

Snapshot of the political landscape of Budapest

*Party-preference and opposition expectations in the
capital.*

ANALYSIS BY THE REPUBLIKON INSTITUTE



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SUMMARY

- In this new analysis by the Republikon Institute, we looked at the political landscape in Budapest in preparation for the double elections (municipal and EU) in 2024. We also investigated the electoral expectations for the opposition.
- Less than 1/3 of the residents in Budapest would vote for the governing parties on the general elections. At the same time the left-liberal parties do better than their nationwide support. Right-wing parties like Jobbik and Mi Hazánk are less popular in the capital.
- Currently Gergely Karácsony would win the seat of the Mayor of Budapest. 50% of the party voters would vote for him. If Alexandra Szentkirályi would run for the office 43% of party voters would support her. The former Deputy Mayor of Budapest has some voter surplus beyond the governing party voters.
- Although there is no final agreement between the opposition parties, the opposition voters in Budapest clearly want the parties to cooperate. They do not differentiate between the EP and municipal elections in this respect. Two thirds of opposition voters expect cooperation from the parties in both elections.
- 86% of opposition respondents want that the incumbent mayors would re-run in their districts.
- Two thirds of the opposition in the capital want to see the smaller parties in the opposition cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

Budapest is a political citadel for the opposition parties. Any electoral map from the last decade will reveal the hole in the middle of the orange landscape - the capital. On one hand, Budapest is becoming more "oppositional", if we consider that since 2019 the city has had an opposition mayor and a majority in the city assembly, and in the 2022 parliamentary elections the opposition won several constituencies from the governing parties; on the other hand, in 2022 the opposition's list performance in Budapest was below that of 2018, so in some respects we can talk about a decline. Among the opposition parties and candidates, the competition for Budapest is also the most intense, as a candidacy in Budapest has the best chance winning a seat. This is why it is important to assess the balance of power between parties and mayoral candidates in Budapest in the run-up to the 2024 double elections, and to map voters' expectations of opposition politics. That's what we tried to do in the latest research from the Republikon Institute.¹

¹ Methodology: the survey was conducted by face-to-face interviews with 1500 people between 10-28 July 2023. The survey is representative of the adult population of Budapest by gender, age and education. Margin of error: +/-2.6%

FINDINGS

Political situation

First, we examined the willingness to participate and party preference of residents of the capital. 80% of Budapest residents would go to the polls if parliamentary elections were held this Sunday, roughly the same as the national average. Less than a third of Budapest residents would vote for the governing parties in a general election, the same as the total population in August 2023. One might think that the capital is not much different from the country in terms of party preference, but the capital has a much lower share of undecided voters than the rest of the country (only 13% of undecided voters in Budapest compared to 28% in the country) and opposition parties do significantly better in the capital than the national average. Thus, while in the national sample Fidesz-KDNP was favoured by 42 percent of party voters in August 2023, in Budapest only 35 percent of party voters would vote for the governing parties, and the remaining 65 percent of voters would support the opposition parties. The order of strength within the opposition is interesting in Budapest. DK and Momentum are the strongest and second strongest opposition, respectively, parties in the capital, as in the population as a whole, but Mi Hazánk in Budapest, which is in third place nationally, is doing particularly badly. Instead, the third strongest opposition party in the capital is MSZP, with 6 percent of the total sample and 7 percent of party voters voting for the party. This is presumably because there are several entrenched socialist mayors in Budapest, whose perception has a positive impact on their party's popularity.

