

PROTECTING ELECTIONS AMID DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN POLAND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines protection of elections at a time of democratic backsliding in Poland. It looks into risk prevention, resilience and crisis recovery with respect to Polish electoral reforms and explores how they have affected electoral integrity in the country.

With respect to risk prevention in the face of electoral reforms that are generally detrimental to electoral integrity, examples of political and civil society actors speaking out and raising public awareness can be readily identified. However, in an environment of curtailed deliberation and rejection of constructive engagement with the opposition, such efforts may well be insufficient to prevent enactment of further negative reforms.

According to democracy indices, elections fared somewhat better than Poland's other democratic institutions during the period in question (2018–2023). This relative resilience emerges from the varying effects of recent reforms on different elements of electoral integrity, defined as a set of four core principles. Broadly speaking, the reforms were less detrimental to the principles of contestation and participation than deliberation and particularly adjudication. In other words, elections in Poland retained competitiveness and engagement, but the quality of public debate suffered and confidence in election administration and dispute resolution was undermined. The other powerful contributor to resilience of the electoral process was civil society mobilization.

With respect to recovery, the road ahead is challenging. Civil society organizations have articulated proposals that address the most pressing

issues, but the result of the June 2025 presidential election—namely, defeat of the government-backed candidate—means that the presidency will continue to frustrate the ruling coalition's legislative initiatives. In the current climate of political polarization and mutual mistrust between the leading political actors, there is little hope that further electoral reforms will enjoy broad political consensus in the foreseeable future.

Protection of elections from democratic backsliding is examined through the lenses of prevention, resilience and recovery.

INTRODUCTION

In exploring protection of elections in Poland, this paper adopts International IDEA's three-pronged framework of analysis—risk management, resilience-building and crisis management (Alihodžić 2023). The focus is on addressing democratic backsliding as an electoral challenge. For these purposes, democratic backsliding is defined as executive and legislative actions undertaken to undermine electoral integrity (International IDEA 2025: 7). Accordingly, protection of elections from democratic backsliding is examined through the lenses of prevention, resilience and recovery.

Focusing on key developments in the organization and conduct of elections, the scope is narrower than a comprehensive examination of electoral processes—which commonly entails analyses of the political environment and the exercise of democratic freedoms. At the same time, the broader context of electoral reforms needs to be acknowledged, thus occasional references are made to other developments in Poland's democratic backsliding, including controversial judicial reforms and the backlash against gender equality and women's rights (Szuleka, Wolny and Szwed 2016; Kelemen and Orenstein 2016; Przybylski 2018; Szczygielska 2019; Roggeband and Krizsán 2020).

1. BACKGROUND

During the last two decades, governments in Poland have been led by two political parties, both formed in 2001—Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) and the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS). After winning both the presidency and the plurality of parliamentary seats in the 2005 elections, PiS formed a coalition government. In early elections in 2007, however, PiS lost to PO and spent the next eight years in opposition (Tworzecki 2019). Between 2007 and 2015, a coalition of PO and the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL) was in power for two parliamentary terms (Markowski 2016). The PO–PSL government was defeated in 2015 by PiS, which also governed for two terms until it was unseated in 2023 by another PO-led coalition.

Several sets of electoral reforms were carried out in recent years. First, the current Election Code was adopted in 2011, consolidating electoral acts governing presidential, parliamentary and local elections. Although the

code was amended several times during the PO–PSL government, these amendments did not amount to major revisions. In 2018, the PiS government carried out far-reaching electoral reforms, which were followed by smaller amendments in 2019. Another substantial package of amendments was adopted in 2023. Apart from these reforms, special legislation was enacted to enable the conduct of the 2020 presidential election during Covid-19. This case study examines electoral reforms carried out between 2018 and 2023, during Poland’s decline in democratic performance (Jasiewicz and Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz 2022).

At the outset, it should be noted that the present focus on democratic backsliding does not imply that all electoral reforms made during this period should be labelled as undemocratic or harmful to electoral integrity. Such a generalization would ignore changes that made a positive contribution to electoral processes, for example the introduction of provisions on citizen observers and creation of the central register of voters. Understanding the relationship between electoral reforms and electoral integrity calls for a more nuanced analysis, as discussed below.

