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CHAPTER

17 Polarized Democracy: Diverging Attitudes towards Democracy

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the changes in attitudes towards democracy within Polish society over time, with a particular focus on the profound impact of democratic backsliding. Using European Social Survey data, it demonstrates how the destruction of democratic institutions during the rule of the Law and Justice Party (2015–2023), combined with intense conflict between the two main parties—Law and Justice and the Civic Platform—has deeply polarized perceptions regarding the importance of democracy and satisfaction with it among the two electorates. Furthermore, this has led to diverging visions of democracy at the level of its components. The chapter concludes by highlighting the challenges of restoring democracy in Poland and reinstating a common vision of democracy that can be embraced by society as a whole.

Keywords: [democracy](#), [democratic backsliding](#), [political polarization](#), [attitudes towards democracy](#), [satisfaction with democracy](#), [Poland](#)

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Introduction

Support for democracy among citizens is considered critical for its emergence and stability (Almond and Verba 1963; Diamond 1999; Easton 1965; Norris 2011). Although satisfaction with the democratic system has deteriorated over recent years, citizens in Europe and worldwide still claim to support democracy (Pew Research Center 2024), and Poland is no different in this respect. In the early years of systemic transition, there was a widespread consensus among political elites and civil society that Poland needed to fully embrace a democratic system and free-market capitalism. Democracy was perceived as a critical step towards modernization and integration with Western Europe (Ekiert and Kubik 2001). Consequently, from the early 1990s, public endorsement of democracy over alternative forms of government has been high, along with a strong belief in the superiority of a system based on democratic principles (CBOS 2023).

Nonetheless, this widespread belief in democracy did not immunize Poland from the episode of democratic erosion pursued by democratically elected governments led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) (2015–2023). While illiberal political thought had been present in Polish politics since the system transition, the nationalist-conservative PiS government was the first to openly and efficiently challenge the foundations of liberal democracy and skilfully win public support by targeting the needs of social groups who felt economically and culturally excluded from the political community following the transformation (Cześnik and Kotnarowski 2011). The anti-democratic reforms authored by PiS, including legal changes regarding the judiciary, media, public gatherings, and women's rights, deepened the already existing political polarization, narratively reviving the well-known division from the Communist past of 'us' (society at large) ↳ versus 'them' (the governing party). Despite this, democracy still ranked high in both opposing groups, revealing that they prioritized different components of democracy (Kwiatkowska et al. 2023), as the conceptual vagueness of the term allows for its varied interpretations (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007).

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In this chapter, we analyse the changes in attitudes towards democracy within Polish society over time. We focus specifically on the profound impact of democratic backsliding, aiming to explain the accompanying shifts in democratic attitudes among Polish citizens. Particularly, we demonstrate how the process of democratic erosion, combined with intense conflict between the two main parties—PiS and the Civic Platform (PO)—has deeply polarized both the perceptions and evaluations of democracy in Poland, leading to two increasingly diverging visions of democracy along party lines. To analyse this research problem, we employ data from all waves of the European Social Survey (ESS 2002–2022)—encompassing the two decades that turned out to be formative for Polish politics, including the complete transformation of the Polish party system and its consolidation in the current form and the period of democratic backsliding, crucial for democracy in Poland.

The chapter begins with a review of the main works on attitudes towards democracy, delineating their various components. The discussion extends to how democratic erosion and political polarization may contribute to the differentiation of visions and evaluations of democracy. Subsequently, the data and methods employed in the chapter are introduced. The final section presents the results of a longitudinal analysis of the evolving attitudes towards democracy, including changes in its perceived importance, satisfaction with it, and understanding of democracy in Polish society, framed within a European comparative perspective. The chapter concludes by highlighting the challenges of restoring democracy in Poland and reinstating a common vision of democracy that can be embraced by society as a whole.

Attitudes towards Democracy

There is a broad consensus among social scientists that a stable democracy requires citizens who believe in the principles of democracy and, therefore, are likely to support it (Almond and Verba 1963; Diamond 1999; Easton 1965; Norris 2011). However, support for democracy should not be conflated with satisfaction with democracy, which relies on the performance of democratic institutions rather than a subjective understanding of what democracy entails. Using the World Values Survey (WVS), Klingemann (1999: 37) observed this split in citizens' political outlook, distinguishing support for democracy as a regime from their satisfaction with the regime's current performance. This abstract preference for democracy is also referred to as 'diffuse support for democracy' (Easton 1965), 'overt approval' of democracy (Norris 2011) or 'abstract democratic support' (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007), and as the majority of survey research shows, it scores highly almost universally around the globe.

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- 1 Satisfaction with the way democracy works is not necessarily an indicator of support for the ideal, normative type of democracy. To explain what drives satisfaction with the performance of the regime, scholars propose different factors, which can be categorized as related to political culture (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1997), socialization processes (Dalton 2004), and performance of institutions (Norris 2011; Putnam 2000), including economic ones (Przeworski et al. 2000). On a political level, it has also been observed that the electorate of the governing party is more likely to be satisfied with the performance of democracy (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gélineau 2007).

In addition, the commitment to democracy does not specify which kind of democracy is supported. Although it is assumed that most citizens conceptualize democracy in terms of Dahl's liberal model (Canache 2012), there is evidence that democracy carries various meanings across and within countries (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016; Davis et al. 2021; Schaffer 2014). Not only do citizens have various perceptions of democracy, but also political elites conceptualize it differently (Klingemann 1999). The public understanding of democracy has been shown to vary across time and space (Davis et al. 2021; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016), among age groups (Nieuwelink et al. 2018; Sack 2017), and due to socio-economic status (Ceka and Magalhães 2020). Some citizens identify democracy with the institutions and processes of democratic governance and others with social benefits and welfare (Huber et al. 1997). This debate over the institutional versus the welfare basis of democracy has been especially prominent regarding democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe (Słomczyński et al. 2007; Stanley 2017). The fact that different groups have divergent attitudes towards democracy showcases that democracy is not a self-evident value that can be taken for granted but rather a complex and multifaceted concept that needs to be constantly re-evaluated and renegotiated.

