Segmentation of Czech Voters: Diversity of the Decision-Making Processes

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Abstract

This contribution is focused on voting behaviour in Czech parliamentary elections. The main goal is to evaluate the key factors of voter decision-making in 4 different categories (attitudes of political parties, candidates, election campaigns, opinions of other people) and subsequent segmentation of voters according to the importance of these (total 17) factors. The data used were obtained through an online questionnaire survey on a representative sample of the Czech adult population (N=1,826). By combining factor analysis and cluster analysis, 7 segments of voters were identified. Individuals within a given segment were as similar as possible in terms of the factors of their decision-making process and, conversely, as different as possible from other segments. The identified voter segments are described not only according to factors of electoral behaviour but also taking into account socio-demographic characteristics, interest in politics or party preferences. Different representation of individual segments among voters of different political parties and spatial differentiation from a regional perspective outlined two applications of this study. The findings should primarily contribute to a deeper understanding of individual and territorial differences in voting behaviour, but secondarily they can also be used for practical purposes in the optimization of targeted election campaigns.

Keywords: cluster analysis, elections, political parties, segmentation, voting behaviour

1.   Introduction and Theoretical Background

Traditionally used theoretical frameworks view the elections and voting behaviour as an act of mobilizing voters to support a particular political party that best represents their interests, often emphasizing the voter's political socialization (Agnew, 1996). However, in developed countries with liberal-democratic political regimes, fundamental changes in the mechanisms of voter decision-making are taking place (Flint & Taylor, 2018). In particular, there has been a significant decline in class voting, which means the decreasing importance of social status and class affiliation when choosing a supported political party (Sanders, 2017). The cause of this negative trend is the development of new political topics that do not address economic issues, but rather cultural issues (Denver, 2003). The described transformation is closely related to society's turn to a post-material value orientation (Inglehart, 2018).

Public opinion polls also show a decreasing level of party identification and an associated increase in the share of so-called responsive (or floating) voters (Johnston & Pattie, 2006). Voters can change their political preferences relatively easily and the reasons can be very diverse (Rohrschneider, 2002). It is possible to divide the factors that cause stability or, on the other hand, instability in voting behaviour into different groups. The psychosocial model of voting (Campbell et al., 1954; Anderson & Stephenson, 2010), which distinguishes between distal and proximal factors, looks at the factors of voters' decisions in a comprehensive way.

Distal factors condition the stability of individual party preferences and voters' long-term political orientations. These distal factors include class, sociodemographics and other personal characteristics, early political socialization and potential party identification (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Anderson & Stephenson, 2010). On the other hand, proximal factors tend to cause instability in electoral behaviour and influence voting preferences in specific elections. What is important in this regard is how the voter perceives the current political and also economic situation, whether the voter is satisfied with it or wishes it to develop in a different direction. Accordingly, he chooses whether to support a party from the ruling coalition or the opposition (Sanders et al., 1987). Pre-election campaigns, in which political parties try to appeal to voters and convince them to vote for the respective party, are an inherent part of the pre-election political battle.

While at the end of the 20th century, parties did not have to deal with online campaigns at all, technological progress has determined a trend that parties must accept if they want to remain competitive. Voter behaviour in the online space became interesting to researchers at the beginning of the 21st century (e.g. Lusoli & Ward, 2005), although various recent studies document that face-to-face contact with voters still has a greater impact than other forms of electoral promotion (Barton et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016). More and more often, politicians

are expected to interact with voters on social networks, which have become an important communication channel for election campaigns (Grill, 2016). It should be noted that not only the 'voter-candidate' interactions (i.e. between voters and candidates) but also 'voter-voter' interactions (i.e. among voters) take place on the Internet (Wright et al., 2016). Therefore, alongside the household, neighbourhood and workplace, the online space has become another arena for political discussions.

Most voters are interested in the attitudes of individual political parties towards specific issues. The parties usually summarize these attitudes in their election programs. However, in recent years, voters' declining interest in reading election programs can be registered, which is the reason why the election campaigns are being personalized and the image of individual candidates is becoming even more important than before (Linek & Voženílková, 2017). This applies not only to national party leaders but also local candidates (Mikešová, 2019). A voter is not just an isolated individual but part of a social system in which his decision-making is influenced by the spatial context of the locality where he lives (Bernard & Kostelecký, 2014; Fotheringham et al., 2021; Pileček, 2021). Ways in which the local environment affects voter decision-making are, for example, contact with neighbours and other people in local networks of personal relationships, information flows through local media or mobilization strategies of political parties based on local targeting (Books & Prysby, 1991).