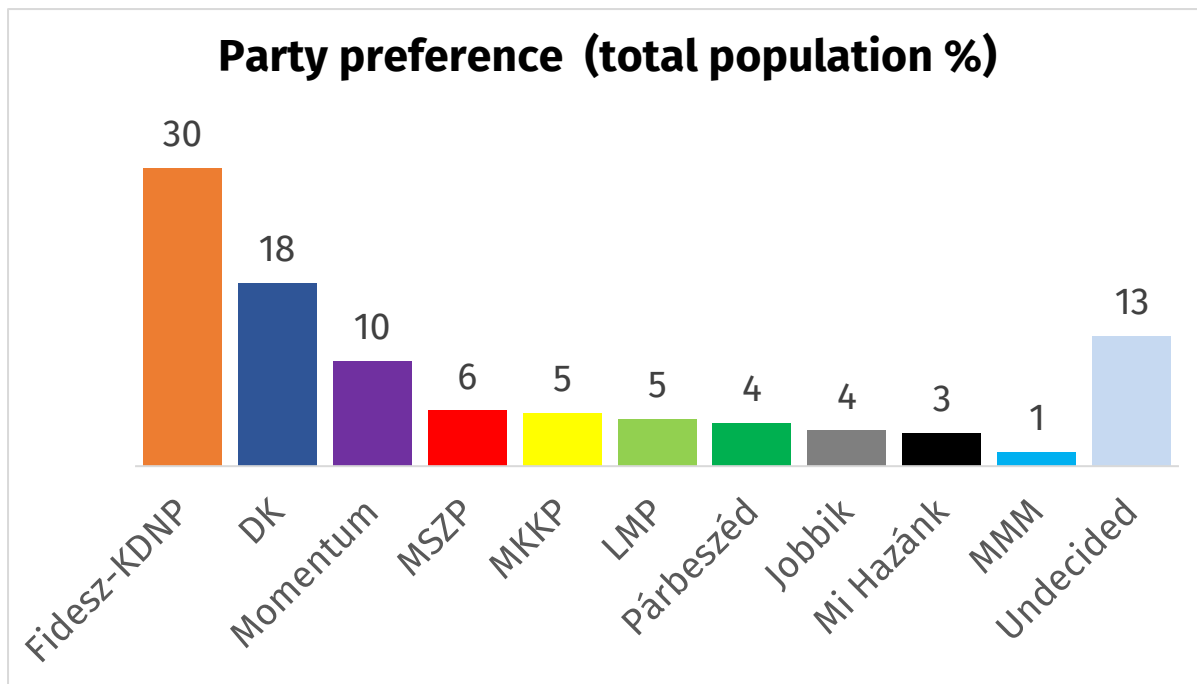


Figure 1: Party preference in Budapest (total population%)

Overall, the party preferences of Budapest residents are more confident than average, with the left-liberal opposition performing better, while the right-wing parties Jobbik and Mi Hazánk are less popular.

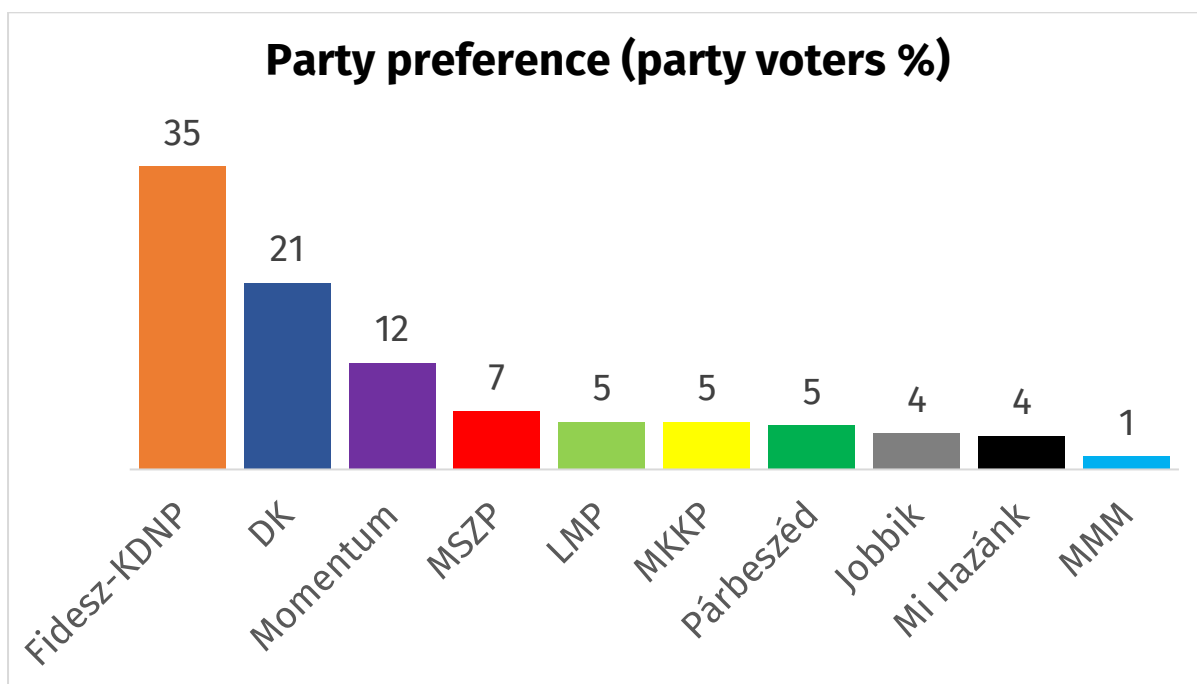


Figure 2: Party preference in Budapest (party voters %)

