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# OPINION'EYE

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PAR MARCIN HINZ,  
HEAD OF QUALITATIVE  
DEPARTMENT  
OPINIONWAY CENTRAL  
EASTERN EUROPE

## THROW BACK ON POLAND'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

**OBSERVATORY OF ELECTIONS** – a unique research project carried out by OpinionWay Polska for MISO<sup>[1]</sup>

Poland's parliamentary elections took place in October, generating exceptional interest. As OpinionWay Poland, we conducted a 3-month qualitative study in the form of an online community, allowing us to capture the current dynamics of the election campaign and subsequent analysis and in-depth interpretations, regarding voting behaviour and the role of the campaign media.

Long before the parliamentary elections, even before the start of the official election campaign, one could observe a very large mobilization of both politicians, citizens and the media - especially those critical of Law and Justice (PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość). This is the party that has ruled Poland for the last 8 years. During this time, it has raised numerous controversies in the eyes of Polish and European public opinion regarding respect for the rule of law (while maintaining strong public support).

So much so that some commentators expressed concerns about whether the elections would be fair and even whether PiS would - if it lost - peacefully hand over power. The latter concerns fortunately turned out to be fears that were overblown. For the third time in a row, PiS achieved the highest electoral result, but at the same time too low to achieve a parliamentary majority and form a government. A coalition of previous opposition parties - centrist-liberal and left-wing - took power in Poland.

Undoubtedly, the election result was influenced by the record turnout (74.38%). Even the turnout of the landmark first free elections in 1989 was not even close, at 62.7%. In subsequent years, the turnout was usually considerably lower, often not even exceeding 50%.



[1] MISO - Międzynarodowy Instytut Społeczeństwa Obywatelskiego, en. The International Institute of Civil Society

In the context outlined, we're happy and proud of conducting the Election Observatory, for at least three reasons:

- the study was carried out according to an original idea that received recognition and funding from MISO and later some media attention
- the project was our (OW Poland) first major research in the form of an online community - one of the specialties of the OpinionWay Group
- the research was conducted before the elections, which are of particular interest this year and considered by some members of the public to be historic

Our overarching goal was to diagnose how the media can influence the campaign and, consequently, the final election results. Over the course of 3 months, we tracked voters' reactions to specific elements of the campaign on an ongoing basis and explored their attitudes towards politicians and political figures. To be able to answer some key research questions:

- how supporters of different parties perceive particular events or statements by politicians
- whether and which campaign elements can influence voters' decisions
- in which media the campaign is being followed and what impact this has on its perception
- how voters evaluate the various media and their impact on the campaign.

The result of the 3-month online community[2] is a huge corpus of respondents' statements, as well as the audiovisual material with which they illustrated their statements (e.g., screenshots of political content observed online, photos documenting media consumption activities). This extensive and multifaceted material will serve us for further analysis. In the meantime, we present the main findings of the study, as formulated for the report prepared for MISO (not published yet).

[[2] Methodology : The study was conducted in the form of an online community - on the FlyBlog platform, run by the Polish company SoftArchitect from July 18 to October 18, 2023 (the election was held on October 15, 2023 and the final, official election results were announced on October 17, 2023)

A group of the same regular respondents took part in the entire project. N=64 - Those interested in politics who voted in previous general elections (apart from a subgroup of the youngest voters), divided by several criteria: various party electorates, consuming different media, at different ages and stages of life, from various regions of Poland

## Politics in the eyes of polish voters

**For years, politics has been an extremely engaging topic of conversation in Poland, but also a source of a kind of... entertainment. This year, however, politics was taken very seriously by many Polish citizens, which translated into mobilisation and a record turnout.**

How engaging the political topics were, this year was already apparent at the basic level of our study analysis. We observed a very high level of activity from project participants, manifested by regular sharing of not only perceived media excerpts, but also extended thoughts on the current political situation.

