

Mass or Elite Polarization as the Driver of Authoritarian Backsliding? Evidence from 14 Polish Surveys (2005–2021)

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ABSTRACT

Is elite or mass polarization the driver of the democratic backsliding? A number of recent papers in the political economy of backsliding have developed theoretical predictions about the effects of polarization in the electorate as well as elite polarization on the process of democratic backsliding. However, when tested, these predictions focus on the polarization of political elites, typically within the same country. Cross-national data is ill-suited for the purpose of testing these predictions as we have no common yardstick against which to measure what is a “dangerous” level of polarization or how to compare countries that use different electoral systems and, subsequently, have different party systems and democratic institutions. Yet scholars for the most part have avoided even describing the emergence of mass polarization outside of the US. We offer a longitudinal analysis of Polish public opinion data that anticipates the country’s authoritarian turn to examine if polarization of the electorate preceded or followed the polarization of party elites. It focuses on a single, yet ultimately divisive issue — EU integration and national sovereignty. Specifically, it makes use of surveys conducted in regular intervals by CBOS, the Center for Public Opinion Research. These surveys offer evidence that

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polarization in attitudes to the EU followed, rather than preceded the polarization of parties on this issue over the last 20 years.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, polarization, European Union

Introduction

The 2010's have seen a surge in research on democratic backsliding with scholars attempting to locate its antecedents (Vachudova, 2020; Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021) and sometimes causes (Svolik, 2020). One of the culprits researchers have identified is polarization, the topic of this special volume.

On the one hand, Milan Svolik (2020) makes the argument that when voters are sufficiently ideologically motivated relative to how important they find democracy, they may choose a representative who is willing to bend democratic rules just to avoid the rise to power of an ideologically distant, though pro-democratic, candidate. Polarization — represented here as the distance between ideal points of the democratic challenger and representative voter — increases the chances of democratic backsliding.

Grillo and Prato (2020), on the other hand, identify circumstances in which ideological polarization, by reducing the support of the incumbent aspiring to be an autocrat, decreases his temptation to backslide. This happens when voters do not use past actions of the incumbent as a yardstick against which to measure his authoritarian tendencies and determine whether to support him. Polarization in Grillo and Prato's (2020) model is interpreted as the support of the distribution from which representative voters are drawn. Hence, this polarization should be interpreted as polarization in the electorate.

Finally, the relationship between polarization and backsliding is also explored in Chiopris *et al.* (2021). There, however, it is interpreted in yet a different way: as the ideological distance between a representative voter and a democratic challenger without any authoritarian ambitions. In this model, there is no elite polarization at all, as the distance between the (potentially authoritarian) incumbent and a pro-democratic challenger remains fixed. *Ceteris paribus*, polarization (measured as the distance between the representative voter and the democratic alternative) intuitively increases democratic backsliding.

In sum, the different conclusions scholars have drawn about the relationship between polarization and backsliding stems from the fact that polarization can be interpreted as either polarization of elites or as polarization of voters. Despite this difference, most political science research has focused on developing tools for measuring polarization of political elites. Such tools include candidate

surveys (Saiegh, 2009), scaling techniques of roll call votes (Carroll and Kubo, 2019; Carroll and Poole, 2014; McCarty *et al.*, 2018) and many others. If tools for measuring polarization in the mass electorate have been developed at all, this effort has focused predominantly on the United States and rarely been used jointly with measures of elite polarization, referenced above.¹

This paper fills the gap in testing theories of polarization by suggesting a way of operationalizing polarization in the electorate over time and measuring it. It makes use of a selection of monthly “Political Preferences of Poles” surveys conducted on nationally representative samples of the Polish electorate between 2005 and 2021, which is the period after Poland joined the European Union. This work contributes to the literature on polarization and backsliding in the Post-Communist context and the role of attitudes to the EU in this process. The next section provides a brief background on the Polish party system and the exogenous emergence of the issue of EU joining. The third section discusses theories connecting polarization to backsliding. The fourth section introduces our method for assessing polarization in the electorate and applies it to Polish respondents’ attitudes to EU joining. The fifth and last section concludes.

