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Author: Waldemar Wojtasik

Citation style: Wojtasik Waldemar. (2020). Changes in the party system in the context of deconsolidation of democracy in Poland. "Polish Political Science Yearbook" Vol. 49, iss. 1 (2020), s. 55-66.

DOI: 10.15804/ppsy2020105



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Waldemar Wojtasik

University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9111-1723>

e-mail: waldemar.wojtasik@us.edu.pl

Changes in the Party System in the Context of Deconsolidation of Democracy in Poland

Abstract: The party system and the parties within it were ones of the relevant elements of system transformation in Poland. We can identify several significant determinants of the process with regard to this area. The first of them is formal standards and their influence on the course of political competition. The second is the functions attributed to political parties in the political and party system. The third one is connected with the significance of social structure's specificity and its influence on voting behaviors. The fourth determinant is the models of competition at the cabinet level. The paper presents these four determinants of development of political parties and the party system in Poland in the perspective of democratization processes.

Keywords: *Polish party system, Polish political parties, functions of political parties, models of competition at the cabinet level, voting behaviors in Poland*

Many dimensions of activity of political system display some balance between democratic and authoritarian solutions. The democratic ones assume that the minimum conditions of pluralism must be observed and citizens must participate in exercising power and controlling the authorities. The authoritarian ones involve the departure from the balance towards the primacy of one type of authority (Levitsky, Way, 2002, p. 53). In the classic separation of powers and in other system solutions alike, it is always the primacy of the executive authority, usually reflected in the rule of strong individuals whose political DNA includes the gene of strengthening and enhancing their power. The dynamics of democratization processes can be defined as competition between powers interested in expanding the principles of democracy and those that want to preserve the authoritarian rule.

The party system is an important component of this competition. It is the effect of the accumulation of different determinants of political competition in this area (Mair, 1996,

pp. 96–98). One of the most vital of them is formal standards and their influence on the course of political competition. The second is the functions attributed to political parties in the political and party system. The third one is connected with the significance of social structure's specificity and its influence on voting behaviors. The fourth determinant is the models of competition at the cabinet level. The paper presents these four determinants of development of political parties and the party system in Poland in the perspective of democratization processes and its deconsolidation.

Deconsolidation of Democracy

The research on democracy deconsolidation processes began in the 1970s, when scholars noticed significant cracks in liberal democracies (Sartori, 1976, p. 220). Deconsolidation is understood as permanent and multilayer division of functional referents of democracy and the actual political practice. As we seek the sources of deconsolidation of contemporary democracies, we can identify several reasons for it. One reason is that the principles of the capitalist economic system have deviated from its original rules, originating from the democratic legal framework. As a result, nowadays, economic interests prevail over social ones, reducing citizens' subjectivity in favor of supranational economic structures (Reich, 2008, p. 38). Another possible cause of deconsolidation of democracy is the crisis of political representation, which may have its sources in the weakening of traditional socio-political divisions (Lipset, Rokkan, 1967, pp. 8–11) and increased personalization of elections (Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik, 2019, p. 13). And finally, the transformations in party systems, essentially involving changes in the patterns of competition between political parties, can also be regarded as a deconsolidation factor (Levitski, Ziblatt, 2018, p. 48).

Processes of democratic deconsolidation take place on two basic planes. The first one is the political system level: the political system becomes less stable and predictable, and democratic procedures are less recurrent (Poguntke, Webb, 2009, pp. 4–7). This may lead to increased institutional instability of the sphere of politics and reduced efficiency of exercising power (Condrat, 2006, p. 12). The second plane is the social one, where the relationships between citizens and the sphere of politics as well as between voters and their political representatives become weaker (Staubager, 2008, p. 334). Consequently, citizens have the tendency to display less respect for the previous standards and patterns of behavior (Diamond 1994, 15), and voters display greater electoral volatility (Turska-Kawa, 2015, p. 117).

Party systems are recognized as a factor of democracy deconsolidation for several reasons. The first one is the change of patterns of political competition, especially at the level of elections. Currently, their essence is the departure from values and ideologies in favor of political efficacy. This is also associated with a change of the basic function of elections, which are no longer a factor linking voters and the political system but have become a mechanism of political disintegration (Linz, 1994, pp. 17–18). Another reason for studying the deconsolidation of democracy with regard to changes in party systems is the evolution

of the political party model into market organizations (Mair, Müller, Plasser, 2004, p. 11). The last reason is the change in the logic of competition between political parties at the cabinet level, connected with the emergence of new, clearly populist political entities.

