

Legacies of Authoritarian Resistance and Present-day Democratic Resilience in Poland

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December 2023

Abstract

Until recently, an empirical regularity, backed by theoretical arguments, has been that backsliders who stay in office for at least two electoral cycles, are never voted out until eventually democracy breaks down. A recent case of backsliding reversal in Poland has defied this regularity. What explains the behavior of voters who switch away from supporting the incumbent? While authoritarian incumbents in democratic backsliding regimes often enjoy widespread public approval, this popular support as well as changes in this support are far from uniform. We exploit this variation to test with subnational data a theory of inter-generational transmission of pro-democratic resistance values. We theorize that people who grew up where resistance to a prior authoritarian regime was commonplace may find it easier to resist the undermining of liberal democracy and the rule of law. We hypothesize that democratic values rooted in past anti-authoritarian resistance may be passed on through family ties and a strong and enduring democratic local civic culture. Our findings demonstrate how historical opposition to autocratic rule may facilitate resistance to democratic backsliding today and highlight the potential democratic legacies of past authoritarian experiences.

The authors are grateful to Olga Bednarek for stellar research assistance and to Barbara Piotrowska for sharing her data. All mistakes are the authors' responsibility. Monika Nalepa is grateful to the Pearson Institute for Global Conflict for financial support.

1 Introduction

The last decade and a half has ushered in a new mode of regime change from democracy to authoritarianism: democratic backsliding (Grillo et al., 2024). In contrast to coups d'état, which end democratic rule abruptly, backsliding unfolds gradually over long stretches of time, while incumbents often unbeknownst to voters chip away at institutions that were previously set up to constrain executive power.

While the literature on the inception of democratic backsliding is quite advanced (Chiopris et al., 2023; Svobik, 2020; Luo and Przeworski, 2019; Lust and Waldner, 2015), scholars have written much less about how backsliding incumbents stay in power.¹ Works discussing failed backsliding episodes are even more rare, even though the reversal of a once commenced process of regime change is at least as important as a successful episode. Of course, such episodes of backsliding reversals are also rare. Among them is the case of the Polish 2023 parliamentary elections, where after the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party won two consecutive national elections (in 2015 and 2019), only to lose the third.² According to Adam Przeworski (2019), this would make Poland the first backsliding democracy to reverse course after the incumbent had been in office for two consecutive terms. Such democratic reversals are puzzling as political scientists have theorized (Grillo and Prato, 2023; Luo and Przeworski, 2019) and empirically demonstrated (Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023; Waldner and Lust, 2018) that once backsliders begin to dismantle lateral institutions that constrain executives, such as judiciaries, or tinker with media freedoms or the way elections are organized, the backsliding progresses. The outcome of the 2023 election begs the question: when can a backsliding course be reversed?

The literature on democratic backsliding has struggled to explain under what circumstances voters withdraw their support for authoritarian incumbents leaving us with few clues as to why across all three elections, PiS support has varied so widely across the country. Neither the urban-rural or economic development divides are capable of explaining this variation. In light of the

¹For exceptions see research by Cinar (2023) and Szilagyi and Bozoki (2015)

²To be clear, the incumbent PiS managed to secure a plurality of seats in the legislature in 2023, but since it failed to secure—even with coalition partners—an absolute majority, the support was insufficient to create a cabinet

inability of such macro-level approaches to explain why some voters withdraw their support for PiS, but not others, we turn to Poland’s rich historical experience of authoritarian resistance. In the 1980s, large social movements such as Solidarity frequently challenged the authoritarian communist regime through strikes, protests, illegal education, and ultimately by creating the “Solidarity” trade union, the first political organization independent of the communist government. We investigate whether past activism in Solidarity, in addition to current institutions and conditions, could be associated with contemporary opposition to authoritarian rule. Because four decades separate the peak of Solidarity activism and the 2023 election we also investigate mechanisms of cultural transmission of political values across generations. In sum, we probe whether resistance to backsliders can be the result of political socialization under autocracy.

In order to vote out of power backsliding incumbents, some of their former supporters have to switch allegiances and start backing the opposition. The target of our investigation is to uncover the sources of such newly found resistance. Our approach is to investigate the role of legacies of opposition activism, drawing on evidence of anticommunist resistance across 49 Polish administrative regions.

To explain patterns through which the consolidation of PiS rule in 2019 was followed by electoral losses we leverage two approaches: an observational analysis using newly released granular data on the internment of opposition members during Martial Law in communist Poland in the early 1980s and an original survey experiment leveraging inter-generational transmission of past authoritarian resistance. For the observational analysis of data on the internment of opposition members, we geo-code the interned dissidents by place of residence and allocate them to electoral precincts. We next correlate measures of the local strength of anti-authoritarian networks under communist rule with changes in PiS electoral support over election cycles and measure transmission channels at the municipality (gmina) level. Contrary to initial expectations, however, we uncovered a non-monotonic pattern of changing PiS support between the 2015-2019 and 2019-2023 cycles. We offer four hypotheses that can account for these patterns, one of which is consistent with our theory of how opposition legacies persist. After testing and rejecting alternative explana-

tion, we propose that backsliding reversals require are the product of historical anti-authoritarian resistance when democratic values are salient for voters. As further evidence that is suggestive of a transmission mechanism we present results linking internment levels during Martial Law to voting patterns in the first fully free parliamentary elections of 1991.³ The final substantive section of the paper reports the results of our pilot survey to investigate inter-generational transmission and the influence of past authoritarian resistance on democratic attitudes and behavior today.

2 Background

In this section, we open with a summary of the most recent democratic backsliding episode, which is followed by a section describing the relevant historical information which we drawn on in our explanations.

2.1 Contemporary backsliding under PiS and its opposition

In 2015, after eight years in opposition benches, PiS won an absolute majority, 51%, of seats in the Lower House, securing enough support to create a majority cabinet. While in power, PiS remolded many formerly democratic institutions into extensions of its dominance. Examples ranged from the judiciary to the security apparatus to public media. While implementing these reforms, the ruling party undercut countless norms of fair play and reciprocity in politics.

Despite these questionable reforms, in the 2019 election, its vote share rose from 37.6% to 43.6% and it retained the absolute majority. Upon that victory it continued to fight sanctions the EU was trying to impose on Poland for violating its charter,⁴ put new restrictions on judges and journalists, particularly those who did not relentlessly criticize the opposition, and criminalized abortion. PiS would refer to the opposition using the term “total opposition” to characterize it as anti-systemic. Yet, support for PiS policies varied widely across the country and, as we show in our analyses, neither the urban-rural nor economic divides could fully account for the variation.

³In the next version of the paper, we plan to supplement this evidence with data from the semi-free election on 1989.

⁴specifics here

Change in PiS vote-share between 2015-2019

Change in PiS vote-share between 2019-2023

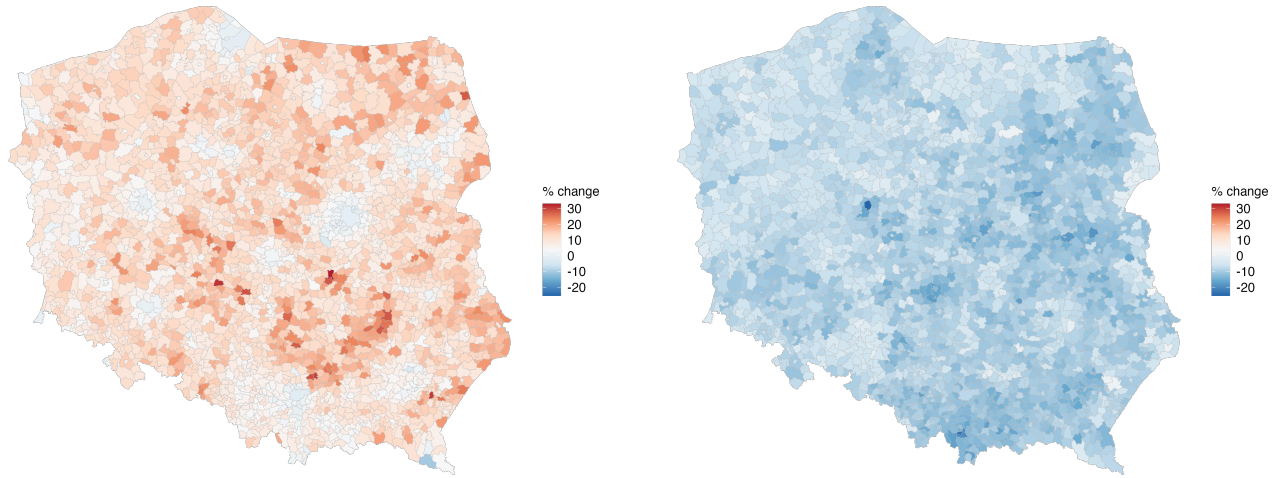


Figure 1: PiS’s voteshare gains/losses 2015-2019 (left) & 2019-2023 (right)

In particular, in 2023 PiS support weakened considerably in many previous strongholds, such as the rural Southeast, for no obvious reason. Consider the two maps below showing changes in PiS support in 2015-2019 (left) and 2019-2023 (right).

