

# **Electoral preferences, How to understand them correctly<sup>1</sup>**

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Researches of election preferences are probably the most monitored products of agencies for public opinion research. The information, which returns via media back to the public, not only describes social reality, but sometimes also co-creates this reality. Results of the researches as such can affect public attitudes. For this reason, among others, we should understand what information the researches of election preferences provide and how to read them correctly. These researches differ in their aims, methods and timing. The following article tries to provide at least a rough outline of all these dimensions.<sup>2</sup>

## **Continuous survey of party preferences**

There are three long-term programmes of regular survey of party preferences executed in the Czech Republic. They are prepared by CVVM<sup>3</sup>, STEM and Factum Invenio (until recently TNS Factum<sup>4</sup>) agencies. All three programmes are based on organization of omnibus surveys<sup>5</sup>, which regularly include a module of questions about elections. The basic output of these surveys is presented in the form of press reports. This practice corresponds to the common situation elsewhere in the world. The Czech researches differ from most of the others by providing their output for free or for a minimum fee. The CVVM programme is financed from the state budget; commercial organizations STEM and Factum Invenio use the advantage of advertisement related to publishing their results in the media.

As far as time dimension is concerned, the CVVM programme is the oldest and it has been providing the results suitable for trend studies for the longest time. It has been running since 1990. The TRENDY research project organized by STEM agency has been executed since 1991. Factum Invenio continuous research of preferences is the youngest one. It has

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on an essay [Lebeda, Krejčí, Leontiyeva, 2004].

<sup>2</sup> The problem is analysed in more detail in a monograph [Krejčí 2004].

<sup>3</sup> Before it was transferred from the Czech statistical office under the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (1.1.2001), the agency was called IVVM (Institute for Public Opinion Research).

<sup>4</sup> Since June 2004, after the change of proprietary relations, the TNS Factum company is renamed to Factum Invenio. The original name of the company was Factum non-fabula and later Sofres Factum.

<sup>5</sup> Omnibus surveys join different survey issues and agencies usually offer space for placing module of questions from various commissioners that concern very different themes.

been regularly included in the omnibus of this agency since 1994. The surveys differ in their periodicity. CVVM research was designed and executed from the beginning as a programme of regular monthly researches. The number of executed researches per year oscillates between 10 and 12. Frequency of STEM and TNS Factum researches of preferences has changed in time. The original surveys were also executed monthly, but currently STEM executes the omnibus research every 14 days and Factum Invenio every week. Questions concerning party preferences can be published in weekly and biweekly periods.

Continuous researches serve for up-to-date media news programmes, analyses of trends in the development of support of individual political subjects, deeper analyses of political attitudes and analyses of relations between political and other opinions. A lot of the data are publicly accessible and serve as a source for secondary analyses in the area of academic research and for deeper synoptic analyses prepared by analysts from the agencies for public opinion research. The data from these researches are also used for international comparative projects. They belong among important and exploited sources of social information about our society.

### **Pre-election polls**

The demand for information based on party preferences surveys increases in time of elections, when the number of executed surveys significantly increases. The character of these surveys can be quite diverse.

Both one time and continuous surveys are commissioned for the use of up-to-date pre-election news programmes. The number and extent of these surveys increase with each elections. There are also projects with frequently repeated, even quotidian surveys, and projects focused on results in individual regions. Simple comparisons with the election results and complex analyses point out [see Lebeda 2004] that the reliability of their outputs fluctuates and is usually rather low. The outputs are usually used in the latest news programmes without previous complex analysis; they quickly become outdated and they are replaced by the latest data. These surveys are executed by agencies that have been dealing with preferences systematically and for a long time (STEM, TNS Factum, SC&C), by renowned agencies that focus on this issue less frequently (for example Median, Tambor, GfK, SC&C and others) and by various unfamiliar research initiatives that often lack proper professional background.

Pre-election survey receives a lot of attention in the academic sphere, especially in political science and sociology. Electoral preferences present a regular part of academic researches, because political attitudes are relevant in the study of various themes. The aim of scientific research is not fast compilation and use of information [see for example Crespi 1980], but a research of trends and relationships.

### **Pre-election exit-polls**

*Exit-poll* is an anonymous questioning of respondents, who are systematically selected immediately after leaving the poll stations. This method presents one of the types of elections prognosis. Unlike pre-election surveys it effectively solves the problem of “undecided” voters.

The subjects of *exit-polls* are adults, who applied their civil rights and participated in the elections. Like every quantitative survey, this method attempts to achieve maximum representative rate of the selected sample of respondents. Reliability of the outputs is ensured by selecting representative inquiry places, relying on experience from previous elections and taking other surveys into consideration, as well as by knowledge of social and political characteristics of individual localities and by sufficient size of the inquired sample of voters. Respondents are usually selected systematically with random beginning.<sup>6</sup> The interval or “step” in the selection of respondents, who are leaving the voting rooms, is determined beforehand on the basis of approximate calculations. Usually, different intervals of questioning are set for town districts and villages as well as for morning and afternoon hours.

