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Politologický časopis

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Under Pressure: The 2025 General Election in the Czech Republic

Vlastimil Havlík, Tomáš Cířhan,
Jakub Lysek¹

Abstract

This article discusses the context and the results of the 2025 general election in the Czech Republic. It stresses the importance of the change of the contextual conditions including the new geopolitical situation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and linked it to the domestic political outcomes. It concludes that the economic impact of the invasion (rise of inflation and pressures in the energy supply) fuelled growing discontent in the Czech society that helped the electoral success of populist political parties and subsequent formation of the populist government. Furthermore, the text analyses the electoral results, pointing to the uneven rise in electoral turnout and the change in the distribution of support among the political parties. Electoral turnout increase was primarily concentrated in socioeconomically vulnerable municipalities characterized by higher shares of primary-educated voters and elevated unemployment rates. The electoral results confirmed a progressive deepening of spatial polarization and reveal a clear pattern of territorial sorting among established political blocs (populist vs anti-populist). This divide was manifested along three dimensions: the classic urban-rural cleavage, the centrum-periphery axis, and a widening structural divergence between lagging, post-industrial regions and economically resilient and richer territories. The pattern aligns with broader European dynamics regarding the 'geography of discontent' where regional economic stagnation and peripheralization foster distinct party alignments.

Keywords: elections; party system; Czechia; populism; Babiš; radical right

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1. Context preceding the election

The Czech 2025 general elections were important for a number of reasons. They were held at a time of significant geopolitical instability, as the first general elections in the country since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The global political, security and economic pressures also combined with unique domestic pressures. Together these factors had a significant impact on the form and content of pre-election campaigns, as well as on the electoral outcomes. The elections were in the spotlight abroad due to the risk of populists returning to power (Havlík, 2025), as well as in the context of democratic backsliding and illiberal tendencies that were noticed to take place elsewhere across the region of Central-eastern Europe (CEE).

The party landscape prior to the 2025 elections was defined by two opposition populist parties, YES/Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) and Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), and the coalition governmental parties that ran under two electoral coalitions of Together (SPOLU) and PirSTAN (Czech Pirate Party and Mayors and Independents). SPOLU grouped the right-wing conservative parties like Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (TOP 09) and the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL), while the centre-right coalition of PirSTAN, consisting of the Czech Pirate Party and Mayors of Independents, aimed at the younger, more liberal, urban-based electorates. Since the 2021 general elections, the Czech party system had one relatively unique aspect, as it completely lacked a parliamentary representation of left-wing parties. Both established parties of the traditional left, Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) that later rebranded to Social Democracy (SOCDEM), and Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) lost their representation when their vote shares fell under the electoral threshold. Their attempt to return to the parliament was not successful, despite uniting together under the Stačilo! (Enough) brand just ahead of the 2025 elections, prolonging the crisis of the left in Czech context even further.

2. Circumstances fuelling the discontent in Czech society

Different factors contributed to the growing support of populists ahead of the 2025 elections. Among these, the most significant contributing factors were the economic pressures and grievances felt by large segments of Czech society (Cirhan & Gherghina, 2026). Most of these issues started to unravel already at the beginning of the former government's term, and later gradually transformed into growing frustration of the electorate. Concretely, the economic uncertainty caused by rampant public spending during the then still recent Covid-19 pandemic

that accelerated domestic inflation, was further fuelled by another major crisis that started on the 24th of February 2022.

The invasion of Ukraine pushed the already rising inflation in the highly Russian-gas dependent Czech economy to new highs. In the longer term, the high prices of basic commodities, such as utilities and groceries, in combination with stagnating wages created a perfect storm. Czechs experienced some of the highest inflation growths in the EU, prices increasing over fifteen percent in 2022 and over ten percent in 2023 (Czech National Bank [CNB], 2023). The former government started to rapidly lose popularity, a trend from which the populists in opposition benefited in every electoral poll. As a result, the Czech party system has experienced a rising popularity of these populist parties scoring almost 60% in pre-election polls. Eventually, the ruling coalition's rating in public polls hit the lowest since 2013, when the ODS-led government collapsed in a major corruption scandal (Fraňková, 2023). Likewise, the former prime minister Fiala was among the worst in the ranking of political leaders in 2024 – the year preceding the recent parliamentary election (Buchholz, 2024).

In such a favourable economic and political climate for the opposition populist parties, ANO and SPD, focused heavily on domestic economic topics, which became a centre of their campaigns. As a result, tackling high energy prices, improving housing affordability and boosting wages were the main focus of their pre-election rhetoric. The former government's moral appeals for 'standing on the right side' (Stuchlíková & Turek, 2025) and focus on foreign policies of supporting Ukraine were no match to ANO's and SPD's promises of improving the living standards and the economy. The fragile state of the stagnating Czech economy haunted by a rapidly-growing inflation of most basic commodities created a fertile ground for such rhetoric. To make the matters even more favourable for the populists in opposition, the economic pressures combined with another major challenge, embodied by the presence of a large newly-arrived diaspora of Ukrainian refugees.

3. Growing anti-Ukrainian sentiments

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not only affect the country economically, but also influenced the public and political discourse, representing a clear divide between the former governing and opposition parties. One of the main reasons behind this trend was a significant influx of Ukrainian refugees to Czechia. While the government parties under SPOLU and PirSTAN rhetorically sided with Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees located in the country, the opposition gradually adopted a contrasting stance, largely stemming from the shift in the societal mood.

The strong pro-Ukrainian stance of the former government that initially mobilized support at the beginning of the Russian invasion was exhausted. The

views of the public started to gradually change as the war continued, and the frustration and fatigue of the population with the economic uncertainty started to show. The growing discontent with the economic situation gradually led to rise of anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Czech society, a trend that especially the SPD populist radical right party capitalized on. Unlike in 2015, when the anti-immigrant stance of the domestic radical right was built around a largely abstract fear of migration wave into the country that never materialized, this time the presence of Ukrainian refugees was an existent issue with real consequences. Since 2022, Czechia hosted the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per-capita in Europe (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2026) and the populist parties, in particular SPD, constantly pushed the Czechs-first narrative. The staple of this strategy was the largely false argument that Ukrainian refugees residing in the country receive financial support at the expense of native Czech citizens who did not have such advantages. Due to the growing demand that several hundred thousand refugees placed on the already struggling health care, education, and social welfare systems, combined with pressure on stagnating wages and an inflated housing market, this narrative was not a hard sell.

Like SPD, ANO also occasionally relied on a similar anti-Ukrainian discourse, however not as frequently and more moderately. Amongst other aspects, the dependency of Babiš's businesses on this newly available workforce prevented ANO from voicing the more radical proposals, that were often articulated by more radical populists, like deportation of Ukrainian refugees from the country. ANO glanced at the far-right segment of voters by including anti-immigrant narratives (Naxera, 2025), joining the Patriots for Europe European Parliament group or by strengthening its cooperation with like-minded populists in other European countries. The Czech main populist radical right, SPD, that was struggling in several polls ahead of the 2025 elections reacted by forming a wide electoral coalition with three other far-right parties, securing its parliamentary presence. Another populist party that successfully competed in the elections was the Motorists for Themselves (AUTO), a party representing a fairly specific segment of voters around the single issue of anti-environmentalism and protection of combustion engine vehicles.

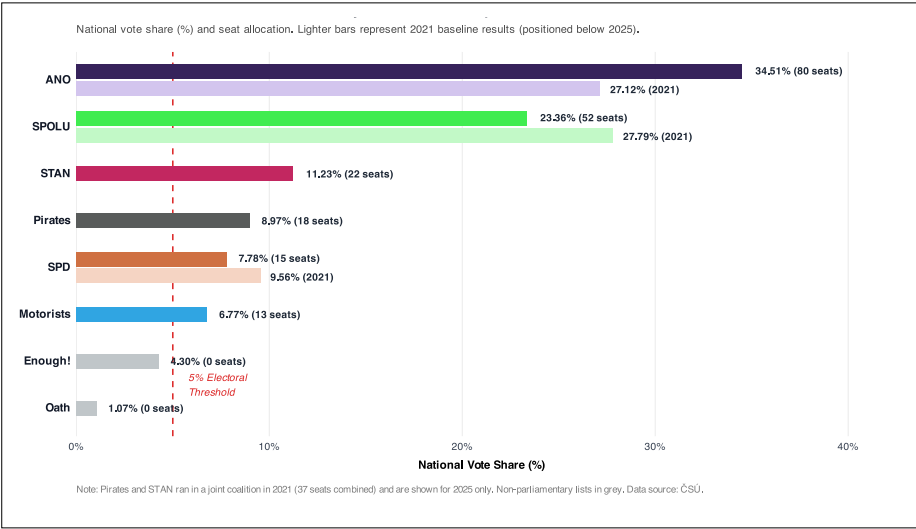
4. Results of the elections

ANO secured a decisive victory in the 2025 election, increasing its vote share by approximately seven percentage points compared to the 2021 contest, whereas the ruling SPOLU coalition experienced a decline of roughly four and a half percentage points (see Figure 1). Running on separate ballots, the Pirates and STAN collectively captured a higher vote share (20.2 %) than they achieved as a joint list in the previous election (15.6 %). Conversely, the radical right SPD

suffered a slight contraction of approximately two percentage points, while the Stačilo! faced electoral defeat again.

These shifts point to a minor voter realignment, characterized by a movement of support from small protest parties and movements toward ANO. Strategically, Andrej Babiš’s decision to stand as the lead candidate in the Moravskoslezský Region likely contributed to Stačilo!’s failure, given that the Communist party leader, Kateřina Konečná, contested her home constituency in the very same region. Through this highly personalized campaign, Babiš effectively targeted all Moravian regions, where ANO recorded substantial gains in electoral support. Nevertheless, despite the parliamentary breakthrough of AUTO, a new protest party, the overall election outcome underscores remarkable structural continuity within the party system and the underlying dynamics of party competition (see Buben & Kouba, 2026).

Figure 1:
Results of the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections in comparison to 2021



Source: The authors.

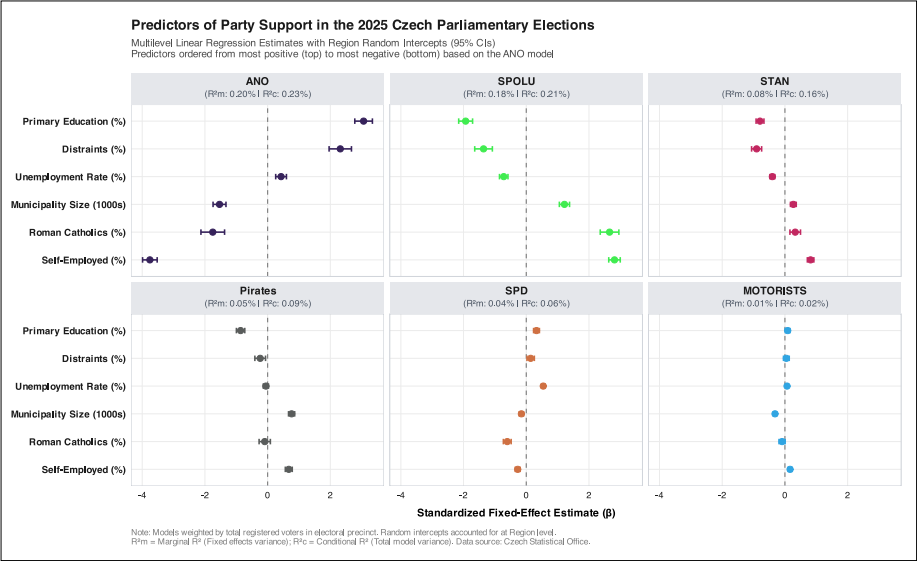
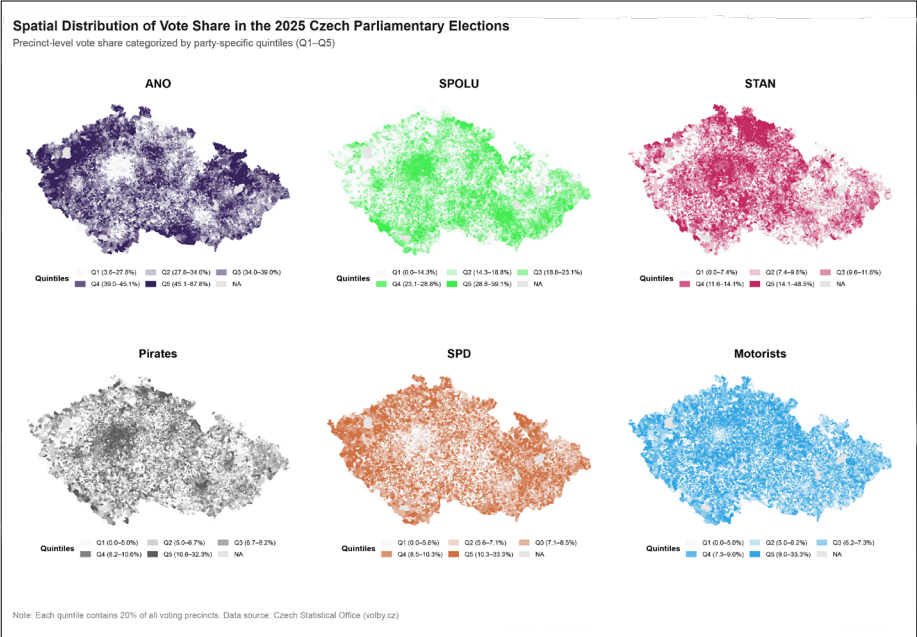
Nearly all major political actors display electoral support strongly structured by elemental sociodemographic factors. The spatial distribution of party vote shares is presented in Figure 2 alongside regression estimates of party support, utilizing key standardized sociodemographic predictors at the precinct level (the lowest spatial aggregation available) while controlling for regional heterogeneity. ANO generates its strongest support in precincts characterized by lower educational attainment (a higher proportion of voters with primary education only), elevated rates of debt distrains, and higher unemployment.

Conversely, ANO's vote share contracted in municipalities with higher shares of self-employed entrepreneurs, a higher proportion of Roman Catholics, and larger urban populations (log municipal size). The main challenger, the governing coalition SPOLU, exhibits a completely inverted pattern of electoral support. SPOLU dominates in larger urban centres, regions with higher proportions of university-educated voters, and in South Moravia, known as a traditional stronghold of KDU-ČSL that are entrenched in municipalities of higher religiosity. All these trends revealed in aggregated level analysis are supported by individual level surveys and opinion polls. In addition, opinion polls (see unique post-election survey *Ozvěny voleb 2025, 2026*) show that ANO has traditionally strong support among elderly, while the younger electorate supports SPOLU (share of 65+ was omitted from the models because it essentially measures inner peripheries and peripheral regions with older population).

Mayors and Independents (STAN) maintained its traditional strength in the Liberec and Central Bohemian regions, particularly in suburban municipalities in close proximity to Prague characterized by a high quality of life. Its track in Moravia remains relatively modest, concentrated primarily in southern regions and in specific municipalities featuring popular local incumbents/popular municipal councillors and mayors. The Pirate Party functions largely as dominantly (but not exclusively) urban actor, concentrating its core support in the major metropolitan areas of Prague and Brno. Interestingly, the unusually higher support for the Pirates in peripheral and mountainous border regions can be attributed to institutional voter mobility—utilizing absentee voter certificates while staying at recreational properties over the election weekend. This same phenomenon is also visible for STAN and SPOLU.

Support for the radical-right SPD broadly mirrored the spatial pattern of ANO, albeit with some regional distinctions. SPD performed stronger in the Olomouc Region and South Moravia yet remained weaker in inner peripheries where ANO held dominance (alongside the unsuccessful Enough! coalition, an umbrella list led by the Communist Party featuring Social Democratic candidates). Finally, the newly parliamentary AUTO exhibited a more spatially dispersed pattern of support. However, a closer inspection would have revealed concentrated support in the rural-suburban fringe zones with lower quality of public transportation around medium-sized municipalities in Central Bohemia, and particularly in the Mladá Boleslav district which is the industrial hub of the national automotive manufacturer (Škoda Auto). This spatial footprint suggests that the party successfully mobilized voters driven by opposition to the environmental regulations targeting personal automobile mobility.

Figure 2:
Spatial distribution of vote share in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections



Source: The authors.

The electoral outcomes demonstrate a progressive deepening of spatial polarization across the Czech political landscape and reveal a clear pattern of territorial sorting among established political blocs. Mainstream actors, specifically the governing SPOLU coalition and the populist ANO movement,

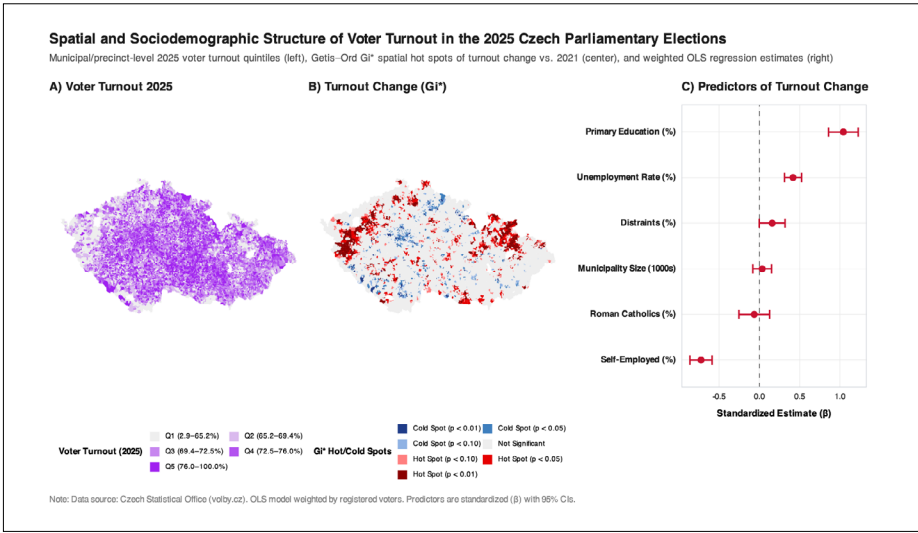
have entrenched their presence within their traditional electoral strongholds while experiencing further erosion in regions where their baseline support was already depressed. This feedback loop amplifies spatial polarization over successive election cycles. This is a trajectory consistently observable since the 2017 parliamentary elections (Lysek et al., 2021; Lysek & Macků, 2022) and possibly reinforced by presidential contests. This territorial divide is manifested along three interlocking dimensions: the classic urban-rural cleavage, the core-periphery axis, and a widening structural divergence between lagging, post-industrial regions (most notably Northern Bohemia and the Moravian-Silesian Region) and economically resilient territories characterized by high indicators of quality of life and social capital (e.g., South Bohemian Region, Vysočina Region, Hradec Králové Region, and Pardubice Region). The pattern aligns with broader European dynamics regarding the 'geography of discontent' where regional economic stagnation and peripheralization foster distinct party alignments.

In contrast, parties such as STAN maintain a geographically localized footprint dependent on municipal incumbency and sub-regional networks rather than broader socio-spatial divides (which exhibits the largest difference between marginal R2 accounting only for sociodemographic fixed effects, and conditional R2 accounting also for regional variance). Finally, anti-establishment and the radical-right SPD and newly emerged protest actor the Motorists defy these traditional socio-spatial logic patterns. Their electoral support exhibits a uniform, rather spatially diffuse distribution across the national territory. Crucially, standardized sociodemographic models yield especially low explanatory power (R2) for Motorists. This socio-spatial decoupling suggests that protest voting is not strictly bound to localized structural difficulties (e.g., unemployment or low education), but is instead driven nationwide by valence dissatisfaction, cultural grievances, and ideological opposition to European Green Deal policies. We also cannot rule out the 'novel appeal' effect for the segment of volatile voters that switch across elections for new parties that usually have short duration due to its dependency on a leader, poor organisational structure (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2018), and low entrenchment within the socioeconomic cleavages.

A defining phenomenon of the 2025 contest was the exceptionally high voter turnout, which reached 68.95%, the highest level recorded in a Czech parliamentary election since 1998. While baseline turnout remains traditionally elevated in larger urban centres and socioeconomically rich regions (Figure 3: A), the primary driver of electoral competition dynamics was the change in turnout relative to the previous 2021 election (B and C of Figure 3). Notably, turnout increase was disproportionately concentrated in socioeconomically vulnerable municipalities characterized by higher shares of primary-educated voters and elevated unemployment rates. Crucially, the standardized predictive model for turnout growth closely mirrors the model estimating support for the populist ANO movement. This empirical convergence demonstrates that voter mobilization was overwhelmingly asymmetrical: ANO successfully activated non-voters in

peripheral and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions, whereas the ruling governing coalition exhibited a constrained mobilization capacity in larger urban cities. Despite the overall increase in turnout, those areas exhibit relative decline in electoral mobilisation (blue colour), while in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions the analysis (Figure 3) indicates statistically significant spatial clusters of increases (red colour).

Figure 3:
Spatial and sociodemographic structure of voter turnout in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections



Source: The authors.

A second key dynamic of the election involved pre-election coalition strategies, specifically informal or ‘covert’ electoral alliances of SPD and Enough! that were virtually approved by the Constitutional Court ruling before the elections (Česká televize, 2025). While not a pivotal factor, the pre-election coalition strategies contributed to a reduction in wasted votes (ballots cast for parties failing to cross the 5% electoral threshold), which plummeted from a historical high of 19.90% in 2021 to 7.26% in 2025 (primarily consisting of Enough! at 4.30% and Oath at 1.07%). Yet the primary driver behind this vote consolidation was ANO’s systematic cannibalization of the protest and left-wing electorate. In 2025, ANO successfully absorbed the fragmented voters who had been disenfranchised in 2021, ultimately hollowing out the traditional left (most notably SOCDEM and the Communist Party, under new label Enough!), and subsumed support from smaller anti-establishment actors. This sharp drop in wasted votes was a complementary factor enabling Andrej Babiš to construct a comfortable governing majority.

Whereas the 2021 election wasted protest vote penalizing anti-establishment parties facilitated the formation of a centre-right government led by SPOLU. This suggests that the bloc of former governing parties must mobilize additional voters outside their core base, because the share of wasted votes will most likely be smaller due to the Constitutional Court's judicial approval of 'covert coalitions'.

Finally, the election featured notable intra-party and descriptive representation dynamics. Preferential voting led to significant candidate list reshuffling, most dramatically within the Pirate Party. Ironically, this happened for the second time, as the party had gained only four seats on the PirSTAN joint list in 2021, meaning it was not needed for government formation (Kudrnáč & Petrúšek, 2022). This time Pirate voters systematically jumped female and younger candidates (including two Green female candidates running on the Pirate list) over original list rankings (beyond the lead candidate in Prague), yielding a parliamentary delegation with a distinctly young female-dominated composition. More broadly, the overall proportion of female MPs (67 out of 200) in the Chamber of Deputies increased across the political spectrum, marking a meaningful reduction in gender disparity and advancing descriptive gender representation within the Czech legislature.

The special issue is made of eight articles focusing on three areas: the content of electoral campaigns and party narrative before the election, party strategies, and electoral results. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the changes in the US foreign security policy after the re-election of Donald Trump as the main drivers of the recent dynamic in geopolitical environment, have affected the political discourses of Czech political parties. As a consequence, the long-term dominance of economic issues has been accompanied by an increase in salience of foreign policy and security issues. In his article, Vít Hloušek (2026) analyses the way how foreign and European policy was politicized in the narratives of relevant political parties and coalitions. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the article examines the alignment of the narratives with the established ideational frames such as liberal internationalism, isolationism, Eurooptimism, and (hard and soft) Euroscepticism. Hloušek points to a clear division between the incumbent and opposition parties: while the government parties (and the Pirate Party) articulated internationalist, Atlanticist and Eurooptimist narratives, the opposition parties offered more nuanced, less pro-Western/NATO and generally Eurosceptic frames.

Irena Skalová's article (Skalová, 2026) is the second study in this issue that is focused on the content of electoral campaigns. Skalová examines how political actors used historical narratives in televised debates during the 2025 Czech parliamentary election campaign. Drawing on theories of memory politics, framing, symbolic politics, and populist communication, she uses qualitative discourse and content analysis of debates broadcast by major Czech television outlets. She identifies four main strategies – historical analogies, warnings against repeating past mistakes, the heroization of democratic milestones, and

reinterpretations of historical parallels – and argues that these references served primarily as tools of emotional and moral mobilization. By linking contemporary issues such as migration, the EU, and democracy to the communist past, the events of 1968, and 1989, political actors transformed programmatic disagreements into broader moral conflicts, thereby reinforcing political polarization.

In their article, Alberto Lioy and Petra Vodová (2026) turn attention to the previously under-researched digital dimension of Czech political parties, mapping the online infrastructures of the nine main parties contesting the 2025 general election. Building on the literature on party digitalization, Lioy and Vodová formulate hypotheses linking digital infrastructure to party type and age, degree of internal centralization, and government-opposition status. Their findings offer only partial confirmation of these expectations: party age proves a poor predictor of digital proficiency, since some long-established formations mounted highly professionalized campaigns while several newer parties lagged behind, and traditional parties did not systematically outperform newer ones in local digital outreach, with the Pirates, STAN, and TOP 09 achieving the widest regional diffusion. Internal party organization, by contrast, is more clearly reflected online: leader-centric parties such as ANO, SPD, and the Motorists concentrate communication around dominant figures, whereas the Pirates, STAN, and KDU-ČSL display more open, distributed forms of platform politics. On this basis, the article offers a novel empirical and conceptual contribution to the study of online campaigning in a Central European context.

Pre-electoral alliances have become an increasingly important feature of Czech party competition, particularly in the context of the recent party system fragmentation and the constraints created by the electoral threshold. In their article, Tomáš Jarmara and Ladislav Mrklas (2026) analyse open and hidden forms of pre-electoral cooperation in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections, focusing on their electoral effects, strategic motivations, and implications for parliamentary representation. Using qualitative analysis of alliance agreements and candidate lists combined with quantitative analysis of electoral results and polling data, the authors conceptualize hidden alliances as a form of institutional adaptation to electoral rules.

The analysis contrasts the openly institutionalized SPOLU alliance with hidden forms of cooperation involving SPD, the Pirates, STAN, and Motorists for Themselves. The authors further demonstrate that preferential voting can significantly shape the distribution of seats within alliances. Overall, they argue that pre-electoral alliances should primarily be understood as instrumental strategies of adaptation to electoral institutions and party system fragmentation. The study contributes significantly to the understanding of the recent developments of the Czech party system and to the research on electoral coalitions in general.

Jakub Charvát (2026) examines whether the 2025 general election extends the ongoing transformation of the Czech party system or signals a return to

stability. Using indicators of party system continuity, the effective number of parties, volatility, and electoral polarization, alongside an assessment of party system format, he finds strong continuity: all parliamentary parties retained seats, with the Motorists the sole newcomer, fragmentation declined, and volatility rose only slightly, driven mainly by shifts among established parties. Polarization between the populist and anti-populist blocs stayed near its post-2013 level of roughly 50–55%, as ANO consolidated dominance within the populist camp at the expense of SPD and the Enough! alliance, while the party system format – extreme multi-partyism with one dominant party – remained unchanged. Yet Charvát argues the election was not a simple maintaining contest either, since it produced a government alternation to a populist-led coalition of ANO, SPD, and the Motorists – the first Czech government including a populist right-wing junior partner. He situates this within the debate on illiberal backlash in Central Europe, concluding that while the result carries some risk for Czech democracy, an illiberal turn is not inevitable if political and civil-society actors can shift competition from affective polarization toward substantive policy debate.

Lukáš Linek and Michael Škvrňák (2026) investigate the class voting in the 2025 election in the context of long-term trends in the electoral behaviour in the Czech Republic. Drawing on post-election survey data from ten national elections held between 1992 and 2025, the authors examine how the relationship between social class and party choice has evolved as the Czech party system underwent successive waves of fragmentation and the emergence of new (often populist or anti-establishment) parties. Linek and Škvrňák show that class voting peaked around 2006–2010, declined to a low point in 2017, and then recovered strongly in 2021 and 2025. The article thus demonstrates that the apparent decline of class voting in the 2010s reflected a temporary increase in party-system volatility linked to partly non-economic mobilization rather than a structural disappearance of class as a basis of electoral competition.

Jakub Čapek and Adam Slavíček (2026) examine how mayoral status translated into electoral success in the 2025 Czech general election, using an original dataset of candidates from parliamentary parties. They confirm a statistically significant ‘mayoral bonus’ in the probability of being elected, though this advantage proves more limited than commonly assumed: it falls well short of the incumbency advantage of MPs. The analysis reveals pronounced variation across parties and regions. STAN fielded by far the largest number of mayoral candidates, yet its mayors were paradoxically the party's least successful professional group, a pattern the authors attribute to internal cannibalization of preferential votes among too many prominent local candidates. By contrast, ANO fielded fewer mayors but deployed them far more effectively. The authors conclude that municipal experience remains a valuable recruitment channel in Czech politics, but its electoral payoff is finite, saturable, and heavily conditioned by party context and regional dynamics rather than an unconditional personal asset.

Petr Bláha (2026) examines the sharp increase in women's parliamentary representation following the 2025 Czech elections, asking how this occurred in the absence of gender quotas or electoral reform. Drawing on the supply-and-demand model of candidate selection and theories of personalized voting in open-list systems, he combines candidate-level data from the 2021 and 2025 elections with decomposition analysis, regression discontinuity, and difference-in-differences designs. The study finds that the increase in women's representation resulted from both changes in party candidate supply and a stronger effect of preferential voting, with each accounting for roughly half of the overall increase. Importantly, however, the effect of preferential voting varied substantially across parties and contexts, suggesting that open-list voting can enhance women's representation when favourable candidate supply is combined with effective voter mobilization.

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Czechia in First Place? Foreign and European Policy Narratives in the 2025 Elections

Vít Hloušek¹

Abstract

The article examines the politicisation of foreign and European policy in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections through an analysis of party narratives articulated in electoral manifestos and campaign discourse. The 2025 campaign was marked by a deliberate effort of incumbent parties to increase its salience and to frame geopolitical orientation and EU membership as existential choices. Building on the literature on the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy and on party-based foreign policy narratives, the study analyses manifestos of all parliamentary parties (ANO, AUTO, Pirates, SPD, STAN, and Together) and one relevant extra-parliamentary actor (Enough!). Using a qualitative narrative approach, the article identifies dominant narrative patterns and maps their alignment with established ideational strands such as liberal internationalism, sovereigntism, Euro-optimism, and Euroscepticism. The findings demonstrate a clear incumbents–opposition divide. Government parties articulated internationalist and Euro-optimist narratives, combining Europeanist and Atlanticist trajectories, whereas opposition parties offered more heterogeneous but generally reactive and Eurosceptic visions. The article contributes to comparative research on the domestic politicisation of foreign policy and the role of party narratives in structuring electoral competition.

Keywords: foreign policy narratives; European integration;
Czech political parties; politicisation of foreign policy

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1. Introduction

The paper examines the narratives on foreign and European policy articulated by Czech political parties in the run-up to the 2025 elections. Its primary aim is to analyse the electoral manifestos of all parties and coalitions that entered parliament (ANO, AUTO, Pirates, SPD, STAN, and Together), as well as the only extra-parliamentary party that secured at least 1.5 per cent of the vote (Enough!).

Foreign policy does not typically rank among the most intensely contested arenas during parliamentary election campaigns. Nevertheless, as the literature reviewed in the following section demonstrates, there is a discernible trend towards the increasing politicisation of foreign policy and its growing intersection with domestic political debates. This trend brings competing foreign policy narratives, articulated by political parties, into direct confrontation, as observed in the case of the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections. Several factors may have acted as facilitators, elevating foreign policy narratives to the status of priority topics in political contestation.

As research on long-term trends in party politics vis-à-vis the EU shows (Karas, 2004; Havlík, 2009; Havlík et al., 2017; Skulínek, 2021; Hloušek & Kaniok, 2021; Sychra & Kratochvíl, 2021), the EU and foreign-policy domains are typically interlinked and entangled in the perceptions of Czech political parties. As Baun and Marek (2010, p. 3) state, European integration did not change the basic perception of Czech foreign-policy orientation but contributed significantly by opening new opportunities and providing Czech foreign policy with new multilateral instruments; Czech foreign policy has therefore ‘EU-ised’. That is why we integrate both intertwined dimensions in our research.

The high degree of politicisation of European Union issues in Czech domestic politics, together with the ‘Europeanisation’ of Czech foreign policy, helps to explain why foreign policy has become a salient dimension of party differentiation. Another possible explanation lies in the general significance of foreign policy issues. As the literature (Calca & Gross, 2019; Hesová, 2025) suggests, periods of international crisis tend to increase the domestic salience of foreign policy. From a Central European perspective, the war in Ukraine constitutes precisely such a palpable and enduring crisis, the duration of which further enhances its political salience and the capacity of political parties to integrate foreign policy into their core discursive agendas.

Both assumptions—namely, politicisation and the impact of the crisis generated by Russia’s war against Ukraine—could be tested in the context of any Central European country. However, Czechia provides a third, complementary (rather than competing), explanation for why analysing party-based foreign policy narratives is essential for understanding the dynamics of contemporary political debate. The polarising effect of relations between the incumbent coalition government led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala and the opposition has

intensified political contestation more broadly. Both the 2021–2025 government and opposition parties sustained a highly polarised, and to some extent bipolar, debate throughout the 2025 election campaign. Foreign policy issues were instrumentalised by both ‘camps’ as components of predominantly negative campaigning. Voters of the governing coalition were warned that Andrej Babiš would steer the country eastwards, while opposition voters were repeatedly exposed to accusations that the government parties were uncritically subservient to ‘Brussels’ and willing to abandon the defence of Czech national interests.

Therefore, an analysis of the party narratives employed by Czech political actors in the context of the 2025 parliamentary elections offers insights that extend beyond a mere case study. It contributes to a broader understanding of the conditions under which foreign policy issues become politicised within domestic political debate.

Still, the main research question is exploratory: (1) What dominant narratives of foreign and European policy did Czech political parties employ in their 2025 electoral campaigns? This primary question gives rise to the following secondary questions: (2) How do these narratives relate to established ideational strands such as liberal internationalism, sovereigntism, Euro-optimism, and Euroscepticism? (3) How are positions on European integration narratively aligned with broader foreign-policy worldviews within party discourses? (4) What is the general pattern, the key dimensions of a conceptual map, of Czech foreign and European policy as presented in the 2025 parliamentary elections?

The paper is structured as follows. First, it develops the conceptual framework, considering the role of political parties in foreign-policy making and, conversely, the role of foreign policy in parties’ electoral appeals, and how parties construct foreign-policy narratives. The second part constitutes a literature review, providing a brief summary of existing knowledge about Czech political parties as actors formulating foreign-policy narratives. Next, data and methods are introduced. In the following section, we examine the narratives expressed in party manifestos and then consider the foreign-policy narratives developed by party leaders. Finally, we discuss the results.

2. Conceptualising party foreign policy narratives

Political parties were not traditionally central objects for scholars studying foreign- and European-policy ideas, discourses and narratives. Except for research on party Euroscepticism (see Marzi, 2025, for an extensive literature review), parties were viewed as actors minimally interested in foreign policy, and the electoral arena was seen as focused on domestic policy domains. This changed with the politicisation of European integration (Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter et al.,

2016; Smekal & Havlík, 2023) and, subsequently, with the increasing politicisation of foreign policy. Some scholars (Kaarbo, 2015) even speak of a 'domestic turn' in studies of foreign-policy formation, given the blurring of the line between domestic and foreign policy (Raunio & Wagner, 2020 and 2024; Hofmann & Martill, 2021). Together with the traditional competence of political parties to feed into the foreign-policy discourse (Varga & Buzogány, 2021), this makes our paper relevant both to the inquiry into Czech political parties' foreign-policy preferences and to the study of the sources of Czech foreign policy more broadly.

Research on party positions on foreign and European policy and the related narratives draws theoretical foundations from discursive institutionalism. It rests on the conviction that ideas expressed by political actors matter not only as devices of communication but also as tools that enable actors to overcome existing equilibria and generate policy change (Schmidt, 2008, p. 304). Vivien Schmidt (2008, pp. 310–311) differentiates between coordinative discourse, held among politicians, and communicative discourse, used by political actors to convey their ideas and policy preferences to the public. From this perspective, foreign-policy narratives and narratives on European integration represent an important part of parties' communicative discourse.

The role of narratives in political discourse remains vital. Narratives frame politics and policy in a story-like form that is comprehensible and compelling to citizens and voters. They provide an accessible way to package policy ideas and preferences for the broader public (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). Narratives help to integrate and translate the inevitable complexity of contemporary politics (Roe, 1994, pp. 2–3). Hagström and Gustafsson (2019, pp. 389–390) stress that the role of narrative should not be limited to a communication device. They describe 'narrative power' as a normative strategy used by foreign-policy actors to persuade through storytelling. Narratives interpret actors, objectives, events, sequences and identities to create shared meaning and to legitimise policy choices (Roselle et al., 2014; Noort & Colley, 2021). Political parties' narratives therefore serve to craft official state foreign-policy narratives.

Narrative is typically defined as a 'story' (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). As Roe (1994, p. 3) reminds us, '[s]tories are not the only kind of narrative ... there are also non-stories, counter-stories and metanarratives'. Most foreign-policy party narratives conform to the concept of non-stories, because they lack a classical plot while employing important elements of storytelling. As De Wilde and Trenz (2012, p. 544) suggest, a policy narrative should be conceptualised as 'loosely rearranged signifiers, symbols and stories'. Policy narratives can, of course, contain stories, but they more typically include scenarios and arguments as well (Roe, 1994, p. 34). A foreign- and European-policy narrative can address the international system (or the EU), identity, policy, or all these aspects together (Miskimmon et al., 2018, p. 80). In the sphere of foreign policy, narrative builds the link between general political identity and foreign-policy orientation (Toettoe et al., 2024). In sum,

narratives expressed in party manifestos and leaders' statements are not mere aggregations of policy positions; rather, they are constructions of the international environment and of international policy that parties and party leaders use in campaigns to present a vision of preferred foreign policy.

Discursive institutionalism frames party manifestos as normative and legitimising narratives that explain not only the country's current situation but also the policy changes deemed necessary to improve it. Since foreign policy represented an important field of contestation between the incumbent parties of the 2021-2025 ruling coalition government of Petr Fiala (three parties of Together coalition: ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09; and STAN) and the prior to 2025 elections opposition parties (ANO, SPD, Enough!, and AUTO), it is worth studying the competing narratives employed by political parties in the 2025 campaign.

3. Czech parties on foreign and European policies: Literature review

Literature review addresses two important areas. First, it summarises the state of knowledge on long-term trends in Czech political parties' foreign- and European-policy positions. Second, it identifies the most important moments and issues that have driven the increasing politicisation of foreign and European policy in Czech domestic debate. Such a survey helps construct a framework for the narrative map representing foreign- and European-policy issues in the Czech 2025 parliamentary elections.

Although Czech foreign policy has often been characterised by indetermination and paralysis (Cadier, 2019, p. 200), this does not imply a lack of interest in foreign-policy narratives as instruments of domestic political competition. On the contrary, the lack of consensus among Czech political parties on the country's vital foreign-policy interests (Marek & Baun, 2012) is a product of intense competition between diverging party foreign-policy narratives.

There is notable continuity in the major orientations adopted by actors in Czech foreign policy, including political parties. Atlanticism, internationalism, Europeanism and autonomism have represented the principal approaches to Czech foreign policy since the emergence of independent Czechia in 1993 (Drulák, 2006; Kořan, 2012; Kříž et al., 2021).

These trajectories, which indicate preferred geopolitical and economic orientations, are accompanied by a basic difference in style. Some parties defend an internationalist, active and cooperative approach; others favour an isolationist option, prioritising domestic issues and non-engagement as the best foreign-policy approach for Czechia (Hloušek & Kaniok, 2021, p. 707).

A similar continuity characterises dominant Czech positions on the European Union. An instrumental narrative of the EU – emphasising economic and

other benefits of membership rather than treating the EU as a community of shared values – has prevailed since the early years of Czech membership (Braun, 2005; Beneš & Harnisch, 2015; Hloušek & Kaniok, 2020; Cabada, 2024b, pp. 6–7). Domestic ambivalence about what Czech Europeanness entails is reflected not only in the ambiguities of Czech presidencies (described as ‘half-European’ in 2009 and ‘model European’ in 2022 – Neuman & Neuman Stanivuković, 2025) but particularly in the ongoing dispute over ‘European’ politics among political parties (Kaniok, 2025).

Turning to prevailing issues and changing salience: for political parties, European integration represented the most important domain of their foreign-policy programmes. This shifted gradually with the emergence of new threats and challenges. The Eurozone crisis drew some politicians’ attention to China as a trading partner (Kříž et al., 2021, pp. 62–63). The Russian occupation of Crimea increased awareness of traditional security issues among Czech foreign-policy makers and experts (Kříž et al., 2021, p. 54), which later influenced party narratives.

