

No Quotas, Just Circles: Institutional and Electoral Dynamics Behind the Rise of Women in the 2025 Czech Elections

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Abstract

The 2025 Czech parliamentary elections resulted in the highest proportion of women in the history of the Chamber of Deputies, without the introduction of statutory gender quotas, without electoral system reform, and without a formal change to the rules of preferential voting. This article explains how such a shift could have taken place within the existing institutional framework. It argues that the increase in women's representation was not the result of a single mechanism, but of a conditional interaction between parties' candidate lists, the activation of preferential voting, and party-regional opportunity structures, which determine whether a shift in ranking actually translates into a seat. Based on candidate-level data from the 2021 and 2025 elections, the article employs a counterfactual simulation of seat allocation without preferential votes, a regression discontinuity design around the five-per-cent threshold for preferential votes, and an analysis of party and regional heterogeneity. The results show that of the total increase of 17 female MPs, approximately nine seats can be attributed to changes in the party list, and approximately eight to an additional difference associated with the stronger impact of preferential voting. This decomposition is interpreted descriptively, not as a standalone causal estimate. RDD shows that exceeding the five-per-cent threshold consistently improves candidates' rankings, but it was not until 2025 that this shift more frequently translated into the gain of a seat. The article contributes to the literature on open candidate lists and gender representation by showing preferential voting not as an automatically beneficial or harmful mechanism, but as a conditional conversion mechanism whose effect depends on the party's list, the proximity of female candidates to winnable positions, and the number of seats won by the party in a given region.

Keywords: representation of women; preferential voting; open candidate lists; personalised voting; electoral institutions; party nominations; Czech Republic; parliamentary elections

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1. Introduction

The Czech Republic has long been perceived as a country with relatively low representation of women in politics, not only at the national level (Maškarinec, 2016; Maškarinec, 2018; Maškarinec, 2021; Maškarinec, 2023). Although there has been a gradual increase in the proportion of women in the Chamber of Deputies since the early 1990s, this development has been rather slow for most of the period. Women's representation typically hovered around a quarter of seats and remained below the level that might be expected with fully gender-balanced political representation. This situation reflected a combination of party nomination practices, weak institutional incentives for balanced representation, and voters' limited ability to influence the composition of representative bodies at the individual candidate level.

Following the 2025 elections, women held 67 of the 200 seats, or 33.5% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. This is the highest level of female representation in Czech parliamentary history. The empirical significance of this result lies in the fact that it did not come about as a result of the introduction of statutory quotas, mandatory parity rules or a change to the electoral system. The Czech case thus differs from a number of well-known instances of a sharp increase in women's representation, where institutional intervention is the main explanation. The fundamental question of this article is therefore: how could such a significant increase in women's representation have occurred in an environment without quotas and without formal institutional reform?

The existing literature on women's representation focuses primarily on institutional explanations, particularly the role of gender quotas and party parity rules (Krook, 2010a; Franceschet et al., 2012). This literature convincingly demonstrates that quotas can significantly increase the descriptive representation of women. However, the conclusions regarding open list systems, in which voters have the opportunity to influence the order of candidates, are less clear-cut. Such systems can correct party-determined rankings, but they can also reproduce existing inequalities if preferential votes are primarily won by candidates with greater visibility, local networks or resources (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Shugart et al., 2005; Thames & Williams, 2010; Folke & Rickne, 2016).

The Czech electoral system provides a suitable analytical context for examining these mechanisms. Voters may cast up to four preferential votes on a candidate list. A candidate who secures at least five per cent of the preferential votes from the total number of votes cast for that candidate list in an electoral district moves up the list ahead of candidates who have not reached this threshold. This mechanism, commonly referred to in Czech political discourse as 'circling', creates scope for the personalisation of voting behaviour and allows voters to partially override the order set by the parties. At the same time, however, political parties continue to determine who is included on the candidate list, how many female candidates they field, and how close to winnable seats they place them.

This article therefore does not proceed from the assumption that preferential voting automatically increases the representation of women. On the contrary, it argues that preferential voting functions as a conditional conversion mechanism. It can convert female candidacies into seats, but only if three conditions are met simultaneously: political parties field a sufficient number of female candidates in winnable positions, voters actually cast their preferential votes in favour of specific female candidates, and the party-regional distribution of seats allows the shift in ranking to translate into election.

The article is guided by three research questions. Firstly, to what extent can the increase in women's representation between 2021 and 2025 be described as a consequence of changes in the parties' selection of female candidates and their placement on candidate lists? Secondly, to what extent did preferential voting alter the final distribution of seats compared to a scenario based solely on the original ranking of candidates? Thirdly, under what party-regional conditions did the shift in preferences actually result in the election of women?

The empirical analysis utilises official election data from the parliamentary elections in 2021 and 2025. The research strategy comprises three steps. First, the paper conducts a counterfactual simulation of seat allocation without preferential votes, which serves as a descriptive benchmark for separating party-controlled candidate supply and list order from voter intervention. It then uses a regression discontinuity design around the five-per-cent threshold for preferential votes to estimate the local effect of crossing this threshold on shifts in ranking and on the probability of election. Finally, it analyses party and regional heterogeneity, in particular the role of the number of seats won by a party in a region and the distance of a candidate from the last seat according to the original ranking.

