

# Political mediation and participation in Czech rural areas

## *Politické zprostředkování a participace ve venkovských oblastech ČR*

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**Abstract:** The objective of this paper is to show the mediation between citizens and political power by political parties in Czech rural areas. The position of political parties in rural municipalities is demonstrated in two perspectives. The top-down perspective is based on the distribution of several tens of thousands mandates in local municipal councils between political parties. The opposite perspective provides the bottom-up point of view – from the level of the individual municipalities, their party systems and party organisational structures. The analysis of the municipal election results reveals clearly that the role of political parties in local politics depends namely on the size of the given municipality. In this sense, the Czech Republic represents a very interesting example as it is characterised by a dense and heavily fragmented population settlement with a large number of small rural municipalities. In rural municipalities, we encounter incomplete party spectra and the absence of political parties in the smallest municipalities. Besides, the lists of candidates in rural municipalities reveal the weakness of the local party organisations that cannot avoid cooperating with the independent candidates. The small distance between the citizen and the elected body in a rural community significantly determines the forms of the local politics; the ideological and party mediation is superfluous, in fact, it is often seen as something harmful which divides the rural community.

**Key words:** political mediation, participation, rural municipalities, municipal councils, elections, political parties, party systems, independent candidates

**Abstrakt:** Cílem příspěvku je ukázat, jak politické strany ve venkovském prostoru zajišťují zprostředkování mezi občany a politickou mocí. Postavení politických stran ve venkovských obcích je ukázáno v dvojí perspektivě. Jednu perspektivu – pohled shora dolů – nabízejí celkové volební výsledky, rozdělení několika desítek tisíc mandátů v obecních zastupitelstvech mezi politické strany. Opačná perspektiva se otvírá zdola nahoru – z úrovně jednotlivých obcí, jejich stranických systémů a stranických organizačních struktur. Analýza výsledků obecních voleb ukazuje, že úloha politických stran v lokální politice závisí zejména na velikosti obce. V tomto smyslu ČR představuje velmi zajímavý příklad, neboť ji charakterizuje fragmentovaná sídelní struktura s velkým počtem malých venkovských obcí. Ve venkovských obcích se setkáváme se neúplnými stranickými spektry, v nejmenších obcích i s absencí politických stran. Kandidátní listiny pro obecní volby ukazují slabost místních organizací politických stran, jež se nedokáží obejít bez nezávislých kandidátů. Malá vzdálenost mezi občanem a voleným orgánem ve venkovské komunitě značně ovlivňuje podobu lokální politiky, ideologické a stranické zprostředkování je nadbytečné a často je chápáno jako rušivý prvek, který venkovskou komunitu rozděluje.

**Klíčová slova:** politické zprostředkování, participace, venkovské obce, zastupitelstva, volby, politické strany, stranické systémy, nezávislí kandidáti

### ABBREVIATIONS

ČSSD = Czech Social Democratic Party, KDU-ČSL = Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party, KSČM = Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, ODA = Civic Democratic Alliance, ODS = Civic Democratic Party, OF = Civic Forum, SNK = Association of the Independents, SNK-ED = Association of Independent Candidates – European Democrats, SZ = Green Party, US-DEU = Union of Freedom-Democratic Union

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This text is focusing on political mediation in Czech rural areas. It continues the article about the citizens' local political participation in the Agricultural Economics (Čmejrek 2007). Political mediation is considered as an important part of the democratic political process. It creates a link between the citizens and the political power. Political mediation is complementary to political participation of citizens. Mediation and participation represent the tools available for citizens to express their social, economic and political interests. Both processes provide legitimacy to the political power and contribute to a significant extent to the integration of the society. This applies to the political process on the national level as well as in the regions and municipalities. However, the local level comprises a broad spectrum of municipalities: larger cities, medium-sized cities, smaller towns, non-urban municipalities of different size. Political participation is influenced by the size of the given municipality. *Imprimis*, it is the case of voter turnout. Small rural municipalities achieve, when compared with the national average, a higher voter turnout in municipal elections. The differences in the voter turnout between urban and rural voters are seen also in the instance of the elections to the Lower House of the Parliament (Čmejrek 2007). Moreover, the municipality size makes a valuable impact on the other aspects of local politics, public spirit and even private life, e. g. work motivation (Kolman et al. 2007).

There are also other forms of the citizens' participation in the local political process and public life, especially the activities in interest groups, citizen initiatives, various forms of public opinion creation, activities of the local government etc. (Gorlach et al. 2008). Last but not least, there are also economic activities in rural areas after the accession to the European Union (Doucha, Foltýn 2008), the participation of farmers in the regional and rural development, creation of the local active groups within the framework of the LEADER initiative (Lošťák, Hudečková 2008).

