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## ARTICLES

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# The State of Democracy in Poland after 2007

## Analyzing the Linkage between Economic Development and Political Participation

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While many new EU member states experienced a crisis of democracy in the course of the fiscal and budgetary crisis in Europe, this was not true for Poland: Most citizens held democracy in high esteem and remained enthusiastic about EU membership. However, in 2015 they voted a Euro-skeptic government into office that began to dismantle the principle of checks and balances. The article analyzes possible explanations by applying a modernization theory approach. It shows that many Poles developed a utilitarian perception of democracy induced by economic development, but only a minority internalizes post-materialist values and participates in public affairs.

### INTRODUCTION

The special issue to which this article contributes follows two guiding observations and discussions in the current academic literature about the decline of democratic standards in East-Central Europe. One line of argument brought forward by Müller (2014), Rupnik and Zielonka (2013), and Coman and Tomini (2014) is that political actors in many countries of the region established institutions that meet democratic requirements only on a formal level and as a response to pressures from the European Union (EU) rather than their own democratic convictions. The main deficit that these authors identified is a low acceptance of political pluralism and a low institutionalization of the principle of checks and balances. Thus, many new EU member states are considered to be backsliding from what are regarded as standard democratic beliefs and practices, once the conditionality of accession has vanished. A second dimension that contributes to the decline is the economic and fiscal crisis in Europe and its impact on governments' capacities to act and to provide material well-being for their citizens, which caused new cleavages in East-

Central Europe after these countries had just experienced an increase in economic growth in the course of their ongoing processes of reconstruction (Brusis 2016). In addition to income losses, this crisis is also perceived as being responsible for a weaker belief in the utility of European integration, because European institutions did not sufficiently support national governments but mainly demanded stricter austerity measures (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014). These failures on the national and the European level then made populist and/or nationalist parties more attractive for many voters as the promise of a rosy future after EU accession appeared to be a rather shallow one (Brusis 2016). Evidence for how these crises are interlinked and induce a downward spiral for both democratic beliefs and procedures can currently be found, among other cases, in Slovenia (Krašovec and Johannsen 2016).

Poland, in the period between 2007 and 2014/2015, does not seem to follow this regional trend. The 2011 parliamentary elections allowed then prime minister Donald Tusk, from the Civic Platform of the Republic of Poland (Platforma Obywatelska Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej—PO RP, or simply PO), to serve a second term in office, the first incumbent to do so since 1989. No anti-democratic party was represented in parliament in those years, nor were there any serious public protests expressing major discontent with the government (Jasiewicz and Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz 2014). Furthermore, Tusk's government

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improved relations with EU institutions and with other member states, especially Germany (Buras 2013). Poland announced it would be ready to take more responsibility on the European level when it rotated into the Presidency of the European Council for the first time, in 2011 (Gostyńska and Parkes 2014; Pomorska and Vanhoonaeker 2012), and then, Donald Tusk was elected as the president of the European Council on December 1, 2014. That these developments are the result of a thorough and successful transition to democracy is underpinned by several long-term studies (Castle and Taras 2002; Kucharczyk and Zbieranek 2010; Gwiazda 2015). They present plenty of empirical evidence for substantial institutional reforms without neglecting the underlying long-term cleavages in the Polish society. In addition, several democracy rankings, such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) and Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI), the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicator (WGI) or the Freedom House *Nations in Transit* reports place Poland in positions that indicate a high level of democracy. This is not only true if the long-term developments during the last 25 years are considered and Poland is compared to other post-communist countries; in the SGI, for example, Poland ranks even higher than some long-established democracies such as France or Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> In October 2015, however, the parliamentary election lifted into government the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość—PiS), a party that can be considered as national(ist)-conservative and moderately to openly Euroskeptic (PiS is member of the European Conservatives and Reformists grouping in the European Parliament). This new government, the first single-party government<sup>2</sup> in post-1989 Poland, very quickly implemented several new laws aimed at bringing the Constitutional Tribunal and the public media under the government's control (Bachmann 2016; Markowski 2016). This action made the European Commission decide to apply its new rule-of-law mechanism to Poland (European Commission, January 13, 2016).

Hence, two questions emerge: why was Poland able to maintain high democratic standards while other countries were experiencing serious crises; and then why, suddenly, did a government come into office that obviously does not accept the democratic control of political power? One preliminary answer to the first question can be found in economic prosperity, as Poland was one of the few countries in Europe—East or West—that was barely affected by the fiscal and budgetary crisis. According to the country's macro-economic data, the economy not only remained comparatively stable but even continued to grow in the years 2007–2014.<sup>3</sup> A second remarkable observation for this period is the fact that a majority of Poles showed consistently high satisfaction with democracy as a form of government and even higher support for EU membership since accession, reaching 89 percent in March 2014 (CBOS 2014a, 7; CBOS 2014c, 2).<sup>4</sup> This

situation can be interpreted as either a product of successful governmental policymaking or the result of some favorable structural conditions.<sup>5</sup> If this observation holds true, then it is all the more puzzling—at first glance—why PO lost the elections in 2015, since, according to the theory of economic voting, it is rarely the case that a government that produces positive economic results is voted out of office (Kotnarowski and Markowski 2014).

