
POLAND'S RIGHTWING POPULIST WIN SHOULD BE A WAKE-UP CALL FOR DEMOCRATS WORLDWIDE

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The Polish parliamentary elections last Sunday will have profound national consequences but also include political lessons that go well beyond Poland's borders. The elections disprove important received wisdom about far-right and populist politics, and the results should cause reflection among liberal democrats around the world.

First and foremost, the ruling rightwing populist Law and Justice party (PiS) increased its vote share by 6%, from 37.6 to 43.6%, and regained its majority in the lower house of parliament (Sejm). However, because of a different electoral system and strategic collaboration by the main opposition parties, PiS lost its majority in the upper house (Senat). While the Sejm is the more powerful house, the Senat can veto legislation and plays a major role in the appointment and removal of some key political figures, including the president of the supreme chamber of control, who supervises the bureaucracy.

But even if the political victory did not fully match the electoral victory, the election outcome should be an important wake-up call for liberal democrats around the world. The PiS victory calls into question at least four received ideas common in the fight against rightwing populism.

Myth 1: Rightwing populism will fail in government

A popular view is that (rightwing) populists are great at campaigning, but terrible at governing. There are many different reasons given for this argument; the most important is that populists campaign against the elite but become (part of) the elite when they join government.

This, however, misunderstands the meaning of the elite in populist discourse. In the eyes of populists, elitism is not about your official position, or even personal class background, but about your morality. If you are part of the people, ie authentic and morally pure, becoming prime minister does not make you part of the (corrupt) elite. Similarly, being out of power does not mean you are now part of the people. Just think about the British rightwing populists railing against the leftwing Remoaners or the continued obsession with Hillary Clinton among US rightwing populists.

Myth 2: High(er) turnout hurts rightwing populists

On Sunday afternoon there was a lot of buzz on social media about the increased turnout in the Polish elections. In fact, at 61.7%, turnout was not just more than 10% higher than in 2015, it was the highest in the history of the (post-communist) Third Republic. However, higher turnout did not bring the expected result, a lower score for the rightwing populists. In fact, not just the radical right PiS did better; so did Konfederacja, a confederation of mostly extreme-right forces under the leadership of the anti-democratic misogynist Janusz Korwin-Mikke. While they increased their support by only 2%, their 6.8% of the vote did bring them into the Sejm for the first time.

Myth 3: Rightwing populist parties moderate in government

A third received wisdom holds that political parties that campaign radically will moderate in power, when confronted with the realities of government. But in Poland the opposite has happened. While PiS campaigned on a rather moderate and vague platform in 2015, even keeping controversial party leader Jarosław Kaczyński in the background while fielding more moderate candidates for the presidential (Andrzej Duda) and parliamentary elections (Beata Szydło), it implemented a much more radical program in government. Copying the Budapest Model of the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, in Hungary, PiS mounted a frontal attack on liberal democracy, which included weakening the independence of the judiciary and media.

Myth 4: Voters are put off by radical politics

The other reason that political parties are expected to moderate in power is that the bulk of voters are supposedly put off by radical politics. As the success of PiS shows, and Orbán had shown before in Hungary (albeit in an even less democratic political context), they are not.

This is not unique to voters of rightwing populist parties in east central Europe, either. As the political scientist Matthew Singer has shown in the Latin American context, citizens who feel represented by an ideologically sympathetic and competent executive may be willing to delegate to the executive additional authority to enact their agenda, even at the expense of democratic principles.

All of this should give liberal democrats pause. Consider what were seeing: rightwing populists open attacks on liberal democracy do not deter their supporters, particularly in highly polarized societies. This helps explain why parties like Fidesz and PiS continue to win after radicalizing in office, or why Boris Johnson has significantly increased popular support for the Conservatives since taking over as party leader and prime minister.

Singer's research is particularly relevant for presidential systems, like the US. He found that supporters of the president, or who perceive that the economy is strong, not only like democracy but are willing to let the president bypass the legislature and court. No wonder then that the vast majority of Republicans still approve of Donald Trump and continue to vehemently oppose impeachment.

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