

## *The Vacuum in Hungarian Politics: Classes and Parties*

In February 1989 the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt* or MSZMP) formally accepted the principles of multi-party democracy.\* Within thirteen months of this decision, free elections were held and a complex political system emerged in which six parties came to represent distinct political fields in parliament. This period offers a fascinating study of political institution-building and sophisticated coalition politics. The aim of this article is to analyse these emergent political fields: to identify the principal issues around which they are organized, the political constituencies on which they draw, the way in which actors competing for these fields emerge, and the process by which their struggle unfolds. Our empirical observations are confined mainly to Hungary, but our conclusions might well have wider application within Central Europe. The main thrust of our argument is that during the post-Communist transition in Central Europe three different political fields developed: the liberal, the Christian-nationalist (centre-right), and the social-democratic. The Hungarian elections in March–April 1990 produced an impressive victory for the Christian-nationalist parties. With the

exception of Czechoslovakia (where the victorious Civil Forum is on the liberal side of the political spectrum, and opted rather than was forced into coalition with the Christian Democrats), this seems to be the dominant trend in the entire non-Balkan region of Central Europe. The hegemonic forces are of a Christian-nationalist type in East Germany, Poland, Croatia, and Slovenia.<sup>1</sup>

In Hungary, the Christian-nationalist field is made up of several political parties: the nationalist Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum* or MDF), the petty-bourgeois Independent Smallholders' Party (*Független Kisgazdapárt* or FKGP), and the conservative Christian Democratic Party (*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt* or KDNP). Despite some differences in their political programmes, these parties have combined to form a coalition government. Together they hold almost 60 per cent of the seats in parliament. The liberals are represented by the Alliance of Free Democrats (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége* or SZDSZ) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége* or FIDESZ). Between them, these two parties polled one third of all votes cast and, for this reason alone, constitute the main source of opposition to the government. Finally, the political Left in Hungary is represented by the Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt* or MSZP). It is constituted by the reform wing of the old Communist Party and, because of its relatively poor performance in the elections, holds less than 10 per cent of all seats in the current parliament. It is interesting to note that, in spite of such variation in the political orientation of the different parties, not a single organization has come forward to represent the social-democratic field in Hungary.

It might be argued that the outcome of the elections was not a surprise in that it reflected a return to the political traditions of the region. Such reasoning has, in fact, inspired at least one American commentator to label the current transformation of Central Europe as a *conservative revolution*<sup>2</sup>—an argument not without historical support. In Hungary, for example, democratic elections prior to the establishment of the socialist regime repeatedly produced centre-right victories: in

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the 'eastern region' of Central Europe (represented by Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia) followed a different road to post-Communism. As late as October 1990, countries in this region were still governed either by Communists or successors of the old Communist elite. Such differences in the developmental trajectories of the two regions may be coincidental. At the same time, we cannot help but be impressed by the uncanny contiguity of these patterns of development with the long-standing division in this region along the lines of Western and Eastern Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> This statement was made by the President of the American Council of Learned Societies at a conference in Budapest in the summer of 1990.

1945 the Smallholders' Party (*Kisgazdapárt*) won 57 per cent of the vote; in 1938 the Party of Hungarian Life (*Magyar Élet Pártja*) won 70 per cent of the vote; and in 1906 the Independence Party (*Függetlenségi Párt*) gained 62 per cent of all seats in parliament.<sup>3</sup> A glance at election results from the past might suggest that embedded in Hungarian political culture is a strong taste for Christian-nationalist political rule.

In the course of the past few months, political commentators attempting to predict the outcome of events were in the position of an audience seated in a theatre with the curtain still down. What, they wondered, was in preparation after forty years of Communist rule? Astonishingly, as the curtain was raised, the audience was confronted with a still life: the 'act' that was interrupted forty years ago with the transition to socialism seemed to have resumed, as if nothing had happened in between.

Given the success of the centre-right in pre-socialist elections, one might have anticipated the historical pendulum moving rightward after decades of *left-wing deviations*. Such expectations notwithstanding, we believe that the restoration of prewar politics in Hungary requires an explanation. During the past forty years, after all, Hungarian society has undergone fundamental changes. For example, the peasantry and the genteel middle class, which have formed the usual social base for centre-right political forces in the past, were virtually eliminated under the socialist regime.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the postwar industrialization of the Hungarian economy created a large industrial proletariat and, along with this, the emergence of a social-democratic field. In the light of such changes, one would have expected to see a general weakening of the traditional centre-right and a strengthening of social-democratic sentiment in this period. Surprisingly, however, the outcome of the March–April elections produced the opposite result. How are we to account for the exceptionally poor predictive power of structural factors and the apparent continuity of political culture? It is intended to shed some light on this apparent paradox in the following discussion.

