

Joanna Marszałek-Kawa¹

Election Dilemmas. Does the Education of a Candidate for Parliament Influence Electoral Decisions?

Keywords: parliamentary democracy, education, electoral decision, deputy

Słowa kluczowe: demokracja parlamentarna, edukacja, decyzje wyborcze, poseł

Abstract

The strength of the parliament in the political system is largely dependent on its professionalism defined by the activity of its deputies. Polish MPs' level of education is high, often higher than the West European average. The aim of this paper is to find out whether candidates' education is an electoral criterion, whether voters base their decisions on the prospective deputies' qualifications and skills confirmed by university diplomas. The study the results of which I present below was carried out between December 2018 and February 2019 as part of the nationwide research project *Political preferences. Attitudes – Identifications – Behaviors*. It was conducted with the application of the survey questionnaire method.

Streszczenie

Wyborcze dylematy. Czy wykształcenie kandydata na posła ma wpływ na decyzje wyborcze?

Siła parlamentu w systemie politycznym w znaczącym stopniu zależy od jego profesjonalizmu definiowanego działaniami podejmowanymi przez deputowanych. Poziom wykształcenia posłów

¹ ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4201-8028, Ph.D., D.Sc., Department of the Political System of the Republic of Poland Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, e-mail: kawadj@box43.pl.

w polskim parlamencie jest wysoki, niejednokrotnie wyższy od średniej na zachodzie. Celem artykułu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie czy wykształcenie kandydatów na posłów stanowi kryterium wyborcze, czy wyborcy podejmując decyzje wyborcze zwracają uwagę na kwalifikacje i umiejętności kandydujących do parlamentu potwierdzone dyplomami uczelni wyższych. Badania, których wyniki prezentuję poniżej, zostały przeprowadzone w okresie grudzień 2018 – luty 2019 w ramach ogólnopolskiego projektu badawczego *Preferencje polityczne. Postawy – Identyfikacje – Zachowania*. Przeprowadzono je metodą kwestionariusza ankiety.

✱

I. Introduction

The quality of parliamentary democracy depends on a number of factors. It is determined by the current parliamentary tradition, the level of political elites and the society's awareness of the role it plays in democracy. The model of parliamentary work is shaped by the deputies themselves. Whether the parliament will exercise the real authority in the state, whether it will attempt to battle for maintaining its enforcement power, or whether it will be able to overcome the diktat of the executive branch, is largely dependent on MPs and their preparation for carrying out representative duties².

It is indicated in the literature that the determinants of the independence of parliamentary representatives' activity, which affect the legislature's position in the system of state authority, have a macro and micro character. The macro factors include all principles of the distribution of power within the system (the form of government: presidential or parliamentary). The micro level, in turn, encompasses structures, procedures, norms, the manner of their practical implementation, the extent of flexibility in the approach to rules, and the degree of the legislature's autonomy³.

² J. Marszałek-Kawa, *The Institutional Position and Functions of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland after the Accession to the European Union*, Toruń 2016, pp. 20–100; *Leksykon wiedzy politologicznej*, eds. J. Marszałek-Kawa, D. Plecka, Toruń 2018, pp. 255–257.

³ P. Norton, D.M. Olson, *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Legislatures: Beyond Transition*, [in:] *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments. The Initial Decade*, eds. P. Norton, D.M. Olson, London 2008, pp. xiv.

There is widely held view that the strength of the parliament in the institutional systems is significantly dependent on its professionalism. It is a rudimentary issue from the point of view of the quality of parliamentary democracy in the state. It is only a professional representative assembly that can exercise effective scrutiny over the government. Whether the legislature is such is determined by the experience and education of its members.

