



## CHANGING ECONOMICS – CHANGING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN HUNGARY OVER THE 1989-2000 PERIOD

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This paper analyses how economic conditions had possible affects on the voting behaviour of people in parliamentary elections in post-1989 Hungary due to statutory changes over the 1989-2000 period. The analysis focuses on two topics. The first focuses on a number of theories implicating how different economic indicators influence voters. The second is that statutory changes condition voters' responses to economic performance.

**Keywords:** economics, parliamentary elections, economic voting, post-1989 Hungary

### **Introduction**

Since the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Central and Southern Europe, the field of voting studies has found itself at an important juncture. Political science has much to say about democratic transitions and, ultimately, political behaviour in a democratic society. As the basic forms of exercising public power both direct and indirect democracy date back to Ancient Times. While direct democracy is governed by the principles of freedom and equality, representative democracy means political institutions in which the decisions are made by the majority voting of democratically elected representatives.

The changing of the political system and the subsequent transitional period took place between 1989 and 1991 in Eastern, Central and Southern European countries. The collapse of communist regimes was followed by legal, administrative, economic and cultural changes in addition to the political ones.

Hungary became a modern parliamentary democracy, which was formed during the changing of the political system between 1989 and 1991. As a basic political right, the right to vote is provided for in the constitution (basic law), whereas the procedural and substantive, system-like norms and the election rules are regulated by the Act on the election of member of the Parliament and the Act on the electoral procedure, respectively, all of them cardinal laws today. This paper analyses how different economic indicators might be important for voters and how political responsibility might condition voters' responses to economic performance. The analysis focuses on the changes of the Hungarian Parliamentary electoral system over the 1989–2000 period, and on the study of economic voting as well. These studies either focus on a single election (Powers and Cox 1997) or a single country (Bell 1997) or a region (Tucker 2006).

Our findings can be interesting to scholars of elections, of economic voting and indirectly for those who are involved in the discussions regarding the relationship between elections and representation.

Huntington (1991) describes the transition and the changing of the political system in Eastern Europe as 'democracy's third wave', affecting more countries and societies than ever before. Eastern European socialist systems were primarily regarded as permanent regimes and not as transitional ones. The changes in Hungary in the 1980s were regarded as transitions within socialism, proving the capacity of the socialist regime to reform itself instead of foreboding the collapse of the entire system amidst a legitimation crisis.



The changing of the political system in Hungary was both unforeseen and unprecedented in terms of historical international changes.

### **The Hungarian parliamentary electoral system after the changing of the political system**

When looking into modern democracies the square one question is what the relationship between the people and their representation is like. What the answers to this question tend to share is the view that the people, as a political subject, is represented by its elected representatives in an institutional system of power. Therefore it is fair to say that the democratic representative system 'makes the people the subject and part of the institutional power, and not an opposing political subject.' (Bihari, 1999)

Election systems have proved to be the most stable of all institutions of representation in democracies, and as Lijphart (1994) sums it up, the amendments of the systems did not apply to the entire system at hand, only to the formulas used and the parliamentary thresholds. It happens rather rarely that the system is reformed in its entirety, i.e. bringing about comprehensive and radical reforms. This stability shows the conservatism inherent in electoral systems. With the legitimacy of government challenged one is faced with the issue of an electoral reform. Together with several other democratised countries, Hungary opted for a mixed electoral system during the landmark events of 1989. However, the Hungarian system of 1989 is still unique not only because for us, Hungarian it was simple even in its complexity, but also because it is one of the most complex systems in the world. Being a three-tier and – two-round system employing even two of the available election formulas, it earned itself respect since the system that was designed for a one-off use was tried and tested in altogether 6 elections, proving that it was viable and functional.

