

# Polish Regional Elections of 2024

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## 1. The Regional Political System

Voivodships are traditional administrative divisions in Poland that have a history of several hundred years. On the one hand, they used to be the backbone of the military structure of the state, where each voivodeship was headed by a voivode (commander of warriors) appointed by the king. However, the same territorial divisions were also used to organize assemblies of nobility which, apart from electing representatives to the national parliament, undertook activities of a self-governing nature.

Voivodeships as the basic governmental administrative structure functioned in Poland throughout the 20th century, although in 1975, a reform that radically changed the number of voivodeships - and thus also their size - was introduced. Instead of the traditional number of a dozen or so historical voivodeships, 49 new ones were created. However, this arrangement generated tensions and did not prove to be a permanent solution.

After the fall of the communist regime, a municipality became the basic unit of local government - the first municipal council election was held in 1990. The introduction of democracy at the regional level came 8 years after the rebirth of municipal self-government. It was accompanied by a reform of the administrative structure at the regional level and reconstruction of the system of several voivodships. The originally proposed number of 12 voivodeships was increased to 16 due to public protests. Three additional smaller voivodeships were separated from larger ones. One of large voivodships was split into two medium-sized ones as a result of the protests.

Polish voivodships do not hold significant power (Hooghe et al., 2010). The core tasks of the regional governments include public services such as transport (regional roads and railways), health care (specialist hospitals),

and higher education (except for the largest universities, which fall under the administration of the central government). However, the most important competence of the regional government is regional development, particularly activities financed from the European Funds. Voivodship authorities prepare Regional Operational Programs, the beneficiaries of which include mainly institutions at other levels of government (from centrally managed universities to rural municipalities), commercial enterprises, and third-sector organizations. As in many other countries, the regional level of government does not attract as much public attention as the central government and local authorities (Gendźwił, 2020, p.77-78).

Voivodships have an average population of 2.2 million. The largest - Mazowieckie - which also includes Warsaw, the capital city of Poland, has a population of over 5 million. The smallest - Opolskie - has less than 900 thousand inhabitants. Some voivodships have clear regional identities (f.e. Wielkopolskie or Śląskie), but not all of them. Poland's administrative division is relatively stable due to historical experiences, particularly resulting from the partitions in the 19th century and the resettlements after the Second World War. Being a part of three different empires - Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian - still translates into different patterns of social behavior today. This applies to issues such as religiosity, urbanization, agrarian structure, and approach towards state institutions. Differences between the voivodships are partly the result of such a historical legacy as well as of different identities at a lower, local level and functional links that go across historical divides. However, after more than a quarter of a century, many of such tensions have been mitigated. The balance found means that currently, any calls for changes to voivodship borders or creating new units are marginal. None of the voivodships is free of territorial tensions - in particular between the main regional centre and other medium-sized cities which lost their status as voivodship capitals after the last reform. However, in none of the voivodships, the position of the main centre is strong enough not to be balanced by the rest of the region.

Polish regional election is held simultaneously across the country, along with local election. This means that voters cast either four or three votes - in addition to the voivodeship councilors, they also elect a mayor, municipal councilors, and in most counties - with the exception of city-counties - also county councilors. In city-counties, municipality councilors also serve as county councilors so voters there cast a total of three votes instead of the regular four.

Voivodship councilors elect the executive - a five-member board headed by a voivodship marshal. Once appointed, the marshals have a strong position and their dismissal requires a qualified majority. Occasionally, internal

tensions within the ruling coalition or party cause regional political crises. However, such crises occur much less often than stable cooperation over the whole term.

