

ELECTORAL ABSTENTION AND VOTING PREFERENCES

*Agnieszka Kos*¹

Summary

The article focuses on the problem of electoral abstention. The author attempts to clarify what kind of electoral preferences have an influence on voting. The question is still very up-to-date, why so many people do not vote, why they renounce their influence on the direction of public affairs, why they do not support actively their sovereignty.

Key words: abstention, electoral activity, voting preferences.

Polish electoral law and abstention

It seems that the Election Code ensures favorable conditions for participation in voting. Elections are held on a day off from work², what guarantees the principle of universal suffrage and provide voters with a minimum opportunity to participate in voting³. In addition, it might be decided that voting would be carried out within two days⁴. Until 31 July 2011 that was only one day⁵. Separate voting districts (at least 15 voters) could be created in health care facilities, nursing homes, prisons, detention centers, dormitories (at least 50 persons entitled to vote)⁶, and even seagoing

¹ PhD, The Witelon State University of Applied Sciences in Legnica, Poland.

² See: Act of 5 January, 2011 Election Code, Journal of Laws 2011, No. 21, item 112, Article 4.

³ See: Commentary on the judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal of 20 July 2011, K 9/11, thesis No. 1.

⁴ See: The judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal of 20 July 2011, Journal of Laws 2011 No. 149, item 889.

⁵ See: Act of 12 April 2001 – Elections to the Polish Sejm and the Polish Senate, Journal of Laws 2001, No. 46, item 499, changed

⁶ See: Act of 5 January, 2011 Election Code, Journal of Laws 2011, No. 21, item 112, Article 12.

ships⁷. Persons staying abroad or disabled are allowed to vote via post⁸ (Article 61a and 62)⁹. Additionally voters with significant or medium disability and a persons who turned 75 years may vote by proxy (Article 54)¹⁰.

The provisions concerning the electoral system should not prevent any person or group of people from participation in the political life of the country, in particular choosing of the legislature¹¹.

Electoral abstention

The electoral abstention is to abandon the voting by eligible persons. It can be divided into undeserved (compulsory) and culpable (deliberate).

Culpable abstention is not due to the will of the voters, but external circumstances. As a rule, these are situations concerning the omission of voters on the electoral register; preventing voters reaching the polling place; inability to vote by persons staying on voting day away from their home or without a home at all (the homeless); obligation to vote in person for disabled, infirm or sick.

When considering the question of forced abstention, it should be noted that there are different kind of external factors that prevent people from voting. Abstention may be on the one hand forced by random circumstances (sudden illness, death or accident in the family) which probability is for every citizen practically the same. On the other hand there are non-random causes. It is difficult to call strictly random the disability, senile infirmity or physical limitation factors (yet they affect people with specific characteristics). Of course, the existence of some of them occur at random (disability), but when they appear, they are a serious obstacle in voting¹².

⁷ Ibidem, Article 15.

⁸ Group of MPs challenged this form of voting, because it evades the jurisdiction of the Polish authorities, even the premises of Polish consular authorities. According to the applicants, the contested provisions violate standards of fairness of elections in a democratic country and the principle of protection of citizens' trust in the state and law, which makes them incompatible with Article 2 of the Polish Constitution. In addition, voting by post from abroad could compromise the secrecy of voting by introducing external factors over which the Polish authorities have no control. See: Judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal of 20 July 2011, Journal of Laws 2011 No. 149, item 889.

⁹ See: Act of 5 January, 2011 Election Code, Journal of Laws 2011, No. 21, item 112.

¹⁰ See: Act of 5 January, 2011 Election Code, Journal of Laws 2011, No. 21, item 112.

¹¹ See: Judgment of the European Court of Human Rights of 19 June 2012, Application No. 29400/05.

¹² See: M. Czeńnik, *Partycypacja wyborcza*, Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa 2009, p. 5.

On the other hand culpable abstention is the result of a conscious decision of the voters, not due to technical obstacles or random. The most common motifs concern apathy and passivity of citizens who are not interested in politics; the relatively high cost of alternative voting (read the offer, making decision, the time and resources needed to reach the place of voting, the act of voting); lack of political options representing the interests of the voters; unbelief in making changes; the opinion that a single vote does not mean anything¹³.

The reasons for abstention can also be: institutional (associated with inadequate or incomprehensible regulations and bad practical solutions), cultural (low levels of social participation caused by a predominance of a parochial political culture), political (alienation of the political class, cartelization of party systems, delegitimation of democratic mechanisms and institutions)¹⁴.

