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The Political Background of  
Structural Changes  
in the Educational System of  
Hungary, 1985-1994

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## THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF HUNGARY, 1985–1994<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Horn

### ABSTRACT

*Equality of opportunity in the current Hungarian education system is low by international standards. Highly selective educational institutions, especially the age of selection, play an important role in this. This paper presents and explicates the evolution of the contemporary education system in Hungary. Focusing on the pivotal years between 1985 and 1994, it asks why and how the country's previously comprehensive education system transformed into a highly selective one during the process of post-communist transition. Bringing together data from a range of sources, the paper parses out the key factors that gave way to this transformation and analyzes the roles of those who had the largest impact on it. It argues that three intertwined factors led to the emergence of the present system and, especially, to the development of early selective tracks: historical conditions, decentralization, and democracy.*

1 This paper is taken from the 4th chapter of my PhD dissertation (D. Horn, 2010), submitted to the Department of Political Science at Central European University, Budapest, Hungary. An earlier version was presented at the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) Joint Session in Lisbon, Portugal in 2009 for members of the Network on Education and Training. I warmly acknowledge their comments and comments from Gábor Kézdi, Viola Zentai, Júlia Szalai, and Balázs Váradi.

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## Introduction

The inequality of opportunity of the Hungarian public education sector is among the highest in the OECD countries. While a marginal change (one year) in parental education predicts a 22.41 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) point change in mathematics scores for an average student in the OECD countries, the respective number for a Hungarian 15-year-old is 32.51, which is one-third of the standard deviation of the literacy score in 2003 (OECD, 2004). The relationship of occupational status or cultural background and literacy scores is similarly strong in Hungary (Balázs, Szabó & Szalay, 2005). This means that parental background in Hungary matters more than in an average OECD country. In addition, in 2000, 2003, and 2006, the between-school variance of PISA literacy scores in participating countries was among the highest in Hungary (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007). This suggests a significant degree of segregation among schools. This is also underlined in a study by Kertesi and Kézdi (2009), who analyze general schools. Using individual-level performance and background data from the National Assessment of Basic Competencies 2006, as well as segregation indexes, the authors show that segregation in Hungary by race (Roma or non-Roma), family status (family support) or parental education is significant. Between-school segregation is higher in all of these aspects than within-school segregation. It has also been increasing over time, especially since 1989. The authors suggest that the growing role of school choice plays an important role in these trends.

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Inspired by these empirical findings, this paper seeks to answer how such a selective system could evolve in Hungary. In terms of education, Hungary today is not only one of the most unequal countries, but also a textbook case of a selective system: it has a rather early age of selection (due to early academic tracking), combined with school choice and the right to establish schools and high school autonomy. This paper studies the evolution of the modern Hungarian education system, focusing on developments between 1985 and 1994. The process of post-communist transition brought about the transformation of a seemingly comprehensive education system into a typical selective one. This paper aims to identify the factors that gave way to such a system and describe the role of those who had the largest impact on the process. I have argued elsewhere that age of selection associates mostly with the inequality of opportunity among the obvious candidates for stratifying educational institutions (D. Horn, 2009). Since the early selective tracks in Hungary have decreased the age of selection significantly during the post-communist transition, this institution will be in the focus of this paper as well, acknowledging that this is not the only factor of rising educational inequalities.

I argue that three intertwined factors led to the emergence of the selective Hungarian system, and especially to its early selective tracks: (1) historical conditions, (2) decentralization, and (3) democracy.

From the historical conditions, two are especially important. The first is the tradition of the elite eight-year academic schools (*gimnáziums*) of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The elite academic schools before World War II were generally eight years long, selecting students after they finished the four years of elementary. They were usually church-run. The second condition is the fact that historically, the Hungarian administration was based on a decentralized local government structure, which was centralized only during Soviet occupation. These two historical factors provided the base for policy-makers during transition to establish the new, decentralized school structure.

By the time of post-communist transition, the idea of de-politicization gained unanimous support. As a result, a consensus emerged that the administration of many social policy issues of the new Hungarian republic, including public education, should be delegated to the local level. According to this consensus, the more decentralized the new system and the more independent the schools, the less likely the interference of the central government with—and the influence of politics and ideologies on—education.

As a result of the democratization process, citizens became important factors in shaping policy. Tautologically, in a democracy, voters have more power to influence policy than do non-voters. Moreover,

“as political scientists have also known for a long time, the inequality of representation and influence are not randomly distributed but systematically biased in favor of more privileged citizens—those with higher incomes, greater wealth, and better education—and against less advantaged citizens” (Lijphart 1997, 1).

In other words, people of higher status and those who vote have much more power to influence policy than do people of lower status and non-voters.

The decentralization process increased the influence of higher-status people. Local elites gained power to shape local policies to a high degree. They could effectively lobby for the early selective tracks if this served their interests. And as I have shown elsewhere (D. Horn, 2010, see Chapter 3), early selective tracks are beneficial for higher-status people. Consequently, higher-status people most likely have demanded effectively early selective tracks as a result of decentralization and the democratization process.

In addition to all this, the two main political powers emerging at the transition, conservatives and liberals, have both supported the establishment of the early selective tracks on different ideological grounds. Liberals fostered the decentralization process most vehemently. They argued that the locally driven education institutions are the most adequate to democratize and de-politicize the education system. Although they have realized that a decentralized education system would develop selective institutions, and that this would lead to increasing inequalities, they considered raising inequalities as a price to pay for the de-politicized, decentralized system that serves the will of the people most effectively. Conservatives, meanwhile, supported the early selective tracks because these resembled the old status-quo. Both their electorate and the churches demanded the return to the “good old system” with the elite eight-year *gimnázium*s that have educated the elite for so many years before. The formerly secularized church schools were returned to the churches, and these were allowed to reform their structure. Naturally, other education providers (mainly local governments) must also have been supported in establishing the old type of elite *gimnázium*s.

The evolution of the selective system, including the establishment of the early selective tracks started before the first democratic elections in 1990 and continued after its effects became obvious for all. Interestingly, neither the communist party before 1990 nor their legal successor, the governing Hungarian Socialist Party after 1994, has halted this process. This was due to the fact that the issue of education was less important before the first elections and also after the second elections for the Socialists. Issues such as privatization and economic hardship were much higher on their agenda. As a consequence, the communists before 1990, like the Socialists after 1994, have let the mainly liberal professionals to influence educational policy. Moreover, after 1994, the Socialists—aiming to become a “people’s party”—could not act against the interest of the higher-status population. Thus, the selective system acted in their interest as well.

In short, due to the democratic transition and decentralization, higher-status people could more effectively shape local policies. This process along with an unfortunate, ideologically-based quasi-compromise between liberals and conservatives, which was also accepted by the Socialists, have led to the creation of a selective education system, including the establishment of several early selective academic tracks.

In this paper, I elaborate on this argument. First, I introduce the historical conditions of decentralization and the education system before post-communist transition. I argue that although the dictatorship forced a seemingly comprehensive education system, it was not as equal as the comprehensive system or the official communication would suggested. Second, I explicate the development of the education system during the transition. I describe the Education Law of 1985, which is the law accepted by Communist parliaments that set stage for the selective system. Interestingly, even before the subsequent

law on education of 1993, which still in force today, the motives for and the consequences of setting up the early selective tracks were absolutely clear.

The third section shows that voters prefer more selective education relative to non-voters. A public opinion survey conducted during the transition highlights that higher-status people are more likely to vote and voters are the more likely to prefer selective educational mechanisms than non-voters. Since it is voters who shape policies, I conclude that this is one of the reasons why selective education could evolve. The empirical analysis also highlights that there were some, but not very large differences between the opinions of the voters of the different parties in educational matters.

This leads me to my last argument about the *de facto* compromise of the two leading parties of the first parliament, and the acceptance of this compromise by the returning Socialist Party, the legal successor of the Communist Party. In the fourth section I cite some representatives from the time to see how the different parties have thought about the emerging selective system. Based on these interviews, I speculate that conservatives did not mind the selective system as long as the church and the conservative voters were happy, and that liberals valued the idea of decentralization, the school autonomy, and the locally-driven education system higher than the issue of inequality. Consequently, both have supported the evolution of early selective tracks.

## 1. Historical conditions: Decentralization and education

This section presents the underpinning historical conditions and the processes in education that occurred during post-communist transition. First, I discuss the change of the public administrative system—decentralization—before and during transition. This underlines how the Hungarian education system could become one of the most decentralized in the world. Then, I introduce the system of education before World War II and during the communist/Soviet era. These parts are intended to show that while the historical education system was very selective, the “comprehensive” system of the Soviet era was, in theory, more equalizing—a feature which is questioned by many social scientists.

### 1.1. Decentralization before and during post-communist transition

In order to understand the rather quick evolution of the selective education system, the seemingly sudden public administration decentralization in 1990 must be understood. Hungary had a very advanced local government structure already at the end of the 19th century. After the Compromise of 1867 between Hungary and Austria,<sup>1</sup> the adopted local government structure was “one of the most liberal systems of communes in Europe” (Toldy, 1891, cited in Péteri & Szabó, 1991, 68). These local governments were highly autonomous, and although the public administration was centralized a little between the two World Wars in order to increase efficiency, the drastic changes in the system came only with the Communist regime. Péteri and Szabó (1991) divides the Soviet-type of local public administration, the council system, into two phases. The first was:

“obviously repressive, [...] the councils in three tiers [central, county level and local]—declared ‘organs of the people’s power’—had to play the role of oppressors and at the same time being very servile to the communist party elite” (Péteri & Szabó, 1991, 69).

The education sector was integrated into the system of public administration. The second phase came after the 1956 Revolution in Hungary against Soviet-imposed policies. In the early 1960s, the system gradually started to loosen up. Local councils officially pursued three functions: they were the units for the representation of the people, units for self-governments, and units for public administration at the local level (Péteri & Szabó, 1991). There were some other important changes from the very oppressive first stage. The three-tier council system was reshaped, so that the central level could no longer directly command the local councils, or in other words the “double subservience” of the system was abolished. The Council Law of 1971 issued more autonomy for the local councils, including more rights in running schools. In the mid seventies, the secondary level vocational training was directed from the central to the regional, and later to the local level, to the city councils. Finally, in 1985, the Education Law (hereinafter, the 1985 law) detached the sector from the general public administration, and transformed it to be a part of the service sector, giving it a much larger autonomy (Balázs, Halász, Imre, Moldován, & Nagy, 2000).

The post-communist transition process brought a large decentralization push. The number of local units (local councils turning to local governments) almost doubled in a short period of time. In 1989 there were altogether 1,542 councils (1,358 village, 165 city and town councils, and 19 county councils), while in 1990, the first democratic local government election, 3,089 local governments were introduced (2,902 village, 168 town, and 19 county). Under the Soviet system, starting from the 1960s, the former local governments (renamed as councils) were coercively merged. In 1962, there were altogether

1 I consider this point in time as the starting point for my analysis. The Compromise of 1867 could be considered as the birth of the “modern” Hungarian state.



3,021 rural councils, of which 167 were in joint councils (merged into another village or town council). By 1977, about the time when the forced merging of local councils ended, 1,470 rural councils existed, of which 723 were in joint councils. This was a primary reason for the large scale decentralization during post-communist transition:

“During the legislative work on the Local Self-Government law our parliament appreciated and respected this tendency and declared the right of every settlement to form a self-government authority of their own” (Péteri & Szabó, 1991, 73).

## 1.2. The education system before transition

### *From the Compromise of 1867 to the postwar period*

The traditional Hungarian education structure was based on a four-year-long elementary or people’s school (*elemi* or *népiskola*) stemming from age 6 to 10. After this there were three tracks, with rather sharp distinctions in the later school career prospects. Two of them existed before 1867. At age 10, one could enter the upper people’s school (*felső népiskola*), which offered no chance of further education. The upper track was the academic school (*gimnázium*, *reálgimnázium*, or *reáliskola*), which generally lasted eight years and offered pupils the possibility to continue studies to any universities afterward. These were the elite schools. The citizen’s school (*polgári*) was created in 1868. It provided the ground for the schooling of the middle classes, the citizens. The graduates of the citizen’s school could continue to secondary level vocational training schools, but these led only to a limited set of universities.

The Hungarian education can be considered a “double system” meaning that the original public education developed both from “below” and from “above.” The elementary schools were developed from the small schools operating within the parishes, while the academic schools were transformed from the lower grades of the universities. So, while all social classes started to study together in the elementary schools, the upper-classes left after grade four to enter the eight-year-long academic education (legalized nationally by the law of 1883) (Nagy, 1996). This double nature of the system fit the class structure nicely, selecting the upper-classes from the public rather early. This is why the citizen’s school was a rather novel idea in 1868. However it could only serve as an additional mechanism to select the middle-classes, the citizen, from the poorest strata.

