Hollowed or redefined? Changing visions of democracy in the political discourse of Law and Justice

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Since 2015, Law and Justice (PiS) has gradually eroded democratic institutions in Poland. To find out whether this process has been reflected in the political discourse solely as a collapse of liberal democracy or whether we are observing a narrative redefinition of the meaning of democracy, we conducted a systematic qualitative study of the framing of democracy in PiS parliamentary speeches (2001-2020), set against the comparative background of major Polish political parties. Having adapted the Varieties of Democracy's classification of dimensions of democracy to discourse analysis, we show that while the liberal model of democracy has dominated Polish political discourse, it has been used by PiS less frequently than by other parties and in an increasingly critical way. Furthermore, electoral and majoritarian democracy has been growing in importance and the will of the electoral majority has been used to legitimize breaking democratic procedures. However, the government's broad redistributive policies have not been accompanied by a more egalitarian vision of democracy. We argue that the unwillingness to incorporate an egalitarian dimension into narratives on democracy demonstrates that the ruling party frames redistribution as their conditional charity towards selected social and occupational groups and not as a corrective toward economically inclusive democracy.

Introduction

De-democratization,[1] autocratization[2] or the illiberal turn[3] has been taking place in Poland throughout the recent years. The gradual decline in the quality of democracy in the country has included violation of civil rights and freedoms, subordination of the judiciary system to the government and violation of the rule of law and media freedom.[4] Democratically elected governing party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), incrementally and under legal disguise, has been dismantling the core principles of democracy and undermining the importance of key procedures safeguarding these values.[5] Thirty years after the collapse of communist regimes, the hard-won democracy has ceased to be "the only game in town",[6] that is "so broadly and profoundly legitimate among its citizens that it is very unlikely to break down".[7]

Law and Justice won the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections consecutively and support for the party remains high regardless of their anti-democratic actions, including repeated violations of the constitution. Moreover, PiS voters are the most satisfied with democracy in Poland (83% versus 12-18% of voters of other parties) and they still consider democracy to be the best political system.[8] This shows that their vision of democracy is at least partially immune to the observed decline in the quality of democracy, even accounting for the fact that electoral winners tend to be more satisfied with democracy than electoral losers[9] and that the level of political knowledge varies greatly between the electorates of Polish political parties.[10]

The existence of a variety of visions of democracy and the multidimensionality of this concept is confirmed by international population surveys[11] and expert surveys.[12] Besides the foundation of democracy consisting of free and fair elections, civil and political liberties, and government accountability, the specific ways of defining democracy change over time and differ between political ideologies and parties. The recent electoral successes of populist parties are frequently seen as a result of rising inequality levels and mainstream parties' shortcomings in ensuring an effective economic redistribution,[13] particularly in the context of resentments and uncertainties brought by transitional reforms.[14] In Poland, the economic costs of rapid transformation from the centrally planned to the free market economy were highly unequally divided, which created the division into "winners" and "losers" of transformation,[15] and was further aggravated by the European economic and migration crises. In this respect, the redistributive policies implemented by Law and Justice can be seen as compensating for the neglect of their predecessors by strengthening the redistributive dimension of democracy.

However, although the discourse of political elites and the cues to voters are an important source of political frames,[16] systematic analyses of the framing of democracy by decision-makers are rare.[17] In this article, we address this deficiency through a qualitative analysis of parliamentary speeches on democracy given by Law and Justice MPs in the years 2001-2020, set against the comparative background of major Polish political parties. Using the theoretical framework based on the Varieties of Democracy (VoD)[18] scheme, we analysed the main frames and contexts of democracy to track how the vision of democracy expressed by MPs has evolved over time. By examining the changing relevance of different models of democracy in parliamentary debates, we investigated whether the vision of democracy in the political discourse of PiS has been redefined and enriched by strengthening its redistributive aspect and, thus, transformed into a more economically inclusive political system or whether the changes in the discourse solely reflected the hollowing of the liberal democracy.

Visions of democracy

The concept of democracy has been deeply studied in social and political sciences. Yet, its exact boundaries remain vague, with a lack of unified conceptualization and operationalization. Despite numerous studies in social and political sciences, no scientific compromise has been reached on the content of democracy, its attributes and types, and it remains a highly contested issue to this day.[19] Furthermore, the public understanding of democracy has been shown to vary across time and space,[20] among age groups[21] and socio-economic groups,[22] and in response to political regime transition.[23]

The fundamental principles of democracy comprising free, fair and transparent elections, civil and political liberties, and government accountability are included in most theoretical studies[20] and empirical international indexes (Freedom House, Polity IV, VoD, Bertelsmann Transformation Index). However, in contemporary societies, democracy requires more than just a formal framework and set of institutions guaranteeing the legal protection of equal rights and free and fair elections. Thus, the scientific debate on democracy mainly concerns such aspects as political inclusion,[24] economic egalitarianism[25] and gender equality.[26] In this study, we draw on the Varieties of Democracy's operationalization, which comprises several hundred indicators and indices of democracy divided into seven main dimensions: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, egalitarian, consensual, participatory and deliberative democracy.[27]

While various aspects of democracy should be accounted for in the evaluation of democratic regimes, in this article we focus specifically on the core (electoral and liberal) and redistributive dimensions of democracy, as the interplay between these aspects has undergone salient changes during the process of post-socialist transformation in Poland. Among all dimensions of democracy, redistributive democracy seems to be the most contentious, as the question of whether the distribution of economic resources should be included in the boundaries of democracy is still unsettled.[28] As Van Aelst and colleagues emphasize,[29] elements of redistributive democracy such as inclusiveness, enlightened understanding and effective and equal participation are becoming more important in the context of the information society and, as a result, are increasingly expressed in the public discourse. While some scholars stand for the exclusive definitions,[30] theorists of substantive democracy argue that a certain level of socio-economic development and redistribution is essential for democratic engagement in politics.[31]

The egalitarian aspect of democracy is also operationalized in many international indexes. The simple models of egalitarian democracy, like the one in the Democracy Barometer, emphasize mainly its political aspects – equality of participation, transparency of political process and substantive and descriptive representation.[32] On the contrary, more complex models, such as the one applied in V-Dem, along with gender and ethnic equality include economic redistribution, accounting for the extent to which the resources of income, education and health are widely and equally available.[33] While the political and economic aspects of egalitarian democracy could be distinguished analytically, they are strongly interconnected, as the equality of political participation highly depends on economic redistribution.

