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Greater than the sum of its part(ie)s: opposition comeback in the 2019 Hungarian local elections

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ABSTRACT

The Hungarian municipal elections of October 2019 were the first ray of hope for the numerous political forces aiming to topple the decade-long Fidesz rule. In this election, the opposition won Budapest's mayoral seat and 10 of the 23 larger cities (turning 8). They also won majorities in the capital's assembly and among the 23 district mayors (turning 10). This was possible through unprecedented coordination of all viable opposition parties, electoral innovations like primaries, effective messaging, and a major Fidesz scandal. We discuss the story of this election and the impact of COVID-19 on the newly elected opposition mayors.

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In October 2019, Hungary has seen its most competitive election for a decade. The municipal elections, where voters elect mayors, local councillors, county assemblies and the Budapest General Assembly, saw a tight race in more urban parts of the country. Joining forces, the opposition parties managed to defeat the incumbent Fidesz mayor in Budapest, to retake the legislative majority in the capital's assembly, won 14 out of 23 districts in Budapest and secured further 56 mayoral seats in municipalities with a population above 10,000 – a significant increase compared to 2014, when only 35 of such settlements have elected opposition mayors. These results came in spite of deep resource asymmetry, a distorted media landscape (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020), state subsidies of opposition parties seized by the State Audit Office and carrot-and-sticks messages, in which Fidesz politicians openly threatened voters that electing an opposition mayor would result in central funds drying up. These institutional and contextual features characterising contemporary Hungary have led many to label the country as a hybrid regime or electoral autocracy within the European Union (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Kelemen 2017). Freedom House (2020) also demoted Hungary, labelling it as a “transitional or hybrid regime”, citing a tilted electoral playing field being one of the reasons Hungary becoming the European Union's first and only “Partly Free” nation.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. We first provide a brief overview of the institutional context of subnational politics in Hungary. The subsequent section

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elaborates on how the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019 shaken up the power balance between opposition parties. Then we conduct a content analysis of the main campaign messages of government and opposition, as well as describe political innovations used for the first time at subnational elections in Hungary. We also assess empirically the impact of the Borkai scandal, the single most important issue on the political agenda. We proceed by discussing the factors enabling wide-scale electoral co-ordination of the opposition and show how voters used the election to punish Fidesz incumbents. Furthermore, we also provide an in-depth analysis of the race for Budapest, using socio-demographic and political predictors of main candidates' favourability with public opinion data from a nationally representative sample. The article concludes by exploring how the government's policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic hindered newly elected mayors in realising their agenda.

Local elections and municipal politics in Hungary

Since Fidesz came to power in 2010, it heavily centralised the Hungarian state. Local governments have lost most of their power, as education, health care or housing and construction came under central government authority. Ministers were given discretionary powers over appointments like school directors or hospital chiefs. The central government has further diminished the jurisdiction of elected local officials by setting up a parallel, district-level administration (*járás*), partly with the aim to offer patronage positions for Fidesz politicians after shrinking the Parliament with a new electoral law in 2011. This allowed former Fidesz officeholders to chair local-level administrative bodies, acting as loyal executives and enforcing the central government's will independent of mayors' (or city councils') party colour.

Examining longitudinal trends of the Local Autonomy Index (LAI), a cross-national expert survey, the aforementioned trend is clearly visible (Ladner et al. 2019). Whereas Hungary had rather high levels of local autonomy immediately after its democratic transition in 1989/ 1990, the index has been in free fall since the reforms of the Orbán government. Hungary has registered the largest decline among the 39 countries covered in the LAI dataset, which could be explained by amendments to the local financing rules, forbidding municipalities to, *inter alia*, prioritise voluntary tasks over mandatory ones, to plan a deficit in their budget, or to take loans without the government's explicit approval (Dobos 2021). Heinelt, Hlepas, et al. (2018, 45) also note these constraints, arguing that Hungary is similar to England and Latvia, as local governments are "characterized by relatively high spending responsibilities [...], but very low local autonomy".

Despite showcasing elected assemblies, the intermediate level, consisting of 19 counties, has been a weak, almost invisible actor, absent of any major tasks or responsibilities in the last three decades (Dobos and Várnagy 2017). Moreover, a 2010 amendment to the electoral law resulted in political parties crowding out regional associations and localist NGOs from these representative bodies (Dobos 2021).

In the light of the above, local elections are second-order ones, more about signalling than checking the central administration. With a highly centralised and notoriously partisan-based fund allocation system (Muraközy and Telegdy 2016), opposition politicians have little means to enact drastic policy changes and have similarly little redistributive capacities. Nonetheless, obtaining mayoral seats and council majorities provides full

control over local governments' admittedly small budgets, which, in turn, allows for channelling resources to their political parties.

Opposition parties have been financially exhausted after 10 years of administrative harassment by public bodies packed with Fidesz appointees. The State Audit Office, for example, has fined all relevant opposition parties, concluding only the governing Fidesz-KDNP complies with the legal requirements and had its funds "managed lawfully". Opposition MPs have regularly received penalties up to 1.78 million HUF (approx. 5100 EUR) from the Speaker of the House, effectively eliminating their salaries. Consequently, opposition actors have hoped that retaking some of the major cities could level the playing field a bit. Such victories promised patronage positions, contracts with liberal and left-wing think tanks and the chance of establishing less biased municipal media.

