

Consolidation and stabilisation around the 'post-transition divide': the October 2019 Polish parliamentary election

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**Consolidation and stabilisation around
the ‘post-transition divide’?:**

**The October 2019 Polish
parliamentary election**

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Abstract

This paper argues that the Law and Justice party won the 2019 Polish parliamentary election by raising the electoral stakes for key groups of its core supporters encouraging them to vote out of fear that the liberal-centrist opposition parties would water down or abandon its extremely popular social welfare programmes. The election saw the continued endurance and strengthening of Poland's 'post-transition divide' which dominated the Polish political scene since 2005 and found expression in the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly. It also saw the continuation of the trend towards levels of electoral volatility decreasing and support for the two main parties increasing, pointing to the increasing stabilisation of the Polish party system. Attitudes towards the nature of the transition to democracy, and divisions between supporters and opponents of the institutions and elites that emerged from it, overlapping with attitudes towards the post-2015 Law and Justice governments, appeared to become the main organising principle of the Polish party political scene.

Consolidation and stabilisation around the ‘post-transition divide’?:

The October 2019 Polish parliamentary election

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University of Sussex

The parliamentary election held on October 13th 2019, the ninth since the emergence of multi-party politics in 1989, saw the highest turnout in any post-communist Polish legislative poll and a decisive victory for the incumbent right-wing Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość: PiS) party. Law and Justice secured the largest vote share won by any political grouping in a post-1989 Polish parliamentary election and became the first governing party to secure re-election with an overall majority for a second term of office. The liberal-centrist Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska: PO), Poland’s governing party from 2007-15, remained easily the largest opposition grouping and, at the head of the ‘Civic Coalition’ (Koalicja Obywatelska: KO), retained a clear lead over the united ‘Left’ (Lewica) slate which finished third. The latter, although delighted to have regained parliamentary representation after a four-year hiatus, had hoped for considerably more. In the biggest surprises of the election, both the ‘Polish Coalition’ (Koalicja Polska) electoral alliance, led by the agrarian-centrist Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe: PSL), and radical right ‘Confederation’ (Konfederacja) grouping also crossed the parliamentary representation threshold.

This paper seeks to explain the election outcome and examines what it meant for the future of the Polish party system. It begins by setting out the background to the election, surveying the main developments in party politics during the 2015-19 parliament. Section two examines the election campaign before section three moves on to analyse the results. Section four then looks at what lessons can be drawn from the election about the long-term trajectory of Polish politics, particularly whether it was continuing to consolidate and stabilise around the two large electoral blocs which formed the basis for what might be termed the ‘post-transition’ divide. Finally, a post-script considers party system developments in the subsequent May-June 2020 presidential election.

The paper argues that Law and Justice won the election mainly by raising the electoral stakes for key groups of its core supporters and encouraging them to vote out of fear that the liberal-centrist opposition parties would water down or abandon the extremely popular social welfare programmes that were the key to its original electoral success in 2015 and subsequent enduring popularity. It also argues that election saw the continued endurance and strengthening of Poland’s ‘post-transition divide’ which dominated the Polish political scene since 2005 and found expression in the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly. The election saw the continuation of the trend towards levels of electoral volatility decreasing and support for the two main parties increasing, pointing to the increasing stabilisation of the Polish party system. Attitudes towards the nature of the transition to democracy, and divisions between supporters and opponents of the institutions and elites that emerged from it, overlapping with attitudes towards the post-2015 Law and Justice governments, appeared to become the main organising principle within Polish politics.

Polish party development in the 2015-19 parliament

The Polish political scene was deeply polarised after Law and Justice, previously the main opposition grouping, took office following its decisive victory in the October 2015 parliamentary election. It also became the first political grouping in post-communist Poland to secure an outright parliamentary majority in the Sejm, the country's more powerful lower legislative chamber.¹ Earlier that year, the Law and Justice-backed candidate Andrzej Duda won a shock victory in the May 2015 presidential election. However, the new government quickly came under heavy fire from its political opponents and the Western opinion-forming media, and was embroiled in an ongoing conflict with the EU political establishment who accused it of undermining the fundamentals of democracy and the 'rule of law', primarily as a result of its approach to the judiciary. Partly as a response to this, Mateusz Morawiecki, a respected former banker, replaced incumbent Beata Szydło as prime minister in December 2017, having earlier served as her finance minister and deputy prime minister. Law and Justice hoped to re-focus the government's priorities on to economic development and improving its international standing, particularly within the EU. It hoped that, having carried out difficult and controversial reforms during the first half of the parliament, a pivot to the technocratic political centre would win over moderate voters.²

However, in spite of the harsh criticisms that it received, Law and Justice retained its popularity and enjoyed a clear opinion poll lead throughout the four-year parliamentary term.³ Many Poles accepted the government's argument that, rather than undermining democracy and the rule of law, its actions were necessary to restore pluralism and balance to institutions which, they said, had been expropriated by extremely well-entrenched, and often deeply corrupt, post-communist elites. Perhaps even more importantly, Law and Justice was trusted on the socio-economic issues that voters cared most about because it was able to deliver on the high profile social spending and welfare promises that were the key to its 2015 election victories. The most significant of these was its extremely popular flagship '500 plus' child benefit programme. This had an important symbolic effect providing a significant and clearly identifiable financial boost to many low-income households who felt frustrated that they had not shared sufficiently in Poland's post-communist economic transformation.⁴ An important element of this - that was linked to, but went beyond, the simple question of financial transfers - was what might be termed the 're-distribution of prestige'.⁵ Many ordinary Poles who previously felt themselves to be second-class citizens started to sense that the government finally cared about and respected the less well-off, helping them to regain their sense of dignity and moral worth. Law and Justice argued that while politicians often promised to help the less well-off, it was the first governing party to actually deliver on these pledges on such a scale.⁶ At the same time, although the government's opponents argued that

¹ For more on the 2015 Polish parliamentary election, see: Kamil Marcinkiewicz and Mary Stegmaier. 'The parliamentary election in Poland, October 2015'. *Electoral Studies*. Vol 41. March 2016, pp221-224; Radosław Markowski. 'The Polish parliamentary election of 2015: a free and fair election that results in unfair political consequences'. *West European Politics*. Vol 39 No 6. 2016. pp1311-1322; Aleks Szczerbiak. 'An anti-establishment backlash that shook up the party system? The October 2015 Polish parliamentary election'. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*. Vol 18 No 4. 2017. pp. 404-427; and Ben Stanley. 'A New Populist Divide? Correspondences of Supply and Demand in the 2015 Polish Parliamentary Elections'. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*. Vol 33 No 1. February 2019, pp17-43.

² See: Piotr Gociek. 'Dlaczego Morawiecki'. *Do Rzeczy*. 11-17 December 2017.

³ See: Konrad Kołodziejki. 'Rząd na fali wznoszącej'. *Sieci*, 9-15 October 2017.

⁴ See: Mariusz Janicki and Wiesław Władysław. '500 plus demokracja'. *Polityka*, 20-26 September 2017.

⁵ See: Michał Szuldrzyński. 'Czego nie rozumieją krytycy PiS'. *Rzeczpospolita*, 19 September 2017.

⁶ See: Konrad Kołodziejki. 'Tajemnica sukcesu PiS'. *Sieci*, 21-27 August 2017.

the huge expansion of social spending and tax cuts placed a massive strain on public finances, the country continued to maintain high levels of economic growth and falling unemployment, together with increased tax revenues that actually led to a reduction in the state budget deficit.

As a result of this, Poles were prepared to cut Law and Justice a lot of slack. So, although there was negative publicity surrounding various allegations of abuse of public office by Law and Justice politicians for partisan or private ends, this did not appear to damage the ruling party to any great extent.⁷ Moreover, because the party was generally quick off-the-mark in acting decisively to neutralise these scandals, if necessary by dismissing the implicated officials, its supporters appeared to regard such allegations as either false, the occasional lapses of a generally honest party, or endemic to Polish politics with Law and Justice at least attempting to ensure that it was not only the governing elites that shared in the fruits of Poland's economic transformation.

Similarly, Law and Justice was tactically adroit in knowing when to defuse, and not expend too political capital on, contentious issues, and retreat when it did not consider these to be priorities or core elements of its governing programme. A good example of this was the abortion issue. In autumn 2016, although most Law and Justice parliamentarians personally supported tightening Poland's already-restrictive law, facing an unexpectedly large groundswell of public opposition they voted down legislation sponsored by Catholic civic organisations representing the party's core 'religious right' electorate to make the practice illegal in all cases except when the mother's life was at risk. For sure, many Poles had misgivings about some of the government's specific measures, particularly its approach to constitutional issues and civic rights. Nonetheless, they often still felt that, for all its faults, Law and Justice deserved credit for at least attempting to tackle some of the apparently intractable problems with, and shortcomings of, the Polish state which were ignored by previous administrations.⁸

Finally, Law and Justice benefited from the fact that the liberal-centrist opposition failed to develop a convincing and attractive programmatic alternative on the socio-economic issues that Polish voters cared most about. For sure, the opposition retained considerable political assets, including: a sizeable potential base of popular support; substantial financial resources; and significant influence within, and widespread support from, the country's business, legal and cultural elites, including the backing of much of the privately-owned media. Nonetheless, the government's opponents floundered during much of the 2014-19 parliament,⁹ and also lacked a convincing leadership figurehead around whom they could rally. For sure, Civic Platform leader Grzegorz Schetyna was a good organiser and extremely effective and ruthless behind-the-scenes political operator. He consolidated his grip on the party apparatus, marginalised his internal opponents, and restored a sense of discipline and purpose to the party.¹⁰ After a period of uncertainty lasting the first couple of years of the new parliament, Mr Schetyna emerged as the undisputed leader of the opposition. Civic Platform also retained a number of important political assets including: a sizeable caucus comprising a large number of experienced parliamentarians; access to substantial state party funding; a relatively well-developed grassroots organisational network; and a local government base that included

⁷ See: Rafał Kalukin. 'Afera nie gejmczendzera'. *Polityka*, 11-17 September 2019.

⁸ See: Piotr Skwieciński. 'Państwo na serio'. *Sieci*, 25 September-1 October 2017.

⁹ For an interesting analysis of how the opposition mishandled and overplayed the 'rule of law' and 'democratic backsliding' issues by a commentator who was not sympathetic to Law and Justice, see: Robert Krasowski. 'Zemsta na salonie'. *Polityka*, 5-11 February 2020.

¹⁰ See, for example: Wojciech Szacki. 'PO: reaktywacja'. *Polityka*, 5-11 October 2016.

control of most of Poland's large cities and 16 regional authorities, which played a key role in distributing EU funds and were a major source of local patronage.

