

Power Tools for “Correcting” the Will of the Voters

The Principles and Practice of the Municipality Election System in Budapest during the Horthy Era (1920–1944)

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The main goal of the elections during the Horthy era was to strengthen and legitimise the existing political system, and to avoid the parliamentary rotation instead of creating its possibility. That is why the restrictions, mostly enacted in laws, were so essential: they could inhibit the expression of free political will and the formation of political boards, which would express the preferences of the electors. This is exactly what happened during the municipality elections in the capital. Although the most severe sanction, the open vote was not used during the elections, in 1925 the opposition, the liberal and social democratic block that won by 52.1 percent at a secret vote, could not assume authority in Budapest. As the balance of power between the parties¹ in the capital were almost even during this election, it was by far the most important thing to use all possible tools in order to keep the control over the City Hall, obtained in 1920 by the Right. These tools were (as follows): the representatives could get in the municipality not only by general elections, but also through other ways; they made restrictions concerning the electors' rights to vote; they kept the uneven arrangements of the election districts and the special nomination system. In this study I wish to demonstrate the principles of the above mentioned tools that were defined in regulations, their actualisation in everyday practice (e.g. because of the “compiling” of the register of voters, lots of people could not exercise their constitutional

rights), and their effects on the results of the elections. That is, to show how the authorities tried to accomplish that the movement “based on national and religious morality” had the majority even if the parties with “opposite ideological approach” got more than seventy percent of the votes.

The instability of the election system

Naturally, a political elite—that is, its decision-making group—enforces their own interests during the framing of the election system. This group chooses the principles and works out the details in agreement with the given political power relations, so this type of political planning serves the goals of the ones in power mainly during the first election after the regulations. Hence the modification of the regulations from election to election can be a way of creating stable majority representation, that is independent of the electors changing or altering intentions in time. If the political planning is thorough and “prudent” enough, that is, it counts with the unwanted changes in advance, and builds corrections in the regulations to compensate for these changes, this system could work throughout several election cycles. That happened, for example, in the case of the Hungarian Parliament, where the 1925 regulations were suitable for the adequate arrangement of three elections.

At the beginning, the absence of stable regulations was characteristic of the municipality elections in the capital during the Horthy era. The first three elections were held according to completely new election regulations.² Before the 1935 Budapest municipal elections, only smaller changes were made, because the previous law had already implied adequate correction mechanisms. So, with some minor changes, it was also suitable for the prime minister, Gyula Gömbös, who brought the elections forward. The instability of the election cycles was also characteristic: the elections were never run as it was specified by law, i. e. at

the end of the given periods, at the exhausting of the mandate of a given council committee. The first election of the counter-revolutionary system in the capital was obviously run by a new law created just for this particular occasion. The mandate of the committee, elected in July 1920 for three years, exhausted at the end of 1923 and it did not work any longer either. The government, lead by István Bethlen, did not extend the mandate—though Károly Wolff's group had asked for it—because of their conflict with the Capital Assembly, lead by Károly Wolff³ and the Christian Parish Party (Keresztény Községi Párt, KKP). Bethlen appointed a commissioner to be the mayor of Budapest, by enacting a special regulation. Thus the next elections were only held in May 1925. According to the valid regulations, the members of the council committee were elected for six years every three years. Three years after the first election, half of the members were to be withdrawn from the committee by drawing, and new members were to be elected. However, the elections in the capital were postponed in 1928 and in 1929, so the appointments of the members, who were selected to withdraw by lot, were extended.⁴ The minister of the interior explained that it was necessary to postpone the elections, because the new capital law, still in preparation, would reorganise the Council Committee, and all members would be re-elected after the law came into force. "With regards to that—he explained—I would not feel that it would be right to cause excitement among the residents of the capital because of two elections held within such short period of time."⁵ The reorganisation of the Council Committee started after the new law for the capital came into force. According to it, the minister of the interior determined when the elections should be held (December 1930), and the exhaustion of the mandate of the previous committee. According to the 1930 regulations the next elections should have been conducted in November 1936. The 1934 amendment of the law gave an opportunity to the minister of the interior again

to discharge the committee earlier: the law changed the number of the committee members and the composition of the committee, and it also appointed the minister to decide when the change should come into effect.⁶ This happened in 1935: Gyula Gömbös won in the parliamentary elections in the capital that spring, hence they held advanced municipality elections at the beginning of June. The next cycle would have also been six years, based on the law, but they used the administrative reform as an excuse and these were the last elections during the Horthy era. The mandates of the committee members, except for those who were classified Jewish, were extended first for one year, then until further action of the legislation.⁷

Committee members elected in non-general elections

During the Horthy era committee members who got in without being voted for during the general election process served as a correction of the unwanted “variation” in the voters will, in order to restrain the incidental strengthening of “extreme” views. Therefore their scale of values (party preferences) and, in some cases, even their identity was known before the elections.

