

Assessing the Correlation Between Women's Civic Engagement and Elected Political Participation: A Case Study of Six Polish Cities¹

Studia Regionalne i Lokalne
Nr 1(87)/2022
© Authors 2022



ISSN 1509-4995
E-ISSN 2719-8049
doi: 10.7366/1509499518701

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the link between women's civic engagement and elected political participation. The first part presents the theoretical aspects of both concepts – i.e. civic engagement and political involvement – and combines them with another category, namely the descriptive representation of women. The second part of the paper is devoted to the methodology of the present research, which consists of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative research examines the composition of six city councils in Poland (Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk, Łódź, Lublin, and Poznań) as well as city mayorships after the last elections (2018). The results confirm a positive correlation between women's elected political participation and women's civic engagement. The qualitative research, based on 11 semi-structured interviews, aims at explaining why the civic sector is dominated by women, even though politics still remains men's domain. Another objective is to identify particular obstacles that prevent female civic activists from further engagement in politics. Specific recommendations for mitigating the identified obstacles and increasing the number of women in politics are provided.

Keywords

women's civic engagement, elected women's political participation, descriptive representation, local elections

Introduction

When people work to change conditions without directly pressuring governments, their activities occur in the civil dimension of life, or what is sometimes called civil society – an arena of civic engagement that exists above an individual, but below the state. Civic engagement refers to any activity aimed at changing or influencing collective life. If one looks at the ultimate goal of politics, the same aim may appear – to affect change. Thus, the distinction between the goals that both political activity and civic engagement pursue disappears. However, what remains unclear is whether both activities are aimed at the same goals, and why are these arenas so different in terms of gender balance? Although the political representation gap among women and men in Europe has narrowed during the last 10 years, men are still the dominant actors in political parties and the political arena, while the civic sector is dominated by women. Another concern is related to the possible transition from civic engagement to elected political participation. While various studies have argued that women's engagement in civic activism could have a spillover effect, further strengthening women's political performance and helping them win elected office, currently, this pattern does not seem so visible in practice.

This study aims at examining whether there is a link between women's civic engagement and elected political participation at the local level. Thus, I seek answers to the following questions: to what extent does civic activism, where women are in the majority, serve as a gateway to political representation in elected office, where men comprise the majority? Are there more female politicians with a civic activism background than with any other background? Does civic engagement equip women to contend with the masculinism of formal political arenas? Are there any other obstacles that prevent women from entering and winning local elections?

¹ This article is the result of the Kirkland Research Programme run in the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław, in strong cooperation with Dr. hab. Marzena Cichocz.

People take part in politics in different ways. The modes of political participation – attending demonstrations, signing petitions, joining boycotts, voting, and direct participation in elections – vary significantly and require different levels of engagement as well as competence. For the purpose of this study, the elected political participation variable is understood as winning elected office in city councils. The civic participation variable is understood as volunteering, community activity, protesting, or participating in various associations, foundations, and movements. There is no focus on the specific type of organisation.

There is an abundance of literature examining the link between civic engagement and political participation. However, despite the extensive research conducted thus far, current scholarship on whether or not civic participation transfers to the political sphere is far from reaching a consensus. Some previous research (Pollock 1982; Erickson and Nosanchuk 1990; McClurg 2003; Klofstad 2005) shows that civic engagement, understood in terms of participation in civic associations, increases political participation. The key evidence supporting this conclusion includes the role of activity within network-based groups which give members a sense of ‘doing something’ and provide personal connections with people who are active politically. In this regard, a positive effect of civic activism is observed from all forms of involvement in political activities, such as voting, volunteering for a political candidate or campaign, contacting government officials, attending meetings of local government boards or councils, signing petitions, or entering and winning elections. In other words, various civic associations serve as schools for democracy that generate broader interest in society among members and volunteers. Civic associations can also become agents of mobilisation, as they disseminate political information and encourage group discussions (Pollock 1982).

Other research (Newton 2001; Norris 2002; Uslaner 2002; Anduiza et al. 2009; Wallman-Lundasen 2015) argues that the influence of civic engagement on political participation is generally very weak or non-existent. Presenting a counterargument to Pollock’s research, these scholars note that the dissemination of information does not automatically mean that all citizens can process or take advantage of that information in ways that promote political participation (Anduiza et al. 2009). This group of researchers focus mainly on the increasing erosion of public confidence in institutions of representative democracy, the lack of trust in politicians, and the declining rates of citizen participation in political activities such as voting, party membership, and running for election. The main limitation of the previous scholarship is that it does not focus on any specific form of political participation and thus generalises the positive impact of participating in civil society organisations for all forms of political activity. Further, it does not concretely address whether participation in such social networks has a beneficial impact on further involvement in political activities at the local or national levels. Though Wallman-Lundasen’s research (2015) stands out in this regard by means of testing the correlation of community-level involvement in voluntary associations with individual-level political participation, it focuses only on activities such as direct contact with local elites and protests, thus diverting attention from elected political participation.

