

Background

Due to conflicting political interests, a sharp debate was under within Fidesz over a proposed electoral law. As it is difficult to foresee shifts in party system in coming years, governing party strategists find it hard to decide which electoral system would offer benefits to the party alliance led by Fidesz at the next one or two elections (it is impossible to see further into the future).

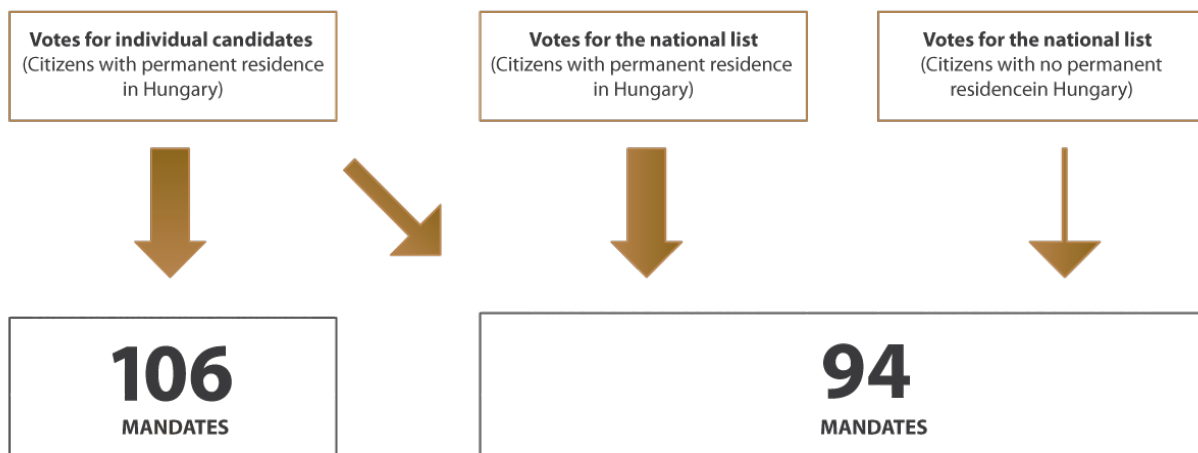
Fidesz caucus leader János Lázár's electoral reform concepts announced on October 6, 2011 are essentially identical to the ideas advanced by MEP János Áder on July 9 2011, and only a few details of minor importance have been clarified since. Our analysis below reviews issues of the proposed electoral reform that have already acquired a solid form.

Recent proposals and announcements reveal two sets of dilemmas facing the governing parties:

- 1) Fidesz would like to involve at least one opposition party (preferably LMP) in the process of reforming the election system. However, to this end Fidesz has to surrender at least one of the reforms serving its political ends (e.g., the introduction of single-round voting and/or restricting the collection of nomination slips).
- 2) Since Fidesz cannot predict the balance of forces at the next election, it is conceivable that some of the reforms ostensibly working to its benefit, as things stand today, may turn against the party in the future.

Shift to the direction of majority systems

The new election system would consolidate the majority principle. It is all but certain that in the future in a Parliament reduced to 200 representatives 106 mandates will be distributed in individual constituencies¹. The remaining 94 seats will be won from a special list with votes coming from three different sources, as illustration shows below. Mandates from these lists will be distributed in proportion of aggregate values, i.e., the system will not become more transparent.



The situation is further complicated when, in a reversal of past practices, not only votes cast for a losing candidate but all votes received by the winner not needed for a mandate will be added to the national list. While the idea is not yet part of the proposal announced by János Lázár, in a recent interview János Áder discussed that option in great detail. Should this practice be adopted, the system's majority character may be further reinforced, i.e., we could have an electoral system granting the winner extraordinary powers.

¹ The proportion of mandates distributed in individual constituencies will increase to 53% from earlier 46% (in the past, of a total of 386 seats 176 could be won in individual constituencies)

Electoral system components	Effective voting system	Most likely version of new voting system
Number of rounds	2	1
Threshold	5%	5%
Number of MPs	386	200
Number of individual constituencies	176	106
Proportion of individual constituency mandates	46%	53%
Number of mandates on county lists	152	0
Number of mandates based on compensation	58	0
Number of mandates on summarized national lists	0	94
Average number of citizens living in a constituency	45 thousands	75 thousands
Number of nominations for a candidate	750	1,500

Voting rights for non-resident Hungarians

Resident Hungarians will continue to have two votes (individual + list), while non-resident Hungarians only one (list), which however may raise concerns over equal voting rights. It cannot be ruled out that the Venice Commission will condemn Hungary for voter discrimination.