In early analyses on attitudes towards democracy in Central Eastern Europe, researchers questioned whether or not decades of authoritarian rule, with limited exposure to independent sources of information and a lack of positive socialization, could have resulted in citizens having informed political opinions on democracy (Mishler and Rose 1999; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017). Survey research conducted at the end of the Communist rule and during the democratic transition confirmed the confusion of Polish citizens in their understanding of democracy. Even in April 1987, more than two years before the first semi-free parliamentary elections, as many as 43 per cent of Poles (of which 6.2 per cent 'strongly' and 37.4 per cent 'rather') perceived the system at that time as democratic. Considering that in March 1990 (i.e. in the first months of the democratic transition) only 58 per cent of people believed Poland to be a democratic country, it is clear that the drastic change of the political system only changed citizens' perceptions to a limited extent (CBOS 1990).

The first in-depth studies on the meaning of democracy conducted in Poland in the early 1990s revealed that Poles' understanding of democracy could be categorized into four types: an efficient welfare state, democratic values, democratic institutions, and an ideological state (Reykowski 1995, 29–30). The last of these types was associated with Christian values and national traditions, a striking illustration of citizens confusing democracy

p. 312 with non-democratic ideologies. Subsequent research conducted a decade later appeared to confirm the earlier findings, with results clustered around the following themes: a national Catholic welfare state, democratic rule of law, and a strong national Catholic state (Jaśko and Kossowska 2008). Thus, since the beginning of the transition, we can observe the existence of various meanings of democracy within Polish society, often diverging significantly from the definitions proposed by scholars. In his recent research, Korzeniowski (2022) concluded that Polish citizens' vision of democracy remains blurred, perceiving 'democracy as non-democracy'. This might be perceived as an increasing misunderstanding of the fundamental elements of a democratic regime as well as evidence that democracy is not yet deeply rooted at the societal level.

In the comparative perspective, Eastern Europe has shown less support for democracy than Western Europe, with citizens also being less engaged and less trusting of political institutions (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017). Auerbach and Petrova (2022) attribute this diminished commitment to democracy to a sense of disillusionment with the practice of democracy following the collapse of communism. Nevertheless, the annual surveys of the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) reveal that throughout the entire period of over thirty years of Polish democracy since the transition, public support for democracy has remained high and stable, with around 65 per cent of citizens maintaining that democracy is superior to all other forms of government, as opposed to 15 per cent holding the opposite opinion and around 20 per cent having no formed opinion. However, low satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Poland has persisted for most of the time, and respondents who are disappointed with the functioning of democracy in Poland outnumber those who evaluate it positively in nearly all waves of the study (CBOS 2023).

Democratic Backsliding and Political Polarization

Following the fall of communism, Poland has frequently been cited as a success story regarding its democratic transition and consolidation (Szczerbiak 2001). Continuous support for democracy, expressed both by the citizens and political elites (Markowski and Kwiatkowska 2018), has been coupled with stable democratic institutions, a functioning and consolidating multiparty system (Walecka 2018), and a broad catalogue of civil and political liberties. This has ensured the country's high position in international democracy rankings (Freedom in the World 2022). When PiS took power in 2015, Poland had been experiencing consistent, strong per capita economic growth since 1989; moderate levels of social inequality; rising wages; and high levels of happiness (see Mitchell A. Orenstein, 'Democratization and Marketization', Chapter 6 in this volume). Thus, Poland, being regarded as one of the most exemplary cases of backsliding in the years 2015–2023, presents a significant paradox. Under these circumstances, the populist-nationalist party managed to garner the plurality of votes in two consecutive elections, which allowed it to implement numerous legal and political changes right from the new authoritarian playbook.

The phenomenon of democratic decline in well-performing, advanced democratic European countries is characterized by cases in which charismatic new leaders are elected by democratic citizens, and then these leaders use their electoral mandates to dismantle the constitutional systems they inherited (Scheppele 2018). Researching this process of gradual democratic erosion, scholars have tested different explanatory factors, including economic inequality (Haggard and Kaufman 2016) and shortcomings of previous governments in ensuring an effective economic redistribution (Gidron and Hall 2017), cultural 'over-liberalization' of the regime (Welzel 2021), and the malfunctioning of traditional political parties (Casal Bértoa and Rama 2020). These factors have been widely discussed within the context of Hungary and Poland, where a modern type of coup took place, based on executive aggrandisement (Bermeo 2016, 10): democratically elected executives gradually weakening checks on executive power and undertaking institutional changes that hampered the power of opposition forces to challenge the actions of the executive. Poland followed the 'model of European backsliding' (Haggard and Kaufman 2021), and PiS almost mirrored the changes that Orbán implemented

successfully in Hungary. Thus, once undemocratic incumbents received overwhelming support, it provided them with an opportunity to undermine democratic institutions, weaken the rule of law, and make use of state resources at their discretion.

Democratic backsliding has been linked to increased political polarization (Lührmann et al. 2018; Somer and McCoy 2019; Svolik 2019); collectively, these phenomena substantially affect attitudes towards democracy, which constitutes the primary focus of our chapter. However, it must be acknowledged that the traditional conceptualization of polarization, which enables citizens to distinguish between the contrasting ideological offers of political parties (Enyedi 2006) and, therefore, the ideological distance between them (Sartori 1976), may strengthen democracy (see also Bornschier 2019), as opposed to extreme variation. Polarization facilitates constituency mobilization and stabilization, simplifies choices for voters, and helps to consolidate the political party system (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). Whether or not polarization serves a constructive or destructive purpose for democracy depends on the behaviour of both the incumbents and opposition. Hence, a vast academic literature attempts to explain where this thin line between the positive and pernicious variants of polarization (Somer and McCoy 2019) lies.

The relationship between democratic backsliding and political polarization is often characterized by a vicious cycle, where each phenomenon exacerbates the other. Democratic backsliding leads to the erosion of democratic norms and practices, such as the undermining of free and fair elections, restrictions on the media, and the weakening of the rule of law (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). These actions can deepen political polarization by diminishing the middle ground for political discourse and encouraging the formation of more extreme ideological positions (Svolik 2019). Particularly, the curtailment of civil liberties and political rights can polarize societies by driving opposition groups to adopt more radical positions in response to perceived authoritarian tendencies (Lührmann et al. 2018).

