

THE POTENTIAL OF THE CENTRAL COALITION’S ELECTORAL SUCCESS IN MITIGATING PIS POPULISM IN POLAND

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Research Article

Abstract

This study examines the electoral defeat of Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) and its significance for the future of right-wing populism in Poland and Europe. Utilising a comprehensive approach, it explores the populist policies implemented by the PiS, the historical background of the Polish elections, and the potential impact of the central coalition’s electoral success on countering PiS populism. The article argues that while PiS’s defeat signals a victory for Polish democracy and pluralism, the structural factors driving populism—such as economic inequality, regional disparities, and identity concerns—require ongoing, targeted attention to prevent a resurgence. The findings suggest that addressing these factors is crucial for sustaining Poland’s commitment to pluralistic values. This research contributes to understanding populism’s rise and the dynamics of political change in Poland, offering insights into broader European political trends.

Keywords: Poland, Law and Justice Party, Right-Wing Populism, Polish Elections, Democratic Pluralism, European Union (EU)

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**Merkez Koalisyonu Seçim Başarısının Polonya'da PiS Popülizmini
Azaltma Potansiyeli**

Öz

Bu çalışma, Polonya'daki Hukuk ve Adalet Partisi'nin (PiS) seçim yenilgisini ve bunun Polonya ve Avrupa'daki sağ popülizmin geleceği açısından önemini incelemektedir. Bu makale, kapsamlı bir yaklaşım kullanarak, PiS tarafından uygulanan popülist politikaları, Polonya seçimlerinin tarihsel arka planını ve merkezi koalisyonun seçim başarısının PiS popülizmine karşı potansiyel etkisini araştırmaktadır. Makale, PiS'in yenilgisinin Polonya demokrasisi ve çoğulculuğu için bir zafere işaret ettiğini, ancak popülizme yol açan yapısal faktörlerin sürekli dikkat gerektirdiğini savunmaktadır. Bulgular; bu faktörlerin ele alınmasının Polonya'nın çoğulcu değerlere olan bağlılığının sürdürülmesi için hayati önem taşıdığını göstermektedir. Bu araştırma, popülizmin yükselişinin ve Polonya'daki siyasi değişim dinamiklerinin anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmakta ve Avrupa'daki daha geniş siyasi eğilimler hakkında fikir vermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Polonya, Hukuk ve Adalet Partisi, Sağ Popülizm, Polonya Seçimleri, Demokratik Çoğulculuk

Introduction

After eight years in power, Poland's national populist Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) has stepped down, marking a significant shift in the country's political dynamics. On December 13, 2023, following over eight weeks of delaying tactics, Polish President Andrzej Duda appointed Donald Tusk, a figure from the centre-right Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO), as the head of a new coalition government that also includes the centrist Third Way (Trzecia Droga) and the New Left (Lewica) parties¹. This appointment not only heralds Tusk's return to the premiership, a position he held from 2007 to 2014 but also represents a turning point in Poland's recent political history.

The three coalition partners had previously garnered a substantial 53.7% of the votes in the elections held on October 15, securing a comfortable majority of 248 seats in the Sejm, Poland's lower house of parliament². Despite widespread calls for a swift transition in the interest of national affairs,

¹ Reuters. (2023, December 11). "Donald Tusk Eyes Thaw in EU Relations as Poland's Prime Minister", Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com>.

² Simon P. W. (2023). "Eight Years of Populist Rule in Poland Comes to an End Retrieved from", <https://www.populismstudies.org/eight-years-of-populist-rule-in-poland-comes-to-an-end/>.

President Duda chose to extend the government formation process to its constitutional limits. Notably, the PiS, despite obtaining the largest vote share (35.4%) and winning the most seats overall, failed to secure a majority and was never in a position to form even a minority government, despite the possibility of support from five independent MPs. This led President Duda to follow the customary approach of assigning the leader of the largest party, the PiS's interim Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, the task of forming a government. While this assignment aligns with tradition, Duda's subsequent delay tactics suggested potential challenges that the Tusk government might face in reversing the eight-year democratic backslide³.

Nevertheless, President Duda ultimately inaugurated pro-EU Tusk as the new Prime Minister on December 13, bringing an end to the eight-year tenure of right-wing populist rule.⁴ In alliance with two smaller political groups, Tusk's Civic Coalition won the parliamentary vote of confidence held on Tuesday. In the election, Tusk's Civic Coalition emerged as the second-largest party without a parliamentary majority, which necessitated negotiations with the Third Way and the Left to secure a coalition government with the support of 248 MPs in the vote of confidence. In the election, Tusk's Civic Coalition emerged as the second-largest party without a parliamentary majority, which necessitated negotiations with the Third Way and the Left to secure a coalition government with the support of 248 MPs in the vote of confidence⁵. Following his appointment, Tusk reassured that his government would remain "faithful to constitutional provisions"⁶. The swearing-in ceremony was followed by congratulatory messages from EU allies, with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressing satisfaction with Tusk's intent to "return Poland to the heart of the EU." The relationship between Poland and Germany had been strained due to PiS's pre-election anti-German rhetoric and repeated verbal assaults on Tusk and his party. Donald Tusk's political resurgence in Poland signifies a transformative era, potentially curbing the populist tendencies of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) following their eight-year national conservative rule. The coalition, encompassing a wide range from left-wing to moderate conservative

³ Vanessa G. (2023). "Donald Tusk Becomes Poland's Prime Minister with the Mission of Improving European Union ties", Retrieved from <https://qz.com>.

⁴ RTE. (2023, December 13). "Donald Tusk Sworn in as Polish Prime Minister", Retrieved from <https://www.rte.ie>.

⁵ DW. (2023, December 12). "Poland: Donald Tusk's Government Wins Vote of Confidence". Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com>.

⁶ Euronews. (2023, December 13). "Poland's New PM Donald Tusk Sworn in, Completing Transition of Power", Retrieved from <https://www.euronews.com>

parties and united under Tusk's leadership, is committed to reinstating democratic norms and strengthening European alliances⁷. Polish President Andrzej Duda, also allied with PiS, could potentially use veto power to block legislation proposed by the new coalition before his term ends in 2025. However, during the swearing-in ceremony, Duda indicated a willingness to cooperate with the new government, assuring that he would not oppose anything that serves the good of the citizens and the Polish Republic⁸.

This article aims to delve into the implications of the latest election in Poland and the defeat of PiS for the future of right-wing populism in Poland and, more broadly, in Europe. Based on the perspective that PiS's defeat signifies a victory for Polish democracy and pluralism, this commentary stresses the importance of not overinterpreting the results. While Poland's populists may currently be in a disadvantageous situation, they are not yet definitively out of the picture. Addressing and managing structural factors—such as economic inequality, regional disparities, and perceived threats to national identity—that have fuelled the rise of populism is essential for Poland to sustain its commitment to pluralistic values. This article will examine three key areas that are essential for understanding whether the PiS's defeat in the October 2023 election could signal an end to populism in Poland: the concept of populism discourse, which provides a framework for analysing how populist narratives shape political identities and public opinion; the populist policies implemented by the PiS government, which reveal the concrete strategies and appeals used to mobilise support; and the historical background of Polish elections, which offers context on the evolution of political dynamics leading up to the current political landscape. It will also discuss whether the electoral success of the central coalition in Poland can effectively counter PiS populism.

I. Populist Policies Implemented by the PiS Government in Poland

The recent parliamentary elections in Poland have not only resulted in a significant transformation of the political landscape but have also initiated a robust debate regarding the evolution and potential future directions of right-wing populism in the country. This shift, occurring after almost a decade of the Law and Justice Party's (PiS) predominance, signifies a crucial phase in the political history of Poland. The outcomes of these elections reflect the

⁷ DW. (2023, December 11). Ibid.

