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# Changes in Ways of Understanding Democracy in the Days of Crisis of Democracy: Evidence from Poland

**Abstract:** The subject of this article are the ways of understanding democracy in Poland during a crisis of democracy. Six studies were conducted in 2016-2019 on nationwide samples of adult Poles with the use of CAWI and CAPI methodology. Using exploratory factor analysis, we found that the term democracy may have different colloquial meanings. The first one is understanding democracy as “privileges and rights” (since the second half of 2016, enriched with cultivating national values), which we interpret as a populist meaning. An accurate way of understanding democracy was revealed to have existed in the first half of 2016, after which it dissolved into a populist understanding of democracy. Identifying democracy with a Catholic state was the most stable in time. This direction of changes turned out to be sustainable in the light of the results of research conducted on representative samples in 2017 and 2019 with the use of CAPI methodology.

Additionally, it turned out that an accurate understanding of democracy increased support for democracy, while understanding democracy as a Catholic state decreased support for democracy. The populist understanding turned out to be unrelated to support for democracy. This changeability in the ways of understanding democracy is explained by events that took place in Poland since 2015 which deepened the crisis of democracy.

**Keywords:** *ways of colloquial understanding of democracy, support for democracy, democracy crisis*

In social surveys people are sometimes faced with statements like: “Democracy has an advantage over other forms of governments”, “Sometimes undemocratic governments can be more desirable than democratic governments”, “For people such as me, it is not relevant whether the government is democratic or undemocratic.” These items are systematically applied in Poland (see CBOS, 2003, 2010, 2016, Czapiński, & Panek, 2011, 2013, 2015). Based on the answers to such questions, the conclusion that *democracy* systematically meets with lesser or greater, yet mass support has been formulated. On the other hand, in 2002-2016 the percentage of Poles that were satisfied with the functioning of *democracy in Poland* was 24-46%, while 42-64% were dissatisfied (CBOS, 2010). These figures may suggest that there was something wrong with democracy in Poland. However, the state of democracy in Poland in 2014 presented in e.g. “Democratic Audit of Poland” might be described as quite satisfactory (Markowski, et al., 2015). In that case, another possibility remains: the perception of democracy in Poles is not entirely accurate. The analysis of CBOS’s results showed that according to many Poles democracy primarily meant a welfare state, and that in their opinion this welfare state was not well realized in their country (Korzeniowski,

2015). So, globally the assessment of the state of democracy was for many Poles at most moderate.

The main objective of the article is comprised of two questions. Do changes to the sociopolitical system that were initiated by presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland in 2015 – sometimes called a crisis of democracy – affect the colloquial ways of understanding democracy? Does support for democracy depend on colloquial ways of understanding democracy?

We will begin our argument by showing how democracy is a complex or even ambiguous phenomenon and – as numerous researchers have shown – how many different colloquial meanings are assigned to this term. We will also cite data showing that since 2015 we have had a progressive crisis of democracy in Poland.

## PROBLEMS WITH DEMOCRACY

There are only a few concepts in the social sciences that are so universally used and ambiguous as democracy. As we know, democracy is – etymologically – the power of the people. At this point caution is recommended. In his critical analyses of six ways of understanding the term *people*, Sartori aptly notes that democracy could mean

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totalitarianism based on some of those understandings (Sartori, 1998). Authors distinguish many forms of democracy: liberal, direct, participatory, social, radical, cosmopolitan, deliberative, and others (cf. Dryzek, 2004, Kurki, 2010, Norris, 2011, Reykowski, 2007). A few axial features of democracy are also being distinguished (cf. Dahl 1971, 1989, Dryzek, 2004, Held, 2006, Norris, 2011, Payne, 2009, Sartori, 1998), but will not be brought up here exhaustively for obvious reasons. However, it is impossible not to mention two central approaches – procedural and substantive – in defining democracy (cf. Antoszewski, 2016, Bobio, 1989, Grabowska, & Szawiel, 2001, Mair, 2008, Schmitter, & Karl, 1991, Schumpeter, 1942, Sekuła, 2009, Tilly, 2007). P. Mair (2008, p. 88) wrote: “On the one hand, there are many *procedural definitions* of democracy, which focus on how the regime is organized and the process by which representation, accountability, and legitimacy are assured. On the other hand, there are the various *substantive definitions* of democracy, which deal also with the goals and effectiveness of the regime and the extent to which the will of the people might be served in a more purposive sense.”<sup>1</sup> Two issues need a few words of comment. Firstly, the presented definitions may be acknowledged as stipulative. They impart a special (e.g. narrow) meaning to the rather ambiguous term. Secondly, we should note that in reality these two “ideal models” dialectically complement each other (cf. Dahl, 1989, Grygieńć, 2016, Krouse, 1982, Wnuk-Lipiński, 1996). Let us note that the presented approaches pay attention to two central aspects of the democratic regime: on the one hand specific procedures and institutions, and on the other – societal and individual goals and values.

