



Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie:
Diritto, Istituzioni, Società

Back to the Future. The Aftermath of Poland's 2023 Parliamentary Election

*Piotr Podemski**

Abstract

On 15th October 2023 Polish voters decided to put an end to the 8-year period of the Law and Justice Party in power, widely seen as “authoritarian populism”. The paper analyses the electoral programmes of the major contenders (Law and Justice, Civic Coalition, Third Way, New Left and Confederation) as well as a variety of election-related statistics (e.g. by voters’ age, education, occupation and residence) revealing a more complex image of the Polish society and its political preferences in 2023. The author argues that due to remarkable ideological and socio-cultural polarization contemporary Poland remains “a house divided” or even “two nations [with] no sympathy [for each other]”. Even if Poland has now chosen a path back to the future, the new pro-EU liberal government will face a number of identifiable challenges.

Keywords: Poland – Polish Election of 2023 – Law and Justice (PiS) – Populism – “Democratic Opposition”

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Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones¹.

Benjamin Disraeli

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect it will cease to be divided².

Abraham Lincoln

1. *The Significance of the Polish Election*

1.1. *Dramatis Personae*

On 15th October 2023 a general (parliamentary) election was held in Poland. 29,532,595 voters were called to elect 460 deputies of the Sejm (lower chamber) and 100 members of the Senate³. There were as many as 6,333 candidates put forward by 12 electoral committees⁴ for the seats in the lower chamber and as few as 360 contenders for the upper chamber seats representing no fewer than 49 committees⁵. This discrepancy in numbers resulted from two different electoral systems governing the election of the Sejm and the Senate. While the former is elected from 41 multi-member constituencies with a required minimum of 5% of the vote nationally for the parties and 8% for the coalitions with seats allocated according to the D'Hondt method, the latter is formed by members coming from 100 single-member constituencies with a first-past-the-post system (FPTP) in place⁶. Thus, while winning a Senate constituency required a locally acclaimed personality capable of beating the opponents by simple plurality irrespective of their party affiliation (relatively few candidates representing many, also grassroots, committees), obtaining a Sejm seat is only possible for candidates representing countrywide political machines (many candidates representing few committees).

The major contenders in the electoral campaign were the ruling Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) on the one hand, and the self-styled “Democratic Opposition”⁷ on the other, including the Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska*, KO), the Third Way (*Trzecia Droga*, TD) and the New Left (*Nowa*

¹ B. Disraeli, *Sybil: or the Two Nations*, Vol. I, Henry Colburn Publisher, 1845, 149.

² D.H. Donald, *Lincoln*, Simon & Schuster, 1995, 206.

³ wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/statics/PKW_AKTUALNOSCI/uploaded_files/1697617008_obwie-szczenie-sejm.pdf.

⁴ In Polish law, since 1991 an “electoral committee” is any party, coalition or movement that officially presents candidates for elections. See F. Millard, *Democratic Elections in Poland. 1991-2007*, Routledge, 2010, 19, 36.

⁵ wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/statics/PKW_AKTUALNOSCI/uploaded_files/1697634760_obwie-szczenie-senat.pdf.

⁶ ifes.org/tools-resources/faqs/elections-poland-2023-parliamentary-elections.

⁷ batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Listy-opozycji-demokratycznej.pdf.

Lewica, NL). Presenting itself as a real alternative to this major political duel, oftentimes referred to as the “Polish-Polish (civil) war”, was Confederation for Freedom and Independence (*Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość*, KONFEDERACJA). Another movement by the name of Nonpartisan Local Government Activists (*Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy*, BS) was regarded by the opposition as a secret prospective ally of the ruling party. Absent from the mainstream media outlets and thus largely ignored by the main body of the electorate were other minor committees such as Poland is One (*Polska jest Jedna*, PJJ), Welfare and Peace Movement (*Ruch Dobrobytu i Pokoju*), Normal Country (*Normalny Kraj*), Repair Poland Movement (*Ruch Naprawy Polski*) and Anti-Party (*Antypartia*).

1.2. Party Platforms

In the electoral campaign Law and Justice Party defended its tenure of two parliamentary terms in power (2015-2019, 2019-2023) as “A Good Time for Poland” and offered new bright perspectives with its slogan: “Secure Future of the Poles” (*Bezpieczna Przyszłość Polaków*). In the official 2023 party programme more than a hundred pages were devoted to the “Our Achievements” section featuring chapters on, *inter alia*, “Great Public Finance Reform”, “Great Social Policy”, “Great Security Policy”, “Great Anti-Crisis Policy”, “Great Agricultural Policy”. One could thus see how PiS built their campaign on fighting tax evasion which allegedly enabled them to finance generous social benefits for families (the all-famous 500 *złoty* for each child) and the elderly (13th and 14th monthly retirement pension every year) as well as a massive re-armament programme *vis-à-vis* the war in Ukraine, while at the same time shielding the country’s businesses and peasants from existing threats (*e.g.* the Covid-19 pandemic).

However, well ahead of those practicalities the party programme dealt with far more ideologically-charged topics such as “Challenges of post-communism” or “Values and principles”. Apart from the universally shared democratic elements such as “freedom”, “solidarity”, “equality” and “justice”, some more divisive content could be found, such as “value of human life” (in the context of the ongoing abortion debate), “family” (defined as based upon a durable heterosexual relationship), “nation” (rejecting alternative “artificial ideological constructs”) or “State” (with the principle of sovereignty re-affirmed). Roughly one hundred more pages were used to outline the party’s plans for two more parliamentary terms in power (2023-2027, 2027-2031) ranging from institutional reforms, both domestically and within the European Union, to healthcare, education, digitalisation and energy transformation⁸. This review of the Law and Justice electoral platform can be deemed sufficient to picture PiS as a conservative and sovereigntist (Eurosceptic) party, with a high degree of self-importance.

⁸ pis.org.pl/dokumenty.



Figure 1. Official PiS Electoral Poster “A Good Time for Poland”, highlighting the party’s social policies and care for the rural areas⁹

However, the document certainly falls short of reflecting the everyday practice of PiS in power in terms of both policies and discourse, often and by many defined as “Poland’s constitutional breakdown”¹⁰ or “authoritarian populism”¹¹. According to a 2023 Freedom House report «since taking power in 2015, a coalition led by the populist, socially conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party has exerted significant political influence over Poland’s State institutions and damaged the country’s democratic progress. Recent years have seen an increase in nationalist and discriminatory rhetoric»¹², resulting in Poland’s Global Freedom Score for 2023 downgraded to 81/100 from 93/100 back in 2015¹³. Similarly, in 2023 Reporters without Borders ranked Poland 57th among 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index (down from 18th position in 2015)¹⁴. The University of Gothenburg Varieties of Democracy Project went as far as depicting post-2015 Poland in free fall in terms of many aspects of democracy, not only liberal democracy (*i.e.* «protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the State and the tyranny of the majority») but also participatory democracy (*i.e.* «engagement in civil society organizations, direct democracy, and subnational elected bodies») and even electoral democracy itself (wherein «political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities») ¹⁵.

⁹ pis.org.pl/materialy-do-pobrania.

¹⁰ W. Sadurski, *Poland’s Constitutional Breakdown*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

¹¹ theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/09/poland-election-democracy-populism-autocracy/675255/.

¹² freedomhouse.org/country/poland.

¹³ refworld.org/docid/55cb45d815.html.

¹⁴ rsf.org/en/index?year=2015.

¹⁵ v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

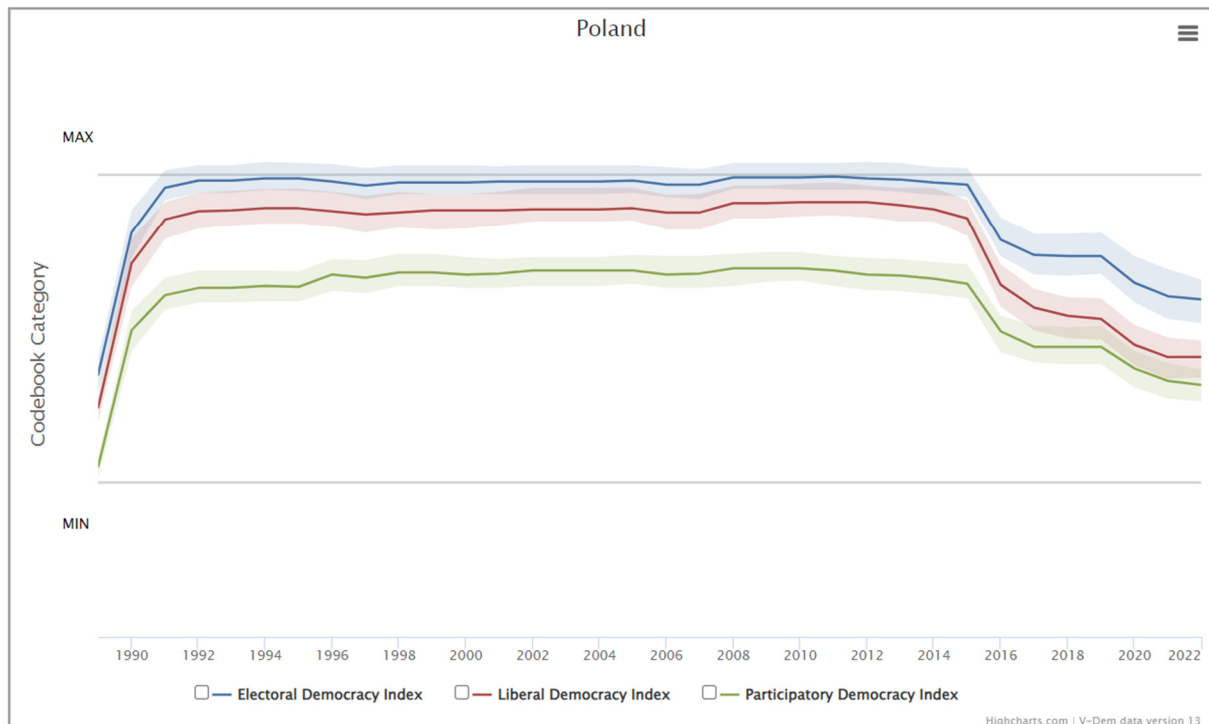


Figure 2. Poland in the University of Gothenburg Varieties of Democracy Project (1989-2022)¹⁶

