

PROFILE

Like Déjà Vu All Over Again: The Hungarian Parliamentary Elections of 2002

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Introduction

On 7 and 21 April 2002, Hungary went to the polls to vote in its fourth competitive election since the transition to a multi-party system in 1989. Voting took place in two rounds, first on 7 April in 176 single-member districts and 20 proportional list districts, and then on 21 April in a run-off in the 131 single-member districts that had not yielded a majority candidate in the first round. The result was a surprise to nearly everyone. First, surpassing all expectations, turnout exceeded 70 per cent of the registered electorate, higher than in any previous election in Hungary. Second, although the governing coalition of the Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Party and its junior partner the Hungarian Democratic Forum was widely predicted to win a majority of the 386 seats in the Hungarian single-chamber legislature, it performed poorly in the first round of elections, and failed to recapture enough lost ground in the second round to win the 194 seats need to maintain power. Hence the alliance of the Hungarian Socialist Party and its former junior coalition partner the Alliance of Free Democrats went on to form a government with a narrow ten-seat lead.

The 2002 election outcome recalls another French adage: ‘plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’. The government turnover following the Fidesz–HDF defeat reinforced the pattern noted by many observers of Hungarian politics: the most striking regularity of Hungarian voting

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behaviour is the rejection of the incumbent coalition. Another parallel: just as in 1998, the joint ticket of Fidesz and HDF had come in second place in first-round votes, yet had won more seats in the legislature than any other single party. As in the previous election, in 2002 no party won a majority of seats that would have permitted it to govern alone. Unlike in the previous election, however, there were no friendly parties winning enough seats – as had the Independent Smallholders' Party in 1998 – to allow Fidesz and the HDF to form a government. Finally, a strange cyclical repetition of events took place among the specific players.

In 1994 the combined forces of the Socialist Party and the Alliance of Free Democrats, winning considerably less than a majority of the votes, wrested power from an incumbent rightist government. In 2002, the same coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD) replaced the incumbent rightist government after winning less than a majority of the votes. In addition, many of the same individuals from the left returned to power, and some of the same individuals from the right, particularly those from the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF), surrendered once again their offices to socialist forces following electoral defeat. The irony of 1994 was that the Socialists, whom the regime change had pushed almost to electoral extinction, had been returned to power just four years later with a majority of seats. The irony of 2002 was that a version of this cycle occurred all over again.

This back-to-the-future outcome was largely the product of Fidesz campaign rhetoric that had backfired: presenting the election of 2002 as a replay of the regime change that had taken place some twelve years previously. Saturated with this message of a simple choice, the electorate divided sharply into two camps: that of the Socialists plus AFD on one side, and the 'Civic' forces of the right, led by the populist prime minister Viktor Orbán, head of the Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Party, on the other. The pre-election polls indicating a polarization of the electorate into two sides were proved correct by the election. The former coalition partner party, the Independent Smallholders (who had won 48 seats in the 1998 election), was completely eliminated from representation in 2002. The AFD saw its share of the seats drop from 24 to 20. The HDF, elected only in concert with the Fidesz party using joint candidacies and lists, managed to add about five seats to its parliamentary grouping, but at the price of losing its identity as an independent party for the purposes of the election. The Hungarian electoral system, having formerly supported some half a dozen parties, had now elected a legislature in which 90 per cent of the seats were divided between just two parties.

The Electoral System

Elections to the 386-member Hungarian parliament are governed by the complex electoral law adopted through bargaining at the Round Table talks of 1989. The law, essentially unchanged since its passage, establishes a mixed-member system of representation whereby 176 districts are elected using a run-off format, and the rest of the seats are elected according to proportional representation. Balloting takes place in two rounds spaced two weeks apart. In the first, voters cast two votes: one for an individual, and one for a party that has a regional list in their county. Individual candidates from the 176 single-member districts are declared elected in the first round if they win more than 50 per cent of the votes cast in their district. In the absence of such a majority, the top three candidates, plus any candidate winning more than 15 per cent of the vote, compete in the second round two weeks later. Candidates may also be elected from party lists in the 20 PR regions, using a modified version of the Droop–Largest Remainder formula. Parties also publish national lists, which are used to allocate seats to parties as compensation for votes from individual constituencies and regional lists that failed to elect candidates.