Czech parties became increasingly aware of the growing salience of foreign and European politics in response to major shifts in Czech foreign-policy orientation. Zákřavský et al. (2025) identify two critical international events that triggered changes in official Czech foreign policy: the migration crisis of 2015 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. During the migration crisis, Czech foreign policy shifted towards sovereigntist preferences and intensified Visegrád cooperation to resist EU pressure for a compulsory relocation mechanism. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Czech foreign policy returned to active diplomacy, supporting the application of international law and broader cooperation within the EU and NATO.

As a result, foreign- and European-policy issues penetrated electoral campaigns well before 2025. Prior to the Russian aggression in 2022, issues related to the EU and European integration were the most salient in party disputes. It took time, for example, for the Russian occupation of Crimea to become part of the domestic foreign-policy debate, yet parties’ differing reactions to the occupation triggered further differentiation of their narratives (Holzer et al., 2020, pp. 74–82).

In 2017, migration and rejection of the compulsory relocation mechanism provoked heated electoral debate (Kovář & Sychra, 2018, p. 42; Strapáčová & Hloušek, 2018) and for the far-right SPD, the prominence of the topic continued (Charvátová & Filipec, 2022). The migration issue was securitised by Czech actors and served to link preferred foreign-policy orientations with narratives of defending Czech identity and sovereignty (Tabosa, 2020, p. 19). It also contributed to the emergence of populist tones in Czech foreign-policy debate (Cadier, 2019, pp. 204–205).

Visegrád Group cooperation increased in salience alongside the migration crisis. Regardless of how fragile and agenda-dependent real cooperation among

Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia is (Eihmanis, 2024), it has become another locus for politicising party foreign-policy narratives. The interplay between Visegrád cooperation and stances towards illiberal regimes within the V4 provides opportunities to frame a Central European dimension in either liberal or illiberal foreign-policy narratives (Cabada, 2024a; Janebová & Hloušek, 2023).

The migration crisis overshadowed other EU-related topics. Brexit was not heavily politicised by Czech parties. Apart from general calls to defend national interests, only ODS used Brexit to critique a lack of national unity, and SPD defended the British decision to leave a supposedly non-reformable EU (Brusenbauch Meislová & Szent-Iványi, 2023, p. 60). In the longer term, Brexit moderated Czech hard Eurosceptic parties, who concealed prior calls to leave the EU behind rhetoric favouring a referendum on membership (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025).

Although some authors (Weiss, 2021, p. 589) underestimated the impact of Czech populist parties on and interest in foreign policy, subsequent developments disprove such assumptions. In the 2021 campaign, foreign-policy disputes featured prominently in the populist-anti-populist clash, with parties opposing populism labelling their opponents (mainly ANO and SPD) as pro-Eastern, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese (Filipec & Měšťánková, 2024). Coalition Together and Pirates plus STAN emphasised a pro-Western orientation and loyalty to the EU and NATO (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022, p. 80).

More specifically, the far left (KSČM), the far right (SPD) and governing ANO challenged the previously predominant European internationalist mainstream, intensifying the conflict between isolationist and internationalist strategies. Only KSČM openly called for replacing Czech Western geopolitical orientation with an Eastern course (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2024, p. 403).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 generated an ‘unprecedented salience of foreign policy’ in Czechia (Hesová, 2025, pp. 149–151) and increased attention to Russia among foreign-policy makers (Bartoszewicz & Prucková, 2024). Support for Ukraine became a top priority for Petr Fiala’s cabinet, while opposition parties criticised both the general direction and particular measures, such as the Czech munitions initiative. Consequently, the 2025 electoral campaign witnessed the greatest increase in foreign-policy salience since Czechia joined the EU in 2004 (Hloušek & Kaniok, 2021, p. 716).

We identify elements of continuity and change in the salience of foreign and European politics for Czech parties, and the moments that politicised and polarised domestic discourse. Both the migration crisis and the war against Ukraine combine genuine foreign-policy dimensions with EU-related aspects. Therefore, we expect that in 2025 electoral manifestos and leaders’ statements these two policy domains will be entangled. In line with the ‘domestic turn’ towards greater salience of foreign policy, we next explore how this trend materialised in the 2025 parliamentary elections.

4. Operationalisation

Anticipating increasing narrative polarisation at both the party and campaign levels, as well as incumbents' use of foreign policy narratives to frame opposition actors as risks to geopolitical stability rather than as conventional policy alternatives, we operationalise our research accordingly. First, we operationalise the possible foreign policy and EU-related positions.

Drawing on existing research (Drulák, 2006; Hloušek & Kaniok, 2021; Kaniok & Hloušek, 2024), we identify four trajectories of the Czech Republic's preferred geopolitical orientation: Europeanism, which narrates the EU as the natural backbone of Czech foreign policy; Atlanticism, which stresses the primacy of the United States as the Czech Republic's strategic partner; Easternism, which suggests that, in a changing world in which the West is in decline, Czechia should turn towards either China or Russia; and unspecified Multilateralism, which narrates Czechia as a small state that should, above all, be institutionally anchored in various multilateral organisations. In addition, Czech foreign policy can be narrated as either proactive or reactive, and as internationalist or isolationist.

With regard to the EU, we employ a logical scale of party positions ranging from enthusiastic support for European integration to its complete rejection. We draw on the classical concepts of soft and hard Euroscepticism, as defined by Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008, 2024; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). Hard Eurosceptic parties seek to dismantle the EU or to replace the current Union with a loose and purely intergovernmental form of cooperation. Soft Eurosceptic parties, by contrast, are critical of certain features of the current EU without seeking its abolition. Furthermore, we employ the concept of the Euro-optimistic party, defined as one that 'exhibits a dominantly positive party position on European integration and the European Union stemming from identification with the idea of European integration' (Hloušek et al., 2025, p. 5).

Party manifestos constitute the primary sources for reconstructing the themes, discourses, and narratives employed by Czech political parties when addressing foreign policy, international security, and European integration—policy areas which, for most Czech parties, continue to be framed primarily as domains of international relations (see Appendix 1). In addition, selected discourses of party leaders articulated during the election campaign (June–September 2025) and reported in the media are incorporated to broaden the scope of the analysed material and to complement institutional narratives with their more personalised counterparts.

The material selection includes articles from major nationwide media outlets (Denik.cz, Deník N, *Hospodářské noviny*, *Metro*, *Mladá fronta DNES*, *Právo*, and *Seznam.cz*). Where both print and online versions were available, both were taken into consideration. The search covered all items published during the June–September 2025 period. From this corpus, the most relevant contributions were

selected for further analysis. The corpus included all materials published by parties of a programmatic nature. Media outputs – interviews with politicians – were included, excluding repetitive contributions that were published twice or more in different media.

For the purpose of narrative reconstruction, either a party manifesto or a politician's media discourse constitutes a single analytical unit. Following the completion of the corpus, the texts were manually coded (see Appendix 2 for the codebook) across four dimensions: geopolitical trajectory, basic approach, Czech agency, and the Czech role within the EU. The coding process was iterative and interpretive. While the categories were informed by the existing literature, they were empirically refined during the analysis.

The approach adopted in this research has, of course, its limitations. First, the anticipation of increased polarisation stems from a profound knowledge of the Czech context at least as much as it is derived from the theoretical expectations discussed above (Section 2), namely that once foreign policy becomes a salient object of electoral competition (i.e. becomes more politicised), one can expect it to become more polarised.

A further limitation of this study relates to the composition of the corpus. Social media communication was intentionally omitted from the sample. Although it appears to be crucial for addressing voters in Czechia, the primary aim of the paper is to reconstruct party narratives, and longer texts—such as manifestos or leaders' interviews—offer a more detailed and nuanced account. Nevertheless, this selection limits the analysis's ability to capture the condensed communication of narratives to voters and prevents the establishment of any robust relationship between parties and voters as consumers of party narratives.

5. (Ex-)Incumbents' views

Parties that participated, at least for a certain period, in Petr Fiala's coalition government articulated largely similar narratives in their 2025 electoral manifestos.

The Pirates summarised their narrative in a concise yet energetic manner. Their account is securitised, albeit in a different way from that of the opposition parties during the 2021–2025 period. Czechia is presented as part of Europe in need of defence; however, defence is not understood as passive reaction. On the contrary, Czechia is expected to contribute actively to the development of joint EU and NATO cooperation, to reject the right of member states to exercise vetoes, and to anchor Czech foreign and European policies in the values of human rights and freedoms. In the Pirates' narrative, Czechia is ready 'to the best of our ability, to help those who are attacked and threatened and to promote a just peace' (Pirates, 2025, p. 9). The European trajectory constitutes a core feature of the Pirates'

narrative, symbolically reinforced by an explicit commitment to preparing for the adoption of the euro.

At the same time, foreign and European policy did not appear to constitute the Pirates' most salient electoral issue. Even in their media appearances, these topics tended to be overshadowed by debates concerning the party's withdrawal from Fiala's coalition government and by other domestic issues (Čapáková, 2025). Nevertheless, the narrative grounded in a Europeanist trajectory, an internationalist orientation, a proactive conception of Czech agency, and Euro-optimism remained largely uncontested.

As the leading force of the incumbent coalition, the Together coalition embedded foreign and security policy within a broader narrative portraying Czechia as a successful country that confronted the challenges of the 2021–2025 period with honour (Together, 2025). An active Czech foreign and European policy is presented as an integral component of this success story. Activity is framed as a key factor in fostering Czech resilience and mitigating external threats. While these threats are not trivialised, the overall outlook remains optimistic. In Together's narrative, Czechia is depicted as a reliable and proactive NATO ally, an active participant in the protection of the EU's external borders, and a driver of necessary EU reforms—without portraying the EU itself as a threat. This narrative effectively combines Czech pragmatic interests (e.g. 'We will adopt the euro when it is economically and politically advantageous for the Czech Republic') with international commitments (e.g. 'We will actively cooperate with our allies within and outside NATO to develop modern military capabilities, fulfil alliance goals, and strengthen NATO's European pillar').

Together's leader, Petr Fiala, placed strong emphasis on foreign policy issues, particularly Czech support for Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression and the country's broader pro-Western foreign policy orientation. Fiala's narrative cast the incumbent government as the principal defender against what he portrayed as a sinister coalition led by the chair of ANO Andrej Babiš and involving actors such as the SPD (Palata, 2025; Perknerová, 2025b). A similar emphasis characterised the foreign policy narratives of other leading Together politicians (Boubínová, 2025; Perknerová, 2025a). Collectively, these discourses confirm a balanced Atlanticist–Europeanist trajectory grounded in a proactive and internationalist orientation, with explicit EU-related positions articulated more cautiously. Nonetheless, moderate Euro-optimism prevailed over soft Eurosceptic tones.

STAN developed the most comprehensive foreign and European policy narrative among the Czech parties analysed in its 2025 manifesto. This Europeanist narrative presents Czechia as an active player that prioritises the European dimension of its foreign and security policy while simultaneously recognising the importance of close cooperation between the EU and NATO (STAN, 2025, p. 18). The Czech national narrative is closely intertwined with the EU narrative,

in the sense that all major policies with international implications are expected to be at least coordinated at the EU level. Czechia is portrayed as an active country firmly embedded within the EU and a broader multilateral framework, underpinned by a commitment to international law and to the legacy of the first Czech president Václav Havel's value-based diplomacy, which emphasises the international promotion of human rights and freedoms (STAN, 2025, p. 57). In STAN's narrative, the EU is not a threat but an opportunity to develop and anchor a strong and capable Czech foreign policy through the strengthening of the EU's foreign and—especially—security policy, including military and industrial capacities, in order to ensure the 'strengthening of European defence capabilities in response to the current geopolitical situation' (STAN, 2025, p. 58). Unlike the other narratives analysed, STAN emphasises the need to reform the EU not to weaken it, but to make it stronger, more active, and more operational (STAN, 2025, p. 60).

Although the context of Russian aggression featured prominently in STAN's campaign discourse (Titlbach, 2025a), the party's chair, Vít Rakušan, in contrast to the strategy adopted by Together's leaders, focused more strongly on EU-related issues, including clear and explicit support for the adoption of the common European currency (Kopecký & Hejl Hromková, 2025). Euro-optimism thus framed the party's overarching Europeanist trajectory, combined with a proactive conception of Czech foreign policy agency and an internationalist approach.

6. Voices from the oppositions

We now turn to parties that portrayed Petr Fiala's incumbent government as a negative hero (ANO, 2025, p. 30; AUTO, 2025, p. 9) or even as a villain (SPD, 2025, p. 3; Enough!, 2025), and whose core objective was to reverse its foreign and European policy course.

In ANO's manifesto, foreign and European policies play only a marginal role. ANO's narrative in these areas is an inward-looking account of a country that must above all defend its sovereignty and pursue its economic interests (ANO, 2025, p. 30). Czechia is presented as firmly anchored in both NATO and the EU; however, its foreign policy role is largely confined to reactive defence, against migration or against the Green Deal. Czechia is not framed as an active international actor, but rather as a state whose engagement is limited to supporting 'diplomatic steps leading to an end to the war in Ukraine and the elimination of the risks of war in Europe' (ANO, 2025, p. 30), building coalitions to defend its sovereignty, and expanding economic diplomacy. In the area of international security, ANO emphasises the indivisibility of internal and external security, yet this narrative is also heavily shaped by economic considerations related to the Czech armed forces. International security is thus portrayed as a straightforward

combination of well-paid soldiers and a strong domestic defence industry, as if economic factors were the decisive dimension (ANO, 2025, pp. 23–24).

The discourse of ANO's leading politicians largely confirmed this manifesto-based line. ANO leaders focused more on EU-related issues than on international relations more broadly. They articulated a soft Eurosceptic position, firmly rejecting calls for referendums on EU and NATO membership, while simultaneously criticising EU migration policy and the Green Deal and calling for profound reform of the Union (Machová, 2025; Titlbach, 2025b; Ťopek & Veinert, 2025). EU membership was framed in pragmatic, primarily economic terms.¹ As Andrej Babiš put it, 'the EU is business' (Vokál, 2025). Russia's war against Ukraine appeared less frequently in ANO's discourse; when it did, party leaders referred only vaguely to the need 'to act towards Russia in such a way that the pro-Western world is united' (Titlbach, 2025b). Babiš himself sought to downplay the importance of foreign policy issues altogether, emphasising a focus on Czech voters and domestic concerns (Nedvěd, 2025). Overall, ANO's rhetoric combined a subdued Atlanticism, a reactive conception of agency, and soft Euroscepticism. While Babiš personally leaned towards an isolationist approach, this tendency was partially offset by more internationalist tones articulated by other party leaders. Such ambiguity aptly reflects ANO's self-proclaimed 'catch-all' character.

For the party describing itself as 'the only real right-wing party in the Czech Republic' (AUTO, 2025, p. 6), neither foreign nor European policy occupied a flagship position in its manifesto. AUTO's narrative presents a geopolitically framed vision of a Western-oriented Czechia, firmly anchored in NATO and viewing European integration as useful, albeit in need of a 'Euro-realist' reorientation towards a community of 'self-confident and sovereign nation-states that collectively pursue only what they agree on, but otherwise do not interfere in each other's internal affairs' (AUTO, 2025, p. 9). The rejection of euro adoption, ideally entrenched constitutionally by anchoring the Czech crown in the Constitution, assumes an almost mythical symbolic role within the party's soft Eurosceptic profile (AUTO, 2025, p. 8). As a 'smaller' country, Czechia is expected to abandon value-based activism in favour of narrowly defined pragmatic economic interests, leading to a return to a 'corridor of normal relations' with China (AUTO, 2025, p. 10) and with illiberal Central European political actors.

In their pre-electoral discourse, AUTO leaders placed even stronger emphasis on criticism of the EU, occupying the discursive edge of soft Euroscepticism while not questioning Czechia's EU membership as such (Kolář, 2025b; *MF DNES*, 2025). The Atlanticism present in the manifesto largely disappeared from campaign rhetoric, as did internationalist elements. Both Petr Macinka, the chair of the party, and Filip Turek, its electoral leader, reduced their campaign narratives to a reactive form of soft Euroscepticism.

In contrast to these pragmatically framed narratives, the solipsist-regionalist narrative of the SPD offers a far more dramatic and securitised portrayal of

Czechia: a country ‘facing a confluence of crises, economic, social, energy, and security, which are the result of the irresponsible policies of the Petr Fiala government and, at the same time, increasing pressure from the European Union’ (SPD, 2025, p. 3). The world is depicted as a space filled with threats—from the Green Deal and Ukrainian or Muslim refugees to the EU Migration Pact—and the situation is framed as approaching an apocalyptic tipping point. Czechia must therefore ‘regain’ its sovereignty, allegedly appropriated by ‘unelected bureaucrats in Brussels’ (SPD, 2025, p. 4). Anything foreign is constructed as at least a potential threat, leading to a call for an exclusive focus on domestic priorities, including the termination of all support for Ukraine. Ukraine plays a central role in SPD’s narrative: the ‘Ukrainian regime’ (SPD, 2025, p. 13) functions as a negative hero symbolising war, financial waste, and neglect of Czech citizens’ needs. The SPD narrative is profoundly isolationist, advocating the revision of all Czech international obligations (SPD, 2025, p. 13) and the construction of a ‘fortress Czechia’ (SPD, 2025, p. 15). Cooperation is envisaged only with illiberal partners within the Visegrád Group. Such a cooperation is meant primarily to oppose the EU and NATO and it can be interpreted only as a tool of generally isolationist approach.

SPD’s electoral leaders adhered closely to this narrative. Calls for referendums on EU and NATO membership played a central role (Kamenský, 2025; Vachtl & Pospíšilová, 2025; Veselý, 2025). Party chair Tomio Okamura in particular portrayed Ukrainian refugees in Czechia as a threat and a social problem, presenting stricter return policies as remedies for issues such as healthcare accessibility or housing shortages (Vachtl & Pospíšilová, 2025). Prominent SPD MP and vice-chair Radim Fiala further developed the narrative of illiberal regional cooperation, stating:

I can imagine that we would reach an agreement with Hungary, Slovakia and, after the next elections, also with Poland, if the Law and Justice party wins there, and they proceed together as the Visegrád Four. In my opinion, we must renew V4 cooperation. And I can imagine the creation of a V6, V8 or V10, with Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and other states that would join. SPOLU and Petr Fiala say that we belong to the West, but I am convinced that we do not. History has shown this several times. But not to the East either. I believe that we are able to create a strong bloc of sovereign states here that will cooperate and ensure free movement of goods, capital, and people. (Kamenský, 2025)

In sum, SPD’s narrative combines a solipsist-regionalist geopolitical trajectory with an isolationist approach, a reactive conception of agency, and hard Euroscepticism.

Finally, the Enough! coalition (2025), although failing to cross the five per cent electoral threshold, articulated a simple narrative of Czech foreign and

European policy. It presents Czechia as economically dependent and endangered by the war in Ukraine, which must therefore be ‘immediately terminated’. As a result, Czech foreign and European policies are required to undergo a complete reversal. The narrative calls for multilateral cooperation instead of NATO and EU membership, a pragmatic turn towards regional cooperation with Austria and the Visegrád countries, and broader global engagement with Eurasian states in place of value-based foreign policy. As the manifesto states: ‘We will develop global trade and diplomatic relations with all countries in the world, including those with different political and constitutional traditions. We will free Czech diplomacy from any lecturing or mentoring by other countries’ (Enough!, 2025). The coalition’s leader, Kateřina Konečná (chair of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, which constituted the backbone of the coalition), consistently reinforced this narrative, emphasising peace as the paramount value, the need to restore intensive contacts with Central European countries, and—ideally—the organisation of referendums on EU and NATO membership (Karbulka, 2025; Kolář, 2025a; Štalmach, 2025). Compared to Okamura or Babiš, Konečná did not restrict her discourse to European integration alone, but engaged with a broader foreign policy context. Overall, the Enough! narrative can be characterised as combining multilateralist internationalism with reactive agency and hard Euroscepticism.

Table 1:
Foreign and European policy narratives in party manifestos

Party / Coalition	Trajectory	Approach	Agency	Role
Enough!	multilateralist	Internationalist	reactive	hard Eurosceptic
SPD	solipsist – regionalist	Isolationist	reactive	hard Eurosceptic
AUTO	Atlanticist	Internationalist	reactive	soft Eurosceptic
ANO	Atlanticist	Internationalist	reactive	soft Eurosceptic
Pirates	Europeanist	Internationalist	pro-active	Eurooptimist
STAN	Europeanist	Internationalist	pro-active	Eurooptimist
Together	Atlanticist-Europeanist	Internationalist	pro-active	Eurooptimist

Source: Author.

Table 1 summarises the foreign and European policy narratives articulated in the 2025 electoral manifestos. One of the most striking findings is that, despite the heated campaign debates, no Czech political party openly endorses an Eastern trajectory of foreign policy orientation.² Neither Russia nor China is presented as the trajectory that Czechia should follow. Only AUTO and Enough! refer to China in pragmatic terms, primarily as an important trading partner, and nothing more. There is, however, one party that does not fit neatly into any of the remaining trajectories. The SPD developed a specific trajectory that combines

a solipsistic vision of an isolated Czechia, passively reacting to and withdrawing from international engagement, with limited cooperation confined to the Central European neighbourhood. The SPD is the only party analysed that explicitly favours isolationism as its basic approach. Moreover, a clear cleavage emerges between reactive parties competing in the 2025 elections from the opposition (ANO, AUTO, SPD, and Enough!) and parties that share a proactive vision of Czech international agency and that had, at least for some time, been part of the incumbent government. Incumbency, bringing direct experience and interaction with EU institutions, also appears to have reinforced Euro-optimist preferences regarding the Czech role within the EU.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis of party manifestos and campaign narratives confirms the broader assumption that foreign and European policy issues have become increasingly politicised and have turned into salient components of electoral competition (Raunio & Wagner, 2020, 2024; Hofmann & Martill, 2021; Varga & Buzogány, 2021). In 2025, Czech political parties devoted considerable attention to crafting and disseminating distinct foreign and European policy narratives, in line with expert expectations concerning the growing salience of these issues in Czech political debate (Holzer et al., 2020; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022; Hesová, 2025; Kaniok, 2025; Zákřavský et al., 2025).

This brings us to the first research question: which dominant foreign and European policy narratives did Czech political parties employ during the 2025 electoral campaign? Our findings show that all parties included in the analysis articulated recognisable foreign policy narratives. Within the camp of the incumbent coalition, an internationalist approach and a proactive conception of Czech foreign and European policy agency remained the prevailing norm, complemented by varying shades of Euro-optimist interpretations of Czechia's role in the EU. Even the Together coalition relegated the Eurosceptic elements traditionally associated with ODS discourse to the margins. The principal difference between Together and the other governing parties (including the Pirates) lay in a stronger emphasis on the Atlanticist trajectory, which was presented not as an alternative to Europeanism but as its complement.

Opposition parties, by contrast, offered a more diverse set of narratives. The narratives of ANO and AUTO were broadly similar, combining an internationalist orientation with an Atlanticist trajectory, yet, unlike those of the incumbents, placing greater emphasis on the reactive nature of Czech agency and on soft Euroscepticism. Enough! continued in a long-standing communist tradition of a reactive, hard Eurosceptic narrative, combined with internationalist and multilateralist elements. The SPD articulated the most distinctive narrative,

grounded in a reactionary conception of agency, isolationism, hard Euroscepticism, and, in particular, a geopolitical trajectory that combines solipsistic withdrawal with selective cooperation among ideologically aligned illiberal regimes in Central Europe. Central Europe demonstrates some prominence only in the opposition narratives, thereby confirming only partially expectations regarding the rising salience of Central European issues in general and Visegrád cooperation in particular (Janebová & Hloušek, 2023). Reciprocally, the incumbent parties did not present Central European cooperation because of regional politicians that were 'toxic' to them (such as Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán and Slovak PM Robert Fico).

The second research question concerned the extent to which the 2025 narratives aligned with established ideational strands. Here, most parties largely adhered to their traditional patterns. The main innovations were the novel trajectory developed by the SPD and the shift of the Together coalition from soft Euroscepticism towards a more restrained, or lukewarm, Euro-optimist narrative. Liberal internationalism remained a defining feature of the incumbent governing parties, while a fully sovereigntist position characterised only the far-right SPD, provided that hard Euroscepticism is not automatically equated with sovereigntism *per se*.

Our third research question examined the alignment between EU-related and foreign policy narratives. A clear pattern emerges. Europeanist and internationalist narratives are typically associated with a strong emphasis on intensive and active cooperation within the EU and with Euro-optimist conceptions of the Czech role in the Union. Conversely, soft and hard Euroscepticism tend to align with isolationist and reactive preferences in foreign policy, at least among parties represented in parliament. At the same time, even Euro-optimist narratives of the Czech role in the EU relied predominantly on instrumental justifications for active and cooperative engagement, thereby confirming the long-standing dominance of instrumental arguments in Czech debates on 'Europe' (Braun, 2005; Beneš & Harnisch, 2015; Hloušek & Kaniok, 2020; Cabada, 2024b).

In simplified terms, the incumbency-opposition cleavage structured two distinct narrative worlds. In the discourse of parties with experience in Fiala's coalition government, Czech foreign and European policy is framed around Russia as the primary external threat and foreign-policy 'other', while the EU and NATO are treated as natural frameworks of belonging. Not as shelters behind which to hide, but as arenas in which Czechia should actively shape its own future and that of Europe. By contrast, the conceptual map of the 2025 'battle' of foreign and European policy narratives remains relatively straightforward, delineating a clear divide between Europeanist and Euro-optimist former governing parties on one side, and Eurosceptic, reactive opposition parties on the other. Within the latter group, however, a further distinction emerges between internationalist actors (ANO and AUTO) and those advancing an isolationist approach (Enough! and SPD).

The pronounced divergence between the narratives of incumbents and the opposition constitutes a noteworthy finding. It suggests that the politicisation of foreign policy narratives is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather reflects the broader pattern of party system polarisation along the government–opposition divide. The Euroscepticism of ANO and the Euro-optimism of the Together coalition, for instance, appear to be rooted more in this structural polarity than in other factors shaping the positions of ANO and the Together parties vis-à-vis European integration.

Another significant finding concerns the cautious manner in which pro-Russian or pro-Chinese sentiments are articulated. Neither SPD nor Enough!, despite including numerous politicians with clearly pro-Russian leanings, adopted an unequivocally pro-Eastern stance; instead, they tended to mask such sympathies behind narratives of isolationism or multilateralism. A systematic comparison of these narrative strategies with those employed by ideologically similar parties in Central and Western Europe would be valuable in elucidating the sources of this relative reticence.

Although the present paper does not aim to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for the use of foreign policy narratives by political parties, the analysis of the Czech case nonetheless opens at least one promising avenue for further theoretical inquiry. The findings provide additional support for the study of politicisation and the erosion of broad domestic consensus on foreign policy priorities. Not only European Union-related issues, but also wider global and regional developments, appear capable of triggering contestation between competing party narratives. Expanding the scope of the politicisation debate to encompass a broader range of foreign policy questions would therefore be highly desirable.

A more fine-grained analysis of how political parties have framed the war in Ukraine may help to clarify one of the underlying mechanisms. Actors such as SPD or ANO did not treat Ukraine solely as a foreign policy issue. While their narratives formally called for an end to the war, they selectively emphasised those aspects of the conflict that intersect with domestic political concerns—for example, mobilising fear associated with refugees from Ukraine residing in Czechia. Broader comparative research could, in turn, generate more generalisable propositions regarding this particular dimension of the politicisation of foreign policy within domestic political debates.

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Appendix 1: List of the party 2025 electoral manifestos

<i>Party or coalition (citation)</i>	<i>Czech title</i>	<i>English title</i>	<i>Website</i>
ANO (ANO, 2025)	Program pro váš lepší život	Program for your better life	https://www.anobudelip.cz/file/edee/ke-stazeni/volebni-program-2025.pdf
Motoristé sobě (AUTO, 2025)	Umíme vyřešit i složité věci	We can solve even the complicated issues	https://36beec02.delivery.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/Volebni_program-2025_MOTORISTE-SOBE.pdf
Piráti (Pirates, 2025)	Nakopneme to! Plán pirátů, jak posunout Česko dopředu	We will start it up! Pirate's plan how to move Czechia forwards	https://majak.pirati.cz/documents/506/PROGRAM_PIRATU_2025.pdf
SPD (SPD, 2025)	Česko, jaké chcete. Jo, pojďme na to!	Czechia, whatever you want. Yeah, let's do it!	https://spd.cz/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Program-SPD-pro-volby-do-Poslanecke-snemovny-2025.pdf
Spolu (Together, 2025)	Vize 2030 – Česko, úspěšná bezpečná země, ve které chceme žít!	Vision 2030 – Czechia, a successful, safe country in which we want to live!	https://spolu25.cz/pdf/SPOLU-program-2025.pdf
Stačilo! (Enough!, 2025)	Program hnutí Stačilo! pro volby v roce 2025	The Enough! movement's program for the 2025 elections	https://www.stacilo.cz/#program
STAN (STAN, 2025)	Pro dobrý život v naší zemi	For a good life in our country	https://www.starostove.cz/files/dobry-program-starostove.pdf

All manifestos are in the author's archive, the websites were accessed on 29 December 2025.

Appendix 2:

Codebook

<i>Category and codes</i>	<i>Key indicators</i>	<i>Example</i>
GEOPOLITICAL TRAJECTORY		
The key partners for orientation of the Czech foreign and European policies		
Europeanist	● Czech foreign policy fully integrated with EU ● EU as security provider	Ukraine is fighting for us too, and that is why we will support it through a strong and united Europe. (Pirates, 2025, p. 9)
Atlanticist	● Czech foreign policy actively building NATO ● USA and NATO as a security provider	Our place is in NATO, which must remain the key defence alliance of the entire Western world. (AUTO, 2025, p. 9)
Eastern	● China and Russia as economic opportunity ● Western power in decline	Expanding NATO has not strengthened European security, the US is reassessing its relationship with NATO, and an opportunity is opening up to create a new European collective security structure that includes Russia. (Enough!, 2025)
Multilateralist	● Czech foreign policy depends on international law and institutional cooperation ● Czech foreign policy shall build and foster international norms and institutions	We will develop global trade and diplomatic relations with all countries in the world, including those with different political and constitutional traditions. We will free Czech diplomacy from any lecturing or mentoring by other countries. (Enough!, 2025)
BASIC APPROACH		
The basic perception of the role Czechia has to play in foreign policy		
Isolationism	● Czechia shall remain passive and focus on domestic issues ● Czechia is a small state	The WHO has become a lobbying tool for multinational pharmaceutical companies and groups that advocate for the restriction of national sovereignty and fundamental human rights and freedoms. Therefore, our membership in this organization must be terminated as soon as possible. (SPD, 2025, p. 13)
Internationalism	● Czechia shall be an active international player ● Czechia plays its international role, typically within EU and NATO framework	We are actively involved in NATO, we participate in international missions – we know that the world does not end at our borders. (Together, 2025)

CZECH AGENCY The source of Czech foreign policy agency, stemming from (and related to) the perception of the role of Czech foreign policy in Europe and in the World		
Pro-active	● Basic value orientation is stable ● Czechia contributes to construction of European and global order ● Stress on active participation in international politics	For the safety of Czechs and the prosperity of the country, we will actively speak out in the world and deepen cooperation with traditional allies. We will not give in to aggressors. We will stand up for those persecuted by undemocratic regimes and for all who are persecuted for their faith or ethnic origin. (Together, 2025)
Reactive	● Global order is not stable ● Czechia depends on changing global and European geopolitics ● Stress on defence of national sovereignty	We will not escape our geographical affiliation with Europe either. Therefore, we need to carefully monitor trends and shifts within the EU, accommodate those that suit us, and seek partners at the level of political forces and states. (AUTO, 2025, p. 10)
CZECH ROLE IN THE EU Czech position towards the EU, role of the EU in Czech foreign policy, Czech role in the EU		
Eurooptimist	● EU as value community ● EU as geopolitical actor	The common approach of the European Union, which acts with a single voice based on a previous agreement, with the views of all members being taken into account, even if they do not always agree. EU membership is absolutely essential for the Czech Republic - it allows us to export more than we import and ensures a stronger position in the world. (STAN, 2025, p. 57)
Soft Eurosceptic	● EU as economic community ● EU as technocratic necessity	It is in the interest of the Czech Republic not to transfer further powers to the EU level (veto right), not to admit our energy dependence (support for nuclear power, opposition to the Green Deal), not to participate in any activities that lead to further indebtedness and further regulations of the European economy, to protect external and, if necessary, internal borders against mass migration and to maintain a free information space. (AUTO, 2025, p. 10)
Hard Eurosceptic	● EU as constraint on sovereignty ● EU as external imposition	It will oppose the centralizing tendencies of the EU institutions and their ideological extremism, which harm its security, economic and social interests. If this is not possible, it is appropriate to prepare a collective withdrawal from the EU in cooperation with similarly oriented states. With this aim, we will declare a referendum on our remaining or leaving the EU. (Enough!, 2025)

Endnotes:

- 1 It is important to note that Babiš uses the concept of a 'pragmatic' foreign policy primarily as a rhetorical device to distinguish his approach from the allegedly unproductive, value-oriented foreign policy of the Fiala government.
- 2 It, of course, does not mean that there are no pro-Russian politicians. Coalition Enough! and SPD include openly pro-Russian politicians but the party leaders and official documents are hiding the Eastern sympathies behind the language of multilateral foreign policy and cooperation with all possible partners. On the other hand, the most pro-Russian remain the small allies of SPD – Tricolour and PRO parties.

Historical Narratives in the 2025 Czech Parliamentary Election Campaign: Strategic Mobilisation and Moral Polarisation¹

Irena Skalová²

Abstract

This article examines how historical narratives were mobilised in televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 Czech parliamentary election and what political functions they performed within electoral competition. Drawing on theories of memory politics, symbolic politics, populist communication, and framing, the study conceptualises references to the past as strategic discursive instruments shaping contemporary political conflict. The analysis is based on a qualitative discourse analysis of debates broadcast by major Czech media outlets during the 2025 campaign.

The findings demonstrate that history functioned primarily as a mechanism of emotional and moral mobilisation. Political actors framed issues such as migration, relations with the European Union, democracy, and national identity through analogies to normatively charged historical experiences, particularly the communist regime, the democratic breakthrough of 1989, and the Soviet invasion of 1968. Four dominant mechanisms were identified: analogical comparison, warnings against repeating past mistakes, the heroisation of democratic milestones, and relativising reinterpretations of historical parallels. These strategies moralised electoral competition and intensified value-based polarisation by transforming programmatic disagreements into existential conflicts over the direction of the state.

Keywords: 2025 Czech parliamentary election; political communication; populism; symbolic politics; politics of memory; historical narratives; discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

In the turbulent environment of contemporary politics, characterised by increasing polarisation and complex societal challenges, the strategic use of historical narratives has gained growing importance as a tool of political communication. The past has become a dynamic arena in which political actors actively construct, interpret, and mobilise historical events, figures, and symbols in order to shape present-day debates, legitimise their own positions, and delegitimise their opponents (Müller, 2002; Olick, 2007; Sierp, 2025). History and the past thus constitute a significant reservoir of symbolic meaning through which political actors interpret the present, justify their policy positions, and mobilise electoral support.

References to past traumas, democratic breakthroughs, or authoritarian experiences may at first glance appear as mere illustrative devices in political communication. In reality, however, they often function as framing instruments that structure political conflicts, generate moral evaluations, and demarcate boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Edelman, 1988; Assmann, 2010; Olick, 2016).

This process—commonly conceptualised as politics of memory or politics of history—extends beyond retrospective engagement with the past and becomes a central component of symbolic politics, effectively shaping public opinion and electoral behaviour (Assmann, 1995; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Particularly in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where societies continue to grapple with transformation fatigue and unresolved historical traumas, memory politics constitutes fertile ground for populist discourses and the reinforcement of value-based cleavages (Blacker, Etkind & Fedor, 2013; Kubik & Mole, 2025; Zelinsky, 2025).

Election campaigns represent periods in which these mechanisms manifest themselves with particular intensity. Political parties and their leaders seek not only to present programmatic proposals but, above all, to offer interpretations of reality that enable voters to navigate complex political conflicts. In this context, the past plays a crucial role, as historical analogies and references provide a comprehensible moral framework through which contemporary political issues—such as relations with the European Union, migration, or the state of democracy—are framed as continuations of earlier struggles for freedom, sovereignty, or national identity (Entman, 1993; Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023).

The Czech political context is no exception. As analyses of pre-election debates suggest, historical analogies—such as references to the 1969 ice hockey victory over the USSR, the Velvet Revolution of 1989, or warnings against a ‘new communism’ and totalitarian practices—have become powerful instruments for shaping political discourse and reinforcing value-based polarisation in the public sphere.

The aim of this article is to analyse how political actors employ historical narratives in televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 elections to the

Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. The primary focus lies on how references to the past are strategically mobilised to delegitimise political opponents and to mobilise voters through moral and emotional appeals.

Against this backdrop, the article asks how historical narratives are mobilised in televised pre-election debates and what political functions they perform within electoral competition. Theoretically, the study draws on concepts of politics of memory and politics of history, collective memory, framing theory (Entman, 1993), and symbolic politics, with particular emphasis on their interconnections with populist discourse (Manucci, 2019; Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023). These concepts allow us to capture how historical narratives generate cognitive and affective frameworks for interpreting current events and how they contribute to dichotomising tendencies in political competition.

The empirical part of the study employs interpretative discourse analysis combined with qualitative content analysis of statements from televised debates broadcast on three major Czech television platforms (Czech Television, TV Nova, and TV Prima, including their news channels ČT24, TN Live, and CNN Prima News). The analysis examines how different historical analogies are used during the campaign to construct narratives of political responsibility, national identity, and threats to democracy.

The article is structured as follows. It first outlines the theoretical framework, elaborating in greater detail on the concepts of politics of memory, collective memory, framing, and their connections to populism and the far right. This is followed by the methodological section, which specifies the analytical approaches and techniques employed, including case selection and data collection procedures. The empirical section presents the findings of the qualitative content and discourse analysis of televised debates and describes the analytical process in detail. The concluding section interprets the empirical findings within a broader theoretical and political context, identifies the main mechanisms through which historical narratives are utilised in the pre-election campaign, summarises the key insights of the study, discusses their theoretical implications, and reflects on the limitations of the research and avenues for future inquiry.

2. Literature review

2.1 Politics of memory and collective memory in the social science discourse

The study of the relationship between the past and politics in contemporary political science and sociology is grounded in the concepts of politics of memory and collective memory. As Müller (2002) and Olick (2007) emphasise, politics of memory does not constitute a mere objective reference to historical facts; rather,

it represents a dynamic process in which interpretations of the past are actively constructed, negotiated, and mobilised to legitimise or delegitimise contemporary political actors and positions. It is not a matter of passive remembrance but of the deliberate production and reproduction of particular versions of the past that serve specific ideological or power-related interests.

Maslowski (2013) distinguishes between two principal dimensions of politics of memory: first, state control over legitimate culture and collective memory, aimed at reinforcing national identity and the legitimacy of the political system; and second, the 'duty of memory' (*devoir de mémoire*), which emphasises the ethical dimension of remembrance and the obligation to learn from the past. Both dimensions underscore that the past constitutes an active arena for contemporary political struggles (Maslowski, 2013).

An illustrative example of an intense political struggle over the interpretation of the past is the commemoration of Kristallnacht in Germany in 1988, during which political actors clashed over how to confront the Nazi past. This debate, marked by controversial speeches and political protests, demonstrated that memory is not a static archive but a living and politically sensitive construct, continuously shaped by social negotiation and power struggles (Olick, 2016).

Closely related to politics of memory is the concept of collective memory, developed by scholars such as Assmann (1995) and Olick and Robbins (1998). Collective memory is not understood as the mere aggregation of individual recollections, but rather as a socially constructed entity composed of shared frameworks, symbols, and narratives through which societies interpret their past. These frameworks are transmitted and reinforced through institutions, rituals, and media. Olick (1999) distinguishes between collective memory as an aggregation of socially framed individual memories and as a collective phenomenon *sui generis*.

In both conceptualisations, collective memory is inherently dynamic and often politically sensitive. It plays a crucial role in politics and society, as representations and recollections of key historical events—such as wars, revolutions, or dictatorships—profoundly shape public debate and influence both domestic and foreign policy (Olick, 1999). Somers (1992) further highlights the importance of narrativity in identity formation and social action, arguing that individuals and groups orient themselves in the world and articulate their positions through narratives.

2.2 Framing, populism, and the strategic instrumentalisation of history in political communication

Understanding how historical narratives are deployed in political communication is inseparable from framing theory. Entman (1993) defines framing as the process through which media and political actors selectively emphasise certain aspects

of reality and assign them greater salience, thereby shaping public perceptions of problems, their causes, moral evaluations, and potential remedies.

A growing body of scholarship highlights the link between historical narratives and populism, as well as the activities of the far right. Manucci (2019) argues that the success of right-wing populism is closely connected to the collective memory of the fascist past, particularly to the ‘stigma’ associated with that legacy. Where this stigma is weaker—such as in Italy, Austria, or France—populism finds more fertile ground for its development. Populism is conceptualised as an ideology that often resonates with fascist conceptions of power, characterised by anti-pluralism and limited protection of minorities.