With these critical judgments in mind the already mentioned “Democratic Opposition” portrayed the 2023 parliamentary election as a quest to “save democracy”¹⁷ in Poland. Since 2021 its leader has been again Donald Tusk, former President of the European Council (2014-2019), mocked as “the Emperor of Europe” by his Polish rightist opponents¹⁸, and Poland’s former Prime Minister (2007-2014), now leader of the Civic Coalition (KO), the main force of the opposition. Often accused of proposing nothing else but an anti-PiS agenda the Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO), the party constituting the backbone of the Civic Coalition, entitled their electoral programme as “100 Points for the First 100 Days in Power”¹⁹. Strangely enough for neoliberals, playing by the PiS-imposed rules they commenced with specific benefit proposals targeting well-defined groups of voters: families, youth and the elderly, women and businessmen, offering social policy measures occasionally more generous than those carried out

¹⁶ v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

¹⁷ kulturaliberalna.pl/2023/10/10/wigura-kuisz-czy-polakom-uda-sie-uratowac-demokracje/.

¹⁸ generator-paskow.pl/katalog/donald_tusk_-_cesarzem_europy_/fe5dfa5e-6f7e-11ee-a5bf-fa163eafb9ad.

¹⁹ platforma.org/upload/document/201/attachments/413/100%20konkretow-pdf.pdf.

by PiS (current benefits to be maintained and more to be added *e.g.* 30% pay rise for teachers and substantial exemptions for lower income taxpayers).

Alongside those promises they declared that some more ideologically controversial points would also be introduced such as liberalising the law forbidding abortion or legally recognising civil unions (both hetero- and homosexual). A return to the mainstream within the European Union and restoring the rule of law only appeared in the subsequent points. Last but not least, four full pages, as opposed to the average of one page per topic otherwise, were dedicated to the plea to “make PiS accountable” *e.g.* for “breaking the constitution”, “using public money for party purposes”, “destroying public media”, “illegal invigilation of citizens with [the anti-terrorist spyware] Pegasus”, “besmirching independent judges” and widespread corruption *e.g.* through selling Schengen visas to random buyers. In short, Jarosław Kaczyński, the Law and Justice party president was personally accused by the Civic Coalition of «an attempt to alter the State’s political system»²⁰.

Another member of the “Democratic Opposition”, the New Left (adopting this name in order to emphasise its distance from the “old”, post-communist Left), came up with a predictable social democratic agenda, their flagship proposals being *e.g.* “Good Job” (stable employment, equal treatment and strong trade unions), “Free and Friendly School” (critical thinking, innovation and skills of the future, no nationalist “indoctrination” and no Catholic religion classes), the “Green Deal” (renewable energy, recycling, protecting the environment and animals’ rights, fighting smog), “Equality and Respect” (legalising abortion and marijuana, LGBT rights, “humanitarian” immigration policy, hate-free public media and culture), “Secular State”, “Health for Everyone”, “Supporting People with Disabilities” as well as “A Strong Poland in a Strong European Union”.

The last but one chapter within the party programme was paradoxically entitled “Law and Justice” claiming that after the eight years in power of a party under that very name these two values needed to be upheld and promoted. The rule of law was to be re-established *e.g.* through the proceedings of a special “Law and Justice” parliamentary commission whose mission it would be to compile a comprehensive report on the multiple cases in which the Constitution was violated by State authorities in the years 2015-2023²¹. Thus, the New Left while sharing PiS concerns over the fate of the needy, *i.e.* the old and the socially excluded, demanded an abrupt end to the predominance of the conservative-nationalistic paradigm that the ruling party had unequivocally embraced. They went as far as self-defining as «the only progressive force in Polish politics»²².

A rather intriguing dichotomy could easily be grasped in the context of the Third Way. Although they openly declared themselves as a member of the “Democratic Opposition”, at the same time their very name indicated they were willing to act as an alternative to the political duel of the two giants (Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald

²⁰ platforma.org/upload/document/201/attachments/413/100%20konkretow-pdf.pdf.

²¹ klub-lewica.org.pl/images/program_Lewica_2023.pdf.

²² klub-lewica.org.pl/program.

Tusk) dominating Polish politics since 2005, also through their chief slogan: “Enough Quarrels, Move On!” (*Dość kłótni, do przodu!*)²³. The Third Way itself was a formal coalition (and as such needed to pass the 8% vote threshold to make it into the Sejm) between one of Poland’s oldest political parties (Polish Peasant Party, *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*, PSL) and a novel social movement party by the name of “Poland 2050”, established only in 2020 in the aftermath of a considerable success of its leader, Szymon Hołownia, in the direct presidential election (13,87% of the vote²⁴). Their choice was to avoid adversarial politics and heated ideological debates, offering instead “Third Way’s 12 Guarantees” concerning relatively ecumenical social and economic issues like affordable housing and subsidies for students, tax exemptions for large families, simplified taxes, accessible healthcare, 6% of GDP for education, cheap electricity and clean air, equal rights for women²⁵. The Third Way was thus considered by many as the only force of the “Democratic Opposition” capable of taking over some of the disenchanted former PiS voters, without antagonising them with the radically hostile discourse of the other opposition parties.

In a somewhat different way the Confederacy for Freedom and Independence, bonding together several far right-wing forces, also attempted to build its image as a valid alternative to the well-established party duopoly of Law and Justice, on the one hand, and Civic Coalition, on the other. Its new young leader, Sławomir Mentzen (born in 1986 and elected as the New Hope party leader in 2023) appealed chiefly to young voters with a simple and attractive message put in the language of personal economic profit. As a successful tax advisor, he made the first point of his electoral programme “simple and low taxes” promising a “revolution” in the Personal Income Tax while no fewer than 15 taxes would be abolished, thus allowing for “cheap fuel and cheap coal”, and housing “30% cheaper”²⁶. Free-market economy was to rule supreme also in the realm of education (parents free to choose any competing school or home schooling for their children, with minimal State interference), healthcare (dismantling the State monopoly, or the National Health Fund, to be replaced by competitive insurance providers) and agriculture (opposing animal rights and environmental activists, as well as abolishing excessive regulations, also from the EU).

The Confederates further claimed that the “old-style parties”, irrespective of the PiS-Civic Coalition cleavage, had “passively carried out EU directives” and that “any kind of objection towards the European Union was unimaginable to them”, while the EU was “violating the Treaties” and enforcing “illegal programmes”. In their view Poland now ought to embrace a far more assertive foreign policy agenda of “secure borders”, “stopping illegal immigration” and “unfair competition” in the form of Ukrainian grain exports, and – last but not least – re-think restrictions on public access to firearms. It truly was a new quality within mainstream Polish

²³ polska2050.pl/trzecia-droga/

²⁴ prezydent20200628.pkw.gov.pl/prezydent20200628/.

²⁵ polska2050.pl/trzecia-droga/12-gwarancji-trzeciej-drogi/.

²⁶ konfederacja.pl/app/uploads/Konfederacja_WiN_Program_2023.pdf.

politics, even though one might argue that one of the Confederates, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, active since 1989, had voiced similar ideas but so far, he had played a marginal role.

1.3. Voter Polarization

In light of the above outlined electoral programmes it comes as no surprise that the level of polarization in the campaign was considerable. A survey conducted by the Government-sponsored Centre for Public Opinion Research (*Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej*, CBOS) in August 2023 revealed some conspicuous contrasts in party electorates' views.

	NEW LEFT	CIVIC COALITION	THIRD WAY	LAW AND JUSTICE	CONFEDERATION	HIGHEST CONTRASTS WITHIN OPPOSITION	PIS-CIVIC COALITION CONTRAST
CBOS, AUGUST 2023							
Poland should pursue close integration within the EU.	79	76	68	13	21	11	63
Poland should abandon coal as major source of energy.	66	63	54	8	29	12	55
The Concordat with the Vatican is unnecessary.	88	71	66	16	57	22	55
Pregnancy termination should be allowed with no limits.	80	73	58	19	52	22	54
State-owned enterprises should be privatised.	27	41	30	5	42	14	36
Poland should accept refugees coming from Africa and the Middle East.	41	35	25	5	11	16	30
Law should allow formal same-sex unions.	78	70	55	13	43	23	27
Fighting crime should take precedence over citizens' rights and liberties.	12	18	18	42	20	6	24
Poland should support Ukraine and her endeavours to join the EU.	74	72	63	64	31	11	8

Figure 3. Polish Party Electorates' Views (CBOS data)²⁷

From the box above one can clearly see that behind the Law and Justice party, on the one hand, and the “Democratic Opposition”, on the other, there stood two distinct and conflicting bodies of the electorate. They differed primarily with respect to European integration, environmentalism and role of the Catholic doctrine in the public sphere. Other topics such as the liberal principles of tolerance, diversity and entrepreneurship constituted slightly less of a divide due to the socialist moods in the New Left and conservative ones in the Third Way. Firm support for the Ukrainian cause seemed the only element uncontested by any party, except for the Confederation.