The creation of the eight-year general school (*általános iskola*) after World War II was thus a shock: it eliminated the systemic early selection, and “comprehensivized” the system, at least theoretically.

### *During the Soviet era*

As in every Central Eastern European country under the Soviet occupation, education in Hungary was highly centralized: the Communist Party regulated every little detail of the education sector; from curricular matters to teacher employment, from institutional structure to textbook contents. The educational structure was developed by the Soviet Union, and it was implemented in the Eastern European countries with little variation. Figure 4 in Appendix 2 shows the basic structure of the public education system before and after the transition. After the kindergarten every child had to attend an eight-year-long general school from age 6 to age 14. The secondary education was divided into three parts. The four-year-long academic schools (*gimnázium*) had maturity exam at the end and offered the highest probability of continuing education on the tertiary level. The vocational training school (*szakmunkásképző*) offered a vocational degree after three years on average, but provided no maturity exam, and thus no possibility to continue studies on tertiary level. In today’s terms, vocational training schools were dead-end. The vocational secondary school (*szakközépiskola*) was a mixture of these two:

somewhat smaller emphasis on the academic training and also a rather theoretical vocational or pre-vocational training. However, it provided the students an option to pass the maturity exam, and thus to continue to tertiary level, and also an option to finish the vocational training (one or two more years) and receive a vocational degree.

Students had to attend general schools of their residence: catchment areas were set, with assigned general schools for everyone.<sup>2</sup> School choice was possible only on the secondary level, after age 14.

This lack of choice was backed up by the centralized structure. Each subject on each level was designated a textbook, and an ideologically-biased curriculum. School or pedagogical autonomy was rather small, and a centrally coordinated supervision guaranteed that teachers teach what they are supposed to teach. The supervisors visited the schools, and classes from time to time to observe class work. Financing was also centralized, through a national plan, and later bargaining between institutions and authorities.

The written part of the maturity exam was also centrally organized, aiming at the lexical knowledge from the textbooks. A typical example is the mathematics exam, where an assigned book was given to those who wanted to pass the exam, with a couple thousand examples/exercises. On the day of the maturity exam, a list of numbers was drawn from a hat, referring to the examples in that book. Whoever could solve these examples could pass the exam.

Today, this system could be called comprehensive—with a relatively long period of non-selective institutional setup, centrally set curriculum, unified teaching method and central coordination—but under a dictatorship this was rather considered as a tool to control the nation than a system to generate equality. As Julia Szalai argued in 1989:

“[...] in the classic socialist planned-economy the educational, economic and social goals of the public education can only be separated analytically, [but in practice they were intertwined], the educational institutions are the most direct supply for the unlimited labor demand of the planned economy, [meaning that] the knowledge-transfer of education in practice means the smoothest possible allocation of people between work places” (Szalai, 1989, 34).<sup>3</sup>

The education was only a “residual” sector, subordinated to the labor market and the economy with the main function of providing work force for the labor market. Moreover, the inequality of educational opportunity—although no comparable data is available from the time—was reported to be higher than the structure of the system or the advertised socialist goal of social equality would have predicted. The most telling example would be the “hypothesis on the development of the public education” (Baráth et al., 1980) work ordered by the Scientific, Educational, and Cultural Unit of the Communist Party in 1980, which emphasized that the most important problem to solve is that “the school structure does not serve the mobility goal of the current social policy, the development of the fluidity of the society” (Baráth et al., 1980, 2). Moreover there were important studies on the relation of education and social mobility during the socialist era as well, which—following a more sociologically oriented, “Bourdieuian” line of thinking—underlined that the education system serves as a tool for status reproduction even in the Socialist era (Gazsó, 1976).

Studies at the end of the 1980s or early 1990s emphasize this phenomenon too. “Social differences between and within schools have grown so much,<sup>4</sup> that the social policy of elimination of class bound-

2 This regulation, of course, could be circumvented for instance by reporting the student to live with a relative nearby a good school, but this was also only possible for those with more social, human or material resources.

3 All translations from Hungarian to English in this paper were done by the author.

4 More precisely: we cannot only talk about the growth of these differences, but also about the institutionalization of the segregation by social strata. [...]” (footnote in the original text).

aries has become fictional [...]” (Szalai, 1989, 40). The capital-county or city-village differences were substantive even in the 1986 Monitor study: “the performance of pupils’ in villages are worse than that of the city pupils in every studied aspect” (Hajdú, 1989, 1148 cited by Andor & Liskó, 1999, 6). In 1995, Vári claims that “in understanding written text and in other cognitive tests the performance of the 7th graders in Budapest exceeds substantially the performance of the village 8th graders. The difference is around two years (!)” (Vári, 1997, 69-70).

Differences were not only between, but also within settlements (or settlement types). Andor and Liskó (1999) bring anecdotic evidence that the specialized tracks—even if these were sport or music specializations—were used in order to select out the academically badly performing pupils, i.e. to create homogeneous classes (Liskó 1999, 7-8).

Even if the pre-transition system was centralized in general, there remained handful of church-run high schools, and elite high schools affiliated with universities with quite a bit of *de facto* autonomy mainly with regard to curricula. This does not contradict the general centralization of the education system that applied to almost everyone but it sheds additional light on the systemic changes after transition: although the fraction of the population entering these privileged schools was tiny, these were the ones with more social, human or material resources, and they were also the ones who would later demand similar treatment from the new regime as well.

“In sum, we can say about the system before 1990, that it was seemingly transparent to everyone, but it had hidden selection mechanisms” (Andor & Liskó, 1999, 6)

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Hungarian institutional setup became much more selective, early selective academic tracks were founded, which have increased the inequality of opportunity, and facilitated the reproduction of status differentials.

## 2. The transformation of the education system

The goal of this section is to explain why the education system changed as it did during the post-communist transition processes. The first part describes the role of different groups in shaping education policy during the communist regime. I argue that the experts of the time understood the inequality problems and were inclined to expand general education instead of making it more selective. However, the Education Law of 1985 (which I describe in section 2.2) established institutions which acted in the opposite direction (most important are school autonomy and school choice) and set the stage for the selective system. The subsequent section elaborates on the demand-driven school structure during the post-communist transition. I cite experts and documents from the time that analyze how the early selective tracks have gained ground and how the selective system evolved. Interestingly, even before the law of 1993, the motives and the consequences of setting up the early selective tracks were absolutely clear.

### 2.1. Education politics of the 1960-1980s

An important factor that gave way to the 1985 law was the development of the education policy sector, and within this the development of those groups that formed the education policy through the communist regime. Halász (1984) distinguishes four policy groups in his work about the 1960-1970s. The first is the “pedagogical” group, the members of which approached the educational system from a pedagogue’s point of view, and argued for a comprehensive, ideologically driven training for everyone. Second, the “central planning” group considered the education sector to be service sector for the economy, with an explicit goal of providing well trained workforce, and which thought to achieve this by careful and long-term central planning. Third is the “vocational training” group with members closely connected to the vocational training institutions, who argued for ideological training and the importance of vocational training at the same time. As Halász (1984) argues, the first group emphasized the importance of ideology,<sup>5</sup> the second the importance of the economy, and the third both. The fourth, and most loosely defined group, is the “professional” group, the experts. This group included both Gábor Halász and Ferenc Gazsó, the father of the 1985 law. Halász (1984) claims that the education policy was a result of the compromise between these groups, and while the first three groups dominated the 1960 and 1970s, the fourth group started to raise in importance at the beginning of the 1980’s, especially with the foundation of the Institute for Educational Research in 1981 (*Oktatáskutató Intézet*), directed by Ferenc Gazsó, the first research institute devoted to conduct policy relevant research.

An interesting source on the policy debates of the communist era is the “Long term development of the public education” series (MSzMP-KB, 1980) ordered by the Scientific, Educational, and Cultural unit of the Communist Party. Most of these papers were written by researchers of the “professional” group. The papers were largely dealing with structural issues and educational expansion. Two of them explicitly analyses the “10-class primary”<sup>6</sup> (J. Nagy, 1979; Szépe, 1979); most of the other papers, just as a cooperative volume of many authors (Baráth et al., 1980), emphasize the inequality aspect.

In short, not long before the 1985 law, the education researchers of the time, who had the most impact at the transition according to Halász (1984), were thinking in comprehensive education, and were emphasizing inequality problems. Most of these people later had significant impact on the evolution of the education system. So, why did a more selective system evolved, despite the arguments made in these volumes, or the already known inequality increasing impacts of the selective education?

Keeping in mind that the councils were already responsible for running schools, and that the ex-

5 Although it is not explicit in his work, Halász (1984) considers ideology to be the ideology of the communist state.

6 The 10-class primary is an “8+2+2 structure,” with an eight-year general school before selection into secondary education, and two years of the same general training for everyone in all school types after the selection.

perts were thinking in inequality terms as well as in school “comprehensivizing” reforms (decreasing selectivity or differentiation), the next chapter introduces the Education Law of 1985, which was a turning point in the evolution of the education system.

## 2.2. The education system during transition

### *Changes in the education system: The 1985 law on education*

The 1985 Education Law was a definite turning point in the history of the Hungarian education. Zoltán Báthory even claims that “thanks to this law the democratic turn was four years earlier in the educational system than in the main politics.” Until then, the III/1961 law on the education system of the People’s Republic of Hungary was in effect. The 1961 law was an ideologically biased law, requiring the teachers to educate the youth with “Marxists-Leninist” ideals. The 1985 law softened the preamble and required only “socialist, humanist” education that was later rewritten to “democratic, humanist” in the law of 1993.

This of course was not the revolutionary feature of the new law. Rather, it was the extent to which it provided autonomy for the schools. The 1985 law declared that “democratic principles should govern the organization, functioning and leadership of the educational institutes” (10.§ (2)). Moreover schools can “conduct experiences and research to facilitate the effectiveness of education” (14.§ (3)), and “can develop its local system of education, additionally, it can work out complementary syllabus and can choose optional subjects” (14.§ (4)). In addition to all this, it was the right of the teacher to “choose—within the limits of the educational plan, and the curricular principles—the course material and the teaching methods” (41.§ (1) a), and what is even more revolutionary, to have a vote in the election of the school principal (64. § (2) and (3)). Last but not least, a ministerial decree also abolished the system of educational supervisors (27. July 1986.), which in practice significantly weakened the grip of the central bureaucracy on the schools.

The 1985 law also allowed for unique educational solutions, experiments, alternative teaching methods, as well as alternative schools. The Minister can permit “the use of unique solutions, the implementation of experiments about the organization of educational institutions and their methodical content” (24.§. b).

In short, the law not only allowed for new alternative schools to open, for individual teaching methods, and the election of the principal for the teachers, but it also took away the “watching eye” of the government in monitoring their practices. This much autonomy had never been given to teachers since World War II.

Another reform attribute of the law is the legalization of school choice. It stated that the children should, in principle, attend the assigned school; however, if the parent wanted to have his or her children educated at another school, the principal of the given schools had the right to admit them (71.§ (1)-(2)).

However reformist this law was, Báthory, admitting all the positive features of the law of 1985, notes that “this law could not start the systemic reform of the educational system or the reparation of its anomalies” (Báthory, 2001, 61). It did not touch either the school structure, or the curricular framework. The highly centralized curriculum together with a somewhat decentralizing law created many anomalies. These anomalies had to be eliminated by another, greater reform. Everyone knew that the system of education must be changed very quickly by the first democratically elected government. The question was rather the content of reform, the specific institutional changes that had to be decided.

It seems that the 1985 law forced one very important aspect: the autonomy of the schools. This, understandably, was a high priority even before the post-communist transition, for it created some space

for the schools, teachers to move around. This started the de-politicization of the system, although did not finish the process. A backside of this relatively liberal law is that it set the stage for the selective system: at the transition the schools and the education sector in general could feel that the state oppression could easily be shaken off. This commonly supported goal succeeded so well, that it created a local demand driven system, a mildly anarchic state. This level of decentralization helped the more informed, higher-status people, who had influence on local decisions and could have only be constrained by strong institutions. As I show in the next sections, this was not the case. There were only mild differences between the party standpoints in educational matters, and these standpoints generally met in supporting the selective system that was demanded by higher-status citizens.

### *The changing school structure*

Changing school structure was one of the most important issues of the early 1990s. The question was whether the system should be 4+8, 8+6, 8+4 or 10+2. Halász (2001, 115) claims that at the time, this question was more important than the issue of decentralization. Before the law of 1993 on education, but after the democratic transition, several papers analyzed observed changes of school structure. Few of these papers could rely on data; instead they focused on anecdotic evidence. Nevertheless, they might have influenced policy. These working papers and weekly articles were published by a relatively small group of educational experts, many of whom were involved with one or the other political party as policy advisor (Drahos, Lukács, Nagy & Setényi, 1992; Kozma & Lukács, 1992; Lukács, 1992). The influence of these thoughts on political decisions is unclear; however it is obvious that the effects of early tracking were clearly understood. The debates about school structure including early selective academic tracks were just as lively as they are today. A quote from the summary chapter of a volume on the draft of the law of 1993 underlines this properly.

