


**The Influence of Corruption Scandals
on Government Accountability**

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Abstract:

The objective of the article is to examine whether corruption scandals involving members of the ruling party lead to changes in support for the government. It will also explore the extent to which the eruption of such scandals and reporting on them leads to an increase in the number of those opposed to the government, and whether in the long run this leads to the activation of the carrot-and-stick mechanism in respect of the governing political party, reflected in increased voting instability during subsequent elections.

Keywords: Corruption scandals, government accountability, volatility

Introduction

During the period of 1997–2015, each election in Poland (excepting that in 2011) led to a change in the ruling party. Would it thus be justified to claim that Polish voters express their dissatisfaction with the ruling class, punishing them by denying re-election? As it turns out, when applying the theoretical assumptions of the accountability concept in empirical research, this dependency is not so easily proven. Firstly, it is difficult to determine the degree to which institutional factors inhibit the use of electoral accountability; secondly, interpretation of the process of voting behaviours is not an easy task. Nevertheless, there is a link between the party system and electoral accountability. Significant in relation to accountability, at least in young democracies, is the low level of institutionalization of the party system. As it turns out, with the institutionalization of the party system, the ideological voting behaviours become more frequent

and supersede economic voting. Thus, there is a correlation between institutionalization of the party system and the associated strong or weak roots of the party system and electoral accountability. One indicator of poor institutionalization is a high degree of electoral volatility.

The primary objective of the article is to examine whether corruption scandals involving members of the ruling party lead to changes in support for the government. It will also explore the extent to which the eruption of such scandals and reporting on them leads to an increase in the number of those opposed to the government, and whether in the long run this leads to the activation of the of punishment and rewards mechanism in respect of the governing political party, reflected in increased of electoral volatility during subsequent elections. The starting point of the study is the year 1997, which marks the moment of consolidation of the Polish political system, and it closes with the last elections conducted in 2015.

Party system in Poland and assigning responsibility

Maravall and Przeworski (2001: 35-76), Clarke, Marianne, and Whitley (2002: 235-260), Sroka (2017: 219-230) have confirmed the hypothesis that electoral accountability is stronger when political parties are weaker. There is thus a correlation between institutionalization of the party system, the associated strong or weak rooting of political parties and vertical accountability. No less important is the institutionalization of political parties themselves; however, in the context of vertical accountability, the institutionalization of the party system would seem far more important as it is derived to an extent from the institutionalization of political parties. Pioneers of the operationalization of this concept are Mainwaring and Sculli (1995, 1998: 67-81). Many other scholars have made the effort to define and operationalize the concept of institutionalization of the party system, among whom it is necessary to mention Morlino (2009), Randall and Svasand (2002: 5-29).

What joins the cited authors, however, is the distinction of stability as a vital element in studying the extent of institutionalization. From the perspective of vertical accountability, the rooting of political parties, which is the most frequently measured index of electoral volatility, would seem to be also the most important. It should be kept in mind that, following the hypothesis of Maravall and Przeworski, weak rooting of political parties reinforces the use of reward/punishment mechanisms.

If we look more closely at one of the most important indices measuring the degree of institutionalization of the party system, *id est* electoral volatility, it turns out that stability is not

one of the Polish party system’s primary characteristics. In the period 1997–2015, aggregate volatility (Pedersen index) was very high; the average global aggregate volatility measured during the examined period was 29.30%. In respect of individual interparty volatility, the average was 44.10%. These results point to a very low level of party system institutionalization. However, it can be said that the level of electoral volatility in Poland is systematically dropping.

Table 1. Electoral volatility in the years 1997–2015 (in %)

Volatility	1993-1997	1997-2001	2001-2005	2005-2007	2007-2011	2011-2015
Global aggregate	19.19	49.3	38.39	24.96	13.74	30.1
Individual Interparty	62.26	55.94	62.64	34.48	23.12	26.27

Source: Markowski & Cześniak (2012: 293), Markowski & Kwiatkowska (2017: 109).

