

Jerzy Jaskiernia

Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce (Poland)

The Development of the Polish Party System: a Perspective of the Parliamentary Elections Results

Abstract: The author analyses the dynamics of the Polish party system in the light of the outcomes of the parliamentary elections in the Third Republic of Poland (since 1989). He exposes especially the last element of that evolution – the 2015 parliamentary election. It resulted with the victory of Law and Justice (PiS) party. For the first time in the history of democratic Poland, the victor was able to create government without having to negotiate with coalition partners. The success of PiS seems to be a result of the combination of several factors. It would be mistaken to portray an emerging situation as a simple rightist win. PiS to some extent represents a social attitudes, typical for the socialist (social-democratic) parties, with some part of program including a populist message, but with the combination of conservative approach to several issues and nationalistic stand on perception of patriotic mood. Important meaning have a support of PiS by the Catholic Church, especially in the grass-roots level. The victory of PiS and forming of the majority government have an important meaning for the functioning of the political parties' system in Poland. For the first time since 1989 there were not balancing of power situation which the coalition governments has brings about. The political parties, creating the opposition in parliament, must offer a new strategy of behaviour in such circumstances, especially dealing with challenging the PiS policy to compromise a democratic system based on the 1997 Constitution, e.g. division of power, position of the Constitutional Tribunal and functioning of the judiciary.

Keywords: *Poland; elections; political parties; Law and Justice; Civic Platform*

Introduction

The Polish 2015 parliamentary elections resulted in victory for a single party, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) (Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2016, p. 223). For the first time in the history of democratic Poland, the victor was able to create government without having to negotiate with coalition partners. This was due not so much to significant switches in the preference of voters, but rather as a result of a very high number of wasted votes (more than 16% of active votes) due to threshold for parties (5%) and party coalitions (8%). As a consequence, Gallagher disproportionality index surged to 11%. It is interesting to note that in three of seven previous parliamentary elections, the victorious party attracted a higher percentage of active voters than that achieved by PiS in 2015 (37.6%), but was unable to form a single-party government. It should be born in mind that 2015 PiS party list also candidates from two other parties, Poland Together (Polska Razem – PR) and Solidary Poland (Solidarna Polska – SP), and was in point of fact a three-party coalition (Markowski, 2016, p. 1311).

Results of the 2015 parliamentary election create an important step in the development of political parties' system in Poland. This result might be interpreted as well in the context of broader tendencies of development of political parties' systems in post-Communist Europe (Tavits, 2012, p. 429).

The Development of the Polish Party System Since 1989

Upon historic changes occurred in 1989, the new system of government was introduced in Poland based on the division of power, political pluralism and parliamentary-cabinet form of government with stronger than in classic model position of the President (Jaskiernia, 2015A, p. 79). The development of political parties' system included a reception of the western pattern of political competition (Antoszewski 1995, p. 15) and had a crucial meaning to forming a democratic political system (Szczerbiak, 2001B, p. 6), stabilized by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 (Smolar, 1998, p. 132), which was based on European democratic standards (Jaskiernia, 2015B, p. 19). This was not however an easy process in Poland (Grabowska, 1993, p. 55). The functions of the political parties has developed during the process of transformation (Żmigrodzki & Sokół, 1992/1993, p. 37) and influenced political practice of accountable government (Rose-Ackerman, 2005, p. 48). Several factors of segmentation and unification appeared in the building of the Polish political parties' system (Szczerbiak 2001, p. 78). The values and beliefs concealed in the 80s, when the opposition belonged to the underground, have been permanently inscribed

into the Polish political landscape. The religious and national values, as well as the historical and cultural issues, which emerged into the daylight, may be treated as the embryo of certain ideas, which in time, as a result of public debates, have become fundamental determinants of many political parties (Górka, 2010, p. 77).

The analytics has offered several features characterizing the Polish political parties' system in context of the election processes. First, voter apathy in Poland is greatest among all the Central and East European countries. Second, the Poles do not have stable party preferences, and voters' fickleness seems infinite – hardly comparable to the values measured in established democracies. Third, the same instability is typical on the “supply side” – in every election politicians represent different positions. Not only are there no well-organized parties, but existing parties continuously change their manifesto promises and follow them only very loosely once they enter government. In addition, they have proven incapable of establishing stable coalitions (Markowski, 2007, p. 46).

The period of political change began in Poland in 1989, after years without democratic institutions at the every level. For the first years after 1990 there was a certain ‘political vacuum’ in the country, and only in the second half of the 1990s were the first signs of partnerships between local authorities and local communities. However, this “political vacuum” has already been filled with the activity of political parties, and since the end of the 1990s one can distinguish the social partners of local authorities (Wódz, 2002, p. 244). It is worth to note recent successes of non-partisans (independents) in Polish local government. A majority of mayors and councillors remains unaffiliated with any party—in this respect Poland is an outlier among European countries. That non-partisans' successes are primarily due to the previous election results (the advantage of incumbency); a possible ‘partisan offensive’ to colonize new resources in local politics is sluggish (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2014, p. 1122).

