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## The Elections in Crisis: Media Coverage of the Postponed 2020 Presidential Elections in Poland<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In Poland, the presidential elections were primarily scheduled on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 circumstances, the elections were postponed and eventually took place in late June (first round) and mid-July (second round) 2020. The aim of the paper is to examine media coverage of the postponed presidential elections in Poland. In particular, the paper explores frames used by journalists in their coverage of the postponed elections. For the purpose of this study we conducted a quantitative content analysis of news items from three TV newscasts, four radio stations, and three on-line platforms. The material was collected on May 10<sup>th</sup> (a day of primarily scheduled the first round of elections), and June 30<sup>th</sup> (a day when the results of the first round of postponed elections were officially announced). The findings showed that both amount of the news coverage and the main frames used by the media across time differed. Although episodic frame prevailed in the media coverage on both days. thematic frame was used more often in the media coverage on the day when voting was supposed to take place, than on the day when results of the first round of presidential elections were announced. On contrary, conflict frame was used more often in the media coverage of results of the elections than on a day without election. The political orientation of the media outlets affected the way journalist employed responsibility and consequences frames.

**Key words:** elections, media, coverage, political parallelism, framing

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### Introduction

In Poland, the presidential elections were primarily scheduled on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 circumstances, the elections were postponed and eventually took place in late June (first round) and mid-July (second round) 2020. As Lipiński (2021, p. 115) noted, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Poland during the presidential campaign (first case announced on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020), “all political parties were completely focused on the electoral competition and the health crisis was, to a large extent, overshadowed by other issues”. However, in the light of the increasing number of COVID-19 cases, the government faced a dilemma when and how the presidential elections should take place.

There has been a disagreement on both time and procedure not only between the government and the opposition, but also within intra-governmental coalition (*Zjednoczona Prawica/United Right*). While the leading political party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law*

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and Justice hereafter PiS) was forcing an idea of elections taking place in May 2020, its coalition partners offered different solutions. Specifically, Solidarna Polska (*United Poland*) offered a counter-suggestion of a (postponed) postal voting on May 23rd, 2020. Porozumienie (*Agreement*) was countering the idea of elections taking place in May by promoting even more radical idea of introducing changes to the Constitution and extending President's term to two more years. At the same time, oppositional parties, operating as a coalition called Koalicja Obywatelska (*Civic Coalition*), were insisting on ordering a state of emergency (due to natural disaster) and postponing the elections (Lipiński, 2021).

It is worth mentioning that the issue of state of emergency was raised by the opposition when the government took measures of lockdown in March 2020 and introduced restrictions, including the closure of schools and universities, an entry ban on foreigners, quarantine, limits on gatherings, closing big shopping malls, and prohibiting travelling with just several exceptions. These restrictions were broadened and prolonged several times through the regulations issued by the Minister of Health and Council of Ministers, while the opposition, many experts and civil society organizations claimed that they were unconstitutional from the very beginning. They argued that such restrictions could only be imposed within the extraordinary measures stipulated in the Constitution, such as state of emergency or state of natural disaster (Lipiński, 2021).

However, the government decided not to use any constitutionally regulated, extraordinary measures. Instead, PiS attempted to introduce postal voting (alongside to traditional direct voting). Despite the fact that Election Code has not been revised yet (it was signed by the President only on May 8th, 2020), the government decided on printing voting packages for postal voting, ordering the National Postal Service being ready to deliver the voting packages, and ordering voters' personal data (name, last name, address, and personal ID) by the local and regional administration to be provided to the National Postal Service (without any legal regulations – see Wanat, 2020). These activities cost the budget of almost 70 million PLN (around 15 million EUR) (Jadczak, 2020).

