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## Patterns of Women's Political Activity

**Abstract:** The article aims at presenting women's and men's political activity, both in its formal aspect (conventional political activity) – manifesting itself in participating in elections or belonging to a political party – and informal actions (unconventional political activity) – connected with direct influence on the political sphere. On the basis of research, including that of the current author, the evolution of women's presence in politics is shown. The main manners of explaining the differences in intensity, as well as the chosen forms of political activity among women and men, are also put forward.

**Key words:** women in politics, conventional and unconventional political activity

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### Political activity – explaining the notion

Political activity is most often defined as the diverse forms of actions focused on supporting political continuity or change (Skarżyńska, 2005). Political participation or taking part in politics are the terms used interchangeably to denote this activity. Political involvement is a wider concept that, apart from activity, encompasses cognitive and emotional components as well. This means that a person politically involved, besides her or his actions, has also formed political views along with an emotional attitude towards political objects.

### Kinds of political activity

The basic distinction of the author's interest is political activity divided into conventional and unconventional activity. Conventional activity means actions in accordance with the law, and above all actions by way of institutions provided by the law. Hence, primarily electoral activity (sometimes treated as a separate form of motion) belonging to a political party or activities undertaken in the course of a campaign are included here.

In turn, unconventional activity, also called direct participation in politics, can be of a legal and illegal character. Various forms of acting, commonly associated with protest or civil disobedience, are classified here, such as: participation in protests, demonstrations or strikes, signing petitions, boycotts, and road blockades or writing slogans on walls. Political violence, that is, for example, damaging other people's property, and physical attacks on other people, is treated separately (Topf, 1998). The above division refers to the concept of P. Norris who distinguishes civil activity, activity connected with protests and voting activity.

### Women's political activity in the light of research by the European Values Study and the World Values Study

The first issue to look into is a comparison of conventional political activity in Europe and in the world. For many decades, gender constituted the most important factor differentiating electoral attendance level. In 1937, H. Tingsten analysed the women's and men's attendance levels, and declared that women take part in voting less often than men (Norris, 2007). This imbalance remained for a very long time. Nowadays, however, the importance of gender as regards elections is decreasing, attendance levels between the genders are more equal and there are actually countries where women vote more often than men, like Chile, Finland or Malta (Żukowski, 2011; see also data collected by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)). Also, in the United States of America, in each presidential election since 1980 the percentage of women entitled to vote that did so has exceeded the percentage of men entitled to vote that did so. Nevertheless, as regards other activities connected with elections, female Americans are less active than males (Norris, 2007). Moreover, if the aggregate results from all countries included in the research conducted by the European and the World Values Study are analysed, there is still a 5% predominance of men in this area. Women are also under-represented in political parties – membership of a party is declared by twice as few women as men. This difference is smaller where membership of a trade union is taken into consideration.

Table 1

#### Women's formal activity in the light of the research by EVS and WVS

	Percentage of voters	Membership of a party	Membership of a trade union
Women	77	4.3	11
Men	82	7.9	14
Difference	-5	-3.6	-3

Source: R. Inglehart, P. Norris, *Wzbierająca fala*, Warszawa 2009.

As revealed by the research, women are also less active informally – 40% of the investigated women and almost 50% of the men had taken part in at least one act of protest. However, the size of this difference, and also its direction, seems to depend on the character of the activity. Among protest activities, both actions of a calm nature, like signing a petition, and more aggressive ones, like painting slogans on walls are enumerated. According to

the data collected in the early 1970s by Barnes and Kaase in five post-industrial societies, women were less committed to demonstrations, occupations and illegal strikes (Barnes, Kaase, 1979). The data gathered at the beginning of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Great Britain, in turn, indicated a slightly smaller involvement of women in individual actions and a somewhat bigger commitment of men to collective actions (Norris, 2007).

Table 2

**Comparison between informal activity of women and men in the light of the research by EVS and WVS**

	<b>Taking part in at least one act of a protest (in %)</b>	<b>Scale of protest activity</b>
Women	40.2	0.62
Men	48.8	0.77
Difference	-8.6	-0.15

**Source:** R. Inglehart, P. Norris, *Wzbierająca fala*, Warszawa 2009.

One separate kind of activity is civic activity, consisting in belonging to and acting in various organisations which aim at the realisation of various groups' interests. The data brought together within the framework of the EVS project show clearly that the activity levels of women and men differ clearly depending on the kind of organisation involved. In the case of belonging to sports clubs or to peace movements, the predominance of men is substantial (reaching even 24% in the case of the former), and it decreases to a 0% difference in the case of organisations connected with environmental protection, while in the case of all organisations relating to religion or social welfare – women prevail. It seems that the differences in participation in the given organisations agree with the stereotyped marking of the specific area of the actions.

