

## **Abstention from elections as one of the indicators of social cohesion / non-cohesion and its wider context** (with special regard to the 2004 regional elections)

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### **1. About the research**

The initial empirical background for this study (and a springboard for analysis of supplementary data and for further interpretation and hypothetic conclusions) is based on the results of a public opinion survey carried out by the Centre for Public Opinion Research between 17 and 24 January 2005. The inquired group consisted of 1037 people over 15 years of age, and a sub-group of 813 people eligible to participate in regional elections. This sub-group did not include people, who were less than 18 years old at the time of elections, and inhabitants of Prague, where regional elections did not take place. The group and the sub-group were selected according to quota selection and they are representative as to the age structure, sex, level of education, size of residence community and distribution by regions. Because the group was not selected randomly, it was not guaranteed beforehand, that it would be distributed in accordance with statistically detected factual participation / abstention of eligible voters in / from regional elections, or in accord with the real structure of citizens as concerns political activity or ideological and political orientation.<sup>1</sup> This problem occurred in the sub-group of eligible voters, which did not include inhabitants of Prague, where only 43.4 % of the questioned mentioned their abstention from regional elections. However, the real abstention from elections to local governments reached, according to official statistics, 70.4 %. Among those who participated in the elections it was the other way round: the real number was 29.6 %, whereas in our sub-group of voters it reached 56.5 %.

Similar phenomena are not uncommon in public opinion researches. Even when the research strictly respects the representativeness according to quota features, almost in every public opinion survey based on quota selection a shift occurs in favour of people, who are more accessible to answer questions that are subject to this survey because of their experience and interests. (This is true about every research, which contains questions about socio-political problems, especially election preferences.) It generally holds true that those who don't refuse participation in public opinion research are usually more active and sociable

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<sup>1</sup> Even random selection cannot easily guarantee the representativeness of a selected group. When we use supplementary second round of selection and a double check we can get significantly close.

people. This creates further pressure on the final structure of the selected group, even though it may represent all the basic categories according to quota features. In our case the decrease in number of absentees from the elections in the group of eligible voters indicates that quota selection according to objective features did not prevent distortion of the selected group by a major shift in favour of people with higher interest in politics. Thus, the data about the group as a whole, concerning this area of questions, are probably more optimistic, than in reality. This does not mean, however, that attitudes and evaluation expressed by such a selection are untruthful or irrelevant, and they will be factored in the following analysis. For our subject under survey it is important that the total number of absentees from elections from the group of eligible voters (354 people) is sufficient to be analysed as a representative group with objective features and opinions for the given part of inhabitants. Because of the quantity shift in the structure of the selected group in comparison with the basic group and because of the limited size of the group we cannot launch into a complex multi-variation analyses or quantitative models (with the exception of a few factor analyses).

The research was set in the time period prior to the launch of the press campaign questioning propriatory situation of current prime-minister Stanislav Gross and his family, which was followed by a rigorous demand of Kalousek asking Gross to resign, ČSSD party assembly decisions concerning this issue, appearances of the president, eruption of government crisis and demission of Gross' government. From public poll results, which were published later, we can draw a conclusion that this series of events further strengthened the sceptical and critical attitude of inhabitants towards politics, which was uncovered in our research. In time of editing this article (in the second half of May 2005) the public opinion researches results published by different agencies consistently confirm further decrease of interest in elections and increase of respondents' inability or unwillingness to choose among the political subjects. This confirms the information, concluded from our January research. Our data from the January 2005 survey do not express any sudden worsening of political conditions or public attitudes, but rather their constant situation. The factors, which caused this situation (detected in the research), as well as their wider context, contributed to the following aggravation of the situation. We believe that these factors have a long-term effect and they are generally more significant than additional effects such as random (were they really random?) personal accusations and their purposive use to provoke government crisis.

In other words, we encounter special constellation of historical events. Results of our surveys and their analysis (analysis of the 2004 regional elections and public opinion about them plus other facts and attitudes concerning participation in/ abstention from elections) prove to be symptomatic for the existence of a certain wider phenomenon – so far we can call it neutrally as a significant drop of interest in politics in a certain period of the development of the Czech society (and perhaps some other similar societies) - and facilitates the prediction as to its course in future. It is obvious that generalization of time and factually limited data and attempts at conditioned prediction have a hypothetical character. They can be disproved by some unpredictable changes or by future surveys.

## **2. Abstention from elections as an increasing social phenomenon**

The increasing phenomenon of abstention from elections in current democratic systems was regarded and analysed a number of times. There is an interesting overview of this problem in a provisional text published on Internet [Kreidl 2004].<sup>2</sup> Another study, focused on the problems of European elections results [Linek 2004] also relates to this issue.<sup>3</sup> Since the analysis of the results of one survey, presented in this text, refers to a situation in one country in a certain phase of its development, the author of this text cannot engage in detail in theoretical thoughts about factors, which affect higher or lower turnout in all democratic systems in general. The author is also sceptical about attempts to explore such phenomena in overtly general level of theory of democracy. He believes that these phenomena may have and probably do have specific universal cultural and civilization causes, which refer to certain trends with spatial and temporally historical determination with global significance (for example affiliation of this or that country to Euro-Atlantic culture or its European variation). First of all, however, it is a) spatially and typologically conditioned by affiliation of the Czech Republic to a group of countries of central European character, which undergo a post-socialist transformation and b) historically and nationally conditioned by a certain stage of the development of the Czech society. Therefore we will base our interpretation on a historical comparison of data for the Czech Republic (and possibly for other similar post-socialist

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<sup>2</sup> [http://pes.fsv.cuni.cz/projekt\\_nevolici](http://pes.fsv.cuni.cz/projekt_nevolici)

<sup>3</sup> Linek, L. 2004. Volby do Evropského parlamentu 2004 – analýza volební účasti a stranické podpory v České republice. Praha: Sociologický ústav, Sociologické studie 04/01.

countries) rather than on universal theories that are based on experiences of countries, which are significantly different from our conditions.<sup>4</sup>

From this point of view it is important for us to identify the main trends of participation in / abstention from elections especially in a transformational period in the Czech Republic, starting in 1990. After more than fifty years' interval from the last democratic elections in Czechoslovakia (even though they were limited in the post-war years, as to the spectrum of political subjects, that could participate in the elections), the first elections, that enabled truly free decision-making of the voters, aroused exceptional interest (both among those, who supported Velvet revolution and among those, who wanted to express their sympathies with the communist party). Another shift of the indicator of participation in / abstention from elections was by far so univocal.