Elections in Poland are overseen by the National Electoral Commission (NEC), with the administrative and logistical preparations handled by the NEC’s executive arm—the National Electoral Office (NEO). The NEO has permanent offices around the country, which work closely with regional administrations. When elections are called, district (or constituency) election commissions are created at the regional level, depending on the type of election, to oversee preparations and carry out specific tasks, such as registration of parliamentary candidates and tabulation of results. Polling and ballot counting is conducted by precinct election commissions. Local administrative authorities support polling preparations, together with election officers—a new category of election officials introduced in 2018 (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a, 2020b). Election commissions should not be confused with ‘electoral committees’, which are formed by political parties or groups of voters in order to nominate candidates.

The 2018 reforms saw some of the most consequential changes to election administration. Before these reforms, the NEC was composed of nine judges: three from each of the Constitutional Tribunal, the Supreme Court and the Supreme Administrative Court. After the amendments adopted in January 2018, which took effect following the 2019 parliamentary elections, the NEC became composed of two judges (one from the Constitutional Tribunal and one from the Supreme Administrative Court) and seven members nominated by political parties in proportion to their representation in the Sejm (the lower house of parliament) (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a: 6). Furthermore, the nomination process for the head of the NEO changed: whereas previously the NEC was free to appoint any candidate, the 2018 reform limited the NEC’s choice to those candidates nominated by the minister for public administration (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a: 7).

With the 2023 reforms, a centralized register of voters was created, replacing the system of municipality-run local registers. The number of voters required to

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form an electoral precinct was lowered, and free transport to polling stations for elderly and disabled voters in rural areas was provided. In the same reform package, trusted persons (proxies) of electoral committees were allowed to record the process of voting and counting in the polling stations. The amendments also introduced allowances to be paid to proxies from public funds. Finally, the qualification requirements for members of regional election commissions were relaxed: while previously these commissions consisted only of judges, now any person with a law degree could be appointed (OSCE/ODIHR 2023).

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2. PREVENTION

All electoral stakeholders have a role to play in preventing risks to electoral integrity. When such risks arise from electoral reforms initiated by the government, as they did in Poland, it falls to the political opposition, independent institutions and civil society actors to raise public awareness and mount challenges. There are numerous examples of these stakeholders voicing their concerns and taking action, within the parliamentary process and in the broader public space.

For example, the Supreme Court president expressed her objections to the proposed reform of the composition of the NEC in December 2017 in her submission to the parliament, noting that abandoning the judicial composition in favour of political party nominees would reduce the guarantees of independence, impartiality and high professional qualifications of NEC members (Supreme Court 2017). The National Council of the Judiciary (NCJ) voiced similar concerns, recalling that, among other powers, the NEC makes decisions which affect the functioning of political parties—including review of their financial reports for compliance with campaign funding regulations. Placing these decisions in the hands of political appointees, the NCJ argued, would jeopardize freedom of action of political parties (NCJ 2017). Ironically, seven years later PiS itself came to experience the consequences feared by the NCJ, when its financial reports were rejected by the NEC (further discussed below).

Politicians and civil society activists, too, were outspoken about proposed changes to the electoral law ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections. While the changes were touted by the ruling party as measures for boosting voter turnout, critics pointed out that proposals for additional polling stations and free transport were designed to facilitate voting in rural areas, where PiS enjoyed more support (Jałoszewski 2022; Pacuła 2023). Meanwhile known problems in urban areas went unaddressed, such as long queues and overcrowding due to high numbers of voters (up to 4,000) assigned to each urban polling station. The high cost to the public purse of these proposals was also questioned (Dec-Kiełb 2023).

Perhaps the most vivid example of preventive efforts is the outcry surrounding the special draft law to organize the 2020 presidential elections during Covid-19. On 6 April 2020 the ruling party voted through a bill in the Sejm to hold the election solely by postal voting on 10 May. To expedite this process, PiS bypassed the NEC and gave the authority to print ballots and conduct other election preparations to the minister of state assets (Vashchanka 2023). However, the ruling party eventually had to backtrack on this initiative and find another way to proceed with the election after mounting criticism. Several candidates threatened a boycott; civil society organizations (CSOs) and the Ombudsman questioned the legality of ongoing preparations; and some of the municipalities refused to hand over voter lists to the postal service. The election was eventually postponed to June and held by in-person voting in polling stations, with postal voting as a supplementary channel (Vashchanka 2023).

