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Parliamentary elections in Poland 1989—2011

Abstract: Parliamentary elections, which are shaping the sphere of political competition and the structure of the party system, have been held in Poland since 1989. The article shows the evolution of the system of elections to the parliament and its impact on the institutionalization of the party system. The current shape of the election system proves that the party system is stable both in terms of the sustainability of party entities and the standards of political competition in the election arena. Elections are also a factor which consolidates party leadership in the case of the major political groups. This is particularly visible after Poland's accession to the European Union. The evolution of the process of gaining political relevance by new political parties is also observed. Following 2001, only one new political party was able to win parliamentary representation.

Keywords: Parliamentary elections in Poland, Polish party system, electoral competition, Donald Tusk, Jarosław Kaczyński

Introduction

A key element in the transformation of political life in Poland was the introduction of free and competitive parliamentary elections. In the case of domestic democratisation processes, the transition from party nomination to the election of the main powers of the state in general elections is considered as the most spectacular example of the political transformation of the Polish political scene.[1] During communist rule, electoral competition during elections to the parliament was not permitted since the very inception of the electoral procedure, that is at the stage of formulating the electoral procedure,

[1] E. Zieliński: "Przekształcenia polityczno-ustrojowe w Polsce." In: *Transformacja ustrojowa państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej.* Ed. Idem. Warszawa 1996, p. 32.

as it did not allow everybody to run in the elections, but admitted only those entities, which were associated with the ruling powers. Deprived of the possibility of making an actual choice and deciding only between persons who received acceptance of the regime, the voters legitimised the regime itself and the persons listed in the electoral registers (conscious electoral absenteeism or refusal to cast a vote were forms of protest against the regime). The decision to restore a bicameral parliament model, though it alluded to political tradition, also derived from the nature of the political contract signed as a result of the Round Table talks between the regime and the democratic opposition. Fully free elections to the senate were only a taste of the future pluralism to come and they served as an alibi to conduct the "contract elections" to the parliament, the result of which (as it then seemed) was supposed to ensure the regime's maintenance of power.

Electoral system

The circumstances under which the legal framework for parliamentary elections in Poland has been developed could have had a considerable impact on the frequent changes in this respect taking place in the future, especially in the case of parliamentary elections. According to A. Antoszewski has stated, "the most apparent feature of the process of development of electoral democracy in Poland, is the extraordinary instability of the system of parliamentary elections. Out of the five parliamentary elections which took place in the years 1989—2001, only two were carried out using the same electoral law."[2] If we are to add the changes which took place in this respect after 2001, we will obtain a picture of an exceptional level of instability of the procedure for electing MPs to the parliament. Wojciech Sokół draws attention to yet another aspect of instability of the electoral law in Poland. It includes amendments of the basic law. The first two parliamentary elections (1989 and 1991) took place in the period when the revised Constitution of 1952 was in force. The election law of 1993 was adopted when the so-called *Mała Konstytucja* (*The Small Constitution*) of 17 October 1992 was in place. The election system of 2001 and the election code passed in 2011 were formed within the legal framework of the Constitution of 2 April 1997.[3]

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[2] A. Antoszewski: "Ewolucja systemu wyborczego do Sejmu." In: *Demokratyzacja w III Rzeczypospolitej*. Ed. Idem. Wrocław 2002, p. 51.

[3] W. Sokół: *Geneza i ewolucja systemów wyborczych w państwach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej*. Lublin 2007, p. 263.

