

Dynamics and Users of Online Petitions in Poland

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ABSTRACT

The paper contains an analysis of the user demographics of online petitioning platforms. **Scientific objective:** To check how the user demographic structure of online petitioning platforms looks like compared to the results of other researches on e-petitioning websites. **Research methods:** Secondary data from the Gemius / PBI study — measurement of the Internet audience. **Results and conclusions:** Online petitions are most often visited by people aged 55 and more, and residents of large cities with higher education. **Cognitive value:** Until now, the largest interest in online petitioning platforms has been attributed to young people. Users of this type of services were also not tested using behavioral data analysis.

KEYWORDS

online petitions, citizen petitions, internet audience measurement, *silver generation*, political participation



Petition platforms emerged with the development of the Web 2.0 Internet – technologies that enable networking, publishing own content, interacting and creating communities. They are the virtual equivalent of paper petitions, under which signatures in the public space were collected, usually in very busy places (and it is still practised). Thus, online petitions create new opportunities for citizens to participate in the political debate. Collection of signatures is not limited to a few physical places and people who are there at any given time, but takes place all over the Internet round the clock and has the chance to gather a much larger, even international audience.

The principle of operation of petition platforms is simple. Users are able to create their own subpages with the content of petitions (also called *causes*) and promote them to get as many signatures as possible. The petition is signed by filling out the contact form on the petition's page. Usually, one must provide first and last name and email address. Signing the petition is only possible by clicking on the confirmation link, which is sent to the signer's email address. Some petition systems also allow users to discuss on the forum (Kollar, Gasperová, & Poliak, 2016).



Do Przewodniczącego Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej, Pana Xi Jinpinga, Gubernatora Prowincji Kuangsi, Pana Chena Wu, oraz członków Rządu Centralnego ChRL:

"My, obywatele i obywatelki z całego świata, jesteśmy głęboko poruszeni przypadkami maltretowania psów oraz spożywania ich mięsa podczas festiwalu w Yulin. Stanowczo domagamy się natychmiastowego zakazania takich praktyk. Miliony Chińczyków poparli wprowadzenie regulacji prawnych, które mogłyby powstrzymać produkcję psiego mięsa, a my dziś przyłączamy się do ich apelu o zaprzestanie tego okrucieństwa"

Przeczytaj więcej:

Aktualizacja, 16 czerwca 2017: HURRA!!! Po olbrzymim apelu społeczności Avaaz, lokalnych działaczy i innych grup, władze Yulin zakazały sprzedaży psiego mięsa na tegorocznym festiwalu! Teraz to od władz zależy, czy nowe przepisy będą przestrzegane i będą obowiązywały także w przyszłości. Festiwal zaczyna się już za kilka dni. Musimy naciskać dalej, by mieć pewność, że ta okrutny zwyczaj zakończy się na dobre!

Aktualizacja, 29 czerwca 2016: Obiecujące wieści! Władze chińskiego regionu Yulin zadeklarowały blokowanie festiwalu torturowania psów i „podjęcie natychmiastowych działań, aby nie dopuścić do jego powtórki”.

To duży postęp w sprawie, jednak tegoroczna edycja niestety miała miejsce. Musimy naciskać dalej, aby zamknąć ten okrutny festiwal

Imię i nazwisko

E-mail

Kraj Kod pocztowy

PODPISZ TERAZ

Kontynuując, wyrażasz zgodę na otrzymywanie e-maili od Avaaz. Nasza **Polityka prywatności** chroni Twoje dane i wyjaśnia, w jaki sposób są wykorzystywane. W każdej chwili możesz zrezygnować z subskrypcji.

3 410 409

3 410 409 podpisało. Niech będzie nas 3 500 000

52 sekundy temu Daria H., Polska

minutę temu Pirra П., Rosja

minutę temu Miquel, Francja

3 minut temu Jacek W., Polska

5 minut temu Anita Y., Chiny

6 minut temu Zuzanna M., Wielka Brytania

Figure 1. Example page with petition and contact form page

Source: avaaaz.org

Currently, there are several petition platforms in Poland:

Avaaz.org – an international service with its Polish language version. It was founded in the United States in 2007 by the civic movement. It promotes global activity in matters such as climate change, human rights, animal rights, corruption, poverty and conflict (Dryjanska, 2009).

Change.org – an international platform with a Polish language version. It is owned by the American company Change.org based in San Francisco, California. The purpose of the website is to make it easier for the public to create petitions. The website runs sponsored campaigns for the largest non-governmental organisations. Popular causes at Change.org relate to economic justice, human rights, education, environmental protection, animal rights, health and sustainable food.

