Political Opposition in Poland: Spatial, Programmatic and Ideological Placement

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Mikolaj Czesnik & Radoslaw Markowski

Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities

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Abstract

Political opposition is crucial for democracy. The ways oppositions operate differ. The aim of this paper is to investigate political opposition in post-communist Poland. We are interested in the mechanisms of consensus and cooperation between government and opposition parties. Our analysis is not limited to the legislative process alone; it is broader, as we investigate similarities between parties’ electorates and elites.

Our study starts from the assumption that the alleged (if unveiled) convergence of governments and oppositions in the parliament is due to centripetal ideological tendencies on the mass and consequently the elite level. We expect that with the passage of ‘democratic time’ and simultaneous processes of cartelisation of post-communist political systems parties converge ideologically and programmatically, and thus in parliament vote more and more similarly. This phenomenon applies to the socio-economic domain, it however manifests itself differently as far as identitarian, social-cultural policies are taken into account. There are two major theoretical arguments explaining this convergence process: first derives from the cartelisation theory, second – from the democratisation theory.

We test our hypothesis using data on mass and elite policy positions (survey data). Our analysis is of diachronic genre – we compare phases of Polish democracy (electoral cycles), from the third fully democratic parliamentary election in the 1997 to the last election in the 2007.
Introductory remarks

Research concerning political opposition in post-communist democracies is a relatively seldom addressed topic. Meanwhile, political opposition is crucial for democracy. The ways oppositions operate differ. The aim of this paper is to investigate political opposition in post-communist Poland. We are interested in the mechanisms of consensus and cooperation between government and opposition parties. Our analysis is not limited to the legislative process alone. In fact, it is broader and goes beyond this issue, as we investigate similarities between parties’ electorates and elites.

Our study starts from the assumption that the alleged (if unveiled) convergence of governments and oppositions in the parliament proceeds due to centripetal ideological tendencies on the mass level, and consequently on the elite level. We expect that with the passage of ’democratic time’ and simultaneous processes of cartelisation of post-communist political systems parties converge ideologically and programmatically, and thus in parliament vote more and more similarly. This phenomenon applies to the socio-economic domain, it however manifests itself differently as far as identitarian, social-cultural policies are taken into account. There are two major theoretical arguments explaining this convergence process: first derives from the cartelisation theory, second – from the democratisation theory.

Partial, scant data on political opposition in Polish legislature (cf. Sokolowski, Poznanski 2008) show that there is a surprisingly widespread consensus in the Polish parliament. However, we know very little (virtually nothing) about the reasons why opposition parties cooperate with the governments. In fact, this issue have been very rarely investigated. Thus, it is indispensable to analyse factors and conditions under which oppositional parties adopt a certain type (consensual or coercive) of behaviour towards the government. Such a study must
go beyond an analysis of the voting behaviour of the oppositional parties, focusing on the reasons behind it.

Study into government and opposition since the very beginning of empirical political science has been one of its major fields of research. A lot has been written about how governments function, how oppositions operate, how parties (both governmental and oppositional) interact, compete and cooperate (cf. Dahl 1971; Sartori 1976; Pedersen 1979; Bartolini, Mair 1990; Katz, Mair 1995; Dahl 1998; Lijphart 1999). In a nutshell, Western democracies are relatively well investigated as far as these issues are concerned.

Conversely, research on new democracies in this field is rather underdeveloped. We know relatively little about governments and political oppositions in new democracies. Several studies, which addressed the issue of party politics in CEE (cf. Kitschelt 1992; Evans and Whitfield 1993; Linz, Stepan 1996; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Lewis 2001), failed to systematically investigate factors and conditions under which oppositional parties adopt a certain type of behaviour towards the government in legislatures. This preliminary study aims to fill this gap. Our findings not only may broaden the knowledge about Polish politics, but can also be useful for future empirical research on government and opposition in other CEE democracies, which is needed given the lack of systematic investigation into this subject-matter.

