

Hatred as an Electoral Strategy and the Erosion of Democracy

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Abstract: This paper examines the claim that political parties which mobilize voters primarily through hatred of an out-group and through misinformation are incompatible with democracy, even when they win free elections. The argument rests on a premise from democratic theory: elections settle disputes only when losers keep accepting the result, and that acceptance depends on a shared baseline of trust and factual agreement. Hatred can assemble a cohesive winning coalition, yet it does so by casting a larger population as enemies, and each cycle of such mobilization shrinks the share of citizens willing to grant the system legitimacy. The historical record is reviewed through Weimar Germany, united Pakistan before 1971, Sri Lanka after 1956, the breakup of Yugoslavia, Rwanda before 1994, and Hungary from 2010 to 2026, alongside contrasting inclusive transitions in South Africa and postwar West Germany. The argument is then restated in the vocabulary of social and political psychology, including social identity theory, intergroup threat, affective polarization, negative partisanship, the illusory truth effect, motivated reasoning, moral disengagement, and superordinate goals. The evidence broadly supports the claim, with qualifications concerning case selection, the definition of hatred, and the capacity of some democracies to recover.

Index Terms: Affective polarization, democratic backsliding, ethnic outbidding, losers' consent, misinformation, social identity theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Electoral victory is the most visible test of a party's democratic standing, and it is often treated as a sufficient one. A party that wins a majority in a free vote is said to speak for the people, and criticism of its methods is dismissed as the complaint of losers. This paper questions that equation. Its central claim is that a party which relies on hatred and misinformation to assemble a loyal electorate works against democracy itself, even if it wins one or two elections by doing so.

The reasoning runs as follows. Democracy needs trust and a shared hold on the truth, because citizens must believe that their opponents will respect the rules and that the information on which they vote is broadly reliable. It also needs a uniting factor, some loyalty larger than any party, that makes losing tolerable. Hatred can unite people, but it unites one part of the population by excluding another, and the excluded portion tends to be larger than the portion it binds together. Repeated over successive elections, the gap between the camps widens until the precondition for democratic competition, the willingness of losers to wait for the next election, collapses. Anyone who believes in democracy and in the power of the people should therefore refuse hatred as a route to a majority.

The paper tests this argument against the historical record and then translates its everyday vocabulary into established academic constructs. Section II sets out the theoretical

framework. Section III reviews historical cases. Section IV describes psychological mechanisms. Section V discusses the findings, Section VI addresses limitations and counterarguments, and Section VII concludes.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Democracy as Managed Uncertainty

Przeworski [1] described democracy as a system in which parties lose elections. Its stability depends on compliance by losers who could, in principle, refuse. Anderson *et al.* [2] call this willingness "losers' consent" and show that the gap between winners' and losers' confidence in institutions is a central predictor of democratic legitimacy. Dahl's [3] account of polyarchy adds that citizens must have access to alternative sources of information and that citizenship must be inclusive.

Levitsky and Ziblatt [4] identify informal norms that protect these formal arrangements: mutual toleration, the acceptance of rivals as legitimate competitors, and institutional forbearance, the restraint from pushing legal powers to their partisan limit. Linz [5], studying interwar breakdowns, distinguished loyal oppositions from semi-loyal actors who take part in elections while treating opponents as enemies of the nation.

B. The Exclusion Asymmetry

The argument of this paper can be stated in these terms. Riker's [6] size principle predicts that rational coalition builders aim for a minimum winning coalition, since surplus members dilute the payoff of office. A strategy built on hatred suits that goal well. It produces strong cohesion within a bloc just large enough to win, and it requires an out-group large enough to seem threatening. Under plurality rules, the winning bloc can be well under half of the electorate. The result is an asymmetry: loyalty is concentrated in a minimal coalition while alienation is concentrated in everyone else. Putnam's [7] distinction between bonding social capital, which strengthens ties within homogeneous groups, and bridging social capital, which links dissimilar groups, describes the same asymmetry at the level of civil society. Hatred-based mobilization manufactures the first kind at the expense of the second.

