

## THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF NON-ELECTED ACTORS IN COMMUNITY POWER STRUCTURE IN POLAND: RESULTS OF A SURVEY EXPERIMENT\*

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### Abstract

Administrative decisions can be influenced not only by policies formulated by elected representatives but also by various external actors. From classic elitist and pluralist theories of community power to urban regime and network governance concepts, academic studies tell us that several institutional and individual actors with no electoral democratic legitimacy may have a significant impact on local government decision-making. In our paper, we ask the question who they are in contemporary Polish cities. Are there any systematic regularities in this respect concerning e.g. how they differ depending on the size of the local community? In this paper we look at the phenomenon through the lens of citizens' perception of the influence on important administrative decisions made in local governments. In this research, we also check whether the style of local political leadership perceived by citizens is reflected in their expectations toward the propensity of local authorities to consider the opinions.

Data is collected through a survey conducted on a representative sample of 2,000 Polish citizens who were asked about their perception of the impact of various business and societal actors. The study uses the survey experiment method in which various formulations of the question are randomly assigned to individual respondents, which allows us to measure the perceived influence of individual types of actors. Referring to the recent debate on the limitation of the applicability of regime theory to large cities only, we place a special attention to the impact of city size on the role of big and small businesses as well as various societal organizations.

**Keywords:** local government, community power structure, regime theory, survey experiment, Poland.

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## 1. Introduction

Administrative decisions can be influenced not only by policies formulated by elected representatives but also can be made under the influence of various non-governmental actors. Administration may be seen as a ‘policy broker’ (Ladner *et al.*, 2019) between politicians deciding on policy directions and their actual implementation. But due to the influence of other actors, instead of a relatively straightforward principal-agent model, in fact administration responds often to ‘multiple principals’ (Jones, 1995).

This article tries to respond to the question of what type of non-governmental policy actors are perceived as the most influential in modifying policy choices in Polish local governments. Is the trend of gaining importance by various civic society organizations (voluntary associations), noted in the literature, observable in public perceptions? We do not claim to trace the actual decision-making process, but we ask how this process is perceived by ordinary citizens.

An important point of reference for our study is urban regime theory (Stone, 1989), which remains the most powerful and popular concept explaining urban power structures (Rast, 2015). However, we do not try to describe the whole regime structure, its goals and durability nor the power relations among its members. Instead, we concentrate on a much narrower goal of identifying the most powerful actors, whose preferences are, according to the perception of ordinary citizens, considered by local governments and who might become members of the city regime. Methodologically, the main part of our analysis relies on a survey experiment as explained in the second section of this article.

## 2. Theoretical framework and empirical expectations

Following the original formulation of urban regimes concept (Stone, 1989) the most influential actors might be recruited from the ‘growth machine’, as defined by Logan and Molotch (1987), in which business actors are the most powerful non-governmental members of the regime. They almost always have a larger impact on local policies than various societal actors (NGOs, neighborhood groups, etc.). Typically those influential actors would be recruited from among the representatives of the local business community (but rather large businesses than small and medium enterprises sector), but it might be also businesses ‘from outside’ interested in the large-scale investments in the locality. In this model, inspired by the neo-liberal interpretation of the economy, interests of large investors, which might be summarized as continuously increasing the intensity of usage of urban space, are seen as identical with the general interest of local communities.

Urban regime concept is not the only source of the claim formulated above; also, in studies of local administration, it is often claimed that bureaucrats are responsive to the needs of business, driven by the necessity of increasing the tax base (Jones, 1995).

This expectation has been also confirmed by some studies conducted in East-Central Europe, including Poland. Sagan’s (2002) study of Gdynia in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century notes a weak position of local government against big investors (especially multi-national corporations) and describes the local regime as similar to the classic growth machine. A similar conclusion may be drawn from the study conducted in Hungary (Kulcsar and Domokos, 2005) according to which in the post-socialist growth machine there is a big role of external trans-national actors and the nation-state (the latter being out of the scope of analysis presented in this article).