In fact, when Mr Schetyna took over the Civic Platform leadership in January 2016 following its crushing 2015 election defeat, the party faced a major, possibly even existential, crisis. Much of the widespread disillusionment with the political establishment, and strong prevailing mood that it was time for change, which contributed to Law and Justice's victories in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, was directed against Civic Platform. The latter was too associated with the 'Third Republic' status quo, which many voters saw as representing an out-of-touch and complacent elite disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people and tainted by scandals.

At the same time, the main focus for mobilising extra-parliamentary opposition to the government came from an anti-Law and Justice civic movement: the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji: KOD). The Committee mobilised thousands of Poles in anti-government street protests and was able to project itself, both domestically and internationally, as a large, bottom-up movement of ordinary citizens genuinely concerned about the apparent risk to democracy, civic freedoms and the rule of law in Poland. (Government supporters argued that its activities were orchestrated by opposition politicians and vested interests hostile to Law and Justice's plans to radically reconstruct the Polish state and introduce sweeping socio-economic policy reforms.) However, the Committee was hit by a leadership crisis when, in January 2017, leaked documents revealed that more than 120,000 zloties from its public collections had been channelled in regular payments to an IT company owned by Mateusz Kijowski, a computer programmer who quickly rose from obscurity to head up the organisation, and his wife.¹¹ In fact, the Committee had been losing momentum even before the IT contract scandal and had little idea of how to reach out to Poles who were not already committed government opponents, especially younger people who were notably under-represented on its protests.¹²

Meanwhile, a significant challenger for the opposition leadership also emerged in the form of the liberal 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) grouping led by financial sector economist Ryszard Petru. 'Modern' was elected to the Sejm in 2015 as the fourth largest party by picking up support from voters who felt that Civic Platform had drifted away from its free market roots. The party's greatest asset was the fact that it was able to contrast its 'newness' with the more compromised figures associated with Civic Platform. Without the political ballast of having to defend eight years in office, Mr Petru's criticisms of the Law and Justice government also appeared more authentic and credible and, at one point in 2016, 'Modern' even pulled ahead of Civic Platform in the polls.

However, Mr Petru's party lost its initial momentum. 'Modern' lacked both grassroots structures and experienced, battle-hardened politicians in its small parliamentary caucus. Unlike Mr Schetyna, who spent the first phase of his leadership attempting to consolidate the party's local organisation, Mr Petru chose a more centralised and media-oriented strategy. Embarrassingly for a grouping that prided itself on its managerial competence, 'Modern' was also hit by a court ruling that it had broken campaign funding rules and, as a consequence,

¹¹ See: Marcin Dobski. 'Kolejne faktury od lidera KOD'. *Rzeczpospolita*, 13 January 2017.

¹² See, for example: Anna Dąbrowska and Malwina Dziedzic. 'KOD reaktywacja'. *Polityka*, 14-20 September 2016; and Piotr Skwieciński. 'Pokoleniowy ból głowy'. *Sieci*, 27 March-2 April 2017.

stripped of its election refund and three-quarters of its 6.2 million złoties annual state subvention.¹³

In fact, ‘Modern’'s biggest underlying weakness lay in the narrowness of its programmatic appeal. Experience suggested that the social base for a technocratic, pro-business liberal party in Poland was relatively small. Civic Platform’s weak ideological underpinnings, on the other hand, always gave it much greater reach across the political spectrum and the potential to garner the support of a very broad coalition of voters united by their dislike of Law and Justice. Particularly after the party first took office back in 2007, Civic Platform adopted a deliberate strategy of diluting its ideological profile and projecting itself as a somewhat amorphous centrist ‘catch-all’ grouping, albeit with an increasingly social liberal tilt. Mr Schetyna also appeared to believe that only an ideologically eclectic, rather than overtly liberal, appeal could peel away enough centre-right voters to make Civic Platform an effective challenger to Law and Justice. He talked about restoring the party’s ‘conservative anchor’ (‘konserwatywna kotwica’ - rhetorically, if not in terms of any actual policy shifts) arguing that the party had become too identified with social liberalism.¹⁴

Moreover, not only did ‘Modern’ lose momentum as the effect of its ‘newness’ wore off but a series of gaffes by Mr Petru allowed the party’s opponents to portray him as an over-promoted political lightweight. Most spectacularly, in an appalling error of judgement at the end of 2016 Mr Petru went to Portugal for a holiday with one of his deputies, the recently divorced Joanna Schmidt, while their party colleagues were involved in a parliamentary sit-in protest as part of an apparently urgent struggle to save Polish democracy.¹⁵ ‘Modern’ never really recovered from this public relations disaster even when Mr Petru was replaced by Katarzyna Lubnauer as party leader at the end of 2017. Mired in debt, ‘Modern’ effectively ceased to exist as an independent political entity when, in the run-up to the autumn 2018 local elections, it joined the Civic Platform-led ‘Civic Coalition’ electoral alliance (which also included a number of other tiny left-wing groupings).

Mr Schetyna’s greatest success came in persuading virtually all the other main opposition parties - including the communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej: SLD), Polish Peasant Party and ‘Modern’ - to join the European Coalition (Koalicja Europejska: KE), an electoral alliance formed specifically to contest the May 2019 European Parliament (EP) election. This cemented his position as undisputed opposition leader and appeared to provide Law and Justice with a formidable electoral opponent. However, the Coalition’s ideological eclecticism made it difficult to develop a clear and distinctive programmatic message, and opposition to Law and Justice on its own did not prove to be a powerful enough mobilising appeal. In the event, Law and Justice won the EP election securing 45% of the votes (and 27 seats), ahead of the Coalition which won 38% (22 seats).¹⁶ This was a particularly impressive result for Law and Justice, given that virtually all of the main opposition parties were united in a single electoral bloc, and turnout in EP elections was traditionally very low overall but higher among better-off, urban voters who

¹³ See: Maciej Pieczyński. ‘Misztrzowie bankructwa’. *Do Rzeczy*, 14-20 November 2016.

¹⁴ See: Grzegorz Schetyna. ‘PO ma być chadecka’. *Do Rzeczy*, 8-14 August 2016.

¹⁵ See: Marcin Fijołek. ‘Latająca para’. *Sieci*, 23-29 January 2017; Malwina Dziedzic. ‘Nowoczesna po romansie’. *Polityka*, 15-21 February 2017; and Michał Kolanko. ‘Nowoczesna na rozdrożu’. *Rzeczpospolita*, 12 April 2017.

¹⁶ For more on the 2019 EP election in Poland see: Aleks Szczerbiak. ‘Poland’ in Vít Hloušek and Petr Kaniok, eds, *The European Parliament Election of 2019 in East-Central Europe: Second-Order Euroscepticism*, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020, pp175-199.

tended to support the liberal-centrist opposition. It provided the ruling party with a major psychological and strategic boost ahead of the autumn parliamentary poll. Moreover, while Mr Schetyna successfully saw off the various challenges for opposition leadership he also lacked dynamism and charisma, and for most of the 2015-19 parliament was Poland's least trusted politician.

At the same time, the 'Kukiz '15' electoral committee, led by the charismatic rock star and social activist Paweł Kukiz, failed to deliver on its early potential and gradually fell apart during the course of the 2014-19 parliament. Standing as an independent right-wing 'anti-system' candidate, Mr Kukiz caused a political sensation when he came from nowhere to finish third in the first round of the May 2015 Polish presidential election, picking up more than one-fifth of the votes. Mr Kukiz's signature issue, and main focus of his earlier social activism, was strong support for the replacement of Poland's current list-based proportional electoral system with UK-style single-member constituencies (known by the Polish acronym 'JOW'), which he saw as the key to renewing politics. In spite of running a poor campaign, following the October 2015 parliamentary election Kukiz'15 emerged as the third largest grouping in the Sejm, the more powerful lower chamber of the Polish parliament,.

However, Mr Kukiz's eclectic candidates list produced an ideologically diverse, and extremely unstable, parliamentary caucus comprising: liberal-conservatives, libertarians, nationalists, trade unionists, local civic activists, businessmen and campaigners for single-member constituencies. Not surprisingly, Kukiz'15 struggled to develop a distinctive political identity, trying not to become directly involved in the bitter, ongoing conflicts between supporters of Law and Justice and the liberal-centrist and left-wing so-called 'total' opposition over constitutional issues, as the Polish political scene became increasingly polarised. While its supporters appeared divided in their attitudes towards the Law and Justice government, Kukiz '15 attempted to position itself as a 'constructive' opposition. Moreover, Mr Kukiz failed to come up with any new ideas or initiatives, and his grouping could point to very few substantive political achievements. The only common denominator uniting its disparate ideological tendencies appeared to be opposition to the constitutional foundations of the post-1989 Polish state and its dominant elites, together with a vague 'anti-systemness' that the rock star-politician was felt to personify. Indeed, the key to Kukiz '15's continued political success, and even survival, remained its leader's personal credibility and popularity. Its supporters appeared willing to give the grouping the benefit the doubt and back it but only as long as they continued to view Mr Kukiz as the embodiment of opposition to the Polish political establishment, with the grouping's support liable to erode very quickly if they ceased to see him as the most credible fighter against 'the system'.

Kukiz'15 only secured 3.7% of the votes in the May 2019 EP election where it was replaced as the main repository for right-wing 'anti-system' and anti-establishment votes by the new radical right Confederation grouping. The Confederation was an eclectic political conglomerate that brought together a mix of radical right-wing free market economically libertarian conservatives clustered around the veteran political eccentric Janusz Korwin-Mikke, and the radical nationalist National Movement (Ruch Narodowy: RN), Eurosceptics and social conservatives. Its programme thus combined calls for tax cuts and shrinking the welfare state with criticisms of Law and Justice's alleged failure to be sufficiently robust in standing up for Poland's interests internationally. Its signature issue in the EP campaign was the question of Jewish wartime reparations which the Confederation argued was emblematic of the government's inability to defend Polish interests, in this case in its relations with the USA and Israel. As one of its leaders put it summing up the grouping's policy platform, 'we

don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU'.¹⁷ However, the Confederation narrowly failed to cross the 5% representation threshold in the EP election, securing 4.6% of votes, which led Law and Justice to feel (erroneously, as it turned out) that it had seen off this challenge on its right flank, particularly given that such niche radical groupings tended to perform less well in parliamentary elections where there was a higher turnout than 'second order' ones such as the EP poll.