In this sense, collective memory becomes a key ‘opportunity structure’ for populism (Manucci, 2019). Within the Czech context specifically, the party system has been characterised as structured around a populist–anti-populist divide, with ANO and the Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) positioned as the principal populist actors, and the SPOLU coalition, STAN, and the Pirates coalescing around an explicitly anti-populist discourse (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). This divide reflects not only party-level positioning but also a broader pattern of anti-elite, anti-establishment discourse and appeals to ‘ordinary people’ against a corrupt or incompetent establishment (cf. Manucci, 2019), a boundary that, as this article's analysis will show, is frequently reinforced through the strategic deployment of historical narratives.

Empirical studies further demonstrate that far-right parties across various European contexts strategically reinterpret historical events in order to redefine national identity and challenge dominant liberal-democratic narratives. Dilling and Krawatzek (2024), for example, analyse the German AfD's call for a ‘Wende 2.0’, which symbolically reappropriates and redefines the meaning of the peaceful revolution of 1989. Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann (2023) show how political actors such as Éric Zemmour mobilise historical references to reinforce ethno-nationalist interpretations of the past. These examples illustrate a broader trend commonly described as the ‘weaponisation of the past’, characteristic of contemporary right-wing populist discourses.

2.3 Gap in the literature and contribution of this study

Although a substantial body of literature addresses politics of memory, collective memory, and populism, systematic analyses of the strategic mobilisation of historical narratives within the dynamic environment of intense political competition—particularly in televised pre-election debates—remain limited. Existing research frequently focuses on institutionalised forms of memory, such as monuments and museums, or on its long-term role in shaping national identity (Sierp, 2025; Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024).

A related, though thematically distinct, contribution is offered by Novotný (2016), who examines the role of Czech-German historical narratives, specifically the Beneš Decrees and the expulsion of Sudeten Germans, in the 2013 Czech presidential election campaign. While demonstrating that such narratives retained social relevance, Novotný finds that their actual influence on the electoral outcome was limited, attributing this partly to the 'Europeanisation' of Czech public opinion. This contrasts with the dynamics observed in the present study, suggesting that the intensity and polarising function of historical narratives in Czech electoral competition may have shifted considerably over the intervening decade.

This study seeks to address this gap by shifting attention to the micro-level of political communication. It examines how political actors in the Czech Republic mobilise historical narratives in direct political confrontation and investigates the discursive strategies and political functions these narratives perform. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the past becomes an active agent in contemporary political communication and how it influences electoral dynamics.

3. Theoretical framework

Historical narratives are conceptualised in this article as strategic interpretative resources through which political actors connect the past to contemporary political conflicts. They are not understood as mere recollections of historical events, but as selectively mobilised frames that enable the structuring of moral evaluations, the delineation of collective identities, and the legitimisation of political positions.

At the core of the study's theoretical grounding lies the concept of politics of memory. Here, it is understood not merely as a general process of constructing the past, but as an analytical perspective that allows for the examination of how political actors strategically engage with historical interpretations within political competition (Müller, 2002; Olick, 2007). In this research, politics of memory is operationalised as a set of discursive practices through which particular versions of the past are actively mobilised in order to legitimise one's own positions and delegitimise opponents.

The concept of collective memory provides a complementary framework for understanding why such narratives are politically effective. Collective memory is conceptualised as a shared repertoire of symbols, events, and interpretative frameworks that constitute cultural resources available to political actors (Assmann, 1995; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Political competition thus unfolds not only at the level of programmatic differences, but also as a struggle over the meaning of the past and its interpretative hegemony. Narrative structures function

as a key mechanism linking past and present, as identities, moral evaluations, and political attitudes are shaped through narrative articulation (Somers, 1992).

Framing theory represents a central analytical tool for examining how historical narratives are integrated into contemporary political communication. Following Entman (1993), framing is understood as a process of selective meaning construction that defines a problem, identifies its causes, implies moral evaluation, and suggests preferred remedies. Within the context of this study, historical references are analysed as a specific form of framing in which the past serves as an interpretative filter for contemporary political conflicts.

The strategic instrumentalisation of history is conceptualised here as a discursive practice through which political actors rearticulate historical events in order to support their own political positions and delegitimise competitors (Couperus, Tortola & Rensmann, 2023). Historical references therefore do not merely constitute thematic content within debates, but function as structuring elements that shape moral dichotomies, identity boundaries, and emotional mobilisation. In the pre-election context, this mechanism becomes particularly visible in moments of direct confrontation, where the past operates as a source of symbolic capital and a tool of political struggle.

Historical analogies and references provide a comprehensible moral framework through which contemporary political issues—such as relations with the European Union, migration, or the state of democracy—are presented as continuations of earlier struggles over freedom, sovereignty, or national identity (Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023).

3.1 Linking historical narratives to populism and the far right

The relationship between historical narratives and populist discourse can be understood as a specific form of political mobilisation in which the past serves as a source of symbolic legitimacy and as a mechanism for constructing moral boundaries. Research shows that populist and far-right actors often operate as ‘memory entrepreneurs’, strategically reinterpreting historical events in order to redefine collective identity and delegitimise established elites (Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024).

In this context, collective memory does not merely constitute the cultural background of political action, but functions as an opportunity structure that enables the articulation of resentment, nostalgia, or perceived threat (Manucci, 2019). Historical narratives thus serve as a form of symbolic capital through which contemporary conflicts are framed as continuations of allegedly unfinished historical struggles over national sovereignty, identity, or moral order.

Far-right political actors are frequently characterised in the literature as engaging in strategic reinterpretations of the past in order to reinforce ethno-na-

tional models of identity and to position themselves against liberal-democratic norms (Couperus, Tortola & Rensmann, 2023). Historical references here do not merely serve an illustrative function; rather, they structure the dichotomy between the 'authentic nation' and its alleged adversaries.

In post-communist contexts, where competition over the interpretation of the former regime and the transformation period remains ongoing, politics of memory constitutes a particularly salient arena of political conflict (Kubik & Mole, 2025). Historical narratives operate here as mechanisms of value-based polarisation and as tools for constructing external or internal threats (Zelinsky, 2025).

3.2 Functions of historical narratives in political competition: Moral appeal, emotion, and dichotomisation

Historical narratives in political communication perform a range of strategic functions that primarily revolve around moral appeals, emotional mobilisation, and the construction of dichotomous divisions. These functions effectively mobilise voters and delegitimise political opponents. Political actors frequently invoke historical events—such as references to totalitarian regimes or 'heroic' moments in national history—in order to present their own political positions as morally justified and uniquely legitimate, while portraying opposing positions as ethically questionable or dangerous (Zelinsky, 2025). Such appeals resonate with voters' conceptions of justice and national identity.

Another important function lies in the mobilisation of emotions. Historical narratives possess a distinctive capacity to generate strong emotional responses, including pride, fear, indignation, nostalgia, or a sense of threat. As Entman (1993) argues, emotions are central to the framing process, as they contribute to the construction of cognitive and affective frameworks through which current events are interpreted. Nostalgia for a perceived 'golden age' or fear of repeating historical mistakes may therefore become powerful mobilisation mechanisms (Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023; Boym, 2001).

An additional crucial element is the construction of dichotomous divisions. Populist discourse frequently relies on sharp polarisation between 'us' and 'them' (Manucci, 2019). Historical narratives provide an ideal vehicle for reinforcing this dichotomy, whereby 'we' represent the 'pure people' and 'they' stand for 'corrupt elites' or 'enemies'. References to historical milestones strengthen collective belonging among 'us', while invocations of 'historical traitors' serve to delegitimise contemporary opponents.

These strategic functions are particularly effective in polarised political environments, where voters may be more receptive to simplified and emotionally charged messages. Analysing these dynamics is essential for understanding

contemporary political landscapes, as historical narratives contribute to the reinforcement of value-based polarisation and structure political conflict.

4. Methodology

In order to achieve the stated objectives and address the research questions, the study employs a combination of interpretative discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis. This methodological integration makes it possible to capture both the manifest content of historical narratives and their latent, strategic, and discursive functions within political communication (Fairclough, 2003; Krippendorff, 2019). While content analysis enables the systematic identification and categorisation of historical references, discourse analysis provides the analytical tools necessary to interpret their strategic and symbolic roles within debate interactions.

The research focuses on televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. Specifically, it examines the so-called ‘hot phase’ of the campaign (the final month before the election), during which media confrontation between political actors intensifies. The unit of analysis is an individual verbal statement by a political actor that contains a reference to the past, identified within the context of a televised debate.

4.1 Data collection and selection of the analytical corpus

The analytical corpus consists of transcripts of televised pre-election debates broadcast during the so-called ‘hot phase’ of the campaign preceding the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, that is, during the final month before the election. This period was selected due to the heightened intensity of media confrontation between political actors and the increased emphasis on mobilising communication.

The primary data sources were recordings and transcripts of debates broadcast on three major nationwide Czech television stations—Czech Television, TV Nova, and TV Prima, including their news platforms (ČT24, TN Live, and CNN Prima News). These stations were selected because of their significant position within the Czech media landscape and their broad national reach.

From these debates, all verbal interventions by political actors containing explicit or implicit references to the past were systematically extracted. A reference to the past was defined as including both direct references to specific historical events, periods, or regimes, as well as analogies, metaphors, or implicit histor-

ical references used to frame a contemporary political issue. Explicit references were straightforward to identify, as they involved direct naming of historical events, periods, or figures. Implicit references required interpretive judgement: a statement was coded as an implicit historical reference when its framing clearly invoked a historically grounded moral or political schema, even in the absence of explicit naming. In cases where the historical referent was ambiguous, the unit was coded according to the dominant interpretive frame suggested by the broader debate context.

Each identified intervention was subsequently transcribed into text form and included in the analytical corpus, which comprises 56 units of analysis. To ensure transparency of the corpus construction process, all televised pre-election programmes broadcast on the three selected stations during the hot phase of the campaign (2 September–2 October 2025) that met the inclusion criteria specified above were systematically screened, regardless of whether they ultimately contained historical references. In total, 44 debate broadcasts were screened: 19 on Czech Television (ČT24), 18 on CNN Prima News, and 7 on TV Nova (including TN Live). These included thematically structured multi-topic debates on individual policy areas (e.g., security, the economy, social affairs), one-on-one leader duels ('ČT Duel'), and multi-party leader 'super-debates'. Of these 44 broadcasts, 23 contained at least one verbal intervention meeting the definition of a historical reference, while 21 contained none; the 56 units of analysis were extracted exclusively from the 23 broadcasts in which such references occurred. This screening procedure ensured that the corpus reflects the full population of eligible debates within the hot phase rather than a purposively selected subsample.¹

For the purposes of this study, pre-election programmes were defined as televised debate formats explicitly labelled by the broadcasters as part of pre-election coverage (e.g., designated as a 'pre-election special' or using similar terminology) and broadcast during the final month preceding the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Only programmes based on direct confrontation between relevant political actors (e.g., one-on-one debates or multi-party debates) were included in the analytical corpus. Individual interviews with single politicians were excluded, as they do not provide space for the interactional mobilisation of historical narratives within the context of direct political competition.

4.2 Analytical strategy and coding framework

For the systematic analysis of historical references, a structured coding framework was developed to capture the key dimensions of their occurrence, form, and strategic functions within televised political debates. The framework is grounded in the theoretical foundations of the study and operationalises its core concepts into specific analytical categories.

Each unit of analysis was coded according to a set of contextual, actor-related, content-related, and functional variables, enabling the linkage between the identification of the type of historical reference and its discursive role in the interaction between political competitors.

The analysis proceeded in two consecutive phases. In the first phase, qualitative content analysis was applied in order to systematically identify and categorise references to the past according to their type, temporal framing, and mode of engagement with history. This phase enabled the mapping of the distribution of historical references across political actors, political positions, and thematic segments of the debates. In the second phase, interpretative discourse analysis was employed to achieve a deeper understanding of their strategic function. The analysis focused on how historical references were used to delegitimise opponents, legitimise one's own position, mobilise audiences, and construct moral boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. At the same time, it examined how these references contributed to the framing of contemporary political issues and to the emotional mobilisation of voters.

The coding framework comprised several types of variables. Contextual variables captured identifying information about the debate broadcast (television station, format, thematic segment, date of broadcast). Actor-related variables focused on the characteristics of the speaker (party affiliation, role in the debate, institutional position—government, opposition, or extra-parliamentary actor). Content-related variables identified the type of historical reference (specific event, historical period, regime, or unspecified past), the temporal scope of the reference, and the mode of engagement with the past (e.g., analogy, warning, heroisation, moral lesson). Functional variables captured the strategic role of the historical reference within debate interaction, particularly delegitimation of an opponent, legitimisation of one's own position, mobilisation appeals, warning or alarmist framing, and the dominant emotional appeal.

The structure and operationalisation of the individual categories are summarised in Table 1. Coding was conducted consistently according to predefined categories, with each unit of analysis assessed in relation to the broader context of the debate interaction.

Table 1:
Structure of the Analytical Coding Framework

Dimension	Category	Analytical Function
Contextual	Debate ID, TV station, debate title, thematic segment, date of broadcast	Identification of the media context and placement of the statement within a specific debate interaction
Actor-related	Speaker's name, political party, role (leader, minister, candidate), institutional position (government/opposition/extra-parliamentary)	Analysis of the distribution of historical references across political positions
Textual evidence	Verbatim quotation, paraphrase	Preservation of the authenticity of the statement and its analytical summary
Content-related	Type of historical reference (communism, 1989, totalitarianism, national crisis, other)	Identification of which segments of the past are mobilised
Content-related	Temporal scope (specific event, historical period, unspecified past)	Determination of the degree of historical specificity
Discursive strategy	Mode of engagement with the past (analogy, warning, trauma, heroisation, moral lesson)	Capturing the instrumental use of history
Functional	Delegitimisation of opponent (yes/no)	Identification of whether the past is used to weaken the opponent's legitimacy
Functional	Legitimation of own position (yes/no)	Identification of self-legitimation through historical framing
Functional	Voter mobilisation (yes/no)	Capturing the mobilisation function of the statement
Functional	Warning / alarmism (yes/no)	Identification of threat construction
Emotional	Dominant emotion (fear, pride, indignation, responsibility, shame/guilt)	Analysis of the affective dimension of framing
Normative	Moral frame (good/evil, democracy/totalitarianism, us/them, victim/perpetrator)	Identification of the value structure of the statement
Communicative	Target of the statement (opponent, voters, nation, institutions – e.g. EU, state)	Determination of the primary addressee and strategic orientation of communication

Source: Author's own elaboration^{*}

The coding categories for the type of historical reference were initially derived from existing scholarship on memory politics in post-communist contexts, which foregrounds references to the communist regime, democratic transition, and experiences of totalitarianism as the primary repertoire of historical narratives in Central and Eastern European political discourse. However, the coding process also allowed for inductive expansion where the empirical material required it. In particular, references to the Second World War emerged as an analytically relevant category that was not fully anticipated at the outset. The

distribution of the 56 units of analysis across the main categories of historical reference was as follows: references to totalitarian and authoritarian experience, including both the communist regime and more broadly formulated invocations of totalitarianism, constituted the largest group ($n=13$, 23%), followed closely by references to the Second World War ($n=12$, 21%), the Soviet occupation of 1968 and related national crises ($n=5$, 9%), and the democratic breakthrough of 1989 ($n=4$, 7%). The remaining units drew on a range of other historical repertoires, including the Cold War, geopolitical East vs. West narratives, historical figures, and references to the interwar First Republic.

5. Presentation of results

5.1 Occurrence of historical references, actors, and party affiliation

The analysis identified a total of 56 units of analysis containing explicit or implicit references to the past across the televised pre-election debates examined. Historical references appeared consistently throughout the entire analysed period and across various thematic segments, suggesting that the mobilisation of the past constitutes a stable and systematic component of pre-election political communication rather than an incidental rhetorical device.

In terms of thematic context, historical references were not confined to debates focused on foreign policy, security, or the state of democracy, although these two thematic segments accounted for a disproportionate share of the corpus: debates on foreign policy ($n=11$, 20%) and on security and defence ($n=7$, 13%) together comprised nearly one-third of all coded units (32%). This pattern is consistent with the prevalence of references to the 1968 occupation and the Second World War, which were frequently mobilised to frame contemporary security threats, particularly in relation to Russia (see the discussion of Rakušan's and Fiala's statements below). Historical references also appeared, albeit less frequently, in discussions of economic policy, social policy, education, and relations with the European Union. In this sense, the past did not function as a separate thematic domain, but rather as an interpretative framework through which contemporary political issues were explained, normatively evaluated, and embedded within a broader field of meaning with a clear gravitational pull toward the thematic areas of security and international relations, where existential and civilisational framing is most readily available.

This mode of engaging with the past corresponds to the concept of framing (Entman, 1993), according to which political communication does not merely present facts, but structures their meaning through processes of selection, emphasis, and moral interpretation. Historical references thus function as

cognitive as well as normative shortcuts that allow political actors to connect current political issues with established collective experiences and shared symbolic meanings (Olick, 2016; Assmann, 2010).

With regard to political actors, the mobilisation of historical narratives was distributed across the political spectrum, albeit with varying intensity and functional orientation, closely linked to the speakers' institutional position and party affiliation. Both government and opposition representatives employed historical references; however, their normative direction and strategic purpose differed.

Government actors primarily mobilised the past as a source of legitimacy for current policies—particularly in the areas of security and foreign policy—and as an argument for defending the democratic order. Opposition representatives, by contrast, more frequently used historical analogies to delegitimise governmental measures and to frame the present situation as a potential threat to democratic principles.

Party affiliation further shaped the mode of engagement with the past, but this pattern requires disentangling from institutional position, since populist actors in the corpus were disproportionately concentrated among opposition and extra-parliamentary speakers. To assess whether populism has explanatory power independent of the government-opposition divide, speakers were classified into a populist and a mainstream bloc following the established distinction between populist and anti-populist competition in Czech party politics (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022), which places ANO and SPD, together with their electoral list partners, on the populist side, and the SPOLU coalition (ODS, TOP 09, KDU-ČSL), STAN, and the Pirates on the anti-populist side. Stačilo! (a coalition led by the Communist Party), Přísaha, and Motoristé sobě, all newly prominent in the 2025 campaign, are not yet covered by peer-reviewed classifications of the Czech party system; they are provisionally included in the populist bloc on the basis of their consistent characterisation as anti-establishment or populist actors in expert and journalistic commentary, and this classification should be treated as provisional pending confirmation in the academic literature.

This reclassification shows that institutional position alone does not account for variation in delegitimising use of the past: the share of units directed at delegitimising a political opponent was similarly high across government (70%), opposition (71%), and extra-parliamentary speakers (68%). The populist/mainstream distinction shows a comparable, though somewhat less pronounced, pattern: 72% of units by populist-bloc speakers performed a delegitimising function, compared to 67% among mainstream speakers. The clearest test is available within the opposition itself, where populist and mainstream actors are represented in equal numbers ($n=7$ each): here, 86% of populist-opposition units delegitimised an opponent, compared to 57% among mainstream-opposition units (Table 2). Given the small cell sizes, this comparison is illustrative rather

than conclusive, but it suggests that populism carries some explanatory weight beyond institutional position, consistent with Dilling and Krawatzek's (2024) characterisation of the populist radical right as a 'memory entrepreneur' that redirects established historical frames against democratic institutions rather than in their defence. At the same time, self-legitimising use of the past was widespread across both blocs (96% mainstream, 90% populist), suggesting that the two groups differ less in whether they mobilise history to legitimise their own position than in how frequently they simultaneously use it to delegitimise an opponent.

Table 2:
Delegitimising and self-legitimising function of historical references, by institutional position and by populist/mainstream bloc

	N units	Delegitimising opponent	Self-legitimising
By institutional position:			
Government	20	70 %	-
Opposition	14	71 %	-
Extra-parliamentary	22	68 %	-
By populist/mainstream bloc:			
Populist bloc	29	72 %	90 %
Mainstream bloc	27	67 %	96 %
of which opposition only:			
Populist-opposition	7	86 %	-
Mainstream-opposition	7	57 %	-

Note: the two functions are coded as separate, non-exclusive binary variables; a single unit may perform both, or neither function, so rows do not sum to 100 %. The full coded dataset underlying this table, including every unit's classification, is publicly available at Zenodo (see note 3), so that all reported percentages can be independently checked against the source data.

Opposition actors, in some cases, employed analogous historical frames to delegitimise the government by symbolically associating it with practices of authoritarianism or a 'new totalitarianism'. The same historical repertoire was thus deployed in opposing directions, depending on the actor's position within the power structure.

5.2 Types of historical references

The analysis identified that the dominant historical narratives in the 2025 pre-election debates drew on two primary clusters of collective memory. The first, and most frequently mobilised, consisted of references to totalitarian and authoritarian experience, encompassing both the communist regime and more

broadly formulated invocations of totalitarianism (n=13, 23%). The second, of comparable frequency, comprised references to the Second World War, including analogies to appeasement, Nazi aggression, and the broader experience of twentieth-century violence (n=12, 21%). Together, these two clusters accounted for nearly half of all identified units of analysis, suggesting that Czech political actors in 2025 drew on the full repertoire of traumatic twentieth-century memory rather than exclusively on post-communist experience.

Further categories included references to the Soviet occupation of 1968 and related national crises (n=5, 9%), and the democratic breakthrough of 1989 (n=4, 7%). These categories correspond to the operationalisation of the type of historical reference within the coding scheme and represent the most frequently mobilised reference points of collective memory in the analysed corpus.

In addition to these dominant frames, references to specific historical figures also appeared, functioning as personalised carriers of particular value traditions or political legacies. Mentions of historical actors enable speakers to symbolically align themselves with a particular line of national continuity or, conversely, to portray their opponents as denying or betraying that tradition. The personalisation of the past thus intensifies the normative dimension of argumentation and facilitates the moral categorisation of contemporary political conflict.

To a lesser extent, references falling into the category of 'other' were also identified. These included symbolically salient yet less frequent moments of modern history, such as references to the ice hockey victory over the Soviet Union in 1969 or allusions to extreme forms of twentieth-century violence (e.g., genocides), employed in analogical or ironic contexts.

The reference to the 1969 ice hockey victory over the Soviet Union is used in the analysed corpus as a symbolic moment of national pride and resistance against a hegemonic power (TV Nova, 2025b). Rather than providing a detailed historical reconstruction of the event, the reference mobilises a shared emotional symbol that, within Czech collective consciousness, is associated with a sense of moral satisfaction following the experience of the 1968 occupation. Through this reference, the speaker indirectly reactivates a narrative of resistance to external pressure and frames the present situation as a continuation of a historical struggle for dignity and sovereignty. The sporting event is thus transformed into a political symbol that performs a mobilising and identity-building function, rather than serving a primarily delegitimising purpose.

An illustrative example of a distinct use of the 'other' category is a statement by Petr Macinka (CNN Prima News, 2025m), who, in response to warnings framed in terms of twentieth-century genocides, ironically questions their relevance and ridicules the claim that a particular political actor is capable of protecting society from such developments: 'No offense, but the idea that from the genocides that happened in the last century, which apparently now threaten us again according to Zdeněk Hřib the Pirates are going to save us from them, that's really funny'.²

In this case, the historical experience of mass violence is not mobilised as a cautionary precedent, but rather as a tool of ironic analogy and relativisation: the mocking tone and the dismissive '*that's really funny*' strip the historical comparison of its gravity, turning the opponent's invocation of genocide into an object of ridicule rather than a legitimate warning. The past thus serves primarily to discursively undermine the legitimacy of an opponent rather than to mobilise moral consensus.

Although these historical motifs do not constitute the core of debate argumentation, they demonstrate that the historical imagination of political actors is not confined solely to the period of communism and the year 1989, but extends to broader symbolic resources of collective memory.

The findings further confirm that historical narratives are not mobilised randomly within the debate arena, but selectively, depending on their mobilising potential, emotional resonance, and capacity to structure political conflict into a moral dichotomy. They carry different normative charges, activate distinct emotional responses, and are associated with diverse discursive strategies. While some references primarily serve to delegitimise political opponents through warnings against a 'return of the past', others function as sources of legitimacy and value continuity, through which actors position themselves as defenders of the democratic order.

The following section therefore systematically elaborates on the individual types of historical narratives and demonstrates how they are mobilised in the context of televised political debates.

a) The communist regime and the period before 1989

The most frequent and normatively most heavily charged category of historical references consists of references to the communist regime and the period before 1989. Within the analysed corpus, these references constitute the dominant frame of reference against which contemporary political reality is symbolically measured. Communism appears not only as an object of historical reconstruction, but also as a negative moral archetype—a shorthand for unfreedom, suppression of pluralism, state control, and restrictions on individual rights.

Within the debate context, this category appears in two primary forms. The first consists of general warnings against a 'return to the period before 1989', which function as a strongly normative frame without detailed historical argumentation. The second form involves more specific analogies in which the actions of a contemporary political opponent are likened to the practices of the former regime. In these cases, a direct symbolic linkage is established between a present-day actor and a historically discredited category.

An illustrative example is a statement by Miroslav Ševčík (Czech Television, 2025d), who, in response to a question concerning education about Russian aggression, compared the government's current official position to the practices of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the 1980s:

That's what the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party used to say too that if this is what's going to be taught in schools, then whatever the government says must be true. Well, God help us then. I myself, back in the 1980s, spoke out against what the government said and what the Central Committee of the Communist Party said.³

The reference to personal experience from the period of 'normalization' functions here as a historical precedent intended to warn against the adoption of a 'single truth' imposed by state power: by drawing a direct equivalence between today's government-endorsed position and the Party line of the 1980s, the statement recasts an official interpretation as an act of ideological conformity rather than a factual judgment. The communist past is thus mobilised as a negative corrective to the present, and the current situation is framed as a potential repetition of authoritarian practices. In this way, the governmental interpretation is delegitimised through historical analogy.

It is characteristic that these references are often not elaborated through detailed historical reconstruction but rather function as shorthand moral categories. They activate the affective dimension of communication—particularly fear, indignation, or a sense of threat—and contribute to a sharp dichotomisation of the political space.

Similarly, Petr Fiala (CNN Prima News, 2025a) mobilises the historical experience of communism in the form of a warning, yet does so through a broader civilisational dichotomy:

We will decide whether we continue along the path of freedom, quality democracy, security, and prosperity or whether we head off somewhere to the East, as Andrej Babiš and his allies from the ranks of extremists and communists are offering us.⁴

The election is framed as a choice between the 'path of freedom, democracy, and prosperity' and a 'turn to the East', with the 'East' explicitly associated, through the direct reference to 'communists', with the communist past and authoritarianism. Unlike Ševčík's statement above, the historical experience is not elaborated through personal recollection but functions as a compressed symbolic counterpoint to democratic identity, reduced to a single oppositional label.

Communism thus appears as a negative historical archetype whose return is presented as a real risk associated with specific political actors. The reference therefore performs a dual function: first, a mobilising function (an appeal for electoral participation), and second, a delegitimising function (the symbolic association of the opponent with an authoritarian tradition). The past operates here as an implicit moral lesson, because democracy is portrayed as the outcome of a historical struggle that may be undermined if voters choose the 'wrong' path.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, it is characteristic that references to communism are often formulated in a condensed manner and without historical specification. The primary aim is the mobilisation of a symbolically powerful collective experience. This type of reference activates above all the emotional dimension of communication—particularly fear of a return to authoritarianism and indignation at its perceived signs. In the analysed corpus, the communist regime thus represents a key negative normative frame through which boundaries between the ‘democratic’ and the ‘unacceptable’ are constructed, contributing to the moral dichotomisation of the political space.

b) 1989 as a foundational democratic moment

In contrast to the negatively connoted references to the communist regime, the year 1989 is mobilised in the analysed corpus predominantly as a positively normative frame of reference. It represents a symbol of democratic breakthrough, the restoration of freedom, and a return to European value alignment. References to this historical moment are not primarily used to delegitimise opponents, but rather to legitimise one’s own political position and to mobilise voters through appeals to responsibility and the defence of the democratic order.

An illustrative example is a statement by Vít Rakušan (TV Nova, 2025b), who frames the current election as a decision about whether the Czech Republic will preserve the democratic character defined by the experience of 1989:

So today we saw what we’re up against in these elections, and I think we showed that when democrats cooperate, we can weather it together, that we’ll win like we did in hockey in ‘69, or that we won’t let our democracy be taken away and we’ll keep it here like in ‘89. We just need to get fired up to go vote, to mobilise.⁵

The year 1989 functions here as a normative anchor of contemporary political identity, explicitly paired with the 1968 occupation within a single mobilising sentence. The then Minister of the Interior sought to mobilize a shared symbol representing freedom, pluralism, and civic engagement. The past is reactivated as a commitment, because democracy is presented as a historically hard-won achievement that requires active protection.

A specific mode of engaging with this historical moment is also reflected in the defence of 17 November as a national holiday:

I wouldn’t reduce the number of state holidays... and perhaps with one reminder from our eastern neighbour, where it is now being proposed that, at least for this year, 17 November should not be a state holiday I would like, and I am sure that with our “Democratic 101” [author’s note: a campaign slogan of the coalition of democratic parties], this will not happen, for 17 November to remain a state holiday.⁶ (Czech Television, 2025n)

Its preservation is framed as confirmation of the continuity of democratic memory and as an expression of the Czech Republic's civilisational orientation, implicitly contrasted with an unnamed 'eastern neighbour'. The year 1989 thus performs both a mobilising and an identity-building function, primarily by delineating the boundary between democratic and authoritarian models of political order.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, it is characteristic that 1989 is mobilised predominantly as a positive historical precedent. Unlike references to communism, which function as a negative cautionary archetype, 1989 represents a source of legitimacy and continuity of values. It contributes to the moral structuring of political conflict yet does so primarily through appeals to the defence of achieved values rather than through direct symbolic exclusion of opponents from the framework of democratic competition.

c) The general experience of totalitarianism / authoritarianism

In addition to historically anchored references to the communist regime or the year 1989, the analysed corpus also contains broadly formulated references to 'totalitarianism', 'dictatorship', 'fascism', or authoritarianism without precise temporal specification. These references are not linked to a detailed historical reconstruction of a specific period, but function instead as highly normative and condensed categories through which the current political situation is framed as a potential threat to democracy.

Unlike specific historical analogies, the past here appears rather as an abstract cautionary archetype. Terms such as 'totalitarianism' or 'fascism' are employed as symbolic signals indicating the crossing of the boundary of democratic legitimacy. This type of reference has a distinctly alarmist character and seeks to mobilise fear, vigilance, and moral rejection of certain political actions.

An illustrative example is a statement by Miroslav Ševčík (CNN Prima News, 2025h), who interprets a specific incident, the disruption of a gathering in Příčovy by a group associated with the controversial activist Mikael (Mike) Oganessian, as a symptom of the emergence of 'fascist militias':

I was personally present when that Oganessian group, together with some ODS people and others, one of whom is actually a councillor in one of the municipalities, attacked civilians in Příčovy who had gathered there to listen to some lectures. So I witnessed that. And I saw how the police intervened. They arrived late, but they did intervene. I want to draw attention to a great danger. This is how fascist militias began. This is how it started, as I saw it happen with my own eyes in Příčovy.⁷

The historical experience of interwar authoritarianism is not elaborated as a complex historical context, but serves as a warning parallel through which a real, verifiable public-order incident is reframed through an alarmist historical

lens, casting a disruptive counter-protest as the genesis of organised political violence. The past thus functions as a dramatising device that shifts the current conflict into the realm of existential threat.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, this category is characterised by the absence of concrete historical specification and the dominance of strongly evaluative terminology. Totalitarianism or authoritarianism here represent abstract negative models against which contemporary politics is measured. This type of reference thus contributes to the intensification of political polarisation by framing the conflict not as a dispute over policy programmes, but as a confrontation between democracy and its endangerment.

d) National crisis and the threat to sovereignty (1968 / Russia)

A specific mode of engaging with the past is represented by references to national crises associated with threats to state sovereignty, particularly the experience of the Soviet occupation in 1968. These narratives are mobilised in the debate context primarily in relation to security policy and relations with Russia.

An illustrative example is a statement by Vít Rakušan (TV Nova, 2025b), who frames the current situation as a continuation of the struggle against an aggressive state in the East and legitimises increased defence spending as a response to an unprecedented security risk:

There's a kind of hidden contest going on here, Czechia versus Russia. Zdeněk Hřib and I are playing for Czechia, and just like in '69 in hockey, we're simply going to win! We have an aggressive state here to the east, and we as a country have to be prepared. This is about the fate of our children. And the fact that we, as a government, this government now governing until 2030, have committed to spending 3% on defence is absolutely right.⁸

The reference to the historical experience of occupation serves here as an implicit argument for the necessity of defence capacity and political unity. The past is reactivated as a cautionary precedent: the experience of the loss of sovereignty in 1968 is invoked, through the sporting analogy of the 1969 ice hockey victory over the Soviet Union, to justify contemporary measures aimed at strengthening national security.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, this constitutes a form of security framing, in which historical memory is used to legitimise specific policies. The reference to the occupation functions as an emotionally powerful symbol of collective trauma, shifting the present conflict into the realm of existential threat. Political debate is thus structurally displaced from a programme-based dispute toward a question of national security and survival.

Not all historical references in the analysed corpus served polarising or delegitimising functions. A smaller but analytically significant subset of statements

mobilised the past in an integrative or constructive manner. Olga Richterová (CNN Prima News, 2025k) invoked the Baťa model of interwar urban development as a positive historical precedent for contemporary housing policy: ‘(...)so that we can build entire new districts here the way they did under Baťa, comprehensively planned and in cooperation with private developers’.⁹ The reference frames the interwar precedent as an achievable standard to be replicated rather than a cautionary warning to be avoided. Similarly, Lubomír Zaorálek (Czech Television, 2025m) recalled the founding of the Visegrád Group by Václav Havel as an example of successful regional cooperation and dialogue, evoking pride rather than threat. Martin Baxa (Czech Television, 2025k) drew on the democratic traditions of the First Republic and T. G. Masaryk as a source of national self-confidence, without directing the reference against any political opponent. These cases illustrate that the historical repertoire available to Czech political actors is not exclusively weaponised: the past can also function as a shared resource for constructive political legitimisation and identity affirmation.

In summary, the different types of historical references differ not only in their thematic content, but above all in the discursive functions they perform within televised debates. While references to the communist regime and to the broadly framed experience of totalitarianism are predominantly cautionary and delegitimising in character, the year 1989 is mobilised as a positive source of legitimisation and a normative anchor of democratic identity. By contrast, references to national crises and the experience of the 1968 occupation primarily serve to frame contemporary conflict in security terms and to legitimise defence or geopolitical decisions.

In pre-election debates, the past functions as an active instrument of political framing through which boundaries are constructed between the legitimate and the illegitimate, between the ‘democratic’ and the ‘threatening’. Historical narratives thus become structuring elements of political conflict and contribute to its moral polarisation.

5.3 Political functions and communicative orientation of historical narratives

The analysis based on the applied coding framework demonstrates that historical narratives in the 2025 televised pre-election debates perform a set of strategic political functions that are systematically integrated into the argumentative structures of individual statements. These are not incidental reminiscences of the past, but deliberately mobilised interpretative resources through which political actors structure political conflict.

The most prominent identified function is the delegitimation of political opponents. Historical analogies and references to totalitarian experience are used to symbolically associate a contemporary adversary with normatively discre-

dited periods or ideologies. Such framing challenges not only a specific political position, but also the moral competence of the actor as a legitimate participant in democratic competition.

References to ‘communism’, ‘totalitarianism’, or a ‘return to the period before 1989’ are mobilised in these cases as a moral benchmark against which a present-day opponent is implicitly or explicitly measured. This mechanism corresponds to the theory of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1988), according to which political conflict is not merely a clash of programmes, but a contest over meanings and moral interpretations of reality.

At the same time, historical narratives fulfil a function of legitimising one’s own position. Political actors present themselves as continuators of democratic tradition or as defenders of historically hard-won values. The past functions here as a source of symbolic capital that stabilises one’s programme-based stance and embeds it within a broader civilisational framework. In particular, references to 1989 or to moments of national resistance against authoritarianism allow current political agendas to be portrayed as historically justified and normatively grounded.

Another significant dimension is the mobilising function of historical references. Analysis of the category ‘dominant emotion’ shows that historical narratives are systematically linked to the mobilisation of fear, indignation, pride, or responsibility. Emotions do not represent a secondary effect, but a constitutive component of argumentative strategy: they intensify the persuasive impact of the statement and contribute to the moral sharpening of conflict.

A specific form of this mobilisation is alarmist framing, in which historical events are presented as precedents for potential future threats. References to communism or totalitarianism structure contemporary political competition as a situation in which the democratic order itself is at risk. Historical experience functions here as a cautionary scenario legitimising heightened mobilisation.

Another key dimension of the analysis concerns the functional role of historical references within debate interaction. The coding framework made it possible to identify whether the past was mobilised primarily for delegitimising an opponent, legitimising one’s own position, mobilising the audience, or constructing threat. The findings show that historical narratives are in most cases used not as neutral illustrations of an argument, but as instruments of strategic boundary-drawing.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that in the 2025 campaign, history is employed primarily as a tool of emotional and moral mobilisation. Historical narratives enable political actors to frame contemporary social and political issues—from foreign policy orientation to questions of democracy and national identity—and contribute to the value-based intensification of political conflict in the public sphere.

5.4 Moral structure and the dichotomisation of political space

The analysis reveals a distinction between historically specific references and more broadly formulated historical invocations. Concrete historical moments (e.g., 1989 or the 1968/1969 occupation) generally strengthen the argumentative weight of a statement and serve to legitimise a particular political position through reference to a shared and relatively stabilised historical experience. In such cases, the past functions as a source of continuity and normative grounding.

By contrast, broadly formulated references to ‘communism’, ‘totalitarianism’, or a ‘return to the period before 1989’ are typically not elaborated through detailed historical argumentation but operate as condensed moral categories. Historical narratives are simultaneously embedded within binary frames such as democracy vs. totalitarianism or ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. Here, the past functions as a symbolic threat or a cautionary precedent rather than as a historically reconstructed experience. Such references primarily activate the affective dimension of communication—they evoke fear, indignation, or a sense of threat—and thereby contribute to a sharp dichotomisation of political space into ‘defenders of democracy’ and ‘bearers of threat’. Political conflict is thus structurally transformed from a programme-based dispute into a value-based confrontation.

This mechanism corresponds to the conception of collective memory as a source of normative framing (Assmann, 2010; Olick, 2016), whereby the past provides not only an interpretation of reality but also a value-based distinction between acceptable and unacceptable political action.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the moral structure of historical narratives does not function as a secondary effect of political communication, but as one of its constitutive principles. Through references to the past, contemporary actors and their positions are morally categorised. As a result, political conflict is transformed: disputes over specific policies or measures are translated into a framework of confrontation between the ‘defence of democracy’ and the ‘threat to its disruption’. Historical narratives thus stabilise the value boundaries of political space while simultaneously contributing to its polarisation, as they generate a binary structure of legitimacy and delegitimacy that extends beyond the framework of ordinary programme-based competition.

6. Conclusions and discussion

6.1 Discussion of results in the context of theoretical frameworks

The findings of the analysis of televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic clearly demonstrate that historical narratives constitute a key element of political communication and are strategically instrumentalised to achieve political objectives. The results confirm the theoretical assumptions of memory politics and collective memory (Müller, 2002; Olick, 2007; Assmann, 1995), which conceptualise the past not as a neutral reference point but as a dynamic arena of political contestation. Political actors actively construct and reinterpret history in order to legitimise their own positions and delegitimise their opponents, thereby transforming the past into a 'normative benchmark of legitimacy' rather than merely a historical reference.

The predominance of references to the communist regime, the Second World War, the Velvet Revolution, and national crises such as the Soviet occupation of 1968 underscores the specific features of the post-communist context (Blacker, Etkind & Fedor, 2013; Kubik & Mole, 2025; Zelinsky, 2025). In societies still grappling with the traumatic legacy of totalitarian regimes and the process of democratic transformation, memory politics becomes particularly fertile ground for populist discourses. Warnings against a 'return to totalitarianism' or 'new communism' are not merely rhetorical devices, but powerful emotional appeals that resonate with collective memory and enduring societal traumas. These strategies align with Manucci's (2019) argument that collective memory—and the associated 'stigma' of the past—constitutes a key 'opportunity structure' for populism, shaping both its reach and its societal resonance.

The application of framing theory (Entman, 1993) reveals that historical narratives function as powerful cognitive and affective frames that simplify complex political realities. When political actors construct parallels between past events and contemporary issues (e.g., relations with the EU, migration, or the state of democracy), they selectively emphasise particular aspects, thereby shaping public perception and embedding moral evaluations within political communication. This 'weaponisation of the past' (Couperus, Tortola & Rensmann, 2023) is particularly evident among populist and far-right actors, who present themselves as 'memory entrepreneurs' (Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024) and utilise history to reinforce collective identity and criticise 'elites'. The identified dichotomisation of 'us' versus 'them' corresponds directly with populist discourse, in which opponents are associated with historical 'mistakes' or 'betrayals', while the in-group is heroised as the defender of national values.

