

# VOTES OF THE POOR

public works and the perils of clean elections

*Summary of the study by Átlátszó, K-Monitor, Political Capital and  
Transparency International Hungary*

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It is patently clear: the poor are defenseless, and defenseless people are more likely to become the victims of election fraud. In Hungary public works schemes involving hundreds of thousands may increase these odds: while in the short term state-funded programs available for the unemployed and administered by municipalities may offer a slightly better life than welfare, they also create a one-sided dependence between citizens and local politicians.

As part of their joint project (supported by the Open Society Institute Budapest Foundation), Átlátszó, K-Monitor, Political Capital (PC) and Transparency International Hungary looked at the potential correlation between public employment and election results. To answer the question two parallel and mutually supplementary methods were applied: a statistical analysis, among others, of election and public employment data helped fact-finding fieldwork, while on-site experience has generated additional research criteria. In other words, both the topic and the method are novel, and initial results tend to confirm the hypothesis: the higher the rate of public employment in a given settlement, the more likely that the governing parties sweep the elections.

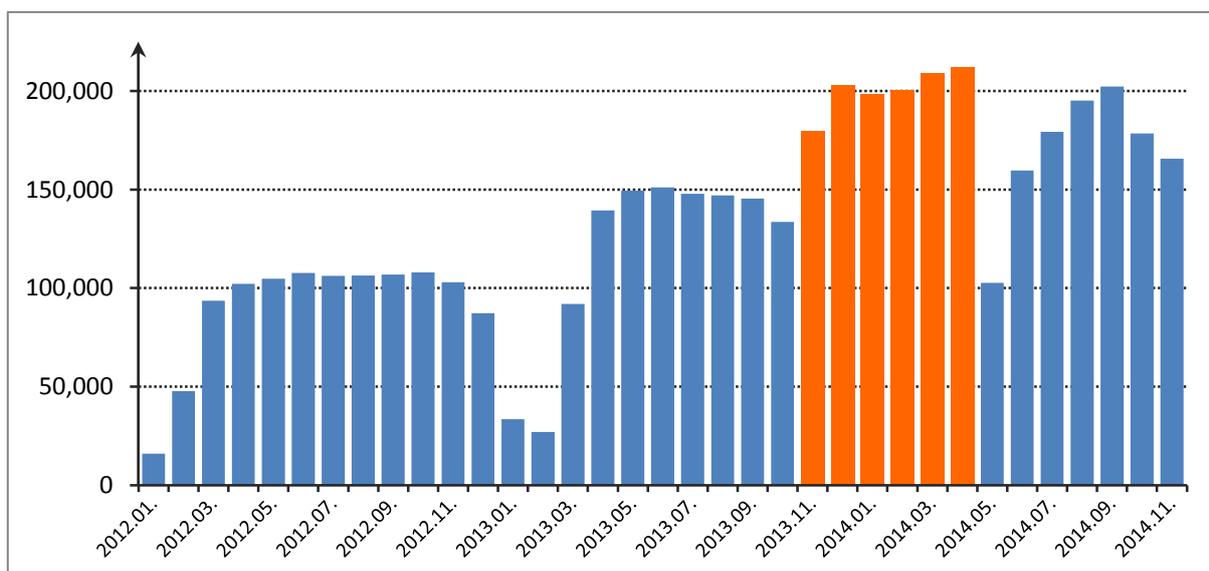
It is important to note that as we are talking about a statistical correlation, the findings of the study cannot be taken as evidence of any election fraud. Our study aims to promote further research into a potential connection between poverty and election abuse.

Below you find a summary of the most salient conclusions of the [study](#) published in Hungarian in February 2015.

## The relationship between public employment and election results

In the past, public works schemes ran out by the end of December the latest and were resumed only in the early spring, i.e., to survive, the affected families had to rely exclusively on welfare precisely in the coldest months of January and February. **However, the schedule was modified for the 2013-2014 winter public works program: with no suspension over the New Year's, it ran continuously through the end of April and the winter programs were phased out only following the parliamentary election.** The majority of public employees are in the employment of the local municipality, and the person employed in a public works scheme has a vested interest in holding down a job as long and as often as possible. And in the vast majority of the cases that decision rests with the local mayor. This state of affairs provides sufficient cause to suspect that **a job offer and the chance to hold on to a position in a public works program may be contingent on the vote cast by vulnerable citizens.**

Figure 1: the number of public works employees



(Source: [KSH](#). The columns highlighted in orange show the period of the 2013/2014 winter public works program.)

