detect unaddressed selection effects driven most likely by selection on unobserved differences between differently exposed settlements. Results of these estimates are shown at the bottom of Fig. 6. All four tests yielded estimates that were not statistically significant and close to zero. We take these results as validation of the causal interpretation of our estimates.

7.3. Raising awareness

We cannot directly link rallies to individual votes; however, we present evidence that the Country Tour rallies raised awareness of a previously unknown opposition candidate and shaped electoral results.

We argue that raising awareness is a key mechanism of opposition campaigns in autocratic settings. In autocratic regimes, rallies and candidate visits play a critical role in increasing visibility and generating local spillovers (Lohmann, 1994). As discussed in Section 3, authoritarian contexts often suppress information about opposition candidates (Trejo, 2014), as is the case in Hungary, outside Budapest and major towns (Hargitai, 2020).

Internet search data show that the Country Tour attracted substantial local attention. We obtained Google Trends data on internet searches for 'Péter Magyar' between April and June 2024. Searches for Péter Magyar far exceeded those for other prominent politicians, indicating that an initially unknown figure attracted substantial attention during the Country Tour. We examined the spatial and temporal correlation of searches with rallies using an event-study model. The Country Tour's county-based schedule—three rallies per day over roughly three days—enables this design.²⁵

Searches rose substantially in response to local rallies. Fig. 7 shows the parameter estimates from the event-time model, demonstrating strong indirect evidence for the raised awareness effect. Searches rose by ~20% the day before a rally, peaked at ~50% on the rally day, and returned to baseline within two days—evidence of short-lived but intense local attention. The spatial distribution of searches gives further support for our interpretation. 70% of significant spikes occurred in visited settlements, and 87% of the remainder came from locations within 15 min of a rally. These search patterns provide indirect evidence that rallies substantially increased awareness of Péter Magyar and his political offer in their immediate catchment areas.

By raising awareness, the Country Tour demobilized FIDESZ voters in the smallest and poorest settlements, which are often under the most severe media suppression (Hargitai, 2020). Estimates for a set of heterogeneous rally exposure effects are shown in Fig. 8 for TISZA (column a) and FIDESZ (b) vote shares by settlement size (row 1), income quartiles (2), the closest rally's time distance to the election (3), if the rally was held during working hours (on weekdays between 8 am and 7 pm, row 4), if a concurrent rally occurred within the catchment (5), and if

²⁵ Model: $y_{it} = \beta_t + \alpha_i + \delta_c + \epsilon_{it}$, where y is Google Trends searches in county i on day t , day 0 marks the first rally, α_i are county fixed effects, and δ_c are calendar-time fixed effects absorbing the national trend (e.g., the effects of Budapest rallies and media appearances).

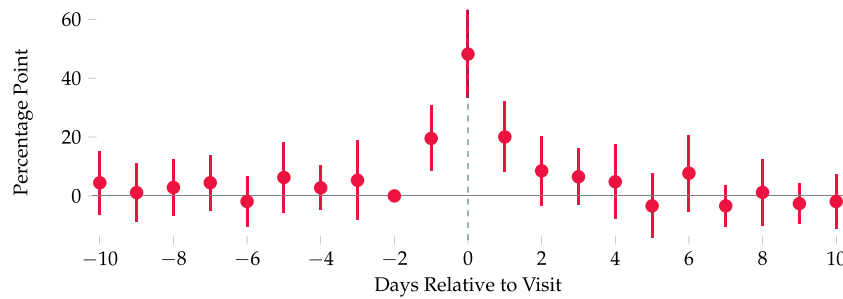


Fig. 7. Internet searches on “Péter Magyar”. *Notes:* Event time coefficients β_t and their standard errors (clustered by counties) of the event study model $y_{it} = \beta_t + \alpha_i + \delta_c + \epsilon_{it}$, where y is Google Trends searches in county i on day t , such that day 0 is set to the day of the first event in each county, α_i represents county fixed effects, and δ_c represents calendar time fixed effects. Coefficients β_t measure internet searches for “Péter Magyar” in percentage point differences relative to day - 2 (the omitted category) within counties.

