

## **Parameters of Czech voters' party identity**

*Daniel Kunštát*

Motivation context for party preferences and the election act criteria are a very multi-faceted variable difficult to grasp and cannot be isolated from the entire process, in which opinions are formed. Understanding or interpretation of natural laws behind actual election behaviour is, therefore, an immensely complex and multi-faceted issue. Political opinions of individuals, in principle, derive from identification with various specific and/or reference groups such as family, internally homogenous work, religious, ethnical groups and – last but not least – party and class collectivity.

The impact of social stratification and socially conditioned characteristics of voters to election behaviour is evident. Class-group interests, derived from perception of the standard of living, social security of the group, position within status hierarchy etc. forms natural social basis for political formations. It is exactly the anchoring of electorate clientele in the structure of social cleavages that the living, non-derived group political tradition is connected to. Based on analysis of social factors, it may be stated practically of all established parties that, in one or another level they take up authentic place in the system of social cleavages. In other words: they fall back on party loyalty of relatively distinctly identifiable segments of society whose real interests represent or – at least – politically instrumentalise the patterns of class loyalty for relevant social classes and groups.

Today, the image of social specification of election behaviour is linked to the knowledge that there exists an entire conglomerate of exceptions to the scheme.<sup>1</sup> The most integrated interpretation of causes behind individual election choice offered by current social science is based on the work of researchers from the Michigan university – books and articles by A. Campbel, P. E. Convers and their colleagues from the 1960s. Russel Dalton summarised this concept into the form of *causal funnel model* (Dalton, 1988).

Although the underlying information on future voting of a voter is his/her social status, there is a number of mediating components between this status and the election behaviour itself and these components filter political supply and shape political outputs in historical, mythical, ideological, cultural, utopian etc. ways. And, what is more – the decision-making of a voter integrates many other factors. From formal respect, identical election decisions are a reflection of entirely heterogeneous and frequently contradictory volitional motivations.

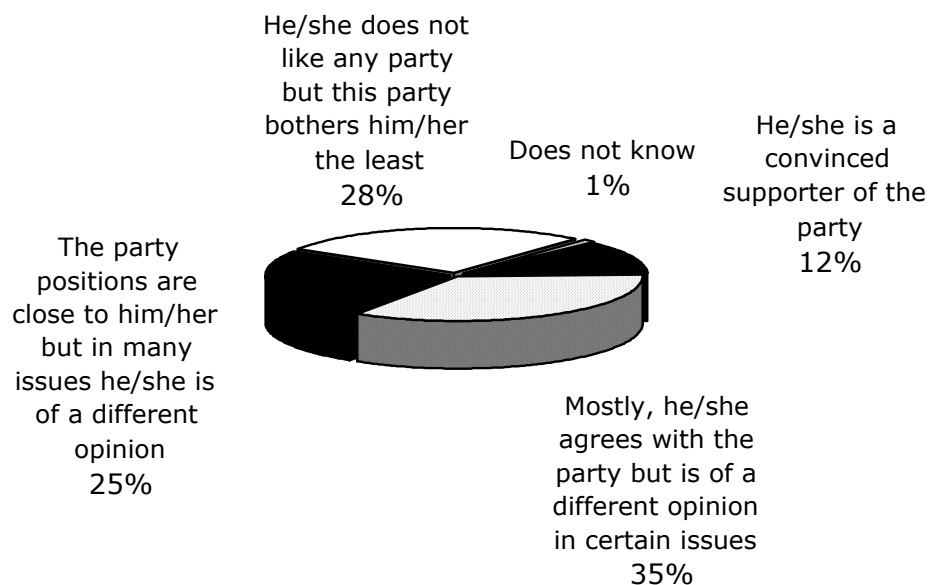
Principally, each political choice represents a chain of motives, logical and random, early as well as deeply rooted ones. The act of election is a mixture of retrospect and prospective "alternative assessment". It is a look back into the past but also a projection into the future. A number of identifications (factors) enter the play. These factors mutually reinforce one another, and, in addition to social rules, also party agitation and propaganda, impact of family background, format of the party and the election system, national, religious, regional as well as other motivations, situational factors, cultural conditions, influence of economic boom etc. belong here.

