

# SOCIAL DEMOCRACY WITHOUT THE PEOPLE?

## CASE STUDY OF THE SLD (DEMOCRATIC LEFT ALLIANCE)

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# **SOCIAL DEMOCRACY WITHOUT THE PEOPLE?**

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For the past eight years, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS, Law and Justice), a populist, statist, right-wing party appealing to national and conservative ideas, has ruled Poland.<sup>1</sup> The process of PiS's rise to its current hegemonic political position has evolved over the years. In 2005, the formation's honorary chairperson, Lech Kaczyński, won the presidential election; at the same time, PiS, led by his twin brother, Jarosław Kaczyński, narrowly won the parliamentary elections. However, PiS was only able to govern efficiently for half a term. PiS's renewed victory in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections laid the groundwork for further wins in 2019 (European Parliament and Sejm elections) and 2020 (presidential elections). At the same time, we witnessed a fundamental decline in the political importance of Polish social democracy and its strongest party, the *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* (SLD, Democratic Left Alliance). Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the SLD candidate in

2000, won the presidential election in the first round, while in 2001, the Polish centre left led by Leszek Miller won the parliamentary elections with 41.04% support. Four years later, the SLD achieved 11.31% of the vote, permanently remaining a second-rate player, at best. In 2015, the centre left was out of parliament for the first time in Poland's history when PiS won a majority. Thus, we can see that, over the past two decades, we have witnessed interdependent processes: an exponential increase in the electoral popularity of the populist right in Poland; and an uneven decline in the political importance of social democracy. This analysis aims to find a causal relationship between these phenomena, focusing on analysing the flow of support between the SLD and PiS in the group of voters of the so-called "popular class". This is a class consisting of representatives of the peasant and working classes, according to Bourdieu's class theory,<sup>2</sup> popularised in Poland by Sadura and Gdula.<sup>3</sup>



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# **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

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For the purpose of the analysis, we critically analysed existing quantitative and qualitative research on the socioeconomic profile of voters of Polish political parties. The comparative and historical method was used to analyse the electoral results of the PiS electoral committees and centre-left lists with SLD participation from 2001 to 2019. The analysis of electoral geography served to capture the dichotomous nature of support for the analysed political forces.

As part of the project, between 9 and 20 January 2023, the *Instytut Badań Rynkowych i Społecznych* (IBRiS, Institute for Market and Social Research) conducted a

quantitative survey on a nationwide sample of n=1100 adult residents of Poland. The survey was conducted using the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) and computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) 50/50 methods. The survey included two groups of respondents: those meeting the criteria of the popular class; and SLD voters who changed their preferences after 2001.

The people's class included those who, according to the eligibility criteria marked "(Q1)", confirmed only one answer, and those who, in the selection marked "(Q)", met the selection criteria in at least two other questions required to qualify.

## CRITERIA:

### *Which social class would you fall into?*

Higher  
Higher average  
Middle  
Lower middle (Q1)  
Lower (Q1)

### *What was the last school you attended?*

Elementary school (Q1)  
Junior high school  
Basic vocational (Q1)  
High school (Q)  
Technical school (Q)  
Post-secondary/post-secondary school (Q)  
Higher education institution (undergraduate studies)  
Higher education institution (master or doctoral studies)

### *What is your primary source of income?*

Employment contract  
Contract of mandate/contract for specific work  
Retirement/pension  
Business activity  
Family assistance  
Unemployment benefit  
Running a farm

### *What is your current occupational status?*

Owner/co-owner of a company  
Director/manager

Legal professional – specialist  
Administrative or service worker (Q)  
Manual worker (Q1)  
Pupil/student  
Unemployed (Q1)  
Run a farm (Q)  
Engaged in housekeeping

### *What range is your monthly income?*

No income (Q)  
Up to 999 Polish zloty (Q)  
1,000-1,999 Polish zloty (Q)  
2,000-2,999 Polish zloty (Q)  
3,000-3,999 Polish zloty (Q)  
4,000-4,999 Polish zloty  
5,000-5,999 Polish zloty  
Over 6,000 Polish zloty

### *What is your household budget per person?*

Up to 999 Polish zloty (Q1)  
1,000-1,499 Polish zloty (Q1)  
1,500-1,999 Polish zloty (Q)  
2,000-2,999 Polish zloty (Q)  
3,000-3,999 Polish zloty  
4,000-4,999 Polish zloty  
Over 5,000 Polish zloty

### *Are you the owner or co-owner of a flat or house?*

Yes  
No (Q)

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# **THE POPULAR CLASS – NAMELY, WHO?**

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For our analysis, using a quantitative method, we attempted to determine the social profile of representatives of the popular class. The IBRiS survey

looked at, among other things, gender, age, place of residence, class self-identification, education level, income source, and owning a flat or house.

**TABLE 1.** Gender of respondent.

Female	48.7%
Male	51.3%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class –its social and political profile).<sup>4</sup>

**TABLE 2.** Respondents with children between the ages of 0 and 18.

Yes	30.7%
No	69.3%

Source: Klasa ludowa – jej profil społeczny i polityczny (The popular class – its social and political profile).<sup>5</sup>

**TABLE 3.** Place of residence in terms of population.

Rural	36.5%
A small city with up to 50,000 residents	25.3%
Medium city with 50,000-250,000 residents	19.3%
Large city with 250,000-500,000 residents	5.5%
Metropolis with over 500,000 residents	13.4%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class –its social and political profile).<sup>6</sup>

**TABLE 4.** Age.

18-29	17.9%
30-39	20.6%
40-49	18.1%
50-59	10.9%
60-69	17.6%
70+	14.9%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class –its social and political profile).<sup>7</sup>

**TABLE 5.** Class self-identification.

Higher	3.5%
Upper middle	7.4%
Middle	54.7%
Lower middle	27.4%
Lower	6.9%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class –its social and political profile).<sup>8</sup>