Given that scholars have not reached an agreement, more research is required. Thus, this study explores the longstanding argument that civic participation translates into elected political participation. I contribute to the literature in three main ways. First, this research focuses on women. Most previous studies had been inattentive to gender and had been built around a neutral actor that is implicitly masculine. The current research addresses gender gaps with the aim of identifying whether women’s engagement in civic activism can have a spillover effect on other women’s participation in politics so that men and women can have equal voices in future political leadership. Though the present research focuses on women, it is potentially significant for the representation of other traditionally-marginalised political actors.

Second, the present research focuses on Poland, while the majority of related studies have been conducted in the USA and Western European states. According to research by the Klon/Jawor association (Charycka and Gumkowska 2019), the third sector in Poland is the domain of women. Less than every second person affiliated with Polish associations is a woman. Further, on boards of directors for both associations and foundations, women comprise almost half of the members, and women make up the dominant share of employees in civil society organisations. According to the same report, an average civil-society organisation employs three people, i.e. two women and one man. As for politics, the picture differs significantly. Poland ranks 54th, with 29.13% of women in the

Sejm (Skwarek 2019). An analysis of the 2018 local government elections results showed that the share of women in local politics has not even reached 30%. Compared to 2010, when there were no quotas, in 2018, the percentage of women at various levels of local government increased by around six percentage points. This means that although the situation has improved, it has not been a radical change (Druciarek et al. 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the validity of the following statement: If Polish women participate in civic associations more actively, then they also participate more actively in the political process.

Third, this research focuses on the local level, looking particularly at six large cities in Poland. Local government is perhaps the easiest level of government at which women can increase their participation. Decisions made at the local level affect many problems that concern women, such as social services, schools, and childcare. Further, women are less likely to face resistance to their participation in local government than they are at other levels. According to Małgorzata Fuszara (2013, p. 23), at the level of local elections, membership in a particular political party matters less than belonging to a local group or organisation. The present research will contribute to the literature through a thorough analysis of primary data obtained from city council websites as well as through conducted interviews with representatives of the local council in the city of Wrocław.

Theoretical Setting and Literature Review

Any attempt at systematically examining the case of Poland requires a brief overview of theoretical concepts used in the study as well as a description of previous literature on the relationship between civic engagement and elected political participation.

Firstly, a distinction should be made between the terms 'participation' and 'engagement'. Aslin and Brown (2004, p. 5) point out that 'engagement goes further than participation and involvement'. It involves capturing people's attention and focusing their efforts on the matter at hand. A subject means something personally to someone who is engaged and is sufficiently important to demand their attention. Engagement implies commitment to a process that includes decisions and the resultant actions. Thus, it is possible that people can be consulted, participate, or even be involved without being engaged. By 'engagement,' Barrett (2014) understands a psychological process relating to individuals' opinions or values about a social issue, while participation is regarded as an activity with a direct impact on governance. It is goal-oriented, rational, observable, and measurable (Emran and Akma 2012, p. 289). With regard to particular forms of engagement, Binder's research (2018) is the most useful. This research suggests that engagement can be operationalised in terms of an association's number of members, level of activity or, more concretely, via the regularity of volunteering activities.

In unpacking the meanings of 'civic engagement' and 'political participation', the idea is to emphasise the differences in the understanding of both categories. Political participation has traditionally been viewed in fairly narrow terms. Teorell et al. (2007, pp. 336–337) highlight that political participation includes actions aimed at influencing political outcomes. The authors developed five categories of political participation: electoral participation; consumer participation (donating money to charity, boycotting, signing petitions); party activity; protest activity; and contacting organisations, politicians, or civil servants. This typology contrasts with Verba and Nie's (1972, pp. 56–63) categories of political participation, presented half a century ago: voting, campaign activity; contacting public officials; and cooperative or communal activities.

Sener (2013) believes that political participation can take different forms: it can adhere to conventional norms, such as taking part in the electoral processes (voting, election campaigning, and running for election), or it can involve non-conventional practices (e.g. signing petitions, participating in political demonstrations, displaying symbols, supporting a political cause, membership in political campaign organisations, writing letters to politicians and public officials, etc.)

