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# **Taking stock of Czech Green politics after two decades: The May 2010 general election**

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## Taking stock of Czech Green politics after two decades: The May 2010 general election

### Background

Taking place 20 years after the first free general election that the Czech Green Party (*Strana zelených*) contested, the 2010 election offers an opportunity to take stock of the development of Czech Green politics during its first two decades. The level of the Greens' electoral support in recent regional, European and national elections did not differ greatly from their gain in the historical 1990 election (Table 1). The right-of-centre self-placement of Green voters and party members on the left-right political scale has also remained unchanged since the early 1990s. In all other respects, however, Czech Green politics underwent profound transformations.

As Table 1 shows, the 1990s was a decade in which the Party was in continuous decline.<sup>1</sup> In the second half of the decade, due to poor electoral results, the Party did not qualify for state party funding (for which 1.5% of the vote is needed) and slid into insolvency and political insignificance. One of the most striking features of the first decade of Czech Green politics was the gulf between the dynamic environmental movement (largely buoyed by foreign funding) and the faltering Green Party. In the 1990s, environmental movement activists shunned the Green Party. While this was ostensibly due to the involvement of the Communist secret police in the origin of the Green Party in Prague in 1989, the main reason was the movement's activists' self-perception as heirs of the dissident political tradition of 'anti-politics' which prioritised civil society over party politics. In addition, there was no social and geographical overlap between these two groups. Green Party members were mostly middle-aged citizens with a secondary technical education living in smaller industrial towns. Environmental movement activists were young, often university students, living in metropolitan areas.

**Table 1:** Electoral results of the Czech Green Party 1990-2010.

Elections	National		regional	European
	vote %	Seats	vote %	vote %
1990	4.1			
1992	(6.3) <sup>1)</sup>	3		
1996	- <sup>2)</sup>			
1998	1.1			
2000			(1.6) <sup>3)</sup>	
2002	2.0			
2004			(2.8) <sup>4)</sup>	3.2
2006	6.3	6		

<sup>1</sup> Although three Green deputies were elected in the 1992 general election, this fact should not be used to gauge the Greens' popularity since the Party was a member of the three-party Liberal Social Union coalition comprised of Greens, agrarians and socialists.

2008			3.2	
2009				2.1
2010	2.4			

- Notes:
- <sup>1)</sup> In 1992 the Green Party was part of the Liberal Social Union coalition.
  - <sup>2)</sup> In 1996 the Greens did not contest the election due to lack of funding.
  - <sup>3)</sup> In 2000 the Green Party did not contest the election in 3 regions and was part of various coalitions in another 5 of 13 regions.
  - <sup>4)</sup> In 2004 the Green Party was part of various coalitions in 6 of 13 regions.

A turning point came in 2001 when the membership of the politically insignificant Green Party was down to its last 239 members (Jehlicka and Kostelecky 2003). This was a result of two interrelated factors: The first was the development of the party system towards the collusion between the two major parties (right-wing Civic Democrats and left-wing Social Democrats). This led some to believe that there was an opening for a centrist party (Deets and Kouba 2008). The second was the realisation by some protagonists of the environmental movement that the decade of ostracisation of party politics was an ineffective strategy that did not bring the movement any closer to achieving its environmental goals. In a sharp reversal of the dismissive attitude towards the Greens, environmental activists who had joined the Greens and outnumbered the ‘old guard’ used the March 2002 Party congress to take over the Party.

