

# Poland's drift to right divides young male and female voters

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## **Polls before Sunday's elections show women under 30 typically much more liberal than men**

Out on the campaign trail before Poland's parliamentary elections, Jolanta Banach, a leftwing candidate, has noticed a recurring pattern. "There's a young couple out for a walk with a pushchair, and I approach them to offer our campaign leaflets. The guy says: 'No, we don't want it.' And then the woman says: 'Actually, I'd like one please.'"

It's an anecdotal indication of what polls suggest is a significant divide between young men and women in their political views, with men under 30 more likely to support nationalist parties and hold far-right views, and women much more liberal or leftwing in their outlook.

Sunday's elections will show how [Poland is divided](#) between supporters and opponents of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, which has based its message on taking pride in Polishness and fighting off supposedly foreign "gender and LGBT ideology".

The split manifests itself along many lines: countryside versus cities; the poorer east against the more affluent west. It was long thought that gender did not play much of a role, with PiS even drawing slightly [more support among women](#) than men in the 2015 elections (a situation mirrored in Hungary, where the far-right ruling Fidesz party won a higher share of female than male votes in elections last year). But among younger Poles there is a growing divergence between the sexes, especially in support for Konfederacja, a grouping even further to the right than PiS.

"Over recent years we saw young women active in the black protests [against a total ban on abortion] and men active in far-right marches. There was a general sense that young people became politically active in different ways, even if they weren't voting in elections, but there was almost no research looking specifically at their views," said Krzysztof Pacewicz, a columnist for Gazeta Wyborcza.

In April, before the European elections, Pacewicz commissioned a poll of 800 young Poles for the newspaper and the results were startling. Among men aged 18-30, 62% said they supported nationalist, populist or far-right parties and 33% backed liberal or leftwing ones. Among women, 55% supported liberal or leftwing parties and 43% were in favour of the nationalists.

In another survey last month, Poles under 40 were asked to name the biggest threat facing the country. Among women the most popular answer was the climate crisis, while among men it was "gender ideology and the LGBT movement".

PiS, just like Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, has built its popularity partly on financial incentives and welfare payments for families with children, which have earned the support of many women. However, both governments have engaged in increasing populist and far-right rhetoric, with Orbán

focusing on migration and PiS recently targeting the threat of “gender ideology” and LGBT rights harming a supposedly traditional Polish way of life.

According to Cas Mudde, a specialist on the far right at the University of Georgia, polling in various countries shows that far-right movements attract around twice as many male supporters as female unless they become mainstream and form governments, when the support evens out.

“Most surveys show that women are not, on the whole, more progressive or less far-right than men. But women tend to have less tolerance for violence. Where far-right parties are established and mainstreamed, the gap gets smaller,” he said.

In Poland, where PiS is in government, there is less of a gender divide in support for the party. But when support for PiS is added to support for other rightwing movements, the divide among younger voters becomes more pronounced. It is probably partly down to education levels, with significantly higher numbers of young women than men attending university in Poland. Many also believe there is a link to the politicisation of the [debate around reproductive rights](#) in the country in recent years.

“This hasn’t happened anywhere else recently, and young women have been mobilised around this issue in a way they haven’t been around other issues,” said Mudde.

Plans to ban abortion and even investigate “suspicious” miscarriages, backed by elements of PiS, prompted a [huge wave of protests](#) in 2016 and eventually led to a climbdown.

Karolina Więckiewicz, a pro-choice activist, said the public discussion around the protests had a transformative effect on the views of many young Polish women. “We are only at the beginning of the conversation but it really woke a lot of people up,” she said.

PiS is expected to easily win the most votes in Sunday’s election, with a number of polls putting its support above 40%, but a question remains over whether the party will be able to form a government again, either by itself or in coalition, or be ousted by a broad opposition coalition.

With predictions of a record turnout, and both the opposition and PiS doing everything possible to mobilise voters, the youth vote, where there is typically a low turnout, could be crucial, especially if the votes of young men propel the far-right Konfederacja into parliament. It is currently hovering near the 5% threshold in polls.

Surveys show Polish young people are becoming more secular and tolerant, but the aggressive PiS messaging resonates much more with young men than women.

“Young women are more pragmatic, they want to talk about real problems, while the men are fascinated by the ideological stuff,” said Banach, the leftwing candidate. “PiS started off by talking about these everyday concerns but now they’ve become obsessed with gender wars and LGBT rights.”

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