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# ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR AS AFFECTED BY THE MEDIA

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## **Abstract**

The media are considered part of the so-called media system which is undoubtedly one of the society sub-systems. The media system is a social system including, besides activities of all means of mass communication, also a system of media companies with their own social, proprietary, economic, cultural and political structures and links, including those to other social sub-systems. As such, the media are an important player not only in politics, but in society as well. Each of us obtains information of social importance from papers, journals, radio, television and internet. The media are responsible for the choice of themes and dispose of power in a political process. Herein, the media are analysed from the viewpoint of their no negligible effect on electoral behaviour. In this context, rational electoral behaviour is considered one of the key moments of democracy execution in modern states. Rationality, however, is not the only determinant of electoral behaviour as an equally important aspect is the effect of family, upbringing and religiosity. Answers are looked for concerning some causes and relations determining the relation of the media, religion, secularization of the social structure and policy, or the behaviour of a rational elector in elections as affected by the means of mass communication.

*Keywords:* elector, rational choice, politics, effect, mass media

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## **1. Introduction**

The media play a no negligible role in the life of man. In the first place, the mass media are an important source of knowledge and experience concerning the world and society around us. More and more data can be drawn from them, and together with our own experience we can create a certain image of both the world and reality, this contributing to our connection with our own environment and with our own estimation of our chances in society. The information mediated by the media can affect our view of the world and of ourselves. It defines the ideal of beauty, tells us how we should behave in certain situations. Its very existence is projected in our every-day life. We meet it at every step – at home, in school, at work, in the street. Directly or indirectly, they

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try to foist on us information which often contradicts that obtained by family upbringing, or mediated by religious institutions. The religious media existing in Eastern Europe are trying to play its role in spreading the news of the God's words, but they often affect the youth even counterproductively since they are often under the influence of the relations in schools, as affected by mainstream culture. One of the reasons can be the effort of individuals to totally belong to the social group they act in. moreover, the religious media have no society-wide scope, they are financed from private donations and cannot be compared with private televisions profiting from commercials. In fact, the media world affects all spheres of social life. At present, it is almost impossible to imagine a world that would not be burdened by the positive or negative effect of the media.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the media are much more important for the running of society than any time in the past. In this context, we have in mind first of all the electronic media which have become everyday part of life of local, regional and global companies [1]. As a matter of fact, the media have reached such a level of development that it exceeds understanding of people from ten years ago, and they keeps developing. On this road, they are helped by the omnipresent technological progress going hand in hand with the development of society. It seems that the development of the media and their effect on all people in society knows no boundaries at present. However, it is necessary to point out that the 21<sup>st</sup> century media more often get into conflict with its social mission as defined originally – to participate in social welfare and to help spread culture, science, humanism and tolerance among the individual cultures of the world [2]. In this context, quite interesting is the very effect of the media on electoral behaviour that is the elementary precondition of democratic governing of society.

## **2. Electoral behaviour**

Electoral behaviour represents one of the key sorts of political behaviour. In this context, it is necessary to stress that political behaviour is most often understood as a form of social behaviour including a political dimension. It is any form of the behaviour of individuals or social groups related to political power in society. In connection with a theoretical definition of the very term „electoral behaviour“, some authors underline that it is necessary to distinguish between a political action and political behaviour. Under political behaviour is understood a reaction (intentional, unintentional, rational, affective, or reflexive) of an individual or a group to an impulse. The term of political action denotes such behaviour of an individual which is characterised by means of following a certain intention, purpose or aim. It results from the above-mentioned facts that electoral behaviour is a sort of political behaviour with elements of rationality, emotionality, system and, at the same time, spontaneity. Research on electoral behaviour is part of some researches on political behaviour, or on political participation of citizens in public life. This means that research on electoral behaviour is based on analyses of official election statistics [3].

However, big data files dealing with electoral behaviour have no information value without their explanation. They can obtain their meaning or relevant information value only within the existing theoretical models of electoral behaviour. Only such an approach creates a relation between electoral behaviour and the respective factors of effect that have to be verified both theoretically and empirically. The basis of such thinking has been formed by knowledge of the French geographer and author of the research direction called electoral geography, Alfred Siegfried [4]. Based upon his long study of election statistics, he has come to the conclusion that political opinions of electors were determined by the following groups of factors:

- those connected with the specifics of historical, administrative and socio-political formation of society;
- those conditioned by the existing social stratification of society;
- those conditioned by religion and membership in Church;
- those created by the effects of external environment on society, and also by the ability of society to face the factors of external environment.

