Regional Elections are really Second Order Elections[*]

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Abstract: *Most of the texts dedicated to second-order elections deal with analyses of European elections. Even less important elections, however, have the character of voting against the government. The goal of this study is to point out the role of regional elections in the Czech Republic, and to demonstrate that the concept of second-order elections depends on above all the current phase of the election cycle. The effect of second-orderness can be truly considered only in the phase when the national governing party has reached its lowest popularity.*

Keywords: *regional elections, second-order elections, Czech republic*

Introduction

Arjan H. Schakel and Charlie Jeffery tested the second-order elections effect in the second tier of local government elections in a recently published study (Schakel, Jeffery 2012). Their conclusion is that a "strong second-order effects can be found for only 18 % of the elections (531 out of 2,933 regional elections). The obvious implication is that much regional elections research hitherto has taken a flawed starting

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point. It is characteristic that the flaw consists in a set of expectations that regional elections outcomes should be shaped by a logic of national — first-order — party competition." (Schakel, Jeffery 2012: 20–21). We, however, do not set the prerequisite that all second-order elections (SOE) must present all SOE characteristics; in fact, we do not have such expectations. It is predictable, after all, that carrying out second-order elections at the same time as national elections would significantly influence their outcome. Voting participation would differ radically as well, which by itself has significant importance for the support of political parties.

Aside from the principal elections (parliamentary, or presidential in a presidential system of government) all other elections are usually referred to as second-order. However, as demonstrated by Freire, the position within the election cycle phase matters greatly: only in mid-term we can expect to see governing party or parties popularity drop down to a minimum and a strengthening of the opposition party or parties to take place. Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt have offered the first coherent SOE description by example of the first direct European Parliament (EP) elections of 1979 (Reif and Schmitt 1980: 3–44). In addition to the EP elections, all manner of local elections, regional elections, presidential elections in presidential systems, referendums or the most upper chamber of the parliament elections belong to SOE. Studies, preceding the coherent theoretical framework of both authors, on the one hand, mapped the differences between national (federal) elections and the so called minor elections, e.g. federal elections in the Federal Republic of Germany vs. the Bundestag elections (Kern, Hainsmüller 2006), and the presidential vs. congressional elections in the USA, etc.; or, on the other hand, pointed out the interrelatedness, mainly in timing, of these types of elections (e.g. Campbell 1960, Stimson 1976). All SOEs exhibit a typical character and significance, regardless of what different expression particular authors may use to call them: *Nebenwahlen, élections intermédiaires* (Reif 1984: 245), *untergeordnete*, irrelevant elections (Heath et al. 1999: 391) or minor elections (Reif 1997: 115). Both in the case of the elections in Germany, and in the case of the above mentioned elections in the USA, the authors have found that the governing party (or the party which holds the presidency in the USA) lose support the most at mid-term. Dinkel (1978), Tufte (1975), and Goodhart and Bhansali (1970) have introduced an election cycle theory, according to which the governing parties in certain periods of their government's administration gain different levels of support in minor elections, compared to the support won in national (federal) elections. Concerning the US presidential elections, "the mid-term loss of support was represented as a 'referendum' on the president's performance, partly reflecting poorly fulfilled election campaign promises, partly the effect of synchronization of the economic cycle and elections timing" (Jeffrey, Hough 2001: 77). Angus Campbell, explaining the voting differences between the presidential and congressional elections, used the simile 'surge and decline' to account for the difference

in voter behavior between these two elections (see Marsh 2003). Reif and Schmitt (1980) had based their SOE concept on similar theses as well. They did not consider the direct elections to EP an example of single (European) elections, decided by particular themes, goals, and a campaign, but a conglomerate of nine national elections. Naturally, the form of the current political constellation played a role along with election factors such as programs and campaigns. The vital criterion to differentiate between first-order elections (FOE) and second-order elections (SOE) is above all of greater importance of FOE. It can be stated that voters indeed judge the importance of elections based on what outcomes they can influence. Voters are chiefly interested in the opportunity to participate in national policy (tax policy, social policy, the state of administration, economy and foreign policy etc.), respectively, in the possibility to influence who and in what manner they shall govern and form these policies. "Just like local elections, the European elections are second-order national elections, because executive power is not their essential premise." (Eijk et al. 1996: 150). The opportunity to influence government is also decisive for voter participation, even when applied to local elections which are the closest to citizens, as the voter can see the particular actions of the local administration and practically monitor daily the activity of elected representatives. The officials' work is more tangible and affects the immediate living space of the electorate. Despite of that, voter participation is lower in these kinds of elections than in first-order elections. The reason being, of course, that in parliamentary elections the vote can influence the composition of the government, and consequently the socioeconomic climate in the country.