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On the other hand, political polarization facilitates democratic backsliding by undermining the consensus-building processes essential for a functioning democracy. When political actors and their constituencies are deeply divided, it becomes challenging to reach agreements on democratic norms and processes, leading to governance paralysis or the bypassing of democratic institutions altogether (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Studies have shown that countries experiencing high levels of political polarization are more susceptible to democratic backsliding, as polarized societies are less likely to form a unified front against the erosion of democratic norms (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Haggard and Kaufman (2021) argue that political polarization paves the way for democratic backsliding in three interconnected ways: by impairing government functionality, which results in distrust towards democracy in general; through employing the allure of anti-system leaders; and due to the willingness of polarized elites and citizens to tolerate deviations from democracy.

A more contemporary phenomenon of severe polarization is defined by McCoy et al. (2018) as the process of social alignment along one dimension. In very polarized democracies, the opponents are seen in terms of enemies that should be annihilated. Thus, the affective dimension of polarization appears, which moves the distance further, beyond antagonizing issues to include social identity (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Polarizing politicians frequently divide citizens into 'good people' and 'evil elites', exploiting existing grievances in society; this is a particular domain of populist leaders, usurping the right to be the sole representative of the nation. The creation of 'formative rifts' is crucial in strategies employed by incumbents, as it gives a better chance of assembling a camp of loyal supporters (McCoy et al. 2018). Following the argument of lack of experience with democracy (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017) and relating to past legacies, ideological polarization is not new in countries with a post-communist heritage where society was divided by the 'us-versus-them' dichotomy.

In Poland, during the PiS government from 2015 to 2023, we could observe the deployment of multiple polarizing strategies, of which the most prominent was based on the solidarity versus liberalism division (see

Kamil Marcinkiewicz, 'Parliamentary Transformation: Unstable Parties, Stable Party Families', Chapter 10 in this volume), highlighting the financial distress of those Poles left behind due to economic transformation and those benefiting from the bad liberal elites. As inequality and relative deprivation are frequently the mobilizing force used by the populist leaders (McCoy et al. 2018), these polarizing politics helped PiS to secure a stable and loyal support base. This suggests that the social polarization resulted from the polarization at the elite level, when PiS broke the liberal democratic consensus and moved to a more extreme position (Tworzecki 2019, but see Monika Nalepa and Ipek Cinar, 'Transitional Justice and Elite Polarization', Chapter 7 in this volume). This process, initiated at the top, spread out to the grassroots of society (Bischof and Wagner 2019), taking an affective version, in the sense of negative partisanship: the expression of more negative sentiment about opposing parties than positive sentiment about one's own party (Wagner 2021). In turn, ↘ increasing affective polarization and 'us-versus-them' politics could have led partisan supporters to tolerate illiberal behaviour of their own party, and thus the erosion of democratic norms, but also the redefinition of democracy to align with the incumbent's needs (McCoy et al. 2018). Democratic erosion is therefore attributed to a growing disbelief in the democratic system, ideologically distant political parties, and ideological polarization (Graham and Svolik 2020; Svolik 2019).

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Data

We employ data from all waves (1–10) of the European Social Survey (ESS) collected during the period from 2002 to 2022. The ESS is a biennial, cross-national survey covering over thirty European countries, which collects data on a wide array of individuals' lives, encompassing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. The use of the ESS data ensures the robustness and reliability of the findings, while its large sample sizes (approximately 1,800 individuals per wave) facilitate methodologically sound intergroup comparisons. We use regular data regarding the importance of democracy and satisfaction with democracy in Poland, aiming to track trends over the past two decades and to contextualize them within the broader landscape of other countries in the region.

The selection of the ESS as our primary data source is particularly pertinent for the case of Poland. Notably, the survey's two waves incorporating a rotating module on the understanding of democracy occurred in 2012 and 2022. These years represent critical junctures: 2012 is the measurement preceding the onset of the democratic backsliding period, while 2022 is indicative of a phase nearing its conclusion, offering a comprehensive view of the democratic trajectory over this decade. Comparing these results offers a unique opportunity to explore public perceptions of democracy in Poland. This approach enables us to assess the impact of the democratic backsliding, primarily driven by the PiS government in Poland between 2015 and 2023, on people's attitudes regarding the importance and understanding of democracy and their satisfaction with democratic processes in the country.

Results

In this section, we present a comprehensive analysis of the evolving attitudes towards democracy among Polish citizens, set against the backdrop of democratic backsliding and increasing polarization within the country. Drawing on extensive ESS data spanning two decades, we analyse the nuances of public sentiment regarding the importance of democracy, satisfaction with its functioning, and the shifting understandings and evaluations of democratic institutions. Through a longitudinal lens, this section elucidates the dynamic interplay between enduring democratic support and the critical evaluations of its erosion, framed within a broader European context.

Despite witnessing a steady erosion of fundamental democratic institutions and principles since 2015, the commitment of Polish citizens to democracy has only strengthened. According to the ESS's 2022 wave, a significant majority of Poles (86 per cent) rated the importance of democracy over 5 on a 0–10 scale). Remarkably, 67 per cent deemed it extremely important, awarding it a 10. Conversely, only 4 per cent of respondents considered living in a democratically governed country as unimportant, with ratings below 5. These results are generally in line with the 2012 ESS findings, wherein democracy was considered unimportant by 6 per cent of Poles, while 85 per cent of the population found it important to live in a democratically governed country. However, in the 2012 ESS study, only 42 per cent of respondents marked democracy as extremely important. Thus, the 2022 results indicate a substantial increase of 25 percentage points in this category, indicating a polarization of opinions.

The overall trend in Europe between 2012 and 2022 was pro-democratic. Among the sixteen countries analysed, thirteen witnessed a strengthening in democratic attitudes, with their 2022 scores exceeding those of 2012 (Figure 17.1). From a comparative European perspective, the average change in attitudes towards the importance of democracy was the second largest in Poland, following Portugal. Although the increase was modest, it is notable given the high baseline value of the indicator. Furthermore, the rise in the importance of democracy in Poland occurred despite the democratic backsliding during this period and the populist government's efforts to undermine democratic values and institutions (Pech and Scheppelle 2017; Sadurski 2019). The increase in democratic attitudes in Poland suggests a noteworthy resilience and a reactive effect to perceived threats to democracy. This aligns with theories of democratic resilience, which argue that societies may respond to challenges to democracy by reinforcing their commitment to democratic norms and values (Foa and Mounk 2016; Norris 2017).