However, the limits of preventive efforts in the face of adverse electoral reforms are also plain to see from these examples. Even with vocal opposition, the ruling party often chose to press ahead with the changes it deemed necessary. Its propensity to disregard opposing views had negative consequences for the quality of the legislative process, with consultations frequently cut short and scrutiny and debate reduced to a formality. For example, the 2018 electoral reform process was described by some stakeholders as rushed, with insufficient consultations and public debate (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a: 6). The postal voting bill, introduced by the PiS government in April 2020, went through all three readings in the Sejm on the same day (Vashchanka 2023: 473). Some of the legislative changes seeking to enable an all-postal May 2020 presidential election were added to crisis Covid-19 legislation at the 11th hour, without the opposition's knowledge (Kondzińska and Szpala 2020). Over 50 CSOs issued a public appeal protesting lack of consultation with key stakeholders and the hasty adoption of the January 2023 Election Code amendments (OSCE/ODIHR 2023: 5).

In this context, the role of the electoral management body (EMB) merits specific examination. In many countries, the EMB is at the front line of public debate on electoral reform, given its statutory role and expertise (Kamindo 2024; Matatu 2023). In Poland, the NEC has undoubtedly played a role in initiating and discussing various electoral reforms and submitted reports and proposals to parliament after each election, as it is mandated to do by the Election Code. For example, after the 2018 local elections the NEC recommended amendments to the appointment and functioning of precinct election commissions, better regulation of the tasks and status of election officers, introduction of a centralized voter register, extension of time limits for registering voters, improved regulation of early campaigning and campaign financing, and change of jurisdiction for appeals against rejections of candidate lists, among others (NEC 2019).

Nevertheless, it is open to question whether the NEC has been sufficiently outspoken in the face of highly controversial moves by the government, such as sidelining the NEC in the initial preparations for the 2020 presidential

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election described above. Observers point out that Poland's EMB has often preferred 'quiet diplomacy' in its engagement with the government and other stakeholders (Lutkiewicz 2025). The change of the NEC composition in 2019, based primarily on political party appointees and resulting in a PiS-friendly majority, is a likely explanation for the NEC's muted reaction and discreet stance vis-à-vis the government's questionable electoral initiatives.

3. RESILIENCE

A closer look at Poland's democratic performance in the last decade reveals an interesting dynamic. While by many accounts Poland has experienced democratic backsliding during the PiS's rule (Sadurski 2018; Jasiewicz and Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz 2022), the quality of elections has remained comparatively high. For example, the Economist Democracy Index has ranked Polish electoral processes above 9 (out of 10) in all the years when elections were held during the last decade, which is considerably higher than the other index components and the country's overall score (see Table 1).¹

Table 1. Poland's Economist Democracy Index scores (elections; overall), 2014–2024

Year	2014	2015	2018	2019	2020	2023	2024
Elections held	Local, European	Presidential, parliamentary	Local	Parliamentary, European	Presidential	Parliamentary	Local, European
Electoral process and pluralism score	9.58	9.58	9.17	9.17	9.17	9.58	10.00
Overall score	7.47	7.09	6.67	6.62	6.85	7.18	7.40

Source: Author, compiled from Economist Democracy Index; National Electoral Commission.

Did elections remain resilient while other democratic institutions declined? In order to examine how electoral integrity may have been impacted by the reforms discussed in this study, we need a working definition of electoral integrity. For the purposes of our analysis, the conceptualization developed by Toby James and Holly Ann Garnett (2025) provides a useful framework. These authors define electoral integrity as a set of four principles to be achieved in

¹ The index overall score is derived from scores in five components: (a) electoral process and pluralism; (b) functioning of government; (c) political participation; (d) political culture; and (e) civil liberties, <<https://www.eiu.com/n/global-themes/democracy-index/>>, accessed 5 September 2025.

elections which realize the ideals of democracy—contestation, participation, deliberation and adjudication (James and Garnett 2025).

Contestation

Contestation is upheld by allowing a wide range of groups, individuals and parties to contest the election. This is contrasted with power remaining in the hands of a monarch or an autocratic ruler (James and Garnett 2025). In Poland's case, none of the electoral reforms undertaken by PiS-led governments have restricted electoral contestation. International observers have described all elections they monitored during this time as competitive, and have characterized candidate registration processes as inclusive. Observers did comment on the playing field, noting the ruling party's advantage in the public media and highlighting misuse of public resources in electoral campaigns (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a, 2020b, 2024). Some of these issues are linked to the reforms carried out in related sectors, for example changes to the appointment of public broadcasters' management (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a: 17), as well as government policies reducing civic space for particular groups, such as women's rights organizations and LGBTQIA+ groups (Szczygielska 2019). But whether this incumbency advantage amounted to diminished contestation is open to question, since opposition parties continued to contest elections and ultimately formed a government in December 2023.

