

**THE RULERS AND THE RULED –
CIVIC COMPETENCE IN POLITICS
AS A CRITERION OF DEMOCRACY**

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The genetic phase of the political science conceptualization regarding civic competence took place in the third quarter of the previous century. Of course, the time frame of this period must be treated symbolically, as a binder for new or modernized theoretical concepts and methodological approach in the social sciences. In the United States of America, the main directions of explaining fundamental issues concerning the political power and the representative democracy were connected with behavioural theories and theories of rational decision making and choice. Elitistic concepts supported the representative democracy or questioned it in the realistically existing governance. On the other hand, the clarification of the representative democracy in Europe, through its electoral democracy form, was strengthened by the political parties concept. However, there were still some competitive political thoughts, focused on the participatory and direct democracy, which remained significant. For example, there was a significant conceptual and intellectual unrest evoked by the ideas of civic and labour self-government (French *autogestion*).

These various contexts were influencing the central position of civic competence in the study of democracy, but some separate models of these researches also emerged. In the American sociology of politics,

their major subjects concerned the political knowledge of citizens, their capacity for political thinking as “informed citizens”. Basically, it was about an intentional research paradigm of the “in-depth”, rationalized and well-established knowledge of citizens about politics. It was allowing citizens to assess the politics and to make political decisions, in particular (exclusively) electoral ones. What was examined, were the individual predispositions in relation to the legitimacy of the authority (the rulers), as well as the support of the ruled for the democracy and its stability.

Such attributes of well-informed citizens, who are capable of producing a coherent and sustainable set of views with reference to each sectoral policy, were analysed in surveys, polls, interviews and focus studies. It was a universalizing and cognitive approach, excluding – apart from some obvious exceptions – the existence of incompetent units.¹

Initially, there were mostly questions about the condition of the political knowledge. Later, some new questions appeared. They were focused on the aspects, concerning the things one can expect from the people who have some specific knowledge about politics. What political effects can the political knowledge have? Additional clarification was found in the social environment of the citizens – in their social stratification and the political environment (in the party system). Therefore, the influence of the parties system with two prevailing parties (Democrats and Republicans) on the relatively easy process of political self-identification of citizens was revealed and it simplified the results of these researches.

At the same time in France, in the 70^s and 80^s, a fundamental change was initiated and it concerned the approach to civic competence consisting of three elements in their classic linear perspective. The elements are: the knowledge of politics, the ability to its evaluation and assessment (of policy) and making decisions, and civil behaviours. Already during that time, the knowledge was not anymore regarded as the main element of this sequence, as its starting point and the reference for the other elements, so

¹ D. Gaxie, *Cognitions, auto-habilitation et pouvoirs des “citoyens”*, “Revue française de science politique” 2007, No. 6, p. 737–738; L. Blondieux, *Faut – il se débarrasser de la notion de compétence politique? Retour critique sur un concept classique de la science politique*, “Revue française de science politique” 2007, No. 6, p. 759–762.

as a kind of meta-power like it was mentioned in the indicated American studies.

After the socio-political crisis in May 1968, which was unpredictable and surprising for politicians, as well as for sociologists and political scientists, the reliability of public opinion surveys decreased significantly. These surveys were seen as a basic tool for measuring civic competence. It turned out that the election polls and surveys poorly respond to the fluctuations of situation assessments and the opinions of people, as well as to the diversity of their confidence or trust in politicians, diverse ties with democracy and politics. This view still prevails in the analysis of civic competence. We can find a characteristic opinion of the longstanding researcher of this subject, Daniel Gaxie: "As far as I am concerned, at the moment, we neither have any "structured" description of the cognitive instruments used by "ordinary" citizens, nor any conditions of its application and the results achieved".² At the end of the 70s, a sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, expressed the idea of "the non-existent public opinion", which was often quoted by scholars, analysing civic competence. He also questioned the cognitive research model used for the analysis of civic competence, which treated as a priority the cognitive competence related to the knowledge about politics. Then, he defined the civicness as the ability to identify the fact of being political in the relation to the standards, procedures and political decisions. He defined this ability as a subjective or practical political competence.³ With time, this phase of the overall political competence formatting became a central issue for research and the genetic phase of the political competence. There was a shift of the central research point, moving it from the quantitative issues (knowledge about politics) to quality issues (the individual ability of gaining competence).⁴

In this approach, the cause and effect relationship between the knowledge about politics and the predisposition to participate in politics, which

² D. Gaxie, *Cognitions...*, p. 741.

