

## DETERMINERS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AT LOCAL LEVEL IN POLAND

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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to show the willingness of citizens to act through the prism of opportunities offered by participation at the local level. Citizens' activity in public life is the core of democracy. Their engagement may assume various forms, among which the most common form is participation in elections. When it comes to direct democracy, participation in referendums is most widespread. However, an element of democracy, which is cognitively equally important as the above ones, results from citizens' engagement in institutional activity through membership in political parties, trade unions, non-governmental organisations or local associations. It is also worth mentioning the participation expressed through signing of petitions, taking part in demonstrations or involvement in local initiatives. Having considered all the above data, one can state that it is clearly visible who undertakes political participation in Poland more often, and for whom this is a less frequent activity. This analysis with its conclusions seems to be a crucial suggestion for people who would like to take effective steps in order to increase citizens' engagement in politics.

**KEYWORDS:** *political participation, local government, Poland.*

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### Introduction

**Problem.** The modern theory of democracy emphasises direct forms of citizen participation in political life. The choice of direct democracy institutions to be implemented is determined mainly by historical, cultural and economic circumstances. A referendum is one of the most common forms of citizen participation both at the national as well as local (regional) level. Other less common forms include participation in demonstrations, local initiatives or signing petitions.

**Purpose.** The main aim of this publication is to show citizens' will to participate in democracy demonstrating the opportunities offered by participation at the local level. The presented research results were collected as part of a nationwide research project "Political preferences. Attitudes – Identifications – Behaviours" (2014 and 2015).

**Object.** The aim of the present study is to explain the level of participation and diagnose citizens' willingness to participate in the existing institutions of direct democracy functioning at the level of local government. A number of research hypotheses were proposed. Verifying them will make it possible to put forward theses concerning the level and specificity of political participation in Poland:

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- H1: Local citizens should have a chance to take decisions concerning their place of living (e.g., in a referendum or through public consultations);
- H2: Men engage in the analysed forms of political participation more often than women;
- H3: Younger people engage in the analysed forms of political participation more often than older people;
- H4: People with higher education engage in the analysed forms of political participation more often than other groups of people;
- H5: People from bigger cities engage in the analysed forms of political participation more often than other groups of people.

**Methods.** The presented data were collected as part of a national research project on a group of adult Poles who had the right to vote, by using a specially designed questionnaire (quantitative research method). The research relates to the participation of citizens in public life and was presented in the context of political views. The present study refers to year 2014 and 2015.

### 1. Political participation as a research problem

Currently, the modern scholarly approaches as well as particular case studies are more often discussed in English language publications (Verba, Nie, 1972; Barnes et al., 1979; Duch, 1998; Dalton, 1998; 2006; 2008; Inglehart, Catterberg, 2002; Barnes, 2006; Bernhagen, Marsh, 2007; Ekman, Amnå, 2012; Lamprianou, 2013; Van Deth, 2014).

Typologies and conclusions based on research into political participation presented in the above publications, unsurprisingly, show no unanimity in defining and perceiving this phenomenon. Moreover, the literature employs various terms to name the analysed reality, with most common terms including primarily political participation, and also citizen participation, political engagement, and political activity. The number of typologies and classifications does not allow one to attempt an exhaustive polemical discussion in this publication. Yet it is worth quoting two attempts to sort the main concepts concerning the presented subject matter.

Sharing theoretical foundations regarding political participation with other scholars, the author's perspective on the selected manifestations of political participation is convergent with empirical studies conducted with reference to other countries. Among many, in the context of this paper it is worth quoting the following conclusions. For instance, in his studies D. Stockemer (2014) pointed out that such factors as education, participation in elections and civic society institutions, as well as lack of satisfaction with the authorities influenced citizen participation in boycotts, demonstrations and signing petitions. In turn, studies by D. F. Melo and D. Stockemer (2014) aimed at showing relationships between age and three types of political participation, considering voting, demonstrations and signing petitions. The scholars noticed that young people vote more rarely than older people, while they more often participate in direct activities, such as demonstrations or signing petitions. Lower political activity of older generations has also been confirmed by other studies (Jennings, Markus, 1988).

