

POLITICAL CYNICISM

The Case of Poland

by Przemysław SADURA
& Sławomir SIERAKOWSKI



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The May 2019 European Parliamentary elections in Poland brought a large PiS victory over the opposition, as well as a twofold increase in turnout (with spikes among unexpected demographics). These results took observers of Polish politics by surprise to such a degree that we decided to carry out an in-depth study of the electorate in order to understand as much as possible about the motivations of Polish voters before the upcoming October 13 parliamentary elections. Our research focused especially on provincial areas. PiS won only in villages and small towns, but that was enough for a record-breaking electoral result.

Upon analyzing existing data, we formulated a questionnaire and conducted our own survey, following which we carried out a series of focus groups. We wanted to know what attracts voters to PiS and what media they consume, as well as how they react to actions by the government and by politicians, to social programs, scandals, historical policy, and foreign policy. We divided PiS voters into the **electoral base**, which has been voting for the party for a long time, and **new PiS voters**, who have begun supporting the party since it came to power.

We divided the PO electorate somewhat differently. We wanted to determine PO's chances of mobilizing voters. In addition to **PO's hardline base** (mostly in large cities), we also analyzed more **fickle voters** (mostly from the provinces) — those who had voted for PO in the past but sat out the most recent elections. The disintegration of the European Coalition into the Citizens' Coalition, SLD, and PSL on the one hand and the uniting of the left (Wiosna, SLD, and Razem) into the **Lewica** coalition on the other inspired us to conduct additional research on left-leaning and **PSL** voters in large and small cities.

The picture that emerges from this analysis is not one of voters naively following the dictates of party communiqués, Church sermons, or TV propaganda. Polish voters are well aware of what they are doing. They are rational actors with a good grasp of politics, at least as far as they think it concerns them. That does not mean that they cannot be trapped. **Poland currently faces three potential paths, which we have dubbed the Hungarian, Slovak, and Bavarian scenarios.** Below, we present the key findings of our report, which is being published by *Krytyka Polityczna* and the Pole Dialogu Foundation.

WHO IS BIGGER

Based on our survey, we estimated the current and potential size of the electorates of the three largest political camps in Poland. The core electorate of a given party consists of those who declare their intention to vote for that party in the upcoming elections. The potential (or “reserve”) electorate consists of those people who have not declared an intention to vote for the given party but have supported it in the past, or designate it as their second choice, while also expressing full or partial confidence in that party.

The PiS Electorate:

- base electorate – 35 percent
- reserve electorate – 20 percent
- together (ceiling) – 55 percent

The PO Electorate:

- base electorate – 25 percent
- reserve electorate – 22 percent
- together (ceiling) – 47 percent

The Lewica Electorate:

- base electorate – 8 percent
- reserve electorate – 12 percent
- together (ceiling) – 20 percent

According to our survey, 35 percent of people who say they intend to vote in the fall parliamentary elections want to vote for PiS. We have designated them as the “core” electorate. Another 20 percent comprise people who can be designated as PiS’s reserve (potential) electorate. Although they plan on voting for another party or say that they do not intend to vote in the fall, they have voted for PiS at least once in the past (in or after the 2015 parliamentary elections).

Based on these results, we have determined that PiS’s electoral ceiling stands at 55 percent. Jarosław Kaczyński’s party has the support of an absolute majority of Poles within its reach. That means it can also hope to attain a constitutional majority. Whether or not this is something that PiS voters themselves want is addressed below. PiS could potentially achieve the same status as Fidesz enjoys in Hungary, regularly attaining more than 50 percent of the vote.

Comparing PiS and PO, we can conclude that the base electorates of these two political camps are similarly determined to vote for their respective parties, but PO’s reserve electorate appears to be a more promising resource for its party because these voters are more likely to cast their ballots, and to do so for PO/Nowoczesna, than their counterparts are to vote at all and to vote for PiS specifically.

THE HARDLINE PiS VOTER: A PARTY MEMBER

Only PiS has an electorate that identifies entirely with the party. This is the only block of voters who actively seek out contact with politicians and attend meetings with them or with members of the party.