The idea of combining postal and direct voting was highly criticized by the opposition and international civic organizations: they insisted that postal voting could open the door to election fraud (Tidey, 2020), while direct voting could cause serious risk to citizens' health. The opposition accused PiS of striving for power at any price (Vashchanka, 2020) and a substantial number of opposition voters planned to boycott the election (Traczyk, Nič, 2020). Moreover, Jarosław Gowin, the leader of Porozumienie (backed up by a handful of MPs loyal to him), rebelled against this plan, claiming that PiS is putting political gain ahead of public health. Critics also noted that due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures, there had been an absence of electoral campaigning and democratic debate. Unlike other candidates, President Duda was still able to continue campaigning while performing his official duties (Krakovsky, 2020).

Eventually, governmental coalition partners, namely PiS and Porozumienie, reached a political deal on May 6th, 2020. In a joint statement, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński and Porozumienie leader Jarosław Gowin said that “After the May 10 term passes and after the Supreme Court predictably confirms the invalidity of the elections, on account of them not taking place, the Speaker of the Sejm [lower house of parliament] will announce new presidential elections as soon as possible” (PAP, 2020). This claim raised another controversy among the opposition parties and the Supreme Court. The latter

responded to that statement expressing discontent with the government imposing a decision to be made by the Court.

Finally, it was the National Electoral Commission that decided and announced a final statement about the elections on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020: “The National Electoral Commission informs voters, electoral committees, candidates and electoral and local administrations that the vote on May 10, 2020, will not be able to take place” (Gocłowski, Plucinska, 2020). The Commission employed an article of the Election Code reflecting a scenario with no candidates to be voted for, while in fact there were ten registered candidates. In practice, the elections were not cancelled but there was no voting, neither in a postal or traditional manner on May 10, 2020.

The aim of this paper is to examine media coverage of political crisis accompanied by (and caused by) the COVID-19 pandemic, namely the postponed Presidential elections in Poland in 2020 and to recognize the main frames used by the media while covering this unusual event on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and its occurrence on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The study combines a media system approach (Hallin, Mancini, 2004, 2012; Castro Herrero et al., 2017) with a concept of framing (Entman, 1993; Cappella, Jamieson, 1996; Semetko, Valkenburg, 2000; Vliegenthart, Van Zoonen, 2011; Brüggemann, 2014). While the former provides a theoretical background for a study on political parallelism (de Albuquerque, 2013) of the Polish media system (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011, 2012), the latter offers a theoretical frame for an exploration of the way media present particular political events. By combining these two perspectives, the paper explores frames used by journalists in the debate over the elections covered by politically biased media organizations.

### **Theoretical background**

The question of how the media report on an issue is central to framing research (Strömbäck, Nord, 2006). Frames are “constructions of the issue: they spell out the essence of the problem, suggest how it should be thought about” (Nelson, Kinder, 1996, p. 1057). They are also defined as “central organizing idea[s] ... for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue” (Gamson, Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). In other words, to frame an issue means to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

There are different approaches to frame analysis in communication science (see, for example, Pan, Kosicki, 1993; D’Angelo, Kuypers, 2010; Gordon, 2015). In general, scholars differentiate between issue-specific and generic frames (De Vreese et al., 2001; Brüggemann, 2014). While issue-specific frames typically pertain to certain issues, “generic frames are broadly applicable to a range of different news topics, some even over time and, potentially, in different cultural contexts” (De Vreese et al., 2001, p. 108; see also Asker Guenduez, Schedler, Ciocan, 2016, p. 585). The generic frames constitute specific layers of contextualization in stories that cover and amplify a desired perspective and can be regarded as compounded patterns of meaning articulated in news content (Brüggemann, 2014). Therefore, generic approach allows investigations and comparisons of these compounded discourses and journalistic contextualization in news framing over time (Guenduez, Schedler, Ciocan, 2016, p. 586).

This study focuses on generic frames and uses the dichotomy of episodic and thematic frames introduced by Iyengar (1991), while adapting the approach suggested by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) on how to research generic frames at the same time. The analysis of episodic and thematic framing helps to establish whether media only focus on particular events or individuals in their published material, or whether they reflect a wider context of events in their articles, e.g., by analyzing facts, providing expert opinion and statistical data. The episodically framed material identified by Iyengar (1991) denotes a reflection of events, whereas thematic reporting demands an in-depth, interpretive analysis that is more difficult to anticipate.

