

Story of the Czech Senate Elections: What Roles of the Upper Chamber Voters Expect and Which Candidates They Vote For

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Abstract: *Although upper chambers play a key role in democratic systems, little is known about how citizens actually perceive their functions. The Czech Senate offers an instructive case due to its ambiguous institutional position and relatively low public visibility. This paper examines how Czech voters perceive the Senate and how these perceptions have evolved over time, distinguishing three main conceptions: an oversight institution within the horizontal separation of powers, a representative of territorial interests and an independent, elitist ‘Chamber of wisdom.’ The analysis draws on a large, original dataset covering all Senate elections from 1996 to 2022, including newly constructed variables capturing candidate characteristics and constituency-level features. Candidate-level regression models identify which types of candidates are most successful and what this implies for perceptions of the Senate’s role. The findings reveal effects of variables connected to all three alternative perceptions of the Senate. They also suggest that the Senate’s independent and less partisan character has gradually strengthened, demonstrating that institutional meanings can evolve in practice even without formal constitutional change. By combining comprehensive electoral data with novel measures, the study contributes to broader debates on the relationship between formal institutional design and citizens’ perceptions, and on electoral behaviour in second-order elections.*

Keywords: *bicameralism, Czech politics, electoral behaviour, perceived roles, political institutions, representation, second chambers, second-order elections, upper house*

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, the decision to dismantle Czechoslovakia was made rather surprisingly and, above all, quickly. Thus, there was a sudden need to create a constitutional system for the newly emerging independent Czech state. Due to the need to adopt the constitution of the new state before its establishment, the constitutional order of the future Czech Republic was hastily created. Not surprisingly, then, parts of the newly adopted Constitution were largely a compromise (Kopeček 2017: 115–119).

One such compromise was the Czech Senate, when several alternative approaches to bicameralism were considered (Kysela 2004). Part of the opposition, as well as some governmental politicians at that time, even rejected the idea of forming an upper chamber (Kopeček 2017: 126–129). Eventually, almost four years after the establishment of the Czech state itself, the Senate was created. However, as Urban points out, the late creation and constant debates – which have not disappeared to this day – regarding the Senate’s position may have weakened its authority early in its existence (2016: 281).

As a result, the role of the Senate (and its need in general) has become an unsettled question. This Czech scenario is no different from what the upper chambers in other countries are experiencing. This should not be too surprising, as the existence of the upper chamber is, according to Sartori (1994), the most contested issue in parliamentary systems of government. Not by chance, Russell (2013) advanced the influential thesis that perceived legitimacy is an important factor to consider when evaluating the functioning of the upper chambers. Russell and subsequently other authors (see, e.g. Just & Charvát 2022; Mueller, Vatter & Dick 2023; Štrus & Brezovnik 2023; Vercesi 2017) place particular emphasis on the *perception* of upper chambers. As Hruška and Balík (2025a) pointed out, this should not be limited to perceived legitimacy, but should also consider the perceived role.

As Saward (2010) notes, even for elected bodies, claims to (legitimate) representation can (and do) extend beyond the mere existence of an electoral mandate to include claims based, for example, on history, culture, competence or other imperatives. This perspective may be particularly suitable for evaluating an institution, such as an upper chamber, with potentially divergent roles. In this regard, Kysela (2004: 125) points to the possible development of upper chambers and the representation of originally unintended interests. Therefore, it is important to examine not only the constitutional designations of the upper chamber, but also the perceptions of individual actors.

Using interviews, Hruška and Balík (2025a) found that ordinary citizens indeed have different perceptions of the Senate’s role. These include the role of traditional political oversight (second opinion) based on the principle of horizontal separation of powers, the role of representation of territorial interests

and the role of independent oversight performed by an elitist apolitical council of the wise. However, we do not know to what extent these different perceptions of the upper chamber are pervasive within the population, or whether they have changed over time. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer two main research questions: how Czech voters perceive the role of the Senate and how this perception has evolved over time. It does so through a quantitative analysis of all Senate elections and candidate characteristics, revealing the types of candidates voters favour and what this implies about their view of the Senate's role.

The analysis is novel because it employs previously unused conceptualisations and operationalisations of some variables. In the appendix (see Appendix B), the paper also examines differences in perceptions of the Senate across different types of constituencies, based on two criteria: 1) urbanisation (urban vs. rural character of constituencies), 2) the natural character of delineation of the senate constituencies in the sense of corresponding or not corresponding to existing territorial/administrative units (such as former counties). The paper's contribution is not only a deeper understanding of Czech bicameralism and electoral behaviour; this work also shows how the perception of the role of an entire constitutional institution can differ and even change over time, despite its constitutional and legal stability.

In the following chapter, the possible roles of upper chambers are discussed while this theory is applied to the Czech context. This is followed by a methodological section, which explains how to measure the different Senate roles and, in particular, the relationship between these roles and the specific characteristics of the candidates. Then follows a section with the results and their discussion.

Theories of upper chambers in the Czech context

Upper chambers are generally justified by two primary functions: 1) representing specific interests, and 2) exercising oversight in line with the principle of horizontal separation of powers (Russell 2001b). Haas (2000) thus differentiates between 1) the principle of representation, which pertains to advocating for particular interests such as territorial entities, minorities or ethnic groups, and 2) the functional principle, which relates to the oversight and controlling role of upper chambers within the framework of power separation. Tsebelis and Money (1997) then use two arguments to legitimise upper chambers: 1) the efficiency argument (oversight over the content and technical improvement of laws), and 2) the political argument (addressing the representation of diverse social interests).

When considering the representation of specific interests, the role of an upper chamber can be further categorised. This includes representation of territorial interests (Russell 2001a), minority groups (whether national, ethnic, linguistic or religious), professional and class interests, and the privileged classes (Russell 2001b: 433–436).

An upper chamber that does not represent specific interests operates primarily under the principle of horizontal separation of powers (Loewenstein 1969: 167–170). This principle encompasses a variety of sub-roles. These include improving legislation, achieving deeper and longer-term compromise, defending against the tyranny of the majority, acting as a check and balance, and acting as a constitutional safeguard (Bogdanor 1992; Riker 1992). In the case of the Czech Senate,¹ most theoretical roles that typically justify the existence of an upper chamber can be largely set aside. The roles that the Senate fulfils – whether from a constitutional perspective or as perceived by actual political actors (including the general public) – are examined in greater detail below.

Political oversight role

Although various roles and justifications for the Senate's existence were debated during the drafting of the Czech Constitution, the principles of separation of powers and the theory of checks and balances ultimately shaped its design. The architects of the Constitution envisioned the Senate as a chamber of second opinion rather than as a body advocating for specific interests, including territorial ones (Kysela 2004: 427). This decision was influenced by the characterisation of the Czech Republic – it is a relatively small, centralised, unitary state with a homogeneous population, where the need for a territorial representation (or representation of other specific interests) in an upper chamber is, in general, minimal (Palermo 2018; Passaglia 2018).² Furthermore, in the aftermath of Czechoslovakia's dissolution, further potential decentralisation and regionalisation were viewed rather unfavourably.

Two key characteristics of Czech bicameralism confirm this conclusion. First, the Senate lacks any formal powers over territorial units, a hallmark of upper chambers that represent territorial interests (Kysela 2004: 125; Popelier 2019). Second, the single mandate constituencies used for Senate elections do not formally align with any administrative or territorial divisions of the country, though some constituencies resemble and are named after counties. Constituencies sometimes even span over two or more regions (see Figure 1).

1 The Czech Parliament consists of the Chamber of Deputies (200 members) and the Senate (81 members). Unlike the majority system used in Senate elections, the lower chamber is elected by a party-list PR system. Both elections are characterised by multi-party competition, which reflects the rather broad multipartyism characteristic of the Czech party system. Czech bicameralism is asymmetrical. The Senate has only a suspensive veto in the legislative process. However, the Senate's consent is required in some specific cases, including the approval of constitutional and electoral laws, the ratification of international treaties and some other decisions. The Senate also has some other, mainly creation or control powers (e.g. appointment of constitutional judges).

