

The Advantage of Incumbency among Czech Mayors: Analysis of Election Results in the 128 Largest Cities in the Czech Republic

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Abstract: The incumbency effect, where incumbents have a higher likelihood of electoral success, is a well-documented phenomenon globally but remains under-researched in the Czech Republic. This article investigates whether and to what extent the incumbency effect is present among Czech mayors. Using a dataset of the 128 largest Czech cities by population (excluding Prague) and covering elections between 2002 and 2022, the study analyses the success of incumbent mayors in retaining their positions. The findings confirm that over 50% of mayors successfully defended their posts. The research also examines the dynamics of mayoral re-election, highlighting that first-time incumbents enjoy a notable advantage, which tends to diminish with each consecutive term. These results contribute to understanding the mechanics of incumbency in proportional electoral systems and offer directions for future research, including the exploration of causal relationships and the impact of socio-economic factors on re-election rates.

Keywords: *Mayors, Incumbency, Municipal Elections, Local Politics, Czech Republic*

Introduction

Incumbency is one of the most significant factors, if not the most significant, for the success of candidates across different types of elections (e.g. Ansolabehere & Snyder 2002; Bernard 2012; Gordon & Landa 2009). Throughout numerous electoral systems, we observe cases where the incumbents significantly improved their previous results in the following elections. Entire careers can be built on such a success, which often starts at the lowest level of the political

system. An example of Czech politicians who have rocketed from the municipal level to the heights of national politics is the Czech minister of interior and leader of the party STAN¹, Vít Rakušan. As mayor of Kolín, a town with a population of 30,000, he managed to gain more than 4,000 votes when he ran as an incumbent for the first time. Similar results can be observed with other prominent Czech politicians who started their careers at the municipal level. It is precisely this issue that this article focuses on.

The advantage that stems from incumbency is a significant and prominent phenomenon, especially in the USA, where it is one of the most frequently studied factors in electoral research (e.g. Ansolabehere & Snyder 2002; Carson et al. 2020; Jacobson 2015). In the Czech Republic, this phenomenon has received more attention in the last decade. Bernard and Šafr argue that the Czech Republic is a great case for analysis because most of the theory on incumbency advantage was formulated in reference to traditional democracies and the Czech Republic was democratised only 35 years ago (Bernard & Šafr 2016: 268).

Apart from minor mentions, the incumbency effect within the Czech political system has been addressed by Voženílková and Hejtmánek (2015), who looked at its impact on the Senate elections. Bernard and Čermák (2021) have also touched upon this issue. There are articles focusing primarily on the incumbency at the regional level (Bernard & Šafr 2016; Linek & Škvrňák 2024) or on the female incumbents (Smrek 2020). At the municipal level of the Czech political system, it has been briefly addressed by Bernard (2012), Ryšavý (2016) and Balík (2010).² The issue of incumbency advantage in the case of mayors themselves has been addressed only in the bachelor or master theses of Čapek (2019, 2021) and Vavrečková (2016).

It cannot be said that incumbency advantage at the level of Czech local elections is a completely unstudied phenomenon. However, compared to the rest of the world, it still represents a certain blank space. The incumbency advantage is widely studied in the USA, where it has long been recognised as a significant electoral factor due to the structure of the majoritarian system. In recent years, interest in this phenomenon has also grown in continental Europe, where scholars have sought to understand how it manifests under different types of electoral systems (e.g. Dahlggaard 2016; Freier 2011, 2015; Mazurkiewicz 2021, 2022; Redmond & Regan 2015). Similar research is also developing in South America, where this phenomenon has been studied intensely focusing on mayors in Brazil after the electoral system reform that allows them to repeatedly run (e.g. Brambor & Ceneviva 2011; De Magalhaes 2015). Similar research also takes place in Asia and Africa (e.g. Lewis et al. 2020; Macdonald 2014).

1 The full name of the party – Starostové a nezávislí – can be translated into English as ‘Mayors and Independents’. This party consists mostly of mayors of smaller towns and municipalities (Maškarinec 2020: 27).

2 In those cases, there were only brief mentions of incumbency as a phenomenon.

This article aims to start filling the gap in the research on incumbency analysis in local elections in the Czech Republic. It focuses on the following: What makes incumbency effect analysis in the local elections in the Czech Republic so specific, what the biggest obstacles in the research are, and how it manifests itself in the context of mayors of the Czech Republic's most populated cities. It also offers other paths to research this phenomenon in the future and presents an extensive and unique database. In addition, it gives the reader an overview of the characteristics of the mayors in those cities. The database used contains information on mayoral elections in the 128 largest Czech cities by population, excluding Prague, over the last twenty years and the election results of all incumbents. Due to the comprehensiveness of the database, the analysis of the incumbency effect is supplemented by other relevant descriptive data, such as the characteristics of those mayors, which are primarily located in the appendix.

This article does not concentrate on explaining the incumbency effect in municipal elections using socioeconomic factors. Rather, it focuses on examining the size of the advantage held by incumbent candidates by using comparable techniques that have proven successful in other countries. It uses a comparison of re-election rates across several election periods and a comparison of the increase in votes received between elections. It is first necessary to confirm whether and how the increase in votes for incumbent mayors occurs and to discuss the specifics of the system. Only after these have been clarified can we then analyse to explain these phenomena.

Incumbency advantage in theory and the specifics of the Czech municipal elections system

Research regarding mayors and incumbents in general shows that incumbent politicians enter their next elections with a certain advantage (e.g. Hogan 2004; Mazurkiewicz 2021; Sloboda 2015, 2017). Voters base their electoral decisions on whether they are satisfied with the performance of the incumbent candidate (Bernard 2012: 636). Of course, they may not know or examine everything the incumbent candidate has done during their term in office. However, if the current officeholders avoid major scandals or do not visibly fail to do their job during their tenure, they usually have a better chance of defending their office than the newcomers do of winning it. This advantage lies in their knowledge of inside information, greater campaign resources, stronger support from their political party or the mere fact that their name is known to voters (Ansolabehere & Snyder 2002; Cox & Katz 1996).

