

2023 Polish Parliamentary Elections: Victory for Women's Rights or Empty Promises?

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The 2023 Polish parliamentary elections were closely observed by the European Union's member states. When on October 15th, 2023, an unprecedented high number of Polish people went to the ballots, not only internal matters were at stake, but, as some would say, the future of democracy itself (Adam 2023). Contrary to the prediction, there were slightly more women than men among the voters. The victory of the opposition over the previously ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) was quickly announced by Western media, however, the truth was more nuanced.

Two Months, two Governments

The right-wing populist party PiS won the elections both in 2015 and 2019, and since then led the government. The media quickly announced its defeat in the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections, but in fact, PiS had won the most votes; however, not enough to gain the majority in the parliament. Nevertheless, on November 27th, 2023, a third government led by PiS was sworn in. With 10 out of 18 ministers being women, it had a record number of women in its ranks. Some voices claimed that the unprecedentedly high number of women was a tactical move, as the election campaign had been highly focused on women's rights. In comparison, in 2019 only three out of 23 ministers were women (Prezydent 2019). As expected, the PiS government was unable to form a coalition, and two weeks later, on December 11th, 2023, it did not win the vote of confidence.

That was the moment when the expected change came into being. On December 13th, 2023, the new government formed by the October 15th Coalition (Koalicja 15 października), consisting of the centrist Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), the centre-right Third Way (Trzecia Droga), and The Left (Lewica), was sworn in (Tilles 2023). In the newly formed government, there are fewer women (nine out of 27 ministers), however, the power they are given is genuine and not illusory. One of the ways the new government wanted to show its commitment to women's rights and matters of equality was by creating the function of Minister for Equality (Minister do spraw Równości), taken by Katarzyna Kotula, a politician from The Left.

A Record Number of Female Members in Parliament (MPs) in the Sejm

It is a common argument that women's interests are best represented by female politicians in parliament, and increasing their number can better the situation of women (Gwiazda 2019). However, it is worth mentioning that elected female MPs may be

in favour of maintaining or introducing conservative policies just as much as overcoming gender discrimination.

Women's rights were one of the main points in the pre-election political debate. Voting out the conservative government was announced a women's victory, as it was women who voted in higher numbers for the opposition. It was also considered a win due to the possible changes the new government was to bring about, and a record number of elected women.

The total number of MPs in the Sejm is 460. Since the first elections in 1991, when women made up less than 10%, the number of female parliamentarians has steadily grown (Kotowska-Wojcik/Luty-Michalak 2019, 8). In 2023, a record of 135 elected female MPs was achieved. However, women still make up only 29.3% of elected MPs (Sejm 2023). In comparison, in 2019 their number was 132 (Sejm 2019), so only three women less. It raises the question, of whether a 0.65% increase can be considered a victory for women.

Gender Equality Policy in Party Programmes, the Coalition Agreement, and in the Current Implementation Process

Implementing gender equality policies was never a priority by any Polish government; and introducing many of the now existing laws, as well as establishing the body of Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment (Pełnomocnik Rządu do spraw Równego Traktowania), occurred because of the European Union's accession requirements (Gaweda 2021). Since Law and Justice came to power in 2015, Poland slowly became "a prominent case of democratic and anti-equality backsliding in Europe" (Gaweda 2021, 629). Deteriorating gender equality policies led to societal mobilisation, and women's issues became one of the main topics in the pre-election period (Druciarek et al. 2023).

An analysis of the programs published by parties before the elections shows that issues concerning gender equality or women's rights were present to different degrees. The more conservative parties included only a few words regarding women's health and dignity, while the opposition put a stronger emphasis on women's rights, especially on access to abortion. Free access to legal abortion has been an issue in the public debate since 1993, the year when it was significantly limited compared to the times of state socialism (Gwiazda 2019). Since access to abortion was further limited in 2020, the topic subsequently became even more present in the debate. However, it is not the only issue as the next paragraph discusses.

Many people put high hopes in the newly formed government when it comes to more progressive gender equality policies. For the first time in eighteen years, The Left party is a part of the government; and it promises to be the guarantee for women's rights, for neutrality in worldview, and for the protection of minority rights (Lewica 2023). Their election program included, amongst others, legal abortion, changing the legal definition of rape, marriage equality for same-sex couples, and government

funded in-vitro fertilization (IVF) programs (Lewica n.d.). Prior to the elections, the centric Civic Coalition had presented a program for 100 policies for the first 100 days in office, similarly promising the introduction of civil partnerships, legal abortion, emergency contraception, and a state-funded IVF procedure (KO n.d.). However, the Third Way had less progressive policy proposals, and among their 12 guarantees, in a point about women, it only promised to close the gender pay gap, introduce state-funded IVF procedures, and reverse the negative effects of the 2020 abortion law change (Polska 2050 n.d.). Altogether, in matters concerning women, the coalition partners fully agreed only on one point, the IVF procedure and the respective legislation were accepted by Sejm in November, notably before the coalition formed the government. Details of who will qualify for the IVF program are yet to be announced.