### Post-Communist Hungary: Class Structure and Political Fields

The class structure of post-Communist Hungary assumes a tri-polar form. As indicated in Figure 1, the main distinctions are between professionals, proprietors and workers. This mapping of the class structure has its origins in the old socialist regime. In the established model of socialism the state had a monopoly over the organization of economic life. Class differences were characterized by a single hierarchy of positions in which the old Communist (cadre) elite was at the top and the working class at the bottom.<sup>5</sup> With the gradual erosion of

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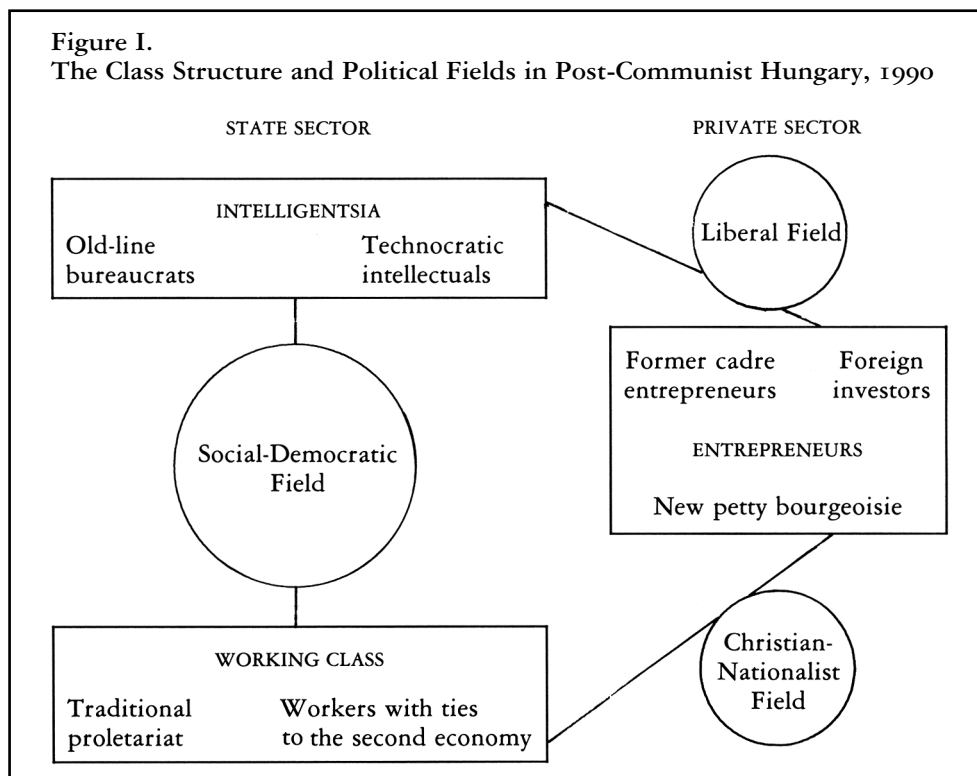
<sup>3</sup> Gyula Benda, *Magyarország Történeti Kronológiája* (The Chronological History of Hungary), Budapest 1983, pp. 810, 954, 1023.

<sup>4</sup> Róbert Manchin and Iván Szelényi, 'Theories of Family Agricultural Production in Collectivized Economies', *Sociologia Ruralis*, vol. xxv, no. 3/4, 1985, p. 260.

<sup>5</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, 'Officialdom and Class: Basis of Inequality in Socialist Society', in Frank Parkin, ed., *The Social Analysis of Class Structure*, London 1974; George Konrád and Iván Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, New York 1979; Iván Szelényi, 'Prospects and Limits of the New Class Project in Eastern Europe',

central management, this pyramidal organization was complemented by a second hierarchy of occupations, based on market integration.<sup>6</sup> In this second order, vertical mobility was determined by ownership of wealth and entrepreneurial skills. Not surprisingly, therefore, owners and entrepreneurs were located at the apex of the hierarchy and waged workers at the bottom.

**Figure I.**  
**The Class Structure and Political Fields in Post-Communist Hungary, 1990**



Following the events of 1989, Central European societies began a swift but arduous journey towards the market economy. At the current stage in their development it would be premature to designate them as fully fledged capitalist societies. They are best characterized as socialist mixed economies in which the state continues to dominate economic life but wherein the private sector plays a stronger and more complementary role. In spite of the continued hegemonic role of the state sector in these economies, the power relationships within the dominant elite have already begun to change. Fragments of the old elite are increasingly isolated from the new centres of power, while others are being forced out of their positions altogether. Only those members of the old guard have managed to survive who were able to

<sup>5</sup> (cont.)

*Politics & Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1986–87; Iván Szelényi, *Socialist Entrepreneurs: Embourgeoisement in Rural Hungary*, Madison 1988; Szonja Szelényi, 'Social Inequality and Party Membership', *American Sociological Review* 52, October 1987.

<sup>6</sup> See Tamás Kolosi, 'Stratification and Social Structure in Hungary', *Annual Review of Sociology* 14, 1988; Tamás Kolosi, *Tagolt Társadalom* (Stratified Society), Budapest 1989; Szelényi, 'Prospects and Limits'.

convert their political privileges into cultural assets or economic capital. In the post-Communist regime in Hungary, professionals in high-ranking positions (especially those *without* prior attachment to the MSZMP) are acquiring new powers of influence. It follows that, in the transition to post-Communism, the ruling elite is highly fragmented. The old-line bureaucracy, in the Gouldnerian sense of the term, is shrinking in size, while a new class of intellectuals is becoming hegemonic.<sup>7</sup> Together they constitute 5 to 10 per cent of the working population.