The case of Poland and democracy deconsolidation processes is also interesting because of the geographical location of the object of research in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The countries in this region went through the process of democratization in the last decade of the 20th century, so neither lasting bonds between social groups and political parties have developed there nor the system of democratic standards and values has taken root so far. It can be presumed, then, that the mechanisms of democracy deconsolidation in Poland and other CEE countries differ from those in countries with longer democratic traditions, e.g., negative effects of European integration (Agh, 2016, p. 9). Researchers also point to the low level of trust and dissatisfaction with the functioning of political system institutions in Poland (Foa, Mounk, 2017, p. 13). This indicates that the party system and its functioning is one of the possible factors of deconsolidation of democracy.

Formal Standards

The normative status of political parties results from prediction of their institutional stratification. It is also the dimension of expectations concerning the functions they are attributed in the political system. This institutionalization also includes models of behaviors which result from the existing system of social references. Democratic institutionalization processes involve both the aspect of political competition and the stabilization of expected models of behavior (Diamond, 1994, p. 15). Institutionalization is a necessary condition of consolidation of democratic procedures, which determines its two basic phases. The *formal-political phase* is the creation of system foundations, initiation of transformation processes, and ensuring the desired form. The *socio-cultural phase* allows the social adaptation of the adopted solutions and uses them to create a commonly approved inventory of universal democratic values (Morawski, 1998, pp. 202–203). The pluralization of the Polish party system was very dynamic, breaking the classic principles of democratization process. Before the legal status of political parties was established in 1990, several dozen political organizations had been formed that called themselves parties. As a result of this mechanism, the legislator initially had to accept the existing situation and create an inventory of rules of party formation and functioning based on previous experiences. It was only the provisions of the Act on Political Parties of 1997 that really reflected people's expectations of formal solutions (The Act on Political Parties, 1997).

The first Act on Political Parties of 1990 was an attempt to create functional solutions in the political system with consideration of the contemporary level of development of party movements. Before the parliament adopted that act, parties (apart from the three alliances originating from the former communist regime) had been operating in a kind of gray area. This was the effect of lack of standards of party formation and supervision.

Consequently, there was no specific formal control of their functioning, either, except some general regulations. Thus, the act that was drafted then had to assume the acceptance of the existing political reality. Experiences of the dynamic formation of political parties and the intention to avoid producing any excessive barriers to party activity resulted in adopting the way of registering political parties which was an institutional incentive for citizens to engage in the sphere of politics. The society getting out of communism was weak, both in terms of civic virtue and or democratic competence. Poles had to learn political and party participation. Therefore, the adopted mode of registering political parties was less procedurally burdensome than other possible solutions. The intention was to establish the registration procedure that would open the way for the expressions of political activity displayed by social organizations (e.g., trade unions or existing associations) which had engaged in the sphere of politics before.

The current Act on Political Parties was adopted by the parliament in 1997. It defines a political party as a voluntary organization with a specific name, whose objective is to participate in public life by exerting democratic influence to shape the state's policy and exercise public authority. The act changed the registration procedure dramatically. The registration model was introduced instead of the recording one. This model assumes that certain procedural requirements must be met before a party acquires legal personality. The record of parties is kept by the District Court in Warsaw. Upon meeting all the legal requirements, the party must be registered, and the Court may not refuse the registration. The new mode resulted in greater subjectivization of the registration authority. It resulted from extending the inventory of formal conditions to be met in order to be recorded as a political party. The change of the model of political parties registration was mostly the effect of stabilization of the party system structure. It was no longer necessary to apply simplified registration processes to form parties.

The last aspect of creating normative framework for the activity of the party system in Poland was the provisions of the Constitution of 1997 (The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997) The Constitution only included two articles directly referring to the regulation of political parties. Article 11 ensured freedom for the creation and functioning of political parties and allowed them to influence the formulation of the policy of the State by democratic means. The financing of political parties was made open to public inspection. In Article 13, the Constitution prohibited political parties whose programmes refer to totalitarian ideologies or sanction racial or national hatred. It also prohibited the legal operation of organizations which apply violence for the purpose of obtaining power or to influence the State policy, and ones that provide for the secrecy of their own structure or membership. However, although the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997 are extensive, political parties are only mentioned marginally in the document (Wojtasik, 2009, p. 156).