Table 3

**Comparison between the civic activity of women and men in the light of the research by EVS and WVS**

<b>Organisation type</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Sports clubs	38	62	-24
Peace movements	42	58	-16
Professional associations	43	57	-14
Local activity groups	48	52	-4
Youth groups	49	51	-2
Environmental protection or animals rights	50	50	0
Organisations for Third World development or human rights	52	48	+4
Organisations dealing with education, art	53	47	+6
Religious and Church organisations	56	44	+12
Volunteer organisations connected with health	56	44	+12
Social welfare	58	42	+16
Feminist organisations	87	13	+72

**Source:** R. Inglehart, P. Norris, *Wzbierająca fala*, Warszawa 2009, p. 133.

The analyses carried out by R. Inglehart and P. Norris make it also possible to verify a hypothesis that assumes differences are reducing in political activity levels connected with gender along with the development of modernisation processes. The specification given below makes it possible to compare the activity levels of women and men in three types of societies-post-industrial, industrial as well as agrarian. As can be seen in the table below, the biggest difference in activity levels is in agrarian societies which still attach importance to traditional values. Membership of a trade union is the only exception: this difference is the biggest in post-industrial societies, which are the most advanced in modernisation processes.

This hypothesis is confirmed also by the data showing a decrease in political activity differences among the youngest generation, which is the quickest to absorb changes.

Table 4

**Differences in the political activity levels between genders depending on the type of the society**

	<b>Agrarian</b>	<b>Industrial</b>	<b>Post-industrial</b>
Political discussions	-13.0	-13.0	-7.0
Electoral attendance	-6.0	-4.0	-4.0
Membership of a party	-4.4	-3.0	-3.3
Membership of a trade union	-2.1	-1.7	-5.7
Participation in at least one protest act	-7.8	-4.7	-3.3

**Source:** Drawn up by the author, on the basis of R. Inglehart, P. Norris, *Wzbierająca fala*, Warszawa 2009.

### Political activity in Poland

It is worth checking how the differences in respect of the political activity of women and men in Poland are shaped. Poland is still a traditional country where the modernisation processes connected with passing on to post-materialist values are not yet far-gone (Szawiel, 2005).

According to analyses by the Polish National Electoral Study in the elections in 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2007, women voted more rarely than men. Only in 2001 was the difference in attendance level between women and men statistically irrelevant. M. Cześniak indicates that “in Poland the difference in electoral participation between women and men is relatively constant. Women constitute a group systematically handicapped as regards representation and the resulting political influence” (Cześniak, 2009).

Also in respect of unconventional activity, significant differences between women and men occur. As it is, according to the author’s own research conducted among students of politics, psychology and pedagogy in Poznań, Gdańsk and Wrocław, 23% of women and 35% of men took part in protest marches in 2004, whereas in 2010 – it was 17% of women and 33% of men. Slightly smaller differences occurred as regards signing petitions – while in the case of marches participation among women decreased, in the case of petitions there was an increase from 37% in 2004 to 65% in 2010. However, among men the growth was bigger – from 45% in 2004 to 75% six years later. The biggest difference