Again, no wonder that as a result the electoral campaign – exceptionally brief since it was officially inaugurated by President Andrzej Duda coming from Law and Justice party himself, as late as 8th August 2023²⁸ – was defined by many observers as “brutal”²⁹. On numerous occasions did Jarosław Kaczyński, the PiS leader, hear from hostile protestors: “You’ll be in jail!”, “You have destroyed

²⁷ cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_097_23.PDF.

²⁸ prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/wybory-parlamentarne-odbeda-sie-15-pazdziernika-2023-r,73017.

²⁹ economist.com/europe/2023/10/05/after-a-brutal-campaign-poland-gets-ready-to-vote.

Poland!” or “Down with the dictator!”³⁰. On the other hand, both Kaczyński himself and his acolytes would define Donald Tusk as “pure evil”³¹ and his party as an “external” or bluntly a “German party”³². Government-controlled TV would run several times a day a footage of Tusk making a speech in the German language at the CDU party conference, emphasising, totally out of context, the moment when he said “...für Deutschland...” (for Germany), as an apparent proof of his foreign allegiance³³. As a result it is fair to assume that in the 2023 elections while, at least some, “Democratic Opposition” voters held that Poland’s democracy and European destiny as much as their own personal freedom were at stake, some PiS sympathisers were inclined to believe they were defending Poland’s very independence and national identity. Some even argued that fascism was a serious threat since a speech, made back in 2019 by the Confederate leader Sławomir Mentzen, was widely circulated by the “Democratic Opposition” in which he had declared that the right-wing voters actually wanted Poland free of «Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the European Union»³⁴.

2. Meaningful Statistics

2.1. Voter Turnout

The above-mentioned polarization might have been a factor determining an unprecedented turnout of 74,38%, in the 2023 Polish parliamentary election (21,966,891 voters out of 29,532,595 voting-age citizens)³⁵. This was a figure considerably higher than the turnout in the historic 1989 election that had ousted the Communist regime (62,70%) or any other election ever since (see below).

VOTER TURNOUT IN POLISH SEJM ELECTIONS POST-2000 AND 1989	
2023 – 74,38%	2007 - 53,88%
2019 - 61,74%	2005 - 40,57%
2015 - 50,92%	2001 - 46,29%
2011 - 48,92%	1989 - 62,70%

Figure 4. Voter Turnout in Polish Sejm Elections post-2000 and 1989³⁶

The turnout differed significantly depending on the type and size of the local community (*gmina*). The smallest ones, up to 5000 people, stopped at 68,1% (against 54,36% in 2019) while the largest cities, over 500,000 people, achieved

³⁰wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,143907,30289170,kaczynski-pojawil-sie-w-krakowie-przywitaly-go-okrzyki-bedziesz.html.

³¹ wiadomosci.tvp.pl/72138179/tusk-to-czyste-zlo.

³²konkret24.tvn24.pl/polityka/wybory-2023-kaczynski-o-tusku-bardzo-czesto-powtarzal-fur-deutschland-to-nie-tusk-to-rzadowa-telewizja-st7386532.

³³ wpolityce.pl/polityka/664950-prezes-pis-partia-tuska-to-jest-partia-zewnetrzna.

³⁴ oko.press/program-konfederacji-zydzi-geje-aborcja.

³⁵ wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/pl/frekwencja/pl.

³⁶ pb.pl/frekwencja-w-wyborach-do-sejmu-najwyzsza-od-1989-r-1198206

82,72% (73,44% in 2019)³⁷. This tendency is corroborated by the example of the region (voivodship, *województwo*) of Mazovia where the turnout varied from 84,92% within the boundaries of the capital city of Warsaw down to 67,05% in one of its rural provinces (*powiat*) of Lipsko³⁸. This is a conceivable explanation of why those regions that contain within their borders the largest Polish urban centres (apart from Warsaw – Cracow, Wrocław, Łódź, Poznań, Gdańsk and the Upper Silesian conurbation around Katowice) saw a turnout somewhat higher than the more rural voivodships. It needs to be pointed out, however, that even if on the whole it was the urban population that participated in larger numbers than the rural one, it was the latter and not the former, that mobilized to a greater extent, comparing the 2023 election to that of 2019. If that was the case with the rural voters, it was largely, as we shall see, to defend the incumbent PiS government and its policies.

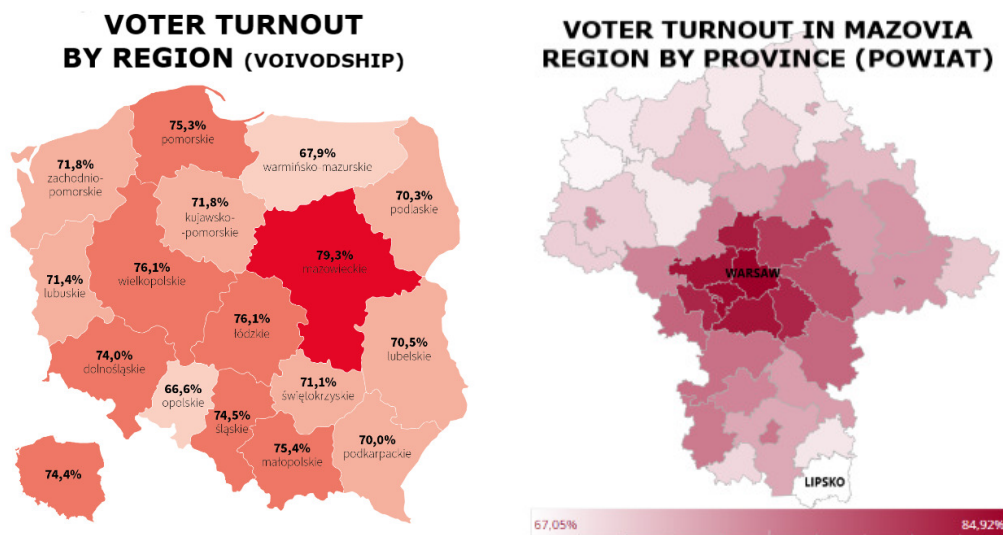


Figure 5. Voter Turnout by Region³⁹ and Voter Turnout in Mazovia by Province⁴⁰

An exit poll carried out as voters were leaving the polling stations by Ipsos for TVN, the liberal, American-owned private television network in Poland, revealed some more interesting turnout-related factors. Compared to the previous election of 2019, it was the 50-59 age group and not the 40-49 group, that now turned out to be that of the most frequent voters. Nevertheless, the main contrast between the two elections, turnout-wise, was an impressive mobilization of the youngest section of the electorate (roughly 1/3 more voters now than in 2019) while the percentage of active voters among the oldest group (60 years and more) stood at the same level

³⁷ wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/pl/frekwencja/pl.

³⁸ wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/pl/frekwencja/Koniec/woj/140000;
sejmsenat2019.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2019/pl/frekwencja/pl.

³⁹ samorzad.pap.pl/sites/default/files/inline-images/igrafika_20231017_06.png.

⁴⁰ wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/pl/frekwencja/Koniec/woj/140000.

or actually dropped slightly. The 2023 electoral shift in Poland was thus determined chiefly by the younger generations, voicing – as we shall see – opinions contrasting with those of the elderly.

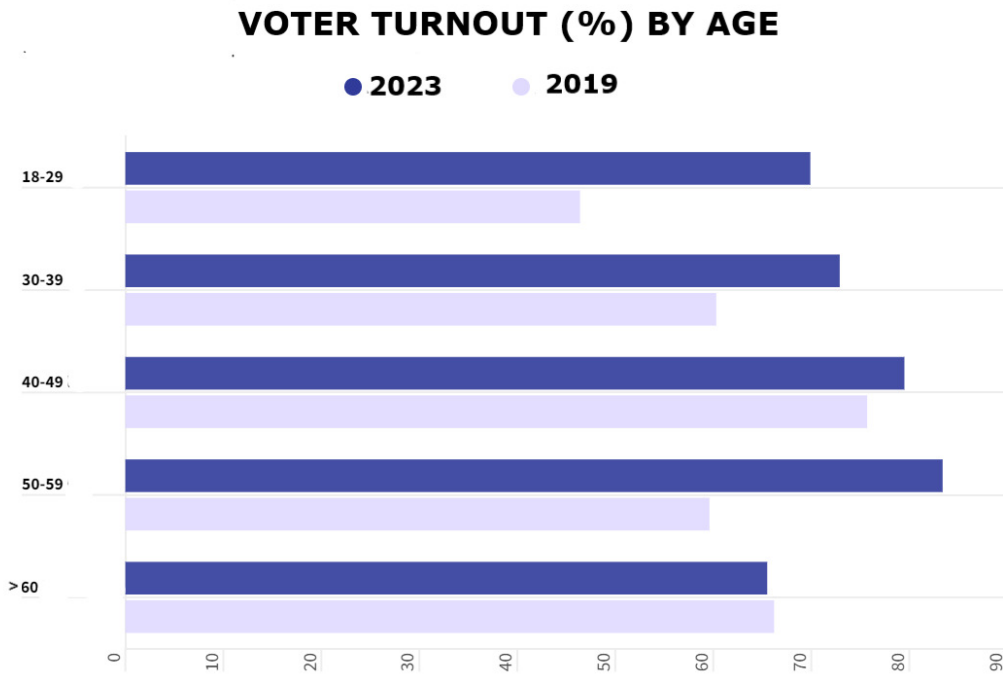


Figure 6. Voter Turnout by Age⁴¹

2.2. Results by Region

The official election results were published by the National Electoral Commission (*Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza*, PKW) on the second day after the vote, *i.e.* on 17th October⁴², as follows:

⁴¹biqdata.wyborcza.pl/biqdata/7,159116,30309159,wybory-2023-mobilizacja-przeplewy-elektoratow-i-nowi-wyborcy.html.

