

Polish election: A final look at the parties and the campaign

Poland will hold parliamentary elections on 25 October. **Aleks Szczerbiak** writes that opinion polls suggest the right-wing opposition, Law and Justice, will emerge as the largest party following the election. However, given that no political grouping in post-communist Poland has ever secured an overall parliamentary majority, and the party's shortage of potential coalition partners, there is still a chance that the current ruling party, Civic Platform, could remain in office.

On 25 October Poland will hold a parliamentary election whose outcome could determine the future shape of the political scene for years to come. Opinion polls suggest that the right-wing **Law and Justice** (PiS) party, the main opposition grouping, will

emerge as the largest formation in the new parliament. In May's presidential election Law and Justice

candidate Andrzej Duda unexpectedly defeated incumbent Bronisław Komorowski, who was backed by the centrist **Civic Platform** (PO), the main governing party since 2007. Since then Law and Justice has maintained a clear lead of around 10 per cent over the ruling party in opinion polls.

Its strategy has been to focus 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 has set out a series of attractive (if potentially very costly) pledges to: reverse the Civic Platform government's deeply unpopular decision to increase the retirement age to 67 (from 60 for women and 65 for men); introduce additional child benefits for poorer and larger families; and raise tax-free income thresholds. In doing so, the party has tapped into the fact that many Poles living beyond the large urban centres, especially younger voters, are frustrated not to have seen a more substantial increase in their living standards, even as the country's economy has grown in recent years.

Law and Justice has also given a higher profile to less well-known, second-rank politicians likely to appeal to centrist voters and moved its more controversial leaders into the background. A good example of this was the decision to make the party's emollient deputy leader Beata Szydło its prime ministerial nominee rather than its more combative leader Jarosław Kaczyński. Mr Kaczyński has an extremely dedicated following among Law and Justice's core supporters but is a polarising figure and one of the country's least trusted politicians among more moderate voters. Civic Platform strategists were banking on the fact that, with Mr Kaczyński as the focus, its negative campaigning would be more effective than it was during the presidential campaign when the Law and Justice leader kept a low profile.

The Duda factor

Another key element of Law and Justice's strategy has been to capitalise on Mr Duda's popularity and high public profile. Although he has been very careful not to support Law and Justice overtly, the new President has used the various political and constitutional instruments at his disposal to advance the party's policy agenda. In his first major



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initiative after being sworn in, Mr Duda proposed holding a referendum on the government's unpopular pension reforms to coincide with the election. When the Civic Platform-dominated Senate – Poland's second chamber, which approves referendum initiatives – voted down Mr Duda's proposal, he used his right to initiate legislation to submit a draft law returning the retirement age to its previous levels.

Civic Platform has found Mr Duda a difficult opponent: knowing that it cannot mount a head-on attack upon a newly elected head of state with a large popular mandate, but sensing the danger that he represents to the party's electoral prospects. It has tried to undermine Mr Duda by criticising him as a 'partisan President' for failing to respond to the government's requests for him to convene meetings of the Cabinet Council (a cabinet meeting chaired by the head of state) and National Security Council.

Mr Duda dismissed these as electoral stunts and instead met with individual ministers to discuss specific policy areas. In fact, Mr Duda does not enjoy especially high popularity ratings compared with other Presidents at the beginning of their term of office; perhaps not surprisingly, having been plunged into an election campaign he is bound to be perceived as partisan by many supporters of the ruling party. Nonetheless, for the moment at least most Poles appear to be willing to give Mr Duda the benefit of the doubt and, as Poland's most trusted politician, he remains a valuable electoral asset for Law and Justice.

Civic Platform's counter-offensive

Civic Platform's election strategy has involved trying to draw lessons from Mr Komorowski's passive and complacent campaign. Party leader and prime minister Ewa Kopacz has been extremely active in trying to convince voters that she is in touch with their concerns, with a government roadshow involving cabinet meetings being held in Poland's provincial cities.

Moreover, conscious of the need to avoid coming across as simply resting upon its laurels, the ruling party has argued that it is now time for ordinary Poles to benefit more directly from the country's economic success and see a visible improvement in their living standards. The centrepiece of this was an apparently radical overhaul of the income tax and social security system which would come into effect in 2017 or 2018, and involve scrapping separate social security and health premiums and introducing new unified personal taxes, ranging from 10 per cent for the poorest families to 39.5 per cent for the wealthiest.

Another important element of Civic Platform's counter-offensive has been an attempt to generate fear of an opposition victory. Although the presidential election suggested that this tactic was not as effective as it had once been, the



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Bronisław Komorowski. Credits: Wojciech Grzędzinski / Wikimedia Commons (CC-BY-SA 4.0)

argument that the ruling party is a better guarantor of stability than the confrontational and allegedly authoritarian style of politics that many voters (rightly or wrongly) associate with Law and Justice and its leader has been a staple of all of Civic Platform's successful election campaigns.