The tone of the right-hand figure is blue in contrast to the tone of the left-hand figure because PiS support increased in 2019, while it dropped in 2023. Critically, however, the areas where the great losses were suffered in 2023 were not the areas with the smallest gains in 2019. Moreover, neither the gains or losses are concentrated in one geographic region (although some losses appear closer to the Ukrainian boarder in 2023—more on that later).

2.2 Historical background: Anti-authoritarian resistance under communism in Poland

During communist rule under the PZPR (Polish United Workers’ Party, the name of the Polish communist party), the communist party’s dominance was periodically challenged by groups whose interests it was supposed to be representing, such as workers. This resistance culminated in 1980 with the creation of “Solidarity,” the largest social movement in the Soviet Block, completely independent of the PZPR. Ostensibly, Solidarity was a trade union, but in reality, it was much

more: it challenged the authoritarian communist regime through strikes, protests, underground education, and other illegal and subversive actions. Eventually, it organized an inter-factory nation-wide strike that brought Poland's economy to a halt and forced the government to negotiate with an organization that according to Poland's constitution at the time was still illegal. Brought to the brink, with more than half of the country on strike (including many militia units), the Communists were forced to meet the demands of striking workers and recognize the legality of Solidarity as a trade union. Solidarity began to enroll members and grew in strength exponentially.

At its peak, Solidarity had over 10 million members, a third of the working-age population in Poland and including many intellectual and artistic elites who nobody would think of as requiring a trade union. After 18 months, with Solidarity cells being created in core communist institutions such as the Citizens' Militia, the communist regime felt threatened (and possibly coaxed) to the point of implementing Martial Law. On December 13, 1981, Martial Law decrees were passed in the PZPR-dominated Sejm. But arrests of Solidarity leaders began in the night of the 12th. Martial Law outlawed and sanctioned the political repression of Solidarity members and its affiliate organizations. Over the course of several weeks in December 1981 the communist police force arrested 15,000 solidarity leaders and placed them in "internment camps," which essentially were places of isolation.

Despite the extensive arrests, Solidarity continued to function illegally, attracting—especially for an illegal organization—wide membership. By 1988 it grew into a powerful anti-authoritarian force with activities spanning strikes, public lectures, distributing and publishing illegal newspapers, etc. In 1988, the communists once more were forced to the negotiating table, this time agreeing to extend the right to contesting elections to solidarity candidates, the first in a succession of moves that culminated in a full-blown transition to democracy.

In this paper, we will make use of the unique fact that the full documentation of orders of internment for each individual Solidarity leader has been preserved and allows us to trace each person to where he or she lived and worked as well as where (and for how long) they were interned. Before we show the results of our analysis however, we describe our theoretical expectations.

3 Inter-generational transmission of democratic values and backsliding into autocracy

Scholars have offered numerous reasons for why opposition to authoritarian power-grabs is not uniform. According to Svolik (2020), more polarized voters are more likely to back an authoritarian incumbent. According to Chiopris et al. (2023) voters with smaller attachments to democratic values will be more likely to support a “closet autocrat,” that is someone in power who *could* have authoritarian ambitions. According to Gratton and Lee (2020), support for open backsliders is related to how much voters value liberty and democracy relative to security. Yet others have drawn attention to reversion scenarios and their power to sway voters into upholding subversive incumbents to avoid incompetent ones (Luo and Przeworski, 2019). A critical role, however, identified by the political economy literature is played by uncertainty of voters regarding the true intentions of the autocrat about “how bad things can get” (Chiopris et al., 2023; Grillo and Prato, 2023).⁵

The broader implications for Poland from the literature on backsliding is that to explain backsliding reversals, we need to focus attention less on what PO voters do and focus more on PiS voters and the correlates of their vote switching behavior.

In addition to these contemporary features, there are also historical structural determinants that could influence where support for backsliders is stronger. Scholars have identified the role of historical legacies in shaping political behavior, trust in political institutions, and even corruption (Popescu, 2023; Vogler, 2019; Rozenas et al., 2017; Wang, 2021; Acharya et al., 2016). In the case of Poland, a key legacy of this kind are the so-called *Partitions* that refer to the divvying up of the territory of Poland in 1895 by Russia, Prussia and the Hapsburg Empire. For 121 years the present day territory of Poland was divided among three different states, with different political systems, affording territories they controlled different degrees of autonomy, and political representation. Scholars of contemporary Poland have uncovered correlations between such imperial legacies—

⁵We note here that according to Grillo and Prato (2023) polarization is not necessary for backsliding to happen.

that is formerly belonging to Russia, Prussia or Austria—and voting behavior from municipal elections to the voting for candidates to the Euro parliament (Grabowski et al., 2018; Davies, 2005; Paczos, 2017; Jasiewicz et al., 2009; Rykiel, 2011; Kowalski and Śleszyński, 2000; Bielecka et al., 2006). Surprisingly, however, these legacies were not at play when determining the patterns of switching away from PiS.⁶

A key problem with the explanations of electoral behavior using imperial partitions is that they lack a theoretical mechanism. Moreover recently, Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya (2015) have shown that rather than imperial legacies, voting is better explained by urbanization and industrialization. At the same time, when investigating Partition legacies, these authors find that despite the disappearance of differences in incomes, education, corruption, and trust in government across Partitions, “differences in the intensity of religious practices and in beliefs in democratic ideals” continue to be detectable and conjecture that they persist because of “inter-generational within-family transmission” (Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya, 2015, page 56).

In the same vein, Becker et al. (2020) find stronger evidence for transmission of values by identifying higher education attainment among populations forcibly transferred following World War II from Eastern Poland (Kresy) to Western Poland. Generally, in historical political economy, there appears to be consensus that cultural values and religious beliefs persist longer and in ways that are easier to detect than legacies of economic deprivation or under-investment (Charnysh et al., 2023; Charnysh and Peisakhin, 2022). These results also provide some evidence that “inter-generational within-family transmission” of values is the key channel of persistence for historical influences on contemporary outcomes, including in Poland.

Another important reason for uneven fluctuations in PiS support across Poland is economic development. In the early post-transition period, the urban-rural divide overlapped to a considerable degree with regime-divide among voters. The term “regime divide” that is the cleavage between parties that are communist successors and dissident successors was coined by Grzymala-Busse (2001) to explain why certain coalition governments failed to form in Poland even though

⁶Note that even if one were to see a pattern of switching away from PiS coinciding with legacies of the Hapsburg empire, these legacies were definitely not at play in 2019 in the same way, as switching away then took place rather in territories belonging to the Prussian partition. Jacob (2023)

the parties that would have formed them were programmatically connected. The term can easily be extended from elites to masses—to describe the growing chasm between voters supporting communist successor parties on the one hand and voters supporting dissident successor parties on the other. The overlap in Poland, of course, ended with the implosion of the post-communist SLD. In the decade that followed, politicians who used to form the Solidarity opposition created two types of post-dissident parties: on the one end of the new ideological spectrum was the liberal and secular Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), led by Donald Tusk, while on the opposite end was Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), a party that was traditionalist but also supportive of an extensive social net.⁷ Because rural values tend to coincide with religious attachments and demands for a social safety net, rural areas became more prone to vote for PiS. Whether we should expect rural PiS voters to be more or less reluctant to persist in their support following democratic backsliding compared to urban voters is not obvious, however.

