

Party System Stability and Territorial Patterns of Electoral Competition in the Czech Republic

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Introduction

The results of elections to the European Parliament in 2004, and the consistent success of independent and small-party candidates in elections to the Senate seem to indicate that the circle of relevant actors in the CR may have become destabilized. Sharp fluctuation in support for the ruling ČSSD in opinion polls hinted during particular phases of the electoral cycle at the possibility of changes in the party configuration with its two distinct major poles. However, the results of elections to the lower house of the Czech Parliament indicated that the Czech party system can still be considered one of the most stable among the post-Communist countries. In this article we will try to demonstrate this hypothesis with the help of more precise research tools. We will also focus on investigating the territorial aspects of party support in electoral competition to the lower house of Parliament with the purpose of showing that the Czech Republic is a unique case among the V4 countries for its territorially extraordinarily stable party arrangement.

Methods

Epistemologically, our research steams from the assumption that research on voting patterns in the post-Communist countries has heretofore been based more on electoral dynamics than electoral statics. We will therefore attempt to follow in the tradition of research that accentuates aspects of electoral change in analyzing one or more selected dimensions of electoral competition (pronounced examples: Stokes 1965, 1967, Jones-Mainwaring 2004, Caramani 2004, Morgenstern-Swindle 2005, Morgenstern-Polthoff 2005).

In the text we start from the theoretical proposition of Scott Morgenstern and Richard Polthoff that a description of electoral change should deal analytically with three (not necessarily mutually interacting) dimensions – volatility, degree of district heterogeneity of party support (alias degree of party nationalization), and degree of uniformity of change in party support between two elections (alias district-time effect). At the same time we believe (and will go on to show) that in researching these dynamics in the post-Communist countries, it is not possible at present to employ exactly the same approaches used in electoral research in the Western democracies.

The most disputable category in research on the countries of post-Communist Europe is *volatility* defined in the classic way as the change (or the sum of changes) in election support for a certain political actor (or actors) between two elections, taken in the aggregate over the entire territorial-political unit where the elections are being held. Criticism is directed mainly at the

impossibility of separating two different sources of instability in the party system under this model: changes in the preferences of voters, and changes in the set of competing parties. The party systems of the post-Communist countries are, measured in terms of volatility, markedly unstable. However, part of this instability is due to the broad transformation within the parties themselves, and switches between parties on the part of leading politicians. In the effort to distinguish between the different sources of instability, it is therefore advisable to separate calculations measuring shifts in support for existing parties to new parties, from calculations identifying movement between existing parties (Birch 2003: 121–126; Rose, Munro 2003: 77–87). In the case of the Czech Republic (at least during recent years), the category of voter shifts to new parties has not been very significant, which could conceivably allow for the unproblematic use of the “classic” model of measuring volatility. On the other hand, for purposes of comparison with other post-Communist countries, and also because of the significant transformation of the party spectrum in 1992, we regard it as useful to select an approach that would also fit countries with a more rapid turnover of political parties.

To verify the outlined thesis on the stability of representation, we will therefore try using a modified calculation of *party replacement* (for details see Šedo 2006a: 91–97; Šedo 2006b; compare Birch 2003: 121–126, 185–186). The modification lies in (1.) focusing on the number of mandates won (instead of the share of votes obtained), and (2.) distinguishing between four possible forms of replacement:

1. No change (0) – expresses preservation of name and election strategy;¹
2. Minimal change (R_0) – signifies minor change in identity or election strategy since the last elections;²
3. Significant change (R_2) – signifies fundamental change, without producing an indisputably new entity;³
4. Complete change (R_c) – signifies the creation of a “new player” on the political scene.⁴

¹ The category “no change” will extend to the following situations: (a) party A under the same or nearly same name gained representation in previous elections; (b) party A in this or past elections ran in coalition with a clearly marginal partner; (c) a faction has split from or joined with a party without causing a change in the title of the party; (d) a coalition won elections in the same combination as in the previous elections.

² Minimal change includes the situations: (a) where party A changes its name during the term between elections; (b) a coalition in which an important role is played by one or more parliamentary parties/a coalition disintegrates and one or more of its members are successful in subsequent elections; (c) a merger takes place creating a party with a title joining the titles of the founding parties, or strongly reminiscent of one or more of the original titles.