⁸ Charlish A. and Florkiewicz P. (2023 December 13). *"In Sea Change for Poland, New Government Is Sword In"*, Retrieved from <https://reuters.com>.

immediate political inclinations of the Polish populace, unveiling deeper socio-political tendencies within the nation, which are integral to understanding the broader implications of this political shift. These developments transcend national boundaries, potentially influencing Poland's engagement with the European Union on issues such as judicial independence, democratic governance, and migration policies⁹.

This section delves into the concept of populism, dissecting its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications. Following this, the analysis explores the ascent of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in the Polish political arena, focusing on the populist discourse employed by the PiS government during its tenure. It is essential to contextualise this discourse within the broader European political spectrum and the global rise of populism¹⁰. The PiS government's approach to governance, characterised by its stance on issues such as immigration, judicial reform, media control, and social policy, reveals a complex interplay of populist rhetoric and nationalistic ideologies¹¹.

The rise of populism in Poland, particularly under the leadership of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), can be understood through a framework that examines various structural factors—economic inequality, regional disparities, and identity concerns—that have contributed to the increasing appeal of populist rhetoric. The Polish case offers insight into how these factors can combine to create a fertile environment for populist movements, especially those that frame themselves as protectors of the marginalised and defenders of national identity. Through its adept use of both policy and discourse, PiS has positioned itself to resonate with large segments of the population that feel economically, socially, and culturally disenfranchised, drawing upon a powerful blend of grievance and identity politics to sustain its support base.

One of the most significant structural factors in the rise of populism in Poland is economic inequality, a legacy that intensified during the post-

⁹ Al Jazeera. (2023, December 11). "Poland's Parliament Elects Donald Tusk as Prime Minister", Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com>; International Socialist. (2023). "Polish Election; Opposition Parties Win Following Defeat of Right-Wing Populist Law and Justice", Retrieved from <https://www.internationalsocialist.net>.

¹⁰ International Socialist. (2023). Ibid.

¹¹ Chojnicka, J. (2015). Anti-EU and anti-LGBT attitudes in Poland: considering quantitative and qualitative evidence. *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, 5(2), 30-55.

socialist transition of the 1990s. As Poland embraced a market-based economy, rapid economic growth was accompanied by widening income disparities, with considerable benefits accruing to urban centres and wealthier segments of society. Poland's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, has fluctuated but continues to reveal an income distribution gap that has left certain social groups—particularly those in rural areas and smaller towns—feeling increasingly marginalised¹². Studies indicate that Poland's lower-income households and blue-collar workers have been particularly affected by this inequality, as the gap between urban and rural incomes has widened over time¹³. PiS has successfully tapped into these economic grievances through both targeted policies and rhetoric that appeal to economically marginalised groups¹⁴. By framing itself as the party that prioritises the needs of “ordinary” citizens over those of the economic elite, PiS has crafted a populist message that appeals directly to Poles who feel overlooked by previous administrations' liberal economic policies. For example, the “Family 500+” program, a flagship policy introduced by PiS, provides direct cash benefits to families, particularly benefitting lower-income voters and strengthening PiS's image as a party that actively supports economically disadvantaged communities¹⁵. Polish President Andrzej Duda underscored the importance of this program, linking it to PiS's broader mission to uplift the living standards of ordinary Polish families:

“When I can hear from an ordinary Polish family that their quality of life has improved, that they live more safely and peacefully, I will feel my primary goal has been accomplished.”¹⁶“

This policy-oriented approach, paired with PiS's emphasis on social justice and economic solidarity, has enabled the party to frame itself as the champion of economic equality, resonating with those who experience economic insecurity and exclusion. This strategy aligns with the party's

¹² Kinowska-Mazaraki, Z. (2021). The Polish paradox: from a fight for democracy to the political radicalization and social exclusion. *Social Sciences*, 10(3), 112.

¹³ Zavala, A. G. d., Lantos, D., & Keenan, O. (2021). Collective narcissism and the motivational underpinnings of the populist backlash. *The Psychology of Populism*, 105-122.

¹⁴ Derkacz, A. J. (2020). From emerging to developed market: the neo-institutional approach based on the case of Poland. *International Journal of Contemporary Management*, 19(2), 37-70.

¹⁵ Kinowska-Mazaraki, Z. (2021). The polish paradox: from a fight for democracy to the political radicalization and social exclusion. *Social Sciences*, 10(3), 112.

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.pl/web/family/500-for-each-child-from-1-july>.

populist discourse, which presents PiS as the defender of “real Poles” against a detached urban elite. Through the 500+ program and similar initiatives, PiS has established a base of support that feels economically disenfranchised, thus positioning itself as the advocate for economic justice and solidarity within Poland. By addressing the economic challenges faced by lower-income and rural populations, PiS has effectively tapped into the structural inequalities that fuel populist sentiments, strengthening its position as a populist force in Polish politics.

Closely related to economic inequality are the regional disparities that have exacerbated social and political divisions within Poland. Poland’s economic growth has been concentrated in urbanised areas like Warsaw, Kraków, and Wrocław, where foreign investment, job opportunities, and infrastructure development have spurred prosperity¹⁷. In contrast, rural regions, especially those in the east of the country such as the Subcarpathian and Lublin Voivodeships, have lagged behind, experiencing relatively high unemployment, lower average incomes, and limited access to high-quality public services. These geographic disparities have resulted in a sense of neglect among rural populations who feel disconnected from the prosperity enjoyed by urban centres¹⁸. PiS has adeptly exploited these sentiments, portraying itself as the party that represents the interests of “forgotten” regions¹⁹. Through policies aimed at rural development, including increased spending on local infrastructure and subsidies for agricultural communities, PiS has solidified its position as the defender of Poland’s rural population. The party’s rhetoric often contrasts the “true Poland” of traditional rural values with the cosmopolitan, “elite” Poland of urban centres, further deepening the sense of cultural and economic division. By framing itself as the voice of rural Poland, PiS has tapped into longstanding grievances over regional disparities, turning these frustrations into support for a populist narrative that pits the rural

¹⁷ Churski, P., Herodowicz, T., Konecka-Szydłowska, B., & Perdał, R. (2021). Spatial differentiation of the socio-economic development of Poland– “invisible” historical heritage. *Land*, 10(11), 1247.

¹⁸ Klamár, R., Kozoň, J., & Ivanová, M. (2020). Regional inequalities in the Visegrad group countries, Serbia and Croatia. *Geographica Pannonica*, 24(3), 187-204.

¹⁹ Stanny, M., Komorowski, Ł., & Rosner, A. (2021). The socio-economic heterogeneity of rural areas: towards a rural typology of Poland. *Energies*, 14(16), 5030.

“heartland” against an urban “elite” that is perceived as detached and indifferent to the struggles of rural communities²⁰.

Beyond economic and regional concerns, issues of national identity and cultural sovereignty have also played a crucial role in fostering a populist environment in Poland. With globalisation and Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004, segments of Polish society have expressed concern over the potential erosion of Polish culture and values. PiS has strategically amplified these fears, framing immigration, EU influence, and Western liberal values as threats to Poland’s unique identity²¹. PiS leaders have frequently opposed EU initiatives that are perceived as undermining Polish sovereignty, such as mandatory refugee quotas, arguing that such policies would disrupt Poland’s social fabric and compromise its security. This rhetoric has been coupled with a broader narrative of resistance to external pressures, portraying Poland as a “bulwark” of traditional values in a Europe seen as increasingly secular and multicultural²². The party’s messaging on identity issues has been particularly effective in areas where concerns about cultural preservation and scepticism toward EU integration are strongest²³. PiS has employed symbols of Polish nationalism and historical references to past struggles for independence to solidify its role as the defender of Polish culture against foreign encroachment²⁴. This stance resonates deeply among Polish citizens who see their national identity as under siege, fostering a sense of collective pride and resistance that is integral to PiS’s populist appeal²⁵.

