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THE CULTURE OF ANTI-POLITICS IN POLAND

Between Democratization and Autocratization¹

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to empirically verify hypotheses positing the existence of a culture of anti-politics in Poland. The author focuses on the period between 2015 and 2023, examining the processes of autocratization within the political system and their impact on the culture of anti-politics. The analysis is conducted on two dimensions of political culture: behavioral and evaluative. The data used in the article are derived from Polish research centers (CBOS) and the European Election Studies (EES), which serve as the basis for comparative research.

Keywords: democracy, anti-politics, autocratization, anti-political culture

INTRODUCTION

Anti-politics is one of the concepts and phenomena in political science that has been extensively analyzed and studied within Western democratic societies.² The discussions surrounding anti-politics often take place in the context of a crisis in liberal democracy and a shift towards populist parties.³ The phenomenon of anti-politics appears to be rather ephemeral: at times, it is perceived through the lens of increasing political

¹ The publication was funded by the Future Democracy Lab, a flagship project of the POB Society of the Future, under the program “Excellence Initiative – Research University” at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

² N. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 5 (2016), pp. 5-19; N. Clarke, J. Moss, W. Jennings et al., *The Rise of Anti-Politics in Britain*, Southampton 2016.

³ D. Albertazzi, S. Mueller, “Populism and Liberal Democracy. Populists in Government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland,” *Government and Opposition*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2013), pp. 343-371; S. Haggard, R. Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2021), pp. 27-41.

passivity, while at other times, through the lens of growing disillusionment with democracy, accompanied by negative evaluations of political elites, their representativeness, and their effectiveness in addressing societal problems.⁴ In another perspective, anti-politics is viewed through the lens of innovative or even rebellious behaviors.⁵ In this case, anti-political attitudes and behaviors extend beyond mere negative assessments of the democratic system and its components, seeking new forms of political engagement and support for emerging political forces. In such a context, anti-politics aims to become a direction for pursuing the empowerment of citizens and enhancing their efficiency.

A significant part of research on anti-politics describes a specific model of anti-political culture understood as a political subculture or counterculture.⁶ Anti-political culture is most commonly understood as a set of political attitudes characterized by a negative, critical attitudes towards democracy, its principles, institutions, and political elites.⁷ Furthermore, anti-political culture can be analyzed across various dimensions, including values, norms, language, symbols, and behaviors, among others.⁸

The following text aims to examine a specific segment within the aforementioned field of research. The author sets forth the main objective of answering the question: to what extent can one speak of the functioning of anti-political culture in Poland? To address this inquiry, certain assumptions must be made. The first assumption involves selecting a specific conceptual framework for anti-political culture, which requires alignment with particular theoretical premises. This clarification is necessary due to the considerable variability in the interpretations of anti-politics itself. The author will focus on two of the most prominent approaches to the study of anti-politics: the passive approach, which assumes a progressive political passivity among citizens, and the evaluative approach, which posits a growing negative and critical assessment of democracy as a system and its elements.⁹

⁴ J. Ziółkowski, "Partycypacyjny wymiar antypolityki – od modelu do badań empirycznych," *Politeja*, vol. 21, no. 3 (90) (2024), pp. 173-196; M. Tobiasz, "Anti-Politics and Civic Identity. How to Revitalize the Public Sphere in a Democracy?," *Politeja*, vol. 17, no. 5 (68) (2020), pp. 159-169.

⁵ M. Flinders, "The General Rejection? Political Disengagement, Disaffected Democrats and 'Doing Politics' Differently," *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 1 (suppl) (2015), pp. 241-254.

⁶ E. Frazer, "Citizenship Education. Anti-political Culture and Political Education in Britain," *Political Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2000), pp. 88-103; B. Axford, R. Huggins, "Anti-Politics or the Triumph of Postmodern Populism in Promotional Cultures?," *Telematics and Informatics*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1998), pp.181-202.

⁷ C. Fieschi, P. Heywood, "Trust, Cynicism and Populist Anti-Politics," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2004), pp. 289-309; C. Hay, G. Stoker, "Revitalising Politics. Have We Lost the Plot?," *Representation*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2009), pp. 225-236; C. Hay, *Why we Hate Politics*, London 2007.

⁸ S. Levitsky, D. Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, London 2018; K Newton, "Trust and Political Disenchantment: An Overview," in Ch. Eder, I.C. Mochmann, M. Quandt (eds), in *Political Trust and Disenchantment with Politics*, Edinburgh 2015, pp. 19-30.

⁹ J. Ziółkowski, "Partycypacyjny wymiar antypolityki...", pp. 173-196; R.F. Inglehart, P. Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism. Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash*, Cambridge 2016; W. Jen-

The next step will be to select specific empirical variables that will serve as the subject of analysis. Here, the author concentrates on two dimensions: the first involves analyzing the dynamics of variables relating to Poland based on data from Polish public opinion research centers (e.g., CBOS), while the second involves a comparative analysis reflecting the phenomenon of anti-political culture in Poland in relation to other European countries (ESS).¹⁰ Based on such data, the author aims to verify two hypotheses:

1. The existing values and dynamics of the selected variables confirm the existence of anti-political culture in Poland.
2. Poland exhibits similar trends in anti-political culture as found in other democratic countries in Europe.

Such an analysis will be situated within the political specificity of Poland in recent years. Here, the period from 2015 to 2023 appears particularly interesting. The rise to power of the United Right (Zjednoczona Prawica) resulted in processes of leaving from liberal democracy, as the democratic system trended toward autocratization.¹¹ These changes affected spheres such as values, institutions, the principle of the separation of powers, the rule of law, and more. The author will not assess the validity of claims regarding the autocratization of the political system itself but will instead rely on the socio-media narrative of such tendencies and their impact on the dynamics of anti-politics indicators. This addresses a highly interesting and timely research problem: the shifts in political attitudes and behaviors of citizens within a system undergoing processes of autocratization and de-democratization.¹² Hence, the titular ‘between democratization and autocratization’ delineates the research field of post-1989 Poland, with two main periods: 1989-2015, characterized by the construction and persistence of an unconsolidated, flawed democracy, and 2015-2023, marked by a withdrawal from liberal democracy – the autocratization of the system. The selection of these two periods is not solely based on the ruling coalition but also on significant differences in empirical indicators of anti-political culture in Poland.

nings, G. Stoker, J. Twyman, “The Dimensions and Impact of Political Discontent in Britain,” *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 4 (2016), pp. 876-900.

¹⁰ See more: CBOS, at <https://www.cbos.pl>; IFiS PAN, at <https://ess.ifispan.pl/>, 17 March 2025

¹¹ J. Szczepański, P. Kalina, “The Road to Autocratization? Redefining Democracy in Poland,” *Studia Europejskie-Studies in European Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2019), pp.121-132; A. Ágh, “The Third Wave of Autocratization in East-Central Europe,” *Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2022), pp. 72-87.

¹² A. Cassani, L. Tomini, “What Autocratization Is,” in A. Cassani, L. Tomini, *Autocratization in post-Cold War Political Regimes*, Cham 2019, pp. 15-35; P. Spáč, “New Political Parties in Czech Republic: Anti-politics or Mainstream?,” in *Alternative Politics? The Rise of New Political Parties in Central Europe*, Institute for Public Affairs Bratislava 2013, pp. 127-148; C. Pîrvulescu, A. Taranu, “Populism, Nationalism, Extremism. Expressions of Antipolitics in Europe?,” *Perspective Politice*, vol. 6, no. 1-2 (2013), pp. 21-35.

ANTI-POLITICS IN THE CONTEXT OF EVALUATING DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS

Research on anti-politics is primarily conducted within the framework of consolidated liberal democracies, particularly in Western Europe and North America.¹³ In non-democratic systems – hybrid or authoritarian regimes – such studies are rarely undertaken. This stems from the foundational assumptions about anti-politics itself. It is generally assumed that anti-politics is a phenomenon rooted in the broader crisis of liberal democracy. It is seen as a symptom of a certain ‘illness’ of democracy.¹⁴ The prevailing view is that the problems lie within the democratic system itself – its core values, principles, social functionality, and the efficacy required to address real societal issues and crises. It also reflects a crisis in the structural and personal dimension, such as political elites and current politicians, who are often perceived as degenerate, self-serving, unethical, ineffective, and corrupt.¹⁵

On the other hand, there are social, cultural, communicative, and symbolic shifts within the culture of anti-politics. An alternative explanation for the crisis of democracy does not focus on changes within democracy, politics, or politicians themselves, but rather on transformations in the social base shifts in mentality, societal expectations, stereotypes, communication models, greater access to information, and a certain trends for critical, anti-establishment, and negativist attitudes.¹⁶ Overarching these studies is a spirit of general disillusionment and tiredness of democracy, often treated as an attractive target for populists seeking to mobilize a frustrated electorate.

