

Local elections in Budapest, 1867–2010

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Foreword

For at least fifteen years we have been working on the research of elections; some of its results are already published in monographs. Our book of studies about the multiparty parliamentary elections for now is published in the third edition, and this latest version covers already the whole period between 1920 and 2010. Collaterally with this research we began to collect data of Budapest local elections; the result of this work is the overall database of the elections of the modern-age capital – a base for analysis of all parliamentary or municipal, local elections that were held in Budapest. One of the collateral results of this widespread research is the publication of the present studies, which follows all the municipal, council- and communal elections in the capital since the unification of Pest, Buda and Óbuda until the recent days.

The research itself offers opportunity to analyze even longer trends. The conditions of the analysis are far more favorable than in the national level since in Budapest after 1920 all elections were secret ballots. Our present volume is the first synthesis of this work. We attempted to exercise comprehensive aspects in the procession of this long epoch from 1867 until 2010. We introduce not only the multiparty elections between 1920 and 1945, or after 1990, but also the periods when there were no secret ballots or any real multiparty alternative to choose. So there are no gaps in this volume: it overall embraces this more than a hundred and fifty years long period.

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The system of the municipal elections of the capital in the age of dualism – as it is revealed by the first study of this book – was “a caricature of the representation of the people”. It concerned only a tiny minority since less than 5 % of the population of the capital belonged to the electorate, and even less actually voted. *Virilism* (the method that half of the representatives were elected from the biggest tax-payers) was criticized immediately after its installation; nevertheless it endured to the end of the epoch, together with the over-elaborated regulations, which offered appropriate conditions for certain infringements. This more and more anachronistic system was challenged just around the turn of the century, when new political parties had emerged, which pasted the petit bourgeoisie into the political field, but any attempts for the electoral reform had failed in sequence. Wide sectors of the population, for example the growing workpeople had no representation in the capital’s assembly. Hence, the function of the elections was not to decide, who should run the City Hall or which parties should be able to proceed their city politics, but only to legitimate the already decided bargains and pacts between the various political actors. So because of the regulations, electoral campaigns were characterized more by the struggles between individuals or cliques than debates between ideologies or real programs.

The electoral reform of the capital – primarily the extension of the suffrage and the extinction of virilism – was enacted already in 1918, during the bourgeois democratic regime, but elections were first held only during the reign of the Council Republic in 1919, and in the summer of 1920, when the counter-revolutionary regime was taking shape. On the latter occasion the democratic principles, universal suffrage and secret balloting were functioning, however the “duty” of the voters was once again only to posteriorly legitimize the annexation of power by the Christian party in the capital. During the Horthy-era there were three definitive political forces in Budapest, which had stable and distinguishable social bases: the Christian party of the capital, the liberals and the social democrats. Secret balloting made clear that despite the limitation of the suffrage, the latter two, that is the oppositional parties together, enjoyed larger social support. Nevertheless, in such an authoritarian epoch the right-wing power secured that the leadership of the capital could not be different from the national. The most appropriate tools for the “correction” of electoral will were those non elected members of the capital’s assembly, who were connected to the right and were co-opted in growing numbers. Hence for example the left-liberal opposition alliance obtained absolute majority in vain in 1925, since with its non-elected members the right was able to turn its electoral defeat into a governing majority in the assembly of the City Hall. During the 1930s the possibilities of autonomy and oppositional influence were ever decreasing, so the city politics was more and more determined by the balances and struggles inside the right wing. In the beginning of the 1920s the Christian Municipal Party was hegemonic, but later the capital branch of the governing party stepped on stage as well, and – although its electoral support was weaker than the bases of the above mentioned three forces – it was able to compel its right wing rival to a City Hall coalition. During the 1920s a kind of difference was perceptible between the Christian party that followed a radical path and demanded more radical politics, and the more modest local branch of the governing party that fitted well to the way followed by Prime Minister Bethlen, and integrated some former liberal politicians as well. This situation had changed, when Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös stepped on the capital’s stage. In the 1935 elections, when the men of Gömbös took over and partially renewed the capital's governing party, the differences were declining between the two rivals, but interdependent right wing forces not only in terms of electoral support, but also of ideology. Their City Hall coalition existed until 1939; but in fact it remained in a dictating position in the city politics with the unification of the two parties even afterwards. After 1935, the right had not has to face any overt challenge or electoral campaign since elections were postponed.

