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S. Societal Impact

From counting to giving account: Citizens auditing the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of fake news and distrust in electoral processes, what is the value of citizen ballot-counting? We take the case of ballot count volunteers on behalf of opposition parties in Hungary concerned about voting fraud by what they saw as an increasingly authoritarian regime, amidst the uncertainty of war in neighboring Ukraine. Analyzing volunteers' publicly shared audit stories as acts of accountability, we found a surprising result. The quantitative and control-driven auditing task spilled over and generated qualitative knowledge about the "countryside", a newly discovered social reality for urban volunteers. They reported unexpectedly harmonious cooperation during potentially controversial audit tasks, as well as "getting along" with the dominant party's officials. However, they were dismayed by what they perceived as the voters' shocking living conditions and political ignorance. In an audit of society, the rich ethnographic descriptions helped volunteers to account for the sweeping victory of Fidesz. Counter-accounts have criticized the volunteers' discoveries for their condescending depiction of voters, closing the circle of accountability. These field observations from a "popular" process audit suggest that ethnographic experiences are part of any formal audit, contributing to collective knowledge-making about the subject of the audit, in this case, the election result.

Keywords: Audit, accountability, elections, fraud

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“It was a huge eye-opener for me as a young student in Budapest.
These people live in unimaginable depths.”
Ballot count volunteer, public Facebook post

Introduction

The war in Ukraine was quickly translated into a stark political message during the electoral campaign in neighboring Hungary in early spring 2022. According to Viktor Orbán, the country’s prime minister, “the stakes [of the parliamentary elections] are war and peace”¹. The illiberal head of state meant that voting for his Russia-friendly Fidesz party would preserve peace, while voting for the coalition of opposition parties that spoke out against the Russian invasion would draw the country into war. This black and white message was highly contested by the coalition of left and right-wing parties that arose to challenge the increasingly entrenched government.

The political landscape in Hungary has remained largely unchanged since 2010 when Fidesz obtained a two-thirds majority in parliamentary elections, despite repeated attempts to reduce its majority by opposition parties. Following reports of suspected voting fraud and a vastly uneven campaign landscape in previous elections², new organizations assembled tens of thousands of citizen-volunteers to audit the voting process at every polling station, monitoring voting and performing the local vote count as representatives of the opposition parties.

The ballot count volunteers produced striking reports about the fairness of the election, which they shared on social media. Surprisingly, their reports contained very little about numbers, voting irregularities, or the voting process. Instead, the factual descriptions gave way to bewilderment at seeing first-hand how “the other half of the country” lives. The largely urban, educated and progressive-minded volunteers described the conditions they encountered across the country with ethnographic detail, expressing shock and talking about a transformational experience.

In the following, we interpret this unexpected turn from a quantitative mission into a qualitative experience of socio-economic difference. First, we introduce our empirical setting and discuss ballot count monitors through the lens of audit and accountability, then analyze our data collected from publicly posted narratives. Based on our preliminary results, we argue that while intending to hold the state accountable, the ballot counters shifted to an “audit of society”, for which they in turn were held accountable in a “circle of accountability”. We conclude by reflecting on the nature of audit work, and on how societies exist within societies in a post-truth political environment.

¹ <https://magyarhaz.net.hu/belfold/2022/04/orban-viktor-a-haboru-es-a-beke-a-tet-2>

² <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/hungary>

The volunteer movement for a balanced vote count

One lesson drawn from reports on preceding elections was that the local voting process was insufficiently monitored as opposition parties did not have volunteer delegates in half the polling stations and could not verify how the votes were counted³. In response, civic organizations emerged in advance of the 2022 elections to organize ballot-counting volunteers, most notably 20k22. Citizens were called on to “hold the state accountable in the name of democracy”⁴. A total of 28,000 citizens volunteered, 19,700 of whom completed the rigorous online training course and qualified as ballot count delegates. The movement’s success meant that at least one opposition party counter was delegated in 99% of polling stations to complement elected and Fidesz officials.

