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REPORT



The 2020 Czech regional elections: A story of a winner that lost

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ABSTRACT


The Czech 2020 regional elections were won by ANO, a party led by prime minister Andrej Babiš. ANO received a plurality of votes in 10 of the 13 regions, but joined the regional government in only 3 of them. This election report explains this puzzling outcome as a result of three main causes: the national political polarization which facilitated coordination between the fragmented opposition parties against the winner, the electoral collapse of the historical Left (the Social Democrats and the Communists), and profound shifts in the voter turnout of key demographic groups. Registering a sharp increase in the regional presence of the Pirate Party and moderate overall gains of the centre-right opposition, these regional elections amplified the polarization of Czech national-level politics. They also increased the regionalization of political competition.

KEYWORDS Czech politics; regional elections; democracy; election results; electoral behaviour

Introduction

Elections to the 13 regional assemblies which constitute the legislative bodies of the second tier of the Czech government were held on 2 and 3 October 2020. The elections were organized three years into the minority coalition government of the populist ANO party of prime minister Andrej Babiš and its junior partner, the Social Democrats (ČSSD). In order to secure a legislative majority, the government relied on the support of the Communist Party (KSČM). The government performance and the management of the COVID-19 epidemic circumscribed the main campaign issues as well as the constellation of political forces during and after the regional elections. The main issues reflected nationwide concerns, and political polarization mostly followed (and intensified) national political rivalries. Regional matters or issues that are related to the authority of the regional governments were

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only rarely reflected in the electoral campaign. On the other hand, a stronger electoral showing of regional-based movements and region-specific electoral alliances of national parties marked a trend towards a greater regionalization of political competition.

The election resulted in an apparent paradox. ANO won the election in 10 of the 13 regions, but was able to join the regional council (the governing body) and have its governor (*hejtman*) elected in only 3 of them. As a result, the governing coalitions in the majority of regions (in 9) are led by the centre-right parties which constitute the opposition at the national level. The elections were also marked by the electoral collapse of the two traditional leftist parties and ANO's political allies, ČSSD and KSČM. The elections created more fragmented regional assemblies and even more fragmented regional governments.

Attempting to explain the paradoxical outcome of the winner that lost, this report is structured in the following way. First, we explain the role of the regional governments and describe the rules governing the election. Second, we focus on some signs of a more regionalized political competition and on the pre-electoral context that was marked by the management of the COVID-19 crisis. The third section summarizes the main election results and presents explanations of the paradoxical outcome of the election. It draws on a regression and graphical analysis of election results and turnout at the level of 13,626 precincts. We conclude by emphasizing some trends in Czech regional politics and the nationwide implications of the election. The dataset and the script in R used for all analyses is available at the Harvard Dataverse repository (Lysek and Kouba 2021a). Further details on the statistical procedures, variables and data sources are available in the Online appendix.

Electoral rules and regional authority

Regional assembly elections are held simultaneously in the 13 Czech regions every 4 years. Elections to the Prague assembly are not synchronized with this election wave due to the special status of the capital city (Prague elections are simultaneous with municipal elections in the whole country which also take place every four years – but two years after the regional elections). In a comparative perspective of small unitary states, the Czech regional authorities enjoy a fairly substantial autonomy scoring 7 on the regional autonomy index (Hooghe et al. 2016). Their share of the total public expenditure is approximately 10% (OECD 2018). The Czech regions possess independent discreet powers in policy areas such as regional development, social policy, health care, secondary education, regional transportation, regional road network and cohesion policy. Additionally, Czech regional assemblies are endowed by a legislative initiative to propose bills to the Chamber of Deputies.

Regional assembly members are elected by a list proportional voting system. The number of seats elected in each assembly corresponds to one of three categories based on the regional population (45, 55 or 65). The whole territory of the region constitutes a single electoral district (Pink and Eibl 2018). The large district magnitude ensures fairly proportional results, although proportionality is somewhat reduced by the 5% electoral threshold. Once constituted, the regional assembly (*zastupitelstvo*) elects by a majority vote the regional governor (*hejtman*) and the regional executive authority, the regional council (*rada kraje*).