In this paper, we argue that today's opposition to authoritarian power grabs by PiS may also be a result of socialization and cultural transmission of deeply rooted political values. Broad resistance to the previous authoritarian regime (the communists) has left its mark on society and has provided impetus for resisting democratic backsliding. People who participated in anti-authoritarian resistance, or grew up where resistance to a prior authoritarian regime was commonplace, or whose family took part in anti-authoritarian resistance may have found it easier to resist the undermining of liberal democracy and the rule of law by PiS. We hypothesize that anti-communist resistance initiated the transmission of democratic values across generations. We also theorize that such transmission can be a broader characteristic of local communities as it intensifies with close family ties, a strong and enduring democratic local civic culture, and democratic-minded local elites.

There is a large literature on the persistent influence of repressive authoritarian institutions on contemporary political outcomes. Political scientists have identified a continuing across generations, relationship between falling victim to political violence and political attitudes. For instance, Lupu and Peisakhin (2017) find that the descendants of Crimean Tatars who were prosecuted by

⁷For more on the substantive interpretation of ideological cleavages formed after the dissipation of the regime divide see Carroll and Nalepa ([n. d.])

Stalin and who suffered more intensely identify more strongly with their ethnic group, support the Crimean Tatar political leadership more strongly and are more hostile toward Russia. Song (2023), who studies the effects of the Gwangju Massacre in South Korea, finds that individuals who were between 17 and 25 when they suffered violence from the hands of the state trusted the democratic government less later on. Finally, in the only paper that uses the case of Poland, albeit in a more historically removed period, Charnysh and Peisakhin (2022) find that the effects of forceful relocations operate through communities. When Poland’s borders shifted 50 percent to the West, residents of formerly Eastern Poland in the former Hapsburg empire were forcefully transferred to the so-called “Recovered territories” in the West of what Poland is today. However, some of them were relocated to villages where they formed majorities of residents, whereas others were relocated to form minorities. Charnysh and Peisakhin (2022) find that the ability to preserve values characteristic of the Habsburg empire (higher religiosity, patriotism, but also voting for PiS in higher numbers) was only detectable in the towns with majority relocations from Poland’s East.

This newly discovered role of communities bolsters the argument that the intensity of anti-communist resistance in different parts of Poland could have long-term effects.

4 Patterns in relationships between internment under communist rule and voting in 2015-2023

Our approach to investigating historical determinants of present-day opposition to authoritarianism is twofold: first, it consists of observational analysis of internment data and second, of a survey experiment. While analyzing the observational data, we discovered a surprising non-monotonic patterned and pause to investigate what may be driving it. This leads us to modify our theory somewhat. We discuss each in turn. The goal of the first part of the analysis is to see whether there is even correlational evidence linking histories of opposition activism with switching away from PiS voting.

4.1 Observational Analysis: Internment for Anti-Authoritarian Activities and Present-Day Democratic Resilience

Our observational research design leverages newly released granular data on the internment of opposition members during Martial Law in late 1980 through early 1981 in Poland. Access to these data was made available recently via the web by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) of the Polish state.⁸ It contains data on the roughly 10,000 internees who were leading Solidarity activists and who were arrested under Martial Law decrees.⁹ The IPN website contains uniquely detailed information on the resisters of the authoritarian regime: their names, dates of birth, how long they were interned for, the reason for internment, and internment location. Associate with the name of each internee is also a pdf file of the original internment decision that additionally includes their place of residence, employment, birthplace, and detailed justification for the internment decision. We scraped and through OCR reading and manual hand-coding of the original documents recovered all this data for each internee.

Details on internees, particularly their residence and employment locations have allowed us to create a dataset that geo-locates internees to current-day Polish municipalities (gminas). We then matched these locations with disaggregated contemporary electoral data. This exercise allows us to recover the correlation between intensity of anti-authoritarian resistance and changes in electoral support of the backslider party, PiS over several electoral cycles, including 2015-2019—when it started to engage in dismantling democratic institutions and norms—and 2019-2023 — when it continued to engage in backsliding. Full details of the process of creating the dataset are available in the Appendix.

Using the geo-coded data on interned dissidents by place of residence, we created measures of the strength of local anti-authoritarian networks under communist rule in each gmina. We use two such measures. The first is a simple count of internees per 1000 members of the popu-

⁸Specifically on [this domain](#).

⁹The spree of arrests and internment was highly comprehensive across the whole country. As news spread about the arrests among Solidarity activists, some took the risk of hiding from the authorities, but it required staying in different apartments every few days, something only the top leaders were able to do and afford.

lation, regardless of how many days they were interned for. The second is a more fine-grained indicator of the total numbers of internee days for a given location, again normalized relative to the population numbers. We expect that it captures the intensity of anti-communist resistance because, in any given gmina, the total number of internee days increases with the “severity” of the anti-communist resistance activity. The motivation for using this second measure, however, is more than just obtaining a more granular indicator of anti-authoritarian resistance. One of the goals interning dissidents during Martial Law was for the secret police to learn more about the internal organization of Solidarity by recruiting high ranking informers. To that end, every interned dissident was interviewed by a secret police officer who tried to recruit them as a secret informer (Nalepa, 2010). According to some sources, hundreds of new informers were recruited during the internment phase of the Martial Law regime (Osinski and Rybarczyk, 2014). One of the reasons internees would succumb to the pressure of becoming informers was to leave internment early. If consent to become an informer is an indicator of weaker opposition commitments, which in turn resulted in fewer days in isolation, internee-days would offer a more precise measure of opposition to the regime.

First, we correlate these with changes in PiS electoral support since it came to power in 2015 and as it engaged in backsliding between 2015 and 2019 and 2019 and 2023, controlling for powiat-level fixed effects (powiats represent the administrative units above gminas). After uncovering correlations, we will hypothesize and develop measures of transmission channels at the gmina level. Although we focus on the periods 2015-2019 and 2019-2023, for comparison, we also calculated the change in PiS voteshare between the elections in 2011 and 2015, so changes in PiS support between the election prior to and the election when PiS came into power.

To obtain results presented in figures 2 through 3 we ran the following model:

$$\Delta_i^{PiS} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(internees) + \beta_2(PiSbaseline) + \beta_3 \log(population) + \sum_{j=1}^{380} \gamma_j X_j + u_i \quad (1)$$

where γ_j are the powiat-level fixed effects.

