

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / Pole position: elections in Poland

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Hello and welcome to The Intelligence from The Economist.

I'm Aura Ogumbi.

And I'm Jason Palmer.

Every weekday, we provide a fresh perspective on the events shaping your world.

In America, over 100,000 people are waiting for organ donations.

So why do so many organs, which could be used to save lives, end up in the bin instead?

And taking notes ain't what it used to be.

For lots of people, particularly the young, that means lectures with laptops out.

But our language columnist says there's still a strong case for grabbing a pencil if you want to remember what you're taking down.

First up, though.

In Poland, a nationwide election may have changed the political balance of Europe.

On the ballot was the Nationalist Law and Justice Party, known as PEACE, which has held power for the last two terms.

Among the parties running against it was the centrist party, the Civic Coalition, led by Donald Tusk, who happens to be the former president of the European Council.

As exit polls were announced last night, it became clear that Mr Tusk's party had upset the ruling party's majority.

Crowds of supporters chanted his name, and even though his party looks only to have placed second in the vote, Mr Tusk declared victory.

Poland has won, democracy has won.

We removed PEACE from power, said Mr Tusk.

On the other side, the PEACE leader Jaroslav Kaczynski seemed to concede that his party would struggle to form a coalition.

It's a complex situation. Will the next government be led by Mr Tusk or Mr Kaczynski?

The political bargaining over Poland's future is just getting started.

A lot of people were worried that Polish voters might not turn up to vote in this election because it was a viciously negative campaign.

As it turned out, those worries were misplaced. Huge numbers of people turned out.

Turnout was over 70%.

And that makes sense, because this may have been the most important election in Poland since the fall of communism in 1989.

And why is that? What happened last night that made this election so important?

For the last eight years, Poland has been run by a populist right government,

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which has overridden a lot of the safeguards that you have in liberal democracies. And that has been a huge problem for Europe. It has put them in conflict with the EU for much of those eight years. There have been a number of such regimes in Europe over the past decade or so, especially in Hungary, of course, but Poland is the biggest and the most important in a lot of ways. And a liberal government there makes all of Europe more liberal. It's a huge change. This contest pitted the far-right populist law and justice party or piss against a coalition of centrist, center-right, left, and just liberal-oriented parties. The contest isn't over yet. We don't know what the exact result will be. And the coalition led by Donald Tusk, the head of the Civil Coalition Alliance, still has to form a government. But it looks as though they've won a solid victory. Matt, it sounds like a big moment for Poland. And over in Warsaw, our correspondent, Maria Wilczek, is in the thick of it. Hi, Maria. Hi, Ori. So, Maria, tell us, what's it been like on the ground? Last night, I came to the Peter Lecture evening actually from another post-Electure party organised by the Third Way, where the mood was bubbly and relieved. And it couldn't be more different as you went to the peace headquarters. There was a sense of tension as you came in. Outside, there was a heavy police presence. They surrounded the headquarters on Nowogrodzka Street, which is the unofficial centre of power in Poland for the past eight years. During past elections, you'd have this small stuffy room where journalists and party hacks would be packed like sardines, awaiting the results. But this time, they had cut numbers back. And as the results were announced, the veteran leader of the party, Jarosław Kaczyński, took the stage immediately as is custom. There were chances we will win in the crowd. But the speech, which was very short and measured, was not that of a victor. Despite coming first in the election and being the largest party according to the exit poll, it sounded more like a concession speech. That couldn't be more different from the tone of the entire campaign, which had been very aggressive and very forward. So right after that speech, the party top brass swiftly left the building. As I stood by the door one by one, they would try to flee the swarm of press to avoid answering any questions. And as they passed me one by one, it felt like I was on a sinking ship. The campaign was dripping with vitriol. The two main parties sought to bring out their core electorates. And so they spoke almost exclusively to the people that were supporting them. And their chosen tool of bringing their voters out to vote was anger and hatred.

They would trade personal insults.

They would accuse each other of treason, of spying and of cronyism.

What it really came down to was a feud between these two politicians that have towered over Polish politics over the past two decades.

One of them was Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, and the other being Donald Tusk.

Both of them have in the past been Polish prime ministers.

But what begins now is a lengthy process of horse trading within parliament.

It's not yet decided who will be able to form the next government.

PiS can spend about two months delaying the process

before the opposition actually gets a shot.

There will be a lot of interesting things happening in the next few weeks.

