

ELECTIONWATCH

CZECH REPUBLIC



Czech Republic Post-Election Watch: May 2010 Parliamentary Elections

The parliamentary elections of May 28-29, 2010, have been called an "earthquake" in Czech politics, producing changes in the party system that have altered the fundamental parameters of how politics will be done in the country in the future. First and foremost, the Czech Republic can no longer be described as having two major umbrella political parties - one on the left and the other on the right - competing largely on socio-economic issues. Instead, the Czech party system is now composed of five medium-sized parties.

Furthermore, for the first time, issues of political conduct (public integrity, transparency and corruption) have taken a firm position in the set of criteria upon which Czech voters base their voting behavior. As was the case in the 2006 elections, pre-election forecasts failed to grasp the coming change; while they correctly assessed the rise of new parties, they failed to capture the ebb in popularity of the two major parties.

Results and Consequences

Party	Vote (%)	Number of Seats	Change from 2006
Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD)	22.1	56	-18
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	20.2	53	-28
Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (TOP 09)	16.7	41	+41
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM)	11.3	26	0
Public Affairs (VV)	10.9	24	+24
Christian Democratic Union (KDU-CSL)	4.4	0	-13
Party of Civic Rights - Zemanovci (SPO)	4.3	0	None
Sovereignty (S)	3.7	0	None
Green Party (SZ)	2.4	0	-6

With a turnout 62.6 percent - just 1.9 percent lower than in 2006 - the election invalidated a number of long-held assumptions about Czech party politics. Never before, since the fall of communism, had Czech voters expressed such intense dissatisfaction with their political class. Overall, traditional parties - including the Greens - lost almost two million votes, out

of a total of 5.2 million cast, when compared to their results in 2006. The two major parties, the Civic Democratic Party on the right and the Czech Social Democratic Party on the left, lost 44 percent and 33 percent of their vote total, respectively, compared to the previous elections. For the first time since 1996, the combined share of the vote taken by the two major parties did not exceed 50 percent.

The loss had more dramatic consequences for the CSSD. While the ODS is set to form a new government despite its worst-ever result, the CSSD - a clear favorite in pre-election polls - will almost certainly retire to the opposition benches. CSSD Chairman Jiri Paroubek resigned as soon as the results were in, launching a major leadership overhaul. Punished by voters who repeatedly identified Paroubek as one of their least-favorite politicians and who were put off by the party's negative campaign, and deprived of votes by an insurgent campaign by another center-left party (chaired by former CSSD Chairman Milos Zeman), the party remains, however, in power in 13 out of the 14 regional governments in the country - a potentially powerful base upon which to rebuild.

On the right, the ODS lost its leading position in the capital city of Prague for the first time since 1992; it was bested in percentage of the vote across the city by newcomer Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity, although both parties ended up winning eight parliamentary seats there. In the country at large, and most specifically in Prague, the party had come to be associated with an intolerable level of mismanagement and corruption that drove away even the historically most dependable parts of its base. Nationwide, it is now difficult for the ODS to claim sole leadership on the center-right as it could in the past. As for the other, smaller traditional player on the center right, the Christian Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party failed to win a single seat; this will be the first parliament since 1920 with no KDU-CSL members. After the defection of a number party leaders to TOP 09, the KDU-CSL's traditional voter base in the rural areas of Southern Moravia proved insufficient to keep the party in parliament. Voters also decided not to return the Greens to parliament. Both the KDU-CSL and the Greens were part of the ODS-led center-right coalition that collapsed in 2009; the chairmen of both parties also resigned after the elections.

The decline of the two traditional major parties was intertwined with the rise of two new parties that have only recently emerged as players on the political scene: TOP 09 and VV. While neither represents radical criticism of the political system, as such, both were able to provide a political home for the large group of voters dissatisfied with the ODS and CSSD. In effect, the emergence of TOP 09 and VV enabled voters in the center of the spectrum to express a protest vote without having to go to the radical right or left. The radical right Workers Party of Social Justice obtained only 1.2 percent of the vote, while the other radical group on the right, the National Party disintegrated prior to the elections. On the left, the unreformed Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia lost slightly in percentage terms compared to its result in 2006; it held even at 26 seats and could not absorb any of the runoff from the CSSD. One message of these elections was that a government including - or tolerated by - the Communists seems to be anathema for Czech voters. Despite losing the least of all traditional parties, the ghetto status of the KSCM appears to have been definitively confirmed, at least as long as it remains in its current configuration.