However it is pointed out that the two flagship values of democracy – freedom and equality – are in opposition. Thomassen (2007) explains the uneasy cohabitation between them by citing their different historical roots, as they emerged in different times and places. Freedom was an axial value of the English revolution, and for the French revolution it was equality. It is no wonder that the category of essential contestability is being applied to democracy given its many traditions, forms, and understandings. Whitehead states that essential contestability “in general refers to the idea that a term can have many meanings at a given moment of time” (Whitehead, 2002, p. 14). According to Gray, essential contestability means that concepts are not only contested in a historical sense, but that in principle it is impossible to conclusively decide on the correct application of the concept (Gray, 1977, p. 338). Prevailing over terminological confusion, M. Kurki tries to explain democracy using the terms pluralization and contextualization. He points out that the observed variety of forms of democracy and meanings of this concept results from the social, historical and political condition-

ings in which particular democratic systems emerged and exist (Kurki, 2010). J. Keane expressed similar thoughts in his indigenization theory, according to which democracy inevitably adapts itself to the specific local conditions in which it develops (Keane, 2009; according to Norris, 2011, p. 148). At this point, the results of Schedler's and Sarfield's (2007) research should be mentioned. They observed a phenomenon of support for the abstract term of democracy with rejection of the empirical core of liberal democracy, and distinguished a few kinds of “adjective democrats”: intolerant, paternalistic, homophobic, and excluding.

Analysis of ways of understanding democracy is not a separate and strongly based trend in research conducted by Western authors living in democratic countries. This seems equally understandable as the lack of research concerning understatement of the term “clear air” in countries without natural environment contamination. Empirical findings concerning ways of understanding democracy appeared as an aside to research on acceptance or support for democracy, especially when more sophisticated measures than simple survey methodology were applied (cf. Canache, et al., 2001). A second source of inspiration are democracies that were born in recent decades. So-called post-communist countries seem to be especially popular research areas. Comparisons of residents of Eastern and Western lands of united Germany deserve special attention. Rohrschneider conducted extensive research on German residents and members of parliament. According to him, general support for rules of democracy was similar in both parts of the country. However, in some specific terms (e.g. tolerance or pluralism acceptance) Western Germany transcended over Eastern parts. This difference also concerned members of parliament (Rohrschneider, 1999). The understanding of democracy in Eastern and Western lands was studied by Hofferbert and Klingerman. They observed that eastern Germans regarded definitional attributes of a welfare state as markers of democracy more often than western Germans. In other words, their understanding of democracy as “protection of socio-economic conditions” was stronger (Hofferbert & Klingerman, 2001). Liberal democracy is a new invention not only in post-communist countries. Guida describes different modifications of the meaning of democracy shared by chosen Turkish Muslims. Their “concept” included elections and representative institutions, but there was no place for pluralism, tolerance, and citizenship (Guida, 2010).

Research conducted in Russia between 1998 and 2003 by Carnaghan is also of particular interest. She applied a method of intensive ethnological interviews to a small group consisting of 60 persons. Her interest was not so much in the representativeness of the respondents as in the most accurate recreation of their course of thinking<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> These definitions coincide with definitions proposed by others authors, e.g. C. Tilly (2007, p. 8). These two approaches formed a background for attempts to formulate definitions of complete or full democracy (cf. Shin, 2007) and systemic democracy (cf. Antoszewski, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that an ethnographic study concerning common-sense convictions (social imaginaries) of rural Polish people about the state, power, politics, and democracy was conducted by Anna Malewska-Szałygin (2017).

It turned out that the political thinking of her respondents was characterized by significant fluency and ductility. The author formulated the following conclusion: “not only can we not be sure that respondents mean what researchers mean when they talk about democracy, we cannot even be sure that they mean what they say they mean” (Carnaghan, 2011, pp. 690-691).