⁴²wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/statics/PKW_AKTUALNOSCI/uploaded_files/1697617008_obwieszczenie-sejm.pdf.

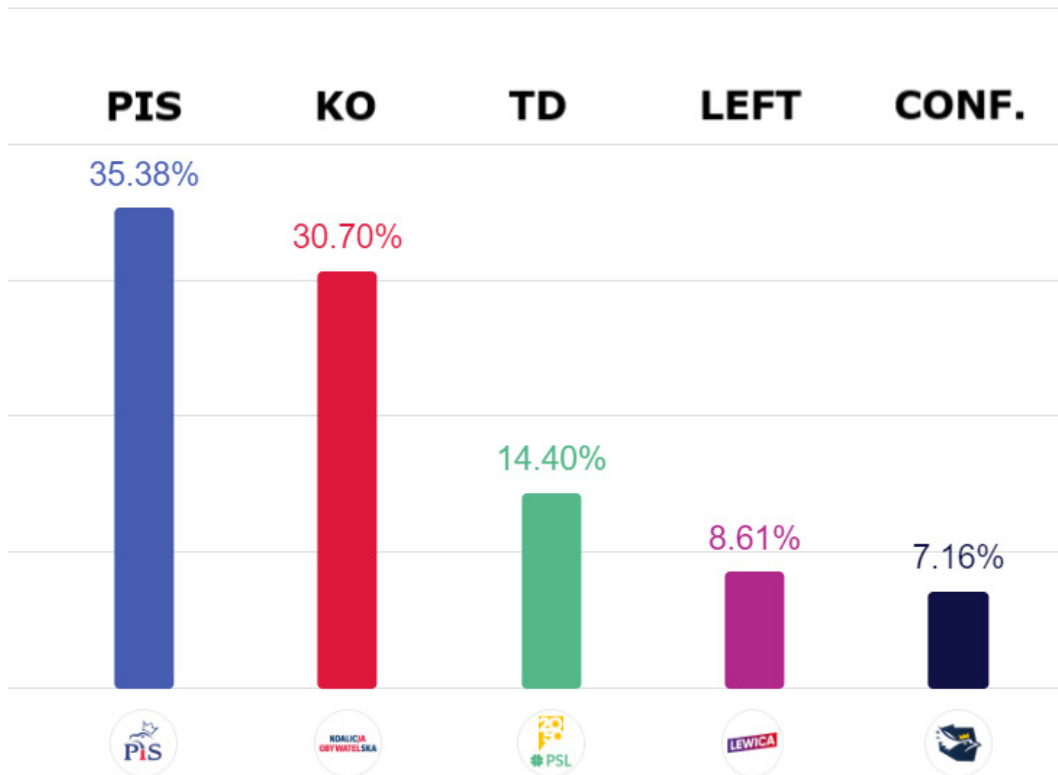


Figure 7. Official Election Results⁴³

Law and Justice (PiS) has obtained the highest number of votes (7,640,854 or 35,38%), with the Civic Platform (KO) coming second (6,629,402 votes or 30,70%). However, the “Democratic Opposition” (Civic Platform, Third Way and New Left combined), which had announced well before the election that they intended to form a coalition government, jointly won 11,599,090 votes or 53,71%. Official PKW results allow for some further analysis. A look at the Sejm constituency map indicates that throughout the country a plurality of the votes was won by either Law and Justice (22 constituencies, its stronghold being especially the South East of Poland) or the Civic Coalition (19 constituencies, particularly in the North West). An important exception to this general rule was that the constituencies including a major city (Warsaw and its surroundings, Cracow, Łódź and the Upper Silesian conurbation) were won by the Civic Platform, even if the adjacent rural areas voted for PiS.

⁴³ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023.

KO VS. PIS RESULTS BY SEJM CONSTITUENCY

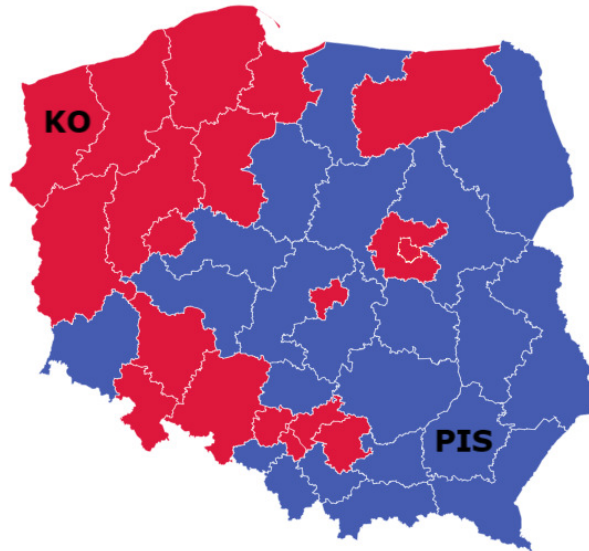


Figure 8. KO vs. PiS Results by Sejm Constituency⁴⁴

The latter element may easily go unnoticed if one only looks at the regional level results (by voivodships). The picture that then emerges is one of a conspicuous Law and Justice victory over the Civic Platform (10 voivodships to 6) or an even more overwhelming triumph of the “Democratic Opposition” if one chooses to perceive them as a united anti-PiS front (13 voivodships to 3).

KO VS. PIS RESULTS BY REGION (VOIVODSHIP)



DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION (DO) VS. PIS BY REGION



Figure 9. KO vs. PiS and Democratic Opposition vs. PiS Results by Region⁴⁵

⁴⁴ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

A far more detailed image of the competing committees' electorates can be outlined based on the already mentioned exit poll carried out by Ipsos. By asking voters a standardized set of questions as they were leaving the polling station, a number of factors – otherwise unknown in a secret ballot – were revealed. As we could presume (see above), Law and Justice obviously won the election among voters residing in the countryside (47,6%), while the largest cities, with population exceeding 500,000, supported the Civic Platform (42,9%). These two respective committees came second in their less favourable contexts (21,2% Civic Platform in the rural areas and 21,1% for PiS in the major cities). Concerning the other competitors, it is well visible that the right-wing Confederation did slightly better in the countryside than in the large cities (7,8% to 5,5%), whereas the New Left received far more support in the major urban centres than in the rural areas (14,5% to 5,9%). This seems nothing less than a clear proof of the actual cleavage in Polish politics between the conservative rural voter and the liberal urban one.

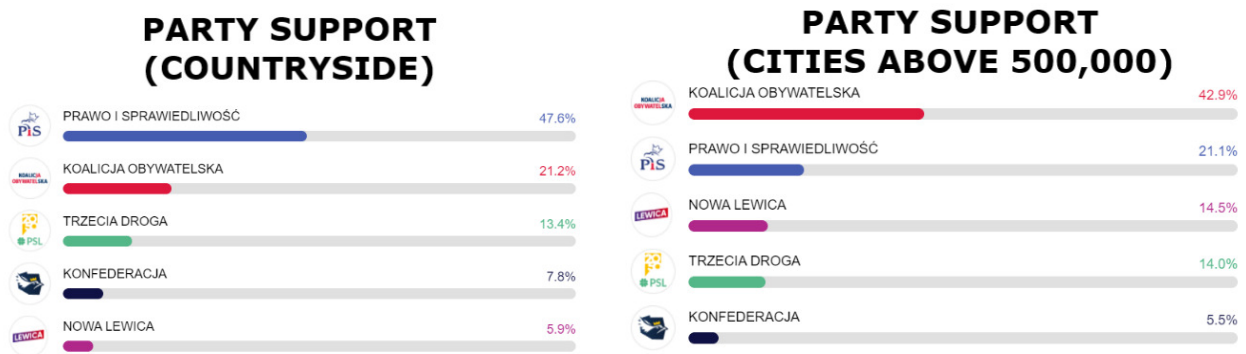


Figure 10. Party Support: Countryside vs. Cities Above 500,000⁴⁶

Even when it comes to the relatively minor urban centres (with population between 51,000 and 200,000 people), as can be seen below, the winner was the Civic Coalition, and not PiS (36,7% to 29,7%). Another remarkable fact is that the Third Way (as we already know, a coalition between the undoubtedly rural-based Polish Peasant Party, PSL, and more *intelligentsia*-oriented Poland 2050) obtained a very similar share of the vote in all three of these social contexts (13,4% in the countryside, 14% in the major cities and 13,8% in the minor ones). This seems indicative of an actual synergy effect materializing with the PSL candidates successfully gathering votes among the peasants and small town voters on the one hand and Poland 2050 contributing its fair share in the more urban contexts on the other.