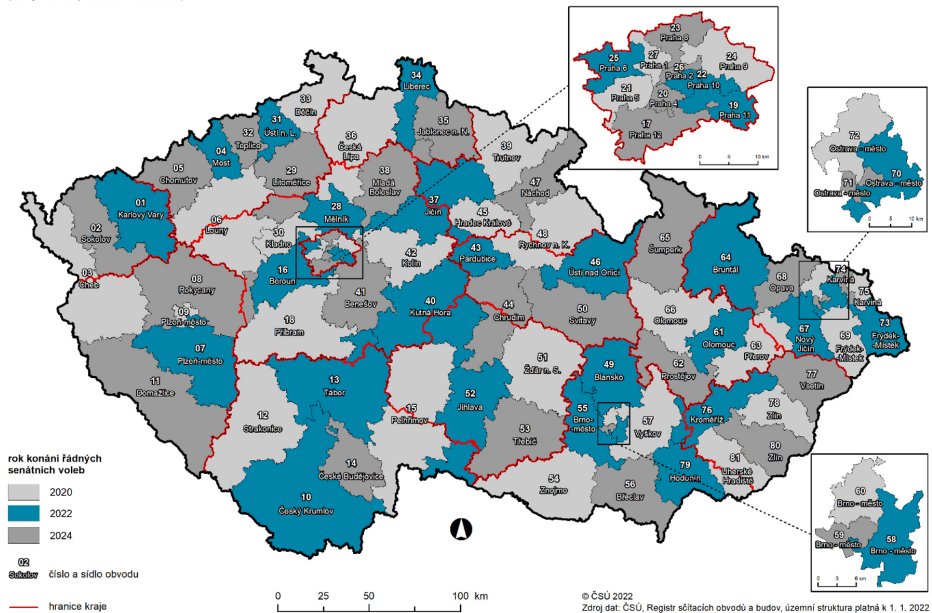
2 The Czech Republic does not have significant regional, religious, linguistic or racial minorities (Frank 2020: 52), which are traditionally represented in upper chambers based on the territorial representation.

This structure makes the potential representation of territorial interests very challenging (though not impossible).³

Under this conception, the Senate performs two specific sub-roles (Kysela 2004: 54). The first is a stabilising sub-role, in which the Senate acts as a democratic safeguard, a stabiliser in the system and a guarantor of long-term compromise. This sub-role relates to the powers of the Senate, such as approving constitutional amendments, electoral laws or the appointment of constitutional judges, where the Senate cannot be overruled. The second is a revising sub-role, in which the Senate is expected to primarily improve the parliament’s legislative performance by providing a day-to-day second opinion on proposed bills. This role primarily concerns the Senate’s powers to adopt common legislation, which can be overridden by the lower chamber. The first role is less well known among citizens but is more important for the Senate’s perceived legitimacy. The second role is more visible as it is more frequently exercised, but is affected by the fact that the Senate can simply be ignored (Hruška& Balík 2025a). It is important to note that both these sub-roles are political in nature, as they are carried out by elected politicians, often affiliated with political parties.

Figure 1: Current delineation of the Senate constituencies

VOLEBNÍ OBVODY PRO VOLBY DO SENÁTU PARLAMENTU ČR
(ve vymezení platném v roce 2022)



Source: CSO 2024

3 The issue of the delineation of Senate constituencies and their changes over time is addressed in detail by Antoř (2013). See also Table A6 in Appendix A with the list of the Senate’s constituencies and their types.

Territorial role

Despite the formal framework of the Senate, the way senators are elected in single-mandate constituencies often creates the perception – among both voters and some senators – that the Senate is composed of representatives tasked with advocating for the interests of their respective constituencies (Hruška & Čapek 2026). This perception is further reinforced by senators' natural inclination to seek re-election at the end of their term. Since their re-election depends on voters in their constituencies, senators are incentivised to prioritise local interests and address issues affecting their electorates. This phenomenon was noted by Petr Pithart, former Senate president, who observed that local concerns began accumulating within the Senate just three years after its establishment (1999: 12). Pithart (2016) has since been highly critical of this trend, arguing that the focus on regional issues detracts from the Senate's ability to fulfil its primary role effectively.

While Kysela rejects the idea that the architects of the Constitution intended to create an upper chamber based on the principle of regional representation, he highlights a broader pattern in which upper chambers may assume roles not originally intended, such as implicitly representing specific interests. In the Czech context, this tendency arises due to the electoral system and the delineation of constituencies. Kysela describes this phenomenon as 'a situation in which members of the upper chamber, in fact, predominantly represent a particular social interest, without this being taken into account when the chamber was designed' (2004: 125).

There is additional evidence supporting the idea of the Senate's spontaneous regionalisation. Although Senate constituencies do not always align with territorial units, many candidates campaign – and later behave – as ombudsmen of their constituencies. According to Malcová (2012), candidates frequently make promises during campaigns that they are unable to fulfil once in office due to the lack of formal powers regarding territorial role. On the other hand, Hruška and Čapek (2026) recently showed that there are (mainly informal) tools that senators use to advocate for the interests of their constituencies.

Moreover, this perception is supported by some of Brokl's (2001) findings from the early Senate years. According to his research, 68% of questioned senators considered themselves to represent a constituency. Only 26.4% of senators saw themselves as representing all citizens, and only 5.6% of senators saw themselves as representing their party. However, according to Jágr (2023), who employed almost identical methodology, only 34.8% of senators primarily represented the citizens of their constituency in 2020, although this is still more than twice as many as members of the lower chamber. However, 56.5% of senators said they primarily represented all citizens. This suggests a change of perception over time.

Chamber of Wisdom

Beyond the two theoretical conceptions of the Senate discussed above, it is important to acknowledge that citizens hold a third, less clearly defined perception of its role. This perception, often referred to as the ‘Chamber of Wisdom’, envisions the Senate as a supervisory body, not dominated by political party representatives, but composed of independent individuals with distinct qualities (Hruška & Balík 2025a). This view aligns closely with the concept that the upper chambers represent certain privileged groups. Blom (1992) explains that, according to this theory, certain segments of society are more predisposed to participate in governance due to accumulated experience, wisdom or specific moral qualities. Passaglia (2018) notes that an ‘heir’ of the aristocratic second chamber may be seen in those chambers which, by their composition, strive to ensure an additional dose of ‘wisdom’ within institutions. It is, therefore, possible to speak of a chamber of elites. In the Czech context, the demand for this type of upper chamber may also stem from dissatisfaction with politicians and political parties, a recurring theme of Czech populism (Engler, Pytlas & Deegan-Krause 2019).

As Kysela notes, such a model (e.g. British House of Lords) is typically associated with forms of membership that do not rely on universal popular elections (such as appointment or ex officio memberships) (2004: 427). According to Passaglia (2018), however, such an approach to upper chambers may also be expressed in increased passive suffrage. That is the case with the Czech Senate, where the minimum age to become a senator is 40. Such senators are supposed to be wise enough to avoid any ‘mistakes of youth’ (Passaglia 2018).

In addition to wisdom and experience, the perception of the Senate as the Chamber of Wisdom also includes political independence of senators (Hruška & Balík 2025a). Balík (2017) describes the intention of constructing this kind of chamber, and Brokl (2001) and Jágr (2023) confirm that senators do not primarily perceive themselves as representatives of their own political party. On the other hand, it is unrealistic for elected politicians not to have certain ideological and value orientations and to make decisions based solely on ‘what is and is not good’, as some citizens reported (Hruška & Balík 2025a). The senators themselves rejected the notion that they are apolitical (Hruška & Balík 2025b).

Methods and data: Towards original conceptualisation and operationalisation

The regression analysis of Senate election results at the candidate level is employed. Data includes all Senate contests held from the first Senate election in 1996 to the 2022 election – fourteen regular Senate elections and fifteen by-elections. In total, 447 senatorial contests are analysed (see Table A1 in the

Appendix A), in which a total of 3,343 candidates stood for election, 447 of whom won a senatorial seat (see the Appendix C for the dataset).

The Senate as a chamber of political oversight

As explained in the theoretical section, an upper chamber operating under the horizontal separation of powers principle is not supposed to defend any specific interests. The rationale for the existence of such a chamber is merely the duplication of legislative power institutions. Therefore, the role of such a Senate is primarily to perform the same or a similar role to that of the lower chamber – mainly the approval of legislation and control of the executive power, as well as creation powers, although the specific powers (and their significance) of both chambers can differ, particularly in the matter of executive power scrutiny.

