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## Functions of elections in democratic systems

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Preferencje Polityczne : postawy, identyfikacje, zachowania 4, 25-38

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2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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## **FUNCTIONS OF ELECTIONS IN DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS**

### ***Abstract:***

Elections are a procedure typical for democratic systems, but also systems which do not respect the principles of democracy often employ them. However, due to their different functional positioning, they fulfill various functions. The presented text is an attempt to present the most important functions performed by the elections in democratic systems. The adopted model of generalization has allowed for separation of seven basic functions, present in all elections: delegation of political representation; selection of the political elite; legitimisation of those in power; control over authorities; political accountability; creation of political programmes; recreation of public opinion image.

The presented typology allows for its use both in different types of elections (parliamentary, presidential, local, regional and European Parliament) as well as in relation to different electoral systems. The general nature of the described types of functions allows the separation of specific categories within its framework, but the objective of the present study has determined that the focus remains on the description and analysis of the presented types.

### ***Key words:***

elections; functions of elections

### ***Introduction***

Reviewing the research relating to the functions of elections, one can see two patterns. The first of these is the very nature of the subject- depending on the discipline they represent, individual authors make references to research characteristic for that discipline. Secondly, varying degrees of generality of the concepts presented should be noted - from the most general terms, based on

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a few main categories, to much more detailed [Pomper, Lederman 1980: 14]. It results not only from a different approach to the subject matter of elections, but also from the changing nature of their impact over time. For individual researchers, functions of the elections will form part of slightly different processes and therefore the authors will consider them in a different causality context. Adopted systemic solutions may determine not only the social system and the significance of the election, but they can also be a factor in distinguishing the relative importance of their individual functions [Lijphart 2008: 209]. In systems based on different models of parliamentarism, elections are a form of seeking political consensus, which would as a result lead to creation of a parliamentary majority, able to govern. In the case of presidential regimes, the emergence of a stable government is the basic systemic assumption, and social concerns center around ensuring that real (for example in the control aspect) influence on those in power can be exerted by the representatives of the opposition. Similar reasoning can be used when dealing with the structural model of the state. The primary goal of unitary states election does not have to be the creation of an adequate regional representation, and emphasis can be placed on recreating – using the equality mechanism – the formal and material territorial structure of the population. In the case of federal states, it is necessary to ensure representation not only in the territorial aspect, but above all - regionally.

Other factors influencing the diversity of functions of the elections is the electoral system on which basis they are carried out, and the nature of organs that undergo the election procedure. The specificity of the majority and proportional election formulas makes it possible to classify the various functions, taking as an indicator the direction of their implementation in different types of electoral systems. A somewhat natural problem in the process described above is the need for a generalised classification of each electoral systems into two basic groups – and it is possible that many system will manifest to a greater or lesser degree the characteristics of both [Katz 1997: 162]. Realisation of the various functions of elections depends also on the nature of the organ they concern. This specificity may result from: collegial or singular character of the elected body, level of the elections (supranational, national, regional and local), the organ's powers (particularly imperative), as well as the electoral formula. Elections to a collective body mean that the dominant aspect is that of political representation, which in the case of a single-person body may be less relevant. The level at which the elections are held determines their social resonance, as can be seen clearly in the increased media interest in the actions and decisions taken at the national arena. However, in some cases, this factor is eliminated by the importance of choosing territorial representation (for example in federal states). In the case of a varying degree of imperative competences of the elected

bodies, there is a difference in their perception in the public consciousness, what can affect the process of their legitimization.