Redistributive democracy and the illiberal turn in Poland

On the political spectrum, the actors accountable for putting the redistributive aspects of democracy on the political agenda are historically constituted by the leftist parties, for whom

favouring redistributive social policies is the essence of their political stance.[34] In many democratic countries, left-wing attitudes have been associated with support for the reduction of income inequalities and redistribution.[35] Following this logic, the representation of egalitarian aspects of democracy in political discourse is usually associated with the presence and relevance of well-organized leftist parties.[36]

The post-socialist context, and Poland specifically, is exceptional in this regard which makes it an interesting case to study. First, since the democratic transformation, the economic dimension of political attitudes has been inversely related to the socio-cultural one in comparison with Western European countries.[37] As indicated by Marks and colleagues,[38] these differences can be explained by the long-term influence of the communist system in the CEE countries which was a redistributive and authoritarian formation. While the central economic management and redistributive policies of communist governments led to much greater economic equality than in free-market economies, the authoritarian nature of the regime limited individual freedoms and penalized alternative lifestyles.

Second, the influence of the communist regime on the post-transition party system in Poland has been manifested in the restrained political competition on economic issues.[39] While the Solidarity movement had aimed primarily at improving the living conditions of the working class, the agreement within the political elite, following the recommendations of Western international organizations,[40] resulted in the implementation of neoliberal economic changes which pushed large social groups with less ability to adapt to market conditions (named later "the losers of transition"[41]) to the margins of society. Although the short-term economic shock therapy, known as the Balcerowicz's Plan, caused a high rise in unemployment and poverty, the neoliberal direction of economic reforms in Poland was for a long time not questioned by a single government.[42]

Finally, the political spectrum of Poland has become skewed to the economic right, with weak representation of organized workers. Since the beginning of the transition, trade unions have been excluded from the political process due to being perceived as a threat to the fast pace of economic reforms. Even such a powerful actor in defending workers' rights as the Solidarity movement has, in recent decades, been accused of betraying their unionist identity and replacing it with a nationalist and religious ideology by taking the side of the ruling right-wing parties in the recent industrial conflicts.[43]

For these reasons, for nearly two decades after the transition, economic issues were not majorly contentious, and most of the competition between relevant political parties took place at the socio-cultural level.[44] The profound changes in the party system were initiated in 2005 by Law and Justice. The party successfully employed fighting economic inequalities as the major issue of its election campaign ("solidary Poland" versus "liberal Poland"),[45] merging this with nationalism, cultural conservatism, and a close relationship between the state and the Catholic Church. Economic issues became an important determinant of voting choice between the two main political parties – Law and Justice and the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) in subsequent elections.[46]

Correspondingly, surveys among voters and MPs in Poland demonstrated that citizens espoused a much broader vision of democracy, encompassing the redistributive dimension, while MPs regarded mainly procedural aspects as essential components of democracy. After the 2008 economic crisis, followed by a period of enhanced deregulation in the labour market and growing economic inequalities, redistributive issues became more salient for MPs as essential

normative features of democracy. However, the post-crisis responsiveness of political elites differed by political affiliation, as PiS met the expectations of voters much more effectively.[47]

Concurrently, the 2015 European migration crisis caused a strong anti-immigration shift in the attitudes of Poles, fuelled by the right-wing parties' nativist campaigns.[48] Incorporation of the redistributive and nativist issues in the electoral programme and later, in the state policies of PiS, targeted the needs of selected social groups who felt economically and culturally excluded from the political community following the transformation[49], and ensured the party's victory in the parliamentary elections in 2015 and 2019.[50] The newly gained inclusion and identity of these groups, and their strong electoral support, facilitated the incremental dismantling of democratic procedures and institutions.

Already in 2015, PiS successfully took over the Constitutional Court by illegally appointing its own candidates and thus disabling constitutional scrutiny over government's actions. Subsequently, the incumbent party imposed restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, and took control over state media and some private media,[51] and in 2017 and 2018, has taken control of the National Council of the Judiciary and partly of the Supreme Court, which undermined the independence of the judiciary and weakened institutional checks and balances.[52] At the same time, the party have introduced generous redistributive policies to support families with children (the '500 +' child benefit programme) and pensioners that chimed with the culturally conservative and economically interventionist values of the PiS's core electorate.[53]

Methods

To examine the changing vision of democracy in the discourse of Law and Justice, we conducted a systematic qualitative analysis of the framing of democracy in the parliamentary speeches of its MPs. The full corpus of over 291 thousand plenary speeches from official proceedings was extracted from the Sejm website (the lower house of the Polish parliament, http://www.sejm.gov.pl), corrected, subjected to stemming and linked to the available socio-demographic and political metadata, including the names and surnames of the MPs, their political affiliation and timing of speeches.

The parliamentary speeches were chosen for analysis due to their multidimensionality, allowing diachronic analyses of the ideological positions of parties and the evolution of political concepts over time. The stenographic data, provided regularly by the parliaments, allow for more detailed cross-time studies than expert surveys and election programmes, which usually appear several years apart. Moreover, the transcripts contain the statements of many party representatives, not just their leaders, and the speeches are personalized in terms of style and arguments. Therefore, they allow for much more precision in analysing changes in the meaning and framing of political constructs than party programmes, in which the organization tries to present one, coherent approach, strategically imposed by the party elite.

In focusing on the specificity of evolving frames of democracy during the current illiberal turn, we narrowed down our analysis to speeches made by representatives of PiS during the period from 2001 (the formation of the party), until November 2020 inclusively. To ensure that the data was relevant to our research, we selected only the speeches containing at least three mentions of democracy (excluding proper names). Ultimately, therefore, we worked on a representative subset of 376 speeches that were manually coded. For comparative purposes, to

identify changes concerning PiS alone, speeches of the two other most relevant parties in this period (PO/KO[54] and SLD/The Left[55]) were coded and included in our analysis.