These voters feel that they are being represented (76 percent believe that they have someone to vote for), they have no second-choice party (71 percent – twice as many as among PO/Nowoczesna supporters), they trust their party (81 percent say they trust PiS without reservations – the highest percentage among the major parties).

For the “old” PiS electorate, it is not the party’s social program that plays a decisive role in their electoral decisions. Their loyalty is older than PiS’s social promises. The strongest motivation for them is their distaste for, and even hatred of, PO and leftist parties as representatives of urban elites. PiS voters identify their opponents as “medium and large cities,” intellectuals, Europe, and money.

This is clearly evident in our focus group results. Respondents were asked to imagine political parties as people:

– *SLD is an older man, flashy, inauthentic, self-righteous, deceitful. Medium and large cities.*

– *Wiosna is a hippie with a peace sign, rainbow, free love, freedom for all, no religion, John Lennon, Imagine. But he’s thinking about money, how to promote himself, (...) about unspecified sources of financing in European salons. (...) PO seems not to differ so much, because sometimes I associate it with someone in a suit, someone who looks nice. But this is a showy careerist, a briefcase, a Rolex. And this is someone younger than PiS. And here [PiS] there’s a flag, patriotism, conservatism. This is definitely someone older who dresses neatly, classically, not for show.*

(Puławy, hardline PiS voters, July 8)

This electorate is clearly much more conservative and traditional, attached to religious and national values. This is evident in voters’ homophobic, anti-refugee, and racist statements. What is more interesting is that some PiS voters from this group are aware of their homophobia and notice its negative consequences. To some extent they explain their homophobia as stemming from the campaign for tolerance, but at the same time they would like to moderate the effects of their stance.

This can be interpreted as a limited but concrete form of progress even in provincial areas:

– *For instance, there are very homophobic young people in my son’s class. (...) They use terrible language. (...) But I think that forcing them to be tolerant and telling them that this is good is not healthy... It doesn’t work... That doesn’t mean that we should tolerate homophobia, because that might lead to aggression towards homosexuals because they are homosexuals. That’s also bad, I think...*

(Puławy, hardline PiS voters, July 8)

THE NEW PiS ELECTORATE: “ABOVE ALL IT’S THE SOCIAL PROGRAMS”

New PiS voters, who played a decisive role in the most recent elections, clearly differ from those who have been with the party for some time. In short, support for PiS among new voters is conditional, even instrumental – it’s as if those who receive public assistance are taking advantage of their party and its desire to maintain power.

These voters primarily live in villages and small towns. They are moderately conservative, but it is not primarily their worldview that attracts them to PiS:

At what moment did PiS speak to you?

– After the presidential election, PiS won the presidential election and we saw the first signs that they might win the next [parliamentary] elections. I decided it was worth looking out for my own interests.

(Toruń, new PiS voters, older group, July 11)

In cultural terms, these voters do not differ significantly from potential PO voters. Despite the constant assurances of PO politicians, these voters believe that that party will cut social assistance programs implemented by the current ruling party.

Support for PiS is also conditional in an additional sense.

HARDLINE PO VOTERS: AN “ANTI-PiS” STANCE

The attitudes of PO voters are contradictory, which is pulling the party apart. PO supporters hold PiS voters in contempt. Nevertheless, PiS’s effectiveness has made such an impression on them that they believe that PO should copy its opponent’s successful tactics. They accept the idea of bribing voters with promises of social programs, which does not prevent them from criticizing “PiS handouts.” They believe that PiS social programs should be defunded, either partially or, better yet, in full.

By far the strongest sentiment among PO voters – and the only factor that unifies the party’s electorate – is an “anti-PiS” stance. The “pro-PO” attitude is weak (“*I can’t really think of anything positive,*” “*there was nothing to attract new voters,*” “*there was no concrete plan that could be heard*”).

These voters will vote for PO, but they are also drawn to Robert Biedroń’s Wiosna and SLD. Sometimes when they are asked to draw the parties as people, they present PO and Razem or Wiosna as twins or figures very similar to one another. This electorate (similarly to left-leaning voters) has a contradictory view of SLD – sometimes they see it as a modern party that promotes tolerance, sometimes they see it as representing the “communist old guard.”

