

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 1 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN POLAND JUNE 13 2004

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Key points:

- Only 20.87% turned out to vote in the first European Parliament election held in Poland, the second lowest turnout in Europe and a record low for a post-1989 national poll.
- European issues played a secondary role in a dull and lifeless campaign to which the main parties and media gave a very low priority and that was overshadowed by a government formation crisis and possibility of an early parliamentary election.
- The election was a triumph for the centre-right opposition parties with the liberal-conservative Civic Platform topping the poll with 24.1%.
- Parties opposed to or critical of the EU performed well although the main beneficiary was the Catholic nationalist League of Polish Families rather than the radical-populist Self-Defence party, that most pre-election polls had placed a strong second.
- The governing Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union saw a huge slump in its support since the 2001 parliamentary election but still performed slightly better than expected.
- With eight parties and electoral coalitions crossing the representation thresholds, the election result points to a weak and unstable centre-right government emerging from a fragmented parliament after the next parliamentary election.
- However, the extremely low turnout and lack of focus on European issues make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the pattern of support for various parties and Polish attitudes towards the EU on the basis of these results.

Background/Context

The June 2004 European Parliament election took place at a time of enormous uncertainty in Polish domestic politics. It was almost completely overshadowed by a government formation crisis that had engulfed Poland since March when ex-communist premier Leszek Miller announced his intention to stand down on May 2nd, the day after Polish accession to the EU. By that stage Mr Miller's Democratic

Left Alliance-Labour Union (SLD-UP) government, was the most unpopular since 1989 with approval ratings of only around 5%.¹ The Miller government had seen its support drain away since its September 2001 election victory due to: a string of high profile corruption scandals, its incompetent handling of certain key policy issues such as health service reform and the failure of the economic recovery to filter down to ordinary Poles and produce a ‘feel good factor,’ in large part due to stubbornly high levels of unemployment. All this was exacerbated by a series of tough austerity measures known as the ‘Hausner plan’ (after its architect the eponymous deputy premier for economic affairs) that the government was introducing to prevent the budget deficit from spiralling out of control.

However, in spite of this and the fact that it lost its parliamentary majority following the departure of its Polish Peasant Party (PSL) coalition partner in March 2003, the Miller government had been fairly secure in office and able to win key parliamentary votes. The Democratic Left Alliance had a more disciplined and cohesive parliamentary caucus than the opposition parties and could generally count on the support of most independents and smaller parliamentary groupings. The latter generally comprised defectors or expellees from other parties fearful that bringing down the government could herald early an election. The Polish Constitution also protects incumbent premiers by requiring a ‘constructive vote of no confidence’ in favour of a named successor.

The situation changed dramatically at the end of March when 33 Democratic Left Alliance and Labour Union deputies led by Sejm Marshall Marek Borowski broke away to form a new party, Polish Social Democracy (SDPL), thereby depriving Miller of his *de facto* parliamentary majority. The catalyst for this split was a huge slump in the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union’s opinion poll standing. In spite of the government’s deep unpopularity, the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union had actually held on to its poll lead until autumn 2003. But from that point onwards support began to drain away and it fell behind first the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO) party and then Self-Defence (Samoobrona), a party that evolved from the agrarian trade union movement led by the controversial radical-populist Andrzej Lepper. Matters came to a head when the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union’s support appeared to go into freefall and began hovering dangerously close to the 8% threshold required for electoral coalitions to secure parliamentary representation (5% for individual parties). At that point, Mr Borowski’s supporters came to the conclusion that only by taking the radical step of forming a new political party could they present themselves as a ‘renewed left’ and thereby save themselves from electoral catastrophe.

Following Mr Miller’s resignation, President Aleksander Kwasniewski entrusted Marek Belka, his one-time economic adviser and Poland’s most senior representative in the US-led civilian administration in Iraq, with the task of forming a new government. Although Mr Belka presented his new cabinet as a one-year interim government of experts, he retained virtually all of the key ministers from the previous Miller administration. Mr Belka failed to secure a parliamentary vote of confidence on May 14th winning the support of only 188 deputies (mainly from the Democratic

¹ The Democratic Left Alliance is the direct successor to former ruling communist party, the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR). The Labour Union is its small social democratic electoral ally that draws its supporters from the both the communist party and democratic opposition.