At the same time, teetering on the brink of collapse the agrarian Polish Peasant Party - which was formed as the organisational successor to a former communist-era 'satellite' party, although it attempted to legitimate itself by claiming to have roots in the pre-communist agrarian movement which dates back to the Nineteenth Century - continued to face an existential challenge from Law and Justice to hang on to what was left of its core rural-agricultural electorate. The party was junior coalition partner in the Democratic Left Alliance-led governments between 1993-97 and 2001-3, and returned to office in 2007 when it became Civic Platform's governing partner until 2015. However, it took a severe battering in the 2015 parliamentary election, when it was both a victim of the anti-incumbent backlash and blamed specifically for failing to prevent the government's perceived neglect of rural areas and the agricultural sector. It only just scraped over the 5% threshold for parliamentary representation, its worst result in any post-1989 poll. As noted above, Law and Justice then went on to strengthen its position in the countryside by delivering on its generous social and welfare pledges, notably the flagship '500 plus' child subsidy programme which provided a significant boost to less well-off families living beyond the large urban centres.

Following its election defeat, the Peasant Party decided to make a radical break with its old guard and elected as leader 34-year-old Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, employment minister in the previous Civic Platform-led government and one of a new generation of young, articulate party activists.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the party always tried to make a virtue of its predictability and, under Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz's leadership, carve out a distinct niche by projecting itself as a constructive and moderating force in Polish politics. However, this proved to be a challenge during the 2015-19 parliament given the way that the political scene was polarised around bitter disputes between Law and Justice and the liberal-centrist and left-wing opposition. Although the Peasant Party supported the largest anti-government demonstrations, it also tried to distance itself from the Committee for the Defence of Democracy and the other opposition parties. This stemmed partly from the fact that the party was concerned that the Committee had developed an increasingly liberal-left ideological profile on moral-cultural issues which was likely to be off-putting to its small-town traditionalist, socially conservative voters. Moreover, not only did the Peasant Party find itself marginalised by other opposition groupings in debates where it had few specialists, 'rule of law' issues were simply not particularly salient for its core electorate.

At the same time, although Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz came across as competent and energetic he also lacked gravitas and charisma, while the party's parliamentary caucus contained many inexperienced deputies and few striking personalities or notable policy specialists. This meant that for much of the 2015-19 parliament it almost completely disappeared from national media debates. Nonetheless, the party retained considerable organisational assets and

¹⁷ See: Michał Kolanko. 'Skrajności Konfederacji'. *Rzeczpospolita*, 21 May 2019.

¹⁸ See: Krystyna Naszkowska. 'Wyciąganie PSL z dołka'. *Wyborcza.pl*, 19 November 2015 at <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,19209762,wyciaganie-psl-z-dolka.html> (accessed 20 November 2015); and Janina Paradowska. 'Miałeś chłopie złoty róg'. *Polityka*, 15-21 June 2016.

remained in the game as potentially the greatest electoral threat to Law and Justice in rural areas. The party's most important asset was its extensive local organisational base of 100,000 members,¹⁹ thousands of local councillors and (until the 2018 local elections) a share of control in 15 out of 16 regional authorities. For a party previously wracked by internal divisions it also displayed a surprising degree of unity around Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz's leadership.

For sure, in the autumn 2018 regional elections the Peasant Party scored 12.1% of the vote, significantly higher than its national opinion poll ratings. But the party always performed better in local elections - partly due to its strong grassroots organisational base, but also because there was generally a higher turnout in rural areas in these polls - and this was actually its worst performance in a regional election since 2002. Moreover, although it remained in power (in coalition with Civic Platform) in 8 out of the 16 regional authorities, the party lost control of some of its most important strongholds, notably the Lubelskie and Świętokrzyskie provinces in South-Eastern Poland. This considerable loss of influence was important because the agrarians were primarily an office-seeking grouping that, critics argued, had developed powerful networks of patronage and interest clusters at the local level. Regional authorities played a key role in disbursing EU funds and were thus a major source of party patronage. Finally, the party proceeded to alienate a large segment of its socially conservative core rural and small-town electoral base as result of contesting the EP election as part of the European Coalition electoral alliance dominated by socially liberal and culturally left-wing parties.

The other big story of the 2015 election was the failure of the Polish left to secure parliamentary representation. For much of the post-1989 period the most powerful political and electoral force on the left was the Democratic Left Alliance, which governed Poland from 1993-97 and 2001-5. However, the Alliance was in the doldrums after its support collapsed at the 2005 parliamentary election following a series of spectacular high level corruption scandals. It contested the 2015 election as part of the 'United Left' (Zjednoczona Lewica: ZL) electoral alliance but failed to cross the 8% threshold for electoral coalitions, securing only 7.6% of the vote (it was 5% for individual parties). As a result, no left-wing party was represented in parliament for the first time since 1989 as a result of which, as noted above, Law and Justice became the first political grouping in post-communist Poland to secure an outright majority.

Deprived of parliamentary representation, the left remained weak and divided throughout the 2015-19 term. Following its defeat, the Alliance elected ex-communist Włodzimierz Czarzasty as its new leader; a controversial figure linked to the so-called 'Rywin affair', the first of the high-profile corruption scandals that engulfed the party during the 2001-5 parliament. Many commentators wrote the Alliance off as a cynical and corrupt political grouping whose ageing, communist-nostalgic electorate was literally dying off. However, the party continued to have deep social roots in those sections of the electorate that, due to their personal biographies, had positive sentiments towards, or direct material interests linking them to, the previous regime, especially those whose families were connected to the military and former security services.²⁰ This was a relatively small, and steadily declining, segment of

¹⁹ See: Jakub Szymczak, 'Partie jak ekskluzywne kluby, należy do nich tylko 0,8 proc. Polaków. To fatalny wynik na tle Europy'. *Oko.press*, 13 June 2019 at <https://oko.press/partie-jak-klubiki-dla-elit-nalezy-do-nich-tylko-08-proc-polakow-to-fatalny-wynik-na-tle-europy> (accessed 14 June 2019).

²⁰ See: Rafał Kalukin. 'Lewa do gory'. *Polityka*, 4-10 April 2018.

the electorate but sizeable enough to allow the Alliance to retain its hegemony on the Polish left. The party had 34,000 members,²¹ high by Polish standards, and maintained extensive local organisational structures covering most of the country.²² It also received around 17.3 million zloties in state subventions over the course of the parliament.²³

Following disappointing results in the autumn 2018 local elections, as noted above the Alliance contested May's EP poll as part of the European Coalition. However, although five of the Alliance's best-known political figures were elected among the Coalition's 22 MEPs, and the party was keen to contest the parliamentary election as part of a broad anti-Law and Justice pact, the electoral coalition broke up after the EP poll. Following the departure of the Peasant Party, Civic Platform was concerned that the Coalition's political centre of gravity would shift too far to the left and the Alliance might nominate high profile former communists among its parliamentary candidates, which could generate a backlash among voters who identified strongly with the anti-communist Solidarity tradition.

At one point, the future appeared to lie with the radical left 'Together' (Razem) party, which was formed in 2015 and gained kudos among many younger, left-leaning Poles for its dynamism and programmatic clarity. The party accused the Democratic Left Alliance of betraying left-wing ideas by pursuing orthodox liberal economic and Atlanticist foreign policies when in office. 'Together' won 3.6% of the vote in 2015 which was not enough to obtain parliamentary representation but meant that it secured around 12.7 million zloties of state funding,²⁴ and peeled away sufficient left-wing votes to, as noted above, prevent the 'United Left' from crossing the 8% threshold. However, it failed to capitalise on its early promise and attract a broader range of support beyond the well-educated urban 'hipsters' that formed its core. It also proved very difficult for the party to cut through with its distinctive left-wing socio-economic message at a time when the Polish political scene was so sharply polarised around attitudes towards the Law and Justice administration. Standing at the head of an alliance of smaller left-wing parties, 'Together' only secured 1.2% of the votes in the EP election.

In February 2019, to try and fill this vacuum a new liberal-left party 'Spring' (Wiosna) was formed by the former mayor of the Northern provincial town of Słupsk and veteran sexual minorities campaigner Robert Biedroń. 'Spring' was the only major opposition grouping not to join the European Coalition in the 2019 EP election campaign. However, after a promising start, the party struggled to carve out a niche for itself as the sharp polarisation between the two large electoral blocs strengthened the argument that the opposition needed to unite behind the Coalition as the only way to defeat Law and Justice. Moreover, 'Spring' increasingly focused its campaigning on moral-cultural issues turning itself into essentially a radical social liberal and anti-clerical party, the electoral base for which was relatively narrow in Poland. Moreover, in spite of the fact that calls for a stricter separation of Church and state

²¹ See: 'Partie jak ekskluzywne kluby, należy do nich tylko 0,8 proc. Polaków.

²² See: Anna Dąbrowska and Joanna Sawicka. 'Leworucja'. *Polityka*, 1-9 January 2018.

²³ See: PKW. *Informacja o przewidywanej wysokości subwencji na działalność statutową, przysługujących partiom politycznym w latach 2016-2019*. 25 January 2020 at <https://pkw.gov.pl/finansowanie-polityki/finansowanie-partii-politycznych/subwencja-z-budzetu-panstwa/informacja-o-przewidywanej-wysokosci-subwencji-na-dzialalnosc-statutowa-przyslugujacych-partiom-politycznym-w-latach-2016-2019> (accessed 5 February 2020).

²⁴ See: *Informacja o przewidywanej wysokości subwencji na działalność statutową, przysługujących partiom politycznym w latach 2016-2019*.

was one of the key elements of its programme, Mr Biedroń's party did not receive any electoral boost from the emergence of clerical sexual abuse as an EP election campaign issue.

Moreover, although 'Spring' crossed the 5% parliamentary representation threshold, the party's 6.1% vote share and 3 MEPs was a disappointing result well below its initial expectations. Mr Biedroń disillusioned many of his supporters when he announced that he would, after all, be taking up his EP seat, having previously said that he would stand down if elected in order to concentrate on the autumn parliamentary election, leaving him open to the charge that he had lost faith in his own political project. Although, for all his flip-flops, Mr Biedroń remained the Polish left's most popular and charismatic leader, 'Spring' lacked any strong ideological core (it initially avoided defining itself as left-wing, preferring the term 'progressive'), the party's finances were in a mess, and it failed to build up any local organisation, with supporters arguing that its decision-making structures were overly centralised and undemocratic.²⁵

The Campaign

At an election rally launching the party's plans to build a Polish version of a 'prosperous state' ('państwo dobrobytu') grounded in social solidarity and state-led economic modernisation, Law and Justice augmented its array of social welfare spending commitments.²⁶ The centre piece was a pledge to almost double the minimum wage by the end of 2023 and introduce regular annual cash bonus payments for pensioners and retirees. Together with earlier social welfare spending pledges, these programmes were aimed at raising the electoral stakes for key groups of Law and Justice core supporters, thereby encouraging them to turn out and vote through fear that the liberal-centrist opposition would water down or abandon them if it were to win office.