It is also important to recognize that liberal democracies are targets of propaganda warfare waged by non-democratic regimes. These efforts aim to fuel social resentments, hostility toward the democratic system, its institutions, values, and elites, while stimulating social conflicts and polarization. In such a climate, research on the culture of anti-politics in systems with weaker democratic traditions – where the democratic system is less consolidated, democratic traditions are fragile, experiences are shorter, pro-democratic mentalities are weak, and there is a lack of entrenched patterns of active political and civic behavior – becomes particularly relevant. One of the most intriguing regions for such studies is Central Europe. Here, democratic traditions often span only the last three decades, with little to no prior experience of democracy, except for brief periods between World War I and World War II. The mentality of citizens from the former Eastern Bloc is frequently replicated in this region, where passivity and permissiveness toward authority were promoted.¹⁷ In these contexts, non-democratic pow-

¹³ S. Levitsky, D. Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die...*

¹⁴ H. Kriesi, “Is there a Crisis of Democracy in Europe?,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, vol. 61, no. 2 (2020), pp. 237-260.

¹⁵ C. Hay, *Why we Hate Politics...*

¹⁶ E. Vines, D. Marsh, “Anti-Politics. Beyond Supply-Side versus Demand-Side Explanations,” *British Politics*, vol. 13 (2018), pp. 433-453.

¹⁷ M. Rust, “A 21st Century Homo Sovieticus?,” *New Eastern Europe*, 05 (28), 2017, pp. 21-29.

er was non-sovereign, elections were facade, and there were prohibitions on engaging in oppositional political activities or civic initiatives. When examining anti-politics in such systems, great caution is required. It is not possible to uncritically compare them to Western societies, which are historically and culturally different, where democratic institutions have much deeper roots, and democratic mentality is older.

Anti-politics in Central European countries thus has a different foundation and a distinct entry point into the construction of a democratic system. This may result in a lower resilience of the system to processes of autocratization, as well as weaker attachment to the institutions and principles of liberal democracy. On the other hand, in such societies, there may be less tiredness of democracy, and the fresh memory of life under non-democratic regimes can serve as an important reference point for evaluating the actions of authorities that deviate from democratic norms. Poland fits very well into this framework. The last 35 years can be divided (somewhat conventionally) into three stages:

- a) 1989-2000 – the construction of the institutional framework of the democratic system, but also a socially painful period of systemic and economic transformation;
- b) 2001-2015 – the consolidation of the democratic system and the development of civic culture (with all its challenges and problems);
- c) 2015-2023 – the rule of the United Right, which significantly undermined the principles of liberal democracy, the rule of law, imposed an anti-liberal political axiology, and came in sharp conflict with the EU.

Since October 2023, a new systemic stage has begun, marked by the formation of a new ruling coalition operating within a framework of legal and institutional chaos, numerous geopolitical and military challenges, and attempts to restore the fundamental principles and institutions of liberal democracy.

DIMENSIONS OF ANTI-POLITICAL CULTURE – SCOPE OF VARIABLES

Research on anti-political culture can refer to various dimensions due to the broad definitional scope of the phenomenon. Vittorio Mete, and building on his work, Jack Corbett, Matthew Flinders, and Matthew Wood, identify four basic dimensions of anti-politics. The areas of research on anti-politics outlined by them illustrate the possible scope of the research field or offer the option to focus on a selected fragment of the phenomenon in studies. Thus, anti-politics can have four primary dimensions or aspects:

- passive anti-politics (declining indicators of political activity, voter turnout, membership in political parties, participation in demonstrations, etc.);
- participatory anti-politics (broad involvement in unconventional, anti-system political activities);
- populist anti-politics (activity of politicians and their electorate focused on a negative image of democracy, elites, and establishment politicians);

- technocratic anti-politics (assuming the reduction of politics to new effective forms of governance, administration, and new technologies).¹⁸

For the purposes of this article, the author will focus on two dimensions: political and civic activity versus passivity, as well as social evaluations and attitudes toward democracy, its institutions, and politicians themselves. This narrowing of the research field directs attention to the problem of evaluating democracy in the eyes of citizens and their participation in political activity. It will allow for answers to the posed research questions and verification of the adopted hypotheses. As the basis for reasoning, the author will analyze the following variables:

- a) variables related to the assessment of the level of political activity and participation (behavioral dimension):
 - electoral activity;
 - interest in politics;
 - participation in demonstrations and protests;
 - signing petitions.
- b) variables related to citizens' attitudes toward democracy and the political system and its components (evaluative dimension):
 - evaluation of democracy as a system (including the perceived importance of the system's nature and the conditional possibility of supporting a non-democratic system);
 - assessment of the functioning of democracy (evaluation of its real effects and impact on citizens);
 - sense of influence on politics and political decisions (both state and regional levels);
 - trust or distrust in political institutions;
 - trust or distrust in politicians;
 - identification with or sense of closeness to political parties.

This selection of indicators will allow for conclusions regarding the posed research questions and hypotheses. These indicators also enable the study of trends and dynamics over the specified period. The author assumes that objectively and comparatively high values of anti-political indicators are key to determining the existence of anti-political culture. Equally important is the analysis of trends in these indicators, which will reveal the direction of changes in the studied system.

¹⁸ V. Mete, "Four Types of Anti-Politics: Insights from the Italian Case," *Modern Italy*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2010), pp. 37-61; A. Mycock., J. Tonge, "The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement," *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 1 (2012), pp. 138-161; M. Flinders, M. Wood, J. Corbett, "Anti-Politics and Democratic Innovation," in S. Elstub, O. Escobar (eds), *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, Edinburgh 2019, pp. 148-169.

BEHAVIORAL DIMENSION OF THE CULTURE OF ANTI-POLITICS IN POLAND*Electoral Activity of Poles and Anti-Political Culture*

A frequently raised aspect of anti-politics in Western democracies is the dimension of electoral participation. Monitoring data from the post-World War II period reveals a decline in voter turnout in many countries.¹⁹ Analyzing such data is challenging, as electoral turnout often depends on numerous incidental factors, such as the climate of political competition, the role of leaders, or specific events. However, it is difficult to dispute the existence of a downward trend in citizens' willingness to participate in electoral processes in liberal democracies.²⁰ This is one of the key arguments supporting the existence of anti-political phenomena. Citizens do not vote because they have a poorer opinion of political elites and politicians, they believe less in their representativeness, and they are influenced by mental and communicative shifts that make them more critical of politics and politicians.²¹

When assessing the dynamics of electoral turnout indicators, caution must be exercised in comparing different countries, and even more so regions.²² Central Europe, until 1989, was under the influence of the Eastern Bloc – a context marked by the absence of free and fair elections and a lack of pluralism, which exposed citizens to different stimuli under different conditions. Consequently, countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and others developed electoral habits in entirely different socio-cultural, economic, and political environments.²³ How does this apply to Poland? It is an interesting case. While other countries in the region started with voter turnout rates of 80-90% in the first free elections after 1989, only to experience varying dynamics of decline afterward, Poland's trajectory was different.

¹⁹ M.N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, Cambridge 2004.

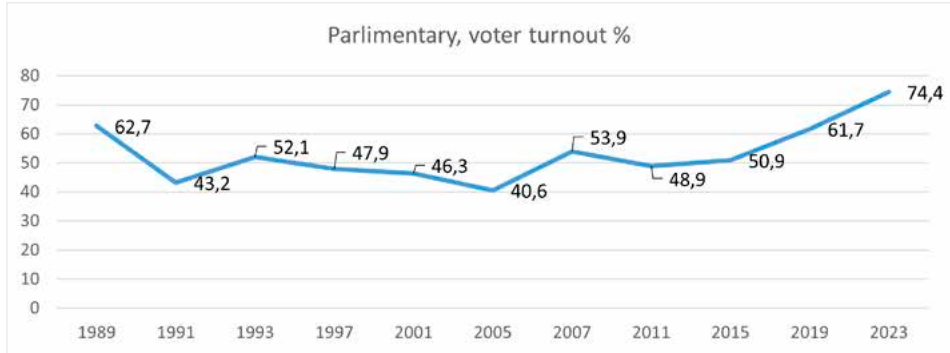
²⁰ See: A. Solijonov, *Voter Turnout Trends around the World*, at <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>, 11 March 2025.

²¹ L. Ezrow, G. Xezonakis, "Satisfaction with Democracy and Voter Turnout. A Temporal Perspective," *Party Politics*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2016), pp. 3-14.

²² F. Addeo, M. Ammirato; A. Delli Paoli et al., "Voter Turnout. Overtime and Regional Trends in Europe," *Working paper*, no. 2.3. (2024), https://www.truedemdata.eu/truedem/D2.3.Voter_Turnout_Overtime_and_Regional_Trends_in_Europe_29_02_2024.pdf, 17 March 2025.