## I. Intensity of voters-to-parties relationship

In its regular investigations, the Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (Public Opinion Research Centre) has mapped for a long period, attitudes of the public to political parties. The investigations include, inter alia, such types of enquiries which uncover the intensity of and motivations behind support to political parties.

In our October investigation, we have asked respondents who have declared preferences for or affiliation to a specific political party (N=829) a repeated enquiry about the intensity of their relationship towards such party (see Chart 1).<sup>2</sup>

**Chart 1: Relationship of voters towards a preferred party (October 2004)**



Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) survey, investigation 04-10

The data obtained clearly suggest that there are relatively very few convinced supporters (12%) among political parties' voters. Majority approval with the party was declared by 35% of respondents. This, traditionally most noticeably represented group, has oscillated in the long run between 40 and 50% of respondents. However, since 1999, this has accounted for only approximately a third of respondents (as opposed to the last investigation, there was an increase of 5 percentage points).

**Table 1: Attitudes of voters towards a preferred party – comparison**

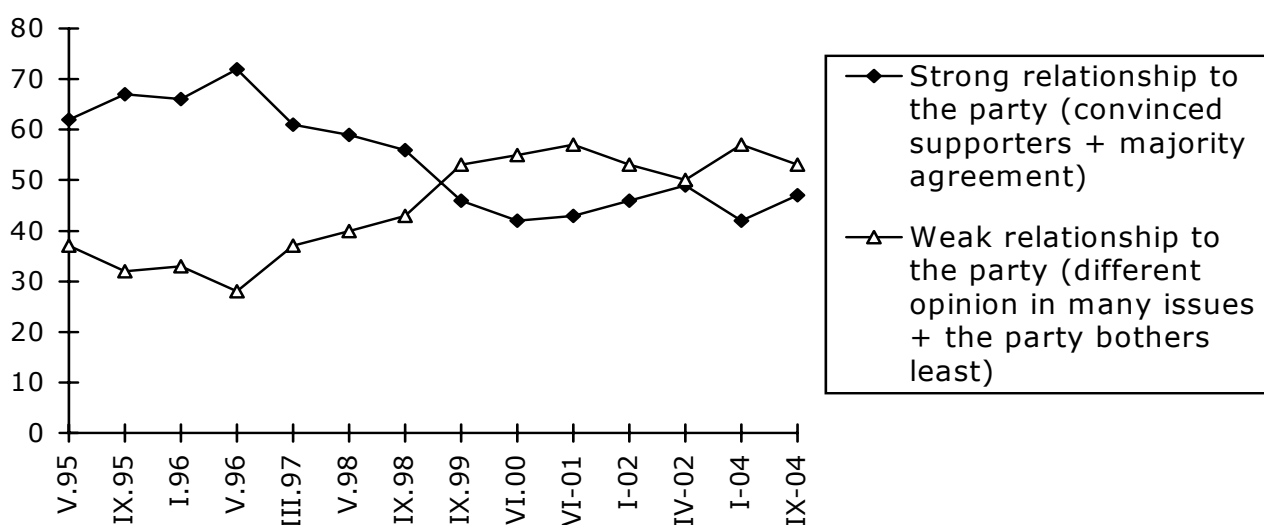
	05/ 95	09/ 95	01/ 96	05/ 96	03/ 97	05/ 98	09/ 98	09/ 99	06/ 00	06/ 01	01/ 02	04/ 02	01/ 04	09/ 04
He/she is a convinced supporter of the party	22	18	19	22	16	18	15	10	11	13	14	14	12	12
Mostly, he/she agrees with the party but is of a different opinion in certain issues	40	49	47	50	45	41	41	36	31	29	32	35	30	35
The party positions are close to him/her but in many issues he/she is of a different opinion	21	18	19	17	20	19	22	27	25	27	23	20	25	25
He/she does not like any party but this party bothers him/her the least	16	14	14	11	17	21	21	26	30	30	30	30	32	28
Does not know	1	1	1	0	2	0	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	1

