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Access to Public Information as a Political Sciences Technique: What and How Should Be Studied, and What for?

Cognition in political science is based on source materials
(Chodubski, 2006, p. 103)

Summary: Access to public information in Poland is most typically discussed in the legal and political contexts. However, it is not consciously discussed as a possibility for political scholars to exercise their right of access to public information. This paper, which is of postulatory nature, identifies the benefits for those political scholars who decide to use, in the process of data collection, their right of access to public information as a data collection technique. The proposed technic of data collection may be used by scholars – political scientists around the world.

Keywords: data collection techniques, political sciences, access to public information, public information, political studies

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Foreword

Everyone has the right of access to public information in Poland (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19; Constitution of the Republic of Poland, Article 61; Act on Access to Public Information of 2001). The possibility to access source materials from public institutions is a valuable source in the course of gathering original materials. It enables conducting empirical research on political life. It is vital at times when the discipline (political science and administrative studies) is in crisis and knowledge is built on the fragile foundations of source materials. Let me quote Andrzej Chodubski to comment on the lack of techniques to collect source materials, characteristic of the discipline: “As regards the use of source materials, reference is usually made to public opinion polling institutions. Interpretation of knowledge and in-depth analysis are replaced with knowledge gained from opinion polls, which contains opinions of ‘accidental’ individuals. In intellectual reception, this weakens the identity of political studies as a science” (Chodubski, 2017, p. 37). Political studies and political scholars also condition their access to source on two techniques known to other disciplines: archives and archive queries (the core of historian work) or on opinion polls (the core of sociologist work). Insofar as archives enable thorough reconstruction of political phenomena in the past, these materials are distant from the most recent events. However, the methodological apparatus of sociologists is based on surveys that, in the legal sense, are not public information but only unsanctioned and voluntary opinions of e.g. officials and politicians in local or state authorities etc. that they express as respondents of a survey. At first, it should be noted that the scope of research and theoretical deliberations that involves the right to access public information in order to acquire data or to verify or falsify previous findings is very broad. If scholars decide to exercise their right to access public information in the course of the research they conduct, their research will be based on documents that not only authenticate their study of social and political facts but also increase the quality and value of their conclusions. This is due to the high reliability of data that

most often correspond to the current need for knowledge and are certified by the stamp of the public institution issuing specific data. This minimizes, among other things, the problem of authenticating the source materials. Andrzej Chodubski wrote: “The basis of cognition in political studies are source materials. They include all sorts of documents, files, statutes, inventories, minutes, reports, transcripts of meetings of various social and political institutions, chronicles, memoirs, memorials, newspaper releases, etc. [...] Source materials provide specific information that is referred to as source knowledge” (Chodubski, 2006, p. 103). The list of source materials does not contain documents that are acquired through a request to access public information, so it may be assumed that such documents belong to “all sorts of documents” that provide source knowledge. Such knowledge is valuable, because it is obtained not only from queries and previously deposited information, but also through the intellectual effort of a researcher who, by asking the right questions, is likely to discover political events or phenomena that were not known previously. Exercising the right to access public information for the purpose of a research is the part of the research process that is called collecting source materials and empirical research. Other common information collection techniques include archive or library queries, whereas other empirical research techniques include observation, interview, survey etc. (Chodubski, 2006, *passim*). As has been noted, the authenticity of source material obtained through a request to access public information is undeniable, but one should be fully critical when evaluating the data contained in such documents: facts that could be fictive, imaginary, distorted, incomplete or manipulated because of the “power sickness”, i.e. the desire of those in power to protect the existing *status quo* even at the cost of official lies. Researchers using their right of access to public information should pay specific attention to this, and they should compare the presented data to the social and political facts they already know and cross-question the verity of the data (this is discussed at greater length in the remainder). In the context of surveys that are very popular among researchers, especially political scholars, using the instrument of access to public information not

only shortens the waiting time for a response (in fact, we receive the requested information within 14 days), but also makes the research more reliable. Michał Bernaczyk writes: “The hard core of the right to know is acquiring source information possessed by public authorities and depriving the public authorities of the ability to influence its form or content otherwise than as explicitly provided for by the law” (Bernaczyk, 2014, p. 61). Moreover “a public authority body is obliged by the law to supply information, even if it is not in the interest of the members of that body or could even result in their losing democratic support” (Bernaczyk, 2014, p. 61). From this perspective, surveying politicians and officials, especially when analyzing the activity of public institutions and institutions that use public funds seems to be anachronistic and it should only supplement research conducted on the basis of source knowledge obtained through access to public information.

