

# MEASURING QUALITY OF SUBNATIONAL DEMOCRACY: DEMOCRATIC COMPETITION AND PARTICIPATION IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONS, 1998–2020

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*The present article aims to contribute to a better understanding of quality of subnational (regional) democracy in post-communist Czech Republic and Poland. Following Dahl's procedural definition of democracy, we focus on two theoretical constitutive dimensions of democracy – participation and competition – and understand high-quality democracy as a type defined by a combination of high levels of both participation and competition. By analysing all six regional elections since the establishment of self-governing regions in both the Czech Republic and Poland, we found that neither Czech nor Polish regions can be consistently classified between the four categories of quality of democracy defined, namely high-quality democracy, uncompetitive participatory democracy, competitive non-participatory democracy, and limited democracy. The substantial inter-electoral oscillation of quality of democracy types at the level of both countries as well as individual regions is primarily caused by a highly limited inter-electoral stability of competitiveness, as opposed to highly stable participation levels.*

**Key words:** quality of democracy; subnational democracy; regional elections; Czech Republic; Poland.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Democracy studies have a long tradition. The conditions contributing to democratization have become one of the important questions in this field of research (Lipset 1994; Geddes 1999; Teorell 2010). However, despite a comprehensive body of research on quality of democracy at the national level (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Diamond and Morlino, 2004; Roberts 2010; Bühlmann et al. 2012), only a very limited number of studies have explored

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quality of democracy at subnational levels.

Most scholars thus overlook that democracy may vary across territories (McMann 2018; Schakel and Massetti 2018) although it was almost five decades ago that Dahl's seminal book (1971) referred to the choice of analysing democratization at national level (so-called "national regimes") as "a grave omission", arguing that opportunities for contestation and participation (two of Dahl's dimensions of democratization) may considerably differ between a country's subnational units (Dahl 1971).

The topic of quality of regional democracy is particularly important for two reasons. First, the importance of its measurement is associated with the continuing process of transfer of policy competences and powers from central to regional government, which resulted (approximately since the 1970s) in the emergence of many regions as full-fledged democratic political systems (Dandoy et al. 2018), together with regional differentiation of processes such as political representation, participation, competition, or accountability (Loughlin et al. 2011). Second, this research gap also exists because there is only a very limited theoretical and methodological framework to assess quality of regional democracy and, at the same time, it is challenging to collect comparable data – and the lack of existing datasets prevents an effort to explain how various dimensions and factors of democratic quality account for observed differences at the regional level.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we seek to offer a research design for evaluating quality of democracy and assessing to what extent quality of regional democracy varies within and across countries. Our second aim is to use this research framework to analyse quality of subnational democracy (and its variation) in Czech and Polish regions.<sup>2</sup> So, we analyse data on electoral competition in all six regional elections from the establishment of self-governing regions in Poland (1998) and the Czech Republic (2000) to the most recent regional elections in 2018 (Poland) and 2020 (the Czech Republic) in 16 Polish voivodships (*województwo*) and 14 Czech regions (*kraj*).<sup>3</sup>

This paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly review the existing literature on quality of democracy. In the second part, the theoretical framework on quality of subnational democracy is presented. In the third part, the methods of analysis are introduced. In the fourth part, an analysis of quality of subnational democracy in Czech and Polish regions is presented, and then the concluding section formulates some implications of the results for further research.

## 2 MEASURING QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

As we mentioned above, democracy studies have a long tradition. At the same time, a large part of the authors studying democratization processes emphasize

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<sup>2</sup> Generally, the term subnational can refer to both local and regional level. In this paper, the term subnational democracy refers to regional democracy unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> The Czech and Polish regions were selected as case studies because while they differ in some aspects, as for instance size (see Swianiewicz 2011, 2014b; Janas and Jánošková 2022), the main similarity is that regional governments in both countries have relatively narrow functions compared to municipalities (see Swianiewicz 2014a) and they score very low on the level of legal authority (so-called the Regional Authority Index – RAI) in the domains of 'self-rule' within the region and 'shared rule' within the country (see Hooghe et al. 2008; Marks et al. 2008).

that the field's current central question is no longer whether a political system can be deemed democratic but rather how a stable democracy can be established and how it can be maintained in good shape so that citizens remain satisfied and engaged. Thus, the issue arises of evaluating the quality of democracy and its variability between countries (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Levine and Molina 2011; Bühlmann et al. 2012).

However, most of the research at subnational levels has focused rather on the spatially uneven nature of democracy and democratization between regions or the persistence of less democratic or authoritarian enclaves within national-level democracies, especially in some selected areas such as Russia (Saikkonen 2016) or Latin America (Giraudy 2013), or only on some aspects of regional politics such as party competition (Schakel 2017), the executive branch (Schakel and Massetti 2018) or quality of governance (Charron et al. 2014). This is also true for Czech and Polish research, where previous studies have especially focused on form of electoral competition and demonstrated that Czech and Polish regional elections can be deemed second-order national elections. As such, they are less important for the workings of the political system because they only decide about institutions with weaker responsibilities and make no direct impact on the functioning of national executives (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Furthermore, as second-order, Czech and Polish regional elections were dominated by nationwide campaign issues and parties, with changing trends in national-level party support followed at the subnational levels of government (Gagatek and Kotnarowski 2017; Šárovec 2017; Pink and Eibl 2018; Gagateg and Tybuchowska-Hartlińska 2020; Kouba and Lysek 2021).

Overall, democracy research at the regional level is rather limited, recent, and far-from-systematic in terms of empirical scope and theoretical development, compared to research at the national level. One of the exceptions is a study of Dandoy et al. (2018), who present a design for analysing institutional characteristics of subnational political systems, including the democratic and policy outcomes of regional institutions. While the authors' aim was to adapt Lijphart's approach (2012), differentiating between consensus and majoritarian democracies as a tool to measure the variation in subnational patterns of democracy, they focused more on institutional patterns of regional democracy (and their impact on democratic performance and socio-economic public policies) than on quality of democracy. More importantly, their attempt was limited to listing possible indicators for measuring patterns of subnational democracy, without operationalizing them.