This portrayal of itself as the most effective bulwark against Law and Justice could be seen in its attempts to repeat its previous manoeuvre of inviting prominent politicians from rival political groupings to join Civic Platform's candidate lists. This time prominent political 'transfers' include Ludwik Dorn, interior minister and deputy prime minister in the 2005-7 Law and Justice-led governments, and Grzegorz Napieralski, former leader of the communist successor [Democratic Left Alliance](#) (SLD), the smaller left-wing opposition party.

Civic Platform also claimed that Mrs Szydło would be steered by Mr Kaczyński from behind-the-scenes, and possibly replaced if Law and Justice won the election. It drew analogies with the situation after the party's election victory in 2005 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.

Law and Justice stays on top

However, for various reasons these initiatives have only had a limited impact: keeping the ruling party in the electoral game but failing to really dent Law and Justice's lead. For sure, while Mrs Kopacz's mobile cabinet meetings appeared unconventional (sometimes even comical) they did at least give the impression of an active government and prime minister trying to engage with the public. Surveys also suggest that Mrs Kopacz is personally quite popular, with Poles admiring her determination and resilience, and even slightly ahead of Mrs Szydło when asked who would make the better prime minister.

However, the Civic Platform leader lacks gravitas and charisma and has found it difficult to translate her personal popularity into electoral support for her party. Moreover, the party's flagship tax reform plan was complicated and presented in a rather vague and incoherent way, with voters struggling to grasp its full implications. Civic Platform also has a major credibility problem with such reforms as many voters see its record in office as being characterised by programmatic timidity, often referred to dismissively as 'the politics of warm water in the taps'.

Law and Justice also benefited from the fact that disillusionment with the political establishment and a strong prevailing mood that it is time for change have been the main drivers of Polish politics in recent months. Much of this anti-establishment feeling has been directed towards Civic Platform, whom many voters, especially younger ones, see as representing an out-of-touch 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.

Moreover, Civic Platform's previously highly successful strategy of mobilising passive anti-Law and Justice voters through invoking the 'politics of fear' is no longer as effective as it once was, particularly among a younger generation who have no (positive or negative) memories of the 2005-7 Law and Justice-led governments. Notwithstanding the



Ewa Kopacz. Credits: Platforma Obywatelska RP / Wikimedia Commons.
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fact that Mr Kaczyński's party has made a conscious effort to 'de-toxify' its image, Civic Platform has also undermined its own narrative by recruiting individuals who are closely associated with the 'Fourth Republic' project, such as Mr Dorn, on to its candidate lists. Indeed, many voters see this as further evidence that Civic Platform is a cynical 'party of power', with its anti-Law and Justice rhetoric simply a rhetorical device to frighten voters for electoral gain.

Everyone against Law and Justice?

While Mr Komorowski's unexpected presidential election defeat leads one to be cautious about making firm predictions based on opinion polls, the momentum in this campaign is clearly with Law and Justice. However, even if, as appears increasingly likely, Mr Kaczyński's party emerges as the largest in the new parliament it may also fail to secure an overall majority, something no political grouping has achieved in post-communist Poland. Law and Justice's current poll ratings suggest that this is possible, and a 'wild card' – such as the European migration crisis, where its hard line stance opposing the government's decision to accept the EU's relocation scheme is in line with public sentiments – could provide the party with enough of a boost to secure such a result.

However, if Law and Justice does need to find coalition partners the performance of the minor parties – particularly which ones cross the minimum vote threshold required to secure parliamentary representation (5 per cent for parties and 8 per cent for electoral alliances) – will be crucial. None of the current parliamentary groupings – the agrarian [Polish Peasant Party](#) (PSL), Civic Platform's junior coalition partner since 2007, and the Democratic Left Alliance and liberal-left '[Your Movement](#)' (TR) grouping, which have formed the [United Left](#) (ZL) electoral alliance – appear likely to want to form a coalition with Law and Justice.

Neither does the '[Modern](#)' (Nowoczesna) grouping led by liberal economist Ryszard Petru which is also hovering around the 5 per cent mark. Law and Justice's most likely potential coalition partner appears to be the '[Kukiz '15](#)' electoral committee, a right-wing grouping led by the charismatic rock star and social activist Paweł Kukiz whose support has slumped in recent months but is still holding up at just over 5 per cent. Another potential ally might the [Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic Freedom and Hope](#) (KORWiN), the latest project of Janusz Korwin-Mikke: a veteran eccentric of the political scene whose main campaign theme is opposition to the Islamisation of Poland and which might cross the threshold if the migration issue flares up again before polling day.

If Mr Kaczyński's party falls short of a parliamentary majority and only the smaller left-wing, agrarian and liberal parties secure representation, then Civic Platform could still cobble together an 'everyone against Law and Justice' coalition government. However, such an administration would be a recipe for (possibly severe) political instability: a very weak, and probably short-lived, construct containing several partners with different policy agendas and having to 'co-habit' with a hostile Law and Justice-backed President.

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