Hedvig ATANASZOV: Electoral Reform Attempts and Their Outcomes in the Early 20th Century

Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Law

DOI 10.21862/siaa.8.1

1. Introduction

In Hungary, Act 5 of 1848, the new suffrage law introduced parliamentary electoral rights and replaced the previously feudal diet with a democratic representative's parliament. The representatives of the lower chamber of the Hungarian Parliament from then on held free mandates. At that time, 7.1% of the population had the right to vote. This law remained mostly unchanged until 1874, when it was amended by Act 33 of 1874. The need for amendment arose partly from the fact that Act 5 of 1848 was a framework of an electoral law, and at the time of its introduction legislators wanted to further amend it in accordance with the ideas of 1848. However, the defeat in the war of independence delayed it for decades. Furthermore, certain territorial changes also required changes in the electoral law. Act 33 of 1874 remained in effect until 1913, and eleven elections were held under this law.[1] During this period, the proportion of eligible voters hovered around 6%, never reaching the levels seen in 1848. By the early 20th century, there was a demand for electoral reform, but the political elite was unwilling to extend voting rights, failing to introduce both universal and women's suffrage. It was not until 1913 and 1918 that new electoral laws were finally adopted, but no parliamentary elections were never held under these laws. Therefore, there was no significant difference in the proportion of eligible voters until the end of the World War I.[2]

Hungarian electoral legislation was considered modern by European standards in 1848, however by the early 20th century, it had significantly fallen behind. By that time, 20-28% of the population in many European countries had the right to vote, compared to only 6.4% in

[1] PÖLÖSKEI, Ferenc: A választójog és a választási rendszerek 1848-tól 1938-ig [*Suffrage and suffrage law between 1848 and 1939].* Jogtörténeti Szemle [*Legal History Review*] No. 1998/7., p. 18.
[2] VARGA, Lajos: Országgyűlési választások a dualizmus korában [*Parlamentary Elections in the Era of Dualism*] in Parlamenti képviselőválasztások 1920–2010 [*Parlametary Elections of the Representatives*]. Editor: Földes, György – Hubai, László, Bp., 2010., p. 18.

Hungary during the 1910 elections.[3] The discrepancy became particularly noticeable in 1907 when Austria introduced universal male suffrage with Beck's electoral reform.

In the following pages, I will discuss the attempts made in the early 20th century to extend the right to vote in Hungary, the outcomes of these attempts, and explore the reasons behind them.

2. Act 33 of 1874 – in the footsteps of 1848

Act 33 of 1874 was the legislation that defined the electoral rights in Hungary during the era of the Dual Monarchy. The law aimed to amend and refine Act 5 of 1848, and while it did follow the spirit of the original act in some respects, it changed the basis of the voting eligibility, hence it was previously based on property, however after 1874, it was based on the amount of tax paid. The law provides detailed descriptions of how much tax must be paid by certain citizens (landowners, homeowners, merchants, factory owners, craftsmen) to qualify for voting rights. Intellectuals received the right to vote, regardless of the amount of tax they paid. It is also important to mention that the law excluded numerous groups from voting rights, amongst other people who failed to pay their taxes. The main problem with this was that the modern taxation system was introduced around this time, therefore there was numerous people who could not pay their taxes properly. Impoverished nobles, industrial workers, and peasants who could not pay the Hungarian land tax were not eligible to vote, however among civil servants, the proportion of eligible voters significantly increased.[4]

In Lajos Varga's writings on the electoral rights of the era of Austria-Hungary, we find data regarding the proportion of people eligible to vote in various elections. In 1848, the percentage of eligible voters was 7.1%. However, between 1875 and 1910, when elections were conducted under the Act of 1874, the proportion of eligible voters ranged between 5.6% and 6.4%—this was due to the significant population growth in Hungary during this period.[5]

---

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[4] VARGA, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
[5] VARGA, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Seeing the Act of 1874 and its provisions, it is clear that the act aimed to regulate electoral rights according to outdated principles. As a result, initiatives to reform the electoral law began in the first decade of the 19th century.

3. József Kristóffy's draft act of the electoral rights – the aim for democratisation

In the elections of 1905, the opposition – not the previous ruling party backed by the king – won a majority in parliament. However, Franz Joseph I did not want to allow the previous opposition parties to come into power, as they wanted reforms that were unacceptable to him. So, Franz Joseph appointed a minority government – the government of Fejérváry.

The first draft act of the electoral rights was submitted by the government in 1905, which aimed to bring about change, is associated with the name of József Kristóffy, the Minister of the Interior in the Fejérváry government.