Rabushka and Shepsle [8] and Horowitz [9] add a dynamic element. In divided societies, a party that appeals to communal fear invites rivals within the same community to outbid it with harder positions, a process known as ethnic outbidding, and the space for cross-communal parties shrinks. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer [10] generalize this as pernicious polarization, a condition in which a society divides into mutually distrustful "us versus them" blocs, and they stress that it is usually produced by political entrepreneurs who choose divisive strategies. The hypothesis tested here is therefore cumulative: each round of hatred-based mobilization reduces losers'

consent among the excluded population, which raises the stakes of the next election, which in turn rewards further mobilization of the same kind.

III. HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Cases were chosen because hatred or misinformation was a documented and central mobilizing tool and because the actors involved operated, at least initially, within electoral or quasi-electoral politics. Contrasting cases follow, and Table I summarizes the evidence.

A. Weimar Germany, 1930 to 1933

The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) rose from 18.3 percent of the Reichstag vote in September 1930 to 37.3 percent in July 1932, becoming the largest party, before slipping to 33.1 percent in November 1932 [11]. Its appeal combined Depression-era economic grievance with an antisemitic and anti-Marxist narrative that cast Jews and the left as internal enemies, including the "stab-in-the-back" myth about the 1918 defeat [11]. Hitler was appointed chancellor through elite bargaining in January 1933, and in the last competitive election, in March 1933, the party won 43.9 percent. Adena *et al.* [12] show that radio slowed the growth of Nazi support while it carried pro-government news, and that this effect reversed within weeks once the Nazis controlled broadcasting. Propaganda was most effective where antisemitism was historically high, consistent with Voigtländer and Voth's [13] evidence that such attitudes persist across centuries. The Enabling Act of 23 March 1933 gave the cabinet legislative power, and by July 1933 Germany was a one-party state. This is the clearest instance of a party using electoral success built on hatred to abolish electoral competition altogether.

B. United Pakistan and the Breakup of 1971

Pakistan's ruling elite treated the Bengali majority of East Pakistan as a problem of loyalty. The declaration of Urdu as the sole state language in 1948 provoked the Language Movement, culminating in the police shooting of protesters in Dhaka on 21 February 1952. Jahan [14] documents how the central state portrayed Bengali language and culture as insufficiently Muslim and Bengali autonomists as agents of India, a narrative that substituted suspicion for integration. When the Awami League won 160 of East Pakistan's 162 general seats in the 1970 election, and with them an outright majority of the National Assembly, the military regime and West Pakistani leaders refused to transfer power [15]. The crackdown that began on 25 March 1971 led to war, mass killing, and secession. This case differs from the others because the exclusionary narrative was promoted mainly by unelected elites. It is included because it isolates the losers' consent mechanism with unusual clarity: the country split once the majority concluded that its electoral victories would never be honored.

C. Sri Lanka after 1956

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's coalition won the 1956 election in a landslide on a pledge to make Sinhala the only official language, and the Official Language Act passed that year [16].

DeVotta [16] argues that the policy began a cycle of ethnic outbidding in which Sinhalese parties competed to appear the stronger defender of the majority, abandoning agreements with Tamil leaders whenever rivals accused them of betrayal, as happened to the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact in 1958. Anti-Tamil riots followed in 1956, 1958, and, most destructively, July 1983. Later measures, including university admission standardization in the 1970s, deepened Tamil alienation, and the separatist war lasted until 2009. Sri Lanka remained electoral throughout, which makes the case especially relevant: repeated democratic victories on an exclusionary platform coexisted with the loss of consent from a large minority and decades of civil war.

D. Yugoslavia, 1987 to 1999

Slobodan Milošević consolidated power in Serbia from 1987 by fusing communist party machinery with Serbian nationalist grievance, particularly over Kosovo, while state media framed Croats, Bosniaks, and Albanians through the memory of wartime atrocities [17], [18]. Multiparty elections in 1990 returned nationalist parties in several republics, including Franjo Tuđman's Croatian Democratic Union. Snyder [18] argues that early democratization in weak institutional settings gives elites incentives to rely on nationalist persuasion, and Gagnon [17] contends that Serbian and Croatian leaders deliberately provoked ethnic conflict to demobilize reformist challengers. The wars of 1991 to 1999 killed well over one hundred thousand people and dissolved the federation. Elections supplied the initial mandate for this process, and later elections were held under conditions of war and media control.

