

Poland: A Case of Top-Down Polarization

By
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Poland represents a surprising case of democratic backsliding since the return to power of the PiS party in 2015, given that positive conditions associated with democracy are present—consistent strong per capita economic growth since 1989, moderate inequality, rising wages, strong preference for democracy, high levels of happiness, and a parliamentary system with proportional representation. The lack of strong underlying cleavages indicates the polarization was not bottom up. Instead, this article argues that polarization was driven from the top down by a segment of the political class that donned the cloak of radical populist anti-establishmentarianism to gain popular support, win an election, and rewrite the constitutional rules of the game to its own benefit. The Polish case points to the importance of elite cues, and especially the pernicious consequences of system-delegitimizing rhetoric, creating distrust in the media and institutions.

Keywords: Poland; democratic backsliding; top-down polarization

Since the elections of 2015, Poland has joined the ranks of countries experiencing democratic backsliding. It was a process driven from the top down by a segment of the political class that donned the cloak of radical populist anti-establishmentarianism to gain popular support, win an election, and rewrite the constitutional rules of the game to its own benefit. Put differently, Poland's democratic backsliding story is essentially one of "establishment insiders 'breaking bad,'" to borrow a phrase from Hanley and Dawson (2017). As argued by

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Tworzecki and Markowski (2017), having won by a twist of domestic and international circumstances unlikely to be repeated, The Law and Justice Party (PiS) set about changing the rules so it could carry out what it called an “exchange of elites” (i.e., rewarding its activists and supporters in a tidal wave of patronage and clientelism) with both permanence and impunity. In terms of the three patterns described in McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018), Poland therefore fits in the category of democratic erosion under new elites.

Although Poland is routinely mentioned in journalistic accounts and academic studies as one of many cases of backsliding or outright breakdown, in important ways it stands apart from the rest. Indeed, the puzzle presented by Poland is that it appears to contradict decades of accumulated political science research on transitions to and from democracy in that it lacks any of the major risk factors identified by previous literature, such as persistent economic dysfunction, crippling racial or ethnic divisions, polarizing winner-take-all institutions (e.g., presidentialism or single-member-district elections), or pernicious international entanglements (e.g., trade dependence on nondemocracies).

The Puzzle of Poland’s Democratic Erosion (2015–18)

Contrary to the expectations of theories that associate risks to democracies with low incomes,¹ inequality (Acemoglu and Robinson 2005; Boix 2003), or poor economic performance (Kapstein and Converse 2008; Svobik 2013; Bernhard, Reenock, and Nordstrom 2003), Poland has seen its per capita GDP increase by 4.1 percent per year since 1989—a remarkable record, matched in the middle/high income country category only by South Korea (Piatkowski 2018). Economic inequality in Poland is moderate by European and low by global standards,² *oligarchization* is a nonissue (the ratio of billionaire wealth to GDP, at 1.3 percent, is among the lowest in the world; see Brzeziński 2017), unemployment is in single digits, and incomes have not stagnated, as in some democracies, but risen steadily, if unevenly, across the board.³ Nevertheless, perceptions of inequitable distributions of material gain have created a type of legitimacy deficit for the post-Cold War system, ably exploited by rising populist parties as described here.

Poland’s membership in the European Union (EU) and dependence on trade and investment from other EU member states should have resulted, in line with “linkage and leverage” theories (Levitsky and Way 2006), in significant pressure on elites to maintain the liberal-democratic package of popular accountability, transparency, and rule of law.

On the political/institutional side, Poland should have been safe from anyone’s authoritarian ambitions thanks to a parliamentary system⁴ and a proportional electoral law, both of which should have—at least in theory—discouraged the kind of zero-sum politics characteristic of presidentialism, especially when combined with single-member district legislative elections (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997). Furthermore, Poland’s constitution features a comprehensive set of checks and balances, along with both domestic (Constitutional Tribunal, truly

independent Central Bank) and external (the European Union) constraints on the power of raw majoritarianism.

In terms of actual political practice, between 1989 and 2015, Poland's parliamentary elections have resulted in seven peaceful handovers of power (including to and from the communist successor party), which, in view of "habituation"⁵ theories should have given the political elite plenty of time to internalize democratic norms, or, alternatively, in view of "institutional stickiness" theories, should have been plenty of time for the emergence of system-stabilizing, self-reinforcing dynamics (Pierson 2004, 10). Indeed, at 26 years old, Poland's democracy should not have been fragile in view of the expected impact of time on democratic survival.⁶

Last, surveys of the Polish public in the run-up to the 2015 elections showed very high levels of happiness and satisfaction with life,⁷ and a strong preference for democracy over any other political system (76 percent), positive evaluations of democratic performance (59 percent), and no evidence of any significant shift in these attitudes compared with previous years (Markowski and Kotnarowski 2016; Markowski and Tworzecki 2016).

Despite these highly favorable circumstances, after the elections of 2015 Poland experienced a period of unprecedented political turmoil. PiS, having won the presidency and majorities in both chambers of parliament (a slim 51 percent of seats in the lower house, based on winning just under 38 percent of the popular vote),⁸ almost instantly embarked on an agenda of far-reaching systemic change. Lacking the two-thirds of majority needed to change the constitution outright, as Hungary's government had done several years earlier, PiS sought to accomplish the same goal through ordinary legislation. When the Constitutional Tribunal objected, its rulings were ignored until it could be packed with government supporters, some of whom were sworn in by the president—a strong partisan of PiS himself, who made no effort to stand in the government's way—in a rushed, middle-of-the-night ceremony. The national legislature was likewise turned into a rubber-stamp body through routine side-stepping of parliamentary procedure.⁹

On the executive side, the offices of the president and prime minister were reduced to mere decorations, while actual decision-making power came to be exercised extra-constitutionally by the PiS party chairman, Jarosław Kaczyński. Kaczyński—who had previously served as prime minister in a PiS-led coalition government during 2005–2007—was technically only an ordinary member of the lower house of parliament, but he was routinely referred to by his subordinates as *Naczelnik* (leader)—the informal title once held by Poland's father of independence, Józef Piłsudski, who became the country's authoritarian strongman during the interwar years (1926–35).

Effectively freed from constitutional constraints, the new government pushed through a flurry of laws aimed at undermining the independence and oversight functions of the judiciary, bringing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and commercial media to heel through restrictive regulatory measures, limiting citizens' freedoms of speech and assembly, increasing the government's surveillance powers, restricting property rights (e.g., the ability to freely dispose of privately owned farmland), and changing the civil service law to remove merit criteria for appointments so as to be able to fill state jobs with party loyalists.¹⁰ The

government also made a number of potentially troubling changes to electoral laws and to institutions responsible for the conduct of elections (Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier 2018).