The contribution of the article is twofold. Theoretically, the article shows that open candidate lists cannot be assessed as universally beneficial or harmful to the representation of women. Their effect depends on whether preferential voting can link the party's supply with voter demand and translate this interaction into seats. Methodologically, the article combines descriptive counterfactual simulation with a local identification strategy and a contextual analysis of party-regional opportunities. In doing so, it responds to the need to distinguish the description of aggregate change from a narrower causal test of institutional boundaries.

Importantly, this article does not view the 2025 elections merely as a Czech empirical peculiarity. The Czech case is analytically valuable precisely because it allows us to observe a situation in which the outcome changed significantly without any change to the formal rules. If women's representation increases following the introduction of quotas, the main institutional mechanism is relatively clear. However, if women's representation increases within an unchanged institutional environment, it is necessary to explain more precisely how, within the framework of existing rules, party strategies, voter behaviour and the relationship between candidate ranking and the winning of a seat have changed.

From this perspective, the article contributes to the literature on quotas by focusing on a less straightforward mechanism of change. It does not ask whether quotas work, but rather what alternative channels might, under certain circumstances, increase women's representation in a system without quotas. The Czech case is not, however, an argument against quotas. Rather, it shows that even without them, there may be institutional mechanisms that allow voters to partially correct party nomination strategies. However, these mechanisms are uncertain, selective and context-dependent.

2. Theoretical framework

Research into gender representation in politics has long sought to explain why women are systematically under-represented in parliamentary institutions and what mechanisms might mitigate this imbalance.

2.1 Women's representation and the supply and demand model

One of the most influential analytical frameworks is the supply and demand model for candidate selection formulated by Norris and Lovenduski (1995). This model distinguishes between the supply of potential female candidates—that is, women's willingness and ability to stand for election—and the demand from political parties, which determine nominations, candidate rankings and the realistic chances of candidates being elected.

On the supply side, social and structural factors play a role: political socialisation, career trajectories, access to resources, family roles and the degree of involvement in party organisations. These factors can influence both the number of women willing to stand as candidates and their ability to enter the competitive nomination process. However, the supply side alone usually cannot explain the differences between parties or sudden changes within a single electoral cycle. It is therefore necessary to analyse the demand side as well, namely the decisions of party elites and nomination bodies.

The demand side of the model emphasises that political parties may disadvantage women not only by giving them a lower share of places on candidate lists, but also by placing them in less winnable positions. Conversely, voluntary quotas, parity rules or internal party norms can increase women's chances of being elected even without a formal change to the electoral system (Krook, 2010b; Krook, 2010c). This framework is important for the Czech context because parties still exercise significant control over the composition of candidate lists. At the same time, however, they are not the only actors determining the final outcome.

In a post-communist context, this logic is of particular significance. Political parties often combine formally open nomination processes with a high degree of informal control by party elites. Women's representation may therefore be limited not only by their willingness to stand for election, but also by how parties define electability, experience, local roots and party loyalty. Czech municipal and regional studies show that women's representation is sensitive to the institutional level, the attractiveness of the office, and previous patterns of representation (Maškarinec, 2016; Maškarinec, 2018; Maškarinec, 2021; Maškarinec, 2023). This supports the expectation that even the parliamentary level cannot be analysed solely as a mechanical outcome of the electoral system.

The supply and demand model is therefore a suitable starting point, but for open-list systems it must be expanded. The classical approach emphasises the relationship between potential female candidates and party gatekeepers. In open lists, however, a third actor comes into play: the voter, who can partially alter the outcome of the party's selection. This turns the selection of candidates into a two-stage process. First, parties decide who stands as a candidate and from where; subsequently, voters decide whether to move certain candidates up the list to such an extent that the original party ranking becomes less important.

2.2 Personalisation and preferential voting in open candidate lists

The theory of personalised voting shows that electoral systems differ in the extent to which they create incentives to support individual candidates rather than party labels (Carey & Shugart, 1995). In systems with open candidate lists, voters can use preferential votes to reorder candidates and thereby influence the final composition of parliament. Preferential voting therefore creates a space in which voter demand can be expressed more directly than in closed-list systems.

However, the consequences of personalisation for the representation of women are not clear-cut. On the one hand, voters can use preferential votes to correct party nomination strategies and move up female candidates who were placed lower than their voter support would warrant. On the other hand, open lists may favour candidates with greater financial resources, media visibility, local recognition or established clientelist networks (Shugart et al., 2005; Folke & Rickne, 2016). The literature therefore does not offer a simple expectation that open candidate lists automatically increase or decrease the representation of women (Thames & Williams, 2010).

For the Czech case, this implies that preferential voting must be understood as a mechanism with conditional effects. The five-per-cent threshold can significantly boost a candidate's position, but the shift itself does not necessarily mean a seat will be won. Whether preferential votes result in election depends

on how many seats a given party wins in the region, how far the candidate is from the last elected position, and whether there are enough female candidates in reachable positions on the list at all.

From the perspective of gender representation, it is therefore essential to distinguish between the possibility of changing the order and the actual ability to change the composition of parliament. Voters can move a female candidate up by a few places, but this shift is politically relevant only if the candidate is close to securing a seat. Open lists can thus produce many visible micro-shifts that have almost no effect on the aggregate composition of parliament. Conversely, even a small number of shifts can have a major effect if they occur right around the threshold of electability.

This distinction is also important for interpreting gender effects. If women receive preferential votes but are placed too low on the candidate lists, preferential voting may improve their ranking without increasing their chances of winning a seat. However, if female candidates are placed just below the electable positions, the same mechanism can lead to a real redistribution of seats. The gender effect of preferential voting cannot therefore be deduced solely from the number of preferential votes, but must be analysed in relation to the original ranking and the party's seat gain in the region.