The complex and highly differentiated system of local elections makes it hard to name an unequivocal winner, as the largest group of winners always consists of independents – in settlements with few inhabitants. Most parties can identify a tier of local government where they can claim victory (Soós and Kákai 2010). Mayors are elected in an FPTP system, in a single round, forcing opposition politicians to co-ordinate before elections if they want to pose a credible challenge. For settlements with >10,000 inhabitants, an SMD system applies for electing councillors, but a handful of compensatory mandates are distributed among politicians nominated on party lists. Smaller municipalities vote in a plurality-at-large (MNTV) system. Furthermore, county-level assemblies also exist: their representatives are elected only by voters of settlements with <10,000 inhabitants, in a PR system.

Unlike other political actors on the local level, mayors had witnessed the increase of their powers vis-à-vis councils and other local actors since 2010.¹ Incumbency effects are the strongest for mayors, given the resources they possess, the clientelistic networks they can build and their influence on local social policy-making (Mares and Young 2018; Kovarek et al. 2017). The ever-growing personalisation of Hungarian politics (Papp and Zorigt 2016) also places them into the center of media attention. In cross-national comparison, mayors in Hungary are usually classified as "strong" and "executive" mayors, being responsible for a broad spectrum of public provision while being also "in full charge of their administrations" (Heinelt and Hlepas 2006, 36). For this reason, in this article, our primary measure of electoral success is the number of mayoral seats secured. Parties have operationalised victory in a similar fashion, concentrating on mayoral gains (and losses), as opposed to council majorities or county assembly seats, about which we will write less.

In the 2019 local elections, two tiers were expected to be competitive: the capital (including mayoral races of Budapest and its districts) and the 23 largest cities (so-called *cities with county rank*). Settlements belonging to the latter group provide a wider range of public services and usually have a population exceeding 50,000. Fidesz held all but three of such cities' mayoral seats and had incumbents in most districts (17 out of 23) of Budapest. Consequently, obtaining the majority of the aforementioned mandates (or coming close to it) would have qualified as a victory for the opposition. A breakthrough at lower levels would have been an unrealistic expectation, given Fidesz's strong support among rural voters.

Political landscape before local elections

The 2018 general election has handed the ruling Fidesz-KDNP an easy victory: the fragmented opposition being unwilling to co-operate resulted in another Fidesz supermajority. Opposition voters used the European Parliamentary elections, a second-order election (Hix and Marsh 2007) taking place in May 2019, to punish *opposition* parties for Fidesz's sweeping victory. Jobbik and LMP became the main scapegoats, as these parties, for strategic and ideological reasons, were the most reluctant to coordinate with other actors. This contributed to surprisingly strong performance of two relatively new opposition parties: former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's Democratic Coalition (DK), which was a vocal proponent of electoral cooperation and branded itself as the only supporter of EU federalism; and Momentum, a liberal and socially progressive party with a strong appeal among the youth.

At the same time, "traditional" opposition parties, with more rank-and-file membership on the ground, performed miserably, hinting that their bargaining potential will be severely weakened in the upcoming municipal elections. This was especially true for the Socialists (MSZP), who had several strong incumbents in Budapest districts and mid-sized cities, but in every election in the last decade, party members had to witness another disappointing result, with MSZP gradually inching towards the 5% parliamentary threshold of exclusion.

Table 1 presents a snapshot of parties' relative strength following the EP election. The third column aggregates the number of mayoral seats won in Budapest districts in 2019 (the change compared to 2014 in the parentheses). It also denotes PR votes received for county assembly lists in 15 counties.² Given the specificities of the electoral system, only those voters are eligible to vote for county assembly lists, who are *not* living in a city with county rights. This means county vote share figures reflect partisan preferences of those living at settlements with less than ~40,000 inhabitants. Fidesz's strong support among rural voters is clearly visible, but the data also shows how DK and Momentum caught up with some opposition parties (and overtook others). Downfall and growing irrelevance is the most visible for LMP: just a year after its best-ever electoral performance (Kovarek and Littvay 2019), the party was unable to field a single PR list in *any* of the counties, essentially vanishing from mezzo-level politics.

Besides its incumbent mayors (many running also with DK support in 2014), the other valuable resource MSZP had, which might not come through Table 1, was its alliance with Dialogue (*Párbeszéd*), a minor green/new left party. Although polling around 2–3%, it was led by chairman Gergely Karácsony, the most popular opposition politician, who was also widely regarded as a master of forging inter-party deals between opposition parties. Running a successful campaign, Karácsony was elected Mayor of Budapest, taking Hungary's most important directly elected office and also keeping ailing MSZP afloat (Figure 1).

Campaign tactics and political agenda

Fidesz employed three distinct strategies to confuse opposition voters: (i) *enticing and cajoling opposition candidates to withdraw before the vote*, (ii) *co-optation of opposition*

Table 1. Political parties in Hungary.

