



Dissatisfied voters in Hungary

ANDRÁS BÍRÓ-NAGY

2019

- 53% of Hungarians are “dissatisfied voters”, saying that ‘things are going in the wrong direction in Hungary’. We believe that understanding those voters’ concerns may be key to future election results. 19% of the dissatisfied voters are currently non-voters – this group could be a primary target for opposition mobilisation in the future.
- There is no single opposition party that a majority of dissatisfied voters would consider sympathetic. The refusal of Fidesz-KDNP, on the other hand, is highest among supporters of left-liberal DK and radical right Jobbik.
- A vast majority of dissatisfied voters demand cooperation from the opposition parties at the 2019 local elections and support the principle of one opposition candidate against Fidesz’s nominees.
- The chances for some opposition gains at the 2019 local elections are not bad: in the whole Hungarian society, there is almost exactly the same number of people who would vote for the government party’s candidate as those who would support an opposition candidate.

The results of the research are based on the data of three opinion polls completed in the spring of 2019. 3000 people – representing the whole adult population of Hungary by age, gender and education – were asked by our partner pollster Závecz Research (fieldwork dates: 6-15 March, 5-15 April and 4-14 May 2019).

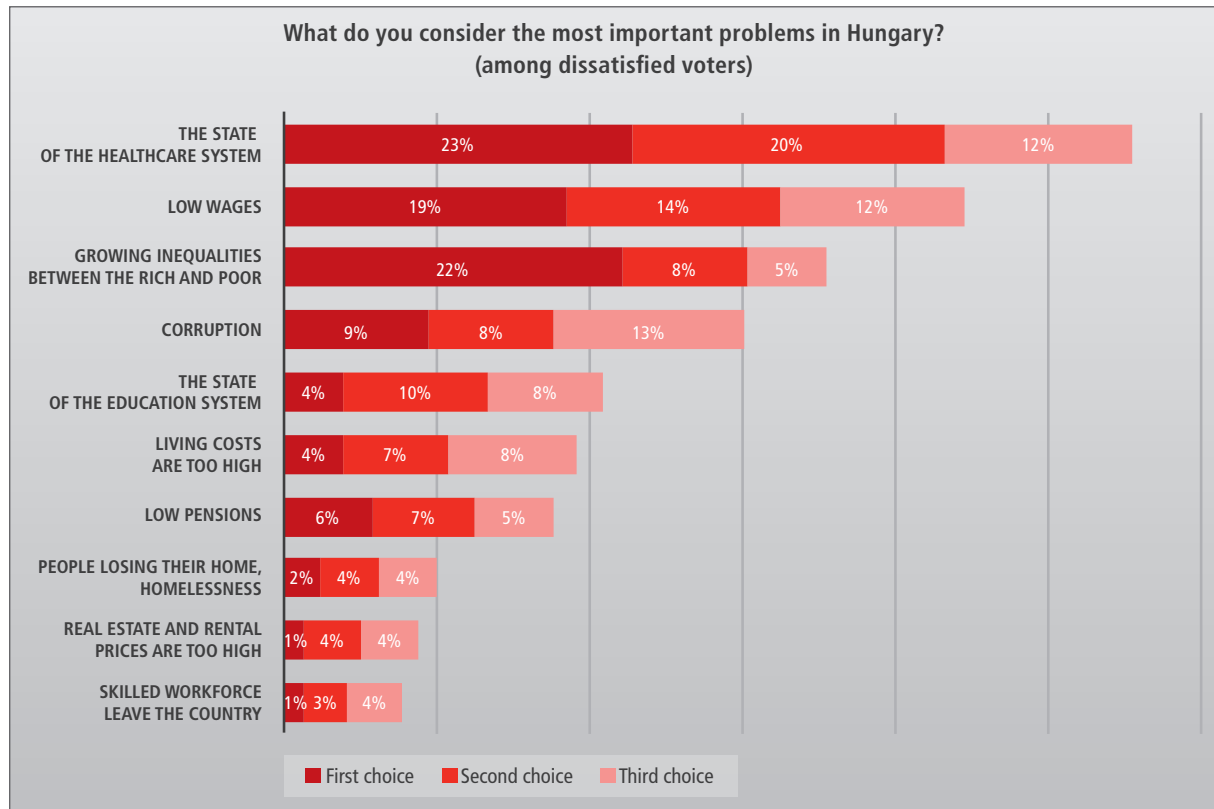
Dissatisfied voters worry the most about health care, low wages, inequalities and corruption