**TABLE 6.** Highest level of education of respondents.

Elementary school	2.7%
Junior high school	0.8%
Basic vocational	13.4%
High school	14.6%
Technical school	23.8%
Post-secondary/post-secondary school	10.6%
Higher education institution (undergraduate studies)	10.7%
Higher education institution (master or doctoral studies)	23.5%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class –its social and political profile).<sup>9</sup>

**TABLE 7.** Current professional status.

Owner/co-owner of a company	5.4%
Director/manager	2.4%
Legal professional – specialist	16.7%
Administrative or service worker	17.9%
Manual worker	22.9%
Pupil/student	4.4%
Unemployed	7.0%
Run a farm	4.2%
Engaged in housekeeping	19.1%

Source: *Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class – its social and political profile)*.<sup>10</sup>

The results from Tables 1-7 indicate that the representatives of the popular class in Poland perceive themselves as being middle class, have mostly attained secondary education, and live in small towns or rural areas. Respondents mostly have children who have already grown up, while they themselves are mostly of working age, as indicated by their current occupational status in addition to their age.

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# **ANALYSIS OF THE SPATIAL SUPPORT OF THE SLD AND PIS**

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Analysing the SLD's electoral successes from the 1990s using the method of electoral geography, we can easily see the over-representation of support for post-communist social democracy in areas that visibly lost out in the process of neoliberal systemic transformation. High and structural unemployment was particularly evident in agricultural and industrial areas. Former employees of the *Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne* (PGR, State Agricultural Farm), state-owned factories and mines may have felt cheated and left behind by the Polish right wing derived from the Solidarity movement. The SLD, based on this, created a straightforward political narrative that was evident from their leading election slogans of 1991, "This cannot go on", and 1993, "This does not have to go on".<sup>11</sup> Kwasniewski also used similar language in his 1995 presidential election speech:

The media do not support me. The Church has repeatedly said anything but me. Special initiatives have even been created to ward off my person. There are Warsaw salons, which also do everything possible to prevent me from winning. The people want to elect me; the people want to elect me!<sup>12</sup>

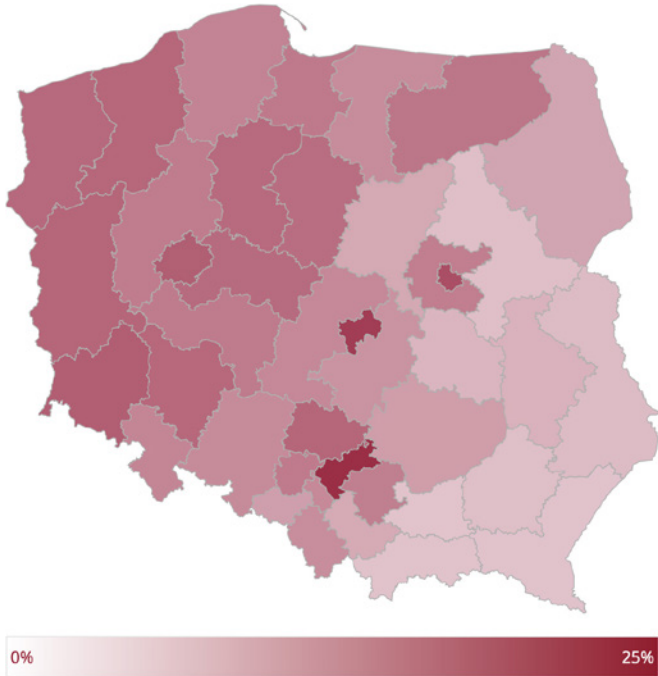
In other words, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the SLD was the main party of the popular class, battered by Balcerowicz's reforms, and those families who looked back sentimentally on and with appreciation for the gains of the communist period. After the SLD's historic success in 2001, we witnessed a collapse in support for the centre left in Poland and a new process previously unseen in Poland. We are discussing replacing post-communism with a division more reminiscent of the sociocultural cleavages typical of Western Europe.<sup>13</sup> While we can superimpose the sides of this western division mostly on the left-right axis, in post-2005 Poland, the main dispute within the political, social, economic and cultural cleavages is between two right-wing parties with roots in the Solidarity movement: the populist-conservative PiS; and the neoliberal-Christian democratic *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO, Civic Platform). For this study, in which we analyse the influence and importance of the popular class for the rise in popularity of right-wing populism at the

expense of social democracy, we will not examine the profile of PO voters in depth. Of course, after 2005, the rise in support for the PO translated into a structural and sustained decline in support for the SLD, but, as research shows, this was not a departure of former left-wing voters from the popular class.<sup>14</sup>

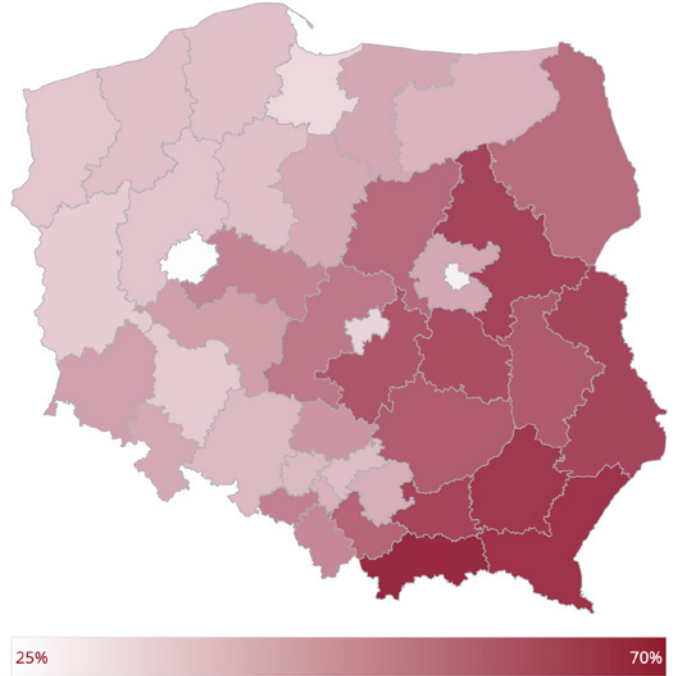
Analysing support for the SLD and PiS electoral committees from the 2019 Sejm elections, we can see an almost dichotomous support distribution. We can observe an over-representation of social democracy's support in northwestern Poland, in Warsaw, Łódź and the Zagłębie Dąbrowskie region. At the same time, the populist right wing is decidedly dominant in southeastern Poland, especially in traditionally Catholic Malopolska, Podkarpacie, Lublin Region and eastern Mazovia.



