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Surveys and preferences: How not to be fooled

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Summary

Journalists love them, political scientists hate them, and die-hard partisans fear them. Yes, today we are talking about polls in the form of an election model. Their regular publication always upsets the stagnant waters of Czech politics, when supporters of growing entities share graphs like a race, and those who are declining in the current survey question their relevance. One way or another, in the pre-election year we will enjoy surveys of various types to our heart's content, therefore in this text we will analyze the pluses and minuses in detail, we will point out the frequent mistakes that the public projects into the surveys, we will explain the fundamental difference between the electoral potential and the electoral model, and also why the potential is often abused by political marketing.

Key Takeaways

- Public opinion polls are only an imperfect picture of society and have many hidden disadvantages. Journalists and the public attach more weight than is healthy to the output of agencies and research institutions.

- Surveys differ from each other in the methodology used, and this causes different results. Rather than looking at the averages of all surveys, it is necessary to look at trends for individual agencies separately.

- Sharing the level of electoral potential is a sign of desperation, and if your favourite party is doing this, then they are probably in very serious trouble and their PR team is grasping at every straw.

A percentage, but of what?

We have somehow gotten used to the fact that the debate between politicians in Otázky Václav Moravec is complemented by a current investigation by the Kantar agency for Czech Television, which reveals the latest distribution of political forces in the Czech Republic. The percentages show how the individual parties stand, which ones are growing compared to the last survey, which ones are weakening and who would no longer get into the Chamber of Deputies because they did not exceed the 5% threshold needed to enter the lower chamber. At least that's how the survey is presented and accepted by the majority of the population.

But the reality is much more complicated. On the one hand, it is a report on the state of the company already in the past. The survey, which in its final form takes the form of a bar graph with percentages, is created several weeks before its actual publication. The agency will address roughly 1,000 respondents, i.e. people who are willing to talk to the researcher or are organized in some research panel. Gone are the days when employees of research companies photographed Czech households and randomly rang individual doorbells asking them to fill out a questionnaire, which also included questions about their willingness to go to the polls and a question about their preferred party or coalition. This method has been superseded by cheaper and much more effective methods. Some agencies and research institutions still use this personal method of questioning, but mostly for other investigations than the political inclination of the population.

Today, the research on political preferences is carried out by a combination of Internet polling, when the agency organizes a panel with its registered respondents, who receive information that a new questionnaire is waiting for them in the system, and part of the survey is carried out by telephone, when people are called by random selection from a pre-created database. The ratio is always skewed in favor of internet polling, as it is cheaper and easier to organize. This process usually takes about 2-3 weeks , and then it takes a few more days to process the data and interpret it. In the best case, the results report on a situation 14 days old, but maybe also 3 weeks old. That's one thing.

Another limitation of such surveys is their limited informative value directly related to that representative sample. In the event that an agency or other research institution conducts a public opinion poll covering the entire adult population and the entire Czech Republic, it usually addresses 1,000-1,200 respondents. Why exactly only one tenth of the population? Only this amount because it makes financial and methodological sense.

A perfect public opinion survey regarding political preferences would be one that could ask every adult in the Czech Republic at the same time according to the same methodological key, so that every respondent would understand the questions in the same way. Then we would have a truly comprehensive report on the political preferences of Czechs at any given moment. This would be unimaginably expensive and organizationally unattainable. On the other hand, the worst public opinion poll would be one that would be based on polling only one person. This would be cheap and simple to implement, but again it would not say anything about the company[1] - it would only refer to that Franta from Horní Dolní.

Therefore, the survey represents a compromise, where their opinions are ascertained on a sufficiently large sample (i.e. 1,000 people) and subsequently their answers are balanced on the basis of individual socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, size of residence, etc. When asking questions,

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[1] This is one of the reasons why a personal observation such as, "I was in the supermarket yesterday, it was crowded and everyone had full baskets, so there is no impoverishment of the population," is completely inadequate for determining trends in society.

it often happens that the researchers are not able to keep the ratio of the individual groups - for example, they have more men and people from Prague in their answers - therefore the data is predominant. Thus, women and people outside of Prague will be added to the total so that the results finally correspond to the distribution of Czech society.

Even in the case of the best methodological procedure, we can never hide the problem that the sample always behaves a little differently than the whole society. Therefore, the results of individual agencies differ (see table below). Not only does each institution have a different methodological procedure, a different way of weighting data and a different database of respondents, but even if we asked the same people the same questions twice in a row, we would get 2 different results. This is simply a general problem that has accompanied public opinion polls since their inception. And we have to take this into account when interpreting the results.

Table 1: Kantar, STEM and NMS poll results in October and November 2024 (election model)

agentura	sběr dat	ANO	SPOLU	STAN	SPD	Piráti	Přísaha	Motor.	KSČM	SocDem
Kantar	21. 10. až 8. 11. 2024	37,0	21,0	12,0	7,0	7,0	---	4,0	3,5	2,0
STEM	31. 10. až 8. 11. 2024	33,7	21,0	8,4	8,9	5,9	2,6	4,1	5,5	3,0
NMS	5. až 12. 11. 2024	35,3	16,6*	11,1	7,0	5,7	3,0	4,4	5,8	3,3

* součet ODS+TOP 09+KDU-ČSL

Source: Kantar 2024, STEM 2024, NMS 2024.

Election model vs. electoral potential

What viewers and readers are used to consuming is the so-called election model. This is a hypothetical situation of how the election could turn out if it were held the week after the data collection. Unfortunately, this is not solid data. The numbers the agency publishes go through a whole series of adjustments and methodological compromises.