Part of the advantage also lies in the greater opportunities of connecting with the electorate through the media. Mayors appear in the municipal or regional media throughout the four years they spend in office. This helps them not only in greater visibility to the electorate, but also in presenting the achievements

that the municipality has accomplished during their tenure. Thus, the mayors can spend virtually their entire term in office campaigning for re-election (Gordon & Landa 2009: 1493). Compared to the newcomers, who are usually candidates without prior experience or recruited from the ranks of ordinary councilors, mayors have an advantage stemming from the title of their office. For example, as Answorth and Mesquida (2008: 1006–1008) point out, politicians who hold senior offices are usually better positioned simply by virtue of holding a prestigious office.

It is also necessary to consider the fact that potentially strong challengers might be discouraged from competing against a popular mayor. Thus, the advantage does not just lie in the resources that the candidate's office provides. Cox and Katz refer to this as the 'quality effect', meaning that the incumbent often has low-quality opponents. Those challengers do not have such a strong and easily recognisable name, resources or support from their political party (Cox & Katz 1996: 478–479). Using the example of local elections in Poland, Mazurkiewicz further elaborates on the argument that weaker competition is a major advantage and is one of the reasons for the low competitiveness (Mazurkiewicz 2021, 2022). Czech municipalities are also increasingly struggling with competitiveness, as shown, for example, by Kouba and Lysek (2023) and the strength of incumbents could be one of the reasons.

When looking specifically at the cases of mayors and the manifestations of incumbency advantage in such cases, we must consider that this phenomenon has been studied in different settings of different electoral systems. The specific role of incumbents has long been the focus of American scholars. The pioneers in this field of study include Cummings (1966) or Erikson (1971), who were subsequently followed by other researchers (Besley & Case 1992; Campbell et al. 2010; King & Gelman 1991). Specifically, American mayors are directly addressed, for example, by De Benedictis-Kessner (2018). The consensus in the American debate is that the incumbency advantage is a phenomenon that manifests itself across different types of elections, especially in majoritarian electoral systems.

In general, research on incumbency and its effects is more common in countries with majoritarian electoral systems. In Europe, specifically regarding mayors, such research can often be found in countries that have direct elections, which are increasingly common. All the neighbours of the Czech Republic have them. In Slovakia, which shares much of its history with the Czech Republic, it was introduced just after the fall of the communist regime in 1990 (Maškarinec et al. 2018). In Poland, the direct election of mayors was introduced in 2002. In contrast to Slovakia, the Polish system has two rounds (Gendźwiłł & Swianiewicz 2017). Austria has directly elected mayors in all its federal states except for three.

Germany also has a larger number of federal states where the mayor is directly elected (Balík 2009: 117–118 and 127–130). Freier (2011, 2015) used

a sample of 25,000 cases from the state of Bavaria to estimate the chances of incumbents winning the election to be between 38–40 percentage points (Freier 2015: 17). He mentions that the municipality's expenditures and whether the mayor is working full-time both play an important role in the chance of defending. The higher these factors are, the bigger the chance of re-election for the mayor. The reverse proportion applies regarding municipal debt. A lower debt gives a higher chance of re-election (Freier 2015: 17–19).

Freier shows an interesting approach where he does not focus on the difference in the number of votes gained in each election, which is a common practice of American academics, but instead examines the success rate of incumbents. This approach was firstly used by Lee (2008) and is becoming increasingly popular in research on this phenomenon (e.g. Lucas 2021; Sloboda 2017). Sloboda used this approach in his research on the direct elections of Slovakian mayors in 2006 and 2010. He demonstrates that incumbents in those elections held a big advantage, especially in the very first election in which they defended their office. In the subsequent elections, their chances of defending decreased, but they were still higher than the chances of their challengers. According to Sloboda, the Slovak direct election system itself also provides strong predispositions for the defending mayors to dominate (Sloboda 2017: 10).

Unlike in neighbouring countries, the Czech Republic does not have direct elections of mayors.³ Instead, the Czech municipal electoral system is proportional. In the Czech system, the citizens of each municipality vote for a council, which then elects a mayor from among its own members at its first meeting. Each voter has as many preferential votes as the number of seats on the council. They have the option of casting their vote for one of the candidate lists as a whole or to selected individuals across the lists. Alternatively, the two methods can be combined.⁴

The incumbency effect is more difficult to prove in proportional systems, such as the Czech local system. Redmond and Regan (2015) argue that in proportional electoral systems, the incumbency advantage is not as strong as in majoritarian systems, but it is still significant. Moral et al. (2015) elaborate that the phenomenon is present even in systems where voters do not vote for individuals but for party lists. Other European researchers have reached similar results by studying this effect in different types of elections (Ade et al. 2014; Dahlgaard 2016; Voženílková & Hejtmánek 2015).

Studies that focus on the incumbency effect in proportional electoral systems often use a regression discontinuity design (e.g. Dahlgaard 2016; Kotakorpi et al.

3 There has been extensive political discussion on the topic, but it has never led to the introduction of direct elections at the municipal level (e.g. Jüptner 2009, 2012; Šaradín 2010).

4 This system has been criticised for its opacity. A candidate needs to get at least 10% more votes than the average of the votes per candidate on a given list, which many voters do not consider. As a result, the highest position on the list is essential for being elected (Lebeda 2009).

2017; Redmond & Regan 2015). Although it is a widely recognised method for estimating the causal effects of incumbency in proportional electoral systems, its applicability to the Czech case is limited. The absence of a centralised and complete dataset of mayors poses significant constraints on data collection. Moreover, due to the indirect nature of mayoral elections, where preferential votes do not directly determine officeholding, it is not possible to define a clear cutoff point required for the valid application of regression discontinuity. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that this article focuses on documenting patterns consistent with the incumbency effect while it does not provide a causal estimate.