**MAP 1.** Support for the SLD in the 2019 parliamentary elections.



**MAP 2.** Support for the PiS in the 2019 parliamentary elections.



Source: SejmSenat2019 website.<sup>15</sup>

To better understand how this dichotomous division of leftist and populist right electoral strongholds came about, we also conducted a historical analysis of support by province.



**TABLE 8.** Support for the electoral committee with the participation of the SLD in the parliamentary elections.<sup>16</sup>

VOIVODESHIP	2001	2005	2007	2011	2015	2019
Dolnośląskie	47.25%	13.04%	14.67%	9.21%	8.43%	14.73%
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	48.91%	15.21%	18.67%	10.18%	10.40%	15.00%
Lubelskie	34.40%	8.20%	10.50%	7.09%	6.54%	7.32%
Lubuskie	51.54%	16.18%	17.64%	10.31%	10.02%	15.61%
Łódzkie	44.75%	13.39%	14.71%	9.22%	8.71%	14.34%
Małopolskie	30.07%	7.11%	8.52%	5.47%	4.41%	8.38%
Mazowieckie	34.97%	9.56%	9.82%	7.05%	5.84%	10.78%
Opolskie	38.84%	10.39%	11.19%	7.73%	6.75%	11.74%
Podkarpackie	31.37%	8.25%	8.99%	5.89%	4.49%	6.31%
Podlaskie	37.91%	12.31%	14.72%	9.47%	7.35%	9.09%
Pomorskie	35.55%	10.13%	11.52%	7.06%	6.61%	12.97%
Śląskie	46.24%	12.48%	14.44%	8.66%	8.59%	13.99%
Świętokrzyskie	45.08%	12.33%	13.81%	9.72%	7.87%	9.95%
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	47.53%	13.15%	14.75%	8.28%	8.22%	12.75%
Wielkopolskie	46.26%	13.09%	16.67%	11.20%	9.45%	14.56%
Zachodniopomorskie	49.29%	14.35%	17.29%	11.22%	9.97%	15.34%

Sources: Wybory 2005 website; Wybory 2007 website; Wybory 2011 website; Wybory do Sejmu RP 2015 website; Wybory Parlamentarne 2001 website; and SejmSenat2019 website.<sup>17</sup>

**TABLE 9.** Support for the electoral committee of PiS in the parliamentary elections.

VOIVODESHIP	2001	2005	2007	2011	2015	2019
Dolnośląskie	7.84%	24.22%	27.86%	25.79%	32.68%	39.20%
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	7.19%	23.69%	25.48%	23.91%	31.88%	35.55%
Lubelskie	7.58%	23.32%	40.51%	38.80%	47.79%	57.44%
Lubuskie	5.66%	22.84%	22.47%	21.73%	28.27%	34.30%
Łódzkie	7.41%	23.09%	34.80%	32.25%	38.92%	46.30%
Małopolskie	12.63%	37.93%	42.95%	41.08%	50.05%	63.59%
Mazowieckie	15.01%	27.62%	36.90%	34.89%	42.21%	45.89%
Opolskie	5.33%	20.53%	22.87%	20.56%	27.77%	37.64%
Podkarpackie	8.57%	35.99%	46.31%	46.38%	54.81%	62.87%
Podlaskie	11.51%	28.46%	38.81%	36.99%	45.38%	52.04%
Pomorskie	12.52%	26.29%	26.81%	24.81%	30.41%	34.26%
Śląskie	9.58%	29.48%	31.44%	26.09%	34.81%	42.23%
Świętokrzyskie	6.73%	23.26%	39.07%	31.89%	42.81%	55.18%
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	7.18%	22.22%	24.20%	23.14%	30.99%	39.84%
Wielkopolskie	6.71%	24.80%	24.62%	22.52%	30.10%	37.68%
Zachodniopomorskie	6.56%	21.78%	22.81%	21.42%	28.83%	35.97%

Sources: Wybory 2005 website; Wybory 2007 website; Wybory 2011 website; Wybory do Sejmu RP 2015 website; Wybory Parlamentarne 2001 website; and SejmSenat2019 website.<sup>18</sup>

In this overview, we can see a few crucial political macro trends that have occurred in Poland over the past two decades:

- the fundamental decline in the electoral importance of the SLD in each voivodeship between 2001 and 2005;
- the jump in support for PiS between 2001 and 2005, as well as between 2011 and 2015, and the hegemonisation of the Polish political landscape in 2019;
- sustained support for the SLD committee in each voivodeship in comparative terms of the 2005/2007 and 2019 elections, with apparent over-representation in western Poland;
- historically bad results for an electoral coalition involving the SLD in 2015;
- visible jumps in support for PiS in every province between 2015 and 2019;
- identical electoral strongholds for the SLD in northwestern Poland in the 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections; and
- identical electoral strongholds for PiS in south-eastern Poland in the 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections.



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# **THE POPULAR CLASS AND THE SLD AND PIS STRONGHOLDS**

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A crucial political revolution occurred in Poland between the 2001 and 2005 elections. The drop in support for the SLD and the double victory of PiS in the 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections continue to influence today's political scene. Unfortunately, there is no in-depth research on the

behaviour of former SLD voters from 2001 and to what extent they still constitute the electoral base for PiS today. Similar conclusions can be reached after analysing a survey of the voting behaviour of the popular class conducted for this analysis by IBRiS.