The particular kind of elections determines the interest in participating in voting. In developed Western democracies as well as in Poland, turnout in presidential elections is higher than in parliamentary or local elections. It is not only the result of the fact that citizens attach greater importance to the functions of head of state than to an MP, but also the effect of increased interest in the presidential elections in the media and usually greater clarity and knowledge of presidential candidates (which is usually a few) than candidates to parliament or to local authorities (of which there are many)¹⁵.

Electoral preferences

Considering the electoral abstention in the context of electoral preferences the latter term should be clarified. Electoral preference means a choice of the entity on which we will give our vote. The electoral preference might be created a long time before the decision of participation in the elections or it may be the effect of the election campaign. Persons may deny participation in the elections for various reasons and by the same token they do not want to be involved in the electoral communication and open themselves to develop specific preference¹⁶.

¹³ See: B. Michalak, *Absencja wyborcza* [in:] *Leksykon prawa wyborczego i systemów wyborczych*, ed. B. Michalak, A. Sokala, Wydawnictwo Wolters Kluwer Polska, Warszawa 2010, p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 9-10.

¹⁵ See: J.W. Deth, *Interest in politics* [in:] *Continuities in Political Action: A Longitudinal Study of Political Orientations in Three Western Democracies*, ed. M.K. Jennings, J.W. Deth, The Walter de Gruyter Publisher, Berlin – New York 1989, p. 175.

¹⁶ See: A. Turska-Kawa, *Psychologiczne uwarunkowania zachowań wyborczych* [in:] *Preferencje polityczne 2009. Postawy – Identyfikacje – Zachowania*, ed. A. Turska-Kawa, W. Wojtasik, Wydawnictwo UNIKAT 2, Katowice 2010, p. 101.

The stability of political preferences is widely described in the literature. On the foreground there is a durability of generational attitudes, while others focus on the changes within a short-time period. High level of individual liability may not be reflected in changes on support for particular parties. The potential instability could be forced by some independent factor, when political offer has been changing in a rapid and irreversible way, and voters are deprived of their voting favorites.¹⁷

According to K. Korzeniowski participation in elections is likely refused by people poorer, less educated, not working, derived from less affluent and educated families living in worse conditions.¹⁸ As emphasized K. Skarżyńska and K. Chmielewski persons who do not participate in the elections are not only less educated than people taking part in elections, but also have worst educated fathers.¹⁹ People who are critically oriented to the institutional order and negatively perceiving the situation in the country, feeling alienated, lost and confused in political reality, keen to paranoid thinking about politics are the most likely to refrain from voting. Egalitarian-minded people who expect a welfare state also tend to abstain²⁰.

Furthermore, it appears that persons who do not vote are characterized by symptoms of psychological maladjustment. They were feeling frustration and helplessness of life, with a pessimistic and depressive moods and state of anomie – decay or disintegration personal system of norms and values²¹.

In turn, the driver of electoral participation is high occupational status and high income. This relationship is explained by the following arguments. Firstly, high professional standing and high income reduce the cost of electoral participation. According to this argument, poor people simply cannot afford to participate in the elections. They are forced to worry about serious matters – how to earn their living, so they cannot devote sufficient time to gather and consume the information needed to make an election decision²².

¹⁷ See: R. Markowski, *Polski system partyjny po wyborach z 1997 roku – instytucjonalizacja czy wichrowatość*, „Studia Polityczne” 1999, nr 9, p. 15.

¹⁸ Compare: *Psychologiczne charakterystyki elektoratów wybranych partii*, K. Korzeniowski, Wydawnictwo CBOS, Warszawa 1996.

¹⁹ See: K. Skarżyńska, K. Chmielewski, *Dlaczego ludzie nie głosują* [in:] *Wartości i postawy Polaków a zmiany systemowe. Szkice z psychologii politycznej*, ed. J. Reykowski, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii PAN, Warszawa 1993, p. 40.

²⁰ Compare: *Psychologiczne charakterystyki elektoratów wybranych partii*, K. Korzeniowski, Wydawnictwo CBOS, Warszawa 1996.

²¹ See: K. Korzeniowski, *Jacy Polacy systematycznie odmawiają udziału w wyborach. Psychologiczna analiza zjawiska „non-voter”*, „Studia Psychologiczne” 1994, No. 1, p. 90.

