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Hungary's Election Process

The Republic of Hungary (population: 10 million) is a parliamentary democracy, where parliamentary elections are held every four years. Hungary has a mixed electoral system, based on majority and proportional representation. The Hungarian unicameral Parliament (also called National Assembly) has a total of 386 members, of whom 176 represent the electorate, each member representing the people in one single-member constituency. They are elected directly by voters in the given constituency, while 210 members are elected from party lists and national lists, based on proportional representation. This means that each voter casts two ballots on election day: one for a candidate and one for a party.

There are no primary elections and caucuses, but people can show their support of a potential candidate by recommending him or her, i.e. writing his/her name on an official form (commonly referred to as “knocking slip”) and giving it to an assistant. During the first stage of the campaign these assistants go from house to house, knocking at doors, trying to collect as many of these slips as possible. One voter can recommend only one candidate. In order to run in the election a candidate has to have at least 750 slips. Campaigning on election day and the day before is forbidden. A candidate wins if he/she gains more than 50% of the votes (absolute majority). If no candidate has obtained more than half of the votes, a second round is held fourteen days after the first round, involving the top three candidates (as well as anybody else who has received more than the 15% threshold of votes). Since any candidate may withdraw from the election between the two rounds, election results may be significantly different in the second round than in the first. The winner in the second round is the one who receives the most votes (relative majority). Those who do not win still have a chance of obtaining a seat in the Parliament.

Each of the 19 counties and the capital Budapest are considered electoral regions, “represented” by 152 candidates. However, these candidates are nominated by the parties. A party can compile a regional list of candidates for the given county/for Budapest, if it has candidates in the first round in at least one fourth of the constituencies in a given county/in Budapest. It is not possible to vote for these candidates separately, votes are cast only on the regional list as a whole, i.e. essentially you vote for a party. If a party has received at least 5% of the total number of regional list votes in the whole country, it will have seats in the Parliament. Seats are distributed in the order of the candidates' names on the list. A party can secure its candidate a parliamentary seat by putting his/her name at the top of the list, just in case he/she loses in the first round in his/her constituency. First-round winners of constituencies are automatically deleted from the list. The actual number of seats that a party wins is determined in proportion of the votes. After election officials determine how many votes can be converted into one seat in a given county – this depends on the available seats assigned to the county (typically 4-6, in some counties 8-14, in Budapest 28) and the number of votes – the number of votes a party has received

is divided by the number of votes required for one seat. Let us illustrate this. Assuming that in county X the number of available parliamentary seats is 11 and 39 568 votes convert into one seat, party A that has received 239 008 votes wins 6 seats ($6 \times 39\,568 = 237\,408$), but 1 600 votes are left over. These left-over votes (or remainder votes) are carried over to the national list.

The national list serves as a kind of compensatory mechanism. It enables a party to win some more seats, using the left-over votes of party lists and the votes cast for non-winning party candidates in single-member constituencies. Any party that has been able to compile seven regional lists is allowed to compile a national list. Seats are distributed in proportion of the votes using a different mathematical formula than in the case of regional votes. But similarly to regional votes, candidates are assigned seats in the order of their names on a national list and those candidates who have already got into the Parliament (either as winners of constituencies or from regional lists) are automatically deleted from the national list of the party.

The president of the Republic of Hungary is elected in a secret ballot by at least two thirds or, after two unsuccessful votes, by a simple majority of MPs for a five-year term. The prime minister is elected by a simple majority of MPs for four years. Real power lies with the prime minister.

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