

Short description

Scientific goal of the project

The recent phenomenon of democratic backsliding in countries whose citizens profess a high level of attachment to democratic values has created an unresolved intellectual puzzle that inspires this project: *"Why do voters who routinely profess a commitment to democracy simultaneously support leaders who subvert it?"* (Svolik, 2019, p. 23). This is a puzzle particularly relevant to the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), several of which have broken with the "imitative modernisation" that defined the first quarter century of post-communist democracy (Krastev & Holmes, 2018, p. 118). In Poland the controversial process of departure from liberal democracy since 2015 (Sadurski, 2019) has thus far failed to result in electoral punishment for the incumbent Law and Justice party despite any significant opposition to liberal democratic principles and institutions (Markowski, 2016, p. 1320; Tworzecki, 2019, p. 99).

Either we have been asking Poles the wrong questions about their attitudes to democracy, or we have been asking questions in the wrong way. Attempting to explain similar processes in the United States, Svolik (2019) has argued that political polarisation is often in conflict with democratic values to the extent that even pro-democratic citizens are sometimes willing to tolerate breaches of democratic principle if upholding those principles would conflict with their partisan interests. While such a conclusion may be warranted in the case of more mature democracies, it remains unclear to what extent citizens in relatively new democracies genuinely do hold pro-democratic views, and to what extent they recognise departures from the orthodox model of liberal democracy as "subversion" of democracy. The case of Poland provides an excellent opportunity to test these distinct (and potentially reinforcing) explanations of the apparently paradoxical tolerance for acts of democratic backsliding amid substantial approval for democracy.

The three research questions this project seeks to answer are:

1. Do Polish citizens *genuinely* value liberal democracy as a set of principles and as a political system, and to what extent?
2. Do Polish citizens view the post-2015 changes as a subversion of liberal democracy, the pursuit of a *different* democratic model, or as "more of the same"?
3. Does political partisanship inhibit the capacity of Polish voters to hold illiberal political elites to account?

Significance of the project

The proposed project emerges from, and will contribute to, an extensive theoretical and empirical literature on the related topics of democratic backsliding, democratic values, affective polarisation and populism.

The increased prominence and electoral success of populist parties in recent years and the pursuit by parties in power of explicitly or implicitly illiberal agendas has led to diagnoses of "autocratisation" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016), or "democratic decay" (Daly, 2019). Much of the recent literature has conceived of this process as strategic and agent-led (Ganev, 2012; Sitter & Bakke, 2019), positing a leading role for an over-powerful executive through the nullification of institutions of accountability (Landau, 2013, p. 189), strategic manipulation of electoral processes instead of outright fraud (Bermeo, 2016, p. 13) and gradual, cumulative repression of civil society and the media (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018, pp. 137-138).

Yet executive aggrandisement requires not only a powerful executive with the will to pursue significant change, but also propitious contexts such as 'fading conditionalities, corruption, and economic crisis' (Dawson & Hanley, 2016, p. 23) and crucially the consent, or at least indifference, of the governed. To understand democratic backsliding, we also need to understand the nature of public attitudes regarding democracy and democratic institutions, and the extent to which those attitudes influence their responses to the actions of political elites.

The diagnosis of a decline in pro-liberal-democratic values has been strongly disputed (Norris, 2017; Voeten, 2017; Zilinsky, 2019). However, the persistence of democratic backsliding and the relative absence to date of punishment for its most egregious practitioners has prompted questions about the susceptibility of standard measures of democratic attitudes to social desirability bias (McCoy, Simonovits, & Littvay, 2020) and research

into populist attitudes as a “disposition” towards monism and majoritarianism that may undercut a tokenistic attachment to liberal democratic norms and institutions (Castanho Silva, Jungkunz, Helbling, & Littvay, 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019).

Recent developments in the literature on affective polarisation also point in a similar direction. The authors of an influential recent overview of the field posit a causal chain linking societal polarisation to democratic backsliding: where crises or perceptions of injustice foster resentment, a populist “us versus them” rhetoric organises interests, loyalties and group identifications around a quasi-tribal cleavage, leading to a deepening of mutual antipathies and perceptions of the “Other” as a threat to the nation, to acceptance of actions incompatible with liberal democratic values, and ultimately to the normalisation of such actions (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018, p. 26). A radical “us versus them” polarisation in which identity-based ideology overwhelms policy orientations as a locus of difference between competing groups (Mason, 2018) threatens to destabilise democracies by destroying consensus over the legitimacy of neutral democratic institutions and incentivising ostensibly pro-democratic voters to sanction undemocratic actions rather than punish their own side.