Data

As has been already mentioned, research on mayors in the Czech Republic faces a problem with a lack of sources. Not a single Czech institution maintains a complete database of mayors over an extended period.⁵ Thus, if researchers want to investigate a larger number of mayors or to look further into the past, they must track down the names of mayors on their own, usually from individual municipal offices. Because of this, political scientists in the Czech Republic mainly limit themselves to a single election period (e.g. Balík et al. 2015; Šaradín 2010) in contrast to researchers from other Central European countries, who can compare the electoral results of mayors from many municipalities by using publicly available data.⁶

Given the nature of this article, it was necessary to construct an entirely new dataset that would cover a longer period with a larger number of electoral years. Due to data collection issues, it was essential to limit the number of municipalities⁷ and the number of elections that would be covered in the analysis. For the aforementioned reasons, mainly due to the missing database of mayors by names, one researcher cannot include all municipalities in the dataset. Two options were therefore considered. The first was to limit the analysis to a specific part of the Czech Republic. The second was to select a particular type of municipality.

Limiting the analysis to only a certain part of the Czech Republic could cover one or more counties.⁸ Counties have been used in Czech political science for

5 For example, in early 2020 the Ministry of the Interior provided a list of current mayors, which was compiled for the internal use of the Ministry of the Interior as a directory of contacts. At the same time, the Ministry stated in the same announcement that it does not keep information on former mayors.

6 For example, Freier's (2015) data set of more than 25,000 cases of independent mayoral elections in the state of Bavaria over the period 1945–2010 is something that is not possible to create in the Czech conditions.

7 There are 6,255 municipalities for a population of 10.7 million people. More than half of them have fewer than 500 inhabitants (Czech Statistical Office 2023). This makes the municipal structure of the Czech Republic one of the most fragmented in the world.

8 The counties were the old administrative units that brought together municipalities and carried out part of the state administration until 2002, when the county authorities were abolished. However,

various, mainly comparative, studies (e.g. Balík 2010; Maškarinec 2010; Valeš 2007). Although from the perspective of investigating the incumbency effect, those units have major shortcomings. Primarily, there is a large variance between the size of municipalities in each county, where small municipalities would have to be compared to larger cities with populations a hundred or more times bigger. Any comparisons across counties would then be complicated due to the huge differences in their size. Another limitation comes with the fact that in the case of small municipalities, it is often difficult to collect the names of former mayors to the extent that is needed for such an analysis. The websites of smaller municipalities are often insufficient, and some do not even have any available staff to contact. Additionally, as highlighted by Dvořák and Balík (2021), certain – primarily smaller – municipalities, face difficulties in even holding elections due to insufficient candidate lists.

After consideration, using a particular type of municipality for the analysis appeared to be a better solution. The largest municipalities in terms of population were chosen because of the easier collection of mayoral names, the greater homogeneity of the group, and the ability to make comparisons more easily. The dataset contains mayors from all Czech towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants.⁹ This number of citizens is the threshold beyond which municipalities can significantly increase the number of their councilors.¹⁰

In total, the database includes 128 cities, of which 26 are statutory cities.¹¹ Sixteen of them have more than 50,000 inhabitants and a little more than a quarter of them have more than 30,000 inhabitants. The capital city of Prague was omitted from the research because elections to the local council in Prague are specific and different from the elections in other Czech municipalities. Similarly, the status of Prague is different from other cities and can be compared relatively to the status of a region (Act No. 131/2000 Coll. 2000).¹²

counties still function as administrative units for a large number of fields such as the judiciary or land offices (Balík 2009: 23–25).

- 9 This is as of 1 January 2020, according to the Czech Statistical Office. This date was selected because the original data collection started at that time. The population in Czech municipalities is dynamically evolving, so some municipalities may have seen their population fall below this threshold for a certain period of time between 2002 and 2022.
- 10 While municipalities between 3,000 and 10,000 inhabitants can have 11 to 25 representatives, municipalities above 10,000 inhabitants can have 15 to 35 representatives. Municipalities with 15 or more councilors must always establish a municipal board. (Act No. 128/2000 Coll.).
- 11 This means that a primator, not a mayor, heads them. This is just a decorative label that carries no extra functions.
- 12 Also, the city of Olomouc was, until 2014, excluded from the research. The reason for this omission was that electoral districts were operating in the municipal elections in Olomouc, which skewed the results (Lebeda 2009: 333–335). Moreover, in the 2006 election year, the Czech Statistical Office server, otherwise used for all election results in the article, threw an error. Thus, it is not even possible to access the results from Olomouc for that time.

The first election year was chosen to be 2002, representing the third municipal election in the independent Czech Republic. This was the first election after the change in the method of counting votes in the municipal elections (Act No. 491/2001 Coll. 2001). It could be argued that in that year, the Czech Republic was finally consolidated compared to previous years when councilors and voters were getting used to the new system, which led to more interest from the researchers. Also during this time, the first more comprehensive works focused on Czech local politics started to appear (Balík et al. 2015: 6).¹³

The database sources include individual municipal offices that were contacted and asked about the names of mayors in the last seven electoral periods. Approximately 20% of the municipal authorities did not respond to further requests for information. It was then necessary to trace the names of those mayors in other publicly available sources, such as municipal documents, council meeting reports or media. Another database, kindly provided by Josef Bernard for research purposes, was used for data control.¹⁴

The Czech Statistical Office's election server was used as a source for the election results. The database, made for this article, contains complete data about every mayor who has defended their office at least once. It includes their election results, the parties and lists of candidates they ran for, their age, gender, the election results of their lists of candidates, and the number of city councilors or competing lists of candidates. Not all data are used directly in the article. However, this is a unique database in the Czech environment, which offers many possibilities for future use. It could be expanded to include complete data on all mayors who took office from 2002 to 2022.¹⁵ At the same time, the database could be combined with other information about municipalities, such as their population or financial results. It would then be possible to look deeper into the socio-economic factors that may influence the incumbency advantage of mayors in the Czech case. The addition of socio-economic indicators could help extend the descriptive insight provided by this paper to causal implications.