But, on a theoretical level, this expected dominant role of big business is not uncontested. First, it is often suggested that regime theory relevance might be limited to large cities (see Olivier, Ha and Callen, 2012). In smaller communities, the constellation of influential actors may be more diversified and less stable (Olivier, Ha and Callen, 2012). Several authors (Stoker and Mossberger, 1994) suggested that the theory developed in the US environment requires adaptation to European reality. In general, in Europe the interplay between business and local government is less important as the local government budget is less dependent on taxes on businesses and business is less dependent on decisions of local government. European local governments are also more involved in the delivery of social policies. As a result, there might be a larger role of actors not originating from the business community. Besides, with the development of the theory, this 'business approach' has also been criticized within the context of the US itself with many examples of marginal actors involved in regime politics (Jones-Correa and Wong, 2015).

Rast (2015) suggests that nowadays local politics is much more dispersed than when the regime theory was developed, a group of involved actors may be more diversified and cooperation between sectors often takes *ad hoc* forms rather than long-term and stable commitment which used to be required in order to solve issues important for cities in the past.

Also in Poland, several researchers distinguish between phases of local politics, which can be identified with the different impacts of various non-public actors. In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the dominant model was a growth machine in which, as explained in the Sagan's (2002) or Kulcsar and Domokos (2005) studies, big private businesses, bringing new investments to the cities, could exert successful pressure on local government decision-making. But later studies, especially those conducted after Polish accession to the European Union, suggest that local governments have strengthened their financial base which made a space for also considering the interests of other actors. Swianiewicz, Klimska and Mielczarek (2006) noted the growing strength of local government in partnerships built to support local economic development and the weakening role of big businesses, who may be sometimes excluded from growth coalitions due to low public support for their involvement. Other authors have noted that various social actors, such as 'new urban movements' (social organizations focused on 'right to the city' and lobbying for alternative policies increasing the quality of life of ordinary citizens) and other social organizations have significantly gained in their importance (Domaradzka, 2018, 2021 and 2022; also see Sagan and Grabkowska, 2012, in their newer study modifying Sagan's earlier 2002 conclusions). Numerous social organizations, in particular those identified with 'new urban

movements' are sometimes able to break the traditional paradigm of urban development and exert an impact on decisions made on a city level (Domaradzka, 2021). After the 2014 local elections, representatives of new urban movements became formal members of governing coalitions in some of the cities. Similar conclusions on the strengthened role of societal organizations are formulated by Bartłomiejski (2017) who focuses on social organizations concerned with ecology and environmental protection. The specific position of societal organizations is described also by Sadowski (2011) in his study of small communities. They are supported by local authorities, and as reciprocity, they contribute to the provision of local social services and legitimate policy of local government. But in case of policy failure and political crisis, they may serve as a reservoir of alternative political elites which may take over the dominant position in the municipality.

As a consequence of the processes presented above, the scope of non-public actors able to play a role in local policy-making and policy implementation has been significantly broadened. In this article we ask the question of whether that changing pattern of the influence of various non-public actors is seen by ordinary citizens in a similar way to that described in recent academic studies.

In addition to that general question formulated above, we ask how the perceived style of local political leadership may influence perception of the importance of various actors in the decision-making process. Are political leaders (mayors) who are seen as more open to listening to opinions of local community groups and more willing to cooperate with others in policy implementation, also seen to be more influenced in their decision-making by any specific type of external actors? In order to answer this question we refer to the John's and Cole's (1999) classification of styles of leadership in which they distinguish between authoritarian (relying on their own vision) and responsive (building policy goals through broad consultations) leaders. On the other dimension, they concentrate on policy implementation, distinguishing between those leaders who are focused on using their own resources and those who invite a broad spectrum of other actors to cooperate in implementing agreed policies. Those two dimensions taken together allow us to identify four styles: city boss (authoritarian and focused on own resources), visionary (authoritarian but cooperative in policy implementation), caretaker (responsive and focused on own resources) and consensus facilitator (responsive and open for cooperation in policy implementation). We expect that municipalities with mayors who are seen to be more open for listening to and cooperating with others (consensus facilitators) are at the same time perceived as more influenced in their decisions by external actors, especially those connected with civic society organizations.