The Polish Party System and the Issue of EU Joining

Before the victory of Orban’s Fidesz Party in Hungary, studies of polarization in Europe were few and far between. Among the few was Frye’s (2002) article about the threat polarization — interpreted as divided government — poses to the quality of economic reforms. According to Frye’s argument, such polarization in preferences of the legislature and executive made implementation of economic reforms slow and inconsistent. It ultimately delayed the consolidation of a market economy with credible enforcement of property rights. Yet not all scholars share Frye’s belief in the perils of polarization. Kitschelt (2000), for instance, includes party polarization in his measure of programmatic representation (*cosalpo*), which he defines as the polar opposite of clientelism in voter-party linkages.²

Yet for Kitschelt, polarization is a factor *improving* party programmaticness. He reasons that in order for voters to have a real choice, parties cannot offer programs too close to one another, lest voters cannot make meaningful choices at the ballot box.

¹There are notable exceptions to this norm. See, for instance (Jakli and Gill, 2022; Schibber, 2016).

²Later Herbert Kitschelt allowed for situations where programmaticness and clientelism might develop alongside one another (Kitschelt and Singer, 2018; Yıldırım and Kitschelt, 2020).

These two interventions notwithstanding, few scholars prior to 2015 had linked polarization in Post-communist Europe to democratic backsliding.³ The paucity of literature on the subject is puzzling. If one believes, as most of the literature appears to suggest, that backsliding is a gradual process, unravelling slowly over time (Luo and Przeworski, 2019), antecedents of the crisis in 2015 in Poland and 2010 in Hungary should have been visible much earlier. Yet, both countries' party systems emerged in extraordinary circumstances, making it very hard to detect the signs of future democratic erosion.

These countries' political transitions from communist dictatorships to democracy took place concurrently with the economic transformations from socialist planned economies to free market ones. While the economic reforms proceeded swiftly and successfully, the electoral and party system took considerably longer to crystallize and for a very long time was governed by the, so-called, *regime divide* (Grzymala-Busse, 2001). The regime divide is understood by scholars as a cleavage dividing the political issue space according to historical legacies rather than economic, ethnic, or socio-cultural differences. In the US context, the Civil War created such a cleavage for many decades well into the 1940s, culminating in the breakaway of Dixiecrats from the Democratic Party (Sundquist, 2011).

In Post-communist Europe, the main cleavage was the division between successor communists and their supporting parties (typically successors of communist satellite parties) on the one hand, and parties based on formerly dissident organizations, on the other. Turning specifically to Poland, the reason this remained the main cleavage dividing elites in Post-communist times was that virtually all parties supported economic reforms and joining international organizations, such as NATO and the EU, so these other issues could not function as divisive.

Figure 1 illustrates the state of the Polish party system at the time of integration with the EU. It also coincides with the period the data on attitudes towards the EU that we analyze in this paper were starting to be collected.

These data begin in January of 2005 and run through the end of 2006, a period marking the ultimate dissipation of the regime divide and its replacement with a new cleavage: one between the traditionalist ex-dissident parties, such as Law and Justice (PiS) on the one hand, and liberal ex-dissident parties, such as Citizens' Platform (PO), on the other.

Figure 1 summarizes answers to the main question posed in the CBOS surveys : "If elections to parliament (called the "Sejm" in Poland) were to occur this Sunday, which party would you vote for?" (The question was only asked of respondents who had already indicated their intention to vote).

³Though see Nalepa, 2016, 2019.

