

**Lebeda, Tomáš
and Lysek, Jakub et al.:**

**PROTEST, OMYL, NEZÁJEM?
NEPLATNÉ HLASOVÁNÍ
V ČESKÉ REPUBLICĚ
A V NOVÝCH DEMOKRACIÍCH.**

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The 2017 monograph by Tomáš Lebeda and Jakub Lysek et al. focuses on the topic of invalid votes in Czechia, specifically, as well as comparatively. The goals of the book can be identified threefold. Firstly, the authors attempt to conceptualize invalid votes. Secondly, they open up the topic of invalid votes in the Czech context in various types of elections and attempt to explain the causes for these types of votes. Finally, they compare invalid votes among Central and East European and Latin American countries. All of these goals are really valuable, considering the fact that most of the theoretical assumptions had to be derived from different research areas, mainly research on voter turnout and electoral integrity, because of the shortage of theoretical work to date, which is, on top of that, full of contradictions.

The structure of the book reflects these goals and, after theoretical reflection on the theme (Chapter 1), it is separated into chapters dealing with invalid votes in different electoral arenas in Czechia. It begins with elections to the Chamber of Deputies, European Parliament and presidential elections (Chapter 2), then continues with an analysis of regional and Senate elections (Chapter 3), and, finally, finishes with local elections (Chapter 4). This clustering mainly follows from the data. The

first cluster of elections is characterized by the lower shares of invalid votes compared to the second cluster. Local elections are problematic in the Czech context because the nature of the electoral system, or more specifically because of how results are reported, does not allow the authors to identify the share of invalid votes; this significantly complicates the analysis, but also reveals the problems connected to precinct election commissions. Chapter 5 then summarizes problems of Czech elections with respect to vote count, tabulation and verification. The following comparative chapter, focused on invalid votes in parliamentary elections in Central and Eastern Europe (Chapter 6), makes sense in the context of this book, especially as it pertains to Czechia; however, the later comparison of invalid votes in presidential elections in Latin American and East European countries (Chapter 7) where presidential systems are compared with parliamentary or semi-presidential systems, make less sense to me, because they have different electoral stakes.

Researching invalid votes is not an easy task, and this is evident in every part of the book. The authors proceed with caution to avoid making logical errors in their explanations of the phenomenon. That is why Lysek, Lebeda, and Kouba (Chapter 1) come up with a conceptualization of causal mechanisms that lead to casting invalid votes. Their conceptualization consists of a few causal models (voter error model; protest model; disinterest/importance of elections model; electoral authority error model; electoral fraud model) that lead to invalid votes; these are differentiated based on actor (voter x electoral institution) and intentionality (intentional x unintentional). Although this concept has further evolved since the publication of the book (see Kouba & Lysek, 2018), it is worth considering adding some other actors, i.e. candidate/party and/or broker. In some countries, brokers are used as

a practical tool to influence voters in the field, among others. While brokers are usually used for practices such as vote buying, they can also e.g. misinform voters in some regimes or areas about how to cast their votes or pressure them to show protest against the regime by casting an invalid vote. This is probably not often the case, as such brokers instead attempt to influence voters to cast a specific vote, but this possibility should be theoretically explored. In fact, Kouba and Lysek (Chapter 7) mention that opposition parties in Bolivia and the anulista movement in Mexico (p. 130) both used such a voter strategy. However, brokers may complicate the use of the concept of invalid votes and it raises the question of whose interest they are operating in and whether this actor (party/candidate) should be reflected as well. This would significantly complicate empirical analyses because of the high demands in identifying and further exploring these actors. On the other hand, the concept operates with intentionality, which is most often a very difficult characteristic to capture in the real world. Although the authors did not extend the category of actors to include hackers (who are considered a factor in the failure of electoral institutions) because they complicate the conceptualization (p. 15), the parties/candidates and/or brokers seem, theoretically, more straightforward for their inclusion into the concept.

Considering the empirical part of the book, especially in the context of such a demanding topic, the authors very inventively, thoroughly and skilfully work with their data to avoid many problematic situations such analyses can bring (especially the inadequacies of electoral minutes or the great complexity of incentives influencing the share of invalid votes). Their approach can be inspiring for other authors willing to work on the topic further. The book is also valuable because of the data sets the authors prepared. The deci-

sion to separate the Czech elections into three groups of elections (chapters) is very smart, but at the same time it is necessary to keep in mind that the causal mechanisms explaining invalid votes can differ among these groups of elections and even among individual types of elections.

The elections with low shares of invalid votes (Chamber of Deputies and European Parliament) do not offer much space for deep exploration. This situation leads Lebeda to observe small variations in invalid votes and to provide rather speculative explanations of the aggregate numbers of invalid votes, even based on a deep knowledge of the Czech case. His explanations are based on a change in the main issues of election campaigns and Czech party system fragmentation. However, these reasons have yet to be fully confirmed.