The final amount of "preferences" is fundamentally influenced by which respondents the agency ultimately includes in the model. Indeed, a significant part of the respondents declares that they are interested in politics and that they are preparing for the elections and that they will arrive 100%, but we know from post-election and micro-level analyzes that this is often not quite true. People like to make themselves more responsible than they really are, and not just in opinion polls. Few people are brutally honest and will tell the researcher straight up that the government annoys them and Fiala should be hanged, but the apple harvest at the cottage will not wait and the election simply cannot fit into his weekend schedule.

Agencies have their own procedures for determining who can and cannot go to the polls. This is usually done through a series of questions about the willingness to come to the polls, the level of general interest in political events and the relationship to the preferred party. A person who declares that he will come safely, but is not sure who he will vote for and cannot name even 3 members of the current government, will probably not make it to the election and will not be included in the model by the agency. A respondent who is firm in his views for a long time (in the last 4 surveys he prefers one party) and orients himself safely in political realities, is after all a safer choice.

It is the quality in assessing the relevance of the respondents that affects the final numbers. Some agencies are more collaborative about methodology and methodological approach (eg STEM) than others. But we still know almost nothing about the actual process, so we consider the numbers from all election models to be a picture far removed from reality rather than exact numbers.

The category itself is the so-called electoral potential. This is a statement of what percent of respondents could support the subject if all the people who realistically consider his choice and do not rule out participation in the elections were to support him. The problem is that the interviewee can often mark more than one sympathetic side. So entities that have a lot in common with others (e.g. TOP 09, STAN and Pirates) have an advantage. This causes the final number in percentages to be high, especially for liberal entities, of which there are quite a few in the Czech Republic. For this reason, the electoral potential is often abused by party secretariats and in PR campaigns before an important election race.

Since citizens are mostly used to the electoral model, high numbers of electoral potential can look much better compared to reality and thus serve as a mobilizing element. Marketeťák reckons that the average citizen has no idea what electoral potential is and that he will really think that e.g. STAN (see image below) can indeed get the stated 27.5% of the vote in the 2024 European elections and defeat YES. Even more disillusionment comes on election night, when ANO gets 26.14% (so it fulfills its potential) and STAN ends up with 8.7% in 5th place behind Turk and the Communists (volby.cz 2024). This is where the disenchantment with "tinkered election polls" arises. And the question is whether such a procedure is not counterproductive, especially from the party that swears by the fight against disinformation.
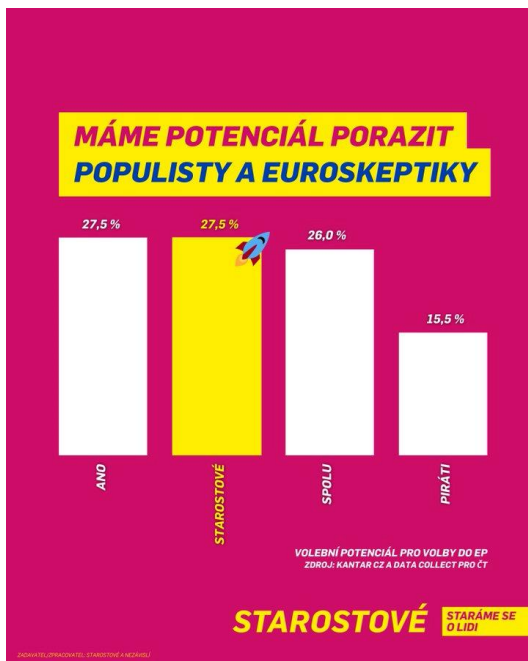
Source: Left Mayors and independents • STAN on x.com (12/05/2024); right Greens - Green Party on FB (April 24, 2024)

If there is a rule of political marketing, it is that if a party shares electoral potential, it does so in anticipation of an electoral debacle and uses every opportunity to push its voters to the polls, even if it is morally on the edge. That non-parliamentary formations such as the Greens (see the picture above) do this is humanly understandable, as they lack professional background and must use every chance to make themselves visible, but if the government party does it, it is a sign of a certain desperation.

How not to be fooled

In general, citizens should not attach too much importance to pre-election polls. It is only an imperfect and outdated picture of society, which is significantly influenced by the way data is collected and

interpreted. It is interesting in the media that someone is falling and another is on the horse, but it says almost nothing about the potential results of the elections 10 months ahead. You cannot read the future from watching LOESS[2] curves, even if some journalists and bettors make a successful living from it - this also says something about the quality of political analysis in the Czech Republic.

The best survey is the election results. This is real and unbiased data about voter preferences. That is why professionals work with pre-election polls in some way, but much more important is the analysis of past elections and voter shifts between them. If you want an answer to the question of how next year's parliamentary elections will turn out, you'd better sit down at the computer and thoroughly review the results of this year's European, regional and senate elections on the wobly.cz website. There lies the answer to the question of who will win the next vote and by how much.

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[2] A statistical method of data interpretation that, in layman's terms, makes it possible to create a waveform based on highly fluctuating data points.

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Karel Sál studied political science at the Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, where in 2016 he defended his dissertation entitled Democracy in the Crisis of Disinterest: the effects of the use of online elections in the electoral process of selected countries. His professional interests include e-Government, internet elections and information freedom. He is the author of several articles, speaks at international conferences and is the founder and editor of the think-tank e-politics.cz.

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