It’s harder for PO to establish an emotional bond with its voters and to motivate them, because their electorate is generally relatively satisfied with its standard of living. Despite the PiS government, PO voters do not feel that they have lost out in any concrete way. One PO voter, when asked about the problems that should be addressed in Poland, gave a rather carefree response:

Why don't you tell us from your heart: the Poland of your dreams in 20 years. What would have to change for that dream to be realized?

– *People should be smiling.*

– *Exactly.*

– *They should be courteous to each other, they should be gentle... They should be in less of a hurry, when they're in a hurry they should avoid running into each other.*

– *People do rush around Warsaw.*

– *We shouldn't complain.*

Ok, smiling people, what else?

– *We should look at the bright side, there should be no harassment in the workplace, children shouldn't suffer from depression.*

– *And we should be more united.*

– *There should be no political polarization.*

(Warsaw, hardline PO voters, July 10)

In order to understand the difference between a PO voter and a PiS voter, let us juxtapose two diametrically opposed (in class terms) responses:

PO Voter: – *I want all this roadwork to end, I want us to have highways. I want us to live in a modern country. (...) I just want our quality of life to be stabilized.*

(Warsaw, hardline PO voters, July 10)

PiS voter: – *They build highways that are free for a year, and then they cost a ton of money. They should do something for the people, and specifically for me. I don't care about having a nice road. I might not have a car, I have no use for a highway. What matters to me is the promise that I will have a pension, that I will have social support, that my children will be able to raise their children, because they'll be able to stay at home for five years".*

(Toruń, new PiS voters, older group, July 11)

Linking political identities with civilizational and class identities is not beneficial to the opposition, because the rhetoric of the country's most recent governments concerning the economic and political success of Poland in the EU means that the reference point for Poles is no longer other post-communist countries, but the wealthy countries of Western Europe. When we compare ourselves to Germany or Scandinavia, the segment of the population that thinks of itself as successful or belonging to the well-off middle class decreases:

– *Compared to what we had before, we see that things are moving forward. But if we look at how much things cost in the West, and see that prices are the same in Poland, and when we compare their earnings to ours, I think the discrepancy is too large.*

(Skierniewice, PSL voters, August 21)

POTENTIAL PO VOTERS: SELECTIVE LIBERALS

The differences and contradictions within the PO electorate become even more noticeable when we compare the party's hardline urban voters with more changeable voters in small towns. This is the result of factors such as the oversimplifications present in the public debate and in mass culture (for instance, in TV dramas) that explain the dispute between PO and PiS as a conflict between metropolitan Poland and provincial Poland.

The greater the mutual dislike between these two groups, the more fractured the potential PO electorate becomes. Antagonizing both is a means of dividing existing PO voters, making it impossible for the party to formulate a coherent message. As a result, the party's program is shaky: PO sometimes tries to prove its progressiveness, while other times it attempts to shore up its "right flank."

Only hardline PO voters are culturally liberal, within certain limits. Other PO voters exhibit a lack of tolerance towards ethnic and sexual minorities. Equality for women is uncontroversial, but so is the lack of tolerance for ethnic minorities. Among PO voters, this is primarily driven by economic factors. This phenomenon can be termed "economic intolerance":

– Locally, I'm mad about ethnic minorities. I mean specifically the Gypsies. It's a huge problem.

– The Gypsies.

– It's really palpable. Something has to be done about it, but I think it will be hard to do anything.

What has to be done?

– They have to be put to work.

(Puławy, potential PO voters, younger group, July 8)

Homosexual people are accepted, but the primary barrier to the recognition of their rights is failure to accept their right to adopt children:

What does it mean to be LGBT?

– It means, they are, they want to adopt children...

(Puławy, potential PO voters, older group, July 8)

The main problem for PO when it comes to maintaining its electorate is the absence of natural ideological barriers and increasing cultural contradictions between hardline PO voters and more changeable voters in the provinces. If that opposition continues to grow, fueled by the ruling party's policies and PO's lacking program, changeable PO voters may be divided among more coherent political formations. The provinces may choose PiS (or PSL), while the large cities may choose Lewica.