Left Alliance and Labour Union), well short of the 226 required. Crucially, Polish Social Democracy did not support him when it failed to extract a pledge for an early election to be held in autumn 2004 (it is not scheduled until autumn 2005). The party was keen to capitalise quickly on its 'newness' and distance itself from the previous administration so, in spite of being sympathetic to Mr Belka personally, could not be seen to be supporting him unconditionally.

The initiative then passed to parliament but none of the parties there was able or willing to collect the signatures to nominate a candidate. According to the Polish Constitution, the President then had a final attempt to form a government and Mr Kwasniewski re-nominated Mr Belka, with an investiture vote scheduled for June 24th. If Mr Belka then failed to secure a vote of confidence, Mr Kwasniewski was constitutionally bound to call an early parliamentary election within 45 days, which effectively meant early to mid-August. This was a scenario that none of the parties, even those that favoured an early election, really wanted, given that it would fall in the middle of the holiday and harvest seasons. However, it also appeared to be strong possibility as all the opposition parties were either implacably opposed to Mr Belka, anxious to distance themselves from what appeared to be a Democratic Left Alliance-dominated administration; or, for whatever reason, simply anxious for an early election to be held.

The European Parliament election also took place at a time of increasingly tense relations between Poland and the two largest EU member states, France and Germany. Relations with these countries were already strained since Poland strongly backed the US invasion of Iraq and agreed to run one of the post-war reconstruction zones without consulting its EU partners. But they deteriorated even further when Polish (and Spanish) opposition to the new voting provisions set out in the draft constitutional treaty that had emerged from Convention on the future of Europe, which France and Germany strongly supported, was one of the key factors contributing to the breakdown of negotiations at the December 2003 Brussels summit. The voting system agreed at the earlier Nice summit gave Poland, along with Spain, 27 votes in the Council of Ministers, only two fewer than the four largest member states. The constitutional treaty, on the other hand, proposed replacing this with a new voting system requiring a 'double majority' of member states representing 60% of the EU's population to pass legislation, which was felt to be much less favourable to Poland and created fears of Franco-German domination. The Polish government also led a group of EU countries insisting that the pre-amble to the constitutional treaty should include an explicit reference to Europe's Christian roots. The Miller government was strongly backed by all the main opposition parties for its stance on the constitutional treaty. Indeed, the parliamentary leader of the generally pro-EU Civic Platform Jan Rokita coined the slogan 'Nice or Death'.

All this meant that by the time of Polish EU accession in May 2004 and the June European Parliament election the positive feelings generated at the time of the overwhelming 77.45% Yes vote in the 2003 referendum had, to some extent, subsided. But one should not exaggerate the extent of this. Rather than showing any substantial increase in opposition to European integration, opinion polls taken since last June indicated that pro-EU feeling remained at very high levels in Poland. This was in spite of the barrage of negative publicity surrounding the negotiations on the constitutional treaty and the apparent threat that it represented to Polish interests;

although it was less surprising when one considers that survey evidence shows that most Poles are actually quite realistic about the short term benefits of EU membership.

The constitutional treaty was due to be resolved at an EU summit scheduled for the weekend after the European election. In fact, the Polish government already appeared to be moving towards a compromise on this issue, when it apparently lost its main ally following an apparent softening of the Spanish government's stance in the wake of the Socialists' March election victory. Fearing that any compromise deal would fail to secure the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority to ratify the treaty, President Kwasniewski had already signalled that the alternative route of a popular referendum should be used. This would be held concurrently with the next presidential election in autumn 2005 in order to secure the 50% turnout required for it to be constitutionally valid.

The Polish electoral law for the European Parliament election was passed at the end of January 2004. Poland's 54 MEPs were to be elected from 13 electoral districts that corresponded broadly to Poland's 16 regional provinces, except that two Western provinces, two Southern provinces and two North Eastern provinces were merged to form single districts. The election was to be contested by election committees that comprised: parties, coalitions of parties or those registered by groups of at least 1000 voters. Much of the parliamentary debate on the election law concerned the participation of these 'civic committees'; given that at one stage it appeared that they might play a very important role. Indeed, there was much speculation that President Kwasniewski would sponsor one as a precursor to launching his own centre-left party. This did not transpire and, as we shall see, the election was dominated by more traditional party formations.