Since the first regional election, it has become clear that political cleavages in such elections generally - albeit with exceptions - follow national party divisions. At the national level, the number of relevant parties remains consistent between 4 and 6. This number generally consists of a pair of primary parties - vying for the office of the prime minister - and two smaller, almost stable parties. The pair of primary parties are PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – Law and Justice) and PO (Platforma Obywatelska – Civic Platform). The pair of secondary parties is PSL (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – Polish People Party) and NL (Nowa Lewica – New Left). An important feature of the four is their entrenchment in the local political scene. It may not be as strong as in the case of permanent parties in many other countries but it is still much stronger than for any new Polish political initiatives. Nevertheless, there is usually also room for 1-2 new political parties on the national political scene which capitalize on social discontent directed against the ‘old’ parties.

The nationwide balance of power influences the regional political scene in such a way that the dominant pattern is also to form of a majority coalition (Majcherkiewicz, 2024). However, similarly to the national level, political deviations can in some cases lead to the rule of a single-party majority. Nevertheless, such situations are much less common than the coalition governments.

Although the political importance of democratically elected voivodeship and county authorities is steadily increasing, the municipalities still have the primary role when it comes to competences, assets, and the interest of the population. Their position in political life has been strengthened after the introduction of direct mayoral elections in 2002. The direct election of mayors has made them strong political players, even if only locally. The weaknesses of the party system - the transformation of identities and the fragility of local structures – helped to develop a specific category of local political activists. They describe themselves as ‘local government activists’ to emphasize their distance from nationwide political divisions, which in turn are described using terms such as ‘party’ and ‘politicians’ with much worse connotations. Regional political scenes are ones where strong, independent local politicians seek to expand their influence. However, unlike in municipal scenes, where there is a balance of power between national and local parties, in regional scenes, challenging the big parties more often leads to failure than to success (Gagatek & Kotnarowski, 2017).

## 2. The Electoral System

The electoral system in Poland is the same for all voivodships and is regulated by a centrally enacted electoral code. Voivodship councilors form regional assemblies, which count between 30 and 51 councilors each. The number of councilors is determined using a special algorithm based on the number of inhabitants, which means that - because of a general demographic crisis - the number of councilors gradually decreases. When the current electoral system was set, before the 2002 election, a total of 561 councilors were elected. Over the following five terms, this number has fallen to 552 councilors.

In general, the regional assemblies are small representative bodies. In the four largest voivodships, the number of assembly councilors is smaller than the number of members of the Sejm (the Polish National Lower Chamber) who are elected from the voivodship.

The voivodships are divided into districts, which - according to the general rules of the electoral code - count between 5 and 15 seats each. The division into districts is decided independently by each regional assembly. When dividing into districts, whole counties and municipalities should fall within the same district. The division procedure consists of indicating which counties belong to which districts and after that, allocating the number of seats based on the population of each district. If according to this formula, fewer than 5 or more than 15 seats are allocated to a district, it is necessary to change the division into districts. There is a clear tendency to create the smallest possible districts. Overall, the voivodships are divided into 85 districts with an average size of 6.5 seats. Only three districts have 10 or 11 seats. By contrast, 25 districts have the smallest possible size of 5 seats. The smallest voivodships are divided into 4 districts, while the largest have 7 districts. Such small districts are a source of large deviations from proportionality.

The seats are allocated separately for each district, using the D'Hondt method. This offers a clear advantage for the larger parties - smaller parties often fall below the natural electoral threshold, which in a five-seat district with three major parties is 7.7% (Flis et al., 2020). It is thus 50% higher than the legal electoral threshold of 5% at the voivodship level. Therefore, it is not surprising that on average only three parties win seats in a district. In such a small district, it is most common for only three parties to win seats. Situations where seats in a district are shared between only the two largest parties are not very rare. Cases where seats in a district are shared by four different parties represent the same margin.

The parties submit lists of candidates for each district, which may count up to two candidates more than the number of seats in a given district. As

in all other Polish elections with the proportional representation electoral system, the voter casts a mandatory preferential vote - the vote for a list is cast by indicating one of the candidates on the list. You cannot therefore vote only for the list, all votes cast for the candidates on a given list add up to form its result. The seats won by a list are allocated based on the number of votes won by the candidates, without any additional conditions. Therefore, it is formally the simplest case of an open-list proportional electoral system (OL-PR).

