

PUBLIC OPINION AND SHIFTS IN POLITICAL PARTIES PREFERENCES¹

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Undoubtedly, party preferences are an indicator (and, from the point of view of media discourse, the most rewarding one) of political moods in the public. Why is it precisely party "popularity" that lays in focus of attention of laymen and expert public alike? Without the need to plunge into theoretical enumerations of functional lists of political parties, it is beyond discussions that political parties represent – along law-making bodies, government, and bureaucracy – the main structural component of the political system and create its institutional and relational environment. They belong to formal organisations, through which authoritative – i.e. binding – decisions are adopted. They are the cornerstone institutions of representative democracy (and this is not a hyperbole). The main difference as opposed to other types of social associations of citizens is that they struggle for support of the general public in elections (Dalton; LaPalombara, Weiner). And it is exactly through elections that decision on the selection of government administration is taken in democracy.

Many post-election investigations show that the basic configuration of party-political arrangement remains unchanged for Czech public opinion. Only preferences of the two strongest parties on the political spectrum, the ČSSD and ODS, continue to be dynamic parts in the structure and post-election development of party inclinations of the population. Despite that, we may express a hypothesis that momentary turbulences in party preferences do not erode the existing basic bi-polar format of the party-political competition with focus on the centre. This is especially the case with the maintaining of current ghettoisation of KSČM and its exclusion from government coalition combinations (Fiala, Strmiska; Sartori). ODS and ČSSD continue to be the two gravitation poles with long-term competitive potential and chance to appeal to the most significant segments of the voter market. Therefore, the assumption that *the perspective of social democracy as a dominant entity on the left-wing political spectrum remains incontestable* is justified. ODS and ČSSD are perhaps the most universal parties – concerning the ideological load, lesser focus on particular interests, attention focused not on narrowly defined collectivism but to the individual voter ("national clientele") and offering access to various interest groups. Both parties are simply best predestined to be all encompassing, integration parties (for more details on the notion of the catch all party, see Kirchheimer, Klíma 1996).

KSČM and KDU-ČSL maintain quite stable voter support. KSČM represents a strong extreme-left pole of the party system. However, its representation in the Parliament or voter potential is no longer sufficient to exclude the alternation of the government parties without participation of KSČM in practice. The solidity of preferences of KDU-ČSL is not surprising either. KDU-ČSL profits from its specific role as a country, socially integrative, denominational party with firmly anchored core electorate. Moreover, its expectations are reinforced by the strategic importance, which political centre has in Czech party system, based on the centripetal character of the political competition (Sartori).

With the exception of the existing parliamentary parties, only Association of Independent Candidates (*Sdružení nezávislých kandidátů*) and the Green Party (*Strana zelených*) regularly show certain, at least minimum gains in preferences (both 1 to 2 percent). The new political formations or formations not present in the Parliament face an extraordinary difficult task: to break certain conservatism of Czech voters. Various investigations show that the undecided voters

oftentimes either choose not to take part in the elections or they do not cast their vote (fictitious as far as preferences are concerned) in favour of the party corresponding to their interests and expectations in reality but they select one of the relatively closer, "least unacceptable" main political parties. The voters, it seems, instinctively look for major power poles of the political spectrum and prefer strong, tried-and-true, and familiar political party "branches". Moreover, the current relevant parties have already created a living tradition, stability, and party loyalty among large segments of the society.

Having said there were no substantial transformations in the basic contours of the party system, we do not mean to suggest that there are no shifts in party preferences in time (see time comparison in the table).

Table: Development of party preferences after the elections (in %)²

	09/02	10/02	11/02	01/03	02/03	03/03	04/03	05/03	06/03	09/03	10/03	11/03
ODS	17	21.5	23	24.5	25	30.5	30	32.5	28.5	28.5	29	32
ČSSD	33	29	25	25.5	22.5	20	21	15.5	15.5	16.5	14.5	16
KSČM	13.5	12.5	14.5	14	14.5	14.5	13	15	11.5	14	13.5	15.5
KDU-ČSL	8	8	6.5	8	8	8	6	7.5	8.5	7.5	9	8
US-DEU	3.5	5	3	2.5	1.5	3	2	3	3	3	3.5	2.5
Other parties	5	4	10	6	9.5	4	5	5	7	4.5	4.5	4
DK, none	20	20	18	19.5	19	20	23	21.5	26	26	26	22

Note: Source CVVM, Our Society (*Naše společnost*) 2002/2003 surveys.