Before 1918, during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy this “stability” was secured by a special form of virilism that was associated with the elections: half of the committee members were selected from the richest 1,200 taxpayers. In 1920 the will of the political forces opposing each other coincided in one matter: property virilism had to be stopped. During the debates of the National Assembly about the act of 1920 from the interpellations—which were to some extent anti-Semitic—of the Christian Party and Smallholder Party MPs it was clear that they saw virilism as the city leaders’ tool of power.⁸

Therefore Budapest, instead of the institute of property virilism, which still existed in the country municipality, was

characterised by the participation of members, different in type and numbers constantly changing, who were selected by non-general elections. *Table 1* shows the ratios in the newly formed assemblies after the elections.⁹

Table 1

The numbers and ratios of members with the right to vote at the assembly of the Council Committee between 1920 and 1935

Date of constituent assembly	Total number of members (N)	Members elected through general elections		Members elected through non-general elections	
		number (N)	ratio (%)	number (N)	ratio (%)
July 28, 1920	284	240	84.51	44	15.49
June 17, 1925	310	250	80.65	60	19.35
January 22, 1931	229	150	65.5	79	34.5
June 28, 1935	182	108	59.34	74	40.66

The radical reduction of the number of committee members—it was 400 before 1918, now 200—was already planned in Act 1920.¹⁰ The advocates of rationalisation and modernisation, propagating the much smaller similar bodies of European and North-American metropolitans, were unable to carry out their plans because of political, party and MP interests. In 1920 there was a smaller reduction than originally planned, and by 1925 the number of MPs got even higher than that, by ten percent. Finally, in 1935 the number of the committee members decreased to less than 200 in two steps. By then the composition of the committee had also changed considerably. The tendency can be seen in *Table 1*: the ratio of the members that were selected by non-general elections has grown considerably, from 15.5 percent to more than 40 percent by 1935.

Almost all members, who were selected by non-general

elections, served the interests of the right and, to some extent, the regime in power. This was the most useful tool for the adequate “correction” of the power relations between the parties and the other trends in the capital, that were reflecting the general will of the electors. The political risk of the election was considerably reduced with this “correction”, and the composition of the newly forming legislations could be planned in advance. From this point of view the 1930 regularisation, when the system of members elected by non-general elections was deliberately altered and expanded for a longer period of time, was an important milestone. During the cabinet council conference discussing the capital law, the speaker, the minister of the interior could proudly point out that “even in really unfortunate circumstances, when more than seventy percent of the members elected would belong to parties with opposite ideological approach, the parties ‘based on national and religious morality’ would still have a majority by 12 members, because of the previously mentioned composition of the committee.”¹¹ On top of that, the opposition to obtain a mandate ratio like that would have to get an even higher ratio of votes, because of other “correction” measures of the election system. These measures shall be explained in detail next.

The restriction of voting rights

The definition of the active and passive voting rights is an important element in judging the whole political system. At the same time, the range of this basic political right, i. e. the percentage of the population allowed to participate in the formation and operation of the legislative and self-governmental councils, and the social strata that are excluded give an overall view of the conception of society of the elite in power. From this point of view not only the accepted election regulations, but also the original suggestions, their

explanations, the committee and plenary arguments can be used as sources. The 1924 bill, submitted by the minister of the interior, for example, would have banned women from being elected in the legislative committee of the capital, because: "The municipal agencies have mostly executive functions, that is, an activity that is very far from the mission of female life" and "there are not even any roots of such desire among the public."¹²

The succeeding governments of the Horthy era while established the limits of voting rights and their implementation, and assembled registers of voters, used them as political tools to influence the composition of the municipal committees to their advantage. The importance of these questions is shown by the fact that during a cabinet meeting, where the 1930 capital law was discussed, the following was stated about the voting rights: "In order to exclude the extreme possibilities the Minister of the Interior wanted to find different corrections, but none of them was fully effective", that is, they would not have altered the election results, but created unwanted criticism toward the government and swayed the opposition against them. That is why they chose, as a way of correction, to compile the registers of voters under the control and supervision of the right-wing mayor.¹³

Earlier the municipality voting rights in the capital were, compared to the low ratio of the parliamentary electors, extremely restricted: in 1909 the latter one was more than eight percent of the population of Budapest, while the previous one was less than five percent.¹⁴ The 1919 large-scale amendments had an influence on the capital, too. The municipality elections in 1920 were held according the preceding regulations of the National Assembly, using the same electors' list. The Bethlen disfranchisement in 1922 was executed through the act of 1924, that not only adopted the census of the parliamentary elections, but made it even more severe by raising the criteria of inhabitancy from two to six years.¹⁵ It seemed reasonable to have

stricter municipal voting rights. As the bill put it: “Only those are entitled to have a right to handle self-governmental affairs who are closely related to self-governmental life.”¹⁶ The regulations did not change from 1925 to 1938, so within this period there were 2-3 percent less municipality voters than parliamentary voters in Budapest, as it is shown in *Table 2*.¹⁷