In the basic type of elections, in the elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament, the indicator developed - according to election statistics – in the following way:

**Table 1: Overview of voter turnout in the elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament of the Czech Republic in years 1990 – 2002 in %**

Year	Participation	Abstention
1990	96,8	3,2
1992	85,1	14,9
1996	76,4	23,6
1998	73,9	6,1
2002	58,0	42,0

Source: CVVM, Our society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005), 05-01

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<sup>4</sup> In the article mentioned on pages 13 and 14, Linek presents an overview of voter turnout in recent parliamentary elections and European Parliament elections in European countries. It is evident, that the Czech Republic together with Estonia and Poland belongs among countries with the smallest voter turnover in parliamentary elections as well as in the European Parliament elections. He also point to differences in development of abstention from elections in Western European countries and Eastern and Central European post-socialist countries.

The three possible explanations of decreasing participation in elections mentioned by the general theory of democracy - theory of resources (based on different characteristics of voters and absentees), theory of mobilisation (based on the character of the political actors, namely political parties and politicians) and theory of context (stressing specific social situation and resulting motivations of voters) are applied in Central and Eastern Europe as well. [Linek c.d.:14-16] (We also mention these general aspects of the problem in the analysis of our data.) However, the post-socialist countries significantly differ from western European countries in all three generalities. And within a group, the post-socialist countries also differ from each other.

The gradual decrease of interest in elections between the politically tense year of “revolutionary elections” of 1990 and the years of more or less tried and tested practice of Parliamentary elections of 1992, 1996 and 1998 is relatively understandable and has certain parallels in other democratic transformations. There occurs a social and psychological (partially also demographical and cultural) differentiation of population among people who are interested in public affairs and the others. There is also a regional and social differentiation, which draws some people away from public affairs to their every day problems. Some citizens may have been affected by disappointment with the acts of the previously elected government (see the difference between participation in 2002 and 1996, or in 1998). We can actually say that a voter turnout at around 75 % can be, in given circumstances, regarded as relatively high or at least satisfactory. However, the decrease of election participation and increase of abstention from elections between the years 1998 and 2002 was unexpectedly high – abstention from elections increased by one fifth compared to previous figures. This phenomenon had no obvious or easily understandable specific cause. The significance of such a radical drop faded out in the euphoria of the supporters of Social Democrats (who won for a second time in a row), in the satisfaction of their new coalition partners and in the grief of the supporters of ODS, which was defeated for the second time. As concerns the decreased number of voters caused by abstention from elections, both biggest parties had the same reason for scepticism. In 1998, 1 928 660 citizens voted for ČSSD, whereas in 2002 it was only 440 279. In case of ODS the figures were 1 656 011 and 1 166 975 respectively. The loss for ČSSD is  $488\,301 = 25,3\%$ , in case of ODS it is  $489\,036 = 29,5\%$ . Whatever were the reasons, not many people understood the frightening increase of indifference in basic democratic activity. None of the renowned agencies for public opinion research surveyed who were the people, who did not come to the elections, and what were their attitudes.

As far as the outrageously small voter turnout in the Senate elections is concerned, it was regarded as a more or less natural consequence of the disapproval of a majority of population with the very existence of the second chamber of Parliament. Some specific reasons for low polls in the 2000 regional elections as well as for the low polls in the local elections were also found. When the great decrease in voter turnout in the 2002 elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament and subsequent small turnout in the 2004 regional elections (from 33.6 % in

2000 to 29.6 % in 2004, even though regional authorities had reached a certain standard and they gained higher confidence of the public) was followed again by small turnout in the Senate elections and finally by an unexpectedly low participation in the European parliament elections - mere 28.3 % (which was excused by strange reasons), it became clear (in spite of specific features of individual types of elections) that the decreasing participation of citizens in basic democratic procedure is a universal trend that testifies the decreasing interest in politics and decreasing trust in the way, in which politics is executed in our country. It also turned out that this trend concerned at least one half of the population of the Czech Republic. Not even then did the abstention from elections become a primary interest of the politicians. They analysed election results from the point of view of “winners” and “losers”, instead of dealing with the serious problem of increasing indifference of citizens in politics and a growing gap between active and passive citizens, particularly between the political elite as a whole and ordinary voters.

In January 2005, the Centre for Public Opinion Research of the Institute of Sociology of the Science Academy of the Czech Republic decided to survey the decreased voter turnout in the 2004 regional elections. Because the structure of the selective group differs from the basic group (higher interest in regional elections and therefore higher interest in public affairs), their experience with the election turnout in the past somehow differs from the experience of the inhabitants as a whole. In 2002, only 27.2 % from the questioned, who had a right to vote, did not attend the elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament, which is much less than the 42 %, recorded in the election statistics on the whole.

It is interesting what ideas the questioned have about their participation in the next parliamentary elections. When asked, whether they would attend the elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament that would take place the following week, they answered in a following way: definitely yes 28.5 %, rather yes 34.5 %, rather not 16.4 %, definitely not 13.2 %, doesn't know 7.4 %. Even in this group we can register the tendency to increasing abstention from elections – real abstention from elections in 2002 (27.2 %) increases to expected abstention in the same type of elections of 29.6 %, while 7.4 % are undecided. As we know from experience, the declared answer “rather yes” wouldn't be executed entirely in real elections. Such ideas, however, are not absolutely valid. As it is generally well-known, sudden and dramatic changes in international and especially in the internal conditions can provoke large numbers of inhabitants to an explosion of public activity, which can result in an

increased voter turnout. Previous experience from the recent and the current development of public attitudes do not indicate so far, that the events provoking such an explosion would have to have an exceptional form in the Czech conditions, different from the existing political practice.