The political science literature distinguishes various types of contemporary parliamentarians. The most common classification defines three sets of representative roles of deputies: the local delegate, the party delegate and the trustee. Local delegates are those members of parliament who wish to represent their constituency, district or town, while party delegates seek to be the representatives of their party, party supporters or party voters. The category of trustees includes those parliamentarians who want to represent the whole society rather than their local voters or their own party supporters. The traditional division into trustees and delegates has transformed into a trichotomous classification. As a result, there is an ongoing debate on three different models (the local politician, the party politician, and the independent politician)⁴.

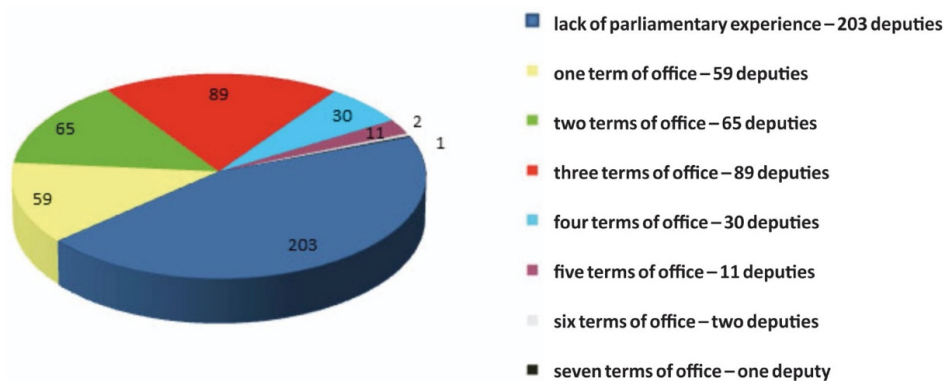
Researchers on legislative issues do not use the pre-defined sets of roles. Julien Navarro distinguishes the models of the animator, the specialist, the mediator, the outsider and the dilettante. Marcelo Jenny and Wolfgang C. Müller use the Austrian parliament to identify five different types of MPs: exemplary MPs, workhorses, showhorses, rapporteurs and spectators. It should be noticed that what roles MPs will play depends on the specific case⁵.

Deputies who held seats in the first parliaments after the collapse of Communist governments did not have any experience or knowledge in the field of democratic representative activity. As Philip Norton writes, some of them were enthusiastic reformers, some were just recognizable, but did not become involved in the legislature's work, while others still belonged to the old system – this was the case of, among others, the Polish parliament elected in June 1989. What needs to be emphasized is the fact that although the first deputies had no experience in parliamentary work, with time they became more and more fluent in making use of and modifying the existing rules for the sake

⁴ O. Rozenberg, M. Blomgren, *Bringing parliamentary roles back in*, [in:] *Parliamentary Roles in Modern Legislatures*, eds. O. Rozenberg, M. Blomgren, London 2012, pp. 211–228.

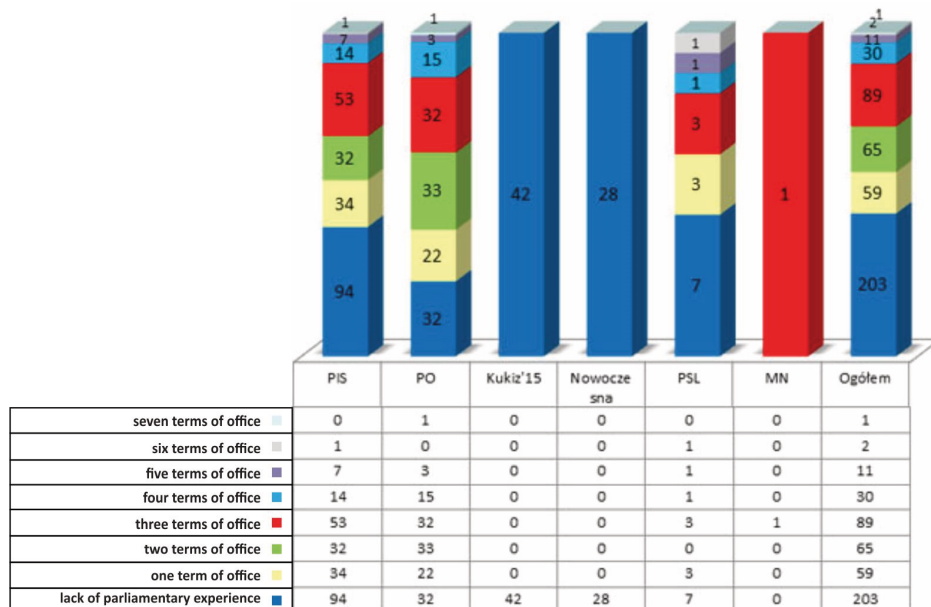
⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 211–228.