Table 2

The development of the numbers and percentages of people having the right to vote in the municipal and the parliamentary elections in Budapest between 1920 and 1935

Year of municipal election	Population (N)	People having municipal voting rights		People having parliamentary voting rights	
		Number of (N)	Ratio of (%)	Number of (N)	Ratio of (%)
1920	928,996	464,718	50.02	464,718	50.02
1925	960,995	289,320	30.11	314,197	32.69
1930	1,006,184	292,580	29.08	319,166	31.72
1935	1,060,431	292,946	27.63	323,227	30.48

In 1920 fifty percent of the residents of Budapest took part in both the national assembly elections in January and the municipal elections in June. At that time every parliamentary force looked upon it as the realization of general voting rights, and its numbers was considered high even in contemporary European practice. The magnitude of the subsequent disfranchisement is shown well by the fact, that by 1925 the number of people that had a right to vote decreased to 30 percent. On top of that, it affected the administration districts differently: in the 1st, 2nd, 9th and 10th districts, that were considered loyal to the right, the decrease was below the average, but in the 6th and 7th, the opposition districts, above. After that the number of voters

was stagnant, and the ratio of voters fell with 30 percent in 1930 and below 28 percent in 1935.

A question arises: why was the number of voters in municipality elections almost the same between 1925 and 1935, when the number of the residents of Budapest was on the rise? In addition to that, the level of education was also increasing, which meant that the number of voters who were eligible to participate in the parliamentary elections increased throughout the country.¹⁸ At the same time, based on the 1931 and 1935 data, this number decreased¹⁹ in Budapest. This points out the anomalies in the compilation and use of the register of voters in Budapest. One of these anomalies, the one associated with the 1935 elections, is worth examining.

According to the decree of the 1930 capital law: "The register of municipality voters is compiled by the mayor every six years, in the year of the elections, by the 31st of March, with the help of the Budapest Statistical Office."²⁰ The preparation of the new register of voters was started in 1930, after the law had come into effect, and at the end of the year the elections were already run according to it. Following the elections and after closing the cases that got to the attention of the Administrative Court, as a result of the opinions expressed, the register of voters was slightly changed. The next census was only made in 1936. (See *Table 3.*)²¹

Table 3

The number of people having the right to vote at the municipal elections, in the register of voters, 1930–1936

The register of voters used	Number of people having the right to vote
during the 1930 election	292,580
according to the 1930 census	292,946
during the 1935 election	292,946
according to the 1936 census	320,884

Table 4 explains the problem stated above. According to it the number of people having the right to vote also increased in Budapest (with almost 10 percent between 1930 and 1936). Before the municipal elections in 1935 no new register of voters was prepared, not even a partial correction of it was made, as the data of 1930/1931 exactly matched the 1935 one. According to the 1934 law any eventual advanced election should have been held “based on the last valid register of municipality voters,” which was confirmed by the bills of the mayor in charge of the election preparations, too.²² The fact that this meant the use of the 1930 register of voters “as is,” without any changes, can only be proved by comparing the 1930 and 1935 registers of municipality voters, but out of the two registers only the latter survived.²³ We have a secondary source for the register of voters of 1935, though: in the certificatory electoral decisions responding to the election complaints, because of special reasons, there are referrals to some concrete data of the applied register of voters.²⁴ While comparing these narrow-ranged, but randomly selected samples are and the appropriate 1930 data we can confirm that the two registers are indeed the same.

The consequences were summarised by a social-democratic representative at the Budapest General Assembly: “The government did not wait with the Budapest elections for the compilation of the register of voters, it ordered the electoral procedure to be conducted according to the 1930 register of voters. A serious election cannot be run using a register of voters already outdated. Thousands of people on the list have died, tens of thousands left the capital. On the other hand, there are tens of thousands who are eligible to vote, either because they reached the age limit, or they have six years of residency. These people cannot vote, because the register of voters has not been recompiled.”²⁵

The extreme regulations, in an indirect manner, extensively altered the conditions of this election: the unstated requirements for participation were the age of 29 years for

men and 35 for women, and 11 years of residency. In addition to the dead still registered, the case of the residents, who, in the meantime, have moved to other locations in Budapest, were "peculiarities" not mentioned by the opposition representative. These people had more difficulty exercising their right to vote, because they had to vote at the electoral districts of their old addresses of 1930. Moreover the Certificatory Committee, in most cases, tried to deliver the voting-papers to the old addresses (without any success), found in the old register of voters. Of course, that made collecting recommendations for the parties more difficult, too, as it was also necessary to have the supporters' counterfoils of the voting-papers for that.

