

Notions of Local Democracy among Czech Mayors¹

Daniel Čermák,² Renáta Mikešová

Department of Local and Regional Studies, Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences

Introduction

The Czech Republic is dotted with towns and cities of various sizes, each with its own mayor, each of whom has his or her own approach to managing the day-to-day affairs of the municipality. But its administration is influenced as well by a range of other factors, including the mayor's vision of how democracy at the local level should be practised.

Mayors' notions of local democracy vary, and these varying notions influence their actions. Our focus here is on two types of democracy that are seen as alternatives: participatory democracy and representative democracy (see Haus and Sweeting 2006: 156).

Our objective is to determine what approaches are taken by Czech mayors to local democracy. We are not content, however, to stop at a description of the spectrum of attitudes assumed by mayors towards local democracy—we also endeavour to identify the factors related to their stances. These point in particular to the mayors' socialization, and not just in political terms. They concern their position within the sociodemographic structure, their political orientation, and variables connected to their political experience and the environment in which they operate, in this case defined by the size of the municipality.

Theory

Prior research into local democracy and its actors (e.g., Haus and Sweeting 2006; Heinelt 2013; Heinelt 2016) has shown that these actors subscribe to one of two distinct approaches to the perception of local democracy. These approaches are reflected in how local political actors perceive their roles in local events, how they conduct themselves, and what positions they take on changes at the local level (Heinelt 2016).

The model of representative democracy is ordinarily understood as government by selected representatives, chosen periodically in recurring elections in which voters entrust them to act in their interest. Elections also allow voters to express their level of satisfaction with incumbents.

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² E-mail: daniel.cermak@soc.cas.cz

In a participatory democracy, by contrast, what is important is the activity of citizens during the entire electoral period. Citizens are personally involved in governing to the maximum extent possible. The emphasis is laid on the quality of civil society, mutual cooperation, and the awareness of citizens.

A frequently used example of representative democracy is Schumpeter's procedural or minimalist conception of democracy (Schumpeter 2003). Schumpeter makes several assumptions. Above all, he assumes that the opinions of various individuals and groups as to what constitutes the "common good" will vary. And even if everyone agrees on the end result, there will still be differences of opinion over how to attain that result.³ In addition, voters cannot on the basis of rational deliberation achieve a solution in which all of their varied demands are represented by their elected representatives. For this reason, Schumpeter maintains, it is better if the elected representatives compete for votes on the basis of their agendas, rather than having those agendas set by the voters.⁴ The actions of elected representatives competing for votes are then legitimized by regular elections.

Participatory democracy is discussed among others by Barber (2003). He labels it "strong democracy", contrasting participatory with representative democracy as in Schumpeter's minimalist conception, which he labels "thin democracy". In participatory democracy, the citizens themselves govern to the maximum extent possible. Civic awareness is emphasized, with citizens acting and cooperating in their common interest. Politics does not incur into our lives, but rather becomes a component of them.

[The specific size structure of Czech municipalities](#)

Municipalities form the basic self-governing territorial units in the Czech Republic, and municipal authorities, represented by the mayor at their head, have long enjoyed the highest level of trust from citizens [CVVM 2017; Čermák, Stachová 2010; Čermák, Mikešová, Stachová 2016]. Although the law defines the functioning of local authorities, their competence and the division of competencies among individual components, self-governance is exercised

³ Schumpeter (2003) provides an example of "health" (of the population) as a beneficial state of affairs upon which everyone agrees. But agreement need not be reached on whether vaccination or vasectomy should be used to attain this state of health.

⁴ For this reason, Schumpeter's conceptualization is labelled elitist (see Novák 2011).

in different ways in different municipalities, and many models and specific examples may be found.

Under the constitution of the Czech Republic, municipalities are the basic self-governing territorial units. The municipality is governed by the council. The mayor is chosen from among council members. The mayor is elected by and responsible to the council, chairs the municipal board, heads the municipal office and is chief of the municipal police. In smaller municipalities, where no board is elected, the mayor performs the duties of the board; where the position of chief administrative officer is not established, the mayor performs these functions as well.

Municipal size is one of the most decisive institutional aspects of local politics. Size determines the scope of municipal functions in terms of economic revenues, infrastructure, service production, and citizen participation (Karlsson 2013).