The attached table serves as an overview since the analysis of two differently sized sets is conducted in the analytical part. The first part examines the success rate of incumbents. Thus, the total N is 583, consisting of all mayors who tried to defend their position in the last five local elections. In the second, longer part

13 Czech political science is, in general, not very interested in the first few municipal elections, and some of the articles directly declare their lack of interest to be mainly due to the fact that the municipal political system was not yet fully crystallised at that time (Ryšavý 2006: 954–956).

14 Bernard's database was based on data from the Czech Statistical Office and could be used to track down the mayors who have already been elected once and have listed the position of mayor as their job position in other elections (Bernard 2013). Unfortunately, this database ends in 2014, covering only half of the electoral period used in this article.

15 This would require the involvement of more authors or a change in Czech institutions' approach to handling data concerning local political authorities.

of the analysis, which focuses on changes in electoral outcomes, only first-time incumbents are considered.¹⁶ The total number of first-time incumbents is 163.

Table 1: Summary of the number of mayors used in the analysis

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022	Total N
Number of mayors/municipalities in the dataset	128	128	128	128	128	640
Number of candidates who ran in their next elections	107	115	127	113	121	583
All successful incumbents	59	57	62	58	61	297
First-time successful incumbents ¹⁷	32	31	40	25	35	163

Source: The author’s own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Methodology

The literature explains that mayors should be advantaged in local elections, even if not elected directly. In this article, several different approaches to measurement are used and aligned with the chosen research questions. The comprehensive database used in the article, which the author is happy to provide, may be helpful to other researchers.

The first research question is inspired by the aforementioned research of Freier (2011, 2015), Sloboda (2017) or Lucas (2021). It addresses whether the incumbency effect can be observed by the increased chances of defending the mandate: ‘How often do the mayors defend their office in the second election?’ Several methodological concerns need to be clarified here. Given the Czech municipal election system, it is unclear whether the mayor’s candidacy in the next election automatically implies an interest in defending the office. As stated above, a mayor is not directly elected in the Czech political system but by a council at its first meeting. Thus, it is not clear how often there have been situations where the mayors have tried to defend their position as opposed to situations where they have run for the council without seeking re-election.¹⁸ This differs from the systems where the mayor is directly elected and where

16 The article distinguishes between types of incumbencies. In the case of a mayor defending their position for the first time, this is referred to as a ‘first-time incumbent’. The same logic applies to all other cases of incumbency.

17 These mayors are analysed in the second part of the analysis in relation to the second and third research questions. These address changes in first-time incumbents’ election outcomes.

18 For example, there may be a situation where a mayor moves to the next level of the political system and runs in the municipal elections only to support their political party. Alternatively, they may decide they are too old or busy with other activities to be a mayor but want to be part of the city council anyway.

they are running to win the mayoral post. It is impossible to ask each mayor to clarify whether they were seeking re-election because of the sheer number of mayors and because some of them are deceased or unreachable. The other option would be to study the records of the first meeting of the newly constituted council and focus on the number of councilors who expressed an ambition to become mayor at that meeting. With this option, however, the question is how much of an informative value such data holds. There could be situations where the incumbents would defend their position, but before the first meeting of the newly established council, they knew that they had no chance of success. The analysis, therefore, works with the assumption that every mayor who runs again wants to defend their position.

It must also be noted that the mayor's first election is counted as the first, after which they were elected to office at the council's inaugural meeting. In some cases, especially before 2002, there were situations where a candidate became mayor during the term of office because the previous mayor resigned or was impeached. For this research, the first election is counted as the election after which the mayor was elected normally by the municipal council and completed the entire term.¹⁹ In the case of the first research question, if the replaced mayor runs again in the subsequent elections, they are counted as a defending mayor. This measure was used because, for previous mayors, it was impossible to track whether they were replaced during the term in all cases.²⁰

The following two research questions focus on testing the visibility of the incumbency advantage in Czech local elections. Only data of the first-time incumbents are used for this because there are only a small number of cases of multi-incumbency mayors.²¹ For a broader analysis of multiple incumbency, we would need a higher number of cases, as shown, for example, by Sloboda (2017). Working only with the elections in which mayors first defended their office also preserves the homogeneity of the sample. At the same time, the manifestation of the incumbency advantage is the clearest in the first elections after the election to the office. In subsequent elections, that advantage is not as straightforward because these elections are not about a new incumbent but about an incumbent who prolongs their time as an incumbent.

19 There are seven cases during the 2018–2022 election cycle where the mayor in one of the cities in the sample was replaced before the new elections. This did not affect the analysis of election results in any of those cases because they were not first-time incumbents. There were six cases of a mayor already being replaced after the 2022 election.

20 For the mayors after the 2018 election, this is only possible because the author continuously updated the database after the next election and could therefore find out if a mayor was replaced before the election or not.

21 There have been only 16 second-time incumbents (mayors who defended their position in two consecutive elections) between 2002 and 2022. There are 9 third-time incumbents and 7 four or more-time incumbents.

The second question asks, ‘How often does the incumbent mayor win in the absolute number of preferential votes?’ The same question has already been discussed in the Czech context (e.g. Balík 2010; Vavrečková 2016). The compiled database offers an excellent opportunity to apply the same procedure to the largest cities of the Czech Republic. When applying this approach, there is no need to deal with effects such as turnout fluctuations or the entry of other strong political parties onto the scene, which is a significant upside. Winning the second election is a clear indicator of whether the incumbent succeeded or not. It can be assumed that while the mayor was not always first in the total number of preferential votes in the first election prior to their election to office, in the next election, the mayor is expected to dominate because of the incumbency advantage.

The final research question builds on the previous question and asks, ‘Does the number of preferential votes received for the mayor in the second election increase compared to the first election?’ This measurement method of calculating the average vote gain for freshman winners who run again in the election is called the sophomore surge. It is a standard method used in the American research (e.g. Ansolabehere et al. 2007; King & Gelman 1991). The assumption is that the difference between the elections will be positive, making it clear that mayors have an incumbency advantage. The question is how significant the increases or decreases between the two elections will be.