The identified functions of historical narratives—delegitimation of opponents, mobilisation of supporters, legitimisation of one's own position, and

the activation of moral and emotional appeals—operate in a mutually reinforcing manner. Fear of repeating historical mistakes, pride in national achievements, and indignation over past injustices become instruments that circumvent purely rational argumentation and directly engage voter preferences. This confirms that emotions are not peripheral but integral to the framing process and are strategically mobilised to strengthen political support (Entman, 1993). The Czech political arena in 2025 thus reflects a broader European trend in which historical narratives are increasingly employed to intensify value-based polarisation and structure political conflict.

6.2 Conclusion, implications, and limitations of the study

The analysis of televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections demonstrates that historical narratives constitute a systematic and strategically deployed element of political communication rather than an incidental rhetorical device. Four discursive mechanisms were identified through which political actors mobilised the past: analogical comparison, warnings against repeating historical mistakes, heroisation of democratic turning points, and ironic or relativising reinterpretations.

Contrary to what a focus on post-communist memory politics alone might suggest, the empirical findings reveal two parallel clusters of historical reference of comparable frequency: totalitarian and authoritarian experience, including the communist regime, and the Second World War. Together, these two repertoires accounted for nearly half of all identified units, suggesting that Czech political actors draw on the full breadth of twentieth-century traumatic memory rather than exclusively on post-1989 experience.

A further finding of theoretical significance is that the same historical repertoire was mobilised across the political spectrum, yet with structurally opposed functions. While governing coalition actors deployed historical references defensively to legitimise the democratic order, populist and right-wing conservative actors strategically inverted these frames, directing them against democratic institutions themselves. This asymmetry illuminates a deeper dynamic of contemporary Czech political communication, in which the past functions not merely as a shared cultural resource but as a contested terrain of meaning.

These findings enrich the theoretical framework of memory politics and political communication by illustrating in detail the micro-level of discursive practice in the context of pre-election debates. While much of the existing literature focuses on institutional aspects of memory or its long-term role in identity formation, this study emphasises the tactical and operational use of history in short-term, high-intensity political competition.

The implications of these findings for Czech democracy are considerable. The increasing instrumentalisation of history for moral polarisation and the delegitimisation of opponents may, in the long term, undermine trust in democratic institutions and weaken rational political debate. Political competition may thus shift from programme-based discussion toward a struggle over the interpretation of the past, in which emotional framing plays a prominent role. This trend contributes to deepening value divisions and complicates the search for compromise solutions to societal problems.

In this regard, it is instructive to compare the present findings with Novotný's (2016) analysis of the 2013 presidential campaign, in which historical narratives centred on Czech-German relations exerted only a limited influence on electoral outcomes. The considerably more pronounced mobilising and polarising functions of historical narratives identified in the 2025 parliamentary campaign may thus reflect a broader transformation of the Czech political climate, one in which memory politics has become an increasingly central, rather than peripheral, instrument of electoral competition.

This study nevertheless has several limitations. First, it is limited to the analysis of televised pre-election debates and therefore does not provide a comprehensive picture of political communication, which also unfolds in other media environments (online platforms, social media, campaign rallies). Second, the focus on a single electoral campaign does not allow for the examination of long-term developments or comparisons with other electoral periods. Moreover, the interpretative nature of discourse analysis means that the findings rely on the researcher's interpretation, even though the analysis is supported by a systematic coding framework.

Based on these limitations, several avenues for future research can be proposed. First, comparative studies could extend the analysis to other electoral campaigns in the Czech Republic (e.g., presidential elections) or to other post-communist countries (e.g., Slovakia, Poland), in order to identify long-term trends and regional specificities in the use of historical narratives.

Second, a multimedial approach incorporating additional media formats (such as social media, print media, and visual materials) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diffusion of historical narratives.

Finally, although this study is qualitative, a complementary quantitative analysis of the frequency and contextual distribution of historical references across a broader corpus could help validate and generalise some of the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insight into the dynamics of political communication in the Czech Republic and highlights the critical role that the past plays in contemporary electoral competition.

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Endnotes:

- 1 The full coded dataset (56 units of analysis, including verbatim quotations, coding variables, and source debate metadata) is available at Zenodo: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18650952>
- 2 Original Czech: *Nezlobte se, ale představa, že tady před genocidama, které tady byly v minulém století, že nás teď ka, které už teda samozřejmě podle Zdeňka Hřiba hrozí. Že nás před nima zachrání Piráti, tak to je super vtipné.*
- 3 Original Czech: *To říkalo dřív i politbyro ÚV KSČ a jestli to má přijít do školy, že to, co řekne vláda, tak je pravdivé. No tak to potěš pánbůh. To i já jsem v těch 80. letech vystupoval proti tomu, co říkala vláda a co říkala ÚV KSČ.'*
- 4 Original Czech: *'Budeme rozhodovat o tom, jestli budeme pokračovat cestou svobody, kvalitní demokracie, bezpečnosti, prosperity a nebo se vydáme někam na východ, jak nám to nabízí Andrej Babiš a jeho spojenci z řad extremistů a komunistů.'*
- 5 Original Czech: *'Tak dnes jsme viděli, proti čemu v těchto volbách stojíme a snad jsme dokázali, že pokud spolupracují demokraté, tak to umíme společně ustát. Že vyhrájeme jako v hokeji v tom roce 69 a nebo si tu demokracii nenecháme vzít a budeme ji tady mít jako v roce 89. Jenom se musíme nabudit k tomu jít volit, zmobilizovat.'*
- 6 Original Czech: *'Já bych počet státních svátků... nesnižoval a možná s jedním mementem od našeho východního souseda, tam se teď navrhuje, že 17. listopad by alespoň pro letošek neměl být tím státním svátkem, tak byl bych rád a určitě s tou naší demokratickou 101 se tohle nestane, aby 17. listopad státním svátkem zůstal.'*
- 7 Original Czech: *'Já jsem byl osobně přítomen tomu, když ta Oganasjová grupa s těmi dalšími ODSáky a dalšími, protože to je dokonce zastupitel v jedné obci, tak útočili v Příčovech na civilisty, kteří se tam sešli na setkání, kde přišli poslouchat určité přednášky. Takže toho jsem byl svědkem. A viděl jsem, jak ta policie zasahovala. Přijela pozdě, ale přece jenom zasáhla. Chtěl bych upozornit na velké nebezpečí. Takhle začaly fašistické bojůvky. Takhle začaly, takhle jak jsem to viděl, jak to probíhalo přímo v Příčovech, tak jsem to viděl na vlastní oči.'* Oganesjan group refers to activists associated with Mikael Oganesjan, who disrupted a 'Patriotic Gathering' (Vlastenecké setkání) in Příčovy.
- 8 Original Czech: *'Odehrává se tu takový skrytý zápas Česko x Rusko. My se Zdeňkem Hřibem teda hrajeme za Česko a stejně jako 69 v hokeji prostě vyhrájeme! ... Máme tady agresivní stát na východě. A my jako země musíme být připraveni. To je přeci o osudu našich dětí. A to, že jsme se zavázali jako vláda, jako tahle vláda, která teď vládne do roku 2030 dát 3 % právě do zbrojení je absolutně správně.'*
- 9 Original Czech: *'(...)aby bylo nově možné stavět ty velké čtvrti... jako za Bati celé nové čtvrti, konceptně a spolu ve spolupráci se soukromníky.'*

Online Campaigning for All? Mapping the Digital Infrastructure of the Czech Party System During the 2025 Electoral Campaign

Alberto Lioy, Petra Vodová¹

Abstract

This innovative article maps the digital infrastructure of the nine main parties in the Czech party system – *ODS*, *KDU-ČSL*, *TOP09* (all part of *SPOLU*), *ANO*, *STAN*, *Pirates*, *SPD*, *Motorists* and *Stáčílo!* – in the month preceding the 2025 general election. By digital infrastructure we mean their formalized online presence over a range of online platforms, websites, and social media portals. Methodologically, this article performs qualitative coding for eight analytical categories, looking at these parties not only through their main pages, but also through the digital platforms of their best-known politicians and a sample of local/regional branches. By performing this mapping, we reconstructed the main features in their political communication and messaging towards the electorate at large. What the data reveals is the degree of personalism, professionalism, negative messaging, and issues of focus of the different parties and their candidates. Coming now to the research question, we wanted to investigate the degree of variation between parties in the level of development of their digital infrastructure and in their style of ‘platform politics’ and see if we could find patterns between parties according to their characteristics. To do so, we formulated a series of clear hypotheses expecting the effect of party type, internal centralization, and incumbency on the digital infrastructure of Czech parties. The findings do not fully support our expectations but point to a crisis for some traditional parties in building digital infrastructures, and a partial success for some of the new parties. Overall, this article promises to change our way of thinking about the online presence of Czech political parties.

Keywords: party systems; online campaigning; platform politics; personalism; parliamentary elections

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1. Introduction

The 2025 Czech election has marked a critical juncture in the Czech party system, shifting the equilibria towards a new government coalition. The pre-electoral period was typical, in that parties used all traditional channels, and even worked at new forms of voter contacting, but all parties also extensively used digital tools for targeted campaigns. In particular, the last month of social media campaigning was labeled an ‘avalanche’ (Nejedlý, 2025). Digital infrastructures, through and beyond social media presence, are increasingly important for the daily activities of political parties, and virtually all parties use some kind of platform to survive in the digital age. However, only a little is generally known about the extent to which parties use those tools at the intra-party level, their strategies, and how to explain possible differences.

Our paper breaks new ground by examining for the first time in an academic context the main formations in the Czech party system in their use of online platforms of different kinds. It does so by going under the surface and proposing a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the social media pages of a purposeful selection of party candidates at different levels. This paper comes at a time when the Czech party system is in flux, both online and offline. Even at three decades from independence, Czech politics is not showing any sign of having halted its evolution, and the country’s party system is no exception to the trend (Balík & Hloušek, 2018; Havlík & Voda, 2016; Havlík and Voda, 2018; Věrtěši et al., 2025). At present, we see that old and new parties are reconfiguring their roles among each other and towards the electorate at large, and these political processes involve the digital sphere.

In times where most Czech citizens have online access¹, political parties cannot afford to avoid digitalization, lest they lose relevance among a majority of the public that lives constantly connected through mobile devices (Macková & Štětka, 2016; Macková et al., 2017). The literature connects the expectations of various uses of digital tools of parties to features such as intraparty organization and centralization (Lisi, 2025), party age (Sandri et al., 2025), or the incumbent/opposition position within the party system (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). Therefore, we formulated expectations about differences between parties’ approaches to their digital infrastructures based on those characteristics.

Our research questions are: what are the main differences in the online presence of Czech political parties? Do variations in party type, intra-party organization, and government/opposition position lead to differences in how parties run their digital infrastructures? The findings create an interesting dialogue with the party digitalization literature. Party age does not predict digital proficiency: only some modern parties have ramified or professionally managed infrastructures, while several established parties ran polished campaigns. Nor do traditional parties necessarily outperform in local and regional digital

presence; here, the Pirates, STAN and TOP 09 fare better than ODS and KDU-ČSL. Crucially, internal party organization is better reflected online: leader-centric parties concentrate more around national-renown figures and higher communicative personalization, whereas the Pirates, STAN, and KDU-ČSL have more spread or open platform politics. Finally, opposition parties generally use more negative messaging, yet two governing parties did as well. On this basis, the article also offers a typological contribution, distinguishing within the Czech party system professional incumbents, open digital or localist parties, traditional parties lagging in their digitalization, and concentrated leader-centric outsiders.

After this short introduction, our article is structured as follows. The second section deals with party digitalization in contemporary politics to introduce the concept of digital infrastructure and formulate the hypotheses for testing. Then a third section describes the Czech party system of the 2025 electoral campaign with special focus on digital infrastructures. The fourth explains the qualitative methodology, then the fifth presents the results, with the help of comprehensive tables aiming for both description and theory-testing. Last, a short conclusion takes stock of the work done, assesses its main limitations, and traces avenues for future research.

2. Literature review and defining digital infrastructures

Over the course of the past three decades the spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has gradually become inescapable for political parties within the transition to a hybrid media system, where old media does not disappear but adapts to new technology and is flanked by new media (Chadwick, 2017). This happened through two dynamics. One was characterized by disintermediation, where the internet allowed political parties to go straight to their members and the electorate at large, without having to pass through media brokers, and often using other sorts of intermediaries instead (Gibson, 2020; Dommett et al., 2021b). This has been the adoption of data-driven campaigning, with the possibility to target not only voter groups, but single voters, something which has had profound repercussions over party organization, voter communication and resource generation at all levels (Dommett et al., 2021a; Dommett et al., 2024a).

At the level of party systems, the diffusion of these new technologies proceeded through cycles of equalization and normalization (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Potter & Dunaway, 2017; Liroy and Contreras Medrano, 2024). Equalization happens when smaller parties use ICTs to fill the gap with larger political formations, exploiting the lower costs associated with campaigning online, while normalization represents the recovery of big parties, which transfer their organizational advantage to the online sphere of *platform politics* (Liroy, Del Valle,

& Gottlieb 2019). Research on the topic has been largely run on Western European cases, while for Central-Eastern Europe the scholarship is still lagging, with notable exceptions like Hungarian-focused Oross and Tap (2023). In the Czech context, the *Pirate Party* has gained a comparative edge through the promotion of internet-related issues and through a distinctive use of online platforms (Martínek & Malý, 2024; Malý, 2024; Jääsaari & Šárovec, 2021; Voda & Vodová, 2024).

Nowadays, all national political parties in Czechia are active online in some form, yet no closer academic look at their differences has been made. Filling this gap is fundamental for several reasons: (1) to evaluate who is and is not using these tools to their full potential; (2) to test assumptions about the digitalization of traditional and non-traditional parties; (3) to unveil new elements for neglected cases or new formations, and (4) to dispel possible misconceptions and abandon past labels. The pre-electoral period is the most appropriate time for such a study, as the stakes for political communication surge, and all parties seek visibility and use their own channels to attract voters, going above and beyond business-as-usual. Our paper explores this diversity by comparing Czech parties' digital infrastructure.

We define a political party's digital infrastructure as *the platforms, tools, channels, and access points that allow it to function in societies where most people live connected to the internet, with the term digital referring to the software, not the hardware layer*. Recent works in this direction have traced the temporal evolution of the websites of 66 political parties in 16 countries (Dommert et al., 2024b) and covered the use of digital platforms and their affordances by 62 political parties in France, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain (Sandri et al., 2025). Here, to concretely operationalize the study of digital infrastructures, we focused on:

Presence, to assess where the party infrastructure is located, on which platforms and for which members, branches, and organisms.

Strategy, visible through which platform a political party chooses and the different affordances and audiences that it can then reach.

Geographical spread, or whether the party is only present through a national page and the pages of its leaders and MPs or whether local branches and candidates are also online. This neglected aspect matters because a capillary political campaign can shift electoral equilibria (Datts and Schultze, 2022).

Openness, or the extent to which the party uses its digital infrastructure to practice internal democracy. At its two extremes lie a 'networked party' with open participation, against the top-down, closed structures of a 'platform party' (Lioy et al., 2019; Gerbaudo, 2019; Deseriis, 2020). For open social media use we expect at least some genuine engagement, and two-way responsiveness in information flows.

Of course, digital infrastructure is not a technical assemblage of different platforms and channels. Party digitalization has a political and organizational

weight because of the use that members and different centers of power make of the digital infrastructure for purposes such as communication and campaigning (Gibson, 2015; Dommett, 2021b; Correa et al., 2021; Raniolo, Tarditi, & Vittori, 2021). Digitalization is not deterministic in its impact, and can facilitate participation or help the work of a personalistic leader (Deseriis, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2019, 2021). We therefore agree with the approach adopted by Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016), who see digital campaign practices as emerging from the interaction between the digital tools, their use and party organization. In other words, we distinguish between the digital infrastructure itself and the outputs that are generated by parties through it, which can be seen through the degree of personalism, professionalism, tone of messaging, and issues of focus (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Bøggild and Pedersen, 2018; Dommett, 2021a; Basu, 2020; Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Walter et al., 2014). To assess personalism, one can look at whether politicians act and speak as if they were *de facto* independent from their own political party (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Liroy, 2023). Then, professionalism has been shown to be a salient element for this field, due to the current prominence of visual political communication. Here, professionalism refers to a party's level of care and production in their content, ranging from amateurish, anti-professional home-style videos and photography to highly curated television-like campaign advertising materials (Baldwin-Filippi, 2019; Farkas, 2023). Given how most parties today generally have a professional core around their leaders, we expect the real differentiation to come from the levels of coordination of their social media communication across different profiles and platforms, and the presence or absence of professional materials in the pages of less important politicians or regional/local branches. The tone of the party's messaging ranges from mostly promoting their own agenda, to routinely targeting their adversaries in various forms of negative advertising (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2022). This is also not to be confused with the overall professionalization of party campaigns, which is a much broader topic, going well beyond digital infrastructures (see Ostrá, 2021, for a roadmap). Finally, examining online infrastructures informs us about the range and salience of issues that they explore, something often related to party size (Basu, 2020).

3. Hypotheses connected to the intra-party functioning and government position

Thinking about how party characteristics impact their digital infrastructures, we shall look deeper into the discussion about the inclusion of ICTs within intra-party organizations, which differentiates between non-intense and intense reforms. The non-intense reforms are connected to general inclusion of digitalization to party communication and campaigns, such as digital tools for spreading information,

attracting new members, and carrying out electoral campaigns (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). This should affect electoral campaigns, which may be focused more on decentralized and grassroots forms (Dommett et al., 2020; Gibson, 2015). On the other hand, there is the expectation that inclusion of ICTs to intra-party functioning will bring party members empowerment and inclusion to intra-party decision-making processes, and will help radical structural changes for aggregation, integration and participation functions. However, centralized intra-party organizations may be a strong inhibiting factor for any of those changes (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). As such, the factors in our analysis may be connected to two distinct patterns of digitalization. Non-intense changes, which apply to all parties, are in our work connected to decentralization and digital professionalization. More intense changes, affecting intra-party functioning and party leadership, map onto digital personalism and range of issues presented.

Following the adoption of digital tools by almost all parties, the question is, to what extent will parties adopt them. We will firstly make our arguments connected to the non-intense changes, and then to the intense, more disruptive changes, which are – as we argue – highly dependent on party original internal organization. In the following section, we argue that the party's age and intra-party power relations, and the government-opposition status, may impact our criteria on the features of digitalization. Of course, age is not an absolute quantity, but has a relative weight in party systems where the older parties are of different ages. This applies to Czech Republic, as to any other country in the world.

The Czech party system sees internal variation from both the developmental and the organizational perspective and is still open to new parties. Generally, we can differentiate between traditional and new parties. Today's parties come from three separate generations, with the first two composing the traditional party type. The traditional category includes institutionalized parties from the time of mass politics, with higher membership figures, including catch-all parties. For the first generation, the Christian democrats (*KDU-ČSL*) and Communists (*KSČM*) are the surviving mass parties from early XX Century, and have strong organizational capacity, a ramified local structure, and party membership. For the 2025 election, the *KSČM* rebranded as *Stačilo!*, with electoral lists that also included some small extreme left parties, which motivates its inclusion among the traditional parties. The so-called second-generation parties built their organizations after 1990 and fit the catch-all party type like *Civic Democrats (ODS)* and *Social Democrats (SOCDEM)* (Kopeček & Svačinová, 2016).² Those parties fit the traditional category and have standard, non-personalist party leadership.

Finally, the third-generation parties – the 'new' ones in our classification – were founded later: 2004 in case of *Mayors and Independents (STAN)*, 2009 for *TOP09* and *Pirates*, 2011 for *ANO*, 2016 for *SPD*, 2022 for *Motorists (AUTO)*. Here, we can differentiate between standard and leader-centric parties. *TOP09* is characterized as a modern cadre party (Grabow, 2001; Kopeček & Svačinová,

2016), with limited membership, party elite overlapping with parliamentary representation, but standard roles for party members and elites. The *Mayors and Independents* (STAN) are a decentralized party that empowers its local branches (Žmolík, 2018). In contrast, *Pirates* belong to a special type, as a ‘networked digital party’ (Martínek & Malý, 2024; Voda & Vodová, 2024). This is a highly digitalized and decentralized party type, allowing party members to broadly participate in agenda setting, deliberation and voting, and leadership positions emerging from the network (Deseriis, 2020). On the other side, both ANO and SPD function as entrepreneurial parties (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020), with ANO carrying recognizable features of a business-firm party with financing from a strong, internally powerful party leader, his managers as party cadres, and a limited role for party members (Kopeček, 2016).

3.1 Non-intense changes – party age as an important factor

Thinking about ICTs’ adoption, Raniolo et al. (2021) stressed higher intensity or radicality is likelier for parties ‘born in last decades’ which lack organizational and communicative structures but can use the Internet to go directly to the public (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). These newer parties can invest in ‘disruptive innovations’, i.e. ‘intense and radical changes of parties’ structural architectures, leading to organizational coordination, and adding to aggregation, integration, and new participatory channels. Conversely, internal change is costly for traditional parties, which implement ‘sustainable innovations’, i.e., small changes focused on disseminating information, increasing membership, or campaigning (Raniolo et al., 2021).

Regarding the spread of information, digital tools allow parties to inhabit the current media environment. The adaptation of parties to the digital transformation of public arena is necessary, because parties can no longer rely on traditional media for their public messaging (Jungherr, 2023). As such, parties now cultivate new and alternative media and have a varied online presence, with party type influencing parties’ ability to accommodate digital reality. Traditional parties should have established ways of communication channels for their supporters, as well as the relations towards traditional mass media. New parties need to be creative in attracting voter interest, because of lower membership size, and scarce resources and thus look for other ways. Parties ‘born in last decades’ also likely lack a media relationship, so they may be forced to use the Internet to go directly to the public (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020, p. 238). Finally, the new parties may enjoy the advantage of having ‘digital’ in their DNA, applying new technologies, or stressing them when campaigning. Conversely, old parties must firstly ‘re-invent themselves without losing their character and identity’. Old parties likely have

large and heterogeneous membership bases and might be expected to use more established communication channels. Thus, the adoption of digital infrastructures may be slower and harder (Correa et al., 2021).

As Jungherr (2016) showed for Germany, these differences have been empirically validated. In Germany, new and small parties experiment with digital campaigning (such as the *Greens*) or even depend on digital infrastructure when making their political campaign (such as *AfD*, or the *Pirates*). Compared to them, mainstream parties, such as *CDU* or *SPD* already have their established campaigning and mobilizing mechanisms, with less pressure to develop new ones. Figeac et al. (2025) found that digital parties extensively use social media to mobilize their activist base, relying strongly on Internet-based mobilization. As such, new parties may be expected to develop professional campaigns and have a higher online presence, such as their way of competing with traditional parties, which likely have more diverse ways of attracting electorates. However, traditional parties with a larger electorate may use digital tools to strengthen some regional presence, activating existing local branches. The newer parties usually lack this advantage, and thus, their presence at regional and local levels will be smaller.

Our expectations carry over to Czechia: traditional parties, with higher membership and established local networks, have more occasions to attract voters beyond digital infrastructure. Newer parties with few members have higher incentives to build a digital infrastructure to attract voters, but also to involve people more into their decision-making, and be an equalizing force within the party system. However, the geographical spread of their digital infrastructure may be limited by their lack of local branches offline. Still, the internet has allowed even smaller, personalistic formations like the *Motorists* to compete nationally and obtain unthinkable electoral results with the help of internet TV (*Vox TV*) that enabled them to present the opinions of the party leader Filip Turek without any criticism or moderation (Zelenka, 2025) Finally, ‘digital parties’ have a specific behavior (Gerbaudo, 2021). Firstly, they likely attract young members, who are open to new communication tools, and may tend to higher decentralization and smaller organizational hierarchy (Magin et al. 2017).

H1a: New parties (*ANO, SPD, AUTO, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a more professional online presence, compared to traditional parties (*ODS, KDU, Stačilo!*)

H1b: New parties (*ANO, SPD, AUTO, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a more open online presence, compared to traditional parties (*ODS, KDU, Stačilo!*)

H1c: New parties (*ANO, SPD, AUTO, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a lower presence at regional and local levels, compared to traditional parties (*ODS, KDU, Stačilo!*)

3.2 Personalism, issue focus and centralization of power

Party digitalization is often connected to the vision of new ICTs included to the intra-party decision making processes, empowering party members, and reducing the role of party elites. These changes are defined as rather intense, and not all parties are willing to adopt them, even when digitalizing other aspects. The internal power relations of parties can dictate how they use their digital infrastructures, determining factors like issue variance and communicative freedom. Digitalization may serve a spectrum of party goals, from empowerment of party members and supporters, to erosion of intra-party democracy, weakening of middle-level elites vis-à-vis party leaders and elites, and even to leader-control over the party (Correa et al., 2021; Deseriis, 2020, Gerbaudo, 2019, 2021). Party leaders who centralize power usually enjoy charismatic legitimacy and gain power over other intra-party bodies, using digital infrastructure to strengthen their personal position. As Raniolo et al. (2021: 185) argue, leader-centric parties often use new ICTs to *‘to reduc[e] the competencies of the executive and collegial party bodies, guaranteeing the leader direct access to the electorate’*. Gibson (2015) even argues that party elites may use ICTs to increase the divide between the passive members and hyper-activist elites.

How free party members and candidates are in electoral campaigns may depend upon intra-party organization. Personalism is likely possible only for party elites, but not for candidates who must strictly toe the party line (Bøggild & Pedersen, 2018). Following this argument, we expect that the digital infrastructure of centralized parties will focus on party leadership, with professionalized presentation of party elite, declining among other party members and branches, and a low range of issues covered (Metz et al., 2020). In Czechia, ANO and SPD notoriously have centralized power structures (Hloušek et al., 2020; Kopeček, 2016). Furthermore, even if the internal functioning of the *Motorists* is still fluid, there was a strong businessmen role in their foundation (Neumannová et al., 2025; Novotný & Ryšavá, 2026). Regarding *Stačilo!*, while belonging to the traditional type, the party selected a new secretary and only 10 formal members for the 2025 parliamentary elections, attempting not only to rebrand the Communists, but also to center its organization around Konečná's personal leadership (Cirhan & Collini, 2025). As such, we considered *Stačilo!* as a traditional, but personalist party. Conversely, the *Pirates* empower their own members and reduce their leaders' power. Somewhere in between are the more standard structures of ODS, KDU, TOP09, STAN. The question regarding online personalism is less trivial than it may seem, because we would like to check whether the internet makes even party elites of non-leader-centric parties become the digital focus. At any rate, we expect:

H2a: Parties enabling higher membership freedom (*ODS, KDU, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have lower personalism compared to leader-centric parties (*ANO, SPD, Motorists, Stačilo!*).

H2b: Parties enabling higher membership freedom (*ODS, KDU, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a higher variability of issue focus compared to leader-centric parties (*ANO, SPD, Motorists, Stačilo!*).

3.3 Government and opposition

Moving on, government and opposition status may impact parties behaving differently in their digital presence. Raniolo et al. (2021) examined the government-opposition divide, arguing that the government parties may not invest as much in the new ICTs. The argument is similar, such as for new-traditional party divide: government parties have a more diverse way of how to communicate their message to voters. Government parties enjoy incumbency advantages, can emphasize policy and promote themselves through their government position. Because of their government status, they need to communicate rather positively, and with respect to reporting the policies they delivered. As the opposition parties lack policy outcomes or issue competence, they need to explain to voters why the government parties do not deserve to govern anymore, and why the opposition parties should replace them (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Dolezal et al., 2018). Claiming poor incumbent performance is thus a natural strategy, using posts to evoke negative emotions and drama to raise user engagement (Klinger et al., 2024), a trend that holds in multiparty systems (Walter et al., 2014). For the Czech parties' use of their digital infrastructures, this becomes:

H3: Opposition parties (*ANO, Pirates, SPD, Motorists, Stačilo!*) use more negative messaging compared to government parties (*ODS, TOP 09, KDU, STAN*).

Based on these characteristics, we can make four types of Czech political parties (see in Table 1 below), crossing the categories related to leader-centrism and party age, and the H1 and H2 hypothesis sets.

Table 1:
Structuring the first two hypothesis sets

parties	standard	leader-centric
traditional	less professional (H1a), smaller presence (H1b), more spread (H1c), less personalized communication (H2a), more issues (H2b)	less professional (H1a), smaller presence (H1b), more spread (H1c), more personalized communication (H2a), fewer issues (H2b)
	ODS, KDU-ČSL	Stačilo!
new	more professional (H1a), broader presence (H1b), less spread (H1c), less personalized communication (H2a), more issues (H2b)	more professional (H1a), broader presence (H1b), less spread (H1c), more personalized communication (H2a), fewer issues (H2b)
	TOP 09, STAN, Pirates	ANO, SPD, AUTO

Source: The author.

4. Digital infrastructures in the context of the 2025 Czech election

The current Czech party system is highly fragmented, with eight parties winning seats in the 2025 election, a ninth barely missing the 5% threshold. Academic literature helps us reconstruct the development of their online presence, even if most works are focused on specific parties. In fact, the *Czech Pirate Party* has been one of the best-known cases of a digital party, transcending its Czech context (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2025). Early evidence of online participation dispelled the myth that Czechs only used the internet as a performative tool, and showed that digital activity already translated into political participation (Mazák & Štětka, 2016), and the mobilizing character of the *Facebook* presence of Czech parties (Štětka et al., 2019). Internet platforms were also studied to trace the rise of Czech populism, as seen with *SPD* in the 2021 elections (Charvátová & Niklesová, 2024). Lamentably, the lonely academic account of the Czech party system covered the websites and social media of central party organizations, therefore only a fraction of digital infrastructure (Šarovec, 2024). Our study aims to fill this gap and provide a richer characterization.

Table 2 summarizes the following characteristics of the nine main parties that competed in the 2025 Czech elections: (a) parliamentary seats compared to four years prior, (b) main ideological focus, (c) the year of foundation, (d) their number of formally registered members in 2023 (we preferred a consistent measurement over figures for different years, except for *Motorists*); (e) the average followers across the pages of the central organization and all politicians that

we followed (excluding regional/local pages), (f) the page that has the highest number of followers within their digital infrastructure, (g) a simple index of concentration – as an average of the four platforms – calculated by dividing the standard deviation of the number of followers by its mean; (h) a quick evaluation of their local presence across the four platforms; and (i) a short description of the main party website. They are discussed in Table 2 following column (e), roughly measuring their online popularity.

Table 2:
Digital infrastructures and stylized facts for the nine parties

political party	seats 2021 seats 2025	year founded	members (2023)	average followers	top page	concentration	local presence	website
ANO	72 76 (+4)	2012	2,574	34,294 high (1)	Babiš FB 550,000	2.59 uneven	Facebook only	news feed with menus
ODS	34 27 (-7)	1991	12,000	19,945 medium (5)	Fiala X 373,000	1.57 balanced	low, FB only	media outlets, social media, map at bottom
KDU-ČSL	23 16 (-7)	1919	19,000	7,751 low (9)	Jurečka X 62,000	1.69 balanced	Facebook only	minimal, text based
TOP 09	14 9 (-5)	2009	2,497	15,532 medium (6)	Pekarová X 189,000	1.78 balanced	Facebook, Instagram, X	short, image-based, media outlet
SPD	20 10 (-10)	2015	11,000	24,423 high (2)	Okamura FB 475,000	2.18 med. spread	Facebook only	small print, Okamura video, media outlet
STAN	33 22 (-11)	2004	2,200	14,001 medium	Rakušan X 165,000	2.34 uneven	Facebook, Instagram, X	modern, very pink, articulate, image-based
Pirates	4 16 (+14)	2009	1,183	19,679 medium (3)	Pirates FB 186,000	2.04 med. spread	everywhere	many functions, has a map, people, menus
STAČILO!	29 0 (-29)	2024	10	9,005 low (8)	Konečná FB 167,000	2.48 uneven	low, FB only	simple, lots of text, donation buttons
AUTO	0 6 (+6)	2022	1,400	11,047 low (7)	Turek IG 262,000	2.48 uneven	none	program, people, media, with lots of images

Source: The author.

Table 2 above highlights the main differences between the 9 main parties competing in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections, ordered by their followers’ average. *KDU-ČSL* represents a negative outlier, as a traditional party anchored to a 20th century way of practicing politics. Its website is minimal and text-based, with a lack of functions and affordances, and their social media following is the lowest, both on average, and also for top party figures. In fact, it is the only party to not even have one page with 100,000 followers, and its local presence is limited to *Facebook*. Together with *ODS*, it is one of two parties with a balanced presence, without excessive attention given to leaders. The other two national organizations with limited online following – *Stačilo!* and *Motorists* – faced their first ever election as populist formations at ideological opposites and have a very similar digital infrastructure. In fact, they share the same high concentration (2.48) around their leaders’ pages and lack a local online presence. They diverge in the highest sophistication and wider range of website affordances for the *Motorists*, *vis-à-vis*

the streamlined, text-based one for *Stačilo!*, the only to prominently display a donation button. In a way, these two parties' websites prefigured their electoral performances.

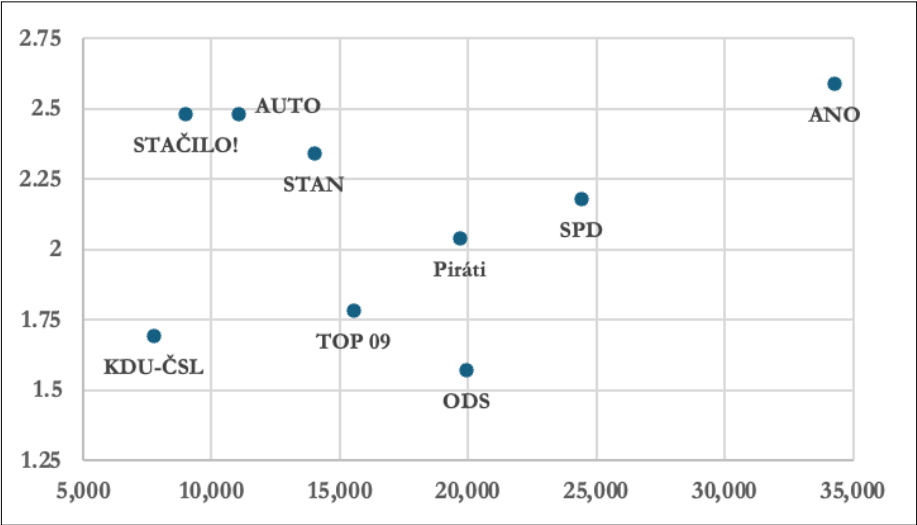
Then comes *STAN (Mayors and Independents)*, which, as a localist party, is endowed with a peculiar digital infrastructure. Its degree of concentration is due to the popularity of former Kolin mayor and Minister of the Interior Vit Rakušan, but it is balanced by a broad geographical spread across the eight regions and cities. Moreover, their website infrastructure is competently made, with a choice of color (magenta) that distinguishes it, and information presented in a clear vertical order: news, important people, program, newsletter signup, local branches, and social media contacts. *TOP 09* has a comparative average in online presence, with a low concentration reflecting a relatively horizontal structure, at least in the public image; its current leader Markéta Pekarová Adamová did not seek re-election in 2025. While it has a good geographical presence, with local pages everywhere, its website is comparatively simple and has a short, official-looking homepage. Its image as a reliable government partner in the *SPOLU* coalition should not imply a lack of creativity.

Still in the middle range lies the *ODS* party of outgoing Prime Minister Fiala, who enjoys some personal popularity online, as the second most followed politician on X after Babiš. Despite this high number, the party's digital infrastructure is balanced, with a good following for almost all surveyed politicians. Surprisingly, the party has a limited geographical spread, as its local branches lack social media accounts across the four platforms (only 11 out of 32) and merely have 3,787 followers combined. Finally, *ODS's* website follows a standard format, with media and press releases, social media updates, and a map for accessing local branches. Along similar averages lie the *Pirate Party*, which offers an intriguing combination of centralization and diffusion. Centralization, because it is the only party where the main organization's page outnumbers all its politicians in followers, and diffusion because the *Pirates* have social media pages for all administrative levels (likely to pay out in electoral contests). Their website is competently made, rich in content and affordances, and prominently features a nationwide map, reinforcing its geographical spread. Thus, we cannot completely say that local presence is more typical for a particular party type (as was expected in H1c) - instead we found a better local and regional infrastructure for *STAN* and *Pirates* (as expected), but also for *TOP09*. Surprisingly, *ODS* and *KDU* created a scarcely developed regional and local infrastructure.

Finally, even if their absolute numbers diverge, the digital infrastructures of *ANO* and *SPD* resemble each other. Both parties are very leader-centric online, with skewed numbers for Babis and Okamura, their inner circle, and everyone else. Furthermore, the geographic spread at the regional and urban level is limited to *Facebook*, with the other platforms being neglected. Their websites look different, but are both rather simple, with *ANO* privileging a classic news feed, and *SPD* choosing an uncharacteristic use of small print.

In addition, the graph below portrays the combination of reach and spread for the nine political parties. Four groups emerge, with *KDU-ČSL* against *ANO* and *SPD* representing two opposite sides, that of a traditional party with a small and diffused online presence, and that of two modern, personalistic parties with a popular, concentrated digital infrastructure. Then the other two groupings are for the unlikely trio of *Stačilo!*, *Motorists*, and *STAN* which are lagging with comparatively lower numbers, and digital infrastructures concentrated on a few pages. Finally, *ODS*, *TOP 09*, *Pirates* (ordered here by concentration), represent different shades of platform politics in the mid-range of the graph.

Figure 1:
Followers and concentration



Source: The author.

5. Methodology

This methodological section starts with a summary of our procedure before providing the criteria that we used for coding specific categories and a description of how the coding process unfolded. As for any scientifically rigorous qualitative work, our article is based upon a detailed process of data collection. An internal case selection for every party generated a list of party officials, MPs, local representatives, and local branches. An internal selection guaranteed that for every party we would have (1) the main party organization; (2) the main party officials outside of parliament; (3) four senators and eight members of parliament (where this was impossible, we filled the gaps with mayors and local representatives);

(4) four regions of Czech Republic (Central Bohemia, Southern Bohemia, Southern Moravia, Moravia-Silesia); (5) four towns of different sizes (Hradec Králové, Cheb, Prostějov, Jihlava).

This process generated a total of 254 units of observation, for which it was possible to examine social media profiles on Facebook, X, Instagram, and Youtube (and more) offering over one thousand potential profiles. Then the data collection proceeded linearly, checking for active social media accounts for all selected members and branches, and gathering figures for evaluating presence, strategy, and spread. The following step was to examine the posted materials during the month preceding the general election of October 3-4, 2025, to perform the theory-guided qualitative coding grounded in the operationalization developed in the theoretical section over this broad range of outlets, without pre-made codes, for openness, personalism, professionalism, message tone, and issues. Then, the following step was to reduce this copious material to categories for each party, with a 0-1-2 scheme detailed later in Table 3. Finally, through this copious data we performed the test of our hypotheses or how the parties' features influence their online infrastructure. The two large-format tables in the appendix cover the five coding categories in discursive form and should be helping to understand more in detail the specific functioning of the nine featured parties.

We made clear criteria for coding, and we offer here a series of examples for professionalism, personalism and negative messaging. A social media profile contains professional materials when it usually incorporates things like HD photography and videos, clear audio, edited music, consistent branding, and similarity to televised advertising. On the other hand, amateur content is characterized as having poor visual quality, with pixelation, unclear audio, a 'handheld camera' feeling, improvised setting, simple memes, casual selfie-style and so on. Then, personalism was not just merely linked to the presence of a politician in a post, but rather related to self-referred language, individual, non-party campaign material, lack of references to the party, absence of party symbols, and the like. Finally, negative messaging does not simply apply to any disagreement or reference to other competing parties. Rather, it referred to the attribution of blame, the use of heavy-handed language along the lines of treason, corruption, danger, delegitimation (unfit to rule, anti-democratic, harmful...) and the repetition of an 'against them' framing, where opposition to another party becomes the dominant message.

For these three categories, the coding was open insofar as the categories relied upon a list of decisive but non-exhaustive examples. That is, our guidelines for the coders for coding did not cover the full range of possibilities. Moreover, other categories such as 'issue coverage' were fully left to the coders' discretion, since politicians might be covering exoteric or local issues of their liking, which it would be impossible to know beforehand. The first step of the coding was to write descriptions, such as (for professionalism) *'relatively, although of a kind - not party*

materials, but own videos and photos, which are ok, but sometimes even selfies from a mobile phone’. Which was then translated into a second-level coding for amateurish material for these specific politicians. Notice that since the coding applied to single politicians’ profiles, we took information from a wealth of profiles into coherent representation of the digital infrastructure of a political party. The descriptions did not disappear, but informed the final description made for each party.