A process audit

On election day, members of the Electoral Count Committee (including the volunteers) had to be present from 5:15 am until the count was completed and declared closed after full documentation, usually past midnight. Their tasks were threefold:

1. participation in the voting process (registering voters, giving out ballot sheets, checking ID cards, accompanying the mobile ballot box) and in the ballot count (sorting invalid and valid ballots, manually counting the votes on paper sheets, recounting)
2. observation and assurance of the lawful conduct of the voting process and the ballot count
3. checking for and reporting on anomalies.

The task was completed by sending the official minutes to the delegating NGO (20K22 or SZAM), and filing an official report of any misconduct.

To qualify as a ballot count delegate, citizens were trained in a disciplined and highly structured process which prepared them for the audit task. Their e-learning course consisted of 8 modules, with a grade of 80% required in each module. Upon completion, they were assigned to one of 10,285 polling stations, and bore all costs of travel. The Handbook of Volunteer Ballot Counters⁵ details the procedures for the main tasks above. Training materials also described examples of voter and vote count manipulation and fraud. They contained precise instructions on the election official’s appropriate behavior and the official process for reporting any unlawful activity⁶.

Auditing democracy

Distrust in the state and in the democratic process has been headlining politics in liberal democracies of the Global North, calling the legitimacy of elections into question, most notably in the United States under Donald Trump’s presidency (Moynihan 2022). Most democracies have audit procedures in place to safeguard the fairness of elections.

³ Political clientelism has factored into electoral corruption in Hungary (Mares and Young, 2019); robust election monitoring is seen as necessary to understand the extent of foul-play in electoral processes.

⁴ SZAM: <https://szamoljukegyutt.hu/> and 20K22 <https://20k-www.vercel.app/kik-vagyunk>

⁵ https://szamoljukegyutt.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Kisokos_2022-0317_16-00perces_KJ.pdf.

⁶ The Fidesz government added a referendum on LGBTQ education in schools. We have omitted the findings on this aspect due to lack of space.

“Postelection audits” are required in nearly all US states. “When polls close on election day, election officials, along with bipartisan teams of election judges, work sometimes for 24 or even 36 straight hours processing ballots.” (Jacobs and Choate 2022: 28) These audits were activated over and over in Trump’s attempt to formally (and unsuccessfully) challenge the results of the 2020 presidential election. By then dismissing the ballot count results, Trump has continued to delegitimize and “undermine the U.S. administrative state” (Moynihan 2022: 36). In Hungary, popular distrust is not from the far right, directed against democracy and the state in general, but across the political spectrum directed against the state that has labeled itself “illiberal democracy”.

Voting systems are traditionally the object of study by political scientists, whereas we mobilize research in accounting to approach the specific practical task of monitoring and auditing elections. This is relevant for two reasons. In concrete terms, winning elections by illegally tampering with the number of votes is akin to delivering returns to shareholders by “cooking the books”. Second, beyond the risk of fraud, as Michael Power’s influential thesis on the rise of the Audit Society describes, modern societies are increasingly permeated by audit-like practices: “The audit explosion was also driven by closely related political demands on behalf of citizens, taxpayers, patients, pupils and others for greater accountability and transparency of service providing organizations.” (Power, 2000: 113).

Such an approach has several advantages. First, it highlights the importance of verification, confirming that a counting process has taken place correctly. Second, it highlights the motive of accountability and the concrete instruments and mechanisms by which actors hold each other accountable: “(...)audits are demanded in the context of relations of accountability between two parties and the existence of operational difficulties for one party to monitor the other” (Power 1997: 134). Third, it offers a comprehensive view of accountability: an audit “seeks to draw conclusions from a limited inspection of documents, such as budgets and written representations, in addition to *reliance on oral testimony and direct observation*.” (Power, 2000:111, our italics). Fourth, auditors must, and do, draw inferences from their sample, including from observations of the audited organization. Finally, auditing goes beyond the individual’s professional judgment and consists of “collectively negotiated settlements” (Power 1995 quoted in Power, 2000:111).

