

GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERNS OF THE 1998 HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The changes in East-Central Europe after 1989 are pivotal in modern history. Political geographers and scientists have been discussing the geopolitical and ideological significance of these events extensively. (*O'Loughlin-Wusten 1993*) The emerging democratic systems in this region provide unique opportunities for the study of the transition from a single-party to a multi-party system and, moreover, the genesis of a pluralistic society.

In terms of the development of multi-party democracy Hungary represents a specific case in East-Central Europe. Unlike the experience of many of its neighbours, the Hungarian communist dictatorship was transformed to a parliamentary democracy in a gradual manner. Both of the freely elected post-communist governments were able to complete their full terms, all three post-communist elections resulted in new structures of powers in the form of coalition governments which made possible rotation and thereby the maturing of political parties. The high degree of political stability and the smooth transformation of the political system was quite unique among the new democracies of East-Central Europe, the only comparable country being perhaps Poland. Therefore it is appropriate that this publication should give an insight into both Hungary and Poland. This essay will focus on Hungary.

In this paper we try to explore the geographical differences of the Hungarian electorate in the 1998 parliamentary elections. After a short overview of the post-1989 elections, the nature of the Hungarian electoral system is discussed. Then a picture will be drawn of the results of the 1998 May elections, where special attention is paid to the long-term characteristics of post-communist elections. Variations in voting behaviour are explained by historical factors as well as the present socio-economic structure of the country. Finally, we try to integrate our findings into a common theoretical framework.

OVERVIEW OF POST-COMMUNIST PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN HUNGARY

Moves towards a western-style democracy and market economy had its roots in Hungary as far back as the 1956 anti-communist revolution. Pressure for a more open society was steady in the 1970s and 1980s. The first multi-candidate elections, within a

one-party system, were permitted in the 1970s. The ruling communist party supported a law passed in 1983 mandating contested elections in all parliamentary seats. In 1985 the first of these contested elections was held and a number of so-called independent candidates defeated official party candidates.

When the collapse of the system became obvious at the end of the 1980s, the communist party started "roundtable discussions" with several opposition groups and organisations regarding the possibility of the Hungarian constitution and establishing a multi-party system. During these negotiations a compromise was reached between the Government and opposition groups which legalised parties. At the end of 1989 a new electoral law was passed by Parliament and the first free-elections after 1947 were scheduled for March 1990. (Kovács 1993)

In 1990, in the first free election, the (Communist) Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP), which had ruled the country for 43 years, was defeated. The party received 3.68% of the votes and thus missed the 4% threshold which was necessary for parliamentary representation. The conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) won the elections with 24.73% of the votes and formed a coalition government with two smaller right-wing parties, the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP; *Table 1*). The biggest opposition party in Parliament was the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) with 21.93%, backed by – at least ideologically – its smaller sister-party, the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ). The only left-wing party which received seats in the newly-elected Parliament was the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) with 10.89% of the actual votes.

Four years later, in May 1994, the centre-right parties were defeated and the election returned to power the reform wing of the former Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, now the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), with a large majority. The 32.99% of the votes meant that the Socialist Party gained 209 out of the 386 seats in Parliament and thus achieved an absolute majority. The second most successful party in the elec-

Table 1
Distribution of votes for party-lists in the post-communist elections (%)
(Only parties with parliamentary representation are included)

Parties	1990	1994	1998
Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF)	24.73	11.74	–
Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ)	21.93	19.74	7.57
Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP)	11.73	8.82	13.45
Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)	10.89	32.99	32.92
Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ)	8.95	7.02	29.48
Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP)	6.46	7.03	–
Hungarian Truth and Life Party (MIÉP)	–	–	5.47
Other parties	15.31	12.66	11.11
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

tion was the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) with 19.74% of the votes and 69 seats in Parliament.

The conservative parties lost support in all regions of the country. The former victor, the moderate centre-right Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) gained less than half of its votes in 1990 and finished in third place with 11.74%. The fourth biggest party, the Smallholders' Party (FKGP) received only 8.82% compared to 11.73% in 1990. Two parties, FIDESZ and the KDNP performed even less successfully and ended up as the smallest parliamentary parties with roughly 7% of the votes each.

In spite of the fact that the threshold for parliamentary representation was raised from 4% to 5% in 1994, the same six parties were able to achieve representation in both elections, but the balance of power shifted enormously. After the 1994 elections, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) formed a coalition with its former liberal opposition partner, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), holding a comfortable majority of 278 seats (72%) in Parliament.

Just as the ousting of the Communist Party in 1990 came as no surprise, the defeat of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in 1994 was equally to be expected. The years between 1990-1994 were difficult years of transition and modernisation. Despite the fact that the country attracted two thirds of the total foreign direct investment in the former socialist countries, most Hungarian companies remained inefficient and many went bankrupt. Rising unemployment (12-13%), high inflation rates (25-30%) and declining social security were the main features of the transition. The 1994 result was the outcome of the dissatisfaction of electorate with the performance of the MDF government. Many voters, disappointed by the arrogant rhetoric of the former centre-right coalition government and disillusioned by economic difficulties, were motivated to vote against the previous government rather than for some clearly stated alternative. The protest nature of voting in 1994 is also supported by the fact that the greatest increase in support for the MSZP came in crisis-ridden Eastern Hungary where industrial decline and unemployment were at their most serious.