A certain counterweight in this respect was the senate electoral procedure that, despite going through particular evolution, seems not very remote from the one in force during the first election (1989). Both politically and systemically the smaller importance of the senate may be among of the reasons why pressure for introducing temporary changes, the intentions which would result from the current political calculations, was not that pronounced. In contrast to the Sejm, elections, regulations concerning elections to the senate did not undergo frequent changes. One of the reasons for such a situation is the fact that the procedure adopted in 1989 ensured freedom of choice. In 1991, when discussion on the new procedure of elections to the senate was ripe, the upper chamber of parliament opposed it, and it was not until 2001 that significant changes were made, apart from resignation of the requirement for an absolute majority. Up until 1997, Poland was divided into 49 electoral constituencies which overlapped with the provincial boundaries, and in each of which 2 or 3 senators were elected. The new administrative division, which resulted in the implementation of 16 provinces, forced a change to the number of election districts, which, starting from 2001, amounts to 40 of (from 2 to 4 senators per province). The new election code introduced single-member districts in the elections to the senate, which was supposed to change the tendency prevalent at that time, to vote for candidates of political parties or candidates who had the support of political parties. This, however, did not happen, and in the 2011 elections, the candidates of the two major political parties won again.[4]

Adoption of the arrangements made with regard to the procedure of conducting parliamentary elections in 1989, stopped the democratisation mechanism halfway, and the need to implement democratic changes to the full in the future had become apparent. The procedure of elections to the parliament of 1989 was used only once, as the consecutive elections held in the future were conducted in a different political setting. The 1989 election law was invented for the needs of only one election, as the subsequent one, planned for 1993, was to be held based on completely different principles, without deciding if a majority or proportionate model will be applied.[5] In addition, the need to complete the democratisation processes meant that in the near future there would be a need to change the election law for the elections to the parliament and replace it with a procedure that would be in line with democratic standards.

The term of then proceeding parliament was shortened on the basis of a provision included in the revised Constitution of 7 April 1989. According

[4] R. Glajcar: "Polityczne konsekwencje zmiany systemu wyborczego do Senatu RP w 2011 roku." In: *Wybory parlamentarne 2011.* Eds. A. Turska, W. Wojtasik. Katowice 2012, pp. 61—78.

[5] A. Antoszewski: "Ewolucja systemu wyborczego…," p. 57.

to the new election law, there was to be a contractual division of seats in parliament and entirely free elections to the restored upper chamber were to be held. As many as 60% of MPs seats were reserved for the PZPR-ZSL-SD coalition, 5% of seats were handed over to the Christian-Social Union (UChS), the Polish Social-Catholic Union (PZKS) and the PAX association party. The regime coalition could submit the national election register, the size of which could not exceed 10% of the overall number of MPs. However, 35% of the seats in the parliament were to be chosen on the basis of free elections, in which candidates, who were put forward by independent citizen groups of at least 3,000 citizens, could run. Completely free elections to the senate were to be held in single-member districts, which employed the absolute majority rule, with the possibility to revote. In each of the 49 provinces, two senators were elected, with the exception of the Warsaw and Katowice provinces, in which 3 seats were chosen. Also, over 50% of valid votes had to be won by MP candidates, while in the second round of the elections, when two candidates with the most votes contended with each other, a simple majority sufficed to win. Such a method of electing MPs was to ensure the victory for those allied with the ruling regime, as it warranted almost 2/3 of all seats. On the other hand, it could have also brought victory to the opposition, especially if the result was to be treated in the categories of achieving absolute support (and not through the prism of the seats won). The detailed election law provisions ensured that the elections would be held per a model similar to the absolute majority system combined with single-member election districts (in the case of the Sejm the size of the election region ranged from 2 to 5).[6]

The elections of 1991 were held in a different political environment. The adopted election law featured a high level of proportionality, constituting a combination of solutions catering to smaller sized parties. The elections of 1991 were supposed to provide a real image of the Polish political scene by "quantifying" the actual power structure, determining the "actual scope of social support for the particular groups" and electing "a broad and adequate representation capable of fulfilling the functions of the constituent."[7] Such assumptions catered to the expectations of the weaker political powers which wanted to use the mechanism of the first fully free elections to the Sejm in order to install their political representation. Increasing the size of electoral districts (from 7 to 17 seats), adoption of a formula for calculating votes into seats, which benefitted smaller political parties, and simplifying the registration of electoral lists in the whole country, led to the expectation that the elected parliamentary representation would be very fragmented as a result of

[6] Ibidem, p. 56.
[7] Ibidem, p. 61.

