

Sowing the seed: (limited) effectiveness of the Polish quasi-reform of local government to boost political participation

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Abstract: In this paper we describe effectiveness of the state intervention into the local political system and imposition of participatory institutions on the local communities. Preliminary results show that such top-down intervention may be effective provided that local community had previous experiences with participatory toolbox.

This relationship can be well pictured by the parable of the sower from the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Matthews. In this parable a sower sows his seed. Some fell on the good soil, where it produced a crop. But other fell on the path, between rocks or among thorns, where it was eaten by the birds, withered or choked – respectively. The same logic may be applied to the state intervention, where introduction of participatory institutions, depending on the previous experience of the community – may yield different results.

In 2018 the Polish parliament decided to amend acts governing the organization of the local and regional self-government in Poland, institutionalising some of the participatory practices, namely participatory budgeting, state of the unit debate and report, and civic legislative initiative. All those institutions were present prior to the 2018 intervention but were not widespread. Their introduction was dependent on the decision of the local communities.

Institutionalisation of the participatory practices was aimed to strengthen popular participation in the decision-making processes in the local communities. In this paper we will evaluate to which extent this aim has been reached. Our working hypothesis is that the newly established (or regulated) participatory institutions were much more often used by the citizens in those municipalities that had strong participatory mechanism in place before 2018.

We draw this hypothesis from the new institutional economics, where some authors claim existence of an institutional path dependence (see North 1990). We also draw from distinction between *de iure* and *de facto* political institutions, where introduction of new legal institutions is insufficient for them to become rooted within the society and to become a part of the legal DNA of the nation. One example of this phenomenon is the existence of waves of democratization and reversal waves. Similar phenomenon may exist in the microscale in the local communities. Additionally, we seek theoretical justification for this hypothesis in the learning-by-doing approach to political participation, where citizens, who had previously had an experience with participation are more likely to participate in the future.

To verify the hypothesis, we collected data on participation patterns in all 291 towns being county-seats in Poland (county, or *powiat*, is a second tier of the Polish local self-government). The data spans over the period 2013 – 2023. We then analysed it using standard statistical and econometrical toolbox (e.g. analysis of correlation and simple regressions). The preliminary results confirm our working hypothesis.