

*THE
ELECTION
CAN
BE
WON*

A Study of the Presidential Field

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As part of a larger project conducted by Krytyka Polityczna and the Pole Dialogu Foundation, we carried out a series of focus groups among the electorates of all the parties present in the new Sejm (PO, PiS, KO, SLD, PSL, Konfederacja). Part of each group interview was devoted to potential candidates in Poland's upcoming 2020 presidential election. We were interested not only in voters' opinions, but also—and perhaps above all—in their feelings and intuitions regarding the country's most prominent politicians, including potential presidential candidates.

This study is especially current now, as Poland's political parties are preparing to select their presidential candidates. We determined that it would be best to ask respondents for their opinions right after the parliamentary elections, before they assimilated any interpretations of the results from the media. We surveyed both urban and rural voters (residents of villages and small towns in the poorest province, Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship), controlling for age and gender. We included members of all social groups, including professionals (doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs—dividing them into opposition voters and PiS voters), the middle and lower middle class (civil servants, teachers, white collar workers), the working class (workers and farmers), and the precariat (service sector workers with so-called “junk contracts”: salespeople, call center operators, temporary manual workers).

In order to capture respondents' attitudes towards the specific politicians we were interested in, we asked them to choose which animal they would associate with the character and personality of each candidate. In order to minimize group pressure on each participant, we asked them to write their associations down on a piece of paper and read them aloud once everyone had finished.

Animal associations can convey highly specific information on emotional reactions (whether a candidate moves voters) and positive characteristics that voters ascribe to the candidate (owl: wisdom, distance; lion: dominance, determination; fox: cunning). Using this as a starting point allows us to understand how respondents rationalize their choices later in the conversation.

We present our results in the form of seven theses and recommendations as to how the opposition can win the presidential election.

VOTERS ARE ONCE AGAIN CERTAIN THAT THE PRESIDENT WILL WIN

PiS voters are certain that Andrzej Duda will be their party's candidate and that he will be handily reelected. Interestingly, a majority of opposition (KO, SLD, PSL) voters are of the same opinion.

PIOTREK: *It seems to me that we are perceived differently in Europe, not as a backwards nation. Everything has been great since the president took power, because his predecessors... I won't say anything about that. Especially the constantly drunk Mr. Kwaśniewski.*

KRYSTYNA: *Yesterday someone started talking about potential rivals for our Duda. As of now they haven't been able to find anyone who could challenge him in the election.*

ADAM: *PO claims that they will win the presidential election.*

SYLWIA: *Who will they put up, Tusk?* [ironically]

[Kielce, PiS voters, middle class, October 18, 2019]

Opposition voters.

Who will win the May 2020 presidential election?

(...)

PAWEŁ: *It will probably be like last time, but maybe Tusk.*

NINA: *No, definitely not. (...) I wouldn't trust him.*

ZOSIA: *Me neither.*

Ok, who else? Will Duda win?

PAWEŁ: *Yes, Duda will probably win.*

KLAUDIA: *Most likely nothing will change.*

So most of you think that it will be Duda?

ZOSIA: *That's what we think, it seems to us that he's Kaczyński's pawn.*

(...)

So there's no one on the opposition side who could beat Duda?

PAWEŁ: *Not at present.*

NINA: *Probably not.*

[Kielce, opposition, working class, October 21, 2019]

Despite the obvious differences, the current situation resembles the 2015 presidential election, when one of the candidates was feted as the obvious winner long before the votes were cast. That candidate was Bronisław Komorowski from PO, while the PiS candidate was none other than Andrzej Duda. Back then no one on the PO side appreciated the danger of a PiS victory. Now we may see something similar, with Duda falling victim to an analogous situation.

ANDRZEJ DUDA IS A LION, JAROSŁAW KACZYŃSKI IS A NOCTURNAL PREDATOR

Respondents most frequently compare the current president to a lion. That is the case for half of opposition voters, while other see him as an elephant or a cat. The qualities voters ascribe to him include independent decision-making, dignity, and a sense of humor. The other aspect of his public image is a certain gentleness, amicability, and conciliation.

