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Poland's Election Provides Lessons and Hope for Democracies

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March 2024

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The October 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland with the selection of Donald Tusk as Prime Minister has recommitted the country to tolerance,

democracy, and Europe. Poland was once widely acclaimed for its successful transition to democracy and capitalism beginning with the [Solidarity trade union movement](#) that led to communism's downfall in 1989 and reaching its pinnacle with its accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004. Yet, in the 2015 and 2019 elections, the rise of Law and Justice Party (PiS), a right-wing populist party, magnified cultural, economic, and geographic cleavages. PiS wrested control of the state, violating norms and reshaping institutions, such as the courts and the media environment, to create an "illiberal democracy" that promoted so-called "Polish," "anti-Western," and "Catholic" values. Tusk's victory is even more remarkable when considered against the backdrop of how it was achieved.

The Law and Justice Party in Poland has functioned as the main right-wing party over the past 20 years. It emerged from the Solidarity movement, like Tusk's Civic Platform Party, as a center-right Catholic party. During the last decade, PiS moved further to the right, becoming a nationalist party that blends "traditional" cultural values with generous welfare spending. Twin brothers, Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, founded the party in 2001 and the latter has continued to lead it since the former's death in a plane crash in 2010. PiS is staunchly anti-EU and maintains a close relationship with the Catholic Church. As a result, its rhetoric frequently attacks LGBTQ+ individuals and migrants, and its social policy supports generous payments for pensioners and families with children. This platform finds strong support among a coalition of the working class, union members, the old, religious people, and inhabitants of small towns and rural areas – often those that have not benefited from economic liberalization and European integration for whom these cultural appeals resonate.

Between 2015 and 2023, Law and Justice welded its newfound power to reconstitute Polish democracy in its image. It restructured the judiciary several times to curtail its independence, filling benches with partisan judges. These efforts culminated with the Constitutional Tribunal's decision to essentially ban abortion in 2020.[1]

Law and Justice also transformed Poland's media landscape by reigning in dissenting voices. The government oversees the public broadcaster, TVP, which it stacked with party loyalists that dismissed independent journalists and filled airwaves with party propaganda. Businesses closely linked to the party purchased newspapers and used them to push the party's messaging. Law and Justice also weaponized the state by bringing defamation lawsuits against independent journalists to intimidate them. Finally, it relentlessly targeted LGBTQ+ individuals and Middle Eastern migrants in its messaging by framing them as threats to Poland's traditional values.[2] The EU chastised Law and Justice's politics for years: it invoked Article 7 against Poland for violating European values in response to its judicial reforms in 2017 and, more recently,

withheld tens of billions of euros in cohesion, structural, and Covid-19 recovery funds. But challenging Law and Justice was exceptionally difficult given its control of state institutions and the media.

Tusk's victory, however, was a turning of the tide, an indication that a reversing of years of culture wars and democratic backsliding is ahead. Too, it serves as a beacon of hope to other democracies threatened by authoritarianism, as it offers a lesson on how to overcome the rise of populism. Having soured on PiS, Poles voted in record numbers to elect Tusk, a historian and politician who served as prime minister from 2007 to 2014 and as president of the European Council from 2014 to 2019. A coalition of the three opposition parties – Tusk's Civic Platform and two smaller parties – eked out a majority of the vote, 53.7 percent, against the combined 42.6 percent of Law and Justice and a small, ultra-far-right party. Law and Justice still received a plurality of the votes (35.4 percent) but lost a significant share of votes compared to the last election while Civic Platform gained enough votes (30.7 percent) to come in second and lead a new coalition government.^[3]

Civic Platform and the other opposition parties primarily campaigned on defeating Law and Justice. Tusk went so far as to frame the election as “a battle between good and evil.” Tusk and the smaller parties formed a coalition that also emphasized political and cultural moderation and an improved relationship with the EU.^[4] No Polish politician was better equipped to deliver this latter promise than Tusk as the arc of his political career followed Poland's democratization and Europeanization. He worked as an anticommunist organizer with the Solidarity movement in the 1980s, helped found Poland's nascent democracy in the 1990s, established Civic Platform as center-right liberal, free-market, pro-European party in the early 2000s, was Poland's Prime Minister between 2007 and 2014, and served as President of the European Council from 2014 to 2019. Yet 30 years after communism's defeat, circumstances would call him back to Poland to fight for democracy once more.^[5]

Law and Justice also faced several challenges that tarnished its image. First, the Foreign Ministry is embroiled in a scandal in which the EU claims that its consulates issued approximately 500,000 visas in exchange for bribes in Asia and Africa.^[6] Second, inflation and the cost of living markedly rose since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, squeezing many Poles' budgets and undermining Law and Justice's reputation for sound economic management.^[7] Third, Polish farmers grew irate with the influx of cheap Ukrainian grain since Russia's war began, which undercut demand for domestic grain and inflicted financial hardship on them.^[8] Combined, these factors convinced enough voters to turn to other parties after eight years of Law and Justice running the government.