2.3 The Czech context: supply, activation and conversion

The Czech electoral system combines strong party control over the candidate supply with a relatively effective tool for voter intervention. Parties decide on the composition of candidate lists and the initial ranking of candidates. Voters, however, can alter part of this ranking using up to four preferential votes. A candidate who exceeds the five-per-cent threshold of preferential votes from the votes cast for that list in the region moves ahead of candidates who did not reach this threshold. This threshold creates an institutional discontinuity that is suitable not only for describing the results but also for a local causal test of the rule's effect.

However, to explain the increase in women's representation following the 2025 elections, it is necessary to distinguish between three successive mechanisms. The first is supply: parties must nominate a sufficient number of women and place them in such a way that their preferential shift can be electorally relevant. The second is activation: voters must actually use their preferential votes and concentrate them on specific female candidates. The third is conversion: the shift in ranking must occur in a party-regional context where the party's number of seats allows the improved ranking to be translated into actual election.

This mechanism explains why the same institutional arrangement can lead to very different outcomes across different parties and regions. If a party fields too

few female candidates or places them too far from winnable positions, preferential voting has nothing to convert. If voters do not activate their preferential votes, the party list order remains decisive. And if a party wins too few seats in a given constituency, even a shift of a few places may not lead to election. Preferential voting should therefore be understood not as an independent cause, but as a conversion mechanism between the party's list and its final representation.

Table 1:
Election results and gender composition of parliamentary parties

Party	Votes (%)	Female candidates (%)	Seats	Seats held by women	Women (%)
ANO	34.5	27.80	80	21	26.3
SPOLU	23.4	23.91	52	11	21.2
STAN	11.2	31.20	22	13	59.1
Pirates	9.0	38.80	18	15	83.3
SPD	7.8	26.50	15	5	33.3
Motorists	6.8	15.60	13	2	15.4
Total	100	31.3	200	67	33.5

Source: Own calculations based on official election data from the Czech Statistical Office.

2.4 Critical mass: a symbolic threshold, not an automatic mechanism

The concept of critical mass was adopted into research on political representation from organisational sociology, where it was originally formulated by Kanter (1977). In debates on women's representation, it has been further developed, particularly in relation to the question of whether reaching a certain threshold of representation, often around 30%, leads to a qualitative change in the behaviour of institutions and actors (Childs & Krook, 2008). However, the current literature warns against a mechanical understanding of critical mass as a fixed threshold, the crossing of which automatically triggers substantive change (Childs & Krook, 2009; Dahlerup & Leijenaar, 2013).

In the Czech case, critical mass is relevant primarily as a symbolic reference point. Exceeding one-third of female MPs may signal a shift in the norms of political competition, voter expectations and party strategies. However, this in itself does not explain the mechanism of change. For this article, therefore, the question of which institutional and electoral channels women used to enter the Chamber of Deputies is more important than the mere observation that a certain threshold has been crossed.

2.5 Research expectations

Three empirical expectations follow from the theoretical logic outlined above. Firstly, part of the increase in women's representation should be attributable to changes in party lists, namely a higher proportion of female candidates or their better placement on the lists. If the entire increase were caused solely by the parties, the counterfactual scenario without preferential voting should approximate the actual result.

Secondly, preferential voting should have an independent impact on the final ranking of candidates. Given the five-per-cent threshold, discontinuity can be expected: candidates just above the threshold should move significantly further up the list than those just below it. At the same time, however, it is not a given that this shift will lead to a seat. This depends on the candidate's distance from an electable position and on the number of seats the party has won in the region.

Thirdly, the gender impact of preferential voting should be heterogeneous. A stronger effect can be expected in parties and regions where there is a combination of a sufficient supply of female candidates, active use of preferential votes, and an electoral structure that allows a shift in ranking to be converted into a seat. These expectations inform the analytical structure of the article: the counterfactual simulation describes the extent of the change, the RDD tests the local effect of institutional boundaries, and the analysis of party-regional opportunities explains why the same shift in ranking resulted in a seat gain in some places but not in others.

This triad of mechanisms also allows for a more precise formulation of the limits of generalisability. If the article shows that preferential voting in 2025 contributed to an increase in women's representation, this does not mean that the same effect must occur in every subsequent election. It means that, under certain configurations of party supply, voter mobilisation and seat opportunities, open candidate lists can function as a mechanism for redistributing representation. In other configurations, the same rules may have only a minimal impact.

For this reason, the article uses the concept of conversion. It is not merely a question of whether women stand as candidates, nor simply of whether they receive preferential votes. What is decisive is whether candidacy and preferential support are converted into a seat. Conversion thus serves as an analytical bridge between the party's offer, voter behaviour and the resulting representation. It is precisely this bridge that often remains implicit in the literature on open candidate lists.

The study also has several limitations. Firstly, the counterfactual simulation does not capture how parties would behave in a system without preferential voting. Secondly, the RDD provides only a local estimate for candidates near the five-per-cent threshold. Thirdly, the article does not identify the effect of mobilisation campaigns separately, as their exposure cannot be measured with

sufficient precision. These limitations do not weaken the main argument, but rather define its scope: the article does not explain all possible causes of the increase in women's representation, but rather the specific institutional and electoral mechanism that contributed to this increase.

