

Polish local democracy in crisis? Non-competitive elections and the supply of candidates for councillors

Marek Mazurkiewicz¹

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Abstract:

Competitive elections are the basis of democracy; without them there is no freedom of choice. Elections without competition are associated with the façade nature of elections in undemocratic systems. There are, however, exceptions to the belief that in a democratic system every election must be competitive. We can also observe them in Poland, particularly in small communes with up to 20,000 inhabitants. They take two forms: non-competitive elections of commune leaders and councillors. The latter case is known in the literature under the legal term of filling seats without voting. In 2018, as many as 8% of Polish councillors obtained their mandate without votes. In 2018 compared to 2014, the number of such cases increased by 77% and compared to 2010, the increase was nearly 300%. In extreme cases, local elections become a ritual with a known result, and the voter loses the ability to influence their representatives. At the same time, from 2002 to 2018, the number of candidates for municipal councils fell by 38%. Both phenomena may be a signal of problems that harm Polish local democracy. The article analyses them through the prism of the mechanisms for selecting candidates for councillors.

Keywords:

local government, local elections, competitiveness, election law, selection of candidates

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I. Introduction

The competitive selection of a political representation is the foundation of representative democracy. The classical theorists of democracy, such as J. A. Schumpeter, A. Downs and R. A. Dahl (Schumpeter 1942, Downs 1957, Dahl 1971), associated democracy with the existence of competitive elections in which two or more groups vie for a share in the exercise of power. The very essence

¹ Marek Mazurkiewicz, Ph.D. (ORCID: 0000-0001-5551-2626) – assistant professor in the Institute of Political Science and Administration, the Faculty of Political Science and Social Communication of the University of Opole; mmazurkiewicz@uni.opole.pl

of elections makes full sense only if the voter has an alternative. The absence of electoral alternatives is associated with elections held in non-democratic systems (Little 2017) by autocrats eager for a propagandistic confirmation of their political position (Tanaka 2018). Competitiveness disappears when a single candidate runs for a single seat. As a result, the citizenry is less likely to check and review the performance of their political representatives. However, the general understanding of the principle of competitiveness is broader. It does not depend solely on the number of running candidates (the ratio of the number of candidates to the number of seats to be filled), but also on the circumstances and rules under which the system of electoral competition is organised. Therefore, there is no consensus in the academic literature on how to actually measure the level of electoral competitiveness (Snyder, Strömberg 2010; Cox, Fiva, Smith 2020). It can be influenced by both changes in the level of voter turnout (Cox 2015, Author 2020) and the phenomenon of incumbency advantage (Carson, Engstrom, Roberts 2007; Author 2021), which undermines the possibility of success of other candidates (challengers) due to the incumbent's privileged institutional (holding the office), communicative (easier contact with voters) and psychological position (Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik 2020). The existence of competitive elections provides a guarantee of the full legitimacy of the activities of public authorities, whether they are central or local government bodies.

Despite these seemingly obvious statements, contemporary democratic systems allow for the existence of electoral adjudication mechanisms without competition (a single candidate runs for a seat or office), or even without voter participation (a candidate wins a mandate seat due to the lack of a challenger). The literature refers to these types of elections or seats as non-competitive, unopposed or uncontested (Koninsky, Ueda 2011; Gendźwiłł, Żółtak, Rutkowski 2015; Gendźwiłł 2020).

In Poland, both types of non-competitive elections occur at the local level, i.e. in elections for the office of commune leader, town mayor or city president, as well as commune councils. Their occurrence is limited to small communes, i.e. local governments with up to 20,000 inhabitants (out of the total number of 2447 communes, as many as 2145 communes - i.e. 87% - are classified as small).

A detailed analysis of the results of the 2018 local elections made it possible to observe the existence of two simultaneous phenomena that cause concern about the condition of local democracy. On the one hand, it is the continuing decline in the number of candidates for councillors (in the years 2002 – 2018 the number by 38%). On the other hand, in comparison to the results of the local elections held in 2014, there was a dramatic (77%) increase in council seats filled without a vote.

The increase in the number of elections decided without competition and the decrease in interest in local government activities can be perceived as a worrying trend or even a threat to representative democracy, as the monopolisation of local political scenes can lead to the disappearance of the accountability of political representations.

II. Methodological assumptions

The objective of this analysis is to describe the processes resulting in an increase in the number of non-competitive elections and a decline in interest in local government activities, to define the determinants that are responsible for the simultaneous occurrence of these phenomena, as well as to identify the mechanisms of selecting candidates for councillors and their inherent barriers or constraints discouraging citizens from active involvement in local government affairs. This paper will focus on attempts to identify factors that may weaken the competitiveness of elections rather than measurements of the competitiveness of local elections. It is assumed that the decrease in the number of candidates for councillors and the increase in the number of elections decided without competition are correlated with each other. In line with previous findings, another premise is that the supply of such candidates decreases in the communes where incumbent commune leaders (mayors) get re-elected (Author 2021: 1023).