Abbreviation	Full name	Budapest districts	Cities	Ideology	2018 vote share	EP vote share	County vote share	City vote share
Fidesz	Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége (Alliance of Young Democrats)	9 (–8)	12 (–8)	Nationalist/populist right	2,824,551 votes (49.27%)	1,824,220 votes (52.56%)	1,010,630 votes (56.07%)	316,564 votes (45.80%)
DK	Demokratikus Koalíció (Democratic Coalition)	3 (+2)	–	Social liberal	308,161 votes (5.38%)	557,081 votes (16.05%)	201,387 votes (11.17%)	} 303,243 votes (43.87%)
Momentum	Momentum Mozgalom (Momentum Movement)	3 (+3)	–	Centrist/liberal	175,229 votes (3.06%)	344,512 votes (9.93%)	206,387 votes (11.45%)	
MSZP–P	Magyar Szocialista Párt – Párbeszéd (Hungarian Socialist Party – Dialogue)	7 (+3)	3 (+1)	Social democratic–green	682,701 votes (11.91%)	229,551 votes (6.61%)	106,218 votes (5.89%)	
Jobbik	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Movement for a Better Hungary)	–	2 (+2)	Right	1,092,806 votes (19.06%)	220,184 votes (6.34%)	183,351 votes (10.17%)	
LMP	Lehet Más a Politika (Politics Can Be Different)	–	–	Green	404,429 votes (7.06%)	75,498 votes (2.18%)	–	
Mi Hazánk	Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement)	–	–	Far-right	–	114,156 votes (3.29%)	61,771 votes (3.42%)	14,322 votes (2.07%)

Source: The authors' own calculation based on National Election Office (valasztas.hu) data.

Notes: Momentum figures include one independent, who caucuses with the party in Budapest's General Assembly; Fidesz figures include two independents running with Fidesz support. District IX also flipped in 2019, electing a fiercely opposition mayor, who refused to join any party. Numbers add up to 23 when taking her seat into consideration. "Cities" stands for cities with county rights; 5 other joint multiparty opposition candidates have also won seats without joining (or even formally affiliating themselves with) any of these parties in particular. "City vote share" reports the number of votes cast for councillors in the 23 cities with county rights; we report opposition parties' result as a single figure, albeit the name and composition of their joint list slightly varied from city to city. County assembly votes are cast in settlements with a population <40,000; respective columns present results from those 15 counties where opposition parties ran independently, with own party lists.

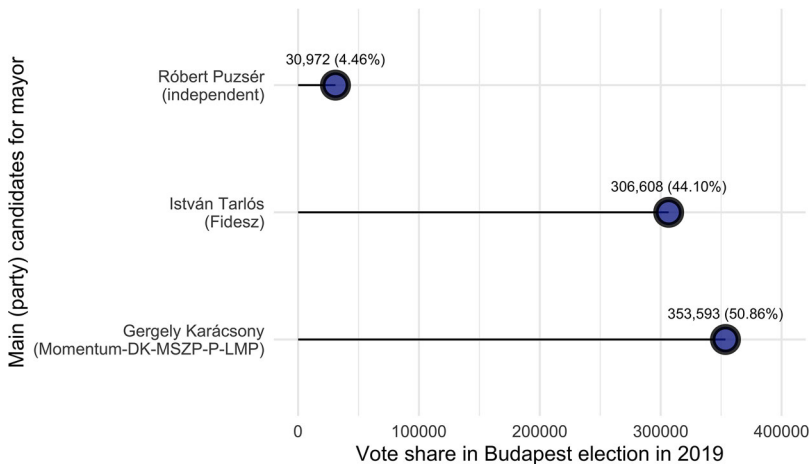


Figure 1. Election results for Budapest, with a turnout of 51.47% (704,073 voters). Source: National Election Office (valasztas.hu).

incumbents and (iii) *fielding independent candidates* where otherwise full-scale coordination helped the opposition. The first strategy resulted in inexplicable last-minute drop-outs of Jobbik and LMP politicians, fielded as joint opposition candidates for councillor seats. These announcements, made by multiple candidates in an orchestrated manner in Miskolc and Győr, respectively, were widely understood as betrayals. Such candidates resigned immediately before election day (making sure that opposition parties cannot nominate a new politician), described the opposition's electoral coordination with derogatory terms or declared their sudden disillusionment. Both LMP and Jobbik were quick to expel these local politicians, but this hardly consoled opposition voters who were left without a genuine opposition candidate. Their respective electoral districts witnessed sweeping Fidesz victories and a substantial drop (8–10%) in turnout compared to other SMDs.

As projecting a winner image has become just as important for Fidesz as securing resources associated with mayoral seats for the opposition, the governing party turned to co-opting strong incumbent mayors, asking them to run for office as independents with Fidesz support as opposed to their prior Jobbik or MSZP (opposition) banners. Reportedly, in exchange for the resources Fidesz can offer, the party only asked that these incumbent candidates eventually nominate a Fidesz Vice Mayor to the council. Mayors accepting such Faustian deals – ones of Csongrád, Szarvas or Budapest's XX district, for instance – were opposition mayors in the eyes of many voters and elites alike. For instance, in Budapest XX, opposition parties have already declared their “unwavering support” for the incumbent mayor – just days before he announced running for re-election with Fidesz support. Co-opted incumbents were re-elected with a comfortable margin, building on the incumbency effect, the support of Hungary's strongest party, as well as major confusion among opposition voters. A couple of former LMP politicians have also run for councillor seats with Fidesz support; whereas they could substantially increase their vote share, shifting allegiances has proven insufficient for securing mandates.³

Unlike the previous two tactics, which qualify as political innovations and were employed at the national level for the first time, nominating independent candidates to fragment the opposition is a proven tool. Sham localist associations, actively sponsored by Fidesz, and aggrieved left-wing politicians – either feeling set aside or having reservations against broadening the scope of electoral co-operation – have already appealed to anti-Orbán electorates in 2014 and 2018. Their potential electorate mainly consists of the uninformed, but Hungarian voters have become more conscious over time. Results show that these candidates obtained less than 2% of votes, and no race for the mayoral seat of any city (or Budapest district) was influenced by them.