Exit polls point to particularly stark divisions across education, age, and geography as registered in a plurality vote for either of the two largest parties – Civic Platform or Law and Justice. Voters with a higher education opted for the Civic Coalition, an electoral alliance of Civic Platform and several smaller liberal and center-left parties, (38.7%) while those with a primary, vocational, or secondary education supported Law and Justice (63%, 61.9%, and 38.2%, respectively) (Figure 1). Young voters (18-29) overwhelmingly favored Civic Platform, voters between the ages of 30 and 49 expressed a small preference for Civic Platform, and voters over 50 demonstrated a strong preference for Law and Justice (Figure 2).[9]

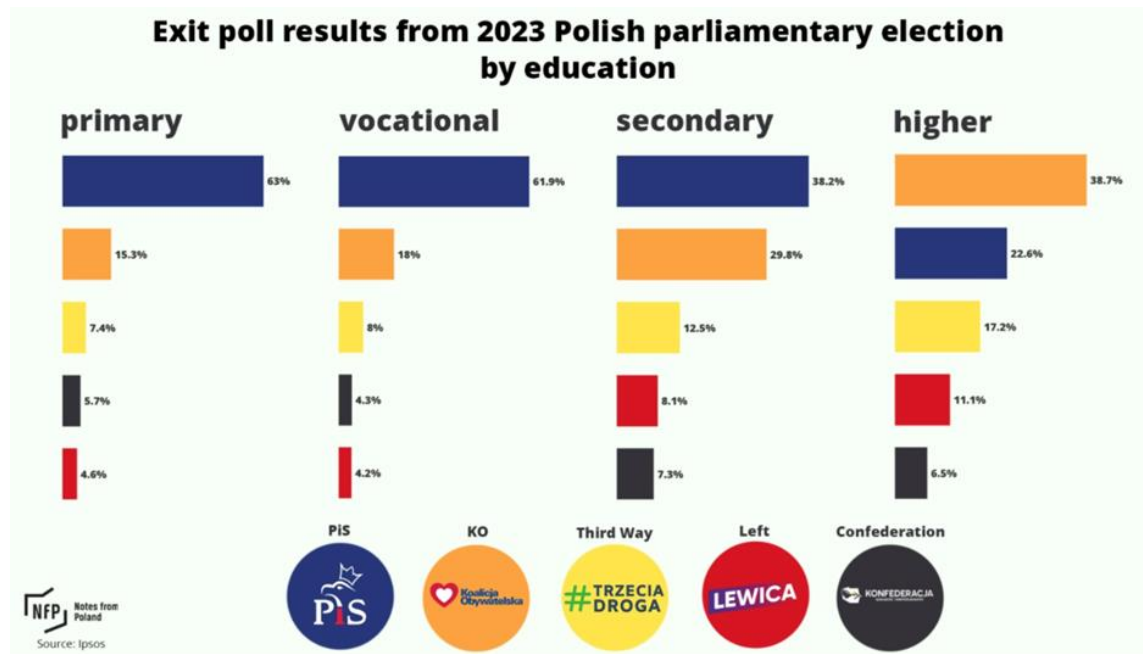


Figure 1

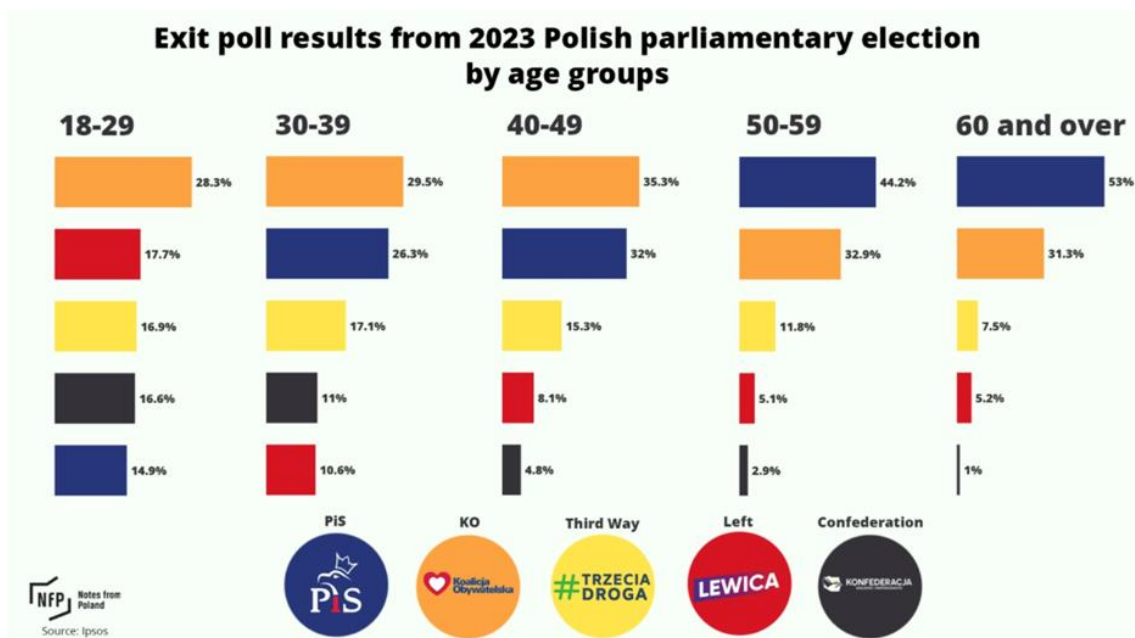


Figure 2

Poland's electoral geography is complex yet broadly follows two trends. First, there is an urban-rural divide with the former favoring Civic Platform and the latter supporting Law and Justice. For example, 48.2 percent of Poles in villages voted for Law and Justice while 43 percent of Poles in cities with 500,000 residents voted for Civic Platform (Figure 3).[10] Tusk campaigned in rural areas and helped diminish this gap compared with the 2019 election.