The lists in regional elections are flexible, constituting a hybrid between closed and open list systems as both the predetermined order of candidates on the lists as well as the preferential votes by voters decide which candidates will be elected (André et al. 2017). Each voter may cast up to 4 preference votes, but these votes matter only if a candidate receives 5% or more on the total number of votes cast for her party. Despite only a minority of candidates being elected due to preference votes, flexible lists nonetheless introduce an element of personalization and individual accountability as candidates in the regional elections are incentivized to emphasize their individual vote earning attributes.

The regional elections were held concurrently with the first round of elections to the Senate, the upper parliamentary chamber. Due to the staggered nature of senatorial elections (senators are elected for six-year terms in single-member districts with one third of the mandates being renewed every two years), voters in only approximately one third of the municipalities cast their votes in these concurrent elections. Contrary to expectations that second order election turnout is significantly boosted by other concurrently held second order electoral contests (Leininger, Rudolph, and Zittlau 2018), this effect does not materialize in the Czech regional elections. The quasi-random assignment of concurrency reveals that turnout rates in regional elections do not differ between municipalities with and without simultaneous senatorial elections (Lysek and Kouba 2021b).

The regionalization of political competition under the shadow of COVID-19

The 2020 regional election was the first in the Czech Republic to be held during the COVID-19 pandemic. This cast a heavy shadow on their outcomes. The most intensive phase of the pre-election campaign in September occurred during an unprecedented outbreak of new COVID-19 cases as part of the second wave of the epidemic in the Czech Republic. By September, the number of new reported cases and hospitalized patients had increased in record numbers, resulting in one of the worst situations in Europe. The ANO government response to COVID-19 was guided by populist

concerns resulting in ad-hoc and erratic policies that catered to instantaneous popular demands (Buščíková and Baboš 2020). According to an opinion poll, COVID-19 was the most salient issue for voters whose electoral decision was in part guided by the government response to it (CVVM 2020).

Rather than focusing on regional problems and overshadowed by the COVID-19 crisis, political communication of all parties constructed their campaigns around national-level issues, general appeals and personalities (iRozhlas.cz 2020). But the 2020 election also marked a progressive trend towards a higher regionalization of political competition. Although the elections were dominated by national politics, issues and parties as in previous election waves (Šaradín 2008; Ryšavý 2013; Pink and Eibl 2018), regional political particularities were magnified in 2020. This is manifested in three principal dimensions.

First, regional political particularities are reflected in the highly divergent composition of pre-electoral alliances between national parties in different regions (Table 1). Low legal barriers for coalition formation encourage parties to form such alliance. This often brings together parties in convenient partnerships that are strictly limited to a particular region (see the online appendix for the full composition of such alliances). But this does not preclude them competing against each other in other regions. Only ANO, the Communist Party and the far-right SPD did not form any coalitions. The dwindling national support for the social democrats (ČSSD) meant that they entered coalitions with the liberal Green party in the Hradec Králové and Zlín regions, while relying on a local populist movement, the Patriots, in the Olomouc region and on other regional movements in the Pardubice region. Some of these regional alliances reflected the ongoing attempts at national-level integration of opposition parties. The conservative Civic Democrats (ODS) formed pre-electoral coalitions with other centre-right parties (TOP09 and STAN) in some regions. The most closely watched coalition impacting national politics was the alliance between the opposition Pirate Party and STAN. The regional elections allowed testing whether their alliance could produce compatible electorates. In the end, such an alliance was formed in only one region (Olomouc).

Second, vote choice in Czechia is strongly conditioned by socio-demographic variables as parties position themselves to capture particular segments of the electorate based principally on class, education, age and type of economic activity. But with highly unequal regional development after the fall of communism, regions have been drifting apart in terms of their socio-economic composition. These increasing differences have deepened regional differences in political behaviour and representation. Centre-right parties concentrate their vote in economically core regions such as Central and South Bohemia and the Pardubice and Hradec Králové regions. The online appendix (Table 2) shows the results of regression models using

Table 1. Election results.