Law and Justice also skilfully mobilised support around a number of moral-cultural issues where it enjoyed widespread public support or that were important to its core electorate. In this campaign, for example, as a key secondary theme the party opposed what it called 'LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) ideology', an allegedly aggressive movement and policy agenda based on foreign ideas promoted by left-wing enemies of Western civilisation. In doing so, Law and Justice projected itself as the defender of the traditional family, Polish national identity, and Christian values and culture. These, it argued, stabilised the social order and promoted the common good but were threatened by 'a great offensive of evil' ('wielka ofensywa zła').²⁷ By focusing on these issues, and thereby strengthening its hold over conservative voters, Law and Justice also hoped to neutralise the electoral challenge from the 'Confederation'.

These were certainly polarising issues that struck an emotional chord with many Poles because they involved a clash of basic moral-cultural values and mapped on to some of the deepest divisions in Polish society. A defence of traditional moral codes and pushing back against Western cultural liberalism had always been a key element of Law and Justice's

²⁵ See: Tomasz Sawczuk. 'Zjednoczenie lewicy to koniec Wiosny'. *Kulturaliberalna.pl*, 28 October 2019 at <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2019/10/28/zjednoczona-lewica-koniec-wiosny/> (Accessed 29 October 2019); and Michał Syska. 'Wiosna już nie istnieje'. *Kulturaliberalna.pl*, 5 November 2019 at <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2019/11/05/wiosna-nie-istnieje-michal-syska-wywiad-tomasz-sawczuk/> (Accessed 6 November 2019).

²⁶ See: Konrad Kołodziejki. 'Państwo dobrobytu'. *Sieci*. 23-29 September 2019.

²⁷ See: Michał Kolanko. 'PiS: Cała naprzód przeciw złu'. *Rzeczpospolita*, 8 July 2019.

appeal to more socially conservative voters. Consequently, raising the issue's salience (according to the opposition, cynically as a pretext to create moral panic) certainly helped to mobilise the party's core supporters in smaller towns and rural areas where such values still held considerable sway. But Law and Justice framed its arguments so that they did not simply mobilise its core electorate but could also win broader public support. So while Poles appeared to be increasingly tolerant of 'LGBT' lifestyles, popular acceptance started to decline when the agenda moved beyond how individuals chose to live their private lives into areas which they felt belong to the realm of family life, such as proposals that appeared to diminish the role of parents as the primary educators of their children in matters of sexual relations and morality. While Poles were fairly evenly divided on the question of legal recognition of same-sex civil partnerships, a substantial majority opposed same-sex marriage (set out in the Polish Constitution as the union of a man and woman) and were overwhelmingly against granting adoption rights to same-sex couples.²⁸ Many, including those who were not especially religious, were also extremely hostile to the profanation of Catholic symbols by LGBT activists, as in Poland many of these were also regarded as broader national symbols.

For its part, Civic Platform ran a poor campaign and its only really successful initiative was, at the beginning of September, proposing the emollient (but low key) former parliamentary speaker Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska as the party's prime ministerial candidate; recognising Mr Schetyna's lack of wider appeal.²⁹ The Civic Platform leader was an extremely effective behind-the-scenes political operator but lacked dynamism and charisma and was one of Poland's least trusted politicians. A May 2019 survey by the Ipsos agency for the OKO.press portal found that only 9% of respondents (and 22% of 'European Coalition' voters) opted for Mr Schetyna as the best prime ministerial candidate (although 50% did not actually choose any of the current opposition leaders).³⁰ In doing so, Civic Platform copied a Law and Justice manoeuvre in the 2015 campaign when its polarising leader Jarosław Kaczyński nominated Mrs Szydło, then one of his deputies, as the party's prime ministerial nominee. However, although the move helped to neutralise one of Civic Platform's most significant negatives, it came too late to give Ms Kidawa-Błońska time to develop a profile as an authentic independent political figure and did not have any discernible impact on the grouping's poll ratings.

In fact, Civic Platform's (and the opposition's more generally) most fundamental problem was its lack of a convincing and attractive programmatic alternative, especially on the socio-economic issues that Poles seemed to care most about.³¹ Civic Platform strategists recognised that, rather than trying to outbid Law and Justice's huge expansion of individual social transfers and welfare benefit programmes (although it promised to continue with them), they should focus instead on improving the quality of public services, especially health care and education. However, while many Poles felt that these services had been neglected, they were also dubious whether Civic Platform and the opposition would actually deliver any improvements. Law and Justice's previous election victories reflected widespread disillusionment with the country's ruling elite, and the party simply had much greater

²⁸ See: CBOS. *Stosunek Polaków do związków homoseksualnych*. CBOS: Warsaw, July 2019.

²⁹ See: Malwina Dziedzić. 'Naznaczona'. *Polityka*, 11-17 September 2019.

³⁰ See: Piotr Pacewicz. "'Żadne z nich" najlepszym kandydatem na premiera z opozycji. Sondaż potwierdza kryzys przywództwa'. *Oko.press*. 29 May 2019 at <https://oko.press/zadne-z-nich-najlepszym-kandydatem-na-premiera-z-opozycji-sondaz-potwierdza-kryzys-przywodztwa> (accessed 30 May 2019).

³¹ See: Konrad Kolodziejki. 'Wymieranie dinozaurów'. *Sieci*, 11-17 September 2017; and Mariusz Staniszweski. 'Platforma Obywatelska się wyczerpała'. *Do Rzeczy*, 23-29 September 2019.

credibility than the opposition on these social policy issues having implemented most of the spending promises on which it was elected.

Although the leaders of the three main left-wing parties - the Democratic Left Alliance, 'Together' and 'Spring' - were bitterly critical of (indeed, probably actively disliked) each other, in July they agreed to contest the election as a single united electoral bloc. Chastened by its 2015 experience of failing to cross the higher 8% threshold, the Alliance did not want to run as party of a formal electoral coalition. However, to maintain their identity 'Together' and 'Spring' did not simply want their candidates to stand on the Democratic Left Alliance electoral lists, so it was proposed that the Alliance re-brand itself as simply the 'Left' (Lewica). But the name change was not approved in time to register with the State Electoral Commission, so the three parties had to contest the election under the old party name with 'Left' as simply the broader over-arching badging and campaign logo. Moreover, although the 'Left' bloc now only had to cross the lower 5% threshold for single parties, any state subsidies would be allocated solely to the Democratic Left Alliance, with funds passed on to the other two groupings on the basis of an informal agreement with no legal standing (under the electoral coalition formula they would all have been guaranteed a share). Nonetheless, the leaders of the 'Left' tried to present the pact as a synergy of its component parts rather than an opportunistic marriage of convenience. At the bloc's programmatic launch, they focused more on socio-economic themes - such as health care, public sector pay, employment rights, housing, and social welfare - rather than moral cultural-issues; understandably given that the former were what Poles appeared to care most about.³²

The European Coalition's disappointing EP election result raised serious doubts about the future of an electoral alliance built largely on the premise that, whatever its programmatic diversity, only a united opposition could defeat Law and Justice. Such doubts were particularly evident within the Polish Peasant Party. Although its leadership initially favoured remaining within a broad alliance, the party contained an influential faction that questioned whether a centrist grouping with a socially conservative, rural and small-town core electorate should contest the parliamentary election as part of a coalition dominated by liberal and left-wing parties. Indeed, following the EP election fiasco even Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz, who had strongly backed the European Coalition idea, realised that the agrarian grouping had to have a more distinctive appeal if it was to survive and recover its support.

As a consequence, the Peasant Party decided to take a risk by contesting the parliamentary election independently heading up a new centre-right electoral bloc dubbed the 'Polish Coalition' (Koalicja Polska: KP); although, in order to avoid the higher 8% threshold for electoral coalitions, its candidates actually stood on the party's electoral lists. The aim here was to reach out to new electoral constituencies, such as moderate conservatives in larger towns, and attract politicians from Civic Platform's increasingly marginalised conservative wing who were uncomfortable supporting a party that they felt was pivoting towards the cultural left. Moreover, although teaming up with the quintessentially establishment Peasant Party meant that Mr Kukiz risked losing much of his appeal as an 'anti-system' campaigner, it also managed to persuade the rock star-turned politician to join the 'Polish Coalition'.³³

³² See: Piotr Semka. 'Lewica ma duży apetyt'. *Do Rzeczy*, 23-29 September 2019.

³³ See: Łukasz Warzecha. 'Zagubiony w partiokracji'. *Do Rzeczy*, 19-25 August 2019; and Rafał Ziemkiewicz. 'Błąd antysystemu'. *Do Rzeczy*, 26 August-1 September 2019.

In spite of its relatively modest financial resources, Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz ran a very energetic and dynamic election campaign and was, for example, the only party leader to participate in the live televised debates, where he performed very effectively. Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz tried to present himself as a conciliatory and consensual political figure, and his party as a constructive opposition capable of acting as a moderating influence on the bitterly divided Polish political scene. An October 2019 survey conducted by the CBOS polling agency found him to be the most trusted opposition politician with 34% approval and 21% disapproval ratings.³⁴

Interestingly, during the parliamentary election campaign the ‘Confederation’ focused more on free market policies, calls for tax cuts and shrinking the size of the state, than its previous signature issues of the Law and Justice government’s alleged failure to take a sufficiently robust stance on moral-cultural issues or in standing up for Poland’s interests internationally on questions such as wartime reparations for the Jewish community.³⁵

Results

In the event, as **Table 1** shows, the October 13th election saw a record 61.74% turnout, the highest in any post-communist Polish parliamentary poll. This reflected the polarisation of, and deep divisions within, Polish society in recent years. Both supporters and opponents of the government were highly mobilised, sensing that this was one of the most important and consequential elections since the collapse of communism in 1989.

As **Table 2** shows, Law and Justice won a decisive victory securing 43.59% of the votes (up from 37.58% in 2015) and taking 235 seats in the 460-member Sejm. This was the largest vote share won by any political grouping (on the highest turnout) in any post-1989 Polish parliamentary election, and Law and Justice became the first governing party grouping to secure re-election with an overall majority for a second term of office. This achievement was all the more impressive given that in 2019 less than 1% of the votes were cast for political groupings that failed to cross the parliamentary representation threshold (5% for individual parties) compared with nearly 17% in 2015. The Polish electoral system, proportional representation with the d’Hondt counting method used for allocating seats, favoured larger groupings but less so when there were fewer such ‘wasted’ votes.

At the same time, the Civic Coalition electoral alliance only secured 27.4% of the votes, down from the combined vote of 31.69% for its component parties (Civic Platform and ‘Modern’) in 2015, and 134 seats. Nonetheless, Civic Platform remained easily the largest opposition grouping and the Coalition retained a clear lead over the united ‘Left’ slate which finished third with 12.56% of the votes and 49 seats. Although delighted to have regained parliamentary representation after a four-year hiatus, the ‘Left’ had hoped for considerably more, and its result was broadly in line with poll predictions and only just above the 11.17% combined vote share secured by the ‘United Left’ and ‘Together’ in 2015 (albeit on a much lower turnout). In one of the biggest surprises of the election, the Polish Peasant Party-led ‘Polish Coalition’ comfortably crossed the representation threshold securing an impressive 8.55% of the vote and 30 seats. The other major election upset was the 6.81% and 11 seats won by the ‘Confederation’, which had been hovering at just below the 5% threshold in

³⁴ See: CBOS. *Zaufanie do polityków w październiku*. CBOS: Warsaw. October 2019, p3.