## Methodology

To prove the hypothesis **the two methods applied reinforced each other**: PC researchers analyzed **election and public employment data** and the resulting municipality lists were made available to Átlátszó that, in turn, conducted a more focused **fact-finding fieldwork**. Local experience added additional issues to the data-analysis process.

In communities with a single polling station we established the **rate of public employees**, indicating the percentage of residents participating in the winter public works program relative to the active population, i.e., the significance of public employment in the specific community. This was compared settlement by settlement to party lists receiving over 10% nationwide.

Based on the rate of public employment, communities with a single polling station were classified into four groups:

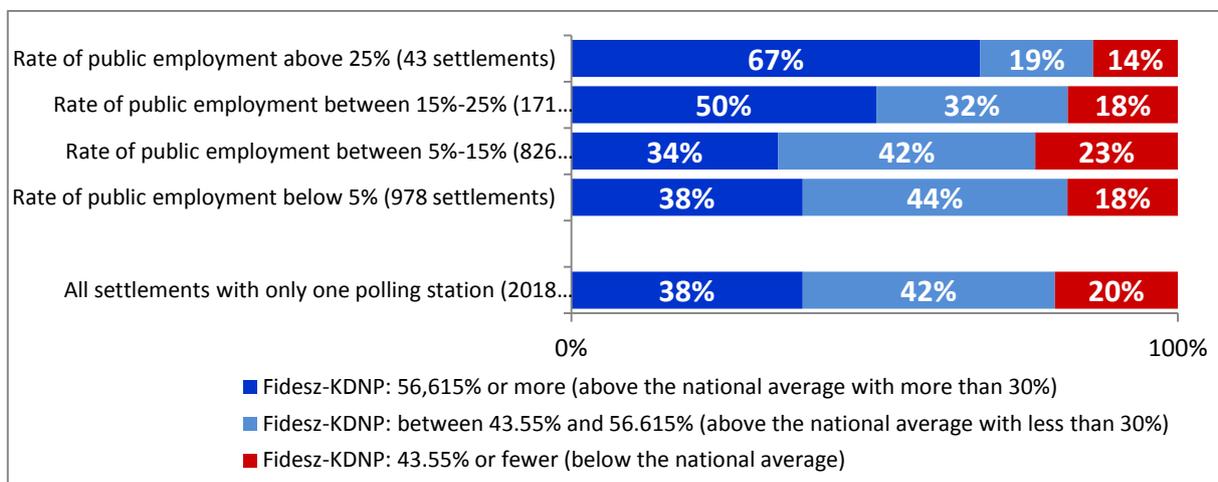
1. settlements where **minimum one quarter of the population between the ages of 15 and 64** participated in the winter public works program (the settlement list may be downloaded in Excel [here](#));
2. settlements where the rate of public employees **was at least 15% but did not reach 25%** (the settlement list may be downloaded in Excel [here](#));
3. small settlements where the rate of public employees was between **5-15%**;
4. settlements where public employment is less relevant; the rate of those participating in the program **remained below 5% in the active population**.

The majority of the communities with a **single polling station** fell into the 4th (48%) and 3rd (41%) group. In 171 communities (8%) the rate of public employees ranged between 15-25%, while in **43 communities (2%) it reached or exceeded 25%**.

## Fidesz-KDNP election results

In places where a large percentage of the working-age population was engaged in public employment, in April 2014 the Fidesz-KDNP national list performed significantly better. While the governing parties did well (with 56.615%, 30% above the national average) only in 38% of small communities, **they won by large margins in small towns and villages most affected by public employment**.