Such high levels of electoral volatility in Poland at both the aggregate and individual levels attest to poor institutionalization of the party system. In summary, we may speak of a very high level of electoral volatility in Poland, which may attest to the weak rooting of political parties, and in consequence lead to the frequent use of the punishment/reward mechanism.

Hypothesis and data

Voters’ volatility may be caused by plenty of factors (majority of them are well known and described in the literature – just to mention political or economic performance, leader evaluation etc.). In the present paper we assume that corruption scandals are one of such factors. We expect that corruption scandals that governing party politicians were involved in lead to decrease of support for the government and – as an effect – decrease of support in subsequent elections.

The verification of the above stated hypothesis would be hard (if not impossible) with traditional postelectoral surveys which are used to test accountability. First, the low number of Polish parliamentary elections and uniform electoral results (the majority of Polish elections resulted in the change of the government) make it difficult to separate the individual effect of corruption scandals on vote choice. The drop in the support for the governing party at the ballot may be attributed to other factors (e.g. its poor performance). What is more, the corruption scandals occur all over the government term, its effect may not last till election day.

In order to verify our hypothesis, we use the declared support for the government as a proxy for accountability. Our key variable is measured with the representative public opinion

survey, which is held systematically¹. The data which covers the years 1997 – 2015 enables us to analyse all democratic governments elected under the same constitutional regime, together with the parliamentary elections during which the government is held accountable.

Despite the fact that – to our best knowledge – there is no literature on government support as a proxy for accountability, this variable seems to well serve our purpose due to both substantial and methodological reasons. First, the notion of accountability is closely associated with the government: it's the government and its politicians that are directly accountable to the citizens for its decisions, actions and – in case of the latter - behavior. What is more, the governing party is being in the spotlight, its politicians are better known and the scandals they are involved in are widely covered by the media. The effect of corruption scandals on the support for the governing party is, then, easier to evaluate by the citizens and should be reflected in the fluctuations of government support.

Second, in the interelectoral period the usual measure of accountability – a vote choice – is much less robust. People do not think about casting a ballot in the middle of electoral cycle, unless they are made to. This may result in higher numbers of missing data (more undecided voters) and more random choices (not necessarily reflecting the real preferences). The changes in support for the government can - in our opinion - be a good proxy for punishment-reward mechanism effect, instead of vote choice. Systematic measurement of this variable perfectly captures not only general trends, but also short-term changes in the support for government, caused by unexpected events like corruption scandals.

We test our hypotheses using the data from Public Opinion Research Center² combined with the information about the extent to which corruption allegations and scandals have occurred is gathered from campaign coverage from selected media.

The percentage of the supporters and opponents of the government is juxtaposed with the data on corruption scandals (listed in the table 2). The choice of scandals is based on selected criteria. First, we took into consideration only scandals which could have an impact on the image of the party at the national, not local level; second, the scandal must have been widely publicized in the media (this increases the probability the significant part of the society was aware of their occurrence, as the data does not allow the direct verification of this assumption); third, the most important politicians of the governing party must have been involved. We assume that only such

¹ At least once a month a sample representative for adult Polish population (with N=1000) is asked whether they support the current government or not.

² The Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) is a publicly funded independent public opinion research institute in Poland, conducting representative public opinion polls on important socio-political and economic issues.

cases could have an impact on the drop in support for the government and consequently the results of the election. At the same time we excluded scandals that dragged on for years and those that involved the politicians of different parties.