E. Rwanda, 1990 to 1994

Rwanda's move toward multiparty politics after 1990 coincided with civil war and the Arusha power-sharing negotiations. Hardline Hutu Power factions, including the Coalition for the Defense of the Republic, used outlets such as the newspaper *Kangura* and, from 1993, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) to depict Tutsi civilians as an alien enemy and Hutu moderates as traitors [19]. Using variation in radio reception created by Rwanda's hills, Yanagizawa-Drott [20] estimates that RTLM broadcasts account for about 10 percent of participation in the 1994 genocide, roughly 51,000 perpetrators, and that spillovers to neighboring villages produced more militia violence than direct exposure did. Human Rights Watch estimates that at least half a million Tutsi were killed [19]. The case shows the endpoint of the dehumanizing rhetoric discussed in Section IV and illustrates how mass media convert exclusionary narratives into coordinated action.

F. Hungary, 2010 to 2026

Hungary offers a contemporary and less extreme case. After winning a two-thirds majority in 2010, Fidesz rewrote the constitution and electoral rules and extended its influence over the media and courts [10]. From 2015 the government ran sustained state-funded campaigns against migrants and against George Soros, which McCoy *et al.* [10] treat as a polarizing strategy that framed opponents as threats to the nation. In 2022

the European Parliament described the country as a “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy” [21], and the pattern fits what Lührmann and Lindberg [22] call autocratization through gradual erosion within electoral forms. Fidesz won four consecutive national elections. On 12 April 2026, however, the opposition Tisza party won about 53.6 percent of the vote and 138 of 199 seats on record turnout, and Orbán conceded [23], [24]. The case supports the erosion component of the argument while showing that, short of full breakdown, an electorate can reverse course.

G. Contrasting Cases: Inclusive Strategies

South Africa’s transition illustrates the alternative strategy. Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC), holding a clear majority after 1994, formed a Government of National Unity with the former ruling National Party and promoted a shared national identity, while the Truth and Reconciliation Commission prioritized acknowledgment over retribution. Gibson’s [25] survey research finds that acceptance of the commission’s account of the past was associated with greater interracial reconciliation, though unevenly across groups. South Africa has since held regular elections, and in 2024 the ANC, having lost its majority, entered a coalition, a peaceful adjustment that depends on the losers’ consent described in Section II. Postwar West Germany took a different route, adopting what Loewenstein [26] had earlier called militant democracy: the Basic Law allowed the Federal Constitutional Court to ban parties seeking to abolish the democratic order, which it did in 1952 and 1956. Both cases suggest that democracies endure when majorities and institutions decline to convert electoral power into the exclusion of opponents.

TABLE I
SUMMARY OF HISTORICAL CASES

Case	Mobilizing narrative	Electoral footing	Outcome
Weimar Germany	Antisemitism; “stab-in-the-back” myth	37.3% (1932); 43.9% (1933)	One-party dictatorship; genocide
Pakistan (to 1971)	Bengali culture and autonomists cast as disloyal	Largely unelected elites; 1970 result refused	War; secession of Bangladesh
Sri Lanka	Sinhala Only; ethnic outbidding	1956 landslide; repeated wins	Riots; civil war, 1983 to 2009
Yugoslavia	Serbian and Croatian ethnonationalism	1990 republic elections	Wars; dissolution of the state
Rwanda	Hutu Power; hate radio	Multiparty transition; power sharing sabotaged	Genocide, 1994
Hungary	Anti-migrant and anti-Soros campaigns	Four wins, 2010 to 2022	Erosion; defeat and concession, 2026
South Africa (contrast)	Reconciliation; shared identity	ANC majorities from 1994	Regular elections; coalition, 2024

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

The argument in Section I was stated in everyday language. This section restates it using constructs from social and political psychology, and Table II maps each everyday expression to its closest academic counterpart.

A. “Hatred Can Unite People”: Social Identity and Threat

Social identity theory [27] holds that people derive part of their self-concept from group memberships and seek positive distinctiveness for their in-group relative to out-groups. Minimal group experiments [28] showed that even arbitrary categorization produces in-group favoritism. Intergroup threat theory [29] distinguishes realistic threats, to resources, safety, or power, from symbolic threats, to values and identity, and finds that both predict prejudice. A party that names a threatening out-group activates both kinds at once, raising cohesion and loyalty within its base. Scapegoating, the displacement of blame for diffuse hardship onto a target group, is the classic route by which economic distress feeds this process, as Allport [30] observed.