Then, the final step of the coding was to assign a 0-1-2 code for all five categories for the party as a whole, in order to facilitate the level of comparability of the different materials. This amounts to a loss of nuance – which is maintained in the descriptions which can be found in the appendix – but allows us to test in a rigorous way the hypotheses formulated in the previous section. The following Table 3 provides us with both the minimal descriptions of the codes and the coding for all nine parties.³

Table 3:
Trinomial qualitative coding for all parties

	ODS	TOP 09	KDU/ČSL	STAN	ANO	SPD	AUTO	Pirates	Stacilo!	HP
professionalism	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	H1a: x
openness	1	1	2	2	0	1	1	2	0	H1b: x
personalism	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	0	2	H2a: ✓
issue breadth	1	2	2	2	1	0	0	2	1	H2b: ✓
negative messaging	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	H3: ✓

openness: 0 closed 1 semi-open 2 open; **professionalism:** 0 fully amateurish, 1 hybrid/professional only at the core, 2 fully professional; **negative messaging:** 0 near-absent, 1 present but not prominent, 2 constant, foundational; **issue breadth:** 0 narrow, repetitive, 1 mixed, 2 broad, large issue portfolio; **personalism:** 0 low (the party matters more), 1 medium, 2 high (the leader matters most). **Bold** indicates that the selected hypothesis holds for a specific party, **red** indicates that it does not.

Source: The author.

6. Comparative analysis

6.1 Professionalism

Examining the digital professionalism of featured content shows a clear divide between the three parties of the *SPOLU* coalition plus *STAN*, on one side, and the rest. For these four parties, professionalism looks like a byproduct of good organizational decisions, as there is a clear brand, with materials that are professionally produced and spread across the board. For *ANO*, *SPD*, *Stacilo!*, and *Motorists*, the quality is high on top and for the party leaders but declines dramatically outside of the most important pages and channels. As we see it, the *Pirates* fit to the group of professional online campaigners, although with higher content independence, and some variation. Yet, they systematically use party-provided high-quality

materials across party candidates and regional branches. This finding contradicts expectations in H1a, about a more professional presence of new parties, as the highest professionalism was for government parties.

6.2 Openness

The nine parties use their digital infrastructures at a different level of openness to the practice of ‘platform politics’ online (Lioy et al., 2019). We present them ordered from high to low openness, acknowledging the limits of social media, where platform ownership is external; functions are pre-made; set interactions embedded... Overall, the *Pirate Party* and *STAN* are the most open in interacting with their public, guaranteeing a baseline level of genuine engagement, two-way responsiveness, and a commitment to internal democracy. Crucially, these two parties competed together in the 2021 election, before their electoral coalition broke. Also, in the higher range, *KDU* politicians tend to have open, calm online interactions with followers, with a commitment to keeping the discourse going. Moving on, the most surprising finding in this category was that both the *Motorists* and *SPD* engage their followers, choosing a responsive style of managing their social media pages. This is key to projecting an image of genuine care for their potential voters and can pay electoral dividends. Then, *ODS* and *TOP09* mostly use their digital infrastructure for mobilization and information purposes, without much openness and limited responsiveness. Finally, *ANO* and *Stačilo!* exemplify closed platform politics, conceived as offered from above to a passive electorate. As such, our H1b hypothesis, expecting new and decentralized parties to be more open, is generally unsupported. Some openness is typical for several parties, including some new personalist ones, but is not (surprisingly) present for *ODS*.

6.3 Personalism

Now the discussion moves to personalism, starting from the most leader-centric parties. *ANO* and *SPD* are clearly on their top officials, Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura, with the parties’ official channels covering them extensively, and other party figures constantly mentioning them. The *Motorists* may have a personalistic style, but also a strong party emphasis, and a more oligarchic leadership, at a minimum a ‘duumvirate’ of Turek and Macinka. This also applies to *Stačilo!*, strongly centered around Konečná (*KSČM*) and Maláčová (*SOCDEM*), including on their colleagues’ pages. Inside both *ODS* and *TOP 09* then, the leadership is very visible, but also well-balanced by an emphasis on the party and on the *SPOLU* coalition. The two most anti-personalist parties online are the *Christian Democrats* and the *Pirates*, which play down leadership roles in favor of

support for the party and its agenda. *STAN* deserves a different discussion, since as a party of independents it hosts some important personalities, which are vital to the survival of the party, but practices a form of decentralized, not centralized, personalism (Balmas et al., 2014). Thus, our findings generally support the H2a hypothesis expecting a higher level of online personalism in centralized parties.

6.4 Issues

The campaign issues can easily be reconstructed for the coded material, and their discussion is useful to understand the context of online messaging. Overall, the three parties of the *SPOLU* coalition (*ODS*, *KDU*, *TOP09*) defended their own work, proposed a strong support for democracy and shared European values, in support of Ukraine, with some moderate social focus, and anti-populism. *STAN* campaigned along similar lines but also emphasized local politics and women's issues. For both *ANO* and *Motorists* we can see a blended technocratic/populist approach to politics, with experts speaking on specific topics, and a call for developmentalism in the *Motorists*' case. The *Pirates* represented an outlier, with high internal freedom of issue of focus for its politicians, within a generally socially liberal agenda. Finally, *SPD* and *Stačilo!* modeled their explicit nationalist discourse around sovereignty, albeit with respective emphasis on security or on extensive social welfare. As such, our expectation (H2b) about parties with higher membership freedom having higher variability of issue focus compared to parties centralizing power can be definitely applied to the *Pirates* and *STAN*, but with less level of certainty to other parties (*ODS*, *KDU*, *TOP09*), which rather followed the party line and didn't vary so visibly. On the other hand, the personalist parties followed the party agenda in a more unified way, so we can keep our expectations for them.

6.5 Negative messaging

Negative messaging is an important component of parties' online campaigning but only represents a structural element in the communication of *SPD* and *Stačilo!*, which, despite opposite ideological commitments, had common enemies in the incumbent government coalition and in European institutions. *ANO* and *TOP09* also heavily used negative messaging, respectively targeting the government and the opposition. Then, for *ODS*, and the *Pirates*, this style was present but not dominant, as policy agendas had a prominent space. Finally, the two parties with the most positive rhetorical style were *KDU* (which had some limited anti-*ANO* content) and especially *STAN*, which tended to campaign more on local and national agendas, with only some members featuring negative content. This

finding does generally support our H3 hypothesis: opposition parties did typically choose negative campaigning, even if two government parties (*ODS* and *TOP09*) still deployed these strategies.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has traced the digital infrastructures of the nine main Czech parties during the final month of the 2025 parliamentary campaign. The results show that Czech platform politics go beyond the simple equalization-normalization dichotomy pitting older parties against newer formations. The most professionalized online campaigns were proposed by three governing *SPOLU* parties and *STAN*, while local and regional digital diffusion was higher for *TOP 09*, the *Pirates*, and *STAN*, rather than among the traditional party organizations. Our hypotheses therefore had only a certain level of support. Generally, party age and organizational strength mattered only partially, and the connection between leader-centrism and online personalization was more strongly supported. In addition, the government-opposition divides mapped upon negative messaging, though with two exceptions (*ODS* and *TOP 09*). The broader implication is that digital infrastructure reflects differences in the age of parties, internal power structure, and governmental position, but not in a deterministic way. At this stage of their evolution, Czech parties have not simply digitalized, they have adopted platform politics in manners that are clearly distinct.

After summarizing our main results, we would also like to acknowledge the main limitations of this work. First, the internal case selection of politicians to follow performed for this paper was useful to get an idea of parties' digital infrastructures but did not cover the whole extent of their online presence. It would have been possible, with more personnel and resources, to monitor all the pages related to each party, and also of other parties currently outside of Parliament (*Přísaha, Generace...*). Second, we chose not to focus excessively upon websites – Table 1 provided some minimal commentary – but rather look at social media sites. This is because websites tend to be more static objects, whereas it was easier to follow the evolution of the campaign on social media platforms. Third, the timeframe of the study was relatively short, and it would also be interesting to examine how digital infrastructures change when parties are not involved in intense rounds of campaigning.

Moving forward, we have suggestions for scholars and practitioners to implement in future research. The one that is perhaps the most important, is that we hope that this study of the Czech party system can inspire researchers in other under-researched contexts to follow our example and perform the same kind of mapping for other party systems. Slovakia would be an obvious starting place, given the degree of similarity between the two, and the countries of the Southern

Balkans would be another easy target. Similarly, we would like to encourage cross-national collaboration, where we can come to a comparative understanding of the current state of the field of digital parties that goes beyond a series of well-known cases as can be drawn from the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and Scandinavia. Last, this article partially contributed to the research agenda on local party digitalization, but could only discuss it tangentially, while it would deserve its own dedicated space in future studies.

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Appendix:

1. Coding scheme (for creation of table 3 and reliability tests)

Professionalism

Refers to a party's level of care and production in their content, ranging from amateurish, anti-professional home-style videos and photography to highly curated television-like campaign advertising materials.

A social media profile contains professional materials if it typically includes elements such as high-definition (HD) photos and videos, clean audio, edited music, consistent branding, and resemblance to television advertising. Conversely, amateur content is characterized by poor visual quality with pixelation, unclear audio, a 'handheld camera' feel, improvised settings, simple memes, an informal selfie style, and the like.

- 0 – non-professional
- 1 – if only the top party elite (a few individuals) is professional
- 2 – if the broader elite and candidates are professional (though not necessarily all of them or across all levels)

Openness

Namely, the degree to which a party utilizes its digital infrastructure to practice intra-party democracy. At its two extremes stand the 'networked party' with open participation versus the hierarchical, closed structures of the 'platform party'.

- 0 – closed – the party's sole objective is mobilization and information sharing; negative comments are moderated, or there is minimal reaction from the party/politicians to comments
- 1 – semi-open – intermediate level; responses to comments may be present among some politicians, but it is not a systematic trend
- 2 – open – higher frequency of responses to comments by the party or individuals; this constitutes an important characteristic, or there is the presence of deliberation and greater openness of the party to the commentators' opinions

Personalism

To assess personalism, we observe whether politicians act and speak as if they were de facto independent of their own political party. Thus, personalism is not linked merely to the sole presence of a politician in a post, but rather relates to self-referential language, individual non-party campaign materials, an absence of references to the party, missing party symbols, and the like.

- 0 – politicians, including the party elite, systematically link their communication with the party and their work for it
- 1 – higher independence of candidates from the party, emphasizing the role of the broader elite and their greater independence
- 2 – the leader is paramount and conflated with the party; other politicians/candidates do not profile themselves independently, or only a minimal number of them do

Issue breadth

- 0 – one single type of topic strongly dominates; coherence across candidates
- 1 – intermediate level (multiple topics that are, however, thematically close)
- 2 – a broad scope of topics from several different policy areas; individuals introduce their own topics

Negative messaging

Refers to blame-shifting, the use of harsh language in terms of betrayal, corruption, danger, or delegitimization (unfit to govern, anti-democratic, harmful, etc.), and the repetition of an 'against them' framing, where the main message becomes defining oneself in opposition to another party.

- 0 – virtually absent
- 1 – present but not dominant
- 2 – a dominant component of communication among politicians, not only the elites but also lower (regional) branches

Endnotes:

- 1 89% of Czech homes have Internet access according to the Czech Statistical office (2024).
- 2 As the *Social Democrats* disappeared from Parliament after 2021 elections, only a few candidates, including their leader Jana Maláčová, and ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek, ran with *Stačilo!*, which had candidate lists mostly made of KSČM members and marginally of small extreme left parties.
- 3 Initial coding was provided by one of the authors, and the measure of reliability was done with the independent coding by the co-author. We measured the inter-coder reliability of assigning the codes to particular parties (i.e. each coder created 9 codes per topic) with Krippendorff α for ordinal data. For professionalism, agreement levels were initially non-acceptable (-0.214 , 90% CI: $[-0.417, -0.063]$), therefore, we discussed the coding and found a lack of clarity in the definition of professionalism, especially for how to consider the independent content of senators, where the crucial element was how broad shall be the use of professional party material among the party core and other party members and candidates (for differentiation between 1 and 2 values). Therefore, we re-elaborated on the definition of professionalism, to distinguish those two situations. The new round of coding brought, then, a sufficient reliability with α 0.790, 90% CI: $[0.370, 1.000]$. The new definition lead to the decision to change the value of Pirates from 1 to 2. For openness, the value of α was 0.692 $[0.217, 0.921]$, the discussion of differences lead to the identification of the high level of responses to the comments as the systematic character of the party and its representatives' behavior as crucial for differentiation between value 2 and 1 (responses to comments may be present among some politicians, but it is not a systematic trend). Based on that elaboration, the authors found perfect agreement between their coding. The α for personalism was then sufficient (0.802; 90% CI: $[0.386, 1.000]$). The original coding for *issue breadth* also led to a low $\alpha=0.580$ (90% CI: $[0.058, 0.882]$). The following discussion lead to the identification of a key discrepancy between value 1 and 2, based on the range and thematic variance of issues. Therefore, for value 1, we agreed upon 'multiple topics that are, however, thematically close', for a value of 2 'broad scope of topics from several different policy areas; individuals often introduce their own topics'. For value 1, we stated that one single type of topic dominates; coherence across candidates. Adding this criterion, the following round of coding ended in perfect agreement. For negative messaging, we had perfect agreement (1, 90% CI: $[1.000, 1.000]$) after the first round of coding.

Pre-electoral Alliances in the Czech Parliamentary Elections of 2025: Patterns, Motivations and Electoral Effects

Tomáš Jarmara, Ladislav Mrklas¹

Abstract

Electoral alliances¹ have become a significant feature of recent parliamentary elections and of the broader development of Czech politics. Political parties increasingly use pre-electoral cooperation as a response to growing fragmentation of voter preferences and as a strategy to overcome institutional constraints of the electoral system, particularly the electoral threshold. This study analyses open and hidden pre-electoral alliances in the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic and examines their effects on parliamentary representation. Methodologically, it combines qualitative analysis of alliance agreements and candidate lists with a quantitative assessment of electoral outcomes. The analysis focuses on the typology of alliances based on their electoral effects, their structural characteristics, and the success of candidates within joint candidate lists. The study contributes to the literature by developing a theoretical distinction between open and hidden alliances, conceptualising hidden alliances as a form of institutional adaptation to electoral rules.

Keywords: pre-electoral alliances; electoral coalitions; party system fragmentation; electoral strategies; parliamentary representation; Czech parliamentary elections

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1. Introduction

Pre-electoral alliances began to play a more prominent role in Czech parliamentary politics during the 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies, when they first became a central element of the electoral strategies of major political actors. At that time, cooperation primarily took the form of open and formally institutionalised alliances responding to changes in the rules governing electoral thresholds for joint candidacy and, to a lesser extent, to the preservation of fourteen electoral districts combined with multiple tiers of vote-to-seat conversion (Charvát, 2022).

The parliamentary elections of 2025, however, marked a further shift and deepening of this phenomenon. Coalition strategies were no longer limited to open alliances operating under a common label or shared visual identity, but also included hidden forms of cooperation realised through joint candidacies or the integration of smaller political actors into the candidate lists of dominant parties. The repetition and diversification of coalition arrangements observed in 2025 thus suggest that pre-electoral cooperation has ceased to be an exceptional response to institutional change and has instead become a stable component of the strategic repertoire of Czech political parties. In this context, alliances function not only as instruments for maximising electoral gains but also as mechanisms for managing party system fragmentation and minimising the risk of exclusion from parliamentary representation.

Despite extensive research on electoral alliances, existing literature has devoted relatively limited attention to distinguishing between open and hidden forms of pre-electoral cooperation and to their differentiated effects on parliamentary representation. Scholarly attention has focused predominantly on post-electoral coalitions rather than on the mechanisms of pre-electoral coordination and their consequences for the representation of political parties, movements, and individual candidates. This article seeks to address this gap by analysing both open and hidden pre-electoral alliances in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections, with particular emphasis on their impact on electoral outcomes and the composition of parliamentary representation, including the role of non-party candidates.

The analysis proceeds along four interrelated dimensions that together provide a systematic framework for examining pre-electoral alliances in the Czech parliamentary context. First, it develops a typology of electoral alliances based on their electoral effects, distinguishing between sub-additive, additive, and super-additive outcomes. Second, it examines the structural characteristics of pre-electoral alliances, focusing on their instrumental orientation, temporary nature, degree of institutionalisation, and mechanisms for preserving party identity. Third, it analyses the motivations driving political parties and movements to engage in pre-electoral cooperation, particularly ideological proximity, strategic calculations related to electoral system parameters, and the pooling of

organisational and personnel resources. Fourth, the study investigates the electoral success of candidates from individual political parties within joint candidate lists, with particular attention to intra-alliance strategies and preferential voting. Methodologically, the article combines qualitative analysis of alliance agreements and candidate lists with quantitative evaluation of electoral results based on official electoral data. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of coalition behaviour under conditions of a fragmented party system.

2. Theoretical framework

In political science, the concepts of electoral alliances and electoral coalitions are often used interchangeably to denote formalised agreements between political parties concluded prior to elections (Laver & Schofield, 1998; Golder, 2005). However, the literature exhibits considerable variation in how these forms of cooperation are conceptualised, depending on their degree of formality, public visibility, and expected political consequences. Research on pre-electoral cooperation therefore draws on a broader body of scholarship on coalition behaviour, party systems, and electoral institutions, while also engaging with theories of party strategy and electoral behaviour that explain how political actors adapt to institutional constraints and incentives (Cox, 1997; Shugart & Carey, 1992; Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005).

Pre-electoral alliances are conceptualised here as strategic instruments through which political parties seek to maximise electoral support, reduce vote loss, and structure post-election bargaining under conditions of uncertainty and party system fragmentation (Golder, 2006; Debus, 2009). This strategic dimension of pre-electoral cooperation can be linked to more general theories of alliances, which emphasise the importance of credible commitments, incentive management, and the containment of opportunistic behaviour within coalition arrangements (Snyder, 1997).

2.1 Pre-electoral alliances as a theoretical problem

Pre-electoral alliances can be understood not merely as strategic choices of political actors, but as institutionally conditioned responses to the constraints and incentives embedded in electoral systems. In proportional systems with electoral thresholds, such as the Czech Republic, alliances represent a key mechanism through which parties attempt to reduce electoral uncertainty, minimise wasted votes, and improve the translation of votes into seats.

Pre-electoral alliances (PECs) constitute an established object of research at the intersection of coalition theory, electoral studies, and institutional

analysis. A foundational contribution in this field is provided by Golder (2005), who conceptualises PECs as a distinct strategic phenomenon and consistently differentiates them from post-electoral coalitions. Pre-electoral alliances are understood as formal agreements in which two or more parties coordinate their electoral strategies—most commonly through joint candidate lists or explicit commitments to post-election cooperation (Golder, 2006).

The theoretical core of this approach rests on the argument that PECs function as signals to voters by reducing uncertainty regarding likely post-election outcomes in fragmented party systems (Golder, 2005). This framework is structured around two key assumptions. First, the probability of forming a pre-electoral alliance increases as ideological distance between potential partners decreases. Second, the institutional context—particularly the level of electoral system disproportionality and the existence of electoral thresholds—significantly shapes incentives for pre-electoral coordination (Golder, 2006). Subsequent research has extended these arguments by highlighting the role of credible commitments, organisational capacity, and coordination costs in sustaining alliance cooperation (Martin & Stevenson, 2001).

2.2 Strategic coordination and institutional incentives

Although Cox's theory of strategic coordination does not primarily focus on pre-electoral alliances, it provides an important micro-theoretical foundation for understanding their emergence (Cox, 1997). Extending Duvergerian logic, Cox demonstrates how political actors adapt to electoral rules in order to minimise wasted votes and prevent inefficient fragmentation of political competition. In the context of PECs, this implies that parties enter pre-electoral alliances when coordination reduces the need for strategic voting or limits vote splitting within ideologically related camps (Cox, 1997, pp. 91–123).

Institutional incentives play a crucial role in this process. Electoral systems characterised by high disproportionality, electoral thresholds, or small district magnitudes increase the costs of independent electoral competition and thereby strengthen incentives for coordination (Shugart & Taagepera, 2017). Conversely, systems with low barriers to parliamentary entry weaken such incentives.

The institutional context is particularly relevant in the Czech case, where electoral law explicitly distinguishes between independent party competition and formal electoral coalitions, assigning different electoral thresholds (5% for single parties, 8% for two-party coalitions, and 11% for coalitions of three or more parties). This legal framework creates strong disincentives for formal coalition formation while simultaneously encouraging alternative forms of coordination, including informal or 'hidden' alliances that allow parties to circumvent higher thresholds.

These mechanisms are further elaborated through the concepts of vote pooling and seat pooling, which describe how parties can more effectively convert electoral support into parliamentary representation through coordinated strategies (Golder, 2006). The emergence of pre-electoral alliances is closely linked to the dynamics of party system fragmentation. In fragmented party systems, the proliferation of political actors increases the likelihood of vote splitting and electoral inefficiency, thereby strengthening incentives for coordination. Pre-electoral alliances can thus be interpreted as mechanisms of strategic consolidation, mitigating the centrifugal tendencies of fragmented competition while preserving organisational autonomy of individual parties.

Comparative analyses of electoral systems emphasise that district magnitude, electoral thresholds, and vote-to-seat conversion rules create structural pressures toward pre-electoral coordination, particularly in fragmented party systems (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005).

Formal modelling supports these conclusions. Both empirical and theoretical studies show that pre-electoral alliances tend to emerge under conditions of asymmetry between coalition partners, with smaller parties seeking electoral survival and larger parties attempting to minimise the risks associated with vote splitting (Blais, Indridason, & Bodet, 2011). More recent work highlights the anticipatory role of post-electoral bargaining in coalition formation processes (Indridason 2011). From the perspective of electoral outcomes, coalition effects can be differentiated using the typology of sub-additive, additive, and super-additive results (Kamiński 1997; Moral 2021). Sub-additive effects occur when alliances underperform relative to the sum of their components, additive effects when they reproduce it, and super-additive effects when they exceed it.

Beyond the international literature, Czech political science provides an important contextual background, although pre-electoral alliances have rarely been examined as a distinct analytical object. Domestic research has traditionally focused on electoral systems, party competition, and voting behaviour, addressing pre-electoral cooperation only indirectly (Lebeda, 2006; Linek, 2012). Analyses of electoral rules and thresholds demonstrate how institutional settings structure party strategies and incentives for coordination in fragmented party systems, while research on party system development highlights increasing volatility and strategic flexibility among political actors (Kubát, 2013). Studies of preferential voting and political personalisation further identify mechanisms directly relevant to the analysis of hidden forms of pre-electoral coordination, particularly in candidate placement and the mobilisation of preferential votes (Voženílková & Šedo, 2015). A specific contribution is provided by analyses of power distribution within coalition governments formed after the 2021 elections, which show—using coalition theory and power indices—that formal pre-electoral agreements do not necessarily correspond to actual influence of coalition partners (Jarmara, 2021). Other authors address related aspects, such as the spatial dimension of pre-

electoral cooperation (Drašar, 2025), or the relationship between pre-electoral alliances in first-order elections and those formed for other electoral arenas in the Czech Republic, including Senate, regional, and municipal elections (see Ibenskas, 2016; Gross et al., 2022; Voda, 2022; Škvrňák, 2024).

2.3 Conceptual distinction: open and hidden pre-electoral alliances

To link theoretical expectations with empirical analysis, this study distinguishes between open and hidden pre-electoral alliances. Open alliances are publicly recognisable forms of cooperation communicated to voters through joint candidate lists, a shared electoral label, or explicit commitments to joint governing after elections. Owing to their high signalling value, such alliances may reduce voter uncertainty regarding post-electoral outcomes, particularly in fragmented party systems (Golder, 2006; Hobolt & Karp, 2010).

Hidden alliances, by contrast, involve coordination that is not publicly framed as a coalition project but operates through mechanisms such as candidate placement, tacit non-competition, coordinated mobilisation of preferential votes, or informal post-electoral commitments. Hidden pre-electoral alliances can be conceptualised as a form of informal institutional adaptation to formal electoral rules. Unlike open alliances, which operate within the legal framework of electoral coalitions, hidden alliances allow political actors to coordinate without incurring the institutional costs associated with formal coalition status. In this sense, hidden alliances may be interpreted as strategies of institutional circumvention, enabling parties to achieve the functional benefits of cooperation while avoiding regulatory constraints.

Although they lack an explicit signalling function, hidden alliances may substantially shape intra-alliance power relations and the electoral success of individual candidates (Ibenskas, 2016; Schlozman, 2015). The distinction between open and hidden alliances is therefore analytically consequential, as it implies different mechanisms of electoral responsiveness, credibility, and performance, as well as distinct legal and financial implications.

In line with the comparative literature, pre-electoral alliances are conceptualised here as instrumentally oriented, identity-preserving, and temporary arrangements, rather than as permanent party mergers (Snyder 1997; Laver & Schofield 1998; Golder, 2006). In the Czech context, open pre-electoral alliances typically correspond to formally registered electoral coalitions as defined by electoral law. However, the distinction between open and hidden alliances employed in this study is primarily analytical rather than legal, as it focuses on the degree of public visibility and coordination rather than solely on formal institutional status.

2.4 Theoretical expectations

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, the study formulates the following expectations:

- H1 (Institutionalisation and electoral effects): open pre-electoral alliances are more likely to generate super-additive electoral effects than hidden alliances, due to their stronger signalling function and higher visibility to voters.
- H2 (Hidden alliances as defensive strategies): hidden pre-electoral alliances are more likely to produce additive or sub-additive electoral effects, as their primary function is to prevent vote splitting rather than to expand electoral support.
- H3 (Fragmentation and alliance formation): the likelihood of forming pre-electoral alliances increases with the level of party system fragmentation and the presence of institutional barriers such as electoral thresholds.
- H4 (Preferential voting): preferential voting is more likely to affect intra-alliance seat distribution in open alliances than in hidden alliances, due to differences in candidate placement strategies and campaign coordination.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data sources

The quantitative analysis draws on official electoral results provided by the Czech Statistical Office (Volby.cz database), which contain detailed information on candidate lists, preferential votes, seat allocation, and the regional distribution of electoral support in the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies. These data constitute the empirical basis for assessing the electoral effects of pre-electoral alliances and the electoral success of candidates competing on alliance lists.

Trends in electoral support prior to the formation of alliances are captured using publicly available opinion polls conducted by KANTAR, STEM, and IPSOS. Between January and September 2025, polling data increasingly focused on electoral alliances rather than on individual parties, resulting in incomplete information on independently competing actors at certain points in time. Despite this limitation, the data remain analytically relevant for evaluating coalition effects by comparing pre-alliance support levels with actual electoral outcomes.

The institutional context is examined through relevant electoral legislation and rulings of the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic, complemented by selected analytical materials issued by the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic. The qualitative component of the analysis relies on coalition agreements, electoral programmes, candidate lists, and public statements by political actors.

3.2 Analytical strategy

The analytical strategy combines descriptive quantitative analysis with qualitative content and institutional analysis. The quantitative component compares aggregated pre-alliance electoral support of individual parties with the actual electoral performance of open and hidden alliances, allowing for their classification as sub-additive, additive, or super-additive. In addition, preferential voting is analysed at the candidate level in order to assess the intra-alliance distribution of parliamentary seats.

The qualitative analysis focuses on the organisational and strategic characteristics of pre-electoral alliances, particularly their degree of institutionalisation, mechanisms of party identity preservation, and the motivations driving political actors to cooperate prior to elections. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches enables the study to capture both the electoral consequences of alliances and their underlying strategic logic.

4. Analysis of open and hidden pre-electoral alliances in the 2025 elections

Chapter 4 presents an empirical analysis of open and hidden pre-electoral alliances in Czech parliamentary elections in 2021 and 2025. The analysis is structured into four thematic subsections that sequentially address the electoral effects of alliances, their structural characteristics, the motivations of political actors to engage in pre-electoral cooperation, and the electoral success of candidates competing on joint candidate lists.

Empirical attention is devoted to all electorally relevant pre-electoral alliances that achieved parliamentary representation in the 2025 elections. This includes both the openly declared SPOLU alliance, which contested both elections under review, and multiple forms of hidden pre-electoral cooperation realised through candidate integration on party lists. These include, in particular, cooperation centred on Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Freedom and Direct Democracy, SPD), the Czech Pirate Party (Pirates), the Mayors and Independents movement (STAN), and the electoral subject Motorists for Themselves.

4.1 Electoral effects of pre-electoral alliances

This subsection focuses on the forms of pre-electoral cooperation and the composition of electoral alliances competing in the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies (Table 1).

The analysis concentrates on all electorally relevant pre-electoral alliances that surpassed the threshold for parliamentary representation in the 2025

elections to the Chamber of Deputies.² The distinction between open and hidden alliances is based on the degree of institutionalisation of cooperation, the existence of a shared alliance label, and the transparency of candidacy vis-à-vis voters. Electoral subjects that did not achieve parliamentary representation, such as the Stačilo! list, are not included in the analysis, as the study focuses on alliances with observable effects on parliamentary seat allocation.

Table 1:
Open and Hidden Pre-Electoral Alliances in the 2025 Czech Parliamentary Elections

Type of Alliance	Electoral Subject	Alliance Composition
Pre-Electoral Alliance	SPOLU	ODS – KDU-ČSL – TOP 09
Hidden Pre-Electoral Alliance	SPD	SPD + PRO + Free Citizens + Tricolour
Hidden Pre-Electoral Alliance	Pirates	Pirates + individual candidates of the Greens
Hidden Pre-Electoral Alliance	STAN	STAN + regional and local political actors
Hidden Pre-Electoral Alliance	Motorists for Themselves	Motorists + candidates affiliated with another political party

Source: Authors.

Open pre-electoral alliances competed under a common name and with a unified candidate list, thereby explicitly signalling the coalition character of cooperation. In the 2025 elections, this type of alliance was represented exclusively by the SPOLU alliance, composed of ODS, KDU-ČSL, and TOP 09. The joint candidacy of these parties was the result of long-term coordination and built upon previous experience with alliance cooperation.

Hidden pre-electoral alliances, by contrast, did not contest the elections as autonomous electoral subjects. Cooperation was realised through the nomination of candidates affiliated with alliance partners on the candidate lists of a dominant actor, without the creation of a separate alliance label. Typical examples of this strategy include the cooperation between SPD and candidates from PRO, the Free Citizens Party, and Tricolour, as well as the candidacy of selected members of the Green Party on Pirate Party lists.

While all electorally relevant alliances are included in the analytical framework, detailed quantitative comparison of electoral effects is limited to cases for which sufficiently robust and comparable pre-election polling data are available.

In the case of certain electoral subjects, such as STAN and Motorists for Themselves, directly comparable pre-election polling data are not available, as these actors were not consistently measured as separate entities by major polling agencies prior to the election. Consequently, these cases cannot be included in the quantitative comparison of pre-electoral support and electoral outcomes, and are therefore analysed primarily in qualitative terms.

By analysing selected cases for which sufficiently comparable pre-election preference data are available, it is possible to distinguish between sub-additive, additive, and super-additive electoral effects. For this purpose, all available data on pre-election support for independently competing political parties were included in the analysis. Aggregated pre-electoral preferences were calculated as simple sums of party support, without weighting for turnout or electoral volatility. This approach enables a systematic comparison between aggregated pre-electoral support and achieved electoral results and captures differences in electoral mobilisation as well as in the capacity of alliances to consolidate electorates under the institutional constraints of the electoral system. These comparisons should be interpreted with caution, as pre-election polls represent estimates rather than actual electoral behaviour. While this comparison does not capture the full temporal dynamics of electoral competition, it provides a useful heuristic for assessing the potential effects of pre-electoral coordination.

The most pronounced case of a super-additive electoral effect was observed for the open SPOLU alliance, which is consistent with theoretical expectations regarding the electoral advantages of highly institutionalised and visible forms of pre-electoral cooperation. Throughout most of 2025, the aggregated pre-election preferences of ODS, TOP 09, and KDU-ČSL remained below the alliance's final electoral result (Table 2). The SPOLU coalition thus not only consolidated the traditional electorates of its constituent parties but also appears to have mobilised a share of undecided voters and potentially attracted segments beyond their long-term electoral bases. Although individual polling agencies differed in absolute estimates, the underlying pattern of super-additivity appears to be relatively consistent across data sources. The temporal dynamics of pre-election preferences suggest that a stable alliance label and continuity of cooperation may have contributed to the gradual strengthening of the alliance's electoral potential. Taken together, these findings can be interpreted as a super-additive electoral effect. The comparison is therefore not intended as a precise measurement of electoral performance, but rather as an indicative approximation of the potential effects of pre-electoral coordination.

Table 2:
Development of Pre-Electoral Preferences of Individual Political Parties
and the Coalition in 2025 (%)

Political party	IPSOS January	IPSOS March	IPSOS May/June	IPSOS September	SPOLU Coalition Electoral Result 23.36
ODS	11	12	13	13	
KDU-ČSL	4	5	5	5	
TOP 09	4	5	5	4	
Σ SPOLU	19	22	23	22	

Political party	KANTAR January	KANTAR February	KANTAR March	KANTAR April	KANTAR May	KANTAR June	SPOLU Coalition Electoral Result 23.36
ODS	13.0	12.5	13.5	14.0	15.0	14.5	
KDU-ČSL	3.0	3.5	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	
TOP 09	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.5	4.5	
Σ SPOLU	20.0	19.0	19.5	20.0	21.5	22.0	

Source: Electoral preferences of IPSOS, KANTAR: available on their websites.

Hidden alliances followed a different logic, which corresponds to theoretical expectations that such forms of cooperation primarily fulfil defensive and stabilising functions rather than generating substantial electoral gains. In the case of cooperation between SPD and candidates from smaller parties, the alliance mechanism was primarily defensive in nature. The electoral effect of this cooperation can be characterised as predominantly additive or weakly sub-additive (Table 3). Empirical evidence suggests that the presence of smaller parties on SPD candidate lists did not lead to a substantial expansion of the electorate but rather facilitated the absorption of potential competition within an ideologically proximate segment. In this context, the hidden alliance can be interpreted as a tool for neutralising fragmentation and overcoming institutional barriers of the electoral system, rather than as a mechanism of active electoral mobilisation.

Table 3:
Development of Pre-Electoral Preferences of Individual Political Parties
and the Coalition in 2025 (%)

Political party	STEM January	STEM February	STEM March	SPD - bloc Electoral Result 7.78
SPD	6.1	7.8	8.4	
PRO	0.4	0.3	0.2	
Free Citizens	0.7	1.1	0.6	
Trikolóra	0.1	0.1	0.0	
Σ SPD-bloc	7.3	9.3	9.2	

Political party	IPSOS January	IPSOS March	IPSOS May/June	IPSOS September	SPD - bloc Electoral Result 7.78
SPD	9	10	10	11	
PRO	1	1	1.5	1.5	
Free Citizens	2	2	2	2	
Trikolóra	2	2	2	2	
Σ SPD-bloc	14	15	15.5	16.5	

Source: Electoral preferences of IPSOS, STEM available on their websites.

A specific form of cooperation was represented by the candidacy of selected Green Party members on Pirate Party lists (Table 4). Although aggregated pre-election preferences of both actors reached levels corresponding to an additive effect in some surveys, the final electoral outcome only partially reflects this potential. The absence of a separate alliance label and the limited visibility of cooperation for voters likely constrained the transformative capacity of this strategy, which remained primarily a selective form of personnel integration.

Table 4:
Development of Pre-Electoral Preferences of Individual Political Parties
and the Coalition in 2025 (%)

Political party	KANTAR January	KANTAR February	KANTAR March	KANTAR April	KANTAR May	KANTAR June	Pirates + Greens Electoral Result 8.97
Pirates	7.5	6.5	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	
Greens	-	2.0	2.0	-	-	2.0	
Σ Pirates + Greens	7.5	8.5	7.5	6.0	6.5	9.0	

Political party	STEM January	STEM February	STEM March	STEM April	STEM May	STEM June	STEM August	Pirates + Greens Electoral Result 8.97
Pirates	4.5	5.6	4.7	3.5	4.5	6.7	7.3	
Greens	1.9	1.6	0.8	0.9	0.7			
Σ Pirates + Greens	6.4	7.2	5.5	4.4	5.2	6.7	7.3	

Political party	IPSOS January	IPSOS March	IPSOS May/June	IPSOS September	Pirates + Greens Electoral Result 8.97
Pirates	8	7	7.5	8	
Greens	3	3	2.5	2	
Σ Pirates + Greens	11	10	10	10	

Source: Electoral preferences of IPSOS, KANTAR, STEM available on their websites.

Further instances of hidden pre-electoral cooperation are represented by the STAN movement and the Motorists for Themselves electoral subject. In both cases, cooperation was realised through the inclusion of candidates affiliated with other political actors on the candidate lists of a dominant party, without the creation of a formal coalition label.

In the case of STAN, candidate lists incorporated representatives of several regional and local political groupings, reflecting a decentralised and territorially embedded form of coordination. This type of cooperation can be interpreted as a structurally embedded variant of hidden alliance, primarily oriented towards the aggregation of local political capital rather than explicit electoral mobilisation at the national level.

Similarly, the Motorists for Themselves electoral subject included candidates affiliated with another political party, representing a more limited but still analytically relevant form of hidden pre-electoral cooperation. In this case, can be interpreted as having functioned primarily as a mechanism of candidate integration and electoral support consolidation within a relatively narrow political segment. In both cases, the electoral effects of cooperation can be interpreted as predominantly additive, which is in line with expectations regarding the limited

mobilising capacity of hidden alliances and their role in mitigating fragmentation-related risks.

These findings broadly correspond to the theoretical expectations outlined in the previous section, suggesting that the degree of institutionalisation and visibility of pre-electoral alliances plays an important role in shaping their electoral effects. From a comparative perspective, super-additive electoral effects appear to be relatively rare in the Czech context and are contingent upon a combination of clear institutionalisation of the alliance, long-term pre-electoral coordination, and a high degree of programmatic compatibility, although the limited number of cases analysed does not allow for broader generalisation. Hidden alliances, by contrast, generally appear to fulfil instrumental and stabilising functions. Rather than aiming to substantially expand electoral support, they tend to serve to optimise candidate supply and minimise risks associated with party system fragmentation. These findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive, but they provide a useful empirical basis for assessing the broader institutional and strategic implications of pre-electoral alliances within the Czech party system.

4.2 Structural characteristics of open and hidden alliances and motivations for pre-electoral cooperation

The pre-electoral alliances analysed in this study are predominantly temporary and instrumental, tied to a specific electoral cycle and political configuration. An exception is the SPOLU alliance, formed prior to the 2021 parliamentary elections and directly building on this experience in the period under review. All analysed cases share the preservation of distinct party identities and the absence of deeper institutional integration, distinguishing these arrangements from formal party mergers.³

Motivations for forming pre-electoral alliances can be analytically grouped into three main categories: (1) ideological proximity between partners, (2) strategic calculations related to the electoral system, and (3) the pooling of organisational, personnel, and voter resources. A context-specific motivation concerns efforts to maximise the chances of becoming the principal governing or opposition actor, including securing or retaining the prime ministerial position. In the Czech context, particular attention has also been paid to the risk of vote wastage resulting from smaller, ideologically proximate parties failing to surpass the five per cent threshold—an issue that gained salience after the 2021 elections, when the loss of roughly one fifth of votes contributed to the formation of a majority government by the SPOLU and Pirates/STAN alliances (Jarmara, 2021). These motivations combine with varying intensity across cases.

The SPOLU alliance was originally formed in 2021 through a combination of ideological proximity, strategic calculations regarding the newly adjusted electoral system, and the objective of aggregating opposition support against the dominant actor in Czech politics, the ANO 2011 movement led by Andrej Babiš. Its position as the main opposition challenger was not self-evident, as this role was contested by the Pirates and Mayors and Independents (see Jarmara, 2021; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022; Havlík & Lysek, 2022).

By 2025, the primary motivation for the continued cooperation of ODS, KDU-ČSL, and TOP 09 lay mainly in electoral system considerations and the need to consolidate support for the incumbent governing force in the face of the growing dominance of ANO 2011. A key factor was the sustained electoral vulnerability of the smaller coalition partners hovering around the five per cent threshold, alongside ODS's ambition to retain the prime ministerial post. Positive experiences from joint government participation and gradual ideological convergence—strengthened by a greater emphasis on security and the international order—also played an important role.

Hidden pre-electoral alliances centred on SPD and the Pirate Party were motivated primarily by resource pooling and efforts to enhance the electoral viability of smaller actors through candidacy on a stronger party platform. This logic was particularly evident in the case of SPD, where all partner organisations consistently lagged far below the electoral threshold in opinion polls. Recurrent difficulties in recruiting strong regional leaders further added a personnel dimension to this cooperation.

Substantial differences also emerged in the degree of institutionalisation (see Table 5, Table 6). The SPOLU alliance was based on an explicit coalition agreement regulating programme coordination, candidate selection, campaign organisation, financing, and post-election procedures. By contrast, the hidden alliances of SPD and the Pirate Party were formalised through memoranda of cooperation that nevertheless regulated individual aspects of collaboration in considerable detail—most notably in the case of the Pirates and the Greens. From the perspective of electoral law, it is crucial that SPD and the Pirate Party acted as the sole nominators of candidates, thereby avoiding classification as electoral coalitions.

The programmatic dimension of cooperation likewise reflected differences between open and hidden alliances. SPOLU entered the 2025 elections with a joint programme developed through inter-party coordination, whereas hidden alliances relied on programmes unilaterally formulated by the dominant party. In the case of the Pirates and the Greens, smaller partners were bound by the programme not only during the campaign but also in legislative activity, while cooperation around SPD reflected partner influence more indirectly and selectively. Overall, the degree of shared programme formulation closely corresponded to the level of institutionalisation and formal symmetry of cooperation.