The Czech Republic is unique among European countries when it comes to municipality size. During the communist era, widespread faith in economies of scale, together with an authoritarian style of governance, made for reforms that resulted in massive amalgamations. After the fall of communism, these large units were once again broken up and the settlement structure of the Czech Republic is now characterized by an extreme fragmentation of local government. Most municipalities have a maximum 500 inhabitants; 80% have less than 1000 inhabitants. Among other countries, the Czech Republic resembles only France and Slovakia, which have similar proportions of municipalities with fewer than 1000 inhabitants (77% and 68% respectively) (Swianiewicz 2005). In countries like England and Wales, Denmark, and Sweden, for example, as well as post-communist countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, and Lithuania, there are no municipalities with fewer than 1000 inhabitants, and the average size of self-governing municipalities is from 16,000 inhabitants up [ibid.]. Such municipalities occupy a completely different position in the settlement system—their budgets are much higher, and they can save on the economic costs of management and services by taking advantage of economies of scale. On the other hand, efficiency is not only an economic value; it is instrumental for the legitimacy of a democracy (Karlsson 2013). The fact that local democracy seems to work better, mainly in terms of participation, trust, political knowledge, and citizen involvement (Karlsson 2013), in smaller municipalities has been proved repeatedly in studies (e. g. Mouritzen 1989).

These factors set local government in the Czech Republic apart. In smaller municipalities, elected representatives are only rarely political party members; independent candidates and

movements prevail. Communal politics in these municipalities is primarily about finding optimal solutions to material problems, with party politics and ideological aspects playing only a minimal role (Outlý 2004: 21). The Czech Republic also differs in terms of the institutional structure of local authorities. Together with the Baltic States, it is one of the only post-communist European countries in which the mayor is elected by a vote of elected representatives, not directly by the citizens. This has a significant, but not decisive, effect on local leadership.

Description of the data set

For the analyses described in this paper, two mutually interleaved data sources concerning the mayors of Czech towns and cities were employed. The first of these is an online survey of mayors of cities and boroughs with more than 10 thousand inhabitants conducted in the Czech Republic in 2015 as part of the international comparative survey *Political Leaders in European Cities*.⁵ All 131 mayors or city managers of municipalities with more than 10 thousand inhabitants were asked to complete the survey. 47 filled out the entire survey, for a return rate of 36%.

The second source was another survey of mayors of towns and cities in the Czech Republic, this time of municipalities with 10 thousand residents or less. Titled *European Mayor II*, it was conducted in 2016. Respondents were chosen for the sample using a stratified multistage randomized selection process. Individual mayors from all regions were randomly selected within the individual municipality size categories.⁶ These categories—the strata—were not proportionally represented in numerical terms, but those categories with the weakest representation were contacted relatively more frequently than their representation in the sample would indicate, and vice versa. All mayors of Czech municipalities in the category with 5000–9999 residents, for example, were contacted, while in the 0–199 resident category only every sixth mayor was contacted. The overall return rate was 31%, equivalent to a total 445 fully (82%) or partially (18%) filled-out surveys.

⁵ The survey took place between 2014–15 in a total 25 EU countries, four other European countries, as well as Israel. The research was coordinated by the University of Florence.

⁶ For purposes of another study, all mayors in the Liberec region were contacted regardless of municipality size.

Because of the above considerations, it was obviously necessary for some analyses to weight the data according to the municipality size categories. This weighted data set was then used for all calculations.

Operationalization and hypotheses

The battery of questions we used to divide the mayors into supporters of representative versus participatory democracy was created by Haus and Sweeting (2006: 157), consisting of a set of statements. The extent to which mayors agreed with these statements provided an indication of their relationship to democracy. In other research projects, modified or updated versions of the battery have been used to study municipal representatives in Europe (Heinelt 2013), representatives from the 2nd Tier of Local Government (Heinelt 2016), and mayors in European countries (Heinelt, Vetter, and Rose 2018). The battery of statements used by Heinelt, Vetter and Rose (2018) for the *Political Leaders in European Cities* study noted above is what we utilized for our research. We made one change, however, in surveying mayors of municipalities with up to 10 thousand residents—we did not ask whether they agreed with the statement: "For citizens to be able to participate in public affairs, it is important that self-governing boroughs exist". Our reasoning is clear: these municipalities are too small to be divided into boroughs or districts, and it is unlikely that the mayors' experience would be adequate to allow them to form a judgement.