Collectively, these structural factors—economic inequality, regional disparities, and identity concerns—have fostered an environment conducive to populism in Poland, with PiS effectively mobilising these grievances to its

²⁰ Koszykowska, P. (2018). *The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland* (Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York).

²¹ Federico, C. M., Zavala, A. G. d., & Baran, T. (2021). The link between religiosity and national identity in contemporary Poland: extended prosociality or collective narcissism?

²² Kotwas, M., & Kubik, J. (2022, December). Beyond “Making Poland Great Again.” Nostalgia in Polish Populist and Non-populist Discourses 1. In *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 37, pp. 1360-1386).

²³ Mole, R., Zavala, A. G. d., & Ardağ, M. M. (2021). Homophobia and national collective narcissism in populist Poland. *European Journal of Sociology*, 62(1), 37-70.

²⁴ Al Jazeera. (2023, December 11). Ibid; International Socialist. (2023). Ibid.

²⁵ Stanny, M., Komorowski, Ł., & Rosner, A. (2021). The socio-economic heterogeneity of rural areas: towards a rural typology of Poland. *Energies*, 14(16), 5030.

advantage. By positioning itself as the party that addresses economic injustice, advocates for neglected regions, and defends national identity, PiS has forged a potent populist platform that resonates across diverse sections of Polish society. Addressing these factors is crucial for sustaining democratic and pluralistic values in Poland, as leaving them unresolved risks the resurgence or entrenchment of populist forces. In the broader European context, Poland's experience serves as a reminder of the need to balance economic progress and integration with sensitivity to social and cultural concerns, as ignoring these issues can create a fertile ground for populist movements that challenge democratic norms and values.

II. The Discourse of Populism

The complexity in defining populism²⁶ stems from the varied historical, cultural, and political contexts in which movements labelled as populist operate, despite their general reluctance to self-identify with this term. This study delves into the populist characteristics of Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS), examining how this attribute has influenced the party's approach to historical memory, its restructuring of media and judicial institutions, and its foreign policy strategies. PiS's use of historical narratives has not only shaped its foreign policy outlook but has also served as a justification for its extensive reforms in the judiciary and media sectors. This analysis seeks to elucidate the multifaceted impacts of PiS's populist discourse on Poland's domestic political structure and its positioning within international relations. In our analysis, we find the conceptualisation of populism as a form of discourse to be particularly enlightening and applicable, as it allows for an examination of how language and narratives are strategically employed to construct political identities and mobilise public support. Unlike fixed ideologies or rigid political strategies, a discursive approach to populism reveals the fluidity and adaptability of populist rhetoric, which can shift in response to varying socio-political contexts while consistently positioning 'the people' in opposition to 'the elite.' This framework thus provides a nuanced lens for understanding PiS's populist appeals as a dynamic and context-sensitive phenomenon. This discursive framework enables a nuanced exploration of how historical narratives intertwine with populist tendencies in both domestic and foreign policy decisions, revealing how history is reconstructed and leveraged at the

²⁶ Dayıođlu, A. Gökhu. (2023). *"Macaristan'da Radikal Sağ: Popülist Radikal Sağ Politikaların Ana Akımlaştırılması"*, Tasam Yayınları.

discursive level to shape national identity, justify reforms, and mobilise public support.

Developed by Ernesto Laclau and expanded through his collaborations with Chantal Mouffe and other theorists²⁷, the discursive approach posits language as a crucial, active agent in shaping societal constructs and realities. This study adopts this framework to interpret PiS's use of historical narratives and populist discourse, exploring how these elements shape political identity and policy choices. While not conducting a full discourse or content analysis, this approach offers a conceptual lens to address the research question, shedding light on how PiS's populist discourse may impact Poland's democratic trajectory. It challenges the notion that language simply mirrors social reality, instead proposing that language plays a performative and relational role in constructing meanings and social identities. This process, known as 'articulation', involves the strategic manipulation of language by political actors to create new associations and narratives. These narratives are understood as complex social and political constructs that link diverse objects and practices, offering roles and identities for individuals and groups to align with²⁸. Within this theoretical framework, populism is seen as a discourse that not only communicates but actively forms a 'popular identity.' It does so by positioning this identity in opposition to perceived 'elites' or 'the establishment,' with a central focus on the concept of 'the people.'²⁹. This approach thus provides a comprehensive lens to examine how the PiS government uses populist discourse to redefine historical memory—for instance, by invoking narratives of national victimhood and resilience, especially related to the Soviet era—and to shape its foreign policy, such as emphasising Poland's sovereignty against perceived EU interference or portraying the nation as a bastion of traditional values in contrast to Western liberalism.

²⁷ Laclau, E. (2005). *“On Populist Reason”*, Verso, New York; Laclau, E., and Mouffe, C. (2014). *“Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics”*, Verso Books; Howarth, D. R., Norval, A. J., and Stavrakakis, Y. (Eds.). (2000). *“Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change”*, Manchester University Press; Howarth, D. R., Norval, A. J., and Stavrakakis, Y. (Eds.). (2000). *“Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change”*, Manchester University Press.

²⁸ Howarth, D., and Stavrakakis, Y. (2000). *“Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis”*.

²⁹ Laclau, E. (2005). *Ibid.*

The distinctiveness of a populist movement, then, lies not in its political or ideological content but in the unique way it articulates these elements. This involves two fundamental processes: creating an 'equivalential chain' linking diverse, unmet social demands and establishing an 'internal frontier' that dichotomises society. The PiS government exemplifies this through its narrative of "Poland in ruins," uniting various societal grievances under a common theme and depicting a polarised society where the majority suffers due to a disconnected liberal elite³⁰.

Understanding the mechanisms through which these internal frontiers and equivalential chains are constructed becomes crucial for policy analysis. The first mechanism involves demonising the 'power', seen as obstructing social demands. Populism necessitates the discursive construction of an adversary, as emphasised by Laclau³¹. The second mechanism centres on structuring populist discourse around 'the People', constructing 'the people' and 'the elite' as antagonistic poles. This can manifest in various forms, such as PiS politicians alternately portraying opposition members as liberal, economically privileged, or Western emulators, in contrast to the conservative, exploited, or traditionally pristine 'people'.

In the realm of historical discourses, populism can manifest in two ways: through the portrayal of an underdog as a historical agent or vice versa. Populist actors may employ historical narratives and symbols to draw internal frontiers, establish equivalential chains, or define 'the other'³². The specific political culture influences these articulations and can involve complex language games of recognition, idealisation, rejection, or demonisation³³. Alternatively, the structural logic of populist articulation may be mirrored in historical narratives, leading to dichotomous portrayals of a nation as an underdog and historical adversaries as 'elites'.

³⁰ Zhu, Q. (2022). Memory politics in Poland under the Law and Justice Party (PiS): Constructing narratives of heroism and victimhood using a case study of three Polish museums (Master's thesis). Jagiellonian University, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Institute of European Studies, Krakow, Poland. p.6.

³¹ Laclau, E. (2005). Ibid.

³² Moffitt, B., & Tormey, S. (2014). Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style. *Political studies*, 62(2), 381-397.

³³ Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). "Discourse Theory in Populism Research: Three Challenges and a Dilemma", *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16(4), 523-534.

III. Rise of the Law and Justice Party (PiS)

The 2010 plane crash near Smolensk, Russia, which claimed the lives of Polish President Lech Kaczynski and other officials, served as a turning point in Polish politics, amplifying nationalist sentiments and contributing to the subsequent rise of the Law and Justice Party (PiS). Following this event, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Lech's twin brother and co-founder of PiS, assumed a central role within the party, leveraging national grief and distrust towards external actors to foster a populist, anti-elite narrative³⁴.