The inequalities of the mandate values of the votes

1. The disproportional division of the electoral districts

The electoral districts—and in the case of voting on the basis of a list the numbers of mandates assigned to them—were always determined by political decisions. In non-democratic systems this gives a possibility for the elite in power to frame an arrangement advantageous for them. Exactly this happened in Budapest during the municipality elections between the two world wars. Although usually it is impossible to enforce the democratic principle that the exact same number of votes is needed for obtaining each mandate, but considerable and tendentious deviancy from the average shows well which parties' or trends' interests are served by a given arrangement of the electoral districts.

Table 4*End values of eligible voters per mandate*

Year of election	Number of eligible voters per mandate			Their ratio
	On average	In the biggest electoral district	In the smallest electoral district	
1920	1,936	3,716	658	5.65
1925	1,157	1,910	612	3.12
1930	1,947	3,414	911	3.75
1935	2,713	4,555	1,301	3.5

Table 4, besides the prominent value of 1920 and even in the cases of the other elections, shows unequal distribution of the mandates within the electoral districts. In addition to that, the positive and negative deviations from the mean show a tendency and, in spite of the changes in the arrangements of the districts from election to election, they are stable in time, too. In those districts where the right-wing parties scored good results fewer voters corresponded to one mandate, and where the liberal or the left-wing parties had better results, it was just the opposite: more voters were necessary for one mandate.

In 1920 in Budapest the municipality elections were held in July, six months after the parliamentary elections. The administrative districts in the capital became municipality electoral districts, but the criterion of having the right to vote remained the same. Therefore when the numbers of mandates were decided, they had already known the number of eligible voters of each district: there was a possibility to adjust the ratio of eligible voters per mandate, as the numbers of voters were different in each district. The 1920 law completely ignored these differences, and it ordained 24 representatives in each district. During the debates in

the legislation, when the liberal opposition called the minister of the interior to account for the inequality between the districts, and spoke about equality before the law, he referred to the principle of the equality of the districts, which would be in danger if the larger districts (6th and 7th) got more mandates. In addition to that he stated: "It would represent the greatest danger and the greatest improvidence to give voting rights based on pure mathematics to those districts, where destructive elements live in big masses."²⁶ The equal distribution was disadvantageous to larger districts, while it was in favour of the smaller ones (2nd, 3rd, 4th and 10th). It is interesting to compare the two extremities from this point of view: the elite downtown (4th district) had less than 16,000 electors, the 7th district, the latter Elizabethtown, had almost 90,000 electors, and both of them sent exactly the same number of representatives to the Council Committee, thanks to the regulations. During the National Assembly elections in January it became clear, that the two most important districts of the liberals were the 6th and 7th, and the Christian Party, which was in power, got more than fifty percent in the four smallest districts.²⁷

Before the 1925 elections one of the biggest debates in the National Assembly was about the distribution of mandates between the districts, because the notions of the different political forces differed greatly in this question. The representatives of the Christian Party were against the changes, because the distribution based on administrative districts, the system that was in use during the earlier election, was clearly advantageous to them. The main goal of the social democrats was to acquire equal rights for the voters, that is, the distribution of mandates between the districts would have been based on the number of the enfranchised voters. The fact, that all other conceptions were disadvantageous for them, made it easier to represent their point of policy. It was especially true for the programme of the Bethlen government, as one of their aims was to force back the influence of the Magyar Szociáldemokrata Párt

(Hungarian Social Democratic Party, MSZDP), that was very successful during the 1922 elections. Theoretically, the liberals agreed to the even distribution of the mandates, the advantageous solution for the voters, but at a given situation they always supported the suggestions of the governing party that were advantageous for them.

Consequently the legislative conference of the 1924 law of the capital resulted in very interesting turns and “alliances.” The original suggestion of the minister of the interior, a new type of arrangement, based on an election conducted in the twenty-two districts defined in 1914, was rejected by a one time “coalition” of the Christian Party and the social democrats at the Administrative Committee meeting in the Parliament, and they reverted to the administrative districts. The government’s suggestion was returned as a motion by an individual representative at the beginning of the plenary debate²⁸ of the issue. The government tried to argue that the change was not going to affect the Christian Party, but would be disadvantageous for MSZDP and advantageous for the liberals and democrats, counted among the “civil forces.” The Christian Party representatives intensely objected to that. Their biggest problem was, as one of their representatives put it, “this arrangement of the districts (by the governing party) represents only the interests of liberalism, or the Jews, the medium of liberalism. [...] The districts that represent liberal, maybe Judeo-democratic, maybe Freemason—to express it in one word—Jewish electors are intensively pronounced.”²⁹ The fear, that had no grounds in the equal system, that the so-called “Jewish districts” (5th, 6th and 7th, that is, Leopold-, Theresa- and Elizabethtown) would be in charge of the Town Hall, emerged again.³⁰ They suggested an amendment: the election districts, that were configured according to the administrative districts, should have the same number of mandates independent of the number of voters living there. The social democrats could not agree with this very disproportionate system, so they tried to

make the 22-arrangement system of the government more equal, but without any success. At the end, the National Assembly passed the conception of the government.

