



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Electoral Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud)

## Electoral contexts that assist voter coordination: Ballot position effects in Poland



Kamil Marcinkiewicz\*

Universität Hamburg, Allende-Platz 1, 20146 Hamburg, Germany

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 10 December 2012

Received in revised form 31 May 2013

Accepted 9 July 2013

#### Keywords:

Electoral systems

Ballot position effects

Electoral coordination

Poland

Parliamentary elections

### ABSTRACT

Hypothetically, in the open list PR system, all contestants, independently of their ballot position, have the same chance of winning a mandate. In practice, candidates placed at the top of the ballot enjoy a large surplus of votes. Their success can be explained by the primacy effect, in which the first ballot position acts as a focal point. The analysis of 6187 candidates running for the Polish Sejm in 2007 finds not only significant gains for top candidates, but that proximity to the upper end of the ballot likewise matters. It correspondingly discovers a weak benefit for candidates placed last on the list. Other sources of candidate advantage such as incumbency, capital city effect, age and gender are also investigated.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Ideologies allow the voter to differentiate between parties, because they ‘remove the necessity for relating every issue to his own conception of *the good society*’ (Downs, 1957: 141). They thus serve as a means of reducing the cost of voting. When, however, a party label is not a sufficient selection criterion, ideology is not a practical heuristic any more. This is the case in an electoral system requiring a voter to choose a single individual from many appearing on several party lists. The cost of comparing alternatives (Downs, 1957: 141) becomes then higher than in systems limiting voter’s decision to selection of a party (closed list proportional representation), or where every party allows only one individual to run in a district (usually under first-past-the post plurality rule). As observed by Shugart et al. (2005: 440) ‘in an open list [...] the information demand on the voter is higher, for a given magnitude, than under a closed list’. Crisp et al. (2012) discuss the electoral contexts that impede voter coordination. This

paper shows how in the face of the complexity of the Polish Sejm (lower house) elections, the ballot position may actually assist voter coordination.

The literature drawing on examples from the United States has long dealt with the problem of the potential ballot position bias. In the context of the plurality electoral system the significant correlation between the slot occupied by a candidate on the ballot paper and the chance of being elected may be perceived as a threat to the ideal of the ‘level playing field’ for all parties (Koppell and Steen, 2004: 267, 280). More recent findings from other electoral systems add a new perspective to this discussion. They show the importance of the institutional context and technical details of the electoral law and practice for evaluating the effect of the ballot position. Some of the examples include works by Faas and Schoen (2006) and Lutz (2010), who investigate the ballot position effects in the Bavarian state elections and Swiss national elections respectively, as well as Geys and Heyndels (2003), who analyze ballot layout in the Brussels regional elections. They all find strong evidence of the systematically better performance of candidates appearing in certain ‘focal’ positions. At the same time, an analysis of the Scottish parliamentary elections in 2007 reveals that ‘minor’

\* Tel.: +49 40 42838 6186.

E-mail address: [kamil.marcinkiewicz@wiso.uni-hamburg.de](mailto:kamil.marcinkiewicz@wiso.uni-hamburg.de).

technicalities of the ballot design may have important implications for the 'legitimacy of elections and representation of voters' (Carman et al., 2008: 443). The present paper provides the first systematic analysis of the effect of the ballot position and other potential heuristics on the results of the Polish Sejm elections. It also shows why and how certain solutions used in the Polish electoral law and practice make the ballot position an efficient cue, helping voters to reduce their decision costs. This is particularly important in a political environment where the party system has just started to stabilize (Millard, 2009). Given the volatility of parties and the electorate, as well as the high frequency of party changing among elected MPs, one might expect the voters to make greater use of cues such as ballot position, incumbency, and age.<sup>1</sup>

Open list PR systems operate in many different ways. Whereas in some countries voters either numerically rank candidates or cast a certain number of votes, in Poland they just cast one vote for a candidate by placing an x-sign in a box next to his or her name. Moreover, indicating preference for a candidate is obligatory, which makes the analysis of circumstances in which this decision is made all the more important.