The concept of political participation has been expanded in recent years to reflect tremendous changes in the IT field. Van Deth (2016) suggests that political participation involves e-campaigning, political groups on Facebook, and online petitions, as well as other types of activities that have been deeply incorporated into modern life owing to digital media. This can be described as an 'expansion of the concept of political participation' since the Second World War.

Regarding the concept of civic engagement, there is a clear trend among political scientists to define it broadly. Putnam (1995) underlined the importance of 'social capital' for a functioning democracy. When labelling almost all activities as civic engagement (reading newspapers, social networks, trust in associations), he actually did not provide any explicit definition of this phenomenon. Putnam was not the only one who shared a wide view of what constitutes civic engagement. Michael Della Carpini (2000) also defines civic engagement in terms of activities ranging from participation in community organisations and volunteer work to voting and taking an interest in politics beyond voting. Lewicka (2004) distinguishes between organised civic activity (including participation in the activities of associations and NGOs) and spontaneous civic activity (activities for the benefit of the local community or protest activity). Klamut (2013) indicates two main criteria for organising the types and forms of civic activity. The first criterium defines the area of involvement and introduces a distinction between social commitment and political commitment. The second one separates individual actions from community actions. As a result of the combination of both of these criteria, four types of activities can be distinguished: (1) social commitment aimed at improving individuals' quality of life in the sphere of social activities, which can be undertaken individually and independently of others, or carried out as a team; as well as (2) political commitment aimed at improving quality of life. Although these approaches tend to be more specific, they seem similar to Putnam's categories, which blur the line between civic activism and political participation.

Recent studies have introduced new concepts and expanded the terminology for this issue. Koc-Michalska et al. (2014) have suggested that the second digital wave – the so-called Web 2.0 technologies associated with social media platforms – contributed to the development of 'civic political engagement', which includes browsing Facebook newsfeeds for news; clicking 'like', 'share', or retweet buttons; and clicking to sign an online petition or send an email to an elected representative. Ethan Zuckerman (2014, p. 156) is the author of another new concept, namely '*participatory civics*', by which he means 'a need for participants to see their impact on the issues they're trying to influence'.

However, the variety of new terms and attempts at expanding the civic engagement concept does not contribute to clarity. It is hard not to agree with Ekman and Amna, who stated that a term that covers everything and is used by scholars to mean completely different things is basically a useless concept – it confuses more than it illuminates (2012, p. 284).

The present research is partly based on the strategy suggested by Ekman and Amna (2012), which defines what can be regarded as civic activism and what is considered political participation. First, Ekman and Amna claim that civic engagement and political participation refer to specific actions. Manifest political participation refers to the public or political domain, where key political rights (such as voting, engagement with a political party, or running for office) are exercised. Attending demonstrations, protests, or strikes is also regarded as political participation for those who want their voice to be heard outside the formal parliamentary domain. Civic participation, on the other hand, refers to activities within the civil domain. Associational involvement and voluntary work constitute typical examples of such actions, which take place outside of the political domain. Any activity aimed at charity, improving conditions in the local community, or helping others (outside of one's own family and friends) is regarded as civic engagement.

However, it is hard to agree with Ekman and Amna when they say that protest mobilisation should be treated as a form of political participation. Though both of these activities were treated as distinct, especially taking into account the political nature of protest and more apolitical civic engagement, the present research relies on Rafail and Freitas' (2016) conclusions, which were drawn while examining the consistency of the profiles of individuals who become engaged and the institutionalisation of protest, which expanded the participatory base of protest to new groups. Since 'the boundaries between protest participation and civic engagement became more permeable over time' (Rafali and Freitas 2016, p. 557), the dependence of protests on established organisations has significantly increased. In the light of the NGO-isation of civil society actors and activities, Korolczuk and Saxonberg (2015, p. 419) argue that civic engagement in Poland can combine both types of activism – engagement in civil society organisations and participation in protests – with the same people engaged in both activities simultaneously. Street protests do not appear out of nowhere. As a rule, people who stand behind them have prior experience in social organising and are

engaged in various civil society organisations. In fact, one of the key organisers of the All-Poland Women's Strike, Marta Lempart, had been engaged in the local structures of the Committee for the Defence of Democracy in the city of Wrocław prior to the women's mobilisation, and had never been involved in feminist organising (Korolczuk 2017, p. 101). Based on the findings of the studies mentioned above, the present research treats participation in protests not only as a form of civic engagement, but also as a subcategory of associational activity.

Employing the typology suggested by Ekman and Amna on the one hand, and Rafail and Freitas on the other, the present article focuses on elected political participation as part of a larger category of 'political participation', measured by winning an elected office – in the case of this study, specifically by winning a seat on city council. Civic engagement can be measured by community work, protesting, and associational activity within the civil society field, such as foundations or associations.