The factors conditioned by religion and membership in church cease to be relevant in the post-modern society. If during the first Czechoslovak republic (1918–1938) it was possible to identify a relation of electors, their religion and identification of the given religion with a political party (Catholicism – HSLS, Evangelic religion – SNS, or a tendency to Czechoslovakism and the Agrarian Party) in its Slovak part, it is not so evident since political pluralism has been regained after 1989. Maybe the only more stabile exemption in the Slovak political room is the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH) [5], which a large part of the Catholic electorate in the regions of Orava and Spiš (the Spiš diocese), where the effect of family and religion keeps playing an important role in social life, identifies with. It can be generally said that some relevant theories of electoral behaviour have come to the fore within research on electoral behaviour in the last years. Out of them, four most important conception models can be mentioned [6]:

- the sociological explanation of electoral behaviour,
- the individually-psychological explanation of electoral behaviour,
- the model of rational electors,
- the model of social environment.

The first three models are based on the well-known research traditions of electoral behaviour in the United States of America in the 1940s and 1950s. The last model was elaborated in the 1980s. From our viewpoint, the best way of how to approach the interpretation of electoral behaviour is through the model that is based on the theory of a rational choice. Generally, it tries to explain the behaviour of an elector in elections based upon knowledge of economy. In the 1950s, this model was developed by Antony Downs who applied his economic theory of democracy when he tried to identify the behaviour of electors. In his book *An Economic Theory of Democracy* [7], he claims that every personal electoral decision leads to the maximal political benefit. Rational electors will decide to vote for a political party or politician that promises them the biggest

benefit possible. In this context, under rational electors can be understood any individuals who meet the following conditions:

1. they are able to make a decision under all circumstances if they have to choose from several alternatives;
2. the alternatives they are facing are ordered according to their own preferences in such a way that every of them will be preferred, indifferent or secondary to any other;
3. the order of their preferences is transitional (depending on the present situation);
4. based upon the ranking of they preferences, they always choose the alternative which is placed highest, and they always make the same decision if facing the same alternatives. All bearers of rationality in this model – interest groups, governments – dispose of the above-mentioned characteristics.

Political parties themselves can be named rational players since they try to obtain votes of electors. From this very reason, political parties have to relatively often change their political programme according to the topical social needs and to present it adequately before the public [8]. However, it is necessary to stress herein that the decision of electors is not only the result of their purely rational behaviour but one of several external determinants as well, often including also the effect of the clergy on the electorate, positive perception of religion in the social structure, and the measure of religiosity of the inhabitants of the individual regions. The secondary aspects are the present political problems, the coalition – opposition relation, then economic indicators such as inflation, unemployment or GDP growth rate. From the viewpoint of the public election theory as the starting theory to explain rationality of people in a decision-making process, social and emotional factors play a secondary role. But as for the unification of the public election theory in decision-making processes (i.e. in electoral behaviour), Czech political scientist B. Říhová [9] claims that „the concept of rationality has sense and information value only as a contextual concept. The players only seldom have precisely and clearly formulated the aims they want to reach and, moreover, they change them without their being able to precisely determine and unequivocally notice the reasons of these changes“. The model of the rational behaviour of electors and political players has its limits, since it is not able to find an adequate answer to the question why citizens do not take part in elections in some cases, or why they vote in protest, i.e. by throwing a blank ballot. Despite this, the model of the rational behaviour of an elector is regarded a precious starting point in the study of an elector’s behaviour in the political market.

### **3. The media role in politics**

The media are studied from several relevant points of view, but we believe that their relation to political activity and the politics as such is the most important for management of society. Despite that we find it extraordinarily

suitable to define the basic functions of the media in modern democratic society in connection with the political aspect of management of democratic society. The very definition of the media at a theoretical level is only hard to comprehend, and that is why there exist many definitions in specialised literature that have pretensions to explain this term. In this context, the media are therefore looked upon exclusively as a means serving the mass communication. Under *the media* are understood „specialised institutions producing and transferring announcements to wide groups of recipients (from our viewpoint, in preference to potential electors) who manage them in various ways and act differently being aware of their existence“ [10].

The media meet the basic functions for political systems. This is typical mainly of the systems that are characterised by a democratic political system. The importance of the media in modern society is so big that constantly growing specialised literature argues against the view that the media represent the fourth power in a state along with the legislation, executive and judiciary [11]. However, it is necessary to point out that the above-mentioned comparison with constituting and through the will of people legitimised powers is out of place, because the media should be institutions independent of a state [12]. However, this comparison is justifiable mainly in connection with the expression of the media power in a political system. T. Meyer [13] has come to the conclusion that the media are winning over politics; they even speak about mediocracy and ‘colonisation’ of politics by means of the media. In general, the media are expected to inform citizens and to support participation in the management of public matters by means of a critical and constructive discussion concerning individual opinions. However, it is necessary to stress herein that it is at least arguable to which measure the media fulfil this function.