Such an electoral system translates into some non-obvious patterns of voting behavior. In particular, the preferential vote is used to build relationships based on territorial ties (Gendźwiłł et al., 2018). Individual candidates seek support in their hometowns or counties. Putting up candidates that fill the district territorially as tightly as possible is a basic political strategy of parties, operating in the logic of contamination (Guinjoan, 2016). A party's list of candidates in a district is therefore a team, with each member tasked with courting voters in some part of the district. The strength of such a team determines the final outcome of the entire list. However, to provide each territorial community with its own representative is an over-promise in such a system. It is not only logically impossible. Territorial competition takes place on each list separately, hence some parts of the district are over-represented while others are devoid of representation at all (Flis, 2015). Candidates, particularly incumbents and those who have already gained political experience at other levels of government, know how to operate within this system. It creates tensions within the parties and between the parties and the electorate, but at the same time, it is the main driving force of electoral campaigns. Candidates very rarely have the certainty of winning a seat, but always have at least a theoretical chance.

### **3. Political Competition and Campaign**

The 2024 election was unique for several reasons. Firstly, the entire 2018-24 term was unique. Since the establishment of voivodships self-governance, elections have been held every four years, in autumn, just like parliamentary elections. For this reason, the period between regional and parliamentary elections was regular. The only change occurred due to the early parliamentary election in 2007 – previously, regional elections were held one year after the parliamentary elections. From then on, they were held a year before the parliamentary elections. This was indeed significant for the regional/local election of 2018, as they were held 3 years after PiS seized power. The policies introduced by this party and its government increased the level of

social tensions and conflicts. At the same time, in the previous local and regional election, the party's position was very weak - it was the ruling party in only one of the 16 voivodships. In part, this was a result of the election being skewed by errors in ballot design in the 2014 election (Flis & Kaminski, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. PiS was the party that suffered the greatest losses from this crisis, as additional votes went to PSL, increasing the strength of the PO-PSL coalition and pushing PiS into opposition. Its seizure of power at the national level and its strong position in the polls raised hopes (for those in power) and fears (for the opposition) that the situation in the regional and local authorities would be reversed - the dominance of the parties forming the previous ruling coalition of PO and PSL would be replaced by the dominance of PiS on a similar scale. Such fears were further fuelled by the exceptional involvement of the government and central politicians in the 2018 election campaign. This in turn led to an extraordinary mobilisation of opposition politicians and voters. As a result, although PiS definitely increased its share in regional assemblies, its gains were below the expectations. The party managed to gain an independent majority in 6 voivodships, while in 2, it seized power either through a coalition with a regional party (Dolnośląskie) or by getting one of the opposition councilors to its side (Śląskie). Thus, an equilibrium was established - the ruling party and opposition divided power in the voivodships almost exactly 50-50 (Gagatek & Tybuchowska-Hartlińska, 2020).

The several-fold increase in the share of regional authorities by the Law and Justice was not without problems. Internal conflicts resulted in local splits and personal changes. During the term, the party lost power in one voivodship (Śląskie), while in two other voivodships, the situation became unstable (Dolnośląskie and Świętokrzyskie). The opposition coalition, with its many years of experience in governing at the regional level that included dealing with strong internal conflicts, handled the tensions noticeably better during that term.