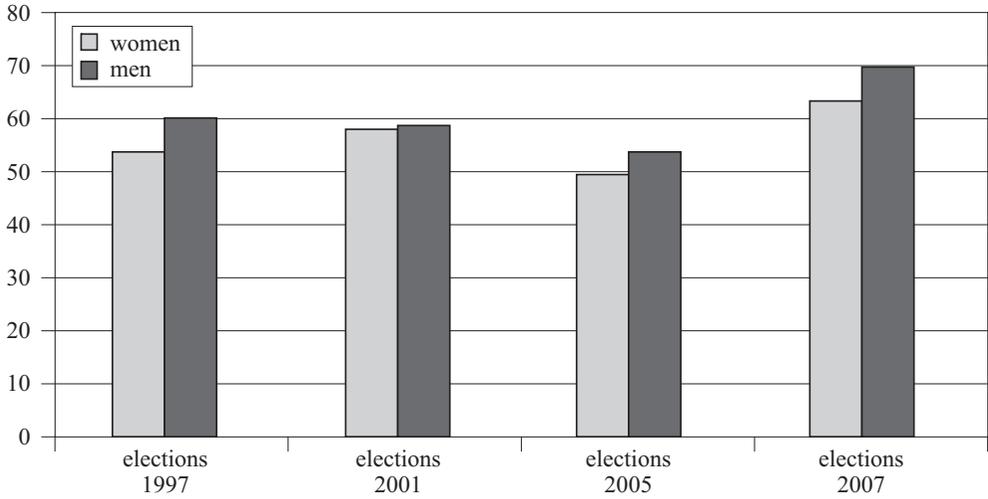


Figure 1. Comparison of the electoral attendance levels in Poland in the years 1997–2007  
 Source: PGSW, after: M. Czeński, *Partycypacja wyborcza w Polsce*, Warszawa 2009.

in activity occurs, however, relating to contacts with representatives of the authorities – in 2010 it was as high as 18% to the advantage of men, as well as in the case of writing political messages on walls, which men engage in almost four times more often than women.

Table 5  
**Level of informal activity of women and men in Poland; comparison of 2004 and 2010 (own study)**

Kind of activity	2004			2010		
	women	men	differ- ence	women	men	differ- ence
Marches	23.0	35.0	–12.0	17.0	33.0	–16.0
Petitions	37.0	45.0	–8.0	65.0	75.0	–10.0
Contact with representatives of the authorities	26.0	37.0	–11.0	21.0	39.0	–18.0
Contact with media	16.0	30.0	–14.0	16.0	27.0	–13.0
Writing on walls	1.6	8.0	–6.4	3.0	9.6	–6.6

Source: Drawn up by the author.

The smallest differences in Poland between women and men occur as regards civic activity. According to social diagnoses from 2011, 15.4% of men and 14.3% of women were members of social organisations, whereas 34% of men and 30% of women performed functions in these organisations.

According to research by CBOS from 2010, in turn, 28% of the examined persons declared working for social organisations (27% of women and 28% of men). 13% of men and 16% of women acted in one organisation, 7% of men and 3% of women in two, while 7% of men and 9% of women were members of three organisations. Two years later the results were

similar, although the general level of activity increased slightly and amounted to 33% among women and 32% among men. 17% of women and 17% of men were active in one organisation, 6% of men and 9% of women in two, and 6% of men and 10% of women in three.

Whether taking up a specific social activity is dependent on gender can also be checked thanks to the data presented in the CBOS report from 2000. Among those surveyed who declared actions for the benefit of the local community, women more often pointed out activities in favour of the cleanliness of the surroundings (32% of women, 20% of men), in favour of education (18% of women and 8% of men) as well as charity (15% in comparison to 7%). Men, in turn, announced activities for the benefit of public and private transport (21% of men, 12% of women), of the social and cultural spheres (18% of men and 9% of women), or local-government and association activities (7% of men and over three times fewer women) (CBOS, 2000; see also Norris, Walgrave, van Aelst, 2002). The data from the report "Civic Society 1998–2004" are provided below; they offer a comparison of women's and men's participation in organisations of various kinds in 2004 as well as 2012, also from the CBOS research. As can be noticed, women outnumber men significantly in organisations acting for the benefit of education, religion or charity, especially those acting in favour of children. Men, in turn, more often than women choose sports organisations or associations of allotment holders, anglers or hunters. It is worth underlining that, in comparison to men, women show a higher average level of commitment (0.76 in comparison to 0.63).

Table 6

**Comparison of women's and men's activity in organisations of various kinds in Poland in 2004 and 2012**

Type of organisation	2004			2012		
	women	men	differ- ence	women	men	differ- ence
Sports organisations	2	8	-6	2	6	-4
Organisations acting in favour of education	6	3	+3	10	4	+6
Religious organisations	4	3	+1	8	3	+5
Associations of allotment holders, anglers or hunters	1	5	-4	1	7	-6
Trade unions	3	5	+2	3	3	0
Charitable organisations acting for the benefit of the elders	NDA	NDA	NDA	7	3	+4
Arts organisations (choirs, theatres)	NDA	NDA	NDA	4	1	+3
Charitable organisations acting for the benefit of the children	2	2	0	8	3	+5
Organisations like VFD or Polish GOPR (Mountain Volunteer Search and Rescue)	NDA	NDA	NDA	1	6	-5
Total*	27	28	-1	33	32	+1

\* The given value is not the exact sum of people active in particular kinds of organisations because some persons act in more than one type of organisation.