Along the way, these extra-constitutional actions were accompanied by a propaganda offensive in state-owned and private, progovernment media outlets that eerily mimicked both the style and substance of the Kremlin's messaging in Putin's Russia: delegitimizing parliamentary and civic opposition as enemies and traitors, while stoking xenophobia and ethnic nationalism, with particular hostility directed toward liberal-democratic values and toward the European Union as their institutional embodiment (Chapman 2017).

Simultaneously, however, in what were some of the largest downwardly redistributive transfers of the post-1989 period, the PiS government introduced a new tax-free child subsidy, brought in a free prescription drug benefit for the elderly, and reduced the retirement age raised by the previous governing coalition. And even though it continually stressed its anticommunism, time and again the government made a nod in the direction of those nostalgic for the days of a command economy, criticizing the sell-off of state-owned enterprises and collective farms during the privatizations of the 1990s, and signaling its commitment to the idea that the state should once again oversee economic development and take upon itself the burdens of providing citizens with employment, housing, and child-care.¹¹ Critical voices, both among opposition elites and segments of the public (particularly the urban middle classes) concerned about the economic consequences of these policies, were dismissed as mere protestations of those who had to give up their "place at the trough" in favor of people victimized and left behind during the post-1989 transition to a market-based economy.

In the nearly three years that have elapsed since the 2015 election, Polish society has remained deeply conflicted about these developments. Surveys continue to show that strong majorities support the government's downwardly redistributive social programs, but majorities almost as large recognize that it does not follow the rule of law.¹² Likewise, even though PiS still—as of mid-2018—retains a strong lead in the polls,¹³ its support has shrunk back to the same <40 percent level it had received in the 2015 election, which, given Poland's history of roughly 50 percent turnouts, may be interpreted as <20 percent of the total electorate, or somewhere between 5.1 and 5.7 million voters (Markowski 2018). Put another way: the generous social programs brought the governing party no great popularity gains over its election result; but then its takeover of the judiciary and attempts to curtail various rights and liberties did not result in significant losses.

So if "PiS did not appear out of nowhere" (as many Polish political commentators are fond of saying), if the country's democratic backsliding has its root causes stretching back many years, what are they? There are a number of possible explanations, including on the demand-side, the supply-side, and various combinations of both. Taking a cue from recent American literature (Abramowitz 2010; Webster and Abramowitz 2017; Mason 2018; Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), this article takes up the proposition that the key mechanisms at work in Poland have been asymmetric polarization at the elite level (meaning that one major party—PiS—broke with the prevailing liberal-democratic consensus and moved toward ever more extreme

positions), resulting in polarization at the level of the electorate. Examining both aspects of the story is beyond the scope of this article, and therefore the empirical analyses that follows focuses on the mass level; however, the next section gives a brief synopsis of how and why one party reneged on its commitment to the democratic rules of the game and embraced the idea of an antisystemic revolt.

Polarization among the Elites

The elections of 2015, which precipitated Poland's turn of democratic backsliding, may be viewed as the final act in the evolution of the country's second post-communist party system. The first system, which lasted from 1989 until 2005, pitted the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)—the modernized heirs of the former Communist Party—against the diverse heirs of the oppositional Solidarity Movement. The SLD featured broad elite consensus on key issues, including the overall goal of “westernization,” understood as building up the institutional framework of liberal democracy and a market-based economy.

By the early 2000s, however, amid an economic slowdown and anxieties related to Poland's approaching EU accession date, there were signs that the party system was about to undergo significant changes. Chief among these were the gradual unraveling of the SLD in the wake of corruption scandals and the rise of populist, anti-establishment parties of various stripes.¹⁴ This turn of events paved the way for the emergence of a second party system oriented along a new axis of “liberalism vs. solidarism,” which pitted the beneficiaries of the post-1989 economic and political transformation against those who felt that they had experienced a decline in their economic well-being or their social esteem (Markowski 2006).

Two new parties, both created in 2001, were in the forefront of this transformation: PiS and the Civic Platform (PO). Although at first ideological and programmatic differences between them were small (both positioned themselves as center-right, and it was widely assumed that they would form a PO-PiS coalition government after the next elections), in the years that followed, they positioned themselves on opposing sides of this new cleavage. Specifically, the PO kept a center-right stance, directing its message to more economically prosperous individuals who were generally content with the direction and socioeconomic consequences of the post-1989 transformation. By contrast, having invented and popularized the “liberalism vs. solidarism” discourse during the 2005 election campaign, PiS set about questioning not only the distributive consequences of the transformation, but also increasingly the entire post-1989 liberal-democratic political order itself. Directing its message to culturally traditionalist (Catholic church-goers) and economically hard-pressed voters, PiS advocated systemic change in the direction of ethno-religious majoritarianism. It produced in 2005 and 2010 two complete drafts of a new constitution that, in addition to enshrining national-Catholicism as the de facto state ideology, would have centralized power in the hands of an executive presidency virtually unconstrained by institutional checks and balances.¹⁵

After winning both the presidency and the plurality of parliamentary seats in the 2005 elections, PiS formed a coalition government with two small populist

parties on the right and the left (LPR and Self-Defense). Unhappy with having to depend on their support, PiS set about to co-opt or neutralize these small parties' leaders and absorb their electorates. In early elections in 2007, however, PiS lost to the PO and spent the next eight years in opposition.¹⁶

It was during those eight years that PiS became more and more radical in its rejection of the status quo. This radicalization happened for two main reasons. The first had to do with incentives created by the cultural prominence of authoritarian ideologies, principally the aforementioned 1930s-style national Catholicism—a type of integral nationalism that had never been discredited in East-Central Europe in the same way it had been in the postwar West. This ideology was bolstered by its embrace from powerful societal actors (namely Poland's Catholic Church, which with the passage of time became ever more reactionary) willing to join PiS to carry out a “cultural counterrevolution”¹⁷ aimed at reversing the emancipatory trends initiated by the fall of communism and restoring something resembling the hierarchical social order of a century earlier. In a country where almost 40 percent of the population attends religious services at least weekly, and where hardly a week goes by without a public pronouncement by a senior clergyman likening liberalism to “soft totalitarianism” and parliamentary democracy to a “dictatorship of materialism,”¹⁸ the impact of this alliance should not be underestimated. In particular, it has the potential for systematically undermining popular support for liberal-democratic values and institutions.