One more hypothesis is connected with the population size of local communities. Population size may influence the intensity of direct versus indirect contact between political leaders, municipal administration and local community members. The contacts are more direct in small towns or rural settings which supports a higher level of trust towards local leaders and facilitates more direct communication of citizens' preferences (Dahl and

Tufte, 1973; Denters *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, due to more direct contacts with ordinary members of local communities we may expect a more responsive policy of local governments in small towns, in which local decisions would more often consider opinions of community groups, such as small local businesses, local societal organizations or ordinary citizens. A summary of our research questions and hypotheses is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Main research questions (summary)

<b>Research question:</b>	<b>Expectation:</b>
<b>Main question:</b> Who, in the opinion of ordinary citizens, are the most influential non-public actors in Polish local government decision-making?	Following regime theory it is expected that big business/ investors in the local economy are the most influential; however, going along with recent research findings various social movements have been gaining comparable importance.
<b>Supplementary questions:</b>	
How do styles of local political leadership influence perceived responsiveness of local governments to bottom-up voices?	Leaders whose style of leadership is perceived as more responsive in general, are also expected to react flexibly to bottom-up initiatives/ protests.
What is the impact of the size of municipality on the perceived influence of non-public actors?	Local governments in smaller local governments are expected to be more responsive.
What is the modifying influence of demographic characteristics of respondents (age, education) on their perception of the impact of various non-public actors?	No ex-ante hypothesis.

Source: The author

### 3. Empirical strategy

Following the discussion in the previous section, in our empirical study we want to measure the perceived influence of the four groups of actors: big businesses active in local communities, small local businesses, ecological organizations and more general social organizations identified with new urban movements. We try to learn which of them are perceived by ordinary citizens as the most influential in local government decision-making.

In order to answer our research question we apply a survey experiment method. As the name of the method suggests, survey experiments combine experimental designs with survey methodology (Druckman *et al.*, 2006). Embedding experimental designs in a survey environment offers an opportunity to achieve both high internal and external validity for research in order to establish causal relationships that are generalizable. While the internal validity is achieved by random assignment of respondents to treatment and control conditions, the external validity is secured by using a representative sample of the population of interest (Sniderman, 2018).

Empirical data has been collected in December 2022 through the survey of 2,000 respondents conducted by PBS public opinion research company. The survey was conducted through the internet on a panel of respondents. The sample is fully representative from

the point of view of gender, size of municipality and age structure. However, there is a certain over-representation of respondents with a university degree<sup>1</sup>.

As an additional point of reference, we compare these results with two earlier studies of mayors (conducted in 2003 and 2015)<sup>2</sup> and one study of local councilors (conducted in 2007)<sup>3</sup>. In all three cases the surveys included identical questions on the perceived influence on local government decision making. Respondents were asked to assess (in a scale from 1 to 5) the perceived influence of various persons and institutions on decisions made by local governments<sup>4</sup>.

But our main focus has been on more indirect measurement used in the 2022 survey of citizens. Respondents were presented with the following story:

‘The municipal (town) authorities are planning to build a new road which will play a role as the ring-road of the town center. The planned location of the road is causing protests from some residents, who fear that their living conditions will deteriorate due to noise and pollution.

What do you think will be the final decision of the municipal authorities - will the planned route of the road be maintained, or will it be modified under the influence of these protests?

- (1) It will definitely be maintained.
- (2) More likely to be maintained.
- (3) More likely to be changed.
- (4) Surely the municipal authorities will decide to modify it.
- (8) Don't know/difficult to say.’

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1 University degrees are held by 40.8% of respondents. A precise assessment of the scale of over-representation is not possible since respective data from the 2021 National Census concerning the education structure of the whole Polish population has not been released.

2 The study was conducted in 2003 and repeated in 2015 within the frame of the international research project POLLEADER. The design of the study and basic results on 29 European countries may be found in Heinelt *et al.*, 2018.

3 Survey was conducted in 2007 within the framework of the international research project MAELG (Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governments). The description of the design of the study and basic results may be found in Egner, Sweeting and Klok, 2013.

4 The exact formulation of the question was as follows: ‘Sometimes decisions made by the local authorities in the municipality are also influenced by other people and institutions besides the elected organs of the local government. Which of the following persons/institutions seem to you to have a significant influence on decisions in your municipality? (1 – no influence, 2 – little influence, 3 – average influence, 4 – high influence, 5 – very high influence)

Local entrepreneurs.

External investors or developers investing in the municipality.

Associations and social organisations operating in the municipality.

Social committees established for a specific issue’.

