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SHORT ARTICLE

Data Pollution as Resistance

A Commentary on Partisan Responses to Government-Dependent Pollsters before the 2026 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections

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Prior to the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections, pro-government and government-independent pollsters published, quite consistently, hugely different figures on the levels of support for the main government and the main opposition parties. In the wake of the elections, it became apparent that rather than the ruling Fidesz party finishing narrowly ahead, as predicted, government-independent pollsters' numbers were much closer to the supermajority the opposition party achieved on the 12 April voting. This commentary reflects on the insincerity of the partisan cheerleader influencing surveys conducted by government-dependent pollsters as reported on Hungarian-language Reddit forums, and consider it a possible contributing factor in their forecasts being less accurate than those of government-independent ones.

Keywords: election forecasting, response substitution, expressive responding, partisanship, survey quality

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2026 Hungarian parliamentary election polls in retrospect

At the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections, the Tisza party won a two-thirds supermajority, thus Hungary joined the recent process of weakening in the right-wing populism of the Visegrád countries, driven by mix of economic frustration, high inflation rates and anti-corruption sentiments. The landslide victory of Péter Magyar, himself a former lower-tier beneficiary of the illiberal regime of the Fidesz party that governed the country between 2010 and 2026, is especially interesting from the perspective of communication studies because it occurred in the midst of/despite an information autocracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2019, 2020; Sik & Krekó, 2025) exercised by the leader of Fidesz and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Relying on the volume of government propaganda, indirect censorship, foreign (mostly Russian) interference, in addition to the results of pre-election opinion polling, the former ruling party and its supporters could have made a reasonable bet on the results of the election being under their control, the general sentiment being that Fidesz would win although, in contrast to most of their previous 16 years of governance, they would not get a supermajority on their own. When it turned out that the reality was far from what Fidesz voters, and perhaps even the party leadership expected, a discussion began about what might have caused the differences between expectations and perceptions, a discussion which is still in its early stages and would, most likely, translate to a variety of research projects in the field of political sciences, media, communication and journalism studies.

Early consensus seems to indicate that, among other effects, trust in the polling results of government-dependent pollsters and distrust in government-independent one's might have contributed to the false perception of the volume of Fidesz's support among their voters, as the figures these two published were consistently different over the past year, with government-dependent pollsters reporting a stable Fidesz lead over the Tisza party. Ten days prior to the elections, an exhaustive comparison of polling numbers measured by independent and pro-government Hungarian pollsters for the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections was published by Átlátszó.hu, a watchdog NGO and a collective of investigative journalists (Zubor & Szabó, 2026). Their data showed that between January 2025 and 2026, government-independent pollsters: 21KK, the Compass Institute, IDEA, Medián, Republikon, Publicus and Závecz Research measured support among voters for Fidesz at between 32% and 40%, and Tisza support between 39% and 53% across the year. Government-dependent pollsters like the Institute of the Twenty-first Century, the Center for Fundamental Rights, Magyar Társadalomkutató LLC, McLaughlin & Associates, Nézőpont Institute and Real-PR 93 LLC measured a higher range (between 43% and 51%) for Fidesz support and a lower range (between 35% and 42%) for Tisza support.

Naturally, government-owned or affiliated pollsters in information autocracies do not often conduct polls for the sake of simply measuring but rather to influence public opinion and voting behaviour, and their sampling and question design might therefore be less solidly based on scientific criteria than on the need to conform to and support a government they have strong financial ties with. It seems that there is strong support among the country's research community for this line of thinking being applicable to the Hungarian situation, as signalled by the position of the Hungarian Sociological Association published on the 20th of April. In their communiqué (2026), the Association challenged several government-dependent

polling institutes by name to publish their database and the precise methods upon which they based their research, voicing the suspicion of incompetence or data manipulation, and citing concerns of eroding public trust in polling and ongoing politically driven attacks against pollsters and academics.

Although we think that these claims merit transparency and further investigation, we would like to draw some attention to the possibility that these differences in reported numbers may also be linked to external factors, resulting in contaminated data being used to generate the results in question. This commentary offers insights on possible data contamination affecting only government-dependent pollsters due to a specific type of expressive survey response so-far less observed in the Hungarian context; fuelled by partisan activism and social media effects on Hungarian-language Reddit channels, especially on r/hungary.