In order to register a candidates' list in an electoral district, an election committee had to collect 10,000 signatures. If an election committee collected 10,000 signatures in at least 7 electoral districts then it was automatically registered across the whole country. In order to secure a share in the division of mandates, individual parties and civic committees had to secure at least 5% of the vote nationally (electoral coalitions 8%) so in reality the only electoral committees with a serious chance were the fifteen who managed to register candidates' lists across the whole country. In fact, only eight of these were really serious contenders: the Democratic-Left Alliance-Labour Union, Peasant Party, Civic Platform, Self-Defence and Polish Social Democracy together with the Catholic-nationalist League of Polish Families, conservative Law and Justice party and the (non-parliamentary) liberal Freedom Union. In a provision designed to encourage electoral participation, there was no fixed number of seats allocated to each electoral district. This would be determined after the election on the basis of turnout in that district. First, the overall allocation of seats between the electoral committees would be determined nationally using the d'Hondt counting method (which favours larger parties). Then, seats would be divided between electoral districts according to turnout using the (more proportional) Hare-Niemayer method.

The Campaign

Although the tempo picked up bit during the last couple of weeks, the election campaign was generally extremely low key and failed to capture the public's

imagination. One reason for this was that the main parties did not take the campaign very seriously. Partly, they were not really sure what kind of campaign to conduct or how to pitch their message, given that it was the first time that they had contested a European election. But perhaps most importantly, as noted above, at the time of the election Poland found itself embroiled in a domestic political crisis and they much more focused on whether a new government would emerge or whether there would be an early parliamentary election, for which they wanted to conserve their energies. At best they treated the polls as a 'dry run' and indicator of their popularity ahead of the third and final attempt to form a government. For example, Civic Platform actually formally wound up its campaign a week before the election was due to take place!

European issues were not really much in evidence in the party campaigns. Only three of the eight main grouping's slogans specifically mentioned Europe: the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union ('Europe for development-development for Poland'), Law and Justice ('Honourable representation in Europe') and Polish Social Democracy ('Let's take advantage of the European opportunity'). Attempts to introduce European elements into the party campaigns, tended to be confined to persuading voters who would best represent Poland's interests, either in general terms or by referring to specific policy areas such as: agricultural subsidies, the EU budget, regional funding or research and development. Civic Platform, Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union, Freedom Union and Polish Social Democracy generally presented the EU in a positive light as an opportunity, while the League of Polish Families and Self-Defence portrayed it as a threat. The League revived its old accession referendum slogan of 'Yesterday Moscow, today Brussels', while Self-Defence, terming their approach 'Euro-realist', called for a complete re-negotiation of the accession terms and withdrawal from the EU if this could not be achieved. Dovetailing with their broader populist message, Self-Defence argued that only they could do this because they were not compromised by earlier participation in the accession negotiations.

Although some parties did take advantage of the opportunity to flesh out their European policies and some even produced special 'European election programmes', there was, with a few notable exceptions, very little attempt to present voters with clear choices about the EU's future trajectory. The main exception to this was probably the Law and Justice party which produced a fairly detailed policy statement titled 'A Europe of solidaristic Nations' which set out a vision of Europe that was both strongly inter-governmentalist but also based on high levels of fiscal transfers from richer to poorer nations. This was published with little fanfare on their website a couple of days before the election, although its main ideas were set out in a shorter policy statement, the 'Kraków Manifesto', which accompanied their campaign launch. Civic Platform and the Democratic Left Alliance also produced reasonably substantial European policy statements but did little to publicise them. The Peasant Party produced a lengthy but fairly banal set of 'election theses', while the League of Polish Families and Polish Social Democracy produced a short 'statement of aims' and 'election appeal' respectively.

Surprisingly, given the earlier controversy that had surrounded it, there was relatively little mention of the constitutional treaty during the campaign. The only main parties to give the issue any prominence were the League of Polish Families, who rejected it in principle as a step towards the construction of a European 'super-state', and Law

and Justice, who called for an explicit reference to Christianity in the treaty and pledged to oppose any moves to 'compromise' on retention of the Nice voting system. Indeed, both of these parties, particularly the League, had a very 'national-patriotic' flavour to their campaigns. Even Civic Platform gave the issue relatively little prominence, save for a brief defence of Nice in their European programme as the best way to protect the EU from the emergence of a 'hegemonic' group of member states (implicitly France and Germany).