The respondent usually fills in an anonymous questionnaire. The attempt to bring the survey closer to the actual elections can lead to a situation, when the respondents throw a filled in ballot into an imitation of a ballot box. The questionnaire itself is usually not very long. Its form ensures that its completion is not complicated and does not take too long. The pre-election survey usually uses closed questions. To make the answering of questions easier, the respondents are presented cards containing possible answers. The demographic part of the questionnaire usually contains questions related to respondents’ age, sex, education, religion and job. The voters’ answers enable the researchers to determine the demographic profile of

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<sup>6</sup> In the instructions for the inquirer we can find for example the following instruction: “Choose the first respondent that you like, count off another six respondents, who leave the voting room and inquire the tenth respondent. “

the sympathizers of individual parties or candidates, monitor “the shift of votes” from past elections as well as election motivation.

The data collected during the pre-election survey are often weighed again in order to achieve higher quality. The scales may be constructed by confronting the result of previous exit polls or other surveys with the real outcomes of the elections. They use statistical data about real demographic, social and political characteristics of the inhabitants from selected localities or from the whole country. The method of calculating scales and coefficients is far from universal and it is usually a closely observed “know-how” of the research teams.

Even though the data is collected during the day (or days) of elections, in many countries it cannot be published before the end of elections. The reason for this is a belief that publishing of the result could significantly affect the voters, who have not voted yet. The extent of this effect is disputed.

The main goal of the Czech *exit polls* is to meet the demands of the media for their election news programmes: to provide the most precise election result as soon as possible in a form of a comprehensible table, to generate data about the situation in the future parliament and to find out more information about the voters and the motives of their decisions. The precise prediction is obviously important especially in the given moment of the election news programme, but other information from the research presents an important source for further elections analysis. Apart from that, the exit poll becomes a valuable source of information, which is otherwise not accessible in such an extent and quality. It provides very precise socio-demographic profile of the voters, who participated in the elections, which can be quite different from the profile of the entire grown-up population. It also provides very detailed information about socio-demographic profile of the voters of individual parties etc.

The answers from the inquiry are usually processed directly in the television studio. As soon as the law allows it, the “elections prognosis” appears on the screens. It is fully based on the *exit-poll* data, but not on all of them. The inquirers gradually telephone or send the results to the studio, but the first prognosis is published right after the closing of the poll stations. The latest data are therefore not processed yet. The prognosis is gradually specified: first by incorporating the remaining data from the survey and later by taking onto account the preliminary election results. From this moment, we talk about “election prognosis.”

Exit Polls are common in most democratic countries. In the Czech Republic they have been executed during all elections to the Lower Chamber of the Parliament since 1990. The

first Exit Poll was organized in 1990 by Gallup international organization. In 1992 this survey was organised for the Czechoslovak television by a consortium of German company INFAS and Czech agencies IVVM and Factum-non Fabula. In 1996 two exit polls were executed. The survey for the Czech television was prepared by the Austrian IFES institute and by the Czech SC&C agency; for Nova it was prepared by German INFAS, which was assisted by Sofres-Factum. In 1998 it was similar. Exit Polls for the Czech Television were organized by IFES and SC&C and for Nova by Sofres-Factum agency. In the last elections to the lower chamber of the Parliament in 2002 only one Exit Poll was executed. It was prepared for the Czech television by SC&C agency. Two years later, the same agency executed the Exit Poll in the first European elections for the Czech Television.

### **Products presenting survey results**

The surveys differ not only in their timing and character, but also in their outputs. Even a simple table indicating frequency of answers to the question, who the respondents would choose, can include either absentees from elections, undecided voters and advocates of the subjects that do not stand as candidates and describe the present state concerning the support of individual political subjects and actual attitudes of the electorate (including the extent of irresolution and willingness of people to go to the polls), or it can take into consideration only support of the candidate subjects in an attempt to illustrate the future outcome of the elections.

Unfortunately, the users of the survey results, including the authors of media news, often fail to distinguish between various types of preferences and they cause significant misinterpretations. For this reason, the Association of Agencies for the Market Survey (SIMAR) initiated an agreement of three Czech producers of continuous survey of preferences [see SIMAR 2001], which established a unified terminology.