Reference to the social structure emphasizes the role of factors such as strata, ethnic groups, dominant religions, interest groups and the depth of social divisions in the performance of the elections' functions. Heterogeneity of modern social structure is a factor preventing the conversion of a wide range of group interests into one common political interest. That is why elections are a means of resolving political conflicts, and as a consequence formation of a hierarchy of political priorities in search of the most widely accepted solutions [Bernard 1991: 180]. At the same time the structural reference is not a simple explanation for the social base of political parties, as their base is more than just a result of the existing social divisions [Siavelis 2006: 367]. Deep social divisions, especially due to ethnicity and religion, could affect the elections by giving them the characteristics of a forced political cooperation mechanism for the different parts of the structure – especially as the source of conflict generation may lie not only in the ideological differences, but also in the economic [Lipset, Rokkan 1967: 99-101]. Peter Mair draws attention to the petrifying function of socio-political divisions, which results in stabilization of constituencies and their electoral behavior. In describing it, he refers to three basic mechanisms characteristic of the voters. First, it must be based on the original social identifications that allow individuals self-determination in relation to categories such as social status, religion or ethnicity. Secondly, the existing group identities should be seen as a manifestation of particular interests, and continuing support for certain political forces in this case – as protection of those interests. Finally, the socio-political divisions must find their institutional expression in the form of political parties, trade unions, churches or other organizations [Mair 2006: 363]. The original hypothesis of Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokke regarding the freezing of party systems at the level of petrification of models of relationships between the electorate and the political parties has been criticized, as the researchers have found new factors and events influencing these relationships, generally referred to as the “New Politics” [Lane, Ersson, 1999: 110], which may cause re-definition of the functions of the elections.

### ***Functions of elections***

Competitive elections determine the democratic legitimization of the exercise of public authority, and through this legitimizing criterion will be different from the non-competitive selection methods. Competition ensures legitimacy of decisions taken by the elected representatives, provided all adults

are eligible to participate in the elections. Key features of elections in democratic systems are: uncertainty of the electoral outcome, which depends only on the decision of voters; possibility of a real alternation of power and formation of a de facto division into those in power and the opposition. As a consequence, citizens decide to whom and to what extent they will grant legitimacy to exercise power on their behalf, and when a change in power should occur. Importantly, the decision legally made during the election is irrevocable, and cannot be changed in any other way than through the next election. The real empowerment of the opposition makes it that, as a result of the election, it has the mandate to control the ruling, and present solutions alternative to those proposed by the government. As noted by Andrew Heywood, mutual influence of the citizens and those in power, as well as elites and the masses is ensured through elections [Heywood 2000: 200].

Authors taking up the issue of functions of elections in the presented typologies at most name only a few, rarely more [for example Burdeau 1950; Rose, Mossawir 1967; Harrop and Miller 1987; Katz 1997, 2000; Birch 2001; Żukowski 2004; Glajcar 2004; Heywood 2006; Dye, Schubert, Zeigler 2009; Medvic 2010; Dalton, Farrell, McAllister 2011; Antoszewski 2012; Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik 2013]. In the presented article as a basis for analyzing the functions of elections, the following types of functions were adopted: (1) delegation of political representation; (2) selection of the political elite; (3) legitimisation of those in power; (4) control over authorities; (5) ensuring political accountability; (6) creation of political programmes; (7) recreation of the image of public opinion.

The function of delegating political representation allows voters to choose those persons who, in their opinion due to the views and values held, seem to be the best representatives [Żukowski 2004: 16]. As a result of the democratic mandate to exert power, the elected have sufficient legitimacy to make decisions on behalf of the public, and their decisions have the same value of legitimacy. The pragmatic will of transferring the decision-making level from all eligible to those who were elected may be due to three main reasons: (1) to increase the efficiency of decision-making, (2) presumption that those elected have higher competencies than the average, and this will positively affect the accuracy of their decisions, (3) to give a higher degree of importance to the decisions made, and thus increase their social impact.

Delegation of political representation as a result of the elections and transfer of the decision-making powers rests on the assumption that voters will be able to choose from among themselves those who have the appropriate attributes (knowledge, integrity, loyalty to the principles, ability to cooperate and reach a compromise), and furthermore that those who are elected will not