It is not only professionals but also the emergent entrepreneurial class that is fragmented. This latter is composed of at least three fractions. Following Poulantzas, its first and largest section can be characterized as the *new petty bourgeoisie*.<sup>8</sup> This class fragment grew out of what used to be the *second economy*: its members are small proprietors in agriculture, service industries and (increasingly) manufacturing. This is potentially a large sector. According to a recent opinion poll, 25 to 30 per cent of all Hungarians expressed a wish to start up a business; this may be regarded as the percentage of aspiring, or potential, members of the new petty bourgeoisie. Realistically, however, as of Autumn 1990, only about 10 per cent of the working population could be regarded as belonging to this class category.

The second fragment of the entrepreneurial class comprises those members of the old Communist elite who, through management buy-outs or joint ventures with Western firms, have successfully converted their political assets into economic capital.<sup>9</sup> They are what might be called a 'political bourgeoisie' in Central Europe. Although this class fragment is much smaller in size than the new petty bourgeoisie, it has attracted a great deal of political interest and, for this reason alone, may end up playing a significant role in the shaping of Hungarian political culture.

Finally, the third segment of the entrepreneurial class grew directly out of foreign investments in the Hungarian economy. By the autumn of 1990 foreign capital had begun to play a significant role in the economic life of Central European societies. Through joint ventures and by direct investments, foreign owners and their comprador intelligentsia (that is, professionals hired by foreign capitalists to run their local affairs) have started to have a significant impact on social and political life. The number of 'players' in this group is still rather small, but their influence is considerable because they control many outlets in the mass media.<sup>10</sup>

Last but not least, the third class position, that of the working class, is also fragmented today. In addition to the well-known cleavages in this

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<sup>7</sup> See Alwin Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, Oxford 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London 1978, pp. 209–23.

<sup>9</sup> For examples of such conversions, see Elemér Hankiss, *Kelet-Európai Alternatívák* (East European Alternatives), Budapest 1989; Jadwiga Staniszkis, *The Dynamics of the Breakthrough in Eastern Europe*, Berkeley forthcoming; Erzsébet Szalai, 'Az Új Elít' (The New Elite), *Beszélt* 27, 1989; Erzsébet Szalai, 'Ismét az Új Elítről' (The New Elite Revisited), *Élet és Irodalom*, 8 December 1989.

<sup>10</sup> The extent of sale of public property to domestic and foreign owners is unknown, but is almost certainly under 10 per cent of all formerly state-controlled assets.

class (namely, the distinctions between blue- and white-collar workers, skilled and unskilled manual jobs, supervisors and supervisees, and so forth), the presence of the 'second economy' has produced another division among workers; this distinguishes between those who are involved in the second economy and those who are left out. Already by the mid 1980s two-thirds of all Hungarian households made some of their living from the second economy. Of course, most households depend mainly on their wages from the state, but a growing proportion have begun to live a genuinely dual existence between the private and state sectors.<sup>11</sup>

Having completed our mapping of the post-Communist class structure, it remains to locate the three 'political fields' among the class cleavages identified. These are illustrated in Figure 1. The liberal field opens between the intellectual elite (especially its professional or 'technocratic' fraction) and the entrepreneurial class. SZDSZ and FIDESZ are the two parties that have competed, so far, for this constituency. In an interview with one of the daily newspapers,<sup>12</sup> Bálint Magyar, one of the most articulate theorists of SZDSZ, described the class character of his party thus: 'our social base is composed of three groups: the radical salaried workers, the small entrepreneurs, and a significant proportion of the intelligentsia.' The Christian-nationalist field is located between the entrepreneurial class and the working class. It is especially popular among those members of the working class who participate in the second economy. This constituency is contested by three parties: MDF, FKGP, and KDNP. Finally, the social-democratic field opens up between the working class and the intellectual elite. With the transition to a market economy, a large proportion of the working class is expected to suffer a great deal: many will be thrown out of their jobs and, without exception, all will experience a decline in their standard of living. In pushing for some protection from the state, this fraction of the working class may find allies not just in the old-line Stalinist bureaucracy but also among those professionals who either have ideological reservations about full-scale privatization or who are themselves existentially threatened by the current transformation.

### Predictions and Results

The March–April elections produced the following distribution of parliamentary seats across the three political fields in Hungary: (1) The governing Christian-nationalist (centre–right) coalition polled 59.5 per cent of all votes: 42.7 per cent of these went to MDF, 11.4 per cent to FKGP, and 5.4 per cent to KDNP. (2) The two liberal parties received 29 per cent of the vote: 23.6 per cent went to SZDSZ and 5.4 per cent to FIDESZ. (3) MSZP was supported by 8.5 per cent of all voters. (4) The remaining 3 per cent of seats (out of a total of 386) were won by members of other (mostly smaller) parties and by independent candidates.

From the perspective of our class-analytic approach, the most surprising

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<sup>11</sup> Szelényi, 'Prospects and Limits', pp. 124–9; István Gábor, 'The Major Domains of the Second Economy', in Péter Galasi and György Sziráczi, eds., *Market and Second Economy in Hungary*, Frankfurt 1985, pp. 133–79.