the elections to come. The basic assumption of the election law was pluralisation of the sphere of politics, which was to ensure transition from a majority to a proportional system. The relative simplicity in registering candidate lists resulted in 111 electoral committees running in the elections. Thanks to such a solution, it was possible to provide quite an accurate reflection of the electoral preferences at the parliamentary level. The election law did not introduce any thresholds at the national level. Instead, 69 seats were guaranteed to parties, which achieved at least 5% of votes on the national level, or which won seats in at least 5 electoral districts. A modified variation of the Hare-Niemeyer method was used to count the votes in the districts, whereas the Sainte-Laguë method was used to calculate votes in the case of nationwide electoral registers. The formula, in principle, gave preference to smaller political groups, which later led to the significant political fragmentation of the Sejm.[8]

The subsequent amendment of the election law was marked by contradictory intentions. It was passed on 28 May 1993 as a document, which in its assumptions, was supposed to counteract excessive fragmentation of the Sejm through the utilization of concentration-favouring mechanisms. Four years after the 1989 elections, the party system and the main political parties were supposed to be mature enough to desire and to be able to submit themselves to such a concentration process. A factor which was decisive to this intention was the instability of the executive elected by the Sejm, together with the cabinet of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, all of them functioned for no more than a dozen or so months. It was decided that the solution to this state of affairs was to decrease the number of political parties in the Sejm. For this very reason the elections were carried out based on an altered election law, whose provisions aimed to alleviate some of the negative consequences of the previous election, that is the excessive fragmentation of the parliament. The change that took place involved replacement of the extreme proportional formula with a moderately proportional one.[9] It catered especially to larger parties, which resulted from the introduction of statutory election thresholds: 5% for parties, 8% for coalitions and 7% for the national election register, increasing the number of electoral districts from 37 to 52 and decreasing the lower threshold of the possible seats in one district from 7 to 3. As a result, the average size of an electoral district decreased from 10.57 in 1991 to 7.52

[8] See S. Gebethner: "Sejm rozczłonkowany: wytwór ordynacji wyborczej czy polaryzacji na polskiej scenie politycznej?" In: *Wybory '91 a polska scena polityczna*. Eds. S. Gebethner, J. Raciborski. Warszawa 1992, pp. 51—55.

[9] R. Wiszniowski: "Wybory parlamentarne w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Polityczne konsekwencje systemów wyborczych." In: *Demokracje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w perspektywie porównawczej*. Eds. A. Antoszewski, R. Herbut. Wrocław 1998, p. 91.

in 1993.[10] The d'Hondt method was used to calculate votes into seats, which favoured middle-sized and large groups. As it later turned out, this move had a key impact on the determination of the number of seats of the victorious parties.

The subsequent parliamentary elections took place in 1997 pursuant to the same election law setting, which remained in the exactly the same form as that introduced four years earlier. This was the first case after 1989 when the rules of the election game were preserved and allowed for parties to participate in a proven and familiar framework. This does not, however, mean that the attempts to amend it were not made in the course of the term, which was the case during Lech Wałęsa's term in office when he came forward with such an initiative or when the Labour Union (UP) was in power (attempt to introduce the Sainte-Laguë method). A factor which, it seems, had a decisive impact on the maintenance of the existing provisions, was the interest of political parties (especially that of the SLD) which were present in the Sejm at that time. All three of the major groups (apart from the mentioned SLD, PSL, and UW — the successor of the UD) were hoping that a similar mechanism would be used to that of 4 years earlier, when they achieved an extraordinarily high percentage of seats compared to the votes they actually received (overrepresentation of seats).

Before the elections of 2001, a correction was made to the provisions of the election law. In changing the election law, the remaining parties present in the Sejm saw an opportunity to block the domination of SLD in parliament when the party was about to obtain decisive majority and rule alone. In these conditions, work was begun on passing a new election law, which the Sejm eventually adopted on 12 April 2001. The second factor, in particular, was a catalyst for actions aiming to change the election law, which was then in place. Part of them (e.g. the change of the method for calculating votes into seats) was motivated by the political interest of those in power, which prompted a change of the expected victory of SLD by using a method for calculating votes into seats, a solution which favoured smaller parties. The necessity to change the election law before the following elections also resulted from the local-government reform and the new administrative division of the country,[11] especially in the facet of changing the borders of the electoral districts, which was the consequence of the creation of new counties (Pol. *powiat* — a second-level administrative unit) and of the decrease in

[10] R. Glajcar, J. Okrzesik, W. Wojtasik: *Ustrój polityczny RP. Wprowadzenie*. Bielsko-Biała 2005, p. 32.