Research question and hypotheses

The above mentioned studies and analyses (especially Katz, Mair 1995 and Linz, Stepan 1996) suggest that in post-communist Poland there should be a growing convergence of political parties. They should converge ideologically and programmatically. In spatial terms,
they should get closer in the multidimensional political space. Two processes, quite well described and investigated in the empirical political science, justify this hypothetical expectation.

Firstly, one can expect that in new democracies their party systems eventually undergo processes of programmatic and ideological convergence. Literature on transitions to democracy, democratisation and consolidation of democracy shows a very difficult beginnings of the democratic competition between political parties in new democracies (cf. Innes 2002: 88-92). Party systems in these countries are chaotic, dispersed, volatile and unpredictable. Often extreme movements or parties come forward. Political scenes are usually fragmented and highly polarised.

This literature further suggests that with the passage of ‘democratic time’ parties converge ideologically and programmatically. Intense political socialisation, democratic ‘learning’ and processes alike bring about stability, order and clarity of political scenes. As a result it is plausible to expect that one of the main results of this process will be the increasing cooperation of political parties in the legislatures (they will vote in parliament more and more similarly).

Secondly, one can also expect that the processes of cartelisation, which for a long period have been occurring in Western democracies, should also take place in new democracies of the CEE. According to many (cf. Dalton 2002) political competition in these systems should resemble the present state of Western European politics. Public party financing, which is central for the emergence of cartel party systems, was already established in most of the post-communist countries (cf. van Biezen 2000). Thus, to the extent that ideological and programmatic competition is concerned, we should expect increasing convergence of political parties in policies and ideologies (members of the cartel converge, because they do not need
to differ substantially, as they do not really compete with each other in the cartelised party system).

Therefore, the main research question this paper aims to answer is what are the relationships between governing and oppositional parties in post-communist Poland. As it was outlined earlier, we know relatively little about political oppositions in new democracies. We are not aware of any study which would systematically and rigorously address this research question. Meanwhile, as political oppositions constitute an important element of democratic politics, it seems indispensable to investigate these processes thoroughly. Thus this paper provides preliminary (and pioneering) analysis of political opposition in post-communist democracy, focusing on Polish case.

We are interested in the mechanisms of consensus and cooperation between government and opposition parties. Our analysis is not limited to the legislative process alone. In fact, we take a broader perspective, as we investigate similarities between parties’ electorates and elites. Our analysis is based on the ‘naïve’ theory of democracy. It means we expect that in democracy there is congruence or cohesion between what people think and what parties do. In a more technical terms, we hypothesise growing ideological and programmatic congruence between electorates' positions, elites' positions and political decisions made (votings in parliament).

There are different dimensions, on which parties can converge. Firstly, parties' electorates can become more similar and get closer in the multidimensional political space. Secondly, parties' elites can converge. Thirdly, parties' manifestos can cohere. Fourthly, parties' roll-call behaviour can become more and more similar – they can vote more and more similarly in the parliament.
In this particular paper we focus on the two first dimensions (first and foremost due to lack of relevant data that would permit analyses encompassing all relevant dimensions\(^1\)). We expect electorates' and elites' positions to get closer in the multidimensional political space. On the basis of the previously reviewed literature and following our research questions, we formulate testable predictions. We expect that there is a growing convergence of political parties in post-communist Poland. There are two major theoretical arguments supporting this thesis. Firstly, we expect that consolidation of democracy should bring about increasing programmatic and ideological convergence. Secondly, we expect that also cartelisation process, which is allegedly taking place in Poland, should bring about increasing programmatic and ideological coherence. In addition, scant empirical evidence on voting in Polish legislatures also supports the thesis of growing convergence of political parties in post-communist Poland (cf. Sokolowski, Poznanski 2008).

