

Conclusion

The physical proximity of the executive branch to the legislature can influence the dynamics of legislative–executive relations. When the executive branch is housed within the legislature building—as is the case in the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia—such proximity enables it to exert undue influence and undermine a legislature’s ability to carry out its legislative and scrutiny functions in tangible and intangible ways.

In assessing the influence of the physical proximity of the executive branch to the legislature during the past five years in the Australian Parliament and its overall effect on legislative–executive relations as compared to prior years, it is clear that the executive branch continues to dominate the policy process in the country.

However, regarding the magnitude of this dominance, the effects of physical proximity on legislative–executive relations have intensified during the tenure of the past two sessions of the parliaments compared with the previous one. That is, the executive branch has used the physical proximity in a more emboldened way to influence the legislative and scrutiny functions of the Australian Parliament. This physical proximity of the executive branch to the legislature and sharing the building weakens the legislature’s mastery of its own precinct. The legislature building and its precinct should be the exclusive domain of the legislature.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS OF POLARIZATION ON THE LAW-MAKING PROCESS

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Krastev (2020) predicted that the world would change significantly after the COVID-19 pandemic. The world probably has not changed to the extent that he estimated. However, society and politics remain divided. An example of extreme political polarization at the elite level is legislative–executive relations in the Czech Republic. This country is a consolidated parliamentary democracy in Central Europe, consisting of a bicameral legislature, the Chamber of Deputies, and the Senate. This Spotlight article focuses only on the lower house of parliament—the Chamber of Deputies (hereinafter, the Chamber)—to which the government is accountable.

A distinctive feature of the Czech political landscape is that since the 2021 electoral cycle, the parliamentary opposition is constituted solely by populist movements. Furthermore, the Left is absent from the parliament. As a result, the division between the parties is no longer based on a clear Left–Right ideological framework. Instead, there is a strong populist–antipopulist elite polarization, which also is manifested in the disruptive effects on the law-making process. This article makes a significant empirical contribution to the field by focusing on a previously under-researched aspect of the Czech political environment, which has the potential to impede the functioning of the entire political system.

A comparison of the distribution of political power in Czech politics before and after the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the change in the position of the most powerful political party: the populist movement Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) led by billionaire Andrej Babiš. Although ANO had control over the government and held the post of prime minister from 2017 to 2021, it became the main opposition party after the 2021 parliamentary election. The transition from “populists in government” to “populists in opposition” created a unique political constellation—after 2021, the parliamentary opposition consisted of only populist parties: the ANO party and the radical populist Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). At the same time, the former opposition parties created an ideologically heterogeneous coalition with a majority of 108 of 200 seats in the Chamber.¹

Furthermore, the number of parliamentary parties was reduced from nine to seven after the 2021 election. Representatives of the Left, who participated directly (i.e., Social Democrats) and indirectly (i.e., Communists) in the previous government, departed the parliament. With this disappearance of the Left from Czech politics, the formerly dominant socioeconomic cleavage also disappeared and has been replaced by an antagonism between

Table 1

Changes in the Chamber of Deputies During the 8th and 9th Parliamentary Terms

	Eighth Term (2017–2021)	Ninth Term (2021–December 2024)
Number of Meetings	119	121
Night Meetings	4 Days	24 Days
Debates on Agenda	175 Hours	495 Hours

Source: Office of the Chamber of Deputies.

populism and anti-populism (Havlík and Kluknavská 2022). The persisting elite polarization was a presumption for further negative dynamics of legislative–executive relations. It has manifested primarily in the inner workings of the parliament and its oversight and law-making functions.

With the predominant populist-oriented opposition, the post-2021 term of the Chamber is highly atypical. It is characterized by an extreme number of plenary meetings, late-night plenary meetings, excessive obstructions, the absence of lunch breaks, the deterioration of parliamentary culture, personal attacks, and a lack of willingness to seek compromises on long-term issues. Table 1 presents changes in the functioning of the Chamber between 2017 and 2024.

The intransigence between the government and opposition blocs is evident in the debate on amending the Act on the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber, which was enacted in 1995. The specific feature of the Rules of Procedure is the considerable autonomy of the deputy. An individual Member of Parliament (MP) can propose bills and amendments and is not limited to debates. Since the 1990s, ongoing discussions have been about limiting the MPs’ extensive autonomy and strengthening the parliamentary party groups’ roles. Despite minor amendments, the fundamental principles of the Rules of Procedure have remained the same because they have not impeded the practical functioning of the Chamber. However, in the context of polarization in the Chamber, the existing framework has become increasingly untenable.

A significant change that began in 2017 is the tendency for MPs to act frequently during the so-called extraordinary plenary meetings. Whereas ordinary plenary meetings are scheduled and follow the same pattern (usually including interpellation), extraordinary meetings are unscheduled and can be requested by one fifth of all MPs. As the term implies, extraordinary meetings should be convened only on an exceptional basis. However, in practice, this is not the case. Between 2017 and 2021, there were more extraordinary than ordinary meetings because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, this trend continued after 2021. Although opposition MPs usually convene an extraordinary meeting, they also are overused by governing coalition members, who conducted even more extraordinary meetings than the opposition after 2021. A motivation of the coalition MPs is to push the agenda and pass legislation more quickly. During an extraordinary meeting, the agenda is fixed and cannot be changed. Consequently, there is no room for debate on the agenda, which—in contrast to ordinary meetings—could create an opportunity for obstruction by the opposition.

The opposition’s motives in convening an extraordinary meeting is evidenced in the failures to include opposition bills on the agenda and in the desire for visibility.