In preparation for the 2024 municipal elections, we also measured the preferences of the mayoral candidates. Of course, at the time of the data collection, the current mayor, Gergely Karácsony, was the only certain candidate, but we assumed that Fidesz-KDNP and Mi Hazánk would also put forward candidates for mayor. Several names have been mentioned on the government side. In this research we counted

on the candidacy of Alexandra Szentkirályi, former deputy mayor of Budapest in the colours of Fidesz-KDNP.

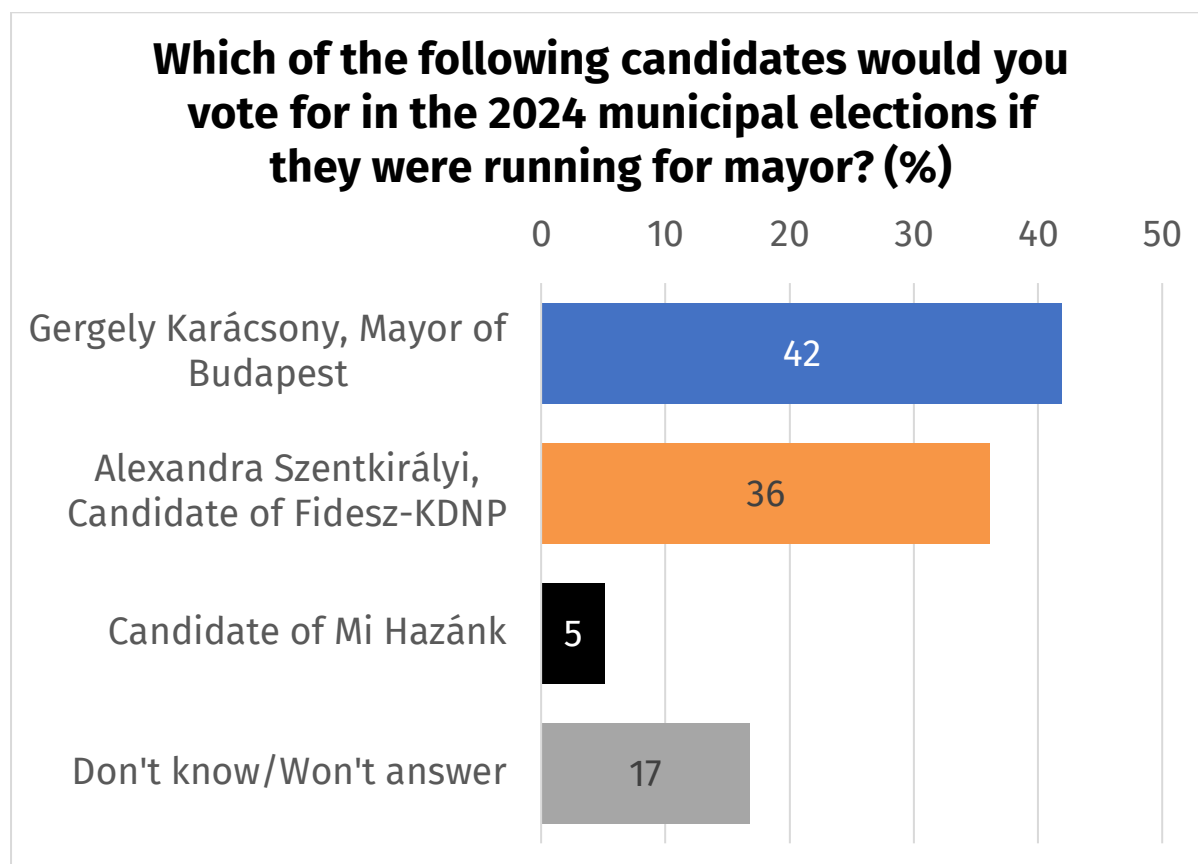


Figure 3: Preferences for Mayor of Budapest (population %)

Between the three candidates, Gergely Karácsony, Alexandra Szentkirályi and the candidate of Mi Hazánk, the vote is split 42-36-5 percent among the total population of Budapest and 50-43-6 percent among party voters, which means that Gergely Karácsony would currently win the election for mayor. The share of undecided voters is 17 percent, slightly higher than for the parliamentary party preference. The Fidesz-KDNP would lose the election, but Alexandra Szentkirályi has a slight voter surplus compared to the governing parties. Gergely Karácsony's support is roughly the same as the aggregate support of DK-Momentum-MSZP-LMP-Párbeszéd, but he does not draw in additional voters. Of course, we have yet to see the announcement of further candidates and the confirmation of the governing party candidate, not to mention the campaigns, so the balance of power may change further down the line.