³ See Y. Déloye, *Pour une "sociologie historique" de la compétence à opiner "politiquement"*. *Quelques hypothèses de travail à partir de histoire électorale française*, "Revue française de science politique" 2007, No. 6, p. 775.

⁴ A. Joignant, *Compétence politique et bricolage. Les formes profanes du rapport au politique*, "Revue française de science politique" 2007, No. 6, p. 800–801.

was typical for the cognitive model of civic competence studying, was completely negated. The knowledge and the tools for its use are not equivalent with the activities and do not determine the civic “contribution” to the politics or the political system. Due to the current media coverage of the politics and the presence of the new electronic media, the opinion that “the more we know, the less we understand” makes its contribution to the topic. This can reinforce the importance of the overall competence of the information selecting and valuation in the process of creating individual and group assessments and opinions about politics, as well as in the process of making individual decisions. It can also result in an anomy and withdrawal from the representative and electoral democracy.

Both the turnout rate and the absence rate are treated as a form of electoral behaviours, with the use of the overall civic competence. However, within the framework of the overall civic competence, not the knowledge is the most important element, but the motivations of political behaviours, including the electoral behaviours.⁵

As a result of the studies in the area of media sciences and psychology of politics, the hypothesis saying that the majority of ordinary citizens have only limited, low, fragmented knowledge about politics was confirmed. Earlier, it was claimed that such knowledge is a starting point and an obvious acquisition phase before reaching higher civic competence. Since the 90s, it is considered that such a small knowledge is not an obstacle to consider these citizens as politically competent. The ordinary citizens, even those who are not very aware, are able to make judgements and opinions about politics, make decisions and act. Instability, volatility in attitudes and behaviours is not the only consequence of their small knowledge, but has also a situational connection with the changes of the political realities. Despite the wide range of political ignorance or even ignorance – from the psychological point of view, in assessing gains and losses connected to gaining and using the knowledge – the citizens may react irrationally, but do not lose predispositions to creating a general competence.⁶

⁵ L. Szczegółą, *Bierność obywateli (Passivity of the citizens) Political apathy in the theory of the democratic participation*, Warsaw 2013, p. 67, 95.

⁶ L. Blondiaux, *Faut-il se débarasser...*, p. 764–771; D. Gaxie, *Cognitions...*, p. 738–739.

“The general political power”, as a simple or simplified individual predisposition, allows to use the knowledge about politics and life experiences for putting together the information puzzles and signals from the social environment and the public sphere and creating “fundamental references to politics”. A higher level of these evaluations and opinions about politics is related to becoming aware of our own interests, which are connected with the elements of the politics at the local scale and in a social group. This, in turn, determines or makes it easier to refer such interests to the government sectoral policies and to the centres of power within the political system.

In the electoral studies, we have mostly to do with the simple competence of ordinary citizens. The production of such competence, however, encounters a variety of procedural and political barriers (related, for example, to the format of the party system, poorly selected software alternatives or conflicting impacts of intermediaries).⁷

In the theory of civic competence, such general, simplified political (electoral) competence are treated as sufficient in the process legitimization and delegitimization of the rulers and the authority in the representative democracy. Nevertheless, such competence may be insufficient to make a contribution to the various forms of the participatory democracy, being its potential resource rather than its source.⁸ However, this resource is not long-lasting, because the civic competence are not static. We can of course assume their temporal ossification and strengthening of their genetic form, but there can be a fluctuation in one or the other direction, that is to say a reduction or increase in the competence. This uncertainty is the result of the previously disclosed asymmetry (in the 70^s and 80^s) between the results of the public opinion surveys and the cognitive research attitude – with the additional falsification of the results connected with the “ideological” or “politicised” planning of the research and analysis of the results – and the actual image of the political attitudes and behaviours, as well as the status of the representative democracy. D. Gaxie pointed out, referring

⁷ P. Mair, *Populist democracy vs party democracy*, [in:] *Democracy facing populism*, (Editors) Yves Mény and Yves Sorel, trans. A. Gąsior-Niemiec, Warsaw 2007, p. 140–149.

