

Attitudes Toward Liberal Democracy in Poland: A Three-Wave Panel Study of Stability and Change

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The October 2023 elections in Poland saw the populist-nativist Law and Justice (PiS) removed from power after eight years of controversial government characterised by substantial democratic backsliding. The victory of a broad pro-democratic coalition running the gamut from conservatives to socialists marks the potential beginning of the renewal of liberal democracy in Poland, but also carries with it significant risks. The new government faces the onerous task of repairing the damage visited upon Poland's democratic institutions, in particular the judicial branch, but in conditions where the necessary haste may raise the risk of violating the very principles it aims to restore.

This paper investigates the stability and fluctuation of Polish citizens' attitudes towards liberal democracy through a three-wave panel survey aligned with the 2023 Polish elections. Incorporating several measures from ESS waves 6 and 10 along with other established measures of liberal-democratic attitudes, this study captures baseline attitudes towards key components of liberal democracy in May 2022, comparing them with attitudes immediately prior to the October elections, and then with attitudes six months after the election. These data make it possible to evaluate whether and how voters' attitudes towards liberal democracy remain stable or shift following a change of government. Data collected for the first two waves suggest stability of attitudes, but, in line with recent research into "democratic hypocrisy" (Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay 2022), the third wave is expected to reveal greater tolerance of illiberal actions on the part of supporters of the new government. This shift towards greater tolerance for illiberalism is hypothesised to be more substantial among voters who have greater awareness of the changes the new government has implemented, and among those who evaluate these changes more positively. Conversely, supporters of PiS are more likely to show the opposite tendencies, becoming more intolerant of illiberalism in general, with awareness and negative evaluation of the government's changes compounding their turn towards liberal-democratic values.

This anticipated divergence in attitudes underscores the complex challenges facing Poland's new government, which must navigate the fine line between necessary reforms and the preservation of liberal democratic principles. This study has implications for the broader discourse on democracy's vulnerability and vitality. The findings will contribute to understanding how shifts in political power affect public attitudes towards democracy, informing strategies for reinforcing democratic norms and institutions.