The problem list identified by dissatisfied voters is largely the same as that of the whole population. As with the whole society, responses from dissatisfied respondents indicate that the collapsing health care system is the most serious problem Hungary has to deal with. Dissatisfied voters consider the state of the health care system, low wages and the inequalities between the rich and poor as the greatest challenges for Hungary (see Graph 1). Compared to the whole society, dissatisfied voters are significantly more

concerned about corruption. At the same time, it is worth noting that migration is less bothering for dissatisfied voters.

Five significant differences can be observed between the problem lists of dissatisfied voters and the total population. Displeased voters mentioned significantly more corruption, health care system and education as their greatest concern, while they are significantly less concerned about immigration and emigration. Other traditional issues of the opposition, like the state of democracy and rule of law or climate protection are concerns only for a small proportion of the society, and therefore have less potential in electoral campaigns. To sum up, the primary concerns of Hungarians and dissatisfied voters (besides the poor state of education and health care system) are materialistic ones: low wages and pensions, social inequalities and the high costs of living are their greatest difficulties. These are the issues of national importance that are the most likely to mobilise voters at the upcoming local elections.

Graph 1. The most important problems in Hungary among dissatisfied voters



Different issues matter to the various voting segments of the dissatisfied voters

Different issues have different importance to voters of the various opposition parties, which makes it more difficult to run unified opposition campaigns. The preferences of the Socialist Party (MSZP) and the left-liberal Democratic Coalition (DK) voters are the most similar: both ranked the state of the health care system, low wages and pensions and social inequalities as the four major problems. The better social status of DK voters is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that while Socialist voters believe that one of the country's most serious problems is that many people lose their homes, DK voters are more concerned about higher real estate prices. The biggest difference between the supporters of the two parties is that the voters of DK are significantly more concerned about the decline of democracy and climate change. This means that – presumably as a result of their better social status –, DK voters seem to be open to post-material issues in addition to welfare promises, unlike the less affluent MSZP voters who are almost exclusively concerned with their own financial situation and livelihood.

Radical right Jobbik's supporters are the only opposition voter group where health care is not on the top of the problem list: low wages are the most serious problem for them. In general, the results indicate that the situation of health care and education, which have been highlighted by left-wing opposition in recent years, have less importance for supporters of Jobbik. On the other hand, Jobbik voters are particularly critical of the government: they have proved to be the most concerned about corruption and the state of democracy and the rule of law. However, they still worry the most about the deterioration in public safety and tensions between Roma and non-Roma people which indicates their openness to the messages of the former, more radical Jobbik.

Among dissatisfied voters, centrist-liberal Momentum supporters differ the most from the sympathisers of other parties. Presumably due to their better social status, preferences of a ma-

terial nature are less dominant among voters of the liberal party. Health care and education are their top priorities which are followed by corruption. It is striking that while climate change was only the 14th most important problem for dissatisfied voters, in the case of Momentum it was the 6th. Furthermore, the level of concern about the quality of democracy is also clearly the most important for the voters of the centrist party. It is also noticeable that Momentum voters choose all material issues less frequently than other dissatisfied voters: high living costs ranked only at the 12th place among Momentum supporters, while in the 6th place among all displeased people. The liberal attitudes and better social status of Momentum voters are best characterized by the fact that only 18 percent of them mentioned that inequalities are too high between the rich and poor in Hungary, while the same ratio among all dissatisfied voters was 36%.

