

HUNGARIAN POLITICS IN-DEPTH

ELECTION EDITION, 8 APRIL 2014

ANALYSIS: WINNERS AND LOSERS

The election is over and it has ended in a clear victory for the governing party, Fidesz. But some underlying details provide interesting and important insights. First, we offer some general observations about election night and then we proceed to evaluate the outcome from the perspective of individual parties, also reflecting on their reactions.

Election results of 6 April 2014

	Fidesz		Alliance (MSZP-E14/PM-DK)		Jobbik		LMP	
	April 6	Change since 2010	April 6	Change since 2010	April 6	Change since 2010	April 6	Change since 2010
Share of popular vote	44.54	-8.19	25.99	+6.29	20.54	+3.87	5.26	-2.22
Share of seats	67	68.1	19	15.28	11.6	12.18	2.5	4.15
Number of seats (2014 only)	133		38		23		5	

Though Fidesz was clearly the winner of Sunday's national ballot, all parties had some success. The left-wing alliance has the chance to win back the majority in Budapest. Jobbik showed that its impressive tally in 2010 did not mark the full extent of potential support for "national radicalism", while LMP survived despite considerable odds of being relegated to an extra-parliamentary existence without much hope for the future.

Turnout was low, and as most analysts previously predicted, this was favourable for Fidesz. At an average of 60%, turnout in the two elections that Fidesz won before 2014 (1998 and 2010) was 9% lower than in the three elections that the left won (1994, 2002 and 2006).

One of the winners of this election are pollsters, though their predictions were by no means perfect. Like last time, they overestimated Fidesz, though not quite as grossly, since the polls published in the previous days projected 45-48% for the governing party. Projections for the left-wing alliance varied wildly, and here Ipsos proved most accurate with its range of 26-31%, though it did overestimate the left's strength, even as the other pollsters underestimated it. Pollsters fared best with Jobbik and LMP, with all major institutes indicating accurate figures or ranges for the far-right and all but Medián successfully nailing LMP's just entry into Parliament. Despite the general trend of slightly overestimating Fidesz and slightly underestimating the left, on the whole pollsters proved the sceptics wrong who had crowed about a massive skew in the polls and predicted a vast hidden movement in the electorate that would tilt the results more to the left or the far-right, depending on the source. For us political analysts the ability of polls to capture the overall trends is a key piece of information in our ongoing effort to understand political processes in Hungary. At the same time, this is now the fourth election in a row which makes clear that polls are not accurate enough to allow for predicting the winner in a close election scenario. And this is crucial because as compared to many western countries, our understanding of "close" must be considerably broader. If the final polls had measured a 5-6% lead for Fidesz over the left (which would be marked as a very likely victory in most countries where polls work properly), for example, rather than a 15-30% lead, then we would have had to project that the outcome of the popular vote is a toss-up.

Fidesz: Fidesz is only the second governing party since regime transition that has managed to get itself re-elected. In light of the opposition's fragmentation, it has successfully exploited the electoral system to attain a parliamentary majority that far exceeds the level of its social support. It has also manipulated other aspects of democratic decision-making, such as the opposition's access to media and its own access to vast campaign funds whose origins are suspect. But the fact is that the governing party is the most popular political force in Hungary, and though the outcome would probably have been closer if the entire process had been clean, Fidesz still would have won the election. The government's abuses of the democratic framework did have an impact on the scope of its parliamentary majority, however, which remained virtually unchanged despite Fidesz's substantial decline in the popular vote.

Fidesz referred to its haul of 44.5% as an unprecedented level of support at the European level, and a visibly pleased Prime Minister Orbán interpreted the voters' verdict as an affirmation of the government's policies. His combative tone also suggested that more conflicts will be coming, and to some extent that is inevitable: Fidesz needs to keep the impression alive that it is forever fighting Hungary's enemies; this rhetoric keeps the base energised. For the time being, there is also an EP election pending, whose relevance is mostly symbolic, but it does matter in terms of sustaining Fidesz's aura of invincibility. And then there are the municipal elections, which matter a great deal, especially as huge distributors of public funds. Municipal governments are a key source of illicit funding for political parties, and if Fidesz wants to leave the left-wing cash-starved, it needs to retain control over most major municipalities. Sunday's results at the local suggest that there are likely going to be some crucial Fidesz losses to the left in Budapest, and some to Jobbik in eastern Hungary, but if it manages to retain its current level of popularity elsewhere, then the governing party should succeed in much of the rest.

Left Alliance: For the left, even the typical trajectory of election nights proved unfortunate. Generally, results from the left-leaning areas come in later, so the Alliance looked particularly weak early in the evening, a situation that was exacerbated by rumours of last minute polls that had it finishing barely ahead of Jobbik in the low 20s. By the time the dust had settled and the Alliance had proved to have expanded its lead over Jobbik with 26% of

the popular vote, election night was mostly over and the mood was set. There was little left to do but step in front of the cameras very late at night and blame most of the result on Fidesz's anti-democratic manoeuvres. EI4/PM's Gordon Bajnai and Tímea Szabó were the exception. Especially the former engaged in intense criticism of the Alliance's efforts, emphasising that the defeat owed to both, the left's failure to persuade voters and Fidesz's manipulations. It is important to point out that though there is no way to quantify the effect of Fidesz's machinations, it is not likely to account for a huge portion of the 18.5% that separated the left from Fidesz. Most of that difference did indeed stem from Fidesz's genuine popularity and the left's failure to present a promising alternative. It is also key to point out that many of the restrictions and manipulations - in particular campaign restrictions - affected Jobbik and LMP as well.