In the current situation, without extraordinary meetings, the executive branch could not pass several proposals in the face of obstruction by the opposition, which is most common when adopting the agenda for ordinary meetings. After the 2021 elections, MPs debated the agenda for 495 hours, surpassing the hours for the previous parliamentary term, when debates lasted 175 hours. MPs with preferential rights (i.e., leaders of parties, leaders of parliamentary party groups, and members of the government) used the majority of this debate time. Furthermore, the leaders of the opposition parties have begun a competition about who can speak longer without a break. However, this obstruction effectively allows the opposition to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the ruling majority. Frequent obstruction and extraordinary meetings significantly increase the time devoted to parliamentary debates. As a result of these trends, the Chamber debates more than it acts and makes decisions. Traditionally, the Chamber was closer to the ideal type of a working parliament than to a talking parliament. Times have changed.

Obstruction traditionally has been viewed as a legitimate mechanism of political struggle within parliaments. However, the problem arose with its massive increase when opposition MPs effectively blocked the government majority in the Chamber. Extraordinary meetings also have surrogate interpellations, which receive little attention in the long-term perspective. Nevertheless, they were an essential source of information for MPs and a form of parliamentary oversight. For example, oral interpellations did not occur between October 12, 2023, and February 29, 2024.

The inability of the antagonistic blocs to negotiate on issues that extend beyond a single parliamentary term or to revise the Rules of Procedure represents the peak of elite-level polarization. With aggressive opposition tactics comes the danger of paralysis not only in the Chamber but also in the Senate. Senators are being given less legislation to pass. Whereas the parliament suffered from legislative inflation a decade earlier, with the intense polarization of the party system, it instead is now suffering from legislative decline. An overall increase in meetings does not automatically mean that more legislation is passed.

Another issue is the personalization of parties and politics, which has been typical for the Czech environment at least since the global economy crash in 2008. In the case of the ANO and the SPD, we can almost describe the ownership of these political entities by their founders, who act nearly monarchically toward their colleagues. The situation in which the leaders own the opposition parties is reflected in the interventions of these influential figures in the framework of agreements between the government and the opposition. At the same time, the populist opposition is not unified. Moreover, the radical SPD has been a permanent opposition since its formation, whereas the ANO movement has been in government for eight years. Therefore, the coalition potential of the parties differs as well.

The Czech case shows that the privileges of the opposition to resist the majority’s oppression, in extreme polarization, can result in a state of paralysis in the functioning of legislative bodies.² As polarization increases, the foundations of parliamentary culture and respect between the government and the opposition disappear. However, the reasons for polarization in the Czech

environment do not stem from different ideological attitudes but rather from the personal antipathy of the political party leaders. If political conflict is based not on the competition of ideas but instead primarily on individual leaders and their mutual antipathy, it is possible that dissatisfaction with the democratic system will increase and lead to dysfunction in the political system.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L6YZV9>.

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NOTES

1. The five-party coalition consisted of the Civic Democratic Party, the Christian Democrats, the TOP 09, the Pirates, and the Mayors and Independents. However, the Pirates left the government in October 2024.
2. It is noteworthy that relations between governmental and oppositional MPs generally are more respectful within the context of parliamentary committees. In comparison to plenary sessions, committees are perceived to facilitate a more consensual, collegial, and work-oriented environment.

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A WRENCH IN THE WORKS: FRANCE AND ITS INCREASINGLY FRUSTRATED POWER DYNAMIC

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The French Fifth Republic is widely known for having a strong, directly elected President and a somewhat weak Parliament

relative to the executive branch. The 1958 Constitution granted the government a wide range of legal tools to protect itself. Since 1962, the executive branch has mostly enjoyed a strong parliamentary majority in the National Assembly, which rendered these tools seldom necessary. Only once in this period has the government lacked an absolute majority, and only by a short margin:

from 1988 to 1993, when the Socialist Party controlled 47% of the seats.

However, the 2022 legislative election produced the most divided legislature in the history of the Fifth Republic—a short-lived record, as it would be surpassed in the 2024 election. From 2022 to 2024, France has had a minority government, with a three-party coalition comprising 43% of the Members of the National Assembly (MNAs)—the smallest parliamentary support for the Cabinet in the lower chamber in more than 60 years. This unprecedented situation has generated much tension, with an increasing number of bills being passed or rejected against the government’s wishes.

This situation is not the result of one specific election. Rather, it is the culmination of recent incremental evolutions in the executive–legislative power dynamics, which is rooted in constitutional reforms, the erosion of in-party cohesion, and a rapid party-system fragmentation. Moreover, it is not without consequences for the relationship between the executive and the legislative branches. We argue that if all of those changes allowed Parliament to regain some influence and centrality in the political game, then the political culture has failed to adapt at the same time and still tends to rely on coercion rather than negotiations, resulting in ever-escalating tensions that have yet to be resolved.

What are the factors that led to this situation? The system underwent a major change in dynamics when, in 2000–2001, a constitutional and electoral law reform shortened the presidential term from seven years to align with the five-year mandate of MNAs and placed legislative elections a few weeks after the presidential election, effectively synchronizing previously asynchronous elections. The shift was designed to ever-so-slightly presidentialize the system and to increase the likelihood that the President and the parliamentary majority would be from the same party. However, this also framed the President no longer as a reasonably independent head of state but instead as the political leader of the parliamentary majority. Suddenly much more at the forefront of public scrutiny, personally tied to any political decisions, the President was exposed to a faster decline of his political capital.

This greater exposure of the President appeared to go hand in hand with growing in-party difficulties. The voting cohesion of successive parliamentary majorities steadily declined from 2002 to 2017, as divisions within governing parties became apparent and the popularity rate of the successive presidents kept decreasing (Lecomte and Rozenberg 2021). During their last terms in power, both Conservatives (2007–2012) and Socialists (2012–2017) experienced the consolidation of internal factions at odds with the successive governments’ methods and increasing difficulties in enforcing party discipline and overcoming ideological