After an unsuccessful attempt at the presidency, Jaroslaw Kaczynski adopted a strategic approach by positioning Andrzej Duda and Beata Szydlo as PiS candidates for the presidency and prime ministership, respectively. This strategy proved successful, as Duda won the presidential election in May 2015, followed by PiS securing a parliamentary majority in October. For the first time since Poland's transition from communism, a single party held both executive and legislative power, enabling PiS to govern without coalition constraints and cementing Jaroslaw Kaczynski's influence³⁵. With its majority, PiS embarked on several controversial reforms that reshaped Poland's political landscape. Among the earliest and most impactful measures were amendments to the Constitutional Tribunal (CT), which had previously served as a check on governmental power³⁶. These amendments expanded PiS's control over judicial appointments and decision-making, transforming the tribunal into a body aligned with PiS's political agenda. PiS framed these changes as necessary to restore "judicial accountability" and address alleged corruption—an argument resonant with the party's populist discourse that criticised elite institutions as disconnected from the public will³⁷.

In a similar vein, PiS targeted the media sector, passing legislation that allowed the executive branch to appoint and dismiss heads of state-owned media organisations. This move was justified by President Duda as a means to ensure "impartial and reliable" news aligned with national values, yet critics argued that it undermined media independence and concentrated power within

³⁴ Jasiiecki, K. (2018). "*Conservative Modernization and the Rise of Law and Justice in Poland*", *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, Routledge, 130-153.

³⁵ Hoffman, M. (2018). "[PiS] Sing Off the Courts: The PiS Party's Effect on Judicial Independence in Poland", *Vand. J. Transnat'l L.*, 51, 1153.

³⁶ Sadurski, W. (2019a). "*Poland's Constitutional Breakdown*", Oxford University Press.

³⁷ Hoffman, M. (2018). *Ibid.*

PiS³⁸. Further consolidating its authority, PiS introduced laws that expanded government surveillance capabilities and restricted peaceful assembly. These measures, coupled with controversial changes to the Supreme Court, raised concerns among domestic and international observers about threats to judicial independence and the rule of law in Poland. Under Jaroslaw Kaczynski's leadership, PiS's actions have sparked ongoing debates about democratic governance, media freedom, judicial independence, and human rights, as critics view these reforms as indicative of a broader authoritarian shift³⁹.

This context illuminates the mechanisms through which PiS has used populist rhetoric and policy reforms to consolidate power, framing its actions as a defence of national interests and public integrity against an elite-driven system. The criticisms that PiS faces from both within Poland and the international community underscore the broader implications of its populist agenda, as discussed in the following sections.

A. Judicial Reforms

The recent legislative changes have sparked debates and concerns, particularly regarding the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers, essential tenets of a democratic society. These reforms, altering the structure and function of the SC and the KRS, signify a significant shift in the judicial landscape of Poland, with potential long-term implications for the country's legal and political order.

1. The PiS's Judicial Reform Bills of 2017

On July 20, 2017, a significant shift occurred in the Polish judicial system when the Parliament, dominated by the Law and Justice Party (PiS), enacted three reform bills that significantly expanded the influence of the executive and legislative branches over the judiciary. These reforms, a subject of considerable debate and concern, marked a pivotal moment in the nation's legal history⁴⁰. The first of these bills brought about a fundamental change in

³⁸ Sadurski, W. (2019b). "Polish Constitutional Tribunal under PiS: From an Activist Court to a Paralysed Tribunal, to a Governmental Enabler", *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 11, 63-84.

³⁹ Gajda-Roszczyńska, K., and Markiewicz, K. (2020). "Disciplinary Proceedings as an Instrument for Breaking the Rule of Law in Poland", *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 12(3), 451-483.

⁴⁰ Scheppele, K. L. (2018). "Autocratic Legalism", *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 85(2), 545-584.

the composition of the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), a body traditionally responsible for safeguarding the independence of the judiciary. The legislation altered the KRS's makeup, increasing the number of members appointed directly by Parliament from eight to fifteen. This shift effectively transferred the power of appointing and promoting Supreme Court (SC) justices from an independent judiciary to the political realm, thereby raising concerns about the erosion of judicial independence⁴¹.

The second bill focused on the Law of Common Courts. It vested the Minister of Justice, who also holds the position of Prosecutor General, with the authority to appoint presidents and vice-presidents of lower courts. Furthermore, the bill revised the promotion process for judges but did not clearly define the criteria for these promotions. This dual role of the Minister of Justice, as both a key figure in the judiciary and an active participant in legal proceedings, sparked apprehension about potential conflicts of interest and the undermining of the impartiality of the judiciary. The third bill was particularly contentious, as it mandated the immediate retirement of all existing SC justices, granting the Minister of Justice discretionary power to extend the tenure of selected justices. This provision effectively allowed the Minister to reshape the composition of the Supreme Court. Additionally, the bill introduced a new dimension to the Minister of Justice's role, involving him in the disciplinary proceedings of SC justices and enabling him to retrospectively challenge the outcomes of such proceedings, even those predating the bill's enactment⁴².

Although President Andrzej Duda initially vetoed two of these bills, he later approved revised versions, which included a modification requiring only 40 percent of Supreme Court judges to retire. However, the fundamental change in the composition of the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS) persisted, granting PiS substantial control over judicial appointments. These judicial reforms reflect PiS's populist discourse by targeting established institutions that it portrays as elitist and unaccountable to the public, framing such changes as a 'restoration' of justice for the people. This consolidation of power within the judiciary underscores the extent to which PiS's populism seeks to reshape Poland's institutional landscape. Addressing these changes is

⁴¹ Mastracci, M. (2019). "Judicial Independence", *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, 61(1), 118-143.

⁴² Jankauskas, T. (2023). "Quality of Democracy in Poland: The Doctrinal Legal Analysis of the Polish Law and Justice Reforms between 2015-2020", (Doctoral dissertation, Vilniaus Universitetas).

crucial for the main research question, as it raises the issue of whether the PO-led coalition government can effectively reverse such measures and curtail populism's institutional grip on Polish democracy⁴³. These reforms sparked a wave of criticism and concern, both domestically and internationally. Critics argued that they represented a significant departure from the principles of judicial independence and separation of powers, cornerstones of democratic governance⁴⁴. The PiS Party's judicial reforms of 2017 thus stand as a critical juncture in Poland's legal and political landscape, with implications that continue to reverberate through the nation's judicial system.

2. The PiS's Rationale Behind the 2017 Judicial Reform Bills

To comprehend the Law and Justice Party's (PiS) justification for the controversial 2017 judicial reforms in Poland, it is essential to delve into the nation's post-communist history. Following the fall of communism in 1989, Poland initially adopted a stance of national reconciliation, refraining from barring former communists from participating in the new democratic government. This approach, however, shifted in subsequent years. In 1997, a right-wing party introduced a "lustration" bill aimed at exposing former communist agents holding high-ranking positions in government, media, and the legal profession⁴⁵. The initial bill faced amendments by then-President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, a reformed communist himself, which critics argue diluted its effectiveness. Despite these amendments, the Parliament passed a revised lustration bill in the following year. This revised bill expanded its scope and was particularly effective in identifying lawyers who had falsely declared their past affiliations. Over seven years, the bill revealed 277 individuals with communist ties⁴⁶.

The Kaczyński brothers, Lech and Jarosław, have been vociferous critics of communism, a stance shaped by their family's historical resistance to communist rule. Lech Kaczyński's six-month internment for dissident activities and Jarosław's conviction that communists retained influence post-1989 underpin their political ideology. This perspective led to the PiS Party's

⁴³ Sadurski, W. (2018). "How Democracy Dies (in Poland): A Case Study of a Anti-Constitutional Populist Backsliding", *Revista Forumul Judecatorilor*, 104.

⁴⁴ Jankauskas, T. (2023). *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Przybylski, W. (2018). "Explaining Eastern Europe: Can Poland's Backsliding Be Stopped?", *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3), 52-64.

