

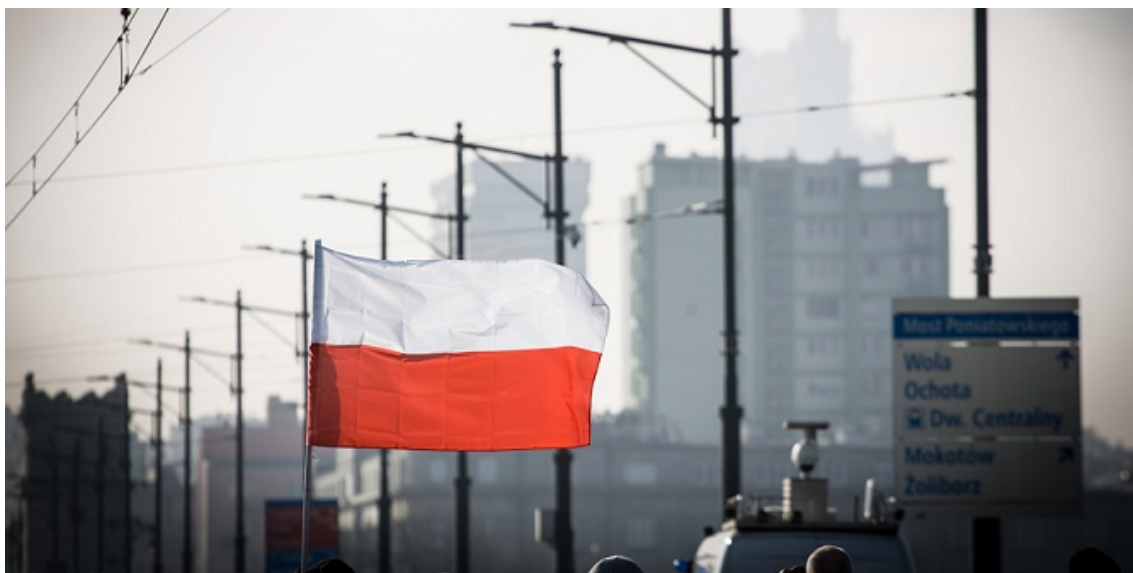
Why do Poland's local elections matter?



Poland is set to hold local elections, with the first round of voting taking place on 21 October, followed by a second round of voting on 4 November. [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes that the elections will be an important test of popularity for Poland's government and opposition parties. Although the governing Law and Justice party is currently riding high in the polls, the vote could be problematic due to high expectations and a lack of coalition potential, coupled with media focus on mayoral contests in urban areas where Law and Justice are relatively weak.

On 21 October, Poles will vote for thousands of councillors and local mayors in regional, county and parish elections; with second round run-offs two weeks later between the two most popular candidates in those mayoral contests where the winning candidate fails to secure more than 50%. The local elections are the first of a series over the next year-and-a-half that will include European Parliament elections in May 2019, parliamentary elections in autumn 2019, and culminating in presidential elections in the summer of 2020. Given Poland's 16 regional authorities play a major role in distributing EU funds and are a key source of local party patronage, these are the most politically significant of the local government polls. As the only tier where elections are contested on national party lines, the aggregated share of the vote in the regional polls is also the best indicator of party support.

For the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) grouping, Poland's ruling party since the autumn 2015 parliamentary election, the elections will be seen as a plebiscite on the government's transformative but highly controversial programme of socio-economic and systemic reforms. In particular, they will be a key test of popularity for prime minister [Mateusz Morawiecki](#), who took over the premiership last December and has been the main focus of the party's national campaign. Although he previously held the post of deputy prime minister and finance minister, Morawiecki is relatively new to front-line politics, having worked in the banking sector before he joined the government. After a shaky start, Morawiecki grew quickly into his new role and is now one of Poland's most popular politicians; widely touted as a potential successor to Law and Justice leader Jarosław Kaczyński who, although he does not hold any formal state positions, exercises powerful behind-the-scenes influence in determining the government's programmatic and strategic priorities.



