

**United we stand, divided we rule:  
How socio-political polarization erodes  
democracy**

**Ekim Arbatli**

**Dina Rosenberg**

**February 13th, 2020**

# Research question

- How does polarization lead to democratic erosion?
- There is abroad consensus that severe socio-political polarization hurts democracies, but very little causal explanation as to HOW this happens.
- One potential channel is the role of socio-political polarization in facilitating electoral manipulation.
- We aim to empirically test the effect of polarization on one type of electoral manipulation: government intimidation.
- *Ceteris paribus*, government intimidation is more likely under authoritarian regimes (Hafner-Burton et al. 2014, Lindberg and Ham 2015, Harvey 2016). Hence, we also test whether the effect of socio-political polarization on government intimidation is mediated by the political regime.

# Main argument

- All else equal, socio-political polarization should increase government intimidation. Two reasons:
  1. Polarization increases animosity between the political camps in the country, creating a dichotomous classification of “us vs. them”. This Manichean mentality makes voters more willing to accept illiberal democratic measures against the opposition.
  2. Polarization lowers coordination costs for political leaders who now need to intimidate only a small part of opposition voters to win.
    - Political polarization decreases vote buying and increases other strategies such as turnout buying, abstention buying and double persuasion (Gans-Morse et al. 2014). It makes mobilization strategies cheaper and vote buying more costly. This can work for government intimidation as well.
    - Since the public is more willing to accept anti-democratic measures, the costs of using them are lower for the leader.

# Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis 1:** All else equal, political polarization increases the scope of government intimidation of voters.
- **Hypothesis 2:** All else equal, the effect of political polarization on the scope of government intimidation is strongest in democracies, while insignificant in autocracies.

# Concepts and measurement

## Political polarization

- Esteban and Ray (1994): “a population of individuals may be grouped according to some vector of characteristics into clusters, such that each cluster is very similar in terms of the attributes of its members, but different clusters have members with very dissimilar attributes”.
- Polarization is the motion in the opinions toward the poles of a distribution (Di Maggio et al. 1996, Fiorina, Abrams and Pope, 2008; Fiorina and Abrams, 2010).
- It requires the existence of (usually) two camps with mutually exclusive identities and interests.

# Concepts and measurement

## Political polarization

- Polarization and fractionalization are fundamentally different - the relatively homogeneous United States is socially and politically much more polarized than the heterogeneous Belgium.
- Consequences also vary. A polarized society is more prone to civil war than a heterogeneous one (Collier and Hoeffler 1998).
  - Empirical evidence: 90 percent of highly polarized countries engaged in a civil conflict in 1960-1995, while among highly fractionalized countries this number was only 40 percent. (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005)

# Concepts and measurement

## Political polarization

- Esteban and Ray's (1994) measure of polarization:
  - Reflects the ideological distance between socio-political clusters.
    - E.g. A society divided in half by two significantly sized socio-political clusters (radical right and radical left) is more polarized than a society divided in half by centrist right and centrist left.
  - Reflects the idea that members of each cluster hold homogeneous political views.
  - Reflects the number and the size of the opposing societal groups.
    - E.g. A society divided into two large ideologically distinct camps is considered more polarized than a society divided into ten small ideologically distinct camps.
- WVS and EVS question: "In political matters, people talk of 'the left' and 'the right.' How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?"

# Concepts and measurement

- Government intimidation of opposition:
- V-Dem dataset question: “In this national election, were opposition candidates/parties/campaign workers subjected to repression, intimidation, violence, or harassment by the government, the ruling party, or their agents?”
- Level of democracy: Freedom House measure. It focuses on civil rights and liberties rather than political competitiveness.
  - Civil rights and liberties distinguish a true liberal democracy from a mere “electoralism”. (Ham and Lindberg 2015, p. 19)



VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ER Polarization (alpha=0.5)	<b>7.497***</b> (2.188)			
Freedom House × Polarization (alpha=0.5)	<b>-1.910***</b> (0.558)			
ER Polarization (alpha=1.0)		<b>11.03**</b> (4.888)		
Freedom House × Polarization (alpha=1.0)		<b>-2.411**</b> (1.110)		
ER Polarization (alpha=1.5)			8.910 (7.090)	
Freedom House × Polarization (alpha=1.5)			-1.708 (1.558)	
Polarization as Standard Deviation				<b>3.123***</b> (1.006)
Freedom House × Polarization (as St.Dev.)				<b>-0.820***</b> (0.281)
Freedom House	<b>3.085***</b> (0.486)	<b>2.25***</b> (0.401)	<b>1.66***</b> (0.264)	<b>3.223***</b> (0.644)
log GDP per capita	-0.155 (0.242)	-0.127 (0.228)	-0.227 (0.246)	-0.217 (0.238)
Life Expectancy	-0.0342 (0.0318)	-0.0294 (0.0330)	-0.0190 (0.0346)	-0.0311 (0.0300)
Log Likelihood	-642	-649	-655	-640
AIC	1301	1317	1328	1298
BIC	1345	1360	1372	1342
pseudo-R <sup>2</sup> (McFadden)	0.408	0.401	0.404	0.410
pseudo-R <sup>2</sup> (Cox, Snell)	0.624	0.618	0.613	0.625
Countries	93	93	93	93
Observations	936	936	936	936

Robust standard errors clustered by countries in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table 1. Ordered Logit Model: Government Intimidation, Polarization and Democracy Level

