

This is not an Arena for Party Leaders: Presidential Elections in the 3rd Republic of Poland

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Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 21, No. 2
DOI: 10.2478/pce-2025-0007

Abstract: Next to parliamentary elections, presidential elections in Poland are regarded as the key arena of political competition in Poland. On the one hand, the specific nature of the political system dictates that the significant, albeit negative, role of the head of state in shaping the law and the President's relatively broad prerogatives regarding the conduct of public business as compared to the standards of the parliamentary-cabinet system should be pointed out. On the other hand, the limitation of the real power of the President compared to the position of the Prime Minister does not provide an incentive for the leaders of the key political parties in Poland to abandon the struggle for the position of the head of government in favour of the presidency. This text addresses the issue of the nomination of candidates for the analysed office, attempting to answer the question of why it is not the party leaders who face off against each other, but rather the arena of competition between candidates from the second row of party structures. Conclusions from the case study suggest that the reasons for this are that party leaders, burdened by the negative consequences of political power, fear that they will not be able to surpass the 'glass ceiling' of party support. Thus, they fear that they will not only suffer a personal loss, but reckon with the consequences for the party as a whole. For each of the main parties, fielding a different candidate is seen as an opportunity to reach beyond the committed party electorate and escape the high negative sentiment around each of the two main leaders.

Keywords: *Presidential elections, creation of candidates, political parties, party leaders*

Introduction

The functions of presidential elections and of presidents themselves, i.e. from a formal point of view – heads of state, are very different in countries of the world. Looking at the issue under study from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe, where in most cases the president has exceptionally strong powers by the standards of parliamentary-cabinet regime conditions, seems justified (Baylis 1996; Hlousek 2013; Hofmann 2002).

A fascinating case in the issue at hand is Poland. Presidential elections in this country are extremely important (Chrobak 2013; Jagielski 2023) and are considered to be first-class elections (Reif & Schmitt 1980; Rief, Schmitt & Norris 1997; Hix & Marsh 2011). The good performance of candidates in this election very often foreshadows the high support given to the parties from which the presidential candidates ran. After all, it was when Andrzej Duda won the presidential election that Law and Justice (PiS) took over independent rule in the country for eight years. Although of course the reasons for the alternation of power are complex and cannot be attributed solely to success in the presidential elections, the victory of Andrzej Duda, who was condemned to defeat after announcing his candidacy, was like the wind in the sails of the Law and Justice party ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections (Markowski 2016; Szczerbiak 2017).

An additional aspect increasing the significance of presidential elections in Poland is their resonance within the party system. A very common practice is the formation of political parties on the basis of relatively high support for politicians from third and subsequent places in the presidential contest. These parties then enter the political scene with such favourable results that they bring their representation into parliament. Examples of this practice include the third-place finish of Paweł Kukiz in 2015, with more than 20% support. His grouping also came third in the parliamentary elections of the same year with almost 9% support. Another example is Szymon Hołownia, who came in third in the 2020 presidential election with almost 14% support. Three years later, his established Poland 2050 party, in a coalition election committee with the Polish People's Party (PSL), also came in third place in the parliamentary elections, with just over 14% support (Peszyński 2023; Wojnicki 2024).

Despite such an important function of the presidential elections in Poland, due to systemic conditions, it is not the leaders of the largest political parties who have held and continue to hold the Office of President of the Republic of Poland. This has been particularly evident since 2005. This situation, after 20 years and four presidential elections, requires an attempt to identify the reasons for this state of affairs. The aim of this paper is therefore to explain the reasons why the office of president in Poland is not held by the leaders of the largest political parties in Poland. This is the case despite the fact that the candidate

selection process ends, according to the statutes of the largest political parties and the described political practice, with a personal decision by the party leader (Kaczorowska 2022). Although he or she can count on the support of the party leadership, the final decision is often taken in an authoritarian manner. It seems, therefore, that party leaders would see themselves in this position.