As for political mediation, the main role belongs to political parties and party systems. They compete among themselves within the political process and reflect the people's political will in their political struggle. The mediation between citizens and the political power by political parties is essential to the national politics and to big cities. In rural municipalities, however, the role of political parties is not so clear. An impression is emerging that in the Czech rural areas, there is not enough space for political parties. We will try and show the position of political parties in rural municipalities in two perspectives. The first,

top-down perspective is based on the overall election results, the distribution of several tens of thousands mandates in the local municipal councils between political parties. The opposite perspective provides the bottom-up point of view – from the level of the individual municipalities, their party systems and party organizational structures.

## PARLIAMENTARY POLITICAL PARTIES IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

The position of political parties on the municipal level of the political process can be best shown on the basis of municipal elections. Table 1 shows the division of mandates between the major parties participating in the 2006 municipal elections.

It stems from the analysis of the election results that all the parties present in the House of Deputies together got in all types of municipal councils approximately one third of the mandates (34.34%). Independent candidates won the decisive majority of votes (59.88%). 2.3% of votes went to the SNK-ED (Association of Independent Candidates – European Democrats). 64 other election parties, generally of local nature, shared the remaining 3.48%.

These figures, however, cover the significant differences between cities and non-urban municipalities. In cities, the candidates of the parliamentary political parties received two thirds of the mandates (69.34%), i.e. more than the double of the nationwide average. In 2006, the ODS (Civic Democrats) beat by more than 12% the independent candidates in cities. In the non-urban municipalities, the representation of candidates proposed by the parliamentary political parties exceeded only marginally one fourth of the total mandates (25.33%). Independent candidates in the non-urban municipalities won 70.48% of the total seat count.

Table 1 is showing the gains of the candidate lists of the parties proposing the candidates. However, the real position of political parties in rural municipalities is greatly distorted by such data. We can get a much more precise idea about the strength of political parties by analysing the party affiliation of the elected representatives, as indicated by the Table 2.

Looking at the election results obtained in the 2006 municipal elections using this perspective, we can see that the position of the parliamentary parties is much weaker compared to the data on the gain of seats in function of the nominating parties. Members of the parliamentary parties got in the 2006 municipal elections only 16.78% of the mandates, i.e. less than one half of the gain of their nominating parties.

Candidates without political affiliation got 82.4% of the mandates, having run as independent or on the candidate lists of political parties.

Here, too, we of course also can observe significant differences between cities and non-urban municipalities. Among the representatives elected in cities, members of the main political parties represented 46.27%, i.e. more than the double and a half of the national average in all kinds of municipalities. On the contrary, in non-urban municipalities, members of political parties got only 9.17% of the mandates. The numbers of the representatives without political affiliation fluctuate in a similar way. 51.15% were elected in cities and in non-urban municipalities, it was 90.45%.

## PARTY SYSTEMS IN RURAL MUNICIPALITIES

The analysis of the municipal council elections results reveals clearly that the role of political parties in local politics depends namely on the size of the given municipality. In this sense, the Czech Republic represents a very interesting example as it is characterised by a dense and heavily fragmented population settlement with a large number of small rural municipalities. After 1989, the overall number of municipalities increased by one half. The following table (Table 3) shows the settlement structure in the Czech Republic.

As the Table 3 shows, more than one fourth of municipalities in the Czech Republic have less than

Table 1. Division of mandates in municipal elections in 2006

Party affiliation	Total		Non-urban		Cities	
Parliamentary parties	21 440	34.34%	12 571	25.33%	8 869	69.34%
– ODS <sup>1</sup>	7 113	11.39%	3 137	6.32%	3 976	31.08%
– KDU-ČSL	5 187	8.31%	4 147	8.35%	1 040	8.13%
– ČSSD	4 361	6.99%	2 367	4.77%	1 994	15.59%
– KSČM	4 333	6.94%	2 789	5.62%	1 544	12.07%
– SZ	446	0.71%	131	0.26%	315	2.46%
Independents	37 380	59.88%	34 981	70.48%	2 399	18.76%
Other parties	3 606	5.78%	2 083	4.20%	1 523	11.91%
– SNK-ED	1 437	2.30%	867	1.75%	570	4.46%
Total	62 426	100.00%	49 635	100.00%	12 791	100.00%

<sup>1</sup>Civic Democratic Party – the main “center-right” party in the Czech Republic

