Improving the accuracy of Polish pre-election polls

Hitting the Bull's-Eye

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Prof. Markowski talks about the possibility of analyzing electoral behavior in Polish parliamentary elections based on the Polish National Electoral Study, which has been conducted for many years

Academia: How do you do it? How can you accurately predict the size of a party's core electorate, what percentage of voter turnout should be expected, how much support different parties will win? Your predictions have gone against the grain of those made by other pollsters. Why is it that when you take information from the same opinion polls and process it, your resulting interpretation is so different from the others?

Prof. Radosław Markowski: If you want to forecast election results accurately it is best to be an American and to have data from the 30 previous elections at your fingertips. Then you really have a good idea of how the core electorate will behave. Obviously there may be certain deviances once every 20 or 30 years, when something evidently strange happens between the parties. Sometimes this is called a "critical election," sometimes "dealignment." But the system is pretty predictable.

Still, successful forecasting does not require one to be gifted with extraordinary abilities. Polish public opinion polling centers take three fundamental steps to try to glean some understanding of what to expect from upcoming elections. The first step involves reaching out the people who make up the selected random sample. But it is known that polling centers nowadays manage to reach 40% or at most 50% of the people intended to constitute their sample. We simply do not obtain responses from half of them. The problem is that those whom we do not manage to reach – people who are very busy, who for some reason are averse to having contacts with the official world, etc. – differ in certain ways from those we do. The unreached people get replaced in the sample by

others, but these are not the same types of individuals. We need to somehow correct for this. We can try to deduce who are these people we did not manage to contact, based on our knowledge of what the sample would have been like if we had reached everyone. We can then extrapolate the results, looking at certain people we have managed to contact that we know to be similar to others absent from the random sample. Then, by multiplication, we artificially reconstruct the sample and ask ourselves whether this now represents the whole set of people who should be included.

A second problem is that Polish opinion polls are dominated by sociologists and their paradigm. Sociologists think that society as a whole, social structure, is what should be studied. But the people who vote in elections form a certain political community that is one part of society, which is not identical to the other part that does not vote – particularly in a country with average turnout of about 50%, as in Poland. We need to know who these people who do come out to vote are, as opposed to those who do not.

And how did you manage to forecast with such accuracy how many people would turn out for these latest elections in Poland?

We researchers at the Polish National Electoral Study (PGSW) have accumulated a certain body of knowledge. This is a research project underway for 15 years now, which I have led since the beginning. What we obtain by asking the normal open question of "Will you vote in the coming elections?" is the same as what the major polling centers like CBOS or OBOP obtain. The answers are the same: 80% of Poles declare that they will indeed vote. Yet we know that turnout will be at most fifty something percent, and usually it is forty something percent. So we need to cull out of this 80% the "liars" who we know will not actually vote. And we are able do so, using the methods we have to cull out those who are politically alienated.

But other pollsters arrive at different conclusions and it is their results that reach the public – because the media present them as reliable and credible gauges of electoral preferences.

That is an interesting topic. How the media, through neurotic behavior and the concoction of the most nonsensical interpretations of the percentage-point data, manage to brainwash people. I will give you an example which particularly

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pains me, because it involves women. Someone recently said, citing the results of our research, that an average of 5% fewer women vote than men. And if we look at the basic data, a conclusion indeed suggests itself that women are less politically or electorally active than men. That's the way things look, but the question is a fundamental one. Is it women's feminine nature that causes them not to vote in elections? The answer is no. My argumentation is if there were the same number of men aged 75-plus in the world as women, if women held the same good management positions as men, and if there were the same number of househusbands as housewives – if, if, if... Yet if women did have the same social parameters as men, they would in fact be more active than men, period. Moreover, age is also important here. At this point we are studying this issue with new data. There is a distinct predominance of women in the, say, 75-100 age group, and that gets calculated into the basis for the percentages. Someone 85 years is unlikely to vote, irrespective of their gender. The reason these elderly women do not vote is not because they are women, but because they are elderly. Getting back to the problem that I have with polling centers, the thing is, they do not actually study public opinion, but rather try to reconstruct it. They take their percentage-based

Prof. Radosław Markowski at the bookshop of the Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities, 3 November 2011

data to be reality. And there is also another issue. Apart from the fact that some researchers simply refuse to understand that the group of people who vote differs from the structure of society as a whole, there is also the fact that certain people respond to various questions by saying "I don't know," unwilling to disclose their views.