## A MODERNIZATION THEORY APPROACH AND ITS METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The aim to investigate the link between economic development and the state of democracy from a comparative politics perspective leads to looking into the concept of modernization theory. While the most influential classical publication of this subdiscipline of political science was the study by Seymour Martin Lipset (1959), more recent authors such as Boix and Stokes (2003) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005; 2010) have updated and amended those original ideas. Lipset approached democracy from a bottom-up perspective and considered economic development as conducive to the emergence *and* the persistence of democracy. He assumed that development, not only measured as economic growth, but meaning a more substantial process of social change caused by processes of urbanization, education, and industrialization, would produce favorable structural conditions for the involvement of the wider public into politics. With decreasing social inequality, a strong middle class emerges that can function as a basis for political participation. Lipset (1959, 84) stressed the relevance of intermediary organizations, such as political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that are able to organize and secure access to government or the political process in general and further mediate societal cleavages. Thus, this concept aimed to trace the roots of democracy by connecting structural, societal changes to changes in individual values and behaviors leading to collective political action. While Lipset's ideas were strongly criticized by Przeworski and Limongi (1997) and he was and is often understood as a proponent of socioeconomic requisites of democracy only, he actually discussed the cultural and value-oriented effects of modernization through his observation that development and participation are connected. This relation was later studied in greater detail by Inglehart and Welzel and their work connected to the World Value Surveys (2005). In their new version of modernization theory, based on worldwide survey data, they claim to have proven that modernization does indeed help to establish and to maintain democracy, because it induces the emergence of emancipative or self-expression instead of authoritarian or survival values, which in turn make people more interested to engage in politics. They also state that this is neither a linear nor an automatic process, due to path dependencies created by persisting

religious beliefs or political ideologies or a given country's political leadership's suppression of democratic political demands (Inglehart and Welzel 2010, 552-554).

When applying this approach to the case of Poland, one has to consider that Poland was already a modern, industrialized country before and after World War II and that it has some strong traditions of public political action, including during the era of communism (Millard 1999, 6-8). After 1989 another process of modernization occurred during the transition from communism and the accession to the EU (Abbott and Wallace 2014), which of course proceeded differently in different countries and often produced new societal conflicts (Blokker 2005). Since modernization theory aims to explore whether economic growth, when it leads to a more equal society, makes people more willing to uphold democratic beliefs and to engage in society, this perspective could help to do both: first, to explain that Poland was able to resist some of the turbulence caused by the Euro crisis because development had helped to improve the country's democratic performance; and second, to highlight reasons for the election to government of a party that works to dismantle those very achievements.

Following the concepts of Lipset (1959) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005, 2010), this article analyzes the period from 2007/2008, when the fiscal and budgetary crisis in Europe began,<sup>6</sup> until the first half of 2015. This analysis will not provide a detailed study of the 2015 parliamentary election itself but it will discuss how its findings can contribute to understanding the outcome of that election. It is conducted in four steps: First, I take a more detailed look at the level of socioeconomic development in order to understand if further industrialization, urbanization, and higher education led to a more equal distribution of employment and income. For this section, data from the BTI, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Polish Statistical Office are used. Second, the expected outcomes of these changes, meaning the perceptions of Poles regarding democracy, politics, and the system change, are investigated mainly through data from Poland's most renowned survey institution, the Center for Public Opinion Research (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej—CBOS). Third, I will examine whether emancipative beliefs led to an increase of public participation in elections and in political parties, which will be assessed by looking at the connections between citizens and parties in terms of their ideological links, voting patterns, party membership, and other organizational characteristics. Finally, the public's engagement in other intermediary organizations and their possible provision of a hinge function between the individual, the society, and politics by producing social trust and offering additional opportunities for participation will be analyzed. These parts are based on diverse primary and secondary academic sources from research on political parties, NGOs, and other social movements.

All in all, this study does not look for robust statistical relationships but rather follows an explorative, qualitative approach. It aims to identify certain patterns that allow for interpretations from the observations made in the light of modernization theory, in order to use the Polish case to provide more substantial insights into the structural and attitudinal sources of democracy in a time when several East-Central European countries are facing a severe political crisis and the project of European integration is under serious question (Brusis 2016).

## MODERNIZATION AND SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGES IN POLAND BEFORE 2015

In the early 1990s Poland underwent a thorough transition process following a shock therapy for the economic system. When the hardships of this period—high rates of inflation, public debts, industrial restructuring and unemployment—and the very conflict-driven domestic political relations of the 1990s and early 2000s due to executive-legislative quarrels and a fluid party system (Millard 1999, Paczynska 2005, 584-87), had become less pronounced, the quality of governance in Poland improved (Gwiazda 2015). In particular, the governing coalition of the PO and the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe—PSL), in office from 2007 to 2015, engaged in prudent economic and fiscal policies that spared the country from experiences that some of its neighbors had gone through, such as risky activities of the national bank, housing bubbles, and extreme tax rates. Less radical reforms produced more stability and the government did not need to bail out or nationalize companies (Meardi and Trappmann 2013, 198).

The indicators that the theoretical approach considers relevant to assess whether the modernization process in Poland extends beyond pure GDP growth, such as employment rates, sectoral changes in the Polish economy, and educational inclusion, provide some evidence for this very process. Opposite to what has been described for the 1990s (Paczynska 2005), on an aggregate level these indicators show a positive development and that social inclusion was growing over the past decade. (Table 1.)

