

## The Polish Parliamentary Elections 2015: A Gender Analysis

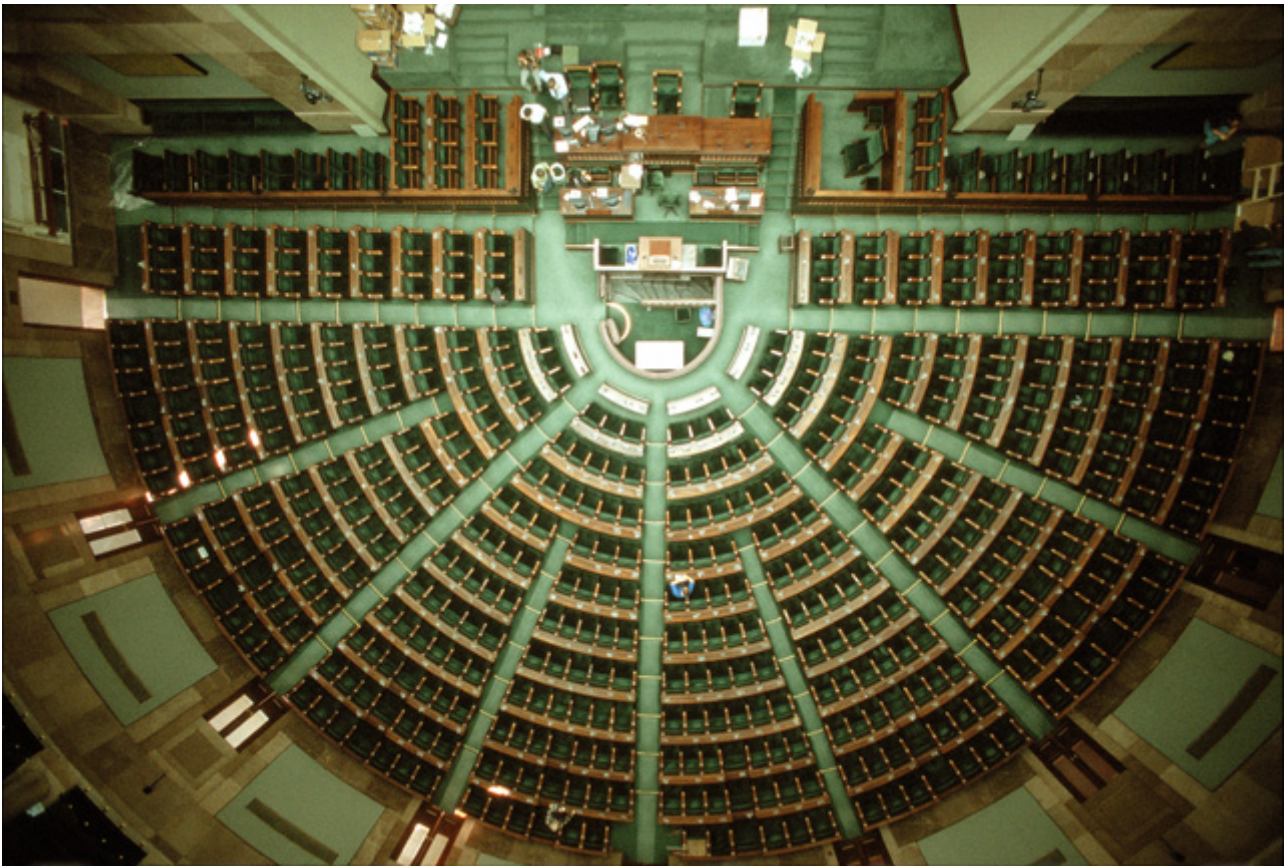


Magdalena Mikulak is a PhD student at the Gender Institute working on religiously motivated reparative therapy in contemporary Poland. Her research interests include sexuality, religion, post-socialism, LGBTQI activism, Central and Eastern Europe, social change and class.

On 25 October, 50,92% of Polish citizens entitled to vote exercised their right to do so in the parliamentary elections. Yet, it is not the low turn out that made this year's election unusual (turn out for the 2011 elections was 48,9%), but the sweeping victory for the right. The results gave the conservative right-wing party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) (Law and Justice) 37,58% of the total vote allowing it to independently form a government. Commenting on the outcome, Adam Michnik, editor in chief of the most important left-leaning daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral Gazette), remarked that **one cannot take offence at democracy**. The ruling centre-right party *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO) (Civic Platform) came second (with 24,09% of the votes), followed by two entirely new parties – Kukiz'15, led by a populist rebel with many causes and no plan (8,81%) and the liberal, business orientated *Nowoczesna.PI* (Modern.PI) (7,6%). The only other party that made it past the electoral threshold (5% for a single party and 8% for a coalition) was *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (PSL) (Polish Peasant Party), which received 5,13% of the votes (**Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2015**). The results for the upper house of the parliament, the *senat* were as follows: PiS 61%, PO 34%, PSL 1%, with the 4 remaining per cent going to independent candidates. In short, in the 26 years of Polish democracy, the parliament has never looked so right-wing, and the consequences of it will certainly be felt in areas such as gender equality and women's rights, with the first becoming evident already in the electoral campaign.

