Polish Politics After the 1997 Parliamentary Election: Back to a Polarized Polity?

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Summary:

Ever since the establishment of the new democratic regime in 1989, the political field in Poland has been defined by two major, cross-cutting cleavages: socio-economic, between those supporting the neo-liberal free market/free enterprise policies and those favoring state interventionism in the economy and welfare state-type social policy; and ideological, between those with either confessional or secular visions of political order, often relating to contrasting assessments of Poland’s Communist past and to opposing stands on the issue of decommunization.

The socio-economic cleavage, no matter how deep and important for the shaping of government policies, remains a poor predictor of voting behavior. Reform- and market-oriented individuals can be found among the constituencies of all major parties, as can be proponents of a tightly-regulated welfare state. It is ideology, not economic predilection, which defines voting behavior of millions of voters. In the 1997 parliamentary election, both leading contenders, the Electoral Action Solidarity and the Democratic Left Alliance, enjoyed the benefits of a bandwagon effect. Many voters choose between the two at the very last moment. The electoral mechanics worked in favor of the ideological extremes and against the parties of the moderate (or indifferent) center. Such polarization brings about potential dangers for Poland’s young democracy, as it weakens the political center and promotes extremist, radical attitudes over moderate ones. Nonetheless, the balance of power between the factions is muting ideological differences and the hot ideological rhetoric of the electoral campaign seems to be giving way to a more balanced, policy-centered debate.

A Polarized Polity?

Observers of Polish politics may have a strong sense of deja vu. As in the historic election of 1989, which precipitated the collapse of Communist regimes across Eastern Europe, the parliamentary election of September 21, 1997, turned into a showdown between the Communists (now: former Communists) in power and the Solidarity-led opposition. And again Solidarity, as eight years before, emerged victorious. The Electoral Action Solidarity (AWS), a coalition of the trade union “Solidarity” and several minor parties, won the election decidedly, mustering 201 of the 460 seats in the Sejm, the main house of the Polish parliament. The post-Communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) finished second with 164 seats. The Freedom Union (UW), a party dominated by the former Solidarity intellectual elite (60 seats), came in as a distant third. They were followed by the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), the
1993-97 coalition partner of the SLD (27 seats), and the Movement for the Rebirth of Poland, another party with Solidarity roots (6 seats). The remaining two seats were won by the Silesian Germans, who as any other national minority, were exempt from the 5% nation-wide threshold. Among those who didn’t clear the threshold was the leftist Labor Union. The exact results are given in Table 1 below. Similarly impressive was AWS victory in the elections to the Senate (conducted, unlike election to the Sejm, on the basis of a plurality, rather than by proportional representation (PR)), where it won 51 of the 100 seats, followed by the SLD (28 seats), the UW (8), the ROP (5), the PSL (3), and other parties and independents (5).

Table 1. Elections to the Sejm, September 21, 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th># votes</th>
<th>% votes</th>
<th>% eligible voters</th>
<th># seats</th>
<th>% seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AWS: Electoral Action</td>
<td>4,427,373</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Solidarity”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLD: Democratic Left Alliance</td>
<td>3,551,224</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UW: Freedom Union</td>
<td>1,749,518</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSL: Polish Peasant Party</td>
<td>956,184</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROP: Movement of Reconstruction of Poland</td>
<td>727,072</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Minority (Opole)</td>
<td>51,027</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP: Labor Union</td>
<td>620,611</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>1,005,213</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seemingly, the electoral history of the young Polish democracy is one of a roller-coaster ride: Solidarity won by a landslide in 1989, only to lose badly in 1993, and to win again four years later. The conventional wisdom has attributed the 1993 defeat to the hardships of economic reforms and the longing for the social safety net of the bygone Communist era. If this was true, however, what would account for the remarkable comeback in 1997? The very simple answer is that neither this election nor the preceding ones were about the economy.

