

Neither Realigning nor Maintaining Election: Czech Party System and the 2025 General Election¹

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Abstract

Since the 2010 critical election, the Czech party system has undergone a significant transformation. Given that the party system stability is a core variable for contemporary comparative politics research, the proposed case study aims to explore the results of the 2025 general election within the framework of the recent dynamics of Czech party politics. To this end, the single-country case study focuses on both the electoral and parliamentary arena, and employs a multi-component conceptualisation of party system dynamics, encompassing well-established indicators such as party system continuity, effective number of parties, party system volatility, and electoral polarisation, but also in terms of the party system format and its change. The study concludes that, notwithstanding the results of the 2025 general election, which suggests signs of continuity rather than discontinuity in the trajectories of Czech party politics, the election cannot be considered either a realigning, or a maintaining contest.

Keywords: party politics; party system change; volatility; polarisation; Czech Republic

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1. Introduction

Although E. E. Schattschneider's well-known assertion that 'the political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties' (1942, p. 1) is more than eighty years old, it remains valid to this day. Indeed, contemporary democracies cannot, by their very nature, function without a viable, competitive, and accountable party system (e.g., Crotty, 2006, p. 499). Furthermore, without understanding of party politics and its dynamics, it is impossible to fully comprehend current politics. Unlike most constitutional institutions, whose formal structure can remain (and often does remain) unchanged for long periods of time, party politics reflects the dynamics of political developments and is thus in a 'state of constant flux' (Norris & Evans, 1999, p. 16).

The Czech party politics has undergone relatively dynamic development over the past thirty years. Following an initial (turbulent) period of the party system 're/construction' (Kunc, 2000)¹, which was characterised by significant fragmentation of parliamentary representation, the fluid structure of political parties, and a high degree of instability, a discernible tendency towards simplification of political competition and stabilisation of the party system with low levels of party system volatility emerged from the mid-1990s onwards. During this period, the Czech party system was regarded as one of the most stable across post-communist Europe (e.g., Hloušek, 2010; Stegmaier & Vlachová, 2011; Tavits, 2013; Haughton, 2014; O'Dwyer, 2014), or even consolidated (e.g., Hanley, 2012). However, the 2010 and 2013 general elections, along with subsequent political developments, indicated that this stability was 'only' fragile (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2010; Hanley, 2014; Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2015) and temporary (Linek & Lyons, 2013; see also Buben & Kouba, 2023), with scholars have referred to the 2010 and 2013 general elections as an electoral or political earthquake (e.g., Haughton, Novotná & Deegan-Krause, 2011; Havlík & Hloušek, 2014; Maškarinec & Bláha, 2014).

As a result, the 2010 general election can be regarded as 'critical', as they brought about an intense and immediate, yet enduring realignment of the Czech electorate and a new direction in political competition (Just & Charvát, 2016)². One manifestation of this change was, for example, the erosion of electoral support for four longstanding parties (namely the Civic Democrats, Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, and Communists) that used to constitute the core of the Czech party system in 1990s and 2000s (hereinafter referred to as the 'old core'). While these parties won the vast majority of votes and seats during this period, their electoral gains began to decline sharply after the 2010 general election. Instead, Czech voters opted for newcomers in the parliamentary arena, frequently challenger anti-establishment and/or populist alternatives, such as the technocratic-populist ANO 2011 party as the most successful of the newcomers, Public Affairs party in 2010, right-wing populist, Eurosceptic Dawn of Direct

Democracy party in 2013, or right-wing populist, Eurosceptic Freedom and Direct Democracy party in 2017 (e.g., Charvát & Just, 2016; Just & Charvát, 2016; Bakke, 2022a; 2022b; Bláha, Charvát, & Maškarinec, 2022; Cirhan, 2023; Cirhan & Kopecký, 2024; Hanley & Kopeček, 2025). As a result, these developments led to an increase in the number of parties with representation in the Chamber of Deputies (from five parliamentary parties in the late 1990s and 2000s to seven and more parties in the Chamber of Deputies following the 2013 general election) and the reconfiguration of the party system core since 2017 at the latest, which now consists of the Civic Democrats (ODS), Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL), TOP09 party, ANO 2011 party, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party, Mayors and Independents (STAN) party, and the Czech Pirate Party (hereinafter referred to as the 'new core').

These developments were also reflected in a change in the party system format. For instance, Balík and Hloušek (2016) have distinguished three phases in the development of the Czech party system in this context. While the authors assessed the period from 1992 to 1996/1998 as a period of extreme pluralism with functional multipolar logic, the 1996 election marked a consolidation of Czech democratic politics. In the context of party politics, this consolidation manifested itself in the transformation of the party system into a period of limited pluralism (from 1996/1998 to 2010/2013), evolving from semi-polarised to moderate pluralism, based on functional bipolar logic and in preparation for the re-emergence of bipolarity. However, following the 2013 early election at the latest, political competition became highly polarised, though no longer bipolar, transforming the Czech party system into a period of extreme and polarised pluralism with multipolar logic and restricted competition in the formation of coalitions (see also Buben & Kouba, 2026). Similarly, various scholars have identified three different phases in the dynamics of the Czech party system. For instance, Hájek (2018) has distinguished between the stages of consolidation (until 1998), stability (from 1998 and 2010), and transformation (since 2010), or Charvát and Just (2016) discuss the phases of re/construction (until 1998), stabilisation (between 1998 and 2010), and restructuring (since 2010) of the Czech post-1989 party politics.

The results of the 2021 general election indicated that the restructuring of the Czech party system was still ongoing. On the one hand, there was a decline in party system fragmentation and volatility, pointing to partial stabilisation of support for the parliamentary parties, including the populist parties, and no new political party entered the Chamber of Deputies. On the other hand, the 2021 election contest was determined by the populist vs. anti-populist divide (e.g., Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022; Cirhan & Kopecký, 2024; Cadier, 2026; see also Cirhan & Kopecký, 2019; Hanley & Kopeček, 2025), with the ANO party's strategic turn to the left (e.g., Hájek, 2017) significantly undermining the electoral support for the two longstanding left-wing parties, the Social Democrats³ and

Communists⁴, who exited the parliamentary arena in 2021 (for more details on the 2021 general election, see Havlík & Lysek, 2022; see also Kudrnáč & Petrůšek, 2022; Linek & Škvrňák, 2022; Lysek & Macků, 2022). This divide was further exacerbated by the emergence of two electoral alliances within the anti-populist camp – among others, due to the fears of smaller liberal and center-right parties of electoral failure, but also in response to the Babiš's immense popularity and his perceived threat to liberal democracy – namely the TOGETHER electoral alliance, comprising of the Civic Democrats, Christian Democrats and TOP09, and the electoral alliance of the Pirates and Mayors and Independents (for more details on the phenomenon of electoral alliances in the Czech general elections of 2021 and 2025, see Jarmara & Mrklas in this issue).

