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Elections to the European Parliament 2004: Voter attendance and significance to the Polish electorate and political landscape

- *Polish politicians are increasingly often referring to the prospect of next year's elections to the European Parliament (EP). Voters, however, are still unaware of the fact that these elections are to take place – and that as early as on June 13th, 2004. Only 27% of Poles know that they will be choosing representatives to the EP in general elections.*
- *The European Parliament plays only a minor role in the present institutional makeup of the European Union. Elections to the European Parliament do not entail any obvious political consequences. As a result, the significance of these elections to Western European politicians and voters is only secondary to national parliamentary elections. As a rule, they only play the role of a "barometer" of the national political landscape, providing information on voter preferences that may be later used in national elections. Therefore, low voter attendance can be primarily ascribed to the absence of political consequences of EP elections (rather than to the rejection of the European integration ideal).*
- *Studies conducted with reference to current EU member-states suggest that the following factors promote higher voter attendance in elections to the European Parliament: compulsory voting, concurrent national parliamentary elections, perceived weakness of domestic institutions and overall support for the country's membership in the EU.*
- *In Poland, owing to a very low assessment of domestic institutions and hopes placed in democratic institutions of the European Union, as well as the fact that elections to the European Parliament will be an interesting novelty to Polish voters, one may expect a relatively high attendance (for Polish standards). If European and national parliamentary elections are held at the same time, then there may even occur a situation opposite to that in Western Europe: elections to the European Parliament will "prop up" attendance at national parliamentary elections.*

Elections to the European Parliament, sixth in history and first for Polish politicians and voters, will take place precisely one year from now - in June 2004. The prospect of these elections is gradually making its way into Polish politics. Last April, in reaction to the growing political crisis in Poland, Prime Minister Leszek Miller publicly suggested after meeting with President Kwaśniewski that the current term in office of the Polish parliament should be cut short and that elections to the Sejm and Senate should be held jointly with those to the European Parliament (on June 13th, 2004). He withdrew that proposal the day after Poland voted in a referendum in favor of joining the European Union. Notwithstanding the fact that politicians act first and foremost in accordance with their domestic political agendas, it would be useful to give a thought to the significance of the first elections to the European Parliament for Polish politicians and electorate.

For the time being, elections to the European Parliament in Poland are *terra incognita* for Polish politicians, voters and experts. Therefore, the questions that follow are only tentative. What significance will Polish voters ascribe to EP elections? How will politicians treat them? If national and European parliamentary elections are held at the same time, what will be the interaction of election campaigns run by political parties? Will voter attendance be high or low? In this paper we will use electoral data compiled between 1979 and 1999 to formulate or quote hypotheses concerning factors that influence voter attendance at elections to the European Parliament. Subsequently, using results of a poll taken by the Institute of Public Affairs on Poles' attitude toward European democracy and EU institutions, we will relate these hypotheses to the Polish situation.

Influence of elections to the European Parliament on the national political landscape

An examination of European parliamentary elections in current EU member-states under the present institutional and political makeup of the European Union demonstrates that voters consider them secondary to national parliamentary elections. Indeed, elections to the European Parliament do not have direct and tangible consequences for the voter, do not result in the appointment of a new government or prime minister, and do not affect the European balance of power. More important than their pan-European consequences

are their implications on the national political landscape. This is why political scientists who write in special Anglophone literature call elections to the European Parliament "second-order national elections" (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Comparing them to local elections, such as those to German *land* governments, they show their role of a "political barometer" of the national political landscape (Schmitt and van der Eijk, 2002). In this sense, elections to the European Parliament as we know it today will always be "subservient" to internal Polish political issues and will remain "secondary" to Sejm elections.

Therefore, if we follow this train of thought, the common date of both elections would paradoxically do nothing to "place European issues on the back burner" but could even give extra weight to EP elections by propping up voter attendance. Indeed, studies of past elections to the European Parliament show that voter attendance is the highest precisely when national and European parliamentary elections are held at the same time. It is the lowest when European elections are held soon after those to the national parliament ("first-order national elections") and grows slowly with the passing of the national election cycle (Schmitt and van der Eijk, 2002:4). These regularities have been observed in Western Europe among current EU member-states.