Table 2. Selected corruption scandals in Poland

Corruption scandal	Description	Date of disclosure	Entangled party
Privatisation of DomyTowarowe Centrum	The company was sold for abnormally low price (due to undervalued valuation); Treasury Minister accused of mismanagement.	Summer 1998	Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS)
Szeremietiew's case	Szeremietiew (AWS politician) was accused of stealing money from the Foundation for Polish Independence and using them to support electoral campaign.	July 2001	Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS)
Marek Czekalski's scandal	Czekalski (UW politician) was accused of bribery.	September 2001	Freedom Union (UW)
Roman Kluska's Optimus scandal	Kluska (businessman) was falsely accused of tax fraud; The government was blamed for persecuting entrepreneurs.	July 2002	Left Democratic Alliance (SLD)
Rywingate	Rywin (film producer) acting in the name of the Group holding power proposed Agora editorial favorable provisions in the Law on Broadcasting in exchange for a bribe.	September 2002	Left Democratic Alliance (SLD)
Starachowice scandal	SLD politicians were involved in cooperation with a criminal group from Starachowice and accused of obstruction of justice.	July 2003	Left Democratic Alliance (SLD)
Orlengate	SLD government accused of determining the composition of the supervisory board of Orlen, taking commissions from fuel contracts and negotiating with Russian spies.	April 2004	Left Democratic Alliance (SLD)
Pęczak and Dochnal's scandal	Politicians accused of bribery.	September 2004	Left Democratic Alliance (SLD)
Recording scandal	Political corruption: politicians negotiated change of partisanship in exchange for ministerial office and other political benefits.	September 2006	Law and Justice (PiS) and Self-Defence
Ground scandal	Politician suspected of taking bribes for changing the status of farmland.	July 2007	Self-Defence
Lipiec's scandal	Corruption in sport ministry and some subordinate organizations.	July 2007	Law and Justice (PiS)
Gambling scandal	Dishonest lobbying of the work on the law on games of chance.	October 2009	Civic Platform (PO)
Infoscandal	IT tenders rigging in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.	October 2011	Civic Platform (PO)
Recording scandal	Financial frauds in state-owned company.	July 2012	Polish People's Party (PSL)
Amber Gold scandal	Government blamed for supporting the activities of financial pyramid scheme.	September 2012	Civic Platform (PO)
Wiretapping scandal	Disclosure of transcripts of illegally intercepted conversations of politicians.	June 2014	Civic Platform (PO)
Madrit scandal	Fraud related to MP's official trips.	November 2015	Law and Justice (PiS)
Skok scandal	Social Banks benefiting from political support and protection.	March 2015	Law and Justice (PiS)

Source: own elaboration.

Following the process tracing logic we track changes in government support after turning points, that is corruption scandals, in order to assess whether their effect is strong and long enough to affect withdrawal of support for the ruler (Collier 2011; Ławniczak 2018). The combination of knowledge about the influence of these two kinds of data measured not only just before elections but during the whole term of the governing party will inform us whether corruption scandals provoke permanent or temporary changes in support for the government.