Due to some of the developments indicated in the table, Poland was the country with the largest decline in the at-risk-of-poverty rate between 2008 and 2014, from 30.5 percent to 24.7 percent among all EU member states (Eurostat, December 12, 2015). The average monthly gross wage that amounted to 2691.03 PLN (€788.33) in 2007 increased to 3899.78 PLN in 2015 (Central Statistical Office of Poland 2016). Inflation stayed low and pay-cuts did not occur, so the private income and purchasing power remained stable on average (Meardi and Trappmann 2013, 197). Intensive reforms in the educational sector made the most important structural

TABLE 1  
Indicators for Socioeconomic Development in Poland (all in %)

	2002	2006	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Unemployment rate <sup>a</sup>	18.0	18.0	7.1	8.2	9.6	9.6	10.1	10.4	9.2
Female employment rate <sup>b</sup>	—	—	46.7	47.4	48.3	48.5	48.9	48.9	48.9
Employment in agricultural sector <sup>c</sup>	19.3	15.8	14.0	13.3	13.2	13.1	12.6	12.0	11.5
In industry <sup>c</sup>	28.6	30.0	31.9	31.1	31.1	31.7	30.4	30.5	30.5
In services <sup>c</sup>	52.0	54.2	54.2	55.6	55.7	55.2	57.0	57.5	58.0
Female legislators, senior officials, and managers <sup>d</sup>	—	—	36.1	35.5	35.6	38.4	—	—	—
People holding a university degree <sup>e</sup>	—	16.93 (2005)	—	—	22.47	—	—	—	27.0
Internet users <sup>f</sup>	—	44.6	53.1	59.0	62.3	61.9	62.3	62.8	66.6
Gini-Index <sup>g</sup>	—	—	33.7	33.6	33.2	32.8	32.4	—	—

Sources: Data compiled from:

- <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.UEM.TOTL.ZS/countries/PL—XS?display=graph>, accessed May 22, 2016; <http://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/labour-salaries/registered-unemployment/unemployment-rate-1990-2016,3,1.html>, accessed May 22, 2016.
- <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS/countries/PL—XS?display=graph>, accessed May 22, 2016.
- [http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=ALFS\\_SUMTAB](http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=ALFS_SUMTAB), accessed May 22, 2016
- <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.LSOM.ZS/countries/PL—XS?display=graph> accessed May 22, 2016
- <https://data.oecd.org/eduat/adult-education-level.htm>, accessed May 22, 2016.
- <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2/countries/PL—XS?display=graph>, accessed May 22, 2016.
- <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI/countries/PL—XS?display=graph> accessed May 22, 2016.

barrier to social mobility, unequal access to education, quite negligible. Women have near-equal access to public offices and well-paid jobs, although career barriers and discrimination still exist (Millard 2014).<sup>7</sup>

As a result of all these changes, including the growing services sector, an urban and partly also a rural middle class, characterized by secondary or tertiary education and a stable average income, has emerged and grown in Poland. In addition, the rural population, which had always been most reluctant to support the transition process—partly rooted in previous privileges and partly in general conservative political attitudes—started to profit from the changes as well. Money from the EU Structural and Cohesion Funds, an amount of 106 billion Euro for the years 2014–2020 (Ministry of Treasury Republic of Poland, March 12, 2013), whose absorption rate is now up to 80 percent, helps to equalize uneven levels of regional development (Gwiazda 2013).<sup>8</sup> Hence, the group of the “winners” of transition and EU integration has become larger. Now the farmers, too, see more benefits (76 percent) than shortcomings (12 percent) in EU membership (CBOS 2014c, 3) as existing regional disparities begin to equalize.

Despite all these improvements, there are a number of Poles who are still economically worse off, especially in the Eastern part of Poland, which remains the poorest region of the country. For comparison, in the first quarter of 2011, the average income in Mazowry, the voivodship around Warsaw, was about PLN 4400 (€1100), while people in Warmia and Mazury in the Northeast earned an average of around PLN 2882 (€720) (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014, 14). Also, in urban areas there is a remaining level of structural unemployment, irrespective of the drop of unemployment and the declining levels of social exclusion. These factors cause severe problems for two groups of people: in 2012, about 28 percent of juveniles between 15 and 24 years of age were without a job, and young families including single mothers are most threatened by falling into poverty (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014, 10 and 15). Thus, although the modernization is visible overall, the uneven distribution of costs and benefits of economic reforms and social changes among social groups, as described earlier (Paczynska 2005, 594), still exists. The question is how these findings—a growing well-educated middle class on the one side and the persistence of structural barriers for specific groups of people on the other side—impact on the population’s values and political attitudes.

#### ASSESSING DEMOCRATIC BELIEFS AND THE LEGITIMACY OF POLISH DEMOCRACY

CBOS surveys asking about the general perceptions of democracy show that Poles’ acceptance of this form of government is very high: around 70 percent of respondents

agree that democracy is superior to other systems (CBOS 2014a). Despite small moves up and downwards, this attitude has been surprisingly stable since the early 1990s. Poles even seem to value democratic principles more highly than do the inhabitants of many other EU countries (Hobolt 2012, 92). More precise questions, asking whether a democratic government is preferable to a nondemocratic one, have been answered affirmatively by a majority of respondents (above 60 percent) since the beginning of the transition. Since 2006 a majority agrees that, for people like them, it does make a difference if the government is democratic or not.<sup>9</sup> For both questions, the most positive answers were given at the end of 2007, when the PO–PSL government had been approved by parliament (CBOS 2014a, 7 and 15). This assessment correlates with the comparatively high turnout in the 2007 parliamentary elections of 53.88 percent, when many, especially young people were mobilized by the antagonistic political situation in the country stirred up by the previous, national-conservative government of Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński (Tworzecki 2012, 617). In addition, while the dissatisfaction with the specific performance of democracy in Poland had been greatest in the years 2001 to 2005, this answer was given less often after 2007. Since that year, the number of those satisfied with everyday democracy has outnumbered the unsatisfied. In 2014, 50 percent of respondents had a positive opinion compared to 40 percent with a negative one (CBOS 2014a, 4–5).