Wages, housing and the relationship with multinational companies are the least convincing campaign issues of Fidesz

It is clear that Fidesz can claim some policy successes even among the dissatisfied voters as well. However, at the same time it has also turned out which issues promoted by the government do not work among those who are not satisfied with the regime. It is noticeable that the reduction of utility costs is still crucial for many voters: this is the primary achievement of the government for dissatisfied voters. At the same time, the family policies of the Orbán government are ranked second by displeased voters. This also means that the most important messages of the last two parliamentary elections and the 2019 family policies campaign have been heard by the Hungarian voters to the greatest extent.

Dissatisfied voters are somewhat more critical than the whole society of the government's fight against immigration, with only 28 percent seeing progress in this area. In addition, the biggest difference can be observed in the assessment of wages in Hungary: only 9 percent of the dissatis-

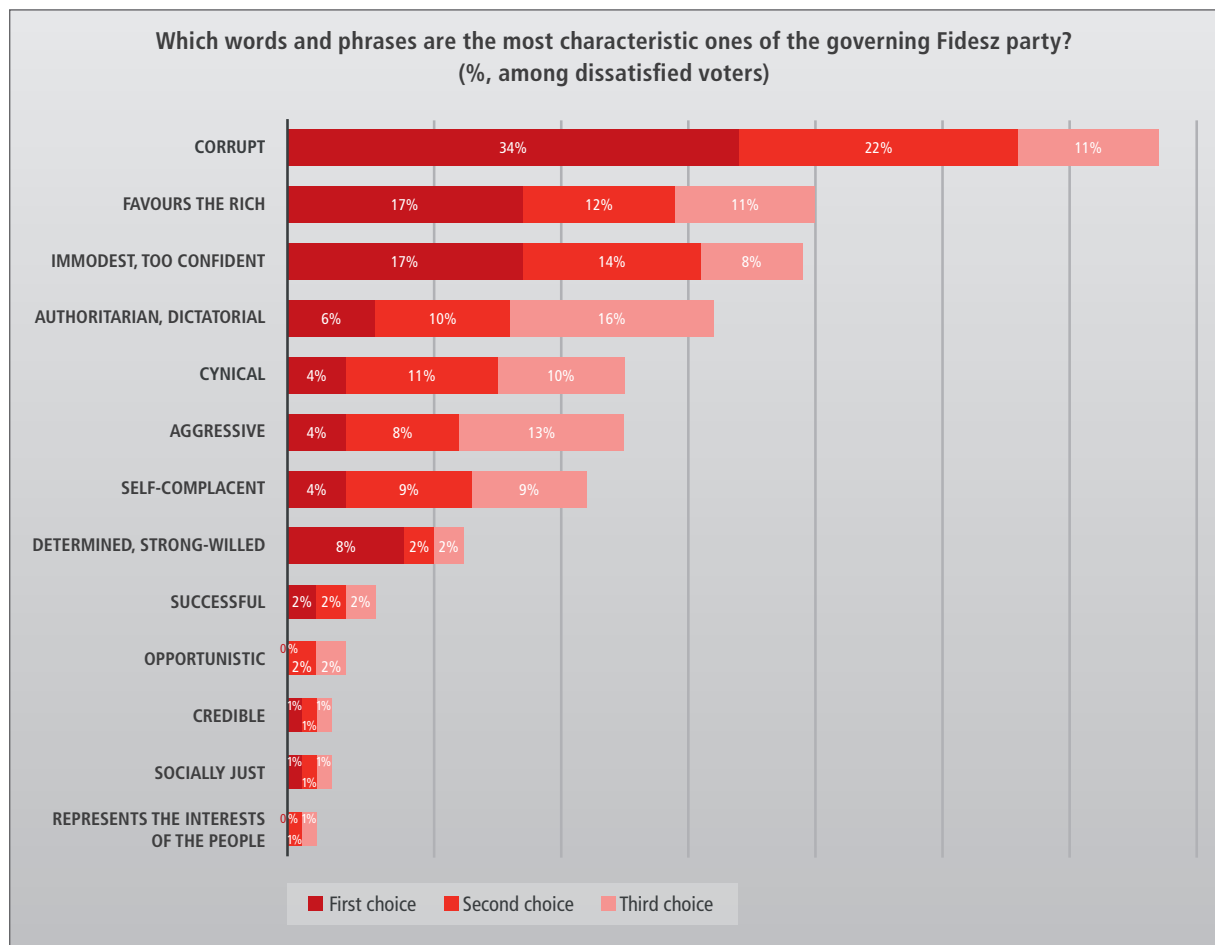
fied voters see an increase in their standard of living. All in all, the three least convincing campaign issues Fidesz among dissatisfied voters are housing policies, increase in wages and the “fight” against multinational companies. These three topics are clearly the weakest points of the Hungarian government’s propaganda.