“In the last two years, a substantial rise of political forces that want to set the end of comprehensive education at the lowest possible age and to educate their children separate from the ‘lower classes’ in order to secure the transition of their advantageous social positions could have been seen. They defend the foundation of academic schools starting after grades 4 or 6. This program is not only beneficial for the upper classes, but can also be attractive for those who are nostalgic about the old Hungary, the feudal state” (Kozma & Lukács, 1992, 9).

“Politically it is obvious, those who stand for curtailing the length of comprehensive education can gain sympathy from the elites, while those who champion to maintain the general schools as they are, can get support from the socially receptive strata, but loose others” (Kozma & Lukács, 1992, 10).

In addition to the fact that the causes and effects of early selective academic tracks were clear, it is noteworthy to see that the teachers were not at all in favor of the selective structure. In 1991 the Institute for Educational Research has done a representative survey among school teachers. 31% of those, who answered thought the structure should remain the same, another 14% thought it should be 8+4 with little modifications, and another 18% supported a ten-year-long comprehensive education. In other words 63% of the teachers wanted a comprehensive system as opposed to 34% who opted for a 4+8 or a 6+6 division (3% thought none of these were adequate) (Junghaus, 1992, 40). However, it is to be expected that teachers, on average, dislike change. Change in the education system means change in curriculum and more, which means more work.

Another empirically based research was done by Ilona Liskó (1992 and, 1994), who surveyed the early selective academic tracks, the motives of teachers, local government officials and parents. The

research highlights how and why the early selective schools were created. Early selective tracks were introduced in 1988, when Ferenc Glatz (the Minister of Education in 1989) allowed the emergence of the traditional 4+8 tracks. The Ministry has also provided some financial incentives for this:

“The Nemeth administration [the last communist government]—as one of its last feats—has modified the law of education [of 1985] with the last non-democratically elected parliament in 1990, removing the 40-years-old state monopoly from the education sector.”

In short, private, foundation and church schools could be established (Bajomi, 1994).

In the 1989/90 school year, two academic schools in Budapest were allowed to start an eight-year-long track. In 1990/91, an additional 12 opened (one of them with a six-year-long track). By 1991/92, another 35 tracks started (24 eight- and 11 six-year-long track). This meant that 14% of the local government run schools had an early selective program as well. As a result, the writers of the new law of 1993 were not really in a position to neglect the actual trends in the education sector.

The schools that opened the early selective tracks were not the most prestigious ones. In fact, these were usually the big suburban academic schools, or schools in large housing projects with ambitious principles that acted quickly to select or retain better students. Although in the survey conducted by the Institute for Educational Research (IER) (Liskó, 1992, 1994) most of these schools could come up with pedagogical motives (easier transition to secondary, more pupil-friendly curriculum, and so on), according to Liskó there were other more important motives. The most robust motivation was that they could select the best students at a relatively early age, and hence improve average performance, or similarly, avoid the negative effects of the demographical decline and thus maintain the long term functioning of the schools.

Local governments had different motives in supporting their schools. Firstly, in the early years (1989/90 and 1990/91) local governments were preoccupied by setting up their own structure, and allocated less resources to monitor schools. As a result the most “innovative” schools could easily get the permission for restructuring from their local governments. Secondly, after 1991, when the local government structure was up and running, the policy-makers and the educational boards were composed of teachers or of higher-status people, who, naturally, supported such reforms. And finally, higher-status parents supported early selective tracks, while the lower-status parents had lower voice in the local governments, or simply paid no attention to these processes (Liskó, 1992).

In the next section, I take a closer look at public opinion about the selective system

### 3. Public opinion about the selective system

Thus far, I have shown the conditions and the processes that have led to a selective education system; however, I have not talked about the reasons this development. I argue that one very important reason is democracy, and another is decentralization. In a democracy, voters can influence politics more than in dictatorship. In decentralized democracy, local voters have more ability to influence local politics, than in centralized democracy. In this section, I show that in Hungary after the post-communist transition higher-status people are more likely to vote, and that voters are more likely to prefer selective education than non-voters. There are very small differences between parties in their attitude towards the change in the education system, which I attribute to two factors. The first is that parties represent the will of their voters, and that voters tend to support selective education. Or, to put it differently, the representation of the educational interest of lower-status people in was very weak during the transition. The second is that there was an unfortunate match of interest between the two major parties in their support for the early selective tracks. I elaborate on this latter idea in the subsequent chapter.

Opinion polls conducted in 1990 just after the second turn of the parliamentary elections and in 1995 after the second parliamentary election shed light on the differences between the parties and their electorate. The polls, conducted by the Institute for Educational Research (IER), asked around 1,000 Hungarian citizens about various issues concerning education. The sample was stratified by age, gender, and residence and was randomized within these cells to represent the Hungarian adult population.

An important feature of these surveys is that the people were asked about party preferences and their opinion on education related issues. A serious setback is that I cannot be sure how strong these opinions are—that is, how much the respondents know about the education sector and how established their preferences are.

Although in 1990 two questions were asked about party preferences, one general party preference and another about party preference in educational matters, there was only one general party preference question in 1995. Therefore, I will use this general party preference in order to be able to compare the two years.

The distributions of seats in the first and second parliament are shown in Table 1, as well as the names of the different parties and their abbreviation. Table 2 below shows the distribution of votes in the 1990 and in the 1994 elections and in the questionnaire.

The surveys largely over-represent Fidesz and under-represent MSZP relative to the number of votes they received in the elections, and they also vary considerably with other parties as well. However, I could not use probability weights to control for this problem because the 1995 survey was conducted much longer after the elections than the 1990 survey. Also, in 1990, the survey was asked months after the election, thus preferences could have changed, and since my aim is to compare the two waves I relied on the un-weighted estimates.<sup>7</sup>

7 I ran robustness checks with probability weighted estimations on the 1990 sample, and the results did not change substantially.



**Table 1: Election results in Hungary, 1990 and 1994**

Abbreviation	Name of party	Share of seats in parliament (seats)			
		1990	1994		
Conservative	MDF	Hungarian Democratic Forum ( <i>Magyar Demokrata Fórum</i> )	42.5% (164)	Government	Opposition
	FKgP	Independent Peasant Party ( <i>Független Kisgazdapárt</i> )	11.4% (44)		
	KDNP	Christian Democratic People's Party ( <i>Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt</i> )	5.4% (21)		
Liberal	Fidesz	Young Democratic Alliance*	5.4% (21)	Opposition	Government
	SZDSZ	Alliance of Free Democrats ( <i>Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége</i> )	24.1% (93)		
Socialist	MSZP	Hungarian Socialist Party ( <i>Magyar Szocialista Párt</i> )*	8.6% (33)		

\* Fidesz at that time—especially in the first election—was considered to be liberal, and cooperated closely with the SZDSZ in educational matters. Fidesz took its current name, Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Union (*Magyar Polgári Szövetség*), in 2003.

\*\* MSZP is the legal successor of the Communist Party.

**Table 2: Party preferences in the 1990 and 1994 parliamentary elections,\* and in the IER survey of 1990 and 1995**

	Election		Questionnaire	
	1990 elections, 1st round (as % of total adult population)	1994 elections, 1st round (as % of total adult population)	1990	1995
MDF	16.1	8.3	21.0	4.0
SZDSZ	13.9	12.8	14.5	14.0
FKgP	7.6	5.4	6.3	8.2
MSZP	7.1	21.6	3.4	13.3
Fidesz	5.8	5.3	11.9	9.5
KDNP	4.2	5.1	4.0	3.5
Other	10.3	11.2	2.8	10.7
No answer	-	-	11.5	9.4
No vote	34.9	31.1	24.7	27.4

\* This differs from the final results considerably (see Table 1). In the 1st round, everyone can cast a vote on any party, while only those receiving over 5% of the votes are in the parliament.

Another unique feature of these datasets is their rich opinion section. People were asked several times and ways about their opinion about the selective education system. Based on these questions, I generated nine dependent variables about opinions of selective educational mechanisms. These variables are the following:

- *Age of selection*: “From which age on should the children be separated based on their knowledge, skills or interests?” (in years)
- *Early tracking*: Please indicate with which of the following statements you agree:
  - › Children should be placed into schools that best fit their skills or knowledge as early as possible. (1)
  - › It is better that children study together as long as possible regardless of their skills or knowledge. (0)
 (*Dummy variable*)
- *School for the gifted*: Please indicate with which of the following statements you agree:
  - › Schools must be opened for talented children, since this is the only way they can develop their skills effectively (1)
  - › Schools cannot be opened for the gifted, since this hurts social justice (0)
 (*Dummy variable*)
- *Education of the gifted*: On what should the state spend more money?<sup>8</sup>
  - › Support the education of the gifted (*average rank number*)
- *Education of the disadvantaged*: On what should the state spend more money?<sup>9</sup>
  - › Support the education of the disadvantaged (*average rank number*)
- *School choice*: Please indicate with which of the following statements you agree:
  - › Parents should have the right to enroll their children into schools they find the best (1)
  - › Parents should enroll their children into the school of their residence, otherwise the children of the privileged will go to the best schools (0)
 (*Dummy variable*)
- *Book choice*: Please indicate with which of the following statements you agree:
  - › Schools should be allowed to choose their way of teaching and the books they use (1)
  - › Schools should be told which book to use and the material to teach (0)
 (*Dummy variable*)

<sup>8</sup> The following responses were provided the following choices to rank, from 1 (least important) to 7 (most important).

- improve the living conditions of pedagogues
- building of new schools, classrooms
- giving financial benefits to pupils (scholarship, meal, home schooling)
- equip schools with modern technology
- support of the education of the gifted
- support the education of the disadvantaged

<sup>9</sup> See previous footnote.

- *Change is needed*: Please indicate with which of the following statements you agree:
  - › Major changes are needed in schools in the future (1)
  - › After so many experiments and reforms it is finally time to leave the schools alone (0)
 (*Dummy variable*)
  
- *Comprehensive education*: Dummy variable generated from the question: Many people say that the current practice of eight-year-long primary education is not good. With which of the flowing opinions do you agree?
  - › The current practice of eight-year general education and four-year secondary should remain (1)
  - › We should return to the old school structure of four-year general and eight-year secondary (0)
  - › We should have a six-year general followed by six years of secondary (0)
  - › We should have a system of ten years general with two-year secondary (1)
  - › We should have a mixed system: local people decide when the general stops and secondary starts. (0)

Table 3 (below) shows the descriptive statistics of the 9 generated dependent variables.

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the dependent variables**

Variable	1990					1995				
	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>age of selection</i>	858	12.31	3.04	4	18	804	13.37	2.62	6	18
<i>early tracking</i>	926	0.70	0.46	0	1	933	0.81	0.39	0	1
<i>school for the gifted</i>	913	0.51	0.50	0	1	893	0.61	0.49	0	1
<i>education of the gifted</i>	876	3.94	1.89	1	7	980	4.63	1.77	1	7
<i>education of the disadvantaged</i>	875	3.47	1.91	1	7	982	4.44	1.86	1	7
<i>school choice</i>	954	0.67	0.47	0	1	981	0.91	0.29	0	1
<i>book choice</i>	902	0.48	0.50	0	1	899	0.53	0.50	0	1
<i>change is needed</i>	878	0.56	0.50	0	1	872	0.42	0.49	0	1
<i>comprehensive education</i>	911	0.51	0.50	0	1	898	0.63	0.48	0	1

The dataset also contains a section on individual background variables such as gender, age, level of education, employment status, residence, income, religion, whether the respondent have children, and whether s/he is a student. In order to control for the compositional bias of the party electorates (e.g. that the more educated electorate of a party is more likely in favor of selective system), I used the above background variables to show the net party effect. That said,, controlling for the compositional effects is unnecessary if we are to show how parties most likely think about an issue, for they will represent its electorate irrespective of their background. Therefore, I show two estimations for each dependent variable and each specification, one without and the other with controls.

In tables 6–13 (Appendix 2), I show the results of several linear regressions. I have estimated two types of models for each dependent variable, for both years and one with and one without controls. The first set of models regress a dummy variable of parliamentary parties on each dependent variable; while the second set of models include party fixed effects as well. The first set (tables 6–9, Appendix 2) shows only the difference between the opinions of those voted for parties in the parliament compared to those who did not vote or have not answered the question (I will call these two latter groups no-voters). The second set (tables 10–13, Appendix 2) intends to show the net party effects; i.e. how do the opinions of people voting for specific parties differ after taking out the effect of voting for a parliamentary party. Table 4 below is a summary of the first set of estimations in Appendix 2.