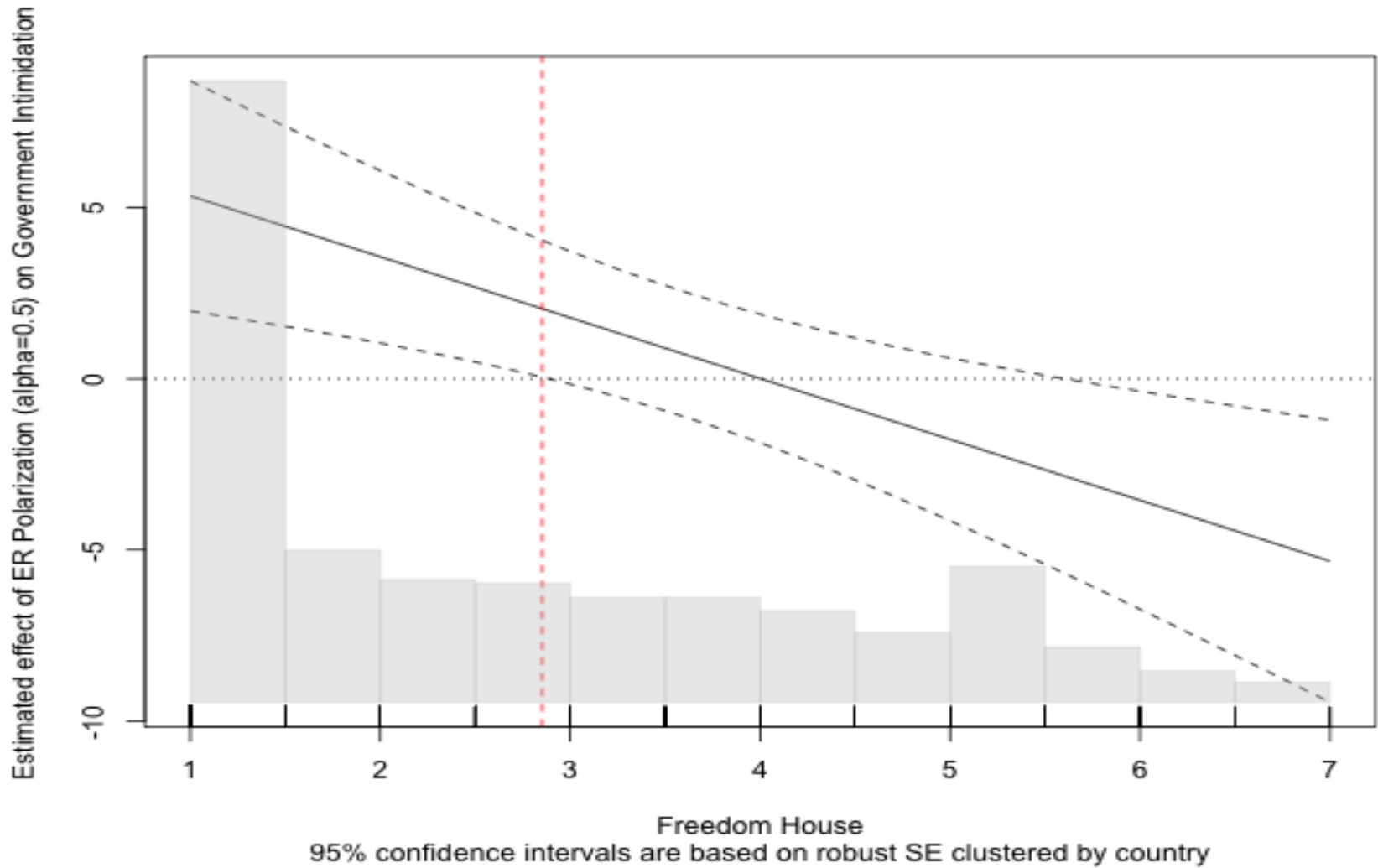


Figure 1. Effect of polarization on intimidation mediated by autocracy level

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)
Polarization = 1	<b>4.244*</b> (2.505)	<b>4.134**</b> (1.899)	<b>4.781**</b> (1.974)
Polarization = 2	<b>4.439*</b> (2.489)	<b>5.312***</b> (1.928)	<b>5.871***</b> (2.002)
Polarization = 3	<b>5.421**</b> (2.380)	<b>6.484***</b> (1.785)	<b>7.103***</b> (1.861)
Polarization = 4	<b>6.402***</b> (2.437)	<b>7.148***</b> (1.824)	<b>7.785***</b> (1.906)
Freedom House	<b>2.529***</b> (0.442)	<b>2.616***</b> (0.328)	<b>2.724***</b> (0.352)
Freedom House × Polarization = 1	<b>-0.979**</b> (0.446)	<b>-0.900***</b> (0.335)	<b>-1.034***</b> (0.354)
Freedom House × Polarization = 2	-0.854* (0.461)	-0.950*** (0.364)	-1.088*** (0.392)
Freedom House × Polarization = 3	-1.173*** (0.428)	-1.344*** (0.327)	-1.466*** (0.342)
Freedom House × Polarization = 4	-1.323*** (0.451)	-1.404*** (0.344)	-1.540*** (0.367)
Log GDP per capita		-0.427*** (0.158)	-0.277 (0.195)
Life Expectancy			-0.0277 (0.0212)
Observations	892	811	790
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes

Robust standard errors in parentheses  
\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table 2. Polarization, Intimidation and Democracy Level