³ The term significant change will include the situations where (a) a party or coalition is created in which some older actor takes a place alongside newer formations; (b) a faction breaks away from party A and founds a new party with a name strongly reminiscent of its earlier participation in party A; (c) a party A regains representation after having once held mandates and then failing to win mandates in the last elections; (d) the relevant party or parties move from one coalition to another party/coalition that was distant from the original coalition in terms of program or policy.

Where categories 0 or R_0 predominate, this is a signal of stability in the array of party actors. Predominance of the R_0 category over the 0 signifies that parties have not as yet arrived at the optimal form of engaging in competition, and are creating and dissolving coalitions in an effort to better address the voter. A larger proportion of parties in the R_2 and R_C can be taken as a signal of instability. Category R_2 indicates that parties are diverging significantly from their previous strategies, R_C indicates the need for elites to introduce new actors onto the party scene; or an effort on the part of the voters to find new alternatives.

With categories 0 and R_0 as an auxiliary indicator we show what % of the mandates went to the same party as in the previous elections (S). An unchanged value for 0, or R_0 , and S indicates that parties in the given categories have not succeeded in increasing their number of seats compared to the previous elections; while increased differences between the two values indicates the presence of parties that have gained strength compared to previous election contests. We will regard coalitions as a unit, because we feel that for the development of the party configuration and identification of successful strategies, it is more important to evaluate whether entering/terminating cooperation within a coalition was successful as a whole, than whether the performance of the coalition candidacy met the expectations of all its members. Moreover, breaking down coalitions into their individual participating parties might lead to other methodological complications (the question of whether to count independent candidates included on the party ballots; how to handle the “quasi-coalitions” when candidates from one party run on the ballots of others, etc.).

The concept of *district heterogeneity*, related to the degree of territorial consistence of electoral support for political parties, is sometimes referred to as *party nationalization*. In the text we stick to the term *district heterogeneity*, because the term *party nationalization* is too much related to the national level of politics, and does not contain within it the possibility of examining the phenomenon in question on the sub-state political level. In the field of comparative political science, a complete consensus on how to examine the degree of heterogeneity of electoral support does not yet exist. At least two types of indicators have gained certain prominence, one of which is founded on the coefficient of variance, the other on the Gini index. We are more convinced of the research utility of the Gini index, which we also selected for our research.

⁴ The term complete change represents situations where (a) party or coalition A gain mandates in elections for the first time and (b) during the term between elections a group splits off from some parliamentary party that in its new title makes practically no reference to its participation in the previous party.

The concept of *territorial uniformity of electoral change* (the district-time effect)⁵ is an attempt to include in the analysis of aggregated data on specific characteristics of an electoral district, or the identities of candidates, or their influence on the election result. Morgenstern and Polthoff assume that politics are more localized in countries with a marked district-time effect. As an indicator of degree of uniformity of electoral change on a district level of national politics, we found for each party in each territorial unit the ratio between the results in two consecutive parliamentary elections (2002 and 2006, T2/T1), followed by calculation of the standard deviation for the set of ratios for each party. Low values for the standard deviation indicate territorially uniform responses, while increasing values show less than uniform responses.

Stability of the Czech party system (lower house)

Measured by modified party replacement, the Czech party scene at the level of the lower house of Parliament was very quickly stabilized. Its great transformation occurred between 1990 and 1992; in all of the subsequent elections the majority of the parties fell into the category “no change”. Stabilization is also evident from the proportion of seats the parties defended. As late as 1996 it was still a “mere” 74% (as a result of a loss of mandates by parties that no longer earned seats, and a strengthening of the ČSSD at the expense of the Left Bloc). In both of the subsequent elections the proportion of defended seats increased. Developments in 2006 have not significantly altered this trend. The gains by the Green Party were not great; the share of defended mandates tends to show support moving in the direction of the strongest parties. The set of S values for both categories is very similar to that of 1998. Beginning with the elections in 1996 we can regard the Czech party system on this level as stable, seen either in terms of the set of party actors, or number of seats held.