Based on our calculations, depending on the turnout and support for specific parties, non-resident Hungarian votes may determine 3-5% of the total mandates.

Dilemma: one or two rounds

- From the point of Fidesz, the major argument for a single-round system is that its individual candidates may win without much effort in individual constituencies with a relative majority of the votes cast (a mandate may be captured with as little as 30% of the votes, provided the opposition is sufficiently fragmented and Fidesz remains the most powerful party). As in all likelihood voters abandoning the party would not vote for Fidesz candidates even in a second round, the introduction of a single-round system appears to be a logical move.
- However, a single round would serve Fidesz' interests only if the status quo is maintained. At the same time, if a currently divided left-to-centre opposition gains strength and manages to forge an alliance, its candidates may capture a large number of individual mandates with a minimum advantage at the polls (mainly in more urbanized districts). Moreover, in "conflict zones" (North-eastern counties) Jobbik may win individual mandates with relative majorities.
- In a single-round system it is easier to win a two-thirds majority that at a later date, while unlikely at the next election, may offer the same opportunity to forces lined up against Fidesz, i.e., with a two-thirds majority they may reverse or modify the constitutional system redrawn by Fidesz.

Based on the current proposal a single-round system will be adopted, although, as we have seen in respect to other information related to electoral reform, the recently announced concepts should not be taken for granted either. If it is indeed important for Fidesz that the election bill is not passed by the governing parties alone, as a gesture to LMP it may eventually keep the two rounds (as suggested by some coalition politicians too).

Nomination process: aggravation or facilitation?

At first glance changes in the nomination process may result in tighter regulations, although these may also play into the hands of the opposition.

Instead of the present 750, 1500 nomination slips will have to be collected, although in a much larger area. If earlier a candidate had to be endorsed by every 60th voter, in the future he will need the support of every 50th voter to run for a seat. Moreover, the collection period will be reduced from 36 to 21 days. Changes involving the fielding of a national list are even more important. It will be sufficient to nominate 27 candidates covering 9 out of 19 counties and the capital. In short, voters will be able to cast their ballot for a party list in all electoral districts of the country (and around the world) without the parties having to collect endorsements in 10 counties. In the current system no political force worth its name could afford such luxury: the party failing to field at least two candidates in a county may not put forward a list in that county.

Based on the Lázár-proposal, potentially three or even four opposition parties could divide the 106 individual districts among themselves and mobilize their activists in the roughly 27 allotted districts. In other words, in the majority of individual constituencies they would not have to fight for nomination slips or defeat the other's candidate, whereas all of them could put forward a national list. The proposal offers an excellent opportunity for opposition parties reluctant to cooperate; they could concentrate anti-government votes with minimal loss of face and without the need to field joint lists. In the single-round system voters will see a list ballot sheet similar to the one used in the first round of the current system with a choice of a relatively large number of parties, while the ballot sheet for individual candidates will reflect the second-round balance of power following the withdrawal of losing candidates.

The elimination of the obsolete nomination slip, rife with data-protection concerns and liable to turn up on the black market, has been raised in Fidesz circles as well. If Fidesz is serious about winning the support of LMP, it may have to pay this price, although abandoning the nomination-slip system offering the party many advantages appears to be an enormous sacrifice. If Fidesz decides to go down this road, it may easily make up for its loss with the introduction of another 'screening mechanism', e.g., preliminary voter registration.



Social Development Institute



Political Capital and Social Development Institute is working on a project that is partially funded by the OSI Think-Thank Fund. The program that is called "New electoral system in Hungary: watchdogging, advocacy and raising awareness" focuses on the electoral reform in Hungary. The website of the project, [Választásirendszer.hu](http://valasztasirendszer.hu) collects all available information on the new Hungarian electoral law for experts, journalists, NGOs, diplomats and politicians who show interest in the topic. The site was launched in September 2011 and is regularly updated with analyses, publications, research and data.

Please find our analyses in English at <http://www.valasztasirendszer.hu/?cat=215>