Similar to the general trend of a stable, diffuse, and increasing specific support, evaluation of the system change, as a measure of acceptance of the various reforms, is also very positive. Since 1994, agreement on this has never fallen below 56 percent, and in 2014, 71 percent of respondents assessed this as a good experience (CBOS 2014b, 2). When asked about the effects of system change in a more detailed way, the majority of the population sees more benefits than losses, especially regarding the international position of Poland (69 percent), international security and relations with neighbors (68 percent each), the economic situation (53 percent), and material well-being (51 percent) (CBOS 2014b, 4). These data indicate that democracy is supported when material needs are satisfied. This points to “survival” rather than “emancipative” values, using Inglehart’s and Welzel’s terminology.

The persistence of these survival values and the correlation of interest in politics with levels of education are confirmed by the data of the World Value Survey. As Siemieńska (2014) notes, the idea of giving people a greater say in government decisions, as one of the main components of the post-materialist objectives, is more often expressed by people with university education who are not overly religious and who live in big cities. Not necessarily politically less interested persons, but citizens who consider the fight against rising prices as the most relevant task of a government, are, to a great extent, inhabitants of smaller



cities with elementary education. Since 1989, a growing number of people consider both aims as important political goals, but those who demand price stability still outweigh those who demand participation by 12 percentage points: 44 percent compared to 32 percent in 2012 (Siemieńska 2014, 146–47).

These findings may be connected to other data indicating that, despite the strong identification of Poles with democracy as a political system, there are quite a number of people who seem to be more critical or frustrated. In 2014, 35 percent of respondents rejected the idea of democracy as a form of governance, 41 percent were dissatisfied with how democracy works in Poland, and 36 percent believed that for people like them the form of government does not matter (CBOS 2014a, 5 and 15). Tied to these assessments are those developments that people consider as negative effects of the system change. Thus, the majority of respondents feel that social security (46 percent) and health services (62 percent) have become worse and that some social values have deteriorated, such as politeness and civility (61 percent), strength of family ties (54 percent), protection against crime (58 percent), honesty (47 percent), and religiosity (67 percent) (CBOS 2014b, 4). In addition, increasing individualization is not always perceived as something positive. Trust in politicians is low as well. They generally have a bad reputation, because people in Poland believe they are likely to look for personal advantage only. Except for the state president, most political institutions, first and foremost the parliament, receive very low support rates of around 20 percent (CBOS 2014e, 1), a finding that is consistently mirrored in Polish surveys (Paczynska 2005, 605). But what has increased over the last ten years is the feeling of being able to change something. The number of people who indicate they can exert an influence on public affairs has grown from 7 percent in 1992 to 30 percent in 2012, and at the local level this conviction is even stronger (CBOS 2013, 2).

The data presented above can be carefully interpreted as an indicator for a consolidated acceptance of democracy for a majority of Poles, fed by the experience that the system change has improved everyday life. Hence, a decisive level of diffuse support has emerged which is bound to specific support based on the named benefits that the majority attributes to the transition process. Specific support nourished by the perception that governments are doing a good job is less visible. In addition to those people who show low specific support due to dissatisfaction with the government's performance in policy fields such as social security and health care, about one-third of the population are not interested in politics and do not consider democracy as the ideal-type of a political system. Because of this focus on material values and performance-based support for democracy, a shift to more emancipative values is not yet evident for a majority of Poles, since it is only about 37 percent of the population that holds post-materialist values (Siemieńska

2014, 147). Still, the interest in getting involved in collective political action has grown.

## POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR ELECTORATE

Democratic and emancipative beliefs become relevant on a societal and political level when they are converted into political participation. In this respect Lipset highlights the role of political parties in two ways: he looks first at how citizens as individuals tend to behave as voters and as members of parties, and second, how parties tend to act as collective groups of citizens who ideally mediate between society and government in an organizational and ideological respect, and in doing so motivate more citizens to become active politically (Lipset 1959, 84–85 and 91). Inglehart and Welzel (2010) argue, similarly but without explaining exactly how, that self-expression attitudes turn into civic participation.

This attributed connection between citizens and parties was rather weak in Poland in the first decade after the transition. Over many years, the Polish party system was mostly characterized by its notorious volatility (Millard 1999). Only in the last few years have parties seemed to concentrate organizationally and ideologically and the party affiliations of voters started to become more pronounced and more strongly rooted in religious, sociocultural, and territorial cleavages, which in turn are now more explicitly addressed by political parties (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2009). This has enabled some political parties to be represented in parliament for several legislative terms. Compared to the 1990s and early 2000s, the number of parties represented in parliament has also tended to decline. Although the effective number of parties slightly increased from 2.8 after the 2007 elections to 3.0 in 2011, it had definitely decreased compared to 4.6 after the 2005 elections. Voter volatility has declined as well, from 40 percent in the early 2000s to 11 percent in 2011, and the percentage of wasted or invalid votes was just 4 percent in 2011, down from 34 percent in 1993 and 11 percent in 2005 (Markowski 2016, 5).