The law imposes a threshold requiring parties to win at least five per cent of the nation-wide vote in order to gain any seats from either the regional or national list allocations. It also stipulates that at least 50 per cent of the eligible voters in an electoral district – whether single-member or PR – must cast ballots in order for the election result in that district to be valid. This requirement drops to 25 per cent if the election has to be repeated in that district, or if the election is a single-member district run-off being held because the first round failed to produce a majority winner.

Finally, the law permits two or more parties to sponsor joint candidates and joint lists, something that featured prominently in the 2002 elections. This provision allows candidates to appear on the ballot with the joint party affiliation, even though they are formally attached to one of the alliance's constituent parties. In this fashion, the constituent parties join together in order to combine each side's voters in the election, but can then establish distinct parliamentary factions once the election has been concluded.

Meet the Contestants

By the 15 March deadline for registering single-member district candidates, there were 1,250 individuals registered. The requirement for establishing a candidacy was the presentation of at least 750 valid nomination signatures collected from the district. Some of these candidates, such as the Hungarian-born pornographic film star and former Italian deputy, Ilona Staller, were disqualified because of irregularities in meeting the qualification

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requirements.¹ Several other qualifying candidates withdrew prior to the election, bringing the total number of single-member candidates competing in the election to 1,244.

A total of 13 parties were able to establish party lists in one or more regions. A party may establish a regional list if it has managed to establish individual candidacies in at least 25 per cent of the constituencies in the given region, or in a minimum of two constituencies where the region has fewer than eight constituencies in total. The top seven parties, including all the incumbent parties elected in 1998, were able to establish lists in all 20 regions. The election law also provides for the establishment of party lists to be awarded nationally on the basis of votes not used to elect a candidate in either the single-member or regional PR districts. In order to submit a nation-wide list, a party must establish at least seven regional lists. Eight parties were able to do so, the eighth party having the minimum requirement of seven territorial list seats.

TABLE I
PARTIES ESTABLISHING CANDIDATES AND LISTS

Party	Number of candidates			Number of lists	
	Individual	On list	Total	Regional	National
Fidesz–Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF)	176	628	804	20	1
Hungarian Justice and Life Party (HJLP)	176	614	790	20	1
Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD)	174	620	794	20	1
Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP)	170	628	798	20	1
Hungarian Workers' Party	148	587	735	20	1
Independent Smallholders' Party (ISP)	148	588	736	20	1
Centre Party	126	402	528	20	1
New Left Side	25	106	131	7	1
Reform Party of Smallholders	15	38	53	4	0
Smallholders' Party	12	18	30	1	0
Hungarian Green Party (Greens)	7	0	7	0	0
MAVEP	5	4	9	1	0
HSP–MSZDP	4	0	4	0	0
Social Democratic Party	4	5	9	1	0
Összefogás	3	0	3	0	0
Hungarian Roma Party	2	23	25	1	0
HSP–AFD	2	0	2	0	0
Party of the Hungarian Retirees	2	0	2	0	0
Democratic Roma Party	1	0	1	0	0
HIDP	1	0	1	0	0
KPDP	1	0	1	0	0
MSZMP	1	0	1	0	0
PEST1601	1	0	1	0	0
Total	1,204	4,261	5,465	155	8

Source: The official Hungarian Central Data Processing, Registration and Election Office website: <<http://www.valasztas.hu>>.

Including other candidates nominated on the lists, there were a total of 3,458 candidates presented for election by the deadline, compared with 4,262 competing in 1998. Although 23 parties were able to field candidates, more than 95 per cent of these candidacies were sponsored by the eight largest parties. These groups included not only the six incumbent parliamentary parties, but also two new entrants in 2002. This meant that the main competition occurred among eight parties.

Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Party, leader of the governing coalition since the elections of 1998 in which it curiously received fewer votes than its main rival but none the less captured more seats. It had accomplished this neat trick by outperforming the Socialist Party – the rival that it had unseated in 1998 – in the second round of the election by gathering up supporters of parties whose candidates had voluntarily withdrawn from the second-round competition. To the right of centre on social issues, yet somewhat ambiguous on its economic policy positions, this party played an increasingly nationalist tune in its rhetoric and actions leading up to the 2002 elections. Populism also featured largely in its 2002 programme, such as promising subventions and tax relief for families having children or taking out home loans, and announcing plans to build more bridges, motorways and dams. Having successfully concentrated the parties and voters of the right into its camp, this party put itself forward as the symbol for continued progress and integration with Europe, yet at the same time protecting Hungarian interests and values. Its message was intended to broadcast confidence, faith in the future, and its willingness to co-operate with what it identified as the cynicism, fear-mongering and hate-speech of the Socialists.

The *Hungarian Socialist Party*, formerly (in 1989) the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. The party in 'opposition' before the 2002 elections, this party had governed between 1994 and 1998 along with its junior coalition partner the AFD. Promising welfare, security and progress, the HSP claimed that there was a split in society which it would repair, addressing needs so as to create equal opportunity, a predictable social security system, and improvements in health care. The irony is that the inheritor of the communist party's mantle was now railing against the former student radicals of Fidesz about the stifling of opposition freedoms – a neat reversal of the politics of just over a decade earlier. The HSP pledged frequently in campaign speeches that, if it won, it would become possible to speak freely and to criticize the government, in contrast to the prevailing tone it claimed existed under the Fidesz government. The HSP chairman, László Kovács, stated this position bluntly: 'The issue is whether we retain democracy, or see the possible emergence of an extreme right-wing dictatorship.'

The *Alliance of Free Democrats*, a liberal party positioning itself as left on social issues but right on economic issues. Formerly the junior coalition partner of both the Hungarian Democratic Forum before 1994, and then of the Socialists from 1994 to 1998, this party had demonstrated repeated pragmatism with regard to political alliances. None the less, it led the most vitriolic and personal campaign against the Fidesz-led government, early on ruling out the possibility of any future coalition with Fidesz should that party win re-election. It repeatedly claimed that widespread corruption had taken place under the Fidesz government, and stated that if elected it would restore the prestige of honesty in the country. In contrast to the nationalist tone of Fidesz, the AFD also promised to ensure that no one should have fears because of his or her origin, faith or opinion.

The *Hungarian Democratic Forum*, having governed from 1990 to 1994 but moribund before the 1998 elections, was resuscitated and brought into parliament by joint candidacies – and in 2002, joint lists – with Fidesz. In September 2001, it agreed to an election alliance with Fidesz of unprecedented scale, entering joint candidates in every single-member district, exercising the first use in Hungary of the provision in the electoral law allowing joint lists, and even developing a joint campaign manifesto. This meant 27 candidates for the HDF in individual constituencies, six of whom were also on regional lists, and party leader Ibolya Dávid in second place on the national list just behind the Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán. Originally the largest opposition grouping following the regime change, this party was the junior coalition partner of Fidesz from 1998 to 2002, representing centre-right, nationalist politics.

The *Independent Smallholders' Party*, a right-of-centre, nationalist party promoting Hungarian interests and opposing the sale of Hungarian farmland to foreigners, was previously a king-maker but now just a shell of its former self. Claiming the mantle of the most popular party before the communist takeover in the late 1940s, chairman József Torgyán led this party into the 1998 elections with considerable support, winning 48 seats in that election and becoming the most important coalition partner of the Fidesz government in 1998. But the ISP was plagued before the elections of 2002 by widespread scandals, including the televised arrest and imprisonment of a senior ISP official for accepting bribes, and severe internal challenges to Torgyán's leadership, resulting in defections (and expulsions) of members and legal challenges that continued right up to the election. With the leader and his party largely discredited, it was not expected that the ISP would reach even two per cent of the vote in the election. With relations between the ISP and Fidesz increasingly hostile,

and no potential partners on the left, there stood no chance of rescue from a larger ally.