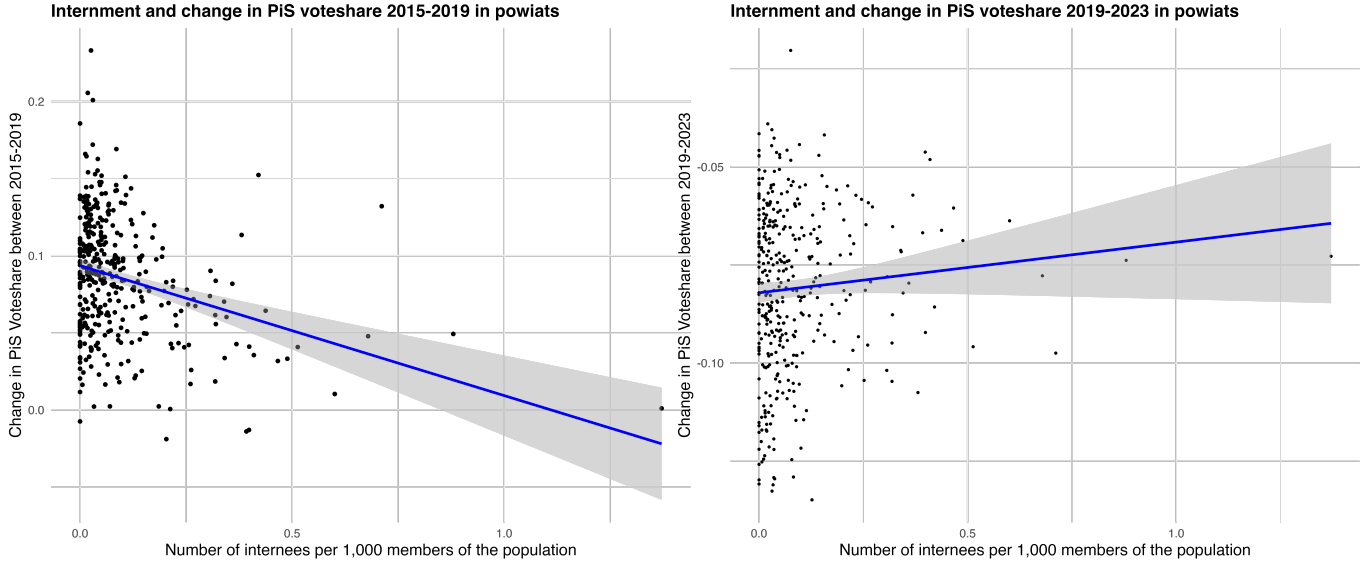


Figure 2: Interned dissidents and change in PiS Voteshare 2015-19 (left) & 2019-2023 (right)

The table containing the full regression is presented below also.

The results show that between 2015 and 2019, PiS vote-share indeed increased less in areas that have a higher share of internees in the population than in areas with lower shares of internees. There is a similar significant negative association with the other indicator of internee days. This trend is consistent with the relationship we hypothesized above. We also note, that the overall support for PiS *increased* between 2015 and 2019.

However, by contrast, the change in vote share between 2019 and 2023 is positively related to the share of internees: support for PiS in areas with larger internee shares decreased less than in areas with fewer internees. In contrast to the previous time interval (2015-2019) overall PiS support decreased between 2019 and 2023. Hence the different wording in describing slopes in opposite directions.

(For comparison, the change in PiS voteshare between 2011 and 2015 is negatively associated with the share of internees in the population, but the effect is very small and not consistently significant.)

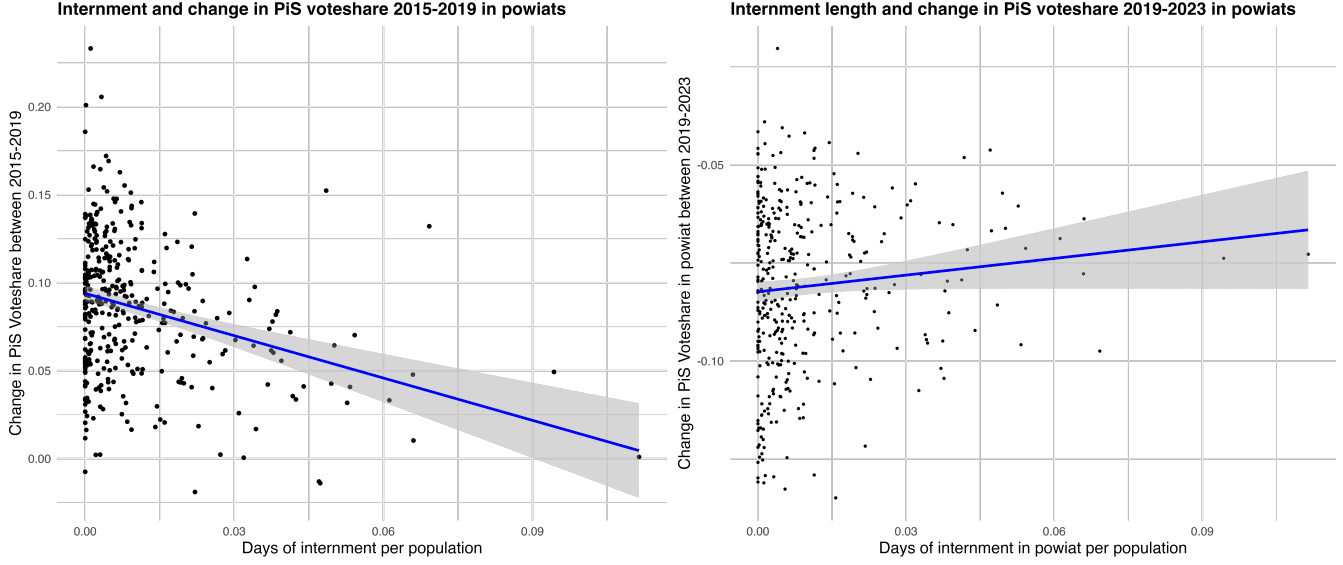


Figure 3: Days of internment and change in PiS Voteshare 2015-19 (left) & 2019-2023 (right)

Dependent Variable:	Change in PiS Vote-Share			
Election cycle:	2015-2019	2019-2023	2015-2019	2019-2023
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Number of internees per 1,000 in population	-0.0143*** (0.0036)	0.0052*** (0.0020)		
Total days of internment per population			-0.1571*** (0.0403)	0.0501** (0.0194)
Population in 2014 (log)	0.0409*** (0.0107)	0.0671*** (0.0057)	0.0411*** (0.0107)	0.0670*** (0.0057)
Number of votes for PiS in 2015 (log)	-0.0692*** (0.0106)		-0.0693*** (0.0106)	
Number of votes for PiS in 2019 (log)		-0.0698*** (0.0060)		-0.0697*** (0.0060)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>				
Powiat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
Observations	2,494	2,494	2,494	2,494
R ²	0.67192	0.61758	0.67255	0.61761
Within R ²	0.33345	0.21375	0.33474	0.21382

Clustered (Powiat) standard-errors in parentheses

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 1: Main regression results: Internment and changes in PiS vote-share between 2015-2019 and 2019-2023

Of course, these results are not immune to several sources of endogeneity. Our regressions

account for differential trends of PiS support between urban and rural areas (hence the log of population controls in our regression), different partition legacies or any other legacies for that matter, which are accounted for by the powiat fixed-effects, and also baseline PiS support, which is measured by PiS vote-share in the first of the elections where we compare changes in PiS support (so for instance the baseline PiS support is measured by PiS voteshare in the 2015 election when the outcome variable is changes in PiS vote-share between 2015 and 2019). While we include fixed effects for powiats ($n = 380$), the administrative divisions above gminas, there might be other sources of differential change in support for PiS across gminas that are correlated with internment for anti-communist activity. Differences in economic performance are one, centrally controlled funding to regions, would be another (but see below). Moreover, an important factor our correlational analysis might be missing is social capital. In his 2023 dissertation, Marc Jacob (2023) writes about the role of citizen values in changing voting behavior and accounts for the strength of communal values using data on library membership and sports' club participation. In the regressions below, we address these alternative explanations, adding to our regression model gmina-level data on urban-rural differences, centrally controlled funding to regions, and sports' club memberships.

The upshot of our analysis, however, is that the trend exhibited in the second term that PiS was in power is the opposite of what we expected and represents a surprising reversal compared to the the first term. We consider several explanations for this below.

4.2 Possible explanations

In this section, we develop and probe explanations as to why historical anti-authoritarian resistance may have decreased contemporary support for the democratic backslider in the 2015-2019 but not in the 2019-2023 electoral cycle. It is striking that we obtain a substantive and significant negative effect of internment on decreases in present-day support for PiS between 2015-2019, while we have a smaller but positive and significant effect for increases in PiS support between 2019-2023. It appears as though historical anti-authoritarian resistance may have inspired defection from the

ruling democratic backslider in the 2019 election but did not have a similar effect in 2023. In this section, we investigate possible reasons for these contrasting results.