In studying television news, Iyengar (1991) concluded that episodic framing dominated here. Thus, when reporting on mass protests, the focus of the stories was on the specific protest actions rather than the issues that had sparked the protest. The same would apply to TV reporting of labor disputes: depictions of picketers gain more airtime than discussions on economic and political issues that are at the root of such disputes. From this, the first research question then follows (RQ1) What is the proportion of episodic and thematic frames in media coverage of the postponed Presidential elections in 2020 in Poland?

In their turn, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) studied five news frames that have been identified in earlier research: attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality, and economic consequences. Responsibility frame presents an issue or a problem by attributing responsibility to someone for its causes or resolution. Human interest frame involves individual stories or an emotional angle in presenting an event, issue, or problem, which is a way of personalizing and dramatizing news and rendering them more emotional. Conflict frame highlights conflict among individuals, groups, and institutions. Morality frame places an event in a context of religious principles or moral injunctions. Economic consequence frame presents an event, a problem, or an issue by underlining the actual or potential economic consequences it will have for an individual, a group, an institution, a region, or a state.

This study will apply an adapted version of Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) approach by studying several frames to answer two following research questions: (RQ2) Which frames are more widespread in the reporting on the postponed Presidential elections? and (RQ3) How does the proportion of the frames differ in the news outlets under study?

Based on the previous studies on the Polish media system recognizing a high level of political parallelism (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011; 2019; 2022; Dobek Ostrowska, Nożewski, 2019), or media bias (Klepka, 2021) in framing events (Palczewski, 2011), we focused on a political leaning of the media organizations while studying differences across media outlets (RQ3). We assumed that (H1) anti-governmental media will use the responsibility frame more often than neutral and pro-governmental media (*government to be blamed for the crisis*), while (H2) pro-governmental media will refer to extraordinary circumstances, presenting a crisis as a result of pandemic-related challenges and concerns that were impossible to predict and neglect. We assumed that such a frame may serve as explanation (or accuse) of government's performance.

The concept of political parallelism was first introduced in the 1970s by Seymour-Ure (1974), and Blumler and Gurevitch (1975) and gained popularity in the 2000s, after

Hallin and Mancini (2004) made it one of the four analytical variables of their comparative media systems framework. As de Albuquerque (2013) noted, the term “political parallelism” has been used to name at least three different phenomena. First, it is used to describe the existence of recognizable patterns of relationship between media and politics in a given society. Second, it may be seen as stable patterns of convergence between certain media outlets and political parties, groups, or tendencies, with regard to their agendas, worldviews, and in some cases, organizational ties. Third, political parallelism is defined as a specific circumstance in which a significant degree of connection between particular media and political groups is a feature common enough to define the political communication system as a whole.

For the purpose of this study, we will employ the second definition which refers to the existence of stable patterns of relationship between certain political parties (in this case – parties constituting the United Right government, namely: PiS, Porozumienie, and Solidarna Polska) and media, and may be referred as media/politics linkage (de Albuquerque, 2013).

### The study

For the purpose of this study we collected news items from ten electronic media outlets. We selected the outlets based on several criteria, such as: a type of the media (television, radio, and online media), ownership model (public versus private), and a size of the audience (media outlets with the highest number viewers, listeners, or users). As a result, we studied a content of three TV stations (one public [TVP], two private [TVN and Polsat]; main evening newscasts: “Wiadomości”, “Fakty”, and “Wydarzenia”, respectively), four radio stations (two public [PR1 “Jedynka” and PR3 “Trójka”] and two commercial [RMF FM and Radio Zet], newscasts collected from 5 time slots during the day; minimum 20 minutes of newscasts per day), and three online news outlets (Wp.pl, Onet.pl, and Interia.pl; items collected twice a day, at 11:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m.).

