


# **The Level of Political Party Activity: Study of the Elections of Presidents in Cities with Poviats Rights of the Silesian Voivodeship in 2002-2018**

Political Preferences  
2022, vol. 30, no. 1:35-48  
[journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/PP](http://journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/PP)  
Submitted: 30/08/2022  
Accepted: 19/09/2022  
DOI:10.31261/polpre.2022.1.35-48

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## **Abstract:**

*Since 2002 in Poland voters in the local government elections can directly elect the head of the rural municipality, mayor and city president. Local elections, in Polish conditions, are treated as an arena favourable for local committees, often non-party. However, it should be noted that many analyses show that the higher the level of self-government, the more important the committees of political parties are. The increase in the participation of political parties in the election competition is also noticeable in medium and large cities. The author decided to check whether the cities with poviat status of the Silesian Voivodeship favour party committees or rather a committee unrelated to any political parties. For this purpose, the participation and effectiveness of these committees in local elections of cities presidents with poviat rights of the Silesian Voivodeship in 2002-2018 was analysed. The study confirmed that the level of politicization in elections is increasing, however, the effectiveness of party committees in the election of city presidents is lower than the effectiveness of local committees. In addition, political parties are more active and influential in larger cities.*

**Keywords:** local elections, local politics, political parties

## ***Introduction***

One of the most important tasks of system transformation in Poland was the restoration of local self-government. In 1990, after more than 50 years of absence, elections to local municipal councils were held, which were the first fully free elections in a young, democratic country (Piasecki, 2001). Since then, the local government has become a permanent element of the political landscape. The research carried out in 2015, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the restoration of local government, shows that a total of 51% of society positively assessed the tasks performed by this entity (CBOS, 2015). When referring to the research on trust in public institutions, which equally accurately shows the approach to local government in Poland, it can

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be noted that in 2020 74% of respondents declared trust in local authorities (CBOS, 2020). Respondents were more favourable toward local government authorities than, inter alia, to parliament, courts, the Constitutional Tribunal or the President of the Republic of Poland. Compared to the 2016 survey, this trust increased by 10 percentage points (CBOS, 2016). Moreover, local government elections in Poland are also becoming more and more popular among the electorate – since 2002, the turnout in this type of elections has been regularly increasing. Citizens gradually stop perceiving local elections in the category of second-order elections. According to recent studies, they are even starting to assign this election a greater rank than parliamentary elections or residential elections (Gendźwiłł & Żerkowska-Balas, 2018).

In Poland, in most elections, the main subjects of competition are political parties, but the situation is different in the case of local elections. Local actors, usually non-party, play a significant role in them. It is worth noting that many studies indicate that in Poland, on the basis of local government elections, national political parties are removed from exercising local authority on a scale unprecedented in most European countries. It can be concluded that rivalry in local elections often takes the form of a party versus non-party electoral fight. Therefore, researchers often make the simplest, dichotomous division entities participating in local elections into party committees and local committees (usually non-party). Maciej Drzonek states that "there are always two types of committees ready to represent the inhabitants of a given commune or city – those created on the basis of the structures of political parties (mainly parliamentary ones) or social organizations, and organized on the basis of local, non-party civic initiatives" (Drzonek, 2016).

Some studies also feature the concept of local parties or municipal presidential parties (Czaja, 2017). Local initiatives (especially the more organized ones) and political parties, although they may differ in many respects, have often similar goals - gaining and maintaining power. Especially in medium and large cities, the role of the so-called local parties is growing (and it can even be said that this is where this type of grouping is formed).

There may be several reasons for the low level of political participation of the Polish local government. Firstly, a decline in trust in political parties and an increasingly lower level of party identification in Polish society. It is also related to the lack of the feeling that political parties represent the interests of citizens (Marmola, 2020). Secondly, the introduction of direct elections

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of mayors led to increased personalization of local elections. This promotes the creation of the committees of local leaders. Another fact is that the instability of the party system is unfavourable for the party's presence in the local government. Moreover, especially in the case of small communes, social relations are very tight, therefore membership in nationwide political parties does not bring the intended benefits (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2020).

