

PETR PAVEL TO FACE ANDREJ BABIŠ IN SECOND ROUND OF CZECH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Key takeaways from the first round of the presidential vote

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INTRODUCTION

Retired army general Petr Pavel and billionaire former ex-Prime Minister Andrej Babiš have topped the first round of the Czech presidential elections. In a crowded race with eight candidates, Pavel secured 35.4% of the popular vote, while Babiš came in narrowly second with 35%. As no candidate was able to collect more than 50% of the popular vote, the race will continue with a second round on 27-28th January.

In the Czech Republic, the head of state holds the power to appoint members of the government, the board of the Czech National Bank and the country's Constitutional Court (with approval from the Senate, the upper house of parliament). Otherwise, the office of the president is largely ceremonial, with most executive power held by the prime minister, a position currently held by Petr Fiala. The winner of the second round will succeed outgoing President Miloš Zeman, whose term ends in March.

Below, Aretera takes a deeper look at the results of the first round of the presidential vote, with an outlook on what comes next.

This memo will cover:

-  the key takeaways from the election results,
-  the profile of the two finalist candidates,
-  the significance of the presidential elections,
-  expectations for the second round of the vote.

HEADING FOR A SECOND ROUND

On 13-14th January, Czech voters went to the polls to elect the country's president who will succeed the country's outgoing head of state, Miloš Zeman. Eight candidates ran for president, of which three were in realistic contention for victory: retired army general Petr Pavel, former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Danuše Nerudová, an economist and former rector of Mendel University. Most of the election campaign was centered around the personality of the candidates, in addition to prominent issues such as high inflation and Russia's war against Ukraine.

From the eight candidates, Pavel and Babiš have topped the presidential race, both securing around 35% of the popular vote. Alongside Pavel and Babiš, Nerudová was the only other candidate believed to have a chance of getting into the second round, however she lost momentum during the election campaign and secured only 14%. According to the Czech National Institute for Cyber Security, a Russia-linked hacker group targeted the websites of two of the presidential candidates: Petr Pavel and fellow independent candidate Tomáš Zima.

As no candidate was able to pick up more than 50% of the popular vote, the election will continue into a second round on 27-28th January, involving the two leading candidates only.

ELECTION RESULTS

Results of the First Round of the Presidential Vote		
Candidate	Affiliation	Popular Vote (%)
Petr Pavel	independent	35.4
Andrej Babiš	ANO	35
Danuše Nerudová	independent	13.92
Pavel Fischer	independent	6.75
Jaroslav Bašta	SPD	4.45
Marek Hilšer	independent	2.56
Karel Diviš	independent	1.35
Tomáš Zima	independent	0.55

(Source: Czech Statistical Office, Turnout: 68.24%)

CANDIDATE PROFILES

Petr Pavel is a retired army general who served as Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Army between 2012 and 2015 and as Chair of the NATO Military Committee between 2015 and 2018. Following his departure from the army, he became a lecturer and a consultant. He is also known for launching the Stronger Together initiative in 2020, the aim of which was to help Czech citizens fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from his brief membership in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (1985-1989), he has not been involved in national politics. In the presidential race, he ran as a pro-Western independent but has also been endorsed by the country's ruling centre-right parties, the SPOLU coalition. Pavel is an outspoken critic of populism and Russia, as well as a strong supporter of his country's pro-EU/NATO stance and helping Ukraine.

Andrej Babiš is the current leader of the Czech opposition, who served as Prime Minister between 2017 and 2021. Previously, he served as Finance Minister in the Bohuslav Sobotka Government (2014-2017). Also a Communist Party member in the past (1980-1989), he is the founder of ANO, the country's leading opposition party and a conservative-liberal-turned-populist formation. He fell out of power in the latest Czech parliamentary elections in 2021, when his ANO movement was defeated by the centre-right SPOLU alliance, the Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independents (STAN).

In addition to his role in politics, Babiš is a billionaire businessman with a considerable stake in agriculture and the media industry. He has been repeatedly accused of corruption, most recently of hiding his involvement in one of his companies to illegally tap EU subsidies. Although the case has not been closed, he was acquitted by court in December, boosting his chances in the presidential race. He is widely seen as an illiberal populist and maintains a strong supporter base among elderly voters despite falling out of power in 2021.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the Czech Republic, the role of the president is largely ceremonial, however the head of state holds the power to appoint members of the government, the board of the Czech National Bank and the country's Constitutional Court (with approval from the Senate, the upper house of parliament). Otherwise, most executive power is held by the prime minister, a position currently held by Petr Fiala. The winner of the second round will succeed outgoing President Miloš Zeman, whose term ends in March. His successor will be the second democratically elected head of state of the Czech Republic as previous presidents were elected by parliament.

As the presidential election campaign continues between the two finalists, Pavel is likely to pick up most of the urban vote, as well as the supporters of other EU-minded candidates, including those of Danuše Nerudová. Simultaneously, Babiš, who is expected to mount a considerable challenge against the retired army general, will likely pick up the voters supporting Jaroslav Bašta, the presidential candidate of the far-right SPD party, among others. He is also likely to benefit from the rising poll numbers of the ANO movement, which currently stands around 30%, and the public dissatisfaction with the Fiala Government over high inflation.

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