³⁵ See: Michał Kolanko. ‘Rywal Konfederacja’. *Rzeczpospolita*, 16 October 2019.

opinion polls, providing Law and Justice with a challenger on its radical right flank in the new parliament.

Table 1: Turnout in post-1989 Polish elections (%)

	Presidential	Parliamentary
1990	60.63(1) 53.40(2)	
1991		43.20
1993		52.13
1995	64.70(1) 68.23(2)	
1997		47.93
2000	61.12	
2001		46.29
2005	49.74(1) 50.99(2)	40.57
2007		53.88
2010	54.94(1) 55.31(2)	
2011		48.92
2015	48.96 (1) 55.34 (2)	50.92
2019		61.74
2020	64.51 (1) 68.18 (2)	

Source: '15 chętnych na jeden mandat,' *Rzeczpospolita*, 8-9 October 2011; and Polish State Electoral Commission (<http://www.pkw.gov.pl/>)

Table 2: October 2019 Polish parliamentary election results to the Sejm

	2015		2019		% Change
	%	Seats	%	Seats	
Law and Justice (PiS)	37.58	235	43.59	235	+6.01
Civic Coalition (KO)(a)	31.69	167	27.40	134	-4.29
The Left (Lewica)(b)	11.17		12.56	49	+1.39
Polish Coalition (KP)(c)	13.94	58	8.55	30	-5.39
The Confederation (Konfederacja)(d)	4.85		6.81	11	+1.96

Source: Polish State Electoral Commission (<http://www.pkw.gov.pl/>)

(a) 2015 figures are the combined vote share and number of seats secured by Civic Platform (24.09% and 138 seats) and 'Modern' (7.6% and 29 seats).

(b) 2015 figure is the combined vote share for the 'United Left' (7.55%) and 'Together' (3.62%).

(c) 2015 figures are the combined vote share and number of seats secured by 'Kukiz'15 (8.81% and 42 seats) and the Polish Peasant Party (5.13% and 16 seats).

(d) 2015 figure is the combined vote share secured by the Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic Freedom and Hope (KORWiN - 4.76%) and Grzegorz Braun's election committee (0.09%).

However, although Law and Justice won a clear election victory, there was a sense among some commentators, and even party leaders, that it had performed below expectations and

failed to deliver the ‘knock-out blow’ to the opposition that many had anticipated.³⁶ This sense of under-performance was exemplified by the fact that Law and Justice lost overall control of the Senate, Poland’s less powerful parliamentary second chamber.³⁷ Law and Justice won only 48 out of 100 seats, the same number as the three opposition parties (who concluded a pre-election non-aggression pact in most constituencies) - 43 for Civic Platform, three for the Peasant Party, and two for the Democratic Left Alliance - with the balance of power held by four independents, three of whom were elected with opposition support. This was the first time since 1989 that a ruling party had not enjoyed a majority in Poland’s second chamber. In fact, the Senate result, and election results more generally, only really confirmed what opinion polls had shown throughout the previous four years: that the overall balance of support for the government and opposition camps was fairly evenly divided.

The long-term trajectory of Polish party politics

So what did this election tell us about the long-term trajectory of the Polish party system? What implications did it have for the ‘post-transition divide’ based on the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly that dominated the political scene since the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections when it replaced the previous so-called ‘post-communist divide’ between the ex-communist and post-Solidarity electoral blocs that had dominated, and appeared to provide structural order to, the Polish party system during the 1990s?³⁸ A substantial comparative literature emerged on the question of post-communist party system (in)stability and (lack of) institutionalisation and, while there was disagreement about its extent and the direction of change, most accounts found few signs of consolidation and stabilisation. Comparing the region with Western democracies, commentators pointed to: party instability; continuing higher levels of electoral volatility; and more fragmented, fluid and unstable party systems; together with lower levels of party attachment that could provide the basis for stable cleavage development; and a general lack of institutionalisation - to be general features of post-communist party systems and electoral politics.³⁹

In Poland, however, the last few elections saw levels of electoral volatility decreasing and support for the two main parties increasing, which pointed to greater stabilisation and consolidation of the party system. For example, aggregate electoral volatility (calculated

³⁶ See: Jacek Nizinkiewicz. ‘PiS - kolos na glinianych nogach’. *Rzeczpospolita*, 15 October 2019.

³⁷ The Senate confirmed the appointment of certain key public officials and could slow down the approval of government legislation for up to 30 days. However, its amendments could be over-turned by an outright majority in the Sejm, and the Senate’s significance was more as a political platform, particularly in interrogating ministers and officials and holding them to account.

³⁸ See: Mirosława Grabowska. *Podział postkomunistyczny: Społeczne podstawy polityki w Polsce po 1989 roku*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar. 2004.

³⁹ See, for example: Ian McAllister and Stephen White. ‘Political Parties and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Communist Societies’. *Party Politics*. Vol 13 No 2. March 2007, pp197-216; Grigore Pop-Eleches. ‘Throwing Out the Bums: Protest, Voting and Anti-Establishment Parties after Communism’. *World Politics*. Vol 62 No 2. April 2010, pp221-260; Brad Epperly. ‘Institutions and Legacies: Electoral Volatility in the Post-Communist World’. *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol 44 No 7. July 2011, pp829-853; Fernando Casal Bertoa. ‘Post-Communist Politics: On the Divergence (and/or Convergence) or East and West’. *Government and Opposition*. Vol 48 No 3. July 2013, pp398-433; Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause, ‘Hurricane Season: Systems of Instability in Central and East European Party Politics’. *East European Politics and Societies*. February 2015, Vol 29 No 1. 2015, pp61-80; and Eleanor Neff Powell and Joshua A. Tucker. ‘Revisiting Electoral Volatility in Post-Communist Countries. New Data, New Results and New Approaches’. *British Journal of Political Science*. Vol 44 No 1. January 2014, pp123-147. Cf: Vincenzo Emanuela, Alessandro Chiamonte and Sonia Soare. ‘Does the Iron Curtain Still Exist? The Convergence in Electoral Volatility between Eastern and Western Europe’. *Government and Opposition*. Vol 55 No 2. April 2020, pp308-326.

according to the ‘Pederson index’) fell substantially from 33% in 2015 to only 10% in 2019, one of the lowest levels in any post-1989 Polish election. Moreover, as **Table 3** shows, the combined vote share of the two main parties increased from 61.7% in 2015 to 70.99% in 2019 while the combined seat share remained broadly static but high at 80.22%.

Table 3: Party fragmentation in post-1989 Poland

	1991	1993	1997	2001	2005	2007	2011	2015	2019
Number of parties elected to the Sejm	29	6	5	6	6	4	5	5	6
Share of votes won by two largest parties (%)	24.31	35.81	60.96	53.72	51.13	73.62	69.07	61.67	70.99
Share of seats won by two largest parties (%)	25.52	65.87	79.35	61.09	62.6	81.52	79.13	81.09	80.22

Source: Radosław Markowski and Mikołaj Cześniak, ‘Polski system partyjny: dekada zmian instytucjonalnych i ich konsekwencje,’ in Radosław Markowski, ed. *System Partyjny i Zachowanie Wyborcze: Dekada Polskich Doświadczeń*. Warsaw: ISP PAN. 2002, pp.17-47 (20); and author’s calculations.

All of this reflected the continued endurance and strengthening of the country’s ‘post-transition divide’ which emerged in 2005 and found expression in the consolidation of the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly. It suggested that this might be a dominant and enduring source of divisions within the Polish post-communist party system, which was consolidating around these parties as the representatives of the two sides. Attitudes towards the nature of the transition to democracy, and divisions between the supporters and opponents of the ‘Third Republic’ institutions and elites that emerged from it, were entwined with more specific evaluations of Law and Justice and its programme of so-called ‘good change’ (‘dobra zmiana’); at one time referred to as the ‘Fourth Republic’ (‘Czwarta Rzeczpospolita’). These divisions appeared to become the main organising principle of the Polish party political scene. They mapped, to some extent, on to the ‘liberal versus social/solidaristic Poland’ divide that emerged in Poland in the mid-2000s, and that Law and Justice mobilised so successfully around to win the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections.⁴⁰

For sure, the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly emerged conjuncturally; indeed, almost accidentally. In 2005 the two groupings were seen as natural coalition partners and when they emerged at the beginning of the 2000s their electorates’ socio-demographic profiles were actually very similar.⁴¹ However, as the divisions between the two party elites widened and deepened, so did the differences between their electorates. They also started to map increasingly on to distinctive and clearly defined socio-demographic constituencies reflecting deeper ideological and cultural divisions within Polish society; in other words, the two sides of the ‘post-transition divide’. As **Table 4** shows, an exit poll conducted by the Ipsos agency found that Law and Justice voters were older, more rural, less well-educated and clustered among less well-off occupations, farmers, the unemployed, and retirees and pensioners, while

⁴⁰ See: Aleks Szczerbiak. ‘“Social Poland” Defeats “Liberal Poland”? The September–October 2005 Polish Parliamentary and Presidential Elections’. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*. Vol 23 No 2. June 2007, pp203-232. Although there were some economic leftists and (moderate) social conservatives who were anti-Law and Justice and identified with the ‘Third Republic status quo’ side of the divide. The mapping was much clearer in the case of the ‘social/solidaristic’ and ‘good change’/Fourth Republic side.

⁴¹ See: Aleks Szczerbiak. ‘Poland’s Unexpected Political Earthquake: The September 2001 Parliamentary Election’. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*. Vol 18 No 3. September 2002, pp41-76 (52).