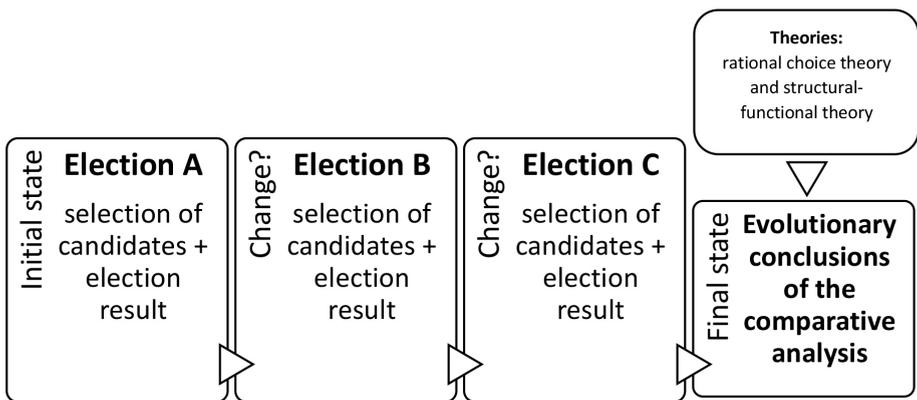
In order to achieve this objective, two main research questions were posed: (1) What are the reasons that the leaders of the major political parties do not hold the Office of President of the Republic of Poland? (2) What are the reasons that the leaders of the largest political parties do not even run for the Office of President of the Republic of Poland after 2000?

Data and Methods

In view of the proposed questions for conducting the research, it was assumed most effective to use a comparative analysis (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003; Schneider & Wagemann 2012) of all seven case studies of presidential elections in Poland since 1990. Only a comparison of the foundational data collected by the State Election Commission allows the purpose of the study to be realised and the initial assumptions to be verified.

The method of conducting the considerations in a chronological and, at the same time, evolutionary manner is presented in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Procedure of conducting the research



Source: Author

The research procedure prepared in this way makes it possible to indicate the change in the role of the President of the Republic of Poland in the political system over the course of successive elections, while comparing identical variables, thus allowing inferences to be made.

Theoretical background

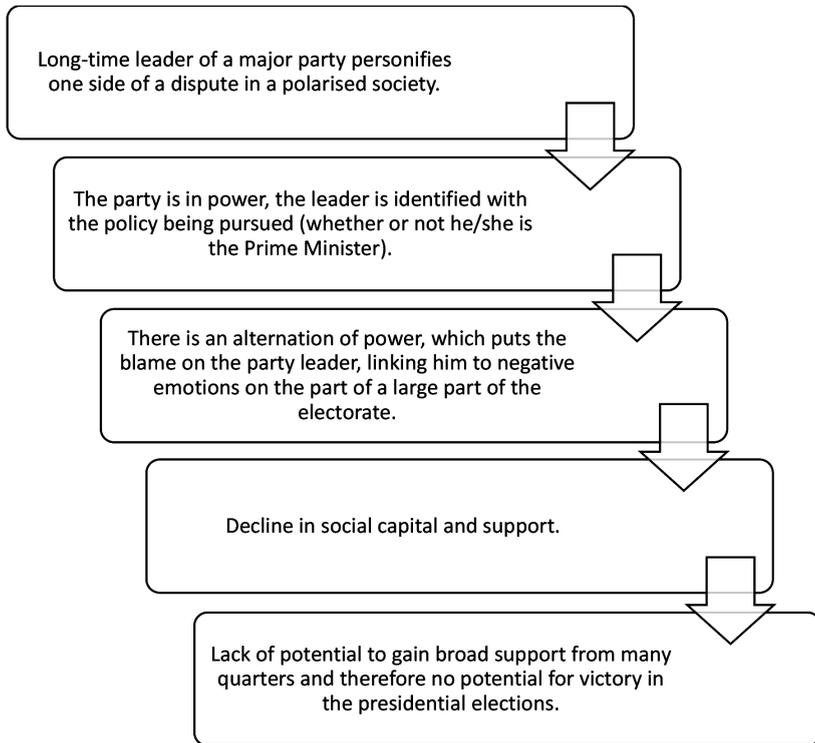
An exploration of the reasons why leaders of the largest political parties in Poland do not hold the presidency can be explained by two independent theoretical approaches.

The first one is the application of rational choice theory (Goode 1997; Hechter & Kanazawa 1997; Lowett 2006). According to its assumptions on the issue under study, the leaders of the largest parties deliberately do not run for the office of president because of the (1) lack of real benefits for their power, image, prestige or connections, but (2) primarily due to the low chances of success. This is because they have a certain ‘political burden’ derived from the natural social discontent associated with the conduct of current politics, especially in highly polarised societies (Kinowska-Mazaraki 2021; Platek 2024). Political burden should be understood as a negative consequence of prolonged political activity, especially related to the exercise of power for a politician’s political image and electoral potential. This is because decisions often have to be taken that are controversial or negative for various social groups, which generates dissatisfaction personally attributed to the person proposing or introducing them (Gajda & Giereło-Klimaszewska 2022). This burden may generate a lack of potential electability to the office of president. Distrust of party leaders by a section of the electorate in opposition to their party is an inherent feature of the strong polarisation which takes place in Poland (Tworzecki 2019).