**TABLE 10.** Did you vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections (excluding undecided)?

Yes	83.92%
No	16.10%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class -- its social and political profile).<sup>19</sup>

**TABLE 11.** If yes, for which electoral list?

SLD-UP	17.9%
AWS-P	2.7%
UW	9.3%
PiS	27.6%
PSL	6.2%
PO	35.8%
LPR	0.4%
Other	0.0%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class -- its social and political profile).<sup>20</sup>

The data in Tables 10 and 11 show a skewed picture of memory regarding participation in elections (the turnout in the 2001 Sejm elections was 46.29%) and declared voting preferences. One hypothesis regarding this declaration may be a desire to hide one's authentic

choices or a projection of one's upcoming political decisions. In the survey, IBRiS also asked questions about how representatives of the popular class voted a year earlier, in 2000, during the presidential elections.

**TABLE 12.** Did you vote in the 2000 presidential election (excluding undecided)?

Yes	84.50%
No	15.50%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class – its social and political profile).<sup>21</sup>

**TABLE 13.** If yes, for which candidate?

Aleksander Kwaśniewski	74.7%
Andrzej Olechowski	9.7%
Marian Krzaklewski	7.6%
Jarosław Kalinowski	4.6%
Andrzej Lepper	2.1%
Other	1.3%

Source: Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class – its social and political profile).<sup>22</sup>

Again, this raises the question of declared participation in elections (the turnout was 61.12%) and the scale of support for Kwasniewski. Although the SLD candidate won in the first round, his nationwide result was 53.90%. According to official statistics provided by the State Election Commission, from no group of voters (by place of residence) did he achieve a result close to those obtained in the IBRiS survey.<sup>23</sup> As with the political election questions from the 2001 Sejm elections, it is, therefore, difficult to determine the actual preferences of the popular class more than two decades ago.

However, analysing data on support for both parties spatially, with particular attention paid to the provinces where industry or state farms were located during the period of real socialism, we can put forward the thesis that, in 2005, PiS became the main

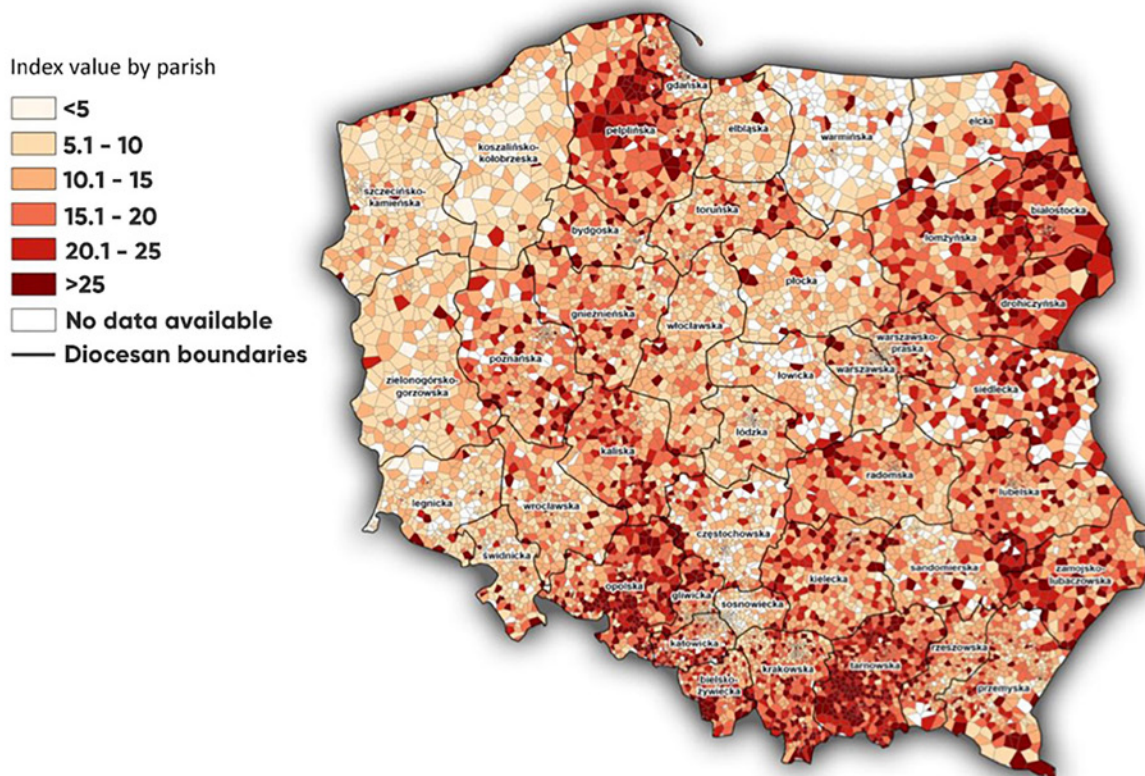
party of the Polish popular class. We see a permanent change in support for PiS (implicitly at the expense of the SLD) in provinces such as Świętokrzyskie, Śląskie, Dolnośląskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Zachodniopomorskie.

Despite the significant decline in support for the SLD after 2001, we can still see several social democratic strongholds today. In these places, too, we can see a visible share of the popular class. This is because in the Łódzkie (including Łódź itself), Silesian (with particular emphasis on cities such as Dąbrowa Górnicza, Będzin, Sosnowiec and Częstochowa), Lubuskie, Lower Silesian (Wałbrzych) and Kuyavian-Pomeranian (especially in Włocławek) provinces there were large state-owned workplaces, factories and mines that collapsed as a result of the neoliberal privatisation process. In these provinces, we faced high and

structural unemployment until Poland joined the EU. This raises the question of why PiS did not fully capture support from the popular class in these districts. One way to explain this phenomenon is the level of secularisation of Poland's various regions. Many factors have influenced the intensity of religious practice, including the historical experience of partitions and the process of industrialisation. In the Russian partition during the 1905 revolution, activists of all left-wing groups, such as the *Polska Partia Socjalistyczna* (PPS, Polish Socialist Party), *Socjaldemokracja Królestwa*

*Polskiego i Litwy* (SDKPiL, Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania) and the Jewish Bund, were actively attacked by the Catholic Church. On more than one occasion, denunciation by priests carried the death penalty for left-wing militants. For this reason, in the dioceses of Włocławek, Łódź, Warszawa, Częstochowa and Sosnowiec, we can witness an overlap between the over-representation of support for the SLD and the low rate of *dominicantes*, or the percentage of Catholics attending Sunday Mass with respect to the total number of those obligated.