Accession to EU was not the only factor but was definitely one of the most important determinate of development of political parties' system in Poland (Antoszewski, 2010, p. 25). It served as a lens on more fundamental dilemmas related to the role of state sovereignty, national identity, religion or individual rights (Zuba, 2009, p. 329). Three main factors explain public support for EU membership: utilitarian expectations, the role of values and ideas, and class partisanship. In the Polish case, public opinion polls and issues more specific to Poland, such as the role of the Catholic Church, populist political parties and profound Euroscepticism among farmers, suggest that although these theoretical explanations overlap, each of them has a different explanatory value. The economic approach remains the best predictor of support for EU membership, and whereas values and identity are closely linked to and dependent upon economic expectations, the impact of national politics appears largely decoupled

from Polish Euroscepticism (Surwillo, Handerson & Lazaridis, 2010, p. 1522). In many ways however 'Europe' appears to have been assimilated successfully into the logic of Polish domestic party politics (Szczerbiak, 2008b, p. 35).

Despite strong political party unity in new democracies, many of party systems in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe are '*quasi*-institutionalized' at best (Tunkis, p. 14). At the onset of the development of democratic politics, the party system was characterized by instability and under-institutionalization. By the end of the second decade, it displayed strong signs of structural stabilization and some evidence of the stability of inter-party competition and party institutionalization, implying that the Polish party system is *quasi*-institutionalized (Gwiazda, 2009, p. 375). Political parties undermine however the governmental grip because of their limited cohesion and competitive coalitional strategies (Zubek, 2008, p. 159).

Polish voters elect bicameral parliament consisting of a 460-member lower house, Sejm and 100-member Senate. Both are elected for a four-year term. The former is elected under proportional representation according to the d'Hondt method whilst the latter is elected by plurality vote in a single-member districts, introduced by the Election Code in 2011 and first used in the election 2015. The transition from a mono-party communist regime to democracy and pluralism resulted in new political parties mushrooming in the early 1990s. After the first free parliamentary elections in 1991 (with no 5% threshold) seats in the Sejm were divided among more than a dozen different parties. The existence of so many parties in the Sejm was seen by many as being counterproductive to the effectiveness of the parliament and a hindrance towards producing stable governments. It was one of the reasons for the collapse of the government of Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka after she was defeated in a vote of no-confidence and subsequently led to the dissolution of the Sejm by President Lech Wałęsa (1993) (Jasiewicz, 2000, p. 116; Jaskiernia, 2015c, p. 612).

In 1993 parliamentary elections several right-win parties, representing almost 35% of votes, did not qualify to the Sejm, because they did not gain 5%. It opens the way for returning to power by former Communists (SLD-Democratic Left Alliance) with the 20.41% votes, but a quite more seats because of the redistribution of seats not taken by parties which not reach 5% threshold. Over-representation of left forces in the National Assembly has helped to pass the new Constitution of the Republic of Poland (2 April 1997).

In 1997 parliamentary election several right-wing parties combined efforts under the umbrella of Election Action 'Solidarity' (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność – AWS) and won the election (33,83%), creating coalition government with Freedom Union (UW). It introduced the systemic reforms (education, retirees, administration, healthcare) which in some part was hugely unpopular and diminished a support for

that government (in last year it was a minority government once Freedom Union has left the ruling coalition).

In 2001 coalition Democratic Left Alliance and Labour Union (SLD/UP) won election (41.04%) and established coalition government with the Polish People's Party (PSL) (Szczerbiak 2002, p. 74; Jaskiernia, 2016, p. 21–23). The election took place in a context of fresh upheavals in the configuration of political parties. The architects of the new electoral law, changing d'Hondt system for the Sainte-Laguë system of the distributing the parliamentary seats, aimed to reduce the seats gained by the social democrats and increase their own. They succeeded in the first aim by a change of electoral formula, forcing the victorious social democratic electoral coalition to seek a third coalition partner. They did not achieve the second aim, as their own failures in government drastically reduced their electoral support and facilitated the breakthrough of populist formations. The result had implications for party development and the composition and workings of both parliament and government. While representation was enhanced by a parliament more accurately reflecting the voters' choice, the impact appeared potentially harmful to Polish democracy as a whole (Millard, 2003, p. 84). This election accelerated upheaval in the party system. It saw the victory of a new left-wing electoral coalition led by the successor social democrats of the Democratic Left Alliance, the defeat of previous incumbents, and new entrants into parliament. The government lost because it was weak, divided and ineffective, while the opposition SLD appeared competent, professional and united. The fragmentation of the post-Solidarity right and centre provided opportunities for populist formations to make gains in a context of continuing transition-anxieties. The election marked the end of the historic division between the heirs of communism and the heirs of Solidarity (Millard, 2002, p. 372).