The relationship between civic engagement and political involvement can be seen as fragile. Some previous research (Erickson and Nosanchuk 1990; McClurg 2003; Klofstad 2005) shows that participation in civic associations increases political participation, while other research (Newton 2001; Norris 2002; Uslaner 2002) argues that the influence of civic participation on political participation is generally very weak or non-existent. Ekman and Amna (2012) suggest that different forms of civic engagement could be strongly correlated with more specific political activities. However, they also point out that civic engagement can be a necessary but not in itself sufficient condition for political participation. Other factors, such as individual or institutional political opportunity structures, might be required for actual political participation.

Recent research on civic and political participation has also demonstrated certain gender differences. Women in particular participate more at the civic level and are more engaged in community service and local civic organisations (Malin et al. 2015; Portney et al. 2009). Compared to men, women are also more engaged in informal, private, and less conflict-oriented types of participation, often acting individually and in less visible ways (Lister 2003; Schneider et al. 2016). Gender differences also vary significantly within conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation. While men are more likely to engage in conventional forms of participation, such as running for office or joining political parties (Stolle and Hooghe 2011; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Verba et al. 1997), women are more likely to select those forms of political participation which are more connected with their daily lives, such as signing petitions or donating (Gallego 2007; Espinal and Zhao 2015).

The study of the interaction between women's civic engagement and political participation is impossible without incorporating another concept, namely 'representation'. In her classic work titled *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Pitkin (1967) establishes four aspects of representation: formalistic, substantive, descriptive, and symbolic. The present research focuses on a descriptive representation, which primarily refers to who the representative is. For the present research, gender plays a crucial role, and the emphasis is on the number of elected women who have a specific (civic engagement) background. Research on women's civic engagement and political representation cannot be complete without considering the institutional context. There is a significant amount of research focusing on how institutions are inherently gendered and favour men as key decision-makers, since women were not supposed to be active at the time when institutions were created (Sawer 2012; Hawkesworth 2003; Rosenthal 2000). While exploring how women can affect formal politics without entering it – particularly by impacting political decision-making through women's movements – Young (2000) finds that the institutional context matters. The author argues that some political systems are defined by high levels of party discipline and unity imposed on legislators, while others are 'characterised by the autonomy of individual legislators to pursue their policy interests or agendas with little constraint from party leaders or organisations'. This explains why women's movements direct their efforts towards parties and party leadership in the first case, but target individual representatives in the second.

Research Methodology

The main independent variable in the present research is the background of these women. This variable includes professional activity in the case of being a member of a political party, professional associations, NGO organisations, or human rights groups. This is a preliminary variable for investigating the effect of women's different backgrounds on the results of elections. Based on the theory of descriptive representation and relying on the independent variable, I derive the first hypothesis:

H1: Female politicians with the civic activism background outnumber other women in the context of city council membership.

The data for testing Hypothesis 1 comes from local municipal elections, which took place in Poland in 2018. The biographies of women elected to six city councils as well as women candidates for mayor were examined. The relevant data was collected from the *Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza* (<https://pkw.gov.pl/>) and from the Internet resource *wyborcza.pl* (<https://wyborcza.pl/>), as well as from the websites of six city councils in Poland (Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk, Łódź, Lublin, Poznań). The sample included six major cities with populations from 400,000 to 800,000. The selected cities are the capitals of six Polish voivodeships.

The key dependent variable for this study is women's motivation to go into politics. This variable includes incentives and challenges which female civic activists experience when entering politics. It examines whether women's civic engagement leads to political participation. My expectations here are largely rooted in the assumption of past literature, which claims that participation in civic associations increases political participation (Erickson and Nosanchuk 1990; McClurg 2003; Klofstad 2005). Based on the dependent variable, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: The more actively a woman is engaged in civic activism, the stronger her motivation for going into politics.

The data for testing Hypothesis 2 was gathered via 11 qualitative semi-structured interviews. As Bryman (2004) highlights, semi-structured interviews allow flexibility, the ease of longitudinal research, convenience, and focus on interviewees' attitudes and experiences, which are of primary importance for the current study. The respondents were selected based either on their relation to either political participation at the local level (members of councils), or on their civic engagement (founders or members of civic organisations or movements). All the respondents were women who were based in Wrocław at the time of conducting the interviews. Five of the interviewees are current members of councils, while six are civic activists. Among the six civic activists, a division should be made between those who have already expressed political ambitions by running for the 2018 city elections (three of the interviewees) and those who have not shown any political aspirations so far (the other three of the interviewees). Most of the interviews were carried out online, though two interviews were conducted face-to-face in October and November of 2020. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. All the respondents were informed about the research purpose of the interview and the anonymisation policy (see the list of interviewees in the Appendix).