The central argument is that, within a multi-level political system, the Senate functions as an actor in the national political arena, comparable to the lower chamber (Chytilék 2005: 106–107). A rational voter, therefore, should prefer candidates representing the same or similar ideologies and views of what national politics should look like when voting for both chambers of the parliament. For instance, a right-leaning voter who favours a smaller state and lower taxation should vote for the party that promotes their preferred policy in both the lower chamber and the senate elections, since both chambers decide the level of taxation (despite the asymmetrical nature of Czech bicameralism).

This approach assumes that in a territory where a particular political party has strong support in the lower chamber elections, a senatorial candidate nominated by the same political party should succeed. For the purposes of this study, the results of the Chamber of Deputies elections were aggregated at the level of the Senate constituencies. A potential issue is that voters' preferences in a given area may change over time. Moreover, observed differences could stem from the distinct nature of the two types of elections – for instance, differences in electoral systems or voter turnout. Therefore, instead of a simple comparison of the results of the two types of elections in the same area, the method of stable spatial electoral support is employed (see Pink & Voda 2014). The area of electoral support is defined in this work as the Senate constituencies where the party achieved the highest percentage gains in the lower chamber election and cumulatively gained 25% of its vote. An area of *stable* electoral support is defined as the set of constituencies that belong to the electoral support area of a given party in elections held before and after the Senate election under analysis (see Appendix D).

This approach identifies the stronghold areas of each political party within a given period. Suppose the Senate is seen as an institution of the national political arena where political parties are dominant. In that case, the senatorial candidates nominated by the respective political party should succeed in these

strongholds. In the dataset, the variable *party's stronghold* indicates whether the candidate is running for a party that lists the given Senate constituency as part of its stable electoral support area.

The effect of the perception of the Senate as a national-level political institution is then measured in an additional way. According to the theory of horizontal separation of powers, the Senate should be an institution that counterbalances the power of the lower chamber. The Senate's role, perceived in this way, should then be reflected in the fact that governing parties are penalised, as predicted by the theories of second-order elections and the electoral cycle (Reif 1984; Reif & Schmitt 1980), which have been confirmed in the Czech context (Kovář 2016).

The confirmation of the penalising effect of the governing parties, nevertheless, does not necessarily mean that the Senate is primarily perceived as an actor in the national politics arena. Penalisation of governing parties is common in second-order elections across various levels of government. However, if the described perception of the Senate were to hold true, we should observe a penalising effect of the governing parties regardless of the electoral cycle. In other words, the opposition effect should not be the result of the mere influence of the electoral cycle (e.g. see Müller & Louwerse 2020) but of the balancing effect of the power of the lower chamber. The variable *opposition candidate*, therefore, measures the effect of an opposition candidate across electoral cycles, indicating whether a candidate was or was not the opposition party's candidate. In alternative models, several alternative ways are used to measure the effect of the opposition candidate (see Appendix E, p. 5).

The Senate as a chamber of territorial representation

Senate elections are highly personalised due to the majoritarian electoral system (Malcová 2012). In such a system, the specific characteristics of candidates are especially important (Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina 1987: 9). If the Senate is perceived as an institution that primarily represents territorial interests, candidates with characteristics suggesting that they are professionally familiar with the given region and its challenges, and therefore, would be able to advocate for the region in the Senate and promote its interests, are expected to be successful in the Senate elections.

Candidates with experience in local or regional politics may certainly be considered as such. Therefore, one of the variables considers whether a candidate held a position as a local or regional politician/prominent regional government official at the time of the elections – specifically, the position of mayor, regional governor or head of a county office.⁴ The variable does not include ordinary

4 The position of *head of a county office* ceased to exist along with the county offices. Only candidates between 1996 and 2002 could have held this position.

members of municipal or regional councils, as these positions are not highly visible to voters.⁵ To ensure that a candidate is familiar with the politics of the region and can thus be perceived as a potential representative of the constituency's interests, the variable includes a condition that the candidate is from a constituency they ran in (see Table A3 in Appendix A).

A modified version of the described variable focuses only on mayors of county capital towns/regional capital cities, governors and heads of county offices (the variable does not include mayors of ordinary, smaller municipalities and villages; see Table A3 in Appendix A). A politician who oversees an important territorial institution (either the county capital town or the region itself) and represents a significant part of the constituency is expected to be an ideal candidate for the post of senator if the position is perceived as representative of the constituency. In fact, in many bicameral systems, it is the representatives of regional or, in the case of federations, state institutions who are delegated to the upper chamber (for instance, the German Bundesrat is established in a similar manner).

From the perspective of the theory of descriptive representation, we can also assume that a senator elected to advocate for the interests of a senate constituency should come from that constituency. As Gimpel, Karnes, McTague and Pearson-Merkowitz (2008) argue, voters may automatically assume that candidates from their locality will serve local interests, even though they do not have specific powers to represent a particular geographic area. Therefore, another measured independent variable is the *candidate's permanent residence*, which is also indicated on the ballot (see Table A4 in Appendix A).

A *candidate of a regional party* is another type of candidate expected to be perceived as a good representative of regional interests (see Table A4 in Appendix A). Regional parties are not strong entities in Czech politics, but they can achieve limited success in regional elections. Alternatively, they cooperate with the main political parties (Folvarčný, Hruška & Pink 2025), as is also the case in Senate elections. Therefore, all nominating parties of all Senate candidates were considered first to identify regional parties. For that, support was provided by previous work that had already focused on the identification of Czech regional parties (Chlupáč 2015). However, contrary to Chlupáč's approach, parties representing Moravianism in Czech politics were also considered regional parties. In ambiguous cases, the emphasis was on the programmatic grounding of a given party.

5 For practical reasons, it is not possible to determine whether a candidate previously held such a role or whether a candidate held the position but did not report it on the ballot. Nevertheless, the fact that this information is typically included on the ballot (candidates frequently list such positions as part of their occupational background) increases the probability that voters are aware of it at the time of the election. Moreover, a candidate holding the office of a local or regional politician (or a prominent regional government official) at the time of the election further increases the probability that the candidate is perceived as having relevant experience in addressing the current issues facing the constituency, rather than merely past concerns.

The Senate as a Chamber of Wisdom and independent oversight

The Senate, functioning as the Chamber of Wisdom, is expected to perform a controlling role. However, this control should not be influenced by political parties and should be exercised by senators with a specific set of characteristics. As the Senate is supposed to perform independent control in this role, independent candidates are expected to be preferred. Therefore, the two following independent variables are measured. The first one considers *candidates' party membership* – i.e. whether a candidate is a member of a political party. Nevertheless, in the Senate elections, many candidates, although non-partisan, still represent a particular party that nominated them. Therefore, to assess the Senate's independent nature, the analytical model also includes an alternative variable indicating whether a candidate ran as an independent without a *party nomination*.

As the often-used label suggests, the wisdom of senators is also part of this particular perception of the Senate. This characteristic, however, is difficult to measure. The only information, albeit imperfect, available in this regard is that of the candidates' education, specifically the degrees they hold. The concern is that bachelor's and master's degrees have become quite common in Czech society over time. On the other hand, doctoral and higher degrees may be considered prestigious degrees demonstrating candidates' above-average cognitive ability. The impact of education and wisdom through degree attainment is measured in this paper in two alternative ways, with emphasis on higher academic degrees. The first variable is ordinal, where more weight is given to higher degrees starting with the doctoral degree (including both a so-called small doctorate and a PhD) (1), continuing with the associate professor ('docent') title (2) and the professor title (3). In theory, the higher the academic degree a candidate holds, the wiser and more educated they should be perceived by voters. The alternative variable is a binary indicator of whether the candidate holds the *title of professor*. This (the highest) academic title is highly prestigious and reserved for the most eminent experts in their fields.

As Hruška and Balík (2025a) note, the perception of the Senate as the Chamber of Wisdom has a clear elitist character. Not only wise candidates but also successful candidates who have accomplished something in their lives and thus enjoy a certain prestige are expected to be perceived as suitable senators. At the same time, McDermott (2005) and later others (e.g. Campbell & Cowley 2014) demonstrated that occupation may play an important role as a shortcut in low-information decision-making, as voters can infer the candidate's ability and qualifications to hold political office from it. According to Atkeson and Hamel (2020), the relationship between a candidate's profession and the specific office they are running for is important. In this study, two variables derived from candidates' occupational backgrounds are used to capture prestige indicators.