⁴⁶ Rydliński, B. M. (2023). "The State of Social Democracy in Poland. In *The Social Democratic Parties in the Visegrád Countries: Predicaments and Prospects for Progressivism*", Springer International Publishing, 137-175.

attempt in 2006, under President Lech Kaczyński, to enforce a more stringent lustration law. This law required a broader range of public figures to disclose any communist-era collaborations, with severe penalties for false declarations. However, the Constitutional Tribunal (CT), perceived by the PiS as being composed of judges from the communist era or appointed by former communists, ruled the law unconstitutional, effectively neutering it. The PiS Party's frustration with the CT's decision laid the groundwork for the 2017 judicial reform bills⁴⁷. Jarosław Kaczyński, echoing his earlier lustration efforts, argued that many judges in Poland were remnants of the communist era, prioritising global over national interests and lacking public accountability due to their non-elective appointments. The PiS contended that these reforms were necessary to enhance the judiciary's efficiency, effectiveness, and integrity, asserting that the pre-reform system served only the elite and was inherently undemocratic⁴⁸.

Supporting these reforms, the Minister of Justice hailed them as a step towards dismantling “court-ocracy” and introducing democratic accountability into the judiciary. The state media and Polish officials also argued that these reforms would align Poland's judicial system with those in other European Union countries. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the reforms aimed to restore public respect for the judiciary. The PiS Party underscored that these reforms were part of a legitimate and democratic process, pointing to public opinion polls indicating that a significant majority of Poles favoured judicial reform⁴⁹. Running on a platform that promised court reform, the PiS argued that enacting these bills fulfilled their electoral mandate and responded to the popular will. In summary, the PiS Party's justification for the 2017 judicial reforms is rooted in a historical context of anti-communism and a desire to overhaul a system they viewed as undemocratic and unresponsive to the Polish populace.

3. Domestic and International Reactions to Poland's 2017 Judicial Reform Bills

The Law and Justice Party's (PiS) 2017 judicial reform bills in Poland have elicited strong reactions both domestically and internationally,

⁴⁷ Stanley, B. (2023). *“The Deconsolidation of Democracy”*, Europe Today: A Twenty-First Century Introduction, 192.

⁴⁸ Millard, F. (2021). *“Transitional Justice in Poland: Memory and the Politics of the Past”*, Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁴⁹ Hoffman, M. (2018). Ibid.

highlighting a divide in perceptions of democratic principles and judicial independence. Domestically, the response to the bills was immediate and intense. Despite a general consensus among the Polish populace on the need for judicial reforms, the specific measures proposed by the PiS sparked widespread protests in major cities like Warsaw, Krakow, and Katowice. These protesters, a diverse group encompassing various sectors of society, voiced their apprehension that the bills would erode judicial independence⁵⁰. They urged President Andrzej Duda to veto the legislation. Public opinion polls indicated a complex sentiment: while a majority favoured judicial reform in principle, a significant portion (55%) believed the President should veto these particular bills. This sentiment was echoed by 76% of Poles opposing a politicised judiciary⁵¹.

The Polish opposition parties broadly criticised the PiS's approach as a covert strategy to undermine the rule of law by consolidating control over the judiciary under the guise of reform. Internationally, these reform bills triggered immediate and varied responses. The United States, through its State Department, expressed concerns regarding Poland's adherence to its constitutional and international commitments, underscoring the critical nature of judicial independence and the separation of powers. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron emphasised the potential threat these reforms posed to the rule of law, a cornerstone principle for collaboration within the EU framework. Luxembourg's Foreign Minister went as far as to question Poland's continued membership in the EU, highlighting the infringement of key EU values⁵². The European Commission (EC), tasked with safeguarding EU treaties, escalated its critique following the PiS Party's actions. The EC's Vice President, Frans Timmermans, warned of the potential erosion of judicial independence and the risk of politicising the judiciary, which could undermine the rule of law throughout the EU. The Commission even contemplated the activation of Article 7, a punitive measure for EU members violating core principles.

⁵⁰ Grabowska-Moroz, B., and Śniadach, O. (2021). "The Role of Civil Society in Protecting Judicial Independence in Times of Rule of Law Backsliding in Poland", *Utrecht Law Review*, 17(2), 59.

⁵¹ Sadurski, W. (2019a). *Ibid.*

⁵² Youngs, R., Alemanno, A., Boucher, S., Chwalisz, C., Gostyńska-Jakubowska, A., Grabbe, H., ... and Thillaye, R. (2019). "Reshaping European Democracy: A Year in Review".

In summary, the PiS Party's judicial reform initiatives in 2017 have sparked intense debate over democratic norms, judicial autonomy, and power dynamics both within Poland and across the European landscape. These developments mirror deep-seated concerns about the trajectory of Polish democracy and its congruence with the EU's foundational principles⁵³.

B. Poland's Media Landscape and Civil Society Response to PiS's Reforms

The Polish media landscape underwent significant changes following President Andrzej Duda's election in 2015, and the subsequent actions of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) have drawn intense domestic and international scrutiny. The PiS's attempts to control the media, particularly public television, have been met with substantial resistance, illustrating the resilience of civil society in the face of potential democratic backsliding. Under President Duda and the PiS, a series of reforms were initiated that targeted the autonomy of state-sponsored television and radio. The most notable of these was legislation permitting the replacement of senior officials in public broadcasting, effectively allowing political control over these institutions. The PiS also leveraged legal frameworks, notably Article 212 of the criminal code, to exert pressure on journalists, fostering a climate of self-censorship. By 2018, this control over media entities like TVP led international bodies like the Council of Europe and Reporters Without Borders to label the channel as propagandistic⁵⁴.

Despite these efforts, civil society in Poland has shown resilience and resourcefulness in countering the PiS's media control. The years following the reforms saw significant protests, notably in 2016 and 2018, where calls for "free media" were prominent. The use of alternative information sources, such as social media, and the active role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been instrumental in challenging the government's narrative and bringing international attention to the issue. Social media, in particular, has played a pivotal role in allowing Polish citizens to circumvent government messaging and foster a counter-narrative. This access to diverse information sources is reminiscent of historical contexts where access to alternative media undermined dominant propaganda efforts, as discussed in studies like "Radio

⁵³ Przybylski, W. (2018). Ibid.

⁵⁴ Politico. (2015). "New Media Law Gives Polish Government Fuller Control", Retrieved from Politico.

and the Rise of Nazis in Prewar Germany.” The significant mistrust in TVP among the Polish populace reflects this dynamic.

NGOs in Poland, such as the Committee for the Defence of Democracy, have actively organised protests and engaged with international media. Their presence and limited media control by the government have allowed for greater dissemination of information and mobilisation against government actions. These organisations have also drawn the attention of international bodies, including the European Commission, to the situation in Poland. The civic engagement demonstrated through protests and voting patterns has emerged as a formidable check against the PiS’s media strategies⁵⁵. The 2019 elections saw a shift, with more citizens voting against the PiS, indicating a weakening of the party’s influence. This increased civic participation in protests and at the polls has been pivotal in highlighting media repression and challenging the PiS’s grip on power. Recognising propaganda and having access to alternative information sources weaken the impact of government-controlled narratives. The ability of Polish citizens to protest, vote, and access diverse media sources has been crucial in countering media repression and drawing international attention to these issues⁵⁶.

IV. Historical Background of the Elections in Poland

The historical context of Polish elections, mainly since 1989, reflects a dramatic transformation from a communist regime to a multifaceted democratic landscape. In 1989, significant international changes and widespread national unrest led to the collapse of the communist regime. The ‘Round Table Talks’ between the government and the opposition, led by the Solidarity movement, marked the initial steps towards Poland’s transition to democracy. These negotiations resulted in a constitutional amendment on April 7, 1989, and an agreement for partially free parliamentary elections⁵⁷. The Solidarity Citizens’ Committee (KOS), the political wing of the Solidarity movement, participated in the 1989 elections and achieved a landmark

⁵⁵ Ekiert, G. (2021). “*Civil Society as a Threat to Democracy. The Power of Populism and People: Resistance and Protest in the Modern World*”, 53.