⁴⁶ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-sondazowe.

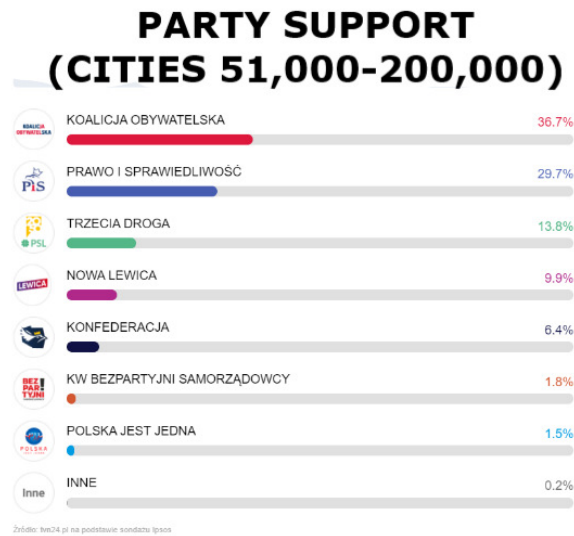


Figure 11. Party Support: Cities 51,000-200,000⁴⁷

2.3. Results by Age and Education

Another typical cleavage in Polish voters' choices is supposedly their age, which is corroborated by Ipsos exit poll results. Law and Justice triumphed crushingly among the oldest voters (aged 60 and above) winning no less than majority support (52,8%) but failed miserably among the youngest generation (aged 18-29) in which category they turned out to be the least preferred committee (14,4%) among the five of them that passed the 5% threshold allowing them to enter the Sejm. An interesting fact, though, is that also the Civic Platform, Law and Justice's main opponent, fared somewhat better among the oldest voters than among the youngest (31,0% to 27,6%), even if they nevertheless beat all their competitors in the youngest category, too. The youngest voters, on the other hand, favoured the other three committees: modestly the Third Way (17,9% support against 14,4% nationwide) but chiefly the Confederation (17,8% against 7,2% nationwide) and the New Left (17,4% against 8,6% nationwide). A plausible explanation could be that a segment of young voters tends to appreciate the Confederation's recipes for individual wealth through low taxation and self-reliance (as opposed to the more generous social benefits policy incarnated by the incumbent PiS government) while another section of the young electorate views with favour the New Left's resolute commitment towards women and LGBT rights (*e.g.* abortion and civil unions), while distrusting the Civic Coalition's cautious stance on these topics, still sensitive even among wide ranks of the otherwise centre-leaning Polish electorate.

⁴⁷ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-sondazowe.

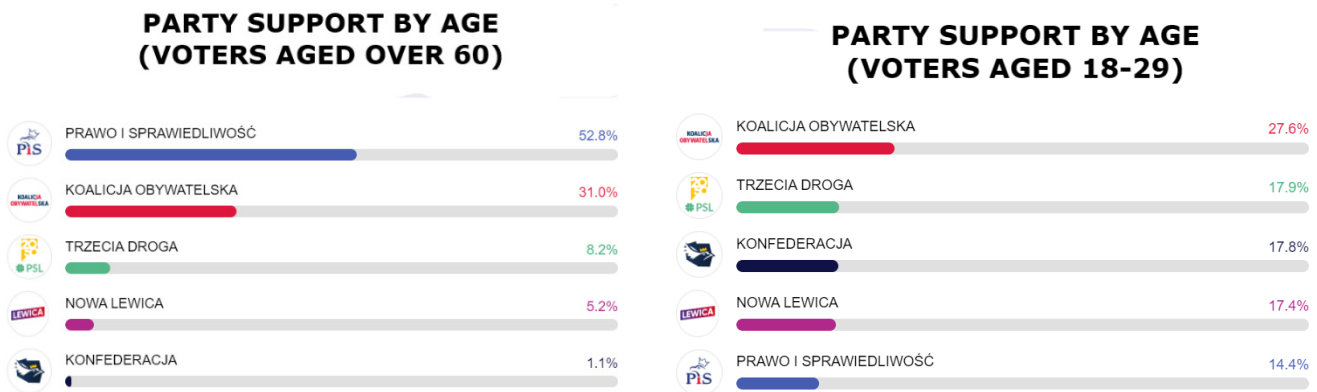


Figure 12. Party Support by Age: Voters over 60 vs. Voters Aged 18-29⁴⁸

However, it is already in the age group ranging from 40 to 49 years that the Civic Coalition defeated PiS by 34,5% to 31,6%, while the other committees achieved results close to their nationwide average. Thus, it can be argued that the general outcome of the vote was determined by the preferences of the middle-aged voters (from 30 to 59) outweighing the radically pro-PiS as well as the moderate pro-Confederation and pro-Left leaning of the oldest and the youngest segments of the electorate.

PARTY SUPPORT BY AGE (VOTERS AGED 40-49)

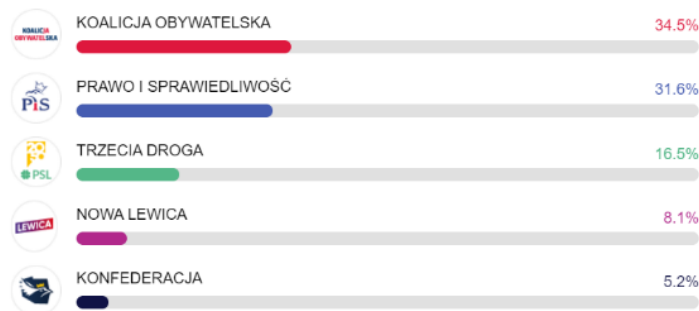


Figure 13. Party Support by Age: Voters Aged 40-49⁴⁹

Similarly, cleavage along the lines of educational differences turned out to be of utmost prominence in the 2023 Polish parliamentary election. Almost two thirds of the voters with elementary education only supported the ruling Law and Justice party (62,6%), whereas the Civic Coalition prevailed among university graduates (38,6%), with the “Democratic Opposition” as a whole gaining as much as 67,5% of their vote. Each of the united front opposition parties did evidently better among

⁴⁸ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-sondazowe.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

the electorate with higher education than they did among the least educated (Civic Coalition 38,6% compared to 15,4%; Third Way 17,8% compared to 7,7%; New Left 11,1% compared to 4,7%). PiS fared much worse with the university graduates obtaining roughly one third of the preferences it received from the elementary education voters (22,2% compared to 62,6%). Education played almost no role as a factor in supporting the Confederation (6,1% of the vote with elementary education comparable to 6,8% among university *alumni*).

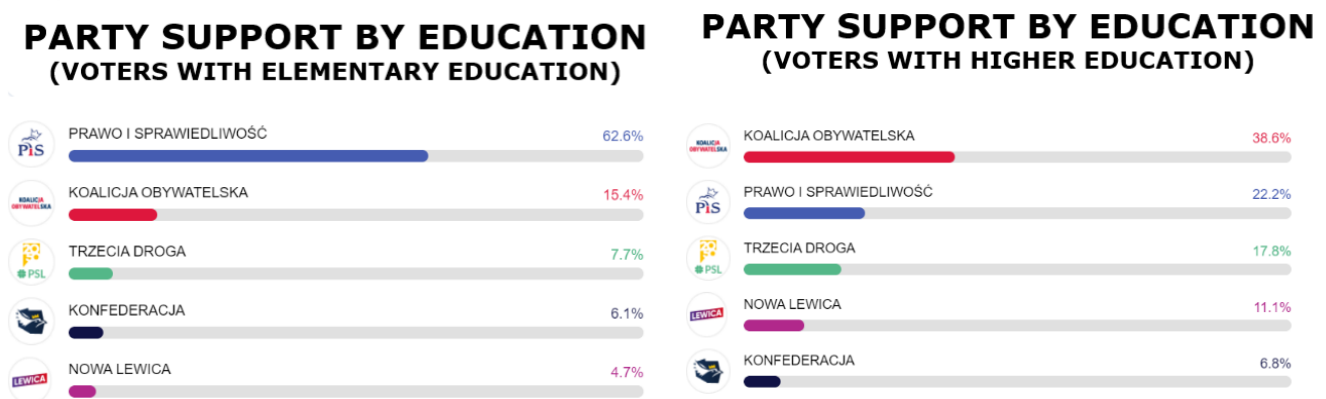
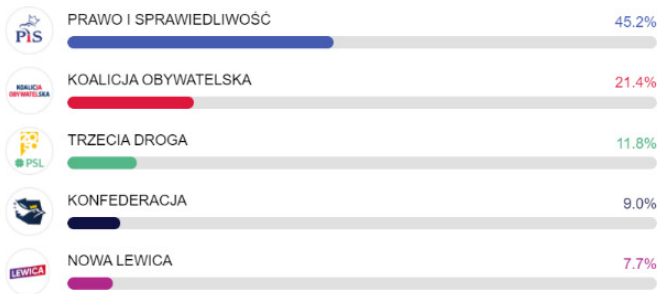


Figure 14. Party Support by Education: Elementary vs. Higher Education⁵⁰

It is to be expected that the contrasts in education will translate into a diversity of the ruling party and opposition electorates in terms of their professional and thus economic status. Again, this is confirmed by the Ipsos survey in question. From it, Law and Justice emerged as unquestionably dominant in the least successful category of the unemployed (45,2%), while the “Democratic Opposition” parties turned out moderately strengthened among the economically privileged group defined as “directors, managers and specialists” (40,4% for the Civic Coalition; 19,2% for the Third Way; and 11,3% for the New Left). In this respect, employment status seems to make a difference among the voters of the Confederation whose mixture of assertive nationalism and radically free-market ideas, perhaps somewhat ironically, mobilized a greater support among the unemployed than among the top management in business (9% compared to 7,3%).