<sup>12</sup> See *Magyar Nemzet*, 1 August 1990, p. 5.

result of these elections was the poor showing of those parties that were nominally competing for the social-democratic field. MSZP won only 8.5 per cent of the seats in parliament, while the other two parties, MSZMP (the orthodox wing of the former Communist Party) and MSZDP (the Hungarian Social-Democratic Party, or *Magyar Szociáldemokrata Párt*) just missed out on the 4 per cent vote necessary to obtain a seat in parliament. Overall, therefore, the political forces that were ready to use the 'socialist' or the 'social-democratic' label in the elections received less than 16 per cent of the popular vote, even though our analysis suggested that some 20 to 30 per cent of the working population (that is, most of the working class and some segments of the professional class) could have voted for them. The discrepancy between the observed outcome of the elections and expectations generated from our analysis of the Hungarian class structure requires an explanation.

Similarly, it is important to account for the relatively unsuccessful performance of the liberal parties in the elections. To be sure, SZDSZ and FIDESZ both fared reasonably well, given the extent of their potential social base. Nevertheless, when considering how popular they were in the early stages of the election campaign, it is clear that they performed less well than expected. At the start of the election campaign, during the summer of 1989, SZDSZ was trailing way behind MDF in the public-opinion polls. By December, however, they were level, leading many observers to conclude that the March–April elections could produce a liberal victory. It is important to explain why SZDSZ could appear so close to victory and yet, in the end, still lose the elections.

The poor performance of political parties on the left and the weakening of SZDSZ during the last few weeks of the electoral campaigns are both linked to the fact that the social-democratic field remained unrepresented in the contest for political power. Neither the old Communist Party (MSZMP), nor its reformed wing (MSZP), were able to transform themselves into organizations genuinely representative of the working class. As a consequence, the social-democratic field was—at least in principle—wide open for SZDSZ. However, as it turned out, the liberals did not dare to occupy the left ground, and for this reason alone lost the elections. In illustrating this point, we will show, first of all, that the social characteristics of voters are accurately predicted by our class theory. At the same time, we will demonstrate that those who did not vote in the elections constituted a reservoir of social-democratic sentiment that SZDSZ could have tapped. It is our contention, in fact, that non-voters in Hungary decided against participation in the elections because none of the parties running articulated their interests.

The elections were conducted in two rounds; those candidates who did not win an absolute majority in the first series of votes were required to run again. In the first round, 35 per cent of those eligible did not cast their vote; this rose to 55 per cent in the second round. Which way this 'silent majority' would have voted, who could have inspired them to participate in the elections, and with what kind of political programme they could have been mobilized, are decisive questions for the political future of Central Europe.

In May 1990, the Social Research Information Society (*Társadalomkutatási Informatikai Társulás* or TÁRKI) conducted a nationwide survey of public opinion in Hungary. Following the well-established format of Hungarian social-stratification surveys, a sample of 981 individuals were questioned about their education, income and occupation. In addition, they were asked if they participated in the March–April elections, which party they supported with their vote, and what their attitudes were on a range of social, economic and political issues.<sup>13</sup> Results from this survey indicate that our class-analytic approach predicted fairly accurately the outcome of the elections. As anticipated, the two liberal parties, SZDSZ and FIDESZ, appealed mostly to professionals, while MDF enjoyed a more diverse class base. At the same time, the results show that class and class-based economic attitudes do not fully explain respondents' choice of party. Social-structural variables account for a much larger percentage of the total variation in voter turnout than they do in party choice.

### Class, Apathy and the Non-Vote

In examining class patterns in party preference, we have found that MDF was the least class- or status-based of all the political parties in Hungary. In the March–April elections its electoral base cut across class lines, and support for its policies came evenly from sub-populations with different age and educational profiles. By comparison, SZDSZ was favoured mainly by white-collar workers (particularly by general non-manual workers and professionals), while FKgP and KDNP were popular mostly among peasants and blue-collar workers. As noted earlier, there is no simple and direct relation between class background and party preference.

The electoral performance of FIDESZ, FKgP and KDNP lends further evidence to our claims. As expected, FKgP was the most 'populist' of all the parties: 73 per cent of those who claimed to have voted for this party were agricultural and blue-collar workers. KDNP followed closely with 70.2 per cent of the 'populist' vote, while only 44.1 per cent of FIDESZ voters belonged to this sector. MSZP was the least popular among agricultural and blue-collar workers, which represented only 39.2 per cent of its vote. It also received a lower level of support—32.7 per cent—from those less-educated.

Our most significant finding is that class is a more reliable predictor of voter turnout than it is of party choice. Specifically, we found that both blue-collar workers and less-educated people represented a significant proportion of those who stayed away from the polling booths. In May 1990, for instance, blue-collar workers constituted 52 per cent of the Hungarian labour force, yet 63 per cent of all 'no-shows' came from this class category. Likewise, 38 per cent of those voting in May 1990 had completed eight years of schooling or less, yet as many as 50 per cent of those who did not vote in the elections came from this less-educated sector.

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<sup>13</sup> The collection of data was supervised by Tamás Kolosi, director of TÁRKI. The questionnaire was administered as part of a larger survey sponsored by the International Social Survey Program. For greater detail, see Tamás Kolosi, *International Social Survey Program: Hungary 1990*, Budapest 1990.



