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Free airtime of election committees in Poland compared with similar solutions in other countries. The attitude of Poles to free election broadcasts in the Polish public media

Darmowy czas antenowy komitetów wyborczych w Polsce na tle podobnych rozwiązań w innych krajach. Stosunek Polaków do nieodpłatnych audycji wyborczych w mediach publicznych

Abstract: The principle of equal electoral opportunities is implemented, inter alia, by allocating free airtime to political entities. In Poland, like in many other countries, the authorized committees have the right to use the public media's airtime free of charge during election campaigns.

The present article's objective is to show the Polish solutions in this domain compared with the regulations in other countries and to present the research results and their analysis concerning Poles' attitude to free election broadcasts – including their assessment of the broadcasts as a source of knowledge about candidates and parties taking part in the election campaign. The studies were carried out based on the survey questionnaire, which was compiled using the five-level Likert scale. The sample was selected by the stratified-quota method (N = 971).

The conclusions resulting from the survey suggest the need to retain the regulation that enables political entities in Poland to use free election broadcasts during election campaigns. At the same time, they point out that it is necessary to seek more advantageous forms and content to put airtime to appropriate use during the campaign period.

Keywords: election campaign, free election broadcasts, political communication, auditory political communication

Streszczenie: Zasada równości szans wyborczych realizowana jest m.in. poprzez udostępnienie podmiotom politycznym darmowego czasu antenowego. W Polsce, podobnie jak w wielu innych państwach, w okresie kampanii wyborczej uprawnione komitety mają prawo do nieodpłatnego korzystania z anteny mediów publicznych.

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Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie polskich rozwiązań w tym obszarze na tle regulacji w innych państwach, a także prezentacja wyników badań i ich analizy dotyczącej stosunku Polaków do nieodpłatnych audycji wyborczych, w tym ich oceny audycji jako źródła wiedzy o kandydatach i ugrupowaniach, biorących udział w kampanii wyborczej. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w oparciu o kwestionariusz ankiety, przy tworzeniu którego wykorzystano pięciostopniową skalę Likerta. Próba została dobrana w sposób kwotowo-warstwowy (N = 971).

Wnioski, które wynikają z przeprowadzonych badań, skłaniają do dalszego utrzymania regulacji dającej podmiotom politycznym w Polsce możliwość korzystania z nieodpłatnych audycji wyborczych w trakcie kampanii wyborczych. Jednocześnie wskazują, że należy poszukiwać korzystniejszej formy i treści dla zagospodarowania darmowego czasu antenowego w okresie kampanijnym.

Słowa kluczowe: kampania wyborcza, nieodpłatne audycje wyborcze, komunikowanie polityczne, audytywne komunikowanie polityczne

The provision of access to free airtime in the public media to political entities before elections is treated, on the one hand, as the implementation of equal election opportunities as part of the radio-and-TV election campaign;¹ on the other hand, it is considered as a form of indirect budget support for these entities.²

As Piotr Uziębło stresses, legal provisions specify the rules of access to free airtime in many European countries. Nevertheless, the author also names the countries whose laws do not provide for the use of free airtime by any entity taking part in the election campaign. These are Austria, Estonia, and Finland. Uziębło emphasizes that, from a formal standpoint, the lack of this opportunity does not contravene the principle of equal election opportunities. However, in practice, it may increase the chances of the largest political parties, which have substantial funds that may be used to pay for radio and TV broadcasts or to conduct their campaigns in other forms.³

In his study on the principles of equality of parliamentary elections in European and South American countries, the author discusses the functioning of three models of allocating free airtime for broadcasting election advertisements in the media. The first model is one in which only those parties that won seats in the parliament in the pre-

1 A. Stępińska, 'Audycje wyborcze jako źródło informacji o podmiotach politycznych', in: *Studia nad komunikowaniem politycznym*, ed. J. Fras, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2007, p. 215; P. Uziębło, *Zasada równości wyborów parlamentarnych w państwach europejskich i południowoamerykańskich*, Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer Polska, 2013, p. 274.

2 P. Uziębło, 'Kampania wyborcza w mediach publicznych', in: B. Michalak, A. Sokała, P. Uziębło, *Leksykon prawa wyborczego i referendalnego oraz systemów wyborczych*, Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer Polska, 2013, pp. 95-96.

3 P. Uziębło, *Zasada równości...*, pp. 274-275.

vious election are entitled to free airtime. This solution is, therefore, advantageous only to parliamentary parties. An example of the country that has adopted this solution is Uruguay.

