

2010: Comparing and Contrasting *Věci veřejné* in the Czech Republic and the Tea Party Movement in the USA

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the development of the Tea Party Movement in the USA and Věci veřejné in the Czech Republic. It argues that historical institutionalism's twin pillars of path dependency and rational choice theory can help to account for the growth of these two phenomena, and, within this framework, attempts to explain the differences in mobilization strategies and similarities in goals of the two groups. This paper analyzes information technology as a mobilization aid as well, and how this type of mobilization benefits diffuse anti-rent-seeking coalitions. Ultimately, the paper finds that formation and consolidation of the Tea Party Movement and Věci veřejné differ due to variations in electoral systems of the USA and the Czech Republic; their similarities spring from their corresponding rational-choice calculations concerning governmental financing of services.*

Keywords: *Historical Institutionalism, Mobilization, Path Dependency, Rent-Seeking, Tea Party Movement, Věci veřejné*

Traditionally, the field of political science asserts that people unite politically in response to the awareness, salience, and crystallization of a claim. These people then seek to influence political decision makers, usually at the ballot box by forming a

party, or by forming an interest group.¹ However, this characterization of interest-group formation almost always concerns itself with *increasing* government outlays in the forms of legislation, redistribution, or other government interventions. Political science interpretations, such as those put forth by T. H. Marshall (1950) and later by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990), have tended to define state development in the context of expanding these social entitlement programs. Very little is known about grassroots efforts to trim back the redistributive powers of the state, outside of studies with more of an economics emphasis, and less of a political science emphasis.² This analysis is meant to be a step in that direction.

What has made recent events in Czech Republic as well as in the US unique is the development of citizens mobilizing to demand (rather than merely tolerate) austerity measures — a sort of “anti-claim” against state intervention. In other words, these groups are actively renouncing (or at least curtailing) their so-called “right” to the provision of public goods. Moreover, both the Tea Party Movement in the US and Věci veřejné (VV) in Czech Republic were formed as decidedly “outsider” groups — citizens at once opposed to additional entitlement spending and concerned with national debt, yet extremely skeptical of the established parties who championed those goals.³ This is due to a perception of cronyism and corruption by established political parties. Nevertheless, leadership from those outside of the typical political processes emerged, via various media personalities (such as Radek John in Czech Republic or Rick Santelli and Rush Limbaugh in the US, none of whom had never held elective office) or retired or “maverick” politicians [such as Dick Armey (Armey and Kibbe 2010), Sarah Palin, or Josef Dobeš]. Because of this, the leaders of these interest-groups-cum-parties were at once political elites, but outside of the established party structures.

This paper proposes that approaching this topic from a historical-institutionalist perspective might shed light on developments in the US, Czech Republic, and other nations where worries about government debt as well as cronyism has mobilized voters and activists. I submit that in democracies with voters historically skeptical of state power and with a relatively classically-liberal outlook, “easy” mobilization through technology leads to advocacy for changes in the way public services are provided, in ways that are (allegedly) less likely to create deficits and cronyism. To achieve this, I give a brief background on historical-institutionalism, with its links to both path dependency and rational-choice theory, and apply it to current trends in these two nations. Additionally, I discuss the role of technology as a mechanism for mobilizing voters against rent-seeking activities, whereby technological advances reduce the opportunity cost of mobilization, and can more effectively target the diffuse population upon whom rents are extracted by more concentrated interest groups and voters. Historical institutionalism helps us to first define the political space, followed by predicting the actors’ self-interested behavior. Institutional dif-

ferences, such as election procedures or the federal-vs.-unitary state dichotomy, lead to differences in the approaches employed by actors; institutional similarities, such as technological infrastructure and historical skepticism of state intervention reveal tactical similarities. However, in both nations, the goals are analogous. In this case, the goals are focused specifically on the reduction of corruption and government debt (particularly through entitlement reforms), and thus of rent-seeking activities in these two nations. The path dependency aspect of historical institutionalism accounts for the differences between the cases of the Tea Party Movement and *Věci veřejné*; the rational-choice aspect explains the similarities.

Methodology

Sven Steinmo (2008) advocates historical institutionalism as a “middle way” between a pure rational-actor model and the social institutionalism of other social scientists. Historical institutionalism is based on the idea that “human beings are both norm-abiding rule followers *and* self-interested rational actors” (p. 126). In other words, institutional rules and traditions help to define individuals’ self-interest: voters are path-dependent. They tend to maximize their self-interest, but not at the risk of being ostracized for doing so. Nevertheless, for historical institutionalism, citizens are rational in the voting booth.