LEWICA: SMALL-TOWN SYMMETRISTS AND URBAN ANTI-PIS VOTERS

Lewica's voters are strongly anti-PiS. Eighty percent of leftwing parties' core voters believe PiS to be a threat to Poland, and that the ruling party should be deprived of power through democratic means as soon as possible. For the sake of comparison, the same is true of 68 percent of PO's base and 58 percent of Lewica's potential voters.

Levels of confidence in leftwing parties among people who intend to vote for them in the fall vary. The highest relative levels of confidence are found among SLD voters, of whom 80 percent declare complete confidence. Wiosna, meanwhile, leads in terms of limited confidence or no confidence, most likely as a result of its leader's posturing after the European elections. Only half of Wiosna's voters have complete confidence in the party.

Our small-town and younger focus groups of Lewica voters consisted of many so-called symmetrists—people who are equally distant from both PiS and PO. Their support for Lewica comes more out of a perceived need for something new than out of leftist tendencies. They are primarily interested in improving public services (healthcare, education), improving quality of life, and introducing changes that would help young people (on the job market, on the housing market).

From the point of view of Lewica voters, there is no clear political leader as of yet. All of our respondents agreed that that leader should be a man. Older voters and urban voters named the leader of SLD, Włodzimierz Czarzasty, although some turned up their noses at his post-communist pedigree. Younger voters are not familiar with him, however.

Robert Biedroń is not accepted as the leader of the left. Urban voters reject him because of his stance on taking up his seat as MEP (people think that he “burned out” more quickly than any other leader before him). Young people who support the left, meanwhile, reject Biedroń as a leader because he is too closely associated with one issue.

– Biedroń, not to denigrate him, everyone associates him with gays, rainbows, and nothing else.

(Skierniewice, Lewica voters, August 21)

Within both groups there were a small number of people who prefer the leader of Razem, Adrian Zandberg, but most respondents were not familiar with him. Even among Lewica voters in Warsaw, Zandberg was seen as a controversial figure because of his Jewish last name:

– I think if he changed his name to something more Polish, he'd have more of a chance. Because after all...

(Warsaw, Lewica voters, older group, August 20)

PSL: A YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR WITH A PITCHFORK

PSL, which initiated the disintegration of the European Coalition, has a problem not only with its identity, but even in terms of maintaining its presence in the minds of vot-

ers. In a focus group consisting entirely of PSL voters, it seemed that even they forgot about their party when they were asked about politics and political parties:

– Perhaps I stopped tracking politics closely, but it seems to me that at this point there is only one party in the country.

You mean PiS?

– Yes, the ruling party. And to be honest, PO seems to me to be already obsolete.

You're worried that PiS will stick around until the end of time?

– No, not at all, I don't think so. I just don't see any alternative at present.

And PO is not an effective alternative?

– I think PO is...

– It's already burned out.

And other parties?

– There is no alternative.

– We need some kind of left...

(Skierniewice, PSL voters, August 21)

PSL voters were asked to draw the party as a person. Half of respondents drew a farmer with a pitchfork, while others drew a young entrepreneur. PSL leader Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz does not have any problem resonating with voters. His popularity eclipses his party. Other parties' voters also see him positively, including those on the left.

The primary problem for PSL is its lack of any defining characteristics that would differentiate it from larger parties. Familiarity with the candidates is the one factor that voters can name. The thing that can keep voters loyal to PSL is – despite the stereotypes – the presence of modern, young, and entrepreneurial party structures. That is in line with voters' perceptions of the younger generation of politicians who are currently leading the party, even though the popular imagination still associates PSL primarily with traditional farmers.

POLITICAL CYNICISM

A new phenomenon that has come to dominate Polish politics is the conscious and open acceptance by voters of pathological behavior on the part of political parties. **Political cynicism** is being displayed by voters on all sides. It functions as a higher form of political initiation, a kind of co-participation in politics, which all voters see as a hotbed of evil. That all is why political participation is on the rise, as evidenced by the doubling in turnout in the most recent European elections.

When they are asked about politics, voters begin to act like politicians, calculating the plays necessary to win and openly accepting underhanded moves. They consider what they should say, whom they should seek accommodation with, what to promise to whom. Just like politicians, they do not pretend to believe the things they say about the other side.

One can get the impression that the political divide in Poland is so deep that voters from the two main factions have no one to feel ashamed in front of. Both sides have

lost the point of reference that they used to provide for each other. That is why we see the emergence of two separate media spheres and two separate political universes.