What was not possible because of the Christian-nationalist central power in the capital, nevertheless was possible to realize in the agglomeration of Budapest – which was incorporated into the capital in 1950 – in the less autonomous, not so important villages. There were possibilities to form bodies of representatives with left-liberal majority that were oppositional for the national level. In the 1920s in some towns, which had considerable worker population (e.g. Újpest, Kispest), the social democrat-liberal blocs were dominant – this agglomeration was called, not by chance, a “red ring” around the capital. The municipal elections in the 1930s were already characterized by the upsurge of the right, the national

governing party of Gömbös, and by the end of the decade the right essentially took over the leadership in these villages as well.

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After the Second World War – in a new historical and political situation ensuing a short, some months long provisional period - a radically, even social-historically new kind of election was held in Budapest and the agglomeration (that afterwards, in 1950, was incorporated by the capital). Resulted from the democratic regulation of suffrage, the rate of voters more than doubled, from less than 28% in 1935 to more than 70%. The age limit was reduced to 20 years of age, which was especially important for the women – before the female age limit was higher by ten years. The ones who were seen as responsible for the war were excluded, and citizens with German origin were abusively excluded too. The seventh study of the present volume defines a 13% rate of those men who missed from the capital because of the war. Albeit the Smallholders Party's 1945 victory, a strong left majority municipality was organized behind the city leadership. The pendulum oscillated left this time, still in a democratic framework.

As concerns the epoch of councils from 19149/1950 until 1990, the most bizarre momentum that one could find to be characteristic to the years of Stalinism is that the councils were already established before the elections took place. Voting in these decades did not mean any doses of real choice between some political alternatives. Despite all secrecy, equal and widespread suffrage, nothing had remained from the democratic atmosphere of the year 1945. Nevertheless, there were differences between the elections of the Rákosi- and the Kádár-era – in the latter the pressure and the ceremonies of the elections were bated, and there were recurrent debates about twofold or multifold nomination.

The change was might even deeper in 1990 than in 1945. A new epoch began, five elections that brought liberal-left leadership of the town – the so called Demszky-era that came to an end with the right turn of the autumn of 2010. However, we should emphasize one thing about the last two decades and the socialist era. The two-ply system of the latter survived the last twenty years as well – 22, later 23 small “republics” besides the Chief Major, all of them equipped with its own major and representative assembly. That made governing difficult and the elective system over-elaborated.

However, the districts did not become “small towns”. In general, personal connections and qualities hardly affected the votes, even in individual constituencies. One could witness the predomination of party preferences instead, as it was proved by the modest results of the independent candidates or the aspirants assisted by NGOs. Moreover, in the elections of 1990, 2006 and 2010 the divisions were formulated not along smashing campaigns of municipal policies, but general political questions. Only the election of some majors broke occasionally this tendency in some places.

In the post-1990 period we assume that besides (or despite) the huge number of uncertain voters, a connection was formulated between the social articulation of the population and the

choices between the parties. It could draw a kind of “map” of electoral behavior. This map was already visible in 1990 with a right victory in the 1st district of Budapest and the general bias of Buda towards the right. Thereafter, the division between the banks of the Danube became more apparent during the 1994 elections; later the Belváros (the City) joined with Buda in this aspect. (In 2002 for example, the right won majority in the three Buda district and Belváros.) The core of right electoral base could be detected especially in the areas that were middle-class quarters before the Second World War. In Pest, the results of Angyalföld, Csepel, Újpest, Kőbánya, Pesterzsébet, even Soroksár proved that not only the inhabitants of the traditional working class areas, but also the housing estates and some lower status inner areas, and a wider circle of skilled laborers with secondary education refused the Christian-nationalist rhetoric and voted left.