Thank you so much, Maria.

We will let you get off and carry on reporting.

Thanks, Ori.

Matt, if PiS isn't coming back into power,

which parties are going to make up this ruling coalition?

So, to explain the situation, which is a little bit complicated,

PiS did win the most votes in the election.

According to current figures, it looks like they got 36.6%, so they finished first.

But that obviously is not a majority,

and no one else wants to form a coalition with them.

The opposition is made up mostly of three parties,

which are likely to form the next coalition.

The main party is the Civic Coalition, which is led by Donald Tusk.

It's a center-right party that's gradually become closer and closer to the center.

The second biggest party, it looks like, is a party called Third Way,

which is also centrist but has a kind of a different flavor.

One of the leaders is a big media personality who used to be a reality TV host.

And the third main party is called Levitsa.

It's the left alliance, so it includes a bunch of social democrats

and some parties that are more to the left.

Third Way got probably 12 or 13% of the vote,

and Levitsa got probably 8 or 9%.

So it looks like those three main parties

that will be negotiating to form the new government.

And far and away, the most likely next prime minister is Donald Tusk.

Okay, so who voted for Mr. Tusk yesterday?

Tell us about the voters behind these figures.

Overwhelmingly, opposition voters skew young,

and the people who voted to support peace and the current government skewed old.

To some extent, these voters are concerned about those issues of a liberalism

that we were talking about earlier.

Women's issues have been very important

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because peace is a very conservative Catholic government, which has all but criminalized abortion and has made access to contraceptives harder. A lot of young people have expressed concerns about unaffordable housing. Of course, this is an issue all across Europe, but peace is not seen as doing enough, especially for university students. Another hot button issue is immigration. Peace has profiled itself as radically opposed to what it calls European Union attempts to ship illegal migrants into Poland. Peace is a very rurally-based party, so the opposition tends to be urban-based. So you get this kind of alignment of rural, older, lower-educated voters voting for the populist right party, and more cosmopolitan, younger, better-educated urban voters voting for the liberal opposition. And they feel that it's their responsibility to try to turn back the clock on the illiberal changes that peace has made over the last eight years. Now, looking beyond Poland, what does this result mean for the rest of Europe, including neighbouring Ukraine? Poland has been a very solid ally of Ukraine, but it's also been a very unpredictable government that doesn't respect EU rules. When it decided to stop grain imports from Ukraine, it violated EU trade regulations. A liberal government is very unlikely to act in such a cavalier attitude towards the way that the EU is supposed to function. What we've been seeing in Europe for about the past decade, and certainly since 2015 when peace I, has been a steady advance of far-right illiberal populist forces. If Poland has a government that is committed to EU principles and committed to the rule of law again, it removes an enormous problem for the EU. It means that Viktor Orban's government in Hungary will be isolated. It's a big shift in the alignment of the EU. There have been a lot of attempts by coalitions of liberal opposition parties to defeat illiberal populist governments. Most of them haven't worked. This one appears to have worked, and that feels like a big shift in mood. Matt, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you, Ori. It's me again. It's me again, with another reminder that we have something very important coming. Economist Podcasts Plus. This new subscription service, which is launching on October 24th, will be the home for our weekly feature shows that you already know and love,

like Drum Tower and Babbage.

And we have a new weekend edition of The Intelligence coming too.

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We really, really can't wait for you to hear all that we have in store.

When someone dies in a hospital in America, their organs are eligible for donation.

Many can be used to save a life.

And time, of course, is of the essence.

But the process of transferring hearts, lungs, kidneys,

or other body parts from the recently deceased is particularly complicated.

Last year, more than 36,000 organs were transplanted from the dead to the living.

But the pool of unrecovered, potentially usable organs is estimated to be at least double that.

So what explains the gap?

America has a lot of the types of deaths that are more conducive to organ donation.

So I think suicides, car crashes, gun fatalities.

Kenneth Werner is our US News Desk Editor.

100,000 people, though, are waiting for an organ in America at any given time.

And last year, about a tenth of those people died while waiting,

or they were taken off the wait list because they were too sick.

The question is how to get more of these organs that are usable

but aren't being transplanted available.

Okay, so before we talk about how we can improve things,

Kenneth, how do things get this bad?

A lot of countries, a lot of European countries have an opt-out model for organ donation.

That basically means your consent is presumed if you die,

about whether your organs could be used for a transplant.