**MAP 3.** Attendance at Sunday Mass (*dominicantes*) in 2021 by parish.



Source: Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego (Institute of Catholic Church Statistics).<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, according to this cultural cleavage related to religion and its role in sociopolitical life, we can see

a correlation between high support for PiS (in every election after 2001) and a high rate of *dominicantes*.



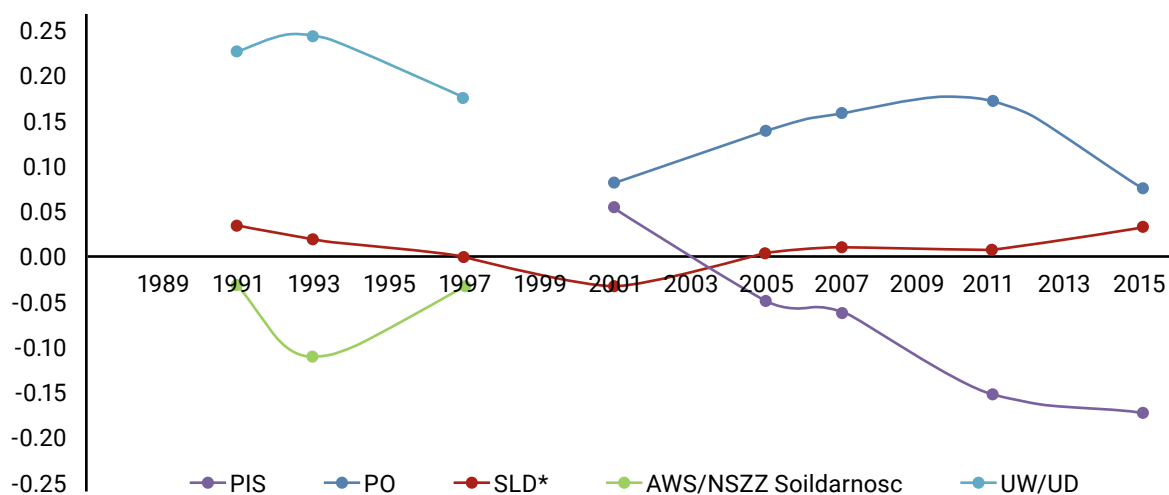
Since 2005, PiS has become the dominant political force wherever we observe the highest percentage of those attending Sunday Mass.

In the Polish context, the attitude towards the Catholic Church during the period of the People's Republic of Poland is relevant to the post-communist historical division. And it is also with this cleavage that we can explain both the electoral over-representation of the SLD and PiS in particular provinces.<sup>25</sup> Polish social democracy, as a grouping primarily derived from the *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* (PZPR, Polish United Workers' Party) can still enjoy higher support than the national result in elections in those constituencies where the People's Armed Forces were stationed during the period of real socialism and where there was sizeable industrial investment after the end of World War II. As the armed forces of socialist Poland were being prepared for a possible

confrontation with NATO troops, their concentration took place in western Poland, where, to this day, Polish social democracy not only wins double-digit electoral results, but it also co-governs in voivodeship and local governments. Similarly, we can see high support for PiS in those electoral districts where the anti-communist opposition, especially its more conservative and Catholic part, was strong.

One of the crucial determinants of class in Poland, including membership of the popular class, is the level of education. As the results of a study by Lindner et al. show,<sup>26</sup> we can see an exchange between the SLD and PiS between 2001 and 2005 in their roles as the primary representative of less-educated voters. In addition, since 2005, we can see that, among PiS voters, there are more and more of such voters, while in the case of the SLD, we can see an increase in more-educated voters.

**FIGURE 1.** The education cleavage: difference between % vote share for political parties among tertiary- and non-tertiary-educated voters in Poland.



Source: Lindner et al., p. 37.<sup>27</sup>

The change in the positions of the SLD and PiS between 2001 and 2005 may provide evidence that, during this period – also due to the rather neoliberal practices of the governments of Miller

and Belka, and a series of socially costly reforms associated with Poland's entry into the EU – that the election of the popular class shifted toward the populist right.





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# **POPULAR CLASS POLITICAL PREFERENCES AFTER 2015**

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An IBRiS survey conducted in early 2023 can shed new light on the recent elections of the popular class as well as its current voting preferences. This way, we can capture an essential shift in support for PiS among the surveyed group. While in the case of the elections of the early 2000s it was difficult to

determine to what extent the declared answers corresponded to the actual state, the question about preferences during the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections, as well as the elections in the first round of the 2020 presidential election, can be used to better understand the problem under analysis.

