

# Election coverage in Poland 2005: A content analysis of the main TV news programs



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**ABSTRACT:** The paper presents results of empirical research of election coverage in Poland 2005. The case of correlation of media content and public polls is described. The author is going to confirm the functioning of an agenda-setting mechanism in the Polish TV news programs. Directions of use of public pools and methods of presentation of outcomes were analyzed.

**KEYWORDS:** elections in Poland, TV news programs, public pools, content analysis, election coverage



## **INTRODUCTION**

The election campaigns in 2005 were preceded by a series of negative political events which reflected the social atmosphere of the time. During the time of left party government, the first parliamentary investigation commission was created. Its purpose was to investigate “Rywingate” – a corruption scandal. In 2004 many other scandals of the political elite were discovered. For example, members of the ruling party – SLD – were accused of informing organized crime groups about planned police actions (“Starachowice scandal”). Another commission was created to investigate abnormalities that occurred during the privatization of state companies. All of these events combined with the current actions of the government had a very negative influence on Polish society: both the government and prime minister were strongly criticized. According to the research of Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (The Public Opinion Research Center), in 2005, the percentage of people who had negative opinions of the leftist government was increasing throughout society. Days before election, the government had the support of only 15% of the population. Critical opinions reached the level of 45 % (*Attitudes...*). The parliament had no better support. Two years before the election, positive opinions were at the level of 20%, a year later this level decreased to only 10% (*Opinions...*). At the beginning of 2005 few Poles identified themselves as belonging to any particular party; the majority believed that there was not a single political party that would represent their

views or interests. Approximately 8% of people held this belief for parties that announced thorough changes – PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice]), PO (Platforma Obywatelska [Civil Platform]) – and about 2% for (Social Democratic Party of Poland), (Unia Pracy [Labor Union]) and (Unia Wolności [Freedom Union/Democratic Party]) (*Opinions...*). A characteristic element of the 2005 election campaign was indecisiveness amongst voters. The number of people who had not made a decision before the final election increased from 20% to 40% (Kolczyński, Mazur, 2007, p. 14).

The opinions reflected in the poll during the parliamentary election were the lowest since the social and political changes in 1989 and reached less than 40%.

The negative atmosphere was successfully used by PiS. A political slogan of “4<sup>th</sup> Republic of Poland”, created by the party’s main strategists, consisted of ideas about necessary changes and ending the present state of social and political relations. The use of the current social situation and, defining a clear “enemy” were the main elements of the campaign organized by all parties. Poles were encouraged to bring an end to pathologies in politics, and at the same time warned about the right party and about a single power. Changes in moods were revealed in many opinion polls.

## OPINION POLLS AND MEDIA

The amount of published opinion polls during the elections in 2005 was impressive. Quoting J. Kowalik: “opinion polls reached the amount that had never been seen before. Everyone was publishing them. In the last two months before parliamentary election new opinion polls were being published almost every day” (Kowalik, 2007, p. 135). The largest amount of them were created by TNS OBOP. This institute conducted research for “Wiadomości” of TVP, *Polityka* and *Fakt*. Regular opinion polls were being created for *Gazeta Wyborcza* and, sometimes, for *Puls Biznesu* by PBS. TVN and *Rzeczpospolita* were cooperating with GfK Polonia. Regular opinion polls were also done by CBOS and PGB (Sora, 2007, p. 180).

