

Chapter 110

New Media in the Process of Shaping Local Democracy: The Case of Poland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an analysis of the voting campaigns in Poland before the local elections in 2002, 2006, and 2010. The 2002 election was chosen as the starting point of the analysis because of the following facts: 1) those were the first direct local elections for mayors/municipality heads, and 2) the number of council members was reduced by law, all of which heralded an interesting competition. The high turnover rate of candidates for councillors across different regions of Poland in 2002, 2006, and 2010 local government elections has been attributed in part to the volatility caused by greater media and public interest in council issues. Many see the media as the most effective way to get voters' attention. Voters also treat media information about candidates as a very important source of knowledge about the candidate, which helps them to vote. However, it is important to check: 1) which medium is the most popular and effective source of information for local public debate; 2) what is the quality of information being published before and after the local elections; and 3) if the "politician activity" and "society response" is only clearly visible during the elections time or maybe "local debate" develops after the election time. The chapter is based on the qualitative and quantitative research. Surveys were carried out in 2002, 2006, and 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing activities are pursued all the time, but they are intensified during the elections campaign. Marketing actions taken in this time have even a specific name – election marketing. Its aim is to popularize the candidates and the party's political

program, gain the highest amount of votes by the candidates and, in consequence – win the elections or achieve the best result possible.

Both, political marketing as well as the widely understood political communication serve a central, somehow definite objective of politics – to gain and stay in power. In democracies power is

gained through victorious elections, therefore, the fact that marketing activities are intensified during elections campaigns should not be surprising. Political parties in Poland are only beginning to familiarize themselves with marketing methods; they use them more often in parliamentary elections as well as on a smaller scale, outside of them.

Ulicka claims that the changes in political actions that are dictated by political marketing caused the increase of personalization of political power, changes in the functioning environment of political parties and evolution of social attitudes – the appearance of new motivations to participate in political life (Ulicka, 1996).

According to Joseph A. Schumpeter:

Every party at any moment, always has a certain set of rules or program points, which can be equally characteristic to it and important for its success, as brand products sold by a department store are important to its success.” What is more, parties and politicians attempt at the regulation of political competition in a way that is similar to certain practices of a commercial union. The psycho-techniques of leading the party and of acquiring supporters, slogans and melodies to which people dance, are not a mere addition. Rather, they are the very essence, the content of politics. (Schumpeter, 1995: 353)

Therefore, political marketing is not a supplement to politics or an effective and expensive setting for political activities, it is the ability to use the natural resources of the party in an effective and suitable way depending on the situation.

Activities in the field of political marketing start with the change in the way of thinking about a politician, and then they concentrate on gaining support for his actions. The politician and the party are treated, in accordance with the philosophy of political marketing, as products, which have to sell high and there is no better way to promote the product as through media so nowadays media seems to be the main actor at the “political busi-

ness” which seems positive from the contemporary democracy perspective. Mass media play a unique role in transmitting information to voters and in shaping their political attitudes. The diffusion of free, non-partisan media during the last centuries is therefore regarded as crucial for the development of functioning democracies. Gentzkow et al. (2006) relate “the Rise of the Fourth Estate” in the US, i.e. the development of the non-partisan press in the 19th century, to the sharp decline of corruption in that era. As many researchers noticed the expansion of mass media and the emergence of new media have transformed the entire democratic system (see: Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Mancini & Swanson, 1996; Schulz, 2004). The media have been moving to the centre of the political process. According to Schulz (2004), the role of mass media in elections campaigns has changed, altering the behaviour of the candidates, the parties’ campaign organization and the behaviour of the electorate. These changes result in shifting relationships between the various protagonists such as the political parties, the candidates, the mass media and the voters. Communication research has produced substantial evidence of the importance of mass media in election campaigns. Elections communication became the centre of the study of political communication. It is worth mention some important studies of elections communication in different democratic systems e.g. Maarek, 1992; Hallin, 1992; Holtz-Bacha, 2000; Keil, 2003; Patterson, 1993; Semetko and Schoenbach, 2003; Wilke and Reinemann, 2001; Winfried Schulz, Zeh and Quiring, 2005; Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001, 2002; Skrzypiński, 1998-2006; Kolczyński, 2002-2008; Mazur, 2002; Rose, 2005; Baldersheim, 1996, 2007; Rallings, 1997). Analysing the relationship between media and politics in countries of reborn democracy we must remember about the historical background of this relationship while after the 1989 turnout, the new and unstable (as reflected by high electoral volatility) party systems had a limited following in Central and Eastern Europe, some parties even

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