As previously, the 2005 election in Poland saw the defeat of the incumbent government (Jaskiernia 2007, 29), but unlike previous elections, it marked the end of the Solidarity-successor party divide that had characterized Polish politics since 1989. The near simultaneity of parliamentary and presidential election campaigns made the campaigns indistinguishable, and each interacted with the other. Party programs were similar; transition-related issues dominated the election. Its unexpected victor was Law and Justice (PiS), which sought a radical break with the trajectory of post-communist development and a moral revolution in a new so called Fourth Republic (Millard 2007, p. 212). PiS successfully appropriated the welfare mantle of the discredited social democrats and mobilized traditional conservative and religious values. Despite formal plans for a PiS coalition with Civic Platform (so called: POPiS), the election resulted unexpectedly in PiS's coalition with the radical parties Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families (Millard, 2006, 1029). The

success of PiS was based on total criticism and a never-ending war declared on all political decisions and actions of the ruling government, especially in the domain of foreign and security policy (Bobrowski, 2007, p. 72). The contemporary practice of representative democracy in Poland fails to engage the electorate and functions to mediate the systemic exclusions produced by post-Socialist neoliberalism (Fleming, p. 91). Some observers argued that 'social Poland' defeated 'liberal Poland' (Szczerbiak, 2006, p. 42).

The dissolution of Parliament after the breaking of the ruling coalition (Law and Justice – Self-Defence - League of Polish Families) open the way to the earlier election. The 2007 Polish parliamentary election is best understood as a plebiscite on the polarizing right-wing Law and Justice party-led government and its controversial 'Fourth Republic' political project (Markowski, 2008, p. 1059). The liberal-conservative Civic Platform opposition won because it was able to persuade Poles that voting for them was the most effective way of removing this government from office. The election also indicates that the 'post-communist divide' that dominated and provided a structural order to the Polish political scene during the 1990s is passing into history and certainly means a more consolidated Polish party system. However, Poland still had very high levels of electoral volatility and low electoral turnout, together with low levels of party institutionalization and extremely weak links between parties and their supporters. It was suggested however that it is too early to say whether the election also marks the emergence of a stable Polish party system based on a new bi-polar divide between two big centre-right groupings, with the confinement of the left to the status of a minor actor (Szczerbiak, 2008A, p. 3). This election exposed the configuration of the party political system around two parties from the right. This unusual situation was the result of the decline of the left and liberal parties in Poland and the shift of politics to the conservative right. The two main political parties shared many historical and programmatic commonalities, but also diverged on a number of crucial issues (Rae, 2008, p. 82).

After many changes and conflicts in the political scene, the two currently most important Polish parties emerged: Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS). Civic Platform is the embodiment of the liberal tendencies and Law and Justice of the conservative tendencies in the post-Solidarity movements (Antoszewski 2008, p. 23). Law and Justice took power for a short time in 2005, but it lost in the earlier elections in 2007 to Civic Platform. And then came the disaster which has shaken the Polish political scene. On April 10th, 2010, the presidential Tupolev airplane crashed near Smoleńsk in Russia during an official trip to a ceremony of commemoration for the Polish officers murdered in Katyń by the Soviets. Everybody on board died. The victims included president Lech Kaczyński (of the Law and Justice party, twin

brother of the party's leader, Jarosław Kaczyński) and the first lady, all of the military chiefs of staff, the national bank governor, all the head army chaplains, and over 90 important political figures. This caused a major split in Polish politics. Jarosław Kaczyński and Law and Justice accused Civic Platform and their leader and then Prime Minister Donald Tusk of treason. They claimed that Civic Platform officials organized the presidential visit in a way that led to the disaster. Civic Platform, on the other hand, claimed that Kaczyński and Law and Justice are crazies who believe in conspiracy theories. Thus began an endless fight over the Smoleńsk disaster. The Left, the nationalists, and libertarians tried to break through this dualist narrative, but the media have followed either of the two narratives, and the public followed the media. Law and Justice began losing elections, both presidential and parliamentary. Civic Platform took full power. They claimed to be a modernizing force that will turn Poland into a prosperous economy modelled on Western European countries, fully integrated with the European Union. They presented themselves as the enlightened liberal elite, which will end all politics and finally make Polish society as well-functioning as the idealized West. The entire mainstream media went into full support mode, on the one hand praising the government, on the other condemning Law and Justice as evil forces of reaction (Ostrognew, 2005, p. 2).

