

Poland: Women, youth mobilize in election to defeat reaction

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Poland's October 15 parliamentary elections have ended the eight-year rule of the incumbent Law and Justice (PiS) party and the United Right (ZP) political alliance centered on it.

The election had the highest turnout in the history of the Third Republic of Poland, at 73.38%.

This result was due to the mobilization of young people and women, especially in the large cities: they were much more inclined to support candidates of the democratic opposition parties.

On election day, the most frequent scenes on Polish media were the queues at polling stations, lasting in some places until the early hours of the following morning (in Wrocław, voting ended at 3am). The scene was similar abroad, with social media circulating pictures of queues in front of Polish embassies and consulates around the world, from Tbilisi to New York.

In the background to this outpouring lay the social movements that have swept Poland in recent years, notably the mass protests against the Constitutional Tribunal ruling limiting grounds for abortion. These engulfed the whole country and were very noticeable in the small towns that have been PiS strongholds.

The massive movement to help Ukrainian refugees at the start of the Russian invasion was likewise important, as has been the longer-term growth of secularization — the drop in the number of young people attending religious classes in schools.

Pre-election situation

PiS traces its origins to the Solidarity (Solidarność) movement. Originally it had a socially conservative and Christian democrat ideological profile, but Catholic-nationalist, Polish-sovereigntist and even moderately Eurosceptic currents have recently emerged within it.

A big part of PiS's previous successes were its social commitments including 500 zloty (PLN500/\$A187) a month for each child — rising to 800 zloty from January 1, 2024, the introduction of 13th and 14th month pension payments, and a rise in the minimum wage.

PiS politicians also portrayed themselves as champions of energy sovereignty (especially more coal mining), finance sector renationalization and ending the privatization of state assets.

In many cases PiS promises ended up as mere rhetoric, notably in a failure to implement an effective housing program (the Polish housing gap is 1–2 million units) and respond to the demands of parents raising adult children with disabilities.

Although there has recently been less worker protest in Poland, the demands of teachers, civil servants and, especially, miners, also went unmet.

Candidates

The right. Beside PiS, the ZP camp consisted of Sovereign Poland, representing a more national-Catholic electorate hostile to abortion, euthanasia, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration and “the impositions of Brussels”, the less extreme Republican Party and Renewal of the Polish Republic, and Polish Affairs and Kukiz`15, seat-winning tools for individual right-populist politicians.

The center. The opposition Civic Coalition (KO) was centered on Civic Platform, led by former prime minister and European Council president Donald Tusk. It brought together center-right and liberal forces, along with smaller center-left groupings, including the Greens. KO's most surprising acquisition was the agricultural trade union AGROunia, famous for its colorful anti-government actions.

The “Third Way”. The new Poland 2050 grouping, led by former Catholic journalist Szymon Hołownia, initially challenged KO in many polls. However, with support declining, it formed the Third Way coalition with the center-right, agrarian Polish People's Party. This alliance emphasized free-market demands, although its voters and activists had diverse positions on these and other issues like abortion.

Social democracy and the left. This was represented by New Left. Formed as a result of the merger of the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance and the social-liberal Spring, its list also included Left Together, the most left-wing grouping in mainstream Polish politics.

Far right. The far-right Confederation presented as a “third force” in opposition to both PiS and KO. In early polling its anti-Ukrainian, anti-immigrant and anti-social welfare message gained around 15% support. However, ratings soon began to fall and this “technical party”, composed of the libertarian-conservative New Hope, the nationalist National Movement and the Catholic-monarchist Confederation of the Polish Crown, failed to recover from its candidates' statements on eating dogs, disenfranchising women, supporting Russia and downplaying pedophilia.

Others. This panorama was completed by Non-Partisan Local Government People, the anti-vax and conspiracy theorist party There Is One Poland, the German Minority Electoral Committee and a gaggle of regional far-right groupuscules.

Campaign themes

The election campaign started long before officially announced, with PiS trying to find “catchy” themes to enthruse voters. A tour of the country by leader Jarosław Kaczyński's featured transphobic jokes, allegations of EU technocrats ordering that insects replace meat on Polish tables and

mobilizations defending the honor of late Pope John Paul II, allegedly slandered by a documentary producing evidence that he had done nothing about cases of pedophilia of which he was aware.

PiS also returned to the anti-immigrant rhetoric, in particular the tragic situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. PiS ministers declared that Poland “will not be a second Lampedusa”, painted Tusk as facilitating the Islamization of Europe, launched a hate campaign against the film *Green Border* (about a Syrian family and an Afghan woman trying to enter Poland via Belarus) and even introduced temporary border controls at the crossings with Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Lithuania.

Yet this narrative was shattered by the cash for visa scandal, in which Polish consulates were found to be charging up to \$US5000 for facilitating visa applications in Asian and African countries.

Other tactics included: stirring anti-Ukrainian prejudice over imports of cheaper Ukrainian grain (PiS prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki threatened that temporary rights for Ukrainian refugees to social benefits could lapse and Poland no longer arm Ukraine); defense (the KO were branded as “traitors” soft on Russia); and bribes in the form of pension increases, handouts to voluntary organizations and a discount price for state-owned Orlen petrol.

The opposition relied on mobilizations, including KO’s half-million strong June 4 march (anniversary of the first partially free elections in 1989) and the October 1 Million Hearts March called in response to the detention of a Krakow woman for taking the morning-after pill (more than a million attended).

Results

PiS won 35.38% (194 seats in the 460-seat Sejm), KO 30.7% (157 seats), Third Way 14.4% (65), the New Left 8.61% (26) and Confederation 7.16% (18). No other forces passed the 5% threshold.

PiS lost support even in districts that traditionally favor it and several well-known ruling party politicians lost their seats.

The Left also lost 23 of its 49 seats in the Sejm, mainly to KO and Third Way, even while within its caucus Left Together increased from six seats to seven. In the Senate, by contrast, the New Left went from two seats to nine (Left Together from zero to two).

The far right, while increasing representation, failed because its expected gain had been much higher.

Thanks to the opposition’s so-called Senate Pact — in each of the 100 Senate districts only one candidate was fielded — it won 66 senators (KO 41, Third Way 11, New Left 9, independents 5) to PiS’s 34.

PiS was unable to form a government coalition, even with Confederation, and the three democratic opposition groups, with 248 seats in total, declared they would govern together.

PiS also presented four loaded referendum questions on election day. All failed because participation failed to meet the 50% threshold.

What next?

A government formed by KO, Third Way and New Left will have to balance varying interests. Initial announcements include improving relations with the European Union, unblocking money for the

National Reconstruction Plan, wage rises for public servants, teachers and health workers, and a halt to the construction of the so-called Central Transport Port, target of local community protest.

Shops will again open on Sundays, but in return New Left is demanding 2.5 times higher pay for Sunday and public holiday work. Renewable energy's role will increase (including the construction of a nuclear power plant), as will defense spending.

Tax policy will be problematic. While the three parties support reinstating tax deductibility for health contributions, they disagree over the tax-free threshold and tax rates on higher incomes (New Left for, KO against).

Issues like abortion or same-sex partnerships will probably not be part of the coalition agreement but possibly subject of a free vote in the Sejm.

Stopping illegal pushbacks on the Polish-Belarusian border, reforming the police and a less repressive approach to culture? We will soon find out.

This piece was originally published on Green Left on Oct. 27, 2023. A detailed version of this article will soon be available on the web site of *Links — International Journal of Socialist Renewal*