### **3. Connection of the abstention from elections with the problems of social cohesion / non-cohesion.**

#### **3. 1. General**

Previous research of the problems of social (macro) cohesion in our country focused primarily on its link to differentiation according to social, cultural and ethical differentiation. Political issues were left aside. First, because researches focused mainly on cultural and political application of acquired data. Second, it was silently assumed, that with the establishment of pluralistic democracy enough was done for social cohesion and that the system could function only as a stable and unquestionable precondition for the strengthening of social cohesion. Only radical decrease of voter turnout, which had to be connected with obvious decrease of trust in politics, political parties and politicians (mainly, but not only, from the coalition in power) in general, led us to the opinion, that functioning of democratic system as a factor universally favourable to strengthening of social cohesion is not without questions. Really, rapid increase of abstention from basic democratic procedure, affecting almost half of the population, is a phenomenon, which markedly divides the attitudes of the society and which concerns the important (in some situations and contexts key) area of social life and that is political culture. Moreover, it seemed probable from the beginning that political abstention is somehow connected with the phenomenon of social deprivation and with differentiation of cultural and ethical values.

It could also be presumed that the decrease of voter turnout is connected with the increasing distrust of ordinary citizens in the political elite. This phenomenon probably has its roots in the attitudes of the politicians (for example abusing of power, excessive enriching, corruption, etc.). It is interesting, that the downfall of the second government of Václav Klaus in 1997, as well as the resignation of the government of Stanislav Gross, started by a suspicion of a partial connection between the politicians and property. In both cases the connection was incomparably smaller, than the existing tendency of some members of the economic elite to enrich themselves or the tendency of the political or administrative elite to

abuse the power. In Poland, the weakening of trust in the left-wing government was also caused by suspicion of corruption (in this case supported with evidence). Citizens are probably exceptionally sensitive to these phenomena: the suspicion of overuse of power together with suspicion of illegal or immoral enriching probably creates an explosive mixture, which can lead (together with some skilful manipulation with political opponents and especially with the media) to a sudden downfall of trust.

### 3.2. Opinions of the respondents

All respondents were asked what they thought about the connection of social cohesion and political democracy in general and in our conditions. They were asked whether the democratic political system rather contributes to / or disturbs the strengthening of social cohesion a) in general, b) currently in the Czech Republic. The questioned answered in the following way:

**Table 2: Respondents' opinions on the relationship of democracy and social cohesion in %**

	Democracy _____ social cohesion:				
	Definitely contributes to	Rather contributes to	Neither contributes to / nor disturbs	Rather violates	Definitely violates
All in general	3,2	27,9	41,8	23,6	3,5
Those who voted*	3,9	29,3	37,8	24,2	4,8
Those who did not vote*	2,3	20,5	47,7	26,3	3,2
All in the Czech Republic	0,8	13,8	35,0	41,2	9,1
Those who voted*	0,9	14,6	33,4	39,8	11,2
Those who did not vote*	0,3	9,0	33,6	50,0	7,1

In regional elections 2004

Source: CVVM, Our society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005), 05-01



On average, the questioned believe that democracy has neutral effect on social cohesiveness on general level (those, who participated in the regional elections, find it as slightly positive). Their opinion corresponds with the reality of current Euro-Atlantic societies and amends the excessive optimism of the former idea about automatic influence of democracy mechanisms on creation of conditions for social unification on the bases of freedom and civil equality. Their specific experience with current Czech democracy is far less favourable – half of them regard the effect of Czech democracy on strengthening of cohesion as negative, only one sixth finds it positive. (Those, who didn't participate in the elections, find the influence of democracy on the cohesion even more negative). This supports our hypothesis that the Czech political experience of the past years can really contribute to the disruption of social cohesion.

#### **4. Causes of abstention from regional elections**

The January survey focused in detail on the abstention from the 2004 regional elections, which has the same causes (apart from a few specific factors) as abstention from other types of elections. Let us therefore have a look at the causes in more detail, because they can enlighten more general circumstances, which cause lower voter turnout in general.

##### **4.1. Opinions of respondents**

###### **4.1.1. Personal**

Respondents were asked the following question: “Why did you personally decide not to vote (in regional elections)?”

**Table 3: Personal reasons for not participating in the elections in %**

Reason	%
1. Illness, old age	7,1
2. Being away from home, holidays, business trip	13,9
3. Lack of time, too much work, family commitments	8,3
4. My vote will not decide anything, nothing will change	17,0
5. Did not find it important, the result is clear beforehand	1,2
6. Could not make a choice	14,2
7. Disgust and dissatisfaction with politics, mistrust in politicians	17,6

8. Does not go to elections, conscientious absentee from elections	6,5
9. General lack of interest in politics	7,1
10. Regions are useless	2,7
11. Other (other problems, did not feel like it, etc.)	4,4
Total	100,0

Source: CVVM, Our society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005), 05-01

The answers can be divided in three basic groups. Answers 1 to 3 (total 29.3 %) refer to some objective causes of abstention. To a certain extent, they are certainly truthful. However, from our experience with public opinion research we can presume, that part of the questioned exaggerates the significance of the objective (and therefore neutral) obstacles. Answers 6, 10 and 11 refer to different specific subjective causes. Even here we can doubt, whether all 17.6 % of absentees could not chose from a large number of candidates. What is surprising, however, is the small number of those, who underestimated the significance of this type of elections - elections to regional authorities – because they opposed the existence of district authorities. (On the contrary, in case of the Senate elections, opposition to the institution plays a key role – in our research, 69.2 % of the questioned mentioned it as a general cause of abstention from elections.)