At least three reasons make it plausible that the Smoleńsk catastrophe had a great impact on Polish politics. Firstly, the disaster had legal and constitutional consequences; the sudden death of a head of state always generates a number of specific actions, policy changes, and (most importantly from the perspective of this paper) determines the election calendar. Secondly, the disaster had psychological consequences; it caused a strong psychological shock for participants in the political process, which redefined political competition, public discourse, and the media coverage. Thirdly, narratives about the events preceding the crash and following it quickly became an important element of Polish politics, especially in the media and in the electoral campaign (Cześnik, 2014, p. 523).

Key to the centrist Civic Platform's victory in the 2011 Polish election, the first by an incumbent governing party in post-communist Poland, was its ability to generate fear about the possible consequences of the right-wing Law and Justice party returning to power. Although many of the Civic Platform's supporters were disappointed with its slow progress in modernizing the country, most voters viewed the party as the better guarantor of stability at a time of crisis and continued to harbour deeply ingrained concerns about the main opposition party. The election appeared to provide further evidence of the consolidation and stabilization of the Polish party system around the Civic Platform-Law and Justice divide. However, other factors pointed to the dangers of declaring that the Polish party system was 'frozen' around these two political

blocs and suggested that it remained vulnerable to further shocks and re-alignments (Szczerbiak, 2013, p. 502).

The scandal of illegal phone tapping that started in June 2014 notably shook the party and destabilized the government which was led by Donald Tusk at the time. The weekly *Wprost* published recordings that revealed an agreement had been made in 2011 between the then Home Affairs Minister, Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz and the President of the Polish Central Bank, Marek Belka. The latter promised to support the government's economic policy if the Prime Minister accepted the dismissal of his Finance Minister Jacek Rostowski. After the scandal caused by these revelations Donald Tusk's government had to undergo a confidence vote which it finally won on June, 25, 237 votes in support 203 against. The investigation that followed the publication of these conversations led to the arrest of several people including a businessman who is said to have communicated the recordings to the weekly *Wprost* in revenge for restrictions set by the State on coal imports. These conversations significantly damaged the government's image and that of Civic Platform (Foundation of Robert Schuman, 2015, p. 2).

Results of the 2015 Parliamentary Elections

The paradox with the result of 2015 parliamentary election is connected with an observation, that for the past few years, Poland has been enjoying good press, having become something of a poster child for economic success in the post-communist region. Poland's real GDP growth has been among the highest in Europe; it has minimal inflation, single-digit unemployment, declining inequality (at a level about average for European countries) and healthy public finances with a budget deficit below 3% of GDP. The country has outpaced not only such regional neighbours as Hungary, but also some countries in "old" Europe. And it's not only the macro-level statistics: Much the same positive story emerges from surveys of individuals and households, which show across-the-board improvements in a variety of economic and human development indicators. And yet in the elections of October 25, 2015, the ruling coalition of the centrist Civic Platform (PO) and the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL), in power since 2007, suffered a resounding defeat. The new government was formed by an electoral alliance headed by the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS), the first since 1989 to win the majority of seats in the lower chamber of parliament. PiS also won 61 of the 100 seats in the Senate. And its candidate, Andrzej Duda, won the presidency in 2015. So does this mean – as some analytics has asked – that the Poles were turning away from liberal democracy? Analytics suggests that it's a mixed picture. PiS has won the majority of seats and unquestionably gained the mandate to

form the next government. But its 37.6% of votes, when only about half (51%) of voters actually went to the polls, means it received the active support of only about 1 in 5 (19%) of all eligible voters, which does not add up to a mandate for overturning the constitutional order (Tworzecki & Markowski, 2015, p. 20).

Law and Justice (PiS), Poland's main opposition party, not only regained power but its electoral committee, composed also of three other minor parties (i.e. Solidary Poland, Poland Together, and the Right-wing of the Republic), obtained an absolute majority of parliamentary seats. This, coupled with PiS' candidate Andrzej Duda's victory in presidential election, gave Jarosław Kaczyński's party unprecedented power in the country. Since then much has been said about the overnight redrawing of Poland's political landscape, the causes of PiS' "stunning victory" and the governing Civic Platform's humiliation despite its incomparable economic record, as well as the implications of PiS' victory for democracy in Poland or in Europe (Bertoa, 2015, p. 1).

