Analysis of the European Parliament elections 2004 in the Czech Republic. Is the theory of second-order elections still valid?[1]

Lukáš Linek

The results of the European Parliament elections in the Czech Republic were surprising for party participants, as well as for observers and students of political science, both from the viewpoint of election turnover, and success achieved by certain political parties. Even though the pre-election polls predicted election turnover of forty percent, no one expected participation at 28 %. High election gains of the opposition parties, ODS (Civic Democrats) and KSČM (Communist Party), were expected. Yet, substantial failure of both government parties (ČSSD and US-DEU) came as a surprise. Whereas in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2002 ČSSD gained more than 30 %, in the EP elections they gained less than 8 %, with a loss of 22 % in the course of two years. Freedom Union (US-DEU) didn't get even a single mandate in the EP, because they gained less than 2 % and didn't reach the required threshold. On the other hand, two parties that had never gained a mandate in the lower chamber of the Parliament – Association of independent candidates-European Democrats (Sdružení nezávislých kandidátů-Evropští demokraté) and Independent Movement (hnutí Nezávislí) – which are relatively successful in some regions and which designate themselves as a non-party entity- gained two chairs in the EP.

These facts suggest that the basic frame for discussing EP elections, which was presented almost a quarter of a century ago by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt in the model of *second-order national election* [Reif, Schmitt 1980], could contribute to the understanding of election behaviour of Czech voters. In this text I will use the model to explain the different participation in the 2002 elections to the Chamber of Deputies and in the 2004 EP elections in the Czech Republic. In the first part of my paper I will present some theoretical reasons for different election participation in EP elections and in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies. With the help of the model I will propose a hypothesis about election behaviour on the individual level. In the second part I will put the election turnover in the 2004 EP elections in the context of other elections in the Czech Republic and I will explore basic differences in the election turnover between the 2002 elections to the Chamber of Deputies and the 2004 EP elections. I will also present the results of the empirical analysis of the proposed hypothesis and I will complete them by final notes and implications for further research of election behaviour.

1. Model of second-order national elections

On the basis of the first direct elections to European Parliament in 1979, Reif and Schmitt presented a model explaining the difference in election participation and election profits of individual political parties on regional, national and European level. [Reif, Schmitt 1980]. From the point of view of power, the national elections are most important in European states, because they contribute directly to the constitution of national governments. For this reason, national parliament elections are regarded as *most salient* both by political parties and by the public. These elections are regarded as *first-order national elections*. Other elections, for example elections to regional and local authorities or elections of the representative head of the state, are less significant. The authors call them *second-order national elections*. The

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basic differentiation of first-order and second-order elections consists in *what is at stake*. From this point of view it is clear that even the EP elections are second-order elections. The voters can influence the composition of the European Parliament (which doesn't have much power, however), but they can't affect the composition of European executive authorities, which is decided about by the representatives of national governments.

Reif and Schmitt also point out that second-order national elections are characterised by the same party system as the first-order elections and therefore the same political parties compete in these elections. According to the authors, the first-order and second-order elections in the same political system can't be separated. That is why the issues from the first-order arena affect behaviour in the second-order elections, even though they are concerned with something completely different. Voters decide according to national issues, overall party profile or by their attitude to the national leadership of the parties. The situation in the first arena affects significantly the second-order elections. Reif and Schmitt also present three basic statements that explain the differences between election behaviour in European and national elections. (1.) Election turnover in EP elections will be lower than in national elections. (2.) Political parties that constitute the government will fail in EP elections. (3.) Bigger parties will be less successful and smaller parties will be more successful in EP elections, as opposed to national elections.