make decisions based on their own particular interests, but *pro publico bono*. Neither of these two conditions is final, as the democratic freedom of choice allows voters to choose anyone who meets the regulatory criteria, and voters can select their favorites not by assessing their competence, but taking into account other factors. Among them we can indicate such as the represented political option, direct acquaintance, family ties and the previous social activity. Within the electoral systems one can identify solutions that at least in theory could serve to increase the competence of the winners of the election. These include for example high age limit for passive voting rights, restricting campaign financing and the possibility to vote for a particular candidate, not the party list [Haman 2003: 63]. Elections in a democracy are not a simple transfer of decision-making powers onto the level of political representatives, similarly as the mere possession of political subjectivity by a voter does not always determine his or her participation in the elections. Additional conditions have to be satisfied, among which the most important are: (1) possession by those elected of some of the political potential of implementation of the programme goals, (2) equipment of the authority with imperative powers, enabling the realisation of postulated tasks, (3) ability to select competing objectives thanks to political cooperation and compromises. In the present context, elections are not only a political mechanism to choose who will hold the office they relate to, but also who will represent the people [Medvic 2010: 12].

The function of elite selection has a two-stage character. The first results from the existence of political parties as entities the action of which leads to institutionalization of the political sphere, the second takes into account the causative role of the electorate. Against the background of the democratization process, the parties have become a factor in organizing the chaotic political objectives and demands of individuals, grouping around themselves members and supporters. The institutionalization of political parties is an ongoing process that began with establishing foundations of modern democratic principles, and is based on the possibility of their inclusion in the political system of links with other institutions, while enabling the implementation of the previously mentioned functions. Selection carried out by the parties can have two main dimensions: substantive and political, although one may also identify its other priorities that occasionally take the dominant role. The substantive postulate specifies the candidate needs to have the appropriate characteristics, which on one hand can help generate support and, consequently, votes, and on the other hand - predispose her or him to the proper fulfillment of the duties of the elected office. The political dimension presupposes the necessity of membership in the party, or at least ideological identity with the core values that form its axiological and programme values. The practical effect of selection of candidates for

the electoral lists is the process of nominating candidates to compete in elections. The process exists in four basic forms: non-regulated; nomination by the local party authority; nomination by the central authorities; primaries (selection by the members of the party) [Sokół 2003: 73-75]. Determinants of the role of the party in the function of recruitment and selection of political actors show [Antoszewski 2006: 21] that they are able not only to guide the decisions of voters towards the proposed candidates, but in specific situations also to actually significantly limit the choice [Wojtasik 2010: 390-391].

The second stage of political elites' selection refers to the role of the electorate in their shaping by participating in the elections, and by manifestation of their personal preferences for the individual characteristics of the candidates and their political affiliations. In the context of individual voting behavior, there are three types of electoral votes: (1) *vote of opinion*, which is the result of the analysis of electoral programmes made by the voter, (2) *vote of belonging*, which is an expression of social and party identification of the voter, (3) *vote of exchange*, given as a manifestation of the strong relationship between the voter and a given candidate [Żukowski 1999: 93]. In the case of selection of political elites, a single voter can simultaneously act upon different types of motivations to vote for a particular candidate, with the resultant deciding about the final vote allocation.

Democratic legitimization of those in power is indicated as one of the basic functions of the elections and consequences that they bring [Raciborski 2003:67-69]. The possibility of universal participation in the elections, the resultant transfer of decision-making onto representatives and legitimization of authority are the stabilizing elements, giving legitimacy to the political system [Banducci, Karp 2003: 443]. In a situation of institutional crisis, direct and general elections may help to maintain the legitimacy of the democratic system by consolidating and mobilizing to participate in them the moderate voters, who will vote against the radical politicians, parties and their extremist postulates [Rose, Mossawir 1967: 179 ]. The question of the legitimacy of political regimes is one of the central problems that are posed by the researchers of political systems, especially in the context of change and transition towards democratic solutions. Classic authoritarian solutions drew their legitimacy from traditions, religion, divine right of kings and submissive stance of society that today have been replaced by nationalism and ideology [Huntington, 1995: 55]. Democratic elections in the presented approach are a legitimised procedure of peaceful takeover of power, giving those exercising power the comfort of having a social mandate, contributing to the consolidation of the political system. Such consolidation includes not only institutional changes that stabilize the functioning of democracy. It is achieved through participation of citizens in the

creation of social development, formation of leadership mechanisms, and other functions carried out by civil society [Diamond 1994: 15].

