


Investigating the Relationship between Media Consumption, System Justification, and Political Efficacy-Related Beliefs in the Hungarian Context

Málna Anna Benza^{1,2}, Zsuzsanna Kun³ , Zsolt Péter Szabó^{2,4} 

¹ Doctoral School of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

² Institute of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

³ Corvinus University of Budapest, Institute of Marketing and Communication Sciences, Department of Intercultural Marketing and Consumer Behavior

⁴ Corvinus University of Budapest, Institute of Strategy and Management, Department of Psychology

The Hungarian political system has been described in starkly contrasting terms since the conservative Fidesz party's landslide victory in 2010, ranging from being the 'last true democracy' to 'no democracy at all.'

Media in Hungary plays a key role in shaping these divergent views. This study investigates the relationship between media consumption, system justification, and political efficacy beliefs. System justification refers to the belief that the current system functions properly, while political efficacy is the belief that the system is responsive to its citizens.

We hypothesized that different types of media consumption would be associated with varying levels of system justification and political efficacy. Specifically, we expected exclusive pro-government media consumers to show the highest levels of both, while independent media consumers would display the lowest. To test these hypotheses, we used a representative sample of 1,000 Hungarian participants (526 females, 474 males; average age = 45.7, $SD = 16.9$).

Our findings largely supported these expectations: exclusive pro-government media consumption was associated with increased system justification and political efficacy. However, a smaller effect emerged where exclusive independent media consumption was linked to enhanced political efficacy through diminished system justification. These effects remained significant after controlling for age, gender, level of education, place of residence, subjective socioeconomic status, and political party preference.

Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, making causal interpretations is challenging. Nonetheless, we propose several speculative explanations for the observed relationships, drawing on the literature on system justification and collective action.

Key words: system justification, political participation, political efficacy, media consumption

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Málna Anna Benza, Department of Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University, Izabella Street 46, 1064, Budapest, Hungary.
E-mail: benza.anna@ppk.elte.hu

Received October 29, 2023



Introduction

Hungary's political landscape, especially under Fidesz rule since 2010, is depicted in starkly contrasting ways by various media outlets. Some describe Fidesz's family policies as a 'complete failure,' while others praise Hungary as the 'vanguard of conservative family-oriented policies.' Similarly, economic indicators are subject to divergent interpretations: are the 'startling GDP figures' signs of a declining quality of life, or evidence that the Hungarian economy is 'holding its own'? These opposing perspectives reflect the broader polarization in Hungarian media, where interpretations of political and economic realities are heavily influenced by the ideological leaning of the news sources.

This study explores the relationships between media consumption, system justification beliefs, and citizens' perceived political efficacy within this polarized media environment. We specifically examine how different types of media – categorized as pro-government and independent – influence individuals' perceptions of the political status quo, their beliefs about the effectiveness of political participation, as well as the connections between these variables.

The following sections offer a theoretical overview of the key concepts underlying our study, along with hypotheses and research questions informed by existing literature.

Political Efficacy-Related Beliefs

Political efficacy is a critical precursor to political participation, which includes the various ways ordinary citizens attempt to influence the political decision-making process (Parry et al., 1992). Political efficacy is typically defined in two dimensions: internal efficacy, the belief in one's ability to engage in politics, and exter-

nal efficacy, the belief that the government is responsive to citizens (Boulianne et al., 2023). A significant psychological barrier to political participation is the perception of limited impact or efficacy, which reflects a constrained sense of agency (van Zomeren et al., 2013).

A vicious cycle of demobilization can occur when individuals feel that their actions – or the actions of others – will not make a difference, leading them to abstain from participation. This disengagement often results in a sense of underrepresentation, deepening their sense of powerlessness and further discouraging future participation. This cycle is exacerbated by perceptions that the system is entirely corrupt, offering limited opportunities for personal contributions to effect change. However, Ayanian et al. (2021) found that people can maintain efficacy even under oppressive conditions by seeing their actions as part of a broader movement. This underscores that efficacy beliefs are inherently subjective, and people can experience high levels of efficacy in repressive environments and low levels in healthy democracies. These beliefs are vital for sustained political participation, which is essential for a healthy democracy, despite some debate (see Amnå & Ekman, 2014 for an overview).

While voting is the most common form of participation, political involvement extends beyond it (Hooghe & Marien, 2012). Efficacy was originally defined as citizens' perceptions of their power – or lack thereof – within the political sphere (Morrell, 2003). This includes beliefs that individuals have a meaningful voice in public affairs, that politicians listen, and that civic efforts are worthwhile (Geurkink et al., 2020).

In summary, beliefs about political efficacy are crucial for combating apathy and encouraging participation. These beliefs are closely linked to, but distinct from, system-justifying beliefs. Understanding the interplay between

these concepts, and the media's influence on them, is key to understanding what drives political participation.

System Justification, Political Efficacy, and Political Participation

The system justification theory (SJT) posits that beyond the motivations to view oneself or one's group positively, people are also driven to see the broader system as legitimate and fair (Jost & Banaji, 1994). SJT suggests that the motivation to defend and justify the existing social order is rooted in psychological needs like reducing uncertainty, addressing existential concerns, and fostering belonging (Jost et al., 2012).

Research on the relationship between system justification and political participation has produced mixed effects, with perceived political efficacy emerging as a crucial – though not exclusive – mediator. High levels of system justification beliefs (SJB) can discourage political participation by reinforcing adherence to the status quo. Conversely, low levels of SJB, sometimes referred to as 'system derogation' (Kelemen et al., 2014), may lead to perceptions that the system is irreparable and that efficacy is nonexistent. Although theoretically, low SJB should motivate action against perceived injustice, in practice, it often results in apathy and disengagement due to a sense of powerlessness. Some degree of system endorsement seems necessary to perceive avenues for reform, thus fostering political engagement (Cichocka et al., 2018).