Non-European and generally domestic themes were very much to the fore in most party campaigns, particularly socio-economic issues such as unemployment, taxation and pensions. Not surprisingly given the issue's salience in recent months, most parties also attempted to present themselves as vigorous opponents of corruption and their candidates as having 'clean hands'. Civic Platform's campaign perhaps best exemplified the way that the campaign was dominated by domestic political concerns. Its election broadcasts, which featured extracts from speeches by party leaders at campaign rallies, dealt almost exclusively with national issues, particularly attacking the Miller government. They could easily be re-run as one of the party's broadcasts at the next parliamentary election! Similarly, in the weekend before the election, the main focus of Civic Platform's final campaign rally was a call for a referendum to amend the Polish Constitution to: reduce the number of parliamentary deputies, abolish the second chamber and introduce single-member constituencies for parliamentary elections (seen by many Polish commentators as a panacea against both corruption and populism). On the other hand, the League of Polish Families devoted one of their campaign broadcasts, titled 'They wanted war', to Poland's involvement in Iraq, calling for a referendum on withdrawal Polish of troops; a demand supported by a clear majority of Poles but opposed by most mainstream parties.

Virtually all of the parties focused on their individual candidates' qualities, particularly stressing their European experience, education, career status and knowledge of foreign languages. The Peasant Party did this implicitly by, uniquely, standing virtually all of the party's top leadership as election candidates. In Self-Defence's case this was a defensive strategy to counter its stereotype as a leader-dominated, parochial and badly educated party lacking experienced and competent cadres.² The Freedom Union, on the other hand, was able to persuade some of the key figures involved in the enlargement negotiations such as ex-Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek and Chief Negotiator Jan Kulakowski to stand on their ticket, and ran a simple but quite clever campaign that juxtaposed them with images of their younger candidates, thereby portraying themselves as representing both 'the future and experience', as their campaign slogan put it. Four of the parties - Civic Platform, Law and Justice, Self-Defence and Polish Social Democracy - ran campaigns that focused heavily on the qualities of their national party leaders even though none of them were actually standing for election.

In putting domestic and non-European issues to the fore, were the parties simply responding to voters' concerns? The evidence for this is inconclusive. According to research undertaken by Gallup in May, 71% of Polish voters said that they would be influenced by party stances on national issues when deciding how to vote. But 62% also said that stances on European issues would be an essential element of their

² Although in Self-Defence's case knowledge of a foreign language often meant Russian!

choice.³ More detailed polling evidence is required before firmer conclusions can be drawn on this.

If voters were not receiving European messages from the party campaigns, then they certainly were not getting them from any other sources. There was virtually no official government campaign informing people about what this election was about nor any thought given as to how to encourage turnout (apart from the provision in the electoral law noted above, about which most voters were probably unaware). The media also failed to cover the election in a way that would generate interest and excitement in the campaign. The lack of coverage by Polish state TV, from which most Poles derive their political information, was particularly important and stood in stark contrast to their approach to other national polls. In the run up to previous parliamentary and presidential elections, Polish TV has traditionally shown short clips on the main parties' campaigns on its main news programmes in the weeks leading up to the poll. Similarly, in the run up to the 2003 EU accession referendum the main Polish TV news programme *Wiadomosci* had a digital clock running in corner of the screen showing the time left before polling day.

As polling day approached, the stage was set for a very low turnout, with most analysts predicting around 25-30%. Final opinion polls also indicated that Civic Platform would emerge as the winner with around 26-31% of the vote. Although for a brief period in March and April, Self-Defence was challenging (and even overtaking) Civic Platform, its support fell back at the beginning of May and final campaign polls placed it second with between 16-23%. Law and Justice was generally placed third place with 11-17%, followed by the League of Polish Families on 8-13%. The two left groupings were hovering close to the threshold, with the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union on 5-10% and Polish Social Democracy on 4-6%, as were the Peasant Party (4-7%), and Freedom Union (3-5%).

Results and Analysis

One of the most striking, and certainly widely commented upon, features of this election was the incredibly low turnout of only 20.87%. As Table 1 shows, this was easily the lowest turnout in any Polish national election or referendum held since 1989. It was also the second lowest turnout (after Slovakia with 16.96%) of in any of the EU member states.