Credit: [Jaap Arrens](#) (CC BY 2.0)

In fact, these could be problematic elections for the ruling party. The fact that Law and Justice is registering impressive levels of opinion poll support (averaging over 40%) means that it has to manage extremely high expectations. Pundits are likely to view as a disappointment anything significantly less than the 38% share of the vote that the party secured in the 2015 election and a lead of less than ten percentage points over the largest opposition grouping. But many Poles who vote in local elections do not do so in national ones (and vice versa) making it difficult to read party support from opinion polls, while the main parties' overall share of the vote could be diluted by support for local civic committees in some regions.

At the same time, Law and Justice has weak coalition potential so if it does not win outright majorities then it will struggle to secure control of many regional authorities, even where it wins the largest number of seats. In the previous 2014 local elections, Law and Justice won the most seats in six regional assemblies but only ended up controlling one of them, while the liberal-centrist Civic Platform (PO) – Poland's ruling party between 2007-15 and currently the main opposition grouping – secured control of the remainder either on its own or in coalition with other parties. This time, Law and Justice is hoping to take control of at least half of the regional councils, although 3-5 is probably a more realistic target. Moreover, much of the media focus will be on the results of the high-profile mayoral contests in Poland's large towns and cities, where Law and Justice is relatively weak. Victory in any of these would be a major success for the ruling party.

Kukiz'15's performance could be key

A key factor determining whether Law and Justice's high share of the vote translates into control of regional authorities could be the performance of the anti-establishment [Kukiz'15 grouping](#), currently the ruling party's only realistic potential coalition partner. After its leader, rock star Paweł Kukiz, caused a political sensation in the 2015 presidential election – when, standing as an independent right-wing 'anti-system' candidate, he finished third, picking up one-fifth of the vote – the newly-formed Kukiz'15 grouping emerged as the third largest in the subsequent parliamentary poll, securing 9%. Since then, Kukiz'15 has maintained a reasonably stable electoral base (especially among younger voters), averaging around 7-8% in opinion polls.

However, the local elections will be exceptionally difficult for Kukiz'15 because they favour established parties with well-developed grassroots organisation. After Kukiz fell out with many of the local government and civic activists who formed the backbone of his 2015 presidential campaign, his grouping has failed to build up such networks. This is exacerbated by the fact that Kukiz'15 has not been registered as a formal political party, thereby making it ineligible for ongoing state funding. Even securing 5% in the regional elections would, therefore, be a substantial achievement for Kukiz'15.

An important test for Grzegorz Schetyna

Civic Platform is contesting the elections as part of the so-called 'Civic Coalition' (KO) in alliance with the smaller liberal 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) party. In September they were joined by the left-wing Polish Initiative (IP), a marginal grouping but led by high-profile feminist activist Barbara Nowacka who earlier this year spearheaded an unsuccessful attempt to liberalise Poland's abortion law. Civic Platform hopes that by bringing Nowacka on board the Coalition can strengthen its appeal to socially liberal voters in urban areas, although the move risks alienating moderate conservative voters that the party also needs to win over.

The local elections are a key test for Civic Platform leader Grzegorz Schetyna who lacks dynamism and charisma (opinion polls show him to be Poland's least trusted politician) but is an effective political operator who has restored a sense of discipline and purpose to the party. Schetyna has been subject to constant criticism from the liberal-left media for his alleged ineffectiveness, and for many voters he is too closely associated with the previous, discredited Civic Platform-led government. Nonetheless, the party retains much greater political assets than any other opposition grouping – including substantial financial resources and a relatively well-developed grassroots base – and better-than-expected local election results would provide it with a major boost in the run-up to next year's decisive parliamentary poll. A good outcome for the 'Civic Coalition' in the regional polls would be to secure at least the combined vote share that Civic Platform and 'Modern' won in 2015 (32%), and limit the Law and Justice lead to single figures. On the other hand, losing control of a significant number of regional authorities, or symbolic defeats in large towns or cities currently run by prominent Civic Platform politicians, would severely undermine Schetyna's leadership and raise questions about the effectiveness of the 'Civic Coalition' formula.