The conceptualization of multiple aspects of democracy for manual coding was based on the authors' adaptation of the Varieties of Democracy[56] scheme for textual data. As the VoD codebook covers theory-driven indicators describing the party system, political parties, the executive and legislature, mechanisms of direct democracy, civil society and civil liberties, we needed to adapt it to the empirical analysis of parliamentary speeches. For this purpose, inspired by the VoD project, we distinguished seven dimensions (or aspects) of democracy: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, egalitarian, consensual, participatory and deliberative. In this article, we present the results of further systematic qualitative analysis, referring only to the aspects of democracy relevant to the research problem: liberal, electoral, majoritarian and egalitarian.[57]

The code system was developed during two methodological phases. Following a deductive, concept-driven approach, we developed an initial code system before viewing the data, and then assigned it to the text segments accordingly. At the next stage, we used the lexical search function to find further uses of the stem *democ* in speeches. The new sub-codes were then inductively added from the data (a data-driven approach). The final coding system (Figure 1) is hierarchically structured and contains two levels of sub-codes. To validate the coding system, we used automatic counting to verify how often a particular code was attached to text segments and how many segments had been coded for the corpus. Then, we analysed all text segments of the same category, which allowed us to trace how a given aspect of democracy changed over time.

Electoral democracy
- **free and fair elections**
  - electoral law
  - electoral participation
  - fair elections
  - free elections
- **media freedom**
  - TV
  - free media
  - politicization of the media
  - press
  - radio
- **political liberties**
  - financing of political parties
  - freedom of assembly
  - freedom of association
  - freedom of beliefs
  - freedom of operation of political parties
  - freedom of speech

Liberal democracy
- **civil rights**
  - citizen's rights and liberties
  - human rights
  - individual rights
  - minority rights
- **courts**
  - constitutional judiciary
  - free courts
  - independent courts
- **democratic institutions**
  - compliance with democratic procedures
  - parliamentary democracy
  - stability of democratic institutions
  - strong democratic institutions
  - transparency
- **pluralism**
  - criticism of the tyranny of the majority
  - political competition
  - rights of the opposition
- **power of parliament**
  - limitation of executive
  - control of the executive and public officials
  - separation of powers
  - strong parliament
- **rule of law**
  - authorities restricted by law
  - authority of the law
  - government accountability

Deliberative democracy
- political dispute
- parliamentary debate
- political compromise common good
- public debate
- political dialogue

Majoritarian democracy
- electoral power as legitimacy
- greater power of the government
- limited or no judicial control
- will of the majority
- majority electoral system

Consensual democracy
- bicameral parliament
- federalism
- proportional electoral system
- representation of minorities
- collective decision making

Egalitarian democracy
- **equal chances**
  - education
  - ethnicity
  - gender
  - nationality
  - regardless of: disability
  - sexual identity
  - wealth/income
- **equal participation**
  - equal access to justice
  - equal influence on policy making
  - equal political participation
- **social justice**
  - redistribution
  - social obligations of the state
  - social problems
  - social solidarity
  - workers' rights

Participatory democracy
- civil society
  - citizen participation in politics
  - civic control of politics
  - high turnout
  - non-governmental organizations
  - social activism
  - social movements
- decentralization
  - competences of local government
  - local elections
  - local government
  - territorial division
- direct democracy
  - direct elections
  - referendum

Notes: Dimensions analysed in the article are highlighted in black

Figure 1. The coding system applied to parliamentary speeches

Results

Overall, the vision of democracy expressed by Polish MPs of all the major parties (PiS, PO/KO, SLD/The Left) relies primarily on liberal and electoral components. Although the number of speeches relating to these two aspects varies throughout the analysed period, both remain dominant in the political discourse. The notion of liberal democracy, including political pluralism, the rule of law, checks & balances, civil rights, and democratic procedures and institutions, appeared most frequently (in 62% of speeches). Electoral democracy, comprising free and fair elections, and the political freedoms necessary to guarantee them: free media, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of political parties, appeared in 39% of speeches. In comparison, the two remaining aspects: majoritarian democracy, covering the will of the majority, electoral victory as the overriding principle in evaluating the legitimacy of government actions, greater powers of the executive and diminished control over it (8% of speeches); and egalitarian democracy, concerning social justice, equal chances and equal participation (11% of speeches), were present to a limited extent in the Polish political discourse. Figure 2 shows how the frequency of these visions of democracy has changed over time, broken down into major political parties.
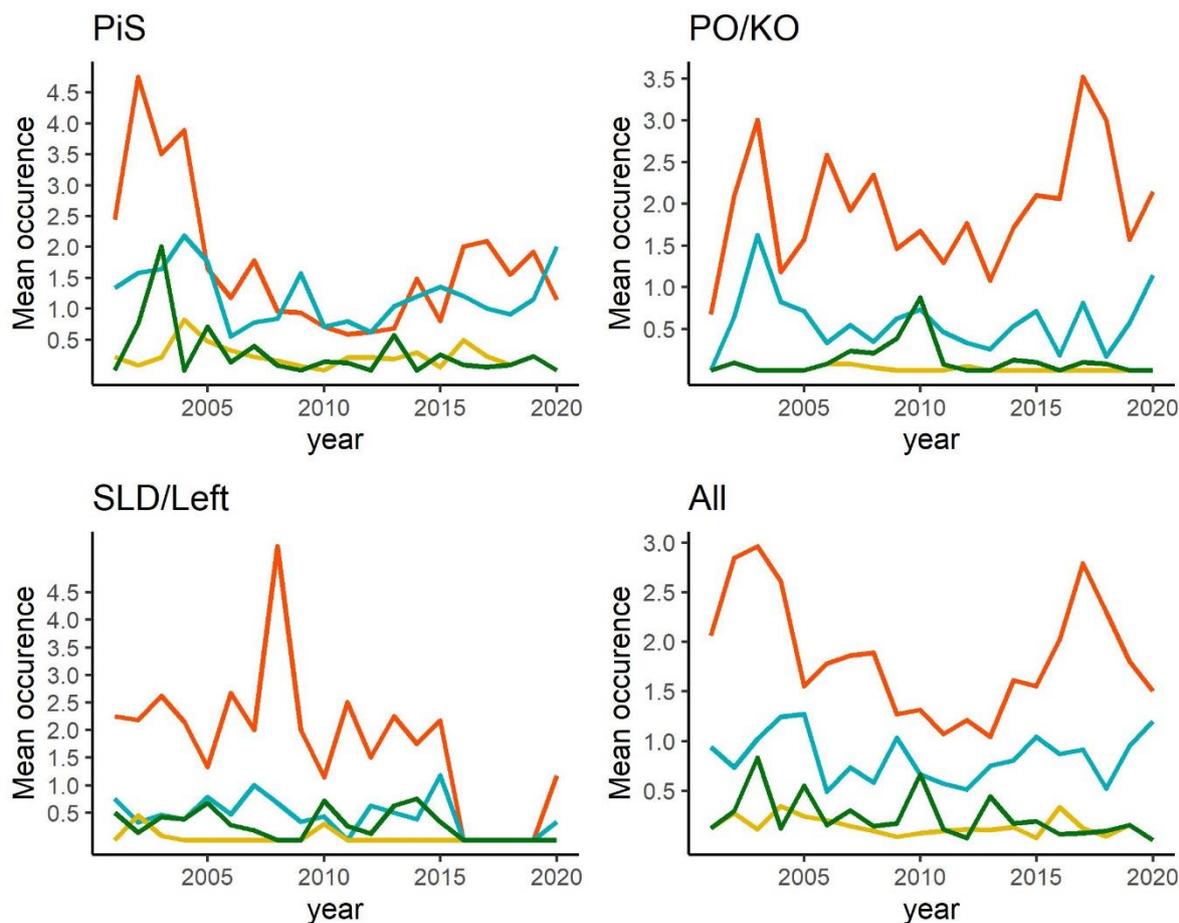
Figure 2. Prevalence of dimensions of democracy over time by party

