

Electoral participation as an indicator of democracy in post-communist countries

Abstract

The Slovak Republic has been in a state of constant transformation since 1989 and, furthermore, one that is happening on several levels. In addition to economic, social and cultural processes, there is also one of the most important issues – that of democratisation. For the citizens of Slovakia – and for citizens of all post-communist countries – the democratisation of society, and their personal contribution to its creation, is a new experience. One of the key measurable indicators of democratisation and, in particular, the individual approach and interest of the population in the state administration is the level of participation in elections. The trends in the Slovak Republic in the last twenty years considering participation in elections have been negative, and one of the article's objectives is to make a comparison with the nearest neighbour – the Czech Republic – and to search for the reasons for why this is so. In the second part of the article, we compare the theoretical definition of democracy with its practical form.

Keywords: *democracy, electoral participation, civil society, electoral legitimacy*

Introduction

Today, we take democracy for granted and we take our society as democratic. Democracy allows individuals to participate in governance either directly through a referendum or plebiscite, in which a citizen may have a say on particular issues and problems, or indirectly, characterised by giving voice to a representative who will represent his or her views, whether in parliament, municipal corporation or other institution. Democratic establishments in western society today are considered to be perfect, on the grounds of the space given to express individual opinions and beliefs while respecting the voice of the majority. Concerning post-communist countries, focusing here mainly on the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic, all of which are relatively recent newcomers to the processes of democratisation: we can correctly assert that the democratisation process is still ongoing.

The aim of this article is to examine the current trend of a declining share of citizens casting their votes and also to compare the theoretical definition and meaning of democracy in actual practice.

Democracy

Democracy is a form of political constitution, accepted by western society as a natural evolution of the administration of government and, in many cases, as replacements for monarchies in modern history in terms of citizens' participation in the man-

agement of the affairs of the state. The beginnings of democracy can be dated from the earliest times, while democracy as a political system of decision-making was first used in ancient Greek city states approximately in the fourth and fifth centuries BC.

Our starting point is to define the concept of democracy. Democracy in its simplest definition was described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a form of government in which all people are involved in administrative functions.¹ At the same time, he denies the value of democracy as follows:

If we take the term democracy literally, true democracy has never existed and never will do, because it is against natural order that a large number will govern and, at the same time, a small group will be controlled.

On the one hand, democracy is considered to be most advanced system but, on the other, there are some doubts about its achievements in all the periods of history since its inception. Even Plato saw in democracy the risk of mediocrity, on the grounds that democracy is the inherently respected voice of the majority but is exposed to the risk that the elite emerging via the regular electoral process attracts people without the required 'skills', but who nevertheless thus have a legitimate mandate. The core of his criticism is also a belief that elected officials will tend to pursue their personal interests over those of the public. He saw the solution in the superiority of a ruling group of citizens – the 'philosopher kings' – providing governance over other citizens which is, however, contrary to the essence of a democratic polity.²

A well-functioning democratic society requires democratic activity of its citizens, in the circumstances of elections replacing revolution and violent change in the governing structure.

Democracy is also characterised by the following:

- equal opportunities of all citizens
- the right of all to participate in the electoral process
- interest in public affairs
- respect for the choice of the majority
- public consultation
- equality of status for all citizens independent of race, gender, religion and sexuality.

The practice of democracy gives citizens the power to participate in governance, but is it really so? We could state yes, since citizens have the right to participate in the electoral process, but there are two important facts which emerge:

- the trend of declining electoral participation and, thus, the declining legitimacy of elected representatives
- democracy being relegated to the casting of a vote in elections.

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau *Rozpravy Svoboda*: Praha, 1989.

2 Platón *Ústava Oikoymenh*: Praha, 2005, ISBN 80-7298-142-0.

These facts will be examined, based on measurable indicators, in the next section of this article which points to the eligibility concerns of Plato, Rousseau and the other critics of democracy in general, i.e. that democracy tends toward decline. This occurs if it is inadequately used to its potential. The objectives of this contribution are to highlight the risks of a democratic constitution which has *de facto* elements of oligarchy.