A partly similar (and much more empirical) approach was taken by authors who tried to verify whether subnational patterns of consensus and majoritarian democracies exist within federal states. Here, Vatter and Stadelmann-Steffen (2013) replicated Lijphart's analysis in three federal states of Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and Bernauer and Vatter (2019) also included the United States in the analysis. Overall, the results of the above-mentioned studies can be summarized by Vatter and Stadelmann-Steffen's (2013) claim that Lijphart's two dimensions of democracy can be distinguished at subnational level as well. This, however, resulted in the formulation of an important question for further research: Do the various models of regional democracy make a difference for quality of democracy?

Furthermore, even the most developed democratic ranking systems (e.g., the Democratic Barometer or the Varieties of Democracy [V-Dem] Project) capture

only a limited set of indicators associated with subnational levels. For instance, V-Dem includes indicators of elections, government authority and constraints, and civil liberties. However, as these indicators evaluate especially the freeness and fairness of subnational elections or participatory opportunities for citizens (e.g., their legal framework rather than the real level of participation in these processes), they measure level of democracy rather than quality of democracy. Thus, while they can serve as a useful tool to identify subnational political units that are less or more democratic than their national regimes (we understand democratic national regime as a precondition for evaluating quality of democracy), they cannot adequately evaluate the varying quality of democracy across several dimensions in individual subnational units of a specific country or in cross-country comparison.

Finally, most of the works concerning quality of democracy ignore subnational levels, although attention to subnational politics can help to expand knowledge in many areas such as theories of democratization and regime change, regime typologies, development, or governance (McMann 2018). More importantly, this more fine-grained (subnational) focus offers several other advantages: (1) increasing the number of observations and thus mitigating the limitation of a small-N research design; (2) strengthening the capacity to accurately code cases and thus make valid causal inferences; (3) better handling the spatially uneven nature of major political processes (Snyder 2001).

### 3 CONCEPTUALIZING QUALITY OF SUBNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Before we focus on conceptualizing the quality of subnational democracy, one important issue must be mentioned which is associated with conceptualizing quality of democracy as such. There is no clear agreement either on defining democracy as a root concept or on how it is to be measured. Therefore, the first objective of this paper is to describe existing approaches and subsequently to present a conceptualization or a theoretical framework enabling us to address some problematic issues of quality of democracy research.

As most studies of democratic quality at the national level employ Dahl's (1971) procedural definition of democracy (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Diamond and Morlino, 2004 Levine and Molina 2011; Bühlmann et al. 2012; Gwiazda 2016), we follow this approach as well. According to the procedural definition, quality of democracy depends on the role of institutions and their mutual relations. Moreover, we assume that the concept of democratic quality should rest on both a normative and an empirical basis. The normative basis serves to define standards for evaluating democratic functioning, while the empirical basis shows the extent to which those standards are met by existing democracies (Roberts 2010). Therefore, higher quality of democracy should be indicated by higher consistence of empirical cases with the definition of democracy as a quality of democracy benchmark (Lauth 2016).

The theoretical approach of the paper is, therefore, based on the assumption that a principal role in quality of democracy assessment is played by analysis of the institutions and mechanisms of representative democracy, thus by the procedural conception of democracy and the view of democracy as a political system providing citizens with legal opportunities for participation and contestation. These are reflected in real patterns of behaviour, giving citizens and organized civil society the tools to check on politicians and political institutions.

They thus meet democratic standards such as representativeness, responsibility, equality, and participation. However, an analysis of democratic quality based on a procedural delimitation should avoid both the minimal (electoral) definition of democracy (Schumpeter 1943[2006]) and the maximalist approach (Ringen 2011; Geissel 2016) based on assessing policy outputs and responsiveness – because the inclusion of social and economic equality (as the output dimensions of the political system) “over-stretches” the concept of democratic quality and leads to evaluating the effectiveness of government in terms of socio-economic performance instead of democratic quality in terms of procedures (Gwiazda 2016).

Therefore, we regard democracy as a set of institutions and procedures, as well as institutional accountability of procedures, that allow for democratic governance and decision making, free contestation, institutionalized constraints in the exercise of political power, measures to make government accountable to people, and citizens’ opportunities to participate (as politically equal individuals) and effectively express their preferences for alternative policies (thus to influence government) when choosing their political representatives in free and fair elections. Finally, as our conceptualization is based on Dahl’s procedural democracy, we focus especially on two theoretical dimensions of democratization (or quality of democracy), namely inclusiveness (participation) and liberalization (contestation) (Dahl 1971) and conceptually, we understand the democracy as a regime type defined by a combination of high levels of participation and competition.

## 4 METHODS

### 4.1 Effective participation

In studies of democratic quality, political participation is closely associated with political equality (Diamond and Morlino 2004; Bühlmann et al. 2012) and represents one of Dahl’s (1971) theoretical dimensions of democratization, namely inclusiveness, which refers to the extent of one’s right to participate in political life. In Dahl’s approach, participation reflects the right to participate in the decision-making process rather than the real level of electoral participation, whereas other authors (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Bühlmann et al. 2012) argue that the dimension of inclusiveness reflects not only one’s degree of political participation or the extent of the right to vote (equality of participation) but also the actual level of both electoral and non-electoral participation.

Despite some opposing views (Rosema 2007), most authors agree that political participation is one of the basic indicators of democratic quality (Lijphart 1997), people’s active involvement in the political process is a necessary condition of successful democratic functioning, and low voter turnout is symptomatic of a crisis of democracy (Norris 2002) or people’s dissatisfaction with its functioning (Karp and Milazzo 2015). A higher level of participation, thus, makes government activities more responsive to broader segments of the population (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002) – something that can be best achieved when participation is as widespread as possible, because different social groups participate differently in elections, and less affluent individuals are systematically affected by low levels of electoral participation. This results in unequal influence of different population groups on political decision making (Lijphart 1997) and violates one of the fundamental normative assumptions of democracy, namely that every

citizen of the democratic polity should have equal influence on political decision making (Dahl 1989). For those reasons, we use the level of voter turnout in elections to regional assemblies in the Czech Republic and Poland as an indicator of so-called effective participation, because any changes in the level of voter turnout may signify growing mobilization of discontented population groups and a crisis of the democratic regime's legitimacy that potentially jeopardizes its stability. However, to ensure equivalence of the values of participation with the indicator of competition, we divide voter turnout by 100, so the value of effective participation ranges along a scale from zero (0% turnout) to 1 (100% turnout).

