

Law and Justice's stunning victory in Poland reflected widespread disillusionment with the country's ruling elite

*What does the recent parliamentary election in Poland tell us about the country's politics? **Aleks Szczerbiak** writes that the victory secured by the right-wing opposition party Law and Justice stemmed from widespread disillusionment with Poland's ruling elite. He notes that the usual strategy employed by the ruling party, Civic Platform, of trying to mobilise the 'politics of fear' against Law and Justice was not successful this time. The election result heralds major changes on the political scene including a leadership challenge in Civic Platform, the emergence of new 'anti-system' and liberal political forces in parliament, and a period of soul searching for the marginalised Polish left.*



Poland's October 25th parliamentary election saw a stunning victory for the right-wing [Law and Justice](#) (PiS) party, previously the main opposition grouping. The party increased its share of the vote by 7.7 per cent – compared with the previous 2011 poll – to 37.6 per cent, securing 235 seats in the 460-member Sejm, the more powerful lower house of the Polish parliament.

This made Law and Justice the first political grouping in post-communist Poland to secure an outright parliamentary majority. At the same time, the centrist [Civic Platform](#) (PO), the outgoing ruling party led by prime minister Ewa Kopacz, suffered a crushing defeat, seeing its vote share fall by 15.1 per cent to only 24.1 per cent and number of seats drop to 138.

Two main factors explain this outcome. Firstly, Law and Justice benefited from the fact that the main driver of Polish politics in recent months has been widespread disillusionment with the political establishment and a strong prevailing mood that it was time for change. A key element of this was scepticism towards the outgoing government's triumphalist rhetoric about its apparent achievements and the success of post-communist transition.

Many Poles living beyond the large urban centres, especially younger voters, are frustrated not to have shared in this success as the country's economy has grown in recent years. They are increasingly disillusioned by what they see as an invidious choice between: moving abroad to take jobs that fall well short of their abilities, or remaining in a country which offers them few prospects for the future.

Much of this anti-establishment feeling was directed towards Civic Platform, which many voters saw as representing an out-of-touch and complacent elite disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people and tainted by scandals. The most notorious of these was the so-called '[tape affair](#)' which drew popular anger at the cynicism when discussing state matters and crude language revealed in secret recordings of senior government ministers and public figures dining in high-end Warsaw restaurants at the taxpayers' expense.

Secondly, Civic Platform's previously highly successful strategy of trying to mobilise the 'politics of fear', which has been a staple of all its recent successful campaigns, was not effective this time. This involved positioning itself as the best guarantor of stability against the allegedly confrontational and authoritarian style of politics that many voters (rightly or wrongly) associate with Law and Justice and its combative leader Jarosław Kaczyński.

However, this time around Law and Justice focused on 'bread-and-butter' socio-economic questions rather than its previous signature issues of corruption and reform of the Polish state, part of the so-called 'Fourth Republic' project of moral and political renewal associated with the controversial 2005-7 period when it was in government.

Law and Justice also made a conscious effort to 'de-toxify' its image by giving a higher profile to less well-known,

second-rank politicians likely to appeal to centrist voters. A good example of this was the decision to make the party's emollient deputy leader Beata Szydło its prime ministerial nominee rather than Mr Kaczyński. Moreover, Civic Platform undermined its own narrative by recruiting a number of prominent individuals who were closely associated with the 'Fourth Republic' project to stand on its candidate lists.

Will Civic Platform implode?

One immediate consequence of Civic Platform's electoral defeat is that Mrs Kopacz faces a party leadership election. The outgoing prime minister has proved to be a reasonably efficient party manager and political tactician, skilled at neutralising potential challenges to her authority through effective short-term manoeuvring. However, Mrs Kopacz lacks gravitas and charisma, and could not translate the fact that many voters appeared to warm to her personally into electoral support for the ruling party.

For all her undoubted energy and commitment, Mrs Kopacz also lacked the capacity for strategic thinking that could have helped Civic Platform develop a more effective response to the changes in societal attitudes that eroded its support. Her main challenger is likely to be Grzegorz Schetyna, a former party deputy leader who retains significant support among the grassroots, and whom Mrs Kopacz appointed as her foreign minister to ensure that her potentially most powerful critic was in the government rather than on the backbenches.

Although it has been one of the dominant forces in Polish politics for more than a decade, there is now a real possibility that Civic Platform could implode under the strain of internal party tensions. It is a deeply divided and factionalised party but, while it encompasses a fairly broad spectrum of views, Civic Platform's ideological underpinnings are very weak with its most serious internal divisions revolving around personalities rather than programmatic currents.



Initially, the party attempted to profile itself as representing a modernising form of pro-market, right-wing liberalism focusing on economic issues and subsequently incorporating a moderate form of social conservatism. However, particularly since it took office in 2007, Civic Platform adopted a deliberate strategy of diluting its ideological profile and projecting itself as a somewhat amorphous modernising, centrist and pro-European 'catch-all' party; what its critics have dubbed a non-ideological 'post-political' party of power.

National and local elites were bound to the party primarily by the access that it provided to state patronage, which does not provide a firm basis for more enduring, long-term organisational stability and makes it vulnerable to implosion if it were to face a really serious internal crisis.

'Anti-system' and liberal new entrants

Another important development in this election was the emergence of two new political groupings that crossed the 5 per cent threshold for parliamentary representation. The 'Kukiz '15' electoral committee, a right-wing 'anti-system' grouping led by the charismatic rock star and social activist Paweł Kukiz, emerged as the third largest formation in the new parliament securing 8.8 per cent of the vote and 42 seats.

