

# Will Poland's opposition contest the next election as a single bloc?

*Poland's next parliamentary elections are due to be held in autumn 2023. Aleks Szczerbiak assesses whether the country's opposition parties are likely to form a united bloc to challenge the incumbent Law and Justice government.*

In recent weeks, there has been a vigorous debate as to whether Poland's opposition should contest the next parliamentary election, scheduled for autumn 2023, as a single joint list. In addition to the radical right 'Confederation' (Konfederacja), the opposition currently comprises four main parties. The most popular of these is the liberal-centrist Civic Platform (PO), which was Poland's main governing party between 2007-15.

Civic Platform's leader is former European Council President Donald Tusk, who was prime minister between 2007-14 and took over the party leadership after returning to front-line Polish politics last summer. According to the ['Pooling the Poles'](#) micro-blog that aggregates voting intention surveys, Civic Platform is currently averaging 29% support compared with 36% for Law and Justice (PiS), Poland's ruling party since autumn 2015.

'Poland 2050' (Polska 2050), a new liberal-centrist party formed by TV presenter-turned-politician Szymon Hołownia after his strong third place in the summer 2020 presidential election, is currently running third with 11% support. Averaging 10% is the 'Left' (Lewica), which comprises the 'New Left' (Nowa Lewica) party – formed last year following a merger of the communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), Poland's governing party between 1993-97 and 2001-5, and liberal-left 'Spring' (Wiosna) led by sexual minorities campaigner Robert Biedroń – and the radical left 'Together' (Razem) grouping.

Finally, there is the agrarian-centrist Polish Peasant Party (PSL), which is the organisational successor to a communist satellite grouping but has attempted to legitimate itself by claiming roots in the pre-communist agrarian movement dating back to the nineteenth century. Although the Peasant Party was in coalition with the Democratic Left Alliance in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, it was also Civic Platform's junior governing partner. It contested the most recent autumn 2019 parliamentary election at the head of the centre-right 'Polish Coalition' (Koalicja Polska) electoral alliance but is currently hovering around the 5% threshold for parties to secure representation in the Sejm, Poland's more powerful lower parliamentary chamber.

## A 'unity premium'?

Donald Tusk, in particular, has been trying hard to convince the other parties to contest the next election as a single list. Supporters of this option argue not only that the combined opposition vote would be more than enough to defeat Law and Justice but also that a single list would actually help the opposition to win extra seats given the Polish electoral system – proportional representation in multi-member constituencies, with mandates allocated using the d'Hondt counting method – favours larger groupings, especially if a united bloc prevented smaller parties from falling below the parliamentary representation threshold. In the 2015 election, for example, Law and Justice secured an outright majority in spite of winning only 38% of the vote because left-wing parties failed to secure parliamentary representation.

Moreover, supporters of a single list argue that, in addition to electoral system rewards, the opposition could also secure a dynamic 'unity premium' as anti-government voters would be mobilised by the knowledge that they would be voting for a bloc with a strong chance of winning (although the greater polarisation could also mobilise Law and Justice voters). Tusk, for example, has cited a May poll conducted by the Ipsos agency for the liberal-left OKO.press portal showing that 50% of respondents would vote for a single opposition list, 20% more than for Law and Justice (although critics point out that the findings assumed an 88% turnout when in 2019 it was only 62%, itself a record high for a post-1989 parliamentary election).

More cynical commentators argue that part of the motivation for a single opposition list is to actually dilute the prominence of Tusk who, although popular among government opponents, is one of Poland's least trusted politicians. While his return to domestic politics re-established Civic Platform as the main opposition grouping, the party still lags behind Law and Justice, and a June-July survey by the CBOS agency found that only 30% of respondents trusted him while 52% did not. Given that Tusk was prime minister for nine out of the ten years that Civic Platform was in office, few politicians better embody the previous administration which came to be viewed by many Poles as lacking social sensitivity and being out-of-touch with their needs.

### Opposing Law and Justice is not enough

However, the leaders of the other opposition parties, especially 'Poland 2050' and the Peasant Party, are much less enthusiastic about the idea of a single list. Their main argument is that, while the opposition may be united in their dislike of Law and Justice, evidence suggests that their electorates are quite heterogeneous and it will be difficult to get such a diverse group of Poles to support a single list. Indeed, critics argue that a single list strategy could actually lose the opposition voters on its 'flanks' and be undermined by those who reject the current duopoly and would support 'challenger' parties instead.

There will, for example, be moderate centre-right voters who may not support Law and Justice but could be put off voting for a joint opposition list that contains parties with a strong liberal-left ideological profile on moral-cultural issues; including, for example, many of the Peasant Party's small-town, socially conservative supporters.

Similarly, 'Poland 2050' has attracted some support through its claim to transcend the 'pro-versus-anti-Law and Justice' binary divide, but it will be difficult for the party to present itself as 'new' if it enters into a pre-election coalition dominated by Civic Platform which, to many voters, embodies the pre-2015 *status quo ante*. Interestingly, an August 2021 CBOS survey found that only 36% of 'Poland 2050' and 45% of Peasant Party voters identified themselves as opposition sympathisers compared with 57% of 'Left' and 70% of Civic Platform supporters.