The 2025 general election were thus marked by anticipations as to whether its results would continue the prevailing trends in party politics. Specifically, whether the dominance of the technocratic-populist ANO 2011 party would continue, whether all parliamentary parties would retain their representation in the Chamber of Deputies, whether any of the newcomers would manage to overcome the 5% legal threshold, whether the two longstanding left-wing parties would return to the Chamber of Deputies after deciding to join forces in the Enough! electoral alliance, etc.

Given that the party system stability (and change) is a core variable for contemporary comparative politics research, the present descriptive analysis aims to explore the results of the 2025 general election within the framework of the evolving dynamics of contemporary Czech party politics. To this end, the single-country case study combines two specific scholarly approaches to the study of party system change, namely power dispersion and party system volatility. The power dispersion (or fragmentation) approach focuses on size and balance within the party system, while the approach deals with the net change in electoral support for political parties. More specifically, it focuses both on the continuity and volatility of party competition as indicators of the multi-component conceptualisation of the party system stability and change, and on changes in its format.

The rest of the study is therefore structured as follows. The very next section addresses the conceptualisation of the party system stability and change, which serves as a framework for analysis. This is followed by a descriptive analysis of the 2025 general election results and their discussion in the context of the trajectories of Czech party politics to date. The study concludes that, notwithstanding the results of the 2025 general election, which suggests signs of continuity rather than discontinuity in the dynamics of Czech party politics, the election cannot be considered either a realigning election, or a political contest maintaining the *status quo*.

2. Party system stability and change: concepts and measures

There is a relatively long tradition of studying party systems dating back almost as far as systemic research on political parties. Since concepts are often anchored in the historical contexts of their origins, early studies focused primarily on party systems as more or less stable configurations that differ in the number of parties and/or their relative strength, emphasising their stability (see, among others, Duverger, 1951; Dahl, 1966; Blondel, 1968; Rokkan, 1968; Sartori, 1976). Similarly, at that time, the number of political parties was identified as a key factor in assessing the party system stability. An advanced method of analysis in this regard is the effective number of parties by Laakso and Taagepera (1979), which is one aspect of the party system stability, with fluctuations in the effective number of parties expressing the instability in the party system.

However, since the late 1970s at the latest, European party systems have undergone substantial transformations. Consequently, significant questions can be raised regarding the continued utility of these studies, particularly their effectiveness assessing patterns of continuity and change (e.g., Mair, 1997; Wolinetz, 2006). For instance, although Sartori's (1976) approach remains relevant for many scholars to this day, Mair (1997) highlighted that its explanatory capacity has clearly diminished, as most competitive party systems of the late 20th century fell into the increasingly universal category of moderate pluralism, while alternative types such as classic bipartism or polarised pluralism seemed redundant at that time⁵. Instead, increasing electoral volatility and the electoral successes of several new political parties have sparked growing scholarly interest in examining party system changes.

For instance, drawing upon Dahl (1966) and Rokkan's (1968) pioneering contributions, Mair (1997) advanced an alternative approach to the classification of party systems, namely the concept of party system closure, distinguishing between closed and open structures of competition. This approach builds around the structure of party competition or, more specifically, the extent to which that competition is predictable, as it investigates the degree to which alternation in government occurs, the degree to which the alternative governmental formulae are innovative, and last but not least the range of parties gaining access to government, and was intended to be a suitable tool for measuring the stability of patterns of cooperation between parties (by focusing on patterns of cooperation and conflict between parties at the government level) and the institutionalisation of the party system. Later on, in order to provide a better differentiation of any temporal changes to interparty interaction, Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2016) further elaborated Mair's original conceptualization, which is largely dichotomous, and offered their own operationalisation of continuous variables indicating party system closure.

Similarly, refining Blondel's (1968; 1990) classification and, to a lesser extent, Sartori's (1976) typology, an alternative approach combining the number of parliamentary parties with their relative size and strength was developed by Siaroff (2000). In addition to quantitative indicators used to classify individual party systems, Siaroff also depends on qualitative estimates of balance. Furthermore, given the relative overcrowding observed within the moderate pluralism category in recent years, Siaroff's classification facilitates a more nuanced understanding of this category by offering a more refined scheme with four separate types of moderate multiparty systems. The increased number of types of multiparty systems also makes it possible to track and analyse even minor changes in party systems over time (cf. Wolinetz, 2006, p. 58).

Last but not least, O'Dwyer (2014) proposed a two-part conceptualisation when comparing party system stability in post-communist Europe. Specifically, the author employed two indicators derived from election results, namely the party system continuity, measured as the aggregate electoral support for long-standing political parties, and the party system volatility, which captures the dynamics of electoral support for political parties running in each of two consecutive elections. The author posits that the rationale behind the research design stems from the recognition that the former measure, by its very nature, is incapable of capturing all changes in the organisational continuity of political parties over time. A salient example of this phenomenon is the decline and subsequent recovery in support for a political party. Consequently, party system volatility is incorporated as a secondary component of party system stability, thereby providing a measure that can effectively address this inherent limitation.

Drawing upon this theoretical background, the present single-country case study employs a multi-component conceptualisation of party system dynamics, which is expressed by indicators representing fundamental and well-established dimensions of party politics and its dynamics, namely party system continuity, effective number of parties (as a measure of party system fragmentation), party system volatility and electoral polarisation. In all instances, these are respected, yet relatively simple indicators commonly used in electoral studies. In this respect, the case study focuses on both the electoral and parliamentary arena. Last but not least, the issue under scrutiny is also assessed in terms of the party system format and its transformations, whereby the party system change involves the transition from one class of party system to another. In light of the aforementioned rationales and with the objective of utilising a more or less complementary set of indicators, an adaptation of Siaroff's (2000) eightfold classification of party systems is utilised as an analytical framework. This framework may provide a more accurate and unambiguous picture of the changes in the party system and structures of party competition. Despite some criticism, this approach offers several advantages compared to, for instance, Sartori's (1976) famous typology of competitive party systems. In particular, it is based on both absolute and relative

party size and, in contrast to Sartori, it offers a clear definition of quantitative indicators (see below), thus enabling classification of individual party systems.

2.1 Party system continuity

The concept of party system continuity reflects the transformation of party systems across multiple election cycles. O'Dwyer (2014, p. 519) proposes measuring it by aggregating the vote share of longstanding political parties. This is based on the assumption that in unstable party systems, political parties lack a stable voter base, which is why the aggregate share of votes cast for longstanding political parties declines over time. Conversely, in stable party systems, established political parties are better able to secure long-term voter support.