Kristóffy's draft would have preserved from the legacy of 1848 the idea of defining voting eligibility based on gender and a moderate level of literacy. According to his plans all literate Hungarian citizens over the age of twenty-four would have had the right to vote and would have introduced secret voting – until then voting was open.

Miklós Szalai writes that Kristóffy's draft aimed for tolerance towards the national minorities and a more democratic approach in order to gain support for the minority government. And as such this attempt was fundamentally different for the subsequent electoral drafts and acts.[6] However, Kristóffy himself, in the rationale for the draft, states that general suffrage would lead to the decrease in the ratio of Hungarian voters, hence the requirement of moderate literacy for eligibility.[7]

Kristóffy's proposal won over both radicals and social democrats, which scared the coalition holding the majority in the Parliament. The coalition opposed to the draft act of the minority government, hence the king and the government could only pass the draft act in

[6] SZALAI, Miklós: Választójogi reformkísérlet a századforduló Magyarországán (1908) [*Electoral reform attempt in the turn-of the-century Hungary].* Múltunk – politikatörténeti folyóirat [*Our Past – political history journal]* No. 2000/45., p. 63.
[7] KRISTÓFFY, József: Választójogi beszédek [Speeches on Electoral Law]. Athenaeum irodalmi és nyomdai r.-t., Bp., 1911. p. 347.

unconstitutional manner. This was acceptable to neither of the parties, therefore they both withdrew.

The government of Fejérváry was unable to build political capital against the coalition parties as a result both the king and the coalition were open to working together. A pact had been made and among other things, it contained that the coalition parties – now governing parties – would accept Kristóffy's electoral reform.

There was no consensus among the coalition parties regarding the need for democratic reforms, however no one really pushed for the extension of suffrage. Nonetheless, the coalition, now in power, had to do something about suffrage, as both their own supporters and the king expected them to do so. Moreover, the labour movement was also a force to be reckoned with outside of Parliament at the time. Working out an electoral reform, acceptable to all, was now the mission of Gyula Andrássy Jr., son of prior Foreign Minister, Gyula Andrássy.[8]

4. Plurality Voting System – Gyula Andrássy Jr.

Another notable electoral reform proposal is associated with Gyula Andrássy Jr., who also served as the Minister of the Interior. In 1908, he attempted to introduce a plurality voting system, which was a foreign concept in Hungary at the time. He based his draft on the Belgian electoral system.[9] Andrássy's goal was to provide suffrage for all social classes without disrupting political stability.[10]

According to Andrássy's plan, every Hungarian citizen over the age of twenty-four would have had the right to vote, however the number of their votes would have varied based on the amount of tax they paid and their level of education. Every literate man over the age of twenty-four would have been entitled to one vote. Dual and triple votes were based on education, military service, the number of legitimate children, employment status, or the

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
[10] *Ibid., p.* 67.

number of employees. The concept also included indirect voting for illiterates, in which the primary voter would have voted on behalf of ten illiterate voters.

The introduction of Andrássy's draft would have significantly increased the proportion of eligible voters. Some estimates suggesting that up to 24% of the population of Hungary would have had the right to vote. A significant increase compared to the ratio under the act of 1874.[11]

The plurality voting system would have brought universal (male) — however entirely unequal— suffrage to Hungary. Nevertheless, the concept neither did win the favour Emperor Franz Joseph, nor the public opinion. The proposal was criticized for several reasons. Some believed that it would allow too many of the representatives of the national minorities into parliament, while others feared the rule of the social democrats. The proposal also caused great concern outside parliament since the coalition parties did not keep their word regarding the electoral reform.[12]

According to Miklós Szalai's evaluation, the Andrássy's proposal would not have been as unjust as the public viewed it at the time as some of the conditions making people eligible for two votes were available for the lower classes as well. This type of universal suffrage would likely have met the standards of the time. Maintaining open voting, however overruled the more democratic approach of the proposal and would have led to similarly undemocratic system as the one in use.[13]

Ultimately, after tedious political debate the king approved Andrássy's draft with reservations. The draft act, however, eventually failed due to internal conflicts within the coalition and conflicts between the monarch and the coalition.[14]

[11] BOROS, Zsuzsanna – SZABÓ, Dániel: Parlamentarizmus Magyarországon 1867-1944 [*Parlamentarism in Hungary 1867-1944].* ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, Budapest, 2008., p. 142. table No. 5
[12] SZALAI, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-70.
[13] SZALAI, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.
[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