Functions of Political Parties

Being an inseparable element of the democratic mechanism, political parties should serve the functions they are attributed in the system (Key, 1966, p. 76). The character of the Polish party system, especially regarding the role the parties serve in the processes of system transformation and stabilization, enables us to identify and evaluate their functions. One problem may be the diversity of party origins, especially as we take into consideration the evolution of their ideological profile. Yet, we should not treat this difference as an absolutizing factor, which would determine the character of performance of political parties' main functions. Thus, if there is a relationship between parties playing certain roles in the political system and particular goals of their activity, then the special character of functional relationships will be visible in the way of achieving those goals. The role of parties in non-democratic regimes is totally different, on the one hand because of their different role assumed in the political system, and on the other hand because of unavoidable limitations. In non-democratic systems, parties serve the functions attributed by the real centers of power, and their main role is limited to supporting the regime. They also perform some specific functions, especially ones that result in the formation and control of public opinion as expected by the authorities, and in licensing political activity (Schedler, 2010, pp. 73–74).

There are many theoretical approaches to the typology of political parties (Sobolewska-Myślik, 2004, pp. 24–28). In the case of countries undergoing a democratic transformation, it is important to identify such categories of functions that will be minimally overlapping and maximally coincident within the identified general categories. It is impossible to fully avoid their overlapping and co-occurrence, but this should not be the factor disqualifying the very idea of the typology. Given the above-mentioned arguments, the following groups of functions of political parties can be identified in the presented model: (1) autonomous ones (organizational function, recruitment function, communication function); (2) ideological and programme ones (axiological function, integration function, the function of articulation and aggregation of social interests, programme function); (3) representation ones (social function, selection function, electoral function); (4) creation ones (participation function, governance function, delegation function) (Migalski, Wojtasik, Mazur, 2006, pp. 81–102).

As regards the autonomous functions, we need to make three reservations that allow the analysis of their performance in Poland. First, organizationally, the existence of a political party is the result of the current legal situation, especially specific regulations. This issue is described above, when discussing changes in Polish legislation concerning political parties. The normative determinant usually forces certain solutions (and limitations) concerning the structure, hierarchization and control of political parties. Second, a party's way of operation is largely the result of the structural model that the party represents (Sokół, Żmigorzki, 2003, pp. 29–34). Thus, the character of party's organization determines its way of operation, e.g., in terms of the course of decision-making process. Third, the relations between the

above-mentioned autonomous functions are weak, which may suggest the research perspective of analyzing individual functions, not the phenomenon as a whole. In comparison with consolidated democracies, the highest specificity in this group of functions occurs in the processes of recruitment and communication.

The group of ideological and programme functions, unlike the organizational ones, refers to quite abstract categories. This does not mean, however, that these functions are socially less important. The contemporary democracy manifests a deficit of values, connected e.g., with the crisis of the representation system. Parties try to fill in this gap through the adaptation of universal values to the ideological plane. In the beginning of the system transformation, the support for democratic changes in Poland was very high. It was natural for Poles to adapt the values connected with freedom and political pluralism to the Polish context. The gradual erosion of social support for the democratic system of values occurred later, though the support was still quite high.

The performance of representation functions is based on the fundamental democratic procedures. It is connected with the system of relationships between voters, parties and authority institutions. The procedures mostly refer to the application of political representation principle in a democratic state. The model representation system serves at least four basic functions: (1) it generally ensures that social demands are reflected in concrete programmes and political activities; (2) it allows the society to influence the choice of representatives who will carry out concrete political activities; (3) it ensures electoral legitimization of both the elected representatives and their activities; (4) it gives the voters control over the election, exercised by means of limited terms of elected offices (Migalski, Wojtasik, Mazur, 2006, p. 89). The main problem in parties' performance of representation functions in Poland is their weak social institutionalization. Effective performance of the functions is possible when parties are strongly rooted in the social structure. It allows the structure of socio-political relations which will ensure directional (i.e. the least collision-prone from the point of view of social interests) performance of the state's policy, and political legitimization of its activities.

The operation of Polish political parties in terms of creative functions translates into the state's policy. Activities taken in this respect may be direct or indirect. The creative functions performed directly are clear for the observer, measurable for the researcher, and usually justified from the point of view of logic of power. At the social level, they are reflected in satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the activities taken, and gaining or loss of support (including electoral support). Comparing them to the above-mentioned other kinds of functions of political parties, the performance of creative functions mostly affects the ongoing evaluation by voters (Manin, Przeworski, Stokes, 1999, p. 30). This may make parties fall into the trap of populism, characterized by parties popularizing views and engaging in activities oriented at acquiring public plaudits, not solving current problems. This trap may equally refer to parties exercising power and ones in the opposition. But while political contestation of those necessary activities of the authorities is part of the logic of being in the opposition, growing duality was visible in the case of Polish political parties, especially after

1997: the need of ruling and being in the opposition at the same time. The effect of that was poorer quality of governance and performance of other creative functions in Poland.