Given the high level of state funding of political parties in the Czech Republic, pre-electoral alliances necessarily addressed both campaign financing and the subsequent distribution of public subsidies. SPOLU adopted a relatively symmetrical cost-sharing model reflecting the balance of power among its partners. In contrast, cooperation between the Pirates and the Greens exhibited pronounced financial asymmetry in favour of the dominant actor, with subsidy allocation specified in detail. The SPOLU coalition agreement did not explicitly regulate the distribution of state funding; however, past practice suggests allocation according to campaign contributions and seats obtained. The situation surrounding cooperation between SPD and its partners is less transparent, with media reports indicating that smaller partners receive only a marginal share of state subsidies, while the dominant portion accrues to SPD.

Neither form of institutionalisation resulted in the dissolution or substantial weakening of the participating parties. Whereas SPOLU partners established separate parliamentary groups coordinated through a coalition council, both SPD and the Pirates formed a single parliamentary group under the label of the dominant party.

Table 5:
Institutional and Formal Characteristics of Pre-Electoral Alliances

Electoral subject (under law) ----- Legal form	Candidacy	Type of agreement	Parties nominate candidates (under law)	Regional leaders	Shared campaign features (logo/ programme)	Campaign financing
SPOLU ----- Coalition of three parties	Pre-defined allocation key for distributing candidates among the three parties	Coalition agreement	3	3	Yes/Yes	In the ratio 55: 22.5: 22.5
SPD ----- Single party	Candidates nominated on the list of a single contesting party	Memorandum of cooperation	1	4	No/ No (information on binding character not available)	Info not available
Pirates ----- Single party	Candidates nominated on the list of a single contesting party	Memorandum of cooperation	1	1	No/ No (the Pirates' programme is binding for the Greens)	Pirates min. CZK 50 million; Greens min. CZK 1 million

Source: Authors' compilation based on SPOLU (2025a), Pirates (2025a), SPD (2025), and Czech media sources.

Table 6:
Post-Electoral Behaviour and Parliamentary Cooperation

Electoral subject	Parliamentary group(s)	Form of cooperation in the Chamber of Deputies	Post-electoral bargaining
SPOLU	Separate parliamentary groups	Coordination within a coalition council; joint allocation of positions	Joint strategy defined by the coalition council
SPD	Single parliamentary group (SPD)	Information not available	Coordinated approach; in practice, entry into the governing coalition
Pirates	Single parliamentary group (Pirates)	Voting in line with the Pirates, with exceptions for 'uncovered' policy areas	The Pirates submit their strategy to the Greens prior to approval

Source: Authors' compilation based on SPOLU (2025a), Pirates (2025a), SPD (2025), and Czech media sources.

4.3 Candidate success and preferential voting on coalition candidate lists

Preferential voting constitutes a key mechanism for analysing intra-alliance dynamics and the distribution of political representation. Analytically, three interrelated dimensions can be distinguished: candidate list formation strategies, the regulation of individual campaigns, and the actual use of preferential votes and their effects on seat allocation.

The analysed alliances adopted distinct strategies in constructing their candidate lists. The SPOLU alliance relied on an approximate assessment of the proportional electoral strength of its constituent parties, which was reflected both in the overall number of candidates and in the allocation of top positions on candidate lists, including regional lead candidates. SPOLU voters made extensive use of preferential voting, which resulted in substantial shifts in the final distribution of parliamentary seats (Grim, 2026).

The Pirates offered the Greens a limited number of candidate positions, largely outside leading list positions. Nevertheless, Pirate voters used preferential votes more frequently than any other electorate and were relatively receptive to candidates affiliated with the partner party. By contrast, SPD adopted a strategy of concentrating candidates from partner organisations in top list positions, thereby minimising the risk of preferential vote-induced reshuffling and effectively securing the election of selected individuals.

Rules governing individual campaigns were most explicitly specified within the cooperation between the Pirates and the Greens, largely in response to experiences from the 2021 elections (Jarmara, 2021). The Memorandum of Cooperation substantially restricted independent campaigning by Greens

candidates and established binding rules for the use of preferential voting (Pirates 2025a). By comparison, the SPOLU coalition agreement addressed individual campaigning only in general terms, while detailed information on campaign regulation is not available in the case of SPD.

Preferential voting led to partial shifts in intra-alliance power balances. Within the SPOLU alliance, KDU-ČSL again benefited disproportionately, gaining four additional seats at the expense of ODS, while reciprocal gains between ODS and TOP 09 effectively cancelled each other out. In the case of the Pirates and the Greens, preferential voting resulted in two seats being won by Greens candidates, despite the fact that the party would not have secured parliamentary representation based on the original list order. No significant reshuffling occurred on SPD candidate lists, confirming the effectiveness of its list-construction strategy in limiting the impact of preferential voting. These intra-alliance shifts in seat allocation are summarised in Table 7.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that preferential voting operates as a critical intervening mechanism between alliance design and representational outcomes. Its effects vary systematically with candidate placement strategies and the degree of regulation of individual campaigns, thereby reinforcing or, in some cases, partially offsetting the intended distribution of seats within pre-electoral alliances.

Table 7:
The quotient of political parties on candidate lists and the number of mandates obtained (%)

Parliamentary elections 2025	Parties	Share of candidates: absolutely	Share: first ten places	Share: first five places	Share of leaders'	Share of additional mandates obtained	Mandates obtained
SPOLU	ODS	51.03	52.14	50.00	71.43	0.00	50.00
	KDU-ČSL	24.93	26.43	28.57	14.29	7.69	29.63
	TOP 09	24.05	21.43	21.43	14,29	0.00	16.67
SPD	SPD	98.25	95.71	91,43	71.43	0.00	73.33
	Tricolours	0.58	1.43	2.86	7.14	0.00	6.67
	PRO	0.58	1.43	2.86	7.14	0.00	6.67
	Free	0.58	1.43	2.86	14.29	0.00	13.33
Pirates	Pirates	90.96	90.71	92.86	100.00	0.00	88.89
	Greens	9.04	9.29	7.14	0.00	11.11	11.11

Source: Authors' calculations based on Czech Statistical Office 2025.

5. Conclusion: Discussion, implications, and directions for future research

The empirical findings broadly support the theoretical expectations outlined in the theoretical framework. In particular, the analysis is broadly consistent with the importance of institutionalisation and visibility of alliances (H1), the predominantly defensive character of hidden alliances (H2), and the role of fragmentation and institutional constraints in shaping alliance strategies (H3). Evidence regarding preferential voting (H4) further highlights its conditional impact on intra-alliance representation.

The empirical analysis of open and hidden pre-electoral alliances in the Czech parliamentary elections of 2021 and 2025 confirms that such arrangements should not be understood as steps toward long-term party integration. Rather, they function primarily as instrumental strategies of adaptation to the institutional design of the electoral system and to the increasing fragmentation of party competition. In the Czech context, pre-electoral alliances serve mainly as mechanisms of strategic coordination aimed at minimizing wasted votes, optimizing the translation of electoral support into parliamentary seats, and reducing the risk of exclusion from parliamentary representation.

The findings further demonstrate that alliance strategies are not static but respond sensitively to changing institutional and political incentives. Whereas the 2021 elections were dominated by open and explicitly institutionalized alliances capable of aggregating opposition support and generating a substantial mobilization effect, the 2025 elections exhibit a greater diversification of forms of pre-electoral coordination. Alongside the continued presence of the open SPOLU alliance, hidden alliances gained prominence as a means of pooling organizational, personnel, and electoral resources while limiting the costs associated with a visible coalition brand and formal institutionalization.

The distinction between open and hidden alliances thus proves analytically crucial. The open SPOLU alliance represents an exceptional case of a super-additive electoral effect, in which a stable coalition brand, a high degree of institutionalization, and a clear signal of governing competence produced an electoral outcome exceeding the simple aggregate of pre-coalition preferences. This result aligns with theoretical expectations that visible and credible pre-electoral commitments increase the returns to coordination in proportional electoral systems. By contrast, hidden alliance arrangements—most notably the placement of candidates from smaller parties on the lists of dominant actors—generated predominantly additive or mildly subadditive effects. Their strategic logic lay less in electoral expansion beyond existing constituencies than in defending against vote splitting within ideologically adjacent camps and overcoming institutional thresholds.

Preferential voting emerges as a central mechanism shaping the internal dynamics of pre-electoral alliances. The empirical evidence shows that open

candidate lists create opportunities for intense intra-alliance competition, which may undermine collective coalition strategies and redistribute mandates in favor of parties with more disciplined or more strongly personalized electorates. Preferential voting thus operates as a key intervening variable between party-level coordination and the final composition of parliamentary representation. In hidden alliances, by contrast, this source of volatility is largely contained through candidate placement strategies and more restrictive rules of cooperation, thereby stabilizing intra-alliance outcomes.

From a broader institutional perspective, the study suggests that the Czech electoral system incentivizes not only the formation of pre-electoral alliances as such but also the differentiation of their organizational forms. Open alliances benefit from a strong signaling effect vis-à-vis voters but entail higher reputational, organizational, and legal costs. Hidden alliances reduce these costs at the expense of limited mobilization potential and increased legal and normative ambiguity. In this sense, hidden alliances can be understood as a functional yet institutionally ambivalent alternative to formal coalition projects.

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. First, a comparative extension to other proportional electoral systems with legal thresholds would allow for an assessment of whether open and hidden pre-electoral alliances constitute a general strategy of adaptation to fragmented party competition or represent a specific feature of the Czech institutional environment. The countries of the Visegrád Group provide a particularly promising context for such comparison. Second, further research should more systematically examine the micro-level dynamics of preferential voting to determine whether voter behaviour on coalition lists is driven primarily by strategic considerations or by candidate-centred motivations. Linking aggregate electoral data with individual-level post-electoral surveys would enable a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between party alliance strategies and voter decision-making. Third, the results invite a normative and institutional debate on how pre-electoral cooperation might be anchored more transparently and coherently within Czech electoral law, without undermining the rational adaptation of political actors to the conditions of fragmented party competition.

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Appendix A:

Political Party and coalition Abbreviation

ANO	ANO 2011
Free Citizens	Svobodní
Greens	Green Party (Strana zelených; Zelení)
KDU-ČSL	former Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová)
ODS	Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana)
Pirates	The Czech Pirate Party or Pirates (Česká pirátská strana)
PIRSTAN	Pirates and Mayors; pre-electoral alliance (Piráti a Starostové)
PRO	Law Respect Expertise (Právo Respekt Odbornost)
SPD	Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie)
SPOLU	Together; pre-electoral alliance: ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09
STAČILO!	Stačilo! electoral list (loosely coordinated multi-party electoral cooperation)
STAN	The Mayors and Independents (Starostové a nezávislí)
TOP 09	Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09 (Tradice odpovědnost prosperita 09)
Tricolour	Trikolóra

Endnotes:

- 1 For the purposes of this study, a strict terminological distinction is adopted. Pre-electoral cooperation is consistently referred to as *pre-electoral alliances* (or simply *alliances*), while post-electoral cooperation, particularly in the form of joint governing arrangements, is referred to as *coalitions*. It should be noted that Czech electoral law uses the term *coalition* to denote formalised pre-electoral cooperation, a classification that carries significant legal consequences. According to Section 49 of the Electoral Act, the electoral threshold is set at 5 % for parties running independently, 8% for coalitions of two parties, and 11% for coalitions of three or more parties (Česko, 2021).
- 2 While this study includes all electorally relevant alliances that achieved parliamentary representation, additional patterns of candidate integration can be observed across other electoral lists. These patterns further illustrate the broader prevalence of hidden forms of pre-electoral coordination in the Czech party system.
- 3 At the same time, several interrelated factors indicate at least a temporarily deeper level of integration among the parties forming the SPOLU alliance. First, the alliance represented a continuation of pre-electoral cooperation established in 2021, which extended beyond the electoral phase to include joint participation in government formation and sustained coordination between parliamentary groups. Second, between 2022 and 2024, SPOLU partners repeatedly coordinated their strategies across other electoral arenas, including presidential, municipal, and European Parliament elections. Third, the parties also acted in a coordinated manner during post-election negotiations following the 2025 parliamentary elections. A significant step towards the possible dissolution of the SPOLU alliance can thus be identified only after the ODS party congress in January 2026, which refrained from endorsing the continuation of the alliance and made no reference to SPOLU in the nomination speech of the newly elected party leader (Kupka, 2026; ODS, 2026). By distinguishing systematically between open and hidden pre-electoral alliances, this study contributes to the comparative literature on coalition strategies in proportional electoral systems with thresholds.

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

Jakub Charvát²

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.

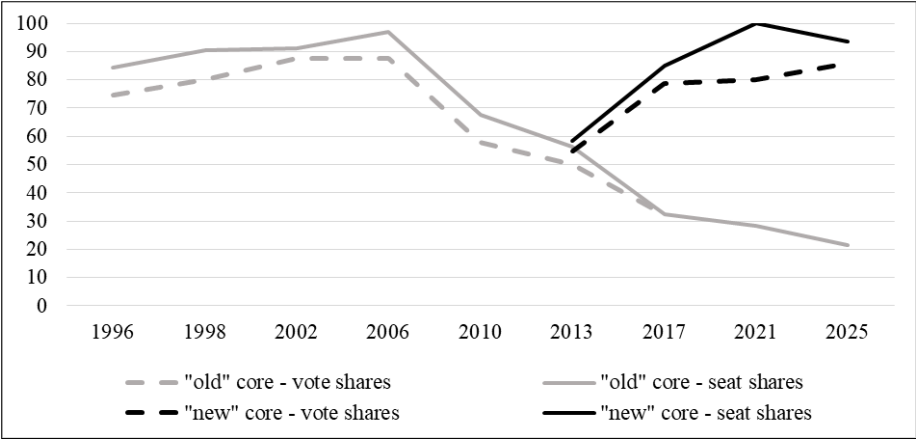
Table 2:
The Czech 2025 general election results: parliamentary parties

	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

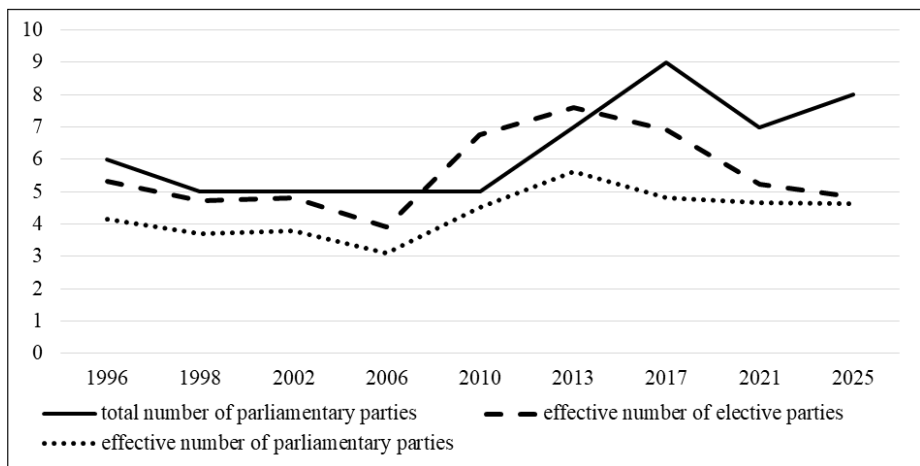


Source: The author based on volby.cz.

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).

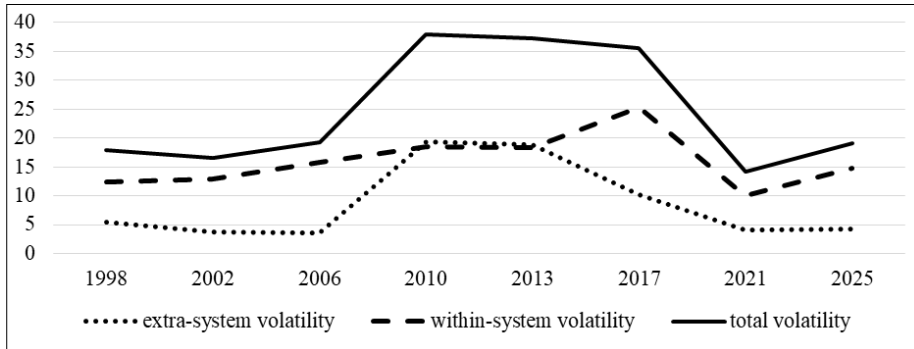
Figure 2:
Effective number of parties



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).

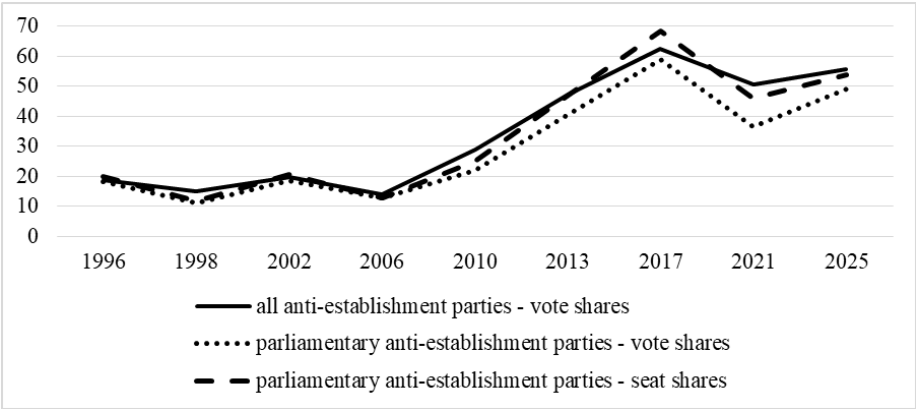
Figure 3:
Party system volatility



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).

Back to Class? Changing Effects of Class on Party Choice in the Czech Republic between 1992 and 2025

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of social class in shaping party choice in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections and situates these findings within a broader longitudinal comparison covering the period from 1992 to 2025. Using post-election survey data from ten national elections, we analyze the relationship between social class and party choice through multinomial regression models and summary indices of class voting. The study addresses two main research questions. First, it investigates whether class voting declined during the 2010s amid the rise of new political parties and whether it re-emerged in recent elections. Second, it examines the extent to which new parties have absorbed the electorates of traditional parties and reshaped class-based patterns of electoral support. The findings contribute to debates on class dealignment and realignment by assessing whether the transformation of the Czech party system led to a weakening of class-party linkages or to their reconfiguration. Overall, the paper provides the most comprehensive longitudinal account of class voting in the Czech Republic to date and offers new insights into the changing social foundations of party competition in a volatile political context.

Keywords: class voting; party choice; Czech politics; Czech parliamentary elections; populist party support

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the transformation of European party systems has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly regarding the changing social bases of political competition. A key debate concerns the extent to which the traditional alignment between social class and party choice, long seen as a cornerstone of West European democracies (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), has weakened, disappeared, or been reconfigured. The decline of European social democratic parties and the parallel rise of national-conservative, economically left-leaning parties have reshaped class-based electoral coalitions in ways that earlier cleavage theory did not anticipate (Rennwald & Evans, 2014; Hartevelde, 2016). At the same time, scholars have documented the growing salience of sociocultural or transnational cleavage, which contrasts cosmopolitan, educated, urban voters with more national-conservative, less educated, peripheral ones. This divide increasingly competes with, and sometimes overrides, the traditional economic left-right dimension (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

These processes of dealignment and realignment are particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, where party systems are younger and more volatile, and where the sociocultural cleavage has found expression in the rise of populist radical right parties that simultaneously adopt an economically redistributive and culturally conservative platform (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2017). The Czech Republic represents a particularly informative case within the broader European context. It is among the few post-communist democracies in which class-based voting – broadly comparable to that observed in Western Europe – developed relatively early and reproduced itself in the following elections (Matějů & Řeháková, 1997; Matějů, 2000; Linek & Lyons, 2013; Smith & Matějů, 2011). At the same time, the availability of post-election surveys allows analysis of changes in class-party alignments over more than three decades of competitive elections. Examining whether class voting declined during this period contributes directly to ongoing debates about the persistence of class cleavages and the conditions under which they are weakened or renewed.

The Czech party system underwent significant changes following the 2010 Chamber of Deputies election. At the party level, new parties entered the system, and established parties were losing their support; at the system level, these changes were accompanied by high volatility and fragmentation (Cirhan & Kopecký, 2024; Havlík & Lysek, 2022; Linek et al., 2023). More specifically, most new parties rejected economic issues and refused to position themselves along the left-right dimension. Instead, these parties used anti-establishment and anti-corruption appeals and mobilized on niche topics such as migration and opposition to European integration. These changes were accompanied by the decline of traditional left-wing parties, namely the Czech Social Democratic

Party (*Česká strana sociálně demokratická*, henceforth ČSSD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, KSČM) and the weakening of the dominant right-wing Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS). Based on the analysis of 2010 and 2013 Chamber of Deputies elections, some authors argued in favour of a decline in the importance of social class for party choice (Havlík & Voda, 2018). However, there is no survey-based evidence about level of class-party alignments since 2013 election.

In effect, relatively little is known about the development of class voting in the Czech Republic, as the only longitudinal studies examining this phenomenon were published more than a decade ago (Linek & Lyons, 2013; Smith & Matějů, 2011), thus not including the four most recent general elections. A key question, therefore, is whether (1) the class-party linkages further weakened over time or whether they recovered as research using aggregate-level election statistics shows (Lysek & Macků, 2022; Drašar, 2025), and (2) whether new parties inherited the class structure of the traditional parties they displaced. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to provide an extensive account of the development of class voting in the Czech Republic from the early 1990s through the 2025 Chamber of Deputies election. In total, we analyze ten national elections since 1992 using post-election survey data. Consequently, this study represents the most comprehensive evaluation of class voting in the Czech Republic to date.

The longitudinal evidence presented in this article shows that class-party alignments have undergone a profound transformation. Manual workers underwent the most dramatic shift: as their share of the electorate shrank from 24 to 10 per cent, their traditional ties to ČSSD and KSČM collapsed and were replaced by strong support for the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, SPD) and its predecessor Dawn of Direct Democracy (*Úsvit přímé demokracie*, Dawn). Old-age pensioners, once a stable pillar of the traditional left represented by KSČM, were effectively absorbed by ANO 2011 (literally ‘YES’, henceforth ANO), which by the 2025 election had consolidated its position as the primary party of retired voters. Higher professionals and entrepreneurs, by contrast, have remained a persistent social backbone of the right, primarily ODS and the later SPOLU (literally ‘Together’) coalition, while also increasingly lending support to the Czech Pirate Party (*Česká pirátská strana*, Pirates), and Mayors and Independents (*Starostové a nezávislí*, STAN). At the system level, these processes led to a nonlinear trajectory of class voting. Initially, the role of social class in party choice was increasing, with a peak around the 2006 and 2010 elections, before reaching a minimum in the 2017 elections. Despite this temporary decline in the importance of social class for party choice, the most recent data from the 2021 and 2025 elections indicate a robust increase in its importance, with class-based voting returning to levels nearly as high as their historical peaks around 2010.

2. Politics and class voting in the post-communist Czech Republic

Class voting in post-communist countries has been the subject of research since the early elections following regime change. Early theories expected that an 'era of extraordinary politics' would create winners and losers of transformation. The main idea was that this winner-loser division was based on subjective evaluations of (changes in) personal status before and after the transformation (Gijssberts & Nieuwbeerta, 2000; Matějů, 1993; Matějů, 1996). Thus, individuals from the same social group could differ in their evaluations depending on their feelings of relative deprivation and experiences of social mobility (see also the theory of transitional economic voting; Tucker, 2006). However, as more time has passed since the early years of transformation, the concept of winners and losers of the transformation has become less directly applicable. Many currently enfranchised voters in post-communist countries were born years after the transition, making it difficult to consider them winners or losers of an event that occurred before their birth. This is why an approach based on objective class position (typically Matějů, 2000) gained prominence.

Objective class position became the main analytical tool for the study of class voting, not only because of the growing temporal distance from the regime transition. Over time, indicators of socio-economic status have become consistent (i.e. the positive correlation between education, occupation, and income), and similar to those in advanced democracies. Objective class differences began to generate class-based inequalities as well as distinct economic and redistributive interests. According to Szelenyi and his collaborators (Szelenyi et al., 1996; Szelenyi et al., 1997), politics in post-communist countries shifted from the politics of symbols to the politics of interests. This shift was expected to be accompanied by the growing dominance of left-right divisions and class-based differences in voting behavior (this process in the Czech Republic is analyzed in Matějů, 2000).

The transition from state socialism to market economy in Central and Eastern Europe fundamentally reshaped the class structures of these societies. Researchers in the late 1990s expected that increasing social inequality would create conditions for the emergence of a class cleavage. More specifically, Matějů et al. (1999, p. 235) identified four processes that would contribute to the strengthening of class-based voting behaviour and the crystallization of the 'traditional' left-right political spectrum: (1) the emergence of a class of proprietors and entrepreneurs; (2) the crystallization of working-class consciousness as a result of increasing vulnerability in the labor market; (3) rising inequality in income and wealth following the transition to a market economy; and (4) the increasing importance of materialist values due to growing consumerism and the abundance of capitalist economies. As a result, these scholars expected class voting to emerge gradually and to be observable through the progressive

crystallization of class-based voting across successive elections. However, this process was expected to be uneven, depending critically on historical development patterns and the specific trajectories of change during the 1990s (Kitschelt et al., 1999; Gijsberts & Nieuwbeerta, 2000).

Although research on class voting in post-communist countries became more common in the 1990s, relatively few long-term and comparative studies have been conducted (but see especially Gethin et al., 2021). Only a small number of post-communist countries exhibit strong patterns of class voting (see also Gijsberts & Nieuwbeerta, 2000; Evans, 2006). Moreover, where class voting does occur, the alignment between social classes and political parties sometimes differs from the traditional patterns observed in Western Europe. Knutsen (2013), for example, demonstrates a weak effect of class on party choice in Hungary and provides evidence of a reversed class alignment, with the working class supporting the right-wing Fidesz party and the service class voting for the left-wing Socialist Party. Similarly, Letki (2013) shows that in Poland, the working class and farmers tended to vote for Christian-democratic and agrarian parties, while the service class supported social democratic parties. These differences appear to stem from other factors, most notably ethnic and religious composition, which shape religious and nationalist values as well as party strategies (Tavits & Letki, 2014; Evans & Whitefield, 2000; Kitschelt et al., 1999). More recent research, however, suggests the (re)-emergence of party alignments based on income and education in both Poland and Hungary during the second decade of the twenty-first century (Gethin et al., 2021).

The Czech Republic represents one of the few post-communist countries in which class voting emerged relatively early and in a pattern similar to that observed in Western Europe. Early analyses of class voting in the 1992 and 1996 Chamber of Deputies elections argued that political polarization along the left-right dimension was associated with support for parties with distinct class bases (Matějů & Řeháková, 1997; Matějů et al., 1999). These studies showed that class voting was primarily driven by competition between the Social Democrats (ČSSD), who attracted support from manual workers, and the Civic Democrats (ODS), who drew support from professionals and managers. Occupations requiring intermediate skills, such as routine non-manual workers and lower professionals, exhibited divided partisan and left-right loyalties. Social class has been identified as the primary and symmetrical cleavage, distinguishing left-wing parties (KSČM and ČSSD) from right-wing parties of both liberal and conservative orientations (ODS, ODA [i.e. Civic Democratic Alliance, *Občanská demokratická aliance*], and US [i.e. Freedom Union, *Unie svobody*]). The central issues structuring this cleavage include income and wealth redistribution, state regulation of the economy, and the scope of public social service provision (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2008).

Subsequent analyses based on post-election surveys from the 2006 and 2010 elections identified a similar pattern of class alignment (Vlachová & Řeháková,

2007; Vlachová & Häuberer, 2012). Moreover, studies covering almost two decades of the Czech electoral politics suggested that class effects on voting were either stable over time or slightly increasing (Linek & Lyons, 2013; Smith & Matějů, 2011). The emergence of new parties in 2010 and 2013, however, was only partly associated with class-based support. Support for populist parties such as Public Affairs (*Věci Veřejné*, VV), ANO, and the Dawn was less strongly structured by social class (Havlík & Voda, 2018). Overall, research on class voting in the Czech Republic since 1992 has consistently found evidence of class-based voting and suggests that group-based economic interests have played a consistent role in shaping party choice (Gethin et al., 2021; Linek & Lyons, 2013; Matějů et al., 1999; Smith & Matějů, 2011).

The relationships between social class and voting for individual parties described above are corroborated by studies that use territorially aggregated electoral results together with the social and economic characteristics of these territorial units. An early form of class-based relationships was already identified in a study of the 1992 elections, which showed that a higher proportion of university graduates was associated with greater support for ODS and lower support for ČSSD (Kostecký, 1994). For the period beginning with the 1996 elections, a pattern described by Kouba (2007) and Kostecký (2009) applies: as unemployment increases and the share of entrepreneurs and university graduates declines, support for ČSSD and KSČM increases, while support for ODS and smaller liberal parties decreases (similarly see Voda & Pink, 2015). Later studies focused on whether these patterns continued to hold and whether new parties replicated them.

Maškarinec (2017) confirmed that in both the 2010 and 2013 elections, support for the three main parties with class-conditioned electoral bases (ČSSD, KSČM, and ODS) was related to unemployment levels and the shares of university graduates, entrepreneurs, and pensioners. At the same time, however, he pointed to a decline in the importance of most of these characteristics for the electoral support of ČSSD and ODS in 2013. Among new parties, only support for TOP 09 was clearly linked to class characteristics and, in terms of its social profile, mirrored ODS, whereas support for VV, ANO, and Dawn was much less strongly related to the class characteristics. Support for VV, ANO, and Dawn nevertheless showed a negative correlation with the share of pensioners and, to some extent, university graduates. In models aimed at explaining support for these parties, the effects of class variables were sometimes reversed: a party could receive higher support in regions with higher unemployment and simultaneously higher shares of entrepreneurs, and so on (similarly see Maškarinec & Bláha, 2014). Comparable findings were also presented by Havlík and Voda (2016) who argued that cleavages as a theoretical framework had lost part of their explanatory power.

Subsequent studies, focusing on elections in 2017 and 2021, do not fully confirm declining importance of social class and instead suggest that support

for new parties, such as ANO, far-right SPD, liberal parties STAN and the Pirates, has gradually acquired a class dimension. Lysek and Macků (2022) showed that support for centre-right and right-wing parties (KDU-ČSL [i.e. Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party, *Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová*], ODS, TOP 09, STAN) in 2017 as well as for coalitions of these parties (SPOLU and PirStan [i.e. Pirates and Mayors, *Piráti a Starostové*]) in 2021 was associated with lower unemployment and higher shares of university graduates and entrepreneurs. By contrast, support for ANO and SPD in recent years has been linked primarily to lower levels of education and a lower share of entrepreneurs, higher unemployment, and higher shares of individuals facing debt enforcement and pensioners (see also Drašar 2025; Maškarinec & Novotný, 2024; Suchánek & Hasman, 2024).

The dominant interpretative narrative of the development of class voting in the Czech Republic is grounded in the re-stratification thesis proposed by Smith and Matějů (2011). They argue that class voting emerged in the Czech Republic during the 1990s because of the re-stratification of Czech society and subsequently continued to gain in significance. In other words, the formation of occupation-based social classes during the transition to a market economy gave rise to class-based political cleavages. The crystallization of socio-economic status and the growing congruence of education, income, and occupational position during the 1990s reduced obstacles to the formation of class interests. Smith and Matějů (2011) find empirical support for their re-stratification thesis, showing that the effect of social class on party choice increased steadily between 1998 and 2010 (see also Linek & Lyons, 2013, pp. 103–129). Ongoing changes in the stratification of Czech society, such as educational expansion (especially in tertiary education), growth in service-sector employment, and increasing wealth inequality (Večerník, 2025), suggest that social class should continue to play a major role in party choice even after 2010.

The emergence of social classes, however, is not the only condition for the formation and reproduction of class-party alignments. Another crucial factor is party strategy. When political parties emphasize class conflict, class-party linkages are more likely to emerge among voters. Electoral campaigns can thus condition the extent of class voting, depending on the salience of socio-economic conflict. Accordingly, class voting is usually stronger when political parties compete on economic issues such as taxation, redistribution, and welfare benefits, and when polarization of the party system along the economic left-right dimension is high (see the discussion of the role of party supply in Evans & de Graaf, 2013). New parties that have entered the Chamber of Deputies since 2010, however, have mobilized voters less around economic or redistributive issues and more around issues such as corruption, migration, and opposition to European integration. As a result, the electoral support of these parties has been less strongly structured by social class, contributing to an overall decline in class voting (Havlík & Voda, 2018).

Building on the above discussion, this article pursues two research questions. The first concerns the trajectory of class voting since the 2010 election. Specifically, it asks whether class voting declined during the 2010s amid the rise of new political parties and, if so, whether it re-emerged in recent elections, thereby indicating a process of class realignment. Based on the reviewed aggregate-level research, as well as the programmatic appeal and mobilization strategies of new parties, we expect that class voting weakened during the second decade of the 21st century but re-established itself from the 2021 election onwards. This would suggest a transition from an initial phase of class dealignment in the 2010s to a renewed structuring of party competition along class lines in the two most recent elections.

Given that we expect the process of declining class voting to be linked to support for new parties, our second research question examines whether these new parties have absorbed the class-based electorates of traditional parties. Specifically, we focus on the extent to which ANO and SPD have absorbed the electorates of ČSSD and KSČM among pensioners and manual workers. On the other side of the political spectrum, we examine whether new centre-right parties (TOP 09, STAN, and the Pirates) have adopted the class structure of ODS and smaller right-wing parties (ODA and US) from the 1990s, which was dominated by higher professionals and entrepreneurs.

3. Methods

3.1 Data and variables

Class voting is conceptualized as the relationship between a particular social class and party choice in elections (Evans, 2000). Our two research questions related to class voting are analyzed using data from post-election surveys conducted in the Czech Republic since 1992. These surveys provide the necessary information on actual party choice as well as relatively detailed data on respondents' social class (for details on these surveys, see Appendix A).

Social class is measured using an adjusted EGP scheme that also includes old-age pensioners. By incorporating pensioners, our measure approximates the European Socio-economic Groups (ESeG) classification. Although old-age pensioners (retirees) do not constitute a separate class category per se, we include them in the analysis for two reasons. First, our second research question concerns the realignment of pensioners from left-wing parties (ČSSD, KSČM) toward the populist parties, especially ANO. Second, only a limited number of post-election surveys contain information on respondents' occupations prior to their retirement, making it impossible to construct a comparable class measure for retirees across all surveys.

The classification of respondents into class groups followed a two-step procedure. First, we used a question on economic activity that distinguishes among employees, employers, small business owners, old-age pensioners, and other groups outside the labor force (those on parental or maternity leave, students, and disabled respondents). This step allowed us to identify two groups which form two distinct categories within our adjusted EGP scheme: entrepreneurs and old-age pensioners (retirees). Second, employees were assigned to the EGP scheme based on descriptions of their occupations, coded according to ISCO-08. In total, we distinguish seven social class groups: higher professionals, lower professionals, routine non-manual workers, skilled manual workers, semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers, entrepreneurs, and pensioners. Residual categories (i.e., respondents outside the labor force, i.e. those on parental or maternity leave, students, and disabled respondents) are excluded from the analyses reported in the article. Appendix B presents detailed information on construction of the social class variable.

Concerning party choice in national elections, we do not restrict the analysis to parliamentary parties only. Accordingly, the detailed analyses of the 2021 and 2025 elections include non-parliamentary left-wing parties, such as ČSSD and KSČM in 2021, as well as Stačilo! (literally ‘Enough!’) in 2025. To enable long-term comparisons of social class support for ideologically similar parties in a volatile political context such as the Czech Republic, we group parties into broader party blocs. Specifically, we collapse support for left-wing parties (ČSSD, KSČM, DŽJ [i.e. Pensioners for Life Security, *Důchodci za životní jistoty*], and SPOZ [i.e. Party of Civic Rights, *Strana práv občanů Zemanovci*]), right-wing parties (ODS, TOP 09, US, ODA, KDU-ČSL, STAN, and Pirates),¹ and far-right and populist parties (SPD, Dawn, VV, and SPR-RSČ [i.e. Rally for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia, *Sdružení pro republiku – Republikánská strana Československa*]). We do not assign the ANO to any of these party blocs, as part of our analysis focuses on the substitution of traditional left-wing parties by the ANO over the past decade.² Moreover, ANO gradually moved from centre-right to the centre and then slightly to centre-left over the three most recent Chamber of Deputies elections (as demonstrated in Appendix C, which presents the party positions on the economic left-right scale between 2002 and 2024). Consequently, ANO is treated as a separate ‘party bloc’; all remaining parties are grouped together into the party bloc of other parties.

3.2 Measures

To analyze changes in the level of class voting over time, we employ two main analytical strategies. First, we calculate an overall index to capture the strength of the association between social class and party choice in each election and then

compare its levels across elections. While earlier research relied on the Alford index, measures of association for nominal variables (such as Cramér's V), or model fit statistics from regression models (e.g. Nagelkerke's R^2), the last decade of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of measures based on multinomial logistic regression models applied to social class and party choice in individual elections.

The kappa index was developed for multi-party systems and multi-category classifications of social groups. It is computed as the standard deviation of log odds representing differences in vote choice across social groups in each election (Hout et al., 1995). The index measures the association between social groups and party choice, without accounting for the relative sizes of those groups. It treats all social groups as if they were of the same size. This limitation is addressed by a newer measure, the lambda index, which modifies the kappa index by incorporating the size of social groups. In short, the lambda index is a weighted version of the kappa index in which log odds are weighted by group size (Lachat, 2007, pp. 86–89).

Both the kappa and lambda indices are derived from multinomial regression models. They can be calculated either from logistic coefficients (the relative version of the index) or from predicted probabilities (the absolute version). The advantage of the absolute version is that it can be computed even in cases of quasi-complete separation, where some combinations of social class and party choice have no observations (Albert & Anderson, 1984; Zorn, 2005; Lachat, 2007, p.89). Because it is based on predicted probabilities, the index is calculated as the standard deviation in levels of party support across social groups. In addition, the absolute version offers a relatively straightforward interpretation, as the index ranges from 0 to 0.5. The value 0.5 is a result of a specific case with two parties and two social groups of the same size where each group votes for different party (Goldberg, 2020). Accordingly, we analyze the development of class voting using the absolute version of the lambda index.³

As a second measure of long-term change in class voting, we employ the index of party structuration (Marks et al., 2023). It measures the over- or under-representation of a particular social class within a party relative to its share in the electorate. The index (denoted P) is calculated as the difference between the conditional probability of belonging to a given social class among voters of a particular political party (i.e. the behavioral component) and the overall marginal probability of belonging to that social class (i.e. the structural component). Positive values indicate that a class is overrepresented among voters of a particular party (i.e., the share of votes for a political party coming from that social class is higher than the share of that class in the electorate).

The index of party structuration is both class- and party-specific and assesses the social bases of individual parties. In effect, this measure allows us to answer our second research question about the development of alignments of specific social classes with a particular political party (ANO) or a set of parties (left-wing

parties, right-wing parties). In addition, this measure allows us to distinguish between two sources of change over time: shifts in the size of social groups (structural change) and changes in the strength of the association between social class and party choice (behavioral change). Both processes affect the salience of class, but they operate through distinct mechanisms (Lachat, 2007, p. 68; see also Flanagan, 1984). The lambda index captures both structural and behavioral change simultaneously and therefore cannot disentangle their respective effects.

4. Results

4.1 Class voting in the last two elections

To illustrate how social class structures party choice, we first examine descriptive patterns of electoral support across social class groups in the two most recent Chamber of Deputies elections (see Table 1). In the 2025 election, higher professionals and entrepreneurs emerge as the key class strongholds of the former government coalition. Around one third of members of both classes voted for SPOLU (35% of higher professionals and 32% of the entrepreneurs), roughly one fifth of these classes cast their votes for STAN (21% of higher professionals and 18% of the entrepreneurs), and around one sixth supported the Pirates (17% and 16%, respectively). Both classes strongly rejected the election winner, ANO, with only 14% of higher professionals and 12% of the entrepreneurs voting for ANO, corresponding to negative deviations of 21 and 22 percentage points from ANO's national vote share, respectively. By contrast, SPOLU, STAN, and the Pirates display double-digit or high single-digit overrepresentation within these class groups compared to their respective national electoral results.

Conversely, pensioners (44% of them) and semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers (42% of them) constituted the core electoral base of ANO, exceeding the party's overall vote share by 10 and 8 percentage points, respectively. A particularly pronounced pattern emerges among skilled manual workers, who show the strongest deviation toward SPD (18% supported SPD, corresponding to a 10-percentage-point overrepresentation relative to SPD's national result). This pattern indicates a distinctive affinity for national-populist and culturally conservative appeals. Meanwhile, routine non-manual workers occupy the 'middle' of the electorate, showing the smallest deviations from the national electoral results across most parties. Overall, these findings suggest that in the 2025 election, the traditional class cleavage was most pronounced at the poles of the social class hierarchy.