Even the casting a fleeting look at the development of party preferences in post-election period clearly shows that the likings of voters have seen some dramatic changes over eighteen months. Definitely, the role of the leader at the momentary political market has been taken over by ODS to the detriment of the governing Social Democrats, while support of other parties remains basically constant, despite certain month-on-month oscillations (moreover, such oscillations are even at variance with certain "popular" theses not substantiated by empirical data, e.g. the thesis about the growing support for KSČM). In practice, changes in party preferences are thus limited exclusively to two parallel processes: dramatic fall of preferences of ČSSD (from 33% in September 2002 to 16% in November 2003) and growth in the number of supporters of ODS (from 17% in September 2002 to the current 32%). Investigations conducted by CVVM therefore indirectly imply that ODS is the major recipient of votes from Social Democrats.

The motivation behind party preferences is a very complex and impalpable variable.³ Understanding, explaining, or even predicting the development of preferences, or the actual decisions in the election, is an immensely complex and multi-faceted issue, with a number of variables entering the process. First of all, social background behind the natural relations of election behaviour are involved. Further, the variables include party canvassing and propaganda, influence of family background, parameters of party and election systems, national, religious, regional or other motives, etc., etc.⁴

The analysis of the re-grouping of party inclination within the general public needs to be based on the fact that certain transfer of "votes" occur almost exclusively between the voter camps of ODS and ČSSD – the Civil Democrats gradually grew stronger after the elections and, since March, they have been regularly reporting support at approximately thirty percent. Although only the future will prove whether this is just a temporary fluctuation of voters or a more

stable trend in the distribution of voter affection, we could nevertheless attempt to trace certain principal factors in the growth of inclination to the benefit of ODS on the one side and loss of the position of ČSSD on the other side.

1) *Core electorate.*

Traditionally, ODS is the party with the most extensive background of firmly anchored voters. They are characterised by high self-identification with the party, its overall ideological orientation, the programme, but also trust in the leading party representatives. KSČM has the largest core electorate. Also, it perhaps has the most strongly anchored electorate in the structure of conflict lines (Lipset, Rokkan). This relates to high loyalty of the electorate (unlike KSČM, ODS has a clear comparative advantage, i.e. its voters show much greater social-demographic diversity).

Taking into account the mentioned aspects, supporters of ČSSD, also traditionally, show rather "lukewarm" attitudes towards "their" party. Their preferences are shallowly anchored. And it is exactly the low identification that allows a relatively smooth transfer of their inclinations, be it to KSČM or to ODS. The votes of the "defectors" from Social Democrats, won over by the Communists in the past with an almost cast iron logic, go to ODS these days. Nevertheless, the influx of former ČSSD voters does not surely mean these days an increase in the numbers of the core electorate of ODS: there is no guarantee that their support is motivated by a deeper change in values and attitudes and not only by their momentary (and temporary) dissatisfaction with the work of the government (and, therefore, with the acts of ČSSD).

The electorate of ČSSD contains high share of volatile voters who, under the impression of momentary events in the political agenda, relatively easily succumb to changes in political likings. They have the weakest election motivation (and interest in politics in general). In their decisions, they are not led by any firmer value (ideological) justification; they succumb more easily to party propaganda and decide rather intuitively and emotively. On the other hand, the success of ČSSD in the past three parliamentary elections was perhaps made possible to a great extent by these voters inclined to vote for the centre (even the "left" centre in this case). What may, in certain circumstances, seem as a disadvantage, could be a valuable principle in election fight. We may express the following hypothesis: currently, it is these volatile, "centre" voters – in the past, paradoxically, the guarantee of the election success of the ČSSD – who are inclined to ODS at the moment.