The *Hungarian Justice and Life Party* (sometimes translated as ‘Hungarian Truth and Life’) was the far-right creation of former HDF member István Csurka, its platform an amalgam of anti-Semitic, anti-communist, anti-homosexual and pro-Hungarian nationalist messages. Although it had won 14 seats in the 1998 election, it was unclear whether this party would reach the five per cent threshold since it was suspected that opinion polls were not accurately measuring the expected vote of this party. Csurka, the party’s chairman, raised hackles on both sides by promising before the elections to sweep Fidesz back to power by withdrawing up to a hundred HJLP candidates from the second round in favour of Fidesz. A battery of criticism then attacked Fidesz for flirting with the far right, despite Fidesz’s insistence that this offer of assistance was unsolicited, and despite it ruling out the possibility of a post-election coalition with the HJLP. This affair led to one of the best posters of the campaign: designed by the AFD, it featured Orbán and Csurka together on a shampoo bottle, labelled: ‘Two in One: Guaranteed to make your hair fall out’.

‘*Centrum*’. Officially known as the Centre of Solidarity for Hungary, this party was founded just months before the election by Mihály Kupa, a popular independent MP and former minister of finance, and backed by leaders from the now all-but-vanished Christian Democratic People’s Party and Hungarian Democratic People’s Party. It claimed to represent those who pursue the road of professionalism and honesty. Its programme promised to reduce poverty, improve the chances of the youth, develop agriculture, health and education, and reform the system of public administration. Its main objective was to bring about a change in government, ushering in a new coalition that was ‘more powerful but more considerate’ – including, of course, itself. Largely viewed as a wild card in the election, it was expected that the Centre Party would face a steep uphill battle in its bid to reach the five per cent threshold.

Finally, there was the *New Left Side*, set up by Mátyás Szűrös, a defector from the Socialist Party, of which he had been a founder, and which expelled him several months before the elections following his announcement to run as leader of a new party. Disagreeing with the HSP’s harsh tone and increasingly centrist policies – but even more so with that party’s failure to include him on its lists for the April 2002 elections – Szűrös and his party were not expected to reach the five per cent threshold.

Expectations Prior to the Vote

Belief was widespread among political leaders and the public before the first round of elections that the ruling Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Party would be returned to power with a legislative majority. Polling agencies' estimates of the ruling coalition's lead varied, but most gave the joint Fidesz and Hungarian Democratic Forum ticket a lead over its Socialist rival of some four to eight percentage points. Forecasts of the final legislative seat outcome, moreover, indicated that the Fidesz coalition would win re-election with a comfortable majority of 200 or more seats. As the Fidesz chairman Zoltán Pokorni confidently expressed less than two weeks before the election, 'never before has a ruling party been in such a good position ahead of the parliamentary elections as today'.

The other party expected to win seats was the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats, but it faced a tough battle to gain an expected five to seven per cent of the vote along with about 20–25 seats. Expectations for the far-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party were uncertain, and thought to be dependent on the level of turnout. Experts estimated that if turnout were below 60 per cent, then the core supporters of this party would be sufficient to constitute five per cent, but that if overall turnout were above 65 per cent, then the HJLP would most likely not pass the legal threshold. The Centre Party, the Workers' Party and the New Left Party, none of which had won representation in 1998, were not viewed as likely to overcome the five per cent obstacle. No other party was expected to come close to winning seats. Universally, it was expected that post-election politics would be bipolar: if not a two-party system, then something very close.

It therefore came as a surprise when the results of the first round gradually became apparent on the night of 7 April. Working with a high-speed, newly overhauled computerized election system, fairly accurate and complete results were available on-line within hours of the close of balloting at 7 p.m. By approximately 9 p.m., it emerged, first, that far more people had voted than expected, and, second, that the Socialists were doing considerably better than predicted.

