

UNIwersytet Łódzki
WYDZIAŁ STUDIÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH I POLITOLOGICZNYCH

Paweł Stępień

Rozprawa doktorska/doctoral dissertation

Wybory niekonkurencyjne do organów stanowiących jednostek samorządu terytorialnego w Polsce

Uncontested elections to local legislatures in Poland

Electoral competition lies at the heart of democratic theories. Most of them presume that voters are given different candidates, parties and election programs and, as a consequence, voters choose among alternatives. Democratic elections should enable voters to compare different options and, as a result, to select the best representatives according to their preferences.

The goal of the dissertation is to advance significantly knowledge of what reasons/factors/ variables determine the phenomenon of so-called uncontested seats/elections. The uncontested races are the most striking aberration of democratic doctrine which assume that voters have a chance to give approval or disapproval for given candidates. In general, the problem appears in practice when the number of registered candidates in a particular district is less than or equal to the number of seats allocated to the district. The result of the uncontested election is basically a foregone conclusion – a seat is often automatically assigned to a registered candidate without an electoral campaign and a war chest. As a consequence, the uncontested seats are won by default.

This dissertation not only posits problems and research questions which has not been studied before, but also adopts fresh methodological framework, including innovative approach for analyzing the so-called ‘free rides’ This approach represents groundbreaking alternative to current studies on uncontested seats because, so far, only statistical measurements have been used to reveal the incidence of uncontested seats. Among others things, I applied a field research method (i.e. questionnaires and interviews) to understand reasons on why people opt out of electoral races and do not contest seats.

The findings show that the substantial number of Polish communes has experienced the phenomenon of uncontested elections since 1998. There are many communes in which the number of uncontested seats exceeds more than 50 % of total seats, and even, there are local entities where elections are not held because all candidates run for offices unopposed (e.g. Rutka-Tartak commune).

Results of the study would seem to demonstrate that the high incidence of uncontested seats in Poland occurs in sparsely populated rural communes where low-magnitude districts are in use. Especially, a first-past-the-post system, which is applied to elect council members in the smallest communes, leads to the lack of electoral competitiveness.

What is more, the number of uncontested seats depends on so-called 'the value of the seat'. Prospective candidates make a rational calculation based on chances of victory and they only contest seats they thought to be winnable and opt out of races where their prospects seem to be dimmer (if the 'value of the seats' is low, there are no incentives to run).

One of the most remarkable results to emerge from the study is that uncontested seats are not related to the geographical location of a commune. There were no significant differences in spatial distribution (i.e. regional idiosyncrecies) of unopposed races between eastern and western parts of the country. Furthermore, there is no plausible evidence that the high proportion of uncontested seats in Poland is directly or indirectly related with the clientelistic style of politics at the local level. Instead, findings have shown that the substantial difference in the occurrence of uncontested seats across the legislatures is a consequence of the level of competitiveness of mayoral elections.

Robert Stappert