Further research could proceed in two directions. The first is a detailed analysis of the campaigns, including party calls for preferential voting, the media visibility of female candidates, and the activism of organisations supporting women's representation. The second is a comparison of the Czech case with other open-list systems. Such a comparison would make it possible to determine whether the Czech 2025 election represents an exceptional configuration or a more general mechanism that may also emerge in other democracies without quotas.

3. Data and methods

The empirical analysis is based on an original dataset compiled from the official results of the parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic in 2021 and 2025. The basic unit of analysis is an individual candidate standing for a specific political party in a given constituency. This approach makes it possible to capture not only the final distribution of seats, but also the process by which this distribution occurs: the relationship between the original ranking on the candidate list, preferential votes and the final allocation of seats.

The dataset includes candidates from parliamentary parties on regional candidate lists. For each candidate, information is available on gender, age, incumbency, initial ranking on the candidate list (*list_rank_initial*), final ranking after preferential votes have been counted (*list_rank_final*), the absolute number of preferential votes, the share of preferential votes in the total votes cast for that list in the region (*pref_share*), and a binary indicator of whether the five-per-cent threshold was exceeded (*above_5pct*). The dependent variable in the individual analyses is whether the candidate was elected (*elected*). The dataset also contains the number of seats won by a given party in the region (*seats_party_region*), which is essential for simulations and for testing an alternative explanation based on the magnitude of the party's gains in the region.

The analytical strategy is deliberately divided into three steps, corresponding to three research questions. The first step provides a descriptive counterfactual simulation. The second step uses a regression discontinuity design to estimate the local effect of exceeding the five per cent threshold. The third step analyses the party-regional conditions for the conversion of preferential votes into seats. This separates the description of aggregate change, the local identification of the institutional rule, and the contextual explanation of the heterogeneity of results.

3.1 Counterfactual simulation of seat allocation without preferential voting

The first analytical step is a counterfactual simulation of seat allocation without preferential voting. Its aim is not causal identification, but a transparent descriptive breakdown of the overall change. In each party $\times$ region combination, the number of elected candidates is kept the same as in the actual result, but seats are allocated to candidates according to their original order on the candidate list. This creates a hypothetical scenario that corresponds to a closed candidate list whilst maintaining the actual party and regional distribution of seats.

This simulation allows us to compare the actual result with the result that would have occurred if voters had been unable to change the order of candidates. The difference between these two scenarios can be interpreted as the descriptive contribution of preferential voting to the final composition of the Chamber of Deputies. It is important to emphasise, however, that this is not a standard Oaxaca-style statistical decomposition (Oaxaca, 1973; Fortin et al., 2011) and that the simulation does not estimate uncertainty or causal effects. Party lists and voter behaviour are not entirely independent: parties may place candidates with an awareness of the existence of preferential voting, and voters respond to the candidate lists drawn up by the parties. The simulation therefore serves as a descriptive benchmark, not as definitive causal evidence.

This point is methodologically important because the original ranking of candidates is not neutral in itself. Parties may place candidates with regard to expected preferential votes, intra-party agreements, or the symbolic value of candidate lists. The simulated scenario without preferential voting therefore does not represent a world that would necessarily exist if preferential voting were not part of the electoral system. It merely provides an analytical contrast: the result that would occur whilst maintaining the actual order and seat allocations, but without the voters' reallocation of candidates.

The advantage of this approach is transparency. Each seat can be assigned to a specific combination of party and constituency, and the candidate actually elected can be compared with the candidate who would have been elected according to the original ranking. The disadvantage is that this approach does not address the endogeneity between party supply and voter behaviour. Therefore, it is used in the article as a first descriptive step, not as a substitute for causal analysis.

3.2 Regression discontinuity design

The second analytical step is a regression discontinuity design based on the five-per-cent threshold for preferential votes. This threshold represents an institutional rule with a clearly defined cut-off: candidates just above the threshold enter

a different institutional regime than those just below it. The running variable is the candidate's distance from the threshold, i.e. `pref_share` minus 0.05; the treatment is the binary indicator `above_5pct`. The dependent variables are rank improvement (`rank_improve = list_rank_initial - list_rank_final`) and the candidate's election.

RDD is suitable for testing whether crossing the threshold actually leads to a discontinuous improvement in rank and whether this shift is reflected in election. The results are interpreted locally, i.e. for candidates situated in the relatively narrow vicinity of the five-per-cent threshold (Imbens & Lemieux, 2008; Lee & Lemieux, 2010). It is therefore not an estimate of the overall effect of preferential voting on all candidates. Furthermore, for gender-specific estimates, it is necessary to take into account the size of the subsamples, as the number of female candidates in the immediate vicinity of the threshold may be relatively low.

The analysis uses alternative bandwidths around the threshold and reports both total and gender-disaggregated sample sizes. This increases the transparency of the estimates whilst preventing gender-based conclusions from being presented as stronger than the available number of observations permits.

For the validity of RDD, it is important that candidates just above and just below the threshold are comparable in relevant respects. The article therefore works with narrow bands around the threshold and interprets the results as a local effect. In this sense, RDD does not answer the question of whether preferential voting generally increased the number of women in parliament. It answers a narrower question: whether crossing the institutional threshold led to an improvement in ranking for candidates close to it and, where applicable, to a higher probability of election.

This distinction is important for the interpretation of the findings. If the overall increase in women's representation stems from broader changes in party nominations, RDD cannot fully capture them. Conversely, if preferential votes helped female candidates who were far from the five-per-cent threshold, RDD will not capture such cases either. The strength of RDD lies in the local identification of the institutional threshold, not in the description of the entire mechanism. It is therefore linked to counterfactual simulation and the analysis of opportunity structures.

