

Conservative Hills, Liberal Downtown, Left-Wing Suburbs?

*The chronological transformation of party preferences
among voters in Budapest*

AN ANALYSIS BY REPUBLIKON INSTITUTE



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INTRODUCTION

In the April election, the centrist–centre-right Tisza Party won Budapest by a landslide, while, much to the surprise of many, left-wing and liberal candidates, including incumbents, markedly underperformed. Public discourse often describes Budapest’s political landscape in simplified terms, portraying the capital as uniformly liberal or left-leaning. This perception is partly shaped by city-level election results and partly by values associated with urban lifestyles. Such generalisations, however, tend to obscure the more subtle differences that are clearly observable within the city, especially at the district level.

In reality, Budapest’s political map is far from homogeneous. The diverse social composition, historical development, housing stock, and economic situation of the different districts all contribute to the emergence of distinct party preferences. While liberal parties tend to be stronger in some inner districts, suburban areas often display more balance or even conservative dominance.

This internal diversity suggests that Budapest’s political behaviour can only be understood to a limited extent through aggregated data. Examining district-level differences not only nuances the overall picture of the capital, but also helps us better understand how social and political cleavages operate locally. The following analysis, therefore, seeks to uncover how and in what direction party preferences have shifted across Budapest’s districts recently.

THESE ARE THE BUDA HILLS

For decades, the Buda districts, especially Districts I, II, and XII, served as stable bastions of the right, of bourgeois and conservative politics. In the 1990 parliamentary election, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (hereinafter referred to as *MDF*) received 27–29 percent of the votes in all three districts, rendering it the strongest party in the Buda area. Although the party’s national election result fell to a total of 13 percent four years later, support for MDF still exceeded 23 percent in these districts. Furthermore, the then-independent Christian Democratic People's Party (hereinafter referred to as *KDNP*) received 7–8 percent of the votes

here in 1994. In 1998 and 2002, most of the capital voted for the Hungarian Socialist Party (hereinafter referred to as *MSZP*), but Districts I, II, and XII were dominated by Fidesz and the Fidesz–MDF coalition. In both years, they outperformed their left-wing challengers by roughly 10 percentage points. Nonetheless, they were not the only right-wing force present: in 1998, the far-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party (*MIÉP*) became the third strongest contender in these districts, receiving 10 percent of the votes, and although the Alliance of Free Democrats (hereinafter referred to as *SZDSZ*) overperformed them in the three districts four years later, *MIÉP*'s support barely declined, remaining above 9 percent.

In 2006, Fidesz further increased its lead to 15–20 percent in these three districts, and it became the strongest party in another district of Buda, namely Újbuda. By the 2010 election, Fidesz had not only dominated all of Buda but the entire city, with Jobbik finishing fourth at 6–7 percent. Interestingly, 2010 was also the year when LMP achieved its best results in the three traditionally bourgeois Buda districts, coming within 10 percent of the second-placed *MSZP* — something it managed nowhere else in the city. By 2014, the erosion of Fidesz's popularity in these districts had become visible. Whether this was due to a shift in voters' values or to Fidesz's rightward drift and growing autocratic tendencies is an open question. In any case, the Fidesz–KDNP alliance won District I by only 15 percentage points, District II by 8, and District XII by 13. Meanwhile, the opposition alliance received 32–36 percent, and LMP 10–11 percent of the votes in the three districts. Combined, the support of left-wing, liberal, and green parties had caught up with the right, though this was less apparent due to the distribution of votes among multiple parties. This trend continued in 2018, and by 2022, the opposition alliance defeated Fidesz across all of Buda. The liberal Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (*MKKP*) also emerged as a third force, achieving over 7 percent in District XII (which elected the party's chairman, Gergely Kovács, as its mayor two years later). In the 2026 election, the Buda middle class finally withdrew its support from Fidesz: the party received around 30 percent in the three districts, which roughly matches its citywide average. Meanwhile, the far-right *Mi Hazánk* performed weakest here, indicating that, like Jobbik before, they also failed to build a stable base in the Buda Hills.

PEST BEYOND THE BOULEVARD

With the exception of the first election, the outer ring of Pest traditionally served as the stronghold of the left, specifically of MSZP, until 2010. In Districts XV–XVIII, the Socialists received 30–40 percent of the votes in 1994 and 1998, rising to 40–50 percent in 2002 and 2006. What was growth for the MSZP was decline for the liberal SZDSZ: from around 20 percent in 1994, the liberal party fell to 8–10 percent in 1998, and to 6–8 percent four years later. Although the SZDSZ managed to climb back to an 8–10 percent margin in 2006, the revival was short-lived: in the 2009 EP election – the last campaign the party ran – it received only 3 percent in the four districts.

