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Neighbourhood Council as a Path of Political Career Development in Poland

Abstract: The article discusses the role of sub-municipal (neighbourhood, city district) councils as a path to a political career in Polish big cities. The reported research is based on data from six Polish cities. The analysis of social composition of the group of neighbourhood councillors refers to Putnam's law of increasing disproportionality. Through reference to various theoretical concepts, the process of selection is divided into three stages: self-selection, pre-selection (top-down selection) and bottom-up selection. The role of neighbourhood councils is considered in the context of the concepts of the "incubator" and "respirator" of a political career.

Keywords: neighbourhood council, political career, local democracy, local election

For over twenty years, several European countries have been trying to implement reforms including organization of sub-municipal councils in individual city districts. For instance, in 1980 and 1990, such experiments took place in the United Kingdom (Hambleton & Hogget 1990; Blakeley 2010) and Germany (Franke & Lohr 2001). During the first decade of the 21st century similar innovations were also introduced in Belgium (Van Asche & Dierickx 2007), Spain (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008), Netherlands (Denters & Klok 2005) and Slovenia (Bačlija & Haček 2009). Special attention was given to Scandinavian cities (Bäck at al. 2000; Bäck at al. 2005), where sub-municipal councils were sometimes responsible for spending over a half of the total city budget. Most of the reforms are seen as an element of the broader process of attempting to strengthen participatory democracy (Quinn 2012; Daemen & Schaap 2012), although Lowndes & Sullivan (2008) mention economic, political and social rationale in addition to the civic rationale which is focused on energizing local communities. Also Griggs & Roberts (2012: 185) note that in some cities, reforms of neighbourhood operations are increasingly concerned with achieving more effective services, rather than enhancing community engagement and political accountability.

These reforms have often been examined from the point of view of their impact on community involvement in governance or management of city services. But less attention is given to their impact on the political recruitment process and city politics. Some studies point out that sub-municipal institutions replicate the same

type of political games as practised by city councils (Bäck et al. 2005; Ringeling et al. 2012).

At the same time, the topic of career development of local government politicians has been explored in numerous publications (eg. Verhelst et al. 2013; Steyvers & Verhelst 2012; Aars et al. 2012; Steyvers & Reynaert 2005; Aars & Offerdal 1998). The writers usually focus either on the municipal level of local politics, or on the upper tiers of sub-national governments. However, there seems to be much less interest in political careers of local activists operating at the neighbourhood or district level.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

In this paper we ask questions concerning recruitment and political careers of neighbourhood activists in Polish big cities. More specifically, we ask:

- What is the social background of neighbourhood councillors? Does it differ from city level politicians or the background of politicians who are active on the upper tiers of public governments?
- Does activity in neighbourhood councils help in furthering political career? How often do local activists consider their role in sub-municipal institutions a step which might help them in political involvement on other levels? And if so, does local activity really help in the process of pre-selection and selection?

Aars et al. (2012) mention three phases in a councillor's political career: the phase before the election; the phase that involves activities taking place within the local council; and the third phase, which comprises ambition-based plans for the future. Their analysis is focused on local councillors, but it can also be applied to members of neighbourhood councils. Answering the first research question, we discuss the first phase, trying to analyse recruitment paths for neighbourhood councillors. The second research questions concentrates on the last phase as defined by Aars et al. (2012).

As regards the social background of neighbourhood councillors we follow the law of increasing disproportion formulated by Putnam (1976). According to it we may expect that a reverse pattern of increasing importance in the government system will be accompanied by decreasing representation of lower-status groups (low education, low income, youth, women¹). To illustrate this phenomenon, Aars & Offerdal (1998: 210) use a metaphor of a "Chinese box puzzle." According to this concept, we may expect the composition of local councils to reflect the structure of the whole community more visibly than is the case of regional or central authorities. The gradual selection (relatively open at the lowest levels and closed towards the top) gives an opportunity for low status groups to be represented as well. This pattern of elite selection makes it possible for candidates to gain experience and compete for higher tier seats with other candidates of "higher status" (Wasilewski 2006). However, Wasilewski claims that this model works in a slightly different way in the Polish setting, where considerable disproportion in representation of various social groups may also be noticed