**Source:** B. Wciórka, *Spółeczeństwo obywatelskie 1998–2004*, Warszawa 2004; M. Grabowska, *Spółeczeństwo obywatelskie w Polsce A.D. 2012*, Warszawa 2012.

Summing up the presented data, one may conclude that women's political activity levels are in most cases lower than men's political activity levels. However, the value of the difference varies depending on the type of society, on the age of those surveyed or on the kind of activity analysed. In Poland, in turn, it is clear that women are active in extra-political spheres to a greater extent – as regards political activity, the differences between the genders are substantial, while regarding civic activity they disappear completely. A stereotype of politics as a sphere not suited to the subtle female character continues to be very strong, which is confirmed also by the research conducted by the author (Pająk-Patkowska, 2012). This might be why Polish women are not eager to enter this sphere. As a matter of fact, it is no wonder – attempting to create a space for oneself in a sphere dominated by the other sex is a doubly difficult task. Firstly, one has to compete in a sphere which is difficult to achieve success in. Additionally, one needs to fight the stereotypical perception of women as not suited to this sphere of activities.

### **Explanation of the tendency**

P. Norris and R. Inglehart (2009) point out three main trends of explaining the differences in the political activity between women and men. These are the structural, cultural and institutional approaches. In the structural trend, the role of differences in the socio-economic position between women and men is stressed as these differences make it difficult for women to take up such activities. In the cultural approach, the role in explaining the differences of political as well as broadly understood culture is indicated. The last approach – the institutional – gives a meaning to the systemic solutions which may support the women's activity.

What is it that weighs in favour, partially at least, of the theses mentioned above? The structural approach underlines the role of education and other factors influencing the position of an individual within the social structure. Indeed, if factors like level of democratisation, class, age, membership of an association and religiousness are taken into consideration in the analysis, gender ceases to be a factor which differentiates the level of political activity. These relations are perfectly described by S. Welch: "a stereotype of politically passive women is simply untrue. Women as a whole participate in politics to the same extent as men when the structural and situational factors are under control" (Welch, 1977). It is still worth specifying at the moment that structural factors here are understood as the over-representation of women in those groups with a lower level of participation while the situational ones are connected with those domestic duties which detain women at home to some extent. The third determinant indicated by the author is the process of socialisation, during which a more passive role in the public sphere is instilled into women. However, it must be emphasised at once that – in the author's opinion – the data collected in the USA until the mid-1970s do not allow the last cause to be treated as basic, since the differences observed between boys and girls are too small.

In the case of the cultural approach it is worth checking whether the differences as regards political activity occur among those societies representing various levels of the development of transformations towards modernisation. More significant differences should occur in those countries which are less developed regarding these processes. This

hypothesis can be confirmed, albeit only partially. Indeed, when comparing agrarian countries to industrial and post-industrial ones, a higher level of activity in the latter can be observed. And thus, in agrarian societies the difference in the activity levels of protest amounts to 7.8%, in industrial societies 4.7%, and in post-industrial ones 3.3%. Moreover, having taken into account age, it turns out that the smallest differences occur among the youngest generation, which is the quickest to adopt the changes which take place. But there are exceptions to this regularity – not every post-industrial country has a higher level of political activity of women than every agrarian one. As mentioned before, the group of countries where women's electoral attendance is higher than men's includes Chile and Ecuador, as well as Finland and Malta. Furthermore, the cultural approach stresses the role of motivation and having an interest in activity regarding public matters, convictions related to equality of the sexes as well as ideologies (the left-wing one would rather favour the political activity of women).

In the institutional approach, attention is paid to solutions which make entering the political sphere easier for women (Gelb, Palley, 2009). On the other hand, the subjective approach emphasises the role of social networks and standards originating in the memberships of groups and organisations in the stimulation of their members to undertake actions in the public sphere.

It ought to be stressed explicitly, that none of these approaches individually, and not even all of them together, can fully explain the examined phenomenon.