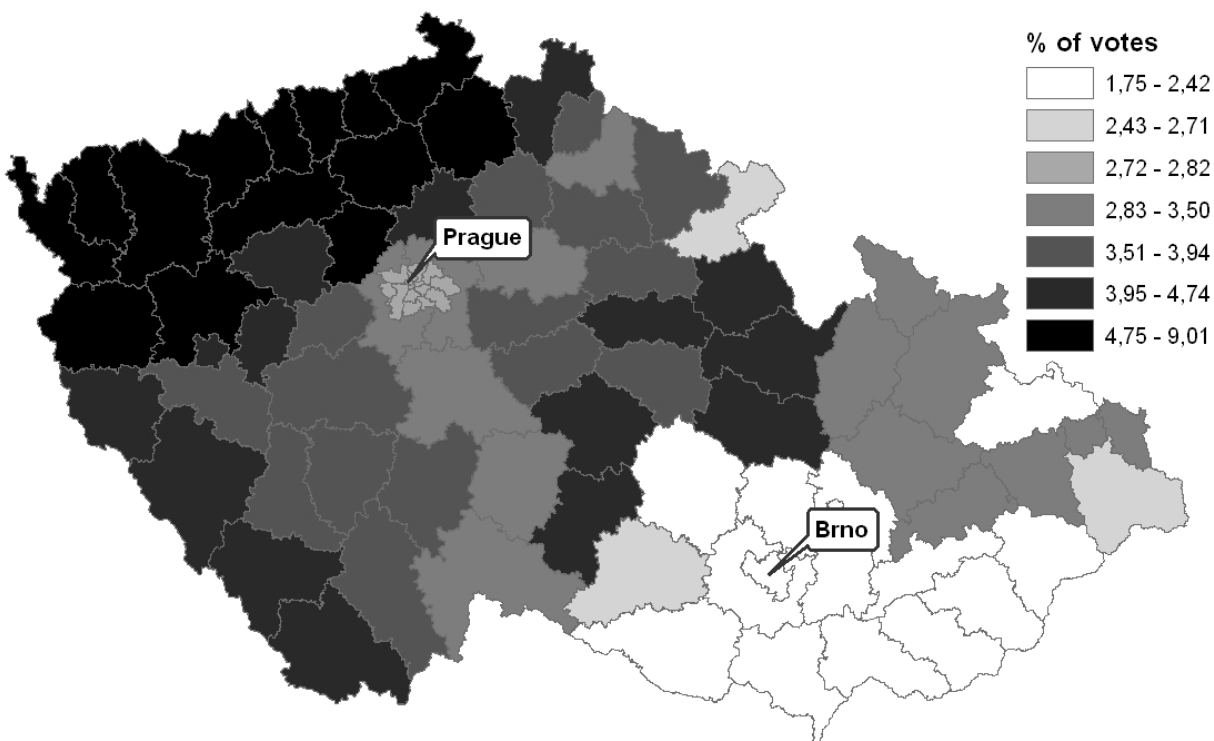
The two per cent gain in the ensuing 2002 general election secured state funding for the Party and the repayment of its debts. However, the poll was soon followed by increasingly bitter infighting between two factions – ‘dark greens’ (advocating the need for structural social changes to achieve environmental goals) and ‘light greens’ (i.e. the reformist faction) - both of which were led by newcomers. The conflict was resolved in 2005 when the leaders of the dark greens – activists Jan Beránek and Jakub Patočka who had engineered the Party’s take over in 2002 – were defeated in the leadership contest. The congress elected Martin Bursík, the minister of the environment in the 1998 caretaker government and former Prague councillor for the Christian Democrats, as Party chairman.

The election of Bursík, with his excellent connections to Prague-based national media and the profile of a socially liberal, right-of-centre politician as well as that of a successful entrepreneur, is a tempting explanation for the reversal of the Greens’ media image in the 2006 campaign. However, there were more factors than merely a media-savvy chairman that explain the 2006 electoral success (six deputies). The reason for the media’s strong support for the Greens had little to do with the environment. Following the collapse of the liberal Freedom Union-Democratic Union, the Greens were, under Bursík’s leadership, the closest embodiment of the political current favoured by the Czech media – pro-market, pro-European and socially liberal.