¹ In several studies of cities in the US and Western Europe ethnic minorities are also mentioned in this context.

at the local government level, similarly to what can be observed at the national level. Although Wasilewski's empirical research focuses on county rather than municipal elites, we may expect that political elites in the largest cities are more similar to those existing at a county level, and less similar to those found in the smallest municipalities. Based on earlier research (Swianiewicz 2008), we know that a typical municipal council may be characterized by weak representation of women, young and uneducated people. Over-representation of persons with university degrees concerns mainly big cities (with population over 100,000), where they constitute just under 80% of all councillors. Low representation of women and youth may be found in all municipalities, regardless of their size, and may be noticed in other European countries as well (Egner et al. 2013).

In this article, we want to find out if similar phenomena may also be noted in neighbourhood councils. We may expect that in the case of institutions which operate at the lowest level, that disproportion will be smaller than in the case of national or even municipal representative organisations. But this potentially good representation of all social strata may be weakened if we confirm the popular stereotype (mentioned e.g. by Matczak 2006), which suggests that neighbourhood activity often attracts the participation of elderly groups (pensioners who have a lot of time for social involvement). Those pensioners are elected due to a lack of competition from other groups and limited interest of local communities in neighbourhood elections.

Investigating the impact of neighbourhood level activity on further political career we refer to attempting to find out if sub-local level activists restrict themselves to activities within neighbourhood structures, or, if they treat them as a helpful step in building their positions in the municipal, and then maybe even in the national, political elites. How often do we come across such intentions? Are they present from the start or are they a by-product of involvement in neighbourhood councils, resulting, for example, from a belief that one can have a real impact only while operating at the upper-tier of the political structure? And, if we are indeed dealing with such far-reaching political plans, then does involvement at a sub-local level increase one's chances to succeed in recruitment to political elites at other, higher, levels? In this part of this study, we try to find answers to the above-mentioned questions. In order to formulate them, we refer to career theories, looking for an explanation of how a neighbourhood councillor's position can help in his/her successful career in politics. We will investigate these assumptions using available empirical data.

Dalton (1950, qt. in Bartkowski 1996) perceives the mechanism of networking as one of the most important parts of a career-building process. It is a way of creating political capital (Bartkowski 1990: 92). Activity within a neighbourhood council can be thus treated as a way of building one's position in the social network which constitutes the basis for developing a political career. Adopting the notion of channels of elite recruitment discussed by Wasilewski (2006) for the case investigated in this article, we can identify two potential means of recruitment: community activity at a local level and active involvement in political organizations (political parties). Wasilewski notices also that regional and local politics have been increasingly gaining in importance as a channel of recruitment of national political elites during the past few years. The

author quotes data pointing out the percentage of representatives with experience in local politics, obtained for the following terms of the Polish parliament: 1991–1993 (7.8%), 1993–1997 (20%), 1997–2000 (42%), 2005–2007 (52.8%). Based on these data, we can expect that a common mechanism could also be discerned at a local level, where activity within neighbourhood structures would be helpful in the process of recruitment of new members of the municipal political elite.

But why should political parties (as well as other political organisations functioning in a city) be interested in enlisting candidates from the pool of sub-local activists? According to Nalewajko (2006), one of several political benefits of having local roots is better adaptation of a party's political program to the changing social needs. In her opinion, "it is in the interest of each political party to penetrate and colonize the territory—to come into existence and to cherish local structures, maintaining mobilization of local activists and their loyalty to the party" (p. 187). According to Cichosz (see Kokot 2009), being a member of a neighbourhood council is a very valuable experience which can be used while carrying out the duties of a councillor of the city council. A neighbourhood council is a place where citizens learn the basics of the functioning of self-government structures, ways of dealing with local issues and the application of various administrative procedures. Political parties might be interested in recruiting municipal activists from among neighbourhood councillors, because they represent an active part of society. Also, the objectives of neighbourhood councillors standing for election to the city council can be convergent with the above-mentioned interests of political parties. Many sub-local activists do use their neighbourhood activity as a channel of recruitment to the political elites of a city. They can expect that thanks to their activity their name will turn up high on a political party's slate, which can improve their chances of electoral success.²