The author focuses on exploring this problem at the local level, i.e. small communes with up to 20,000 inhabitants. Due to the complex nature of the topic, the author decided to apply the pragmatic paradigm and use mixed methods in the research procedure. Consequently, the research made use of quantitative and correlational analyses, juxtaposing their results with those of qualitative research based on case studies. These, in turn, were conducted in the communes selected based on the concept of extreme case analysis (Seawright, Gerring 2008). The advantage of this concept is the possibility of a structured sampling and the avoidance of simplifications in the research procedure.

The study of the aforementioned phenomena focused on the period of the past three elections held in the years 2010 – 2018. Eighteen municipalities from six provinces were included in the detailed research. Their selection was based on three criteria: population (communes with up to 20,000 inhabitants), the occurrence of the phenomenon of non-competitive elections to municipal councils (dependent variable) and the re-election of the commune leader (independent variable). The analysis of the election results (based on data from the National Electoral Commission) made it possible to distinguish three groups

of communes (3 x 6). The first group included the communes in which, in the period of 2010-2018, the phenomenon of non-competitive elections to commune councils was on the rise; in the second group, this phenomenon was on the decline; and the third group was characterised by a sporadic occurrence of the phenomenon, i.e. there were between zero and three cases of seats on a commune council being filled without voting in the period under examination. In addition, in each of the selected communes there was at least one re-election of a commune leader/mayor (at most two people held the position of commune leader during the three terms of office). The qualitative research comprised 18 in-depth interviews (IDI) with persons involved in local government activities or experts in the field local government (one person from each commune), former commune leaders, mayors and councillors. The interviews were conducted between February 2019 and March 2021.

In the next section of the text, entitled Theoretical and analytical context, the author provides an overview of the current state of research on the problem and related quantitative analyses. He also examines the impact of the evolution of the electoral law on the supply of candidates for councillors. This section concludes with a characterisation of those actively involved in Polish local government life. The next section, Selection of candidates for councillors – research conclusions, presents a synthetic summary of the conducted research procedure, together with a definition of the mechanisms of selecting candidates for councillors. In the last part, Conclusions, the author summarises the conducted research and indicates a set of determinants responsible for the dynamics of the occurrence of the phenomenon of non-competitive elections at the local level and a catalogue of possible reasons for the decline in interest in the activities of local government bodies.

III. Theoretical and analytical context

Are non-competitive elections the result of a diminishing supply of candidates? An affirmative answer to this question seems the most plausible explanation for the causes of this problem. Interest in political activity as reflected in a number of candidates for elective local government positions (councillors) is declining in many European countries. This problem not only affects the Scandinavian countries (Kjaer 2007) but also England with Wales (Ryan, Stoker, John, Moseley, James, Richardson, Vannoni 2018) and Germany (Gerlach 2019). This problem has led researchers to advance the thesis of a crisis of political recruitment at the local level (Aars, Offerdal 1998). Among the reasons for the decline in interest in local politics, researchers, using the example of Northern European countries, emphasise the progressing, transformation from a society

characterised by mass participation in democratic practices to a ‘democracy of spectators’ (Radzik-Maruszak 2019: 97). Various authors often indicate the provisions of the electoral law, with the caveat, however, that this is not the sole and main factor responsible for the lower number of candidates (Kjaer 2007). In the Czech Republic, the low supply of candidates for councillors is due to the strong fragmentation of communities and narrow local political elites (Ryšavý, Bernard 2013).

A preliminary survey of research results on the declining supply of candidates for council members at the local government level does not yet provide a clear answer to the question of why democracy at this level is undergoing an intensifying recruitment crisis. Some researchers have focused on the issue of candidate selection (Hansen 2007; Rallings, Thrasher, Borisjuk, Shears 2010, Loxbo, Bolin 2016) and the recruitment mechanism itself (e.g. Papp, Zoirgt 2016). Most studies however, focus on the process of selecting and recruiting candidates for legislative bodies at the central level (Mitschel, Bradbury 2004; Gauja, Cross 2010, Lisi Freire 2012) or on the role of the gender criterion and the accessibility of legislative bodies to minority groups (Childs 2003; Buckley, Mariani, White 2014; Vandeleene 2014; Krook, Zetterberg 2014; Beer 2016; Kjeaar, Krook 2019; Pignataro, Taylor-Robinson 2019). The issues raised in this paper are not a popular research topic in Poland, either. Previous studies have focused primarily on the formation of political elites in large urban centres (e.g. Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz, Betkiewicz 2012a; Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz, Betkiewicz 2012b).