[11] K. Skotnicki: "Ogólna charakterystyka trybu uchwalenia i postanowień ordynacji wyborczej do Sejmu RP i do Senatu RP z 12 kwietnia 2001 r." *Przegląd Sejmowy* 2001, No. 4. p. 74.

the number of provinces.[12] The main changes proposed and accepted in the election law contradicted those introduced eight years before. The sizes of the electoral districts were increased, while their number were decreased and seven to 19 MPs were elected in each of them. Instead of the d'Hondt method introduced in 1993, which favoured large political groups in the process of allocating seats, the Sainte-Laguë method was introduced (in a modified version, with the first divisor being 1.4) which was a more proportionate reflection of the electoral preferences at the level of the seats granted, and which as a consequence could destroy the advantage of large political groups. The national election register, which allowed for additional seats to be awarded to those parties which achieved significant support on a national scale, was also made redundant. Taking into consideration the pre-election polls, the only party that could be at a loss as a result of the changes, was SLD.

The 2005 elections featured a reintroduction of the d'Hondt method, which was used in place of the modified Sainte-Laguë method, as a formula for calculating votes into seats.[13] In contrast to the previous change, which was made shortly before the elections of 2001, this was one of the first moves of SLD, then the ruling party, and introduced on 26 July 2002. These actions were motivated by a short-sighted hope that the support achieved could only increase for SLD (since this was actually the case as in each of the consecutive elections after 1991, SLD achieved a better result) and it would be this very party which would benefit from the change in the provisions during the next election. However, the outcome was quite the opposite, and as a result of the use of the d'Hondt method, the dwindling support for SLD led to the loss of a certain amount of seats. Two post-Solidarity formations, namely PiS and PO, benefitted from the change. The initiated change of the method for calculating votes was figuratively referred to by Rafał Glajcar as SLD's political "own goal."

The political haughtiness and calculation, which made SLD introduce this change (as the party was expecting to be the main beneficiary of the change in the following elections), was punished and worked for the benefit of the political competitors of SLD.[14]

The last significant change introduced into the election law was passing of the election code. Work on its draft version finished with its presentation in the lower house of parliament on 1 December 2010. Two days later, the

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[12] A. Piasecki: *Wybory 1989—2002. Parlamentarne, samorządowe, prezydenckie.* Zielona Góra 2003, p. 87.

[13] W. Sokół: "Ewolucja systemów wyborczych do Sejmu po 1989 r." In: *Dwadzieścia lat demokratyzacji systemu politycznego RP*. Eds. A. Antoszewski, R. Herbut. Lublin 2011, p. 202.

[14] R. Glajcar, J. Okrzesik, W. Wojtasik: *Ustrój polityczny RP. Wprowadzenie…*, p. 37.

bill was read for the third time and concluded with an undisputed vote, by which the election code was passed.

The corrections to the draft made by the Senate were revised a month later, and on 5 January 2011, the Sejm finally passed the new election law. Its provisions, in the first place, organised into one whole the election regulations, which were scattered all over various legal acts. Apart from making a synthesis all of the previously applicable elections laws, the code introduced a series of changes in the election method, of which the following are the most important from the perspective of parliamentary elections: passing of a quota system in the election registers and introduction of single-member districts to the senate.