Table 4: Voting profile of party supporters in the October 2019 Polish parliamentary election (%)

	Law and Justice	Civic Coalition	The Left	Polish Coalition	Confederation
Voting by age					
18-29	26.2	24.0	17.7	10.3	20.2
30-39	36.9	29.8	12.4	11.1	8.2
40-49	40.7	31.7	11.6	10.6	4.3
50-59	51.0	26.3	9.2	9.9	2.8
60+	55.6	25.3	10.0	7.4	1.1
Voting by education					
Primary/junior high	63.8	11.7	7.6	9.8	6.5
Basic vocational	63.9	15.7	5.7	10.0	3.7
Middle/college	45.5	25.5	11.7	9.4	6.9
Baccalaureate/higher	29.9	36.6	15.4	9.7	7.2
Voting by place of residence					
Villages	56.2	16.7	7.5	12.3	6.0
<50,000	41.7	28.2	12.2	10.4	6.4
50-200,000	38.3	32.2	13.7	7.6	7.1
200-500,000	32.6	39.3	14.4	5.6	7.5
500,000+	26.9	41.1	19.2	6.0	6.3
Voting by occupation					
Entrepreneurs	29.5	38.8	12.1	9.9	8.8
Directors/managers	26.6	39.7	13.3	9.2	8.1
Administration/services	38.5	29.6	13.3	10.3	6.6
Farmers	67.4	7.8	3.5	17.1	3.4
Workers	57.9	16.7	6.9	9.9	7.4
Students	22.3	24.8	23.4	10.0	17.9
Unemployed	55.6	16.8	7.6	11.6	6.9
Retirees/pensioners	42.1	26.0	11.9	10.3	8.2
Voting by 2015 party					
Law and Justice	90.2	2.2	1.1	3.8	2.4
Civic Platform	3.6	68.8	15.6	9.1	2.2
Kukiz'15	21.6	15.9	11.8	22.8	24.1
Modern	4.2	53.9	26.7	9.2	4.5
United Left	2.5	18.7	70.5	6.3	1.4
Polish Peasant Party	8.6	8.5	9.4	70.2	2.4
KORWiN	8.2	9.3	6.2	7.0	66.8
Together	5.6	22.9	54.2	11.3	5.2
Did not vote	23.4	27.1	21.1	11.3	15.2
Actual	43.59	27.40	12.56	8.55	6.81

Source: Ipsos exit poll data supplied to the author, 2019.

Civic Platform supporters were better educated, more urban and clustered among better-off groups such as entrepreneurs and directors and managers, as well as students.⁴² The increase in election turnout also suggested that it was these two parties, and this ‘post-transition’ divide, that represented the key political reference point for many Poles and mobilised them to vote.

For sure, since 2005 a number of challengers have emerged to contest this duopoly. For example, the 2015 parliamentary election saw the breakthrough of Kukiz’15 and ‘Modern’, together with the narrow failure of the Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic Freedom and Hope (KORWiN), Mr Korwin-Mikke’s then-party, to enter parliament and the success of ‘Together’ in crossing the 3% state party funding threshold. However, these new entrants - and earlier ones before them, such as the anti-clerical Palikot Movement (Ruch Palikota: RP) in 2011 - found it difficult to sustain their initial success. They all faded into obscurity after one parliament, or were simply absorbed by the ‘old’ parties that were strong in the early-to-mid 2000s. The leading member parties of the four main groupings and electoral alliances that were elected in 2019 had all been represented in parliament since 2001. Indeed, both the Democratic Left Alliance and the Polish Peasant Party, which had been among the main Polish parties since the beginning of the democratic transition in the early 1990s, actually experienced something of a revival in this election. In 2019, the only ‘new’ party to enter parliament was the ‘Confederation’ but even this was really an electoral conglomerate mainly comprising two ‘older’ parties: Mr Korwin-Mikke’s grouping, and the National Movement (Ruch Narodowy: RN) whose deputies were represented in the previous parliament having been elected as part of the ‘Kukiz’15’ electoral lists.

Interestingly, this was in spite of the fact that these ‘older’ parties themselves appeared to be weakly institutionalised and had only loose formal organisational links with their voters exemplified by their small memberships, lack of developed organisational structures and local penetration, and low levels of identification with, and trust in (indeed, arguably hostility towards), political parties. For example, according to a 2010-14 survey of 19 countries Poland had the lowest levels of party membership at only 0.75% as a percentage of the electorate (241,542) compared with an average of 3.13%.⁴³ This figure had actually fallen from 1.15% (326,000) in 2000 and 0.99% in 2009.⁴⁴

This stemmed partly from the fact that, on the ‘supply side’, there was little enthusiasm among the Polish parties themselves to develop organic links with and ‘encapsulate’ their supporters. However, it was also because, on the ‘demand side’, Poles had extremely negative attitudes towards parties so that even if party strategists had actively sought to recruit substantially more members their prospects for success would have been slim. For example, a May 2017 CBOS survey on attitudes towards political parties found that overall 89% of respondents disapproved of their activities while only 11% approved. 91% felt that

⁴² Jasiewicz identified the two parties’ supporters at opposite ends of a ‘solidarism-liberalism’ continuum which pitted ‘market friendly and inclusive liberals...against the redistributionist populists’. See: Krzysztof Jasiewicz. “‘The Past Is Never Dead’: Identity, Class, and Voting Behaviour in Contemporary Poland”. *East European Politics and Societies*. Vol 23 No 4. October 2009, pp491-508 (p506).

⁴³ See: Thomas Poguntke et al, ‘Party rules, party resources and the politics of parliamentary democracies: How parties organize in the 21st century’. *Party Politics*. Vo 22 No 6. November 2016, pp661–678 (668). Based on Polish Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny: GUS) data, Szymczak puts the figure at 0.8%. See: ‘Partie jak ekskluzywne kluby, należy do nich tylko 0,8 proc. Polaków. To fatalny wynik na tle Europy’.

⁴⁴ See: Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke. ‘Going, going,... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe’. *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol 51 No 1. January 2012, pp24-56 (28).

parties caused arguments and confusion in the country, 87% that they were cliques of politicians seeking power, and 80% that they brought together individuals for whom their own ambitions were the most important motivating factor. 66% did not know what their purpose was and only 28% felt that parties were attempting to tackle the problems faced by ordinary people.⁴⁵ Similarly, a June 2017 CBOS survey found that only 39% of respondents felt that there was a political party or grouping among those operating in Poland that they felt close to (albeit up from 25% in 2013 but down from 57% in 1998). 17% said that they felt somewhat closer to one party than to others while 44% said that there were no such parties (albeit down from 56% in 2013 but up from 27% in 1998).⁴⁶ A February 2018 CBOS survey also found that only 23% of respondents said that they trusted political parties (2% to a large extent), the lowest level of any Polish institution, while 63% did not.⁴⁷ All of this suggested that Polish parties had not succeeded in rooting themselves solidly in the electorate and, if anything, party identification had actually fallen in recent years. This, of course, should have led to greater openness and volatility rather than consolidation and stabilisation within the party system.

On the other hand, an important factor that appeared to encourage party system consolidation and stabilisation, and which may have been under-estimated in previous analyses (including by this author), was the impact of the Polish state party funding regime which provided a considerable head-start to the existing major parties and, arguably helped to ‘freeze’ the party system in the mid-2000s. After 2001 - when the new, much more generous, party funding system was first established⁴⁸ - the state became the largest source of income for the main parties at a time when political campaigning was becoming increasingly professionalised, and therefore expensive. This development clearly favoured the larger ‘insider’ parties such as Law and Justice and Civic Platform while discriminating against smaller non-parliamentary groupings, thereby potentially blocking the emergence of new entrants and making it increasingly difficult for them to challenge this duopoly. For example, in the previous parliament between 2016-19 the annual state subventions paid per annum to the main parties were 18.5 million złoties for Law and Justice and 15.5 million for Civic Platform, compared with 6.2 million for ‘Modern’ (before deductions), 4.5 million for the Polish Peasant Party, 4.3 million for the Democratic Left Alliance, 4.2 million for Mr Korwin-Mikke’s party, and 3.2 million for ‘Together’ (again, before deductions).⁴⁹ The estimates for what parties that were eligible for subventions following the 2019 election would receive per annum between 2020-23 were: 23.5 million złoties for Law and Justice and 19.8 million for Civic Platform compared with 11.5 million for the Democratic Left Alliance, 8.3 million for the Peasant Party and 6.9 million for the ‘Confederation’.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ See: CBOS. *Ogólny stosunek do partii politycznych*. CBOS: Warsaw. June 2017, p2. For sure, 55% felt that parties brought together the postulates and wishes of the voters and 54% that they proposed solutions to solve the important problems that the country faced, although these were down from 60% and 65% respectively in 2011.

⁴⁶ See: CBOS. *Reprezentywność sceny politycznej*. CBOS: Warsaw. June 2017, p8-9.

⁴⁷ See: CBOS. *O nieufność i zaufanie*. CBOS: Warsaw. March 2018, p7.

⁴⁸ See: Jarosław Zbieranek. ‘The system of financing political parties in Poland - experience and challenges’, in Jacek Kucharczyk and Jarosław Zbieranek, eds. *Democracy in Poland 1989-2009: Challenges for the Future*. 2010. ISP: Warsaw, pp77-87.

⁴⁹ See: *Informacja o przewidywanej wysokości subwencji na działalność statutową, przysługujących partiom politycznym w latach 2016-2019*.

⁵⁰ PKW. *Informacja o przewidywanej rocznej wysokości subwencji przysługującej partiom politycznym w związku z wyborami do Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej przeprowadzonymi w dniu 13 października 2019 r.* at https://pkw.gov.pl/uploaded_files/1571140952_Subwencja_2020-2023.pdf (accessed 5 February 2020).

For sure, the Polish state party funding regime did not mean that there was no scope for new entrants. Indeed, the breakthrough in 2015 of Kukiz'15, which was able to enter parliament as the third largest party (having spent only 2.9 million złoties on its campaign), and 'Modern' (which spent a larger sum of 11.6 million but this paled in comparison with the 29.7 million and 29.4 million spent by Law and Justice and Civic Platform respectively),⁵¹ - together with the narrow failure of Mr Korwin-Mikke's new party to enter parliament and 'Together's success in crossing the 3% state party funding threshold - showed how challenger parties could emerge regardless of the barriers. Similarly, in 2019 the 'Confederation' was able to secure parliamentary representation in spite of spending only 1.7 million złoties, compared with 30.2 million spent by Civic Platform, 30 million by Law and Justice, 9.6 million by the Democratic Left Alliance, and 8.5 million by the Peasant Party.⁵²

Nonetheless, the state party funding regime certainly discriminated in favour of the existing major parties. For example, it was clearly a key factor that kept Civic Platform in the game when it was challenged for the mantle of main opposition grouping during the 2015-19 parliament. Moreover, while challengers certainly emerged (and would no doubt continue to do so) and were successful in the short-term, their ability to sustain that challenge was another matter, and lack of state party funding no doubt played a key role in preventing them from consolidating and sustaining that challenge. 'Kukiz'15', for example, consciously chose not to register as a political party and contested the election as a 'civic committee of voters' so, even though it secured parliamentary representation, the grouping was denied access to all ongoing state subventions. As noted above, 'Modern' lost a large share of the subventions that it was due because of irregularities in its accounts. At the same time, although the three groupings failed to enter parliament, the fact that they crossed the 3% threshold for accessing state party funding helped the Democratic Left Alliance, Mr Korwin-Mikke's party and 'Together' (which received a share of the 6.2 million złoties per annum due to the parties comprising the 'United Left', 4.2 million and 3.2 million respectively)⁵³ survive the 2015-19 parliament and make a political comeback at the next election.