Just as in the first model, the second one, which is emphasized by Uziębło, one can speak only of the proportional treatment of the principle of equal opportunities. Free airtime is divided between a larger group of entities than the first model, but according to the criteria taking the level of support in the previous election into account. As the author stresses, this model is characteristic of Western European countries. However, he regards the Chilean regulation as the closest to this model. The third model provides access to free airtime to all political entities taking part in the elections. It may include variants involving both the equal allocation of time to each party or proportional to the number of proposed candidates. The variant taking account of the equal allocation of time to each party is found in the countries' regulations like, inter alia, Paraguay, Bolivia, or Argentina. The variant that considers the allocation of time proportionally to the number of candidates put forward by a political entity is found in Andorra's regulations. Uziębło points out that in practice, there are also solutions that combine the preceding models, Peru being an example. The author placed the Polish regulations in the third model, stressing that it is implemented by combining the variant of equal time allocation to each party⁴ with the variant taking account of the time allocation proportional to the number of candidates put forward by a political entity.⁵

1. Free use of airtime on the public media in Poland during election campaigns

Under the law of the Election Code (Kodeks wyborczy)⁶ in Poland, the authorized committees have the right to free airtime on the pub-

4 Free airtime on the channels of national public media is allocated equally to all election committees that have registered their election tickets in at least half the number of constituencies. P. Uziębło, *Zasada równości...*, p. 281.

5 On the channels of regional public media, free airtime is allocated proportionally to the number of candidate tickets registered in the broadcasting area of Polish Radio regional stations or a Polish Television regional centers. Piotr Uziębło mistakenly writes, "proportionally to the number of registered candidates instead of 'candidate tickets'". P. Uziębło, *Zasada równości...*, p. 281.

6 Law of 5 January 2011, the Election Code, Dz.U. 2011, no. 21, item 112, as amended, art. 117.

lic media during the election campaign. The right is specified in detail in the *Regulation of the National Broadcasting Council of July 12, 2011 concerning time and general allocation of time for transmission of free election programs, the procedure for allocation of time, the scope of recording and method of preparation and broadcast of election programs on public radio and television channels*. The regulation specifies in detail the following issues:

- time allocated for free election broadcasts divided by national and regional channels of public media,
- general allocation of time during the period of the broadcast of programs,
- the procedure for allocation of airtime,
- the mode of preparation,
- the scope of recording and broadcast of programs,
- the type and kind of carrier of the recording of an election broadcast,
- the manner of distribution of information on the dates of transmission of free election broadcasts.⁷

Some Polish scholars, both political science and media scholars, highlight the controversies around free election broadcasts.⁸ In the literature, there are comments concerning the mutual exclusion of the obligations of public media in this field, the loss of potential profits by the media, doubts whether money from license fees should be spent for this purpose, challenging of the sense of presentation of the election proposals in this form by political entities, etc.⁹

7 Rozporządzenie Krajowej Rady Radiofonii i Telewizji z dnia 12 lipca 2011 roku w sprawie czasu oraz ramowego podziału czasu przeznaczanego na rozpowszechnianie nieodpłatnie audycji wyborczych, trybu postępowania dotyczącego podziału czasu, zakresu rejestracji oraz sposobu przygotowania i emisji audycji wyborczych w programach publicznej radiofonii i telewizji, Dz.U., 2011, no. 154, item 915; Dz.U., 2011, no. 193, item 1146; Dz.U., 2013, item 1285, par. 1.

8 For more: T. Fredro-Boniecki, 'Kampanie wyborcze 2005 roku w mediach publicznych', in: *Media w wyborach. Kampanie wyborcze. Media w polityce*, ed. T. Sasińska-Klas, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2007, pp. 211-212; M. Kolczyński, *Strategie komunikowania politycznego*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2007, p. 343; D. Piontek, *Komunikowanie polityczne i kultura popularna. Tabloidyzacja informacji o polityce*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe WNPiD UAM, 2011, pp. 30-31.

9 Opinions on free election broadcasts found in literature are collected in the study by A. Łukasik-Turecka, *Zmiana usytuowania radia w komunikowaniu politycznym*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2018, pp. 180-182.

The author of the present study conducted the survey to examine what stance the Polish voters take on free election broadcasts and whether these broadcasts are useful to individual parties' electorates in obtaining knowledge about the candidates and parties.