[11] Second, Western Poland overwhelmingly backs Civic Platform and the other democratic opposition parties while Eastern Poland strongly stands with Law and Justice. This pronounced East-West divide extends back to imperial borders that ceased in 1918. Tusk is from the wealthy, northern port city of Gdansk and had a German grandmother which presented a challenge in the face of this latter divide.[12] Figure 4 demonstrates both geographic divides with the 2023 elections results and superimposes the imperial borders of Prussia, Tsarist Russia, and Austria-Hungary.

Prussia controlled Western Poland and as a result the region was historically more industrialized and wealthier. For example, it still holds a higher density of railroad tracks than the East. Tusk's native Gdansk fell in Prussia, then *Danzig*, and PiS regularly stoked fears that he is beholden to Germany, which seeks to reclaim influence over the country through the EU. This claim is doubly emotional when considering that Germany's invasion of Poland precipitated the Second World War. Tsarist Russia oversaw most of Eastern Poland and Austria-Hungary also held a small Southeastern slice. Under these imperial powers, Eastern Poland remained largely feudal and agrarian. While the Eastern regions

have slowly converged with the West, they are still poorer and among some of the poorest regions in Europe. The historical East-West divide also manifests itself culturally – for example, the East has higher church attendance.[13] Election results likely capture these cultural manifestations.