But as They Turned Out ...

Turnout was generally predicted to be about 60–65 per cent of the 8.04 million eligible voters, casting ballots in 10,842 polling stations in 3,153 towns and villages across the country. Given the heated nature of the campaign, it was thought that turnout would exceed that of the 1998 election when first-round turnout was 56 per cent. But it was a great surprise when turnout reached 70.5 per cent, exceeding the previous high of 68 per

cent in 1994. Among the regions, turnout was greatest in Budapest, reaching 77.5 per cent, and lowest in Bács-Kiskun county at 65.0 per cent. It was estimated that a large number of voters in 2002 were casting ballots for the first time. Some notable incidents include two separate cases of elderly voters collapsing and dying at the polling stations, although this did not include a Rozália Csiki, a 108-year old voter from Lepsény (who claims she voted for Fidesz, the former Youth Party).

When the results of the first round of voting were declared, the Socialists were in the lead, with close to one per cent of the list vote ahead of their rival. The final list result for the HSP was 42.05 per cent, compared with 41.07 for the combined Fidesz–HDF list. In terms of seats, the HSP lead following the first round was even greater. The Socialists had won outright 25 of the single-member districts seats (one them as a joint candidate) by gaining more than 50 per cent of the vote in each, compared with 19 such victories for the Fidesz–HDF joint candidates. Overall, there were 44 of the 176 single-member districts yielding a result following the first round, a significant departure from previous first round elections (only one first round yielded a seat in 1998, and two in 1994). Furthermore, in contrast with 1998, when there had been 32 single-member districts and two regional PR districts where balloting had to be repeated because turnout dropped below 50 per cent, not a single district in 2002 was declared invalid on these grounds (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
RESULTS FROM THE FIRST ROUND OF VOTING, 7 APRIL 2002

Party List	Votes received	Per cent	SMD seats won, Round 1	Regional List seats won	Total seats
Hungarian Socialist Party	2,361,997	42.05	25	67	92
Fidesz–HDF	2,306,763	41.07	20	69	89
Alliance of Free Democrats	313,084	5.57	0	4	4
Hungarian Justice and Life Party	245,326	4.37			
Centre Party	219,029	3.90			
Hungarian Workers' Party	121,503	2.16			
Independent Smallholders' Party	42,338	0.75			
New Left Side	3,198	0.06			
Reform Party of Smallholders	1,086	0.02			
Social Democratic Party	912	0.02			
Hungarian Roma Party	745	0.01			
Smallholders' Party	451	0.01			
MAVEP	318	0.01			
Total	5,616,750	100.00	45	140	185

The smaller parties were kept in considerable suspense about whether they would win sufficient votes to meet the minimum threshold of five per cent. The Alliance of Free Democrats just passed with slightly over 5.5 per cent of the votes, qualifying for list seats and winning four from the regional list allocation. The HJLP, however, did not overcome the five per cent obstacle, winning only 4.4 per cent of the list vote nation-wide. Other notable results were the 3.9 per cent attained by the new Centre Party, and the 2.2 per cent gained by the Workers' Party. Notable for its abysmal result was the mere 0.75 per cent won by the previously formidable Independent Smallholders' Party, largely discredited by the antics of its outspoken and controversial chairman József Torgyán. As with the Christian Democratic People's Party in 1998, internal disputes, personal scandals and poor relations with the governing party had reduced a former junior coalition partner to virtual extinction.

Following the first round, a total of 140 of the regional list seats were allocated (the remainder being added to the national list for distribution once the final results were known). From the regional list allocation, the Socialists received 69 seats, compared with 67 for the Fidesz–HDF alliance and four for the AFD. On the basis of the first-round results, therefore, the Socialists led by 94 seats to Fidesz–HDF's 87. Considering that it was widely expected that the Alliance of Free Democrats would ally with their former coalition partner, the HSP, this meant the position following the first round was 98 seats for the HSP and AFD versus 87 for the Fidesz–HDF alliance.