A politician who is criticized in the media for his servility to the leader of his party with nicknames like “the pen” (he almost always follows orders of Kaczyński and immediately signs bills passed by the Sejm) is seen completely differently by most of Polish society. This has little to do with Duda’s actual character, but rather reflects the fact that the image of the office of the President of Poland is ascribed to the politician holding that office, not the other way around. This is the so-called “halo effect.”

This phenomenon explains why Poland’s incumbent president is almost always at the top of public trust rankings. Aleksander Kwaśniewski (especially in his first term), Lech Kaczyński, and Andrzej Duda all had many more critics among political commentators than among society at large, a fact that never ceases to amaze the former.

MARCIN: *I’d say he’s a lion, because it seems to me that our president is an individualist, he’s brave, he’s not afraid to express himself on difficult subjects.*

KAMIL: *I put the same thing. I see him above all as a leader.*

OLGA: *I also put down a lion. His appearance, his wisdom.*

KAŚKA: *I said he’s a bear, because I associate him with a little bear cub who wouldn’t hurt anyone.*

MICHAŁ: *I said a panda. Very pretty.*

DAMIAN: *A cat. Elegant, technically a predator, but he doesn’t attack anyone.*

ANIA: *A sloth, because that’s what he looks like. When he smiles it reminds me of a sloth hanging from a tree.*

OLGA: *I’ve seen him in person, and that’s not at all what he looks like.*

ANIA: *But that smile of his.*

[Kielce, PiS voters, middle class, October 18, 2019]

Perceptions of Andrzej Duda change when Jarosław Kaczyński is included in the conversation. Then Duda is seen as another big cat (for instance, a tiger), but not as a lion.

Kaczyński himself is seen as a lion or a cat, an owl, a fox, or another nocturnal predator. PiS voters from the Warsaw professional class (a group of lawyers, doctors, and entrepreneurs) saw Kaczyński as an owl—combining the traits of wisdom and cunning in a nocturnal predator. Overall, however, Jarosław Kaczyński is not a favorite figure among PiS voters.

Kaczyński?

MONIKA: *A lion.*

DOROTA: *I said a tiger.*

KAROLINA: *I said a monkey.*

Pr. Why a monkey?

KAROLINA: *Because he's ugly, disgusting, terrible...*

MONIKA: *He's giving you money.*

KAROLINA: *Not him, the party. I can't bear to look at that old man, it makes me sick. I liked his brother, but not him.*

MONIKA: *He's the leader who decides everything.*

KAROLINA: *Ok, fine, let him be, but far away from me. I don't like him.*

GRZEGORZ: *I said a cat, he always lands on his feet.*

ANDRZEJ: *I put down a fox, but in a positive sense—he is cunning and will outsmart everyone.*

CZESŁAW: *I said an owl, he's a smart guy.*

[Warsaw, PiS voters, working class, October 18, 2019]

**MORAWIECKI IS SET TO BE KACZYŃSKI'S SUCCESSOR,
BECAUSE HE MOST CLOSELY RESEMBLES HIM**

We asked what would happen to PiS if Jarosław Kaczyński retired from politics. It turns out that that is not a significant concern for PiS voters, especially those with more cultural capital. They foresee a smooth succession, with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki taking up Kaczyński's mantle.

It is important to note that voters, unlike most political commentators, see many similarities between Mateusz Morawiecki and Jarosław Kaczyński. They see both politicians as reserved and wise. Both seem detached and are surrounded by an air of mystery that voters find attractive, although that also means that they cannot be seen as sympathetic figures. It makes sense that the ruling party decided to separate the roles of party leaders and president. Polish voters' perceptions and expectations of those political roles indicate that they should be demarcated, but in such a way as to complement each other.

Mateusz Morawiecki?

OLGA: *I put down a giraffe, because he's tall, he wears glasses. He's generally a positive person, although he's more of a curmudgeon than our president. At the climate summit the president came up to us, shook our hands, asked us questions. Our prime minister is gruffer. But he's also very knowledgeable, he speaks well.*

KAMIL: *An owl, because he has a lot of knowledge and the owl represents wisdom. He has glasses. I also put down an ant, because he's very industrious.*

MICHAŁ: *A cheetah, because he's a bit crafty, but he thinks very quickly and he can get organized very quickly.*

DAMIAN: *A kangaroo because he looks kind of like one. He jumps. When something happens he's here, there, at the other end of the country.*

KAŚKA: *A cat, because he's so dignified and clever.*

ANIA: *I don't like him, for me he's like a hyena.*

Why's that?