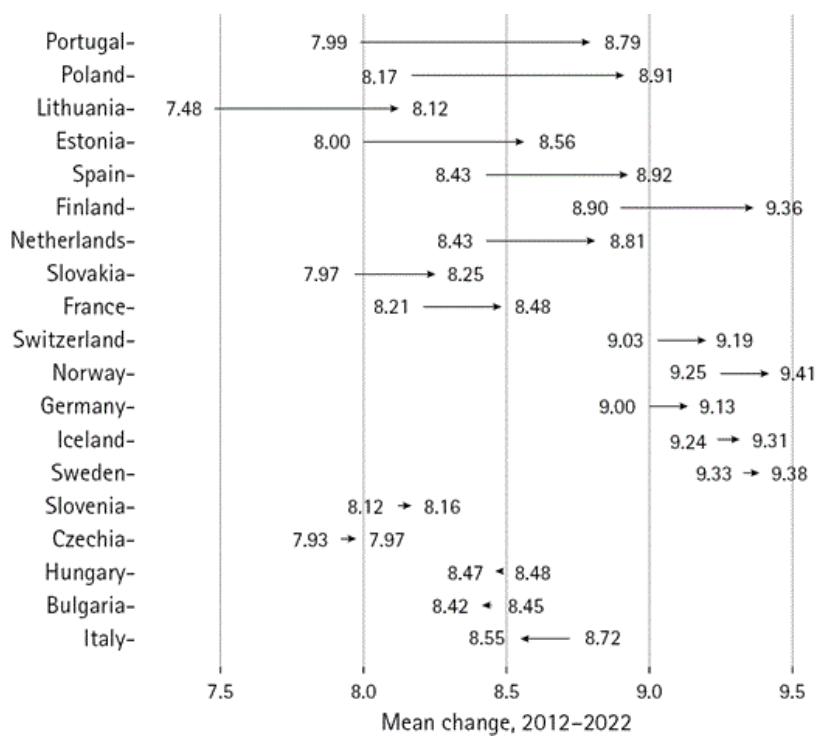


Figure 17.1 Comparative change in perceived importance of democracy in Europe, 2012–2022

Note: Arrows indicate direction of change over time. The mean response on a scale from 0 (Not at all important) to 10 (Extremely important). Source: ESS (2002–2022) data set, weighted data, authors' own calculations.

Satisfaction with Democracy

While the perceived importance of democracy in Poland has increased in the past decade (2012–2022), this period has simultaneously witnessed a growing disillusionment with the state of democracy in the country in general as well as with its practical implementation in certain aspects. According to the ESS 2022 results, the average satisfaction with democracy in Poland has seen the largest decline among all analysed countries. The mean satisfaction score plummeted from 4.9 to 3.6 on a 0–10 scale, positioning Poland as having the third lowest satisfaction level among all countries (Figure 17.2). This stark contrast highlights a widening gap between democratic ideals and realities as experienced by the Polish public.

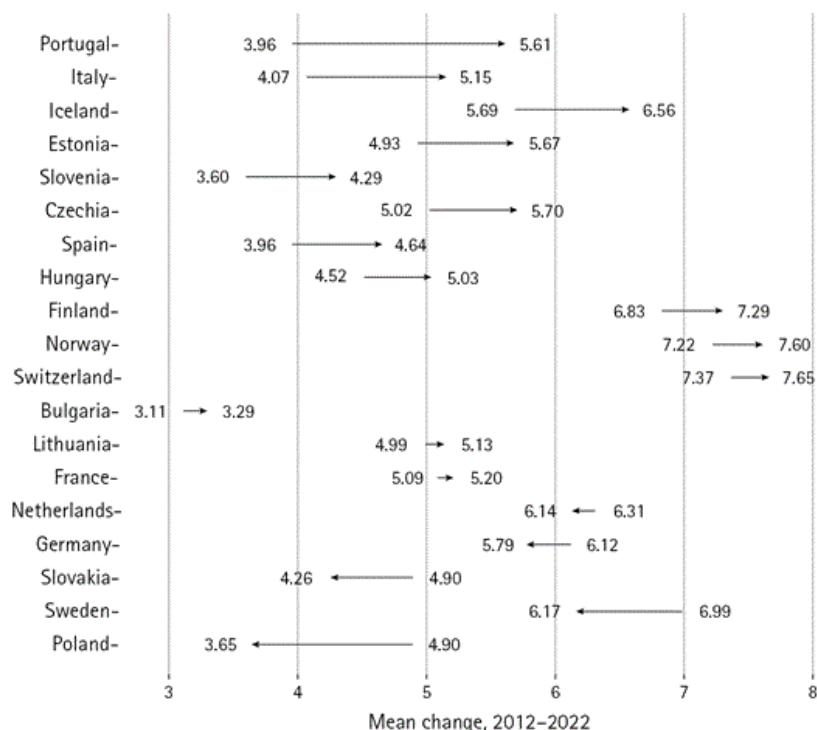


Figure 17.2 Comparative change in satisfaction with democracy in Europe, 2012–2022

Note: Arrows indicate direction of change over time. The mean response on a scale from 0 (Not at all satisfied) to 10 (Extremely satisfied). Source: ESS (2002–2022) data set, weighted data, authors' own calculations.

The pivotal factor responsible for the decline in democratic satisfaction in Poland were the anti-democratic actions of the PiS government, in power since 2015. These included restricting the independence of the judiciary, limiting the freedom of the media, and suppressing political opposition and civil society organizations (Sadurski 2019; Surowiec et al. 2020). Particularly, the judicial reforms initiated by PiS have been perceived as eroding the checks and balances essential for democratic governance (Przybylski 2018; Sadurski 2019). Moreover, the government's tightening grip on public media and attempts to exert influence over private media outlets have led to increased polarization and diminished public trust in democratic institutions (Chapman 2017; Surowiec et al. 2020).