First, we address the possibility that our results may be due to issues of endogeneity. Although in the comparison above, we are comparing two adjacent electoral terms in the same country in gminas belonging in the same powiat (the administrative level above gminas), our gmina-level analysis may suffer from issues of ecological inferences and the significant results may be explained by factors correlated with internment that had a different effect on electoral behavior in 2019 and 2023. To rule out this possibility, we gather data on and operationalize three potential factors that may affect changes in incumbent support differently in 2015-2019 and 2019-2023 and may also be correlated with our proxy for anti-authoritarian resistance and include them as controls in the regression models. These are: level of urbanization, local social capital, and potentially politically motivated intergovernmental transfers to gminas from the PiS central government. We show that the results remain significant and substantively large after the inclusion of all three controls, allowing us to rule out all three endogeneity concerns.

We then turn to present-day issue salience in electoral campaigns as a conditioning variables as a potential explanation for the observed pattern. We argue that democracy as an issue must be a salient factor in electoral choice for historical anti-authoritarian resistance to affect present-day resistance to democratic backsliding, i.e. defection from supporting a democratic backslider. Only in elections where the incumbent’s undemocratic record is an important determinant of voter support does historical anti-authoritarian resistance inspire defection from the democratic backslider.

In this section, we articulate and test (or propose how we will test) these potential explanations.

4.2.1 Explanation 1: Urban-rural differences

According to the first, alternative explanation, what drives our differential results in 2015-2019 and 2019-2023 electoral cycles are not the differential effects of internment, but rather the fact that rural gminas follow different patterns of voting than urban gminas. According to this explanation,

urbanization is correlated with internment simply because Solidarity was a trade union and so its membership was concentrated in cities. Moreover, the effect of urbanization levels on PiS support may have changed between 2019 and 2023 and as urbanization is correlated with interneers per population, this too would explain our results. To address this concern, we control for population density (a measure of urbanization) and reestimate our main regression models. We see in Figure 4.2.1 that while population density is a significant predictor of changes in PiS support, its inclusion does not affect the significance or the size of the estimated effect of internment on changes in PiS support in either 2015-2019 or 2019-2023. The direction of the relationship is the same as previously: in the term 2015-2019, having more interneers lowers the rise in PiS voteshare between 2015 and 2019, while in the voteshare decreases slightly lower with more interneers between 2019 and 2023. Hence, it appears that controlling for population density preserves the previously identified relationship at the level of gminas ($n=2,494$). However, we note and report in the appendix that the significance of the effect of interneers disappears if the analysis is done at the level of powiats ($n=380$).

4.2.2 Explanation 2: Local social capital

The second alternative explanation focuses on social capital. It may be that the amount of local social capital affected PiS support differently in 2023 and 2019 and is correlated with historical anti-authoritarian resistance. This could be the case if local communities with stronger within-community ties defected from PiS in greater numbers already in 2019, while communities with weaker ties only followed suit in 2023. At the same time, it is also very plausible that anti-authoritarian resistance under communism was also greater in communities with stronger ties. For this explanation to account for the patterns we observe in Figures 3 through 2, anti-authoritarian resistance and social capital must be highly correlated and this variation in social capital must have a strong enough explanatory power to explain differences between gminas in the same powiat (i.e., so our powiat-level fixed effects would not control for this possibility). To rule out this explanation, we operationalize and control for local social capital in the regression models. We

Dependent Variable:	Change in PiS Vote-Share			
Election cycle:	2015-2019	2019-2023	2015-2019	2019-2023
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Number of internees per 1,000 in population	-0.0125*** (0.0036)	0.0042** (0.0017)		
Total days of internment per population			-0.1400*** (0.0398)	0.0408** (0.0177)
Population density in 2015	-8.35×10^{-6} * (4.36×10^{-6})	5.1×10^{-6} *** (1.95×10^{-6})	-8.24×10^{-6} * (4.32×10^{-6})	5.09×10^{-6} *** (1.95×10^{-6})
Population in 2014 (log)	0.0431*** (0.0107)	0.0641*** (0.0058)	0.0433*** (0.0106)	0.0641*** (0.0058)
Number of votes for PiS in 2015 (log)	-0.0687*** (0.0106)		-0.0687*** (0.0105)	
Number of votes for PiS in 2019 (log)		-0.0684*** (0.0060)		-0.0684*** (0.0060)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>				
Powiat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
Observations	2,494	2,494	2,494	2,494
R ²	0.67498	0.62141	0.67552	0.62143
Within R ²	0.33967	0.22162	0.34079	0.22166

Clustered (Powiat) standard-errors in parentheses

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 2: Regression results: Internment and changes in PiS voteshare between 2015-2019 and 2019-2023, controlling for population density

measure local social capital with membership in local sports clubs in the year prior to the first election of each electoral cycle (2014 for estimating changes in PiS support between 2015-2019 and 2018 for estimating changes in PiS support between 2019-2023). Sports clubs play a crucial role in local communities in Poland, serving - along with churches - as the main venues for participation in the local community. As such, membership of local sports clubs should be a robust measure of local social capital.

Figure 3 shows that this alternative explanation also does not account for our results on the effect of anti-authoritarian resistance for support for the incumbent democratic backslider. All the previously identified estimates of the effect of internment on changes in PiS vote-share continue to be significant and substantive in the identified direction. The results from Table 3 also show that within-powiat variation in social capital is not a significant predictor of changes in PiS support across gminas. These results confirm that it is not the correlation between social capital and internment that is driving our results.

4.2.3 Explanation 3: Politically motivated intergovernmental transfers

Third, we address the possibility that the correlation of intergovernmental transfers in the 2019-2023 election cycle with internee density may explain the puzzling reversal we uncovered. Our third hypothesized explanation for the pattern observed posits strategic behavior on the part of PiS, which would have targeted those areas where its losses between 2015 and 2019 were greatest with discretionary funding.

By this strategic explanation, PiS would have taken notice of the supporters they had lost in 2019 in certain regions and attempted to bring back those votes by steering centrally allocated funds to regions where their losses were most severe between 2015-2019. According to Figures 3 and 2 these were also the regions with the most internees and some voters in these regions may have responded to the financial incentive. If this were true, it would produce lower rates of defection from PiS in areas with more internees in 2023 but this pattern would not be a direct effect of internment.

Dependent Variable:	Change in PiS Vote-Share			
Election cycle:	2015-2019	2019-2023	2015-2019	2019-2023
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Number of internees per 1,000 in population	-0.0107*** (0.0038)	0.0038** (0.0015)		
Total days of internment per population			-0.1225*** (0.0378)	0.0354** (0.0168)
Sports club membership in 2014 (log)	-0.0011 (0.0007)		-0.0011 (0.0007)	
Sports club membership in 2018 (log)		0.0002 (0.0004)		0.0002 (0.0004)
Number of votes for PiS in 2015 (log)	-0.0686*** (0.0109)		-0.0686*** (0.0109)	
Number of votes for PiS in 2019 (log)		-0.0682*** (0.0061)		-0.0683*** (0.0061)
Population in 2014 (log)	0.0464*** (0.0109)	0.0628*** (0.0059)	0.0465*** (0.0109)	0.0629*** (0.0059)
Population density in 2015	-1.49×10^{-5} *** (2.35×10^{-6})	7.84×10^{-6} *** (1.04×10^{-6})	-1.48×10^{-5} *** (2.33×10^{-6})	7.84×10^{-6} *** (1.05×10^{-6})
<i>Fixed-effects</i>				
Powiat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
Observations	2,443	2,443	2,443	2,443
R ²	0.66823	0.62749	0.66871	0.62748
Within R ²	0.34675	0.23066	0.34771	0.23065

Clustered (Powiat) standard-errors in parentheses

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 3: Regression results: Internment and changes in PiS voteshare between 2015-2019 and 2019-2023, controlling for population density and local social capital

