

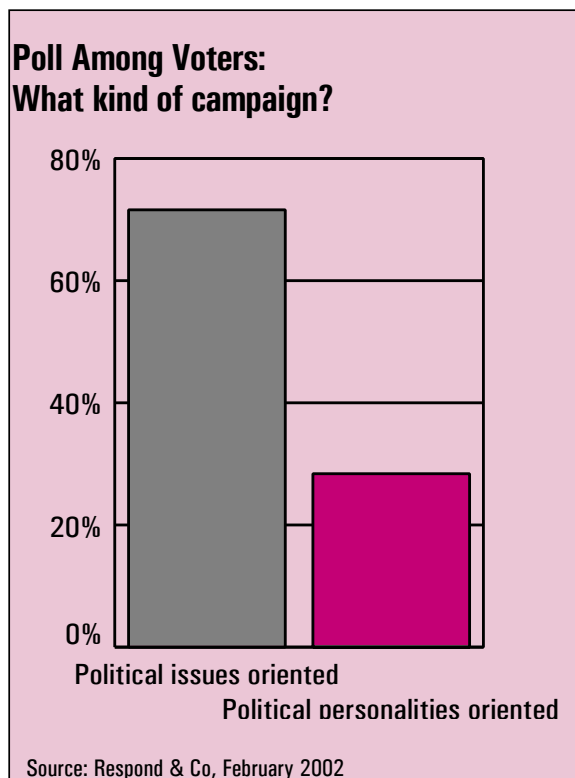
Agenda Setting: Czech Elections

Czech Voters in Need of Information on Policy Issues

„Americanisation“ of the Czech election campaign leads to smallest voter turnout since 1989

Czech voters want to be informed about political programs. A poll by the market research company Respond & Co (Chart 1) showed that 72 percent of voters wanted the 2002 Czech election campaign to be about basic issues, while only 28 percent voted for a „Person-related“-campaign. However, the media did not react to their readers' wishes. In the share of analysed statements about parties, only 41 percent represented basic political issues reported in daily newspapers and 49 percent on main TV news programs (January - June 2002).

Reporting on policy issues reached its height in March. The most factual daily, *Hospodarske Noviny*, presented a 57 percent share in coverage of political issues. The most factual TV news channel („21“ public service CT 2) had a 86 percent share, and the private *Zpravodajsky Denik TV Prima* a 74 percent share of policy issues. Nevertheless, in the following weeks and months reporting on political issues was losing the battle, and horse-racing, as well as mud-throwing information received more and more media coverage. In June - the month of the election - basic policy issues received only 27 percent of the total share of analysed statements in the media (Chart 2).



These percentages allow for a comparison of the Czech elections with the „Americanisation“ of national elections in the Czech republic. In the final days before the elections, voters got more information about concerts and other events to support leading politicians, than about their particular political programs. The media ‚thoroughly analysed‘ the media discussions of politicians, but only from a superficial point of view - who was better dressed, whose voice and style was more eloquent, etc. To the critical eye and ear, the content of basic policy issues in the politicians' speeches remained untouched. This was done in typical American election style. Also typical American, only 1% of the coverage was devoted for information about alternative non-parliamentary parties and political attitudes (Chart 3).

The situation described above, was perhaps the main reason for the smallest election turnout since the Velvet revolution in 1989: Only 58 percent of voters voted, compared to 74 percent in 1998. A total of 12 percent of these voted for non-parliamentary parties (none of them reached the 5 percent limit to enter the parliament). Consequently, less

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than 50 percent of the voters now have their representatives elected into parliament.