The individual statements in Battery 1 (see Table 1) measure the strength of the attitude to participatory vs. representative democracy. Statements 1a, 1d, 1f, and 1g reveal the strength of the attitude to representative democracy. The remaining three statements, 1b, 1c, and 1e, then indicate the strength of the attitude to participatory democracy. The items in Battery 2 (see Table 1) reveal the extent of agreement with various elements of direct democracy. We also took this battery from the *Political Leaders in European Cities* study. The reason for its inclusion in our analysis is the ease it affords in identifying the relationship between participatory and representative democracy on the one hand, and elements of direct democracy on the other.

Table 1: Question Batteries 1 and 2 on Notions of Democracy used in the survey

Battery 1: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	
1a	Political parties are the most suitable arena for citizen participation

1b	Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions
1c	Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives
1d	Apart from voting, citizens should not be given the opportunity to influence local government policies
1e	Council decisions should reflect a majority opinion among the residents
1f	Political representatives should make what they think are the right decisions, independent of the current views of local people
1g	The results of local elections should be the most important factor in determining local government policies
Battery 2: How desirable or undesirable do you consider the following reforms, irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your municipality?	
2a	A decisive (binding) referendum
2b	Direct election of the mayor
2c	Non-binding referenda
2d	Participatory Budgeting
2e	Reduction of the number of councillors

Note: A five-point scale was used in Battery 1, with answers ranging from "Definitely Disagree" to "Definitely Agree". Battery 2 also includes a five-point scale whose answers range from "Very Undesirable" to "Very Desirable". Questions on the attitude to representative democracy are highlighted in grey.

Source: The international research project *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015).

On the basis of prior studies and a literature review, we formulated the following hypotheses:

1. There is an association between the sociodemographic characteristics of the mayors, particularly their gender, age, and education, and:
 - a. their perception of local democracy,
 - b. their attitude to the elements of direct democracy.
2. There is an association between the political orientation of the mayors and:
 - a. their perception of local democracy,
 - b. their attitude to the elements of direct democracy.
3. There is an association between the political socialization of the mayors, characterized by the number of years they have been in office, their level of professionalization (whether full-time or part-time mayor), and whether they are members of a political party on the one hand, and on the other by:
 - a. their perception of local democracy,

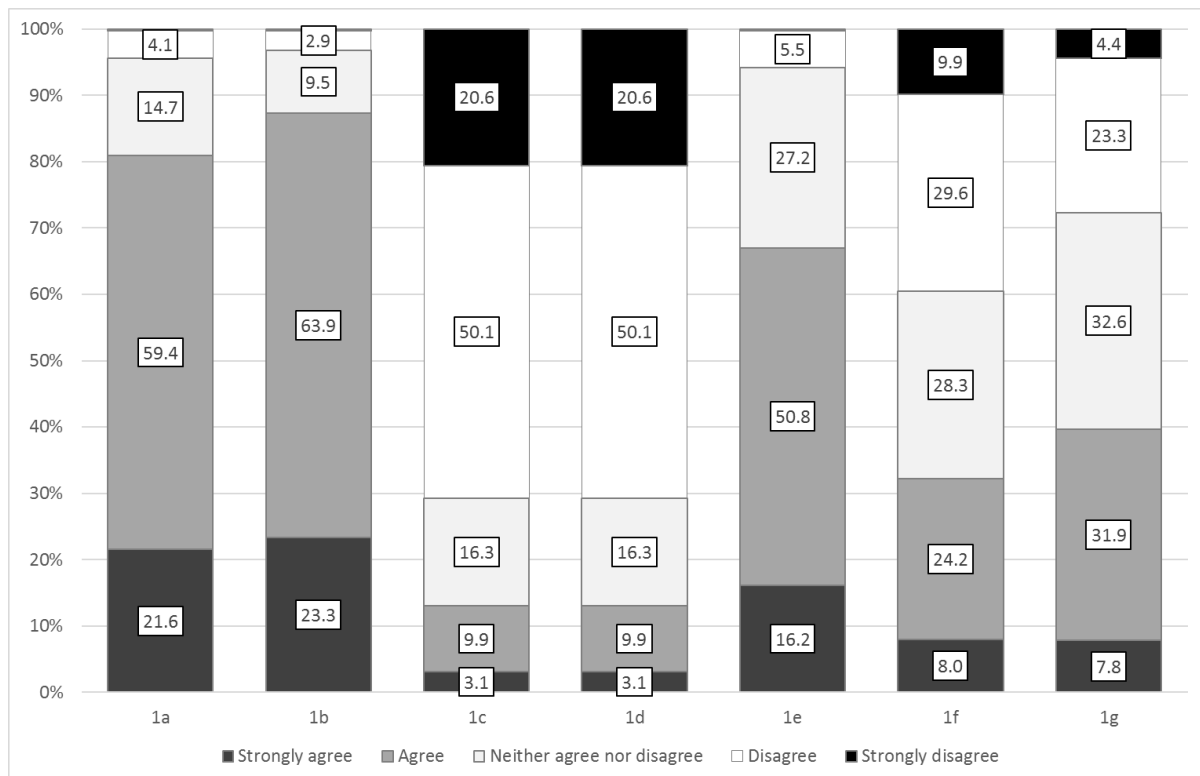
- b. their attitude to the elements of direct democracy.
4. There is an association between the population size of the municipality in which the mayor holds office and his or her:
 - a. perception of local democracy,
 - b. attitude to the elements of direct democracy.
5. No positive relationship exists between support for the concepts of participatory and representative local democracy.
6. A relationship does exist between local democracy and the elements of direct democracy. We anticipate a positive association between support for participatory local democracy and the elements of direct democracy, and a negative or lacking relationship between support for representative local democracy and the elements of direct democracy. The positive relationship is to be anticipated because supporters of the participatory view, who are seeking different ways of involving citizens in public affairs decision-making, are likely to make use of the elements of direct democracy.