But in America, we have an opt-in system.

So organ donors have to register before they die,

or at their deathbed, their families would have to consent for those organs

to be recovered and transplanted.

That obviously poses a challenge.

I mean, it's hard to convince people and families,

so even the places that do this best that do a really good job of this

end up convincing about a half of potential donors.

But the fact is that a lot of places, rates are much, much lower.

For example, the Veterans Health Administration,

which is the country's largest healthcare provider,

it got just 33 deceased donors out of over 5,000 people

who had died in a way consistent with the donation between 2010 and 2019.

And why are these rates so low? Who's responsible?

So the way that the system works is that when a hospital has a patient

who's dead or dying and they're on a ventilator,

they have to call organ procurement organizations, OPOs for short.

And those organizations actually do the legwork.

They will arrive at the hospital.

They'll identify whether this dead person was a registered donor.

If not, they'll try to convince their family members to donate their organs.

If they get consent, then they will actually vary the organs to a transplant center.

There are 56 of them across the country.

And the fact is that there's a huge variability in their performance.

Some do really well and others do really poorly.

That's part of the reason why we have lots of organs that are going unrecovered.

I spoke to one consultant who had worked for Arkansas's OPO.

She told me that the organization didn't answer most phone calls outside of the 9-5 workday or on weekends.

And so that's just an example of the number of opportunities that were being missed.

Obviously, if someone is dying or they're dead and you can recover their organs, speed is of the essence.

You have to work really fast.

Most OPOs, by contrast, would send staff to the hospital within an hour of getting an alert about a dead patient.

Each OPO has a monopoly in the region that it operates.

And importantly, none has ever lost its contract.

And so that means there hasn't really been a huge incentive to improve.

And is anything being done about this?

Yeah, so not too long ago, the government said that starting in 2026, poor performers were going to be decertified.

So that means that if you're a high-performing OPO, you can bid for low-performers contract.

So we're going to see some change in consolidation in the next few years.

The jobs that the OPOs do, that's only one part of the overall system.

The fact is that a lot of organs that are recovered aren't actually transplanted.

In fact, they're thrown in the trash.

And why is that?

Why do so many donated organs end up being thrown away?

So there are a few reasons for this.

One is that a few years ago, the nonprofit organization that is in charge of the entire system, the United Network for Organ Sharing, they expanded the geographic area over which organs could travel to be transplanted.

That basically meant longer travel times,

more complexity in the matching system between hospitals and transplant centers.

And basically this has led to higher organ discard rates.

That's one explanation.

Another is the fact that hospitals are risk-averse

and are less inclined to transplant organs that they think are riskier

or have a greater chance of presenting complications.

So some of this is actually about giving patients quality transplants then?

Yeah, the fact is not every organ is right for every recipient.

If you're a young person and you need a kidney,

you're going to want a kidney from a young, dead donor that will last you longer.

An older kidney for an older person might be just fine,

but the fact is America throws out more of these kidneys relative to other countries.

There was a study from France a few years ago that showed that America's discard rate was twice that of France's for kidneys.

If hospitals and transplant centers in America used more of these kidneys, you could see more people getting kidneys faster.

But why are American hospitals so much more risk-averse than those elsewhere?

So there are a few reasons why hospitals don't want to use these kidneys.

Older or riskier kidneys present more complications,

so patients who get them might need more time in the hospital,

they might need more immunosuppressants,

and all of that will eat into the hospital's margins.

So there's a financial element.

The other aspect of it is that transplant centers are evaluated by regulators

and by insurers based on the survival rate of patients a year after transplant.

If you're a doctor weighing whether to give someone a transplant,

you're less likely to put someone on a waiting list who you think has worse prospects.

But the fact is we're throwing out lots of usable kidneys.

So if we made more use of those,

that would save a lot of people's lives,

that would cut down on waiting lists and do a lot of good.

Kenneth, thank you so much for coming on the show.

Thanks for having me.

When you walk into a university lecture theater today,

you won't see many sheets of paper.

Instead, what you'll see is hundreds of open laptops,

and you'll hear lots and lots of typing,

as well as maybe also the occasional ping of a message popping up on somebody's screen.

University professors are complaining of rampant distraction by these devices in the classroom, and it's not just at the university level either.

Parents of ever younger students are dismayed to find that their children are encouraged or sometimes even required to bring a laptop to school.

Obviously, everyone is relying on computers more than ever before,

but a new line of research really shows the benefits of a very old technology, which is handwriting.