Specifically in electoral geography, the influences of spatial context on electoral behaviour are widely studied (Taylor & Johnston, 1979). One of them is the neighborhood effect. When we talk about the neighborhood effect, we consider the fact that the political opinions and also electoral preferences of voters depend to a great extent on the opinions of people around them (Pattie & Johnston, 2000). This effect is best described by the phrase that "people who talk together, vote together" (Miller, 1977), as voters partially adopt political attitudes from their relatives, friends, neighbours or work colleagues with whom they discuss political topics and elections. When some voters are in the minority in their local environment in terms of socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics, they perceive the social pressure to support a political party that is supported by the majority of people in their surroundings (Cox, 1969).

As indicated by the previous paragraphs, there is a really wide range of factors in the voter decision-making process. However, each voter is specific and different factors are of different importance to him. For example, some voters rely heavily on the traditional division of parties in the sense of left-wing or right-wing, for others the primary question is whether the party supports membership in the European Union or whether it is in favor of accepting refugees or immigrants. Some voters may like one of the party leaders, thus they decide to support the party that this candidate represents. And someone who is not at all interested in politics may just get advice from others on which party to vote for. Based on this principle of diversity, voters in Czechia were categorized into segments, according to the importance of

different factors in their decision-making in the Czech parliamentary elections (elections to the lower house of the legislative body).

The voter segmentations based on decision-making factors have already been implemented in the past, especially (but not only) in the American or British electoral environment (e.g. O'Shaughnessy, 1987; Baines et al., 2005; Phillips et al., 2010). These studies approached voter segmentation predominantly from a political marketing perspective. The results of such research help in the formation of political communications strategies, including theme and message development. The presented study, focused on the Czech parliamentary elections, could have a similar impact. In addition to practical purposes, it also brings the opportunity to identify differences in the representation of individual voter segments in different regions of Czechia and contributes to a deeper understanding of regional differences in voting behaviour and election results. Therefore, this work has a greatly interdisciplinary character, connecting marketing, sociology, political science and geography.

2.   Methodology and Data

The conducted research has a predominantly quantitative character. In order to carry out voter segmentation, it was necessary to obtain a comprehensive database, which includes not only variables on the basis of which individual voter segments are identified but also variables that will help in describing and characterizing the segments and their typical features. The Czech parliamentary elections with which this study is connected took place on the 8th and 9th of October, 2021. Approximately 2 weeks after the elections, a questionnaire survey was organized in cooperation with the STEM/MARK research agency. The data provided by this survey were subsequently analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The process of segmentation of the respondents participating in the questionnaire survey was carried out by a combination of factor analysis and cluster analysis.

2.1 Questionnaire survey

Data collection took place through a questionnaire survey at the Czech National Panel using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) method. A total of 1,826 respondents filled out the questionnaire, proportionally representing the Czech adult population by gender, age, education and place of residence. A quota prescription for the place of residence was not based on the administrative regionalization of the country but corresponded to the typology of Czech regions from the perspective of the results of the analyzed elections in the sense of the ratio of the electoral gains of liberal-democratic political parties compared to the electoral gains of populist political parties (Pileček & Kostelecký, 2022). Possible deviations from the quota prescription were taken into account and corrected by weighting the final data, thus the sample of Czech voters was fully representative.

The questionnaire included questions regarding the respondents' voting participation and electoral preferences in the 2017 and 2021 Czech parliamentary elections. On a 5-point Likert scale, respondents recorded various attributes of their decision-making in the parliamentary elections – 10 different items related to their interest in candidate lists, 5 items assessing with whom and how often they discuss politics and elections and 17 items aimed at evaluating the importance of different factors in choosing a supported political party. Finally, in addition to basic socio-demographics, information about their interest in politics and the strength of their local, regional and national identity was obtained.

2.2 Factor analysis

The importances of 17 evaluated voter decision factors were converted to z-scores within individual respondents, in order to show which factors are above-average and which below-average important for the given respondent. These z-scores entered the factor analysis, on the basis of which 17 variables were transformed into 7 principal components. The factor analysis already points out which factors are closely related to each other (if one of them is important to the respondent, then the second one is very likely to be above-average important to him as well) and which, on the contrary, diverge (Table 1).