Reif and Schmitt based their model on the analysis of aggregated data from election turnover and party profits in individual countries, where the EP elections took place in 1979. It is not based on analysis of individual data from post-election surveys. That's why their model is not a model of individual *electoral choice*. In order to transfer their model to an individual level it is necessary to explain the changes on the aggregated level by changes in individual behaviour, which are (according to the model) (1.) change from election participation to election non-participation; (2.) change in *party choice*. According to the logics of the second-order election all participants to the election – voters, political parties and media – believe that there isn't much power at stake in EP elections, which decreases the expected profits and on the contrary increases the expected costs of the election participation of individual voters. That's why lower participation of voters can be expected. The arguments concerning party choice are similar. In the EP elections, voters only choose the EP representatives and not the members of European Commission. Therefore they don't have to speculate, whether their vote will contribute to the constitution of this or that government. They can vote for parties, for which they wouldn't vote in national elections (for example because they wouldn't be sure, whether these parties would get over the electoral threshold for the distribution of mandates and their votes would not be useless). The change in party choice can be also explained by the priority of the first-order elections over the second-order elections. The EP elections usually take place in the middle of national election cycle, when the public preferences of government parties are decreasing. By turning away from government parties, voters want to signal their dissatisfaction, which may be only temporary. They can also express their dissatisfaction with the governmental politics by absence in the elections.

The concept of EP elections as elections of second order has not been significantly contested in literature; on the contrary. Michael Marsh tested this model on aggregated data for individual countries and parties and arrived at the same conclusion, claiming that the model holds true especially for countries, where national elections directly and significantly affect the government [Marsh 1998: 591–607]. On the basis of individual data analysis Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin and Eric Oppenhuis arrived at several conclusions that indirectly confirmed the model of second-order elections (the authors have not focused directly on the testing of the model). According to these authors the difference in election turnover in individual EU countries is caused mainly by institutional context (compulsory participation in elections or proportionality of voting system) and by concurrent elections to the lower

chamber of the Parliament. This last factor suggests that the election turnover increases, when political power is at stake. According to these authors, election turnover increases, when voters are convinced that their votes can contribute to the results that they desire [Franklin, van der Eijk, Oppenhuis 1996: 328–9]. These authors have also found out that party choice in the EP elections is first of all affected by strategic and ideological thoughts of the voters, that is by the parties' programme and by the involvement of the parties in the government [van der Eijk, Franklin, Oppenhuis 1996: 363–365].

The basic hypothesis, following from the theory of the second-order elections, claims the following:

H1 "Election turnout in the EP elections will be lower than in the national elections."

Theory of second-order elections implicitly contains other hypotheses dealing with election turnover. They are based on the assumption, that election turnover should be smaller, because parties, voters and media share their belief about the small significance of EP elections.

H2 "Citizens, who strongly identify themselves with a certain political party, will participate in the elections more frequently than other groups of people," because they are immune towards the prevailing message that the EP elections have small significance.

H3 "Voters, who are well informed by media, will participate in the EP elections less frequently than in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies", because they will be informed about small significance of EP elections.

H4 "Attitude to the EU has no affect on the election turnout, because citizens are led to participate in the elections by problems in the first-national arena."

2. Election turnover in the Czech Republic from 1992 to 2004 – continuous decrease

Election participation in the EP elections reached mere 28 percent, which is one of the lowest values of democratic elections turnout in the Czech Republic in the last fifteen years. Participation in the elections to the European Parliament in the Czech Republic was half the size of the participation in the referendum about accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in 2003 and in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2002. When investigating the differences and similarities between the first direct elections to the EP and national parliamentary elections, Reif and Schmitt claimed that the most important arena of political competition is the national level [Reif, Schmitt 1980]. This statement suggests the existence of hierarchy between individual types of elections (concerning, among others, election participation) and it confirms hypothesis number 1. Diagram 1 illustrates this hierarchy between individual elections with regard to election turnover. The highest turnover was in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies with the exception of the elections to regional bodies in 1994. We can apply the limit of 50 percent as a criterion to distinguish elections of the first and second order. It is evident that elections to the Senate, local authorities, and European elections belong in the category of second-order elections. In simple terms, for a Czech voter, elections to the Senate and to the EP are of the same significance.