To better understand the relationship between system justification, perceived efficacy, and political participation, Jost et al. (2017), and Osborne et al. (2019) propose that conflicting effects can be clarified by distinguishing between system-challenging and system-supporting collective actions. System-challenging actions, such as protest

marches and public demonstrations advocating for minority rights, criticize the status quo, while system-supporting actions, such as demonstrations defending the rights of dominant groups, uphold the system. High levels of SJB weakens support for system-challenging actions and strengthens support for system-supporting ones, with the reverse pattern for low SJB. Importantly, a sense of collective efficacy consistently predicts support for system-challenging actions, highlighting its role in envisioning and pursuing alternatives to the status quo.

Examining political contexts with extremely low levels of system justification, also known as system derogation, has further clarified these relationships. For example, system derogation in post-communist Eastern and Central Europe during the early 1990s did not result in increased system-challenging actions, likely due to perceptions of limited efficacy (Cichocka & Jost, 2014). Individuals who felt alienated were dissatisfied with the system but also felt powerless, lacking confidence in their ability – or that of others – to influence political outcomes. Cichocka and Jost (2014) suggest that political participation may peak at moderate levels of system justification, creating an inverted U-shaped relationship between system justification and political engagement (Cichocka et al., 2018). The key difference between low and moderate SJB seems to be linked to efficacy beliefs.

These studies clearly demonstrate the connection between beliefs about the system and the potential for successful participation, especially in system-challenging collective actions. Media plays a crucial role in shaping these beliefs. In the following section, we examine how media portrayals of the system, particularly negative ones, influence collective action or reinforce perceptions of ineffectiveness.

A Link between System Justification and Political Participation: Media Portrayals of the System

Media exposure evidently shapes perceptions of social and political realities, yet the impact of media consumption on citizen mobilization remains uncertain. Research on the relationship between media consumption and political participation has not reached a consensus on whether media mobilizes or demobilizes citizens, with mediating and moderating variables still understudied (Boulianne et al., 2023).

Some studies suggest that media consumption is linked to demobilization (Avery, 2009; de Vreese, 2009; Kipkoech, 2023). Robinson (1976) introduced the concept of 'videomalaise,' proposing that the media fosters cynicism and diminishes trust in politics. This view is supported by research showing the media's negative impact on institutional trust and participation (e.g., Hallin, 1992; Johnston et al., 2004).

Conversely, Norris (2000) presents the 'virtuous cycle' theory, arguing that media consumption, particularly of political news, can enhance trust in government and civic engagement. According to this theory, politically interested individuals are more likely to consume political news, deepening their understanding and boosting trust and engagement, thus reinforcing democratic participation. However, disengaged individuals tend to avoid political news, perpetuating their disengagement. Recent studies supporting this theory explore factors such as affective polarization (Chan & Yi, 2024), political expression (Chen & Chan, 2017), political interest (Dimitrova et al., 2014), and the role of different media channels (Boulianne, 2015).

The influence of the media likely depends on how it portrays the political system, es-

pecially in polarized environments, where portrayals are often starkly dichotomous. Pro-government media may present the system as flawless, while anti-government media depict it as deeply flawed or illegitimate, leaving little room for nuance. Perceptions of the system as just or unjust are linked to varying levels of political efficacy and, consequently, political participation.

This is where gaps in literature become evident. Surprisingly, only a few studies have examined the connections between media consumption, system-justification, efficacy beliefs, and political participation. Wang and Kobayashi (2021) found that consumption of state-controlled media in China increased support for the political system, while the relationship between social media use and system justification proved more complex, with varying effects across different platforms. Their study revealed that nationalist propaganda in state-controlled media mediated the link between media consumption and system justification but did not explore whether this increased system justification correlated with higher political efficacy or engagement.

Seo and Hyun (2018) found that following celebrities on social media was associated with increased system justification among individuals with high materialistic values, potentially explained by the 'strong' version of system justification theory, which suggests that disadvantaged groups may sometimes – though not universally (Osborne et al., 2019) – be more inclined to justify the status quo. Finally, Liu et al. (2021) identified a weak but significant positive association between the frequency of political news consumption and system justification.

Despite these findings, the limited research on the relationship between media consumption and system justification leaves many questions unanswered, particularly regarding how different types of media relate to system

justification and efficacy beliefs. Our study seeks to address these gaps by examining these variables.

The Hungarian Context

Hungary's political landscape is marked by deep polarization and low political engagement. Since 2010, when Fidesz won a decisive victory with a nationalist and cultural campaign, the party has implemented significant constitutional and legislative reforms, including changes to electoral and media laws. Despite roughly half of the electorate voting for opposition parties in subsequent elections, Fidesz has maintained its dominance, winning three more national elections with supermajority.

Control of the media has been central to Fidesz's strategy. Shortly after taking power, the party amended the media law, allowing the formation of media conglomerates controlled by pro-government oligarchs and coercing state-owned public media to serve the party's agenda. By 2017, Fidesz's influence extended to nearly all regional newspapers, major television networks, and leading news websites, creating a media landscape where government narratives dominate (Brogi et al., 2019; Enyedi & Krekó, 2018; Krekó, 2022).

This media segment, organized around the ruling party's propaganda, actively disseminates its key messages and targets its adversaries. Krekó (2022) describes this as 'information autocracy,' which relies on information manipulation rather than overt violence. Pro-government media frequently propagates unverified claims, misinformation, and fake news. A 2022 study found that pro-government media lost 377 defamation lawsuits over five years, with many involving disinformation (Erdélyi, 2022).

