

Preferential Votes in Municipal Elections and the Possibility of their Analytical Use in the Study of Voting Behaviour

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Abstract: *The article deals with the appointment of municipal councils in the Czech Republic as one of the key elements of endogenous regional development. The electoral system applied in municipal elections has a number of internal elements that lead to a relatively high degree of disproportionality between votes expressing the interests of voters and the elected representative body, and they also prevent easy detection of the nature of the voting behaviour of the electorate. One of the few ways to assess electoral behaviour is to analyse the variance of electoral votes needed in order to understand how the vote takes place. In the case of the administrative district of Vodňany, the purpose is to find out what the prevailing method of voting is in the electoral behaviour, and how important are the deformation effects of the applied electoral system in comparison with the interests of the voters.*

Key words: Electoral System · Municipal Board · Municipal Elections · Electoral Behavior · Preferential Vote · Vodňany

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1 Introduction

The nature of staffing representative bodies at sub-national levels of political decision-making can certainly be considered one of the key factors of regional development. In this context, it makes sense to pay attention to the basic method of the appointment of the basic elected local government bodies, not only in terms of the voting behaviour of the electorate, but also of the voting - electoral system mechanism itself.

In the past, several works were devoted to the issue of the voting behaviour of the electorate in local elections in the Czech political environment. Most of them were based on an analysis of preferential votes received by individual candidates. One way to understand the reasons for the electoral decision is to study the inclination of voters toward candidates based on their personal characteristics. Voting behaviour is to a certain extent influenced (in particular by voters with a low level of awareness) by elementary information regarding the personal characteristics of the candidates. These may serve voters as helpful criteria for their electoral decisions. The candidacy of the candidate for a political party plays a role in municipal elections in the Czech Republic (Bernard 2012). In small towns (up to three thousand inhabitants), candidates seeking a mandate from an independent list of candidates have the greatest chance to be elected. In large cities (more than 50,000 inhabitants), the most successful candidates are those of parliamentary parties. In the middle category of municipalities, joint independent list of candidates are still the most successful, but only slightly more so than the candidates from the lists of political parties. Simply put, during municipal council elections the importance of candidates of political parties is increasing with the growth of the municipality, and the importance of independent candidates running on joint independent lists is increasing with a decrease in the size of the municipality (Bernard 2012).

In addition to party affiliation, Bernard also focused in the characteristics of gender, age, incumbency and political affiliation. The characteristics of gender, age and political affiliation (whether a candidate is or is not a member of a political party) do not play an essential role in voters' decisions; the remaining characteristics are significant in this regard. A greater inclination of voters to support electoral candidates who obtained university degrees was demonstrated. An important criterion for electoral decision-making is incumbency². Electing a candidate from unelectable section of the candidate sheets³ is not very likely, which also applies for various size categories of

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² The concept of incumbency is usually used in connection with the so-called incumbency effect. This means advantages for candidates elected in the past to a political congregation in filling positions on candidate lists.

³ A unelectable section of a candidate sheet means a position on the sheet that does not lead to a mandate being obtained by a candidate, unless it is moved to the higher levels of the list.

municipalities. Adversely, it applies that the previous holding of political office will likely lead to a mandate being obtained (Bernard 2012). Nevertheless, the importance of preferential votes cannot be completely ignored. In addition to contributing to the re-election of former representatives, preferential votes also have staffed-stabilizing effects. They often contribute to the re-election of candidates who were previously members of the municipal council and are now seeking a representative mandate from an unelectable section of the list (Šedo 2009; Balík 2009; Balík 2012). Preferential votes for candidates of parties were also used in analytical works focused on the estimation of the used voting technique in municipal elections. It turned out that in small municipalities there is a predominant tendency to support more candidates from different lists, whereas in larger municipalities the constituency prefers to elect entire lists of parties (Kopřiva 2012).

