

Strengthening Mayors, Weakening Opposition

Evaluation of the Budapest Elections

ANALYSIS BY REPUBLIKON INSTITUTE



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SUMMARY

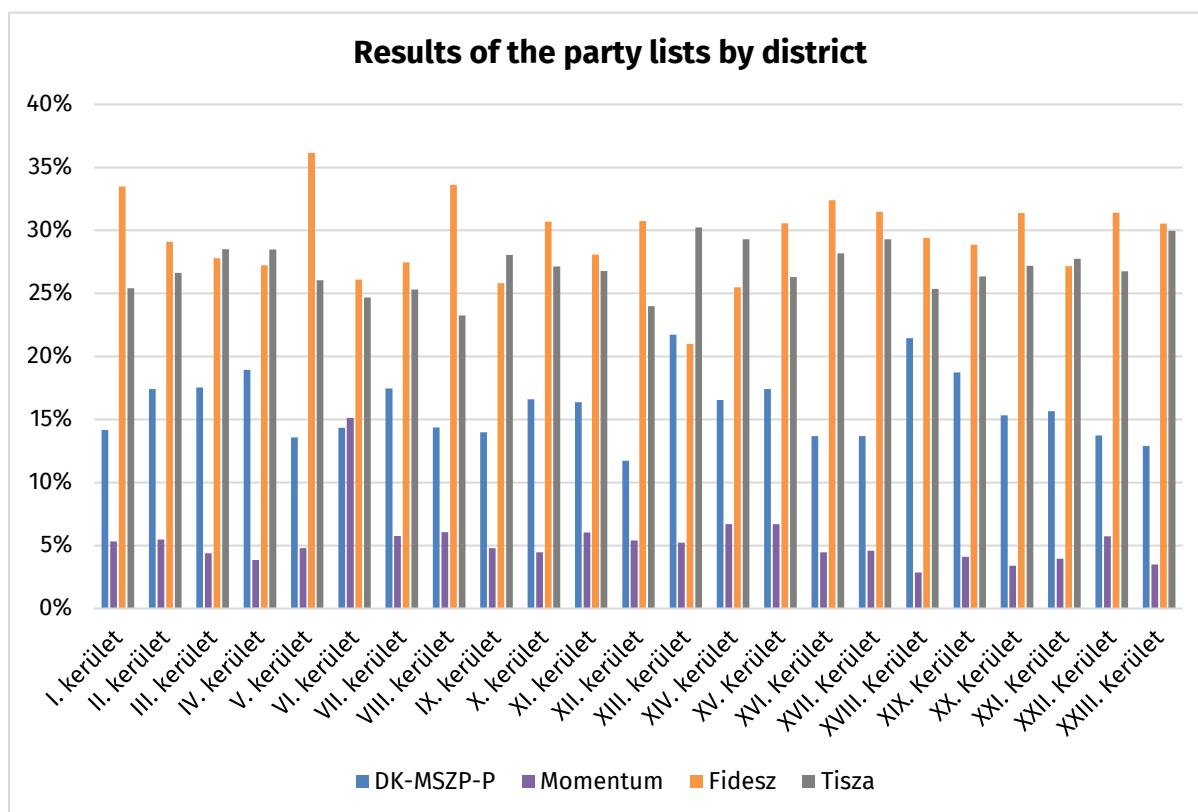
- The Budapest City Assembly will be completely transformed, no party will be able to govern Budapest without compromises, the new leadership will have to work together with either Tisza or Fidesz on specific issues
- The Tisza Party has defeated Fidesz in several districts, and both parties can delegate 10-10 members to the Assembly. However, they are unwilling to cooperate with each other or with the other parties on a lasting basis, which will further slow down decision-making and give the two parties considerable potential for blackmail
- In total, four mayors have changed, but in two places this has not meant a change of sides in the party political sense
- In almost all cases, the incumbent mayors' relative advantage over their strongest challenger has increased, so the incumbency effect has been strong, but the weaker mayors face the challenge of a possible Tisza Party in five years' time

BUDAPEST CITY ASSEMBLY

After the recount, Gergely Karácsony still won the election for Mayor, but he will have a much tougher job in the next five years. Even though there will be the same number of opposition and Fidesz district mayors in the new term starting in the autumn, the amendment to the electoral law means that Budapest City Assembly will once again be composed of members who have won seats in the list vote. Nevertheless, this is the right thing to do: the self-government of Budapest is better served by an assembly that functions independently of the districts than by an unjustified confusion between the metropolitan and district levels.