In the context of local elections in Poland, it is also worth mentioning that the level of activity of political parties often depends on the level of the election. Political parties (mainly those represented in parliament) dominate at the level of voivodeship assemblies. According to the research, elections to the voivodeship assemblies can be treated as a miniature of the elections to the parliament. In turn, poviats are still a field of competition between party and local entities, from which the local ones usually emerge victorious (Galicki, 2014). On the other hand, research on the level of activity of political parties in communes shows that political parties are the least represented in medium-sized communes (which may be surprising, because the smallest role of political parties in the smallest communes is often indicated). However, both in small and medium-sized communes, these party structures are usually less developed than in large cities, especially in cities with poviat rights. Adam Gendźwiłł and Tomasz Żółtak also note that the position of political parties in local elections is related to their position in the parliamentary arena, although this applies only to stable parties<sup>1</sup> (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2020).

The main goal of this article is to check the level of activity of political parties in the elections of city presidents in cities with poviat rights of the Silesian Voivodeship in the years 2002-2018. I want to focus in particular on the participation in the electoral rivalry of party committees and their electoral effectiveness in comparison with non-party committees. The choice of the research area is not accidental, because the Silesian Voivodeship has the largest number of cities with poviat status of all voivodeships.

### ***Methods***

The subjects of this analysis were the number of candidates of local and party committees and their support in the elections of city presidents in 19 cities with poviat status in the Silesian

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<sup>1</sup>Which are institutionalized enough to participate successfully in at least two consecutive elections to the Parliament and which are provided with stable funding from subsidies and budget subsidies.

Voivodeship in the years 2002-2018. The main research problem is to analyse whether the level of political party activity in electoral rivalry has increased over the years and whether the size of the city has an impact on the importance of political parties in the rivalry. For the purposes of the research, it was decided to divide the running election committees into party committees and local committees. The data was collected only on the basis of the results of the National Electoral Commission. Among the party committees there were:

- the election committees of a political party / coalition election committees of political party;
- the election committees of an organization or election committees of voters, but which have run for authority at the central level;
- the committees participating in the election competition in two or more voivodeships.

Local non-party committees include: all committees that are not party committees, local leaders' committees, civic committees and party-non-party committees. In order to investigate the relationship between the city size and the effectiveness of the subjects of electoral rivalry, a division into three groups of cities (according to the number of their population) was made – cities below 100,000 inhabitants were considered small towns, cities from 100,000 inhabitants up to 200,000 residents for medium-sized cities and cities with more than 200,000 residents for large cities. Therefore, the following were considered small towns: Jastrzębie-Zdrój, Jaworzno, Mysłowice, Piekary Śląskie, Siemianowice Śląskie, Świętochłowice, Żory and in 2018 Chorzów. The medium-sized cities were: Bielsko-Biała, Bytom, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Gliwice, Ruda Śląska, Rybnik, Tychy, Zabrze and Chorzów in the 2002-2014 elections, and Sosnowiec in the 2018 elections. On the other hand, the following were considered large cities: Częstochowa, Katowice and Sosnowiec in the 2002-2014 elections. This means that over the years the Silesian Voivodeship has had a similar number of small and medium-sized cities (with powiat rights), and only a few large cities.