²³ T. Kostadinova, "Voter Turnout Dynamics in post-Communist Europe," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2003), pp. 741-759.

Chart 1. Turnout, parliamentary elections in Poland 1989-2023

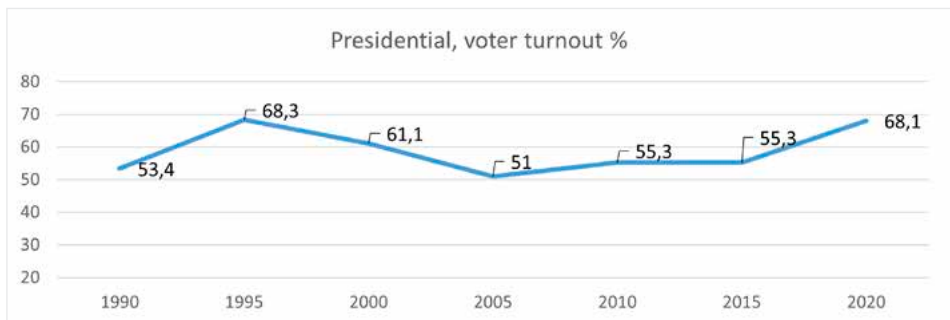


Source: own study, data: Idea.int²⁴

In the first fully free parliamentary elections in 1991, voter turnout was only 43%, and until 2005, it generally did not exceed 50%, reaching its lowest point in 2005 at 40.6%. These are objectively and comparatively very low levels. Both countries in the region and, even more so, consolidated Western democracies achieved much higher turnout rates. It is worth noting that these low turnout levels up to 2005 were positively correlated with lower acceptance of democracy as a system, much worse evaluations of the actual functioning of democracy in Poland, and higher acceptance of non-democratic alternatives.

In the period 2007-2015, turnout oscillated around 50%, which was still very low. However, in 2019, turnout reached 61%, and in 2023, it achieved an unprecedented level of over 74%. The increased turnout was correlated with higher indicators of approval for democracy and validation of the political system. Similar, though not identical, trends can be observed in presidential elections.

Chart 2. Turnout, presidential elections in Poland 1990-2020



Source: own study, data: Idea.int²⁵

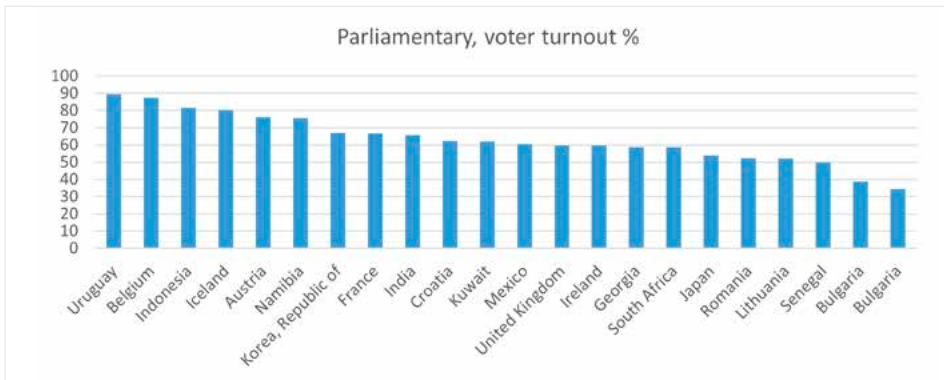
²⁴ *Voter Turnout Database*, at https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/country?country=178&database_theme=293, 17 March 2025.

²⁵ Ibid.

Generally, voter turnout in presidential elections in Poland is higher than in parliamentary elections. This is often explained by greater personalization, higher levels of polarization, and a sense of having a greater impact on the election outcome. Over the last 30 years in Poland, the highest turnout in presidential elections occurred in 1995 and 2020, while the lowest was recorded in 2005.

When evaluating data related to anti-political culture in the context of electoral behavior, it is difficult to argue that Poland is characterized by a culture of passive anti-politics. In the most recent parliamentary elections, turnout exceeded 74%, and in presidential elections, it reached 68%. Comparing these results to other democratic countries, it is clear that Poland demonstrates a very solid level of electoral participation.

Chart 3. World voter turnout 2024 (selected countries)



Source: own study, data: Idea.int²⁶

When assessing the dynamics, a clear upward trend in electoral participation can be observed in Poland. It is difficult to speak of the existence of behavioral attitudes associated with passive anti-politics in this context. Between 2015 and 2019, one could argue that the rejection of anti-democratic actions, led to increased electoral activity among Poles. Of course, voter turnout is influenced by many factors, and the dynamics of systemic changes (democratization vs. autocratization) is only one of the significant variables.

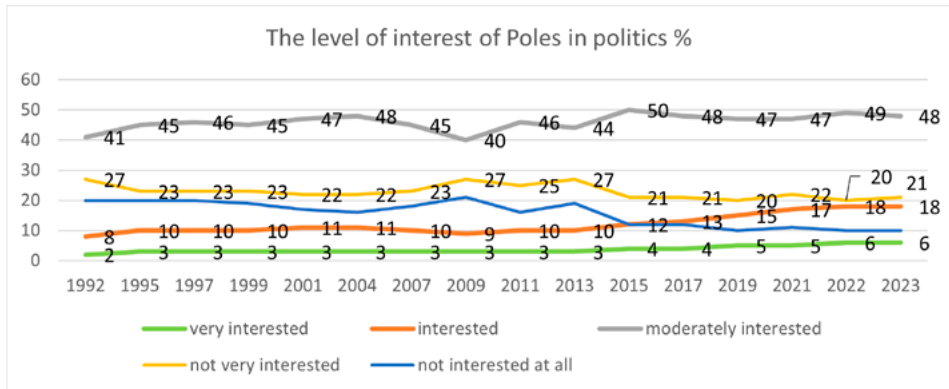
Level of Interest in Politics

A crucial dimension of contemporary discussions on anti-political culture is the assumption of a growing disinterest in political matters among citizens. Due to disillusionment with politics and politicians, citizens are thought to disengage from politics and stop seeking information on the subject. As a result, lower political and electoral activity is observed. The principle at play here is: *I am not interested, so I do not*

²⁶ Ibid.

participate. In this interpretation, lower political competence may also lead to emotionally driven evaluations of politics, greater susceptibility to disinformation, and a simplified perception of politics promoted by populist or radical parties. While each of these theses is debatable on its own, for the purposes of this text, let us assume that a low or declining level of interest in politics is a component of anti-political culture.

Chart 4. The level of interest in the politics of Poles CBOS 1992-2023



Source: own study, data: CBOS²⁷

As the data show, approximately 24% of Polish society declares a high or very high level of interest in politics. There is also a noticeable upward trend over the last three decades. In comparative studies such as the European Social Survey (ESS), Poles' interest in politics fares quite solidly compared to other European countries, particularly those in the Central European region. It is also worth noting a significant increase in political interest after 2015, which aligns with trends in other data presented here.

As the comparative data show, the level of interest in politics in Poland places it in the middle range among European countries. Approximately 50% of Poles declare a basic or high level of interest in politics. This indicates that there is no evidence of declining political interest in Poland, nor are the values significantly lower than in other countries in the region.

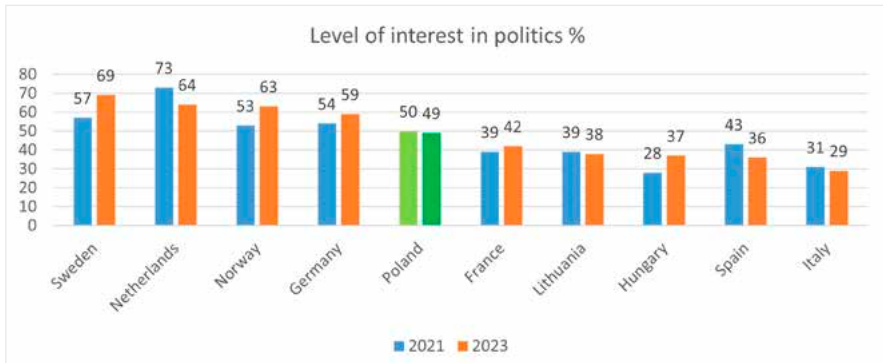
Participation in Demonstrations

One of the main features of anti-political culture can be the political passivity of citizens. The most obvious indicator is electoral abstention, which may reflect a negative evaluation of the democratic system, its institutions, and a lack of a sense of influence over political decisions. However, it is also important to consider other non-electoral indicators of political participation. These include membership in political parties,

²⁷ CBOS, "Zainteresowanie polityką wśród osób od 65 roku życia," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 151 (2023), at https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_151_23.PDF, 17 March 2025.

signing political petitions, activity in non-governmental organizations, or participation in strikes and demonstrations. The chart below shows the declared participation in strikes or demonstrations since 1989.

