

ELECTIONWATCH

POLAND



Poland Pre-Election Watch: June 2010 Presidential Election

Following the tragic death of President Lech Kaczynski (and his wife and a large number of Polish political, military, economic and civil society leaders) in an airplane crash in April, Polish voters will elect a successor on June 20, 2010, to fill the post of president for a full, five-year term. The election was originally scheduled for early autumn, but has been brought forward to meet the Polish constitution's requirement that within two weeks of a vacancy an election date must be declared for a weekend not more than in 60 days in the future. By-elections to fill the seats of three senators also killed in the crash will take place on the same day.

The last presidential election took place in 2005 when, after two terms in office by Aleksander Kwasniewski of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), and after the dramatic decline in popularity for the center-left in the country, candidates of the two major parties of the Polish right contested the race. The liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO) nominated party Chairman Donald Tusk, while the conservative-national Law and Justice (PiS) party chose Lech Kaczynski, one of the twin brothers who founded and ran the party. The 2005 campaign coincided with, and was influenced by, the parliamentary election campaign of that year, in which PiS defeated PO by a slight margin of 22 seats in the 460-seat parliament and later formed a government with Self-Defense (SO) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) which collapsed in 2007.

In the 2005 presidential contest, polls indicated the PO's Tusk to be the favorite, and Tusk did, in fact, narrowly win the first round of balloting. In the second round, however, PiS candidate Lech Kaczynski managed to reverse the results and surprisingly defeated Tusk by a margin of almost ten percent. The campaign between the two rounds included a dose of negative campaigning focused on Tusk's personality, family and competence for the job, which seemed to catch the PO by surprise. It also seriously embittered the relationship between the parties for some time. Another factor contributing to the surprising turnaround was the decision by SO and the LPR to support Kaczynski after their own party candidates had been excluded in the first round. This was in large part the result of a very focused and determined effort by leading PiS figures, as noted by President-Elect Lech Kaczynski in an immediate post-election compliment to his twin brother and PiS leader, Jaroslaw: "Mission accomplished, Mr. Chairman!"

Candidates

With the PiS-SO-LPR coalition having been brought to an early end when the PO won an impressive near majority of seats in parliament in 2007, and with the declining popularity of incumbent President Lech Kaczynski before his death, the PO's Tusk (now prime minister) came to be seen widely as the challenger with by far the best chance to replace Kaczynski in

fall 2010. Two unanticipated events changed this situation.

First, Tusk earlier this year announced that he would not run for the presidency, in order to focus on winning another term leading the government in the next parliamentary elections, which are expected in 2011. This triggered a competition inside the party for a candidate, in which the party opted for a primary election that ultimately pitted Parliamentary Speaker Bronislaw Komorowski against Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski. While the organization of this primary election represented a new and challenging situation for the party and made the PO one of very few parties in the region to organize primaries, the process was well managed and is regarded as having been successful. Without increasing tensions within the party organization, the primary nominated Komorowski as the official PO candidate for president. Komorowski immediately became the odds-on favorite in public opinion polls, which indicated practically no chance for President Kaczynski to successfully defend his post.

Second, the plane crash that took President Lech Kaczynski's life in April threw the electoral process into an entirely new light, as the need to move the elections to June meant the parties and candidates would face a significantly shorter campaign period and would have to adjust their strategies accordingly. In the case of the PiS, it also meant the party would have to identify another candidate. The late president's brother and former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski announced his candidacy shortly after the official commemorations of the president's death had been completed.

Altogether 10 candidates met all legal requirements and will contest the race on June 20, including (in alphabetical order):

- **Marek Jurek** (Right of the Republic, a splinter from Law and Justice), former Speaker of the Parliament
- **Jaroslaw Kaczynski** (Law and Justice), former Prime Minister
- **Bronislaw Komorowski** (Civic Platform), Speaker of the Parliament and Acting President
- **Janusz Korwin-Mikke** (Liberty and Rule of Law)
- **Andrzej Lepper** (Self-Defense), former Deputy Prime Minister
- **Kornel Morawiecki** (Fighting Solidarity)
- **Grzegorz Napieralski** (Democratic Left Alliance), Party Chairman
- **Andrzej Olechowski** (Independent), former Minister of Foreign Affairs
- **Waldemar Pawlak** (Polish People's Party), Deputy Prime Minister and former Prime Minister
- **Boguslaw Zietek** (Polish Labour Party), Party Chairman

As in 2005, the candidates of the two major parties of the Polish right are the only serious contenders in the race. This year, however, the dramatic events of last several months have overshadowed the policy plans with which the main parties have approached the election. In January 2010, PO publicized its plans to introduce legislation imposing a cap on the public deficit and to amend the constitution to weaken the powers of the presidency relative to those of the government. This plan included elimination of the second chamber of parliament, the election of the president in the chamber (rather than by the public), and the concentration of executive power in the office of the prime minister. The PiS, on the contrary, argued for a strengthening of presidential powers to be included in a new constitution for the "Fourth Republic." "The president should stand above all other powers.

He should be the guardian of the nation's independence and determine the state's strategy," Jaroslaw Kaczynski explained while his brother Lech was still alive and seeking re-election.

The wave of emotion following Lech Kaczynski's death naturally had an important impact on the nature of the campaign. The PiS was boosted in the polls by public sympathy and the PO was severely constrained in the way it could run Komorowski's campaign by concerns that arguments that would otherwise be a normal part of political competition could be misunderstood by the public as an attack on the legacy and personality of the former president. Moreover, as constitutional succession mandated that Speaker Komorowski temporarily fill the vacancy in the presidency, he found himself in the awkward position of having to call the early elections for the office for which he was running as an opposition candidate. Indeed, the original, significant advantage of (any) PO candidate shrank to a certain extent after Lech Kaczynski's death, and the estimated margin by which, according to polls, Komorowski is expected to defeat Jaroslaw Kaczynski is notably smaller than it might otherwise have been had Lech Kaczynski been the PiS candidate. Interestingly, the margin of difference in popularity between the PO and the PiS has also shrunk over the last several months.

Komorowski nonetheless remains the favorite in the race, and polls show a consistent lead over Kaczynski of at least 10 percentage points in the first round of balloting. Assuming these two candidates move on to the second round, Komorowski should be able to count on the support of the left-of-center electorate, once its main candidate, Grzegorz Napieralski of the SLD, is eliminated in the first round (another possible SLD candidate, Jerzy Szmajdzinski, was also killed in the crash that took Kaczynski's life). In spite of Napieralski's recent impressive rise in the polls - from four to 11 percent in just several weeks - no other candidate has a chance to make it to a second round, which is scheduled for July 4, if necessary.

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