

Presidential elections in Poland shake up the ruling camp

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Around 29 million Poles were called to the polls on Sunday to elect a new head of state. Incumbent President Andrzej Duda was ineligible to run for re-election after two terms in office. As predicted, none of the eleven candidates won an absolute majority in the first round, meaning that a runoff will be held on 1 June. The election is considered a historic turning point for the development of Poland and Europe. At 67 percent, it also saw the highest turnout in a first round of voting since 1989.

The frontrunner, Rafał Trzaskowski, surprisingly won only 31.3 percent of the vote, significantly less than predicted before the election. The mayor of Warsaw is the candidate of the right-wing Civic Platform (PO) and thus the ruling party of Donald Tusk.

Karol Nawrocki is close behind him and significantly stronger than expected with 29.5 percent. The non-party historian was head of the far-right Institute of National Remembrance and, like his predecessor Duda, is the candidate of the far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS). In accordance with electoral law, Trzaskowski and Nawrocki will face each other in a runoff election on 1 June.

The fact that Trzaskowski and the other candidates from the ruling camp only received around 41 percent of the votes in the first round is a bitter blow for the Tusk government. Szymon Hołownia performed particularly poorly. The former journalist and presenter had surprisingly come third in the 2020 presidential elections with 13.9 percent of the vote as a newcomer. Since then, he and his party Polska 2050, together with the farmers' party PSL, have been one of the most important coalition partners of the Tusk government. Now he came fifth with only 4.9 percent.

Third place went to 38-year-old Sławomir Mentzen. With 14.8 percent, the candidate of the far-right Konfederacja party roughly doubled his party's share of the vote compared to the last election. Mentzen belongs to the New Right, which presents itself as young, modern

and an anti-establishment force. He summed up his mixture of fascist and economic libertarian views with the slogan "We don't want Jews, gays, abortion, taxes or the EU."

In fourth place was Grzegorz Braun, another openly fascist candidate, who received 6.3 percent of the vote. Braun, who sees himself as a monarchist and repeatedly attracts attention with physical attacks, split from the Confederation shortly before the election. Both far-right candidates are benefiting from the massive discrediting of the old establishment of PO and PiS, including the state apparatus. Their rejection of the war in Ukraine, which they formulate from a reactionary, nationalist standpoint, also resonates with voters.

In a distorted form, the share of the vote won by Adrian Zandberg (4.8 percent) and Magdalena Biejat (4.2 percent) from the pseudo-left Razem party also reflects the growing opposition to the united political course of PiS and PO. It is the best election result for nominally "left-wing" candidates in presidential elections since 2010.

Biejat, along with four other MPs, left Razem only last year because she—together with the social democratic Nowa Lewica—wants to continue supporting the Tusk government. Although Razem has never entered government and, unlike Nowa Lewica, does not hold any ministerial posts, it voted for Tusk, supports his pro-war policies and has acted as a loyal opposition.

Due to the increasing discrediting of the Tusk government, Zandberg, a popular frontman and disciple of Pabloite Jacek Kuron, had recently sought to distance himself and left the joint parliamentary faction Lewica.

Even if Zandberg primarily serves as a left pressure valve, the approximately one million votes he received show that many workers and students in Poland are looking for a left-wing alternative. Zandberg was the only candidate who clearly spoke out in favour of higher taxes

on companies and the rich, social redistribution and against anti-refugee sentiment.

The shift away from the establishment parties, particularly among young voters, becomes even clearer when analysing the distribution of votes by age group. The 18-29 age group had both the highest turnout and the lowest results for PO and PiS: while both parties only achieved 12 and 10 percent respectively, Mentzen won 36 percent and Zandberg around 20 percent of the votes in this age group.

The younger generation in Poland knows nothing but the power struggles between PO and PiS – but they have experienced first-hand that behind the staged hostility there are hardly any differences between the two camps. Social inequality has exploded, the education and health systems have been steadily dismantled, and affordable housing is almost impossible to find.

To break with these policies and build their own socialist party—a Polish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—workers and young people need a clear understanding of the history and political forces they are confronting. The roots of today's party landscape and the careers of Tusk and Kaczyński go back to the trade union, which emerged in 1980 in a rebellion against the Stalinist bureaucracy. Under Lech Wałęsa, however, it quickly became the driving force behind capitalist restoration in Poland.

PiS and PO emerged in 2001 from the collapse of the Solidarność electoral alliance and the government of Jerzy Buzek, which initiated Poland's path into NATO and the EU. The associated privatisation and austerity policies were then continued by Leszek Miller of the social democratic SLD—until this government also collapsed in 2005. PO and PiS emerged as the dominant forces from this political wreckage. A brief PiS government under Kaczyński was followed by eight years under Tusk.

Tusk moved to the top of the European Council in 2014. In the parliamentary elections a year later, his coalition of PO and PSL lost almost three million votes. The PiS won with a popular social programme that deliberately targeted Tusk's business-friendly policies: early retirement, tax breaks for low earners and the introduction of child benefits.

When PiS candidate Duda became president in 2015, the party soon gained an absolute majority in the Sejm (parliament). Backed by this majority and the presidency, it attacked democratic rights, pushed for the enforced conformity of the judiciary and the media, and fuelled anti-

European nationalism—especially against Germany.

The global economic crisis of 2008 and the euro crisis of 2013 had already triggered massive social upheaval. Based on strong economic growth in the interim, PiS pursued a limited redistribution policy—but this was not to last. The de facto abolition of abortion rights, reactionary coronavirus policies and the ensuing economic crisis led to the decline of PiS. In the 2023 election, it lost over eight percent of the vote and was ousted from government by a broad coalition led by Tusk.

Since then, there has been a stalemate between President Duda and the Tusk government. Duda can block laws, grant amnesties and, as head of state, has supreme command of the armed forces.

But despite all the factional rivalry, there is broad agreement on the fundamental issues. The Tusk government has intensified the rearmament already begun by PiS and established an arms budget of five per cent of GDP—the highest in the EU. The goal of building the largest land army in Europe and militarising the entire society, including shooting lessons in schools, is a cross-party consensus.

Duda not only approved the defence budget but also intensified attacks on refugees and the de facto abolition of the right to asylum. Just a few days before the election, Tusk announced that an additional (\$3.4 billion) would be invested in the police, fire brigade, border guards and state security. "Security is not about words, but about deeds and money," he declared.

Even the limited liberalisation of abortion laws failed not because of Duda's veto, but because of resistance from Tusk's far-right coalition partners, especially the peasant party PSL.

What Tusk really needs presidential support for are the planned attacks on the working class. To finance military spending, the government will be forced to cut the already meagre social programmes of the PiS era. At the same time, there will be tax breaks for big business. In early May, Duda blocked a government decision to reduce health insurance contributions for the self-employed—a policy that Trzaskowski openly supported during the election campaign, declaring that "there will be no such blockades" with him in power.



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