Before the 2018 election, the term of local government was extended to five years. This decision was not preceded by a calculation of all possible outcomes but instead, it was the result of inner-party games. By changing the rules this way, the ruling party failed to address warnings about an overlapping of the date of the sub-national and parliamentary elections in 2023 - a situation for which Polish electoral law was in no way prepared. A year before the upcoming elections, the possible effects of such an overlapping

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<sup>1</sup> The ballot paper was in the form of a booklet not a single sheet as usual. Each page listed the candidates of one party. Some voters voted for the candidates on each list, thus casting an invalid vote. Some voted for any of the candidates on the first page, increasing support for the party that was listed there. In the regional elections this was PSL.

become obvious. The Law and Justice party feared that the sub-national election, which according to the current law was to precede the parliamentary election by 1-5 weeks, would result in its defeat. This, in turn, would have a negative impact on support in the parliamentary election and thus on the party's chances of staying in power. Therefore, the decision was made to extend the term of local government once again and hold the election in April 2024. This decision led to an even closer influence of national politics over regional elections.

The postponement of the sub-national election did not prevent the party from losing power in the parliamentary election of 15 October 2023. However, as PiS remained the largest party in the Sejm (which customarily nominates the candidate for the prime minister) and was favored by the president, the seizure of power by a majority coalition consisting of the previous opposition parties was delayed, and did not take place until two months after the parliamentary election. Therefore, it occurred as late as three months before the regional election. The political life of the country in the weeks after seizing power was dominated by exciting events – particularly, taking over the public media and the prosecutor's office as well as legal problems, including the arrests of two politicians from the previous government and stripping them of their seats in the Parliament. The losing party - PiS - engaged in protests against the new majority. Within the ruling coalition, the structure of the government was being determined, and a campaign for deputy ministerial positions was ongoing. All these developments overshadowed the upcoming election. Even the mayoral election, usually attracting media attention, looked different this time. While the candidacy of incumbents was obvious, the appointment of challengers in the larger cities took place with very long delays, under the pressure of statutory deadlines. The problem affected all parliamentary parties - both those in the ruling coalition and the opposition.

In such circumstances, the regional election attracted only marginal public attention. Instead, there was widespread media speculation that a 'honeymoon' effect was to be expected after the defeat in the parliamentary election and PiS party could lose power in all voivodships. Many opponents of PiS believed that the party owed its previous successes to aggressive rhetoric, abuse of the organs of power, and control over the public media. As the latter two 'advantages' had been lost, a significant drop in support for the party was expected.

However, the campaign turned out differently. During the convention launching the local and regional election campaign, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński announced a new approach to politics - a focus on positive messages and an openness to cooperation with other parties. The credibility of

such a change was questioned, but at least it meant that the previous PiS negative rhetoric, attributing all possible despicable motivations to its rivals, had been abandoned for the duration of the campaign.

The lack of central and local media interest in the campaign at the regional level meant that its outcome depended only on the actions of individual candidates. The asymmetry of the situation and the unforeseen consequences of the change in the elections' sequence became apparent. Of course, the losing party lost many parliamentary and senatorial seats. On the other hand, some of the coalition parties' voivodship councilors won parliamentary seats and did not run again in the regional election. Thus, PiS had a chance to enlist candidates with greater electoral capital - media recognition, the network of social contacts, and the number of votes won in earlier elections. This had important consequences, particularly in the more individualized election campaign caused by the regional election being overshadowed by national events. While references to positional issues are primary in national politics, at most supplemented by accusations of destroying democracy or national independence, the regional election campaign was quite different in character. It referred exclusively to valence issues - concerns for the region, a specific town or county. Achievements were shown - especially infrastructural investments - and promises of such investments were made. Concerted cooperation for the benefit of the region was declared. In central campaign events, Prime Minister Donald Tusk emphasized the need to remove PiS from power. However, this was a rather confusing strategy, as at the regional level PiS was already in opposition in 3/5 of the country. PiS, on the other hand, had no hopes of taking power in any new voivodship, concentrating on defending power where it still held it.