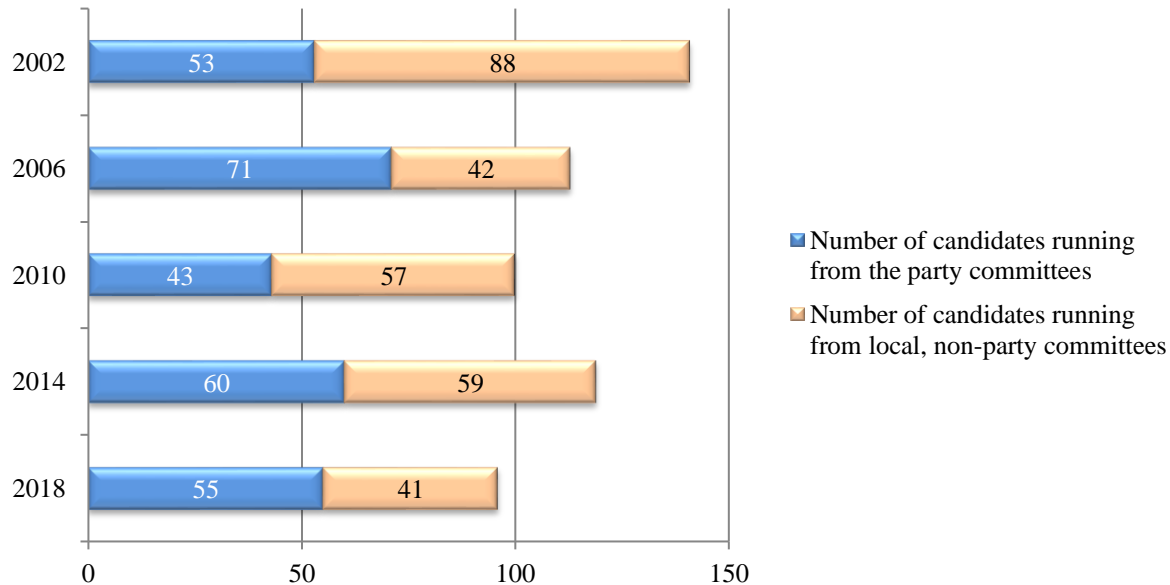
### ***Results***

From 2002 to 2018 in the elections of city presidents in cities with powiat status of the Silesian Voivodeship the presence of party candidates was visible – this is illustrated in Chart 1. Three times (in the elections of 2006, 2014 and 2018) the number of candidates running from the party committee was greater than the number of candidates running from local committees. The

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smallest number of party candidates ran in the 2010 elections, which may be related to the political situation and the mood in the country after the Smolensk disaster.

*Chart 1. Candidates of party committees compared to candidates from other committees in the elections of presidents in cities with poviats rights in the Silesian Voivodeship in 2002-2018*



*Source: own elaboration*

The smallest percentage of candidates running for political parties took part in the 2002 elections, and the biggest in the elections 4 years later - in 2006. This situation probably resulted from the introduction of the universal selection of one-person executive bodies in 2002. The fact that party committees would run in the elections in 2002 should not come as a surprise to anyone, however, based on the data in Chart 1, the participation of 88 candidates running from local committees in the election competition may be baffling. Moreover, filling only 5 offices (out of 19) could also contribute to dissatisfaction among the party circles. Therefore, in 2006, political parties might have wanted to intensify their activities to make their role more visible in the local elections. Apart from the elections in 2006, in which political parties put up the most candidates, it can be noticed that in recent years we have witnessed an increase in the participation of party candidates in elections in cities with poviats rights in the Silesian Voivodeship. In 2018, this result was slightly lower than in the 2006 elections. However, when analysing all 5 elections, it should be stated that the majority of party candidates in the electoral competition was not related to the majority of candidates from party committees elected for the office of mayors in cities with

poviat status in the Silesian Voivodeship. It should also be noted that since the 2014 elections, the percentage share of candidates from party committees in election has increased, which is related to an increase in the party's participation in this competition.

*Table 1. Participation of party committees and party membership in the elections of cities presidents with poviat rights in the Silesian Voivodeship in 2002-2018*

	2002		2006		2010		2014		2018	
	number	% of the total	number	% of the total	number	% of the total	number	% of the total	number	% of the total
<b>Number of party committees</b>	10	10.5%	10	21.3%	5	8.5%	7	11.7%	7	14.3%
<b>Number of cities where party committees participated</b>	19	100%	18	94.7%	18	94.7%	19	100%	19	100%
<b>Number of candidates running from the party committees</b>	53	37.6%	71	62.8%	43	43%	60	50.4%	55	57.3%
<b>Number of candidates with membership in a political party</b>	no data	no data	67	59.3%	47	47%	58	48.7%	41	42.7%
<b>Number of cities presidents filled by candidates of party committees</b>	5	26.3%	4	21%	6	31.6%	7	36.8%	7	36.8%
<b>Number of cities presidents with membership in a political party</b>	no data	no data	5	26.3%	6	31.6%	6	31.6%	6	31.6%

*Source: own elaboration.*

Both in the 2014 and 2018 elections, party candidates won elections in 7 cities, which means an increase in effectiveness compared to the elections of 2002-2006. In 2006, the party committees were completely defeated – they put forward 71 candidates, and they won the elections only in 4 cities. It was the worst result of party committees in all elections so far. Although there is a noticeable tendency in increasing the participation of political parties in the positions of city mayors, the presented data allows for an important conclusion – party committees at the city level with poviat rights are less effective than non-party committees. However, political parties try their hand in the vast majority of cities.