The second reason for the PiS radicalization had to do with internal politics of autocratically run political parties. While it is true that many Polish parties have long suffered from institutional underdevelopment and internal democratic deficits, PiS was an extreme case, fitting Panebianco's (1988, 147) definition of a *charismatic party* in which there exists “total symbiosis between the leader and the organizational identity.” Indeed, one could go further and argue that, due to the extent of this symbiosis, PiS was not so much an “organization” (a term that implies a degree of institutionalization and depersonalization), but rather the private domain of its chairman,¹⁹ a type that some literature refers to as a *personal party*—one held together only by the founder's authority (McDonnell 2016, 723). Consequently, although for a few years after its founding in 2001—when it was still a moderate, mainstream party—PiS could accommodate within its ranks a number of moderate, mainstream politicians with national reputations of their own, afterwards it became clear that Mr. Kaczyński insisted on treating the party as his personal property, the party was subjected to a process of negative selection, shedding its best and brightest and replacing them with more “plebeian” cadres—people with little to lose and potentially much to gain from a fundamental transformation of the social, economic, and political orders in a manner that would discount meritocratic criteria in favor of political patronage and clientelism.

In the years that followed, these politicians advanced the party through ideological outbidding, knocking out rivals in “purity tests” and engaging in displays of fervent loyalty to the leader. The result was radicalization, leader cult reminiscent of a religious sect, and ultimately full-blown authoritarianism not just in the party's internal politics, but in its relationship with the voter base and its approach to constitutionalism and the rule of law. After President Lech Kaczyński (the twin

brother of PiS leader Jarosław) died in 2010 in an airplane crash in Smolensk, Russia, these trends only accelerated, and PiS became a kind of quasi-church with its own martyr (the dead president), its dogma (belief that the crash was the result of a conspiracy between the Kremlin and the president's domestic enemies), its special rituals (monthly processions through the center of Warsaw to commemorate the president's death), and its prophet-leader Jarosław on a mission to take the suffering nation to the promised land.

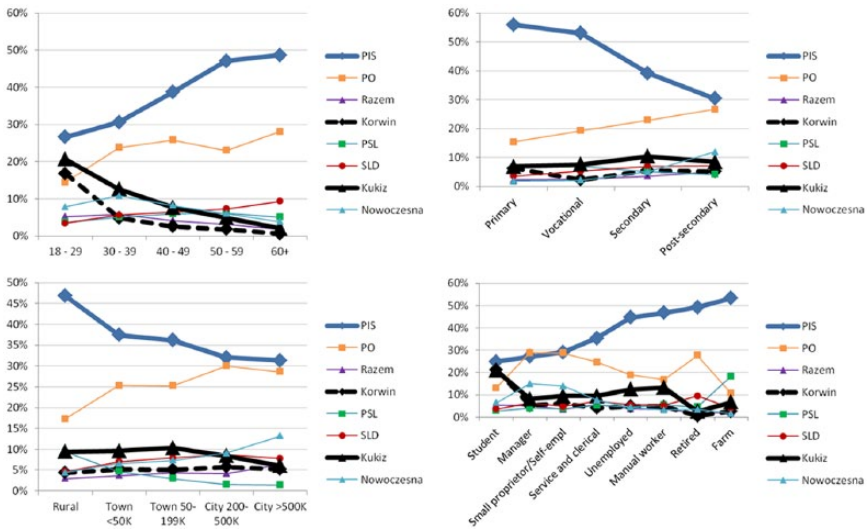
To be clear, seeking to change the constitution by itself (assuming, of course, that PiS had won a sufficiently large majority to do this according to the rules) would fall well within the confines of normal democratic politics; however, with the passage of time, the party's other positions became much more pernicious in the sense of making a systematic effort to delegitimize existing institutions (including elections), sow mistrust by normalizing conspiracy theories, and flood the news environment with false information. Through its aligned media outlets (including Church-owned ones), PiS and its allies in the media sought to create an alternative reality in which pre-2015 Poland was portrayed not as an economically thriving democracy, but as a country "in ruins" where elites lived the high life while the people suffered, election results were falsified, corruption and lawlessness were rampant, non-PiS media outlets could not be trusted, dissent was repressed, and protesting workers risked being shot by the police.

Polarization among the Electorate

Poland's polarization, then, has been asymmetric: the PiS moved toward an extreme position of reneging on its commitment to respect the constitution, while its main rival (PO) did not change its position and remained a broadly centrist mainstream party. To what extent did this asymmetric polarization on the part of one political party translate into polarization at the level of the general electorate? Might Poland have witnessed a process similar to the one described by Svoboda (2017, 1) in the case of Venezuela, whereby "voters in polarized societies are ... willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests"? The answers are far from obvious. PiS' internal culture of unquestioning obedience to the leader meant that it was capable of toning down its radicalism temporarily, whenever he commanded it, as happened in the 2015 election campaign. Indeed, in the early days of the campaign, especially during the presidential contest, the party's most controversial figures, including Mr. Kaczyński himself, largely withdrew from public view and the presidential campaign was dominated by ordinary issues (old age pensions, child support policies, etc.).

Then again, the tone of the parliamentary campaign that followed a few weeks later had a much harsher edge, with leading PiS figures saying manifestly untrue things like "GDP growth is mainly on paper, Poles are getting poorer, the middle class is disappearing" (Cienski 2015). In addition, PiS instrumentalized the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, presenting it as a multifaceted threat to physical security (in the words of top PiS figures, the refugees would not only bring

FIGURE 1
Electorate Demographics

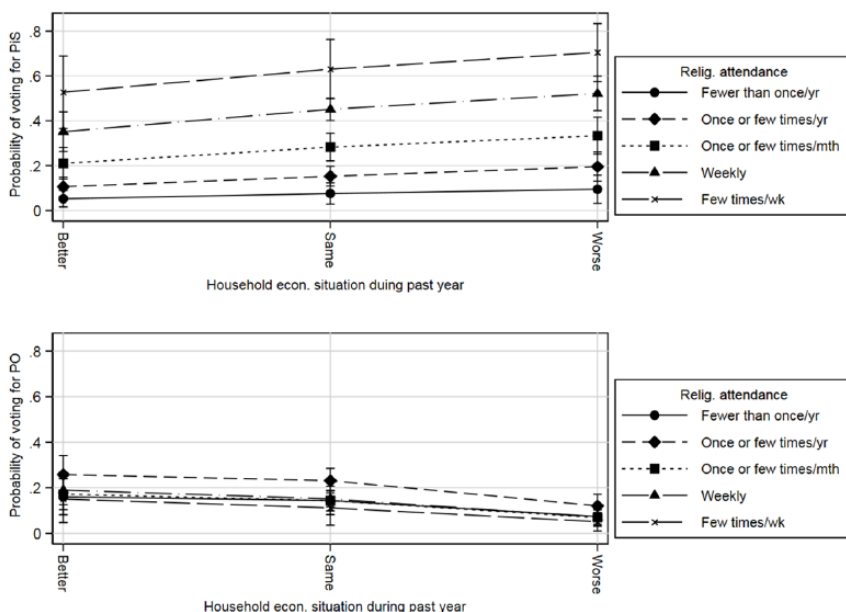


SOURCE: October 25, 2015 parliamentary election; IPSOS exit poll data.
NOTE: Percent of vote for a given party in a given category: age, education, urbanization, job-type.