Most research showed the highest support for PO and Donald Tusk. However, election day verified those polls in a negative way. Politicians, together with some journalists and commentators accused poll labs of not being precise enough and of a high difference between predictions and reality. Labs were trying to defend themselves. OFBOR (Polish Association of Public Opinion and Marketing Research Firms) announced that those accusations are groundless because researches were showing a trend of changes in preferences. Since the victory of PIS in parliamentary elections, a rapid decline in support for D. Tusk was observed, together with an increase in support for Lech Kaczyński. Showing the trend was the most important element of the research. According to A. Sora, the difference between opinion polls and the real result (given by PKW) is the effect of so called “last minute voters” (Sora, 2007, pp. 185). It was seen especially during the second round of presidential election, when decisions were made in front of the ballot. Huge changes in prefer-

ences were also a result of the negative campaign and low voter attendance (Sora, 2007, pp. 186–188). I. Hofman: “elections [2005 – B.Ł.] in Poland with no doubt have shown a lot of problems such as: dependence of preferences on the order, length and frequency of candidate’s presentation in media, modifying voters attitudes by selecting topics of public debates [...], designating analysis context of politicians speeches [...], ways of presenting opinion polls” (Hofman, 2007, pp. 157–158).

An interesting topic for consideration is whether the content of debates was created with the influence of released results or whether those results influenced media reports. It is underlined that the massmedia plays an enormous role in creating opinions. A basic element of media analysis is verifying the relationship between media content and the reactions of the audience. The purpose of my research is to search for a correlation between the content of the media agenda (election topic) and the results of the election. I hypothesized, according to research already done on agenda-setting, that together with an increased amount of information about particular parties or candidates, the amount of votes given to the most important politicians will also rise.

In my research, in addition to analyzing the correlation between media content and the results of election, I also checked ways of presenting opinion polls. Significant for quality analysis was checking the editorial staff precision while presenting data. Crucial quality confirmation was whether the methodology had been included (if opinion polls included facts about who, when and what number of people were asked to participate). I also checked whether the public was informed about the type of research (for example by phone, at home, etc.). If only the first group of criteria was included I estimated opinion polls as “methodology included.”

I also verified which research institutes were used most often and whether presented opinion polls were created on the demand of the editorial staff or whether they were only presenting opinion polls that had already been shown in other media.

Results of preferences were included in 26% of all information that I researched,<sup>1</sup> 10% of topics were based only on opinion polls, often without any other comments.

The precision of news that included results of research was the reason for my reservation. “Wydarzenia” was my biggest concern. Although this news program had the highest amount of opinion polls, only 2 (2.7%) out of 75 (during 5 months) included methodology. “Fakty” was no better. Precision of information was seen only in 5%. More methodology was observed in “Wiadomości”. News in public television included information about methodology in more than half of presented information (Table 1). Compared to the competition it looked impressive. However, 48% of information about opinion polls lacked methodology, which has to be

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis made from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2005 till the second round of presidential election. More than 4000 pieces of information were registered in all examined auditions. Election topics were included in 770 pieces of information.

judged negatively as it is a public television. Authors of information, relating news to the same opinion poll the next day, would not present full data. Many times opinion polls were used only partly to fill up presented news.

Table 1. Presence of methodology in opinion polls

TV news program	Methodology				Total
	yes		no		
“Wydarzenia” – Polsat	2	2.7%	73	97.3%	75
“Fakty” – TVN	3	5.0%	57	95.0%	60
“Wiadomości” –TVP 1	33	53.2%	29	46.8%	62

Source: the author's elaboration.

“Wydarzenia” was leading when it came to the amount of opinion polls. Unfortunately, since the beginning of June 2005 until the day of election, information about methodology appeared only once (!). During the two weeks after the parliamentary election, private televisions did not publish information about methodology even once. Single data were published only before second round of presidential election.

## PRESENTATION OF PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

During the period of research, opinion polls of TNS OBOP were being presented most often. Results of PBS DGA and CBOS were also popular (see Table 2).

Table 2. Public opinion institutes in TV news programs

Institute	Frequency	Percent
CBOS	38	14.8
OBOP	78	30.4
PBS DGA	45	17.5
GFK POLONIA	32	12.2
Others <sup>2</sup>	38	14.8
No information	26	10.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: the author's elaboration.