The four years of the left-liberal coalition government also proved to be difficult. An increasing budget deficit, high unemployment and economic stagnation was the heritage of the new regime. The new government implemented strict restrictions (the so-called Bokros package) in the budget and financial policy in spring 1995, which was a near disaster for most people, especially the older and retired workers and public sector employees. As a consequence of this harsh fiscal policy, Hungarian economy started to recover gradually. By the time of the 1998 elections the economy was showing an astonishing 5% growth, a performance experienced last time in Hungary in the mid-1970s, thus the ruling parties had an optimistic perspective to be re-elected for another term. However, the outcome of the elections brought an unexpected surprise.

THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN HUNGARY

The Hungarian electoral system, modelled on that of the Federal Republic of Germany, is a mixture of a single-member electoral district and proportional represen-

tation using two rounds of balloting. In practice two elections are going on at the same time, because each elector has two votes, one to cast for a specific candidate and another to cast for a particular party. (Kovács 1993) These two elections are separated but linked. One link is that most, but not all, the candidates in the constituency represent particular political parties. The other, more important link is made by geography. (Dingsdale-Kovács 1996, Martis et al. 1992) The country is divided into 176 parliamentary electoral districts. The territories and boundaries of these districts are based on the geographical distribution of population to ensure broadly similar numbers of voters in each district. However, these districts 'nest' within counties. County boundaries are therefore incorporated into the system, making them discrete territories that become the units for the first tier of the two-tier proportional representation system.

Each party usually puts up a list of county candidates equal to the number of seats apportioned to that county. The county list is allowed to stand if the party is able to nominate a candidate (i.e. collects 750 recommendations) in at least two districts in that county. The 'County List' of candidates elects members on the basis of votes cast for each party in the 20 counties of Hungary (the capital city Budapest is included as a county). The second tier is the 'National List' of candidates who are chosen using votes cast for their party in the country as a whole, but which have not affected the result at the district or county level (i.e. 'scrap' votes). Political parties must initially organise county lists in at least seven counties to be eligible to participate in the national voting pool.

Any party gaining 5% (in 1990 only 4%) or more of the total national vote has a right to representation in Parliament. The number of constituency members is fixed at 176, but the balance between candidates elected on the 'County List' or 'National List' can vary depending on the pattern of votes cast, to make up the 386 members of Parliament.

There are over 130 political parties officially registered in Hungary. The proliferation of parties owed a great deal to the liberal requirements of the law (Martis et al. 1992) and few had any real organisation. Most of the smaller parties voice the opinions of specific interest groups, such as peasants, smallholders, environmentalists, pensioners, entrepreneurs or the unemployed. This variety of 'niche' parties reflects the plurality of Hungarian society which has rapidly emerged since 1990 and are often a local manifestation of single-issue politics. Few of these parties could expect to play a role in the elections after 1990.

In the 1990 elections 19 parties had sufficient support to set up a county list and only 12 parties could set up a national list. In 1994 the same number of parties were able to set up a county list; however, the number of national lists increased to 15. Four years later in 1998, only 15 parties gained sufficient support to set up a county list and 12 to participate in the national list competition. The decreasing number of parties both in Parliament and in the contest reflects the gradual maturing of the party-system and the development of the Hungarian electorate.

THE RESULTS OF THE 1998 ELECTIONS

In 1998 the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) nearly repeated its 1994 performance and finished in first place with 32.92% of the votes in the first round of the elections. The second biggest party was the moderate-conservative FIDESZ with 29.48%. Since the other parties received significantly fewer votes than the two front-runners, the final decision remained for the second round of voting, the single candidate competition. Thanks to its clever campaign and skilful coalition tactics FIDESZ was able to integrate all conservative votes in the second round and won 90 of the 176 single constituency seats, compared to the Socialists' 54 seats. As a result the biggest party in Parliament became FIDESZ with 148 seats on aggregate, as opposed to the Socialist Party (MSZP) with 134 seats. Thus, after four years of socialist-liberal government FIDESZ had the right to form a conservative coalition government with the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) and the remnants of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF).

Two particular aspects of the geography of voting indicate the importance of the dynamic changes between 1994-1998 for the progress of democratic politics in Hungary. These are turnout and patterns of support for the major parties at settlement level.