A specific kind of race can be noticed in studies of democracy. On the one hand, scientists have struggled for years with the complexity of the term and phenomenon of democracy, and people’s colloquial representations about what democracy is. On the other hand, politicians are an eternally living and everlasting source of the high and constantly growing level of this complexity. In this field, politicians from the so called real socialism camp are especially responsible for it. Another name for this camp was “people’s democracy”, though it is universally known that it had little in common with democracy and especially with the “power of the people.” Let us remember an interesting linguistic experiment attributed to Mao Zedong. He claimed that the order brought by communists to China, obviously called democracy, has an advantage over Western liberal democracy. The latter is usually described as “power of the people”, while China’s system was “power for the people.” In other words, democracy was used to define an autocratic state that posed as a welfare state and took away its citizens responsibility for themselves, their community and the state. Mao’s definition is supposedly derived from the Confucian tradition of China (cf. Norris, 2011, Shi, 2000), but today it bears mainly the mark of newspeak.

Above we tried to outline some difficulties with the concept of *democracy*, and with the ways in which democratic order functions in the world. Do they really imply that democracy as a dubious, contestable, context dependent concept may mean nothing or is semantically empty? The presented discussion in and of itself proves that such a conclusion cannot be true. Scholars continuously discuss democracy because it is a continuously vivid theme. So what is democracy? It is worth turning towards somebody who has “correct views on everything” for an answer for such a question<sup>3</sup>. Kołakowski tried to extract the essence of democracy and captured three of its core features. He wrote: “Leaving aside the historical vicissitudes of the word *democracy* and all kinds of spurious and fraudulent usages of it (‘socialist democracy’, ‘people’s democracy’, ‘Islamic democracy’), we may say that this concept, as usually understood, includes three components. First, we think of a set of institutions aimed at assuring that the power and influence of political elites correspond to the amount of popular support they enjoy. Second, we have in mind the independence of the legal system from the executive power; the law acts as an autonomous mediating device between individual or corporate interests and the state, and is not an instrument of ruling elites. Third, we

think of enforceable barriers built into the legal system that guarantee both the equality of all citizens before the law and basic personal rights, which (though the list is notoriously contestable) include freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom of association, religious freedom, and freedom to acquire property” (Kołakowski, 1990, p. 147). Let us accept Kołakowski’s description as a useful approximation of democracy. It enables us to distinguish democracy from autocratic regimes, but also from ochlocratic (populist) political projects. The quoted definition is a descriptive one. It spells out the meaning of democracy, but it also aims to be adequate to existing usages. The proposed formula is semantically condensed, but its core is comprised of the most important features of procedural and substantive democracy. Moreover, it seems similar to definitions of complete (cf. Shin, 2007) or systemic (cf. Antoszewski, 2016) democracy. For the purposes of this paper let us accept that the composition of procedural and substantive elements of democracy will serve us as a prototype of an accurate colloquial understanding of democracy.

#### Ways of Colloquially Understanding Democracy in Poland

Research on how democracy is colloquially understood started in Poland in 1993 (cf. Reykowski, 1995), and has been continued to date by social psychologists and sociologists (cf. CBOS, 2010, Jaśko & Kossowska, 2008, Korzeniowski, 2015). The first conclusion of this research is that Poles’ representations of democracy are sometimes very distant from scholar definitions. An accurate way of understanding democracy was not unfamiliar to Poles, but the most popular way was understanding democracy as a welfare state. However, it turned out that democracy can also be understood as an undemocratic order dominated by national and/or Catholic values (Reykowski, 1995, Korzeniowski, 2015)<sup>4</sup>.

The second important conclusion concerns the changeability of ways of understanding democracy. It seems that the structure of these construals may depend on the current political situation. For instance, research conducted in 2010 revealed two ways of understanding democracy (“democracy as a homely democratic state” and “democracy as a religious-welfare state”), which relate to two dominant political projects that are responsible for deep polarization of the political scene in Poland. The first project was propagated by the Civic Platform (PO) and Polish Peasant’s Party (PSL), and the second by Law and Justice (PiS) and its acolytes (as The Fourth Republic of Poland)<sup>5</sup>. This result shows an interesting and perhaps previously unknown phenomenon. It is obvious that

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that all theoretically distinguished ways of understanding democracy were highly correlated. This result convinced the authors to use factor analysis in order to find out the “real” ways of understanding democracy.

