

No. 11 (56), November 2023

Very unusual 2023 parliamentary elections. How Poles voted from abroad

The Polish parliamentary election of October 15, 2023, was memorable in many ways, one being the record turnout at the polls – 74 per cent. The increase in turnout was even more spectacular in polling stations abroad, with the number of votes cast outside of the country almost doubling compared to the previous parliamentary election of 2019. The increase was especially notable in the UK (despite the number of Polish residents dropping) and Germany. In this issue of CMR Spotlight, Magdalena Lesińska reflects on the reasons for this mobilisation of Poles abroad, and on how voting should be organised in the future.

For Polish speakers, voting abroad, as well as the political and public participation of Poles in Ireland, are the topic of the latest episode of CMR's [Migroścacja](#) podcast, please check it out.



"Your vote counts!" – electoral advertisement from the Midlands Polish Community in the Republic of Ireland. Source: Midlands Polish Community CLG



Very unusual 2023 parliamentary elections. How Poles voted from abroad

Magdalena Lesińska

The 2023 parliamentary elections promised to be different from the previous ones long before the polling day. There were several controversial issues that diaspora organisations brought to the attention of the institutions responsible for organising elections outside the territory of Poland, namely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ) and the National Electoral Commission (PKW). One of the main complaints concerned the insufficient number of polling stations organised abroad, especially in the EU countries such as the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. A week before election day, when the registration of voters abroad

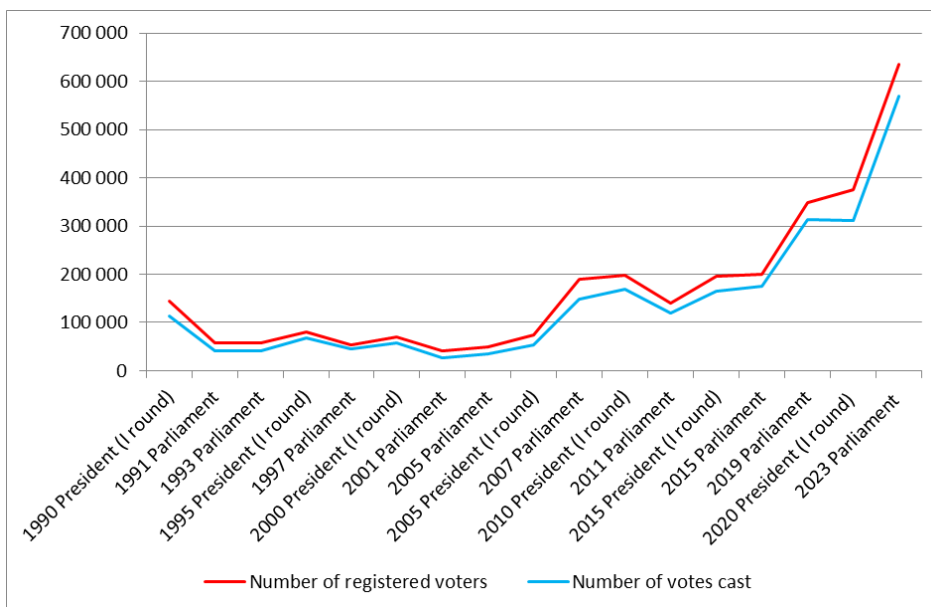
was closed, it became clear that the turnout of Poles abroad would be a record. The number of registered voters exceeded 636 thousand, almost twice as many as in the previous parliamentary elections four years ago. The number of valid votes cast abroad was also the highest in history (569 thousand).

Why the 2023 elections were unusual?

Unprecedented turnout

Over the past three decades (1990-2023), the number of eligible voters abroad (those who were registered to vote) varied (see

Figure 1. Number of registered voters and votes cast in parliamentary and presidential elections in years 1990-2023