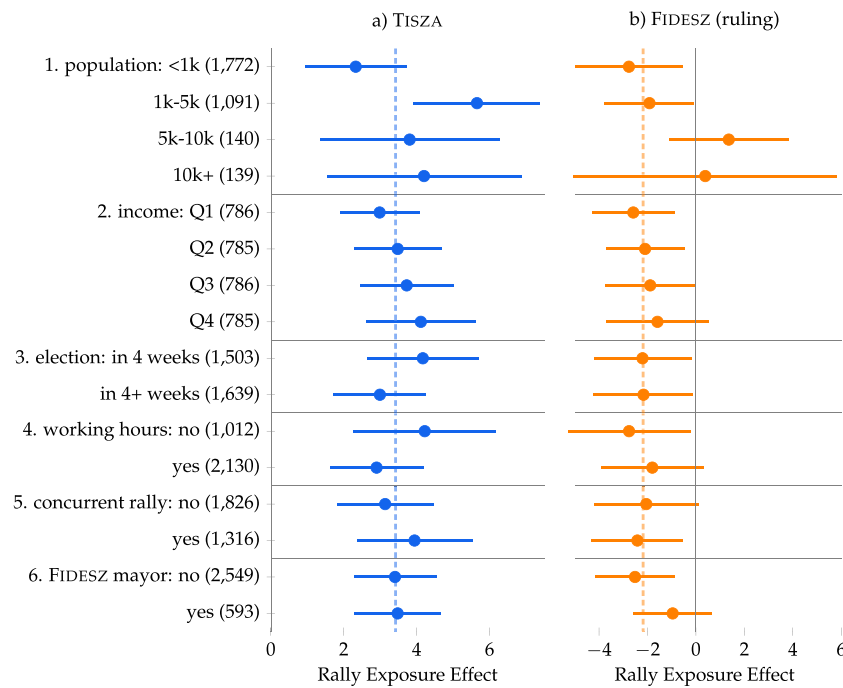


Fig. 8. Heterogeneous Effects on Vote Shares. *Notes:* Point estimates (circles) and 95% confidence intervals (lines, based on clustered s.e.’s within rallies) of the coefficient of exposure of Eq. (2)) measuring the difference between zero exposure (beyond 45 min) and rallied settlements. Dependent variable: TISZA (a) and FIDESZ (b) vote shares. Rows indicate the margin of heterogeneity tested: settlement size, income quartiles, share of tertiary educated, (closest) rally’s time distance to election, if rally held during working hours (weekdays 8:00-17:00), if a concurrent rally occurred within the catchment, if the incumbent mayor was supported by FIDESZ. Subsample sizes are indicated in parentheses. Dashed lines represent the baseline (homogeneous) point estimates (3.42 for TISZA and - 2.18 for FIDESZ).

the incumbent mayor was supported by FIDESZ (6).²⁶ The mobilizing effect of rallies was stronger when they were held outside working hours, providing further evidence of the awareness-raising channel. The rallies mobilized more strongly for TISZA in the second-smallest settlement-size category (1k–5k) and among the highest-income quartiles.

7.4. Persistence and counter mobilization

Rally effects are diminished by about one percentage point in four weeks. Row 4 of Fig. 8 shows the difference between rallies held within 4 weeks of election day and those held more than 4 weeks before election day. Rallies closer to the election raised TISZA’s vote share by about 1 percentage point and TISZA’s votes per voter by 2.5 percentage points.

²⁶ Estimates are obtained from a specification analogous to our baseline fixed effects model in which exposure is broken down by interaction terms with the categorical variable of the specific heterogeneity shown by the Figure. Sizes of the subsamples are shown in parentheses.

Our finding of the short-lived nature of rally effects is in accordance with Heersink and Peterson (2017) and highlights the importance of avoiding working hours. Two interpretations arise: (i) growing momentum, assuming local effects are permanent and social media irrelevant; or (ii) weak persistence, where effects decay without reinforcement. We favor the latter, as it requires weaker assumptions. We did not detect a similar decay in demobilizing FIDESZ supporters.