However, given the highly dynamic development of political parties in the Czech Republic, especially in the early 1990s, it will be necessary to modify or partially reduce O'Dwyer's original approach in this study. Specifically, the present study focuses on changes in the aggregated electoral support of the so-called core of the party system, i.e. political parties with long-term representation in the Chamber of Deputies (e.g., Charvát & Just, 2016; Bakke, 2022a; 2022b). The aggregation of electoral support for these 'core' parties is set to serve as the primary indicator of the party system's continuity.

2.2 Effective number of parties

Beyond the party system continuity, the aforementioned indicators also provide information regarding the tendency of the party system towards greater concentration or, conversely, fragmentation. Alternative expression of comparable information may be provided by Laakso and Taagepera's (1979)⁶ concept of effective number of parties, which is usually considered an indicator of party system fragmentation. Indeed, the most obvious expression of party system change at the party level is the alteration in the party system size.

The effective number of parties quantifies the party system size by indicating 'the number of hypothetical *equal*-size parties that would have the same total *effect* on fractionalization of the system as have the actual parties of *unequal* size' (p. 4; italics taken from the original). If there is only one party in the political system, the effective number of parties is equal to {1}; if there are more political parties, then the effective number of parties is greater than {1}. If all parties are of equal size, then the effective number of parties is equal to the actual number of parties. The effective number of parties thus not only assesses the number of political parties in the system, but also takes into account their electoral strength and relative electoral size.

A compelling argument can be made in favour of the effective number of parties, as it is relatively easy to interpret ‘in operationally unequivocal terms’ (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979, p. 4), and without having to establish arbitrary rules for counting political parties (Shugart, 1992, p. 211). At the same time, this measure has the capacity to capture every change, however negligible, in the number of votes or seats won by each political party in the election. Last but not least, although criticised for some of its shortcomings (e.g., Molinar, 1991; Dunleavy & Boucek, 2003; Golosov, 2010; see also Taagepera & Shugart, 1989, p. 259; Taagepera, 2007, pp. 47–64), the effective number of parties remains the most commonly used (quantitative) measure of party system size, as it is still more applicable than any other proposed alternative (Taagepera, 2007, p. 56).

The effective number of parties is calculated as the reciprocal of the sum of the shares of votes or seats of each party:

$$N = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2}$$

where p_i is the fractional share (of votes or seats, as the case may be) of the i -th party. The effective number of parties can be calculated in two ways, either at the electoral level as the effective number of elective parties, taking into account the share of votes of all parties running in a given election, or as the effective number of parliamentary parties for parties with parliamentary representation, counting the fractional shares of party seats. Hence, this measure establishes a connection between the parliamentary and electoral arena.

The effective number of parties is also supplemented by information on the absolute number of parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies, which thus serves as an auxiliary indicator of the party system size. While the absolute number of parliamentary parties possesses limited informative value, given its inability to account for the actual strength of individual parties and their position and role within the party system, its values offer immediate and clear insight into the data’s implications. In addition, in instances where inaccuracies arise in the effective number of parties, this approach serves as a valuable corrective mechanism, thereby ensuring the accuracy of measurements pertaining to the party system size.

However, when determining the number of parliamentary parties (whether absolute or effective) in the Czech case, it is necessary to deal with the fact that in some cases certain political parties ran in the general election as part of electoral alliances, but subsequent to the election, these parties did not establish a joint parliamentary party group; instead, each party established separate parliamentary group. This phenomenon was exemplified by the electoral alliance of the Christian Democrats and the Freedom Union in 2002, or electoral alliance TOGETHER, comprising of the Civic Democrats, Christian Democrats and TOP09, in 2021

and 2025. In the present analysis, in cases where political parties that ran in the election as part of an electoral alliance but formed separate parliamentary groups after the election, the effective number of elective parties is calculated using the vote share of the entire electoral alliance⁷, while the effective number of parliamentary parties is calculated according to the number of MPs in each party's parliamentary group separately. A similar procedure is then followed when determining the absolute number of parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies.

2.3 Party system volatility

To complement the numerical party indicators, the concept of party system volatility has been employed to represent the electoral dimension of party system change (e.g., Casal Bértoa & Weber, 2019). The party system volatility is usually calculated using the classic Pedersen's (1979) index, which expresses the aggregate change in electoral support for political parties between two, usually consecutive, elections at the party system level. However, this concept of volatility fails to distinguish between situations where voters switch their votes between established political parties and situations where voters shift their votes towards new and/or outsider parties, with the political consequences of these two different types of voter shift can be different.

While moderate to high levels of volatility among longstanding parties can be considered a healthy component of democratic systems as it reallocates power between relevant political actors and enables desirable alternation of governments, volatility caused by the entry and exit of parties from the political system tends to be much more closely associated with instability as it significantly weakens the predictability of interactions within the party system. Or, while the former case reflects temporary shifts in votes within the existing party system without necessarily foreshadowing its transformation, since such shifts in electoral support may not fundamentally change the structure of political competition or threaten the predictability of interactions within the system, the latter case indicates a tendency towards the transformation of the existing party system. Indeed, high volatility towards new parties reflects voters' dissatisfaction with the composition and functioning of the original party system. At the same time, this situation reflects the weak roots of established political parties in society. The entry of a new actor into the system, possibly exacerbated by the departure of some of the longstanding parties, then necessarily transforms the existing interactions between political actors and disrupts the balance of the system (e.g., Powell & Tucker, 2014, p. 124).

Hence, scholars later proposed categorising volatility into two distinct components, namely within-system volatility, which is caused by the transfer

of votes between existing parties, and extra-system volatility, which is caused by new party entry and old party exit (e.g., Powell & Tucker, 2014; Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017; Mainwaring, Gervasoni, & España-Najera, 2017; cf. Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Birch, 2003; Rose & Munro, 2003)⁸. Furthermore, as Powell and Tucker (2014) emphasised, it is especially important to distinguish between volatility among established parties and volatility towards new and/or outsider parties when studying party politics in post-communist countries. In the context of these party systems, volatility has been significantly influenced by a shift in votes towards new parties, while longstanding parties have experienced erosion in voter support (see also Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2015).

Hence, the present case study employs the strategy proposed by Powell and Tucker (2014) for measuring the party system volatility. According to this approach, the party system volatility is disaggregated into two separate components, within-system volatility and extra-system volatility, with the total party system volatility is simply the sum of these two components.