The first binary variable focuses on generally *prestigious occupations*. Prestigious occupations are defined as those considered prestigious by citizens themselves (CVVM 2019). Czech citizens consistently identify (by a clear margin from the others) the following five occupations as the most prestigious: doctor, nurse, university teacher, elementary school teacher and researcher/scientist.⁶

A possible concern is that occupational prestige affects electoral success regardless of how the Senate is perceived. Therefore, a candidate's occupation is approached in an alternative way that arguably better fits the theoretical role of the Senate as a Chamber of Wisdom. Interviews conducted by Hruška and Balík (2025a) suggest that, within such a conception of the Senate, it should be composed of strong personalities with prior experience in holding important positions. Such positions reflect the candidate's (especially professional) experience, wisdom and personal accomplishment. Various leadership roles – such as director positions – can be seen as roles that require wisdom, responsibility and other relevant abilities. At the same time, these should be leadership positions in institutions known to the electorate and, ideally, demonstrate that the candidate has served the public interest. Accordingly, this binary variable, based on the candidates' occupations, indicates whether a candidate was listed as a director or another leadership role at a public, well-known institution (including the institution's name, except for schools). These primarily include directors of hospitals, schools, theatres, regional fire departments, national parks, zoos, charities, trade unions, university rectors, deans of faculties, heads of professional organisations and institutes, or directors of national government bodies.

The candidates' experience is also reflected in their age. At the same time, however, age does not automatically imply professional experience. In addition, the possibility of running for the Senate only from age 40 ensures that all candidates have some experience. In this respect, a positive effect of age on candidates' electoral success is not expected.⁷

Mandate defence and gender are included as control variables. Incumbents who defend their mandate have the advantage of being better known and more visible. The preference for defending candidates is also confirmed by existing research (e.g. Eggers & Spirling 2017; Uppal 2010), including in the Czech context (but in the PR electoral system) (Voda 2014).

6 In this study, the prestigious occupations also include high school teacher (which is not part of the CVVM surveys) and occupations that imply simultaneous performance one of the mentioned prestigious occupations (e.g. school principal, who must also be a teacher, or dean of faculty, who must also be a university teacher or researcher).

7 This was confirmed by the absence of a linear relationship between age and the two dependent variables as well as the absence of any meaningful correlation. Therefore, age is not included in the models.

Dependent variable(s)

For the dependent variable – the success of a candidate in the Senate election – several alternative ways of measuring this concept exist, each with certain limitations. The first option is to measure electoral victory, i.e. winning the mandate. However, this approach has a major drawback, as the second round operates under a different logic than the first and is typically influenced by a range of additional confounding factors – for instance, the closeness of the election, the similarity or dissimilarity of the two advancing candidates, and their ideological distinctiveness. Turnout also declines significantly, and therefore, the composition of the voters differs in the second round.

For many candidates, simply advancing to the second round can already be regarded as a significant achievement. Furthermore, given the limitations of the approach outlined above, regression models that assess the impact of independent variables on the likelihood of reaching the second round can capture a larger share of the variation in the dependent variable, providing a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing candidate success. For these reasons, both alternative approaches to measuring dependent variables are employed, and two sets of logistic regression models are calculated, each offering slightly different explanatory value. At the same time, comparing the effects of the independent variables across the two models with different dependent variables can signal the robustness (or sensitivity) of those effects to intervening factors that come into play between the first and second rounds.⁸

Results

General effect of independent variables

Influence of national-level politics and political parties

The regression model (see Table 1) suggests a considerable importance of political partisanship in Senate elections. Analysis of all Senate elections shows that if a candidate ran in a constituency that their supporting party could claim as a *stronghold*, their chances of advancing to the second round increased fourfold. Based solely on this result, we cannot assert that voters clearly perceive the Senate as an institution operating within the national political arena. However, the evidence does indicate that in the constituencies where such an effect would be most expected – party strongholds – political parties exert a strong influence

⁸ Measuring a senator's success through percentage gains is not reasonable since such results strongly depend on the number of candidates running in each electoral contest. This number varies widely not only across time but also across constituencies.

on voters' perceptions of the Senate. Table 2 shows that this predictor also had a substantial effect on the candidate's chance of winning the seat.

The relative decline in the effect of this independent variable between advancing to the second round and being elected can be explained by the factors already discussed: The second round of Senate elections occurs in a different context, where additional variables come into play. Nevertheless, the positive effect remains substantial, and candidates representing political parties in their parties' strongholds continue to enjoy a significant advantage.

The influence of political parties in Senate elections is further confirmed by the positive effect observed for *candidates representing opposition parties*. Such a candidate was 1.5 times more likely to advance to the second round and 1.7 times more likely to win a seat than other candidates. While this effect is not as large as the *party stronghold* effect, it fluctuates widely across different years (see section 4.2). Moreover, it seems immune to factors that come into play between the first and second rounds, as it better explains a candidate's victory than just their advancement to the second round.

The opposition candidate effect holds regardless of the election cycle. The alternative variable, which measured the effect of an opposition candidate only in midterm elections (see Tables A7 and A8 in Appendix A), also had a positive effect on the candidate's chance of advancing to the second round. The same applies to the variable's effect on the candidate's chance of winning the seat. Another alternative variable, most accurately capturing the theory of the electoral cycle, predicted that government candidates would be preferred during the honeymoon period, as government support does not generally decline during this time but often even increases. In the alternative model (see Tables A9 and A10 in Appendix A), this variable has an effect similar to that of the *opposition candidate*. The results described distinguish Senate elections from other second-order elections and suggest that the Senate may not be a typical second-order institution, as Chytilek (2005) argued. In other words, the general effect of an *opposition candidate*, regardless of the election cycle, confirms the assumption that the Senate is, to a considerable extent, seen as a counterbalancing institution to the lower chamber and, thus, an actor of national-level politics.

This claim is additionally confirmed by the variable monitoring whether a candidate (either partisan or non-partisan) was *nominated by one of the main political parties* of the Czech party system (see Tables A17 and A18 in Appendix A). If a candidate was nominated by such a party, their chances of advancing to the second round of the election increased almost seven times compared to other candidates, and their chances of winning the election increased 3.5 times.

Table 1: Effect of independent variables on candidates' chances to advance to the second round

| Variables in the Equation ⁹ | B | S.E. | Wald | Sig. | Exp(B) | 95% C.I. for EXP(B) Lower/Upper | |
|--|--------|------|---------|-------|--------|------------------------------------|--------|
| Party's stronghold | 1.406 | .130 | 117.662 | <.001 | 4.078 | 3.163 | 5.257 |
| Opposition party candidate | .405 | .097 | 17.384 | <.001 | 1.500 | 1.240 | 1.814 |
| Mayor/governor in constituency | 1.476 | .128 | 132.633 | <.001 | 4.374 | 3.403 | 5.623 |
| Residency in constituency | .130 | .120 | 1.179 | .278 | 1.139 | .900 | 1.441 |
| Regional party | -.599 | .230 | 6.801 | .009 | .549 | .350 | .862 |
| Non-partisan | -.422 | .098 | 18.698 | <.001 | .656 | .541 | .794 |
| Degree | .238 | .089 | 7.138 | .008 | 1.269 | 1.065 | 1.511 |
| Degree professor | -.363 | .322 | 1.271 | .260 | .695 | .370 | 1.308 |
| Prestigious occupation | .289 | .122 | 5.605 | .018 | 1.335 | 1.051 | 1.695 |
| Occupation director | 1.016 | .169 | 36.251 | <.001 | 2.763 | 1.985 | 3.847 |
| Mandate defence | 2.365 | .178 | 177.015 | <.001 | 10.640 | 7.510 | 15.074 |
| Gender | -.042 | .119 | .128 | .720 | .958 | .760 | 1.209 |
| Constant | -1.832 | .162 | 128.272 | <.001 | .160 | | |

Source: Author

Regional dimension

Another set of independent variables examines whether voters perceive the Senate as a regional chamber and, therefore, whether they vote for candidates who are well-suited to advocate for the constituency's interests. The first such predictor tested the effect of a *mayor/governor/head of a county office's position*. Such candidates were more than four times as likely as other candidates to advance to the second round. This effect does not weaken in the second round, as the chance of a *mayor/governor/head of a county office* to win a seat is then 4.5 times higher. The strong positive effect and the stability of the effect across the two rounds of elections signal voters' preference for candidates with experience in local or regional politics within a given constituency, and thus a certain regional character of the Senate in public perception.

