Strategic (in)action

A comparative study of public policy reforms in public sector governance

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Research Design

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the conditions under which governments undertake – or strategically avoid – significant public policy reform in a core area of service provision, focusing particularly on education. The empirical impetus for this research emerged from observation of the Hungarian education system, which has experienced decades of institutional decline marked by centralisation, politicisation, and deteriorating service quality. Despite this protracted dysfunction, governments have consistently avoided undertaking deep structural reform, opting instead for fragmented measures or rhetorical commitments. This puzzling absence of comprehensive policy response – despite mounting societal and institutional stress – raises a central question: *under what conditions do governments actually choose to initiate reform, and why do they so often refrain?* The present study was conceived as a first attempt to systematically investigate this problem, by identifying the underlying political and institutional conditions that enable – or suppress – substantive reform. While existing academic literature offers robust accounts of institutional inertia, blame avoidance, and incremental change, it often fails to explain why reform occurs in some contexts but not in others with comparable structural features.

To fill this gap, the paper develops and tests a theoretical model of "problem pressure", defined as a configuration of systemic stress that may (or may not) activate a government response. Empirically, the study uses quantitative trend analysis of Hungarian education-related bills and executive decrees, drawn from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) database. These are analysed relative to national election cycles, with legislative output treated as a proxy for institutional responsiveness. This is an exploratory, theory-building approach designed to identify structured variation in government activity that could signal responsiveness to accumulated pressure. Consequently, the central research question of the paper is the following: **when and what kind of problem pressure in public service provision trigger policy reform?** In terms of variables, the primary dependent variable of this study is the occurrence of reform (Y), while the key independent variables are forms of problem pressure (X_1, X_2, etc.). Further contribution of this paper lies not merely in mapping reform outcomes, but in theorising the activation logic – why some forms of pressure are absorbed or deflected, while others translate into reform.

The results reveal a non-random pattern of policy activity: education-related legislative output peaks sharply in the year prior to an election and drops markedly in the election year itself. These findings lend preliminary support to the theoretical model by suggesting that governments respond more actively to pressure in pre-election periods, while retreating into caution as elections approach. This cycle of strategic action points to a politically patterned logic of responsiveness – one that can be captured and explained by the framework developed in this paper.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical literature on institutional inertia, strategic reform, and political responsiveness. Section 3 outlines the theoretical model of problem pressure and introduces key concepts and expectations. Section 4 presents the data, operationalisation, and methodological choices. Section 5 details the empirical findings and interprets their implications. Section 6 concludes with a summary of results, limitations of the current design, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Explaining why governments undertake – or fail to undertake – substantial reforms in public policy, more specifically, public service provision remains a central concern in comparative welfare state research. The literature has evolved through various theoretical lenses, from path-dependent institutionalism to behavioural, discursive, and agency-based approaches. This chapter maps out the dominant schools of thought relevant to understanding the relationship between service performance (the independent variable) and reform occurrence (the dependent variable), while also accounting for instances of discursive masking of failure.

The historical institutionalist tradition offers a foundational framework for understanding the dynamics of welfare state reform, particularly by emphasising the enduring impact of institutional legacies and structural constraints. A pivotal contribution to this school is Pierson's (1994) seminal work, "Dismantling the Welfare State?", which sparked one of the most influential debates in the field, commonly referred to as the "new politics of the welfare state" (Jensen et al., 2019, p. 864). Building on earlier insights by Immergut (1990), Pierson (1994, 1996, 2000) argued that increasing returns and path dependency make welfare institutions particularly resistant to reform—especially retrenchment. These increasing returns are not only structural but reinforced through policy feedback, whereby existing policies generate vested interests and expectations that constrain future changes. Bonoli (2001) supports this interpretation, noting that welfare policies themselves create the constituencies that subsequently defend them. Within this framework, Pierson distinguished between "programmatic retrenchment", aimed at short-term spending cuts, and "systemic retrenchment", which seeks to alter the institutional rules governing welfare provision (Pierson, 1994, cited in Jensen et al., 2019, p. 684). Despite his focus on institutional resilience, Pierson did not exclude the role of political agency. He acknowledged that governments may still pursue reform when they can engage in strategies such as blame avoidance, obfuscation, or division of responsibility (Pierson, 1994). As he argued, political actors often face "political punishment" for attempts to reform benefits perceived as acquired rights (Pierson, 1996, p. 178), making inaction a politically rational strategy.

While early historical institutionalists focused mainly on inertia, later scholars such as Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2009) developed a typology of incremental but transformative change. Building on this, Palier (2010) applies these insights to conservative welfare states, showing that reforms often occur not through rupture but via sequential, cumulative adjustments – what Peter Hall (1993) terms first-order (instrumental), second-order (procedural), and third-order (paradigmatic) change. First-order change is the adjustment of policy instruments (e.g. tightening benefit rules), second-order change is characterised as change in the instruments themselves (e.g. shifting from earnings-related to flat-rate benefits). Finally, third-order change represents paradigm shifts in policy goals (e.g. moving from passive income replacement to active labour market policy). As mentioned, Palier's (2010) key insight connected to this is that reforms in highly institutionalised systems – such as the Continental European "conservative" or Bismarckian regimes – rarely take the form of radical ruptures. Instead, they tend to follow a sequential logic, characterised by the layering of new rules, the recalibration of old instruments, and the strategic reinterpretation of policy goals. What distinguishes Palier's contribution is his focus on the interdependence of change across multiple dimensions of welfare institutions. For instance, changes to benefit eligibility criteria, contribution rules, and financing mechanisms may appear marginal when examined independently, but can together result in a profound shift in the overall function of a welfare programme (Palier, 2010).

