

What we learned about (voter) abstinence

Policy Solutions took an in-depth look at the phenomenon of voter abstention in Hungary. Combining turnout data since 1990 with recent polling results, it has affirmed some longstanding assumptions about the segment of the electorate that is likely to stay at home on election day. It has also refined some of them, however, providing a more nuanced view of this problem. In addition to a very brief overview of the detailed study, we also analyse the implications for the 2014 elections, and in particular the left's not so rosy prospects of ousting Fidesz.

Much of the opposition's hopes for the election rests on the masses of persons who have not yet declared a party preference. While as a share of the overall electorate, the size of this group has declined from its peak of over 50%, over 40% of adults still indicate that they do not know if and/or for whom they'd vote. While this may look like a vast pool of potential voters, the reality is that a large segment of this crowd is simply not going to turn out next spring.

Back when over 50% of respondents indicated that they had no party preference, the opposition's hopes in this group seemed somewhat well-founded. Yet as this number declines and edges closer to 40%, it becomes increasingly likely that much of the remaining mass of "voters" without preferences is not really motivated – and hence won't vote no matter what.

Swaying those that have not made up their minds has always been the objective of oppositions hoping to oust incumbents, and sometimes of embattled governments, too. In the framework of a detailed study and a conference, Policy Solutions has used official data on turnout and opinion surveys to take a closer look at this group. We will review some of the more interesting results below, but for a more detailed analysis see the summary on PS's webpage.

Dedicated and casual non-voters

While Western European election participation rates have been declining over the past decades, voters in the former communist bloc have on the whole been less active to begin with. Hungary was no exception to this trend: abstention rates in the first – and generally more active – round of the elections have ranged from a high of 43.7% in 1998 to a low in 2002, when an intense campaign, the increasing bipolarisation of Hungarian politics and presumably high stakes left only 29.5% of the electorate insufficiently motivated to cast a ballot. Of these non-voters, some 2 million – 25% of the Hungarian electorate – are the obstinate abstainers, those who are for a variety of reasons lastingly alienated from politics.

The rest, ranging roughly between 5-20% of the electorate at any given election, do not abstain as a matter of principle; they stay at home either out of a temporary frustration with their preferred party, or else because some practical obstacles (travel, weather, sickness, etc.) made voting difficult for them at the time. Though the latter may on average be less

dedicated than the hardcore party supporters, this group can in principle be motivated to vote and large parts of it will often - sometimes even overwhelmingly, as in 2002 - turn out.

What we knew...

Our study has affirmed and rebutted some commonly held views regarding non-voters in Hungary. As one might assume, ideological commitment and especially an adherence to left or right-wing values is a hugely influential factor. Only 50% of those who indicate they do not understand the concept of left/right vote, compared with 68% of self-identified centrists. As one moves from the centre to the left on the ideological scale, participation rises nearly continually, all the way to 84%; the rise on the right is even more pronounced, going up to well over 90% on the far fringes. On average, right-wing voters are 10% more likely to vote than left-wingers, a general trend that has probably been reinforced by the widespread frustration with MSZP's (and SZDSZ's) two terms in office between 2002-2010.

Among other anticipated results we observed that people committed to democracy, the elderly (up to the age of 64), the more educated, and those involved in their communities are far more likely to vote than the average citizen. Though regional differences in turnout have been declining, wealthier areas tend to be far more active electorally. Budapest, with a concentration of residents who possess many characteristics that foster a predilection to vote, has unsurprisingly been the turnout leader since 1998 (closely followed by the country's wealthy northwestern counties). The capital is anything but monolithic, though. While the Buda districts far exceed the national and the city average, many of the poorer districts in Pest hew closer to the national figures, in line with the respective indicators on education, etc.

...and what we didn't

Two insights that contradict conventional wisdom stand out. For one, it would be a mistake to simplistically employ an urban-rural framework and assume that it predicts voter participation levels across communities. Though there are rural areas where the majority of the population is never active in elections, there are also rural regions whose turnout far outstrips that of the urban areas, sometimes even that of the turnout bastions in Buda. Anybody analysing the electoral map with a view towards either combating voter passivity or targeting highly active areas with campaign messages must take a more nuanced view of the regional distribution of political participation.

Second, the data did not bear out the widespread assumption that Hungary's most significant minority, the Roma, are largely passive when it comes to voting. Controlling for income, education and other relevant factors, municipalities with high proportions of Roma residents do not have significantly lower turnout rates. This suggests that political parties would be ill-advised to ignore Roma voters.

For the left, a long hard look at the numbers

The data offer two seemingly contradictory insights for the left. Firstly, turnout figures suggest that the left fares badly when passivity is on the rise. This was not only true of 2010,

when voters in formerly left-wing bastions were especially likely to stay home, but also of the previous election the left lost, namely 1998, which saw the lowest turnout since transition. To a substantial degree, this is explained by right-wing voters' greater ideological commitment - outside of its shrinking core, which was mostly socialised under the old regime, the left has never engendered much emotional attachment - and the left's now waning appeal to less educated, working class and poorer voters. On the whole, the latter are more prone to belong to the occasionally abstinent group than the highly educated and wealthy burghers of Buda, for example, who have constituted the right's most consistently loyal base since 1990.

When polarised elections engender high turnout, as in 2002 and 2006, the left succeeded because the occasional abstainers voted in great numbers. Hence, polarised elections in which voters perceive the stakes to be high augur well for the left. This implies that the left's failure to cast itself as an alternative to Viktor Orbán and Fidesz might well become a self-fulfilling prophecy even if - and that's a big if - a majority of voters wishes for a change of government in 2014.

Mobilisation is not enough

At the same time the numbers also clearly show that at this point just raising turnout won't do the trick. Even in an unrealistic scenario wherein all the occasional non-voters turn out and reject Fidesz by unprecedented margins, without a shifts towards the left-wing opposition among those who have already made up their minds, Fidesz is still likely to prevail.

In light of Fidesz' massive edge among likely voters, it is not enough to mobilise the much vaunted passive reserves. The left must also actively persuade current Fidesz supporters. This is a double or nothing scenario, since a failure to achieve this will convince the occasional abstainers that given Fidesz' near certain re-election, the stakes are low. This in turn will increase the magnitude of the left's defeat. Taken together, these challenges make for an uphill battle, to say the least.