The most prestigious and high profile contest is the Warsaw mayoral election which has developed into a major strategic battleground between the government and opposition, setting the tone for the local election campaign more generally. As is the case with most Polish cities, Warsaw is a liberal heartland and extremely difficult territory for Law and Justice, but the party's candidate, deputy justice minister Patryk Jaki, has run an extremely energetic campaign.

Jaki has benefited from his high profile role as chair of a special government-appointed commission investigating irregularities in the return of Warsaw properties confiscated under communist rule. Even many of the government's critics have praised his efforts in seeking redress for ordinary citizens who lost out as a result of the so-called 'reprivatisation' process. At the same time, although he was once touted as a future party leader, Civic Platform candidate Rafał Trzaskowski has been uninspiring and found himself on the defensive as Law and Justice has reminded voters of his links to the party-backed incumbent Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz whose reputation has been severely damaged by the 'reprivatisation' scandal. However, although the opinion poll gap has narrowed, Mr Trzaskowski remains favourite to win and a Law and Justice victory in Warsaw, one of Civic Platform's electoral bastions, would be a political sensation.

Rural areas are a key battleground

One of the key local election battlegrounds has been the bitter competition for rural votes between Law and Justice and the agrarian Polish Peasant Party (PSL). Although it was Civic Platform's junior governing partner and is in coalition with Schetyna's party in most regional councils, the Peasant Party decided not to join the 'Civic Coalition'. The party had its worst result in any post-1989 election in 2015, only just scraping over the 5% threshold for parliamentary representation, and is currently hovering around this level of support in national polls. However, it has tried to refresh its image by electing Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz – one of a new generation of young, articulate party activists – as leader, and some commentators argue that the party is slowly re-building its support among rural voters. Law and Justice strategists are concerned that there is a segment of this electorate that may vote for the ruling party in national elections, but support the Peasant Party in local polls, and they have taken a number of high-profile initiatives aimed at boosting its support in the countryside, including replacing the unpopular agriculture minister.

In fact, the Peasant Party always performs much better in local than national elections due to its strong grassroots organisational base and the fact that turnout in rural areas, that form the bedrock of its support, is always higher in these polls. Indeed, in 2014 the party won a stunning 24% of the regional assembly vote; although Law and Justice supporters questioned the reliability of these results. The fact that the Peasant Party is primarily an office-seeking grouping – which, critics argue, has developed powerful networks of patronage and interest clusters at the local level – means that the stakes are extremely high and securing anything less than 10% in the regional elections will be interpreted as a sign that it is in serious, possibly terminal decline.

A comeback for the ex-communists?

The local elections are also an important test for the once-powerful communist successor [Democratic Left Alliance](#) (SLD), which failed to secure representation in the last parliamentary election but has made something of a comeback and is now third in most opinion polls, averaging around 8-9%. Notwithstanding the Alliance's extensive local organisation and access to substantial state party funding, this was driven largely by the revival of debates about the country's communist past prompted by Law and Justice legislation affecting the interests of its core electorate: those who, due to their personal biographies, have positive sentiments towards, or direct material interests linking them to, the previous regime. The Alliance will be looking to match, or even improve on, the 9% that it secured in the 2014 regional elections.

In fact, no political current is more divided in these elections than the left. The Polish Initiative split over Nowacka's decision to throw her lot in with the 'Civic Coalition', with critics pointing out that Civic Platform and 'Modern' parliamentary deputies have failed to take a decisive stance on abortion. The radical left 'Together' (Razem) party, which unexpectedly emerged from nowhere to win 4% of the vote in the 2015 election (enough to obtain state funding but not parliamentary representation), is running separately from the Alliance but has failed to build on its earlier momentum. Meanwhile, Robert Biedroń, another political hopeful often touted as the left's potential saviour, has decided not to stand for re-election as mayor of the provincial town of Słupsk and is waiting until next year to launch a new political initiative.

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Note: This article originally appeared at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). The article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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