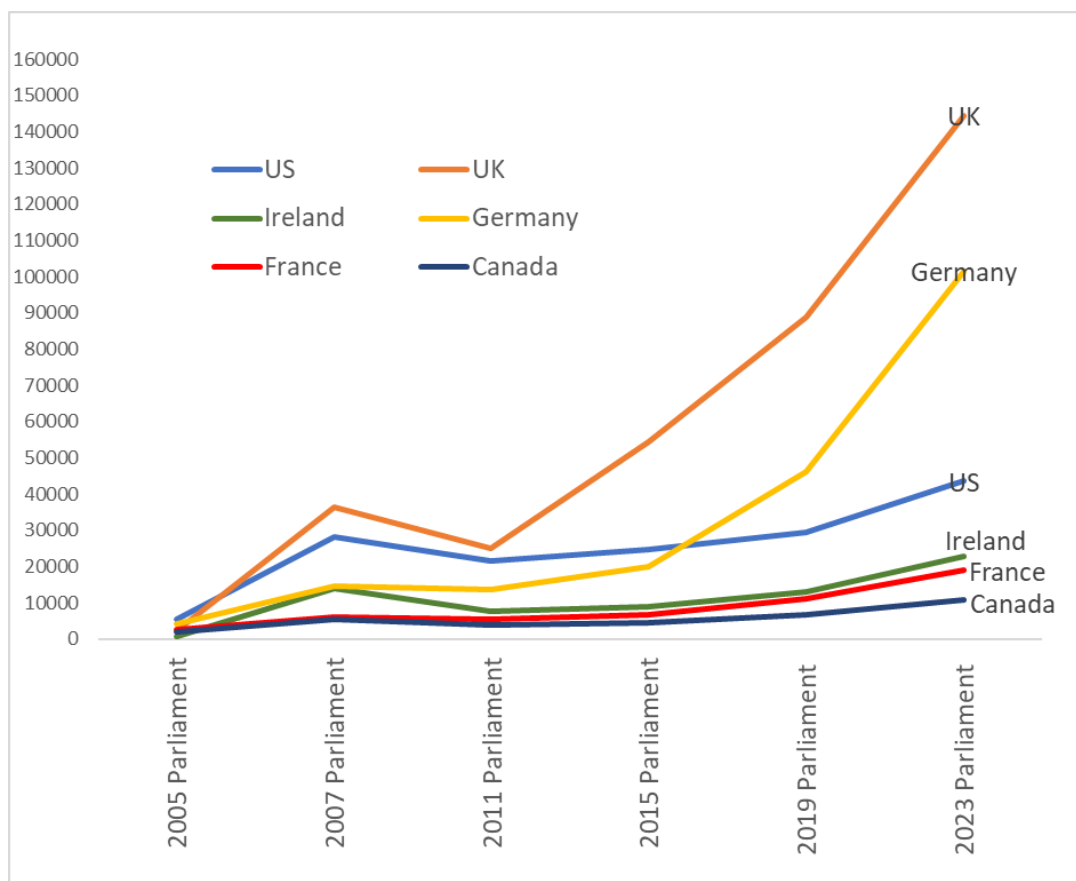
Source: National Electoral Commission (PKW) database, Author's own elaboration

Figure 1). It has to be mentioned that Poland does not have a permanent register of voters abroad, which means that non-resident citizens are obliged to register to vote before each election. Since 1990, the lowest number of registered voters was 41 thousand (in the 2001 elections), the highest was 636 thousand (in 2023). There are similar fluctuations in the number of votes cast, which is always lower than the number of eligible voters, as not all those who register finally end up casting a vote. The record was also set this year (569 thousand valid votes cast abroad).

The highest level of interest all over the world (not only in the EU countries)

The 2023 elections saw a very high level of participation not only among Poles living in European countries, which have been the main destination since Poland joined the EU in 2004. In countries such as the USA and Canada, more Poles voted than in previous elections. This could mean that voters who did not participate in the past decided to do so this time. It should be noted that Poland also had a record turnout of 74% (such a high turnout has never been recorded in the history of free elections in Poland). The highest turnout was also registered among

Figure 2. The number of votes cast in Polish parliamentary elections in selected countries



Source: National Electoral Commission (PKW) database, Author's own elaboration

the Poles voting in the UK and Germany, the main destination countries for Poles since the EU accession. In the UK, 2.4 thousand Poles voted in the 2005 parliamentary elections, and almost 20 years later this number increased 60-fold to 144 thousand. In Germany, the shift was 25 times (from 4 thousand to 101 thousand). This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 2.

Since the 2007 parliamentary elections, half of all votes cast abroad have been registered in three countries: the UK, Germany and the US. One in four votes was cast in the UK, one in five in Germany and one in ten in the US. The most visible change in the share of total

votes cast abroad was in the UK: from 3% in 2001 to 31% in 2015. At the same time, the share of votes cast in the US fell from 26% to 8%. Details are shown in Table 1.

