

Stanislav Balík, Petr Gongala, Kamil Gregor:
Twenty Years of Local Elections in the Czech Republic

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Reviewed by Roman Folwarczny

The Czech Republic, or rather the Czechoslovak Republic, saw the final end of its local government on 17 May 1954.¹ Given its historical context, it was another logical step on the way towards suppressing a democratic form of government. These events caused, among other things, people to resort to submissive and passive positions towards the strongly hierarchized state order, whose power centre was paradoxically outside the state's borders.

The years 1989 to 1990, and especially the first free elections to legislative bodies, represented a partial liberation from the yoke of an undemocratic re-

gime but it is essential to ask whether the change in the systemic parameters was parallel with a change in the behaviour of society. A fully intuitive observation leads to a sceptical answer to this question. The ability of citizens to interfere with and influence the public space is what distinguishes, however, democratic regimes from other types.² Where else to start with political research than with the people on its lowest levels — in local politics?

This book written by three scholars from Brno and entitled *Twenty Years of Local Elections in the Czech Republic* focuses — as the title suggests — on the

¹ Act No. 13/1954 Coll., on National Committees.

² There are obviously several ways to define democracy or non-democracy and it is almost impossible to put one approach above others without completely eliminating a normative assessment.

issue of local elections during the Czech Republic's history as an independent state. The introduction introduces us to an approach that permeates the entire text. It is a quantitative approach; "... with the complete data sets (...) using advanced research techniques (the authors) try to provide insight about the entire setting of local politics..." (p. 5). The authors mention some interpretation limitations that are inseparable from an analysis of aggregate data. This shortcoming is not further explained, however, and as the book is also written for the general public, it would be useful to mention at least some of its possible problems (such as the relatively common problem of false correlation). They also promise to use new methods and techniques not yet applied by Czech political science to local politics (p. 7).

The book is divided into eight chapters, which can be read independently. Readers can choose to study only the topic relevant to their needs without the need to read the entire text.

The sub-chapter *1.4 Long-term trends*, which the authors rightly begin by emphasizing the need for diachronic comparison, can be considered an appropriate introduction to the topic of local politics. They gradually present the data relevant to the electoral turnout from 1994 to 2014, where two trends are apparent: (1) the decline in electoral

turnout by almost 20 % during this period across all groups of municipality sizes and (2) the break in the non-linear decline of electoral turnout in the municipality size of 3 hundred — 10 thousand inhabitants.

Another observable trend in local politics is the independence phenomenon: "Since 1990, both individual independent candidates and their associations can run for mandates" (p. 12). The real world teaches us that these candidates are not common in the smallest municipalities.³ The situation is diametrically different with the candidacy of independent candidates' associations. Here the legislation requires the support of a certain number of eligible voters in order to allow such an association to stand for election. With a slight overstatement, one could argue that this condition somewhat deforms political competition, or supports party politics, because in municipalities with "...over 14,300 inhabitants, it is easier to establish a political party" (p. 13). A compromise are the so-called "independent parties" (political parties) *with nationwide activities, whose purpose is only to provide a service to local independents* (p. 13).

The *Introduction* is followed by the following chapters: 2. *Stability of candidates and party affiliation on candidate lists and in local government*; 3. *Preferential voting*; 4. *The effects of the electoral*

³ The authors claim that it actually becomes a majority system in a multi-member constituency. The obvious condition is that all candidates accept this type of candidature.

system; 5. *Local councils from the point of coalition theory*; 6. *Mayors*; 7. *Geography of the 2014 local elections* and 8. *Conclusion — what did the 2014 election bring?*

The strength of the publication lies in the extensive data set used for the analyses. The authors also managed to aptly process the collected data. The complementary comments on the presented data, that is explaining and putting the data in their context, are also appropriate. One example is the second chapter, which focuses on the so-called defectors (p. 30–33); we can see that there is a substantial difference between the ratios of defectors in big cities when compared with smaller municipalities; it is hardly surprising that bigger cities have less “loyalty”.