Most of the candidates running from party committees are members of a political party. In the 2006 elections, members of political parties accounted for more than half of the candidates participating in the election competition, which is related to the dominance of party candidates in

this election (62.8%). On the other hand, in 2018 we have the lowest participation of members of political parties in elections. The number of cities presidents with poviats status of the Silesian Voivodeship who are members of political parties remains more or less at the same level (as a rule, 6 mayors have a political party membership).

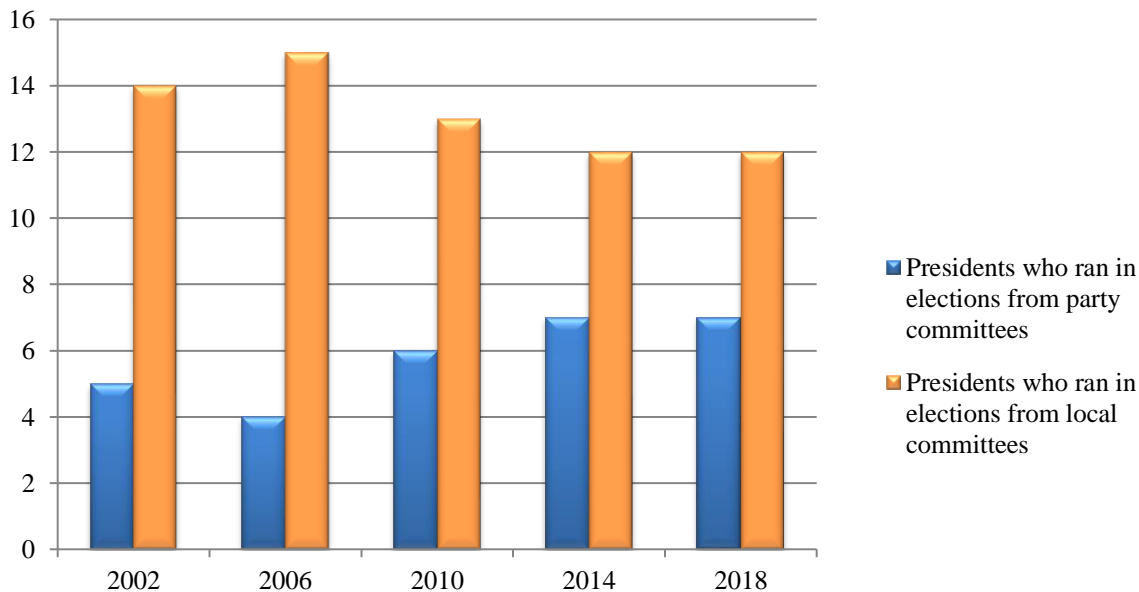
*Table 2. Candidates of party committees in I. and II. rounds of presidential elections in cities with poviats rights in the Silesian Voivodeship in 2002-2018*

	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
<b>Number of party candidates who won in first round of elections / Number of non-party candidates who won in the first round</b>	0/2	2/7	0/8	3/4	4/7
<b>Number of cities where at least one party candidate competed in the second round / number of cities where the second round of elections took place</b>	14/17	7/10	10/11	7/12	7/8
<b>Number of party candidates taking part in the second round of elections / the total number of candidates running in the second round of elections</b>	14/34	9/20	13/22	9/24	9/16
<b>Number of victories of the second round of elections by party candidates</b>	5	2	6	4	3
<b>Number of clashes with non-party committees by political party committees in the second round / total number of clashes between political party committees and non-party committees in the second round</b>	5/14	0/5	3/7	2/6	1/5

*Source: own elaboration.*

Table 2. presents the most important data on the participation of candidates standing on behalf of party committees in the first and second rounds of the elections in 2002-2018. Party candidates in each election were elected less frequently in the first round of elections than candidates from non-party committees, although in the 2014 and 2018 elections an increase in votes for party candidates in the first round can be noted. Although party committees participated in most of the second rounds, which took place in 2002-2018, it should be emphasized that their effectiveness in these rivalries is low. Duels with non-party committees lost: in 2002 in 9 cities, in 2006 in 5 cities, and successively in the 2010, 2014 and 2018 elections in 4 cities. This shows that party candidates are an important part of the election competition in many cities with the poviats status of the Silesian Voivodeship, but usually they fail in the second rounds in duels with non-party candidates.