Conducting the survey was possible due to my participation in the research project "Political Preferences. Attitudes – Identifications – Behaviors", implemented since 2009. Those polled in all the provinces in Poland responded to the questions during the autumn of 2018, right after the local government's elections. The five-level Likert scale was used in designing the survey questionnaire. The sample was selected by the stratified-quota method (N = 971). The studied group consisted of 509 women (52.4%) and 462 men (47.6%), the sample being diverse in terms of age (18–24 years: N = 105, 10.8%; 25–34 years: N = 181, 18.6%; 35–44 years: N = 183, 18.8%; 45–54 years: N = 151, 15.6%; 55–64 years: N = 156, 16.1%, over 65 years: N = 194, 20.0%), education (uneducated: N = 7, 0.7%; elementary/junior high school: N = 42, 4.3%; vocational: N = 132, 13.6%; secondary/post-secondary: N = 384, 39.5%; higher – completed Bachelor's degree program or Master's degree program: N = 399, 41.1%), marital status (single: N = 219, 22.6%; married: N = 571, 58.8%; divorced: N = 72, 7.4%; widowed: N = 84, 8.7%), and the place of residence (village: N = 366, 37.7%; town of up to 20 thousand residents: N = 104, 10.7%; town of 20–100 thousand residents: N = 172, 17.7%; city of 100–200 thousand residents: N = 124, 12.8%; city of over 200 thousand residents: N = 204, 21.0%).

For the purpose of the present article, the results of surveys of the individual parties' electorates in the elections to the provincial assemblies in 2018 were analyzed.

2. The attitude of Poles to free airtime – research results

Among the questionnaire statements, on which the respondents had to take a stand, there were also two statements (theses) that I authored concerning free election broadcasts.

In the case of the first statement: "I find it right that the public media make free airtime available to election committees during the election campaign, in the form of free election broadcasts", most respondents answered: "rather agree". This is the largest percentage of answers by respondents who voted in the elections to provincial as-

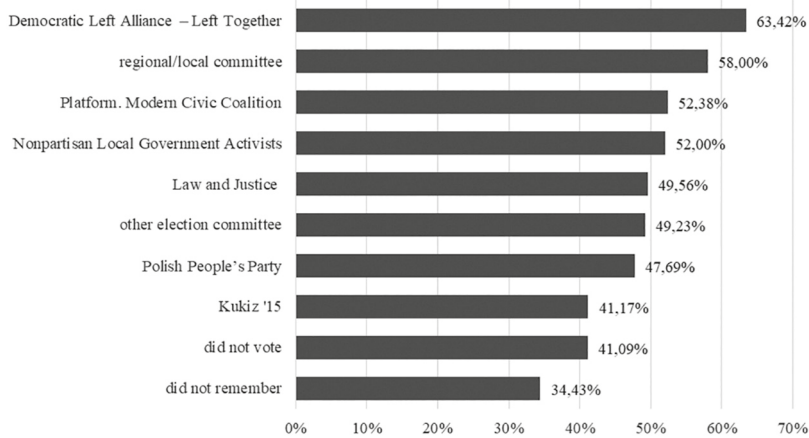
semblies in 2018 for: Nonpartisan Local Government Activists [Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy] (34%), Platform. Modern Civic Coalition [Platforma. Nowoczesna Koalicja Obywatelska] (34.20%), Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together [SLD Lewica Razem] (51.22%), Kukiz'15 (29.41%), Law and Justice [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość] (33.19%), for a regional/local committee (32%), as well as for a party other than those named in the survey questionnaire (30.77%). Only in the cases of respondents who did not remember whom they voted for in the elections to provincial assemblies in 2018, the most frequently marked answer was “difficult to say (neutral)” (36.07%). The percentage of answers by respondents who voted for Polish People's Party [Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe] was equal for “rather agree” and “difficult to say”, being 32.31%.

Even greater acceptance for the provision of free airtime to election committees before the election is observable after totaling up answers “rather agree” and “strongly agree” (Table 1). The largest percentage of the two positive answers was found among respondents who voted in the provincial assemblies election of 2018 for the committees: Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together (63.42%), a regional/local committee (58%), Platform. Modern Civic Coalition (52.38%), Nonpartisan Local Government Activists (52%), Law and Justice (49.56%), for an election committee other than those named in the survey questionnaire (49.23%), Polish People's Party (47.69%), and for Kukiz'15 (41.17%).

Among respondents who did not vote at all or did not remember whom they voted for, this percentage was 41.09% and 34.43% respectively. Like in the case of the answers “rather agree”, also in the case of the totaled up answers “rather agree” and “strongly agree” the largest percentage was reported among respondents who voted in the provincial assemblies election in 2018 for the committee Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together.