In the regional election, five lists that had won seats in the parliamentary election took part in almost unchanged form. Additionally, a sixth nationwide list competed - the largest of the lists that had not won any parliamentary seats. The short interval between elections resulted in no time for regrouping between the parties on the political scene or creating new initiatives. On the other hand, if one compares the 2024 election party lists with those from the 2018 regional election, only minor changes can be seen. The most important one is the integration of the lists of the Left and the extreme right KWN (Konfederacja Wolność i Niezawisłość - Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'), which, however, already took place before the 2019 parliamentary election. It should also be noted that PSL, traditionally strong in local and regional elections, in 2024, ran in a formation developed before the 2023 parliamentary election, i.e. in a coalition with the Polska 2050 party of media celebrity Szymon Hołownia, operating under the name Trzecia Droga

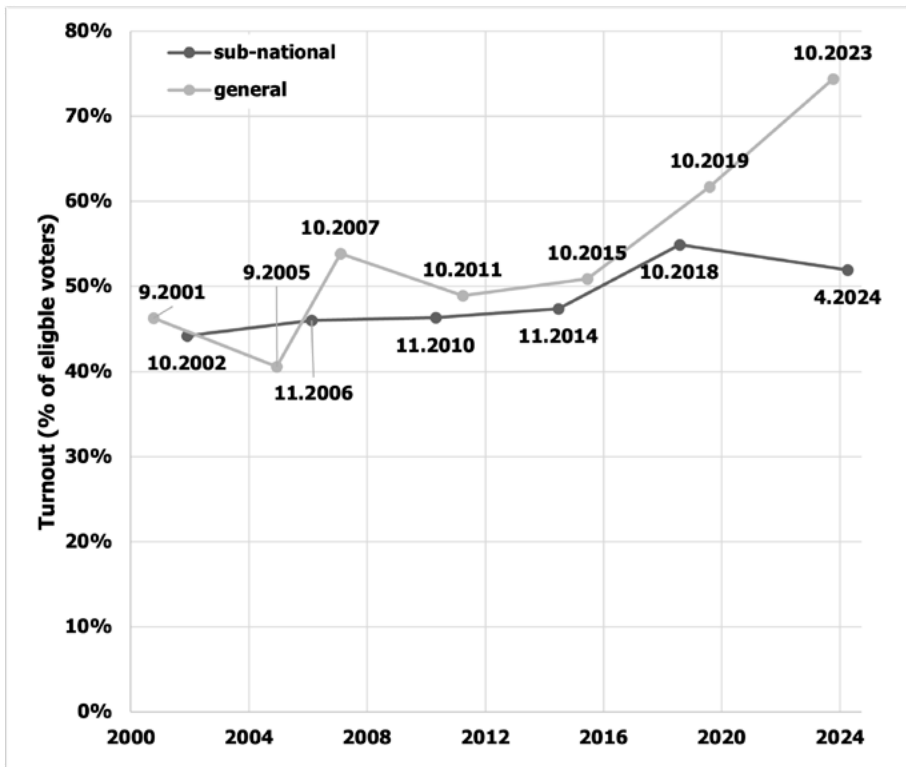


(TD - Third Way). Civic Platform (PO) - has started running in the 2019 elections under the name Koalicja Obywatelska (KO - Civic Coalition).

#### 4. Turnout and Results

The turnout in the 2024 sub-national election was 52%. This was below the expectations fueled by the exceptional turnout of the general election in autumn 2023 (Figure 1). It was also below the record turnout in the previous sub-national election but clearly above the average turnout in the four sub-national elections before 2018. Such a turnout was achieved despite the low level of national media coverage and the close proximity to previous election. It seems clear, however, that the level of turnout in Polish sub-national elections is significantly derived from their relationship with parliamentary elections.