In an era of post-truth information bubbles, the physical act of counting votes took on special significance since many Hungarians did not trust the election results reported by the government-controlled media and suspected that the government was undermining the democratic process. For these ordinary citizens, being present where the election “really” happens was meaningful. They could verify the election—“I saw it with my own eyes and hands”, as one ballot count volunteer commented—opening up the black box of election results and participating in its making. The numbers here were generated by the people themselves.

To understand how a fact-oriented task of counting votes and auditing that process developed into broad and diffuse accounts of “how people live”, we must draw further on the notion of accountability mentioned above. Accountability involves an actor “giving account” of their actions to others (Garfinkel, 1967). Accounting techniques and auditing protocols are examples of organizational systems of accountability, situated within the broader practices of accountability, in other words, giving others an account of oneself on an everyday basis (Roberts and Scapens, 1985). People constantly engage in account-giving in the ordinary course of life, telling work colleagues about their weekends or explaining how to fill out a tricky online form. This broader view of accounting as accountability resonates with ballot counters’ mixed accounts of factual vote count information and descriptions of countryside conditions.

Actors do not simply perform their actions but also simultaneously witness the situation in which they participate. While giving an account can be seen as integral to any ordinary action, it gains more importance when actors sense that a situation might break down. Giving account is an important act that remedies delicate situations, maintaining the social order (Garfinkel, 1967) and evoking the actors' underlying assumptions about what constitutes normal behavior.

In this sense, it is productive to conceptualize ballot counters' actions as accountability:

- driven by the desire to witness and account for the votes, creating the fact of a fair election in the situation by seeing and describing it
- moving from a strict sense of accountability as an election official towards a broader sense, accounting for society
- accounting for a situation that is abnormal in their eyes: why an overwhelming majority of other citizens vote for an unacceptable political choice, Fidesz.

We studied the posts and comments in the two main Facebook groups created by and for the ballot count volunteers. These groups were set up as *fora* where volunteers could relate their task experience and evaluate the fairness of the vote count. The posts were often anonymous. They do not represent all the volunteers' experience, but they do convey a typical experience.

Volunteers' "ethnographic" results emerging from their ballot count experience

We found two types of "expectation gap" among volunteers' reports of their auditing activities. First, those who volunteered to count ballots on behalf of the opposition party coalition expected to uncover fraud by witnessing how voting happened and how votes were tallied in the hard-to-reach polling stations across the country. The overwhelming majority of posts confirm the opposite: volunteers were almost disappointed not to find any fraud. Second, many volunteers also expected controversy within the ballot count committee between themselves and the government (Fidesz) delegates, but their accounts reveal that they collaborated well on the work task with their ideological opposites.

We argue that having discovered no wrongdoing in the election day process, the volunteer delegates felt empty-handed as auditors and could not account for the landslide election victory of Fidesz. The ballot count volunteers' underlying theory that the victory was only possible due to fraudulent practices was proven wrong. They had to adjust their accounting for the 'abnormal' result, and subsequently devise new accounts. The posts invariably proceed to ethnographic descriptions of the voting day and the voters, serving as hindsight justification of voter choice, and accounting for all the ways their fellow citizens might have arrived at casting their ballots in favor of Fidesz. Below, we discuss the major themes that appear in the volunteers' broader accounts of election day.

1) Policing a fair election, the official task

The posts have a pattern. They begin with a description of their jobs as volunteers, but interestingly, the election process and the vote count are not the focus or even the main section of the posts. Most descriptions start off with details of the polling station, the number of registered voters, and the time they arrived or opened up the premises. The tone

is somewhat official and focuses on giving factual information, as if reinforcing the volunteers' legitimacy:

"1070 people were registered in the electoral district and 800 people came to vote"

"Our committee consisted of the three elected members, two Fidesz delegates and two of us, and the secretary helped out when he could during the day."