⁵ Consider for example two different examples of election contest in which party A increases its number of votes on a national level by 3%. In the first example party A wins 3% more votes in each district. This is termed a uniform swing. In the second case, in half of the districts it loses 3%, but in the other half it picks up 9%. This type of change is territorially less than uniform.

Table 1: Stability at the national level (lower house ČNR/PSPČR)

Form replacement	1992		1996		1998		2002		2006	
	No. ^a	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0 (S)	1	7 (7)	4	55 (29)	4	90,5 (82)	3	84,5 (76)	3	90,5 (77)
R ₀ (S)	2	25 (23,5)	2	45 (45)	0		1	15,5 (15,5)	1	6,5 (6,5)
R ₂	1	38	0		0		0		0	0
R _C	4	30	0		1	9,5	0		1	3,0

Source: ČSÚ—Election results—Czech National Council and Chamber of Deputies, Parliament Czech Republic; Belko 2004: 194–207.

^a Number of [candidate ballots][parties] winning seats in parliament.

Aggregate shift (where potentially disputed, source of more detailed information is given):
1992 – in category 0 HSD-SMS; in category R₀ KDU-ČSL (subtype b – transformation of coalition KDU in 1990. 1990, accompanied by split by second-most-important party of that coalition KDS, therefore in our opinion cannot be classified as subtype b category 0 – see Mareš 2002: 135–136), LB (subtype b – KSČM before elections joined with the Democratic Left ČSFR, while later disintegration of that club markedly weakened the position of the KSČM in Parliament, therefore we do not classify it with subtype b category 0 – for more, see Fiala, Mareš, Pšeja 2004: 1424–1425); in category R₂ ODS (subtype b – ODS was created by the transformation of the Civic Forum, which its title partly indicates; in view of the character of the Civic Forum as a very heterogeneous grouping, which left its marks on a number of the parties both in and out of Parliament, we elect to use this category (more about the history of the CF for example in Pšeja 2005: 52–54, 166); in category R_C ČSSD, LSU, SPR-RSČ and the ODA.
1996 – in category 0 ČSSD, KDU-ČSL, SPR-RSČ and ODA; in category R₀ ODS (subtype b – change from a coalition candidacy with the KDS to an independent ballot), KSČM (subtype b – left coalition ballot with smaller parties)
1998 – in category 0 ČSSD, ODS, KSČM and KDU-ČSL; in category R_C US
2002 – in category 0 ČSSD, ODS, KSČM; in category R₀ the Coalition (subtype b – creation of a coalition between KDU-ČSL and US-DEU dominated by actors represented in 1998.
2006 – in category 0 ODS, ČSSD, KSČM, in category R₀ KDU-ČSL (subtype b – disintegration of Coalition), in category R_C SZ.

District heterogeneity

Electoral support for Czech parties is territorially very homogeneous. This applies especially to the two main poles of party competition, the ODS and the ČSSD; meanwhile it is indicative that in the case of the ČSSD, the process of significant strengthening of territorial homogeneity took place in the years 1992-1996; that is, the time when it was becoming one of the major poles of party competition. Also consistently high is the degree of homogeneity for the KSČM. The party with the most territorially heterogeneous support is the KDU-ČSL. It is notable that the highest degree of territorial homogeneity was achieved by the Christian Democrats in the 1998 election; that is, the period in their history when they were trying hardest

to present themselves as a catch-all party. It is also noteworthy that even parties that were eventually unsuccessful (ODA, SPR-RSČ) were on the trajectory of territorial homogenization of electoral support during the 1990s.

The Czech case also shows that a high degree of territorial homogeneity cannot automatically be regarded as a virtue or even a factor assuring a political party some kind of systemic comparative advantage. This was shown most recently in the 2006 elections, when the mechanics of the electoral system (d' Hondt in electoral districts of 5-25 mandates in size) penalized the Green Party which had relatively territorially homogeneous support, while the KDU-ČSL was much less affected by the workings of the electoral system. It seems that especially for smaller political parties, evenly-distributed electoral support on a national scale is presents more of a problem than an opportunity.⁶

Table 2: Degree of territorial heterogeneity of party support (*Gini coefficient. Level of aggregation: 1992-1998 8 electoral districts, 2002-2006 14 electoral districts*).