Narrowing further analysis to the speeches of Law and Justice MPs, it can be seen that while the two visions of democracy most frequently referred to are still liberal and electoral, their frequency differs from other parties. Consistently with their actions on dismantling democratic institutions,[58] PiS refers to the liberal vision the least frequently (in 51% of speeches, while both PO and SLD/The Left - in 71%). In contrast, PiS more often refers to electoral democracy (in 48% of statements, while PO - 32%, and SLD/The Left - in 31%) and majoritarian democracy (PiS - 14%, PO - 2%, SLD/The Left - 6%). However, although fighting economic inequalities has been declared as one of the central aims in PiS election campaigns[59] and the party has implemented generous redistributive policies,[60] egalitarian issues are raised relatively

rarely by PiS and PO (9% in both cases) while in the speeches of SLD/The Left they appear almost twice as often (17%).

References to liberal democracy in Law and Justice's discourse reached a peak during the 4th term (2001-2005) when the party was in opposition, and then significantly decreased after PiS lost the elections to PO in 2007. The use of electoral and majoritarian democracy is varied - after extensive use during the 4th term, there was a decline in both cases, but during the PiS government's rule since 2015, both have been used more frequently than in previous terms when the party was in opposition. Finally, except in the early years after the party was founded, mentions of egalitarian democracy are rather underrepresented in PiS's parliamentary speeches, despite the broad social support for selected groups under its rule. The patterns identified in political discourse analysis are consistent with the broader political strategy of PiS discussed above: the party targeted specific social groups previously excluded from politics in order to ensure victory in the elections.[61] The detailed cross-time prevalence of dimensions and sub-dimensions of democracy in the speeches of Law and Justice MPs is presented in Figure 3 and analysed below.
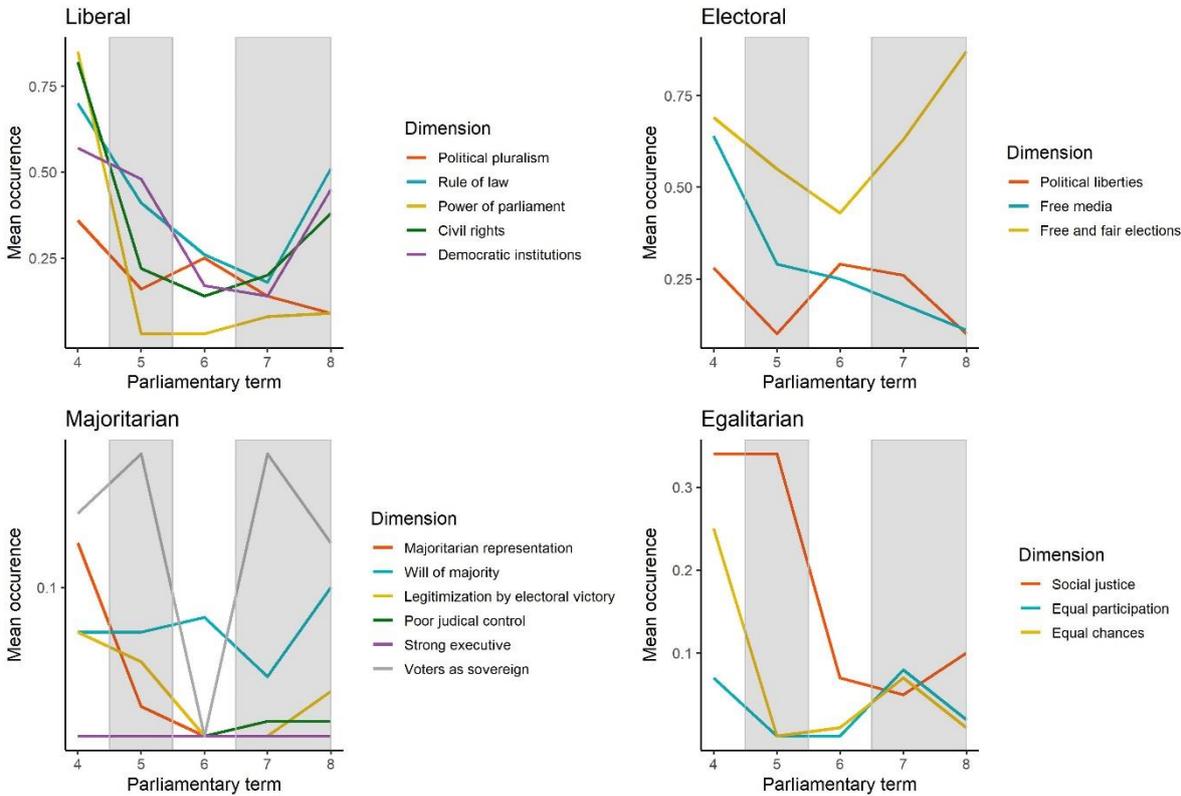
Note: The grey background indicates the party in government.