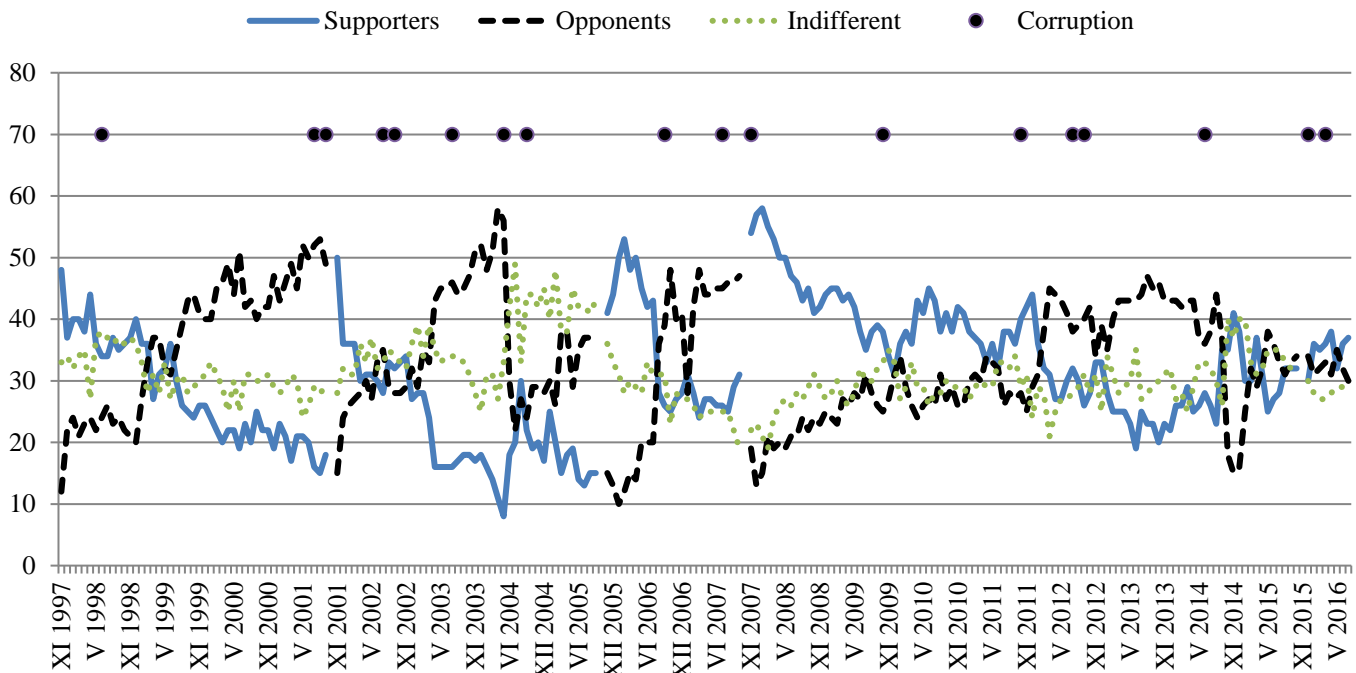
Empirical analyses

The combination of the above described two kinds of data enabled us to verify whether and how corruption scandals influence the support for the government. In our analyses we focused on two kinds of findings. We verified whether and how the publicity of the corruption scandal in the media influenced the level of supporters and opponents of the government (according to our hypothesis the percentage of the former should increase and of the latter – decrease).

Firstly we combined the data on evaluation of the government and presence of corruption scandals for the whole analyzed period (figure 1). It is clearly visible (and obvious) that subsequent governments differ as far as the percentage of supporters and opponents and its changes are concerned. Also the level of support for the government varies across the time. The major flow is between supporters and opponents of the government (the Pearson correlation between these two variables is -0.82 , $p < 0.001$), lesser changes concern the indifferent.

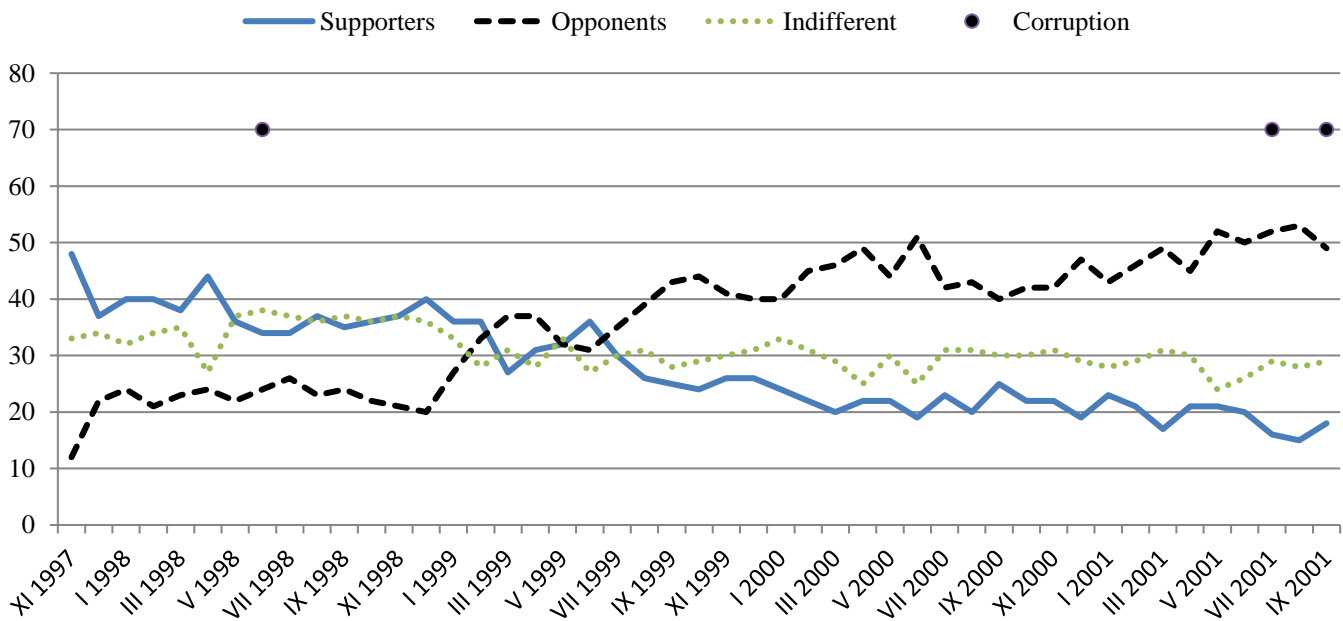
There are plenty of factors that may influence our dependent variable (majority of them are well known and described in the literature – just to mention political or economic performance, leader evaluation etc.). Corruption scandals (at least some of them) are one of such factors, however, as the data shows, the validity and strength of their impact is different. Some of them (like privatization of Domy Towarowe Centrum or Infoscandal) do not change the evaluation of the government. In case of others, which took place just before elections (some were even a part of electoral campaign) it is hard to examine their real impact. As all elections but one resulted in the change of government, it is impossible to separate the effect of corruption scandal and drop in the support for the government resultant from its poor performance (the trends in data indicate that rather the latter is true). Still some corruption scandals significantly influence the evaluation of the government. Closer insight on the figures 2-5 lets us analyze its impact in more detail.