Region	ANO	Pirates	ODS	STAN	KDU- ČSL	ČSSD	SPD	TOP09	KSČM	UFO +ProMOST	Trikol+Souk +NEZ	KVC +VOK	HNHRM	Jihočeši
Central Bohemia	18.54	14.41	19.77	22.21		4.52	4.63	5.89*	4.26					
South Bohemia	18.12	12.85	17.52	7.38	10.45*	8.74	4.67		4.77					6.54
Píseň	22.5	13.56	21.23*	14.9*	4.36	5.85	6.18		5.48			6.51	7.29	
Karlovy Vary	24.79	11.56	7.35*	14.66*		3.7	7.25		4.41					
Ústí nad Labem	25.88	10.09	12.37	11.17		3.16	8.94		6.26	5.97				
Liberec	17.85	9.86	8.59	38.57**	3.83*	2.16	6.09		3.22					
Hradec Králové	22.04	14.41	23.53*		8.32*	8.88*	5.45	7.84*	4.51					
Pardubice	19.61	12.68	14.10*	7.9	13.41*	14.76*	4.85		4.01					
Vysočina	18.48	13.2	13.19*	10.87*	11.96	11.86	4.66	4.99*	5.26					
South Moravia	19.76	13.8	12.77*	10.4*	15.54	5.67	6.25	6.62*	4.44					
Olomouc	27.01	19.51*	10.36		18.43*	4.82*	7.85		4.71					
Zlín Region	19.08	13.26	10.04	12.69	18.62	8.45	6.04		4.04		5.99			
Moravia-Silesia	30.24	11.86	13.84*	4.30*	9.57	6.95	7.68		5.89					
Total (Czech Republic)	21.82	12.02	6.96	6.04	5.1	4.92	6.13		4.75					

Note: * Party ran in a coalition with another party or parties in the following regions (see volby.cz). The full composition of such coalitions is listed in the online appendix. **SLK – Mayors for Liberec region. Results are available at: <https://volby.cz/pls/kz2020/kz?xjazyk=EN> (Czech Statistical Office)
The vote shares do not add up to 100% because results of minor parties that did not reach a single seat (i.e. at least 5% votes) in any region are not included.

aggregate data in the 13,623 electoral precincts with dependent variables corresponding to vote shares of the three parties (ANO, SPD and KSČM) that presented solely individual candidate lists in all regions, or formed an alliance in only a few of them – the Pirates and Social Democrats. Similar models are produced for the centre-right parties national parties (ODS, KDU-ČSL and TOP09) but they only include precincts in those regions where they ran individually or constituted the dominant force within the alliance. Including regions where they ran in large alliances with other parties would not be comparable. Census data at the precinct level is used for the construction of independent variables (see Lysek, Pánek, and Lebeda 2021). Data sources, data description and further details on these analyses is available in the online appendix.

Despite the obvious caveats concerning the ecological inference problem, the results reveal a poorer showing of ANO in areas with younger and better educated electorates (measured by the share of the elderly and of inhabitants with a college degree), with lesser entrepreneurial dynamism (measured by the share of self-employed), and where citizens face economic harshness and financial insecurity (pervasive restraint orders and unemployment). With some notable exceptions, these general tendencies also apply to the KSČM, SPD and ČSSD. The spatial conditioning of electoral support for the Pirate Party and the centre-right parties is the mirror image of these patterns.

Table 2. Election winners and composition of regional councils by region.