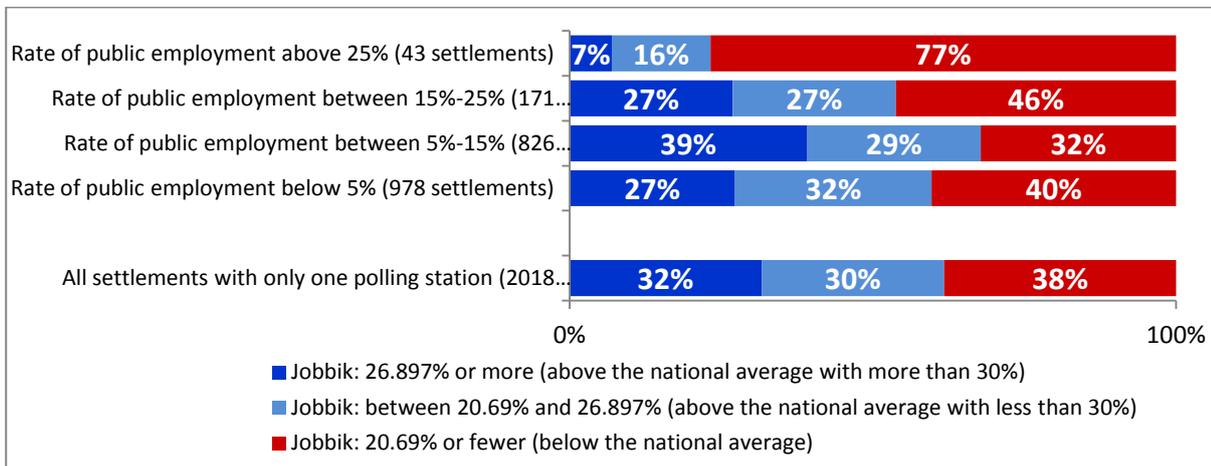
**Figure 2: the distribution of Fidesz-KDNP election results in small communities, relative to the rate of public employment**



### Opposition party election results

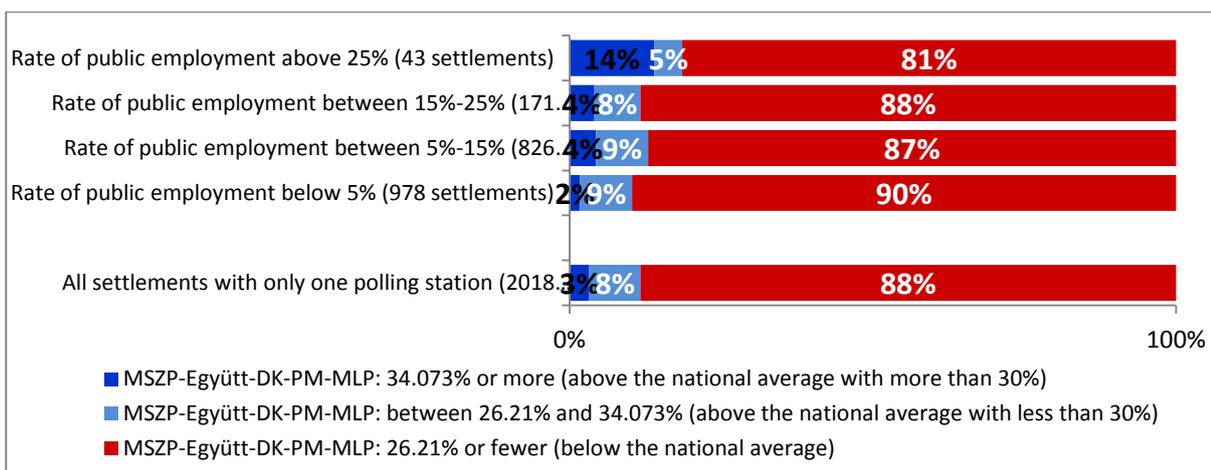
In the case of Jobbik the trend was quite the opposite. Similar to Fidesz-KDNP, in the spring the far-right party also did exceptionally well in small communities, however, when we factored in the rate of public employment, it turned out that **Jobbik performed poorly in settlements most affected by the public works scheme.**

Figure 3: the distribution of Jobbik election results in small communities, relative to the rate of public employment

