



Małgorzata Niewiadomska-Cudak  
Społeczna Akademia Nauk

## The influence of voting system on electoral participation of women in Poland

**Abstract:** In the research, there was taken an attempt to analyze to which extent the electoral system, currently functioning in Poland, influences electoral participation of women. In the elaboration electoral participation, as a form of political activity will concern realization of suffrage right. The electoral system as a category of political studies analysis is the one of the utmost importance. The matter of scientific understanding of the system concentrates an attention of researchers for a while. The analysis of contemporary voting systems became one of the basic tasks of empirical political studies. It is worth look closer at an mechanism, which became a tool for enhancing a participation of women in political life.

**Key words:** Electoral system, electoral participation, elections, women, parliament

The basis for conducting parliamentary election there are the electoral systems. The electoral system is treated as a set of laws, which rule the process of conducting elections, which relate to the way of expressing voters' preferences and transformation of their votes on mandates, allocated to competing fractions [Sokół W., 2007, s. 23]. In this case, the political institutions functioning in the electoral process, especially general rules of voting law and detailed procedural provisions, describing the way of conducting and setting the final results of elections, consist on it. [Antoszewski A, Herbut R., 2004, p. 442]. As the crucial elements of electoral system there are stated: shape and size of constituencies, voter's rights in the act of voting, establishment of electoral thresholds and the electoral formula, which means the way of counting votes [Sokół W., Żmigrodzki M. 2005, p. 158-159]. The electoral formula mean the rule, according to which a candidate becomes elected in a certain constituency and how are the number

of votes received by a party “counted” in the number of received mandates, this differentiates the electoral systems [Sokół W., 2007, p. 37]. Determination of election results is done by a specified election formula [Antoszewski A, Herbut R., 2004, p. 442], so that with usage of proportional, plurality or mixed voting system. In most of European countries there are the proportional electoral systems. In Poland, we have the proportional and plurality one. The elections to Sejm are conducted with a proportional formula, where it functions the system of party lists, and those to Senate – with a plurality formula.

In literature the influence and role of voting systems on female political participations is strongly exposed. As Richard Matland states, [2003, p. 160] a change of electoral system in a specific country is a more realistic goal than a radical change of females perception, rooted deep in culture.

Can women in Poland really enhance their chances for nomination and win in elections to specific representative bodies just by the electoral system being in force? Which electoral system supports political careers of women in Poland: proportional or plurality one? Are the supporters of one-mandate constituencies to Sejm right, that such a solution supports democracy more?

The goal of those research will be proving the influence of being in-force electoral system during last parliamentary elections in 2011, both to the lower house of parliament, as well as to the higher one, on increasing the participation of women in those bodies.

The difference between proportional system, in accordance to which elections to Sejm are conducted and the plurality system, which is in-force in case of elections to Senate, generally speaking, is that in proportional system the elections are conducted in multi-mandate constituencies. The parties present lists of candidates and receive mandates in proportion to the overall vote share [Sokół, 2007, p. 46]. The voter, does vote for a particular candidate, but the parties decide about the list of candidates on the electoral list and order of those who start on those lists. The basic idea of that system is the division of seats in a representative body, which reflects precisely the support, which is gained by particular voting comities from a society. While grading proportional systems, special attention is paid to the fact that they guarantee balance of voting power, but on the other hand there is a threat of paying an too important political role by small parties (so called swing vote) [Banaszak B., 2012, p. 272]. The crucial disadvantage of that is a hardness in emerging a majority, stable governing coalition [Chmaj M. Skrzydło W., 2008, p.65-66]. To its undoubted advantages, avoiding great deformations of election's results, may be enlisted, which happens in plurality voting system.

The most popular type of plurality voting system is however a competition of candidates in single-member districts, where a winner is the one, who

got the greatest amount of votes [Banaszak B, 2012, p. 266]. We also notice here absolute plurality voting system, being in force in Poland in elections for the office of Polish Republic's President of and in elections of mayors and presidents of cities, where the mandate is won by the one who yields at least 50% +1 of valid votes and the relative plurality voting system, currently in force in Poland in elections to Senate and municipal councils which are not cities of the county rights. In that system a mandate is won by the person who got the greatest amount of votes in an electoral district [Chmaj M. Skrzydło W., 2008, ss. 65-66]. To it's main advantages there might be included possibility to achieve parliamentary majority which can create a government and guarantee its stability [Banaszak B, 2012, s. 267], and as for the main disadvantages – sometimes it leads to huge deformations of voting results and the possibilities of creating new parties are highly limited, because they have little chances to get a mandate [Sokół, 2007, p. 45].