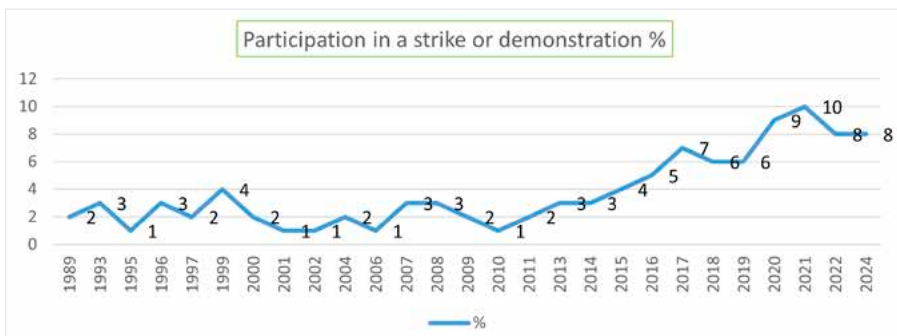
Chart 5. Interest in politics in Europe (selected countries 2021 and 2023 ESS)²⁸



Source: own study, data: ESS 2021, 2023. Sum of answers: very interested and quite interested²⁹

As the data show, until 2010, declared participation in strikes or demonstrations ranged between 1% and 4%. However, over the last 15 years, this figure has systematically increased, reaching around 10%. It is worth noting the year 2020, as a significant surge in protest activity was triggered by the Constitutional Tribunal's decision to restrict abortion rights, which led to widespread demonstrations across the country.

Chart 6. Declared level of participation in a strike or demonstration in Poland CBOS 1989-2024



Source: own study, data: CBOS³⁰

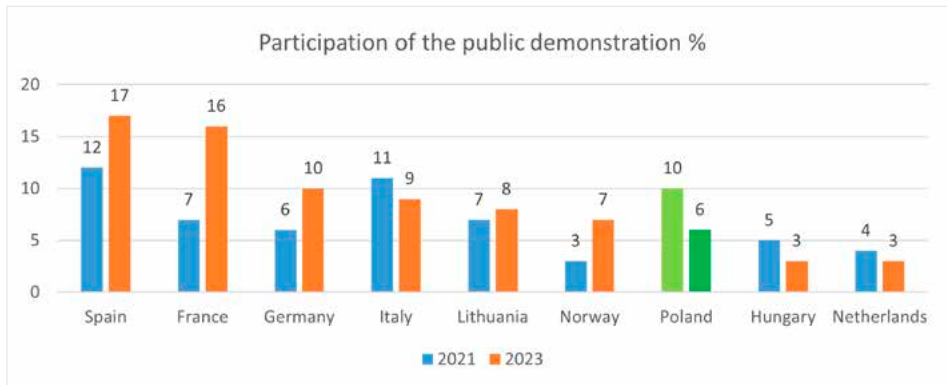
²⁸ In the ESS comparative studies, the graphs include, in addition to other countries, the systems with the lowest and highest values in a given dimension, to better assess the values in Poland.

²⁹ ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=b6e9618a-1c1a-4be5-9b1d-e13fea485d0c_2, 17 March 2025.

³⁰ CBOS, "Aktywności i doświadczenia Polaków w 2023 roku," *Komunikat z badan*, no. 11 (2024), at https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_011_24.PDF, 17 March 2025.

When comparing Poland to other European countries, it is worth noting that the declared level of participation in demonstrations in Poland is at least solid, with 10% of the population reporting involvement. For adult citizens of Poland, this translates to approximately 3 million people. However, when observing actual participation in demonstrations, this figure seems slightly inflated. It is possible that, for some respondents, a desirable archetype of an engaged citizen has become widespread, where political activity is seen as a positive trait. Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) appear to confirm this. Between 2021 and 2023, the indicator of participation in demonstrations significantly decreased in these studies.

Chart 7. Participation of the public demonstration in selected European countries ESS 2021-2023



Source: own study, data: ESS³¹

Relating these values to the assumed characteristics of anti-political culture, doubts may arise. On one hand, an increase in participation in demonstrations can be observed, which contradicts the assumption of growing passivity within anti-political culture. It is also worth noting that the peak of Polish citizens' activity in this form occurred during the pandemic period, when there was simultaneously an increase in the sense of having no influence on political matters, a rise in distrust toward political institutions, and an increase in positive evaluations of democracy itself. Perhaps this activity was reactive in nature or resulted from growing trust in democracy and a lack of acceptance for the then-current elites and actions of political institutions. This assumption seems to be confirmed by the peak in electoral participation in 2023 and the results of the parliamentary elections, which changed the ruling coalition. Thus, the increase in non-electoral activity contributed to greater electoral engagement.

³¹ ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=5f2a409d-0bb9-4134-82c6-f1737023ab81_1, 17 March 2025.

Signing Petitions

Willingness to sign petitions can be understood, on one hand, as an expression of political activity, and on the other, as an indication of interest in politics, a sense of identification with a cause, and a feeling of the meaningfulness of action and empowerment. It is also an important intersection of political and civic activity, a key component of civic culture and civil society. The results of the European Social Survey (ESS) are particularly relevant here.

Chart 8. Declared scope of petition signing in selected European countries ESS 2023



Source: own study, data: ESS³²

In terms of signing petitions, the activity of Poles is comparatively low, with only 10% of respondents declaring that they have signed a political petition in the last 12 months. The values of indicators of civic attitudes and behaviors in Poland remain low. In this regard, the thesis about the passivity of Poles and the existence of a passive anti-political culture finds solid support. This is also one of the key dimensions of discussions about the state of civil society in Poland.

THE EVALUATIVE DIMENSION OF ANTI-POLITICAL CULTURE IN POLAND

Evaluation of the Democratic System

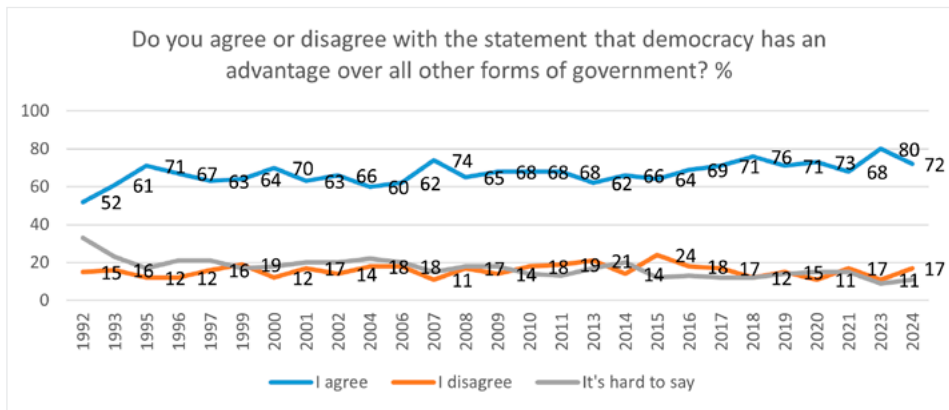
One of the arguments supporting the thesis of the existence of anti-political culture is the assumption of a crisis in the evaluation of liberal democracy as a system.³³ Research

³² ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=fdec1f91-495a-4445-b999-2158156d191c_1, 17 March 2025.

³³ See more: Democracy Index, at <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/>, 17 March 2025.

and theses in this area have been conducted for at least two decades, with recent years often being treated as a period of a global crisis in democratic indicators. The Central European region was until recently considered a leader in the dynamics of autocratization processes, for example, in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Serbia, and earlier in Russia and Belarus. The assumption of such studies is that the contemporary crisis of democracy is not only about the crisis of perception of politicians themselves, their decisions, or their axiological foundation. It is not solely based on a lack of faith in specific elites but rather on a crisis of democracy as a system of governance, which is no longer seen as the only alternative way of conducting politics. How do Poles' attitudes toward the democratic system look in this context? First, it is worth examining the dynamics of the evaluation of democracy over the last three decades.