ANIA: *I don't know, he seems like the kind of person who goes wherever something is happening. And I don't like people like that, I don't like people who want to be the center of attention at all costs. He looks strange when he laughs.*

OLGA: *He's gruff, but he's knowledgeable.*

ANIA: *I'm not saying that he's not knowledgeable.*

KAMIL: *He's a very good economist.*

[Kielce, PiS voters, middle class, October 18, 2019]

DONALD TUSK DIDN'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING TO DECEIVE HIS OWN SUPPORTERS

Although Donald Tusk has announced that he will not run, it is worth noting that he fell victim to an interesting phenomenon. Other politicians (especially Robert Biedroń) may fall into a similar trap. Not so long ago (during our July focus groups), the fantasy of Tusk returning from Brussels as the opposition's only possible savior was dominant. A radical change took place in the course of a few months. This was reflected in opinion polls, but the impetus for this change remained a mystery. When asked about a potential Tusk candidacy in October, opposition voters distanced themselves from him and even accused him of betrayal. Most of the group representing the Warsaw working class described Tusk as a fox. Only the Warsaw intelligentsia talked about him as an important figure.

This change in attitudes was not caused by any concrete political events or actions on the part of Tusk himself, because nothing of sufficient significance took place. People were disappointed by their own unrealized expectations. Donald Tusk acted as a kind of screen onto which so many hopes were projected that, even though he had never promised anything, people felt deceived. That is why Tusk is compared to a cunning fox.

Tusk?

MONIKA: *A fox, a cunning beast.*

TOMEK: *Donald Duck, because of his name.*

INGA: *I also put a fox.*

ARTUR: *That's what I think of him, too.*

ULA: *I also have a fox.*

IGOR: *I also have a fox.*

ULA: *He gave up on the country and left.*

MONIKA: *He sold himself like a whore.*

ULA: *Exactly, he left PO. As long as he was in PO they were much stronger.*

MONIKA: *He couldn't get anything for himself here, so he struck out on his own.*

So a fox?

MONIKA: *Mostly.*

ULA: *A reddish one.*

MONIKA: *Yes, a mean fox.*

[Warsaw, opposition, precariat, October 17, 2019]

MAŁGORZATA KIDAWA-BŁOŃSKA HAS A SHOT, BECAUSE SHE IS LIKE A FIRST LADY

Opposition voters do not have a clear idea of who their candidate should be. Kidawa-Błońska (who was announced as the PO candidate for prime minister before the most recent parliamentary elections) is the most positively perceived. She is the only potential opposition candidate who was well received by voters from various social groups. She has a traditional warm, feminine image. She is seen as a conciliatory figure (a cat, or, among PiS voters, a lama, a seal, a nutria, etc) with a certain dose of aristocratic elegance, or non-threatening haughtiness (a swan, a stork, a doe, a peacock). Perceptions of her are similar to those of Jolanta Kwaśniewska (the very popular wife of President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who for similar reasons was once seriously considered as a potential presidential candidate in a situation analogous to that of Bill and Hillary Clinton). Like the president, the first lady benefits from the “halo effect” in the eyes of voters. This means that Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska can increase her standing among voters not only by acting as Polish voters think a president should (for instance, demonstrating nonpartisanship), but also by acting like a first lady (demonstrating her support for those in need, participating in charitable activities, etc).

ANETA: *Kidawa-Błońska reminds me of a dog, she's loyal to her views, loyal to the party.*

OLA: *She reminds me of a stork. It's something everyone likes, such a positive animal, harmless.*

PAWEŁ: *I put down an owl. Calm, patient.*

ANETA: *I put Tusk down as an owl.*

AGNIESZKA: *She's an old bear. She's been in politics for so many years, she's a kind of clan elder.*

DOROTA: *A cat. On the one hand a better face, kind of nice, a cat is more elegant than a dog. On the other hand, a somewhat softer face.*

KATARZYNA: *I put down a mace as an object, because her name seems a bit noble to me.*

ŁUKASZ: *A peacock. She's proud.*

[Warsaw, opposition, professional class, October 17, 2019]

If Kidawa faces Andrzej Duda in the second round of the presidential election, it will be in the interest of both candidates to conduct a subdued campaign. Strong attacks by either side would contradict the public's perceptions of the candidates.