**TABLE 14.** Did you vote in the 2015 parliamentary elections (excluding undecided)?

PiS	37.2%
PO	36.3%
Party Together	1.6%
Korwin	3.7%
Polish People's Party	4.0%
United Left (SLD+TR+PPS+UP+Greens)	11.4%
Kukiz'15	4.2%
Nowoczesna Ryszarda Petru	1.6%
Other	0.0%

Source: *Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class -- its social and political profile)*.<sup>28</sup>

**TABLE 15.** Did you vote in the 2019 parliamentary elections (excluding undecided)?

PiS	39.0%
Civic Coalition (PO, .N, IPL and Greens)	37.0%
SLD	11.1%
Polish People's Party	4.7%
Freedom and Independence Confederation	7.8%
Other	0.4%

Source: *Badanie IBRiS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRiS survey: The popular class -- its social and political profile)*.<sup>29</sup>

**TABLE 16.** Did you vote in the 2020 presidential elections (excluding undecided)?

Andrzej Duda (PiS)	39.0%
Rafał Trzaskowski (Civic Coalition)	35.1%
Szymon Holownia	9.9%
Krzysztof Bosak (Confederation)	5.4%
Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz (PSL)	4.1%
Robert Biedroń (Left Party)	6.0%
Other	0.4%

Source: Badanie IBRIS: Klasa ludowa -- jej profil społeczny i polityczny (IBRIS survey: The popular class – its social and political profile).<sup>30</sup>

Analysis of the quantitative survey results shows similar results for PiS and PO Yes during the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections. Candidates for these parties, Andrzej Duda and Rafał Trzaskowski, in the first round of the 2020 presidential election, also achieved similar results. It is interesting to note high support for the United Left, according to the respondents' declarations, as the result for the surveyed group exceeds the committee's result from the 2015 parliamentary elections (7.55%). The SLD's result in 2019 is close to the national result, while the surprising result for Robert Biedroń in the surveyed

group is almost three times better than the national result (2.22%).<sup>31</sup>

When analysing the responses to these questions – as was the case with the 2000 and 2001 voter preference surveys – one gets the impression that respondents, for the same reasons, may not have fully remembered to whom they entrusted their vote four years ago or may not have answered honestly. Such a conclusion can be drawn after analysing the results of an exit poll conducted by Ipsos on the day of the 2019 parliamentary elections.

**TABLE 17.** Distribution of votes by education level during the 2019 parliamentary elections.

	PSL	PIS	SLD	CONFEDERATION	KO	OTHER
Elementary	9.8%	63.8%	7.6%	6.5%	11.7%	0.6%
Basic vocational	10.0%	63.9%	5.7%	3.7%	15.7%	1.0%
Secondary and post-secondary	9.4%	45.5%	11.7%	6.9%	25.5%	1.0%
Bachelor's and higher	9.7%	29.9%	15.4%	7.2%	36.6%	1.2%

Source: Wyborcza.pl.<sup>32</sup>

As can be seen from Table 17, PiS won in 2019 in almost all groups (except for those with higher education). The total domination of Jaroslaw Kaczynski's party among voters with primary and vocational education is worth noting, as an important determinant of membership in the popular class. It is also interesting to note that the SLD had a worse result in these cohorts than the *Koalicja Obywatleska* (KO, Civic Coalition) and even the *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (PSL, Polish People's Party). On the other hand, Poland's centre left enjoyed the most significant support among those with a university degree.



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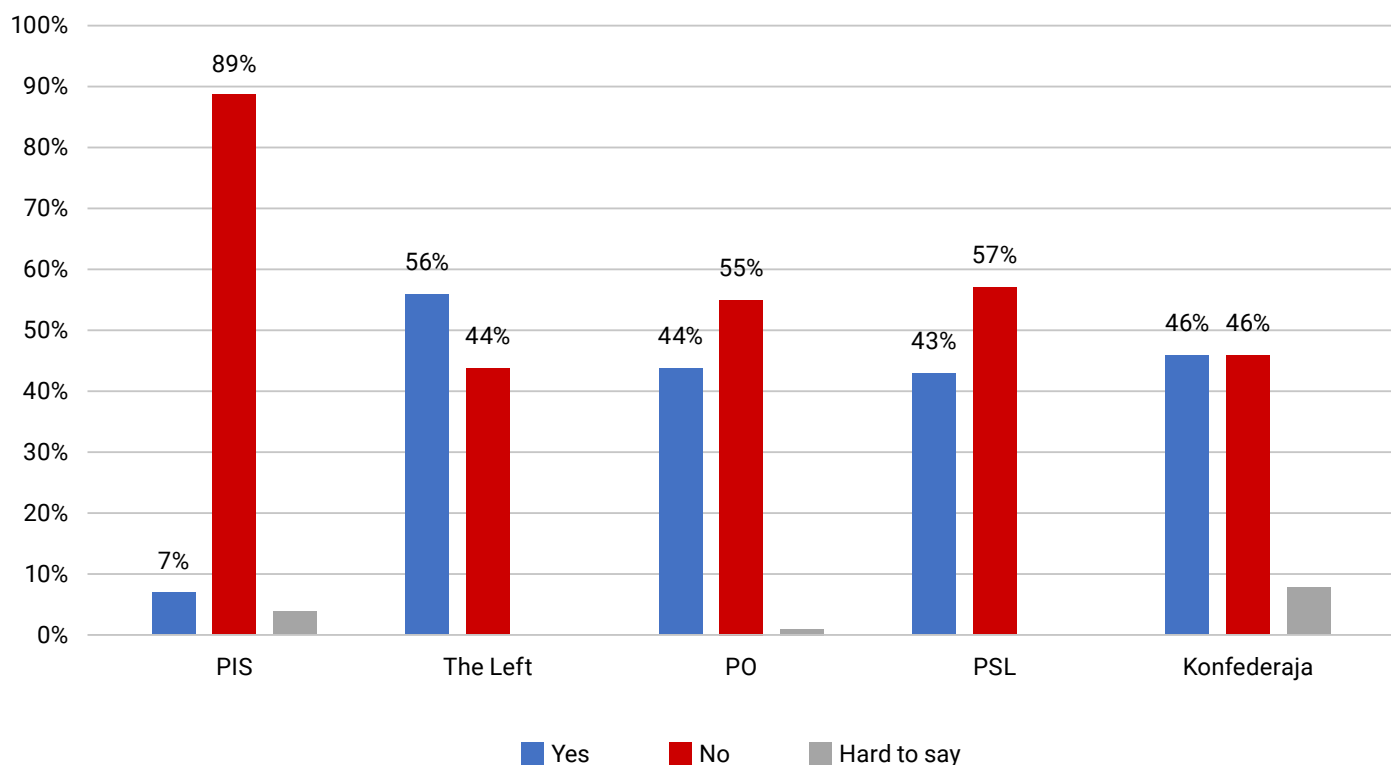
# **LEFT OF THE LIBERALS - THE POPULIST RIGHT OF THE STATISTS?**