The book becomes more interesting, especially in the section dealing with the more problematic Senate and regional elections where Lysek, Lebeda, and Kouba (Chapter 3) attempt to answer very difficult questions such as whether these votes are invalid by mistake or intentionally, or which situations lead to higher shares of invalid votes. The results show some interesting features (concurrency of the two elections increases the share of invalid votes in regional elections; higher share of people with university education reduces the impact of concurrency of elections on the share of invalid votes; inconsistent effect of the structure of political competition on the share of invalid votes in the first rounds of the Senate elections; etc.) although some of the statistical models are pretty weak and, therefore, the issue also remains open for further investigation. That is why the authors often tend to guess at other explanations for invalid votes. These guesses are, again, pretty reasonable and based on some additional analyses, however, they are limited by the nature of the data and some of the explanations are disput-

able. For instance, one disputable argument could be that some electoral commissions force voters to take both ballot papers in the concurrent (1st round) Senate and regional elections and, therefore, voters invalidate their vote in the less preferred election. Even though this may really be the case in some precincts, which the authors evidence by specific cases (p. 49) and indicate by additional analysis (pp. 62–64), there can be other explanations as well, such as a social desirability effect on a voter who feels bad for taking only one voting envelope from the hands of an (often familiar) electoral commissioner; or a voter's ill-informed belief that he/she must vote into two bodies instead of opting for just one, etc. To be fully convincing, such arguments need to be tested in the future because these explanations would, on a theoretical level, change not only the actor but also the intentionality and therefore the whole causal mechanism of the explanation. However, the real case examples of misconduct offered by the authors are important findings that can be used to make practical adjustments in electoral practices, and the authors' explanations of them can serve as a strong baseline for further academic research discussions.

Lebeda, Navrátilová, and Soukup et al. further problematize the already questionable Czech local elections (Chapter 4). The integrity of these elections is further eroded in light of the non-transparency that the non-judicial inspection allows. It is not possible to count the share of invalid votes, only the share of unused votes; so it is not clear what the share of invalid votes is. Consequently, this makes it impossible to clarify whether the votes are not used because of a voter's intentional decision to not cast the vote, someone's mistake or even because of fraud. This raises the question of the credibility of local elections and calls for some kind of a reform of these electoral rules. Given the demand-

ing nature of analysing such non-transparent elections, the authors approached the task inventively using Lebeda's method of voter fraud detection (pp. 73–74). Unfortunately, the logic of the method is not as innovative as it is presented in the book. The method is based on the identification of suspicious precincts based on observable irregularities within these precincts derived from the election results. This is known as digit-based election forensics (see e.g. Beber & Scacoo, 2012; Medzihorsky, 2015) and the logic of this procedure has already been used in a number of other studies in a more (e.g. Myagkov, Ordeshook, & Shakin, 2009) or less (Mebane, 2010; Jarabinský, 2015) similar fashion. However, the authors go deeper into their analysis when they further systematically explore the suspicious precincts independently. This leads to the identification of three types of errors, all of them connected to counting procedures of election commissions. On top of that, the authors very skilfully identify inconsistencies in election results which could be considered fraudulent; this stresses the need for electoral reform or some legal improvements. If nothing else, which is not the case, this is a highly valuable practical contribution of the book.

All of these problems that the Czech elections suffer are suitably summed up and commented on in Chapter 5 by David Dohnal, whose contribution can serve as an initial insight into the general problems of the Czech elections; these problems are mainly linked to the work of election commissions, and go beyond the topic of invalid votes.

The comparative parts of the book are introduced by Jakub Lysek, Michal Soukup, and Alena Navrátilová. This introduction is not particularly successful however, as it consists mostly of information presented in Chapter 6 by Lysek, Lebeda, and Kouba rather than providing any original insight.

The latter authors reveal, on competitive parliamentary elections in 18 countries between 1990/92–2016, that invalid votes are caused mainly by voters' protest and error behaviour, which is explained by political institutions, political system and party system fragmentation. On the contrary, socioeconomic indicators do not seem to be particularly useful in explaining shares of invalid votes. These findings mean that invalid votes are not connected solely to minor provisions in electoral laws or practical procedures of election commissions as seems to be the case after reading the first part of the book, but that structural and institutional situations also play some (even indirect) role in the story of invalid votes.

The scope of the analysis is further extended by Kouba and Lysek (Chapter 7), who prove an effect of institutional determinants on invalid votes in the first rounds of presidential elections in Latin American and Central and East European countries. Their finding that conditions encouraging voter turnout can, at the same time, produce higher shares of invalid votes is an important input for electoral engineering as well as for deliberation of the risks of introducing new electoral rules. The demonstration of their hypotheses by rather indirect indicators provide, again, enough space for further, more detailed, analyses of their findings. However, the contribution of the chapter is definite.

Based on the above, it is evident that the authors overcome a big task by taking a topic difficult to cope with and analysing it by mixing various research methods. Sometimes, they do it intuitively, but logically, so they do not refer to already established methods, as is the case of 'Lebeda's method', or in fact a natural experiment/quasi-experiment (even with high probability of omitting other explanatory variables) (Chapter 3.1.1). However, this is a rather formal issue that does not affect the authors' abilities or findings.

The contribution of the book to the field is evident. It provides a conceptualization of invalid votes that seems to be fairly good and which has potential broader impact, represented also by Kouba and Lysek's (2018) publication. This book opens up new topics for further research and uncovers new issues that electoral practitioners now need to face. Based on their analyses, the authors offer practical improvements of electoral systems to redress detected problems. The book also provides basic explanations of the phenomenon in a comparative fashion. The book is a case in point of how relevant local research with practical implications can (and ought to) get an influential space in political science and it should serve as an inspiration for other researchers.

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