Remaining answers (4, 5, 7, 8, 9), which exhaust almost half of the reasons for abstention from elections, can be characterized as different levels of indifference with regard to politics – from lack of interest to disgust. Those, who did not attend the regional elections, openly mentioned this group of reasons as a main factor of their decision. Perhaps even part of those, who mentioned different reasons, secretly feel the same. It is obvious, that the specific phenomena that we analyse – the abstention from district elections – is (even according to the claims to the questioned, who participate on this type of behaviour) explained as a part of a more general phenomenon of lack of interest in politics, in many cases openly characterized as disgust by politics.

#### **4.1.2. General**

Because we didn't want to pose an emotionally charged question about abstention from regional elections, we asked those (no matter whether they did or did not participate in the regional elections), who generally regard voter turnout in the Czech Republic as a small one –

and who formed 93.5% of the group – about the causes of this phenomenon in relation to the 2004 elections to regional self-government. The answers were categorized in a following way:

**Table 4: Causes of low voter turnout in regional elections in %**

Cause	%
1. Regions are useless	5,3
2. Regions have no tradition, they have not become common yet	1,4
3. Regions are too remote to people	3,9
4. Bad campaign, not enough information, unsuitable date	7,6
5. Disgust with politics and politicians (bad political situation)	54,8
6. Irresponsibility of people (they do not make use of their right to vote)	21,0
7. Laziness, indolence	4,1
8. Other	1,9
Total	100,0

Source: CVVM, Our society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005), 05-01

In this case, the structure of answers is obvious: 10.6 % of answers stress the problem of “lack of establishment” of regions (this answer was more frequent among those, who participated in the elections; as we have seen, those, who have not participated, did not find this reason so important). Still, this number is relatively low in comparison with the fact, that the most important factors for abstention in regional elections are those, which are specific for this type of election. 7.6 % of the questioned point out to real or seeming technical drawbacks in the election organization and election campaign. It is less than in the statements of absentees from elections – the voters as if could reveal more precisely and more severely the real motives, which are sometimes hidden by excuses. Almost 55 % of the questioned stated directly and without hesitation disgust with politics or bad political situation as the main cause. Roughly one quarter of the questioned was outraged by irresponsibility or indolence of the election saboteurs, which certainly points out to one of the grave general causes of abstention from elections. We cannot deceive ourselves that in the best possible conditions the overwhelming majority of citizens would participate in the elections. There are always people, whose personality and values are oriented in a different way and they do not regard their participation in elections as necessary. Our problem lies in the fact that the number of those, who do not participate in the elections, is exceptionally high and in the past few years it

has rapidly increased. Nowadays, it includes many of those (roughly about half of that half), who used to participate in these acts. The increase is unquestionably connected with the negative evaluation of political climate.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.2. Effects of different factors on the objective abstention from elections

Analysing and identifying different variables among participants of regional elections on one side and absentees on the other also informs us about conditions and causes of election abstention. We surveyed relations of the differentiation of eligible voters to a whole series of variables. The closeness of this relation is characterized by normalised contingency coefficient (zero relation = 0,0, absolute closeness of relation 1,00).

**Table 5: Closeness of relation of differentiation between participants in and absentees from regional elections with selected variables**

Variable	Cn*
1. Supposed turnout in the upcoming elections to the Lower Chamber of the Parliament	0,465
2. Current preferences of political parties	0,347
3. Self-categorization on the scale left-wing / right-wing	0,257
4. Which party did the questioned vote for in 2002	0,242
5. Net personal income	0,223
6. Social position	0,221
7. Acceptability of the type of political orientation	0,202
8. Age	0,201
9. Demographic type of household	0,195
10. Coverage of basic household needs	0,186
11. Self-categorization on the scale of the household living standard	0,184
12. Marital status	0,182
13. Region	0,166

<sup>5</sup> Such an increase of abstention from elections in our conditions does not express in any case satisfaction of more or less well-situated part of population, with the stabilised situation, which is often mentioned in case of culturally more developed societies. On the contrary, it is a phenomenon, which disturbs democratic culture and threatens social cohesion. See [Kreidl 2004 i Linek 2004].

The opinion, that among absentees from elections there are also extremely radical voters, whose votes could threaten democracy, does not pass either. We believe that by expressing their opinion in elections, the radical minorities violate social cohesion less than they would do by their absence, which is usually connected with a tendency to isolation from majority society or with a tendency to radical, undemocratic acts.

14. Religion	0,150
15. Education	0,135

\* All presented relationship have a statistical significance lower than 0.01, with the exception of the relationship with district membership, where the level of significance was 0,04.

Source: CVVM, Our society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005), 05-01

It is obvious from the overview, that determination effect of selected variables (with the exception of the first four) is not very strong, even though it is not insignificant. Variable 1 demonstrates the strongest relation, because it is only a modified expression of different attitudes of two parts of population towards politics, as we have previously demonstrated in connection with the causes of election abstention. It is obvious, that large part of election participants believe that – in spite of all evident drawbacks of our current political conditions – it is still worth it to actively attempt to change it. Division of the society in these two types of attitudes, which disturb social cohesion, seems to be unchangeable at this point. Still, we cannot rule out a possible increase of activity of those, who are indifferent at this point, as a result of significant political changes, which can be only roughly outlined at this moment. Variables 2 to 4 and 7 represent differentiation of political orientation and its effect on election activity is obvious. Even though this effect is different with different orientations, the further mentioned specific data give evidence, that loss of interest in active participation in politics concerns (to a certain degree) all of them. The effects of socio-economic position, symbolized by variables 5, 6, 10 and 11 are not insignificant. They are partly interwoven with demographic effects (variables 8, 9 and 12). Effect of descent (level of statistical significance = 0,08) expressed only by approximately five percent of men among voters and women among absentees. Territorial differentiation according to regions is relatively weak, among others because the regions as units do not socially differ that much from each other – complexes of socially threatened regions are within a larger district outweighed by regions with higher standards of living – with the exception of Prague, whose inhabitants have not participated this time in the regional elections. The size of permanent address surprisingly does not have any significant effect on the regional elections turnout. What is surprising is a connection between differentiation of participation/abstention from elections and religion (higher turnout of Roman Catholics and lower turnout of citizens without religion). What is also surprising is a small influence of differentiation according to education. Smaller group of people with basic education differs in smaller turnout, and a small group of people with University education differs in higher turnout. This phenomenon is partly affected by a higher

voter turnout of younger and therefore more educated part of population and higher voter turnout of older and therefore less educated population.