Thus, a question arises—at which stage of the process of recruitment to the city political elites does the experience gained at a sub-local level become helpful? Referring to Halamska (2001) and Prewitt (1970), we distinguish between three processes:

- (i) *self-selection*—in which individuals make a decision to stand for election; in some groups of people, for different reasons, the willingness to run for election can be stronger than in others;
- (ii) *pre-selection (top-down selection, oligarchic selection)*—in the case of proportional elections, significant role is played by representatives of political parties, responsible for the preparation of electoral lists of candidates; a high position on the list can enhance, and a low one can diminish, chances for succeeding in the election. The "pre-selection" term is used by Halamska. Prewitt and Wasilewski opt for the term "top-down" or "oligarchic selection," respectively;
- (iii) *selection (bottom-up selection, democratic selection)*—in which voters decide about the final result. Wasilewski uses the term "bottom-up selection" (as opposed to the *top-down* selection discussed above).

² The Polish election system distinguishes between two types of election—a majoritarian system in smaller local governments and proportional elections in big cities. As a result of the detailed regulations of each system, candidates who are placed at the top of the list submitted by election committees have the highest chance of being elected.

We want to examine at which of the described stages being a neighbourhood activist enhances one's political career. Do neighbourhood councillors tend to make a decision to stand for election to city authorities more often than other citizens? Are they given preference by individuals responsible for preparing electoral lists of candidates within political parties? Does their activity help them in getting stronger endorsement from the electorate? The concept of building political capital through connections created during a neighbourhood councillor's activity at the sub-local level can be helpful in answering these questions.

At this point, we will focus for a while on the last question—which elements of voting behaviour can work in favour of neighbourhood councillors? Skarżyńska (2005) names a few mechanisms shaping voting decisions. We find the most interesting one to be *voting concentrated on the candidate*, or, in other words, on his social perception. In the case of neighbourhood activists, personal recognition can, to some extent, reduce the impact of a mechanism described by Zarycki (1997), according to which the dominant model of voting in big cities results from identification with a particular political party. Michalak (2001) also points to personal acquaintance with the candidate as a very important factor in making decisions in a local election. The author suggests the existence of a specific kind of activity carried out by a candidate, which has an important impact on decisions made by the electorate during local elections. It is working for the local community—which definitely can be identified with an activity within the neighbourhood authority structures.

In the following parts of this article, assumptions arising from theoretical concepts will be tested on the basis of empirical data collected in six Polish cities.

Research Context, Data Collection and Research Methods

The Polish Law on Local Government indicates that creation of sub-municipal district or neighbourhood councils lies within the city prerogative. The Law does define a very general framework for neighbourhood councils' operations, but the decisions on the boundaries of sub-municipal units as well as details of the election system, allocated financial resources, and competencies are in the hands of the city council.³ The law allows the city to use different names for sub-municipal units, which are usually called "districts" (*dzielnice*) or "neighbourhoods" (*osiedla*), although occasionally cities can use their own original terms, different from the two mentioned above. However, the law does not determine any differences in regulations concerning competencies and institutional structures of *dzielnica* (district) and *osiedle* (neighbourhood), and, in practice, the difference between the two units is fuzzy anyway. In this paper we use the term *neighbourhood* for any type of a sub-municipal structure.

Sub-municipal councils have been created in nineteen out of twenty two Polish cities with population above 150,000 inhabitants. Our analysis covers six cities characterized briefly in [Table 1](#).

³ The situation is different in Warsaw (capital city), in which a two-tier structure of local government is regulated by a separate national law.