So, other attempts at explaining the lower representation and participation of women in the political sphere are worth considering. To this end Ł. Wawrowski divided these considerations into initial and secondary reasons. Among the initial reasons, he distinguishes:

- direct inner causes: the level of the political aspirations of women and their political potential;
- direct outer causes: the inequality of women and men in the process of their political career;
- indirect inner causes: the position of women in extra-political spheres of social life;
- indirect outer causes: the social roles attributed to women (Wawrowski, 2009).

In this case it seems necessary to supplement the above catalogue of causes with the psychological causes associated most of all with the psychological features of women but also with the matter of stereotypes. These influence women themselves and also voters of both sexes, and may determine the election of a given person for a political post. It seems as well that the stereotypes of a given sphere of activity are also important, which is seen particularly when the differences in the activity level of women and men in the social and political organisations of various kinds are being analysed. Women are more active in those which operate in the spheres stereotypically linked to femininity, such as social welfare or the religious sphere (Pająk-Patkowska, 2012; Murray, 2010).

Searching for the sources of the still remaining inequality of women's and men's participation in politics, it is worth taking a closer look at those countries in Europe where this has already been dealt with. Strictly speaking, this, of course, means Scandinavia. Per Adman analyses the reasons for this state of affairs in detail (Adman, 2009). He indicates that a leading role in explaining the Scandinavian phenomenon is played by the Scandinavian "welfare state", which enables women to compete equally in the political arena. So

the commitment of the state in taking care of children brings about the disappearance of one of the major barriers in women undertaking political activity. Two additional hypotheses pointed out by Adman underline the role of socialisation, during which women themselves assimilate more strongly to the norm of being active, as well as the greater mobilisation of Swedish women towards taking up political activity. It is worth taking closer look at the conclusions of the researcher.

The first hypothesis – the formal one – points out the role of political resources and motivational factors. The author enlarges on the traditional understanding of resources, dividing them into:

- individual political resources including revenues and social skills (the ability of organizing oneself and communicating);
- the social network (belonging to a network and relationships in which members are encouraged to undertake activities and which increase the political activity level);
- collective resources measured by means of activity in associations;
- socio-economic resources connected with education and professional positions.

The weight of research indicates the predominance of men, both as regards resources and revenues. The same pattern is repeated also in the studies of the Swedish Citizen Survey of 1997 analysed by the same author. Women, even in Sweden, found themselves in less advantageous positions both as regards their resources and their motivation. Thus, the analyses by S. Welch, originating in the mid-1970s, suggesting that if the variables connected with status and resources are under control, women become more active than men – are confirmed (see also Chhibber, 2002).

Two alternative hypotheses have been confirmed as well – if the matters of standards, of views on feminine issues, as well as the membership of an organisation are taken into consideration in the analyses, the meaning of gender in explaining political participation falls by 40%. It can also be seen that views and memberships of organisations are of the greatest importance. However, as the quoted author emphasises, and what has been stressed several times in this article, the still existing correlation between gender and political participation shows that not all the factors which might fully explain this relation have yet been found.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of the collected data makes it possible to state that apart from intensive changes related to modernisation, women are still less active in politics than men. They also choose slightly different forms of this activity than men. However, if the factors determining the position of an individual in a society are taken into account in these analyses, gender stops being a significant factor. This means that if women and men of similar education, income and professional status are taken into consideration, there are no statistically significant differences between them as to undertaking political activity. Thus it can be presumed that once gender no longer determines the position of an individual in a society, also the differences in levels of political activity will vanish. Furthermore, which is indicated, in turn, by the analyses of R. Inglehart and P. Norris, changes occurring in the sphere of values are conducive to diminishing these disproportions. Therefore,

it seems that the equalling of the political activity levels of women and men is just a matter of time.

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### Streszczenie

#### Wzory aktywności politycznej kobiet

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie aktywności politycznej kobiet oraz mężczyzn, tak konwencjonalnej, objawiającej się uczestnictwem w wyborach czy przynależnością do partii politycznej, jak i niekonwencjonalnej, związanej z bezpośrednim oddziaływaniem na sferę polityczną. Na podstawie badań, w tym również badań własnych, pokazana zostanie ewolucja uczestnictwa kobiet w polityce. Przedstawione zostaną również główne sposoby wyjaśniania zróżnicowania intensywności oraz wybieranych form aktywności politycznej wśród kobiet i mężczyzn.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kobiety w polityce, aktywność polityczna konwencjonalna, aktywność polityczna niekonwencjonalna