Note: The 100% total in columns

Source: CVVM (IVVM)

A quarter of respondents have selected the “The party positions are close to me but in many issues I am is of a different opinion” alternative. Almost every third voter (28%) prefers the selected party only because the party bothers him/her the least. Until 1997, this share was 10 percentage points smaller. The year 1998 represents, therefore, a crucial turning point. On the one hand, the share of convinced supporters decreased in the subsequent period, on the other hand, there was an increase in the share of the most lukewarm sympathisers, i.e. those who decide “negatively” for a party, based on the fact that their favourite bothers them the least. These findings make complete the picture of **overall loosening of links between voters and their parties of preference** in which a relatively weak relationship towards the party is declared by more than half of respondents (25% have a different opinion in many issues, 28% do not like any party).

**Chart 2: Attitudes of voters towards a preferred party (1995 to 2004)**



Source: CVVM (IVVM)

Analysis of the structure of statements by electorates of individual parties for which parties the analysis is possible taking into account the number of respondents, brought the following findings (see Table 2):

**ODS**, which is traditional for this party, features relatively strong identification of its supporters. However, also for this party, there has been – in line with general trends – a certain weakening of the relationship between the party and its electorate base over the past five years. Currently, ODS has only 15% of convinced supporters; to the contrary, a fourth prefers this party only because the party bothers them the least.

The weakest relation of the electorate base is clearly characteristic of **ČSSD**. On the one side, an exceptionally low share of convinced supporters (6%) is evident and, on the other side, almost one third (30%) of voters support social democrats only because it is the least unacceptable party.<sup>3</sup>

**KSČM** continues to be the party with the most extensive electorate core. It still has the highest number of convinced supporters (21%) and only for two fifths of the sympathisers can their links to the party be called loosened.

A wide pool of convinced core voters is characteristic also of **KDU-ČSL**, although this party has also seen a certain loosening up of links to it recently (similarly to ODS). Currently, almost three fifths of voters (59%) feel rather a strong valence to the Christian party.

**Table 2: Attitudes of voters towards parties for which they would cast their vote in the elections (in %)**

	Convinced supporter	Mostly agrees with the party	In many issues different opinion	The party bothers least
ODS	15	39	21	24
ČSSD	6	35	27	30
KSČM	21	37	19	22
KDU-ČSL	17	42	20	20

Note: To reach 100% in the lines, the "does not know" answers need to be added.

Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) survey, investigation 04-10

## II. Election Motivations

In addition to the intensity of relationship between voters and political parties, CVVM has also regularly investigated, starting as early as 1990, motivation background of election preferences of residents (see Table 3). The last investigation of this issue was conducted in October 2004. Respondents were people having right to vote, who stated a certain specific party which they would vote for in the elections or stated at least a party of which they are sympathisers.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 3: Reasons for voting for a party (in %)**

	Definitely yes	Tends to agree	Tends to disagree	Definitely no	Yes/no
Does the programme of the party convene you?	17	66	9	2	83/11
The party's focus is close to you, does it correspond to your conviction?	16	66	11	3	82/14
Do you trust its representatives?	10	62	17	4	72/21
Has its activity so far convinced you?	8	60	20	5	68/25
Is the party in touch with residents and does the party know their concerns?	12	47	19	6	59/25
Does any of people close to you wish to vote for the party?	8	26	24	38	34/62
Are you involved in the internal party life?"	2	5	17	75	7/92

Respondents expressed separate opinions in each category, to achieve 100% in individual lines, the "Do not know" answers need to be added. Information in the last column represent totals of the "definitely yes" + "tends to agree" and the "definitely no" + "tends to disagree" categories.  
Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) survey, investigation 04-10

The declared reasons behind election preferences are stated in Table 3. Almost globally, respondents agreed that identification with the party programme (83%), overall ideological direction of the party (82%) and trust in the representatives leading the parties (72%) are reasons of their choice. Only for activities of the party (68%) there was a slightly lower consensus. Lesser focus on the reflection of empiric knowledge can signal that people tend to base their election intentions on more general aspects connected to the image of the political parties to which they relate their expectations rather than on real experience with activities of parties in the political arena. The motivations perceived as the strongest therefore tend to be rather of a projective, future-based character while retrograde accents tend to take a back seat.