Voter participation

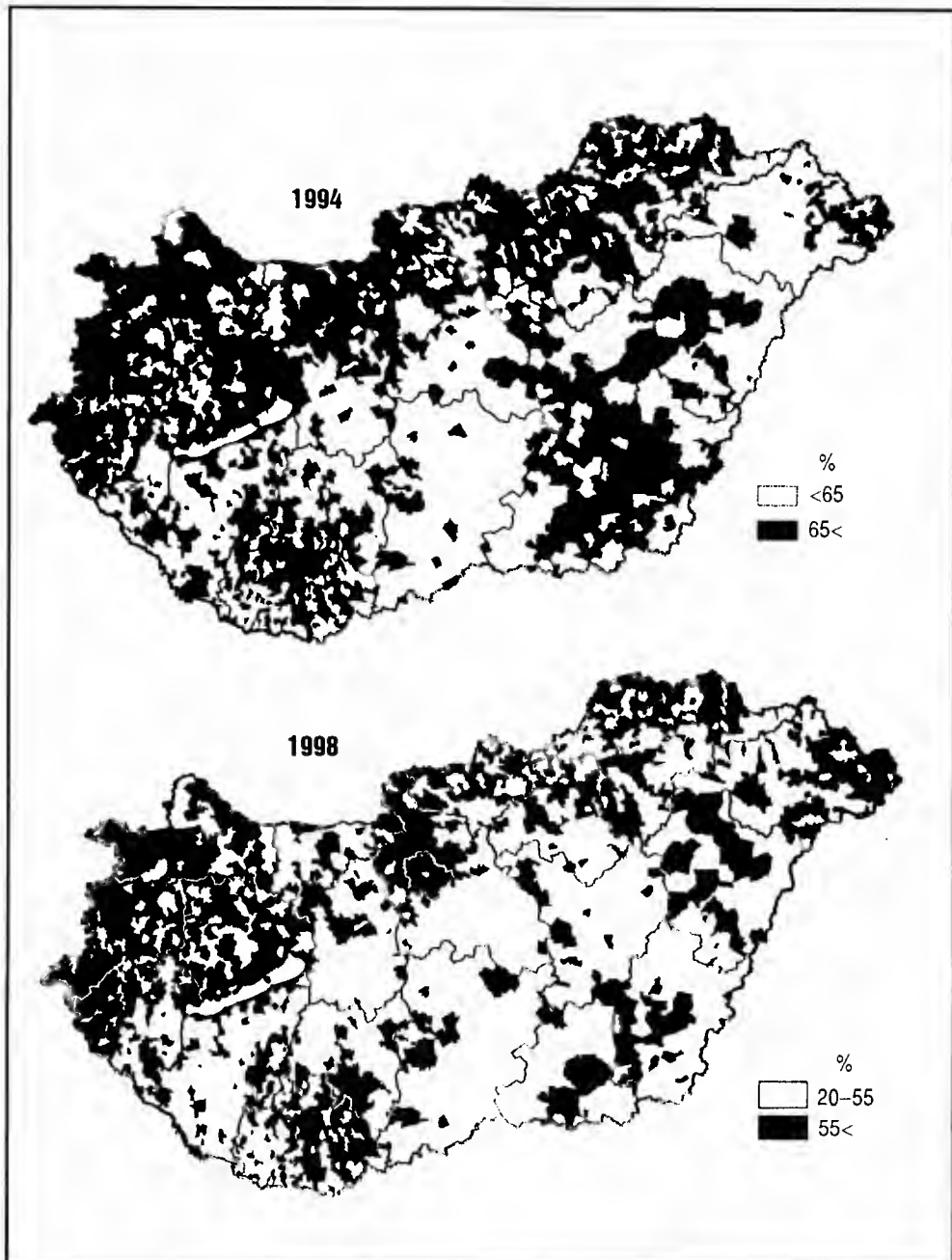
In 1990, 65% of the electorate voted in the first round and 45% in the second one. In 1994, 69% voted in the first round and 55% in the second one. This overall increase in participation was a favourable feature and one would have expected that turnout would increase well above 70% in the 1998 elections, and thus Hungary would approach the level of Western democracies. (*Hajdú 1992*) Therefore, the 56% turnout in the first round of the 1998 elections was a disappointing result, which was not counterbalanced by the astonishingly high participation (57%) of the second round.

It seems likely that the unexpected decrease in political awareness between 1994-1998 is related to more than one factor. Among the reasons we would mention people's general disappointment in politics, as well as the 'quiet campaign' of the ruling Socialist Party or the nice sunny weather on the day of elections, which diverted many voters to weekend activities and away from voting.

The geographical pattern shows stability when compared with 1994. (*Figure 1*) In both elections the highest turnouts were recorded in the north-west of the country. The difference between Eastern and Western Hungary is about 20% on average; in two eastern counties (Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Hajdú-Bihar) participation rates remained below 50%, necessitating a repeat of the first-round election. It seems likely that this pattern of political awareness is related to the divergent socio-economic development of regions.

According to survey data the most important variables predicting voting participa-