The above formulation of the question was asked to a part of respondents, forming the control group for the experiment. Four other formulations of the same question were randomly assigned to the rest of respondents, indicating joining the protest by various groups of other actors. Groups of respondents of equal size were asked about the following groups:

- A. Opposition is also expressed by a major investor (developer) interested in investing in that area;
- B. Opposition is also expressed by a local environmental organization;
- C. Opposition is also expressed by some local entrepreneurs;
- D. Opposition is also expressed by some social movements/organizations active in the city.

Option D was used only in cities with over 50,000 residents, in which various ‘urban movements’ are the most developed and active. Our measure of the perceived impact of various groups of actors is measured by the difference between the proportion of respondents who expect that local government will change the decision in the control group and the groups A, B, C and D respectively.

In the same survey we asked questions about perceived styles of leadership, allowing to distinguish among four styles identified by John and Cole (1999)<sup>5</sup>. According to results of our survey, two most frequently observed styles are: consensual facilitator (51% of respondents) and city boss (31% of responses). Therefore, in our empirical tests we concentrate on the impact of those two styles, leaving aside the remaining two styles identified by John and Cole (visionary and caretaker).

The main test is conducted through a logistic regression model in which the dependent variable is defined as endorsement of the likelihood of the change in the decision of local government as a result of an additional group joining to protest against the original decision. Perceived style of leadership and size of local government unit are considered

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5 Respondents in the survey were asked to assess (in a 1 to 7 scale) the following options of the styles of their local political leaders:

‘How would you describe the typical way in which local authorities operate in your municipality?’

A. Local authority leaders operate on the basis of their own clear vision about the future of the municipality.

B. Local authority leaders operate on the basis of a vision developed jointly in a close consultation with the local community.

A. Local authority leaders manage their town/ city using exclusively administrative staff and local authority resources to implement policies.

B. Local authority leaders spend a lot of time mobilizing the resources of different community groups and getting their support in implementing local policies.’

To make up our empirical typology, we consider those answers which indicate clear preferences (either 1–3 or 5–7 for the respective style). Respondents who chose the medium answer (4) are not taken into account in our typology.

independent variables in the model which may modify the endorsement power. Additional control variables are age and education of the respondents.

#### 4. Results and discussion

Before we turn to the results of the survey experiment we will present the results of the direct question asked about the perceived influence of the selected groups of policy actors. Two sets of surveys of mayors, conducted in 2003 and in 2015, give us an opportunity to follow changes in their perception of influence of various external actors on local decision-making.

Figure 1 shows the change which goes along with conclusions from studies quoted in the conceptual section of this article: between 2003 and 2015 business actors have been losing their power of influence while civic society organizations (voluntary associations) have been gaining in their importance. In 2003 the perceived importance of business actors was higher than in the case of voluntary associations, but in 2015 the order was reversed, even if the difference between the perceived impact of two groups of actors was very small.

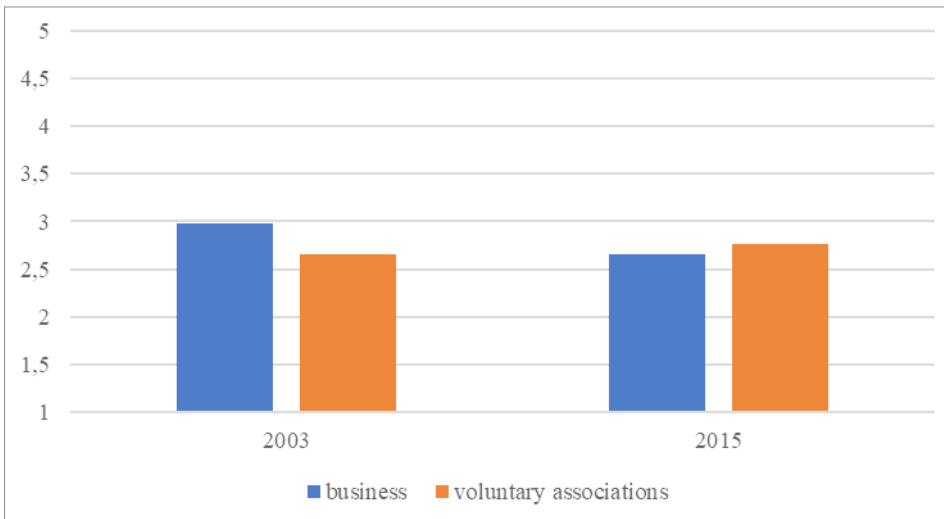


Figure 1: Influence on local decision-making as perceived by mayors (1–5 scale)<sup>6</sup>

Source: The author

Figure 2 allows us to compare perceptions of mayors, councilors and ordinary citizens. Obviously, data is not fully comparable due to the considerable time distance of the three surveys; the results of that comparison may be treated as tentative, which may be subject of verification in future studies.