Analysis

The sample of municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants can be divided into several categories. More than half of those municipalities have under 20,000 residents. Only a quarter of the cities have more than 30,000 inhabitants (see Appendix Table 1). This is another illustration of the Czech municipal structure’s high fragmentation level.

The average age of a mayor in a Czech city with more than 10,000 inhabitants increased from 48.1 to 51.5 between the 2002 and 2022 elections. The average age of a mayor rose significantly more in smaller cities from the sample (see Appendix Table 2). This is likely due to the more frequent mayoral turnover in larger cities, where there is more competition and elections are more likely to reflect national sentiment and trends (Balík et al. 2015). The years in which the average age of mayors within a group of municipalities was significantly higher than in others indicate that a more significant proportion of them defended their positions. For example, more incumbents were present in the 2014 and 2022 elections. Alternatively, for smaller municipalities, the same happened in 2018. The natural turnover of mayors also impacts the average age. Mayors in the biggest Czech cities are generally younger than in the smaller ones (see Appendix Table 2).

The number of female mayors in large Czech cities increased sharply after the 2006 elections but has since been relatively stagnant, ranging between 9% and 13.5% (see Appendix Table 3). According to analyses conducted by the NGO Forum 50% (2015; 2020), after the 2014 elections, women made up 23% of all Czech mayors. Then, in 2018, it reached 24.3% of the total number. However, the analyses emphasise that there is an inverse proportionality whereby as the size of the municipality increases, the number of women in leadership decreases.²² In total, 17 women, mainly those in larger cities, defended their positions between 2002 and 2022.²³

Moving from the sample characteristics towards incumbency shows that the Czech mayors in large municipalities seek re-election very often. In the 2006 elections, almost 85% of the incumbents ran for re-election.²⁴ In 2010 and 2018, the number rose to 90%, and in the exceptional year of 2014, only one mayor from the sample did not attempt to run again. The number of first-time mayors is gradually decreasing. In contrast, the number of mayors defending their office for the third time or more is increasing. There seems to be a consolidation in the last election years, where voters have become accustomed to the new parties. Mayors from them have either established themselves or were replaced.

Table 2: Number of incumbents who ran in their next elections

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Successful incumbents	59	57	62	58	61
Unsuccessful incumbents	48	58	65	55	39
Non-candidates*	21	13	1	15	7

Source: The author’s own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office
 Note: * Mayors who did not participate in the next elections

Regarding defending the post, 2006 was a very successful year for incumbent mayors. In these elections, the success rate was 55%, meaning that more than half of the mayors successfully defended their positions. In subsequent years, the re-election success rate stabilised at around 50%, with it picking up again

22 A similar trend has been observed, for example, in neighbouring Slovakia (e.g. Lukáčová & Maličká 2023; Maškarinec et al. 2018; Maškarinec & Klimovský 2017).

23 Interestingly, between the 2002 and 2014 elections, only two female mayors were elected in the ten largest Czech cities, including Prague. In the last two elections, this number has doubled, and the mayor of Brno, Markéta Vaňková, even managed to defend her post.

24 It should be stressed here that, as discussed in the data section, mayors in the Czech Republic are not directly elected. This is the number of mayors who ran again in the council elections.

in the last election year. Second-time incumbents especially have a very high re-election rate in the last elections.

Table 3: Success rate of incumbents distributed by the number of terms in office

Incumbents	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Number of first-time incumbents	64	64	73	57	65
Success rate	59.4%	60.9%	54.8%	43.9%	53.8%
Number of second-time incumbents	31	38	36	35	25
Success rate	45.2%	36.8%	27.8%	57.1%	64.0%
Number of multiple-time incumbents ²⁵	12	13	18	21	30
Success rate	58.3%	30.8%	66.7%	61.9%	60.0%
Total number of successful incumbents	107	115	127	113	120
Total success rate	55.1%	49.6%	48.8%	51.3%	57.5%

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Looking only at the first-time incumbents, their success rate was around 55–60% between 2002 and 2014. This started to change with the 2018 elections, in which the success rate of first-time incumbents became significantly lower and the success rate of second-time incumbents higher. This pattern continued in 2022. In the case of the second-time incumbents, a drop can be observed in the 2010 and 2014 elections. In 2014, only 10 out of 36 mayors who had already served two consecutive terms were re-elected. This fact could be caused mainly by the emergence of new political parties led by STAN, a party built explicitly around mayors, and the populist ANO.²⁶ As a result, some mayors from more established parties, especially from ODS, were pushed into the opposition and failed to defend their positions.²⁷ Some of those were able to return to office in the next election because the mayors from ANO failed their runs for incumbency.²⁸

²⁵ Mayors who defended their position three or more times.

²⁶ To substantiate this interpretation, a more detailed examination of the candidate lists associated with incumbents would be necessary. A more robust approach would involve comparing candidate names across elections to capture continuity beyond mere party labels as there are some shifts in coalition structures.

²⁷ After the 2014 elections, ODS lost seven incumbent mayors, while STAN won three new mayors and ANO won six.

²⁸ Five of those mayors who lost their position in 2014 returned after the 2018 elections, which makes nearly 20% of mayors who were not able to defend in 2014.

It is important to highlight that the number of such mayors has been gradually increasing. In the last election, there were 30 of them, an increase of 150% over the last five terms. These are often mayors approaching the age of 60 or more and who are thus moving into the position of ordinary councilor. Equally, younger incumbents who defended their position of mayor multiple times often move to the next level of the Czech political system and do not seek the position of mayor again.²⁹ The pattern of ascending political careers is not limited to mayors but is also observed at other levels of Czech politics. Bernard and Čermák (2021) show that many Czech politicians follow a trajectory from local or regional politics to the higher levels.

Table 4 below shows the final position of the first-time incumbents when comparing the total number of preferential votes received among all candidates in the municipality. This refers to the election after which the mayor first took office and, thus, the election before becoming an incumbent.