Figure 1. Evaluation of the government and presence of corruption



Source: CBOS/own data.

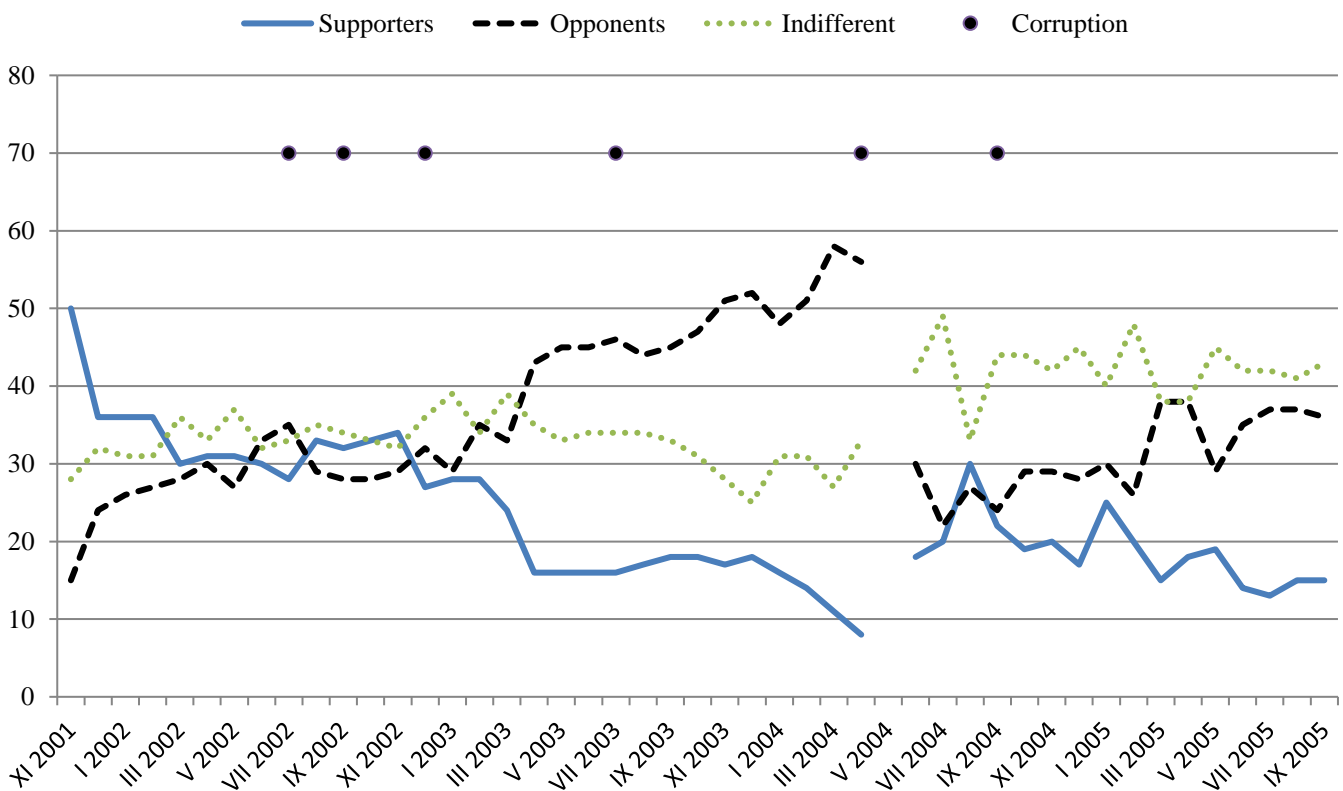
Figure 2. Evaluation of the Solidarity Electoral Action/Freedom Union and presence of corruption



