
THE 2018 HUNGARIAN NATIONAL ELECTIONS¹

Gábor Tóka

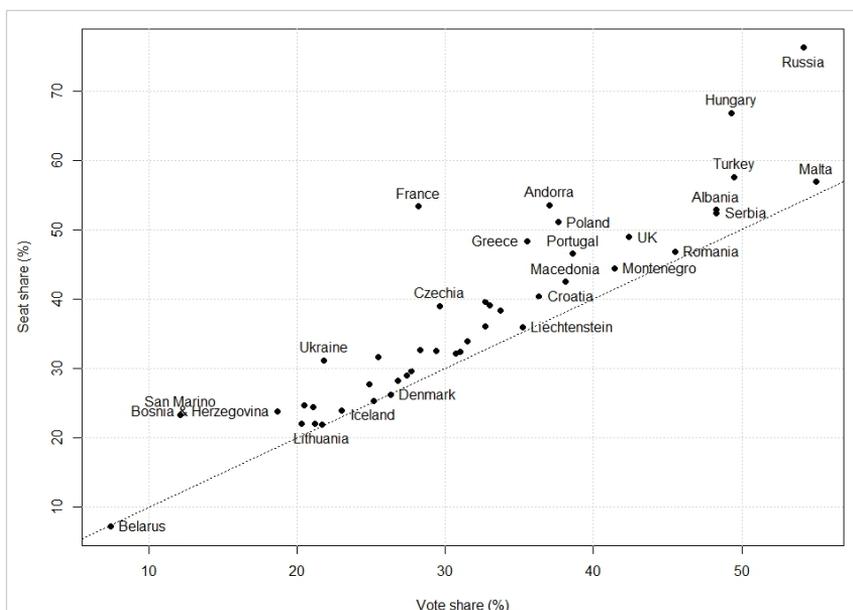
The eighth parliamentary elections since the 1988–90 regime change were held in Hungary on 8 April 2018. In a development probably without historical parallel in any sizeable democracy, the same party, Fidesz, won two thirds of the seats for the third time in a row in a national election. This achievement is lessened somewhat by the fact that this perennial winner is formally an alliance of two parties; but one of the two, the Christian Democrats (KDNP), has had no noticeable popular support on its own for the last 15 years or so. To put these Hungarian results into context: in the past 200 years, a single party has only twice obtained two thirds of the seats in a British general election, while such a majority has never been recorded in Germany, Italy or Japan, despite the enduring dominance of a single party (or party alliance) in all these countries in the years since the Second World War. Such a thing has never occurred in any of those free, competitive elections held since 1990 in the former communist countries – not even in tiny Montenegro, which has been governed by the same party since 1990. The practical importance of this exceptional result is further heightened by the fact that in Hungary a two-thirds majority in the only chamber of parliament means that any law can be changed – and any clause of the constitution amended – by a one-off decision. In this sense, the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary elections have given unlimited power to a single party for a third time.

As *Figure 1* shows, it is unusual, but not unheard-of, for a single party to receive around 50 per cent of the vote in a free and fair election – the Maltese Labour Party, quite exceptionally, gained 55 per cent of the popular vote in 2017. But it is only in authoritarian regimes that we are ever likely to find one party winning two thirds of the seats. Single parties in government are even less able to change constitutional rules: the only democracies that have a population of over half a million and still let a single legislative house change constitutional rules on its own are found where that chamber is elected under

¹ I am grateful to Dániel Róna for sharing with me his collection of 1990–2010 polling data on the voting intentions of the Hungarian public.

proportional representation. This raises the inevitable question about the democratic nature of Hungary's political system. I will not devote space to this question here, because many observers have already noted the partisan bias in the electoral rules, media coverage and oversight bodies, and the extreme inequity in the public resources committed to the election campaigns of the various parties (e.g. OSCE/ODIHR, 2018).

Figure 1 *The vote and seat share of the biggest party in the most recent parliamentary elections across Europe*



Notes: Forty-four countries appear as one dot each in the plot. Not fully sovereign territories like Greenland and Monaco are omitted. The diagonal line in the plot marks the perfect equality of vote and seat shares. Autocratic Belarus produced a strikingly small biggest party because nominally independent candidates won most votes and seats.

Source: <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu>

Instead, this chapter focuses on a quantitative description, comparison and analysis of the most striking features of the election outcome and the voting behaviour in 2018. After a brief overview of the election results, I discuss the surprisingly high turnout and its possible causes. Next, I advance a partly original narrative about the development of voting intentions shown in post-2014

time series data, and analyse the impact of the electoral system. Regarding the 2018 election results, I rely on my own database, which I have made public with detailed documentation and commentary on sources.²

Table 1 2010–18 Hungarian parliamentary election results aggregated to comparable party groups

	Party list votes (%)			Single-member district votes (%)			Seats (%)		
	2018	2014	2010	2018	2014	2010	2018	2014	2010
Fidesz–KDNP	47.4	43.5	52.7	47.9	44.1	53.6	66.8	66.8	68.1
Jobbik	19.8	20.7	16.7	23.2	20.4	16.4	13.1	11.6	12.2
MSZP and allies*	18.0	26.2	19.3	17.6	26.8	21.3	14.6	19.1	15.3
LMP	7.3	5.5	7.5	5.7	5.0	5.1	4.0	2.5	4.1
Other political parties**	5.6	-	3.6	3.1	-	2.4	0.5	-	-
Other parties***	1.3	3.7	0.3	1.4	3.4	0.6	-	-	-
Independent candidates	-	-	-	1.0	0.3	0.7	0.5	-	0.3
German minority list	0.5	0.2	-	-	-	-	0.5	-	-
Roma minority list	0.1	0.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other minority lists	0.1	0.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total (N)	5,507, 258	4,918, 934	5,132, 531	5,504, 530	4,908, 608	5,114, 570	199	199	386

* votes for the MSZP–Párbeszéd joint list and its candidates, plus DK list and candidates in 2018; votes for ‘Összefogás’ five-party (MSZP, DK, Együtt, PM, MLP) joint list and its candidates in 2014; MSZP in 2010.

** Momentum, MKKP and Együtt lists and candidates in 2018; MDF and Civil Mozgalom lists and candidates in 2010.

*** Lists and candidates of parties without any visible campaign activity beyond nominating candidates for the election.

Source: election results in the first or only round of the election among citizens with a residential address in Hungary, calculated from the official data shown on www.valasztas.hu

1. The election results

Table 1 renders the official results comparable across the three most recent elections and the two main segments of Hungary’s electoral system. The latter changed significantly in 2011, but ever since 1990 it has given citizens two votes (one in a single-member district and one for a party list). For the sake of readability, the table:

a) ignores the distinction between the two major ‘left-wing’ options – the joint list of the once-dominant Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the small

² Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yeh8q2d5>

- social liberal–green party Dialogue (Párbeszéd) on the one hand, and the party of former socialist leader Gyurcsány (Democratic Coalition, henceforth DK) on the other; in any case, in 2018 these two groupings aligned to support the same candidate in every single-member district;
- b) collapses the many small parties into two broad categories that separate real political parties from ad hoc formations that seem only to have entered the race to abuse the new public funding scheme for election campaigns introduced in 2013, or with the apparent intention of fragmenting the opposition vote; and
 - c) excludes the mail ballots from ethnic Hungarians living in the neighbouring countries, who only obtained voting rights after Fidesz won its first qualified majority in parliament in 2010.