⁸ D. Gaxie, *Cognitions...*, p. 748.

to this issue, that “the act of voting is not a guarantee that all the citizens are able to express their critical judgement of the decisions made by the rulers. Regardless of the cognitive resources, the dispositions of the civic self-legitimization or delegitimization control the ability to take advantage of the control powers or giving them away, in spite of the fact that they are granted to everyone in “the official theory of democracy”.⁹

A contradiction between the normative equality of citizens and their unequal access to information has been indicated here. As well as the controlling role of the civic political competence, both in its narrow electoral meaning and in the meaning of its permanent control by the ruled in contemporary democracies and political systems.

In the theoretical and methodological considerations of the political scientists, who treat civil political competence as one of the main problems of the modern democracy, it is worth mentioning two kinds of research screenings of this topic. The first one is the postulated extension of the research field to include civic competence in the public space. The second one is to shift attention to the relationship between the changes of representative democracy (representative, electoral) and the new forms of participative democracy (direct, deliberative), and amendments to political competence.

As a starting point we can take an opinion by Julien Tapin, saying that “nowadays, the expectations towards citizens are much higher and in the same time much lower than before.” This seemingly paradoxical observation has already been explained before in relation to its final part. “Less than before” in this context refers to the abandonment of the cognitive model used to explain the competence in political studies. Whereas, some fundamental political and electoral competence, as well as the overall competence of judging and deciding by the citizens, gained importance.

The first part of the quoted opinion describes the real process of the political powers’ shift from the narrowly defined political system to the wider public and civic sphere, which reaches outside the political system in its institutional, procedural and normative outline. The importance of cultural factors is increasing. The political culture also includes the legal

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 756.

and organizational culture, as well as ethical and moral standards. The opening up to other social sciences, other than only political sciences, was highlighted. In addition, and not necessarily in the background, there were legal and historical sciences. In this respect, Julien Tapin pointed out, that “civic competence can be defined as the sum of cognitive, technical, political, emotional and practical resources that are available to citizens in the public space”.¹⁰

In Polish publications, the forms of competence or civic competence rather than civic political competence can still be found more frequently. There are also meta-competencies, treated as a designation of civic competence in the social communication, from the sociological and psychological perspective.¹¹

The extension of the research field concerning civic political competence has at least two more reasons. The first one concerns the dispersion of power and decision-making bodies, which was noticed in scientific observations. Ryszard Herbut especially focused on the processes of decentralisation and fragmentation of political decisions, and the multiplicity of sectoral policies. In conclusion, he pointed out that “the authoritative activities in the area of public policy are conducted in a decentralized manner and the authorities operate within the framework of a scattered system of relations and solutions.”¹² In this case, I believe that a broad approach to the political system can be applied. It was described by Andrzej Antoszewski as “the system of normative and actual relations functioning in the area of political power”.¹³ These “actual relations” include “the political life

¹⁰ J. Tapin, *Ces moments qui façonnent les hommes. Éléments pour une approche pragmatise de la compétence civique*, “Revue politique de science politique” 2010, No. 1, p. 98.

¹¹ See J. Szomburg, *Nowe metakompetencje warunkiem rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego Polski* [New meta-competencies as a condition of socio-economical development in Poland], [in:] *VI Civic Congress*, Gdańsk 2011, No. 41, p. 7–8.

¹² R. Herbut, *A paper (draft) for the Second National Congress of Departments and Units of Political Sciences* (May 2013, Trzebnica).

¹³ A. Antoszewski, *System polityczny jako kategoria analizy politologicznej*, [Political System as a Category of Political Sciences Analysis] [in:] *Studia z Teorii Polityki*, [Theory of Politics studies], Vol. I, (eds.) A.W. Jabłoński, L. Sobkowiak, Wrocław 1998, p. 85.

of a given society”, indicating a broad approach to policies and openness of the system to the social environment and relations in the public space.¹⁴

A radical critique of the modern representative democracy was made by Michel Foucault. He especially pointed out the issue of the systematic normative, institutional and intentional dispersal of power, which was exercised with the use of arbitrary methods such as the compulsion of law and the political compulsion, as well as the sophisticated modern control, persuasion and manipulation techniques.¹⁵ Although there are clear differences in the scientific opinions concerning the inconsistent and temporally changeable set of arguments and conclusions of M. Foucault, his thesis about the dispersal of power and the civic society opposition to the domination of the rulers remain an important point of reference in the French research on political and civic competence and on democratic subjectivity. They also spread to the European political thought and the scientific reflection on the contemporary democracy.