Table 1. Results of October 25, 2016 elections to the lower house of parliament (the Sejm)

Party	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats	Seats (%)	Seats change since 2011
Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS)	5.711.687	37.58	235	51.09	+78
Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO)	3.661.474	24.09	138	30.00	- 69
Kukiz'15	1.339.094	8.81	42	9.13	
Modern (Nowoczesna)	1.155.370	7.60	28	6.09	
United Left (Zjednoczona Lewica)	1.147.102	7.55			-67
Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – PSL)	779.875	5.13	16	3.48	-12
Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic Liberty and Hope (KORWiN)	722.999	4.76			
Together (Razem)	550.349	3.62			
German Minority (Mniejszość Niemiecka)	27.530	0.18	1	0.22	No change
Other parties	105.191	0.68			
Total	15.200.671	100.00	460	100.00	

Total electorate: 30.629.150, turnout: 50.92%.

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2015).

United Left did not win seats because, as a coalition, it needed to clear a higher threshold (8% rather than 5%). Threshold rules do not apply to parties of national minorities. Half of Polish voters have preferred staying at home to participating in the electoral process. Thus, even though the last parliament have been the third most supported in Polish history, only 51% of the electorate went to the polls and cast their vote. This makes Poland, with an average turnout of 48%, the most apathetic democracy not only in post-Communist Europe but in the European Union. And even if, as explained elsewhere, such low levels of electoral participation are not enough to question the legitimacy of the Polish democracy per se, it certainly confirms a tendency observed in most European countries: namely, the growing distance between citizens and their representatives. Moreover, it questions the extent to which a party system in which barely half of the citizens regularly exert their voting rights can be considered consolidated (Bertoa, 2015, p. 2).

Explanations of the Results of the 2015 Parliamentary Elections

There were several attempts to explain results of the 2015 Parliamentary election in Poland (Tworzecki & Markowski, 2015, p. 2; Markowski, 2016, p. 1315; Jaskiernia, 2016, p. 27; Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2015, p. 224). In almost all elections since the fall of Communism in 1989 (in 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2007) Polish voters have voted against incumbents. They finally brought themselves to re-elect a government in 2011 — but that seems to have made them all the more determined to boot it out in 2015. This tendency to vote against incumbents, no matter how well or poorly they govern, has also been observed in other post-communist countries. It persists because the region's political parties still aren't very good at representing their constituents' interests. Indeed, in Poland and neighbouring countries, parties remain at the very bottom of rankings of institutions in which the public has confidence. This tendency also suggests that voters in this part of the world find it difficult to hold governments accountable by objectively assessing their accomplishments and failures.

Several observers suggest that economic factors had weakly determined the electoral behaviours before 2015. It was confirmed by many research conducted by the Polish National Election Study. However, in 2015 while Poland's overall economic health was strong, some groups and some parts of the country were suffering. Youth unemployment was twice the national average. Good jobs were scarce in small towns and rural regions, especially in eastern Poland. Many people are working under short-term contracts that carry few protections or benefits. And although Poland was the only country in the EU to avoid a recession after the post-2008 global crisis (Prime Minister Donald Tusk often exposed himself in front of the map of the

European Union where Poland is the only one “green island” without recession), that came at a cost. The government imposed austerity measures (including pay freezes for some public employees), while private businesses often imposed pay cuts while simultaneously demanding higher productivity. That’s why, in these elections, the incumbent PO party lost support even among younger, well-educated, urban voters who pushed it to its first victory back in 2007. It’s also why PiS was able to garner so much support beyond its religious, socially conservative strongholds in small towns and rural areas of eastern Poland, winning the plurality of votes in almost all regions and demographic categories.

To respond to the widely felt hardships and anxieties, PiS ran a campaign that called for vastly expanded public spending. It promised to increase the minimum wage and the personal income tax exemption; to offer new child support payments (program Family 500+), housing subsidies (program Housing+), and free prescription drugs for seniors; and to lower the retirement age from the current 67 to 65 for men and 60 for women. In so doing – positioning itself as a culturally rightist but economically leftist party – PiS was able to attract voters who in the past may well have voted for the left. In this election the United Left (the latest incarnation of the former communists and assorted allies), failed to win any seats in parliament (do not reach 8% threshold for the coalitions). PiS backed its economic promises by a radical critique of the *status quo*: Rather than simply poking a few holes in the positive economic statistics, it went with the hyperbolic message of “Poland in ruins”, through which it achieved its main goal of demobilizing the ruling parties’ supporters, leading many of them to stay home on election day.

PiS also exploited the European migrant crisis which was especially visible in 2015. While the government dithered, PiS argued adamantly against the EU proposal for a quota system that would deliver a certain percentage of migrants to each country. PiS stoked fears that the refugees and migrants would threaten Poland’s national security, religious and cultural identity, economic well-being and even public health. After World War II Poland became one of Europe’s most ethnically and religiously homogeneous countries (87.5% of Poles identify themselves as Roman Catholic), which has meant that it has not had to confront the challenges of multiculturalism – although it did receive nearly 100,000 war refugees from Chechnya and, more recently, nearly half a million economic migrants from Ukraine with hardly anyone noticing. But the refugee crisis has dominated the news for much of the summer. Nevertheless, conditions were ripe for xenophobic appeals.