Social Structure and Voting Behaviors

One of the predictors of political parties' behavior is their being rooted in the social structure. Thus, changes in the political structure of the community will affect the evolution of parties' methods of activity (Bartolini, Mair, 1990, pp. 34–36). In the beginning of democratic evolution, there was a common view that the categories of the left and right wing were inadequate for the description of political reality in Poland (Szawiel, 2001, p. 227). The diagnosis that the left wing won and the right wing lost the 1993 parliamentary election was only adopted after the election was over (Antoszewski, 2005, p. 20). The post-communist division developed in the social awareness then. It divided the political space into post-communist left wing and post-Solidarity right wing. The end of its formation influence was the parliamentary election of 2005, when the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) with the post-communist origin suffered a defeat (Wojtasik, 2010, p. 41). Some symptoms that suggested a change of the 1990s political system of reference were even visible in the results of the 2001 parliamentary election, when the coalition of SLD and post-Solidarity Labor United (UP) won but parties that did not directly refer to any genetic criterion – Samoobrona and League of Polish Families (LPR) – also got to the Sejm (Wojtasik, 2009, p. 157).

It turned out that the 2005 election initiated the period of political marginalization of formations declaring leftist ideas. The marginalization is understood as considerable loss of electoral support in relation to the previous period and the lack of real influence on the ongoing competition in the cabinet. Changes in the left wing also affected the other side of the political scene, monopolized by the Civic Platform (PO) and the Law and Justice (PiS). We may, however, have some doubts with regard to the structure of the party scene: was there really any left wing (in terms of ideology) if the actual political dichotomy was between two rightist parties? After 2005, there have been some changes in the political attitudes of Polish community which lend credence to the possibility of permanent marginalization of the leftist parties. The latest decade, especially the 2015 parliamentary election, proves that this is actually happening. After that election, SLD did not exceed the electoral threshold, and for the first time since the beginning of the system transformation no party referring to leftist ideologies went into the parliament.

A study by Agnieszka Turska-Kawa and Waldemar Wojtasik (2010, pp. 123–138) shows that in the Polish society there is no strong variety in left/right self-identification declarations. It proves that the analysis of differences in left-right declarations against the background of socio-demographic data gives negative results. There were few statistically significant differences. Although there was some variety in the means, it rather shows some tendencies than concrete conclusions. This result corresponds to other analyses of ideological identities presented in literature, suggesting that orientations after 1992 evade the influence of the

basic socio-demographic factors (Godlewski, 2008, pp. 133–163). The analysis of respondents' self-identifications with reference to party preferences shows the structuring of Polish party scene with extreme points in the form of parties with leftist and rightist origin (SLD and PiS). The quantitative analysis of declarations of different ideological attitudes shows that the leftist ones have much lower support, which confirms the general political weakness of the left wing in Poland. It is hard to decide, however, whether this is the result of global processes (leftist parties losing the social base) or of the specificity of the Polish electorate. Its strong roots in Christian values and the institutional role of the Catholic Church may suggest the latter option (Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik, 2017, pp. 189–201).

Models of Cabinet Competition

Elections are an instrument of distribution of power in democracies. They allow the members of the society to give their representatives the legitimacy to take decisions on behalf of the whole society and within the boundaries resulting from the adopted legal, and sometimes also customary, regulations (Wojtasik, 2013, pp. 25–38). As part of functional role understood this way, elections should result in the establishment of authorities that would be able to form a stable majority and to actually rule. The way of performing this function mostly depends on the model of the state, since there is a difference in function performance between presidential and parliamentary systems. In the first case it is necessary to form relations between the president and the government and legislative institutions, different in each country. In the case of parliamentarism, the essence of developing a stable majority refers to the existence of political competition models that force political parties to cooperate unless one of them has the majority and does not need to form a coalition. The process of cabinet formation in parliamentary democracies serves threefold functions: (1) to recruit individuals to the highest positions in the political executive; (2) to create the cabinet's programme; (3) to ensure the cabinet a parliamentary base of support through the structure of the governmental block and the opposition block (Jednaka, 2004, p. 13).