Chart 9. Assessment of the democratic system in Poland CBOS 1992-2024

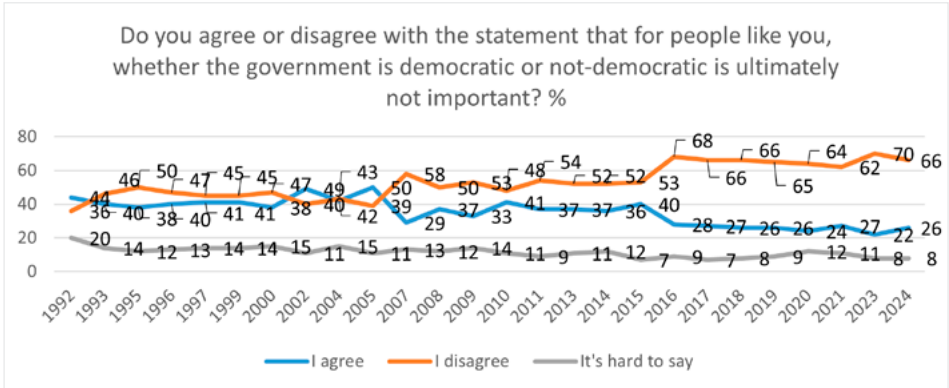


Source: own study, data: CBOS³⁴

As the data show, except for the first few years after 1989, the level of support among Poles for the statement that democracy (as a system or model) is the best among all available options has remained within the range of 60% to 80%. Moreover, after 2015, when parties opposed to the liberal democracy came to power in Poland, support for the democratic system significantly increased. Just after the parliamentary elections in 2023, it reached a record high of 80%. In this case, it is highly likely that Poles' sympathy to the democratic system grew in response to the undemocratic changes in the political system during the 2015-2023 period. The previous major peak in support for the democratic system occurred during 2005-2007, when a coalition of right-wing and illiberal parties was also in power. It is certainly not possible to speak of objectively low levels of support for democracy or a declining trend in these indicators.

³⁴ CBOS, "Demokracja – postawy i oceny," *Komunikat z badan*, no. 128 (2024), at https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_128_24.PDF, 17 March 2025.

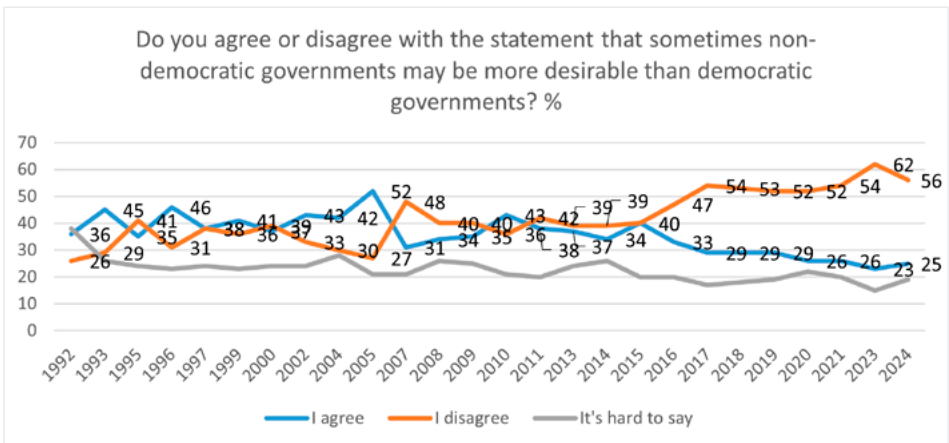
Chart 10. The Importance of the Political System in Poland CBOS 1992-2024



Source: own study, data: CBOS³⁵

The above conclusions are also supported by data on the validation (legitimacy) of the political system. The chart above shows the importance Poles attach to the political system in which they live. Here, too, both 2005 and 2015 marked the beginning of periods when respondents increasingly declared that the nature of the system they live in matters. The peak of such beliefs occurred in 2023, at the end of the rule of right-wing parties and the process of autocratization of the system. These data also do not support the thesis that the political system is indifferent to Poles; on the contrary, they indicate that Poles attach significant importance to the nature of their political system.

Chart 11. The scope of support for non-democratic governments in Poland 1992-2024



Source: own study, data: CBOS³⁶

³⁵ Ibid.

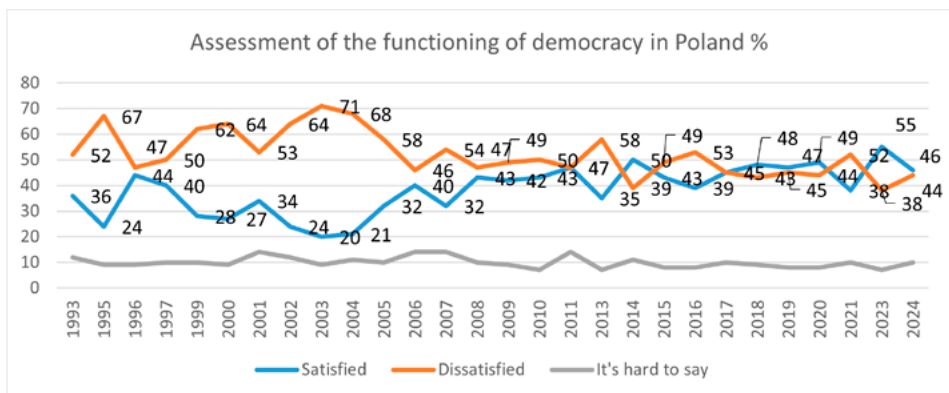
³⁶ Ibid.

The third chart (above) in this context shows the conditional willingness of Poles to support a non-democratic system. Until 2005, there were frequent periods when more Poles declared that, at times, a non-democratic system could be better than democracy. The peak of such trends was in 2005, when the Law and Justice party (PiS) came to power. Over the next two years, influenced by the assessments of the efforts of the anti-liberal right-wing government, the rejection of a non-democratic system significantly increased. The period up to 2005, with its high indicators of conditional support for a non-democratic system, pointed to considerable dissatisfaction among Poles with the state of democracy. Relatively high acceptance of a non-democratic system persisted until 2015. The second rise to power of PiS in the years 2015-2023 reveals a new dynamic, consistent with changes in support for the democratic system. In 2023, the level of rejection of a non-democratic system was the highest since 1989 (62%). Once again, it can be argued that the autocratization of the system in Poland during 2015-2023 significantly reduced Poles' willingness to support non-democracy. In this case as well, it is difficult to speak of a crisis of democracy, and the dynamics of the trends do not indicate the existence of an anti-political culture in Poland.

Evaluation of the Functioning of Democracy

The three charts above illustrate rather theoretical issues: attachment to democracy as a system, as a certain model, or support for non-democracy as a model alternative. Making conclusions from them about the evaluation of the real system in Poland does not seem entirely justified. Therefore, it is at least equally important to study attitudes and evaluations of democracy as a real system. Here, the assessments do not concern democracy as a theoretical system, but rather as a specific, real system functioning in Poland.

Chart 12. Assessment of the functioning of democracy in Poland CBOS



Source: own study, data: CBOS³⁷

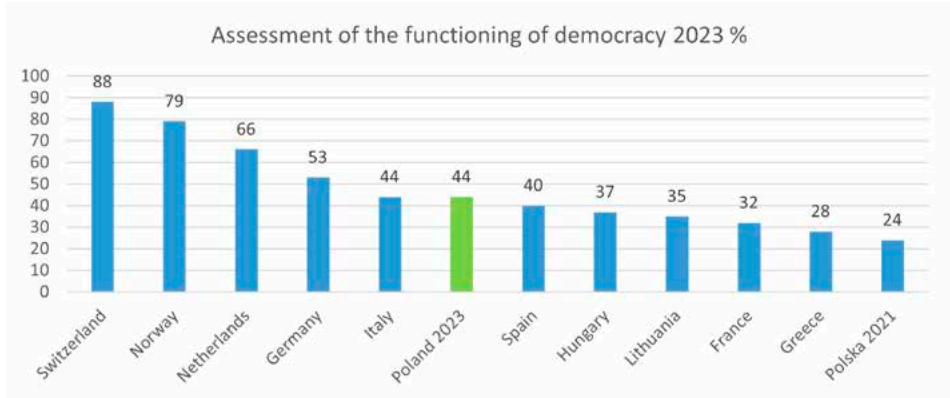
³⁷ Ibid.

When the question is framed this way, the results are less optimistic. In the period up to 2005, those who negatively assessed the state of democracy in Poland clearly predominated. Over the last 20 years, there has been a more balanced level of positive and negative evaluations of the functioning of democracy. The peak of optimism in this regard again occurred in 2023: 55% positive evaluations and 38% negative ones. However, by 2024, the proportion of positive and negative evaluations has balanced out once more. This clearly shows that while Poles are currently very positively inclined toward democracy as model and reject non-democracy, they remain more skeptical and critical of how democracy actually works in Poland. Nevertheless, the thesis of a crisis in the evaluation of democracy or the widespread prevalence of critical attitudes toward its actual functioning is not supported by the data. Comparing the current state of these data to those from 20-30 years ago, a very significant positive change is evident.

Aggregating the above data, it can be concluded that in terms of evaluating democracy as a system and the actual functioning of democracy in Poland, the theses about anti-political attitudes related to the political system are not supported by empirical data. Both the level of the indicators studied and, even more so, their dynamics point to the exact opposite. Over the last 30 years, Poles have become far more favorable toward democracy, the nature of the political system in which they live matters more to them, and the evaluation of the actual functioning of democracy in Poland has improved.