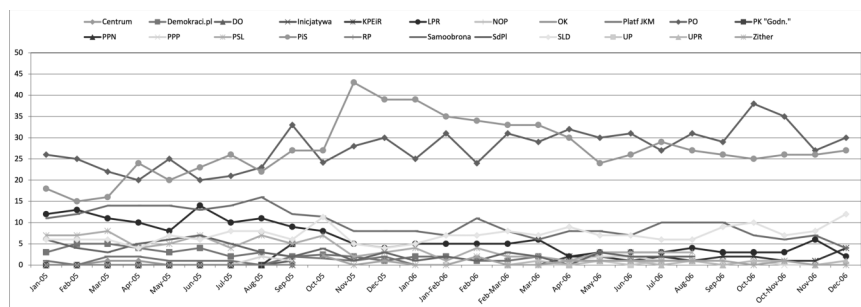


Figure 1: Center for Public Opinion Research, “Political Preferences of Poles” (2005–2007). *Notes:* Answers to “If the election were to be held this Sunday, which party would you vote for?,” asked to nationally representative samples limited to respondents who indicated they “would vote this upcoming Sunday.”

The parties with most voter support during this period were Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Platform (PO). With common roots in the post-Solidarity dissident movement, initially, they were allies.⁴

In 2002, PO and PiS held talks to form an electoral coalition and even considered the possibility of a future cabinet coalition. When an attempt at an electoral coalition failed in the municipal elections of 2002, the two parties engaged in a game of chicken, developing competing programs for running against the post-communist SLD.

According to Jacek Janiszewski, a former MP, interviewed for this project, “members of the two parties tried to form another overarching coalition of the post-Solidarity right, based on the Conservative Peoples’ Party (SKL), but went their separate ways when this attempt failed.”⁵ This “going their separate ways” by PiS and PO is what we interpret as the dissipation of post-regime divide cleavage.

As the new democratic cleavages were forming, the negotiations surrounding Poland’s accession to the EU were in full swing. Some of the details being discussed provided additional sources of disagreement between PO and PiS. Among them was the question of allowing EU citizens to acquire property in Poland. On the one hand, foreign direct investment could offer a boost to the economy, but on the other, it could attract the return of descendants of 10.5 mln Germans expropriated as a result of the Yalta Treaty (which had caused Poland’s to shift to the West). The fear was that they would either reclaim or simply repurchase their former land and real estate. This stoked

⁴Trade Union “Solidarity” was the largest anti-communist dissident organization in Communist Europe, which at the height of popularity reached 10 million members. At the time of the democratic transition, all parties that were not successor communist parties had roots in the Solidarity trade union.

⁵Interview with one of the authors, Warsaw, June 2011.

fear among nationalists. By 2001, two parties representing the interests of the Euro-sceptics had emerged: Sammobrona (SRP), led by Andrzej Lepper, and the League of Polish Families (LPR), led by Roman Giertych.

The popularity of these two parties becomes fully visible in Figure 1. After PiS and PO, these two parties had most supporters in the 2005–2007 period. The support of these EU-skeptical parties — with no or very modest dissident background — hovered between 5% and 10%. In this period, CBOS offered respondents 22 parties to choose from, which although it seems high, was 7 parties fewer than in the previous decade.

The coalition of PiS, LPR and SRP collapsed over a corruption scandal within SRP, offering PiS the opportunity to distance itself from the anti-EU agenda of the two traditionalist parties. Instead, however, PiS shifted even more to the right in its programmatic appeals. Along the way, PiS acquired also some former LPR voters. By 2015, Poland's party system became dominated by PiS and PO, with SLD and PSL (the two post-communist parties) in the background. Today, PiS and PO are the parties that scholars blame for polarization in Poland.

Yet if Poland's backsliding is to be attributed to PO and PiS's polarization in the mid 2010's, the antecedents of this process should have first become visible when the two parties started first separating following the dissipation of the regime divide (in which SLD and PSL played a significant role). The next two sections investigate this link in more detail.

Linking Polarization to Backsliding

In her work, on the origins of backsliding and polarization, Cinar (2021) posits that would be “closet autocrats” (Chiopris *et al.*, 2021) take advantage of new topics to use in their polarizing rhetoric. She argues that polarizing discourse helps backsliders prevent their party members from defecting and keep their vote base intact. Closet autocrats then employ polarizing rhetoric to solidify their platforms and views of the party.

