International Snapshot: Poland
Parliamentary Elections, September 2005

Inga Kwiatkowska | Program for Representative Government
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ABSTRACT

Poland held elections to its parliament in September 2005. Its lower house, the *Sejm*, is elected proportionally from closed lists. The Senate is elected in two- or three-member winner-take-all districts. While this feature of Senate elections should discourage small parties from running candidates, more and more parties contest elections with each passing cycle. Despite a relatively high threshold of 5% to enter the *Sejm*, small, ideologically similar parties proliferate, and coalition-building remains a challenge. This paper looks the intersections of Poland's electoral system and party behavior, coalition-bulding, and turnout. It also considers the potential implications of a change to the formula used to allocate Sejm seats.

Inga Kwiatkowska interned with FairVote's Program for Representative Government during the summer of 2006.

INTRODUCTION

Poland held parliamentary elections in September 2005. In that vote, the center-right Law and Justice party took power away from the governing Democratic Left Alliance, winning 155 out of 460 seats. Law and Justice formed a coalition with the populist Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland and far right League of Polish Families parties. The election results were a reflection of disappointment with former post-communist government and longing for more social welfare.

POLISH ELECTIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Poland held its first semi-democratic elections in 1989, when the ruling communist party allowed 35% of seats in the Parliament to be elected in free voting, while the remaining 65% of the seats were reserved for the communist party. The first wholly democratic parliamentary elections after World War II took place in 1991 and started a new period in Polish history characterized by deep partisan polarization. This has led to difficulties in creating long-lasting coalitions.

Figure 1: Parties Contesting Election Since 1997
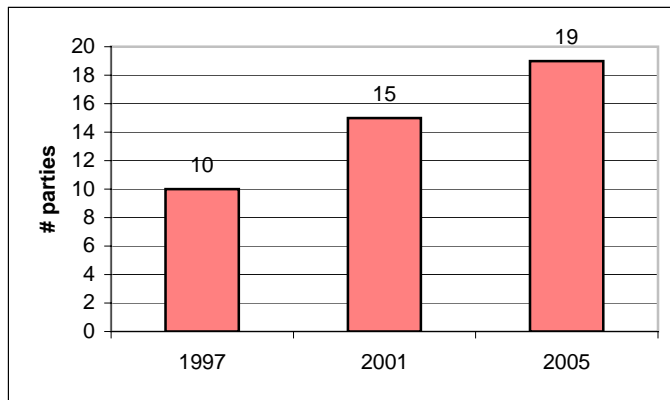
The party system became more streamlined after elections in 1993 and 1997. In 1991, 29 parties were represented in the parliament. In the following years, there were about six parties representing a broad spectrum of views.

There is always a big group of parties contesting elections, often representing similar views but not willing to run candidates together on the same list. This could be called the "spoiler" problem of Polish democracy. Instead of competition among different political views, there is competition among parties with the same ideologies. With parties organized around personalities, it is often impossible to predict possible coalitions and party agreements from such a large number of contesting parties.

One problem of the Polish electoral system is turnout, which has been declining since the introduction of free elections.

In the 2005 parliamentary elections, only 12 million Poles out of an eligible 30 million decided to cast their votes. There are various reasons for such a situation, one being a crisis in civil society and indifference towards active participation in public life. This is caused mainly by mistrust of politics, due partly to unfulfilled pre-election promises. The voters

Figure 2: Turnout Since 1991
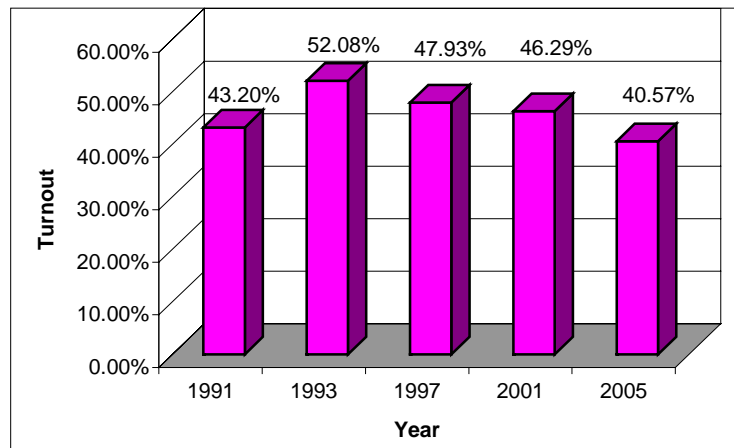
are also uninformed about how to use their votes effectively within the framework of the current electoral system.