## Estimated effect of Polarization on Intimidation

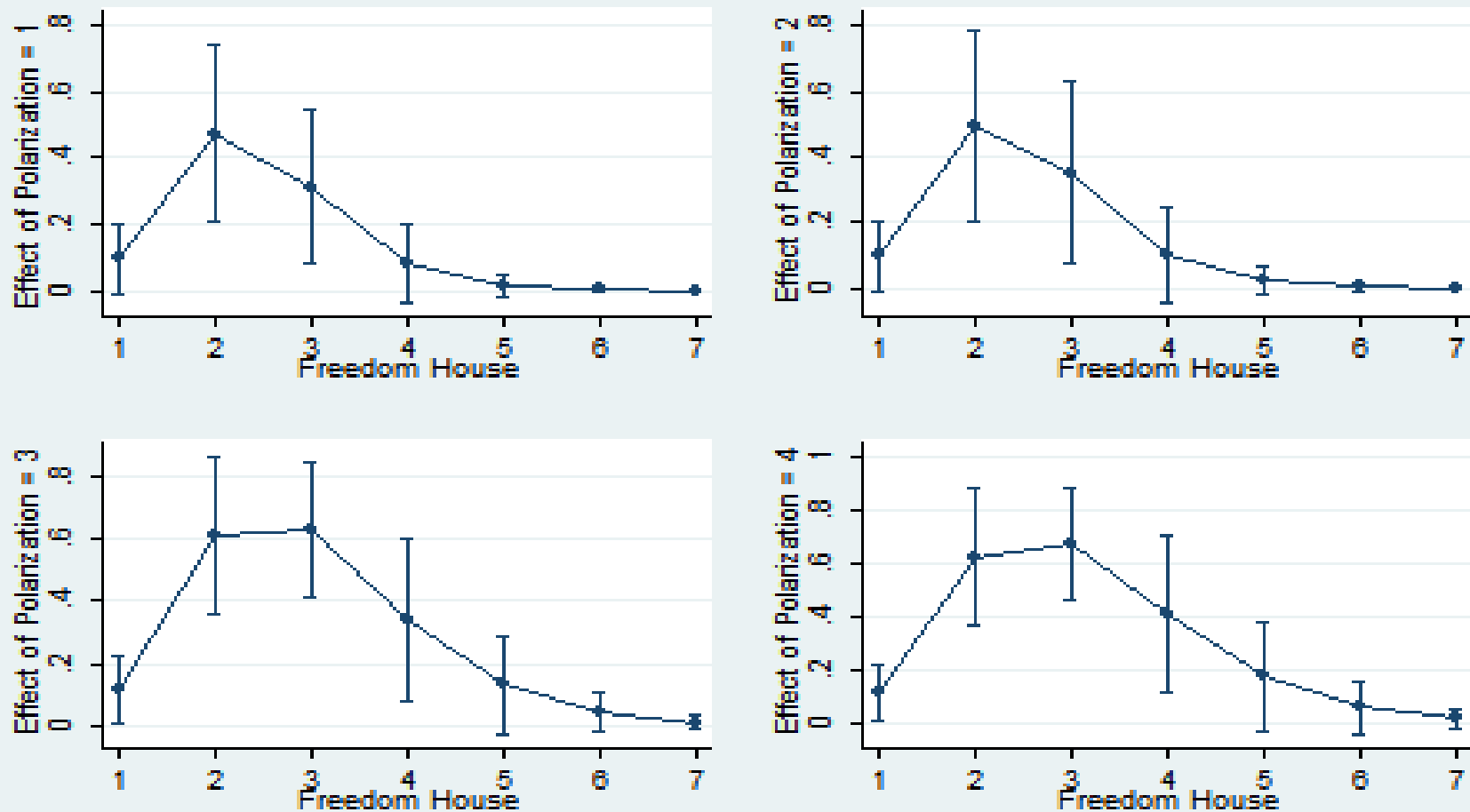


Figure 2. Effect of polarization on intimidation mediated by autocracy level

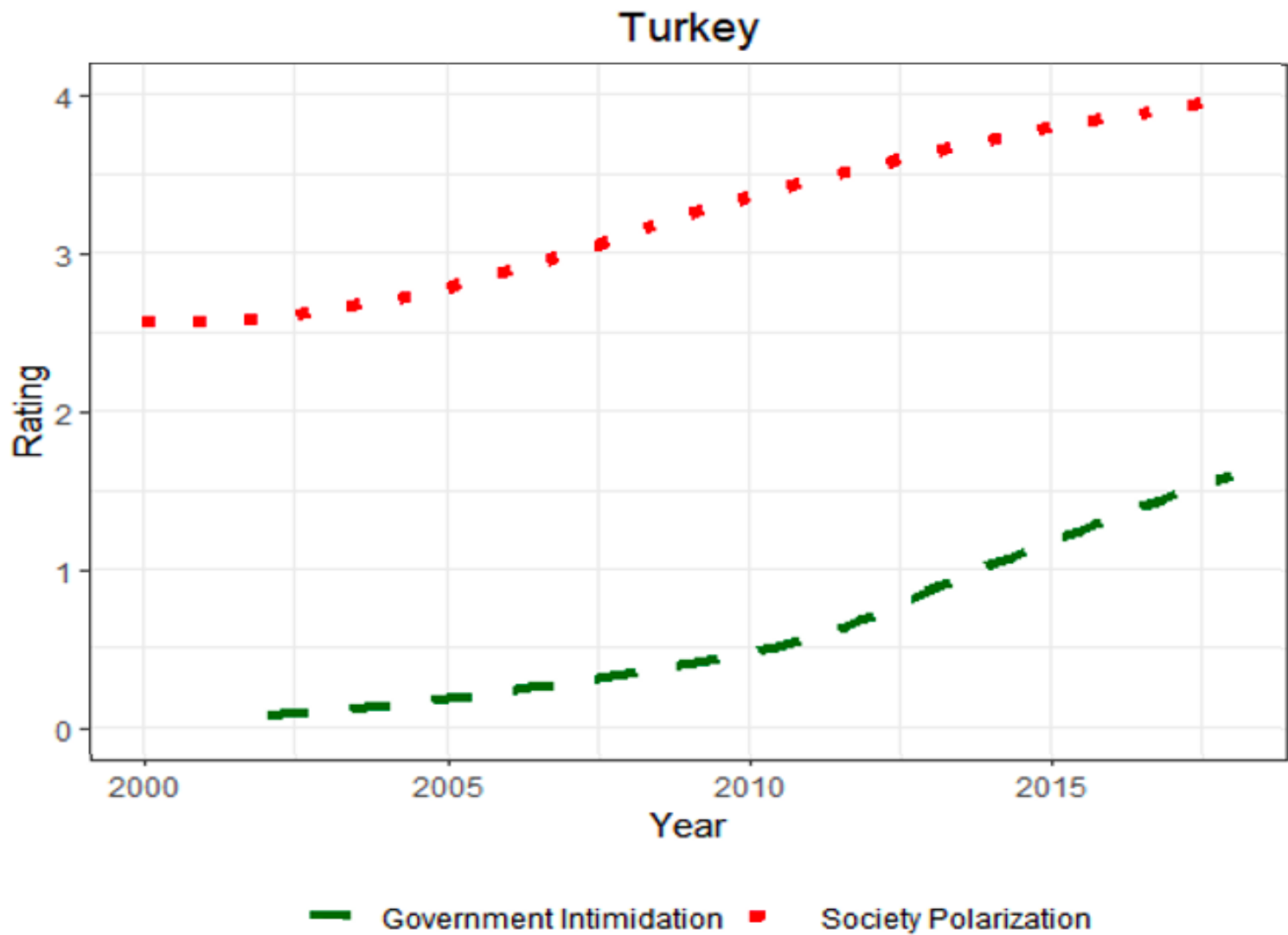


Figure 3. Government intimidation and polarization trends in Turkey

# How democracies die: The case of Turkey

- Historically, there were three main divisions within the society:
  - Cultural: secular vs. conservative/Islamist
  - Religious: Alevite vs. Sunni
  - Ethnic: Turkish vs. Kurdish
- Konda 2010 survey identified three major groups within society: Modernists, traditional conservatives, religious conservatives
- AKP has used and exacerbated existing cleavages – political preferences solidified into social identities.
- According to a 2016 survey:
  - 83% does not approve of their daughter marrying someone from the ‘other’ camp
  - 78% would prefer not to do business with the other groups’ members
  - 74% would not allow their kids to play together!
- Electoral violence has been steadily rising, especially very notable in 2015 general elections. Clean Elections Index declined from 0.93 in 2002 to 0.84 in 2011, and a dismal 0.62 in 2015.
- Press freedom disappeared. Freedom House ratings declined to 5/7 in political rights and 6/7 in civil liberties in 2019.