Source: CBOS/own data.

Two out of three cases of corruption concerning the Solidarity Electoral Action and Freedom Union coalitional government affected the support for the government. The Szeremietew's case caused short term increase of the number of government opponents. The Marek Czekalski's scandal's effect is hard to estimate, as it happened just before elections in which the Solidarity Electoral Action lost. On the one hand it is plausible to expect, that the two scandals triggered the punishment-reward mechanism, leading to the electoral loss of the governing party. On the other hand the support for the government was steadily decreasing since the beginning of 1999, hence voters disappointment had more than this cause. Still we cannot exclude that the scandals were the straw that broke the camel's back.

Figure 3. Evaluation of the Democratic Left Alliance and presence of corruption

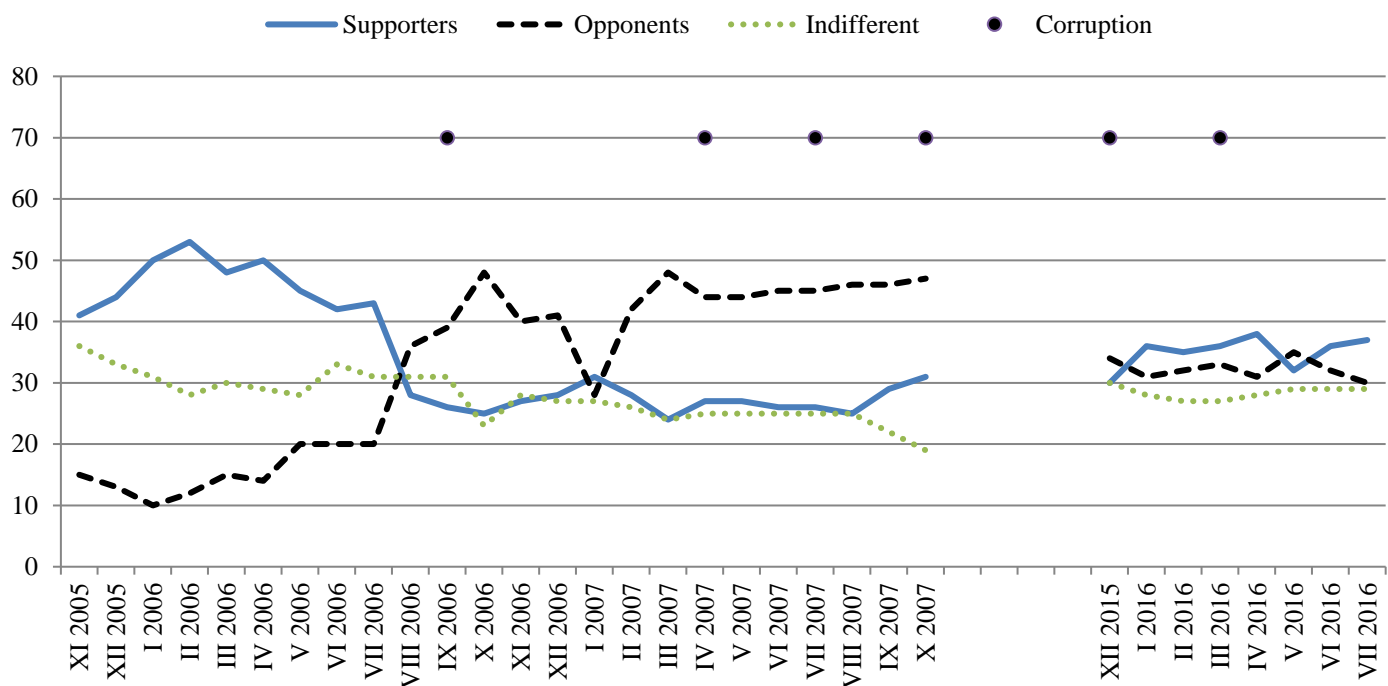


Source: CBOS/own data.