On the opposition side, however, there has been a major reshuffle: the Tisza Party has won as many seats in the Budapest Assembly as Fidesz, the DK-MSZP-Párbeszéd alliance has lost seats, and Momentum has not been elected to the Assembly this time.

The ruling party's list generally received more votes in districts where the Fidesz mayoral candidate performed well, and the same correlation is true for the left-wing parties and Momentum lists concerning opposition mayoral candidates. The distribution of the Tisza Party's results, however, is much more interesting. The party achieved an average of 27 percent in the districts, with only a 7 percentage point difference between its best and worst results in Budapest, resulting in a very low standard deviation of 1.8 percentage points from the average result.



The equal number of seats for Tisza and Fidesz means that the city government will not have a permanent majority in the next five years (the two parties have a total of 20 seats out of 33), and will have to cooperate on issues with the Tisza Party or Dávid Vitézy. If Péter Magyar's party proves to be constructive, this is not necessarily a bad thing, since - however naive it may seem - forward-looking professional debates help decision-making and transparency. It is important, however, that we do not have a situation like the one in Esztergom between 2010 and 2014, when the Fidesz majority in the city council practically paralysed the city's operations by refusing to cooperate even minimally with the opposition mayor Éva Tétényi.

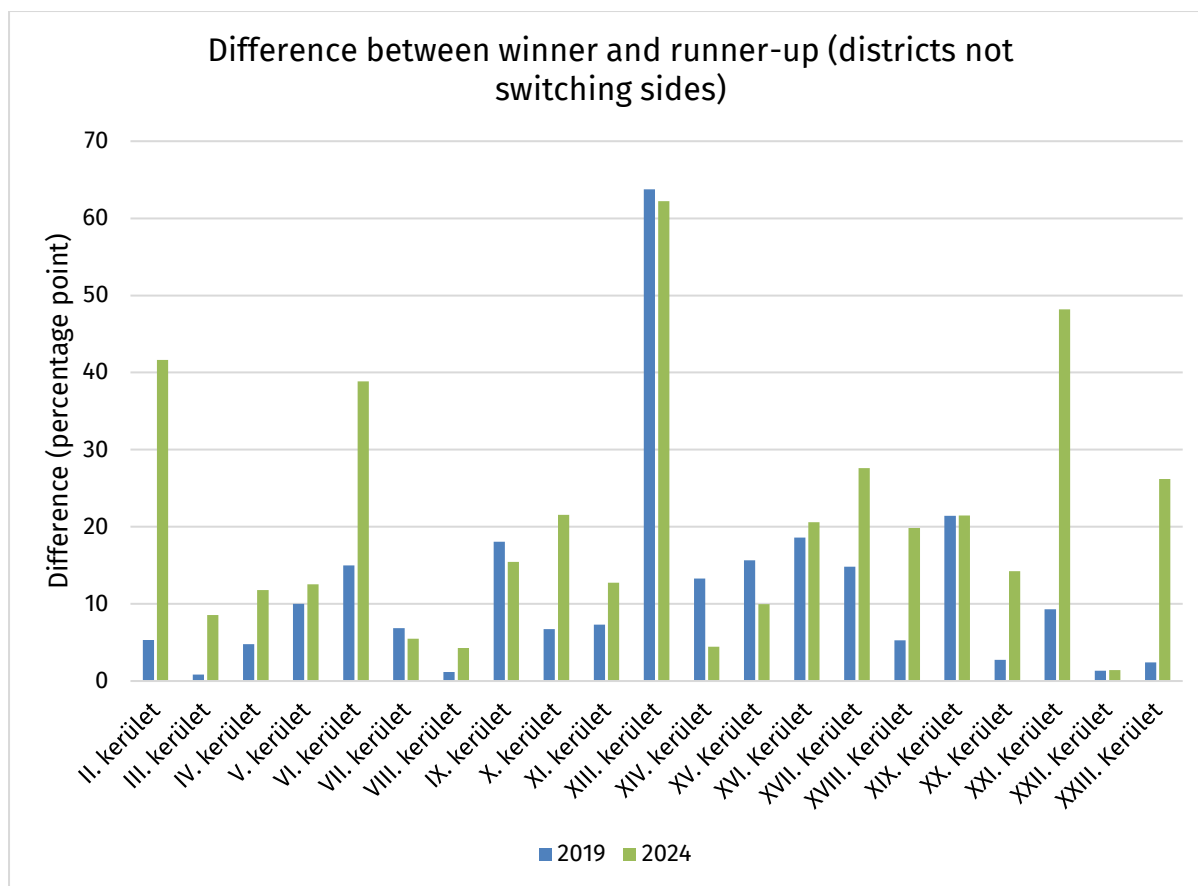
THE DISTRICT RESULTS

In the districts as a whole, the balance of power has not changed significantly. Fidesz retook the lead in district I, while the opposition won in district XII. In district V. Márta Naszályi's mayoralty was already overshadowed in 2022 when the Fidesz candidate won the by-election for the Momentum deputy mayor's seat, who had left for Parliament, resulting in the mayor losing her majority in the council.

In Hegyvidék, the results of the previous parliamentary elections had already shown that after the retirement of Zoltán Pokorni, who had led the district since 2006, the opposition had something to gain in the XII district (Miklós Hajnal won the single-member constituency with 48.42% in the 2022 parliamentary election), and this expectation was confirmed by the victory of Gergely Kovács of the Kétfarkú Kutya Party. Winning the mayoral seat of Hegyvidék is the first major victory for the organisation, which started out as a joke party, since its formation.

The strength of the opposition in Budapest is shown by the fact that several opposition politicians stood (or became) mayors against the Fidesz candidate. This is how Péter Niedermüller remained mayor in VII, András Pikó in VIII and Krisztina Baranyi in IX. In Zugló, another opposition victory was achieved when Csaba Horváth, former MSZP mayor, was replaced by András Rózsa, a Momentum candidate.

The incumbency effect of the incumbent mayor running with a lead was felt in almost all districts. In 16 of the 21 districts where there was no party-political change of side (in districts IV and XIV the mayor changed, but the districts remained opposition), the incumbent mayor was able to increase his lead in 16 districts compared to five years ago.