Building on the work of Streeck and Thelen (2005), Mahoney and Thelen (2009), and Palier (2010), Béland and Powell (2016) developed an even more nuanced account of institutional change, a typology of gradual but transformative institutional change. They

identified incremental but transformative mechanisms that allow for institutional evolution even in systems marked by strong inertia. These mechanisms – layering, drift, conversion, and displacement – capture the ways in which institutions and policies may be altered incrementally but with long-term transformative effect (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009; Béland & Powell, 2016). Taken together, these mechanisms challenge the binary between continuity and rupture. They demonstrate that "big bangs" can result from the cumulative effect of "small moves" (Hacker, 2004, cited in Béland and Powell, 2016, p. 136.). Moreover, the likelihood of each mechanism emerging depends on the interaction between institutional rigidity, actor strategy, and the political context. Hacker's (2004) typology, for instance, maps these forms of change onto varying levels of policy discretion and veto player strength, offering a matrix to predict how reform strategies unfold under different conditions. As Jensen (2009) and Béland and Powell (2016) note, these mechanisms have now become central to the mainstream of welfare state research, particularly in explaining the subtle yet significant ways in which public policies evolve even in the absence of formal, paradigmatic shifts.

So far, the literature reviewed has primarily drawn on the historical institutionalist tradition, which has provided invaluable insights into the path-dependent nature of public service institutions and the mechanisms by which reform unfolds – or fails to materialise – over time. Institutionalist approaches have at times been critiqued for their limited capacity to explain why reform happens when it does, and how governments actively construct, frame, or even obscure the nature of reform. In what follows, attention will turn to other streams of research, particularly those rooted in political economy, behavioural theory, and discursive institutionalism, which offer complementary – or at times competing – accounts of reform processes.

One such approach is the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), introduced by Baumgartner and Jones (1993). PET challenges the assumptions of incrementalism by proposing that major policy changes are not rare anomalies, but rather integral parts of how policy systems function. According to this theory, policy subsystems tend to operate in a state of relative stability – maintained by institutional routines, monopolies of attention, and shared interpretive frames – but this equilibrium can be disrupted by exogenous shocks or changes in the political environment. In this framework, problem pressure alone is insufficient to produce reform unless the issue in question breaks into the agenda of macropolitics. This occurs when policymakers, influenced by public sentiment, political narratives, or strategic reframing, suddenly redirect their attention toward a previously marginalised policy area. As Boda (2020) notes, such interventions can undermine the established balance within policy subsystems, challenging the dominant interpretive frameworks and institutional arrangements. In these moments, reform is not only possible but potentially large-scale and rapid, driven from outside the subsystem rather than emerging incrementally from within. While PET is not incompatible with historical institutionalism, it shifts the explanatory focus from internal, path-dependent dynamics to external disruptions and agenda-setting mechanisms accounting for sudden and significant shifts in public policy.

Other streams of research are rooted in rational choice theory and political economy. Scholars working within this tradition argue that governments operate under conditions of bounded rationality, seeking to maximise electoral rewards while minimising political costs. Drawing on prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), Vis and Van Kersbergen (2007, cited in Bartha and Tóth, 2013, p. 165.) propose that political elites are more likely to pursue reform when they perceive themselves to be in a "losing position" – for example, when faced with economic crisis, public dissatisfaction, or declining electoral support. In such scenarios, risk-taking becomes more rational than maintaining the status quo. This insight complements the work of Tsebelis (2002) on veto players, which suggests that the configuration of political institutions can either facilitate or hinder reform depending on the number and ideological

distance of actors whose consent is required. Bartha and Tóth (2013) synthesise much of this literature and adapt it to post-socialist welfare politics to explain Hungary's erratic policy reforms in the pension system. They argue that reform occurs either under acute fiscal pressure or when governments enjoy such dominant parliamentary control that electoral backlash is negligible.

From the perspective of veto players, inaction is not necessarily a consequence of institutional inertia but may reflect a deliberate political calculation. Governments may avoid reform in areas where the anticipated political backlash outweighs potential gains, particularly when reforms would impose short-term costs on well-organised constituencies (Bonoli, 2001). This helps explain why reforms are often concentrated in politically safer domains, or why governments may engage in symbolic reforms that create the appearance of change while avoiding substantive disruption. This line of reasoning echoes Pierson's (1996, p. 178.) earlier observation that strategic agency plays a crucial role in welfare state reform, as governments face "political punishment" for attempting to alter benefits that are widely perceived as acquired rights.