However, the conclusions of the work, which are based on an analysis of the results of municipal elections built on preferential votes, suffer from a certain degree of distortion. This stems from the nature of the applied electoral system. The election system which is used to establish municipal councils in the Czech Republic is characterized by considerable freedom with which voters can vote for candidates. During an election, an open list of candidates allows voters to prioritize candidates from different lists within the limit of mandates distributed in the constituency, or to support one list of a candidate party with all of the available votes. A third possibility is the possibility to combine the two previous alternatives. In such a case voters can often use some of the votes for candidates from several lists of candidates, and then use the remaining votes to support one party list of candidates. When looking at the election results, however, it is not clear how many votes obtained by a candidate can be considered as “direct,” how many votes meant that he/she was a preferred candidate and how many they earned as a member of the list of candidates (party support).

There are not many works devoted to the municipal electoral system and its effects in the Czech Republic. In the past, Outlý (2003) devoted work to the normative development of the election system, and characteristics of the specificity of the electoral system were the result of the work of Lebeda. The municipal system is intrinsically complex and difficult to understand from the perspective of voters. The system leads to a high degree of disproportionality, in particular in the case of transformation of votes into mandates for individual candidates. The system often favours candidates with little voter support, and earning the largest number of electoral votes may not lead to acquiring a mandate. In addition, this controversy is not known to voters (Lebeda 2009). As a result, it is difficult to draw conclusions about voting behaviour when analysing mandates obtained by the candidates of different lists of political entities.

One of the few analytical possibilities given by work with preferential votes in local elections - and on its basis, to be able to relevantly judge the nature of voting behaviour - comes from the description of the method of voting. As mentioned above, the voter has the opportunity to vote in three ways. Of course, the nature of voting behaviour cannot be deduced from the very manner in which elections take place. From the comparison of the voting method in the context of the type of elected bodies, we can after all accept some indicative conclusions. Understanding voting methods in the context of the elected party can be a starting point for further analytical work.

2 Methods

This article aims to assess the applicability of preferential votes for candidates who are running for political mandates in municipal council elections in the Czech Republic when describing voting methods. The work is created based on data from the Czech Statistical Office. Specifically, it relates to election results in the municipal elections in 2014 (mainly in the form of preferential votes for candidates) in the municipalities of the administrative district of Vodňany (available at www.volby.cz). The data are processed analytically via simple statistical methods (coefficient of variation), and are subsequently mutually compared.

The municipalities of the administrative district of Vodňany were chosen deliberately. This is a set of municipalities that are intrinsically heterogeneous in terms of the size of individual elements. The administrative district Vodňany is located in the South Bohemian Region in the District of Strakonice. The administrative district has a total of 16 municipalities.

3 Analytical part

As stated above according to Lebeda, the majority of voters are not able to imagine the consequences of the effects of the municipal electoral system, and in the context of elections, they do not subordinate election strategy to the electoral system. It can thus be considered that the electorate prefers candidates from lists with the hope that the relevant vote

will increase the likelihood of their election. This of course applies provided that the voter uses preferential votes and selects different candidates from different lists of candidates within elections. Voters, however, can also prioritize the entire party list, but the voting method cannot be read from the election results. It is not clear from the total number of votes that a candidate won which of them stem from the support of a party, and those in which the candidate was preferred as an individual. However, the predominant technique of the election can be indirectly derived from the results. If there is significant variance of preferential votes of the candidates in comparison with the average votes per candidate on the electoral lists, it is clear that the electorate increasingly used of preferential votes in the selection of the relevant party. In comparison with this, it is also clear that a small variance of the number preferential votes for individual candidates compared to the average is caused by increased support for the party as a whole.

If voters tend to support the entire party list, they do not consider what personnel representation the party will have in the elected ward. From the voter's point of view, the decisive factor is the relative size of party. Under such circumstances, the normatively-grounded effects of the electoral system are not a problem for voters. However, if the voter selects candidates from different lists and combines them, they expect that preferential votes will be a criterion for selecting representatives. In this case, the election system may somewhat transform the interests of the voter. The electoral system is set up so that the mandates for the party are not primarily distributed to candidates according to the number of preferential votes, but rather according to the order on the list. In order to be able to move to an electable spot on a list, it is necessary that the candidate gains at least 10% more of the vote from the unelectable spot compared to the average for one candidate on the list.

For municipal elections, which took place in the municipalities of the administrative district of Vodňany in 2014, the rates of use of preferential votes can be derived from the calculation of the coefficients of variation of preferential votes for individual candidates and parties. Their value is displayed in Table 1a, 1b.