In the next section the role of heuristics in electoral processes is contemplated. The focus remains especially on the ballot position effect, and discussion of some earlier work on this issue. The following three sections provide the reader with general information on the 2007 Polish Sejm election, the data and methods used, and the results of the empirical analysis. Finally, the findings are summarized and their implications for future research discussed. The results of this study prove the importance of the ballot position effect in the context of the Polish Sejm elections. It is also shown how this effect differs depending on the prominence of individuals or status of the party.

## 2. Ballot position and other heuristic cues

### 2.1. Making correct decision at the polls

Heuristics may be understood as 'problem-solving strategies (often employed automatically or unconsciously) which serve to keep the information processing demands of the task within bounds' (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001: 952; Abelson and Levi, 1985: 255) or 'simple means for generating information substitutes' (Lupia and McCubbins, 2003: 8). In order to determine which heuristics are relevant for the Polish voter, it will be important to differentiate between several conceivable strategies voters may be expected to follow. The most parsimonious strategy of minimizing decision-making costs would focus only on information available on the ballot. The role of ballot paper cues (Kelley and McAllister, 1984: 452) in Poland play party name, ballot position and gender which can be implied from the candidate's first and occasionally also last name (Resolution of the Polish National Electoral Committee, 2001). Besides ballot papers voters may also read announcements hung out in every precinct. They contain

additional information such as the candidate's occupation, place of residence and details concerning her party affiliation<sup>2</sup> (e.g. *Announcement of the District Electoral Committee in Cracow, 2007*).

Apart from the possibility of getting access to heuristic cues in different electoral systems, the efficiency of these cues also has to be taken into account. Cognitive schemata are applied in order to increase the probability of a correct vote, understood as 'the extent to which people vote in accordance with their own values and preferences' (Lau et al., 2008: 395). They can also be a cause of serious biases or errors (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001: 953) when a signal does not correspond with reality. A piece of 'information is useful only if it helps people avoid costly mistakes' (Lupia and McCubbins, 2003: 6). It is therefore legitimate to ask if 'electoral institutions help voters to acquire useful substitutes for the knowledge they lack' (Lupia and McCubbins, 2003: 206). This paper intends to answer this question with respect to the solutions found in the Polish electoral law.

In case of the most efficient strategy, relying solely on cues available on the ballot, the party name can certainly be considered a reliable, but not exhaustive, shortcut, since it does not provide any insights as far as choice within a party list is concerned. Gender, implicitly also existent on a ballot (through name), is a poor help, despite certain stereotypes which may be associated with male and female candidates (McElroy and Marsh, 2010). The third piece of information found on the ballot, the position of a candidate on her list, can prove helpful only if it contains a meaningful signal that allows voters to coordinate on a given option. In order to assess the efficiency of relying on the ballot position as a cognitive heuristic, it is necessary to know details of the mechanism of assigning slots on a party list to individual candidates. Nomination procedures vary between very similar electoral systems and in some cases make ballot position a poor cue.

The importance of apparently minor details of electoral law may be explained by comparing Polish and Finnish systems. Both states apply the single vote open list PR, also referred to as the quasi-list (Shugart, 2005: 42). Unlike in the Czech system, there is no option of casting an 'unmodified ballot' containing only party preference (Stegmaier and Vlachová, 2011). In Finland, however, as opposed to Poland, the candidate's ballot position seems to be a low-quality cue, because names within party lists are arranged in alphabetical order (Raunio, 2005: 475–476). In Poland, on the other hand, the order in which names appear on the party list is decided by the party (Gazeta Prawna, 2005). Ballot position can hence be meaningfully interpreted as a signal of endorsement by the party leadership if voters and party selectors agree that certain positions serve as focal points (Darcy and McAllister, 1990: 13). The position on the ballot signals to the voters that from the point of view of a party a candidate is particularly well qualified to become legislator (Lutz, 2010: 170).

The first alternative on the list appears to be particularly attractive for those filling out written questionnaires

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this remark.

<sup>2</sup> One can run on a party's ballot not being a party member or being a member of an affiliated group.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1051913>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1051913>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)