A total of 201 seats remained to be allocated in the second round: 131 single-member district contests remained undecided, and following this, 70 seats would be allocated indirectly from the compensatory national list. It was clear that, if Fidesz–HDF were to repeat its spring forward from 1998, it would need to win most of the open contests. All efforts turned quickly to the campaign for the second round.

Round Two

Following his party's unexpected defeat in the first round, the incumbent prime minister and Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán was quick to outline a strategy for recapturing the lead in the second round. At a rally held on 9 April, attended by tens of thousands, he drew the battle lines with a harsh speech warning of dire consequences should the Socialists return to power. Arguing that all the achievements of his government were in jeopardy, he warned that the HSP would exclusively favour international capital that cares only for its own profit, that it would effect drastic rises in gas prices, and that there would ensue a breakdown in public security, claiming for

instance – and incorrectly – that the HSP's programme included legalization of 'certain drugs'. The elections had not been decided in the first round, Orbán told the gathering, adding that Fidesz was the first party in Hungary's post-communist history to increase its number of votes by 200,000 after four years in power.

In this speech, Orbán claimed that the Fidesz target was to win 85 of the 131 open seats. A few days later on Friday, 12 April – the last day on which polls and forecasts could be published legally before the second round of voting – I published an analysis in the daily *Népszabadság* calculating the chances that Fidesz would win a majority of 194 seats should it boost its vote to levels sufficient, on average, to win 85 of the 131 open single-member districts. My computer model indicated that the chances were still only about two in three that Fidesz would gain its legislative majority on the most plausible assumptions required for it to win 85 seats. In general, however, the figure of 85 seats was accepted as the minimal target needed.

On 21 April, Fidesz held a controversial rally at Kossuth Square, behind the parliament, to rally support for its second-round effort. According to Fidesz, the rally drew nearly 2,000,000 people, although Budapest city maintenance workers estimated the number at closer to 300,000–400,000. Prime Minister Orbán exhorted supporters to 'bring one other person' with them to vote for the Fidesz–HDF candidates, to 'guarantee a victory for the civic forces, a victory for Hungary. Go Hungary, Go Hungarians!'

Meanwhile, the contest narrowed considerably to reduce the number of candidates running in the second round. While originally the electoral law was designed to allow the top three contestants to compete against one another, the evolution of electoral strategy in Hungary has led to the tactical withdrawal of candidates becoming the norm. Usually according to agreements between party leaders, one party will withdraw its lower-placing candidates qualifying for the second round, and urge its supporters to support the allied party. In 2002 this had the effect of reducing the 131 open contests effectively to a two-party contest. After considerable negotiations, the HSP agreed to withdraw seven candidates in favour of the AFD, which agreed to withdraw its remaining candidates and to call upon its voters to support the Socialists. On the side of Fidesz, the few candidates of the HJLP and the ISP agreed to step back as well, although not by formal agreement.

By 21 April, the day of the second round, there were just six of the 131 constituencies where there were three candidates, the remainder having been narrowed to two-candidate contests. A total of 7,990 polling stations in 2,169 cities, towns and villages were open for some 6,040,000 eligible voters.

The results of the second round of voting seemed to confirm that the 85-seat goal set by Fidesz was accurate. Winning 75 of the SMD contests, Fidesz made up a remarkable amount of lost ground, considering that of the

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131 districts undecided in the first round the HSP candidate had led the vote in 75 of these, compared with just 57 for Fidesz. As they had done in 1998, Fidesz candidates had managed to rally supporters in the second round and in many districts move from second place to first. The effect, however, was not enough. Once the voters were finished – some 4,365,000 individuals, or 73.5 per cent of the eligible voters – the joint Fidesz–HDF ticket had won a total of only 188 seats, compared with 178 seats for the HSP, and 20 for the AFD (one elected as a joint candidate). With a combined total of 198 seats, the forces of the HSP and the AFD had a ten-seat lead over Fidesz and the HDF, enabling the left–liberal alliance to form the next government (see Table 3).