Their common share was about 15%. The results of OBOP were mainly presented in “Wiadomości” and “Wydarzenia”. In “Fakty,” next to OBOP, results from PBS were

<sup>2</sup> PGB, Pentor, Ipsos.

also often presented. This TVN news program was also characterized by the largest variety and uniformity of data that came from different labs (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of researches of public opinion institutes in TV news programs

Institute	TV news programs			Total
	"Wydarzenia"	"Fakty"	"Wiadomości"	
CBOS	13	12	13	38
OBOP	27	17	34	78
PBS	19	15	11	45
GFK POLONIA	7	16	9	32
Other sources	10	17	11	38
No information	11	10	5	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>257</b>

Source: the author's elaboration.

It happened, during the examined period, that presented opinion polls in news were not followed by the name of the lab. This mistake was observed, again, in private television: "Wydarzenia" (12.6%) and "Fakty" (11.5%). It was less frequent in public "Wiadomości". Another aspect of quality analysis, concerning professional presentation of opinion polls, was information about who ordered them. All news programs mostly did not give this information. It was observed, again, especially in private televisions – mainly in "Fakty" (see Table 4).

Table 4. Mandator of opinion polls

	TV news programs			Total
	"Wydarzenia"	"Fakty"	"Wiadomości"	
	Frequency			
Editorial staff	1 (2.8%)	11 (30.6%)	24 (66.7%)	36
Other media	46 (51.1%)	22 (24.4%)	22 (24.4%)	90
No information	40 (31.7%)	52 (41.3%)	34 (27.0%)	126
Other sources	0 (0.0%)	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>257</b>

Source: the author's elaboration.

Comparing quality aspects, I also analyzed which editorial staff presented the largest amount of opinion polls ordered by themselves. In this case "Wiadomości" was at the very top. Almost 67% of them belonged to that news program. "Fakty" also

owned some. In “Wydarzenia” it happened only once, which was only 3%. The last criterion, while observing opinion polls, was verifying the relationship with other programs. Journalists of “Wydarzenia” did that twice as often as journalists from the competition. Relating to “other news programs” happened in more than half of the presented opinion polls, especially between the parliamentary election and the first round of the presidential election (in almost 77% of cases) (see Table 5).

Table 5. Clients of opinion polls – comparison of TV news programs and research periods

Periods of research	Clients of opinion polls	TV news programs			Total
		“Wydarzenia”	“Fakty”	“Wiadomości”	
From the beginning to the parliamentary election (1.06–25.09.2005)	editorial staff	0	5	18	23
	other media	32	17	17	66
	no information	35	50	32	117
	other sources	0	2	3	5
	<b>total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>211</b>
Between parliamentary election and first round of the presidential election (26.09–9.10.2005)	editorial staff	0	2	4	6
	other media	10	2	3	15
	no information	3	1	1	5
	<b>total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26</b>
Between first and second round of the presidential election (10.10–23.10.2005)	editorial staff	1	4	2	7
	other media	4	3	2	9
	no information	2	1	0	3
	<b>total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>19</b>

Source: the author's elaboration.

In this period both “Fakty” and especially “Wiadomości” tried to order their own opinion polls. In “Wydarzenia” there was not even a single one. The only one registered took place before the second round of the presidential election. A growth trend concerning intensified orders of those three news programs was perceptible after the parliamentary elections. As a result a very interesting trend can be observed. The media prefers to present direct “fight” between two candidates for president. Most of the time two daily newspapers were being quoted – *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*. Opinion polls ordered by those were presented by all examined news programs. Occasionally results of the tabloid *Fakt* were also shown. Weekly magazines – *Polityka* and *Wprost* were also quoted. All news programs were using research done by Polskie Radio, which showed that W. Cimoszewicz may win the presidential election. “Wydarzenia” also presented internet opinion polls from *gazeta.pl* and *wirtualnapolska.pl*. The news program of T. Lis used research done for “Wiadomości”. Such a large amount of opinion polls coming from newspapers shows their great influence on the agenda of TV programs. It concerned especially