The Borkai scandal

Nine days before the elections, an anonymous blog published intricate details of the private life of Győr's incumbent mayor. Zsolt Borkai, an influential Fidesz politician, Olympic gold medalist gymnast and former head of the Hungarian Olympic Committee, held a comfortable lead over his opposition challenger and was expected to deliver an easy Fidesz victory in Hungary's sixth-largest city. The blog, titled "The Devil's Advocate" (*Az ördög ügyvédje*), uploaded pictures and video footage of Borkai taking part in an orgy at a yacht, discussed corruption schemes involving his close aids and allies, and accused Borkai of cocaine consumption. Fidesz decided to downplay the scandal and, initially, refused to comment on it. Government-controlled public media and regional newspapers meticulously avoided to cover (or mention) the story, but this helped little as photos and (porno-)graphic video footage quickly went viral.

The scandal did not mean an (immediate) end for Borkai's political career, as he was re-elected with 44.3% of votes, beating his challenger with a margin of 1.5%. But it had a spillover effect in Budapest districts and major cities, where the opposition could capitalise on the topic. Stickers were affixed to posters of Fidesz candidates with the text "Recommended by Zsolt 'Kerb Crawler' Borkai".⁴ Momentum ran a "There Are No Two [Faces of] Fidesz" campaign, originally aimed at linking locally popular Fidesz mayors to corrupt and divisive national politicians of the party – but it played out even better when suddenly the party could depict the moral decay of incumbent Fidesz mayors. Independent MP Ákos Hadházy, who maintained his issue ownership on fighting corruption even after quitting LMP (Kovarek and Littvay 2019), published sham contracts and assets owned by Borkai's adult children; disseminated pictures illustrating the mayor's son's lavish lifestyle.

When the scandal broke, Orbán was meeting President Macron in France. Given Fidesz's highly centralised structure, the PM's absence caused major confusion in the party. Witnessing his lead at polls evaporate, Budapest Mayor István Tarlós has launched a vigorous attack in his interviews against Borkai, exerting public pressure to resign. Other high-profile Fidesz politicians have condemned the mayors' orgy, but labelled it as a matter of private life, which should have no political consequences. The online version of the largest pro-government daily, *Magyar Nemzet*, also called for Borkai's resignation, but retracted the article an hour later (Benke 2019). Board members and founders of Fidesz – the most influential group of politicians within the party (Kovarek and Soós 2016) – were also divided over the issue, giving contradictory statements.

Just as Borkai's videotaped sex life and alleged cocaine consumption was insufficient to block his re-election, scandals did not hurt opposition politicians either. Socialists in

It is hard to capture the effect of Borkai's scandal on voting behaviour. Figure 2 presents the relationship between PR (party list) votes obtained by Fidesz and data from GoogleTrends on relative interest towards the blog publishing sexually explicit videos and photos of Borkai. Fidesz gained votes in all counties (compared to the 2019 European Parliamentary elections), but the gain is substantially lower at counties where people were more eager to explore Borkai's private life.

The silver bullet: full-scale electoral coordination

Ever since the electoral system (for both parliamentary and local elections) was transformed into a quintessentially majoritarian one, opposition parties were unable to realise the necessary cooperation to not split the vote and successfully challenge Fidesz. Left-liberal parties either ran alone in prior elections, or established alliances, yielding joint lists including some parties and excluding others. But as Jobbik and LMP were reluctant to take part in any of these co-operations, such alliances could not credibly claim to be dominant players of the oppositional landscape – not to mention pose a real challenge for Fidesz. LMP even split over the issue of cooperation with those preferring to run together with centrist and left-wing forces establishing the Dialogue party in 2013.

The parliamentary elections of 2018 were hallmarked by noticeable public anger at challenger parties' inability to coordinate. In the absence of party elites' comprehensive agreement, a handful of SMD candidates withdrew bilaterally last minute (Kovarek and Littvay 2019). As these isolated acts were insufficient to stop Fidesz from gaining another supermajority, public opinion penalised Jobbik and LMP – parties that were perceived the most reluctant to coordinate – in the subsequent European Parliamentary elections.⁵

Losing 3 MEPs and 11.4% of votes combined was a message strong enough to be heard. LMP and Jobbik understood the lesson and ran jointly with the rest of the opposition. LMP could hope for a couple of councillor seats at best; Jobbik abandoned Budapest and was determined to nominate as many joint candidates for mayor in the countryside as possible. Unlike LMP, the latter had a handful of incumbent mayors, known for their extreme stances and racist policies (Kovarek et al. 2017). Nevertheless, most of them deserted to Our Homeland (*Mi Hazánk*), a splinter far-right party, leaving Jobbik with little bargaining potential but with a profile easier to cooperate with by leftists. Further weakened by the resignation of its charismatic chairman (Metz and Oross 2020), Jobbik abandoned hopes of dominating the opposition and fell in line co-ordinating with other parties.