In the October 15th Coalition agreement women's rights were identified as a key area, however, in the document it was only ranked as the sixth point (PO 2023). In the pre-election period, both The Left and Civic Coalition promised unrestricted access to abortion, but the coalition agreement mentions only overturning the 2020 Constitutional Court ruling, accompanied by a vague statement: "Women have the right to decide for themselves" (PO 2023, transl. EP). However, there is one progressive proposal concerning gender equality included in the agreement, as point seven talks of amending the Penal Code, so that hate speech regarding sexual orientation and gender/sex is an offence prosecuted ex officio. In the document, much more space is dedicated to the climate crisis, to the environment and to farmers' interests – all of them important issues, but since women's issues were discussed the loudest in the election campaign, the lack of concrete actions leaves a sour aftertaste.

In his introductory speech (KPRM 2023), the new Prime Minister Donald Tusk mainly referred to the war in Ukraine, the necessity of protecting the borders, and reconciling with the European Union, but not the issue of women's rights. He highlighted that the October 15th Coalition already was cooperating before forming a government, and thus introduced the IVF program, still during the PiS legislative period. Tusk emphasized that the coalition agreement must provide a synthesis of the coalition parties' programs and that many aspects are still subject to debate. At the same time, he ensured that all Polish women would "feel an immediate, radical improvement in their rights, in their dignity, in their health, in their safety" (KPRM 2023, transl. EP).

The Polish language is, like many others, strongly gendered, and in his speech, Prime Minister Tusk used feminatives for female ministers, which can be acknowledged as quite progressive against the background that a significant part of the population does not accept them. However, when introducing the new Minister for Equality, Tusk explicitly addressed the use of feminatives, underlining that everyone is allowed to use whichever form they prefer, as there is no dogma for a gender-just use of language (KPRM 2023). This waters down an otherwise strong statement.

The Future is Female – Or is It?

Overall, the current government's actions don't seem to fulfil the hopes for strong gender policies raised by the party programs. Even though the statements regarding women's rights are not as substantial now as in the pre-election period, and the former opposition uses somewhat vague language, all hope for progress is not lost. Many of the voters were mobilised *because* of the promises made by the opposition parties now providing the new government, and those voters won't stop holding the politicians accountable.

The Civic Coalition in particular is under scrutiny, as the largest party in the government, for their program of 100 policies for 100 days in office. In his introductory speech, Tusk admitted he's aware of the expectations, and even though forming a coalition requires compromising he said: "On behalf of the entire future government, I can tell you, we are not afraid of any of these promises. They will be fulfilled" (KPRM 2023, transl. EP). Time will tell whether those were just empty promises.

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Feministische Facetten zu Künstlicher Intelligenz und Politikwissenschaft

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Künstliche Intelligenz (KI) ist ein Anwendungsbereich der Informatik, in dem mit algorithmischen Methoden versucht wird, automatisiert neues ‚Wissen‘ aus vorhandenem, bekanntem ‚Wissen‘ abzuleiten. Zwei wichtige Ausprägungen von KI sind Algorithmische Entscheidungssysteme und generative KI-Systeme. Algorithmische Entscheidungssysteme werden beispielsweise von Banken zur Risikobewertung von Kreditnehmenden genutzt oder im Gesundheitswesen für die Klassifikation von Tumorzellen. Auch für generative KI-Systeme gibt es zahlreiche Anwendungsfelder. Sie können als Chatbots (z.B. ChatGPT) dynamisch Antworten erzeugen, sodass der Eindruck eines Gesprächsverlaufs entsteht. Als Analysetool können sie Texte nach gegebenen Kriterien auswerten und zusammenfassen. Als Schreibwerkzeug eingesetzt können mit generativer KI vorhandene Texte umformuliert oder eigenständig neue Textbeiträge für Social Media oder Nachrichtenmagazine produziert werden. Bei Eingabe des gewünschten Inhalts in einem Textprompt erzeugt generative KI sogar fotorealistische Bilder und Videos. Generative KI kann ohne technische Vorkenntnisse einfach auf Smartphones genutzt werden und zieht derzeit global in nahezu alle Arbeits- und Lebensbereiche ein. Im Folgenden soll aus einer feministischen Perspektive skizziert werden, was dies für politikwissenschaftliche Forschung bedeutet.

KI-generierte Manipulationen von Nachrichten und Wahlen

Geschlechtsspezifische Benachteiligungen in der Politik zeigen sich bereits ohne KI, etwa in sexistischen Fake News und Wahlkampagnen (Stabile et al. 2019). KI kann diesen Einfluss weiter verschärfen, denn mit künstlich erzeugten, aber als realistisch wahrgenommenen Bildern und Videos lassen sich Emotionen besonders gut steuern. So verbreitete der AfD-Bundestagsabgeordnete Norbert Kleinwächter als stellvertretender Vorsitzender seiner Fraktion Anfang 2023 über Instagram bedrohlich wir-