#### 4.2 Effective competition

Concerning the dimension of competition, political parties continue to be the main means of channelling people's demands into the political decision-making process. Furthermore, free party competition or contestation is one of the fundamental conditions of democracy.<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in Dahl's (1971) dimension of liberalization, which refers to the extent to which political opposition can compete for power. Therefore, if the party system is viewed as a system of interactions arising from interparty competition (Sartori 2005), the quality of those interactions represents the central focus of quality of subnational democracy in the dimension of contestation/competition. Furthermore, there is a consensus that vibrant contestation is a necessary condition for democracy because it implies electoral uncertainty of the party competition, as no actor is sure who will win the election, so called "institutionalized uncertainty" (Przeworski 1991, 14) and the stable patterns of interparty competition is also one of the necessary conditions of democratic consolidation (Morlino 1995).

Like in the case of participation, we measure the competitiveness dimension using the effective version of the indicator, partly building on an operationalization presented by Altman and Pérez-Liñán (1999, 2002). They define effective competition as one where opposition parties enjoy access to policy making and the extent to which they can present an alternative to the government coalition – or as the vote share differential between government and opposition parties. Government parties are defined as those represented in the legislature (here regional assembly) and belonging to a formal government coalition (here regional government), whereas opposition parties are all other parties represented in the regional assembly and not directly participating in regional government, although they may support that government in some cases (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Centellas 2011). Thus, legislative coalitions are not considered government coalitions.

As it is important to penalize party system fragmentation (or fragmentation of assembly, more precisely), Altman and Pérez-Liñán (2002) created the "typical party" in government and in the opposition by weighting the shares of seats in favour of the largest parties. The size of the "typical party in government" is, then, calculated as:

$$G = \frac{\sum g_i^2}{\sum g_i}$$

where  $G$  is the size of the typical government party and  $g_i$  is the share of seats for

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<sup>4</sup> Dahl (1971) refers to the liberalization dimension interchangeably as liberalization, political competition, competitive politics, public contestation, and public opposition.



the  $i$ -th government party. By analogy, the size of a “typical opposition party” is calculated as:

$$O = \frac{\sum o_i^2}{\sum o_i}$$

where  $O$  is the size of the typical opposition party and  $o_i$  is the share of seats for the  $i$ -th opposition party. In the final step, Altman and Pérez-Liñán use the values of  $G$  and  $O$  to calculate their index of competitiveness ( $C$ ) as follows:

$$C = 1 - \left| \frac{G - O}{100} \right|$$

The value of  $C$  tends to zero whenever the government (or the opposition) controls the whole legislature and to one when there is a balance between government and opposition; thus, growing competitiveness is indicated by growing  $C$  values and decreasing competitiveness by a decline of  $C$ . The competitiveness index is a measure of potential contestation (rather than closeness in the races) and considers any consociational agreement dividing the legislative seats to be effective power sharing, even if distribution of votes is not that even (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002, 98).

Centellas (2011), among others, points to the strength of this solution (calculating weighted  $G$  and  $O$ ) in identifying the relative size of the government and opposition blocs instead of their mere aggregate seat shares (Centellas argues that the latter fails to reflect fragmentation and the individual parties' seat shares). At the same time, this calculation assumes that one-party governments with a large share of seats in the legislature are more effective at implementing their policies than multi-party government coalitions, even if both control the same aggregate number of seats in the legislature (Centellas 2011, 13).

At the same time, the fact that  $G$  and  $O$  are calculated as weighted means of the seat differential between government and opposition parties' results in two characteristics of the competitiveness index. On one hand, the index provides a very good indication of situations when the main (or even the only) government party is considerably stronger than all other parties (whether in government or opposition). On the other hand, it performs much poorer when coalitions consist of equally strong parties, which may especially be a problem in multiparty systems with balanced party sizes, including most Czech regional party systems.<sup>5</sup> For that reason, we opt for calculating the competitiveness index based on aggregate seat shares of government ( $G$ ) and opposition ( $O$ ) parties, rather than their weighted seat shares.

Finally, we consider the issue of quality of democracy in Czech and Polish regions following Dahl's (1971) typology, with four regime types constructed along the dimensions of participation and competition: 1) closed hegemonies (low

<sup>5</sup> For example, for a single-party government enjoying an absolute majority of 55.56 or 62.0% of the seats,  $C$  equals 0.664 and 0.554, respectively, indicating a steep decline of competitiveness (the Podlaskie and Subcarpathian voivodeships in the 1998 elections). In contrast, for a two-party coalition backed by 64% of the seats (where the stronger party alone has 54% of the seats),  $C$  rises to 0.818 (Pomeranian voivodeship in the 1998 election) and similarly, a two-party coalition with 71.11% of the seats where the stronger party alone does not have more than half of the seats results in a relatively high  $C$  level (0.796), which does not fully correspond with the real strengths of the government and opposition blocs (Holly Cross voivodeship in the 1998 election).

participation, low competition); 2) inclusive hegemonies (high participation, low competition); 3) competitive oligarchies (low participation, high competition); and 4) polyarchies (high participation, high competition) (see Dahl 1971, 6–9). Nevertheless, as our analysis builds on the effective version of both dimensions' indicators, we use a different terminology in line with Centellas' (2011) study of quality of democracy in Latin America (Table 1).

**TABLE 1: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY BASED ON THE DIMENSIONS OF COMPETITION AND PARTICIPATION**

	<b>Low participation</b>	<b>High participation</b>
<b>High competition</b>	Competitive non-participatory democracies	High-quality democracy
<b>Low competition</b>	Limited democracies	Uncompetitive participatory democracies

Source: Author, according to Dahl (1971) and Centellas (2011).

In the two-dimensional approach to quality of democracy assessment, it is important to define the cut-off points between “high” and “low” levels of competition and participation. Here, Centellas chooses two solutions. The first choice (Centellas 2011) is based on 50% cut-off points (or the 0.5 value more precisely) and the second (Centellas 2000) on the values of 0.4 in the case of participation and 0.6 for competition.

Nevertheless, both these solutions are problematic because Centellas fails to explain why he chose those cut-off points between low/high participation and competitiveness. Using the value 0.5 in the Czech and Polish cases is problematic especially for participation, as voter turnout did not exceed 50% in either of the six Czech regional elections in either region; the situation was only slightly more favourable in the Polish case, as most voivodeships did pass the threshold (albeit by relatively low margins) in the 2018 elections but few did in the other elections. For this reason, the cut-off points proposed by Centellas fail to provide relevant differentiation of quality of democracy between the different regions of Poland and Czechia.