The map of electoral behavior also could be drafted following the Millennium, moreover, in some cases it could be refined until the single polling-districts, as we could see in some of the studies of the present volume. Nevertheless, the results of 1994 and 1998 have demonstrated that not only the tripartite political mentality (socialist – liberal – conservative) has been reborn, but also the far right, and not only in traditional areas with Christian-nationalist bias, but as well as in working class areas. Hence, the right and far-right voters together had and still have a strong base in the capital, they are a notable alternative of the left-liberal block, especially after the 1994 turn of the Fidesz. This trend manifested itself well for example during the elections of the majors of the districts. In addition, as a 1994 sociological survey attests, right wing voters have a stronger, more firm identity than socialists or liberals – it is clearly visible in the electoral mobilization up until nowadays.

The elections of the 1990s and the following city politics maintained a tripartite political field in which the SZDSZ – despite its consistent aerial division of votes – was unable to keep its central position. One of the most important points of the polarization between the liberal and socialist alliance and the right wing led by Fidesz was exactly the winning of the central position. From the aspects of an electoral analysis the situation was more difficult since socialist voters were rather open to vote to Gábor Demszky and the liberals, but debates emerged also about the recruitment of the far right and the directions of its willingness to vote to other forces. There were some ganglions also in the initially evenly divided voting base of the SZDSZ, for example in Lipótváros, Újlipótváros, in some areas of the Buda hills and Zugló, or the housing estates in Pók street.

The split of the tripartite political field manifested itself sharply during the 2006 elections, when the voting base of SZDSZ decreased dramatically in the capital, and even the result of the MDF – which was at the edge of the election threshold – proved to be unable to counterbalance it. This time the two poles had already equal weight; hence the central position seemed to be more and more “unoccupied”. The next few years then solved this problem. Far right radicalism has resurged, this time with Jobbik, the Fidesz-KDNP has routed the liberal parties and has ousted MSZP towards left. Beyond its Christian-nationalist character, it needs populism as well to be successful. Nevertheless, István Tarlós got the

opportunity to win the election of the chief major with a moderate conservative manner in 2010.

The analysis of the experiences of the 2006 elections has further animated the electoral map. Heterogeneity has grown in the garden suburbs of the Pest side, which are sometimes even rural in their structures. It is well illustrated in the 4th district, where the formerly SZDSZ-backed Tamás Derce was elected major with Fidesz assistance, but it is reflected also by the divisions of some districts since there was a socialist victory in the 15th, 18th and 20th districts, while the right has won in the 16th and 17th districts. The right's onrush appeared in the absolute victory in the 1st, 2nd and 12th districts. Based on the 2006 results, one could call Soroksár the "most civilian" district.

The reliability of the electoral map is naturally affected by the electoral participation, which even in Budapest was lower compared to the parliamentary elections; in the 1990s participation was below 50%, in 2002 a bit above it, in 2006 it was around 56%, while in 2010 it fell back behind the national average, to around 43%.

Accordingly, the 2010 election in the capital marks the end of an epoch. Nevertheless, one-party dominance does not mean the extinction of the political variegation of Budapest – this miscellaneousness and diversity will certainly prevail in the next decades as well. This kaleidoscope of civil and party politics gives the metropolitan grandeur of Budapest, its unique – and, let us note, specific – role in the Hungarian political life.

The present volume lets an insight to the context of high politics, gives a sample of the content, sometimes even the mood of the campaigns. Both in the interwar period and the post-1945 epoch we attempted to keep our researcher's eye also on the agglomeration, the areas that were incorporated by the capital in 1950.

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