

# Declining Democracy: Poland as an Example to the Rest of the World

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## Introduction

Democracy is where the voice of every individual matters, and the collective will of the people guides the direction of governance and society. Introduced in 507 BCE by the Athenian leader, Cleisthenes, *demokratia* or ‘rule by the people’ has been the premise of successful societies since (History, 2024). Today, modern democracy is similarly a system where rulers are held accountable to a public, ‘power for the people, by the people’ (Bano, 2024). The original conception of *demokratia* represented progress, but it wasn't without faults. The first implementation of democracy in 5th century ancient Greece only allowed male participation, excluding a major portion of society, including women, foreigners, slaves, and young people (Bano, 2024). While this subversion of true democracy was apparent then, it is absolutely clear that a more discreet undermining of democracy is still prevalent today. This will be explained by examining Poland and its experiences with populism, polarization, democratic institutions, and international relations.

## Background

The Republic of Poland, located in Central Europe, is home to a diverse population of approximately 37 500 000 people (Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2024). The country borders two mountain ranges, the Baltic Sea, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia. Boasting a purchasing power parity adjusted gross domestic product of \$1.99 trillion in international dollars, Poland ranks as the 21st largest economy in the world (Silver, 2025). Unfortunately, this relative success has not been without tribulation. In the mid-1500s Poland was “Europe's largest and perhaps most powerful state” (Jasiewicz & Wandycz, n.d., para. 1), despite this, during the Partitions of Poland (1772 - 1918) the state was divided and absorbed by the empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Once restored as a nation in 1918, Poland was subsequently decimated by two world wars and its strong Jewish

population was almost wholly annihilated during the Holocaust (Jasiewicz & Wandycz, n.d.). After the fall of the Third Reich, Poland was cast aside once again, becoming a satellite state of the Soviet Union and experiencing nearly 50 years of totalitarian rule (Jasiewicz & Wandycz, n.d.). In 1989, the Polish government and similar Communist regimes collapsed and a rapid surge towards economic growth and democracy began (Freedom House, 2024). As explained by Rawson “...after more than 50 years of Nazi and Communist oppression, Poland was once again a free, democratic state” (2019, p. 192).

Today, Poland is considered a parliamentary republic, its governance consists of an executive branch and a legislative branch. The executive contains the President serving as head of state, Prime Minister as head of government, and the Council of Ministers. Similar to the United States, its legislature is bicameral, consisting of the Sejm with 460 seats, and a Senate with 100 seats (Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, n.d.);(European Union, n.d.). Despite Poland's comprehensive governance premised on democratic norms, the country consistently demonstrates “...a mismatch between political supply and demand” (Sadowski, 2024, para. 7). The differences between the public and its representatives shows “a clear process of democratic backsliding in Poland” (Sadowski, 2024, para. 1), which lends support to other claims of more general democratic decline.

While Poland's deficiencies are clear to many, the reasons for them are less obvious. As pointed out by Tworzecki, Poland “...lacks any of the major risk factors identified by previous literature...” (2019, p. 98). The country does not face any obvious economic dysfunction, crippling racial or ethnic divisions, polarizing institutions, or harmful international entanglements (Tworzecki, 2019). As such, the specific operations of Poland, its people, and its government, must be rigorously examined in order to understand the source of

its democratic backsliding. The Law and Justice Party (PiS) and its allies have been a common source of blame, after holding office in Poland from 2015 - 2023 (Fella, 2024). Platforming on the slogan of 'Good Change' they promoted traditional conservative positions on the majority of matters, while leaving "signs of authoritarian leanings... out of public view" (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016, p. 60);(Fella, 2024). The party is accused of an 'exchange of elites' after it "effectively dismantled a number of checks and balances..." (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016, p. 63). Ultimately, the ensuing impunity enabled a rush of patronage, clientelism, and nepotism. Poland, therefore, serves as a vital example of modern democratic decline under new elites, which should be examined further (McCoy et al., cited in Tworzecki, 2019).

