

LOCAL REFERENDUM AS A TOOL OF DIRECT PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN THE DECISION-MAKING OF MUNICIPALITIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Místní referendum jako nástroj přímé participace občanů na rozhodování obcí v České republice

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Annotation

The local referendum is the only tool of direct democracy in the Czech Republic, allowing citizens to decide on issues falling within the independent competence of municipalities directly. The aim of the paper is to assess the use, voter turnout, binding force, and thematic focus of local referenda as a tool of direct participation of citizens in the decision-making on local issues in the Czech municipalities with respect to their size defined by the population in the period 2006-2019. To fulfil the aim, descriptive statistics, binary logistic regression, classification analysis and correlation analysis have been employed. A total of 288 local referenda were held in the examined period, 193 of them in the municipalities up to 1,999 inhabitants. The results do not indicate a statistically significant relationship between the municipality size and the holding of referenda. On the other hand, the results show a weakly negative correlation relationship between the municipality size and the turnout (the binding force, respectively). The referenda focused on territorial development, environment, alternative sources of power and infrastructure predominate in the municipalities up to 4,999 inhabitants. The referenda on municipal property and public order prevail in the municipalities with 5,000 and more inhabitants.

Key words

direct participation, local government, local referendum act, municipality, voter turnout

Anotace

Místní referendum představuje v České republice jediný nástroj přímé demokracie, prostřednictvím kterého mohou občané přímo rozhodovat o otázkách spadajících do samostatné působnosti obcí. Cílem tohoto článku je zhodnotit využívání, volební účast, závaznost a tematické zaměření místních referend jakožto nástroje přímé participace občanů na rozhodování místních záležitostí v obcích České republiky v závislosti na jejich velikosti vymezené počtem obyvatel za období 2006-2019. K naplnění cíle byly využity popisné statistiky, binární logistická regrese, klasifikační analýza a korelační analýza. Ve sledovaném období se uskutečnilo celkově 288 místních referend, z toho 193 v obcích do 1 999 obyvatel. Výsledky neindikují statisticky významný vztah mezi velikostí obce a uskutečněním místního referenda. Na druhou stranu ale ukazují slabě negativní korelační vztah mezi velikostí obce a volební účastí (resp. závazností místního referenda). Tematicky převažují v obcích do 4 999 obyvatel referenda zaměřená na územní rozvoj, životní prostředí, alternativní zdroje energie a infrastrukturu. V obcích nad 5 000 obyvatel převládají referenda týkající se obecního majetku a veřejného pořádku.

Klíčová slova

přímá participace, místní správa, zákon o místním referendu, obec, volební účast

JEL classification: H11, H80

1. Introduction

Citizens take part in the conduct of public affairs directly or through freely chosen representatives. While local elections are a representative form of democracy, local referenda represent an institute of direct democracy, allowing municipal residents to make decisions on local political issues directly. Local referenda support

community involvement in local governance (Klausen and Sweeting, 2004), can generate strong beliefs in the legitimacy of decisions (Esaïsson et al. (2012) and positive citizens' attitude about their ability to influence what local government does (Benz and Stutzer, 2007). On the other hand, turnout in referenda tends to be lower than in traditional elections, calling the legitimacy of the decision into question (Kuźelewska, 2015). Besides, voters and non-voters might have different preferences, and thus, referenda should lead to unrepresentative decisions (Leininger and Heyne, 2017).

Most European countries use local referenda as a tool of direct citizen participation in local government decision-making. Only a minority of them does not foresee local referenda in their law systems, i.e. Denmark, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Georgia, and Turkey (Uşvat, 2017). The results of local direct voting in Switzerland, Germany and Austria are binding, which is not the case in most of the other European countries. But for instance, in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, local referenda may be binding under certain conditions. (Hendriks et al., 2012)