The regulation of the electoral system, negotiated between 13 June and 18 September 1989 in the course of tri-lateral political negotiations, was adopted in a law requiring a two-thirds majority. Amidst conditions of the political transition the participants of the negotiations agreed to come up with a so-called mixed and two-round and set the threshold for representation in Parliament at 4% to ensure governability and functionality. The mixed system adopted both by those preparing the (National Roundtable) negotiations and by the Members of Parliament was rather complicated since it was trying to combine the advantages of majority and proportionate representation systems, i.e. directness and representativity. As intended by its makers, the law was designed to serve its purpose a single time. Even though the social and political circumstances changed in the meantime, the system was up and running and served altogether six elections. From as early as 1990 on a number of proposals have been tabled to amend the Hungarian parliamentary elections system.

Even though a number of other suggestions were put forward in the past 20 years to amend the electoral system in addition to the proposals above, the system *per se* remained unchanged in its most important features. One of the key issues such proposals were focusing on was the parliamentary headcount. Although most opinions on this tended to include the proposal to reduce the headcount on grounds of efficiency and cost-cutting, not very many feasibility and impact studies were published and governments continued to be formed from 1990 on without a hitch in the electoral system elaborated when the political system was changed. Analysing headcount issues in a European context and on the basis of data from all over Europe Rózsa (1999:4-5) concluded in 1999 that the Hungarian Parliament counts as a large one in Europe; its headcount even renders it the largest among countries with a similar sized population, but nonetheless not so large that it would be an absolute necessity to reduce it.

In addition to the points above we can conclude that during the discussions concerning the reform of an electoral system the problem often pointed out by experts, namely the disproportionate size of the individual constituencies was not given due attention.



Ever since their establishment the differences in the disproportionate size of the constituencies grew up to two or even three times, which, due the demographic changes that took place since, triggered further disproportionalities. In democratic systems such anomalies are normally corrected after the forthcoming ten-year census.

What logically follows from this is that in the period preceding the two-thirds victory of the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition in 2000 the parties failed to come to an agreement on the electoral reform, which was probably due partly to the fact that the old system was negotiated before it was set up and partly to its relatively balanced nature and the democratic values achieved and acknowledged in the mixed system.

### **Economic Ideology of Post-1989 Statutory Changes in Hungary between 1989 and 2000**

The path to a market economy is creating poverty, unemployment, and enormous economic uncertainty. As Hungary introduced market economy in 1989, the main results were the creation of massive inequality, of economic uncertainty and crises, and the ignorance of the human costs of transition. The central elements of this overall process are privatizations and foreign investment. (cf. Rider, 1994 and Powers and Cox, 1997)

The legal system plays a vital role in creating capitalist societies. There are important laws to create a free market economy, i.e. the reforms of the socialist state and the formation of post-socialist laws. The transition to a market economy in Hungary caused crises, which meant that only a small and wealthy entrepreneurial upper class enjoyed the benefits of it and most of the population were impoverished. Free market ideology and privatization – among other factors – caused enormous material inequality and poverty.

The post-1989 East European path to market economy is called the false promise of the free market by Klaudt. (Klaudt, 1995:1) He states that Hungary failed to successfully re-create itself as a free market economy despite of the fact that Hungary had been experimenting with marketization since 1968. It was the wealthiest country in Eastern Europe before 1989. By 1989 Hungary's economy had already taken substantial steps to capitalism. Privatization and foreign investment was the essence of the project of transforming Hungary into a capitalist market economy.

The creation of a market economy dominated by private enterprise has been accomplished through statutory, rather than constitutional change. The legal environment in the final years of state socialism changed due to legal reforms. We highlight two laws as being part of the legal reform before 1989. The first one is known as the Companies Act (Act XXIV of 1988 regarding investments by non-residents in Hungary). This Act reintroduced capitalist production relations to the Hungarian economy and created a legal framework for developing employer business organizations similar to those of the western market economies. The second one is the Foreign Investment Act (Act VI on Economic Associations of 1988) this was the most liberal foreign investment law in the region. It gave foreigners the rights to create or join Hungarian companies and gave them the full protection and security of their investments. These are the seeds of a market economy in the late socialist legal system.