Following the European elections of 1984, Karlheinz Reif verified the hypotheses of the above mentioned 1980 text. The hypothesis that "there is a systemic relationship between all SOE and FOE results in a political system, based on the status of political parties within the first-order political space of that system, whether they are a part of the government, or the opposition" (Reif 1984: 245) had become the cornerstone of his theory. This way, he helped to raise awareness of the election cycles, which are being analyzed particularly in SOE election studies. Various authors have different understandings of election cycles, yet a common division of the election cycle into three periods emerges: *honeymoon* (a period within 12 months after the elections), *mid-term* (a period between 13 and 36 months after the elections), and *late-term* (from 37 to 48 months after the elections) (Freire 2003: 14). The popularity of the governing parties may survive the waning of voter euphoria and psychological contentment immediately after the elections, but will decline in the following periods (in some cases very rapidly). Particularly the mid-term slump tends to be the worst. Immediately preceding the next national elections, the popularity of governing parties increases again.

Following the second European Parliament elections, Reif clarified his former hypotheses and statements regarding SOE research, i.e. he stated that the governing

party popularity curve influences SOE results in the individual phases of the election cycle (Reif 1984: 247).

Thirteen years later, in 1997, in confrontation with Pippa Norris, Karlheinz Reif clarified the theses of his 1980 and 1984 studies, namely in regards to the course of election cycles: "The parties governing the first-order political arena have a tendency to gain more votes in second-order elections following shortly after FOE than in the FOE themselves. As soon as the FOE-related post-election euphoria passes, however, the governing parties tend to lose in SOE. If we consider the last FOE results (meaning the 1994 EP elections — author's remark), then popularity losses of governing parties are heavier toward the end of their term" (Reif 1997: 117). In some regards he also takes a critical stance toward a text he published with Schmitt in 1980, according to which many authors misunderstand the term "national" in the expression "second-order national elections." "National" underscored that SOEs always "follow the constellation of the dominant political arena, that is the political arena of the first-order" (Ibid). Based on further research, Reif stated that in addition to smaller, new and more radical parties, protest and populist parties are also successful in SOEs.

Regional elections as a government referendum

Therefore it is not unusual to analyze regional elections (regions being called variously provinces, counties, *départements* or *Landkreise*) from the SOE theory viewpoint. In 2008, following the third regional elections in the Czech Republic, when the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS) lost by a landslide, failing to win a single post of a head of regional council, the ODS long remonstrated with the social democrats for dragging national issues into the regional campaign, while there were no competencies to decide such issues on the regional level. Petr Bendl (ODS), a former regional council head for the Central Bohemia Region, hoped that "people will not be misled and duped into believing that regional elections decide competencies belonging to the parliament." Accusations of "deceiving the electorate" were heard, or else claims that "it is not possible to reflect on issues that have nothing to do with these elections." However, a look into the course of regional and European election campaigns of 2004, clearly dominated by the ODS, would reveal that the ODS then behaved in exactly the same manner. For example, Mirek Topolánek (ODS), an opposition leader at that time, kept warning against growing bureaucracy as a threat to freedom, and targeting the government for "liquidation tax policy against thousands of self-employed tradesmen." Half a year before the European elections, he was appealing to the citizens: "These elections will become a referendum about the Czech government and our capability to replace

it witnessed by the electorate. Let us not underestimate the elections!" A little while later the appeal yet intensified: "At last you can tell Špidla [the social democratic party Prime Minister], that enough is enough. We wish you would give him the first yellow card in these elections [which were EP elections], and the second one in the fall elections [which were regional elections]. And after two yellow cards, as anyone knows, follows the red card. He will get that one in the parliamentary elections." The last regional campaign of 2012, in which the opposition Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká sociálně demokratická strana, ČSSD) attacked the right-wing governing party and won as a matter of course, was no different. Government criticism certainly is not the agenda for regional councils, but it provides an effective election campaign weapon to the opposition.

The Czech Republic thus confirms one of the basic rules formulated by Freire. The support of the principal governing party is at a low ebb at mid-term, while the principal opposition party wins the regional elections. Table 1 summarizes all previous results; election support for the ČSSD and the ODS is the determining factor for this study. The election year 2000 was exceptional, because the winning ODS, subject to competition from a right-of-center alliance of four parties called the Quad-Coalition (Čtyřkoalice, 4K), did not gain as dramatic distance from the ČSSD.