⁵⁰ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-sondazowe.

PARTY SUPPORT BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS (UNEMPLOYED)



PARTY SUPPORT BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS (DIRECTORS/MANAGERS/SPECIALISTS)

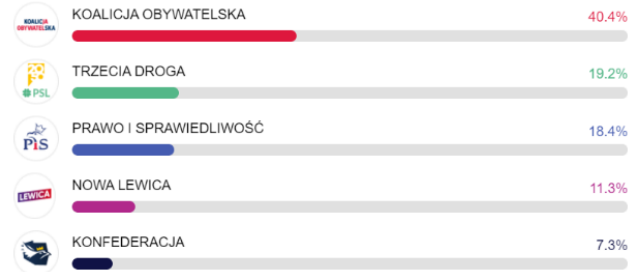
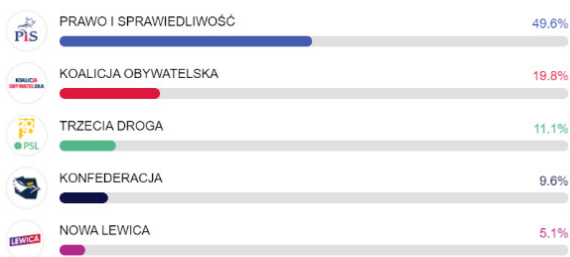


Figure 15. Party Support by Employment Status: Unemployed vs. Directors⁵¹

As a consequence, it certainly comes as no surprise that Law and Justice also prevailed overwhelmingly amongst peasants (66,6%), pensioners (53,4%) and workers (49,6%), identifiable with the already mentioned groups of consistent PiS voters defined by type of local community (rural, as opposed to urban), age and level of education. Equally predictable may now seem the opposition's preponderance in the case of high school and university students (31% for the Civic Platform; 21,6% for the New Left; 18,6% for the Third Way), while PiS received only 11% in this group.

PARTY SUPPORT BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS (WORKERS)



PARTY SUPPORT BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS (STUDENTS)

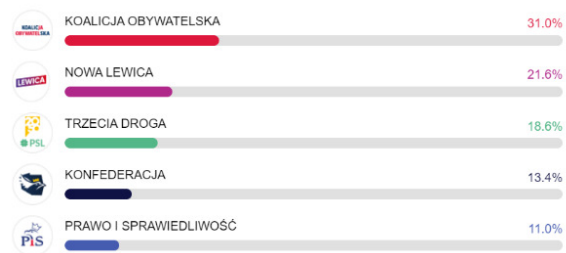


Figure 16. Party Support by Employment Status: Workers vs. Students⁵²

To sum it up, it can be concluded that the polarization of Polish voters in 2023, measurable *inter alia* by an exceptionally high voter turnout, can be interpreted with a set of statistically tangible socio-economic criteria. Within this angle a typical 2023 Law and Justice voter would be a pensioner or elderly peasant with elementary

⁵¹ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-sondazowe.

⁵² tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/sondaz-exit-poll-ipsos-województwa-w-ktorych-pis-stracil-najwiecej-poparcia-7393144.

education living in Poland's rural areas, most likely in the South East. In contrast, a stereotypical Civic Coalition supporter would be a middle aged or younger university graduate working as a well-paid specialist in one of Poland's major cities. This, as we may infer from the previously cited CBOS survey on party electorates' views, translates into a deeply conservative mindset of the PiS voter and a liberal mentality within the supporters of the Civic Coalition. On the side of the "Democratic Opposition", sympathizers of both the New Left and the Third Way are younger and well-educated but more radically leftist in the case of the former and moderately conservative in the case of the latter. Therefore, it seems fair to say that while the "Democratic Opposition" incapsulates the hopes of those who have generally benefitted from Poland's post-Communist transformation and integration with the European Union, the Law and Justice party voices the exasperation of those who have failed to collect the fruits of the country's post-1989 structural reforms and macroscale development.

2.4. Electoral Shifts 2019-2023

In order to determine whether or not this is truly the case of what Benjamin Disraeli back in his days described as «two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones», even though they share and call home the same country of Poland, it seems vital to verify to what extent these voting patterns may be considered durable. A general look at the electoral shifts between parties in the 2023 election compared with the previous one in 2019 allows one to make a series of claims.

PARTY ELECTORATE SHIFTS (%)

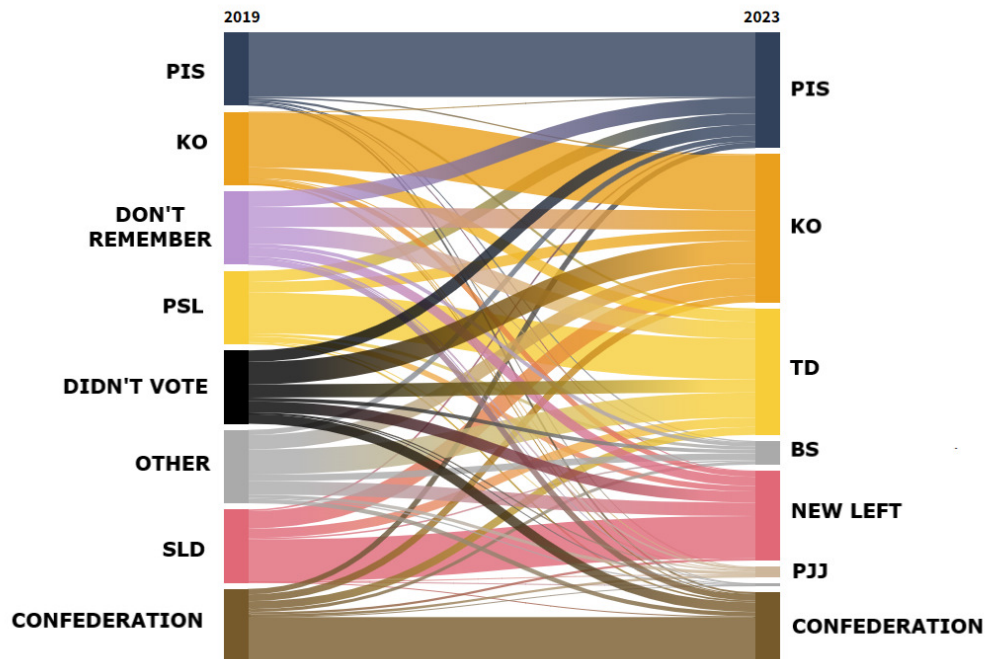


Figure 17. Party Electorate Shifts 2019-2023⁵³

On the one hand, the Law and Justice party electorate is solid and disciplined with very few former voters deciding to abandon their party of choice. If PiS gains new voters, this is thanks to mobilizing some elements of the less politically conscious electorate that either admit they didn't vote or claim they don't remember who they voted for in the previous election. Gains at the expense of other parties are minimal with the exception of the Polish Peasant Party losing some support taken over by PiS, thus consolidating its grip on the rural areas. On the side of the "Democratic Opposition" electoral shifts may be more frequent, yet they are limited to shifts between the different forces of the opposition. The Civic Coalition would lose some of the more conservative voters to the Third Way and those more left-leaning to the New Left, and *vice versa*, but the boundary between the PiS and anti-PiS camps looks fortified and most bridges are all but burnt.

⁵³biqdata.wyborcza.pl/biqdata/7,159116,30309159,wybory-2023-mobilizacja-przeptywy-elektoratow-i-nowi-wyborcy.html.

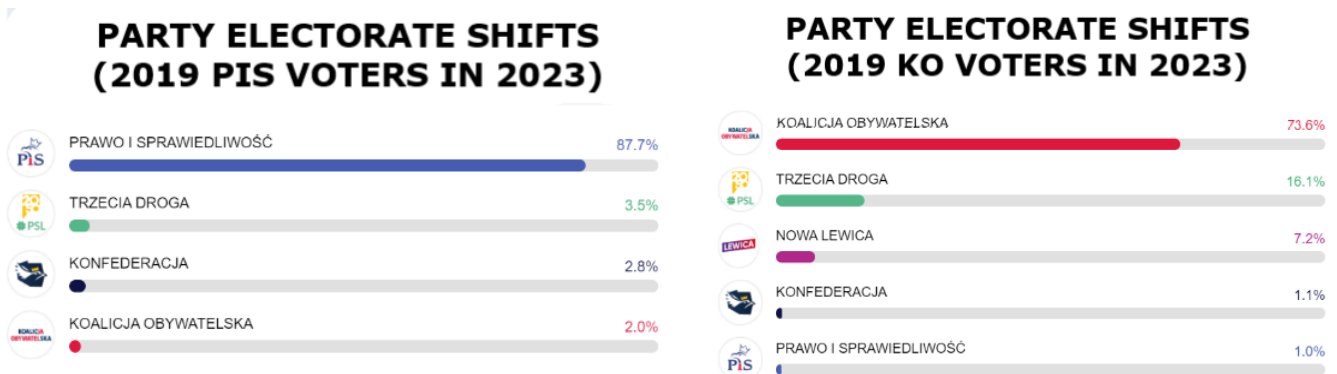


Figure 18. Party Electorate Shifts 2019-2023: PiS Voters vs. KO Voters⁵⁴

87,7% of the PiS voters back in 2019 chose to support their party also in 2023, with just 6,6% going over to the “Democratic Opposition” (3,5% for the Third Way; 2% for the Civic Platform and 1,1% for the New Left). Among the 2019 Civic Platform supporters visibly fewer remained loyal to their party (73,6%) but the other 23,3% went over to other “Democratic Opposition” parties, with only 1% voting for PiS and 1,1% for the Confederation. The decisive factor that allowed the “Democratic Opposition” to win the election, unpredicted by previous opinion polls, was an astounding mobilization among the voters who hadn’t voted before (many of them very young), a majority of whom decided to support the Civic Platform (30%), the Third Way (19,3%) and the New Left (15%), while PiS only received 15% of this vote. The “Democratic Opposition” also prevailed among the group of voters who declared they did not remember who they had supported in the previous election (63,1% for the coalition committees against 20,9% for PiS).