In the Czech Republic, the institute of the local referendum is regulated primarily by the Act No. 22/2004 Coll., on Local Referendum (Local Referendum Act), and specially by the Acts No. 128/2000 Coll., on Municipalities, and No. 131/2000 Coll., on the Capital City of Prague. The Czech legislation distinguishes between two types of local referenda – obligatory and facultative. According to Filip (2011), an obligatory referendum must be held to decide an issue regarding the division of a municipality into two or more parts, while a facultative referendum is not mandatory and can be announced to determine any topic, falling within the independent competence of municipality. A local referendum is announced by the municipal board on its initiative (i.e. top-down referenda) or the initiative of a preparatory committee of citizens supported by the signatures of eligible voters (i.e. bottom-up referenda) (Local Referendum Act, section 8). The question asked must be formulated in such a way that it can be answered yes or no; thus, it is not possible to vote on supplementary questions introduced by the pronouns where, when, who, where etc. (Rigel, 2011). The right to vote in a local referendum is vested in everyone who is entitled to vote in municipal council elections. All referendum costs are covered by the municipal budget (Local Referendum Act, section 51).

If the referendum meets legal conditions, it is binding for the municipal council and other municipal bodies. The prerequisite for the binding force is validity. The referendum is valid if at least 35% of all eligible voters have taken part. The valid local referendum is binding for the municipal bodies if the decision has been endorsed by the absolute majority of the voters who have taken part in the referendum and concurrently, this number is at least 25% of the eligible voters in the municipality. Regarding decisions on change of municipal boundaries (e.g. a division of a municipality), the local referendum is binding if an absolute majority of all eligible voters have been voted for the decision. (Local Referendum Act, sections 48-49) This rule ensures that changes in municipal boundaries will genuinely be decided by the majority of the municipality's population, and the result will be representative.

Several authors studied local referenda in the Czech Republic. Jüptner et al. (2015) addressed the factors influencing their results and turnout. Novy (2016) studied voters' participation in local referenda concerning the concept of NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) and concluded that the turnout could be positively affected by NIMBY questions. However, the author pointed out other factors affecting the participation as well, i.e. turnout threshold, concurrent elections, and municipality size. Burešova and Balík (2019) analysed initiators of local referenda and stated that the municipal board was the most frequent initiator of local referenda in 2007-2016. Following these studies, the paper extends the dataset of local referenda by ones held in recent years and deals in more detail with the turnout, binding force, and topics with respect to the size of the Czech municipalities.

2. Aim and methods

The aim of the paper is to assess the use, voter turnout, binding force, and thematic focus of local referenda as a tool of direct participation of citizens in the decision-making on local issues in the Czech municipalities with respect to their size defined by the population in the period 2006-2019.

Pursuant to the section 1 of the Local Referendum Act, a local referendum can be announced on the territory of the independent self-governing municipalities (including statutory cities and the capital city of Prague), but also on the territory of city boroughs or city districts of territorially subdivided statutory cities and on the territory of parts of independent municipalities in case of local referenda regarding the separation of a municipality part or establishing of city districts or city boroughs. Therefore, in the paper, the term municipality contains not only independent self-governing municipalities (and statutory cities) but city boroughs, city districts and territory parts of independent municipalities where local referenda were held as well unless otherwise stated. Municipalities were

divided into five size categories based on the number of inhabitants on 1 January of the year of the referendum was held, as follows: municipalities with 1-499 inhabitants, 500-1,999 inhabitants, 2,000-4,999 inhabitants, 5,000-19,999 inhabitants and 20,000 and more inhabitants.

The use of local referenda, their binding force and turnout in the size categories of municipalities have been analysed using descriptive statistics. A referendum was considered binding if legal conditions stipulated by the Act on Local Referendum were met and concurrently, it was not subsequently annulled by a court decision. If more questions were asked, the binding force of each one was assessed separately and included in the results proportionally. Based on the classification analysis of the content of questions asked, local referenda were classified into seven identified thematic categories which are presented, including their description, in Tab. 1.

