DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 26.05.2025 | Michał Szułdrzyński

# Quo vadis, Poland?

## Liberal persistence or further right-wing radicalisation? Poland's presidential election is a dress rehearsal for Europe's future

In the Polish political system, although the president has a powerful popular mandate, their power is still limited. The constitution restricts the role of the president to largely ceremonial duties, such as representing the country, signing judicial, ambassadorial or military appointments, and serving as the formal commander-in-chief of the armed forces. And yet, the president does hold one important check: the right to veto any law passed by parliament — except for the state budget.

At the same time, the president enjoys the strongest democratic legitimacy of any political figure in Poland, as they must be elected in a direct vote with an absolute majority of over 50 per cent. In the first round of the election, 66 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballots – almost 20 million people – meaning that the president will ultimately be chosen on 1 June by more than 10 million direct votes.

To secure such a majority, a runoff is almost always required. This means that the first and second rounds are, in fact, two different elections. This year, 13 candidates entered the first round, each of whom submitted at least 100 000 signatures to the National Electoral Commission. These were highly democratic elections, more akin to parliamentary contests, where voters could support the candidate whose views were closest to theirs and had a wide spectrum of political options to choose from.

In the second round, the choice becomes binary. Only two candidates remain, and the dynamics and stakes of the election shift. It is in the second round that citizens decide the direction in which they want the country to go.

## A snapshot of political sentiment

The first round, then, serves more as a snapshot of political sentiment. And what does that snapshot tell us? Rafał Trzaskowski of Donald

Tusk's Civic Platform came first with 31,34 per cent. Karol Nawrocki, backed by Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party (PiS), received 29,54 per cent. Sławomir Mentzen of the anti-immigration, anti-EU Confederation placed third with 14,81 per cent. Lastly, another far-right candidate, Grzegorz Braun – formerly part of Confederation and even more radical than Mentzen – received 6,34 per cent.

What stands out in these results? Several things. First, the narrow margin between the liberal and the national-conservative candidates. Both will need to win several million more votes to prevail. Second, the outcome is a warning sign for Prime Minister Tusk's ruling coalition. Together, the coalition's candidates gained slightly over 40 per cent of the vote. If parliamentary elections were held today, Tusk would likely struggle to secure a majority. Neither PiS nor Civic Platform would be able to form a government without the increasingly popular Confederation.

Third, candidates of the right and far-right – Nawrocki and others – collectively received more than 50 per cent of the vote. This does not mean Trzaskowski has no chance, but it does mean the race will be tightly contested.

*Among voters under 39, the far-right Mentzen placed first.*

Fourth, it is worth noting the significant support for anti-establishment candidates — more than 25 per cent of all votes cast. Among the youngest voters, anti-system candidates received nearly three-quarters of the vote. In the 60+ age group, nearly 90 per cent of votes went to the two leading candidates – Trzaskowski and Nawrocki – who represent the two-decade-old political polarisation between Tusk and Kaczyński. But in the 18–29 demographic, that figure drops to just 22 per cent.

Among voters under 39, the far-right Mentzen placed first. In fact, if only Poles under 29 could vote, Mentzen would likely be facing off against the radically left-wing, anti-capitalist Adrian Zandberg in the second round. This reveals a deep generational divide in Poland, one that may eventually bring an end to the longstanding Tusk–Kaczyński political duopoly. Young people are demanding a different kind of politics. They believe the political elites of the past three decades have failed and that radical change is necessary.

## Poland and the new right-wing international

Nevertheless, older voters still outnumber the younger ones. People under 40 make up 38 per cent of the electorate, while those over 40 account for 62 per cent. This generational shift cannot be ignored. The younger generation is rejecting politics built around the PO–PiS divide. And yet, until 1 June, that very divide will dominate the Polish political landscape.

For it is between these two options that Poles will ultimately choose. Each outcome carries far-reaching consequences. The result will determine whether the liberal coalition's breakthrough over the dominance of PiS in 2023 was merely a blip – an anomaly in Polish and perhaps European politics – or whether Tusk's victory one and half years ago marked a real shift.

*A win for PiS candidate Nawrocki could signal that a 'Donald Trump effect' is taking root not only in Poland but across Europe.*

Around the world, a wave of right-wing identity-driven politics has been rising. A win for PiS candidate Nawrocki could signal that a 'Donald Trump effect' is taking root not only in Poland but across Europe. His campaign has echoed Trump-style rhetoric, including declarations of a 'common sense revolution', a rejection of 'woke' culture and opposition to politics based on DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion).

It's worth remembering that Trump, in a highly unusual move, appeared to endorse Nawrocki — meeting with him in the Oval Office on 3 May, Poland's national holiday. This kind of gesture had never occurred before in the history of Polish elections. An official photo of the meeting was even published on the White House's social media.

A victory for Trzaskowski, on the other hand, would demonstrate that the growing wave of far-right radicalisation can be stopped. That Polish liberals have found a way to convince voters that they can better address the challenges that populist and nationalist politicians claim only they can solve.



## Michał Szułdrzyński

Michał Szułdrzyński has been the editor-in-chief of the Polish daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* since October 2024. He joined *Rzeczpospolita* in 2008 as head of the national department, later becoming deputy editor-in-chief. He won the Grand Press award in the journalism category in 2016 and is the author of the book *Prawica dla opornych* ('The Right Wing for Dummies'). He has been a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations since 2025.