It is well documented that the governing party PiS distributed generous municipal transfers through its special Strategic Investment Program (Program Inwestycji Strategicznych) in a highly discretionary fashion between 2021-2023 Swianiewicz and Flis (2021). Following the 2019 election, PiS embarked on a tax reform creating a completely new system, called ironically the “New Deal”, which radically slashed income taxes, a primary source of revenue for local governments. The projected effect of the New Deal on local governments was summarized by Barbara Piotrowska et al. (2023). Prior to the New Deal, local governments were predominantly funded through income tax collected on their territory. Local budgets would suffer as a result of the New Deal’s cuts to the income tax. PiS’s response to this criticism was to promise local governments support through increased investment grants, yet these would be disbursed at the discretion of the national government, controlled by PiS. According to Piotrowska, the “arbitrary character of funding allows [PiS] to increase their control over local government.” She goes on to explain how because over “the last years, local governments were not under control of Law and Justice to the same extent that the national parliament was, the opposition held influence over many of them.” As Piotrowska projected, after the tax reform went ahead, investment grants were indeed awarded on a discretionary basis, meaning PiS further exerted pressure on the local government. Furthermore, the politically motivated distribution of funds was further aided by another opportunity: the Covid-19 pandemic. As in the United States, the Polish Sejm passed legislation awarding grants to sustain payroll to small businesses. These grants were disbursed again by the central administration (Piotrowska et al., 2023). Analysis of the geographic distribution of these funds carried out by Piotrowska et al. (2023) found that areas that supported PiS received three times the average amount of spending per person and those supporting the opposition three times less. These authors however did not look at the deeper characteristics of these PiS strongholds and whether they were strongholds that despite voting for PiS had lost supporters or not.

Since data on the awarding of such investment grants is part of the public record, we were able to investigate if PiS attempted to “bribe” areas where they were losing PiS support to a greater extent. We therefore gathered data on all 19,203 transfers to gminas through the Strategic

Investment Program between 2021-2023 and created an indicator of total amount of funds each gmina received through the Strategic Investment Program.

This alternative explanation would be supported if the funding was predominantly distributed to areas where PiS support increased at a slower pace than elsewhere, that is, regions like our internee-networked areas. To test this explanations we first ran models that predict funding to regions using information about the change in PiS vote-share between 2015-2019. We find that the effect here is insignificant and negative: changes in PiS support in 2015-2019 did not affect the amount of transfers gminas received in 2019-2023. In results reported in the appendix, we also confirm that anti-authoritarian resistance under communism also does not predict transfers.

Dependent Variable:	Total amount of central governmental transfers (log)
Model:	(1)
<i>Variables</i>	
Change in PiS vote-share between 2015-2019	-0.0739 (0.2723)
Population in 2014 (log)	0.2125*** (0.0777)
Number of votes for PiS in 2019 (log)	0.0650 (0.0830)
Population density in 2015	0.0003*** (3.89×10^{-5})
<i>Fixed-effects</i>	
Powiat	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>	
Observations	2,296
R ²	0.61014
Within R ²	0.34090

Clustered (Powiat) standard-errors in parentheses

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 4: Regression results: Central governmental transfers to gminas in 2019-2023 and change in PiS vote-share between 2015-2019

As a second test, we also re-estimated our models for changes in PiS support between 2019-2023 and included a control for the total amount of intergovernmental transfers each gmina received through the Strategic Investment Program. Here, we find that the positive effect size decreases and for the regression model using the indicator of internment days per population it only stays

significant at 10%. This shows that lower PiS defection in areas of internment in 2019-2023 may be partially explained by economic benefits under the PiS incumbency in 2019-2023 and such centrally allocated funds could be weakly correlated with internment to the point that including this variable slightly reduces the significance of the internee effect. Still, Table 5 does not alter the conclusion that there was a negative effect of anti-authoritarian resistance on PiS support in 2019 that did not persist to 2023. Therefore, intergovernmental transfers in 2019-2023 do not mask a negative effect of internment on changes in PiS vote-share in 2019-2023 and therefore do not explain the puzzling result that anti-authoritarian resistance is significantly and negatively associated with changes in PiS support between 2015-2019 but this negative association is not present in 2019-2023. [In our next empirical analyses, we plan to include a control for the receipt of general municipal funds for both the 2015-2019 and 2019-2023 electoral cycles.]

Dependent Variable: Model:	Change in PiS Vote-Share (2019-2023)	
	(1)	(2)
<i>Variables</i>		
Number of internees per 1,000 in population	0.0033** (0.0014)	
Total days of internment per population		0.0290* (0.0172)
Total amount of central government transfers (log)	0.0006 (0.0013)	0.0006 (0.0013)
Number of votes for PiS in 2019 (log)	-0.0683*** (0.0063)	-0.0683*** (0.0063)
Population in 2014 (log)	0.0643*** (0.0061)	0.0643*** (0.0061)
Population density in 2015	5.72×10^{-6} *** (1.06×10^{-6})	5.73×10^{-6} *** (1.07×10^{-6})
Sports club membership in 2018 (log)	-6.37×10^{-5} (0.0005)	-7.05×10^{-5} (0.0005)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>		
Powiat	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>		
Observations	2,268	2,268
R ²	0.63284	0.63281
Within R ²	0.23103	0.23098
<i>Clustered (Powiat) standard-errors in parentheses</i>		
<i>Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1</i>		

Table 5: Regression results: Internment and changes in PiS vote-share between 2019-2023, controlling for the total amount of central governmental transfers to gminas

4.2.4 Explanation 4: The conditioning role of issue salience

We posit that our results are explained by shifting issue salience between the 2019 and 2023 elections. For the historical determinant of anti-authoritarian resistance to motivate defection from the democratic backslider incumbent, it must be that democracy as a campaign issue is highly salient in a given election. In other words, a large share of previous PiS supporters must defect from PiS due to their dislike of the incumbent party's anti-democratic actions, and not for other reasons. Based on anecdotal evidence for now, we posit that while in the 2019 election, democracy was a highly salient motivator of defection from PiS, in 2023 voters defected from PiS for primarily economic reasons. As a result, historical anti-authoritarian resistance only had a

negative effect on changes in support for PiS in 2015-2019 because that is when democratically-motivated previous PiS supporters defected, while in 2023 citizens cast their ballots with other issues in mind.

This explanation posits two waves of switching away from PiS voting. The first wave in 2019 were voters who are sensitive to democratic values. 2015-2019 was a period marked by intense pro-democracy mobilization in Poland. Numerous pro-democracy protests organized by grassroots "KOD" (Komitet Obrony Demokracji, Committee for Defense of Democracy) and Obywatele RP (Citizens of the Polish Republic) and many voters engaged in politics participated frequently, especially in urban areas. Given that these protests were the most intense in the years 2015-2019,¹⁰ it would not be surprising if all the democracy-allied voters previously supporting PiS had transferred their support for alternative liberal parties by 2019 and the only voters left to transfer PiS support to the liberal coalition in 2023 were voters disinterested in democratic values but pre-occupied with their own survival and disenchanted with PiS.

The second wave of defection from PiS in 2023 was then motivated by economic issues, rather than democracy. The 2023 election took place in the context of high inflation and downward spiral of grain prices in Poland caused by the Ukraine war, both of which were highly salient anti-PiS criticisms in the democratic opposition's electoral campaign.

Right in the middle of PiS's second term in office, an issue emerged that radically shaped voters' everyday economic realities: the war between Russia and Ukraine. During the first year of the war, the political response in Poland was uniform across political divisions. MPs and Senators unanimously supported and even impressed upon the EU and US expansive military aid, offered easy refuge to Ukrainians fleeing war zones and even provided them with social security numbers so they would be eligible for public healthcare and public education. After a year, however, divisions started emerging, when the EU allowed Ukrainian farmers to export their very high quality grain to Western Europe, free of standard regulations that constrain EU farmers. While the goal of the legislation was to supply the Western parts of the EU, the grain ended up flooding Polish markets

¹⁰With the single exception of the "March of a Million Hearts," that was inspired by the case of a woman denied an abortion despite grave health conditions, but then escalated into a much broader anti-PiS opposition uniting event.