The large presence of politics in the political space and, consequently, in the daily thoughts of voters, is also the result of political topics going beyond the media traditionally devoted to them (such as TV news channels and news portals). In this year's campaign, politics also appeared in media that are entertaining in nature (vide gossip portals, but also specific social media accounts whose dominant content so far has been non-political topics).

Especially the most committed voters rarely change their party sympathies in a radical way, i.e. between the main competing camps - PiS and KO (nevertheless, such cases also occurred among the study participants - in favour of KO). As it turned out, this makes:

- Program postulates are of limited importance in a campaign - even the best idea of PiS will not make a representative of the iron electorate of KO start voting for it. Also, the program of the party supported by a given voter is not crucial - he or she responds more enthusiastically to mobilizing and empowering actions and statements.
- Voters generally distrust content presented in media with an opposing political profile - even if it relates to well-documented facts.

When following the media, there is a limited degree of separation between fact and opinion. This is particularly evident in the reception of the least formal sources (e.g. accounts of popular vloggers, closed Facebook groups, profiles of socio-political influencers), which as a rule constitute a kind of journalism. Yet their followers, especially when there is a strong personality behind such a source, take the content they learn there as certain and irrefutable facts. This undoubtedly reinforces the certainty of conviction and, consequently, the current shape of the political scene.

## Different role of the different media

The role of the internet is growing, but - contrary to emerging predictions - this is still not the moment when elections in Poland could be won solely through a social media presence. The role of traditional media remains substantial.

The role of the internet in Poland is growing in many respects, among which are:

- widespread network access and high average daily internet usage time
- the importance of mobile devices, allowing access to information at any time
- a wide range of formal and informal sources of information with different political and philosophical profiles
- last not least - strong presence of politicians on social media

Yet it is still television and its major news programs that seem to shape narratives about national politics to the greatest extent. Even the most popular Twitter post (X) takes on its truly opinionated, wide-ranging power when it is quoted by traditional media, especially television.

At the same time, it is the audience of the main TV channels that is the most polarized and, in a sense, 'set in stone'. At the same time, among the viewers of TVP Info (public television, strongly in favor of PiS) or TVN24 (private television, perceived as closest to KO) there are almost fanatics of their favourite channels. Yes, a loyal viewer of TVP's news programs may occasionally watch TVN's news programs for comparison purposes, but he or she still 'knows his or her own'.

On the internet, although it is in relation to social media that information bubbles are most often referred to, it is paradoxically easier to come across content with a completely different worldview profile. At the same time, the internet is much more fragmented - even people with similar demographics and political leanings may use a different set of sources (including randomly 'bumping' into a feed while scrolling) or simply pay more attention to content of different form and subject matter.

The role of radio also remains important - still keenly listened to and often the daily first source of information, which is deepened in further sources throughout the day. The role of the traditional paper press, on the other hand, appears to be increasingly marginal, which was not referred to spontaneously by virtually any of the study participants, hence this thread was omitted.

## Voters changing their mind

The electoral decisions of the iron electorate of the respective parties are difficult or impossible to influence by any means, including the media. Nevertheless, we have seen some movement this year, supported by the record turnout, which undoubtedly supported the victory of the opposition camp.

Conducting the study continuously with the same voters allowed us to capture in real time at which point they changed their decision to vote for a particular party. And these changes varied (including New Left > KO, Trzecia Droga > KO, PiS > New Left or PiS > Trzecia Droga), with:

- Among undecided voters, the Third Way in particular gained sympathy, which they became convinced of right at the end of the campaign
- Voters were least likely to change their minds and decide to vote for the Law and Justice party (if they were opposition or undecided voters at the start of our project)

It seems that the two main political events (otherwise falling into completely different orders) that influenced the final defeat of the ruling camp were:

- **The visa scandal** (MFA officials were accused of selling visas to Poland) - an affair that shook the confidence of even some PiS voters for some time. For many voters, the problem was not the affair per se, but - as they described it - the hypocrisy of PiS. Indeed, the revealed facts contradicted one of the leitmotifs of the campaign, in which the ruling party opposed the influx of refugees. The affair disrupted one of the ruling party's main narratives.
- **A march of a million hearts** organized by KO - although the march was convened under the influence of the case of Ms Joanna (a woman who was called to the police by a hospital because she had taken an early abortion pill), invitations to it soon became an incentive for voters wanting to show their general dissatisfaction with 8 years of PiS rule. And indeed, the March was a turnout success that had a mobilising effect not only on the voters of the Civic Coalition, but also on those of other opposition parties. One can also assume that it influenced the final decision of at least some undecided voters. Some of them - paradoxically - eventually voted for the Third Way, even though its leaders did not attend the event in person.