Tab. 1: Thematic categories of local referenda and their characteristics

Thematic category	Characteristics
Territorial development	decision-making on issues of regional development and specific constructions carried out by entities other than the municipality itself (e.g. department stores, industrial buildings, airport expansion or US radar military base)
Environment	decision-making on projects with a significant impact on the environment (mining permits, construction of a nuclear waste repository, sandpits etc.)
Alternative sources of power	decision-makings on constructions of solar, wind, hydroelectric power plants and biogas plants
Municipal property	decision-making on matters with direct impacts on a municipal budget, i.e. acquisition of property, sale/lease/usufructuary lease of communal property, construction projects financed from the municipal budget
Infrastructure	decision-making on projects of transport infrastructure and engineering networks (sewerage systems)
Public order	decision-making on issues related to public order, especially the regulation of gambling games and casinos in the municipality
Municipal boundaries	decision-makings on changing of municipal boundaries (merging of municipalities, separation of a municipality part) or establishing and dissolving city districts or city boroughs

Source: author's processing based on the classification analysis of data obtained from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (2019)

The binary logistic regression model has been employed to determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the size of the municipality and the holding of a referendum. The model estimates the probability of event occurrence (holding [1] or not holding [0] a local referendum, *hold_ref*) given the values of explanatory variables (i.e. the number of inhabitants in municipalities, *n_inhabitants*). For the purposes of the binary logistic regression, the data sample contains only independent municipalities (basic territorial self-governing units) where a local referendum was held throughout their whole territory. All assumptions have been met. The logistic regression model can be expressed as:

$$\pi_i = \frac{\exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_i)}{1 + \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_i)}$$

To assess the relationship between the turnout (*turnout*) and the population of municipalities (*n_inhabitants_2*), and the binding force of referenda (*binding*), correlation analysis has been employed. Pearson's correlation coefficient *r* was calculated. It is a measure of the linear correlation between two variables computed from standard deviations of both variables and their covariance as follows:

$$r = \frac{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum(y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

Properties of the Pearson's correlation coefficient *r* are:

- $r \in (-1; 1)$;
- $r = 0 \Rightarrow$ there is no correlation dependence between variables;
- $r = 1 \Rightarrow$ linear direct dependence between variables;
- $r = -1 \Rightarrow$ linear indirect dependence between variables.

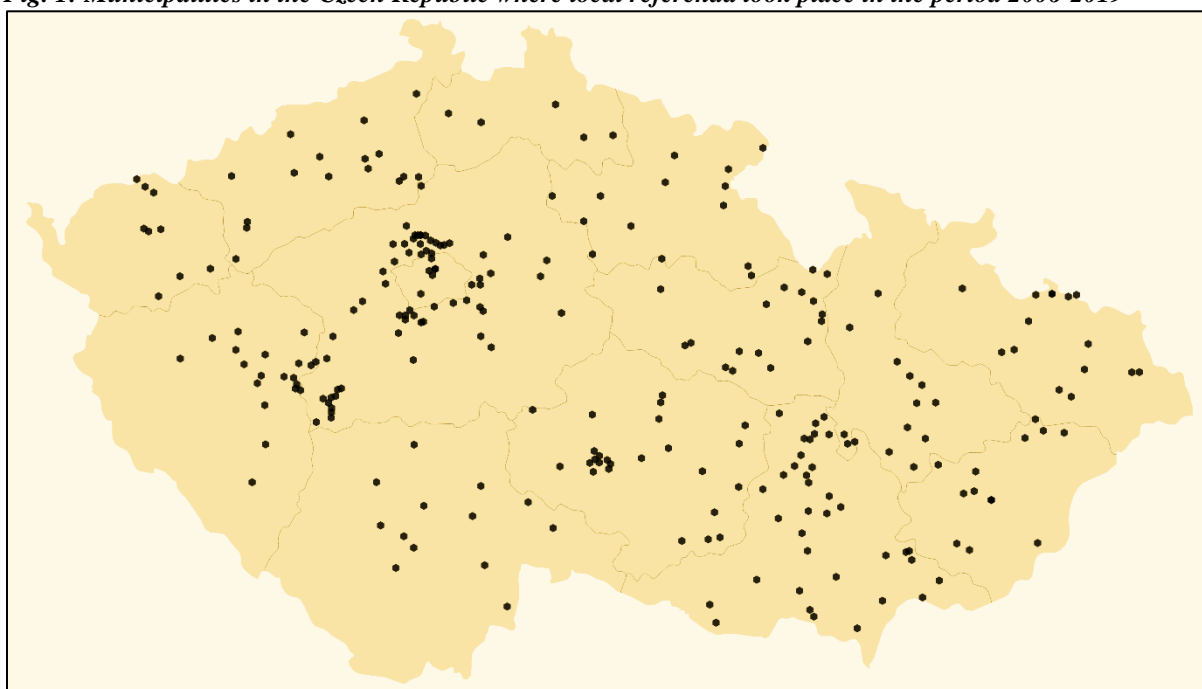
The number of municipalities in the Czech Republic and their population were obtained from the publicly available statistical data published by the Czech Statistical Office (2006-2019). Data on the local referenda, their binding force and voter turnout was acquired from the records of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (2019) and the websites of municipalities.

