



Poland at a crossroads? Analysing the 2019 parliamentary election

Press briefing

15 October 2019

BACKGROUND

On 13 October 2019, Polish voters went to the polls to re-elect the 460-member Sejm (the lower house of parliament) and the 100-member Senate (the upper house).

The ruling nationalist-conservative Law and Justice (PiS)-led coalition retained its majority in the lower house, winning 235 seats, but, with 48 seats, lost its majority in the Senate. It was the PiS-led coalition's second electoral victory after gaining an absolute majority in both houses in 2015.

The main opposition bloc, the Civic Coalition, came second with 134 and 43 seats in the lower and upper houses, respectively. The Left coalition also gave a strong enough performance to enter parliament.

Voter turnout was a record 61.7% – the highest of the post-1989 parliamentary elections in Poland.

This press briefing summarises points made by three leading commentators on Polish politics and society during an event at UCL SSEES on 15 October 2019.

TRIUMPH OF THE RULING PARTY

Professor Aleks Szczerbiak (University of Sussex)

KEY POINT PiS achieved this remarkable electoral success as they were the sole party not only campaigning about, but also with a record of delivering on, the social needs that many Poles care most about.

1. PiS was able to score a victory despite accusations about undermining Polish democracy put forward by both domestic and external actors.
2. PiS popularity was predicated on its success in fulfilling its generous welfare pledges while in office. Also, the party “redistributed prestige” by providing a sense of importance to the social groups previously condescended to by the governments led by liberal urban elites.
3. PiS was also helped by the relatively poor performance of the Civic Coalition (centre-liberal) who lacked credibility on social issues they had failed to tackle when in power before 2015.

4. The election demonstrated that the opposition still enjoys a strong base of support in Polish society. This means PiS will have to fight hard in next year's presidential election. Having lost an outright majority in the Senate, PiS may find its draft legislation passes more slowly, but it most fears the election of an opposition president who could actually veto laws. As presidential elections in Poland are usually not fought on socially polarising but, rather, unifying platforms, PiS will probably hold back from continuing with its more divisive policies until after this next election.

GROWING NUMBER OF WOMEN IN POLISH POLITICS

Dr Anna Gwiazda (King's College London)

KEY POINT Four years of PiS-led government did much to awaken the civic spirit of the Polish population, and the relatively high number of women among centre and left deputies entering the Sejm may lead to heated debates on women and gender.

1. The high voter turnout compared with 2015 demonstrates that Poles have become increasingly active as citizens. This rise of civic consciousness had been visible during recent years of PiS rule when great numbers of Poles took to the streets in various protests. Some of those demonstrations (i.e., "Black Protests") concerned proposed abortion restrictions, that were eventually rejected by the PiS-led government.
2. Participation of women in the Sejm has grown since 1991, when 9.6% of deputies were women; the turning point was the introduction of gender quotas before the 2011 election. The Act of 5 January 2011 on the electoral code stipulates that at least 35% of all

candidates on party lists must be women. Although the percentage of women candidates has significantly increased since then, reaching 42% in 2019, the share of women in the Sejm has only reached 29%. Only two parties have a significant percentage of female deputies: the Left leads on gender diversity, with 43% of its deputies being female, followed by the Civic Coalition with 37%. Other parties underperform in this respect: 24% of PiS deputies are women; the respective figure for the Polish Peasant Party is 17%; and the far-right Confederation has no women deputies.

3. The representation of women is important, not least in discussions on women's emancipation and gender equality, but also regarding controversial moral and social issues that affect women directly, such as reproductive rights. The 2019 election resulted in the representation of diverse women's interest. In the previous parliamentary term, progressive and feminist voices and concerns were not sufficiently represented by Sejm deputies because parties of the Left were not present in parliament; instead the conservative claims supported by Law and Justice dominated. Hence, the 2019 election is important in producing a more representative parliament in terms of women's interests. It remains to be seen how a diversity of women's interests will contribute to debates and policies of concern to women.

SOLID RESULTS FOR THE OPPOSITION DESPITE POOR CAMPAIGN AND PARTISAN PUBLIC MEDIA; MORE POLES VOTING IN THE UK

Jakub Krupa (former UK Correspondent for the Polish Press Agency)

KEY POINT While the opposition's lacklustre and uninspiring election campaign will raise questions about its leadership going forward, it did relatively well, given the distortion of a level playing field in the media with the public broadcaster openly supporting the government. As in previous years, Poles in the UK voted against the incumbent government. The electoral turnout of Poles living in the UK was higher than in previous years, but still only about 10%.

1. Law and Justice's result gives the party a decisive victory, but many will be questioning why, after four years in government and millions spent on social transfers, the party was unable to deliver on its expectations of a higher majority in the Sejm, never mind losing its Senate majority. Moreover, the new government is likely to be more divided, as two junior partners within the three-party coalition of the United Right have returned more MPs than before, giving them more power in internal battles.
2. PiS also thrived on the weakness of the Civic Coalition, which did not present a credible programme to seriously threaten PiS. Moreover, during the election campaign, the main public TV channel in Poland openly supported the ruling party; arguments that other media outlets helped back the opposition do not hold water when considering the reach of TVP (the public broadcaster). In its report on the Polish election, the OSCE also noted the lack of impartiality in the media.
3. After four years of absence, left-wing parties made a return to parliament, giving them a stronger platform to criticise the government on social inequality issues. Their long-term success will depend on how much they will be able to sell a broader left-wing agenda without antagonising parts of the electorate by opening highly controversial issues, including those around the liberalisation of same-sex partnerships and abortion laws. As the Left will be represented by three parties, it will also be interesting to see if they manage to stick together despite differences – or split the moment they take their seats in parliament.
4. The Polish Peasants' Party, in coalition with formerly anti-establishment leader Pawel Kukiz, can celebrate its strongest result in 12 years, establishing itself as a moderate, centre-right alternative to the two main parties in favour of modern, compassionate conservatism. With the first Sejm seat won in Warsaw since 1989, the party is likely to increase its appeal beyond the traditional base of voters, as its leader, Wladyslaw Kosiniak Kamysz, is seen as one of the rising stars of the opposition – and a strong candidate for the presidential election next year.
5. Three areas have to be watched in relation to PiS activities that could undermine liberal democracy: the judiciary, the media (attempts to reduce foreign ownership, in particular), and minority rights (primarily those relating to immigrants and the LGBT community). More decisive actions may come if and when a PiS-supported candidate wins the presidential election next year.
6. Poles in the UK have traditionally been politically passive. This year's turnout was 11%, which – although small compared to national figures – is

considerable for UK Polish voter participation, usually in the range of 2-7%. This year, UK Poles voted overwhelmingly for the centre-liberal Civic Coalition (37%) – a surprising reversal from 2015 when the winner was the anti-establishment Kukiz party (24%). The left-wing coalition came second this year (23%), followed by PiS (20.3%).

7. A number of Poles complained about the abolition of the postal vote option, which (together with the growing, but still inadequate number of polling stations in the UK) may have prevented many people from exercising their electoral right.