The spectre of joining the EU has been used by scholars as a foil through which to analyze transformations of the Polish party system (Zuba, 2009). In a 2010 article, Markowski and Tucker (2010) wrote that “prior to the 2005 election, PiS was a classical conservative party, in terms of both its programmatic appeal and its electoral support. Only around the time of the 2005 election and in particular before the 2007 election did their . . . ‘Euro-sceptic’ rhetoric become more pronounced, but even then it was more of an electoral device than a serious programmatic goal.” Markowski and Tucker (2010) go on to argue that voters of SRP and LPR (the parties whose electorates PiS subsequently captured) had Euro-sceptic preferences long before those parties came along and that these parties formed in response to these preferences. They test this (as they call

it “Downsian”) theory against a competing (“responsible parties”) hypothesis, according to which party leaders led their supporters to oppose the EU.

Markowski and Tucker (2010) test their hypotheses using three surveys conducted prior to elections (in 2001, 2005, and 2007) on voters for LPR and SRP, contrasting them with voters of all other parties. They argue that if cues from Euroskeptic parties led voters to Euroscepticism (per the responsible party model), then at the time of the 2001 election, we should see little, if any, distinction in the degree of Euroscepticism among voters for the LPR and SRP, on the one hand, and voters for other parties (as well as non-voters), on the other. In contrast, if voters for the LPR and SRP were significantly more Eurosceptic than voters of other parties as early as the 2001 parliamentary election, then, Markowski and Tucker argue, one would reach the opposite conclusion: that voters were already Eurosceptic when they made the decision to support the LPR and SRP in 2001, and thus could not have been ‘led’ to this position in the ensuing years by these new political parties. After presenting data from the three above mentioned electoral surveys, the authors conclude that they have “found evidence that these two new parties were attracting a previously unrepresented portion of the electorate, which is what the Downsian model suggests should occur” (Markowski and Tucker, 2010, p.529).

Setting aside potential problems with this research design and empirical test,⁶ we do not find support for this “responsible parties” theory. Instead, we find evidence consistent with the Downsian hypothesis, leading to similar expectations as posited by Cinar (2021): leaders use their rhetoric in polarizing ways, by exploiting new policy issues that they hope will divide the electorate. Critically, our technique, goes beyond looking only at voters of two parties and only at times preceding elections. In another contrast to Markowski and Tucker (2010), we examine attitudes to the EU over a sixteen year period and disaggregate electorates of the top four vote attracting parties in this period.

The details of our approach are explained in the following section.

Evidence of Polarization

To make the argument that voter polarization of the electorate is driven by the emergence of exogenous issues that parties can then manipulate to carve out support, we use sixteen years worth of data from the Center for Public Opinion Research, CBOS. CBOS is one of the most reputable pollsters in Poland and has been conducting surveys for nearly four decades. It is a state funded

⁶For instance, the category of “other” parties might be regressing to the mean opposite extremes of attitudes to the EU.

institution but its independence from the government in office is legislatively sanctioned.⁷

The specific survey from which we extracted our questions, *Political Preferences of Poles*, is fielded, roughly, every month on a nationally representative sample of Poles between the ages of 18 and 75 (see Online Appendix section A.1 for details on sampling and interview structure). Of the surveys analyzed here, each had approximately 1000 respondents, of whom about 60% indicated they would be interested in voting in the upcoming elections.⁸ The surveys share similar, though not exactly the same, questionnaires. All include questions that ask respondents about their intention to vote and who they would vote for, outlooks for Poland’s future, trust towards party leaders, and democratic institutions (Legislature, Presidency and Constitutional Court), and collect basic demographic information. In addition, every couple of months, the surveys include self-placement questions on various thermometer scales. The thermometer questions range from feelings concerning EU expansion and separation of church and state to self-placement on the fiscal liberal-conservative scale.

For our exercise, we selected data between 2005 and 2021. Roughly once or twice a year (once in 2005, twice in 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2015, and once in 2016, twice in 2019 and 2021) during that period, the questionnaires included four thermometer questions pertaining to the EU. Among those, we selected the thermometer question that provides the longest temporal coverage.⁹ The question asks for self-placement on 7 point scale from 1 (“Poland should be as closely integrated with the EU as possible”) to 7 (“Poland should aspire to be as independent from the EU as possible”).