⁹ For binary variables, the reference category (0) is always 'No' (the candidate does not possess the given attribute), while 'Yes' (the candidate possesses the given attribute) is coded as 1. For instance, for *Mandate defence*, the reference category (0) means the candidate does not defend the mandate. Thus, the table always shows the effect if a candidate possesses the attribute in question compared to a candidate who does not possess the attribute. For the variable *Gender*, the reference category (0) is female. The same approach was applied in all other models (including models in Appendix A).

An ideal candidate to represent the interests of a constituency in the Senate is arguably a *mayor of a county capital town or a regional capital city, a governor or a head of a county*. Because of their position, these prominent local or regional politicians/government officials already represent a large share of (or even the entire) constituency. The effect of this variable has indeed proved (in an alternative model, see Table A11 and A12 in Appendix A) to be positive and very strong – such candidates were 7.4 times more likely to advance to the second round and 4.4 times more likely to win the seat. Such a strong effect suggests that the potential ability of senators to represent their constituency’s interests is important to voters. This again implies that many voters may perceive the Senate as a kind of regional upper chamber.

The counterargument may be that these candidates are not preferred because of their greater ability to represent their constituency in the upper chamber, but simply because they are visible and well-known in the given area. That was also mentioned, to some extent, during several interviews with members of the general public (Hruška & Balík 2025a). On the other hand, local and regional politicians running for the Senate often refer to their experience in local/regional politics in their campaign and position themselves in the role of potential ombudsman of the constituency

Nevertheless, as a robustness check, an alternative variable was tested in another model to confirm the relevance of the regional dimension effects. The alternative variable indicates whether a candidate is a *mayor of a smaller municipality*. It thus excludes mayors of counties or regional capital cities, governors and heads of county offices – compared to these candidates, candidates with the position of mayor of a smaller municipality cannot base their success on mere familiarity, visibility and reach. The alternative model (see Tables A13 and A14 in Appendix A) showed that if a candidate was a mayor of a smaller municipality at the time of the election, their chance of advancing to the second round was 2.7 times higher, and their chance to win a seat was then even 3.4 times greater compared to the other candidates. Although the effect has weakened, it remains significant and strong, which suggests that even local politicians who could not benefit from their familiarity as regional leaders were clearly advantaged by voters in the Senate elections. A plausible explanation is that they were seen as suitable representatives of the constituency due to their experience in local politics. This line of reasoning was used in the interviews with senators (Hruška & Balík 2025b), who were encouraged by their peers to run in the Senate election because of their extensive experience in local politics and knowledge of the region, even though they were mayors of smaller municipalities. After being elected, they began performing the ombudsman role for the constituency.

The variable indicating whether the candidate resides in the constituency they are running in has almost no effect on their chances of advancing to the second round or winning the seat. This result is probably because the vast majority of

candidates (80.4%) resided in the constituency in which they ran. On the other hand, candidates who do not reside in the constituency occasionally succeed.

The last measured variable related to regional representation is *regional party support*. However, it does not improve a candidate’s chances of advancing to the second round or of winning the election. On the contrary, the effect is negative. It does not automatically imply that voters perceive regional party support for a Senate candidate as aggravating and thereby signal their opposition to the perception of the Senate as a regional chamber. A more plausible explanation is that regional parties are not significant actors in Czech politics, not even at the regional level (see Folvarčný, Hruška & Pink 2025).

Table 2: Effect of independent variables on candidates’ chances to win the seat

| Variables in the Equation ¹⁰ | B | S.E. | Wald | Sig. | Exp(B) | 95% C.I. for EXP(B) Lower/Upper | |
|---|--------|------|---------|-------|--------|------------------------------------|-------|
| Party’s stronghold | 1.173 | .141 | 69.416 | <.001 | 3.231 | 2.452 | 4.257 |
| Opposition party candidate | .547 | .119 | 21.072 | <.001 | 1.728 | 1.368 | 2.183 |
| Mayor/governor in constituency | 1.499 | .146 | 105.544 | <.001 | 4.478 | 3.364 | 5.960 |
| Residency in constituency | -.091 | .151 | .365 | .546 | .913 | .679 | 1.227 |
| Regional party | .106 | .247 | .182 | .670 | 1.111 | .684 | 1.805 |
| Non-partisan | -.118 | .123 | .926 | .336 | .888 | .698 | 1.130 |
| Degree | .217 | .110 | 3.862 | .049 | 1.242 | 1.001 | 1.541 |
| Degree professor | -.381 | .408 | .871 | .351 | .684 | .307 | 1.520 |
| Prestigious occupation | .177 | .157 | 1.276 | .259 | 1.194 | .878 | 1.625 |
| Occupation director | 1.073 | .196 | 29.934 | <.001 | 2.924 | 1.991 | 4.294 |
| Mandate defence | 1.788 | .170 | 110.745 | <.001 | 5.980 | 4.286 | 8.343 |
| Gender | -.041 | .150 | .073 | .786 | .960 | .716 | 1.288 |
| Constant | -2.691 | .206 | 171.083 | <.001 | .068 | | |

Source: Author

The Chamber of Wisdom

Within the Chamber of Wisdom perception, we expect that *non-partisan* or *fully independent candidates* would be preferred. However, the election results do not confirm this. On the contrary, as Tables 1 and 2 show, a *non-partisan candidate* is less likely to succeed in Senate elections. A nonpartisan candidate had

¹⁰ Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.175$; Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.095$ (model’s sig. < 0.001).

only a 65% chance of advancing to the second round compared to a partisan candidate. The candidate's chance of winning a seat was less affected. *Independent candidates* not nominated by a political party had an even lower chance of succeeding in the election, according to both models (see Tables A15 and A16 in Appendix A). The size and direction of the effects thus do not suggest that the apolitical nature of the candidates had a general positive effect on their electoral success.

However, the observed effects of both variables may be influenced by other factors. The negative effect of *independent candidates* can, at least partly, be explained by the relative ease of meeting the candidacy threshold – an independent candidate only needs a petition signed by at least 1,000 eligible voters in the constituency. As a result, many constituencies see independent candidates repeatedly running despite having little realistic chance of success. These candidates may not aim to win, but rather to raise their own profile. The presence of such candidates can, in turn, reduce the apparent effect of serious independent candidates who do have a realistic prospect of electoral success, although the distinction between the two types of independent candidates is not always clear.

An alternative model, which examined a modified variable capturing only *non-partisan candidates nominated by political parties*, revealed no significant effect. This could be due, at least in part, to the fact that many smaller parties also nominate non-partisan candidates, while these parties are often marginal and their candidates have little to no chance of success. Thus, to investigate further, the effect of non-partisan candidates was tested in an additional model using data that included only *candidates – both partisan and non-partisan – nominated by one of the main political parties* of the Czech party system (see Tables A19 and A20 in Appendix A). Nevertheless, no substantial effect was found for such candidates either. Overall, these findings suggest that voters did not generally favour non-partisan candidates in Senate elections.

Two additional measured variables consider the candidates' degrees, referring to the education and potential wisdom of their holders, and simultaneously to the Senate's general elitist character. The ordinal variable measuring the effect of *doctoral and higher degrees* has a positive effect on a candidate's electoral success. As the degree increases by one category, the chance of a candidate advancing to the second round of the election increases almost 1.3 times. This variable had an almost equally large effect on the candidate's chance of winning the seat. Thus, the chances of a candidate with a professor's degree advancing to the second round or winning the seat increased 1.8 times compared to a candidate with less than a doctoral degree (or no degree). However, it cannot be ruled out that this effect is not solely related to the Senate elections, a possibility that was, in fact, confirmed by Voda (2014).

An alternative variable that measured only the effect of the *degree of professor* does not have a positive effect on candidate success. On the contrary,

candidates who were not professors were more likely to advance to the second round and to be elected. An explanation for this discrepancy may be that there are relatively few candidates with a professor's degree (94), and that other (lower) degrees, which are more represented in the data – especially doctoral degrees (879) – substantially influence the effect of the ordinal variable elaborated above.

The perceived elite character of the upper chamber and its members was also examined through a variable that monitors the prestige of candidates' occupations. Candidates practising a *prestigious occupation* had higher chances of succeeding. If candidates listed a prestigious occupation on their candidate list, their chances of advancing to the second round of the election increased 1.3 times. The positive effect on winning the election was smaller. Nevertheless, as with candidate education, preferences for candidates with prestigious occupations may not be related to specific perceptions of the Senate's role. Such candidates may also be preferred in other elections (see Voda 2014).