In the first round, the opposition may have an important advantage: a more radical left-wing candidate could play the role of the “hare” in the race for the second round, complementing Kidawa-Błońska's candidacy and mobilizing a wide electorate, and then transferring support to the opposition candidate in the second round. At the same time, acrimony among opposition candidates would significantly advantage Duda. We cannot assume, however, that Lewica will undertake such a ceasefire, because it is still primarily competing with PO rather than with PiS.

A highly significant group of voters are those who support Andrzej Duda even though they do not support PiS. They are especially influenced by the above-described halo effect. Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska's air of distinction might at least partially offset this effect, especially in the second round. If it came to a direct confrontation, it might also serve to "unmask" Andrzej Duda, demonstrating the difference between Duda the person and his distinguished office.

KOSINIAK IS NOT DOOMED TO SUCCESS

The leader of PSL is seen as having a promising career ahead of him after he unexpectedly led his party to a solid 8.7 percent result in the most recent parliamentary elections, which were expected to be disastrous for PSL. For some time Kosiniak has been reconstructing the peasant party, which seemed doomed to following in the footsteps of the modern Christian Democrats. Nevertheless, voters still see him as a hazy figure, conciliatory but also harmless: a koala bear, a mole, a mouse, or some other rodent. Some voters did not recognize Kosiniak at all. Our working-class opposition focus group in Kielce had to be shown photos of the PSL leader, because some of them did not recognize his name.

PAWEŁ: *I don't know these two at all. Kosiniak?*

You don't know who Kosiniak is?

ZOSIA: *Kosiniak-Kamysz is the leader of PSL.*

PAWEŁ: *I have no idea what he looks like.*

ZOSIA: *Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz. Medium build.*

I'll show you a photo.

PAWEŁ: *So, a bear?*

(...)

Anyone else?

JACEK: *I don't associate him with anything.*

[Kielce, opposition, working class, October 21, 2019]

The same group saw him as an unassuming mouse or a hardworking horse. Another opposition group also described him rather vaguely:

BEATA: *A bit of everything, I would say, I can't really justify it, but I'd say a horse.*

Joanna?

JOANNA: *I said a koala. Because he seems very calm, measured. Koalas don't move around too much, that's just how he is, I mean his behavior. Calm, measured.*

PAWEŁ: *I said a giraffe. He towers over everyone. He's always smiling, he grins like that. He claps when everyone else claps, even when he shouldn't. Then he wonders why he was clapping. [laughter] When everyone is running away, he's bringing up the rear.*

Bartek?

BARTŁOMIEJ: *A seal. He's too sugary for me. Too sweet. He's awkward at times.*

[Kielce, opposition, middle class, October 21, 2019]

That might be the primary problem for Kosiniak-Kamysz, one that up until now has gone unnoticed in the public debate—political commentators know who Kosiniak is and rarely assume that he might be an opaque figure for ordinary voters. Voters do not see him as a statesman, a big stage politician, or even a particularly attractive figure. He is perceived as generally unproblematic and sympathetic, which may be an advantage against the backdrop of PiS-PO antagonism, but it also presents an obstacle.

Kosiniak has proven that he has political talent, something that did not go unnoticed by some respondents (some even saw him as the real winner in the parliamentary elections), but in order to take the next step he will have to take on more color and reach a wider group of voters with his personality and his political program so that they are able to remember him. Being a complete candidate—one who is versatile—is different from being “generally proper” and liked, but it’s not entirely clear why.

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS DO OR DIE FOR ROBERT BIEDROŃ

The presidential election presents the greatest challenge for Lewica (the Left). Name recognition and experience make Robert Biedroń the obvious candidate. He is seen as a distinctive politician, while at the same time being perceived as warm and non-aggressive (a nice furry bear), but his reputation was severely damaged when he failed to honor his promise to give up his seat in the European Parliament (the fox—a traitor) and run for the parliamentary elections. A serious obstacle to gaining support—especially in small towns and villages—lies in the fact that he is closely associated with the LGBT movement and is open about his sexual orientation. That means that working class voters, even those who declare their support for Lewica, do not see him as a serious candidate (a clown, a baboon). For now, Biedroń seems to be the candidate of the urban middle class.