**Party preferences** inform us about the way the entire grown up population *declares* their decision in potential elections. The basis (100%) is formed by answers of all adult respondents in the research, who are eligible voters. Apart from specific answers, which indicate particular parties, we also find answers “I don’t know who I would vote for”, “I wouldn’t participate in the elections,” etc. Party preferences attempt to provide a picture of the entire grown-up society’s attitude to elections, which is definitely not identical with the group of the real voters, e.g. grown-up citizens, who ultimately participate in the elections. This permanently decreasing group of actual voters will always differ from the society as a

whole. It is practically impossible to detect the definitive stand of the “undecided voters” as far as party preferences. The same holds true for the potential extent of absence from elections of those respondents, who declared their participation. The table of party preferences provides some important information about the attitudes of the electorate. However, they definitely do not present a prognosis of elections results.

Method of inquiring about election preferences illustrated by a sample of questions used by CVVM:

1) *“Imagine that the elections to the Lower Chamber of the Parliament would take place next week. Would you participate?”* The respondents answer the question on the basis of a range of five answers. *“Definitely yes, rather yes, rather not, definitely not or you don’t know?”* Another question follows:

2) *“If you went to the elections, which party would you vote for?”* This “open” question does not contain a choice of possible answers and all the respondents have to remember the preferred party themselves. The question is posed even to those respondents, who in the first question excluded the possibility of participating in the elections. Not all respondents are consistent in their answers and many people indicate their preferred party, even though they excluded their participation in the elections in the previous question. The answers are not always contradictory due to the formulation of the question. The second question is in conditional. It can be interpreted in this way: Even though you do not want to come to elections, who would you hypothetically choose if you participated?

If the respondents resist even this time and answer that they wouldn’t go to the elections or didn’t know which party they would chose, “the persistent” inquirer asks them a third question:

3) *“Even though you do not know so far, which party you would vote for, do you prefer some party to the others? If you do, which one?”* This question is also open and enables the respondent to remember their preferable party. The aim of this question is to find out “party affections” (see below).

Party preferences published nowadays by CVVM and STEM agencies do not comply completely with their original definition (see above). They include only the answers to question number two (which party would the respondents choose) and ignore the first question about election participation. In case that the respondents declare in the first question their absence from elections, the method of inquiring does not exclude the following question but supports the respondents to indicate one of the parties. The published party preferences do not enable us to detect the number of voters, who really will not participate in the elections. In reality, this group is much larger than it is stated in the CVVM and STEM party preferences. Only the respondents, who insisted twice on their absence from election, will be included in the group refusing to participate in the elections.

The second type of election preferences published by the agencies are the so-called **voter preferences**. They provide a picture of a situation, which is more similar to the real election results. All the respondents, who declared their absence from elections, are excluded from this analysis. In spite of that, voter preferences are not elections prognoses. In the group of answers still remain respondents, who do not know whether they will participate in the elections or who they would vote for.

For forecasting the result of the elections there are so-called **election prognoses**. In some cases it is only simple conversion of answers to the question, which party the respondent would elect. All types of answers, which do not comply with voting in real elections, are excluded from the calculation. Those respondents, who do not plan to go to elections or who hesitate as well as those, who are not decided who to vote for or who want to support a party which is not running in the elections, are excluded. On the other hand, the construction of real elections prognoses is a very complicated process. The data are significantly adjusted and “weighed” with the aim to eliminate distortional factors. The method of these procedures can be compared to a sort of “cook book,” whose recipes are based on the experience from previous elections and which takes into consideration the current political situation and knowledge about the effect of various types of events on the development of the preferences. The authors attempt to map the differences between the result from previous surveys and the results from real elections. They try to detect trends and then apply them in the form of “scales” on the relevant data. The basis of a good prognosis is (apart from quality data) a long-term experience with election results and elections.

An important factor in the success of sophisticated procedures of constructing elections prognoses is the character of political situation and the related long-term stability in the voters' attitudes and in the samples of voter behaviour. Another advantage is a consolidated party system, which does not bring many turns and surprises, and stable election participation. Czech democracy is young and its party system cannot be regarded as completely stable. The lack of experience with a longer succession of parliamentary elections and preceding researches also impede creation of quality prognoses in the Czech environment. The recent years were also marked by unstable and hardly predicable election participation, which significantly affects the election results as such.

Prognoses clearly have to deal with a number of major problems. First of all, for a precise prediction of election results, it is necessary to have a precise prediction of election participation. However, it is not sufficient to identify correctly the number of voters, who will

come to elections. It is more important to identify correctly, what group of voters it will be. That is, what characteristics will the segment of real voters have and in what way it will differ from the segment of respondents, who only declared their participation. Undecided voters present another problem to prognoses. We cannot presume that this group would divide their preferences in the same proportion as the decided voters. Even in this case, long-term experience is needed to estimate, what types of parties are able to gain the votes of the undecided voters in the last moment. It is also important to determine correctly, what number of undecided voters will really come to the elections in the end.