Figure 1. The number of mandates in the Sejm of the RP of the 8th term of office (2015–2019) by seniority



Source: http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/page.xsp/poslowie_poczatek_kad (9.09.2019).

Figure 2. The number of mandates in the Sejm of the RP of the 8th term of office (2015–2019) by seniority, according to party affiliation



Source: http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/page.xsp/poslowie_poczatek_kad (9.09.2019).

of achieving their own political goals. According to P. Norton, the more parliamentary experience the legislature's members have, the higher the level of balance and stability in it is. And vice versa, the higher the legislative turnover is, the higher the risk of the destabilization of the parliamentary system is⁶. He also points out that the low level of knowledge and competence puts parliaments in the inferior position in relation to executive organs, negatively affecting their activity⁷.

Many agree with Janusz Czapiński that an age qualification should be introduced to the election law and that deputies/senators should hold at least Bachelor's degree⁸. One must admit, however, that our elites are quite well educated. After 1989, the percentage of MPs with a university degree in the Polish Sejm has been high, often exceeding the West European average. In the 8th term of office of the Sejm, out of 460 deputies, only 34 had general secondary education and vocational secondary education, while three MPs had completed vocational education. The others had graduated from university. Moreover, 18 of them held Professor degree and 41 had PhD degree. Having this in mind, one should wonder what the reason for such a high percentage of elected MPs with a university degree was and whether it was the confirmation of electoral preferences among the voters. Or perhaps the reason was that it was mostly people with Bachelor's or Master's degree that pursue such a career.

II. The research problem and methodology

The aim of this paper is to find out whether candidates' education is an electoral criterion, whether voters base their decisions on the prospective deputies' qualifications and skills confirmed by university diplomas.

The study the results of which I present below was carried out between December 2018 and February 2019 as part of the nationwide research project

⁶ P. Norton, D.M. Olson, *op.cit.*, p. xiv.

⁷ G. Ilonszki, M. Edinger, *PMs in Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Nations: A Parliamentary Elite in the Making*, [in:] *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments. The Initial Decade*, eds. P. Norton, D.M. Olson, London 2008, pp. 140–150.

⁸ D. Leonowicz, *Kto nas reprezentuje – jak wykształceni są posłowie?*, December 2, 2010, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kto-nas-reprezentuje-jak-wyksztalceni-sa-poslowie-6031714628617345a> (9.09.2019).

“Political preferences. Attitudes-Identifications-Behaviors”. The sample was selected in the quota and stratified manner. Provinces were separable strata (N=16), while quota involved such factors as gender, age and place of residence (city-country). The research team consisted of 16 coordinators of provincial studies, who, after proper training, were responsible for conducting the research in their region. The research was carried out with the application of a survey questionnaire. 967 respondents participated in the study.

III. Research findings

As regards the question whether you pay attention to the education of a candidate when voting in the parliamentary election, it was the voters in the age group 45–64 who constituted the largest group among those for whom it was relevant. 64% of the respondents in this age bracket confirmed that they do attach importance to the level of education when making and electoral decision (“rather yes” 48.00%, “definitely yes” 16.00%). The smallest percentage of positive answers was observed among the respondents in the age group 25–34. 56.67% of the research participants in this age range do look at the educational background of would-be MPs, while it is of no importance for 25% of them. It should be noted that the biggest number of “it is difficult to say” answers was recorded among voters in the age group 18–24 (17.14%) and 25–34 (18.33%). Only 8% of the respondents in the age range 45–54 could not answer this question.