Analysing correlations between non-conventional political participation and consolidation of democracy, D. Stockemer and B. Carbonetti (2010) did not find any. However, Bernhagen and Marsh (2007) state that the activity presented by citizens of post-communist countries as compared to citizens of stable democracies is lower. Interesting research results show that in many cases conditions conducive to political participation in those two groups of countries are different. Hence, it is significant that in western countries left-wing views are a factor leading to undertaking protests, while right-wing views clearly discourage citizens from undertaking such activities. In eastern countries it is the other way round.

A. Kern, S. Marien and M. Hooghe (2015) point out that economic crisis, which increases the unemployment rate, facilitates non-institutionalised political participation. What is more, their studies confirm that variables which matter include: age (younger people participate more often), education (those with higher education participate more often), and sex (men more often follow institutional participation forms; while women – non-institutional ones).

Judging by what has already been said, it appears that age, sex and education are among the most often mentioned issues. Changes in the age structure of Polish society and increasing disproportion between younger and older people are reflected in political activities. Thus the issue of age becomes of key importance in the research into the current and future politics, and as such requires a more in-depth analysis.

In the studies concerning the presented phenomenon it is crucial to pay attention to the term APC (age – period – cohort). The triad of age (since birth), period (in years) and cohort (year of birth) constitutes a key point in the attempts to understand more thoroughly the correlations between age and other issues, e.g., election participation, political views, election turnout, presented views. A cohort effect appears when one of the cohorts refers to a unique set of socialising experiences, differentiating it from other cohorts (Yang, Land, 2013). Thus, focusing on the APC model, it can be seen that results differ depending on the maturity of individuals (the effect of ageing or life cycle), all the people (the effect of a given period), and age of individuals (the effect of cohort) (Yang, Land, 2006; 2008; Winship, Harding, 2008; Dinas, Stoker, 2014). Applying the APC model in research into taking political decisions is not a new solution in political sciences. Numerous studies show that there are differences between people of different ages regarding their electoral behaviours.

According to A. Goerres (2009), when it comes to political participation there are at least four differences between age groups as a result of which older people behave in politics unlike younger people. These differences comprise: 1. The political generation effect: because older people are part of a different political generation, they have developed different political preferences, which in turn has effect on their political choices; 2. The socioeconomic cohort effect: socioeconomic experiences, such as education, directly influence people's participation preferences and predispositions; 3. The life-cycle effect: older people are at a different stage in their lives – socially and physically – which is reflected in their political decisions; 4. The individual ageing effect: older people have more experience in participation and are more willing to abide by social norms defining behaviours in a given situation.

Analysing the issue of participation referring to people in different age groups, it is worth noticing to what extent determiners governing the choice of party change from generation to generation. That is why, one of the significant aspects related to age and electoral behaviours consists in the fact that generations of voters come one after another (Miller, 1992; Lyons, Alexander, 2000; Hooghe, 2004). Regarding ideology, it is usually emphasised that conservative values and preferences are on the increase among older generations (Tilley, Evans, 2014). However, in line with a progressing generation change among voters, a shift towards social liberalism is observed among younger cohorts (Danigelis, Cutler, 1991; Tilley, 2002; 2005). Still it needs to be pointed out that analysing older people researchers encounter a greater stability of views than when they deal with younger people. Thus undertaking research concerning electoral approaches and behaviours, one has to take into consideration the changeability of life cycle and effects of ageing (Neundorf, Niemi, 2013).