⁵⁶ Guzek, D., Mihelj, S., and Šte˘tka, V. (2021). “*I Don’t Vote Because I Don’t Want to Get Infected*”, *Political Communication in the Time of Coronavirus*, 192.

⁵⁷ Markowski, R. (2016). “*The Polish Parliamentary Election of 2015: a Free and Fair Election that Results in Unfair Political Consequences*”, *West European Politics*, 39(6), 1311-1322.

victory⁵⁸. Wojciech Jaruzelski was elected President of the Republic in a joint session of the two houses under the Round Table Agreements framework. In December 1989, the Constitution was amended again, removing references to the state's socialist character and instituting a democratic government system, further fragmenting the Polish political sphere⁵⁹.

The loss of a 'common enemy' led to internal divisions within the Solidarity Citizens' Committee, representing diverse interests. This division became apparent in the 1990 presidential elections, with conservative factions supporting Lech Wałęsa and liberals nominating Tadeusz Mazowiecki and was evident in the 1991 parliamentary elections. The 1993 parliamentary elections, called prematurely by the President to solidify the existing parliamentary majority, were won by the Polish Republic's Social Democracy (SdRP), the successor to the Communist Party⁶⁰. Additionally, SdRP candidate Aleksander Kwaśniewski won the presidential elections in 1995 and 2000⁶¹. The scenario evolved further in 1996 with the formation of the Solidarity Electoral Action of the Right (AWSP), a conglomerate of over thirty right-wing parties, which won the 1997 parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, an Interim Constitution was introduced in 1992, leading to significant amendments in the fundamental laws. The new Constitution was adopted in 1997 after a lengthy contemplation period and nationwide discussion⁶².

In 2001, a centre-left coalition formed by the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the Labor Union (Unia Pracy, UP) won the parliamentary elections. The same year saw an internal split within AWSP, leading to the creation of the Civic Platform (PO) and the Law and Justice Party (PiS), which entered parliament as opposition parties. From 2001 onwards, the political landscape underwent a radical shift from a 'post-Communist party system' to a 'post-Solidarity' system, characterised by conflicts between centre-left and centre-

⁵⁸ Szczerbiak, A. (2003). "Old and New Divisions in Polish Politics: Polish Parties' Electoral Strategies and Bases of Support", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 55(5), 729-746.

⁵⁹ Wyrzykowski, M. (1992). "Constitutional Changes in Poland 1989-1991", *Bull. Austl. Soc. Leg. Phil.*, 17, 25.

⁶⁰ Millard, F. (1994). "The Polish Parliamentary Election of September 1993", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 27(3), 295-313.

⁶¹ Pienkos, D. E. (2000). "Poland's 2000 Presidential Election", *The Polish Review*, 45(4), 435-443.

⁶² Dudek, D. (2022). "New or Just Amended? On the Legality of the "Major Change" to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland", *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia*, 31(5), 35-53.

right parties⁶³. This new bi-polar balance was dominated by two right-wing parties: the liberal PO and the conservative PiS. The 2005 parliamentary elections marked a decisive defeat for the Democratic Left Alliance, while both Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice Party (PiS) gained significant ground, with PiS eventually forming a coalition government⁶⁴. Law and Justice Party candidate Lech Kaczyński won the presidential election the same year. The Civic Platform secured victories in the 2007 and 2011 parliamentary elections, with their candidate Bronisław Komorowski winning the 2010 presidential election. The reappointment of Civic Platform leader Donald Tusk as Prime Minister in 2011 indicated a continuity in the political system⁶⁵.

The 2015 victory of the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (PiS) led to the formation of a single-party majority government and significant changes in Polish politics. PiS's success was underpinned by nationalist and xenophobic sentiments rekindled during the migrant crisis and promises of social support to citizens affected by neoliberal transformations⁶⁶. The party secured power with 38% of the vote and a narrow absolute majority of parliamentary seats, marking a substantial shift in Poland's political landscape. PiS's victory reflected broader challenges related to civil society and regime changes in the post-1989 period⁶⁷.

This political transformation led to an increase in the PiS government's control over the judiciary and media, intensifying pressures on democratic institutions and adopting a more authoritarian stance against government dissent. Government interventions, especially in the Constitutional Tribunal and public broadcasting, raised concerns about Poland's democratic standards and the principle of the rule of law. These developments caused tensions in relations with the European Union (EU) and raised questions about the EU's commitment to the rule of law⁶⁸. On the other hand, PiS's social policy

⁶³ Dudek, D. (2022). Ibid.

⁶⁴ Szczerbiak, A. (2007). "Social Poland Defeats 'Liberal Poland'? The September–October 2005 Polish Parliamentary and Presidential Elections", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 23(2), 203-232.

⁶⁵ Marcinkiewicz, K., and Stegmaier, M. (2016). "The Parliamentary Election in Poland, October 2015", *Electoral Studies*, 41, 221-224.

⁶⁶ Narkowicz, K. (2018). 'Refugees not welcome here': state, church and civil society responses to the refugee crisis in Poland. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 31(4), 357-373.

⁶⁷ Marcinkiewicz, K., and Stegmaier, M. (2016). Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jaskiernia, J. (2017). "The Development of the Polish Party System", *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 46(2), 227-246.

implementations, particularly in family assistance and pension reforms, were positively received by some segments, providing support among economically disadvantaged groups. However, concerns over democratic backsliding in the political and institutional spheres counterbalanced this support. In conclusion, Poland's political and institutional transformations following the 2015 elections have had significant domestic and international implications. PiS's policies and practices have sparked crucial debates regarding Poland's democratic future, its relations with the EU, and the rise of populist movements in Europe⁶⁹.

V. Discussing Whether the Electoral Success of the Centrist Coalition in Poland Can Prevent PiS Populism

A. The Success of the Central Coalition in Poland's Elections and Its Potential Impact on PiS Populism

Assessing whether the recent electoral success of Poland's central coalition can effectively counter the entrenched populism represented by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) requires a close examination of Poland's unique political landscape. This coalition victory suggests a potential shift in the ideological balance within Poland, challenging the populist and nationalist framework that PiS has cultivated over the past decade. Rather than diverging into comparative analyses with other European nations, this discussion will focus specifically on the mechanisms through which Poland's central coalition has gained public support and the implications this has for the stability of PiS's populist influence. In Poland, the rise of PiS was underpinned by a populist discourse that framed the party as a defender of 'the people' against elite, liberal establishments, both domestic and foreign. This discourse gained momentum particularly during the migrant crisis of 2015 and subsequent waves of socio-economic transformations that amplified public discontent.⁷⁰

PiS successfully harnessed nationalist sentiments, promising a restoration of Polish sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic security in response to perceived threats from the European Union and globalisation. This narrative has been instrumental in PiS's sustained success, reinforcing a populist agenda that prioritises conservative social values, critiques of EU interference, and scepticism towards liberal democratic norms. The recent

⁶⁹ Marcinkiewicz, K., and Stegmaier, M. (2016). Ibid.

⁷⁰ Stanley, B., and Czeński, M. (2019). "Populism in Poland", *Populism Around the World: A Comparative Perspective*, 67-87.

electoral gains of the Civic Coalition and its allies suggest that there may be emerging cracks in PiS's populist armour. As a unified front, the central coalition has positioned itself as an alternative to PiS's divisive politics, advocating for democratic pluralism, rule of law, and re-engagement with the European Union. Analysing the strategies employed by the Civic Coalition, the Third Way, and the Left to garner widespread support offers insight into whether these shifts signify a durable change in Polish politics or a temporary reaction to PiS's governance style.