Next, to see how the electorates of different parties place themselves on these thermometer scales, we subset our respondents into electorates of four main parties in 2005–2021: PiS, PO, SLD, and PSL. We then compare over time how the distribution of the self-placement of these four electorates changed for our EU-specific thermometer question.

Attitudes promoting more integration would manifest themselves as the mass of the distribution skewing to the right. Attitudes favoring sovereignty within the EU would be visible as the mass of the distribution skewing to the left.

These visualizations allow us to descriptively answer several questions. First, they allow us to see the distribution of respondents on an EU integration scale, according to their own self-placements. Second, they allow us to observe differences in self-placement over several key electorates. Third, they allow

⁷Ever since its establishment in 1983, the Academic Director has been appointed from the Sociology Institute of Warsaw University to ensure CBOS independence. This norm has persisted throughout the democratic period and is respected even currently, in democratically eroding Poland.

⁸In our results, we omit non-voters.

⁹The coverage of other self-placement questions pertaining to the EU ends in 2011.

us to observe changes in self-placements on these thermometer scales within party electorates across time.

Moreover, these visualizations allow us to see if polarization in the electorate preceded polarization among elites or if polarization among elites (interpreted here as party leaders) preceded polarization among the electorate.

Critically for our theoretical question, the visualizations allow us to evaluate the “responsible parties” hypothesis against the “Downsian” hypothesis. Suppose first, that prior to EU joining, members of the PiS electorate self-placed against EU integration, skewing the distribution of PiS voters to the left on the EU integration scale. This could be interpreted as supporting the responsible parties hypothesis: voters were Eurosceptic to begin with and parties, such as PiS, emerged to represent them. Assume now in contrast to the previous supposition, normal or uniform distributions of electorates of all parties, including PiS, on the same EU integration scale. Such distributions would corroborate the Downsian hypothesis, according to which voters did not have strong preferences either way at the time EU was expanding east. Further support for the Downsian hypothesis would be provided if over time, presumably in response to party rhetoric, the mass of the PiS electorate, began to separate from PO (the party that promoted tighter integration) on the EU integration scale.

Previewing our results, what we observe in Poland between 2005 and 2021 offers considerable support for the Downsian hypothesis.

The analysis below includes **all** surveys from the series “Political Preferences of Poles” where the EU integration question was asked. For each survey, we plot the density of responses using their kernel density estimates.

One year after EU accession (which took place in May of 2004) electorates do not vary much on the EU integration scale. On the first question, we see that indeed, electorates of all parties, are practically uniform in their responses to all EU questions, except for PO (in dashed-line) which decisively sees a larger mass of voters at point 7 of the thermometer scale than the others.¹⁰ This is however, exactly the opposite of what one would expect from a PO electorate, so definitely cannot be used to support the “responsible parties” hypothesis. Aside from that one blip, the parties are largely indistinguishable from one another.

By November of 2007, the mode of both electorates was at the highest integration possible, though a sizeable portion of the PO electorate placed itself above 4, the middle of the scale. Just a month earlier, in October of 2007, the PiS electorate had a second mode at the lowest integration possible.

¹⁰A possible explanation for this was mistrust associated with the fact that PiS, the opponent of PO was in government and finalizing the EU accession negotiations. The treaty signed by Poland in the end was not exactly the result PO had hoped for. For instance, labor markets of all but a couple EU countries were to remain off-limits for Polish citizens.

Generally, until 2019, there are two patterns that the distributions fall into. Either there is a uni-modal distribution with a mass of citizens at one of the extremes of the scale (for PiS at 7, for PO at 1, which is visible in surveys in August 2009, June 2011, July 2011, and March 2016); or there is a bimodal distribution for one or both parties with an additional mass in the mid-range of the scale at 4. This is visible in addition to November 2007, in surveys in July 2011, April 2015, and May 2015.