The preliminary consolidation of voter-party relations is reflected in the electorate's preferences for certain parties and the parties' more explicitly stated programmatic positions on certain issues (Brusis 2013, 408; Markowski 2008). Ideologically, PiS stresses moral values, often uses a simple and aggressive black-and-white vocabulary, favors a larger involvement of the state in the economy and a more centralized type of government with a stronger presidency, and tries to discredit the achievements of the transition in Poland by talking about the necessity to establish a so-called Fourth Republic, meaning a new, really post-communist constitutional setting (Tworzecki 2012, 617). PO stands for an economically liberal, culturally secular, and pro-European attitude but also rather conservative societal values (Brusis

2013, 408; Majcherek 2014, 2–3). At the same time, the interpersonal relations between the two main camps—PO and PiS—became more pronounced and more hostile, especially between the previous two party leaders, Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński (Markowski 2008).

The ideological cleavages among parties go hand in hand with a closer ideological linkage of parties and their voters. The great differences between the politicians of the two camps on social, political, and cultural values regarding EU integration, religious values, personal liberties, and economic policies resemble their voters' decision-making patterns in the elections. Surveys conducted in the course of the 2010 presidential and 2011 parliamentary elections show that a vote for PiS is mostly based on religion (as indicated by frequency of church attendance), dissatisfaction with democracy, and a vote for this party in the 2007 elections. PO voters indicated support for more liberal societal values, an interest in politics, and on average they had a higher level of education (Czeńnik 2014b, 18, Tavits and Letki 2014, 250). Electoral survey data show that for the two parliamentary elections, in 2007 and 2011, party affiliations with reference to PO and PiS respectively did increase (Czeńnik 2014b), and at least for some parts of the electorate, voting has become a habit (Czesnik, Zerkowska-Balas and Kotnarowski 2013). This is all the more relevant since many new voters had voted for one of the two parties in 2007 and obviously they had become loyal supporters in the 2011 elections. The same is true for the presidential election of 2010 (Czeńnik 2014b, 20; Tworzecki 2012; Rosset 2011).

The main issues that the voters considered when making their choice in the elections were moral values, including religion, plus a greater involvement in political discussions on the part of PO voters. This contradicts to a certain extent the finding that voters' interests are more of a socioeconomic nature and less value-based. But what political parties do in their struggle to attract political support is to appeal to the existing traditional, value-oriented cleavages in societies, in the Polish case mainly religion and nation (Tavits and Letki 2014; Castle and Taras 2002). In addition to the material interests of the voters, this is quite a successful strategy for these parties and it obviously binds voters in a medium- or even long-term perspective. Hence, while a concentration of voters' preferences on certain parties works along the liberal-market vs. strong-state dimension according to socioeconomic status, moral and identity-based values are also important (Slomczynski and Shabad 2011; Kotnarowski and Markowski 2014).

These divisions in terms of attitudes do not exclusively correlate with the income levels of voters. Poor voters mainly vote for PiS and better-off voters vote for PO, but it was not poor voters alone that built the base for PiS. To quite an extent this cleavage between the liberal and the conservative Poland also has a territorial basis, with people living in northwest of Poland more often voting for PO while in the southeast there is a preference for PiS. Both

are connected to the structural divisions in Poland (Brusis 2013, 410), although these have weakened since EU accession.

The trend for concentration in the party system is furthered by institutional regulations and not only an outcome of a society that is politically more interested in and supportive of certain political parties. In 1997 a new law on political parties was implemented that covers party activities, organization, and finance (Casal Bértoa and Walecki 2014, 332). These changes reduced the influx of private donations and strengthened parties organizationally.<sup>10</sup> Another aspect of closer ties between parties and voters is stressed by McMenamín and Gwiazda (2011), who argue that Polish parties to an increasing extent respond to voters through vote-seeking instead of office-seeking strategies.

Despite these hints of consolidation of party–voter relations, it is still not attractive to be a member of a political party. Only 0.99 percent of the population belong to a party, which is one of the lowest figures in Europe, compared to Austria with 17 percent and Slovenia with 6.3 percent. Only Latvia has a lower ratio at 0.74 percent (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). This figure clearly underlines that even those citizens who are interested in politics and who hold emancipative values are not very interested in participating in political parties and in the opportunity structures of what is called established political participation in older democracies. An explanation that is often brought forward for that is the experience of forced mass participation in socialist institutions, which makes the more traditional forms of political participation less attractive (Lubecki and Szczegółka 2007). This indicates the context-bound nature of modernization theory to previous pathways that Inglehart and Welzel (2010, 552) stress and that has been addressed before in other studies on participation in political parties in Poland and in East-Central Europe (Siemieńska 2014; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). Another indicator for the participation gap that exists for that segment of society that does not become a supporter of a specific party and that declares low trust in parties is the low turnout in Poland. After a relative<sup>11</sup> increase of turnout in the 2007 elections to 53.88 percent, due to the wish of many voters to change the government of that time, it declined again to 48.92 percent in 2011 and 51 percent in 2015 (Tworzecki 2012, 620, Markowski 2016, 4). The idea that choosing a specific party can make a difference is overshadowed by a great disappointment with parties and a low belief in their democratic utility (Lubecki and Szczegółka 2007).