The 'media war' (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013) has resulted in a deeply polarized media landscape,

lacking political neutrality. Trust in media is among the lowest in Europe (Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth, 2023), with over 34% of the population consuming only media aligned with their political views, leading to a one-sided perception of reality (Tóth et al., 2023). System justification studies in Hungary reflect this polarization. While there is a debate over the extent to which Hungarians justify the existing social order (Jost & Kende, 2020; Kelemen et al., 2014; Lönnqvist et al., 2021; Szabó & Lönnqvist, 2021), there is a consensus that society is divided in its perceptions. Fidesz supporters tend to justify the system and have more positive views, whereas opposition voters generally show lower levels of system justification and more negative perceptions.

Overall, citizen engagement occurs in an environment where information is heavily distorted, significantly altering beliefs about the impact of political participation. While some aspects of this issue have been explored internationally, research on the relationship between media consumption, system justification, and political efficacy remains limited, and virtually non-existent in the Hungarian context. To our knowledge, only one study has examined the 'malaise versus mobilization' dynamics in Hungary, finding some support for the mobilization hypothesis (Tworeczki & Semetko, 2012).

Research Aims

Our study examines the relationships between media consumption, system justification, and efficacy-related beliefs regarding political participation in Hungary. We hypothesize an inverted U-shaped relationship between system justification and efficacy beliefs (H1), where moderate levels of system justification are associated with the strongest efficacy beliefs, while both low and high levels correlate with weaker efficacy beliefs.

We also hypothesize that individuals who consume only pro-government media will exhibit higher levels of system justification and stronger efficacy beliefs compared to those who consume only independent media (H2a, H2b). While we do not have clear expectations about the system-justifying and efficacy-related beliefs of individuals who consume both pro-government and independent media, or neither, we include these groups in the analysis (labeled RQ1 and RQ2, respectively).

Finally, we propose that system justification mediates the relationship between media consumption and efficacy beliefs (H3). These hypotheses were tested using data from a 2018 representative survey of 1,000 Hungarian participants.

Study

Participants and Procedure

The study employed a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Hungarian adults, with quotas based on age, sex, education, and place of residence according to the latest available data from the Hungarian Statistical Office in 2018. Data were collected using the random walking method, where trained researchers followed predetermined routes to randomly approach households. Out of the 4,095 adults approached, 1,000 face-to-face interviews were completed, resulting in a response rate of 24%. Among the others, 1,427 refused to participate (35%), and 1,668 people (40.7%) did not meet quota criteria.

Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated. The final sample consisted of 526 females and 474 males, with a mean age of 45.7 years ($SD = 16.9$). Educational levels varied: 23 participants had not completed elementary school, 406 had completed elementary school, 435 had finished high school, and

134 had higher education (BA or MA), two did not respond. Regarding residence, 317 lived in villages, 304 in cities, 204 in cities with county rights, and 175 in the capital. In terms of subjective socioeconomic status (SES), 31 participants reported severe financial difficulties, 262 struggled financially, 652 managed within their means, and 52 reported no financial problems.

Data were collected in late 2018, approximately six months after Fidesz secured its third supermajority in parliament. The research was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Pécs. The data were initially collected for a previous study (Lönnqvist et al., 2021) on system justification, authoritarianism, just world beliefs, and anti-immigration attitudes. This manuscript independently investigates media consumption and perceived political efficacy, topics not covered in the earlier publication.

Measures

Media consumption

Two items measured media consumption. The first question asked, 'Which of the following newspapers do you regularly read?' Participants were provided with a list of the 12 most popular newspapers and an option for 'I do not read newspapers.' The second question asked, 'Which of the following news websites do you regularly read?' This was followed by a list of the 17 most popular news websites, along with options for 'Other' and 'I do not read news websites.' Participants could select multiple options for both questions.

Newspapers and websites were categorized as 'pro-government' or 'independent' (non-government) based on Mérték Media Monitor's 2019 study on media pluralism (Máriás et al., 2019). 'Independent' was de-

defined as being financed independently of the government, either by domestic or international investors. Participants were classified as consumers of pro-government or independent media if they indicated that they regularly followed at least one such outlet. Based on their responses, participants were grouped into four categories: 1) those who consume both pro-government and independent media ($n = 313$), 2) those who consume neither ($n = 470$), 3) those who consume only pro-government media ($n = 91$), and 4) those who consume only independent media ($n = 126$).

System justification beliefs

System justification beliefs (SJB) were assessed using Kay and Jost's (2003) General System Justifying Belief (G-SJB) measure, which includes the following six items: 1) 'In general, I find society to be fair,' 2) 'Hungarian society needs to be radically restructured' (reverse-coded), 3) 'Hungary is the best country in the world to live in,' 4) 'Most policies serve the greater good,' 5) 'Everybody has a fair shot at wealth and happiness,' 6) 'Our society is getting worse every year' (reverse-coded). Participants responded on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 4 (absolutely agree). A composite score was calculated by averaging the response across all items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$), with higher scores indicating stronger system justification beliefs.

Political efficacy-related beliefs

Political efficacy-related beliefs were assessed using four items: 'It is not right to ignore public affairs and focus only on our own family and friends,' 'The average person has an influence on public life,' 'Participating in elections is worthwhile, as it can influence politi-

cal decisions,' 'Fighting corruption in Hungary is necessary because it will eventually lead to results.' While these items do not directly measure political efficacy itself, they reflect beliefs that are closely associated with the concept, making this a proxy measure rather than a precise assessment. It is important to note that our analysis is based on a secondary dataset that was originally developed to address different research questions. The items used in our analysis were created by the original survey author, who is not involved in this study. Participants responded on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 4 (absolutely agree). We calculated a composite score by averaging the responses across all items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$), with higher scores indicating stronger beliefs in the effectiveness of political and civic engagement.