August 2019 is the last instance where there is a discernible mass of voters above 4. Beyond that date, the electorates of PiS and PO clearly separate on the issue of EU integration with the proportion of PO voters advocating the tightest possible integration exceeding 40% in September 2019 and May 2021.

PiS's electorate is not as insistent on sovereignty from the EU as PO's was over EU integration, but since March 2016 the extreme end of the scale has support of at least a quarter of that electorate.

The contrast between the two parties is even starker when compared to the two post-communist SLD and PSL, where no clear pattern is visible.

But why is 2019 such a turning point in public opinion regarding European integration? After all, the populist PiS party had been in power since 2015 and had been forcing unfavorable judges to early retirement or moving them to peripheral judiciary districts at least since 2016. We argue that the greatest effects of the politicization of the judicial nomination process by changing the composition of the National Council of the Judiciary (NCJ), the equivalent of the Bar Association in the United States occurred towards the end of PiS's first term in office.¹¹ In 2019, PiS created a disciplinary chamber within the reformed Supreme Court to investigate acts of "unprofessional" behavior among judges. Finally, the summer of 2019 marks the critical last few months before the Polish voters had their first chance to reelect the PiS government. After four years in office, PiS not only managed to pack the highest courts in the land and fire insubordinate judges, but also picked a fight with the European Union, whose Council recommended the case to the European Union's Court of Justice, seeing the judicial reforms as a potential violation of Poland's obligations under EU treaties. The EUCJ's decision was due around the time of the elections but in the preceding months, PiS launched an anti-EU campaign, going as far as to signal its readiness to leave the Union, should the EU continue to meddle in Poland's affairs.

Exemplary of this anti-EU stance is the following quote from Poland's deputy minister of justice, Stefan Kaleta, in response to a decision of the EU court requiring Poland to instantly abandon disciplinary proceedings against individual judges: "this decision is a brazen act of usurpation against Poland's constitutional sovereignty" (Wozniacki, 2020).

¹¹Prior to PiS's reforms the NCJ was made up exclusively of judges, but PiS legislation replaced them with political appointees.