Findings and Discussion

In order to test Hypothesis 1 (that most women elected in the local elections will have civic engagement experience), the biographies of female members of six city councils elected in 2018 were examined. Table 1 presents the collected data.

Overall, I find support for Hypothesis 1: women's political participation and women's civic engagement are positively correlated. My results suggest that most women elected to local councils have civic engagement backgrounds in various fields, such as ecology, women's rights, sustainable urban development, culture, assistance for people with disabilities, youth education, and help for senior citizens. However, Gdańsk and Łódź stand out from the data presented above. My research is insufficient for explaining why these two cities demonstrate deviations.

It is worth noting that the civic engagement background – subject to a scrutinised review of biographies of women elected as members of city councils – is considered only when civic engagement precedes political activity. For this reason, elected members of the six city councils who had

become members of political parties and had run for elections long before their engagement in civil society organisations were automatically excluded from the third column. The same logic was demonstrated during the interviews when most respondents drew a clear dividing line between civic engagement and their political careers.

Table 1. City council elections of 2018, Poland

City	Number of elected members of city councils	Number of female members of city councils	Number of female members of city councils with a civic engagement background
Wrocław	37	10	6
Poznań	34	15	9
Kraków	43	11	8
Lublin	31	8	4
Gdańsk	34	11	5
Łódź	40	15	4

Source: own research.

In order to test the validity of Hypothesis 1, the same research was conducted for the city mayor elections of 2018. The biographies of female candidates running for mayor in six selected cities (Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk, Łódź, Lublin, Poznań) were examined. Table 2 presents the collected data.

Table 2. City mayoral elections of 2018, Poland

City	Number of candidates	Number of female candidates	Number of female candidates with a civic engagement background
Wrocław	10	4	2
Poznań	7	1	1
Kraków	6	3	2
Lublin	6	2	1
Gdańsk	7	2	2
Łódź	9	3	2

Source: own research.

These results show that men are still members of the local elite, which means that the percentage of women running for the city mayor elections is insignificant. However, even among the modest number of women who took part in the elections for mayor, the majority of women candidates had strong civic activism backgrounds. These results correlate with previous research conducted in Poland on the issue of women's representation. As shown through Anna Pięta-Szawara's study (2019), the percentage of women running for the office of city mayor, as well as those who manage to win these elections, is increasing very slowly compared to the percentage of women at other decision-making levels, such as in municipal council or in auxiliary units of municipalities, which have the highest representation of women.

While testing Hypothesis 1, there appeared a need to include a separate column with data on the number of women who had served on neighbourhood councils. Though there is no common view in the literature on whether activity on neighbourhood councils can be regarded as a true example of civic activism, the collected materials confirm a correlation between elected women politicians who have a civic engagement background and those who have experience on neighbourhood councils (see Tables 3 and 4). Interestingly, the majority of those women elected as members of city councils who were previously engaged in typical civic activities – such as membership in associations or volunteering for the community – were also either members or heads of neighbourhood councils.

The same observation is true for female politicians elected as mayors in the six selected Polish cities. Moreover, while the female city councillors with civic engagement backgrounds had previously been active in different fields as civic activists, those with experience on neighbourhood councils had predominantly been active in urban development or in initiatives for the benefit of children and elderly people.

Table 3. City council elections of 2018, Poland; civic engagement vs. neighbourhood council experience

City	Number of female members of the city council with a civic engagement background	Number of female members of the city council with experience in neighbourhood councils
Wrocław	6	5
Poznań	9	6
Kraków	8	3
Lublin	4	2
Gdańsk	5	3
Łódź	4	3

Source: own research.

Table 4. City mayor elections of 2018, Poland; civic engagement vs. neighbourhood council experience

City	Number of female candidates with a civic engagement background	Number of female candidates with experience as members/heads of neighbourhood councils
Wrocław	2	0
Poznan	1	1
Krakow	2	0
Lublin	1	1
Gdansk	2	0
Lodz	2	0

Source: own research.