## Populism

In the post-communist era, Polish politics has been defined by conflict between populist and non-populist interests (Stanley & Czeński, 2018). Populism, as a political approach, is inherently anti-elitist, "its primary focus is on the people, or the demos, who should lead them, and who should not" (Varshney, 2021, p. 134). While this initial understanding might suggest that populism reinforces democracy by empowering 'the people', this is far from the truth. Instead, democracies all over the world are being undermined by populist diversions which fear mongers and prey on people's emotions. Meanwhile, the rhetoric employed enables deterioration of democratic institutions as proposed by Mounk (2018), "in the early phases, the war on independent institutions frequently takes the form of inciting distrust, or even outright hatred... the most ruthless attacks, are usually reserved for state institutions that are not under the direct sway of the populist government" (cited in Varshney, 2021, p. 142). In Poland, the PiS party used populist rhetoric in order to fortify its own voter base, as well as detract favour from

opposing parties. PiS leaders attempted to portray Donald Tusk, leader of the opposing Civic Party, as “subservient to German interests... [and] as an agent of Russia” (Fella, 2024, p. 5). Furthermore, under the PiS, the Polish government approved the establishment of a commission to investigate Russian interference in Poland between 2007 and 2022 (Fella, 2024). The legislation was criticised internationally over fears of an unfair trial, objections stated that it was “...designed to attack opposition leader and ex-prime minister Donald Tusk” (Murphy, 2023, para. 3). These instances highlight the potential influence of unchecked and unfounded populism.

When Populism gravitates further to the right, ethnic, religious, or racial majorities become the focal point - to the detriment of minorities (Varshney, 2021). Referred to as ethnopopulism, the PiS promoted an anti-LGBT+ agenda in order to take advantage of peoples differences. As described by Fella,

In June 2020, President Duda called the promotion of LGBT+ rights an ‘ideology’ that was more destructive than communism. In 2019 and 2020, over 90 Polish municipalities, covering around a third of Poland’s territory, declared that they were ‘LGBT-free zones’ or ‘free from LGBT ideology’ (2024, p. 6 - 7).

It is clear that the PiS defines ‘the people’ meticulously, offering stark oratorical distinctions between Poles who are ‘true’ and Poles who belong to ‘the worst sort’ (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016). The detriment of this disregard for the needs of a few, in favour of a majority, is explained by Mills, “‘the tyranny of the majority’ is now generally included among the evils against which society requires to be on its guard” (2011, p. 7).

All together, The Law and Justice Party has utilized anti-elitist rhetoric to gather, maintain, and tighten its rule over Poles. A tendency to cast internal enemies including elites and minorities as conspiring with the external other has allowed for a position of superiority (Watmough, 2023). Meanwhile the checks and balances of governance are discreetly undermined as they are accentuated as preventing rule by the people. While the benefits of dividing people have become apparent, many interest groups begin turning to other methods of sowing dissension.

## Polarization

Much of the divide in today's societies can be blamed on polarization. Put simply, polarization is the process of presenting this or that choices - right and wrong. This approach relegates opinions and beliefs, which normally operate on a continuum, to the side and suggests that opposing extremes are the required standard (McCoy & Somer, 2021). This notion of extremes has become entrenched in politics, from simple connotations, such as right and left, to stances on complex issues, such as pro-life and pro-choice, most debate has divulged into polarization.

When employed by 'representatives of the people' polarization places the "political field into opposing, increasingly immovable blocs...[and becomes] harmful for democracy, when it divides the electorate into two mutually distrustful camps" (McCoy & Somer, 2021, p. 6). The deeper this division is, the easier it is for political actors or demagogues to take advantage (Svolik, 2019). Poles have become familiar with polarization as, during their 8 years in office, the PiS took advantage of many contentious issues, often equipping severe stances in order to garner targeted support. The majority of these debates avoided economic topics and instead focused on cultural differences and individualism, including abortion,

climate change, vaccinations, LGBT+ rights, and migration (Żuk et al., 2019);(Żuk & Szulecki, 2020).

Former president Duda told constituents “Don't worry. As long as I am the president of Poland, I won't allow for anyone to murder Polish mining” (quoted in. *Flesh Out the Promises*, 2018, para. 2). In response, many supporters were enabled to share radical polarizing statements, such as “We do not quite understand why Poland does not consume its brown coal deposits near the German border - Germans can mine coal on the other side of the border, and we can't do the same? Are we scared? Let's have the courage!” (quoted in. Żuk & Szulecki, 2020, p. 7). Ignoring the underlying environmental disaster of coal, the core issue is the PiS “...ask[ing] their supporters to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests” (Svolik, 2019, p. 23);(GreenPeace, 2005). Here, an understanding from the PiS is evident, in “sharply polarized electorates, even voters who value democracy will be willing to sacrifice fair democratic competition for the sake of electing politicians who champion their interests” (Svolik, 2019, p. 24), in this case, people whose livelihood depends on the production of coal.