“diseases and parasites,” but also “blow up Polish infants”), to identity and sacred values (they would “turn churches into lavatories”), and to economic well-being (they would compete with locals for welfare payments, housing subsidies, etc.) (Wasik and Foy 2015). This was clearly about firing up the base, not about appealing to moderate voters.

When it was all over, PiS won the plurality (37.6 percent) of votes, while the incumbent PO-PSL coalition came in second with the combined total of 29.2 percent. The exit polls (Figure 1) showed that, as expected, PiS did best among its core electorate of older, rural, less-educated voters employed in less-skilled occupations; however, it won pluralities in virtually all socioeconomic categories. The only exception was among those employed in managerial positions—PiS tied with PO. A new party, called Nowoczesna (Modern), tried to offer a sharply defined liberal alternative to PO’s centrist blandness, and succeeded in winning 7.6 percent of votes, but even among its core target of urban professionals it lagged far behind PiS and PO.²⁰ Notably, in the 18–29 age category the two largest parties (i.e., PO and PiS) did the worst, and the two small antisystem parties registered their strongest showing. These two were “Kukiz’15,” an anarchistic-flavored right-populist party started by a former punk rocker Pawel Kukiz; and “Korwin,” an odd libertarian-monarchist outfit led by the provocateur European Parliament member Janusz Korwin-Mikke, whose penchant for making bigoted statements got him suspended by the European Parliament in 2017 (Rankin 2017).

FIGURE 2
 Predicted Probability of Voting for PiS vs. PO in 2015

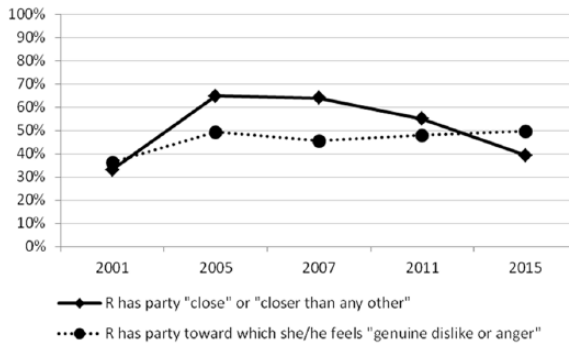


SOURCE: Polish National Election Survey data.

Put another way, if we look only at the three thicker lines in Figure 1 indicating “antisystem” parties (i.e., those that ran on a radical critique of the status quo combined with a call for fundamental systemic change), we could make the argument that the goal of dismantling the status quo was backed by a collection of social groups that included older individuals from traditionalist social settings (close-knit, religious, rural) voting for PiS with its old-fashioned national Catholicism, as well as younger persons from diverse backgrounds (and not necessarily with low socio-economic status) voting for the more eclectic populism of Kukiz'15 and Korwin. Conversely, supporters of the status quo were concentrated among the middle and older age groups, principally among the urban middle classes.

Since the exit poll asked neither about income nor religious attendance, it might be useful to supplement it by looking at relevant data from the postelection Polish National Election Survey (PGSW) to obtain a better purchase of whether economic anxieties (operationalized here as perception that the financial condition of the respondent’s household had worsened over the previous year) or cultural factors (commitment to traditionalist, identity-reinforcing rituals, operationalized here as regular attendance at religious services) were more predictive of voting for the two largest parties, PiS and PO.²¹ As Figure 2 reveals, religious attendance was more predictive of the vote than economic assessments, especially in case of PiS. These results are not surprising in view of other research

FIGURE 3
Positive and Negative Affective Partisanship



SOURCE: PGSW data.

on Polish voters (see, for example, Jasiewicz 2009), which had consistently shown that **religiosity mattered more than economic circumstances**.

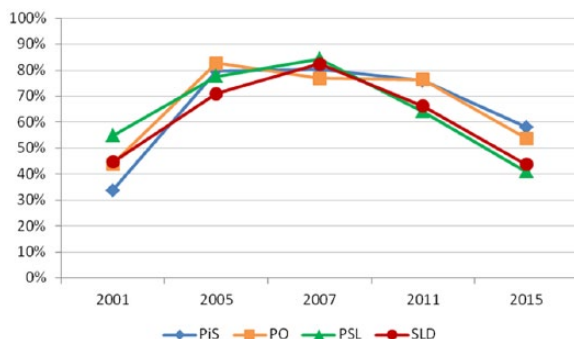
Polarization and Erosion of Democratic Norms

It should be noted, however, that the picture presented above is suggestive more of social sorting than polarization.²² So what specific evidence is there that in the run-up to 2015 the Polish public had become polarized in a way that made democratic backsliding possible in the manner described by McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018)? Specifically, was there a rise in 1) affective polarization, especially in the sense of negative partisanship where voters express more negative sentiment about opposing parties than positive sentiment about their own party, and 2) ideological polarization, in the sense of partisan divergence on evaluations of and normative commitment to democracy? McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) hypothesize that growing affective polarization and the zero-sum perceptions associated with us-vs.-them politics will lead partisan supporters to tolerate illiberal behavior by their own party, and thus the erosion of democratic norms. The analyses that follow take up these questions by looking at successive waves (2001, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015) of the PGSW, each of which was conducted in the immediate aftermath of a parliamentary election on a nationally representative random sample of respondents using face-to-face interviews.

Affective polarization: Sympathy and antipathy toward political parties

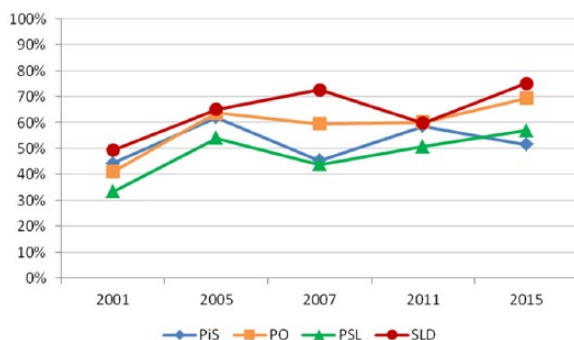
Let us consider first the question of affective polarization. Figure 3 shows that, in 2001, around a third of respondents mentioned a party that they considered in line with their beliefs, while roughly the same proportion said that there was a party toward which they felt “genuine dislike or anger.” The graph shows a spike

FIGURE 4
Positive Affective Partisanship, by Vote in Parliamentary Election



SOURCE: PGSW data.