A more specific variable, closely related to the perception of the chamber as composed of wise, experienced and accomplished individuals, is whether a candidate holds *the position of director of a public institution or a similar leadership role* (see section 3.3). Such candidates were 2.8 times more likely to advance to the second round, while the chance of winning the election was three times higher. The substantial positive effect of this variable across multiple models provides strong evidence about the types of candidates voters tend to favour in Senate elections. Professional experience, personal abilities and prior public exposure appear to play a key role in shaping perceptions of a suitable Senate candidate, a pattern that aligns with senators' accounts (see Hruška & Balík 2025b). Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether this effect reflects voters' specific perceptions of senators and the Senate, or the broader personalisation of elections inherent in the given electoral system.

Evolution of effects in time

Given the Senate's ambiguous and somewhat compromised position, perceptions of its role may have shifted over time. Citizens' views of political institutions develop gradually, shaped not only by the institution's performance across different contexts but also by factors such as its self-presentation and that of its members. These perceptions are further influenced by general political knowledge as well as specific knowledge of the Senate, both of which can change over time at the individual and societal levels. Accordingly, this section examines the effects of each variable over time, offering a more nuanced understanding of how the Senate is perceived.

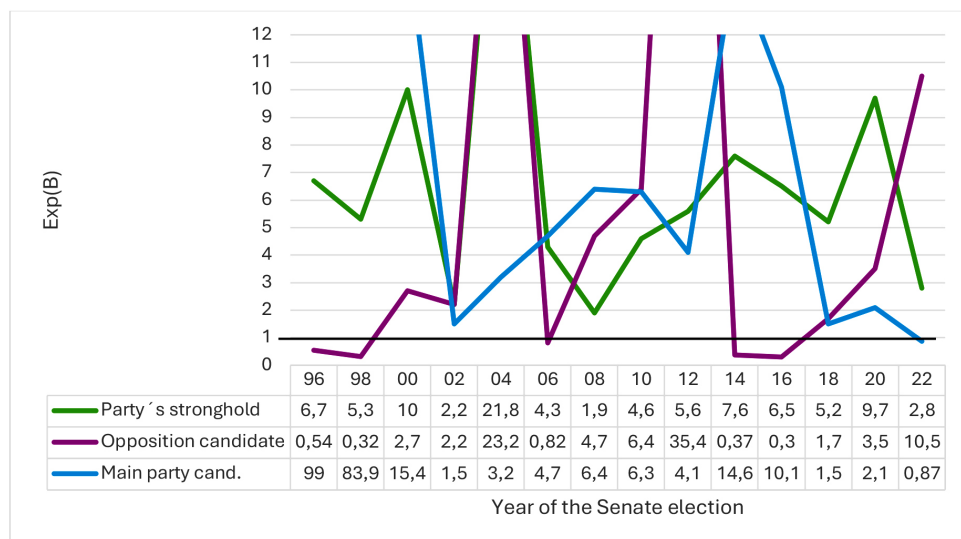
With that aim, the effects of the independent variables were estimated for each regular Senate election (the results of the individual regression models are

presented in Appendix A). The evolution of the effects' sizes is then presented in time plots (Figures 2–7).¹¹

Influence of national-level politics and political parties

Neither Figure 2 nor 3 show that the effect sizes of the variables signalling the influence of national-level politics on Senate elections form a clear long-term trend. This is especially true for the effects of the *party's stronghold* and *opposition candidate* variables on both types of observed dependent variables. The effects of the variables are unstable in both graphs; instead, the effect sizes fluctuated considerably over time. Nevertheless, they still indicate a general large effect of political parties in Senate elections.

Figure 2: Changes of independent variables' effects on a candidates' chances to advance to the second round over time – influence of national-level politics



Source: Author

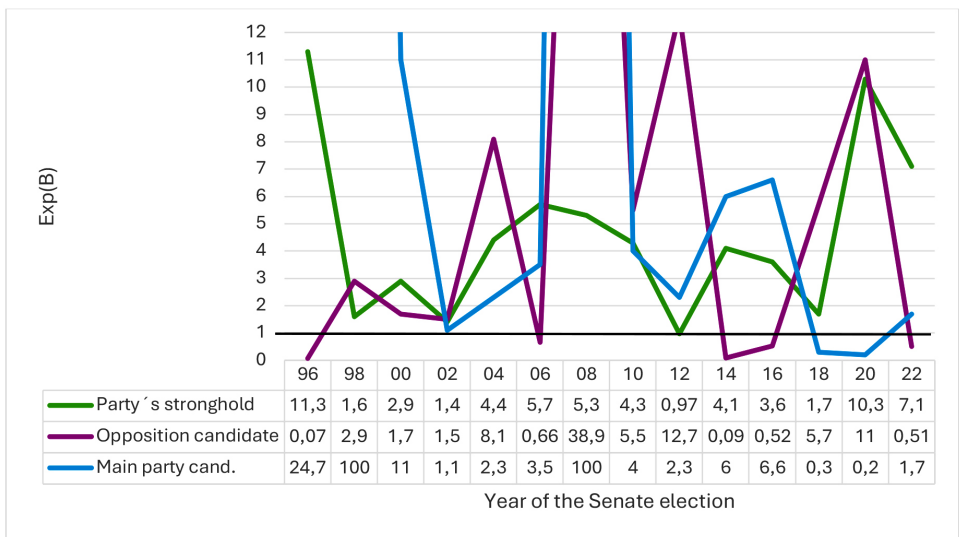
The overall effect of the variables discussed in the previous section can be considered as an average, from which the effects often deviate significantly in individual elections. In particular, the effect of an *opposition candidate* seems to be more important than the original regression model indicated. In the extreme case of the 2012 election, an opposition candidate was even 35 times

¹¹ A limitation of this procedure is the smaller number of cases in each model. This makes the data more sensitive to the occurrence of seemingly strong effects. In the case of some binary variables (notably mayor of a county capital or governor, regional party, degree professor, occupation director) that took only one of two values, this led to either zero or, conversely, extreme values of the observed effect. Therefore, the effect size for these variables should be interpreted with caution and viewed more as a general direction of an effect.

more likely to advance to the second round compared to the candidates of the governing (and other) parties. This effect reflects the great success of the ČSSD, which was then in opposition and managed to get its candidates into the second round in 23 out of 27 constituencies. This dominance of the opposition was certainly fostered by the problems of the then centre-right government, which was heading from crisis to crisis at that time.

The same variable had a similarly extreme effect in the 2008 election, when an opposition candidate was 39 times more likely to be elected than the other candidates. This effect occurred during the Senate election, often labelled the so-called ‘orange tsunami’ due to the overwhelming dominance of the social democrats (ČSSD). On the other hand, in five elections (1996, 1998, 2006, 2014, 2016), the effect of an opposition candidate on the candidate’s chance to advance to the second round was negative,¹² and in four elections (1996, 2006, 2014, 2016), there was a negative effect on the candidate’s chance to win the election. However, the existing effect (in both directions) still confirms the considerable influence of political parties on Senate elections. The elections in which political parties played the smallest role in voters’ decision-making were those in 2002 (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 3: Changes of independent variables’ effects on candidates’ chances to win the seat over time – influence of national-level politics



Source: Author

¹² However, for instance, during the 2006 Senate election, when ODS was formally in government, the cabinet had been appointed only shortly beforehand, and the outcome may therefore still partly reflect reactions to the preceding ČSSD-led government.

An interesting case regarding the effect of an opposition candidate is the 2022 election. In this election, we observe a big difference between the effect of an opposition candidate on advancing to the second round and on winning the election. Opposition candidates were 10.5 times more likely to advance to the second round than other candidates. However, at the same time, they had only a 50% chance of winning the seat compared to candidates of governmental (and other non-parliamentary) parties. This seeming paradox is a good illustration of the Senate elections (and the Czech party system in general) of recent years. The dominant ANO party is frequently able to advance its candidates to the second round, owing to consistently high levels of support relative to other parties. However, due to the considerable controversy surrounding the party and its leader, Andrej Babiš, most voters tend to support the opposing candidate in the second round, effectively voting against ANO candidates. This provides a clear illustration of the classic dynamics of a two-round majority voting system: Radical or otherwise controversial parties and candidates are systematically disadvantaged under this system.