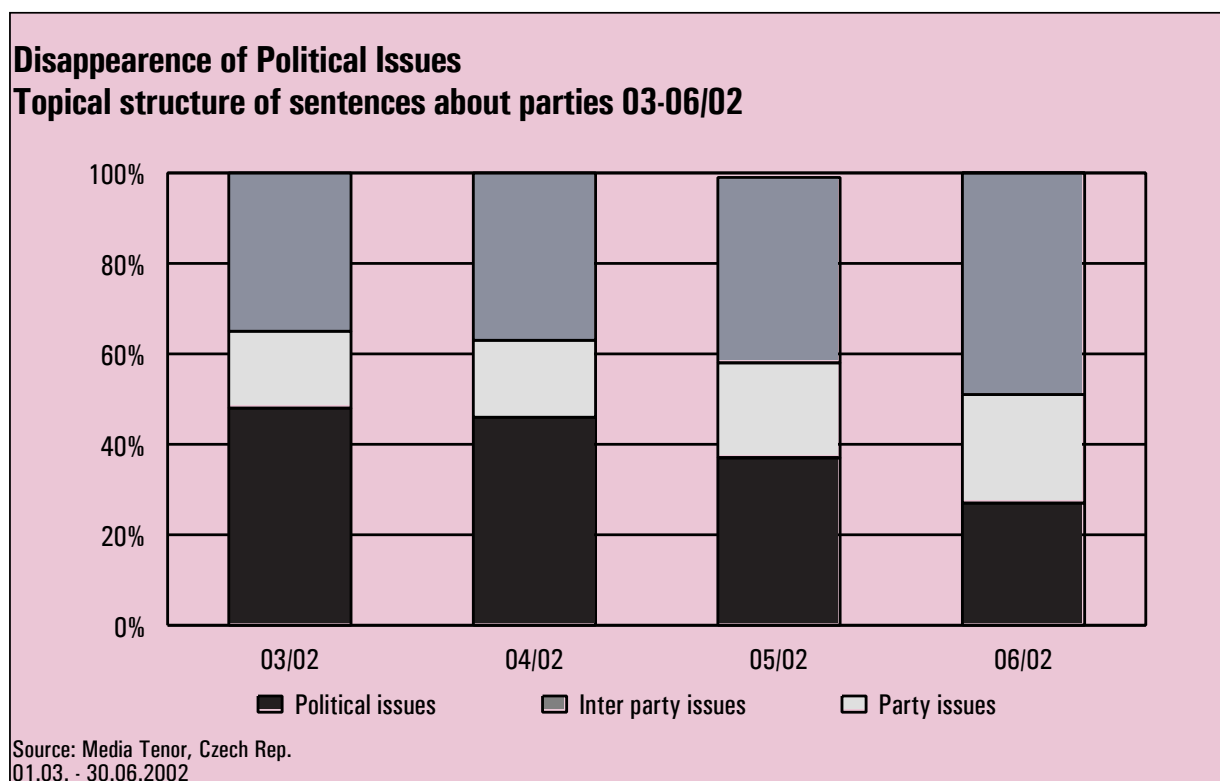
Promising start of Czech election campaign

The election campaign was started early this year by the Civic Democratic Party (CDP), who was in power from the Velvet revolution in 1989 till the political crises of 1997, and who desperately wanted to regain power. Surprisingly, the CDP embarked on a new style of campaigning. It was not the „American way“ of „electotaining“, in the format other parties followed, but the „British way“ of discussion about particular political issues. „Issues of the Decade“ were monothematic slogans on billboards, supported with several party statements on basic issues advertised in the press, on in-depth TV programs, on internet pages and in e-mails. This „British way“ of discussing political issues was of great value to journalists, as well as to opinion leaders, as it contained useful and comprehensive information (e.g. the political programs of party members in the different regions, clipping of articles, and the transcription of discussions in electronic media).

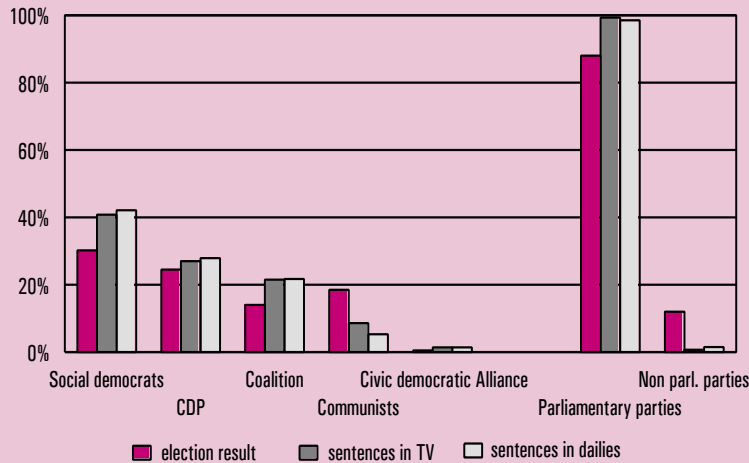
The CDP chose especially controversial issues to discuss that improved their chances to be reported on in the media. For instance, by means of the slogan „CDP votes for EU“, the party wanted to stress the point that the CDP is „for the EU“, and not „anti-European“, as it was labelled in the media. This slogan was followed by additional information, such as: „CDP votes for EU, but...“

On the whole, the first part of the CDP campaign helped voters to understand CDP policies. Nevertheless, in the second phase of its campaign, the CDP abandoned its policy of following the British way of electioneering by emphasising basic political issues and turned their focus to emotional appeals according to the American model.