²² See: M. Cześnik, *Partycypacja wyborcza...*, p. 18.

Numerous studies on electoral participation clearly indicate that electoral participation is not equal in modern democracies. Definitely persons from the upper class of the social structure are more likely to participate in this procedure whereas representatives of the lower classes and the underprivileged are much less likely to vote. That causes less representation of their interests and less chance of realizing their expectations. Low participation, which is usually uneven, leads to unequal representation, and thus to unequal political influence.²³

It should be emphasized that a significant impact on the abstention has the place of residence. In the rural and small-town its role as factor of absenteeism is greatly enhanced, which is due to much higher costs of participation in voting, related to the accessibility of polling places. In the city they are minimal, because getting to the polling place usually does not require much time, or more spendings.

Without any doubt, persons not participating in religious practices are generally more able to abstention. First, religious people are more likely to be influenced by mobilization activities of clergy, who proclaiming their beliefs urge the crowd to specific behaviors, with a result that members of these communities more tend to participate in elections above the average. Secondly, persons participating in religious practices are more strongly integrated with their religious communities which provide citizens with education in civic skills and formation of civic qualities. It fosters electoral preparation.

Participation in the elections is also linked with age. Usually, abstention is the highest among the youngest eligible to vote. Among the young, non-participation in the election is something of a generational pattern and probably has other causes than abstention of middle-aged and older. Turnout among the young is interpreted as a result of lower stability and a greater spatial mobility and less interested in politics (at any level of education). In Poland, young people are mostly focused on values such as family, friends, interesting and well-paid job and at the same they reveal little interest in participation in political life. Abstaining youngsters are less different socially and psychologically from their peers participating in elections than older abstaining people from their voting active peers.²⁴

Activity in the world of formal institutions, voluntary associations, associations and religious communities is a factor which makes participation in

²³ Ibidem, p. 4.

²⁴ See: B. Fatyga, G. Flauderska, J. Wertenstein-Żuławski, *Wszystko byłoby z nami w porządku, gdyby nie rzeczywistość. O życiu codziennym młodzieży w Polsce* [in:] *Młodym być...: młodzież szkolna '92*, ed. K. Kosęła, Wydawca CBOS, Warszawa 1993, p. 50.

the elections higher. These organizations link the person with public life, develop a sense belonging to a wider community and prevent a sense of alienation. Moreover, they also ensure the access to a better information about policy: better knowledge of the political scene, programs, various groups, and finally the candidates running in the election²⁵.

According to J. M. Yinger, sense of alienation towards the system and the ruling class leads people to activity rather than passivity if alienated persons have some other political affiliations to compensate for the lack of connection with the political system²⁶.

Research on the relationship of political activity with the level of trust in politicians show that the generally low level of political trust is a feature of people who are passive, alienated, not interested in politics and poorly educated. But those politically active often do not trust politicians at the central level of government, but highly appreciate and trust the local politicians. Often a selective lack of confidence could be noticed. People believe in the competence of politicians, but they do not trust their promises²⁷.

It is assumed that people will not be interested in taking political action if they do not believe that their actions have even a minimal influence on what happens in reality. The sense of political effectiveness can be derived from the overall high self-confidence. Persons with a high sense of so-called internal control and positive self-esteem highly estimate their effectiveness also in politics, while those characterized by the so-called external control and low self-esteem feel helpless and powerless in politics also²⁸.

The decision to participate in elections also depends on the current electoral law defining who and on what basis can obtain a mandate in parliament. Any difficulties in its meaning, reservations or doubts about the rules of “transforming” the votes gained in elections for mandates, changes in these rules, may contribute to the emergence of abstention²⁹.

A large number of parties or persons taking part in the elections, little perceived differences between their programs, no signs of significant changes

²⁵ See: D.E. Butler, D. Stokes, *Political changes in Britain*, The Macmillan Publisher, London 1990, p. 30.

²⁶ See: J.M. Yinger, *Anomie, Alienation, Political Behavior* [in:] *Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. J.N. Knutson, The Jossey – Bass Publisher, San Francisco 1973, p. 28.

²⁷ See: K. Skarżyńska, *Aktorzy Polityczni. Czym jest polityka dla jednostki?* [in:] *Podstawy psychologii politycznej*, ed. K. Skarżyńska, Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2002, p. 36.