Naszademokracja.pl – online petition platform created by Akcja Demokracja civic initiative. The assumption of Akcja is to unite people with the help of modern technologies in order to build a better, fairer society. As part of its activities, Akcja runs Naszademokracja.pl platform. Its thematic specialisation is related to social justice, democracy, human rights and effective environmental protection.

Petycje.pl – the Polish Petycje.pl website was established in 2004. According to its administrators, it has recorded over 68 million visits so far, and over 2.3 million signatures have been submitted under the petitions. The service emphasises that user data is collected only to verify the petition and is not shared with third parties.

Petycjeonline.com – a Finnish platform with offices located in Oulu. The service provides the users with free platform to publish online petitions. It profits from the ads placed on the website.

Podpisz.to – the owner of the website is the Polish company Ensila based in Bielsko-Biała. The service is designed to facilitate online formalities. One of the additional features are online petitions. According to administrators, almost 45,000 signatures have been collected so far.

Also authorities discovered the potential of online petitions. The White House has its own website with citizen petitions named We the People. If the petition collects 100,000 signatures in 30 days, it is considered by the White House, passed to experts and an official response is published.

The European Parliament also has a separate service of this type. Citizens are able to submit their own petitions to Parliament, as well as promote petitions among their friends thanks to social sharing mechanisms. As in 2002, in the European Social Survey, 20% of citizens of various European countries declared to have signed a citizen petition (Acik, 2013), so transfer of this activity to the Internet was a natural consequence.

The potential of petitions has also been noticed by Facebook. In March 2017, the service announced the release of the new Town Hall function. It facilitates the contacts of citizens with politicians and institutions, and reminds about political events. It also allows submitting petitions online. For now, Town Hall operates only in the United States (Wirtualnemedial.pl, 2017).

Literature review

The scientific discussion on online petition concerns mainly the extent to which they are the expression of limited activity of Internet users, and the extent to which they constitute one of the valuable manifestations of political activity. Initially, the debate on online petition was pushed by the critical approach, initiated by Christensen, who formulated the concept of slacktivism (2011) – political activities that do not affect the actual political results, and only serve to improve the participants' self-esteem. In Poland, Szpunar (2014) is an advocate of this approach, as she directly states that signing a petition is one of the manifestations of slacktivism, an activity characterised by little effort and commitment.

Kristofersson, White, & Peloza (2014) formulated the concept of token activity, which means low-cost commitment, opposed to significant commitment – high cost. In their opinion, many Internet users, including those signing petitions, stop at sharing information about their own involvement. However, it is not obvious whether involvement in *social media* increases the voters activity (Howard, Savage, Saviaga, Toxtli, & Monroy-Hernandez, 2016), and the phenomenon itself is difficult to measure, because it is dispersed among various platforms.

In later years, both political activity on the Internet and online petitions became subject of subsequent analyses that exposed their positive functions. Research shows that people active on the Internet are also active outside of it (García-Galera, Del-Hoyo-Hurtado, & Fernández-Muñoz, 2014; Velički, Dumančić, & Topolovčan, 2017). The activity associated with online petitions generates low costs and allows to quickly disseminate information about the protest (Nowak, 2013; Tran, 2013). In the case of young people, participation in online activities is often a prelude to offline activity (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013) or a natural form of expression of political views (Konieczny, 2014). Online interactions are also important for increasing political awareness (Jensen, 2013).

Research results describing online petition users as a group are not unambiguous. Some researchers indicate that these are young people. This is what Malin Sveningsson claims, analysing the current debate on online petitions and the properties of these websites (2014). However, the researcher does not support her claim with specific demographic data. Wojniak (2010) quotes data from declarative research in the United Kingdom, according to which young people are most interested in online political participation. According to Štětka and Mazák (2014), when there is political mobilization through social media, older people rather than younger people are more affected.

Shepard (2015) claims that people with higher incomes are most interested in online petitions, which is associated with higher education and communicative competences in the Internet. Stekelenburg, Klandermans and Akkerman (2016) also concluded that the group most active in political organisations is people aged 45–65, while those in the range of 25–44 are much less active and declare a willingness to passively participate. Wojniak (2010) also indicates that the creation of a political culture of participation can be influenced by the spatial context – the tendency of appearing clusters of individuals that show greater interest in public affairs, as well as the activity of political elites who focus their attention on a specific region for its political mobilisation.