In other instances, similarly contentious topics are taken advantage of within Polish politics. Vaccinations, for example, have been another point of polarization, “under the pretext of dislike for western pharmaceutical concerns, this anti-modernisation opposition... manifest itself by the growing hostility to obligatory vaccinations” (Żuk et al., 2019, p. 1493). The agenda is further advanced by bots and trolls actively involved in online public health discourse, “skewing discussions about vaccination” (Broniatowski et al., 2018, para. 33). Acting on the divide created by vaccinations, the PiS attempted to institutionalize anti-vaccine rhetoric in 2018. The proposed bill would have abolished the obligation to vaccinate and was signed by 121 000 people. Ultimately, it was rejected in parliament after

medical profession and media pressures (Žuk et al., 2019). Regardless, the power of polarisation was revealed, as “the spread of the ‘culture of fear’ [could] create social attitudes which may act as a ‘biological bomb’ in specific areas” (Žuk et al., 2019, p. 1491).

Many of the above issues are propagated by anecdotes and emotions instead of facts and figures. Polarizing politicians appeal to their bases by exploiting real grievances and providing scapegoat villains. By dividing the public, political identity and mental justifications for partisan loyalty can be more easily conjured (McCoy, Murat Somer, 2021). Many states and democracies have become victims to division and Poland is no exception.

## Democratic Institutions

Democracy is inherently complex and hard to balance. As explained by Wolin “democracy, whose culture extols the common and shared, is alien to all of those practices [of elites] and their modes of communication” (2018, p. 132). So, while the demos remain the focal point, it is increasingly difficult to maintain adequate representation in an increasingly pluralistic and polarizing landscape. As such, the checks and balances placed on democratic governance plays an increasingly important role. Democracy does not operate as it was originally intended under *demokratia*, it must be actively compelled by democratic institutions to represent the people.

Media has been one of these pivotal institutions in all democratic states, but it is waning. In Poland, the PiS successfully created “fact resistant narratives with the help of traditional and online media... a vivid illustration of the broader phenomenon of the ‘politics of parallel reality... in which reason is an irritation, evidence a distraction’” (Fomina &

Kucharczyk, 2016, p. 60);(Blair, 2015). According to popular dissent, media policy has been a primary focus of these illiberal forces:

Empirical studies and descriptive accounts of media policy demonstrate that public media and the governing body were of particular interest to Polish political parties, which either aimed at shaping media regulations (Goban-Klas 1996) or, using politically motivated appointments, strived to control the [National Broadcasting Council] KRRiT (Surowiec et al., 2020, p. 29)

In particular, proposed bills such as the 2016 Big Media Act and the 2015 Small Media Act attempted to formalize efforts by sanctioning staffing changes in the sector, removing treasury affiliations, and strengthening ties between the state and public media (Surowiec et al., 2020). Eventually, public broadcasters reflected “biased coverage...” (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe cited in. Freedom House, n.d., para. 7), serving as a spokesperson for political partisanship.

After addressing public media, further public conditioning was pursued via private outlets. Social media has been especially susceptible to technological advancements that have enabled methods of discourse management, such as behavioural targeting (Jakubowski & Pająk-Patkowska, 2022).

Besides media capture, many states are also facing judiciary reforms which similarly aim to cripple democracies' ability to represent the people. In 2015, the Polish government led a judicial reform programme. In response the European Commission launched a

procedure to determine whether Poland was in breach of core EU values. In reference to concerns, the Court of Justice of the European Union of the specified:

Charter and Article 9(1) of Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (OJ 2000 L 303, p. 16) must be interpreted as precluding cases concerning the application of EU law from falling within the exclusive jurisdiction of a court which is not an independent and impartial tribunal, within the meaning of Article 47 of the Charter. In the same paragraph, the Court stated that that is the case where the objective circumstances in which that court was formed, its characteristics and the means by which its members have been appointed are capable of giving rise to legitimate doubts, in the minds of subjects of the law, as to the *imperviousness of that court to external factors, in particular, as to the direct or indirect influence of the legislature and the executive and its neutrality with respect to the interests before it* [emphasis added] and, thus, may lead to that court not being seen to be independent or impartial with the consequence of prejudicing the trust which justice in a democratic society must inspire in subjects of the law. (p. 8, 2021)

Eventually, the CJEU deemed a breach of core EU values was indeed made. Subsequently, Poland was ordered to suspend several provisions in relation to their disciplinary processes for judges, or face a daily fine of €1 million per day (Fella, 2024).