They replaced the in-depth discussion and publication of their policies with the face and name of their leader Vaclav Klaus. „Stop the Socialists. The nation votes for Vaclav Klaus!“ was one of the emotional final slogans in typical American style in the last part of the election period. Since then, the public support declined from 30 percent

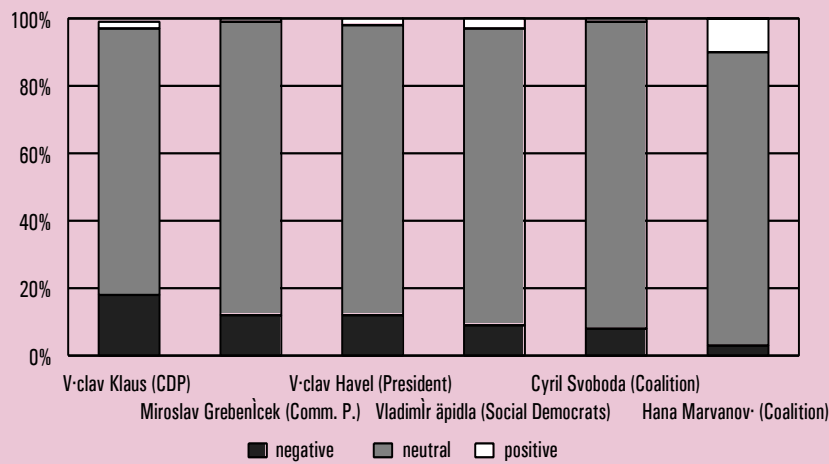


Small Parties Cut from Media Agenda
Election results and media coverage on parties 03-06/02



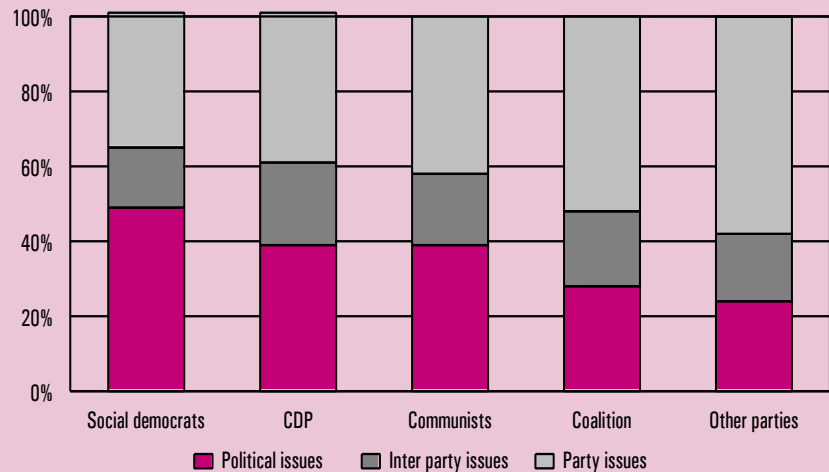
Source: Media Tenor, Czech Rep. 01.03. - 30.06.2002
 Basis: 54.886 sentences in Dailies, TV, Radio

CDP Bet All its Money on Vaclav Klaus
Evaluation of the Czech leaders in media 03-06/02



Source: MEDIA TENOR, Czech Rep. 01.03. - 30.06.2002
 Basis: 14.181 sentences in Dailies, TV, Radio

Coalition Did Not Communicate its Program
Topical structure of coverage on parties 03-06/02