For most of the discussion, PiS voters demonstrated distance from PiS. When asked how they had voted, they grew serious and admitted that they had cast their ballots for the ruling party. They gave two reasons: attachment to the Catholic Church and the financial assistance they receive from the state. As one respondent put it, “that 500 złoty, even though I am against that kind of government spending, I think it is sometimes helpful.” [Toruń, new PiS voters, younger group] One can get the impression that the religious-nationalist framing of the PiS campaign served as a kind of code that was taken seriously by only a minority of PiS voters. For the rest, this facet of the party is a negative rather than a plus. The facial expressions of PiS voters resemble those of government ministers participating in Radio Maryja events. They are not happy, but they know that this is how things have to be done. This kind of competition over who is more liturgically proficient resembles the behavior of communist politicians under the old regime.

On the PO side, this cynicism is manifested in the relatively widespread belief that although politicians from that party have been implicated in scandals and lies, that they are rich and haughty, they have not brought Poland shame on the international stage and they look out for economic development and democratic freedoms. Voters do not pretend to be idealists. They tell interviewers and other participants directly that they are waiting to see who will offer them more.

We will illustrate our theses with statements from our focus groups:

What would have to happen to convince you to vote for the European Coalition or PO in the upcoming elections?

- *They’d have to offer something good. [laughter]*
- *They’d have to make realistic promises and support them by saying that they only have to win to implement them successfully, to help us.*
- *I don’t know, I think we are self-interested and believe that we will derive some benefit from this, so we have to wait and see...*

(Puławy, potential PO voters, younger group, July 8)

How did you benefit from voting for PO?

- *There are programs that I might benefit from.*

(Puławy, potential PO voters, younger group, July 8)

PO voters believe that the opposition cannot afford to openly call for the repeal of PiS’s social programs, although that is something that voters often expect the party to enact. That is why, in the view of some of those surveyed, PO should declare that nothing that has been given will be taken away, and indeed make additional promises, but then find a pretext for cutting the 500 złoty child subsidy once the party is in power.

So if I understand you correctly, you would like PO to avoid talking about cuts to social programs during the campaign, but you think that they should implement changes once they come to power?

– Yes...

– No, I think that they can't do that. People have to be made aware of the fact that the budget is not made of rubber. In order to distribute funds, they have to have some influence.

– I think they should go in the direction of deception, right? [laughter] I agree that people have to be taught, they have to be shown...

– But not right away...

– I would rather say, yes, we'll provide for you, we'll leave this in place, and so on... We will provide, but in a different form, right? And later, not in a rude way, make cuts. I keep saying that we may have to explain that circumstances change, and perhaps the 500 zloty child subsidy will have to be reduced to 300 zloty...

– Why not just get to the point and cut it to 100 zloty? [laughter]

(Warsaw, hardline PO voters, July 11)

NO TO INDIVIDUAL CORRUPTION, YES TO CORRUPTION FOR THE PARTY

One of the consequences of political cynicism that demonstrates the strength of voters' identification with political parties is the dual attitude of Polish voters when it comes to corruption. Poles disapprove of theft to benefit an individual, but they see nothing wrong with stealing in order to benefit the party. They see this as necessary in order for their party to stay in power. This kind of corruption is seen as acceptable in service to the greater good. A politician will not lose the confidence of voters for breaking the law in a way that benefits the party.

This may explain the ruling party's resilience in the face of numerous scandals.

You said that PiS sometimes engages in nepotism and corruption. Should politicians such as Kaczyński be forgiven for engaging in corruption to some degree?

– Not necessarily. If we're talking about individual material benefit...

For himself.

– Then no, he's finished.

What if it weren't to benefit himself, but his mother?

– If it were for the party, for the greater good, if that were documented, then yes, I'd be inclined to forgive him.

For the party, not for himself?

– Yes.

(Puławy, hardline PiS voters, July 8)

When Jarosław Kaczyński accepts rent-seeking behavior by PiS politicians on behalf of their party and its institutional affiliates (the placement of many PiS politicians in high-paying positions in state-owned companies, for instance) on the one hand while sometimes reacting very sharply to private corruption by members of his party (for instance, the scandal concerning the payment of large bonuses to government ministers under Prime Minister Beata Szydło), the seeming contradiction in behavior is illusory.