Standing as an independent, Mr Kukiz came from nowhere to finish third and pick up more than one-fifth of the vote in the May presidential election. His signature issue, and main focus of his earlier social activism, was strong support for the replacement of Poland's current list-based proportional electoral system with UK-style single-member constituencies (known by the Polish acronym 'JOW'), which he sees as the key to renewing Polish politics.

However, Mr Kukiz squandered this political capital with a series of bitter rows and splits within his movement, which caused his electoral support to plummet. In the event, it turned out that Mr Kukiz had a hard core of potential voters immune to the kind of gaffes that would be fatal for more mainstream politicians and willing to support him as long as he remained a credible fighter against 'the system'. However, his parliamentary caucus will be extremely eclectic and could fragment rapidly as it is forced to confront issues that bring its ideological incoherence to the fore.

The other newcomer is the 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) grouping formed in May by liberal economist Ryszard Petru, which won 7.6 per cent of the vote to emerge as the fourth largest party in the new Sejm with 24 seats. Although it got off to a slow start, Mr Petru's party steadily consolidated its support by advocating policies such as a 'flat tax' of 16 per cent, appealing to younger, well-educated and better-off urban voters and entrepreneurs.

At one time such voters, attracted by the economically liberal policies once associated with Civic Platform, formed the outgoing ruling party's core electorate, but many of them feel that the party drifted away from its free market roots and turned to Mr Petru's grouping as a more credible liberal alternative.

No left-wing parties in parliament

The other big story of this election was the failure of the [United Left](#) (ZL) alliance to cross the 8 per cent threshold for electoral coalitions, securing only 7.6 per cent of the vote, which means that no left-wing party will be represented in the new parliament. United Left comprised the communist successor [Democratic Left Alliance](#) (SLD) and liberal-left [Your Movement](#) (TR), together with a number of smaller left-wing groupings.

The once-powerful Alliance governed Poland from 1993-97 and 2001-5 but was in the doldrums since its support collapsed at the 2005 election. In 2011 the party suffered its worst ever parliamentary election defeat slumping to fifth place with only 8 per cent of the vote. Your Movement emerged from the anti-clerical liberal [Palikot Movement](#) (RP) which was formed by Janusz Palikot, a controversial and flamboyant businessman and one-time Civic Platform parliamentarian, and came from nowhere to finish third in the 2011 election with just over 10 per cent of the vote.

However, Mr Palikot's party failed to capitalise on its success and, while he clearly had a talent for attracting substantial media interest, Poles grew tired of his erratic behaviour and political zig-zags. Catastrophic results for both parties in May's presidential election, together with polls suggesting that neither of them would cross the 5 per cent threshold, convinced many of their younger leaders that the only hope was to contest the parliamentary election on a united ticket.

Although formed as a 'marriage of convenience' the United Left's campaign was moderately successful in containing programmatic and personal divisions as it pushed younger activists to the fore, such as Your Movement's media-friendly joint leader Barbara Nowacka who emerged as the coalition's main spokesman. However, while its leaders were hoping for a sizeable 'unity premium', United Left lacked its component parties' name recognition and struggled to develop a distinctive appeal.

Ms Nowacka also failed to live up to her initial promise and, in a televised leaders' debate, was overshadowed by Adrian Zandberg, a charismatic leader of the radical left [Together](#) (Razem) party which refused to join the United Left coalition arguing that the parties it comprised had discredited the Polish left. In the event, Together secured 3.6 per cent of vote, not enough to secure parliamentary representation but peeling away sufficient support to prevent the United Left from crossing the 8 per cent threshold.

The Polish left now faces a period of marginalisation and soul searching. Its biggest electoral-strategic challenge is that while various surveys have put the number of Poles who identify themselves as left-wing at around 25-30 per

cent the left has struggled to develop an appeal that can bring together its two main potential bases of support: socially liberal and economically leftist voters.

In Poland, the kind of socially liberal voters who tend to be younger and better-off, prioritise moral-cultural issues, and in western Europe, would incline naturally towards left-wing parties, are often quite economically liberal as well. The economically leftist electorate, on the other hand, tends to be older and more culturally conservative.

Competing power centres?

Law and Justice appears well placed to form a strong government supported by party-backed President Andrzej Duda and buttressed by a majority in the Senate, Poland's second chamber. However, some commentators have raised concerns that competing power centres could emerge in the prime minister and Mr Kaczyński's offices with the party leader trying to steer Mrs Szydło from behind-the-scenes.

Analogies have been drawn with the situation after the party's 2005 election victory when Mr Kaczyński, whose brother Lech was elected President at the same time, appointed a second-rank politician, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, as prime minister to avoid the controversy of twins filling Poland's two highest state offices, only to replace him a few months later.

Mrs Szydło is in a stronger position, having her own direct electoral mandate. However, these kinds of tensions could come to the fore quickly if the new government starts to encounter difficulties, which is almost certain given that its political agenda will bring it into conflict with the Polish (and European) establishment.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article was originally published on Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). It gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1MBYdw8>

About the author

Aleks Szczerbiak – *University of Sussex*

Aleks Szczerbiak is Professor of Politics and Contemporary European Studies at the University of Sussex. He is author of [Poland Within the European Union: New Awkward Partner or New Heart of Europe?](#) (Routledge, 2012) and blogs regularly about developments on the Polish political scene at <http://polishpoliticsblog.wordpress.com/>



•