

Evaluation of Vlastimil Havlik's Habilitation Thesis

Vlastimil Havlik's habilitation thesis represents a significant work of scholarship which both captures the existing state of knowledge about populism and considerably extends that knowledge with new analyses of Czech populist parties. With some revision, the thesis should have little problem finding an English-language academic publisher and thus further entrench Prof. Havlik's reputation as a serious and important scholar of postcommunist politics. I will elaborate on these evaluations below. But first I will state that in my judgment the thesis fulfills the requirements for promotion to the rank of docent and marks the beginning of a new phase in Prof. Havlik's already successful career.

The thesis focuses on the three new populist parties in the Czech Republic, Veci Verejne, ANO, and Usvit. As Prof. Havlik points out, these parties present us with two puzzles. The first is their intrusion into what has been a very stable party system in the Czech Republic. While such volatility is common in the postcommunist region, the Czech Republic remained relatively immune from it until two decades of the transition had elapsed. Why has this happened only now? What has changed? The second puzzle is the nature of these parties. They do not resemble traditional parties representing distinct ideologies or social groups. Nor do they resemble the standard right and left-wing populists that we see elsewhere. Indeed, their positions on the ideological spectrum are relatively ambiguous. What exactly are they?

The aim of Prof. Havlik's thesis is to resolve these puzzles. How should we characterize these parties and does this characterization help us to understand their emergence. Empirically he engages in two major tasks. The first is to see how well the party programs fit into existing characterizations of populism. Do they present themselves as populist parties do? The second is to determine why voters choose these parties. Are these parties representing social classes, ideological positions, or certain evaluations of politics? Answering these questions can give us a better sense of why these parties emerged and what consequences they will have for Czech politics.

Havlik's analysis begins with a chapter that considers the concept of populism. This of course is an extremely contested concept and the chapter allows Prof. Havlik to showcase his skills in conceptual analysis. He thus wades through a large number of definitions of populism and tries to extract the core elements that they have in common. While a table might have been helpful here to keep track of the existing work, the results of his analysis are clear. He finds that populism at its heart consists of three elements: a focus on the people, an anti-establishment appeal, and a desire to restore the people's sovereignty. He persuasively makes the case that

these elements unite a number of disparate political movements and give us a core concept of populism.

Most interesting is how Havlik develops the concept of a centrist populism. Most scholars associate populism with nationalist, agrarian, neo-liberal, or anti-capitalist movements, which obviously does not apply to the Czech parties he considers. He thus attempts to build on a relatively new concept of centrist populism where the populist party lacks a strong ideology and a distinctive social base. Such parties instead present themselves as fighting against a corrupt elite and emphasize competence and managerial efficiency. I like this concept and I believe that it will increasingly become a useful lens for analyzing politics. The big question is what consequences it will have.

The thesis then turns to empirical analysis. In Chapter 3, Havlik considers the programs of the three Czech populist parties. His aim is to see how well these parties' self-presentation corresponds to the conception laid out in the previous chapter. He compares this to the alternative that their programmatic appeals resemble those of traditional parties. His evidence is drawn from a variety of sources: expert surveys of their positions, party manifestoes, media appearances, books and blogs written by party leaders, and several interviews with MPs and advisors.

He finds that the centrist populist label fits them well with some variations in how the parties conceive of the people and how sovereignty should be restored. By contrast, they do not look like traditional parties. To establish this, the chapter skillfully interweaves quotations from party programs and media appearances with Havlik's own interviews and data from expert surveys and evaluations of their campaigns. Together Chapters 2 and 3 could serve as an excellent stand-alone journal article on centrist populism in the Czech Republic.

Having shown that the parties present themselves as centrist populists, it remains to be seen why voters are attracted to them. Chapter 4 thus looks at both the distribution of their support across the country and the individual-level factors that lead voters to choose them. Unfortunately, he does not find many correlates that explain why regions or people vote for these parties. He does manage to establish that these parties are not merely replacing or supplementing existing parties as, for example, TOP 09 might be seen as a replacement for ODS.

So what or who do they represent? One might expect that these parties attract voters who are economic or social "losers" or those who worry more about corruption or are more dissatisfied with democracy. However Havlik finds only weak or non-existent effects for these variables. This may be the most interesting and novel finding of the paper. Havlik ventures an explanation that voters choose these parties out of hope for the future, but it is not clear what they see in them or why they have given up hope. I believe that Havlik has identified a major puzzle here and I hope that he will explore new explanations that would turn this into a major theoretical work.

I would add that I was not entirely satisfied with the statistical work in this chapter. One problem was simply that he sometimes did not describe exactly what he was doing and so the analysis was hard to follow. Similarly some basic descriptive statistics would have helped readers to see more clearly what is going on. Havlik should also be more open about the shortcomings of these

analyses, for example, the ecological inference problems inherent in regional data. It might also be helpful to consider the funnel of causality – how deeper factors like demography interact with shallower factors like evaluations of competence. Nevertheless, these are correctable problems and Prof. Havlik has demonstrated the skills and willingness to address them.

Overall, the thesis breaks important new ground in the study of Czech populism. It sets the terms for debate on what Czech populism is and is not. Future scholars will need to respond to Havlik's interpretation of centrist populism. The empirical analysis similarly provides the first major analysis of the origins of these populist movements. Impressively, he is able to dismiss most of the existing theories and creates a novel one based on hope for the future. Again, his analysis will set the tone for future debates. He has thus produced an important work of political science on perhaps the key issue in Czech politics today.

Further, Prof. Havlik's thesis demonstrates his mastery of many of the skills that one would wish for in a professional political scientist. He shows facility with most major methodologies: conceptual analysis, qualitative analysis of political texts and interviews, and quantitative analysis of voting results and opinion surveys.

More important, in all these forms he shows sensitivity and nuance. He does not try to fit his results into standard templates at all costs. Rather he listens to his data and evidence and does not hide pieces that do not fit. This was most impressive in Chapter 4 where a lesser political scientist would have mined the data to find confirmation for a standard explanation like corruption or economic distress. That Prof. Havlik resists this temptation is testimony to his integrity and skills and leads to a richer and more interesting work.

I believe that with some revisions this thesis can be published with a press like Routledge and that such a solo-authored monograph with an international publisher will considerably add to Prof. Havlik's strong and growing reputation. I plan to convey to Prof. Havlik personally some of my recommendations for revisions and I have little doubt that he is willing and able to carry them out. Moreover, I see this manuscript as a first step in a long and successful career. It proves his ability to take on big and important questions and produce big and important answers to them. I am confident that this ability will lead to even more success in the future.

On the basis of my assessment of this work, I support the habilitation process of Vlastimil Havlik.

Sincerely,

Andrew Roberts
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