Figure 1
Election turnout, 1994 and 1998



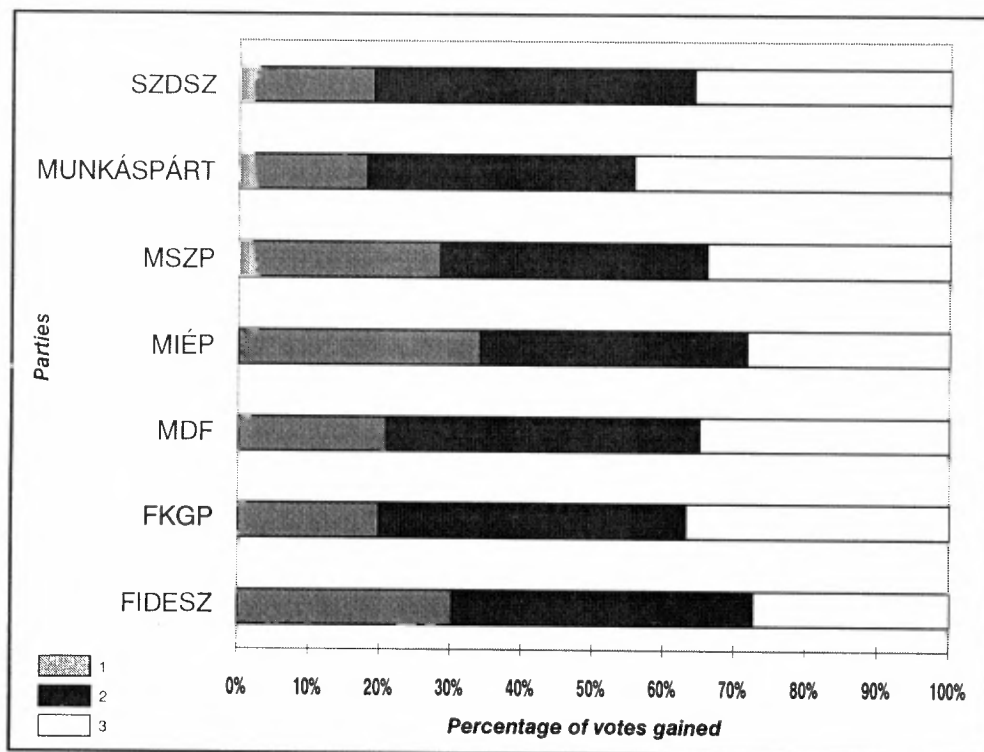
Kovács, Zoltán : Geographical Patterns of the 1998 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections.
In: Spatial Research in Support of the European Integration. Pécs: Centre for Regional Studies,
1999. 97-112. p. Discussion Papers. Special

recession. In this context the 1994 and 1998 general elections in Hungary represent important political barometers of the transition, reflecting the fortunes and misfortunes of regional performance in the dynamism of transition.

Figure 3 displays the data for each of the top seven parties with respect to settlement. Out of them only five reached the 5% threshold and gained direct parliamentary representation in 1998. However, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) managed to send 17 candidates into the new Parliament with the aid of FIDESZ support, whereas the marxist-leninist Munkáspárt (Workers' Party) remained out of Parliament.

As in the earlier two elections, the liberal western-oriented Free Democrats (SZDSZ) won most of their votes in Budapest and other towns and on the other end of the scale the conservative Smallholders' Party (FKGP) and FIDESZ were supported mainly by non-Budapest voters. The distribution of votes cast for MSZP and MDF is somewhat balanced. However, the most astonishing pattern can be observed in the case of the extreme right MIÉP and extreme left Munkáspárt. The former was supported mainly by urban voters, with the highest proportion of Budapest residents

Figure 3
Voting patterns by settlements types, 1998



1 - Budapest, 2 - towns, 3 - villages

Figure 4
Voting results of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)