Results

Before we embark on multivariate analyses to uncover the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, let us illustrate the distribution of answers to the questions. The figure (Figure 1) shows the distribution of the mayors' answers to the entire battery of questions concerning their attitudes to representative and participatory democracy.

The distribution of attitudes to representative democracy may be found in the figure (Figure 1) in columns 1a, 1d, 1f and 1g. Four-fifths of the mayors subscribe to the view that political parties are the best platform for participation (with responses of Strongly Agree or Agree to Statement 1a). Other responses even more associated with representative democracy received substantially lower support. The lowest level of support, at 13%, was expressed for the view that it is inappropriate for citizens to influence politics outside of taking part in elections (1d). Almost 40% of the mayors thought the decisive character of election results was a desirable thing, although one-third agreed (with Statement 1f) that once elected, politicians should vote their conscience.

Figure 1: Attitude of the mayors to local democracy (%)

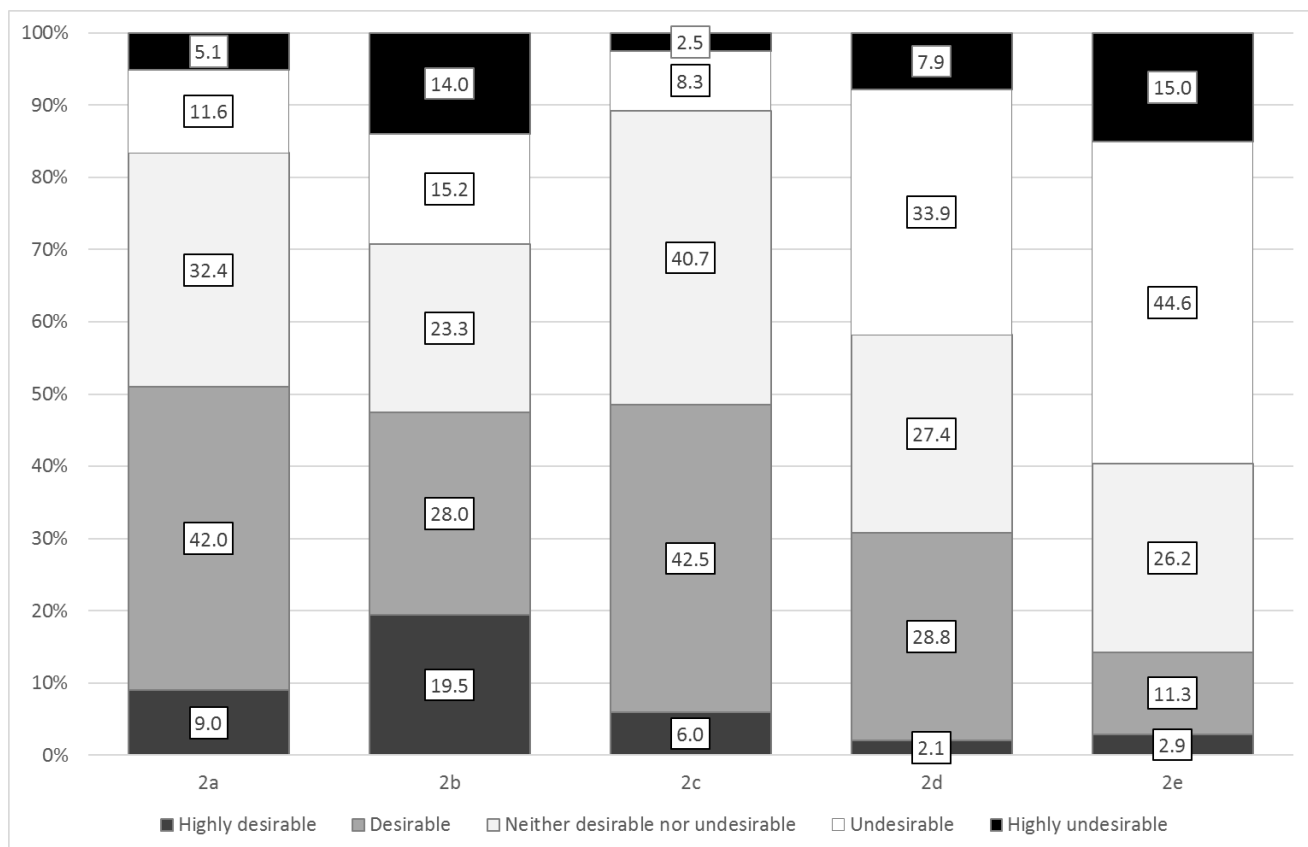


Note: Question: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

Source: *European Mayor II* (2016) research project and the Czech portion of the international project *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015).

The distribution of attitudes to introducing elements of direct democracy is shown in the following figure (Figure 2). Support hovers around the 50% level (with responses highly desirable and desirable) for binding and non-binding referendums (2a and 2c), together with direct elections for mayors (2b). Substantially less support—31%—is shown by mayors for participatory budgeting (2d), and support for reducing the number of representatives (2e) is negligible, at around 14%.

Figure 2: Mayors' attitudes to elements of direct democracy (%)



Note: Question: "How desirable or undesirable do you consider the following reforms, irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your municipality?"

Source: *European Mayor II* (2016) research project and the Czech portion of the international project *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015).