FIGURE 5
Negative Affective Partisanship, by Vote in Parliamentary Election

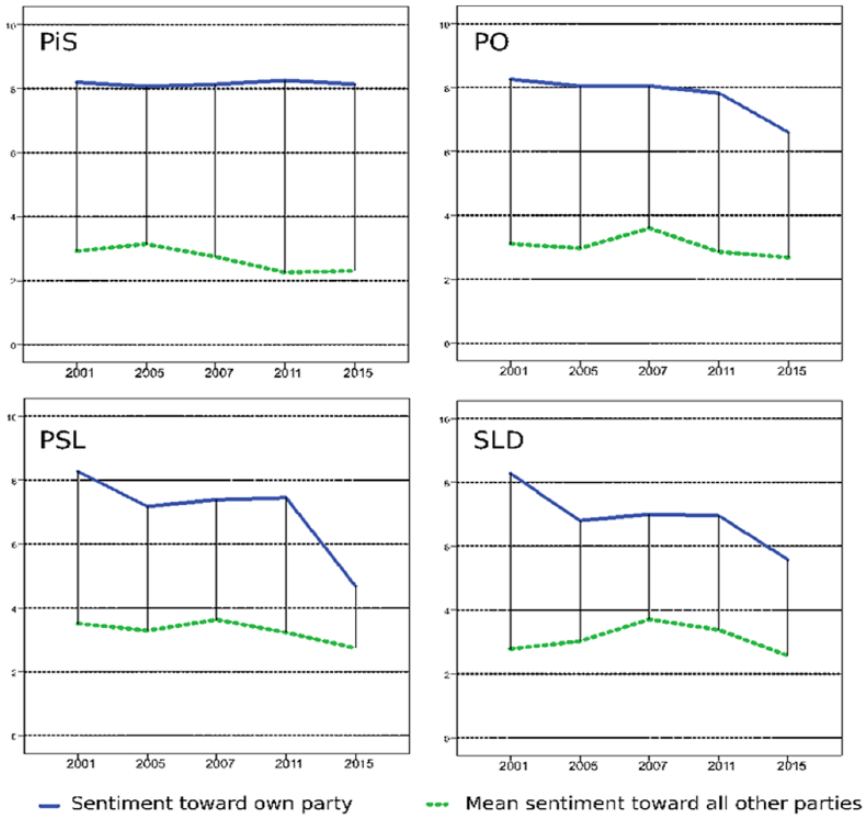


SOURCE: PGSW data.

in positive partisanship during 2005–07 followed by a small decline, while the level of negative partisanship from 2001 onward has remained much more flat.

But perhaps beneath these overall trends there were changes in the level of affective partisanship—of either the positive or negative variety—within specific party electorates?²³ This appears not to have been the case. As Figure 4 makes clear, positive partisanship rises pretty uniformly in the electorates of the four major parties in 2005–07, and then declines in all four, with just a slightly smaller decline among voters of the two largest parties (PiS and PO). With regard to negative partisanship (Figure 5), there are some differences among parties, but no steep rise in any one electorate, not even among PiS voters, despite all the angry rhetoric coming from that party’s elites.

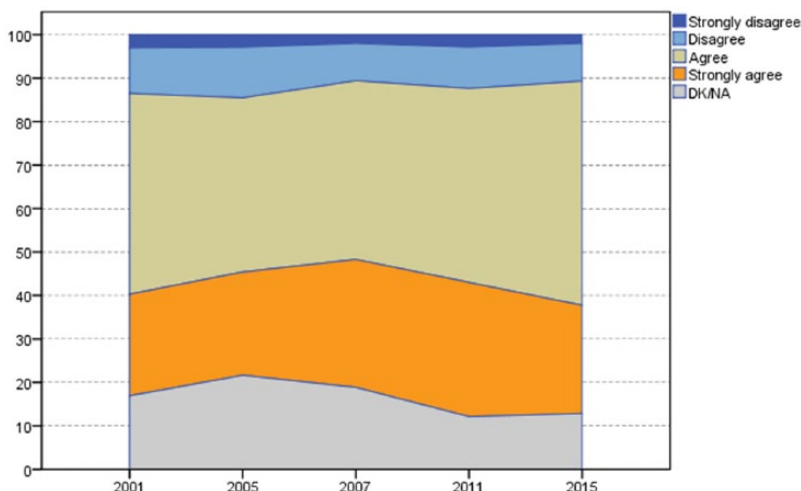
FIGURE 6
Affective Differential Plots



SOURCE: PGSW data.

Another way to examine the possibility that there might have been a rise in affective polarization is to consider how responses on “feeling thermometer” scales (i.e., how much the respondent likes a given party, on a scale from 0 to 10) have changed over the years. To do so, Figure 6 shows the “affective differentials,” meaning differences between sentiments toward one’s own party (solid lines) vs. the mean value of sentiments toward all other parties (dashed lines). It would appear that respondents for whom PiS was the party “close or closer than any other” (the top left of Figure 6) have remained much more steady in their positive feelings (the solid line in that top left graph is almost completely flat) than any of the others, whose positive sentiment have all declined. Further, the affective differential of PiS respondents (indicated by vertical range lines between solid and dashed lines) is not only the largest among the four partisan groups, but has increased over the years, while it has shrunk in the other three electorates. Put another way, uniquely among Polish parties, PiS appears to have

FIGURE 7
Democracy is Better Than Any Other System



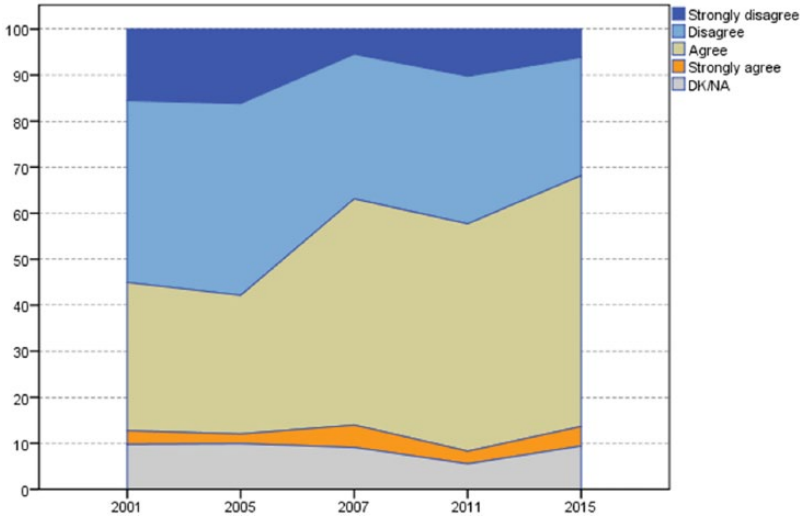
SOURCE: PGSW data.

succeeded in creating an electorate with a strong and lasting positive sentiment toward itself, and with a larger affective distance toward all of its competitors. Now, this was surely not the reason PiS decided to embark on a course of democratic backsliding, but it might have played some role in its calculations, in that having a uniquely committed electorate gave its leaders the confidence that they might just get away with a brazen power grab.