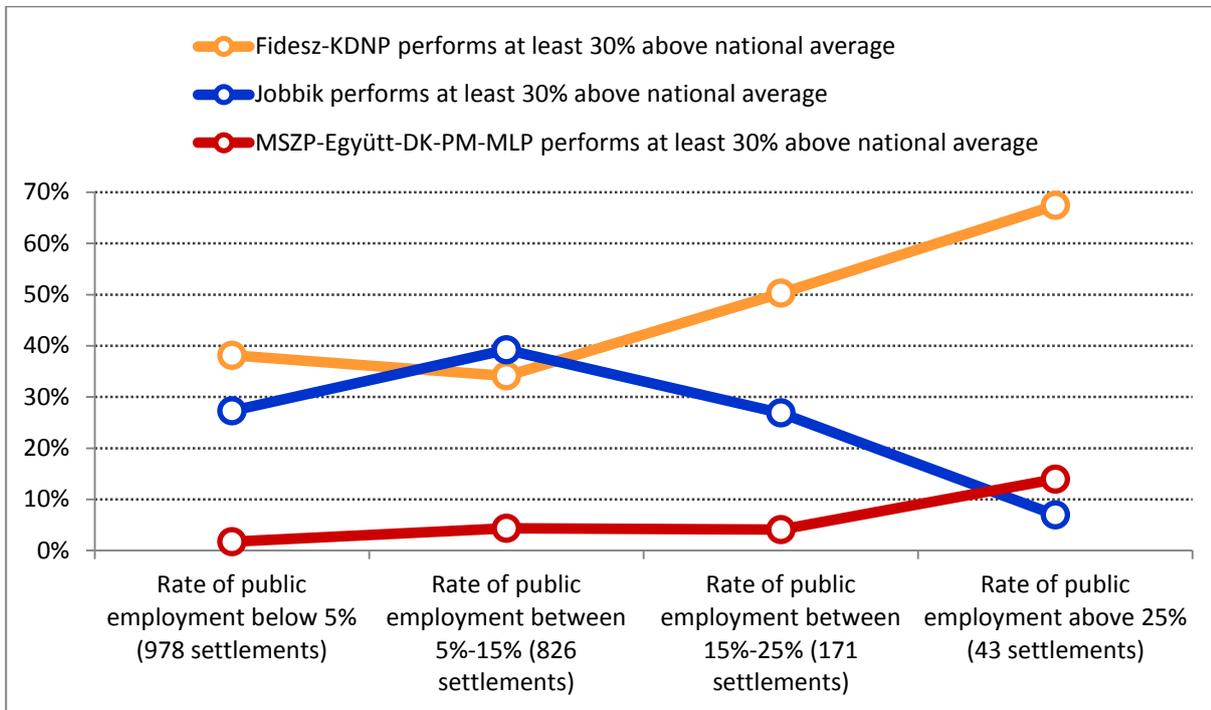


At the same time, in April 2014 the five-party left-wing list did rather poorly in communities with a single polling station. In 88% of these communities the percentage of ballots cast for the list fell short of the national average, and outstanding results were reached in only 3%. **At the same time, in small communities most affected by public employment the percentage of places where the party list did exceptionally well was actually higher.**

Figure 4: the distribution of MSZP-Együtt-DK-PM-MLP election results in small communities, relative to the rate of public employment



**Figure 5: the percentage of outlier settlements based on the prevalence of public employment, and in respect to party lists performing above 10% nationwide**



We also compared the October 12, 2014 municipal election results and public employment figures that confirm the same trends. [Find](#) details in the Hungarian-language paper.

### Potential causes for correlation between public employment and election data

The correlation between public works and the success of governing parties at the polls **is not necessarily a sign of abuse.**

It is conceivable that for many participation in the public works program offers a genuine opportunity and these people express their gratitude **to politicians in power (to mayors and government politicians alike)** without any illicit prompting. In this context it may be a logical step to vote for the Fidesz-KDNP national list and individual candidates in parliamentary elections or for the incumbent mayor and for the county list of the political force offering formal or informal support at municipal elections.

Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that owing to **welfare chauvinism** the public works scheme is popular among other voters: people worried about losing their job and/or privileges based on their relatively solid financial position may be inclined to support a public works scheme that cuts welfare benefits and promotes entry into the primary labor market reluctantly or not at all.

With all that, correlation between public employment data and the impressive performance of some political forces at the polls (mainly the governing parties, although in some places Jobbik and leftist parties alike) **raises the suspicion of potential abuse**, which serves as an incentive for a wave of further fieldwork.

## Field experiences

One month after the municipal elections there were aftershocks in several communities. In some places, like [Nyírmada](#), people were confident that criminal complaints would be investigated. However, after all legal remedies [ran their course](#), despite the alleged abuses the majority reluctantly accepted the official results. This had the additional consequence that with the passage of time fewer people were ready to talk than immediately following the election. In responses “Five years is a long time” was a frequently repeated theme – suggesting that people living in a small community are reluctant to speak their mind.