²⁸ See: C. Barner-Barry, R. Rosenvein, *Psychological Perspectives on Politics*, The Waveland Press Publisher, Englewood 1985, p. 80.

²⁹ See: K. Skarżyńska, *Aktywność i bierność polityczna* [in:] *Podstawy psychologii...*, p. 43.

after the elections and the lack of voter identification with the presented programs make the elections less stimulating and increase psychological costs (difficulty in deciding) of participating in voting, what eventually leads to abstention³⁰.

The psychological cost of participation in the elections concerns the time that we lose by participating in the election (or electoral decision) and how much alternative activities is available at the time of making choices for a given person. It turns out that participation in the elections (or taking the time to decide the election) quite often loses with other opportunities to spend time.

In temporal aspect of political preferences and their dynamics, we consider their stability or ephemeral, the impact of external shocks on the dynamics of individual perception of reality and, consequently, the loss of old and creation of new patterns of behavior and the mechanisms for fixing the changes occurring in individuals and societies. The perspective of time when examining the political preferences is crucial if we take into account the effect of long-term social processes. Their long-time impact generates among voters adaptive mechanisms which are no relevant any more in periods of social change, making the changes more dynamic and creating new models of behavior³¹.

The most common way of explaining the significance of the structural aspect in the study of political preferences is to appeal to a socio-structural paradigm, whose main reference of person's consciousness is group membership, which determines the attitudes and behavior of its members³².

Further "freezing" and "unfreezing" of party systems are the result of changes in the social structure, which in turn are linked to the dynamics of socio-political divisions. Partly competitive to the socio-structural paradigm is a paradigm of party identity. In its assumptions voters are guided by loyalty to specific parties rather than membership of a particular social group. In turn, the administrative transformation, creation and destruction of centers of power or ethnic diversity constitute a possible diversification of political attitudes at the regional or local level³³.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 44.

³¹ See: A. Turska-Kawa, W. Wojtasik, *Postawy, zachowania i decyzje wyborcze jako przedmiot badań empirycznych* [in:] *Preferencje polityczne...*, p. 9.

³² Zob. S.M. Lipset, S. Rokkan, *Osie podziałów, systemy partyjne oraz afiliacje wyborców* [in:] *Elity, demokracja, wybory*, ed. J. Szczupaczyński, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 1993, p. 97-99.

³³ See: J. Raciborski, *Wybory i wyborcy* [in:] *Demokracja polska 1989-2003*, ed. J. J. Wiatr, J. Raciborski, J. Bartkowski, B. Frątczak-Rudnicka, J. Kiliński, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2003, p. 229-230.

Many researchers write about the spatial differentiation of political preferences³⁴. T. Szawiel uses the concepts of self-identification and self-determination for structuring personal ideas in the ideological space and determine one's ideological identity³⁵.

Referring to the literature on electoral preferences, it can be assumed that the election result is not only a product of party's action, nor is it solely the product of individual decisions of voters. It is an effect of the interaction between parties and voters³⁶.

A significant impact on the political preferences have psychological factors such as optimism, pessimism, self-confidence, willingness to cooperate, paranoid thinking, authoritarianism, anomie, political alienation³⁷, conservatism, innovation³⁸.

Optimism stimulates to action, persistence in undertaking projects and commitment. Therefore, the optimists are more self-efficient. Belief in their own effectiveness provides them with motivation, prosperous actions and personal skill. Self-efficacy influences the choices we make and our efforts associated with them, as well as how long we take such an effort, when we face obstacles³⁹. Optimistic style puts an end to helplessness, in turn pessimism deepens it even more. The way in which we explain ourselves various events determines our approach to them. It makes us helpless or treating the problems as temporary failure, mobilizing to be more active⁴⁰.

Persons who decide to be active during elections presenting more positive attitude towards themselves. In turn, those who in recent

³⁴ See: S. Rokkan, *Geography, Religion and Social Class: Crosscutting Cleavages in Norwegian Politics* [in:] *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross – National Perspective*, ed. S. M. Lipset, S. Rokkan, The Free Press Publisher, New York 1967, p. 372-379.

³⁵ See: T. Szawiel, *Podział lewica – prawica w polityce oraz w szerszym kontekście kulturowym* [in:] *Budowanie demokracji. Podziały społeczne, partie polityczne i społeczeństwo obywatelskie w postkomunistycznej Polsce*, ed. M. Grabowska, T. Szawiel, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2001, p. 220-221.