Table 1: Regional election results from 2000 to 2012

Party	Election year	Vote (%)	Mandates	Number of regions won
ČSSD	2000	14.7	111	
	2004	14.0	105	
	2008	35.9	280	13
	2012	23.6	205	9
4K/KDU-ČSL[1]	2000	22.9	171	5
	2004	10.7	72	1
	2008	6.7	43	
	2012	5.8	42	
KSČM	2000	21.1	161	1
	2004	19.7	157	
	2008	15.0	114	
	2012	20.4	182	2
ODS	2000	23.8	185	7
	2004	36.3	291	12
	2008	23.6	180	
	2012	12.3	102	1

Party	Election year	Vote (%)	Mandates	Number of regions won
Others	2000	17.5	47	
	2004	19.3	50	
	2008	18.8	58	
	2012	31.3	42	1
TOP 09 [2]	2012	6.6	44	

As I have stated, the position of the regional elections within the first-order election cycle determines the SOE election results. Up to the year 2000, however, Czech political parties had no practical opportunity through a vote to experience that a SOE could become a government referendum. At first, municipal elections had a different character, and their election "menu" was different from national elections. Moreover, political parties were capable of assembling slates only in towns, not in smaller municipalities. The reason lies obviously in the limited membership of Czech political parties. To define oneself through opposition against the government then does not make sense. The first Senate elections were held in 1996, in the honeymoon phase, according to Freire. Taking place approximately five months after the parliamentary elections, these elections were won by the principal governing party, the ODS.

The regional elections campaign of 2000

As we stated above, it is mainly the opposition politicians who incite the voters to settle matters with an unpopular government in regional elections. Communication with the electorate happens through election campaigns which are decentralized, but essentially suffused in the government agenda. Contemporary election campaigns are professionalized, and it is not easy to win recognition with a purely regional program. A retrospective to 2000, when the first regional elections were a big mystery for the individual parties, still busy with defining core political strategies, is interesting. The chief question was whether to conceive the campaign as a municipal elections campaign, or as a parliamentary elections campaign. Whether to address the electorate through regional and local politicians, and a similarly oriented program, or to emphasize the success of the government (or lack thereof). ČSSD, for example, took the second route, emphasizing the existing government successes, despite unfavorable party preference and government popularity polls. Miloš Zeman, former chairman of the ČSSD, noted: "But the first regional elections had, to my surprise, a municipal character, and I wrongly assumed that they would have a national character," (Žantovský, Jüngling 2001: 134). Although political parties at the time tried

to present regional election programs, voters' decisions were largely influenced by the unpopularity of Zeman's government. He has commented on this in one of his later texts: "Originally I have thought that ČSSD will have won the 2000 regional elections for two reasons. The first being that we have put through decentralization and the establishment of regional self-government against the opposition of ODS. The second being that in September 2000 for the first time in a long time ČSSD outstripped ODS in election preferences. I was wrong in considering the regional elections to be analogous to the Chamber of Deputies elections, whereas in reality they were more of an analogy to municipal elections. And municipal elections are, as is commonly known, decided by personalities rather than party programs."[3] The quotation exemplifies that after all these years Miloš Zeman still misunderstands the true significance of second-order national elections. Issues such as decentralization are of no interest to citizens; as voters they decide according to socio-economical issues. The theme of decentralization is not one of them. Moreover, even though the ČSSD did outstrip the ODS in voting preferences right before the elections, a third entity was present, that is the Quad-Coalition. Having finished second, only a little behind the winning ODS, K4's popularity owed much to the ČSSD vs. ODS relationship on the national level. During the parliamentary elections of 1998, the ODS was sharply critical of the ČSSD, but later entered into an agreement enabling the ČSSD to form a minority government.

All subsequent regional elections since have obviously born the characteristics of second-order elections, a fact that has always been amply used by the principal opposition party. Anti-government themes have served later as a powerful mobilization tool, utilized by ODS against ČSSD and vice versa.

Conclusion

Asking whether regional elections are still second-order elections, the authors have reached the following conclusions:

> "1. Regional elections where there is no (potential) link between regional vote and national government formation (1,231 of the 2,933 elections) do not conform to second-order expectations.
>
> 2. Moreover, regional elections which are held simultaneously with national elections (another 349 elections) do not conform to second-order expectations.
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> 3. Of the remaining 1,199 elections (41% of the full dataset), second-order effects are more apparent for national government parties in regions with weak regional authority than in stronger regions, so identifying a further 623 elections as not conforming with SOE expectations.

4. Of the remaining 576 elections, second-orderness is also limited by the presence of NSWPs which reduces the number of elections further by 45 leaving a total of 531 elections (in 7 countries and 30 regions) where we can find clear SOE effects"

<div align="right">(Schakel, Jeffery 2012: 19)</div>

The Czech Republic is among the countries which have confirmed the SOE effect without a doubt. Considering the number of monitored elections, the research is formidable. Limiting the selection only to mid-term elections would, however, lead to slightly different conclusions. The Czech Republic, of course, posits the question to what extent the regional elections are indeed still regional, and to what extent they have become national. This, however, would be a subject for another study.

Notes

[1] In 2000, the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová, KDU-ČSL) ran in coalition with the liberal Freedom Union (Unie svobody).

[2] TOP 09, originated by politicians splitting off KDU-ČSL, was a governing party after the 2010 elections.

[3] ZEMAN, Miloš: *What would benefit social democracy today.* http://www.novinky.cz/04/41/94.html (12. 3. 2005)

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