Source: Media Tenor, Czech Rep. 01.03. - 30.06.2002
 Basis: 54.886 sentences in Dailies, TV, Radio

to a final 24 percent of votes – also perhaps because Vaclav Klaus was one of the politicians with the worst ratings of statements in the media (Chart 4). Undecided voters defined the outcome of this year’s election by finally deciding not to vote. Each established party faulted in one way or the other. As the CDP, during the end of its campaign, the Coalition did not bother to communicate its program for the duration of the four-year period before the 2002 elections and right up to voting day. Patrik Nacher, responsible for campaigning for the Coalition (Christian Democrats, and the Union of Freedom), complained in the Tyden weekly magazine (27th May 2002): „I am angry and despairing when I hear all the nonsense about elections based on political issues. Politicians themselves often do not read the political programs, neither do journalists, nor do ordinary people“ (Chart 5). The governing Social Democrats invested heavily in their Americanised campaign, but the money was lost in a bucket of amateur billboards and emotional slogans such as: „Do you want a government

that thinks about peoples' needs?"

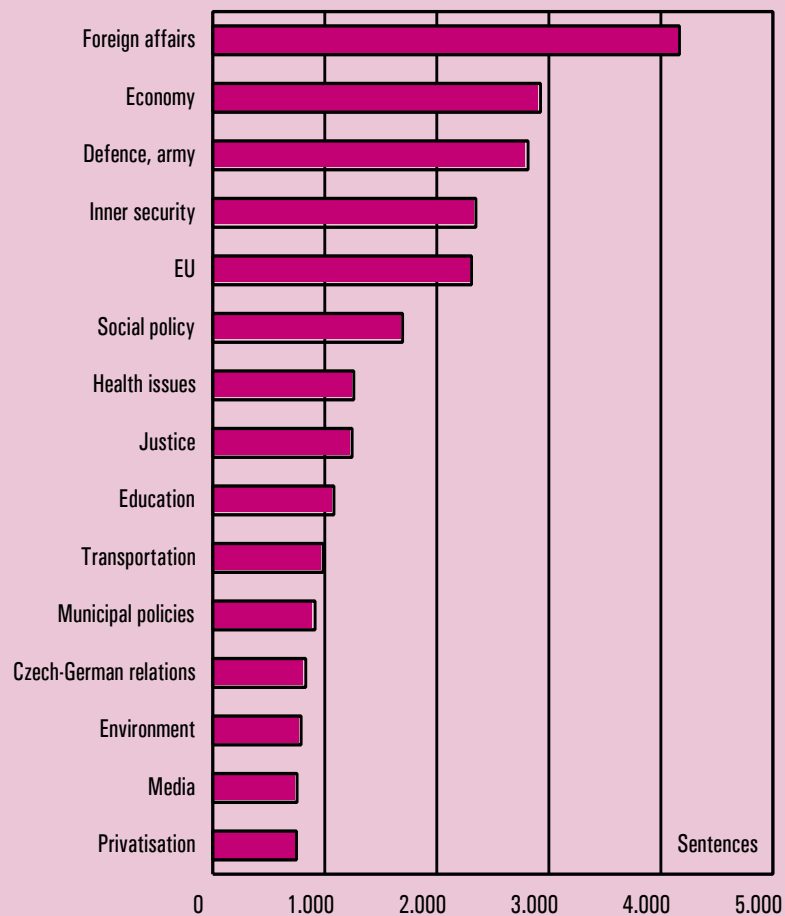
The result was a loss of half a million votes for each democratic parliamentary party (Social Democrats, CDP, Coalition) and more than 200 000 new „protest votes“ for the Communists who gained 17 new chairs in Parliament. And the paradoxical or ironic result? The „Americanisation“ of the campaign helped the Communists!