5. Act 14 of 1913 – an insignificant step towards change

By the early 1910s, István Tisza – prominent politician at the time – had also realised the need for reform regarding suffrage, and he believed that gradually extending voting rights would be most beneficial for the country. He took part in the drafting of the Act 14 of 1913. His contribution, however had to be kept in secret due to his controversial role as Speaker of the House.[15]

Eventually an electoral reform took place in 1913. Nevertheless, the new act was still a far cry from the electoral standards at the time. The act attempted to favour the national minorities as in the pre-war atmosphere the Triple Alliance desperately needed to win over the countries – in this case, Romania – not yet committed to either side.[16]

The rationale for the act contains the principle that electoral reform should be carried out without *"subverting the social conditions of the country and compromising the national interest*". Although the draft did not provoke the same kind of opposition as the Andrássy's proposal, some considered it too permissive – as it contained no requirement for literacy in Hungarian – and others considered it a poor achievement in the light of the earlier proposals.

The act set the minimum age for voting at twenty-four and people with lower levels of education were granted voting rights in a higher age with more taxes paid. The ratio of eligible voters would thus have risen to 9%, however due to the World War I no elections were held under this legislation.

6. Act 17 of 1918

The Act of 1918 was originally drafted by Vilmos Vázsonyi, a member of the 'Választójogi Blokk' – an organization fighting for universal suffrage – and the minister without portfolio responsible for electoral law. Vázsonyi's draft based suffrage on a moderate literacy to be eligible to vote. Moreover, it was the first draft submitted by the government proposing women's suffrage. The government party did not enjoy the support of a majority in

[15] PÖLÖSKEI, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

parliament, thus Várzsonyi's original draft was revised by the House of Representatives' electoral law committee. Women's suffrage was removed from the draft altogether and stricter rules regarding literacy were introduced. However, front-line fighters and war wounded were granted the right to vote.

The final version of the act according to János Kende in his paper on 'Lajos Varga: Országgyűlési választások a dualizmus korában [*Parlamentary Elections in the Era of Dualism*]' : *"It is astonishing that in the Hungarian parliament in the spring and summer of 1918 it was possible to discuss at length whether women should be granted the right to vote, when they had long since been forced to become 'equal' with men in factories, on the land, at office desks and at work. That the subject of securing Hungarian supremacy was up for discussion at a time when the death sentence of the monarchy and of Hungary with its historical borders was already in the making. "*[17] (Kende, 2005., p. 327.)

The law was in force for only for a few weeks, as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed in November 1918. For a brief period of time following the Aster Revolution owing to the Mihály Károlyi-led government a law guaranteeing universal suffrage was in effect.

7. Reasons behind the lack of universal suffrage in Hungary

It is worth examining why Hungary could not keep up with the standards regarding voting rights in Europe. One reason for the reluctance of the political elite to extend suffrage was the national minorities of the country. In the decades following the birth of Hungarian nationalism, the national minorities living in Hungary also began developing a nationalist sentiment and demanded rights and autonomy for themselves. The issue of territorial autonomy and a wider use of their native language often was often a source of conflict between national minorities and the Hungarian political elite. The Hungarian politicians feared that if the national minorities were given broader representation, these issues would be decided favouring the national minorities. They also feared that the feelings of the national minorities towards the Monarchy would surface, believing that the nationalities would not support the Monarchy in time of need. Mihály Réz's summarizes that the

[17] KENDE, János – Varga Lajos: Kormányok, pártok és a választójog Magyarországon 1916–1918 [*Governments, parties and suffrage in Hungary between 1916 and 1918*]. Múltunk [*Our Past*], No. 1, 2005, p. 327.

leadership of the time believed that electoral laws should serve the supremacy of the Hungarians.[18]

Another reason why the ruling class was afraid of extending suffrage was the working class. Andrássy Jr., for example, believed that the working class would not support the Monarchy on the long run, a role that only the upper classes could fulfil. He believed that bringing the masses to power would result in an unpredictable political environment, hence it should be done gradually.[19]

8. Austria and Hungary - differences in the light of universal suffrage

At this point, we can ask what led to the ratio of eligible voters in Hungary differing so much from the other half of the Monarchy. Why were the Austrians able to introduce universal suffrage for men as early as 1907, when the proportion of eligible voters in Hungary was only around 10%?