The most striking feature of *Table 1* is the relative constancy of the seat distribution. Though Fidesz's in-country vote share dropped by 9.5 per cent between 2010 and 2014, its seat share remained almost the same, because of the changes in the election law between 2011 and 2013 (Tóka, 2014). The opposite occurred between 2014 and 2018: though the rules barely changed, the Fidesz vote share increased nearly 4 per cent among voters with a residential address in Hungary, and the fragmentation of the opposition vote increased quite markedly, too. Meanwhile, within the total valid vote the proportion of mail ballots from non-resident citizens – i.e. the newly enfranchised ethnic Hungarians in Romania, Serbia and so forth – increased from 2.4 per cent to 4.6 per cent (these votes are not shown in *Table 1*, but 96 per cent of them supported Fidesz in 2018, and 95 per cent in 2014). Thus, the vote distribution became markedly more favourable to Fidesz between 2014 and 2018 – and yet, the party's total seat share remained virtually unchanged once again. This time, the explanation apparently lies in the limited, inconsistent, but nonetheless effective electoral coordination of the opposition parties in 2018: there was considerable tactical voting, and some candidates in single-member districts withdrew to give the best-placed opposition candidate a clear run. Accordingly, the opposition managed to increase its share of single-member district seats in 2018, in spite of polling fewer votes than in 2014. Indeed, had about a quarter of the supporters of the far-right opposition party For a Better Hungary Movement (henceforth Jobbik) not voted for left-wing or green candidates in the most urban districts, and had many left-wing and centrist voters not supported Jobbik candidates in less urban areas, Fidesz would have obtained well over 70 per cent of the seats in 2018 (Kmetty, 2018; Tóka, 2018).

Looking merely at vote shares, Jobbik's single-member district candidates benefited most from these vote transfers between the opposition parties in

2018. Since they nearly always finished second behind Fidesz candidates in those districts where many supporters of other opposition party lists gave their second vote to Jobbik candidates, tactical voting helped Jobbik in two ways: first, it increased the pool of remainder votes for Jobbik (which earned it compensatory list mandates); and second, it reduced the Fidesz lead over Jobbik candidates in many single-member districts. Because of the ‘winner compensation’ mechanism of the electoral system, Fidesz’s smaller lead in turn reduced its share of list seats (see Tóka, 2014 for more details on this and other unusual features of the electoral system).

In terms of seats, Jobbik owed its only single-member district victory and probably two list seats to tactical voting; those seats would otherwise have been won by Fidesz.³ The main green party (LMP) probably lost one list mandate due to tactical voting, but it did win a single-member district seat thanks to the coordination of the opposition. The left’s pronounced geographical concentration in the most urban areas (where it remains a potent challenger to Fidesz candidates) meant that it won far more – at least 10 more – single-member district seats than Jobbik, thanks to the electoral coordination. Ultimately, all these coordination-induced opposition gains counterbalanced the pro-government shift in the vote since 2014, and fell only narrowly short of preventing Fidesz from winning a two-thirds majority of the seats. This leads us to an analysis of the next paradoxical aspect of the 2018 results.

2. A record high in-country turnout

Despite the multiple handicaps faced by the opposition, never since 1990 did so many Hungarians participate in a political event as in the 2018 parliamentary election. This was partly because of a growing electorate. Yet, with some caveats, it becomes clear that in-country turnout as a percentage of resident citizens was also a record high. Official total turnout was reported by the National Election Office to be 69.73 per cent in 2018 – well below the 73.51 per cent in the second round of the 2002 elections (the figure that conventional wisdom regards as the true historical record). Yet the figures are not comparable. The 2002 run-off figure only refers to the then most closely contested 131 of the 176 single-member districts. It was a response to the extraordinarily close result in the first round of the election and to the intense campaigning,

³ I talk of a lower-bound estimate to reflect some uncertainty regarding the true impact of tactical voting on the distribution of list seats, since that would depend on how exactly the vote distribution looked in the absence of tactical voting.

which focused on the 131 districts that were left undecided after the first round. Since second-round polling was abolished under the 2011 electoral reform, comparisons are no longer possible.

Nor can the 70.53 per cent turnout in the first round in 2002 be compared to the data for the total 2018 electorate, since the latter included 378,449 dual – mostly Romanian and Hungarian – citizens who have no residential address in Hungary. Citizens without a residential address in the country only obtained voting rights following the 2011–13 electoral reform, which provided for a postal ballot for them (and controversially only for them). The turnout of these registered postal voters was 59.58 per cent in 2018, well below the 66.14 per cent recorded in 2014.⁴

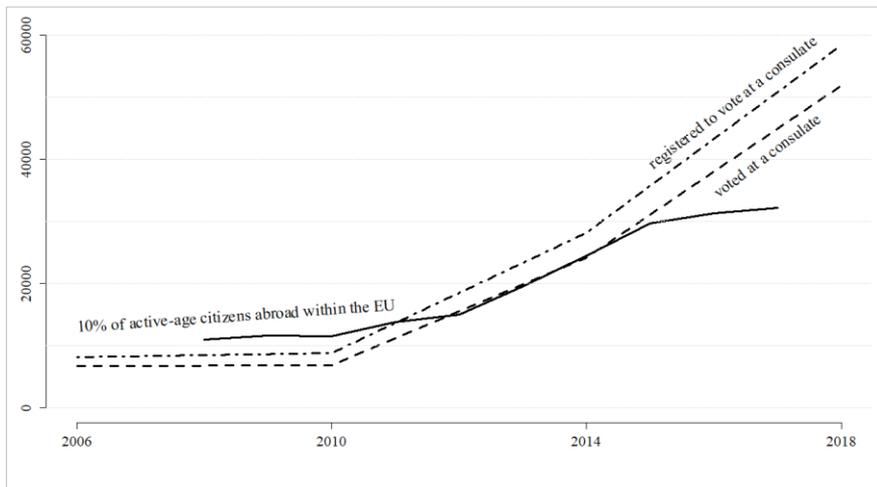
By contrast, the 2018 turnout of citizens voting in person (i.e. those with a residential address in Hungary) exceeded the previous record set in 2002. It should be mentioned that their turnout, as reported by the National Election Office, was still just 70.22 per cent – far higher than the 61.73 per cent recorded in 2014, but lower than the 70.53 per cent in the first round of 2002.⁵ What this comparison ignores, though, is that by 2018 there were about 400,000 more citizens than in 2002 who permanently lived abroad but retained a residential address in Hungary. Voting abroad was not allowed before 2004; and it remains a costly affair, since it requires advance registration and a journey – often quite a long one – in person to a Hungarian consulate on election day. Hence, the turnout of citizens abroad is extremely low, and the large growth in their number between 2002 and 2018 artificially deflates the officially calculated turnout of in-country voters. *Figure 2* reveals that the number of those pre-registering to vote at a consulate (and then actually doing so) hovers at around 10 per cent of the Eurostat-estimated number of active-age Hungarian citizens permanently resident in another EU/EFTA country. Given what we know about estimation errors in the Eurostat figures (Előd, 2018) and about the number of Hungarians living elsewhere in the world (OECD, 2018), probably about 5 per cent of all Hungarian citizens who permanently live abroad but are on the electoral roll of in-country voters turn out to vote in

⁴ See <http://www.valasztas.hu/dyn/pv18/szavossz/hu/levjkv.html> and <http://www.valasztas.hu/dyn/pv14/szavossz/hu/levjkv.html>

⁵ We can ignore here the very small reductive impact on official turnout of a 2013 change in how the National Election Office calculates the participation rate of absentee voters who are pre-registered to cast their ballots in person at a Hungarian consulate or at a polling station outside their home municipality. Had the pre-2013 rules been applied in 2018, the official turnout of all in-person voters would have stood at 70.25 per cent instead of 70.22 per cent.

national elections (being deprived of the option of postal voting on account of still having a residential address in Hungary).