SYSTEM BASICS

According to Polish law, elections are: [1]

- **Direct:** Voters choose their representatives directly; there are no proxies (e.g. electors). The voters are not represented by other people, e.g. electors.
- **Equal:** Each vote has the same value and importance.
- **Common:** Each citizen has the right both to vote and stand for office.
- **Secret:** Voting is anonymous, and votes are cast personally.
- **Proportional:** Each party receives an amount of seats proportional to the number of votes received.

The Polish Parliament consists of two chambers: the upper Senate, and the lower *Sejm*.

The *Sejm* consists of 460 members elected under proportional voting in multi-member districts from lists of candidates. During elections, voters indicate their preferred candidate on the party's list. This does not mean, however, that when the party gets seats in Parliament, the specific candidate will become an MP. The seats reserved for the particular party go then to the candidates from that list that got the most votes. The Polish electoral system in this way blends aspects of *party-* and *candidate-centric* proportional voting systems.

The threshold needed to win seats – 5% for individual parties, and 8% for pre-election coalitions – usually reduces the number of effective parties (parties winning seats) to usually seven, with one or two leading parties.

The upper chamber, the Senate, consists of 100 senators whose main task is to 'supervise' the work of the *Sejm* and agree to or veto the bills passed in the lower chamber. In contrast with the *Sejm*, the Senate is chosen in multi-member districts using winner-take-all, at-large voting. Each voter is given as many votes as there are seats to be filled (usually two or three). Such a system is alternatively called the block vote or first-past-the-post, at-large voting.[2]
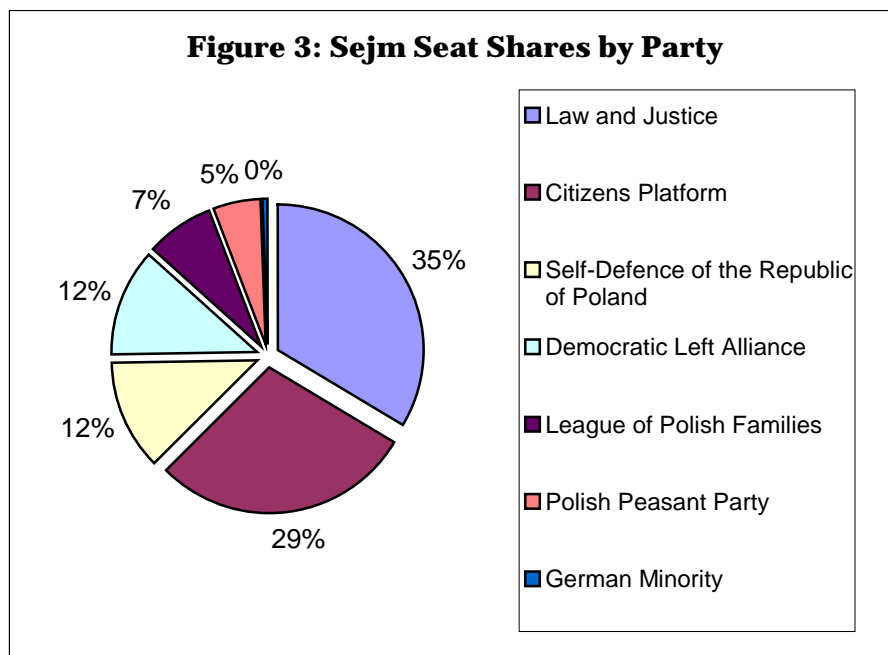
PROPORTIONALITY ANALYSIS