One of the research directions in the context of age is the voter turnout (Bhatii, Hansen, 2012a; Bhatii, Hansen, 2012b; Bhatti, Hansen, Wass, 2012; Konzelmann, Wagner, Rattinger, 2012). These trends show, however, that young people vote less frequently than older ones (OECD 2011). With societies ageing, this may be a significant factor. Younger people are believed to be less interested in politics, have smaller knowledge when it comes to political issues, and be characterised by a lower sense of responsibility concerning voting (Franklin et al., 1992; Topf, 1995; Blais et al., 2004; Wass, 2007). At present, it is possible to notice and describe some changes in electoral regulations which take into consideration lowering the voting age and which aim at mobilising and politically socialising younger generations, allowing them to vote when they are 16, like in Austria (Wattenberg, 2008; Wagner, Johann, Kritzinger, 2012; Zeglovits, Aichholzer, 2014).

Hence, on the basis of the analysed literature, it can be stated that political participation is analysed primarily in the context of voting, which is a common and constant element taken into consideration. However, one can also find examples of studies which refer to other manifestations of political participation, such as signing petitions or taking part in demonstrations. The literature also very often presents individual characteristics of voters and attempts at finding a correlation with sex, age or education in the context of political participation.

## 2. Participation in Poland

Referendums and public consultations are among the main forms of direct democracy regulated by the law applied to local government. Inhabitants' meetings, especially village community meetings, play an important role in building participatory society in the local space. Other direct democracy institutions include: popular initiative, assembly, popular referendum and recall. It is worth emphasising that new citizen participation forms gain more popularity; these are: consultations, participatory budgeting, and deliberative participation. Membership in local structures of political parties, associations and circles, as well as local initiatives, demonstrations and signing petitions are considered by some scholars to be micro-scale forms of non-political participation (not related to elections).

Implementing direct forms of participation, first of all using their new forms, citizens have an opportunity not only to assess the incumbent authorities, but they also gain real influence on how their community functions. Where is then a chance to increase citizen participation on the local government level? The main tool is to create mechanisms facilitating cooperation among democratically elected authorities, social organisations and citizens. This can give a chance to increase trust in public authorities, which at the same time can show that the needs and benefits of local community are important for them. In such a way local and regional democracy is strengthened. The ways to increase citizens' participation in public life of their local communities should primarily rely on free access to public information, introducing electronic public consultations concerning undertakings of local government institutions or assessing how institutions or their employees work. Additionally, mechanism of direct democracy – public consultations, referendums – should be more often applied when controversial decisions are to be taken by local government bodies (Grosse, 2008).

## 3. Problems undertaken in the study and verification of hypotheses

Political participation of citizens can take many faces. In this paper attention is focused on two types of participation. First, by expressing one's opinion in the form of signing petitions, and participating in demonstrations and local initiatives. Secondly, inhabitants' meetings, especially village community meetings and local referendum.

Individual factors such as gender, age, education and a place of residence were taken into account in the analysis of the above manifestations of political participation. Moreover, it took into consideration diversity in the context of electoral decisions such as belonging to particular constituencies, and ideological self-determination on the axis of the left-centre-right.

The most common forms of participation in Poland at the local (commune) level feature expressing one's opinion through a petitions (23%), local initiatives (21%) and demonstrations (12%). It can be thus seen that petitioning and proposing local initiatives are practised by about one fifth of the respondents, while half as many take part in demonstrations.

Considering particular variables, the study shows that men more often than women express their opinions through petitions and local initiatives, and even more often take part in demonstrations. In the case of the first two, the difference is 9 percentage points, while in the case of the latter – over 20 percentage points.

*Table 1. Participation and sex*

	Men	Women
Petitions	54.2	45.8
Local initiatives	54.3	45.7
Demonstrations	61.6	38.4

Focusing on the place of living as a category to analyse, political participation in the forms mentioned in this study is characteristic of rural inhabitants and big city dwellers. People from towns and little towns do not engage in politics to such a degree. Citizens from towns between 100 to 200 thousand inhabitants are found to be least active.

Table 2. Participation and place of residence

	Village	City (less than 20 000)	City (20 000–100 000)	City (100 000–200 000)	City (over 200 000)
Petitions	32.2	18.7	14.0	11.7	23.4
Local initiatives	36.2	14.6	20.1	9.5	36.2
Demonstrations	26.8	10.7	17.0	14.3	31.3

The collected data also show clearly that the level of political participation is related to the level of education. The comprehensive secondary school level seems to be the borderline here, as the level of participation among people who completed only a vocational school is lower by about 30 percentage points in comparison with the former. There is no such acute difference when we compare secondary schools' and higher education institutions' graduates (only about 10 percentage points).