Source: Czech Statistical Office

Table 2. Party affiliation of elected representatives

Party affiliation	Total		Non-urban		Cities	
Parliamentary parties	10 472	16.78%	4 553	9.17%	5 919	46.27%
– ODS	4 084	6.54%	1 133	2.28%	2 951	23.07%
– KDU-ČSL	1 791	2.87%	1 301	2.62%	490	3.83%
– ČSSD	1 825	2.92%	572	1.15%	1 253	9.80%
– KSČM	2 578	4.13%	1 503	3.03%	1 075	8.40%
– SZ	194	0.31%	44	0.09%	150	1.17%
Without affiliation	51 439	82.40%	44 897	90.45%	6 542	51.15%
Other parties	515	0.82%	185	0.37%	330	2.58%
– SNK-ED	209	0.33%	76	0.15%	133	1.04%
Total	62 426	100.00%	49 635	100.00%	12 791	100.00%

Source: Czech Statistical Office

200 inhabitants and almost 60% of municipalities have less than 500 inhabitants. Whereas in almost half of the European states, there are virtually no municipalities with less than one thousand inhabitants, in the Czech Republic the number of such municipalities achieves almost 80% of the total number of municipalities (they cover more than 57% of the territory and more than 17% of the overall population of the Czech Republic live in them). Almost 90% of municipalities in the Czech Republic (89.6%) have less than 2 000 inhabitants. On the other hand, there are only 21 cities with the population of more than 50 000 and there are just 5 cities with the number of inhabitants exceeding 100 000.

In big cities, the role of political parties is the same as it is in the political process on the national level. Most of the mandates in the local councils are divided between the parties represented in the House of Deputies. The political spectrum is then completed by the non-parliamentary and regional political entities whose position is in most cases only marginal. A completely different distribution of power has formed in smaller cities. The position of the parliamentary parties in comparison to big cities is much weaker, the independent and non-parliamentary political entities are more important. And an even more different situation is to be observed outside cities. For instance, in 576 non-urban municipalities of the South Bohemia region, 4 713 mandates were distributed in 2006. The majority was won by the Association of Independent Candidates (SNK) – the local association. Overall, it was 2 726 mandates (57.8%). Another 776 mandates (16.5%) went to independent candidates. Only then

came the lists of the candidates of the parties represented in the House of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. 381 mandates (8.1%) was gained by the KDU-ČSL (Christian Democrats). 275 mandates (5.8%) to the ODS, 175 mandates (3.7%) to the ČSSD (Social Democrats), 165 mandates (3.5%) to the KSČM (Communist Party). The Green Party (SZ) running independently only got 3 mandates (0.06%) and further 2 mandates in an election coalition. The parties which succeeded in the elections to the House of Deputies of the Parliament together divided among themselves only 21.6% mandates in the non-urban municipalities. More than 74% mandates were won by the associations of independent candidates.

The category of non-urban municipalities is still too large. We will try to show the relationship between the size of the municipality in this category and its party spectrum, namely from the point of view of the participation of political parties, using the results of the 2002 local elections in the district of Strakonice. There are 111 municipalities in the district. Only four of them have more than 2 000 inhabitants. In Blatná (6 644 inhabitants) and Volyně (3 194 inhabitants), all parties represented in the House of Deputies participated in the municipal elections as well as the entities of the local nature, in Strakonice (23 800 inhabitants) and Vodňany (6 581 inhabitants) one of the parliamentary parties (US-DEU) did not participate in the local elections. 107 out of 111 municipalities in the district of Strakonice have less than 2 000 inhabitants. In 64 municipalities in the district, no parliamentary party participated in the elections and 63 of these municipalities had less than 1 000 inhabitants. The opposite example is represented by three municipalities wherein four out of five parliamentary parties run for the elections. All these three municipalities had more than 1 000 inhabitants.

In the district of Strakonice, there were only ten municipalities in 2002 where no local or regional entities participated in the elections. In Katovice (1 234 inhabitants), for instance, all votes were distributed among four parliamentary parties, in 2006 it was three. In Přední Zborovice (65 inhabitants), all votes went to one parliamentary party (KDU-ČSL). In the smallest municipalities, we often see major changes in the electoral preferences. For instance in Pohorovice (79 inhabitants), all votes were won by the KDU-ČSL in the 1998 municipal elections, however, in 2002, this party did not run – and all votes went to the Association of Independent Candidates that had only formed before the elections. The same situation was repeated in the 2006 election.