Similarly, if the second definition of cut-off points were used, at 0.4 for effective participation and 0.6 for effective competitiveness, respectively, more than two-thirds of Czech regions (58 cases or 69.0%) would be classified as competitive non-participatory democracies, while the other types would be only weakly represented. Again, this solution would not sufficiently reflect the divergent forms of quality of democracy across regions.

For these reasons, an alternative solution was designed. After calculating basic measures of central tendency (separately for each regional election in Czechia and Poland), we defined the cut-off points of 0.36 for effective participation and 0.78 for effective competitiveness in the Czech case and 0.47 for effective participation and 0.80 for effective competitiveness in the case of Poland.<sup>6</sup>

Even a basic comparison reveals a much higher classification performance for the cut-off points used by us. Whereas Centellas' cut-off points concentrated more

<sup>6</sup> The Czech dataset of all regional elections exhibits the following values of central tendency: effective participation index – mode (0.284), median (0.364), mean (0.360); effective competitiveness index – mode (0.800), median (0.800), mean (0.780). The Polish regional election dataset exhibits the following values of central tendency: effective participation index – mode (0.459), median (0.467), mean (0.474); effective competitiveness index – mode (0.889), median (0.851), mean (0.796).



than two-thirds of Czech cases in the competitive nonparticipative category and left the other types with only limited representation, our definition of cut-off points led to a much better differentiation of quality of democracy between regions. More specifically, then (see below for more details), the different types range from almost one-fifth to one-third (for Czech regions) and from one-seventh to one-third (for Polish voivodeships).

There is one disadvantage to the solution proposed by us: defining cut-off points separately for each country makes subsequent comparison difficult. On the other hand, especially in the case of participation, there may exist significant country differences in voter turnout because of contextual factors (e.g., different extent to which regional elections are second order based on different levels of autonomy of regional councils, or the authority in self-rule and shared rule exercised by regional governments). As a result, a common definition of cut-off points might obscure those contextual differences and misrepresent quality of democracy in the individual countries.

## 5 QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONS

In the first step, a descriptive analysis of the development of the effective participation and effective competitiveness indexes reveals low levels of interregional variability (in terms of the coefficient of variation), especially for voter turnout. This suggests an overall rather minor oscillation of electoral participation and competitiveness in the different regions.<sup>7</sup> Especially, values of effective competitiveness are almost the same in both countries, both minimum, maximum and mean. In contrast, values of turnout vary much more, when average turnout in Polish regional elections is more than 10 percentage points above the Czech case.

More specifically, whereas the mean values of participation in Czech regions range between 0.309 (Karlovy Vary) and 0.409 (Prague), competitiveness lies in the range of 0.689 (Zlín) to 0.874 (Plzeň). Similarly, Polish regions exhibit values of effective participation between 0.425 (Opole) and 0.519 (Holy Cross) and a competitiveness index ranging from 0.624 (Kuyavia-Pomerania) to 0.914 (Lublin).

TABLE 2: AGGREGATE LEVELS OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEXES FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020

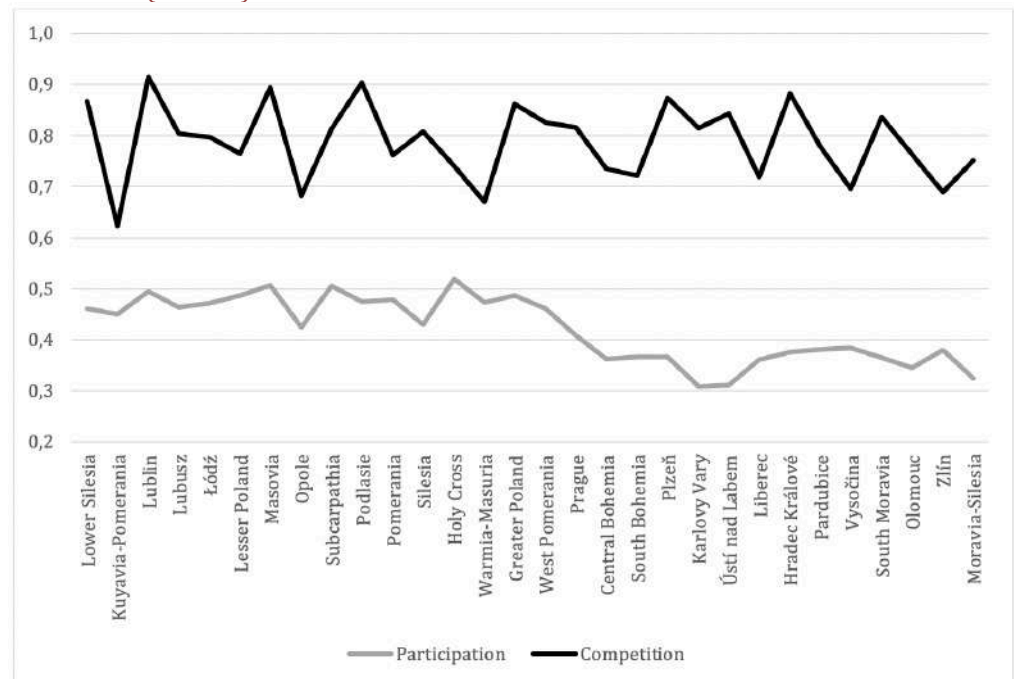
	Lowest	Highest	Mean	Coefficient of variation
Participation – Czech Republic	0.250	0.464	0.360	12.6
Participation – Poland	0.380	0.610	0.474	9.0
Competition – Czech Republic	0.364	0.985	0.780	19.6
Competition – Poland	0.333	1.000	0.796	19.5

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

<sup>7</sup> Coefficients of variation were used to indicate relative variability. Expressed as a percentage, the coefficient is calculated as standard deviation ÷ mean × 100% and shows the variability of a random variable's probability distribution. The higher the coefficient of variation, the higher the differences between units of observation.