Table 3. Participation and education

	Without education	Elementary school	Vocational school	Secondary school	Higher education
Petitions	0.0%	2.3%	12.6%	37.9%	47.2%
Demonstrations	0.9%	0.9%	13.4%	44.6%	40.2%
Local initiatives	0.0%	1.5%	13.6%	36.7%	48.2%

Expressing one's opinion is also dependent on age; it is done more often by young people. The highest result is registered among people of 25–34 years old, a lower but similar result refers to groups of 18–24- and 35–44-year-olds, while in groups of older generations this activity sharply decreases.

There are also differences among age groups when it comes to preferred activities. The youngest are most willing to take part in demonstrations. People aged between 25–34 sign petitions and engage in local initiatives. All the activities analysed in the study are more or less equally common among 35–44-year-olds. In turn, 45–54-year-old people most often choose to take part in demonstrations. Older people, who declare a clearly lower level of engagement, participate in all the activities at a more or less similar level if they decide to participate at all.

Summarising this part of analysis and taking into account the above variables, one can draw the following conclusions. Political participation – assuming the form of petition signing, participating in demonstrations and local initiatives – is dependent on sex, age, education and place of living. As such, it has its specificity and allows one to state that groups of citizens, who express their opinion more often than others, are: men, rural citizens and urban citizens from cities above 200 thousand inhabitants, people with higher and comprehensive secondary education, and younger rather than older people.

Another point worth discussing is political participation as visible in electoral behaviours such as voting for particular political parties.

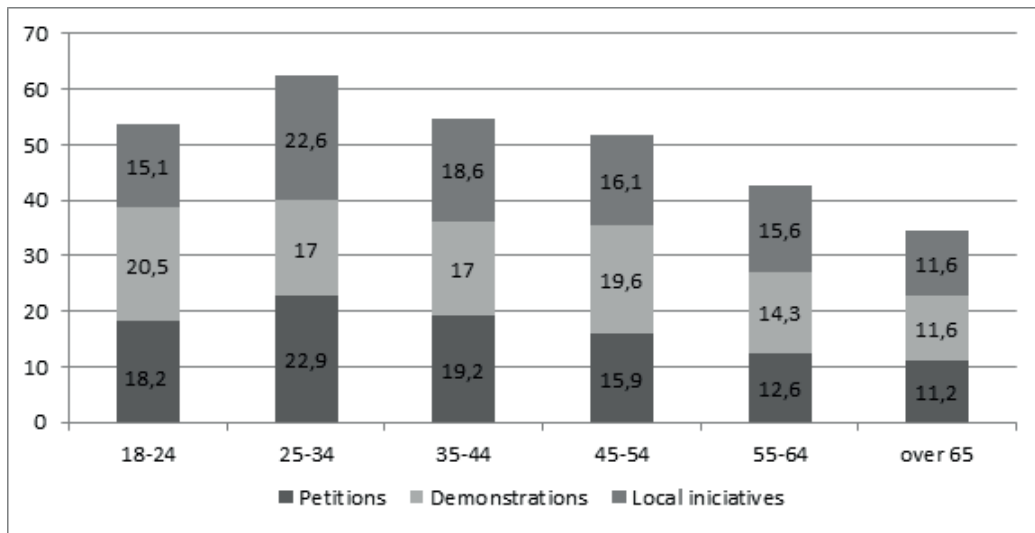


Figure 1. Participation and age

Elections to local governments have a direct impact on the way local communities function. Interest in these elections and electoral participation are at a satisfactory level. What is the participation level in other forms of the citizen decision-taking process? The respondents were asked about their participation in direct democracy institutions regulated by the law, that is: village meeting, district (housing estate) meeting, public consultation and local referendum. The structure of the question made it possible to select more than one answer in various arrangements and provide both negative and positive answer to each of the four elements in the question.