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Participation

Participation broadly refers to the right and opportunity to vote (James and Garnett 2025). This principle is mirrored in the international electoral standards of universal and equal suffrage, including the obligation of state authorities to ensure that all eligible voters are able to exercise their right to vote in practice.²

As with contestation, it may be too much to conclude that PiS's electoral reforms undermined this principle. Granted, with the amendments of January 2018 postal voting was limited by PiS and retained only for voters with disabilities. However, an exception was made for the 2020 presidential election, when all eligible voters in the country and abroad could vote by postal ballot. In 2024, the PO-led government initiated amendments extending postal voting to all voters in the country and abroad (Infor.pl 2024), albeit the opposition (PiS) commented that the proposal was politically expedient, since voters abroad tend to support PO (Kwiatkowska 2024). The politics of postal voting in Poland is instructive, but the unavailability of this channel for all voters hardly amounts to restriction of participation in principle. The package of measures adopted by PiS ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections, on the other hand, is an example of facilitating participation of voters in rural areas—many of whom tend to support PiS (Jałoszewski 2022).

With regard to inclusive participation in public life, the picture is mixed. While the broader context has been characterized by shrinking civic space and

² The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN 1966: article 25) provides that every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has elaborated that states must take effective measures to ensure that all persons entitled to vote are able to exercise that right (UN 1996: paragraph 11).

the delegitimization of CSOs working on gender equality and human rights, feminist organizations have played a central role in mobilizing and sustaining popular protests, particularly following the 2017 proposals to further restrict access to abortion (Szczygielska 2019). These massive 'black protests' became a powerful platform for political engagement and contributed to a surge in electoral participation among women and younger voters. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, women's turnout reached a historic high of 73.7 per cent (Dziemidok-Olszewska and Michalczuk-Wliziło 2024).

Deliberation

Deliberation refers to decisions based around evidence, discussion and consensus, rather than being influenced by the interests of powerful actors. At the minimum, deliberation requires freedom and opportunity for voters to formulate their preferences, encompassing freedom to form and join associations, freedom of expression and alternative sources of information. At a higher level, deliberation also concerns the quality of political debate (James and Garnett 2025). On this measure, PiS-led governments can be faulted, for both the deterioration of basic freedoms and the quality of the debate, due to PiS's unwillingness to engage in debate or consensus-building with its political opponents. Healthy deliberation was undercut, in particular, by extending political control over public media (Horonziak 2022). Further eroding democratic public debate, the conservative policies of the PiS government, combined with state-backed support for anti-feminist movements and attacks on sexual and reproductive rights, have significantly restricted civic space for CSOs working on gender issues (Szczygielska 2019; Roggeband and Krizsán 2020).

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Adjudication

As a constituting principle of electoral integrity, adjudication refers to electoral governance, legality, and effective remedies against violations (James and Garnett 2025). This is the area most affected by PiS reforms, and one where backsliding can be noted. Changes extending political influence over EMBs and the courts were detrimental to the independence and impartiality of adjudication, as illustrated below (see 4. Recovery). Such reforms pave the way for a decline in electoral integrity, but observers' reports suggest that electoral governance did not deteriorate significantly and the credibility of election results was not questioned by the stakeholders (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a, 2020b, 2024).

Summary: Resilience through mobilization

In sum, a certain resilience of elections can be observed during the period of democratic backsliding in Poland, which can be explained by the nature of electoral reforms. The latter did not affect all constituent elements of electoral integrity. Polish elections largely retained competitiveness and engagement, although the quantity and quality of deliberation suffered and confidence in election administration and dispute resolution was undermined. It can be argued that the decline in deliberation and adjudication was at least partially offset by the mobilization of civil society. There is considerable evidence that the active engagement of civil society made a significant contribution

to the resilience of elections. This includes mobilization of citizens to participate in election administration and observation (Hoffman, Lutkiewicz and Frydrych-Depka 2023), as well as ‘pro-turnout’ voter education campaigns (Jaworska-Surma, Bendyk and Gutkowski 2024). Feminist and gender equality organizations played an important role by mobilizing women and younger demographics, linking rights-based agendas with democratic participation even in the face of political pressure and intimidation (Roggeband and Krizsán 2020).