At the end of the 1980s the economic and financial crisis became untenable in Hungary, the communist party reformists negotiated and compromised with the opposition as the best solution, which ultimately took the form of Roundtable Talks (cf. Halmai, 1998; Bozóki and Karácsony, 2002; Ripp 2002).



The socialist constitution of 1949 had never been repealed up to 2011 but was extensively rewritten in 1989 on the basis of the Roundtable Talks. According to Paczolay „...scrupulous attention was paid to ensure that changes were carried out within the constitutional and legal systems”, in other words, the changes were not only “...legally prepared, but were also based on an existing Constitution and emphasis was placed upon the continuity of the legal system” (Paczolay 1993: 561). The new constitution created a western-style parliamentary democracy, as part of it an independent constitutional court, and an independent judiciary. The old constitution was given a completely new meaning by discarding of the references to socialist values and prioritizing rights in an absolute sense (cf. Paczolay 1993b: 24). The rewritten version completely changed the substantive value and status of the constitution. Unlike most western constitutions, it defines the basic economic doctrine of the country and certain economic rights of individuals. The constitution declares that “Hungary has a market economy in which public and private property are to receive equal consideration and protection under the law,” (Constitution of the Republic of Hungary, Ch. I, Art. 9, § (1)) and that the state “recognizes and supports the right to enterprise and the freedom of economic competition.” (Constitution of the Republic of Hungary Ch. I, Art. 9, § (2))

Two distinct objectives drove the reform of the legal system between 1989 and 2000. First, Hungary sought to create a western-style multi-party democracy, second the creation of a market economy. The government’s top priority was selling state enterprises to foreign investors. The Parliament passed more laws to further liberalize the banking system, regulate bankruptcies, define contract and, to some extent, property.

It is difficult to isolate the specific effects of each statutory change on economics. (cf. Powers and Cox, 1997). Privatisation has a special role among these. As Rider states "Privatisation is a fetish of the era, as well as a strange euphemism for an ideological crusade. It offers both negative and positive potential. The danger is that it will merely create the conditions for massive increases in inequality of income, wealth and power, and in the case of eastern and central Europe enable foreign capital to obtain and/or cement control over national economic and social policies, as well as create more fertile conditions for the ‘mafiosation’ of the State." (Rider, 1994:589) In other words, privatization will determine society's economic winners and losers. (cf. Stark, 1991)

The essence of successful reform in Eastern Europe and in Hungary at that period should be economic democracy, not just political democracy, because economic dissatisfaction causes political dissatisfaction, and these influence the voting behaviour of people.

### **Studies of Economic Voting**

Our goal is to make a contribution to the understanding of the interaction between economic factors and electoral outcomes in post-communist Hungary, i.e. how parliamentary election results can be affected by economic conditions.

While studying the Hungarian parliamentary electoral system from the changing of the political system between 1989 and 1991, we can ask questions about vote choice. Why people vote the way they do is one of the most often asked questions in economics and political science. Voting behaviour is an important topic in economics and political science. Further generally asked questions are the following ones: Do citizens make logical and informed choices? How has the economy affected the vote for the parties that contested the given election? Why do voters act the way they do? Our final question can be whether democracy is working or not. In this paper, we give a summary of the different models of economic voting and give the example of a more general model that can be applied in any post-communist Hungarian context. Elections serve as a means of linking citizens to government.



They provide a means of legitimizing governmental authority. In this paper theories of electoral behaviour will be studied in the examined period.

### **Theories of Electoral Behaviour**

One of the first major systematic examinations of electoral behaviour, i.e. vote choice can be found in *The American Voter* by Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, (1960), this is an impressive study of the research on American political behaviour. The Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan in 1960 restored the political dimension to data and published an accumulation of survey research materials covering national, state and local elections from 1948 through 1956. The examinations of vote choice are basically social-psychological ones. The voters are described as driven by an attitude, it means that their party identification, partisanship is basically unchangeable. Some partisans could be won over by short term forces, and others, the independents could be swung over as well.

