

What does Paweł Kukiz's election success mean for Polish politics?

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Poland held the first round of its presidential election on 10 May. As [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes, one of the key stories from the vote was the success of Paweł Kukiz, a former rock singer and political novice who finished a surprising third with more than a fifth of the vote. He notes that while the odds are that this will generate another short-lived protest movement, the support for Kukiz tapped into deeper underlying concerns about the functioning of the Polish political system.



There were two major surprises in the first round of the Polish presidential election held on 10 May. Incumbent and odds-on favourite Bronisław Komorowski, supported by the ruling centrist [Civic Platform](#) (PO), was beaten into second place by Andrzej Duda, the candidate of the right-wing [Law and Justice](#) (PiS) party, the main opposition grouping, losing by 33.8 per cent to 34.8 per cent.

He now faces Mr Duda in a second round on 24 May and, although the outcome is difficult to predict, the challenger clearly has the strongest momentum. The other surprise was the stunning success of charismatic social activist and former rock star Paweł Kukiz. In spite of being a relative political novice (he has been a regional councillor since last autumn) and with no party or organised political grouping supporting his candidacy, he finished a very strong third with 20.8 per cent the vote.

Mr Kukiz stood as an independent 'anti-system' candidate. His background is as a rebellious rock singer who performed in a band called 'The Breasts', best known for their 1992 anti-clerical song 'The ZChN (Christian-National Union) is coming'. The now-defunct Christian-National Union was a clerical-nationalist party which, as a member of Polish governments in the 1990s, promoted the Catholic Church's social and political agenda. However, Mr Kukiz also professes a strong commitment to the Catholic faith, arguing that his best known composition was motivated by a desire to protect the Church from abuse by exploitative clerics.

Indeed, in recent years he has been better-known as an advocate of social conservative and patriotic causes. In 2010 Mr Kukiz opposed a 'EuroPride' homosexual march in Warsaw and was dismissive of the election in 2011 of Anna Grodzka, Poland's first transsexual parliamentary deputy, as the product of identity politics rather than ability.

His musical recordings have also increasingly emphasised national-patriotic themes and he was at one time involved in supporting the annual 'Independence March' held on 11 November, the day that Poles celebrate national independence, which has come to be associated with nationalist groupings. However, describing himself as 'a right-winger with a left-wing heart', Mr Kukiz also has a very eclectic approach towards socio-economic policy: supporting low taxes while positing an active role for the state in tackling poverty, and enjoying close links with a number of prominent trade union activists and leaders.

Opening up the political system

In fact, Mr Kukiz supported Civic Platform in the 2005 and 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections, although he now refers to it as a 'party of swindlers' following its failure to introduce UK-style single member electoral constituencies (known by the Polish acronym 'JOW'), at one time a key element of the party's programme. Indeed, Mr Kukiz's strong support for the replacement of Poland's list-based proportional electoral system with first-past-the-post is his signature issue and was the main focus of his presidential campaign and earlier social activism.

Like many on the Polish right, Mr Kukiz argues that politics and the economy in post-communist Poland are

dominated by networks whose power stems from the 1989 round table agreement, the elite bargain that led to the collapse of the previous communist regime. This facilitated a peaceful transition to democracy but also prevented a comprehensive reckoning with the communist past thereby allowing a corrupt oligarchy and political class to enrich itself and entrench its power.

According to Mr Kukiz, as a consequence of the proportional electoral system that was introduced after 1989, the country is governed by a 'partocracy': a cartel of hierarchical political parties dominated by leaders who dictate which candidates appear on electoral lists. This has created a closed political system in which the electoral process is a pure formality, leaving the country weakened and vulnerable to manipulation by external powers.



The aim of introducing single member constituencies is to create a system in which citizens by-pass these leaders by voting for individual candidates rather than parties, thereby holding their elected representatives directly accountable. This, he argues, facilitates the creation of less hierarchical parties that function as non-ideological associative groupings in which individuals debate openly and collaborate for the common good, and where the leader is a 'manager' who attempts to find consensus between the various currents of opinion.

In fact, although Mr Kukiz sees the introduction of single member constituencies, together with the abolition of state party funding, as critical for changing the relationship between the government and its citizens, it is really a slogan around which he can mobilise a broad and heterogeneous movement to open up and renew the Polish political system more generally.

A repository for young protest voters

Mr Kukiz performed strongly, in spite of the fact that he could not draw upon the resources and organisational infrastructure enjoyed by the main candidates, because he was able to mobilise a substantial segment of Polish society who believe that post-1989 Poland has produced a privileged and complacent ruling elite who are only interested in protecting their own interests.

Lacking faith in the current political system, these people appear to be looking for new leaders who, like Mr Kukiz, are more genuine and sincere than the current crop of cynical and calculating career politicians, even if their policies and programmes are not particularly coherent or well thought-through. Moreover, while his 'wild' rock star past, and ability to connect with ordinary voters and articulate genuine anger at the perceived dysfunctionality of the political system, burnished his anti-system credentials, Mr Kukiz was also able to portray a more moderate image than other protest candidates.