Table 1

Summary

	Observations					
	Taken into consideration		Excluded		Total	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Age	967	99.7%	3	0.3%	970	100.0%

Age [summed up%]

Age	When you choose your candidate, do you take into consideration to his or her education?					Total
	Definitely not	Rather not	Difficult to say	Rather yes	Definitely yes	
18–24	8.00	14.00	18.00	36.00	29.00	105.00
	7.62%	13.33%	17.14%	34.29%	27.62%	100.00%
25–34	12.00	33.00	33.00	64.00	38.00	180.00
	6.67%	18.33%	18.33%	35.56%	21.11%	100.00%
35–44	10.00	39.00	25.00	73.00	36.00	183.00
	5.46%	21.31%	13.66%	39.89%	19.67%	100.00%
45–54	8.00	34.00	12.00	72.00	24.00	150.00
	5.33%	22.67%	8.00%	48.00%	16.00%	100.00%
55–64	11.00	31.00	20.00	61.00	32.00	155.00
	7.10%	20.00%	12.90%	39.35%	20.65%	100.00%
above 65	12.00	48.00	21.00	71.00	42.00	194.00
	6.19%	24.74%	10.82%	36.60%	21.65%	100.00%
Total	61.00	199.00	129.00	377.00	201.00	967.00
	6.31%	20.58%	13.34%	38.99%	20.79%	100.00%

Source: Author’s own work on the basis of the research conducted.

The research shows that the level of education had the biggest influence on the decisions of the supporters of Civic Platform. When asked the question whether they paid attention to the educational background of candidates, 69.51% of them gave a positive answer (“rather yes” 46.75%, “definitely yes” 22.76%). For 22.76% of the voters of Civic Platform, education was not an electoral criterion. The followers of Kukiz’15 also declared that they consider the school a candidate graduated from – 65.12% of the respondents expressed such a view (“rather yes” 44.19%, “definitely yes” 20.93%). Only 13.95% of the people voting for Kukiz’15 said that education did not influence their electoral decisions. 59.68% of the supporters of Left Together confirmed that a can-

didate's educational background affects their electoral preferences. It was the followers of Polish Peasants' Party that represented the largest group of voters who found MPs' education irrelevant – 41.51% gave a negative answer (“rather not” 5.66%, „definitely not” 35.85%).

Table 2

Summary

Observations						
Taken into consideration		Excluded		Total		
N	Percentage	N	N	Percentage	N	
967	99.7%	3	0.3%	970	100.0%	

Vote in parliamentary elections [summed up%]

Vote in parliamentary elections	When you choose your candidate, do you take into consideration to his or her education?					Total
	Definitely not	Rather not	Difficult to say	Rather yes	Definitely yes	
No answer	.00	2.00	.00	6.00	3.00	11.00
	.00%	18.18%	.00%	54.55%	27.27%	100.00%
Polish Peasants' Party	3.00	19.00	6.00	16.00	9.00	53.00
	5.66%	35.85%	11.32%	30.19%	16.98%	100.00%
Civic Platform. Modern. Civic Platform	16.00	40.00	19.00	115.00	56.00	246.00
	6.50%	16.26%	7.72%	46.75%	22.76%	100.00%
Democratic Left Alliance. Left Together	5.00	13.00	7.00	21.00	16.00	62.00
	8.06%	20.97%	11.29%	33.87%	25.81%	100.00%
Kukiz ,15	2.00	4.00	9.00	19.00	9.00	43.00
	4.65%	9.30%	20.93%	44.19%	20.93%	100.00%
Civic Platform	17.00	59.00	30.00	95.00	51.00	252.00
	6.75%	23.41%	11.90%	37.70%	20.24%	100.00%