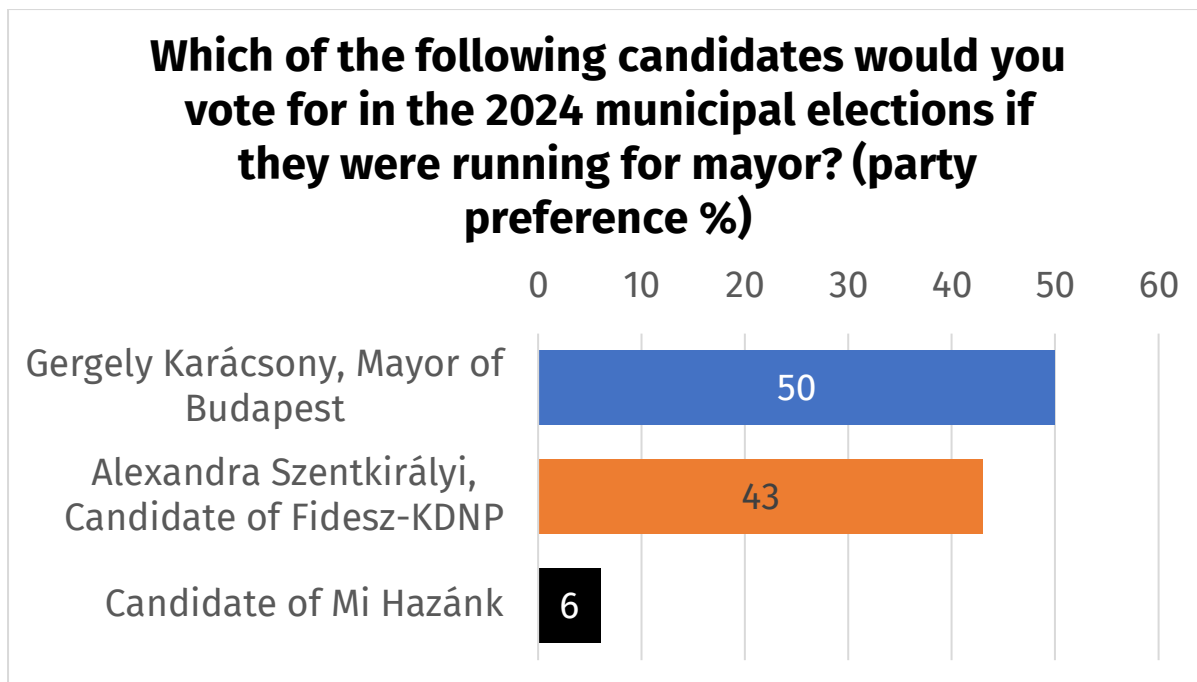


Figure 4: Preferences for Mayor of Budapest (party voters %)

Expectations for the opposition

The opposition's performance in Budapest will also depend on the strategy chosen and the coordination of candidates and campaign. Therefore, we considered it important to assess the demands that opposition voters in the capital place towards opposition politics. The data presented below relate to the attitudes of opposition voters in Budapest². The first and most important question, especially in the light of the fact that the EP and municipal elections will take place on the same day: should there be a single candidate? The logic of the two elections is fundamentally different, since the proportional EP election system allows for separate candidacies and serves as a confirmation of the strength of the parties; while in the municipal elections, as in the parliamentary elections, there is a need for cooperation, coordination of candidates is important, and in Budapest, larger joint lists are preferred when allocating compensatory seats. Opposition parties have a number of factors to consider when deciding whether to cooperate, and one of the most important is what voters think.

² Opposition voters in the sample are DK, Momentum, MSZP, LMP, MKKP, Párbeszéd, Jobbik, MMM. The opinions of Mi Hazánk voters are quite different from the main opposition, so they are not part of the opposition sample in the following statements.