Hungarian-language Reddit and anti-government partisanship

The use of social media to convey political messages is a phenomenon almost as old as the platforms themselves. Political communication research (and practice) is generally quick to keep up with new platforms and formats, but since there are significant differences in popularity and reach between social media platforms across different regions and age groups, some platforms are more often sampled and better covered in political communication research focusing on specific countries. In Hungary, such research is mostly focused on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and (more recently) TikTok, while the role of Reddit has so far eluded research interest, despite it being slowly discovered by Hungarian political actors and partisan activism in recent years. I expect this focus in coverage to adjust in the years ahead.

Reddit is unique among social networking platforms in the sense that it provides users with the actual ability to create self-governing forums ('subreddits') while letting members make use of the publicity of such forums without forcing them to surrender their anonymity. Users here engage in complex public social interactions, which makes Reddit an ideal setting for both politicians and activists to engage communities and generate feedback on events of public interest. Some U.S. politicians have been using Reddit for AMAs[1] since the early 2010s; the most notable early adopter being Barack Obama from 2012, his example was followed by not only active politicians but political operatives and congressional staff members as well. In Hungary, besides relying on traditional media outlets, the majority of which were under governmental influence and closely coordinated, pro-government actors and politicians have a history of being most active on Facebook, where audience characteristics and Meta's advertising system provide optimal environment for government-financed propaganda. Reddit – which is popular among younger urban users

1 Abbreviation for "Ask Me Anything"; posts under which users can submit questions as comments directly to the Original Poster (OP). These questions are usually ranked by the community through public votes which the OP answers in order of popularity during a designated timeframe. The more popular and visible the question, the better the chances of it being answered.

with higher digital literacy – however, remained mostly a platform for government-critical discussions. When it came to campaigning and endorsement, Hungarian subreddits are almost exclusively used by government-critical actors. High-profile politicians like Péter Márki-Zay (leader of the united opposition for the 2022 national election), the newly elected Prime Minister, Péter Magyar, and the new Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, Bálint Ruff, held multiple AMAs in the last few years on the biggest Hungarian-language subreddit; r/hungary. This sub has 5–600k visitors weekly, actively moderates political advertising and linking to certain types of media associated with governmental propaganda, and generally has a government-critical sentiment through its user-generated content. Its political impact seems to be meaningful in the sense that members of the new Tisza Government seem to follow and react to feedback received through this community. Beside direct engagement through AMAs; for example when rumours began to spread about the person of the future Minister of Education; the community of r/hungary vocally expressed their discontent about Rita Rubovszky, an education professional with a conservative Christian background. This feedback was addressed by Péter Magyar in one of the first press conferences he held after it became certain that his party had won the elections, and he asked the public not to lynch rumoured candidates – or anyone else – verbally, not even on Reddit (ATV Magyarország, 2026). It is also worth mentioning that after a few days, Tisza announced its new Minister of Education in the person of Judit Lannert.

Besides politician AMAs and feedback to events of political significance, r/hungary was also used by various individual accounts in the past years to report on occasions when a pollster had contacted them by telephone. Based on the general content of such threads – the majority of them are still accessible and can be found with a simple keyword search – these posts and comments discussed the questions the pollsters had asked, whether they were pro-government or not, and the professionalism of the person or AI assistant asking the questions.

Many of the aforementioned posts and comments were focused on presenting evidence that the polling entity was associated with the government, and offering opinions on this characteristic. The evidence offered was both direct (when the interviewer introduced themselves as being associated with a known pro-government pollster) or indirect (based on the type of questions they asked; as certain loaded questions, topics, style and language use are connected to well-known government narratives), and evaluations of perceived pro-government-ness or government dependency was generally negative. Discussions under posts mentioning pro-government pollsters and their questionnaires also contained reports from individual users promoting the idea of how one should contaminate pro-government pollsters' data to ensure the results they got would be unusable without them knowing that would actually be the case.

The first step was to ensure that they did not accidentally pollute government-independent polling data. If the polling entity was not clearly identifiable from the introduction or they did not introduce themselves at all, users wanted to obtain that information anyway through directly asking the interviewer. It seems that, at least in some cases, interviewers did not want to disclose this information:

"They cut me off when I asked which polling company they were with", one user reported (drnst, 2025). This behaviour can be explained either by legal or ethical issues the interviewer was aware of (e.g. they had not obtained the interviewee's data in compliance with GDPR

or other applicable laws) or by the presupposition that the respondent's answers would be biased by knowing the political affiliation of the pollster; rendering them unusable.

