

Geography of Electoral Volatility in the Warmia and Mazury Voivodeship of Poland

Tarasov, Ilya N.; Fidrya, Efim S.

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**GEOGRAPHY
OF ELECTORAL VOLATILITY
IN THE WARMIA
AND MAZURY VOIVODESHIP
OF POLAND**

*I. N. Tarasov**

*E. S. Fidrya**



The authors describe the impact of administrative reforms on the electoral volatility in the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship of Poland. The administrative reforms resulted in the formation of a new territorial organization of power. Using three large administrative units of Poland as an example, the authors analyse the experience of the formation of a geographic region by merging several politically diverse territories. The merger took place in a changing political environment. It inevitably affected the strategy and tactics of the development of local self-governance. The formation of the region has been going on in such a manner that differences in the electoral preferences and political behaviour of the urban population (the regional metropolis) and the periphery remain unchanged. Having performed the index analysis and a comparative analysis of the electoral data, the authors conclude that the consistency of administrative decisions on the formation of the region and the electoral performance have been weakening over time. During the initial phase, the electoral volatility was mainly due to the sluggishness and inertia of the previous territorial organization. After the phase of stabilization, the electoral volatility indices in different geographical areas changed due to a combination of social and political factors. The authors show that the 'looseness' of the Polish party system affect the electoral volatility in the region more than institutional decisions of the administrative reforms.

Key words: political geography, Warmia and Mazury voivodeship, Poland, electoral volatility, administrative reforms

* Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University
14 A. Nevskogo ul., Kaliningrad,
236041, Russia.

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This article examines three administrative units that are comparable in terms of population, contribution to public policy, and their influence on the development of regional political and geographical space. The subjects under scrutiny are the city of Olsztyn and the

cities and powiats of Elbląg and Elk. We will focus on the geography and electoral volatility in the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship. The index analysis and synchronic comparison of electoral data from the emerging region's districts were carried out to identify the qualitative characteristics of electoral volatility and its geographical distribution. Without striving to describe strict patterns of the regional polity's development, we aim to explore the coherence of conditions for regional construction in the framework of the administrative reform (enlargement of territorial units and segmentation of administrative functions) and electoral preferences of local residents.

A major achievement of the post-communist transformation in Poland was the creation of a functional municipal system [15, p. 87], although the process was complicated. Two large periods are identified in the history of the country's territorial divisions — the interbellum (from the independence until the World War II) and the post-war ones [1, p. 18]. The former witnessed the establishment of uniform administrative units and the latter changes in the territorial structure catering for the needs of the current political situation. Initially, the territorial organisation of post-War Poland was characterised by certain dualism — unification coupled with diversified functions of local authorities [2, p. 23]. The resulting mass of contradictions led to the abolition of powiats as an administrative level. A two-tier system required segmentation of voivodeships. The abolition of voivodeships and establishment of 49 administrative units were meant to centralise power under autocratic rule. The political regime of 'people's democracy' reduced local governance to a merely technical function, which affected the administrative performance of people's councils. The situation did not change dramatically after the administrative reform of 1975 and the adoption of a new law on people's councils in 1983, which defined councils as bodies with powers of self-government.

Non-electoral polities — such as the Polish People's republic was — demonstrate a tendency towards the vertical consolidation of government bodies. A different case is electoral polities following the principles of free competition of political agents. Local government plays an important role in such polities. National-scale political changes often begin with local initiatives. An important indicator is the volatility of citizens' electoral preferences demonstrated in local elections.

Immediately after reaching a political compromise in the Round Table Talks in 1989, the restoration of local government in Poland became an urgent issue. During the political transformation parliamentary institutions were at the centre of political changes. This could be explained by their broad powers and the fact that they enjoyed greater legitimacy than the party and administrative structures did [11, p. 32]. In March 1990, the *Sejm* adopted a law on local government, which introduced *gminas* as its principal units [3]. May 1990 saw the first election to local government bodies, which were strengthened with additional powers. At this stage, Poland's first democratic government did not only manage to restore the self-governing status of the lowest territorial unit but it also made an important step towards a subsidiary



state — a form of rule serving the needs of an ordinary citizen [14, p. 87]. Gminas have never had significant financial resources. Even those located in rapidly developing areas required considerable subventions, thus the central government was relieved to grant financial independence to gminas. A different case was regional authorities. Concerned about the possible loss of governmental control of both regional finances and the political situation in voivodeships, the left-wing cabinets were impeding reforms. This created a tradition of regional leaders' affiliation with a certain political force. The ex-Prime Minister Leszek Miller stressed that regional leaders should consider themselves appointee of the government rather representatives of local authorities.