Ideological polarization: Support for democracy

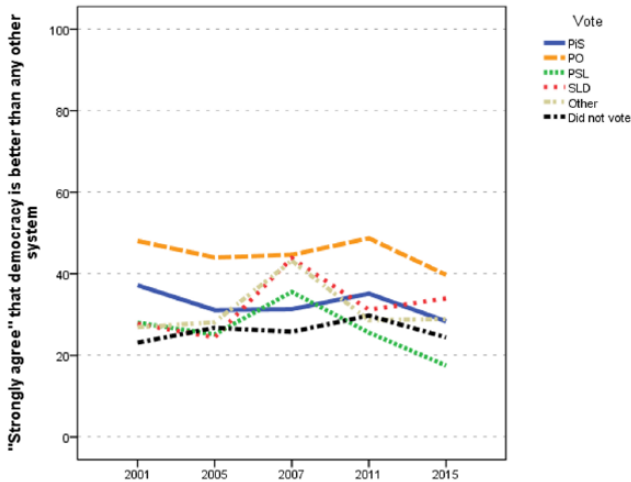
Let us turn now to examining the issue of prodemocratic sentiments more directly to see if a declining normative commitment among voters may be emboldening party leadership to violate democratic norms. The PGSW surveys contain one question that gauges respondents' commitment to democracy in the normative sense, as well as another question asking them to evaluate democracy's actual performance. The overall distributions of responses to these questions are shown in Figure 7 ("Is democracy better than any other system?") and Figure 8 ("Is democracy in Poland performing well?"). On the normative side, the data show a small and steadily shrinking proportion (to around 10 percent by 2015) of respondents who might be described as nondemocrats. By contrast, the prodemocratic "strongly agree" responses are consistently in the 30 percent range, while the "agree" category has grown from around 40 percent in 1997 to 60 percent in 2015 (so 90 percent support democracy as a system). On the evaluative "Is democracy in Poland performing well?" question, the responses are somewhat less enthusiastic, with a consistently small proportion (3–5 percent) of "strongly

FIGURE 8
Democracy in Poland is Performing Well



SOURCE: PGSW data.

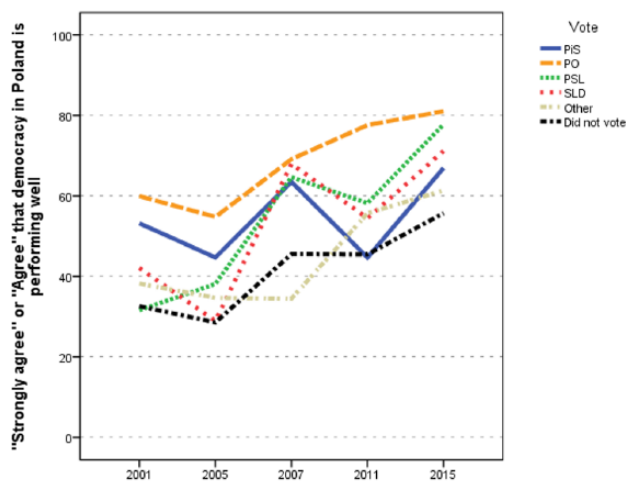
FIGURE 9
Differences in Normative Commitment to Democracy, by Vote in Parliamentary Election



SOURCE: PGSW data.

agree” responses, but a steadily growing (to 55percent in 2015) proportion of “agrees.” At first glance then, these figures do not seem to indicate a democracy

FIGURE 10
Differences in Evaluations of Democratic Performance, by Vote
in Parliamentary Election



SOURCE: PGSW data.

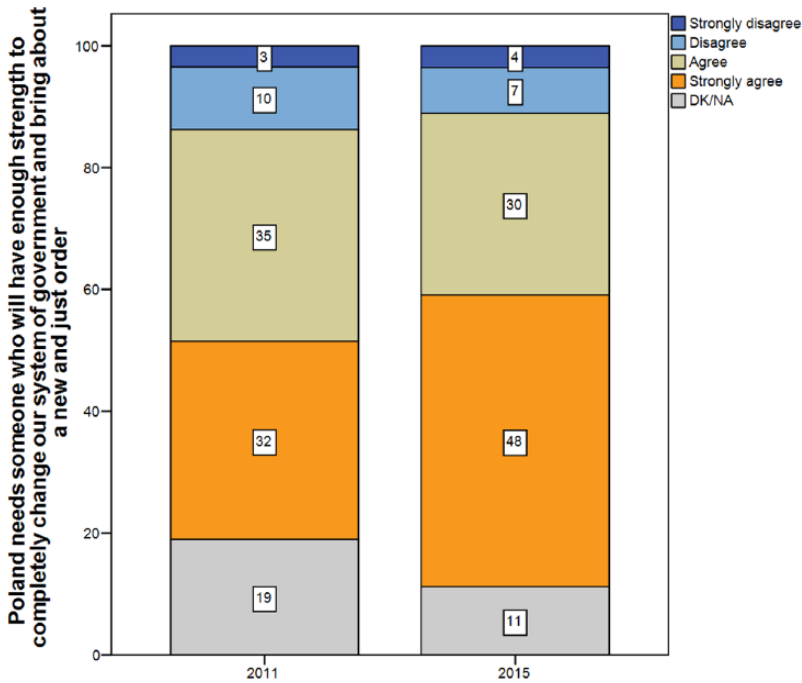
in trouble, or a people who have lost faith in the political system and might be open to nondemocratic alternatives.

But what about the possibility that, over the years, these commitments and evaluations became intertwined with partisanship: that support for democracy increasingly became a partisan issue? Again, this does not appear to have been the case. According to Figure 9, although a partisan gap does exist among respondents on the question of whether democracy is preferable to any other system, it has not widened over time. Throughout the entire duration of the second party system (2001–2015), PO voters were ahead of PiS voters in supporting democracy by an 11–13 point margin.²⁴

Sharper partisan differences are definitely visible in evaluations of democratic performance (Figure 10), especially between supporters of PO and PiS, where an almost 38-point gap opened in 2011, shrinking to about 17 percent in 2015. To be sure, there is plenty of research from other countries to the effect that partisanship affects people’s evaluations of the state of the national economy, of whether the country is “on the right track,” and of its undemocratic performance (see, for example, Pew Research Center 2017). And indeed, there is nothing terribly surprising—or out of line with findings from other countries—in that supporters of the party currently in opposition (as PiS had been from 2007 to 2015) would be more critical of the political system’s performance than supporters of the party in power (as PO had been during the same period).