Figure 2 *The number of voters at Hungarian consulates, compared to the number of active-age Hungarian citizens residing in other EU/EFTA states, 2006–18*



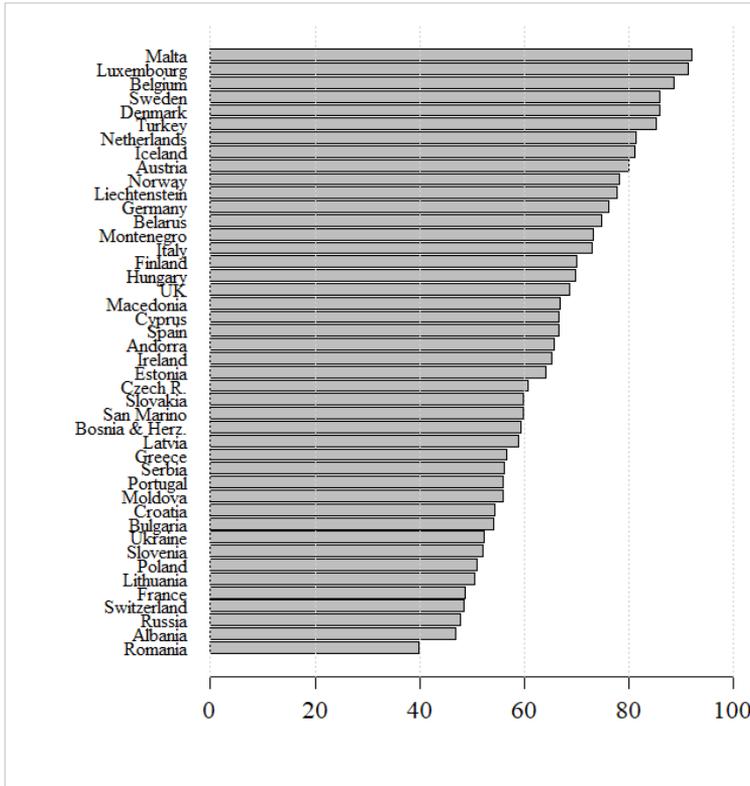
Sources: Eurostat (2018), MTI (2010), www.valasztas.hu

All in all, the best way to compare participation among actual in-country voters in 2002 and 2018 is to subtract from the number who voted in 2018 the number who turned out at consulates, and to subtract from the number of eligible citizens the approximately 400,000 who swelled the number of those permanently living abroad between 2002 and 2018. This then yields an estimated in-country turnout of 73.26 per cent in 2018, which is quite a bit above the 70.53 per cent in-country turnout for 2002.

The record high in-country turnout requires an explanation. It reversed the trends prevailing in Hungarian elections since 2002, and defied the general trend towards ever-lower turnout that has been visible in the post-communist countries since the 1990s and in Western Europe since the 1970s. Counterintuitively, this jump occurred in an election that was expected to be anything but competitive. Political participation is generally quite modest in Hungary: over the past two and a half decades, Hungary's electoral participation rates have been – at best – average in European terms (albeit considerably better

than its strikingly low non-electoral participation rates, e.g. for petitioning) (Tóka, 1998; 2006). And yet, even the official turnout for 2018 is among the highest in contemporary European elections (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 3 *Turnout in the most recent parliamentary elections across Europe (per cent)*



Source: <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu>

So how can we account for this puzzle? It is well known from the literature that turnout can be increased among citizens by: a) prior expectation of a close race; b) perception of high stakes in the election; c) low personal costs of participation (or, conversely, high cost of abstention under mandatory voting laws); d) a strong sense of civic duty; and e) a strong electoral mobilization

by party organizations (which can substitute for any of the previous four factors) (Blais, 2000; Franklin, 2004). What little we know about (d) in Hungary arguably does not promise much, and cannot explain any increase that occurred between 2014 and 2018. Costs of participation are reasonably low for in-country voters, but this is common across most European countries (Tóka, 2006), and the only change since 2014 concerns the rising costs of voting due to increased outward migration from the country. The high concentration of political power and the predominantly majoritarian electoral system create relatively high stakes in Hungarian elections. But since 2002, belief in the political efficacy of voting has weakened markedly among Hungarian citizens (Tóka, 2018) – and certainly did not promise a record turnout in 2018. The public probably expected a closer result in 2018 than actually awaited them once the polls closed. Both government and opposition – as well as the expert forecasts from polling organizations working for one or another partisan campaign – tried to mobilize voters by stressing that Fidesz would likely fall short of a two-thirds majority this time. Actual public opinion polling results were widely disseminated and consistently showed an overwhelming Fidesz advantage in the years before the election (see *Figure 5*). It is thus highly implausible that more than a few misguided souls expected a genuinely close election in 2018.

By elimination, then, only factor (e) can explain the surprisingly high in-country turnout. Indeed, there was something quite extraordinary in the electoral mobilization in Hungary between 2014 and 2018, and that could well have had a big effect. From spring 2015 on, the political communications of Fidesz were dominated by a new concern: the refugee crisis that hit Europe that year, with the arrival of over a million Middle Eastern refugees via Turkey, and more generally the treatment of immigrants arriving from outside the EU. A propaganda campaign of unprecedented scale, length, budget, negativity and emotional intensity ensued in Hungary. The government generously sponsored a massive multi-year advertising campaign on virtually every conceivable platform – from online news media to radio, TV, billboards and municipal publications; this campaign was echoed in all the news media that are influenced editorially by Fidesz and/or the government – i.e. most of them. The campaign dramatically underlined the importance of the issue, portrayed the policy response of Fidesz and the government in glowing terms, and misinformed the public about the views of the opposition, in a bid to discredit the latter. The campaign then led to a well-supported referendum in October 2016 to ‘Stop Brussels’ contemplating an EU-wide policy on the distribution of refugees among EU Member States; a national consultation (essentially, a survey

with extremely leading questions mailed out by the government to all citizens) in autumn 2017; and a Fidesz campaign for the election that focused exclusively on immigration and anti-refugee agitation, and that was closely connected to a simultaneous large-scale advertising campaign by the government to ‘Stop Soros’ (i.e. advocating a ban on the supposedly pro-immigration activities of NGOs in Hungary). Public spending on these initiatives and campaigns exceeded several dozen times over the total spending on any previous election or referendum campaign in the country. The response of the opposition was initially mixed and cautious, contingent upon the ideological orientation of the party in question. Eventually, though, the response became one of nearly complete silence, apparently motivated by the belief that it was impossible to compete with government propaganda.