In addition, severe conflicts between society and government have been vividly manifested through mass mobilizations, including students and teachers' strikes, multiple pro-environmental actions, LGBTQ+ community demonstrations, and the most prominent nationwide women's protests since October 2020, triggered by the Constitutional Tribunal's decision to impose a near-total ban on abortion (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). Such events have not only highlighted the deep societal divisions but also underscored the government's increasing willingness to legislate on deeply contentious issues without broad societal consensus, thereby exacerbating tensions and diminishing public trust in democratic processes. In combination with the

economic crisis of the early 2020s and very high inflation levels, it lowered evaluations of the incumbent political authorities and diminished satisfaction with democracy (Clarke et al. 1993).

p. 318 The observed decline in satisfaction with democracy in Poland has not been uniform across different segments of the population. While the discontent can be observed across nearly all analysed population subgroups, there are various socio-demographic and political factors determining the strength of the decline, as illustrated in Figure 17.3. Among socio-demographic variables, higher education levels are related to a greater loss of satisfaction with democracy, due to increased political awareness and critical thinking abilities among educated individuals, making them more sensitive to infringements of democratic processes (Norris 2011). Taking as a base the 2012 survey wave, prior to the onset of democratic backsliding, education levels showed a slight positive correlation with satisfaction with democracy (Kendall's $\tau = 0.068, n = 1800, p < 0.001$) and only the difference between marginal groups was significant (Games-Howell test: $MD = 0.51, p < 0.001$). However, by 2022, the relationship direction was reversed (Kendall's $\tau = -0.17, n = 1954, p < 0.001$) and disparities among all groups widened, primarily due to a great decline in satisfaction among those with a higher education and a considerable drop in the middle-educated group, making the differences significant across all subgroups (GH tests: primary education (primary education (P) – secondary education (S): $MD = 0.78, p < 0.001$; secondary education (S) – higher education (H): $MD = 0.73, p < 0.001$). ↴

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↳ Moreover, satisfaction with democracy became a gendered issue after the 2020 women's protests. In the 2022 survey wave, women appeared less satisfied with democracy than men ($MD = 0.62, t(2004) = 4.8, p < 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 0.21$), reflecting the conservative government's policies and actions directed against women's rights that exacerbated gender inequality and discrimination (Gwiazda 2021).

In contrast to the phenomena described above, the rule of PiS led to an equalization in satisfaction with democracy across subjective income groups, measured here as expressed feelings about a household's current income. During the PO governments (2007–2015), income became an increasingly stratifying factor for satisfaction with democracy, with the largest differences between groups observed in 2012 (ANOVA: $F(3, 1702) = 36.7, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.06$; GH tests: Lowest(1)–2: $MD = 1.07, p = 0.025$; 2–3: $MD = 0.92, p < 0.001$; 3–Highest(4): $MD = 0.65, p = 0.005$). Following the shift in power in 2015, due to a decrease in satisfaction among the more well-off groups coupled with an increase among those living in challenging economic conditions, the differences between groups became statistically insignificant in all waves of the study and remained so during the rapid decline in satisfaction in the 2022 wave.

Regarding the impact of age on satisfaction with democracy, citizens aged sixty and above show the least loss in satisfaction, which is plausibly attributable to their role as the principal support base for the PiS government, coupled with the receipt of substantial financial transfers. This relationship appears to engender an elevated degree of contentment with the political system as a whole, distinguishing them from other age groups (GH tests: 18–29 vs 60+: $MD = 0.72, p < 0.001$; 30–44 vs 60+: $MD = 0.73, p < 0.001$; 45–59 vs 60+: $MD = 0.51, p = 0.037$). It should be noted that the educated, women, and those well off are overrepresented groups in the opposition electorate, while older citizens are overrepresented among the voters of PiS.

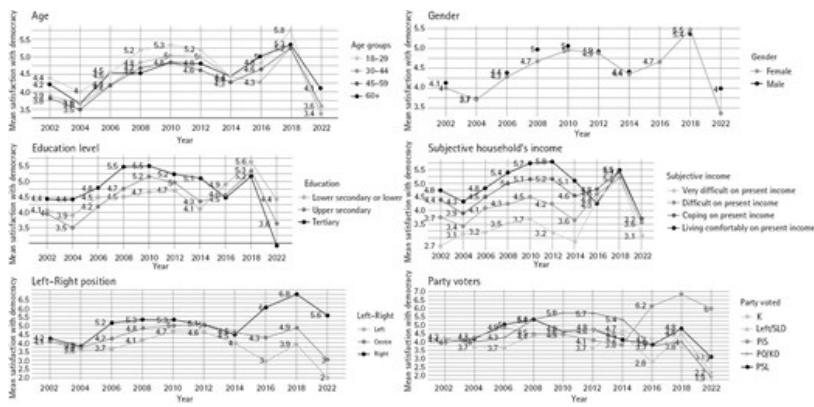


Figure 17.3 Changing satisfaction with democracy in Polish society, 2002–2022

Source: ESS (2002–2022) data set, weighted data, authors' own calculations.

Note: Left–Right groups were recoded from the original scale: 0–3 = Left, 4–6 = Centre, 7–10 = Right.

In addition to socio-demographic factors, political variables seem to account for a more substantial proportion of the variance in the level of satisfaction with democracy. Since 2016, there has been a large differentiation in satisfaction with democracy based on ideological position and voted party. In comparison to the 2012 base level, the 2022 wave showed that declared satisfaction with democracy had diminished during the period of democratic backsliding by nearly 60 per cent among those with left-wing positions, and by 40 per cent among centrists, whilst only marginally increasing, by less than 10 per cent, among those holding right-wing views. As a result, the political space became composed of highly unsatisfied left-wing and centrist voters and above-average satisfied right-wing voters (ANOVA: $F(2, 1945) = 291.3, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.23$; GH tests: Left–Centre: $MD = 1.04, p < 0.001$; Centre–Right: $MD = 2.54, p < 0.001$).