In fact, the technique of access to public information may also be applied in research that goes beyond Poland, as currently about 90 states globally have relevant legislation that grants access to public information practically to “everyone”. This opens a vast field of research, among other things in the area of international relations or comparative political studies in an international perspective. The time it takes to acquire information is also important, since it is possible for a researcher to obtain the information they need by making an anonymous email request to the institution concerned. Using the technique of access to public information in scholarly work is also important due to the fact that Public Information Bulletins (public information available without request) usually contain only information that is the most important from the perspective of a public institution, which may not be enough for the purpose of a research. It is also significant that Polish institutions, especially local authorities, make a limited use of registers of requests for public information, whereas such registers would give citizens access to a whole catalogue of matters that other citizens were interested in. The society, not only in Poland, is highly ignorant of political matters and has low political awareness. This means there is a high barrier blocking access to knowledge about public affairs in the so-

ciety (Siegelman, Yanarella, 1986, pp. 402–410). Thus, the activity of scholars who exercise their right of access to public information may also serve an additional educational purpose by increasing social awareness of public affairs.

The position of political scholars in the context of the right of access to public information is unique, mainly because, with their knowledge of power relations and the nature of politics, they are not hindered by the political knowledge barrier which, alongside the cost barrier, is the major obstacle to exercising the right of access to public information, (Wałdoch, 2017, p. 272), like Socrates said “A wise man knows that he knows nothing”. A political scholar, more than anyone else, knows what questions to ask of public institutions in order to get the fullest possible picture of given political phenomena and events. The proposed research technique may significantly contribute to the development of the political scholar’s workshop (Chodubski, 2006, pp. 68–83). In the context of the social sciences philosophy, the technique of access to public information is associated with the critical realism (critical rationalism) paradigm, which is an expression of the epistemological optimism that assumes that it is possible to study both the society and politics. The final effect of such approach, apart from knowledge development, are alternative solutions to current politics and perhaps even optimization of political systems (Benton, Craib, 2003, pp. 139–162). Thus, this technique is relevant to popperism (Popper, 2002). This technique enables collecting and analyzing the original material from such theoretical perspectives as: behaviorism, rational choice theory, institutionalism, normative or critical theory. In terms of processing research results, both quantitative and qualitative methods are relevant. Qualitative methods applied to documents acquired through access to public information will translate non-numerical data into numerical data (Johnson, Reynolds & Mycof, 2010, pp. 285–315), although it should be noted that it is also possible to request numerical public information.

The author determined, through library queries, that political scholars only sporadically use the technique of access to public in-

formation in the research process (Skoczko, 2016)². The problem of access to public information as a research technique is even subject to criticism, but in the Anglo-Saxon world (Savage & Hyde, 2014). Most typically, access to public information is perceived as a manifestation of civil participation and an element of the formation of a civil society, especially among the individuals, social groups and environments that use access to public information as a power control technique (as watchdogs). The technique is not extensively used to collect source data by political scholars. It is surprising that the technique of access to public information has not been consciously implemented in political research, even though access to public information has helped, for example, to stop the shooting of kangaroos (Simmons, 2017) and contributed to other achievements of watchdog organizations that control the transparency of public life. This “open governance” tool has great cognitive potential as well as potential to trigger social changes. It enables access not only to archives and repositories, but also to the sources of most recent information.

What to Study?

The task of political studies is defined as “presenting interrelations between the objects of studies, interactions within and between subsystems as well as within the entire political system”, which requires access to source materials in various fields of research. Scholars who decides to use access to public information in their research have access to a very broad range of research fields, and the technique yields the best results in research concerning:

- voting behavior (e.g. in analyzing the sources of financing in politics);
- political attitudes;
- functioning and activity of political and public institutions;

² The website of the Citizens Network Watchdog Poland has published a text that proves the usefulness of the right of access to public information, for example to students who collect source data for their theses.