Closely related to these strategic considerations is a growing literature on discursive institutionalism, which focusses on the role of ideas, narratives, and communication in policymaking. Béland (2005, 2010) argues that political actors are not merely constrained by institutions but actively engage in framing policy problems and constructing the legitimacy of reform. Discursive strategies can serve to justify previously unpalatable reforms, redirect blame, or frame continuity as change. For instance, governments may present cost-driven cuts as efficiency-enhancing "modernisation," or depict targeted family policies as expansive social investment. This aligns with the work of Green-Pedersen (2002) who shows that reform discourse is often shaped by blame avoidance and credit claiming strategies. In contexts of high electoral risk, political actors may engage in policy packaging and ambiguity, introducing reforms in complex or technocratic language to minimise public resistance. Moreover, discursive strategies can be used not only to enable reform, but also to mask policy failure, by reframing stagnation or regression as adaptive governance. This is particularly relevant in cases where governments maintain strong formal authority yet pursue minimal or ineffective reforms while asserting rhetorical success. In a pivotal contribution to discursive institutionalist literature, Cartensen and Schmidt (2016) argue that ideas are not only vehicles of persuasion but also instruments of power. They identify three distinct forms of ideational power: power through ideas, which refers to the ability to persuade others to adopt one's vision; power over ideas, which involves controlling which ideas enter the policy arena; and power in ideas, the most subtle form, which shapes what is considered legitimate or even thinkable within a given institutional and discursive context. Their framework highlights that policy actors are not merely carriers of ideas but also strategic agents who wield ideational tools to stabilise or transform dominant paradigms.

2.1. Literature gap

Despite the considerable theoretical richness in the field of comparative public policy and welfare state reform, much of the literature remains sectorally siloed, retrospectively narrative, and weakly operationalised in its approach to explaining *why* reform occurs. Historical institutionalism, for instance, offers powerful insights into the structural inertia of welfare systems, highlighting the role of path dependence, increasing returns, and policy feedback. Yet these models often function retrospectively, explaining how change occurred after the fact, rather than identifying when reform becomes likely. Similarly, while theories of blame avoidance and strategic inaction explain political reluctance, they do not account for the variation in responsiveness across service areas or over time within the same regime. Moreover, the identification of these mechanisms is highly interpretative, often based on individual

empirical judgement, which compromises their external validity and makes cross-case generalisation difficult. The same concern applies to discursive institutionalism, which emphasises how political actors frame policy choices and construct the legitimacy of reform. While discursive power is undoubtedly real, its causal force is hard to pin down systematically. It often requires deep interpretive analysis of rhetoric, documents, or interviews, and is thus ill-suited for comparative, large-N, or even structured small-N research. The inherent subjectivity of discursive coding and the context-specific nature of ideational framing further limit the replicability and predictive power of this approach.

Rational choice and political economy approaches, including veto player theory, address how institutional configurations and strategic incentives shape reform trajectories. These models offer clearer predictions and variables, but often assume that actors are responding to acute, visible problems—without theorising how such problems are perceived, prioritised, or structured. Furthermore, they generally treat "problem pressure" as self-evident rather than conceptually defined, leading to underspecified models of causality. Also, while Punctuated Equilibrium Theory shifts focus toward moments of systemic disruption and agenda volatility, providing a compelling explanation for sudden reform episodes, it tends to treat institutional stress and policy change as exogenous, offering little analytical traction on internal policy subsystem dynamics or the conditions under which non-disruptive pressure accumulates without leading to reform.

Taken together, these pieces of literature provide essential tools for analysing reform but fail to offer a unified or testable account of the conditions under which policy decline results in reform – or does not. In particular, the absence of a formalised concept of problem pressure – as a distinct, measurable phenomenon – leaves a significant theoretical and empirical gap. While most frameworks implicitly reference crises, decline, or public dissatisfaction, they rarely conceptualise these factors as systematically comparable causal variables. Instead, they rely on post hoc narrative reconstructions or interpretive case study logic, limiting generalisability and predictive value. This paper seeks to fill that conceptual and methodological gap by introducing problem pressure as a formal, structured independent variable. Rather than treating decline, dissatisfaction, or dysfunction as background conditions, the framework positions problem pressure as the central explanatory construct – defined as a build-up of political, institutional, and social tensions within a public service domain, which may or may not trigger reform. This construct is theoretically grounded in the insights of institutionalism, political economy, and behavioural theory, but formalises and operationalises what other literatures have treated implicitly or narratively. By categorising pressure into dimensions such as performance deterioration, fiscal stress, public mobilisation, or reputational damage, and coding its intensity across cases, the model enables structured comparison across policy domains and time – something that has been elusive in prior research.

3. Theory

This paper advances a theoretical model that places problem pressure at the centre of reform dynamics in public policy. Unlike most existing frameworks that treat reform as a function of institutional legacies, partisan dynamics, or ideational change, this model begins from the observation that governments often face mounting dysfunction in public services without acting.

This study develops a two-stage explanatory framework to account for when and how governments initiate substantive reform in public service domains, particularly in education. At the core of this model is a novel conceptualisation of problem pressure as a structured, measurable set of stressors that accumulate within service systems and signal the demand for institutional response. While existing literature references crises, decline, or public dissatisfaction, it rarely treats these dynamics as systematically theorised or operationalised variables. This study fills that gap.