Table 1a Coefficient of variation – elections to local council 2014

Bavorov	ČSSD	KSČM	Sdružení Bavorov	SNK Evr. Demokraté
	5	3	5	2
Coefficient of variation	0.23	0.44	0.2	0.38
Bílsko	Pro Bílsko			
	7			
Coefficient of variation	0.24			
Budyně	SNK Budyně			
	5			
Coefficient of variation	0.38			
Čičenice	Nezávislí Čičenice			
	7			
Coefficient of variation	0.37			
Drahonice	SNK			
	9			
Coefficient of variation	0.08			
Hájek - can not calculate coefficients of variation of reasons candidacy only independent candidates				
6 candidates (independent), allocate 5 seats				
Chelčice - can not calculate coefficients of variation of reasons candidacy only independent candidates				
14 candidates (independent), allocate 7 seats				
Krajníčko - can not calculate coefficients of variation of reasons candidacy only independent candidates				
10 candidates (independent), allocate 7 seats				
Krašovice	KDU-ČSL			
	7			
Coefficient of variation	0.27			

Source: Own calculation based on electoral data of the Czech Statistical Office

Table 1b Coefficient of variation – elections to local council 2014

Libějovice	Libějovice 1	Libějovice 2					
	5	2					
Coefficient of variation	0.24	0.22					
Měky nec - can not calculate coefficients of variation of reasons candidacy only independent candidates							
6 candidates (independent), allocate 5 seats							
Pivkovice	Nezávislí						
	7						
Coefficient of variation	0.41						
Pohorovice	SNK Pohorovice						
	7						
Coefficient of variation	0.28						
Skočice	KDU-ČSL	Lidmovice					
	5	2					
Coefficient of variation	0.4	0.3					
Stožice	SNK 1	SNK 2	SNK 3	SNK Stožice			
	4	2	1	2			
Coefficient of variation	0.51	0.85	0.86	0.14			
Truskovice	Strana za zkrášlení obce						
	7						
Coefficient of variation	0.38						
Vodňany	ČSSD	KSČM	ODS	SNK 1	SNK 2	Vodňany pro změnu	Vodňany 2022
	1	1	2	8	1	4	4
Coefficient of variation	0.38	0.23	0.11	0.09	0.46	0.09	0.17

Source: Own calculation based on electoral data of the Czech Statistical Office

The values of coefficients of variation up to 0.2 show a low rate of dispersal of preferential votes for individual candidates compared to the average value of votes per candidate on the list. In the municipalities of the administrative district Vodňany, 27 political entities competed for electoral votes with more candidates on the list. A low value of the coefficient of variation (up to 0.2 inclusive) was found in five candidate lists. It is thus clear that the electoral support of most political entities is mainly based on selecting candidates from different lists and combining them. An exception are the five mentioned lists, where it is very likely that the party received the majority of the votes thanks to the support of the entire party list.

If the coefficient of variation is higher than 0.2, this usually shows that the amount of preferential votes for the best candidate is more than double compared with the least successful candidate. Support of the party ballot clearly arises from less than half by the vote for the entire party list. Yet there may be more voters marking different candidates of parties, as only a few give preferential votes to the party.

For parties for which the calculated coefficient of variation from preferential votes for its candidates reached values higher than 0.3, there can be no doubt that the greater part of the election acquisition of the party comes from voters selecting candidates from different lists and combining them. In the overall view of election results according to the number of preferential votes for candidates, it is possible to definitively state that the election outcome for a party is primarily determined by support for its individual candidates, and not the entire party lists.