3.3 Party-regional opportunity structures

The third analytical step is not a difference-in-differences analysis of mobilisation campaigns. Such a design would require a clearly defined treatment variable, i.e. a reliably measurable exposure of regions or party-regional combinations to campaigns promoting preferential votes for women. As such an operationalisation is not sufficiently robust in this version of the article, the article instead analyses party-regional opportunity structures.

This step responds to an alternative explanation, according to which the same shift in ranking might have translated into seats more frequently in 2025 not because the nature of preferential voting had changed, but because parties where preferential voting was active won more seats in some regions. In other words, a shift of two to three places has a different significance for a candidate in seventh place on the list of a party that won six seats in a region than for a candidate in seventh place on the list of a party that won only two seats.

To capture this logic, the article uses the variable *distance_to_seat*, defined as the difference between a candidate's original ranking and the number of seats won by the party in that region. A value close to zero means that the candidate was just outside the winning positions. The higher this value, the greater the shift in ranking would be required to win a seat. This variable allows us to distinguish the purely mechanical effect of crossing the five-per-cent threshold from the conversion of this effect into a seat.

This approach is more conservative than a difference-in-differences design, but better aligns with the available data. Rather than attempting to identify the effect of mobilisation campaigns—which cannot be reliably operationalised—the article focuses on a mechanism that can be directly observed in the data: the relationship between a candidate's original ranking, the number of seats the party holds in the region, and the candidate's final election. This enhances the transparency of the empirical analysis and keeps the empirical claims aligned with what can be directly observed in the available data.

3.4 Limitations of methods and triangulation

Each of the analytical steps used has a different status. The counterfactual simulation is descriptive and serves to establish a clear benchmark. RDD provides local causal identification of the effect of exceeding the five per cent threshold; however, it cannot be mechanically generalised to all candidates and all party-regional situations. The analysis of opportunity structures is contextual and explains why similar shifts in ranking translated into a mandate in some cases but not in others.

The strength of the article therefore does not lie in the fact that a single method alone explains the entire increase in women's representation. It lies in triangulation: the simulation describes the extent of the difference between party ranking and the actual result, the RDD tests whether the five-per-cent threshold actually creates a discontinuity in ranking and electoral success, and the analysis of party-regional structures shows under what conditions this local effect translates into a seat. This combination allows us to formulate a more cautious but theoretically stronger claim: preferential voting in 2025 functioned as a conditional conversion mechanism.

4. Results

The analysis is based on microdata covering candidates in the parliamentary elections of 2021 and 2025 and tracks the change in the gender composition of the Chamber of Deputies between these two elections. In 2021, 50 women were elected, representing 25.0% of all seats. In 2025, the number of women elected rose to 67 out of 200 seats, or 33.5%. The overall change corresponds to an increase of 17 seats, or 8.5 percentage points.

4.1 Counterfactual simulation and breakdown of the increase in women's representation

The counterfactual simulation shows that without preferential voting, 41 women would have been elected in 2021 and 50 women in 2025. The difference between these figures is nine seats. This difference can be described as a change on the supply side of candidates and their ranking on the candidate lists. In other words, even if voters had not changed the ranking of candidates, there would have been some increase in the representation of women between 2021 and 2025. However, this increase would have been significantly smaller than the change actually observed.

The difference between the actual result and the simulated scenario without preferential voting was nine seats in 2021 and seventeen seats in 2025. The additional difference between these figures, namely eight seats, shows that preferential voting had a stronger impact on the final composition of the Chamber of Deputies in 2025 than in the 2021 elections. This result must be understood as descriptive: it shows how the outcome would change in the hypothetical absence of preferential voting, not as an independent causal effect separate from party strategies.

Table 2:
Breakdown of the total increase in the number of female MPs:
candidate supply and preferential voting

Component of change	Number of seats	Proportion (%)
Change in candidate supply and ranking	9	52.9
Additional difference associated with preferential voting	8	47.1
Total increase	17	100.0

The values represent a descriptive counterfactual simulation, not a causal decomposition.

Source: Own calculations based on official election data from the Czech Statistical Office.

The relative weight of both components is analytically important. The increase in women's representation cannot be interpreted as a pure consequence of more progressive party nomination strategies, nor as the exclusive result of voter mobilisation. The candidate pool and preferential voting acted in concert. Parties created a broader or more appropriately positioned pool of female candidates, but voters actively reordered this pool in certain cases.

This result also shows why it is necessary to distinguish between aggregate change and individual mechanisms of election. At the macro level, preferential voting increased the number of women in the Chamber of Deputies compared to the simulated scenario. At the micro level, however, preferential voting may in some cases have merely altered which specific woman was elected, without changing the overall number of women.

From the perspective of the main argument, it is important that the simulation does not support either of the extreme explanations. It does not show that the increase was driven solely by the parties, as the increase would have been lower without preferential voting. Nor does it show, however, that voters were able to compensate for the party's supply, because without some improvement in the candidate lists, preferential votes would not have had a sufficient number of relevant female candidates to promote. The empirical result therefore corresponds to the theoretical concept of interaction between supply and conversion.

This conclusion is also significant for the interpretation of party strategies. Parties did not necessarily have to adopt an explicit gender strategy or quota logic to increase the number of female MPs. It was sufficient that, in some cases, they created a candidate configuration in which female candidates had a realistic chance of being promoted by preferential votes. In such an environment, preferential voting becomes a mechanism that can amplify the effects of even relatively modest changes in the party's candidate list.