**Table 4: Significance of the difference between those who voted and those who did not vote for parties in the parliament (difference in favor of voters)**

Dependent variable	Controls		Off		On	
	1990	1995	1990	1995	1990	1995
<i>age of selection</i>		*				
<i>early tracking</i>	***	**				*
<i>school for the gifted</i>	***				*	
<i>education of the gifted (rank)</i>	***				**	
<i>education of the disadvantaged (rank)</i>			*			
<i>school choice</i>	***				***	
<i>book choice</i>	***				*	
<i>change is needed</i>	***				***	
<i>comprehensive education</i>	*		***			

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

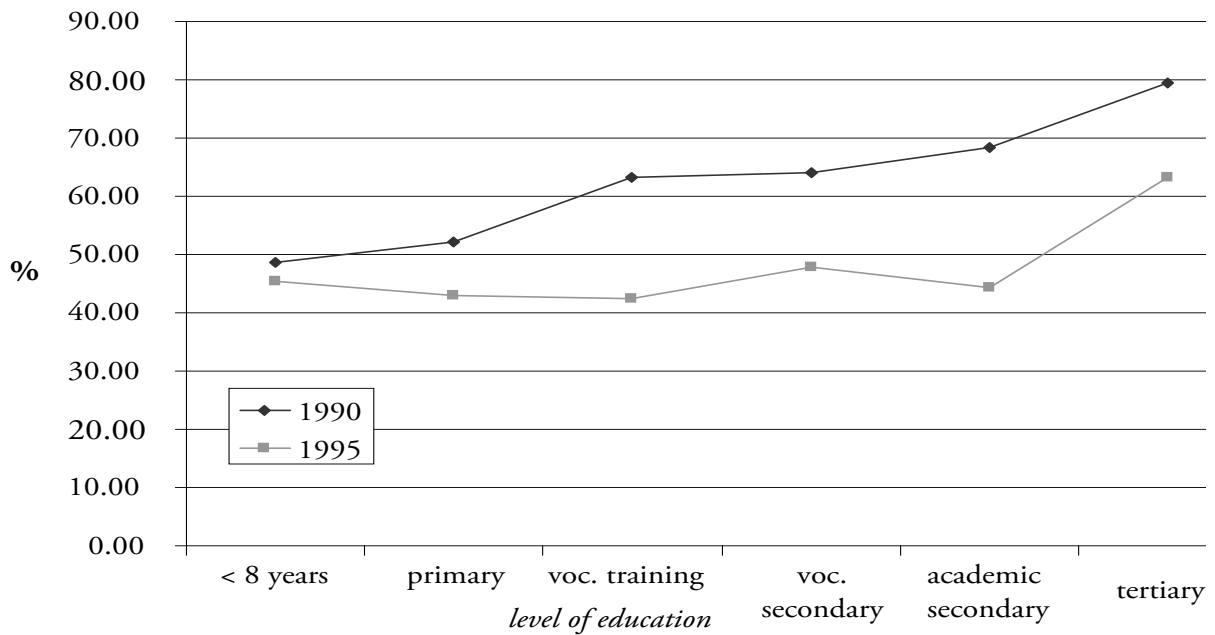
Note: this table is a summary of table 6–9 in Appendix 2.

The estimations show that people voting are much more likely to support selective education. The differences diminish and disappear in 1995 if status characteristics are controlled for. The fact that voters are more in favor of selective education is obviously due to the fact that higher-status people are more likely to vote (Figure 1) and they also tend to support selective educational mechanisms more, since they profit more from these mechanisms.

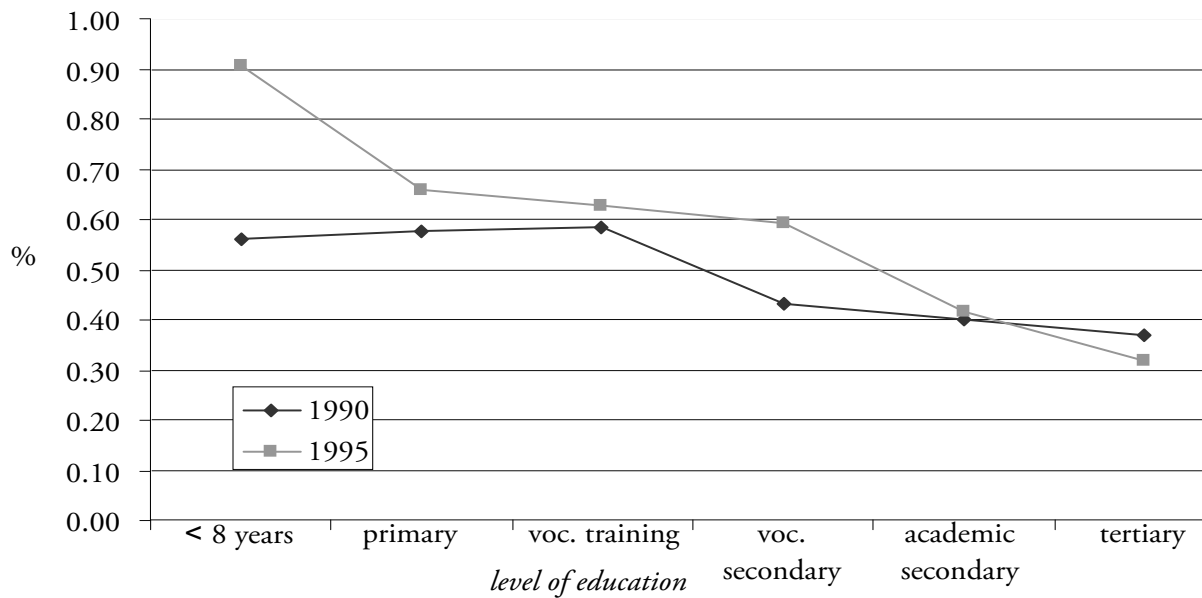
Voters are more likely to support the selective mechanisms (school for the gifted, education of the gifted, school and book choice) than non-voters, even if their status is controlled for. But this effect is much more pronounced in 1990 than 1995 (Table 4, above and Table 8, Appendix 2). This difference between the two years could be due to several factors. In 1990 a general “transition euphoria” was present, and some of these questions (school choice, change is needed) were generally supported by the voters irrespective of their background, and irrespective of who benefits from these. On the other hands it is possible that non-voters replied randomly, maybe because they are more uninformed. Another factor could be a relatively larger ratio of high status people voted in 1990, which pulled upwards the status of the median-voter, and thus the “median opinion” towards a more selective one (figures 1, 2, and 3). The relative percentage of tertiary educated voters is much smaller in 1995 than in 1990; hence, if I assume time-fixed preferences (a harsh assumption), then the median-opinion is more selective in 1990 than in 1995. Moreover, it seems that educational level differences in opinions favorable towards comprehensive education, is much smaller in 1990 than in 1995 (Figure 2), although the same cannot be said for the age of selection (Figure 3).

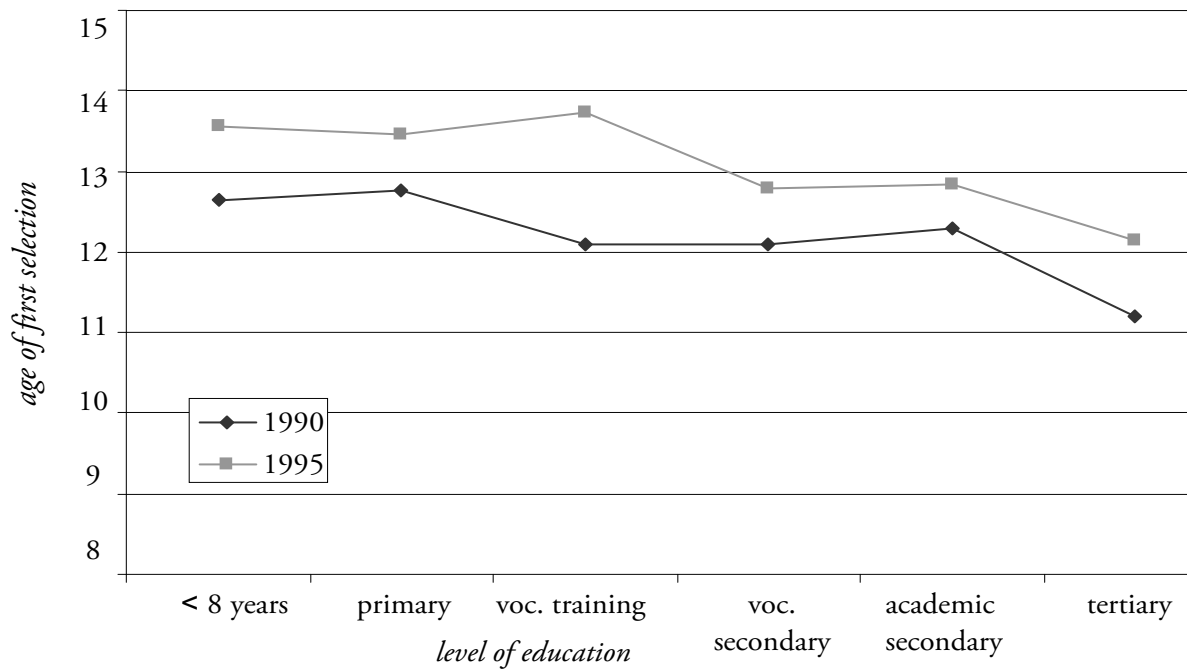
Nevertheless, differences between voters and non-voters are much more solid without the status controls in 1990 than in 1995 (tables 6–7, Appendix 2), meaning that if parliamentary parties wanted to represent their electorates’ opinion, they must have supported selective education more at the dawn of the democratic republic than five years later.

**Figure 1: Percentage of voters of parliamentary parties by education**



**Figure 2: Percentage of those supporting comprehensive (8+4 or 10+2) education by level of education**



**Figure 3: Supported age of first selection by level of education**

Looking at the party effects (tables 10–13, Appendix 2), the most obvious result is that the liberal SZDSZ electorate was most in favor of the selective system. It is the only electorate that supported an earlier age of selection in both years, although only significant on the 10% level in 1990. From the estimations, I conclude that the electorate of the SZDSZ undoubtedly wanted a more selective system than it was during the socialist era.

Quite similarly, the electorate of the conservative governing MDF has also shown significant differences from the reference (the non-voters). Like the SZDSZ electorate, they wanted less comprehensive education and supported early selective tracks (see below in detail). However, unlike the SZDSZ, the other dimensions are not significant for the MDF.

The electorate of the liberal opposition party Fidesz is also in favor of the selective system, but similarly to the MDF this is only substantial in their refusal of the comprehensive system (the support of the early selective schools).

The voters of the Socialist Party (MSZP) demanded a less comprehensive system in 1990, but not in 1995. However, they opted for an earlier age of selection in 1995, even if their status is controlled for. There are no significant differences between the opinion of the MSZP voters and non-voters in any other aspect.

Finally there are only a few significant “positive” effects in the whole analysis: the electorate of the Independent Peasant Party (FKgP) supports the education of the gifted but only if controls are off and only in 1990, while the Christian Democrats (KDNP) oppose the education of the gifted in 1990 and support the education of the disadvantaged in 1995 even with controls on.

In short, none of the parliamentary parties are more in favor of a comprehensive system (or the soviet system) than the non-voters. The data shows that the electorate of both the main opposition party in the first parliament (the SZDSZ and the Fidesz) and the main government party (MDF) were significantly less in favor of a comprehensive (8+4 or 10+2) education, along with the voters of the Socialist Party.

Table 5 (below) shows the opinions about the early selective tracks in more detail. Almost all parliamentary parties support local demand driven education more than the general population (i.e. much more than those who did not vote). Especially in 1990, but also in 1995 the supporters of the main parties in the first parliament (MDF and SZDSZ) are more likely to support locally shaped schools. These party supporters are also more likely to defend early selective (4+8 and 6+6) structures in general, especially in 1995. In 1990 almost every group supports 4+8 configuration equally, but 6+6 is favored more by the SZDSZ and the MSZP. In 1995, only the FKgP and, surprisingly, the Christian KDNP supporters opt for 4+8 and 6+6 structures less than or around the population average. The liberals (SZDSZ and Fidesz) are much less likely to choose the status quo (8+4) in 1990, although they are more likely to opt for the 10+2. The Socialists stand by the 8+4 system the most, especially compared to their coalition partner after 1994, the SZDSZ.