It is symbolic that the first successful opposition challenge to Tarlós in Budapest since 2010 was posed by the politician who has been advocating for full-scale cooperation between opposition parties for the longest. Gergely Karácsony (previously a political scientist and a public opinion pollster) put forward the idea of a "technical coalition", covering the entire range of opposition parties, as early as 2011. What was perceived as "political science fiction" back then became reality (and the winning formula) eight years later.

Even after having agreed to full-scale electoral cooperation, the opposition knew that ousting incumbent mayors in Hungary is never an easy ride. Whereas at the national level, Hungary was characterised by hyperaccountability for decades (Roberts 2008) and

incumbency is a disadvantage for MPs elected in SMDs (Papp 2018), incumbency gives mayors an ability to cling to their seats, making it possible to survive political landslides of their rival parties (Körösényi, Tóth, and Török 2009, 157–159). Consequently, it is noteworthy that opposition challengers were able to defeat incumbent Fidesz mayors in several municipalities. With respect to mayoral seats, the opposition won 14 districts of Budapest's 23, 10 cities with county rights (out of 23) and 32 further settlements with a population greater than 10,000 inhabitants (out of 123) (László and Molnár 2019).⁶

To understand what factors made mayors more likely to retain office, we construct two logistic regression models, with re-election of incumbent mayors as a dependent variable.⁷ We first use the POLLEADER (Political Leaders in European Cities) dataset, an elite survey which reports mayors' own perceptions about the local political context and the resources at their disposal. As part of a cross-national survey (Heinelt, Magnier, et al. 2018), mayors of settlements in Hungary with more than 10,000 inhabitants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire in September 2015, including questions on attitudes, perceived roles, public management and more; 165 mayors were invited to take the survey, who were then subsequently reminded 4 times via phone and e-mail, if they failed to respond to the original inquiry. Mayors had nearly two months to complete the questionnaire; the response rate was 44% ($N=72$) (Dobos and Papp 2017).

To predict re-election, we use items measuring time spent with office and party-related tasks, as well as ones capturing the intensity of local political conflict and the economic situation of the municipality. We also control for mayors' age and use an item tapping into *personal vote* (perceived driver of electoral support being "personal leadership skills" as opposed to the "party or organisation" nominating the mayors).

Figure 3 presents the results of a regression, where these items serve as independent variables, predicting the likelihood of mayors' re-election in October 2019. Results suggest those mayors who attribute their victory five years ago (partly) to personal vote and those governing an economically better-off municipality were more likely to be re-elected in 2019. This corresponds with findings of the POLLEADER questionnaire, which demonstrates that Hungarian mayors' single most important priority is "to stimulate economic growth and employment" – an ambition shared with mayors of Southern Europe, but not with those in the Northern and Western countries of the continent (Cabria, Magnier, and Pereira 2018).

Subsequently, we present a model (Figure 4) using observational data obtained via desktop research, rather than mayors' self-perceived assessment. The dataset includes all incumbent mayors leading a municipality above 10,000 inhabitants ($N=165$), and records previous political experience (length of tenure as mayor, MP or local councillor), local roots (born, raised or living in the respective settlement), partisanship (nominated by Fidesz in 2014) and three dichotomous variables capturing mayors' gender, their settlement being a city with county rights – essentially the 23 largest municipalities in Hungary – or a district of Budapest, respectively. Data were collected and coded by graduate student interns of the Hungarian Academy of Science in 2015, and it is meant to complement the findings of the POLLEADER survey.

Results tell us that being a mayor in a Budapest district is associated with significantly lower chances of re-election; in a similar fashion, Fidesz mayors were less likely to keep their seats, suggesting the 2019 local election in Hungary was indeed a second-order election used to punish the national government.

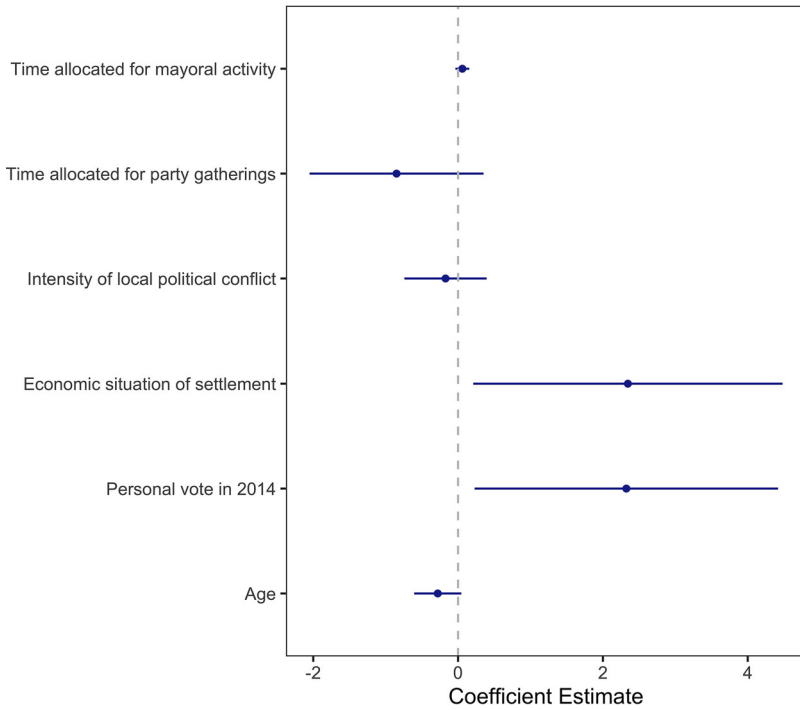


Figure 3. Logistic regression coefficients and corresponding 95% confidence intervals for predictors of incumbent mayors' re-election. Source: POLLEADER (Political Leaders in European Cities) survey responses from mayors of settlements with a population above 10,000.