Diagram 1 – Development of election participation in the Czech Republic in the elections of first and second order in the period from 1992 to 2004 (percent)
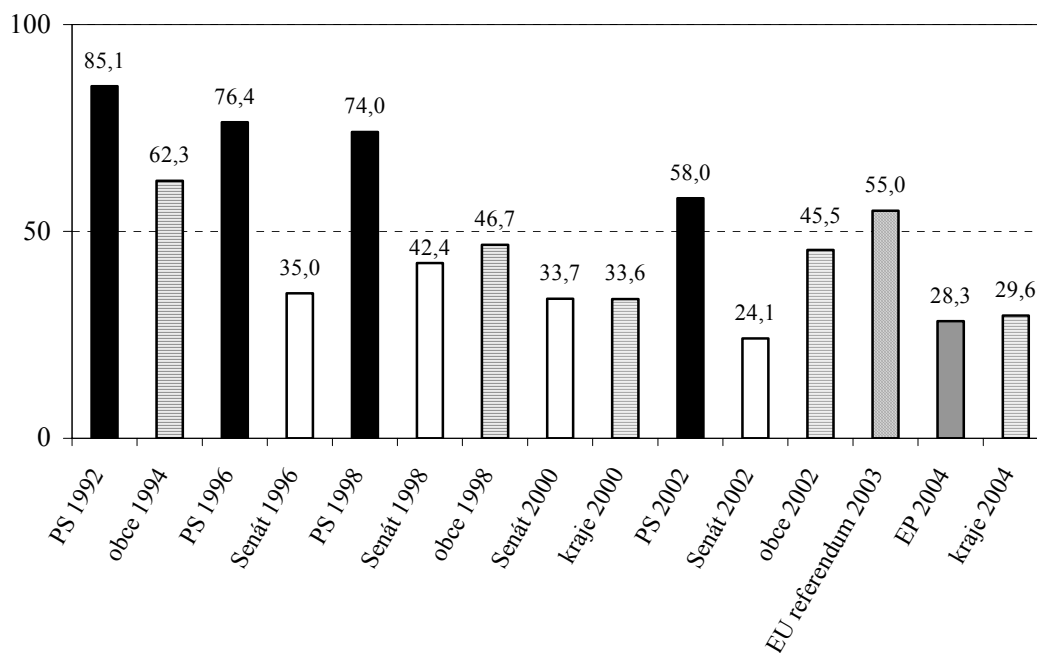
Source: Czech Sociological Institute (ČSÚ).

The comparison of election turnover in the 2002 elections to the Chamber of Deputies and in the 2004 EP elections in individual electoral districts suggests, that there was a total and uniform decrease of election turnaround in 2004 (diagram 2). The relation between the 2002 and the 2004 election turnover is positive and linear (it can be regarded as slightly curved). The smaller the election turnover was in 2002, the smaller it was in 2004. Determination ratio is 0,58, which means that election turnover from 2002 explains 58 % of election turnover in 2004. In those electoral districts, where the election participation was higher in 2002, election participation decreased faster than in the districts with small turnover in 2002 (the higher the election turnover was in 2002, the more it decreased in the given region in 2004).