Study results for the groups of users of petition platforms are therefore not explicit.

Problem and research objective

Ambiguities related to the group of users of petition platforms were the reason for the author's interest, who decided to take a closer look at this group in terms of demographic criteria. Are they really young people who are fluent in the Internet? Is interest in petition platforms characteristic of metropolitan areas, which inevitably also have better internet infrastructure and where the political elites are focused?

It was also decided to check what interest in petition platforms in Poland was from their creation until the end of 2017. Is the popularity of these platforms increasing or does it remain unchanged? What could be the reason for possible changes in their popularity?

The following research questions were formulated:

- Is the number of users of petition platforms in Poland growing? Is it possible to indicate specific events that cause changes in the number of users?
- Can there be any seasonal regularities in the number of users of petition platforms?

- Are the users of petition platforms primarily younger people, rather from the age group of 7–24 years than from 45 and more?
- What is the education of users of the petition platforms?
- What is the size of town of residence of the users of petition platforms?

Research method

To determine the demographic structure of users of petition platforms, the results of the Gemius/PBI research were used. This is the only Internet audience research in Poland, which is a standard on the Polish market in settlements between advertisers and owners of websites. The research has been conducted since 2016 by PBI and Gemius. It replaced the previous Megapanel research, carried out in 2005–2015. The study uses a hybrid measurement, i.e. a combination of methods: *site-centric* (measuring user activity on the website using tracking codes) and *user-centric* (measuring user activity using the application installed on the devices). The data from the measurement is then combined and estimated for the entire population of Internet users. The research sample in December 2017 amounted to 146 thousand people.

Using the Gemius/PBI research we can learn the basic indicators of the online service, i.e. number of users, time, range, page views and a number of derived indicators. We can also set demographic parameters of w users: age, sex, education, professional status, size of the place of residence, voivodship, net income, size of the household, net income of the household.

The main advantage of using the data from the measurement of the Internet audience is the measurement of the actual activity of Internet users on the Internet. The measurement used in the Gemius/PBI research is a measure of behaviour, not a declaration. This allows to avoid errors related to the “interviewer effect” (the respondent declares behaviours that will make him/her look more favourably in the eyes of the researcher). Respondents, when asked about which websites they visited on the previous day (and especially the whole month), would not be able to list all of them, because they simply cannot remember it. Therefore, this method of measurement allows us to get the most accurate results.

However, the measurement method used in the Gemius/PBI research has its limitations. Presenting the result for a given platform in the research results depends on the number of panelists recorded in a given platform. The threshold is 300 panellists, which means that the results of nodes below 300 panelists remain hidden. The result is that the smallest platforms are not present in the measurement.

The first step in the implementation of the study was the selection of petition platforms that should be included in the analysis. This was done on the basis of Google search results, including the phrases: “online petitions”, “petition platforms”, “internet petitions”, “civic petitions”. In this way, an initial list of platforms was collected. Next, it was checked for which of them it was possible to obtain data from the Gemius/PBI research. Three platforms had sufficiently large traffic to be included in the results of the study: petycjeonline.pl, avaaz.org and change.org. Due to the fact that the number of users of these platforms are not too high for individual platforms (and therefore drawing conclusions regarding individual platforms could be affected by error), the analysis combined the data from all three platforms.

To create a demographic profile, data from the Gemius/PBI research from June 2017 was selected, when traffic in petition platforms was of moderate intensity. On the other hand, data from the Gemius/PBI research for 15 months between June 2016 and September 2017 was selected to track the trends in traffic on the websites. The results of the Megapanel research (2011–2015) and the Gemius/PBI research were used to track changes in particular years (2016–2017). The PC (so-called desktop) traffic indicators used in both studies were compared. The

Gemius/PBI research also presents data for the total indicator, which connects users of PCs and mobile devices, taking into account the co-ratings.

Results

Some petition platforms were launched in Poland as early as in 2007, but they increased in popularity in 2011. That year, for the first time, they appeared in the results of the Megapanel research. Since 2014, there has been a clear increase in interest in petition platforms – then electoral campaigns began: presidential and parliamentary. After the elections in 2015, first presidential (May 2015) and then parliamentary (October 2015), the opposition party Law and Justice has taken over the power. The new government and its plans triggered an intense public debate, especially in the first year of operation. This is reflected in the increased interest in petition platforms in 2015. In December 2016, the number of users of these platforms decreased, although it was still higher than in December 2014. In December 2017, the drop in the number of users was much more visible.