This assumption was already confirmed in 2005 and 2010, when Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński had to acknowledge the superiority of the other candidates.¹ Consequently, the rational choice of political party leaders is to point to a candidate unencumbered in this way, who will have a chance to win the office. After all, the political practice of the cohabitation periods in Poland shows that having a party in the role of president means having an advantage in the political system (Jagielski 2022; Szczurowski 2016). This thesis is confirmed by the period when Lech Kaczyński of the opposition Law and Justice party was the president, while Donald Tusk of the Civic Platform (PO) headed the government (2007–2010). However, it is even more clearly confirmed by the period (2023–2025) when Andrzej Duda found himself in the role of a fuse for the interests of the Law and Justice party after that party’s loss of power, forcing Donald Tusk’s government to take extra-legal and extra-constitutional actions in order to implement political demands, including, in particular, the takeover of state institutions from the previous government.

1 Significantly, however, although party leaders have reason to fear losing the presidential election, neither Donald Tusk nor Jarosław Kaczyński lost their positions in their parties after such defeats. This, however, does not undermine the indicated assumption, as not only are the indicated politicians the founders of their respective parties, but also the peculiarity of the clustering of both these parties around the leader makes his or her dismissal significantly more difficult.

Chart 2: Evolution of the political load of party leaders



Source: Author

In the context under study, it is also justified to use structural-functional theory (Parsons 2017), which shows the problem addressed through the lens of the political system, as the resultant of institutional entanglements. These entanglements, however, are not just understood as posts and positions, but as the structure of power flows (Butler 2003). In the Polish political system, it is the prime minister who is the central figure, as the greatest resources and decisions flow through him. He is therefore at the centre of policy creation.² The exercise of the president would therefore, in a sense, push this individual to the margins of political activity, as he or she could not hold both offices simultaneously. Furthermore and importantly, he or she could not exert open pressure (though they could symbolically during public speeches), as this would be construed as bias (and the president of Poland should be the president of all Poles) or

² At this point, it should be pointed out that although Jaroslaw Kaczynski did not head the PiS government after winning the elections either in 2005, 2015 or 2019, this was due to image issues, thus benefiting the party and its government. However, Jaroslaw Kaczynski's influence on the exercise of power was colossal.

a desire to accumulate democratically illegitimised power. Through the prism of this theory, we can explain the willingness of party leaders to fight for real power – in government and parliament – rather than perform representational functions and, in a sense, fuse party interests.

The place of the president in the political system of the Republic of Poland

The collapse of communist rule and systemic changes towards democratisation in Poland, as in other CEE countries, necessitated a new organisation of the political power structure. The departure from the one-man management of the Communist Party secretary, supported by the central party body, was a necessity. In the new organisation of state power, the supreme role of the political parties in power in the socialist bloc was abandoned in favour of bodies found in democratic states. In this way, presidential offices were created as part of the executive, alongside the prime minister and the government (Welsh 1994).

However, the situation was somewhat different in Poland. The Office of the President had already been in place since 1921 (Dudek 2021). During World War II, despite the occupation of Poland by the Third German Reich and the Soviet Union, the continuity of state authority was maintained (Kruszewski 2011). After the end of the war, the Office of the President in exile functioned in parallel to the recognised, official state authorities (Kozłowski 2024). Although formally the office of the parliament-elected president was restored in Poland in 1989, in the face of the Round Table arrangements it was the leader of the Communist Party, Wojciech Jaruzelski, who was elected by the Parliament, in which the representatives of the Communist Party and its coalition partners secured a majority (Gancewski 2024; Wiatr 2024). Only the first fully free, general presidential election in 1990, which was won by the leader of the Solidarity movement in opposition to the communists, Lech Wałęsa, resulted in the transfer of the presidential insignia from the last President of the Republic of Poland in exile – Ryszard Kaczorowski (Gotowiecki 2020; Siwik 2024).

This brief historical introduction points to the important position of president as guarantor of the continuity of state power in Poland. Hence, it was the creation of a parliamentary-cabinet system with a corrective president (Wojtasik 2012: 203), or with a corrective position of the head of state (Antoszewski 2012: 47), with broad (by the standards of cabinet parliamentarism) powers and a very strong social mandate through the universality of elections that was socially and politically expected (Gebethner 1998: 13).

