

Predicting the Outcome of the 2018 Hungarian General Elections

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Introduction

In April 2018, there has been a general election for the eighth time in Hungary after the transition from the Communist era in 1989. This was the second time that the new election law was used to elect 199 members of the National Assembly. The electoral system introduced in 2012 changed the two-round voting system to a single round of voting and put more emphasis on the 106 single seat constituencies (OEVK) making a majority or super-majority more likely.

To contest more effectively in the new election system, opposition parties would have had to form coalitions prior to the vote or they would have had to agree on 106 single candidates standing in each OEVK. However, this has not happened therefore electorates had to vote tactically – which was a new kind of voting behavior in Hungary – to support the strongest opposition candidate against the governing party, Fidesz.

In March 2018, several websites had been created to inform voters about the strongest candidate in each OEVK. Using the 2014 election data, I published my predictions on the website taktikaiszavazas.hu (literally meaning “tactical voting”). The site focused on all districts and worked with an adjusted uniform national swing (UNS) model, which was crafted from 20 constituency polls commissioned by Közös Ország Mozgalom (Common Country Movement) an NGO and activist group that tried to facilitate voter participation in the elections.

UNS model and candidate strength

Using the 2014 election data, different OEVK types were identified. First, there were the districts in Budapest and major cities, where mostly the left-wing parties had voters. Then, there were the mixed constituencies, where a major city was linked to several smaller towns and villages. Finally, there were OEVKs with mostly rural areas.

Seeing the 2014 data, it was clear that in rural areas, the candidates of Jobbik had a higher chance to take the seat whereas in larger cities and in Budapest, the left-wing candidate would be the stronger. The constituency-level polls of Common Country Movement backed

this hypothesis, but they also showed that it is not always clear who the stronger opposition candidate would be. In about 30 out of 106 seats, it was too close to call between the left-wing and the Jobbik candidates. Without a formal deal between the opposition parties, it was hard to make recommendations in these cases (and eventually, all these seats have been lost to Fidesz).

The adjusted UNS model (that shows the expected vote share of all parties in each seat) was quite simple: using the averages of the recent constituency-level polls and weighing them to the 2014 results showed the relative strength of each party. These values were adjusted based on the expected error in polling (Fidesz has received 3-4% less votes than they were originally forecast by polling agencies, so this amount was deducted from their national average). Also, smaller parties had higher expected vote shares in larger cities and in Budapest as some of the voters in these areas tended to favor smaller parties in past elections. The adjusted UNS model showed the following level of support for major parties:

Fidesz: 42%, Jobbik: 22%, MSZP-P: 12.5%, LMP: 8.5%, DK: 7.5%, Other parties: 7.5%

This indicated that Jobbik and LMP will perform somewhat better in 2018 while Fidesz, MSZP and DK will perform slightly worse.

Using these values and also accounting for the personal strength of each candidate (such as nationally known party leaders who contested seats), predictions were made on who can take certain seats and who should people be voting for tactically.

Tactical voting and the rationale behind it

As voters were aware that Fidesz is likely to win many seats, their only choice was to vote tactically. My website recommended the left-wing (MSZP-DK) candidate in 37 districts, Jobbik candidates in 61 districts, Green (LMP) candidates in 4 districts, 2 liberal (Együtt) candidates and 2 independents.

Calculating the number of tactical voters were done by comparing the number of voters voting for different party lists versus the number of voters of different candidates

Party list difference: Number of Fidesz party list votes minus the number of party list votes of the strongest opposition party (MSZP and DK counted together as they fielded joint candidates)

Single seat difference: Number of Fidesz candidate votes minus the number of votes of the strongest opposition candidate (all parties and independents included)

With this calculation, the net vote gain through tactical voting showed an additional 497,832 votes against Fidesz by opposition parties. This meant that in some cases, the opposition candidate had won a seat that otherwise would have gone to Fidesz. In other (most) cases, this resulted in less winner bonus votes awarded to Fidesz.

In 102 out of 106 constituencies, the opposition parties got a better result thanks to tactical voting and in more than half of the seats, the vote gain was over 4000 votes.

Results and summary

The election results were quite surprising as Fidesz performed much better than expected. They gained 47.5% of domestic votes while opposition parties performed worse than expected. Left-wing parties also failed to agree on some joint candidates in some districts and this resulted in lost seats despite higher than average tactical voting numbers in key districts. Jobbik also lost some of its voters from 2014 to Fidesz which was an unexpected swing in a dozen of their target seats. Most of these seats were in rural areas where many small villages made up the OEVK.

Overall, thanks to tactical voting, opposition parties gained an additional 15 seats in the final seat allocation, but it was not enough to prevent Fidesz from gaining 91 out of 106 seats and also getting their third supermajority in a row. Despite this fact, the tactical voting movement was the largest and most influential electoral information campaign in Hungary since 1990.