<sup>6</sup> Note: survey of mayors of cities over 10,000 residents. In 2003, N = 302, in 2015 N = 329.

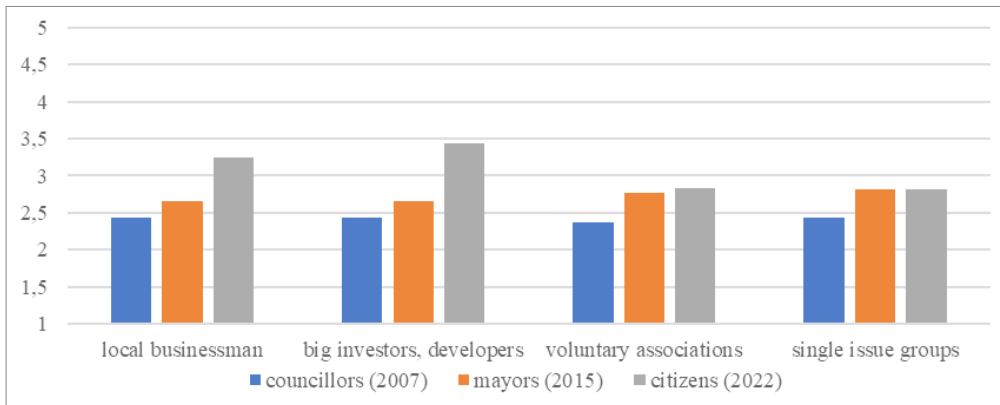


Figure 2: Perceived influence of various actors on local government decision making in Poland (1–5 scale)<sup>7</sup>

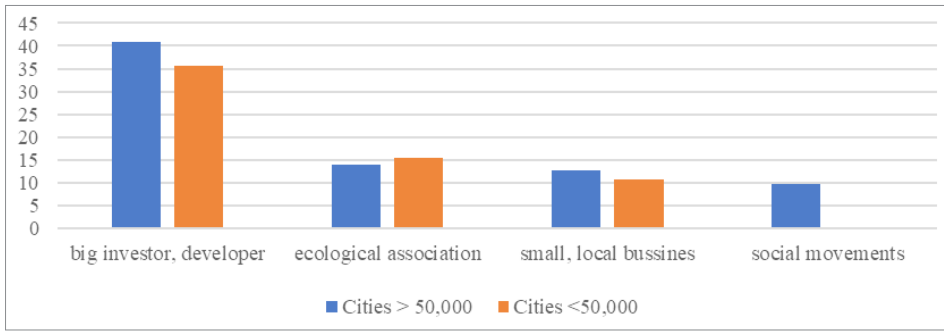
Source: The author

There are two striking differences between the impact of various actors perceived by ordinary citizens and elected politicians. First, according to citizens, various external actors are more influential compared to the perception of mayors and councillors. Second, while local politicians (especially mayors) perceive various societal actors (voluntary associations, *ad hoc* single-issue groups) as equally, or even more influential, than business actors, the opinions of citizens are to the contrary. Business actors, especially big investors or developers are perceived by citizens as having the largest impact on local government decision-making. It suggests that in the perception of ordinary citizens, the model of community power structure in Poland is still close to a growth machine or classic formulation of urban regimes theory.

But the major test of the opinion of residents has been the survey experiment in which, as described in the methodological section of the article, randomly selected groups of citizens were asked about the expected impact of various groups of local policy actors. In each case of another actor joining the protest against the location of the road investment, the chance for the local government to change its decision increases in the eyes of asked respondents. But the ‘value added’ of that support depends on which group/ institution is joining the protest.