The incumbents ran a lacklustre campaign that lacked a coherent message. The PO was started back in 2001 to appeal to the newly-emerging middle class. By 2015, the party has become a broadly centrist “party of power” worn out by eight years

in government. Its long-time leader, Donald Tusk, left for a job of the President of European Council, leaving it weakened. The new leader, Ewa Kopacz had not enough time to build her own prestige and reputation in the circumstances of divided PO, especially dealing with position of the potential leader, Grzegorz Schetyna. PO has been further weakened by a steady trickle of secret recordings of senior politicians dining at pricy restaurants, which – while falling short of revealing actual criminality – had a damaging undertone of sleaze and arrogance. Last but not least, the PO was not able to articulate effectively what it stood for and what it would do if reelected – except by promising to continue with necessary but mundane infrastructure improvements: building more roads and so forth. In the end, on election day many PO supporters stayed home and others — especially those in upper education and income brackets – opted for a new, more clearly market-liberal oriented party called *Nowoczesna* (“Modern”), which won 7.6 percent of votes. According to exit polls, a huge 71 percent of *Nowoczesna*’s support came from those who had voted for PO in 2011 (Tworzecki & Markowski, 2015, p. 2; Markowski, 2016, p. 1317).

The Law and Justice Party, though considered “far-right” by many political scientists and experts, is hard to define with a straight-forward ideological label. The party calls for an increase in social spending, higher taxes on the wealthy, and re-nationalization of key sectors of the economy. The party leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, also expressed that the Law and Justice party was opposed to immigrants, gays, feminists, liberals, and most foreigners. In addition, he has expressed that his goal is to create a Poland in which lives only one Polish nation, and not diverse nations. He has admitted that his goal has been to remain in power for life. This combination of liberal and conservative sentiments can be seen in other European countries, like Hungary for example. According to the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, “the era of liberal democracy is over”. Simultaneously, he has worked to increase taxes of larger businesses and establish price controls on electricity. In addition to domestic contributors, aspects of the international stage he have also contributed to the rise of the rightist Law and Justice party in Poland. This category of issues is more complex, as it involves neighbouring countries and other members of the European Union. What is most fascinating is that the EU, a body which touts a set of conditions for all of its member nations that are cemented in democratic gains, is actually acting as a hindrance to the development of Poland as a democracy that ensures basic liberties and the oversight of government. Over time however the reputation of the EU as a powerhouse of democracy and strong socioeconomic gains for its member states has greatly diminished. It has been tarnished by the failure of member countries Poland and the EU to manage conflicts, like the influx of refugees recently (Arnston, 2016, p. 11).

Consequences of the 2015 Parliamentary Elections

What do these elections mean for democracy in Poland? Political science has long held that rising prosperity would inoculate countries against the risk of authoritarian backsliding. But in its draft constitution and various other pronouncements PiS has made it clear that its ambition is to transform Poland's political institutions in ways similar in their illiberal spirit to those seen recently in Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Although PiS did not get the 2/3 parliamentary majority required for it to make constitutional changes, it has won majorities in both chambers of parliament. With the presidency also in hand, PiS may be able to put many of its proposals into effect through a combination of ordinary legislation and determined political practice. A version of the Hungarian scenario is therefore possible. Going by the results of these elections, it is impossible to tell now whether Poland is experiencing illiberal backlash. At this point analytics suggest that Polish voters are reexamining the two fundamental democratic values: freedom and equality. Since the fall of Communism a quarter-century ago, the Poles have enjoyed an unprecedented expansion of liberties, not only of the political kind but also in social mores and lifestyles. Indeed, for the more traditionally inclined, the pace of cultural change has become threatening. At the same time the demand for economic equality hasn't been met. PiS achieved its victory by responding to this combination of fears and needs with promises to both increase economic redistribution toward the less well-off and protect traditional cultural values (Tworzecki & Markowski, 2015, p. 2).