We have methods that make it possible to estimate what the results would have been like if they had in fact answered all the questions – by looking at people who say they do not know, but

are in fact very similar to other people who do give answers to the given questions. And there is another trick that should be used in a democracy, if we are to be serious about polling: we should analyze what the results would be like if the politically unsophisticated respondents, those who most often say they "don't know," are treated the same as the sophisticated ones in their respective socio-demographic categories. We impute the same better knowledge of reality to them and consider how they would respond then. If we want to reliably reconstruct what society as a whole thinks in the privacy of their homes – including those we are unable to reach, and those who avoid giving answers for cultural or situational reasons – that is a certain type of knowledge we are indeed able to produce. Not doing so is just due to laziness (or somewhat laziness, somewhat a shortage of money). The media want to pay the polling centers as little as possible and the poling centers unfortunately consent to that – and various stupidities are the consequence.

But how do the media make use of such results?

Perhaps I'll give you the example involving the stubbornness with which Poland's prominent female journalists talked on a highly-watched television program about how young people had begun to embrace the Law and Justice (PiS) party. I tried to explain to the media people – and Prof. Janusz Czapiński did, too – that we could not say anything about the 18-24 age group because in each regular sample there are about 100 such individuals, of which 30 actually vote, and so if the journalists claim that, say 32 % of them declare voting for Law and Justice and 29% for the Civic Platform (PO), that does not mean anything, since the absolute numbers are close to 9 and 8 respondents respectively. In a nutshell, one cannot claim swinging support for any one party, based on such small numbers.... There is simply no such data. Why doesn't a major television station have some expert on hand to tell such a journalist that she should not say such rubbish?

The media are in a hurry, they want to dazzle viewers by unthinkingly reiterating various things, without proper verification. And that is the biggest problem. If the media spent a lot more time on what can be done with what poll results we do have, it would be a lot more useful. I have been talking about these simple things for 15 years, because not much has changed in this regard. Fortunately, perhaps things will change for the better thanks to the accurate results recently produced by OBOP. First of all OBOP spent a lot of money, secondly it treated various guidelines seriously, and – it nearly hit the bull's-eye! Its pre-election forecast was on the mark.