Regular drop in attendance at elections to the European Parliament

During the latest elections to the European Parliament (1999), average attendance across the European Union was 49% and did not exceed the 50% mark for the first time in history. The interest in EP elections has been regularly falling since they were first held (in 1979, voter attendance was 63% - as many as 24 percentage points higher than in 1999). Attendance is dropping practically in all member-states. When comparing elections held in 1994 (in case of Austria, Finland and Sweden - in 1996) with those held in 1999, attendance has risen only in Portugal, Spain and Ireland.

Voter attendance at elections to the European Parliament between 1979 and 1999 (in percent)

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999
Austria	-	-	-	68 (1996)	49
Belgium	92	92	91	91	90
Denmark	47	52	46	53	50
Finland	-	-	-	60 (1996)	30
France	61	57	49	53	47
Greece	79 (1981)	77	[80]	71	70
Spain	-	69 (1987)	55	59	[64]
Netherlands	58	51	47	36	30
Ireland	[64]	48	[68]	44	[51]
Luxemburg	[89]	[87]	[87]	[89]	[86]
Germany	66	57	62	60	45
Portugal	-	72 (1987)	51	36	40
Sweden	-	-	-	42 (1996)	38
Great Britain	32	33	36	36	24
Italy	86	84	82	75	71
EU	63	61	59	57	49

Source: <http://europa.eu.int> and Schmitt & van der Eijk, 2002. Bolded figures indicate compulsory voting. Figures in square brackets indicate EP elections held at the same time as national parliamentary elections.

The waning interest of EU member-state populations in elections to the European Parliament are a major and increasingly recognized problem. Critics go as far as question the need for general elections to the EP in a situation where the "European public opinion" does not exist, as demonstrated – in addition to the steadily falling voter attendance – by the weakness of "European" parties. Instead they propose relying on national parliaments as the source of legitimization.

There are other attempts to remedy the situation. For example, there is talk about increasing the impact of the European Parliament on the functioning of the Union (e.g. France and Germany have submitted a proposal in 2002 whereby the European

Parliament would have a major say in deciding the EU budget and would elect the European Commission president). Current proposals of the European Convention are also moving in that direction. If the proposed changes were implemented, elections to the European Parliament would allegedly have realistic political consequences and voters – rational political players – would take that into consideration when deciding their preferences. The reforms would lead to a changed logic in the process of European elections (the logic of "second-order national elections") and, possibly, to higher attendance. However, all this is in the future. What influences voter attendance in elections to the European Parliament today?

What influences attendance in elections to the European Parliament?

Here are hypotheses as to the factors that influence attendance in European elections. Some have been tested and discussed by various authors (e.g. Rohrschneider, 2002; Schmitt and van der Eijk, 2002).

- **Compulsory elections and second elections held at the same time as those to the European Parliament increase attendance.**

In Belgium and Luxemburg, where voter attendance is high and fluctuates only slightly around 90%, voting is compulsory and those who do not vote are fined. In Greece, where voting is also compulsory but fines are lower, attendance remains high, although not as high as in Belgium or Luxemburg. The Irish example shows that holding European and national parliamentary elections at the same time has a major impact on increasing voter attendance.

- **Attendance is higher in countries that benefit from EU subsidies.**

Higher attendance is found in countries that benefit more from the EU structural funds: in Italy it exceeds 70%, in Spain – 60%. In Germany, where the public discourse is full of references to that country paying more into the EU than getting out of it, attendance at the latest elections to the European Parliament was only 45% (at the same time, attendance at elections to the Bundestag was 82%).

- **A perceived weakness of domestic institutions promotes attendance at elections to the European Parliament. Conversely, perceiving domestic institutions as effective and well functioning promotes lower attendance at EP elections.**

During the year of the latest elections to the European Parliament, Italians and Greeks were by far the most dissatisfied with the state of domestic democracy (Eurobarometer No. 52, 1999). Meanwhile in the Netherlands, where 77% of adult citizens expressed satisfaction with the state of domestic democracy, attendance at elections to the European Parliament did not even reach 30%. In Italy the situation is exactly opposite: only 27% of the population declared satisfaction with Italian democracy and these opinions went hand in hand in 1999 with a very high attendance at European elections, exceeding 70%.

- **In countries where the popular support for the EU membership is higher, voter attendance is also higher.**

Measurements taken within the framework of Eurobarometer No. 52 a few months after the latest elections to the European Parliament, in June 1999, showed that the least support for the EU membership could be found at that time in Great Britain, Sweden, Austria, Finland, Germany and France (where less than 50% of respondents believed that the EU membership was "good for their country"). An examination of voter attendance in these states shows that it too did not exceed either 50% or the EU average. The Netherlands and Portugal are an exception - there the support for the EU membership in 1999 was high (71% and 68%), but voter attendance at elections to the EP was relatively low (less than 30% in the Netherlands).