The number of candidates for local government bodies has been declining since 2002, and this trend has particularly intensified in recent years: the number of candidates in the 2018 elections was lower than in 2014 by as much as 20.74% (PKW 2014). The decreasing supply of candidates is accompanied by additional phenomena, such as a decrease in the number of election committees (by 29.58% between 2010 and 2018) and an increase in the number of seats filled without voting, which rose by 77% compared to 2014. Such electoral decisions have become almost universal at the commune level. In 2018, as many as 889 communes (i.e. 41% of all small communes in Poland) recorded at least one case of filling a seat without voting.

The problem of declining interest in participating in elections as candidates for councillors and an increase in the number of non-competitively decided elections at the local level is highlighted by the case of the commune of Iłowa (Żagański district, Lubuskie province). Over a period of 16 years, the local political scene there became sterile and non-competitive. In 2002, as many as 15 election committees took part in the elections, fielding a total of 103 candidates,

while 12 years later, in 2014, there were four committees with 58 candidates. In 2018, the local political scene consisted of one electoral committee, which nominated just 15 candidates for councillors, who, pursuant to the Polish electoral law, obtained their mandates without a vote. The mayor won his mandate for the next term in an election (of a plebiscite nature) without a challenger.

Table 1. The communes in which elections for commune councils were not held in 2018 against the background of the elections held in 2010 and 2014

commune	district	province	Number of:					
			councillors elected without voting in 2010	election committees participating in 2010 elections	councillors elected without voting in 2014	election committees participating in 2014 elections	councillors elected without voting in 2018	election committees participating in 2018 elections
Pęcław	Głogowski	dolnośląskie	0	4	13	2	15	1
Dragacz	Świecki	kujawsko-pomorskie	0	6	0	6	15	1
Tarnawatka	Tomaszowski	lubelskie	0	6	0	4	15	1
Iłowa	Żagański	lubuskie	0	3	0	4	15	1
Korczew	Siedlecki	mazowieckie	4	3	0	2	15	1
Leśnica	Strzelecki	opolskie	1	5	10	7	15	3
Czarna	Bieszczadzki	podkarpackie	0	3	2	3	15	1
Jasienica Rosielna	Brzozowski	podkarpackie	0	4	0	5	15	1
Bakałarzewo	Suwalski	podlaskie	0	5	0	5	15	1
Wisła	Cieszyński	śląskie	0	2	0	7	15	1
Suszec	Pszczynski	śląskie	0	7	14	2	15	1
Krzano-wice	Raciborski	śląskie	0	10	0	2	15	1
Kowale Oleckie	Olecki	warmińsko-mazurskie	8	2	0	4	15	1
Przedecz	Kolski	wielkopolskie	0	6	4	3	15	1

Source: the author's own work based on the data from the National Electoral Commission, www.pkw.gov.pl (1.08.2022).

The extreme sterility of the local political scene in the commune of Iłowa is not an isolated case. In 14 small communes throughout the country, all seats on commune councils and, at the same time, the office of commune leader or mayor

were filled on a non-competitive basis. In the vast majority of cases (13 out of 14), the local political scene in these communities consists of only one election committee (Author 2020: 97).

The decline in interest in local government activities affects all levels of the local government system, and the number of candidates for commune leaders and mayors is also declining. The 2018 elections witnessed the lowest number of candidates running for these offices after the introduction of this element of the system (the office of commune leader or mayor was filled on a non-competitive basis in 326 communes) (PKW 2018). The scale of the problem is illustrated by the figures below. In 2002, 10371 (PKW 2002) candidates ran for offices in the first direct elections of commune leaders; 16 years later there were 6958 (PKW 2018), i.e. 32.9% fewer candidates.