While selecting media outlets we focused on political leaning of the media organizations first (conservative/right wing, liberal/left-wing, or neutral/center), and then divided them into three main categories based on their attitudes towards the United Right government (pro-governmental, anti-governmental, or neutral/balanced). Based on the previous studies (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011; 2019; Palczewski, 2011; Klepka, 2021) in 2020, we regard public TV station (TVP1, “Wiadomości”) and two public radio stations (PR1 and PR3) as pro-governmental media outlets, one commercial TV station (TVN, “Fakty”) and one online media platform (onet.pl) as explicitly oppositional toward the government in 2020, and one commercial TV station (Polsat, “Wydarzenia”, two news online media (Wp.pl and Interia.pl), as well as two commercial stations (Radio Zet, RMF FM) as either neutral (no clear political leaning) or balanced (equally critical towards all political actors from the broad spectrum of political scene) media organizations.

The material was collected on two days: May 10th (a day of primarily scheduled elections) and June 30th (a day when the results of the first round of postponed elec-

tions were officially announced). We did not include the print press in our study due to the fact that print press is not published on Sundays (the election day). In order to analyze the frames, a quantitative content analysis was conducted, and the units of analysis were news items selected by a keyword: *elections*. In total 143 unique news items were found to qualify for the framing analysis. Table 1 presents number of items per media outlet.

Table 1

Sample

Media type	Outlet	Ownership	Political orientation	May 10th	June 30th
Radio	PR1 Jedyńka	Public	Right-wing	7	7
	PR3 Trójka	Public	Right-wing	4	6
	Radio Zet	Private	Center	0	5
	RMF FM	Private	Center	1	7
Television	Wiadomości TVP1	Public	Right-wing	1	8
	Fakty TVN	Private	Liberal	2	4
	Wydarzenia Polsat	Private	Center	2	3
Online	Wp.pl	Private	Center	9	16
	Interia.pl	Private	Center	9	14
	Onet.pl	Private	Liberal	8	30
TOTAL				34	100

Source: Own elaboration.

It is worth mentioning that as many as 100 of them were collected on June 30<sup>th</sup> (when the media reported the results), while only 43 on May 10<sup>th</sup> (when the elections were supposed to take place). Interestingly, one radio station (commercial Radio Zet) did cover the “not-happening” elections on May 10<sup>th</sup> at all, and two other news media, namely public TV station (in its main evening newscast “Wiadomości”) and other commercial radio station (RMF FM) devoted only one news item to that topic. Results of the elections (specifically, first round of voting) were covered more intensely across media outlets in comparison to the event that supposed to happen on May 10<sup>th</sup>.

In this study we employed a deductive approach to framing analysis. Specifically, we identify predefined framing categories as the variables of the content analysis and assess their prevalence in published media items. For each frame, indicators were defined relying on Semetko and Valkenburg’s approach, but the original structures were adapted to the context of this study. In particular, we were examining a presence of: (1) responsibility frame, (2) conflict frame, and (3) consequence frame, complimented with (4) (democratic) rules and standards frame (that can be seen as adapted original morality frame: in this case an event is presented by underlining democratic values and standards being either protected or compromised), and (5) extraordinary circumstances frame (presenting an event in a context of pandemic-related challenges and concerns that were impossible to predict and neglect; “force of nature”; unprecedented case of postponing elections due to unusual circumstances).

Responsibility frame is a multi-layered category of analysis. The majority of the criteria of responsibility frame reflects the practice of searching for and identifying those responsible for or guilty of causing the crisis, as well proposing solutions (or recognizing

those who were able to propose a solution). Therefore, while tracing this frame, we asked following questions: Who was responsible for a crisis? Who is to be blamed? (A government; an opposition; a COVID-19 pandemic)? Who proposed a solution (A government; an opposition; the National Electoral Commission; the Supreme Court)?

In justifying the need to include conflict frame among the “armory” of frames of their research project, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) invoked previous studies that demonstrated the relatively high incidence of conflict framing in news, for instance, by reducing complex and relevant political debate issues to the level of simplistic conflict. In their research, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) concluded that conflict frame is more frequently used in “serious” newspapers, which are the ones that report more on political issues.