Elections

The first parliamentary elections were held after the transformation took place on 4 June 1989. They were "opening elections," referred to also as "transition" or "founding" elections, and they served to grant citizens their basic political freedoms (mainly the freedom of political expression and the right for the citizens to organize themselves for political purposes).[15] The 1989 elections can be characterised by means of the political consequences of the applied election law. The key consequences include: 1) lack of full competition and determination of the division of seats on the basis of a political contract; 2) ephemerality of the election law — it was passed for the purposes of only one election; 3) competition of a large number of independent candidates, who were not associated with any political party or quasi-party (e.g. Solidarity); 4) the possibility to speak out against the existing system without actually leading to the removal of any of the elements of power, but with the opportunity to grant power to a politically significant number of anti-system representatives.[16] Despite the fact that the laws of election to the Sejm and the senate were passed in a rush and featured certain shortcomings,[17] they were a step forward towards introducing democratic election laws. Apart from the

[15] Further on this topic A. Antoszewski: "Wzorce rywalizacji na arenie wyborczej." In: *Systemy polityczne Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej. Perspektywa porównawcza*. Ed. Idem. Wrocław 2006, pp. 77—80.

[16] A. Antoszewski: "System wyborczy i wybory parlamentarne po 1989 roku." In: *Polityka w Polsce w latach 90. Wybrane problemy*. Eds. A. Antoszewski, R. Herbut. Wrocław 1999, pp. 79—80.

[17] A. Żukowski: "Ewolucja ordynacji wyborczych do parlamentu RP." In: *Partie i system partyjny III RP*. Eds. K. Kowalczyk. Toruń 2011, p. 310.

undemocratic, quota-based division of seats to the Sejm, they were the first example of such solutions being introduced in the countries of the Eastern Block.[18]

The established election date significantly shortened the length of the election campaign and restricted the room for manoeuvre of both sides of the political competition had. In this short period, both the solidarity and the regime side had to form a stance with regard to the political situation which had unfolded, and in light of the development, elaborate an election programme, which would ensure them social support. According to the agreements made, the elections were to be non-confrontational. However, it was difficult to reach the minds of the disoriented majority of voters without referring to the negativities of the other option. An obvious consequence of the elections was the Sejm, in which the majority of seats fell into the hands of the communist coalition. In reality, however, it was the opposition that had the majority of social support, as 16.5 million Poles voted for 161 members of the "Solidarity" Citizens Committee, which corresponded to a total of 63% of the voters. A supreme example of the support expressed for the candidates of the Solidarity opposition, was its obvious triumph in the senate, in which not a single member of the regime won a seat. As many as 99 seats went to the candidates of Solidarity, whereas the remaining one was taken by Henryk Stokłosa, a formally independent candidate, who was, however, connected with the regime.[19] The results of the elections to the Contract Sejm, even though they formally guaranteed majority for the regime, revealed actual opposition of society towards real socialism. The results came as a big surprise to the regime that was not prepared for such a turn of events. This was the result of its overestimation of its own capabilities, at the same time underestimating those of the opposition and a complete inability to understand the prevalent social climate (connected with failing to understand the consequences of the election law).[20]

The first entirely free parliamentary elections took place in 1991. They were first intended to be held as late as 1993, however, they were rescheduled to take place earlier. Several causes are given to why that was the case. Firstly, it was necessary to conduct further structural changes, severing ties with the heritage of the communist past. Secondly, a new political setup had come to exist, with President Lech Wałęsa, whose legitimacy was much stronger to that of the Contract Sejm. The Sejm was becoming an institution which was incapable of acting in the new democratic realm being formed and which was even further divided and conflicted.[21] The international

[18] Ibidem, p. 310.

[19] A. Dudek: *Pierwsze lata III Rzeczypospolitej 1989—1995.* Kraków 1997, p. 49.

[20] A.K. Piasecki: *Wybory 1989—2002…*, p. 24.