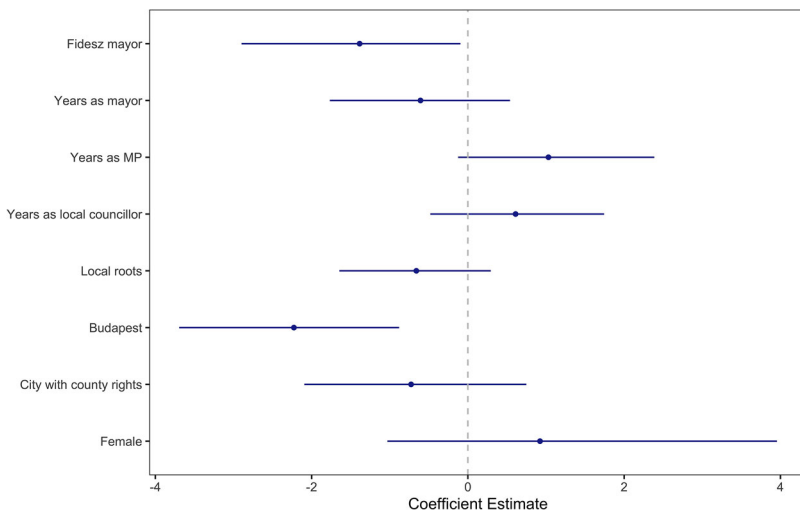


Figure 4. Logistic regression coefficients and corresponding 95% confidence intervals for predictors of incumbent mayors' re-election. Source: Institute of Political Science, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Battle for Budapest

Budapest's mayoral seat was sought by three major candidates. Fidesz incumbent István Tarlós was seeking a third term, having won with the plurality of votes against multiple challengers in 2010 and 2014. Opposition parties' joint candidate was Gergely Karácsony, who served as Mayor of Budapest's XIV district, and was undoubtedly the most popular politician of MSZP-P, the alliance of Socialists and Dialogue. Apart from these parties, Karácsony was also supported by DK, Momentum and LMP with Jobbik not officially endorsing any candidate. Finally, Róbert Puzsér, maverick pundit and columnist was running on an anti-establishment and environmentalist platform, promising to transform Budapest's entire downtown into a pedestrian zone.

The capital also served as the venue for political innovation. Realising that voters despise inter-party agreements made behind closed doors, and opposition parties' relative electoral strengths provided little guidance on who should give Budapest's next joint opposition nominee, parties agreed to hold primaries. Everyone with a residence card was entitled to cast a ballot in a two-round open primary. As the primary was a bottom-up initiative, organised and validated by an NGO, it could not legally bind candidates to refrain from challenging Tarlós later; nevertheless, candidates entering the race committed themselves not to run if defeated. The opposition challenger of Tarlós was selected in a two-round primary.

As MSZP and Dialogue were allied and meant to field a joint candidate, Karácsony first had to defeat Csaba Horváth, MSZP's previous mayoral candidate in 2010 and 2014. After winning the first round, Karácsony defeated two other politicians. Momentum nominated a political novice coming from the world of small business, whereas DK's candidate was a journalist and former TV show host with outstanding name recognition and approval among left-leaning voters. Obtaining 49% of votes in the second round, Karácsony emerged as a clear winner of the primary. The DK-nominated journalist was supported by 37% of the voters, whereas Momentum's candidate got 14%.

An identical procedure was implemented in Budapest's IX district to solve a political stalemate. There, a self-nominated and locally embedded independent candidate defeated the joint candidate of Momentum, MSZP and Jobbik.

One could compare these multi-party open primaries to those implemented in Italy, where the Left was similarly fragmented, and sought primaries as a remedy for the introduction of a mixed majority electoral system (Vassallo and Passarelli 2016). Similarly to Hungary, primaries were first implemented at the regional level, and only after their local success were they used to select a joint Prime Minister candidate for the entire left-wing bloc (De Luca and Rombi 2016). However, an important distinction is that local primaries in Italy only had a single round, whereas the primary for the Mayor of Budapest was a two-round one, with an essentially single-party first round (MSZP–Dialogue alliance) and a multi-party second one. Voters of Budapest/District IX primaries needed to register personally, but could cast their votes online, resembling more to online primaries of the Five Star Movement (M5S).