Region	Winner (%)	Governing coalition	Governor (party)
Central Bohemia	STAN (22.2%)	STAN + ODS + Pirates + Allies 1	Pecková (STAN)
South Bohemia	ANO (18.1%)	ODS + Together + ČSSD + J2012	Kuba (ODS)
Plzeň	ANO (22.5%)	ODS & TOP09 + Coalition 1 + Pirates	Mauritzová (ODS)
Karlovy Vary	ANO (24.8%)	STAN & TOP09 + Pirates + ODS & KDU-ČSL + MHHR + VOK + SNK1	Kulhánek (STAN)
Ústí nad Labem	ANO (25.9%)	ANO + ODS + Allies 2	Schiller (ANO)
Liberec	SLK (38.6%)	SLK + Pirates + ODS	Půta (SLK)
Hradec Králové	ODS&STAN (23.5%)	ODS & STAN + Pirates + KDU-ČSL & Allies + Coalition 2	Červíček (ODS)
Pardubice	ANO (19.6%)	3PK + ODS & TOP09 + Coalition 3 + STAN	Netolický (ČSSD)
Vysočina	ANO (18.5%)	Pirates + ODS & Mayors + KDU-ČSL + ČSSD + Mayors	Schrek (ODS)
South Moravia	ANO (19.8%)	KDU-ČSL + Pirates + ODS + STAN	Grolich (KDU-ČSL)
Olomouc	ANO (27.0%)	Pirates & STAN + Allies 3 + ODS	Suchánek (STAN)
Zlín	ANO (19.1%)	ANO + Pirates + ODS + ČSSD	Holiš (ANO)
Moravia-Silesia	ANO (30.2%)	ANO + ODS & TOP09 + KDU-ČSL + ČSSD	Vondrák (ANO)

Third, the 2020 election saw an increase in the political presence of local and regional – based movements. In the Liberec region, the Movement of Mayors and Independents (SLK) overwhelmingly won the election for the third time with 38.6% votes after becoming the first regionally based political movement to do so in Czechia in 2012 (Ryšavý 2013, 634). Other purely regional parties have also entrenched their position in regional councils (e.g. Jihočeši 2012 in South Bohemia) and became important coalition partners of national parties in the Hradec Králové and Pardubice regions. These local movements can count on well-known local politicians which makes them ideal allies of smaller national parties.

Election outcomes: Why did the winner lose?

Despite the governing ANO party receiving most votes in 10 of the 13 regions, it was able to enter the governing coalition and secure the post of the regional governor in only 3 regions (see Table 2). In spite of the electoral dominance of ANO, the remaining centre-left and centre-right parties created blocs that both secured a majority in the regional assembly and excluded ANO from regional councils. This was a product of three main causes.

First, this was a direct consequence of national-level politics which generated intensive polarization between ANO, allied with its two coalition partners (the Communists and Social Democrats), and the bloc of centre-right parties (ODS, TOP09, STAN, KDU-ČSL) together with the Pirate Party. The national-level contest of these two blocs spilled over into regional politics, affecting the preferences and strategies of coalition formation. These parties discarded post-election cooperation with ANO and coordinated together to exclude the election winner from regional governments. The 'entrepreneurial party' ANO rose to prominence as a spinoff of billionaire Andrej Babiš's business empire consisting of 200 firms and almost 30,000 employees (Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020). It positioned itself in the centre of the Czech ideological space (Hájek 2017). In particular, ANO adopted a 'technocratic' brand of populism that discursively emphasizes allegedly apolitical leadership skills and administrative competence and prides itself on its lack of coherent ideological grounding (Havlík 2019; Guasti 2020). In doing so, ANO aggressively attacks all established parties of both the left and right that allegedly engage in corrupt behaviour (Havlík 2019). This radical stance gradually alienated most centre-right parties and the Pirate Party from potentially cooperating with ANO at the national level.

Second, the inability of ANO to enter governing coalitions was also driven by another notable feature of the election: the crushing defeat of both leftist parties. The Communists and the Social Democrats wielded insufficient political strength or were completely eliminated from some regional assemblies.

Without the support of both national-level allies, ANO was unable to assemble majority coalitions in most regions. The Communist Party lost its only governorship (in the Ústí nad Labem region) that it has ever held in the post-communist era after receiving a meagre 6.3% there (down from 15.8% in 2016). Overall, the party received only 13 mandates of assembly members (down from 86 in 2016), passed the 5% threshold in only four regions, and entered the governing coalition in none. The collapse of the Social Democrats was even more dramatic. The number of elected assembly members was reduced to only 30, down from 125 in 2016 and 205 in 2012. They received no representation in 5 of the 13 regions.