Jobbik: Jobbik HQ was an odd sight to behold on election day. Even as the party improved over 2010 (with some 100.000 new voters) and remained the second party in significant parts of the country, its leaders seemed sombre, even downcast. Mostly, politicians are determined to squeeze even weak election returns for whatever glimmer of good news they allow. Even as the commentariat - including us - assessed the party's performance as a success, however, Jobbik appeared determined to see it as a disappointment. They had clearly expected more, maybe based on their seemingly unstoppable surge in the polls, or maybe because they believed their own hype about challenging Fidesz for leading the government. Regardless, its result firmly establishes Jobbik as a presence in the Hungarian party landscape, and at the very least for the time being makes it a major player, too. Jobbik's candidates finished second ahead of MSZP in 41 of the 106 single-member districts. Most crucially, Jobbik performed very successfully in those areas in Hungary's east which are indispensable for the left if it ever wants to challenge Fidesz for the leading position. In a number of districts that used to give MSZP its greatest margins of victory, the Alliance was stuck in third place at levels under 30%, while Jobbik's candidates vied with Fidesz for first place. Jobbik's Achilles heel remains Budapest, where the far-right candidates failed to break 10% in almost half the districts, and only took over 15% in one of 18. The party has made some inroads in conservative northwestern Hungary, where it had also been weak four years ago, but it still remains far stronger in the east. In the long run, an inability to break through in Budapest could be a huge stumbling block for Jobbik's national aspirations. There

are namely at least 6-7 counties where Fidesz is likely to remain dominant and win most if not all single-member constituencies even if it loses significant national support. If you add Budapest to the regions where Jobbik won't win any districts, then there simply aren't enough seats left for Jobbik to win an election outright, though it could conceivably win a plurality. The municipal elections in October will be a key test of Jobbik's newly found strength. In particular, the question is whether it will be able to translate its numbers into winning the mayoralties and municipal councils of several of the major eastern Hungarian municipalities where it ran strong on Sunday.

LMP: For the Green party, the election yielded a victory, though the fact that its decline from 7.5% in 2010 to 5.3% is considered a major success is in itself a testament of the rough ride the party experienced over the last few years. It was squeezed in particular by the party split last year, which led to the defection of a majority of its MPs, along with a key portion of the party's left-leaning base. At the time, it was assumed that a majority of the party base had left along with the defectors who ultimately joined Gordon Bajnai's team, and that may well be the case, since many of the folks who opted for LMP on Sunday may indeed be newly-minted Greens. The party was also under pressure from an increasingly majoritarian electoral scheme and a concomitant political culture that does not tend to appreciate small players. Interestingly, LMP co-chair András Schiffer had some kind words for his MSZP counterpart Attila Mesterházy, which the latter duly reciprocated in his own concession speech. For analysts, who pounce on every detail that might signify a softening of Schiffer's anti-MSZP position, this was an interesting tidbit (but Schiffer's attitude to Mesterházy has always been friendlier than towards Bajnai and especially Gyurcsány).

For now, András Schiffer's course to refuse the bipolarity of mainstream politics has been successful. In the long-run, five seats in Parliament won't count for much, however (unless in a rare set-up these five seats tip the balance in either direction), and some of LMP's current voters may decide to ditch the greens in favour of a formation that has more of a chance to impact national policy. LMP has won another four years in its quest to find a permanent place in Hungarian politics, but it still lacks a stable bloc of voters who can sustain this position indefinitely.

Other parties: The mass of new parties that appeared on the ballot, including two whose names mirror that of the left-wing Alliance ("Összefogás") or parts of it ("Együtt 2014"), failed to make a discernible impact. But in a supreme twist of fate, Fidesz' two-thirds majority might well depend on a 'business party', Együtt 2014, whose candidate in Budapest's 18th district drew 187 votes. The left's candidate, Ágnes Kunhalmi, trails Fidesz' László Kucsák by a mere 22 votes out of 53,500 cast. If Kucsák prevails once the few outstanding ballots have been counted and all votes have been recounted, Fidesz retains its two-thirds majority. Though we can't know for certain, there is a chance that if Együtt 2014 had not made it onto the ballot these votes might have ended up with Kunhalmi, putting her well over the top. Such a situation would eminently seem to qualify as a manifestation of the butterfly effect, with some minor party candidate qualifying for the ballot, then failing to win even as many votes as she collected in citizens' signature for the ballot. And now the nigh 200 votes she hogs may well be votes originally intended to reduce Fidesz' two-thirds majority. Even if this particular butterfly was steered in some remote sense, in that Fidesz was pushing for Együtt 2014 to qualify and organised its signature collection, no one could have reasonable anticipated that it could play this rule here. But there might several dozen situations where electorally irrelevant Együtt 2012 or Összefogás hoard a few hundred votes that could have come in handy.

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