After "getting through" the monitoring and counting tasks, the narrators quickly move on to their main points: the other, qualitative aspects of what they witnessed.

2) Audit work: reports of "getting along" with opposing party delegates

The posts almost always describe the other members of the ballot count committee and mention the working relationship. Here, factual information is often mixed with qualitative descriptions of, for example, how it felt to work alongside representatives of the governing Fidesz party. In face-to-face interactions, controversy was rare, and reports abound of collegiality. Volunteers describe this aspect of the work that forged solidarity between people, glossing over political differences:

"Working together was smooth, tasks were rotated, there were no conflicts. If something came up, we were able to discuss it."

"My counting partner was a self-confirmed Fidesz fan. He was a terribly nice guy. He was smart, we talked a lot, we teased each other, he was the most positive character in the whole story."

These descriptions of cooperation reinforce the auditors' status as separate from the people and the environment audited and suggest that the issues were not with the other auditors.

3) Giving account of countryside life: a collective ritual that justifies the election results

It is at this stage that most accounts take a decisively ethnographic turn. The transition from an official report to a qualitative narrative occurs as volunteers evaluate the outcome of their audit, mostly confirming that they did not witness fraud despite their expectations:

"There were no irregularities in the counting, all decisions were unanimous. So the bottom line here is that I have no reason to question the fairness of the vote (in my own constituency)."

And yet, even as they confirm the fairness of the elections, volunteers seem unable to comprehend what occurred before their eyes: a vast majority of people came to the polls and voted for Fidesz. The volunteers feel they must relate their experience to the community to account for both the work they did as auditors and for the election results, searching for causes as to what they witnessed. The volunteers start by expressing their incredulity with respect to the situation:

"There was no unexpected event, no need to record any mistakes or fraud.... really everything went well....and yet it didn't!"

Hereafter, ethnographic descriptions lengthen. Their positioning in the posts makes it clear that these descriptions serve to justify the election results. A range of "ethno-theories" appears that are often blended within the same post. We can distinguish four main theories: the state holding citizens captive; the essence of the Hungarian People; individuals' physical-mental state; and the regions' socio-economic conditions that drive them to vote the "wrong" way.

First, many posts theorize that the voting process is not where fraud happens. They refer to larger issues already documented elsewhere, such as the government's near complete control of the media, which "leaves alternatives no chance" as one user observes; subsidies to help with the cost of living, and fearmongering communication:

"The election was not rigged in the electoral commissions, but before, on TV, on Kossuth Radio, with billboards... and scaring people with the war [in Ukraine]"

Most typically, volunteers turn to ethnographic descriptions of voters and the countryside in an attempt to justify voters' choice, getting a glimpse of another world that is not theirs and which would explain the results:

"...the catastrophic physical and mental condition of voters. (...) There was no shortage of voters who could hardly move, could barely see, could barely sign [the electoral register], were rotting, or had basic hygiene problems"

"100% extreme poverty. These people were penniless. They live in rickety, crumbling shacks at subsistence level...there is poverty and ignorance."

"As people from this tiny, tiny village wandered in, I had to wake up to the fact that most of them really are incredibly stupid."

As the volunteers could not "catch" Fidesz red-handed in their job as election officials, their attention shifted from the process and the state to an audit of society. The results of the counting process and the lack of documented fraud lent legitimacy to the elections, which could reinforce the legitimacy of Fidesz. This underlying realization may have been the turning point in the audit process: the audit's object became not the fairness of the state but the soundness of society. Their underlying assumption was that voting for Fidesz was unacceptable. With the actors' "suspension of disbelief", adopted in order to operate in everyday life, the situation where such a morally abnormal event could happen needed to be accounted for and remedied. The volunteers thus generated accounts about voters to help "make sense" of the situation. Based on their audit of society, some posts did hold the state accountable for building a political-economic system which has become self-sufficient and keeps the government in power, even through legal elections. Mostly, however, they held society accountable.