Data and analytic approach

In order to test our hypothesis we need proper data, permitting estimation of electorates' and elites' positions in the multidimensional political space. The issue of policy positioning and locating parties in political space has for a long time been one of the major challenges students of politics have been facing. Indeed, in most political systems it is rather difficult to tell where particular party is located on certain issue – parties are often heterogeneous in this regard (for instance due to existence of party factions), their voters can differ from party elite, electoral manifestos often tend to be at odds with what parties really intend to do etc. Thus, it

\(^1\) Actually, this paper is a part of a wider project, which will address the whole issue of political oppositions in post-communist Poland. However, preparation of the data indispensable for this kind of analysis (harmonisation of datasets etc.) is very costly and time-consuming. For these reasons at this stage of the project we limit ourselves to the investigation of electorates' and elites’ positions in the multidimensional political space.
is difficult to provide a comprehensive and at the same time unquestionable classification of parties’ positions in political space. The same pertains to parties’ positions in post-communist democracies\(^2\).

Spatial theories of politics propose various ways of estimating policy positions. Some students of politics rely on electoral manifestos (cf. Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006), others employ expert techniques (expert judgments), yet others study budget structure (cf. Klingemann, Hofferbert, Budge et al. 1994). An important line of research refers to survey data (position of a party defined as a mean position of voters or party elite).

From time to time such conceptualisations and operationalisations are criticised. It is argued that mean electorates’ or elites’ positions oversimplify the situation; they for instance do not report the dispersion of voters' or MPs' views, preferences and opinions. But, on the other hand, this is a necessary oversimplification, impossible to overcome. Parties’ electorates and elites indeed differ to the extent that their positions in the multidimensional political space are concerned. If we however theoretically and conceptually agree that it is at all possible to ascribe a single position to a party\(^3\), we must rely on somewhat oversimplifying measure, such as for instance mean.

In this project we employ the Polish National Election Study (PNES) from 1997. This is a research project affiliated with the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. It covers most important national-level electoral events in Poland. PNES collaborates with the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The data are available in the public domain.

\(^2\) Here probably this notion is even more relevant and true, by reason of problems related to transition to democracy and democratic consolidation processes.

\(^3\) Agreement with this very assumption is a \textit{sine qua non} condition permitting use of spatial models of politics. Denial of this notion in some way implies refutation of the spatial way of thinking about politics.
Our data quite well enable to estimate positions of political parties. PNES provides an useful tool for estimating programmatic and ideological positions of party electorates and party elites. Both voters and MPs are asked to locate themselves, and the main parties, on a number of 0-10 scales, representing main political issues\(^4\). For each party, mean position of the electorate and the elite can be derived.

As it was outlined earlier, these measures are obviously an oversimplification. They say nothing for instance about the dispersion of opinions and views (of voters or MPS) on the particular issue (dimension). We nevertheless argue they are useful for investigating convergence/divergence of political parties in post-communist Poland. The literature examining political competition in spatial terms (cf. Golder, Stramski 2010) suggests that there are hardly any other measures that would properly serve for these purposes (though a lot of attention should be paid to how congruence\(^5\) should be conceptualised and measured, since empirical results regarding ideological congruence can depend on exactly how scholars conceptualise and measure it).

In order to test our hypothesis we compare diachronically mass and elite ideological and policy positions (derived from survey data). Our analysis is thus of diachronic genre – we compare phases of Polish democracy (electoral cycles), from the third democratic

\(^4\) This is the exact wording of the question: ‘A variety of solutions and policies aimed at solving the above mentioned issues are conceivable. On subsequent CARDS we present opposite solutions to each issue. Please read them carefully and tell me, where would you place your own opinions and stances. In doing so, please use the 11-point scale, where: 0 -- means full acceptance of the statement (solution) proposed on the left side of the CARD, 10 -- means full acceptance of the statement (solution) -- on the right side, 5 -- means that you favour solutions lying in between both opposite ones, and the remaining scale points indicate different levels of acceptance of each of those opposite statements’.

\(^5\) Golder and Stramski (2010) use the term ‘congruence’, which first and foremost relates to the (vertical) citizen-representative or citizen-government relationships. We prefer to talk about ‘convergence’, as we are primarily interested in the (horizontal) relationships between parties.
parliamentary election in the 1997 to the last parliamentary election in 2007. Earlier periods are not investigated due to lack of relevant data.