Part of the political defection reflects developments on the top political levels, that is, mergers and breakdowns of parliamentary political parties: “*For example, many former ODS candidates were nominated by the newly established Union of Freedom in 1998 (...) some KDU-ČSL candidates defected to TOP 09 or STAN*” (p. 32). Table 2.9 shows a possibly interesting fact about the ratio of defectors to the ANO party; 14 % of the ANO candidates in the 2014 local government election were nominated in the previous election by ODS, 7 % by VV, and 6 % by TOP 09. Unfortunately the data about the candidates nominated by ČSSD are missing.

Other than mergers and breakdowns of parties, defections also reflect the loss in a party’s popularity on the nationwide level (p. 36).

If one wishes to investigate the topic of local elections from the point of analytical political science, the most interesting chapters would in all probability be: 4. *The effects of the electoral system* and 7. *The geography of local elections*. The fact that the electoral system is a variable affecting the final election results and voting behaviour is quite well known in political science. The issue of the electoral system used for local elections is even more controversial in the Czech Republic because it is quite complex. The authors discuss in the chapter the *illusion of personalised voting* (sub-chapter 4.1), where they refer to the findings presented by Tomáš Lebeda regarding the possibility of a situation when a candidate receives a mandate despite receiving the lowest number of votes on the list.

Table 4.2 (p. 63), which shows the share of constituencies where the higher share of votes for a candidate did not lead to his/her election, is also of interest. The increase in the share can be observed in constituencies with a higher number of voters, when, for example, up to 36 % of constituencies with 2001–5000 voters did not elect a candidate with a higher share of votes. One effect of this “illusion” of preferential voting is the fragmentation of local government, when more entities with a small number of mandates enter the local government (p. 64). The authors claim that this effect can be most often observed in middle-sized municipalities, where the effort to give a preferential vote dramatically changes the result of the election (p. 67). A different situation takes place in the

largest municipalities, where the voting resembles national election. When investigating elections in the smallest municipalities, in contrast, where one finds the lowest number of candidates or even lists with a single candidate, it is apparent that preferential voting is dramatically limited in these cases, or actually does not exist.

The data and findings in this chapter can be useful for a debate about possibly changing the current system of local government elections.

Chapter 7 is extremely important — *The geography of local elections*. The authors visualise the information related to the last local elections (such as voter turnout, local government fragmentation, etc.), which they present in cartograms. Although they note in the chapter's introduction that the interpretation might be biased (large units on the map might not necessarily imply a tangible importance in reality), it is true that one can uncover certain relationships better when they are presented in figures. It is regretful, however, that the maps in the book are small and only black and white. If one can cope with this shortcoming, the maps can help us understand local politics somewhat better.

The authors state in the chapter's conclusion that most of the presented variables carry a clear pattern of spatial differentiation (p. 122), although the known and established patterns of voting

behaviour have been confirmed, such as: a high election gain for leftist parties, especially KSČM, in the Ústí nad Labem Region. In contrast, it is potentially useful to determine that independent candidates have a lower, or parliamentary parties a higher (especially KDU-ČSL), representation in Moravia.

Somewhat more interesting might be the information that they found a similarity in the electoral support for KSČM, ČSSD and ODS, on the one hand, and TOP 09 and ANO on the other. The results for TOP 09 and ANO are similar in the sense that despite different electorates, both parties tried to succeed in big cities (p. 122). This information could be considered an indicator that these young political parties have not become established as yet. The final Chapter 8 brings together the preceding information but only focuses on the 2014 election.

I would evaluate the book as a well done project, which thanks to the availability of a large number of data and the possibility of computer processing provides interesting information, which could be used not only in the area of local politics, but beyond. The authors attempt to keep the descriptions under the tables and graphs to a minimum, yet the reader comes across passages which are purely descriptive. All in all, I recommend it for reading, and not only to an academic audience.