Table 1: Rotated Component Matrix (output of factor analysis using the method of principal components)

Importance of voter decision factors (5-point scale), converted to z-scores within individual respondents	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Classification on the left-right spectrum	.058	-.125	-.052	.020	-.081	-.042	**-.918**
Party's long-term political priorities	**.385**	**-.316**	-.074	**.456**	-.165	-.050	-.165
Current election program	**.649**	-.178	-.132	.217	-.017	-.166	.135
Party's attitude towards the European Union	-.008	-.097	.007	.224	-.197	**.663**	-.100
Party's attitude to international migration	.068	-.007	-.091	.015	.067	**.753**	.153
Party's attitude to local problems	.213	**-.291**	**-.405**	**-.312**	**-.262**	.137	**.362**
Personality of the national party leader	.095	-.074	**.763**	.062	-.120	.033	.037
Other leading personalities of the party	.027	-.145	**.719**	-.123	-.068	-.092	.002
Composition of candidate lists in your region	.099	-.115	**.272**	**-.560**	-.202	-.130	.012
Candidacy of someone from your neighbourhood	-.034	-.063	-.134	**-.784**	.013	-.108	-.017
Election campaign in the streets, billboards, etc.	-.031	**.716**	-.060	-.017	.038	-.025	.025
Election campaign on the Internet	.110	**.708**	-.134	.096	.011	-.068	.045
Pre-election debates on television	-.026	**.343**	-.029	**.263**	**-.459**	**-.367**	.165
Opinions of your partner and family members	**-.721**	-.163	-.219	.094	-.063	-.142	.045
Opinions of your colleagues at work	-.250	-.110	-.207	.135	**.557**	-.143	.183
Opinions of your friends	**-.548**	-.210	-.112	.197	**.304**	-.206	.220
Opinions of strangers, e.g. in internet discussions	.050	.189	-.060	.030	**.749**	-.031	-.002

Note: Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 9 iterations. Factor loadings greater than 0.25 (absolute values) are highlighted in bold.

Source: Author, own calculations, data from questionnaire survey (N=1,826)

2.3 Cluster analysis

The division of respondents into groups was done in such a way that individuals within a particular group were as similar as possible in terms of the factors of their decision-making process and, conversely, as different as possible from other groups. For this purpose, cluster analysis was used, specifically the k-means clustering method. This is a frequently used type of non-hierarchical cluster analysis, which operates on the principle of finding centroids (means) and associating every observation (i.e. every respondent) with the nearest mean. The position of the centroids is optimized until convergence is reached.

In this clustering method, the researcher sets in advance the number of clusters he wants to create. Since the number of voter segments was not known and clearly defined in advance, the clustering was performed repeatedly with different clustering parameters and with different numbers of desired resulting clusters. All obtained segmentations were statistically tested in crosstabs (cross tabulation analysis tool in SPSS), computing differences between segments across all questions of the questionnaire and testing their significance. The segmentation with the greatest differentiation between the individual segments was chosen as the final one and is presented in this paper.

The result of the cluster analysis is 7 voter segments. Theoretically, it would be possible to extract a lower number of segments, but we would lose a substantial part of the information obtained about the diversity of the decision-making process of Czech voters. On the other hand, it would also be possible to distinguish a larger number of segments and their sub-segments, but this could end up being unnecessarily fragmented and difficult to present. An alternative to the used clustering method would be, for example, latent class analysis (LCA; e.g. Kácha et al., 2022). However, LCA analysis is particularly suitable for linear typologies, while the used k-means cluster analysis can better capture complexity in a multidimensional space.

3. Results and Discussion

Long-term political priorities of individual parties and their electoral programs, which are very or rather important for more than 70% of voters, were identified as the most important attributes when choosing which political party the voter will support in the elections. Party's attitude to international migration is important (answer 'very important' or 'rather important') for 64% of respondents, similar to party's attitude towards the European Union (62%). Both of these factors averaged 3.8 on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very important). In terms of importance for voters, the party's attitudes to local problems were also

rated very high (average 3.6). Not only the personality of the national party leader but also other leading candidates of the party are more important for voter decision-making than the fact whether it is a right-wing or left-wing political party. This finding supports the assumption of a long-term weakening of the horizontal political dichotomy (Kitschelt & Hellemans, 1990).