As far as the parliamentary, nationwide parties are concerned, in the municipalities up to 2,000 inhab-

Table 3. Municipalities by population (as at 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007)

Number of inhabitants	Number of municipalities
To 199	1 591
200–499	2 019
500–999	1 307
1 000–1 999	685
2 000–4 999	375
5 000–9 999	140
10 000–19 999	69
20 000–49 999	42
50 000–99 999	16
More than 100 000	5
Total	6 249

Source: Czech Statistical Office

itants we generally see an incomplete spectrum of political parties and in the smallest municipalities up to 1 000 inhabitants, there often are no political parties at all, we will only find there the independent candidates and their associations (Čmejrek 2003; 2008). Observing the incomplete parliamentary parties spectra on the local level, we must also consider the fact that those party organisations that exist in a given municipality have often little in common with their “own” parliamentary parties. P. Jüptner points out that “parties, however, have only a negligible membership in such municipalities and are often formed and established just prior the elections. Some of the local government representatives mention that local organisations of parties established after 1989 would not last long” (Jüptner 2001: 148).

Political parties in rural municipalities and smaller towns lack the sufficient membership to be able to constitute a list of candidates formed solely of their members. We often encounter in rural municipalities lists of candidates made by the majority, or sometimes exclusively, of the independent candidates. Optical illusions thus created can be demonstrated using the example of the aforementioned Katovice municipality (1 234 inhabitants) in the district of Strakonice. In the 2002 municipal elections, all votes were won by the lists of candidates of four parliamentary parties that also divided among themselves all the mandates: the ODS got eight out of thirteen mandates, three went to the KDU-ČSL, whereas the KSČM and the ČSSD obtained only one mandate each. However, looking at the party affiliation of the 13 elected local representatives, we discover that only one representative was a member of a party, the ODS. In the 2006 municipal elections, the situation did not change much. All votes in the municipality were divided between the candidate lists of three parliamentary parties. The ODS again got 8 mandates, the KDU-ČSL 4 mandates, so it gained one extra mandate, and the remaining mandate went to the KSČM. The only representative organised in a party, an ODS member, was joined by another one from the KDU-ČSL. The weakness of the party structures in small municipalities has very often as a consequence seemingly surprising changes in the election results.

#### **THE INDEPENDENTS ON LISTS OF CANDIDATES OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

The large representation of independent candidates and their associations is a characteristic feature on the political scene on the municipal level. Independent candidates meet the specific nature of the local po-

litical process. Of course in this instance, too, the size of the municipality plays a role. As we have seen above, in the smallest municipalities, the independent candidates and their associations represent the main, sometimes the only way of forming political entities; in most municipalities, they complete the spectrum of political parties.

The role of independent candidates is surely not limited to their independent standing for election. They also have a great importance in making the lists of candidates of the parliamentary political parties in municipal elections. In the instance of Katovice (1 234 inhabitants), we have seen the example of a rural municipality where only parliamentary parties run for the election, their candidate lists, however, were composed, with one or two exceptions, exclusively of non-party candidates. It is not a stand-alone example. The bigger the municipality, admittedly, the lower the participation of independent candidates.

Independent candidates are to be found also on the candidate lists of the parliamentary parties in cities. Their role can be illustrated using the example of the Blatná town in the district of Strakonice with 6 707 inhabitants. In 2002, 15 mandates were divided between seven election parties in total: 4 mandates went to the Association of the Independents, 3 mandates went to the SNK-Blateňáci and the ODS each, the ČSSD got 2 mandates and one mandate went respectively to the US-DEU, the KSČM and the KDU-ČSL. Candidate lists of the parties represented in the House of Deputies got 8 mandates in total, i.e. 53.3%. Two associations of independent candidates got 7 mandates in total, i.e. 46.7%. Comparing the distribution of mandates between the election parties with the party affiliation of the elected representatives, we observe, though, that the position of the independent was in reality even stronger. There were 9 representatives without party affiliation, i.e. 60%.

In the 2006 municipal elections, the position of independent candidates in Blatná was further boosted, although the ratio between the number of mandates for the parliamentary and non-parliamentary candidate lists stayed unchanged – 8:7. As for the candidate lists of political parties, the ČSSD and the ODS got three mandates each, the KDU-ČSL and the KSČM one each. Four other entities succeeded in the elections: the Volba pro město (Vote for the City) – 3 mandates, the SNK Evropští demokraté – 2 mandates, Nezávislí kandidáti (Independent Candidates) – 1 mandate and the Nezávislá volba (Independent Vote) – 1 mandate. Still, there was a shift concerning the party affiliation of the elected representatives. Eleven representatives had no party affiliation, i.e. 73.3% (compared to 60% in 1998 and

Table 4. Political affiliation of candidates and representatives in Brtnice

	1998				2002				2006			
	A	B	B	D	A	B	B	D	A	B	B	D
KDU-ČSL	21	15	6	3	21	16	5	4	21	15	4	3
ČSSD	21	16	5	5	21	13	6	5	21	14	8	7
SNK-Sokol Brtnice	19	19	2	2	21	21	4	4	21	21	3	3
KSČM	9	0	2	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	91	68	21	15	84	69	21	17	84	68	21	18

Note: A – total of election party candidates, B – election party candidates without political affiliation, C – total of election party representatives, D – election party representatives without political affiliation

Source: Czech Statistical Office

2002). One representative was member of the SNK Evropští demokraté, so only 20% of the elected representatives were members of political parties represented in the House of Deputies.