<sup>5</sup> In the first, democratic values and procedures were emphasized, but there was also a place for national sentiments. The second project mainly proposed a centralized welfare state and commitment to conservative-Catholic values.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase was a playful allusion to Kołakowski’s book (and an essay) “My correct views on everything” (Polish edition: “Moje słuszne poglądy na wszystko”, Kraków: Znak).

polarization of the political scene can set preferences and political tastes. However, it turned out that it could also be responsible for the structure/content of political concepts in the colloquial mentality of citizens.

The third general conclusion is a specifying of the second. Reykowski and his followers usually assumed four separate ways of understanding democracy: (a) as democratic values, (b) as democratic institutions, (c) as a welfare state, (d) as an anti-democratic regime (e.g. theocratic state) (Reykowski, 1995). It quickly turned out that the imagination of ordinary people surpassed the imagination of researchers. Hybrid ways of understanding democracy were found, as for instance the above mentioned “religious-welfare state.”

Why it is worth dealing with ways of understanding democracy? Many authors claim that the success of democratization – apart from legislative, economic, institutional, etc. determinants – depends on the values, attitudes, and behavior of the citizenry (cf. Almond & Verba, 1989, Burton, Gunther, Highley 1995, Dybel, 2015, Reykowski, 1993, 1995, Sekuła, 2009). Support for democracy – independently of how it is comprehended (cf. Easton, 1975) – seems to depend in a large extent on socio-political orientations (Ben-Nun Bloom & Arikan, 2012, Canetti-Nissim, 2004, McFarland, 2015, Napier & Jost, 2008, Radkiewicz, 2012, 2016). Furthermore, there are studies showing that an accurate way of colloquially understanding democracy may strengthen essential (not only overtly declared) support for democracy (cf. Cho, 2014, 2015, Hofferbert & Klingerman, 2001, Korzeniowski, 2015, Norris, 2011, Rohrschneider, 1999, Rosenberg et al., 1988).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this article is to show structure of ways of understanding democracy (and its possible changeability) in times of a rising crisis of democracy in Poland, i.e. after 2015. The second objective is to test whether these (to be discovered) ways of understanding democracy may determine support for democracy in comparison with central features of the socio-political mentality of Poles: religiousness and conservatism (Holubec & Rae, 2010). It is worth reminding that religiousness as well as conservatism usually diminish support for democracy and pro-democratic attitudes (cf. Allport & Kramer, 1946, Altemeyer, & Hunsberger, 1992, Ben-Nun Bloom & Arikan, 2012a, Ben-Nun Bloom & Arikan, 2012b, Brambrilla et al., 2013, Canetti-Nissim, 2004, Canetti-Nissim & Beit-Hallahmi, 2007, Gorsuch & Alshire, 1974, Leak & Finken, 2011, Nelson, 1988, Radkiewicz, 2012, 2016, Stouffer, 1955, Wald et al., 1988, Wylie & Forest, 1992). On the other hand, conservative and religious values constitute the core of current government propaganda. In other words, the second aim is to check whether ways of understanding democracy may serve as separate (independent of mentality orientations) predictors of support for democracy.

## Assessment of the Current State of Democracy in Poland

In 2015, the party PiS (Law and Justice) won the parliamentary and presidential elections in Poland. This party is well-known for promoting anti-democratic and populist slogans (cf. Greven, 2016, Guiso, et al., 2017, Hooghe, & Reeskens, 2007, Inglehart & Norris, 2016). In less than half a year after the elections, the Venice Commission expressed concern at the state of democracy in Poland<sup>6</sup>. In June 2016, the European Commission issued a critical opinion concerning the state of law and order in Poland.

The state of democracy in many counties is systematically monitored by several independent agencies with the use of sophisticated scientific methodology. They use sets of criteria. For instance, Freedom House provides numerical ratings for each country on seven indicators: a) national democratic governance, b) electoral process, c) civil society, d) independent media, e) local democratic governance, f) judicial framework and independence, and g) corruption (Schenkkan, 2017, p. 22). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest and 7 the lowest level of democratic progress. Since 2015, we can observe a consistent decrease in the level of quality of democracy in Poland according to the Freedom House criteria: 2014 – 2.18, 2015 – 2.21, 2016 – 2.32, and 2017 – 2.57.