#### **4.3. In light of more specific identifications of absentees from elections**

The level of statistical significance or extent of contingency does not inform us about agreement or disagreement of the orientation of both variables or about specific characteristics of the absentees from elections. It is difficult to determine them without specific data. In these identifications, we will mention only those characteristics, which significantly set the absentees apart from the participants (that is, from average structure of the group).

##### *Political identifications*

As far as the intention to participate in the elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament is concerned (that is, some information about possible direction of the development of voter turnout), 58.8 % of those, who did not participate in the regional elections, plan not to participate in these elections either. Among those, who attended regional elections, only 13 % plan not to participate in the Parliamentary elections. This is serious information, which confirms our opinion, that causes of abstention in the regional elections are not specific only for this type of elections (for example because eligible voters regard them as less significant). In most cases (with the exception of the Senate elections) they indicate negative attitude towards election participation in general. At present we can hardly expect that elections to the most important executive body would attract significantly more voters, than the regional elections. Participation could increase only if some socio-political situation aroused problems, which would become a comprehensible and serious subject of the voters' decision.

It is interesting to compare participation in elections and abstention from elections in the 2002 elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament and in the last regional elections. Among those, who did not participate in the regional elections prevail former ČSSD voters by 45 % (even though this party already lost part of their voters because of abstention from elections already in 2002 in spite of the relative success of Zeman's government – which was expressed in 2002 by 80 % of ČSSD voters). Among the absentees from 2004 elections there are also former voters of ODS (25 % of those, who did not come to the elections), KSČM (13.8 %) and KDU-ČSL (10 %). These general losses, caused by decreased interest in politics, are

much smaller, than in case of ČSSD and they are outweighed by the fact, that among election participants prevail loyal voters from 2002 (ODS 34.3 %, KSČM 34.3 %, KDU-ČSL 19.9 %). Former ČSSD voters from 2002 comprised only 26.6 % of them. This can be expressed by another fact: in case of the regional elections, ČSSD lost 34.2 % of voters from 2002, whereas losses of other parties (except for nowadays marginal Freedom Union) were roughly two times smaller.<sup>6</sup> We can therefore say that the increasingly negative relation towards political participation is differentiated by a stronger share of former ČSSD and US voters and by a significantly smaller share of former opposition parties and KDU-ČSL voters. The negative perception of ČSSD and US governance (no matter to whatever extent it corresponds with reality) belongs among factors, which contribute to decrease of trust in politics and to the decrease of public political participation in general. Similarly to other countries, after a certain period of unpopular governance, the opposition supporters call for a change and they tend to be more politically active than the former government supporters. In the Czech Republic, however, it is quite a significant phenomenon, which somehow contrasts with the fact that the positive development of national economy and average living standards, initiated by Zeman's government, continued also during the governance of Špidla and Gross.

Similar information can be traced out from the data about distribution of current supporters of political parties among the 2004 voters (who are detected through a question about current political preferences). Among ODS, KSČM and KDU-ČSL supporters who participated in the regional elections there are more people, who are nowadays determined to vote than among ODS, KSČM and KDU-ČSL supporters, who did not participate in the elections. In case of ČSSD the proportion is practically equal. Information about political orientation of the 2004 voters and absentees point in the same direction. Number of social-democratic, socialist, nationalist and environmental supporters who did not participate in the elections is higher than among conservative, liberal, communist and Christian-democratic supporters. The significance of different level of political participation becomes apparent, when we realize, that social-democratic and social orientation is the most frequent in the population (23.3 % and 18.8 %). Representation of nationalistic and ecological parties is also quite significant (5.5 % and 4.9 %). People with this orientation probably do not find adequate political representation and they reinforce the numbers of those, who give up political activity. Only 4.8 % of die-hard supporters profess their communist orientation – the electoral college of KSČM are

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<sup>6</sup> Recent public opinion researches show that this trend continues as a result of recent government crisis. The process is probably similar to current development in Poland.

people with socialist orientation. To make the picture complete: 17.7 % profess conservatism, 18.4 % liberal orientation. Radical anarchist thinking is represented only by 0.4 %.

Another cause for small voter turnout is the fact, that absentees from elections are mostly people, who profess political centre (certain political neutrality) and who could have been disappointed by previous democratic-left wing politics. 54.6 % of absentees ranked to the centre, 19.1 % to the left and 26.3 % to the right.<sup>7</sup> This distribution may be also affected by the fact that Czech political scene does not provide a sufficient choice of strictly centrist (social-liberal) programme – since the defeat of Civic movement in 1992 it has not been convincingly formulated. Left-centrist social-democratic program was never clearly explained to the public and its last formulation is rather an inorganic combination of left democratic and liberal elements. Among those, who participated in the elections, 27.1 % belong to the left, 33.3 % to the centre and 39.6 % to the right. Supporters of moderate left and radical right did not participate in the elections in large numbers.

#### *Socio-economic identifications*

According to participation in / abstention from the regional elections, population divided into three groups. The first one demonstrated abstention of roughly two thirds. This group consists of the unemployed, housewives, students and trainees. Non-qualified workers and farmers draw close with abstention exceeding one half. In the second group, managers, self-employed people and pensioners who do not work reached participation of approximately two thirds. The third group consist of non-manual employees and qualified workers, whose participation distinctly exceeded one half. These quantitative data apply only for the given selected group with its shift towards higher participation in elections, which was announced beforehand. In real population, the total voter turnout would be smaller and abstention would be higher, but the division into three types according to participation and abstention would be apparent as well. The structure roughly corresponding to the following table would probably be preserved.