Second, when a government-dependent pollster was identified, motivated individuals tried to ensure that they would actually be selected for inclusion and not be filtered out by initial screening questions.

> *"I've already got it off pat: I am a 50-year-old with elementary school education living in a village and hesitating between Fidesz and the Good-for-Nothings* ["mihasznák"; a reference to Our Hungary; a far-right Hungarian nationalist party]. *I always tell them that."* (Adventurous-Ice3325, 2025).

Finally, once one was 'in', various individuals pushed other members of the community to give false answers to pollute the database and weaken the government party's ability to accurately assess their situation.

> *If you receive a call from Társadalomkutató (or any other unknown pollster working for Fidesz) you should tell them the opposite [of what your opinion is]. Let them believe everything is in order* (gd42, 2024).

> *In my opinion, it is worth saying in these cases that you are a Fidesz voter. This will introduce a false input into their survey, and their strategy [drawn from the results] will be wrong* (austurist, 2026).

> [I told them that] *I used to be a Fidesz supporter, but now I'd definitely vote for the Tisza Party. As for [question of] the room, I believe Péter Magyar when he says he didn't use drugs; in fact, my sympathy for him has grown, and my attitude toward Fidesz has become more negative. Meanwhile, I'm worse off than I was four years ago. Let Tóni* [Antal Rogán, at that time Minister of the Prime Minister's Office] *see that even Fidesz voters withdraw support (I was never a Fidesz voter)* (erer1000, 2026).

This type of data pollution is difficult to clean (because countermeasures should have been built into the survey design and data cleaning methods beforehand) and, if introduced systematically, would potentially lead to untrustworthy results. Redditors also reported another opportunity for data pollution when the interviewer's apparent political biases were discussed. For example, when one respondent evaluated Viktor Orbán's actions consistently with the worst possible values, the interviewer started asking question like "are you sure about that, young man?" and proffered comments like "I wouldn't bet on that" or "interesting; that's not how most people see it" (OwlOnly4079, 2026). Others reported how interviewers were biased towards the very questions they had to ask:

> [The interviewer] *was cool, for example they did not even read out the question if I agreed with Viktor Orbán on many things and that he should continue his work. Instead they just marked the opposite end of the scale* (GrassNo7577, 2026).

> *I had the same yesterday. Just like you did, the interviewer could hardly hold back their laughter* (ElectricalMacaroon96, 2026).

This would raise questions not only about the methods based on which government-dependent pollsters had gathered their data but also about the recruitment of their interviewers, the training they received, and the quality control measures they implemented. A politically biased interviewer, or those with a 'conspiratorial' attitude could have encouraged partisan responding or may have contributed directly to the contamination of datasets with misleading information.

Self-reported information in Reddit posts and comments thus provide sporadic evidence on a type of expressive response as yet unexplored in Hungarian political communication. Beside the general characteristics of expressive responding, i.e. a sharp difference between misinformed answers and answers given with the aim of expressing the respondent's identity commitments, such behaviour would point toward insincere partisan cheerleading (Peterson & Iyengar, 2021), where users intentionally distort their answers to signal support for their party. This support, in the Hungarian case, seems to have indirect parts since support to the preferred side was provided by hindering the disliked side's ability to compile a database appropriate, after analysis, to identifying voter sentiment, and thus to draw conclusions for campaign strategies and to allocate resources to implement said strategies. In other words, these acts went beyond merely signalling support for the preferred side: they were intended to damage the opposing one.

Naturally, a verdict on the overlap between self-reported respondent behaviour on Reddit and the actual activities undertaken, as well as the extent, influence and other characteristics of Reddit discussions to respondent behaviour in the government-affiliated polling of the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary election cannot be reached without future studies analysing Reddit data and transparent, publicly accessible databases and the methods of said pollsters. This commentary serves as a mere reminder that discrepancies between pollsters or group of pollsters with different political affiliations can be affected by the strength, commitment, and level of organisation of partisan actions targeting pollsters with a specific (and apparent) political affiliation.

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