The index of democracy developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) is based on five main criteria: a) electoral process and pluralism, b) functioning of the government, c) political participation, d) political culture, and e) civic liberties. Sixty items are analyzed to obtain an overall score, where 10 is the maximum value. In 2014, “Democracy index” gave Poland a rank of 40 (in the world), but in 2017 this position dropped to 53. The exact numbers were as follows: 2014 – 7.47, 2015 – 7.09, 2016 – 6.83, and 2017 – 6.67. It may be worth noting that while “functioning of government” was raised from 5.71 in 2014 to 6.07 in 2017, “civic liberties” and “political culture” decreased in these years – respectively from 9.12 to 7.65 and from 6.25 to 4.38 (cf. Democracy Index, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

The newest ranking, titled “Sustainable Governance Indicators”, is elaborated by Betelsmann Stiftung (cf. Schraad-Tischler, & Seelkopf, 2015). To date, the authors have published two reports concerning Poland (cf. Matthes et al., 2016, 2017). Among others indicators of sustainable governance the quality of democracy was assessed. Three main criteria are taken into account: a) electoral processes (including: candidacy procedures, media access, voting and registration rights, party finan-

<sup>6</sup> See: “Opinion on amendments to the Act of 25 June 2015 on the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 106th Plenary Session” (Venice, 11-12 March 2016) [[http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2016\)001-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2016)001-e)] and “Opinion on the Act of 15 January 2016 amending the Police Act and certain other Acts, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 107th Plenary Session” (Venice, 10-11 June 2016) [[http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2016\)012-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2016)012-e)].



cing, popular decision making), b) access to information (including: media freedom, media pluralism, access to government information), c) civil rights and political liberties (including: civil rights, political liberties, non-discrimination) and d) rule of law (legal certainty, judicial review, appointment of justices, corruption prevention). Assessment of data from 2016 and 2017 (with the use of 1-10 scale) show a clear decrease in the quality of democracy in Poland: electoral processes – from 8.8 to 7.8, access to information – from 8.33 to 5.33, and civil rights and political liberties – from 8.33 to 6.33, and rule of law – from 8.0 to 4.25 (cf. Matthes et al., 2016, 2017).

The presented data seem to convince that the quality of democracy in Poland has decreased since 2015, and the thesis about a rising crisis of democracy – especially in the sphere of civic right and liberties – that is shared by many analysts is not a fiction (cf. Puddington & Roylance, 2017).

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

We conducted four empirical studies on nationwide random-quota samples of adult Poles to answer our research questions. The first one was carried out in February 2016 (N = 1022), the second in May (N = 1044), third in December (N = 1071), and the fourth in May 2017 (N = 1077). The internal structure of our samples reflected the composition of the Polish population aged 18 years and above in terms of geographical region, size of the place of residence, sex, age, and education<sup>7</sup>.

The samples consisted of 52.3-52.4% females and 47.6-47.7% males. They included 13.6-13.7% of respondents in the 18 to 24 years age bracket, 20.1-20.3% from 25 to 34, 15.8-15.9% from 35 to 44, 18.3-18.4% from 45 to 54, and 31.8-32.1% above the age of 55. 27% of the respondents had primary and lower education, 22% vocational, 33% secondary and post-secondary, and 18% had higher education. The quoted (very narrow) ranges of percentages of socio-demographic variables distributions in four studies seem to reflect the goodness of quota sampling.

In the subsequent parts of the paper we relate to the number and/or date of each study in order to stress the time sequence of the measurements conducted in the very special historical era in Poland. Thus four studies are described separately but they are supposed to reflect historical changes of Polish political life and Poles' mentality after 2015.