The second example is Brtnice (2 351 inhabitants) in the Vysočina region. In the 1990s, the ODS and the KDU-ČSL held the strongest position. In 1994, the KSČM was still third but in 1998, its election support dropped by almost two thirds and the party has not run ever since. It was replaced in 1998 on the local political scene by the ČSSD whose support has not ceased to go up and in 2006; it won a landslide victory in the local elections. The Table 4 shows that not a single party in the town has a list of candidates free of the independent. Their representation is significant not only on the lists of candidates, but also among the elected representatives.

Independent candidates represent a serious problem when it comes to processing and evaluating the municipal election results. Sometimes, they are real personalities having no ties to any political party, but very often the status of “independence” on political parties masks tactical reasons. An association of independent candidates may represent a “backup” list of the candidates of one of the major political parties. Examples are known from the municipal politics that a parliamentary party has its party organisation in the given municipality but its members prepare not a party list but rather an independent list of candidates for the municipal elections.

The independents appear on the candidate lists of the parliamentary parties for a variety of reasons. It is namely the weakness of the membership of political parties. In smaller municipalities, and in many instances even in bigger ones, political parties would not be able to compose the lists of candidates without the presence of the independents. Moreover,

the structure of votes in municipal elections forces political parties to fill the lists of candidates as much as possible. Yet another reason is the image of a political party entering the local political scene. As shown by the research of the local political systems in the Czech Republic, candidacy of political parties is seen in small municipalities as a necessary evil and according to some local representatives, it does not really matter on whose election list a candidate appears (Jüptner 2001). In small municipalities, political parties are often seen as a source of discord and politicking, whereas independent personalities stand for “hard work” and “the will to cooperate”. Political party or faction meetings are usually not held at all or they have just a social character to bring the community together and to celebrate. Personalities are given preference in the local politics over ideas and manifestos. The third reason is often a tactical calculation foreseeing the coalition talks after the elections. The independence on political parties can prove as an advantage in the post election coalition talks, even in the medium-sized cities. For instance in Nové Město nad Metují (10 049 inhabitants), for the whole 1990s, the mayor was an independent politician who had stood in 1990 for the OF (Civic Forum), later on for the ODS. He became the mayor even after the municipal elections in 1998 and together with him; another independent candidate was elected the deputy mayor who appeared on the KDU-ČSL list.

In the political process of the individual cities and municipalities, different approaches can be observed of the political party’s vis-à-vis the participation of candidates without political affiliation when forming the lists of candidates and during the post election coalition talks. For instance, in the above-mentioned Brtnice, party members appear on the ODS list in

2002 and 2006 only in the first and second position, followed by the candidates without political affiliation. A member of the political party on the first position on the list was elected the deputy mayor in 2006. On the ČSSD candidate list, on the other hand, party members are in the middle or by the end. The mayor and two other members of the town council who were elected in 2006 from the ČSSD list of candidates were without any political affiliation at the time of the elections.

## CONCLUSION

In rural municipalities, we encounter the incomplete party spectra (incomplete compared to the House of Deputies) and an absence of political parties in the smallest municipalities. Moreover, the lists of candidates in rural municipalities reveal the weakness of the local party organisations that cannot avoid cooperating with the independent candidates. In many instances, political parties present lists of candidates but are not active as such in the given municipality. From this point of view, the situation in the Czech Republic differs from most other European countries (Jüptner et al. 2007). The explanation must be sought in the settlement structure of the Czech Republic that is marked with a high number of very small municipalities.

The political process is dependent on the distance between the citizens and the elected political bodies. On the parliamentary level, on the level of regions and in big cities, too, this distance is great and the democratic process would not work without the ideological and party mediation. On the other hand, there is a narrow social space in small cities and rural municipalities. Inside small communities, there is a close relationship of social networks and a high personalization of political life. The ideological and party mediation is superfluous; in fact, it is often seen as something harmful which divides rural communities. The small distance between the citizen and the elected body in a rural community significantly determines the form of local politics; it influences socialization as well as the forms of

political participation of citizens and namely their electoral behaviour.

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