The data collected in the above table shows that public consultation is the most common form of participation, whereas village meeting, district (housing estate) meeting and local referendum were less common. Assessing particular electorates, one can see that the greatest interest in participation in *solectwo* meetings or housing estate meetings was shown by supporters of Left Democratic Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* – SLD) – 39%. Similar levels of interest were observed among voters of Polish Peasants’ Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* – PSL) – 33.3%, and Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS) – 28%. Public consultations gathered supporters of Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska* – PO) – 29.6%, *Palikot* Movement (*Ruch Palikota* – RP) – 29.6%, PSL (29.2%), SLD (23.7%) and PiS (23.2%). The remaining form of direct democracy, namely local referendum, was most actively supported by voters of PO (27.8%), PiS (26.8%) and RP (23.2%), while those voting for SLD did not participate in this initiative.

Another issue worth analysing is the extent to which citizens use their passive voting right, that is participating in elections as candidates. Similarly to the first questions, they could choose more than one answer among the proposed ones. Considering the number of vacancies in each election, it should not be surprising that the biggest number of respondents took part in elections to local governments or councils of districts (or *solectwo*). In the case of local government elections, the greatest activity was shown by supporters of PSL (53.8%), SLD (36.8%), and PO (35.8%), with RP (26.7%) and PiS (32.3%) not so well represented. When it comes to elections to councils of districts (or *solectwo*), the highest activity was presented by supporters of RP (63.3%), PSL (46.2%) and PiS (44.1%). In the case of elections to the Sejm and Senate, the greatest number of candidates were found among the electorate of PO (16.4%), while supporters of SLD, people who did not vote and those who supported another party, as well as those who did not remember which candidate they voted, never took part in these elections as candidates. Citizens supporting PSL also did not run in parliamentary elections to the Polish and European Parliament. Among candidates to the European Parliament, supporters of SLD (36.8%), PO (19.4%) and PiS (11.8%) were most active.



Table 4. The quantitative and percentage distribution of people, who have taken part (even once) in any of the below given socio-political events, in particular electorates and among people who did not vote in parliamentary elections in 2011

	Meeting in Solectwo		Meeting in district		Consultations of inhabitants		Local referendum		Total	
	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%
Civic Platform	53	18.7	68	23.9	84	29.6	79	27.8	284	100.0
Polish Peasants' Party	16	33.3	7	14.6	14	29.2	11	22.9	48	100.0
Law and Justice	47	28.0	37	22.0	39	23.2	45	26.8	168	100.0
Palikot Movement	20	18.5	31	28.7	32	29.6	25	23.2	108	100.0
Democratic Left Alliance	23	39.0	22	37.3	14	23.7	0	0	59	100.0
Other	7	25.0	6	21.4	8	28.6	7	25.0	28	100.0
Do not remember	5	41.7	1	8.3	5	41.7	1	8.3	12	100.0
Did not vote	53	37.3	26	18.3	41	28.9	22	15.5	142	100.0

Table 5. The quantitative and percentage distribution of people, who have been candidates (even once) in any of the below given elections, in particular electorates and among people who did not vote in parliamentary elections in 2011

	Elections to the Sejm and Senat		Elections to the European Parliament		Local elections		Elections to Solectwo		Total	
	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%
Civic Platform	11	16.4	13	19.4	24	35.8	19	28.4	67	100.0
Polish Peasants' Party	0	0	0	0	7	53.8	6	46.2	13	100.0
Law and Justice	4	11.8	4	11.8	11	32.3	15	44.1	34	100.0
Palikot Movement	2	6.7	1	3.3	8	26.7	19	63.3	30	100.0
Democratic Left Alliance	0	0	7	36.8	7	36.8	5	26.4	19	100.0
Other parties	0	0	2	18.2	6	54.5	3	27.3	11	100.0
Do not remember	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	100.0	1	100.0
Did not vote	0	0	1	7.6	6	46.2	6	46.2	13	100.0