### **Transformations of Czech Green Politics 1990-2010**

Over the last two decades, Czech Green politics has undergone more profound structural changes than this account of the Party's electoral (mis)fortunes suggests. In the early 1990s, the Party's stronghold was in working class, industrial, medium-size towns in north-western Bohemia (today's Ústecký region; 44,000 votes; 15% of the total Green vote in 1990), the region most seriously affected with industrial pollution, while it polled modestly in the two largest cities, Prague and Brno (together 37,000 votes; 12% of the total Green vote; Figure 1). In contrast, in 2010 the Ústecký region accounted for only 9,000 votes (7% of the total Green vote), while Prague and Brno, affluent metropolitan areas with high levels of education, combined for 38,000 Green votes (29% of the total Green vote in 2010; Figure 3).

**Figure 1:** Votes for the Greens by administrative districts in the 1990 general election.



Source of data: Czech Statistical Office ([www.volby.cz](http://www.volby.cz)).

This geographical shift of the Greens' stronghold is related to changes in membership and in the Party's *raison d'être*. In the 1990s the Party's membership was fairly socially inclusive. Twenty-five per cent were manual workers, 40% held technical and professional jobs, 15% were retired

and 2% were students. Members were typically middle-aged and lived in mid-size towns (Jehlička, 1999). The majority of the Party's candidates were publicly unknown figures. In contrast, by 2010 the Party had a highly elitist profile with its ballot featuring publicly known intellectuals and artists,<sup>2</sup> leading environmental activists and university students. While in the 1990s the Greens and their voters were mobilized by their concern for industrial pollution's effect on human health, in the 2000s they had more consumerist concerns as reflected in their 'Quality of Life' electoral slogan.

### **The 2010 election campaign**

The result of the 2006 elections – the literal tie between the left and right (100 versus 100 with the six Green deputies considering themselves a part of the right) - gave the Party political clout far exceeding its actual electoral support. This eventually led to the Party's participation in the right-wing government, which came into being after two deputies defected from Social Democrats and switched their support to the coalition. Aligning with the Civic Democrats and Christian Democrats, the Greens held four ministries in the coalition government: foreign affairs, environment, education and human rights and minorities. The government promoted policies that were either not part of the Greens' manifesto or were in direct contradiction to it, including support for the Bush administration's plan to build a military base on Czech soil and the introduction of university and health-care fees. Shared responsibility for policies pushed forward by the unstable and unpopular government (Kunštát 2010) was followed by a drop in the Greens' popularity, a high level of disloyalty among their six deputies and the participation of two Green dissenters in the vote of non-confidence in the government in March 2009, i.e. 14 months before the end of the normal electoral cycle.