Nowadays, from the point of view of the political system, the position of president in Poland is not limited to representing the country externally. The very peculiarities of the analysed office and its broad prerogatives have consequences for the political system. The model of the presidency as introduced

under the 1997 Constitution in Poland maintained the principle of assuming the position of head of state by universal suffrage, which creates for the president a legitimacy equal to that of the Sejm and the Senate. Such legitimacy equalisation may become a source of tension between the Parliament and the president, even assuming that the constitution seeks to counteract them (Antoszewski 1999: 109; Wojtasik 2012: 204). Confirmation of this assumption is provided by a negative analysis of the powers of the president of Poland. It is justified insofar as the legal analysis of prerogatives does not indicate how they are used in real and political terms, which is extremely important in Poland.

One of the key negative prerogatives of the president is the ability to refuse to sign a law. However, this can be rejected by a 3/5 majority of the statutory number of members of the Polish Sejm, though which is very difficult in political practice. This prerogative is of crucial importance especially in periods of cohabitation. At that time, the percentage of vetoed bills increases significantly, though less so when the president and the prime minister are from the same political camp (Wicherek 2023). The indicated phenomenon thus confirms that the position of president significantly increases in scope during periods of executive conflict of interest.

Another competence relevant in this context relates to the role of the guardian of the Constitution, allowing the president to refer laws to be assessed for compliance with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland via the authorised Constitutional Tribunal (TK) (Alberski 2010). Although, as with the vetoing of laws, presidents use this tool much more frequently during the period of cohabitation (Wicherek 2023); this scenario has taken on more special significance since 2023. According to many researchers, a politicised TK is unable to perform this task reliably (Florczak-Wątor 2020; Koncewicz 2018; Piotrowski 2016; Sadurski 2019; Schulz & Sawicki 2024; Szwed 2022). A peculiar situation occurred after the Law and Justice party's departure from power and the final conviction of two of its MPs, Mariusz Kamiński and Maciej Wąsik, both having been previously pardoned by President Andrzej Duda (using another of his prerogatives). However, Szymon Hołownia – the speaker of the Sejm – terminated the parliamentary mandates of the two recalled parliamentarians. The president considered that, in his view, this was unlawful and therefore any act passed by Parliament could result in a legal defect. Accordingly, he decided to refer each of them to the TK to assess, in particular, the constitutionality of the composition of Parliament (Bogdanowicz & Filipek 2024; Chybalski 2024; Woelke 2024). This situation resulted in a near impossibility to introduce legal changes on the statutory path. However, the recalled situation also indicated a significant weakness of the president vis-à-vis the government. The most media-attractive evidence was the detention of the recalled MPs Kaminski and Wąsik by the police in the presidential palace, where they tried to find refuge from law enforcement.

Another important issue that needs to be addressed is the joint conduct of foreign policy, together with the prime minister and the foreign affairs minister. Again, in this case, periods of cohabitation bring conflicts. Nowadays, during the presidency of Andrzej Duda, this was evident in the conflict over the appointment of Poland's ambassadors abroad, as the required approval for the government's proposals is not given by the president, but this did not prevent the prime minister and the foreign affairs minister from dismissing the ambassadors, pointing to the weakness of the presidential office (Jagielski 2024). During the first government of Donald Tusk of the PO and the presidency of Lech Kaczyński (PiS), the dispute over foreign policy was much stronger. It was not until the Constitutional Tribunal in 2009 that the conduct of the state's foreign policy was a power of the government (Constitutional Tribunal 2009). Before this could happen, the president and the prime minister appeared at a meeting of the European Council, where the president arrived by chartered plane, having been prevented from taking a seat on a government plane (Śliwonik 2022). Also, since their visits were separate, Lech Kaczyński's visit to Katyn (ending tragically in a plane crash in Smolensk) was to take place three days after Prime Minister Donald Tusk's visit (Lachowska 2023).

The analysis made in this chapter shows that the role of the president in the Polish political system significantly increases in scope during the period of cohabitation; however, skillful action by the government and parliamentary majority can effectively limit this increased role. This is when the holder of this office becomes the only real obstacle to the introduction of legal changes and the conduct of day-to-day policy by the government and the parliamentary majority behind it. In a situation where the president, the government and the parliamentary majority all come from the same party or coalition, the role of the president is almost exclusively limited to representational functions.