In the 2021 election, the higher professionals and the entrepreneurs likewise emerged as the primary class strongholds of the electoral coalition SPOLU. Around two fifths of higher professionals (39%) and over two fifths of the entrepreneurs (43%) voted for it. These high-status groups showed substantial

positive inclination toward SPOLU (+11 and +15 percentage points, respectively), while ANO faced significant deficits among these groups, with negative deviations of -12 and -10 percentage points from its national electoral result. In contrast, pensioners constituted the core electoral base of ANO: 42% voted for the party, corresponding to a 15-percentage-point overrepresentation, closely mirroring the pattern observed in 2025. Furthermore, pensioners (25%) and, to a much lesser degree, semi- or unskilled manual workers (12%) provided the most fertile ground for traditional left-wing parties. Pensioners, in particular, showed pronounced overrepresentation for ČSSD and KSČM combined bloc (+16 percentage points), indicating that the left retained a substantial class-based foothold prior to its subsequent decline in 2025. A distinct pattern was already visible among skilled manual workers, among whom one quarter supported SPD, representing the largest deviation toward the SPD (+15 percentage points) and anticipating this group’s later consolidation as a stronghold of national-populist far-right rhetoric. Meanwhile, routine non-manual workers and lower professionals occupied the ‘middle’ of the electorate, displaying relatively small deviations from national electoral results across most parties in 2021.

Table 1:
Party choice by social class (row percentages)

2025 election								
	ANO 2011	SPOLU	STAN	Pirates	SPD	Motorists	Enough!	Other
Entrepreneur	12	32	18	16	6	10	1	5
Higher Professional	14	35	21	17	7	1	1	6
Lower Professional	19	26	21	14	9	4	4	3
Routine non-manual	38	21	8	10	9	4	4	6
Skilled manual	32	16	11	7	18	11	2	5
Semi-skilled or unskilled manual	42	12	12	4	14	9	7	0
Pensioner	44	23	8	5	7	3	8	2
2021 election								
	ANO 2011	SPOLU		Pirates+ STAN	SPD		KSČM+ ČSSD	Other
Entrepreneur	17	43		17	6		0	17
Higher Professional	15	39		19	5		10	11
Lower Professional	24	19		20	13		4	20
Routine non-manual	22	27		18	13		6	14
Skilled manual	19	19		19	25		6	13
Semi-skilled or unskilled manual	18	18		22	15		12	16
Pensioner	42	15		4	7		25	7

Note: Tables present row percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.
 Source: The authors.

Comparing the two most recent elections, a key development in 2025 is the significant realignment within the pensioner electorate, marked by a partial shift away from traditional left-wing parties toward the right-wing SPOLU coalition. In 2021, pensioners constituted the main electoral stronghold of the left-wing parties (KSČM and ČSSD), with 25% of pensioners voting for them. By 2025, however, these traditional left-wing parties ran in a protest-oriented coalition Stačilo! and attracted only 8% of the pensioner vote. As a result, a substantial share of old-age pensioners' electorate shifted toward other parties, esp. the right-wing coalition SPOLU and STAN. Whereas SPOLU significantly underperformed among pensioners in 2021 (by 13 percentage points), by 2025 it had reached parity with its national electoral result in this group. This pattern suggests that although ANO remains the dominant force among retired voters, SPOLU has successfully repositioned itself as a credible secondary option.

At the same time, notable shifts are evident among the lower strata of the social class hierarchy, pointing to a broader restructuring of class-based electoral alignments. Routine non-manual workers and manual workers (both skilled and unskilled), who were markedly underrepresented among ANO voters in 2021, had become a central pillar of ANO's electorate by 2025. This realignment is particularly pronounced among semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers: whereas only 18% of this group supported ANO in 2021, fully 42% did so in 2025. In addition, manual workers constituted a substantial part of the electorate of the new party Motorists for Themselves (*Motoristé sobě*, Motorists). Together, these changes indicate a strengthening of class-based polarization at the lower end of the class structure.

4.2 Class-party blocs alignments since 1992

Having examined descriptive patterns in the two most recent elections with contingency tables, we now turn to a long-term perspective on class voting. In the following paragraphs, we trace the evolution of class-based differences in party choice across the entire post-communist period. Figure 1 presents the predicted probabilities of vote choice derived from multinomial logistic regression models (reported in tables D11. through D20. in Appendix D) that include social class as predictors.⁴ These models are estimated separately for each of the ten Czech general elections held between 1992 and 2025. To enhance comparability and parsimony, conceptually similar and adjacent social class categories were merged into broader classes, resulting in four social class groups: higher professionals and entrepreneurs; lower professionals and routine non-manual workers; manual workers; and pensioners. Similarly, we collapse support for parties into five party groupings: left-wing parties; right-wing parties; far-right and populist parties; ANO; and a residual category of other parties (the latter is not reported in Figure 1).

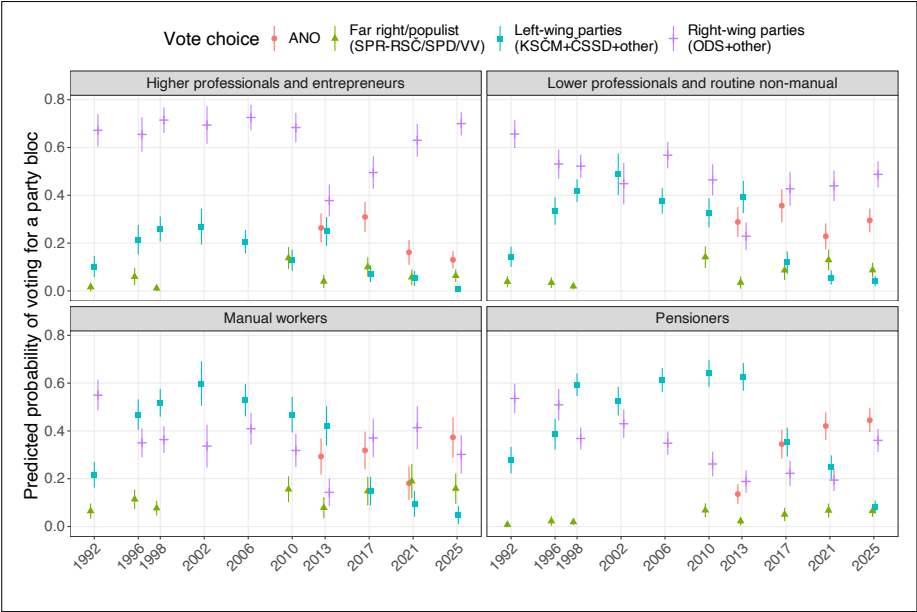
The higher professionals and entrepreneurs (top-left panel) represent the most stable social class group, consistently favoring right-wing parties, with predicted probabilities generally fluctuating between 0.6 and 0.8 throughout the entire period. Although this class experienced a brief decline in support for established right-wing parties around 2013 and 2017, corresponding with a temporary rise in the probability of voting for ANO, which at that time was positioned more towards the right of the political spectrum (see Appendix C), it subsequently reverted to its traditional party-bloc alignment. By 2025, preferences of this high-status class for the right-wing party bloc remained dominant, while predicted probabilities of supporting left-wing or far-right/populist parties remained consistently very low.

Among lower professionals and routine non-manual workers (top-right panel), class voting has been characterized by substantially higher volatility and a marked decline in support for traditional left-wing parties. Initially, this social class was split between the right-wing and left-wing blocs (with the exception of the 1992 election), but after 2013, support for left-wing parties (KSČM and ČSSD) collapsed from a peak of nearly 0.5 to negligible levels by 2025. This vacuum was largely filled by the rise of ANO, whose predicted probability fluctuated between 0.2 and 0.4, alongside a resilient right-wing bloc that recovered significantly in the three most recent election cycles.

Manual workers (bottom-left panel) have experienced a profound realignment, shifting from a predominantly left-wing electorate to a more fragmented class that increasingly supports far-right and populist parties. From the late 1990s through 2010, this group displayed a high probability of supporting left-wing parties (peaking at nearly 0.6 in 2002), but this support collapsed rapidly thereafter. Since 2013, there has been a notable and sustained increase in the probability of manual workers voting for ANO and far-right SPD.

Finally, the pensioners (bottom-right panel) exhibit the most dramatic transformation in Figure 1, shifting from the core electorate of traditional left-wing parties to the ANO's core support base. During the first two decades, pensioners were the most reliable left-wing voters, with predicted probabilities frequently exceeding 0.6. After 2013, however, left-wing support disintegrated, falling toward zero by 2025, while the probability of voting for ANO surged, making it the pensioners' dominant vote choice. Despite this shift, the 2025 data confirm a secondary trend noted above, as the right-wing party bloc saw a recovery among pensioners, surpassing the remnants of the left-wing parties.

Figure 1:
Predicted probabilities of social class voting for party blocs, 1992-2025



Source: The authors.

4.3 The development of aggregate class voting

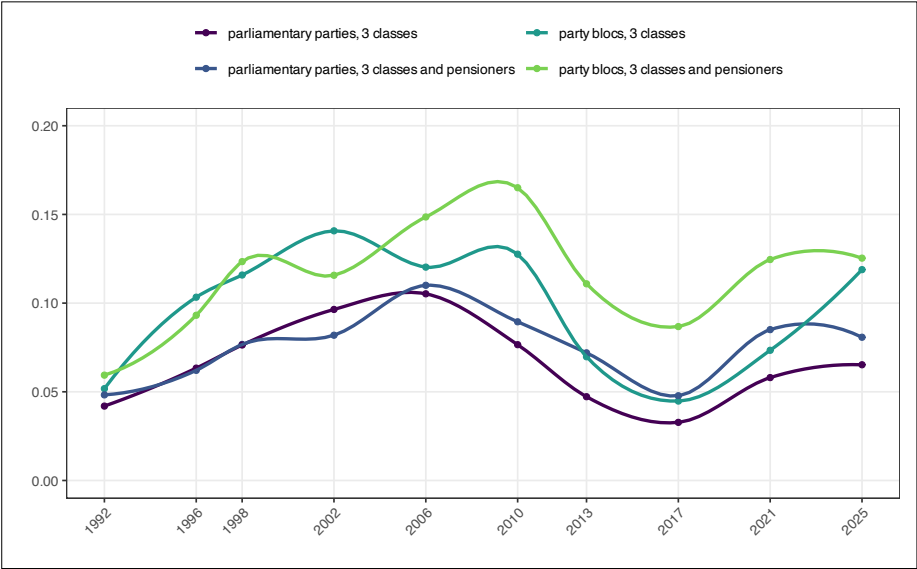
The following subsection provides an overall assessment of the development of class voting in the Czech Republic. In this analysis, we again utilize multinomial regression models, the results of which were presented in the previous section. Based on these models, we calculate summary indices of absolute lambda for each election. The lambda index ranges from 0 (indicating no class-based voting) to 0.5 (indicating complete class-based voting, with two social classes voting for two different parties under perfect deterministic alignment). Figure 2 presents the development of the absolute lambda index from 1992 to 2025 across ten elections.

The figure displays four different versions of the lambda index. These calculations differ in both the dependent variable (party choice) and the independent variable (social class). With respect to party choice, we use: (1) party blocs introduced in the previous section ($N = 5$); and (2) all parties that gained parliamentary representation in a given election. With respect to social class, we use: (1) three broad social classes among the economically active population; and (2) these three classes supplemented by old-age pensioners. There are two main reasons for these different operationalizations. First, the lambda index is sensitive to the number of parties included in the calculation. As the number of parties gaining

parliamentary representation has varied substantially over time, we also employ a more stable operationalization based on party blocs. Second, pensioners do not constitute a social class, but rather an economically inactive social group defined by age. At the same time, however, this group is sizeable and excluding it from the analysis would limit the explanatory power of our findings. In addition, our second research question directly taps into the relationship between pensioners and specific party choice (ČSSD, KSČM, ANO).

The longitudinal analysis of class voting from 1992 to 2025 presented in Figure 2 reveals a nonlinear yet generally increasing trend in the salience of social class in party choice. Starting from a relatively low baseline in 1992, where the absolute lambda index for all four operationalizations was at its minimum (between 0.04 and 0.06), class voting intensified significantly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. This upward trajectory peaked around 2010, after which class-based voting declined sharply. This decline in aggregate class voting reached a local minimum in 2017. However, the most recent data from 2021 and 2025 indicate a robust class realignment of the Czech electorate; lambda values have returned to levels nearly as high as their historical peaks, suggesting that social class remains a fundamental, albeit evolving, pillar of Czech voting behavior.

Figure 2:
The development of class voting since 1992 (absolute lambda)



Source: The authors.

The analysis also highlights how different operationalizations of the lambda index affect the interpreted strength of class voting across the post-communist period. A key finding is that including pensioners (i.e. an economically inactive, but sizable social group) consistently yields higher levels of class voting than indices limited to the economically active population. This is evidenced by the light green line (denoting party blocs and social classes with the pensioners) consistently sitting above the corresponding dark green line (denoting party blocs and only three economically active social classes). Furthermore, the results demonstrate that class voting is more clearly discernible when analyzing party blocs rather than individual parliamentary parties (as evidenced by the light green line always above the blue line, and the dark green line above the violet line for all ten elections). While individual party indices are more sensitive to shifts in the number of parties gaining representation, bloc-based measures provide a more stable and higher estimate of the underlying social divisions and the process of class realignment between traditional and new parties.

4.4 Party structuration with respect to three classes

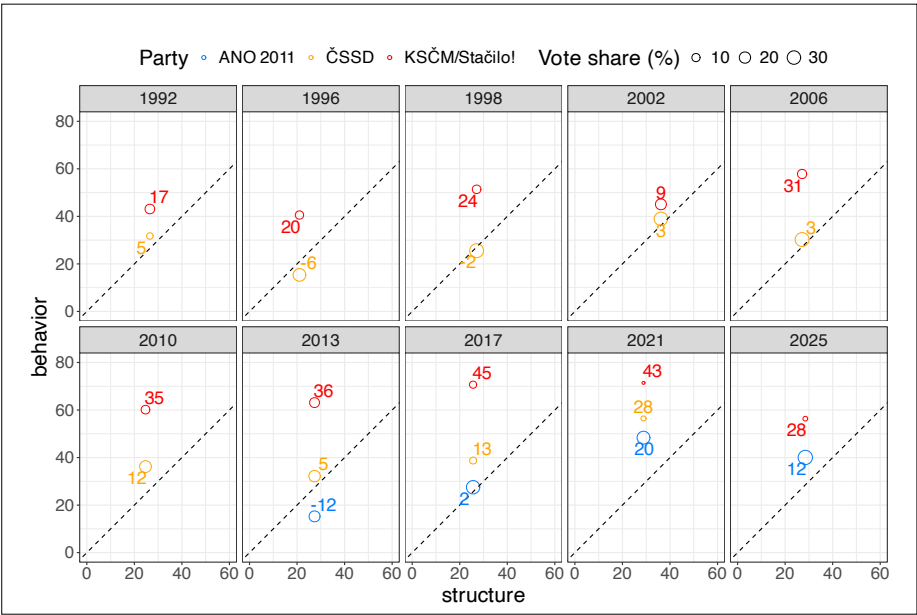
Whereas the previous sections adopted a social class perspective (i.e., for which parties social classes vote), the following section focuses on class voting from the party perspective (i.e., which classes compose a party's electorate). Therefore, this section examines the party structuration of voting among three key social classes that have shaped the post-communist Czech electoral landscape: old-age pensioners; manual workers; and higher professionals, together with the entrepreneurs. To map these dynamics, the next three figures employ a coordinate-based visualization that distinguishes between structural and behavioral drivers of change in class voting. The horizontal axes of these three figures represent the structural component (i.e. the respective social category's share in the electorate), while the vertical axes capture the behavioral component (i.e. the respective social category's share in a corresponding party vote). The index of party structuration (denoted as P by Marks et al., 2023), reported as a numerical label next to each party's circle, quantifies the degree of over- or underrepresentation of a respective social class by measuring the vertical distance from the diagonal line (which denotes statistical independence between class and vote choice). Expressed in percentage points, rounded to whole numbers, positive values of the index indicate that a party is disproportionately anchored in a specific social class.

Figure 3 illustrates a significant shift in the party structuration by Czech pensioners between 1992 and 2025, moving from a landscape dominated by traditional left-wing parties to one centered around ANO. Since the early post-communist period (i.e. before 2000), the KSČM had its primary pillar in the pensioners' vote. The KSČM maintained a remarkably high and relatively stable level of overrepresentation (i.e. the behavioral component), relative to the size of the pensioner social group (the structural component). While the share of pensioners in the

electorate remained relatively constant (roughly between 20% and 30% on the horizontal axis), the vertical distance of the red circles from the diagonal indicates that the KSČM consistently over-performed among this demographic, with the P index peaking at 45 in 2017 (meaning that while pensioners represented only around a quarter of the electorate in 2017, stunning seven out of ten votes received by the Communist party were cast by pensioners, resulting in a P value of 45). The electoral support of the Social Democrats (ČSSD) was more strongly structured by pensioner voters only between 2010 and 2021, peaking at the end of this period with the P of 28.

However, the longitudinal data reported in Figure 3 reveal a dramatic destabilization of these traditional class ties starting around 2017 with the ascent of ANO. The figure shows a clear ‘crowding out’ effect: as ANO’s vote share (represented by the size of the blue circles) grew from 18.7% in 2013 to 34.5% in 2025, the overrepresentation of the KSČM decreased substantially, while ČSSD virtually disappeared from the chart (being subsumed by the small red Stačilo! circle in 2025). By 2025, the pensioner vote had undergone a total realignment. Although the pensioners’ vote for KSČM (Stačilo!) in 2025 remains overrepresented, its overall vote share and overrepresentation have shrunk considerably compared to its 2017 peak. Meanwhile, ANO has consolidated its position as a major representative of this social group, maintaining a P index of 12 in 2025 (meaning 40% of ANO votes came from pensioners who constituted approximately 28% of the electorate in 2025).

Figure 3:
Party composition of pensioners' voting



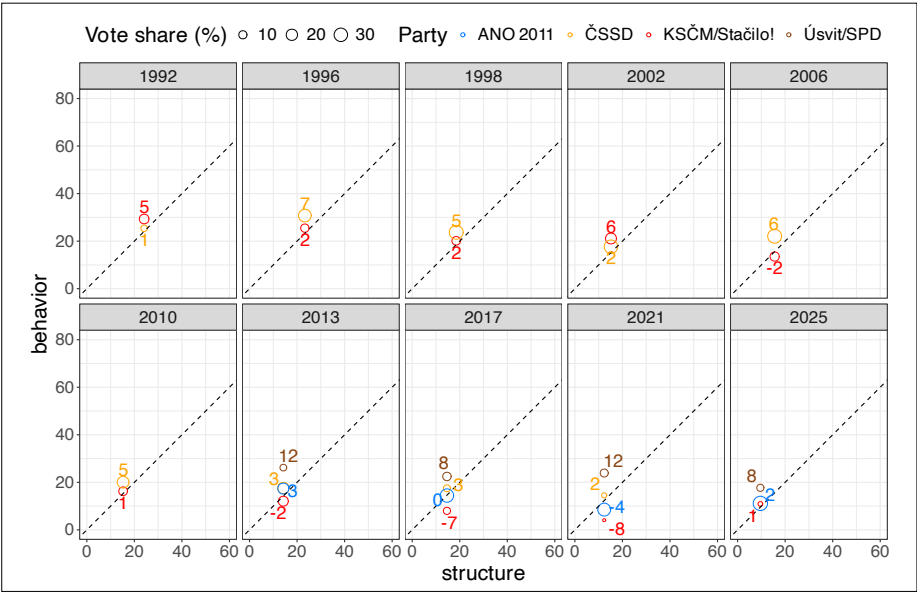
Source: The authors.

Figure 4 illustrates a significant transformation in the party structuration by manual workers in the Czech Republic from 1992 to 2025. A primary driver of this shift is the significant structural change in the electorate: the proportion of manual workers (i.e., skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers) has undergone a gradual and substantial decline among voters, falling from 24% in 1992 to just 10% in 2025 (as indicated on the horizontal axis). Despite this shrinking demographic base, the competition for the ‘worker vote’ has intensified, evolving from a stable reliance of traditional left-wing parties like the ČSSD and KSČM on this social class toward a more fragmented landscape featuring populist and far-right party challengers.

Overall, the party structuration by manual workers in the Czech Republic is relatively weak (especially when compared to that by pensioners presented in Figure 3). Figure 4 captures the near-total collapse of the manual workers’ class-based voting for the ČSSD and KSČM. In the 1990s and early 2000s, manual workers were overrepresented among voters of both parties, but by 2017, the KSČM’s P index turned substantially negative (-7), indicating that manual workers had become underrepresented in the Communist party.

This ‘behavioral’ vacuum was filled mainly by the far-right Dawn/SPD. The emergence of Dawn and its successor, SPD, represents a crucial behavioral shift among manual workers. In 2013, Dawn registered a P index of 12, indicating a strong initial overrepresentation of manual workers in this party’s relatively small overall vote share. By 2021 and 2025, the SPD consolidated this position, maintaining high levels of manual worker overrepresentation with structuration index values of 12 and 8, respectively. The vertical position of this party, significantly above the diagonal line, demonstrates that manual workers remain a core pillar of its electoral base, even as the total number of such workers in the country diminishes.

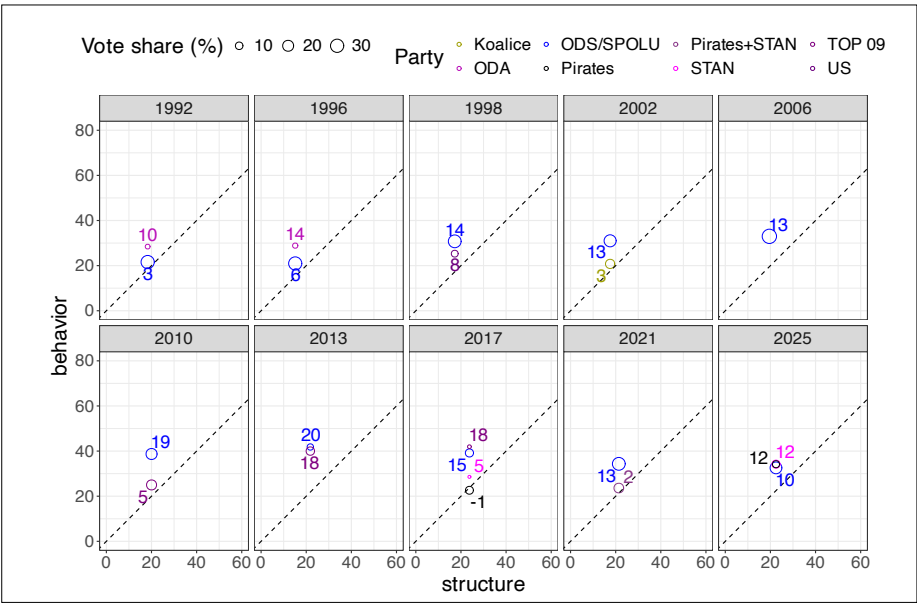
Figure 4:
Party composition of manual workers’ voting



Source: The authors.

Figure 5 illustrates the structuration of right-wing parties by higher professionals and entrepreneurs. This high-status social class has consistently served as the ideological and social backbone of the Czech right-wing parties. The figure highlights a persistent and significant overrepresentation of this class within the ODS (and later the SPOLU electoral coalition), as indicated by their consistently high behavioral component relative to their share in the electorate. The P index for ODS reached its highest point in 2013 at 20, reflecting a period when nearly half of the party's voters were drawn from this high-status social class, while the party recorded its worst electoral result, receiving just 8% of the popular vote. Conversely, the index reached its lowest point in 1992 at just 3, that is, in the electoral period, when vote choice was not significantly structured by social class. Despite these fluctuations, the positive values of the P index throughout the entire 1992–2025 period demonstrate that higher professionals and entrepreneurs remain disproportionately aligned with ODS/SPOLU.

Figure 5:
Party composition of higher professionals and entrepreneurs' voting



Source: The authors.

The Pirates have gradually emerged as a significant secondary party target for higher professionals and entrepreneurs, demonstrating a distinct upward trend in party structuration since its parliamentary breakthrough in 2017 (with P of -1). The Pirates have increasingly anchored themselves in more developed urban regions and among highly educated, IT-focused professionals. By 2021, the

party began making notable inroads into historically right-wing strongholds like Prague and Central Bohemia, regions with high concentrations of professional and entrepreneurial classes. This behavioral shift is reflected in a rising P index, as the party transitioned from a fringe protest movement to a ruling coalition partner. In 2025, the Pirates maintained a stable presence among these high-status social groups, with a third of their votes cast by this social class, resulting in a P of 12. Furthermore, STAN (running in an electoral coalition with the Pirates in 2021) had the same numbers among this high-status social class in the 2025 general election as the Pirates did (i.e., a third of STAN voters were cast by higher professionals and entrepreneurs, with a P of 12).

The overall level of party structuration by professionals and entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic occupies a distinct middle ground between the other two major social classes. It is higher and more stable than the structuration by manual workers (Figure 4), whose ties to traditional left-wing parties like the ČSSD and KSČM have largely collapsed or shifted toward fragmented populist far-right alternatives. However, it remains lower than the intense structuration observed among pensioners (Figure 3), who have exhibited the most dramatic levels of overrepresentation, particularly in their recent consolidation behind ANO and historically behind the KSČM. This positioning suggests that while professional and entrepreneurial status is a strong predictor of voting for right-wing parties, it does not exert the same singular, dominant pressure on party choice as the pensioner class voting has come to represent in the recent Czech party system.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to provide a comprehensive account of the development of class voting in the Czech Republic from the early 1990s to the 2025 parliamentary election. Drawing on post-election survey data and using multinomial regression models and summary indices (e.g. absolute lambda and index of party structuration), we traced the strength of the relationship between social class and party choice over time. The analysis brings novel findings and contributes to a long-standing debate on the persistence, decline, and transformation of class voting in post-communist contexts by offering a systematic longitudinal perspective.

The results indicate that class voting in the Czech Republic weakened notably during the 2010s, coinciding with the rise of new political parties and the erosion of traditional party alignments. In line with expectations derived from the recent literature using aggregate-level data (Drašar, 2025; Lysek & Macků, 2022), the entry of new parties mobilizing voters along non-economic dimensions, such as corruption, migration, and European integration, was associated with a decline in the structuring role of social class. Importantly, the analysis

also points to signs of a partial realignment of party competition in more recent elections. As economic issues regained salience and party competition became more polarized along the left-right dimension, the association between social class and vote choice appears to have strengthened again. This suggests that the decline of class voting in the Czech Republic was contingent on specific political conditions rather than representing a permanent structural shift.

At the same time, our findings suggest that class-based alignments appear to have gone through a process of reconfiguration. In particular, new parties ANO and SPD largely absorbed the electorates of traditional left-wing parties, while other new parties (TOP 09, STAN, and Pirates) partially took over the electorate of right-wing ODS. The fragmentation of parties on the centre-right of the political spectrum suggests, however, that other non-economic issues are also salient to Czech voters. Overall, the study demonstrates that class voting in the Czech Republic has been neither stable nor uniformly declining, but instead characterized by phases of strengthening and weakening, as well as reconfiguration. These findings highlight the importance of considering both party supply and voter demand in understanding changes in electoral behavior (Evans & de Graaf, 2013).

It is important to note, however, that our analysis documents the presence of class-structured voting patterns rather than demonstrating that class interests directly caused individual vote choices. The class realignment we observe with the latest elections could reflect a combination of factors. Party competition in the Czech Republic illustrates how economic and sociocultural issues can become intertwined: for example, debates about positions towards Russia, support for Ukrainian refugees, migration, the Green Deal, or energy transition carried simultaneous economic and identity-based resonances that complicate any clean separation between class-based and culturally driven voting motivations. Therefore, the mechanisms driving the realignment of social classes with new parties may not be purely economic: the pronounced working-class support for ANO and SPD in 2025 likely reflects a combination of redistributive preferences, anti-establishment attitudes, and sociocultural conservatism, and the present analysis cannot fully disentangle these motivations. Disentangling these motivations is beyond the scope of the present study, but it remains an important task for future research.

The Czech trajectory of class-party alignments resonates with broader European patterns, where the weakening of traditional class-party alignments in the 2000s and 2010s was followed by the emergence of new class-based coalitions structured around education, occupation, and cultural values (Gethin et al., 2021; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). The Czech case contributes to this comparative literature by showing that even in a highly volatile, post-communist party system, class-based voting is not simply a relic of early transition politics: it can be disrupted, reconfigured, and reconstituted as parties compete for the social constituencies left behind by the collapse of traditional left-right alignments.

In particular, the ‘crowding out’ of traditional left-wing parties by ANO among pensioners and the capture of the manual worker vote by the far-right SPD mirror dynamics observed in France, Italy, and the Netherlands, where mainstream left-wing parties lost their working-class base to populist challengers (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018; Rennwald & Evans, 2014). These findings thus position the Czech case within a wider European story about the social consequences of party system transformation.

Future research should further explore the mechanisms linking party strategies, issue salience, and social structure, and assess whether similar patterns can be observed in other Central and Eastern European democracies (see Gethin et al., 2021). Moreover, future studies should take heterogeneity among pensioners more seriously (Večerník, 2021), as our study was unable to differentiate among pensioners based on their previous occupation. Future work should also more directly address the relationship between class position and issue preferences, particularly on economic redistribution, migration, and European integration, to better understand whether the class-structured voting patterns documented here reflect class-based interests, sociocultural identities, or some combination of the two.

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Endnotes:

- 1 We acknowledge that labelling all these parties as right-wing is a simplification. However, we adopt this convention for presentation purposes.
- 2 Our classification mirrors the standard classification of populist parties by PopuList project (Rooduijn et al., 2024).
- 3 We are aware of two serious limitations associated with multinomial regression models. First, they often fail to provide reliable estimates for the electorates of small parties. Second, the identification of estimates (one for each alternative) depends on the assumption of Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA), which is unlikely to be satisfied in most multi-party systems. However, these limitations are not easily addressed within our analytical framework unless an alternative strategy, such as the use of stacked data or the use of different dependent variable like probability-to-vote, is employed. To mitigate these limitations, we merge similar parties and social classes in some analyses (see Appendix D for four types of multinomial regression models differing by party and class groupings).
- 4 The regression models estimate the gross effect of social class on party choice. We do not account for variables that may mediate the relationship between class and party choice, such as income, education, or union membership. Since income and education are themselves correlated with social class, controlling for them would risk absorbing part of the very effect we seek to capture. Our analytical approach, therefore, captures the overall association between class position and party choice without decomposing it into the pathways through which class exerts its influence.

From City Hall to Parliament: Electoral Performance of Mayors in the 2025 Czech General Election¹

Jakub Čapek, Adam Slavíček²

Abstract

This article examines the electoral performance of mayors in the 2025 Czech general election, focusing on candidates from parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies. Amid the growing personalisation of politics, mayors are often seen as valuable assets to party lists due to their local visibility and perceived competence. Using a dataset of 2,052 candidates, we compare the electoral performance of mayors and deputy mayors against other high-status professions (medical doctors, lawyers, teachers) and incumbent MPs. Methodologically, the study employs a probit model to estimate the probability of election and quantile regression to analyse preferential vote gains relative to ballot position.

The results confirm that mayors hold a statistically significant electoral advantage (+4 pp probability of election), yet they do not outperform medical doctors or incumbent MPs. The analysis further reveals significant variations across political parties and regions. While the STAN movement fielded the most mayors, their individual electoral impact was often surpassed by that of other professionals within the party. Conversely, the populist ANO movement successfully leveraged its mayoral candidates, who significantly outperformed the party's average. The findings suggest that while municipal experience remains a key recruitment channel in this multi-level political system, the 'mayoral bonus' is finite and heavily dependent on party context and regional dynamics.

Keywords: mayors; parliamentary elections; personalisation; Czech Republic; preferential voting

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1. Introduction

The shift of voter attention from political parties to individual politicians is a well-documented phenomenon, observed not only in Europe but across liberal democracies in general. This trend is supported by extensive research over the last two decades focusing on the personalisation of politics (e.g., Garzia, 2019; McAllister, 2007; Van Aelst, Sheaffer, Hubé, & Papathanassopoulos, 2016). While traditional party identification is declining, an increasing number of voters prioritise characteristics such as personal trust in a candidate or their track record at the local level. Consequently, the question of who represents a given party has become increasingly vital to voters, especially when compared to the declining interest in formal party programs (Linek & Voženílková, 2017).

As recent research indicates, the phenomenon of personalization is also significantly present in the Czech Republic. Linek and Voženílková argue that the decision-making process of Czech voters was already highly personalised as early as the 1990s (2017, p. 171). Numerous other studies have addressed this trend from various perspectives (e.g. Cabada, 2016; Jurek, 2012; Smolková & Balík, 2018; Voženílková, 2018). Voters tend to fixate more on political leaders than on party brands or policy content. This applies not only to national party leaders but also to local leaders, including mayors. Balík, for instance, identifies a phenomenon that can be described as a 'voting bonus for mayors' or 'mayoral advantage' (Balík, 2009, p. 214). This thesis is further supported by recent studies specifically targeting Czech mayors and their electoral successes (Čapek, 2025; Pileček, 2021).

The number of mayors in the Czech parliament is gradually increasing, as shown by Dvořák (2023, p. 204). A clear manifestation of this trend was observed in the well-documented case of the PirSTAN coalition during the 2021 Chamber of Deputies elections (e.g. Drašar, 2025; Lysek & Lebeda, 2021; Lysek & Macků, 2022). In these elections, the Pirate Party, who were leading in the pre-election polls at the time, ran in a coalition with STAN.¹ However, due to preferential voting, candidates from STAN secured 33 of the coalition's 37 mandates. This outcome can be attributed to the fact that STAN benefited from regionally well-known figures, whereas the Pirates lacked such personalities (Maškarinec & Naxera, 2022, p. 17). Among STAN candidates who outperformed their Pirate counterparts on the ballot, a significant majority were mayors². Their influence is further confirmed by Lysek and Lebeda (2021), who found that party support for STAN significantly correlates with the presence of local mayors in the respective regions.

Mayors are generally expected to enter elections with a specific advantage stemming from several factors. Primarily, within the municipality where the candidate serves as mayor, the *friends and neighbours effect* is highly likely to manifest. This effect is based on the premise that a candidate in national elections attracts votes from citizens who already know them from the local level (Campbell,

Cowley, Vivyan, & Wagner, 2019). Mayors appear to be the logical beneficiaries of this support, as demonstrated in the Czech context by Pileček (2021). This is further reinforced by the fact that they can effectively spend their entire term campaigning, as any positive development in their municipality can be presented as their own achievement (Gordon & Landa, 2009, p. 1493). This is also illustrated by mayors' long-standing status as the most trusted constitutional officials in the country³.

One might conclude that due to mayors' consistent electoral performance and ability to attract voters, political parties frequently place them on candidate lists across all levels of governance⁴. Research shows that this may not be entirely true. Czech voters are more likely to promote regional assembly and municipal council members than the selectors from political parties (Däubler & Linek, 2024, p. 9)⁵. The disparity between the selectors and the voters is further illustrated, for example, by Jurajda & München (2015).

Either way, a look at the 2021 general elections reveals that they were remarkably successful for mayors. Nearly one-sixth of the new Chamber of Deputies consisted of candidates who qualified for the office from the position of mayor⁶. The 2025 elections followed the trends of the previous cycle, characterised by a persistent atmosphere of strong polarisation that has endured in the Czech Republic since the COVID-19 crisis (see e.g. Cirhan & Stauber, 2026; Macková, Novotná, Čejková, & Hrbková, 2024; Malý & Michal, 2023) and a fundamental conflict over democratic values and norms (Guasti & Michal, 2025).

The electoral contest pitted two distinct political blocs against each other. On one side, the incumbent government, comprising the coalition SPOLU, STAN, and the Pirates. On the other side, the ANO movement, along with smaller populist parties, the SPD and AUTO⁷. This polarisation raises the question of whether local-level personalisation can still play a significant role in highly intensified national elections, or whether local personalities were overshadowed by a highly nationalised campaign.

The objective of this article is to examine the electoral effectiveness of mayors in the 2025 Czech general election. Specifically, this article addresses two research questions: (1) Are mayors more successful in moving up the ballot through preferential votes than candidates from other respected professions? (2) How does the electoral performance of mayors vary across different political parties and regions?

The article's structure is as follows. The second section outlines the research context, focusing on the position of mayors in the Czech political system and the theoretical framework of the personalisation of politics. The third section describes the data and methodology employed, specifically the probit and quantile regression models. The fourth section presents the empirical results of the analysis. Finally, the fifth section summarises the main findings and discusses the limits of the study.

2. Mayors and personalisation in the Czech context

The Czech Republic has a specific institutional framework in which, unlike its neighbouring countries, mayors are not directly elected, despite a historical debate over such a change (see e.g. Jüptner, 2009). Voters first elect the municipal council, which then elects the mayor. At the same time, a large number of mayors, particularly in smaller municipalities, are not members of any political party (see e.g. Kostecký, Bernard, Mansfeldová, & Mikešová, 2024).

Compared to other candidates for the Chamber of Deputies, mayors occupy a distinct position, as they are already established politicians at a relatively significant level of governance. This is particularly true for mayors of larger cities, where they are in charge of a larger administrative infrastructure. Furthermore, their candidacy is only possible because of the permissive approach to the accumulation of mandates that prevails in the Czech Republic.

Although dual mandating is prohibited, restricted, or simply uncommon in other countries, it remains a standard practice in the Czech Republic (see e.g. Hájek, 2016; Navarro, 2009). Although certain elements of self-regulation and voluntary restraint can be observed, for instance, in the varying internal policies of political parties (Hájek, 2016, pp. 160–161), the accumulation of mandates is still a widespread phenomenon, as noted by various authors (e.g. Bernard, 2013; Pileček, 2021; Ryšavý, 2016). This situation can be illustrated by the well-known case of Bohuslav Svoboda. As late as 2025, at the age of 81, he concurrently held the positions of MP, mayor of Prague, and remained an active gynaecologist.

Thus, if mayors seek to advance to higher levels of governance, there are very few institutional barriers in their way. The existing literature indicates that mayors' orientation toward positions in the higher levels of the political system is common both in the Czech Republic and abroad. Dodeigne, Krukowska & Lazauskienė (2018, pp. 96–99), for example, employ a typology of mayors which identifies a non-negligible number of European mayors as 'nationally-oriented' or 'multi-level' mayors. Their extensive survey confirms that the Czech Republic, alongside France, Italy, and Serbia, possesses the most politically ambitious mayors in Europe, specifically those aspiring to reach levels of governance beyond the municipal sphere (Dodeigne et al., 2018, pp. 108–111). This aligns with earlier data from Kjaer (2006), who also noted that Czech mayors are among the most ambitious in Europe, with one in seven aspiring for a seat in parliament⁸.

There are two overlapping phenomena. First, mayors themselves often plan careers in high-level politics and utilise their municipal office as a sort of political elevator. Second, political parties value their mayors and seek to field them in as many elections as possible, or even specifically recruit active mayors into their ranks. Generally, local and regional politicians, and mayors in particular, represent a welcome recruitment pool for political parties. Which is evident

from the regional as well as parliamentary elections (Ryšavý, 2016; Ryšavý & Čermák, 2015).

What, however, leads parties to believe that mayors are such effective candidates? It appears that merely mentioning the mayoral profession on the ballot paper generates additional preferential votes. This is evident not only in the disproportionate results within the PirSTAN coalition in 2021 or the overall strong national performance of STAN, a party primarily composed of mayors. It is also observable at the level of regional elections, as shown in previous collective volumes (Balík, Pink, & Dvořáková, 2013; Eibl, Pink, Voda, & Sax, 2018). As Däubler & Linek (2024) point out, according to the election results, voters generally prefer local politicians even more than the political parties themselves. Interestingly, voters tend to perceive mayors as the primary representatives of their municipalities, even though they do not legally possess strong executive powers (Balík, 2009, pp. 74–75).

Voters are more likely to be familiar with their own mayor or the mayor of a neighbouring town than with a random candidate on the list. This reality is manifested in the friends and neighbours effect, a term used to describe the relationship between the geographical proximity of a voter and a candidate (Arzheimer & Evans, 2012). This effect is characterised by an increased number of votes for a candidate in the vicinity of their residence, as demonstrated both in the Czech context (e.g. Malcová, 2012) and internationally (see e.g. Johnston, Wickham-Jones, Pattie, Cutts, & Pemberton, 2016; Panagopoulos & Bailey, 2020; Put, 2021).

Specifically regarding mayors, research by Pileček (2021) shows that this effect is more visible in small and less populated municipalities. He explicitly identifies mayors as prime examples of candidates capable of mobilising their home electorate (Pileček, 2021, p. 235). Mikešová (2019, pp. 418–420) expresses a similar view. This is also linked to arguments that the personalisation of politics in the Czech Republic is becoming increasingly visible, resulting in more frequent efforts to utilise local candidates (Malcová, 2012; Mikešová, 2019).