The distribution of the mandates between the 22 election districts was based on social values, as according the governing party, and it favoured the inner, elite regions. It was advantageous mostly to the Downtown and the Buda quarter, to the post-1930 1st administrative district, but the inner parts of the 6th and 7th administrative districts and Leopoldtown were also among the preferred sections. The suburban election districts, on the other hand, got smaller mandate ratios. The election district system was changed by István Bethlen to give some concessions to the liberals,³¹ and because he also probably felt that his newly forming capital governing party, which was also in opposition to the Christian Parish Party, had a chance to score good results in the preferred districts. However, the fact that in 1925 the social democratic and the liberal opposition ran for election on single lists and were successful significantly altered the effects of the new arrangement, but at the end it was neither evidently advantageous nor disadvantageous to either party.

In 1930 they returned to the arrangement system based on administrative districts. Obviously this served the interest of the right better. The new "law plans to have 14 districts instead of 10, which is according to the calculations more advantageous to parties standing on a national basis" was reported on the previously mentioned cabinet meeting in 1929.³² The distribution of mandates was again based on the principle of equality between the districts: the base was 10 mandates. Only the four largest districts got more than that, with two or four mandates. This again gave preference mostly to the Downtown and the new 1st district, that had the smallest number of voters, instead of Leopold-, Theresa- and Elizabethtown. As a result of this "equaling" system the third most preferred district became the 13th, where MSZDP was far the strongest party.³³ By 1935 the election districts

and the division of the mandates did not change, only the number of the elected representatives was cut back by three in each district, with altogether 42 representatives.

2. The effect of the mandate distribution system

During the Horthy era in the Budapest municipal elections people voted on the basis of party lists, called the proportional election system. This was an advanced system compared to the ones used earlier, or to the individual or majority election systems of the National Assembly in 1920. Before World War I, the elections had been already been practically conducted by voting on the basis of the list in the capital, even though illegitimately and non-officially. On the other hand, because of the majority election system, mandates could only be gained from the “winner” list. The main novelty of the election in July 1920 was the introduction of proportionality, that is—as it was stated during the negotiation of the bill—“the accurate mapping of the public opinion and the assuring of the representation of the minority.” As a result of the new regulation, besides the above mentioned changes, they expected the disappearance of the “pacts between parties” and “unprincipled bargaining” preceding the elections—which were part of the former municipal elections.³⁴

Achieving precise correlation between the number of votes and mandates could not be guaranteed even in completely proportional systems either. It can be best accomplished if the given area (the whole country, the whole town) is one election district.³⁵ Therefore, the existence and the disproportionateness of the election district divisions are one of the factors which, either accidentally or deliberately (as seen above), lead to a more favourable mandate distribution for a particular party or trend. The other deviation emerges at the distribution of the fragment mandates: the employment of various methods leads to different final results. Though, this can only create a minimal

difference in the case of each single election district, but it can accumulate into a significant discrepancy. In 1920 the results were determined by the so-called d'Hont the highest average method of³⁶ which was better for the bigger parties. At that time it was advantageous to the majority Christian parties. However, before the elections in 1925 the government changed the regulations. The executive decree of the new law, in opposition to the previous one, adhered to the so-called biggest residue principle,³⁷ which was more advantageous to smaller parties. Presumably, the aim of the change over was to help the newly formed capital ruling party that had otherwise no hope to win. During the National Assembly elections in 1922, in those districts of the capital where the people voted on the basis of lists, MSZDP was the strongest, and a good performance by the Wolff party (Christian Parish Party), that was in opposition to Bethlen's party, was also expected. From this point of view, the change was successful: owing to this new method, the ruling party obtained three more seats, while the united liberal-social opposition four less and the Christian Parish Party two less.³⁸ During the 1930 elections, when the principle of the biggest residue was still in use, MSZDP had 37 out of the 150 mandates. To make a comparison, I did a calculation based on the d'Hont method: according to this 43, that is 6 more seats (would) have been obtained by MSZDP. After that, the highest average method was only used during the 1939 parliamentary elections, when, because of the introduction of voting based on county lists, the strengthening of the extreme right-wing parties and the changes in party preferences were more advantageous to the ruling party. Due to the lack of elections after 1935, these changes did not occur in the life of the municipal authorities of the capital.