Implementation of the function of control over those in power exists in two basic dimensions: (1) negative, when as a result of the elections the mandate of the governing is revoked, (2) positive, when the ruling, through elections, renew their mandate to govern for the next term. The main political consequence of the elections is the division into winners and losers, and indirectly – those who will exercise political power and the opposition (controlling the authority). Those in power obtain a mandate to govern thanks to legitimizing attributes they were granted, and their political opponents are legitimized to control the political authorities and create political alternatives to official governmental action. Control expressed in the vote, and the consequent ability to change those holding power is, according to Key, the only truly effective weapon of social control in a democracy [Key 1966: 76].

The impact of the control function of elections is manifested in two main areas. Firstly, thanks to the cyclical nature of the elections and preferences expressed in them, it is possible for the voters to control those in power. If voters decide to once again offer their support, the mandate to govern is renewed and awarded for the next term in office. In a situation where voters withdraw their support, alternation of power is a possibility. It is a procedural protection for individuals and groups against possible tyranny of power, voted in in democratic elections [Katz 1997: 309]. In the latter case, the citizens give their power of attorney to indirect control in their own name, carried out by the opposition over those in power. One factor that may determine the level of support for the opposition, even if the authorities are evaluated critically, is whether the opposition is a true political alternative. If aspiring political groupings are not seen as capable of replacing the ruling and doing their job better, the voters may refrain from offering their support, despite the declared opposition to the current government [Medvic 2010: 12].

Realization of the control function is based on the potential to cause reflection in voters whose aim is to assess what has been done by the government and make a comparison with the visions for the future, projected both by those seeking re-election, as well as those aspiring to seize power. In this case, voters may refer to two basic motivations when deciding how to vote: retrospective and prospective. In the first option, important for the decision is the aspect of evaluation of performance of those in power and, consequently, the desire to provide them with political mandate or the need to make changes. Prospective voting focuses on the political plans of entities competing for power (disclosed in the political programmes during the election campaign), triggering among voters the mechanism of assessing the direction, reasonableness

and feasibility of their implementation. The subject of this vote are the election promises, and its prospectivity refers to anticipation of future events, as political promises have not yet been fulfilled. Prospectivity is a basic assumption of the model of “economic voting,” oriented towards an analysis of the future effects of electoral decision [Kukliński, West 1981: 437] and their evaluation from the voters’ perspective [Lewis-Beck 1988: 135]. Some researchers raise two major concerns in terms of actual impact of these motivations. *Primo*, retrospective voting requires voters to possess enough competencies to make a retroactive assessment of effects of actions previously taken by the government. *Secundo*, in case of the prospective model, the ability of voters to assess what politicians should do in the future is equally questionable [Manin, Przeworski, Stokes, 1999: 30]. The control function of elections is therefore not only critical to ensure smooth operation of the political system, but also allows for proper orientation of the existing political potential. Thanks to the division into the ruling and the opposition, the latter can exert control over the authorities and inform about possible irregularities in the exercise of power; at the same time, preparing for the possible takeover of power, they should learn from the mistakes of their predecessors.

The function of enforcement of political accountability assumes the possibility of drawing consequences against persons holding public office. It consists in the expression of disapproval for their political activity – and the consequences thereof, including the political consequences. This distinguishes the political accountability from other types of responsibility found in the political system, such as constitutional or criminal. Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully see in elections the primary mechanism of enforcement of political accountability, focusing on the possibility of changing those in power as a result of the election. Elections provide parties with opportunity of creating communication links between voters and the government, and the elections themselves give them the option of replacing the existing political leaders and representatives with new ones [Mainwaring, Scully 1995: 21]. The enforcement of political accountability is expressed through the cyclical nature of the elections, as a result of which the previously granted power of attorney may be extended if voters are satisfied with the policies – or revoked, as a sanction for failure to meet the expectations placed upon the government [Antoszewski 2004: 13].