Table 1

Cities covered by empirical analysis

	Population (in ,000)	Number of sub-municipal units (neighbourhoods/ districts)	Average population size of the sub-municipal unit (in ,000)	Expenditure of neighbourhood councils in proportion to city budget (2013)
Kraków	760	18	42	1.61%
Poznań	550	42	13	0.70%
Szczecin	410	37	10	0.05%
Gdynia	250	22	11	0.83%
Zabrze	180	17	11	0.07%
Olsztyn	175	23	8	0.04%

Source: own calculation based on information from city websites and city budget execution reports.

Concrete functions and competencies of neighbourhood councils differ among cities, as they depend on the decision of individual city councils. But [table 1](#) clearly shows that sub-municipal councils in Polish cities tend to have very limited competencies, and their budget is not larger than 3% of the total city budget (mostly it is below 1%). But, as we demonstrate in our empirical analysis, the varying significance of sub-municipal councils in city politics (measured by the size of their budget) can be a major factor explaining the variations in their impact on political careers of local activists. Citizens' interest in neighbourhood institutions is also limited, and, as [Denters & Klok \(2012\)](#) notice, the turn-out in sub-municipal elections is usually low, below the European average for similar institutions in other countries. Nevertheless, sub-municipal councils seem to play an increasingly important role as a channel for recruitment of local elites to local political parties ([Swianiewicz et al. 2013](#)). This role will be examined more carefully in the following sections.

Data used in empirical analysis originate from major three sources:

- Official web-sites of the cities, which are the source of information on sub-municipal councillors and their elections'. In some cases the information was supplemented by the telephone interviews with city hall employees;
- Official web-site of the National Bureau of Election (*Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza*) which provides precise information on city-level election, including list of all candidates, and number of votes for each of them;
- 55 face-to-face interviews with sub-municipal councillors in the researched cities. The interviews involved both responses to the questionnaire and semi-structured in-depth interviews and were part of the wider research project (see: [Swianiewicz et al. 2013](#)). In this article we refer to answers on questions related to their education, previous political career of the respondents, declared motives of activity in sub-municipal councils, as well as to their plans for the political career in the future.

All questionnaires were conducted in the second half of 2012 (June to September) and access to web-sites was between September and December 2012.

Who are the Neighbourhood Councillors?

Our data allow us to test the hypotheses discussed above. An average neighbourhood councillor is 49 years old. He or she is a bit older than a typical city councillor in a city over 150,000 inhabitants—who, according to calculations based on the Central Statistical Office data, is exactly 46.8 years old (see also [Table 2](#)). However, we notice considerable variation in councillor age among cities and even more among individual neighbourhoods. For example, the average age of a councillor in the Olsztyn district of Brzeziny is 58. It confirms the observation made earlier by Matczak (2006: 222), who concluded in his research that the claim about disproportionately high participation of pensioners cannot be confirmed on aggregate data, but it is possible to identify several single neighbourhoods in which this stereotype prevails. An indirect confirmation of the advanced age of neighbourhood activists may be found in the data collected by Olszowiec (2012). She demonstrates that candidates for the city council, who were neighbourhood councillors before, are usually older than candidates with no such experience. The rule is confirmed both by the 2006 and 2010 electoral data.

Table 2

Basic demographic characteristics of neighbourhood councillors as compared to city council members

	Neighbourhood council	City council	
		6 analysed cities	All Polish cities with population above 150,000
Mean age	49	47.2	46.8
% of university degree holders	75	92	85
% of women	39	27	26

Source: Websites of analysed cities, information collected through interviews in city halls, data from the National Electoral Committee.

None of the 55 interviewed neighbourhood activists working in 4 cities had less than a secondary school diploma and three quarters of them held a university degree. This is a higher percentage than what can be seen in total populations of the cities, but still lower than among city councillors in the same cities, where the rate of university degree holders is 92% (or 85% in all Polish cities with more than 150,000 inhabitants).