Election campaigns on the Internet and social networks are a slightly more important factor for voters than campaigns in the streets such as billboards. However, pre-election debates on television, which belong to the most watched television broadcasts in Czechia, are even more fundamental than targeted pre-election campaigns for voter decision-making. 36% of voters declare that these debates significantly influence them, on the other hand, only 16% of voters claim that they are not interested at all. As part of the influence of political discussions with other people, the opinions of partners and family members are the most important for shaping voters' electoral preferences. The opinions of friends also have a key effect for some voters. Conversely, opinions of colleagues at work or opinions of strangers, for example in internet discussions, do not play a great role. The exception is segment number 3 – 'Lovers of political discussions' (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Comparison of the importance of various factors of voting behaviour for individual voter segments in the Czech parliamentary elections
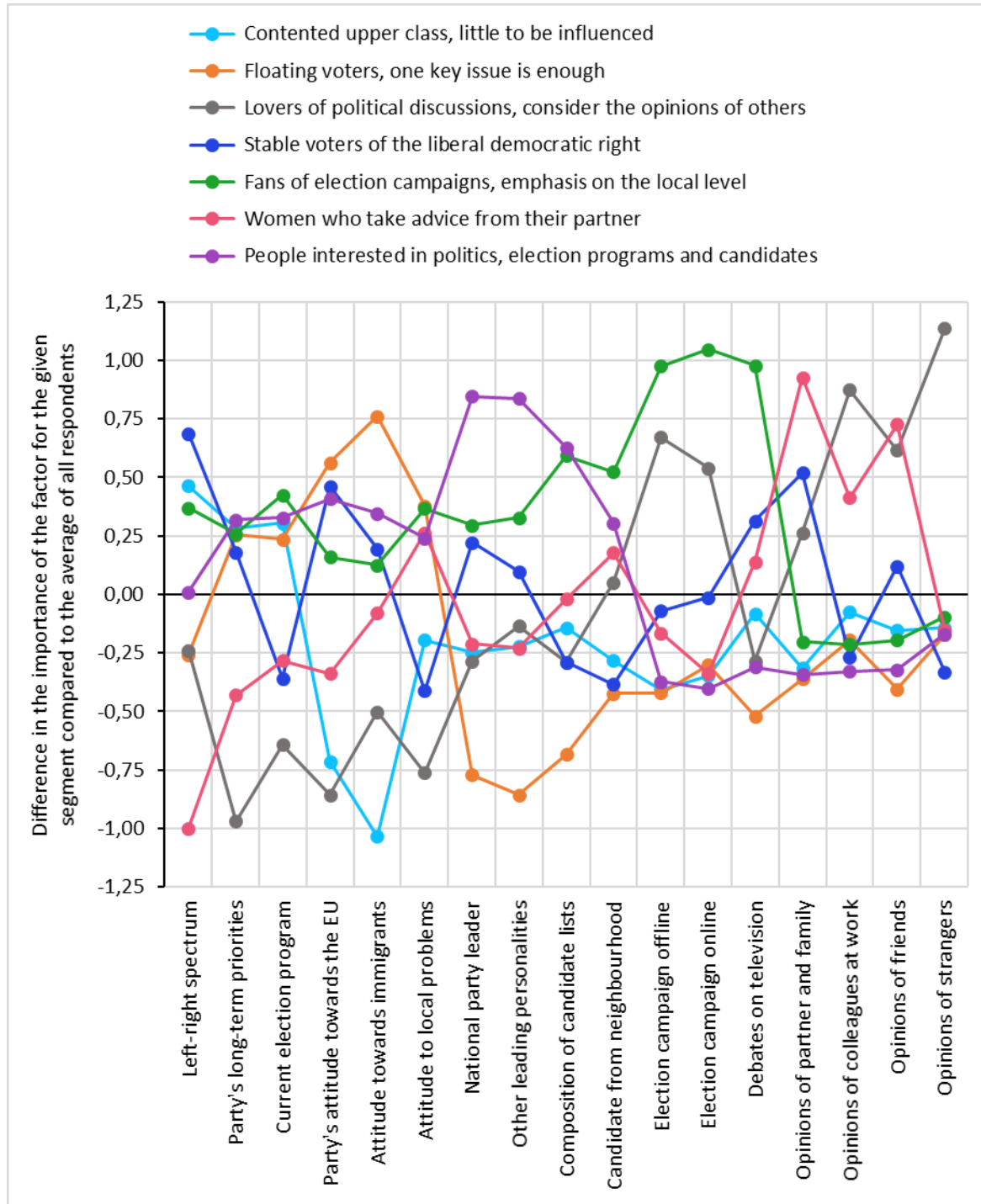
Source: Author, own calculations, data from questionnaire survey (N=1,826)