Yet the question remains what the relationship is between the form of voting voters in view of the nature of the elected political entities and the political environment. Of the five monitored municipalities in which ran more than one

political entity list (single candidate lists are not taken into account), it applies in four cases that the party with the largest electoral support has the least amount of scattered preferential votes relative to the average value. Yet it is not possible to see from the results of coefficients of variation that the in municipalities with the most pluralistic political environment (at least judging by the number of running parties) the most successful running parties achieved the lowest values of coefficients of variation. From the municipalities in the sample in which at least four electoral parties ran, the winning political entity achieves a low coefficient of variation values only in one case. This is the largest municipality in the sample: Vodňany. In this case, low or average values of coefficient of variation are also achieved by other parties that were successful in the elections and won at least one political mandate. Yet this is not easy to understand. This is a municipality that in terms of the size of its population (less than seven thousand), can be perceived, under Czech conditions as moderately-large. For municipalities of this size, it can be expected that some of the electorate does not consistently follow the local political process, does not know most of the candidates, and, during elections, decisions are made on the basis of knowledge of the political entity, not the candidates. In their voting behaviour they tend to support the entire list of the political party. A relevant conclusion, however, can be formed only on the basis of studying a larger number of medium-sized and large cities in the Czech Republic. All other municipalities, including those where at least four electoral bodies ran (Bavorov, Stožice) can be considered so small that the vast majority of the electorate knows the local political environment, and in the election they usually select candidates rather than supporting the entire political party list. For electoral bodies for which the coefficient of variation value was calculated at a low level (0.2), we only see two such cases in the small municipalities of the administrative district Vodňany - one in a municipality where only a single entity ran with a number of candidates equal to the number of council members, and in view of the logic of the electoral system, it makes no sense to prefer candidates.

The above can be summarized that in the municipalities of the administrative district of Vodňany, the majority of voters vote through preferential votes for selected candidates from different lists of running political parties. The basic question remains whether their vote is reflected in the composition of the councils of the municipalities. As mentioned above, the electoral system applied in selecting municipal councils in the Czech Republic has considerably reductive effects in relation to candidates from the lower levels of candidate lists. Candidates for elective positions are favoured in comparison to them in that they obtain the mandates given to a party in the event that some of the candidates in an unelectable spot do not obtain at least ten percent more votes than the average number of votes per candidate on the list. By analysing the distribution of mandates to candidates of various political parties in the municipalities of the administrative district Vodňany, we can see that a significant majority of the elected representatives received a mandate from the electable spots on the lists. Of the 27 monitored entities, 23 of them achieved only minor shifts on the list of candidates, or there were no shifts at all. This number is significant, given the proven fact that the electorate in these municipalities in most cases tends to prefer candidates at the expense of electoral support for entire party lists. On the basis of this fact, it can be concluded that there is a very high level of disproportionality in the municipal electoral system. A detailed analytical perspective also shows that most of the elected candidates not only come from the top spots of candidate lists, but also that in most cases they are former, and thus re-elected candidates – i.e. the so-called incumbency effect. On the basis of these results, we can conclude that the composition of the municipal councils is not the result of mere wishes and the voting behaviour of the electorate. In this respect, nomination meeting of party organizations, during which their lists of candidates are compiled, play an important - perhaps the most important - role.

4 Conclusions

The municipal electoral system has reductive effects in the Czech Republic. It favours candidates who run from electable spots on lists, compared to candidates from unelectable spots, despite the fact that it gives voters relatively significant freedom in electing candidates. A voter has (among other things), the possibility of giving preferential votes to individual candidates, as many as there are mandates distributed in the relevant constituency. The analysis of preferential votes of the municipalities of the administrative district of Vodňany shows that the majority of voters use preferential votes. In the file monitored municipalities, we cannot find many running political parties for which it would be possible to assume that their electoral support arises primarily on the basis of support of the entire party list. Those who this concerns run in large municipality in the monitored set - Vodňany. Although in municipal elections the preferences candidates are expanded through voting, the elected councillors usually receive their mandate due to their position on the electable spot on the party candidate lists.

It appears that working with preferential votes can be useful, despite certain limitations that stem from the lack of information on how particular voters vote. Based on the work with preferential votes, we can assess the manner in

which voters vote for the given entities in the majority of cases. This knowledge can provide information about the impact of, for example, the size of the municipality or nature of the local political environment on voting behaviour. The conclusions acquired from analysing preferential votes in the municipalities of the administrative district Vodňany must of course be received with some caution. This represents a relatively small number of municipalities, which are also located in the same area of the Czech Republic. An analysis of a representative sample of Czech municipalities may, however, provide valuable insights about the voting behaviour of the electorate in the local council elections.

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