The within-system volatility (V_B , according to the Powell and Tucker's coding) is calculated using the original Pedersen index (1979). However, only all stable (continuing) parties (p_s) that participated in both consecutive elections under review (i.e., election t and election $t + 1$) are included in the calculation:

$$V_B = \frac{\sum_{s=1}^n |p_{st} - p_{s(t+1)}|}{2}$$

By contrast, the calculation of extra-system volatility includes only old parties (p_o) that participated in the previous election (t) but not in the current election ($t + 1$), and new parties (p_w) that participated in the current election ($t + 1$) but not in the previous election (t)⁹. The extra-system volatility (V_A , according to the Powell and Tucker's coding) is thus calculated as follows:

$$V_A = \frac{|\sum_{o=1}^n p_{ot} + \sum_{w=1}^n p_{w(t+1)}|}{2}$$

From its very definition, the total party system volatility (V) is equal to the sum of the extra-system (V_A) and within-system (V_B) volatility. Or,

$$V = V_A + V_B.$$

The values of the party system volatility index range within the closed interval $<0; 100>$, where the value of $\{0\}$ indicate a situation in which the electoral support of all parties remained unchanged in two consecutive elections. Conversely, the extreme value of $\{100\}$ implies that none of the political parties retained a single vote from the previous election, but instead all the votes were distributed amongst the new parties that emerged in the subsequent election.

A decline in the volatility may be indicative of an increasing degree of stability within the party system under examination. Conversely, increasing values indicate the emergence of destabilising tendencies, and high volatility may even indicate the breakdown of established patterns of voter behaviour.

2.4 Electoral polarisation

Since party system volatility in post-communist countries has been significantly influenced by the entry of new political parties, with recent years seeing the rise of challenger anti-establishment and/or populist parties in European democracies, i.e., parties that are considered to provide a 'strong anti-institutional impulse' (Kriesi, 2014, p. 363), and thus to thrive on challenging the status quo (Katz & Mair, 2018; Gonthier, 2026), with these developments are believed to result in an increase in political polarisation (e.g., Dalton, 2021; Schedler, 2023; see also Enyedi, 2016), the present case study focuses also on electoral polarisation. Indeed, political polarisation is widely regarded as a crucial parameter in the functioning of party competition (Schmitt & Franzmann, 2020), or even as an indicator of 'the quality of party competition' (Dalton, 2008).

This study draws upon the approach of Casal Bértoa and Weber (2019) to measure electoral polarisation as the sum of the shares of votes obtained by challenger anti-establishment reform and/or populist parties in the respective election. Casal Bértoa and Weber (2019) define such a party as one that meet 'all of the following criteria: (1) it perceives itself as a challenger to the parties that make up the political establishment; (2) it asserts that a fundamental divide exists between the political establishment and the people (implying that all establishment parties, be they in government or in opposition, are essentially the same); and 3) it challenges the status quo in terms of major policy issues and political system issues' (p. 234; see also Abedi, 2004, p. 12)¹⁰.

2.5 Party system format

As mentioned above, with regard to the format of the party system and its transformations over time, Siaroff's (2000) classification has been employed, with party system change involving the replacement of one type of party system by another. Specifically, Siaroff utilises the number of parties with at least 3% of the parliamentary seats to distinguish between three overall categories of party systems, namely two-party systems, moderate multiparty systems, and extreme multiparty systems. In the next step, Siaroff employs three additional indicators, namely two-party seat concentration (2PSC), the seat ratio between the first and the second party (SR1:2), and the seat ratio between the second and the third party (SR2:3), to expand the categories into eight more precise types of

party systems, reflecting current forms of party systems much better than the original typology of Sartori.

Since Siaroff’s classification has not been utilised for cross-country comparative analysis in this study, but for a single-country case study, it seems beneficial to adapt the measure of the number of parties with at least 3% of seats to the total number of parliamentary parties (*PP*), i.e. parties with representation in the Chamber of Deputies. Although, with the exception of the 2021 election, the condition of 3% of parliamentary seats is also fully applicable to the Czech case, given that the lowest share of parliamentary representation was precisely 3% of seats (the Green Party in 2006 and Mayors and Independents in 2017), the elimination of the 3%-of-seats condition allows for the inclusion of the Czech Pirate Party in 2021 in the classification (the Pirates won four out of the 200 seats in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2021 election). Furthermore, similar to the effective number of parliamentary parties, in instances where political parties contest the election as part of an electoral alliance but subsequently formed separate parliamentary party groups, such a coalition is not evaluated as a single political party, but each party is assessed separately.

Table 1:
Adaptation of Siaroff’s classification of party systems

party system type	classification criteria
two-party system	$PP = 2-3; 2PSC \geq 95\%$
two-and-a-half-party system	$PP = 3-5; 2PSC = 80-95\%; SR1: 2 < 1.6; SR2: 3 \geq 1.8$
moderate multipartism with one dominant party	$PP = 3-5; SR1: 2 \geq 1.6$
moderate multipartism with two main parties	$PP = 3-5; SR1: 2 < 1.6; SR2: 3 \geq 1.8$
moderate multipartism with a balance among the parties	$PP = 3-5; SR1: 2 < 1.6; SR2: 3 < 1.8$
extreme multipartism with one dominant party	$PP \geq 6; SR1: 2 \geq 1.6$
extreme multipartism with two main parties	$PP \geq 6; SR1: 2 < 1.6; SR2: 3 \geq 1.8$
extreme multipartism with a balance among the parties	$PP \geq 6; SR1: 2 < 1.6; SR2: 3 < 1.8$

Source: Adapted from Siaroff (2000, pp. 69–71).

3. Czech party system and the 2025 general election

In many respects, the course and results of the 2025 general election followed on from those of the previous election. Above all, the political landscape remained highly polarised, particularly along the lines of ‘nativist culture wars’ (Buben & Kouba, 2026) and framed by a populist vs. anti-populist divide (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). Indeed, even in 2025, the so-called democratic parties governing between 2021 and 2025 continued to rely largely on an anti-populist electoral strategy, in which these parties ‘presented a strong dichotomy

of populism versus democracy, contrasting economically irresponsible, pro-Eastern, divisive, amoral and untruthful populism with their own economically responsible, pro-Western, unifying, moral and truthful style of politics’ (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2025, p. 81). Furthermore, as Buben and Kouba (2026) pointed out, not only the national-conservative SPD party and Enough! electoral alliance, but also the ANO party were portrayed by their opponents in the anti-populist camp as Putin’s explicit or potential collaborators (literally).