[21] T. Godlewski: *Polski system polityczny. Instytucje — procedury — obywatele*. Toruń 2005, p. 36.

context was also crucial here, since it pointed to the domestic Sejm as the only parliament which did not have a fully democratic mandate compared to other Central-European states.[22] In the case of elections to the senate it could be observed that despite a different election law, the result of the elections turned out to be similar to the parliamentary elections. The specificity of the initial stages of democratic transformation resulted in the majority system failing to lead to a significant reduction of the number of political groups, whose representatives received seats in the senate. The political fragmentation of the upper house of parliament resembled that of the Sejm. The election results attest to the fact that the Senate was elected primarily as a representation of the main political groups,[23] while hopes that it would play a civic or self-government role turned out to be a misjudgement. The Democratic Union (21 seats), Solidarity (11 seats) and the Centre Agreement (PC), Catholic Election Action (WAK) and the Polish People's Party (all received 9 seats each) won the most seats. A peculiarity was the weak result of SLD (4 seats), despite it winning second place in the elections to the Sejm. The above statistics show that the elections to the senate took place along the same lines of party competition as the elections to the Sejm, and the differences in the election formulas to both the chambers of parliament did not lead to different standards of election behaviour. The only significant difference, according to Stanisław Gebethner, was the level of deformation, which became apparent in the elections to the senate. It was the result of the election system, which was based on the principle of relative majority in unequal electoral districts.[24]

The subsequent parliamentary elections also did not take place at the date defined in the constitution. It resulted from political weakness of the regime elected in the previous election, the development of relations between the institutions of the political executive, and also because of the social exhaustion of the transformation process, especially the results of economic reforms. There was no political stabilisation in the Sejm, the institutionalisation of political entities progressed at an unsatisfactory speed, and the functioning government coalitions were torn by struggles and conflict. The necessary system reforms were hindered by the conflicts between President Lech Wałęsa and the consecutive prime ministers (Jan Olszewski, Hanna Suchocka) and

[22] R. Alberski, W. Jednaka: "Wybory prezydenckie i parlamentarne — jedność czy różnorodność funkcji politycznych?" In: *Ewolucja polskiego systemu politycznego po 1989 roku w świetle komparatystycznej teorii polityki*. Ed. A. Antoszewski. Wrocław 1998, p. 73.

[23] S. Gebethner: "System wyborczy: deformacja czy reprezentacja?" In: *Wybory parlamentarne 1991 i 1993*. Ed. Idem. Warszawa 1995, p. 40.

[24] S. Gebethner: "Wybory do Senatu." In: *Polska scena polityczna a wybory*. Ed. Idem. Warszawa 1993, p. 203.

governments. In these conditions, there was a social and political expectation for a new political setup.[25]

Experience gained in the 1991 elections and the functioning of the parliament, which was elected resultantly, led to the commencement of work on changing the election law. The elections, as a result of grave public discontent, led to the defeat of post-Solidarity formations (in terms of the seats won and not the aggregate support). In analysing the results of the elections to the Sejm, it can be concluded that according to intention, it was possible to avoid significant political fragmentation of the composition of the lower house. The results of the election to the senate, as previously, were a reflection of the support expressed for parties running in the parliamentary elections, however, the impact of the formula of relative majority was noted. As a consequence, the two victorious groups won almost 3/4 of the seats, leaving the other parties with only a handful of mandates. This model of overrepresentation of the triumphant groups was to become a rule in the subsequent elections to the upper house.

The next elections took place on a constitutionally fixed date after expiry of the four-year term, the first such instance in the history of the Third Polish Republic. The lesson learnt by the voters (and the politicians of the defeated parties) four years earlier caused a less pronounced reformation of the parliament this time. The electorate drew conclusions and the voters were more tactical in their electoral decisions. This, in part, happened thanks to a change in the logic of action of political parties, which put forward much fewer electoral committees, avoiding thus a scattering of support.[26] A serious change took place in terms of the nature of electoral competition, as small united right-wing formations, which had made an alliance under the wings of Solidarity, ran against SLD. This "electoral bonus for unity" allowed them not only to win the elections, but to create, along with UW, a cabinet with a stable majority in the Sejm. This was possible in light of the complete defeat of the ruling coalition, as was the case four years earlier, but with much stronger support for SLD. In the case of the elections to the senate, two of the largest committees once again received over 3/4 of seats of which AWS won twice as many as SLD. PSL suffered a defeat this time and its number of senators fell over tenfold from 36 to just 3. This should be viewed in light of a return to the right proportions (resulting from actual public support), as four years earlier, PSL party members, along with SLD, were the main beneficiaries of the defeat of the right-wing parties.