Due to the fact that the organization of Presidential elections in 2020 was a highly polarizing issue, we decided to replace indicators related to regular elections (such as rivalry between candidates, public opinion polls, or election campaign events such as meetings and debates), with indicators of actual argument. Specifically, in our study we aimed in recognizing following types of conflict: (a) between government and opposition, (b) inside a governmental coalition (between coalition partners), and (c) intra-party conflict.

Finally, consequence framing (originally: economic consequence framing) depicts events, issues and problems by also highlighting their economic consequences. It is identified as a frame used often in news, as the impact on people also represents significant news value. In the present instance, adapted Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) original approach. Specifically, we recognized several indicators of the consequence frame that allowed us to examine which aspects of the public sphere were presented by the media as affected by the election crisis: (1) law and order (legal acts, state institutions, and procedures), (2) economics (budget/costs), (3) democracy (standards and values), or (4) citizens (health and security).

In addition to “classic” frames suggested by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) we added a frame that emphasizes both the unprecedented case of rescheduling elections and the unusual circumstances of this case (pandemic). Since such a case happened for the first time in 30-year history of modern democracy in Poland, we assumed that media may address this aspect in their reporting. We aimed in examining to what extent this frame was used on the day when the voting was primarily scheduled in comparison to the day when the results of postponed voting was officially announced. In particular, our goal was to study whether the fact of rescheduling the elections was mentioned in the media coverage of the results of the first round of voting.

Table 2

**Indicators of frames used in the media coverage of postponed elections in 2020**

Frame	Dimensions	Aspects/indicators	Type of frame in media coverage
1	2	3	4
Responsibility	Blame and solutions	Accusations against a government or an opposition. Proposing solutions by a government; an opposition, the National Electoral Commission, or the Supreme Court.	Thematic

1	2	3	4
<b>Conflict</b>	Political conflict	Tensions between a government and an opposition Tensions between governmental coalition partners/ intra-government relations Intra-party tensions Rivalry between candidates Public opinion polls Regular election campaign events (meetings, debates)	Episodic
<b>Consequences</b>	Law and order	Legal acts: Constitution, the Election Code The election calendar (dates and deadlines) Rules and procedures Obligations and permissions Institutions (the Parliament, speakers of chambers, the Supreme Court, the National Electoral Commission)	Thematic
	Health and security	COVID-19 pandemics Threat to health Security measures	Thematic
	Economic (organization of voting)	Format of voting (direct and personal; postal) Printing voting cards Delivery of voting cards (postal voting) Voting outside the country (institutions). Costs of postal voting	Thematic
<b>Morality</b>	Democratic standards and values	Right to vote Freedom of choice Equal rights and chances for all candidates Clear and transparent rules	Thematic
<b>Event</b>	Unprecedented case	Unusual situation Unique circumstances First case of postponing elections	Episodic

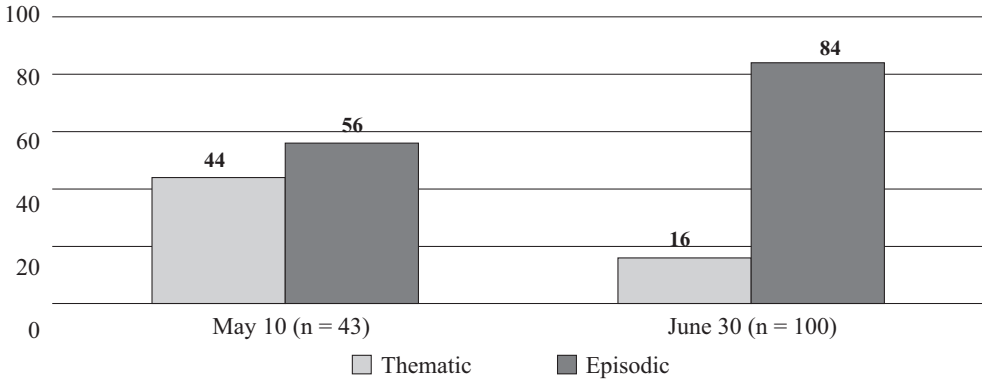
Source: Own elaboration.