The biggest loser of the elections was unquestionably the left-wing coalition *Zjednoczona Lewica* (ZL)(United Left), with 7,55% they failed to make it into parliament; ZL was weakened by the emergence of a new, leftist party *Razem* (Together), which got 3,62% the votes, splitting the left vote. The result did not lead to *Razem* gaining any seats in the *sejm* (lower house of the Polish parliament) but ensured that it will receive public funding until the next elections based on the party receiving over 3% of the votes. The fact remains that the two most gender equality-orientated factions in this election did not make it into the parliament.





Img source [Wszechnica Sejmowa](#)

This year's elections were unusual considering that three out of eight campaigns were led by women: PiS put forward Beata Szydło, PO the prime minister, Ewa Kopacz, whilst Barbara Nowacka was appointed as the leader of ZL. Despite this, comments on how these women are being directed from behind the scenes by men (Jarosław Kaczyński in the case of Beata Szydło, Leszek Miller in the case of Barbara Nowacka) were a daily occurrence, whilst a lot of debate around Ewa Kopacz was focused on her *not* being Donald Tusk – the man who led PO and the government prior to becoming president of the European Council in December 2014.

In terms of gender equality in the electoral process, Poland has had a quota system in place, since 2011, that requires each party to put forward at least 35% of both female and male candidates for the lower house election; a measure that has significantly increased the number of women in the *sejm*, bringing it up to 23,7% after the 2011 parliamentary election ([Druciarek & Niżyńska, 2014](#)). In this year's election – the percentage of women on the party lists reached 42%. By comparison, in 2007 elections – so prior to the introduction of the quota system – only 23% of candidates were female. In this year's elections it was *Razem* and ZL that put forward the most women with 49% and 44% of female candidates respectively. The lowest percentage of female candidates was recorded for Kukiz'15, where only 39% of candidates were female. Yet, as argued by Frances Millard (2014) 'it is not enough to place women on the lists, they must also be visible, that is, they must occupy high list places'. Thus, the obligatory quota cannot counter the practice of placing female candidates lower down the list, reserving the top places for men. From the parties that made it into the *sejm* the number of women put forward as 'no. 1' (*jedynki*) in the 41 electoral constituencies is a better reflection of the actual state of gender equality in Polish politics. These numbers were as follows: PiS – 9 women as 'no. 1'; PO – 12; Nowoczesna – 15; Kukiz'15 – 6; PSL – 5 ([Feminoteka, 2015](#)). It is therefore not surprising that the total percentage of women who actually got into the *sejm* is only 27%<sup>[1]</sup>, and for the winning PiS the percentage is even lower with 23% of female MPs elected from its lists.

Nevertheless, the results can also be considered as a moderate success of the quota system, when compared to those for the *senat*, where there is no such mechanism in place: in the recent elections only 14% of candidates put forward for the *senat* were women ([Feminoteka, 2015](#)), in effect only **13% of newly elected senators** are women<sup>[2]</sup>. Another minor success for gender

equality was the fact that KORWiN (short for: Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic – Liberty and Hope), party of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a right-libertarian known for his outright sexist and racist ideas, failed to meet the threshold, which was not a given considering how close it came – falling just 0.24% short. On the whole and disappointingly, Polish parliamentary politics remains dominated by men and right-wing political groupings.

Finally, one should not confuse descriptive representation with a substantive one: even though the link between the two does exist, it is not a straightforward one (see for instance Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). In September of this year, Beata Szydło – who is to become Poland's next Prime Minister – voted (alongside all other MPs from PiS) for the **total ban** on abortion<sup>[3]</sup>, in June she voted **against** the act for treatment of infertility that regulates the availability of IVF, whilst in February she voted **against** ratification of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. In PiS' election program women were reduced to their roles as mothers while gender equality was treated with suspicion and viewed as a threat to the institution of traditional family (Olszewska & Żakowski, 2015). Following the election, PiS is dominating both houses of parliament as well as the presidency (PiS' candidate, Andrzej Duda, was elected president in May this year).

It would be hard to argue that the last two terms of PO's rule (PO won the 2007 and 2011 elections and in both cases formed a coalition with PSL) have been a success for women's rights or gender equality in Poland. Still, some limited progress has been made, including the ratification of the above-mentioned anti-violence convention, change to the availability of the morning-after pill (which since the beginning of this year can be obtained without prescription), and the introduction of two weeks paternity leave and shared parental leave that makes it possible for fathers to stay at home for up to 26 weeks in the child's first year. PiS' stance on the questions of reproductive rights and women's place in society poses a direct threat to these limited gains. The result will be stagnation at best and sharp regression at worst.

### Works cited:

Franceschet, S., & Piscopo, J. M. (2008). Gender Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation: Lessons from Argentina. *Politics & Gender*, 4(3), 393-425. doi:10.1017/S1743923X08000342

Millard, F. (2014). Not much happened: The impact of gender quotas in Poland. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 47(1), 1-11. doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.01.004

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[1] The average for EU as a whole is currently 26.85% (with Sweden at the top 43,6% and Hungary at the bottom of the list with 10,1%) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015)

[2] The percentages of women in *sejm* and *senat* after this year's election have been calculated by the author, as no official data has yet been released.

[3] This proposition – prepared by the group *Pro-Prawo do Życia* (Pro-Right to Live) – to change the Polish law which allows for abortion in certain circumstances, was rejected by the parliament.