From the reaction of the opposition (and from my personal experience of discourse in the anti-refugee sections of the public), it seems plausible that this extensive campaign could have brought many new voters into the Fidesz camp, especially from among citizens who had not often voted in previous elections. The topic was also aired extensively in the social media throughout the period 2015–18. It seems reasonable to suppose that the exceptional emotional intensity and negativity of the campaigns, their richly dramatized hostile images and narratives, and above all their unprecedented scope and obtrusiveness did significantly increase turnout in the 2018 election.

Yet, no clear, empirical evidence is available to buttress the point. Hence it would be worthwhile testing the hypothesis with correlational data at least. The methodological difficulty is that virtually everyone in the country received essentially the same messages on the issue for a very long period of time; hence it is not clear whose views or attitudes might reflect the impact of the campaign more or less. There is plenty of survey evidence that Fidesz supporters were more likely than other voters to agree with Fidesz policies, but this proves nothing: the causality between policy views and party preference can go in either direction. We know that many more people voted for the Fidesz list in 2018 than in 2014 – 32.9 per cent and 26.6 per cent of all eligible in-country voters, respectively. This might explain most of the increase in turnout between the two election years. But how could we relate the increase in the Fidesz vote to individual reactions to the refugee and immigration issue? Below I examine municipality-level voting returns in the 2014 and 2018 national elections and in the October 2016 referendum, in order to shed light on the matter. Did Fidesz’s vote share increase between the two elections in proportion to the support at the referendum for ‘no’ – the Fidesz recommendation

for how to vote on the ballot question (which blatantly misrepresented EU policy)?

If it did, that would not necessarily confirm that the anti-refugee campaign led to gains in the Fidesz vote – and a higher turnout – in 2018. It would certainly not rule out the possibility that something else may (also) have contributed to both the turnout and the Fidesz gains – and to a far greater extent than the campaign in question. But such a finding would make it likely that the campaign at least altered the composition of the Fidesz electorate (since it is hard to see what else could alter the cross-municipality differences in the appeal of Fidesz prior to the referendum). If the statistically estimated impact of the 2016 ‘no’ votes on the 2018 Fidesz vote share is positive and strong, then it is also likely that the size of the 2018 Fidesz electorate was also impacted by the anti-refugee campaign. After all, 40.4 per cent of all eligible in-country voters voted ‘no’ in 2016, which is considerably more than Fidesz’s corresponding vote share in 2014 (26.6 per cent). Moreover, the popularity of Fidesz started to grow (and that of the far-right Jobbik to fall), straight after Fidesz’s anti-refugee campaign started in spring 2015, and ideologically re-positioned the two parties on the issue (see *Figures 5 and 6*).

The three regression models in *Table 2* find a fairly strong and, as expected, positive relationship between Fidesz votes and ‘no’ votes in 2016. About 63 per cent of the variance in the 2018 Fidesz vote share across localities is explained by the 2014 differences in the Fidesz vote across localities. Yet a further 18 per cent (and thus a total of 81 per cent) of the variance is explained if we also take account of the proportion of ‘no’ votes in the localities (see the R-squared statistics in the first two columns). According to the estimates obtained with the second model, shown in the middle column, the 2018 Fidesz vote share was, on average, the sum of 47 per cent of the 2014 Fidesz votes and 53 per cent of the 2016 ‘no’ votes.

Table 2 *Linear regression models of the proportion of Fidesz–KDNP list supporters among eligible voters in 2018 with the 2016 referendum and 2014 national election results among the predictors*

	<i>b</i> (s.e.)		<i>b</i> (s.e.)		<i>b</i> (s.e.)	
Intercept	0.09 (0.003)	***	-0.01 (0.003)	**	0.09 (0.002)	***
Fidesz–KDNP vote, 2014	0.90 (0.012)	***	0.47 (0.012)	***	0.90 (0.009)	***
‘No’ votes in October 2016			0.53 (0.009)	***		
Residual of 2016 ‘no’ votes					0.53 (0.009)	***
R-squared	0.63		0.81		0.81	
N	3176		3176		3176	

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

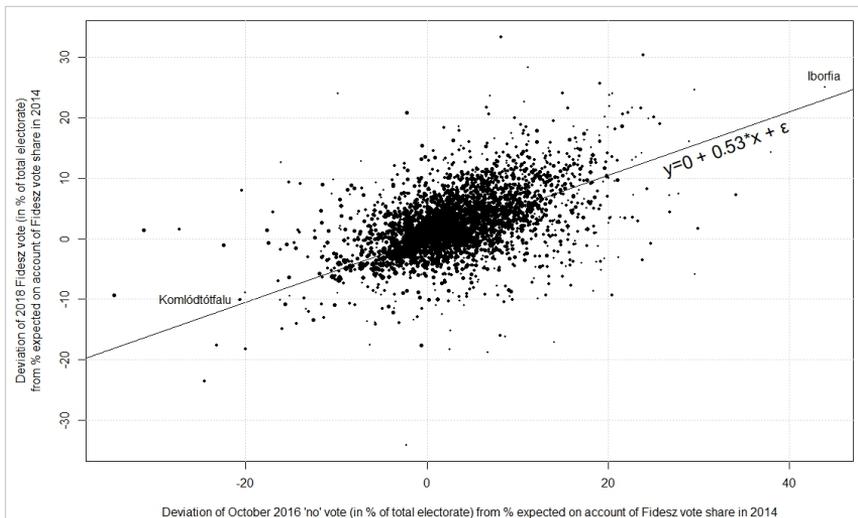
Notes: Table entries are linear regression coefficients from three models and their standard errors in parentheses, plus information on explained variance and the number of cases in the analysis. The cases are the localities of Hungary, which were weighted in the regressions by the number of eligible voters in them in 2014. Balatonakarattya, which seceded from Balatonkenese after the 2014 election, was collapsed with Balatonkenese in the 2016 and 2018 data, too; hence the unweighted number of localities in the analysis is 3,176.

Source: municipality-level data from official election and referendum results.

It is hard to believe, though, that without the helping hand of the referendum campaign only 47 per cent of the 2014 Fidesz voters would have stayed loyal to the party in 2018. More likely there is instead a problem with an implicit assumption of the second model: namely, that there is no causal sequence among the independent variables. This is then corrected by the introduction of a fairly strong assumption in model 3. This premise is that the 2014 Fidesz voters remained loyal to Fidesz (or defected from it) in 2018, irrespective of how they voted in the 2016 referendum. Thus, if both 2014 and 2018 Fidesz votes correlate with the 2016 ‘no’ votes, then that is because 2014 Fidesz voters voted ‘no’ in 2016, and then went on to vote for Fidesz in 2018. To build this premise into model 3, I replace the actual percentage of ‘no’ voters in the 2016 eligible electorate with a constructed variable, which is the unexplained residual of the 2016 ‘no’ votes from a model that takes the 2014 Fidesz vote as the only predictor variable. In other words, this residual term shows how much more or less the ‘no’ share was in a municipality, compared to what we may expect just on the basis of the 2014 Fidesz vote, and the fact that its observed correlation with ‘no’ votes in 2016 explains 45 per cent of the cross-municipality variance in the latter.