## Findings

In a first step, we examined which general type of generic frames (thematic or episodic) was prevalent in the media coverage of the postponed Presidential elections in 2020 in Poland. We found that on both days (a day of primarily scheduled elections – May 10<sup>th</sup> and a day of announcing results of the first round of the postponed elections – June 30<sup>th</sup>) journalists used the episodic frame more often than thematic one (see Figure 1). However, on a day when the elections were primarily planned, thematic frames were more frequently used by journalists across the media (44% of news items) than on the day when the results of first round of the elections were officially announced (16%). In other words, media coverage on a day when the voting was supposed to take place was more oriented towards an in-depth, interpretive analysis of the event, while the reporting on the number of votes each candidate gained was definitely more focused on particular events or individuals in their published material than on analyzing facts or providing expert opinion.



**Figure 1. Episodic versus thematic frames across time (%), N=143**



Source: Own elaboration.

In order to deepen our understanding how exactly journalists covered postponed elections on two selected days, in the second stage of our study we traced a presence of particular generic frames used in the news media content. We found that the responsibility frame was the one used most frequently on May 10<sup>th</sup> (see Table 3). As many as 39% of news referring to elections on that day, presented the postponed voting by attributing responsibility to someone for its causes or resolution. On that day media focused less on conflicts between political parties (21%) than on stating objections against political actors whose performance led to a situation when voting had to be postponed or providing analyses of proposed solutions (39%). Furthermore, 14% of news items emphasized consequences of decision on postponing elections, while in 16% news items journalists framed that event as threatening democratic standards and values. In 9% of items journalists presented the postponed elections as unprecedented case in 30 years of Polish modern democracy.

Media reporting on the day of announcing results of the first round of Presidential elections was focused mostly on conflict. Namely, almost 60% of news items presented elections as a competition between political actors (presidential candidates and political parties), while only 5% of news items emphasized the responsibility of political actors regarding the ‘election crisis’. Although in 12% news items 2020 Presidential elections were framed as ones that underlined democratic values and standards, journalists employ again their regular way of covering elections – that is framing them mostly as a conflict-oriented event. Interestingly, only in 2% of the items journalists recalled the fact that these elections were unique in terms of circumstances and procedures (see Table 3).

Table 3

**Generic frames across time (%)**

FRAMES	May 10 <sup>th</sup>	June 30 <sup>th</sup>
Responsibility	39	5
Conflict	21	59
Consequences	14	13
Democratic standards and values	16	12
Extraordinary event	9	2

Source: Own elaboration.

In the next step, we took a closer look at a presence of particular indicators of the aforementioned frames. While framing elections as a conflict on May 10th, media focused mostly on relations between political parties constituting the government (19% of news items), while less on arguments over the elections between the government and opposition (9%). The consequences frame was built mostly on references to threats to democratic procedures (19%) and legal aspects (11%) of scheduling and then rescheduling voting on May 10<sup>th</sup>, as well as to economic and organizational challenges (11%). Less attention was paid to risks related to COVID-19 pandemic: only 1% of the analyzed news items addressed a potential threat to health of those who would participate in ballots (see Table 4).

On the day when the official results of actual first ballot were announced, journalists focused mostly on covering conflict between government and opposition (13% of news items), while still placing elections in a context of democratic frame (values and procedures, 9% and 6% of news items, respectively). Legal, organizational, and health-related issues were less frequently addressed at that time (see Table 4).