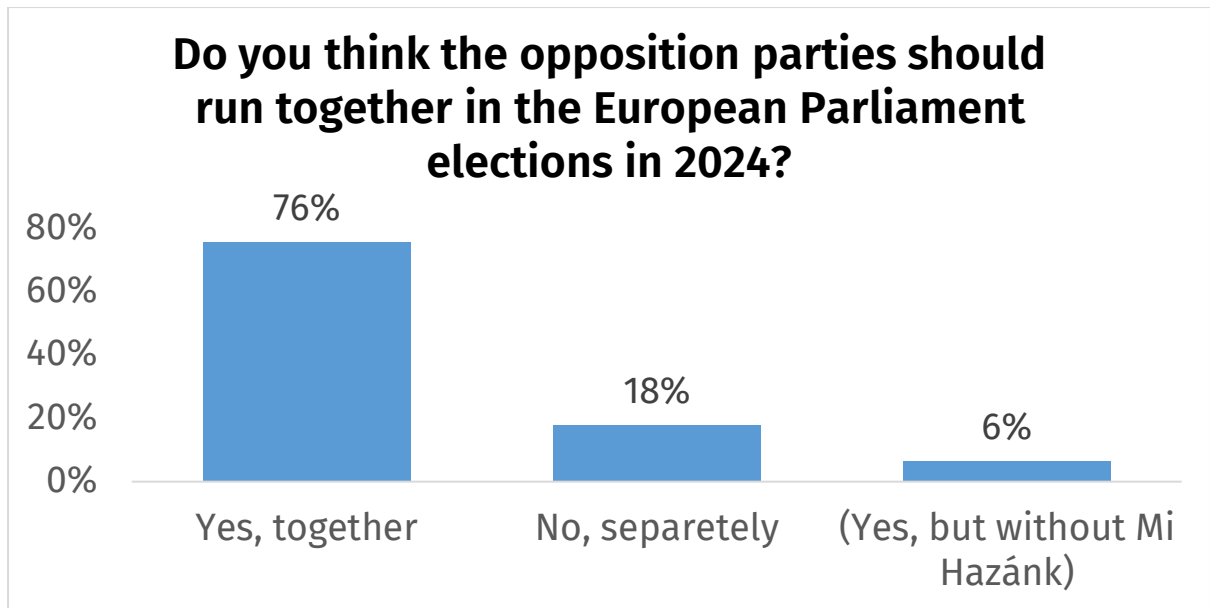


Figure 5: Opposition cooperation – EP elections

While our current understanding is that the opposition parties are running separately in the EP elections and in cooperation for the municipal elections, opposition voters in Budapest clearly want the opposition to cooperate and do not distinguish between EP and municipal elections in this respect. More than three quarters of opposition voters expect the parties to cooperate. Not indicated in the response options, 4 and 6 percent of voters respectively considered it important to highlight that they would not want Mi Hazánk to be part of this cooperation.