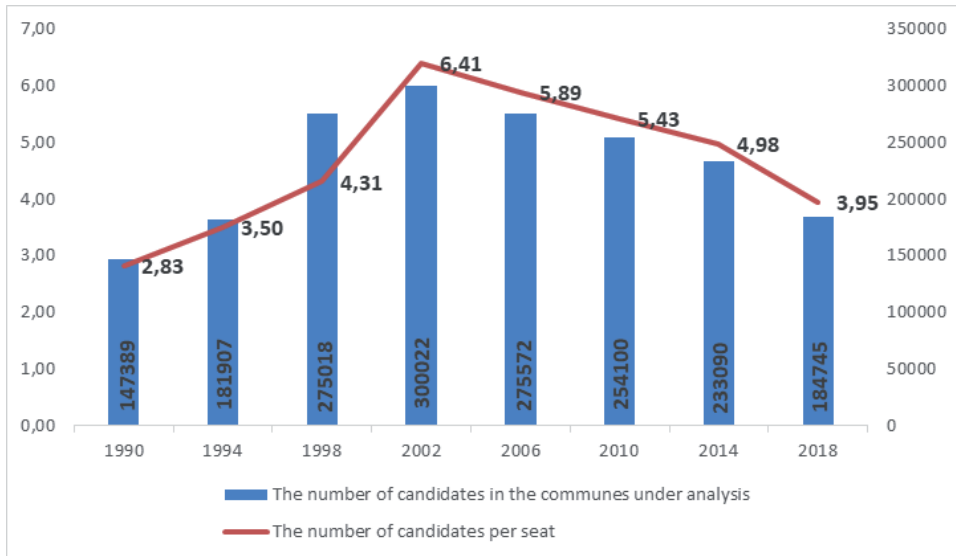


Figure 1. The number of candidates for commune councillors and the average number of candidates per seat between 1990 and 2018

Source: the author's own work on the basis of the data of the National Electoral Commission.

Note: In 1990 and 1994 elections were held only for commune councils.

An analysis of the above data indicates that the following elements should be taken into consideration in the adopted research procedure: (a) the significance of the evolution of the electoral law in the context of its impact on the supply of candidates for councillors and (b) the characteristics of those running for seats on commune councils.

a. Evolution of the electoral law and the supply of candidates for commune council members

Over the course of 30 years of the functioning of the Polish local government system, the structure of local government, but also the role of commune councillors in the overall political system have changed. Two elements should be noted in this context: the importance and dependence of the council on the executive body at a given level of local government and the characteristics of political rivalry at its various levels.

In the case of the relationship between the legislative body and the executive body, in 2002, the municipal council lost its creative function vis-à-vis the commune leader, town mayor or city president. The fact that the head of the local executive body is directly elected means that the office of a commune leader (mayor/president) differs from that of a councillor and the council as a whole in terms of not only powers and prerogatives, but above all the level of legitimacy: the executive body is elected by the entire local community, a councillor – by the members of a given constituency. The situation is different at the higher levels of local government, where executive powers are vested in a collegiate board headed by a district head in a district or a marshal in a province. Although the law allows district and province boards to include members from outside district or province councils, the practice of the functioning of the Polish local government system shows that such cases are rare and, from the perspective of the political circumstances present in a given district or province, undesirable.

At each level of the local government system, the character of political competition is different. On districts and provinces level, the political competition is an emanation of the parliamentary (national) level (Gendźwiłł, Żółtak 2012; Ganowicz 2015; Ganowicz, Opióła 2017). The commune level has remained the area where the importance of political groups (committees) formed by the civil society is the most important. In 2018, on a national scale, in commune council elections, local groups of citizens won over 72% of votes to be followed by the political parties represented in the parliament (PKW 2018). The strong dominance of local committees in commune councils is also a sign of the strong personalisation of elections at the lowest level of local government. Additionally, at the local level, there are practically no structures of political parties represented in the parliament. This is confirmed by the in-depth analysis of the communes selected for the detailed research. They are dominated by local election committees which appoint leaders of individual rural communities as candidates for councillors or executive positions.

After the 2002 elections the commune council lost its creative role in relation to the executive body. The direct election of commune leader, mayor or president by the local community led to a decrease in the importance of councillors. One of the most important effects of this evolution could be seen in the 2006 elections. There was a massive increase in the number of cases where seats were filled without voting (from 323 to 1199). In the 2010 elections, the scale of non-competitive elections remained at a similar level (1180 cases), but already in 2014 there was another dynamic increase in the number of such cases (1733) to be further exacerbated by the results of the 2018 elections (3062). The most probable cause of the two simultaneous phenomena, i.e. a decrease in the number of candidates for councillors and an increase in the number of council seats filled without voting.

In 2011, the Electoral Code was substantially amended. In the context discussed here, two solutions deserve special attention. The first one was the division of small communes (with up to 20,000 inhabitants) into 15 single-member constituencies, and the other reason was a change in the procedure for nominating candidates for councillors and candidates for commune leaders. Both solutions have a constitutive impact on local political scenes and simultaneously regulate their functioning. This means that a candidate for a commune leader is obliged to appoint at least half of candidates for councillors. This provision gives a candidate for commune leader often a decisive role in the formation of an election committee. In other words, it is the candidate for mayor or commune leader that determines the composition of their group (this state of affairs is confirmed in most of the examined cases). This naturally has political consequences. If a candidate for commune leader, being the leader of their group, takes office, they also become the main political actor on the commune scene. Their strong political position in relation to local matters also leads to the development of hierarchical subordination of councillors. This effect is reinforced when a given commune leader succeeds in winning a subsequent election. The combination of the two solutions introduced by the 2011 amendment (the appointment of candidates for commune leader and the introduction of single-member constituencies), which in practice determined the way in which local political scenes were organised, had a feedback effect. It increased the number of cases in which council seats were filled without a vote and also contributed to the strengthening of the political positions of current mayors and commune leaders (Gendźwiłł, Żółtak 2016).