The third driver of the paradoxical election result was profoundly changed voter behaviour and patterns of voter turnout compared to previous elections. The electoral-institutional setting of the Czech regional elections is, in theory, favourable to promoting an overall high turnout. The large district magnitude in proportional systems is conducive to higher turnout. Similarly, weekend voting is expected to bolster turnout rates (Kouba, Novák, and Strnad 2021). Furthermore, the dense network of polling places in the Czech Republic significantly decreases voting costs (Kudrnáč 2021). In spite of this, the overall turnout rate was low, only 38.0%, which is only a slight increase over the participation rates in previous regional elections (34.6% in 2016 and 36.9% in 2012).

However, the overall figure of aggregate turnout conceals some powerful shifts in the turnout of particular social groups between the 2016 and 2020 elections. This is evident from a model which regresses the change in turnout between 2016 and 2020 on a variety of social characteristics of the precincts (Figure 1). The associations of several key variables indicate that the better-educated and urban voters were much more mobilized in 2020. This benefited the centre-right parties, especially TOP09, ODS and the new Pirate party with an urban young middle-class electorate (Maškarinec 2020). Concomitantly, social groups that disproportionately constitute the electorate of ANO and the two leftist parties turned out in lower numbers compared to 2016. Precincts with higher numbers of unemployed citizens, with a higher share of elderly voters, and with a higher share of people facing distrait registered significant declines of voter turnout. The model also includes a variable measuring the number of identified COVID-19 cases at the level of the 76 districts. The coefficient suggests that a higher local incidence of COVID-19 deterred eligible voters from turning out. These were very likely elderly voters, the most vulnerable to the disease, who also happen to disproportionately favour ANO and the two leftist parties.

Facing these electoral and political constraints, the victorious ANO was able to form a governing coalition and obtain a governor under only one of two very restrictive conditions. First, ANO had to become an undisputed winner with a very large electoral margin in an extremely fragmented

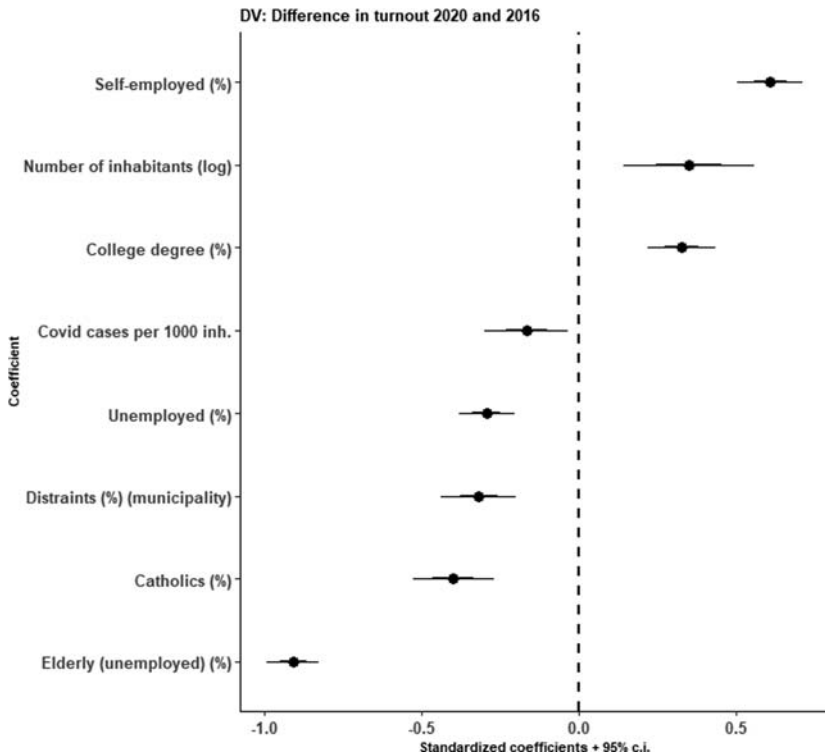


Figure 1. Regression model of change in regional elections turnout between 2016 and 2020. Note: Standardized coefficients are employed for ease of comparison of effect sizes across predictors on different measurement scales (coefplot package in R). $N=13542$. $R^2 = 0.22$.