Party/year	1992	1996	1998	2002	2006
ODS	0.07	0.09	0.10	0.09	0.08
ČSSD	0.11	0.08	0.07	0.04	0.06
KSČM	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.09	0.08
KDU-ČSL	0.30	0.23	0.19		0.25
Coalition				0.14	
US			0.10		
SPR-RSČ	0.17	0.15	0.14		
Green			0.10	0.07	0.11
ODA	0.26	0.12			

Territorial uniformity of electoral change

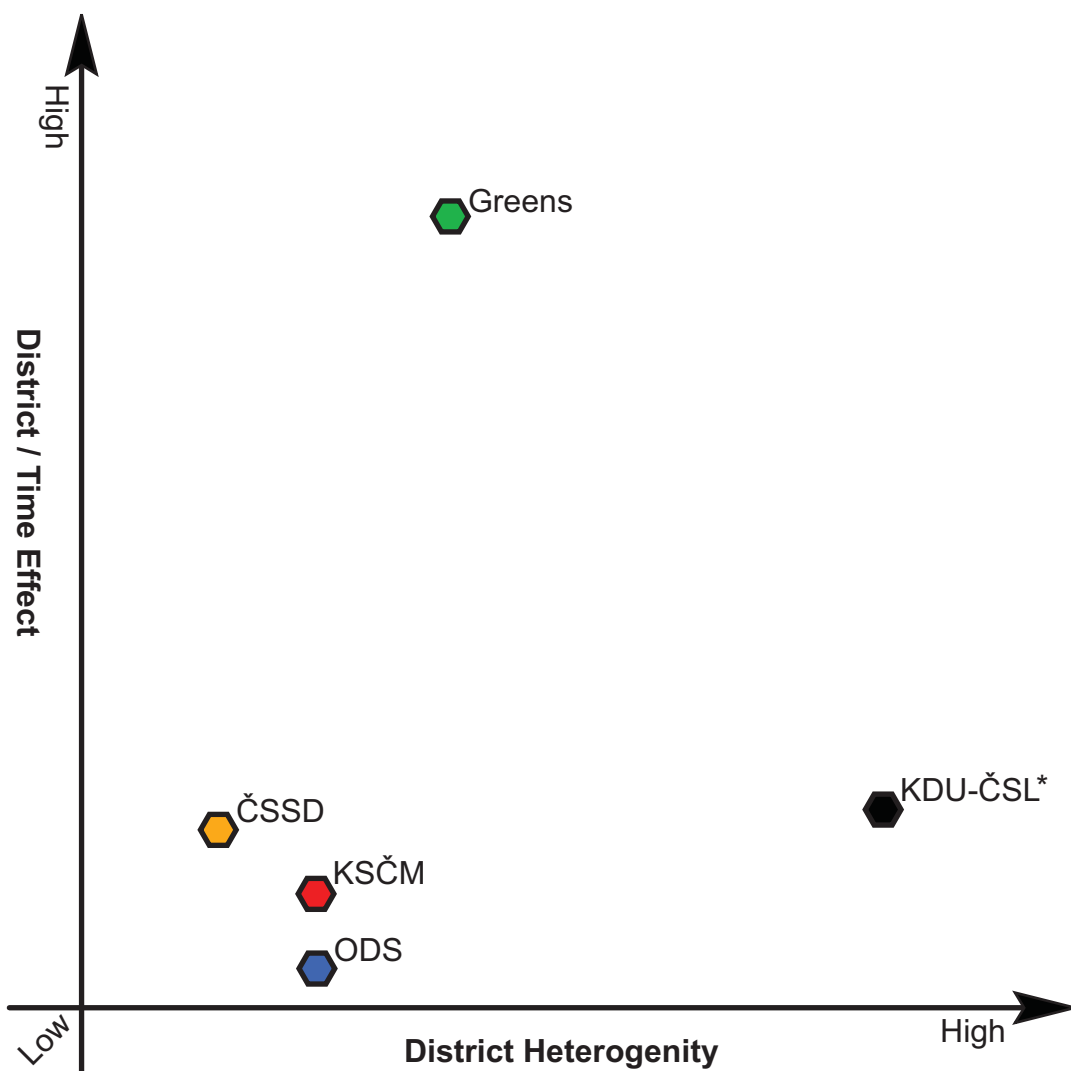
At present, for the majority of Czech political parties, distribution of electoral change has from a territorial standpoint a markedly uniform character. In comparing the 2002 and 2006 elections this fact is especially noticeable with the ODS and KSČM; a markedly uniform swing also took place in the case of the ČSSD. The party with territorially non-uniform changes was the Greens. Rigorous analysis of support for the KDU-ČSL is not possible for the time being because the Christian Democrats ran in 2002 under the banner of the Coalition. However, when we experimented somewhat, combining the results for the Coalition and the GP in 2002, and