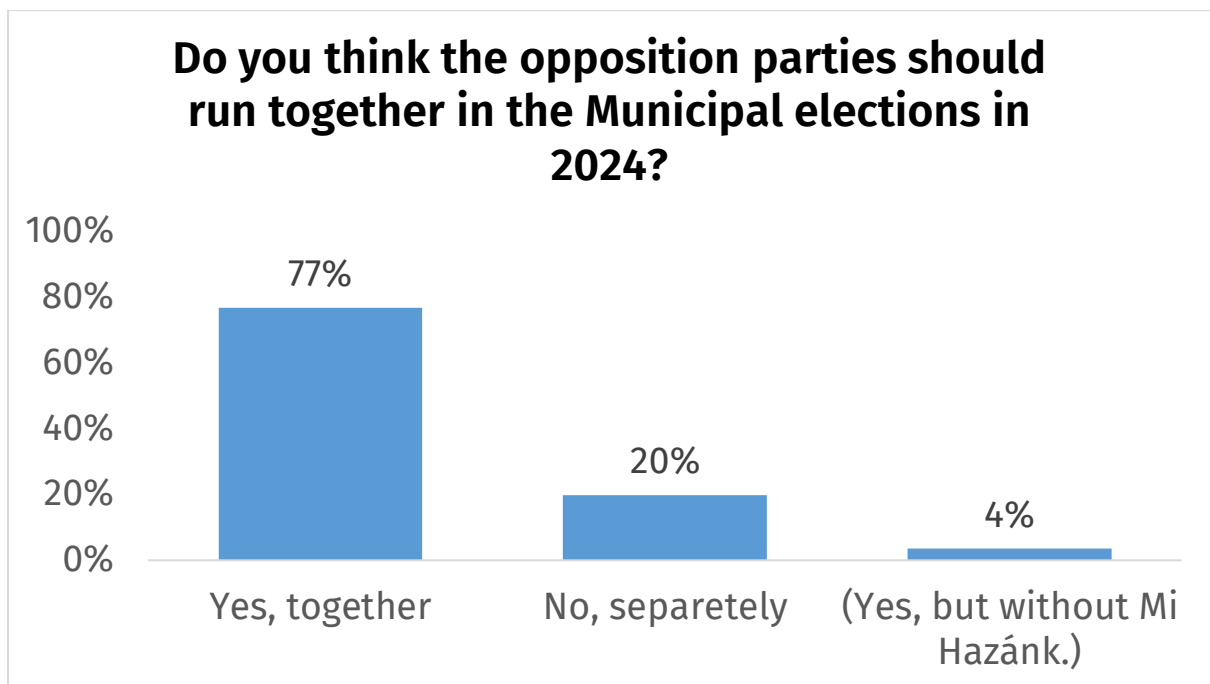


Figure 6: Opposition cooperation - municipal elections

14 of the 23 districts in Budapest has opposition mayors, and retaining these districts is key for the opposition to retain its majority in the Budapest assembly. The question therefore arises should the incumbent mayor run again in opposition-controlled districts or should this not be a consideration in cross-party negotiations and new mayoral candidates should run. In this respect, voters were unanimous in favour of incumbents: 87% of opposition respondents would retain incumbent opposition mayors. Previous election results and research confirm that incumbent mayors have a positional advantage in municipal elections.