Figure 1 shows the differences between voter segments according to the importance of all 17 individual factors. The voter segments are further described in more detail as separate sub-chapters. The differences and characteristic features of the individual segments are captured here in terms of key factors of electoral behaviour, as well as in terms of socio-demographics, income, place of residence, preferences in 2017 and 2021 parliamentary elections, interest in politics, interest in the composition of candidate lists or the frequency of political discussions.

3.1 Segment 1 – 'Contented upper class, little to be influenced'

Only 3 out of 17 factors are above-average important for their decision-making compared to other segments – classification on the left–right spectrum, the party's long-term priorities and its election program. The above-mentioned most basic attributes of political parties are key for them, on the other hand, segment 1 is not interested in controversial topics, candidates or election campaigns. Therefore, these voters are hardly influenced. The overall interest in the composition of candidate lists is also rather low. Although they sometimes discuss politics and elections, for example, with their colleagues at work, the opinions of others are not that important to them.

From a socio-demographic point of view, a typical member of this segment is a middle-aged, university-educated individual (or at least completed secondary education with a high school diploma), who has a high income. They live more often in cities, less in villages. In the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections, they voted mainly for SPOLU (a coalition of Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) and TOP 09) and PirSTAN (a coalition of Czech Pirate Party (Piráti) and Mayors and Independents (STAN)), democratic coalitions that won the elections and formed the new Czech government.

3.2 Segment 2 – 'Floating voters, one key issue is enough'

The most important decision-making factors of the second voter segment are the attitudes of the individual political parties to specific issues such as accepting refugees or membership in the European Union. Such topics cause controversy, divide society and are often used to mobilize voters, especially responsive/floating voters. This voter segment is relatively easy to be influenced. All a party needs to do is find a suitable topic that will attract attention, take a strictly defined position and thereby gain the support of voters who share this opinion. These voters subsequently do not care who is running for a given political party or what their friends think of that party. They have a very low interest in politics, which is the reason why these voters can be susceptible to populist rhetoric and disinformation.

The members of segment 2 are not specific according to their age. They are more often less educated people with a lower standard of living, who we would meet in underdeveloped and peripheral regions than in metropolitan areas. In the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections, they most supported the far-right populist party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), for

which Euroscepticism and anti-immigration policy are essential. Political party Trikolora (full name Tricolour Citizens' Movement), another strongly Eurosceptic and nationalist party in Czechia, also registered an above-average electoral gain in this segment.

3.3 Segment 3 – 'Lovers of political discussions, consider the opinions of others'

The name of segment 3 is based on the significantly above-average frequency of political discussions with other people, whose opinions these voters take into account, thus influencing their electoral decisions. Election campaigns are also a key factor for them, as they do not so much search for information themselves, rather they rely on the content that is presented to them, for example, on the Internet and social networks, billboards or on television. When they receive the candidate lists before the elections, they pay surprisingly great attention to the personalities in the back positions. Sometimes they are even more interested in the fact who is running from the last place than from the forefront of the candidate list.

In this segment 3, men are slightly more represented than women, especially the age group 30–45, while seniors over 60 are represented only marginally. Typical features are a low level of education and a low income. According to the party preferences in the Czech parliamentary elections, there are no statistically significant differences compared to the preferences of the entire Czech adult population, but a lower voter turnout is observable.

3.4 Segment 4 – 'Stable voters of the liberal democratic right'

For voter segment 4, the most important factor in choosing a supported political party is the traditional dichotomy in the sense of left-wing vs. right-wing parties. A crucial attribute is also, for example, the party's attitude towards the European Union, but unlike segment 2, in this case it is more about positive (pro-Western) views and support for European integration. A typical feature of segment 4 is low interest in the local level – local problems and local candidates. They often discuss politics with their partner and other family members, take their opinions into account, and it often happens that the whole family has the same long-term political and party preferences.

