

Abstract

In recent years researchers of democracy have drawn attention to a paradoxical situation in which voters declare a commitment to liberal democracy while supporting political elites who take undemocratic actions. While a majority of citizens say that they prefer democracy over other forms of government and declare a preference for the independence of democratic institutions from political control, the rise of populist parties and movements across the democratic world suggests that voters are more tolerant of illiberal political systems than their declared values might lead us to expect.

Recent research into this situation (Carey et al., 2020; McCoy, Simonovits, & Littvay, 2020; Svulik, 2019) has pointed towards an important but still underdeveloped research agenda. The literature on democratic backsliding focuses predominantly on the supply side, with little consideration as yet of the role played by voter demand either in providing electoral incentives for backsliding or in sanctioning the protagonists of such changes. Recent studies of democratic values remain inconclusive, but suggest that consolidated democracies may be more vulnerable than previously assumed to democratic backsliding at the citizen level. This is a conclusion supported by research into populist attitudes and affective polarisation, which highlights the potential for democracy to be undermined through hyper-polarisation and failure to punish backsliding elites for their actions even when those actions are contrary to the pro-democratic values a majority still purport to hold.

The goal of this project is to push forward this research agenda through the study over time of a crucial case in the shape of Poland, a country which has experienced a particularly marked degree of democratic backsliding since 2015 and is characterised by contestation over the legitimacy of the political regime, significant polarisation between the incumbent and a credible alternative executive, and a relatively recent history of democratisation. The project will seek to answer three research questions: (a) whether Poles genuinely value the norms and institutions of liberal democracy, (b) whether Poles regard the post-2015 changes as a process of democratic backsliding, as the pursuit of an alternative model of democracy, or as simply a continuation of ‘politics as usual’, and (c) whether the political polarisation Poland has experienced in recent years adversely affects the capacity of voters to hold illiberal political elites responsible for their actions.

The project will undertake a three-wave panel survey of a representative sample of the Polish population between the summer of 2022 and the winter of 2023. These surveys will have three key characteristics. First, they will contain an innovative new set of questions designed to measure democratic values in ways that overcome the social desirability bias that many researchers believe artificially inflates the level of approval for liberal democracy. Second, the surveys will use conjoint experiments to test the extent to which Poles act in accordance with liberal-democratic principles when making political choices. Third, the panel nature of the research design will measure the views and attitudes of voters over an 18-month period, allowing us to establish whether pro-democratic attitudes and behaviours remain stable or are prone to fluctuate.

We expect to find that levels of “actually-existing” democratic values are lower than those typically declared in standard survey questions, but that they remain stable over time. However, in line with similar research conducted primarily in the United States, we expect to find that political polarisation interferes (a) with the extent to which Polish citizens view post-2015 changes as legitimate or illegitimate from the perspective of democratic values, and (b) with their capacity to ‘punish’ political elites for taking illiberal and undemocratic actions.