Vote in parliamentary elections	When you choose your candidate, do you take into consideration to his or her education?					Total
	Definitely not	Rather not	Difficult to say	Rather yes	Definitely yes	
other party	5.00	25.00	32.00	57.00	42.00	161.00
	3.11%	15.53%	19.88%	35.40%	26.09%	100.00%
I would not vote	13.00	37.00	26.00	48.00	15.00	139.00
	9.35%	26.62%	18.71%	34.53%	10.79%	100.00%
Total	61.00	199.00	129.00	377.00	201.00	967.00
	6.31%	20.58%	13.34%	38.99%	20.79%	100.00%

Source: Author’s own work on the basis of the research conducted.

The analysis of the respondents’ declarations shows that a candidate’s education is important for people voting for left-wing and centre parties. 65.63% of the followers of left-wing parties take into consideration the educational background of prospective deputies; 64.17 of voters with centre political views are of the same opinion. 25.70% of right-wing supporters do not care about the education of future MPs, although 60.68% of respondents from this group do find schools completed by candidates important. It should be pointed out that as many as 33.74% of those who cannot specify their party preferences declared that a candidate’s education is not important for them. Moreover, 16.06% of the respondents with no precise political views ticked “difficult to say” answer.

Table 3

Summary

	Observations					
	Taken into consideration		Excluded		Total	
	Percentage	N	N	Percentage	N	N
Declared views	967	99.7%	3	0.3%	970	100.0%

Declared views [summed up%]

Declared views	When you choose your candidate, do you take into consideration his or her education?					Total
	Definitely not	Rather not	Difficult to say	Rather yes	Definitely yes	
No answer	.00	.00	.00	2.00	.00	2.00
	.00%	.00%	.00%	100.00%	.00%	100.00%
left wing	12.00	33.00	26.00	79.00	56.00	206.00
	5.83%	16.02%	12.62%	38.35%	27.18%	100.00%
centre	9.00	39.00	19.00	75.00	45.00	187.00
	4.81%	20.86%	10.16%	40.11%	24.06%	100.00%
right wing	23.00	60.00	44.00	133.00	63.00	323.00
	7.12%	18.58%	13.62%	41.18%	19.50%	100.00%
I do not know, I cannot decide	17.00	67.00	40.00	88.00	37.00	249.00
	6.83%	26.91%	16.06%	35.34%	14.86%	100.00%
Total	61.00	199.00	129.00	377.00	201.00	967.00
	6.31%	20.58%	13.34%	38.99%	20.79%	100.00%

Source: Author's own work on the basis of the research conducted.

The research findings also show that the level of religiousness declared by the respondents does not significantly influence their electoral choices. Only a slightly bigger groups of lapsed Catholics (and also non-believers) among the respondents declared that they did not pay attention to the education of candidates (62.25%). 22.51% were of the opposite opinion. It should also be noted that as many as 15.23% of non-practising respondents gave "difficult to say" answer. 57.21% of occasionally practising respondents stated that they evaluated would-be MPs on the basis of their educational background. Irregularly practising voters, as well as those who practice often or very often, pay attention to the education of future deputies to a similar extent. What is interesting, people who practice very often constitute the largest group (31.19%) among those who found a candidate's education irrelevant. At

the same time, it is in this group that the smallest number of “difficult to say” answers (8.26%) was recorded.