If one were to evaluate the innovation of the primaries, the result is overwhelmingly positive for the opposition. Both winning candidates went on to defeat the Fidesz incumbent, an outcome helped by increased media attention and legitimacy due to extra months of campaigning. It mobilised partisan voters in the midst of the slow news

season and provided an opportunity for the opposition to update their databases and recruit activists. For the Budapest-wide primary, turnout was over 68,000 – an impressive number compared to ballots cast for Tarlós (approx. 290,000) in 2014. Momentum’s runner-up candidates could also profit from higher visibility, easily securing councillor mandates in October. Debates and other campaign events provided a platform for primary contestants to discuss policy issues, which would have been overshadowed by the negative campaign, amplified by the government’s propaganda juggernaut. The experience allowed parties, with often stark differences, to cooperate, form binding agreements, activists to work together. Earlier concerns about *party raiding* (Donovan 2008), i.e. Fidesz’s interference in primaries via organising its own voters to support “weak” or divisive candidates, were also proven unfounded.

We use public opinion surveys, representative of the voter-aged population living in Budapest, to understand factors driving support for major party candidates running for the capital’s top political office. Data was collected by Medián Research Institute ($N = 501$) in September 2019. As Figure 5 demonstrates, unsurprisingly, party identification was the strongest predictor of Tarlós’s and Karácsony’s favourability. The incumbent mayor was also backed by more religious voters, whereas Karácsony had an edge among male voters. The figure also shows that supporters of the two opposition parties most wary of electoral co-operation with the Left – LMP and Jobbik – had only showcased a half-hearted effort in backing Karácsony. In fact, being a Jobbik voter was significantly associated with lower levels of favourability for Karácsony. For Jobbik supporters, this is likely driven by ideological distance, whereas the Greens’ reservations may also be rooted in Karácsony’s leading role in “tearing LMP apart” (Petőocz 2014) and establishing the splinter Dialogue party.

Fidesz ran a rather low-key campaign in Budapest, aiming to minimise general turnout and focus on their targeted get out the vote campaign. It distanced its incumbent mayors

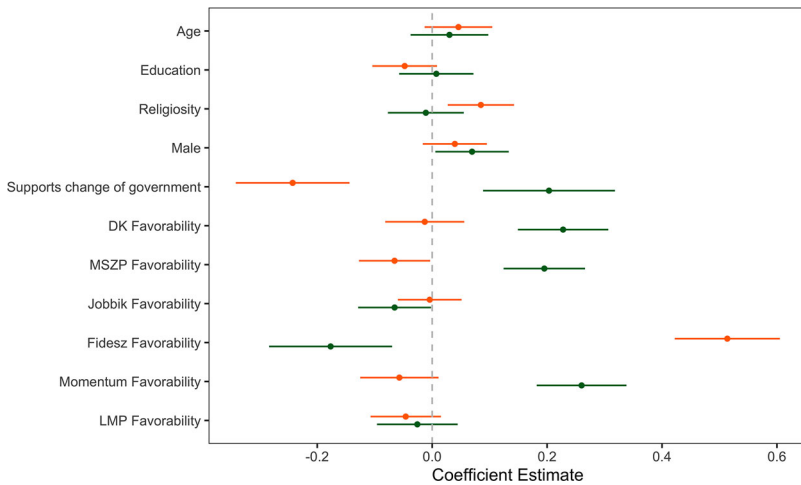


Figure 5. Regression coefficients and corresponding 95% confidence intervals for socio-demographic and political predictors of Gergely Karácsony’s (green) and István Tarlós’ (orange) favourability. Predictors are dummy coded for categorical variables and scaled as a unit-change constituting two standard deviations for continuous ones. Source: Medián Opinion and Market Research Institute.

from the party, knowing they would need voters from the other side of the aisle for re-election. By providing media coverage (and allegedly databases and activists) to an infamous celebrity spoiler candidate and echoing furious statements of Róbert Puzsér, Fidesz's main goal was to depict the upcoming election as a parade of quarrelling, light-minded candidates. Soon billboards with the tagline "Budapest is not a circus!" followed, depicting opposition candidates as equally unfit for office.

Karácsony's main response was running a "Budapest is not a Puppet Show" campaign, where Tarlós was depicted as a marionette figure of Orbán. The message resonated with Budapest locals' frustration over large-scale, government-funded developments lacking public support (stadiums, transforming the City Park into a museum district, elimination of forest areas for the Budapest–Belgrade railway), over which the City Hall had no say whatsoever. Programmatically, Karácsony campaigned on a markedly leftist and green platform. Main promises included the expansion of municipal housing, taxation of real estates worth 1.5 million EUR or more, introduction of a moratorium on eviction, as well as the declaration of climate emergency.

This was accompanied by a common visual identity for all opposition candidates. Choosing a yellow-green colour scheme (indicative of none of the parties) and labelling politicians as "Karácsony's candidate" were tools of detaching candidates from traditional brands of their parties. This meant the simplest possible heuristics for voters: they only had to find the Momentum-DK-MSZP-P-LMP joint candidate. At the same time, it made them go the extra mile if they were to figure out candidates' original party affiliation; such cues were not provided as default. This incentivised bloc-voting, diminishing perceived ideological distance between candidates.

The joint list also made harder for Fidesz to confuse voters. Outside of Budapest, opposition parties most often created local NGOs, with the sole purpose of nominating joint candidates without appearing together on the ballot. These newly registered umbrella organisations in county seats and other cities struggled with name recognition and voters can be misled by actors close to Fidesz using the same acronym or similar organisation names. Additionally, opposition candidates with common names often found their namesakes running against them. But Budapest went with a five-party list publicly highlighting the inter-party cooperation. This was made possible by Jobbik's absence in Budapest. In the countryside, the party refused to add its name (and logo) next to Jobbik's arch villain Ferenc Gyurcsány's DK party. In the absence of Jobbik, leftist and liberal forces had less of a problem with openly endorsing their newly forged alliance.