The functions and specifics of presidential elections in Poland

Presidential elections in Poland fulfil a number of important functions from the point of view of the political system and political practice itself. First and foremost is the creative function – presidential elections are supposed to allow for the selection of the person who will hold this office. This function is independent of the political situation, as it occurs in every case. This function was fulfilled even in the presidential elections of 1989, when the National Assembly appointed the communist leader, Wojciech Jaruzelski, to the office (Wojtasik 2012: 215).

As proposed by Robert Alberski (2002: 97–98), other functions of presidential elections in Poland also seem to be universal. The cited author considers as such, in addition to the creative function, the legitimising function for the power thus gained and the articulation and mobilisation function from the point of view of the electorate. Waldemar Wojtasik (2012: 215–233) also points

to the following functions: selection of political elites, ensuring control of those in power, enforcement of political responsibility, limited function of creating political programmes, expressing the will of the electorate and the function of selecting a stable government majority.

In line with the research approach in operation, successive presidential elections resulted in an evolution of the functions of these elections, making them dependent on the current political situation, while retaining in each case the functions indicated above (Alberski 2002; Wojtasik 2012). In this way, successive elections have assumed diverse functions. The 1990 election, thanks to the previously unknown Stanisław Tymiński reaching the second round, fulfilled the function of creating new or selecting political elites (Wojtasik 2012: 218). The situation was similar to the 1995 election, which became a plebiscite in which the most likely candidates to succeed were the incumbent president and symbol of the anti-communist opposition, Lech Wałęsa, and Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who came from the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), i.e. a post-communist party. In addition, entering the fray were a number of candidates wishing either to secure recognition, such as Andrzej Lepper, or to secure the support of their political parties, such as Jan Olszewski (Alberski 2002). The same was true of the 2015 presidential election, when Andrzej Duda, hitherto not very well known to the public, unexpectedly won, immediately becoming part of the political elite. Additionally, Paweł Kukiz, whose strong performance in the same election brought his political movement into Parliament (Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier 2016).

Elections in which the incumbent president renewed his mandate, on the other hand, fulfilled primarily a legitimising function. This was the case when Aleksander Kwaśniewski renewed his mandate in 2000 and when Andrzej Duda did it in 2020.

The predictive function of presidential elections is also worth mentioning here. The success of Lech Kaczyński in 2005 or Andrzej Duda in 2015 foreshadowed the high electoral outcome of Law and Justice in the parliamentary elections that followed shortly after the presidential elections. The situation is somewhat similar in the 1995, 2010 and 2020 elections,³ when winning the presidential elections for the candidates of the party in power in Parliament was a confirmation of the public's support.

The above analysis confirms that the functions of presidential elections in Poland are diverse and evolve with changes in political reality. In one case they served to strengthen the legitimacy of the incumbent president, while in another they heralded the alternation of all power in the state. Only a thorough analysis of each election, however, makes it possible to indicate its specifics and fulfil the purpose of the work.

3 Although the gap between the presidential and parliamentary elections was greater than in 2015, when the two elections were separated by just five months.

Analysis of the candidates and the results of the presidential elections in the Third Republic of Poland

Thus, starting from the proposed theoretical assumptions for a comparative analysis of presidential elections in Poland since 1990, it is reasonable to focus on the analysed issue in an evolutionary manner. The assumptions already indicated in this work dictate that the present state of affairs is the result of past events, and that politicians, learning from the mistakes of previous elections, do not repeat them in subsequent ones.

The first completely free and universal presidential election was held in Poland in 1990. Significantly, it was not a plebiscite to choose between the candidate of the hitherto pro-democratic opposition and the candidate representing the post-communist party. Indeed, the poll favourites of the competition were the candidates coming from the anti-communist opposition. The leaders of their political camps ran in this election. Notable among them were the first non-communist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Solidarity movement leader Lech Wałęsa, who were seen as clear favourites. Surprisingly, the previously unknown Stanisław Tymiński went through to the second round of the competition, along with Lech Wałęsa. In the second round, however, Tymiński had to acknowledge Wałęsa's (predicted) superiority (Jones 1999; Szulkin 1993).