In each of the six cities we have analysed, the proportion of female neighbourhood councillors is higher than in the respective city council. For the 2010–2014 term, the proportion of women in councils in all cities over 150,000 inhabitants is 26%. In our sample of six cities it varies from 15% in Olsztyn to 35% in Gdynia. At the same time, the percentage of female neighbourhood activists varies between 30% in Kraków to 45% in Olsztyn. In almost one quarter of all neighbourhoods the number of women councillors is higher than the number of their male colleagues. Interestingly enough, there are usually (though not always) fewer women chairs of executive boards or chairs of neighbourhood councils (see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3

The proportion of women participation as city and neighbourhood councillors

	City council	Neighbourhood council	Chair of the neighbourhood council or chair of the neighbourhood executive board
Gdynia	35%	41%	41%
Kraków	23%	30%	6%
Olsztyn	15%	45%	26%
Poznań	22%	40%	26%
Szczecin	29%	44%	49%
Zabrze	35%	36%	30%
Average	27%	39%	29%

Source: Websites of analysed cities and information collected through interviews in city halls.

This means that executive positions in neighbourhoods are much less feminized than their councils, but there are still many more women in those positions than women mayors in Polish big cities (just 7% in the 2010–2014 term).⁴

Almost 50% of the interviewed neighbourhood councillors declare their past or present membership in voluntary social organizations. Taking into account their community activity, the proportion does not look impressively high. It is also lower than among city councillors in Polish cities of a comparable size: according to research conducted in 2007, three quarters of all city councillors were also members of voluntary sector organizations (Swianiewicz 2008). It confirms a recent claim (Swianiewicz et al. 2013) that participation in the non-governmental sector and activity in neighbourhood councils are alternative, and often competing, ways of practising social involvement.

In conclusion, the data presented in this section confirm the applicability of the law of increasing disproportionality to sub-municipal units of Polish big cities. The social structure of neighbourhood activity is closer to the composition of local communities than to the city-level political elites.

Neighbourhood Activity as a Step in a Political Career?

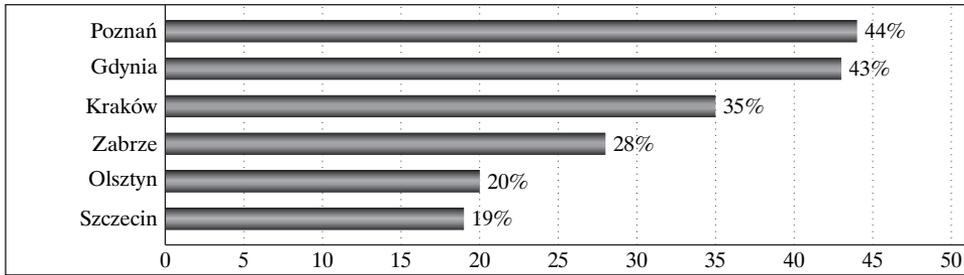
Self-selection

As can be seen in Figure 1, a high percentage of municipal councillors have prior experience of working within neighbourhood councils. This percentage varies from over 40% in Poznań and Gdynia (according to Olszowiec (2012), during the 2006–2010 term, it also reached 40% in Kraków) to approximately 20% in Olsztyn and Szczecin. It is characteristic and definitely not coincidental, that this percentage is higher in those cities, where neighbourhood units are more important in the functioning of city

⁴ A similar pattern may be found at a county level in Poland. Only 19% of all county councillors elected in 2010 are women. However, only 13% of executive board members are female and just 3% of chairs of county executive boards (data after Bartkowski 2012) are women.

Figure 1

Percentage of the city council members who are former or current neighbourhood councillors



Source: Information collected in city halls and on the websites of the analysed cities.

structures (which is measured by the share of their spending in a total city budget expenditure)—Kraków, Poznań, Gdynia.