Dissatisfied voters consider Fidesz corrupt, socially insensitive and too confident

The adjectives that resonate the best among dissatisfied voters about Fidesz are ‘*corrupt*’, ‘*favouring the rich*’ and ‘*too confident*’. Concerning the whole society, most people found the adjective ‘*corrupt*’ the most characteristic of Fidesz when they were asked to choose three expressions out

of a predefined list. One-third of the respondents chose the *determined* option, while the third most common response referred to its economic policy which *favours rich people*. Negative adjectives, as expected, even more dominate among dissatisfied voters (see Graph 2). Two-thirds of them consider Fidesz *corrupt*, moreover, one-third put this option in the first place. 40 percent think that the government is *favouring the rich*, and almost as many chose *immodest and too confident*. One-third of dissatisfied voters mentioned *authoritarian*, one-fourth ranked *cynical* and *aggressive* among the most representative adjectives, while every fifth respondent described Fidesz as *self-complacent*. The most frequently chosen positive values of Fidesz are all qualities that critics of government should also admit: 12 percent highlighted its *determined, strong-willed* character, 6 percent see them *successful*.

Graph 2. Phrases associated to Fidesz among dissatisfied voters



Dissatisfied voters do not like opposition parties either

Poor numbers in the 'party sympathy indexes' among dissatisfied voters provide a potential explanation for the lack of breakthrough of opposition parties against Fidesz in the recent years. It is important to emphasize that there is no opposition party that the majority of dissatisfied voters would consider sympathetic. The antipathy of opposition party voters is the highest towards the green party LMP, radical right Jobbik and extreme right Mi Hazánk, while the refusal rates of MSZP, DK and green-left Párbeszéd are slightly lower. On the whole, dissatisfied citizens are the most open to Momentum as we can observe the smallest difference between approvers and disapprovers in the case of the centrist-liberal party. DK has the second-best reputation among displeased voters which gives a partial explanation for the surprising results of the 2019 European Parliament elections in Hungary. The refusal of Fidesz-KDNP is the highest among supporters of DK and Jobbik.

Sympathies and antipathies within the opposition camp are indicative of the obstacles that opposition parties should address during their cooperation efforts before the 2019 local elections. Jobbik is antipathetic for the majority of each of the opposition voter groups. In the case of the Socialists, a clear majority of Jobbik, LMP and Momentum voters assess the Socialist party's activity negatively, however, half of DK supporters have a positive opinion about MSZP. The opposite is also true: besides its own electorate, DK is acceptable for the most voters of MSZP, as the proportion of approvers and disapprovers of DK among MSZP voters is almost identical. Momentum has a somewhat better reputation compared to other parties, however, the positive voices are the minority in their case as well: MSZP and DK voters have a moderate rejecting attitude towards the young liberals, while only every fourth Jobbik voter likes the new centrist party.