Table 4

**Presence of selected indicators of frames across time  
(%)**

INDICATORS	May 10th	June 30th
Intra-government relations	19	1
Conflict between government and opposition	9	13
Values	2	6
Procedures	19	9
Legal aspects	11	2
Health risk	1	1
Organization of voting	11	4

**Source:** Own elaboration. Note: up to three indicators were coded per item.

In the last stage of the study, we compare, and contrast framing used by media outlets representing different political orientations (liberal, conservative, or neutral) and – as a result – either pro-, or anti-governmental attitude. All three categories of the media presented the postponed elections most frequently in a way that highlighted conflict among political parties (see Table 5). At the same time, pro-governmental media outlets paid more attention to discuss consequences (36% of the news items) than other types of the media outlets. Neutral and anti-governmental media organizations, on the other hand, seemed to be more focus on analyzing responsibility of the government (21% and 16% of news items, respectively) than pro-governmental media (3% of news items).

Democratic standards and values were addressed more frequently by conservative, pro-governmental media (18% of news items) than by liberal, anti-governmental ones. Neutral media outlets (commercial TV station, two commercial radio stations and two news online platforms) led in presenting the 2020 Presidential elections as an event of the extraordinary character (6% of news items).

Table 5

**Generic frames across political orientation of the media outlets (%)**

FRAMES	Pro-governmental media	Anti-governmental media	Neutral
Responsibility	3	16	21
Conflict	42	50	48
Consequences	36	4	8
Democratic standards and values	18	9	14
Extraordinary event	0	4	6

Source: Own elaboration.

Once we traced individual indicators of frames, we noticed that intra-government relations as well as conflict between government and opposition were covered most frequently by the pro-governmental media outlets (public TV station and two public radio stations). Journalists working for this type of media made references to procedural and organizational aspects of the elections, while paying less attention to legal aspects and risks related to health of the voters (see Table 6). Anti-governmental media focused mostly on conflict between government and opposition, procedures, values, and legal aspects. They were also more concern about risks related to COVID-19 pandemic than other types of the media under study. Neutral media organizations focused mostly on procedures, on conflict between government and opposition, intra-government relations, and legal aspects of the elections.

Table 6

**Presence of selected indicators of frames across political orientation of the media outlets (%)**

INDICATORS	Pro-governmental media	Anti-governmental media	Neutral
Intra-government relations	12	2	6
Conflict between government and opposition	19	9	11
Values	3	8	4.5
Procedures	12	11	13
Legal aspects	1	6	6
Health risk	0	3	0
Organization of voting	10	4.5	5

Source: Own elaboration. Note: up to three indicators were coded per item.

**Conclusions**

As Vashchanka (2020, p. 5) noted, “the COVID-19 pandemic presented politicians and election management bodies around the world with difficult choices”. In case of Poland, procedural challenges were accompanied by a fierce campaign of accusations, both between the government and opposition, and within the governmental coalition. The conflict arouse around legal (regulations and procedures), economic (costs), but also moral (democratic values) aspects of the elections. Not surprisingly then, episodic frame

prevailed in the media coverage on both days. However, thematic frame was used more often (44%) in the media coverage of “the last minute” reschedule of voting than in the media coverage of results of the first round of presidential elections (16%).

Specifically, on the day of primarily scheduled elections media focused more on the context and such issues like responsibility issue, consequences, and democratic standards and values that could be compromised by actions undertaken by political actors in power. Additionally, media emphasized an unprecedented event of postponing voting just four days before the scheduled elections. However, the episodic frames prevailed in the media coverage of the results of first round of presidential elections. In other words, once elections actually took place on June 28<sup>th</sup>, media focused more on a regular competition between presidential candidates and political parties backing them up than on context of the elections. Conflict frame was used more often in the media coverage of results of elections (59%) than on a day without election (21%). Findings of this study support previous observations on the media tendency to cover politics as a conflict, especially during elections.

The analysis of indicators revealed, however, that the conflict frame used on May 19<sup>th</sup> and June 30<sup>th</sup> differed: on a day without voting more attention was paid to intra-government relations than to conflict between ruling parties and their political opposition. Namely, journalists focused mostly on presenting discrepancies between governmental coalition partner in ideas how to deal with presidential elections during the pandemic, procedures that have been considered and then neglected, regulations revised or broken, as well as organizational challenges and costs. While reporting the results, on the other hand, journalists covered mostly a competition between political parties who supported “their” presidential candidates.