In fact, Mr Kukiz's electorate is very diverse, other than the fact that he won the largest share of the vote among students (40.3 per cent) and younger voters (41.4 per cent, compared with only 3.8 per cent among the over-60s). A large number of young Poles are frustrated at an apparent 'glass ceiling' of vested interests and corrupt networks stifling their opportunities, and often face an invidious choice between moving abroad to take jobs that fall well short of their abilities and aspirations or remaining in a country which they feel offers them few prospects for the future.

Mr Kukiz was clearly able to tap into this frustration. Indeed, one of his arguments for single member constituencies was that it could facilitate the kind of state action required to prevent millions of Poles being forced to emigrate in

order to find work, a process which he described graphically as the 'extermination of the nation', pointing out that many of them had moved to the UK which has a first-past-the-post electoral system.

What impact will Mr Kukiz have?

As we lack detailed analysis of Mr Kukiz's electorate, it is difficult to predict whom they will support in the second round run-off. Given that they appeared to be motivated by a desire to see political change rather than continuity, one might expect them to support Mr Duda as the challenger. Moreover, while Mr Kukiz has not openly endorsed either candidate, he made it clear in the past that he did not want to see Mr Komorowski re-elected.

However, many of Mr Kukiz's voters are otherwise disengaged from the political process – 41.8 per cent of those who did not vote in the previous 2010 presidential election supported him as did 46.8 per cent who abstained in the most recent 2011 parliamentary election – so a large proportion of them are unlikely to vote at all in the second round. Moreover, they also include former Civic Platform sympathisers – Mr Kukiz secured 17.3 per cent of Mr Komorowski's 2010 voters and 15.1 per cent of those who supported the ruling party in 2011 – who may simply have wanted to register a protest vote against the government or were put off by the President's weak and complacent campaign.

Many of these may return to the fold when faced with the prospect of a Law and Justice-backed candidate being elected President. Indeed, in an effort to win over his supporters, the day after the first round results were announced Mr Komorowski promised to initiate a national referendum on introducing single-member constituencies (together with the abolition of state party funding), although Mr Kukiz immediately questioned the authenticity of this move.

Looking beyond the presidential election, the substantial vote for an anti-system candidate like Mr Kukiz shows that the potential protest electorate in Poland is very large. But will his presidential success be a flash-in-the-pan or can he use this momentum to build a new political movement that can achieve success in the more critical autumn parliamentary election? While it is possible, as a one-off, to mobilise a frustrated electorate to cast a protest vote, in order to hold on to his support Mr Kukiz will have to develop a political machine with at least a minimum level of organisational infrastructure, funding and professionalism.

This is less of a problem for one candidate standing in a presidential campaign. Mr Kukiz's charisma and high media profile attracted crowds and generated news coverage, and he was able to develop a rudimentary election machine through a volunteer network based on his pro-electoral reform civic movement, social media and crowdfunding. To contest a parliamentary election he will have to build up political structures that can identify hundreds of local candidates across the whole country and develop grassroots local organisation to campaign on their behalf, all within the space of a few months.

In fact, unless Mr Kukiz proceeds to make a series of spectacular blunders, his stunning presidential election success should give him enough political capital to sustain his support into the autumn election, if not necessarily through the subsequent parliamentary term. Moreover, if a substantial 'anti-system' right-wing bloc clustered around Mr Kukiz enters the new parliament, this could radically alter possible future coalition configurations.

Opinion polls suggest that the two main parties are running neck-and-neck and it is unlikely that either of them will secure an outright majority, so the key to who governs after the next election is likely to be which of them has the greatest coalition potential. Up until now, Law and Justice appeared to have no obvious partners among the main parliamentary groupings which meant that, even if it 'won' the election, Civic Platform could still end up remaining in power. However, if Mr Kukiz's success acts as a precursor to a strong electoral performance by the 'anti-system' right this could open up a pathway to power for a Law and Justice-led coalition.

Another false dawn?

Mr Kukiz is the latest in a long line of anti-establishment candidates and parties in post-1989 Poland who have been able to garner the support of protest voters. All of them have found it difficult to maintain their support and, sooner-or-later, faded from the political scene. The real test for anti-establishment political movements is, of course, whether they can hold on to their protest electorate if they ever happen to find themselves in power.

Indeed, in the past Law and Justice skilfully marginalised its radical coalition partners and then absorbed much of their electorate. So even if he can sustain his presidential election momentum long enough to secure parliamentary representation, this will just be the beginning of the political challenges that Mr Kukiz faces. However, while the 'Kukiz phenomenon' may just fizzle out like previous anti-establishment challenges, the broader social trends that he has tapped into and have formed the basis for his protest movement's success are likely to remain a longer-lasting feature of the Polish political scene.

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

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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/>



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