In the early 1990s, it was already clear that electoral volatility in segmented districts had a profound effect on self-government. At the time, it was widely discussed whether there was a need for a radical reform in local government. The 'founding father' of the Polish self-government reform, Jerzy Regulski believed that a regional leader could be re-appointed from one voivodeship into another, as it had been the case in pre-war Poland. Using pre- and post-war public administration practices as benchmarks was an important element of the constitutional process and an obstacle to reaching necessary decisions on local governance [15]. Only in 1997, as the current Constitution was adopted, members of the Parliament set out to develop administrative reforms, which were implemented in 1998. The system of local government underwent a fundamental change. A three-tier administration system — voivodeships, powiats, and gminas — was re-introduced. One of the authors of the Polish local government reform Michał Kulesza emphasised that only the victory of the right forces in 1997 enabled the emergence of 16 new voivodeships composed of self-governed powiats consisting of gminas. The administrative division reform strengthened Poland's bicameralism. The Senate was developing into a chamber of regions. Despite limited constitutional powers, the upper house strives to play a significant role in shaping the regional policy.

The criticism of Poland's administrative reform centres on the growing socioeconomic disparities between enlarged voivodeships as compared to the previous administrative division. The so-called 'Eastern wall' emerged — the three regions at the country's eastern border (the Podlaskie, Lublin, and Podkarpatskie voivodeships). The area has high unemployment and crime rates and it experiences problems with private entrepreneurship development and investment attraction. The enlargement of regions did not lead to prosperity in these voivodeships. On the contrary, they lagged even further behind the industrially developed territories of Silesia and Lesser Poland. The development and adjustment of the local government system has not been finalised in Poland. The process has been stalled by the political, social, and economic changes in the regional policy.

The Warmia and Mazury voivodeship was established on January 1, 1999 in the course of the administrative reform aimed to unite the former Olsztyn voivodeship and large parts of the Elbląg (Elbląg and Braniewo

powiats and the gminas of Kiszewice and Susz) and Suwałki voivodeships (Węgorzewo, Gołdap, Olecko, Ełk, Pisz, and Giżycko powiats), and part of the Toruń (Nowe Miasto powiat), the Ciechanów (Działdowo powiat), and Ostrołęka ones (the Rozogi gmina was incorporated into the Szczytno powiat). The territorial organisation of the new voivodeship was close to that of the Olsztyn voivodeship of 1946—1975. Olsztyn ‘reclaimed’ its lost powiats and gminas extending its dominion over Elbląg, Ełk, Gołdap, and Olecko. This was not only a territorial and demographic, but also an economic increment. The most important acquisition was the cities and powiats of Elbląg and Ełk. The territories of the former Elbląg voivodeship increased regional population by 240 thousand people and that of the Suwałki voivodeship by almost 294 thousand people. Out of a rural voivodeship with one city, Warmia and Mazury turned into a relatively urbanised region with sufficient resources to develop both industry and agriculture [4].

In 2002, in the voivodeship two new powiats were created: Gołdap and Węgorzewo. Today, the voivodeship comprises two city powiats and 19 powiats proper, which are divided into 116 gminas — 16 town gminas, 33 mixed type gminas, and 67 rural gminas.

The preparation and implementation of local government reform was accompanied by heated discussions about the nature of future relations between local bodies and the national government and the composition and number of new administrative units. One of the central issues was redistribution of authority, i.e. the question as to which political force will benefit from the reforms. The Polish society perceived the local government reform as an isolated administrative decision. The relevant discussion was viewed as a continuation of the struggle that accompanied the constitutional process of 1990—1997 [5, 120]. Both the left and the right had grounds to suspect each other of the intention to change the situation in their favour through enlarging the regions. Small political parties feared that their representatives would be forced out of the regional political class [12].