The frequently mentioned "problem pressure" variable is defined in this paper as a multidimensional condition comprising political, social, and administrative strain. These stressors may include deteriorating service performance, fiscal imbalance, stakeholder mobilisation, reputational damage, or rising citizen dissatisfaction. Crucially, the model does not assume that these forms of pressure automatically produce reform. Rather, it posits that such pressures constitute a latent field of potential change – reform occurs only when this pressure is activated by a trigger variable. The "trigger variable" is conceptualised as key problem pressure variable, a catalytic event or condition that shifts the political calculus of decision-makers. Examples include electoral turnover, elite realignment, international obligations, media-driven agenda shifts, or public protest. Without such a trigger, even severe problem pressure may be absorbed, reframed, or deferred. With a trigger, however, accumulated stress can be converted into reform – ranging from modest procedural adjustments to ambitious structural redesign.

This logic is visualised in Figure 1. On the left, the model depicts the multidimensional nature of problem pressure, composed of various domain-specific variables (X_1, X_2, ..., X_n). These interact with contextual triggers to influence Y, the outcome variable, representing policy reform. Each dimension of pressure contributes differently to the outcome, and the comparative aim is to identify patterns of association – such as which combinations or intensities of pressure are most likely to result in substantive reform, and which are consistently ignored or deflected by political actors.
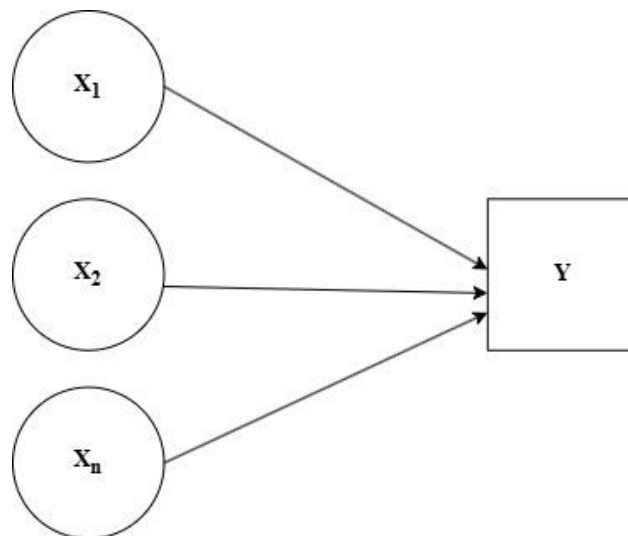

Figure 1 Visualisation of the theoretical model (Source: author's own work)

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The theoretical model therefore proceeds as follows:

- **Stage 1:** problem pressure accumulates within a public service domain.
- **Stage 2:** a trigger activates that pressure, leading to a reform response (Y), whose form is shaped by the configuration of the original stressors.

This framework moves beyond static, binary models of reform to offer a dynamic account of conditional responsiveness. It explains not only *whether* governments act, but also *why the nature of their response varies* – and why reform may fail to occur even under high-pressure conditions. By formalising problem pressure as a measurable concept and embedding it within a causal model, the study enhances both explanatory power and cross-case comparability.

In sum, the theory offers a structured answer to a longstanding puzzle in the reform literature: why do governments facing similar challenges respond so differently? It argues that reform is best understood not as the inevitable result of crisis or ideology, but as the product of a specific configuration of pressure and activation – a logic that this study will explore through comparative case analysis and process tracing.

4. Data and Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods strategy to explore the relationship between systemic stress in public service domains and the initiation of policy reform. The current methodological phase involves the construction of an exploratory dataset and the application of quantitative techniques – specifically trend analysis – to assess the plausibility of using legislative activity as an indicator of problem pressure. The primary objective is to detect whether observable shifts in legislative output can serve as preliminary indicators of problem pressure – a core concept in the theoretical framework of this dissertation. This section details the data sources, operationalisation of constructs, and the strategies used to ensure internal and construct validity, as well as the replicability of findings.

4.1. Data sources and reliability

The empirical foundation of this study is drawn from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), a widely recognised and methodologically transparent database that enables cross-temporal and cross-sectoral analysis of policy activity. The dataset used here incorporates data from two distinct CAP modules: the Hungarian Bills Dataset and the Hungarian Executive Decrees Dataset[1]. Each entry was organised by year and aligned relative to the timing of national parliamentary elections. This approach enables the construction of a reproducible, time-aligned dataset, in which every observation corresponds to a particular year's distance from an election (e.g. -3, -2, -1, 0).

The bills dataset includes every piece of legislation introduced in the Hungarian National Assembly since 1990 until 2022. Each entry is coded by a trained team of researchers following the standardised CAP policy content scheme, which assigns one and only one policy code (both major topic and subtopic) to each bill. The coding is based on official summaries published by the National Assembly, and is supplemented by manual verification of key variables such as the date of introduction, status of passage, party affiliation of the introducer, and electoral cycle. Each record includes metadata linking it to government cycles, the name and type of the introducer, and, where available, links to the full legislative text and its publication in the Hungarian Official Journal (*Magyar Közlöny*). Similarly, the executive decrees dataset covers all decrees issued between 1990 and 2018. Each decree is also categorised using the CAP topic coding system, with content classification based on official summaries provided by the Hungarian Official Journal. Variables include decree type (e.g., ministerial vs. prime ministerial), the issuing authority, length of the text (in characters and pages), number of paragraphs, and the electoral cycle during which the decree was published.