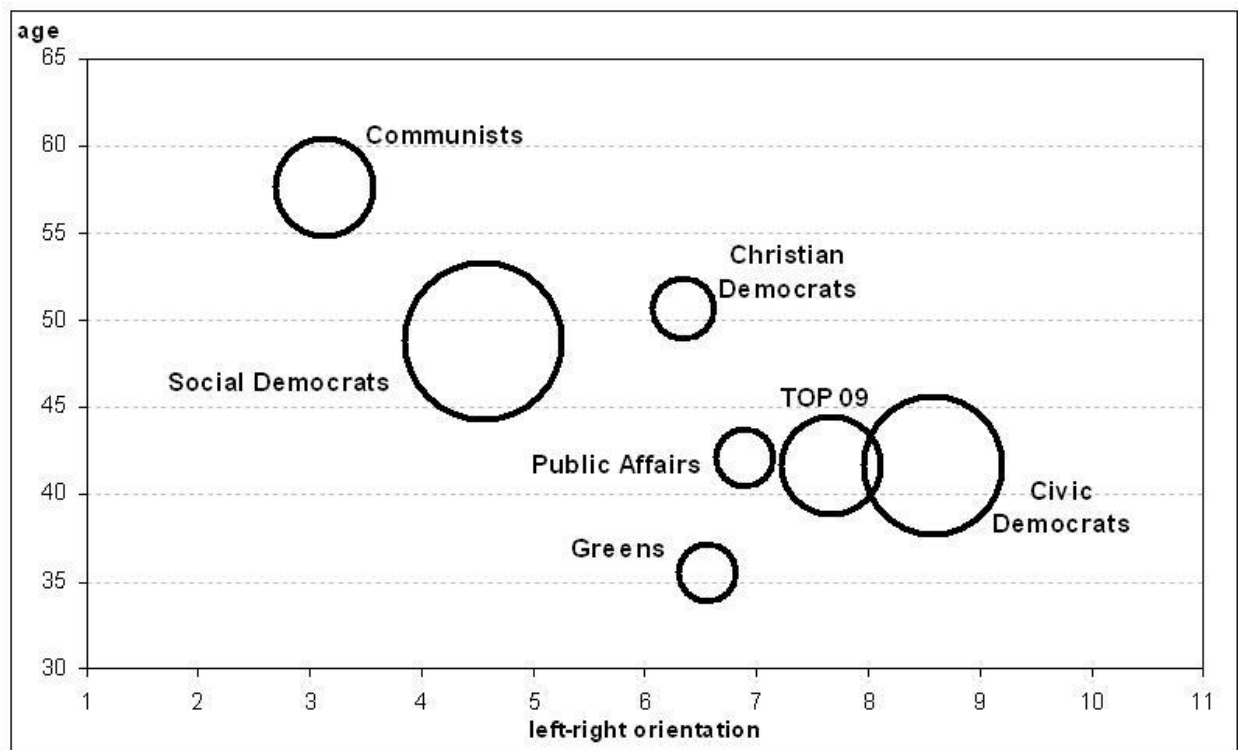
The Civic Democrats and Social Democrats subsequently passed a special law enabling them to call an early general election in autumn 2009. With the electoral campaign in full swing, the Constitutional Court declared this law unconstitutional resulting in the elections taking place on the original date in May 2010. A caretaker government was installed for the interim 12-month period, during which the Party lost its appeal in the national media which had supported the 2006-2009 government. Instead, the media shifted their attention to the two new right-of-centre parties – TOP 09 and Public Affairs – both of which were launched to contest the 2009 cancelled election. The Green Party, drained of resources squandered on the aborted autumn 2009 electoral campaign, was also deprived of free TV publicity. Low opinion polls – in months before the election the Greens polled between 2 and 3% - eliminated its representatives from candidates' weekly debates broadcast on national public TV, for which 5% was required.

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<sup>2</sup> On several occasions before the 2010 election Václav Havel publicly endorsed the Green Party including appearing on their electoral billboards.

The Party, ignored by the media, faced strong challenges from the two new parties for its urban affluent vote (Figure 2). At the same time, its record in the government constrained its ability to reach out to other constituencies. Less affluent sections of the society were put off by the Green Party's advocacy of special taxes for coal used for domestic heating (the cheapest fuel in Czechia) and its support for a new tax on old cars. The Party was also universally, though incorrectly, blamed for steep rises in electricity prices linked to the swift expansion of solar energy.

**Figure 2:** Average age and political positioning on the left-right scale of supporters of main political parties in the Czech Republic in the period September 2009 – May 2010. Circle size is proportional to the number of party supporters among respondents.



Source: Authors' own calculation based on the data from The Centre for Public Opinion Research of the Institute of Sociology in Prague.