Starting from a point of path dependency, we can then use rational-choice models, particularly public choice theory, to examine how citizens mobilize and vote. Public choice theory suggests that rent-seeking will occur when a highly organized interest group receives a state benefit at the expense of the (more diffuse) public as a whole, such as subsidies for certain industries, as Buchanan (1997) notes. This rent-seeking can be manifested as “pork-barrel” or “logrolling” actions (Buchanan 1999), or as regulatory capture (Stigler 1971). Both of these, in turn, contribute to citizen perceptions of government waste and corruption.

In other words, historical institutionalism can provide us with a platform to both analyze the political space as well as the reactions of individual voters to political decisions: it can help us define what constitutes a “realistic” political space, as well as the tactics of voters.⁴ It is like ice hockey: first we must define how big the rink will be, how many players will be allowed on the ice, and where they are allowed to move (i.e. institutional rules); only within this context will the players develop a strategy for victory (as rational actors). For these reasons, what is a good strategy for hockey is not necessarily a good strategy for soccer (due to different institutional rules): an effective political strategy in the US may be a bad political strategy in the Czech Republic. If we consider the welfare state, its benefits, and its eligibility requirements as given “rules of the game” or institutional facts (Steinmo quotes Esping-Andersen on

this), then we must accept that different welfare states will affect their populations' "rule-following" differently. At the same time, we can expect reactions to welfare state (or any other politically-oriented) changes to be based on the self-interest of voters at the individual level — the "strategy" of the players.⁵

Within an institutionally-defined political space, shifting to a more rational-actor model can then allow us to examine how "self-interest" is perceived by voters. On this, Baldwin argues that (western) European welfare states have implemented solidarity welfare states based on a "generalized and reciprocal self-interest" (1990, p. 299). If feelings of reciprocity are absent, or if citizens feel that they are getting a bad "deal," we should not be surprised if these voters start to demand cuts in these services.

Protesting, but not "protest parties"

Precisely because the Czech Republic has a traditionally more "social" (i.e. government-administered) system of health care and pensions than the US does,⁶ the political space will be somewhat shifted. Nevertheless, to be politically viable (i.e. not ostracized, or actively denounced by all parties), both groups have had to call for *reform* rather than *drastic* action, or in the case of the Tea Party, to argue that the current health care reforms enacted by President Obama are more extreme than the Tea Party itself is when arguing for repeal of the recent health care act (Bolton 2010). In other words, both movements-cum-parties must respond to the situation as it already is in their respective nations — they are path-dependent, fenced in by the *status quo* institutional setting. At the same time, the strategic objectives — a realistic change in entitlement programs and how they are funded — of both groups are similar. The system of party typologies put forth by Katz and Mair (1995) and later by Wolinetz (2002) tends to focus on "mainstream" parties that are viable and can actively achieve their 1) policy, 2) electoral, or 3) office-holding objectives. Since protest parties generally neglect vote maximization or regard holding and retaining public office (alone or in coalition) as "selling out," they are able maintain their "pure" policy stance (either for opportunistic or genuine reasons) while consciously maintaining their status on the ostracized margins of political society (Mair 2006). In stark contrast, we observe VV and the Tea Party movement putting a distinct focus on gaining electoral office. As a result, these groups cannot be considered mere "protest" parties. Ultimately, if we characterize Věci veřejné and the Tea Party as "parties," they fall into what Wolinetz described as parties relatively committed to maximizing their policy objectives (where possible), but tactically addressing policy reform in a way that recognizes the need for compromise to achieve vote maximization and, in turn, office-holding. In both cases, the goal is to put "their people" in position of influence. Unlike Wolinetz's typology, however, neither group intends to

win power for its own sake or for the “spoils of power,” but instead to reduce or more equally spread the overall number of “spoils” available to interest groups. In the US, this has chiefly been argued in the context of reduced earmark spending as well as alternatives in entitlement spending; in Czech Republic, VV argues for reductions in “abuse” of entitlement spending, increased use of public-private partnerships to help finance state obligations to seniors, and greater oversight of government contracts (“Program VV — Ekonomika” 2010, “Program VV — Zdravotnictví” 2010).