Figure 3. Prevalence of dimensions of democracy in PiS speeches over time

Liberal democracy

In each term, a substantial part of the speeches referred to liberal attributes of democracy that constitute the core of the conventional models of democracy.[62] According to the Varieties of Democracy's operationalization, it includes notions of human rights, civil rights, the rule of law, the constitution, an independent judiciary, separation of powers, and the role of procedures

and political institutions.[63] When PiS was in opposition, the recognition of parliament as the main area of inter-party competition made pluralism and guarantees of the opposition's rights an essential component of their vision of democracy.

> Formal democracy is one in which anyone with a brutal naked majority is able to outvote anything, even that two plus two equals five. Real, material democracy, is one in which the rights of citizens and the rights of the non-parliamentary opposition are respected and in which system the parliamentary opposition (...) can take part on equal terms in the public debate. (7_009_2_145)[64]

> The measure of democracy in parliament is how the opposition is treated: whether it is perceived as a necessary element of balance and a needed voice to evaluate the actions of the majority, or as an enemy on whom war must be declared. (7_075_1_54)

This narrative was accompanied by postulates of giving the opposition parties wide-ranging responsibilities and allowing them to participate in managing the work of parliament. Law and Justice MPs criticized the excessive restriction of the time and number of statements of deputies, and perceived the use of parliamentary procedures in a dispute with the government as the essence of a responsible opposition in a democratic state. The violation of the adopted agenda and abuses of the legislative process were considered equivalent to limiting democracy.

> The use of parliamentary procedures to argue with the government is the essence of an (...) opposition in a democratic state. This is the essence of parliamentary democracy. In the last year, we have been dealing with (...) an attempt to introduce a kind of censorship of parliamentary interpellations, and the parliamentary questions are to be shortened. (4_033_1_8)

> These beautiful words about parliamentarism, about principles, about respect, are complete fiction, as today's debate shows. This is evidenced by the fact that the largest parliamentary club that has gained power is eager to retaliate and is trying to close the mouth of the opposition and limit its role in parliament. (6_001_3_31)

The PiS MPs' narrative expresses the firm belief that democracy at its core should guarantee individual and civil rights and freedoms. However, since the 8th parliamentary term, when the party held the majority of seats, liberal democratic values have become embedded in a negative context, as most of the statements of the party's MPs involve defending allegations of violating the rule of law and citizens' rights by the Law and Justice government.[65] Similarly, frequent references to the principle of an independent judiciary need to be interpreted in this case as a consequence of the process of making courts and tribunals dependent on the political executive, which led to the constitutional crises in Poland[66] and triggered a wide civic movement in support of democracy.

> Democracy, human rights, civil rights, and the constitution are just a screen for your dark interests. It's just a screen. (8_006_2_233)

> You are hiding behind democracy and the constitution. You are hiding behind civil rights, and yet the citizens are demanding a change and reform of the judiciary. (8_046_1_25)

This is in contradiction with previous party declarations, pointing to the irreplaceable importance of the judiciary for democracy:

> Without a properly understood judicial independence, it is impossible for a judge to reliably perform the duties that are incumbent on him in a democratic state ruled by law; it is impossible to exercise the right of citizens to equal access to an impartial and fair court for all. (7_047_3_95)

During the rule of Law and Justice, its MPs actively countered accusations of dismantling liberal democracy and the principle of separation of powers by using references to electoral and majoritarian democracy.

> How do I understand democracy, the separation of powers? What is the rule of law and independence? If we are talking about democracy, I will not repeat what is obvious to all. Democracy is based on listening to the people, listening to the voters, serving the people. The authorities want to give all their power to a narrow group of judges, but that is not the case with democracy. (8_027_2_211)

Despite the introduction of unconstitutional changes to the political system, representatives of PiS actively appropriated the democratic discourse, applying the legitimacy flowing from their election victory. In their vision, such political action did not threaten the democratic regime but, instead, reinforced democracy through "serving the people". In this context, the MPs frequently refer to their voters whose (alleged) preferences are equated with "the will of the nation".[67] Such patterns of political discourse correspond with the nativist aspect of party's electoral programme discussed above. The next section presents a detailed discussion of the role of "the sovereign" thus constructed, representing the electoral majority in the Law and Justice political discourse.

Electoral turned majoritarian democracy

A similar change in the party narrative over time accompanies the core principles of electoral democracy, that, according to the operationalization based on V-dem scheme,[68] includes free and fair elections, freedom of expression and independent media. The topic of media independence was widely articulated in the 5th term in the context of the Rywin Affair – the largest corruption scandal concerning Polish media which contributed significantly to the collapse of the previous SLD government. Law and Justice accused SLD of abusing the National Broadcasting Council as its own propaganda machine. Thus, the strong articulation of the need to depoliticize the media was widely seen in parliamentary speeches. Similarly, during the 6th and 7th terms (in opposition), PiS MPs stressed that public media were an important component of the democratic system and emphasized that the Civic Platform had hijacked and destroyed these media.

> However, the basis of the democratic system is free and independent media. We have as much democracy as we have freedom in the media, and we have the quality of democracy we have as the quality of free media. (5_004_2_95)

> The essential role of the media in democracies is the control of authorities. Meanwhile, in Poland today, it can be said that both public and commercial media are an element of authorities, not of their control. They are becoming a tool of party and pro-government propaganda and there is no place in them for presenting a view other than that convenient for those in power. (7_014_2_297)

Although while in opposition, PiS clearly thematized the issue of democracy and independent media, during the 5th term and since the 8th term, the party has itself been accused of taking complete control over the media.[69] Additionally, in consistence with party's nativist campaigns,[70] since 2015, the role of public media, according to PiS (in government) has been to defend the "good name" and image of Poland, and present patriotic and religious content. MPs argued that strong and stable public media made it possible to reveal the re-privatization affair of the previous government. In response to accusations of dismantling democracy and freedom of the press, Law and Justice MPs recalled the journalists' surveillance by the intelligence agency during the previous PO rule.