Table 4: Final position of the first-time incumbent mayors in the number of preferential votes in their first election

Year	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
First	12	18	28	16	16
in percentages ³⁰	37.5%	58.1%	70.0%	64.0%	45.7%
Second	8	11	3	3	2
in percentages	25.0%	35.5%	7.5%	12.0%	5.7%
Third or worse	12	2	9	6	17
in percentages	37.5%	6.5%	22.5%	24.0%	48.6%
Total number of first-time elected mayors	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author’s own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

A situation where the candidate who does not receive the highest number of preferential votes becomes mayor occurs often. In the 2002 elections, about two-thirds of the candidates who became mayors failed to win in the total number of preferential votes received. After the 2002 elections, a change in the behaviour of political parties in creating their candidate lists can be observed. Since then,

29 Many high-profile politicians have done this in the past. In the current government, Minister of Finance Zbyněk Stanjura, Minister of Interior Vít Rakušan, Minister of Transport Martin Kupka and Minister of Culture Martin Baxa were all successful mayors and incumbents.

30 Percentages from the total number of first-time incumbents.

most future mayors have been leaders of their candidate lists.³¹ In the following election years, the number of mayors who won the elections in the number of preferential votes gradually began to increase. However, we can still observe a relatively large number of candidates who came in worse than first or second overall in the number of total preferential votes. In some instances, a future mayor may have been overshadowed by a popular candidate who did not seek the office. The fact that the mayor was not yet well known to ordinary citizens at the time could also play an important role. This changed significantly after the first term, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Final position of the first-time incumbent mayors in the number of preferential votes in their second election³²

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
First	24	25	37	24	32
in percentages	75.0%	80.6%	92.5%	96.0%	91.4%
Second	3	6	3	1	1
in percentages	9.4%	19.4%	7.5%	4.0%	2.9%
Third or worse	5	0	0	0	2
in percentages	15.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.7%
Total number of first-time incumbents	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Looking at the performance of mayors as first-time incumbents, there is a significant increase in those who came in first in the total number of preferential votes received. Incumbents in the position of mayor have significantly improved their performance from their first elections. While only 12 out of the 32 candidates who eventually became mayors managed to win by the number of votes received in the 2002 election, this number doubled in their first elections as incumbents. In the last three municipal elections, only 5 out of 100 incumbents were not overall election winners. This data shows the clear dominance of incumbents over other candidates and that this dominance is growing over time.

31 The results in the largest cities of the Czech Republic are consistent with earlier findings showing that in 2014, at least 90% of elected mayors in municipalities with over 5,000 inhabitants were leaders of their candidate lists (Balík et al. 2015: 92–93).

32 An election in which they were incumbents for the first time.

Finishing first in the total number of preferential votes can be interpreted as winning the elections in the Czech system.³³ Results of the analysis indicate that a certain respect for the winner's right is still persistent in the Czech political system. It refers to the belief that the position of mayor, governor or prime minister should be occupied by the member of a winning party or the candidate with the highest number of preferential votes obtained. This is not something that is established in law. It is rather a matter of candidate and voter alignment, partially caused by the local electoral system not being completely clear to the voters (Balík 2009: 208–210). Respect for the winner in local elections in the largest Czech cities is very high. A candidate list with a candidate who became mayor for the first time won the election in 65–80% of the cases. In contrast, a candidate list with an incumbent mayor won the election 77–95% of the time.

A deeper look at the candidates who have made it to the mayor's office in recent years from a position other than first on the candidate list shows that this usually happens in two ways. One is where the head of the candidate list is a person who is expected to be mayor after the election, but unexpected personal events force them to change their mind after the election. The second, more frequent variant is when someone other than the head of the candidate list is expected to be mayor from the beginning. The populist party ANO has used this route several times. A locally well-known person was put into the position of the candidate list leader to increase the party's chances of success. After the elections, the leader did not seek the mayor's post and left it to the candidate number two or three.³⁴

Incumbent mayors tend to move up on their candidate lists and often become the overall election winners regarding the votes received. This means that an increase in the number of votes received between the first and second elections should be expected.

Cases where mayors receive more votes in their second election than in their first are significantly more frequent. Of the 163 cases in which the mayors participated as first-time incumbents, there was an increase in the number of preferential votes received between the two elections occurred in 126 of them. This means there was an increase in the preferential votes received by incumbents in more than 77% of cases.

33 The concept of winning in Czech local elections was discussed by Balík (2010: 26–27). There are two approaches. One considering the winning party as the winner of the election, and the other the candidate with the highest number of votes among all.

34 The specificity of the Czech electoral system, where the mayor is elected directly by the council, has led to some odd situations. In Opava, the number two candidate on the ANO list was nominated for the position of mayor. In response, the former mayor of Opava from ČSSD nominated the ANO number one for the position of mayor. He explained his move by saying the party leader should be the mayoral candidate. According to him, many voters fell for the impression that the leader of the candidate list should become mayor and were tricked to some extent.

Table 6: Change in the number of preferential votes for the mayors in their second elections

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Increase	29	20	28	23	26
in percentages	90.6%	64.5%	70.0%	92.0%	74.3%
Decrease	3	11	12	2	9
in percentages	9.4%	35.5%	30.0%	8.0%	25.7%
Total	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

As seen before, the 2010 and 2014 election years were not as successful, with incumbents displaying better results in only about two-thirds of the cases. This decline is similar to the drop in the number of successful incumbents in the same election years. Among incumbents in the 2010 elections, there is a relatively large number of cases where the mayor did worse in their second election than in their first election. There was also a low number of cases in that year where the mayor improved their previous result by more than 50%.