Citizen engagement in election observation began to emerge even before the January 2018 reforms gave non-partisan civic observers formal recognition in the Election Code. Pioneering election monitoring groups registered their observers as partisan proxies (OSCE/ODIHR 2015: 16). Several organizations recruited and trained small groups of observers for the 2019 parliamentary elections (OSCE/ODIHR 2020a), but for the 2020 presidential election citizen observers already numbered in the thousands (OSCE/ODIHR 2020b), in addition to tens of thousands of proxies enlisted by election contestants (Danielewicz 2020). Not limited to election day monitoring, CSOs have also been among the most active participants in parliamentary committee hearings on electoral reforms (Frydrych-Depka 2025). They have also drawn important institutional developments to the public’s attention, such as the appointment of the new chief of the NEO (Batory Foundation 2024b).

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4. RECOVERY

The change of government following the October 2023 parliamentary elections signalled an opportunity for a change of course in electoral reforms. The current administration has shown an appetite for electoral reforms, adopting amendments to the Election Code in June 2024. However, these did not become law due to opposition by the then president of the republic, who submitted them for review by the Constitutional Tribunal (Infor.pl 2024). Further reform plans were put on hold until the 2025 presidential election. While the full contours of the government’s plans were not articulated, CSOs detailed the main issues and possible options for addressing them. These comprehensive proposals include changes to the formation of EMBs; expanding the use of special voting arrangements such as postal voting; improving equality of the vote by reallocation of parliamentary constituencies; addressing third-party campaign expenditures and providing for greater transparency of campaign funding; and regulating paid political advertising in social media, among others (Batory Foundation 2024a).

The loss of the presidential election by the PO-supported candidate in June 2025 will make it more difficult to enact legislation. Bridging the political divide is another matter still. The prospects of electoral reform supported by broad political consensus appear to be slim. This is because the radical path of rejecting the legal status quo, chosen by PiS, has dramatically increased political polarization (Tworzecki 2019). PiS’s majoritarian approach

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to governance, relatively unchecked by the rule of law, has left a legacy of controversial reforms and disarray in the legal order. The 'total opposition' stance adopted by PO in response has further reduced the space for finding middle ground (Horonziak 2022).

Recent developments in the electoral arena illustrate that the political divide remains as wide as ever. Since the appointment of new NEC members in March 2024, reflecting the new government's parliamentary majority (*Rzeczpospolita* 2024), the commission has ruled against PiS on campaign financing issues. In August 2024, the NEC voted to reject the financial report of PiS's electoral committee for the 2023 parliamentary elections. The committee was found to have accepted prohibited non-monetary benefits and exceeded the limits of election campaign expenditure. The expenses in question were made by administrative bodies and benefitted public officials who were also candidates. The NEC did not accept the argument that these were third-party expenditures made independently of the PiS electoral committee (Horbaczewski 2024). In November 2024, the NEC also rejected PiS's annual report, essentially on the same grounds (Onet.pl 2024). For PiS, rejection of these financial reports had dramatic consequences in reducing their access to the public subsidy for election campaigns and withdrawing altogether their annual subsidy as a parliamentary political party (Horbaczewski 2024).

For PiS opponents, these NEC decisions represented long-awaited accountability for misuse of state resources in election campaigns. For PiS politicians, they were a political witch-hunt, part of the government's plan 'to eliminate the only real opposition in Poland through illegal, administrative actions', and 'denial of standards that apply in a civilized world' (TVN24 2024). Independent experts pointed out that while PiS's use of state resources in the 2023 election campaign was heavy-handed and undeniable, the NEC reasoning gave a new and 'creative' interpretation to the relevant Election Code provisions (Izdebski 2024).

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Different interpretations of the same rules by an administrative body such as the NEC would normally be settled by the judiciary. However, in Poland's current political environment, judicial decisions further add to the legal conundrum, in which each side refers to authorities not acknowledged by the other (Bill and Stanley 2025). The Supreme Court ruled on PiS's appeals against the NEC in December 2024 and in January 2025 and sided with PiS, declaring the NEC's decisions to be unfounded (Horbaczewski and Żaczekiewicz-Zborska 2025). Yet these judgments did not resolve the matter, because the Supreme Court's chamber ruling on election disputes is tainted by contested judicial reforms carried out by PiS. Following controversial changes to the NCJ in 2017, the Supreme Court's Chamber of Extraordinary Review and Public Affairs was created and filled with judges appointed by the reformed NCJ. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that the chamber's appointment was deficient and it could not be recognized as a tribunal established by law under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECtHR 2021).