That explains why PiS did not lose its standing among voters as a result of a scandal revealed by *Gazeta Wyborcza* shortly before the European Parliamentary elections (a company connected to PiS planned to build two skyscrapers on land acquired in the 1990s by Porozumienie Centrum, Kaczyński's former political party; it was also revealed that bribes had been paid to an Austrian businessman involved in the project).

Opposition parties have fewer opportunities to engage in corruption. But it is easy to imagine that part of the opposition electorate would be willing to forgive corrupt campaign fundraising in service of defeating PiS. Opposition voters are also holding out hope for a “mother of all scandals” that will finally remove PiS from power. They envision it as follows:

– I think some kind of internal PiS scandal might erupt [laughter]. For instance, if there is proof that Kaczyński has been taking bribes, the allegation that was made so loudly, that 50,000 in an envelope, then maybe the public would see, since everything is done under the table anyway, as they say, and ends up on TV.

– Exactly.

(Puławy, potential PO voters, younger group, July 8)

That seems impossible for the same reason that such a possibility is discussed in the first place – there are cynics on both sides, and no one is genuinely outraged.

THE CHURCH IS INVOLVED IN POLITICS, BUT POLITICS AVOIDS THE CHURCH

Our research shows that scandals involving the Catholic Church hurt only the Church, and not PiS. This is yet another consequence of political cynicism.

Respondents of all political persuasions talk vividly about abuses by priests that they themselves have witnessed, or which were witnessed by people they know. But they do not think that these issues present a burden for PiS, a party very close to the Church:

You haven't said anything about pedophilia in the Church. Have you seen the Sekielskis' film?

– Yes.

– Yes.

And what do you think, who is responsible for pedophilia in the Church?

– It's hard to say that the government is responsible.

I'm asking who's truly at fault. Is it a systemic problem?

– *It's a Church issue.*

– *It's the Church.*

(Puławy, potential PO voters, younger group, July 8)

Pedophilia in the Catholic Church is still a relevant and highly engaging topic for Poles, although it has fallen out of the public debate because of a misconception regarding what the Polish public thinks about the issue. Politicians (for instance those from PSL) and journalists mistakenly concluded that the jump in support for PiS in rural areas and small towns, as well as the party's victory in the European Parliamentary elections, resulted from voters' reactions to revelations concerning pedophilia in the Church. The viral film on that topic by the Sekielski brothers was received with utmost seriousness by the Polish public, and was largely considered credible. The Church lost a lot of credibility, even among PiS voters. But because of the idea of the “greater good,” as discussed above, PiS was absolved of responsibility, even though it was the only party that tried to dodge the pedophilia scandal and refused to establish a secular commission to examine the issue of pedophilia in the Church.

LEGITIMATION THROUGH SCANDAL

We observed that the phenomenon of “legitimation through scandal” plays a significant role in attracting new voters. Going after elites, humiliating them, creating distance from them by provoking controversy and spurring outrage in the media has become a standard tactic for politicians such as Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, and Matteo Salvini, who use this as a means of not only gaining popularity, but also earning the trust of voters who feel that they have been harmed by the elite.

Scandalizing politicians may have low levels of support and trust from voters on a day-to-day basis (like Trump or Kaczyński), but during elections anti-elitism and authenticity give them (or their parties) a shot at defeating their political opponents. That is why we see unexpected outcomes like Trump's electoral victory or Brexit. Provoking controversy is seen as breaking through the barriers of the politically correct and moving beyond a studied, PR-motivated standard. That is why indecorous, eccentric, singular politicians appeal to voters. They no longer score low in terms of trustworthiness. Thanks to his originality, Jarosław Kaczyński has earned a level of appreciation even among a left-leaning group of voters:

Whatever you say about the leader of PiS, I don't support him, but he is very natural in terms of his...

Authenticity?

– *In his... His isolation. He doesn't speak with anyone, he doesn't talk, he doesn't give interviews. He hasn't been shaped by specialists in order to market himself. That's something I appreciate about him.*

(Skierniewice, Lewica voters, younger group, August 21)

Do you consider anyone to be a model politician? A good example?