Institutional differences: how the rules are different

The chief institutional differences discussed here concern the system of government: two-party government versus multi-party government, and a federal versus a unitary state. Thus the main difference between VV voters and Tea Partiers lies more in their tactics than in their attitudes — the respective institutional political environments influence how they seek office. In a two-party system such the US, third-party candidates can significantly influence elections [witness the effects of Ralph Nader in 2000 (Abramowitz 2001) or Ross Perot in 1992 (Alvarez and Nagler 1995)], but working within the two-party structure is often more effective.⁷ This is due to the “first-past-the-post” voting system, which reinforces the two-party system (Sartori 2001). A third-party candidate in the US usually leads to a siphoning off of voters from the “base” of another party, such as Nader’s Green Party candidacy likely “spoiling” the candidacy of Al Gore (Abramowitz 2001). Voters must thus vote strategically if they desire representation.

There is thus of course some methodological difficulty in the overlap between a “social movement” and a “political party.” The Tea Party itself tends to shun its “party” character, and has been generally focused more on electing “the right people” (usually Republicans) rather than running as independents or third-party candidates.⁸ It is also highly decentralized (Rauch 2010), and demonstrates a lack of unified leadership, noting that social conservative Sarah Palin (not currently running for any office) as well as the more libertarian-oriented Rand Paul (who completed a successful run for Senate in Tennessee) have both been associated with the movement. Nevertheless, the movement is highly engaged in party politics, and has used open primaries to best take advantage of the two-party structure. On the other hand, in a system with party lists, movements are generally more independent of parties.⁹

On the other hand, in a multi-party structure such as Czech Republic, particularly with its relatively high rates of party “birth” and “death” (Kitschelt 2001), it becomes far easier to form (or expand) a party that can clear the 5 % hurdle and enter Parliament. Party volatility in such an environment gives impetus to the idea of starting a new party, or attempting to transform a party from a local party to a

national party. Additionally, the aspect of coalition government also plays a role. In a proportional representation (PR) system, parties have incentive to gain voters even from those parties that they might form a coalition with after an election. Moreover, it is far easier in the Czech Republic to *form* a new party than to *reform* an existing one. Indeed, *Věci veřejné* is not the only party in the previous election cycle which undertook this, as the case of TOP 09 makes clear. On the other hand, new parties in the US are hampered by constraints both of tradition and of the “first-past-the-post” voting system.

Additionally, in a federal system, candidates can (and must) tailor their message to their specific electorate. Indeed, some candidates who might have “tea party” attitudes may even avoid endorsements from various other politicians, in an effort to appear more appealing to a more centrist constituency. In a unitary state, in contrast, the message can be far more spread across a national demographic, and voters driven away from VV’s message (or any other party’s message, for that matter) in one region of Czech Republic may be compensated for in another region.¹⁰

In sum, the tactics of the two groups was different, because the electoral systems (as well as other institutional settings) are different. A “strategic” primary vote for an “establishment” Republican was often weighed against a “principled” vote for a Tea Party candidate. Later on, the “Tea Party” winners of GOP primaries were sometimes defeated in the general election — a strategic “loss” for anti-debt campaigners.

In a PR system, the opportunity for cooperation after the general election is much greater than in a first-past-the-post system; in a first-past-the-post system, the opportunity to defect from a party and mount an independent bid for office is much stronger. As a result, the “Tea Party” movement can be co-opted by more moderate parts of the Republican Party before the general election; alternatively, “establishment” candidates in the Republican Party will be encouraged to defect and launch independent bids. This was the case with Senate races in Florida and Alaska, where Charlie Crist and Lisa Murkowski respectively launched independent campaigns. In Czech Republic, on the other hand, unconventional bids [such as those of Kalousek’s formation of TOP 09 or Zeman’s SPO, or, earlier, in the case of ODA (Císař and Kopeček 2009)] are implemented by forming new parties early; PR thus engenders *party*-based cooperation or defection; however, that cooperation occurs after the election, rather than before.

Goals and tactics: how they are similar

The economics-and-corruption focus of both *Věci veřejné* and the Tea Party movement is critical for understanding the two groups. VV’s strong emphasis on debt

reduction was mirrored by other parties, but the voters' desire to "throw the bums out" was possibly more salient as a campaign tool (Mladá fronta Dnes 2010). Indeed, when portfolios were negotiated after the election, VV was more emphatic about filling the Ministry of Interior position with party chairman John than the more economics-oriented ministries. This indicates a desire to see corruption weeded out. A similar perspective is brought to political affairs by Tea Party candidates. One Gallop poll showed that GOP voters were statistically as likely to vote "against the Democrat" as they were to vote "for the Republican" (Jones 2010). This indicates a high level of dissatisfaction with both parties, including skepticism on the part of voters toward the GOP.