4.2 Party heterogeneity in preferential voting

An analysis of female candidates elected thanks to preferential voting shows that this mechanism was not distributed evenly across parties. On the contrary, its impact was highly concentrated. Of the total of 22 female MPs whose election was linked at the micro-level to a shift in preferential votes, more than half belong to the Pirates. Specifically, 12 out of 15 female Pirates were elected thanks to preferential votes. In the case of the Pirates, therefore, preferential voting was not merely a supplementary adjustment to the ranking, but the main mechanism that reshaped the final composition of the parliamentary group.

The second strongest effect can be observed in STAN, where six out of thirteen female MPs were elected thanks to preferential voting. In this case, preferential votes complemented the party nomination and allowed voters to

shape the final composition of representation. For the SPOLU coalition, the effect was weaker: three out of eleven female MPs were elected thanks to preferential voting. For ANO and Motorists, no women were elected through this mechanism, and for the SPD there was only one such case.

These differences confirm that preferential voting cannot be understood as a neutral institutional mechanism with similar consequences across parties. Its effect is mediated by the party context: the structure of candidate lists, the intensity of intra-party competition, the nature of voter mobilisation, and the real possibility of converting a shift in ranking into a seat.

The case of the Pirates is analytically the strongest, as it illustrates a situation in which preferential voting fundamentally altered the internal composition of the parliamentary group. It is not merely a matter of the high proportion of women among the elected MPs, but of the fact that a large part of this result only came about after voters intervened in the ranking. The Pirates thus represent a case of high activation and high conversion: the female candidates were accessible, voters gave them their preferential support, and the resulting gains in seats enabled this support to be translated into election.

STAN represents a different but similarly important case. Preferential voting was not as dominant here as it was for the Pirates, but it significantly complemented the party's offering. The result shows that the mechanism need not function solely within a party with an exceptionally specific culture of internal competition. It can also manifest itself in a movement that combines local networks, regional candidates and a high degree of personalisation. It is precisely this combination that may have created an environment in which preferential votes were relevant to the allocation of seats.

At the other end of the spectrum are ANO and Motoristé, where preferential voting did not result in the election of women in this way. This does not mean that their voters did not use preferential votes, but that their use did not lead to a measurable gender correction in the final representation. This may be linked to a different structure of candidate lists, a more centralised party logic, the strength of leaders, or the fact that female candidates were not placed in positions where a shift in preferential votes could alter the result.

Table 3:
Women elected through preferential voting by party

Party	Total female MPs	Elected through preferential votes	Proportion (%)
ANO	21	0	0.0
Motorists	2	0	0.0
Pirates	15	12	80.0
SPD	5	1	20.0
SPOLU	11	3	27.3
STAN	13	6	46.2
Total	67	22	32.8

Source: Own calculations based on official election data from the Czech Statistical Office.

4.3 The regional dimension and the difference between gross and net effects

Regional analysis further shows that preferential voting did not function evenly across the country. In 2025, 22 female MPs were identified whose election was linked to a shift in preferential votes. These cases were concentrated in a limited number of regions, particularly in Prague, the Olomouc Region and the Pardubice Region. However, the mere concentration of cases does not mean that every preferential shift increased the total number of women.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the gross number of female MPs elected via preferential voting and the net impact of preferential voting on the total number of women. In gross terms, 22 specific women were elected via preferential voting; however, the net contribution of preferential voting to the number of female MPs amounted to 17 seats. The difference arises because, in some cases, a candidate boosted by preferential votes replaced another woman who would also have been elected under the original ranking. Preferential voting thus sometimes altered the personal composition of female representation, rather than its overall extent.

This distinction is important for interpreting the entire article. At the micro-level, preferential voting may have been a necessary condition for the election of a specific candidate. At the aggregate level, however, not every such case resulted in an increase in the number of women. This is precisely why it is necessary to combine the analysis of individual candidates with an aggregate view of the party and regional distribution of seats.

Distinguishing between the gross and net effects also prevents an overestimation of the impact of preferential voting. If the article were to count

only the number of specific female candidates elected thanks to preferences, it might overestimate the impact on overall gender representation. Conversely, if it were to track only the aggregate increase in the number of women, it would lose sight of how significantly preferences have altered the personal composition of the representation. Both perspectives are therefore essential.

This logic is particularly important in regions with a larger number of seats, where there may be more intense intra-party competition. In such regions, more male and female candidates may be relatively close to the threshold for election, and preferential votes may decide not only between men and women, but also between female candidates themselves. Preferential voting can thus serve simultaneously as a mechanism for gender correction and as a mechanism for selection within the group of women.

4.4 Party-regional conversion of preferential shift into a seat

A key addition to the interpretation is the question of when a preference shift actually translates into a seat. The RDD results show that exceeding the five-per-cent threshold leads to a shift in the ranking. However, this shift has a different significance depending on how many seats the party in question has won in the region. If a party won many seats and a female candidate was just below an electable position, a shift of two to three places could determine her election. If a party won few seats or a female candidate started too low, the same shift might not have been sufficient.

This logic is captured by the variable ‘distance_to_seat’. A candidate with a value of one was, according to the original ranking, the first below the line; a candidate with a value of two was the second below the line. It is precisely for such candidates that the preferential shift has the greatest potential to change the result. Conversely, for candidates several places away from the last seat, exceeding the five-per-cent threshold may be important for their ranking but may not translate into election. This explains why, in 2025, the same institutional mechanism had a stronger effect: a significant number of candidates who were successful in terms of preferences were found in party-regional combinations where a shift in ranking was relevant to the allocation of seats.