It is a dynamic sort of analysis. We want to see whether parties (electorates and elites) are with time ‘getting closer’ in the multidimensional political space. As it was outlined earlier, it is plausible to expect that consolidation of democracy and simultaneous cartelisation of post-communist political systems bring about ideological and programmatic convergence. Thus, in order to test this hypothesis, in the analyses that follow we compare diachronically positions of party electorates and party elites. We are interested in investigating the distances between party electorates and party elites.

Due to data constraints we limit ourselves to certain dimensions of programmatic and ideological competition. We compare mass and elite positions on the left-right scale, and on the two indexes (of economic and symbolic preferences), constructed on the basis of several policy scales. The economic policies index is constructed on the basis of the questions on unemployment\(^6\) and taxes\(^7\). The symbolic policies index is constructed on the basis of the questions on crime\(^8\) and nomenklatura\(^9\). The indexes are additive; they are recoded into the 11-points scale.

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\(^6\) This is the exact wording of the question: 0 ‘Fighting unemployment should be an absolute policy priority of the government, even if it leads to higher spending and inflation’; 10 ‘Many other – more important than unemployment – issues should be governmental priority, i.e. balanced budget, fighting inflation, etc.’.

\(^7\) This is the exact wording of the question: 0 ‘The higher one’s income the higher share of it should be taxed’; 10 ‘Everyone should be taxed the same percentage of his/her income, irrespectively of the income level’.

\(^8\) This is the exact wording of the question: 0 ‘Crime policies should be „tough” even if it restricts basic freedoms of average citizens’; 10 ‘Crime ought to be fought against, but the policies should not restrict basic freedoms of average citizens’.

\(^9\) This is the exact wording of the question: 0 ‘Individuals occupying high positions under communism (‘nomenklatura’) should now be forbidden to perform responsible state functions’; 10 ‘These individuals (‘nomenklatura’) should have the same rights as all others in competing for public offices and state positions’.
Following our hypotheses, we expect distances between the parties to decrease. Convergence of political parties should result in lower distances between them in the multidimensional political space. Therefore, we need a proper, synthetic measure of convergence (estimated for each election under scrutiny).

Neither median parties’ position, nor mean parties’ position, nor mean distance between the parties’ positions (in a given election year, or election period) seems to be a proper measure of ideological or programmatic convergence. The main problem here is the heterogeneity of the investigated parties, which differ quite considerably in terms of their size, parliamentary strength, voters support, but also to the extent that their dispersion in the multidimensional political space is concerned. Due to this reason construction of any synthetic measure of convergence is somewhat problematical. Hence in the analyses that follow we limit ourselves to the simplest (though imperfect) measure of convergence, namely range, which we compare diachronically.

Empirical analyses

In the empirical analyses that follow we examine (possible) convergence/divergence of Polish political parties (which could effect in growing level of consensus and cooperation between government and opposition in the Polish parliament). Three dimensions of political competition are investigated. We compare positions of parties’ electorates and parties’ elites on the left-right dimension, on the economic dimension and symbolic dimension.

The most important finding is the difference between electorates and elites on all the dimensions investigated (see below). On average, party elites are much more dispersed in the multidimensional political space than party electorates. Their positions on the issues are much
more distant, which means that members of the elite (i.e. MPs) are much clearer as far as their political preferences and views are concerned. This is not surprising, since it is well known and documented from the very first empirical studies on politics that members of the elite are much better informed and knowledgeable about politics than members of the electorate, which results in clearer positions in the multidimensional political space.

*Figures 1 and 2 about here*

Figures 1 and 2 present the main findings regarding the left-right scale. Figure 1 shows the situation in the Polish electorate. We observe a pattern of relative stability. The shifts of the party positions (i.e. mean voters positions) in the years 1997-2007 are only minor (none of the parties' electorates changes its position more than 1 point on the 11-points left-right autoidentification scale). In all four elections under scrutiny the distance between the most right-wing party (respectively AWS in 1997 and LPR in 2001, 2005 and 2007) and the most left-wing party (SLD in all four elections) is nearly the same (about 5 points on the 11-points left-right autoidentification scale). It means that not only the parties have been relatively stable in the period under scrutiny, but also the whole system has not been changing much in the decade discussed. The ideological supply, defined as parties’ offer on the left-right scale, has been in the whole period under scrutiny relatively similar.