From the beginning of the 90s, the transition from treating electoral competence as a priority to analysing also other forms of civic participation is accompanied by the criticism of the liberal model of democracy. Consequently, this results in a significant modification of the individual (personal) dimension of civic competence and in raising the status of the social competence. Such social competence could be more group or more community related. What should be examined are not the competencies of the citizen – elector, but the competencies of the citizen who is constantly present in a local community and has knowledge of the major issues that are decided in his place of residence and in his immediate vicinity. He is also aware of his own interests and relations with the local community, as well as of simplified relations of such localism with the authorities and politics on a larger scale, and his attitude towards the rulers is expressed in the elections.¹⁶ This set of elements, constituting the civic competence, becomes the main subject of research in the changed conditions of the

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 73.

¹⁵ See M. Foucault, *Philosophy. History. Politics. Selected works*, Warsaw–Wrocław 2000, p. 163–185; B. Hindess, *Philosophy of power. From Hobbes to Foucault*, Warsaw–Wrocław 1999, p. 110–154.

¹⁶ D. Gaxie, *Cognitions, auto-habilitation et pouvoirs...*, p. 752.

modern democracy. And this is the second of the two issues that were identified earlier and are related to the new research conceptualization concerning civic political competence.

Again, the elements that are gaining importance are: the status and relations between the ruled (citizens, ordinary citizens) and the rulers (politicians, elected representatives, and experts), the legitimization and delegitimization of the authority, as well as its functionality and dysfunctions. In these relations, one of the basic categories of civic competence, which is trust, has been changed in a significant way. Here are the forms that are used: minimal trust, limited trust, trust combined with mistrust, the requirement of the permanent control over the rulers by the ruled. In a paper presented at the Second National Congress of Departments and Units of Political Sciences, the latter was emphasised by Jarosław Szymanek, who stressed that strengthening the civic control of the rulers, known as the reactive democracy, is the necessary correction of the representative democracy.¹⁷ Pierre Rosanvallon presents a radical way to reform the democracy in the form of “the democracy of rejection” and the civic counter-democracy.¹⁸ In fact, it is the civic democracy *à rebours* – “monitoring democracy” or “reviewing democracy” (“to monitor and punish”), based on the concept of power by Michel Foucault.

Regardless of the scope and forms of the real control of the authorities (rulers), the concept itself gained a new meaning and a permanent status in the studies of political competence. The control of authorities here is directly combined with the participatory and deliberative democracy in its variety of forms. They are conducive to diversification of methods and forms of making political and social decisions, not only in the majority procedures, but also in the consensual procedures including the elements of deliberation. The idea is, among others, to “give citizens the possibil-

¹⁷ J. Szymanek, *Zasady reprezentacji w nowej i ponowoczesnej polityce* [Representation rules in the new and the postmodern politics]. Questions for discussion (draft paper), Trzebnica, 20–21 May 2013, p. 10–14.

¹⁸ See P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy. Politics in an Age of Distrust*, trans. A. Czarnacka, Wrocław 2011, p. 11–12, 163.

ity of increasing their participation in the democratic decision-making procedures".¹⁹

Deliberation is still poorly grounded in the society. It tends to be confused or considered equivalent with the "ordinary", sometimes pointless and hermetic debate between politicians and experts, conducted in a routine manner within establishment and celebrities. Meanwhile, "deliberating means rethinking all the pros and cons," exchanging arguments by the participants, who trust each other, and consensual agreeing on a common position. This is an inclusive formula with the equal participation of citizens who have unequal competence. It is quite popular in the urban centres in France, in small social groups analysing important issues related to a social infrastructure, which is at the discretion of local authorities or a government.²⁰