*Chart 2. The winners of the election competition in the elections of city presidents in cities with poviata status of the Silesian Voivodeship in the years 2002-2018*



*Source: own elaboration.*

In each election held in 2002-2018, the offices of city president in cities with the poviata status of the Silesian Voivodeship were dominated by representatives of local committees. In the elections in 2006, the local committee candidates achieved the best result in the period of 2002-2018 – they won in 15 out of 19 cities with poviata status. In turn, the worst result was recorded in the elections of 2014 and 2018. It should be noted that in the elections of 2018, compared to the elections of 2002, the share of party candidates in the executive power increased, but for party committees the increase from 5 to 7 of the positions taken over is rather undesirable.

As it has already been mentioned, in the cities with poviata status of the Silesian Voivodeship in the years 2002-2018 prevailed mayors who had ran from non-party committees. However, in some cities the effectiveness of party committees is much greater than that of non-party committees (Table 3). Sosnowiec is the only city where a party candidate won each election in years 2002-2018 (a left-wing candidate won three times, and a person associated with the *Platforma Obywatelska* won twice). This may mean that the pro-party tendencies in this city are so strong that a party candidate will also be victorious in the next election. Bytom and Dąbrowa Górnicza are the next cities where mayors running from party committees dominate over mayors running from non-party committees (4 out of 5 elections). In the case of Bytom presidents representing the committee associated with the *Platforma Obywatelska* (Committees *Platforma*

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*Obywatelska RP* and *Committees Platforma. Nowoczesna Koalicja Obywatelska*) dominate and in the case of Dąbrowa Górnicza there is a supremacy of candidates associated with the *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*<sup>2</sup>. In 5 cities, the party candidate won only once (of which in 3 cities only in 2002), and in 6 cities there was not a single situation in which a candidate running from a party committee won the election competition. Moreover, two conclusions arise: 1) party presidents ran either from a committee associated with the *Platforma Obywatelska* or a committee associated with the *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*; 2) since the introduction of general elections of the city president the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*<sup>3</sup> has not won in any city with the poviats rights of the Silesian Voivodeship, nor in a single election.

*Table 3. Cities with poviats status in the Silesian Voivodeship in 2002-2018 where candidates starting from party committees won*

City	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
<b>Bielsko-Biała</b>	-	-	-	-	X
<b>Bytom</b>	X	X	X	-	X
<b>Chorzów</b>	-	-	X	X	X
<b>Częstochowa</b>	-	-	X	X	X
<b>Dąbrowa Górnicza</b>	-	X	X	X	X
<b>Gliwice</b>	-	X	-	-	-
<b>Jastrzębie-Zdrój</b>	-	-	-	X	-
<b>Jaworzno</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Katowice</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Mysłowice</b>	X	-	-	-	-
<b>Piekary Śląskie</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Ruda Śląska</b>	X	-	-	-	-
<b>Rybnik</b>	-	-	-	X	X
<b>Siemianowice Śląskie</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Sosnowiec</b>	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Świętochłowice</b>	-	-	X	X	-
<b>Tychy</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Zabrze</b>	X	-	-	-	-
<b>Żory</b>	-	-	-	-	-

*Source: own elaboration.*

<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant left-wing parties in Poland after 1989.

<sup>3</sup> The ruling party since 2015; one of the most significant parties on the Polish political scene since 2005.

Many quantitative analyses of the results of local elections research the effectiveness of election committees with regard to the level of the election and also to the size of municipalities/cities (Marmola & Kaczmarczyk, 2021; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2020). As a rule, the higher the level and the larger the city, the less effective the local committees are. I would like to inspect whether this rule could be applied the Silesian Voivodeship. The data in Table 5 show that party committee candidates dominated in large cities. Their percentage share in the election competition was also quite high in medium-sized cities. Although in small towns the participation in the competition by candidates of party committees was the lowest, it is worth noting that the candidates of these committees outnumbered the candidates of local committees twice. This means that party committees do not treat smaller towns as insignificant in their struggle for office.