The effects of class and education on voter turnout, can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, it might be argued that the mass abstention of blue-collar workers and less-educated individuals indicates their lack of interest in politics. This is by no means a new line of argument, but one frequently employed in explanations of the same general trend in Western democratic regimes.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Central European societies, however, a second argument could be made that the strength of the class effect on voter turnout is an indication that none of the parties offered a political Package that was attractive to blue-collar workers. Accordingly, two alternative explanations of the non-vote in Hungary present themselves: one would tell a story about working-class 'apathy', while the other would pay attention to characteristics of the 'social-democratic constituency' and, on the basis of this, consider the non-vote as a 'protest vote'—that is, a vote against the absence of a viable social-democratic alternative.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, both factors—apathy as well as protest— influenced non-voter behaviour in the March–April elections. As it turns out, however, lack of interest in political life seems to have played a surprisingly minor role. The question of apathy was present in a single item on the May 1990 survey: this asked respondents how interested they were in political issues.<sup>15</sup> Contrary to what one might have expected, the overwhelming majority of non-voters were either 'considerably' or 'very interested' in politics. What is more, we observed the same pattern of responses among voters. From this it follows that apathy provides, at best, a partial explanation for why people did not vote in the elections.

In line with our second theory of voter turnout, data from the May 1990 survey indicates a strong correlation between political attitudes and electoral participation. Specifically, we found that people with strong social-democratic values were significantly overrepresented among non-voters.

### An Untapped Constituency

It is not surprising that social, political and economic values played an important role in the Hungarian elections, given the enormity of the social change that the electorate was being asked to effect. In the course of their election campaigns, the two major opposition parties (MDF and SZDSZ) focused heavily on social and ethical issues. Candidates for SZDSZ were particularly outspoken on questions relating to civil liberties, and were also quite critical of MDF for not being sufficiently committed to these issues. In its political programme, MDF was indistinguishable from SZDSZ on human-rights issues. However, its position on social questions—particularly with respect to abortion—was considerably more conservative than that of SZDSZ.

The scale of the difference between the two parties became especially

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Roberto Michels, *Political Parties*, New York 1966.

<sup>15</sup> The precise wording of this question was as follows: 'Mennyire érdeklődik ön a politika iránt?' (How interested are you in politics?). The full set of possible responses included: 'nagyon' (very much), 'melehetősen' (considerably), 'nem nagyon' (not very much), 'egy kicsit' (a little), and 'egyáltalán nem' (not at all).

apparent in the closing speeches made by their leaders on the night before the vital second round of the elections. In his final words to the television audience, the leader of MDF, József Antall, pledged that those who supported his party would vote for a 'quiet force'; while the leader of SZDSZ, János Kis, promised the electorate a 'radical change', and a 'smashing of the party state'.

While MDF and SZDSZ differed considerably on social issues, their stances on economic matters were similar: both advocated the privatization of production units and the expansion of free markets, and neither paid much attention to questions of unemployment and growing inequalities. In other words, both parties offered the electorate a clear choice between conservative and liberal values on social issues, but neither appealed to those voters who wanted to cast their ballot in favour of a welfare state, security of employment, and protected social benefits.

Results from the May 1990 survey indicate the main difference between voters and non-voters to be much smaller on social issues and significantly more pronounced on attitudes towards economic reorganization. Thus, while we found that non-voters were, on average, more conservative on social issues than voters, it is also true that they held stronger social-democratic opinions on economic matters. This suggests a curious discrepancy between popularly held attitudes and party platforms in the elections: the major opposition parties all positioned themselves on the political right (in the Western sense of the term), but public opinion was overwhelmingly in favour of social-democratic measures. Thus, for instance, when respondents in the May 1990 survey were asked whether it was the responsibility of the state to assure full employment, control prices, promote social justice, or monitor spending on health care, welfare, and education, 80 to 90 per cent gave answers that favoured a Scandinavian—that is, a social-democratic—type of government.

Differences between voters and non-voters were not restricted to issues relating to economic reform. Our analyses indicate that at the time of the elections non-voters were particularly concerned with issues relating to jobs (unemployment, pensions, benefits), while voters were more interested in abstract social-policy matters (government spending on culture, the environment, education). In many ways, therefore, the main difference between these two groups might be seen as that between left-Labourites and middle-of-the-road (or even right-wing) social democrats.

At any rate, it is clear from these results that there existed a large social-democratic constituency (both in terms of class position and political attitudes) in Hungary, and, moreover, that the interests of this constituency were unrepresented during the last elections. For this reason, then, we believe that Hungarian political parties are unduly complacent. What is emerging in political life may well be only the tip of an iceberg; dramatic changes could take place any day. The strong correlation between welfare-statist attitudes (on economic matters) and conservative values (on social issues) makes the situation particularly explosive. It suggests, above all else, that the 'silent majority' in the last elections could be mobilized in the future either around

welfare issues (that is, around its strong social-democratic values), or around issues of law and order (appealing to its conservative social values). What this suggests, of course, is that the potential for Peronism is as real in the political future of Central Europe as is a Scandinavian-style welfare-state government.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, as we argue below, the direction the political organization of these countries will take has less to do with the nature of their class structure, or the character of their political culture, than with the dynamics of institution-building and the role of political leadership in the transition to post-Communism.