Decline in electoral turnout (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary after 1989)

Voter participation is among the most accurate indicators of the level of civil society and democracy as such in any democratic country. It refers to the interest of citizens in using and benefiting from the status of having a democratic order, i.e. to participate in the electoral process. The Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic appear in that context as representatives of post-communist countries, where the democratisation process has been in place over a relatively short period since 1989, when there was a change of political system to democracy from socialism. Citizens saw the change as a very strong hope for providing new life chances and, of course, in anticipation of an improved quality of life after a long period of totalitarianism. The proof was the nearly 96 % turnout in the first parliamentary elections in 1990. However, voter participation had, by the time of the most recent parliamentary elections in 2010 in the Slovak Republic, fallen to 58.83 % – and to not much higher than that (62.60 %) in the Czech Republic.

Neither are these countries alone: the following table portrays a falling turnout in Romania, although the picture in Hungary is more complex:

Table 1 – Voter participation in Romania and Hungary, 1990-2010

Country	Election type	Turnout
Hungary	Parliamentary election 2010	64.36 %
Hungary	Parliamentary election 2006	67.83 %
Hungary	Parliamentary election 2002	73.51 %
Hungary	Parliamentary election 1998	56.26 %
Hungary	Parliamentary election 1994 1st round	68.90 %
Hungary	Parliamentary election 1990 1st round	65.00 %
Romania	Legislative election 2009	39.20 %
Romania	Chamber of deputies 2004	56.50 %
Romania	Chamber of deputies 1992	72.00 %
Romania	General election 1990	86.00 %

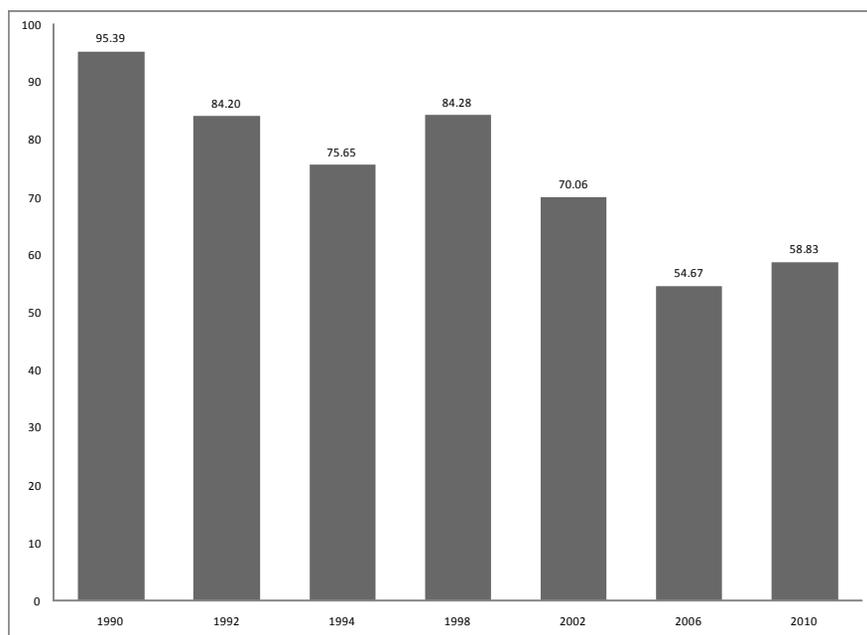
Source: Hungary – Országos Választási Iroda; Romania – Biroul Electoral Central; Carey, H (2004) Romania since 1989: politics, economics, and society Lexington Books: Lanham, US.