Table 2: Local democracy factor analysis results

	Component	
	1	2
1b [Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions]	.852	-.132
1c [Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives]	.876	-.015
1d [Apart from voting, citizens should not be given the opportunity to influence local government policies]	-.235	.647
1f [Political representatives should make what they think are the right decisions, independent of the current views of local people]	.091	.839

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. 2 components extracted.

Source: Authors' calculations using data from the *European Mayor II* (2016) study and the Czech portion of the *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015) project.

Not all the statements in Battery 1 measuring various positions were appropriate for creating a scale indicating the relationship to participatory vs. representative democracy. Using factor analysis, we were able to identify two factors with loadings on four questions from Battery 1 that best captured liberal and participatory democracy across the municipalities in the study. The questions were numbers 1b, 1c, 1d, and 1f. The two resultant factors on which these questions were loaded we labelled *Participatory Democracy* and *Representative Democracy*, respectively (see Table 2). Questions 1b and 1c, which contain statements indicating that people should be able to participate in all important decisions for the municipality or at least offer their input, show the highest loadings on the first of these factors. The highest loadings for the second factor occur with questions 1d and 1f, which indicate that politicians should vote their conscience and that citizens should leave them free to govern in between elections.

Other questions were unsuitable, either because they were a function of municipality size—1a, for example, on the importance of political parties—or because they did not help clearly identify or differentiate between the two relevant notions of democracy.

Further factor analyses were conducted on the items in Battery 2 focused on the Elements of Direct Democracy. We identified only a single factor here, with loadings on items 2a, 2c, and 2d, concerned with binding and non-binding referendums and participatory budgeting (see Table 3).