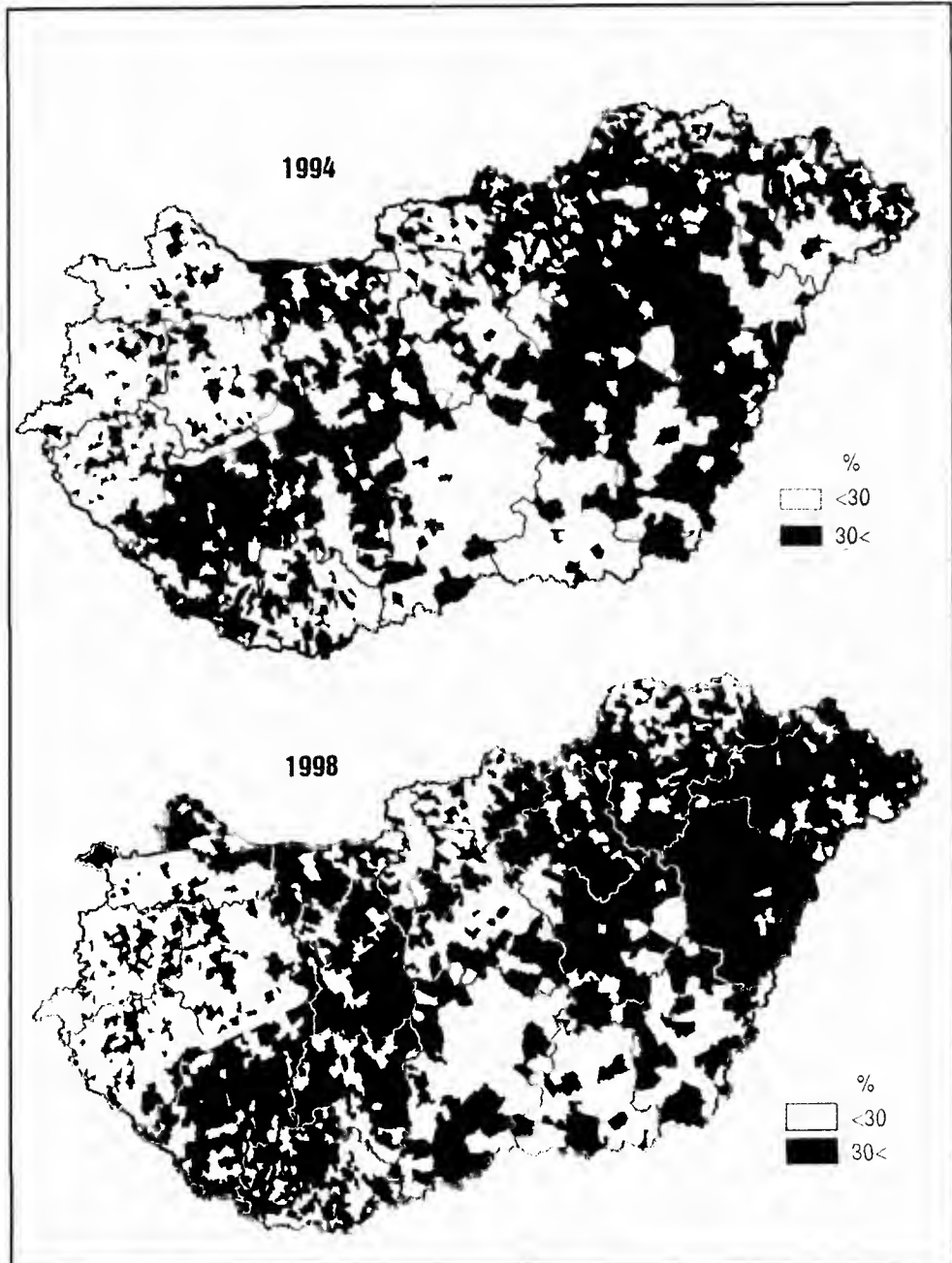


Figure 5
Voting results of the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ)

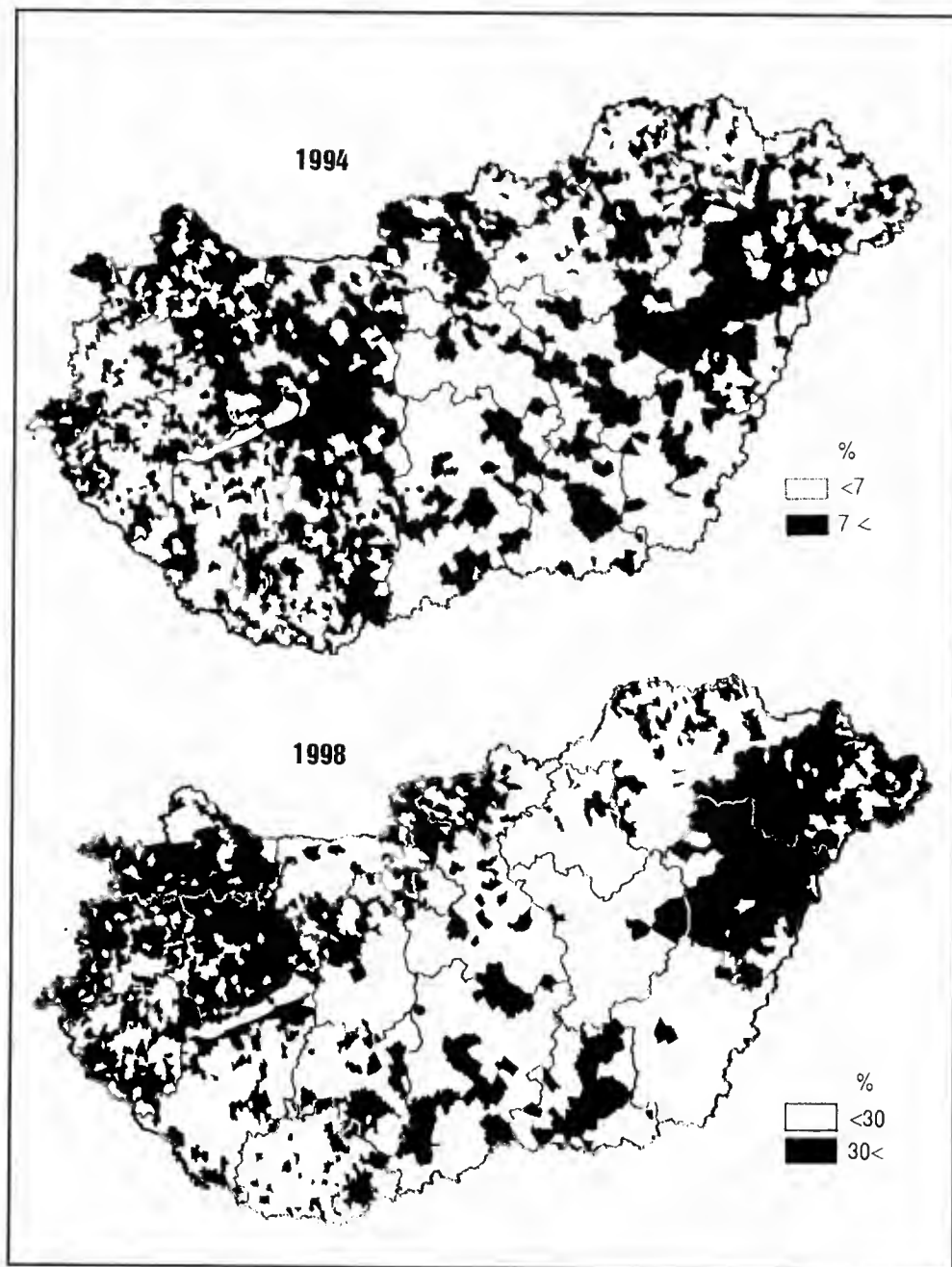


Figure 6
Voting results of the Workers' Party (Munkáspárt)