This resulted in an intense competition between the bloc of the so-called democratic parties, i.e., the Civic Democrats, Christian Democrats, and TOP 09 running as part of the TOGETHER electoral alliance, as well as the Mayors and Independents and the Pirates, and the populist bloc, dominated by the ANO party led by the former prime minister Andrej Babiš (from 2017 to 2021), with both blocs maintaining more or less consistent levels of electoral support (for more details on electoral polarisation, see below). Meanwhile, the ANO party was vying for dominance within the populist bloc against the SPD and Motorists, as well as against the national-conservative electoral alliance Enough!, which ultimately failed to win seats in the 2025 general election (winning ‘only’ 4.30% of the vote).

The continuous electoral polarisation contributed significantly to a further increase in voter turnout, with almost 250,000 additional voters (an increase of 3.5 percentage points as compared to the 2021 election)¹¹, with the ANO party in particular succeeding in mobilising voters (an increase of almost half a million votes, i.e., one-third of the vote, compared to 2021). In terms of party system continuity, all parliamentary parties from the previous election cycle retained their parliamentary representation, while only one new political party, the Motorists (gaining almost 7% of the vote)¹², joined the Chamber of Deputies (see Table 2). At the same time, the two longstanding main left-wing parties, the Social Democrats and Communists, remained outside the parliamentary arena, despite running in the 2025 election as part of the shared electoral alliance Enough!, alongside the National Socialists and several independents.

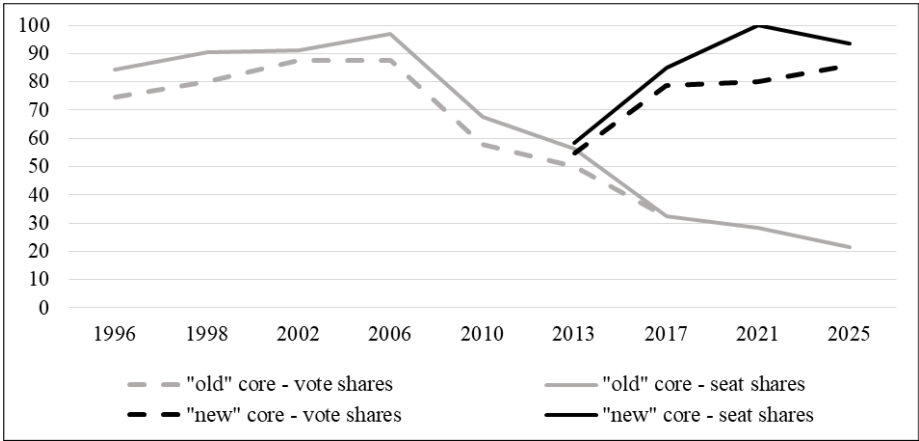
Table 2:
The Czech 2025 general election results: parliamentary parties

	the 2025 general election			the 2021 general election		
	votes (abs.)	Votes (in %)	seats	votes (abs.)	votes (in %)	seats
ANO	1,940,507	34.51	80	1,458,140	27.12	72
TOGETHER	1,313,346	23.36	ODS: 27	1,493,905	27.79	ODS: 34
			KDU-ČSL: 16			KDU-ČSL: 23
			TOP 09: 9			TOP 09: 14
SPD	437,611	7.78	15	513,910	9.56	20
Pirates	504,537	8.97	18	839,776	15.62	33
STAN	631,512	11.23	22			4
Motorists	380,601	6.77	13	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Volby.cz.

The results of the 2025 general election also suggest that ANO has replaced the former longstanding left-wing parties and successfully taken over their voters, a trend that had already been indicated by many previous studies (e.g., Hájek, 2017; Lysek, Pánek, & Lebeda, 2021; Voda & Havlík, 2021; Linek et al., 2023; Cirhan & Collini, 2025). Even though the populist vs. anti-populist divide has become a significant framework of party competition – one that, at first glance, has to some extent weakened the salience of the traditional left-right divide, traditional societal cleavages actually overlap with this new, rather instrumental divide and continue to be strong determinants of voter behaviour (for more details on changing effects of class on party choice, see Linek & Škvřňák in this issue). Since the socio-economic agenda remains an important backdrop to the political competition in the Czech Republic, with the cultural dimension – albeit variably approached by each party – being the other salient dimension (Vérteši, Kopeček & Havlík, 2025; see also Hájek, 2018), it is precisely in ANO's propensity to appeal to left-wing voters (combined with culturally conservative positions) that the foundation of their electoral success lies. At the same time, these developments thus confirm the aforementioned thesis on the reconfiguration of the 'core' of the Czech party system, which since 2017 at the latest has been formed by ANO, ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09, STAN, SPD, and the Pirates (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Aggregate electoral support for and parliamentary representation of the 'core' of the Czech party system (in %)¹³

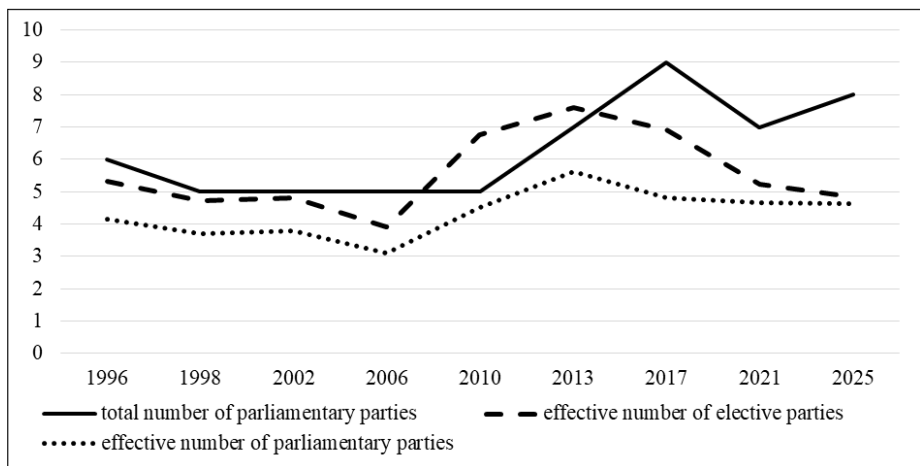


Source: The author based on volby.cz.

Similarly, in terms of the party system size, the results of the 2025 general election confirm the continuous consolidation trend that has been evident since at least the previous two general elections (in 2017 and 2021). Despite Motorists entering the Chamber of Deputies as a new party after the 2025 election, the

Czech party system did not actually become more fragmented; in fact, the opposite occurred. Specifically, the effective number of elective parties decreased from 5.23 to 4.83, while the effective number of parliamentary parties fell slightly from 4.67 to 4.64 between 2021 and 2025 (see Figure 2). Although short of majority, this phenomenon can be attributed primarily to the augmented electoral strength of the ANO party, accompanied by the partial changes in the relative size of the running parties (see Table 2).