regional party system. Such dominance allowed ANO to forge a governing coalition because alternative coalitions excluding ANO would have to rely on parties of both the far right (SPD) and far left (KSČM). Though numerically possible, this was not an attractive option for the centre-right and centre-left parties some of which therefore chose to ally themselves with ANO instead. This was the case in two regions. In the Ústí region, ANO won with 25.9%, more than twice as many votes as the second party (ODS with 12.4%). Similarly, in Moravia-Silesia, ANO won its largest vote share (30.2%), far ahead of the second biggest vote-getter (the centre-right alliance of ODS and TOP09 with 13.9%).

The second condition facilitating an ANO governorship occurred when a strong regional issue overshadowed the partizan rivalries and issues inherited from national politics. In only one such region, Zlín, was there such an overarching mobilizing issue that profoundly reconfigured the regional political alliances. The Christian democratic governor Jiří Čunek pushed for a costly

project of moving the principal regional hospital to a new site, whereas most opposition parties favoured a gradual reconstruction in its existing location. The regional election was therefore effectively converted into a referendum on the hospital and ANO was able to cobble together a coalition of centrist parties excluding the Christian Democrats.

The remaining governorships were distributed between the national centre-right opposition parties (ODS, STAN, KDU-ČSL) and ČSSD which received one governor. Although it did not receive a single governorship, the opposition Pirate Party gained electorally the most relative to the 2016 election and joined 9 governing coalitions (it received 99 assembly seats compared to mere 5 in 2016). The Pirate Party – with a programme nominally devoted to transparency and inclusiveness, and with an internal structure based on plebiscitary deliberation – thus confirmed its meteoric electoral rise as had already been registered in the 2017 legislative and 2018 municipal elections when the first Pirate mayor of Prague was elected (Vodová and Voda 2020). The far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) retained stable electoral support, as it had received already in 2016. However, identified by the tight personalist control of its leader Tomio Okamura (Kubát and Hartlínski 2019), and an Islamophobic, anti-EU and xenophobic discourse (Slačálek and Svobodová 2018), the party was an unacceptable coalition partner and so remained excluded from all governing coalitions.

Conclusion

Twenty years after the first elections to the newly established regional assemblies in Czechia, the 2020 elections showed signs of a gradual, although still limited, regionalization of political competition. Not only purely regional-based movements but also region-specific alliances of national parties strengthened their political presence. This political differentiation is in part driven by the highly divergent trajectories of socio-economic development of Czech regions. As Czech vote choice is strongly conditioned by socio-economic determinants, this also translates into increasing regional political differences. However, the polarizing logic of national politics as well as the overshadowing impact of COVID-19 prioritized national concerns, issues and political strategies over purely regional ones. The Pyrrhic electoral victory of the governing ANO did not translate into regional executive power not because of its regional performance, but because the competing opposition parties successfully coordinated to exclude it due to national considerations and because its political allies, the Communists and the Social Democrats, suffered a major electoral defeat.

The rise to national power of the populist ANO was interpreted as a sign of democratic backsliding (Vachudova 2020) and a challenge to the liberal democratic paradigm (Havlík 2019). However, the major electoral setback

of ANO and its allies in the 2020 regional elections is more consistent with a view that the Czech populist advances still face countervailing popular and institutional constraints that derail the country's path towards democratic backsliding (Bakke and Sitter 2020; Cianetti and Hanley 2021). The declining electoral support of ANO and its allies, as well as the effective pre-electoral and post-electoral coordination between centrist parties to exclude the winning ANO from regional governments are clear signs of a backlash against the real or imagined democratic abuses of the populist movement. Importantly, the regional elections served as a testing ground of the opposition parties' strategies for the general elections scheduled for October 2021. To the extent that the excessive fragmentation of the opposition camp had earlier meant a feeble barrier against the advance of populism, the regional elections for the first time successfully tested the ability of the electorate to mobilize against these challenges, and of the centrist parties to cooperate in this regard. They made it easier for a similar strategy and a similar outcome to occur in the 2021 national election.

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