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<sup>7</sup> Similar tendencies were already noticed in the analysis of a group of absentees from elections in 1998 (even though it was not that large).



**Table 6: Socially-economic structure of participants in / absentees from regional elections in %**

Category	Absentees	Participants
Students, trainees	5,4	2,1
Pensioners	20,3	31,3
Unemployed	11,9	5,0
Housewives	3,7	1,5
Self-employed	6,2	10,5
Managers	8,2	12,0
Other non-manual employees	26,8	24,6
Qualified workers	9,3	7,8
Other workers and farmers	8,2	5,2
Total	100,0	100,0

Source: CVVM, Our Society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005) survey, 05-01

Notice the important role that the relatively numerous groups of the unemployed, pensioners, non-manual employees and manual workers play in the unbalanced proportion of abstention and participation. The unemployed and the non-qualified behave more or less according to our expectations – they tend not to participate in elections. On the contrary, pensioners, whose average incomes are relatively low and unwillingly valorised by the government, belong among the most prolific voters. This is due to their age, life experience, lifestyle and political orientation (communist and populist preferences), rather than to their social situation. A smaller group of students and trainees put their voting potential (which would probably support the right wing) into minimal effect. This also corresponds with their specific lifestyle. Living conditions and way of life also affect smaller voter turnout of housewives. In case of the last two groups, we cannot rely on the quantitative data because of their small frequency.

Participation in or abstention from elections of non-manual employees reflects their different incomes and material position. We can hardly expect excessive voting eagerness of the large group of professionals, whose incomes depend on the state budget and whose salaries do not correspond to their qualification. As it is expected, professionals and experts with specializations that are successful at the labour market and whose salaries correspond with or even overcome their qualifications have a relatively high voter turnout. The result of

these two contrary inclinations is an equal proportion of non-manual employees among absentees from elections and participants in elections. People with very low and low incomes tend to participate less in the elections and they constitute a significant part of absentees from elections. In case of people with higher incomes it is the other way round. As concerns the coverage of household needs by income, it is similar. The structure of absentees from elections from this point of view includes 27.1 % of those, whose incomes are definitely not sufficient or rather not sufficient to cover their household needs, and only 16.2 % of those, whose incomes are definitely sufficient. In case of voters, it is the other way round in both extreme points: they include 28.1 % of people with highly saturated households and only 14.4 % of respondents from insufficiently saturated households. The self-categorization of the household living standard in the three-grade scale offers a similar picture – see the following Table.

**Table 7: Participation in / abstention from regional elections according to living standard in %**

Living standard	Absentees	Participants
Good	30,7	47,1
Neither good, nor bad	44,6	38,3
Bad	24,7	14,6
Total	100,0	100,0

Source: CVVM, Our Society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005) survey, 05-01

All three analysed indicators give relatively simple picture, which corresponds with the previous analysis of socio-economic situation: people with higher incomes and living standard and corresponding social position tend to higher election participation. Those with lower income and living standard demonstrate tendency to higher abstention from elections. This tendency is most apparent in the highest and in the lowest social classes. It is obvious, that apart from the above emphasized political factors the voter turnout was also affected by the social factor. There is a certain connection between the two factors, which is given by the differentiation of social supports for different political subjects. It is obvious, that the gradual loss of ČSSD electorate is related to the current unclear and hesitant policy of this party and its government coalition towards low-income groups including pensioners and the unemployed, as well as towards groups on lower-middle, middle and higher social level with insufficient income, who depend on the state budget. Smaller part of ČSSD (and particularly

US) electorate shifted to ODS support, a slightly larger group to the communists, and another significant group enlarged (together with smaller groups of drop-outs from other parties) the category of people withdrawing from politics and therefore from election participation. Nowadays, the election preferences of ČSSD are on the level of stock voters, who share the same ideas and interest.<sup>8</sup>

### *Demographic identifications*

Structure of absentees from and participants in regional elections differs in the group of people up to 20 years of age and people 60 years old or more. Among those, who did not come to the elections there were 26.3 % of young and 16.4 % of old people. Among voters there were only 14.2 % of young and 31.6 % of old people. This phenomenon increases the significance of high election abstention. It seems that the predominant trend in this society is a diversion of the upcoming (and probably more dynamic) generation from politics, which presents a significant threat to democracy. The factor of generation estrangement must also be included among the important findings of this survey.

Logical consequence of the effect of age structure is a fact, that among absentees from elections there are more unmarried and divorced people. Marriage, on the other hand, supports participation in elections. Crisis of election participation is also affected by the shifts in marriage and divorce rate, which concerns mainly younger groups of population.

Findings about differentiation of participation in and abstention from elections among different demographic types of households bring interesting information to these problems as well as to social issues. Among absentees from elections there is a larger number of people from incomplete families and unmarried partners. Among participants in elections there are more people from childless marriages. The proportion of people from marriages with children is almost equal among participants and absentees. The situation in this group is therefore worse than in the group of people from childless marriages. The proportion of people who live independently and people from multi-generation household is also balanced, which is connected with the balanced number of young and old people in these groups. This information emphasises the negative effect of material and other worries about children and unmarried partner life on voter turnout.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the last public opinion surveys they lose these voters as well, which is probably connected with the results of party leadership election at the last Social-democratic meeting.

## 5. Opinion of respondents on abstention from elections

The questioned mostly agreed on the well-known fact. 45.4 % regard the voter turnout in the Czech Republic as low, 48.1 % as very low. Only 6.5 % of optimists believe, that the voter turnout is high.