These results are not surprising. Jacob Aars and Audun Offerdal (1998), in the conclusions from their study of municipal policy, emphasise that political recruitment theories attribute excessive importance to the role of political career ambition as motivation for running for local elections. Their research confirmed that membership in local associations and participation in neighbourhood councils precede political motivations, which arise only under the influence of participation in social structures. Other research, one conducted by Paweł Swianiewicz and Karolina Olszowiec (2013), confirms that activity on neighbourhood councils increases the chances of a political career on the scale of the entire city. This dependence applies to all of the considered stages of political recruitment: self-selection, pre-selection (top-down or oligarchic), and bottom-up selection related to decisions made by voters. Neighbourhood councillors can expect more favourable treatment than other candidates in the pre-selection process. The average position of a neighbourhood councillor on election lists for city councils is generally higher than the position of other candidates. Moreover, the same research confirms that citizens more willingly choose candidates coming from neighbourhood councils. This is particularly true about large cities in Poland, where the difference between support for representatives of neighbourhood councils and support for other candidates is greater.

The discussion of whether neighbourhood councillors are civic activists or politicians made it necessary to include this question in the interviews conducted to test Hypothesis 2 (*the more actively a woman is engaged in civic activism, the stronger her motivation for going into politics*). All the interviews began with questions aimed at unpacking the respondents' understanding of the difference between civic activism and politics.

The analysis of the interviews shows that **understandings of civic engagement vary significantly among women politicians and civic activists**. Most of the respondents point to the fact that activism is an activity for the benefit of the community:

'Civic activism is the willingness to act for the common good of other people. It is also acting for the benefit of people who are discriminated against in our country, who are not tolerated here. It is also an activity in your neighbourhood as a neighbourhood councillor.' (CA)²

'The civic activism is pro bono public activity. This kind of activity is aimed at solving small problems on a small scale. In this regard, the engagement in neighbourhood councils can be regarded as civic activism since neighbourhood councillors focus on solving the issues that are relevant to the specific category of people.' (P)

The previous answers demonstrate a prevailing trend to equate engagement in neighbourhood councils with civic activism. This approach is common among those interviewed female politicians who had previously been members of neighbourhood councils. What is interesting is that the same female politicians had also been previously engaged in typical civic activities, such as membership in associations or volunteering:

'The idea to run for elections in the neighbourhood councils does not appear out of the blue. There are always some prerequisites, such as limitations women can see acting solely as an NGO worker or volunteer. However, I can see no difference looking back at my goals when I was a civic activist and a member of the neighbourhood council.' (P)

When the interviewees were describing their paths, they pointed to their common disagreement with the ways their cities were managed. This disagreement, in combination with a realisation of the limitations of civic environments, triggered their willingness to follow the path of becoming a civic activist, a member or a head of a neighbourhood council, or a member of the city council.

'A long time ago I started volunteering. My civic activism was at the very local level. I could see that there was a lot to be done in my neighbourhood for the sake of the community in general and elderly people in particular. Local authorities did nothing. It seems to me that it is the best example of civic activists, i.e. grouping of people in micro-groups and acting for the best of their neighbourhood. As ordinary citizens, we really were doing our best to achieve something by cooperating or acting together. But at some point I realised that no matter how closely we, 'ordinary citizens', cooperate with each other, the only way to really affect decisions made is to join the neighbourhood council. I believe that neighbourhood councils do have more authority, that their decisions or applications for repairs, access to property, etc. are always taken into account, while the voice of several people united in a local foundation by the same goal – doing something good for their neighbourhood – can be ignored. However, I realised that if I really wanted to change anything in my neighbourhood and city, then it was only at the level of the local council that I could affect the decisions made.' (P)

'I disagree on many issues with the city council's policy and with the fact that the current city council does not really fulfil its de facto function, because the city council should not be politicised, but should again serve the interests of the citizens and not the interests of the political parties. So now I consider the option to run in the city council's elections. However, without my experience as a member of an NGO, I have little chance to win. It is not about skills I am lacking, it is about connections and visibility. So the neighbourhood council, I hope, will serve as a bridge to enter formalised politics.' (CA)

'Only politics allows a person to shape the better future, while civic activism is more about creating the better present.' (P)

'It seems to me a natural process when a person understands the demands of the community and then realises that in order to make real changes for the community, it is necessary to be there where the decisions are made.' (CA)

Several interviewees held the opposite opinion:

² '(CA)' means that the author of the quote is a civic activist, '(P)' means that she is a politician.

'The engagement in a neighbourhood council is more politics than civic activism, as this activity is closely linked to the management of the city budget. Moreover, some neighbourhood councils enjoy more support from the city council, as personal connections matter. In this case, projects funded from the city budget are implemented more smoothly thanks to an active support of particular city council members.' (P)

This was the only respondent acting as a current politician and holding this view.

'Civic activism is not about elections. The last thing a civic activist should think about is the potential voters' support. The neighbourhood councillors, in contrast, depend largely on the citizens' vote.' (CA)

And this was the only respondent acting as a civic activist and holding this view.