- public policies (social, economic, etc.);
- international relations (international organizations), since public information in Poland may also be accessed by foreign citizens;
- ideologies and political values;
- social inequalities and goods distribution channels;
- political regimes (including the condition of democracy and local democracy – local governance);
- social movements (especially non-government organizations that use public funds and engage in economic activity);
- political activity, especially of professional politicians (to get a fuller picture of a political biography);
- the role of the media in shaping the politics;
- globalization (e.g. by characterizing the political processes in relations between the state and transnational corporations);
- security issues – which, to a large extent, is guaranteed by public institutions;
- decision-making processes;
- effectiveness of public institutions;
- demographic processes (e.g. the discrepancies between official municipal registers or residents and so-called junk registers);
- making skillful use of the access to public information may also contribute to the development of research in the area of the theory of politics by supplying important empirical data for the progress of science. After all, any reliable collection of data may stimulate development of academic theories.

Why Study?

What, then, is the difference between political scholars using the right of access to public information and watchdog organizations? The former develop new theoretical approaches to the political life and verify or falsify the existing academic theories. Meanwhile, the main goal of using access to public information by watchdog

organizations or the curious (individuals who form a global social movement) is to ensure the transparency of public authorities. Moreover, political scholars cannot be compared to the so-called whistleblowers, who often come into possession of the documents of public institutions in an illegal way and publish them also illegally. On the one hand, they compromise the security of the state and its agendas, but, on the other hand, they disclose government abuse of power (Delmas, 2015, pp. 77–105).

Using access to public information for the purpose of academic research may be problematic if a researcher needs access to processed information³. There are both ethical and financial reasons not to overburden public administration organs or institutions obliged by law to respond to requests for public information with work that can be done individually after obtaining raw public information. According to the case law, academic research is not a special public interest⁴ that requires provision of processed information (Jakubowski, 2012, pp. 141–145). However, this is contrary to the Polish legislation, which stipulates that public institutions should support the development of science and research in order to strengthen the economy and innovations (Jakubowski, 2012, p. 150). The situation of scholars using in their research the right of access to public information may relevantly be described as “a combination of private and public interest” (Jakubowski, 2012, p. 151). It should be noted that: „[...] research will only be the basis for an effective request for processed public information if the specific circumstances make the interest special, the source of such circumstances being, in particular, arguments of functional and subjective nature” (Jakubowski, 2012, p. 154).

³ Processed information is information the provision of which requires work, time and technical means, and intellectual effort.

⁴ Special public interest, in the context of research, is associated with research commissioned by public institutions whose success depends on the provision of public information, failing which, public funds will be wasted. This is how special public interest should be understood in the context of research

How to Study?

The easiest way to make a request is by sending electronic mail to the e-mail box of the office concerned. The requesting person may choose to reveal or conceal their identity, because law provides for making anonymous requests. The simplest form of a request for public information is as follows:

“Using my right of access to public information, I would like to request for:

- information concerning...
- copies of documents for the period from... to...
- etc.

Please, send the above information by electronic mail to my e-mail address: xyz@xyz.pl within the statutory period of time”. If the employees of the institution concerned fail to provide public information within the statutory period of 14 days, it is good to repeat the request. There could always be an electronic mail error or an employee may have omitted the original request.

Research may be comprehensive, partial, vertical or comparative, which is particularly valuable for correct scientific reasoning. Comparative research seems to be the most promising method that enables making the most of data obtained through access to public information. Both qualitative and quantitative research may gain a new empirical base that is not commonly available. It is worth mentioning the “join the dots” method, i.e. obtaining official documents in such a way as to get a full picture of specific political reality (Bernaczyk, 2014, p. 80).

In the context of theoretical foundations for political research, this specific data collection technique seems to be unlimited in any way right now. All the known theoretical paradigms of political studies in various research areas are relevant to this data collection technique.

Being Critical of the Content

An expression of a researcher's reasonable attitude to the political reality is the principle of limited trust (Sztumski, 2010, pp. 288–299), even with respect to official documents that are submitted upon request, even on pain of criminal liability. There is abundant case law that proves the unreliability of civil officers.

Cross examination when using the right of access to public information is done by verifying data on a given phenomenon or event with at least two institutions that have information on that phenomenon or event. An example could be an analysis of the impact of public policies on demographic processes (e.g. a request for the number of residents in a municipality submitted both to the municipality and the Statistical Office, concerning requests for the number of junk declarations submitted to the municipality that reflect the actual number of residents). An alternative cross examination method would be to obtain data on a phenomenon or event from one institution but by making a number of requests that will serve to reconstruct the cause-and-effect sequence without asking *ipso facto* directly for the data or phenomenon that interest us. By means of cross examination, we obtain a certain hybrid of public information. If we ask for raw rather than processed information, we reconstruct important aspects of the reality that interests us in order to obtain objective research results. Cross examination may also involve critical comparison of data obtained through access to public information to publicly available information, e.g. information published on Public Information Bulletin websites, or information released by the media. Data recorded in the form of public information should be confronted with other data generated by specific institutions, such as minutes of committee or municipal council meetings, city council meetings, parliamentary commission meetings, etc.