Effects of Proportional and Winner-take-all Voting: Sejm vs. Senate

Poland held its latest parliamentary elections in September 2005. The turnout reached only 40.57% and was the lowest in all democratic Polish elections to date. Of the 19 parties contesting elections, six won seats. The distribution of seats for parties was very different in both chambers.
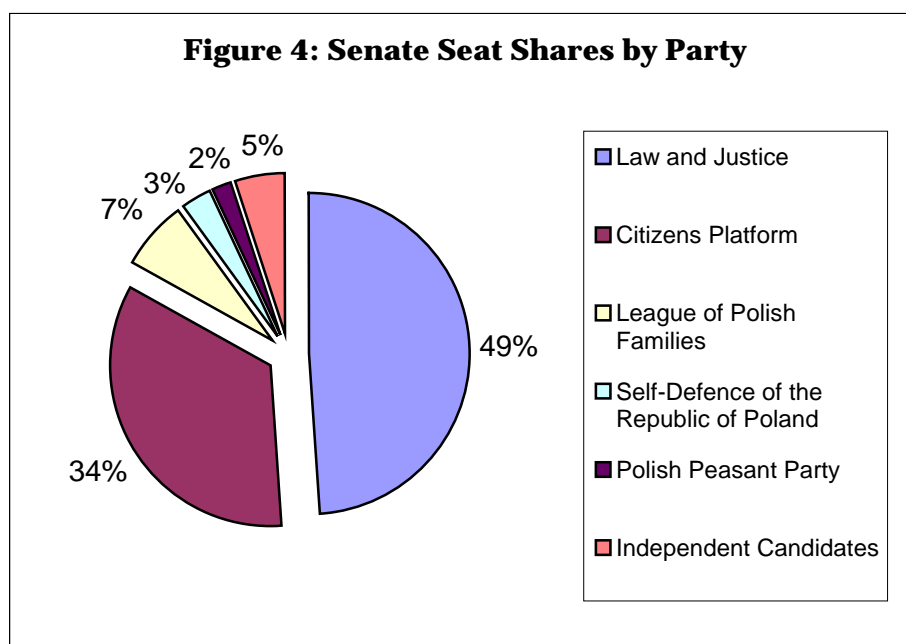
In the lower chamber, the Sejm, two major parties got 34% and 29% of seats, and the rest of the seats were divided among the remaining six parties quite equally.

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[1]　　Webpage of the Polish Parliament.
　　　<http://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/nowaord/kon11.htm>

[2]　　Andrew Reynolds, et al, *Handbook of Electoral System Design,* 2nd ed. (Stockholm: International IDEA, 1997), 36.

Figure 3: Sejm Seat Shares by Party

- Law and Justice
- Citizens Platform
- Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland
- Democratic Left Alliance
- League of Polish Families
- Polish Peasant Party
- German Minority

35%
29%
12%
12%
7%
5%
0%

In the Senate, however, which is elected in winner-take-all districts of usually two or three members, the results looked different with the 83% of seats going to the two main parties:

Figure 4: Senate Seat Shares by Party

- Law and Justice
- Citizens Platform
- League of Polish Families
- Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland
- Polish Peasant Party
- Independent Candidates

49%
34%
7%
3%
2%
5%

During the same elections, with the same voters, the distribution of seats was much more proportional to the distribution of votes cast in the Sejm than in the Senate. Winner-take-all districts, especially the multi-member type used in Senate elections, encourage voters to support parties with better chances of winning pluralities.

Seat Allocation 2001 vs. 2005: D'Hondt vs. Sainte-Laguë

The electoral system used during the parliamentary elections in September 2005 was the same as it was during previous elections, except for the seat allocation method used.

Poland uses the highest averages method to allocate seats in Parliament. The number of votes for each party is divided successively by a series of divisors equal to the number of seats already allocated to that party (*s*) plus some constant. Seats are allocated to parties that secure the highest resulting quotients, up to the total number of seats available. Two major types of the method are D'Hondt and Sainte-Laguë.[3] With different ways of calculating the seat allocation, there are different levels of over- or under-representation in the Parliament. Seat allocation methods are basically formulas used to translate a raw number of votes into a share of legislative seats. Outcomes can change depending on what formula is used.

In the 2005 elections, the D'Hondt formula, using the divisors $s + 1, 2, 3, 4$, (and so on) was applied. It favors larger parties. This is because highest average methods are basically repeated division problems. Because D'Hondt divides by smaller numbers (or leaves larger divisors until later division problems), larger parties will tend to have larger quotients.

A different type of the highest averages method to allocate seats was used in 2001, namely, the Sainte-Laguë formula, which uses divisors that increase more quickly ($s + 1, 3, 5$, and so on). It yields more proportional results and avoids favoritism for larger parties.