We detect weak evidence of counter-mobilization. Rally effects on FIDESZ voters were weaker (1 ppt) in settlements with an incumbent FIDESZ supported mayor. Similarly, demobilization effects were slightly weaker if the catchment area of a Péter Magyar rally received at least one campaign visit from a leading political figure of FIDESZ, the left, or the radical right opposition.²⁷

²⁷ Additional heterogeneous rally effects are tested in B.7. We did not detect any significant differences in any of the other tested margins.

8. Conclusion

Earlier research on the impact of political rallies on voting behavior has largely produced weak or null results, primarily based on evidence from democratic contexts with majoritarian electoral systems, such as the UK and the US. In such contexts, rallies are almost always coupled with other campaign tools, making it difficult to isolate their effects.

We estimated the direct and indirect effects of opposition rallies on electoral outcomes, leveraging a unique series of opposition campaign rallies—the Country Tour of Péter Magyar—unaided by any auxiliary campaign tools. The Country Tour took place in Hungary, a country classified as an electoral autocracy. We proposed and provided empirical evidence for two new mechanisms of rally effects: raising awareness of the opposition (candidate) and the demobilization of government supporters. Our strategy addressed the non-random selection of rally locations and potential spillovers through fixed-effects regressions, matching, and placebo estimations.

We also provided a comprehensive summary of the socio-economic and political context of the Country Tour, documenting the critical events that paved the way for the rapid rise of Hungary's newest political figure, Péter Magyar. Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ, in power since 2010, secured its fourth consecutive parliamentary victory in 2022, gaining a constitutional majority. By 2023, however, Hungary faced severe inflation and declining real wages, compounded by a high-profile pardon scandal. The established opposition remained fragmented and unpopular, failing to capitalize on rising public discontent. It was in this context that Péter Magyar emerged and quickly became a central figure in Hungarian politics.

Our findings indicate that rally effects are strong when isolated from other campaign tools. Opposition rallies contribute substantially to electoral success in autocratic settings by raising awareness of the opposition's political offerings and demobilizing government supporters. Overall, campaign rallies were found to be an effective opposition strategy, helping overcome media bias and organizational constraints.

Our study focuses on a specific politician, Péter Magyar, within Hungary's unique socio-political context, which limits the external validity of our findings.²⁸ Given the evidence of the awareness-raising and demobilization effects of opposition rallies, our findings generalize to a large set of electoral autocracies with extensive media control.²⁹ Viktor Orbán's system, which is increasingly serving as a blueprint for Western populists, contributes to the general relevance of our results. Even though the 'greenfield' nature of the Country Tour facilitates isolating rally effects, it also limits our ability to explore interactions and potential substitutions among the campaign tools that are usually present in parallel. We are also limited in identifying the contributing factors of autocratic systems to the large impact of opposition rallies. Such comparative questions are left for future research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Olivér M. Rácz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Mátyás Bódi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision. **Tamás Kovalcsik:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization.

²⁸ While it is true that new political parties tend to enter the Hungarian political arena during EP elections, which are much less consequential for power than national elections. However, political preferences are overly persistent (see Appendix A), i.e., electoral results in EP elections carry over to national elections. Moreover, unlike in other EP elections in 2024, turnout (60%) was as high as in a regular parliamentary election. Thus, our results generalize to national elections.

²⁹ A clear limit to this generalization is systems, where attendance at opposition rallies is also suppressed by the autocrat.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Microsoft Copilot (GPT-4) and Grammarly Premium in order to enhance the clarity and conciseness of the manuscript. After using these tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Persistence of political preferences

See Table A.4.

Table A.4
Persistence of Political Preferences.

dependent variable	(1) FIDESZ	(2) Left	(3) R-Right
Vote Share '22	0.884*** (0.009)	0.264*** (0.005)	0.676*** (0.015)
Observations	3142	3142	3142
R-squared	0.749	0.447	0.383
Catchment FE	•	•	•

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered within rallies.

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data for this article can be found online at doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2026.103085.

Data availability

The data and code are available on the first author's website.

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