Table 1: Turnout in post-1989 Polish elections and referendums (%)

	90	91	93	94	95	96	97	98	00	01	02	03	04
Local	42.3			33.8				45.5			44.2		
Presidential	60.6(1) 53.4(2)				64.7(1) 68.2(2)				61.1				
Parliamentary		43.2	52.1				47.9			46.2			
Referendums						32.4	42.9					58.9	
European													20.87

Source: Rzeczpospolita, 14 June 2004 and Polish State Electoral Commission (<http://www.pkw.gov.pl/gallery/10/17/10174.pdf>).

³ See: http://www.eosgallupeurope.com/flash_20eb_20161_20wave_203/pl.pdf

Table 2 shows that eight parties and electoral coalitions crossed the respective 5% and 8% thresholds. Given the extremely low turnout, one must be wary about drawing too firm conclusions about patterns of support for the various parties based on this result. However, the clear winner was Civic Platform with 24.09% of the vote, a little less than what opinion polls had predicted but still 11.42% up on its 2001 score. This result provides Civic Platform with an excellent launch pad for the forthcoming parliamentary election, and suggests that it has been able to construct a broad coalition of supporters that reaches well beyond the traditional mobilising capacity of Polish liberal parties (previous elections suggest they have a ceiling of support of around 15%) into the more conservative segments of the centre-right electorate. However, the biggest surprise was the strong second place of the League of Polish Families, which won 15.92% of the votes, 8.05% up on 2001 and clearly above what opinion polls had predicted.⁴ Law and Justice finished third with 12.67%, broadly in line with projections and 3.17% up on 2001. However, the other big surprise was the fact that Self-Defence only finished fourth with 10.78%, broadly what it achieved in 2001. This was a very disappointing result for the party, well below its opinion poll projections, suggesting that its support was both ‘soft’ and extremely volatile.

Table 2: June 2004 Polish election to the European Parliament

	Votes	%	2001	Change %	MEPs
Civic Platform	1,467,775	24.10	12.68	+11.42	15
League of Polish Families	969,689	15.92	7.87	+8.05	10
Law and Justice	771,858	12.67	9.50	+3.17	7
Self-Defence	656,782	10.78	10.20	+0.58	6
Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union	569,311	9.35	41.03	-31.68	5
Freedom Union	446,549	7.33	3.10	+4.23	4
Polish Peasant Party	386,340	6.34	8.98	-2.64	4
Polish Social Democracy	324,707	5.33	-	-	3

Source: Polish State Electoral Commission (<http://www.pkw.gov.pl/gallery/10/17/10174.pdf>)

Although the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union’s 9.34% represented a massive 31.68% slump in support compared with 2001, they were probably fairly relieved with this result given that polls showed them hovering around the 8% threshold for electoral coalitions. They were also pleased to emerge as the clear victors in the battle for the ‘left vote’ with Polish Social Democracy. In one sense, Polish Social Democracy’s result (5.33%) was fairly good given that it was only formed less than three months earlier and had little time to organise itself for the campaign. Indeed, early exit polls indicated had it had failed to cross the 5% threshold. On the other hand, the party must have been disappointed to have lost its earlier momentum; polls taken at the time of its formation gave it around 10% support. The two parties’ votes combined vote suggest that there is a ‘core’ electorate of at least 15% prepared to vote

⁴ There is a tendency for Polish opinion polls to systematically underestimate the support for parties such as the League of Polish Families, whose electorate comprises what might be termed the ‘religious right’, because many of these people distrust opinion pollsters and are reluctant to co-operate with them.

for the left in spite of the massive difficulties it has encountered in government during the last three years.

The Freedom Union (7.33%) and Peasant Party (6.35%) were also relieved to have crossed the 5% threshold. For the Freedom Union these elections were 'make-or-break' following the party's failure to enter parliament in 2001 and consequent slump in public profile, and came as a surprise given that only one pre-election poll had showed it securing 5%. If it does get back into parliament it will be remarkable and unprecedented; no unsuccessful Polish party has ever re-entered parliament without entering an electoral pact with a stronger partner. The Peasant Party was also under intense pressure; punished for its support for the Miller government but unable to capitalise on being in opposition and relentlessly squeezed for its rural-agricultural base by Lepper's Self-Defence.