Table 1. The number of users of petitions platforms *petycjeonline.pl*, *avaaz.org* and *change.org*, including co-ratings

Number of users (RU)	12.2010	12.2011	12.2012	12.2013	12.2014	12.2015	12.2016	12.2017
desktop	–	103,522	–	103,528	167,979	991,723	577,717	255,993
total	–	–	–	–	–	–	731,488	379,455

Data source: Megapanel PBI/Gemius research (2014–2015) and Gemius/PBI research (2016–2017)

The range of petition platforms is characterised by sudden popularity spikes during the year, and there is no clear drop in interest in seasons associated with less Internet activity (around Christmas, winter or summer holidays). This means that the rhythm of interest in petitions on the web is determined by the temperature of the public debate. It can then be noted that both supporters and opponents of the government are active, trying to gain the support of Internet users by creating and promoting specific initiatives.

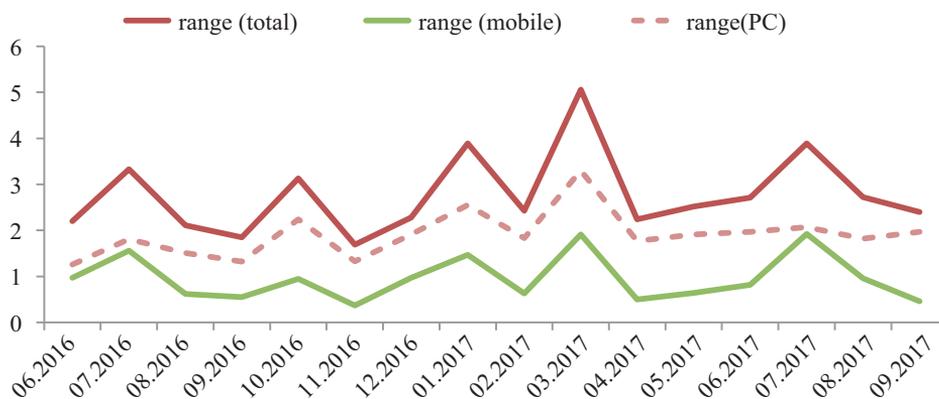


Chart 1. Range in petition platforms *petycjeonline.pl*, *avaaz.org* and *change.org*, including co-ratings (in percent)

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, June 2016–September 2017, monthly data

Analysis of demographic data of users of selected petition platforms shows that women are more often users of these platforms. However, the difference between men and women is not very high and amounts to 8 percentage points.

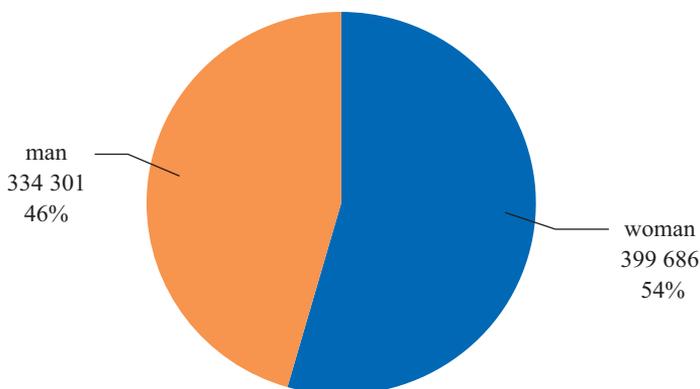


Chart 2. Gender of users of selected petitions platforms *petycjeonline.pl*, *avaaz.org* and *change.org*, including co-ratings, N = 733 987

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

When we compare the percentages for gender in relation to the internet, we can see that the difference is still small. Both women and men are similarly interested in petition platforms.