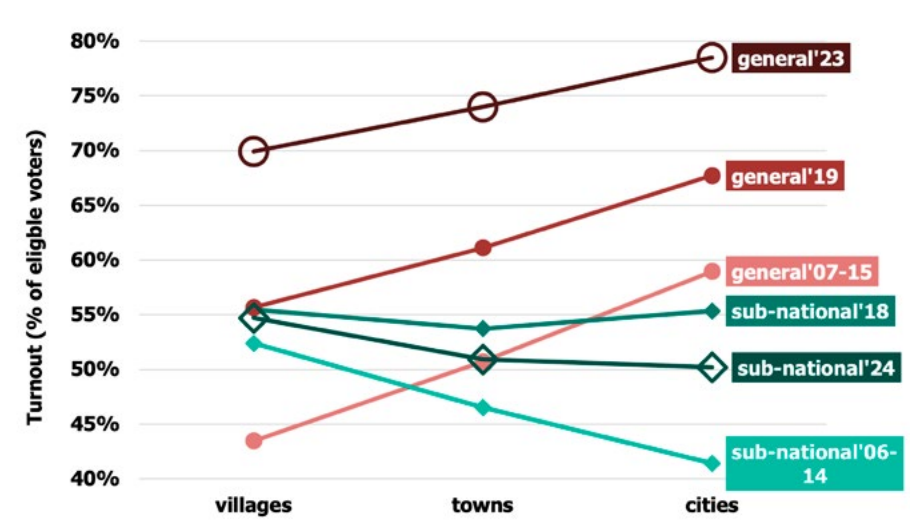
Figure 1. Turnout in sub-national and general elections.



Poland, until 2018, was a model example of the ‘turnout twist’ phenomenon, meaning that the turnout in smaller municipalities is higher in sub-na-

tional elections than in parliamentary elections, while in cities, the situation is the other way around (Horiuchi, 2005). From 2018 onwards, amid a surge in turnout, the gap between urban and rural areas began to narrow (Figure 2). In the 2024 election, the situation returned to the earlier pattern - the decline in turnout in cities was almost twice the size of that in villages. Apparently, a proportion of urban voters only get involved in sub-national elections when they have a strong connection to national ones. However, compared to the pre-2018 period, the situation changed in this regard that the turnout became lower in the sub-national election than in the national one in rural areas as well. Thus, it is likely that the group of people who voted in local elections but did not get involved in national politics disappeared - or at least was greatly reduced in size. Meanwhile, this very group created the specificity of Polish regional elections (Flis & Wołek 2018).

Figure 2. Turnout in sub-national and general elections in the urbanization division.

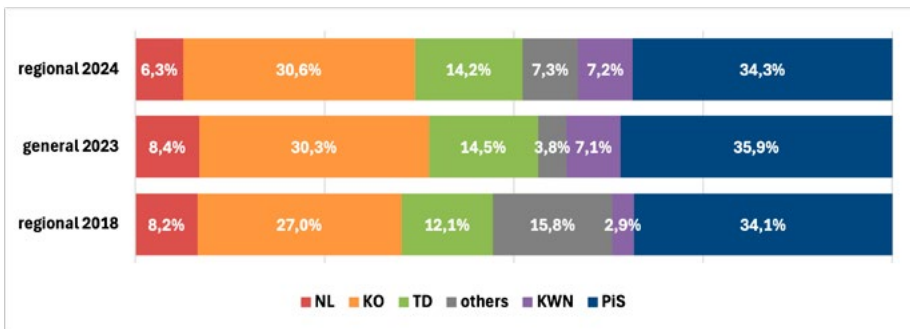


Changes in the patterns of electoral engagement of the Polish society, particularly the residents of rural municipalities, in the past quarter of a century, affected also another important aspect of regional elections - invalid votes. Regional elections, perceived as inferior to local elections, were characterized by a high share of invalid votes (Gendźwiłł, 2015). Between 2002 and 2010, such a share was generally above 10%. In 2014, as a result of a defectively designed ballot, it jumped to 17.5% (Pierzgałski et al., 2020). This situation triggered a nationwide political crisis and resulted in the resignation of the National Electoral Commission. Paradoxically, the crisis caused

a sharp decrease in the number of invalid votes in the 2018 election - down to 6.7%. This process intensified further in 2024. The most likely explanation is that until 2014, some voters considered the regional elections irrelevant and threw blank ballots into the box. It was only the serious political crisis that apparently convinced them of the importance of these elections. The percentage of invalid votes in the 2024 election fell to 4.4% - not an anomaly when several elections for different bodies are held simultaneously.