## Media and election results

The role of the media during the Polish parliamentary elections was clearly crucial, but at the same time proved very difficult to diagnose precisely by individual media, channels or programs.

For the dominant part of the electorate, the election campaign was completely mediatized. De facto, when voters are asked about political events, including the typical elements of the campaign, they do not describe them in themselves only what they saw in the media. Few of the average voters directly attend party conventions or program congresses. Nor does everyone get to meet even the candidate they later vote for in their constituency.

It also seems that relatively few people express any real need to do so.

Voters follow the campaign in the media, but often do not know where they got their information. Especially when the topic is high-profile and long-buried - they don't remember where they first heard about a particular event or statement. This makes it difficult to assess how influential each media outlet is.

At the same time, it is apparent that many voters do not value individual sources at all. A meme or a video on TikTok can be just as informative to them as a program on a major TV station or an in-depth article.

What voters value is the objectivity of the media in question - especially in relation to television and online portals. However, in assessing the objectivity of the media they are... very subjective. It seems that confirmation bias is strongly at work here - those media that present events in a way that coincides with the beliefs of a given group of voters are considered objective. In practice, this supports the popularity of identity media, including those directly identifying with specific political groups.

In the end, the results of the parliamentary elections appear to have been influenced primarily by mainstream-liberal media critical of PiS. This happened in particular with regard to two elements of the electoral outcome that might have presented themselves differently had it not been for the final weeks of the campaign:

- Record turnout - voters, irrespective of their political sympathies, perceived that the topic of electoral mobilization was widely reported in the media. It seems that voters reluctant to PiS in particular have internalized the sense that this is indeed an important and crucial election, requiring greater mobilization.
- Third Way's result higher than predicted shortly before the elections - in the last straight of the campaign, even publicists almost directly identifying with the Civic Coalition (including those who supported the idea of a joint opposition list for a very long time, criticizing fragmentation) started to refer to the Third Way in a positive way.

Among some voters, this resulted in a 'tactical' vote (so that the TD would not fall under the electoral threshold envisaged for coalition committees, which could affect the victory of the incumbent ruling party).



Photo from the debate "Poles after elections"

<b>Ruling party to date (2015-2023)</b>	PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	Law and Justice	<b>35,38%</b>
<b>New coalition government (from December 2023)</b>	KO – Koalicja Obywatelska	The Civic Coalition	<b>30,7%</b>
	TD – Trzecia Droga	The Third Way	<b>14,4%</b>
	NL – Nowa Lewica	The New Left	<b>8,61%</b>
	K WiN – Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość	The Confederation Liberty and Independence	<b>7,16%</b>

**Marcin Hinz**  
 Head of qualitative department  
 OpinionWay Central Eastern Europe  
 marcin.hinz@opinion-way.com

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## ABOUT THE OPINIONWAY GROUP

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Founded in March 2000, OpinionWay is a pioneer in the digitalization of market research, innovating in marketing and opinion research and developing agile approaches (online panels and communities, data hybridization and Social Media Intelligence).

Born in France and able to operate on all five continents, OpinionWay has offices in North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), Eastern Europe (Poland) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Ivory Coast). The Group is involved in understanding audiences, markets and brands; in product and service research, for clients developing in France and internationally with BtoB and BtoC targets.

OpinionWay is an active member of Esomar, has been ISO 20252 certified by AFNOR since 2009, and is a member of CroissancePlus.

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