*Gazeta Wyborcza*, opinion polls of which were greatly presented. A program that consisted of the greatest variety of opinion polls was “Wydarzenia”. There were many topics concentrated around the results of public opinion research. Some of them would not occur if particular phenomena were not stressed (as the example of W. Cimoszewicz). It is worth considering whether such a great amount of research could have had an influence on news programs. For the best analysis verifying the function of agenda-setting I chose the reports of CBOS. Data placed CBOS at the third place in the general amount of information presented by news programs but their estimated results were not far from the true ones. Another reason for choosing CBOS was that this institute was the only one to allow access to all data. The rest of them either published partial reports or demanded fees for all information. A very important element was also the time and duration of the research. CBOS was doing research continuously, monthly, and most importantly in the analysis of agenda-setting – in the first days of the months. Correlation analysis consisted of verifying information every month (from all TV programs) about particular politicians with every month research results. Simple statistics helped to estimate which data had a greater influence. The task was to check whether the information presented by the media was positively correlated with election results and preferences or whether opinion polls influenced the content of news programs (the amount of information). I analyzed the election agenda each month from June until September 2005 and also the content of programs between the rounds of the presidential election. My research was based on a scheme proposed by agenda-setting creators (“Research in Charlotte”). Full presidential and parliamentary election agendas were also compared (all election information about particular candidates). Results of analysis (Fig. 1) show that the greatest amount of correlation (+0.84) took place in the parliamentary elections. The presidential election had not much less

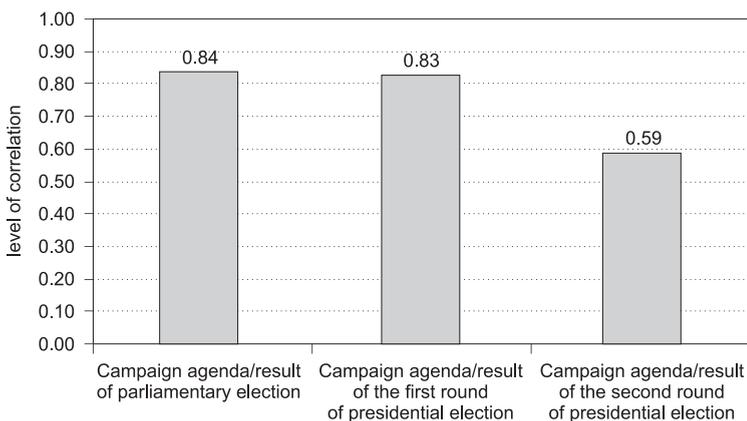


Fig. 1. Correlations between TV news programs campaign agenda and elections results (Pearson correlations)

Source: author's elaboration.

(+0.83). The lowest, but still statistically important were the results of the second round of the presidential elections (more information about D. Tusk, but victory for L. Kaczyński). The results confirm hypothesis of agenda-setting. Partial information from each month is also interesting.

Detailed analysis showed strong correlations between the contents of news programs and opinion polls. When it comes to the parliamentary elections, correlation between opinions and contents of news programs (and vice versa) in particular months stayed at a stable and high level (Fig. 2).

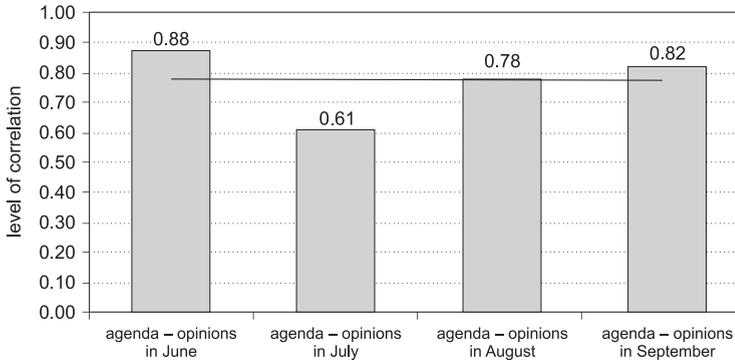


Fig. 2. Parliamentary campaign: correlations between media agenda and polls from June to September 2005 (Pearson correlations)

Source: author’s elaboration.