Our main argument, then, is that the social-democratic constituency in Hungary is considerable, but that it has remained unmobilized in recent elections. By implication, therefore, the political culture of post-Communist societies is potentially less right-wing than has hitherto been demonstrated. The obvious question, of course, is why none of the political parties in Hungary have tried to mobilize this social-democratic constituency. In answering this question we hope to demonstrate that the unique dynamics of political institution-building and the question of political leadership are factors as important as the social composition of constituencies in the making of political fields.

### Strategy and Image

During the summer of 1989, SZDSZ perceived MDF as a centre-left party with close links to the Communists (especially its populist wing represented by Imre Pozsgay). SZDSZ therefore focused its line of attack on the left of MDF. In an interview given at this time Bálint Magyar called MDF a 'crypto-communist party'—a vehicle that would enable Pozsgay to prepare himself for the collapse of Communism while at once preserving his existing power-base. Magyar argued that MDF was the post-Communist analogue of the Peasant Party, which, after 1945, was the umbrella organization of a number of left-wing populist writers (that is, the party of the 'Third Way') who proved to be little more than Communist fellow travellers. During the autumn of 1989, SZDSZ continued its line of attack on MDF by criticizing its pact with the MSZP on the issue of the presidential elections. According to this deal, MDF was to have given the relatively strong presidency to MSZP (and, specifically, to Pozsgay) in return for majority rule in parliament. Suggestions were also made by SZDSZ officials that MDF may even have granted MSZP a 'junior partner' role in government. Following the Polish pattern, the MDF-MSZP alliance had hoped to accomplish this by holding early presidential elections—an ingenious solution. If elections could have been held by the end of 1989 (or at the beginning of 1990), Pozsgay would have been guaranteed the presidency. After all, he was far ahead in the public-opinion polls. (At this

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<sup>16</sup> Juan Peron was elected as president of Argentina in 1946 largely by working-class support. In its centrist-authoritarian politics, Peronism brought together a unique combination of nationalist sentiments with right-wing social attitudes, as well as a strong sense of law and order and a positive orientation towards trade unions. For more details on Peronism, see Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man*, New York 1960, pp. 173–5; Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*, Berkeley 1979, pp. 56–77.

early stage opposition candidates had not yet had a chance to make a name for themselves.)

With acute political insight, SZDSZ did not sign the agreement between MDF and MSZP, but instead called for a referendum to determine the timing of the presidential elections. According to Hungarian law, parliament is compelled to call a referendum on an issue if more than 100,000 signatures demand it. SZDSZ had easily collected some 200,000 signatures to this end and, in November 1989, the referendum was held. MDF was in disarray and unable to respond to the challenge posed by SZDSZ. Members of the party, however, began to sense that their ties to Pozsgay were becoming a handicap and that, in future, they would have to demonstrate greater distance from MSZP to succeed in political life. During the referendum, MSZP advised its supporters to vote 'no' on the question of whether presidential elections should be delayed. MDF, rather than follow the MSZP suggestion, called instead for a boycott. On the surface, this was not an unreasonable political strategy. According to Hungarian law, after all, 50 per cent of the electorate has to vote in order for the referendum to be valid. Had the MDF plan worked, SZDSZ could have lost the referendum. Unfortunately for MDF, however, the referendum produced a good turnout (about 60 per cent of those eligible voted) and, by a small margin, the 'yes' vote was ratified. Against the wishes of MDF, therefore, the presidential elections were delayed.

The call for a referendum was a shrewd political move on the part of SZDSZ because it resulted in the breakup of the alliance between MSZP and MDF. In the process it also succeeded in humiliating MDF, which, following the referendum, began to perform poorly in public-opinion polls. As a consequence, SZDSZ gained considerable popularity among Hungarian voters, although it did so by locating itself on the right of MDF. This initial success was, however, short-lived and the dynamics of political institution-building took a new turn.

Soon after the referendum, József Antall took over the leadership of MDF. A historian, whose father was a leading government official under Admiral Horthy, he had little to do with left-wing populist writers of MDF that SZDSZ linked to the Communist Party. Antall and his circle had aristocratic connections; they were more centre-right Christian-democrats than left-wing populists—in contrast to those who controlled MDF prior to Antall's leadership. In an effort to distance himself from MSZP, Antall gradually cut loose the left-populist wing of MDF and moved his party without difficulty to the right. He was quick to realize that, if the name of the Hungarian political game was anti-Communism, he could play this better than SZDSZ. After all, the latter's leadership included many with relatively strong left-wing pasts: János Kis, for instance, was a Lukács disciple and a prominent young Marxist during the early 1970s; Miklós Haraszti was a Maoist and a vocal opponent of the Kádár re-privatization programme during the late 1960s; even Gáspár Tamás (the most articulate supporter of nineteenth-century liberalism currently in SZDSZ) began his political career with anarcho-syndicalist aspirations. A large number of SZDSZ leaders also came from old (Communist) cadre families. Beginning in January 1990, then, MDF politicians began to criticize

the social and political origins of the SZDSZ leadership and, in so doing, succeeded in beating the party at its own game. Antall and his circle emerged from this battle more authentically right-wing than members of SZDSZ.