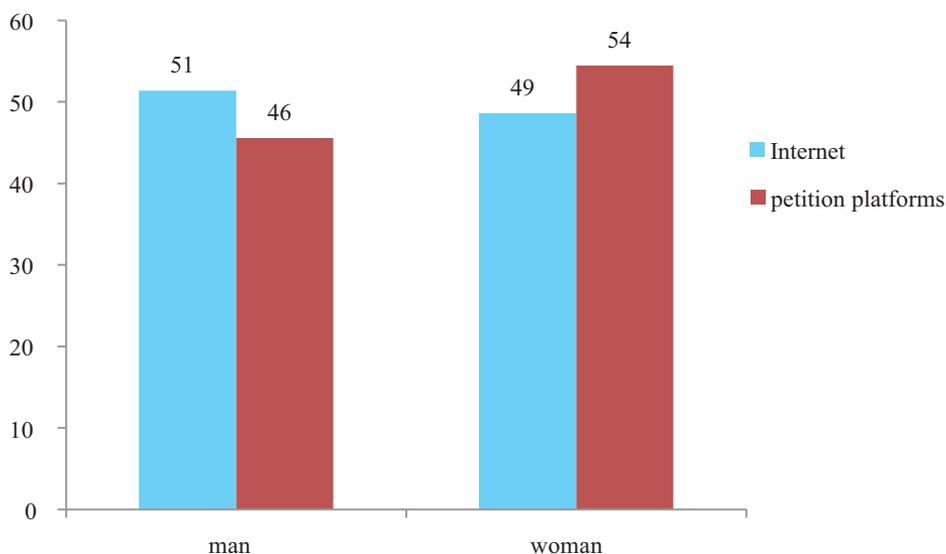


Chart 3. Gender: Percentage of users of selected petitions platforms *petycjeonline.pl*, *avaaz.org* and *change.org* in relation to the percentage of Internet users (in percent)

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

In the case of the age of users, the situation is different. The smallest group of users of petition platforms are people aged 7–24. The next two age groups, 25–44 years and 44 years and more are numerically similar. In order to explain this more comprehensively, a comparison of the age structure of petition platforms users with general internet users was made.

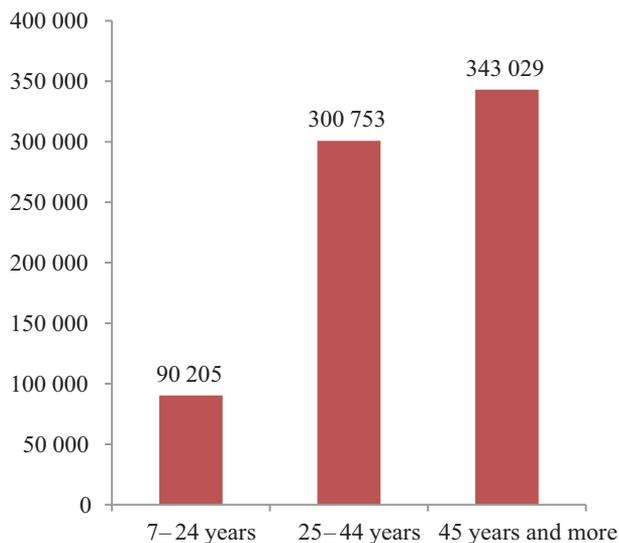


Chart 4. Number of users in particular age groups for selected petition platforms (petycjeonline.pl, avaaz.org and change.org), N = 733 987

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

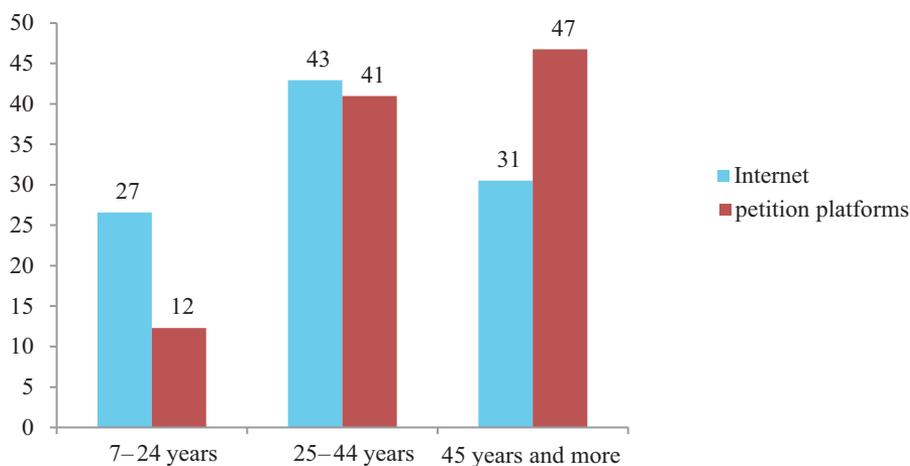


Chart 5. Age: percentage of users in particular age groups for selected petition platforms (petycjeonline.pl, avaaz.org and change.org) in relation to the percentage of Internet users (in percent)

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

Although in the petition platforms the number of people aged 25–44 and the group of people over 44 is similar, the difference between the first group and Internet users is small and amounts to 2 percentage points. This means that among Internet users and among users of online petitions, the share of the 25–44 age group is similar. A big difference can be found only in the case of the group of 44 years and more – Internet users from this second group in petition platforms are clearly overrepresented in relation to the Internet.