The political science literature emphasises the fact that the functioning of majority voting systems results in the development of two-party systems. Placing this hypothesis (the so-called Duverger's law) into the Polish context, it

can be assumed that a decrease in the number of candidates (and by default also the number of election committees) and the accompanying processes of consolidation of local political scenes lead to the establishment of two-party systems in communes (Mielewczyk 2015; Gendźwiłł, Żółtak 2016), which would correlate with the conclusions of research on this problem conducted in other countries (Cole 2005). However, the most recent findings indicate that a decline in competitiveness at the local level results from the considerable fragmentation and personalisation of majority voting in Poland (Gendźwiłł 2020: 232).

b. Candidates for councillors against the background of Polish society

Analysing the election turnout in local government elections, one can observe that only in 2018 the level of electoral participation exceeded the threshold of 50%, and in 1994 it did not exceed the value of 34% nationally (sic!) (PKW 1994). At the same time, the results of studies on the level of trust in the Polish society have been the lowest in Europe for years. Extremely high levels of mistrust among Poles, measured by people's attitude towards one another and public institutions, have been reported since the 1990s, and in international rankings on the quality of democracy, the Polish society has been consistently given poor ratings (Ossowski 2008: 102-103). In the middle of the first decade of this century, hierarchical and undemocratic organisations (such as the army, the Catholic Church, the police) enjoyed the greatest public trust, while only 10% of respondents trusted the parliament (Ibidem: 105).

These pessimistic observations were confirmed in subsequent years by the 'Social Diagnosis' study. According to a report of 2015, only 16% of respondents in Poland trusted other people (Social Diagnosis 2015: 351). From the perspective of this analysis, the tendency to associate (to participate actively in organisations, also in the local government area) in Poland is also one of the weakest in Europe. At the end of the first decade of the previous century, 77% of Poles did not belong to any organisation (Ossowski: 107). 7 years ago, only 13.4% of respondents expressed readiness to become involved in activities of any organisation, which by no means indicated any actual involvement (Social Diagnosis 2015: 353).

Analysing the age structure of the respondents who act for the benefit of others, the authors of the Social Diagnosis indicate that it is people aged 45-59 who are 'elected as local representatives' (councillors). Of all the age groups involved in any organisation, councillors were the oldest (Ibidem: 341-343). The results of social research are confirmed by the official election results. According to the data provided by the National Electoral Commission, the average age of

candidates for commune councils in 2018 was 47 years (46 years for women, 48 years for men) (PKW 2018). The majority of them are between 40 and 60 years of age and dominate clearly over the other age groups. Since 1990, the proportion of women among candidates and councillors has been steadily increasing, from 10.9% in 1990, to 39% in 2018 (PKW 1990; PKW 2018; Gendźwiłł 2020: 210-219). The so-called law of minority attrition also applies, which is a mechanism by which men of prime working age are the most represented in political elites, at the expense of women and minority groups. However, due to the specificity of local government elections, the over-representation of men is lower than in the case of parliamentary elections (Gendźwiłł 2020: 220).

IV. Appoint candidates for councillors – research findings

In order to define local mechanisms of selecting candidates for councillors, the author will use the conclusions from the results of studies conducted by Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, the creators of the interactive model of candidate selection (Norris, Lovenduski 1995) developed within the framework of the legislative recruitment concept and the so-called funnel of causality in which there is a feedback among (1) the conditions of a political system, (2) the recruitment mechanism, (3) the supply of and (4) demand for candidates shaped by (5) the leaders of political circles, so-called stakeholders (Norris 1997: 1).

The research was based on the assumption that if a constituency does not carry out the voting process, it is an extreme manifestation of the shortage of candidates for its commune council and a factor responsible for the diminishing competitiveness of local elections. The sample selected for the purposes of the research was intended to allow the identification of as many models of selecting and recruiting candidates for councillors as possible.