All in all then, it is a mixed picture: partisanship does matter for some things, but in terms of normative commitment to democracy as a system “better than any

FIGURE 11
Support for Changing the Political System



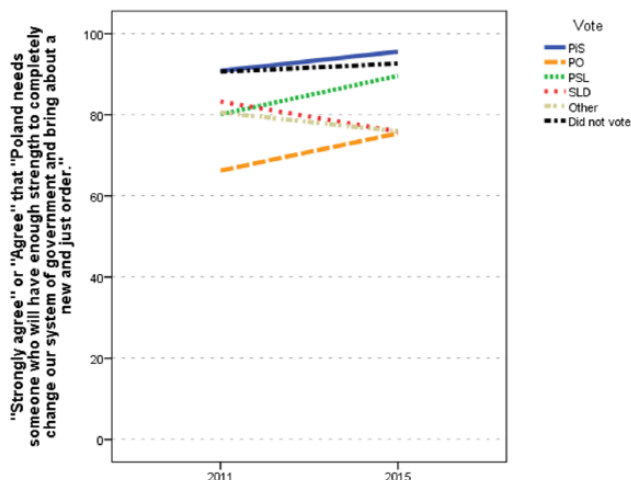
SOURCE: PGSW data.

other,” these differences are not large, even where one would most expect to see them between supporters and opponents of the party (PiS) responsible for embarking on a course of democratic backsliding. More significant perhaps is the finding that both normative comments and performance evaluations of democracy are lowest among nonvoters, who are by far the largest group of the electorate given Poland’s history of only around 40–50 percent turnouts in parliamentary elections.

There is still the possibility, though, that any survey question that contains some variant of the word “democracy” will inevitably pick up a large amount of social desirability bias associated with this system of government. Especially in face-to-face interviews, which is how all the PGSW studies were conducted, respondents likely feel reluctant to present themselves as skeptical or hostile to democracy. And besides, the new populists in Poland and elsewhere do not claim to be “anti-democratic”—they just understand the term differently, as a kind of simple majoritarianism—which means that a populist party supporter is not necessarily falsifying his or her preferences in claiming to be a committed democrat.

To get around this problem, and gauge the extent of support for systemic change in the Polish electorate, the 2011 and 2015 editions of the PGSW contained the question: “Do you agree or disagree that Poland needs someone who

FIGURE 12
Support for Changing the Political System, by Vote in Parliamentary Election



SOURCE: PGSW data.

will have enough strength to completely change our system of government and bring about a new and just order?” This wording consciously avoids the term “democracy,” and although it hints at a strong leader (“someone who will have enough strength ...”), it does so in a subtle way that does not necessarily imply a dictator who runs roughshod over parliament or does away with elections. However, the wording is explicitly asking about support for “completely changing” the system of government, so responses to it might be interpreted as indicating willingness to see major changes made to the constitutional status quo.

The breakdown of answers to this question (Figure 11) is quite striking, with nearly 78 percent of respondents in 2015 placing themselves in the “agree” or “strongly agree” categories—an 11-point increase from 2011. Broken down by parliamentary vote (Figure 12), an astonishing 96 percent of those who voted for PiS in 2015 expressed support for major systemic change, as did nearly the same proportion of those who did not go to the polls at all. There was a huge, 21-point gap in 2015 between the supporters of PiS and PO, but it is striking that more than 75 percent of PO’s voters wanted systemic change as well, and this for the quintessential mainstream “status quo” party seeking a third term in office. What these results hint at, therefore, is not only partisan polarization on the question of maintaining vs. changing the political system, but a massive legitimacy deficit that spanned across partisan divides—including among nonvoters who, had they actually turned out in 2015, might have swayed the result even more in favor of PiS. Unfortunately, this exact question was not asked prior to 2011, so it is not possible to establish whether this sentiment had been as intense all along, or if it had spiked as a kind of spillover effect from the negative, system-delegitimizing rhetoric coming from PiS party elites from 2005 onward.²⁵

Conclusion

Unraveling the puzzle of Poland's democratic backsliding will demand considerable analytical sophistication, with equal attention paid to the role of demand-side and supply-side factors. The results presented here offer initial indications of how popular opinion might have evolved in terms of rising demand for systemic change. Though perhaps surprising at first glance, they fit well with other findings that have been familiar to researchers of Polish and other postcommunist electorates for more than two decades: namely that the political systems—and, more broadly, new social orders (including economic and status hierarchies)—established in the wake of communism's collapse never gained moral approval in the sense of the social outcomes they produced being perceived as legitimate, just, and fair. For example, when asked to choose between the statements “Thanks to post-1989 reforms, everyone is better off” versus “A handful of rich people is getting richer and average people are getting poorer,” the latter was picked by 88 percent of Polish respondents in 1992 (with some justification, since the early 1990s were a time of sharp economic contraction). But more astonishing in view of steadily rising incomes for all sectors over the next decades was the 2014 response to that same question: 79 percent of respondents answered again that the rich were getting richer and average people poorer.²⁶

To be sure, so-called system justification sentiments are a double-edged sword: when they are very strong (i.e., when large majorities believe that social outcomes are just and fair, and that individuals have only themselves to blame for their failures), they may make it more difficult to address problems of inequality or discrimination (Jost and Hunyady 2005; Wakslak et al. 2007). But when they are very weak—as in the Polish case where perceived inequity is high—they may make it easier for opportunistic elites to tear down existing institutions on the promise of bringing about a new and just order.

Psychologists have long puzzled over the mechanisms through which these system-justifying beliefs are produced: whether they are internal, having to do with needs for reassurance and rationalization, or linked to observable societal processes of rising incomes or other measures of upward mobility, or perhaps result from elite cues and socialization into a political culture in which existing institutions and their outcomes are deemed by authority figures to be fair and legitimate. The Polish case seems to point to the importance of elite cues, and especially the pernicious consequences of system-delegitimizing rhetoric that may have contributed to resentment about perceived unfairness and thus support for an antisystem party like the PiS, despite economic progress and steadily rising levels of individual happiness and satisfaction with life.

Notes

1. Poland's per capita GDP in 2015 was almost twice that of Argentina in 1975—the level that had long been regarded as the threshold above which democracies did not break down (Przeworski et al. 2000; Przeworski 2008).

2. Poland's Gini coefficient of .31 is almost exactly at the European Union mean and far below that of Russia—or the United States for that matter (Novokmet, Piketty, and Zocman 2017); see <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&language=en&pcode=tessi190>.

3. While incomes did grow fastest at the top (at an average of 4.2 percent per year since 1989 for the top 10 percent), there was also growth—albeit slower—among middle (1.5 percent per year for the middle 40 percent) and lower-income categories (1 percent per year for the bottom 50 percent) (Bukowski and Novokmet 2017).

4. Although popularly elected, Poland's presidency is nonexecutive, so the country is best classified as having a parliamentary rather than a semi-presidential system, and therefore “perils of presidentialism” (Linz 1990) arguments do not apply to it.