Table 3: Factor analysis results for Elements of Direct Democracy

	Component
	1
2a [Binding referendum] How appropriate or inappropriate are the following measures and reforms?	.674
2c [Advisory (non-binding) referendum] How appropriate or inappropriate are the following measures and reforms?	.730
2d [Participatory budget] How appropriate or inappropriate are the following measures and reforms?	.707

Note: Only one component extracted.

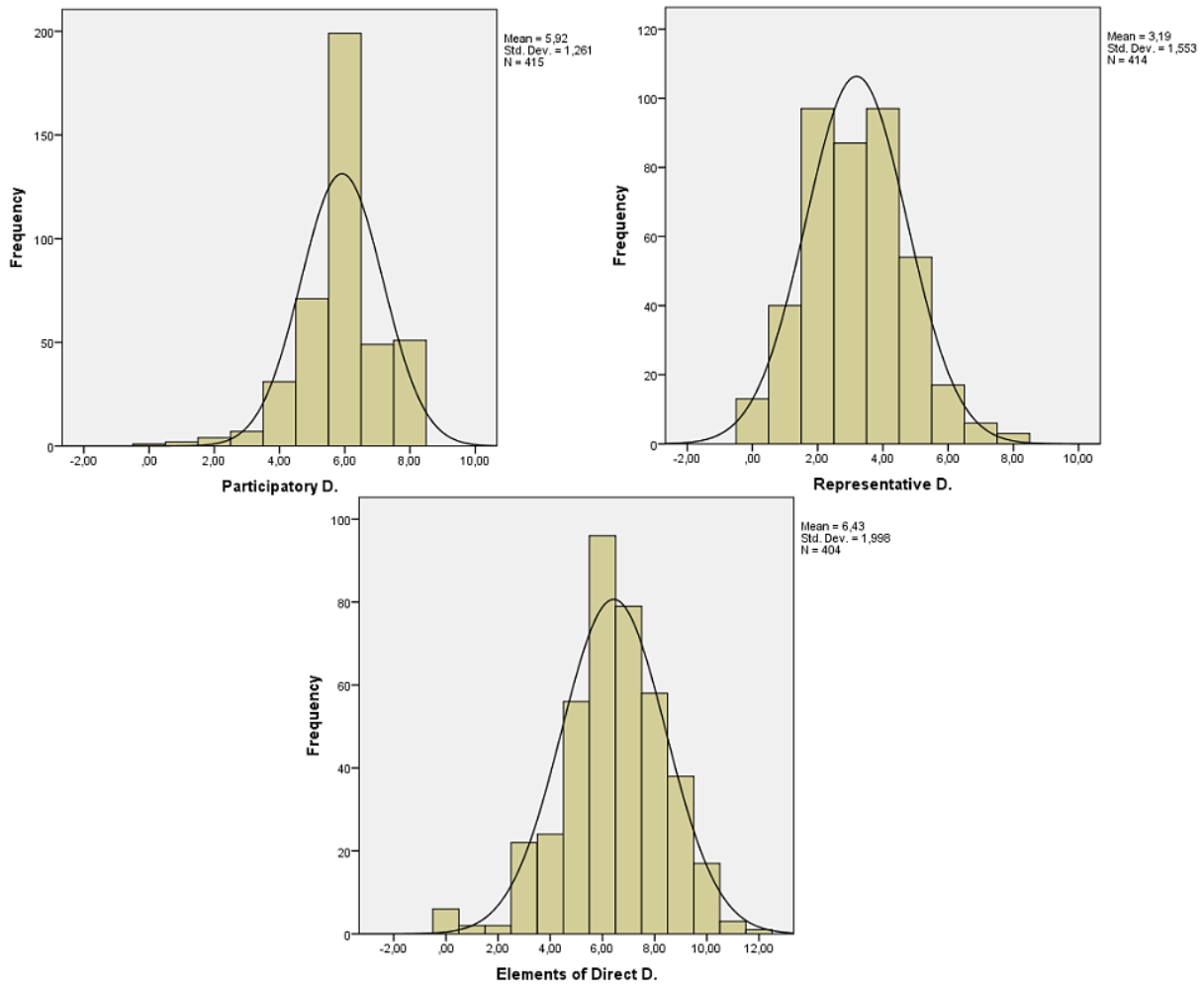
Source: Authors' calculations using data from the *European Mayor II* (2016) study and the Czech portion of the *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015) project.