Left-wing parties should recover their credibility in social and economic issues

Credibility issues should be also addressed if the Hungarian opposition is to stand a chance at the upcoming elections. Regarding the credibility of political parties, it is outstanding that party preference clearly determines voters' opinion. In spite of that several policies of Fidesz-KDNP are clearly opposing social democratic values (such as reducing social inequalities, increasing social mobility, introducing a progressive tax system, improve access to quality public services to all, etc.), their voters still find them the most credible political formation in those questions as well. Except for corruption, the respondents assess the different political parties almost in the same way in the case of all examined public policy areas. Roughly one-third of the Hungarian people consider Fidesz as the most credible party, 20% trust the leftist opposition on most issues, and 10% believe that Jobbik is the most authentic, while every fourth Hungarian does not trust any political party, regardless of whether we ask them about education, climate change or social policies. Dissatisfied citizens also evaluate the various political formations within the margin of error in all of the issues examined: 7-9 percent trust the governing parties, 31-34 percent prefer the left-wing opposition, 14-17 percent consider Jobbik as the most authentic political formation, while about one-third of them have doubts about the credibility of every political force. This means that the dissatisfied voters are also very partisan when it comes to evaluate the Hungarian political parties on policy issues, and none of the parties are able to reach much beyond their stable fans in terms of credibility.

These results confirm our findings from a research conducted in 2018 about the popularity of social democratic values in Hungary: the fundamental problem is not the level of support for social democratic programme elements, but the credibility of parties located on the left-liberal side of the Hungarian party system. As a consequence, the greatest strategic challenge for the

left-liberal opposition in 2019 is still to associate with themselves the popular social democratic issues more effectively, and persuade voters that they represent these issues in the most credible way. It can be concluded that if left-wing parties cannot recover their credibility in the key pillars of their identity, there is very limited chance of establishing a viable alternative against the Fidesz government.

Opposition is the most credible in the fight against corruption

MSZP voters consider the left-wing opposition as the least credible in the improvement of living conditions for rural people, while they believe the most in leftist parties in reducing social inequalities and the representation of ordinary people's interest. The supporters of DK also regard the political actions of the leftist opposition as the most credible in reducing social inequalities, while LMP voters assess its efforts as the most authentic regarding corruption and climate change. The voters of Momentum also ranked leftist opposition to the top in the case of corruption. Sympathisers of Jobbik think that their favourite party is the most credible in representing citizens' interests and fighting against corruption.

There is no alternative to cooperation at the local elections

The chances for some opposition gains at the local elections are not bad: in the whole Hungarian society, there is almost exactly the same

number of people who would vote for the government party's candidate at the municipal elections in the autumn as those who would support an opposition candidate. Those voters who are dissatisfied with the Fidesz government demand cooperation at the 2019 local elections. A vast majority of them agree that opposition parties should stand united for the local elections: 57 percent agreed that opposition parties should support only one candidate against Fidesz's nominees, while only every fifth dissatisfied Hungarian does not demand the coordination among the parties.

The request for more cooperation is strong in all segments of the dissatisfied voters: from old parties to new parties and from left-wing voters to far-right supporters. Momentum voters prefer cooperation the most (over 70%), but also two-thirds of the supporters of MSZP, DK and Jobbik expect a united opposition, and half of LMP voters support an electoral coalition at the elections. There is a clear correlation between the intention of voting for a joint candidate and the age of dissatisfied citizens: with getting older, there is a growing willingness to support a common opposition candidate. The same trend can be observed regarding qualification, as the more educated the voter is, the more it is likely that he or she has a positive attitude towards the candidate of the opposition. Furthermore, it must be added that half of those dissatisfied citizens who are not affiliated with a particular party also prefer cooperative behaviour from the opposition parties. This is a message that opposition parties should listen to in as many places at the local elections as possible.

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András Bíró-Nagy is Director of Policy Solutions. He is also Research Fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and Board Member of the Hungarian Political Science Association. Previously, he worked at the European Commission as political adviser to László Andor, EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. His publications mainly focus on Hungarian politics, radical right parties, contemporary social democracy and the politics of the European Union. András Bíró-Nagy holds a PhD in Political Science from the Corvinus University of Budapest, and an MSc in Public Policy and Administration from the London School of Economics.

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