MS Excel was used for the calculation of descriptive statistics, and Gretl statistical package was used to perform the binary logistic regression and correlation analysis.

3. Results and discussion

A total of 288 local referenda were held in 270 municipalities in the examined period 2006-2019. Considering only independent municipalities (basic territorial self-governing units) where a local referendum took place throughout their whole territory, there were 249 municipalities with a referendum representing 3.98% of a total number of 6,258 (figure on 1 January 2019, Czech Statistical Office, 2019b). Picture 1 shows the municipalities where local referenda took place from 2006 to 2019.

Fig. 1: Municipalities in the Czech Republic where local referenda took place in the period 2006-2019



Source: author's processing in the web application Datawrapper

Tab. 2 shows the number of municipalities where a local referendum was held, number of local referenda, their binding force and voter turnout related to the size categories of municipalities in the period 2006-2019. Most local referenda (193 of 288, i.e. 67.01%) took place within two size categories representing small municipalities with 1-499 and 500-1,999 inhabitants, respectively. On the other hand, the fewest referenda (24 of 288, i.e. 8.33%) were held in large municipalities with 20,000 and more inhabitants. A higher number of local referenda in small municipalities is not surprising given a highly fragmented municipal structure in the Czech Republic (more than half of all self-governing units falls within the category of 1-499 inhabitants). However, a comparison of independent municipalities with their total number in the size categories shows that a higher proportion of larger municipalities used local referenda. At least one referendum was announced in 36.07% of municipalities with 20,000 and more inhabitants, but only in 2.43% of small ones with 1-499 inhabitants. The smallest municipality held a local referendum was Vísky with 42 inhabitants, while the largest one was Brno with 408,550 inhabitants.

Tab. 2: Number of municipalities where a referendum was held, number of local referenda, their binding force and voter turnout related to the size categories of municipalities in the period 2006-2019

Size category	Number of municipalities	Number of referenda	Binding force*		Voter turnout*	
1-499 inhabitants	83	87	YES	79.5*	median	66.60%
				93.53%	max.	96.80%
	30.74%	30.21%	NO	5.5	min.	27.30%
				6.47%	std. dev.	0.14492
500-1,999 inhabitants	99	106	YES	80.5	median	55.45%
				75.94%	max.	83.30%
	36.67%	36.80%	NO	25.5	min.	18.10%
				24.06%	std. dev.	0.13635
2,000-4,999 inhabitants	34	37	YES	25	median	44.72%
				67.57%	max.	63.10%
	12.59%	12.85%	NO	12	min.	13.70%
				32.43%	std. dev.	0.14527
5,000-19,999 inhabitants	32	34	YES	12	median	32.65%
				35.29%	max.	66.29%
	11.85%	11.81%	NO	22	min.	6.34%
				64.71%	std. dev.	0.14527
20,000 and more inhabitants	22	24	YES	6	median	23.35%
				25.00%	max.	53.30%
	8.15%	8.33%	NO	18	min.	3.57%
				75.00%	std. dev.	0.13758
Total	270	288	YES	203	median	53.65%
				70.98%	max.	96.80%
			NO	83	min.	3.57%
				29.02%	std. dev.	0.18983

Source: author's calculation

Notes: The percentage of municipalities where a local referendum took place (number of municipalities) and the percentage of the number of local referenda held (number of referenda) are calculated from the total number. The rate of binding force is calculated from the number of referenda held in the relevant size category of municipalities. An asterisk (*) means that there are no data on the binding force and turnout available for two local referenda.