It is noteworthy that on both days, little attention was paid to more general context, which is COVID-19 pandemic and a risk it carried for public health. Despite the fact that politicians addressed that issue in their statements, the media outlets did not emphasized this aspect neither on May 10<sup>th</sup>, nor on June 30<sup>th</sup>.

In the second step we compared and contrasted coverage provided by media outlets representing different political leanings. (H1) was confirmed: responsibility frame was used more often by journalists in the neutral and anti-governmental media than in the pro-governmental media. (H2), on the other hand, was not confirmed. On contrary, the neutral and anti-governmental media presented the postponed elections as a unique case more often than pro-governmental ones. In fact, none of the news items under study coming from either public radio or television framed the postponed elections that way. At the same time, pro-governmental media did not refer to health risk related to participation in voting. Still, they were referring to organizational challenges in the media coverage of the presidential elections in 2020 more than other types of the media.

The findings also showed that political orientation of the media outlets affected the extent to which journalists were referring to such aspects like democratic values and procedures, as well as legal frameworks of the elections. While pro-governmental media focused less on values and law, they emphasized more the procedures in comparison to neutral and anti-governmental media. In fact, public media, controlled by the ruling parties, paid much of the attention to discredit the opposition and portray the governmental coalition as those who protected procedures and offered the solution despite the

opposition's performance that could "throw the country into chaos", as Andrzej Duda, the president representing PiS, stated (see: Lipiński, 2021).

At the same time, media outlets that were critical towards the United Right government and those that were rather neutral at that time, emphasized legal and moral (values) aspects of the postponed elections, focusing on irregularities and threats to democracy caused by government's performance.

### Author Contributions

Conceptualization (Konceptualizacja): Agnieszka Stępińska

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## Wybory w czasie kryzysu: medialny obraz przełożonych wyborów prezydenckich w Polsce w 2020 roku

### Streszczenie

Wybory prezydenckie w Polsce zostały pierwotnie zaplanowane na 10 maja 2020 r. Niemniej, z uwagi na okoliczności, które powstały w związku z pandemią COVID-19, głosowanie zostało przełożone i odbyło się pod koniec czerwca (I tura) i w połowie lipca 2020 roku (II tura). Celem artykułu jest zbadanie sposobu, w jaki media relacjonowały przełożone wybory prezydenckie w Polsce. W szczególności celem badania jest rozpoznanie ram interpretacyjnych stosowanych przez dziennikarzy podczas relacjonowania wydarzeń związanych z tymi wyborami. Przeprowadzona została ilościowa analiza zawartości przekazów pochodzących z audycji informacyjnych trzech stacji telewizyjnych, czterech stacji radiowych i trzech platform online. Materiał badawczy został zebrany 10 maja (czyli w dniu, w którym pierwotnie głosowanie miało się odbyć) oraz 30 czerwca (czyli w dniu, w którym oficjalnie ogłoszono wyniki I tury wyborów). Wyniki analizy ukazały różnice w sposobie relacjonowania wyborów pomiędzy pierwszym i drugim dniem uwzględnionym w badaniu. Co prawda rama epizodyczna dominowała w medialnym przekazie w obu dniach, ale rama tematyczna była częściej wykorzystywana w dniu, gdy zaplanowane wcześniej wybory ostatecznie się nie odbyły, niż w dniu, w którym ogłoszono wyniki. Rama konfliktu była częściej wykorzystywana w materiałach dziennikarskich w dniu ogłoszenia wyników niż w dniu bez głosowania. Wyniki ukazały także wpływ orientacji politycznej organizacji medialnej na sposób wykorzystania ramy odpowiedzialności i ramy konsekwencji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wybory, media, relacjonowanie, paralelizm polityczny, ramowanie