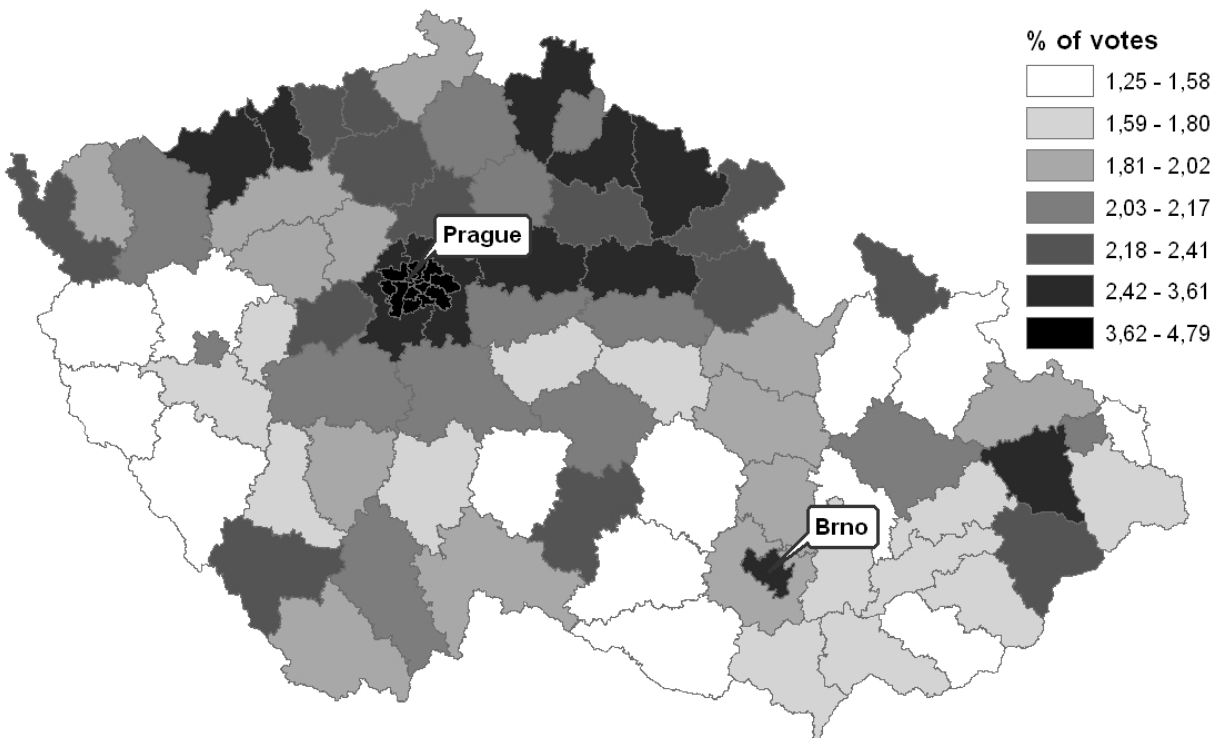
In contrast to the elections in the early 1990s when the Greens were a single-issue party concerned with the environment, in campaigns in the 2000s, including the 2010 election, the environment was not an important mobilising factor. Nonetheless, the environmental agenda was well developed and integrated with other parts of the Party's 2010 comprehensive manifesto. The Greens' approach to the environment could be best described as reformist and summarised as a

reliance on economic instruments and the promotion of green consumerism and renewable energy. One feature which distinguished the Greens from other parties was their attention paid to the rights of ethnic minorities. One of their regional ballots was headed by a female Roma candidate.

### Electoral results

Owing to the great public dissatisfaction with the political situation (perceived widespread corruption and the vote of non-confidence in the government in the middle of the Czech presidency of the EU followed by the aborted electoral campaign; Kunštát 2010), all parliamentary parties involved in the 2010 election, with the exception of the Communists, were badly hurt by the shift of voting preferences towards the new parties, and the Green Party was the biggest loser in that respect. The number of votes for the Greens decreased dramatically from 336,487 (6.3%) in 2006 to only 127,831 (2.4%). The Party lost all seats in the Chamber of Deputies and, consequently, also a substantial part of state funding.