Swianiewicz et al. (2013) has analyzed motives of individuals standing for election to neighbourhood councils. Based on his research, we know that, according to citizens of Kraków, Poznań and Gdynia, the intention to launch one's political career is perceived as the most important reason for becoming active within neighbourhood authority structures. This motive was pointed out by almost three-fourths of the respondents as an important or even a *very* important reason for standing for election to neighbourhood councils. Only in Olsztyn (the city characterised by the lowest political importance of neighbourhood councils) this motive was considered not important. This reason was also regarded as most important by the interviewed city-level politicians from Kraków and Poznań (in Gdynia it was mentioned as the second most important factor). Neighbourhood councillors have emphasized their public spirit as the most important factor in their involvement in activity within neighbourhood authority structures. But also in self-assessment of groups of neighbourhood activists, the political career motive was mentioned relatively frequently (over 40% claimed it is important or very important).

Almost half of the 55 interviewed neighbourhood councillors declared, at the beginning of their term, an intention to stand again for neighbourhood election. However, for the purpose of our research, it is more interesting to note that over 10% declared a wish to stand for election to the city council at the beginning of the term, and the next three respondents considered standing for other election (to the regional council or in mayor election). What is particularly interesting is that the three responses were recorded in Kraków—the city where the political position of neighbourhood councils is definitely the highest as compared to the rest of the analyzed cities. On the other hand, in Olsztyn—the city where the significance of neighbourhood units is relatively low—more neighbourhood councillors declared the wish to discontinue social involvement than in the other cities. For ten percent of candidates to the city council to be neighbourhood councillors is not a high number, but we can expect that in time, a part of the group that did not plan a future political career at the beginning of the term (the majority of interviewees) will finally make

such a decision. Moreover, 10% is a substantially higher number than the percentage of all citizens standing for the municipal election. In none of the six analyzed cities the proportion of the candidates to the city council to the number of all adult citizens pass 0,25% (the data relate to the local elections of 2006 and 2010).

The available data from the previous election (Table 4) confirm that usually over 10% of neighbourhood councillors decide to stand for election to the city council. The same table shows that neighbourhood activists very often constitute a significant part of the total number of individuals running for positions in the city council. Among the cities being analyzed in this article, only in one this proportion was lower than 10%. At the other end of the spectrum, in two cities, almost every fifth candidate was a neighbourhood councillor.

On the basis of the data presented above, we can presume that being active within a neighbourhood council encourages the self-selection process—the decision on standing for election to the city council is made relatively frequently among neighbourhood councillors. However, the collected data do not confirm that activity in a neighbourhood council is a dominant reason for political involvement at the municipal level.

Table 4

Neighbourhood councillors' participation in the election to the city council

	% of neighbourhood councillors standing for election to the city council		Neighbourhood councillors as a % of candidates to the city council	
	2006	2010	2006	2010
Gdynia	17%	14%	19%	19%
Kraków	25%	18%	10%	11%
Olsztyn	9%	10%	8%	12%
Poznań	no data available	8%	no data available	18%
Szczecin	9%	5%	9%	6%
Zabrze	15%	12%	9%	14%
Average	15%	11%	11%	13%

Attention: data include only neighbourhood councillors from the terms directly preceding the election to the city council organised correspondingly in 2006 and 2010.

Source: websites of analyzed cities and information collected in city offices and the National Bureau of Election.

The presented data concern an accessional model of career, according to which neighbourhood councillors try to transfer their activity on to the higher level in the structure of governance. In fact, such transfers take place in both directions. According to the descending career model, we can expect that politicians who have conceded a municipal election can treat neighbourhood councils as a kind of “repository” which could give them a chance of gaining ground in the local environment and coming up for election again in a couple of years.⁵

⁵ Such behaviours are known in national-level politics. Well-known politicians sometimes treat the position of the mayor of a big city as a place where they could rebuild their popularity as well as a starting

In this context, we can also use the terms applied by Kjær (2012) in regard to political parties. According to the author, local politics can play a role of an *incubator* for new parties that have just started their activity and have not yet come into their own in national politics. On the other hand, local representation of the party can appear as a *respirator* that keeps the party alive in difficult times, helps to strengthen it, and allows it to stand again for election to the national parliament. The same concept may be applied to neighbourhood councils which can be perceived as an incubator for aspiring politicians at the beginning of their career (the accessional career model) and, equally, as a respirator for local politicians in times of endorsement loss (the descending career model).

