

Presidential poll proves popular

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Susan Viets in Budapest

HUNGARIANS faced their first democratic test at the polls in more than 40 years yesterday in a national referendum called to determine how and when the president will be elected.

Despite pessimistic forecasts, early returns based on a 10 per cent sample — excluding the decisive Budapest vote — show a turnout of 54 per cent. Trends also indicate a majority vote against postponing presidential elections until after parliamentary elections.

"The weather, this lovely sunshine, helped a great deal," said Mr Tibor Vidos, campaign manager for the opposition group, Alliance of Free Democrats, which initiated the referendum. Many byelections earlier this year have failed because of lack of interest.

Hungarians were called to the polls primarily to decide whether the president should be elected before or after a parliamentary election.

The vote will also determine how the president will be chosen, whether the population approves of recent parliamentary decisions to ban party cells from the workplace and dissolve the party army, and whether the Hungarian Socialist Party should account for its property.

The Alliance, in coalition with three other opposition parties, wants the presidential election, now set for January 7, to be delayed until after next spring's parliamentary election

and says if the president is elected earlier it will influence the parliamentary campaign.

HSP posters told Hungarians to vote no to maintain the order of elections. Voters are told this is a one-time opportunity to elect their president directly. Once a new parliament is in place, it will always choose the president. The influential opposition group, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, has boycotted the referendum, saying it is a waste of time and money.

In the wealthy district of Rozsadomb, a family arrived at the local school to cast their votes. The grandmother had voted in the rigged election of 1947 which consolidated Communist power. She said: "Then, we were handed blue (Communist) slips which we had to throw in the ballot boxes. This is the first free election."

The HSP presidential candidate, Mr Imre Pozsgay, who had cast his vote at the same station, stands to lose if the referendum succeeds and the presidential election is delayed. In an early election his recent glowing reform record would offset his greatest political liability — 20 years of membership of the Communist Party.

● Only weeks after reports of little green spacemen in Hungary, meteorologists say they have sighted four large bright orange unidentified flying objects.

A meteorologist, Mr Gyula Bazso, said yesterday the objects were spherical and between 50 and 100 yards in diameter. He said that one flew at 2,625 mph.

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