However, although the 2019 parliamentary election provided clear evidence of the Polish party system consolidating and stabilising, a number of significant questions remained about the future prospects for the 'post-transition divide'. Firstly, although this divide appeared to remain as the key source of political divisions within Polish politics, it was less clear what precise organisational form it would take and whether it would continue to find expression in the continued dominance of the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly. For sure, Law and

⁵¹ See: PKW. *Komunikat Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej z dnia 15 lutego 2016 r. w sprawie sprawozdań finansowych komitetów wyborczych uczestniczących w wyborach do Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i do Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, przeprowadzonych w dniu 25 października 2015 r.*, 15 February 2016, http://pkw.gov.pl/394_Wybory_do_Sejmu_RP_i_do_Senatu_RP_-_2015/1/6911_Komunikat_Panstwowej_Komisji_Wyborczej_z_dnia_15_lutego_2016_r_w_sprawie_sprawozdan_finansowych_komitetow_wyborczych_uczestniczacych_w_wyborach_do_Sejmu_Rzeczypospolitej_Polskiej_i_do_Senatu_Rzeczypospolitej_Polskiej_przeprowadzonych_w_dniu_25_pazdziernika_2015_r (accessed 5 May 2016).

⁵² See: PKW. *Komunikat Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej z dnia 30 stycznia 2020 r. w sprawie sprawozdań finansowych komitetów wyborczych uczestniczących w wyborach do Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i do Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej przeprowadzonych w dniu 13 października 2019 r.*, 30 January 2020 at <https://pkw.gov.pl/finansowanie-polityki/finansowanie-kampanii-wyborczych/wybory-do-sejmu-i-do-senatu/wybory-do-sejmu-rp-i-do-senatu-rp-2019/komunikat-panstwowej-komisji-wyborczej-z-dnia-30-stycznia-2020-r-w-sprawie-sprawozdan-finansowych-komitetow-wyborczych-uczestniczacych-w-wyborach-do-sejmu-rzeczypospolitej-polskiej-i-do-sen> (accessed 5 February 2020).

⁵³ See: *Informacja o przewidywanej rocznej wysokości subwencji przysługującej partiom politycznym w związku z wyborami do Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej przeprowadzonymi w dniu 25 października 2015 r.*

Justice appeared to have been very successful at developing an integrative ideological narrative that provided a fairly solid basis for its medium-to-long term political survival. Initially, this was focused on the so-called ‘Fourth Republic’ project of moral and political renewal. However, over time the party proceeded to abandon explicit references to the Fourth Republic and, since the mid-2010s, focused more on socio-economic issues and the programme of social spending and welfare transfers that came to be associated with the ‘good change’ slogan.

Nonetheless, the need for the radical reconstruction of the Polish state remained at the heart of a powerful conservative-national project that provided the party with a sense of cohesion and purpose and bound it closely to its core voters. During the first half of the 2010s this link was re-inforced strongly by the April 2010 Smoleńsk tragedy, the plane crash in which the then Law and Justice-backed President Lech Kaczyński, Jarosław Kaczyński’s twin brother, and 95 others, including dozens senior state officials, died in Western Russia. Together with the concomitant portrayal of Lech Kaczyński as a national martyr, Smoleńsk became a touchstone issue for the Polish right through which Law and Justice built even stronger emotional ties with its supporters.

The key question mark hanging over Law and Justice’s future was: what would happen to the party - and, specifically, would underlying internal tensions come to a head - when Jarosław Kaczyński stood down from front-line politics? Mr Kaczyński exercised a powerful behind-the-scenes influence in guiding and determining the government’s programmatic and strategic priorities and, more broadly, provided a crucial source of cohesion and unquestioned authority within the Polish right which would be extremely difficult for any future leader to replicate.

However, a much bigger question mark appeared to hang over the future of Civic Platform. For sure, the party saw off the challenge from ‘Modern’ and in the 2019 parliamentary election once again emerged as the unquestioned largest opposition grouping. Nonetheless, as **Table 2** shows, the vote share for the ‘Civic Coalition’ was lower than the combined share for Civic Platform and ‘Modern’ in 2015, while its combined seat share actually fell from 167 to 134 over the same period. Moreover, while Civic Platform encompassed a fairly broad spectrum of views, its ideological underpinnings were very weak with its most serious internal divisions often revolving around personality-based factions rather than programmatic currents.

Initially, the party attempted to profile itself as representing a modernising form of pro-market, right-wing liberalism and subsequently incorporated a moderate form of social conservatism, and even some national-patriotic themes. However, particularly after it took office in 2007 Civic Platform adopted a deliberate strategy of diluting its ideological profile, downplaying its economic liberalism and social conservatism and projecting itself as a somewhat amorphous modernising, centrist and pro-EU ‘catch-all’ party in opposition to the forces of provincial nationalism apparently represented by Law and Justice. All of this suggested that the party’s national and local elites were bound to it primarily by the access that it provided to state patronage. This was not a firm basis for more enduring, long-term organisational stability and made it vulnerable to eventual implosion if it were to face a really serious crisis. A further electoral defeat raised the prospect of a major, possibly even

existential, post-election crisis for what continued to be a deeply divided and factionalised party.⁵⁴

One possible major source of party system uncertainty and challenge to this duopoly came from the left. For sure, the 'Left' electoral alliance's 2019 result was, as noted above, broadly in line with poll projections and only very slightly higher than the combined vote for left-wing parties four years earlier. It finished well behind the Civic Coalition and did not even come close to mounting a challenge for the leadership of the opposition. Nonetheless, the left was delighted to have regained parliamentary representation following its 2015 electoral catastrophe and four-year period of prolonged marginalisation and soul searching. It hoped to use this breakthrough as a platform to become the first credible left-wing alternative to the right-wing and liberal-centrist Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly and shift the terms of the Polish political debate decisively towards the left, especially on moral-cultural issues.⁵⁵

However, the left's main structural problem and electoral-strategic challenge remained the fact that, while various opinion surveys put the number of Poles who identified themselves as left-wing at around 15%,⁵⁶ centre-left parties struggled to develop an appeal that could bring together socially liberal and economically leftist voters, the two main bases of support that formed the core electorates of most European left-wing parties. In Poland, less well-off, economically leftist voters tended to be older and more socially and culturally conservative, so often inclined towards voting for parties of the traditionalist right with a leftist economic appeal, such as Law and Justice which was right-wing on moral-cultural issues but also supported high levels of social welfare and greater state intervention in the economy.⁵⁷ This was particularly likely to be the case if the left focused too much on moral-cultural questions putting off potential, less well-off but culturally conservative, voters who might otherwise have been receptive to its socio-economic policies. Indeed, as noted above, Law and Justice delivered on most of the high profile social spending pledges on which it was elected.

At the same time, the kind of younger, better-off social liberals who in Western Europe inclined naturally towards the political left, in Poland were often quite economically liberal as well. Interestingly, a June-July 2017 CBOS survey found that the largest number of left-wing 'self-identifiers' actually planned to vote for Civic Platform (38%) compared with only 19% who opted for the Democratic Left Alliance and 4% for 'Together'.⁵⁸ CBOS data from August-September 2019 also found that attitudes towards moral-cultural issues, particularly Church-state relations and state recognition of same-sex partnerships, were the strongest determinants of whether voters supported the 'Left'. In terms of socio-economic policies, such as high levels of social welfare and progressive taxation, 'Left' supporters were in line with - and, on questions such as the role of the state in the economy and employment protection, were actually slightly more liberal - than the average voter.⁵⁹

Another possible challenger to the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly was a 'centrist' Christian Democratic formation built upon the foundations of the Polish Peasant Party's

⁵⁴ See: Jakub Bodziony, 'Platforma Obywatelska - nie czas na lifting, kiedy model ma wady konstrukcyjne', *Kulturaliberalna.pl*, 17 October 2019 at <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2019/10/17/spor-o-przyszlosc-platformy-obywatelskiej-bodziony-komentarz/> (accessed 18 October 2019).

⁵⁵ See: Ryszard Łuczyn. 'Razem ale jak'. *Polityka*, 6-12 November 2019.

⁵⁶ See, for example: CBOS. *Elektorat lewicy od roku 2005*. CBOS: Warsaw. August 2017, p2.

⁵⁷ See: Wojciech Czabanowski. 'Koniec lewicy i prawicy'. *Rzeczpospolita*, 23 November 2015.

⁵⁸ See: CBOS. *Elektorat lewicy od roku 2005*. CBOS: Warsaw. August 2017, p9.

⁵⁹ See: CBOS. *Elektoraty 2019 - charakterystyka poglądów*. CBOS: Warsaw. October 2019, p10-11.

expanded 'Polish Coalition' electoral alliance. Here, the 2019 parliamentary election, where the Coalition crafted a centrist appeal directed at the moderate conservative intelligentsia and middle classes in both rural and urban areas, offered the party some encouraging signs. As **Table 4** (where the comparisons are between the Peasant Party's 2015 and the 'Polish Coalition's 2019 vote shares) shows, although it continued to lose support among farmers (its vote share fell from 18.6% in 2015 to 17.1%, while Law and Justice's increased from 53.3% to 67.4%), the agrarian grouping held its own in rural areas more generally increasing its vote share there from 9.4% to 12.3%. At the same time, the Peasant Party compensated for losses in its traditional rural-agrarian heartlands by broadening its demographic base and increasing its vote share in larger towns (with populations between 200-500,000) and cities (with more than half-a-million inhabitants) from 1.4% and 1.5% to 6% and 5.5% respectively. For the first time, the party also won parliamentary seats in some of these urban agglomerations.

In particular, as **Table 4** shows, the Peasant Party increased its vote share among entrepreneurs - many of whom were no doubt concerned about Law and Justice's costly social spending and welfare programmes, especially its plans to almost double the minimum wage by the end of 2023 - from 3.8% to 9.9%. It did so by stressing the importance of protecting businesses against excessive bureaucracy and high taxation; one of the party's flagship policies was a proposal to make national insurance contributions voluntary for entrepreneurs.⁶⁰ Interestingly, 9.1% of 2015 Civic Platform voters switched to the Peasant Party, and these switchers comprised more than one-fifth of the latter's total 2019 electorate.⁶¹ Moreover, although, as noted above, teaming up with the quintessentially pro-establishment Peasant Party severely undermined Mr Kukiz's credibility and core appeal as an 'anti-system' campaigner - and the Polish Coalition's vote share was less than the combined total secured by the two parties in 2015 - the agrarians won 22.8% of the rock star-turned-politician's grouping's 2015 voters, bringing in a small but valuable swathe of new supporters. This probably contributed to the Peasant Party's significant increase in support among young voters from 3.8% in 2015 to 10.3%.