A new line of research uses conjoint experiments to examine these processes. Studies of the US case find that only a small minority of American voters punish otherwise favoured candidates for violating democratic norms (Graham & Svobik, 2020) and that toleration of breaches of democratic norms is significantly greater when respondents’ favoured parties are in power and affective polarisation is greater (McCoy et al., 2020). Although little comparable research has been conducted outside the US context, a study of the Hungarian case found that partisanship strongly conditioned attitudes to the legitimacy of controversial electoral reforms in 2014 (Ahlquist, Ichino, Wittenberg, & Ziblatt, 2018).

These findings highlight an important but still underdeveloped research agenda for which Poland can serve as a crucial case. Attempts to theorise the democratic backsliding observed in Poland since 2015 have focused primarily on elite-level factors such as the collectively irrational outputs of autocratically governed parties (Markowski, 2018) or an “autocracy trap” created by a perverse set of incentives at the EU level (Kelemen, 2020). While there have been studies of polarisation (Tworzecki & Markowski, 2014) and populist attitudes (Stanley, 2018) that have found *correlations* of these phenomena with voting for backsliding parties, there has been no attempt to theorise and study *causal* linkages between actually-existing democratic values, political polarisation and the failure to sanction backsliders.

To understand why it has been possible for political elites in one of the frontrunners of the CEE region to depart so swiftly and decisively from liberal democracy, we need to have better measures of democratic attitudes and ways of modelling the causal links between the values and actions of Polish citizens. Recalling the second research question, we also need to ensure we have a better understanding of Polish voters’ *awareness* of transgressions of democratic norms. As Ahlquist (2018, p. 907) observes, to punish such transgressions, voters must be aware of them in the first place, and view them as illegitimate. Existing data on democratic values and contentment with Polish democracy do not furnish information on the extent to which Poles consider the events of the last five years to consist in a breach with the liberal-democratic order, or which other conceptions of democracy they might consider more compelling.

The data which are available are insufficient to answer the research questions in several respects. First, questions about democratic values and institutions in existing surveys are susceptible to the social desirability bias discussed above. It is therefore necessary to test and collect new data about democratic values that are less affected by these biases. Second, current data are only tractable for observational analyses. These datasets allow us to identify relationships between key variables of interest, but cannot be used to explore the theorised causal relationships between democratic values, political partisanship and approval for (or opposition to) non-democratic outcomes. Third, the cross-sectional nature of existing datasets makes it impossible to observe changes over time. While there is a long-running panel survey conducted by the POLPAN project at the University of Warsaw, it does not contain the key variables of interest, nor does it employ the experimental element we require.

The purpose of this project is not simply to explain the relationship between democratic values, polarisation and political behaviour in the Polish case, but also to generate concepts and hypotheses for further comparative investigation. While the choice of Poland is motivated in part by pragmatic considerations concerning the realisability of the project, in particular the adjacency of Poland to the research team and the expertise of the principal investigator in that area, the primary reason for the choice of country is its potential as a crucial case study.

First, Poland has experienced a sustained process of democratic backsliding in recent years, as evidenced by the V-Dem measures of democratisation (Coppedge et al., 2020). Against the backdrop of other democracies in CEE (the exception being Hungary), it can be treated as a case of a country in the vanguard of democratic backsliding, and one whose experiences may foreshadow more general tendencies in the coming years. Second, the process of backsliding has been accompanied by significant polarisation on both sides of the political divide (Leszczyński, 2019). Unlike Hungary, the opposition in Poland remains relatively coherent and viable as an alternative power holder. This makes the case for treating Poland as a crucial case study more compelling, as it will be possible to observe not only the consequences of polarisation over Law and Justice, but also of attitudes to a credible alternative executive. Third, the choice of a case in which there is a recent history of democratic backsliding allows us to explore the impact of the memory of *actual* political events, rather than relying only on hypothetical breaches of democratic norms. This will add to the realism of our experimental manipulations and improve the external validity of our findings. Finally, until now, the majority of research in the area of our research questions has been conducted in the context of the US. While these findings are suggestive with respect to the cases of other democratic countries, it ought not to be assumed that the concepts and theories thus generated can simply be transferred to European contexts. A crucial case study approach such as the one proposed here will help generate hypotheses and confirm and infirm theories for more contextually adjacent cases.