### Measures

*Ways of understanding democracy.* This method consisted of 12 statements, four for each of the three distinguished ways of understanding democracy<sup>8</sup>: (1) de-

mocracy as a democratic state (markers of democracy): “Everyone can publicly express their beliefs”, “Majority takes into account minority’s rights”, “Every citizen has the same electoral rights”, “There are many political parties with different programs”, (2) democracy as a welfare state: “The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone”, “The state guarantees education for everyone who wants it”, “Everyone is allowed to benefit from healthcare”, “The state helps the poor and those who earn less money”, (3) democracy as a religious-national state: “In raising children, religious commandments are being obeyed”, “Polish Catholic traditions are being nurtured”, “For all Poles, the nation is the supreme value”, “Poland is truly independent” (cf. Korzeniowski, 2015). Respondents were asked to assess how correctly and accurately each statement describes democracy. They marked their answers using the standard scale: “I definitely do not agree – I do not agree – I agree – I definitely agree”. Numbers from 1 to 4 were assigned to these answers. The indices of ways of understanding democracy were factors obtained with the use of factor analysis with Varimax rotation (see: footnote).

*Liberalism-Conservatism.* Measured with the use of one question: “How do you assess your political beliefs?” The possible answers were: “liberal – rather liberal – difficult to say – rather conservative – conservative.” Numbers from 1 to 5 were assigned to these answers.

*Religiousness.* Religiousness was measured with the use of two questions: “Do you believe in God?” (answers on 6-point scale from “I’m an atheist” to “I deeply believe and follow religious observances”) and “How often do you attend masses and church observances” (answers on 6-point scale from “never” to “every day”). The internal reliability of the scale amounted to Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$  (Study 1), .84 (Study 2), .89 (Study 3), and .88 (Study 4).

*Support for democracy.* Support for democracy was operationalized as the intention of voting for parties promoting democratic values and respecting democratic procedures. These were: PO (Civic Platform), SLD (Democratic Left Alliance), Nowoczesna (Modern), and PSL (Polish People’s Party). Let us recall that these parties cooperated in the framework of KOD (Committee for the Defense of Democracy) while the research were carried out. On the opposite side of the Polish political scene were the populist parties, i.e. PiS (Law and Justice) and Kukiz’15. The index of support for democracy was created as follows: A declaration to vote for PO, SLD, Nowoczesna or PSL was coded as “3”, a declaration to vote for PiS or Kukiz’15 was coded as “1”, while a lack of preference declaration or declaration to vote for political groupings which were not listed above were coded as “2.”

<sup>7</sup> All of the studies were carried out online on the Ariadna Panel with the use of web interviews (CAWI) (cf. <http://panelariadna.eu/index.php/en/>).

<sup>8</sup> This research tool is modeled on the Scale D, which was developed by J. Reykowski (1995). The original method comprised two groups of markers of democracy: corresponding to procedural and substantive

definitions of democracy. Construction of the method used in the described research was preceded by analysis of the psychometric goodness of the original’s items. As a matter of fact, the aim of the construction of this research tool was to contain – in accordance with its prototype – items diagnostic for procedural and substantive democracy. Certainly this research tool – because of the specificity of the employed methodology – does not comprise all possible valid markers of democracy.

It should be noted that PiS and Kukiz'15 did not form a parliamentary (and cabinet) coalition, so the global index cannot be interpreted as simple support for vs opposition to those in power. As the index was calculated only for respondents who declared willingness to vote, the final analyses were carried out on smaller samples of  $n = 613$  (Study 1),  $n = 627$  (Study 2),  $n = 642$  (Study 3), and  $n = 723$  (Study 4).

### Results

The empirical part has been divided into two sections. The first depicts the results of factor analyses conducted in order to identify the ways of understanding democracy. The second section, by means of multivariate regression analyses, answers research question 2 concerning the role of ways of understanding democracy as predictors of support for democracy.

### WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY: EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSES

To discover ways of understanding democracy – in compliance with existing tradition – factor analyses (with the use of Principal component extraction and Varimax rotation) were performed. In Study 1 (February 2016), the determinant value was .003 and KMO measure statistic was .84, which allows us to recognize the solution as reliable. Obtained results are presented in Table 1.

The solution presented in Table 1 explained 59.91% of variance. The first factor loaded all four items diagnostic for “welfare state” meaning and three markers of democracy expressing democratic rights/liberties. It may be interpreted as “democracy as privileges and

rights.” The second factor may be interpreted as “democracy as a Catholic state” with a touch of nationalism. The third factor – loading four markers of democracy – was “democracy as a democratic state”; however, it has the addition of nation independence worship.

The results of the factor analysis performed on data from Study 2 (May 2016) are presented in Table 2. The determinant value was .006 and KMO measure was .87, which also allows us to recognize this solution as reliable.