Another sign of intense dissatisfaction with the established party politics was the massive use of preferential votes. Driven by discontent and encouraged by various public initiatives, voters used a change in the election process that increased the number of preference votes they could use to boost specific candidates from two to four to express their opinion on the

quality - and integrity - of candidates. These votes made a difference, as several candidates were given seats in parliament even though they originally held practically unelectable positions near the bottom of their respective party lists. When all the preference votes were counted, some lists had even been "decapitated," as voters denied preference to list leaders and essentially ensured they would not make it into parliament. The most notable case was that of controversial ODS Deputy Chairman Ivan Langer, who failed to win a seat despite being the leader of the regional list in Olomouc. The advent of TOP 09 and VV, on the one hand, and the impact of preferential votes, on the other, account for the fact that out of the 200 members of the lower chamber of the Czech parliament, 114 will be freshmen. Also, a record number of women, 44, will occupy seats in parliament.

Prospects for a New Government

A major novelty in the aftermath of the 2010 elections is that a government with a clear majority in the Chamber is not only desired, but also viable and, indeed, probable. The surprising success of TOP 09's uncompromising, market-liberal appeal seems to have made a center-right "coalition of fiscal responsibility" possible, with VV agreeing with TOP 09 and the ODS on the necessity of a "debt-free future." ODS, TOP 09 and VV signed an agreement on June 9, 2010, outlining their intention in principle to form a ruling coalition and among them would have a total of 118 seats in the lower house - the largest number for a Czech government since 1992. Based on this agreement, President Vaclav Klaus has appointed ODS Interim Chairman Petr Necas as formateur of the new government.

The three parties involved have now formed teams of experts designed to develop a common program in seven broad policy areas, which would later be included as part of a coalition agreement that would, in turn, become the official program of the new government. As for the time line, the actors involved envision the work to be completed in one to two months. For the time being, however, VV continues to take a somewhat stand-offish position on its formal participation in a coalition, saying it might opt for the support of the government in parliament on policy measures related to a balanced budget, transparency, and the fight against corruption. VV has announced that any coalition agreement would need to be approved by an internal on-line ballot.

It should be noted that some uncertainty regarding the emerging ODS-TOP09-VV coalition also seems to prevail among the "old guard" of ODS party bosses linked to the business world. According to some sources, this part of the party has attempted, but failed, to oust acting leader Necas in order to push through its preference for a grand coalition with CSSD that would be friendlier to its business partners and interests, unencumbered by calls for cracking down on corruption and changing the way politics is done in the country. In the meantime, Necas has called a party congress for the end of June and announced his ambition to run for the post of chairman, presumably in an effort to firm up the ground under his feet with a mandate from the congress.

Provided an "anti-populist," center-right, ODS-TOP09-VV coalition appears in the due course of events, it may still be a challenge for the three parties to maintain stability for a full, four-year term. As new parties, TOP 09 and VV have both been accused of not being coherent enough politically or ideologically to survive and prosper over time. TOP 09 has been accused of being a vehicle for homeless Czech political personalities, who used the support of business circles and the low public regard for the CSSD and ODS to engineer a way to carry on their political careers. Interestingly, the one exception to this accusation

seems to be party Chairman (and Prince) Karel Schwarzenberg, who has emerged from the 2010 elections with a sort of star quality - he's already being touted as the logical successor to incumbent President Klaus. But it is primarily the VV that is singled out for attack on grounds of opaque financial backing and translucent, rather than transparent, policy orientation. The party - as has been the case with similar groupings in other countries - must resolve the question whether it is just a new jumping board for corporate interests that in the past supported the ODS, and often also the CSSD, or represents a genuinely new alternative to the stagnation that dominated Czech politics in the past two election cycles.

IRI in Europe

In Europe, the International Republican Institute (IRI) focuses on helping political parties become more issue-oriented and responsive to voters' concerns. IRI's training helps parties create more coherent platforms, better strategic communications, more effective grassroots organizations and stable party foundations or institutes that can provide necessary training and analytical support. IRI is also active in expanding political participation among women, youth and minorities. By working with governments and civil society to concentrate more on policy, IRI seeks to make the region's democracies more responsive and sustainable.

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