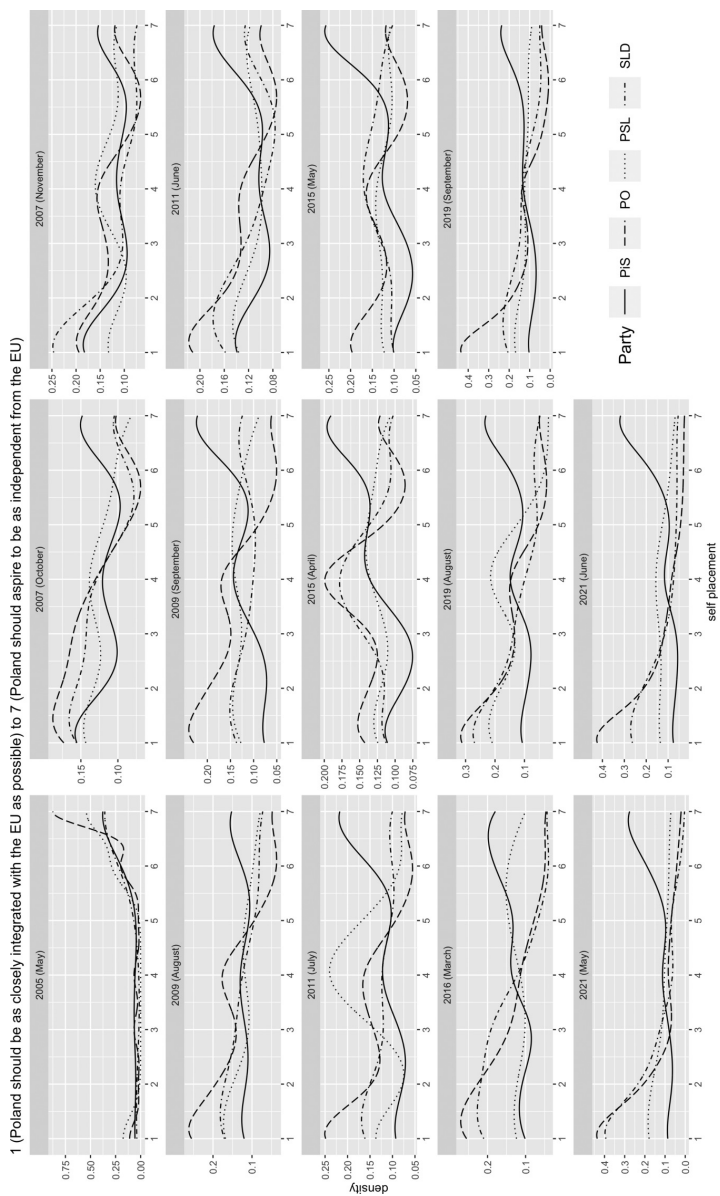


Figure 2: Center for Public Opinion Research, “Political Preferences of Poles” (2007–2011), self-placement on 7 point scale from 1 (Poland should be as closely integrated with the EU as possible) to 7 (Poland should aspire to be as independent from the EU) as possible.

On the other end of the political spectrum, the EU criticism of PiS’s actions was playing into the hands of the PiS opposition and most of PO’s rhetoric concentrated on explaining how PiS’s actions ran contrary to the interests of Poland, distancing it from the European community. Emblematic of couching of PiS criticism in terms of the harming Poland’s position within the EU is the following statement from Donald Tusk, the founder and current leader of PO: “Whoever is questioning today the European model of democracy, while violating the constitution and the culture of rule of law, is exposing all of us to critical risks. By tarnishing the spirit of freedom and community, he or she is writing the next chapter of the Polish tragedy” (Beylin, 2017).

In light of the above discussion, it is hardly surprising that after August 2019, the electorates of PiS and PO appear more polarized than ever. Despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, the EU remains a polarizing issue for Poles. Yet this has not always been the case. We see no evidence that polarization of Polish parties on the issue of EU integration was preceded by polarization in the electorate. What we do observe is evidence consistent with leaders sending most of their cues on EU integration, which Markowski and Tucker (2010) refer to as the Downsian hypothesis.

To support our argument further, we have also developed a measure called “Polarization in Electorate”:

$$P_j(m, n, i) = \frac{Var_j^i(n_j + m_j)}{MaxVar(n_j + m_j)} \quad (1)$$

Polarization of the electorate in survey j on issue i (in our case EU integration) is a function of the responses of the n respondents who declared voting for the first party (in our case for PO) and the m voters who declared voting for the second party (in our case, PiS). It relates the actual distribution of voters of the two electorates on the EU integration thermometer scale to a distribution that would be consistent with the maximal possible polarization: a situation where all voters of one party (say, PO) placed themselves at the lowest value of the thermometer scale and all voters of the other party (PiS) placed themselves of the highest value of the thermometer scale.¹²

The distributions are then summarized by calculating their variance: $Var(X) = \sum_i (x_i - \bar{x})^2$.

$P_j(m, n, i)$ is naturally bound by 0, the theoretical minimum, at which all respondents would choose the same answer, and 1, where they would be evenly divided at the polar opposite ends of the scale. In surveys, which are displayed

¹²Note, that these numbers are specific to each survey, but not to each issue, as the same survey may ask voters to self-place on more than one issue. The theoretically maximal variance is denoted in Equation (1) as $MaxVar(n_j + m_j)$ to highlight that this maximal theoretical variance depends in each instance on the specific sets of voters of the two parties placing themselves on issue j . We are very grateful to Milan Svobik for suggesting to us a measure along these lines.