In terms of electoral characteristics, the newly established Warmia and Mazury voivodeship was not a homogeneous political region. The last pre-reform election took place in 1997 — the voters elected members of the Sejm and the Senate. The Democratic Left Alliance won the election in Elbląg and Olsztyn with 33.9% and 33.4% of votes respectively. The right Solidarity Electoral Action won in Ełk with 33.3%, whereas the Lewica secured 27% of votes. The results of the 1998 election to local governments were quite similar. In the very first months of their existence, the voivodeship leadership was faced with the problem of ‘separatism’ in Elbląg and unrealistic economic demands from Ełk [13, p. 54]. In the course of the 1998 Sejmik campaign, the liberal right opposition in Elbląg and the radical left opposition in Ełk were putting emphasis on the socioeconomic problems, although from different perspectives [6]. Elbląg insisted on acceding to the more economically developed Pomeranian voivodeship with the centre in Gdansk (until 1975, Elbląg was part of the Gdansk voivodeship). The less developed Ełk — once part of the Białystok voivodeship — counted on economic support from the new metropolis. These two cities and powiats, which

did not have administrative relations with Olsztyn in the post-war period, became important objects on the electoral map of the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship.

Of interest are the results of three post-reform elections — the presidential of 2000, parliamentary of 2001, and local of 2002. The left won the election in all three districts. In 2002, the first election to local administrations took place, with the voters electing *Burmistrzs*, *wójt*s, and town presidents. The geographical distribution of support for the incumbent showed a decrease from the west (Elbląg) to the east (Ełk). Geographical volatility was 4.8% for each election in 2000—2002. At the time, it seemed that the beneficiary of the 1998 administrative reform and the incorporation of Elbląg and Ełk into the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship was the Lewica, which had improved its positions at the local level.

However, the situation changed in 2005, primarily, due to the crisis in the Lewica [16, p. 60]. In the 2005 parliamentary election, most voters opted for the liberal Civic Platform in Elbląg and Olsztyn and the conservative Law and Justice in Ełk (51.96%). The decreasing geographical volatility of support for the metropolis's incumbent was preserved. The Civic Platform secured 56.47% of the votes in Elbląg and 48.09% in Ełk. The volatility also increased. In 2000—2002, it was 4.8% and, in 2005—2006, it reached 8.4%. In the 2010 local election, the situation repeated itself, although a local non-party group won in Ełk. In 2006 and 2014, the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice were almost equally popular with the voters in Ełk, with a difference of approximately 5%. Together, they accounted for slightly above ½ of the electorate.

Table 1

Incumbent parties in administrative units of the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship, the Sejmik election

| Year | Elbląg | Olsztyn | Ełk |
|------|--|--|--|
| 1998 | Democratic Left Alliance | Democratic Left Alliance | Solidarity Electoral Action |
| 2002 | Democratic Left Alliance — Labour Union | Democratic Left Alliance — Labour Union | Democratic Left Alliance — Labour Union |
| 2006 | Civic Platform | Civic Platform | Law and Justice |
| 2010 | Civic Platform | Civic Platform | Civic Platform |
| 2014 | Civic Platform | Civic Platform | Law and Justice |

Source: Serwis PKW — pkw.gov.pl

By 2006, Elbląg was integrated into the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship in terms of electoral geography. However, the west of the former Suwałki voivodeship still stands out, and the territory is characterised by significant volatility in electoral preferences, which is typical of certain zones of the 'Eastern wall' of poverty in today's Poland [7, p. 23].

If attractive for political struggle, the town and gmina of Elk is a complicated area due to its high electoral volatility. The calculation of the Pedersen effect proves this fact.

The index is optimal for studying the dynamic properties of party systems, since it reflects the commonalities and differences between the diachronic patterns. Moreover, it can be easily interpreted as it is based on a theoretically significant method [8, p. 27].

The index is calculated using the following formula:

$$V = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (p_{it} - p_{i(t+1)})}{2},$$

where V stands for volatility, p_{it} for the initial electoral result (% of the votes) within one cycle, and $p_{i(t+1)}$ for the final electoral result within the same cycle (% of votes).