When the [Civic] Platform takes over the public media, it is good. When Law and Justice, together with partners in the parliamentary coalition, tries to carry out elementary objectivity and correct these errors, it is obviously annexation. (5_013_1_41)

In addition, across different terms, Law and Justice MPs have frequently associated democracy with free and fair elections. The issue of elections appears in the context of political changes in Poland after 1989, as well as democratic transformation in other countries, such as Belarus and Iraq. The fairness of elections and threats to it in Poland were raised most frequently when PiS was an oppositional party (especially in the 4th and 7th terms). This was accompanied by a negative assessment of the fairness of the elections lost by PiS, especially before 2005.

Someone may say: vox populi, vox Dei; the will of the people, the will of God. Well no. In this case, the will of the people resulted from something that was not an act of democracy (...), but an act of great manipulation that led to such a decision by voters (...) who, at best, had a very poor understanding of reality, led to success. (4_074_2_116)

Although all elections in the Third Republic were fully democratic in terms of form, we cannot refer to them as such, because society, among other things, due to defects in the media, did not have reliable information that could be used in its election decisions. (5_004_2_95)

It can be said that, according to the politicians, free and fair elections are a *sine qua non* condition for democracy. However, during the PiS rule in the 8th and 9th terms, the invocation of electoral democracy started to be used to justify the anti-democratic actions of the government[71] based on the will of the majority of voters expressed in the electoral act. The party interpreted this narrow aspect of democracy as the main basis of a democratic society. In such a way, PiS MPs created an exclusive interpretation of democracy that considers the interests only of those citizens, who supported the party in the elections, while leaving others outside the political decision-making process, including the parliamentary opposition. Moreover, opposition parties' objections to PiS policies were presented as assailing the will of Poles or even undermining democracy.

I will repeat it: we are implementing the program to which we committed ourselves on behalf of the voters; the program was chosen by Poles in democratic elections. This choice, the democratic choice of Poles, is our duty, as politicians, to respect. And I deeply believe that in this House all politicians respect the democratic choice of Poles. (8_008_1_2)

I wanted to say this: first of all, the elections were democratic, Law and Justice won the elections ... You, totalists, have not come to terms with the election results and your attitude is simply that of fascists who do not recognize democratic elections. (8_078_1_118)

The important role in this legitimizing discourse is played by the idea of the "will of the sovereign", through which Law and Justice translates the will of the majority expressed in electoral acts. While in opposition, PiS politicians were critical of the autocracy of the parliamentary majority and the government, and warned against the dangers of abusing the majoritarian understanding of democracy.

Democracy is a tool that is to be effective, to foster and to facilitate the manifestation of the will of the sovereign through the actions of individual citizens. Since, then, democracy is not an end in itself, let us recognize that, as representatives of the nation, we will do our best not to turn into greedy misers guarding the exclusive right to have the nation's legitimacy. (7_052_2_82)

Because the sovereign is not us, usurpers, here, not us MPs, but the sovereign is the citizens of the Republic of Poland (...) our voters. (7_011_3_56)

However, the party's victory in elections since 2015 changed this narrative into identifying the preferences of the parliamentary majority and the single-party government with the will of the nation through the very fact of an election victory. As follows, PiS sees their primary mission not in serving citizens regardless of their political attitudes, but rather in using the tools of democracy to suppress parliamentary opposition under the cover of the will of the electoral majority.

> Democratic elections have decided who has the right to… [Voice from the audience: To break the constitution.] ... to decide the fate of Poland in the years to come. (...) I wonder why you are constantly striving to prevent these changes, the reforms expected by Polish citizens, from being carried out. (...) Complaints to European institutions, causing quarrels, not only here in Poland, but also abroad. This is your way (...) to breach the democratic right of citizens to be represented by a democratically elected government. (8_053_2_3)

> Consider whether solidarity should not be a beautiful value uniting Poles again. In building this unity, it is first of all necessary to accept the majority decision expressed by the nation in last year's parliamentary elections. (8_032_1_237)

In this way, Law and Justice use the vision of democracy understood as the implementation of the will of the sovereign, which is expressed in framing an electoral victory as a justification for the full freedom of government action, also in a way that goes beyond the competences of this institution and violates democratic procedures as well as civil rights and freedoms.

Egalitarian democracy

The aspects of egalitarian democracy are rather underrepresented in the discourse of Law and Justice compared to other models of democracy, with a limited number of mentions in speeches (96 mentions in 35 documents). In most of the contexts related to redistributive democracy, MPs address the goal of equality across social groups, especially concerning income. The representatives of Law and Justice apply these concepts to the idea of equal access to political representation which, according to them, has to be assured regardless of the level of individual income:

> Too often today, Poland is ruled by the absolute power of money. There is no reason why this principle should also apply to Polish democracy. Access to politics cannot be rationed, as unfortunately today in Poland access to education or access to healthcare is regulated. (…) Democracy means that everyone has the right to be politically represented, both rich and poor, and one who can afford to pay for a political party and one who cannot. (7_052_3_99)

Although Law and Justice MPs acknowledge the importance of equal access to political decision-making regardless of the level of income as an important pillar of democracy, they interpret current economic and social problems as rather detached from the "success" of democracy in Poland. In addition, the limited aspects of redistribution which they mention in this context primarily emphasize youth unemployment, family crises and depopulation. These aspects are strongly connected with their conservative perception of reality, in which family values play a crucial role. As a result, this is translated into support for specific social groups, such as young families[72].

> We also have many serious, extremely serious social problems in Poland, there is unemployment among young people, almost 40%, we have poverty, we have a shortage of apartments, we have a family crisis (...). Of course, there are also successes, very great successes. There is independence, it is imperfect, but it is democracy. (...) But in this situation, Poland needs very vigorous actions aimed at improving the situation of the most disadvantaged groups. (5_010_3_56)

Summarizing, while in power (5th and 8-9th term), Law and Justice stand for a narrow version of democracy, the core of which is a manifestation of the will of the majority, which, in the PiS narrative, gives sufficient permission for the implementation of its programme, including the government going beyond its powers. As well illustrated by MPs' support of opposition rights while they are in opposition themselves, PiS extends their vision of democracy only in those cases when this fits their political goals. Redistributive themes are present in the party's parliamentary speeches mainly shortly after its formation, and then almost disappear.