The overwhelming support for opposition parties

In the 2023 parliamentary elections, the main competition took place between the ruling right-wing party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS) and the opposition parties representing the centre and the left: Koalicja Obywatelska (Civic Coalition, KO), the new coalition

Table 1. Votes cast in selected countries as a percentage of total votes cast abroad in Polish parliamentary elections (2001-2023)

	the UK	Germany	the US	Ireland	France	Canada
2001 Parliament	3%	11%	26%	0,3%	5%	6%
2005 Parliament	6%	11%	15%	2%	7%	5%
2007 Parliament	24%	9%	18%	9%	4%	3%
2011 Parliament	21%	11%	18%	6%	4%	3%
2015 Parliament	31%	11%	14%	5%	3%	2%
2019 Parliament	28%	14%	9%	4%	3%	2%
2023 Parliament	25%	18%	8%	4%	3%	2%

Source: National Electoral Commission (PKW) database, Author's own elaboration

Trzecia Droga (Third Way) and Nowa Lewica (New Left). The main opposition party (KO) won in the vast majority of countries. In the main EU countries, it reached half (or almost half) of the votes: in Spain 51%, in Germany 49%, in Ireland 47%, in the UK 46%. The PiS won more votes than any other party in only four countries: Canada (47%), the US (40%), Belarus (36%) and Kosovo (34%). Surprisingly, even in the US, where Poles traditionally support right-wing parties and candidates, the opposition candidate for the Senate - former ombudsman Adam Bodnar - won more votes than his PiS rival. Four years earlier, in the 2019 elections, PiS won in ten countries (Angola, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Iraq, Canada, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, Latvia and the US). Support for political parties among Polish voters abroad is shown in Table 2.

The impact of votes from abroad

Poland is an example of an assimilated representation system, where votes cast abroad are added to a specific constituency in the capital. In practice, this means that in the case of the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish Parliament), polling stations set up abroad are part of the Warsaw constituency (No 19), which is one of 41 constituencies in the country and the largest in terms of the number of voters. Elections to the Senate (the upper house of the Parliament) are held in 100 single-mandate constituencies, and voters abroad vote in constituency no. 44 (also in Warsaw). This arrangement means that non-residents vote for the same list of candidates as residents of the capital. Although the system of assimilated representation is easy to organise (the foreign votes are collected and transferred directly to a particular domestic

Table 2. Support for political parties among Polish voters abroad

Political party	Number of votes in 2023 elections	Share in the votes cast abroad in 2023 elections	Change in comparison with 2019 elections
Civic Coalition (KO)	257 310	45%	+6%
Law and Justice (PiS)	92 576	16%	-9%
New Left (Nowa Lewica)	82 489	14%	-7%
Third Way (Trzecia droga)	69 326	12%	-
Confederation (Konfederacja)	51 074	9%	-2%

Source: National Electoral Commission (PKW) database, Author's own elaboration

constituency), it is also criticised because votes from abroad may have a potential impact on the results in that particular constituency. This is particularly the case in the 2023 elections, when foreign votes accounted for 67% of all votes cast in constituency no. 44 (the Senate) and 33% in constituency no. 19 (the Sejm).

The organisational framework of external voting in the 2023 elections

Currently, voting in overseas constituencies is only possible in person. Although postal voting was introduced as an additional option in the 2011 elections, it was abolished a few years later by the Law and Justice (PiS) government in 2018. The restriction to voting in person for non-resident citizens is considered to be extremely disadvantageous due to their territorial dispersion and the often long distance to the nearest polling station. As a result, there were very long queues at polling stations, especially in the capitals of the main destination countries. In order to vote at the Polish Embassy in London, applicants had to wait several hours. This was despite the fact that the largest number of polling stations had ever been set up abroad.