Some critical theorists of the media and communication have come with a conception of a so-called social reproduction. According to their opinion, the media serve to maintain the persisting power conditions. From this point of view, the media do not mediate topical news or educational and entertainment information from social actions around us, but work for the dominant political elites, political leaders and various interest groups having big capital at their disposal. It can be stated in general that the media inform the public of the world exclusively from the point of view of the ruling elite [14]. In this way, the media stand for a source of organised and publicly shared systems that define what is normal and what is deviant from the point of view of empirism and value [10, p. 17]. In a very simplified way it can be said that „a political event exists for the public only when it is informed of by the media“ [15]. From this point of view, the theory of independence and impartiality of the media is considerably damaged, because the media are not only a bearer of the so-called neutral news, they are responsible for creation of a certain political reality. It is necessary to stress in this context that not only the content of information mediated by a certain medium is important, but its form is important as well, because the aim is not to provide only knowledge, but to affect the emotional side of an addressee (elector) and to create preconditions for the required attitudes of an

elector to be formed [16]. As for the above-mentioned facts, J. Baudrillard [17] has written that „the problem of the veracity or reality of this world has been solved by a technical simulation and superfluous profusion of images where nothing can be seen. We live in a world where the highest function of a sign is to enable the reality to disappear, and to mask this disappearance at the same time.”

Within its everyday activity as well as in connection with electoral behaviour, the media affect a member of society in two elementary ways – intentionally and unintentionally. It is necessary to stress that the unintentional effect of the media is only rare and extraordinary at present. In reality, we much more often meet the intentional effect of the media. The following forms of the intentional effect can be found in specialised literature: political publicity, political campaigns, declarations and speeches of political leaders and social authorities, campaigns aimed at a change in the way of life – a change of lifestyle, and popularisation of various events (festivals) in the media. Both media manipulation and propaganda are mentioned as the most often used ways of affecting an elector by the media. In the case of propaganda it is necessary to point out that it is present and used mainly in non-democratic political systems favouring the use of suffrage to legitimise illegal power. In this context, propaganda stands for „an intentional and systematic process of manipulation with the intended and immediate behaviour of individuals or groups with intent of reaching attitudes or reactions that are identical with the intentions of propaganda“ [18]. On the other hand, under manipulation is understood such a way of affecting an elector or a group of electors through which their opinions and attitudes are changed every now and then without their realising it. Manipulation can be objectively considered the most effective tool of how one group (the media, media owners, politicians) can affect opinions of some other group (electors) with the aim of obtaining a share in power. It can be generally stated that contrary to the persuasion it is a relatively unfair, but very effective way [19]. But it is still a fact that the media serve as an intermediary between the political reality and final addressee, i.e. the elector. As affected by the mainstream media, the influence on the secularization character of society has continued also after 1989. During the Communist regime, the very political regime created this intentional pressure; after its fall, its place has been taken by commercialization of society which pushes away every effort to obtain a more adequate spiritual dimension of the life of inhabitants. Both the secularization factor and the efforts for modernity affect significantly the elector’s decisions in elections. In this sense, they fulfil important tasks of society-wide importance that are presented below [20].

### ***3.1. The media as a tool of education***

Within the understanding of the relation between the media and society, a thesis that the media should educate its addressee can be considered the traditional and long-term consensus. However, it is necessary to point out a risk here that such comprehension of the media can be misused by various negative

ideologies or non-democratic regimes. The media contribute substantially to the creation of a cultural symbiotic environment, or to the forming of social life [21]. In this context, J.B. Thompson [22] has written about a so-called symbolic power of the media. According to him, „the symbolic activity is the elementary feature of social life. People are permanently engaged in their expressing at a symbolic level and in interpreting how other people express themselves ... the media have an ability to interfere in the flow of actions, to affect the actions of other people and, understandably, to create events by producing and transferring symbolic information.“ There is still a question if the media also fulfil their role, because in the case of political campaigns there often absents the elementary awareness of an elector concerning political alternatives, possibilities to fulfil political promises, and the outcomes of concrete political steps. The attempts of the religious media to reach educational character of their programmes collide with low interest of the inhabitants.

### ***3.2. Acquiring of followers and electors***

This knowledge proceeds from the historical experience of the existence of the media and political parties in the European continent. In the past years, the media were in fact mostly owned by political parties that used them abundantly to acquire not only party members, but to secure votes in elections as well. The factor of the the media affiliation with a political grouping has been shifted in the indirect level, though even today it is possible to identify groups of the inhabitants with a certain ideology and print medium. Generally it can be said that the media have a radical effect on forming of public opinion which becomes the basis for decision-making/behaviour of electors. Public opinion can be generally characterised as a sum of interests, requirements and ideas which are discussed in public in certain time and within certain society [23]. Some authors perceive public opinion as an opinion of some important fact dominating in the public [24]. However, much more often is public opinion interpreted as a sum of all ideas, opinions and attitudes affecting the actions of an individual in the society – not only in the context of electoral behaviour [25]. As a result, this creates preconditions for behaviour of electors in public decision-making processes at national, regional and local levels [26]. The religious media do not try to obtain new followers and electors in the election process, but they mostly are confirming the electorate in the correctness of their decision based upon their religiosity.

### ***3.3. Helper in the execution of the rights of people***

In this context, primarily the democratisation role of the media is thought of. A democratic political system of any form consists in a precondition that power in a state is derived from the will of the people. The most common way of manifestation of the will of the people in modern democratic political systems is by means of direct participation in the election of its representatives. Generally,

it holds true that a citizen inevitably needs a sufficient body of objective information to be able to make a free decision. By means of the media, political responsibility to citizens is taken over. As far as the above-mentioned is concerned, it can be stated that politics tries to conquer the public sector and to rule it, while the media, in its ideal form, are one of the tools by way of which electors try to control political power and to maintain relative independence of the public. The importance of the media existence in the modern political system consists primarily in the constructive completing of division of power, or in the overcoming of deficiencies of the triple division of power among state bodies. By way of media right, the modern states are trying to ensure a certain measure of legal security so that the mass media really control the execution of public power, but with no dictatorship of the mass media [27].

### ***3.4. The orienting power, and a research and theoretical view***

The media inform about the present social activities both at home and in the world and minimise the time that potential electors have to spend to obtain necessary information about public matters. The electors are often offered selective information by the media and there is often absent a more professional conceptuality of the processed themes. This may be why, possible selectivity of information impedes the secularized electors to follow the religious media. Here can be observed the traditional conflict between cosmopolitanism and traditionalism. This information can radically affect their final decision, or to whom they give their preference. In this context, the media are able to determine topics of public discussions concerning present problems they believe they could be talked about in the public. However, it is necessary to stress here that when embracing and forming opinions of electors on the discussed topics, the media are only one of the numerous sources of effect. The political culture and values to which society of a given state adheres affect both the way of how opinions are formed and the final decision of electors. Generally it can be stated that a media social system, perceived in this way, has a big effect on thinking, behaviour and actions of a wide circle of electors and the quality of the whole democratic system [18].

### ***3.5. Social criticism***

Investments in modern means of mass communication mean a relative problem at present, because only rich corporations can afford to effectively invest in the technical development of the media. Their owners – very often politicians – are the determiners that dictate the content of the mass media. Finally, this can lead to providing non-objective and goal-directed information. Within social criticism, we can talk about a media content as well, since commercialisation can lead to giving useless information and hiding the true nature of social problems. „Purchases, mergers and conflicts between concerns come about, but there is no competition in the sense that mutual destruction

would cause the best to win – not speaking about the one offering the best quality for the lowest price. Instead, there exists stabilised, media and oligopolistic capitalism.” [28] It is the very oligopolistic capitalism which weakens traditional Christian-Democratic political groupings in the media sphere and is able to constantly produce new marketing parties with no legible value orientations.

#### **4. Conclusions**

It can be said at the end that the media are one of the decisive elements affecting the electoral behaviour of a given country. It can be seen in all types of elections – from local elections at the municipal level through regional and parliamentary. Elections of a head of state and even those in the European Parliament are not neglected. This effect can be both positive and negative. Though the media should inform in the first place, at present we witness their tendency to affect public opinion and, in this way, to advance their interests, or those of their owners. From a certain point of view, a transformation of the media in a propaganda tool can be talked about. Based upon the historical facts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this rather negatively perceived notion designates the efforts to obtain social control through the media. We know several variations and alternatives of propaganda forms, but at present the economic, political or diplomatic form prevails. Despite all negative examples from recent history there has been nobody so far who could affect or replace this power of the media. Here lies the most significant risk for the existence of traditional society. It is a task of protection institutions to be able to keep the effect of the media also in this sphere within certain limits that will positively affect the expansion of democratic character of our society. The aim of democracy is to build up a society that will be directed by informed citizens based upon access to alternative information. Only in this way they will be able to fulfil completely their right of a free choice of their representatives in the organs of representative democracy.

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