When asked whether small voter turnout is a social problem, those, who acknowledge the existence of small voter turnout, answered in the following way: definitely yes 30.4 %, rather yes 50 %, not a problem 19.7 %. We can conclude that absolute majority of adult population (even though it is slightly improved by higher participation in regional elections, than it really is in reality) is aware of the serious problem of small voter turnout. The number of answers, which characterize this phenomenon as rather serious is unexpectedly high (it is probably connected with general cautiousness of Czech respondents, who avoid extreme opinions). We can hardly agree with the opinion that it is not a problem. And we have to say, that the answers of the Czech public were much more far-sighted than those of their political representation who judge the election results mainly from the viewpoint of proportion of votes for different political parties fighting for power. It is true, that the Czech politicians did not deal seriously with the small voter turnout in the 2002 elections (and previously in the Senate, local and regional elections), until the Social Democrats realized in 2004 that this phenomenon endangered their position.

We have also asked the respondents, who regard voter turnout as small (93.5 %), to express their agreement or disagreements with different possible formulations of the social context (causes and effects) of small voter turnout. The results are arranged according to frequency of affirmative answers. Table 8: % of agreement with possible social connections with low voter turnout

Variant	% of yes
1. Small trust in political parties	98,0
2. General disgust with politics	97,2
3. Lack of interest of political parties in the public problems	92,6
4. Small possibility of the citizens to affect politics	79,7
5. Weakening influence of wider public on politics	75,2
6. Expression of democracy, enabling independent choice	73,9

7. Weakening of democracy by conceding decision-making to the minority	66,6
8. Low public responsibility	65,2
9. International disgrace, disclosing immaturity of our democracy	37,1

Source: CVVM, Our Society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005) survey, 05-01

Answers to questions 1 to 3 are univocal. Absolute majority of population connect small voter turnout (in correspondence with our hypothesis) with general disgust with politics and with distrust in political parties, which according to the respondents do not deal with public problems. This belief is only partly based on personal experience or deep knowledge of political life – it is shaped to a large extent by purposeful and long-term media campaign. Nevertheless, the obviously expressed predominance of this opinion is an exceptionally serious fact, which must be taken into account by any cognitive as well as practically active entity.

From one fifth up to one third of respondents expressed their disagreement with the majority, which related small voter turnout to certain disruption of democratic principles in questions 4, 5 and 7. The understanding of democracy is therefore differentiated – there exists a significant, probably liberally thinking minority, which does not regard small voter turnout as something causing harm to democracy. Almost three quarters of the questioned regard the connection of the surveyed phenomenon to democracy from even more formal point of view. According to their answer to question number 6, they regard small voter turnout as a result of extensive democracy. Because of the inaccurate formulation of the question, they could not say whether they regard such a conception of democracy as a positive or as a negative one. Three quarters of respondents in question 8 did not attach responsibility for small voter turnout to the citizens at all, either because of their exasperation with political parties or because of their excessive liberalism. Two thirds, however, fully realize the public responsibility. Opinions about question 9 show, that the public still does not fully comprehend the international aspect of the given problem – this is true about number of other issues of our public life and it is connected with general underestimation of their European context.

It was logical to ask the respondents, whether the state should somehow engage in the attempt to increase the voter turnout. 65.7 % answered definitely or rather yes, 34.3 % rather

or definitely not. The opinion of this minority is probably also based on liberal understanding of democracy and role of the state.

We were naturally interested in the respondents' opinion about possible directions and tools of potential state measures. As it came out from the factor analysis, public opinion divided in two opinions. The first type relies on technical and organizational measures without significant change of voting system. Majority of those, who support obligatory participation in elections (36.8 %), expressed this opinion. The smallest number of respondents believes that a change of election term to the middle of the week (13.6 %) and the rest supported the possibility of electronic voting (44.6 %). The second group of respondents sees the solution of the problem in the shift towards majority system (44.6 %) and introduction of the principle of a dismissal of the members of Parliament by a party or a movement that nominated them as a their candidates (80.1 %). The second idea especially contains features that would deepen the connection between elected representatives and the voters. The drawback of its possible acceptance would be the violation of equality of voting right and disadvantage of smaller political parties.

The next question was directed towards the possibility of a deeper reform of pluralistic democratic system. Factor analysis of an approval of possible techniques of such reforms led to three types of opinion groups. Most people mentioned introduction of general referendum on crucial questions (90 %!), direct presidential election (84.5 %) and limitation of pre-election party expenditures (total 88.4 %). The second largest group combines requests for enlarging enforcing powers of state authorities (76.7 %), extending government's powers (33.6 %) and requests for limiting political party expenditures. The least represented is a right-wing radical type of opinions, which sees the solution in an increased quorum for representation of political parties or movements in the Parliament over the current 5 % (45.5 %), increase of presidential powers (30.6 %) and restriction of some political parties or movements (32.4 %).

## **6. Final summary**

When we consider public opinion expressed in this survey and results stated in the previous parts of this analysis, we can formulate our own brief evaluation of the phenomenon of intensive increase of abstention from elections in the Czech Republic during the past years. It is a universal phenomenon, which concerns to a certain extent all types of elections.

Increased abstention from the Senate, regional, local and European elections, as well as elections to the Lower Chamber of the Parliament certainly have their specific causes typical for each type of the elections. However, the small voter turnout is caused mainly by general indifference, apathy or even disgust of the Czech population in relation to politics. This overall syndrome seriously threatens future development of the Czech democratic system (which was initiated so promisingly in the last century) to such an extent, that we believe we can call it a beginning of a democracy crisis. At the same time it divides the society between people, who try to overcome this syndrome by active participation in democratic procedures, and passive, apathetic and resigned people and signalises the existence of a deep split between the political elite and the rest of the society.