Enforcement of political accountability requires voters to participate in the elections by casting a valid vote. If voting against the incumbent authorities, voters should therefore vote for opposition candidates, who must be able to seize power, or vote “against all” if the electoral system provides for such a possibility. However, in the latter case, voting “against all” may be, in practice,

a form of support for the current government, especially in a situation where the ruling party has a loyal and disciplined electorate. To allow the alternation of power, it is therefore necessary to participate in the election, rather than to stage a passive protest, involving deliberate absence. Among the factors influencing the level of voter turnout in this context may include, for example, the actual distribution of power as a result of the elections, uncertainty of the final outcome and related competitiveness, as well as the associated media coverage [Czeńnik 2007: 92-93]. These factors all favour greater participation in elections. It is worth pointing out, however, that there are concepts that attempt to justify the low turnout by social satisfaction with the ruling and policy direction, which are not factors mobilizing electoral participation [Lipset 1998: 232-233]. Voters, satisfied with the general state of politics and ongoing activities, cannot see much point in taking part in the elections, especially if the prospect of power alternation does not seem real. An indirect confirmation of the validity of these concepts, in some circumstances, may be the presence of the mechanism of increase in electoral participation in crisis situations.

Elections are not only an arena of political competition, but also, for the candidates and political parties, a way to communicate with the public. The most common form of communication are wide political programmes and their ad hoc electoral versions, created as part of election programming function. An important medium influencing the implementation of the programming function are the political parties that create political agenda, referring to the represented values and their translation into the realm of ideological abstracts. Realization of the programme creating function by political parties assumes formulation of political and electoral programmes and their public dissemination, mainly in order to obtain social support and votes. The process takes place on at least two major planes. The first is the translation of general principles and values represented by the parties into postulates of specific political action. The second, referring in part to the creational function of parties, assumes public dissemination of the programme in order to gain on its basis new members and supporters, and generate electoral support. However, the programme must meet the needs of the changing political situation, which requires the possibility of ongoing adjustments [Migalski, Wojtasik, Mazur, 2006: 95]. Research on electoral programmes most often refers to the spatial intra-party competition theories, built around the concept of competition in areas perceived by the parties and electorates as important. The range of possible solutions creates a continuum from one extreme to the other (with multiple intermediate options) [Bukowska, Czeńnik 2002: 268].

Through creation of political programmes parties carry out their programme functions. This occurs on at least two main planes: (1) translation of

general principles and values represented by the parties into postulates of specific political action, (2) public dissemination of the programme in order to gain on its basis new members and supporters, and generate electoral support. Programmes are an attempt at modeling the expected shape of reality, assuming the possibility of a directional impact on the policies pursued. The approach remains a model only, as it employs high degree of generalizations and simplifications in order to create, in line with one's abilities and knowledge, a comprehensive picture of social reality. The reality described is idealized, as by references to the category of ideal types it makes it possible to explain the positive (for potential recipients of the programme) aspects of implementation of the proposed solutions. Moreover, political pragmatism forces the winners of the election to try to fulfill as many election promises as possible, as it may increase their chances in the next vote.

Therefore, it can be assumed that the programmes of political parties are more of a general indication of the direction of their future actions, than a specific agenda. Implementation of the agenda is after all dependent upon many factors, many of which are independent from the political party itself. On the other hand, attention is also drawn to the uncertainty of the public as to the course of action after the elections, because: (1) government programmes may differ significantly from the declared election programmes, (2) political parties and candidates may during the election campaign refrain from revealing their real views and intentions [Stokes 1999: 102-103]. The difference between election programmes and government plans may result from their purpose – during the campaign social promises are emphasized, while after the elections the government, as a rule, chooses means of greater economic efficiency. The desire to hide one's true political views and plans during the electoral campaign may be a function, for example, of the knowledge of preferences of the majority of voters, and expertise as to the necessity of undertaking a given action in the future. All aforementioned factors point to non-programmatic determinants of voters' decisions.