Consequently because of the disproportionateness of the election districts, and to some degree as a result of the mandate distribution system, the ratios of the votes and mandates of the parties won at the municipal elections were not the same. This is shown in *Table 5* in detail.³⁹

Table 5 Differences in the ratio of votes and mandates of the parties between 1925 and 1935

Main parties, coalitions running for the elections	1925			1930			1935		
	votes	mandates	Differences (% points)	votes	mandates	Differences (% points)	votes	mandates	Differences (% points)
Christian Parish Party	36.65	36.4	-0.25	27.39	30.67	3.28	27.12	30.56	3.43
Ruling parties of the capital	8.73	9.2	0.47	12.44	14	1.56	25.49	26.85	1.36
Christian Opposition				6.79	6.67	-0.12	2.73	3.7	0.98
Democratic Block	52.08	51.2	-0.88						
MSZDP				27.4	24.67	-2.74	22.27	19.44	-2.82
National Liberal Party	1.95	2.4	0.45	11.03	9.33	-1.69			
National De- mocratic Party				10.5	10.67	0.17			
United Oppo- sition (liberal)							19.58	16.67	-2.92

It is clear that the 1925 elections met the principle of proportionality, because the differences remained within one percent. It was due to the different division of the election districts and the single ticketing of the oppositionist parties, as explained above. With the change of the former, disproportionateness appeared and prevailed in 1930 and 1935. The Christian Parish Party and, to a lesser degree, the actual ruling party in the capital gained more electoral seats than their suffrage ratio, while the ratio of mandates of the social democrats and the liberal oppositionist party fell behind their social support. With other words, the latter parties had to "pay" much more votes than the average for one mandate.

*Narrowing down the number of runners:
the nomination system*

During the Horthy era the parties practiced "pre-filtration" during the capital municipal elections, too. In order to be able to prepare a list, they had to collect a certain number of signatures from supporting voters. This number was one thousand for each election district, and stayed that way throughout the whole period. That demonstrated a noteworthy stability, compared to any of the other rules that changed from election to election. As a result of the nominal specification of the nomination threshold there were significant differences—between election districts, and between the given elections—in how many percent of the electors were represented by the required one thousand heads, that is the ones eligible for nomination. From this point of view, the differences between the elections became more significant with the changes of the election districts, as described earlier. *Table 6* shows the average percentages of electoral recommendations that the parties had to receive for each election from people eligible for voting, in order to prepare a list.

Table 6

Ratios of recommendation thresholds and number of electors with voting rights (average values of electoral districts for the entire Budapest area) between 1920 and 1935

Year of election	Recommendation thresholds of Budapest average (%)	End values of electoral district thresholds	
		highest (%)	lowest (%)
1920	2.96	6.33	1.12
1925	7.91	11.14	5.24
1930	5.91	10.98	2.43
1935	5.88	10.98	2.43

The recommendation thresholds values, just like in the case of parliamentary elections, were the lowest in 1920: on average a list could be prepared with the support of 3 percent of the people having the right to vote. During the following, 1925 elections this threshold value grew considerably, almost up to 8 percent. The 1930 and 1935 data (close to 6 percent) are basically the same, because the division of electoral districts was not altered and the number of voters changed only slightly. That was due to the above mentioned problems of the electoral register which made the collection of the required number of recommendations more difficult in 1935.

It is easy to see that between the electoral districts there were huge differences in the recommendation threshold values. Obviously, the highest number of recommendation signatures had to be collected in the smaller districts, where the number of voters was less. The parties, that wished to run for elections had the toughest job in the Downtown (6th district), as they needed recommendations from almost ten percent of the voters after 1925. In 1930 the situation was similar in the 1st district in Buda after the district became

smaller. In these two districts there were never more than three lists competing with each other, although there were all together seven parties running in the elections in at least half of the election districts. In the Downtown and in the 1st district, where there were only a little more than 9,000 electors, they needed all voters—if we count the extra signatures needed over the minimum—to give nominations in order to have seven parties running in the elections. In Elizabethtown (7th district), on the other hand, the conditions for running in the elections were a lot lighter. Here a list could be prepared with only 2-3 percent of the voters.

From 1925 on the high recommendation thresholds were clearly served to reduce the number of new parties participating in the elections. In 1920, in spite of the relatively low recommendation limits, in 3 districts (1st, 9th and 10th) out of 10 the election was unanimous, but it was mainly due to the peculiar political circumstances: the social democrats stayed away from the elections and so the rivalry narrowed down to the Christian and liberal trends. In 1925 the concentrating of the party system compensated for the high thresholds to some extent: the three main movements (the Christian Party, the centre of the ruling party, and the liberal-social democratic coalition in opposition), but only these three, won the right to run in each district. The 1930 elections were characterised by intense competition and the participation of several parties. As a result, only the Christian Parish Party and the strengthened ruling party could prepare a list everywhere, while MSZDP was unable to have a list in the Downtown and the liberals (including both parties) could not prepare a list in the 1st and 14th districts. The constraining nature of the nomination system had the strongest effect in 1935, because of the special register of voters used that year. Naturally, it did not cause any difficulty to the two strongest right-wing parties, mentioned above. On the other hand, MSZDP could not run in the elite districts of Pest (4th) and Buda (1st and 12th), neither could the united liberal opposition in the 1st, 12th

and 13th districts. Due to this, the number of parties shrunk considerably. In the 12th district the electors could only choose between the two big right-wing parties, which choice was rejected by a lot of voters, almost 15 percent casting spoiled ballots.