Both datasets are the result of meticulous coding protocols, with clearly defined variable formats and regular updates, ensuring a high degree of transparency, replicability, and internal consistency. The CAP team provides access to codebooks, historical metadata, and procedural documentation that make it possible for other researchers to reconstruct and verify the dataset's structure and content. This level of documentation enhances the reliability and methodological transparency of the research. For this phase of the study, all bills and decrees are included without differentiation by content. While this broad inclusion supports the completeness and reproducibility of the dataset, it also introduces a notable limitation in terms of construct validity. Specifically, the current dataset does not distinguish between routine or symbolic legislation and substantive reform efforts. This issue will be addressed in future iterations through the content coding of bills that explicitly propose or mention reform, using the CAP's policy topic codes and descriptions as the baseline for reform classification.

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[1] https://www.comparativeagendas.net/project/hungary/datasets

4.2. Operationalisation

The key conceptual construct introduced in this research is problem pressure – defined as a configuration of political, social, and institutional stress. In this preliminary quantitative stage, problem pressure is operationalised through annual counts of legislative activity (i.e., number of bills and decrees submitted), categorised by proximity to an election year. This choice reflects the hypothesis that governments may respond to, or strategically anticipate, systemic pressure through increased policy activity. This study focusses on Hungarian education-related bills and decrees, analysed in relation to the relative timing of national election years, as an illustrative entry point into the proposed problem pressure – policy reform framework. The choice of Hungary's education policy domain is both substantively and analytically strategic. Substantively, education has long been a contested area of public service provision in Hungary, marked by recurring debates over quality, equity, centralisation, and ideological control. These characteristics make it a fertile ground for investigating the dynamics of institutional stress and political responsiveness.

The independent variable (*problem pressure*) in this preliminary trend analysis is relative time to an election year, operationalised as a set of ordinal categories (-3, -2, -1, 0), where 0 indicates the election year. The dependent variable (*policy reform*) is the average number of parliamentary bills or decrees introduced during each of those years. This output is treated as a proxy indicator of political activity potentially linked to institutional strain, agenda manipulation, or anticipatory responsiveness – all dimensions conceptually tied to problem pressure. This operationalisation is rooted in the assumption that legislative activity is a surface indicator of deeper political dynamics.

While legislative output is a rough proxy for pressure, it serves as a useful first approximation for identifying politically responsive patterns. The assumption is that governments under growing strain may seek to act pre-emptively, increase policy attention, or use legislation to manage institutional risk. However, the current dataset does not distinguish between reform-related and routine legislation, which introduces limitations in construct validity. Future phases of the study will refine this operationalisation by coding only those bills that include or propose reform content, thus allowing for a more precise and conceptually aligned measure of problem pressure. Construct validity will be significantly improved in subsequent stages by coding the content of bills – distinguishing, for instance, between administrative updates and substantive structural reforms. This will ensure that legislative activity is not just frequent but substantively aligned with the type of system-level stress theorised as problem pressure.

4.3. Methodological appropriateness

The method employed here – trend analysis of legislative activity over electoral time – is appropriate to the exploratory aims of this phase. It allows for preliminary hypothesis validation: specifically, whether there is a patterned relationship between electoral timing and policy output, which might correspond to latent or anticipatory forms of problem pressure. While this design does not allow for causal inference on its own, it supports pattern detection, which is essential for theory-building and guiding deeper case-based investigations.

Internal validity is strengthened by controlling for electoral time across multiple cycles and by applying the same measurement standard to each year. However, limitations remain: without content coding, the relationship between bill frequency and actual problem pressure is indirect. Furthermore, the analysis assumes that the quantity of legislative output reflects political responsiveness, which may vary depending on institutional norms and partisan strategies. These risks will be mitigated in the next research phase by triangulating legislative data with protest activity, fiscal indicators, and economic performance metrics in core service areas.

Analytically, the education domain allows for observable variation in both policy activity and institutional pressure over time, while remaining sufficiently delimited to permit focused operationalisation. The use of relative time to election year as the temporal axis for analysis provides a structured and politically meaningful context in which to observe variation. Given the well-established literature on electoral cycles and political responsiveness, this time structure offers a useful scaffold for exploring when governments act, and how such actions may be temporally concentrated in anticipation of electoral incentives or heightened public scrutiny. While this case study is exploratory in nature, it is not merely illustrative. It demonstrates the practical applicability of the theoretical framework by operationalising key variables and detecting initial patterns in how pressure may translate into policy activity. At the same time, the case is intended as a gateway to a more comprehensive research agenda, which will include further sectors, deeper content coding of reform-related legislation, and qualitative process tracing.

4.4. Validation strategy

At this stage of the research, validation focusses on assessing whether temporal variation in legislative activity – measured through the number of parliamentary bills and decrees – shows systematic patterns in relation to electoral cycles. This is done using trend analysis, which serves as a first test of the theoretical expectation that political systems exhibit observable cycles of responsiveness that may correspond to mounting or anticipated problem pressure.