The estimates for this model are displayed in the rightmost column of *Table 2*. They provide a simplified picture of the 2018 Fidesz vote as a sum of four factors that runs as follows. Of all eligible voters, about 9 per cent voted for Fidesz no matter what happened in the municipality before (see the 0.09 intercept). In addition, Fidesz received as much as nine tenths of the 2014 Fidesz vote share in the same locality. These two factors together explain exactly the average 2018 vote share of Fidesz across municipalities. Any deviation from this default expectation is then explained by some residual unexplained variance plus 53 per cent of the residual component of the 2016 ‘no’ vote share.

Figure 4 *Partial correlation of the proportion of Fidesz supporters in the 2018 national election and the 2016 quota-referendum controlled for the proportion of Fidesz supporters in the 2014 national election*



Note: The plot uses the same data as the analyses in *Table 2*. Each dot is a municipality, and its size is proportional to the 2.7 base logarithm of the municipality’s electorate size. The horizontal and the vertical axes are residuals from a linear regression. Both regressions used the 2014 Fidesz–KDNP vote (as a proportion of the total electorate) as the only independent variable. The dependent variables were the proportion of 2016 ‘no’ votes in the total electorate and the number of 2018 Fidesz–KDNP list voters as a proportion of the total electorate.

Source: precinct-level data from www.valasztas.hu aggregated to the municipal level.

Figure 4 depicts the strikingly linear and powerful relationship between the 2016 referendum results and the 2018 Fidesz vote share on the basis of this

third model. It plots the residual component of these two variables against one another, i.e. the variation on either variable that cannot be explained by the linear impact of the 2014 Fidesz vote share alone. Each dot in the plot is a municipality, and the regression line running across the plot shows the slope ($b=0.53$, $p<.001$) of the regression line connecting the two residuals.

The villages of Iborfia and Komlódtótfalu are opposite extremes, and both lie close to the regression line. Therefore, they illustrate the general trend quite well. In the first, the percentage of eligible voters who supported the Fidesz–KDNP list increased from 45 per cent in 2014 to a whopping 75 per cent in 2018. The regression analyses presented above suggest that such a 30 per cent increase is exactly the kind of thing we can expect where the actual proportion of 2016 ‘no’ voters in the electorate exceeded by a good 40 per cent the figure that we may have expected just on the basis of the 2014 Fidesz votes.

In Komlódtótfalu, by contrast, both the 2016 ‘no’ vote and the 2018 Fidesz vote were quite low, considering what we may have expected on the basis of 60 per cent of the local electorate supporting the Fidesz list in 2014. For whatever reason, only 47 per cent of the locals voted ‘no’ in 2016, which is 20 per cent less than we might have expected on the basis of the strong Fidesz showing in 2014. Probably because of this drop in 2016, only 53 per cent of the locals (10 per cent less than might be expected on account of the 2014 results) voted for Fidesz in 2018.

All in all, in-country turnout reached a record high in 2018, and the only unusual circumstance I can see that could plausibly explain it is the extraordinarily intense anti-refugee campaign that Fidesz and its government ran from 2015 until the 2018 election and beyond. The data show that the 2016 referendum campaign significantly altered the geographical distribution of Fidesz support between 2014 and 2018, while the geography of the opposition vote remained much more stable between the two elections.⁶ By and large, 1 per cent more ‘no’ votes over and above expectations based on the 2014 data yielded 0.53 per cent extra Fidesz votes over and above what could be expected from the 2014 results alone. Conversely, 1 per cent fewer 2016 ‘no’

⁶ At the level of municipalities, the 2014 Fidesz vote share explains only 63 per cent of the variance in the 2018 Fidesz vote. When the 2016 ‘no’ vote is added to the model, the explained variance rises to 81 per cent (see the R-squared values in *Table 2*). Repeating this analysis for the opposition vote, the percentage of all non-Fidesz votes (as a proportion of the electorate) in 2014 explains 86 per cent of the same variance of the same variable in 2018, and adding the number of 2016 ‘yes’ and invalid votes (as a proportion of the total electorate) only increases the R-squared to .88. Thus, the geography of the opposition vote remained far more stable and less affected by the 2016 referendum than that of the Fidesz vote in 2014–18.

votes than expected meant 0.53 per cent less support for Fidesz in 2018 than otherwise expected. Much of the larger than usual 2014–18 change in where Fidesz did better or worse in national elections is explained by relative success in the 2016 referendum.

There is one further issue that has attracted much attention in Hungary. According to received wisdom, a high turnout should favour the opposition – and yet, in 2018 both the turnout and Fidesz’s vote share increased. Some commentators have viewed this as paradoxical. However, while Fidesz may have won over some non-voters, the simple fact is that its supporters are more likely to turn out on election day than are the opposition’s supporters. Thus, in 2018 the potential impact on turnout of voter mobilization campaigns may well have been greater among opposition supporters,⁷ but Fidesz was more successful in the targeted mobilization, thanks to its superior voter databases and its get-out-the-vote campaigns on the ground.

3. Party popularity 2014–18

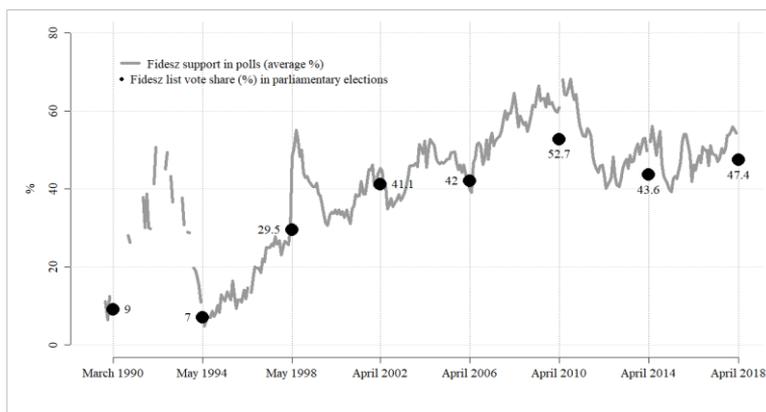
It does not follow from the above that the refugee crisis was the most important determinant of party popularity in the last electoral cycle. If there was a party for which it counted, then that appears to have been Fidesz. But even the impact of the 2016 referendum on the geography of the Fidesz vote could be more apparent than real: perhaps it was just the reach of party patronage networks that changed after 2014 and that transformed the geography of the Fidesz vote (Hont, 2018), which in turn made its mark on the referendum results. Indeed, voting behaviour can be influenced by a large range of factors, and there is no way to probe every one of them in an analysis.