*Table 4. Participation of party committees in the elections of city president in cities with poviats rights in the Silesian Voivodeship in relation to the size of these cities*

Size of city	Small cities (less than 100,000 residents)					Medium cities (100-200,000 residents)					Large cities (more than 200,000 residents)				
	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
Number of cities	7	7	7	7	8	9	9	9	9	9	3	3	3	3	2
Number of party committees' candidates	14	16	12	18	19	27	37	22	29	28	12	18	9	13	8
The average number of party committees' candidates in one city	2	≈2.3	≈1.7	≈2.6	≈2.4	3	≈4.1	≈2.4	≈3.2	≈3.1	4	6	3	≈4.3	4
Party committee candidates compared to local committee candidates (%)	36.8	53.3	34.3	45.0	54.3	35.1	63.8	44.0	50.1	58.3	46.2	78.3	60.0	61.9	61.5

*Source: own elaboration.*

The share of political parties in local government authority is minor in small towns – the lowest compared to medium and large cities. Referring to the division into local and party committees, it could be noticed that in this type of cities, the winners running from local committees have completely dominated their rivals. This confirms the often put forward thesis that in small towns party committees do not have much support. In medium-sized towns, the number of winners starting from the party committee is greater than in small towns. This means that in larger units the role of party committees increases. However, such a result for political parties is certainly not satisfactory. When analysing the effectiveness of election committees in large cities, it is difficult to look for certain trends, because there are few of these types of cities in the Silesian Voivodeship and much may depend on the specificity of the rivalry in a given city.

*Table 5. Effectiveness of election committees in the election of city president in cities with poviats rights of the Silesian Voivodeship in relation to the size of these cities*

Size of city	Small cities (less than 100,000 residents)					Medium cities (100,000-200,000 residents)					Large cities (more than 200,000 residents)				
	Year	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2002	2006	2010	2014
Number of cities	7	7	7	7	8	9	9	9	9	9	3	3	3	3	2
Winners of the party committees	1	0	1	2	1	3	3	3	3	5	1	1	2	2	1
Winners of the local committees	6	7	6	5	7	6	6	6	6	4	2	2	1	1	1