Table 4

Summary

	Observations					
	Taken into consideration		Excluded		Total	
	Percentage	N	N	Percentage	N	N
Declared religiousness	962	99.2%	8	0.8%	970	100.0%

Declared religiousness[summed up%]

Declared religiousness	When you choose your candidate. do you take into consideration to his or her education?					Total
	Definitely not	Rather not	Difficult to say	Rather yes	Definitely yes	
non-practising (including non-believers)	11.00	23.00	23.00	52.00	42.00	151.00
	7.28%	15.23%	15.23%	34.44%	27.81%	100.00%
practising only occasionally, during Church celebrations, e.g. wedding, christening, festivals	16.00	48.00	37.00	93.00	42.00	236.00
	6.78%	20.34%	15.68%	39.41%	17.80%	100.00%
irregularly practising	11.00	50.00	27.00	85.00	47.00	220.00
	5.00%	22.73%	12.27%	38.64%	21.36%	100.00%
often practising religiously	12.00	54.00	33.00	100.00	47.00	246.00
	4.88%	21.95%	13.41%	40.65%	19.11%	100.00%
very often practising religiously	11.00	23.00	9.00	44.00	22.00	109.00
	10.09%	21.10%	8.26%	40.37%	20.18%	100.00%
Total	61.00	198.00	129.00	374.00	200.00	962.00
	6.34%	20.58%	13.41%	38.88%	20.79%	100.00%

Source: Author’s own work on the basis of the research conducted.

IV. Conclusion

It is obvious that for the parliament to function properly and efficiently it is not enough to be elected in free, democratic elections. If MPs without any experience constitute more than a half of its composition, and, added to that, some of them treat their parliamentary seat as “a springboard to the career of a professional politician, who makes his living on political activity”, the position of the legislature in the system of state authority will never be significant. It should be pointed out that deputies’ inexperience in parliamentary work combined with their unwillingness to develop their competence is the factor which seriously threatens the stability of the whole political system⁹. The constitutional position of the legislature in the system of state authority is also weakened by the passive approval of government proposals, which is often the result of MP’s lack of preparation to exercise representative tasks¹⁰.

The results of the study presented above show that Polish voters usually take into consideration candidates’ education when deciding on who to elect. What is also important is the recognizability of a candidate in the constituency and the programme of the political party who entered him or her on its election list. On the other hand, data concerning candidates’ parliamentary experience show that seniority is not a crucial electoral criterion. Discouragement and disappointment related to the quality of political elites, thus also connected with the level of public debate, have an impact on the judgment of voters, who seek new faces in politics. As a result, this often appears to be unfavorable to the work of the parliament and to the quality of the legislative process.

Literature

Ilonszki G., Edinger M., *PMs in Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Nations: A Parliamentary Elite in the Making*, [in:] *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments. The Initial Decade*, eds. P. Norton, D.M. Olson, London 2008.
Leksykon wiedzy politologicznej, eds. J. Marszałek-Kawa, D. Plecka, Toruń 2018.

⁹ E. Nalewajko, W. Wesolowski, *Five Terms of the Polish Parliament*, [in:] *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments. The Initial Decade*, eds. P. Norton, D.M. Olson, London 2008, pp. 68–70.

¹⁰ D.M. Olson, P. Norton, op.cit., pp. 173–176.

- Leonowicz D., *Kto nas reprezentuje – jak wykształceni są posłowie?*, December 2. 2010, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kto-nas-reprezentuje-jak-wykształceni-sa-poslowie-6031714628617345a> (9.09.2019).
- Marszałek-Kawa J., *The Institutional Position and Functions of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland after the Accession to the European Union*, Toruń 2016.
- Nalewajko E., Wesołowski W., *Five Terms of the Polish Parliament*, [in:] *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments. The Initial Decade*, eds. P. Norton, D.M. Olson, London 2008.
- Norton P., Olson D. M., *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Legislatures: Beyond Transition*, [in:] *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments. The Initial Decade*, eds. P. Norton, D.M. Olson, London 2008.
- Olson D. M., Norton P., *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments: Divergent Paths from Transitions*, [in:] *Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Parliaments. The Initial Decade*, eds. P. Norton, D.M. Olson, London 2008.
- Rozenberg O., Blomgren M., *Bringing parliamentary roles back in*, [in:] *Parliamentary Roles in Modern Legislatures*, eds. O. Rozenberg, M. Blomgren, London 2012.