Most of the interviewees agreed that mass mobilisation and protest participation should be seen as a type of civic engagement activity:

'When people go out and protest, there is no guarantee that they will be heard by decision-makers. Moreover, when it comes to women's movements, the likelihood to be neglected by predominantly male political institutions highly increases.' (P)

'I personally take part in all women's movements. I organise some of them at the local level and help mobilise others. However, I am not sure that this can be viewed as political activity. My ultimate aim is to raise awareness of a particular issue, make people think about it and understand that if they do not face this issue themselves, it does not mean that it does not exist. At the end of the day, it is about collective mindset and tolerance.' (CA)

It is worth noting that some female politicians who took part in the research expressed some reluctance to speak about their participation in protests, while others openly criticised such activity, emphasising its radical nature and the threat to the public order. At the same time, all the civic activists who took part in the interviews acknowledged that they had participated in a protest at least once.

The link between civic activism and political engagement is seen differently by the interviewees. Most of the respondents emphasise that this link is visible in cases of female activists who are first engaged in movements, then are elected to neighbourhood councils, and after that run for city council elections. Politicians who have undergone this path tend to believe that political and civic activities overlap and pursue the same goals. They point out that the difference between civic engagement and political activity is blurred, as both activities are aimed at serving people:

'It is not surprising to see in the Wrocław city council women who repeat the same pattern: civic activist – member/head of the neighbourhood council – member of the city council. The second level in their career allows them to acquire more experience and gain enough support to be elected.' (P)

However, one of the interviewees highlighted the following:

'Only politics allows a person to shape the better future, while civic activism is more about creating the better present.' (P)

Turning to **the difference between women's leadership in civic activity and women's leadership in political activity**, most of the interviewees point to the difference in motives between female civic activists and female politicians:

'It's easier to work with men in politics and with women in civic activism. Women in politics focus too much on their own reputation, name and authority. In civic activism, I see the opposite trend. Women are extremely goal-oriented. They have no intention of focusing on themselves. They are driven to achieve a common goal.' (P)

Reflecting on **the reasons why men make up the majority in politics while more women are engaged in civic activism**, most of the respondents referred to statements such as the following:

'Politics is a dirty business full of compromises, which demands sacrificing one's principles and ideas as well as complying with the party discipline. That is unacceptable for some women.' (CA)

'Women are not so active in formalised institutions and parties. They are more interested in engagement where an aim is specific and can be reached. They are task-oriented. Such issues as raising money for a new playground, taking part in participatory budget processes or protesting in order to change a specific law fully resonate with women. Political parties should offer new forms of engagement for women.' (CA)

Other interviewees point to **the obstacles with regard to entering politics for female civic activists who are not members of a political party:**

'Elections demand a lot of financial resources. Political advertising, renting office space for meetings, even printing out a candidate's political programme can be money-consuming for ordinary people. Political parties have more resources and gain more results in the elections.' (P)

As for **ways to increase women's representation**, more realistic gender quotas to ensure a gender balance of 50-50 was mentioned in several of the interviews. As one argument in favour of this measure, several respondents emphasised the need to transform politics into a gender-neutral activity. Since the political parties led by men still control nominations, 50-50 quotas will contribute to a more formalised and transparent process of drafting an electoral list. Another measure mentioned in the interviews with regard to increasing women's representation in politics is education, which should start in school and include both boys and girls.

'More men should be engaged in the discussion on how to reach gender equality in politics. When men do not hear about the problem of inequality and low representation of women, they believe that it does not exist.' (CA)

However, the idea of ensuring rotation by limiting the terms that a member of city council can serve is not popular among either female politicians or female civic activists. Most of the interviewees emphasise that such artificial measures can have side effects. For instance, outstanding leaders whose experience is valuable can be excluded from politics. Further, by voting for specific candidates, citizens ensure a natural rotation and political cleansing, since under the conditions of decentralisation, local authorities take on responsibility for the development of their city and have no chance to transfer this responsibility to a central level. This increases their reputational risks if they are unable to manage the local processes. After five to ten years, voters do not expect that failed politicians will change, and thus stop voting for them.

Recommendations

The results of this research demonstrate that the traditional pathways into politics – which exclude women to a large extent – should be reviewed. So far, the traditional incubators of political leaders, such as youth parliaments and political parties, have been fostering styles of politics that can silence women (Cornwall and Goetz 2005, p. 788). Unless political parties are obliged to put women on their lists, they, as a rule, do not give priority to women's promotion for office. There is a clear need to reconfigure the political landscape and foster the growth of civil society spaces for participation in politics. Spaces such as NGOs, foundations, and human rights movements might serve as alternative entry routes into politics, as they offer opportunities for learning and networking, and generating new leadership.