Time spent on petition platforms increases with age. While the group of users aged 7–24 spends there 1,5 minutes monthly, in the group of the oldest users this time doubles and is just over 3 minutes. So, the older the user of petition platforms, the more time he/she spends in them.

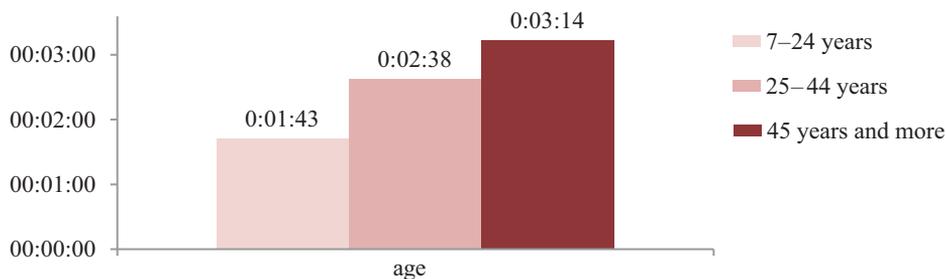


Chart 6. Average time per user (h: min: s) on petition platforms depending on the age group

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

The number of users for selected petition platforms at first glance seems to be the largest in rural areas, while in other types of towns size it is at a similar level. In this situation, it was decided to check the coverage of these platforms and to compare the structure of their users with the structure of Internet users in terms of their place of residence.

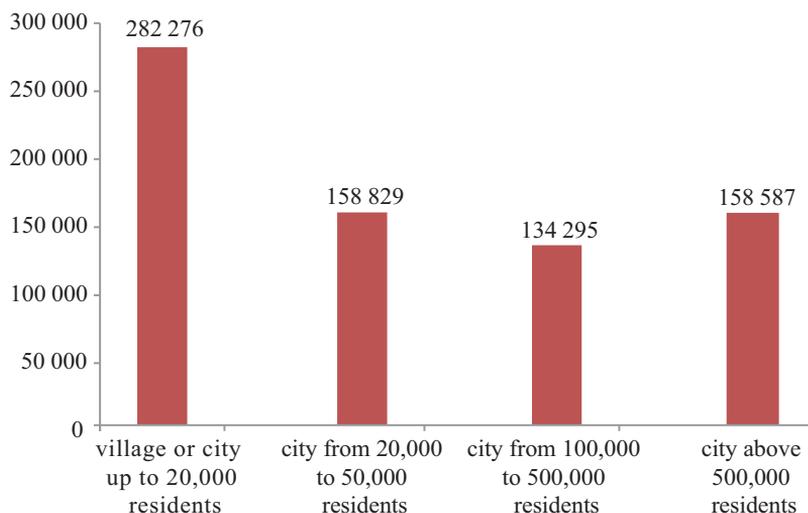


Chart 7. Number of users of selected petitions platforms petycjeonline.pl, avaaaz.org and change.org in towns of different size, N = 733 987

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

Range of petition platforms increases with the size of a town. This means that the bigger the town, the greater the percentage of Internet users using the petition platforms.

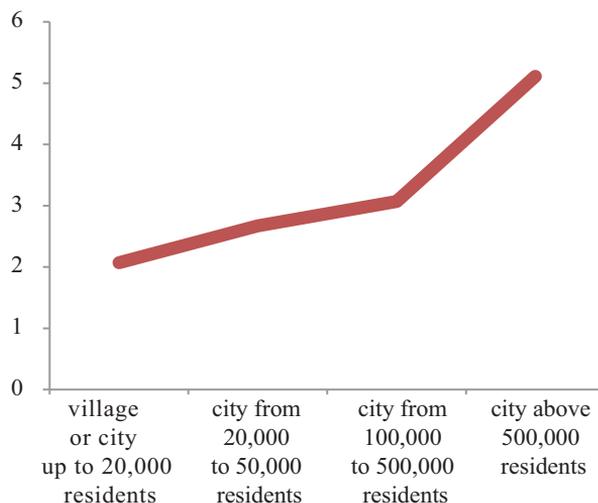


Chart 8. Range of selected petition platforms petycjeonline.pl, avaaaz.org and change.org in towns of different size (in percent)

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

On the other hand, when comparing the percentages of Internet users and petition platforms living in towns of different sizes, the biggest difference can be seen in the case of rural areas and major cities. In petition platforms, there is 12 percentage points less rural population than on the Internet. The situation is opposite in the case of major cities. In petition platforms, there is 11 percentage points more major cities population than on the Internet.