The analysis will evaluate whether changes in the volume of policy activity over time align with the logic of pressure accumulation and strategic responsiveness, particularly in pre-election periods. While this does not confirm causality, it allows for an initial plausibility probe of the theoretical model. Specifically, it tests the assumption that problem pressure can be reflected in policy system outputs, and that these outputs vary in structured ways around political cycles. This trend-based validation is appropriate to the exploratory phase of the research. It supports internal validity by applying a consistent measurement strategy across multiple time points, and by anchoring variation to a politically meaningful benchmark (the election year). While reform content is not yet isolated in this phase, the identification of cyclical patterns in overall legislative activity lays the groundwork for more refined, content-specific coding in future iterations.

5. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this section is to present and interpret the descriptive results of the trend analysis conducted on Hungarian education-related legislative activity, measured in the number of parliamentary bills and government decrees introduced in the years preceding national elections. These indicators serve as initial empirical proxies for the concept of problem pressure, operationalised by observing variations in policy output over time.

5.1. Results

The data reveal a clear and structured temporal pattern in both bills and decrees, providing initial empirical support for the theoretical expectation that political systems exhibit responsiveness cycles that may be linked to institutional stress or electoral considerations.
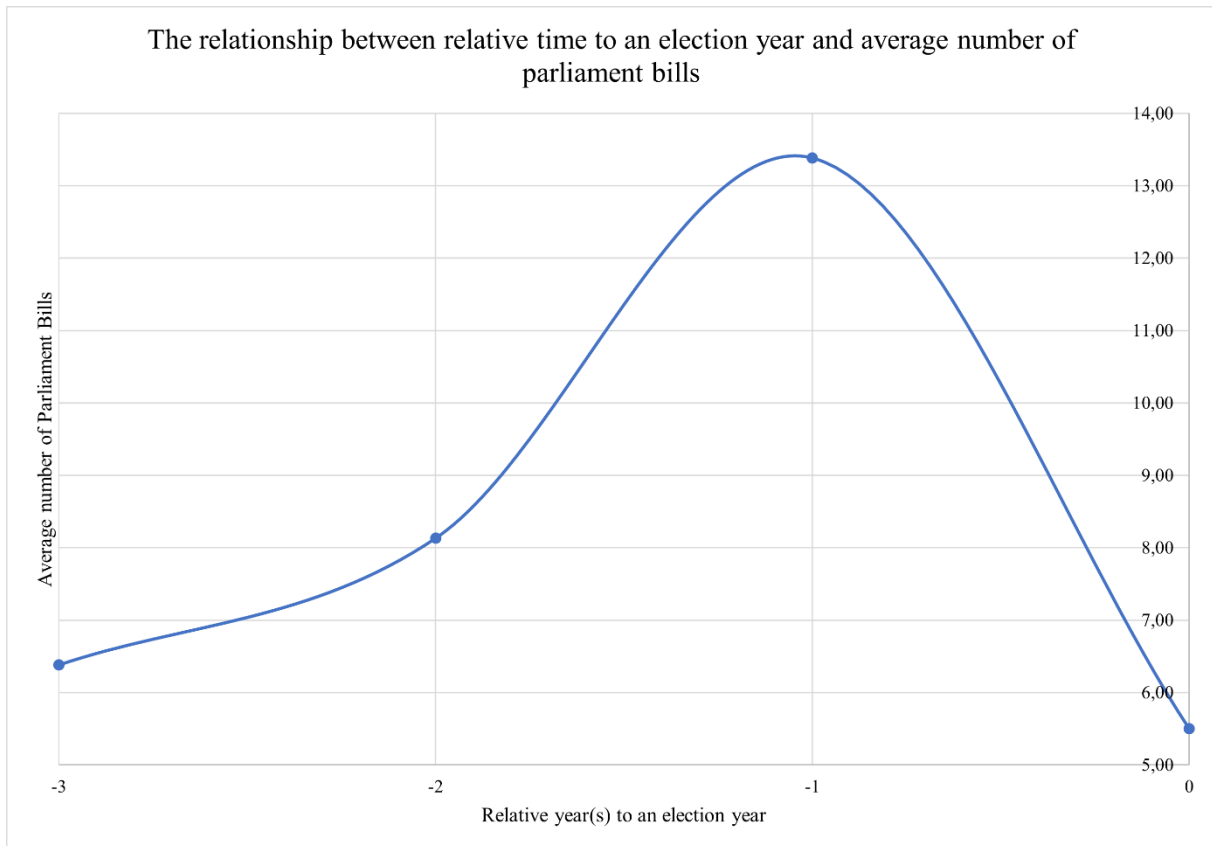

Figure 2 The relationship between relative time to an election year and average number of Parliament bills in Hungary between 1990-2022
(Source: author's own work based on data provided by the CAP dataset)