Diagram 2 – Election participation in individual districts in the elections to the European Parliament and in the referendum about accession to the European Union in relation to the participation in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2002 (% of authorised voters)
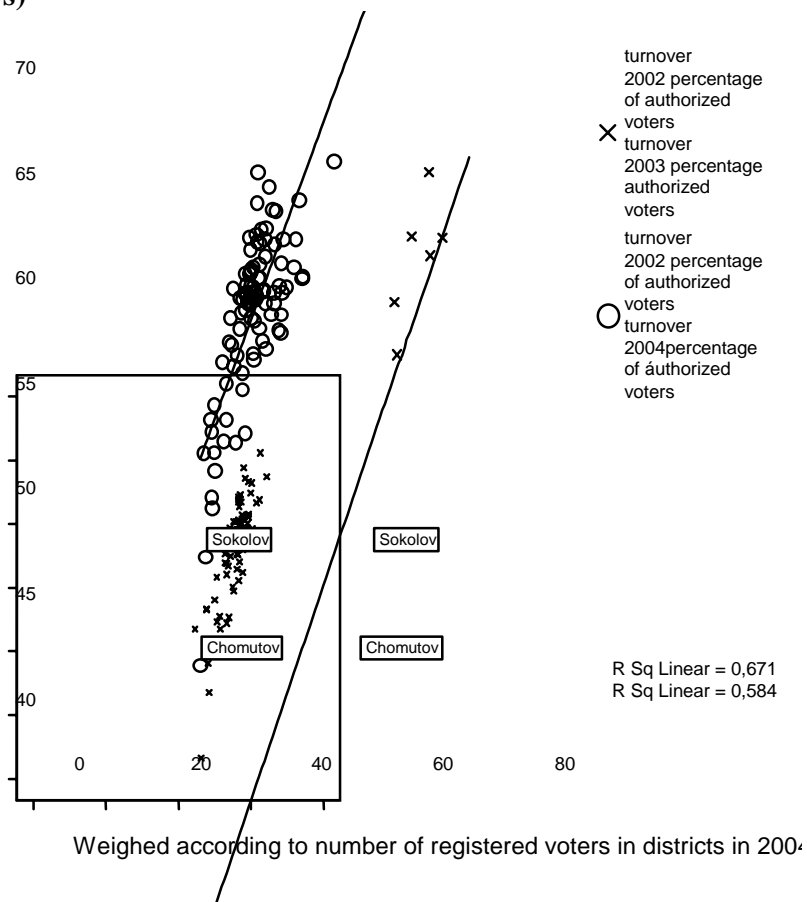
More detailed analysis of aggregated data about election turnover for individual electoral districts indicated that the regional differences in election turnover increased in 2004. Variation ratio (calculated as a proportion of standard deviation and average value expressed in percentage) of participation in the EP elections was 14 %, whereas in the previous elections and in the referendum it was only 7 %. Regional differences in election turnover doubled in comparison with the previous elections and the referendum. The increase of variation ratio suggests that the decrease of election turnover didn't have to be the same in all districts. The differences between districts with the highest and with the smallest election turnover grew larger in relation to the total extent of election turnover. The increase in regional variability in election participation can be seen as an indicator that there exist regionally differentially dispersed systematic elements that caused the decrease in election turnover.

The above mentioned fact that on the district level the aggregated data about participation in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2002 explain 58 % of the participation in the 2004 EP elections, indicates, that there is a strong relation between participation in both elections. In aggregated form this relation means, that in regions with high election turnover in 2002, there was a high election turnover in 2004 as well, even though it decreased faster than in regions with low election turnover in 2002. On individual level it can be expected that those, who participated in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2002, participated in the EP elections in 2004 with a higher probability than those, who didn't participate in the 2002

elections. By comparing information about participation in EP elections and in the last elections to the Chamber of Deputies we can asses the types of citizens according to their participation in elections: voters in European and national colours, voters in European elections only, voters in national colours only and non-voters in European and national colours.

I have created a two-dimensional table, which contains information about the number of individual types of those citizens (see Table 1) on the basis of data from the post-election questionnaire survey and data about election participation and non-participation in individual districts. Information in column *ECOL – aggregated data* are the results of the so-called ecological reasoning [about method and data see Linek 2004; for more detailed information see Thomsen 1987]. Information in column *EES – individual data* contain the results of the analysis of the post-election European Election Study 2004.[2] Data gained on aggregated level and on individual level are slightly different (results of the exit-poll survey after the EP elections in 2004 indicate that the similarity of data from the post election questionnaire survey is higher than that from the ecological reasoning. Whereas three types of electoral behaviour are represented equally – roughly by thirds (voters in European and national elections, voters in national elections only and non-voters in European and national elections), only a very small part of voters (reaching 5 % at a maximum) participated in the EP elections as well as in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies two years ago.[3] Those, who participated in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies, participated roughly in 47 % also in the EP elections. In case of those, who didn't participate in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies, this probability was only 5 %. EP elections, or rather political parties, candidates and media, have an ability to demobilize large part of population that participates in the elections to the national parliaments, and at the same time a very low ability to mobilize new voters among those, who don't participate in the national elections.