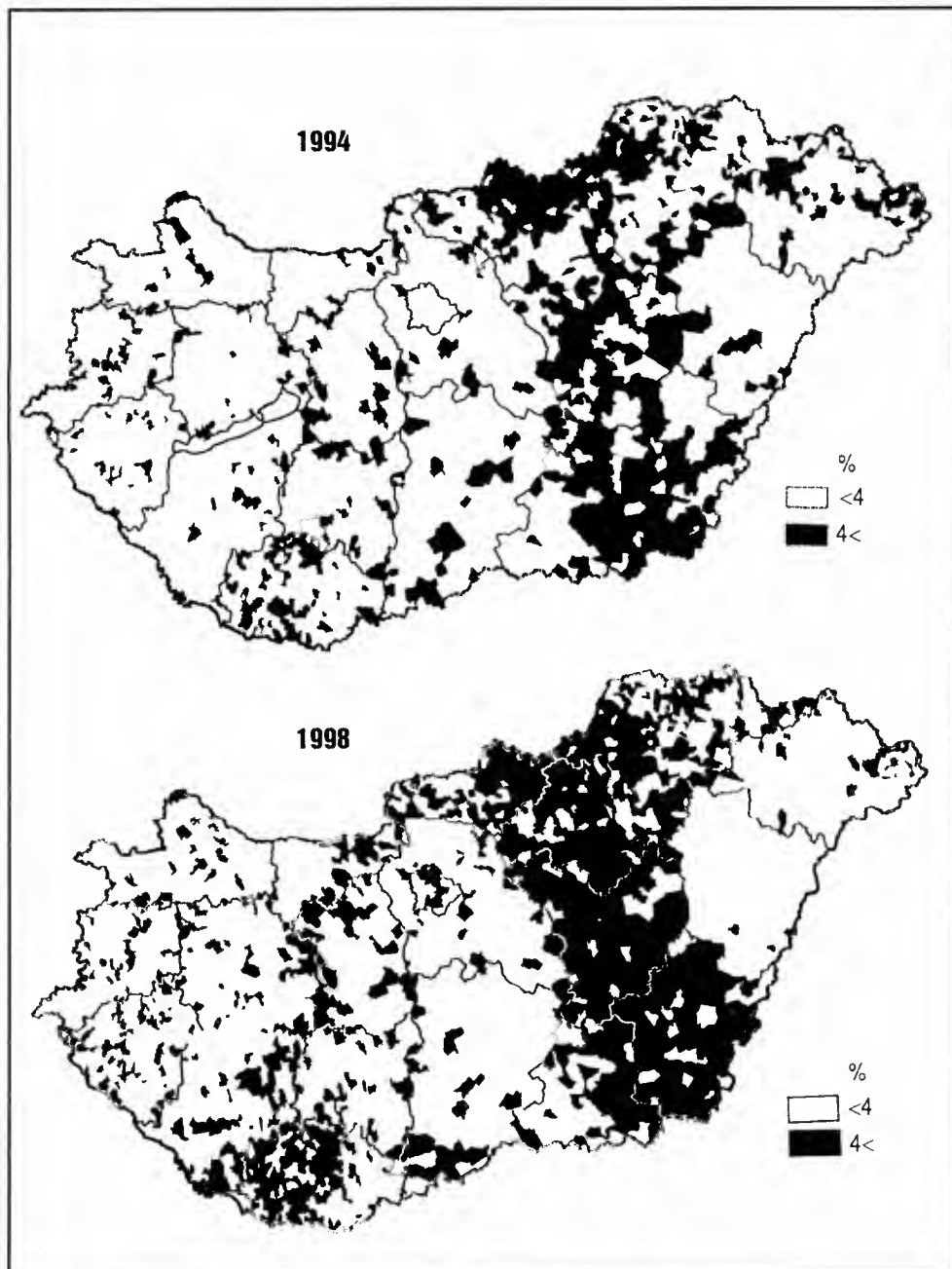


Figure 7
Voting results of the Hungarian Truth and Life Party (MIÉP)

