

# The Scapegoat Scam

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The Hungarian strongman Viktor Orbán, who lost his election in a landslide on Sunday after 16 years in power, presented himself as a defender of Western civilization. But at best, his lofty rhetoric was a code for bigotry and a justification for the persecution of minorities; at worst, it was a scam to fleece Hungarians by persuading them to blame everyone but those responsible for their problems. Maybe both.

Eventually Hungarians decided that a major source of their problems was Orbán himself. Maybe someday Americans will come to a similar realization about Orbán's great admirer, Donald Trump, who [praised](#) the former Hungarian leader before the election as a "fantastic man" who had done a "fantastic job."

Orbánism was, more or less, a model for what Trump and the Republican Party are trying to do in the United States. The Trump administration was so desperate to prevent Orbán's defeat that it sent J. D. Vance to ask Hungarians to "stand for Western civilization" and "freedom, for truth and for the God of our fathers." Few vice presidents have more consistently debased the office, to the point that most people hardly noticed that Vance had praised as godly a man who [publicly condemned "race mixing."](#)

Hungarians didn't listen to Vance's pleas. They swept the opposition leader Péter Magyar into office with a large enough majority to undo the changes to the system that Orbán had instituted to keep himself in power. Those changes forced an otherwise ideologically divided opposition to coalesce behind the center-right Magyar, a former member of Orbán's party, because he was committed to restoring Hungarian democracy.

After 16 years of Orbán, freedom and truth, not to mention material prosperity, are relatively scarce. Hungarian media were consolidated by regime-friendly billionaires, the independence of universities was curtailed, and the distribution of state benefits was predicated on loyalty to Orbán's party, Fidesz—making people reluctant to criticize the government. All this meant that more direct tactics of state control, such as violence, were unnecessary.

Orbán rode to power on resentment over the economic stagnation that developed under center-left governments. But he leaves office with Hungarians facing falling wages and higher inflation than similar countries are experiencing. Orbán's sectarianism and intolerance have sparked neither a religious revival nor a fertility bump; Hungary's [population is shrinking](#) and [has become more irreligious](#), even as Orbán has [demonized LGBTQ people](#), "[Muslim invaders](#)," and [Jews](#). Orbánism, in short, did not make Hungarians more rich, Christian, or free—unless you happened to be one of Orbán's buddies, in which case you may have gotten rich. As most Hungarians felt their economic circumstances worsen, Orbán provided them with relatively powerless targets to hate.

That was effective, but it didn't last forever. The massive [turnout for a banned](#) Pride parade last June, despite Orbán's threat of "legal consequences" for any attendees, was seen as a sign that Orbán had lost his iron grip.

That Orbán's carefully constructed system for keeping himself in power was ultimately overwhelmed by discontent over economic stagnation offers a warning for his successors. The European Union had held up funds for Hungary in response to Orbán's corruption—a central issue in the campaign. Those funds may now be released, and this should help the Hungarian economy. Still, further stagnation could revive the authoritarian right, and, as [my colleague Anne Applebaum points out](#), much of the media and the private-sector economy in Hungary remain in the hands of Orbán

allies.

Although Orbán has been defeated, America is following the path he blazed. [Many American conservatives](#), surprised lately to find themselves on the defense regarding culture-war issues such as marriage equality—wars that, just a few short years ago, they seemed to be winning—openly admired the Orbán model, even [inviting him](#) to the Conservative Political Action Conference to inveigh against “wokeness.” The Trump administration’s public communication is almost entirely scapegoating—blaming immigrants for low wages, housing scarcity, and crime, while appealing to high-minded sentiments about “Western civilization.” The rhetoric of administration figures such as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and the adviser Stephen Miller is only slightly paraphrased [from the 19th century](#), language used to justify colonialism and imperialism by framing Europeans as [heirs](#) to the great civilizations of antiquity and their enemies as worthless “[savages](#).”

The Trump administration [has ignored Congress](#) in its distribution of funds, it has made corporate mergers and government contracts [contingent on Trump’s approval](#), and it has used state power to threaten the free speech and independence of [media outlets](#), universities, and political opponents. Trump has sought to compromise the [independence of both the federal judiciary](#) and the [Federal Reserve](#). Although Trump has not entirely nullified Congress’s appropriations power, he has done enough to signal to powerful actors that they need to genuflect before him to protect their interests. Trump has done his best to centralize power over elections Orbán-style, but he has [been largely thwarted](#) by America’s federal system.

Demonizing immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ people has helped the GOP win elections but, as in Hungary, economic prosperity has not been widely shared. The Trump administration’s economic policy has been to [redistribute income upward](#), cutting taxes on the rich while [slashing health care](#) for everyone else, even as costs rise because of the president’s tariffs and his catastrophic war with Iran.

Traditional American conservatism once held that this kind of centralization was a sure path to tyranny, the very reason to keep government small, so as to prevent it from dominating political, economic, and cultural life. That view was informed by genuine insight, even if one is skeptical that anyone since Barry Goldwater has actually believed it. Whatever earnest commitment to small government that once animated the GOP has not survived its encounter with Trump. Opposition to equal rights, to higher taxes on the wealthy, and to a more generous social safety net is all that is left.

Trumpism will not deliver broad prosperity any more than Orbánism did, and keeping Americans strung along will require new enemies and panics to focus their frustrations elsewhere. It took Hungarians the better part of 20 years to reclaim their freedom. How long will it take Americans?