During its four years in power, the SLD/PSL coalition sailed rather smoothly, and avoided major
collisions with public sentiments (in part by avoiding decisions on such controversial issues as health care and pension reforms). If anything, the SLD/PSL should have been rewarded for the good shape of Polish economy: high economic growth, shrinking unemployment, and a decreasing inflation rate. While many experts have argued that those good economic indicators were merely the positive effects of Leszek Balcerowicz's initiation of "shock therapy" in 1990-91, the broader public remained rather indifferent to this interpretation. In a post-election survey, respondents were divided in their views about the Balcerowicz plan: 26% assessed it positively, 26% negatively, 30% admitted to have an ambivalent opinion, and 19% expressed no opinion. Moreover, the constituencies of the SLD and the AWS did not differ significantly in their views on this issue.

The SLD was, in fact, credited by the voters for positive economic trends. If a party in power loses an election, it usually has no one else but itself to blame for failed policies or an ill-conceived electoral campaign or both. But the SLD should have no regrets in this respect. In the 1990's, it increased both its share of the popular vote (from 12.0% in 1991 to 20.4% in 1993 to 27.1% in 1997) and the actual number of supporters (from 1.3 to 2.8 to over 3.5 millions). Still, it wasn't enough to win this time around. Moreover, it wasn't enough to defeat a foe who did not record any impressive gains in popular support.

Remarkably, a closer look at Solidarity's 1997 following reveals that it was comparable in its absolute numbers (at the 4 million-plus level) to the combined vote for the parties now constituting the AWS, when they ran independently in 1991 and 1993. This analysis might be dismissed as a counterfactual reasoning, but also data collected in post-election surveys and public opinion polls strongly suggest that pro-Solidarity sentiments remained relatively stable throughout the 1990's. Of those who voted for the AWS in 1997, 98% say that they voted for Solidarity candidates in the 1989 election, and no less than 74% in 1991 and 70% in 1993 voted for parties that in 1997 ran under the AWS umbrella. In presidential elections of 1990 and 1995, their choice, by overwhelming margin, was Solidarity's former Chairman, Lech Wałęsa.

What, then, accounts for the change of government in Poland? On the level of electoral mechanics, the most obvious factor is the stunning defeat of the SLD's coalition partner, the PSL. From its 15.4% share, equaling two million-plus votes in 1993, the political representation of Poland's

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1 All survey data cited in this paper comes from the Polish General Election Survey (PGSW), a post-election study of voting behavior drawing on a representative sample of all eligible voters in September and October 1997. Dr. Radosław Markowski of the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Political Studies (ISP PAN) led the research team. The project was financed through a grant from the Komitet Badań Naukowych (Committee for Scientific Research). The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) questionnaire module was included as a section of the PGSW questionnaire. A grant from the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER) covered the preparation of the data set for CSES. Data cited here comes from the CSES module, as well as from other sections of the PGSW questionnaire.
numerous peasants and farmers (arguably the only true class-based party in Poland and perhaps throughout Central Europe), fell into a mere 7.3% share (less than a million votes), below even its 1991 level. The PSL suffered mostly because of the failure of its leadership, especially of its (now former) chairman, and twice Prime Minister, Waldemar Pawak, to recognize that politics in a democracy is much more than just an art of personal intrigue. The SLD’s gains were erased by the PSL’s loses, and the old coalition was doomed.

Another obvious reason is the return of the many parties, factions, and splinter groupings so typical of the Polish political landscape of the mid-1990’s under the protective Solidarity umbrella, reflected in the dramatic increase in the number of the seats controlled by Solidarity. In the 1993 election, when the parties of the so-called Right, most of them with Solidarity roots, ran against one another and won only a handful a seats in the Sejm, a humiliating defeat despite collecting about 40% of popular vote. In 1997, they overcame personal animosities and fielded a joint slate of candidates.