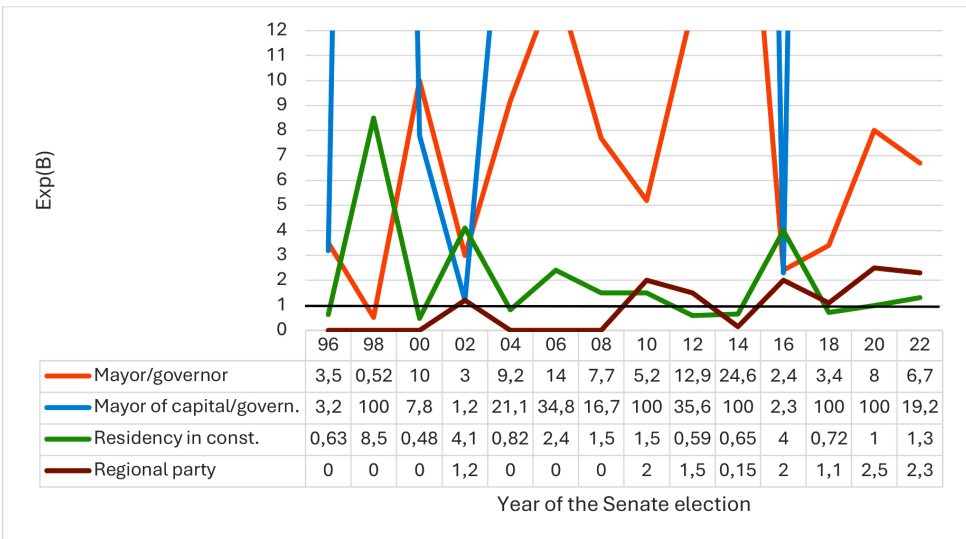
At least a tentative trend can be observed for the variable *candidate of the main political parties*. Figures 2 and 3 show that the main political parties exerted the greatest influence in the first two Senate elections. To illustrate, in 1996, out of 210 candidates not from the main political parties, only two made it to the second round! Then, in 1998, all 27 Senate seats were won by candidates of the main political parties. By contrast, in 2002, candidates representing major parties experienced a substantially smaller boost in their chances of success. This pattern aligns with the effects observed for the variables described earlier. One possible explanation is voter dissatisfaction with politics, particularly with the main political parties, following the Opposition Agreement period. However, if this were the case, we would expect the effect to have already been apparent in 2000, which it was not. In the subsequent years, the influence of the main political parties increased once again, coinciding with the blue and later orange tsunamis. From 2018 onwards, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, the electoral prospects of candidates from the main political parties have shown a relative decline, with the effect even turning negative in some instances. These results correspond with what some senators reported in the interviews conducted by Hruška and Balík (2025b), namely that voters in recent years have come to perceive the Senate less as a partisan chamber and more as a body of strong, independent personalities.

In general, this section suggests that political parties and national-level politics exert a strong influence on voter decision-making in Senate elections. However, the magnitude – and, in the case of opposition candidates, the direction – of this effect appears to depend on the broader political context and likely on additional factors beyond those examined in this study. At the same time, there are indications that voters' perceptions may be shifting in recent years, as the influence of political parties in Senate elections appears to be weakening.

Regional dimension

Figures 4 and 5 show no clear trend over time for the variables expected to signal regional perceptions of the Senate. The only exception may be the regional party effect. Candidates running with the support of a regional party had, over time, a progressively increasing chance of success in elections. While in the first half of the Senate's existence, the regional party effect was clearly negative, since 2010, we have observed an increasingly positive effect of this variable. This applies to the effect on advancing to the second round and on winning the seat. However, this trend is far from linear – we still observe declines after 2010 (see Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4: Changes of independent variables' effects on candidates' chances to advance to the second round over time – regional dimension



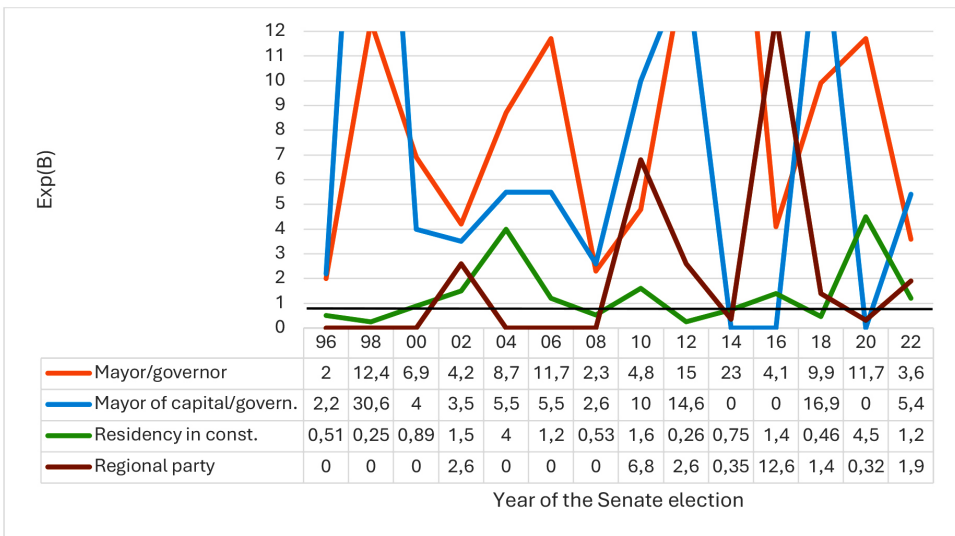
Source: Author

One factor that may partly explain this trend is the relatively late establishment of regions in 2000 and the consequent delay in the development of regional identities, which are crucial for the emergence and influence of regional parties (Folvarčný, Hruška & Pink 2025). Another explanation may lie in a strategic shift by regional parties. They appear to be more successful not only in Senate elections, but also when cooperating with one or more main political parties by nominating or supporting a single joint candidate. Overall, there seems to be a growing tendency toward cooperation among different actors in Senate elections, sometimes involving regional parties.

It is unclear whether the increasing electoral success of candidates supported by regional parties reflects a change in the perception of the Senate. This could be corroborated by trends in the effects of other variables, but none are observed. Other variables associated with the regional dimension of the Senate fluctuate considerably over time. This also applies to holding the position of mayor, governor or head of a county office, which has at least always increased candidates' chances of success in Senate elections (except in 1998).

To conclude this subsection, candidates possessing characteristics likely to be perceived by voters as suitable representatives of their constituency generally enjoyed a considerably higher chance of success in Senate elections. However, the magnitude of this positive effect varied substantially from election to election, and, apart from the effect of regional party support, no clear trend is visible.

Figure 5: Changes of independent variables' effects on candidates' chances to win the seat over time – regional dimension



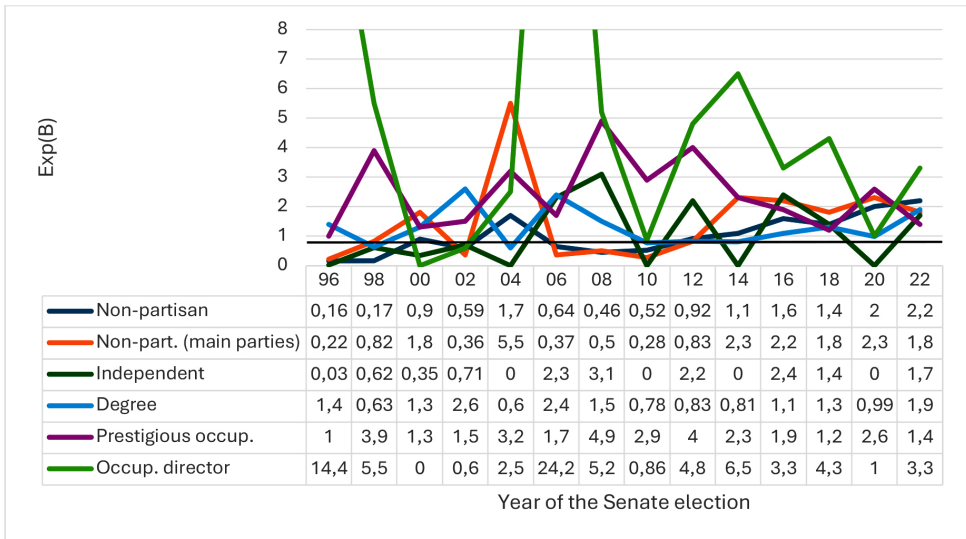
Source: Author

The Chamber of Wisdom

As shown above, a non-partisan candidate generally did not have a higher chance of succeeding in the Senate elections. On the contrary, the overall effect of this variable was negative. However, Figures 6 and 7, which depict the evolution of the effects over time, show that this variable's effect on a candidate's success in the election has been changing. The negative effect is particularly evident in the early years of the Senate. This applies to both advancing to the second round of the election and winning the election. In the subsequent period, the effect of

being a non-partisan candidate was neither substantially positive nor negative. However, from 2016 onwards (for the effect on a candidate's advancement to the second round), we observe a substantive increase in the effect, which becomes positive. In the 2022 election, the non-partisan candidate was then 2.2 times more likely to advance to the second round compared to other candidates.