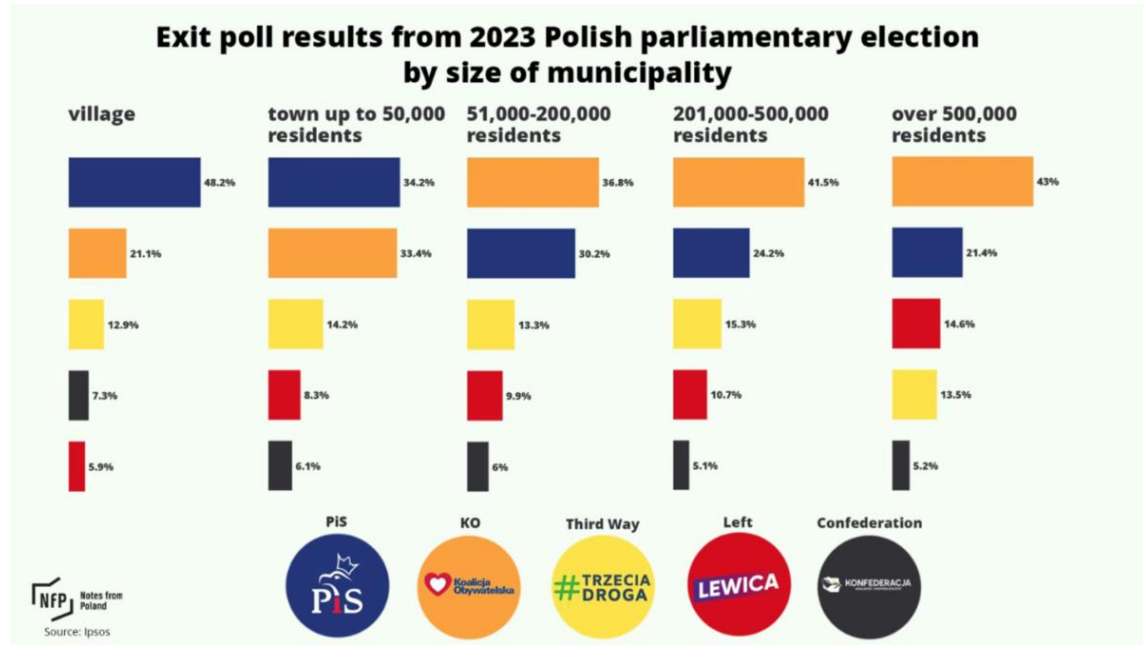


Figure 3

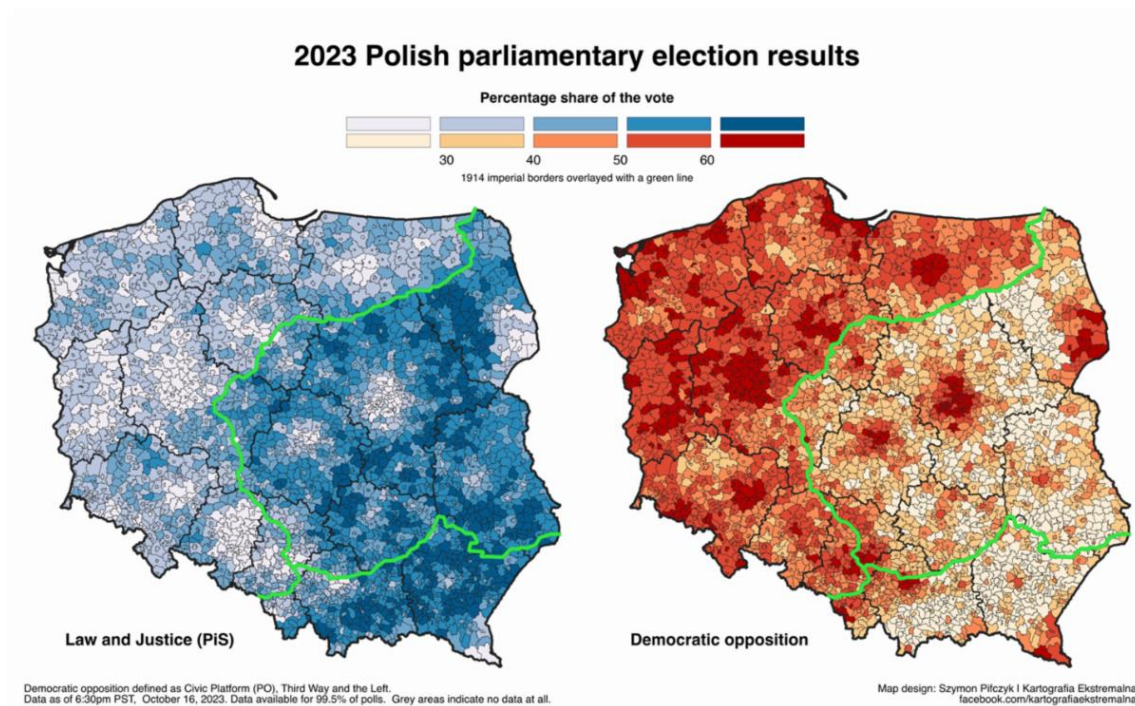


Figure 4

Despite being a young democracy, Poland’s political cleavages closely resemble those of longer-standing Western democracies, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Both countries also have strong geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural divides that have manifested themselves in recent presidential elections and the Brexit vote in 2016.

Yet Poland has undergone greater democratic backsliding than either country, while Tusk was able to deliver a victory for liberal democracy. On one hand, this was likely because Law and Justice overplayed its hand and the drumbeat of culture wars, political divisiveness, fighting with the EU, and scandals wore down on the electorate. On the other hand, Poles may retain a stronger attachment to democracy than other neighboring countries, such as Hungary, which is also experimenting with illiberalism. Tusk is a savvy politician and a sympathetic figure, representing Poland’s fight against communism and turn to democracy. Additionally, he spelled out the benefits of the EU, such as receiving the tens of billions of funds frozen under Law and Justice. These factors enabled Tusk to stem the educational, age, and geographic divisions that affected Law and Justice in the past two elections.

Other pro-democratic leaders and parties across the West would be wise to study Tusk and the Polish case as pivotal elections approach in the coming years. More broadly, democracies must devise policy solutions to close the cleavages,

especially economic and geographic, that give rise to far-right politics in the first place.

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- [10] Ptak.
- [11] Katarzyna Skiba, “Do Poland’s 19th-Century Partitions Still Influence Elections Today?,” *Notes From Poland* (blog), December 5, 2023, [Here](#)/.
- [12] Boffey, “Donald Tusk’s Second Coming.”
- [13] Skiba, “Do Poland’s 19th-Century Partitions Still Influence Elections Today?”; “Imperial Borders Still Shape Politics in Poland,” *The Economist*, October 19, 2023, [Here](#).
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