Control variables

Additionally, we collected participants' age, gender, place of residence, highest level of education, SES, and political party preference. Age was recorded as a continuous variable. Gender was categorized as a dichotomous variable. Place of residence was categorized into four options: village, town, city, and Budapest (the capital of Hungary). Education level was assessed using five options, ranging from 'unfinished primary school' to 'university degree.' SES was measured by four options, from 'I have serious financial troubles' to 'I do not have any financial problems.' Political party preference was assessed through a single item asking which party they voted for in the last election. Responses were initially recorded across ten options, including the seven largest political parties, 'other party,' 'do not want to answer,' and 'did not vote.' For analysis, these responses were recategorized into two groups: government voters ($n = 368$) and non-government voters ($n = 274$). Additional-

ly, 358 participants either chose 'do not want to answer' ($n = 291$) or 'did not vote' ($n = 67$).

Data Analysis Procedure

We conducted the statistical data analysis using IBM SPSS 25.0. In the preliminary analysis, we used cross-tabulation to investigate the relationship between media consumption and political party preferences, ensuring these measures were distinct.

The main analysis included analysis of variance (ANOVA), scatter plot analysis, and mediation analysis. First, we conducted two separate one-way ANOVAs to examine differences between media consumption groups. In one ANOVA, SJB served as the dependent variable, and in the other, political-efficacy-related beliefs were the dependent variable. We applied Tukey's HSD for post-hoc comparisons. To test H1, we created a scatter plot to visually examine linear and quadratic associations between SJB and political efficacy-related beliefs.

For the remaining hypotheses and research questions, we conducted a mediation analysis using 10,000 bootstrapped samples with the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017). In this analysis, we included media consumption as the independent variable, political efficacy-related beliefs as the dependent variable, and SJB as the mediator. We dummy-coded media consumption, using exclusive pro-government media consumption as the reference group, resulting in three comparison groups: pro-government media consumers versus consumers of both media types; pro-government media consumers versus independent media consumers; and pro-government media consumers versus consumers of neither. We controlled for age, gender, place of residence, level of education, SES, and political party preference for potential confounding factors.

Results

In our preliminary analysis, a chi-square test revealed no significant association between media consumption and political party preference ($\chi^2 = 10.87, p = .09$). This suggests that, within our sample, patterns of media consumption did not strongly correlate with voting behavior. Figure 1 shows the distribution of political party preferences across different media consumption groups.

Figure 2 presents the descriptive statistics for each media consumption group and the results of the ANOVA analysis, which revealed significant differences between groups on SJB, $F(3, 996) = 4.428, p < .01$, and political efficacy-related beliefs, $F(3, 996) = 7.386, p < .01$.

Post-hoc pairwise comparisons using Tukey's HSD indicated that participants who exclusively consumed pro-government media had significantly higher SJB scores compared to those who exclusively consumed independent media ($p < .05$). Additionally, participants who consumed both pro-government and independent media had higher SJB scores than those who only consumed independent media ($p < .02$).

In terms of political efficacy-related beliefs, participants who consumed both pro-government and independent media had significantly lower scores than those who exclusively consumed pro-government media ($p < .01$) and those who did not consume either type of media ($p < .01$).

The scatter plot analysis investigating the linear and quadratic associations between SJB and political-efficacy related beliefs revealed that adding a quadratic term ($R^2 = .09$) did not account for any additional variance beyond the linear term ($R^2 = .10$). The relationship between these variables is best described by a moderate, significant negative linear associa-

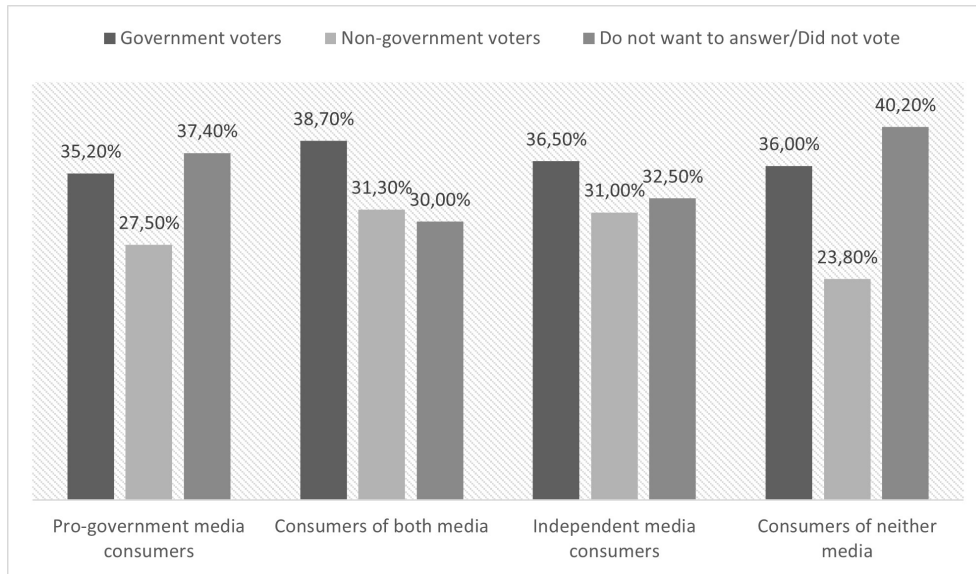


Figure 1 Cross-tabulation of media consumption and political party preference.