How do you see Biedroń?

ZOSIA: *I see him as a fox.*

NINA: *I see him as a chimpanzee.*

Why’s that?

NINA: *Because he’s for all that equality and you don’t know if it’s a man or a woman, so I got a monkey.*

PAWEŁ: *I have something similar, a lemur.*

A lemur?

AGNIESZKA: *I said a cat, because he’s so sweet. He’s always smiling, so sweet, nice.*

JACEK: *For me, a bear, but a teddy bear.*

ZOSIA: *A teddy bear.*

JACEK: *Exactly.*

NINA: *A bear-like monkey.*

Any other associations?

AGNIESZKA: *I said a cat, sweet and nice.*

You have a fox?

ŁUKASZ: *A fox.*

Someone else also had a fox.

ZOSIA: *I also put down a fox.*

Why a fox?

ŁUKASZ: *He's wily.*

ZOSIA: *I think so too, he's wily.*

[Kielce, opposition, working class, October 21, 2019]

The leader of Wiosna has to be careful, because he has found himself in the same situation as Tusk. The prolonged wait for him to announce his plans may be perceived as a cunning calculation. The election is doubtless a threat to Biedroń. Failing to at least match Lewica's most recent result or being outdone by the PSL candidate would be seen as a disastrous failure. The leader of PSL is not doomed to success, however, and he has serious limitations. For Biedroń, the presidential election presents not only a risk, but also his best chance to make up for his losses by achieving something that would allow voters to forget about his backsliding on the European Parliament. That is especially true because Biedroń is not in the Sejm, where the main political debate is taking place. If he does not run for president, he may disappear from the political scene and pass the mantle to someone else.

There is also Adrian Zandberg. He is seen as strong, aggressive, and even belligerent. His problem is lower recognition as compared to Biedroń. Some urban voters see his economic views as overly radical, which might confine him to a smaller electorate that Biedroń's. Zandberg has begun to tone down those views, which is something Biedroń cannot do with his rainbow image.

Zandberg?

ANETA: *A mother bear.*

MACIEJ: *I see him as a grizzly, because he always attacks PiS and PO, and ideally he'd like to fight with everyone (...).*

ANETA: *He's not aggressive, he defends his values.*

ŁUKASZ: *I don't know.*

OLA: *I also don't know.*

ŁUKASZ: *I don't associate him with any animal.*

DOROTA: *I just have that nice photo to go off of, but I think he looks like a dog.*

PAWEŁ: *A lion, because even his face resembles a lion. His face resembles a lion. He seems calculating. He already has a taste for politics, even though he was not in the Sejm. He is a sophisticated player.*

[Warsaw, opposition, professional class, October 17, 2019]

If Lewica ever goes after PiS rather than PO, Zandberg's chances of replacing Biedroń as the face of Lewica will significantly increase. But today, putting forward such a leftwing candidate may lock Lewica in to its current level of support (12.5 percent in the parliamentary elections in November 2019) and impede the party's competition with PO for more centrist voters. And that is a larger electorate.

HOW TO WIN THE ELECTION

It would be a mistake for the opposition to put forward a common candidate. If opposition leaders decide to do so and select the likeliest choice, Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, we can expect a boring campaign, low turnout, and a victory for Andrzej Duda in the first round.

The opposition should approach the first round as a chess match against the ruling party, with the placement of the chess pieces playing a decisive role. The candidates from PSL and the nationalist Konfederacja (neither we nor Konfederacja voters have any idea who that might be) will be highly important. Lewica's candidate will only be running in order to increase support for Lewica and himself. Meanwhile PSL's candidate, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, will be important to the final result, because he is the only one who has the potential to siphon off votes from PiS and Andrzej Duda. He may play a similar role to that of Paweł Kukiz in 2015, who won over some of Bronisław Komorowski's electorate in the first round, and then the majority of those voters cast their ballots for Andrzej Duda in the second round.

If the far-right nationalist party Konfederacja is able to put forward a serious candidate, the opposition may win the presidency. Konfederacja's candidate will be competing above all against Andrzej Duda, and because Konfederacja voters are highly critical of PiS, they will most likely sit out the second round.

If those two conditions are met, it appears that Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska will be able to defeat Andrzej Duda.