Evaluation of parties: CDP received the worst percentage

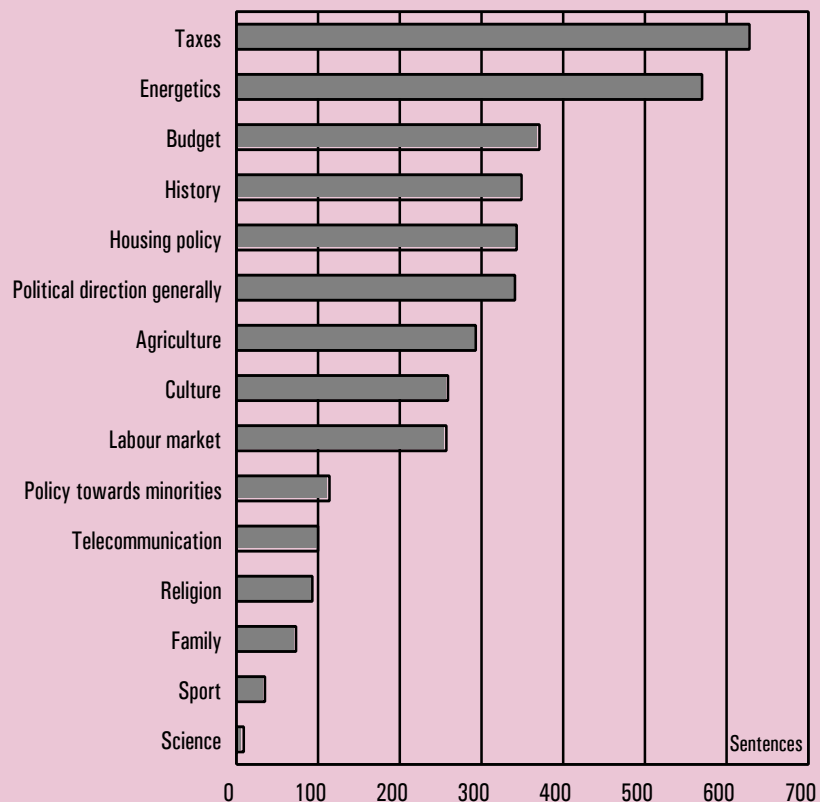
After their election defeat, the CDP talked again about the possibility of reaching out to their voters through the media. But the problem is that the CDP received the worst percentage of negative statements in daily newspaper commentaries, with a total of 25 percent of negative statements this year. Other parties were described only slightly less negatively: the Civic Democratic Alliance (23 percent), Communists (22 percent), Social Democrats (22 percent).

Only the Coalition Parties were described more positively, because there was very little news or other reasons to write about them - the Union of Freedom (16

Science, Family and Minorities at the Bottom Top fifteen issues of election campaign 2002



Bottom fifteen issues of election campaign 2002



percent negativity), and Christian Democrats (15 percent). On the other hand: on television news the CDP was the media's darlings. On the private TV Nova the CDP was the less negatively evaluated party (5 percent), while the most criticised party was the Coalition (10 percent). On the public service Czech TV, the CDP, as well as the Coalition, were evaluated negatively in only 2 percent of the analysed statements. The Social Democrats were criticised in 6 percent of the statements.

Parties set the agenda by keeping issues out of the media's reach

This year, rather than blaming the media for setting their viewers' and readers' agenda, and demanding more space for political issues and alternative points of view, it was a case of the politicians who set the agenda by keeping inconvenient issues out of the media's reach and coverage.

„Issues of the decade“ was one of the best examples of agenda setting. Thanks to the EU, it was rated as the fifth most important political issue of the year. „Environment“ climbed to 13th place, while it almost didn't exist as a political news topic in the 1998 election.

The Social Democrats set their agenda in a more ambiguous way - perhaps as part of their governmental activities. Their focus was on leading the Czech economy out of its crises, and this became the second highest news issue during the pre-election period. The Social Democrats also decided to modernise the army by its controversial decision to buy 24 Grippen air-fighters. This was one of the factors causing the army to be the third major news issue of this year's election campaign.

However, the most often mentioned issue was foreign affairs, mostly due to discussions about the Benes decrees (Chart 6). The important question was if the Benes decrees were an example of agenda setting or agenda cutting. The Czech media were full of articles, commentaries and speculations about it. Journalists informed the public about almost every single press conference or statement on this issue, provided mostly by the Social Democrats and the CDP, but failed to inform the public about topics on the „readers' agenda“, such as agriculture, housing policy, family policy, policy towards minorities, and science.

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Basis

Media: TV: UDALOSTI CT1, „21“ C 2, TELEVIZNI NOVINY, DENIK TV PRIMA

Daily Newspapers: MF DNES, LIDOVE NOVINY,

HOSPODARSKÉ NOVINY, PRAVO

Radio: CECKY ROZHLAS

Time: 01.03.2002 - 31.06.2002

Analysis: Research of all stories; Analysis of all sentences on political parties and politicians in TV News, Daily Newspapers and Radio

Agenda Setting Article, MT Journal Nr. 122, July 2002