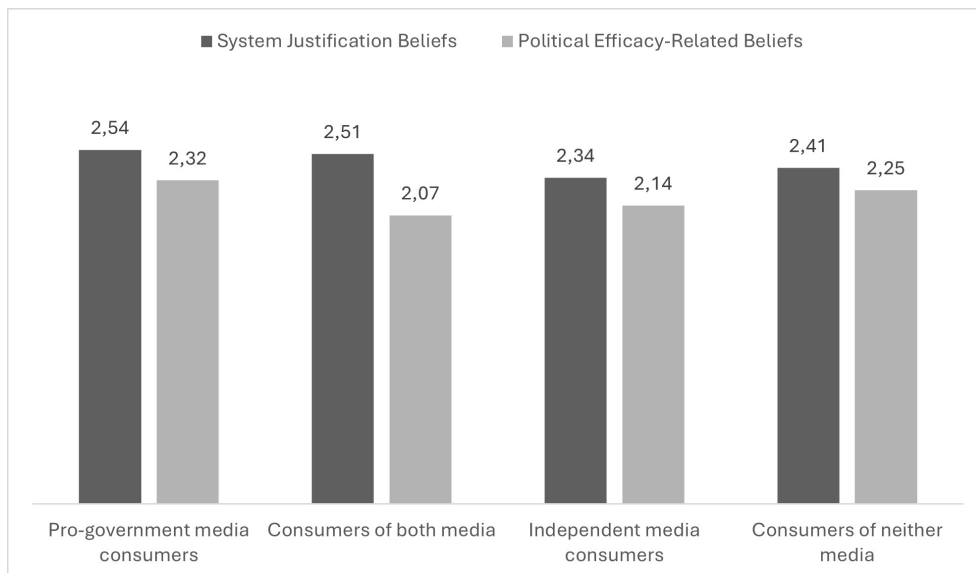


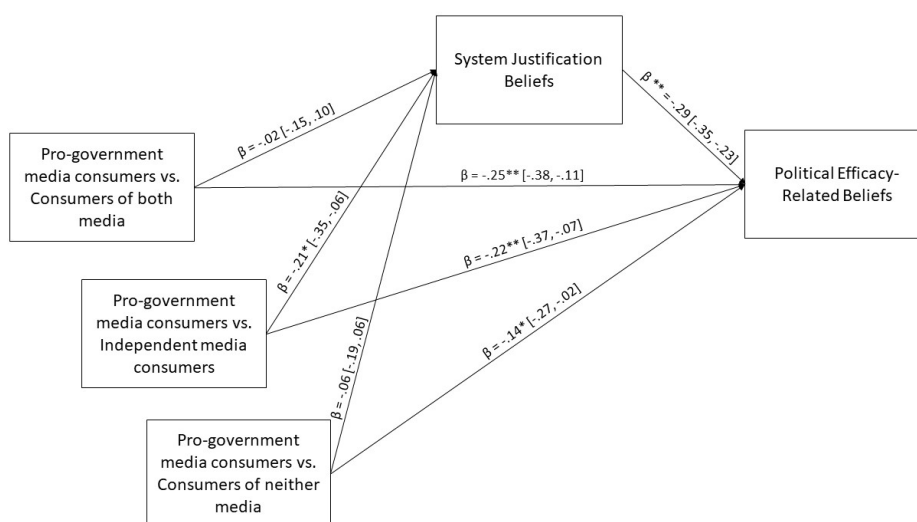
Figure 2 Differences in system justification beliefs and political efficacy across media consumption groups.

tion, $r = -.30, p < .001$. Importantly, this negative correlation was consistently significant across all media consumption subgroups: $r = -.21, p = .05$ for exclusive pro-government media consumers; $r = -.37, p < .001$ for consumers of both pro-government and independent media; $r = -.18, p = .05$ for exclusive independent media consumers; and $r = -.30, p < .001$ for those who did not follow either pro-government or independent media. The addition of a quadratic term did not improve the explanation of the relationship in any of these subgroups.

In the mediation analysis, conducted with or without controlling for covariates (age, gender, place of residence, educational level, SES, political party preference), media consumption demonstrated both significant direct and indirect effects on political efficacy-related beliefs. Specifically, the direct ef-

fects were significant for all media consumption groups when compared to the exclusive consumption of pro-government media, indicating that those who exclusively consume pro-government media exhibit higher political efficacy-related beliefs.

However, the only significant indirect pathway through system justification beliefs was found in the comparison between those consuming exclusively independent media and those consuming exclusively pro-government media, with $b = .06, SE = .02, 95\% CI [.01, .11]$. Interestingly, the direction of this relationship suggests that the direct and indirect effects operate in opposite directions: while the direct effect shows that consuming independent media reduces an individual's sense of political efficacy, the indirect effect, mediated through system justification beliefs, actually enhances it.



Note. The numbers in parentheses are 95% Confidence Intervals. The analysis controlled for age, gender, place of residence, educational level, SES, and political party preference.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Figure 3 Mediation analysis of system justification and political efficacy-related beliefs across different media consumption groups.

The indirect pathways for those consuming both types of media ($b = .01$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.03, .05]) and those consuming neither type ($b = .02$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.02, .06]) were not significant.

The total effects were significant for participants consuming both pro-government and independent media ($b = -.24$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [-.38, -.10]), and for those consuming exclusively independent media ($b = -.16$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI [-.32, -.01]). However, the total effect was not significant for participants who consumed neither type of media ($b = -.12$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [-.26, .01]).

Figure 3 serves as a visual summary of the result of the mediation analysis, providing a graphical representation of the pathways among the variables.

Discussion

In our research, we sought to examine how, within a highly polarized media environment (where media consumption habits are often characterized by 'selective exposure,' a tendency to favor information, media, and news sources that reinforce preexisting beliefs, attitudes, and opinions while avoiding contradictory information; Tóth et al., 2023) media with differing political orientations influence individuals' perceptions of societal functioning, and the potential for ordinary citizens, including the participants themselves, to impact political decision-making.