Probably due to this disappointment, there seems to be an ideological demand outside the more established parties, PiS and PO, and different kinds of new parties pop up over time: in 2011 the national-conservative Solidary Poland (Solidarna Polska—SP) and the liberal-conservative Poland Comes First (Polska jest Najważniejsza—PJN) seceded from PiS; the latter merged in December 2013 with the new center-right party Poland Together (Polska

Razem—PR) led by Jarosław Gowin, who had left PO. Palikot's Movement (Ruch Palikota—RP), now called Your Movement (Twój Ruch—TR), separated from PO in 2011, and in 2014 the Euroskeptical Congress of the New Right (Kongres Nowej Prawicy—KNP), and then in 2015 the rather populist party of rock-singer Paweł Kukiz (Kukiz '15) and a new liberal party, Ryszard Petru's Modern (Nowoczesna Ryszarda Petru), were established (Fuksiewicz 2014; Majcherek 2014, 6, Markowski 2016).

All in all, PiS and PO, as the two most established parties, have obviously managed to bind voters due to more pronounced ideological profiles. Parties are also able to fulfill their function of recruiting personnel for political offices and satisfy their voters to a certain extent regarding their policy performance, but their embeddedness in society is weak. They do not manage to gain more members and so it has not become a habit to be engaged in a political party. It is still the belief in the general idea of democracy and overall achievements of the political and economic transition in Poland that make people support democracy.

#### ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In contrast to participation in political parties, in recent years some NGO-led activities have provided alternative options for those middle-class groups that articulate a demand for greater political involvement. A relatively close-knit network of interest groups with over 125,140 autonomous, self-organized associations has developed in Poland, and this promotes the growth of a participatory democracy. Especially religious groups, charitable organizations, and sport associations are popular and work well. A lot of NGOs try to remain politically independent from parties and other government actors. They profit from Poland's EU membership as they get access to funding schemes, training, and networks at the European level, although this mainly favors larger NGOs and leads to internal stratification of the non-profit sector (Czeńnik 2014a; Ponomarev 2013).

Still, when assessing the intermediary function of NGOs, it has to be considered that only 60 percent of them are really active, partly because there is wide variance concerning their economic viability, with 4 percent of NGOs accounting for 80 percent of the income in this sector, and partly because, for the majority of the population, engagement in civic activities takes place within the direct social and mostly family-related environment. Civic activities in public organizations are mostly conducted by well-educated people and in the larger cities (Czeńnik 2014a, 476–77; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014, 9).

The PO–PSL government professed to assign an important role to civil-society actors in deliberating and planning policies. Although the state–society relation is more pluralist than corporatist and the involvement of interests in the

preparation of laws was sometimes formalistic and perfunctory, all of the reform proposals that the PO–PSL government introduced in the health sector, on science, or on economic policies had been discussed with major interest groups in advance. Prime Minister Tusk used to have a special advisor for relations with social partners, Michał Boni, who was in charge of drafting compromises and agreements with civil-society actors. In 2009 the government developed an anti-crisis package and renewed social dialogue with trade unions and employers in order to get acceptance for this measure. Since neither PO nor PSL has traditional ties to trade unions, which are united in their negative attitude toward governmental reforms, this made it quite difficult for the government to stick to its more deliberative way of policymaking. Irrespective of their size, trade unions are quite powerful in mobilizing their members to participate in demonstrations and engage in strikes. So, for example, in the automotive sector, they were quite successful in securing concessions from the government (Meardi and Trappmann 2013, 199–200; Ekiert and Kubik 2014, 51). However, despite their mobilizing power, as the relevance of classical industries is decreasing compared to the faster growth of employment in the service sector, there are few incentives for employees to join one of the traditional trade unions. While membership had been compulsory under socialism and still was up to 80 percent in the 1990s, it had dropped to 17 percent in 2007 and 12 percent in 2012 (Ekiert and Kubik 2014, 51).

Regarding the general impact that NGOs have on developing social capital and incentives for political participation, the picture is ambiguous. On the one hand, surveys show that social trust is not well developed. Many people express a rather high level of mistrust toward the political class and toward strangers, meaning non-family members. In 2014, only 22 percent of respondents said they trust strangers, while 75 percent thought one has to be careful. This was only slightly lower than the 2002 figures of 19 percent and 79 percent, respectively (CBOS 2014e, 8). The level of trust in charitable institutions such as the Polish Red Cross and Caritas is always above 80 percent; trust in the televised media (public and private) is also around 80 percent; and trust for the Catholic Church is at 61 percent. Police and military receive positive assessments of 71 percent and 66 percent respectively, compared to the 20–25 percent of trust in the parliament (CBOS 2014d).