Lech Wałęsa also appeared in the 1995 presidential election. The then ruling SLD-PSL coalition was in major conflict with the president (Materska-Sosnowska 2015). Faced with this situation, leader of the SLD Aleksander Kwasniewski stepped up to fight for the presidency. It was obvious that the other candidates had no chance of being elected. As expected, Wałęsa and Kwaśniewski made it to the second round of the election, receiving very similar support. After a difficult contest, the representative of the post-communist party (Millard 1996) became president and was also reelected five years later, helped by the capitulation of the Freedom Union (UW), which did not field a candidate at the cost of a heavy defeat in the parliamentary elections a year later. This was the only case where a candidate won in the first round of the presidential election, immediately obtaining more than 50% of all votes cast (Szczurbiak 2001).

As the above analysis indicates, in the 1990, 1995 and 2000 elections, the presidential office was won by key politicians who could be considered party leaders of their political camps. This was despite the fact that each of the three elections presented took place in a different political period. The first general election for the president of the Republic of Poland took place in 1990. In 2000, on the other hand, the first presidential election was held under the new Constitution. We were therefore faced with three completely different electoral and systemic situations. Despite the fact that in each of these three cases the struggle was for a different presidency at the level of the system, but also different ideas about it, resulting in different motivations of the competitors and their

Table 1: Support given to the two most important candidates in the presidential elections in Poland between 1990 and 2000

Year	Candidates	Support in the 1 st round	Support in the 2 nd round	Leader of a party/ political camp
1990	Lech Wałęsa Stanisław Tymiński	39.9% 23.1%	74.3% 25.7%	YES NO
1995	Aleksander Kwaśniewski Lech Wałęsa	35.1% 33.1%	51.7% 48.3%	YES YES
2000	Aleksander Kwaśniewski Andrzej Olechowski	53.9% 17.3%	X X	YES NO

Source: Author, based on Wicherek (2023: 40–42)

backgrounds, the common denominator of these elections was the struggle of party leaders for the presidency. It is highly significant that a change in the attitude of party leaders towards the Office of the President can be seen after 2005.

Both Lech Wałęsa and Aleksander Kwaśniewski were elected to the office in a situation of leadership over the strongest political groupings, and their candidacy in the elections could be treated as the natural culmination of their political careers to date. The selection process in these cases elevated the stature of the office by producing a figure who was a real political leader (Wojtasik 2012: 216–217). However, in this period – shortly after the political transition and amid the creation and slow development of the new Constitution – it seemed a rational choice for leaders to take advantage of their public recognition to run for the presidency during these difficult, transitional times.

After 2005, the presidential office was taken by politicians who were leading figures in Polish political life, but who remained in the shadow of their party leaders. The 2005 election marked the beginning of the dominance of the candidates of Law and Justice and Civic Platform, which has lasted to this day. Thus, the party system and the formation of two political camps led by the indicated groupings was solidified (Bojarowicz 2017; Walecka 2018; Wojtasik 2020). The first two presidential contests still featured candidates who were from the leadership of these parties, but in both cases they were up against politicians from within the party structures. In 2005, the leader of PO – Donald Tusk – competed against the brother of PiS leader and the mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński. Jarosław Kaczyński betting on his brother Lech seemed very rational. After all, he was a recognised anti-communist opposition activist, former minister of justice and president of the Supreme Chamber of Control, as well as a law professor known for his fight against corruption and abuse of power. In addition, he had already successfully won the election for mayor of Warsaw. After a very close battle and a narrow victory in the first round, he had

to acknowledge the superiority of the Law and Justice candidate in the final round (Szczzerbiak 2007).

Five years later, the situation was reversed. The leader of the Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński, faced the speaker of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland Bronisław Komorowski from the Civic Platform. This time, the leader fighting for the presidency lost in both the first and second rounds of the presidential election (Cześniak 2014). However, these were very specific choices. Indeed, the expected repeat of the Lech Kaczyński-Donald Tusk battle could not take place due to the death of the incumbent president. Jarosław Kaczyński, with no alternative, was forced to face the fight alone. Consequently, the rational choice for Donald Tusk was to field a less polarising candidate against him. This was historian Bronisław Komorowski, who had thus far stood in the shadows. Importantly, however, in both of these elections, party leaders lost to relatively strong, recognisable and relevant candidates from the Polish political scene. Additionally, the parliamentary elections that took place shortly after the presidential elections confirmed the party preferences of the electorate.