There are, however, other, more deeply rooted reasons of the political turn-around in Poland. Both the PSL defeat and the Solidarity reunification should be viewed as elements of a broader process of re-polarization in Polish politics. Ever since the establishment of the new democratic regime, the political field in Poland has been defined by two major, cross-cutting cleavages: socio-economic, between support for the neo-liberal free market/free enterprise policies and the option in favor of state interventionism in the economy and welfare state-type social policy; and ideological, between confessional and secular visions of political order, closely related to contrasting assessments of Poland’s Communist past and opposing stands on the issue of decommunization. Unlike in Western Europe, the latter cleavage is defined as the left-right dimension in the language of Polish politics.

The socio-economic cleavage, no matter how deep and important for the shaping of government policies, remains a poor predictor of voting behavior. Pro-reform and pro-market individuals can be found among the constituencies of all major parties, as can be proponents of a tightly-regulated welfare state. According to the data from the PGSW survey, the constituencies of the AWS and the SLD do not differ from one another in their position on issues such as privatization of the economy, the scope and availability of social welfare, tax policy, unemployment, subsidies for the agriculture, and penetration of foreign capital. Similarly negligible are their differences regarding Poland’s accession to NATO and the EU, and crime prevention.

The constituencies diverge widely on issues such as legality of abortion, the public role of the Catholic Church, and decommunization. Of the other major parties, the Freedom Union constituency has a very strong pro-reform and pro-market profile on the social and economic issues, and shows moderation on ideological questions. On the contrary, the constituency of the PSL voices very strong opposition to market reforms and support for state interventionism. However, neither of these parties attracted a
following comparable in numbers to that of the AWS or the SLD. Clearly, it is ideology, not economic preference, which defines voting behavior.

This, indeed, is déjà vu. If there has been at all a see-saw effect in Polish electoral politics, it is defined by the oscillations from polarization to fragmentation and back. The outcome of the 1989 election reflected the high level of political polarization in Poland throughout the 1980's, delineated along precisely the same ideological cleavage that re-emerged in the mid-1990's. Then came the fragmentation of 1990-91, from which the left side of the political continuum was to recover much sooner. The post-Solidarity Right remained fragmented even after the seemingly sobering defeat in 1993. They failed to agree on a common candidate in the 1995 presidential election, bitterly divided over the assessment of the incumbent President, former leader of Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa.

The post-Communist Left without the slightest hesitation supported its leader, Aleksander Kwaśniewski. From this point on, the momentum shifted toward polarization. Voters, not mindful of politicians' wobblings, rushed to join one of the two major camps. Those of Catholic and/or anti-Communist orientation rallied behind Wałęsa while Kwaśniewski gathered more support among voters with secular views and/or those perceiving the issue of Poland's Communist past as irrelevant. This polarization was reinforced in the run-off round (for which both Kwaśniewski and Wałęsa qualified by a large margin), and, moreover, has remained prominent in Polish politics ever since the 1995 election.

The AWS emerged in the wake of Solidarity's electoral defeat, being assembled with surprising political skill by Wałęsa's successor as Solidarity's Chairman, Marian Krzaklewski. It confronted the SLD/PSL coalition for the first time in the constitutional referendum of May 25, 1997, calling for the rejection of the draft accepted by the Sejm, and labeling it as "Soviet," "Stalinist," and "foreign." It lost this standoff, but only by a slim margin (45% to 53%). It had more luck four months later.

Of course, the AWS victory in the September election isn't just a matter of better luck. Two factors worked in its favor. Firstly, the narrow defeat in the referendum had a mobilizing effect on the AWS constituency. Secondly, the constitution was supported in the referendum not only by the SLD, but also by the PSL, the Freedom Union, and the Labor Union. In the election, obviously, all these parties ran independently, receiving their share of the popular vote. Still, the share of the three latter was diminished by the growing polarization of the polity. As in the 1995 presidential election, both leading contenders enjoyed the benefits of a bandwagon effect, with many voters choosing at the very last moment to vote for either the AWS or the SLD.