But the media make a living by selling sensation. Is such a result or interpretation something that a journalist can report as hot news? I understand that there is a shortage of experts on hand to provide consultation, but on the other hand journalists are not entirely certain they want such experts around.
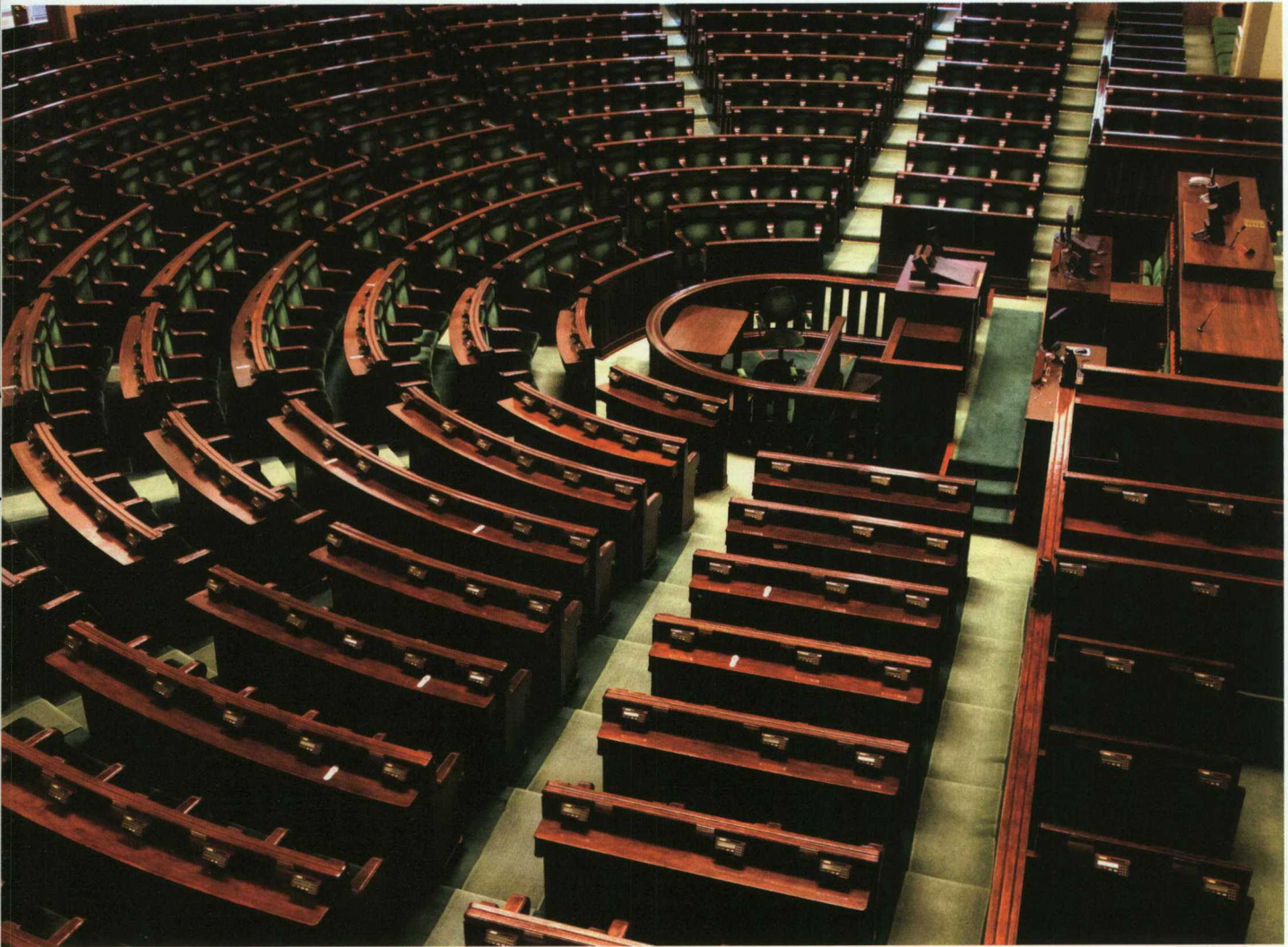
Mariusz Wideryński

Serious polling centers are able to forecast the future breakdown of seats in parliament quite accurately in their pre-election polls

I have proposed that we should organize training courses; believe me there is a lot to improve in basic statistics among both the journalists and the mass public. So sometimes there is a temptation to propose training courses to the big-name journalists who do the evening shows. But if one offered to teach them how to properly read such results, most of them would probably feel insulted. Some truly believe they know best. But as much money as possible should be invested in public television: it should proceed slowly, more reliably, and then be able to say: see, we were right! Because if there are no reliable opinion polls out there, charlatans will always try to persuade people that their party is actually in the lead.

The result scored by Janusz Palikot's new movement in the latest Polish elections indicates that irrespective of what results the polling centers are showing, if a party really does enjoy public support it will manifest itself sooner or later. Palikot was fortunate that most of the polling centers were saying that the Civic Platform was ahead of Law and Justice by more or less 10 points. Most people felt the Civic Platform

would win in any event. A second conviction was that even if the Civic Platform lost it would still form the cabinet anyway, that it would be practically impossible for Law and Justice to form any sort of coalition. As a result there was room for what we call "sincere voting," straight from the heart.

Did you expect Palikot to make such a strong showing?

I'll admit that I did not think he would win 10% of the vote. Because the poll results were telling us nothing about his electorate. I expected that he would win 7%, in the best case. That's the way things go with such research. Every once in a while things break down, but those are exceptional situations. Still, the next elections in Poland could be unpredictable. If this economic crisis does hit us hard, if unemployment rises to 20% and people lose their savings – anything could happen.

Interview by **Anna Zawadzka**

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