Finally, in addition to undercutting Mr Kukiz's appeal as the most credible opponent of the political establishment, especially among younger voters, the success of the 'Confederation' suggested that there was a segment of right-wing voters, particularly younger men living in smaller towns and rural areas, who were not convinced by Law and Justice's socio-economic policies and social welfare transfers programme. Nonetheless, the 'Confederation' also appeared to face an uncertain future as an eclectic political conglomerate that would be very difficult to hold together in the new parliament.

Conclusion

Following its 2015 election triumph, the new Law and Justice-led government quickly came under heavy fire from its political opponents and the Western opinion-forming media. It also became embroiled in an ongoing conflict with the EU political establishment who accused it of undermining the fundamentals of democracy and the 'rule of law', primarily as a result of its approach to the judiciary. However, in spite of the intense and harsh criticisms that it received, Law and Justice retained its popularity. Many Poles accepted the government's argument that its actions were necessary to restore pluralism and balance to institutions which, they said, had been expropriated by extremely well-entrenched, and often deeply

⁶⁰ See: Michał Kolanko. 'PSL i Kukiz'15 idą trudną drogą'. *Rzeczpospolita*, 19 August 2019.

⁶¹ See: Ipsos exit poll supplied to author, 2019.

corrupt, post-communist elites. Law and Justice was trusted on socio-economic issues because it was able to deliver on the main high profile social spending and welfare promises that were the key to its 2015 election victories.

Poles were prepared to cut Law and Justice a lot of slack and, although there was negative publicity surrounding various allegations of abuse of public office by party officials for partisan or private ends, these did not appear to damage it to any great extent. Law and Justice was also tactically adroit in knowing when to defuse, and not expend too much political capital on, contentious issues such as abortion, and retreat when it did not consider these to be priorities or core elements of its governing programme. Many ordinary Poles who previously felt themselves to be second-class citizens started to regain a sense of dignity and feeling that, as they saw it, their government finally cared about the less well-off and was trying to restore an elementary sense of justice and moral order. Law and Justice also benefited from the fact that the liberal-centrist opposition failed to develop a convincing and attractive programmatic alternative on the socio-economic issues that Polish voters cared most about.

In the election campaign, Law and Justice tried to raise the stakes for key groups of its core supporters and encourage them to turn out to vote out of fear that the liberal-centrist opposition would water down or abandon its social welfare programmes if it were to win office. A key secondary theme of its campaign was its opposition to what it called 'LGBT ideology', a moral cultural issue that was important to its core electorate. At the same time, Civic Platform, and the opposition more generally, once again failed to articulate a convincing and attractive programmatic alternative, especially on socio-economic issues.

The October 2019 election saw the highest turnout of any post-communist Polish parliamentary poll, reflecting the polarisation of, and deep divisions within, the country's society in recent years. Law and Justice won a decisive victory securing the largest vote share won by any political grouping in any post-1989 Polish parliamentary election, and became the first governing to secure re-election with an overall majority for a second term of office. Civic Platform remained easily the largest opposition grouping. It retained a clear lead over the united 'Left' slate which finished third and, although delighted to have regained parliamentary representation after a four-year hiatus, had hoped for considerably more. The Peasant Party-led 'Polish Coalition' comfortably crossed the representation threshold, as did the radical right 'Confederation'. However, although Law and Justice won a clear election victory, there was a sense among some commentators, and even party leaders, that it had performed below expectations exemplified by its loss of the Senate.

The last few Polish elections saw levels of electoral volatility decreasing and support for the two main parties increasing, pointing to the stabilisation and consolidation of the party system. All of this reflected the continued hegemony of the country's 'post-transition' divide which found expression in the Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly as the main source of political divisions. It suggested that this divide might be an enduring feature of the Polish post-communist party system with these two parties the clear representatives of each of the two 'sides'. For sure, since 2005 a number of challengers emerged to contest this duopoly. However, these new entrants found it difficult to sustain their initial success and all of them either faded into obscurity after one parliament or were simply absorbed by the 'old parties' that were strong in the early-to-mid 2000s. An important factor that appeared to encourage such party system consolidation and stabilisation was the impact of the Polish state party funding regime which arguably helped to 'freeze' the party system in the mid-2000s. This

development clearly favoured the larger ‘insider’ parties such as Law and Justice and Civic Platform while discriminating against smaller non-parliamentary groupings, thereby potentially blocking the emergence of new entrants and making it increasingly difficult for them to challenge this duopoly.

However, although the 2019 parliamentary election provided clear evidence of the Polish party system stabilising, it was less clear what precise organisational form the ‘post-transition’ divide would take and whether it would continue to find expression in Law and Justice-Civic Platform duopoly. For sure, Law and Justice appeared to have been very successful at developing an integrative ideological narrative that provided a fairly solid basis for its medium-to-long term political survival. The need for the radical reconstruction of the Polish state remained at the heart of a powerful conservative-national project that provided the party with a sense of cohesion and purpose and bound it closely to its core voters. The key question hanging over Law and Justice’s future was: what would happen to the party - and, specifically, would underlying internal tensions come to a head - when Jarosław Kaczyński stood down from front-line politics? Mr Kaczyński exercised a powerful behind-the-scenes influence in guiding and determining the government’s programmatic and strategic priorities and, more broadly, provided a crucial source of cohesion and unquestioned authority within the Polish right which would be extremely difficult for any future leader to replicate.

A much bigger question mark appeared to hang over the future of Civic Platform. For sure, the party saw off the challenge from ‘Modern’ and in the 2019 parliamentary election once again emerged as the main opposition grouping. But the party’s ideological underpinnings were very weak and its national and local elites bound to it primarily by the access it gave them to state patronage. This provided less of a firm basis for more enduring, long-term organisational stability and made the party vulnerable to eventual implosion if it were to face a really serious crisis. A further electoral defeat raised the prospect of a major, possibly even existential, post-election crisis for what continued to be a deeply divided and factionalised party.

Post-script

The 2019 parliamentary election was followed shortly afterwards by the June-July 2020 presidential election. The latter was of crucial importance because Law and Justice lacked the three-fifths legislative majority required to over-turn a presidential veto. So the defeat of the party-backed incumbent Andrzej Duda would have been a disaster seriously hampering its ability to govern effectively and possibly precipitating an early parliamentary poll. The election was originally scheduled for May 10th, with a second round run-off a fortnight later if no candidate secured more than 50% of the votes, but was postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic crisis.

Given Mr Duda’s relatively high approval ratings, and the fact that he was Poland’s most trusted politician, he was widely assumed to be the favourite. However, although polls suggested that Mr Duda would easily win the first round of voting with around 40-45% of the vote, the October 2019 Senate election results showed how evenly balanced support for the government and opposition was. Given the deep polarisation of the political scene, and with many voters determined to use any opportunity to block the ruling party, the second round was always expected to be extremely closely fought and unpredictable. In fact, the coronavirus pandemic crisis changed the dynamics of the campaign and initially helped to

create a ‘rally effect’: the inevitable psychological tendency for worried citizens to unite around their political leaders and state institutions as the embodiment of national unity at times of a sudden and dramatic external threat. This strengthened Mr Duda and, at one point, polls started to show that he could actually win an outright victory in the first round.

Until the pandemic crisis, Mr Duda’s nearest rival and most likely second round challenger appeared to be Civic Platform candidate Mrs Kidawa-Błońska who, at one point, was averaging around 25% support in opinion polls. However, even before coronavirus changed the nature of the campaign, Mrs Kidawa-Błońska appeared to be a very weak candidate, and the pandemic showed her to be completely unsuited to a national crisis situation when more decisive leadership was required. The final nail in her campaign’s coffin was Mrs Kidawa-Błońska’s half-hearted suggestion that a boycott of the May election might be necessary, but without herself withdrawing from the race, which simply confused and de-mobilised her already-declining electorate, and she saw her poll ratings slump to single figures.

Mrs Kidawa-Błońska’s disastrous campaign and decline in support provided an opportunity for other opposition candidates to replace her as Mr Duda’s main challenger. Initially it looked like this could be Peasant Party presidential candidate Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz. However, his campaign failed to take-off and, in the event, the most successful of the ‘third party’ challengers turned out to be the independent TV presenter and liberal-centrist Catholic journalist Szymon Hołownia. By precipitating a shift from traditional campaigning to political communication through the Internet and social media, the pandemic crisis played to Mr Hołownia’s strengths as a skilled direct-to-camera performer. As well as mopping up a swathe of disillusioned Civic Platform voters, he was able to make an attractive pitch as a non-party candidate that the many Poles who craved ‘newness’ at a time of extraordinary politics.

In the event, the May election never took place because legislation proposed by Law and Justice, that would have introduced universal postal voting to allay public safety concerns, was not approved in time due to a split within the governing camp. Subsequently, the Polish parliament agreed a new electoral law that allowed Poles to either vote traditionally in polling stations or (which very few chose to) cast postal ballots, and the first round was re-scheduled for June 28th. The postponement of the election allowed Civic Platform to replace as its presidential candidate the struggling Mrs Kidawa-Błońska with party-backed Warsaw mayor Rafał Trzaskowski, a much more formidable campaigner who quickly emerged as Mr Duda’s main challenger. Nonetheless, Mr Duda was the clear first round winner securing 43.5% of the votes with Mr Trzaskowski runner-up on 30.5%. The incumbent went on to win the closely fought second round run-off on July 12th by 51% to 49%. This once-again confirmed the dominance of the ‘post-transition divide’ in Polish party politics, and Mr Trzaskowski’s result specifically showed that Civic Platform continued to be the main opposition grouping and challenger on the anti-Law and Justice side of this divide.

Although Mr Hołownia lost ground following Mr Trzaskowski’s entry into the race, which limited his scope for picking up disillusioned Civic Platform voters, the independent was still attractive to Poles looking for a ‘new’ non-party candidate to support. He finished a respectable third in the first round of voting with 13.9%, which was enough to serve as the basis for launching a new liberal-centrist party, ‘Poland 2050’ (Polska 2050), in autumn 2020. At the same time, ‘Confederation’ candidate Krzysztof Bosak united the party around his candidacy and his decent first round result, he finished fourth with 6.8% of the votes, secured its short-term future by ensuring that it did not implode in spite of the apparent

tensions between its component parts. On the other hand, the extremely disappointing first round results for Mr Kosiniak-Kamysz (in spite of his early promise) and 'Left' candidate Mr Biedroń (whose campaign was hamstrung from the outset by his perceived lack of gravitas), who only secured 2.4% and 2.2% respectively, halted the momentum developed by their political grouping's promising results in the October 2019 parliamentary election.

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