Opponents of the single list idea point to the experience of the 'European Coalition' (Koalicja Europejska) when virtually all of the opposition came together to form an alliance specifically to contest the May 2019 European Parliament elections. In the event, Law and Justice secured 45% of the votes, ahead of the Coalition with only 38%, less than the combined support of the parties comprising the bloc when it was formed.

Critics also point to April's Hungarian election where a single opposition list spanning left-to-right saw its early poll advantage crumble and the incumbent right-wing Fidesz party secure a landslide victory by drawing attention to its opponents' programmatic incoherence. These examples highlight one of the key problems with a single list: that, unless the Law and Justice government implodes or is completely discredited, opposition to the ruling party is not, on its own, a powerful enough mobilising appeal, but the opposition's ideological eclecticism makes it difficult to develop a clear and distinctive programmatic message.

Supporters of a single list counter that, in spite of their differences, the four anti-government parties' electorates have more in common than divides them, pointing to how in autumn 2019 they rallied to overturn Law and Justice's majority in the Senate, Poland's less powerful second chamber whose members are elected in single-member constituencies. They argue that, because the Polish electoral system is based on 'open' candidate lists, voters can support their preferred party even within a single opposition bloc (although this ignores the fact that most voters simply support the candidates at the top of the list, who thereby define the grouping's overall political profile).

Comparisons with the 2019 European elections are, they say, erroneous as the 'European Coalition' only failed because it did not manage to unite the whole opposition. They also argue that there were particular circumstances explaining why the Hungarian opposition lost so heavily to Fidesz (until the Russian invasion of Ukraine they were running neck-and-neck) and its result would have been even worse if it had run as separate party lists.

### Who aligns with Civic Platform?

The opposition parties know that contesting the next election as four separate lists strongly favours Law and Justice, so self-interest will, sooner or later, probably incline them to be more flexible in their approach to forging electoral alliances. But there is less agreement about what the optimal opposition configuration should be. A single opposition list remains extremely unlikely given the anti-Law and Justice camp's ideological diversity, and because it would mean the other parties accepting Civic Platform's hegemony. So, the key questions are: which parties will join together on which lists, and (in particular) who aligns with Civic Platform?

The greatest electoral system benefits would probably come if Civic Platform ran separately and the three smaller groupings came together in an electoral bloc but, for the reasons discussed, it would be very difficult to bring together the Peasant Party in a joint list with the 'Left'. While Civic Platform would probably feel most comfortable in an alliance with the Peasant Party and 'Poland 2050' (leaving the 'Left' to run separately), these two groupings would prefer not to be aligned with Tusk's party.

Their leaders argue that the most promising approach is to have one 'centrist' opposition list comprising these two parties, and a second that comprises Civic Platform and the 'Left'. They cite the example of last October's Czech election when two opposition blocs, one centre-right and one liberal, ousted the incumbent government headed by controversial billionaire Andrej Babiš, and a May United Surveys poll conducted for the RMF FM radio station which appeared to confirm that such a configuration would actually be more effective than a single list.

Certainly, 'Poland 2050' and the Peasant Party, joined by smaller liberal-conservative groupings and defectors from Law and Justice and Civic Platform, would appear to be the most natural 'fit' for a joint list. However, Hołownia remains wary of undermining his party's appeal to 'newness' by teaming up with a party that for many is still associated with the post-communist establishment.

A joint Civic Platform list with the 'Left' is certainly feasible. Although relations between the two groupings' leaders were particularly bad when the latter suspected Tusk of sponsoring a pro-Civic Platform left-wing breakaway party, they now appear to have declared a truce. Nonetheless, although in recent years Civic Platform has shifted to the left on both socio-economic and moral-cultural issues, sections of the 'Left', particularly supporters of 'Together', have considerable misgivings about running on a joint list with a party that they believe is still rooted in a conservative-liberal mindset. For its part, Civic Platform retains ambitions to draw support from across the political spectrum, and is concerned that building an alliance solely with the 'Left' could put off moderate conservative voters.

### **No final decisions until next spring?**

At the moment, the most likely configuration appears to be three opposition lists: Civic Platform; 'Poland 2050' with the Peasant Party and smaller liberal-conservative groupings; and the 'Left'. Some analysts feel this might even be a sufficient level of consolidation, given that the biggest electoral system 'unity premium' comes from the smaller parties combining to ensure that their votes are not 'wasted', with the benefits of then joining a larger grouping being incrementally smaller.

But the situation is very fluid and, with over a year to go until the election, most opposition leaders feel that they can wait and see how the situation develops during the next few months. Hołownia, in particular, is keen to leave it until the last moment to join a coalition as he feels he needs to carve out the best possible position for his new party. Indeed, it could be that final decisions on the configuration of the opposition lists will not be taken until as late as next spring.

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*Note: This article first appeared at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European People's Party \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)*

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