Another novelty was displaying micro-level policy pledges on posters. Fidesz incumbents collectively refused to take part in public debates and local newspapers published by municipalities were reluctant to share programmes (or introductions) of opposition challengers. Consequently, candidates broke down their manifestos into one-sentence units and displayed these pledges visually, on posters or via spray paint. "Let's have a tree here", "We'll reopen the police station here" and "We'll build a park for preschoolers on this parking lot" are just a few examples of micro-level, spatially focused policy promises opposition candidates campaigned with.

Assessing the share of votes received, mandates won or even invalid votes casted, Puzsér's performance can be understood as a failure. He obtained 4.46% of votes, falling behind predictions of pollsters and underperforming any other relevant (party's) candidate since 2010. He designated Budapest's XI district as a "model battleground".

Realistically, he had very few candidates to run, consequently his organisation decided to field most of them in the XIth. Most of them failed even to approximate Puzsér's vote share (gaining only 2–5% of votes), suggesting that it was not strategic voting, but rather the lack of support for his platform what made him irrelevant. Puzsér's weak performance was not driven by opposition voters perceiving the Karácsony vs. Tarlós race as a close, high-stake election, as in that case they could have still revealed their true preferences by supporting Puzsér's NGO's candidates to obtain councillor seats, which are of substantially lower salience. Puzsér also called for casting invalid votes where the opposition's joint candidate was a DK/MSZP politician, as he considered them to be part of the "old establishment", given their governing experience (Kovarek 2021). While the share of invalid votes in such districts rose compared to 2014, even these increased figures remained negligible, hovering around 0.5–1.5% of votes.

Aftermath: COVID-19 and austerity

The opposition won the control of Budapest, 14 districts out of 23, and a handful of mid-sized cities, but its efforts to realise its pledges were put on hold first by the COVID-19 pandemic, then the subsequent austerity measures induced by the government withholding municipal revenues. Similarly to other European countries, the Hungarian government has introduced lockdown measures and border closure in response to COVID-19 in March 2020. As the main source of income for larger, more urban municipalities is tourism and hospitality taxes, this already meant a serious blow for municipal budgets.

Furthermore, the government declared that municipalities should "demonstrate solidarity", and redirected revenues such as motor vehicle or business taxes to the central budget. The so-called solidarity tax, originally paid only by a few well-to-do cities with plenty of tax revenue, was extended to a lot more municipalities (Dobos 2020). As more urban, populous and developed areas were more likely to elect an opposition mayor, these measures have particularly targeted "disloyal" settlements (i.e. ones ousting Fidesz incumbents), yet shielding Fidesz's main strongholds: small, rural localities. Some other measures, such as the mandatory increase of public transportation services or banning the collection of parking fees to incentivise people driving, have meant further extra costs for local governments without any central compensation.

Witnessing a notable share of their budget evaporating, newly elected mayors of Budapest and other cities quickly retracted on the large-scale expansion of social housing or renovations of cultural institutions. Instead, they focused on inexpensive and rather symbolic decisions, such as extending the network of bike lanes, introducing participatory budgeting (Oross and Kiss 2021) or proposing monuments like Budapest commemorating victims of wartime rape. Time will tell if a speedy economic recovery will allow opposition mayors to realise their promises, or in the absence of resources to allocate, local-level politics will irrevocably become just an act of expressive voting without much substantive policy consequences.

Notes

1. However, mayors are losing grounds in terms of vertical power relations. The average response, provided by mayors for the question measuring their perception about the

influence of local MPs and ministers, was the highest in Hungary among the 23 European countries surveyed; Heinelt, Hlepas, et al. (2018, 49) attribute this “extremely high score” to patron-client relationships and the “strong centralistic party system”.

2. In 4 out of 19 counties, some (or all) opposition parties ran with a joint list. To offer a clearer picture, our calculations in Table 1 are based on only those 15 counties, where each party contested the election alone. If we aggregate results from all 19 counties, we see Fidesz obtaining 1,364,048 votes (57.23%), opposition parties together collecting 907,913 votes (38.1%), whereas Our Homeland was supported by 68,272 voters (2.86%).
3. For instance, a Budakeszi councillor received 41.4% in her electoral district, whereas Fidesz’s nominee in Budapest’s District XIII was supported by 24.5% of voters. In 2014, vote share was substantially lower for both politicians (15.6% and 4.3%, respectively), nonetheless they got elected on compensatory mandates from LMP’s party list.
4. It sounds better in Hungarian. It more clearly refers to a man who regularly uses the services of prostitutes.
5. None of Jobbik’s 106 SMD candidates withdrew, as party chairman Gábor Vona’s aim was to project the image of the only potent challenger. LMP withdrew six candidates, but intra-party divisions, infightings and congressional resolutions forbidding electoral co-ordination made it hard (if not impossible) for the public to understand LMP’s position on the issue.
6. Political competition is not necessarily bipolar in settlements belonging to the latter group, as demonstrated by 21 of them electing an independent mayor in spite of Fidesz and/or opposition candidates also running.
7. Mayors who did not seek re-election – most commonly a consequence of death, poor health or reaching retirement age – are excluded from the analysis.

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