Until 2010, Fidesz typically scored 30–40 percent here, however, in 2010, it obtained a landslide victory of 45–50 percent, mirroring its citywide performance. Yet Fidesz was not the only strong right-wing force in Pestszentimre and the areas along the Rákos-stream. Jobbik achieved an outstanding 12–13 percent in all four districts, further increasing it to 15–16 percent by 2014 (except in District XVI). Meanwhile, Fidesz fell by 8–10 points compared to 2010, but still remained ahead of the opposition alliance in all four districts. Together with Jobbik's results, the right reached around or above 50 percent in Districts XV–XVIII. In 2018, Fidesz–KDNP still achieved the best results in these districts, but by 2022, the opposition alliance managed to defeat them in all four districts by 1–2 percentage points. Mi Hazánk outperformed its Budapest average, taking away the third place from MKKP in Districts XV, XVII, and XVIII, receiving over 5 percent of the votes. The far-right party managed to maintain this result in 2026, while Fidesz fell from its 43–44 percent support to around 30 percent in all four districts. Just like in the rest of the capital, Tisza Party won these districts, though it performed slightly (1–2 percentage points) below its Budapest average.

A RIGHT-WING EXCLAVE IN THE CITY CENTRE

In 1990, the MDF and SZDSZ were neck-and-neck in the inner city, with solely 1–2 percentage points separating them. Districts V–VIII voted liberal, while District IX chose the centre-right. The then-liberal Fidesz finished fourth in these districts, always only a few points behind MSZP. By 1994, SZDSZ clearly overtook MDF in all

five districts, though it still finished second behind its coalition partner, MSZP, which won decisively, receiving 27–35 percent of city centre votes. In 1998, Fidesz closed in on MSZP in these districts, typically finishing within a range of 5–6 percentage points, except in District V, where the gap was barely over 1 percentage point. However, Fidesz was not the only strong right-wing party here. District V was the only place outside the bourgeois Buda precincts where MIÉP's result exceeded 10 percent. From then on until 2010, SZDSZ became the third strongest force here, usually receiving 10–16 percent of the votes.

The gap between District V and its surrounding areas widened further in 2002. The right caught up with the Socialists in Belváros–Lipótváros: MSZP received 34.60 percent, while the Fidesz–MDF alliance acquired 34.58 percent of the votes. MIÉP, though weakened, still achieved one of its best results here. Meanwhile, in Districts VI–IX, MSZP defeated Fidesz by 6–14 percentage points. In 2006, Fidesz defeated MSZP 41 to 32 in District V, becoming the first right-wing force able to dominate there. This was not Fidesz's only success; in District VI, it narrowed the gap with MSZP to 1 percentage point, while managing to reduce its deficit in the other districts.

In 2010, Fidesz-KDNP won every district confidently, however, it managed to win District V with a result of over 50 percent, which the right-wing coalition only managed to repeat in the three Buda districts. By 2014, the left-wing coalition closed the gap on Fidesz, winning Erzsébetváros by 1 percentage point, falling just 0.1 percentage points short in Terézváros, and 3–5 percentage points short in Józsefváros and Ferencváros. Meanwhile, although Fidesz-KDNP secured only 44 percent of the vote in District V, it still beat the left by 10 percentage points. Due to divisions within the opposition in 2018, Fidesz won every district with results of around 40 percent, however, the opposition coalition managed to win all five inner-city districts in 2022, with results ranging from 45 to 50 percent. Fidesz fell short by 10 percentage points in Districts VI, VII, and IX, and by 5 percentage points in Districts V and VIII. In other words, the once-strong Fidesz bastion Belváros–Lipótváros began turning away from the party just like the districts in the Buda hills. The extent of this shift, however, was smaller; in 2026, among the Budapest

precincts, Fidesz achieved its best result in District V with 34 percent, and this was the only district in the capital where the Tisza Party received less than 60 percent of the votes (58.5 percent).

CONCLUSION

The above processes clearly show that Budapest's political structure has not been strictly left-wing or liberal over the past decades. Instead, it has undergone continuous realignment, often driven by local trends moving in opposite directions. The traditionally bourgeois-right Buda districts have been opening toward liberal parties since 2010, while the former left-wing dominance of the outer Pest districts has eroded, giving way to long-term right-wing advantage. The inner city has functioned as a transitional space, where political competition is more balanced, yet also more responsive to national political shifts. What cannot be determined from election data alone is whether voters' values have changed (perhaps significant demographic turnovers occurred), or whether the parties themselves changed so much that they lost some segments of the electorate while gaining others.

From this perspective, the election of 2026 was not merely another political turning point but a decisive moment that brought several previous trends to a close all at once. Fidesz's decline became evident not only in traditionally liberal or left-wing strongholds, but also in its previously stable bases. It is difficult to draw long-term conclusions from 2026, as anti-Orbán sentiment overrode ideological divides. Historically, however, Budapest has always had roughly 40 percent right-wing voters. The question is whether the remaining 60 percent, comprising left-wing, liberal, and green voters alike, can be united in the long term either by Tisza, or by an alternative political community that may emerge in the future.

Overall, Budapest today is less easily defined by ideological categories than it was in the past. District-level differences remain significant, but they no longer align neatly with the traditional patterns of suburban right – housing-estate left or downtown liberal – outer-district working-class. Instead, a more fragmented and rapidly shifting political landscape has emerged, where party preferences are

increasingly shaped by short-term political supply, leadership credibility, and current social issues. This means that Budapest's political future is less predictable than at any time in the past three decades.