Table 1 – Participation and non-participation in the elections to the European Parliament in 2004 and in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2002 (total, line and column numbers)

	ECOL – aggregated data			EES – individual data		
	Voted Chamber of Deputies	**Didn't vote Chamber of Deputies**	**Total**	**Voted Chamber of Deputies**	**Didn't vote Chamber of Deputies**	**Total**
Voted Chamber of Deputies	23	5	28	30	2	32
Didn't vote EP	35	37	72	33	35	68
Total	58	42	100	63	37	100
Voted EP	40	13		47	5	
Didn't vote EP	60	87		53	95	
Total	100	100		100	100	
Voted EP	81	19	100	94	6	100
Didn't EP	49	51	100	48	52	100

Source: European Election Study 2004: the Czech Republic, Centre for Public Opinion research (CVVM) a Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Sociologický ústav AV ČR), weighed file according to election results; N=737.

[2] Even though the data from the post-election survez are weighed mainly according to the election results, the percentage in the table differs from the complete data about election participation (31,3 % instead of 28,2 %). It is caused by exluding the respondents, who couldn't participate in the 2002 elections because of their age, from the analzsis. These citizens had a small participation in the 2004 elections.

[3] For similar data see post-election survey carried out by European Commission.

More than seventy percent of people in the Czech Republic did not attend the EP elections, and half of these didn't attend the 2002 elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament either. The question about the reasons for not participating in the 2004 EP elections we can indicate the differences between the two groups of non-voters. In the research performed after the elections, respondents were openly asked about their reasons for not participating at the elections. Their answers were recoded into two basic types of election non-participation – *circumstantial abstainers* and *voluntary abstainers* [introduction of this typology see Blondel, Sinnott, Svensson 1997; in a different way Marsh 1991]. The answers that express objective obstacles preventing participation in the elections such as illness, old age, problems with election registration, lack of time, too much work or absence in the place of residence can be classified as circumstantial absence. Voluntary non-voters, on the other hand, are defined by such reasons, that express free choice of citizens not to participate at the elections for some reason. They include for example lack of interest in politics, European Union or Parliament, lack of information, distrust in politics, politicians or a belief, that attending elections is not going to change anything.[4] Table 2 shows, that circumstantial absence was much lower in case of EP elections. Moreover, the circumstantial abstainers participated much more in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies two years ago (65 %: 35 %) and on the contrary, voluntary abstainers in the EP elections participated much less in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies (57 %: 43 %). Striking majority of those, who didn't participate in the 2002 elections to the Chamber of Deputies are voluntary abstainers in the EP elections (77 %). There are only 18 % of circumstantial abstainers and 5 %d of EP voters.

Table 2 – Types of election participation in the elections to the European parliament in 2004 (percent)

	Participation in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies	**Non-participation in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies**
Participation in the EP elections	Voters in national and European elections 31	Voters in European elections only 2
Circumstantial absence in the in the EP elections	Voters in European elections only 2	Circumstantial abstainers in national and European elections 6
Voluntary absence in the EP elections	Voters in European elections only 2	Voluntary abstainers in national and European elections 28

3. Reasons for election participation
When testing the results of participation in the elections to the European Parliament I used the OLS regression analysis, even though the dependant variable has a form of dichotomy