A new Election Code [Act nr 21, pos. 112] enacted by Sejm of Polish Republic on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2011 changed hitherto *status quo*, functioning until an entry into force of the new regulations. It replaced more than five hitherto existing electoral laws. Not only did it repeal five laws on election issues and unified the regulated matter, but it also introduced new solutions. Some of them are changing the voting law and the process of voting process in a general way [Rakowska A. Skotnicki K., 2011, p. 10]. Proportional formula is still in force as for elections to Sejm, European Parliament and elections to municipal counties which are not cities on rights of a district and to district and voivodship councils. However, a significant change is the establishment of a first-past-the-post constituencies in the elections to the Senate [art. 260§1] and in elections to municipality councils which are not cities on rights of a district [art. 418 § 1] it was resigned from hitherto election of authorities in multiple-winner constituencies – with plurality voting system in case of elections to Senate and with plurality or proportional voting system depending on the amount of citizens living in a specific community – below or above 20 000 [Chmaj M. Skrzydło W., 2008, p. 70]. Bringing back plurality voting system in municipalities consisting of below 40 thousand of citizens, which were in force before 1998, was a crucial change [Niewiadomska-Cudak, 2011, p. 34-37], nevertheless with a stipulation that in each electoral district created for council in a municipality, there was only one councillor elected. However, the legislator went one step further and first-past-the-post voting districts were also in force in the areas inhabited by more than 40 thousand of citizens. But was it a step in good direction?

It is commonly known, that the “rule of relative majority and first-past-the-post (FPP) voting districts cause a situation in which the election results equally in scale of one district and in cross-country scale, repeatedly, do not

reflect the real will of the voters [Gdulewicz E., Kręcis W. 2002, p. 27]. Last elections to Senate showed that indication of FPP voting districts led to, more visible than previously, domination of that body by representatives of a political party which got most of seats in elections to Sejm. For it came up that despite imposing uniform representation standard in Art. 261, the discrepancies in a number of citizens living in the voting districts were significant [Rakowska A. Skotnicki K., 2011, p. 12]. In the literature there is another issue discussed: that councillors of the new election which is to be held in 2014, may be elected in FPP voting districts in communities which are not cities with county rights of a large number of people, often in excess of up to 50 000 citizens (Belchatow, Bedzin, Pabianice, Zgierz), while hitherto, in municipalities of more than 20 000 people there were proportional elections, and by 1998, this ceiling began above 40 000. According to A. Rakowska and K. Skotnicki, in such a huge territorial divisions elections do not have a personal character, but mainly political, and there candidate's features are less important than political background [Rakowska A. Skotnicki K., 2011, p. 13]. It is hard not to agree with the arguments that an imposed change in big as for the number of citizens in municipalities will lead to de-politicisation of the municipality council. So they can politically look similarly to contemporary Senate, which seems not to be the most representative body as for political preferences of the citizens.

Elections to the Senate in 2011 have clearly showed that the introduction of a FPP voting districts is not a good solution, not only because it does not support the representativeness of elected bodies in terms of the image of the current shape of political scene in Poland, but it also maintains the right proportions of both sexes in collective bodies. In the last elections in the upper house there were barely 13 women out of 100 elected senators. It was proven more than once, that FPP voting districts do block an access to politics for women, because in country structures, dominated by males, female candidates are less likely to be elected. The data from 1995 on the proportion of seats in parliamentary elections as for gender in countries with stable democracies show that composition of parliaments chosen with usage of relative majority there were 11% of women elected, while with proportional voting system – about 20%. Whereas the data from 2004 show even greater differences in the amount of elected female parliamentarians while relative majority voting system – 14,4% – and while proportional voting system was used – 27,6% [Markowski R., 2010, p. 6]. Richard Matland attempted to analyze a percentage share of female parliamentarians in 24 country public legislative bodies between 1945 and 1998 [Matland R., 2003, p. 161]. It shows that women taking part in proportional elections did always have a slight advantage over those who were elected in plurality voting system (with FPP electoral districts). A growing advantage of representation of women