#### *The Retrospective and Prospective Models of Voting Behaviour*

Since the publication of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) there is agreement that macroeconomic issues "matter" for political evaluations, but how they matter is not fully understood. Still many researchers have revised their view of the American electorate and some of them developed an alternative approach, i.e. the theory of retrospective voting. According to this theory vote choice has been explained by the voters' retrospective evaluation (Fiorina 1981), voters reward the incumbent administration for good performance while in office and punish them for bad performance by voting. Fiorina (1981) also notes that retrospective judgments demand less of voters than prospective judgments, voters can take advantage of the presence of an incumbent to greatly simplify their vote decisions. (Chappell and Keech, 1985). Later a new direction has been taken in the study of economics and politics. Researchers have begun to focus on the role of prospective economic evaluations of vote choice. Lockerbie (2008) argues that economic evaluations are strongly related to voting behaviour, i.e. voters take into account both what has happened and what they think will happen when they vote. MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson (1992) combine the two models and make a distinction between the 'peasant' and the 'banker'. The former is cannot be fully applied in the post-communist countries. We need further discussion of how economic conditions affect election results.

#### *The Referendum and the Transitional Models for Predicting the Effect of Economic Conditions in Election Results*

Tucker (2006) uses an original data set of regional level economic, demographic, and electoral variables, i.e. a data set of 20 national presidential and parliamentary elections from Russia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. He presents two models for predicting the effect of economic conditions in election results in post-communist countries. The models are the following ones: the Referendum Model and the Transition Model.

The former predicts that Incumbent parties will perform better in areas of the country with better economic conditions, while the latter predicts that New Regime parties will perform better in areas of the country where the economy is stronger and Old Regime parties will perform better where the economy is weaker.



The effect of the economic conditions on Incumbent parties is largely conditional on their status as New Regime parties, Old Regime parties, or neither type of party. Old Regime parties can be associated with the prior regime, New Regime parties with the newly emerging democratic and capitalist world.

According to Tucker (2006) we can define Old Regime parties as those linked directly to the party that ruled during the previous non-democratic regime. Within this category we can identify two sets of parties. The first party is the legal successor to the previous ruling party. The second party group consists of all ‘splinter’ parties, they have split from the legal successor party in order to remain what is perceived as a closer ideology of the old ruling party. The Old Regime parties are noticeably associated with the previous regime. New Regime parties – on the contrary – are a set of parties connected to the transition itself.

The second assumption of the model is that, instead of assuming that voters are guided by concerns with specific economic problems, we assume that they have general concerns about the economy; they react to it either being “bad” or “good”. As both assumptions are motivated by the presence of simultaneous economic and political transitions, we refer to this model as the Transition Model.

The Transition Model (Tucker 2016) therefore produces two hypotheses. The New Regime Hypothesis predicts that New Regime parties will do better where economic conditions are better, and worse where economic conditions are worse. Conversely, the Old Regime Hypothesis predicts that Old Regime parties will benefit where economic conditions are worse and will do worse where economic conditions are better. Both predictions stem from a conception of the transition as representing a sharp break from the past, complete with new dangers and opportunities. The New Regime Hypothesis is based on a fairly straightforward logic. Voters who are enjoying more benefits from economic reforms and have avoided more of the pain from economic reforms are likely to want the reforms to continue. Irrespective of who is currently in power, there is a good chance that voters will think that New Regime parties are likely to continue pursuing policies that ensure the transition to a full-fledged market economy. As we should find more voters who are enjoying the benefits of the transition where the economy is performing better, we expect New Regime parties to likewise perform better where the economy is stronger.