Connection between the results of “presidential” opinion polls and content (and vice versa) was at higher level compared to information about political parties. However, a falling trend was observed, which could show a sharp fight between politicians, more intensive discussions of particular topics in the media and changes in public opinion research (Fig. 3).

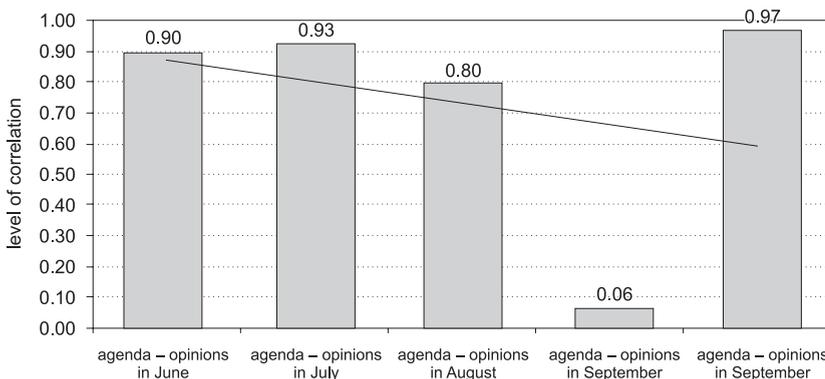


Fig. 3. Presidential campaign: correlations between media agenda and polls from June to October 2005 (Pearson correlations)

Source: author’s elaboration.

Analysis consisting of the verification of the media content's influence on each other (time1) on voter's opinions (time2) and opinion of voters (time1) on election agenda (time2) brought interesting effects. Considering the parliamentary elections, a high influence of media on respondents answers was observed in June when knowledge of society about candidate parties could have been insufficient. It suggests that respondents could give answers only about politicians who were shown most often. In summer the influence was falling. It can be explained by people's holiday journeys and so no interest in media whatsoever. It is clear that at the same time when politicians were also on holiday building topic agendas, media searched for opinion polls. During the last month of the campaign strong media influence was again observed. Not only politicians were very active (as it was the final phase of the campaign) but also media intensively concentrated on them. It is suspected that a great amount of people who had not a made decision about their vote yet, were searching for information and finally made their decisions under the influence of the media. The essential influence of news program content was observed between the September agenda and the final result of the election. Predominant negative information about SLD had a very unsatisfactory effect on that party's final result. Moreover, all the parties showed most often in the researched period became present in the new parliament. Victory of PiS despite more information about PO can illustrate the effect of the spiral of violence (see Fig. 4).

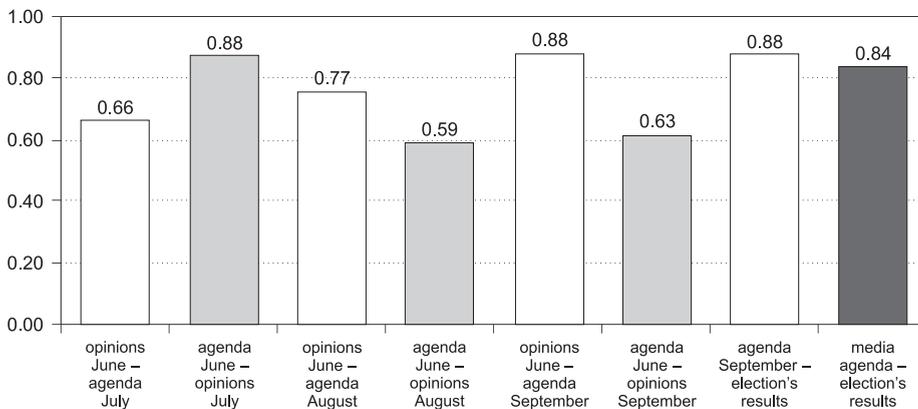


Fig. 4. Crosslagged correlation analysis between television agendas and public opinion polls – parliamentary election