**Table 5: School structure: Support for early selective schools**

1990	MDF	SZDSZ	FKgP	MSZP	Fidesz	KDNP	Non-voters
don't know	4.2%	2.1%	9.0%	0.0%	2.6%	5.0%	14.9%
local demand	16.7%	20.6%	13.4%	17.7%	21.7%	10.0%	6.9%
4+8	19.9%	19.9%	19.4%	20.6%	19.1%	25.0%	17.8%
6+6	13.9%	17.1%	10.5%	17.7%	10.5%	5.0%	13.8%
8+4	33.8%	23.3%	32.8%	38.2%	20.4%	45.0%	35.6%
10+2	11.6%	17.1%	14.9%	5.9%	25.7%	10.0%	10.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Number of responses	216	146	67	34	152	40	348
1995	MDF	SZDSZ	FKgP	MSZP	Fidesz	KDNP	No-voters
don't know	5.1%	3.7%	9.9%	4.6%	1.1%	6.1%	14.3%
local demand	18.0%	16.1%	8.6%	14.5%	15.1%	6.1%	10.4%
4+8	20.5%	16.1%	8.6%	6.1%	12.9%	12.1%	6.9%
6+6	20.5%	15.3%	13.6%	9.9%	22.6%	9.1%	9.4%
8+4	33.3%	33.6%	49.4%	51.2%	39.8%	48.5%	51.4%
10+2	2.6%	15.3%	9.9%	13.7%	8.6%	18.2%	7.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Number of responses	39	137	81	131	93	33	490

In sum, we see that voters are generally inclined to support selective system, for the simple fact that voters are likely to be of higher status and this group benefits more from the selective system. This effect was much stronger in 1990 than in 1995. Thus, if the parliamentary parties wanted to represent their voters, they should have supported selective education. Moreover, it seems that the voters of the two main parties of the first parliament (the conservative and governing MDF and the liberal SZDSZ) preferred selective education more than everyone else, although this is probably only due to their higher than average social status. Concerning the school structure, however, it seems that voters of these two parties preferred locally-shaped school types more than the average voter or the non-voters did.

#### 4. Opinions of the main party representatives in 1990

The above shown empirical data have highlighted that differences between the voters and non-voters in educational matters can mainly be explained by differences in their social status, and that differences between voters of different parties are very mild. This leads me to my last argument about the quasi-compromise between the two leading parties the liberal SZDSZ and the conservative governing MDF. In this section, I utilize a unique data source, a set of interviews with the main party representatives on education related issues. Based on these interviews, I speculate that the conservatives did not mind the selective system as long as the church and the conservative voters were happy, and the liberals valued the idea of decentralization, the school autonomy, and the locally driven education system higher than the issue of inequality. Consequently, both have supported the evolution of early selective tracks. Moreover, this consensus was not challenged by the returning Socialists in 1994, probably due to the fact that their electorate also benefited from this process, and also that they have not ranked the issue of education high on their agenda.

Right before the first parliamentary elections in 1990, a Hungarian educational journal, *Pedagógiai Szemle* (Review of Pedagogy) conducted 10 interviews with the representatives of the major political party representatives and with three churches.<sup>10</sup> Although, the structure of the interviews and the questions asked were not purely identical, and the answers to these questions were not always truly system-focused (i.e. they depended on the interviewee; moreover, it can be difficult to differentiate between personal opinions and party standpoints at a time when parties and party ideologies were still forming), it is still a unique data source that shows the political forces behind the changes of the Hungarian education. Although the interviews are mostly ideologically-focused (e.g. what it means to be liberal or conservative in education, what is a religious education), I try to concentrate on factual questions. Specifically, I concentrate on how the party representatives imagined the system of the Hungarian education after the transition. The reasons for this are twofold. On the one hand, the institutional changes are in the focus of the thesis of this paper; on the other hand, factual questions are more likely to be party standpoints than personal communications. Based on these interviews, I cannot differentiate between the important and less important goals of the parties—i.e. the preference ordering of the parties. I can only see what the interviewee brought up, which of course also depended on the questions asked. To recognize (the lack of) this aspect is very important for my purposes. The political negotiations about the structure of the system have only began around or after these interviews were conducted, and thus I cannot judge that the disappearance of a specific issue in the 1993 Education Law was due to the inadequacy of the party to influence the law or that the specific issue was placed low on the given party's preference ordering,<sup>11</sup> or on the political weight of the person interviewed. The *Pedagógiai Szemle* has tried to interview the person responsible for the education at the given party at that time. This, however, does not mean that this person became an influential figure of the following era. I will comment on this issue, where possible, in footnotes.

There were several issues that most interviewed agreed on. In fact, as Kata Beke the interviewed representative of the MDF wrote in her memoir in 1993 “there were only a mild, about five percent difference between the party programs, this was a marked difference, but not irreconcilable” (Beke, 1993). Hence, in the subsections below I will emphasize those issues that they treated differently. But there were more issues that everyone thought to be important.

The most unanimously supported idea was the “de-politicization” of the system: the ideologically biased, centrally planned curriculum and books were collectively rejected, just as the prohibition and the negation of religious education. All of the party representatives proposed to have autonomous schools, decentralized education and to free the right for schools establishment. These ideas were

10 All of the interviews were conducted by Mr. Tamás Schüttler.

11 A list of the major parties and their share of votes and seats in the parliament are shown in tables 1-2.



facilitated by the negative experiences of the central-planning under the Soviet era. The proposed level of school autonomy and preferred level of decentralization was not the same, but this was less clear in the interviews. To complement decentralization and school autonomy most experts put forward a per-student lump-sum grant. This was to be allocated to schools or to local governments instead of the “politically” (i.e. not transparently) allocated funds. Some have proposed an output regulated system, where centrally established examination would be used to evaluate school work and let the schools themselves work on the methods (curriculum) they want to use. Meanwhile, others preferred process regulation, where the Ministry of Education would define the curriculum or at least the minimum requirements that the teachers should follow. Naturally, each expert emphasized that the process regulation should allow for large diversities between schools. Similarly most of the experts have seen the 8+4 structure (8 years of general schooling with 4 years of secondary education) as outdated, and would have allowed all kinds of separation of school levels. The two most popular were the 4+8 and the 6+6 structure (the early selective academic tracks). Finally, and especially interestingly, almost all of the interviewed have recognized the main disadvantage of a decentralized and highly differentiated system, namely the high probability of further rising inequalities, but none of the main parties have emphasized that it is the major goal of the state to halt this process.

I think this latter point is the main issue to be emphasized. Increasing inequalities could not be the main concern for the parties due to the fact that their voters did not value this issue highly. Naturally, this might not have been such an explicit choice for the parties—i.e. none of them explicitly wanted to increase inequalities—but the focus at that time was much more on increasing performance, and especially on the liberalization and de-politicization of the system, which interested the higher than medium status people (the voters) more.

#### 4.1. MDF – Hungarian Democratic Forum

*Ms. Kata Beke*<sup>12</sup>

This interview was carried out before the elections took place. Although it was obvious that the MDF will be one of the most important parties in the newly elected parliament, it was not clear that they would be the main government party in the first democratically elected government.

As Kata Beke said, the Forum’s “most important goal to change, or if you’d like, point of breakthrough would be to establish the autonomous school” (Beke, 1990, 47). The local governments should receive real rights to provide education, thereby genuinely decentralizing the system. On the other hand central government would be responsible to create a consensual curriculum, including subjects such as culture of behavior, ethics or home economics. The MDF in general—as opposed to the liberal parties, especially to that of the SZDSZ—also promotes a more active central involvement in the educational sector. But the central government should closely cooperate with the teachers within the (autonomous) schools. The school programs should be prepared within the schools but they should be based on a curricular framework prepared by the central agencies. Specifically, this central involvement would materialize in a system of school supervisors, whose job would be to visit schools regularly and report any problems to the Ministry. The MDF also proposes that the Ministry should prepare the national standards for a possible output regulation, but curricular (process) measures are also to be taken.

12 Beke was the author of the MDF’s first educational party program. As a founder of the party, she became a Member of Parliament in the first cycle. She was also the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs in 1990 for a short period, but since she was unable to pursue her educational concepts, she quit both the Ministry and the Party.

As for the institutional structure, school configuration, and age of first selection:

“the recent eight plus four pattern is the worse both for the child’s development and from the curricular viewpoints. We would prefer the revitalization of the classic four plus eight system – or even the human and real gymnasium division within this. We can imagine some schools where the [...] six plus six system will evolve. There will be areas where a four or six year-long high quality vocational training will be placed upon a six year-long primary education. [...] From these it should be obvious that we do not want to prescribe a school structure.” (Beke, 1990, 48)

To put it differently, the MDF promoted the change of the soviet structure by reintroducing the “classic” types of academic school. These schools, the natural science oriented and the other focusing on humanities, were the bases of the elite training before and between the World Wars. Politically the reintroduction of the “Austro-Hungarian regime” was appealing for the MDF for several reasons. Most importantly it was appealing because of the conservative ideology of its electorate. Secondly, the historical churches wanted to get back their confiscated schools, which had typically been eight-year-long gimnáziums before the war. And finally the proposition to return to the old system satisfied the desperate need for change of the citizens.<sup>13</sup>

The MDF wanted to finance the system by per-student lump-sum grants that would have been transferred to the schools directly, since the MDF promoted school choice, this would have generated competition among the schools. The party also promoted to extend the right for the free establishment of schools. Most of the schools would be run by local governments, but the churches would also be given back their confiscated schools (which would be renovated by the state first). Naturally, private organizations could also establish any type of institution, just as the central government would also maintain schools where the local government is inadequate for this job.

It must be noted here that although Beke was the author of the MDF’s education party program, she states in her book (Beke, 1993) that the government had not pursued this program. In fact, it did not even consider following the program. This is one of the reasons why Beke later quit the party.

#### 4.2. SZDSZ – Free Democratic Alliance

*Mr. István Bessenyei*<sup>14</sup>

Similarly to the MDF, the SZDSZ also had a decent chance to win the elections. At the time of the interview it was still unsure whether in the next four years the SZDSZ will govern or be the main opposition force, as it turned out later. The difference between the MDF’s and the SZDSZ’s education program—as Kata Beke, the MDF, representative put it—stemmed:

“not only from the difference between the approaches to liberalism, but that the program of the SZDSZ was prepared by educational experts while that of the MDF was prepared by practicing teachers” (Beke, 1990, 51).<sup>15</sup>

13 However, I must also note that it is rather hard to judge the strength of the preference for the old-type system of the MDF based on this interview. The interviewer once asks that “based on what you have said the MDF promotes a rather liberal public-education policy...” and the answer for this is not negative.

14 Bessenyei was a researcher at the Institute for Educational Research and later at the National Institute for Public Education from 1980 till 1998. In the interview he only represented the well prepared educational program of the SZDSZ (also the program was copied next to the interview).

15 In fact, it was written mostly by those people, who were referred to as “professionals” by Halász (1984).

From the interviews, and from other background materials, it seems that the SZDSZ had the most developed program at the time. It included three principles: of the right for school establishment, school choice and autonomy of schools. And included three regulatory mechanisms: regulation via exams, regulation via financing, regulation via transparency.

The right for school establishment not only meant that anyone could have founded an educational institution, but that the structure of the established school would also be decided by the founder. It could have decided whether it was four, six or eight years long, or whether it included vocational or general training. The SZDSZ imagined that most of the schools would be founded by local governments, but also private companies, foundations, or churches will establish their own institutions. The students or the parents could freely choose among these institutions, independent of their residential status. The schools must also be very autonomous in choosing teaching method, books, programs, and also be economically independent.

This system was intended to be guided by exams, financing and transparency (public pressure). The state would have had to provide the framework for this. Every school would have had to prepare for the national exams/standards given at “critical exit points,” while the state would have provided per student lump-sum resources for every institution (given directly to the institutions or to the parents as vouchers). Transparency would have been secured by the state through legal regulations (the local and national political deals must be made public) and through providing school report cards and local educational papers or pamphlets.

The major drawback of the conception was that it would have generated, or at least had not reduced inequalities. As István Bessenyei, the interviewed SZDSZ expert put it: “Inequality of opportunity cannot be eliminated or even alleviated by this [voucher] system.” However “today’s situation produces an unmanageable differentiation” while the proposed system would produce a manageable one (Bessenyei, 1989, 1222). Since the processes of a highly liberalized education are rather apparent, according to the SZDSZ, the disadvantaged pupils or the “losers” of the system should have been assisted via directed programs.

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The MDF and the SZDSZ, the two main political forces before (and after) the election, had the two most developed educational programs. However, the representatives of the other parties also had some thought provoking ideas, but based on the interviews made with them their systemic reform ideas were less intact.

### 4.3. The governing side: Conservatives

The interviews with the Independent Peasants Party (FKgP)<sup>16</sup> and the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP)<sup>17</sup> were made after the elections of 1990. It was already known that the parties made it to the parliament, and negotiations about the future coalition with the MDF—the winning party—were under way. This could be one of the reasons, why these two representatives were less keen on giving details in their interviews.