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When analysing the dichotomous nature between current SLD and PiS voters, it is also worth examining the difference in socioeconomic views. One of the critical programs of the post-2015 PiS government was the 500-plus program, which entailed a monthly cash transfer of 500 Polish zloty for the second and each subsequent child until they turned 18. The mere announcement of the program in 2015, its introduction in 2016 and expansion of the program in

2019 to include the first child laid the foundation for PiS political hegemony in recent years.<sup>33</sup> The opposition parties were ambivalent about this reform. The PO voted against 500 plus; the SLD, which remained outside parliament, favoured the reform with the comment that top earners should not receive this benefit. In contrast, a slightly different attitude toward the 500-plus program is observed among voters themselves.

**FIGURE 2.** Answers from the electorate to the question should the government reduce payments from the 500-plus program due to the effects of the pandemic?



Source: *Oko Press*.<sup>34</sup>

In May 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, Ipsos conducted a survey for *OKO Press*, which tested the willingness of voters for each party to limit the 500-plus program due to the high state spending associated with the

pandemic. As we can see in Figure 2, voters of the Left were the biggest supporters of limiting 500 plus, even outpacing supporters of the libertarian and far-right confederation.

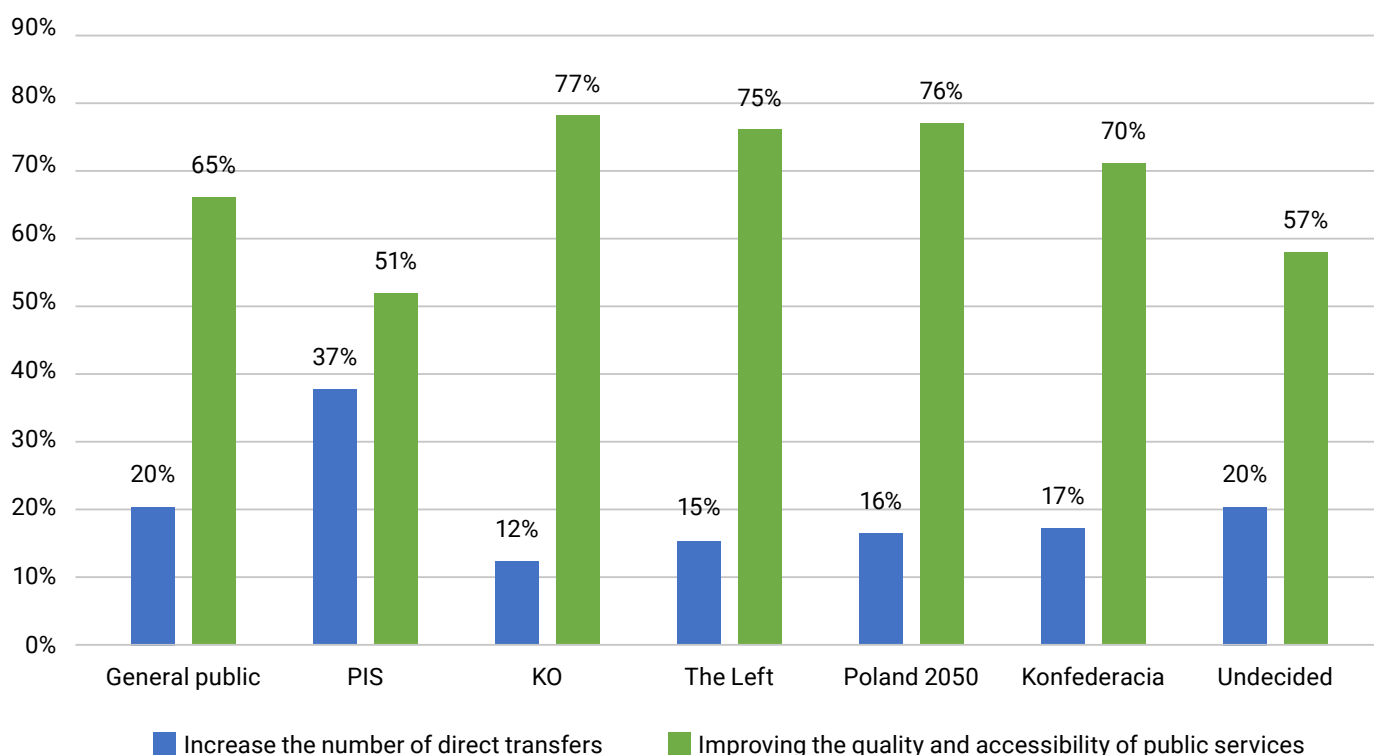
One way to explain this attitude of leftist voters is their intense dislike of PiS. As Sadura and Sierakowski note in their research:

The electorate of the Left is strongly anti-PiS. 80% of the 'core' voters of the Left parties believe that PiS is a threat to Poland and should be democratically removed from power as soon

as possible (for comparison: 68% of the core PO/N electorate and 58% of the Left's reserve electorate believe so).<sup>35</sup>

It is also interesting to note the apparent split between voters of PiS and opposition parties (including the Left) regarding attitudes toward the welfare state and its form of activity.

**FIGURE 3.** Opinions of the electorate on the form of the welfare state activity.



Source: *More in Common*.<sup>36</sup>

As can be seen in Figure 3, all groups of voters favour improving the quality and accessibility of public services, but 37% of PiS voters prefer a system based on increasing direct cash transfers. We do not know to what extent the views of Left voters, in this case, are a product of social-democratic opinions on the state's role and its responsibility for creating universal public services and to what extent they are opposed to the transfer model that PiS has popularised.