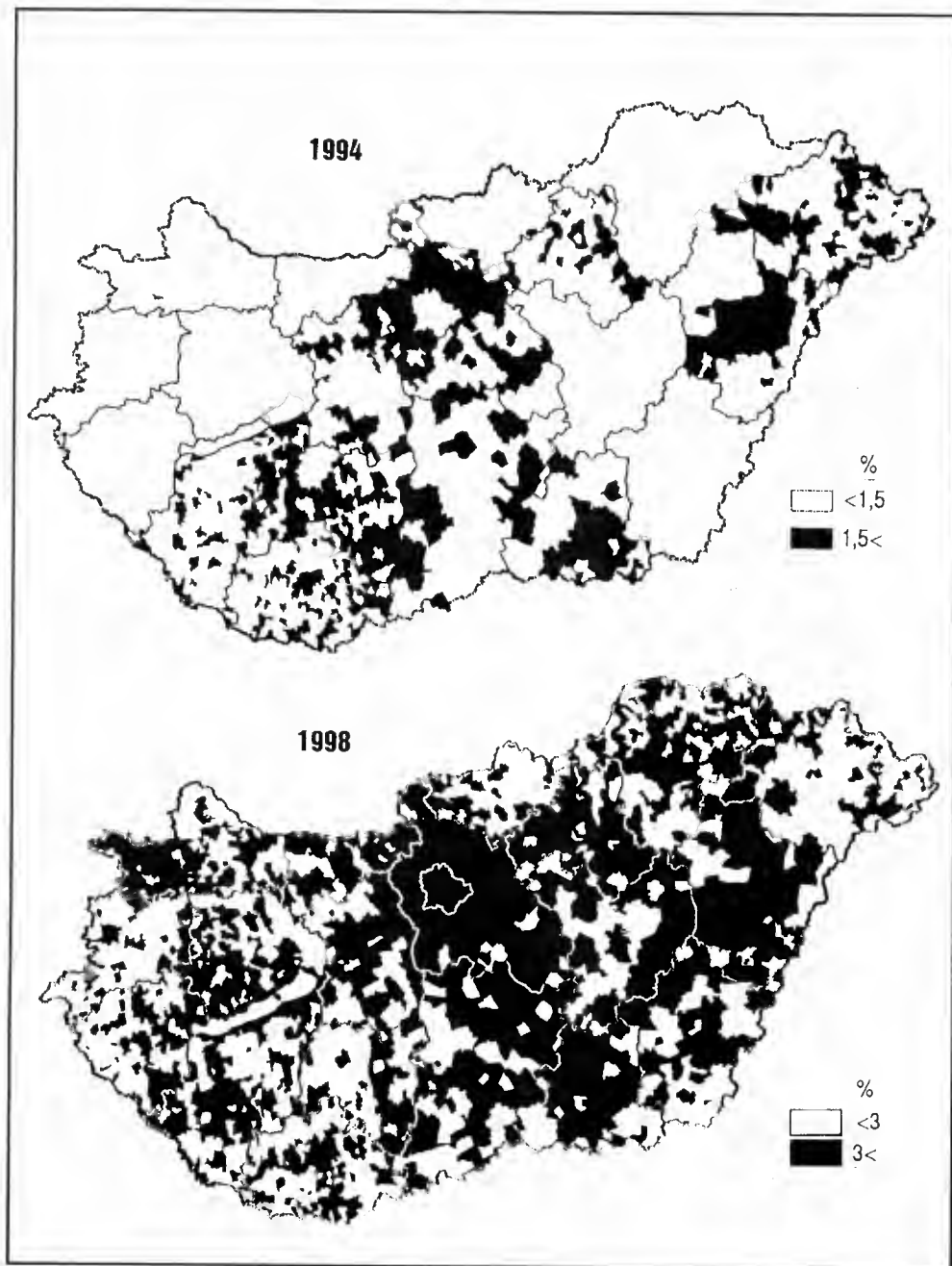
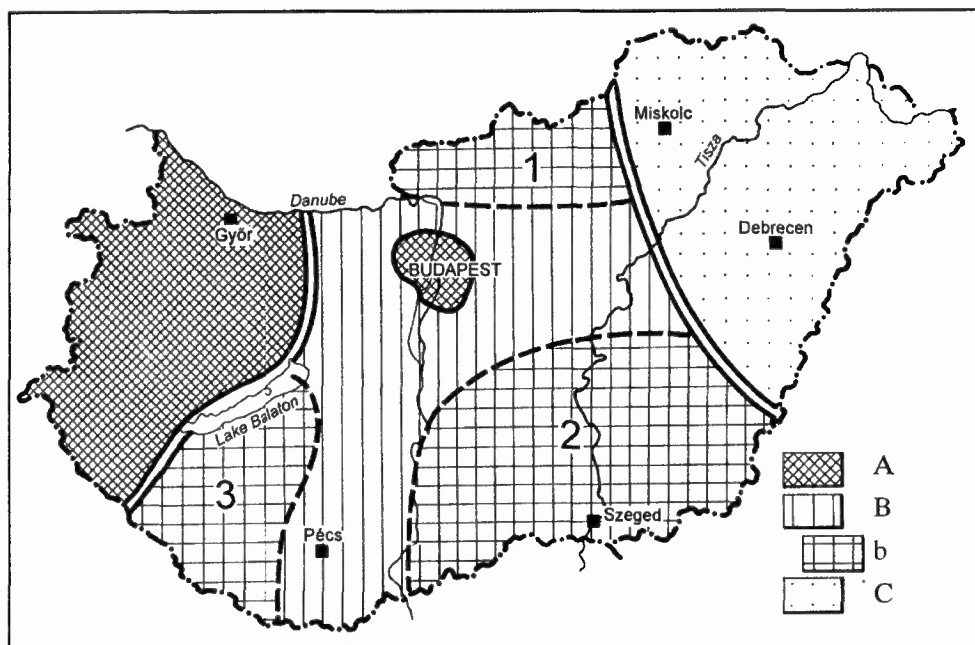


Figure 8
 Political geographic profile of Hungary



Political profile: 1 – Christian and socialist, 2 – agrarian, 3 – agrarian and socialist
Party preference: A – stable, B – mixed, b – mixed with distinct party-domination, C – unstable

among them, whereas the working-class-oriented communist Munkáspárt had disproportionately large support in rural areas.