The Left Democratic Alliance's term of office was abundant in corruption scandals, however, despite their significance, they did not influence the support for government. The Optimus scandal had no instant impact on the number of supporters and opponents of the leftist government. Neither had the revealing of Rywingate, however intensification of the activities

related to this scandal in December 2002 caused stable increase of government opponents. This probably covered the influence of Starachowice scandal and Orłengate which did not provoke short-term change of support, but the downward trend continued and finally led to the change of the Prime Minister. This action, together with positive outcome of the EU accession referendum to some extent improved the government's evaluation (yet the number of supporters only for short overcame the number of opponents and after some time the number of opponents steadily increased. Pećzak and Dochnal's scandal caused short-term increase of the opponents.

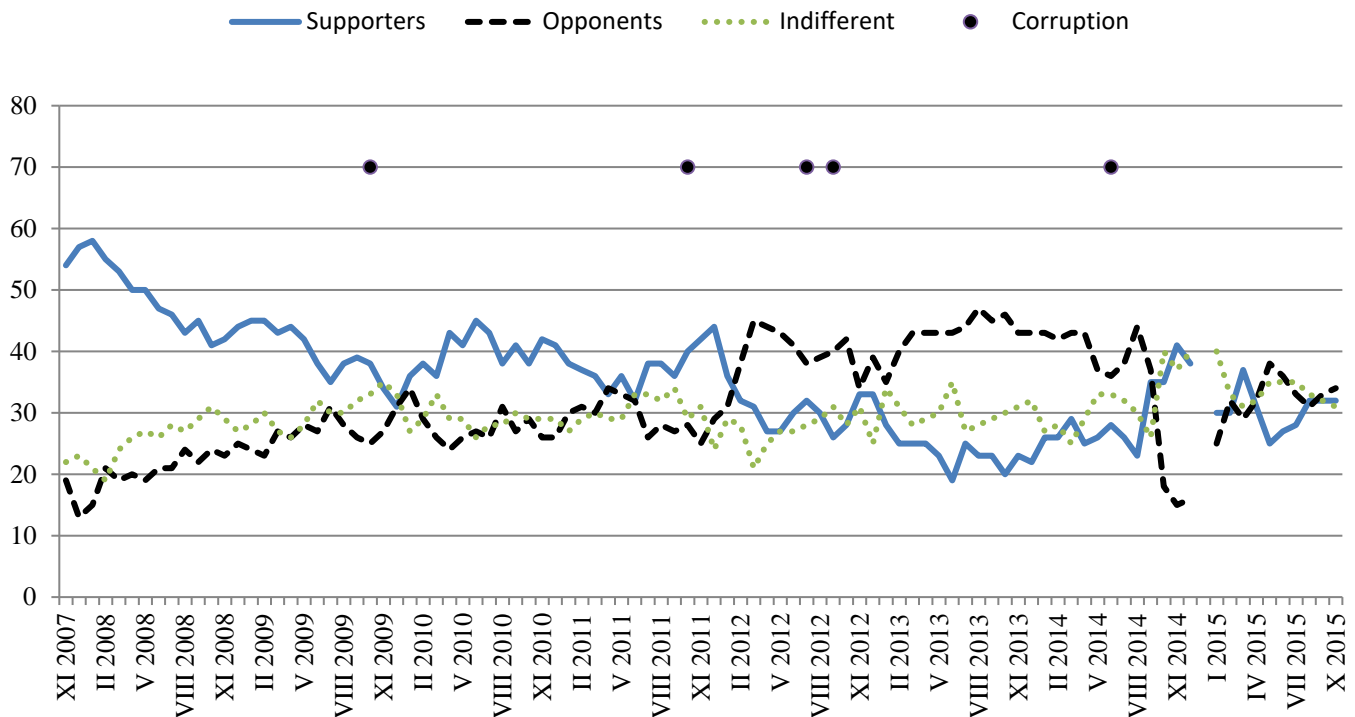
Figure 4. Evaluation of the Law and Justice and presence of corruption