Following this new line of attack from MDF, SZDSZ hesitated briefly over the nature of its political field. The leader of the party, János Kis, has consistent left-wing values and would have been quite comfortable with a social-democratic party platform. In an interview given during one of his official visits to Paris, in fact, he characterized SZDSZ as a 'centre-left' party.<sup>17</sup> As it turns out, this statement was mere wishful thinking. Given the nature of the attack from MDF, the leadership of SZDSZ considered it too risky to assume a left-wing stand and consequently the Paris statement made by Kis was swiftly shelved. Leadership of the party was assumed by a group of free-marketeters who continued the party's earlier policy of trying to position itself on the political right of MDF. In the light of the March–April election results, it is now clear that this was a strategic error: by confirming their initial winning tactic as a long-term strategy, SZDSZ lost the elections. Given the strength of the social-democratic field in Hungary, SZDSZ could have performed much better if, following the MDF–MSZP split, it had occupied the political field now wide open on the centre-left.

After the elections, SZDSZ found itself in a difficult situation. Its representatives sat in a parliament dominated by centre-right political forces. Antall's confessed political model is Adenauer; however one looks at the matter, there is little room to the right of this position. To demonstrate its difference from the ruling party, SZDSZ has continued to display its liberalism on social issues. Thus, for instance, it fought bitterly against the reintroduction of religious instruction in schools. Though this is undoubtedly a worthwhile cause, it is one unlikely to produce additional votes. According to a recent survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Institute in Budapest, by the end of May 1990 MDF and SZDSZ had both begun to lose public support, with the latter being the bigger loser of the two parties.

Given its current appeal across the three political fields, SZDSZ is probably destined to become a party as ineffectual as the Free Democrats in Germany, or the Liberal-Democratic Party in Britain. From its current position it will never take power away from MDF. Its success is therefore contingent on its ability to transform itself: it needs to move into the centre-left position and construct a programme that emphasizes welfare-state policies and issues of social justice. Despite its numerous strategic errors, SZDSZ continues to be the party best positioned to fill the social-democratic field in Hungarian political culture. Other contenders' claims for this constituency are less convincing. For their part, the successor parties of the old Communist elite, MSZMP and MSZP, simply have no appeal. As we have already demonstrated, MSZP is the party that relies more heavily on the upper-middle class than any other party; its support among the working class is the weakest. This is not surprising of course: the Communist Party is seen as having betrayed the fundamental interests

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<sup>17</sup> This interview with Kis took place in December 1989.

of the working class for forty years; it is unclear why workers should begin to trust it now.

The poor performance of MSZDP, the only party with an expressly social-democratic platform, was more of a surprise. Early commentators expected a good performance in the elections. It received a great deal of support from Western social-democratic parties and, given the strength of such sentiments in Hungary, was favoured on the eve of the elections to be the winning party. These expectations notwithstanding, MSZDP failed to obtain even 4 per cent of the votes and, consequently, was unable to place any representatives in parliament. The reasons for this failure are complex, but worthy of attention. Most important is the fact that, unlike the winning parties, MSZDP had considerable difficulty with institution-building. In the initial stages of the election campaign, an 'old guard' of Communists tried to rebuild the party from the inside. There were two problems with this strategy. First, the members of this group were all men in their seventies and eighties with little political future. Secondly, they were unable to get along with one another. Their efforts to rebuild the party were delayed by constant disagreement, until eventually they gave up and broke away. At this point, a group of younger members tried to institute reforms, but their strategy also failed. In fact, young members of the party were in constant conflict with the 'old guard'; but, due to their political inexperience and vulnerability, they were ultimately outmanoeuvred.

Following these internal fights, the party tried once more to restructure itself by rebuilding its public profile. But in so doing, it made further mistakes. For example, in selecting an image, it chose to return to the tradition of the 1920s and appeal to the worker with a hammer in his hand. Predictably, this came across as an entirely inauthentic appeal and cost the party many votes. As a final strategy, MSZDP elected a woman to chair the party. Although she possessed considerable charm as well as ability, it became clear in the course of the election campaign that she lacked charisma and was unable to garner votes. Internal conflicts, lack of leadership, wrong policies, and a dated image thus worked together to undermine the party's relaunch.

### Problems of Legitimation

Events during the second half of 1990 gave further support to our argument that political institutions in post-Communist Central Europe fail to represent the strength of social-democratic sentiment in civil society. The municipal elections, held on 14 October, are a good case in point. Once again the turnout was abysmally low: fewer than one third of those eligible to vote turned up at the polls. This degree of participation would normally be regarded as serious cause for concern. The October results, however, were particularly disturbing as political parties campaigned *explicitly* on the slogan that municipal elections, more than any other attempt at economic restructuring, represented a real change in regime. It is apparent from the results that voters disagreed with this assessment; and, to make matters worse, they actually re-elected a significant number of mayors from the old government.

The municipal elections produced a humiliating defeat for MDF and its allies. Unlike in the March–April elections, SZDSZ and FIDESZ obtained an almost equal proportion of the votes and, in so doing, gained an absolute majority in most municipal governments. In particular, these results represented a major victory for FIDESZ, which increased its popular vote significantly. Interestingly, although SZDSZ received only the same level of support from eligible voters as in the March–April elections, it now had a larger share of the total number of votes cast. This was because a significant proportion of those who voted MDF earlier in the year either did not turn up at the polls or had cast their vote in favour of FIDESZ.