Examining the composition of those elected, we note some interesting facts (compiled by the Hungarian Press Agency). The representation of women did not significantly change in the legislature: 32 won seats in the 2002 elections, versus 28 in 1998. Twenty of these women belong to the Socialist parliamentary group, nine to Fidesz, two the AFD, and one (the leader, Ibolya Dávid) to the HDF. Incumbents also fared well, as incumbents typically have done in previous Hungarian elections. From the Fidesz group of 165 elected to parliament before the 2002 elections, 123 retained their seats; from the group of 134 HSP legislators, 86 retained seats; for the ADF and the HDF the number of incumbents re-elected was 15 each.

One curious feature was the unprecedented number of namesakes elected in 2002. From different parties, there were two Zsolt Némeths, two József Baloghs, two István Tóths. In the HSP, moreover, there were two László Kovácses, two Gábor Simons, and both a Péter Kis and a Péter Kiss. As if this were not enough confusion, there were also three deputies named András Tóth. Finally, also sharing names were Zoltán Gal and Zoltán J. Gal, a father and son both elected for the HSP.

TABLE 3
FINAL RESULTS AFTER THE SECOND ROUND OF VOTING, 21 APRIL 2002

Parties	Single-member districts	Territorial lists	National lists	Total seats	Percentage of seats
Hungarian Socialist Party	78	69	31	178	46.1
Fidesz–HDF	95	67	26	188	48.7
Alliance of Free Democrats	3	4	13	19	4.9
Total	176	140	70	386	100.0

Following the Election

For the first time in Hungarian politics, the losing side gave indications that it did not accept the legitimacy of the election result. While the changeover of power proceeded in an orderly fashion, the incidence of recounts, the charges of irregularities, and the legal actions brought following the second round were unprecedented in Hungarian electoral history. Alleging fraud in some districts and widespread infringement of campaign laws, numerous individuals from the right called for recounts and in some cases even invalidation of the results and the holding of new elections. Following the first round, HJLP chairman Csurka claimed that irregularities observed by his supporters in the first round had discriminated against votes being counted for the HJLP and Fidesz. Demanding a recount, he began collecting signatures to petition for a complete manual recount of the ballots. This was one of two proposals submitted to the Hungarian president and to the National Election Committee demanding full recounts, although both were rejected for lack of concrete evidence.

In the individual constituency of Gyöngyös, the local election committee ruled that the HSP candidate – previously declared victorious – had broken the rule of campaign silence when his supporters distributed free drinks and goulash soup on election day. Annulling the election results, it called for a by-election to determine the new winner. This ruling was overturned by the Heves county election board, however, because the complaint was filed later than the official deadline of 24 hours following the election day.

Numerous other complaints were also made, although all were resolved without major changes. The Supreme Court reported receiving a total of 56 election-related protests, all rejected within the legal deadline. Once this deadline had passed, Fidesz announced in early May that it would call for a complete recount of the ballots from the election. A law currently in force calls for the destruction of all ballots within 90 days of the election, which would have prevented the recount. The Fidesz grass-roots effort was aimed at amending that law, in order to prevent the possibility of a recount from being lost.

One interesting petition lodged by a law student from Pécs to the National Election Committee concerned the consequences for the national list of candidates who withdrew from the second round. The national list seats are distributed to parties on the basis of the first-round votes of their candidates who did not win seats. This mechanism makes it less painful for third- or fourth-place parties to agree to withdraw their candidates from the second round of individual constituencies – as the AFD did, for example – since the first-round votes of these candidates would collect as votes for the party's national list. The petition argued that under the law on electoral

procedure, candidates who withdraw in writing should be considered as eliminated. Their first-round votes would hence be ignored for the purposes of the national list distribution, which always takes place after the second round of voting. The effect of this interpretation would have been to strip the AFD of more than three-quarters of its seats. Although rejected by the committee, the motion caused a brief but excited stir, especially among partisan experts (and neutral outside observers) on the Hungarian electoral law.