More than a third of supporters of political parties mention opinion orientation of their family as a reason behind their preferences. It is not a surprising finding that from the reasons presented, the factor of participation in party life is at the closing position – at present, it plays a role in their decision-making only for less than one tenth of respondents.

As opposed to the previous investigation conducted in January 2004, no more significant changes occurred in this motivation scheme save for noticeable decrease in trust in leading party representatives (8 percentage points less). In the long-term respect, however, it is possible to generally observe relatively high stability of motivations behind election behaviour, but "intensity" of certain key aspects decreased relatively distinctly – especially after 1998. To the contrary, despite certain changes in percentage representation, the order of motivations behind the choice has not varied much over the period under review (see Table 4).

Traditionally, the motivation perceived most strongly is especially the feeling of compliance of one's own conviction with the overall ideological direction and programme of the preferred party. Identification with the party based on trust in their representatives and experiences with the party's activities so far maintains high prestige (attention dedicated to evaluation of specific results of the activities of the party has forwarded itself more distinctly before the 1996 elections; soon, however, it returned to the level of the previous years, and not only that: in the next phase, it weakened gradually even further). In this context, it is necessary to stress that in comparison to the first half of the 1990s, all the above reasons of party identification are reflected much more weakly. Also this fact suggests that party preferences are currently much more shallowly rooted than in the past.

Effects of family background to election behaviour of respondents saw a relatively major transformation. In this respect, especially over the past five years – despite certain oscillations – we may talk of a quite apparent tendency towards formation of certain family value orientation which projects also into political preferences of respondents. On the other hand, direct participation of respondent in party life undergoes an opposite tendency, effects thereof have gradually decreased and already since the 1998 election, this aspect remains at the same, i.e. roughly ten-percent level (over the past years, there was further decrease even under this level).

Party identification or "die-hard followership", derived predominantly from family milieu, represents one of the rational explanations of "non-rational" behaviour of voters on the political market (Cambell, Converse, Miller, 1966). According to a number of election analyses, family heredity of trust and support to parties is apparent in elections ("Law of Heredity in Politics"). Some researchers (Inglehart 1977:254, Rose 1984) even assume that the most reliable predictor of political (party) orientation – more significant than social class, education or employment – is family environment, that is certain generation value continuity of "cultural matters of fact" in the closest social group (Rose, McAllister). Although processes demonstrating destruction of such trust were recorded – especially orientation to voting based on individual issues – party fidelity is considered one of the stabilising factors of elections.

**Table 4: Reasons behind preferences for a political party (comparison of 1990 and 2004)**

	05/ 90	05/ 92	05/ 96	06/ 98	12/ 99	01/ 01	01/ 02	06/ 02	01/ 04	09/ 04
Does its programme convene you? <sup>1)</sup>	96	95	93	92	89	86	82	85	83	83
Is its focus close to you? Does it correspond to your conviction?	94	92	94	95	88	87	82	86	82	82
Do you trust its representatives?	87	94	93	93	86	84	77	78	80	72
Has its activities so far convinced you? <sup>2)</sup>	79	79	88	79	79	77	76	68	68	68
Is it in touch with residents and does it know their concerns?	-	-	-	-	70	69	-	62	-	59
Does any of people close to you wish to vote for it?	19	20	27	29	49	48	39	35	35	34
Do you take part in internal party life? <sup>3)</sup>	28	18	15	11	10	7	8	8	8	7

The data in the table represent the total of the "definitely yes" and "tend to agree" answers, to reach 100% for each information, the negative answers and the "Do not know" answers need to added, the statistical error size is +-3%.