The 18 communes were divided into 3 groups. The first group (group A) comprised local governments in which the phenomenon of non-competitive elections had had an upward trend since 2002 and had led to the loss of competitiveness (the commune council was elected entirely without voting): Leśnica, Wisła, Iłowa, Pęcław, Dragacz and Korczew. The second group (group B) was made up of local governments where the problem of filling seats without a vote had been sporadic, i.e. up to 5 cases in the years 2002-2018 (Reńska Wieś, Tworóg, Bolesławiec, Łągów, Sadki, Gzy). The third group (group C) included local communities that had experienced an increase and then disappearance of the phenomenon (Dąbrowa, Pawonków, Mściwojów, Siedlisko, Dębowa Łąka, Mszczonów) between the years 2002 and 2018. In other words, the phenomenon of non-competitive elections was sinusoidal in these communities.

For the purpose of the research, four values were adopted which could be used to analyse the degree of competitiveness of local elections: the number of candidates for councillors, the number of candidates for commune leader/mayor, the number of election committees and the number of seats filled without voting. Thus, the selected sample was supposed to allow the identification of possibly diverse paths for the selection and recruitment of candidates for councillors, also taking into account regional (ethnographic, socio-ethnic) conditions.

In this respect, the recruitment model proposed by P. Norris served as a comparative matrix and a tool to define a model for selecting candidates for commune councillors.

Table 2. The phenomenon of non-competitive elections in the communes included in the detailed research.

	commune	inhabitants (2017)	2010				2014				2018			
			candidates for councillors	candidates for commune leader	election committees	seats filled without the vote	candidates for councillors	candidates for commune leader	election committees	seats filled without the vote	candidates for councillors	candidates for commune leader	election committees	seats filled without the vote
Group I	Leśnica	2668	29	2	15	1	20	1	7	10	15	1	3	15
	Wisła	11132	51	3	7	0	49	3	7	0	15	1	1	15
	Pęcław	2284	29	1	4	0	17	1	2	13	15	1	1	15
	Iłowa	6931	45	3	3	0	58	4	4	0	15	1	1	15
	Dragacz	7229	57	4	7	0	58	5	6	0	15	1	1	15
	Korczew	2662	24	1	3	4	30	2	2	0	15	1	1	15
Group II	Dąbrowa	6646	39	3	7	0	19	1	5	11	29	2	5	2
	Pawonków	4113	39	3	3	0	26	2	3	5	33	2	3	1
	Mściwojów	3653	49	3	8	0	20	1	4	12	34	2	6	1
	Siedlisko	3183	40	2	5	0	16	1	2	14	46	3	4	0
	Dębowa Łąka	6433	29	3	2	1	16	1	2	14	31	2	3	0
	Mszczonów	8229	41	3	7	0	26	1	6	5	33	2	7	1
Group III	Reńska Wieś	8197	34	2	8	0	50	4	8	1	46	4	4	1
	Tworóg	14391	39	2	4	0	43	2	5	1	36	1	5	2
	Bolesławiec	6908	57	4	10	0	98	7	14	2	33	2	5	1
	Łągów	7287	39	2	7	1	37	6	7	1	43	3	6	0
	Sadki	3583	55	4	6	0	48	3	6	1	37	3	3	1
	Gzy	3858	41	6	3	0	32	2	7	1	44	3	3	0

Source: the author's own work based on the data from the National Electoral Commission, www.pkw.gov.pl (1.08.2022).

It seems that one of the methodological problems in identifying the local rules for selecting candidates is the great variety of existing mechanisms. However, the recruitment model by P. Norris proved valuable in identifying individual mechanisms for selecting candidates for political representation because of its general character. In the model of recruitment, its author takes into account the importance of the law in force, as well as the electoral and party system shaping the recruitment process, and this determines the supply of and demand for candidates expressed by political actors in a given system (community). Both supply and demand interact with each other, and the result of the functioning of such a model is the appearance of a candidate who meets the expectations of political stakeholders (Norris 1997: 1-2).

Transferring the analytical assumptions to the local level in Poland and taking into account the electoral system presented above, a description of the legal system and the conditions related to the organisation and conduct of elections will be based on the same articles of the Electoral Code. In the analysed cases, the election committees of the current commune leaders and mayors play the most important role on the local political scenes. It turns out that the legislator's intention to provide a candidate for mayor/commune leader with their own political base in the commune council in the event of victory may in practice lead to the appropriation of the local political scene by one political group. This happens when a commune leader or mayor is re-elected. This dimension of incumbency advantage (Żurek 2012, Bartnicki 2015, Krukowska 2018) is more clearly evident in the communes where there was no voting for candidates for the commune council. In Wisła, Hłowa, Leśnica, Pełcaw, where in 2018 councillors were elected without voting (their commune leaders and mayors were elected for a second or third term), it was the commune leader who had determined the composition of the election committee, although this had often been a tedious search, combined with intensive efforts to gain a given resident's consent to run for councillor.