Therefore it was not a coincidence that one of the most hotly debated elements of the election procedure was the nomination system. Its rules were modified and made stricter in 1925: besides their signature, the voters also had to enclose a special segment (the so-called “boletta”) of their official ballots that was made for this specific purpose. The opposition mostly criticised the purchasing of and dealing with the “bolettas”. They also disagreed with sending the ballots by mail, because by delaying the time for collecting the nominations could be reduced considerably. The problems with the register of voters during the 1935 elections naturally affected the nominations to a great extent. The officials in the capital, responsible for conducting the elections, acknowledged the existence of people with unknown residency and the fact that these people therefore could not be reached, but they denied their considerable number and blamed everything on the shortness of the available time.⁴⁰ The advanced municipal elections were characterised by short time limits serving the interests of the central power and the ruling party, the parties, for example, had barely ten days to collect the nominations. The anomalies of the nominations were also indicated by the complaints following the elections: altogether eleven claims were handed in, because of the rejected nominations, most of them in the 12th district.

The high nomination thresholds required intense mobilisation of the voters preceding the actual elections from the parties. From this point of view the 1930 electoral campaign was prosilient, as in the 3rd, 11th and 12th districts at least 45 percent of the people eligible to vote had to participate in the nomination, because seven parties ran for election in all of these districts, so altogether at least 7,000 nominations

were handed in. Naturally the number of collected signatures was definitely more than that, so more than half of the 14,000 to 16,000 voters in these districts were supporting one of the lists. This way the nomination system was able to limit the number of parties running in the election and it also helped to identify the voters of the opposition, i. e. they were able to perform a kind of partial "open" vote. The bill, handed in at the end of 1923 by the minister of the interior on the reconstruction of the Budapest Council is a good example of the ambitions of those in power. The bill would have de facto introduced, although only to a limited extent, the open vote in Budapest, with the provision that "they have to consider the signers of the nomination sheets as if they voted for that particular list".⁴¹ In the background of this miscarried plan was probably the government's effort to ensure that the nominations that were obtained by force from the voters, who were in tie positions, would not "get lost."⁴²

During the Horthy era, as a combined result of the techniques and tools that were regulated in the electoral laws and decrees, the take over of the opposition was prevented in Budapest, too. In spite of the inner dividedness and conflicts of the right-wing coalition, they managed to have a firm control over the direction of the city hall. Moreover, other methods, known from the opposition's objections, that were already non-legitimate during that era, belonged to the elections: e. g. names from the register of voters were left out on purpose, valid nominations of the opposition were not accepted and nominator signatures were acquired by threats.

Translated by Ágnes Gyenes

NOTES

- ¹ Compared to the 52.1 percent voting ratio of the Democratic Block, the radical right-wing Christian Parish Party received 36.7 percent and the Public Civil Party, supported by the prime minister, István Bethlen got only 8.7 percentages.
- ² For the 1920 elections act IX of 1920, for the 1925 elections act XXVI of 1924 and for the 1930 elections act XVIII of 1930 were in effect.
- ³ Károly Wolff (1874–1936) was the president of the Christian Parish Party, the dominating party in the Municipal Committee of the Capital, from 1920 until his death. While he was supporting the right-wing governments in the national politics, in the political life of the capital he often contradicted them.
- ⁴ Act ILV of 1928 and Act ILVIII of 1929.
- ⁵ *Az Országgyűlés Képviselőházának irományai 1927–1931* (Minutes of the Sessions of Parliament) (Budapest: XII. k. Pesti Könyvnyomda, 1929), 196.
- ⁶ For that matter the minister of the interior—in cases of certain and exceptional incidents, with special rules – since 1920 had the right to dismiss the committee.
- ⁷ Act XXXI of 1940, §2, and Act XIX of 1941, §1–2.
- ⁸ *Nemzetgyűlési napló: 1920–1922* (Journal of the National Assembly), vol. 3 (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1920), 4–5, 23, 89–93, 95–96 and 191–192.
- ⁹ The table was made according to the proceedings of the assembly meetings.
- ¹⁰ *Nemzetgyűlés irományai: 1920–1922* (Minutes of the Sessions of the National Assembly), vol. 1, 20–212 and 213–221.
- ¹¹ “Kelet Párizsától” a “bűnös városig”. *Szöveggyűjtemény Budapest történetének tanulmányozásához* (From the “Paris of the East” to the “Sinful City”. A Budapest History Reader), vol. 1, 1873–1930, comp. and ed. by Sipos, András and Péter Donáth (Budapest: BFL-BFT, 1999), 328.
- ¹² *Nemzetgyűlés irományai: 1922–1926* (Minutes of the Sessions of the National Assembly), vol. 8, 192. There were five female representatives in the general assembly in 1920, and six in 1925.
- ¹³ “Kelet Párizsától” a “bűnös városig”, 326–327.
- ¹⁴ *Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Évkönyve, 1909–1912* (Budapest Statistical Yearbook), 32, 148.
- ¹⁵ Act XXVI of 1924, §2.
- ¹⁶ *Nemzetgyűlés irományai: 1922–1926* (Minutes of the Sessions of the National Assembly), vol. 8, 191.