Conclusion

In this study, we conducted a systematic qualitative analysis of parliamentary speeches of PiS MPs in the years 2001-2020, focusing on changes in the framing of democracy. We were particularly interested in whether the ongoing democratic erosion was reflected in the political discourse and whether it was narratively compensated via the strengthening of other dimensions of democracy. Specifically, based on a wide catalogue of nativist[73] and redistributive[74] claims in the electoral campaigns of Law and Justice, we aimed to check whether these components were included in their vision of democracy, redefining the model of democracy towards economic egalitarianism.

The study is the first systematic qualitative research of the framing of democracy in Polish parliamentary debates. The applied sample selection method led to the choice of the most relevant statements for the topic, remaining representative for the whole dataset. Thanks to the qualitative analysis carried out on a large data set, the research provides reliable knowledge about the mechanisms of change in the interpretation of democracy.

The conducted analysis leads to several conclusions. First, all relevant Polish parties most frequently refer to a narrow understanding of democracy based on liberal and electoral aspects. The liberal model of democracy dominates political discourse, remaining the central topic of discussions on democracy over time - even when criticized. Notwithstanding, PiS has deviated from other parties in key areas. Of all the parties, PiS refers to the liberal vision the least frequently, and many of these references are deprecatory. In contrast, when speaking of democracy, PiS MPs have much more frequently than PO/KO and SLD/The Left evoked its electoral and majoritarian aspects, especially in the last two terms. These findings nuance the oft-repeated assessment of Law and Justice as entirely anti-democratic[75] by showing how the vision of democracy in their parliamentary speeches has evolved rather than been rejected.

Additionally, the emphasis within a given type of democracy depends on the Law and Justice's status in the opposition-government dynamics. While in opposition, the party particularly emphasized the importance of parliamentary opposition and political pluralism. However, since it took over power in 2015, notions of democracy have been used in the discourse to justify undemocratic decisions and reforms. Particularly, PiS abuses the majoritarian vision of democracy as the "will of the sovereign"[76] to override democratic procedures and legitimize the full freedom of government action, including going beyond the competencies of this institution and violating democratic procedures and values. Thus, analysis of the parliamentary speeches confirms that Poland has become a deficient democracy "in which a single leader enjoys, or thinks he or she enjoys, a 'democratic' legitimacy that allows him or her to ignore, dismiss, or alter other institutions—the legislature, the courts, and the constitutional limits of power".[77]

Finally, we have shown that the process of dismantling the liberal, procedural vision of democracy by Law and Justice, contrary to possible expectations based on the party's extraordinary redistributive policies,[78] has not been accompanied by the reinforcement of an egalitarian, redistributive variety of democracy. The redistribution policies pursued by PiS on a scale unprecedented in Polish post-transitional politics are not linked to any substantial changes in the party's MPs understanding of democracy. Rather than promoting egalitarian democracy, the Law and Justice government applies selective redistribution policies to reward specific groups of the potential electorate (e.g. farmers, retirees and young families) while refraining from supporting other economically disadvantaged social groups less susceptible to their electoral appeal (e.g. state administration workers, teachers, healthcare workers).

The combination of redistributive and nativist elements in the public discourse of PiS resembles patterns of welfare chauvinism. Broadly defined as narratives and policies aimed at reserving welfare benefits for the "native" population,[79] welfare chauvinism became increasingly applied by populist parties that criticized mainstream parties for cutting welfare at the expense of the "native" population for the benefit of "undeserving" immigrants.[80] However, as we have demonstrated in this article, the "native" population that deserves the political representation has been defined by PiS as much narrower than an ethnic community - in a way that identifies the nation with the electoral majority through the concept of "serving the sovereign". Moreover, we argue that the lack of incorporation of an egalitarian dimension into narratives on democracy, even with regard to such narrowly defined "natives", is a deliberate act by the party to showcase redistribution as their benevolence and conditional charity towards selected social and occupational groups - in return for their electoral support - rather than as ensuring the long-term transformations towards a more egalitarian society.

Overall, we claim that the weakening of procedural issues, combined with low diffuse support for democracy in Poland and a low level of trust in political institutions,[81] has made it possible to construct an illiberal, exclusivist model of democracy based on the nativist ideas.[82] This model is based on the identification of society with the nation, the image of the nation as a homogeneous entity with universally shared views and values, the (alleged) will of the electoral majority as the basis of legislation and political decision-making and the whole political elite as representatives of the national majority. Individuals with different views, minority groups and their political representation are framed in the public debate as enemies of the nation and the state, threatening the economic welfare, and moral and cultural identity of the nation.[83] In a similar way, the notion of the "will of the sovereign" is used as a tool for a political crusade against the opposition, aimed at presenting the MPs opposing governmental policies as villains and traitors, unworthy of participating in the political process.

Such illiberal narratives, although present since the transformation in Poland, were initially shared by political actors unsatisfied with the process of political transformation that was negotiated, self-limiting and gentle towards the communist political elite,[84] as well as with the further political development of the country. However, they were suppressed by an agreement of the political elites on the direction and pace of transition.[85] As many authors pointed out,[86] the process of autocratization in Poland became possible due to the preceding 'over-liberalisation' of the regime (liberalization exceeded the advancement of the emancipative values of electorate), that opened a window of opportunity for autocratization for the skilful populists that capitalized on this discrepancy. Taking advantage of the decline in the sense of security caused by economic and cultural crises in the last decade,[87] PiS was able to revive the concept of nativist, majoritarian democracy and secure social support sufficient for electoral victory despite the breakdown of democratic procedures.

In conclusion, the study provides new insight into the relationship between a variety of concepts of democracy and the political discourse of populist parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties that use redistributive claims to gain or maintain power. The analysis contributes to a clearer understanding of whether the selected government actions are part of a broad vision of democracy or rather they are *ad hoc* actions, calculated for electoral success. Thus, while acknowledging the unique political and economic context in Poland, the results of this study provide valuable insight for the analysis of other countries where the democratic erosion process is taking place, especially when institutional aggrandizement occurs in conjunction with redistribution demands. In particular, the changing relevance of the dimensions of democracy enables distinguishing between the hollowing out of democracy and its transformation into a more economically inclusive political system. In other words - it discerns populist parties as being a threat to or a corrective for democracy.[88] However, further research is needed to identify different understandings of the concept of democracy between political parties in order to present the full ideological spectrum in the parliamentary discourse.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Notes

[1] Bogaards, "De-Democratization in Hungary."