It is clear that both of these parties supported the right for school establishment. The FKgP, mostly due to its agricultural electorate, argued that it is vital because the vocational training can only be provided properly by the agricultural chambers, while the KDNP emphasized the importance of the religious academic schools. Both have also agreed that the financing should be made through per student lump-sum grants, but the FKgP argued that “only the state maintained institutions should be entitled

16 Sándor Győriványi was the member of the first two parliaments, from 1990 till 1998, representing the FKgP. For a short period in 1990 he was also the Minister of Labor Affairs.

17 Emese Ugrin was the member of the first parliament. She was elected on the national list of the Christian Democrats, but joined the FKgP parliamentary group in 1991, which she quit in 1992.

to state grants,” while the other schools could apply for state aid, and it also stated that grants should be allocated to the education provider, the local government in most of the cases, and not to the schools (Győriványi, 1990, 454).

Both parties were in favor of a liberalized school structure. Győriványi—emphasizing that decisions about the structure of the system should be postponed—thought that “the school structure should not be the same in the whole country” (1990, 458). The representative of the KDNP was more straightforward: “In general, I see the 4 plus 8 structure as the most suitable method” for transmitting knowledge (Ugrin, 1990, 540). Moreover, she argued that due to the different needs in the different parts of the country, the structure could vary. Ugrin also claimed that especially for social groups that do not demand academic education “the eight-year-long primary should be maintained,” and although it leads to selection, “this selection is needed in every country, where there are masses of social strata, that are originally out-crowded from the high quality education” (1990, 541). The interview with the KDNP representative revolved around the issue of inequality and social mobility. Their solution to the unwanted selection, to increase social mobility, was a so called *liceum*, which is a comprehensive school (similar to the German Gesamtschule), that would be established with the explicit goal of increasing social mobility.

Besides the two parliamentary conservative parties, some church representatives were also interviewed. The Catholic (Várszegi, 1990), Jewish (Várhegyi, 1990), Calvinist (Bóna, 1990), and Evangelical (Gyapay, 1990) churches, unsurprisingly, all agreed on two important systemic aspects. The formerly confiscated schools should be returned to the churches and that their structure should be decided by the church. “So much have emerged from our conception that if it is possible to organize denominational schools—which is, by the way, under process—we would like to change the structure of the school” (Várszegi, 1990, 148). That is, let the churches re-establish their formerly high quality eight-year-long early selective tracks.

#### 4.4. The opposition: Liberals and Socialists

The original concept of the first-best educational system of the Young Democratic Alliance (Fidesz) was very similar to that of the liberal SZDSZ. The main difference was, maybe, in their emphasis on radical changes. Although they could have also agreed on temporary compromises, such as a local government run school system, instead of fully autonomous schools, or per student grant allocated to the local governments instead of a pure voucher system. They would have also liberated the market for textbooks, and argued that the school structure should be decided from below, and the state should only provide the legal framework for it.

The Fidesz representative made an interesting remark to the issue of inequality, when the interviewer was pushing that the market would create even greater inequality: “Evidently, there is a belief that the appearance of the market will lead to the increase of inequality of opportunity. I call it only a belief, since facts have not proved this to be true” (Drahos, 1990, 251). Moreover, “we cannot flatter ourselves with some sort of an illusionist, egalitarian way of thinking. We have to live together with the differences.” (Drahos, 1990, 254).

The second biggest opposition party, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP),<sup>18</sup> was the successor of the Communist Party. It was not “too socialist” at that time, in the sense of not emphasizing equality above all. “We think that it cannot be the duty of the school to equalize social inequalities. This is simply not possible. Its duty, conversely, is to be able to lift the talented from anywhere. [...] We have to break up with the previous perception [...], that says that everyone is equal from the birth.” (Ormos,

18 Mária Ormos was the member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party between 1988 and 1989. She was elected to the first parliament on the Socialist national list, but has resigned four months later. She is a historian, member of the Academy of Sciences and the rector of the Jannus Pannonius University.

1990, 240-241). The MSZP also supported the liberalized school structure, but emphasized that the movement between schools must be eased. The representative stressed that the vocational training should be made more general, in that a vocational training, ending at age 18, cannot give a finished vocational degree. It should be either moved to tertiary level or handed over to companies to train their own workforce.

The only truly socialist perception on education was given by a social scientist, Andras T. Hegedűs, representing the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (MSZDP).<sup>19</sup> This interview was rather a communication of Hegedűs, since the party did not make it to the parliament. In fact it performed very poorly.<sup>20</sup> Hegedűs also supported the free school establishment, but warned that it will most likely lead to high selectivity.

“Who has, at least a little, read himself into the Western-European and American literature on free school establishment, would have found that unless some rules limiting positive or negative discrimination are not attached to the right to establish a school, then the increase of inequalities will lead to serious schooling failures.”  
(Hegedűs, 1990, 344)

After the first democratically elected government started to work, legal changes in the educational sector accelerated.

19 Andras T. Hegedűs was a renowned social scientist, and expert on inequality and especially on Roma issues. He was a Professor of Pedagogy at the University of Economics until his death.

20 The MSZDP has received only 0.03% on the election, but it was mainly due to the fact that most of its candidates stepped down to support other parties (mainly the MSZP).

## 5. Changes in the education system after transition and the law of 1993

As I have shown there were very mild differences between the party standpoints. However, there are striking differences in what education researchers were communicating and how the system evolved. The researchers wanted more equality, and propagated comprehensive education, but the system generated more and more inequality by turning more and more selective. In this chapter, I elaborate on the evolution of the 1993 Education Law. This is an important milestone in the modern history of the Hungarian education, since it is the law which is still in act today.

After the election, in the autumn of 1990, a committee led by Ferenc Gázsó—the “father” of the former 1985 law—was appointed to prepare a new law on education. The committee started to work very quickly and ambitiously and, in January 1991, they presented a concept for a new law. At this time, the governing parties realized the mistake of appointing the “wrong” people to the committee: most of the members were educational experts and coming from the liberal side of the political arena, which, naturally, led to a rather liberal concept. This concept was undesirable for the conservative side, and admittedly the committee had less than desirable societal support, at least not enough to fight with the educational government (Bajomi, 1994). As Gábor Horn, the leader of the educational workshop of the liberal SZDSZ, put it in 1994:

“This was an absurd situation: the experts of the government were actually the experts of the liberal opposition parties, the SZDSZ and the Fidesz [...] in other words the government gave the issue of education to its own opposition, and then realized that it was a mistake (for itself and not for the people, naturally)” (1994, 56).

After half a year of negotiations and a revised concept, by June 1991, the Gázsó committee was dismissed, and a new law was started to be prepared by the Ministry of Education. This law was later accepted in 1993 as the LXXIX/1993 Law on Public Education.

For my purposes, it is interesting to look at the differences between the committee’s concept and the accepted law. The concept was published in a book in 1992—after it was obvious that it would not become law, but before the actual law had come into power (Gázsó, Halász & Mihály, 1992).

### 5.1. The committee’s concept

This concept was practically a linear continuation of the 1985 Law on Education, and resembled highly the SZDSZ concept on education, adapting a highly decentralized structure, autonomous schools, massive rights of freedoms (school choice and school establishment) and minor central regulatory powers.

It proposed a pluralist educational system, where anyone could establish any type of institution, where the rights of the state was only to provide legal and financial regulatory framework, but no everyday controlling mechanism was allocated to the highest level: the curriculum was a “framework,” where the minimum requirements were described, but the actual regulation would have been made by a detailed three-tier examination system. A “diagnostic” measure early in the primary school to inform teachers and parents about the student’s basic skills and abilities, a “basic” exam at the end of the primary level and the maturity exam at the end of the secondary. All schools must be capable of preparing the children to both of the exams and use the diagnostic measure if necessary.

The institutional structure would have been highly liberated. The only requirement was that the established school must allow for transitions between schools, and that it fits the exam structure.

The financing would have been a multi-channel financing, where the yearly budget would have contained the grants to be transferred to the education provider. The provider would have had three

types of funds to be allocated to education: academic, per student lump-sum grants that must be transferred directly to the given school; infrastructural grants, where the provider could allocate the money from the state among its educational institutions according to its will; and other special grants also directly given to the specific schools. Naturally the providers could and should have allocated their own resources to the educational institutions as well.

An interesting part of the concept where it stated that “the state [...] facilitates the decrease of social and cultural inequalities with specific decrees. The avoidance of early selection should be facilitated by supplementary lump-sum and targeted financing...” (Gazsó et al., 1992, 258). It seems that its designers were also aware of the negative side of the liberated system.

Almost a decade after the committee was set up, Ferenc Gazsó answered a question asking about the reasons why a liberal committee was asked by a conservative government:

“There are two reasons. First is that they had no experts. The second reason is that they have probably thought that they can make a consensus with me and this group of experts about the educational policy questions. Then they realized that we are representing our own standpoints, and we can only work within this framework. Then they have realized that they had chosen wrong.” (Báthory, 2001, 126)

## 5.2. The law of 1993

“This was the first law which included the whole institutional structure of the education sector, indirectly it facilitated the loosening up of the whole educational structure, but especially the primary school” (Báthory, 2001, 127).

It is unclear whether it was the influence of the Gazsó committee, the law of 1985, simply a need for more freedom after a heavy repression or a simple adjustment to the old law to fit the new social trends, but the new law is a fairly liberal one. Even in light of the fact that the inequality advancing effect of a selective system was clear at the time, and that the law of 1985 had already somewhat de-politicized the system, the new law was liberal. It adopted all of the “reformist” characteristics from the law of 1985, and also added several of the basic institutional advancements of the Gazsó committee.

Namely, the freedom of school establishment, school choice, a relatively great extent of institutional autonomy (although smaller than it was proposed by the committee) was put into blueprint. The newly established local governments became the main education providers—it was their responsibility to provide proper education for everyone between 6 and 16 years of age—but they could contract with private enterprises or the church to supply this service. School choice was extended entirely, everyone had the right to enter any institution, and it was the right of the teaching staff to decide over the acceptance. School autonomy meant that the teachers could pick the modes and ways of teaching, choose the specific books and other materials, and it was the principal, who decided over the employment of the teachers.

The law did not specify the mode of financing. It only specified that the yearly state budget must contain the amount to be spent on education, and that the state must finance the teachers and other major costs. However, in practice the per-student lump-sum grant financing was introduced. Teachers became civil servants, with centrally specified salaries and very secure jobs (hard to fire).

The school structure was “freed,” in the sense that the 4+8 and the 6+6 types were allowed, and local governments could decide over the school structure. Specifically the law spelled out that the new basic curriculum—which has not been issued during the first government—would specify the basic knowledge till the end of the grades four, six, eight and ten. These points became the points for possible

transfers between schools, and the law also declared that the “education in the academic tracks starts in the 5th, 7th, or 9th grade, and [...] finishes in the 12th” (28.§ (2)). This basically has defined the possible types of tracks.

There were three specific aspects, which for the liberals were too conservative: the relatively great emphasis on the religious education, the re-establishment of the abolished supervisory system, and the use of a centralized basic curriculum instead of a curricular framework. The emphasis on the religious education was not substantial, but it appeared specifically in the law that the participation of the children in religious education must be made possible everywhere (4.§ (4)). The establishment of the new supervisory system was taken more seriously by the opposition. It was seen as an attempt to centralize the system. The newly established *Tankerületi oktatásügyi központok* (TOK, or Centers for Regional Educational Matters) were seen as the “arms of the Ministry” (Jánosi, 1994, 51). As a consequence, the first socialist-liberal government has abolished them in 1995 (LXXXV/1995). The debate about the curriculum lasted much longer, and it was not settled until after the turn of the century, and it is a entirely separate story, which is outside of the focus of this paper (see Báthory, 2001, ch. III/4.).

In short, the conservative government further decentralized, liberalized the system, and rather adopted a law which legitimized these processes. The new law helped the proliferation of the school and program types. A report on the education system of the transition countries by the World Bank states:

“In Hungary, there are indications that decentralization have progressed too far, resulting in a highly unequal distribution of resources across municipalities. Such effects have serious implications for the quality of education across regions, especially between poorer rural and wealthier urban communities” (Laporte & Ringold, 1997, 27).

It is unclear what the main factor was: the influence of the liberal education experts (the SZDSZ program, the Gázsó committee, the law of 1985), a demand from the conservative electorate (a need for more freedom after a heavy repression, a need to return to the historical status quo), or a demand from the churches. Nevertheless, the new law legitimized a system that had become much more selective than it had been before.

### 5.3. Major party opinions about the structure of the system in 1994

I could not emphasize enough the discrepancy between the communications of the policy makers and the experts and the way the system evolved. While the experts doomed the inequality advancing effect of a selective system, the new system became very selective. By 1994 these discrepancies had become clearer. Some policy makers have explicitly said that this was the price to pay for a decentralized system.