According to Swianiewicz et al. (2013) the intention to secure political survival after conceding the election to the city council is not perceived as an important reason for standing for election to the neighbourhood council. Nevertheless, it does happen that candidates who have lost the municipal election look for an opportunity to work in neighbourhood structures (Table 5). On average, it concerns about 10% of those individuals who did not succeed in the election to the city council. In conclusion, we can claim that neighbourhood councils are not perceived as attractive places of activity for those people who have already been active in politics at the city level.

Table 5

Neighbourhood councils as a “respirator” of a political career (mean for 6 case study cities)

	% of city councillors from previous term who decided to become neighbourhood councillors after failure in election for the next term of the city council	% of candidates who failed in the election to the city council but who after election became members of neighbourhood councils
2006	14%	10%
2010	8%	10%

Source: websites of analyzed cities and information collected in city offices and the National Bureau of Election.

Pre-selection (top-down selection)

In this section we investigate if neighbourhood activists standing for election to the city council can count on favourable treatment by party leaders responsible for compiling electoral lists for the election. We use two indicators: the average position on the voting ticket (which shows if the position of neighbourhood councillors standing for election was higher than the position of other candidates) and the proportion of candidates with prior experience of activity within neighbourhood structures, whose names were placed as one of the first three on the list. The indicator's values are presented in the table 6.

The comparison confirms that neighbourhood councillors enjoy more favourable treatment in the pre-selection process than the other candidates. In almost all analyzed cases, the average neighbourhood councillor's position on the voting ticket (in

position for success on the national political stage. We can find examples of European countries where a city mayor successfully ran for the national presidential election (France, Poland).

Table 6

Pre-selection of neighbourhood councillors in city level elections

	Average position on the voting tickets in the election to the city council		Frequency in securing one of the first three positions on the voting ticket	
	Neighbourhood councillor	Other candidates	Neighbourhood councillor	Other candidates
2006	5.1	5.6	39%	33%
2010	5.3	6.0	39%	25%

Note: the raw 2010 data include the data referring to neighbourhood councillors from two preceding terms.

Source: websites of analyzed cities and information collected in city offices and the National Bureau of Election.

the election to the city council) was higher than the average position of the other candidates. Similarly, names of neighbourhood councillors appeared in one of the first three positions on the voting ticket more often than the names of the other candidates.

Bottom-up selection

In this section we will focus on the question if candidates with neighbourhood councillor's experience can count on voters' support to a greater extent than the other candidates. Does creating political capital through activity at the neighbourhood level involve networking only with the organizations responsible for preparing voting lists (resulting in the preferences at the pre-selection level) or does it also affect relations with citizens who are prospective voters? The question is not trivial, since we are aware of the low level of citizens' interest in neighbourhood councils, as well as of the weakness of embedding neighbourhood structures in local communities.

However, data presented in [Table 7](#) confirm that citizens more willingly choose the candidates with experience of activity at a neighbourhood level. This relationship appears in five of the six analyzed cities. The only exception is Olsztyn, where neighbourhood councillors' fare poorly in elections despite strong preferential treatment in the pre-selection process as described before. Characteristically, the biggest difference between the two different groups of candidates was in evidence in Kraków. Although the relatively wide extent of neighbourhood council competencies there does not have a strong impact on the position of neighbourhood activists in the political organizations standing for election, their local activity noticeably enhances recognition of the candidates by voters and results in better electoral scores.