One of the first clear effects of the last parliamentary elections in Poland has been the end of the so-called 'post-communist cleavage' which pitted post-Communist parties (mainly SLD and PSL) against post-solidarity parties (including PO and PiS) and characterized Polish politics for most of its democratic history. Indeed, SLD's failure to secure any parliamentary seats in the new parliament (the failure of the Left coalition to cross the threshold meant the redistribution of these wasted votes) constitutes the last strike to a political divide that started to fade away with the electoral and government coalition between SLD and UP in 2001, PSL parliamentary support to Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz's (PiS) cabinet in 2005, and the PO and PSL coalition government in 2007. PiS' victory in almost all regions and across different socio-demographic groups (e.g. age, place of residence, education, gender), questions another feature of Polish politics which has so far been constant: the awareness of Poland's past. There seemed to be a clear cultural, economic and political division between the northwestern part of Poland, consisting of the territories that belonged to Germany before 1945, which were culturally more cosmopolitan, economically more developed and politically more liberal, and the south-eastern part of the country,

which was culturally more traditional, but also poorer and politically conservative. Indeed, from the first presidential election in 1990 until the last presidential contest in May 2015, throughout every single electoral contest – local, legislative, for the European Parliament – social-democratic (SLD until 2001) or liberal (PO from 2005) parties received more votes in the west than in the east, more incline to support rightist (Solidarity and AWS until 1997; PiS from 2001) parties (Bertoa, 2015, p. 1).

As a result, the PiS could achieve an absolute majority with only 19 % of votes of the eligible electorate. This would appear far from sufficient for a party to speak and act on behalf of the whole nation. Nonetheless, the party presents itself as the only true representative and protector of the common good. In its dominant narrative, the PiS creates an artificial division between “liberal post-communism” and a “truly free Poland of solidarity with the poorest” while reducing the term “liberalism” to radical economic reforms and individual freedom. However, contrasting liberalism with social solidarity is misleading, because democratic order needs both (Solska, 2016, p. 12).

The last parliamentary elections have also demonstrated that forming a “successful” political party in Poland is a matter of months. Indeed, out of the eight parties that have more than 3% of the votes, half are new: the Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic-Liberty and Hope (KORWiN), Together (Razem), Modern (Nowoczesna) and Kukiz’15. These latter two obtained one-sixth of the parliamentary seats but, interestingly enough, all of them were founded between January and May 2015. And even if this “party newness” is a characteristic common to all post-communist democracies, Poland is perhaps the only country where only one party (i.e. the Polish People’s Party – PSL) has managed to obtain seats in all elections since 1989 (Bertoa, 2015, p. 1).

The main victor is, of course, the Law and Justice party. They are a great example of breaking through a seemingly hopeless situation. Civic Platform had all power, full mainstream media support, and broad social support. They successfully created a narrative according to which they were the forces of modernization, the only party able to turn Poland into a prosperous and respected country. On the other hand, they presented Law and Justice as crazy kooks who would blow everything up and ruin things for everyone. Civic Platform also presented their time in power as the period of Poland’s greatest prosperity, with the construction of highways, roads, stadiums, and great international investments in the country. Law and Justice seemed to be banished from the mainstream forever. However, they started creating their own channels of information: they revived small conservative newspapers, founded new magazines, created internet TV and YouTube channels, Facebook profiles, etc. Most importantly, these were not directly linked to the party but to so-called “independent” journalists with clear conservative tendencies. Every time there was a breach in the mainstream

narrative, any time an actor, a performer, a journalist, or a writer has voiced a pro-Law and Justice opinion, he or she would immediately become a star of this alternative, conservative media. These media outlets began, of course, with crazy conspiracies about the Smoleńsk disaster. But with time they changed their strategy. They started showing the mistakes and plot-holes of the lengthy Russian and Polish investigations of the disaster. They blew the whistle every time there was an instance of corruption in the ruling party. They have emphasized every instance of hatred towards traditional Polish society among the mainstream media. They started presenting Civic Platform's 'modernized Poland' as a lie and claimed that Poland was becoming a neo-colony of the West, from which only the politicians of the ruling parties can profit (Ostrognew, 2015, p. 2).

Law and Justice are usually denounced as nutty Catholic reactionary right-wingers by the chattering classes within Poland and around Europe. In fact they are a *sui generis* movement of truculent, carefully Eurosceptic étatist-patriots. They urge a "strong Poland", by which they mainly mean robust and sternly honest state institutions, and a square deal for state employees and pensioners. Latterly Law and Justice have made a successful effort to broaden their appeal towards small businesses and younger voters. But they are instinctively suspicious of big business and banks, and loath to do anything radical to reform state processes or advance privatization/deregulation. They are comfortable playing to conservative Catholic instincts of older Polish voters, but they see the Catholic Church as a patriotic force (Crawford, 2015, p. 1).