The combined effect of, on the one hand, the provisions of the Electoral Code (single-member constituencies and the procedure for nominating candidates for commune leaders/mayors), and on the other hand, the possibility of holding the office for many terms contribute to the consolidation of the position of the commune leader as the main and sometimes even independent political actor on the local political scene (Gendźwiłł, Żółtak 2017).

The commune of Wisła is a case in point. In the 2014 elections, it had seven election committees with 49 candidates; in 2018 these numbers were reduced to one committee with 15 candidates for councillors. Elected for a second term of office, the mayor had made effective political transfers of the leaders of

particular groups to his own election committee well in advance of the election. The leaders known in the local community had been united under one political banner, which, as the mayor himself claimed, was to the benefit of the community itself. The problem, however, is that narrowing the political elite to such a small group creates the risk that local representative democracy will turn into a fossilised system characterised by ritualism and a façade form of debate on the directions of community development. In this respect, the community of Peçław also constitutes an interesting case in which the legal provisions creating a framework for the functioning of the local political scene serve in principle to legalise the decisions of the commune leader concerning the structure and division of that scene. The fact that the commune leader had been holding office for many terms contributed to the sterilisation of the local political scene. His position in the commune (in 2018 he was elected for the fourth term, so he had been in office since 2006, and in 2010, 2014 and 2018, he had no rival) is so strong that he himself appoints potential candidates for councillors. The information obtained during the in-depth interviews indicates a certain mechanism which is pathological for the local civil society. It is assumed that those willing to become councillors do not emerge from grassroot initiatives but are appointed by the commune leader from among 'distinctive personalities' in the commune. In the case described above, the selection mechanism is limited to individual ideas of the commune leader who can determine the composition of the commune council according to his own expectations and needs, which will serve to maintain his political position. As a result, the work of the commune council is limited to rubberstamping decisions made by the commune leader, and the frequency of its meetings does not exceed the limit set by the law, i.e. 'as necessary, but not less frequently than once a quarter' (Article 20 of the Act on Communal Local Government). In the commune, not only has the competitive formula for selecting political representation disappeared, but also the function of supervision over the executive office has been reduced to a minimum. In consequence of such circumstances, voters lose their influence on whether, by whom and how their interests are represented in the council.

Interestingly enough, this process of exhausting the local political scene is not correlated with its size. With respect to population, Wisła is five times bigger than Peçław, so it may have a correspondingly larger local political elite, and yet it was not possible for any group to emerge and develop in opposition to the mayor there.

The selection and recruitment mechanism described on the basis of extreme cases (Group A), where the competitiveness of elections has disappeared, does not differ from the cases diagnosed in other communities. Candidates

for commune leader (mayor) are of key importance in the process of selecting candidates for councillors. The number of candidates for commune leader determines the diversity of the local political scene. The correlation between it and the supply of candidates for councillors is clearly visible in indirect cases (group B, i.e. the communes of Dąbrowa, Pawonków, Mściwojów, Siedlisko, Dębowa Łąka, Mszczonów).

In all the communes mentioned above, the immediate effect of the introduction of single-member constituencies was a dynamic increase in the number of council seats filled without a vote in the 2014 elections in comparison to those held in 2010. At the same time, the elections of mayors in these communities (with the exception of Pawonków) were non-competitive. The appearance of competitors running for the office of commune leader in 2018 contributed to the reversal of the downward trend.

In the case of the communes where the level of electoral competitiveness was sinusoidal, the mechanism for selecting candidates for councillors may be similar to that of the previously described extreme examples (group A). A candidate for commune leader – whether the benefactor of profits associated with holding office for more than one term or their top-down elected rival – develops their own political environment. Here, too, the expectations of local political actors translate into the supply of candidates, and their political profile coincides with the expectations of the leader.

In the third group of the communes (group C), which recorded sporadic cases of filling seats without voting in the years 2002-2018, a greater variety of models for selecting candidates for councillors can be observed. It can be assumed that in these communes, local political elites are more numerous. This can be proved by a larger number of election committees than the number of candidates for commune leader. The commune of Bolesławiec stands out in this respect. In 2002, as many as 24 committees took part in the commune council elections, and 4 people were candidates for the position of commune leader.

Political diversity is also enhanced by the presence of local structures of national parties. In all the communes included in this sample (Reńska Wieś, Tworóg, Bolesławiec, Łagów, Sadki, Gzy), election committees of political parties took part in the commune council elections, and with the exception of one commune (Reńska Wieś), these parties were also represented in the Polish Parliament. It can be assumed that the existence of a party organisational network forces local activists to take active part in election campaigns, even if it is limited to a negligible number of proposed candidates for commune councils.