This pattern of sophisticated voting hurt, in particular, the Labor Union, which didn't clear the threshold. Of those voters who in the PGSW survey chose the Labor Union as their favorite party, only 35% voted for it, while 42% voted for the SLD. Also, both the Freedom Union and the PSL lost some
voters to the AWS, but their eleventh hour losses were not that dramatic. Support for the PSL seems to be diminishing regardless of sophisticated voting. The Freedom Union, on the other hand, enjoys the relatively stable support of the old Polish intelligentsia and urban professionals – the nucleus of the emerging middle class. Altogether, electoral mechanics worked in favor of the ideological extremes and against the parties of the moderate (or indifferent) center.

Such polarization brings about potential dangers for Poland’s young democracy, as it weakens the political center and promotes extremist, radical attitudes. With many unresolved economic and social issues on the new government’s plate, there is a need to build a broader consensus to promote reform policies, which may cause real, if only temporary, hardships for many segments of Polish society. Both the AWS and the SLD seem to have adopted the attitude of rejecting a priori the ideas promoted by the other side. (The SLD, for instance, opposed the new government proposal of the 1998 budget, which in fact had been drafted by the SLD-PSL government before the election). The ideologization of public policies dwindles their effectiveness, or altogether prevents their implementation. Simultaneously, shifting the focus of public attention towards ideological issues (like most recently the question of sexual education in primary and secondary schools), fuels further polarization of the polity. It may even encourage the re-emergence of the “us versus them” dichotomy of the Communist times. It redefines politics as a zero-sum game, in which the old Soviet principle, “kto koro?,” becomes the ultimate norm of political behavior.

There are, however, certain reasons for moderate optimism. The electoral arithmetic resulted in one viable coalition -- the moderate Freedom Union working with the AWS as a junior partner. The negotiations that led to the creation of the coalition and the new government were long and painful. In part, such tension was due to the mutual distrust of the partners, each blaming the other for an alleged departure from the original ethos of Solidarity. Moreover, both the AWS and the Freedom Union understood that the other had no option but to join this coalition, and therefore, could be pressed to surrender on contentious issues. Nevertheless, since its investiture the government of Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek (a moderate leader of Solidarity’s branch in Silesia) and Deputy PM Leszek Balcerowicz (the leader of the UW) has been working relatively smoothly and effectively, focusing its attention on the substantive issues of economic, social, and administrative reforms.

The two parties of the ruling coalition control 261 seats on the Sejm, fifteen short of the two-thirds majority necessary to override a presidential veto of a legislative act. President Kwaśniewski has already demonstrated that he is willing to use his veto to satisfy the left-of-center public sentiment (e.g. sex education), or to protect interests of the SLD (and his own) constituency (e.g. pension privileges of the former military and police functionaries). This situation forces the coalition to seek a broader consensus on the issues that will be covered in future legislation, by either coopting the PSL, or assuring
the President's approval beforehand, or by striking a deal with the SLD (as is likely to happen in the case of local government reform, strongly opposed by the PSL). Altogether, the actual distribution of power within Poland's cohabitation model promotes bargaining over confrontation, and may help to shape the political process along patterns that prevail in consolidated liberal democracies.

Finally, the hot ideological rhetoric of the electoral campaign seems to have given way to a more balanced, policy-centered debate. In both the AWS and the SLD there are ideological warriors, but there are also pragmatic, down-to-earth politicians. The former may find themselves in relative isolation, if they speak out-of-tune with the prevailing mood of the public, which is tired of the tug-of-war among the elites. At the AWS side, the extreme Catholic fundamentalists seem to have lost the endorsement of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church, once reluctant to see Poland's approach toward the secular West, now openly and actively supports the nation's drive to join NATO and the European Union. And on these strategic issues, there is a full consensus among the public and the political elites alike. Whether it will be sufficient to overcome the negative facets of political polarization remains to be seen.