Research Ethics

The main principle of the presented method of collecting data through access to public information is to use and process these data in such a way as to reveal the truth about socio-political phenomena and possibly to provide real contribution to the processes of implementing political decisions that will stimulate the growth of overall welfare and well-being, the focus being, however, on the progress of political studies. A separate issue is the complexity of administrative procedures associated with acquisition of data for a research. Every researcher should decide on this issue for him or herself, bearing in mind not only the goal of the research but also possible violation of the social homeostasis, which should not happen if the research results are to be objective. It can happen that if someone who studies certain issues that are important for domestic or international politics becomes involved in court proceedings, this will attract the attention of the media and later the public opinion, which compromises the objectivity of the results of research.

Practical Examples

The author has not found any traces of systematic use of the technique of data collection by means of accessing public information and may only list a few publications that serve as an example of the effectiveness of this particular technique. These are the following scholarly articles: *Echo natury: czyli o politycznych skutkach katastrofy naturalnej w Borach Tucholskich w 2017 roku* [Echos of nature: on the political aftermath of the natural disaster in the Tuchola Forest in 2017] (Wałdoch, 2019); *Strategie cyberbezpieczeństwa Nowej Zelandii i Polski w procesie globalizacji i dywersyfikacji świata: analiza porównawcza* [Cyber safety strategies in New Zealand and Poland in the era of globalisation and diversification of the world: comparative analysis] (Wałdoch, 2018); *Dociekliwi jako nowy ruch społeczny: aspekty polityczne realizacji prawa dostępu do informacji publicznej w Polsce* [The curious as a new social movement: political aspects of

using the right of access to public information in Poland] (Wałdoch, no data); *Polityki senioralne wybranych miast średniej wielkości w Polsce i Nowej Zelandii: analiza krytyczna i porównawcza* [Senior policies in selected medium sized cities in Poland and New Zealand: critical and comparative analysis] (Wałdoch, 2019b) and books pending publication *Bliskie antypody: relacje nowozelandzko-polskie w procesach globalizacji i dywersyfikacji świata* [Close antipodes: Poland-New Zealand relations in globalisation processes] and *Dociekliwi jako nowy ruch społeczny: analiza porównawcza aspektów politycznych realizacji prawa dostępu do informacji publicznej w Nowej Zelandii i Polsce* [The curious as a new social movement: political aspects of using the right of access to public information in Poland]. Another example is the bachelor thesis of Daria Woźniak *Uwarunkowania efektywności finansowej samorządowych kampanii wyborczych w Bydgoszczy w latach 2010–2018* [The conditions of financial and administrative effectiveness of local government elections in Bydgoszcz in 2010–2018] (Woźniak, 2019).

Conclusion

The vast possibilities offered by the information collection techniques that are currently used now include the right to access public information that consists of up-to-date source materials, which is a necessary conditions to make accurate forecasts and present reliable analyses in political studies. Assuming the high reliability and up-to-dateness of data acquired in this way, political research may, on the one hand, become more practical and, on the other hand, better rooted in the new paradigm of political studies as the scientific discipline referred to as political and administration studies. The author believes that the new data collection technique, if consistently used, constitutes a very promising approach to the political reality with a potential to enrich the source material collection techniques in political sciences.

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Dostęp do informacji publicznej jako technika prowadzenia badań politologicznych: co, jak i po co badać?

Streszczenie: Dostęp do informacji publicznej w Polsce jest najczęściej dyskutowany w kontekście prawnym lub politycznym. Jednakże nie jest dyskutowany, świadomie, jako narzędzie do gromadzenia danych w trakcie badań prowadzonych przez politologów. W tym artykule, któremu nadano charakter postulatyczny, wskazuje się na korzyści płynące z realizacji prawa dostępu do informacji publicznej jako techniki gromadzenia danych źródłowych przez politologów. Proponowana technika gromadzenia danych może być użyta przez naukowców – politologów w różnych państwach świata, tam gdzie jest prawnie gwarantowany dostęp do informacji publicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: techniki gromadzenia danych, nauki o polityce, dostęp do informacji publicznych, informacja publiczna