However, a much more interesting question is whether the levels of participation and competition vary between regions, as well as between consecutive elections within regions. To start with interregional differences (Figure 1), there is considerable variability, especially in the case of competitiveness. At the same time, these differences are much higher in Poland, where the governing parties have strong dominance in some regional councils (especially the Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Warmian-Masurian, and Opole voivodeships). But also in the Czech Republic, there are several regions where the opposition has only small influence on regional political decision making (e.g., the Zlín, Vysočina, Liberec, South Bohemian, and Central Bohemian regions). In the contrasting case of participation, the differences between individual regions are much smaller, although some regions again show very low values of voter turnout in the long-term comparison (the Opole and Silesian voivodeships in Poland, or the Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem and Moravian-Silesian regions in the Czech Republic).

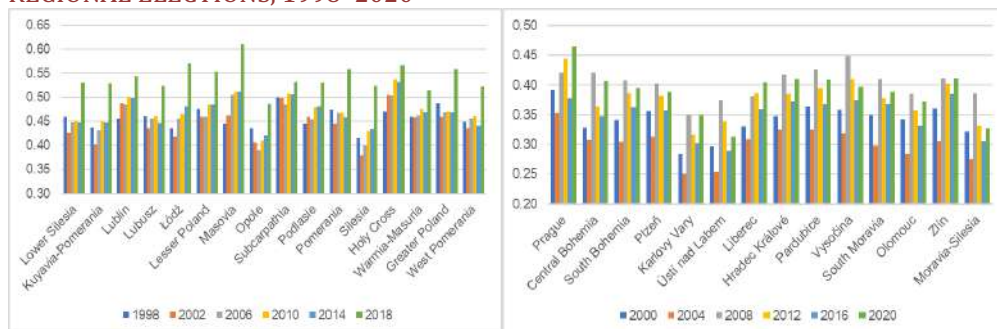
FIGURE 1: AGGREGATE LEVELS OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEXES FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020 (MEANS)



Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

On the other hand, significant differences in both dimensions also exist within specific regions. Here again, variability is much smaller in the case of effective participation, with constant levels across almost all regions, and transformations of the index are associated with an overall rise or decline of participation in specific elections, e.g., in Poland's most recent regional elections of 2018. More specifically, effective participation in Czech regions ranges between 0.250 (Karlovy Vary) and 0.464 (Prague), whereas Poland exhibits values from 0.380 (Silesia) to 0.610 (Masovia). More importantly, there is a much smaller variance in electoral turnout between Polish regional elections (apart from the 2018 elections) than in the Czech case.

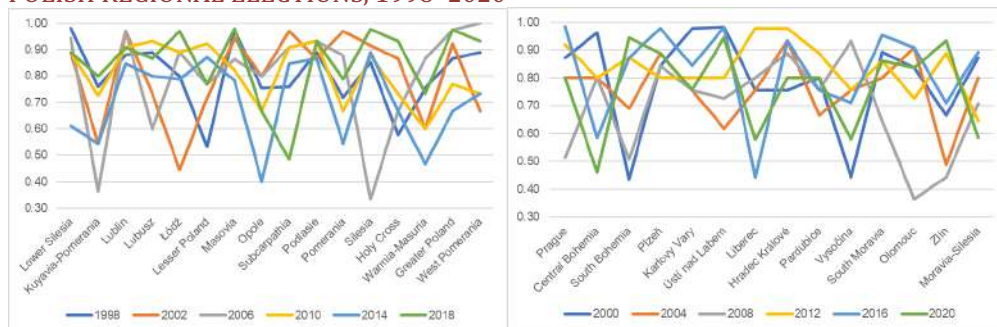
FIGURE 2: VALUES OF THE EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEX FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020



Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

Compared to participation, the competitiveness index tends to significantly change within one region between elections, so that a region that had low competitiveness in one election may have a very high level of competitiveness in another election and vice versa. This finding applies to both countries, as only three regions in the Czech Republic (Plzeň, Karlovy Vary and Hradec Králové) and three in Poland (Lublin, Podlasie, Masovia) exhibit relatively a constant index of competitiveness without a significant decrease. In contrast, the balance between governing and opposition parties varies considerably in most regions. For instance, the Silesian voivodeship exhibits a range between 0.333 and 0.978, the Łódź voivodeship between 0.444 and 0.970, the Warmian-Masurian voivodeship 0.467 and 0.867, or the Subcarpathian voivodeship between 0.485 and 0.970. Similarly, the index of competitiveness in Czech regions varies considerably in the South Bohemian Region (between 0.436 and 0.945), Liberec (0.444 to 0.978), Vysočina (0.444 to 0.933), or Zlín (0.444 and 0.933).

FIGURE 3: VALUES OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS INDEX FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020



Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

The above-mentioned conclusion is also confirmed by the values of the correlation coefficients between successive elections for both indexes (Table 3). Here, too, we see a very strong correlation in the case of participation. Correlation coefficients for regional turnout between consecutive elections in the Czech Republic range from 0.78 (the elections in 2008 and 2012) to 0.91 (2000–2004), or in the case of Poland from 0.69 (2014–2018) to 0.96 (2010–2014). In the contrasting case of competitiveness, the correlation values are medium at most (0.26 for 2004–2008 in the Czech Republic and 0.29 for 2014–2018 in Poland, with one exception in each country) and in some cases, we even see a trivial or negative relationship. The above findings demonstrate an extremely limited inter-electoral stability of competitiveness in the different regional assemblies, in stark contrast to extremely stable levels of electoral participation.

TABLE 3: INTER-ELECTORAL STABILITY OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEXES FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998-2020

		Participation - Czech Republic					
		2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
2000		-	0.912	0.784	0.919	0.856	0.823
2004			-	0.802	0.920	0.879	0.919
2008				-	0.775	0.779	0.657
2012					-	0.885	0.884
2016						-	0.885
		Participation - Poland					
		1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
1998		-	0.201	0.236	0.257	0.142	0.403
2002			-	0.204	0.187	0.218	-0.034
2006				-	0.010	-0.009	-0.044
2010					-	0.859	0.181
2014						-	0.293
		Competitiveness - Czech Republic					
		2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
2000		-	0.208	0.037	-0.160	0.220	-0.073
2004			-	0.256	-0.123	0.274	-0.276
2008				-	0.052	-0.242	-0.498
2012					-	-0.228	0.224
2016						-	0.643
		Competitiveness - Poland					
		1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
1998		-	0.201	0.236	0.257	0.142	0.403
2002			-	0.204	0.187	0.218	-0.034
2006				-	0.010	-0.009	-0.044
2010					-	0.859	0.181
2014						-	0.293

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

In the final step of our analysis, we attempt to classify quality of democracy in individual regions along the dimensions of participation and competition. Table 4 summarizes the results of simultaneous analysis of both dimensions (participation and competitiveness). Even a basic comparison of the cut-off points defined by us with those used by Centellas demonstrates a much better classification performance of our solution, with a relatively even distribution of regions into the different segments of the graph (Figure 4). Thus, the most frequently occurring type in the Czech Republic is high-quality democracy (33.3%), followed by competitive non-participatory democracy (26.2%), limited democracy (21.4%), and finally uncompetitive participatory democracy (19.0%). The most common variant among Polish regions is competitive non-participatory democracy (30.2%), followed by high-quality democracy (29.2%), limited democracy (25.0%), and finally uncompetitive participatory democracy (15.6%).