<sup>1)</sup> In previous surveys, the thesis went "Does its election programme convene you?"

<sup>2)</sup> In 1990 and 1992, the formulation "The party made a lot of good things" was used.

<sup>3)</sup> In investigations conducted in 1990 to 1998, the formulation "Are you its member, do you work in the party?" was used.

Source: CVVM (IVVM)

Reasons stated by potential voters of specific political parties forming the basic ground plan of the Czech party system have not differed much in overall support to individual presented aspects. Differences were usually only in intensity, i.e. in the share of the "definitely yes" answers (Table 5); their analysis has brought the following findings:

1. It has been confirmed that the clearly highest identification with preferred party is still apparent for **KSČM**. As opposed to other parties, the highest share of followers voiced accented support to the party's activities. For example, the fact that the party has a suitable programme and close focus is accentuated strongly. Also for other theses, however, above-average high share of the "definitely yes" answers was recorded. It is not uninteresting that among the KSČM voters, family political orientation and party involvement play significant role.
2. Based on the level of self-identification of voters with the party of their choice, **KDU-ČSL** voters continue to follow KSČM. KDU-ČSL is close to its voters predominantly with its overall ideological focus.
3. Also **ODS** supporters belong to more anchored voters in relation to their party. Predominantly, satisfactory programme and trust in party representatives has strong accentuation.
4. **ČSSD** followers present the most lukewarm attitude towards their party of preference. In majority of aspects under observation, they expressed intensity below the average values and, practically, all presented aspects are reflected very weakly, in particular in face of sympathisers of KSČM and KDU-ČSL. These findings confirm low level of party loyalty, belonging to key sources of political decision-making and behaviour and prejudging political (ideological) continuity in

time irrespective of changing conditions, even in periods of dramatic regime changes or following long generational pauses.

In the given context, let us note that it is precisely ČSSD which faces considerable deficit of electorate discipline as compared to other established parties. The core electorate, usually remaining loyal to the party banner from elections to the next, is evidently incomparably more numerous for other relevant parties.<sup>5</sup> The low discipline of potential social democratic supporters reflect, no doubt, factors just mentioned, firstly the fact that the highest share of undecided or weakly decided voters figure among ČSSD sympathisers.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 5: Reasons for selection as seen by individual voter camps (in %)**

	Entire set	ODS	ČSSD	KSČM	KDU-ČSL
Does its programme convene you?	17	22	11	28	18
Is its focus close to you? Does it correspond to your conviction?	16	15	13	24	34
Do you trust its representatives?	10	16	9	17	10
Have its activities so far convinced you?	8	10	4	14	13
Is it in touch with residents and does it know their concerns?	12	9	7	28	12
Do any of people close to you wish to vote for it?	8	11	9	16	9
Do you take part in the internal party life?	2	1	2	8	3

Note: Data in %. The data included in the table represent the share of the "definitely yes" answers. Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) survey, investigation 04-10

## Conclusion

The fundamental work of the Michigan school (Campbel, Converse, Miller, Stokes, 1964) states, based on rich empiric material that the rate of information available to residents and voters concerning the subject matter of the election fight and the programme offer of parties is modest if not zero; that their decision-making is based rather on certain political socialization or party identification, which cannot be termed rational actions – at least not from the point of view of economic rationality.

Such party identification is based on justified – frequently, however, mechanical in stereotypes – perception of group interests, and on historical background of election patterns. These include the layer of cultural and value automatisms, deeply rooted attitudes and prejudices, which represent the results of mostly historically anchored experience mediated by many generations (Lipset: 270 a n.).<sup>7</sup>

Selection of parties and personalities is frequently motivated by abstract faith in certain ideological direction and faces of politicians. It develops at essentially intuitive level, when rational analysis is replaced with emotional symbols. With not a small amount of justification, it is possible to assume that an average voter (aware of all relativity of such expression) does not select in practice for whom to vote based on programmes of political parties or personal dispositions of candidates or based on factual analysis of group and individual needs or national interests – he/she only pretends this form of selection or honestly, yet erroneously, assumes that he/she elects in this manner.