The European Social Survey (ESS) on the evaluation of the functioning of democracy provides comparative material for Poland. In this case, an 11-point scale was used: 0 – extremely negative evaluation, 10 – extreme satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the country. The chart (below) presents aggregated results between 6-10, i.e., individuals who are more satisfied than dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country. In Poland, 44% of citizens express such attitudes. The best evaluations are found in Switzerland (88%) and the Scandinavian countries, while the worst results are in France (32%) and Greece (28%). It is worth noting that in the same survey conducted in 2021, Poland had the worst result among the surveyed countries (24%), which is significantly lower than indicated by the Polish research center CBOS, albeit with a different research tool design.

Chart 13. Assessment of the functioning of democracy in selected European countries ESS

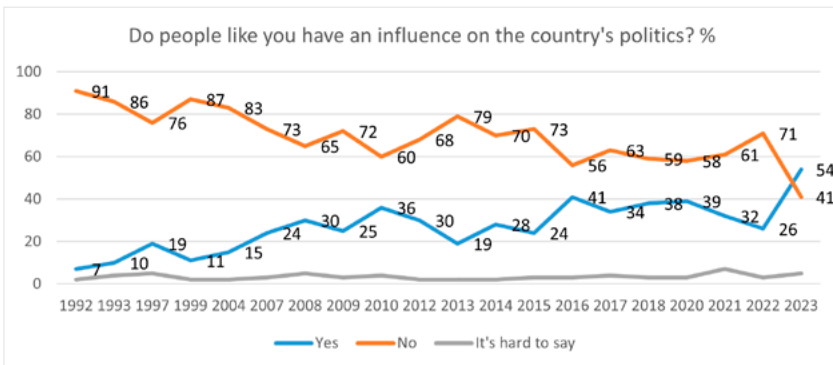


Source: own study, data: ESS³⁸

Sense of Political Efficacy

In studies on anti-politics, it is often pointed out that citizens lose their sense of political efficacy. They no longer believe that their decisions, preferences, or values genuinely shape the decisions of politicians. As a result, they feel excluded from decision-making processes, which can lead to passivity, political alienation, support for new political parties, or unconventional political behaviors. How does this apply to Poland? It is worth discussing this using two examples.

Chart 14. A sense of influence on the country's politics in Poland 1992-2023



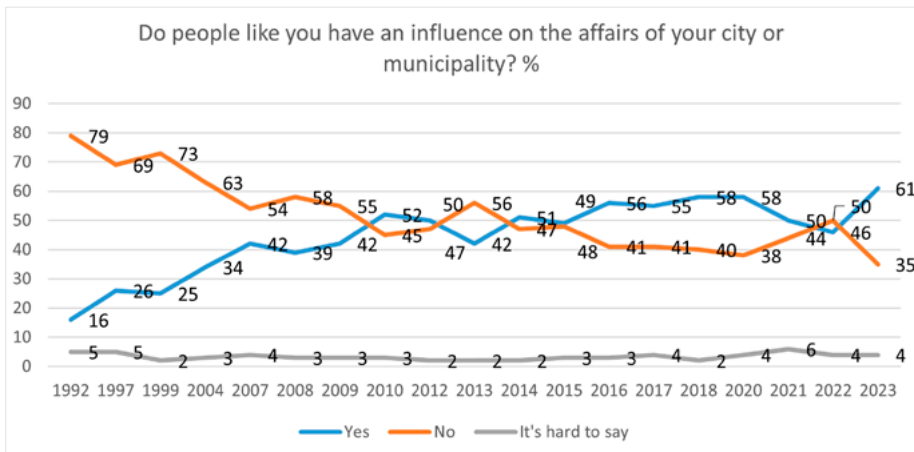
Source: own study, data: CBOS³⁹

³⁸ ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=c3a9e8cd-0578-4114-a08e-3d6d14796ee2_1, 17 March 2025.

³⁹ CBOS, "Poczucie wpływu obywateli na sprawy publiczne," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 149 (2023), at https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_149_23.PDF, 17 March 2025.

In the first study, the chart (above) shows the subjective sense of influence on politics at the national level. This is the most general feeling of a citizen's influence on how politics is conducted and the political decisions made by state authorities. Over the last 30 years in Poland, a sense of lack of such influence has predominated. In the early 1990s, the indicator of the lack of influence reached as high as 90%, only to systematically decline afterward. The most recent study from 2023 indicates – for the first time – that the proportion of people who felt a sense of efficacy in this regard was greater than those who did not (54% to 41%). Long-term directional trends are also clearly visible here.

Chart 15. Sense of influence in the dimension of local politics in Poland 1992-2023

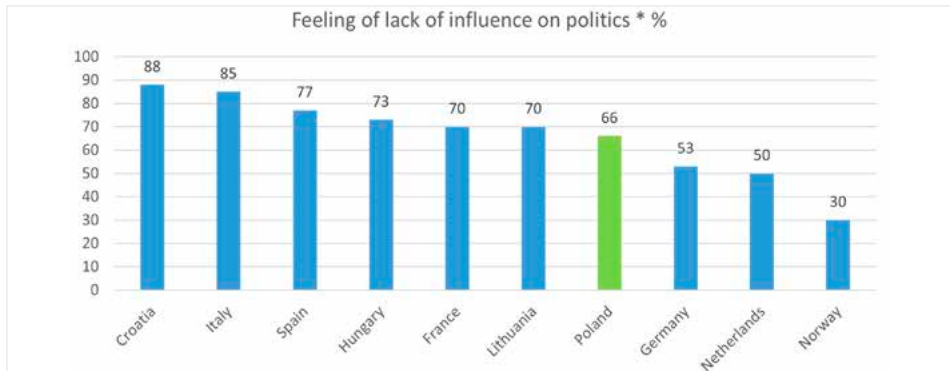


Source: own study, data: CBOS⁴⁰

The situation looks somewhat different in terms of citizens' sense of influence on local governance. Here, Poles generally declare a higher level of efficacy, and often the number of people who feel such efficacy outweighs those who do not feel any influence on local matters. It is worth noting the change during the COVID-19 pandemic, where a clear decline in the sense of agency is visible. At the same time, the 2023 study recorded the highest level of perceived influence on local politics at 61%. How to interpret the data from Poland in comparison to other countries? The results of the European Social Survey (ESS), using a different research tool design, show a very high level of perceived lack of influence or minimal influence on politics. The aggregation of these two responses reaches almost 90% in some countries, 66% in Poland, and around 30% in the most subjectively efficient societies. This shows a clear structural problem in Europe and a feature of anti-political culture.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Chart 16. The scope of the feeling of lack of influence on politics, selected countries of Europe 2023



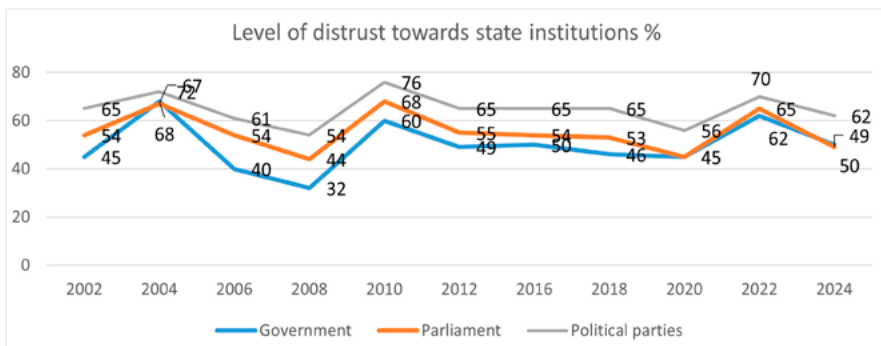
Source: own study, data: ESS ⁴¹

* Sum of responses: "none" and "little" impact on politics

Level of Distrust Toward Public Institutions

Anti-political culture is characterized by a high level of distrust toward politics, the political system, and its components: political institutions, politicians, and political decisions. The chart below shows the level of distrust toward state institutions in Poland. These are high indicator values. Political parties evoke the greatest distrust, while parliament and the government are viewed with slightly less distrust. It is difficult to identify a clear trend here, as distrust toward state institutions has been a constant feature of the last 30 years in Poland, with periodic fluctuations.