Table 2: Support given to the two most important candidates in the presidential elections in Poland between 2005 and 2010

Year	Candidates	Support in the 1 st round	Support in the 2 nd round	Leader of a party/ political camp
2005	Lech Kaczyński Donald Tusk	33.1% 36.3%	54.0% 45.9%	NO YES
2010	Bronisław Komorowski Jarosław Kaczyński	41.5% 36.4%	53.0% 46.9%	NO YES

Source: Author, based on Wicherek (2023: 40–42)

The leaders of the major political parties competing for the presidency, having learnt from the mistakes of the two elections indicated, stopped running for the presidency. This is because the tactics of 2005 and 2010, indicating a greater chance of less polarising candidates, proved successful. Facing off in 2015 were incumbent President Bronisław Komorowski of the PO and Andrzej Duda, the little-known candidate of the Law and Justice party, former member of the European Parliament and employee of the president’s office during the time of Lech Kaczyński. Faced with being in opposition and with poor polls, Law and Justice decided to go *va banque* by not choosing a known candidate, but by creating one. Despite the crushing poll advantage of the incumbent president, the programme demands and the campaign run by the PiS candidate allowed him to spring a huge surprise. He won narrowly in both rounds of the election and assumed the Office of President (Chmielewska-Szljajfer 2018). He

was also reelected to it five years later. At that time, he ran again with the support of the Law and Justice party and was faced by Rafał Trzaskowski from the PO, the incumbent mayor of Warsaw. Donald Tusk therefore decided to follow the seemingly rational path of the Law and Justice Party from 2005 by fielding a fresh, but already successful, candidate from the local elections. Andrzej Duda won the first round of the election decisively and proved superior in the second round as well (Sula, Madej & Błaszczyszki 2021). Also noteworthy in these elections, the parliamentary elections that followed (in 2015 and 2019) confirmed the electorate's preferences expressed in the presidential elections, as these elections were won by Law and Justice, indicating the relevance of the candidates' party affiliation.

Table 3: Support given to the two most important candidates in the 2015-2020 presidential elections in Poland

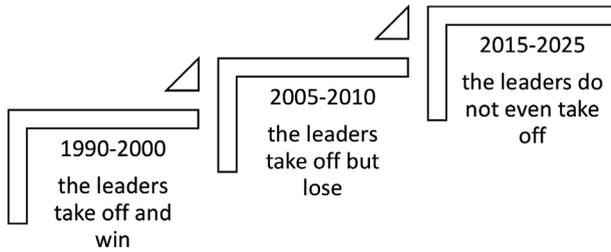
Year	Candidates	Support in the 1 st round	Support in the 2 nd round	Leader of a party/ political camp
2015	Andrzej Duda Bronisław Komorowski	34.7% 33.7%	51.5% 48.4%	NO NO
2020	Andrzej Duda Rafał Trzaskowski	43.5% 30.5%	51.0% 49.0%	NO NO

Source: Author, based on Wicherek (2023: 40–42)

Significantly, the candidates in the 2025 presidential election representing the two largest political parties fighting for the presidency are also not their front-runners. Once again, rivals Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński decided not to try. Instead, they put up (respectively) local government official and mayor of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski, and the president of the Institute of National Remembrance – and thus far politically unconnected – Karol Nawrocki. Both party leaders know that they are polarising public opinion too much to get a chance of victory. On top of that, they seem to be interested in real and not just negative power in both government and Parliament. Consequently, they are using interesting political tricks. Based on his victory in the parliamentary elections and Trzaskowski's large voter base of 2020, Tusk wants to capitalise on his party's good moment. Kaczynski, on the other hand, knows he has nothing to lose. So he is repeating the 2015 manoeuvre by creating a candidate.

The analysis carried out makes it possible to indicate the evolutionary nature of the changes in the method of selecting candidates for the Office of President of the Republic of Poland. Immediately after the political transformation, party leaders decided to run for this office – and did so successfully. Later, however, changes in the party system involving the formation of two political camps

Chart 3: Evolution of candidate selection in two biggest parties in presidential elections in Poland between 1990 and 2020



Source: Author

centred around two major parties – Law and Justice and Civic Platform – led to a situation in which only candidates from these two groups could effectively compete for the presidential office.

Although initially the party leaders tried their chances there, their electoral failures caused them to abandon further attempts. In addition to the desire to compete for more power in the position of the prime minister, this seems to be the result of the exceptionally high social polarisation evident in Poland (Tworzecki 2019) and the huge distrust of politicians, especially those burdened with power. Given these two factors, prominent leaders are concerned that they do not have adequate potential to win an additional moderate electorate, which is crucial for success in the presidential elections. Such an electorate has been able to be reached by lesser-known candidates, as evidenced by the electoral success of Andrzej Duda and the fact that Rafał Trzaskowski and Karol Nawrocki are competing in 2025. Party leaders therefore fear that they will not only suffer a personal loss, but reckon with the consequences for their party, and with polarisation so high, the loss of the presidency is of great importance.