Figure 6: Changes of independent variables' effects on candidates' chances to advance to the second round over time – the Chamber of Wisdom



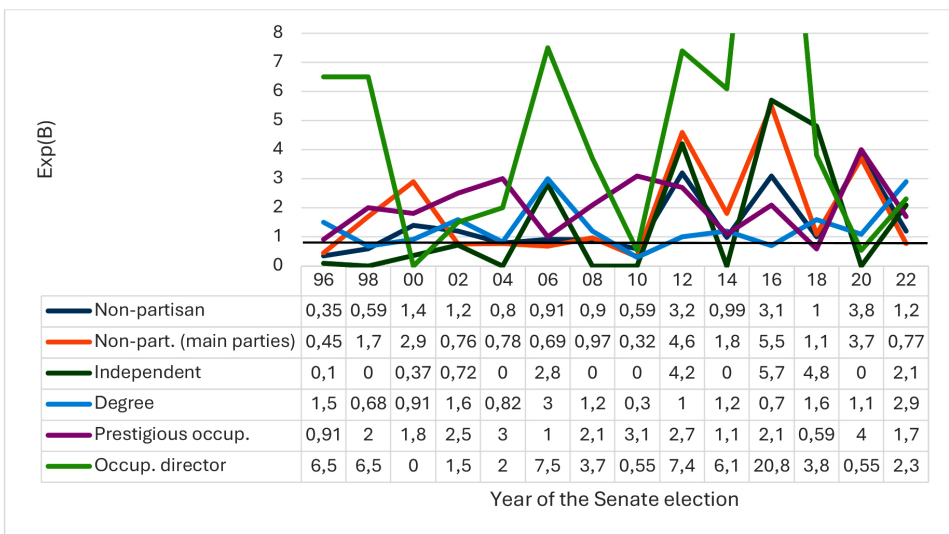
Source: Author

The described trend becomes even more apparent when considering the adjusted variable measuring the effect of *non-partisan candidates nominated by one of the main political parties*. As noted earlier, this variable was introduced to filter out non-partisan candidates with only negligible chances of success. Moreover, as demonstrated in the preceding section, political parties play an important role in Senate elections, as reflected in this adjusted variable. While the overall effect of non-partisan candidates nominated by major political parties appeared neutral in the previous analysis, figures illustrating the development of these effects over time provide a clearer picture of what the non-partisan candidate variable represents. That is, from roughly 2012 to 2014, we observe a substantial increase in the effect that became positive in recent years (the exception being a large and isolated positive increase in the effect on advancing to the second round as early as 2004).

The positive increase in the effect of a *non-partisan candidate* corresponds to the decrease in the effect of a *candidate nominated by the main political party*, described in the first part of this section. It suggests a shift in the Senate's per-

ception towards an institution less dependent on political partisanship. On the other hand, the increasing chance of a non-partisan candidate succeeding in Senate elections may also be associated with the decline in political party membership (Hájek 2019). Even major parties are increasingly forced to cooperate in Senate elections with non-partisan candidates who run with their support. Hruška and Balík (2025b) described the nomination of candidates to the Senate by political parties as a form of headhunting, in which parties often approach candidates with potential to succeed in the election. In effect, however, it still contributes to shaping the Senate into an institution that is relatively less dependent on political parties.

Figure 7: Changes of independent variables' effects on candidates' chances to win the seat over time – The Chamber of Wisdom



Source: Author

For the other variables, the trend over time is not as apparent. On the contrary, we observe a seemingly random fluctuation. This is especially true for the variables connected to the *candidate's occupation* and *degree*.

Conclusion and discussion

This article examines which candidate characteristics increased their likelihood of success in Czech Senate elections, thereby revealing how voters perceive the Senate and its role within the political system. The analysis identified substantive effects for variables corresponding to all three distinct perceptions of the Senate's role.

First, the influence of political partisanship points to the Senate's role within the horizontal separation of legislative power, where it is seen as a component of the national political arena and an instrument of political oversight. Second, variables linked to the territorial background of candidates and their experience in regional politics reflect a regional dimension of the Senate's role, suggesting that voters may partly view the Senate as a forum for articulating local or constituency interests, despite its limited formal powers in this regard (see Hruška & Čapek 2026). Third, the recurring advantage of elite (and in recent years independent) candidates resonates with the perception of the Senate as a Chamber of Wisdom, a body more detached from party politics and grounded in personal reputation and competence – even though the evidence in this case remains somewhat tentative. These findings are thus in line with previous qualitative work highlighting the multiplicity of meanings attached to the Czech Senate (Hruška & Balík 2025a, Hruška & Balík 2025b).

Moreover, some evolving patterns of electoral behaviour suggest that understandings of the institution may also shift, even without constitutional reform – a conclusion echoed by senators' reflections (see Pithart 2016). The analysed data primarily indicate that the Senate's independent character seems to have strengthened over time. The findings thus provide additional evidence that the way institutions are perceived and enacted in practice may differ from their formal constitutional design. This nuance aligns with the perspective of discursive institutionalism, which understands institutions not merely as external structures constraining actors, but as arenas in which meanings and roles are continuously interpreted and reproduced through discourse (Schmidt 2008; 2010). Such dynamics are particularly salient given the Senate's limited public visibility. Previous research shows that many citizens are only vaguely aware of its powers and functions (Hruška 2023), which likely amplifies the symbolic and interpretive aspects of representation over formal-legal ones. Moreover, this may subsequently affect the institution's perceived legitimacy (Hruška 2026).

By employing a large original dataset – linking lower-chamber electoral outcomes to the level of Senate constituencies – this study also provides a novel empirical contribution to the broader discussion about electoral behaviour in second-order or less salient elections. Senate contests, like other upper-chamber elections across Europe, exhibit unique logics of voter motivation and institutional perception. Understanding these logics is essential not only for interpreting the Czech case but also for theorising how citizens engage with institutions designed to act as checks within democratic systems – a question that remains increasingly pertinent in the current era of democratic erosion (see Just & Charvát 2022; Hruška & Hanley 2026).

Several limitations must nonetheless be acknowledged. The analysis does not directly measure citizens' perceptions of the Senate, but rather infers them from voting outcomes. This indirect approach risks conflating instrumental motiva-

tions with genuine evaluations of institutional roles (for instance, voting for a well-known regional politician may stem from name recognition or personal popularity). Second, the relatively low voter turnout in Senate elections means that voting behaviour reflects only a limited share of the public's perceptions. Furthermore, the characteristics most relevant to the Chamber of Wisdom perception – such as wisdom or independence of judgment – are difficult to capture using the available data. A further limitation concerns the presence of multi-party nominations and ad hoc pre-electoral alliances, which complicate the attribution of party-level electoral support to individual Senate candidates. Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into the types of candidates preferred by voters and, by extension, into the perceived role of the upper chamber in Czech politics. Combined with qualitative evidence from prior research (Hruška & Balík 2025a), the results help better understand how voters navigate the Senate's triple nature.

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Supplementary files

Appendices can be accessed here:

Appendix A: Descriptive statistics and alternative models, DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.31812196

Appendix B: Influence of the different types of constituencies, DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.31812292

Appendix C: Candidates in the Czech Senate elections and their characteristics, DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.30540587

Appendix D: Areas of electoral support of Czech political parties at the level of the Senate constituencies, DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.30540683

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