This project thus has significant potential to open up new lines of enquiry in the study of European democracies, party politics and voting behaviour. The proposal is pioneering in three respects. First, it applies emergent theories of the trade-off between democratic values and political partisanship to a key European case where these questions have not yet been adequately investigated. Second, the use of experimental and panel survey methods will move forward the investigation of political causality in a case where research remains dominated by observational data, advance beyond monocausal explanations of the political consequences of polarisation and actually-existing democratic values, and explore the impact (or non-impact) of changing political circumstances on the relationships we observe. Thirdly, the project will lead to new ways of measuring democratic values, advancing the re-conceptualisation of demand-side aspects of the study of democracy in a field where most rethinking currently concerns the supply side of parties, movements and elite institutions.

Concept and work plan

The research project will consist of four distinct stages. The first is a preparatory stage (October 2021 - December 2022) during which the PI will undertake conceptual and methodological preparation of the conjoint analysis aspects of the survey, and recruit a post-doctoral student to join the research team.

The second stage (January 2022 - June 2022), will focus on survey design, with the creation of new survey questions measuring attitudes to democracy and their testing in a pilot survey, and the preparation of the survey questionnaire for the first panel survey.

The third stage (July 2022 - December 2023) will consist in the implementation of the panel surveys, with the initial plan to field the first survey in the third quarter of 2022, the second in the second quarter of 2023, and the final panel survey in October or November 2023.

The fourth stage of the project (January 2024 - September 2024) will be dedicated to analysis and interpretation of the data and the writing of several journal articles to be submitted to peer-reviewed journals both nationally and internationally. During the third and fourth stages findings of the project will be disseminated at national and international conferences.

The main risk to the successful execution of the project is the dropout of survey panel participants. To ensure that the continuity of the panel survey is not adversely affected by dropouts over the three waves, we will recruit a larger sample for the first wave to ensure that we retain at least 1250 respondents over the three waves.

Research methodology

Data for the project will be collected using a three-wave panel survey with embedded survey experiments, preceded by a pilot survey to develop new questions measuring democratic values. The observational aspect of the pilot and main surveys will consist in a range of standard variables concerning political and social attitudes, voting behaviour and socio-demographic characteristics. The experimental aspect of the surveys will consist in the administration of conjoint survey experiments. This method will allow us to measure the causal impact of attitudes to democracy and political partisanship on the decision to reward or to punish political elites for acts of democratic backsliding. Surveys will be carried out using computer-aided web interviews

(CAWI), as this survey infrastructure is best suited to the administration of complex conjoint survey experiments and is the most accessible and cost-effective means of reaching a representative sample of the Polish population.

The choice of conjoint analysis over classical experimental designs is motivated by the multidimensional character of decision-making over this issue. As Hainmueller et al (Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2014, p. 2) observe, traditional survey experiments that vary only one aspect of an experimental treatment at once have two major drawbacks: they lack realism in circumstances where respondents are being asked to consider scenarios in which multiple attributes may potentially be of relevance, and as a result they often yield limited findings given the cost outlay of implementing survey experiments.

Our interest is in determining the causal impact of polarisation and democratic values on willingness to sanction democratic backsliding, while also accounting for other aspects that influence electoral choices. By allowing the researcher to vary a number of factors in a single experiment, conjoint analysis makes it possible to estimate the impact of multiple components of an experimental treatment in the determination of an outcome, enabling the simultaneous testing of competing hypotheses (Hainmueller, Hopkins, et al., 2014, p. 3; Knudsen & Johannesson, 2018, p. 260). Conjoint analysis also improves the external validity of survey experiments by replicating real-world choice processes more realistically (Hainmueller, Hangartner, & Yamamoto, 2015) and mitigates the social desirability problems associated with asking about democracy by giving respondents a variety of reasons to justify their choices (Hainmueller, Hangartner, & Yamamoto, 2014, p. 3).

Three broad types of quantitative analysis will be undertaken using these data. First, confirmatory factor analysis will be used to identify latent attitudes to liberal democracy among respondents elicited by our observed variables. Second, multivariate regression modelling will be used to measure the impact of key independent variables of interest on dependent variables relating to democratic attitudes, party identification, party political polarisation and vote choice. Third, the results of the conjoint experiments will be analysed using estimations of the average marginal component effect (AMCE), which gives the effect of the value of interest after taking into account the effects of the other attributes, and the conditional AMCE, a measure which gives this effect conditional on a characteristic of the survey respondent. These quantities of interest will allow us to assess the extent to which democratic values affect preferences conditional on the level of partisanship.

With data collection outsourced to a survey organisation, the only equipment necessary to carry out research is the computers available to the project team. Quantitative analyses will primarily be carried out using the free statistical programming language *R*. Supplementary analyses, particularly those requiring the use of structural equation modelling and latent variable analysis, will be conducted using the proprietary software *Mplus*, for which SWPS University already holds a licence.

Project literature

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