Some commentators interpreted the extremely low turnout and high vote for parties that were hostile to or extremely critical of the EU - particularly the League of Polish Families, Self-Defence and (although to a lesser extent) Law and Justice - as a sign that Poles were becoming disillusioned with the EU. The League of Polish Families had spearheaded the campaign against Polish EU accession during last June's referendum and, although it did not explicitly advocate Polish withdrawal, its campaign materials it continued to attack the Union for as a threat to Polish sovereignty and for promoting what it saw as anti-Christian values. As noted above, it also strongly opposed any EU constitutional treaty as a matter of principle. While Self-Defence did not share the League's axiological critique of the EU, it was, as noted above, bitterly critical of the terms of Polish EU accession and threatened withdrawal if these could not be re-negotiated successfully. Law and Justice also had a highly critical, if somewhat more restrained, approach towards the EU. As noted above, it pledged to oppose any constitutional treaty that departed from the Nice voting arrangements and did not explicitly reflect Christian values. Some observers, therefore, also suggested that the election result boded ill for the prospects of a Yes vote in any referendum on the constitutional treaty. As sociologist Tomasz Zukowski pointed out on Polish TV's election night special, 80% of voters supported parties that were opposed the government's stance on the constitutional treaty.

However, interpreting the low turnout as representing some kind of 'Eurosceptic backlash' in which Poles turned their back on the EU is an over-simplification at best. Post-1989 election turnouts have generally been fairly low in Poland. As Table 1 shows, turnout in three out of the last four parliamentary elections was below 50%. Moreover, in recent years Poles have become increasingly cynical about politicians and alienated from the political process in general, not least because of a string of high profile political corruption scandals that have emerged. Given that the Catholic feast of Corpus Christi, which is a national holiday in Poland, fell on the Thursday before polling day (Sunday), many Poles have simply chosen to leave home for a 'long weekend'. But the main reason for the exceptionally low turnout was the fact that most Poles simply did not understand the purpose of the election. A May 2004 Gallup poll found that among the most common reasons cited for abstention were because respondents did not know enough about the role of the European Parliament (71%) or that they were not sufficiently well informed (62%). Only 20% of Poles (compared with the EU average of 42%) said that they had enough information in order to choose whom to vote for. On the other hand, only 26% of respondents said

that they would be abstaining because they were against the EU.⁵ As noted above, the government ran no official information campaign explaining the European Parliament's functions, and the main parties and the media made little attempt to either fill the information vacuum or generate any interest.

Moreover, drawing conclusions about Polish attitudes towards the EU from the vote obtained by Eurosceptic and Eurocritical parties in this election is also problematic. Firstly, as noted above, other issues overshadowed the campaign. Secondly, again as noted above, most parties did not present voters with clear choices about the EU's future trajectory and Poland's role within it. The League of Polish Families was perhaps one of the few who did but even they also focused on other issues such as Poland's involvement in Iraq. Thirdly, polling evidence suggests that the European issue actually has a low salience in determining the voting behaviour of the Eurosceptic and Eurocritical parties' supporters, given that many of them are actually pro-EU. More than a third of League of Polish Families supporters' actually voted Yes in last year's EU accession referendum, Self-Defence voters were almost evenly divided and more than 80% of Law and Justice voters supported accession.⁶ Recent opinion polls indicate that these patterns of support for EU membership still hold true.⁷ Fourthly, it is important to bear in mind that the vote for parties that conveyed a broadly positive message about the EU - the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union, Freedom Union, Polish Social Democracy and (earlier talk of 'Nice or Death' notwithstanding) the Civic Platform - was also very high. The Peasant Party, which backed a Yes vote in the referendum but contains a strong Eurosceptic current (including its recently elected leader Janusz Wojciechowski), took a broadly neutral line. Finally, as noted above, opinion polls indicated that Polish attitudes towards the EU have changed little since they voted Yes overwhelmingly in last June's referendum.

In fact, the Eurosceptic and Eurocritical parties' support was not really much more than predicted in campaign polls. The main surprise was that the primary beneficiary of this was the League of Polish Families rather than Self-Defence. This was probably because the League's 'religious right' electorate was much more disciplined and motivated than Self-Defence's, which - in the context of a very low turnout - boosted the former's support. Incidentally, this is probably also the explanation for the relatively good (at least compared to their worst expectations) vote for the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union and the Peasant Party. The Democratic Left Alliance and the Peasant Party were easily the best organised political parties in Poland, with the highest membership levels and local organisational penetration, and, therefore, best able to mobilise their 'core' supporters.

⁵ See: http://www.eosgalluurope.com/flash_20eb_20161_20wave_203/pl.pdf.