[2] Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave."

[3] Hanley and Vachudova, "Understanding the Illiberal Turn."

[4] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020*.

[5] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave."

[6] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, 5.

[7] Diamond, "Toward Democratic Consolidation," 15.

[8] CBOS, *Stosunek do demokracji*.

[9] Anderson et al., *Losers' Consent*; Blais and Gélineau, "Winning, Losing and Satisfaction."

[10] Kwiatkowska, „Poglądy - sympatie partyjne."

[11] Ferrín and Kriesi, *How Europeans View*.

[12] Wilson and Boese, "Empirical Dimensions of Electoral"; Markowski and Kwiatkowska, "The Political Impact."

[13] Guriev, "Economic Drivers of Populism"; Burgoon et al., "Positional Deprivation"; Gidron and Hall, "The Politics of Social Status"; Engler and Weisstanner, "The Threat of Social Decline".

[14] Stanley, "Populism in Central."

[15] Słomczyński et al., "Changes in Class Structure."

[16] Gilens and Murakawa, "Elite Cues and Political."

[17] Oksanen, "Framing the democracy debate"; Kanra, Islam, *Democracy and Dialogue*; Parra, Bakker, and van Liere, "Framing Democracy."

[18] Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v11*.

[19] Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy*; Munck and Verkuilen, "Conceptualizing and Measuring"; Coppedge et al., "Conceptualizing and Measuring."

[20] Ferrín and Kriesi, *How Europeans View*.

[21] Sack, "Regime Change."

[22] Ceka and Magalhaes, "Do the Rich."

[23] Sack, "Regime Change."

[24] Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*.

[25] Knutsen and Wegmann, "Is Democracy about Redistribution."

[26] Welzel, Norris, and Inglehart, "Gender Equality."

[27] Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v11*.

[28] Knutsen and Wegmann, "Is democracy about Redistribution."

[29] Van Aelst et al., "Political Communication," 19.

[30] Diamond, "Toward Democratic Consolidation."

[31] Coppedge et al., "Conceptualizing and Measuring"; Knusten and Wegmann, "Is Democracy about redistribution."

[32] Engler et al., *Democracy Barometer*.

[33] Coppedge et al., "Conceptualizing and Measuring."

[34] Imbeau, Petry, and Lamari, "Left-Right Ideology"; Knusten and Wegmann, "Is Democracy about Redistribution."

[35] Jou and Dalton, "Left-Right Orientations."

[36] Huber and Stephens, *Democracy and the Left*.

[37] Bakker, Jolly, and Polk, "Complexity in the European Party Space."

[38] Marks et al., "Party Competition," 159.

[39] Jasiewicz, "Pocketbook or Rosary."

[40] Orenstein and Bugarič, "Work, Family, Fatherland."

[41] Słomczyński et al., "Changes in Class Structure."

[42] Orenstein and Bugarič, "Work, Family, Fatherland"; Swindal, "Ideology and Social Position."

[43] Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*.

[44] Bakker, Jolly, and Polk, "Complexity in the European Party Space."

[45] Cześnik and Kotnarowski, "Nowy wymiar."

46 Żerkowska-Balas, Lyubashenko, and Kwiatkowska, "Determinanty preferencji wyborczych."
47 Markowski and Kwiatkowska, "The Political Impact."
48 Jaskułowski, *The Everyday Politics*.
49 Guriev, "Economic Drivers of Populism"; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash.*
50 Gromadzki, Sałach, and Brzezinski, "When Populists Deliver."
51 Sadurski, "Polish Constitutional Tribunal."
52 Przybylski, "Explaining Eastern Europe."
53 Sadura and Sierakowski, *Polityczny cynizm*; Bill and Stanley, "Whose Poland."
54 PO (Civic Platform); KO (Civic Coalition), the electoral coalition formed around PO in 2018 in opposition to undemocratic decisions imposed by PiS.
55 SLD (Democratic Left Alliance), social-democratic, post-communist successor party; The Left, a political alliance formed in 2019 consisting of SLD, the Spring and the Left Together.
56 Bernhard et al., "The Varieties of Democracy Core"; Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v11.*
57 Consensual, participatory and deliberative dimensions of democracy were left out of the focus of this study as they are generally underrepresented in PiS political discourse and we did not observe any substantial cross-time changes for those models.
58 Przybylski, "Explaining Eastern Europe."
59 Cześnik and Kotnarowski, "Nowy wymiar."
60 Sadura and Sierakowski, *Polityczny cynizm*; Bill and Stanley, "Whose Poland."
61 Gromadzki, Sałach, and Brzezinski, "When Populists Deliver."
62 Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy*; Munck and Verkuilen, "Conceptualizing and Measuring."
63 See Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v11.*
64 Speeches are coded using the scheme: term_session_day_speech number.
65 Przybylski, "Explaining Eastern Europe."
66 Sadurski, "Polish Constitutional Tribunal."
67 See Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."
68 Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v11.*
69 Sadurski, "Polish Constitutional Tribunal."
70 Jaskułowski, *The Everyday Politics*.
71 Przybylski, "Explaining Eastern Europe."
72 Sadura and Sierakowski, *Polityczny cynizm*; Bill and Stanley, "Whose Poland."
73 Jaskułowski, *The Everyday Politics*.
74 Cześnik and Kotnarowski, "Nowy wymiar."
75 Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave."
76 Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."
77 Linz and Stepan, *Problem of Democratic Transition*.
78 Brzezinski, Myck, and Najsztub, "Sharing the Gains of Transition."
79 Keskinen, Norocel, and Jørgensen, "The Politics and policies."
80 Schumacher and Van Kersbergen, "Do Mainstream Parties Adapt."
81 Markowski and Kwiatkowska, "The Political Impact."
82 Jaskułowski, *The Everyday Politics*.
83 Krzyżanowski, "Discursive Shifts in Ethno-Nationalist Politics."
84 Staniszkis, *Post-Communism*; Renwick, "Why Hungary and Poland."
85 Appel and Orenstein, *From Triumph to Crisis*.
86 Welzel, "Democratic Horizons"; Lührmann, "Disrupting the Autocratization."
87 Algan et al., "The European Trust Crisis."
88 See Rovira Kaltwasser, "The Ambivalence of Populism."

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