Three factors revealed in Table 2 explained 66% percent of variance. The first factor loaded all markers of welfare state and two items diagnostic for an accurate understanding of democracy. It may be also interpreted as “democracy as privileges and rights.” The second factor loaded three markers of democracy and two items expressing national sentiments. Let us call it “democracy as democracy with a national touch.” The third factor was “democracy as a Catholic state.”

The two-factor solution presented in Table 3 explained 54% of variance. It also seems reliable: the determinant value was .008 and KMO measure was .84. The first factor loaded statements diagnostic for welfare state, markers of democracy and two items expressing national sentiments. The second factor loaded the remaining two items diagnostic for a Catholic state. The obtained factors may be called – respectively – “democracy as privileges, rights, and nation worship” (or interchangeably “democracy as everything except for the Catholic state”) and “democracy as a Catholic state.”

The results of Study 4 (May 2017) are presented in Table 2. The determinant value was .006 and KMO measure was .87, which also allows us to recognize this solution as reliable.

**Table 1. Factor loadings and percentages of explained variance for exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation of ways of understanding democracy (Study 1, N = 1022)**

	Components		
	1	2	3
The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone	.835		
Everyone is allowed to benefit from healthcare	.791		
The state guarantees education for everyone who wants it	.766		
The state helps the poor and those who earn less money	.651		
Everyone can publicly express their beliefs	.582		.576
In raising children. religious commandments are being obeyed		.867	
Polish Catholic traditions are being nurtured		.858	
For all Poles the nation is the supreme value		.602	
There are many political parties with different programs			.797
Poland is truly independent			.720
Every citizen has the same electoral rights	.433		.652
Majority takes into account minority's rights	.501		.511
Explained variance (%)	28.72	19.23	18.97

**Table 2. Factor loadings and percentages of explained variance for exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation of ways of understanding democracy (Study 2, N = 1044)**

	Components		
	1	2	3
The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone	.807		
The state guarantees education for everyone who wants it	.750		
The state helps the poor and those who earn less money	.719		
Majority takes into account minority's rights	.704		
Everyone is allowed to benefit from healthcare	.698		
There are many political parties with different programs		.852	
Poland is truly independent		.693	
Every citizen has the same electoral rights		.690	
Everyone can publicly express their beliefs	.516	.625	
For all Poles the nation is the supreme value		.577	
Polish Catholic traditions are being nurtured			.892
In raising children. religious commandments are being obeyed			.823
Explained variance (%)	28.61	22.45	14.62

**Table 3. Factor loadings and percentages of explained variance for exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation of ways of understanding democracy (Study 3, N = 1071)**

	Components	
	1	2
The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone	.778	
The state guarantees education for everyone who wants it	.751	
Everyone can publicly express their beliefs	.731	
Everyone is allowed to benefit from healthcare	.717	
Poland is truly independent	.696	
Every citizen has the same electoral rights	.690	
The state helps the poor and those who earn less money	.671	
Majority takes into account minority's rights	.664	
For all Poles the nation is the supreme value	.536	
There are many political parties with different programs	.520	
Polish Catholic traditions are being nurtured		.921
In raising children. religious commandments are being obeyed		.913
Explained variance (%)	38.61	15.49

The three factors shown in Table 4 explained 66% of variance. The first factor loaded statements diagnostic for welfare state, three markers of democracy (the exception was “*There are many political parties with different programs*”), and two items expressing national sentiments. The second factor loaded items expressing national sentiments and diagnostic for a Catholic state. The third factor loaded mainly statements diagnostic for democracy: “*There are many political parties with different programs.*” The described factors may be interpreted as

“democracy as privileges, rights, and nation worship” (or interchangeably “democracy as almost everything except for a Catholic state”), “democracy as a Catholic- national state”, and “democracy as political pluralism.”

The factors obtained in the described exploratory factor analyses (regression based factor scores) served as the indices of ways of understanding democracy in the next analyses.