Our data revealed a negative linear correlation between system justification and political efficacy-related beliefs, indicating that lower levels of system justification are linked to mobilization rather than demobilization. Contrary to previous findings (Cichočka et al., 2018), we found no evidence supporting the proposed inverted U-shaped relationship, thereby falsifying H1. Nonetheless, we concur with the existing literature in suggesting

that extremely low levels of system justification are likely associated with inaction rather than engagement. However, as we will discuss below, due to its limitations the present data may not fully capture the complexity of such nuanced relationships.

Our findings supported both H2a and H2b, while also providing insights into RQ1 and RQ2. Exclusive consumption of pro-government media was associated with higher scores on the system justification scale and increased perceived political efficacy. Comparisons across different media consumption groups revealed a consistent pattern: significant direct effects were observed for all groups, and the total effect was also significant for two groups. These results remained robust even after controlling for relevant covariates, including political party preference.

Arguably, the most critical comparison is between consumers of exclusively pro-government media and those who consume exclusively independent media. In this comparison, both the total and direct effect suggest a demobilizing impact, with independent media consumers exhibiting reduced confidence in their ability to influence political decisions. Nevertheless, a smaller mobilizing effect was observed in this group through the mediating role of system justification. Specifically, since there was a negative association between system justification and efficacy-related beliefs, coupled with a negative association between being an independent media consumer and system justification, the indirect effect was positive.

It is important to note that, given the cross-sectional nature of our study, we can only hypothesize about the causal relationships between the variables, and the precise mechanisms underlying the identified effects remain speculative. Our tentative explanation for these findings is that exclusive consumption of independent media does not inherent-

ly increase perceived efficacy but may instead enhance motivation to resist. Herein lies a crucial limitation of our measure of political efficacy-related beliefs. While the four items we used may suggest a certain level of perceived efficacy, such as hope in influencing political decisions, these items could also be interpreted in a more idealistic manner. For example, agreement with statements like 'Fighting corruption in Hungary is necessary because it will eventually lead to results' might not necessarily reflect a belief in efficacy but rather an idealistic conviction that one must continue to act, regardless of the perceived effectiveness. In this context, agreement with these items, particularly when coupled with a perception that the system is flawed, could indicate a determination to persist in civic engagement – such as voting or combating corruption – even if the system appears unresponsive. This interpretation reflects a commitment to action and to standing up for what is right, rather than a true sense of efficacy concerning the success of one's actions. In other words, as protestors' signs during recent demonstrations about the government's educational decisions state, 'I'm standing here and there is nothing else that I can do.'

Another possible explanation is that, unlike previous findings on extreme system derogation in Hungary or, more generally, in Central and Eastern Europe (Cichocka & Jost, 2014; Kelemen et al., 2014), our study found that group-level averages for both system justification and efficacy-related beliefs were slightly above the scale's midpoint. This suggests that participants who exclusively followed independent media still displayed moderate levels of system justification and efficacy. Although they justified the status quo less and exhibited lower efficacy compared to pro-government media consumers, they did not entirely reject the system and believed there was room for reform. This finding reflects a para-

dox inherent in this hybrid regime (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Enyedi & Krekó, 2018; Krekó, 2022), which we term the 'illusion of possible change.' For instance, national elections are widely regarded as free but not fair (Hegedűs & Levine, 2022). Citizens who do not support the government face a difficult choice: either believe that the government can still be defeated in an election, despite systemic flaws, thereby fostering efficacy at the risk of naivety, or succumb to despair. This despair is reflected in the negative view of the system and its responsiveness among those who follow non-pro-government media, aligning with the sentiment that 'to sin by silence, when we should protest, makes cowards out of men' (Wilcox, 1914, line 1-2).

Yet another potential explanation concerns the causal relationship between the study variables. It is possible that individuals with lower efficacy are more likely to turn to independent media. In these media outlets, they may encounter both mobilizing messages ('I'm standing here...') and demobilizing messages ('...and there is nothing else that I can do'), which could lead to a more critical or resigned perspective on the system. We acknowledge this possibility, as suggested by a reviewer, and recognize that the cross-sectional design of our study limits our ability to establish causal directionality or explore temporal relationships between the variables. Nonetheless, it is crucial to highlight the potential bidirectional nature of these phenomena (Chan et al., 2018; Lu & Luqiu, 2020; Park & Kaye, 2018).

As noted, our study did not detect extreme levels of system derogation. It remains to be determined whether these positive attitudes reflect genuine improvements in societal conditions under the current government or are a product of the reality constructed by pro-government media. Importantly, by 'constructed reality,' we do not imply a val-

ue judgment but refer to objective evidence: since 2010, pro-government media outlets have lost numerous defamation cases, while independent media have faced far fewer such rulings (Erdélyi, 2022). These legal cases often revolved around the dissemination of unverified or false information. The potential impact of such misinformation on public perceptions, and its role in cultivating overly optimistic beliefs about the functioning of democracy and citizens' ability to influence the system, require further investigation.