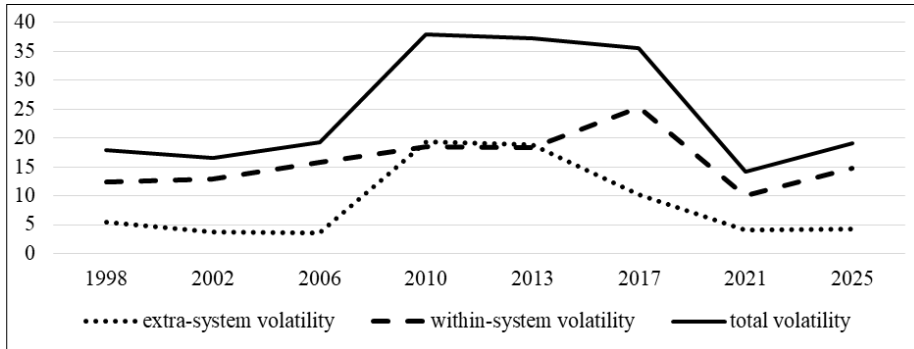
Figure 2:
Effective number of parties



Source: The author based on volby.cz.

The 2025 general election also served to consolidate the earlier trend of stabilising party system volatility. Although the 2025 election witnessed an increase in the aggregate change in electoral support for political parties as compared to 2021 (an increase of around 5 points from 14.20 to 19.06), the value and internal structure of the party system volatility are comparable to those of the era of stability in the Czech party system in the late 1990s and 2000s. The increase in party system volatility in 2025 was primarily attributable to its within-system component (an increase from 10.07 to 14.81), mainly as a result of increased electoral support for the ANO party, but also for the Mayors and Independents, and the Pirates, while the SPOLU electoral alliance lost votes. However, these shifts in voter support resulted in a government alternation following the 2025 election, when Fiala's 2021 coalition government, comprising representatives of the so-called democratic parties, was replaced by Babiš's coalition government, consisting of nominees of the populist bloc (namely ANO, SPD, and the Motorists). In contrast, values for extra-system volatility remained comparable to those of 2021 (4.13 in 2021 vs. 4.25 in 2025).

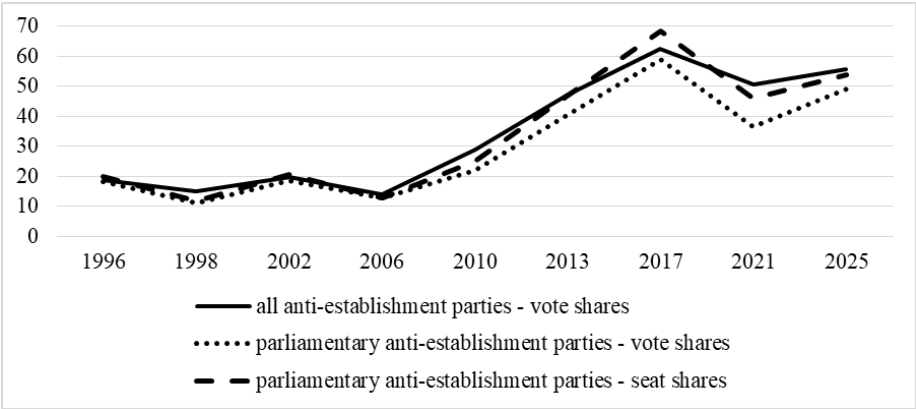
Figure 3:
Party system volatility



Source: The author based on volby.cz.

As far as electoral polarisation is concerned, the results of the 2025 general election mirror stability and continuity rather than an expansion in the share of votes for the populist bloc, with the ANO party dominating within this bloc, as was the case in 2021¹⁴. Indeed, the total electoral support for anti-establishment and/or populist parties has remained steady at around 50% of the vote since 2013¹⁵, with these parties winning 55.65% of the vote in 2025 (see Figure 4). Similarly, the considerably higher increase in the aggregate vote and seat shares of parliamentary anti-establishment parties in 2025 was caused not only by the increase in the electoral strength of the ANO party, but above all by the fact that the right-wing, Eurosceptic Motorists managed to overcome the 5% legal threshold and thus gain parliamentary representation, which the Oath party narrowly failed to achieve in the 2021 general election (with 4.68% of the vote). Moreover, ANO's strong election results came largely at the expense of the other populist actors, namely the SPD party and the Enough! electoral alliance, both of which significantly underperformed in 2025. Specifically, the SPD party lost roughly one-fifth of its voters in 2025 compared to 2021 (i.e., a decline in electoral support of almost 2 percentage points). This occurred even despite the SPD party's attempts to unify the national-conservative camp, both by capitalising on anti-immigration sentiment and social frustration in structurally disadvantaged regions (such as Northwestern Bohemia and Northern Moravia), and by placing candidates from rival parties (the Freedom Party, Tricolor, or PRO party) on its party lists, without, however, forming a formal electoral coalition.

Figure 4:
Electoral polarisation



Source: The author based on volby.cz.

Last but not least, the 2025 general election did not bring about any alterations to the configuration of party system format. Building upon the Siaroff's (2000) classification, the Czech party system (since 2017) can be defined as a case of extreme multipartism with one dominant party, the ANO party, whose parliamentary representation is approximately three times higher than that of the second largest parliamentary party, the ODS, with the two largest parliamentary parties holding a combined total of just over 50% of the seats¹⁶.

Table 3:
Czech party system types since 1996

	party system type	PP	2PSC	SR1:2	SR2:3
1996	extreme multipartism with two main parties	6	64.50	1.1148	2.7727
1998	moderate multipartism with two main parties	5	68.50	1.1746	2.6250
2002	moderate multipartism with a balance among parties	5	64.00	1.0269	1.4146
2006	moderate multipartism with two main parties	5	77.50	1.0946	2.8462
2010	moderate multipartism with a balance among parties	5	54.50	1.0566	1.2927
2013	extreme multipartism with a balance among parties	7	48.50	1.0638	1.4242
2017	extreme multipartism with one dominant party	9	51.50	3.1200	1.1364
2021	extreme multipartism with one dominant party	7	53.00	2.1176	1.0303
2025	extreme multipartism with one dominant party	8	53.50	2.9630	1.2273

Source: The author based on volby.cz.

4. Conclusions

The present case study focused on analysing the results of the 2025 general election in the context of the recent trajectories of Czech party politics. To this end, a multi-component conceptualisation of party system dynamics was employed, encompassing well-established indicators such as party system continuity, effective number of parties, party system volatility, and electoral polarisation, but also in terms of the party system format and its change. More specifically, the objective of the descriptive analysis was to ascertain whether the 2025 election would confirm the prevailing trends in party politics or whether they would become a source of further change in the Czech party system.