TABLE 4: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998-2020 (PERCENTAGES)

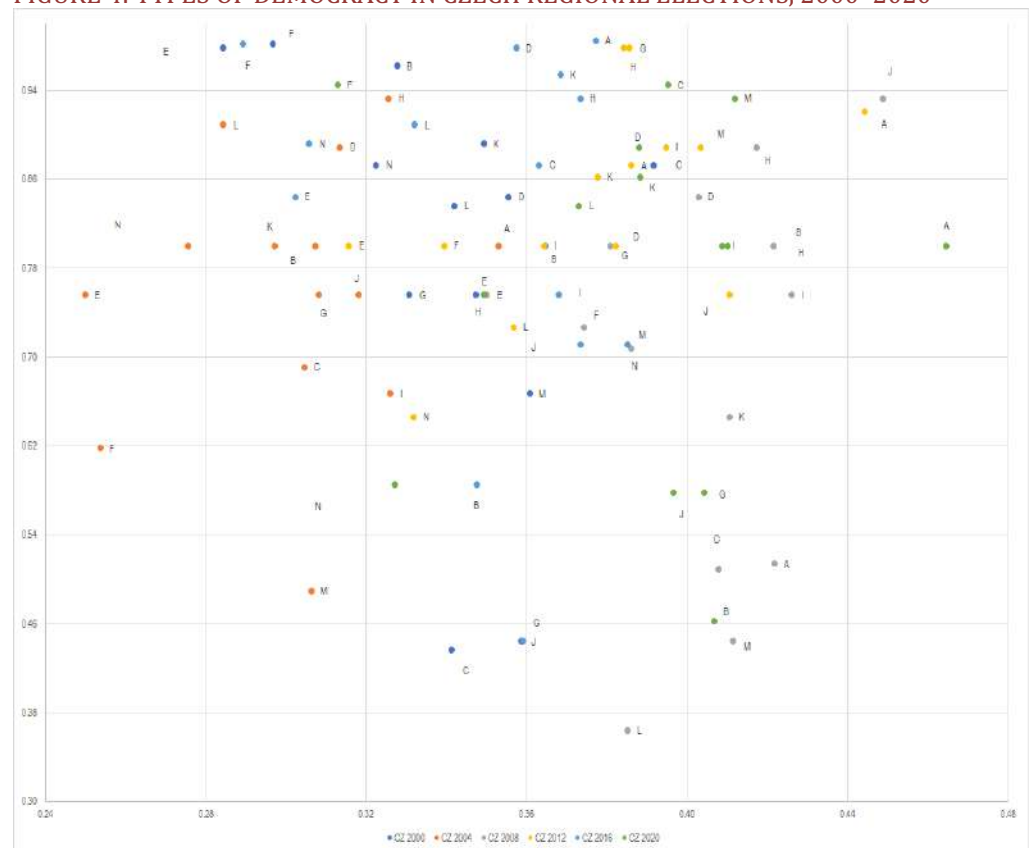
Region	High-quality democracy	Competitive non-participatory democracy	Uncompetitive participatory democracy	Limited democracy
Czech Republic	33.3	26.2	19.0	21.4
Poland	29.2	30.2	15.6	25.0

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

Beyond the mere enumeration of types and their proportions for the entire period of observation, a much more interesting question is whether some regions consistently fall within one of the above types or whether quality of democracy tends to strongly transform between regional elections. The distribution of Czech and Polish regions based on both dimensions of democracy is summarized in Figures 4 (Czech Republic) and 5 (Poland). It is immediately apparent that in neither country can most regions be assigned consistently, in the long-term, to one of the types defined (for better clarity, Appendix 1 summarizes the occurrences of each type in concrete regions). Despite that, several conclusions can be drawn.

To begin with the Czech Republic, the first finding is that high-quality democracy is primarily typical of Bohemian regions, which account for three out of four cases (4 cases were observed in Prague, followed by 3 cases in South Bohemia, Plzeň, Pardubice, etc.). Among Moravian regions, more occurrences (3) were only observed in South Moravia, and the overall situation would not change much even if Vysočina was reclassified as a Moravian region.<sup>8</sup> Then again, even some Bohemian regions were never classified in the high participation, high competitiveness category, namely Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem. The same applies to the Moravian-Silesian region in Moravia – and all three are the so-called structurally disadvantaged regions.

FIGURE 4: TYPES OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 2000–2020



Source: VOLBY.CZ, authors' own calculations. Note: A) Prague; B) Central Bohemia; C) South Bohemia; D) Plzeň; E) Karlovy Vary; F) Ústí nad Labem; G) Liberec; H) Hradec Králové; I) Pardubice; J) Vysočina; K) South Moravia; L) Olomouc; M) Zlín; N) Moravia-Silesia.

<sup>8</sup> Vysočina is the only Czech region stretching across the former land boundary between Bohemia and Moravia. Of the five former administrative districts that were merged into it, three belong to Moravia and two to Bohemia.



On the other hand, it cannot be confirmed that all these three structurally disadvantaged regions belong to the limited democracy category. Although the category, too, is dominated by Bohemian regions (two out of three), with the most occurrences in Karlovy Vary, but also Liberec (three each); two occurrences of limited participation and competitiveness were also observed in the Moravian-Silesian and Vysočina regions. Similarly, Bohemian regions dominate the category of competitive nonparticipative democracies (almost two out of three), especially those in the country’s west and northwest (Ústí nad Labem in 4 cases and Plzeň and Karlovy Vary in 3 cases). In Moravia, then, the combination of low voter turnout and a power balance between government and opposition is most often (in 3 cases) seen in the Olomouc and Moravian-Silesian regions. Finally, uncompetitive participative democracy is the only one of the four categories dominated by Moravian regions, after including Vysočina (3 occurrences, like Zlín), yet two occurrences are only observed in the Bohemian region of Pardubice.