Chart 17. Distrust of state institutions in Poland 2002-2024



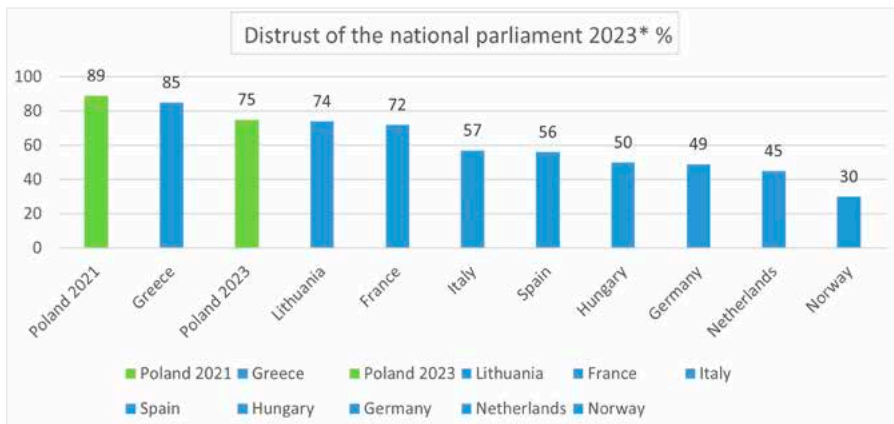
Source: own study, data: CBOS⁴²

⁴¹ ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=6e615306-5bb9-44f3-b30d-67cd23ba0353_1, 17 March 2025.

⁴² CBOS, "Zaufanie społeczne," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 40 (2024), at https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_040_24.PDF, 17 March 2025.

The actual level of distrust toward political institutions in 2021 was very high in Poland compared to other European countries, both regionally and in relation to western democracies. Polish political culture has been characterized by a very high level of distrust, and this is a persistent feature of Polish society. Some changes can be observed in 2023, as the level of distrust decreased after the parliamentary elections, though it remains high. In 2021, Poland recorded the worst results in these studies (89% lack of trust), while in 2023, countries such as Greece (85%), Croatia (84%), and the United Kingdom (72%) achieved worse or similar results.

Chart 18. Distrust of the national parliament in selected European countries 2023



Source: own study, data: ESS 2021, 2023

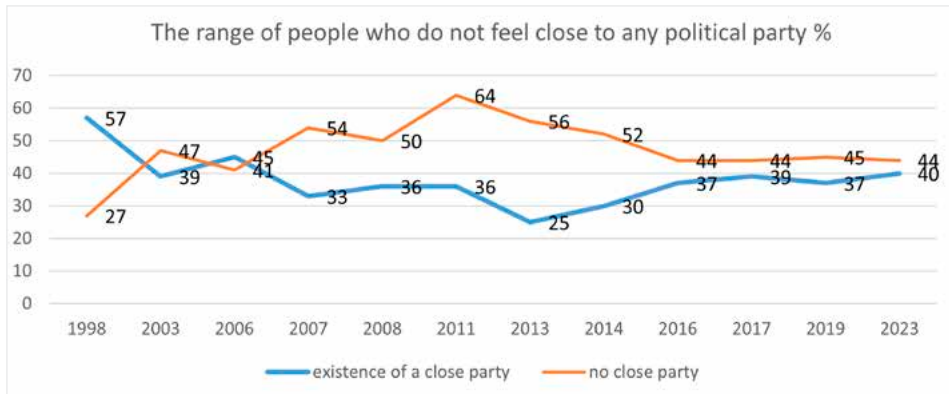
* Total answers 0-5 points on a 10-point scale, 0- total lack of trust, 10- full trust⁴³

Identification with Political Parties

The level of citizens' attachment to current politics can also be measured by their sense of identification with a specific political party. In such cases, citizens feel that they have a party that shares their values and/or represents their interests. This is an important indicator, as citizens often rationalize their lack of political activity by pointing to the absence of a political offer from parties that aligns with their views. How does this look in Poland? In CBOS studies, until 2011, the group of people who declared that they did not see a political party close to them clearly predominated. In the following years, the size of this group decreased, while the group that declared they saw a party close to them on the political scene grew. However, even in these studies, the group that does not feel identification with any party still outweighs the group that feels close to a particular party.

⁴³ ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=02738785-25f2-49d0-b248-e80349eb7e2c_1, 17 March 2025.

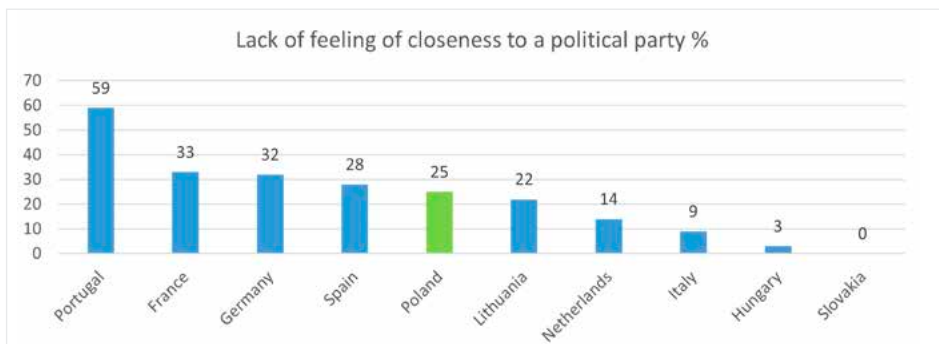
Chart 19. The range of people who do not feel close to any political party in Poland 1998-2023



Source: own study, data: CBOS⁴⁴

In the European Social Survey (ESS), which provides a comparative basis for this dimension in Poland and other European countries, a slightly different methodology was used. Respondents were given a 4-point scale to measure their closeness to a party: *very close*, *quite close*, *not close*, *not close at all*. The study below from 2023 shows Poland's position relative to other countries. The chart presents aggregated responses: *not close* and *not close at all*. Poland achieved a result of 25% in this ranking, meaning that a quarter of society does not feel close to any political party. The highest result in this ranking was achieved by Portugal, where 60% do not feel close to any political party, while the lowest result (none in a sample of several hundred people) was recorded in Slovakia.

Chart 20. Lack of a sense of closeness to political parties in selected European countries ESS



Source: own study, data: ESS 2023⁴⁵

⁴⁴ CBOS, "O bliskości i dystansie wobec partii politycznych," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 80 (2023), at https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_080_23.PDF, 17 March 2025.

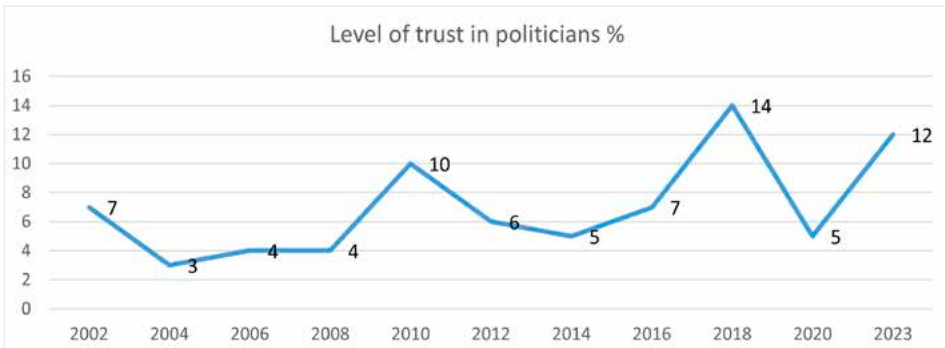
⁴⁵ ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=5c39ccf4-ea58-474f-b1fa-ebccc73f67fb_1, 17 March 2025.

The comparative ESS study shows that Polish society feels a moderate lack of closeness to political parties. However, it is certainly not possible to speak of a growing trend of distrust toward political parties.

Level of Trust/Distrust Toward Politicians

In this case, the ESS studies will be treated as the primary data for assessing the level of trust in politicians. For unclear reasons, Polish research centers such as CBOS prefer studies on trust in specific politicians, often omitting the level of trust in politicians as such, or such studies are incidental and do not allow for capturing trends or dynamics. The chart below (ESS) is based on responses on a 0-10 scale: 0 – absolute lack of trust, 10 – full trust. The presented values represent the sum of responses 6-10, i.e., the range of attitudes of respondents who trust politicians more than they distrust them.

Chart 21. Declared level of trust in politicians in Poland 2002-2023

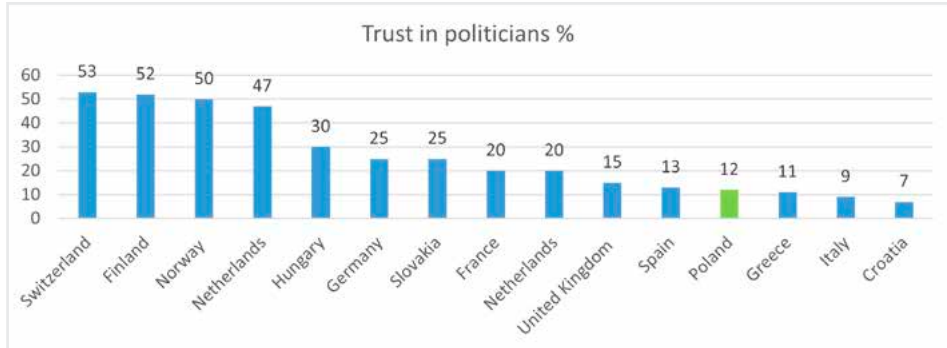


Source: own study, data: ESS⁴⁶

These values should be compared to results from other countries. Poland, in the history of ESS studies, emerges as one of the most distrustful societies toward politicians. In most rankings, Poland has been among the last or in the top three most distrustful societies toward politicians. Only occasionally has Poland ranked higher than last in this distrust ranking.