This exploration is especially pertinent given the coalition's commitment to reversing some of PiS's policies, particularly those that have weakened Poland's judiciary, restricted media freedoms, and limited civil liberties. These policies, often justified through populist rhetoric, have reshaped Poland's democratic institutions in ways that consolidate PiS's control. Understanding whether the new coalition government can effectively dismantle these structural changes and restore democratic norms will provide a clearer perspective on the resilience of populism in Poland. By examining Poland's recent election results and the central coalition's policy goals, this section aims to address the main research question: does the formation of a Civic Coalition-led government signify the beginning of the end for populism in Poland? Or will PiS's populist ideals continue to influence the Polish political landscape despite this electoral setback? This analysis not only situates PiS within the broader trends of European populism but also highlights the unique factors shaping populist discourse and counter-movements within Poland itself.

B. Understanding the Rise of Right-Wing Populist Parties and the Populist Policies of Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS)

The phenomenon of the rising influence of right-wing populist parties has garnered significant attention in contemporary political discourse. This emergence is often attributed to a political milieu where issues prioritised by these parties – such as immigration, nationalism, and cultural grievances – gain prominence. A notable shift has been observed in the electorate's value system, leading many to conclude that the burgeoning success of these parties can be ascribed to a 'cultural backlash.' Key aspects contributing to this trend include the influence of economic apprehensions over immigration in engaging core supporters and extending their appeal. Secondly, the right-wing populist parties are adept at leveraging various cultural and financial

insecurities to their advantage. Thirdly, the efficacy of social policies in addressing the insecurities that fuel support for these parties⁷¹.

The critical question concerning voter Behavior revolves around how cultural and economic grievances influence an individual's likelihood of supporting a right-wing populist party. Contrary to the common perception of immigration as a predominantly cultural concern, evidence suggests a more complex reality. Both cultural and economic apprehensions regarding immigration significantly enhance the propensity to vote for a right-wing populist party⁷². While cultural concerns are a more potent predictor of such voting Behavior, their relative importance in the overall success of right-wing populist parties is moderated by the broader base of voters with economic anxieties. This distinction underscores the necessity to differentiate between core and peripheral voter segments. Those primarily focused on the cultural implications of immigration constitute the core supporters of right-wing populist parties. Though this group is highly likely to endorse these parties, they represent a more minor faction of the electorate.

In contrast, voters who are predominantly anxious about the economic repercussions of immigration fall into the peripheral category⁷³. This segment, while also inclined towards right-wing populist parties, is more numerous. The disparate concerns and preferences of these two groups imply that the most successful right-wing populist parties are those that can effectively appeal to and unite both factions. Hence, the triumph of right-wing populist parties hinges not just on their ability to engage those worried about the cultural dimensions of immigration but also on their capacity to galvanise a wider voter base with economic grievances⁷⁴.

The analysis of parties categorised as right-wing populists is conducted while maintaining a sceptical approach towards the analytical usefulness of the term 'populism' in elucidating the ascent of this phenomenon. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the significance of nationalism as a mobilisation tool

⁷¹ Inglehart, R., and Norris, P. (2017). "Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse", *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2), 443-454.

⁷² Jankauskas, T. (2023). *Ibid.*

⁷³ Gwiazda, A. (2021). "Right-Wing Populism and Feminist Politics: The Case of Law and Justice in Poland", *International Political Science Review*, 42(5), 580-595.

⁷⁴ Malone, J. J. (2014). "Examining the Rise of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe".

that facilitates the achievements of right-wing populist parties. The concept of the “national way of life” is increasingly highlighted by these parties. In Western Europe, right-wing populist parties are promoting a strategy of civic nationalism that normalises nationalist solutions for various forms of insecurity. This strategy encompasses two distinct components: it portrays culture as a realm of values and justifies exclusion based on ideological criteria.

Furthermore, it directs attention towards social welfare and welfare chauvinism⁷⁵. Conversely, right-wing populist parties in Eastern Europe predominantly adhere to an ethnically nationalist stance, concentrating on inherent criteria of national belonging and galvanising electorates through socially conservative positions and opposition to minority rights. In Eastern Europe, these parties also tend to underscore negative attitudes towards multiculturalism⁷⁶.

In other words, the ascendancy of right-wing populist parties does not follow a uniform pattern across Europe. Analysis of existing studies and regional data reveals distinct regional variances, with different voter demographics and grievances driving the success of such parties. Consequently, progressive counterstrategies must be context-specific. For instance, while the centre-left in Western Europe can leverage its traditional strength in welfare expansion, its Eastern European counterparts face unique challenges⁷⁷. An important observation is that the centre-left’s adoption of diluted right-wing populist themes, particularly in nationalism and chauvinism, has led to a loss of distinctiveness in these areas⁷⁸. However, replicating the right-wing populist playbook—transitioning to populism, restrictive immigration policies, and nationalistic rhetoric—is not viable for centre-left parties. Instead, they should focus on addressing economic insecurities and championing issues like equality, which resonate more deeply

⁷⁵ Halikiopoulou, D., and Vlandas, T. (2022). “*Understanding Right-Wing Populism and What to Do about It*”, Report by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

⁷⁶ Trumm, S. (2018). “*The ‘New’ Wave of Populist Right-Wing Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: Explaining Electoral Support for the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia*”, *Representation*, 54(4), 331-347.

⁷⁷ Szelewa, D. (2020). “*Recurring Ideas: Searching for the Roots of Right-Wing Populism in Eastern Europe*”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 989-997.

⁷⁸ Rydgren, J. (2004). “*Explaining the Emergence of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties: The Case of Denmark*”, *West European Politics*, 27(3), 474-502.

with their base. A shift towards nationalism could alienate their traditionally pro-immigration electorate⁷⁹.

In the context of the broader trends of right-wing populism, an examination of Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) reveals the implementation of a series of policies that mirror these widespread tendencies. To comprehend these policies, conducting a thorough analysis of PiS's approach to governance, which distinctively amalgamates nationalism, cultural values, and social welfare, is essential. This multifaceted approach reflects the party's strategic positioning within the Polish political landscape and offers insights into the evolving nature of right-wing populism in Europe⁸⁰. As PiS stands as a prominent figure in this movement, understanding its policies provides a window into the mechanisms through which right-wing populism gains and sustains influence in contemporary European politics.

PiS has strategically emphasised Polish nationalism and cultural values, much like other right-wing populist parties in Europe. This emphasis often manifests in the portrayal of Poland as a nation under threat, both from external forces like the European Union and from internal changes such as multiculturalism and liberal social policies. PiS's stance on issues like immigration, national sovereignty, and traditional family values is reflective of a broader cultural backlash against perceived threats to national identity. This approach has effectively rallied core supporters who feel alienated by globalisation and cultural changes. PiS has diverged somewhat from typical right-wing populist rhetoric in its approach to economic policies and social welfare⁸¹. The party has implemented or maintained several social welfare programs, like the '500+ program', which provides financial assistance to families with children, and pension reforms that have been popular among many Poles, especially in rural areas and smaller towns. These policies have helped PiS secure support from groups traditionally not aligned with right-wing populism, such as the working class and the elderly, by addressing their economic insecurities. Reflecting broader European trends, PiS has also had to navigate financial challenges like job insecurity and austerity. While the

⁷⁹ Santana, A., and Rama, J. (2018). "Electoral Support for Left-Wing Populist Parties in Europe: Addressing the Globalization Cleavage", *European Politics and Society*, 19(5), 558-576.

⁸⁰ Koszykowska, P. (2018). "The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland", (Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York).

⁸¹ Santana, A., and Rama, J. (2018). *Ibid.*

party has not radically liberalised labour markets, it has maintained a conservative fiscal stance. PiS's policies, therefore, blend elements of welfare state protection with conservative economic governance, which has broadened its appeal but also led to criticisms of inadequate responses to economic inequality and labour market challenges⁸².