Before one considers the reason for the decline in electoral participation, we will present the results of parliamentary elections for the period since the early ‘democratic’ history of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Table 2 – Voter participation in the Slovak Republic, 1990-2010

	1990	1992	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010
Electoral participation	95.39 %	84.20 %	75.65 %	84.24 %	70.06 %	54.67 %	58.83 %

Chart 1 – Voter participation in the Slovak republic, 1990-2010

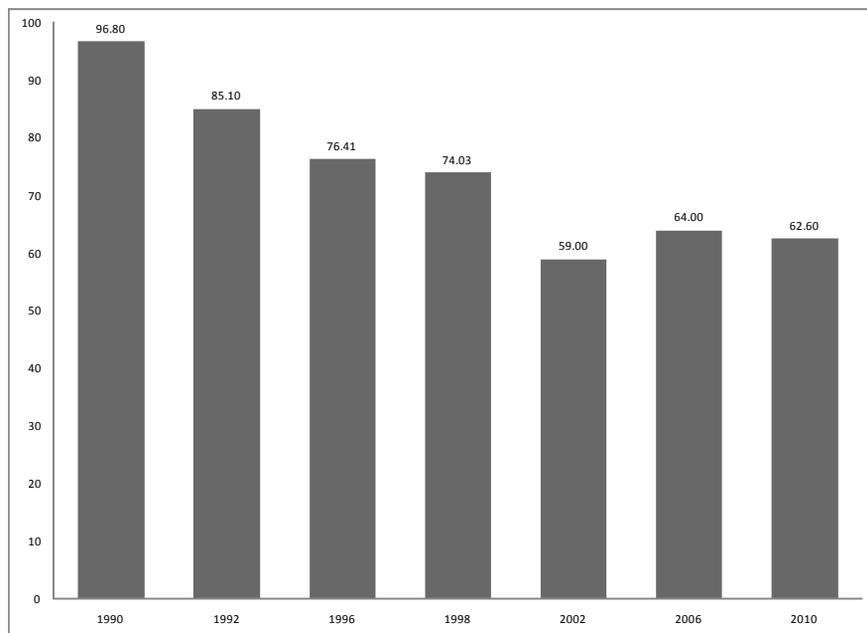


Source: Štatistický úrad SR

Table 3 – Voter participation in the Czech Republic, 1990-2010

	1990	1992	1996	1998	2002	2006	2010
Electoral participation	96.80 %	85.10 %	76.41 %	74.03 %	59.00 %	64.00 %	62.60 %

Chart 2 – Voter participation in the Czech Republic, 1990-2010



Source: www.volby.cz

Analysis

From these results, it is quite clear that voter participation is significantly decreasing. The earlier analysis of the Czech Centre for Public Affairs into the reasons for electoral failure are still current – the main reasons for non-participation remain as follows:

- a disinclination toward politics
- the low credibility of political parties

- the view that participation in elections is useless; nothing will change anyway
- the view that politicians will do what they want.

The above results can be considered as ‘normal’ reasons for the non-participation of citizens in the electoral process. Our aim here is, however, to explore the reasons for non-participation from another perspective: such reasons as listed above for non-participation do not consider the cause, but are instead the consequences of the changes in the terms of democracy. Democracy as a form of government established in western culture (the Slovak Republic and Czech Republic provide the evidence) tends to afflict the transfer of activity into electoral votes.

Is democracy only about voting? Certainly not: voting in elections should be merely the final phase of the democratic process, to give a voice to the citizens and to deliver a mandate for that part of the elite which has convinced the citizens of the value of their ideas. De Tocqueville has already described in detail the processes of democratisation in the United States after the French Revolution, which he cites as an example of democracy at work – and from which we can take the example of post-revolutionary Europe. Countries, laws and social and economic outcomes were shaped by the active participation of citizens who were interested in what is happening in their community and country. And here we see the core problem of electoral non-participation. Citizens are not interested in a continuous state of society, gaffes by elites have been taken for granted in terms that ‘Nothing will happen to them anyway’ and both the elite and the majority of the voting options are selected based on sympathy.