The results of the binary logistic regression model presented in Tab. 3 do not show a statistically significant relationship between the size of independent municipalities and the holding of local referenda. Thus, there is no indication that larger territorial self-governing units announce local referenda with a higher probability.

Tab. 3: Results of binary logistic regression (n = 6258; dependent variable hold_ref)

	coefficient	z	p-value	significance
constant	-3.19571	-49.07	0.000	***
n_inhabitants	4.89918e-06	1.602	0.1092	no significance

Source: author's calculations

The reason for a relatively low share of small municipalities where local referenda took place (only 2.43% out of a total number of them) might be concerns that the referendum costs would be burdensome for the municipal budget. Although the costs are relatively low, on average tens of thousands CZK (Transparency International, 2017), they may be high for many municipalities. According to the Ministry of Finance of the Czech Republic (2017), there are 3 262 indebted municipalities in the Czech Republic which cannot afford any additional expenses. Another reason may consist in the fact that residents of smaller municipalities know their local representatives, can informally meet them and convey the opinions or attitudes to them directly. Thus, small municipalities use the institute of the local referendum only in cases when an informal procedure is not possible, and it is necessary to support a residents' attitude formally.

The median turnout in local referenda reached 53.65%. Given the size categories, the highest median turnout was in the smallest municipalities up to 499 inhabitants (median 66.60%). With the growing population, the turnout is declining to 23.35% in the municipalities with 20,000 and more inhabitants. The municipality of Vískey showed the highest participation of its residents (96.8%), while Ostrava-South the lowest one (only 3.57%). These results are consistent with older studies conducted in the Czech Republic analysing local referenda until 2013 (e.g. Smith, 2006 or Jüptner et al., 2015) and with the results from foreign countries as well, e.g. study of 309 local referenda

held in 1965-2005 in Norway conducted by Sørberg and Tangerås (2007), or with a meta-study of turnout for 17 different European countries with an emphasis on the Netherlands performed by Houwelingen (2017).

Pursuant to the Local Referendum Act, the binding force of local referenda relates to voter turnout. Thus, it is understandable that binding referenda predominate in small municipalities with higher turnout. In the municipalities with 1-499 inhabitants, 93.53% of referenda were binding for the municipal bodies, while only 25.00% in large municipalities with 20,000 and more inhabitants. In total, 70.98% of local referenda were binding in the examined period.

The higher participation rate of inhabitants in smaller municipalities might be related to the thematic focus of referenda as presented in Tab. 4. Most referenda in the municipalities up to 4,999 inhabitants were focused on territorial development, environment, alternative sources of power and infrastructure. The overwhelming majority of questions asked in these municipalities can be deemed affecting the entire local community, and most of them can be considered NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) which residents try to prevent. Therefore, inhabitants were highly motivated to participate in the local referenda to decide on them. For instance, the referendum in Vísky with the turnout of 96.8% concerned with the construction of a military radar base. The results of the classification analysis revealed three main NIMBY projects (questions) in the municipalities up to 4,999 inhabitants in the period 2006-2019, i.e.:

- construction of a military radar base of the United States of America in the Brdy military district (19 referenda, 16 of them binding, median turnout 65.70%);
- expansion of the Vodochody Airport (11 referenda, all binding, median turnout 59.40%); and
- construction of a deep nuclear waste repository (13 local referenda, 12 of them binding, median turnout 73.30%).

Tab. 4 Thematic focus of local referenda in the size categories of municipalities in 2006-2019