In the case of parliamentary bills, the average number increases steadily as the election year approaches. As illustrated in Figure 2, the average number of education-related bills rises from 6,38 three years before an election to 8,13 two years prior, peaking at 13,38 in the year immediately preceding the election (year -1). This is followed by a significant drop to 5,5 in the election year itself. This pattern suggests that parliaments are most legislatively active in the penultimate year of the cycle, potentially in anticipation of heightened scrutiny or to pre-

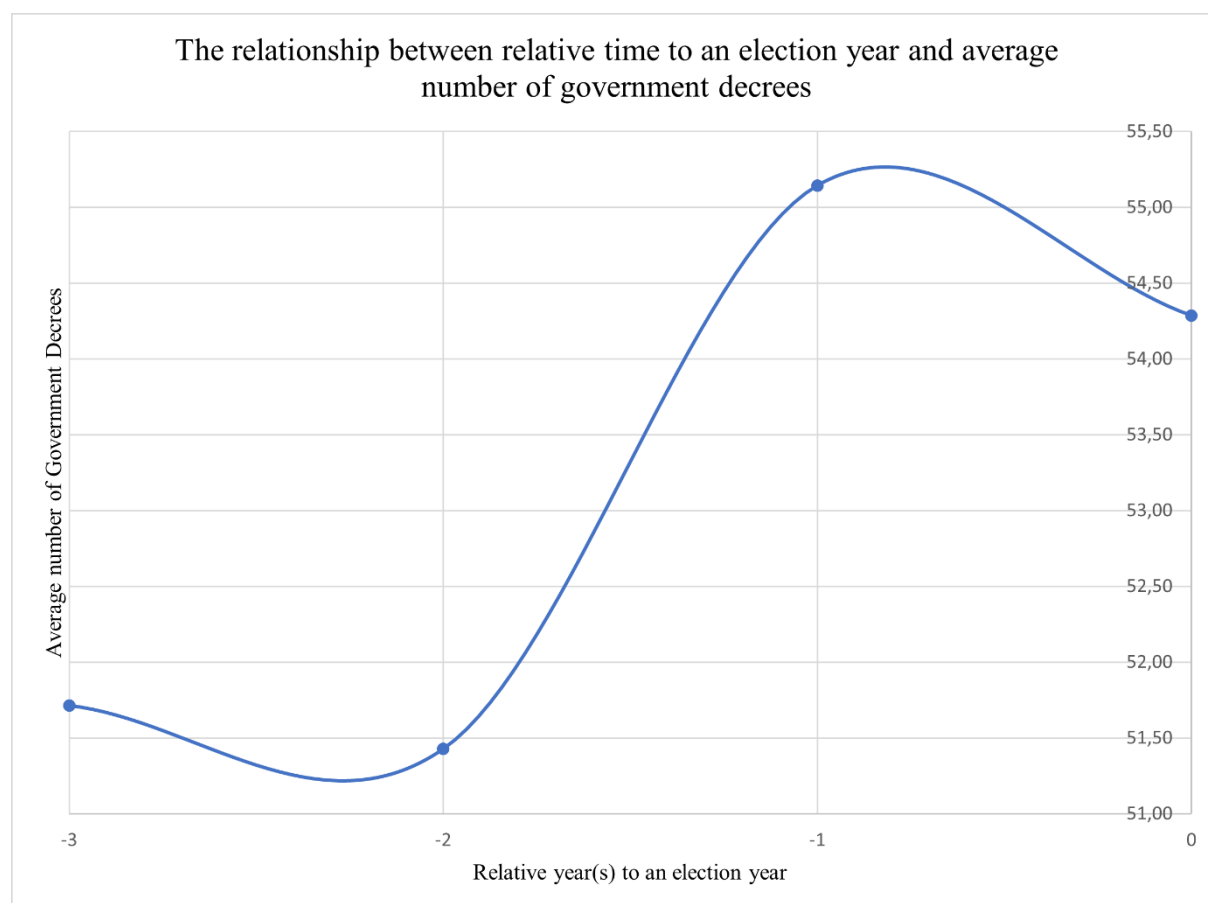emptively address emerging discontent – two conditions that plausibly align with growing problem pressure.

Figure 3 The relationship between relative time to an election year and average number of government decrees in Hungary between 1990-2018
(Source: author's own work based on data provided by the CAP dataset)

A similar, albeit more moderate, trend is observable in the case of government decrees. As shown in Figure 3, the average number of education-related decrees dips slightly from 51,71 to 51,43 in year -2 but then rises steadily, reaching a high of 55,14 in year -1 before declining slightly to 54,29 in the election year. Although the variation here is less pronounced than with parliamentary bills, the upward trend in the pre-election period is consistent and visible, reinforcing the notion that governments respond to electoral timing by increasing their policy activity – not only through formal legislation but also through executive instruments.

5.2. Discussion

These patterns suggest a strategic timing of legislative output. The surge in bills and decrees in year -1 likely reflects a window in which the government is still fully functional and politically motivated to address public concerns through visible policy activity, while avoiding the political risks and institutional slowdowns often associated with the election year itself. The drop in activity during election years may reflect political caution, legislative gridlock, or the shifting of political attention to campaign dynamics rather than policy-making.