The logic underlying the Old Regime Hypothesis is a bit subtler. If a voter has not benefited from the reform – has not enjoyed the new prosperity and is suffering greater hardships – then he/she is likely to want to stay away from parties that are associated with reform. Having excluded New Regime parties as an option, however, the voter still has many other parties to choose between in casting his/her vote. While he/she may not have much information about most of those parties, he/she does know something about the Old Regime parties. When they were in power, there were none of the new problems associated with the reforms, such as unemployment, inflation, and non-payment of wages, etc. Thus, if the voter is particularly concerned about these problems, then he/she knows at least one type of party that in the past – at least on the surface – dealt with these problems successfully. Even if a return to the past is not desired, the voter still is likely to have more confidence in the Old Regime parties to address these issues than any of the other non-New Regime parties. And the worse the economic conditions are, the more likely he/she is to act on these concerns when she casts his/her ballot. Both models could be consistent with either retrospective or prospective approaches. Although the Referendum Model is clearly based on past performance, a voter may be acting out of concern for the future in trying to keep the incumbent parties out of power. Likewise, although the Transition Model is predicated on choosing preferred parties for the future, the expectation of what these parties may or may not do is taken from the past.



Likewise, if a voter enjoyed more of the benefits from the new economy, he/she would be less motivated to turn to an Old Regime party. Thus, we arrive at the Old Regime Hypothesis, which predicts greater success for Old Regime parties when economic conditions are poor and less when they are strong. Included in the Tucker 2006 study all elections for national office – parliamentary and presidential – took place in each of the following countries: Russia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic between 1990 and 1999.

Traditional analyses of the effects of economic conditions on election results in established democracies have usually relied on measures of changes in income or economic growth. In the post-communist context, however, unemployment and inflation have been arguably the most drastic economic developments and the ones to which we might think voters would be most likely to respond.

According to the Incumbent Hypothesis in many settings, incumbents have a significant, often almost insurmountable, advantage at election time. In this paper – firstly – we are interested in what effect incumbency has upon voters' engagement with election campaigns, because the presence of an incumbent candidate can provide an easy voting cue that enables voters to make easier and earlier vote decisions. Our second question is how campaign period attentiveness affects incumbent support. Voters who are aware of who the incumbent is should be best able to use that cue when voting. To that end, we assess whether those with more knowledge tend to support incumbents, and whether that support is conditioned by campaign attentiveness. Regardless of the setting, incumbency can provide an important and powerful cue for voters (cf. Alford and Hibbing, 1981).

On the basis of Tucker' data analysis (2006) the overall conclusions remain the same: there is much stronger empirical support for the Transition Model than the Referendum Model and there is more support for the Old Regime Hypothesis, followed by the New Regime Hypothesis, and followed by the Incumbency Hypothesis.

Based on the results of different data analysis (Tucker 2006) our conclusion is that there is more empirical support for the Transition Model than the Referendum Model Thus we arrive at a second major empirical finding: the effect of the economy on Incumbent parties is almost completely dependent on their relationship to the transition. For Incumbent parties that are also New Regime parties, Tucker (2006) found strong support for the prediction of the Incumbency Hypothesis across a wide number of cases. But for Incumbent Parties that are also Old Regime parties, he found almost no evidence that these parties performed better in parts of the country where the economy was stronger.

Across numerous tests Tucker' data analysis (2006) definitely generate more empirical support for the Transition Model, and its predicted effects on New Regime and Old Regime parties, than for the Referendum Model, which made predictions about Incumbent parties. Of the three hypotheses, we consistently find the strongest empirical support for the Old Regime Hypothesis, followed by the New Regime Hypothesis, and then the Incumbency Hypothesis.

The debate has been raised to prominence once again in the edited volume *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation* (Manin, Przeworski and Stokes 1999). In the opening chapters of the volume, the authors very clearly frame the debate as one between “Sanctioning Representation” and “Mandate Representation.”

In the case of the former, voters exert control over politicians by threatening to punish them in subsequent elections, while the latter, voters control politicians by voting for politicians whose policies they prefer

As a final conclusion, we can say that the results of the study are certainly suggesting an interesting avenue for future research.



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