However, the situation in the presidential election was more complicated. Political parties had waited until the last moment when presenting candidates. That together with speculation about possible candidates of famous people (J. Kwaśniewska, T. Lis) caused great variation in opinion polls results. On the one hand, the media, by presenting opinion polls considering “untypical” candidates, influenced their high position, but also the presence of opinion polls themselves had a great influence on the election agenda of information content. Intensive

“fight” between the most serious candidates was a very attractive topic for the media. However, the media were not that passive as well. It could be well seen during the information about the campaign of W. Cimoszewicz. Problems with the justice system or “Jarucka case” had a great effect on this candidate’s final standing. The amount of information about him was high, but his support was dramatically falling. Considering that, through the first level of agenda-setting, a paradox could be seen. However, it should be considered through the second level of agenda-setting. Attributes of W. Cimoszewicz had a great influence on his negative image and fall of support as a consequence. “Crump” of correlation in September and the beginning of October was a result of a great deal of information about this politician and a lack of presence in the opinion polls. W. Cimoszewicz withdrew from the campaign in the middle of September (see Fig. 5).

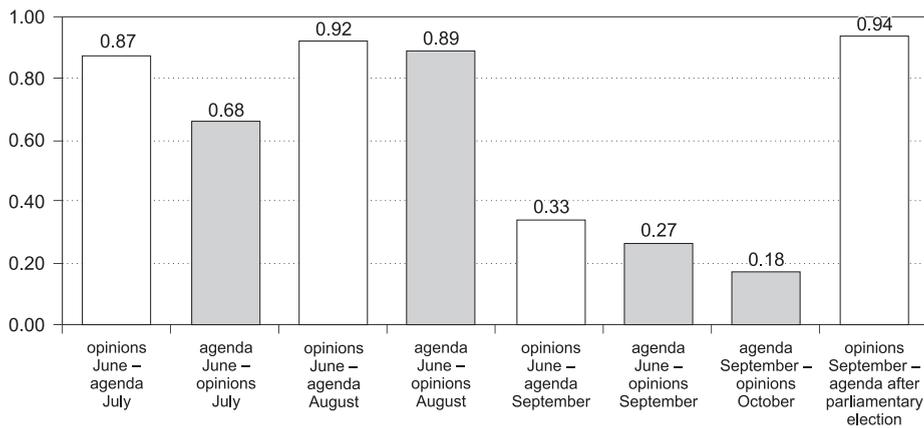


Fig. 5. Crosslagged correlation analysis between television agendas and public opinion polls – parliamentary election

A very high positive correlation of news program content was observed again between the parliamentary elections and the first round of the presidential elections. As it was said before, at that time information about D. Tusk was the most popular. Presence of candidates in the agenda was highly correlated with the first round result. However, a lower indicator occurred in the second round. Between the rounds journalists were speaking about candidates who had not got to the second round. Their presence in the media obviously could not have any effect on the second round. In information content, D. Tusk had a small advantage. Despite that, similarly to parliamentary elections, the candidate of PiS was a winner. This time Tusk’s attributes had negative image. Many times the media presented elements of political programs which were negatively presented by PiS and L. Kaczyński in particular. Again, spiral of silence might have some effect.

## CONCLUSION

Collected data confirmed the functioning of an agenda-setting mechanism. Correlation of the election agenda (both elections) with final results suggests that media (news programs) could have had an influence on election decisions in Poland. However, there is space for another concept. Data show that in the particular months of analysis it was the results of opinion polls that became a reason for the creation of a topic agenda.

The results of the research open space for the next research and looking for the answer to the question: who does influence whom?

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