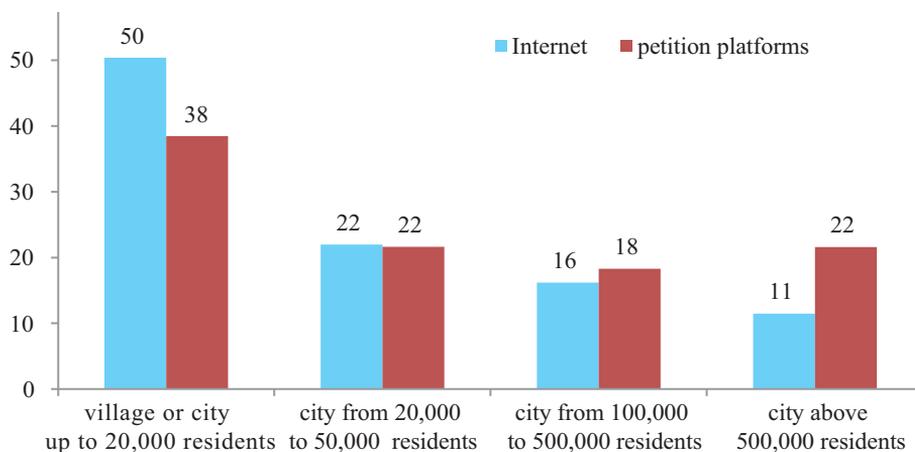


Chart 9. Size of town: percentage of users of selected petitions platforms petycjeonline.pl, avaaaz.org and change.org in relation to the percentage of Internet users (in percent)

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

The smallest groups of users of petition platforms are those with elementary, lower secondary and incomplete secondary education as well as persons with vocational education. The number of groups with secondary and higher education is over 4 times higher.

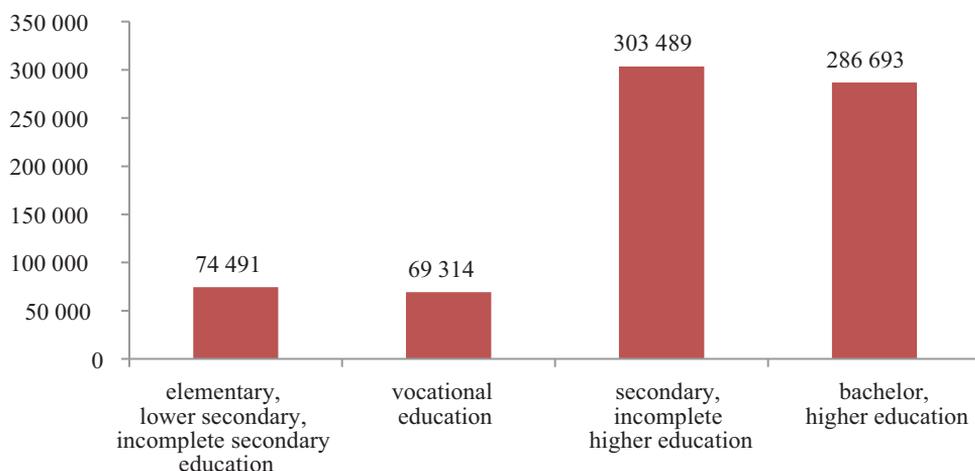


Chart 10. Number of users of selected petitions platforms petycjeonline.pl, avaaz.org and change.org with different education, N = 733 987

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

When comparing the distribution of education in the group of users of petition platforms and Internet users, it can also be noted that people with higher education are definitely overrepresented in petition platforms. In the case of secondary education, the difference is not so significant.

