

Linek, Lukáš:

**KAM SE ZTRATILI VOLIČI?
VYSVĚTLENÍ VÝVOJE VOLEBNÍ
ÚČASTI V ČESKÉ REPUBLICE
V LETECH 1990–2010.**

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Where have the voters wandered off to? With this fitting question, Lukáš Linek opens his monograph detailing his study of the evolution of election turnout in the Czech Republic. His objective is to explain the post-transformational dynamics of voter turnout in Czech parliamentary elections. It is widely known that voter turnout has been gradually declining in both traditional and new democracies. In the Czech Republic (along with other post-communist democracies), an unusually rapid decline in turnout has been registered ever since the first democratic election in 1990. It has become a topic of research for political scientists, as well as a favourite topic for the mass media. The author's research examines the decline in turnout in the Czech Republic using parliamentary (lower-chamber) election data from 1990–2010.

Before presenting his own research and insight, the author first puts forward a vast amount of theoretical and research background on the function of elections and voter turnout. In Chapter Two, six existing paradigms and theories are briefly discussed and reflexively evaluated, with an emphasis on their chief strengths and weaknesses. The conclusion drawn is that none of the theoretical frameworks and/or methods presented is able to encompass all the essential features of turnout, i.e., both individual and aggregate. In what follows, the author focuses more on those features and the effect they have

on explaining turnout as a specific form of political participation. Political participation in the author's view depends upon three different types of motivation for participating in elections, as well as on mobilization. He uses these factors to form the basis of his theoretical model explaining election turnout.

As noted above, each of the existing theories covers only a portion of the subject matter. Based on knowledge derived from studying existing paradigms, Linek proposes his own methodology, intended to measure those features he thinks are crucial. This new model uses parts of various existing election turnout theories, e.g. rational choice theory, social-psychological theory, valence politics theory, mobilization theory and socioeconomic status and resources theory. The model manages to combine various mechanisms for evaluating turnout, permitting the inclusion of a greater number of relevant variables.

The author's first research step was to examine the long-term evolution of election turnout to answer the question, "Who is it that votes in the Czech Republic?" To do so, he uses bivariate and multiple regression analyses. Voter turnout is a socially stratified phenomenon, with the highest turnout among those with greater resources and higher status. In addition, the analyses suggest that individual characteristics' impact change over time; education, age and income are slowly increasing their effect on general turnout and consequently causing gradual growth in disparity of turnout. It is nevertheless shown that sociodemographic characteristics affect turnout rates only at levels with little statistical significance from a long-term perspective.

By contrast, Linek has managed to prove that the four basic mechanisms contained in his model, i.e., the three types of motivation plus mobilization, are capable of explaining almost one-third of the variance in election turnout. Moreover, regression analysis demonstrates that their influence seems to be

ongoing throughout the entire period under examination. The three different types of motivation are: instrumental (the platform distance between the voter and the party and the perception of party competence to govern), expressive (identification with the party) and normative (the “meaningfulness” of voting). It is emphasized that these findings may not be interpreted simply as individual characteristics but rather as consequences of interaction between individuals and their environment, particularly in the case of instrumental motivation, which depends upon the current political offering. In addition, mobilization, both direct and indirect, has an impact on turnout – especially union membership, adherence to the Christian religion (direct) and marriage or having a common household (indirect).

Something the author addresses throughout the book is the dichotomous or “symmetric” character of factors which explain participation versus nonparticipation. In particular, he addresses the issue of how suitable it is to employ the same variables to explain both participation and nonparticipation – the only difference being that in the former case, the factors are positive (bearing a ‘+’ sign) and in the latter, negative (bearing a ‘-’ sign). Linek presumes the existence of circumstances that exist outside of the perception of symmetric binary and outside the reach of all three types of motivation. These may be health issues, issues focused on disability or staying abroad. Having included this aspect of electoral reality in the research, we must assume that the explanation of participation and nonparticipation are ‘asymmetric’ rather than ‘symmetric’. In that respect, the author justifies using open-ended questions as a convenient method for measuring (non-)participation, due to the fact that voters are not limited by the ‘symmetric’ (insufficient) frame given by researchers.

Yet another interesting outcome is the hypothesis that generational changes have

contributed to the continuous decline in election turnout. This presumption is based on the fact that values gained at a young age tend to persist for the entire lifetime of an individual and may therefore be taken as an independent variable. The analysis demonstrated that the impact of generational changes has been dropping, i.e., that the younger the generation, the less the impact. But compared to traditional democracies, the generational impact was not statistically significant. In addition, the hypothesis was refuted that the specific form of youth socialization that characterized the early phase of the communist regime gave rise to an embedded antipathy toward democracy that resulted in lower turnout. Instead it was found that the generation concerned shows higher turnout than those who were born later. This outcome may be expected regardless of the research. The simple fact that generational change comes very slowly, as opposed to the rapid change experienced in voter turnout, suggests that the crucial causes do not lie in generational change. In addition, the drop in turnout due to generational change may in the future be compensated for by other variables. Increased educational attainment, along with the general aging of the population, are expected to boost turnout rates slightly.

In Chapter 8, Linek undertakes a complex analytical strategy involving regression decomposition to determine the causes of the decrease in turnout. He identifies three main reasons. The first is decreasing social mobilization caused by a decrease in the number of people living in matrimony, as well as in the number of union members. Both these variables normally contribute to greater turnout. But in recent years, the influence of unions has declined significantly, as has the number of people with union membership. The reason for this may be found not only in the declining influence of the unions, but also as a result of their negative perception vis-à-vis the former regime. As for marriage,

indirectly related to positive mobilization, divorce rates climbed in the 1990s and have been growing slowly ever since. It is expected that the number of marriages and union members will continue to decline and their impact on turnout will therefore be ongoing. The second identify cause of the drop in turnout in the Czech Republic is the decline of instrumental motivation based on the valence evaluation of the parties as relates to their competence and credibility. This is strongly connected to general post-revolution disillusionment and a significant decrease of confidence in politics. Last but not least, the decline in turnout has been influenced by the drop in normative motivation, i.e., awareness of the meaningfulness of voting versus the feeling that it is meaningless.

These outcomes demonstrate that the decline in turnout has not been caused by a lack of stimulus in left/right political competition and party identification (expresses motivation). These remain fairly constant. The decline in turnout is additionally caused by events at the individual, small-group and societal levels. Finally, Linek applies his

findings on Czech political representation in Chapter 9, focusing in particular on the relationship between the turnout rate and the election gains of the various political parties. The last chapter discusses research results which were put forward in a broader research context.

The author tackles the complex phenomenon of declining election turnout using inventive research methodology and advanced statistical tools. He presents his findings not only in the context of data analysis, but also of theoretical research and the social reality of the Czech election environment. This makes the monograph a quality source of information for quantitative methodologists, election turnout researchers and political science students, as well. Well-addressed research limits and an extensive bibliography containing references to hundreds of scholarly publications add up to well-designed research and a reasonably readable book which is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to scholarship and the community.

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