Below I list some opinions by party representatives on the educational issues of first four years of democracy. The interviews conducted by the *Pedagógiai Szemle* in 1989 and 1990 were such a success—according to its publisher—that they were repeated right before the election of 1994. These interviews conducted by the *Új Pedagógiai Szemle* (New Review of Pedagogy), the successor of the *Pedagógiai Szemle*, were much more organized (and thus allowing for less space to elaborate on own ideas), and similar to each other than the previous ones to facilitate comparison. Also the elections and the whole atmosphere at that time necessitated a more politicized, more party and less individual focused approach. However, while before all of the interviewed were in opposition—meaning that none of them had to identify themselves with the communist past, all of them could criticize freely and



could present their ideas as they were—in 1994 the governing parties (the MDF, FKgP and KDNP) had to argue in favor of the changes of the past four years, while the opposition had to come up with new ideas for reform and criticism. Accordingly, the interviews of the government are much less informative. Mostly they either praise the law and the changes or blame the opposition and the environment for failures. Similarly, the opposition says not much positive about the past changes—or if they do they attribute it to the pre-government agreements or to the 1985 law—but at least they come up with new systemic solutions and ideas. For these reasons I will not deal much with the governing party opinions, nor with the criticism of the government, but focus more on the propositions in the interviews with the Fidesz, SZDSZ and MSZP representatives, and to the ideas of Ferenc Gázsó, the “father” of the law of 1985 and the head of the committee of 1991, who represented the MSZDP (Hungarian Social Democratic Party). Although the MSZDP was not a serious political power it is still interesting to see the reactions of a very influential social-scientist on these issues.

The interviews had some important elements that were raised by almost all of the parties. The first, and for my purposes the most vital, is the disagreement about the six- or eight-year-long academic schools. The problem of this school type was best captured by Ferenc Gázsó, who claimed that:

“These effects will be more observable if the spreading down of the *gymnazium* will continue. The 6- and 8 year-long academic tracks will select some percentage of the 10- or 12-year-old children into this new type of school and the parents of these children will almost all be the better off, more educated parents with higher ambitions. The consequence of this could be that the so called 10-class-primary<sup>21</sup> will be the school for the poor” (Gázsó, 1994, 44).

Although all of the interviewed understood this selectivity problem very clearly, ideological problems arose. As György Jánosi (the MSZP representative) put it:

“if, for instance, some party considers the freedom to modify school configuration as part of the idea of freedom of education, this would inevitably put a limit on the decreasing of the inequalities” (Jánosi, 1994, 50).

Jánosi were unmistakably directing this comment towards the liberals, who criticized the governing conservatives on the basis of centrally supporting the early selective academic tracks, but accepting the fact that these could exist if people demanded them.

“Ethics and theology as parts of the curriculum were principal elements in the program of the MDF, just as the preference for the 8 year-long academic tracks. The SZDSZ could never accept this latter, firstly because we consider school structure decisions local responsibility, secondly if we must decide centrally about the preferences, then we rather opt for the comprehensive school than the early selective feudal school types. [However] we do not even think to block the operation of the already existing 8-year-long academic schools if there are pupils and parents that choose this” (G. Horn, 1994, 59).

The representative of the other liberal party of the time (Fidesz) made similar statements: “Although the Fidesz is in favor of the eight-year-long primary school, we do not want to prohibit the six- or eight-year-long academic schools” (Pokorni, 1994, 9).<sup>22</sup> Pokorni also stated that they would rather create incentives for the schools not to transform into a six- or eight-year academic tracks, and for the

21 The so-called 10-year primary is 8 years primary and 2 +2 years of vocational training.

22 Fidesz, with Pokorni as the Minister of Education, put a cap on the establishment of early selective academic tracks in 2000.

parents not to take their children out from the eight-year primary. “The eight-year-long primary is [...] a possible foundation for a comprehensive school type.”

Another important element raised by the opposition parties was the centrally provided examination. The idea revolves around the output regulation: the liberal parties argued, and no-one really disagreed, that a standardized maturity exam has to be provided in order for the system to be fair, and to provide the same incentives for every child. Moreover, the exam would also act as an output regulatory mechanism, so that the schools know what they should teach for. “According to the Fidesz, the recent situation must be legalized, that is we must legally recognize the difference between the standard, national, unified [tertiary entrance exam as a maturity exam] and the locally conducted maturity exam” (Pokorni, 1994, 10).

But the devil rests in the details: it was harder than it seemed to agree on a unified knowledge that every child should know. A complaint, concerning this issue, from the governing side was that it was the liberal side that wanted to allocate too much autonomy for the teacher and for the school, because the liberals treated “the value-neutrality of the education of each school as the most important factor. This is simply impossible” (Lukáts, 1994, 21). However, the liberals disagreed, and claimed that the conservatives’ “Christian-national schools wanted a specific ideology to succeed” (G. Horn, 1994, 59), which they, naturally, could not let happen.

In short, while the conservative side urged a Christian or nationally-oriented value structure to be the base of the unified knowledge, the liberals insisted on a value-free system. And this is the key: none of the sides really had the incentives to halt the process of the spreading down of the academic schools. What is more, none of the serious stakeholders of the education system did. The liberal parties wanted to serve local demand, and local demand was driven by higher-status people. Conservatives backed the Churches in their attempt to reopen the traditional elite academic tracks, and they also assumed that their voters sympathized more with the traditional education system than with the Communist one. The only group of people, who really lost—and are still losing—from this arrangement are the ones without proper representation. In theory, this representation should have come from the Socialists. But as we have seen their voters’ opinion on the selective system have not been any different from the voters of the other parties. Moreover, it is likely that the issue of education has been placed low on the Socialist agenda. In 1994, they gave the Ministry of Education to a liberal Minister,<sup>23</sup> and although they have been in power for 12 years out of the 20 years of post-communist transition, only in the last four years had they run the education ministry. Thus, I argue that the quasi-compromise made by the liberals and the conservatives was implicitly approved by the Socialists.

23 Liberals and the Socialists have coalesced in 1994, although the Socialists have themselves had more than 50% of the seats in the parliament. The reasons for this are still debated today and are outside the scope of this paper.

## Concluding notes

Equality of opportunity in the current Hungarian education system is low by international standards. Highly selective educational institutions, especially the age of selection, play an important role in this (D. Horn, 2009, 2010). This paper presented the evolution of the current system and tried to answer: why and how such a system could evolve. I listed three necessary factors: (1) historical conditions, (2) decentralization, and (3) democracy.

The two historical conditions are the decentralized administrative structure, and the elite eight-year academic schools, the *gimnáziums*. While the first set the stage for a quick and substantive decentralization when the communist system fell apart, the second represented the tradition of high quality education of the “good old days.”

As a result of democratization and decentralization, higher-status people gained much more power in shaping local policies than before. In this paper I have shown that higher-status people are more likely to vote, and voters prefer selective educational policies. Since selective education, including early selective tracks, is beneficial for the higher-status people, voters effectively demanded these institutions.

In addition, the two main political powers emerging at the post-communist transition, the conservatives and the liberals, have both supported the establishment of early selective tracks on different ideological grounds, and this quasi-compromise was implicitly approved by the Socialists. The liberals fostered the decentralization process most vehemently. They argued that the locally driven education institutions are the most adequate for democratizing and de-politicizing the education system. While they realized that a decentralized education system would develop selective institutions with the result of increasing inequalities, they considered raising inequalities as a price to pay for the de-politicized, decentralized system that serves the will of the people most effectively. However, the conservatives supported the early selective tracks because these resembled the good old days. Both their electorate and the churches demanded the return to the “good old system” with the elite eight-year-long *gimnáziums* that have educated the elite for so many years before. The formerly secularized church schools were returned to the churches, and these were allowed to reform their structure. Finally, although the Socialists should have been the representatives of the lower-status population, they have done nothing to stop this implicit deal. In fact they gave the Ministry of Education to the liberals even after they returned to power in 1994.

The puzzle is that education experts and also policy makers alike have foreseen the consequences of the selective system. It was emphasized throughout the transition that early selective tracks would benefit the higher-status people, and thus increase inequality. Yet, the logic of the mechanism (higher-status voters demand selective education, and in a decentralized system this demand is hard to block) together with the fact that the two main powers did not want to stop this process have led to this selective system.

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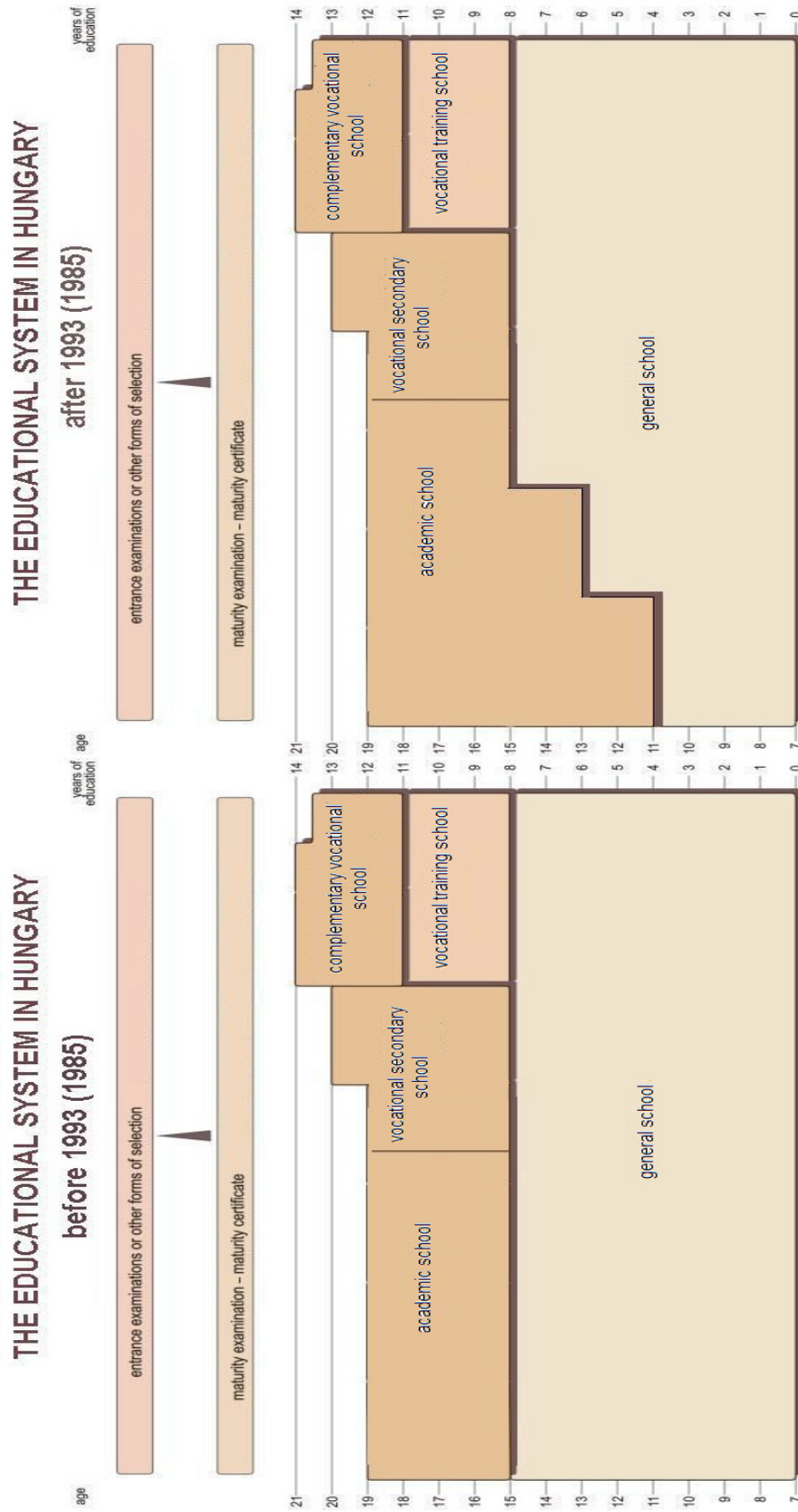
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## Appendix 1: Acronyms

Acronym	Name in full
FKgP	Independent Peasant Party ( <i>Független Kisgazdapárt</i> )
Fidesz	Young Democratic Alliance
IER	Institute for Educational Research
KDNP	Christian Democratic People's Party ( <i>Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt</i> )
MDF	Hungarian Democratic Forum ( <i>Magyar Demokrata Fórum</i> )
MSZP	Hungarian Socialist Party ( <i>Magyar Szocialista Párt</i> )
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
SZDSZ	Alliance of Free Democrats ( <i>Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége</i> )