On the other hand, as presented above, NGOs are able to mobilize people, sometimes in a destructive, but more often in a constructive manner. A critique of an overly neoliberal way of organizing the economy and societal relations is expressed. This is done not only through “voice” articulated in demonstrations and strikes organized by trade unions (Ekiert and Kubik 2014, 51), but more often through new forms of protest and participation in grassroots movements that often lack the more coherent structure of a NGO. For example, the Platform of the Outraged (Platforma



Oburzonych) addresses similar issues as “Occupy Wall Street” and raises public awareness, while women have founded self-help organizations such the MAMA foundation launched in 2006 in order to establish a network for young mothers regarding family and professional affairs (Siemieńska 2014, 150–52). Several tenant movements and other urban social movements organized in the Congress of Urban Movements try to convince city governments in Poland to shift their focus from “big capital” to projects that serve the majority of the people living in a city (Polanska Vergara 2015). Another new form of involving citizens is the model of participatory budgeting, which has been practiced in several Polish cities quite successfully and increased the will to participate in public affairs (Cześniak 2014a, 480).

Obviously, an outburst of class anger purely expressing dissatisfaction by those who did not gain from the system change did not occur in Poland. Such people either feel alienated from politics and do not participate any longer or do not vote,<sup>12</sup> or they look for alternative channels to exert some influence on political decision-making. In this sense, the ongoing societal change creates a new cleavage between the more educated, who engage in civil society and try to advance their interests, and other parts of the population who simply drop out of politics. Thus, although NGOs and social movements do have an impact as mediators of social conflicts, this is more or less a middle-class and urban activity (Tybuchowska-Hartlińska 2015). Politicians should be more concerned that those social strata that do not profit from socioeconomic development abstain from politics since they have several structural barriers to overcome.

## CONCLUSION

This study has offered evidence for the assumption that the level of satisfaction with democracy in Poland is to a great extent rooted in the country’s economic stability. It has made a majority of the population more prosperous and led to a decline in inequality. Hence, the factors that Lipset (1959) and Inglehart and Welzel (2010) consider as relevant to initiate and then to maintain democracy provide explanations for the question why Poland did not follow the same trend as its neighboring countries: there is a general and stable consensus on democracy that is based on the material benefits from the system change and the related social developments (Zawojcka and Siudek 2014).

This outcome allows for two interpretations: First, Poles support democracy *only* because and as long as they consider it as beneficial for their material well-being; this is what Easton (1975) calls specific support. Second, the post-1989 modernization process, which enabled a growing number of citizens to access higher education and work in the services sector, has helped to develop and foster “emancipative” values. Both are true. According to Siemieńska

(2014, 147), citizens holding post-materialist values accounted for 37 percent of the population in 2012. In 2014, 50 percent of Poles were satisfied with how democracy works in practice and 66 percent supported democracy as a form of government (CBOS 2014a), so there is also one-half to one-third of the population that is not overly satisfied, despite economic development.

This mixed result has an impact on the level of participation. While it was assessed as rather low in the 1990s and early 2000s (Paczynska 2005), it has substantially increased in the meantime, but it is mainly urban and well-educated people who become active in public affairs. They engage in conventional forms of participation in education, charitable and other social organizations, and, more recently and more frequently, in new and multifaceted forms of protest and less institutionalized grassroots movements (Siemieńska 2014, 150–53, Polanska Vergara 2015). Political activists support established structures and parties but they also express discontent with urban living conditions and/or negative outcomes of the economic change. While some are part of a leftist, progressive environment, there are also more conservative, national(ist) movements that speak up in society (Cześniak 2014a, 477). Only involvement in party politics is not a desire for most Poles, although the 2007 parliamentary elections, with the highest turnout since 1989, demonstrated that voters can have an impact and change the composition and political style of the government.

The level of contented but silent supporters of democracy and active, dissatisfied but democratic activists is likely to increase considering the continuously positive macro-economic data in Poland, the equalizing impact of the EU on regional disparities, and the opportunities for political engagement.

However, the positive relation between development and political participation is valid for only around one-half to one-third of the society. As the collected data also prove, those who do not profit from better education, better jobs, health care, stable incomes, and improved infrastructure feel neglected and turn away from politics or toward populist parties. Only to a lesser extent do they protest against the circumstances they criticize. Obviously these people’s experiences cannot be mediated, whether by established political parties or by civic organizations. This development is well known also in the so-called established democracies of Western Europe (Schäfer 2012).

Until the October 2015 elections, expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy as a political system and low trust in political parties did not endanger the state of democracy in Poland. Now, since PiS is again in charge of governing the country and is heavily engaged in dismantling the institutional control mechanisms of political power. Does this mean that those parts of the population who were not winners from modernization and those who hold anti-democratic attitudes decided the election? The answer is

rather no. Considering the turnout of 51 percent and the 37.58 percent of the vote total that went to PiS, the current government of PiS, in an electoral coalition with PR and SP, was elected by only 19 percent of eligible voters (Markowski 2016, 4). PiS did attract dissatisfied voters with their campaign promises on social and family policies, especially voters who are highly discontented with their temporary work contracts, and they managed to gain a large amount of votes from former PSL voters, since PiS argued they could make even better deals with Brussels. But not all PiS voters belong to the “working poor” and, more important, not all of them support the current institutional reforms (Bachmann 2016, 41 and 58).