But theoretical possibility does not compel us to believe in the existence of alternative explanations. A straightforward inductive method for exploring possible influences is to examine temporal trends in support for the different parties in the polls. *Figures 5 to 7* compile the longest possible time series for all relevant parties. The trendlines average the monthly figures reported by the most active polling companies in the post-2010 period. The data show fairly large fluctuations in the popularity of the major parties even within a single

⁷ For instance, in the pooled data from 17 random-sample constituency polls commissioned by the Country for All Movement in February and March 2018 (N=17,000), only 59 per cent of respondents who intended to vote for an opposition party list in the April election said they would ‘definitely turn out’, while the same figure was 74 per cent among self-declared Fidesz supporters.

electoral cycle, and demonstrate that polls tend to forecast accurately the election results of Hungarian parties. The election results displayed in these plots do not, of course, include postal voters, who are excluded from the sampling frame of the polls and were not part of the electorate before 2014. Only in the case of Fidesz and Jobbik do we see sizeable – and indeed recurring – prediction errors. Jobbik support is underestimated, while – since 2010 at least – Fidesz is overestimated by the averaged estimate of the leading polling companies.⁸

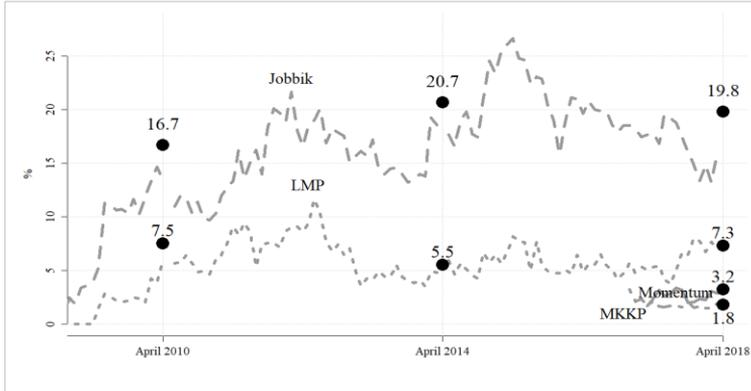
Figure 5 *The average expected vote share of Fidesz in monthly opinion polls by Ipsos/ZRI, Medián, Nézőpont, Századvég and TÁRKI, and its actual share of list votes in national elections*



Sources: collection of Dániel Róna and kozvelemenykutatok.hu

⁸ Following the 2018 elections, it was often argued in the Hungarian media that the polls actually underestimated Fidesz support this time around. This, however, only holds for certain polling companies that had no traceable track record in previous electoral cycles and were therefore not considered in my charts. Prior to the 2018 elections, some pollsters also released ‘expert estimates’ about the most likely distribution of the vote that put the expected Fidesz vote share at 41 per cent. However, in actual public opinion polls of the five market leaders, whose data are shown in my figures, and that interviewed random samples face to face or over the phone and avoided special political weights and other ad hoc adjustments not routinely applied for monthly releases in the middle of the electoral cycle, there was just one ZRI poll that found Fidesz support falling below 50 per cent during the entire 2018 election campaign.

Figure 6 *The average expected vote share of parties outside the two main blocs in monthly opinion polls by Ipsos/ZRI, Medián, Nézőpont, Századvég and TÁRKI and their actual share of list votes in national elections, 2009–18*

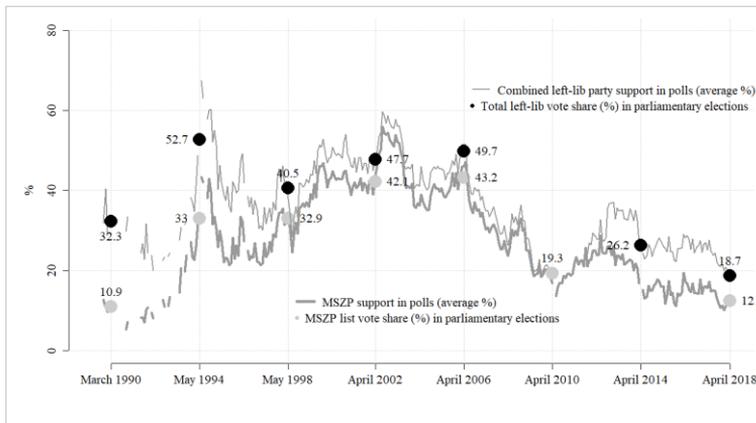


Sources: collection of Dániel Róna and kozvelemenykutatok.hu

As for the trends of interest in this chapter, it is striking from *Figures 5* and *6* how much Fidesz support dropped towards the end of 2014 and early 2015, in a period when US officials appeared to allege and attack high-level corruption in the Hungarian government, the main commercial television channel temporarily switched to a decidedly critical coverage of the Fidesz government, and a major split occurred between the prime minister and Lajos Simicska, the former Fidesz treasurer who subsequently turned some of the private news media against the government for a while. Then, in the months of the 2015 refugee crisis and its immediate aftermath, support for Fidesz rose sharply, and the far-right Jobbik party – which had been on a sustained path of incremental growth since 2013 – suddenly fell back in the polls. Meanwhile support for the green LMP and the left-liberal parties (i.e. MSZP plus DK, Együtt and Párbeszéd; note that the combined support for these last three can be seen as the difference between the two lines in *Figure 7* in the period 2012–18) shows no obvious link to the chronology of the refugee crisis and the government’s anti-refugee campaign. So far, this is all consistent with the conventional wisdom that Fidesz repositioned itself as a sharply anti-immigrant party during the 2015 crisis, which may have increased its popularity, especially among erstwhile Jobbik supporters.

However, *Figure 5* also reveals that at the beginning of 2016, just as the refugee crisis was ending, the popularity bonus that Fidesz earned so quickly during the second half of 2015 evaporated even more rapidly. For a short while, the popularity of the party fell back to the same level as in early 2015. It was only from spring 2016 on that an enduring trend of growth in Fidesz popularity really got under way. With a wild enough imagination, one might attribute this also to the continued anti-refugee stance of the party. But it would be hard to explain how such an enduring increase could be achieved on such an issue, when no longer were hundreds of thousands of refugees tramping through the country, and given that the Fidesz gains made in the polls during the actual crisis had been so quickly lost in the immediate aftermath. The time series seems to call for an alternative explanation of why the popularity of Fidesz rose from the low of early 2016 to the high of the 2018 elections.

Figure 7 The average expected vote share of left-liberal parties in monthly opinion polls by Ipsos/ZRI, Medián, Nézőpont, Századvég and TÁRKI and their actual share of list votes in national elections



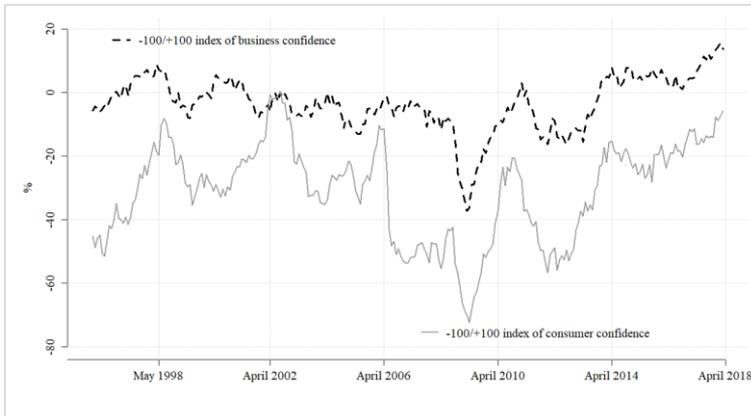
Sources: collection of Dániel Róna and kozvelemenykutatok.hu

Searching for alternative explanations, I first compared some macro-economic time series (inflation, unemployment, GDP growth) to the popularity of the main government party in monthly polls from the 1990s to 2018. However, not much of a correlation strikes the eye. This is not all that surprising: it is a common finding in the scholarly literature on economic influences on election outcomes that trends in the real economy only impact party popularity through

the complex intermediaries of political discourse, party competition and popular perceptions (e.g. Johnston et al., 2004). Even within a short period of time, there can be a change in which economic indicator appears to pull public opinion about the state of the economy. How strongly any economic factor drives incumbent popularity is, however, mostly affected by how clearly the executive is perceived to be responsible for economic outcomes (Sanders, 1995; Duch and Stevenson, 2008).