On the basis of the above factor analyses, in a subsequent step, we created three summation indexes. The first index, Participatory Democracy, comprises the summed values from the five-

point Likert scale reflecting the extent of agreement with items 1b and 1c. The lowest value, 0, represents the attitude “Strongly Disagree”, while a value of 4 represents “Strongly Agree”. The resulting index was thus a nine-point scale stretching from 0 to 8. A similar summation index was created for Representative Democracy using the extent of agreement with items 1d and 1f. The summation index for Elements of Direct Democracy differed in that it was the sum of three values, 2a, 2c, and 2d, expressing the mayors' attitude to the desirability of these elements. A value of 0 on the Likert scale was assigned to “Highly Undesirable” and, at the opposite end of the scale, a value of 4 was assigned to “Highly Desirable”. The resulting index was thus a thirteen-point scale running from 0 to 12.

The distributions of index values are shown in the next figure (see Figure 3). From these, it is clear that the mayors identify more closely with Participatory Democracy than with Representative Democracy on a nine-point scale running from 0 to 8: the centre of the scale stands at 4, and 91% of mayors have indicated values of between 5 and 8 points. By contrast, on the Representative Democracy scale, only 20% of mayors awarded 5 to 8 points. Support for the Elements of Direct Democracy, on a 13-point scale, is distributed more evenly around the central value of 6.

Figure 3: Distribution of values in the Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy, and Elements of Direct Democracy indexes.



Source: Authors' calculations using data from the *European Mayor II* (2016) study and the Czech portion of the *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015) project.

We were also interested in the degree to which the individual indexes were associated. This prompted us to calculate the correlation coefficients between them. We assumed that a negative, or at least zero, correlation would obtain between Participatory and Representative Democracy due to the difference in attitudes held by their proponents. By contrast, we anticipated a positive association between adherents of Participatory Democracy and Elements of Direct Democracy, since support for these elements may be expected of those who believe in broader participation by the voters in governance. Although the values are not particularly high, they are statistically significant, and we may therefore conclude that our assumptions were confirmed (see Table 4).

Table 4: Correlations between summation indices for Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy, and Elements of Direct Democracy

	Participatory D.	Representative D.	Elements of Direct D.
Participatory D.	1.000	-0.214**	0.368**

Representative D.	-0.214**	1,000	-0.174**
Elements of Direct D.	0.368**	-0.174**	1,000

Note.: The data shown in the table represent the Spearman Correlation Coefficient. Entries with double asterisks are significant at the .01 level. N=415.

Source: Authors' calculations using data from the *European Mayor II* (2016) study and the Czech portion of the *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015) project.

Table 5: Correlation of summation indices for Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy, and Elements of Direct Democracy with selected characteristics

		Participatory D. index	Representative D. index	Elements of Direct D. index
Gender [0-male, 1-female]	Correlation Coefficient	,140**	-.054	.053
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.275	.284
	N	415	414	404
Age	Correlation Coefficient	-.101*	-.098*	-.077
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.040	.047	.124
	N	415	414	404
University education [0-no, 1-yes]	Correlation Coefficient	-.108*	,129**	-.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.028	.008	.903
	N	415	414	404
Party Member [0-no, 1-yes]	Correlation Coefficient	-.106*	.070	-.184**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.031	.156	.000
	N	415	414	404
Full-time mayor [0-part-time, 1-full-time]	Correlation Coefficient	-.042	.065	-.123*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.400	.185	.013
	N	414	413	402
No. of inhabitants of the municipality	Correlation Coefficient	-.130**	,099*	-.195**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.045	.000
	N	415	414	404
Left-right scale [self-attribution 1-left up to 11-right]	Correlation Coefficient	.022	-.033	-.097
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.664	.519	.059
	N	392	391	381

Note: The data shown in the table represent the Spearman Correlation Coefficient. Entries with double asterisks are significant at the .01 level, those with a single asterisk at the .05 level.

Source: Authors' calculations using data from the *European Mayor II* (2016) study and the Czech portion of the *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015) project.

How do the mayors differ in their attitudes represented by indices when analysed on the basis of their sociodemographic characteristics, partisanship, level of professionalization (full-time vs. part-time mayors), self-attribution along the left-right spectrum, and municipality size? The answer to this question is contained in the data in Table 5, which shows the correlation coefficients between these attributes and the indices.