was noticed in 70' of last century, while there was an enormous growth of their share in 90's in proportional systems, while in plurality voting systems the situations did only slightly change. In European Union countries, where there is over 35% of share of females in parliaments of Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, where proportional system is applied [European Parliament Report, 2008, p. 9]. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that in countries having proportional representation system, there are often quotas as for female and male candidates on electoral lists applied. Such solutions may be used voluntarily by political parties, or it can be compulsory in the name of law, as it happens in Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia or, since 2011, in Poland. According to R. Matland, the reasons for such situation can be found in superiority of value of a district in proportional systems, which leads to a growth of so called party's value. The value of an electoral district is an amount of seats in parliament which are given for a district, and the party's value is an amount of seats reached by a party in the district. Matlandt states that those values are so crucial, because they do influence the strategy of a party during candidates' selection by a party. When the value of a district is one, as it happens in FPP electoral districts in plurality voting system, , a party can reach at most one seat in a district. Often, while a decision to nominate a female is taken, the party clearly has to refuse a male, who aspires to start in elections in the same district. While the value of a district decreases, chances for a party to get a few mandates improve in a district.

Table 1. Why are proportional voting systems more favourable for women

Greater district's value	Result
A greater amount of seats attributable for an electoral district (greater value of a district)	Party's lists give greater chances of females' nomination
A party can expect few seats in one district (greater party's value)	Greater possibilities of females' promotion in a rivalry with another party
It is more probable to balance mandates by including women (the balance)	A party does not need to deprive males from a mandate to nominate a female

Source: [Matland R, 2003, p. 163]

For party decision-makers a female candidate may become a strong party's trump, because it can attract voters, not threatening the inner party's business dominated by males. In a plurality voting system, it lacks such a balance, because in here only one candidate may represent a party in a district, whereas it is usually a male. In proportional systems, a party has a few places in a district for its disposal and for that reason it is easier to use them for females. However, not all of proportional systems are favourable for political activity

of females. In districts of a greater value, parties have chances to win more mandates, what is beneficial for women, similarly as high election threshold for their influence on an average party's value. High election thresholds are unfavourable for "mini-parties", which usually introduce to a parliament only one or two representatives, what decreases the female representation, because usually those who are elected from such a party's lists are males. Similarly with closed lists, where the voter votes for the whole list and has no influence on personal results which are not as favourable for females as open lists, where a voter may point out one candidate. It should, however, be exposed that a position on the party's list is also a crucial factor – the higher position it is, the chances to be elected are bigger. Apart from that, it is easier to build a quota system, compatible with proportional voting system, because there can be more candidates introduced on a single party list and because the parties try to balance the list consciously, to gain the mandates. Nevertheless it is much harder to build quota system that includes gender, which would be adequate for an electoral system with FPP voting districts, because parties chose only one candidate, who represents it in the district and it is impossible, as it happens with proportional system to place at the same time females and males. As it is presented in a literature, it is however possible to impose quotas at the stage of candidates' who will compete for party's nomination emergence, but such a solution would cause changes in inner laws of parties. The other option is imposing appropriate provisions in the Act on Political Parties, which would take effect over all the political groupings which operate on the political stage.

Plurality voting system does systematically exclude minorities from political representation. So that, where the FPP voting districts are, the electoral participation of females is smaller, what is a phenomena proven and very adverse for the democracy. In Scotland and Wales there was a concept called "twinning" introduced [PR Report, 2008, p. 16 and 17], what it means – coupling FPP voting districts in pairs by nominating candidates of both sexes in neighbouring districts.

It turns out however, that in Poland, a few weeks before parliamentary elections to Senate, the system of FPP voting districts was positively evaluated by most of the interviewees (66%) researched by Institute of Public Affairs and Public Opinion Research Centre, out of which 38% valued simplicity of that solution and 28% pointed out the success of the best candidate. Interviewees who evaluated negatively the solution were a minority (13%), by which 5% said that the mandate might be received by a person with a slight voting advantage over the other candidates. Each fifth interviewee had no opinion in that matter. Among strong supporters of the new solution men were the majority (73%), women were more restrained (60%).



The parliamentary elections in 2011 in Poland had a break-through character, because on the one hand there were quota mechanisms introduced and women and men were guaranteed the representation not less than 35% of all candidates on the list (Election Code Art. 211§ 3). As it is exposed, it was a great step in equalization of males and females chances in decisive bodies. While introducing the FPP voting districts system in elections to Senate and counties municipalities which are not cities on the laws of a district, one step backwards was done, because the negative consequences for FPP district voting system described above will not contribute to a greater political involvement of minority groups in Poland. To support the thesis it is enough to analyze the results of elections to the Senate in 2011. The result of introduction of a quota system law was a double growth of females who run for a mandate on the political lists. In 2011 there were 3063 women, and to the higher one – 69 women, who run for in elections, which were appropriately 44% and 14% of all candidates to both chambers [Druciarek M. Fuszera M. Nizińska A., Zbieranek J. 2011, p. 33]. The disproportions as for the amount of eager candidates are, in case of both chambers, a result of plurality election system to Senate where a system of voting lists is in force, and what follows it – a quota mechanism. In 2011 compared to 2007 we could notice a slight growth in the amount of female candidates to the upper chamber. As a result of the elections, to the lower chamber there were more women elected than ever before in last twenty years. Women are now 23,91% of all deputies. In Sejm there are 110 women now. Compared to previous cadencies, for the first time in Polish history, the amount of females went over 100.