Within the context of party electorates, the satisfaction levels have decreased the most among PO supporters (67 per cent) and voters of the Left (55 per cent). Smaller declines in satisfaction with democracy were observed in the Polish People's Party (PSL) (34 per cent) and Confederation (17 per cent) electorates. The only electorate whose satisfaction with democracy increased during the period of backsliding was the voters of PiS, which governed during this time, showing a 47 per cent increase. However, even their level of satisfaction with democracy in 2022 (6.0) was lower than in the earlier survey wave from 2018 (6.9), which was the highest observed result among all the electorates analysed in the period 2002–2022. As of 2022, voters of Polish parties remain deeply divided in their levels of satisfaction with democracy (ANOVA: $F(4, 1387) = 215.8, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.38$): while the main cleavage lies between the government party and the block of opposition parties (GH tests: PiS–Civic Coalition (KO): $MD = 4.12, p < 0.001$; PiS–Democratic Left Alliance (SLD): $MD = 3.82, p < 0.001$; PiS–PSL: $MD = 2.85, p < 0.001$; PiS–Confederation (K): $MD = 2.96, p < 0.001$), there exist minor, yet significant differences within the opposition block, between the most unsatisfied PO/KO voters and electorates of PSL and Confederation (GH tests: KO–PSL: $MD = 1.28, p = 0.001$; KO–K: $MD = 1.16, p < 0.001$).

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These pronounced disparities across political electorates over time indicate that political ideology and attitudes towards the government have played a pivotal role in the general erosion of satisfaction with democracy in Poland. The emergence of the largest difference over time between the electorates of the two main actors in the political dispute over democracy—PiS versus PO/KO—to a degree that extends beyond the usual differences stemming from the disparity between election winners and losers (Blais and Gélineau 2007) highlights the immense power of the conflict. In the subsequent sections, we examine the extent to which these differences are reflected in changes in the understanding of specific aspects of democracy and satisfaction with their functioning in Poland.

Changing Public Understanding and Evaluations of Democracy

The gradual degradation of democratic norms and the concurrent reduction in public satisfaction with democratic processes, alongside the intensifying political polarization, have significantly influenced the public's perception of democracy. This dynamic change in understanding democracy has been documented through comparative ESS survey 2012 and 2022 modules, aimed at probing deeper into citizens' evaluation of various democratic principles, representing different dimensions of democracy—namely, liberal democracy, direct democracy, and social democracy¹—and at gauging the perceived effectiveness of these principles' implementation within their countries (ESS 2022).

The current priorities of Polish citizens regarding the aspects of democracy they deem most significant, as delineated in Figure 17.4, align closely with the broader tendencies observed amongst Europeans (Pereira et al. 2023). Among the various dimensions of democracy assessed, the liberal dimension emerges as the most valued. This is evidenced by the high mean scores attributed to aspects such as free elections and the rule of law, both receiving a mean score of 9.3, indicating a strong consensus among Polish citizens on the importance of these elements. Additionally, retrospective accountability, with a mean score of 8.8, underscores a shared belief in the importance of holding governing parties accountable through electoral processes. ↴

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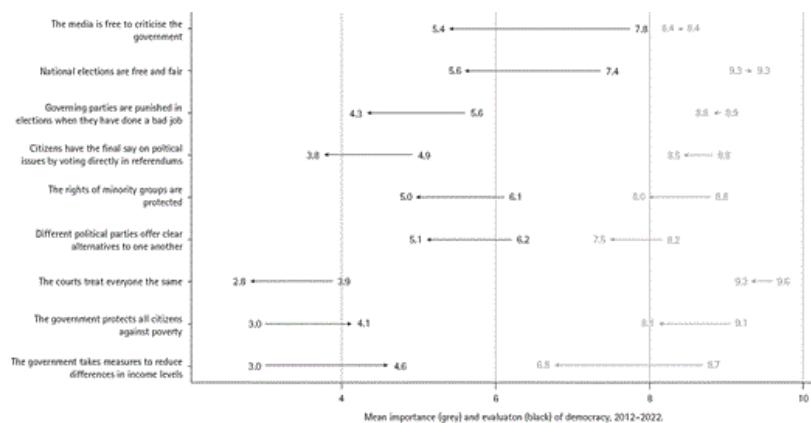


Figure 17.4 Changing importance and evaluation of specific aspects of democracy in Poland, 2012–2022

Source: ESS (2002–2022) data set, weighted data, authors' own calculations.

Note: Arrows indicate direction of change over time.

Other aspects within the liberal dimension, highly ranked by respondents, cover a broad endorsement of fundamental liberal democratic principles such as media freedom (mean 8.4), protection of minority rights (8.0), and (to a somewhat lesser extent) political pluralism (7.5). Conversely, dimensions of direct and social democracy, while still rated as important, score marginally lower. For instance, direct political participation through mechanisms like referendums has a mean score of 8.5. This suggests a moderately high but less unanimous evaluation compared to liberal aspects. In the realm of social democracy, recognition of the government's role in safeguarding citizens against poverty garners a mean score of 8.1, while the acceptance of income equalization is much lower (6.8).

Looking at changes in the perceived importance of democracy between 2012 and 2022, there is a noticeable decrease in the mean scores from wave 6 to wave 10 across most of the features. While the foundational tenets of democracy (such as the fairness of national elections, democratic accountability, and media freedom) maintain a stable high level of importance among citizens, there is a noticeable decline in the importance of the impartiality of the judiciary, which saw a decrease by 0.3 points ($t = -5.7, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -0.18$), and

citizens' direct participation via referenda ($MD = -0.4, t = -6.0, p < 0.001, d = -0.19$), as well as larger decreases regarding the protection of minority rights ($MD = -0.8, t = -11.6, p < 0.001, d = -0.37$) and political pluralism ($MD = -0.7, t = -9.1, p < 0.001, d = -0.29$). This downward trend suggests a recalibration of public expectations as a result of democratic backsliding.