I don't think this is just a young people thing, Lane.

I type grocery lists now.

Reassure me, what does the new research indicate?

Well, there are lots of different studies on the topic,

and it turns out that writing on paper can improve everything from recalling items on a random list

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of words

to actually imbibing a better conceptual grasp of complex ideas.

Their benefits seem to lie somewhere in the kind of motor and sensory systems that are used to do these things,

and the memory that is recruited when you write things down.

If you play the same piece on the piano a bunch of times,

your fingers will start to kind of learn the music as well as your auditory system,

and that goes as well for writing things down.

You might also notice the visual shape of the page where you wrote notes down on a page or where you wrote a specific word to remember or something like that,

so that recruits your visual memory as well.

The biggest advantage seems to be in superior note-taking by people who do it with a pen and paper.

When you have to write things down with a pen and paper,

it is slower for almost everybody, nearly everyone,

can type faster than they can write with a pen, especially at the college level.

But it turns out there's an advantage in that inefficiency,

which means that it makes you compress ideas as you're writing them down.

It means you have to be thinking as you're writing, and as a result,

what goes down is a sort of distilled essence that's already been through your brain.

Students who take handwritten notes have consistently well outperformed students who take typed notes,

and that's because the students who type, they're taking a lot more down.

There's a lot more words on the page, but those notes are almost entirely verbatim,

which means they're not really going through the brain quite in the same way,

and that seems to make a big difference.

Okay, so the advantages seem clear, seem sort of intuitively clear, in fact,

but what about getting people to follow that advice,

students in particular, to grab their pens back out of their bags?

Well, it has started to come into the policymaking of education ministries around the world.

For a long time, I think that everyone was trying to get more and more devices into classrooms like STEM, STEM, STEM, science, technology, engineering,

and mathematics were taking such a central role that it seemed like the best thing we could do for our kids

is get a device almost as soon as possible,

but that tide has really started to turn as the cost of having devices around all the time has become more evident.

So to go back to 2010, when America created what's called the Common Core Curriculum,

it doesn't require any handwriting instruction past the first grade,

which is kids who were about six or seven years old,

but since then, this research has made enough of its way into the public consciousness

that about half of America's states have mandated teaching of handwriting in upper grades as well.

And we're seeing this also in countries like Sweden,

which this year has put more physical books and pens and papers into classroom,

and even the English national curriculum,

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which has students joining up letters into what we call cursive, already in about the second year of schooling. Some schools have gone as far as even banning technology. They lock up kids' phones and they also ban laptops even in some cases. That seems pretty extreme. It probably is going too far because for some kids, laptops are a godsend. They might have difficulty writing by hand. There's a condition called dysgraphia, which means it's very difficult to write legibly, especially at speed, and some kids will benefit from being able to type. As well, let's be honest, everybody's going to need computer skills, and that includes typing skills when they get older. It's also reasonable to imagine, and there's research around this too, that when you write at speed, there are certain advantages. If you've got a couple of ideas in your mind and you're trying to get them down in the same paragraph, if you can get them down quickly, there's a better chance that you're going to remember them all and sequence them properly. Whereas if you're writing in a way that really slows you down, as a pen slows most people down, people find that they actually lose the thread of some of the ideas they're trying to get into words, and that can be disadvantage as well. Well, there's something of a mixed message here. Using your pen and paper is great, but then using your laptop sometimes is great. What's the take home? Well, the solution really has to be a mix. One of the people I talked to, Virginia Berninger, who's a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, she's been studying the benefits of handwriting for a long time, but she really made the point that all three skills have research tested benefits. And when I say three, that's the sort of manuscript or what they call print style writing, where you write the notes like they're printed. Cursive as well, where you join up the letters, and sometimes the letters have a very different form, and for typing as well. Cursive kind of combines some of the slowing you down of manuscript writing and some of the speed and fluidity of typing, and that's why it's kind of a middle ground. But it's quite clear that as students spend more time on devices as they move up through the school years, they're not only going to need typing skills, but she recommends that they also take up occasional sort of tune up sessions for their handwriting in the later years so that they don't see those skills decay and they can still get some of the benefits of handwriting. I haven't written in cursive since I was in grade school, so I need to sign myself up for one of these tune up sessions. Lane, thanks very much for joining us. Thank you, Jason.

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That's all for this episode of The Intelligence.

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