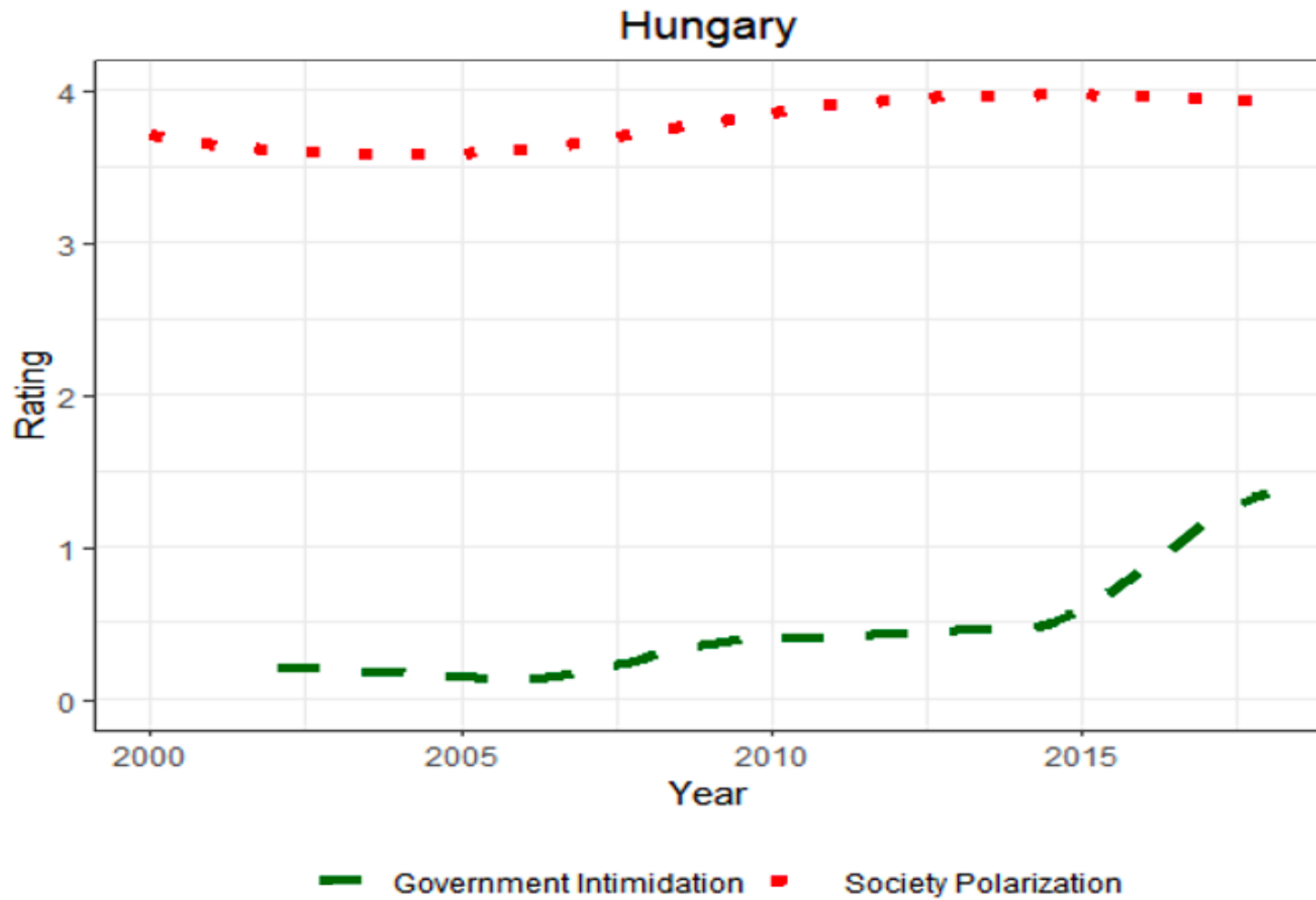


Figure 4. Government intimidation and polarization trends in Hungary

# A spectre is haunting Europe: The case of Hungary

- Considered an exemplary case of post-communist transition
  - Elite consensus in place
  - Most institutionalized party system in the CEE
- The formation of two camps dates back to 1994
  - Left-liberal bloc: Socialist MSZP and liberal SZDSZ
  - Nationalist-conservative bloc: FIDESZ + FKGP (nationalist/conservative) + MDF (Christian-democrat)
- In 2002 and 2006, the country was already relatively polarized. Polarization is self-imposed. It's created by the elites to distinguish themselves in a post-communist society with no other cleavage than the cultural divide.
- Orbán's victory in 2010 started the democratic decline. He won 52% of national votes, but 2/3 of all seats! Majoritarian electoral system played a large role in creating this result. The new Constitution was drafted with these results.
- FH scores dropped from 1/7 to 3/7 in nine years. In 2017, the press was only considered 'partly free' with a score of 44/100
- Social identities only calcified and polarized further. Opposition driven out of all decision-making process.