Figure 5: Seats-to-votes Results Under d'Hondt Method (2005)

Party	Valid Votes	% of Valid Votes	Seats	% of Seats	Skew
Law and Justice	3,186,082	26.99%	155	33.70%	6.71%
Citizens Platform	2,849,649	24.14%	133	28.91%	4.77%
Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland	1,346,914	11.41%	56	12.17%	0.76%
Democratic Left Alliance	1,335,109	11.31%	55	11.96%	0.65%
League of Polish Families	940,833	7.97%	34	7.39%	-0.58%
Polish Peasant Party	821,605	6.96%	25	5.43%	-1.53%
German Minority	34,234	0.29%	2	0.43%	0.14%
Other	1,290,251	10.93%	0	0.00%	-10.93%
Totals	11,804,676	100.00%	460	100.00%	0.00%

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[3]   Pippa Norris (Harvard University), "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems," in *International Political Science Review*, Vol 18(3) July 1997: 297-312.
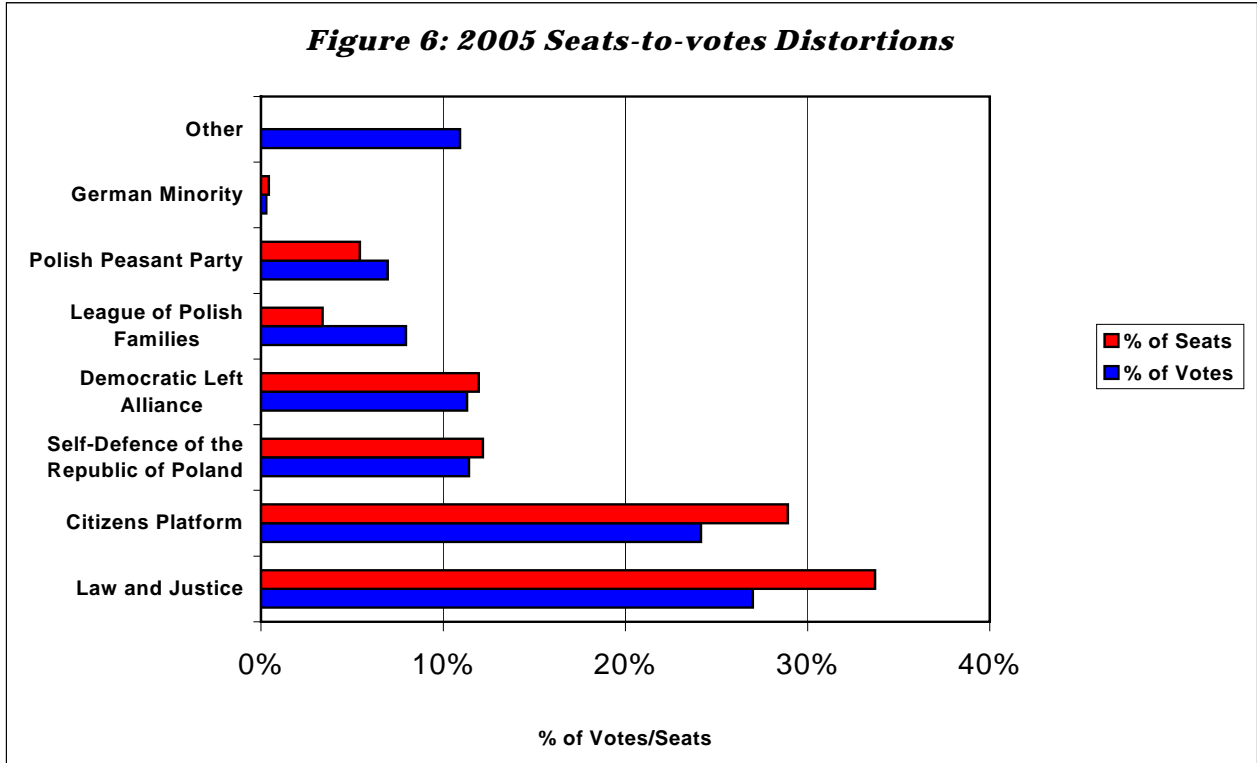
Figure 6: 2005 Seats-to-votes Distortions

Figure 7: Seats-to-votes Results Under Sainte-Laguë Method (2001)

Party	Valid Votes	% of Valid Votes	Seats	% of Seats	Skew
Democratic Left Alliance	5,342,519	41.04%	216	46.96%	5.92%
Citizens Platform	1,651,099	12.68%	65	14.13%	1.45%
Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland	1,327,628	10.20%	53	11.52%	1.32%
Law and Justice	1,236,787	9.50%	44	9.57%	0.07%
Polish Peasant Party	1,168,659	8.98%	42	9.13%	0.15%
League of Polish Families	1,025,148	7.87%	38	8.26%	0.39%
German Minority	55,254	0.43%	2	0.43%	0.00%
Other	1,210,835	9.30%	0	0.00%	-9.30%
Totals	13,017,929	100.00%	460	100.00%	0.00%