The dichotomous nature of the centre-left and PiS elections is also pointed out by Machowski, who analysed the portraits of the electorate in the upcoming parliamentary elections based on the First and Second Citizen Surveys conducted on 1-13 March and 12-18 June 2023, as commissioned by the Long Table Forum Foundation and "Gazeta Wyborcza" by Kantar Public.



**TABLE 18.** Portrait of voters according to the First and Second Citizen Surveys.

THE LEFT	PiS
<p>Voters of the Left – their average age is 49, but this average consists of more than 40% of voters under 40 and more than 40% in their 60s (only 15% are aged 40-59). It can be seen that today's Left is, on one hand, indeed the New Left – younger and more feminine (23% of the Left's electorate is made up of women aged 18-39; this is the highest percentage of all groupings), but, on the other hand, it is the "old" Left. – i.e., voters who voted for the SLD in the days of Jozef Oleksy and Leszek Miller. The Left's voters are well-educated, with an average of 13.8 years of education (the best result of all groupings); 39% have higher education; and only 11% have primary or vocational education. The Left is an urban party (only 20% live in the countryside) but primarily a metropolitan party (57% of its voters live in cities over 100,000). The Left's electorate is very liberal, with 72 points on the statism-liberalism economic scale and 69 points on the conservatism-liberalism worldview scale.</p>	<p>PiS voters are the oldest electorate – the average age is nearly 59 (as many as 50% of PiS voters are aged 60+). This is the only electorate with a noticeable over-representation of women – 59%, so many that nearly 60% are 60 and older. PiS is a decidedly rural party – as many as 52% of its voters live there. PiS voters are also characterised by the lowest level of education – an average of 11.6 years of education (as many as 50% of PiS voters have completed only elementary or vocational school, with only 17% having a university education). PiS voters are very conservative in worldview – 33 points on the 0-100 point scale of worldview conservatism-liberalism and adhere to very statist economic views – 31 points on the 0-100 point scale of economic statism-liberalism.</p>

Source: Wyborcza.pl.<sup>37</sup>

The examples cited in Table 18 clearly show that the voters of the Left and PiS are on the socio-economic and cultural antipodes. They differ in age, place of residence, level of education, approach to social policy and role of the state in modern Poland.

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# CONCLUSIONS

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Poland's centre left has remained a second-rate political force, at best, for more than 18 years. Since 2005, it has not taken part in governing the country; from 2015 to 2019, it was outside parliament. Its return to the Sejm four years ago, with the best result since 2001 in terms of the absolute number of votes, broke the progressive trend of marginalisation of social democracy. The passing parliamentary term, however, showed that the PiS-PO duopoly could effectively deprive the Left of political oxygen. Polling support for the joint list of the New Left, Together, Labor Union and PPS oscillates around 10%, which is worse than the 2019 election result. The composition of the electorate is also a challenge for Polish social democracy. As Sadura and Sierakowski note, the Left in Poland faces the following challenges:

a lack of faith in the ability to carry out the reform program among the same people who at the same time argue for its necessity (lack of faith in the state's capabilities); little interest in public services on the part of young people, among whom the electorate of the Left is growing the fastest (it is primarily the young who would like to see the abolition of ZUS and the 500-plus program). The selfish choices on public services of wealthy people, among whom, at the same time, trust in the state is the highest, and thus also the potential for supporting social reforms (they support the Left most often only because of progressive views related to the secular state and defence of minority rights rather than social issues).<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, in presenting its traditionally social-democratic program, the Left must realise its incompatibility with the profile of its own voters.

However, despite the permanent loss of some popular class voters to PiS, the Left should not stop fighting to regain them. The demands for the construction of state and local government rental housing, the introduction of a fair and progressive tax system, good-quality universal public services, and decently paid workers could be the building blocks of a Polish "people's house" (*Folkhemmet*), in which workers, farmers and middle-class people alike could live. Attempts to combine worldview liberalism, the

principled struggle for women and LGBTQ+ people's rights and postulating a viable separation of Church and State should be given equal priority. Polish social democracy should be able to combine social-economic and cultural aspects in its message. We are talking about a skilful narrative in which the Left is always on the side of the weaker: a worker illegally fired for trade union activity; a woman denied a pregnancy termination procedure; an elderly person in need of a "widow's pension"; or a gay man beaten in the street by the radical right. The remedy for these problems must be an efficient state that cares about citizens, regardless of age, gender, wealth, social class membership or sexual orientation.

The success of the strategy of Polish social democracy and its strongest party, the *Nowa Lewica* (NL, New Left), will determine whether the described model can be an antidote to the crisis of other centre-left parties in the region, especially in the Czech Republic and Hungary.

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Poland has been governed alternately by the populist and neoliberal right for 18 years. During this time, we have witnessed a steady decline in the importance of Poland's center-left, including its strongest party, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD, Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej). Over the years, Law and Justice (PiS, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) has successively gained support, becoming the dominant party in Poland in 2015. We can see that, over the past two decades, we have witnessed interdependent processes: an exponential increase in the electoral popularity of the populist right in Poland and an uneven decline in the political importance of social democracy. This analysis aims to find a causal relationship between these phenomena, focusing on analyzing the support flow between the SLD and PiS in the group of voters of the so-called "popular class."

For the purpose of this study, IBRiS conducted in-depth quantitative research entitled "The popular class - its social and political profile" to answer the question of who the representatives of this class are, what political views they hold, and to what extent they have changed their voting behavior in recent years. The study's author also focused on analyzing the spatial support of the SLD and PiS. In doing so, he tried to explain the sources of the dichotomic nature of the voters of the illiberal, populist right, and social democracy in Poland.

The study's conclusions on the relationship between the popular class and the Democratic Left Alliance may prove helpful for the successor of the SLD, the New Left (NL, Nowa Lewica), and European social democracy as a whole. Regaining the trust of the popular class is crucial in reducing the popularity of the populist and far-right in the whole Europe.

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