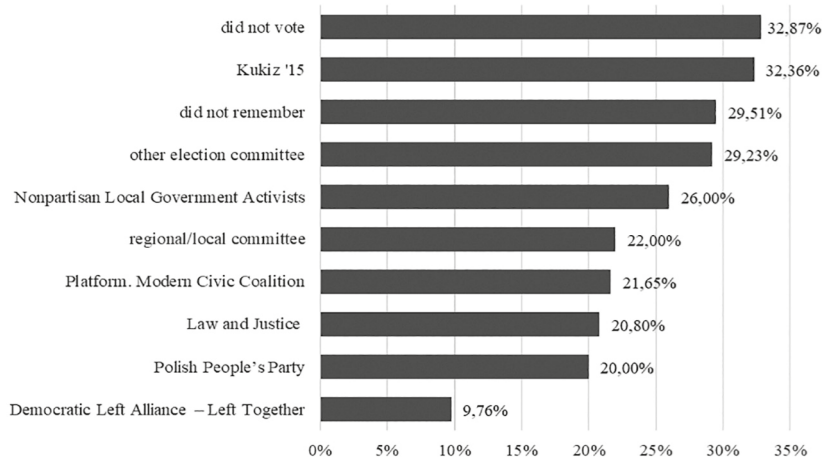
The percentage of negative answers was far smaller (Table 2). After the answers “strongly (absolutely) disagree” and “rather disagree” were summed up, the results among respondents who voted in the provincial assemblies election in 2018 for a particular committee were as follows: Kukiz'15 (32.36%), an election committee other than those named in the questionnaire (29.23%), Nonpartisan Local Government Activists (26%), a regional/local committee (22%),

Table 1. The percentage breakdown of answers “rather agree” and “strongly agree” to the statement “I find it right that the public media make free airtime available to election committees during the election campaign, in the form of free election broadcasts”



Source: own source.

Table 2. The percentage breakdown of answers “rather disagree” and “strongly disagree” to the statement “I find it right that the public media make free airtime available to election committees during the election campaign, in the form of free election broadcasts”



Source: own source.

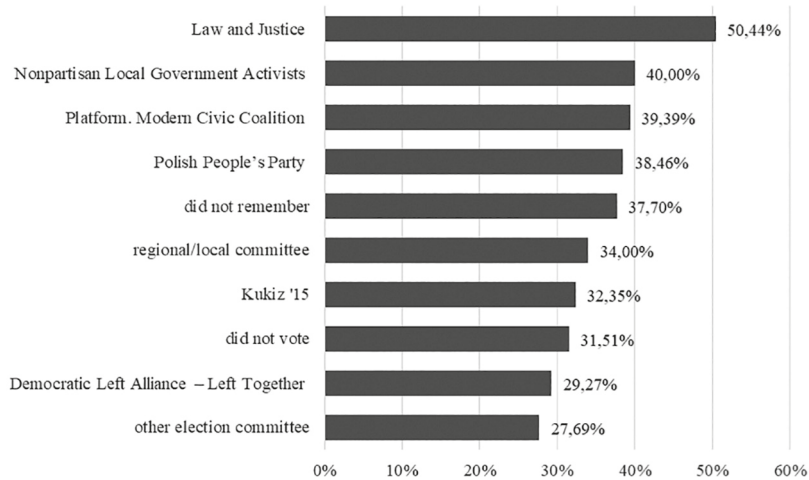
Platform. Modern Civic Coalition (21.65%), Law and Justice (20.8%), Polish People's Party (20%) and Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together (9.76%). Among respondents who did not vote at all or did

not remember whom they voted for, this percentage was: 32.87% and 29.51% respectively.