Before delving deeper into the differences, it is important to examine exactly how universal suffrage was implemented in Austria. Universal male suffrage was introduced in 1907 for all men aged twenty-four or over, who had lived in an Austrian province for at least a year. In theory, this suffrage was equal, however due to the electoral division the Polish-speaking urban population and the German-speaking rural population were over-represented, as they reliably supported the parliamentary forces that aimed to maintain the monarchy.[20]

There are several differences between the Austrian and Hungarian suffrage systems; however, the main reason lies within the political elite. In Austria, the political parties were more similar to the ones known today, because they were formed by social and economic problems and their responses to them. By comparison, in Hungary political parties were largely so-called 'club' parties – loose gathering, based on the English and French clubs – formed based on their relationship to the Monarchy. The governing party emerged from a

[18] RÉZ, Mihály: A választói jogról [*About the suffrage*], In: Tisza István Választójog. Tanulmányok. [*Suffrage. Studies]* Magyar Figyelő, Budapest, 1913.
[19] SZALAI, *op. cit.,* p. 81.
[20] THOMSON, Henry: Universal, Unequal Suffrage: Authoritarian Vote-Seat Malapportionment and the 1907 Austrian Electoral Reform. University of Minesota, 2013, pp. 2-3. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2220787

parliamentary majority which accepted the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, while the opposition typically fought to achieve greater independence from Vienna. The near-constant parliamentary majority was therefore reluctant to let in new voters to protect the monarchy. [21]

There were also significant differences in the way the question of national minorities was handled. One of the main reasons for the Hungarian political elite's opposition to the extension of suffrage was the national minorities and their supposed opposition to multi-national country. In Austria, on the other hand, it was precisely the extension of suffrage that was seen as an opportunity for the political elite to preserve their own power and keep the Dual Monarchy intact. Democratisation in Austria, too, however could only be achieved through universal suffrage, which was not entirely equal.[22]

In Hungary, moreover, the emergence of the working class in political life would have changed the composition of the political elite. New elite would hardly have supported the aristocratic ruling class, therefore they were not welcome into parliamentary politics. In Austria, the process of democratisation was gradual after 1848. In Hungary however the same steady progress could not happen due to the conflicts with the Emperor between 1849 and 1867.[23] The lack of sufficient management of extending suffrage left society very divided. In Austria, new parties such as the Social Democrats and the Christian Socialists were able to emerge and gain support. In contrast, in Hungary, there was less ideological difference among the parliamentary parties.[24]

Some believe that István Tisza was the main reason behind keeping the fraction of those who had the right to vote low. He believed that voting rights of the lower classes were a threat to the national interest and believed that the future of Hungary – at least with its

[21] MURBER, Ibolya: Válság és demokratizálás [*Crisis and Democratization*]. Múltunk [*Our Past*], No. 4., 2023, pp. 18-19.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
[23] RIGÓ, Balázs: 1867 as the Year of Constitutional Changes Around the World. *ELTE Law Journal* No. 2. 2017. pp. 43-45.; KÉPESSY, Imre: Föderalizmus, centralizmus, dualizmus - avagy a kiegyezéshez vezető út [*Federalism, centralism, dualism – or the way to the Compromise*]. In: MEGYERI-PÁLFFI, Zoltán (ed.): Szuverenitáskutatás [*Reseach on Souveregnity*]. Budapest, Gondolat, 2023. pp. 93-112.
[24] MURBER, *op. cit.,* pp. 20-21.

historical borders – could only be maintained within the Monarchy. Therefore, did everything in his power to ensure the survival of the Monarchy.[25]

9. Summary

In Hungary, electoral reform remained an unresolved issue in the era of the Dual Monarchy. The effect of the act of 1848 can be discovered in all acts regarding suffrage passed during that time. The drafts that were not adopted contained many compelling elements, but the politicians of the time did not take the risks they entailed.

Kristóffy's proposal sought both to create a solid foundation for the minority government and to move towards a more democratic system, while maintaining the monarchy. His idea for the Hungarian system was something very similar to what the Austrians achieved later.

Andrássy took a very conservative approach, and his aim was the opposite of Kristóffy's. The pact, however required him to respect the promised broad suffrage. By circumventing the promises, he wanted to ensure the survival of the political elite at the time, while at the same time widening the circle of those entitled to vote.

Vázsonyi, feeling the winds of change, wanted to introduce a broad suffrage for both men and women. But even amid the war, on the verge of the collapse of the Monarchy, the ruling class still did not see the need for change.

Therefore, in the era of the Dual Monarchy, no truly democratic act — at least according to the standards of the time — could be passed. The situation was no better after the World War I, as the elite of the Horthy era also hoped to maintain authority with the help of electoral laws. The first ever democratic election based on universal suffrage was held in 1945.

[25] RÉZ, Mihály: Gróf Andrássy választójogi tervezete [*Count Andrássy's draft act on suffrage*] In: Tisza István Választójog. Tanulmányok. [*Suffrage. Studies*] A Magyar Figyelő, Budapest, 1913, pp. 80–81.