In contrast, while the number of mayors who scored worse remained similar in 2014, there was a significant increase in the number of mayors at the other end of the spectrum. This election year also saw the highest-ever increase in the votes received. The mayor of Čelákovice, Josef Pátek, and current Minister of the Interior Vít Rakušan, who was the mayor of Kolín at the time, recorded increases of nearly 150% in the number of preferential votes received. The absolute record holder in this regard is the mayor of Náchod, Jan Birke. He saw a 269% increase in votes received between the 2010 and 2014 elections. In total, 11 mayors have managed to at least double their results as first-time incumbents.

Increases in the number of votes are frequent and usually high. In contrast, declines in this regard are unusual and not so steep. Only six mayors fell by more than 25% of votes received in the period under observation, and almost half of the drops were below 10%. The record holder in this respect is the mayor of Jeseník, Zdeňka Blišťanová, whose votes fell by 43% as a first-time incumbent. This was a special case because Jeseník had lost almost 500 registered voters in the previous four years, and the council had shrunk from 25 seats to 21. This is the only observed case of a reduced municipal council and again shows that, unlike the systems with a directly elected mayor, many more variables are involved in the Czech system.

A comparison of the performance in the mayors' first and second elections clearly implies that incumbent mayors have an advantage in the Czech municipal elections. The factors influencing the increase in preferential votes received for Czech incumbent mayors can vary. Such variables include campaign funds, inferior opposing candidates, access to media and widespread awareness of their character among citizens (e.g. Bernard 2012; Freier 2011, 2015; Sloboda 2017).

Due to the database's scope, using those explanatory variables is not possible.³⁵ There are, however, electoral variables that can shed some light on at least part of the increase in the number of votes for the mayors in their successive elections.

Table 7: Regression model examining the effects of electoral factors on the final placement of a candidate in the election³⁶

Year	Term	Estimate	StdError	tValue	PValue
2006	(Intercept)	1.178	0.953	1.236	0.222
2006	Pos	0.208**	0.063	3.304	0.002
2006	VT	-0.008	0.017	-0.486	0.629
2006	Age	0	0.014	-0.023	0.982
2006	INCYES	0.12	0.218	0.549	0.585
2006	GDM	0.384	0.325	1.181	0.242
2010	(Intercept)	-0.311	1.625	-0.191	0.849
2010	Pos	0.564*	0.277	2.037	0.045
2010	VT	0.007	0.025	0.263	0.793
2010	Age	0.01	0.017	0.6	0.55
2010	INCYES	-0.095	0.299	-0.318	0.752
2010	GDM	0.571	0.559	1.022	0.31
2014	(Intercept)	2.349**	0.699	3.361	0.001
2014	Pos	0.143**	0.053	2.698	0.009
2014	VT	-0.018	0.013	-1.402	0.165
2014	Age	-0.003	0.009	-0.319	0.751
2014	INCYES	-0.594***	0.171	-3.475	0.001

35 As explained in the introduction and methodology – the aim of the article is not to study the factors that influence the incumbency advantage but to confirm whether it is present in the case of Czech mayors and what the possibilities for its measurement are. With this plan in mind, a database was prepared that thus includes only electoral factors.

36 < 0.001 (***) p < 0.01 (**) p < 0.05 (*)

2014	GDM	0.043	0.301	0.142	0.888
2018	(Intercept)	3.212	2.899	1.108	0.271
2018	Pos	0.335	0.6	0.559	0.578
2018	VT	0.076	0.055	1.394	0.167
2018	Age	-0.016	0.035	-0.448	0.655
2018	INCYES	-2.864***	0.63	-4.547	0
2018	GDM	-2.176*	1.053	-2.066	0.042

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Dependent variable: FPos – Final standing in the election

Independent variables: Pos – Position on the candidate list; VT – voter turnout; Age – age of the candidate; INCYES – Incumbent (YES); GDM – Gender (Male)

A regression analysis examining the effect of several variables on the final position in the total number of votes shows that incumbency is statistically significant. In 2014 and 2018, it had a significant effect on the final position of the mayor in the number of preferential votes received. If the mayor was an incumbent, they achieved, on average, a better ranking in the total number of preferential votes received in these two election years. Position on the candidate list also has an effect, although generally lower, as can be seen from the values of the coefficients. The higher the position on the candidate list, the better the mayor's result. On the other hand, neither age nor turnout seems to be a factor.

Gender might have some influence, but in the sample of 420 cases, only 9% were women. The number of women among the incumbents is even lower than the number of women among the mayors. Situations where a woman is elected mayor but does not retain her position in subsequent elections occur often. The same analysis was conducted where the dependent variable was a log-transformed number of votes received.³⁷ In this case, incumbency also appears to be a significant variable (see Appendix Table 5).

Conclusions

The findings of this article strongly indicate the existence of an incumbency advantage for Czech mayors in the largest municipalities. Those findings are consistent with similar research from other countries (e.g. Ansolabehere et al. 2007; Freier 2015; Mazurkiewicz 2021; Sloboda 2017). Incumbent mayors in cities with over 10,000 inhabitants are better placed to win a mandate over their challengers, with their re-election rate averaging over 50%. Situations where a person who did not receive the highest number of votes is elected mayor only

³⁷ Log-transformation was used due to the large differences between the number of votes received.

to win the race four years later are very common. This conclusion corresponds with the results of other comparable analyses (Balík 2010; Vavrečková 2016; Čapek 2019, 2021).

Following Balík's approach that the winner of the election is the candidate with the highest number of preferential votes received (Balík 2010: 26–27), it can be concluded that incumbent mayors are election winners in most cases. These incumbents frequently improve on their performance from their first election. More than 75% of them saw an increase. These increases often exceed the 50% mark, and there is a larger number of incumbent mayors who have managed to win more than double the number of preferential votes when compared to their first elections. Cases where the number of votes for an incumbent mayor decreases between elections are uncommon. When they do occur, they are drops of a few units, at most a few tenths of a percent. Incumbency seems to be the most significant of the studied factors that play a role in the increase of votes between elections. Other factors, like age or gender, could play a role, but a more extensive dataset with the addition of more variables would be needed to confirm it.