B. “It Excludes More Than It Unites”: Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is the tendency of partisans to dislike and distrust supporters of the opposing party, measured with feeling thermometers and social distance items, and it can grow even when policy disagreement does not [31], [32]. Negative partisanship describes political behavior driven primarily by antipathy toward the opposing party [33]. These constructs explain the asymmetry of Section II. Hatred-based appeals raise affective polarization in both directions: the targeted group, and those who sympathize with it, come to view the mobilizing party with comparable hostility, and their combined numbers often exceed the party’s base. Mason [34] shows that when partisan, religious, and ethnic identities align, the resulting stacked identity magnifies hostility toward outsiders.

C. “The Gap Widens”: Group and Pernicious Polarization

Group polarization refers to the tendency of like-minded groups to move toward more extreme positions after deliberation [35]. When hatred sorts citizens into homogeneous camps, internal discussion pushes each camp further from the other. McCoy and Somer’s account of pernicious polarization [10], [36] supplies the political feedback: opponents often reciprocate with polarizing tactics of their own, and politics becomes a contest over existential stakes. Rathje *et al.* [37] find that social media posts about the political out-group are shared at substantially higher rates than other posts, and Brady *et al.* [38] show that moral-emotional language increases diffusion, which suggests that digital platforms reward the very content that widens the gap.

D. “Misinformation Keeps Supporters Loyal”: Illusory Truth

The illusory truth effect is the finding that repeated statements are judged more credible than novel ones, regardless of their accuracy [39]; Pennycook *et al.* [40] extend it to fabricated news headlines, which gained perceived accuracy after a single prior exposure. Motivated reasoning describes the tendency to evaluate evidence in ways that favor conclusions one is already motivated to reach [41]. Lewandowsky *et al.* [42] document the continued influence effect, in which retracted misinformation still shapes later inference. Together these explain why a falsehood about an out-group, once repeated and tied to identity, resists correction. They also explain the damage to Dahl’s requirement of alternative information: when factual

claims become badges of group membership, citizens lose the common ground on which electoral persuasion depends [43].

E. “Democracy Stops Working”: Partisan Trade-Offs and Moral Disengagement

Graham and Svolik [44] find that only a small fraction of American voters punish undemocratic behavior when doing so means voting against their own side, and that this willingness declines with stronger partisanship and wider platform divergence. Braley *et al.* [45] show that voters who value democracy may still support backsliding because they believe the other side poses a greater threat to it. At the extreme, dehumanization, the denial of full humanness to others [46], and moral disengagement, the cognitive mechanisms by which people exempt themselves from moral self-sanction through euphemistic labeling, displacement of responsibility, and blaming of victims [47], make violence thinkable. RTLM’s habit of calling Tutsi *inyenzi*, or cockroaches, is a textbook example [19].

F. “Democracy Needs a Uniting Factor”: Superordinate Goals

Sherif’s Robbers Cave study [48] found that hostility between rival groups of boys fell once they had to cooperate on superordinate goals that neither group could achieve alone. The common ingroup identity model [49] proposes that recategorizing “us” and “them” into a more inclusive “we” reduces bias, and intergroup contact theory, supported by Pettigrew and Tropp’s meta-analysis of more than 500 studies [50], shows that contact between groups reliably reduces prejudice. These are the psychological counterparts of the uniting factor. Generalized trust, the belief that most people, including strangers, can be trusted [51], is both a product of such inclusion and a resource on which democracy draws.