## Conclusions

Employing direct forms of participation, citizens can assess how the incumbent authorities work, as well as paying attention to matters that are important for them and which influence their everyday life. Citizens are still not able to fully exploit the privileges the state grants them. Although there is a variety of direct democracy institutions and people can participate in elections as candidates, these forms are not widely used by society. Campaigns initiated in local government units as well as in the nationwide political space, which are to engage local inhabitants in the matters of their community, are not as successful as expected with the participation rate on average reaching only 20%. The situation might improve thanks to the development of modern technologies which will be instrumental in taking decisions concerning public life.

Considering the specificity of particular forms of expressing one's opinion, the following conclusions can be drawn. Men more often than women declare that they sign petitions; people signing petitions are more often graduates of higher education institutions than secondary, vocational, or primary schools; they most often live in villages and towns having above 200 thousand inhabitants. As for local initiatives, among people declaring this way of expressing their opinion the majority are men, people with higher or secondary education, and rural citizens. Expressing opinions through participation in demonstrations is declared by 12% of the respondents. Among them, men constitute a bigger group than women; people with secondary education are the most numerous group, similarly to those who live in towns bigger than 200 thousand inhabitants.

Having considered all the above data, one can state that it is clearly visible who undertake political participation in Poland more often, and for whom this is a less frequent activity. This analysis with its conclusions seems to be a crucial suggestion for people who would like to take effective steps in order to increase citizens' engagement in politics.

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## PILIEČIŲ DALYVAVIMO POLITIKOJE VIETINIŲ LYGMENIU NUSTATYMAS LENKIJOJE

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### Santrauka

Pagrindinis tyrimo tikslas – parodyti piliečių norą dalyvauti politikoje, nagrinėjant galimybes prisijungti vietiniu lygmeniu. Piliečių aktyvumas viešajame gyvenime yra demokratijos esmė. Jų aktyvumas gali pasireikšti įvairiomis formomis, iš kurių pati dažniausia yra balsavimas. Laikantis demokratijos principų, dalyvavimas referendumuose yra plačiausiai išreikštas dalyvavimo veiksmas. Kitas demokratijos elementas, ne mažiau svarbesnis už jau minėtuosius, yra piliečių dalyvavimo instituciniu lygmeniu (politinėse partijose, profsąjungose, nevyriausybinėse organizacijose ar vietinėse asociacijose) rezultatas. Verta paminėti ir dalyvavimą, išreiškiamą pasirašant peticijas, demonstracijose ar dalyvavimą vietinėse iniciatyvose.

Atsižvelgiant į specifinius būdus išreikšti savo nuomonę galima daryti šias išvadas: vyrai dažniau nei moterys pasirašo peticijas; asmenys, pasirašantys peticijas, dažniausia yra baigę aukštąjį mokslą nei vidurinį, profesinį ar pradinę mokyklą; jie dažniausia gyvena kaimuose arba miestuose iki 200 tūkstančių gyventojų. Didžioji dalis teigiančiųjų, kad savo nuomonę išreiškia vietinių iniciatyvų lygmeniu, yra vyrai, asmenys su aukštesniu arba aukštesniu išsilavinimu ir kaimo gyventojai. Nuomonės išsakymas demonstracijose – 12 proc. respondentų atsakymas. Iš jų vyrai sudaro didesnę grupę nei moterys; asmenys, turintys vidurinį išsilavinimą, yra pati didžiausia grupė, panašaus dydžio, kaip asmenų, gyvenančių didesniuose nei 200 tūkstančiai gyventojų miestuose.

Remiantis surinktais duomenimis galima teigti, kad aiškiai matoma, kas Lenkijoje dažniau užsiima politiniu dalyvavimu ir kas tai daro rečiau. Ši analizė ir jos išvados – tai pasiūlymai asmenims, kurie norėtų imtis veiksmingų priemonių, siekdami paskatinti piliečių dalyvavimą politikoje.

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