

Jostle over rural vote will determine power broker

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Susan Viets in Budapest

HUNGARY'S leading rural party, the Independent Smallholders, has always known that the real divide in Hungarian politics is between the countryside and the city.

The Smallholders party is a wild card widely predicted to hold the balance of power in

coalition bargaining. Its main policy is returning land to owners listed in the 1947 registers, and its constituency should be the countryside.

A recent Gallup poll puts the Smallholders in third place behind the Democratic Forum and the Alliance of Free Democrats. Support for the Smallholders, however, has dropped by nearly 5 per

cent, to 12 per cent in the polls.

However, in Pomoz, a small village 30 miles north of Budapest, the vote seems scattered among six of the 12 parties fielding national lists. The youth party, Fidesz now jostles the Smallholders for third place, with 11 per cent in the polls.

In the Smallholders' Budapest election centre, staff were confident that their party would win 30 per cent of the vote.

In 1947, the countryside north of Budapest was a Smallholders' stronghold. Today, leading parties have adopted the variation of land reform, and this has split the Smallholders' vote.

If the crucial countryside vote is as varied throughout Hungary as it is in Pomoz, the Smallholders will have lost its position as power broker in coalition negotiations.

Ian Traynor writes from Budapest: The complicated voting system, which combines first-past-the-post constituency battles with proportional representation, means that although voting patterns reveal the relative strengths of the competing parties, many of the 176 constituency seats in the single-chamber parliament will require a second-round vote on April 8.

Some prominent figures can expect to lose in the constituency fights, but they will be virtually assured of a seat in Parliament by featuring near the top of the various parties' regional and national lists.

The proportional representation seats go to 152 MPs elected on the basis of regional lists, while the remaining 58 seats go, by transferable vote, to the 12 of the 27 parties competing in on the national list.

Voters received two ballot papers. One was for the constituency MP of their choice, the other featured the list of parties in the region for whom they could vote.