Table 2

Electoral volatility in local elections to the council of the city of Elk

| Political agents | 2006 election, % of the votes | 2010 election, % of the votes | 2014 election, % of the votes |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Democratic Left Alliance (within coalition) | 12.82 | 17.32 | 11.91 |
| Polish Peasants' Party | 4.53 | 4.24 | 4.1 |
| Civic Platform | 23.57 | 24.5 | 20.34 |
| Law and Justice | 22.48 | 16.27 | 21.03 |
| Common Good | 16.92 | 31.48 | 34.33 |
| Other | 19.68 | 6.19 | 8.29 |

Source: Serwis PKW — pkw.gov.pl

The average weighted index was 3.31 based on the 2010 election result, and 1.56 based on the 2014 results. The absolute figures are even more stunning. Almost 20% of the voters changed their initial preferences in the 2006—2010 cycle and 9.4% in the 2010—2014 cycle. Even in view of a twofold decrease in volatility, approximately 6,500 potential votes or over 2,000 votes, if the turnout is taken into account (32.16% in the 2014 election), are available for competitive distribution thanks to the stabilisation of the electoral performance of the non-party Common Good alliance.

High volatility in Elk makes it possible for local non-party groups not only to affect local politics but also to achieve political success. For instance, the Common Good public initiative emerged during the electoral campaign of 2006. It put forward Tomasz Andrukiewicz as the city president candidate. In the second round of the election, he defeated his competitor from the Civic Platform having secured 57.2% of the votes. For the second time Andrukiewicz became the head of the city in 2010 with the support of 73.7% of the voters. He won his third term in office in 2014 with 77.3% of the votes. The Common Good is presided by Marek Chojnowski, the *starosta* of the gmina of Elk. The organisation declared ideological proximity to the right,

but it does not deem cooperation with other parties within the local government impossible. Initially, the Common Good was considered a spoiler for the Law and Justice party. However, today, it is described as a centre-right organisation with a high coalition potential. For instance, having failed to secure the majority of seats in the Ełk gmina council in 2014, Chojnowski did not ally with the Law and Justice but rather turned to the Polish Peasants' Party. Surprisingly, an established political party became a minor coalition partner of a non-party organisation at the local level.

Another non-party group initiated impeachment of the president of Elbląg. The 2013 removal of the president and the city council did not increase the electoral volatility in the voivodeship. However, it demonstrated the possible amplitude of oscillations in electoral preferences in the city and emphasised the difference between personal and party voting. Grzegorz Nowaczyk (Civic Platform) was elected president of Elbląg in 2010, having secured 18308 votes in the second round (60.22%), and he was removed from office by 23087 votes (96%) of citizen who took part in the referendum [9]. The removal was initiated by the local 'Free Elbląg' community, which accused the authorities of incompetency and erosion of the citizens' trust [10]. As a result of the 2013 by-election, a member of the Law and Justice Erzy Wilk became the new city president with 17266 (51.74%) of the votes. However, the 2014 presidential election was won with 17180 (55.23%) of the votes by the independent candidate Witold Wróblewski who was supported by the Civic Platform and the Polish Peasants' Party. The average weighted electoral volatility index stood at 2.05. The two major political forces of today's Poland the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice are in control of electoral preference — in Elbląg to a greater degree than in Olsztyn and, naturally, Ełk.

The geographical equalisation of electoral volatility from west to east achieved by the establishment of the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship had a mid-term effect. Today, the same 4.8% in the incumbent's results describe the difference between Elbląg and Olsztyn. The effect of the administrative reform, namely, the enlargement of regions, was rather limited. At least, it is the case in the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship. Although the metropolis incumbent is still capable of securing its positions, it cannot be excluded that, in the future, the voivodeship periphery will determine major political rifts and set the regional political agenda.

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About the authors

Prof Ilya N. Tarasov, Head of the Department of Politics, Social Technology and Mass Communication, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Russia.

E-mail: ITarasov@kantiana.ru

Dr Efim S. Fidrya, the Department of Politics, Social Technology and Mass Communication, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Russia.

E-mail: EFidrya@kantiana.ru

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