Polling stations for non-resident citizens are usually set up at diplomatic missions and headquarters of Polish organisations in the country concerned. Their number and location are announced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ) before each election. In 2023, a record number of 417 polling stations were organised. In comparison with

previous parliamentary elections, there were 250 polling stations abroad in 2015 and 320 in 2019. The increase in the number of polling stations was particularly noticeable in the EU countries. In the UK, the number increased from 54 in 2019 to 77 in 2023 (19 polling stations were organised in London alone). In Germany and the Netherlands, the number of polling stations doubled: from 23 to 47 and from 5 to 13 respectively. The number of polling stations was also increased in countries with a large number of traditional Polish settlements: in the USA the number of polling stations increased from 48 to 54, in Canada from 8 to 12 and in France from 13 to 18. It is worth mentioning that the list published by the MSZ initially contained 402 polling stations; it was changed twice as a result of information about the enormous interest of Poles abroad in the elections. The final number was 417. The additional polling stations were set up at the last minute in Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain.

The record number of voters raised concerns about whether electoral commissions abroad would be able to count the votes in 24 hours and send the protocols to the competent electoral commission Warsaw. According to the law, if this did not happen, the votes cast in such a commission would not be taken into account. As it turned out in practice, all protocols were sent on time, but the commission in Warsaw for many hours did not confirm the acceptance of protocols sent from abroad, forcing the members of

the commissions to stand on the spot and wait for information from Warsaw.

The possible reasons for the mobilisation of Poles abroad

The 2023 elections undoubtedly proved that Poles living abroad have a vital interest in the political situation in Poland. This interest is not only characteristic of Polish emigrants after Poland's accession but was also noticeable among the "old" clusters of the Polish diaspora. Half a million people were willing to spend a lot of time travelling to the polling station, sometimes from far away, and waiting in line for several hours to cast their vote. What could be the reasons for such an unusual mobilisation?

Firstly, the intense political polarisation between the ruling party and the democratic opposition parties contributed to the record turnout. Secondly, this was the first election campaign to be conducted so intensively on the Internet. This allowed voters abroad to follow the political debate in real time, which was especially important also for young voters. This election showed also an unprecedented mobilisation of young people (under 30), and it should be remembered that the average age of Polish emigrants is lower than the population in the homeland. Thirdly, the PiS campaign was full of anti-EU slogans, while Polish migrants are the beneficiaries of Poland's presence in the Union and freedom of movement. Moreover, it seems that the memory of Brexit and the difficulties associated with it are still alive among Polish migrants not only in the UK. Fourthly, it is important to

highlight the involvement of Polish organisations abroad in promoting participation in the elections and lobbying for an increase in the number of polling stations.

Recommendations

Taking into account the unprecedented electoral mobilisation of Poles abroad, the decision-makers responsible for organising elections abroad should consider:

- Returning to the mixed method of voting, i.e., in person and by post. This postulate is particularly important in a situation where Poles abroad are more and more territorially dispersed and live far from Polish diplomatic missions. In the near future, serious consideration should be given to testing e-voting (online voting) by Poles abroad (Estonia was a pioneer in the use of this solution).
- Launch a debate on changing the electoral system from assimilated representation to special representation, i.e., establishing an extraterritorial electoral district for Poles living abroad. This solution is used in a dozen countries in the world, most recently in Lithuania ([Héjj, Lesińska, Wilczewski 2021](#)). It is also recommended by the Venice Commission as more suitable for countries with large diasporas, as a more representative system for non-resident voters and with a positive impact on the stability of the entire electoral system. Do not the millions of Polish citizens living abroad deserve their own representation in the Polish Parliament?

CMR SPOTLIGHT

**CENTRE OF MIGRATION
RESEARCH NEWSLETTER**



Magdalena Lesińska

PhD, political scientist, Professor and Deputy Director of the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw (CMR UW), Chairwoman of Committee on Migration Research, Polish Academy of Sciences. Her areas of expertise are diaspora and migration policy in Poland and CEE countries, political and public participation of diaspora members in transnational space, including external voting. Recently, she was the Principal Investigator in the project "Diaspora policy in the context of post-accession emigration. Comparative perspective of Poland, Hungary and Lithuania", funded by the National Science Centre in Poland.

Suggested citation: Lesińska M. "Very unusual 2023 parliamentary elections. How Poles voted from abroad", *CMR Spotlight* 11(56).

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not reflect the opinions or views of the CMR.

Editors of CMR Spotlight: Michał Nowosielski, Dominika Pszczółkowska, Antoni Wiśniewski

© 2023 Centre of Migration Research



**CENTRE OF
MIGRATION
RESEARCH**

Pasteura street 7
02-093 Warsaw
Tel/fax +48 22 55 46 770
e-mail: migration.cmr@uw.edu.pl
www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/en/