More detailed geographical discussions of political party-support tend to concentrate on only the two victorious parties and the extreme right and left-wing parties, MIÉP and the Munkáspárt.

The electoral support for the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) shows a relative stability over time. (Figure 4) The electoral map shows the distribution of support for the MSZP in settlements in 1994 and 1998, on the basis of the party gaining more or less than 30% of the votes on party list. In 1994 the MSZP did best in the crisis-ridden north-east where industrial decline and unemployment were at their most serious. (Rivera 1996) Better results could also be detected in the traditional heartlands of the left-wing support in Komárom-Esztergom and south of Lake Balaton, in Somogy county. (Mészáros-Szakadát 1995) In 1994 the Socialists owed their landslide victory mainly to the strong support of the eastern regions where voters turned against the policy of the MDF-led government in large numbers. Four years later the MSZP

achieved nearly the same result; however, the geographical pattern of non-left wing votes had changed substantially.

The spatial pattern of the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) shows greater variations. (*Figure 5*) In 1994 the party did not perform successfully and ended up with 7.02% of the votes as not only the youngest, but also the smallest parliamentary party. In 1998 the party achieved a much better result and through the single candidate competition won the majority in Parliament. What was the secret of FIDESZ in 1998 and how we can interpret the voting pattern of the party geographically?

In 1994 internal conflicts within the party foreshadowed the eventual demise of voter support for FIDESZ. (*Kukorelli-Racz 1995*) However, between 1994-1998 the party went through a consolidation and gradually shifted to the right. At the same time the traditional conservative parties (MDF and KDNP) were considerably weakened by inter-party rivalries and subsequent splits between the different platforms of these parties. This gave FIDESZ a good opportunity collect all the Christian democratic/conservative votes.

In 1994 the MSZP was able to integrate most of the left-wing votes, four years later FIDESZ was able to do the same. The party recorded its best results in north-western Hungary and in the eastern part of the country. This contradiction can be explained by two different factors. In the western counties (Vas, Veszprém) FIDESZ managed to replace the MDF and KDNP and most of their voters gathered under the banner of the Young Democrats. In the east (Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg) people who were disappointed with the ineffective regional policy of the socialist-liberal government turned also towards FIDESZ.

The spatial pattern of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the earlier regime can also be detected in the results of the smaller, but more radical parties. The geographical spread of votes for the Workers' Party, the remnant of the former Communist Party, also shows a high level of stability. (*Figure 6*) The party is clearly strongest in a north-south zone east of the Tisza River. (*Dingsdale-Kovács 1996*) This region has experienced the least benefit from the post-communist changes, thus, nostalgia towards the communist regime is the strongest in this part of the country.

The nationalist/populist Hungarian Truth and Life Party (MIÉP), a former fraction of the MDF, received only 1.56% in the 1994 elections and did not gain parliamentary representation. However, four years later the party performed much better and with 5.47% of the votes became the smallest parliamentary party. (*Figure 7*) The success of MIÉP has several components. The low level of turnout favoured the party, just like the turmoil in other right-wing parties (MDF, KDNP). In 1998 the party did especially well in the central regions of the country, in Budapest and its agglomeration. This clearly indicates that the party is supported not so much by voters of the crisis regions – as one would expect – but the dissatisfied strata of the more developed urban regions, petty bourgeois, civil servants and those who experienced dramatic decline in their status during the last eight years.

CONCLUSION

The first free post-communist Hungarian elections resulted in three different types of power in Parliament with seemingly dramatic changes. What were the reasons for the results of the 1994 and 1998 Hungarian general elections and how has a geographical analysis thrown particular light upon them?

As our geographical analysis reveals, in those districts in which foreign investment and economic dynamism had stimulated increased prosperity (i.e. Western Hungary), voters turned out in greater numbers to support the centre (i.e. MDF, SZDSZ, FIDESZ) in all three elections. Where the economic changes had hit hardest, voters turned out strongly to register their desire for policy changes, and supported in 1994 the MSZP, then FIDESZ in 1998.

The geographical analysis of the votes suggests that the victory of both the MSZP and FIDESZ was a result of the protest of the disillusioned economic losers of the transformation. The mass of people who suffered from the dismantling of the socialist economy and the economic recession voted against the ruling parties both in 1994 and 1998.

On the basis of the results of the 1990, 1994 and 1998 parliamentary elections the map of political stability and awareness can be constructed for Hungary. (*Figure 8*) It reveals that Hungary can be divided into three major regions with respect to political awareness and party preference of the population. In this framework, Western Hungary and Budapest can be classified as stable and politically more mature regions, with high turnout rates and ideologically-stable party preference. On the other hand, Eastern Hungary can be classified as an unstable, politically less motivated and mature region, with generally low turnout rates and considerable swings in party preference. Between the two politically stable and unstable zones, a mixed central region can be distinguished, which can be further differentiated, with some districts moving towards particular party orientations and thus stability, whilst others have an unstable tendency.

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