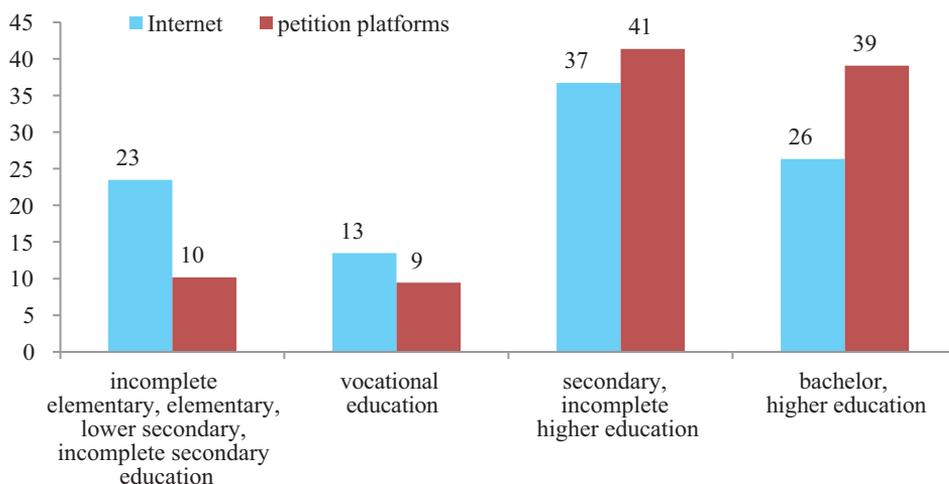


Chart 11. Education: percentage of users of selected petition platforms petycjeonline.pl, avaaz.org and change.org in relation to the percentage of Internet users (in percent)

Source: data from the Gemius/PBI research, September 2017, monthly data

Conclusions and discussion

Petition platforms are a tool that among Polish Internet users began to be popular in 2014, when election campaigns began. The popularity of the petitions significantly increased during the presidential elections (May 2015) and elections to the Sejm and the Senate of the Republic of Poland (October 2015) and remained high during the year after the election, when there was an intense political debate between supporters and opponents of the victorious Law and Justice. Petition platforms were also used during political disputes at the time, as evidenced by sudden jumps in their popularity.

Among the users of petition platforms, older Internet users prevail (45+ age group is most strongly represented). Other analyses show that this group most often visits websites from the “Information and journalism” category (Miotk, 2017). It can therefore be assumed that interest in online petitions results from greater political commitment and, at the same time, from more free time that can be devoted to the pursuit of interests. This is consistent with the results of studies that indicated the 45–65 group as the most active in political organisations (Stekelenburg et al., 2016).

Internet users with higher education are also more involved in petition platforms, which is confirmed by the results of other studies. Education is associated with higher communication competences in the area of the Internet, and at the same time translates into higher income (Sheppard, 2015). As we can see, it also means more interest in public affairs.

Residents of major cities are most involved in petition platforms. This is the result of several facts: greater Internet penetration occurs in highly urbanised areas (GUS, 2017). Urban centres are also areas of the greatest political elite involvement and centres in which the most intense political debate takes place (Wojniak, 2010).

The presented data indicates what people visit petition platforms, but it is not possible to determine what percentage actually signs petitions or is involved in their further promotion. Such a study would require advanced cooperation with the owners of individual websites with petitions and access to their internal statistics. The question is whether the owners of this type of websites would be willing to make it public.

On the basis of the presented results, it is also impossible to determine how strong the involvement of people visiting petition platforms is. Do they come back regularly to look at petitions and sign those with which they agree? Do they prefer specific types of causes, such as the well-being of animals, and then signing a petition is one of the dimensions of their involvement?

One could also ask a more general question – how is involvement in online petitions related to other dimensions of civic activity online and offline? In this case, quantitative data on the behaviour of Internet users would be worth supplementing with qualitative data from interviews with the most involved users of such platforms.

Data from the Gemius/PBI research does not say anything about the consciousness of the respondents. Therefore, another direction of deepening of knowledge is to examine the knowledge of average Internet users about online petitions. Are they aware of the existence of petition platforms? Do they declare visiting those? Are the declared and actual visits significantly different? What causes the users to be interested in them (or to reject them)? What approach to these platforms the most involved petitioners have?

Another dimension, not included in this analysis, is the political commitment of people aged 45 and more. Until now, this group was treated as irrelevant by marketing researchers – older people had little purchasing power, and were therefore not considered by marketing specialists as an attractive target group. However, in recent years, the situation of this group has changed. Increasingly, we speak about high income and purchasing potential as well as very active *silver*

generation (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek, 2018). It would be worth checking how this generation feels on the Internet not only as consumers, but also as citizens.

Conclusions

Online petitions are a tool for online civic activity, which is becoming more and more popular in Poland every year. The increase in this popularity is visible during the intensified political debate – for example during the election campaign and elections. Contrary to the claims that social media is a tool used mainly by young people, petition websites are visited by older people, educated individuals and residents of large cities. Their involvement in public affairs and communication skills make them eager to speak on the Internet – also via online petitions.

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