Attitudes to participatory democracy show a considerable influence from gender, size of the municipality, age, education, and party membership. Women prefer participatory democracy more often in comparison with men. There was an inverse relationship between municipality

size and level of support for participatory democracy. We can find the same relationship between age and level of support. University educated mayors and/or party members prefers less often participatory democracy.

Other variables are connected to representative democracy index. There was a significant influence of education, size of the municipality, and age. Mayors with a university education evince a substantially higher level of support for representative democracy. There was a positive relationship between municipality size and level of support and an inverse relationship between age and level of support.

We also explored relationships between selected variables with regard to elements of direct democracy index. There was found significant association with party membership, size of the municipality, and level of professionalization. Party members prefer less often elements of direct democracy. Full-time mayors prefer less often as well. There was an inverse relationship between municipality size and level of support.

Multivariate models

The final step in our analyses was to create multivariate models. Accordingly, we created three linear regression models in which the Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy, and Elements Of Direct Democracy indexes served as the dependent variables. All of the previously mentioned sociodemographic variables were used as explanatory variables.

Table 6: Results of regression models for the dependent variables Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy, and Elements of Direct Democracy

	Participatory D. Model			Representative D. Model			Direct Participation Model		
	B	Beta	Sig.	B	Beta	Sig.	B	Beta	Sig.
(Constant)	8.097		0.000	6.359		0.000	10.456		0.000
Gender [0-male, 1-female]	0.270	0.094	0.067	-0.210	-0.059	0.252	0.021	0.005	0.928
University education [0-no, 1-yes]	-0.024	-0.010	0.859	0.281	0.090	0.103	0.433	0.108	0.049
Full-time mayor [0-part-time, 1-full-time]	0.204	0.072	0.271	0.055	0.016	0.813	-0.068	-0.015	0.819
Current Political Party Member [0-no, 1-yes]	-0.182	-0.063	0.255	0.053	0.015	0.790	-0.655	-0.144	0.009
Age [no. of years]	-0.418	-0.066	0.198	-0.903	-0.115	0.026	-0.483	-0.048	0.348
Ln_ob2015 [ln(no. of inhabitants of the municipality)]	-0.112	-0.140	0.057	0.056	0.058	0.440	-0.229	-0.180	0.013
Left-right scale [self-attribution 1-left up to 11-right]	0.016	0.028	0.581	-0.018	-0.027	0.599	-0.079	-0.088	0.080
R square	0.046			0.036			0.082		
ANOVA	0.011			0.050			0.000		

Source: Authors' calculations using data from the *European Mayor II* (2016) study and the Czech portion of the *Political Leaders in European Cities* (2015) project.

The regression equations (see Table 6) demonstrate that the observed variables are able to account for only a relatively small portion of the variance. Despite this, some play a significant

role in explaining the differences of attitude towards participatory and representative democracy, together with the attitude to some elements of direct democracy.

Support for participatory democracy varies according to the size of the municipal population. There are near-significant differences between mayors from municipalities of different sizes.

The mayors' age plays a statistically significant role in their attitudes towards representative democracy. This support increased with decreasing age.

Support for the elements of direct democracy showed statistically significant differences according to education, political membership, and municipality population. Mayors with a university education showed a significantly greater liking for these elements. Mayors without membership in political party showed a significantly greater liking for these elements as well. There was an inverse relationship between municipality size and level of support.

Summary

In the foregoing text, we analysed two batteries of questions concerning the concept of local democracy and attitudes to the elements of direct democracy. We found that mayors tend to prefer participatory democracy over representative democracy.

The hypothesis that there would be a positive relationship between participatory democracy and the elements of direct democracy was confirmed, as was the conjecture that there would be a negative association between representative and participatory democracy.

Further hypotheses concerned the influence of other independent variables on local democracy. It was already clear from the correlation analysis that the mayors' attitudes are related to sociodemographic variables, political socialization, and the size of the municipality. This was also confirmed by a regression analysis of the Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy, and Elements of Direct Democracy indexes. The models made particular use of age, education, party membership, and municipality size. However, these variables were only able to explain a relatively small portion of the total variance. Explaining the remaining variance would likely require knowledge of the influences that have shaped the mayors throughout the course of their lives—influences that are difficult to capture within the limited scope of such a survey.

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