Figure 3 illustrates the ‘value added’ of joining the protest, which we measure by change in the proportion of respondents who believe that the decision will be modified (believing that rather will be modified + certainly will be modified). Results of the survey experiment suggest that big investors are perceived by citizens as the most influential, much more than small local businesses or ecological associations. The effect observed in bigger and smaller cities has a similar magnitude.

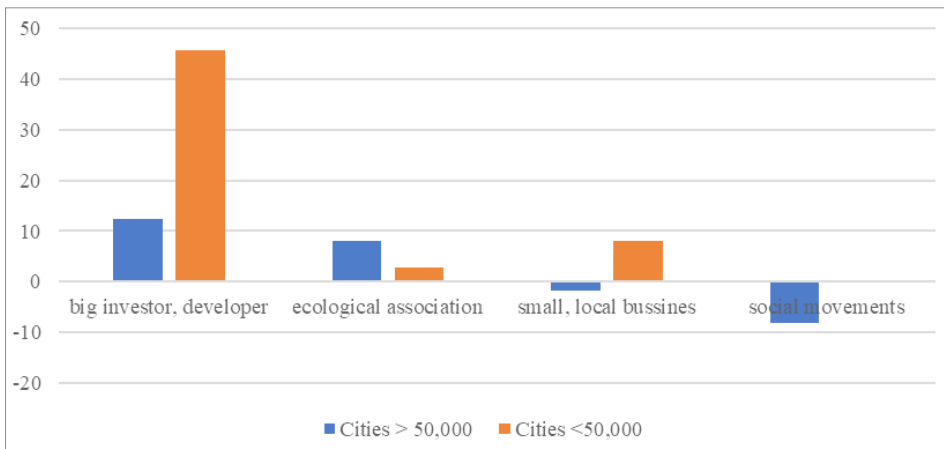
<sup>7</sup> Note: N for mayors = 325, for councillors = 328, for citizens = 2,000.



**Figure 3:** Percentage increase of the proportion of respondents believing in the change of local government decision (rather yes + certainly yes) after other actors joining the protest

Source: The author

But, as we see in Figure 4, the situation is slightly different if we consider only the change in the number of those respondents who strongly believe in the modification of the decision to be made by the local government (so we disregard those who answer that the decision ‘will be rather modified’). In this case, although the impact of the support of the big investor is still perceived as the most important, the change is much more visible in small than in large cities. This finding complies with earlier studies showing that in smaller local government units people more often believe that they can have an impact on local decision-making (e.g., Denters *et al.*, 2014). But both in small and bigger cities big investors (or developers) are perceived as actors who may have much stronger impact on local governments than any other considered actor. Social movements are on the opposite extreme of that scale.



**Figure 4:** Percentage increase of the proportion of respondents who are strongly convinced that local government will change the decision after other actors join the protest

Source: The author

Finally, Table 2 presents a summary of the results of our logistic regression model. Not surprisingly (considering the results presented in Figures 3 and 4) the dominant role of big business has been confirmed once again. Joining the protest by representatives of big business, in the opinions of ordinary citizens, increases the likelihood of positive reaction of local authorities almost twice. The impact of other groups (ecological organizations, small local businesses and social movements) is always positive, but relatively small and statistically below the 0.05 significance threshold.

The presented results reveal that the opinions of ordinary citizens differ from conclusions of earlier studies of community power structures as well as from the perception of local government mayors. In both earlier literature and in the opinion of mayors, the last few years have brought increasing importance of voluntary social organizations in local politics, going along with the twilight of absolute dominance of big business lobbying power. Data presented in this article does not allow us to confirm or deny that such a shift in community power structure has actually appeared. That will require additional quantitative and qualitative studies based on case study methodology. But what we can say at the moment is that for ordinary citizens this shift has remained unnoticed so far. Urban politics is commonly perceived as dominated by the city growth machine model, in which big business organizations remain the most powerful non-public actors.

But interestingly, our regression model also reveals the importance of two other variables. As expected, if citizens perceive their mayor as a consensus facilitator they more often expect that a decision of the local government may be changed under the influence of additional influential actors opposing the original decision. The age of a respondent is the most powerful of our control variables. Older citizens more often believe that decisions of local government may be modified under the influence of bottom-up reactions of various actors. Opposite to our expectations, the size of the municipality remains statistically insignificant in our model.