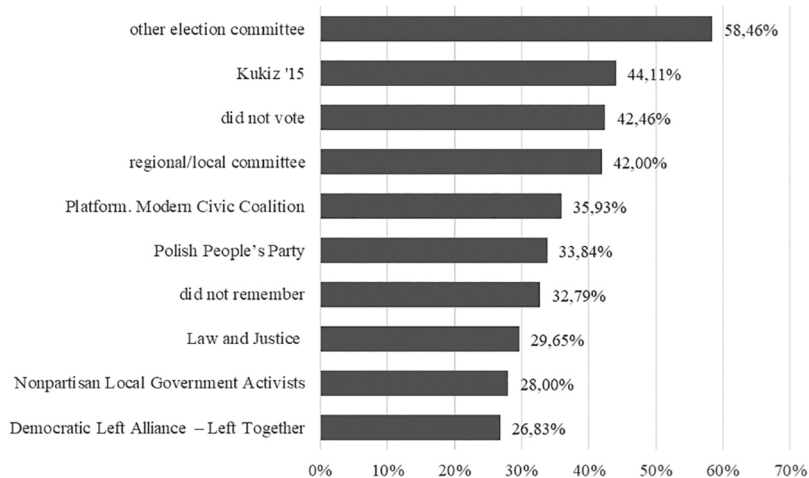
In the case of the other statement: “I find free election broadcasts a valuable source of information on the election proposals”, respondents also answered “rather agree” in most cases. This is the largest percentage of answers by respondents who voted in the 2018 provincial assemblies election for the committee: Law and Justice (39.38%), Platform. Modern Civic Coalition (33.33%), a regional/local committee (32%), Polish People’s Party (27.69%), and also by those who did not vote (27.40%). In the case of the electorates of the other committees, the answer “rather agree” was not the most frequent, nevertheless it is worth quoting the data for these electorates: Nonpartisan Local Government Activists (30%), Kukiz’15 (24.91%), Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together (24.39%), those who did not remember whom they voted for (22.95%), an election committee other than those named in the survey questionnaire (18.46%).

After totaling up the answers “rather agree” and “strongly agree”, it is clear that the results are not as high as in the case of the first statement. The largest percentage of the two positive answers was reported for respondents who voted in the 2018 provincial assemblies election for the committee: Law and Justice (50.44%), Platform. Modern Civic Coalition (39.39%), Polish People’s Party (38.46%), a regional/local committee (34%), as well as for those who did not vote (31.51%). In the case of the electorates of the other committees, the results were: Nonpartisan Local Government Activists (40%), Kukiz’15 (32.35%), Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together (29.27%), those who did not remember whom they voted for (37.7%), an election committee other than those names in the survey questionnaire (27.69%).

In the case of the other statement: “I find free election broadcasts a valuable source of information on the election proposals”, the percentage of negative answers was much higher. After totaling up the answers “strongly disagree” and “rather disagree”, the following figures were obtained on respondents who voted in the provincial assemblies election of 2018 for the committees: a committee other than those named in the questionnaire (58.46%), Kukiz’15 (44.11%), those who did not vote (42.46%), a regional/local committee (42%), Law and Justice (29.65%), Platform. Modern Civic Coalition (35.93%), and Polish People’s Party (33.84%). In the case of the electorates of the remaining

Table 3. The percentage breakdown of answers “rather agree” and “strongly agree” to the statement “I find free election broadcasts a valuable source of information on the election proposals”

Source: own source.

Table 4. The percentage breakdown of answers “rather disagree” and “strongly disagree” to the statement “I find free election broadcasts a valuable source of information on the election proposals”

Source: own source.

committees, the results were as follows: those who did not remember whom they voted for (32.79%), Nonpartisan Local Government Activists (28%), Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together (26.83%).

Conclusions

The analysis of the survey results explicitly shows that the respondents find it right that the public media in Poland provide free airtime to election committees during the election campaigns, in the form of free election broadcasts. This is evidenced by the results of surveys conducted with individual electorates, whose percentage of positive answers either exceeded 50% of all answers (in the case of the following electorates: Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together, a regional/local committee, Platform. Modern Civic Coalition, Nonpartisan Local Government Activists), or approximated this value (in the case of the following electorates: Law and Justice, an election committee other than those named in the questionnaire, Polish People's Party). The highest support for the rightness of providing free airtime to election committees by public media was reported for the electorate of the Democratic Left Alliance – Left Together and the lowest for the electorate of Kukiz'15. The percentage of negative answers in the case of the first statement was usually one third.

Respondents took a different position on the other statement: "I find free election broadcasts a valuable source of information on the election proposals." There were definitely far fewer answers that found free election broadcasts a valuable source of information about the election proposals. Only in the case of the electorate who voted for the Law and Justice Party's committee did the percentage of positive answers exceed 50%.

The survey results show that the majority of those polled understand the need to provide free airtime on the public media to election committees during election campaigns and acknowledge such regulations as just. However, far less often do the respondents regard these broadcasts as a valuable source of information on the election proposals.

The conclusions from the survey results suggest that it is still worthwhile to maintain the provisions enabling political entities in Poland

to use free election broadcasts during election campaigns. At the same time, it is necessary to seek more advantageous forms and content of these broadcasts and their appropriate place in the media's program format so that these broadcasts would be a rich source of information on the election proposals offered by political entities participating in the elections.

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