In 5 districts where this did not happen, there are 3 where this drop only happened because there were more candidates than in the previous election. In the IX, XIII and XIV districts, if we add up the results of the opposition parties' candidates, their relative advantage already exceeds that of 2019. There were two districts where the mayor achieved a worse result than before compared to his strongest challenger, despite the fact that none of the parties of the former coalition ran their own separate candidate. Not only did Angéla Cserdiné Németh lose her percentage point lead, she also received fewer votes than five years ago. In contrast, Fidesz fielded a new candidate who won more votes than the 2019 candidate. In addition, the district saw relatively strong results for a civil candidate and Mi Hazánk (8 percent and 7 percent).

Péter Niedermüller was the mayor with the lowest percentage of votes to retain his seat. In his case, there were not only Fidesz, but also Kétfarkú Kutya Party and two civilian challengers, all of whom achieved relatively confident results. In the end, the fragmentation of the vote resulted in a victory for the DK candidate.

The interesting thing about the district mayoral elections is that the previously successful pro-government mayors were unable to regain their positions anywhere. Although the candidacies of the former Fidesz mayors gave us an idea of which districts Fidesz sees a chance to win back and which districts it considers important to win back, Balázs Bús of district III, Zsolt Wintermantel of district IV, Botond Sára of district VIII and Attila Ughy, the former Fidesz leader of district XVIII, did not become mayor again. All four candidates trailed the incumbent mayors by a larger margin than in 2019, when they lost their seats.

However, the now victorious Budapest mayors cannot rest easy in the long term. The list-based election of the Budapest City Assembly clearly shows that the Tisza Party must be taken seriously in the capital as well. Péter Magyar's party, which grew stronger at a tremendous speed after the pardon scandal, has become inescapable in a matter of months, which means that the time factor is the only reason why Tisza has not been able to compete in either the mayoral or district elections. And this is probably the last time that has happened.

CONCLUSION

The existence of an incumbency effect was key to the results in the capital. Almost all incumbent mayors have won bigger victories than in 2019. However, 9 June was also a success for newcomers, with the Tisza Party finishing second in the Budapest City Assembly list election, just behind Fidesz. This will leave a very divided and difficult to govern Assembly in the coming autumn. This means that Budapest will be governed only at the cost of serious compromises. At the district level, the I and XII districts have changed sides, with the biggest shift since 2019. The incumbent mayors were largely able to strengthen their positions, which they will need if the Tisza Party is to mount a meaningful challenge to them in 2029.