Our research has both strengths and limitations. We utilized representative data from face-to-face interviews that sampled a diverse cross-section of society. However, practical constraints inherent in this data collection method introduced some limitations in the measurement of variables. First, we had to use brief scales to assess various constructs, often relying on just a few items. Second, because the study's original focus was different, our measure of perceived political efficacy-related beliefs may be subject to criticism. Nevertheless, agreement with these items still indicate some level of perceived ability to influence the political system and its responsiveness. Additionally, our items did not specify whether the action was system-challenging or system-supporting, a crucial distinction in the literature. Fourth, our measure of media consumption asked participants to report which media outlets they regularly follow, and we classified these outlets based on a comprehensive study of the media landscape (Máriási et al., 2019). However, it is unclear to what extent participants are fully aware of their own media consumption habits. During the 'media war,' several newspapers and media outlets changed ownership, and even the political orientation of established outlets may not be evident to less engaged or less informed citizens. Additionally, while participants were asked to report the media they

follow regularly, modern citizens are also passively exposed to political news through other channels, such as social media (Bouilanne, 2015; Bouilanne et al., 2023). Lastly, we were unable to include potential individual or contextual mediators and moderators, which would have enhanced our understanding of the effects observed.

Future research should address these limitations by refining the measures employed, including potential mediators and moderators such as the perceived credibility of media, susceptibility to fake news and conspiracy theories, trust in institutions, and political cynicism. Moreover, longitudinal designs are recommended to provide a more precise understanding of how media influences societal perceptions and vice versa.

In conclusion, our findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how media influence citizens' perceptions of the system and their political efficacy-related beliefs. The results indicate that consuming pro-government media increases both system justification and efficacy-related beliefs compared to other media segments. However, there is also a smaller indirect effect, where consuming independent media is associated with lower system justification, which, in turn, leads to greater motivation for systemic change.

Acknowledgement

Zsolt Péter Szabó was funded by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (Grant No. NRD-146582 and NRD-151474).

Authors' ORCIDs

Zsuzsanna Kun
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2323-6174>
Zsolt Péter Szabó
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8124-2869>

References

- Amnå, E., & Ekman, J. (2014). Standby citizens: Diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review*, 6, 261–281. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175577391300009X>
- Avery, J. M. (2009). Videomalaise or virtuous circle? The Influence of the news media on political trust. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, 410–433. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161209336224>
- Ayanian, A. H., Tausch, N., Acar, Y. G., Chayinska, M., Cheung, W.-Y., & Lukyanova, Y. (2021). Resistance in repressive contexts: A comprehensive test of psychological predictors. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 120, 912–939. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000285>
- Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2013). The party colonisation of the media: The case of Hungary. *East European Politics & Societies*, 27, 67–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254124650>
- Bajomi-Lázár, P., & Horváth, K. (2023). Két médiarendszer Magyarországon - Az álhírekről szóló újságírói diskurzusok tükrében [Two media systems in Hungary – Journalistic discourse on fake news]. *Lakmusz*, 2023/01/04. <https://www.lakmusz.hu/ket-mediarendszer-magyarorszag-on-az-alhirekrol-szolo-ujsagiroi-diskurzusok-tukreben/>
- Bouilanne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication, & Society*, 18, 524–538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.10008542>
- Bouilanne, S., Oser, J., & Hoffmann, C. P. (2023). Powerless in the digital age? A systematic review and meta-analysis of political efficacy and digital media use. *News Media & Society*, 25, 2512–2536. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231176519>
- Bozóki, A., & Hegedűs, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization*, 25, 1173–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664>
- Broggi, E., Nenadic, I., Viola de Azevedo Cunha, M., & Parcu, P. L. (2019). Assessing certain recent developments in the Hungarian media market through the prism of the Media Pluralism Monitor. European University Institute. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2870/560715>
- Chan, M., Chen, H. T., & Lee, F. L. (2018). Examining the roles of political social network and internal efficacy on social media news engagement: A comparative study of six Asian countries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24, 127–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218814480>
- Chan, M., & Yi, J. (2024). Social media use and political engagement in polarized times. Examining the contextual roles of issue and affective polarization in developed democracies. *Political Communication*, 41(5), 743–762. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2325423>
- Chen, Z., & Chan, M. (2017). Motivations for social media use and impact on political participation in China: A cognitive and communication mediation approach. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20, 83–90. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0174>
- Cichocka, A., & Jost, J. T. (2014). Stripped of illusions? Exploring system justification processes in capitalist and post-Communist societies. *International Journal of Psychology* 49, 6–29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12011>
- Cichocka, A., Górska, P., Jost J. T., Sutton, R. M., & Bilewicz, M. (2018). What inverted U can do for your country? A curvilinear relationship between confidence in the social system and political engagement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 115, 883–902. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000168>
- De Vreese, C. (2009). The effects of strategic news on political cynicism, issue evaluations, and policy support: A two-wave experiment. *Mass Communication and Society*, 7, 191–214. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0702_4
- Dimitrova, D. V., Shehata, A., Strömbäck, J., & Nord, L. W. (2014). The effects of digital media on political knowledge and participation in election campaigns: Evidence from panel data. *Communication Research*, 47, 95–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650211426004>
- Enyedi, Zs., & Krekó, P. (2018). Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's laboratory of illiberalism. *Journal of Democracy* 29, 39–51. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/explaining-eastern-europe-orbans-laboratory-of-illiberalism/>
- Edélyi, K. (2022). Közel 400 pert veszített 5 év alatt a Fidesz-barát média, ebből 103-at az Origo bukkott [Nearly 400 lawsuits lost by pro-Fidesz me-