[25] R. Chruściak: "Prace nad ordynacją wyborczą do Sejmu i wybory parlamentarne w 1993 r." In: *Polski system polityczny w okresie transformacji*. Eds. R. Chruściak, T. Mołdawa, K.A. Wojtaszczyk, E. Zieliński. Warszawa 1995, pp. 263—264.

[26] A. Piasecki: *Wybory 1989—2002*…, p. 69.

Preparations for the 2001 elections took place in the shadow of the political marginalisation of the ruling political groups (first the AWS–UW coalition, followed by the minority AWS government) and the growing support for SLD. The elections brought about the victory of the opposition SLD, which was able to increase support for its group considerably compared to 1997. The pre-election poll predictions spoke even about the possibility of garnering an absolute majority by SLD, which would allow them to independently form a cabinet. The unfortunate ending of the campaign (e.g. Marek Belka's comment on the social costs of the reform) resulted in the need for PSL to participate in forming the government of Leszek Miller. Two formations, PO and PiS, emerged out of AWS. They won parliamentary representation and paved their way through to domination in the party system to come. Attention also needs to be drawn to the fact that there appeared a few groups, which were genetically not akin to the main political trends of the times. The Self-Defence Party (Pol. Samoobrona) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) were parties of protest, and their success was also made possible by support received from the electorate which was opposed to Poland's future integration with the European Union.

The 2005 parliamentary elections were held again in the constitutional timeframe, and as previously, the first coalition did not survive until the end — first PSL left the government, and then in 2004 Marek Belka replaced Leszek Miller as a prime minister. The changes being described also prove the political downfall of SLD, which was gradually losing social support, as confirmed by its defeat in the elections to the European Parliament in 2004. The election was thus not only a test of the level of support for the particular parties, but was also perceived as a battle for survival of the left-side's hegemon. Paradoxically, the result of the elections can be interpreted both as a continuation and as a qualitative change of the previous election. It was a continuation in the sense that the same committees put forward their MP candidates, which was indicative of a certain stabilisation of the sphere of politics and the party system. On the other hand, the defeat of SLD (up until then SLD received increasingly better results in every consecutive election) was seen as the beginning of a reconstruction of the parliamentary political competition scene, in which SLD had been the key subject (due to the constant support it received and the institutional stability it represented). Compared to the previous elections, the increase of support for post-Solidarity formations is worth taking note of. It was them who were the main beneficiaries of the decreased support for SLD. What is more, both of them ran in the elections with a pre-election declaration that they would form a single cabinet, which made political competition between them take a specific shape. The growth of support was also influenced by the presidential elections, in which the two favourites (Lech Kaczyński and Donald Tusk) were nominated by PiS and

PO. Eventually, the party of the Kaczyński brothers won both the elections, and PO was left with having to observe how PiS is taking over complete power in the country. Their victory was one of the key factors which polarised the political scene. The vision of social and political reality presented by the party of Jarosław Kaczyński became the subject of political discourse, which drew clear division lines within the political class.[27]

Though the subsequent parliamentary elections were planned for 2009, the resulting political situation led to them being held faster than planned (and the surprise of the political class of having to actually hold them, could have been one of the causes of why no real changes to the election law were made). The main axis of the conflict in the 2007 elections was a dispute between PO and PiS, which within two years, transformed from being potential allies and coalition members, to opponents battling their way through in an open political struggle. The elections resembled a plebiscite evaluating the government of PiS, with a clearly outlined alternative in the form of PO. In a situation of a dichotomous division of the sphere of politics, the significance of smaller parties fell, among which SLD and PSL only slightly improved their results compared to the previous elections, and where parties, providing political support for PiS, suffered a defeat. Neither LPR nor the Self-Defence Party passed the election threshold to enter into parliament and, what is more, they also failed to qualify for funding from the state budget. In such circumstances, the number of political parties in parliament fell to the lowest level in the history of the Third Polish Republic.

