

To vote, or not to vote? That is the question.

What can we infer based on data regarding voter participation?

AN ANALYSIS BY REPUBLIKON INSTITUTE



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SUMMARY

- Public opinion surveys indicate an extremely high level of willingness to vote ahead of the 2026 election.
- Voter turnout in the elections following the transition to democracy fluctuated, but it clearly moved in tandem with the perception of how much was at stake in the elections.
- The record is still held by the 2002 election, but it could be broken this year.
- There is a clear correlation between participation and the size of the municipality: the larger the municipality, the higher the level of participation.
- Between 2018 and 2022, disparities in voter turnout narrowed slightly as turnout increased in smaller towns.
- The growing mobilization in rural areas may be linked to Fidesz's increasing support in villages and small towns.
- The 2026 election will take place in a new political landscape with the emergence of the Tisza Party, which may also influence the regional patterns of voter turnout.

INTRODUCTION

As the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2026 approach, the issue of expected voter turnout has become a central topic of political discourse. Opinion surveys published during the campaign period indicate exceptionally high levels of engagement, with respondents in some cases stating at rates exceeding 90 percent that they will definitely or likely participate in the election. These figures point to a strong political mobilization environment and suggest turnout levels that exceed previous records.

It is important to note, however, that measuring party preferences and voter turnout intentions are not exactly the same thing. Voter turnout is fundamentally a different kind of decision than party preference. In many cases, choosing a party is an identity-based, long-term, stable attitude that is less likely to fluctuate over a short period of time. If someone can name today which political force they are closer to, there is a good chance they will choose the same option on election day. Provided, of course, that they go out to vote. In contrast, participation itself is a commitment to future behavior that can be influenced by numerous factors that cannot be fully controlled in advance. Even the smallest things, such as a scheduling conflict or a sick child in the family, can prevent someone from participating who, just a few weeks ago, told the pollster they were certain to vote.

For this very reason, it is difficult to predict what level of turnout we can expect, but we can attempt to draw some conclusions from past data. One pillar of our analysis thus consists of a chronological review of past election turnout data, while another part involves exploring structural patterns of turnout, particularly by residential category in the 2018 and 2022 elections. Differences by settlement type help us understand in which social contexts the willingness to participate is more stable, and where there is a greater gap between declared intent and actual turnout. This not only aids in interpreting expectations for 2026 but also provides a more nuanced picture of the structure of Hungarian voter behavior.

VOTER PARTICIPATION THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

Voter turnout has fluctuated since the transition to democracy, but since 2018 there has been a noticeable increase in the intention to vote (and this applies not only to parliamentary elections, but also to local and European Parliament elections). The table below illustrates the turnout figures for parliamentary elections:

Year	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
First round	45,54%	68,92%	56,26%	70,53%	67,83%	64,2%	61,73%	70,22%	70,21%
Second round	65,11%	55,12%	57,01%	73,51%	64,39%	46,64%			

Between 1990 and 2010, six parliamentary elections were held under the old electoral system, which consisted of two rounds of voting. In the parliamentary elections held after the transition to democracy, voter turnout showed a fluctuating trend. However, it is clear that turnout was particularly high when voters felt that the election had something at stake, and low when, in the absence of such stakes, the election descended into relative indifference. A good example of this is the second round of the 1994 election, when the number of participants in the second round dropped dramatically due to the MSZP's victories in the first round; the same pattern can be observed in 2010, when the outcome in 119 of the then 176 OEVKs was already decided in Fidesz's favor in the first round.

In contrast, voter turnout reached record levels in the 2002 elections, a figure that has remained unchanged to this day—though the situation may change starting in April. In the first round, 70.5 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots. In the second round, Fidesz—which had previously been overconfident—managed to raise the stakes, and through mobilization efforts between the two rounds, they increased the already record-high turnout by 3 percentage points. Nothing illustrates how Fidesz's first-round defeat spurred the party to further mobilization as well as Orbán's now-famous statement: "Everyone go out and vote, and bring one more person with you!" With this effective mobilization, Orbán nearly managed

to turn the election around. Neither side in the 2006 election was able to stake as much on the outcome, but voter turnout was still relatively high in both rounds.

The next time people felt there was truly a lot at stake was in 2018, by which point the new single-round system was in place. At that time, due to tactical voting, many believed they had found a way to defeat Fidesz in single-member districts—a problem caused by the elimination of the second round in 2014. This was the second time since the transition to democracy that a turnout of over 70 percent was achieved. In 2022, both sides staked a great deal on the election. The opposition sought to bring its supporters to the polls through full cooperation, while Fidesz tried to do so by scaremongering about the war in Ukraine and holding a referendum. We can see that the latter was ultimately much more successful in this regard, which essentially resulted in the same level of turnout as four years earlier.

It is clear that in 2026, both sides are placing greater emphasis on the elections than ever before. Fidesz has further intensified the war-like campaign of recent years; according to their narrative, even the prime minister’s life is in danger. Meanwhile, the Tisza Party has been able to reach voters whom left-wing and liberal parties had previously completely neglected, using much more innovative methods than previous parties and consciously reclaiming national symbols. Magyar is also trying to raise the stakes by increasingly talking about accountability; in the case of Péter Szijjártó, he has even mentioned a life sentence. With stakes raised this high, it is easy to imagine that the 2026 election will result in record voter turnout.