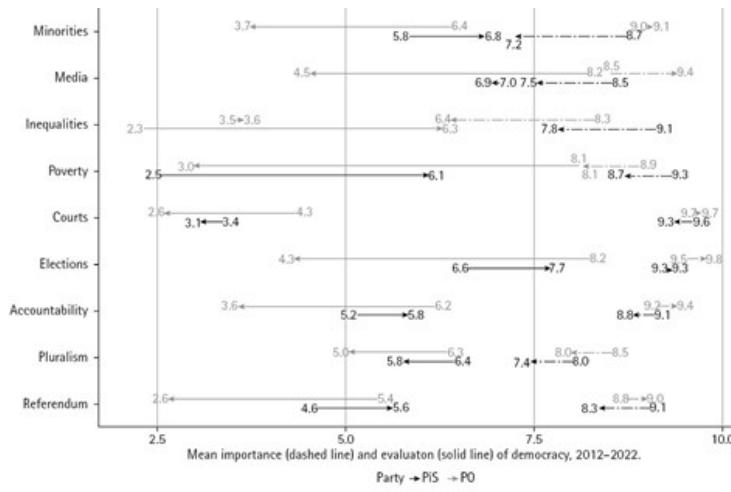
Furthermore, the most important conclusion stemming from the comparison between the importance of specific aspects of democracy and the evaluation of their actual implementation in the country is that some of the most valued aspects became the ones evaluated the worst; namely, key aspects of liberal democracy, which has the highest average rankings in importance, are perceived as definitely flawed: rule of law (average evaluation in 2022 equals 2.8, $MD = -1.1, t = -12.1, p < 0.001, d = -0.39$) and retrospective accountability (average evaluation in 2022 equals 4.3, $MD = -1.3, t = -12.7, p < 0.001, d = -0.41$). Additionally, other liberal democratic features, while somehow better evaluated, encountered the largest drop between 2012 and 2022. These include media freedom ($MD = -2.4, t = -25.3, p < 0.001, d = -0.8$) and electoral freedom ($MD = -1.8, t = -18.5, p < 0.001, d = -0.59$).

However, although exactly all aspects of democracy were rated significantly lower in 2022 than in 2012, the most significant alteration in public sentiment pertains to the government's role in economic matters, particularly those affecting social welfare and income disparity. The importance score for the government's responsibility to reduce income differences witnessed a substantial drop by 1.9 points ($t = -22.7, p < 0.001, d = -0.72$), while the importance of safeguarding citizens against poverty saw a decrease of 0.9 points ($t = -13.7, p < 0.001, d = -0.43$). What's more, at the same time, the evaluation of the social dimension is the only dimension in which an overall increase can be observed: by 1.1 points ($t = 12.6, p < 0.001, d = 0.4$) regarding the elimination of poverty and by 1.6 points ($t = 18.0, p < 0.001, d = 0.58$) regarding income equalization. While these changes could indicate citizens making their democratic expectations \hookleftarrow more realistic regarding economic issues, which is especially pertinent in the context of Poland's economic challenges, we argue that they reflect the political cleavage between the pro-government and anti-government voters. Because the government relies on disadvantaged groups in society, economics, like all other dimensions of democracy, has been drawn into an all-encompassing political polarization.

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Towards a Polarized Democracy

The combined impact of democratic backsliding and political polarization has significantly affected voter attitudes towards democracy, particularly when examining the contrasting perspectives of pro-government and anti-government voters. As illustrated in Figure 17.5, a profound divergence emerged over the 2012–2022 period between the two main Polish electorates: pro-government (PiS) and anti-government (PO) voters in Poland regarding their understanding of the importance of specific aspects of democracy and their evaluations of its functioning.



Aspect	Measure	MD6	CohenD6	MD10	CohenD10	F(party)	F(wave)	F(party:wave)
The courts treat everyone the same	Importance	0.06	0.056	0.37	0.271	21.3***	2.3	7.5**
Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	Importance	0.52	0.261	0.58	0.226	33.8***	29.4***	0
National elections are free and fair	Importance	0.27	0.215	0.45	0.354	38.7***	9.4**	3.9*
Governing parties are punished elections when they have done a bad job	Importance	0.07	0.045	0.62	0.345	25.3***	0.1	13.4***
The government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	Importance	-0.81	-0.388	-1.44	-0.497	70.4***	195.3***	6.9**
The government protects all citizens against poverty	Importance	-0.43	-0.241	-0.58	0.272	21.5***	59.6***	0.8
The media is free to criticise the government	Importance	-0.03	-0.012	1.90	0.883	119.5***	0.1	96***
The rights of minority groups are protected	Importance	0.32	0.187	1.84	0.824	207***	47***	67.3***
Citizens have the final say on political issues by voting directly in referendums	Importance	-0.28	-0.160	0.68	0.356	13.3***	5.6*	33***
The courts treat everyone the same	Evaluation	0.96	0.375	-0.50	-0.172	5*	72.6*	32.4***
Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	Evaluation	-0.10	-0.038	-0.74	-0.254	7.3***	64***	6.6*
National elections are free and fair	Evaluation	1.62	0.675	-3.41	-1.180	82.3***	177.1***	409.5***
Governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	Evaluation	1.02	0.351	-2.28	-0.712	30.5***	54.3***	136***
The government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	Evaluation	1.21	0.507	-2.65	-0.936	118.6***	240.9**	255.4***
The government protects all citizens against poverty	Evaluation	1.02	0.427	-3.14	-1.089	174***	116***	290.2***
The media is free to criticise the government	Evaluation	1.16	0.471	-2.41	-0.775	24.7***	241.3***	186.8***
The rights of minority groups are protected	Evaluation	0.58	0.252	-3.12	-1.136	163.7***	75***	225.6***
Citizens have the final say on political issues by voting directly in referendums	Evaluation	0.82	0.283	-2.98	-0.941	82***	56.3***	171.2***

Figure 17.5 Diverging importance and evaluation of specific aspects of democracy in Poland in two major electorates, 2012–2022

Source: ESS (2002–2022) data set, weighted data, authors' own calculations.

Note: The table shows changes over time in differences between PiS voters and PO voters. Reported are the mean differences in 2012 (MD6) and 2022 (MD10), effect sizes (Cohen's d6, Cohen's d10), and F-tests for party, wave, and their interaction. Stars indicate statistical significance levels: $p < 0.05$ (*), $p < 0.01$ (**), $p < 0.001$ (***)�

It is a well-documented phenomenon that ruling parties (and their voters) tend to evaluate the quality of democracy differently than opposition groups, with incumbents' voters frequently rating democratic processes and institutions more favourably than opposition voters (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gélineau 2007). Given that different parties were in power in the two waves of the survey analysed here, it is inevitable that their interpretations of the quality of democracy differ. Both PiS and PO voters significantly changed their evaluations regarding nearly all aspects of democracy. PiS supporters exhibited the highest increases in satisfaction with the government's economic performance, namely in the reduction of differences in income levels ($MD = 4.0$, $t = 23.0$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.5$) and protection of citizens against poverty ($MD = 3.6$, $t = 19.2$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.3$). At the same time, PO supporters showed a very large decline in their evaluations, particularly in areas related to electoral integrity ($MD = -3.9$, $t = -24.0$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.5$), media freedom ($MD = -3.7$, $t = -22.2$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.3$) and minority rights ($MD = -2.68$, $t = -16.8$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.0$), reflecting growing concerns about the erosion of democratic institutions.