Based on the regulations of the electoral code, the most recent parliamentary elections were held in 2011, which wrapped up the parliament's full term. The mentioned four-year period, though three elections were held in this time (to the EP, presidential elections and local-government elections), was characterised by relative stability of support for the main political parties. This period was marked by the consecutive victories of PO and its candidate for president, stable support for PiS as the second political power, and relatively smaller support for the two remaining parliamentary groups. A system of two large and two smaller groups became established. They filled the space of political relevance and complemented each other, radically restricting the chances of other parties gaining support.[28] The results of the 2011 election can be viewed in two ways. First, significance is given to the aforementioned consequences for the observed stability of the parliamentary

[27] M. Jeziński: "Wybory parlamentarne: pomiędzy uniwersalizmem a partykularyzmem." In: *Wybory parlamentarne 2005. Analiza marketingowa*. Eds. R. Chruściak, T. Mołdawa, K.A. Wojtaszczyk, E. Zieliński. Toruń 2006, p. 31.

[28] A. Turska-Kawa: "Emocjonalny odbiór w poszczególnych elektoratach w wyborach parlamentarnych 2011." In: *Wybory parlamentarne 2011.* Eds. A. Turska-Kawa, W. Wojtasik. Katowice 2012, pp. 151—168.

political competition arena. In this case, for the first time in 10 years, a new political entity, namely that of the Palikot's Movement, had entered the Sejm independently. What is also worth mentioning, its genesis took place outside parliament, as it did not form as a result of its secession from another group, but was created from inception by a former MP of PO — Janusz Palikot. The second consequence of the elections was that the same government coalition and the same prime minister, Donald Tusk, had remained in power, which was the first time a situation like this had ever happened since the beginning of democratic transformation. What is worth noting is that all the parties in parliament, compared to the previous election, lost part of their support, which, however, did not inflict as much harm on them as previously. A fall in support for the governing parties did not result in their losing power and they were able to restore their cabinets, even though their parliamentary representation dropped. The loss of support by PiS signified the gradual downfall of this group and gave the opponents of Jarosław Kaczyński arguments to question his leadership. SLD suffered a complete defeat which led to the loss of leadership by Grzegorz Napieralski.[29]

Conclusion

Several regularities are observed when analysing the influence of the parliamentary elections on Polish politics over the last 25 years. The first of them involves stabilisation of the party system, both in terms of the reduction of the number of parties with parliamentary representation, as well as in terms of the standards of political competition. Changes of the electoral system in elections to the Sejm, which were evolutionary in nature especially in the second period, were the basis for the processes of institutionalisation of the main political actors. It manifested itself in the adoption of such strategies by the political parties, which would provide them with repeatable election successes. It is also worth noting here that loss of parliamentary representation resulted in each case with the marginalisation of the political entity.

A second important consequence of the impact of parliamentary elections, is the creation of political leadership, which the elections themselves inspired. In contrast to the beginning of the 1990s, electoral institutionalisation of the emergence process of political leaders took place. At the beginning, also due to the instability of the political parties of that time, political leadership was

[29] W. Wojtasik: *Funkcje wyborów w III Rzeczypospolitej. Teoria i praktyka*. Katowice 2012, p. 160.

labile. Often times, especially in the case of right-wing political parties, their leaders were unable to ensure a long-lasting effect of their actions. The elections conducted in the 21st century brought about the stabilisation of party leadership of the leaders of the biggest political parties. This also happened in the case of Jarosław Kaczyński, whose party came to lose more elections than it actually won.

It is also worth drawing attention to how new political parties acquired political relevance. The election system in place, in which election thresholds form an inseparable part in the elections to the Sejm, constitutes a factor which restricts the chances of other political groups of succeeding. The most recent significant change of the number of relevant parliamentary groups took place in 2001. Back then four new parties won representation in the Sejm as a result of the elections. From that point on, only once more in 2011, a new group (the Palikot's Movement), achieved the minimum 5% threshold required and became a relevant player on the political scene.