Since the 70^s, there are also organised so called "civic panels" adopted from American models, which somewhat resemble civic questionings.²¹ Another form are civic think tanks. In Poland, the non-public Institute for Market Economics can be considered an example of the think tank. The institute organizes debates involving experts and "ordinary citizens" with "remarkable professional achievements" in a social or hobby area. The debates are organized in the form of Civic Congresses and cover issues related to the forecasting of economic trends and proposals for solving important social problems. In the United States, in turn, there are so called "civic petitions" for a recall procedure. The petitions gained a significant coverage, being present in more than a dozen states. Such petitions are used to dismiss an official or a public official in a voting, in the area where he has been elected (for example, a mayor of the city, a sheriff, a governor,

¹⁹ Further described [in:] J. Sroka, *Deliberacja i rządy wielopasmowe (Deliberation and multiparty governing). Theory and practice*, Wrocław 2009, p. 95–120.

²⁰ See S. Luc, *Entre contestation et participation. L'ambiguïté du rapport vote des activistes de la gauche libertaire*, "Revue française de science politique" 2008, No. 2, p. 231–256.

²¹ Y. Sintomer, *Le pouvoir au peuple. Jurys citoyens tirage au sort et démocratie participative*, Paris 2007. See the review by Muriel Rambour, "Revue française de science politique" 2007, No. 3–4, p. 499–500.

etc.).²² This is similar to the Polish local or sublocal referendum, which is limited in its scope, serving to dismiss a borough leader, a municipality mayor or a city mayor. These and other forms of the civic control are indicated by civic competence researchers as the examples of the direct or deliberative democracy.

There can also be noticed an increased interest in the judiciary, in the meaning of the control over other authorities: executive and legislative. Courts and tribunals seem to gain prestige as the institutions enjoying the confidence of citizens in the democratic rule of law. Some organizational forms, such as the jury, are treated almost as textbook examples of deliberation concerning ordinary citizens with small legal competence, who in a jury are capable of reaching a verdict. In conclusion, it is worth mentioning some issues connected to researches that are at the meeting point of human rights and civic competence with the criminal law, the civic culture and the legal culture, which seem to be sort of overlooked or neglected – with the exception of some political science works concerning the judiciary and tribunals (e.g. by Dariusz Skrzypiński).

After some fundamental changes, that took place in the research model of civic political competence in the last decades, can it still be treated as the criterion for analysis of the modern democracy, as in the title of this work? The first point, bringing us closer to the answer, are some questions posed by Loïc Blondiaux in his program manifesto published in 2007, which concerned the scientific status of this concept and the possibility of using it in practice: in what sense civic political competence can be thought of as the central issue in the political science? To what extent this academic conceptualisation remains adequate to political phenomena that are tested? To what extent this concept can be functional in explaining changes in the contemporary democracy and the relations of power?²³ The developed answers to these questions, given by the author, are directly related to the critical analysis of the status of researches and controversies that had still been discussed from the 60^s in the past century until the middle of the previous decade. It is connected also with the worth notic-

²² P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy...*, p. 149–150.

²³ L. Blondiaux, *Faut-il se débarasser...*, p. 759–761.

ing opening of the political science to other social sciences – psychology of politics, sociology, philosophy of politics and legal sciences. Also, the additional notes and methodological hints can turn out to be important here. One of them is related to the issue, mentioned by Jarosław Szymanek, concerning the electoral redistribution of political competence between the ordinary citizens (represented) and the rulers (representatives), as the central point of the representative democracy.²⁴ And so, the research on civic competence, going beyond the electoral research and the democracy based on plurality voting system, may be important in the dynamic processual revealing of the legitimization and delegitimization of the authority, civic trust and mistrust. It is still a complicated task to link the results of the individual civic competence research with their group aggregation. As the final conclusion, we can suggest a methodological advice of L. Blondiaux, saying that the civil competence research should be conducted in relation “with the context of structural social inequalities and the issue of engagement (or political withdrawal) of dominant social groups.”²⁵

The supporters of giving to the civic political competence paradigm higher appreciation in the area of political sciences, also cite the need to bear in mind the cultural dimension of the political phenomena. In their opinion, this phenomena is underestimated or even unacknowledged in the research of authority, governance and sectoral policies. Undoubtedly, the cultural aspect of civic political competence is clearly defined both in the socio-liberal and libertarial trends in the political thought, as well as in the community republican variant.²⁶ Jan Garlicki even pointed to terminological synonyms of “the civic culture” and “the civic political culture” with “the political culture”. The latter was defined by J. Garlicki in a manner reminding a developed description of civic political competence. The main points are the four features, defining the political culture, that were indicated by him: “1. An interest in politics, knowledge about politics and about some political facts; 2. The renown and desirable values with

²⁴ J. Szymanek, *Zasada reprezentacji w nowej i ponowoczesnej polityce...*, p. 7–10.

