

Description for general public

The main aim of the proposed research project is determining the scope and character of the influence of media on political orientations. The planned research should fill a gap that exists in the knowledge about factors shaping the public opinion. Do the media matter for democracy? Do they have a role in changing citizens' minds, influencing their cognitive processes and, ultimately, decisions? We know a lot about public opinion, and we know a have in-depth knowledge about the media. However, we do not know enough about their interaction. Sociology and political science have gathered a significant body of theory and data on the structure and correlates of social and political attitudes. We know what factors differentiate political orientations in the society, and how attitudes are related to the programs of political parties. Polish sociology and political science have long-term of experience in conducting empirical research of voters and political parties, both in-depth and comparative. Some examples are: Polish General Electoral Study and European Election Studies. On the other hand, communication studies have gathered a body of knowledge about the changing landscape of print and broadcast media. We have determined structural constraints of the functioning of this sector. Many works have been published about the changing criteria for publishing media content, and about the forms of consumption of the media. In recent years, the focus has shifted to internet communication: the web is both a channel of distribution for traditional media sources and a source of exclusive material. Moreover, thanks to interactivity, it brings qualitative difference to media exposure: consumers are often also producers. The changes in the internet occur fast, but they are followed by a growing number of scholars. Our main research objective is determining the scale and character of the influence of the media (both traditional and social) on selected political attitudes. We are interested in the process of public opinion formation: if, and to what extent, it is the product of the media system.

The proposed project can be located on the intersection of three disciplines: political science, sociology and communication studies. The political science approach will be necessary in conceptualizing and operationalizing beliefs, attitudes and political behavior. Sociological approach will be applied to analyze the factors of change in attitude structure. The experience of communication studies will be useful for conceptualizing and recording the media content. In the study we will test hypotheses derived from existing theoretical and empirical work. They will concern: 1. The structure of the media flow (one- or two-sided, i.e. whether there is media consensus on the issues); 2. The impact of media on developing and articulating attitudes; 3. The role of ideological links between citizens and the media (friendly v. hostile) in influencing attitudes; 4. The strength of cognitive competence as intervening variable in the relation between the media exposure and attitudes.

We formulate the following hypotheses:

Firstly, we posit that citizens are intellectually and emotionally linked to particular news outlets (newspapers, internet websites), which frame issues in the manner consistent with citizens' ideological orientation (partisan bias). This hypothesis flows the friendly media theory: news consumers tend to switch to like-minded outlets whenever possible, and these outlets serve in organizing and reinforcing voters' belief systems

Secondly, we believe that "friendly" media have more impact on political attitudes than "hostile" outlets. However, the impact of the media will be limited, regardless of orientation (source bias).

Thirdly, in our view exposure to positive or negative news frames will have different influence on support for particular political parties, depending on intervening variables.

We believe that a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods will provide a deep and wide insight into the problem under study. The most important empirical component will be the two-wave panel survey on a sample representative for the citizens of Poland. The first wave will be a reference point: it will establish political attitudes, knowledge and political orientation of respondents. In order to measure cognitive abilities, the cognitive reflection test will be used. The second wave will contain the stimulus and its result. The survey will be fielded online.