This observation is confirmed by the data presented in [Table 8](#). In the municipal election to the city council in Kraków, neighbourhood councillors gained on average over three times more votes than the rest of the candidates. In other cities that difference was not even twice as many. Interestingly, a more significant advantage in the number of votes for neighbourhood activists was also observed in the remaining two cities with a relatively significant (but not as significant as in Kraków) position of neighbourhood councils, namely in Gdynia and Poznań. However, in the cities with

Table 7

Success in municipal election — difference between neighbourhood councillors and other candidates

	2006 — % of winning candidates		2010 — % of winning candidates	
	Neighbourhood councillors	Other candidates	Neighbourhood councillors	Other candidates
Gdynia	11%	9%	23%	8%
Kraków	22%	3%	18%	5%
Olsztyn	3%	9%	7%	9%
Poznań	no data available	no data available	12%	8%
Szczecin	8%	5%	15%	6%
Zabrze	12%	8%	19%	10%
Average	11%	7%	16%	8%

Note: the column 2010 includes the data referring to the neighbourhood councillors of two preceding terms.

Source: websites of analyzed cities and information collected in city offices and the National Bureau of Election.

Table 8

Average number of votes gained in the municipal election to the city council

	2006			2010		
	Neighbourhood councillor (1)	other candidates (2)	proportion 1 : 2	Neighbourhood councillor (1)	other candidates (2)	proportion 1 : 2
Gdynia	369	311	1.19	521	327	1.59
Kraków	770	192	4.01	912	300	3.04
Olsztyn	141	165	0.85	198	182	1.09
Poznań	no data available	no data available	no data available	525	325	1.62
Szczecin	253	244	1.04	365	232	1.57
Zabrze	129	165	0.78	252	199	1.27
Average	332	215	1.57	462	261	1.70

Note: the column 2010 includes the data referring to the neighbourhood councillors of two preceding terms.

Source: websites of analyzed cities and information collected in city offices and the National Bureau of Election.

an inconspicuous position of neighbourhood units—Szczecin, Olsztyn, Zabrze—this advantage is smaller or, as in the case of the 2006 election, it does not exist at all.

Conclusions

The data presented in this article confirm the law of increasing disproportionality as formulated by Putnam (1976). The level of education and gender of neighbourhood

councillors reflects the structure of the local communities more accurately than it does in the case of city councillors or political elites operating at the upper levels of government.

The collected material also confirms that activity at a neighbourhood level increases chances of a successful political career at the city level. This rule may be applied to all stages of political recruitment: self-selection, pre-selection (top-down selection) and bottom-up selection made by the voters.

However, the advantage of being active at a community level is not very strong; it often happens that city politics is successfully entered into by candidates with no neighbourhood experience. Additionally, the intention to continue one's political career at a higher level is not a decisive factor in choosing to undertake activity in a neighbourhood council.

Concluding their study of municipal politics in Scandinavian countries, Aars & Offerdal (1998) stress that recruitment theories often overestimate the role of career ambitions as the main motivation to stand in municipal elections. In fact, it happens that "participation precedes political motivation or ambition (...) Motivation is often created and cultivated through participation" (p. 227). Here, Aars & Offerdal comment on municipal councillors, but their observation may be even more accurate in reference to neighbourhood-level activists. Our results demonstrate that the situation in Poland is to some extent different from the Scandinavian reality and political career ambitions appear relatively often as the driving force of candidates to neighbourhood councils. Nevertheless, these motives are much less important than the *civic duty* of being involved in local community issues. Several municipal councillors used to be involved in activity at a neighbourhood level in the past, and we also demonstrate that this kind of past experience increases their chances of success in city-wide elections. However, most city-level politicians "appeared in politics" without any prior experience of activity in sub-municipal government institutions. This reflects a very weak position of neighbourhood councils in city politics, as documented in a recent study of Polish cities (Swianiewicz et al. 2013). It is very telling that—as we can see by comparing our data with the material collected by Wasilewski (2006)—the proportion of individuals with municipal government experience among members of the Parliament is substantially higher than the proportion of former neighbourhood activists among city councillors.

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