However, not only did party electorates flip their position regarding evaluations of existing democracy in Poland, but also inter-party differences in evaluating democracy greatly increased during the period of democratic backsliding. This can be attributed to the increasing polarization, where incumbent and opposition parties' voters diverged in their perceptions, leading to a more pronounced contrast in their assessments of democratic quality over time. The differences between PiS and PO voters significantly increased in all cases except regarding the impartiality of the courts and, in the 2022 wave, concerned particularly minority rights, electoral integrity, and protection of citizens from poverty.

It is even more remarkable that the significant increase in inter-party differences over time was evident in the perceived importance of all analysed aspects of democracy except two (protection from poverty and political pluralism), although on a smaller scale ↓ than in evaluations. PO voters further increased their emphasis on liberal democratic values, while the vision of democracy of PiS voters wandered in an illiberal and majoritarian direction, with decreases in the perceived importance of democracy regarding all aspects except one (electoral integrity). As of 2022, the areas of stark contrast between pro-government and anti-government voters were notably media freedom, minority rights, and the reduction of economic inequalities.

Overall, these findings underscore a polarization in the perceptions of democracy's functioning between PiS and PO voters. While PiS supporters exhibit increasing satisfaction with the government's performance in economic welfare and democratic processes, PO supporters show a decline in their evaluations, particularly in areas ↓ related to media freedom and electoral integrity. The growing divergence between these voter groups signals a deepening divide in how democracy is perceived and valued in Poland, reflecting the broader impact of democratic backsliding and political polarization. In turn, this fragmented perception of what democracy means to different segments of the population poses a significant challenge to social cohesion and the endurance of democracy, as consensus on fundamental democratic principles becomes increasingly elusive.

Conclusions

Polish democracy, after twenty-five years of continuous support expressed both by citizens and the ruling elites, unexpectedly entered a period of democratic backsliding during the two terms of the PiS government (2015–2023). However, one of the most significant conclusions from our study is that during this backsliding, the continuous undermining of democratic values and dismantling of state institutions did not lead to a decline in democratic support in Polish society as a whole. On the contrary, it seemingly strengthened it. While Poland has experienced one of the largest falls in the quality of democracy, as indicated by international indexes (EIU 2022; Freedom House 2022) and citizens' evaluations in surveys (ESS 2022), belief in the importance of democracy per se has concurrently risen.

This counterintuitive trend suggests that the erosion of democratic institutions and practices has, in a sense, galvanized public support for democratic ideals. As the functioning of democracy became increasingly compromised, it appears to have heightened the public's awareness and appreciation of its value. The decline in actual democratic practices served as a wake-up call for many citizens, leading to reinvigorated support for democracy and social dissent, where the public's increased endorsement of democracy stands in opposition to the government's undemocratic tendencies. However, while support for democracy has seen (on average) a significant rise, it has become highly polarized. During the rule of PiS, Polish society became divided into pro-government voters who mostly tolerated its illiberal and anti-democratic actions, and opposition voters who strengthened in their pro-democratic attitudes. In this way, democratic norms and institutions became increasingly contested grounds between the governing and opposition parties over the course of the democratic backsliding episode.

Furthermore, the real danger lies in the divergence of democratic understanding and evaluation of democracy along strict party lines. The growing political polarization has exacerbated the already existing differences and led to the diminishing of the common ground of shared understanding of democracy between the different political factions. In particular, the democratic regression initiated by PiS resulted not only in the erosion of democratic norms among their supporters but also in a redefinition of democracy to suit the incumbent's needs (McCoy et al. 2018). This was especially visible in the loss of ↓ support for the liberal dimension of democracy, including media freedom and the rights of minorities. The consequence of such a sharp division in the perception and support of democracy between the supporters of the ruling party and those of the opposition is a weakened democratic framework, where the concept of democracy is interpreted in different

ways, depending on political affiliations. Political polarization has resulted in the metaphorical existence of ‘two different democracies’ within the geographical boundaries of Poland, highlighting a severe fracture in the democratic consensus.

These findings fall in line with previously identified low levels of generalized (diffused) support for democracy across both the voters and the parliament (Markowski and Kwiatkowska 2018). Changing visions and satisfaction with democracy in both main party electorates over time described in this chapter suggest the high impact of specific support for democracy, which refers to the evaluation of the incumbent government. In contrast, low generalized support, characterized by enduring orientations toward democracy, rooted in a trust in the political system and a belief in the legitimacy of political authority, makes it difficult for individuals to accept or tolerate outcomes of governance that they find unsatisfactory or contrary to their preferences, as argued by Easton (1965).

The period of democratic backsliding showed that Polish democracy is less stable than it was assumed in previous optimistic predictions. It became evident that, skilfully approached, a large share of voters is willing to accept a fast, top-down process of destruction of key democratic institutions and values. The eight-year rule of PiS threatened the public attitudes towards democracy not because support for this system waned—as the average support for democracy significantly increased—but because imagining democracy became polarized along party conflict lines, diminishing the common ground.

The 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland resulted in a majority win for democratic opposition parties, termed by the newly re-elected prime minister Donald Tusk the ‘Coalition of the 15th of October’ in his exposé. Halting the process of democratic erosion, they have put Poland once again on the spot, to observe how favourable are the conditions to re-democratize in an environment of persistent lack of trust and still deep polarization. This situation presents a complex challenge for restoring democracy. While the increased support for democracy is a positive sign, the actual deterioration in democratic practices cannot be overlooked. The short-term challenge lies in harnessing this public support to restore and strengthen the democratic institutions dismantled during the rule of PiS in a way that is immediate, efficient, and does not violate democratic principles of legal order. Meanwhile, the long-term goal is to reinstate a common vision of democracy that can be embraced by society as a whole.

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Note

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1. In the 2022 wave, a populist dimension was added. However, due to the lack of comparability with earlier waves of the survey, we omitted it from this study.

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