Appendix 2: Figures and tables

Figure 4: The Educational system in Hungary before and after the transition





**Table 6: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those who voted for parties in the first parliament (1990), controls off**

1990	age of selection	early tracking	education of the gifted	school for the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
Voted for parties in first parliament	-0.277 (0.217)	0.083*** (0.031)	0.118*** (0.034)	0.431*** (0.133)	0.006 (0.134)	0.147*** (0.031)	0.115*** (0.034)	0.156*** (0.035)	-0.064* (0.034)
Constant	12.455*** (0.178)	0.672*** (0.025)	0.461*** (0.027)	3.735*** (0.108)	3.424*** (0.109)	0.608*** (0.026)	0.443*** (0.027)	0.502*** (0.028)	0.550*** (0.027)
Controls	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off
Observations	858	926	913	876	875	954	902	878	911
R-squared	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.00

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

**Table 7: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those who voted for parties in the first parliament (1995), controls off**

1995	age of selection	early tracking	education of the gifted	school for the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
Voted for parties in first parliament	-0.352* (0.185)	0.053** (0.025)	0.023 (0.033)	0.151 (0.113)	0.203* (0.118)	0.003 (0.019)	0.052 (0.033)	0.050 (0.033)	-0.084*** (0.032)
Constant	13.537*** (0.126)	0.789*** (0.018)	0.597*** (0.023)	4.558*** (0.078)	4.348*** (0.083)	0.906*** (0.013)	0.501*** (0.023)	0.397*** (0.023)	0.672*** (0.022)
Controls	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off
Observations	804	933	893	980	982	981	899	872	898
R-squared	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

**Table 8: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those who voted for parties in the first parliament (1990), controls on**

1990	age of selection	early tracking	education of the gifted	school for the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
Voted for parties in first parliament	-0.125 (0.219)	0.043 (0.033)	0.062* (0.036)	0.297** (0.142)	0.215 (0.137)	0.116*** (0.033)	0.063* (0.036)	0.161*** (0.036)	-0.037 (0.036)
Constant	13.548*** (0.677)	0.756*** (0.094)	0.374*** (0.113)	3.584*** (0.401)	3.792*** (0.422)	0.659*** (0.098)	0.458*** (0.112)	0.789*** (0.109)	0.602*** (0.111)
Controls	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on
Observations	803	867	857	814	813	890	851	819	854
R-squared	0.10	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.10	0.05

*Note:* Robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls are: gender, age, level of education, employment status, residence, income, religion, is a student, have children.

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

**Table 9: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those who voted for parties in the first parliament (1995), controls on**

1995	age of selection	early tracking	education of the gifted	school for the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
Voted for parties in first parliament	-0.206 (0.210)	0.058* (0.030)	0.024 (0.038)	0.109 (0.132)	0.208 (0.141)	0.018 (0.023)	0.041 (0.038)	0.062 (0.039)	-0.043 (0.037)
Constant	13.722*** (0.585)	0.779*** (0.087)	0.616*** (0.110)	4.185*** (0.413)	3.957*** (0.399)	0.900*** (0.064)	0.781*** (0.109)	0.550*** (0.114)	0.551*** (0.105)
Controls	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on
Observations	635	727	701	762	764	764	700	685	707
R-squared	0.07	0.06	0.10	0.02	0.05	0.05	0.10	0.04	0.09

*Note:* Robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls are: gender, age, level of education, employment status, residence, income, religion, is a student, have children.

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

**Table 10: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those, who voted for parties in the first parliament (1990), controls off, party fixed effects**

1990	age of selection	early tracking	school for the gifted	education of the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
MDF	-0.296 (0.427)	0.089 (0.066)	0.004 (0.082)	-0.191 (0.291)	0.251 (0.309)	0.027 (0.069)	-0.070 (0.075)	0.122* (0.066)	-0.196*** (0.074)
SZDSZ	-0.657* (0.392)	0.131** (0.062)	0.123 (0.078)	0.103 (0.268)	-0.194 (0.276)	0.084 (0.064)	0.041 (0.070)	0.177*** (0.062)	-0.234*** (0.069)
FKgP	-0.312 (0.519)	-0.055 (0.078)	-0.005 (0.098)	-0.358 (0.362)	0.787** (0.368)	-0.037 (0.078)	-0.218** (0.087)	0.011 (0.085)	-0.129 (0.089)
MSZP	-0.382 (0.623)	-0.044 (0.099)	-0.159 (0.113)	-0.007 (0.416)	0.267 (0.400)	0.006 (0.099)	-0.081 (0.108)	0.052 (0.098)	-0.208** (0.099)
FIDESZ	-0.397 (0.399)	0.094 (0.060)	-0.005 (0.076)	-0.214 (0.271)	-0.213 (0.277)	0.039 (0.064)	0.098 (0.069)	0.100 (0.063)	-0.157** (0.067)
KDNP	-0.157 (0.663)	-0.121 (0.103)	-0.049 (0.112)	-0.688* (0.375)	0.132 (0.430)	0.005 (0.097)	-0.118 (0.106)	0.091 (0.098)	-0.097 (0.106)
Voted for parties in first parliament	0.160 (0.461)	0.012 (0.070)	0.101 (0.085)	0.611** (0.307)	-0.083 (0.315)	0.111 (0.073)	0.140* (0.078)	0.032 (0.071)	0.136* (0.077)
Controls	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off
Constant	12.455*** (0.179)	0.672*** (0.025)	0.461*** (0.027)	3.735*** (0.109)	3.424*** (0.109)	0.608*** (0.026)	0.443*** (0.027)	0.502*** (0.028)	0.550*** (0.027)
Observations	858	926	913	876	875	954	902	878	911
R-squared	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.02

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

**Table 11: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those who voted for parties in the first parliament (1995), controls off, party fixed effects**

1995	age of selection	early tracking	school for the gifted	education of the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
MDF	-0.892*	0.053	0.043	0.235	0.111	-0.016	0.084	0.104	-0.262***
	(0.495)	(0.060)	(0.087)	(0.298)	(0.354)	(0.058)	(0.091)	(0.099)	(0.089)
SZDSZ	-0.979**	0.123***	0.112*	-0.045	-0.192	0.050	0.205***	0.151**	-0.140**
	(0.386)	(0.046)	(0.067)	(0.244)	(0.263)	(0.039)	(0.068)	(0.073)	(0.069)
FKgP	-0.661	-0.014	-0.133	0.098	-0.047	-0.130**	0.127	0.068	0.019
	(0.456)	(0.058)	(0.083)	(0.284)	(0.322)	(0.058)	(0.082)	(0.090)	(0.085)
MSZP	-0.814*	0.048	-0.061	0.423	0.026	0.008	0.053	-0.028	0.040
	(0.430)	(0.053)	(0.073)	(0.265)	(0.272)	(0.037)	(0.076)	(0.081)	(0.076)
FIDESZ	-0.722*	0.073	0.032	-0.075	0.197	-0.004	0.147*	0.056	-0.142*
	(0.413)	(0.053)	(0.072)	(0.273)	(0.297)	(0.048)	(0.076)	(0.081)	(0.077)
KDNP	-0.594	0.154***	-0.098	-0.035	0.718**	0.005	0.050	0.107	0.084
	(0.478)	(0.055)	(0.104)	(0.356)	(0.327)	(0.056)	(0.108)	(0.118)	(0.094)
Voted for parties in first parliament	0.565	-0.026	0.026	0.025	0.158	0.010	-0.089	-0.028	-0.009
	(0.408)	(0.052)	(0.072)	(0.262)	(0.284)	(0.043)	(0.075)	(0.081)	(0.075)
Controls	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off	off
Constant	13.537***	0.789***	0.597***	4.558***	4.348***	0.906***	0.501***	0.397***	0.672***
	(0.126)	(0.018)	(0.023)	(0.078)	(0.083)	(0.013)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.022)
Observations	804	933	893	980	982	981	899	872	898
R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.03

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

**Table 12: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those who voted for parties in the first parliament (1990), controls on, party fixed effects**

	age of selection	early tracking	school for the gifted	education of the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
<b>1990</b>									
MDF	-0.355 (0.483)	0.046 (0.068)	0.030 (0.084)	-0.281 (0.298)	0.295 (0.323)	-0.021 (0.067)	-0.106 (0.074)	0.101 (0.068)	-0.175** (0.077)
SZDSZ	-0.587 (0.451)	0.073 (0.063)	0.107 (0.079)	0.056 (0.271)	-0.005 (0.287)	0.026 (0.063)	-0.012 (0.069)	0.157** (0.062)	-0.198*** (0.075)
FKgP	-0.574 (0.544)	0.010 (0.081)	0.070 (0.101)	-0.334 (0.368)	0.583 (0.384)	-0.013 (0.076)	-0.181** (0.089)	0.040 (0.086)	-0.136 (0.095)
MSZP	-0.403 (0.710)	-0.076 (0.101)	-0.145 (0.113)	-0.050 (0.416)	0.288 (0.434)	-0.008 (0.099)	-0.085 (0.103)	0.037 (0.106)	-0.161 (0.100)
FIDESZ	-0.385 (0.463)	0.030 (0.063)	-0.034 (0.078)	-0.260 (0.280)	-0.150 (0.300)	-0.019 (0.064)	0.025 (0.068)	0.078 (0.067)	-0.140* (0.073)
KDNP	-0.655 (0.708)	-0.122 (0.108)	0.022 (0.115)	-0.767* (0.392)	0.107 (0.430)	-0.036 (0.095)	-0.122 (0.105)	0.110 (0.104)	-0.043 (0.109)
Voted for parties in first parliament	0.370 (0.512)	0.017 (0.072)	0.033 (0.087)	0.548* (0.313)	0.045 (0.329)	0.128* (0.070)	0.138* (0.077)	0.054 (0.073)	0.133* (0.080)
Controls	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on
Constant	13.602*** (0.700)	0.745*** (0.096)	0.395*** (0.115)	3.587*** (0.407)	3.895*** (0.422)	0.660*** (0.099)	0.423*** (0.113)	0.785*** (0.112)	0.625*** (0.113)
Observations	803	867	857	814	813	890	851	819	854
R-squared	0.10	0.06	0.08	0.05	0.10	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.06

*Note:* Robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls are: gender, age, level of education, employment status, residence, income, religion, is a student, have children

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

**Table 13: Opinions about selective educational institutions of those who voted for parties in the first parliament (1995), controls on, party fixed effects**

	age of selection	early tracking	school for the gifted	education of the gifted, rank	education of the disadvantaged, rank	free school choice	free book choice (curriculum)	change is needed	comprehensive education
<b>1995</b>									
MDF	-0.735 (0.514)	0.048 (0.070)	0.047 (0.083)	0.454 (0.309)	0.241 (0.391)	-0.008 (0.062)	0.103 (0.092)	0.179 (0.112)	-0.209** (0.100)
SZDSZ	-0.585 (0.410)	0.062 (0.054)	0.055 (0.068)	-0.146 (0.277)	0.046 (0.288)	0.013 (0.046)	0.201*** (0.076)	0.139* (0.077)	-0.078 (0.075)
FKgP	-0.763* (0.457)	-0.006 (0.069)	-0.060 (0.085)	0.037 (0.322)	0.035 (0.347)	-0.091 (0.065)	0.288*** (0.090)	0.090 (0.102)	-0.026 (0.100)
MSZP	-0.975** (0.474)	0.017 (0.065)	0.011 (0.079)	0.377 (0.309)	0.226 (0.300)	0.005 (0.045)	0.117 (0.089)	-0.026 (0.087)	0.038 (0.086)
FIDESZ	-0.100 (0.449)	-0.016 (0.067)	-0.002 (0.076)	-0.112 (0.322)	0.295 (0.355)	-0.040 (0.061)	0.093 (0.090)	0.061 (0.091)	-0.031 (0.093)
KDNP	-0.452 (0.623)	0.107 (0.074)	-0.064 (0.119)	0.154 (0.440)	1.494*** (0.383)	-0.037 (0.064)	0.056 (0.124)	0.167 (0.139)	0.115 (0.114)
Voted for parties in first parliament	0.523 (0.447)	0.028 (0.065)	0.016 (0.077)	0.004 (0.304)	-0.049 (0.315)	0.040 (0.052)	-0.140 (0.087)	-0.023 (0.089)	-0.012 (0.088)
Controls	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on
Constant	13.606*** (0.589)	0.791*** (0.086)	0.617*** (0.110)	4.290*** (0.418)	4.017*** (0.403)	0.911*** (0.064)	0.773*** (0.109)	0.536*** (0.116)	0.569*** (0.106)
Observations	635	727	701	762	764	764	700	685	707
R-squared	0.08	0.07	0.11	0.03	0.07	0.06	0.12	0.05	0.11

*Note:* Robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls are: gender, age, level of education, employment status, residence, income, religion, is a student, have children

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%