Technology and social networking have become critical aspects of party-building in both the Czech Republic and the US. The extensive use of Facebook and other social-networking sites is well-known (CATO, 2010) as a facilitator in the Tea Party movement. Indeed, the Tea Party's preference for decentralization is not only directed toward government institutions; like many social movements, activists resist any particular official anointing himself or herself as a "leader." Decentralization and technological know-how also means that local activists, like in other social movements, can quickly learn best practices,¹¹ yet can also tailor their message (or their candidate) to the local general electorate. (For example, a "Tea Party" candidate in left-liberal Massachusetts like Scott Brown may be further to the left than one running in a more moderate or conservative area, such as Joe Miller in Alaska, but activists can discuss campaign strategy across borders more easily than ever before.) More importantly, in the US, older voters are increasingly likely to take advantage of social networking tools. The fastest-growing demographic of Facebook users in the US, for example, has been women over 55 (Smith 2009). This would help to explain why VV's voters are younger than their American counterparts; social networking tools are still more geared to the young in Czech Republic, while in the US the phenomenon is somewhat more pervasive among older voters (Gonzalez 2010a, 2010b).

As a more structured organization in a unitary state, Věci veřejné nevertheless also takes advantage of the technological advances of social media and interactive web portals. The party encourages their "věčkaři" to vote on the VV website about the party's political platform ("*O nás*," 2010), which rewards technologically engaged citizens (Němeček 2010), possibly helping to account for the skew toward young voters (ČT24 2010). However, as a political party, it obviously is required to filter these opinions through a party leadership — an example of this is its attention to working with nebulous "experts" with respect to tax issues ("*O nás*," 2010). As a result, the formal "party" aspect of VV overshadows its technological innovation, but its extensive use of internet campaign methods cannot be overlooked. The use of Facebook, for example, is much more extensive than among many other parties in Czech Republic; as of the 16th of October, VV's page had 22,182 who "liked this,"

compared to 1,204 for ČSSD (“ČSSD” 2010) and 21,832 for ODS (“*Občanská demokratická strana*” 2010). Only TOP 09, which has some similarities to VV in voter composition and attitudes, had more people who clicked “liked this,” with 46,014 clicks (“TOP 09” 2010).

Concluding remarks

While Věci veřejné and the Tea Party have used different methods to mobilize, their goals are similar. Bringing a perspective of historical-institutionalism allows us to study how path dependency demonstrates the variations in these two groups’ tactics, but the rational choice theory component allows us to explore their goal-oriented similarities. Equally interesting, the technological aspects of mobilizing the diffuse interests of society in opposition to rent-seeking groups and those who receive entitlement benefits may begin to illustrate a solution to the problem of rent-seeking in democratic societies. The future of the Tea Party movement and Věci veřejné is by no means assured; the same churning of politics that leads to party death in Czech Republic, and the same movement-assimilating processes that occur in the US have not been changed in recent elections — the two systems remain as path-dependent as ever. In the future, these two groups may fall victim to their own successes. Nevertheless, the anti-debt, anti-cronyism populism of both the Czech and US electorate has already had a profound impact on 2010 elections in these two nations.

Notes

- ¹ This list is by no means exhaustive. See Císař 2008 for a list of other forms of political expression.
- ² But see Baldwin’s 1990 discussion of this, however.
- ³ Because of this “outsider” status, I exclude TOP 09, which is a new party, but one formed by prominent and “established” politicians.
- ⁴ This attention to “rule-following” also explains why countries less influenced by classical liberalism and instead more influenced by other ideas may not mobilize similarly. Voters of other nations may judge these movements as extreme – other nations are also path-dependent.
- ⁵ Of course, all this assumes a pluralist, factional democratic system based on competing interests and a balance of power. See Madison (Publius), *Federalist #10*.
- ⁶ I use government expenditure as a percentage of total health and pension expenditure as a proxy for this. Sources: World Health Organization 2010, Salou and Yermo 2007.
- ⁷ This is particularly true down the ticket; third-party runs for president are relatively common, but it is very difficult to field viable senatorial and congressional candidates nationwide.

- ⁸ An exception to this was the relative success of a third-party “Tea Party” candidate for governor of Colorado, who relegated the Republican nominee to also-ran status; see Malone (2010). It is possible that it is easier for third-party candidates to run for (individual) executive positions than as members of a (collective) legislative body.
- ⁹ For a discussion of open primaries, see Robinson 2010.
- ¹⁰ See Pšejka 2005 for a discussion on the political system of the Czech Republic.
- ¹¹ Much of the literature on cross-national movements such as environmental organizations discusses dissemination of best practices. See for example della Porta 2009.

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