The traditional voters of PiS are composed of rural, less educated, economically less successful voters, but also of people who want to protect traditional values and a strong state. Hence, the outcome of the elections is rather an expression of the liberal–national and urban–rural divide regarding values and not only material circumstances, since people who have jobs and can make their living may nevertheless fear the changes in a globalized world. In addition, this election is the result of a strategic and successful political usage of these divides by PiS, whereas PO and PSL lost because of their underperformance. Among other reasons,<sup>13</sup> both of their campaigns were low-profile and did not mobilize their voters the way PiS did. What followed after the elections—in particular, the restrictions on the Constitutional Tribunal and the public media—had not been announced during the campaign, and there was immediate and strong protest against these measures. The many large and countrywide demonstrations organized by the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji; KOD), plus the opposition in parliament expressed by Nowoczesna and the reorganized PO, are a confirmation of the strength of democratic beliefs and practices held by a decisive part of Polish society and political actors.

Considering the developments in Poland before 2015 and after, what makes this case relevant in the light of modernization theory are three insights. First, as Inglehart and Welzel argue, the processes contributing to the emergence of emancipative values are highly dependent on context and other structural conditions, such as underlying religious and historical cleavages. This can be studied in Poland. Second, and what was not explicitly considered by modernization theory, is how political actors can make use of these cleavages. In Poland, the political dividing line is no longer the socialist/post-socialist history of political parties per se; however, PiS is a party that aims to keep this cleavage alive and to transfer it to its rivalry with the liberal PO and now Nowoczesna. Looking at their ability to bind specific groups of voters, one can go so far as to argue that the socialist/post-socialist cleavage was just a temporary substitute for an older cleavage in Poland that can be framed in terms of the religious, sociocultural, and territorial East–West cleavage.<sup>14</sup> Third, the case of Poland shows that modernization does not always produce post-materialist

values but can rather induce the opposite and lead people to hold on to national values in times of real or perceived social change, despite growing personal income. This is another aspect that Inglehart and Welzel did not sufficiently cover in their research and that deserves further research to better understand the populist-nationalist movement, not only in Poland but also elsewhere in Europe.

## NOTES

1. In the BTI, Poland’s score from 2006 to 2014 increased from 8.90 to 9.16, which translated to a ranking of 5 out of 129 countries. The SGI lists Poland at rank 8 among 41 OECD countries, and the Freedom House (FH) *Nations in Transit* report for 2014 considered Poland to be fully consolidated at rank 4 out of 29 transition countries. The SGI integrates six aggregate indicators, including information from the BTI and FH plus many others, and places Poland on a higher or similar level as the average OECD high-income countries. See [www.sgi-network.org/2014/](http://www.sgi-network.org/2014/); [www.bti-project.de/bti-home/](http://www.bti-project.de/bti-home/); Czeńnik (2014a); and <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#reports>, all last accessed on July 7, 2015.
2. In fact, two other parties, Poland Together (Polska Razem) and Solidary Poland (Solidarna Polska), had formed an electoral coalition with PiS and ran collectively on one list (Markowski 2016, 1).
3. Economic growth in Poland was 4.3 percent in 2011, 2.8 percent in 2012, and up to 3.3 percent in 2014 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014).
4. For a more detailed discussion of Poland’s stance on Europe and the EU, which oscillates between very positive perceptions connected to the image of Poland as a “model European”, stemming from a belief in shared common values and seeing EU membership as a “civilizational choice” that in addition brings benefits such as free movement and access to labor markets, and other, more skeptical and national attitudes that are to an extent nourished by a feeling of disappointment, due to the conviction that, despite its size and growing impact within the EU, Poland is still not treated as an equal key player by the larger and older member states (see Szczerbiak 2012).
5. One positive aspect surely is that Poland’s main trading partner, Germany, which supplies 22 percent of Polish imports and takes 26–30 percent of Polish exports, was also comparatively less affected by the economic crisis (Buras 2013, 18).
6. Sticking to this time frame is relevant for comparative purposes, as it is the common period of analysis for all of the articles in this special issue. In 2007 parliamentary elections took place in Poland, so this is another relevant juncture.
7. Women in general still earn only about 60 percent of what men earn, are increasingly more often unemployed than men (11.0 percent of women compared to 9.3 percent of men in 2011), and are often the target of violence (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014, 10 and 15).
8. In her case study, Gwiazda (2013) finds a party consensus on EU regional policy across government and opposition, which became especially manifest after EU accession.
9. Between 1992 and 2006 the curves had been closer to each other, oscillating between 36 percent and 44 percent for the “disagree” position and 45 percent to 50 percent for “agree” (CBOS 2014a, 15).
10. However, there is a tendency toward cartel parties, as all parties have become dependent on state subsidies. Between 2005 and 2011 public funds constituted no less than 55 percent of the major parties’ income, and PiS was 95 percent reliant on state resources (Casal Bértoa and Walecki 2014, 342; Innes 2014).
11. Turnout was 40.87 percent in 2005 and between 44 percent and 48 percent in previous and later elections (Markowski 2016, 5).
12. I owe this assessment Jerzy Wiatr, who stressed the nonvoter problem in Poland in his contribution at the Conference of the Central

European Political Sciences Association in Prague on September 26, 2014.

13. Other factors explaining the defeat of PO are connected to the so-called tape scandal, when PO politicians were secretly recorded in a restaurant using disrespectful language; the fact that Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz administered the government after Donald Tusk had left; the loss of the presidential election in May 2015; and open support for PiS by the Catholic Church (Markowski 2016, 2–3).
14. For a more detailed analysis of the traditional cleavages within Polish society dating back to communist and pre-communist times, see Castle and Taras (2002).

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