⁶ In the framework of the Czech political system, other factors are lacking that would reward parties with territorially homogeneous support, such as the existence of regional thresholds or the favoring of territorially-homogeneous party actors in party financing. Probably the only negative externality for the KDU-ČSL is the fact that heterogeneous electoral support is reproduced on the sub-national level as well, which leads to the KDU-ČSL not being able in regional elections in 2004 to cross the 5% threshold and gain seats on some regional councils (for example in the Ústí nad Labem or Liberec regions).

compared them with the combined results for the KDU-ČSL, US and Greens in 2002, the character of territorial changes between 2002 a 2006 was again very uniform.

On the basis of criteria of district heterogeneity a district-time effect it is possible to categorize the Czech political parties in two-dimensional space describing the dynamics of voting patterns. This operation indicates (especially in the cases of the Greens and the KDU-ČSL), that the district-time effect and district heterogeneity do in fact represent analytically discrete categories, and must be worked with separately.

Graph 1: Territorial patterns of Czech electoral competition (*district heterogeneity and district/time effect. The position of KDU-ČSL in the district/time effect dimension should be treated as an approximation because of reasons described elsewhere in the paper*).



The example of the Greens is also interesting on a theoretical basis. It demonstrates that analysis of territorial uniformity of electoral changes is, in the post-Communist countries, a suggestive operation, but efforts at an interpretation of territorially-heterogeneous reactions

cannot be exclusively focused in the same way as for highly structured party systems, i.e. on the identities of the candidates alone, but rather on other factors more related to the national forces of electoral competition than to local factors (for example, changes in the party structure, redefinition of party identity, change in the party status at another level of governments, or fluctuations in voter turnout)⁷.

Conclusion

On the basis of the research tools utilized here, we can conclude that the circle of parties competing in elections in the CR is markedly stable on a national level. The system remains open to new parties, but their appearance is infrequent. Apparent instead in the Chamber of Deputies is growing success on the part of incumbents. Electoral support for Czech parties is territorially distributed quite homogeneously, with a few exceptions only. Likewise the territorial uniformity of electoral change is high, which leaves little grounds to continue to think that electoral patterns at the national level of politics are locally influenced. Today, more than 15 years after the fall of the old regime, there is strong evidence that the Czech party system has firmly stabilized.

In conclusion, it can be observed that the Czech case clearly shows that the stability of electoral models does not necessarily contribute to governability. The reasons for this state of affairs must be sought in the interaction within the party system; that is, outside the scope of this article.

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⁷ Indeed, it is a question whether this conclusion can be extended to more fluid electoral competition in the post-Communist countries only, or whether it can be extended to [the European] countries that use some version of the proportional electoral system.

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Party abbreviations:

ČSSD – Czechoslovak Social Democracy (1992), Czech Social Democratic Party (1996, 1998, 2002);

DEU – Democratic Union;

HSD-SMS – Movement for self-governing Democracy – Society for Moravia and Silesia;

KDS – Christian Democratic Party;

KDU – Christian and democratic union (1990 coalition of the ČSL, KDS and smaller parties);

KDU-ČSL – Christian and democratic union – Czechoslovak People's Party;

KSČM – Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia;

LB – Left Bloc (coalition of the KSČM and the Democratic Left of ČSFR);

LSU – Liberal Social Union;

ODA – Civic Democratic Alliance;

ODS – Civic Democratic Party;

OF – Civic Forum;

SPR-RSČ – Association for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia;

SZ – Green Party;

US – Freedom Union;