Elections prognoses can be also complicated by the character of the electoral system. Electoral systems producing very proportional results present an ideal environment for the prognoses makers. The more disproportional the results are and the more the regional specifics of voting behaviour are reflected in the national results, the more complicated is the prognosis. The research used as a background for the prognosis is naturally more expensive.

We cannot define the method of elections prognoses more closely. The know-how of individual agencies (if there is any) is of course a closely guarded secret. Let us content with the definition of the Factum Invenio agency, which publishes its results in the form of prognoses most frequently. *"Elections prognosis means an estimation of the real outcome of the elections. Mathematical model, which is used as a basis for the estimation, takes two aspects into consideration. First, it reflects the extent of the probability that the potential voter will really participate in the elections. Second, it takes into account the fact that during the real elections it is not possible to choose an undecided variant (answer "doesn't know") and distributes the votes of the undecided voters at the expense of the candidate parties.* [iHNed 2002].

The last type of preferences are the so-called **party sympathies**. They have nothing to do with the prediction of election results. Their aim is to provide a picture of sympathies of the widest possible part of public with political parties. In the example of CVVM questionnaire, questions number 2 and 3 were used for detecting party sympathies. The basis is formed by party preferences detected by question number 2 (*"...which party would you vote for?"*). In this case, however, there are many answers *"I don't know"* or *"I wouldn't participate in the elections."* It does not give us a sufficiently precise picture about the sympathies of the entire public with individual parties. The third question is used in order to specify the complete picture of sympathies with individual parties and decrease the number of undecided answers. It is addressed only to those respondents, who did not mention any



specific party in question number 2. This question can be formulated for example in the following way: “*Even though you do not know so far, which party you would vote for, is any of them closer to you than the others? If yes, which one?*” (formulation of CVVM). It intentionally tries to reduce the number of indefinite answers. When we put together the results of question number 3 and the specific answers from the previous question number 2, we get an output, which is called party sympathies.

**Unified terminology for publishing different types of outputs of CVVM, STEM and TNS Factum surveys of preferences according to the SIMAR agreement.**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Description – quotation from the agreement</b>	<b>Specification</b>
Party preferences	Number of people, who prefer certain political party, from the group of all eligible voters. In case of this data, the sum of 100% consists of supporters of individual political parties, people, who plan to vote, but are not decided about the party at the time of the survey, and people, who do not want to vote.	Data about the latest support of individual parties in the entire population under survey including absentees from elections and non-decided voters. In comparison with the election prognosis, the percentage of support for candidate party is therefore smaller. Agencies always publish them and therefore it is possible to compare the data.
Voter preferences	Number of people, who prefer certain political party, from the group of respondents, who did not exclude their election participation in the survey. The sum of 100% will consist of supporters of individual political parties and people, who plan to vote, but who were not decide about the party in the time of the survey. People, who excluded the possibility of participating in the elections, will not be included in the calculation.	Data about the latest support of individual parties among people, who plan to go to elections, including the undecided voters. In comparison with elections prognosis the percentage for candidate party is therefore smaller.
Party sympathies	Number of people who either prefer certain political party or they at least express it their sympathies. The sum of 100% consists of sympathizers of individual political parties, people, who are not decided about their sympathies with political parties, and people, who do not sympathize with any party.	Specification of data about voter preferences by data about possible sympathies of undecided voters aiming to get closer to the prediction. In reality it is usually specification of preferences by the data from the following question in the questionnaire.
Election prognosis	Estimation of real outcome of elections. The sum of 100% will consist of anticipated real voters of individual parties.	Elections prognosis, which can be based on various information sources. In reality it often means only including absentees from elections and undecided voters in the question about party preferences.

Source: SIMAR [Preferences more comprehensible... 2001].

## **Conclusion**

Not all the results of the surveys of election preferences aim directly at the prognosis of election results. They often bring us a wider overview of the latest attitudes of the voters, which is also very important. It is not possible to compare the outputs of party preferences, voter preferences, elections prognoses and party sympathies. They are different products with different aims and different type of information. We can do some conversions to facilitate the comparison of some of them, but without an independent data file they may be inaccurate. In the media news programmes, however, we often come across such comparisons of the incomparable.

The question remains, however, whether it is not the agencies themselves who allows the inaccurate use of different types of outputs. In the period before elections the public expect that the surveys will show them the probable outcome of elections. Elections prognoses naturally serve them best. Instead of concentrating on the publishing of party preferences, the agencies should perhaps pay more attention to the preparation of professionally based elections prognoses. This way the incorrect use of party preferences as a source for estimating the results of elections would be prevented. No matter what forms of election preferences we are confronted with, we should always bear in mind what type of research and what type of output is concerned. We should always know what product comes into our hands and from what survey it is: what we can and what we cannot expect from it and how to interpret it accurately.

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