Source: CBOS/own data.

The most interesting finding concerns the Law and Justice government. During both terms in office (since 2005 and since 2015) all scandals but one caused changes in the support for the government: only the recording scandal resulted in significant but short-term growth of the number government opponents. The stability of support (and its lack) for the Law and Justice government, especially since 2015 elections can be considered a proof of strong bound between this party and its electorate on the one hand and significant number of stable opponents on the other. In other words the Law and Justice is loved or hated in spite of all.

Figure 5. Evaluation of the Civic Platform and presence of corruption



Source: CBOS/own data.

In case of Civic Platform, it is the only party which was reelected, majority of scandals had short-time effect on the support for the government. The most serious scandals related to the law on games of chance, PSL recording scandal and wiretapping scandal caused few months increase of governments’ opponents. Infoscandal and Amber Gold scandal did not leave almost any trace in government evaluations.

Conclusions

The main objective of the present paper was to examine whether corruption scandals in which members of the governing party were entangled provoke changes in the support for the government. According to our hypothesis once the public opinion learns about a case of corruption, the percentage of the government opponents should increase and of the supporters – decrease. In long term this should trigger the punishment-reward mechanism, leading to lower support for the governing party and higher voter’s volatility in subsequent elections.

Our hypothesis is, to some extent confirmed: majority of corruption scandals we analyzed provoked decrease of support for the government, however this drop was only temporary. After

some time the effect of corruption scandal weakened and government evaluation returned to the previous level (unless the scandals occurred when the support for the governing party was steadily decreasing).

This can be attributed firstly to low interest in politics in Poland, secondly to the way people acquire and process information about politics. Approximately half of the Poles declares low or no interest in politics (in the data we use the number of indifferent citizens in the study ranges from 20% to 50%). This means that people do not follow current political news and do not think about politics on the daily basis hence they do not pay much attention to corruption scandals in politics. People also tend to remember only information which is consistent with their views and reject those that are not. This may explain low effect of corruption scandals on public opinion about the government.

High level of political interest is not necessary to make a political choice. According to some researchers people collect and store pieces of information about political parties encountered in their daily lives. On the basis of such data they build a positive or negative image of each party (e.g. credible or corrupted party), which is used for summary judgments and decisions, including vote choice. Hence despite the fact that corruption scandals cause only short-term changes in the government evaluation, they plausibly influence the overall evaluation of the governing party performance which is finally expressed at the polls.

Still, our findings are of preliminary character, as we analyze only effect of publicity of corruption scandals on government evaluation. Final conclusions can be drawn after more complex analysis which should include not only the starting point of each scandal but also the most important events related to its course and its final effect (whether the guilty were punished or the case was swept under the carpet) which can affect government evaluation more than just a mention that the scandal had occurred. Also qualitative data on the perception of corruption scandals would surely enrich our analyses.

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