Figure 2 shows the situation in the Polish parliamentary elite. Here again we observe a pattern of relative stability. However, in the period under scrutiny there has been more dynamics among the elite than among the voters. After a clear rightward shift, which took place after the 2001 parliamentary election (*nota bene* won by the left-wing SLD), parties have moved back to the centre of the scale. In the elections under scrutiny the distance between the most right-wing party (respectively AWS in 1997, LPR in 2001 and 2005, and PiS in 2007) and the
most left-wing party (UP in 1997 and SLD in 2001, 2005 and 2007) has slightly decreased and in 2007 equals 6 points (on the 11-points left-right autoidentification scale).

The two figures just presented and discussed show also an interesting evidence on congruence between party electorates and their elites in post-communist Poland. Voters and their representatives are quite closely located on the left-right dimension. Distances between mean electorates' and elites' positions are rather small. Usually they do not exceed 1 point (on the 11-points left-right autoidentification scale). This implies relatively high ideological congruence between electorally active citizens and their representatives in post-communist Poland. It is a very important finding to the extent that representation and responsiveness mechanisms in this country are concerned.

Figures 3 and 4 about here

Figures 3 and 4 present the main findings regarding the economic dimension. Figure 3 presents the situation among Polish voters. Polish parties’ electorates are in general rather ‘leftist’, though after the 2001 parliamentary election the political spectrum started shifting to the centre of the scale. Some parties’ electorates made really spectacular moves: LPR voters for instance changed their position radically, moving from the left-wing to the right-wing (of the political spectrum). Between the 2005 and 2007 elections all the major Polish political parties moved rightward, which means that their voters on average became more liberal and pro-market (even electorates of socio-conservative PiS, populist SRP and social-democratic SLD followed this path). However, convergence has not been achieved, since the range between the extremes did not change or changed only slightly (because parties were shifting correspondingly in the political space).
Figure 4 shows the situation among the MPs. Here, we observe more of a convergence. Parties’ elites with time become more and more similar on this issue – their mean positions are less and less distant. However, the shifts are only moderate, and might be at least partly ascribed to consolidation of the political scene in Poland, resulting in decreasing number of (effective, relevant) political parties. Moreover, major political opponents, which were relatively close on this dimension for instance in the 1997 election (AWS and SLD), lately (the 2005 and 2007 elections) are further from each other (distance between PiS and PO).

Unlike in electorate, where we observe an interesting pattern of a rightward shift, occurring after the 2001 election (and unprecedented victory of the left-wing SLD¹⁰), among the MPs it is difficult to find any clear pattern (despite the slight convergence pattern). The congruence between voters’ and representatives’ preferences is thus limited on this dimension. Parties’ elites are more dispersed, and (on average) more liberal and pro-market than citizens.

Especially interesting is the case of PSL. This post-communist (peasant) party in the ten years under scrutiny moved considerably (both voters and MPs). In the 1997 election it was clearly on the leftist side of the dimension. Then, in the 2001 election, it moved even further left. But in the 2005 election and especially the 2007 election it shifted right. Its elite in the 2009 survey on average occupies a position to the right of the centre of the scale.

Also worthy of note is the case of SLD. This party, often criticised for the (alleged) neoliberal profile, seems to be the most left-wing alternative on the Polish political scene (at least to the extent that its elite’s position on the economic dimension is concerned). The problem for the party might be the very fact that its electorate is steadily drifting rightward, weakening the linkage with voters and their representatives.

¹⁰ This observation reveals quite a ‘perverse’ relationship: voters turn rightward ideologically in reaction to the electoral victory of the left-wing party.
Figures 5 and 6 about here

Figures 5 and 6 present the main findings regarding the symbolic dimension. Figure 5 presents the situation among the voters. As it can be seen Polish electorates has actually diverged in the last four elections on this issue. In the 2007 election parties’ positions are much more dispersed than earlier. The range between the extreme parties’ positions doubled.