The results also show that women's engagement in the activities of the smallest municipal units – neighbourhood councils – leads to further political participation. Women benefit from working in neighbourhood councils, which enhances their capacity to understand the community they serve, as well as it equips them with unique training. The research findings also imply that the formation of not only neighbourhood councils but also other women's groups that lobby for change and give women more visibility would be beneficial. These groups can serve to develop women's political leadership and organisational skills. They also contribute to networking and creating strong ties among women, which is important for their political careers.

The process of selection on electoral lists still matters. Since leadership in political parties belongs mainly to men, who determine which policies are promoted and how candidates are selected, external (nonconformist) players (especially those who belong to marginalised groups, such as

women) have fewer chances to appear on the electoral lists. The requirement to include women is often met by exploiting kinship connections. One solution to this might be to require the list to be formed not only on the basis of gender, but also on a professional basis, thus ensuring that the electoral lists include not only politicians, but also representatives of civil society and academia, as well as other professions.

Conclusion

A thorough examination of the biographies of the women elected as members of six city councils in Poland (Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk, Łódź, Lublin, Poznań) and women candidates for mayor office in the same cities in the latest local elections (2018) allows one to draw conclusions about a clear link between women's elected political participation and women's civic engagement. Civic engagement offers women the possibility to gain necessary experience on the one hand, and to exert influence on the policy process from outside formal political institutions on the other. It teaches them to articulate interests, advance common projects, debate effectively, accept failures, and cooperate and compromise. Moreover, the results of the present research demonstrate the correlation between those elected women politicians who have a civic engagement background and those who have experience on neighbourhood councils. The latter case is seen as 'political training', allowing women to gain visibility and necessary connections with voters. The lessons learnt through women's civic engagement and further activities of neighbourhood councils are of great importance to women who later enter formal political environments.

The semi-structured interviews conducted for the present research provide a clearer idea of how local politicians and civic activists perceive similarities and differences between women's leadership in civic activity and women's leadership in political activity, as well as the link between these activities. While the latter is seen by all of my respondents, the number of obstacles – such as limited financial resources, low motivation to be involved in a 'dirty business' (the way politics is perceived), or the reluctance to fight for unclear ideas – continue to impede women's access to, and participation in, politics. The interviews focus on the ways to increase the number of women in politics, such as parity measures, ensuring more transparent processes of drafting electoral lists, and raising awareness among the broader public as to the need to involve more women in the political environment.

The findings of the present research have potential implications for policymakers and practitioners who engage people in the political process and foster civil society. International donors looking to close the gender gap might also be interested in the presented findings. For instance, various learning programmes implemented in schools and as part of lifelong training can not only raise the awareness among participants as well as encourage greater engagement, but they also can have the added benefit of increasing women's potential for further political participation.

Future research could assess the efficiency of women's political activity. A comparative analysis could be conducted in order to examine whether female politicians who have civic activism backgrounds are more effective in representing the interests of marginalised communities. For this purpose, a number of submitted regulatory drafts and official information requests should be examined as well as content analyses of speeches could be carried out. Future research could also focus on whether an increase in the number of women running for – and elected to – office correlates with periods of social unrest caused by interference with women's rights.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted within the Kirkland Research Programme in affiliation with the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław. I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for Dr. hab. Marzena Cichocz, whose guidance, support, and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this study.

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Appendix

List of interviewees

- Agata Bulicz, representative of the Lower Silesian Federation of NGOs
- Izabela Duchnowska, president of the association 'Nowe Nadodrze', candidate for councillor of the Wrocław City Council 2018
- Renata Granowska, Deputy Mayor of Wrocław, councillor of the Wrocław City Council
- Agata Gwadera-Urlep, councillor of the Wrocław City Council
- Marlena Joks, president of the Lower Silesian Association of Real Estate Agents and Property Managers, candidate for councillor of the Wrocław City Council 2018

Joanna Klima, councillor of the Szczepin Neighbourhood Council, founder of the association 'Serce Szczepina'

Natalia Kwaśnicka, civic activist, co-organiser of the National Women's Strike, candidate for councillor of the Wrocław City Council 2018

Jolanta Niezgodzka, councillor of the Wrocław City Council

Monika Włodarczyk, councillor of the Lower Silesian Parliament

Ewa Wołak, councillor of the Wrocław City Council

Maja Zabokrzycka, member of the Coalition 'Wrocław Wita Uchodźców', vice-president of the Foundation 'Dom Pokoju'