³⁶ See: R. Rose, I. Mc Allister, *Voters Begin to Choose. From Closed – Class to Open Elections in Britain*, The Sage Publications, London 1986, p. 7.

³⁷ See: G. Reimanis, *Relationship of locus of control and anomie to political interest among American and Nigerian students*, „Journal of Social Psychology” 1982, No. 116, p. 7.

³⁸ *Psychologiczne profile elektoratów partyjnych. Komunikat z badań. Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej*, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2002/K_095_02.PDF, 08.05.2015 r.

³⁹ See: A. Bańka, *Poczucie samoskuteczności. Konstrukcja i struktura czynnikowa Skali Poczucia Samoskuteczności w Karierze Międzynarodowej*, Wydawnictwo Studio PRINT-B, Instytut Rozwoju Karier, Poznań – Warszawa 2005, p. 9.

⁴⁰ See: M.E.P. Seligman, *Optymizmu można się nauczyć. Jak zmienić swoje myślenie i swoje życie*, Wydawnictwo Media Rodzina, Poznań 1995, p. 32.

years have been electorally passive, have less positive attitude towards themselves⁴¹.

As it was pointed out by K. Skarżyńska, an electoral indifference is often caused by the situation when a voter considers the politics to be irrelevant or not important because there is no possibility of implementing personal motives and subjective estimation of the extent to which own political activity will lead the unit to achieve those objectives⁴². In the field of declared and actual electoral indifference people vary in psychological terms. They have lower levels of self-efficacy and a higher level of anxiety⁴³.

It can be assumed that the relationship between voters and political parties will be more durable if the electoral message is compatible to their psychological needs. Persons who have higher levels of dispositional anxiety need a sense of security and belonging, whereas people with higher levels of self-efficacy and optimism need new challenges and opportunities for individual involvement. These determinants are associated with the process of socialization, because they have their source in the initial individual experience, which lead to a specific behavior in response to stimuli that once triggered similar reactions. They become a personal resource that acts as a filter for external stimuli. Thus, if the message meshes with one's resources, it will imply a greater commitment and loyalty. However, when the message requires from a person to activate less abundant resources, it may trigger a series of defense mechanisms, including a decisions to abstain⁴⁴.

Conclusions

Abstention is an important issue also because of its political consequences. High degree of abstention has a negative impact on the quality of the legitimacy of the parliament and government interferes with the process of social representation of interests, because it revalues preferences of privileged groups and generally reduces the quality of democracy. Among

⁴¹ See: J. Blascovich, J. Tomaka, *Measures of self-esteem* [in:] *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes. Volume 1: Measures of social psychological attitudes*, ed. J.P. Robinson, P.R. Shaver, L.S. Wrightsman, The Academic Press Publisher, New York 1991, p. 115.

⁴² See: K. Skarżyńska, *Aktywność i bierność polityczna* [in:] *Podstawy psychologii...*, p. 33-34.

⁴³ See: A. Turska-Kawa, *Psychologiczne uwarunkowania zachowań wyborczych* [in:] *Preferencje polityczne...*, p. 109.

⁴⁴ See: A. Turska-Kawa, *Psychologiczne uwarunkowania zachowań wyborczych* [in:] *Preferencje polityczne...*, p. 117.

these consequences the most important is deformity of legitimizing function. Polish elections provide only a shallow legitimacy of parliaments and governments that emerged in a consequence of election⁴⁵.

It should be remembered that the level of abstention is the result of millions of individual decisions relating to participation in the elections. Decisions to refrain from voting could have very different grounds. For example, they may stem from institutional changes or disappointment with a ruling regime. Random factors, independent from the will of the citizen, may also be a key factor⁴⁶.

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⁴⁵ See: J. Raciborski, *Wybory i wyborcy* [in:] *Demokracja polska...*, p. 213.

⁴⁶ See: M. Cześnik, *Partycypacja wyborcza...*, p. 13-14.

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- Commentary to the judgment of Constitutional Tribunal of 20 July 2011, K 9/11.
- Act of 12 April 2001 on Elections to the Polish Sejm and the Polish Senate, Journal of Laws 2001, No. 46, item 499, changed
- Act of 5 January 2011 on Election Code, Journal of Laws 2011, No. 21, item 112
- Judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal of 20 July 2011, Journal of Laws 2011 No. 149, item 889.
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