The NEC appeared to be just as divided by the effects of the Supreme Court rulings as it was over the PiS financial reports. Some NEC members made it publicly known that they would not recognize the Supreme Court's rulings even before they were handed down (Onet.pl 2024). The NEC chairperson indicated that the status of the so-called 'neo-judges' of the Supreme Court was not a matter for the NEC to address (TVN24 2024). These differences were evident in the NEC's 30 December 2024 decision to accept the financial report of the PiS electoral committee on the basis of the Supreme Court's judgment, while at the same time stating that the NEC did not 'prejudge that the Chamber of Extraordinary Review and Public Affairs is a court within the meaning of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland' and did not 'prejudge the effectiveness of the ruling' (NEC 2024). The NEC's decision was duly communicated to the minister of finance, who did not, however, act on the payments of public subsidies to PiS, stating that the legal situation needed to be studied further (Minister of Finance 2025a, 2025b). This prompted a public rebuke by the NEC chairperson that the minister was not fulfilling his statutory duty (NEC 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

Recent elections have seen record turnouts in Poland, with many voters feeling that the stakes are high and their vote matters (Jaworska-Surma, Bendyk and Gutkowski 2024). In the 2020 presidential election, turnout was the highest since 1995, at 64.51 per cent in the first round and 68.18 in the second round (Onet.pl 2025; International IDEA n.d.); the 2023 parliamentary elections saw the highest turnout in Poland's post-communist history, at 74.38 per cent (International IDEA n.d.). This level of voter engagement is a positive sign for democracy. However, it is not matched by trust in the integrity of elections. Ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections, only 45.5 per cent of survey respondents thought that the elections would be conducted in a fair manner. Over 35 per cent were convinced otherwise. Trust was higher among ruling party supporters and lower among opposition voters (Hoffman, Lutkiewicz and Frydrych-Depka 2023). Experts warn that Poland's current political discourse does not bode well for the acceptance of future election results (Izdebski 2024). In this and other ways, polarization presents a key challenge for democratic recovery.

Poland offers examples of prevention in the face of potentially detrimental electoral reforms, with politicians, independent institutions and civil society actors speaking out and raising public awareness of the risks. The decline in deliberation and adjudication was at least partially offset by the mobilization of civil society, which played a key role in election resilience. Besides speaking out against undemocratic reforms this also involved citizens in the electoral process as polling staff, as well as partisan and non-partisan observers. Such personal experiences have shown to strengthen individuals' trust in elections (Hoffman, Lutkiewicz and Frydrych-Depka 2023). Record-high turnouts in recent elections are also at least partially attributable to voter mobilization campaigns by CSOs (Jaworska-Surma, Bendyk and Gutkowski 2024).

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Importantly, gender featured prominently in both the backsliding process and the resilience response. The restriction of gender equality and civic space was a clear feature of the broader authoritarian turn, with feminist and gender equality organizations facing delegitimization and pressure. Yet these same actors were central in organizing mass protests and mobilizing younger voters, linking rights-based struggles with democratic participation. Beyond the traditional election watchdogs, their activism broadened the scope of civic engagement and contributed to safeguarding electoral integrity.

With respect to recovery, the road ahead is challenging. The new government has shown interest in election reform, but the amendments presented so far have so far been rejected by the PiS-affiliated president. While CSOs have articulated proposals that address the most pressing issues, the government may be unable to follow through. As things stand, there is little hope that future electoral reforms will enjoy broad political consensus. A high degree of political polarization, stemming from the radicalization of PiS positions and its rejection of constitutional fundamentals, have left little space for dialogue with political adversaries. Recent events surrounding the sanctioning of PiS by the NEC for misusing state resources in election campaigning show the depth of divisions and dramatically diverging narratives: what is seen as long-awaited accountability by one camp is for the other, a partisan move. This discourse is unlikely to strengthen the perception of impartiality of the NEC.

ABBREVIATIONS

CSO	Civil society organization
EMB	Electoral management body
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual
NCJ	National Council of the Judiciary
NEC	National Electoral Commission
NEO	National Electoral Office
PiS	Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)
PO	Civic Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska)
PSL	Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe)

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