The municipal elections also showed the newly elected government to be suffering from a growing problem of legitimation. During the early stages of the transition to post-Communism, opposition forces (among them, of course, MDF and its allies) argued that the power of the Communists lacked legitimacy because it was not sanctioned by popular support. Ironically, the first freely elected government in Hungary also lacked popular support: it was chosen by a majority of that minority of voters who cast their ballot in the March–April elections. By October 1990, the democratic process had deteriorated to such an extent that mayors were elected to office with as little as 15 per cent of eligible voters supporting them.

Those who attributed low voter turnout to ‘apathy’ were taught an important lesson during the last week of October, when taxi drivers staged a blockade and brought the entire city of Budapest to a halt. The issue behind this strike was straightforward. The Hungarian government—without consultation with the Chamber of Commerce, trade unions or members of parliament—announced its intention to double petrol prices overnight. An increase of this magnitude, if enacted, would have threatened the economic well-being of many taxi drivers. In an effort to prevent this, they decided to engage in collective action: within two or three hours of the government announcement, they blocked all intersections in the country and paralysed transportation for two full days.

This event was of considerable sociological interest. It indicated, for example, that what we have identified as the legitimation crisis of the Hungarian government is not restricted to the ruling coalition, but encompasses, in fact, the entire political system. The taxi drivers chose to express their dissatisfaction with the government in an act of civil disobedience because they had lost confidence in their parliamentary representatives, who had failed to support their interest. Although members of parliament were reluctant to show solidarity with the taxi drivers’ cause, the general population was not. According to a small telephone survey conducted by the Hungarian Public Opinion Research Institute a day after the strike, 60 per cent of the population gave unconditional support to the taxi drivers and another 25 per cent expressed sympathy with their cause. This is not entirely surprising given that spokespersons for the taxi drivers had successfully reframed the particular interests of the drivers as a much broader national cause. Specifically, they argued that the government was using the Gulf crisis, as well as the resulting increase in prices, to

boost tax revenues from the sale of petrol. They were also quite successful at convincing people that this strategy was unwise economically, because its inflationary results might have disastrous effects in an economy already bordering on hyper-inflation. With the doubling of petrol prices, they argued, about half of all taxi drivers would go out of business; there would be an expansion in the relative size of the proletariat; competition for work would increase; and all would suffer from the inflationary effects of fuel price increases.

The dispute ended in a negotiated settlement. In an uncommon alliance, the trade unions and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce joined forces against the government (or, to put it more generally, against the new political class) and forced it to accept a compromise. The price of petrol was reduced, the amount of tax on each gallon was set at a fixed amount (rather than as a percentage); thus, within the range of world market prices, government and its negotiating partners finally agreed on a modest price increase.

One of the more positive results of the taxi drivers' blockade was a major restructuring of the political parties. SZDSZ, under the leadership of Kis, once again made a cautious opening toward the centre-left. Restructuring also took place on the political Left: Pozsgay departed from MSZP and announced his intention to form a 'national centre' political party.<sup>18</sup> Upon being freed from Pozsgay, MSZP held a national congress and formulated an unambiguously social-democratic programme. MDF also responded to the crisis with a major reorganization: populists within the party expressed dissatisfaction with József Antall for pushing the party too far to the right and argued for a political programme that would recapture the left-populist vote. It is clear from these efforts at reorganization that the political class in Hungary is beginning to learn the rules of electoral politics: politicians are starting to think in terms of constituencies and not in terms of ideologically inspired political programmes. Moreover, they are also showing concern about the low electoral turnout, and are formulating policies intended to gain the support of the silent majority.

The taxi drivers' action and its popular support showed the electorate in Hungary to be far from apathetic. If people stayed away from the election booths, it was not because they lacked an interest in politics but because they simply did not see any of the political parties offering a desirable alternative to Communist rule. Throughout this article we have argued that the 'silent majority' could go in different directions politically. From this point of view, the presidential elections in Poland in December 1990 were of considerable significance. Mazowiecki, who represented a sober version of liberal economic policies, suffered a humiliating defeat at the polls: he finished only third in the first round, being beaten by an unknown Polish émigré from Canada. In the second round, Walesa secured roughly 75 per

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<sup>18</sup> In our terminology, Pozsgay's new party will represent an alliance between the centre-left and the nationalist centre-right.



cent of the votes, and he did so with a largely 'Peronist' programme: he promised his electorate security, law and order, as well as strong leadership.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, we have argued that there exists a large social-democratic constituency in Hungary around which a possible challenge to the currently dominant Christian-nationalist regime could emerge. We have also demonstrated, however, that during the electoral campaigns of 1989–90 the interests of this constituency remained unarticulated for a number of (mostly) institutional reasons. It is our contention that the future of Hungarian politics depends on whether these institutional problems can be overcome. If the necessary centre–left force fails to emerge in the future, then the dominance of the Christian-nationalist forces could last a millennium. If a major crisis evolves (due to an explosive rise in unemployment, for example, or to unbearable increases in social inequality), however, it is possible that a right-wing force could rise to power in Hungary—a force further to the right than Antall's regime. This force could then fill the gap that the potential centre–left parties failed to occupy in the last election.

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<sup>19</sup> Significantly, voter turnout in the Polish elections was almost as low as in Hungary. On 9 December, when Walesa was elected president, only 55 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote.