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# Media Visibility Index as a Tool for Measuring the Presence of Political Parties in the Media: Case of Polish Parliamentary Election Campaign in 2019

**Abstract:** The problem of media visibility of politicians and political parties is at the heart of the interest of political communication researchers. Theoretical reflections and empirical studies focus on numerous media presence determinants. At the same time, attempts to identify the media visibility of political actors in specific periods, such as the particularly important for democracy period of the election campaign preceding the parliamentary election, are relatively rare. This study is intended to fill that gap. It proposes a simple research tool in the form of a media visibility index, which makes it possible to calculate and compare the visibility of electoral committees in selected media during the election campaign. The tool was used to determine the visibility of electoral committees taking part in the 2019 parliamentary elections in Poland in two TV news services “Wiadomości” and “Fakty”, and three weekly opinion magazines “Newsweek”, “Polityka” and “Sieci”. The data to calculate the index was gathered through manual content analysis of the studied media conducted six weeks before the day of the parliamentary elections.

**Keywords:** *media visibility, parliamentary election campaign, parliamentary elections, opinion weeklies, TV news programmes*

## Introduction

The issue of media visibility analysed at different levels of social life is the subject of broad interest of researchers (Creech, 2020; Mateus, 2017; Szpunar, 2018). It also refers to the media visibility of political actors, especially during ongoing election campaigns (Drosik, 2017; Maguś, 2016). The media serves as a political communication arena for politicians, which allows them to gain media visibility and opportunities to favourably present their own image and to promote specific issues, problems, and their desired interpretations for

a particular politician or party (Walgrave & Aelst, 2017). At the same time, the media, by allowing political actors to treat them as an arena, is driven by self-interest. That is, they present figures and events more frequently and favourably, guaranteeing greater audience interest. In addition, the media promote political solutions and actors, giving all media or only a particular one the chance for political gains in the form of specific policy decisions, or additional economic gains, for example, in the form of buying time or advertising space. Potential gains or benefits are treated by the media as long-term and less certain profits while offering content attractive to the audience should be treated as an important and ever-present motive for the media.

From the perspective of political actors in an election campaign, it is important to gain and appropriately use media attention, with those running for election realising that media attention is limited (Dalmus et al., 2017). Obtaining effects in the form of media visibility and selection of issues raised in the media that are favourable for the party or politician may be a consequence of both the adoption of a passive attitude by the political actor and the result of favourable circumstances or the politician's personality alone, as well as a consequence of a planned active strategy of actions towards the media, with the latter case seeming more typical in the period of contemporary election campaigns.

Researchers have often searched for regularities and determinants of the media visibility of certain political actors. In this context, the results of a study by the NEPOCS group, political scientists studying phenomena in the field of political communication, who compared the visibility in the press, television and websites of politicians holding various institutional positions in the US and fifteen Western European democracies, should be considered valuable (Vos & Aelst, 2018). The findings from their analysis illustrate how many factors significantly affect the visibility of politicians. The first group of factors related to the political system allowed to identify the regularity that the dispersion of media visibility in relation to different types of politicians is greater in countries characterised by coalition governments, a high degree of federalism and a proportional electoral system (Marszałek-Kawa & Plecka, 2017). The second group of factors is related to media and media systems. It was found that the dispersion of media visibility of politicians is greater in newspapers and online news outlets compared to television news, greater in public media compared to commercial media, and greater in less competitive media systems than in more competitive.

Numerous studies have confirmed that the media are likelier to portray politicians with certain personality traits. Promising results were achieved by an international research team that tested the relationship between politicians' personality traits and media visibility, with 339 parliamentarians from Belgium, Canada, and Israel selected for the study. They analysed amicability, openness to experience, and emotional stability, defined as the opposite of neuroticism, conscientiousness, and extraversion. Results show that less agreeable and more extroverted politicians are more likely to appear on television news programmes. On the other hand, openness to experience and low levels of neuroticism are traits that favour

visibility in all media studied, namely newspapers, news websites, and television channels (Amsalem et al., 2020).

Media visibility is also boosted by having prior political presence experience. Pretenders to political visibility have a much tougher task of making it in the media than those holding political positions, especially prominent ones, which is sometimes referred to as an incumbent bonus (Hopmann et al., 2011). Media visibility is also boosted by having prior political presence experience. Pretenders to political visibility have a much tougher task of making it in the media than those holding political positions, especially prominent ones, which is sometimes referred to as an incumbent bonus (Hopmann et al., 2011). According to other studies, media visibility is enhanced by the existence of a strong political conflict. In the case of Poland, media attention is most often drawn by the two main political parties, the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska), between which there is a constant political dispute, unabated for years, concerning basically all matters of public life (Marzęcki, 2012).

Studies of the visibility of participants in electoral contests in the media are conducted in many countries (Kruikemeier et al., 2018; Marszałek-Kawa, 2009), but in Poland, such analyses are still relatively rarely undertaken (Klepka, 2018). This article attempts to fill the existing gap. It proposes a simple research tool in the form of a media visibility index, which makes it possible to calculate and compare the visibility of electoral committees in selected media during the ongoing election campaign. The index was calculated using data from manual content analysis of two television news programmes and three opinion weeklies carried out during the six weeks preceding the day of the parliamentary elections. The study aimed to determine and compare the presence of all election committees participating in the parliamentary elections in analysed media. In undertaking the study, it was decided to verify the following hypotheses:

**H1.** The analysed media most often presented the two main participants of the election rivalry, devoting little attention to the remaining electoral committees.

It was expected that due to the existing strong political polarisation (Tworzecki, 2019), as well as the already mentioned conflict between the main political parties, the media would focus on publicising the rivalry between the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) and the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO), giving far less visibility to the other electoral committees.

**H2.** The media studied will provide the greatest media visibility to one of the two major election committees they overtly or covertly do not support.

The two most popular TV news services (Kurdupski, 2019) and the three socio-political weekly magazines having the highest sales ratings (Kurdupski, 2019) were selected for the study. News services included “Wiadomości”, broadcasted by Telewizja Polska, and “Fakty” by the commercial station TVN. Although television is far more often expected to be unbiased than the press (Hopmann et al., 2012), numerous studies have found that selected news programmes had distinct editorial lines during the period under study, consisting of

TVP supporting those in power and TVN supporting the opposition (Golińska-Konecko, 2018; Seklecka, 2017).

The group of weeklies included “Newsweek”, “Polityka”, and “Sieci”. In the case of the weeklies, their ideological identity is often defined by self-identification, as in the case of “Sieci”, which describes itself in the subtitle as a conservative magazine. The analyses of the weeklies prove that their editorial line, already expressed in the texts of their editors-in-chief published in the last issue before the election, makes it possible to clearly define the preferences regarding the election’s results. The researchers suggest that “Sieci” and earlier “W Sieci” supported PiS, while the remaining weeklies expressed their dislike for this party from the beginning (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2018; Mielczarek, 2018).

## Methodology

The study was conducted using manual content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Pisarek, 1983; Krippendorff, 2004; Klepka, 2016). It covered six weeks preceding the parliamentary election day on October 13, 2019. The content of all editions of the programmes “Wiadomości” TVP1 and “Fakty” TVN, which were broadcast from September 1 to October 12, 2019, was analysed. A total of 84 programmes were recorded, 42 editions of each programme. In the case of opinion weeklies, the study covered six editions of each magazine that were published in the six weeks before the elections. In total, 18 editions of weekly magazines were analysed. The unit of analysis for television programmes was a single piece of information, i.e., a news item and the unit of measurement was 1 second. In contrast, in the case of opinion weekly magazines, every journalistic material was recorded, and the unit of measurement was 1 square centimetre.

The first stage of the research was to assess each news item and each journalistic material and determine whether it related to the parliamentary elections and the election campaign. Only those news items and press materials that were devoted to the election issues were qualified for the next research stage. Polish and foreign researchers referring to media visibility most often measure the percentage of airtime or area of a publication devoted to a particular party or position and compare it with the results for other political groupings or positions in a given medium (Eberl et al., 2017; Szostok, 2013). Keeping in mind the fundamental objectives set for the media content analysis, the most important part was to identify the visibility of the electoral campaign actors featured in the programmes and weekly magazines. Identifying election committee visibility for news items and articles in the research body required a slightly different procedure.

For each news item relating to the election, it was determined which election actors were presented in the news item through analysis or apparent reference to an election programme, decision, past action, statement or reference to a politician associated with the committee. The pilot study provided a preliminary assessment that news items from “Wiadomości” often feature references to multiple election actors, thus limiting the coding of the news item to

identifying which is the main topic or protagonist of the news item would be insufficient. For weeklies, the pilot study produced other patterns of visibility. In principle, each press material was devoted to a single committee, and it was rare for another election participant to be even mentioned in the same material. The codebook used to analyse the weeklies also included the rare but noteworthy categories “relations between PiS and KO” and “campaign in general, voting rules, general about elections and committees”.

The obtained numerical data provided a basis for constructing the Media Visibility Index (MVI), which takes the value from 0 to 1. It is a relation between the number of appearances or the space devoted to a given committee and the number of news items in which committee appearances were recorded or the sum of space devoted to the presentation of all the committees. In calculating the index, materials that were not devoted to a specific committee but concerned multiple committees, the election campaign in general, or the relationship between committees were not considered. Thus, the index took the following form:

$$MVI = \frac{\text{visibility of a particular committee (number of news items/area)}}{\text{sum of visibility of all committees (number of news items/area)}}$$

Thus, the higher the value of the index, the more attention a given media outlet devotes to a given election committee. The indicator is a convenient tool for comparing values between different media and election committees.

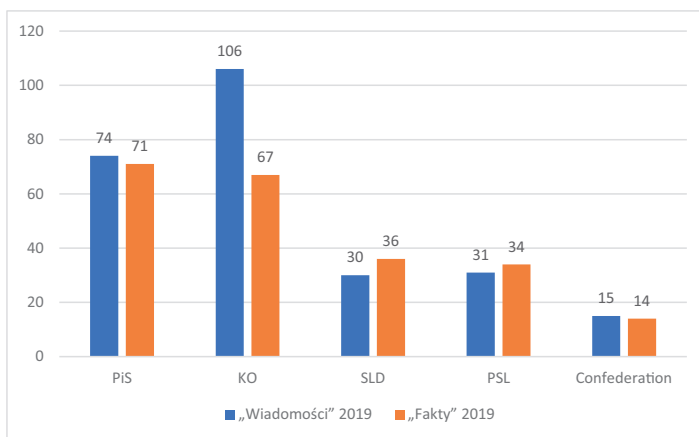
## Results

The research on media visibility of election committees in the news refers, as has already been pointed out, to those materials in which an appearance of a committee’s representative was connected with an ongoing election campaign. This conception of the research required separating materials about the role of the ruling party and its activities related to the ongoing exercise of power from those that were merely a part of the ongoing election campaign. An excellent example is a need for an in-depth assessment of whether the presence in the news item or press material of Mateusz Morawiecki was due to his office or candidacy in the elections. A prerequisite for including material for further analysis was a direct reference to the ongoing election campaign. In the course of the study, it was decided to thoroughly analyse such materials in terms of their nature. If they did not relate to the ongoing electoral campaign, they were not treated as involving parliamentary elections. Another reservation that must be made is that the study of candidates’ visibility in information programmes took into account only the news items and did not include the last segment of the programmes, which were announcements of evening talks with politicians on other programmes or channels such as TVP Info or TVN24. Despite this reservation, however, a specific edition of “Wiadomości” should be emphasised, which was broadcast on October 11, 2019, i.e., on the last day of the campaign before the beginning of the electoral silence. The programme lasted that day exceptionally 45

minutes, and the last 12 minutes were devoted not only to the announcement but also to an interview with the leader of Law and Justice, Jarosław Kaczyński.

The analysis of the visibility of the participants in the election rivalry began by assigning to each news item related to the election campaign the electoral committees which were presented or at least mentioned. In both news services, the largest number of news items concerned the Law and Justice and the Civic Coalition, however, among the most frequently appearing electoral committees and among those which appeared less frequently, there are clear differences between the two news channels. Details are presented in the chart below.

**Chart 1.** Number of news related to the parliamentary election campaign in TVP’s “Wiadomości” and TVN’s “Fakty” that featured the election committee



Source: own study.

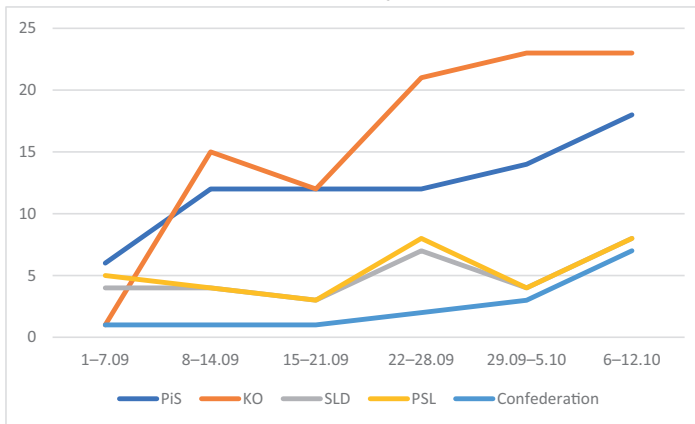
Although PiS and KO could count on the most frequent presence in news programmes, the patterns of their presence are somewhat different in each of the studied programmes. In “Wiadomości”, the election campaign of the governing party was mentioned in 74 news items, while as many as 106 referred to KO. In the case of the “Fakty”, PiS could expect to be present more often, but TVN analysed PiS’s campaign in 71 news items and KO’s in 67, which means that PiS had an advantage of only 4 news items. The visibility of the other participants in the election rivalry was very similar in “Wiadomości” and “Fakty”. The third place in “Wiadomości” was taken by the Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL), and in “Fakty” by the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD), but the differences in the frequency of presenting these committees were not significant. The public television programme presented information about SLD’s campaign 30 times and PSL’s 31 times, while in the case of commercial television, it was 36 and 34 appearances, respectively. Similarly, both programmes rarely spoke about the Confederation (Konfederacja), “Wiadomości” devoted 15 news items to this committee and “Fakty” 14.

The varying frequency with which election committees were mentioned makes it possible to divide them into three groups:

- the leading committees, i.e., PiS and KO, which were mentioned more than 60 times in the period under study,
- second-tier committees, i.e., SLD and PSL, which were mentioned at least 30 times,
- an overlooked committee, i.e., the Confederation, was mentioned half as many times as the second-tier committees in each news programme during the analysed period.

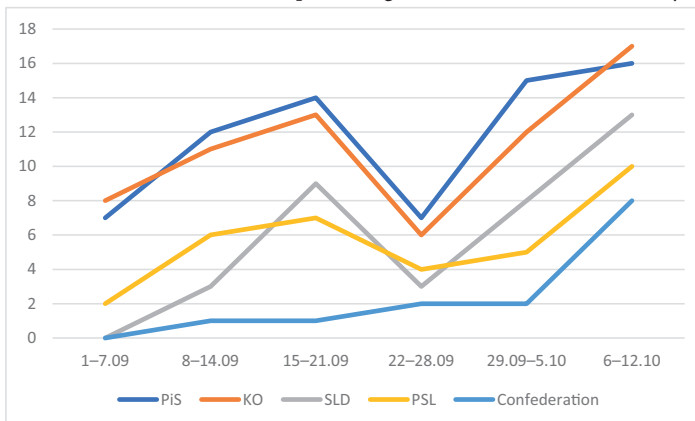
Additional information about the visibility of participants in the parliamentary election campaign is provided by the time distribution of news items that mention specific election committees. This data is presented separately for each programme in the charts below.

**Chart 2.** The time distribution of news items presenting electoral committees in “Wiadomości” TVP



Source: own study.

**Chart 3.** The time distribution of news items presenting electoral committees in “Fakty” TVN

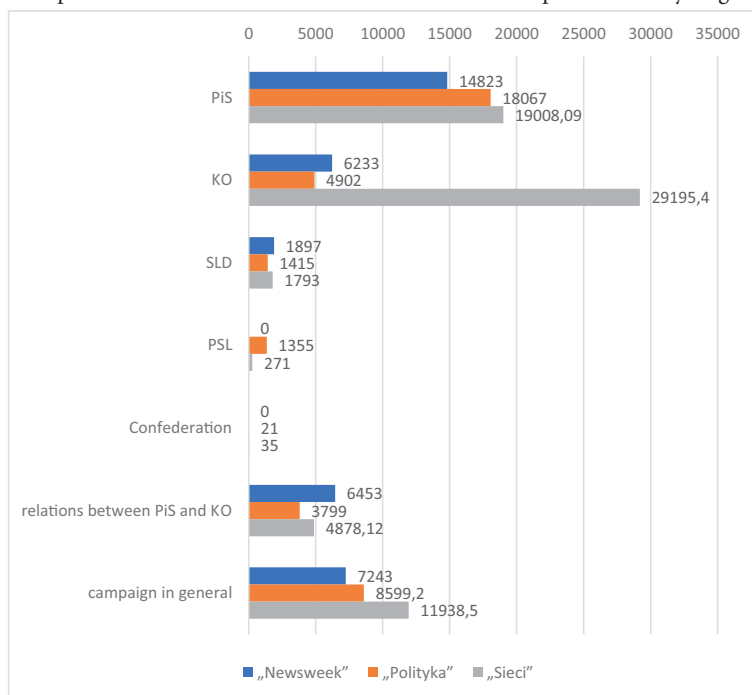


Source: own study.

The presented data shows that some election committees could rely on the coverage of their election campaign in news programmes infrequently and only at the very end of the campaign. We are dealing with such a situation in the case of the Confederation. “Wiadomości” twice began its programme with information about this committee because they had to apologise or supplement the news item broadcast earlier due to the court proceedings. The Confederation was presented mainly on the occasion of other committees and in the polls when all the registered election committees were mentioned. Only on a few occasions did the “Wiadomości” or “Fakty” devote the whole news item or a large part of it to that committee. The time distribution of news items about the participants in the election contest is very important if it is assumed that the news programmes consolidate the viewers’ knowledge about those running for office. The lack of any material on a particular committee when other committees are repeatedly mentioned may give the impression that it is not participating in the electoral competition at all.

The analysis of the visibility of the election committees in the socio-political weekly magazines shows that similarly to the news programmes, they wrote mainly about PiS and KO. Only the weekly “Sieci” devoted a more extensive article to SLD. Detailed data on the volume of publications about particular committees are presented in the chart below.

**Chart 4.** Area of publications devoted to election committees in socio-political weekly magazines (in cm<sup>2</sup>)



Source: own study.



Although, as mentioned above, all weekly magazines devoted the most attention to the PiS and KO electoral committees, the share of publications about them was not the same. The “Newsweek” and “Polityka” weeklies devoted much more space to PiS’s election campaign than to its main rival, while the “Sieci” magazine gave PiS’s rival the lead in the materials devoted to the election committee. “Sieci” devoted over 50% more space to KO than PiS. “Newsweek” devoted more than 60% of all its materials to the parliamentary election campaign to PiS alone. “Polityka” devoted almost four times more space to PiS than KO. It is noteworthy that in none of the weeklies, the reader received a single material about the Confederation which would present any elements of the candidates’ profiles or their programme proposals more extensively.

A synthetic assessment of the visibility of election committees in the surveyed media is facilitated by the Media Visibility Indexes calculated and tabulated below.

**Table 1.** Media Visibility Index of particular election committees in the analysed media

	PiS	KO	SLD	PSL	Confederation
„Wiadomości”	0,29	0,41	0,12	0,12	0,06
„Fakty”	0,32	0,30	0,16	0,15	0,07
„Newsweek”	0,65	0,27	0,00	0,00	0,08
„Polityka”	0,70	0,19	0,06	0,00	0,05
„Sieci”	0,38	0,58	0,01	0,00	0,03

Source: own study.

The analysis of visibility indicators allows for a broader look at how election committees are presented in the surveyed media. Concentration on the two main participants in the electoral competition proved stronger in socio-political weeklies than in television news programmes. At the same time, the index of PiS’s visibility in “Polityka” and “Newsweek” turned out to be the strongest. Among the analysed media, the news programme “Fakty” offered the highest visibility dispersion, which guaranteed almost equal visibility to the main rivals and the highest visibility among all examined media to the remaining electoral committees.

## Discussion

The results of the analysis enabled the verification of both hypotheses. The hypothesis that the media covered the election campaign of the two main rival parties was confirmed. The highest visibility index for the two main committees was recorded in the case of “Sieci” – 0.96. A slightly lower value was recorded in the case of “Newsweek” – 0.92, followed by “Polityka” with 0.89. The lowest index was recorded in the case of “Fakty” – 0.62.

Assuming that the media in Poland support certain political parties in a more or less unambiguous way, as indicated by the mentioned research, then the hypothesis that the highest media visibility is granted not to the party that is supported but to its biggest competitor is also confirmed. This regularity was most noticeable in the case of “Polityka” and “Newsweek”, which devoted most attention to PiS. However, this regularity turned out to be also true for the remaining analysed media. The “Wiadomości” gave more visibility to the opposition party KO than the governing PiS. In turn, the PiS could rely on higher visibility in the “Fakty”. A similar strategy can be observed in the case of “Sieci”, which, as a conservative weekly magazine, devoted more space to KO than to the conservative PiS.

Summarising the presented research results, it is worthwhile to point out a few additional conclusions. While focusing their visibility on the main actors in the political contest, the analysed media almost completely avoid presenting the other parties. This result makes it difficult for smaller participants of electoral competition not only to present their political offer but also to be noticed by voters, who remember mostly those political entities mentioned the most. It is also important to note that if one agrees with the thesis that the media favour a certain electoral committee, all examined media adopt the same strategy of offering greater visibility to an enemy committee rather than a supported one. It remains interesting to what extent such a strategy will be maintained in the next election, especially in the case of the media favouring the opposition. The media would then seem to be guided by the assumption that criticism of an unsupported election committee has a stronger impact on an audience than presenting a supported committee in a positive light.

The calculated media visibility indexes do not remain consistent with the theoretical findings outlined in the introduction. Conversely, the dispersion of media visibility was found to be greater in television programmes than in magazines and greater in commercial rather than public media. The existing discrepancies suggest the need for further research on a larger study sample and in different, including non-election, periods. It would also be valuable to extend further research to look for relationships between individual characteristics of politicians and political parties and their media visibility. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the results of the quantitative studies do not refer to the meaning of the text and the context of the statements. The results of the research analysing the visibility of election committees in the surveyed media are worth embedding in the context of the Polish political and media system as part of further in-depth qualitative studies.

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