2) *Assessment of the Opposition Potential.*⁵

The character of the opposition has major impact on party preferences. Ideologically, the opposition alternative (ODS, KSČM) is heterogeneous and more dispersed than the governing majority. High internal unity and discipline are symptomatic for both opposition parties (Dahl, Novák). But, bilateral opposition on both poles of the party spectrum adds to certain illegibility. It prevents the possibility of a clear alternative, clear choice for the general public in relation to governmental policy. For example, the governmental public budgets reform is criticised from cardinally different positions. To a major degree, the different concepts of ODS and KSČM correspond to totally different social classes, at which they are primarily oriented.

Both of these parties have chosen a strictly competitive strategy in relation to the government – at least in the key votes in the Parliament. Unlike in the past election term, this is a novelty especially for ODS, which was co-operative

towards Zeman's minority government. ODS, free of this co-operation for now, has a freedom to set up itself clearly in relation to the government. Moreover, and above all, it may focus almost exclusively on influencing the general public opinion to its benefit. From its own point of view, ODS has acquired a new, unique historical position within the party spectrum. For the first time, it is a clear opposition party. It may also benefit from being the only relevant democratic opposition to the policies of the coalition government.

As far as longer-term trends are concerned, we should mention that *while in the past, the decline in preferences of ČSSD almost logically meant strengthening of KSČM, currently the situation appears as radically different: despite the fall in support for ČSSD, there is no major transfer of votes to KSČM (preferences of KSČM remain practically constant), but (especially) to the benefit of ODS.*

3) *Decline in Authority of the Government: Roots of the Decline of ČSSD Support.*

It is necessary to see the decline in the support of ČSSD at two levels. Firstly, experience from the past years shows that *the dominant government party always loses some of its fans in a certain moment of its mandate.* We saw this both in the case of ODS (the cabinet of Václav Klaus after the elections in 1996) and in the case of ČSSD (the last government of Miloš Zeman). Traditionally, the party bearing the largest share of government responsibility suffers some outflow of fans. Most probably, this is independent, for the most part, of what specific steps and with what practical success this or that government adopts, whether it is objectively successful or not. Rather, there is a certain psychological effect. People associate certain expectations with each new government. These, however, gradually prove to be unrealisable, or unrealistic in the common political operation. Therefore, at a certain stage of the term of office, the public support of the government falls. Currently, this phenomenon is reinforced by lack of unity within the coalition (facing internal opposition, especially within Social Democracy), programme heterogeneity of coalition parties, factual weakness of the political mandate of the government as well as poor communication with the general public.⁶

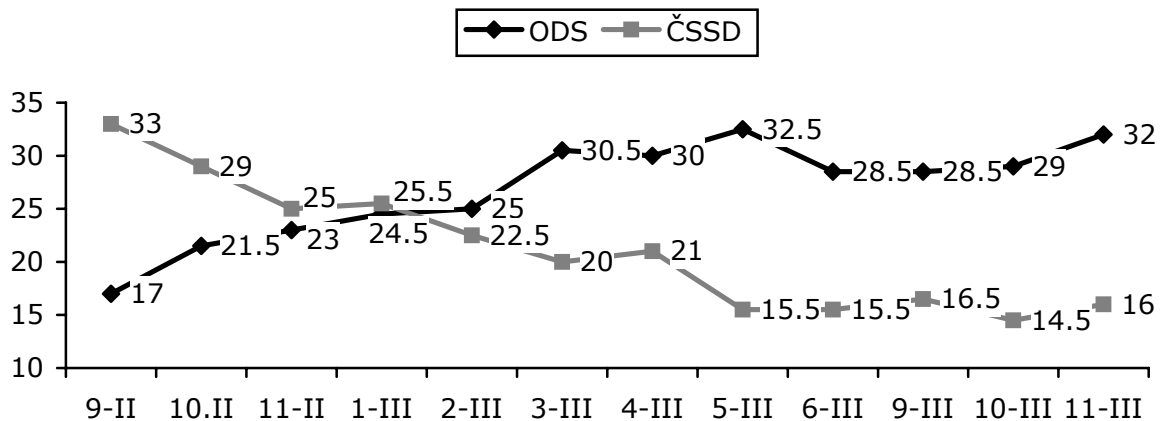
The second aspect of the decline in preferences of ČSSD linked to the activity of the government is completely specific: In addition to a number of other questionable steps, and particular issues (health care), *the loss of credibility of the government is caused by the public finance reform that especially the general public assesses as controversial.* The reform, explicitly negating the pre-election promises of ČSSD in many respects, will affect exactly the social groups forming the natural backbone of the electorate of the Social Democrats and those who backed-up the election success of this party. The consequences of unrealistic expectations currently involve certain insecurity of a part of voters of Social Democracy who either do not know who they will vote for or who do not intend to attend the elections at the moment and/or (for the most part) who seek refuge in other parties, above all in the ODS.⁷