TABLE II
EVERYDAY TERMS AND ACADEMIC CONSTRUCTS

Everyday expression	Academic construct	Sources
“Hatred unites people”	Social identity theory; in-group favoritism; intergroup threat; scapegoating	[27]–[30]
“It excludes more than it unites”	Affective polarization; negative partisanship; minimum winning coalition	[6], [31]–[33]
“The gap widens”	Group polarization; pernicious polarization; ethnic outbidding	[8], [10], [35]
“Misinformation builds loyal supporters”	Illusory truth effect; motivated reasoning; continued influence effect	[39]–[42]
“Democracy stops working”	Erosion of losers’ consent; partisan trade-off; dehumanization; moral disengagement	[2], [44]–[47]
“Democracy needs trust and truth”	Generalized trust; shared epistemic baseline; alternative information	[3], [43], [51]
“A uniting factor”	Superordinate goals; common ingroup identity; intergroup contact	[48]–[50]

V. DISCUSSION

The historical record is broadly consistent with the claim. In each primary case, hatred or misinformation was a central mobilizing resource, and in most of them it produced real electoral success: the NSDAP became Germany’s largest party,

the Sinhala Only platform won a landslide, nationalist parties carried the 1990 Yugoslav republic elections, and Fidesz won four national elections. In none of the primary cases did that success yield a stable democracy. The outcomes differed in form, from dictatorship in Germany to secession in Pakistan, civil war in Sri Lanka and Yugoslavia, genocide in Rwanda, and prolonged erosion in Hungary, yet each involved the breakdown of the losers’ consent on which electoral competition rests.

The psychological literature explains why the strategy works electorally and fails democratically. Social identity and threat processes produce intense cohesion in the mobilized bloc. Affective polarization and negative partisanship produce equal or greater hostility among those excluded. Group polarization, platform dynamics, and ethnic outbidding make the divide self-reinforcing, and the illusory truth effect and motivated reasoning protect the narratives that sustain it. Once citizens see opponents as existential threats, the experimental evidence [44], [45] indicates that they will tolerate violations of democratic norms by their own side. The contrasting cases suggest the converse: strategies that build a superordinate identity and include former opponents leave behind a population willing to lose elections.

The normative conclusion follows. A commitment to democracy entails a commitment to the conditions that make democracy possible, and those conditions include a citizenry that trusts the process enough to accept defeat. A party that wins by manufacturing distrust consumes the resource on which its own mandate depends. For anyone who believes in popular sovereignty, the choice of mobilization strategy is a democratic obligation in its own right, binding on the way to a majority as well as after one is won.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND COUNTERARGUMENTS

The cases were selected partly because they ended badly, which risks selecting on the dependent variable. Many democracies have hosted parties with exclusionary rhetoric without collapsing, and a systematic test would require a sample of such parties coded independently of outcomes, for example with the V-Party expert survey of party illiberalism [54].

Other causes operated alongside hatred in every case: the Depression and the Versailles settlement in Germany, majoritarian institutions in Sri Lanka, the collapse of federal communism in Yugoslavia, and civil war in Rwanda. Hatred-based mobilization is better understood as an accelerant that interacts with crisis and weak institutions than as a sole cause.

“Hatred” and “misinformation” are contested labels. Every party portrays its opponents unfavorably, and legitimate grievances can be dismissed as hate by those who benefit from the status quo. McCoy and Somer [36] warn that answering polarizers by demonizing their voters can deepen the divide. An operational definition, such as dehumanizing language, sustained targeting of a group defined by birth or belief, or demonstrably false claims about that group, would make the argument testable and harder to misuse.

Research on the inclusion-moderation hypothesis [52] finds that radical parties sometimes moderate once they participate in institutions, and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser [53] argue that populist challengers can act as a corrective by giving voice to neglected constituencies, even while threatening liberal norms. Finally, Hungary's 2026 election shows that erosion can be reversed. The argument should therefore be read as a claim about tendency and risk; the point at which democracy stops working varies with institutions, civil society, and the choices of opponents.

VII. CONCLUSION

Elections measure who commands more support on a given day, while democracy depends on whether those who lose still believe the next contest is worth entering. The cases reviewed here, from Weimar Germany to Hungary, show parties and movements gaining power through hatred and misinformation and, in the process, eroding the consent of the citizens they cast as enemies. Research on social identity, intergroup threat, affective polarization, and misinformation explains why that strategy generates loyal majorities in the short run and ungovernable divisions in the long run, and research on superordinate goals and intergroup contact describes the alternative. Future work should test the argument across a large sample of parties using measures of exclusionary rhetoric that are defined before outcomes are known, and should study the cases in which deeply polarized democracies recovered.

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