FIGURE 5: TYPES OF DEMOCRACY IN POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 2000–2020



Source: PKW, authors’ own calculations. Note: A) Lower Silesia; B) Kuyavia-Pomerania; C) Lublin; D) Lubusz; E) Łódź; F) Lesser Poland; G) Masovia; H) Opole; I) Subcarpathia; J) Podlasie; K) Pomerania; L) Silesian; M) Holy Cross; N) Warmia-Masuria; O) Greater Poland; P) West Pomerania.

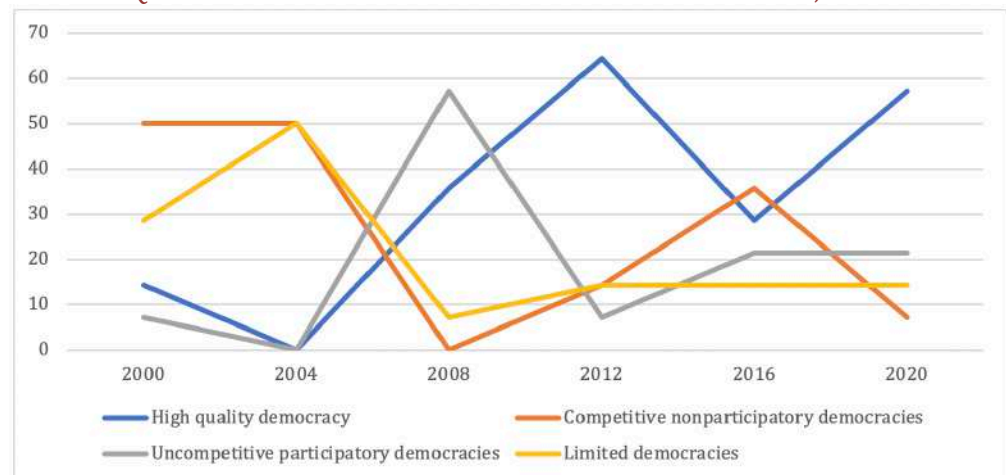
Moving on to Poland, high-quality democracies again concentrate in a part of the country, namely a contiguous territory of the three borderland voivodeships of Lublin (5 cases), Subcarpathia (4 cases) and Podlasie (3 cases) along with the south-eastern region of Holy Cross and the east-central Masovian region (3 cases). In contrast, all other regions exhibit only isolated occurrences of the combination of high participation and competitiveness. The next category of limited democracies is populated by the north-central region of Kuyavia-Pomerania (5 cases) along with two seaside regions – West Pomerania a Warmia-Masuria – and the southwestern region of Opole (each with three occurrences in the category). The combination of low voter turnout with balance between governing and opposition parties, then, is populated by 4 cases in regions bordering the Czech Republic,



Lower Silesia and Silesia, followed by the neighbouring regions of Lubusz and Łódź, and the north-eastern region of Podlasie (each with 3 occurrences in the category). In contrast, for the combination of high voter turnout and dominance of government parties in regional assemblies, which is generally the weakest category in Poland, there is only one region with at least 3 cases – Holy Cross.

The final question to attempt answering here is whether the proportions of the different types of democracy change over time. The development in Czech regional arenas (Figure 6) does not substantiate a clear answer to that question because the types strongly oscillate between elections. Perhaps the only rather apparent trend is the declining proportion of regions in which the combination of high participation and low competitiveness has been observed since the elections of 2012 (uncompetitive participatory democracies) or of limited democracies, where few occurrences of the combination of low voter willingness to participate in electing political representatives and dominance of government parties have been observed since the elections of 2008. Nevertheless, there is strong inter-electoral oscillation of the occurrence of high-quality democracies and competitive non-participatory democracies.

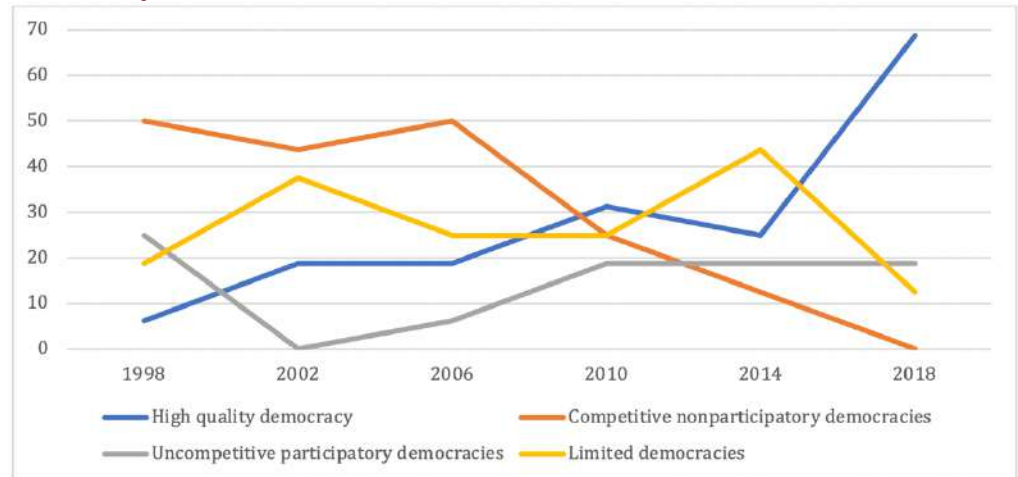
FIGURE 6: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 2000–2020



Source: VOLBY.CZ, authors' own calculations.

In contrast, some clearer trends are characteristic of the situation in Polish voivodeships (Figure 7). First, there has been a long-term decline of the proportion of regions with low turnout and balanced gains of government and opposition parties (competitive non-participatory democracies), from the most frequently occurring category in Poland's first three regional elections to zero occurrences in the most recent election. Second, there have consistently been relatively few occurrences of uncompetitive participatory democracies. In contrast, an almost constant long-term slight growth has been observed for the category of high-quality democracies, which became clearly dominant after the most recent election, whereas the category of limited democracies fails to exhibit any discernible trend and has remained at low levels.