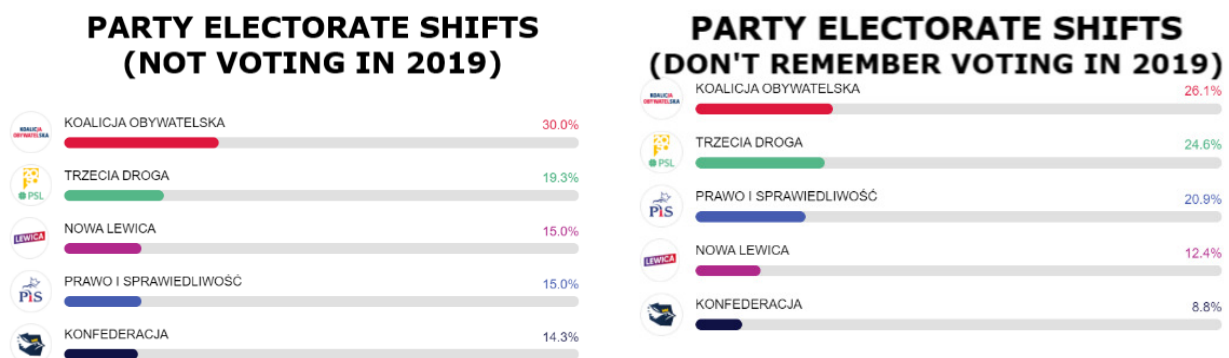


Figure 19. Party Electorate Shifts 2019-2023: Not Voting vs. Don’t Remember Voting⁵⁵

⁵⁴tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/sondaz-exit-poll-ipsos-województwa-w-ktorych-pis-stracil-najwiecej-poparcia-7393144.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

3. *Eternal PiS? Imminent Perspectives*

What are the probable consequences of the Polish 2023 parliamentary election in the weeks and months to come?

With the popular vote translated into the allocation of seats in the Sejm, according to the D'Hondt method, the new lower chamber of Polish parliament will have the following composition.

SEJM SEATS BY PARTY

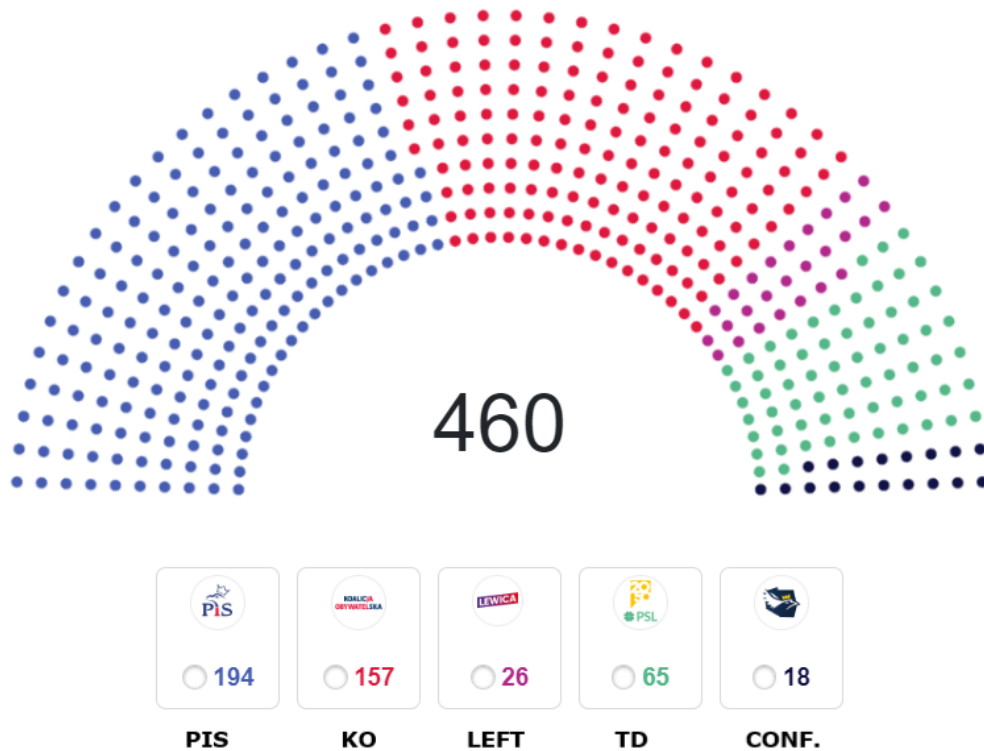


Figure 20. *Sejm Seats by Party*⁵⁶

With its most numerous parliamentary group (194 out of 460 Sejm members) PiS is the single strongest party, nevertheless unable to form a majority coalition against the united front of the “Democratic Opposition”, 248 seats strong, with the required majority of 231. Furthermore, the only possible and yet not sufficiently

⁵⁶ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-pkw-sejm.

strong potential ally to Law and Justice, the Confederation, has in the meantime repeatedly refused to enter coalition talks with PiS.

An even worse situation the Law and Justice party still in power has materialized in the upper chamber, the Senate, which has not been the focus of our analysis up to this point.

SENATE SEATS BY PARTY

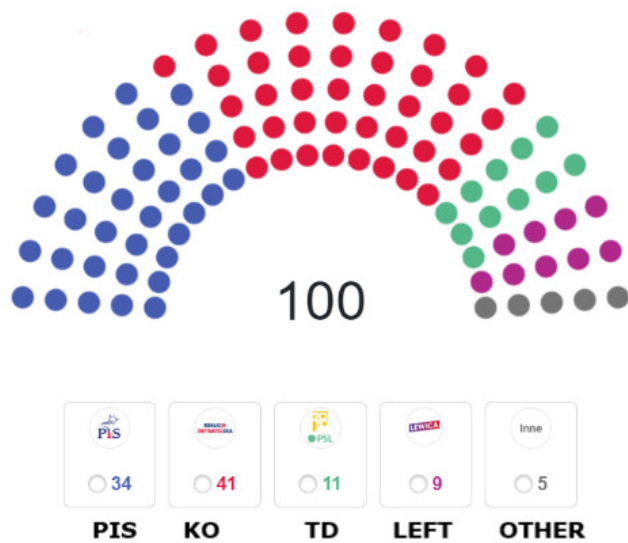


Figure 21. Senate Seats by Party⁵⁷

With Senate seats allocated according to the simple plurality rule in one-member constituencies, the “Democratic Opposition”-led coalition Senate Pact ‘23 (*Pakt Senacki* ‘23) prevailed over PiS that can now rely on no more than 34 senators (out of 100), while the forces of the opposition have managed to introduce: 41 senators for the Civic Platform, 11 for the Third Way and 9 for the New Left, with 5 independent, yet opposition-friendly, senators, constituting an absolute majority of 66 out of 100.

This supposedly undeniable aftermath of the election has since then, however, become the subject of a heated debate. Law and Justice party leaders, and the government-controlled Polish Television (TVP) network, have defined this result as their party’s «third victory in a row» and «a great success for our formation and our project for Poland»⁵⁸. Accordingly, President Andrzej Duda, with his own

⁵⁷ tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-pkw-senat.

⁵⁸ tvp.info/73444266/wybory-2023-jaroslaw-kaczynski-skomentowal-wynik-wyborow.

political roots in the Law and Justice party, after consultations with all parliamentary forces, decided to convoke the first session of the new chambers for 13th November (*i.e.* late but within the one-month period following the election imposed by the Constitution)⁵⁹ and to give the incumbent Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki of PiS, mandate to form a new government⁶⁰. Comments from observers in general sympathy with the “Democratic Opposition” interpret these moves as the President’s attempts to postpone the passage of power to the parliamentary majority coalition or even to gain time for PiS-controlled government to buy off (if not blackmail into submission) enough opposition MPs to maintain power⁶¹. The Presidential Palace’s counterargument is that it has been a well-established constitutional practice ever since 1989 to entrust the leader of the strongest single parliamentary party with the mission of forming the new government⁶².