## Bibliography:

- Berelson, B., Lazarsfeld, P. F., McPhee, W. N. 1954: *Voting*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., Stokes, D. E. 1964. *The American Voter. An Abridgment*. New York, London, Sydney: J. Wiley & Sons.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E. (eds.) 1966. *Elections and Political Order*, New York.
- Dalton, R. J. 1988. *Citizen Politics in Western Democracies*. Chatham: Chatham House Publishers.
- Dalton, R. J., Flanagan, S. C., Beck, P. A. (eds.) 1984: *Electoral Change and Advanced Industrial Democracies. Realignment or Dealignment?*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gallagher, M., Laver, M., Mair, P. 1992. *Representative Government in Western Europe*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Inglehart, R. 1977. *The Silent Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kunštát D. 2003: Strany a voliči v zrcadle předvolebních výzkumů veřejného mínění /Parties and Voters in the Mirror of Pre-Election Public Opinion Polls/, In: *Volby do poslanecké sněmovny 2002 /2002 Parliament Elections/*, Prague: SoÚ AV ČR.
- Lipset, S., M. 1981. *Political Man. The Social Bases of Politics*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Rose, R. 1984. *Do Parties Make a Difference?* Chatham: Chatham House Publisher.
- Rose, R., McAllister, I. 1990. *The Loyalties of Voters. A Lifetime Learning Model*. London, Newbury Park and New Delhi: Sage Publications.

---

<sup>1</sup> Simplified deriving of party differentiation from class context may be put to doubt with relative success even in transit countries. Election decision-making undoubtedly is not based exclusively on the membership in certain social groups (and natural interests related thereto) but also on ideas attracting individuals in a rational or emotional manner. However demonstrable from scientific point of view the relation between party programme and aspiration of social basis is, class conflict in the social structure cannot be the sole explanatory prism or social basis. The clear association between class and choice, i.e. the concept of rational momentary behaviour of voters, formed solely on the basis of membership in social groups is disturbed, first of all, by *party identification*. That is based on emotionally perceived belief and deep mental stereotypes. Party identification, being a dependent variable, takes the resident from social relationships, from "objective situation", in favour of attitudes and cognitive personality formation in psychological and longer-lasting framework.

<sup>2</sup> Question: "What is your relationship towards this party?"

<sup>3</sup> Pre-election investigation of CVVM from May 2002 reached analogous conclusions. Only 10% of voters termed their relationship to ČSSD as "very close" while, e.g., for KSČM, it was an entire third, ODS 16%, the then Koalice 21%, in: Kunštát D., Seidlová A., Červenka J. (2003): *Voliči a nevoliči /Voters and Non-Voters/ – The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*, s. 106. *Volby do poslanecké sněmovny 2002 /2002 Parliament Elections/*, SoÚ AV ČR, Prague 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Question: "What reasons lead you to vote exactly for this party or to sympathise with this party? Is it because..."

<sup>5</sup> That is why results of various types of elections in the Czech Republic are much more frequently affected not only by the distribution of power in the entire electorate community at the specific moment, i.e. how many potential supporters do individual parties dispose of, but also the election turnout: And not only how many people come to the elections but also which people come.

<sup>6</sup> Under the impression of topical events in political agenda, undecided voters succumb relatively easily to changes in political affiliations and they decide in the last moment very often. They have the least election motivation and interest in political realities in general. Their decision-making – more intuitive and emotional – is not governed by a more solid value (ideological) justification.

---

<sup>7</sup> It was already Walter Lippmann who, in his classic analysis of public opinion (*Public Opinion, New York 1961*) noted that most people do not decide on consideration based on experience in politics but under un- or semiconscious influence fixated by habits.