²⁵ L. Blondiaux, *Faut-il se débarasser...*, p. 775.

²⁶ See A. Szahaj, *Spółczesność obywatelskie i kultura upokarzania* [Civic society and the culture of humiliation], [in:] *VI Civic Congress. Development and education. The great redefinition*, Gdańsk 2011, No. 42, p. 131.

regards to the political system and the functioning mechanisms of its institutions; 3. An assessment of the political phenomena and evaluating judgements on political institutions; 4. Recognized patterns of behaviour in the area of politics and tried-and-true political actions.”²⁷

In order to illustrate the importance of the cultural factors in the research on civic political competence, I would like to quote two examples. In 2007, Yves Déloye defended the “historical sociology” – focused on the cross-cutting electoral research – and criticized by some political scientists. He pointed on their usefulness in creating the “sociohistorical imagination” in relation to the long-term trends of civil political socialization, exactly by raising the visibility of cultural and local factors. He warned against narrowing, by the political science, the topics in the area of political competence and against being prone to explaining through the unconscious politicization. He also emphasised the importance of stereotyping in the political culture.²⁸

Alfredo Joignant, however, urged to take into account, in the research on civic competence, the language of politics, its local colour in different forms, political “decorations” and props, associations. He mainly referred to the examples of the focus studies of political competence that were carried out in Chile. For example, he mentioned the “overall political competence” or “the substitutes of political skills” of two soldiers from conscription, serving in one of the distant garrisons in the south of the country in 1993 or 1994. They were both physical labourers and during the focus study they declared lack of interest in the politics. They remembered, however, that their first contact with politics took place during their military service. Officers were encouraging them to vote “according to their behaviours,” arguing that they were close to the right wing only because they were rising their right hand, and not the left one, when they wanted to ask a question to their commander.²⁹

A. Joignant stressed the importance of cultural aspects precisely in the focus studies. He also recommended using the method of anonymous test-

²⁷ J. Garlicki, A. Noga Bogomilski, *Kultura polityczna w społeczeństwie demokratycznym* [Political culture in a democratic society], Warsaw 2004, p. 44–45.

²⁸ Y. Déloye, *Pour une “sociologie historique”*..., p. 797–798.

²⁹ A. Joignant, *Compétence politique*..., p. 807.

ing, which was more in-depth and less concrete than detailed surveys and opinion polls. Especially in the researches on selected respondents, who in the polls were regarded as SO/SR (Fr. SO – sans opinion and SR – sans réponse).³⁰ This recommendation, in my opinion, is worth broadening by adding the category of voters casting invalid votes, which is usually omitted in the detailed analysis.

Despite the fact of questioning the cognitive model of testing civic competence, some of the research threads are still justified, however, more as research hypothesis than as recognised principles. One of them is based on the assumption that the citizens who are better informed have higher ability to independently define their own interests in a political contexts. The second thread concerns the unequal distribution or individual resources of civic competence, as well as the correlation between the general level of civic competence in a given political system and more or less egalitarian dimension of government policy and sectoral policies.³¹

I believe that this set of the chosen theoretical and methodological aspects can be considered a testimony, proving the attractiveness of the scientific conceptualization of civic political competence. In addition, it can be considered a justification for the functional analysis of the modern democracy criteria, thanks to the already significant achievements and the scientific research experience in the area of social sciences.

SUMMARY

The text deals with the topic of civic political competence (civic competence) as an additional criterion of the quality of the democracy. It shows both theoretical aspects of this issue, identifying some specific elements of competence and the methodological problems of the research on civic competence. The article also includes reflections on the implementation of civic competence in the processes of deliberation.

Keywords: civic competence, citizen, civic knowledge, political culture, political elites

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 803.

³¹ L. Blondiaux, *Faut – il se débarasser...*, p. 774.