Regarding the solutions adopted in Poland after 1989 in terms of the role of political parties, we can see the initial common custom of narrowing the composition of parliamentary coalitions to parties with a similar origin. This, in turn, excluded some of the coalitions that met the criterion of mathematical possibility but were unacceptable because of their historical roots. As a result, until 2005, the syncretic model had been applied in the formation of cabinet coalitions in Poland (Jednaka, 2002, p. 123). The 2005 election was a breakthrough in this regard, because innovative mechanisms of forming coalition cabinets (different to the former ones) were first used. Katarzyna Sobolewska-Mysłik (2008, p. 34) observes that: (1) after the 2005 election, the structures of cross-party competition first opened because of the innovative form of the cabinet coalition and some parties becoming relevant for the cabinet; (2) after the 2007 election, the ruling coalition was replaced for the first time (in terms of the post-Solidarity / post-communist parties), though not completely; (3) the form

of the ruling coalition was innovative again: a party that had only made coalitions with post-communist parties before was for the first time the partner of a post-Solidarity party. The positive expectations of forming the party system in Poland formulated by the author came true after the next election of 2011. It gave rise to a new situation: the restoration of the coalition that had been ruling before (PO-PSL). It can be regarded as a proof of advancing stabilization of the party system in Poland, as all the previous parliamentary elections had resulted in the defeat of the ruling parties. Another innovative formula of cabinet creation occurred after the latest parliamentary election in 2015. The coalition formed by PiS was the winner. For the first time in the history of Polish transformation, a competing party received more than a half of seats in the *sejm* and formed a cabinet without the need to negotiate with other parties.

Conclusions

The four discussed areas of change in the party system in Poland can be analyzed as part of the processes of consolidation of democracy and their potential regression. What is important, some of them can currently be treated as mechanisms deconsolidating Polish democracy. The presented study shows that the analyzed factors of evolution of the party system in Poland can be divided into two groups. Formal standards and models of competition at the cabinet can be regarded as potential factors of stabilization and consolidation of democratic processes. The former produced a relatively stable normative system of reference, resulting in the reduction of the number of registered political parties in Poland (Glajcar, Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik, 2017, p. 18). However, normative solutions are not a formal barrier to the possibility of engaging in political activity in the form of political parties. The latter, as a mechanism limiting political activity of citizens, could be regarded as a factor deconsolidating democracy.

The models of cabinet competition have been subject to considerable evolution since 1989. In the beginning, the created cabinets were characterized by high lability, mostly caused by the organizational instability of political parties. However, cabinet coalitions established after 2007 have been more permanent, which contributes to the consolidation of democracy. Its sources, apart from higher organizational stability of political parties, also include strong personalization of the sphere of politics. It is manifested in the growing role of party leaders, who are very often the strongest organizational bonds of political parties. Another proof of the increasing personalization of Polish political parties is the patterns of new political movements developing and gaining political relevance. Within the last decade, only two new political formations exceeded the threshold of Parliament representation. These were: Palikot Movement [Ruch Palikota] (later renamed Your Movement [Twój Ruch]) associated with Janusz Palikot, and KUKIZ'15 established by rock musician Paweł Kukiz.

The factors that undoubtedly contribute to the deconsolidation of Polish democracy are the evolution of the function of political parties and a change of the model of voting

behaviors. In the case of functions of political parties, we can see two main phenomena with a negative influence on the consolidation of Polish democracy. The first of them is electoral determinism, which identifies each party's significance with the support it receives. It may lead to political parties giving up their ideological and axiological message in favor of an immediate electoral result. This may contribute to representing populist and anti-system attitudes, especially in the situation of high level of political polarization. Another phenomenon connected with political parties performing their functions which can have a negative impact on the consolidation of democracy is the transfer of decision-making processes to the highest structure levels. The centralization of management of party organizations leads to the erosion of their social roots. Citizens begin to perceive parties as strange organizations, which do not represent their interests but act for the good of political elites. This is proved by the level of social trust in them. In a study from March 2018 (CBOS, 2018, p. 8) political parties were the last in the ranking of the analyzed institutions: only 23% respondents declare they trust political parties, and only 2% declare they definitely trust them.

Another factor that can have a negative impact on the processes of consolidation of Polish democracy is the consequences of voting behaviors. It is connected with faulty performance of the function of ensuring adequate political representation as a result of the election. In consolidated democracies the role of elections is to help identify the most important issues which due to their social importance will be attributed to different parties and voters, contributing to their association with the existing system of norms and values (Rose, Mossawir, 1967, p. 173). Since 2005, and especially since the parliamentary election in 2015, there has been no adequate representation of voters with leftist views at the parliamentary level. It is so although approximately 25% Polish voters declare leftist or center-leftist views (Wojtasik, 2014, p. 11). In this case, the mechanism that deconsolidates the democratic regime may be lowering the level of legitimization of political representation acquired as a result of the election. Political alienation of a part of the society, who cannot see their representatives in the parliament and as a result may begin to oppose the consequences of democratic processes, will also play a role.

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