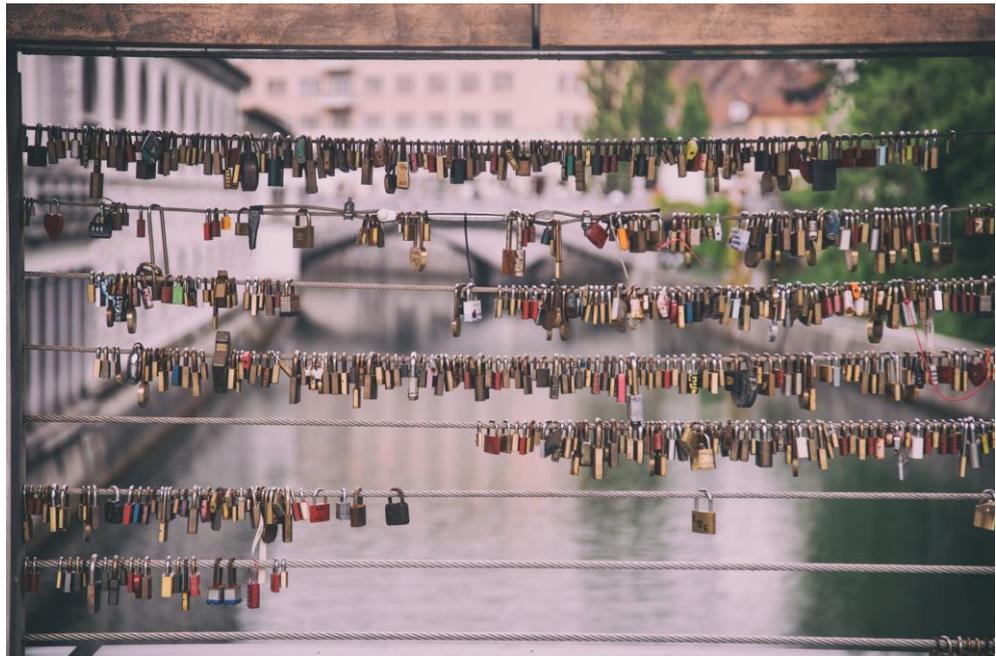


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You Reap What You Saw



A recurring theme in Hungarian politics is that while Fidesz does not have to present an election program, everyone expects the opposition to try to win the support of voters with detailed policy programs demonstrating their ability to govern. What is the reason for this, and how does the current Hungarian campaign relate to Western trends?

While in the West both the ruling and opposition parties draw up their own programs, in Hungary there appears to be a sharp contrast between the government and the opposition. Given Fidesz's dominance, we could say that there is currently little in Hungarian politics that is more useless from an electoral point of view than program development, since the pecking order has so far been determined not by the elaborateness of government programs, but by who society saw as strong enough to solve its problems. However, programs are an important part of elections, as they can serve as a reference point for voters when assessing the performance of parties in government.

The lack of a written program does not mean that the ruling party does not have a vision of society, as evidenced by its measures and promises, such as a "work-based society" or "family-friendly governance." In this case, the lack of an election program is rather an indicator that the prime minister does not want to unnecessarily limit his room for maneuver and considers politics to be a practical activity. This was also evident in Fidesz's two parliamentary campaigns after 2010: the 2014 and 2018 campaigns were characterized by minimalist promises (the ruling party asked for a mandate to continue and to halt the migration of African and Middle-Eastern refugees). In contrast, there was a significant change in the 2022 campaign.

In 2022, the ruling party felt that it needed to emphasize that it was capable of governing, despite the challenges introduced by the pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war, so it introduced income tax exemptions for young people, offered tax refunds, and intervened in market processes (price caps, utility cost protection). In the current campaign, Fidesz has once again stepped up its welfare measures (tax breaks for mothers with multiple children), and has identified the continuation and further expansion of these measures as one of the most important issues at stake in the election. Péter Magyar, the ex-husband of Judit Varga, who served as Minister of Justice in the Orbán Government, who is the new challenger also wants to demonstrate his ability to govern with his detailed election program recommending expert governance, promising tax cuts, the social extension of utility cost reductions, the reform of healthcare and education, and a rental housing program. This is often referred to pejoratively as a tsunami of promises by his opponents.

But is the phenomenon of the so-called "promise tsunami" unique to Hungary, or is it a more general trend?

Danish political scientist Mathias Bukh Vestergaard provides some clues to answer this question in his [study](#), which examines the party systems of 11 Western countries (Western European

and Anglo-Saxon countries) in light of how the practice of making election promises has changed over the past 40 years. According to the author, politics has become much more competitive in most Western party systems in recent decades. Politicians have distanced themselves from society, which has weakened the relationship between voters and the parties that traditionally represent them (see: the left and the working class), and "single-issue" parties and movements have emerged that, by embracing climate change, identity politics, or immigration, have been able to gain significant support to this day. Vestergaard argues that since several parties are competing for less loyal and therefore more easily swayed voters, it is a rational strategy for parties preparing to govern to try and outbid the others and take over issues such as immigration from the new movements.

The results showed that, compared to the 1980s, parties today make twice as many policy commitments in their programs. In addition, Vestergaard found that the increase in the number of parties is inversely proportional to the increase in commitments; that is, promises proliferate when fewer parties compete for power. This is particularly characteristic of party systems in Anglo-Saxon countries (U.S.A.; NZ, U.K., Canada, Australia). The size of the parties also matters: smaller parties that focus on specific issues made fewer promises than traditional mainstream parties.

Furthermore, if parties were able to increase the importance of the issues they represented, the proportion of commitments in their programs also increased.

If we apply these findings to the Hungarian case, then the decisive factor behind the fierce competition can be seen as the convergence to a two-party system. As long as the opposition was a multi-party system made up of rival forces, Fidesz did not have to make any particular effort; it was enough to say that they would continue their previous efforts. During this period, Fidesz did not have to make as many promises or prove its governmental performance, as the competitive pressure was weaker. As the opposition unified under the banner of United for Hungary in 2022, Fidesz had to talk more about what it had achieved and what it wanted to achieve in the future. This was only exacerbated by the Tisza Party, which grew to become the ruling party's sole challenger, led by Péter Magyar, the ex-husband of Judit Varga, who served as Minister of Justice in the Orbán Government. The recent developments in Hungary fit into Western (mainly Anglo-Saxon) trends because there is no fragmentation on the opposition side anymore, so Fidesz had to shift into a higher gear. The April election will reveal which will win: the promise of expert governance by Péter Magyar or the philosophy of practice-oriented governance of Viktor Orbán.