In the case of these communes, the effect of the procedure for appointing candidates for commune leader and the functioning of the majority system is less evident. The decrease in the number of candidates for councillors is also less acute. It can therefore be assumed that the negative effects of the discussed provisions of the Electoral Code are not fully applicable in these communities, and the main factor 'saving' competitiveness is the political diversity of the local community. Importantly, this diversity is independent of the population criterion. Communes such as Sadki and Gzy, which are among the smallest in the selected group, did not experience the loss of competitiveness.

In the third group of the communes (group C), four candidate selection mechanisms were identified. The first one is consistent with those described above and consists in the fact that the candidate for commune leader determines the composition of the election committee on their own. The second one, also present sporadically in communes where competitiveness has disappeared (e.g. Leśnica in 2018), comes down to the individual initiative of a candidate who registers a one-person election committee. This recruitment path is inconsistent with the adopted theoretical model, as it is limited to the fulfilment of certain formal and legal conditions by a candidate who undertakes to register their own election committee. There is also no mechanism linking the supply of candidates and the expectations of local political leaders. The third form of selecting those willing to participate in local government activities is based on the bottom-up process of appointing an election committee focused on a particular group of people (e.g. a local association). Such a committee usually does not appoint a candidate for commune leader/mayor. The fourth form, present only in communes where structures of national political parties are functional, is similar in character to the selection and recruitment of candidates at higher levels of the local government system and can be assumed to be consistent with the model functioning within a given party. In the case of the third and fourth mechanisms described above, the main role in the process of candidate selection and recruitment is played by the expectations of a community (party) as to the desired profile of candidates.

The mechanisms defined in the three groups of communes do not exhaust the issue, nor do they give a clear answer to the question of why the number of candidates for councillors has been falling. There are many factors causing a decrease in the supply of candidates. In a specific combination, they generate negative effects and in extreme cases they result in the loss of competitiveness and the ossification of democratic mechanisms. In communes with a larger political elite there are more frequent cases of bottom-up appointments of candidates for councillors, and in communes dominated by the current commune

leader/mayor, the selection mechanism is of a top-down character. The latter mechanism weakens competitiveness and, in extreme cases, generates a process with the symptoms of cartelisation of local political scenes.

V. Conclusions

The presented research results are compatible with other critical assessments of the condition of the contemporary model of democracy. Research conducted in other countries often focuses on the problem of the inadequate, sometimes even facade-like character of the functioning of democratic institutions, which, instead of fulfilling the role of a genuine representation of the needs and interests of the community, are becoming dominated by ritualism. Such tendencies are exemplified by the aforementioned Polish communes where competitiveness is gradually disappearing. Competitiveness, in turn, is linked to the issue of accountability, which is one of the main tools for citizens to influence the quality of representative democracy.

The research reveals a pessimistic picture of the condition of Polish democracy at the local level. The number of candidates for councillors is successively decreasing, and there are no signs that this trend will be stopped. The current provisions of the Electoral Code create circumstances in which it is the candidate for the office of commune leader (mayor) and their circle that can dominate the local political scene. In force since the 2014 elections, the majority electoral system adds to the severity of the problem. This manifests itself most strongly in the communities where commune council elections were not held due to the number of appointed candidates being equal to the number of seats on a council. Importantly, the majority system has not contributed to the development of two-party systems at the local level, but rather decimated them.

What should be taken into account are the factors characteristic of the specific nature of Polish local elections, such as the personalisation of elections, as well as the conviction that there are political benefits resulting from the fact that a commune leader/mayor or a councillor holds their office or seat for many terms. This conviction means that, besides formal and legal barriers, potential contenders are discouraged from taking action by the vision of an insurmountable advantage of those currently in power.

The described mechanisms for selecting candidates for councillors and those willing to engage in local government activities are not conducive to strengthening the position of councillors within the country's political system. The electoral law favours election committees that nominate their own candidates

for the office of commune leader/mayor. Such a candidate is able to control this mechanism on their own, especially when, as the incumbent commune leader or mayor, they enjoy the advantage resulting from their position in the local political system. The situation is different in communes with broader local political elites and where national political party structures are present. In their case, the decline in the number of candidates for councillors is slower and the process of recruiting those willing to become politically active is often oriented towards finding someone who meets the expectations of the strongest local political actors. What breaks out of the theoretical framework of selection and recruitment are the examples of single-member, personalised electoral committees, whose importance in the council is most often proportional to their size.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the websites of the National Electoral Commission (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza: www.pkw.gov.pl).

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