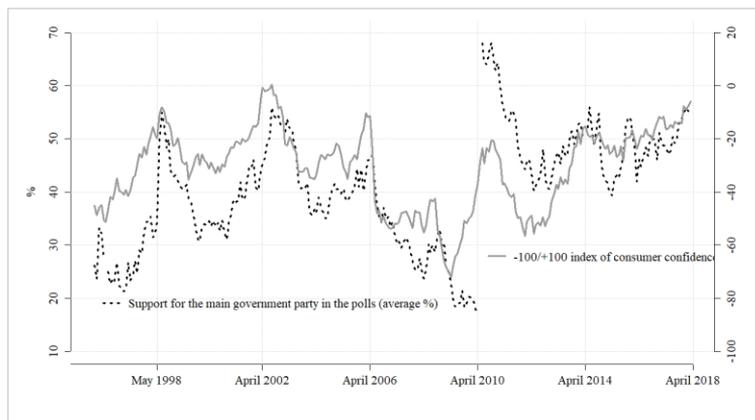
Such clarity of perception emerges easily in Hungary's political system, which has allowed a very considerable concentration of power in the prime minister's office ever since 1990. Not surprisingly, then, the index of consumer confidence – which is not merely a reflection of partisan sentiment, but tracks very closely the index of business confidence, based on responses from company managers (except in times of unsustainable consumer credit expansion, as in 2001–03 (see *Figure 8*)) – shows a remarkably close correlation with the popularity of the main government party in public opinion polls (*Figure 9*).

Figure 8 *Monthly data on business and consumer confidence, 1996–2018*



Source: GKI (2018).

Figure 9 *Consumer confidence and the average expected vote share of the main government party in monthly opinion polls by Ipsos/ZRI, Medián, Nézőpont, Századvég and TÁRKI*



Sources: GKI (2018), collection of Dániel Róna and kozvelemenykutatok.hu

Of course, even a spectacular correlation is just a correlation. Yet it suggests that it was probably not the refugee crisis and the government's response to it that had a lasting impact on the level of Fidesz popularity in the period 2014–18. The handling of the refugee crisis only appears to have prompted a short-lived surge in Fidesz support. The way in which Fidesz outmanoeuvred Jobbik to become the main anti-immigration party in Hungary may have restructured the Fidesz electorate, but the incremental growth of the latter in 2016–18 is probably best explained by an unusually long period of high and increasing consumer confidence in the run-up to the 2018 election, which has literally no parallel in the history of the series in Hungary.

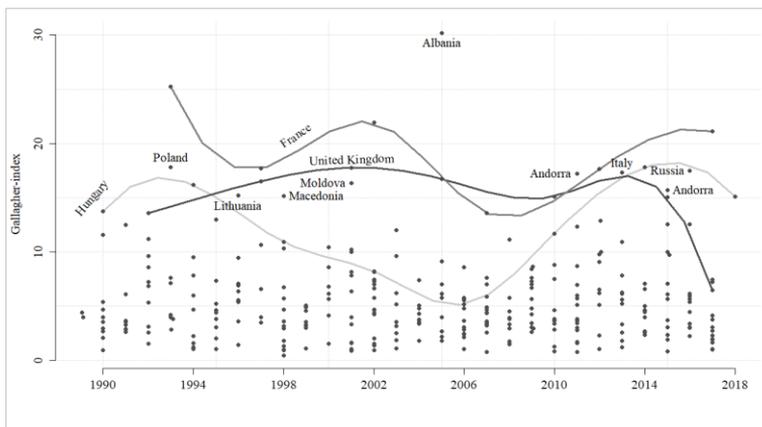
4. The impact of the electoral system

The rising popularity of the government party would not have been enough to secure a qualified majority of seats for a third time. Half of the uncompetitive shape of Hungary's current party system can be explained by the electoral system and the constitution itself.

For one thing, Hungary is virtually unique among the post-1990 contemporary democracies for allowing change in the constitutional order to be made following a one-off decision by a single body that is not elected under strictly

proportional representation. Outside Hungary, wherever the lower house is elected under majoritarian rules, constitutional change normally requires at least the cooperation of a second chamber that is elected under somewhat different rules.⁹ Second, while the electoral system adopted in 1989 was intended to be a middle-of-the-road mix of majoritarian and proportional elements, in reality it produced – even before, but especially after the 2011 reform – disproportionality in representation on a scale rarely found outside purely majoritarian systems (see *Figure 10*).

Figure 10 *Electoral disproportionality in 2018 in Hungary and in all European national elections between 1990 and 2017*¹⁰



Source: Gallagher (2018).

⁹ The only examples similar to the Hungarian case are, to the best of my knowledge, Barbados and New Zealand before the 1993 electoral reform, i.e. former British colonies with a common law tradition and respect for informal conventions.

¹⁰ The Gallagher-index used in *Figure 10* calculates half the square root of the squared differences between each party's vote and seat shares expressed as a percentage of the total (Gallagher, 1991). The point of this complex formula is to give a greater weight in the index to the under- or overrepresentation of a big party by X per cent than to the over- or underrepresentation of X small parties by 1 per cent each. Otherwise, however, the Gallagher-index works in much the same way as if we just summed the absolute differences between each party's seat and vote share and divided the result by two.

As *Figures 1* and *10* show, the most extreme disproportionality between the seat and the vote shares of the competing parties tends to occur not in the most majoritarian (first-past-the-post) electoral systems, but rather:

1. in the French run-off system; under this, however, it is unfair to compare (as *Figure 10* does) the vote distribution of the first round with the seat distribution that obtains after both rounds, since the seat distribution is mostly shaped by the markedly different vote distribution that is recorded in the second round. In 2017, for instance, disproportionality in the French election drops to less than half of the value shown in *Figure 10* if we calculate it on the basis of the vote distribution in the run-off;¹¹
2. occasionally in those list proportional systems where either a high legal threshold for entering parliament deprives many citizens of parliamentary representation by the party of their choice, or a special bonus system tops up the seat share of the biggest party to manufacture a single-party majority in parliament;¹²
3. in those mixed electoral systems – such as Albania, Andorra, Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia and Russia till 2003 and then again from 2017 – where the list mandates at most only partially compensate for the disproportionality generated by the application of majoritarian rules in the single-member districts.

How can mixed electoral systems – above all, the current Hungarian one – sometimes produce greater disproportionality than purely majoritarian systems? The answer is that pure majoritarian systems reduce disproportionality between vote and seat distributions by providing clear incentives for party concentration: those who do not want to weaken the legislative representation of their own political camp are impelled to back the locally strongest candidate on their side. Therefore, high disproportionality is only to be expected in pure single-member district systems under special circumstances (Cox, 1997).¹³

¹¹ In the 2017 French lower house elections, Macron's En Marche! party obtained 53.4 per cent of the seats, after winning just 28.2 per cent of the popular vote and just two seats in the first round. In the second round, however, they won 43.1 per cent of all votes and a further 306 seats (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017).