**Figure 3:** Votes for the Greens by administrative districts in the 2010 general election.





Source of data: Czech Statistical Office ([www.volby.cz](http://www.volby.cz))

Figure 3 illustrates the variation in support for the Greens across the country – it ranged from 1.3% in the west Bohemian rural district of Klatovy to 4.8% in Prague (confirming the general trend, the Greens were stronger in more upscale quarters of the city and relatively weak in city boroughs with remnants of industry) and 3.5% in the country's second largest city, Brno. Generally, the Greens were stronger in urban districts than in rural ones, and more popular in the highly secular northwest part of the Czech Republic than in the relatively more religious southeast. This voting pattern highly correlated (Pearson  $R = 0.716$ ) with the 2006 voting patterns. The 2010 Greens voting pattern was similar to that of the two largest parties of the right – the Civic Democrats ( $R = 0.451$ ) and TOP 09 ( $R = 0.610$ ). Many Green supporters were university students. As Figure 2 shows, Green supporters were the youngest among the main Czech parties – the average age only slightly exceeding 35. In terms of their average age and ideological profile, the supporters of Public Affairs and TOP 09 were the most similar to Green supporters (Figure 2). A detailed analysis of the data revealed that in the 2010 election the two new parties were the very ones to which many former Green voters switched and which many first-time voters preferred to the Greens.

The Czech Greens' 2010 electoral failure after their first participation in a governing coalition confirms Hooghe and Rihoux's (2008, p. 822) thesis that 'participation in government usually leads to an electoral challenge for Green Parties'. The participation in the unpopular government and internal squabbles turned many Greens' supporters away. However, accounting for the loss in 2010 of nearly two-thirds of their 2006 votes requires a more nuanced explanation. The lesson drawn from the comparison of the 2006 and 2010 elections is that to overcome the 5% threshold, the Party needs to mobilize, in addition to its relatively small electorate motivated primarily by environmental concerns, another group of voters. In 2006 the Greens succeeded in attracting a wider and more diverse electorate due to the combination of two favourable and interconnected factors, both of which were largely beyond their control. The first was the absence of an alternative non-nationalistic, pro-European, right-of-centre party which gave Bursík's leadership of the Greens the opportunity to fill that void. The second factor was the positive coverage that a party occupying this place in the political spectrum usually enjoys from the Czech media, which was the case for the Greens in 2006.

It seems that the Party hoped for a repeat of the same scenario for the 2010 campaign, as it was unable to effectively respond to the challenges generated by the profoundly altered political landscape in the country. TOP 09 and Public Affairs received favourable coverage similar to that which benefited the Greens four years earlier. The electorate targeted by these two new parties was the same the Greens sought to attract – young, affluent and right-of-centre voters dissatisfied with political establishment. Many of these voters, for whom the environment was not the highest priority, but who in 2006 voted for the Greens in the absence of a better alternative, in 2010 abandoned the Party and switched their support to the new 'challengers of the system' –

TOP 09 and Public Affairs. A number of controversies besetting the Party during the 2006-2010 parliament contributed to these voters' desertion in the 2010 election. Given the emphasis the Greens placed on transparent government and fight against corruption, many voters were disappointed by their unprincipled stance during the affair of Jiří Čunek, the Christian Democrats' minister facing serious allegations of corruption. With the exception of Bursík, Green ministers, most notably their successive ministers of education Dana Kuchtová and Ondřej Liška, lacked both political experience and policy expertise which made them look incompetent. During the election of the President of the Republic by the Parliament in 2008, when the joint candidate of the Greens and Social Democrats lost the first round by one vote, one Green deputy was inexplicably absent.

To be a serious contender for the seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 2014, the Greens will need to find a way of expanding their electoral base beyond the group of metropolitan environmental activists and right-of-centre, highly educated and affluent green consumers. The 2006 situation – unique in its absence of liberal, right-of-centre alternatives to the Greens - is unlikely to be repeated. Exploring a left-of-centre repositioning of the party, while maintaining its environmental, pro-European and socially liberal credentials would seem a more viable strategy for the 2014 election. Neoliberal and anti-environmental policies introduced by the government of the Civic Democrats, TOP 09 and Public Affairs might have a sobering effect on some sections of the electorate which supported these parties in 2010.

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