Literature primarily focuses on the electoral outcomes of local candidates, a group to which mayors belong, as a whole (e.g. Blais, Gidengil, Dobrzynska, Nevitte, & Adeau, 2003; Däubler & Linek, 2024; Roy & Alcantara, 2015). Mayors are frequently mentioned because their results tend to be more significant than those of other local candidates. At the same time, however, authors such as Put and Maddens (2015, p. 613) point out that a mayor of a small municipality does not possess as great an advantage as a mayor of a larger one, which somewhat contradicts the findings of Pileček.

Naturally, mayors are not the only candidates who benefit from the fact that voters often decide based on personal familiarity or the information provided on the ballot papers. For instance, Atkeson and Hamel (2020) found in their study of Californian elections that information about a candidate's occupation can

play a more significant role than their party affiliation. Similar conclusions, that candidate characteristics are highly influential, are reached by Crowder-Meyer et al. (2020). Among the occupations most favoured by voters are teachers (Crowder-Meyer et al., 2020, pp. 138–141), medical doctors and incumbent MPs (Dvořák, 2023; Dvořák & Pink, 2023; see e.g. Sedláčková, 2012; Voda, 2014).

From this perspective, Jurajda and München's findings are particularly interesting. According to them, medical doctors are popular among Czech voters and secure a higher share of preferential votes. However, this popularity is often not reflected in their initial position on the candidate list. The same applies to municipal council and regional assembly members (Däubler & Linek, 2024, pp. 8–10). In contrast, lawyers are frequently overestimated by the selectors. They are placed higher on the lists, yet their actual electoral results do not match this positioning, as voters do not show them the same level of favouritism (Jurajda & München, 2015, pp. 458–460).

Furthermore, it is essential to consider other characteristics that may influence electoral outcomes. Beyond candidates' occupations, their highest level of education also plays a significant role. Czech voters generally value academic titles, and the higher the degree, the more preferential votes it tends to attract (Däubler & Linek, 2024). These titles function more effectively in smaller municipalities, where they are less common (Jurajda & München, 2015).

Similarly, being placed at the top or at least in a winnable position on the ballot is a major advantage. The leader of the candidate list receives the highest number of preferential votes, and as the position on the candidate list drops, the number of preferential votes decreases rapidly (Voda, 2014, p. 264).

Another undeniable factor is the incumbency effect, which is evident in the Czech Republic both at the parliamentary level (Voda, 2014; Voženílková & Hejtmánek, 2015) and at lower levels of governance (Bernard & Šafr, 2016; Čapek, 2025; Linek & Škvrňák, 2024). A brief look at the MPs elected in 2025 reveals that more than half were re-elected⁹. It is the highest number of successful incumbents since the establishment of the independent Czech Republic. In previous years, the re-election rate hovered around 40–45% (Bakke, 2022, pp. 68–69).

In addition to these characteristics, the 2025 elections in the Czech Republic witnessed a relatively strong initiative advocating support for female candidates through preferential voting¹⁰. A record 52 women were elected to the Chamber of Deputies, representing 26% of all MPs. Notably, 13 of them were elected because they received more preferential votes than other candidates on their candidate list. While the gender dimension of elections is not the focus of this article, it appears to have played a role in the recent elections and warrants mention.

Regarding the electoral context itself, several points must be clarified. Elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic are held in 14 regions¹¹, which correspond to the regional administrative structure, with a total of 200 mandates to be distributed. Political parties have their own candidate lists in

each region, and a different number of seats are redistributed in each of them. To enter the Chamber, a party must cross a national electoral threshold of 5%¹².

Crucial to this research is the option of giving candidates preferential votes. A voter selects one party in a given region and can cast a preferential vote for up to four candidates on the ballot. If a candidate receives at least 5% of the total votes cast for their party in that region, they are prioritised for a mandate and move to the top of the list. Otherwise, the initial order of the candidate list, as determined by the political parties themselves, remains decisive.

Since the 2021 reform, the Czech Republic has implemented not only new thresholds for coalitions but also a two-round system for allocating seats. The first round takes place at the regional level, where the majority of seats are allocated. Votes for parties that did not receive enough votes in a region to secure a mandate, or those that had surplus votes after securing a mandate, are then distributed in the second round. In the 2025 elections, 12 seats were distributed in the second round, with two of them going to mayors and one to a deputy mayor.

3. Data

The analysis is based on data published by the Czech Statistical Office via the Volby.cz portal (ČSÚ, 2026). The initial dataset contains information on a total of 4,462 candidates from 28 different political entities. For this study, the analysis focuses on 2,052 candidates. Those candidates come from the six parties or electoral coalitions that were successful in the election. Specifically, the dataset includes all candidates from political subjects that surpassed the 5% electoral threshold and secured seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 2025: ANO, STAN, Pirates, SPD, AUTO, and the SPOLU coalition.

It should be noted that SPOLU consists of a coalition of three parties: ODS, KDU-ČSL, and TOP 09. Although they campaigned together and currently operate as a single entity in the Chamber of Deputies, they remain historically distinct entities that are likely to act independently in the future. For this reason, they are treated separately in the analysis. Consequently, while most other parties have approximately 340 candidates in the tables, the number of candidates for the individual parties forming the SPOLU coalition is logically lower. Similarly, while SPD included candidates from other minor parties on its lists, their numbers were negligible, and they were not categorised separately. The same applies to the Pirates, who had Green Party candidates on their lists.

The key focus of this analysis is on candidates who listed ‘mayor of a municipality’¹³ as their occupation on the ballot. These are compared with other candidate groups whose professional characteristics, according to existing literature, suggest a higher-than-average potential for gaining preferential votes (Atkeson & Hamel, 2020; Crowder-Meyer et al., 2020; Däubler & Linek, 2024;

Jurajda & München, 2015). For comparative purposes, the following groups were selected: ‘Doctors of Law’ (holding the JUDr. degree), medical professionals (indicated by titles MUDr., MVDr., or MDDr.), incumbent MPs from the previous term, and teachers or principals of primary and secondary schools. Deputy mayors are also treated as a distinct professional category. We assume that deputy mayors may achieve better results than average candidates due to the friends and neighbours effect or their perceived association with the mayors themselves. Furthermore, we have found no existing research in the Czech context that specifically analyses deputy mayors, despite their high-ranking status within municipal management.

A minor limitation of this analysis is its reliance on self-reported data from the ballot papers. Theoretically, a situation could occur in which a candidate would withhold their profession, list a different one, or fail to include their academic title. It would be possible to compare the data with a database of Czech political candidates (Linek, Škvrňák, Šoltés, & Titl, 2025), although we assume that any incorrectly listed data would involve only a negligible number of cases, not statistically significant, given the total sample size of more than 2,000 analysed candidates.

Former mayors and deputy mayors are not included in these specific categories. If an MP also serves as a mayor, they are classified as an MP, based on the assumption that voters primarily associate the individual with their parliamentary role rather than their mayoral office¹⁴. Analogously, if a mayor or deputy mayor also holds a law or medical degree, or is a teacher, they are classified as a mayor or deputy mayor, respectively¹⁵.

We acknowledge that these classification decisions are not self-evident. To assess their potential impact on the results, we estimated an alternative model in which professional titles (MUDr., JUDr., teacher) were assigned priority over mayoral, deputy mayoral and MP status. The results of this robustness check are presented in Appendix B. The two classifications yield substantively similar results for most categories. The main exception is MUDr., where the alternative classification produces a notably larger estimated effect, driven by the reassignment of candidates who hold both a medical degree and an MP status. We therefore retain the original classification as the primary specification.

Table 1 below displays the absolute numbers (relative numbers can be seen in Appendix Table A1) of these selected professions across the Czech Republic's regions.

Table 1:
Absolute numbers of candidates' occupations in Czech regions¹⁶

Region	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other	Total
Central Bohemian	12	11	4	8	19	9	141	204
Hradec Králové	7	10	1	4	7	3	88	120
Karlovy Vary	7	5	1	4	3	3	61	84
Liberec	10	9	0	1	6	2	74	102
Moravian-Silesian	17	18	3	2	11	7	158	216
Olomouc	13	3	3	2	8	3	103	135
Pardubice	12	8	1	2	9	7	75	114
Plzeň	15	5	3	4	3	9	81	120
Prague	3	9	8	12	12	3	169	216
South Bohemian	8	10	2	7	9	7	89	132
South Moravian	16	15	3	2	8	6	152	202
Ústí nad Labem	17	10	1	4	10	4	110	156
Vysočina	8	10	1	3	5	4	89	120
Zlín	17	12	0	3	8	2	89	131
Total	162	135	31	58	118	69	1479	2052

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office

In certain regions, the number of mayoral candidates on parliamentary parties' ballot papers was significantly higher than in others. This could be due to differences in the number of municipalities across regions, but upon examining the data, no clear causal relationship was observed. To assess whether mayors in certain regions run for office more frequently than those in others, a long-term comparative analysis across regions would be required.

The distribution of professions across political parties offers an interesting perspective. More than half of the mayors from the parties that entered Parliament in 2025 elections ran on the STAN candidate list. Every fourth candidate from this party was a serving mayor. This high concentration of mayors within STAN is unsurprising and aligns with previous research highlighting the strong position of municipal leaders within the party (Lysek & Macků, 2022; Maškarinec, 2020).

A significant number of mayors were also present on the candidate lists of the eventual election winner, the populist ANO movement, representing one-quarter of all mayoral candidates. Moreover, ANO fielded 50 deputy mayors in the elections, the highest number among all competing entities. In contrast, the SPOLU coalition fielded only 26 mayors in total, possibly due to a decline in municipal leadership roles in recent years. AUTO and SPD, parties that can be characterised as anti-system, clearly face challenges in recruiting mayors or their deputies. However, SPD boasts the highest number of medical doctors apart

from ANO. Finally, while the Pirates have few mayoral candidates, they feature a significant number of deputy mayors on their lists.

It is important to note that AUTO is a new party without a strong regional base, and the SPD has long struggled to win seats at the local level. As a result, they lack a pool of candidates from which to field their own mayors. The Pirates, on the other hand, have at least managed to form coalitions at the municipal level, holding deputy-mayor positions, which they can then field in parliamentary elections.

From a general perspective, it is noteworthy that each party has a different position and different opportunities when it comes to recruiting candidates, and these may change over time depending on many factors. Mayors and deputy mayors represent the largest groups among the selected categories. Relative numbers of candidates' occupations are shown in Appendix Table A2.

Table 2:
Absolute numbers of candidates' occupations by party affiliation

Political party ¹⁷	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other	Total
ANO	43	49	8	11	40	12	179	342
AUTO	6	3	5	5	1	7	313	340
KDU-ČSL	9	10	0	2	8	4	52	85
ODS	10	17	2	9	21	8	107	174
Pirates	3	22	3	9	10	15	281	343
SPD	0	5	8	10	14	7	299	343
STAN	88	25	3	6	15	11	195	343
TOP 09	3	4	2	6	9	5	53	82
Total	162	135	31	58	118	69	1479	2052

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

4. Methods

R (R Core Team, 2024) statistical software was used for data processing, model construction, and visualisation of calculations. The calculations were performed using the quantreg (Koenker, 2024) and margin (Leeper, 2024) packages. The results were visualized using the ggplot2 package (Wickham, 2024).

In the first part of the analysis, we examine whether candidates with chosen profession had a higher probability of being elected to the Chamber of Deputies with control on the position on the candidate list. We employ a probit model (Anděl, 1993) in the following form:

$$P(M) = \phi(\beta_0 + \beta_l \log(\text{position on the candidate list}) + \sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k X_k)$$

Where:

- M – a binary variable taking the value of 1 if the candidate secured a mandate and 0 otherwise, $P(M)$ is the estimated probability of the candidate being elected.
- Φ – the distribution function of the standard normal distribution
- X_k – binary variables indicating the candidate's profession, specifically:
 - Mayor
 - Deputy mayor,
 - Doctor of law (JUDr.),
 - Medical doctor (MUDr., MVDr., MDDr.),
 - Member of Parliament (MP),
 - Teacher (or principal) of a primary or secondary school.
- *Position on the candidate list* – a control variable representing the candidate's initial position on the ballot. Excluding this control variable could bias the results (for example, if incumbent MPs tend to be placed higher on the lists, their higher probability of election would be partially due to their position rather than their profession alone).

The probit model serves here as a tool for controlling ballot position rather than as a test of a general hypothesis about voter preferences. Based on this probit model, we then calculate the average partial effects (Wooldridge, 2010) for the selected professions.

Since there are only 200 distributed seats in the Parliament, the available data for comparing the success of individual professions across all regions and parties is relatively limited. Therefore, in the second part of the analysis, we evaluate candidate success not only by the criterion of being elected but also by the number of preferential votes received. This approach allows us to assess the relative success across professions, even among non-elected candidates. A candidate may receive a high number of preferential votes but still fail to secure a mandate due to an unfavourable position on the ballot¹⁸.

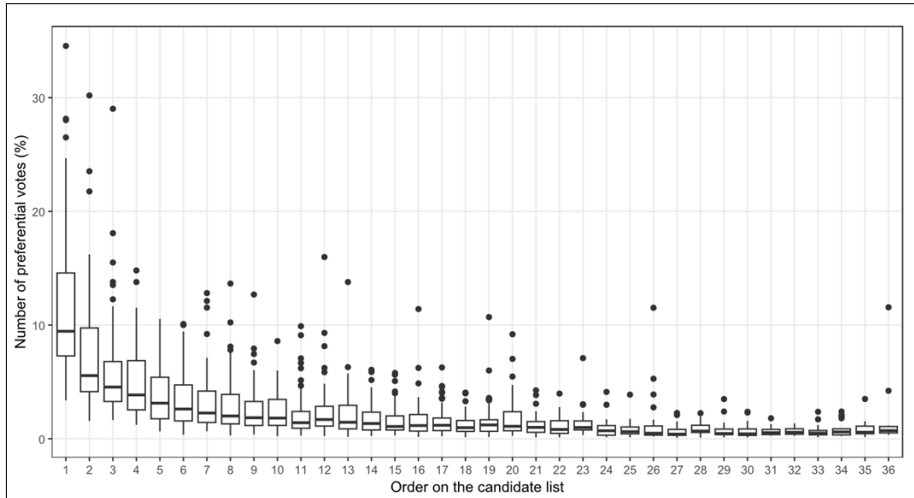
In the second part of the analysis, we examine the number of preferential votes received by candidates in relation to their initial position on the ballot. We establish the expected number of preferential votes for each position and then analyse whether individual candidates received more or fewer votes than is typical for their respective position on the ballot.

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, there is a clear relationship between the number of preferential votes and the candidate's position on the ballot. It is evident that this relationship is non-linear - the difference in the average number of preferential votes between the first and second positions is relatively large, but these differences gradually diminish as one moves down the list.

From approximately the 12th position onward, the average number of preferential votes remains nearly constant. The figure also reveals several outliers in the

data, representing exceptionally successful candidates who secured significantly more preferential votes than others at the same ballot position.

Figure 1:
Distribution of the number of preferential votes received in relation to the candidate's position on the candidate list



Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

Based on the above, we employ a quantile regression model (Koenker, 2005) with a logarithmic transformation to estimate the expected share of preferential votes as a function of the candidate's ballot position. The model is defined as:

$$Q_{0.5}(\log y) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \log x,$$

Where y represents the share of preferential votes received and x is the position on the candidate list. This model estimates the median share of preferential votes relative to the candidate's rank and is therefore more robust to outliers than, for example, a standard linear regression model.

The quantile regression model also allows us to estimate the 25th and 75th percentiles of preferential votes in relation to the candidate's ballot position. These models enable the identification of exceptionally weak and exceptionally strong candidates, specifically, those who received fewer preferential votes than the predicted value for the 25th percentile, or more than the predicted value for the 75th percentile, respectively.

5. Results

Table 3 presents the average partial effects from the probit model, indicating the percentage-point difference in the probability of being elected for each profession relative to the reference category (all other candidates), after controlling for ballot position. The full probit model output (and robustness check for the classification of professions) is reported in Appendix B.

Table 3:
Average partial effects of selected professions

Profession	Difference in probability of being elected (pp)
JUDr.	5pp
Deputy mayor	4pp
MUDr.	3pp
MP	15pp
Mayor	4pp
Teacher	-1pp

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

In the 2025 elections, the largest difference in the probability of being elected was associated with incumbent MP status (+15 pp). Mayors, deputy mayors and medical doctors showed more modest but positive differences (+4 pp, +4 pp and +3, respectively). For teachers, the estimated difference was small and negative (–1 pp), suggesting no meaningful electoral advantage associated with this profession in these elections. For Doctors of Law, the estimated difference (+5 pp) is comparable in magnitude to that of mayors, though it is estimated with considerably greater uncertainty due to the lower number of candidates in this category.

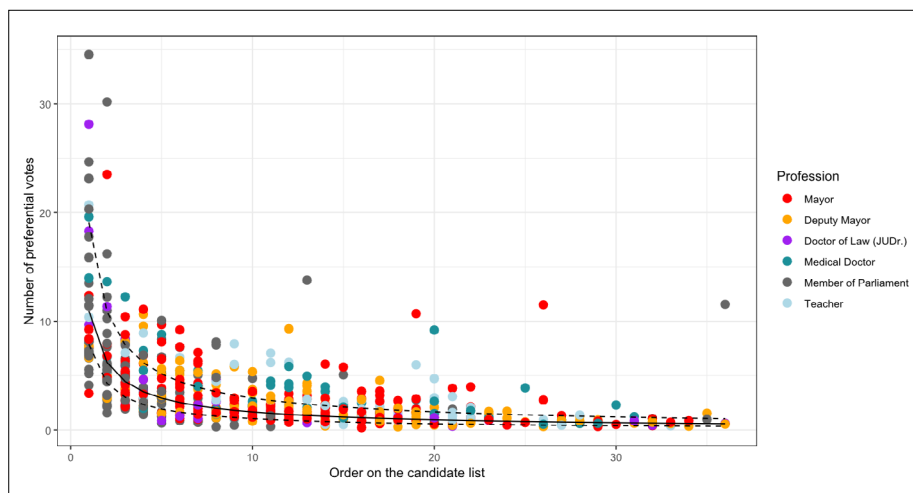
Figure 2 below presents the distribution of the share of preferential votes received in relation to the candidate's position on the candidate list, compared to the modelled expected share of preferential votes (solid line). The figure also includes the modelled predicted shares for the 25th and 75th percentiles (dashed lines). The solid line distinguishes between successful candidates (those above the line) and weak candidates (those below the line). The lower dashed line identifies exceptionally weak candidates, while the upper dashed line identifies exceptionally successful candidates.

As evident from Figure 2, the advantage of holding a higher ballot position remains valid for the selected professions, which is a phenomenon confirmed across various types of elections (see e.g. Koppell & Steen, 2004; Lutz, 2010; Spáč, 2016; Voda, 2014). This reflects the confluence of two effects: political parties tend to place their strongest candidates at the top of the list, while voters often

mechanically select from the top. Furthermore, the figure shows that mayors are typically positioned at the top of the candidate lists. The majority of them were placed within the first 20 positions.

Figure 2:

Comparison of the distribution of the share of preferential votes received in relation to the candidate's position on the candidate list with the estimated median (solid line), 25th percentile, and 75th percentile (dashed line) of preferential votes received in relation to the position on the candidate list



Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

Given that mayoral candidates are not evenly distributed across the Czech Republic (see Appendix Table A1), it is appropriate to analyse their performance through a geographical lens. Table 4 displays the proportions of successful candidates within selected professional groups across the Czech regions, specifically those candidates who received a higher share of preferential votes than is typical for a candidate at a comparable position on the ballot.

It is evident that mayors performed best in the Karlovy Vary region, where all seven mayoral candidates outperformed the expected results for their respective ballot positions and in Vysočina region. Strong performance of mayors was also recorded in the Olomouc, Ústí nad Labem, and Pardubice regions, where more than two-thirds of mayors exceeded their expected results.

In contrast, mayors were least successful in Prague and the Central Bohemian region, where only one out of three candidates outperformed the median. However, only three mayors ran for office in Prague. This can be attributed to the fact that while regions have hundreds of municipalities from which to recruit mayors, Prague has only 57 city districts¹⁹.

As Pileček (2021) suggests, the mobilisation of the home electorate is often more visible in smaller and less populated municipalities. This invites a discussion

on whether the total number of municipalities in a region or their average size plays a significant role. However, a comparison between the two most successful regions, the Karlovy Vary and Vysočina regions, suggests that regional structure alone may not be the decisive factor²⁰. Alternatively, it would make sense to look at the size of the individual municipalities represented by the mayoral candidates.

The table further indicates that mayors' success in a given region does not automatically translate into similar success for deputy mayors. In several regions, the proportions diverge considerably. The most pronounced contrast is observed in the Liberec region, where 60% of mayors but nearly 90% of deputy mayors outperformed their expected ballot position. A similar pattern, though less extreme, appears in the Zlín and Pardubice regions. However, in 8 out of 14 regions, mayors have achieved better results.

Table 4:
Ratio of successful candidates²¹ in selected professions in the Czech regions

Region	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
Central Bohemian	4/12	6/11	2/4	3/8	10/19	4/12	38/141
Hradec Králové	5/7	9/10	0/1	4/4	3/7	2/3	43/88
Karlovy Vary	7/7	2/5	1/1	4/4	0/3	3/3	44/61
Liberec	6/10	8/9	0/0	1/1	2/6	2/2	49/74
Moravian-Silesian	7/17	6/18	2/3	1/2	2/11	4/7	64/158
Olomouc	9/13	2/3	2/3	2/2	5/8	3/3	56/103
Pardubice	8/12	4/8	1/1	2/2	3/9	5/7	38/75
Plzeň	9/15	4/5	2/3	4/4	2/3	5/9	41/81
Prague	1/3	4/9	6/8	9/12	10/12	1/3	65/169
South Bohemian	5/8	5/10	1/2	4/7	3/9	4/7	38/89
South Moravian	9/16	6/15	2/3	2/2	3/8	4/6	59/152
Ústí nad Labem	12/17	9/10	0/1	4/4	3/10	3/4	65/110
Vysočina	7/8	6/10	0/1	2/3	2/5	4/4	41/89
Zlín	10/17	6/12	0/0	2/3	6/8	2/2	43/89

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

We can further distinguish the proportions of exceptionally successful candidates, those who significantly outperform the expected share of votes relative to their ballot position. These data are captured in Table 5, which reveals a trend broadly similar to that observed in Table 4. In most regions, the proportion of exceptionally successful deputy mayors equals or exceeds that of exceptionally successful mayors. Notable exceptions include the Karlovy Vary and Olomouc regions, where mayors outperform deputy mayors among the exceptionally successful.

Table 5:
Ratio of exceptionally successful candidates²² in selected professions in Czech regions

Region	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
Central Bohemian	2/12	2/11	1/4	1/8	4/19	4/9	19/141
Hradec Králové	2/7	4/10	0/1	3/4	0/7	1/3	22/88
Karlovy Vary	4/7	2/5	0/1	3/4	0/3	1/3	27/61
Liberec	2/10	1/9	0/0	1/1	1/6	2/2	25/74
Moravian-Silesian	2/17	5/18	1/3	1/2	2/11	2/7	33/158
Olomouc	5/13	1/3	0/3	1/2	3/8	2/3	28/103
Pardubice	6/12	3/8	0/1	1/2	1/9	4/7	22/75
Plzeň	4/15	2/5	0/3	3/4	2/3	3/9	20/81
Prague	1/3	1/9	1/8	5/12	6/12	1/3	43/169
South Bohemian	2/8	2/10	0/2	1/7	3/9	1/7	19/89
South Moravian	1/16	2/15	1/3	1/2	2/8	0/6	31/152
Ústí nad Labem	6/17	3/10	0/1	3/4	2/10	0/4	23/110
Vysočina	2/8	2/10	0/1	1/3	0/5	2/4	20/89
Zlín	4/17	2/12	0/0	1/3	2/8	2/2	23/89

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

In the Karlovy Vary region, exceptionally successful mayors account for 57% of all mayoral candidates in that region - the highest share across all regions. By contrast, in Vysočina region, where the ratio of successful mayors was 87.5 %, only 2 of them can be counted as exceptionally successful. In the Moravian-Silesian region, by contrast, deputy mayors appear to be considerably stronger candidates than mayors, with 28% of deputy mayors qualifying as exceptionally successful compared to only 12% of mayors. This aligns with the fact that the ANO movement, which fielded the highest number of deputy mayors on its lists, performed very strongly in this particular region.

For further comparison, Appendix Table C1 displays the proportions of exceptionally weak candidates. The highest proportion of exceptionally weak mayors is found in the Central Bohemian region, where they account for 33% of all mayoral candidates in that region, followed by the Hradec Králové region at 29%. Otherwise, mayors are rarely among the weakest candidates: out of the 170 mayors who ran on the lists of parliamentary parties, only 19 (11%) fell below the 25th percentile of preferential votes relative to ballot position. This compares favourably with deputy mayors, of whom 16% qualified as exceptionally weak. Medical doctors again stand out positively, with only 3 out of 58 (5%) falling below the 25th percentile - the lowest share among all professional categories examined.

A look at the distribution of successful candidates, those who received a higher share of votes than others at the same ballot position, primarily reflects

the strong overall electoral performance of parties such as KDU-ČSL and TOP 09, where the majority of candidates across virtually all professional categories outperformed their expected ballot position. As mentioned above, while the chosen quantile regression method does not allow a direct comparison of the overall performance of individual parties, it does enable comparisons across selected professions within each party.

In this regard, the data point to a striking paradox within STAN. Although the party is literally named 'Mayors and Independents', its mayoral candidates are the least successful professional group within the party: only 60% of STAN mayors outperformed their expected ballot position, compared to 76% of deputy mayors, 67% of medical doctors, and 82% of teachers. Doctors of Law within STAN achieved a 100% success rate, albeit from a small base of three candidates.

A different pattern emerges within ANO, where mayors (53%) considerably outperformed deputy mayors (24%), despite the party fielding the largest number of deputy mayors of any party. This suggests that while ANO successfully recruited deputy mayors in large numbers, their individual electoral contribution was more limited than that of the party's mayoral candidates. Within ANO, mayors are among the most successful candidates, as otherwise only 27% of ANO candidates can be considered successful.

KDU-ČSL and TOP 09 stand out for the uniformly high success rates across all professional categories, which likely reflects the strong list-level performance of these parties rather than profession-specific advantages. Among anti-establishment parties, SPD fielded no mayoral candidates but showed relatively strong results among candidates with law degrees (75%) and medical doctors (60%)²³

Also noteworthy are the results for lawyers, who can be classified as exceptionally successful candidates in only 13% of cases. And especially the results of deputy mayors from the Pirates. Nearly 80% of their deputy mayors received more preferential votes than expected for their positions on the ballot. Pirates candidates were generally the most successful in this metric, with nearly 75% exceeding the expected number of votes. This points to the discipline of their supporters. On opposite side, are the populist parties.

Table 6:
Ratio of successful candidates in selected professions by party affiliation

Party	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
ANO	23/43	12/49	5/8	8/11	8/40	7/12	37/179
AUTO	2/6	1/3	0/5	3/5	1/1	5/7	59/313
KDU-ČSL	9/9	10/10	0/0	2/2	8/8	4/4	46/52
ODS	7/10	13/17	1/2	8/9	12/21	5/8	78/107
Pirates	2/3	17/22	2/3	9/9	9/10	13/15	214/281
SPD	0/0	2/5	6/8	6/10	5/14	1/7	77/299
STAN	53/88	19/25	3/3	4/6	4/15	9/11	130/195
TOP 09	3/3	3/4	2/2	4/6	7/9	5/5	43/53

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

6. Conclusions

The presented study examined mayors' electoral performance in the 2025 Czech parliamentary election, focusing on their ability to secure preferential votes and their overall performance. The findings provide clear answers to selected research questions and contribute to the broader understanding of personalised politics in the Czech Republic.

The analysis confirms that mayors remain a significant source of recruits for national politics. Among the selected professions expected to achieve better results than the average candidate, mayors are the most frequently fielded group. In the last elections to the Chamber of Deputies, they constituted more than 8% of candidates from parliamentary parties. If deputy mayors are included, leaders of Czech municipalities represented 15% of all candidates.

Regarding the first research question, we found that mayors hold a statistically significant electoral advantage, with a 4 pp higher probability of being elected than average candidates. However, their electoral power is not limitless, and mayors may not be as omnipotent as their voters or the political parties themselves often believe. In the 2025 elections, they did not significantly outperform other high-status professions such as doctors (+3 pp) and MPs (+15 pp). The quantile regression model also showed that while mayors consistently improve their ballot positions, they often hit a ceiling where their status cannot overcome the dominance of MPs, and leaders of the candidate lists.

Regarding the second research question, mayors' electoral performance varies significantly across parties and regions. For STAN, mayors and other local politicians represent an integral part of their identity. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of mayors who participated in elections to parliamentary parties are from STAN, and also in the fact that mayors account for 26% of their

candidates. The second party that capitalises on mayors is the ANO movement. However, compared to STAN, it fielded only half as many mayors. Nevertheless, the high number of deputy mayors running for ANO suggests that while the movement values their candidacy, it may face challenges in recruiting incumbent mayors to its ranks.

Other parties fielded far fewer mayors. The entire SPOLU coalition had only 26, and other parties combined had only 9. Especially for anti-establishment parties such as the SPD and AUTO, this highlights a problem that can be broken down into multiple parts. One problem is recruiting local elites. Another is that SPD has been struggling to become part of coalitions across the Czech political system. This also means they were unable to create their own mayors, as they were mostly in opposition at the municipal level. This may change now, when they are part of the government. It would make sense to form coalitions on a similar basis at the city level. In this case, though, it can be assumed that the mayoral post would almost always go to ANO regardless. AUTO is a newly established party and apart from the independent mayors they recruited and the political converts, they have not yet had a chance to establish their own mayors.

The Pirates, while having a small number of mayors, fielded a high number of deputy mayors. This fact relates to the Pirates' ongoing struggle to penetrate the local level (see e.g. Malý, 2024; Maškarinec & Naxera, 2022). On the other hand, it shows that Pirates are becoming more established at the local level, as 22 deputy mayors are comparable to STAN and SPOLU.

The findings further suggest that the electoral impact of mayors reaches a saturation point. In the case of the STAN movement, the high concentration of municipal leaders on the ballot appears to lead to internal cannibalisation of preferential votes. This indicates that while having a mayor on the list is an asset, fielding too many simultaneously may result in the fragmentation of local support. This corresponds with the findings of Dodeigne and Pilet (2021) who argues that intra-party competition in flexible list systems like the Czech one is characterised by concentration of votes on a group of prominent candidates. In the case of STAN, where mayors represent a significant portion of candidates, this may lead to dispersion of support among them.

These findings thus contribute to the debate on the personalisation of politics by suggesting that the 'mayoral bonus'²⁴ is less about the office itself and more about being part of a broader group of trusted professionals who can build connections at the local level. This supports the already established findings regarding the functionality of the friends and neighbours effect at the level of the Czech parliamentary elections (Pileček, 2021; Voda & Pink, 2009). Moreover, this trend, in which voters seek personal credibility regardless of the specific executive office held, persists despite the polarisation in Czech society.

The presented study naturally has its limitations. The most visible is its restriction to a single election term, which prevents tracking the long-term development of mayors' strength in parliamentary elections. It also relies on self-re-

ported occupations on ballot papers, which excludes former mayors whose local influence might still be significant.

Additionally, future research could monitor the length of mayoral mandates and their influence on election results. Which could be possible with the data from the database of Czech political candidates (Linek et al., 2025). Also, a spatial analysis of the size of the home municipality, which directly correlates with the magnitude of the preferential vote gain, could be beneficial.

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Appendix A

Appendix Table A1:
Relative numbers of candidates' occupations in Czech regions

Region	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
Central Bohemian	6%	5%	2%	4%	9%	4%	69%
Hradec Králové	6%	8%	1%	3%	6%	3%	73%
Karlovy Vary	8%	6%	1%	5%	4%	4%	73%
Liberec	10%	9%	0%	1%	6%	2%	73%
Moravian-Silesian	8%	8%	1%	1%	5%	3%	73%
Olomouc	10%	2%	2%	1%	6%	2%	76%
Pardubice	11%	7%	1%	2%	8%	6%	66%
Plzeň	13%	4%	3%	3%	3%	8%	68%
Prague	1%	4%	4%	6%	6%	1%	78%
South Bohemian	6%	8%	2%	5%	7%	5%	67%
South Moravian	8%	7%	1%	1%	4%	3%	75%
Ústí nad Labem	11%	6%	1%	3%	6%	3%	71%
Vysočina	7%	8%	1%	3%	4%	3%	74%
Zlín	13%	9%	0%	2%	6%	2%	68%
Total	8%	7%	2%	3%	6%	3%	72%

Appendix Table A2:
Relative numbers of candidates' occupations by party affiliation

Political party	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
ANO	13%	14%	2%	3%	12%	4%	52%
AUTO	2%	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	92%
KDU-ČSL	11%	12%	0%	2%	9%	5%	61%
ODS	6%	10%	1%	5%	12%	5%	61%
Pirates	1%	6%	1%	3%	3%	4%	82%
SPD	0%	1%	2%	3%	4%	2%	87%
STAN	26%	7%	1%	2%	4%	3%	57%
TOP 09	4%	5%	2%	7%	11%	6%	65%
Total	8%	7%	2%	3%	6%	3%	72%

Appendix B

Table B1 presents the full output of the probit model underlying the average partial effects reported in Table 3 of the main text. Table B2 presents the results of a robustness check using an alternative classification in which professional titles (MUDr., JUDr., teacher) were assigned priority over mayoral status. As discussed in the Data section, the two classifications yield substantively similar results for most categories. The main difference concerns MUDr., where the alternative classification produces a larger estimated effect (+10 pp vs. +3 pp in the alternative), driven by candidates who hold both a medical degree and an MP status and are classified differently across the two specifications.

Appendix Table B1:
Probit model output

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	p-value
Intercept	0.27	0.12	0.02
log(position on the candidate list)	−0.968	0.06	< 0.001
Mayor	0.36	0.16	0.02
Deputy mayor	0.38	0.18	0.04
JUDr.	0.32	0.31	0.3
MUDr.	0.76	0.21	< 0.001
MP	1.09	0.17	< 0.001
Teacher	−0.256	0.37	0.49

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

Appendix Table B2:
Average partial effects: alternative classification
(professional title > mayoral status > MP status)

Profession	Difference in probability of being elected (pp)
JUDr.	2pp
Deputy mayor	4pp
MUDr.	10pp
MP	16pp
Mayor	4pp
Teacher	0pp

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

Appendix C

Appendix Table C1:
Ratio of exceptionally weak candidates²⁵ in selected professions in Czech regions

Region	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
Central Bohemian	4/12	3/11	1/4	1/8	6/19	2/9	71/141
Hradec Králové	2/7	0/10	0/1	0/4	3/7	0/3	23/88
Karlovy Vary	0/7	1/5	0/1	0/4	0/3	0/3	4/61
Liberec	1/10	0/9	0/0	0/1	2/6	0/2	9/74
Moravian-Silesian	3/17	4/18	1/3	0/2	4/11	0/7	48/158
Olomouc	0/13	0/3	1/3	0/2	1/8	0/3	12/103
Pardubice	0/12	1/8	0/1	0/2	5/9	1/7	21/75
Plzeň	2/15	0/5	1/3	0/4	1/3	0/9	16/81
Prague	1/3	2/9	0/8	0/12	2/12	1/3	63/169
South Bohemian	1/8	3/10	1/2	0/7	5/9	0/7	28/89
South Moravian	1/16	5/15	1/3	0/2	3/8	1/6	62/152
Ústí nad Labem	1/17	0/10	1/1	0/4	4/10	0/4	18/110
Vysočina	0/8	1/10	1/1	1/3	3/5	0/4	24/89
Zlín	3/17	1/12	0/0	0/3	1/8	0/2	19/89

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

Appendix table C2:
Ratio of exceptionally successful candidates in selected professions
by party affiliation

Party	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
ANO	8/43	0/49	1/8	3/11	4/40	2/12	8/179
AUTO	0/6	0/3	0/5	2/5	1/1	1/7	11/313
KDU-ČSL	6/9	10/10	0/0	2/2	7/8	4/4	29/52
ODS	5/10	4/17	0/2	5/9	4/21	2/8	49/107
Piráti	1/3	7/22	0/3	8/9	7/10	8/15	137/281
SPD	0/0	1/5	2/8	0/10	3/14	0/7	13/299
STAN	21/88	7/25	0/3	3/6	0/15	5/11	84/195
TOP 09	2/3	¾	1/2	3/6	2/9	3/5	24/53

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

Appendix table B3:
Ratio of exceptionally weak candidates in selected professions by party affiliation

Party	Mayor	Deputy mayor	JUDr.	MUDr.	MP	Teacher	Other
ANO	9/43	14/49	3/8	1/11	26/40	2/12	84/179
AUTO	2/6	1/3	2/5	0/5	0/1	1/7	163/313
KDU-ČSL	0/9	0/10	0/0	0/2	0/8	0/4	0/52
ODS	0/10	0/17	0/2	0/9	3/21	0/8	11/107
Piráti	1/3	3/22	1/3	0/9	0/10	0/15	25/281
SPD	0/0	1/5	2/8	1/10	6/14	1/7	107/299
STAN	7/88	2/25	0/3	0/6	4/15	1/11	26/195
TOP 09	0/3	0/4	0/2	0/6	1/9	0/5	2/53

Source: Own processing based on the data from the Czech statistical office.

Endnotes:

- 1 The full name of the party 'Starostové a nezávislí' can be translated into English as 'Mayors and Independents'. This party consists mostly of mayors of smaller towns and municipalities (Maškarinec, 2020, p. 27).
- 2 One-third of the 33 newly elected STAN MPs were serving mayors at the time. STAN also had a higher number of former mayors on its list of candidates who had already defended their seats in the Chamber of Deputies.
- 3 In the latest poll by the Public Opinion Research Center, 58% of the Czech population trusted them, and they shared the top spot in the trust rankings with the president (CVVM, 2026). Previously, though, they had been in first place on their own for a long time.
- 4 The only exceptions are the European Parliament elections, in which mayors made up only 2% of the candidates in the last elections, perhaps because it is practically impossible to combine the roles of mayor and Member of the European Parliament. The second exception is the local elections themselves, where the influence of political parties is low and has been declining over the long term, as shown, for example, by Kostecký et al. (2024).
- 5 Their research does not directly address mayors. However, a mayor must always be a member of the municipal council, and many of them are also members of the regional assembly.
- 6 A total of 34 mayors were elected, excluding former mayors who listed different occupations on their ballot papers, most commonly, that of a Member of Parliament. Data is drawn from the candidate lists. If a candidate was a mayor but did not list this as their profession, they are not counted as a mayor.
- 7 English equivalents for the names of those parties are: ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens), STAN (Mayors and Independents), Piráti (the Pirate Party), SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy). AUTO is a shortened version of Motoristé sobě and can be transcribed as 'Motorists for Themselves'. SPOLU is a coalition of ODS (Civic Democratic Party), TOP 09 (Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09), KDU-ČSL (Christian and Democratic Union- Czechoslovak People's Party).
- 8 In this context, it is important to note that in both cases the data came from POLLEADER network scholars. The data was collected only for municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants.
- 9 Specifically, 108 out of 200 MPs were re-elected.
- 10 The initiative still has a functioning web domain, zakrouzkujzenu.cz. This could be translated into English as 'vote for a woman'.

- 11 From a European perspective, these are equivalent to NUTS 3.
- 12 SPOLU, as a three-party electoral coalition, had a higher electoral threshold. For a single party, the threshold is at least 5% of the votes. A two-party coalition requires 8%, and a three-party coalition requires 11%. Although the SPD and the Pirates had candidates from other political parties on their candidate lists, these were not coalitions. Therefore, the 5% threshold applied to them.
- 13 In Czech *starosta* or its female equivalent, *starostka*.
- 14 There were a total of 8 such cases of mayors who were MPs and 4 deputy mayors.
- 15 These included 3 mayors and 2 deputy mayors, who were lawyers. Also, 9 mayors and 9 deputy mayors were teachers. Paradoxically, there were no cases of mayors who were doctors in the dataset, but 3 deputy mayors.
- 16 The official English names of the regions (in Czech: *kraj*) have been used. JUDr. = Doctor of law; MUDr. = Medical doctor; MP = Member of Parliament.
- 17 The party names have been left in Czech short forms. The Pirate Party does not have a short form so the term Pirates is used instead.
- 18 This reflects the institutional requirement that a candidate must obtain at least 5% of the total votes cast for their party in a given region to move up the list.
- 19 That is half as many as Karlovy Vary Region and one-twelfth as many as the Central Bohemian Region.
- 20 While Karlovy Vary is a small region with a relatively low number of municipalities (averaging over 2,000 inhabitants), Vysočina has no more than twice as many inhabitants, but approximately five times as many municipalities.
- 21 Candidates who received a higher share of preferential votes than usual candidates in a similar position on the candidate list.
- 22 Candidates who received significantly more preferential votes than would be expected given their position on the candidate list.
- 23 These results are further illustrated in the appendix tables B2 and B3.
- 24 Based on the term used by Balík (2009, p. 214).
- 25 Candidates who received significantly fewer preferential votes than would be expected given their position on the candidate list.

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

Petr Bláha¹

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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