⁶ See: A. Szczerbiak, 'The Polish EU Accession Referendum', *Opposing Europe Research Network Referendum Briefing No 5*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/poland5.pdf>.

⁷ More detailed survey evidence of which issues were salient in determining voting behaviour in this particular election is obviously required before more definitive judgements about the nature and meaning of the vote for these parties can be drawn. But the fact that, for example, so many League of Polish Families voters disagree with the party on this 'trademark' issue suggests that opposition to the EU is not necessarily what motivates them to vote for the party.

Projections based on this result of on the number of seats that parties would have won in a national election point to a fragmented parliament.⁸ Civic Platform (118 seats) and Law and Justice (63), felt by many commentators to be natural partners in any new centre-right government, would fall short of a parliamentary majority (231), even with the backing of the liberal Freedom Union (34). Both main centre-right parties have ruled out a coalition with either Self-Defence (58) or the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union (46), and a coalition with Polish Social Democracy (25) also appears unlikely. This only leaves them with only the League of Polish Families (82) or (more likely) the (primarily office-seeking but ideologically anti-liberal and EU-critical) Peasant Party (34) as potential government partners. Based on this result, the most likely coalition, therefore, appears to a rather unwieldy four-party one involving Civic Platform, Law and Justice, Freedom Union and the Peasant Party. This would have a roughly 40-seat majority over the combined Eurosceptic/populist and ex-communist/left opposition.

According to the academic literature, given that they are ‘second order elections’ voting for the European Parliament is generally characterised by high levels of protest voting against governing parties and an unusually high vote for fringe parties.⁹ The June 2004 Polish result fits broadly, but not entirely, with this pattern. Although at the time of the election Poland only had a caretaker government led by a non-party technocrat, given that its parliamentary base comprised the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union, the Belka administration could reasonably be seen as a continuation of the previous Miller-led government. In that sense, although a little better than expected, the 9.35% vote for the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union was certainly a massive slump in support for the ‘governing’ party. On the other hand, this was probably a reasonable reflection of the true state of Polish public opinion if a parliamentary election were to be held and, therefore, not directly comparable to a classic, mid-term ‘protest vote’. Similarly, although the vote for non-mainstream parties such as the League of Polish Families and Self-Defence was high (over 25%), it was also very much in line with what was predicted in general tracking polls; indeed, in the case of Self-Defence it was actually around 10% below. In other words, non-mainstream parties did well in this election because they were (or appeared to be) genuinely popular and not necessarily because voters used it as a cost-free opportunity to desert mainstream parties that they would have otherwise have supported in order to register a one-off protest.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Although turnout in the 2004 European election in Poland was exceptionally low and the vote for parties that were highly critical of or opposed to the EU very high, this did not necessarily question Poland’s commitment to the EU. Low turnout was a reflection of an alienated and confused, rather than anti-European, electorate. The campaign failed to generate any interest or excitement and was completely overshadowed by the government formation crisis and prospect of an early parliamentary election. The main parties did not know how to approach the campaign which they gave a low priority and the Polish media did little to fill the information

⁸ See: *Rzeczpospolita*, 15 June 2004.

⁹ See: K. Reif and H. Schmitt, ‘Nine Second-Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results’, *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol 8 No 1. 1980. pp 3-44.

vacuum. With few notable exceptions, very little attempt to was made to use the campaign to present voters with clear choices about the EU's future trajectory. The low salience of the European issue, together with the absence of hard data on what motivated voters to support particular parties, makes it makes it very difficult to draw firm conclusions about Polish attitudes towards Europe, specifically how they will vote in a future referendum to ratify the EU constitutional treaty, on the basis of this election.

The extremely low turnout also makes it hard to extrapolate general political trends from the result. The election was clearly a major triumph for the liberal conservative Civic Platform and provides the party with an excellent basis on which to build for the forthcoming parliamentary election. The biggest surprise was clearly the strong second place achieved by the League of Polish Families. But question marks remain how much this was due to its ability to mobilise its core religious right electorate on a very low turnout and how far it can broaden its appeal beyond that base. The most disappointed party will be Self-Defence that finished fourth with only the same level of support that it achieved in 2001, when earlier opinion polls had shown it challenging Civic Platform for first place. If these voting patterns are repeated at the next election then a fragmented parliament will emerge leading to the formation of a weak and unstable centre-right coalition. Eurosceptic and Eurocritical parties will also play an even more significant role than they do in the current parliament.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>