There were 47 women and 338 men competing for a mandate of senator in the seventh cadency, and in 2011 – 69 female candidates and 430 male candidates. So it was a slight growth of females who competed – from 12.2% to 13,8%. There were 8 females elected to Senate in the seventh cadency, and in the eighth one – thirteen. Those who got the mandates were candidates of party's comities – 8 represented Electoral Committee of the Civic Platform (on 63 generally chosen), 4 – Electoral Committee of Law and Justice (in 31 chosen), one PSL (in 2 chosen). Among candidates who gained mandates were: Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, Kazimierz Kutz, Marek Borowski and one of representatives of a new political initiative – Citizens to Senate from Electoral Committee of Rafał Dutkiewicz – Jarosław Wojciech Obremski, local government employee. Women who created their own, independent committees did not succeed in elections to upper chamber: Elżbieta Hibner, Grazyna Gluszek, Iwona Borchulska, Izabela Sierakowska, Katarzyna Elżbieta Bider i Maria Olszak-Winiarska.

The results of elections to Senate show precisely the weakness of FPP voting system in our Polish reality. To the upper chamber of a Parliament

there were barely three independent candidates elected and one from a new political initiative Citizens to Senate, what undermines the argument of the system supporters, that competences of candidates matter more than political affiliation. According to Rafal Chwedoruk, introduction of such a system in elections to Sejm might mean the end of real democracy in Poland. FPP voting districts, in R. Chedoruk's opinion, *have a huge manipulative potential. The governors, using their temporary advantage, can cut the electoral districts in a way which will make them always have a majority. If it was used also in elections to Sejm, a Civic Platform's voter from Lomza would never live long enough to have his or her representative in parliament, similarly – a Law and Justice voter from Ursynow.* [Chwedoruk, 2011, online]

The conducted elections to Senate show also the deformation of a support view for parties, from which warned the opponents of such solution. In elections to Sejm, which would be conducted with a plurality voting system in FPP voting districts, the grouping which gets less than 40% of support gets two thirds of all mandates. The myth about so said greater bound of a parliamentarian or deputy with the voter chosen in plurality voting system is refuted. By contemporary pace of life, the voters do not have time to meet directly their deputy or parliamentarian and in fact they do it only when they were put in a state of some threat, i.e. eviction or unemployment. It will be hard for the supporters of FPP voting districts to Sejm to introduce new regulations, because changes in Constitution will be needed. There is however more and more people approving and supporting such a system solution also as for the lower chamber. Frequently cited argument for the introduction of FPP voting districts, which concerns increasing ties of a chosen representative with the voters, is just a catchy slogan, easy to use in a society which does not know the mechanisms of elections conducted using different systems [Rakowska A. Skotnicki K., 2011, p. 12].

From the cited above analysis it results that women in Poland can enhance their chances for nomination to representative bodies in a proportional system. Due to the fact that in that formula, a party disposes a few places in one district and it is easier to save a nomination for a female. In plurality formula, where after legislative changes there are FPP districts to some collegial bodies, political grouping can have only one candidate and it is hard i.e. to force a man who wants to candidate again to be replaced by a woman who wishes to be nominated. Apart from that, in those systems only big political entities win, while parties with little support have actually no chances there. According to Jaroslaw Flis, *This is the first step to total elimination of opposition. In huge cities there may happen again the experiences from Senate elections, where the Civic Platform took majority of mandates* [Kursa M. 2012, online]. There can only be



added that among 63 senators from Civic Platform there are only 8 women, which represents 12,6%. The FPP voting districts, are not only unfavourable for women, but also in greater cities on the law of a district there may happen a greater politicization and a president, as a single-person executive body, who will not be, i.e. from a grouping of a mandates advantage in a council, will meet obstacles to find support for the needed initiatives, because it will be more politicized and realizing line of a specific party, and not the vision of city's development. Proportional representation system gives a chance to reflect in collegial bodies the actual share of political preferences in society, which gives a possibility to represent various ideas and businesses. It also creates a greater chance to enhance a share in political power for minority groups.