## **5. Conclusions**

Decisions made by local governments, including administrative decisions of local bureaucrats, are influenced not only by local politicians but also by powerful non-public actors. Studies conducted in Poland in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> and first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century suggested that the pattern of community power reminds conclusions of elitist theory (Hunter, 1953) as well as classic formulations of growth machine and urban regimes concepts. Local governments faced with a lack of sufficient financial resources were ready to subordinate to demands formulated by big business (external investors) which became the most powerful non-public actors influencing local policies as well as many concrete decisions. But later (although very un-numerous) research studies suggest that this model is evolving. Growing financial resources of local governments, together with pressure from the rules accompanying European Union structural funds availability, as well as political culture change, have made a space for the development of community consultation and

**Table 2: Impact of joining protests by various groups of actors on likelihood of local government decision modification (logistic regression model)**

	Experimental group A Big investor, developer	Experimental group B Ecological organization	Experimental group C Small, local businesses	Experimental group D Social movements
Experimental variable	Estimation of $\beta$	Estimation of $\beta$	Estimation of $\beta$	Estimation of $\beta$
Endorsement	$e^{\beta}$ odds ratio	$e^{\beta}$ odds ratio	$e^{\beta}$ odds ratio	$e^{\beta}$ odds ratio
Year of birth	<b>0.570***</b> (0.139)	0.235 (0.141)	0.196 (0.141)	0.368 (0.242)
Education	-0.017*** (0.005)	-0.021*** (0.005)	-0.020*** (0.005)	-0.032*** (0.009)
Population size (ln)	0.038 (0.093)	0.011 (0.096)	0.136 (0.098)	0.197 (0.182)
City boss style	-0.044 (0.043)	-0.057 (0.043)	-0.046 (0.045)	0.089 (0.103)
Consensus facilitator	-0.131 (0.188)	-0.081 (0.191)	-0.342 (0.191)	-0.292 (0.314)
Chi-square test significance	0.378* (0.159)	0.405* (0.160)	0.261 (0.162)	0.331 (0.273)
Pseudo R2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Likelihood logarithm	0.032	0.028	0.027	0.052
N	-597,675	-583,146	-580,743	-205,647
	921	921	921	337

Note: \* – variable significant on 0.05 level; \*\* – on 0.01 level; and \*\*\* – on 0.001 level.

Source: The author

participation mechanisms. This led to the increasing influence of local societal organizations on local decision-making, which more and more often could provide a successful alternative for business lobbying power.

The trend described above has been confirmed by the opinions of mayors expressed in two subsequent surveys (2003 and 2015). The main empirical focus of this article was to investigate the perception of community power structure by ordinary citizens of local communities. The main method was a survey experiment in which respondents were asked about the expected impact of various actors on important administrative decisions to be made in local government. Results of the experiment suggest that the shift of power structure, if real, has mostly remained unnoticed by ordinary citizens. Both societal organizations and small local businesses are perceived as relatively un-influential, which is in contrast with the perceived high impact of big investors or developers on policies and decisions of local governments. In the eyes of citizens, most of the Polish local governments are still stuck in the frame of classic growth machine paradigm, in which opinions of big business actors are often identified with the interest of the whole community and which have a larger impact on local policies.

Opposite to what we expected, there are no differences in the perception of citizens in municipalities of different population sizes. However, there are two other variables which modify the perceived shape of community power structure. First, citizens who perceive their mayors as more responsive in general, expect also greater readiness to change the original decision of the local government in the case of demand from the most powerful non-public actors. Consequently, it means that big business which is perceived to be the most influential actor having an impact on local government decisions is seen in municipalities with responsive mayors even more powerful. Second, older citizens more often believe that various external actors may have an impact on local government decision-making.

What might be potential consequences of discrepancy between citizens' and mayors' perception of influential societal actors for local governments? It should be reminded that recent academic studies reveal results which are closer to the perception of the mayors compared to the reality as perceived by average citizens. The negative consequence for local governments may be reduced input legitimacy as a result of lower perception of local politicians' and bureaucrats' responsiveness to demands of non-business interests. A special attention placed on transparency of administrative procedures and decision-making might be in the long-run at least a partial remedy for that legitimacy issue.

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