I would advance the view that the above argument is the real justification, by which we may substantiate evidence from two periods of history. The first example is the level of participation at the end of totalitarianism in post-communist countries – almost 100 % – when the change touched people at their heart and had dramatic effects on their living standards; the second example is, again, taken from De Tocqueville who described the same trends after the French Revolution:

It has been observed that man rarely retains his customary level in presence of very critical circumstances; he rises above, or he sinks below his usual condition, and the same thing occurs in nations at large. Extreme perils sometimes quench the energy of a people instead of stimulating it; they excite without directing its passions; and instead of clearing, they confuse its powers of perception.³

We may see the changing of other citizens as well as of the ruling elite, forcing us to question whether the ‘state’ has any interest in increasing the level of participation in elections. I would argue that it definitely does not. The state, in today’s terms, representing a closed elite, is seeking to capitalise on electoral success and most of its goal over the last century has radically changed. The aim is no longer to represent the voices of citizens and to work on behalf of companies, but to work to secure their own interests and their subsequent re-election.

3 Alexis De Tocqueville, *O demokracii v Amerike*, Kalligram 2006, ISBN 80-7149-765-7

Consequently, a low level of participation not only facilitates the choices of selected population groups (often in the Slovak Republic the mandate of a representative has been decided on the basis of dozens of votes) but, in addition, reduces the legitimacy of the elections. For example, in the most recent election to the National Council of 2010, voter participation was 58.83 %. In reality, this means that, out of 4 362 369 eligible voters, 2 529 385 cast valid ballots out of a population of the Slovak Republic, as at 30 June 2010, which numbered 5 429 763 inhabitants.⁴ The coalition which formed the government received a total of 44.2 % of votes and, as a result, the total number of people deciding the direction of the country was 20.5 % of the population.

Is this a lot or a little? The answer to that question is, perhaps, not the most conclusive one; it is important, instead, that democracy and the fundamental nature of democracy may be implemented. And here we see the greatest risk in the decline of democracy, where the mandate of the elite is to prefer its own interests before the interests of the public and when it can easily consolidate its own mandate. The statement here even features in the economic literature, such as in Stephen J. Bailey's example of public service:

Opportunism and rational self-interest means that the users and providers of public services will always pursue their personal interests against the collective interest.⁵

Conclusions

This article has aimed to highlight the risks in the current direction of democracy in western society – especially in post-communist countries, which have lost the participation of citizens in public affairs and democratic processes – a situation which has been used by the elites to consolidate their own positions. Democracy, the political establishment that started the economic processes in western countries and brought global domination, is now likely to turn against us because we are becoming passive. This is incompatible with other social and political, but also economic, avenues of progress.

A possible means of improving such a situation is to focus on two important things: education; and personal responsibility.

Education may allow a focus on the basic principles of democracy driven from the very beginning of education process by the government but independent of the current ruling party:

- democracy – opportunity for everybody
- ethics
- civil society
- justice.

4 Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, <http://portal.statistics.sk>.

5 Stephen J. Bailey (2004) *Veřejný sektor: teorie, politika a praxe* Eurolex Bohemia: Praha, ISBN 80-86432-61-0.

In addition, personal responsibility in everyday life adds the following considerations:

- as an approach to society in general
- in terms of responsibility for the values accorded to the administration (state clerks, government members, members of parliament): the taking of financial, criminal and ethical responsibility for the public domain
- responsibility for public goods and services the same as for private ones.

References

Jean-Jacques Rousseau *Rozprawy Svoboda*: Praha, 1989.

Platón *Ústava Oikoymenh*: Praha, 2005, ISBN 80-7298-142-0.

Alexis De Tocqueville *O demokracii v Amerike* Kalligram, 2006, ISBN 80-7149-765-7.

Stephen J. Bailey (2004) *Veřejný sektor: teorie, politika a praxe* Eurolex Bohemia: Praha, ISBN 80-86432-61-0.

<http://portal.statistics.sk/showdoc.do?docid=4490>

<http://www.volby.cz/>