

The Development of Representative Suffrage in Hungary in the mid-19th Century¹

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Abstract:

The development of the modern parliamentary based political system required the reform of the representation of estates and the transformation of the government so as the forums of publicity outside the Parliament. The voting right and the electoral system might be the most appropriate legal structures that support the social embeddedness of modern political systems. They constitute the bases for politics and may provide legitimacy to it. Two dimensions are vital in relation to elections: 1. where, the territorial dimension (geometrical aspect), 2. who, the social dimension (scope of political rights). Considering the geographical basis of elections, two main directions can be observed at the beginning of modern parliamentarianism: the British and the French. Three rival electoral systems existed in the constitutional states in the 19th century: egalitarian (democratic), elitist (liberal) and corporative (conservative). The democratic and the liberal way of thinking shared the idea of individual voting right. In this regard, they both differed from the corporative system. However, those who favored the concept of universal suffrage recognized voting right as a natural right of equal people; liberals derived the voting right from the state and not from the natural equality of men. Voting right was entitled only to property owners and the educated/cultivated (Besitz und Bildung) elites.

Liberalism had been increasingly affecting the mindset of Hungarian politicians from the 1830's. Hungarian history writing labels the two decades preceding 1848 as the 'Hungarian Reform Era' because the era's social, political and modernization efforts were inspired by liberal ideas. During this period, assemblies were regularly held (1830, 1832-1836, 1839-1840, 1843-1844, and 1847-1848), where the liberal noble elite was demanding progressive reforms more and more loudly. Reformists truly gained considerable successes during the Reform Era, however, the discourse and debate on how to transform had even more significance. These debates enabled the Hungarian Assembly at the revolutionary spring of 1848 to approve substantial laws within only a month.

This study provides an overview on the development of representative electoral legislation in Hungary. The scope of voting right was determined by the liberal model in Hungary, whilst the geometric structure of elections linked fundamentally to

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the British model. However, the established electoral system was generating serious debates during the next decades. The scope of voting right and its spatial effectiveness were both highly criticized. Despite all criticism, the fundamental elements of the system remained unchanged in Hungary. Although it is true, that the Hungarian National Assembly approved the establishment of a new electoral law in 1913– which, still did not recognize the institution of the universal, secret and free suffrage –, the forthcoming elections due to the eruption of the war was postponed in 1915.

This paper demonstrates the variety of techniques of power applied by the law-makers when determining the basics of representation. As this paper also indicates, there were several reasons why the legislatures did not lean towards the extension of right. The parliamentary debates on the suffrage often brought to light the question of the nationalities. The ethnic mix of voters did not alter the ethnic mix of the inhabitants in the nationality areas of Hungary. The incongruous situation of the system arose from the fact that these nationality areas were the most reliable constituencies of the government. Therefore, the success of the politics of support for the compromise was chiefly built on the votes of nationality voters. The fragile mandate distributive system of both Transylvania and Hungary was threatened by the extension of suffrage, the transformation of constituencies and the equalization of the number of voters behind the mandates.

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