The theory of democracy offers different theories of low election participation. On the basis of the previously mentioned data, we can refuse the stability of a political regime, leading to a dominating opinion, that the election participation is not necessary, because everything functions well anyway [Kreidl 2004]. If the regime was in a deep crisis, caused for example by a radical drop in public living standards or by attempts to restore totalitarian practices, then higher participation should be expected. Higher participation could also be caused by seriousness and depth of problems needed to be solved. No one can deny that problems, which will be dealt by the next elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament, will definitely be deep and serious – from deciding between radicalisation of the future social polarization and maintaining social state to hesitating between Euro-scepticism and pro-European policy. However, there are not many signals of increasing election participation.<sup>9</sup> The probable explanation of the tendency to increasing abstention from elections of a large group of inhabitants, comprising roughly one half of electorate, can be a combination of the seriousness of the problems and the fact, that almost no renowned political subject offers this part of electorate any program or strategy, that would correspond with their needs and interests. From the public point of view it means gradual loss of legitimacy of political entities. In the given situation it corresponds with the lack of a clear program and strategy of democratic left as well as democratic right, while the interest of higher classes and higher middle classes seem to be articulated (especially in the program of ODS) quite clearly. Current situation is sharpened by an increasing belief of part of the public in the proneness of politicians to clientelism and corruption, whether or not aroused by media campaigns.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the only obvious relief of the media and of the public that followed the change of Prime Minister, some rational steps of the renewed government and certain shifts in the popularity of politicians. On the other hand, any mistake or indication of a government scandal can cause another crisis in trust.

The roots of these phenomena lie to a large extent – as the data from the survey point out – in the current system of political parties and movements, which can be at least partially reformed by a set of legislative measures aimed at improvement of election system or the system of constitutional law. The significant decrease of voters of all parliamentary parties in the 2002 elections to the Lower Chamber of Parliament and the 2004 regional elections (most apparent in case of Social Democrats and Freedom Union), as well as general judgements of causes and connections of small voter turnout, expressed by respondents in this survey, support the hypothesis, that the most serious cause of prevailing negative attitude towards the current state of democratic politics is the fact that eligible voters do not see any attempt of the politicians to seriously solve their public and personal problems. We do not have to accept the prevailing opinion, supported by most media, that the ignorance of public needs is universal. Serious analysis of the overall results of the activity of social democratic governments can hardly be as negative, as the respondents' opinion, who in this survey<sup>10</sup> expressed distrust in Gross' government in 62.2 % of cases.

It is obvious, however, that political parties or movements are not able to formulate their programmes and strategies comprehensibly and openly enough or to clarify what needs and interest of the country and of its inhabitants they want to enforce and what tools they want to use. This is the only way people can demonstrate their relationship to the two basic principles of democracy - "for people" and "through people" - asserted by the respondents in our survey. This survey can help to a more specific identification of the neglected problems, namely by registering several causes of abstention from elections. Among those belong, apart from political experiences and attitudes, especially the social factors: the problems of low-income groups, the unemployed, pensioners, families with children and incomplete families, underdeveloped regions, but also the problem of insufficiently paid experts in areas dependent on the state budget and the serious problem of estranging young generation. Self-employed, employees in leading positions and experts from prospering professions do not have problems with participation in elections. If any political party wants to enlarge their electorate, they have to formulate their programme and strategic political aims also in relation to the groups that so far provide major part of election absentees.

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<sup>10</sup> That is to say before the beginning of a campaign led against him. In the later surveys, the trust in government before its demission decreased to a minimum, which was previously (during the time of transformation) recorded only before the collapse of the second government of Václav Klaus.



Both centre parties have strange problems in this respect: ČSSD as a party of left centre does not seem to be able to promote (apart from national and European interests) interests of low and middle classes, and Freedom Union as a party of right centre is not so far able to distinctly articulate their position in relation to the needs of the “new” middle class. The two right-wing parties (ODS and Christian Democrats) advocate interests and needs of the well situated people and at the same time obscure the final social impact of their orientation, which is a significant assertion of capitalist principles in the life of the whole society. Moreover, ODS owes us clear explanation of how they see the existence of the Czech Republic in the EU after a possible refusal of the European agreement. KSČM use their position of a radical opposition and undecided attitude of ČSSD to social problems. At the same time, it has not openly formulated their strategy of possible return to “positive sides” of state socialism and methods of implementing their Euro-sceptic programme. Similar objections related to vagueness, unclearness and lack of comprehensibility could be raised against the Green party as well as against the Movement of Independents and European democrats.

Considering this universal obscurity in their programmes and strategies, the political parties use alternative tools to assert themselves in politics: use or misuse of different components of executive on one side and obstructions against it on the other, media campaigns, arousing personal conflicts and scandalising opponents, etc. All that is obscuring and pushing the serious problems of the society and its future aside. The further loss of their legitimacy and deepening of political apathy (possibly leading to anomy) is an inevitable result. All these - more or less randomly connected – elements played their role in the recent government crisis and it is not surprising that it resulted in a further decrease of trust in politics, political parties and politicians, especially in parties and among politicians connected with Gross’s government.<sup>11</sup> The reconstructed structure of the government as well as opposition camp have only a short time to compensate or overcome the significant increase of their social isolation and decrease their legitimacy by relevant social, political and ideological activities. To pretend that nothing has happened and continue in autotelic political games that would intensify public political apathy would be the worst choice for Czech democracy, social cohesion and public life. We certainly do not want to predict the failure of seriously based reformative efforts, which could (on the basis of serious political words and actions) even in a short time contribute to the reputation of political elite, especially because many

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<sup>11</sup> Including KDU-ČSL, who will, in the end, hardly benefit from their attempt to persuade voters, that they belong both to the government and opposition.

absentees from elections consist of former voters of political parties of whom many are prepared to participate again in certain conditions. This text attempts, among others, to point out that the negative attitudes to politics would require unexceptional effort and real, not declarative, fair, frank and good will to be connected simultaneously with the courage to openly announce unfavourable news and comprehensibly explain unpopular measures. It is obvious, that such a turn, whoever will initiate it, would have to be carried out in all significant political subjects, in the government as well as in the opposition, and would have to concern all the significant state institutions and administrative bodies as well as regional authorities. In such case it would be relevant in functional stabilisation of social cohesion not only in the political, but also in social and cultural dimension.