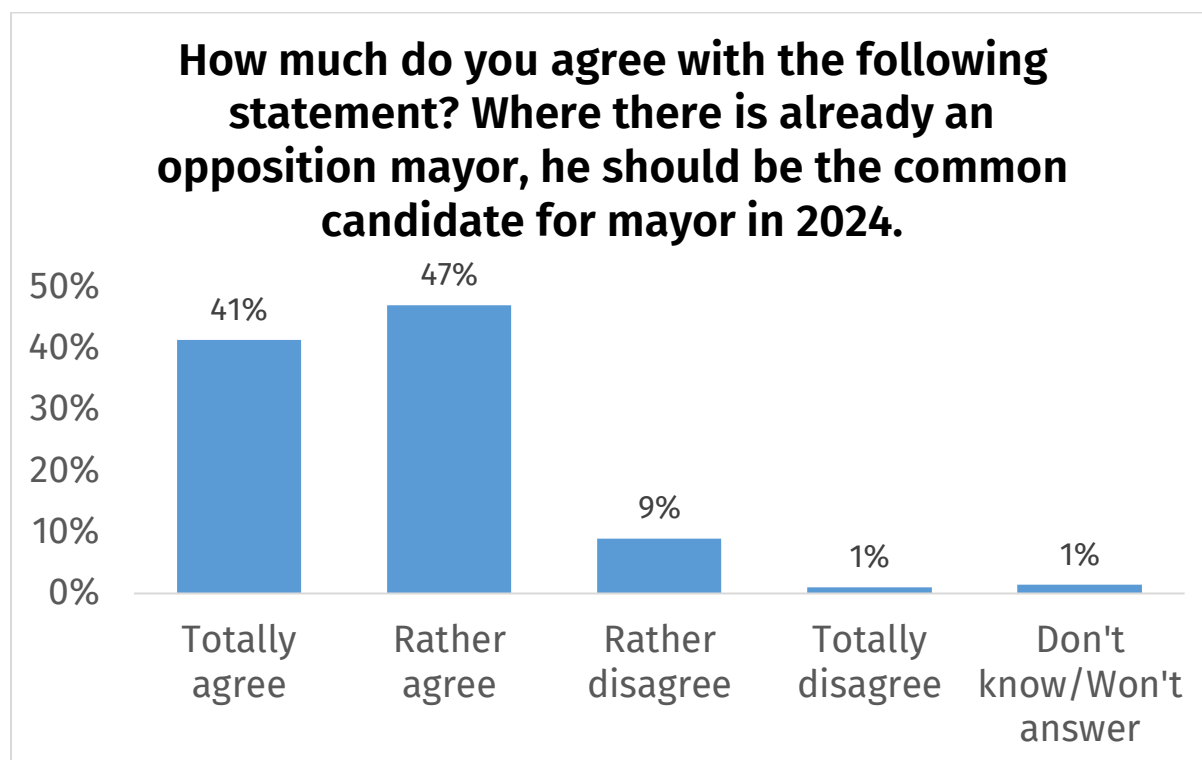


Figure 7: Retention of incumbent mayors

Finally, we wanted to know whether respondents think there is a place for small parties in the cooperation. Again, the dilemma of the double vote comes up: the EP elections could serve as a qualifier for the opposition in the 2026 parliamentary elections and narrow the party field, but in the municipal elections, cooperation is key to achieve the best results. As we have seen, the smaller opposition parties also find their voters better in the capital; if it were up to the people of Budapest, most left-wing and liberal parties would currently win seats in the European Parliament, so it is not surprising that two thirds of the capital's opposition would like to see smaller parties join the cooperation.

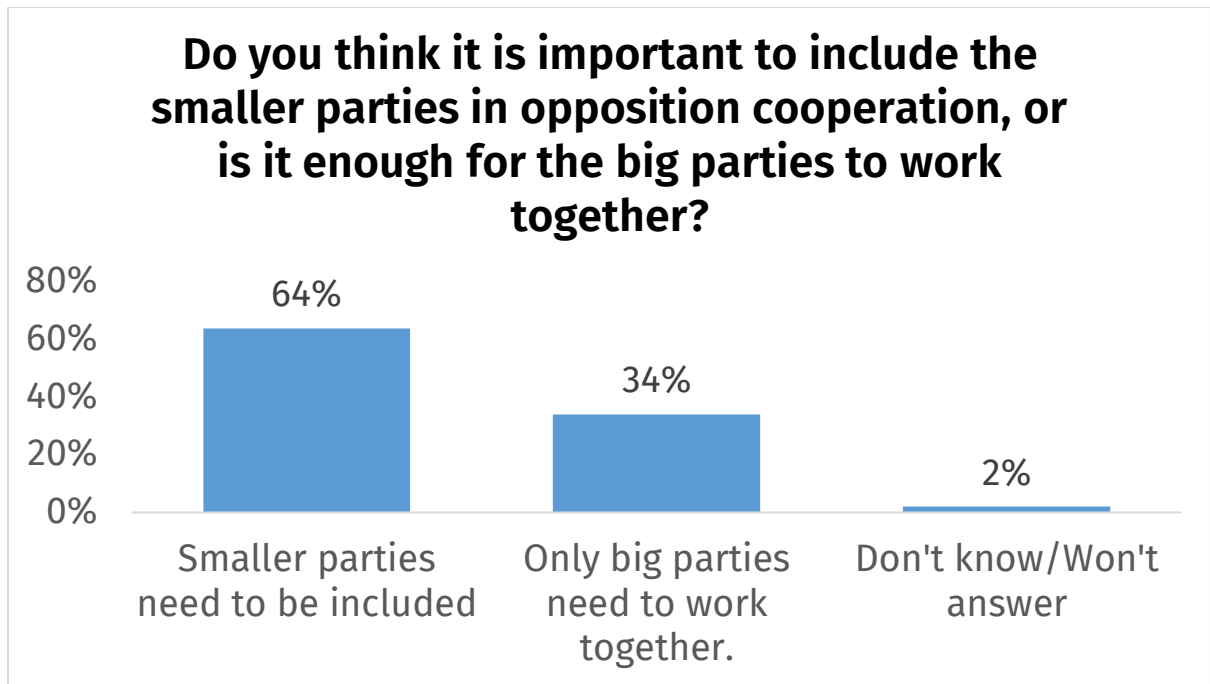


Figure 8: Role of small parties

The opposition is still over-represented in Budapest and that Gergely Karácsony would currently win the mayoral election, but his lead is not huge. Likewise, Fidesz-KDNP is still the strongest party in Budapest, so without cooperation, the 2024 election would result in a pro-government Mayoral leadership. This is no secret to opposition voters, and there is a clear need for cooperation, the retention of incumbent mayors and the involvement of small parties. Despite the bad experience of 2022, the electoral system has not become friendlier at national or municipal level, so opposition politics will have to reinvent itself to take the field against the governing parties.