PARTICIPATION BASED ON SETTLEMENT TYPE

The turnout data for the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections, broken down by settlement type, are particularly valuable in that they allow us to compare the patterns of two elections that saw exceptionally high turnout nationwide. Since national turnout was virtually identical in both years, the differences can be attributed not to changes in overall turnout but to subtle shifts in the internal structure. The following table presents turnout data for the two elections by settlement type:

Year	National	Budapest	Major cities	Mid-size cities	Small towns	Villages
2018	70,22%	74,84%	71,76%	70,75%	68,30%	67,47%
2022	70,21%	74,46%	71,24%	70,74%	68,39%	67,9%
Change	-0,01	-0,38	-0,52	-0,01	+0,09	+0,43

When broken down by settlement type, the same pattern of voter turnout is evident in both elections. It is clear that settlement size and voter turnout are correlated; that is, the larger a settlement's population, the higher the turnout tends to be. The difference between Budapest and rural villages was 6.5–7.5 percentage points in both years. This is not a marginal difference, but a stable structural gap. Thus, the structure of the settlement has a strong influence on participation. The reason for this is that the intensity of political participation is linked to the social environment, the flow of information, institutional embeddedness, the demographic characteristics of the population, and the perceived proximity of political competition. In metropolitan areas, the political agenda is more prominent, campaigns are more intense, the stakes of the election are more directly felt, and residents typically have higher social status than those living in villages; these people are also typically more interested in politics. In smaller towns, by contrast, different types of mobilization mechanisms are at work.

Although national participation remained unchanged, a slight but consistent trend can be observed in the internal structure between 2018 and 2022. It is clear that the smaller the municipality, the more positive the shift by 2022. There was a slight decline in the largest categories, the middle range stagnated, while the smallest settlements saw growth. Of course, it is important to emphasize that **these changes are small**, as we are talking about shifts of less than half a percentage point, but **their direction is clear**.

This suggests that the urbanization gradient reflected in the differences in voter turnout across settlement types has not disappeared, but has moderated somewhat. This can be partly interpreted as a saturation effect: that is, turnout in Budapest and other major cities was already very high in 2018, making it harder to increase further from that level. At the same time, there may also be political factors behind this phenomenon. In the 2022 election, Fidesz-KDNP achieved an exceptionally strong result nationwide, but particularly so in smaller areas, especially in rural settlements. While 56.98 percent of rural voters cast their ballots for Fidesz in 2018, that figure rose to 63.2 percent in 2022. This represents an increase of 6.22 percentage points. Although Fidesz was able to increase its share of the vote in all types of settlements, the smaller the settlement, the greater the proportion by which it was able to do so. The ruling party's traditional base has long been heavily concentrated in villages and small towns, where mobilization based on personal networks works more effectively. However, this trend shifted even further in this direction in 2022, and research from the past 1–2 years shows even more clearly that Fidesz has a clear advantage over Tisza exclusively in villages. Consequently, **the increase in participation from smaller settlements is not a spontaneous process, but the result of targeted political mobilization.**

The 2026 election, therefore, will no longer take place under the party structure that existed in 2022. Since then, the Tisza Party has emerged and built up nationwide support, with a regional base that extends beyond Budapest. The Tisza Party is actively present outside the capital as well, particularly in large and medium-sized cities, but there are also numerous Tisza “islands” in small towns and villages, and Péter Magyar is making a spectacular effort to prevent Fidesz from taking over these small settlements. **The expected changes to the electoral structure in 2026 are thus directly linked to the transformation of the party system.** In fact, during his travels across the country, Magyar visits settlements with populations ranging from a few thousand to, at times, just a few hundred people, where—as if he were in a county seat—he delivers an hour-long speech, reflecting on issues and topics affecting the lives of the locals.

Based on the data from the 2018 and 2022 elections and the differences between them, the question is not whether the urbanization gradient will disappear from the spatial structure of voter turnout, as it most likely will not. The question is whether rural mobilization will continue to converge toward the national average, and how the emergence of the Tisza region will reshape the spatial structure of participation. This question, however, will likely only be answered by the election.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data, the pattern of voter turnout in Hungarian parliamentary elections is not merely the result of campaign effects, but is determined by enduring structural factors. At the same time, turnout levels are strongly influenced by the perceived stakes of the election: a closely contested race consistently leads to higher turnout, and we can expect this to be the case in 2026.

Differences in settlement structure are persistent: voter turnout is consistently higher in large cities than in smaller towns. Data from the 2018 and 2022 elections, however, suggest that this difference may be narrowing, primarily due to increased mobilization in rural areas—a trend that, while not significant, was not spontaneous but rather a politically organized process.

The geographical distribution of voter turnout is closely linked to the balance of power among political parties, meaning that it can be directly influenced. From this perspective, the 2026 election raises a key question. It is not the overall level of turnout nationwide, but rather its distribution that may prove decisive, particularly with regard to the evolving differences between turnout in rural and urban areas.