(while rapidly enriching a small class of speculating “businessmen” who offered to take the grain off Ukrainian farmers right after it crossed the EU boarder in Poland) and hit Polish farmers hard.

While Polish farmers had in the past supported PiS in extremely hard numbers, by 2023 many of them, particularly in areas near the Ukrainian border would have been willing to switch loyalties as a result, which they did not do sooner. Concomitantly, a period of extremely high inflation commenced in 2022, partly as a consequence of the War in Ukraine, which served as a basis of a strong and effective anti-PiS campaign message.

We intend to test this explanation, using two approaches. First, we will compare characteristics of PiS switchers in the pre-election survey data from 2019 to the characteristics of PiS voters in 2019 and 2023 [The 2023 Survey data will be released to us in January 2024]. Second, we will estimate whether exposure to Ukraine grain exports - operationalized as distance from the Ukrainian-Polish border - is associated with greater defection from PiS in rural areas in 2023. [We are currently in the process of creating this measure.]

4.3 Transmission mechanism: voting in the early democratic era

One easy criticism to leverage against our findings using observational data is that more than four decades separate the 2023 election and the internment process. Many scholars believe that Martial Law was implemented at the peak of the social movement’s popularity and through the rest of the communist period, its following petered off (Sulek, 2009; Sulek, 1990). If the legacy of Solidarity membership depreciated as fast as the trade union’s popularity, one ought to receive our theory with skepticism, even if we are able to refute the three alternative explanations suggested above with corroborative evidence. To alleviate such concerns, in this section we present evidence of a possible transmission mechanism by analyzing the linkages between internees in 1981 and the first Polish free elections to the national parliament in 1991. A caveat here is in order. Although the elections of 1991 were the first elections where candidates from all parties were allowed to run for all seats, they were not the the first in which non-communists were allowed to run for select seats. The 1989, so-called semi-free elections, however, were the only ones organized according to

SMD in 108 districts. Maps of these districts are not available in a digital format that could be easily matched to our powiats or gminas and thus our indicators of the number of internees in each geographical unit. The second difficulty is that because at the Roundtable the communists did not want to sanction the creation of parties affiliated with Solidarity, each of the candidates would have to be individually linked to either PZPR or one of its satellite parties.

The 1991 elections however, were organized according to proportional representation and included SLD, the successor of PZPR on the one hand, and several Solidarity successors on the other.

We ran a series of regressions according to the same model as presented in equation 1 above but using instead as outcome variable simply the vote-share of the main Solidarity successor parties and next, the vote-share of the successor communist Democratic Left Alliance, SLD.¹¹

[Note that for the time being we include powiat population and population density measures from 2014 and 2015, which are both post-treatment variables, but this is only because we have yet to obtain population density measures from the time of transition.]

We see from Table 4.3 that internment for anti-authoritarian activities strongly predicts voting for parties created on the basis of Solidarity in the 1991 election, even when we control for population density. The effects are highly significant and even stronger than for our contemporary outcomes, which makes sense due to the recent history and continued salience of anti-authoritarian resistance at the time.

In the appendix, we provide results from predicting 1991 voteshare with alternative indicators of internment such as the raw and logged numbers of internees and internment days and the results are very similar.

¹¹We note that both among the successor-Solidarity parties and successor communist parties, we omitted parties with programs predominantly addressed to rural electorates, such as the Polish Peasant Party, PSL in on the communist successor side and the Porozumienie Ludowe, PL on the Solidarity successor side.

Dependent Variable: Model:	Solidarity successor parties' vote-share in 1991	
	(1)	(2)
<i>Variables</i>		
Number of internees per 1,000 in population	0.1019** (0.0445)	
Total days of internment per population		1.158** (0.4047)
Population in 2014 (log)	0.0478** (0.0174)	0.0485** (0.0171)
Population density in 2015	$2.77 \times 10^{-5}*$ (1.47×10^{-5})	$2.45 \times 10^{-5}*$ (1.31×10^{-5})
<i>Fixed-effects</i>		
Wojewodztwo	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>		
Observations	365	365
R ²	0.34911	0.35578
Within R ²	0.24123	0.24901
<i>Clustered (Wojewodztwo) standard-errors in parentheses</i>		
<i>Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1</i>		

Table 6: Regression results: Internment and Solidarity successor parties' support (except agrarian successor PL) in powiats in 1991, controlling for population density

Dependent Variable: Model:	Vote-share of communist successor SLD in 1991	
	(1)	(2)
<i>Variables</i>		
Number of internees per 1,000 in population	0.0474 (0.0295)	
Total days of internment per population		0.5331* (0.2676)
Population in 2014 (log)	-0.0033 (0.0069)	-0.0030 (0.0067)
Population density in 2015	9.95×10^{-6} * (4.96×10^{-6})	8.56×10^{-6} (5.03×10^{-6})
<i>Fixed-effects</i>		
Wojewodztwo	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>		
Observations	365	365
R ²	0.33315	0.33707
Within R ²	0.05072	0.05630
<i>Clustered (Wojewodztwo) standard-errors in parentheses</i>		
<i>Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1</i>		

Table 7: Regression results: Internment and SLD support in powiats in 1991, controlling for population density

Moving to predicting support for the communist successor party, SLD, in Table 4.3 we use the same control variables (Population density and log population density) and we find that the effect of internees on voting for SLD is much smaller and for the most part insignificant. In the appendix we similarly provide results for alternative measures of internment and the results are very similar to the ones reported here.

Although examining the influence of internees on voting ten years after the implementation of Martial Law is suggestive of the persistence of opposition legacies, it still falls short of direct evidence that links to opposition networks actually make voters less likely to reelect backsliding incumbents. For direct evidence, we turn to our experiment in the next and final substantial section.

Anti-communist resistance	He/She	Family	Overall
Participated	0.14	0.23	0.267
Did not participate	0.79	0.49	0.733
No answer	0.07	0.28	(coded as 0 in pilot)

Table 8: Participation in anti-communist resistance by respondent or respondent’s family members

4.4 Survey Design

The purpose of our survey experiment is to test our hypothesis that mobilizing memories of resistance to communist authoritarianism triggers readiness to oppose other potential usurpers, such as PiS in Poland. Following standard questions about demographics and income, it opens with a series of questions about connections of the respondent to the anti-communist opposition, inquiring whether they themselves or someone in their family actively resisted the communist regime. For instance, we asked “During the communist regime, did you participate in any illegal activity aimed at overthrowing the communist regime?” and next, if a respondent answered affirmatively, we asked them to indicate the specific activity they engaged in, ranging from distributing leaflets to organizing illegal meetings. Next we asked them which organizations they belonged to and whether they faced repressions for their activity.¹² After respondents had answered such questions about themselves, we asked them similar questions about their family members and close friends.¹³

We note here that in our pilot, our sample was biased towards more senior individuals. The reason was that with only 120 respondents and not knowing at all how respondents would answer questions about their dissident past, we wanted to ensure we would have enough respondents with ties to the former opposition to examine heterogeneous treatment effects.

We see that links to the opposition overall are about 27% which is quite high and suggests a somewhat better measure of opposition engagement than the proportion of internees in the population, which only proxies for anti-authoritarian activity based on the activity of Solidarity *leaders* as opposed to all opposition activists. Critically however, it gives us sufficient variation

¹²For ethical and legal considerations, we included a preamble where we underscore that we are only interested in prosecutions due to anti-communist activity that took place before 1989.

¹³The original inter-generational questions included in our survey in their English translations are provided in the Appendix.

to examine heterogeneous effects of anti-authoritarian activity in historical Poland on switching away from voting for an incumbent. We note that even though our questions originally asked about friendship networks of respondents, we left those out of the analysis because we learned that the question was most commonly interpreted as “I knew of someone who engaged in this activity.” Due to the nature of illegal anti-communist opposition and the ensuing regime divide it created, which lasted decades after communism, if someone “was friends” with a dissident, they most likely were a dissident themselves.