4) *Consolidation of ODS and Internal Conflicts in ČSSD.*

After the leadership of the party changed last autumn and after the undeniable success in the form of instituting Václav Klaus as the President, ODS appears to be unified, at least from the outside, and internally disciplined. This is significant because public opinion perceives very sensitively every lack of unity, destabilisation, or even open conflicts in political parties. Internal party conflicts

and lower unity in Social Democracy, initiated, for example, by the election of the President and the public finance reform, and were accompanied by certain loss of capacity of action and dynamics. They have principally damaged the public (media) image of ČSSD and have definitely reflected on the outflow of a part of its supporters. *Long-lasting internal conflicts in Social Democracy – at personal, strategic, or ideological level in general – and the decreasing trust in the work of the government, notably undermine the credibility of ČSSD in the eyes of the general public.*

Chart: Development of Preferences of ČSSD and ODS after the Parliamentary Elections in 2002 (v %)



Note: Source CVVM, Our Society (*Naše společnost*) 2002/2003 surveys.

5) The KSČM-Gate: Myth of Growing Preferences.

At least CVVM surveys do not suggest at all that KSČM would surpass the Social Democrats in their preferences throughout the post-election period. As found out by CVVM, the support of ČSSD and KSČM has been more or less equal most recently.⁸ *The preferences of KSČM have remained constant since the elections; with the exception of several month-on-month oscillations, they have ranged between 13 and 15 percent.* Therefore, it is not possible to say that KSČM would grow stronger to the detriment of ČSSD. Rather, what may be said is that preferences of Social Democracy have gradually fallen to the level of KSČM.

More detailed analyses show that KSČM continues to benefit from its customary advantages. Its electorate demonstrates clearly the highest identification with the preferred party. In comparison with other parties, the highest share of (KSČM) supporters expresses strong support for the activities of the party. Convenient programme of the party and closeness of its ideological direction are accentuated extremely strongly.

KSČM is the only party in the Post-Communist countries that did not undergo any radical transformation. By this, it freed the space at the left centre for Social Democrats. It is extremely difficult to credibly identify and grasp in complexity all the causes behind the existence of a strong anti-system or a refusal-to-protest party. Moreover, such task is beyond the possibilities of this article (confer with Sartori) as is the issue to what degree may KSČM be considered at all as a clearly anti-system party.⁹

Looking at possible government constellations, KSČM is in fact a mere appendix of the party environment. Its zero coalition potential and unwillingness

to recognise its government legitimacy meant and, most probably, will mean in the near future the exclusion of KSČM from the option to participate in power.

Conclusion

Unlike the results of the elections into the Parliament and the development of party preferences in previous election term, the current distribution of party preferences implies that the left wing as a whole weakened significantly (ČSSD + KSČM). Significant fall was recorded in preferences of Social Democracy throughout the post-election period. While shortly after the elections, a third of the voters would elect the Social Democrats, it would be more than fifty percent less since last spring up to now.

Nevertheless, when attempting to have an outlook concerning the next (regular?) parliamentary elections, it is correct to approach the current division of preferences with some temperance. Especially, the current level of support of ODS and ČSSD may change relatively significantly over a relatively short time. The momentary dominant position of ODS in the structure of party preferences and its head start on the other relevant parties involves a number of pitfalls. The mentioned variables are important: including how the "fluctuating" part of the former voters of ČSSD (who currently express inclination towards ODS) will act in the future, whether ODS retains its opposition ethos, the ability to make an attractive offer for the public of credible programme alternatives and the image of a consolidated party and, last but not least, how and with what consequences the left-centre government headed by ČSSD manages to implement the public budget reform and whether it succeeds in defending the reform in the eyes of the public, namely in the eyes of its natural electorate. At the moment, it seems that it is ODS that benefits the most from the adamant criticism of the public finance reform.