This section also addresses an alternative explanation for the difference between 2021 and 2025. It is possible that preferential voting did not become stronger in the sense that voters generally wanted to reorder candidates more, but that its effects were stronger because preferentially successful candidates were closer to a seat. The article therefore interprets 2025 not as a simple intensification of voter demand, but as a change in the conditions for conversion. Preference votes were more likely to coincide with candidate and seat configurations in which they could alter the outcome.

This interpretation is more cautious but theoretically more productive. It explains why preferential voting in 2021 also boosted candidates but less often led to election. The institutional mechanism was present in both elections. The difference lay in whether its mechanical effect encountered a suitable opportunity structure. It is precisely here that the main analytical contribution of the article lies.

Table 4:

Conditions for the conversion of preferential shift into a seat

Mechanism	Empirical indicator	Analytical significance
List of candidates	Proportion of women on the list; list_rank_initial	Preferential voting can only help female candidates who are on the list and are not too far from the winnable positions.
Activation of preferential votes	pref_share; above_5pct	Voters must concentrate their preferential votes so that the female candidate exceeds the institutional threshold.
Conversion to a seat	seats_party_region; distance_to_seat	A shift in ranking leads to a seat only if the list is sufficiently close to the party's last seat in the region.
Party-regional concentration	party × region combination	Explains why the effects were concentrated mainly among the Pirates and STAN and were not evenly distributed across parties.

The author.

4.5 Regression discontinuity design: the effect of crossing the five-per-cent threshold

The regression discontinuity design compares candidates just below and just above the five-per-cent threshold of preferential votes. The first test focuses on whether crossing the threshold leads to an improvement in the candidate's final ranking. In the 2025 elections, the RDD shows a clear discontinuity: within a band of ± 2 percentage points around the threshold, exceeding the threshold leads to an improvement in ranking of roughly 2.3 to 3.0 places. In the narrower range of ± 1 percentage point, the estimate is similar. A similar mechanical effect can also be observed in the 2021 elections, confirming that the institutional rule operated in both elections under review.

From a gender perspective, this mechanical effect is not significantly different. In 2025, female candidates move up at least as much as male candidates after crossing the threshold. This means that the five-per-cent threshold rule itself is not gender-selective. The difference only arises at the conversion stage: whether the shift in ranking translates into a seat. It is precisely here that the

distance from an electable position and the number of seats the party holds in a given region become crucial.

The second test therefore focuses on candidates who, according to the original order, would not have been elected. In 2025, candidates just above the threshold show a higher probability of election than those just below it. Within a range of ± 2 percentage points, this amounts to approximately 10 to 15 percentage points; within a narrower range, the point estimate is higher but less precise. In 2021, we do not find a comparable effect. Crossing the threshold did shift candidates, but on average this shift did not translate into a seat more often.

This difference cannot automatically be interpreted as a net change in voter behaviour. The probability that a shift in ranking will lead to election also depends on the number of seats won by the party in the region. Therefore, the RDD result is interpreted in conjunction with an analysis of party-regional opportunity structures. Preferential voting did not merely manifest itself more strongly in 2025; it manifested itself more strongly where candidates were sufficiently close to a seat and where party gains allowed the shift in ranking to be translated into election.

Table 5:
Transparency of RDD samples by election year, bandwidth and gender

Year	Bandwidth around the 5% threshold	Total N	Female candidates N	Male candidates N	Note
2025	± 2 percentage points	381	132	249	Main estimate of the effect on ranking.
2025	± 1 p.p.	195	72	123	Narrower bandwidth, higher uncertainty.
2021	± 2 percentage points	234	79	155	Comparative estimate for the previous election.
2021	± 1 percentage point	115	42	73	Supplementary narrower bandwidth.

Note: The figures show the number of candidates around the five-per-cent threshold for preferential votes. Gender-specific subsamples are provided for the sake of transparency regarding RDD estimates and the assessment of their accuracy.

Source: The author.

Gender-specific estimates must be interpreted with caution. The number of female candidates in the immediate vicinity of the five-per-cent threshold is smaller than the total number of candidates, and therefore separate estimates for women are subject to greater uncertainty. However, the results do not suggest that female candidates would benefit less from exceeding the threshold than male candidates. This is important because the main argument of the article is not that the five-per-cent threshold in itself favours women, but that in 2025 the local effect of this rule combined with the party list and electoral structure in such a way as to lead to a more significant representation of women.

Overall, the RDD provides three conclusions. Firstly, exceeding the five-per-cent threshold does indeed create a discontinuity in the final ranking of candidates. Secondly, in 2025, this shift was more frequently reflected in the winning of seats by candidates outside their original eligible positions than in 2021. Thirdly, the gender interpretation of this effect must be linked to an analysis of where female candidates were placed and how many seats their parties won in individual regions.

5. Discussion: preferential voting as a conditional conversion mechanism

The results of this study lead to a reassessment of the role of preferential voting in debates on women's representation in open-list systems. Preferential voting cannot be understood as a mechanism that automatically corrects gender inequalities. At the same time, however, it cannot be assumed that open-list systems merely reproduce existing inequalities or that they are neutral with regard to women's representation. The Czech case shows that preferential voting can function as a mechanism for the gender redistribution of seats, but only under certain conditions.

