

# Who really won Poland's local elections?



*Poland held local elections on 21 October, followed by a second round of voting on 4 November. The elections were billed as a key test for the country's Law and Justice government. As [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) explains, the liberal-centrist opposition mobilised its core supporters in urban areas, winning high profile mayoral races, but Law and Justice won the more politically significant regional polls. He argues that unless the opposition can broaden its appeal and attract more voters in smaller towns and rural areas, the governing party remains on track to win next year's parliamentary election.*

Poland's autumn local elections – the first of a series over the next year-and-a-half including European Parliament elections in May 2019, parliamentary elections in autumn 2019, and culminating in the summer 2020 presidential poll – were always going to be difficult for the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) grouping, the country's ruling party since autumn 2015. This was partly due to high expectations given Law and Justice has been averaging over 40% in opinion polls, but mainly it was because much of the media focus was on mayoral contests in larger towns and cities where the ruling party is relatively weak.

Sure enough, the liberal-centrist Civic Platform (PO) – Poland's ruling party between 2007-15 and currently the main opposition grouping – made a very strong showing in these urban areas, winning high profile mayoral races without the need for second round run-offs (which were scheduled for 4 November where no candidate obtained more than 50%). Civic Platform was particularly buoyed by its surprisingly easy victory in Warsaw, the most prestigious and high profile contest which developed into a major strategic battleground between the government and opposition and set the tone for the campaign more generally. Here, the uninspiring Civic Platform contender Rafał Trzaskowski won with 57% of the vote in spite of the extremely energetic campaign run by deputy justice minister Patryk Jaki, his Law and Justice-backed opponent.

Polish local elections normally see a higher turnout in small towns and rural areas, where Law and Justice enjoys strong support. This time, however, many urban liberal voters appear to have been mobilised by the fact that (albeit in different ways) both Law and Justice and the opposition presented these elections as a plebiscite on the ruling party's transformative but highly controversial and polarising programme of socio-economic and systemic reforms. As the first nationwide elections after three turbulent years of Law and Justice government, many otherwise electorally passive urban voters were thus encouraged to use the local polls to pass a verdict on national politics. Overall, turnout in the first round was 55%, a record high for Polish local elections.

## Law and Justice wins the regional poll

However, as the only local government tier contested on national party lines, the aggregated share of the vote in elections to Poland's 16 regional authorities was actually the best indicator of party support. Given that they play a major role in distributing EU funds and are a key source of local party patronage, the regional elections were also the most significant politically of the local government polls. Here the results were much more encouraging for Law and Justice which won 34% of the vote overall and emerged as the largest party in nine regional assemblies.

This represented a 7% increase on its performance in the previous 2014 local elections, and the highest ever national vote share by a party in Polish regional polls. Civic Platform contested the elections as part of the 'Civic Coalition' (KO) in alliance with the smaller liberal 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) party (and a tiny left-wing grouping led by feminist activist Barbara Nowacka) which won 27% of the regional vote and is the largest grouping in seven assemblies. This was slightly more than the 26% secured by Civic Platform in 2014 but less than the 32% combined vote share of these two parties in the 2015 parliamentary election.

Given Law and Justice's previous difficulties in building local coalitions – in 2014 the party won the most seats in six regions but only ended up governing in one of them, while Civic Platform secured control of the remainder either on its own or in coalition – there was concern that it would again struggle to secure control of regional authorities, even where it won the largest number of seats (3-5 was a realistic target). In fact, thanks to a counting system that favours larger parties, Law and Justice actually secured outright majorities in six regions and could take control of a seventh in coalition with non-party independents. Nonetheless, Law and Justice's share of the vote was less than the 38% it won in the 2015 election and there was some disappointment that the party did not secure a larger electoral bonus for delivering on its costly but extremely generous social spending programmes.

Some commentators also felt that debates about possible 'Polexit', Polish withdrawal from the EU, during the last week of the campaign may have cost Law and Justice votes and helped to mobilise its urban liberal opponents. It emerged that justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro had asked the constitutional tribunal whether Polish judges had the right to refer queries on the interpretation of EU law to the European Court of Justice. The European Commission has referred a law reforming the Polish supreme court to the European Court, arguing that it violates EU law, and Mr Ziobro's query was interpreted by the opposition as a pretext for Poland to ignore the Court's verdict if the constitutional tribunal questions the primacy of EU law in Polish affairs.

Although Law and Justice accused the opposition of manipulation, vehemently denying that it had any plans to leave the EU, the government's opponents argued that undermining the EU treaties in this way could be a precursor to de facto 'Polexit'. The debate was further ignited when, on the final day of campaigning, the European Court issued a preliminary injunction ordering the immediate suspension of the supreme court law's early retirement provisions until it could hear the Commission's case.