With all that, there were some exceptions in **Tarnabod** in Heves, **Nyírmada** in Szabolcs and **Forró, Szendrő, Szin** and **Tornanádaska** in Borsod Counties: in these communities we found people ready to talk about election abuses in front of our cameras. In recorded statements they described practices and methods used in disenfranchised rural communities where, in some cases, with the active assistance of minority leaders, incumbent mayors manipulated voters primarily with promises of public employment. Our experience suggests that the practice, if not universal, was quite widespread.

### When there is election fraud – how does it work?

The method of influencing/pressuring may range from “having a personal talk” with voters through the enforcement of open voting. In respect to the latter, it is self-evident for locals that people who **don’t wish to lose the goodwill of the mayor or local minority leaders “must prove” proper voting**: they either ask for assistance – enter the polling booth with a district delegate – or, before dropping the ballot into the box, show the ballot paper to the mayor’s representatives. By definition, in such a system anyone who declines to cooperate, i.e., does not reveal his vote in this manner (insists on a secret ballot) is branded as an opponent of the mayor and can expect to suffer the consequences.

At the same time, a strong performance of the governing party list in a small settlement is not necessarily a proof of manipulation: for instance, in **Lak** in Borsod County, according to our source the 78% of the votes received by the mayor reflects genuine satisfaction with his performance. And it’s only obvious that satisfaction with the mayor shows up in the number of votes cast for the delegating governing party as well. We received a similar report from our sources in the village of **Fáj** where, despite five candidates, the incumbent mayor received two thirds of the votes cast. At the same time, in **Szendrőlád** – despite all the mayor’s efforts at exploiting the fact that close to one third of the active population was on public payroll – a new mayor was elected.

In several settlements where the incumbent and re-elected mayor [exerted](#) the strongest pressure on public works employees, after the closing of the polls the promised rewards and sanctions were implemented – as [reported](#) by our sources in **Farkaslyuk, Nyírmada, Forró, Tarnabod, Heves** and a number of other settlements in Borsod County.

While due to few resources and locals’ increasing fear of reprisals, Átlátszó had limited opportunities to validate or refute PC’s “risk list”, but in the most suspect settlements we managed to collect information. In several Szabolcs and Nógrád County settlements our sources confirmed attempts at influencing public employees, although we managed to document non-anonymous local witnesses only in Nyírmada.

However, we managed to gather direct information from almost all listed settlements in Borsod County. In the village of **Lak** already mentioned above, local sources claimed that the mayor did not pressure public employees: the majority of the residents are satisfied with the mayor, incidentally delegated by the governing party, and put more confidence in him than in his only rival, who received but one fourth of the votes cast for the re-elected incumbent. In the village of **Szin** the re-elected mayor was the only candidate running: here people not only talked about pressure tied to the public works program, but [reported](#) election-related anomalies as well. The listed **Tornanádaska** is one of the poorest settlements in the county and, due to the prevailing conditions, those who could had already left the village. (The village mayor [had been](#) in pre-trial custody for three years.

He and his wife had been [charged](#) with loansharking, the forging of public documents, fraud and taking the law into their own hand; the case was later dismissed for lack of sufficient evidence.) We found some Tornanádaska residents willing to talk: according to our sources, the mayor and his associates even made cash distributions and eventually the locals did not have the courage to block the reelection of Tamás Beri, with a terrible reputation throughout the county. Locals reported similar pressuring and reprisals in settlements facing similar conditions.

In our experience, when it comes to exercising democratic rights and opportunities for legal remedies, an asymmetry and vulnerability concerning access to information represent a serious risk: for one thing, for all practical purposes people with a complaint may turn for information only to the local notary – while in most places the notary is a member of the local elite surrounding the mayor. A similar deficit is presented by the fact that typically members of the committee supervising the fairness of the election are municipal employees, i.e., the mayor is their de facto employer. In other words, the chance of anyone challenging the incumbent mayor in the event of an infringement is close to nil.

Even this limited sample shows that in small communities in disenfranchised regions local elections are heavily affected by the utter vulnerability of residents, typically earning a living as public works employees.

Regarding the two major elections of 2014, one hears two recurring claims made by Hungarian Roma: one is the all but standard complaint that they see politicians in the community only during the election campaign and then are forgotten for the next four years; according to the other, “we won the two thirds for Fidesz”. While, of course, the latter statement is too simplistic, it reflects a perception of a correlation between public employment and election results, as outlined in the present study as well.