

ELECTIONWATCH

CZECH REPUBLIC



Czech Republic Pre-Election Watch: October 2010 Senate and Municipal Elections

The tradition of a bicameral parliament in Prague dates back to the era of interwar Czechoslovak democracy, and after the dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federation in 1993, the constitution of the Czech Republic established the second chamber known as the Senate. However, establishing the Senate provided its share of challenges. The notion of creating another elected house in a small, largely homogeneous country was universally unpopular and several attempts were made to abolish the Senate before it could be constituted in the early years of the republic. These attempts ultimately failed and the first elections took place in November 1996 - almost four years after the constitution was written.

The Senate, which serves as the upper chamber of the parliament, is elected separately from the Chamber of Deputies, for which elections were held in May. For the upcoming elections, one-third of the upper chamber will be decided in October 2010, with the first round taking place on October 15-16, along with municipal elections. A second round, required where no candidate secures a majority, will take place on October 22-23. Czech elections are held over a two-day period, always on a Friday and Saturday.

In drafting the new constitution, it was expected that the upper house would supplement and counterbalance the more partisan lower house as a forum of "personalities" independent from political parties, counteracting what was perceived as growing polarization of society and attempting to raise the level of public debate. The Senate has limited (not absolute) veto power, giving it the ability to block legislation passed by the Chamber of Deputies, which then can override a Senate veto with qualified majority. The Czech constitution also allows certain legislative measures and decisions to be passed by various majorities achieved in a joint session of both chambers; the election of the president is the primary example.

To make differences with the lower house clear, Senate elections are run according to different rules than elections to the Chamber. Senators are elected in 81 single-member geographical districts of roughly 100,000 people each, the boundaries of which are different from those of any other political body in the country. In contrast to the proportional-representation, party-list system used for the Chamber, the election system for seats in the Senate is a simple majority mandate - with 50 percent plus one vote required for a candidate to be elected. If the first round of the elections does not deliver a winner, the two most successful contenders move on to a run-off. As in the United States, one-third of the seats is up for election every second year, and senators are elected for six-year terms, a further factor contributing to the Senate's capacity to produce majorities different from those in the lower chamber. In these elections, 27 seats are being contested.

Although the actual day-to-day work of the Senate has been organized from the beginning along party lines, the rules of candidacy and the majority-vote election system provide a

space for independent - or, more often and more precisely, unaffiliated - candidates to be elected. Senatorial elections regularly return unaffiliated candidates, even though this trend has been declining over time. In fact, many nominally independent candidacies turn out to be only tactical moves, with the successful senators immediately joining a party caucus once taking their seats.

What is at Stake?

The May 2010 Chamber of Deputies elections resulted in a new right-of-center majority in the lower house composed of the traditionally strong Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and two newly created parties - the conservative Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity (TOP 09) and the liberal Public Affairs (VV). The coalition is hoping to defend a sufficient number of Senate seats to confirm a mandate for its economic and institutional reforms and to prevent an anti-reform majority in a new Senate from blocking them.

A review of the seats up for competition in this cycle shows that this will not be easy. The ruling ODS is defending 19 seats (of its total of 36) and TOP 09 six (out of eight seats it holds), most of which are held by senators elected as independents who later joined the TOP 09 caucus when it was created in 2009. One is the seat vacated by Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg when he entered the government. As a new party, VV has had no senators so far, and the elections will indicate whether the party's support outside of the capital city of Prague is strong enough to capture at least a few seats. The Christian Democrat Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-CSL), which suffered a serious defeat in May after a group of deputies splintered to establish TOP 09, is defending one seat, as is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia. Finally, and more importantly for the future of the current center-right coalition government, the major opposition Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) does not have to defend any of its 29 seats in this cycle (23 of which it won in 2008), and will therefore consider any gain a success. The CSSD won the 2008 senate elections for the first time - taking all but four of the 27 seats competed - and broke the ODS absolute Senate majority.

Apart from being a test of the strength of new parties, the elections are seen as 1) a litmus test that will either confirm or reject the idea of a longer-term negative trend for the ODS, 2) a referendum on the series of reforms announced by the new government, and 3) an assessment of the effect of the opposition counter-reform campaign being waged by the CSSD. The Social Democrats' position, however, is itself weakened by the fact that the party has no chairman following the May resignation of Jiri Paroubek. Interim Chairman Bohuslav Sobotka faces opposition from other leadership contenders, and core CSSD voters (who traditionally do not participate in large numbers in senate elections, even under the best of circumstances) are confused by the situation within the party.

Apart from the concerns of the parties, these elections have produced some interesting races in various districts. First, the entire top leadership of the Senate is defending seats this year, including long-time Senate Speaker Premysl Sobotka, and deputy chairmen Jiri Liska and Jiri Sneiderger, all from the ODS. Former European Commissioner Vladimir Spidla is running for the Social Democrats in Cesky Krumlov, and would be the likely CSSD candidate for speaker, should the party win a majority. CSSD Deputy Chairman and Member of Parliament Zdenek Skromach is also seeking a seat in the Senate.

The race in Kutna Hora, in particular, has made for headlines as all the main competitors are

women and all are current or former parliamentarians and all well-known figures at a national level: Michaela Sojdrovova, Interim Chairwoman of KDU-CSL; Lucie Talmanova, former deputy chairwoman of the Chamber of Deputies and the wife of former Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek for the ODS; former CSSD parliamentarian Jana Volfová, former CSSD deputy and ally of former Prime Minister Zeman, who chairs the Party for a Decent Life and is running on the nationalist and Euroskeptic Sovereignty list; and former Green parliamentarian Olga Zubová, who voted with the opposition to bring down Topolánek's ODS government last year and is now chairwoman of the Democratic Party of the Greens.

Overall, though, it seems that the number of candidates drawn from the worlds of sports, show business, and business, as well as their chances of being elected, has been kept at a minimum in these elections, unlike in previous years when such well-known figures were called upon to serve as placeholders for the major parties.

In case of local council elections, which will take place along with the first round of the senate elections, attention will be focused on major urban areas, most importantly Prague. The ODS has traditionally been dominant in major Czech cities - often in coalition with other center-right partners, or, occasionally, with the Social Democrats - and thus tended to hold the mayoral posts in these cities (mayors are elected by city assemblies, not directly). Given the recent ODS decline in popular support, a drop in its share of council and mayoral seats is expected. As traditional ODS voters are expected to remain on the right side of the political spectrum, the question remains whether TOP 09 and VV will divide this constituency - unless these voters opt to abstain - and if so, in which proportion. The most recent polls indicate that TOP 09 may face problems in the countryside compared with its performance in Prague. The highest degree of anticipation is focused on the post of Lord Mayor of Prague, which may drop out of ODS hands for the first time since 1994. Four years ago, the ODS won the largest number of local assembly seats nationwide, followed by the KDU-CSL, the CSSD, and the Communists. Overall, a majority of seats in local assemblies is filled by independent candidates elected mainly in smaller municipalities

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