- That’s difficult.*
- I very much appreciate our little duck [Kaczyński]...*
- He doesn’t have a wife, so he has a cat, he has to occupy himself somehow.*
- For me, Kaczyński inspires trust.*

He does?

- Yes. But he’s not very good in terms of PR. When it comes to competence as a politician, that’s something a politician should have. He provokes a lot of controversy. But actually it’s an advantage that he’s authentic, not cynical.*
(Puławy, hardline PiS voters, July 8)

The phenomenon that we have termed “legitimation through scandal” makes PiS immune to the political costs of the scandals uncovered by the mainstream media. Scandals involving a party that is a priori controversial and from the outset criticized by the media (including foreign media) do not move voters. Voters no longer have common points of reference that would determine who is in the right and who is in the wrong in the political struggle. Voters remain loyal to their parties.

Hence the great importance that politicians attach to so-called broadcasts of the day and to friendly media outlets. It is through them that the ruling party gives voters ready answers that are meant to allow voters defend their political choices, but neither side takes them especially seriously.

PiS voters learn the true state of things by consuming various media. And this brings us to yet another paradox.

THE PIS VOTER HAS A PROBLEM WITH PIS PROPAGANDA

The PiS electorate is not as deluded by state-owned TVP propaganda as supporters of the opposition assume.

As shown by qualitative research, and confirmed by the quantitative results of our survey, political preferences are clearly correlated with the level of diversity of sources of information on politics. But the direction of that relationship is completely different than the stereotypical image of the electorate would suggest. It is hardline PO voters who have the least diversified news sources – they reject TVP and consider TVN (owned by Discovery, Inc.) to be the only objective and trustworthy station.

By contrast, the landscape of news programming consumed by PiS voters is much broader. Among hardline PiS voters, 30 percent say that they perceive the bias of Wiadomości, TVP’s flagship news program, while 16 percent say the same is true of all news programming on public television and on private channels.

Some PiS voters, especially those with higher cultural capital, see “pushy propaganda” as embarrassing. Our respondents do not believe that public television can drive the party’s voters. The majority of our respondents from among hardline supporters of the ruling party have clear problems with public television (a point that is supported by

survey data), which is why they seek out a wider range of news sources than do supporters of the opposition.

The views of hardline PiS voters regarding TVP are, for instance:

– In terms of what annoys me about PiS, there is one minus: public television. God, they are, forgive me, so far up PiS's ass, it really irritates me.

– That's an exaggeration. Let the government's news programming be a skill, but not to the extent that they're doing it.

– There's too much propaganda on TV and from that lady who anchors the program...

Would you prefer that it work differently?

– Of course, it shouldn't be so fawning.

– There should be more objectivity.

– They should include other viewpoints.

– And they should also include some self-criticism, because not everything is perfect!

– If something isn't working out, they should tell the truth instead of laying it on thick – it's as if they want to improve their own moods by talking about how wonderful everything is.

[laughter]

– Sometimes it gets to the point that you have to change the channel to TVN or Polsat.

– I don't just watch TVP – a bit of this, a bit of that.

– I've almost started changing the channel...

– I still remember the '80s, it's the same thing all over again.

– I sometimes watch archival footage, it's unbearable. [laughs]

– But back then we only had two channels, and now the programs go on and on. And each program is the same – it shouldn't just be honey, there should also be some tar.

– Yes, I agree. (Puławy, hardline PiS voters, July 8)

The phenomena we observed are supported by an analysis of the various parties' electorates.

PIS VOTERS DO NOT WANT A PIS MONOPOLY

PiS voters do not want their party to have a monopoly – they are even apprehensive of that prospect. The majority, even among the most hardline PiS supporters, is reluctant to support a constitutional majority for PiS. They feel safer when Kaczyński's party has some competition:

Would you like him to have a constitutional majority, so that he could change the constitution?

– No.