The effect size of these variations is substantial – more than doubling in the case of bills from year -3 to year -1. This sharp increase underlines the potential salience of legislative output as an indicator of political responsiveness to accumulating problem pressure. In contrast, the

more tempered increase in decrees suggests that executive action may be less sensitive to electoral incentives, or subject to different institutional dynamics.

Importantly, while these findings do not establish causality, they do lend preliminary empirical support to the theoretical model introduced earlier in the paper. They demonstrate that legislative behaviour is not temporally uniform, and that meaningful variation exists in relation to election cycles – a promising sign that the concept of problem pressure can be meaningfully proxied through such output trends.

These results also reinforce the value of the education sector as a case study. The sector's recurring politicisation and sensitivity to public opinion likely amplify these legislative rhythms, making it a strong candidate for illustrating how political systems respond (or fail to respond) to stress through reform-oriented activity.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate a critical question in public policy: when and what kind of problem pressure in public service provision triggers policy reform? Motivated by the long-term institutional decline of the Hungarian education system and the persistent absence of deep reform, the study introduced a novel conceptual framework that treats problem pressure as a structured, measurable construct and policy reform as a variable, non-binary response.

Using exploratory trend analysis and data from the Comparative Agendas Project, the research examined education-related legislative activity in Hungary between 1990 and 2022, relative to national election cycles. The underlying hypothesis was that legislative and executive output could serve as surface-level indicators of responsiveness to accumulated institutional stress. In line with this expectation, the findings revealed a clear and cyclical pattern: education-related legislative activity – particularly parliamentary bills – intensifies in the year prior to elections and declines significantly during the election year itself. This variation is especially pronounced in parliamentary bills, which more than double in volume between year -3 and year -1, suggesting that political actors may strategically respond to perceived or anticipated pressure through heightened policy activity. While executive decrees also display a similar upward trend, the variation is more muted – potentially reflecting different institutional dynamics or constraints within executive decision-making.

These results offer preliminary empirical support for the proposed framework. They demonstrate that policy activity is not evenly distributed across time but clusters around politically sensitive moments, suggesting a strategic, patterned logic of reform (in)action. Even though causal attribution remains beyond the reach of this phase, the descriptive results already point to the analytic value of problem pressure as a conceptual lens for capturing the conditions of reform responsiveness.

In conclusion, the study has taken a first step toward formalising a causal model of political responsiveness, showing how structural stress – if properly conceptualised and measured – can provide new insight into long-standing puzzles in the reform literature. While further empirical work is required to deepen and extend the findings, the results underscore the promise of a framework that brings pressure, timing, and political strategy into structured analytical alignment.

6.1. Limitations

As an exploratory and theory-building exercise, this study is necessarily bounded by several important limitations. First, while the concept of problem pressure is central to the theoretical contribution of the paper, its operationalisation in this phase is partial. The current dataset includes all bills and decrees in the education domain, without filtering for content that explicitly proposes or references reform. This broad inclusion enhances coverage and replicability but limits construct validity, as it does not distinguish between routine legislative acts and meaningful reform efforts. Future iterations will address this shortcoming by developing a coding scheme to isolate reform-oriented legislation using content variables already embedded in the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) structure.

Second, the analysis relies on aggregate counts of legislative output as a proxy for problem pressure. This approach provides a useful starting point for identifying patterns of political responsiveness but may oversimplify the relationship between institutional stress and reform behaviour. The assumption that higher legislative activity signals mounting pressure must be treated with caution, particularly in the absence of triangulating indicators such as fiscal data, protest events, or service performance metrics.

Third, the current design does not yet permit causal inference. While trend analysis over electoral cycles allows for the detection of systematic patterns, it cannot determine whether changes in policy activity are directly caused by pressure or strategic anticipation. The

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relationship remains correlational at this stage, and the role of trigger variables – though central in the theoretical framework – is not yet empirically tested.

Finally, the case selection is limited to a single policy sector (education) and to one national context (Hungary), which constrains the generalisability of the findings. Although the choice is justified analytically and conceptually, future work will need to test the framework across additional domains and countries to establish broader external validity.

6.2. Suggestions for further research

Beyond the scope of this preliminary analysis, the theoretical framework centred on problem pressure and reform responsiveness opens the door to a wide array of future research possibilities. By formalising a causal logic that links systemic stress to political action, this approach provides a structured yet flexible lens through which to study when and why reforms occur – or fail to occur – across different policy domains and political contexts. For instance, future analyses could incorporate additional layers of data from the Comparative Agendas Project, such as the "Urgent Questions in the Hungarian National Assembly (1994–2022)"[2], which offer real-time insight into perceived pressure points within the parliamentary agenda. These could be temporally juxtaposed with election years to test whether urgent questioning precedes, aligns with, or lags behind legislative surges. Similarly, integrating economic performance indicators from Eurostat – such as unemployment rates, fiscal deficits, or GDP growth – could help trace how objective socio-economic deterioration interacts with political responsiveness. The framework thus enables a comparative, multi-dimensional reconstruction of reform dynamics, bridging political behaviour, institutional design, and societal demand. In short, with its simplicity and scalability, the model holds considerable explanatory potential: the only constraint is the ambition and creativity of future researchers.

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[2] https://www.comparativeagendas.net/project/hungary/datasets

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