Why did Civic Platform lose the elections? There are two main reasons, as some observers suggests: corruption and arrogance. One has to admit that they used to seem like a decent, typically Western centrist party. But once they seized full power, they lost contact with reality. It seems that they really started to believe what the mainstream journalists told them. As some insiders claim, many of the top politicians truly believed that they would never lose power. The other reason was corruption. They quickly began to create countless new government jobs and hired people from the party as well as family members. This is nothing new in Polish politics, but this time the scale was enormous. The public discontent grew, and when then Prime Minister and head of Civic Platform, Donald Tusk, was promoted to the rank of the President of the European Council in December 2014, the government and the mainstream media proclaimed it a great victory, but much of the public saw it "as the biggest rat leaving a sinking ship" (Ostrognew, 2015, p. 3).

The events in Poland show that strong economic success does not necessarily transition to strong positive sentiments in a country. Though Poles believe that the election of the Law and Justice party will bring a refreshing change domestically, including a lower retirement age and a strong minimum wage, its election might hinder the

country internationally as countries shy away from a nation run by such a right-wing government. Poland's strong economic and diplomatic relationship with Germany will most likely suffer. This may lead to a weakening of the Polish economy, an economy that was so strong during the rule of the Civil Platform that is completely avoided the woes of the 2008 economic recession. Domestically, this election could also mean the return to social Conservatism and authoritative populism, further separating Poland from its historic allies and supporters. In addition, the election of the Law and Justice party will conclusively change (Arnston, 2015, p. 13).

The current composition of parliament in Poland reflects a crisis of traditional political forces in the country. The disappearance of entire sections of the Polish political spectrum (specifically, of post-socialist left-wing forces, as the Democratic Left Alliance) from the parliamentary structure is a sign of distrust in the traditional political structures (the poor performance of another long-standing party, the Polish People's Party, which mustered just 3 per cent of the votes, is further proof of this). At the same time, parties that have built their rhetoric primarily around non-participation in the political system (such as Paweł Kukiz's union) have enjoyed huge success. It is worth noting here that 25 per cent of the people who voted for Paweł Kukiz in 2015 voted for Janusz Palikot in 2011. This is particularly interesting because, judging by his views, Janusz Palikot has little in common with Paweł Kukiz, a left-leaning liberal. The only thing uniting these parties and their leaders is the tendency towards scandalous behaviour and their anti-system stance. This means that a part of the Polish electorate (both Kukiz in 2015 and Palikot in 2011 relied on the youth vote) is prepared to cast their vote as a vote of protest, as they are dissatisfied with the state of Polish politics in principle and are ready to support any party that offers a clear alternative (Kuvaldin & Gushin, 2015, p. 1). If this trend will continue in the next elections, it will have an important impact of the functioning of the Polish political parties' system.

Final Remarks

The success of PiS in 2015 Parliamentary election in Poland seems to be a result of the combination of several factors. It would be mistaken to portray an emerging situation as a simple rightist win. PiS to some extent represents a social attitudes, typical for the socialist (social-democratic) parties, with some part of program including a populist message, but with the combination of conservative approach to several issues and nationalistic stand on perception of patriotic mood. Important meaning have a support of PiS by the Catholic Church, especially in the grass-roots level. The ideological importance of nationalism in Poland makes it a vivid example of the interaction between conflicts of definition of political community, on the one hand,

and parties' European attitudes, on the other (Pontes Meyer Resonde, 2005, p. 12). The 2015 election results might be treated as well as an proof of growing of a illiberal order in contemporary world (Boyle, 2016, p. 49). Populist tendencies are present in Poland as well as in another Central and Eastern European countries (Lang, 2007, p. 6) and their credibility must be analysed dealing with the responsiveness of established parties to peoples' expectations (van Kessel, 2013, p. 186). Major resources of political knowledge was changed and political knowledge leads to changes in political interest, alienation, democratic attitudes and voting behaviour (Kunovich, 2013, p. 75). Growing importance, as show the Standard Eurobarometer 84 Survey (EB84), conducted between 7 and 17 November 2015, has a refugee crisis (Public Opinion, 2015, p. 12).

The victory of PiS in 2015 election and forming of the majority government have an important meaning for the functioning of the political parties' system in Poland. For the first time in the Polish after 1989 history there were not balancing of power situation which the coalition governments brings about. The political parties, creating the opposition in parliament, must offer a new strategy of behaviour in such circumstances, especially dealing with challenging the PiS policy to compromise a democratic system based on the 1997 Constitution, e.g. division of power, position of the Constitutional Tribunal and functioning of the judiciary. The political situation occurred after 2015 election has also open the way to new civil society initiatives, as the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji – KOD) (Karolewski, 2016, p. 265). It could influence further development of political parties' system in Poland.

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Author

Professor Dr Hab. Jerzy Jaskiernia

Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Institute of Law, Economy and Administration. Contact details: ul. Świętokrzyska 21a, 25–406 Kielce, Poland; e-mail: jerzyj@hot.pl.