Another reason why Law and Justice's regional vote share was lower than its national opinion poll ratings, and why it was not been able to gain control of even more regional councils, was the fact that the ruling party did not succeed in eliminating the agrarian Polish Peasant Party (PSL), its main competitor in rural areas. The Peasant Party, Civic Platform's coalition partner in regional assemblies (and previously in government), secured 12% of the votes, well above the 5% that it has been scoring in national opinion polls. Nonetheless, this was still the Peasant Party's worst local election performance since 2002 and its overall tally of regional councillors fell to only 70 from 157 in 2014 when it won a stunning 24% of the regional vote (although commentators questioned the reliability of these results).

As a consequence, the party – primarily an office-seeking grouping which, critics argue, only survives because it has developed powerful networks of patronage and interest clusters at the local level – has lost considerable influence in the regions. Moreover, Law and Justice strategists believe that there is a segment of the rural electorate that may vote for the Peasant Party in local polls but supports the ruling party in parliamentary elections. Barely a year after its stunning 2014 local election performance, the Peasant Party recorded its worst result in any post-1989 election and only just scraped over the 5% threshold for parliamentary representation.

### **The prime minister, opposition leader (and Mr Biedroń?) strengthened**

The local elections were a key test of popularity for prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who took over the premiership last December but is relatively new to front-line politics, having worked in the banking sector before he joined the government as deputy prime minister for economic affairs (and later finance minister) in 2015. During the campaign, Mr Morawiecki became embroiled in a scandal following the publication of tape recordings of private conversations with business colleagues, held in Warsaw restaurants five years ago, which portrayed him in an unflattering light as a member of the post-communist business elite.

Nonetheless, Mr Morawiecki was generally felt to have fronted Law and Justice's national campaign effectively and strengthened his position within the party. Crucially, he still enjoys the support of party leader Jarosław Kaczyński who, although he does not hold any formal state positions, exercises a powerful behind-the-scenes influence in determining the government's programmatic and strategic priorities. On the other hand, Law and Justice's poor results in the larger towns and cities suggest that Mr Morawiecki may have spent too much time shoring up his credibility among the party's less well-off, provincial core electorate rather than trying to attract new supporters among better-off, centrist urban voters; the potential for which was felt to be part of his original appeal as prime minister.

The local elections also confirmed the position of Civic Platform leader Grzegorz Schetyna as the leading figure within the liberal-centrist opposition. Mr Schetyna lacks dynamism and charisma, has been subject to constant criticism from the liberal-left media for his alleged ineffectiveness, and for many voters is too closely associated with the previous, discredited Civic Platform-led government (opinion polls show him to be Poland's least trusted politician). However, he is an effective political operator who has restored purpose and discipline to a party shattered by its 2015 defeat. For sure, the 'Civic Coalition' regional vote fell short of the combined share its two main component parties secured in 2015. Nonetheless, the fact that it reduced Law and Justice's lead to single figures convinced many (although by no means all) commentators that only an electoral alliance led by Mr Schetyna's grouping is capable of mounting an effective challenge to the ruling party.

The clear loser in these elections was the Polish left. The once-powerful communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which failed to secure parliamentary representation in 2015, was hoping to use the local elections to launch a comeback. However, it only secured 7% of the regional council vote and won 11 seats compared with 9% and 28 respectively in 2014 (felt, at the time, to be disappointing results). Smaller left-wing groupings performed even worse: the radical left 'Together' (Razem) party (which came from nowhere to win 3.5% of the vote in 2015), for example, only secured 1.6%. This creates an opening for Robert Biedroń – another political hopeful often touted as the left's potential saviour, who decided not to stand for re-election as mayor of the provincial town of Słupsk. Mr Biedroń is waiting until next year to launch a new initiative, although he may struggle to carve out a niche in a political scene so polarised between the two large electoral blocs.

### Law and Justice still on course to win?

One should be wary of drawing far-reaching national conclusions from local election results, but they can help us to identify certain trends ahead of next year's crucial parliamentary poll. Despite its poor performance in urban areas, on the strength of the regional results Law and Justice still appears on course to emerge as the largest party – although with a lead of only 7% over the opposition this may not be enough for it to retain its outright parliamentary majority. The ruling party's hope that its programme of large-scale social transfers would mobilise large swathes of (previously passive) beneficiaries to start voting for Law and Justice has yet to materialise, while its attempts to eliminate the Peasant Party as a challenger in rural areas also appear to have been unsuccessful.

For its part, the 'Civic Coalition' has consolidated and mobilised its core liberal supporters, especially in urban areas, on the basis that it is the grouping best placed to defeat Law and Justice. However, the liberal-centrist opposition will struggle to win the parliamentary election if it cannot significantly dent the ruling party's bedrock support in the countryside and smaller towns. And while the Peasant Party offered a challenge in rural areas, which reduced Law and Justice's share of the regional vote and denied it control of some councils, no one expects the agrarian grouping to repeat their local election performance in next year's parliamentary poll.

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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. Featured image credit: [CC0 1.0](#) (Public Domain)*

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