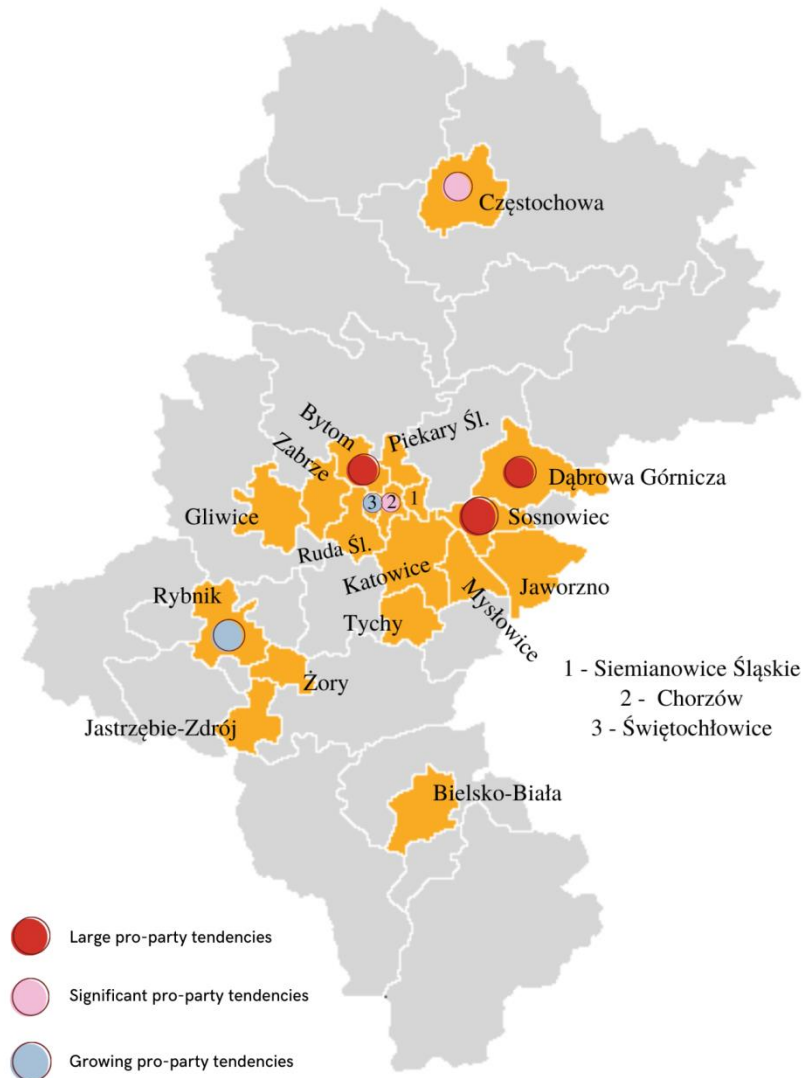
*Source: own elaboration.*

Based on the data on the election effectiveness of this type of committees, it is possible to identify cities with large or smaller pro-party tendencies (Figure 1), and then try to make some assumptions about the role of political parties in the next elections. If in 3 out of 5 analysed election cycles the election for the office of the mayor of the city was won by the candidates (or the candidate) running on behalf of the party committee, the city was considered to be the city with significant pro-party tendencies. If 4 or 5 out of 5 elections were won by candidates (or a candidate) from party committees, the city in question was considered to have particularly strong pro-party tendencies. Cities where a party candidate twice took the office of president were also

distinguished, because it seems that this may be the beginning of a certain party trend in those units. On the basis of the stated conjectures, it can be assumed that in cities with particularly strong or significant pro-party tendencies in the electoral competition before the elections in 2023, the candidate running on behalf of the party committee will play an important role. It seems especially probable in Sosnowiec (where the party candidate won in years 2002-2018) and Dąbrowa Górnicza (where the candidate running on behalf of the party committee has been constantly winning the competition since 2006). Also, in Chorzów and Częstochowa in the last 3 election cycles a party candidate won each time. In Bytom, although a candidate associated with the party committee won 4 times, in 2014 the candidate of the local committee won. It may turn out that in the election competition in 2023, voters when making their choice will compare whether it was better for them when a president associated with a political party ruled, or when someone relatively independent was in power. In Rybnik and Świętochłowice in general the local candidates won more often, but it should be noted that in the last 3 election cycles the party committee candidates won twice in those cities. It may also have an impact on the outcome of the next elections. In Bielsko-Biała, although a local candidate had dominated there for years, the party candidate won the 2018 elections. Such a situation may be favourable for party committees in the next elections.

In the case of the remaining but not mentioned cities with powiat status of the Silesian Voivodeship, presidents representing local committees definitely prevailed in them, which may prognosis effectiveness of local committees' candidates. It should be emphasized that these are assumptions made on the basis of the results of the elections for the office of the city president in cities with the powiat status of the Silesian Voivodeship in 2002-2018, so it is possible, as it happens in politics, that in the case of a city the prognosis will not turn out true. Much also depends on the political context in a given city, and above all on the satisfaction of residents with the activities of the incumbent presidents.

Figure 1. Tendencies in the election of presidents in cities with powiat status in the Silesian Voivodeship (based on the election results in 2002-2018)



Source: own elaboration.

### Summary

Political commentators admit that political parties consider local elections of secondary importance. Although political parties may be more mobilized during parliamentary or presidential elections, it does not mean that they do not want to expand their power also at the local level. Especially that the growing importance of local government in Poland is undeniable. Political parties are present in the election rivalry and participate in the exercise of local government power, although their overall effectiveness certainly differs from the assumed goals.

It is said that party committees do not care so much about local elections, but on the basis of the presented data it can be seen that political parties want to be an important part of these elections. Candidates of party committees prevailed in 3 out of 5 election cycles. However, it is only from the 2014 elections that the percentage share of candidates from party committees in the election competition increases, which is related to the increase of the political nature of this competition. The predominance of party candidates in the election competition was not related to the predominance of candidates from party committees elected for the office of president in cities with powiat status in the Silesian Voivodeships. The above research also confirmed the popular thesis that the larger city, the greater the role of party committees is. In 2018, changes were made to the electoral code. One of them was controversial – limiting the terms of office of rural municipalities heads, mayors, and city presidents to two terms. That change introduced by *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* is perceived as a deliberate limitation of the importance of municipal and city heads who are associated with local committees. The elections in 2023 and 2028 will be particular in terms of the strategies adopted by long-term city presidents.

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