⁴⁶ ESS Data Portal, at <https://ess.sikt.no/en>, 17 March 2025.

Chart 22. Trust in politicians in selected European countries



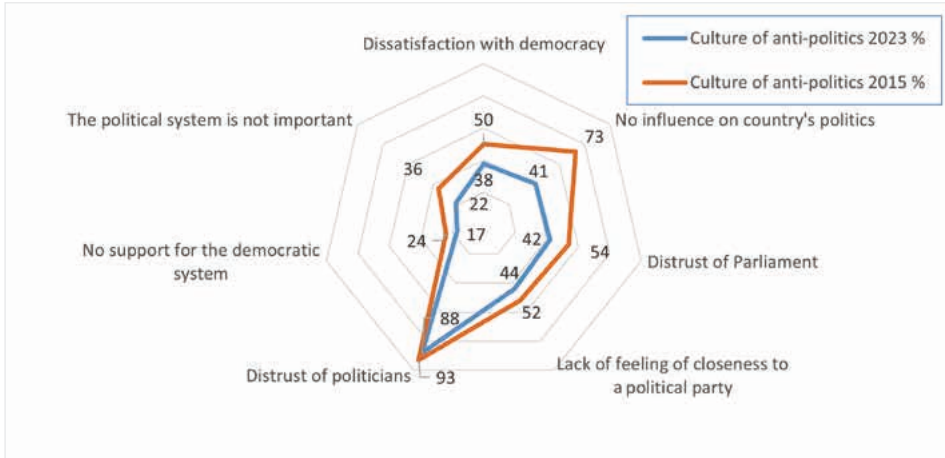
Source: own study, data: ESS⁴⁷

In this dimension, Poland appears as a system with a very high level of distrust toward politicians, reinforcing the thesis of the existence of an anti-political culture.

Aggregating the results from 2015 and 2023 provides an interesting picture. The year 2015 reflects the state of anti-political culture at the beginning of the autocratization processes, while the results from 2023 show the situation after the 2023 elections and the removal of the United Right from power. Comparing the results from 2015 and 2023, an improvement can be observed in all the studied dimensions. Only the level of distrust toward politicians remains very high. Evaluating these results, a clear improvement is visible in the adopted dimensions during the period of autocratization of the system. The period of autocratization and the violation of liberal democratic principles and the rule of law significantly strengthened the evaluation of democracy (both as a model and in practice), increased the sense of political efficacy and interest in politics, and partially weakened negative attitudes toward democracy and elements of political system. The period of weakening liberal democracy in Poland (2015-2023), in terms of empirical data, clearly reduced the scope of anti-political culture.

⁴⁷ ESS Data Portal, at https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/242aaa39-3bbb-40f5-98bf-bfb1ce53d8ef/126?tab=2&elems=12407541-8d0a-4bb6-bc2c-a0ac056dc0ba_1, 17 March 2025.

Chart 23. Aggregate results of attitudes towards politics in Poland 2015 and 2023



Source: own study, data: based on previous sources (CBOS and ESS)⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

The presented picture of anti-political culture in Poland is not entirely uniform. The aim of the article was to outline the image of anti-political culture in two dimensions: behavioral and evaluative. At the same time, the collected data should be assessed in terms of indicator values, their dynamics, and comparisons with other European countries.

Behavioral Dimension

The behavioral data can be divided into three categories: electoral activity, political activity, and civic activity:

- **Electoral Activity.** Over the last 35 years, a clear increase in voter turnout has been observed, with the highest levels recorded in 2023, marking the end of the period of autocratization of the political system in Poland. The turnout in the 2023 parliamentary elections was one of the highest in the region and globally.
- **Political Activity.** Political activity can be illustrated by the level of interest in politics and participation in demonstrations. The level of interest in politics is comparable to the European average, with a gradual increase observed over time. Similarly, declared participation in demonstrations showed significant activation between 2020 and 2023, likely driven by government actions during the pandemic and mobilization ahead of the 2023 elections.

- Civic Activity. In the area of signing petitions, Poland shows low levels of activity compared to other countries. This is consistent with other forms of civic engagement in Poland, such as membership in non-governmental organizations or volunteering, which are also relatively low compared to other countries.

Considering the above data, the hypothesis about the existence of a passive dimension of anti-political culture in Poland is not supported. In particular, data on electoral activity do not confirm the thesis that Poles are turning away from political participation. Even in areas where activity levels are relatively low, such as interest in politics, participation in demonstrations and signing petitions, an upward trend has been observed over the last 30 years. In terms of political and civic activity, both the comparative values of indicators and their dynamics do not confirm the hypothesis of the existence of passive anti-political behaviors in Poland.

Evaluative Dimension

In the second dimension-attitudes and evaluations toward democracy and politics, the situation is also not constant. The research covered the following areas:

- Attitudes and Evaluations Toward Democracy. Over the last 30 years, Poles have consistently expressed positive attitudes toward democracy as a system (values ranging between 60% and 80%). The peak value occurred in 2023, marking the end of the period of autocratization in Poland. At the same time, since 2015, there has been a clear increase in the importance attributed to the nature of the political system and a decline in support for non-democratic systems. These are significant effects of the erosion of liberal democracy and the rule of law in Poland. However, while attitudes toward democracy are very positive, evaluations of the actual functioning of democracy in Poland are less optimistic. Since 2011, the number of positive and negative evaluations has been very close, with the highest optimism recorded after the 2023 elections (55% positive evaluations, 38% negative). In comparative ESS studies in 2021, Poland had the lowest level of positive evaluations among the surveyed countries (24%), but this figure increased significantly in 2023 (44%), placing Poland in a solid middle range in Europe.
- Sense of Political Efficacy. In terms of the sense of influence on national affairs, for the first time in 30 years of measuring this indicator, in 2023, the proportion of people who declared a sense of influence outweighed those who did not (54% to 41%). The last 30 years have shown a clear upward trend in this regard. This trend is even more pronounced in the sense of influence on local matters, where Poles report a greater sense of effectiveness, with the highest level recorded in 2023 (61%). It is worth noting that the ESS studies, using a different methodology, show that 66% of Poles declare little or no influence on politics, and 26% declare a complete lack of influence. These results are difficult to compare with those of Polish research centers (due to different tools). However, it is worth noting that the same tool in 2021

showed that 80% of Poles felt little or no influence on politics, indicating an upward trend in this area as well.

- **Distrust Toward Politics, Politicians, and Political Institutions.** The situation is different in this regard. In Poland, high or very high levels of distrust toward state institutions, parliament, the government, and especially political parties, persist. In 2022, 62% distrusted the government, 65% distrusted parliament, and 70% distrusted political parties. Distrust is a constant feature of Polish political culture. Comparative ESS studies showed that in 2021, Poles had the lowest trust in parliament (89% distrust), and in 2023, Poland had the third-worst result. The situation regarding trust in politicians is even worse. Between 2002 and 2023, trust in politicians in Poland ranged between 3% and 14%, some of the lowest levels in Europe.
- **Sense of Identification with Political Parties.** This indicator reflects the level of attachment or closeness to the political parties. According to CBOS studies, in 2023, 44% of Poles felt no closeness to any political party, while 40% declared such closeness. The worst period in this regard was 2011, when 64% declared no closeness and only 36% felt some closeness. In the comparative ESS 2023 studies (using a different methodology), 25% of Poles declared no closeness to any political party, with Portugal having the worst result (59%) and Slovakia the best (0%).

When aggregating the results related to attitudes and evaluations within anti-political culture, it is clear that Poland has a very high and relatively consistent level of distrust toward political institutions and politicians compared to other countries. In this regard, one can speak of the existence of a culture of political distrust in Poland. However, in other dimensions, the hypothesis of the existence of anti-political culture in Poland is not supported. Poles highly value democracy as a system, the nature of the political system is increasingly important to them, and support for non-democratic system is declining. Slightly lower evaluations of the state of democracy do not stand out compared to data from other European countries, and there is no downward trend. The level of political efficacy in Poland is increasing, according to both national and European data. Similarly, interest in politics is growing, albeit slowly.

The obtained data also show that the period of autocratization significantly contributed to strengthening civic and pro-democratic culture while weakening anti-political attitudes. Of course, the range of possible variables influencing attitudes toward democracy is very broad, but in the case of Poland, it is clear that anti-liberal and anti-democratic actions of authorities have strengthened pro-democratic attitudes among citizens.

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