4) Counter-accounts: "society" responds

After eight days of such posts, the first critical comments began to appear, questioning the ethical nature of the descriptions of the countryside, accounts of how "the other half lives". These counter-posts criticized the "ethnographic moment" for what they saw as the urban elite's shock at discovering what life outside their comfortable bubble looks like. They criticized the volunteers for taking a condescending stance towards the voters they encountered, for their ignorance, and their lack of prior empathy towards fellow citizens.

"Very good writing - it would be if it didn't ooze fundamental prejudice and the supposed "experiences" that seek to justify it... The superior, pompous bullshit of a metropolitan man, contemptuous of the countryside, bitterly resentful of electoral defeat, peers out from between the lines...based on these crumbs [of truth], a false stereotype of the countryside and rural people is neatly constructed."

These newer accounts criticize the previous accounts, providing a different justification for the election results and holding up a mirror to the volunteers who, while declaring themselves to be the "heroes of democracy", cannot seem to accept that fellow citizens could vote for a party they dislike. The justification that emerges from these counter-posts

is that as representatives of the opposition, the privileged urban volunteers should have tried to engage with other parts of the country earlier, suggesting that the fault lies with the leftwing coalition for alienating voters outside the urban elite.

Conclusion

The ballot counters were representing the “audit society”, holding the state accountable on behalf of society. From the starting point of auditing as a process of democracy, however, they ended up with an audit of society, scrutinizing voters’ way of life from close up to find the individual or societal “errors” that would account for a disappointing performance in the election. The ballot counters themselves were then held accountable by way of disparaging comments from other citizen-users for their allegedly unethical and untrue audit of society. A veritable “circle of accountability” emerged.

Audits spill into their environment as the auditors’ activities are not completely and narrowly bounded. Auditors almost always become ethnographers. In our case this aspect was highlighted by the mobile ballot box, delivered by delegates to those unable to vote in person. The public and private sphere is blurred as election officials enter citizens’ homes, but it nonetheless resonates with the corporate auditor experience. The audit process generates qualitative accounts, although these experiences are not usually formalized or accepted as valid in professional audits. The distance between “us” the auditors and “them” the auditee is constantly created and maintained through storytelling about the milieu. A favorite pastime of auditors is sharing stories about their clients. Instead of the corporate auditors’ private and informal setting, the election volunteers shared their stories on a public social media platform which has no backstage (Goffman, 1959; relative to the frontstage of social performances). This is what enabled the circle of accountability to close.

Is it ever possible to conduct an audit without having an “ethnographic experience”? Is there an audit without the milieu? The auditor does not perform the task solely in its pure state but enters an organization, a world, which he/she observes and witnesses. Auditors produce unique and rich vernacular knowledge about the society and culture of the organizations with which they engage. The election volunteers’ case affirms that audit procedures exist to produce reassurance and comfort, rather than critique (Power 2000, Power 1997), and shows that the ethnographic material produced by auditors is a venue for critical accounts with implicit theories about the organizations observed.

Finally, in the context of election results, public audit stories by volunteers fulfill a therapeutic function and constitute a social ritual. Taken together, the mass of posts quickly became a method of collective processing after the government’s overwhelming election victory. Solidarity emerged from the election audit experience of “them”, the Fidesz voters. The ethical issues of such *othering* or creating differences between the in-group and the out-group is what prompts other actors (citizens, journalists, politicians) who read the posts and thereby observe the election observers. Taking place on an interactive social media platform, the otherwise “backstage” social ritual of the volunteers is witnessed by others, challenged and constantly over-written. It is a social ritual that cannot remain self-contained and cannot provide closure. The accounts of the auditors and the audited are brought into conflict, with vastly different versions of the “truth” colliding, which may be reconciled or remain apart.

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