These findings align with previous research from the Czech municipal (Bernard 2012; Ryšavý & Bernard 2013) and regional elections (Bernard & Šafr 2016), which showed that incumbents are more likely to get re-elected. Re-election rates of Czech mayors are certainly a phenomenon worth monitoring in the future, as they may reflect on the quality of local democracy. As other researchers have shown, long-serving mayors and their leadership can have a positive impact on economic development (e.g. Calabrese & van Leeuwen 2024; García-Vega & Herce 2011). On the other hand, the persistence of incumbency could also lead to challenges such as reduced accountability and potential for corruption (e.g. Akhtari et al. 2022; Coviello & Gagliarducci 2017). A growing number of incumbents could also negatively affect the competitiveness of elections, as shown by Mazurkiewicz (2021, 2022).

The specifics of the Czech local political system, where mayors are elected by council members rather than directly by voters, must be considered. Other articles that focused on the effects of incumbency reached similar conclusions. However, the results do not compare very well because of different election settings. The findings of this article are limited to the most populous municipalities, and future research could expand the sample to smaller towns to see if similar patterns emerge. The problem of collecting data regarding the names of mayors in individual municipalities, which are not tracked by any authority, is a significant limitation.³⁸ Additionally, a further analysis combining more

38 As discussed in the section dedicated to data, any major database expansion would require the work of more people, such as the 2014 project, which involved 26 students and still could not cover all the mayors from the selected elections (Balík et al. 2015: 6, 89).

socio-economic and personal factors, such as campaign funding, media access or opposition strength, could explain the re-election rates of the incumbents in more detail. Also, candidate list affiliation and its coalition potential, or candidate turnover between elections, could be included in the analysis as discussed in the article.

The unique dataset created for this article provides a foundation for further research, with several potential directions for future exploration. The next step might be a cross-state analysis, which is so far largely absent from incumbency effect research in general. Another possibility would be to expand the dataset to include a broader range of electoral trends, such as the results of all mayors. A regression discontinuity design could be applied to try to identify the causal effects of incumbency by focusing on elections with small margins between winners and losers. Alternatively, tracking how those mayors do in subsequent elections and how many are still running after losing their position would be a possibility.³⁹ Exploring those dimensions could enhance the understanding of the incumbency effect not only in the interesting case of the Czech local elections but in proportional electoral systems in general.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1: Number of municipalities of a given size included in the sample

Number of inhabitants	Number of cities	Percentage
10,000 – 15,000	42	32.81%
15,001 – 20,000	26	20.31%
20,001 – 30,000	26	20.31%
30,001 – 50,000	18	14.06%
over 50,000	16	12.50%
Total	128	100

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office valid as of date 1.1.2022

Appendix Table 2: Average age of the mayor in a municipality of a given size

Number of inhabitants	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
10,000 – 15,000	50.1	48.3	48.8	48.6	52.1	52.6
15,001 – 20,000	48.8	50.3	48.6	51.1	52.1	53.9
20,001 – 30,000	46.5	47.7	52.6	49.8	51.4	50.6
30,001 – 50,000	46.4	46.3	50.2	52.5	47	50.2
over 50,000	46.5	46.4	45.7	46.4	46.1	48.2
Total average	48.1	48.1	49.3	49.6	50.5	51.5

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Appendix Table 3: Proportion of female mayors in municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants

Number of inhabitants	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
10,000 – 15,000	7.1%	7.1%	7.1%	7.1%	2.4%	7.1%
15,001 – 20,000	3.8%	7.7%	19.2%	7.7%	15.4%	19.2%
20,001 – 30,000	3.8%	7.7%	19.2%	11.5%	11.5%	7.7%
30,001 – 50,000	5.9%	29.4%	11.8%	23.5%	23.5%	23.5%
over 50,000	11.8%	17.6%	5.9%	0.0%	11.8%	17.6%
Total proportion of female mayors	6.3%	11.7%	12.5%	9.4%	10.9%	13.3%

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Appendix Table 4: Position on the electoral list in the mayor's first election

Year	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
First	22	28	40	20	32
Second	5	1	0	3	2
Third or worse	5	2	0	2	1
Total	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Appendix Table 5: Regression model examining the effects of electoral factors on the number of votes received (log-transformed)⁴⁰

Year	Term	Estimate	StdError	tValue	PValue
2006	(Intercept)	9.129***	0.876	10.423	0
2006	Pos	-0.08	0.058	-1.378	0.173
2006	VT	0	0	-0.398	0.692
2006	Age	-0.012	0.013	-0.957	0.343
2006	INCYES	-0.122	0.2	-0.608	0.546

⁴⁰ Number of votes received by the candidate was log-transformed due to the vast differences caused by the size of the municipality.

2006	GDM	-0.354	0.299	-1.185	0.241
2010	(Intercept)	8.185***	0.879	9.314	0
2010	Pos	-0.159	0.15	-1.064	0.291
2010	VT	0	0	-1.079	0.284
2010	Age	-0.003	0.009	-0.33	0.742
2010	INCYES	0.406*	0.162	2.509	0.014
2010	GDM	0.342	0.303	1.129	0.262
2014	(Intercept)	8.187***	0.568	14.424	0
2014	Pos	-0.046	0.043	-1.059	0.293
2014	VT	0	0	-1.379	0.172
2014	Age	-0.007	0.007	-0.897	0.372
2014	INCYES	0.266	0.139	1.917	0.059
2014	GDM	0.278	0.244	1.14	0.258
2018	(Intercept)	9.519***	0.655	14.522	0
2018	Pos	-0.013	0.136	-0.094	0.925
2018	VT	0	0	-1.019	0.311
2018	Age	-0.019*	0.008	-2.432	0.017
2018	INCYES	0.201	0.142	1.414	0.161
2018	GDM	-0.335	0.238	-1.409	0.163

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office.

Dependent variable: NVotes – Number of votes received by the candidate (log-transformed)

Independent variables: Pos - Position on the candidate list; VT - voter turnout; Age - age of the candidate; INCYES - Incumbent (YES); GDM – Gender (Male)