Evidently political actors are propagating democratic backsliding globally and attempts in Poland to concentrate executive control over public institutions such as the judiciary and media are vital examples (Surowiec,, 2019).

## International Relations

The erosion and undermining of democracy is generally regarded as an internal process, but upon inspection of Polish democratic backsliding, it is clear that its external international relations, or lack thereof, have also played a role. In what has been described as a back-sliding coalition, Poland-Hungary relations have been “important in sustaining and even advancing backsliding in the face of strong countervailing pressures” (Holesh & Kyriazi, 2021, p. 2). This is premised on societal cohesion from historical ties, proverbs such as ‘Pole and Hungarian brothers be, good for fight and good for party’, and by legislation such as March 23 being declared Polish-Hungarian Friendship Day by Polish parliament (Poland Daily 24, 2024). Together the countries have provided each other reciprocal protection. For example, in 2016, Poland and Hungary attempted to block the previously mentioned CJEU dissent surrounding judiciary reform and related fines (Fella, 2024). Furthermore, proposed sanctions on Poland were all together rejected by Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s prime minister, as he announced that he would disrupt the required unanimous vote within the European Council (Scheppele, 2016). Ultimately, Hungary's own illiberal practices have certainly motivated Poland’s, a true backsliding-coalition. Other relations have also been highlighted as illiberal allegiances. The European Conservatives and Reformists group (ERC) in the European Parliament was founded by Poland’s PiS. Members now include Italy’s ruling-Brothers of Italy, the UK Conservative Party, the Sweden Democrats, Spain’s Vox, and the Finns party from Finland (Fella, 2024). As with many positive movements, negative movements are equally taking advantage of an increasingly interconnected world.

Outside of sinister relationships, conflict between Poland and others has also prevailed. Under the PiS, governance devolved into a negative narrative of distrust,

prompting rejection of many democratic states and a more general rejection of European law, European institutions, and Western influences (Fadhli & Makanbaeva, 2023);(Piotrowski, 2021). In September 2020, a letter signed by ambassadors from 50 countries, including the United States of America and the United Kingdom, called for the rights of LGBT+ people to be respected in Poland (Fella, 2024). These acts are showcased to a targeted audience by the populist leaders and presented as a rejection of Polish political sovereignty. On other matters, Poland has taken similarly antagonistic approaches, requesting unrealistic reparations for WWII from Germany and banning Ukrainian grain imports amidst Russian invasion, a previous promise to store Ukrainian grain, and negative impacts on domestic farming sectors. The differences between Polish interests and other members of the international community are valuable sources of populist and polarizing rhetoric.

All together, international relations have become a pivotal duty of governance, particularly as globalization persists. With each country now extremely interconnected, illiberal interests have sought ways to take advantage of this connection. In Poland, the PiS has demonstrated an ability to form democratic-backsliding coalitions, while subjecting its public to biased rhetoric when confronted with dissent.

## Conclusion

Many efforts are being made today to undermine democracy globally. Without democracy, the collective will of ‘the people’ can be rejected and absolute power gained, maintained, and strengthened. While democracy has been subverted by interest groups since its inception, it is clear that a discreet decline is still prevalent. Poland is a crucial example of this decline, with a long-history of subjugation and fighting for liberal democratic reforms. Once achieved in 1989, the country experienced rapid economic growth and stood as a

regional model of the benefits of government for the people by the people. Unfortunately, in the 21st century Poland has devolved into a deficient democracy. The Law and Justice Party, which came into power in 2015, is largely to blame for this contemporary status. The party promised ‘good change’, but its methodologies have since incited domestic and foreign backlash. They focused on cultural issues, rather than economic, assigned right or wrong opinions, and used fear as a tool. They employed populist rhetoric and polarizing stances, indicating to others the power of division. Meanwhile, attacks on abortion, climate change, immigration, vaccinations, LGBT+ rights, and political opposition have since been successful. Once in control, the party used the conjured divide to seize democratic institutions, including the judiciary and media. A calculated alignment with ‘the people’ against ‘the elites’ including European Law, the West, minorities, and any other forms of dissent allowed the party to govern Poland for 8 years. Let Poland be a lesson to the world, crisis demands consistency and perseverance, not shifts or disruptions(Wolin, 2018). The checks and balances originally conceived under demokratia still serve a necessary purpose, without them democracy declines and “pluribus without unum” (Reich, 2011, p. 321) ensues.

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