

Poland

Warsaw mayor focuses on Poland's provinces in bid to unseat Duda

Opposition's presidential candidate Rafal Trzaskowski faces formidable challenge in run-off



Rafal Trzaskowski scored best among liberal voters in big cities in the first round of Poland's presidential election © Tomasz Wojtasik/EPA/EFE/Shutterstock

James Shotter and **Agata Majos** in Skierniewice JULY 5 2020

Rafal Trzaskowski finished his speech in the cobble market square of Skierniewice, a midsized town in central Poland, by accusing his presidential rival Andrzej Duda of lacking the courage to stand up to the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS).

“All he does is wait for them to send him laws at night to sign. Is that real courage?” Mr Trzaskowski said of the incumbent. “Today we need a president who is strong, who will work with the government when it wants to help citizens. But who will be tough when the government wants to make your lives harder.”

The salvo drew applause from the few hundred people who had turned out to support [Mr Trzaskowski](#). But Mr Duda's fans had not left Skierniewice uncontested. As Mr Trzaskowski prepared to speak, a car towing a huge pro-Duda billboard did laps of the square. Posters backing the incumbent hung from several balconies. And among the crowd, a lone Duda supporter held aloft a banner comparing Mr Trzaskowski to the Roman conspirator Catiline — although it drew little attention as it was written in Latin.

Mr Duda and Mr Trzaskowski face each other on July 12 in the [second round](#) of a bitterly contested presidential election that both sides of Poland's partisan divide have billed as a fork in the road for the country. And with polls predicting a neck-and-neck race, midsized towns such as the 47,000-strong Skierniewice will be a crucial battlefield.

[Mr Duda](#), backed by the conservative-nationalist PiS, won the first round last week with 43.5 per cent of the national vote, attracting strong support from the socially conservative voters who dominate Poland's countryside and provincial towns.

Mr Trzaskowski, mayor of Warsaw and a member of Poland's main opposition group, the centre-right Civic Coalition, came second with 30.5 per cent. He scored best among liberal voters in big cities, such as Warsaw, Poznan and Lodz. But with just 24.8 per cent of voters living in places with more than 100,000 inhabitants, he will need to appeal to voters in smaller towns if he is to overtake Mr Duda.

In Skierniewice, which is surrounded by orchards and fruit farms hit hard by drought in recent years, Mr Trzaskowski made fighting climate change and dealing with local water issues central to his pitch.

"Last year, the water literally dried up. At some point we didn't have any in our taps," said Malgorzata, a social worker enthused by his plans. "If we don't do anything about it, it will be a tragedy."

For most in the crowd, however, the main concern was the state of Polish democracy. Since PiS came to power in 2015, it has introduced welfare policies that have improved the lives of many poorer Poles. But it has also undermined democratic checks and balances, threatened the [independence of the judiciary](#) and captured the public media.



President Andrzej Duda enjoys strong support among socially conservative voters in the countryside and small towns © Maciej Kulczynski/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

The changes have set Warsaw, once seen as the poster child of the EU's 2004 eastern expansion, at loggerheads with Brussels. Many liberal voters believe that a win for Mr Trzaskowski, which would give the opposition control of the presidency's veto powers, is the only way to stop PiS doing deeper damage to Polish democracy.

"The actions of the current government are destroying the country. They're just destroying it. The courts. Culture. The education system. Everything," said Barbara Omiecinska, a pensioner who came from the nearby village of Dabrowice to see Mr Trzaskowski speak. "[In these elections] we are fighting for independence, democracy. Unfortunately that's how it is."

Concerns about leaving PiS unchecked may help Mr Trzaskowski pick up voters who backed other opposition candidates in the June election, such as the independent Szymon Holownia, who won 13.9 per cent, and the leftwing Robert Biedron, who won 2.2 per cent.

"Of course I will vote for Trzaskowski . . . For me the choice is obvious," said Magdalena Placek, a 35-year-old who owns a business making orchard machinery, and voted for Mr Biedron in the first round. "Since I've had the right to vote, I've never been as involved in an election as I am now."

But Mr Trzaskowski still faces a formidable challenge to unseat Mr Duda. Many in Poland's smaller towns view his support for liberal causes such as LGBT rights as a threat to the country's traditional Catholic values. The welfare policies of PiS remain hugely popular. And even after five years out of power, Civic Coalition remains a toxic brand for many voters.

"Civic Platform [the predecessor of Civic Coalition] was a vassal state of Brussels. It was absolutely visible," said Piotr, who brought the Latin banner to Mr Trzaskowski's rally. "In the past Polish leaders went to Moscow to get a green light for certain things. Civic Platform officials were going to Brussels and getting a clap on the back from [German chancellor Angela] Merkel."

Zbyszek, who runs a stall at a vegetable market a few minutes' walk from Mr Trzaskowski's rally, was similarly unenthused. "It's hard to say [who has the better programme], but I think it is Duda," he said. "In Poland we have two parties that are fighting each other . . . And of those two evils I am choosing Law and Justice. The lesser evil."

In an effort to appeal to moderate PiS voters, Mr Trzaskowski has repeatedly insisted that he would not ditch the party's popular child benefit scheme, or raise the retirement age. In Skierniewice, he admitted that Civic Platform had made mistakes, and also distanced himself from its former leader, Donald Tusk.

His supporters concede that the race will go down to the wire. "We want [Trzaskowski] to win. Mr Duda is the past. He's not authentic. He's not a president for these times," said Ms Omiecinska. "[But] it's 50-50."

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