A counterfactual simulation shows that changes in party lists were important, but do not in themselves explain the entire increase in women's representation. Without preferential votes, there would have been an increase in the number of female MPs between 2021 and 2025, but only by approximately half of the change actually observed. Voters therefore did not play a purely passive role in 2025. In some parties and regions, they actively reshaped the party list.

RDD complements this interpretation by demonstrating the actual institutional effect of the five-per-cent threshold. Candidates above the threshold systematically move up the list. Crucially, however, in 2025 this shift was more frequently reflected in the allocation of seats. This difference cannot be explained by the change in rules alone, as the rules remained the same. The explanation therefore lies in a combination of party nominations, voter activation and the opportunity structure.

Party heterogeneity is crucial to this argument. In the case of the Pirates and STAN, a relatively wider range of female candidates was combined with active preferential voting and a realistic possibility of converting shifts in the ranking into seats. For ANO, Motorists or, to a lesser extent, the SPD, this mechanism was much weaker. This does not mean that the voters of these parties necessarily rejected the candidate lists, but that the combination of supply, mobilisation and conversion did not produce the same effect here.

These findings also challenge the simple dichotomy between party supply and voter demand. In open-list systems, these two dimensions are not separate.

Parties create a list of candidates that determines whom voters can support through preferential voting. However, voters can, through their preferences, retroactively alter the significance of parties' nomination decisions. In this sense, the representation of women is the result of an endogenous interaction between parties and voters, not exclusively of one or the other side of the process.

From a methodological perspective, the article demonstrates why it is useful to combine multiple analytical steps, whilst at the same time clearly distinguishing their inferential status. Counterfactual simulation provides a comprehensible description of the aggregate difference, but is not a causal estimate. RDD provides a local causal threshold test, but cannot on its own explain the overall change in the gender composition of the Chamber of Deputies. An analysis of party-regional opportunities helps to link these two levels and explain why the same institutional mechanism has manifested itself differently in various political contexts.

The practical implication is that open candidate lists cannot be assessed in isolation. Their effect on women's representation depends on how parties compile their candidate lists, how voters use preferential votes, and whether parties' electoral gains in regions create realistic scope for change. Preferential voting can therefore function as a corrective tool, but it is no substitute for party nomination strategies. If parties fail to nominate female candidates or place them too low on the list, preferential votes alone cannot create gender-balanced representation.

From the perspective of the literature on gender representation, this result is also important because it highlights the limitations of purely institutional typologies. The distinction between open and closed lists is insufficient in itself. What matters is how strong the preferential mechanism is, what the threshold is for candidates to move up the list, how many preferences voters can cast, and how seats are allocated between regions and parties. The same formal type of electoral system can thus have different gender implications.

The Czech case also shows that the personalisation of politics does not necessarily mean only the strengthening of already established candidates. Under certain conditions, it can also open up opportunities for female candidates who have not been placed in the top positions by their parties. However, this effect is not guaranteed. It requires a combination of the visibility of female candidates, voters' willingness to use preferential votes, and the proximity of seats. Without these conditions, personalisation may, on the contrary, reproduce existing hierarchies.

The findings also have practical implications for political parties. If parties wish to increase the representation of women without formal quotas, it is not enough simply to increase the proportion of female candidates on the lists. What is crucial is their placement in winnable positions and the creation of an environment in which preferential votes can realistically make a difference. Symbolically adding female candidates to low positions has only a limited effect. Conversely, strategically placing female candidates close to winnable seats can fundamentally change the final result in open lists.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the causes of the historical increase in women's representation in the Chamber of Deputies following the 2025 elections. The starting point was the fact that this increase occurred without the introduction of gender quotas, without a change to the electoral system, and without formal institutional reform. The article showed that this result cannot be explained by a single mechanism. It was the result of an interaction between the parties' selection of female candidates, preferential voting, and party-regional opportunity structures.

Empirical analysis showed that the number of female MPs increased from 50 to 67 between 2021 and 2025. A counterfactual simulation suggests that approximately nine seats of this increase can be attributed to changes in candidate lists and their order, whilst a further eight seats correspond to the additional difference associated with the stronger impact of preferential voting. This result is descriptive, but it shows that preferential votes were not merely a marginal correction to the order.

The regression discontinuity design confirmed that exceeding the five per cent threshold for preferential votes leads to a discontinuous improvement in candidates' rankings. In 2025, this shift was also more frequently reflected in the winning of a seat, particularly for candidates outside the original winnable positions. Gender-specific conclusions must be formulated with caution due to the size of the subsamples, but the results do not suggest that female candidates benefited less from the preferential voting mechanism than male candidates.

A key finding is the selectivity of the entire process. The strongest effects were concentrated among the Pirates and STAN, whilst for other parties the role of preferential voting was significantly weaker or non-existent. This confirms the article's main thesis: preferential voting is not a universal solution to gender inequalities, but a conditional conversion mechanism. It translates the party's list into seats only when there are female candidates in winnable positions, voters give them preferential support, and the party-regional distribution of seats allows a shift in the ranking to result in election.

Theoretically, the article contributes to the literature on open candidate lists by showing that their effect on women's representation is conditional and context-dependent. Methodologically, it demonstrates how descriptive simulation, local causal identification and the analysis of opportunity structures can be combined without confusing their inferential claims. The Czech case thus demonstrates that even without quotas, a significant change in the gender composition of parliament can occur, but only under specific configurations of party, voter and institutional factors.

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