Key for testing our transmission mechanism and understanding if past opposition activism is associated with a readiness to switch away from voting for PiS, our survey includes a conjoint experiment, such as the ones that frequently occur in democratic backsliding papers (Svolik, 2020; Chiopris et al., 2023). For our purposes we use the exact same questions as in Chiopris et al. (2023), where respondents are assigned randomly to a control and a treatment group.

Next, we ask them to select between Candidate A and Candidate B, each of whom is described by his ideological position and policy proposal. For the control group, A and B differ in ideology, but offer the same policies. This gives us a baseline for how much respondent perceptions of ideology determine candidate choice. For the treatment, the candidates share ideological positions with the control. However, the candidate on the right (Candidate B) proposes to usurp executive power (by unilaterally extending his term in office). Respondents in the treatment group—just as in the control—are asked to choose between the two candidates. Finally, we ask all respondents to rate the candidates on a 1 to 10 scale based on how close they are to a respondent’s ideal candidate. Tables 9 (Control) and 10 (Treatment) provide the candidate profiles presented to respondents:

Our next table (11) shows how well our variable of interest—opposition legacy—is balanced across the treatment and control, ensuring that there is no systematic difference between respondents exposed to the backsliding treatment and purely ideological control.

In the first instances when such conjoint experiments were used (by Svolik and Graham) the focus of the analysis was a simple comparison of support for the two candidates across the

Candidate A	Candidate B
[profession],[age]	[profession], [age]
Wants to strengthen relations with the European Union and limit the role of the Catholic Church in deciding about abortion rights	Is in favor of upholding Christian values, also in public life, and wants greater guarantees of Polish sovereignty within the European Union.
Wants to popularize participation in elections by opening polling stations both on Saturday and Sunday of the election weekend (currently the presidential and the Sejm and Senate elections are held only on Sundays)	Wants to popularize participation in elections by opening polling stations both on Saturday and Sunday of the election weekend (currently the presidential and the Sejm and Senate elections are held only on Sundays).

Table 9: Conjoint Experiment Table: Control Group

Candidate A	Candidate B
[profession],[age]	[profession], [age]
Wants to strengthen relations with the European Union and limit the role of the Catholic Church in deciding about abortion rights	Is in favor of upholding Christian values, also in public life, and wants greater guarantees of Polish sovereignty within the European Union.
Wants to popularize participation in elections by opening polling stations both on Saturday and Sunday of the election weekend (currently the presidential and the Sejm and Senate elections are held only on Sundays)	Wants the government to be able to extend the terms of the Sejm and Senate for a year or more in situations of exceptional state emergency and to postpone the election date without consulting other state authorities. ¹⁴

Table 10: Conjoint Experiment Table: Treatment Group.

	Share of respondents who or whose family	
	Participated in anti-communist resistance	Did not participate
Control group	0.75	0.25
Treatment group	0.72	0.28

Table 11: Balance of rates of participation in anti-communist resistance across treatment and control

Own/family participation in anti-communist resistance	% Choosing B:		Difference	% Change
	Control	Treatment		
No participation	0.46	0.38	-0.08	-0.17
Participation	0.44	0.25	-0.19	-0.44

Table 12: Result of candidate-choice experiment pilot: Voting for candidate B by treatment and participation in anti-communist resistance by respondent or respondent’s family members

treatment and control groups to estimate of how much voters are willing to punish undemocratic maneuvers. Since candidates are devoid of party labels and share the same ideological positions across treatment and control, any difference in respondent choice is driven by the proposed policies. In the case of Graham and Svolik (2020) this was enough as they were interested in measuring the effects of polarization on the readiness to reelect backsliding incumbents.

However, evaluating our argument requires more than this simple comparison. The key issue for our account is whether the willingness to punish is a function of links to anti-authoritarian resistance. Holding fixed voters’ ideological commitments, we expect respondents with stronger linkages to anti-communist resisters to punish backsliding usurpers more.

We measure this by comparing the difference in support for B across the control group to the average support for candidate B in the treatment groups and see whether the willingness of respondents to switch away from candidate B towards A for the group treated with backsliding is greater among respondents with links to the opposition.

4.5 Results of candidate-choice experiment

The results of the pilot experiment are summarized in Tables 12 and 13.

First, we see that respondents who were dissidents themselves or had family members who participated in the opposition are more likely to be undecided between the two candidates (also in the control group they are ever so slightly less likely to vote for candidate B). However we also see that when subjected to the treatment, former dissidents and their families are more likely to switch away from voting for B (from .44 to .25, which is 44% change) than respondents with no family ties to the opposition. For the latter, the backsliding treatment only induces a switch of

Own/family participation in anti-communist resistance	Rating of candidate B:		Difference	% Change
	Control	Treatment		
No participation	5.63	5.21	-0.43	-0.08
Participation	5.80	4.27	-1.53	-0.26

Table 13: Result of candidate-choice experiment pilot: Rating of candidate B on 1-10 scale by treatment and participation in anti-communist resistance by respondent or respondent’s family members

.08, which is a 17 % change.

Results comparing the ratings of the candidates across dissident and non-dissident respondents offer further corroboration of our theory. The difference in the rating of the conservative candidate drops by 26% in the group of respondents with dissident ties, but only by 8 % in the group with no dissident ties. We note that the change of 8% is consistent with the findings of Graham et al. (2022) based on conjoint experiments carried out in several different countries across the world, which increases confidence in our results.

Because these results are based on a pilot with only 120 respondents (of which we use 80, since one of our treatments did not work), we do not report results of significance test, though will obviously do so for the final survey.

To sum up our findings, our pilot survey results offer corroborative evidence of a legacy effect between opposition activism to communist autocratic rule and resistance to democratic backsliding today. Because our sample was skewed towards an older public we can only conjecture the existence of a family transmission effect, but in our full survey, we plan to explore this effect by isolating respondents by age and answers to questions about which family members specifically engaged in dissident activity. It is our hope to ultimately show the persistence of pro-democratic attitudes stretching from anti-communist resistance to a readiness to abandon voting for PiS as soon as it became apparent that the party is backsliding Poland into autocracy.

5 Conclusion

In this paper we tackle the puzzling reversal of Poland’s backsliding episode. In the last decade, political scientists conjectured that when democracies remain on the path of backsliding towards authoritarianism for more than two electoral terms, they do not recover. In light of this, Poland’s 2023 reversal is surprising. After examining patterns of voting for the (initially closeted, then obviously) authoritarian PiS over the course of two electoral cycles (2015-2019 and 2019-2023) we notice a pattern that does not correspond to any existing structural or institutional determinants of voting behavior. We theorize that the variation in switching away from PiS voting and ultimate driver of backsliding reversal may be an opposition legacy of anti-authoritarian resistance. We first investigate this theory with observational data, using a newly assembled dataset of geographically dispersed records of internment of Solidarity trade union leaders in 1981-1982. We find, somewhat surprisingly that although reversals in PiS voting were highly and positively correlated in the first term (2015-2019), they were negatively correlated in the second term (2019-2023). To investigate the possible reasons for this pattern, we supplement our initial analysis with data on population density (to control for the urban-rural divide), centrally distributed grants in the second term of PiS, and data on civil society. This preliminary analysis leads us to speculate that although internment had an effect in the 2015-2019 term, the salience of the 2019-2023 election had shifted away from issues of democracy and rule of law. This is consistent with an explanation according to which in 2019, the democratically motivated original PiS supporters defected from the party they voted for in 2015, but by 2019-2023 former PiS voting were switching for other reasons. If this explanation is correct, Poland’s backsliding reversal required both historical persistence (internees) and salience of democracy.

We also support this argument with preliminary results from a pilot survey experiment, where in a conjoint set up, we uncover heterogeneous treatment effects between respondents with and without ties to anti-communist dissidents for their readiness to switch support away from a backsliding incumbent. Future versions of this paper will extend the pilot survey to a full survey and support the issue salience argument with data on boarder proximity and Ukraine war effects.

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