In line with other European right-wing populist parties, PiS has taken a restrictive stance on immigration. The party has capitalised on fears related to cultural change and security concerns, positioning itself as a defender of Polish cultural identity against the backdrop of the European migrant crisis⁸³. This stance has resonated with a significant portion of the electorate, further solidifying PiS's political position. PiS's success has influenced the policy agendas of other political parties in Poland. Both left and right mainstream parties have had to respond to PiS's dominance, with some adopting more conservative positions on issues like immigration and national identity to recapture the lost electorate⁸⁴. These dynamics highlight the broader impact of right-wing populism on national political discourses. PiS's blend of welfare policies, nationalistic rhetoric, and conservative cultural values represents a tailored approach to populism that has proven successful in Poland. This approach mirrors broader European trends in right-wing populism but also displays unique characteristics shaped by Poland's historical, cultural, and economic context.

C. Can the Success of the Central Coalition in Poland's Elections Prevent PiS Populism?

The recent ascension of Donald Tusk to the role of Poland's Prime Minister, following a significant victory of a pro-European Union coalition, signals a transformative moment in Polish politics. This shift, potentially curtailing the populist tendencies of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), emerges after an eight-year reign of national conservative rule under PiS. The coalition, encompassing a spectrum from left-wing to moderate conservative parties, unified under Tusk's leadership, committing to restore democratic norms and strengthen European alliances⁸⁵.

⁸² Koszykowska, P. (2018). Ibid.

⁸³ Halikiopoulou, D., and Vlandas, T. (2022). Ibid.

⁸⁴ Szelewa, D. (2020). Ibid.

⁸⁵ Al Jazeera. (2023, December 11). Ibid; Reuters, (2023, December 12). "*Donald Tusk Appointed Polish PM, Setting Stage for Warmer EU Ties*", Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com>.

Tusk, a centrist leader and former European Council president, was elected almost two months after the national election, demonstrating a historic voter turnout of nearly 75%. This turnout, the highest since Poland's return to democracy, even surpassed the 1989 vote that catalysed the collapse of the Soviet-backed communist regime⁸⁶. Notably, despite PiS securing more votes than any other single party, it lost its parliamentary majority, marking a pivotal shift in the nation's political landscape⁸⁷. The government, formed from Tusk's Civic Coalition, along with the liberal Poland 2050 party, the conservative agrarian Polish People's Party, and the Left, is poised to adopt a centrist, pro-EU stance. Tusk's intentions to align Poland more closely with European allies and bolster support for Ukraine are significant. Moreover, his pledge to unlock approximately 110 billion euros of EU funds, frozen overrule-of-law concerns, is indicative of a new direction in Poland's political trajectory⁸⁸.

However, the coalition faces internal challenges, particularly in addressing contentious social issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. The coalition's spectrum includes more conservative members, creating a complex dynamic in tackling these rights⁸⁹. Tusk's commitment to advancing gender equality policies, simplifying legal processes for transgender individuals, and considering the introduction of same-sex civil partnerships and relaxed abortion laws is a hopeful sign. Yet, the implementation of these reforms may be gradual and complex, given the diversity within the coalition and the necessity for President Andrzej Duda's approval of new laws⁹⁰. In juxtaposition with the coalition's progressive agenda, the question remains: what does the PiS defeat signify for the future of populism in Poland and possibly Europe? While the electoral success of Tusk and his coalition undoubtedly represents a democratic resurgence and a move towards pluralism, it is crucial not to overestimate this outcome. Poland's populists, though currently displaced, are not entirely diminished.

⁸⁶ Özalp, G. O. (2016). "Avrasya Bölgesinin Stratejik Önemi ve Türkiye-Bölge Ülkelerin Savunma ve Güvenlik Alanlarında İlişkileri", Akademik Bakış Dergisi, (54), 596-617.

⁸⁷ ITV News. (2023). "Polish Opposition Leader Donald Tusk Declares Election Victory as Country Awaits Final Results", Retrieved from <https://www.itv.com>

⁸⁸ Reuters. (2023, December 11). Ibid.

⁸⁹ Reuters. (2023, December 13). "In Sea Change for Poland, New Government is Sworn in", Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com>.

⁹⁰ Sierakowski, S. (2023a). "What's Next for Poland? Project Syndicate", Retrieved from <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>.

Understanding the structural factors—such as economic inequality, regional disparities, and perceived threats to national identity—that have fuelled populism is essential for Poland to steadfastly remain in the pluralist camp⁹¹. These factors, present to varying degrees across different demographics and regions, can be measured through public opinion surveys, socio-economic data, and studies on national identity perceptions. Looking ahead, Tusk’s government must navigate the challenges of reversing democratic backsliding and meeting heightened public expectations. The coalition, while diverse, must present a united front to avoid giving populists like PiS opportunities to regain ground. The effectiveness with which Tusk’s government addresses these structural factors will ultimately determine the extent to which it can curb the influence of populism in Poland⁹².

In conclusion, while Tusk’s election and the success of the centrist coalition mark a potential departure from PiS’s populist policies, the path ahead is intricate. The government’s commitment to EU alignment, rule-of-law improvements, and social reform reflects a promising new direction for Poland. However, the accurate measure of this shift and its impact on mitigating populism will depend on the coalition’s capability to harmonise internal differences and effectively navigate the broader Polish political landscape.

Conclusion

The recent electoral victory of Donald Tusk’s pro-European Union coalition, marked by his ascension as Poland’s Prime Minister, signifies a momentous shift in the nation’s political arena. This change, emerging after an eight-year period of national conservative governance under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), heralds a potentially transformative era in Polish politics. The new coalition, comprising a spectrum from left-wing to moderate conservative parties, has pledged to restore democratic norms and fortify European alliances, indicating a departure from the populist tendencies that characterised PiS’s tenure.

The historic voter turnout, nearly 75%, in these national elections underscores a heightened engagement of the Polish electorate in the democratic process. The outcome, which saw PiS lose its parliamentary

⁹¹ Al Jazeera. (2023, December 11). Ibid.

⁹² Sierakowski, S. (2023b). “*What Donald Tusk’s Return Means for Poland*”, Project Syndicate. Retrieved from <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>

majority despite securing the highest votes for a single party, reflects a pivotal alteration in the political landscape. The newly formed government, led by Tusk's Civic Coalition and including diverse political entities, aims to adopt a centrist, pro-EU stance. Their intentions to realign Poland closely with European partners and support Ukraine are significant markers of this new political direction.

However, this coalition faces internal challenges, especially in navigating social issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. The spectrum of political views within the coalition suggests a complex dynamic in addressing these contentious topics. Tusk's commitment to advancing progressive policies in these areas is promising, but their implementation might be gradual and complex, considering the coalition's diversity and the need for President Andrzej Duda's approval. The defeat of PiS raises critical questions regarding the future of populism in Poland and Europe. While the electoral success of the centrist coalition represents a democratic resurgence and a move towards pluralism, it is essential not to overestimate this outcome. Poland's populist elements, though currently displaced, are not entirely vanquished. Sustaining Poland's commitment to pluralistic values necessitates addressing and managing the structural factors that have fuelled populism.

The coalition's victory underscores the electorate's willingness to sanction populist governments that falter in effective governance. PiS's governance failures and allegations of corruption have undermined its image as an efficient governing body. The future trajectory of populism in Poland hinges significantly on how the Tusk-led government navigates the challenges of reversing democratic backsliding and meeting public expectations. The coalition's ability to present a united front and effectively govern will determine its success in curbing the influence of populism. In conclusion, while the electoral success of the central coalition under Tusk marks a potential shift away from PiS's populist policies, the journey ahead remains intricate. The new government's commitment to aligning with the EU, improving the rule of law, and implementing social reforms indicates a promising direction for Poland. However, the real measure of this shift and its ability to mitigate populism will depend on the coalition's capability to harmonise internal differences and adeptly navigate Poland's complex political landscape.

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