Drawing upon this analytical framework, the presented study revealed, in line with the findings of Buben and Kouba (2026), that the change in the structure of the Czech party system following the 2025 general election was modest at best, with the 2025 election reflecting a gradual culmination of existing long-term structural trends within the Czech society and politics rather than a critical election. Indeed, the election results show signs of party system continuity, with all parliamentary parties maintaining their representation in the Chamber of Deputies, while only a single new party, the Motorists, gained entry to the lower chamber of the Czech Parliament. Similarly, the level of party system fragmentation decreased, while the levels of party system volatility increase only slightly, mainly due to its within-system component (while keeping the extra-system volatility at a low level). Last but not least, the political competition remained highly polarised along the populist vs. anti-populist divide in 2025. Hence, the 2025 election seems unlikely to serve as a catalyst for transformation in the structure of political competition in the Czech Republic.

In terms of the consequences for party politics, Norris and Evans (1999) distinguished three types of elections, namely maintaining elections, dealigning elections, and realigning elections¹⁷. Drawing upon the aforementioned findings, it can be concluded that the 2025 general election cannot be regarded as a dealigning event. Similarly, it seems inappropriate to consider the 2025 election as a realigning contest. However, notwithstanding the results of the 2025 general election indicating signs of continuity rather than discontinuity in the dynamics of Czech party politics, it is evident that the 2025 contest cannot be either considered a typical maintaining election. This is evidenced in particular by the rise in electoral support for the ANO party and the decline in support for the TOGETHER electoral alliance, resulting in a government alternation from the so-called democratic bloc to the populist bloc, consisting of the ANO party, the SPD party, and the Motorists.

Given the recent illiberal backlash in Central Europe, it is clear that the rise of populists to power and 'the consolidation of illiberal space' may pose some risk to the prospects of Czech democracy. In general, populist leaders

in power tend to alter the quality of democracy by challenging the liberal pillar of representative democracy. Furthermore, although short of constitutional majority that enabled Hungary's Fidesz to overhaul the political system into an illiberal democracy, Babiš's 2026 government could pose a threat to liberal democracy because, as for the first time in the country's post-1989 history, a populist right-wing political party, the SPD party, has become part of the government coalition – albeit only as a junior coalition partner, and its chairman Okamura has even become the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies. Next, the populist vs. anti-populist divide, which mostly frames the political conflict around cultural issues (such as the nature of democracy, moral and social values, the role of civil society and its institutions, foreign policy, minority rights, etc.) creates fertile ground for affective polarisation, which can be dangerous for democratic developments, as it represents a latent factor that subtly undermines support for underlying democratic principles. However, given the institutional structure of the Czech political system and the active civil society (*vis-à-vis* a perceived threat), it appears that the illiberal backlash is not an inevitable consequence of the 2025 Czech election. Hence, the long-term prospects for Czech democracy depend on the ability of both the political system and civil society to replace affective polarisation with genuine policy-based competition and to resist the hollowing of liberal democracy (cf. Buben & Kouba, 2023; 2026).

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Appendix A

Party system volatility: coding scheme

- The only case that can be considered relatively straightforward is those in which a party ran in both elections and is organisationally the same party. Such party is designated as stable (continuous) party (p_s) and is included in the calculation of within-system volatility.
- In the event of an electoral alliance comprising multiple political parties that have ran in the previous election, such an electoral alliance is classified as a continuing party (p_s). Its electoral support is compared with the support of all the original parties constituting the electoral alliance, both prior to the relevant election in which these parties coalesced and, where applicable, also in the subsequent election.
- In the case of a merger between multiple parties, the newly established party is considered new (p_w) only if it is a new organisation and uses a completely new name.
- If, on the other hand, the merger between multiple parties takes the form of the integration of smaller parties into the organisational structure of a large party, thereby maintaining the original organisational structure and name, the calculation is carried out in the same way as in the case of an electoral alliance; i.e., such a party is considered to be continuing (p_s) and its electoral support is compared with the total support of all parties that have integrated in the electoral alliance.
- In the event that a party splits into multiple new parties with a new organisation and a new name, the parties thus established are considered new (p_w).
- Similarly, in the event of the establishment of a new party through the process of splitting off from another party or through the departure of some members from the original party, the party thus established is considered new (p_n).
- In the same case, if the original party continues with its original name and the same organisation, it is considered to be organizationally the same and therefore a continuing party (p_s).
- In instances where there have been multiple alterations in party names and organisational structure across electoral cycles as a result of mergers and splits, the newly established parties are considered new (p_w).
- If, on the other hand, the original organisation was retained but the party was (only) renamed, such a political party is considered to be continuing (p_s).
- Parties that only ran in the first election but did not participate in the second election are labelled as old parties (p_o).
- Parties that only participated in the second election are considered new parties (p_w).

(for more details, see Charvát & Just, 2016; see also, among others, Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Birch, 2003; Šedo, 2007; Casal Bértoa & Mair, 2012; Linek & Lyons, 2013; Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017; Linek et al., 2023).

Appendix B

List of challenger populist and/or anti-establishment reform parties

	Name	1996	1998	2002	2006	2010	2013	2017	2021	2025
ANO	Action of Dissatisfied Citizens						18,7	29,64	27,12	34,51
KSCM	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	10,33	11,03	18,51	12,8	11,27	14,9	7,76	3,60	
Stacilo	Enough									4,30
AUTO	Motorists for Themselves									6,77
USVIT	Dawn of Direct Democracy						6,88			
SPD	Freedom and Direct Democracy							10,64	9,56	7,78
VV	Public Affairs					10,88				
PIRATI	Czech Pirate Party					0,80	2,66	10,79		
DSSS	Workers' Party of Social Justice					1,14	0,86	0,20		
HV	Cheer up-voting bloc						0,42			
SSO	Party of Free Citizens					0,74	2,46	1,56		
RMS	Republicans of Miroslav Sládek	8,01	3,90	0,97		0,03		0,19		
SDS	Party of Democratic Socialism			0,00						
SDL	Democratic Left Party	0,13								
MNS	Moravian National Party	0,27								
NEZ/DEM	Independent Democrats (chairman V. Železný)									
Prisaha	Oath								4,68	1,07
CRPM	Czech Republic in First Place!									0,22
Trikolora	Tricolour Citizens' Movement								2,76	
SSZR	Sovereignty-Common Sense Party			0,22	0,46	3,67	0,27	0,72	1,33	0,18
ND	National Democracy ¹				0,23					
KC	The Crown of Bohemia				0,13	0,07	0,17		0,16	0,13
NS	National Party				0,17					
OC	We Will Open Czechia								0,40	
M	Moravians				0,23	0,22			0,26	
MZH	Moravian Land Movement								0,03	0,06
	Swiss Democracy								0,31	0,21
HP	Sources Movement								0,15	
Urza.cz	Don't Vote Urza								0,12	0,00
ANS	Alliance of National Forces								0,09	
COS	Path of Responsible Society							0,07		
R	Realists							0,71		
Levice	The Left								0,01	0,05
	Rebels									0,07
SMS	The State Should Serve									0,05
Voluntia	Voluntia									0,13
JaSaN	Clear Signal of Independents									0,06
HOP	Movement of Citizens and Entrepreneurs									0,06
BPI	Bloc against Islamization							0,10		
RN-VU	Order of the Nation - Patriotic Union							0,17		
APB	Alliance for the Future								0,21	
STOP	Stop					0,06				
		18,74	14,93	19,70	14,02	28,88	47,32	62,55	50,79	55,65

Source: Volby.cz.