The attempts to mar the legitimacy of the HSP victory following the April elections is no doubt partly a political tactic to position the Fidesz forces before the October 2002 local elections. Hoping to maintain the favourable results achieved in the 1998 local elections, the right has used the April outcome as a tool to mobilize its supporters. While most of the local elections are to small municipal councils, numerous county assemblies and several key mayoralities, including that of Budapest, hang in the balance.

Postscript

The coalition agreement between the HSP and the AFD was officially sealed on 26 May, following the resolution of the election-related challenges and a lengthy period of bargaining between the two parties. The Socialist–Free Democrat Alliance was back in government following four years in opposition, in circumstances similar to those experienced in 1998 – but with a different outcome.

In 1998, the Socialists had won more votes in the first round of voting, and came first in the greatest number of districts. But the Fidesz–HDF candidates in that election had also moved ahead between rounds after rallying voters towards their candidates, enough to ensure that the Fidesz–HDF alliance won more seats in the election than any other party. All three of these events occurred again in 2002. Yet this time, the result was not quite enough to win the prize of government. The reasons are several. For one, there was no viable coalition partner with which Fidesz–HDF, with 188 seats, could form a majority government. Although the HSP had won ten seats fewer than the Fidesz–HDF alliance, along with the AFD it had the seats required to form a majority coalition. Ironically, had the HJLP passed the five per cent threshold, Fidesz might well have had the potential for forming a viable coalition, although it had pledged explicitly before the election not to accept such a coalition. Alternatively, had a viable coalition partner for Fidesz–HDF existed in the Independent Smallholders' Party, Fidesz–HDF might have been able to hold on to power by forming a three-party government as it had previously.

Because the bipolarization of politics had narrowed of the field of political parties, there were far more first-round victories than in any

previous election. This meant that the strong showing of the Socialists in the first round was much harder to undo than in the 1998 election, when Fidesz had the chance to move ahead in not 131 but 175 single-member districts where second rounds were held. The smaller number of open second-round contests in 2002 meant that much more of the outcome had already been determined. Primarily this result was a consequence of the concentration of the vote by two parties. The existence of stronger third- and fourth-party candidates, such as the ISP had provided in 1998, would have denied majority wins to many Socialist candidates in the first round and forced a run-off where Fidesz's rallying effect could have potentially produced more second-round victories.

A final lesson of the election, learned the hard way by Fidesz, is that a party cannot win if it neglects Budapest. With 32 single-member districts and 28 seats to be allocated from its regional list, Budapest offers the greatest density of seats per square kilometre in Hungary's electoral map. Quite simply, the HSP and the AFD did far better in Budapest than did the Fidesz-HDF ticket. The HSP won some 130,000 votes more than Fidesz in Budapest, and the AFD garnered ten per cent of the vote there, nearly twice its national average. Of the 11 individual constituencies decided in the first round from Budapest, every one went to an HSP candidate. From the mandates distributed from the Budapest list, the HSP and AFD together won 16, compared with nine for Fidesz. In the 21 contests decided in the second round in Budapest, Fidesz-HDF candidates won only four. Given that Fidesz-HDF was only six seats short of its target of 194 seats, it is not inaccurate to state that losing Budapest cost the Fidesz government the election. This lesson will no doubt both cause parties to consider their Budapest strategies more carefully in 2006, as well as raising the stakes even further in the Budapest mayoral election scheduled for October 2002.

NOTE

1. A single-member district candidacy requires at least 750 signed recommendation slips from voters in the constituency. A party may submit a regional list if it has managed to establish individual candidacies in at least 25 per cent of the constituencies in the given region, or in a minimum of two constituencies where the region has fewer than eight constituencies overall. In order to submit a nationwide list, a party must establish at least seven regional lists.