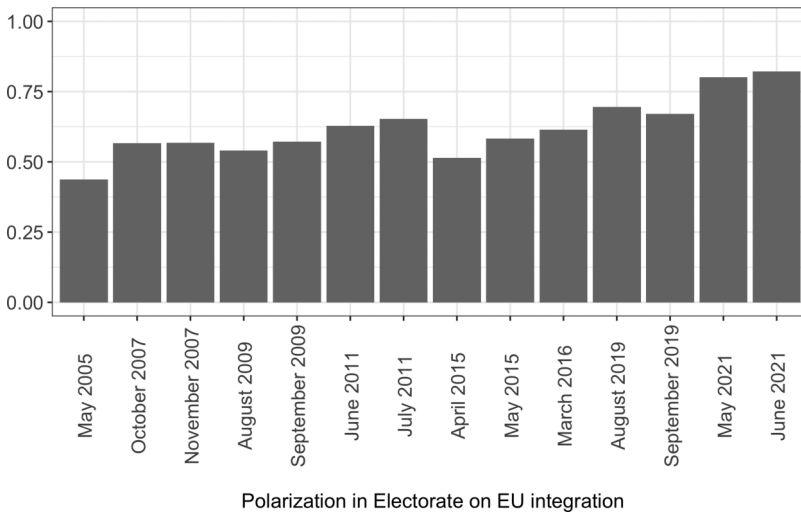


Figure 3: Polarization in electorate on EU integration.

above, $E(P_j) = 0.619$ and across all surveys, the values range from 0.437 to 0.822.

The graph presented in Figure 3 clearly shows that polarization on the issue of EU integration between PO and PiS has been steadily increasing from May of 2005 to June of 2021.

An alternative measure to the one defined above could subtract from the numerator and from the denominator in Equation (1) above, the theoretical uniform variance, calculated as the variance of a uniform distribution for that survey. This minimal variance would assume that the respondents are distributed evenly across the thermometer scale. For instance for 700 voting respondents and a 7 point scale, the theoretically minimal variance would be $(1 - 4)^2 * 100 + (2 - 4)^2 * 100 + (3 - 4)^2 * 100 + (5 - 4)^2 * 100 + (6 - 4)^2 * 100 + (7 - 4)^2 * 100 = 2800$. The graph presented in Figure A.1 in the Online Appendix visualizes this alternative measure of polarization applied to our surveys. It too shows an increase in polarization over the 2005–2021 period.

This evidence is broadly consistent with the argument linking polarization and democratic backsliding to actions of leaders who use exogenous events to sow the seeds of polarization in the electorate (Cinar, 2021).

Conclusion

Recent theoretical work on democratic backsliding points to polarization as one of the causes of this process. Yet empirical scholarship has not devoted enough

effort to distinguishing between two types of polarization — polarization in the mass electorate and polarization among political elites. Even though the two may go together, it is worth disentangling them and asking which came first. We argue that when mass polarization precedes elite polarization, party behavior can be interpreted along the lines of the responsible parties hypothesis: where there is a need for representation, parties will emerge. The more dangerous form of polarization, however, is when leaders create divisions in the electorate that previously did not exist. This creation of cleavages may take place via polarizing rhetoric that re-calibrates everyday political decisions as matters of “us versus them.” It is easier to stoke conflict surrounding issues that are new than issues that electorates have long been organizing around. In the latter case, rhetoric would need to persuade some voters to switch sides. Precisely because of its novelty at the time the surveys started, the issue of EU expansion in Poland presents an ideal topic to resolve the polarization conundrum.

In this paper we have proposed a measure of polarization, as well as a visualization technique based on simple descriptive statistics that, for suitable data, allows us to detect the sources of polarization—attributing them to party elites, per the Downsian hypothesis, or to genuine cleavages appearing in society, as suggested by the responsible parties hypothesis. The technique requires survey time series data that includes self-placement while also allowing for grouping respondents according to the party they intend to vote for. The visualization allows to observe the development of cleavages over time and in response to exogenous campaign events.

We apply the technique to the well-researched issue of EU integration with an application to Poland. While attitudes to the EU have become one of the most polarizing topics in the country, it has not been clear if this sharp division was the result of party elites driving the point home or an organic sentiment of Polish voters. We find evidence supporting the former theory, contradicting some existing research on this topic.

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