5. The idea that the passage of time works in democracy's favor through a “habituation” mechanism, first given wide currency by Rustow (1970), was later identified by Carothers (2002) as one of the core assumptions of the so-called transitions paradigm.

6. Contrary to the expectations of the early transitions literature, later research showed that “the risk of democratic breakdown actually increases with the passage of time, other things being equal, for what is usually the first several election cycles If a democracy manages to survive into its early twenties, the risk of failure begins to decline with the passage of time as generally expected” (Ulfelder 2009, 30).

7. In the 2015 edition of the *Diagnoza Społeczna* survey (Czapiński and Panek 2015), 81 percent of respondents described their lives in positive terms (as very successful, successful, or mostly successful), following a steady increase from a low of 53 percent in the 1993 edition of the same survey.

8. This unusually high vote-seat disproportionality occurred because the United Left coalition failed to clear the threshold necessary to win parliamentary seats by a mere half of a percentage point. Poland's electoral law for the lower house of the national legislature is proportional, based on the d'Hondt formula, with a threshold of 5 percent for parties and 8 percent for coalitions. United Left ran as a coalition of the ex-communist Democratic Left Alliance and several other parties. It received 7.5 percent of votes and thus failed to enter parliament. This failure gave PiS its razor-thin parliamentary majority. For complete results and discussion of the 2015 elections see Tworzecki and Markowski (2015); Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier (2016).

9. Post-2015, the national parliament began to operate in open disregard of both its constitutional role as a deliberative body (e.g., with PiS-appointed speakers of both chambers routinely limiting opposition members' speaking time to as little as one minute and penalizing them financially for going over the limit and/or turning off their microphones), as well as its own rules of procedure (e.g., by going around the so-called *vacatio legis* requirement, meaning time for reflection and public consultation before a bill may become a law, through the trick of bringing forth government legislative proposals as private members' bills) (Batory Foundation 2017).

10. For summaries of these developments see: U.S. Department of State (2017), Freedom House (2017b), Freedom House (2017a), European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) (2016), European Commission (2016), United Nations General Assembly (2017), United Nations General Assembly (2018), and Freedom House (2018).

11. The government's case for this set of economic politics is laid out in the report “Capitalism—The Polish Way” Polish Economic Institute (2018). For a critical outsider's take, see Orenstein (2018).

12. For example, according to an IPSOS survey from June 2016, 60 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that the new government, in contrast to the previous one, “cares more about the poor, the weak, the excluded,” but only 44 percent agreed that it “respects the rule of law.” See <https://oko.press/dobra-zmiana-minimalnie-wygrywa-pis-sie-troszczy/>.

13. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_next_Polish_parliamentary_election.

14. In accordance with commonly used definitions, the term *populist* is used here to describe anti-establishment parties that emphasize the divide between a homogenous, morally elevated people and a corrupt, unrepresentative elite. *Left-populists* typically make their case in economic terms (targeting the wealthy) in contrast to the ethnonationalism (and the targeting of outgroups) commonly invoked by *Right-populists* (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Inglehart and Norris 2016).

15. As set out in the current 1997 Constitution, Poland's system of government may be described as parliamentarism with a directly elected, but nonexecutive and largely ceremonial presidency. By contrast, PiS's 2010 draft envisioned concentrating power in the hands of the president at the expense of the parliament and cabinet (e.g., the president would gain the ability to reject the parliament's candidate for prime

minister at his sole discretion), weakening judicial independence and the Constitutional Tribunal's power to declare laws unconstitutional (by requiring the Tribunal to reach verdicts by four-fifths majority), and introducing a provision that constitutionally guaranteed individual rights and liberties could be restricted by means of ordinary legislation in the name of the "common good." Unlike the 1997 Constitution, the draft lacked articles prohibiting discrimination (Art. 32), guaranteeing the rights and liberties of citizens (Art. 5), protecting freedom of the press (Art. 14), and prohibiting compulsory participation in religious practices (Art. 53).

16. PiS retained the presidency until Lech Kaczyński's death in a plane crash in 2010. Lech's twin brother and PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński ran as a candidate in the special presidential elections that followed later that same year, but lost to the Civic Platform's Bronisław Komorowski.

17. The goal of "cultural counterrevolution" was explicitly mentioned, for example, during a joint press conference between Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Poland's leader Jarosław Kaczyński on September 6, 2016 in Krynica, Poland. See: <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/307451-polska-i-wegry-oglaszaja-kontrewolucje-kulturalna-debata-kaczynski-orban-w-krynicy>.

18. For example, the headline-making statement in a homily delivered on June 24, 2018, by the head of the Polish Episcopate was that "Europe is becoming a place of soft totalitarianism." (<http://fakty.interia.pl/polska/news-abp-gadecki-europa-staje-sie-miejscem-miekkiej-wersji-totali,nId,2598424>).

19. The PiS statute (<http://pis.org.pl/document/archive/download/122>) gives the chairman unlimited power to suspend members' rights (including the right to participate in internal votes and other decision-making processes), as well as nearly exclusive power of initiative (nothing can happen without his say-so).

20. According to the same IPSOS exit poll, 71.4 percent of Nowoczesna's voters were former PO voters, so Nowoczesna's appearance on the political scene was one of the several reasons for PO's poor showing. Another reason was demobilization of PO's electorate: in the 2015 PGSW survey, among those who reported not having voted in the last election, the single largest group by far (at 17.5 percent) were former PO voters.

21. The predicted probabilities were calculated from multinomial logistic regression results, controlling for gender, age, education, and urban vs. rural place of residence.

22. Writing about the American case, Mason (2018, 18) defines social sorting as "increasing social homogeneity within each party, such that religious, racial, and ideological divides tend to line up along partisan lines."

23. Because the Polish party system still features plenty of "top-down" volatility, this analysis looks only at the four parties that, despite experiencing various ups and downs, have remained on the political scene continuously since the turn of the millennium: Law and Justice (PiS), Civic Platform (PO), Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), and the Polish Peasants' Party (PSL).

24. If considering both "strongly agree" and "agree" responses together, PO supporters were still ahead, but the PO-PiS gap was narrower, between 4 and 10 points.

25. No similar question was asked in the 2007 edition of PGSW; however, in previous years (1997, 2001, and 2005) there was a question with the following possible responses: "1. Our political system is good and does not need any changes; 2. Our political system is basically good and needs only small changes; 3. Our political system is not too good and needs many changes; 4. Our political system is not good and needs major changes." The total proportion of responses in favor of systemic change (answers 3 plus 4) increased from 50 percent in 1997, to 66 percent in 2001, to 74 percent in 2005. So on one hand there was an increase in 2005, but on the other hand there had been an upward trend even before then.

26. See CBOS research bulletin 31/2014, "Polacy o gospodarce wolnorynkowej," https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_031_14.PDF.

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