In segment 4, all age groups are represented, with a slightly above-average representation of young people under 30. The level of education among them is considerably above-average, a third of the members of the segment have a university degree. In terms of socio-economic activity, this segment includes the largest share of students and entrepreneurs. Their standard of living is usually very good, which is related to the predominant support of right-wing political parties. In the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections, within this segment, the liberal democratic coalition SPOLU had the highest electoral gain, on the contrary, the populist party ANO was significantly behind.

3.5 Segment 5 – 'Fans of election campaigns, emphasis on the local level'

All of the 17 evaluated factors, except those associated with other people's opinions, are above-average important for segment 5 compared to the average of all voters. Above all, the importance of the current election program, pre-election campaigns and pre-election debates on television, which are of enormous interest to these voters, stands out the most. In complete contrast to segment 4, segment 5 is characterized by an emphasis on the local level – party's attitudes to local problems and candidacy of someone from the same locality where the voter lives. The overall interest in the composition of candidate lists of individual political parties is relatively high. These voters take into account the age, occupation and place of residence of the individual candidates.

The members of segment 5 are not specific in terms of their age, education or standard of living, the only personal characteristic that makes them significantly different from others is a strong regional identity. From the offer of political parties in the parliamentary elections, they support STAN more often than other voter segments, specifically the PirSTAN coalition, of which this party was a part, in the 2021 elections.

3.6 Segment 6 – 'Women who take advice from their partner'

Voters from the segment 6 are characterized by minimal interest in politics and elections. When it comes to deciding which political party to support in the elections, they often just get advice from their partner, family members or close friends. They have no idea which parties are left-wing and which are right-wing, or what their attitudes and political priorities are. The local level is closer to them than the national level. That is the reason why it can be important for them when someone from their neighborhood is a candidate, especially if they know him personally. A political party can also address them through a proposal to solve a specific local problem in the municipality or region of their residence.

More than 70% of segment 6 are women, usually less educated, living in small villages and towns rather than in large cities. The party preferences of this voter segment are not clearly defined. Based on the characteristics described, it can be assumed that their party preferences depend significantly on the preferences of their partners and the closest people who surround them and influence them, which is the reason why there are significant regional differences in the voting behaviour of this segment in the Czech parliamentary elections.

3.7 Segment 7 – 'People interested in politics, election programs and candidates'

While segment 6 has the lowest interest in politics, segment 7 is the exact opposite in this regard. These people are interested in political topics and they are aware of political parties and individual candidates. It is the candidates who are very important from the perspective of their electoral decision-making, especially party leaders and other leading (most promoted) personalities. Although the members of segment 7 follow the election campaigns, they do not have a fundamental influence on them, as these voters tend to form their long-term political

orientations. They think about the choice of the supported political party well in advance and do not leave it until the last days before the elections. They declare a very high interest in the composition of candidate lists, both in the matter of national leaders and regional candidate lists in their respective regions.

Voters who can be classified in segment 7 are more often men than women. 50% of them are over 60 years old, 43% are retired. A strong national identity is typical for them. They live a little more often in larger cities than in villages. In the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections, the ANO political party had the highest electoral support in segment 7, mainly because of its charismatic leader Andrej Babiš.

4.   Conclusion

The main goal of this paper was the identification of voter segments in Czechia based on differences in the decision-making process of voters in the Czech parliamentary elections and in the different importance of various factors of individual voting behaviour. Czech voters were divided into 7 segments, which are specific in their characteristic features, primarily in the context of political behaviour and preferences. The presented results cannot be reliably generalized to other countries, but the methodology used is easily transferable, thus similar voter segmentations could be carried out also in other countries of the world. Thanks to the comprehensive concept of the study, it is possible to distinguish 3 essential contributions that the findings bring.

The first of them is in the field of sociology, as the research provides new insights into the structure of Czech society and the differences in electoral decision-making process between different population groups. The second contribution of the study is practical, in the context of political marketing. Voter segmentation could be used by political parties to get to know their voters better, as each political party has a different representation of individual voter segments among its supporters. In connection with other information, this segmentation of voters can serve as the basis for optimizing the communication strategies and pre-election campaigns of individual political parties. The third benefit can be described as geographical. The results of this study also offer the possibility for a deeper understanding of the regional differentiation of voting behaviour, as significant differences in the representation of individual segments in different regions of the country are observable.

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