Figure 8: 2001 Seats-to-votes Distortions
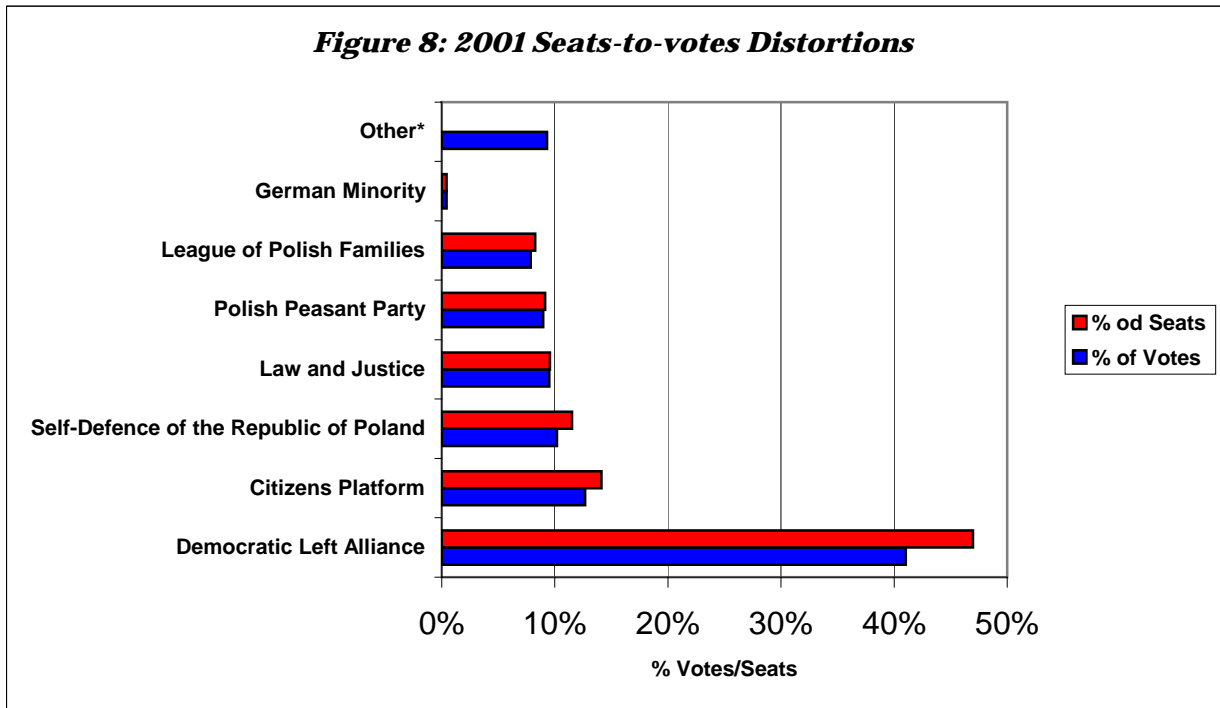
The seat distribution was skewed in favor of the winning, big parties both in 2001 and 2005. However, the Sainte-Laguë formula applied in 2001 minimizes that discrepancy and provides more proportional representation. Note how the difference between the lengths of two corresponding bars is generally smaller in the second graph. Whereas in 2005 elections the two major parties were over-represented by 6.71% and 4.77%, in 2001 the seats-to-votes distortion was smaller: 5.92% for the biggest party.

CONCLUSION

The results of parliamentary elections in Poland depend on many features, and the voting system applied for either chamber – proportional or winner-take-all – causes a different distribution of seats in Parliament. Also, the way the votes are translated into seats affects the number of seats allocated to each party, and policymakers are aware that they can influence election results by changing the formula. Large, ruling parties may therefore have an incentive to apply the formulas that provide them with desired over-representation in Parliament.

The 5% threshold seems not to discourage smaller parties from contesting elections, as their number increases every 4 years. Switching to a seat allocation formula more favorable to small parties provides them a further incentive to run. Such a situation leads voters of the same beliefs and worldviews to "split" their votes among many contesting parties, thus preventing them from forming ruling parliamentary majorities. This problem could be solved by temporarily increasing the required threshold to a much higher level, which would decrease the number of contesting parties and promote more pre-election coalition-building.