In this context, it is good to recall the situation of the previous election term. Approximately two years into the mandate of the (minority) cabinet of ČSSD, the preferences of Social Democracy fell accordingly, down to approximately the current level. And, to the contrary, the support for the former Čtyřkoalice was above the level of 30 percent for a long time. Moreover, KSČM regularly exceeded 20% at that stage. Today is a long time before the regular elections are to happen and it would be inappropriate at the moment to write the Social Democrats off because the Social Democrats actually have a traditional place in the Czech political spectrum. It is a party whose election potential is undoubtedly much higher than what the current preferences suggest. The tendency of an indecisive, volatile voter, perhaps currently preferring ODS, may again change in a relatively short period.

The positions of US-DEU and KSČM (yet, in both cases, for completely different reasons) establish a cardinal issue in the fragmentation of the left and the right in Czech party system. Assuming that KSČM is excluded from coalition alternatives, the possibility of alternation of homogenous government coalitions of the left and the right is practically restrained. On the other hand, the stagnating support of US – DEU may, in its final consequences, mean that the "schism on the right" is to be surpassed. Unless, of course, the party manages to vary its programme sufficiently from ODS (like ODA in its time) and suppresses the overlap of the electorate.

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² In individual months, all respondents with voting rights are asked an identical open question (i.e. a question not using a list of political parties). The data in the table represents spontaneous answers to the question: "Imagine that the election into the House of Representatives of the Parliament would happen next week. Which party would you vote for?"

³ CVVM has investigated the motivations behind party preferences in the long run (in March 2003 for the last time). Almost universally, the respondents agreed that the reason for their choice was identification with the party programme (91%), with the general ideological direction of the party (89%), and trust in the representatives leading the parties (88%). A distinctly smaller consensus was recorded for the importance of activities of the party up to now (78%). Two fifths of supporters of political parties mention that the opinion orientation of the family is behind their preferences. It is not a surprising finding that the factor of participation in party life is at the last place from the offered reasons. Currently, this is a reason for decision only for less than one tenth of the respondents. Traditionally, the feeling of agreement with the overall ideological inclination and programme of the preferred party is the strongest motive perceived. The impact of family environment on election behaviour of the respondents has undergone a relatively distinct transformation in time. In this respect, we may talk, especially over the last three years, about a relatively clear tendency to form and strengthen certain family value orientations, reflecting also in the political preferences of the respondents. On the other hand, the factor of direct participation of the respondent in party life recorded an opposite tendency, its influence has gradually decreased and, starting in the elections of 1998, it has remained at the same, i.e. approximately ten-percent level (in the last investigations, there was another decrease below this level).

⁴ Election decision is not clearly formed only by the membership in certain social groups. The most comprehensive interpretation of causes of election decision, offered by social sciences today, is based on the work of the researchers of the Michigan University – books and articles of A. Campbell and his colleagues from 1960s. R. Dalton (1988) summarised this concept into a *causal funnel model*.

⁵ The overall ratio of preferences of the coalition and the opposition was (in November 2003) 26.5%: 47.5%.

⁶ While shortly after the elections, in November 2002, 48% of respondents trusted the government, in November 2003, the trust decreased to only 35% of respondents.

⁷ The reform will apparently affect the groups of the population that are the traditional core electorate of ČSSD (state and public sector employees, small traders, people depending on social benefits, pensioners, etc.) the most. One of the consequences is the deviation of some of these people from support of ČSSD to ODS; the deviation is rather paradoxical, provided we consider that ODS leads its criticism from the "right" and that the alternative proposals of ODS are – at least as declared – incomparably more serious.

⁸ Especially taking into account the standard statistical error, which in this instance amounts to approximately two percent.

⁹ At the moment, let us be satisfied with a statement that KSČM is able to mobilise successfully special sub-cultural groups who wish that their vote – radical, strongly protest, negativistic, and frequently indeed anti-system – be heard in the public space. And this happens despite the fact that the party's presence in the making of the state will is more or less unrealistic.

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