FIGURE 7: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN POLAND REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2018



Source: PKW, authors' own calculations.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to offer a research design for evaluating quality of democracy at the regional level and use that research design in analysing a set of regional elections in the Czech Republic and Poland from the establishment of self-governing regions in each country to the most recent regional elections. As our conceptualization followed Dahl's procedural definition of democracy, we focused on two theoretical dimensions of democratization – participation and competition – and understood high-quality democracy as a type defined by a combination of high levels of both participation and competition. Furthermore, we used (in contrast to Dahl, but in accordance with the work of authors measuring quality of democracy) indicators of effective participation and competition to determine the different types of quality of democracy in specific regions and their development between elections.

Overall, our main conclusion is that in most cases, neither Czech nor Polish regions can be consistently, for most elections, classified in one of the four quality of democracy categories defined. Strong inter-electoral oscillation of the different types was observed. The only visible trend for Czech regions, then, is a rather low proportion of the categories of uncompetitive participatory democracies and limited democracies, while the shares of high-quality democracies and competitive non-participatory democracies tend to vary considerably between elections. In contrast, Poland exhibits a clear trend – a significant decrease of competitive non-participatory democracies together with a constant long-term slight growth of high-quality democracies, which became clearly dominant after the most recent election.

The substantial inter-electoral oscillation of quality of democracy types at the level of both countries as well as individual regions is primarily caused by a highly limited inter-electoral stability of competitiveness in the different regional assemblies (i.e., balance between the shares of seats held by government and opposition parties), in stark contrast to highly stable electoral participation. As a result, further research should pay detailed attention, above all, to the reasons behind the strong inter-electoral oscillation of competitiveness in individual regions of Czechia and Poland. Due to considerable shifts in the balance of power between government and opposition parties, regions that became high-level

democracies in one election shift to the category of uncompetitive participatory democracies in the next election (thus retaining their high voter turnout but experiencing a strong growth in the dominance of government parties) or even, in some cases, to the category of limited democracies.

The central question remains whether the main factors responsible for the strengthening/weakening role of opposition in regional assemblies can be traced back to the first-order arena. Indeed, as stated in the introduction, both Czech and Polish regional elections can be deemed second-order elections, which are dominated by nationwide parties and reflect changing trends in support for those parties as well as nationwide campaign issues (Gagatek and Tybuchowska-Hartlińska 2020; Kouba and Lysek 2021). Then again, the strongly variable dynamics of competitiveness between elections, and between regions, suggest that local (regional) context also plays a role – and the question is whether that context is also shaped primarily by nationwide factors, i.e., varying territorial support for nationwide parties in some regions (see Kouba 2007; Zarycki 2015; Maškarinec 2017; Grabowski 2019). That would support the effect of so-called top-down vertical spill-over between the national and regional party systems (see Schakel and Romanova 2021). At the same time, a possible horizontal spill-over should be considered, i.e., a situation when the political development in one or more regional arenas impacts on the shape of party competition in other regional arenas. Finally, as political development in a regional arena may also affect (and be affected by) the region's socioeconomic conditions, a combination of political as well as socioeconomic or other contextual factors appears as the suitable starting point for examining not only the reasons behind changing competitiveness but also the quality of democracy types across regions.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE 1: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020

Region	High-quality democracy	Competitive non-participatory democracy	Uncompetitive participatory democracy	Limited democracy
<b>CZECH REPUBLIC</b>				
Prague	4	1	1	-
Central Bohemian	2	2	1	1
South Bohemian	3	-	1	2
Plzeň	3	3	-	-
Karlovy Vary	-	3	-	3
Ústí nad Labem	-	4	1	1
Liberec	2	-	1	3
Hradec Králové	4	1	-	1
Pardubice	3	-	2	1
Vysočina	1	-	3	2
South Moravian	3	2	1	-
Olomouc	1	3	1	1
Zlín	2	-	3	1
Moravian-Silesian	-	3	1	2
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>26.2</b>	<b>19.0</b>	<b>21.4</b>
<b>POLAND</b>				
Lower Silesia	1	4	-	1
Kuyavia-Pomerania	1	-	-	5
Lublin	5	1	-	-
Lubusz	1	3	-	2
Łódź	1	3	1	1
Lesser Poland	2	-	2	2
Masovia	3	2	1	-
Opole	-	2	1	3
Subcarpathia	4	-	2	-
Podlasie	3	3	-	-
Pomerania	-	2	2	2
Silesia	1	4	-	1
Holy Cross	3	-	3	-
Warmia-Masuria	-	1	2	3
Greater Poland	2	2	1	1
West Pomerania	1	2	-	3
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>29.2</b>	<b>30.2</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>25.0</b>

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.





## **MERJENJE KAKOVOSTI SUBNACIONALNE DEMOKRACIJE: DEMOKRATIČNO TEKMOVANJE IN SODELOVANJE V ČEŠKIH IN POLJSKIH REGIJAH, 1998–2020**

*Namen članka je prispevati k boljšemu razumevanju kakovosti subnacionalne (regionalne) demokracije v dveh postkomunističnih državah, in sicer Češki in Poljski. Po Dahlovi proceduralni definiciji demokracije se osredotočamo na dve teoretični konstitutivni razsežnosti demokracije – sodelovanje in tekmovanje – in razumemo visokokakovostno demokracijo kot tip, ki ga opredeljuje kombinacija visokih stopenj sodelovanja in tekmovanja. Z analizo vseh šestih regionalnih volitev od ustanovitve samoupravnih regij tako na Češkem kot na Poljskem smo ugotovili, da ne čeških ne poljskih regij ni mogoče dosledno razvrstiti med štiri opredeljene kategorije kakovosti demokracije, ki so visokokakovostna demokracija, nekonkurenčna sodelovalna demokracija, konkurenčno nesodelovalna demokracija in omejena demokracija. Precejšnje medvolilno nihanje kakovosti tipov demokracije na ravni obeh držav in posameznih regij je predvsem posledica močno omejene medvolilne stabilnosti konkurenčnosti v nasprotju z zelo stabilnimi stopnjami sodelovanja.*

**Ključne besede:** kakovost demokracije; subnacionalna demokracija; regionalne volitve; Češka; Poljska.