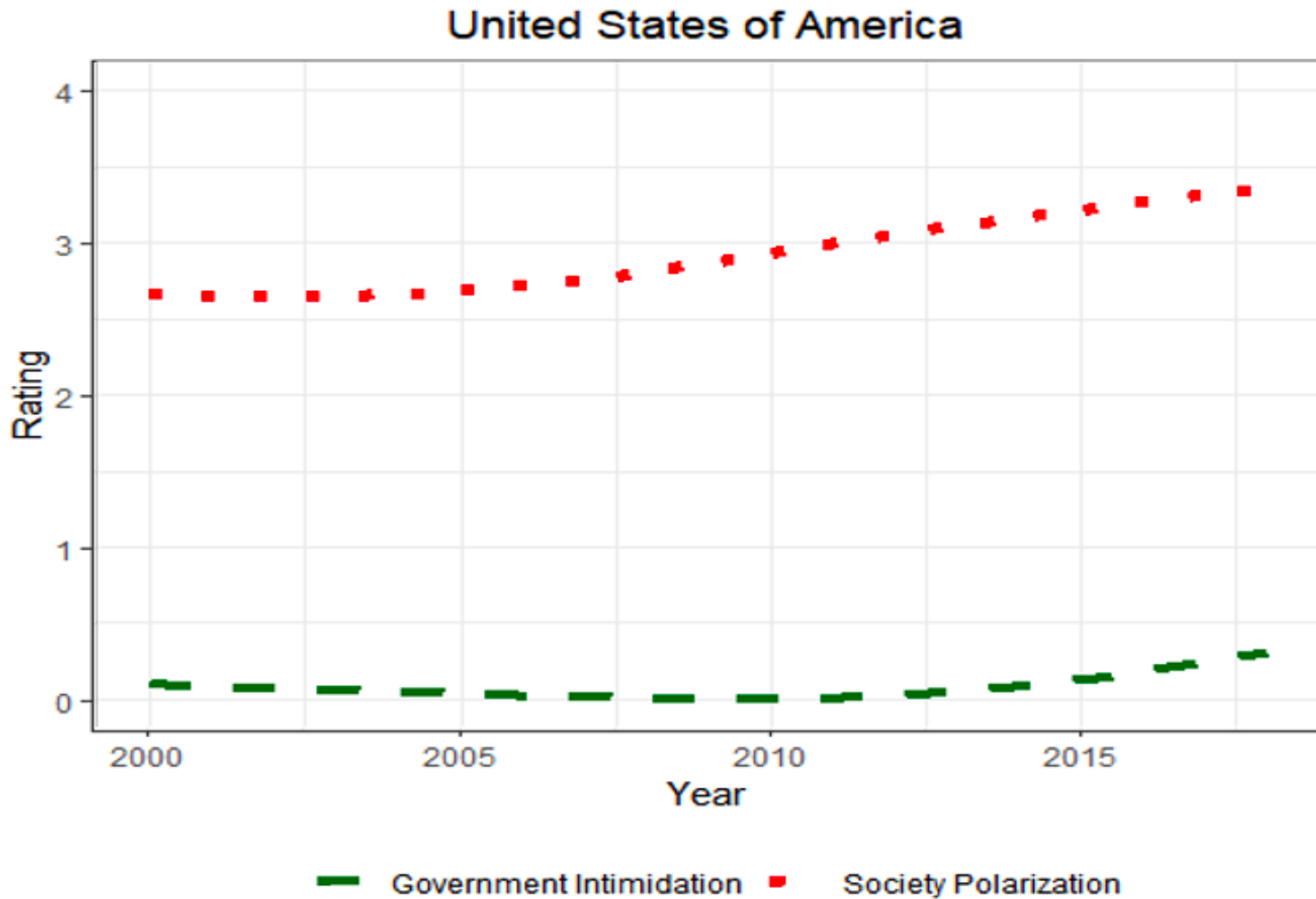


Figure 5. Government intimidation and polarization trends in the U.S.

# Why people tolerate anti-democratic norms: The United States

- Affective polarization is becoming widespread: Democratic Party members hate Republicans more than they like the Democrats (and vice versa)!
- The respect for counter-arguments (5-point index) declined from 4/5 in 2013 to 2/5 in 2016.
- Policy gridlocks are becoming more common.
- Political polarization is blending into social identities. In a poll in 2016,
  - 45% of Republicans see the other party as a threat
  - 41% of Democrats see the other party as a threat
- Experimental evidence shows that party animus is now stronger than racial divide (Iyengar and Westwood 2015).
- Intimidation and opposition suppression tactics have been on the rise.
  - E.g. In Texas, in January 2019, the unlawful prosecution of 58,000 'immigrants' that were alleged to vote illegally.
- The Freedom House score was 86/100 in 2019. This is the lowest score that the United States received since 1972.