Thematic category	1-499 inhabitants		500-1,999 inhabitants		2,000-4,999 inhabitants		5,000-19,999 inhabitants		20,000 and more inhabitants	
	abs. value	%	abs. value	%	abs. value	%	abs. value	%	abs. value	%
Territorial development	28 (27*)	32.18	38 (32.5)	35.85	17 (15)	45.94	12 (2)	35.30	4 (1)	16.67
Environment	16 (16)	18.39	11 (9)	10.38	2 (1)	5.41	2 (2)	5.88	1 (0)	4.17
Alternative sources of power	20 (19)	22.99	16 (11)	15.09	2 (1)	5.41	2 (0)	5.88	0 (-)	0.00
Municipal property	13 (8.5*)	14.94	16 (10)	15.09	10 (5)	27.03	11 (5)	32.35	8 (3)	33.33
Infrastructure	7 (7)	8.05	11 (10)	10.38	4 (3)	10.81	2 (2)	5.88	2 (1)	8.33
Public order	2 (1)	2.30	3 (3)	2.83	1 (0)	2.70	5 (1)	14.71	8 (1)	33.33
Municipal boundaries	1 (1)	1.15	11 (5)	10.38	1 (0)	2.70	0 (-)	0.00	1 (0)	4.17
Total	87 (79.5)	100	106 (80.5)	100	37 (25)	100	34 (12)	100	24 (6)	100

Notes: The numbers of binding local referenda are presented in parentheses. The asterisk (*) means that the result of one local referendum in the relevant thematic category is not publicly available.

Source: author's calculations

In large municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants, the referendum topic does not often affect the entire local community, partly due to the municipal area. Thus, the “untouched” residents do not have any motivation to participate in the decision-making in the municipality. This corresponds with the obtained results. For instance, in local referenda falling within the thematic category of territorial development, only 3 out of 16 referenda in the municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants were binding and the median turnout reached only 25.90%.

Correlation matrix in Tab. 5 presents the correlation coefficients indicating the relationship between the size of the municipality (defined by the number of inhabitants), where local referenda were held, and turnout and binding force, respectively. The calculated coefficients show a slightly negative correlation between the size of the municipality and the turnout and binding force as well. Thus, the results confirm above presented descriptive

statistics. A strong positive correlation between the turnout and the binding force is understandable given the rules for the binding force stipulated in the Czech Act on Local Referendum.

Tab. 5: Correlation matrix (number of observations $n = 286$)

n_inhabitants_2	turnout	binding	n_inhabitants_2
1.0000	-0.2470	-0.2861	n_inhabitants_2
	1.0000	0.6673	turnout
		1.0000	binding

Source: author's calculations

Higher participation of inhabitants in local referenda in larger municipalities could be endorsed by digitalisation, i.e. by the introduction of electronic referenda (e-voting). Since 1 July 2018, the Czech identification cards have been issued with a contact chip enabling unique identification of citizens in the internet environment. If the Local Referendum Act is amended, residents of municipalities will be allowed to vote from their home and will not have to visit polling stations. The comfortable possibility to vote from home could persuade people who are not directly affected by the topic of a referendum to participate in it. On electronic referenda related to the tools of e-participation of citizens in local government, pointed out Hampl and Jaňurová (2019) as well.

4. Conclusion

The local referendum is the only tool of direct democracy in the Czech Republic, allowing citizens to participate in decision-making on issues falling within the independent competence of municipalities directly. The paper was devoted to the assessment of the use, voter turnout, binding force and thematic focus of local referenda in the Czech municipalities with respect to their size defined by their population in the period 2006-2019. A total of 288 local referenda took place in 270 municipalities (including city districts, city boroughs and parts of independent municipalities) in the examined period.

Out of a total number of 288 local referenda, 193 were held in the small municipalities up to 1,999 inhabitants which is related to a highly fragmented municipal structure in the Czech Republic. However, the results of binary logistic regression did not show a statistically significant relationship between the size of the municipality and the holding of a local referendum. The highest participation rate of residents in local referenda was found out in the small municipalities with 1-499 inhabitants (median 66.60%). On the contrary, the lowest participation was observed in the municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants (median 23.35%). The calculated correlation coefficients showed a slightly negative correlation between the size of the municipality and the turnout. The low turnout in the larger municipalities might be explained by the referendum topic which does not directly affect all citizens in these municipalities and does not motivate them to participate in the referendum. Given the legal regulation of binding force, the most binding referenda were held in smaller municipalities as well.

Thematically, local referenda focused on territorial development, environment, alternative sources of power and infrastructure predominate in the municipalities up to 4,999 inhabitants. On the contrary, referenda on municipal property and public order prevail in the larger ones with more than 5,000 inhabitants.

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