¹² Examples of the first are the 2015 Polish and Turkish results in *Figure 1*, and the 1993 Polish and 2001 Moldovan results in *Figure 10*. A bonus seat system has existed in San Marino since 2016, and was also an unused part of the electoral system in Italy between 2005 and 2013.

¹³ Such circumstances include: (1) elections with multiple rounds, which provide for different incentives for parties and their voters in the different rounds (e.g. France); (2) party systems divided by multiple lines of cleavage (e.g. left–right plus the regional and linguistic divides in Canada); and (3) situations where the local pecking order of parties is uncertain (as in UK constituencies with a strong third-party presence).

Otherwise the system efficiently encourages (though does not mathematically guarantee) the concentration of parties and the diversification of electoral geography, thereby helping the single-member district system to deliver a relatively high proportionality between vote and seat distributions.

Mixed systems increase proportionality via the list seats. At the same time, however, they reduce proportionality in the single-member component both by weakening the incentives for party concentration that are offered by a pure single-member district system (i.e. the system guarantees exactly zero legislative representation to small parties with an even spread of support across the country) and by preventing some minority parties from building up regional strongholds in smaller districts. The result is a party system that often gets even more fragmented than party systems that develop under pure proportional representation (Moser, 1999) and that, in combination with the majoritarian component of the mixed system, can produce as much (or even more) disproportionality between vote and seat shares as a purely majoritarian system.¹⁴

This much is also confirmed by *Figure 10*, which shows the degree of disproportionality between the parties' vote and seat shares in every European national election since 1990 as a separate dot. Only the two pure majoritarian systems (France and the UK) and Hungary's mixed system produce rather consistently high disproportionality values. For better visibility, the series for these three countries are joined up. High disproportionality only occurs elsewhere sporadically. As is also visible, the British system can deliver reasonably proportional seat distributions at times, i.e. when competition becomes mostly a two-party affair (as was the case in 90 per cent of the country in 2015).

Highly disproportional results are thus more frequent in Hungary than in other non-proportional mixed electoral systems, such as Andorra and Lithuania – and at certain periods, Albania, Croatia, Italy, Macedonia, Russia and Ukraine. In the light of the post-2010 data, only the French two-round system is as disproportional in Europe as the Hungarian: but we already saw above that the French system looks far more proportional than the Hungarian if (as is not done in *Figure 10*) we also consider the vote distribution in the second round.

¹⁴ Obviously, this does not hold for mixed electoral systems that guarantee full proportionality, such as the German and the post-1993 New Zealand systems.

Things were moving toward less disproportionality in Hungary, too, between 1998 and 2006, when balanced competition emerged between two political blocs. This process was first halted by the breakup and demise of the left-wing electoral bloc after 2006, which thereafter enabled the rival bloc to win virtually all the single-member district seats on offer. Not only did the 2011–13 electoral reforms imposed under Fidesz’s constitutional majority increase the disproportionality of the system (by reducing the proportion of list seats in the system), abolish the second round and introduce the (uniquely Hungarian) system of ‘winner compensation’, but they also cemented the already increased disproportionality by adding incentives for the further proliferation and fragmentation of small parties. Allowing citizens to nominate multiple candidates for election¹⁵ makes it easier for small parties to nominate separate candidates in as many single-member districts as they possibly can, and thus increase the fragmentation of the vote. The new party- and campaign funding regime made party proliferation financially very attractive,¹⁶ and the new rules on connected party lists¹⁷ made it much more important for any party to have a separate candidate in every district than was the case before. Meanwhile the ruling party could easily resist these new temptations thanks to its de facto unlimited access to public funds. Consequently, vote–seat disproportionality became even greater in 2014 than it had been in 2010, and in 2018 there were much stronger institutional obstacles to inter-party electoral coordination than before 2011. The drop in electoral disproportionality in 2018 compared to 2014 was due mostly to the much-increased tactical voting among opposition party supporters, which provided for a more efficient conversion of minor party votes into single-member district seats.

¹⁵ In the new electoral system introduced by Fidesz in 2011, each citizen is allowed to nominate as many candidates – from as many parties – as he or she wishes.

¹⁶ Under the new public funding regime introduced in 2012–13, the financial support available for running just 27 candidates in single-member districts is greater than the entire annual public funding for a smaller parliamentary party; public funding for the campaign rapidly increases with the number of candidates nominated for election, and is extremely easy to embezzle for private purposes without any legitimate campaign spending.

¹⁷ The 2011 reform discontinued a previous rule that allowed parties running separate lists in the election to jointly nominate candidates in one or more districts and to allocate the remainder votes of such candidates in a predetermined proportion between various party lists.

5. Conclusions: A critical election?

The sweeping victory by Fidesz in the 2018 Hungarian elections made headlines around the world. As mentioned above, it was indeed unprecedented among the world's democracies – at least outside micro-states. The methods of the campaign will surely find admirers, students and followers in other countries. Hungarian observers found it only natural that no opposition leader saw fit to congratulate the winning party on its stunning victory; however, observers in functioning democracies elsewhere may be surprised to learn that even pro-government commentators in the Hungarian media (who are normally sharply critical of the opposition) failed to condemn this apparent show of incivility. Presumably even they felt that the rules governing democratic competition had ceased to apply to Hungarian elections.

Much of the electorate questioned how clean the election was (Tóka, 2018), but the record high in-country turnout demonstrates that it was no empty ritual. Party responses to policy challenges and the popular perception of economic conditions (which, as we have seen, has mirrored business confidence since at least 2009) may well have influenced the result. Certainly, party popularity – as revealed in opinion polls – was clearly converted into parliamentary seats (albeit with an unusual degree of disproportionality, secured by an electoral system that is closely aligned with the partisan interests of the government). Although the political system is not democratic, in the above (limited) sense the 2018 election did take place within the parameters of a competitive party system, even if it raised doubts about the genuineness and seriousness of the competition.

Statistical analysis of the election results is therefore justified. This chapter sheds new light on the common assertion that the 2018 election was a genuine watershed in the development of Hungarian voting behaviour. Following Key (1955) and Burnham (1970), scholars label as 'critical' those elections that clearly articulate a new and major ideological or policy conflict; conspicuously demonstrate the hitherto unknown salience of this new issue for the electorate; produce a jump in turnout; visibly restructure the electorate of at least one major party; and reshape the relationship between the parties in the system in an enduring way. The centrality of the refugee crisis and immigration policy to the agenda of the 2018 campaign, the record high turnout, the geographical restructuring of the Fidesz electorate, the crossover tactical voting between the previously antagonistic far-right and centre-left camps – all this suggests that the 2018 election was indeed a 'critical' one. Maybe even more critical

than the 2010 election, which heralded the era of Fidesz dominance in Hungarian politics. Yet the close correlation between incumbent popularity and the economic mood of the public (*Figure 9*) cautions against any extrapolation of current trends into the future.

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¹⁸ The date of last access for all web pages on the list is 13 July 2018.

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