- ¹⁷ Population: *Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Évkönyve, 1936* (Budapest Statistical Yearbook), 43–44; the number of people having the right to vote: *Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Évkönyve, 1921–1924* (Budapest Statistical Yearbook), 565–567; 1927, 284; 1930, 160; 1931, 124; 1935, 133. and 138. In the case of people with parliamentary voting rights I used the numbers from 1926, because of the absence of information about the year 1925.
- ¹⁸ Hubai, László. *Magyarország XX. századi választási atlasza* (20th-century Election Atlas of Hungary) (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2001), vol. 1, 57.
- ¹⁹ The number of eligible voters during the elections of 1931 was 328,125; during the 1935 elections it was 323,227 (*Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Évkönyve, 1931*, 125 and 1936, 155).
- ²⁰ Act XVIII of 1930, § 15 (2).
- ²¹ Source of Table 4: *Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Évkönyve, 1931*, 124. and 1937, 206; Report of the Budapest Statistical Office about the preparation of a new register of voters on March 30, 1936. *Források Budapest történetéhez* (Sources to the History of Budapest), vol. 3. 1919–1945, ed. Szekeres, József (Budapest: BFL, 1972), 403–405.
- ²² Act XII of 1934, §28 (2); announcement of the mayor, *Fővárosi Közlöny* (Capital Gazette), April 30, 1935, 835–836.
- ²³ Final register of the Budapest municipal voters, National Széchényi Library, 18,037/electoral district/ polling-area.
- ²⁴ *Fővárosi Közlöny*, September 24, 1935, Supplement 10.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, December 31, 1935, 2063.
- ²⁶ *Nemzetgyűlési napló: 1920–1922*, vol. 3, 137–138.
- ²⁷ *Budapest Statisztikai Évkönyve, 1921–1924*, 565.
- ²⁸ *Nemzetgyűlési napló, 1922–1926*, vol. 2 (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1924), 204–206. and 213–232.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.
- ³¹ For a detailed description of Bethlen’s Budapest politics and the tactics against the liberals see L. Nagy, Zsuzsa. *A budapesti liberális ellenzék, 1919–1944* (The Liberal Opposition of Budapest, 1919–1944) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972), 63–70.
- ³² “Kelet Párizsától” a “bűnös városig”, 327.
- ³³ In 1930 it got 48.23 percent of the votes. Mónus, Illés. “Az 1930. évi törvényhatósági választások statisztikája” (The Statistics of the Municipal Elections in Budapest in the Year of 1930), *Szocializmus*, no. 1. (1931), 6–7.
- ³⁴ *Nemzetgyűlési Irományai, 1920–1922*, vol. 1, 352; *Nemzetgyűlési napló, 1920–1922*, vol. 3, 6.

- ³⁵ In 1920 the liberal István Bárczy proposed this possibility in order to create the “most perfect” voting system. *Nemzetgyűlési napló*, 1920–1922, vol. 3, 70.
- ³⁶ Decree no. 37,488/1920. B. M. sz. §45.
- ³⁷ Decree no. 7600/1924. B. M. sz. §57–58.
- ³⁸ The new rule also helped the two smaller parties, running for election, with two and one extra mandates respectively.
- ³⁹ We do not have all the information about the 1920 elections. In order to have a good perspicuity the smaller parties that ran only in a few districts are not included.
- ⁴⁰ In contrary to the opposition’s data of 58,000 voters, the number of such voters was estimated at about 20,000. After the elections the opposition MPs spoke about 72,000 bolettas (*Fővárosi Közlöny*, May 24, 1935, 923–924, and June 28, 1935, 1051).
- ⁴¹ *Nemzetgyűlési irományai, 1920–1922*, vol. 8, 182.
- ⁴² Based on the data of the opposition there were more voters registered on the governmental nomination forms than were actually voting for the governmental lists. Mónus, “Az 1930. évi törvényhatósági választások statisztikája”, 1.