- **First-time participation in elections to the European Parliament is an interesting but quickly dissipating novelty for voters.**

In most EU member-states, first-time participation in European elections showed the highest voter attendance. In most cases, it has never reached the same level again. Great Britain and Denmark, i.e. countries with a high proportion of Euro-skeptics, are a curious exception.

- **Dropping attendance at elections to the European Parliament should be ascribed to their minor political significance rather than to voters' anti-European attitudes.**

Elections to the European Parliament as we know it today do not bear any political consequences considered important and clear to the electorate. According to the theory of "second-order national elections", the lack of interest in these elections is not a result of the rejection of European integration and politics by a part of the population but an expression of their slight (actual and perceived) significance for politicians and voters.

Will Poles bother to vote in European parliamentary elections?

Poles will vote in elections to the European Parliament for the first time in June 2004. They will be choosing their representatives to the same body as the Spanish, Dutch or German. However, the context of these elections will be different. In Poland, both the trust of domestic politicians and attendance at elections to the Sejm are traditionally low. In addition, even among people interested in politics and, therefore, wishing to participate in political life, almost 30% are not able to indicate which party they would want to support in such elections. In view of these processes, there is a need to once again ask what role European parliamentary elections will play in the context of the problems of Polish democracy.

The exceptionally low level of trust in domestic democratic institutions may promote the shift of voters' hopes onto European Union institutions and result in higher attendance at elections to the European Parliament. A significant proportion of respondents (57%) give good marks to the European Parliament, assessing that institution in a much better light than the Polish Sejm (12%). However, this does not mean that the positive image of that EU institution results directly from the negative perception of the Polish one. More criticism of Polish institutions goes hand in hand with more criticism of EU institutions and vice-versa (Pankowski, in print). Therefore, it seems that the absence of correlation between a negative assessment of Polish institutions and positive assessment of EU institutions weakens the hypothesis that Polish voters will transfer the mandate from the

Polish political landscape to the European forum and, in consequence, will be more interested in elections to the European Parliament.

Another hypothesis states that Polish hopes associated with the European Union, e.g. better institutional functioning and access to European assistance funds, will contribute to a higher voter attendance. The European Union is already present in the Polish political discourse as a peculiar and often unique source of salvation for Poland. Polish politicians increasingly often suggest that the only hope rests in the Union because "without it we will not be able to cope" (for example, with balancing the budget). Similar Polish attitudes and hopes are demonstrated in a study conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs: more than one half of respondents consider that joining the European Union will have a positive effect on the functioning of Polish public institutions. This type of thinking is also present among the electorates of parties professing Euro-skepticism. A large proportion of the supporters of the League of Polish Families and the Self-Defense Party (35% and 50% respectively) voted for integration in the accession referendum. This gives grounds to believe that supporters of the Euro-skeptical parties will also vote in elections to the European Parliament.

On the other hand, the level of civic participation in Poland is low, a rather large proportion of the population criticizes public and political life in general, and the political landscape is unstable. We will not be able to get rid of these problems overnight. All these systemic features create a context that is radically different from that in West European countries. It is also characteristic that the Polish population has so little knowledge of European elections only one year before they are to take place.

In a study conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in March 2003, 63% of respondents declared that they would attend elections to the European Parliament if they were held the coming Sunday. However, when asked a little earlier about the method of choosing Polish representatives to the European Parliament, only 27% knew that deputies to the EP would be chosen in general elections (over 40% thought that they would be selected by the government, president or Sejm and Senate). It is significant to note that the responses were not associated with any social or demographic variables - neither the education level nor age had any particular impact thereon. They show that these issues are very distant from the Polish population at present, that there is very little knowledge of the issue and that major changes in the declared and actual voter participation are possible. Should it be decided to hold national and European parliamentary elections at the same

time, an important role would be played by the current social mood, polarization of political attitudes and campaign accompanying elections to the Sejm and Senate. It may then turn out that - in the face of a very low level of trust in MPs and the Sejm, and hopes placed by the Polish society in EU institutions - we will deal with interdependence opposite to that existing in Western Europe: voter attendance will be higher precisely because of elections to the European Parliament.

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