Conclusions

Conclusions from the presented analysis indicate that the presidential election in Poland is a unique and at the same time important election. Indeed, the position of the President of the Republic of Poland is relatively strong by the standards of the parliamentary-cabinet system, although much weaker than the position of the head of government. Analysis of the president's negative prerogatives, and in particular the political practice of successive presidents in office, has proven that having the Office of the President is crucial for political parties in terms of the effectiveness of exercising power and the speed with which postulated solutions may be introduced. This is most evident when cohabitation occurs. This is when the president becomes a fuse of the interests

of the party from which he or she comes, making it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the opposing parliamentary majority to pursue effective policies.

It is significant that, under the current arrangement within the party system, it appears that only candidates from one of the two major parties have a chance at winning office. Since 2005, the office has been shared exclusively by the candidates of Law and Justice and Civic Platform. Previously, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, representing the Democratic Left Alliance, which dominated the Polish political scene at the time, was president for two terms. The other candidates are running for two main reasons. The first is that they are counting on a positive result that will pull their party ahead in the parliamentary elections. This succeeded, for example, in the cases of Andrzej Olechowski in 2000, Paweł Kukiz and Adrian Zandberg in 2015, Szymon Hołownia in 2020, and it is a situation specific to new candidates. The second is because of the negative consequences for the party in the event that they lack a candidate in the presidential elections (which succeeded, for example, in the case of Grzegorz Napieralski in 2010) – and is the situation of well-known politicians. A very poor result in the parliamentary elections of parties that did not put up a candidate in the presidential elections (such as the Freedom Union in 2000) should be considered as such. So while small party candidates are doing poorly in gaining support for their candidates, new candidates just entering the political scene may see the presidential election as a springboard for their careers and for the success of the political parties they are forming.

In order to identify the reasons why the leaders of the largest parties have not held the presidency since 2005 (although, as indicated, it is the representatives of these parties who win the presidential elections), systemic circumstances and those resulting from current politics are relevant. The low attractiveness of real presidential power compared to the role of the prime minister may cause reluctance on the part of major party leaders to run. Crucially, however, when the leaders of the major parties tried their chances at competing for the presidency, they lost, and they lost to candidates who are not the leaders of their parties. This was the case of Donald Tusk, who lost to Lech Kaczyński in 2005, or Jarosław Kaczyński, who had to acknowledge the superiority of Bronisław Komorowski in 2010. Neither of them dared to run again in the presidential elections due to (1) the desire to fight for real power in government and Parliament and (2) the low potential for election to the presidency due to the factors already indicated. This is despite the fact that they are still (respectively) governing the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice parties in succession (although Tusk took a break during his time as president of the European Council).

As has already been pointed out, while one of the fundamental reasons leaders of the major parties do not run in presidential elections is that they have little real political power compared to the role of the prime minister, the explanation for the electoral failures they have suffered is to be found in the political

burdens they have for holding important public office. Prominent leaders of the major parties fear that they will not be able to breach the 'glass ceiling' of party support. Thus, they fear that they will not only suffer a personal loss, but reckon with the consequences for the party as a whole, and in a polarised environment, the loss of the presidency has a huge negative impact on the party. On the other hand, for each of the main parties, fielding a different candidate (one who is less well-known and not associated with making the difficult decisions of proper governance) is seen as an opportunity to reach beyond the committed party electorate and escape the high negative sentiment around each of the two main leaders.

However, since the analysis shows that having the president on one's side in the political argument gives an advantage in the political system, parties field strong candidates, fiercely fighting for victory. This is a rational choice by party leaders for political advantage of their parties.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the role and functions of presidential elections and the political behaviour of presidents themselves are evolving. The analysis of all cases has shown that the importance of having the office on one's side of a political dispute increases significantly during cohabitation. The president then becomes the fuse of the party from which he or she comes and a formidable obstacle to major legal and institutional changes and the party affiliation of the president is important not only for the electoral success itself, but also for the way in which power is exercised.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for critical remarks related to qualitative aspects of this paper from Robert Alberski, Arkadiusz Lewandowski and Dominik Szczepański. All errors or omissions remain my own.

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