Also, to convince the President of the existence of a majority coalition formed by the former “Democratic Opposition”, its leaders signed a formal coalition agreement. The last of its three parts concerned the division of the highest offices (Donald Tusk as Prime Minister, Szymon Hołownia and Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska as speakers of both parliamentary chambers for the first two years) among the members of the coalition. The second part was devoted to the question of PiS accountability and constitutional responsibility since «without accounting for the pathologies and crimes of the previous government there is not and there will not be a Poland based on justice and the rule of law»⁶³. Last but not least, the first and crucial part of the contract identified twenty-four programme points to be implemented by the new government. While there was a broad consensus on a number of topics, the agreement has also revealed major contrasts over ideologically sensitive issues such as abortion and LGBT rights, totally absent from the text amidst reluctance from the more conservative coalition member, the Third Way.

Accordingly, on 13th November Szymon Hołownia and Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska were elected speakers of the Sejm and the Senate, however President Andrzej Duda later that day nonetheless appointed Mateusz Morawiecki as new Prime Minister.

In a speech delivered on the occasion of Independence Day, celebrated on 11th November, Jarosław Kaczyński made some very strong remarks, not only once again defining the Civic Coalition as a “German party” but also warning his followers that, due to the planned EU treaty revision, with the “Democratic Opposition” in power, Poland as State «will not be sovereign and independent,

⁵⁹ prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/pierwsze-posiedzenia-sejmu-i-senatu-13-listopada,76906.

⁶⁰ pap.pl/aktualnosci/prezydent-powierza-misje-tworzenia-rzadu-premierowi-morawieckiemu-marek-sawicki.

⁶¹ oko.press/duda-wskazal-morawieckiego-na-premiera.

⁶² wpolityce.pl/polityka/668748-pis-w-tej-samej-sytuacji-co-koledzy-tuska-z-partii-ludowej.

⁶³ polska2050.pl/assets/uploads/2023/11/69273236-dd1a-6c16-30eb-3751c06dcb20.pdf.

indeed will not be a State»⁶⁴, adding that «any price is acceptable, when one fights for your country's independence, [...] it is beautiful to suffer and even die for the good of one's fatherland»⁶⁵.

Consequently, even if Mateusz Morawiecki ultimately fails to gather the necessary majority and, as a result, by Christmas, Donald Tusk is elected Prime Minister by the Sejm, according to the procedure foreseen by the Constitution, his prospective government of the now “Democratic Opposition” will continue to face substantial challenges.

Firstly, one must consider the institutional dimension. It is to be expected that President Duda, armed with a veto power in legislation, which the probable Donald Tusk-led government will be unable to override (with its 248 MPs against 276 required for the qualified majority of 3/5), will prevent the entry into force of any legislation aimed at reversing previous PiS policies. Another valid possibility is for the President to direct any act of parliament to be reviewed by the Constitutional Tribunal, dominated by PiS-friendly judges, some of whom appointed, as most lawyers argue, in violation of the Constitution. Within the judicial branch a highly sensitive issue is the Supreme Court (*Sąd Najwyższy*, SN), with a conflict between pre-PiS era “old judges” and PiS-appointed “new judges”, the latter ones within the Chamber of Exceptional Supervision and Public Matters meant to determine the validity of the election itself. Another institutional pillar of PiS controversial reforms has been the National Council of the Judiciary (*Krajowa Rada Sądownictwa*, KRS), also shaped by the ruling party against the previous constitutional practice, still actively appointing judges who subsequently pronounce thousands of verdicts in public courts of law. A number of other State institutions, including but not limited to the Polish National Bank, the National Broadcasting Council or the National Media Council, controlled by PiS appointees will no doubt remain loyal to Jarosław Kaczyński and hostile to the new parliamentary majority that will no doubt make attempts to replace some of their leading members as soon as possible.

Secondly, a major challenge facing the new coalition will most likely be its complex internal structure. Even though formally it consists of three forces, *i.e.* two coalitions (Civic Coalition and Third Way) and one unitary committee (New Left), in fact they all unite no fewer than nine minor entities, some of them more or less radically leftist, some (most in fact) liberal, some moderately conservative. These discrepancies are likely to surface on numerous occasions as the more left-leaning elements within the coalition will attempt to eagerly make good on their electoral promises by proposing bills on highly contentious topics such as abortion, LGBT rights, separation of church and State, *etc.* Another likely problem is that of a choice between a more or less radical strategy to be adopted *vis-à-vis* previous PiS policies. Since the PiS-controlled Constitutional Tribunal is unable to rule on unconstitutionality of the former government majority's steps, the more radical

⁶⁴ wpolityce.pl/polityka/670351-prezes-kaczynski-w-krakowie-dzis-mamy-szczegolna-sytuacje.

⁶⁵ wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/przemowienie-jaroslaw-a-kaczynskiego-czy-zaskoczy-polakow-relacja-na-zywo/j2v57nj.

wing of the future government might consider as a viable solution a declaration by the Sejm that these acts are simply null and void. The more moderate elements, however, would regard such actions as a medicine no better than the disease (unconstitutionally erasing now unconstitutional decisions hitherto taken by PiS). Thus, either the more radically-minded voters of the New Left will likely feel unsatisfied with their deputies' inability to pass vital equality and human rights legislation or, if it is passed, the more cautious Third Way supporters will feel they are contributing to a cultural revolution they have little appetite for.

Thirdly, immense socio-psychological problems are probably ahead. Only a minority of observers believe that the sooner or later inevitable end of PiS rule and the subsequent dismantling of the “national media”, as a vehicle for nationalist-populist propaganda, will enable the former PiS voters to embrace a more nuanced vision of both Polish and European reality and will thus reduce the existing polarization in society⁶⁶. However, many other Polish intellectuals are of the opinion that «PiS is a child of Polish tradition deriving from its aspect which I call ‘eternal PiS’, [...] which is all about ill-treating our own State and turning our backs on Europe» or a «gene of self-destruction»⁶⁷. Therefore, PiS and its voters will most likely remain a crucial factor in Polish politics, all the more prone to radicalization since, as we have seen, its leaders picture the perspective of Donald Tusk in power as comparable to German occupation aiming to revise EU treaties in a federalist direction so as to reduce Poland to «a territory populated by Poles» and not a sovereign State. Therefore, it is to be expected that PiS will try hard to mobilize their supporters against the new government, resorting to emotional and ideological polarization. With PiS sympathizers gradually losing their posts in public institutions (*e.g.* parliament, government, the judiciary, the media), this kind of hostile propaganda will gain in strength and radical protests or violent clashes are more than possible.

Finally, financial issues will most likely be at stake. Law and Justice government has made a flagship of their electoral success since 2015 the generous social policies symbolized by the monthly 500 *złoty* per child grant and reversing the previous liberal reform postponing retirement age to 67 years of age. Liberal experts had long claimed that «there is and there will not be the money» to finance these promises⁶⁸. However, in the recent electoral campaign the “Democratic Opposition” came up with its own series of benefits, grants and other financial proposals (*e.g.* the already mentioned 30% pay rise for teachers and “0% mortgage” for young people). Efficient as they have proved to be in the campaign, these programmes – if put into practice – will certainly generate a significant burden for public finances. The current condition of the latter remains somewhat of a mystery. Although the incumbent PiS government at the beginning of 2023 had still argued

⁶⁶rp.pl/wybory/art39228581-po-zapowiada-likwidacje-tvp-info-i-wiadomosci-porownanie-do-russia-today.

⁶⁷wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,29120605,odwieczny-pis-skad-wzial-sie-w-nas-gen-samozaglady.html.

⁶⁸ wpolityce.pl/polityka/667291-oni-juz-wskrzeszaja-haslo-pieniedzy-nie-ma-i-nie-bedzie.

that Poland had a budget surplus, and not a deficit⁶⁹, already in November Prime Minister Morawiecki admitted the deficit would amount to 165 billion *złoty*, while independent experts estimated that the actual deficit of the whole public sector, including the sums hidden in a variety of government funds and agencies, would stand at 277 billion *złoty*⁷⁰. Therefore, it might turn out to be all but impossible to deliver on the electoral promises of the “Democratic Opposition”, amidst not only the institutional barriers, divergences within the coalition, intense polarization, but also an empty national treasury.

As we have seen the 2023 parliamentary election by all means marked a turning point in the country’s political life returning back to the future, or to its former liberal democratic order. Amidst unprecedented mobilization of young voters resulting in a historically high turnout at the polling stations, the authoritarian populism practiced by the Law and Justice party since 2015 came to an end, despite the incumbents’ unwillingness to accept it. However, an analysis of the electorates of PiS and the “Democratic Opposition” has shown that alongside some classic cleavages of urban/rural, young/old, educated/uneducated, wealthy/poor, liberal/conservative contemporary Poland remains “a house divided” which – according to Abraham Lincoln’s famous phrase – “cannot stand”. Therefore, the new government, if and when it is finally allowed to take office, will need to face harsh accusations of no less than national treason, apart from the other challenges within the institutional, structural and financial spheres. Those observers who shy away from forecasting such a “house divided” to fall, find consolation in the hope that it may also “cease to be divided” through a gradual process of depolarization and reconciliation.

⁶⁹money.pl/gospodarka/budzet-2023-r-rzad-pis-chwali-sie-nadwyzka-w-budziecie-ale-gigantyczna-dziura-tak-naprawde-sie-powieksza-6871703618751168a.html.

⁷⁰businessinsider.com.pl/gospodarka/oszacowali-realny-stan-finansow-publicznych-gorzej-niz-sadzono/cj5370s.