The results of the 2024 election were notable for their remarkable stability. It was evident both when compared with previous regional election and with the parliamentary election six months earlier (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Party support in the 2024 regional elections compared to support in the 2023 general and 2018 regional elections.



Nationwide, PiS gained slightly more support than in the 2018 regional election and slightly less than in the 2023 parliamentary election. KO's results were minimally better than in 2023, which shattered hopes of overtaking PiS as a party with the highest support. The TD party gained higher support than the PSL alone in 2018 but slightly lower than in the parliamentary election. Such a result was below expectations, according to some commentators, and raised questions on the purpose of such a coalition. However, the joint list won slightly more seats and retained its strong position in forming governing coalitions.

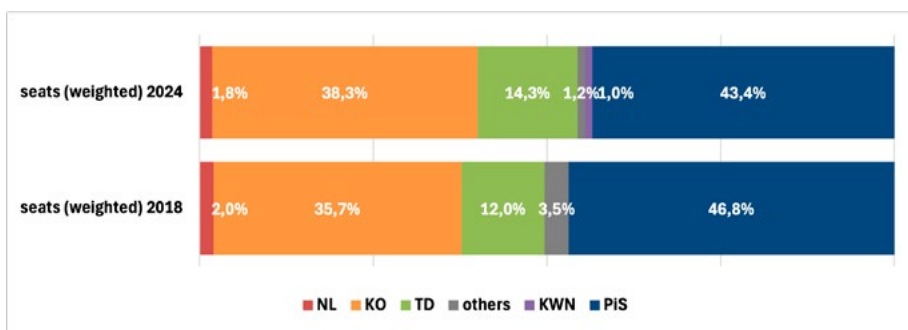
Far below expectations was the result achieved by the Left (NL). The nationwide outcome was one-quarter lower than in the parliamentary election, in which it lost one-third of its support compared to the previous election. Despite combining two lists which ran separately in the previous regional election, the joint list won fewer votes and seats than in 2018. Only in the Łódzkie voivodship its single mandate proved crucial to the balance of power in the voivodship.

In contrast, KWN's result was regarded as a relative success. The party slightly improved its outcome from 2023 and won single seats in several

voivodships. However, similarly to the Left, KWN was only able to play a significant role in forming a governing majority in one voivodship.

Small changes in support meant that there were small changes in the number of seats won as well. Figure 4 shows the share of seats won, with each voivodship weighted by its population. The 2024 shares are compared to the results of the 2018 election, for which the same weighting method was used.

*Figure 4. Party strength in the 2024 regional elections against the results of the 2018 regional elections.*



A slight decrease in the strength of PiS and the regional parties is visible. A slight increase in the support of KO and TD indicates an already clear shift in the balance of power in favor of the current national ruling coalition. However, it must be taken into account that some of the changes in the number of seats for the individual parties in the voivodships do not translate into a change in the balance of power, as they only mean the strengthening of those who have already ruled before. A comparison with the distribution of votes also shows the disproportionality of regional elections. The Gallagher Index in the voivodships ranges from 8.1 to 14.3, with a weighted average of 11.7. Thus, it is not far behind the values known from countries having majoritarian electoral systems.

PiS lost the independent majority in only one voivodship - Łódzkie. However, there was also a change of power in the Dolnośląskie voivodship, where the previous regional ally of PiS clearly weakened as a result of internal divisions. The KO-TD coalition also gained a clear majority in the Śląskie Voivodship, where there was a change of power during the term as a result of splits. In the latter two voivodships, where PiS rule was associated with internal conflicts, the decline in support for the party was greatest.