- dia in 5 years, of which Origo lost 103]. <https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2022/02/23/kozel-400-pert-vesztett-5-ev-alatt-a-fidesz-barat-media-ebbol-103-at-az-origo-bukott/>
- Geurkink, B., Zaslove, A., Sluiter, R., & Jacobs, K. (2020). Populist attitudes, political trust, and external political efficacy: Old wine in new bottles? *Political Studies*, *68*, 247–267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719842768>
- Hallin, D. C. (1992). “Sound bite news: Television coverage of elections, 1968–1988.” *Journal of Communication* *42*, 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00775.x>
- Hayes, A. F. (2017). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. Guilford Publications.
- Hegedűs, D., & Levine, D. (2022, Feb 16). Hungary monitors not enough to stop first ‘rigged’ election in EU. *Euobserver*. <https://euobserver.com/opinion/154355>
- Hooghe, M., & Marien, S. (2012). A comparative analysis of the relation between political trust and forms of political participation in Europe. *European Societies*, *15*, 131–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2012.692807>
- Johnston, R., Hagen, M. G., & Jamieson, K. H. (2004). *The 2000 presidential election and the foundations of party politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511756207>
- Jost, J. T., & Banaji, M. R. (1994). The role of stereotyping in system-justification and the production of false consciousness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *33*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1994.tb01008.x>
- Jost, J. T., Pelham, B. W., Sheldon, O., & Sullivan, B. N. (2003). Social inequality and the reduction of ideological dissonance on behalf of the system: Evidence of enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *33*, 13–36. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.127>
- Jost, J. T., Chaikalis-Petritsis, V., Abrams, D., Sidanius, J., van der Toorn, J., & Bratt, C. (2012). Why men (and women) do and don’t rebel: Effects of system justification on willingness to protest. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *38*, 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167211422544>
- Jost, J. T., Becker, J. C., Osborne, D., & Badaan, V. (2017). Missing in (collective) action: Ideology, system justification, and the motivational antecedents of protest behavior. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*, 99–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417690633>
- Jost, J. T., & Kende, A. (2020). Setting the record straight: System justification and rigidity-of-the-right in contemporary Hungarian politics. *International Journal of Psychology*, *55*, 96–115. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12631>
- Kay, A. C., & Jost, J. T. (2003). Complementary justice: Effects of “poor but happy” and “poor but honest” stereotype exemplars on system justification and implicit activation of the justice motive. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*, 823–837. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.5.823>
- Kelemen, L., Szabó, Z. P., Mészáros, N. Z., László, J., & Forgás, J. P. (2014). Social cognition and democracy: The relationship between system justification, just world beliefs, authoritarianism, need for closure, and need for cognition in Hungary. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *2*, 197–219. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v2i1.208>
- Kipkoeh, G. (2023). Media use and political trust in Kenya: Media malaise or virtuous circle? *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 2643–2664. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19607>
- Krekó, P. (2022). The birth of an illiberal information autocracy in Europe: A case study on Hungary. *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, *2*, 55–72. <https://www.doi.org/10.53483/WCJW3538>
- Liu, J. H., Zeineddine, F. B., Choi, S. Y., Zhang, R. J., Vilar, R., & Páez, D. (2021). Living historical memory: Associations with national identity, social dominance orientation, and system justification in 40 countries. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, *10*, 104–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2020.09.007>
- Lönnqvist, J-E., Szabo, Z. P., & Kelemen, L. (2021). “The New State That We Are Building”: Authoritarianism and system-justification in an illiberal democracy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 703280. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.703280>
- Lu, S., & Luqiu, L. R. (2020). Does political efficacy equally predict news engagement across countries? A multilevel analysis of the relationship among internal political efficacy, media environment and news engagement. *New*

- Media & Society*, 22, 2146–2165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819888417>
- Máriás, L., Nagy, Zs., Polyák, G., Szávai, P., & Urbán, Á. (2019). Központosított médiarendszer. Lány cenzúra 2018 [Centralized media system. Soft censorship 2018]. Mérték médiaelemző műhely. Mérték füzetek 17. szám, 2019. december
- Morrell, M. E. (2003). Survey and experimental evidence for a reliable and valid measure of internal political efficacy. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67, 589–602. <https://doi.org/10.1086/378965>
- Norris, P. (2000). *A virtuous circle*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Osborne, D., Jost, J. T., Becker, J. C., Badaan, V., & Sibley, C. G. (2019). Protesting to challenge or defend the system? A system justification perspective on collective action. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 49, 244–269. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2522>
- Park, C. S., & Kaye, B. K. (2018). News engagement on social media and democratic citizenship: Direct and moderating roles of curatorial news use in political involvement. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95, 1103–1127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699017753149>
- Parry, G., Moyser, G., & Day, N. (1992). *Frontmatter*. In *political participation and democracy in Britain* (pp. I-IV). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511558726>
- Robinson, M. J. (1976). Public affairs television and the growth of political malaise: The case of “The Selling of the Pentagon”. *American Political Science Review*, 70, 409–432. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1959647>
- Seo, M., & Hyun, K. D. (2018). The effects of following celebrities’ lives via SNSs on life satisfaction: The palliative function of system justification and the moderating role of materialism. *New Media & Society*, 20, 3479–3497. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817750002>
- Szabó, Z. P., & Lonnqvist, J.-E. (2021). Who’s in power matters: System justification and system derogation in Hungary between 2002 and 2018. *International Journal of Psychology*, 56, 679–687. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12747>
- Tóth, F., Mihelj, S., Štětka, V., & Kondor, K. (2023). A media repertoires approach to selective exposure: News consumption and political polarization in Eastern Europe. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28, 884–908. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/19401612211072552>
- Tworzecki, H., & Semetko, H. A. (2012). Media use and political engagement in three new democracies: Malaise versus mobilization in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, 407–432. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161212452450>
- van Zomeren, M., Saguy, T., & Schellhaas, F. M. H. (2013). Believing in “making a difference” to collective efforts: Participative efficacy beliefs as a unique predictor of collective action. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 16, 618–634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430212467476>
- Wang, X. & Kobayashi, T. (2021). Nationalism and political system justification in China: Differential effects of traditional and new media. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 14, 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2020.1807372>
- Wilcox, E. W. (1914). Protest. In *Poems of Problems* (pp. 154–155). W. B. Conkey Company.