Figure 6 shows the situation among the MPs. There is no clear pattern neither of convergence nor divergence. Three parties – PO, PSL and SLD – show a relatively similar path (initial rightward shift and then clear move in the 2007 election towards the left). The parliamentary elite of PiS since the very first election is steadily going left. The range between the extremes in the 2007 election is even slightly higher than in the 1997 election (though the difference is rather minor). But the situation among the elite is much less clear than among voters.

It is interesting that in the 1997 election major parties occupied the extremes of the political spectrum (on this dimension) – in this election AWS and SLD were the major competitors. In the 2007 election instead, major parties are on moderate positions (on this dimension) – extremes are occupied by smaller, less at this time significant parties (LPR and SLD). This shift is probably caused by the process of redefinition of the main division (or cleavage) on the Polish political scene (cf. Markowski 2006: 820), which started in the 2005 electoral campaign and since then has been gradually invalidating all the other socio-political divisions. This new division is first of all related to economic matters: ‘The party system has been transformed into one that essentially consists of two big new political camps – the ‘social-solidaristic’, represented by PiS (and currently their populist, agrarian and nationalist allies), and the ‘liberal’, represented by PO’ (Markowski 2006: 831). Consequently, main political parties in the 2005 and the 2007 elections compete dynamically on this new dimension, so
their positions on the other issues may converge, as they are less important for these parties from the point of view of their electoral strategies and tactics.

Conclusions

Our findings show that Polish political parties have not been significantly changing their positions in the period under scrutiny (1997-2007). This indicates rejection of our hypothesis put forward above. We do not find empirical support for the thesis that Polish political parties converge ideologically and programmatically (which would result in increasing cooperation of political parties in the legislature).

Instability of the Polish political system, including political parties, their electorates and elites, has been discussed relatively often (cf. Markowski 2008). Our findings corroborate earlier observations only partially. The changes observed are rather minor and have not been very systematic: parties have converged on some dimensions and at the same time have diverged on others. In general, slight divergence (of the main political actors) on the symbolic issues can be observed; at the same time growing (but also slight) convergence on the economic issues is found; on the left-right scale we observe relative stability.

Surprisingly, clearer patterns can be observed in the analysis of the electorates. Analyses of elites’ positions are much more ambiguous and puzzling, owing to the fact that there are no clear patterns among the MPs.

The above findings are quite intriguing, given the instability of Polish politics (especially Polish voters), which has been often pointed out. Undoubtedly, further analyses of this phenomenon are needed. Nonetheless, they can actually indicate lack of programmatic competition between main Polish political parties, which might behave (for instance vote in
the parliament) independently of their positions in the multidimensional political space. This (alleged) lack of relationship between what voters think and what parties actually do can in fact denote serious problems of Polish democracy: representation, responsiveness and accountability are limited in such systems.

It is an empirical question whether our results really signal any serious threat to Polish democracy. But trustworthy answer to this question unquestionably requires further analyses. In these analyses findings reported here (programmatic and ideological convergence/divergence of political parties in Poland) must be confronted with data on legislative process. It is crucial to investigate the effects of the processes reported here on the legislatures process – the question is whether they have any impact (or any association with) on the decision whether to cooperate with the government, by voting in favour of legislation, or oppose it, by voting against.

It is also open to discussion whether and to what extent the results of our analyses can be extrapolated to other CEE democracies. Poland, as far as politics is concerned, is quite unique (cf. Markowski 2006). Therefore relationships observed and conclusions reached in this paper can be of limited significance for other post-communist democracies. However, the findings, despite their uniqueness and problems with extrapolating them to other countries, can be useful for future empirical research on government and opposition in other CEE democracies, which is needed given the lack of systematic investigation into this issue.
References


Appendix

Figure 1. Left-right parties’ positions in years 1997-2007 (electorates).

Figure 2. Left-right parties’ positions in years 1997-2007 (elites)
Figure 3. Economic index parties’ positions in years 1997-2007 (electorates).

Figure 4. Economic index parties’ positions in years 1998-2009 (elites).
Figure 5. Symbolic index parties’ positions in years 1997-2007 (electorates).

Figure 6. Symbolic index parties’ positions in years 1998-2009 (elites).