In the Podlaskie voivodship, the situation from the Śląskie voivodship in the previous term was repeated, only in the opposite direction. Although PiS was formally the winner of the election, two of its councilors went over to the side of the KO-TD coalition and it formed the executive board. Conflicts

within PiS, combined with speculation about a possible change of sides by some councilors, took place in two more voivodships - Świętokrzyskie and Małopolskie. In both, however, it was PiS councilors who eventually elected new executive boards. In the end, PiS lost power in half of the voivodships where it dominated at the beginning of the previous term - it retained power in four voivodships. The distribution of seats on the voivodship boards and the party affiliation of the voivodship marshals are given in Table 1.

*Table 1. Marshall Party affiliation and Seat distribution*

	Marshal			Executive Board				
	PiS	PO	TD	PiS	PO	TD	NL	REG
Dolnośląskie			x		2	2		1
Kujawsko-Pomorskie		x			3	2		
Lubelskie	x			5				
Lubuskie		x			3	2		
Łódzkie		x			1	3	1	
Małopolskie	x			5				
Mazowieckie			x		3	2		
Opolskie		x			3	1		1
Podkarpackie	x			5				
Podlaskie		x			2	1		2
Pomorskie		x			4	1		
Śląskie		x			3	1	1	
Świętokrzyskie	x			5				
Warmińsko-Mazurskie		x			3	2		
Wielkopolskie		x			3	1	1	
Zachodniopomorskie		x			3	1	1	
Total	4	10	2	20	33	19	4	4

Source: State Election Commission

If one compares the results in the individual voivodships, a clear pattern becomes visible. Almost only those voivodships where PiS was in power throughout the entire previous term contributed to the minimal increase in support for this party. In those voivodships where PiS was in opposition at the regional level, its support declined. However, the overall support for the regional parties increased there. By contrast, in those voivodships where PiS ruled continuously, support for the opposition did not increase. Such a pattern is also confirmed if support in the regional election is compared with the results of the 2023 parliamentary election. Apparently, at the regional level, when it comes to the individual campaign, incumbent advantage also plays a significant role (Trounstine, 2011). This, however, does not change the fact that the changes in support for parliamentary parties in individual voivodships when compared to the previous election did not exceed  $\pm 8$  pp with an average of 3 pp.

## 5. Conclusions

It is hardly surprising that the turnout in Polish elections is unpredictable (Cześnik, 2009). Surprisingly, however, with such a changing turnout, the stability of party support remains extremely high. This is true both when compared to the previous regional election in 2018 and with the parliamentary election held six months previously.

The change in trend is clearly visible - between 2006 and 2015, the nationalization of the regional elections was declining, which was caused by new, relatively successful initiatives in the parliamentary elections, nonexistent in the previous regional elections (Grzyb & Gendźwił 2019). However, when comparing the 2024 and 2023 elections, we can see a very significant increase in similarity, exacerbating the trend already seen in the previous election cycle. This applies to both Supply Volatility and Demand Volatility (Bolgherini et al., 2021).

What is more, the differences in the direction of change between the voivodships where PiS was in power and ones where the opposition was in power translated into the level of overall political polarization in the country. Once again, one can notice what was already evident in the previous regional election - if a nationwide party weakens, its results tend to skew more territorially, while if it gets more support, the skew flattens (Flis & Stolicki, 2017).

Paradoxically, the political turmoil visible at the national level translated into stabilization at the regional level. Polish political parties, although on a day-to-day basis attract attention with their exaggerated rhetoric, are in fact,

well-rooted in ideological and social cleavages. They address the worldviews of particular groups of voters, build social networks of influence, and recruit candidates with comparable competencies. Under these conditions, their competition is evenly matched and does not cause such violent shocks as one might expect if one were to believe what politicians say at conventions and how media commentators explain it afterwards. The 2024 regional election, held under special circumstances, provides arguments for such a thesis.

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