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[4] An objection against this typology in sense of rationalization respondents' answers may be raised. However, among the individual types still exists a strong semantic distinction [for more info see Blondel, Sinnott, Svensson 1997: 247–248].

variable (participation – non-participation). The OSL regression analysis is used for these variables because it communicates the results more easily, even though logistical regression would be much more convenient [for example Eijk, Franklin 1996]. Most of the variables that I used for the analysis were recoded from their previous form or I created summary scales (I created two summary scales). The first one contains seven items, which measure internal and external political efficiency and which refer to the citizens' ability to act politically and to their trust in political system. The second one measures positive attitude to the European Union and it is formed by four variables which determine, whether the EU membership is a good thing for the citizens, whether the European integration should be extended and whether citizens believe that the EU decisions are in their interest.

Table 3 – Regression model for election participation in elections to the European parliament in 2004 (OLS regression, Enter method)

	Non-standardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients
	B	**Directional error**	**Beta**
(Constant)	−0,125	0,082	
Identification with a political party	0,205**	0,037	0,194
Interest in politics	0,151**	0,039	0,148
Positive attitude to the EU (scale alpha=0,78)	0,050**	0,014	0,143
Feeling of political effectiveness (scale alpha=0,63)	0,119*	0,048	0,092
Age	0,028	0,014	0,097
Watching the TV news before elections	0,036	0,021	0,065
Sex	0,051	0,031	0,055
Membership in Trade Union	0,081	0,036	0,075
Reading the dailies before elections	0,023	0,020	0,041
Education	0,010	0,019	0,020
Satisfaction with democracy in the EU	−0,006	0,042	−0,006
Salary	0,000	0,014	0,001
Retired	−0,001	0,051	−0,001
Satisfaction with democracy in the Czech Republic	−0,006	0,041	−0,005
Religion	−0,028	0,033	−0,029
Satisfaction with the government	−0,043	0,041	−0,035
Unemployed	−0,087	0,064	−0,046
Model	R − 0,455	R^2 − 0,207	Significance − 0,000

Source: European Election Study 2004: the Czech Republic, Centre for Public Opinion research (CVVM) a Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Sociologický ústav AV ČR), weighed file according to election results; N=720.

Even though majority of variables included in the model was not statistically significant (only 4 variables were), the model of 21 % explains variances in the election turnover, which is a similar number as in the western surveys. The first hypothesis, which I specified in connection with the model of the EP election as a second-order election, claimed, that the citizens, who strongly identify with a political party, participate more in elections than other groups of citizens. This hypothesis was confirmed, because party identity is statistically significant and has a positive direction. The second hypothesis claims, that the citizens, who

widely follow media in the pre-election period, will participate less in the elections, because they are informed about small significance of the EP elections. Both variables that measure impact of media are statistically insignificant, but at the same time they have a positive direction (that means that wider following of media increases probable election turnover). This hypothesis therefore cannot be confirmed. The last hypothesis deals with the influence of the positive approach to the EU on election turnover. Even though the model of the second-order elections indicates that voters in the EP elections are led by national politics and its problems and that the attitude to the EU shouldn't have any effect on election turnover, regression analysis showed, that positive attitude to the EU has a statistically significant effect on the participation in the EP elections.

4. Conclusion

Theory of the second-order elections was created a quarter of a century ago on the basis of an aggregated data analysis. It contains, however, some implicit assumptions about individual behaviour. In my paper I have tested those that concern election turnover. It turned out that in the Czech Republic, party identification and positive approach to the European Union had a positive effect on the EP elections participation. At the same time, we can't confirm the opinion that election turnover is significantly affected by media. The Czech media informed the voters that only a small share of the population would participate in the EP elections and that there wasn't power at stake, claiming that it was only a matter of issuing a certificate to the Czech government. In the Czech Republic, assumptions of the theory of the second-order elections on individual level in connection to election participation cannot be confirmed completely. More accurate answer would request a more sophisticated analysis based on monitoring interactive effects of individual variables.

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