While introducing quotas in Acts, they became a first step in the direction of a greater political participation of women. Another one is introduction of record about alternating places of candidates on political lists so that each grouping has an obligation to put such a state in their statutes. Parties which promote the share of females and males in governance should ease women's access to those not on the basis of improving the party's image, but for equal treatment regardless their gender. Proportional systems exist in countries with rich percentage of women in parliaments, but it should be noticed that enhancing the chances of females participation in politics is a long-lasting process and it does not guarantee fast results. In developing countries to make proportional systems support female representation's enhancement, there should be used some other solutions, at least such as: better organization of groups fighting for a greater share of female gender in politics and electoral quotas. Due to the fact that they limit a temptation on which is followed by some political parties to sign mostly males on political lists and they force male political leaders to find active and competent candidates. As the last elections to Sejm showed, there does no shortage of brave and engaged in political activities females in Poland. So another myth spread among and by males, that they are the only ones who can run politics, forgetting that political activity is not only the matter of merits, but also representation of both genders, collapsed As Richard Marland states, the electoral system itself is only a more complex element of the strategy, which goal is to improve political activity of females. The females themselves should operate actively and effectively in society and inside a party, and not to be afraid of new challenged to be able to gain advantage by the benefits offered by electoral structures.

### **Bibliography**

- Antoszewski A., Herbut R, (2004) *Political systems of contemporary world*, Arche, Gdańsk.
- Antoszewski A., Herbut R (2004) *Leksykon politologii*, Atla 2, Wrocław.

Banaszak B. (2012) *Comparatory constitutional law of contemporary democratic countries*, LEX, Warszawa.

Gdulewicz, E. Kręciszyński, (2002) *Political system of Great Britain*, [in:] Skrzydło W., *Political systems of contemporary countries*, UMCS, Lublin 2002.

Chmaj M. Skrzydło W. (2008), *Electoral system in Polish Republic*, Oficyna, Warszawa.

Matland R. E. (2003) *Enhancement of female political participation: nomination to legislative bodies and electoral systems*, [in:] Siemieńska R., *Actors of public life. Gender as differentiating factor*, Scholar, Warszawa.

Niewiadomska-Cudak (2011) *Communities elections in Lodz in years 1990-2006*, Adam Marszałek, Toruń.

Sokół W. (2008) *Genesis and evolution of electoral systems in Middle and Eastern Europe countries*, UMCS, Lublin.

Sokół W., Żmigrodzki M. (2005) *Contemporary parties and party systems*, UMCS, Lublin

Articles in scientific journals:

A. Rakowska, K. Skotnicki, (2011), *Changes in electoral law imposed by Election Code*, „Sejm Journal”, nr 4, p. 10-15.

Legislative sources:

Act from 5.01.2011, Election Code (Dz. U. nr 21, pos. 112).

Researches, Expertises, Recommendations:

Markowski R. (2010) *Electoral system – party system – quality of democracy. About FPP voting districts*, Institute of Public Affairs, p.1-16.

Internet sources

CBOS and IPS: *66 percent of interviewees positively about FPP voting districts*, [online]

<http://wiadomości.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/> access: 22.09.2011.

Chwedoruk R.: *Supporters of FPP voting districts should remain silent*. An interview with Rawał Chwedoruk by Magdalena Błędowska, [online]

<http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/wywiady/Chwedoruk>, access: 19.10. 2011.

Druciarek M., Fuszera M., Niżyńska A., Zbieranek J., *Women on Polish political stage*, Institute of Public Affairs, Programme of Law and Democratic Institutions, [online]

<http://isp.org.pl/uploads/filemanager/Program%20Prawa%20i%20Instytucji%20Demokratycznych/aa338207000.pdf>,

Kursa M., *FPP voting districts. Who can gain on it?*, [online],

<http://krakow.gazeta.pl/krakow/> access: 25.08. 2012.

European Parliament Report, *Gender quotas in electoral systems in Europe*, [online]

[http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/Content/uploaded/files/sytuacja\\_kobiet\\_w\\_europie/kwoty-dotyczyce-plci-w-systemach-wyborczych-w-europie.pdf](http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/Content/uploaded/files/sytuacja_kobiet_w_europie/kwoty-dotyczyce-plci-w-systemach-wyborczych-w-europie.pdf), access: September 2008.

<http://wybory2011.pkw.gov.pl/wsw/pl/000000.html>