

Abstract for the general public in English

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.

The goal of this project is to reach a better understanding of the relationship between democratic values and political preferences in Poland, a country which has experienced a process of ‘democratic backsliding’ since 2015 according to standard measures of liberal democracy. The project will seek to establish (a) whether Poles genuinely value the norms and institutions of liberal democracy, (b) whether Poles view the post-2015 changes as a process of democratic backsliding or as the pursuit of a *different* model of democracy, 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” (the tendency to want to be associated with something society considers positive when answering survey questions) that many researchers believe artificially inflates the level of approval for liberal democracy. Second, the surveys will use “conjoint experiments” (a survey technique for identifying causal explanations for the choices respondents make), 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.