- *No, I would like there to be some kind of counterbalance.*
 - *Yes, me too... because we might make a mistake, first of all – we’ve already had a “leading party.” And secondly, when there’s an effective opposition, it means that the ruling party tries harder.*
 - *Yes, when there’s a strong opposition, the ruling party has to make an effort.*
 - *I am a PiS supporter, but I don’t trust them to the extent that I would want them to have complete control and do whatever they want.*
- (Toruń, new PiS voters, July 11)

Voters believe in the idea of checks and balances, but not necessarily in institutional form (for instance, when it comes to the independence of the judiciary). That means that they may someday wake up in the very PiS monopoly that they are apprehensive about.

THREE SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

Depending on the posturing of the country’s major political forces, there are three possible scenarios:

The Hungarian Scenario

PiS is on the verge of achieving a level of political power that is unprecedented in Poland’s post-1989 history, resembling that of Fidesz in Hungary or the AKP in Turkey. Through its promises of social programs, PiS may win over a large number of PO and PSL voters, especially in the provinces.

The opposition may become insular and focus on competition between PO and Lewica in municipal elections in large cities. Those are the only areas where Lewica currently has a foothold, and it shares the same electorate as PO.

The only party that can currently compete with PiS when it comes to conservative voters in the provinces is the struggling PSL in an eccentric coalition with Kukiz.

Our study shows that voters (even PiS voters) are not in favor of the Hungarian scenario, but an effective campaign by the ruling party, combined with ineffective action on the part of the opposition, could easily lead to a “social trap,” in which good individual intentions yield the opposite result at the collective level.

The Slovak Scenario

If PiS were to buckle, either because of outside factors or due to a crisis of leadership (it is unlikely that the party would be brought down by scandal), that might lead to the emergence of leftwing populism. Voters will not give up their expectations when it comes to social programs. The most recent PiS convention, and indeed the entire period of the party’s rule, has shown that the situation in Poland is ripe for some version of the welfare state.

A coalition of the left with strong participation by a party such as Razem may “outbid” PiS and propose a welfare state 2.0. Proposing new solutions would be crucial in order to appeal to voters beyond full-time salaried employees. This includes measures such as universal basic income (the 500 złoty child subsidy implemented by PiS could be

deemed a kind of UBI), which would have to be addressed to the precariate and to young people, whose problems were brought up by respondents in all of our focus groups.

Cultural issues would present a challenge for the populist left. Nevertheless, some voters currently cast their ballots for PiS because of its social programs, even though they are put off by its religious conservatism. Would they not vote for a “rainbow” left, even if they did so reluctantly?

The Bavarian Scenario

PO, with support from PSL or the moderate left, might learn to be a democratic PiS.

Our research clearly shows that Poles are eager to accept a **conservative welfare state**, one in which entitlement to benefits is dependent on the presence of a “breadwinner” in the family (at least one spouse must be employed). Support for this approach is evident in the universal opinion that the 500 złoty child subsidy should not be paid out to “pathological” families (those who do not work and live off of public assistance) or the very rich.

The point is that *“our children should be able to work in Poland, they shouldn’t have to run away,”* but at the same time *“we shouldn’t change too much here, culturally.”* Our research shows that Polish voters do not want a situation *“like in Denmark or Sweden, where minorities impose how we’re supposed to behave in our own country.”*

Combining this kind of welfare state with a platform composed of positions that are relatively uncontroversial in Poland (like imposing taxes on the Catholic Church, promoting equality for women, guaranteeing the abortion “compromise” while ensuring access to sexual education and contraceptives, and combatting homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation), PO could count on the support of a majority of voters and present a democratic alternative to PiS.

This study was coordinated by the Pole Dialogu Foundation.

Our survey was conducted via telephone interviews (CATI) on July 2–8, 2019, on a random-quota representative sample of adult residents of Poland. Our base sample size was 800 interviews, with an additional sample (residents of villages and cities of under 50,000) of 400 interviews. The standard error is 3.5 percent. Field research was carried out by the firm DRB Polonia. Nine focus group interviews were conducted in two phases. Focus groups of PO and PiS voters took place on July 8–11, 2019. Focus groups with PSL and Lewica voters took place on August 20–21, 2019.

Dr. Przemysław Sadura is a sociologist and a researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw. He is a member of the Krytyka Polityczna staff.

Sławomir Sierakowski is a sociologist and a Senior Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations. He is the founder of Krytyka Polityczna and a columnist for Polityka.



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