Endnotes:

- 1 According to Kunc (2000), the term reconstruction may be employed in situations involving alterations to the party system where a competitive party system has already been established (i.e., 'transitions' from democracy to democracy). Conversely, under circumstances of change that were not preceded by a competitive party system (i.e., transitions from non-democratic regimes to democracy), the term construction seems to be appropriate. However, based on Kunc's preliminary examination of the party system change in Czechoslovakia and other democratising countries, the author realised that even many years of non-democratic rule do not lead to the construction of party systems on a *tabula rasa* without historical reminiscences. Kunc thus proposed the term 're/construction' for such cases, which, in his opinion, best captures the essence of the process of party system change after the end of a non-democratic regime.
- 2 Key Jr. (1955) defined the 'critical election' as a contest with a relatively high level of participation, whose results bring about intense and immediate transformation within the party system, and whose specific characteristic is that the change that occurred in these elections is enduring and remains in place for several subsequent elections. Norris and Evans (1999) later add that although critical elections are often the result of seemingly insignificant and long-term changes, it is precisely the critical election that symbolise a change in the party system, with the existing party balance shifting towards a new arrangement that subsequently stabilises and consolidates.
- 3 For more details on recent trends in the Czech Social Democratic Party, see e.g., Bakke & Sitter, 2021; Šaradín & Eichler, 2023; see also Perottino & Polášek, 2013.
- 4 For more details on recent trends in the Czech Communist Party, see e.g., Cirhan & Collini, 2025; Perottino, 2025.
- 5 Today, however, polarised pluralisms are widespread and significant party system formats even in Western European democracies.
- 6 The authorship of the effective number of parties is attributed to Laakso and Taagepera, although it was in fact first introduced by Laakso (1977) in his study on the fragmentation of the Finnish party system.
- 7 In the case of a joint candidacy within an electoral alliance, it is not possible to determine what share of the votes each party in the alliance received individually.
- 8 The terms 'within-system' and 'extra-system' volatility is taken from Mainwaring, Gervasoni, and España-Najera (2017). Powell and Tucker (2014) In a similar context, Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2017) propose the terms 'volatility by alteration' and 'volatility by regeneration'. However, the former terminology seems to be more appropriate and comprehensible for the purposes of the present analysis and is thus employed by this case study.
- 9 For more details on coding parties as 'stable', 'old', and 'new' in this context, see Appendix A.
- 10 For a list of challenger populist and/or anti-establishment reform parties, see Appendix B.
- 11 In 2025, voter turnout was 68.95% (with 5,621,717 valid votes), compared to 65.43% in 2021 (with 5,375,090 valid votes).
- 12 The party was founded in the spring of 2017 as the Referendum on the European Union party. However, in the autumn 2017 general election, the party received only 0.08% of the vote. In 2018, the party changed its name to the Independence Party of the Czech Republic, but did not participate in the 2021 parliamentary elections. Prior to the 2022 municipal elections in Prague, the party changed its name again, this time to Motorists for Themselves, but once more failed to achieve electoral success. The electoral breakthrough came in the 2024 European elections, when it exceeded the 5% threshold for the first time.
- 13 In the 2021 and the 2025 elections, the longstanding ODS and KDU-ČSL ran under electoral alliance with TOP 09 entering the parliamentary arena in 2010, which is why the vote share of the 'old' core cannot be determined.
- 14 In this context, shortly after the election, Czech political scientist Havlík even described the ANO party's clear victory as "a consolidation of the illiberal space" (Gultasli, 2025).
- 15 As mirrored in Figure 4, in 2017 the total vote share for populist parties was 62.55% of the vote. However, it should be noted that this result also includes the Czech Pirate Party (gaining 10.79%

of the vote and 22 seats in 2017), which ran on an challenger anti-establishment and even populist platform but soon after the election underwent a process of mainstreaming and joined the ranks of the so-called democratic bloc (for more details on electoral strategy trajectories of the Czech Pirates, see e.g. Naxera, 2023; Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2025; Naxera et al., 2026; see also Maškarinec, 2020; Pink & Folvarčný, 2020). In subsequent general elections, the Pirates are no longer included among challenger anti-establishment and/ or populist parties. If the Pirates had not been included in the calculation in 2017, the total electoral support for populist parties would have been 51.76% of the vote.

- 16 When focusing exclusively on the electoral arena – and thus treated electoral alliances (i.e., TOGETHER in 2021 and 2025, and Pirates and Mayors and Independents electoral alliance in 2021) as a single political party – the Czech party system would have taken the form of moderate multipartism with two main parties in 2021 and extreme multipartism with two main parties in 2025. Such a view would, however, be misleading and inconsistent with the actual distribution of parliamentary power, both because no joint parliamentary group was formed after either of these elections (instead, each political party established its own separate parliamentary group) and because these parties have been ideologically somewhat heterogeneous (although this ideological diversity was concealed during the 2021 and 2025 election campaigns under the guise of anti-populism).
- 17 Maintaining election encompasses contest that mirror the prevailing *status quo*. Consequently, political parties ‘only’ mobilise their traditional electorates, with the result that the existing party system structure and the balance of power in parliament remain more or less unchanged (there are only slight shifts in electoral support between the longstanding parties), nor is there a change of government. In the case of a dealigning election, on the other hand, the growing party system volatility caused by the weakening of social and psychological ties between parties and voters (dealignment) leads to the destabilisation of the existing party system and to less predictability and, conversely, greater fluidity in party competition. Finally, realigning election is distinguished by a realignment in the ideological basis of party competition (e.g., as a result of new issues and events), in the social base of electoral competition (when the social structure of party electoral bases changes in relation to existing cleavages), and in party identifications and voter loyalties (Norris & Evans, 1999).
- 18 Formerly, Law and Justice (2006-2014).