The last function of the elections covered by the present article is recreation of the image of the public opinion [Turska-Kawa 2010A; 2010B]. They serve as a mechanism for translating public preferences into legitimization of power, and also by the opportunity to actively engage citizens in the processes of electing authorities and systemic channeling of their activity in this field. Elections build a map of significance of individual topics in the public consciousness, and translate them into the realm of current policy. Cyclical nature of the elections permits observation of possible dynamics of change in this regard, since both on the basis of the topics covered in electoral discourse, as well as the focusing of voters' interest on specific demands, evolution in

the public perception of politics can be observed. Apart from specific demands that are the pragmatic and ideological axis of disputes in each campaign, one can also indicate more general factors helping in diagnosis of the public opinion. The politics itself uses such general categories as individual ideological formulas or concepts of left and right to illustrate important issues visible in the public discourse. These abstract ideas are used to show the crucial points of political differences, as well as to define the basic political options. Within the described framework, a vote serves to identify the most important issues, which by their social “carrying capacity” may influence decisions made by voters, and assignment of positions on each issue to the specific parties, candidates and voters. In addition, elections should allow voters to identify further with the values represented by them, contributing to their linkage with the existing system of constitutional norms and values [Rose, Mossawir 1967: 176].

Image of the public opinion mirrored in the election result may be interpreted according to two basic models. In the first, specific one, citizens making an electoral decision address the specific issues that are the subject of pre-election discourse. In the most popular approaches, attention is paid to the role of axiological and economic determinants as important elements shaping voting preferences [Jasiewicz 2002: 76-78]. All elections are held in different (sometimes even dramatically) socio-economic circumstances, what also very differently shapes the focal points of social interest. In periods of profound change and economic crises, social attention is focused on the economic issues. In times of economic stability and sustainable economic growth, the accents shift towards axiological matters, making the economic demands a less important platform for the political competition. This in turn may lead to the impression that the choice of representatives and determination of main policy directions in this situation is relatively less important [Rose, Mossawir 1967: 181].

The second model of the public opinion image recreated in the elections uses a certain generalization, in which the role of specific demands in the electoral discourse is replaced by ideological self-identification of the voters. Since the individuals describe their attitudes and their structuring employing generalized concepts, one can attempt to identify the position on the right – left scale. The result is a generalized image of the public opinion, in which the voters take into account the degree of consistency of their self-identification with the party dimension of the left – right continuum.

## ***Conclusion***

Larry Diamond argues that today, just as there is no single form of democracy, it is also impossible to talk about one model of authoritarianism,

what affects the ability to describe various forms of political hybrids [Diamond 1999: 23]. This observation allows not only to distinguish different types of regimes, but also points to the existence of many systemic conditions that affect the elections, and consequently functions they perform. In democratic systems, the multiplicity of alleged election functions may result from both these systemic conditions, as well as from scientific approach of the authors raising this issue. In different political system contexts, elections will be able to fulfill varying functions. That conclusion is clear not only from their different normative location, but primarily from the relationships that exist between the elections and the potential possibility of emergence of the leaders and their alternation as a result of the vote. Therefore, outside the political system context, elections and their functions can be analyzed as consequences of the decisions of those in power, wanting to avoid the possibility of losing this very power [Gandhi, Przeworski 2009: 4]. Democratic systems referring to the competitive elections formula signify uncertainty of the final outcome, and possibility of actual alternation of power.

Elections respecting the free and fair principles will serve as a stabilizer for the democratic system, ensuring repeatable mechanism of recruitment and selection of candidates for elective positions in the political institutions. They create patterns of peaceful transfer of power in the event of changes in the political frame of reference. They are also a forum for cyclical opportunity to evaluate the government, renew or revoke its mandate to rule and, consequently, cause power alternation. Elections also offer a moral title to rule, granting legitimacy to take action in respect of the domestic and foreign policy. A function that increases stabilization of the political system is the socialization of citizens and their political integration, and the opportunity to present political positions and programmes by small political parties and independent candidates [Jackson, Jackson 1999: 366]. These factors will affect the adaptive changes in the political system, constituting the stabilization mechanism for democratic procedures and institutions.

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