As ways of understanding democracy depend on cognitive sophistication, the effect of education on the

**Table 4. Factor loadings and percentages of explained variance for exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation of ways of understanding democracy (Study 4, N = 1017)**

	Components		
	1	2	3
The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone	.866		
Majority takes into account minority's rights	.752		
Everyone can publicly express their beliefs	.736		
Everyone is allowed to benefit from healthcare	.732		
The state guarantees education for everyone who wants it	.700		
Every citizen has the same electoral rights	.617		.462
The state helps the poor and those who earn less money	.597		
Poland is truly independent	.595	.408	
Polish Catholic traditions are being nurtured		.908	
In raising children, religious commandments are being obeyed		.901	
For all Poles the nation is the supreme value	.457	.569	
There are many political parties with different programs			.914
Explained variance (%)	34.91	19.39	11.51

above described factors was examined with the use of one-way analysis of variance. No consistent pattern was observed. The values of  $\eta^2$  coefficient ranged from .002 to .06 with a mean of .02. Low education explained "democracy as a Catholic state" (Study 2 –  $\eta^2 = .06$ ) and "democracy as a Catholic- national state" (Study 4 –  $\eta^2 = .064$ ) most strongly.

#### WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY AND SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY: MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSES

Before conducting the second step of analysis, the effect of education on support for democracy was checked with the use of one-way analysis of variance. The following F values were obtained: (a) Study 1:  $F(3, 612) = 2.45$ ,  $p = .063$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , (b) Study 2:  $F(3, 626) = .869$ ,  $p = .457$ ,  $\eta^2 = .004$ , (c) Study 3:  $F(3, 641) = 4.183$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , (d) Study 4:  $F(3, 722) = 2.297$ ,  $p = .076$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . The conjecture that education affects support for democracy was not confirmed, thus education was not entered into subsequent analyses.

In order to answer our second research question we used two-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Conservatism and religiousness were entered into Step 1 and the ways of understanding democracy detected in consecutive studies were entered into Step 2<sup>9</sup>.

In Study 1, conservatism and religiousness turned out to be distinct predictors of weak support for democracy in Step 1 of the regression analysis (respectively:  $\beta = -.32$ ,

$p = .0001$  and  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In Step 2, three ways of understanding democracy were entered: "democracy as privileges and rights" (P\_R), "democracy as a Catholic state" (C), and "democracy as a democratic state" (D). Entering these ways of understanding democracy into the regression equation in Step 2 made the impact of religiousness non-significant and by large did not change the impact of conservatism, which still remained pretty strong and highly significant ( $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p = .001$ ). It turned out that support for democracy depended on ways of understanding democracy. The lower C and P\_R, and the higher D, the stronger was support for democracy (respectively:  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\beta = -.09$ ,  $p = .019$ , and  $\beta = .07$ ,  $p = .051$ ). The increase in the percentage of explained variance of support for democracy in Step 2 was low, though statistically significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .04$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The regression equation was significant ( $F(5, 612) = 27.79$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and in total explained 18% of support for democracy variance.

In Study 2, the regression equation in total explained 21% of support for democracy variance and was significant ( $F(5, 626) = 34.34$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The depiction of the relationship we obtained was similar to that described above. In Step 1, conservatism and religiousness turned out to be distinct predictors of weak support for democracy (respectively:  $\beta = -.28$ ,  $p = .0001$  and  $\beta = -.16$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In Step 2, three ways of understanding democracy were entered: "democracy as privileges and rights" (P\_R), "democracy as democracy with a national touch" (D\_n), and "democracy as a Catholic state" (C). Once again religiousness lost its predictive power, but the power of conservatism remained almost unchanged ( $\beta = -.24$ ,  $p = .0001$ ). Additionally, support for democracy was significantly predicted by the three analyzed ways of understanding democracy. The higher D\_n and P\_R, and

<sup>9</sup> Just in case, a 3-step regression analysis of Study 3 data with education entered in step 1 was conducted. It contributed nothing important to the reported results.



especially the lower C, the stronger was support for democracy (respectively:  $\beta = .10$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\beta = .10$ ,  $p = .008$ , and  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The increase in the percentage of explained variance of support for democracy in Step 2 was statistically significant, but not imposing ( $\Delta R^2 = .08$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

In Study 3, Step 1 of the regression analysis once again showed that conservatism and religiousness predicted weak support for democracy (respectively:  $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p = .0001$  and  $\beta = -.09$ ,  $p = .016$ ). In Step 2, two ways of understanding democracy were entered: “democracy as privileges, rights with nation worship” (P\_R\_N) and “democracy as a Catholic state” (C). The impact of religiousness became non-significant ( $\beta = -.04$ ,  $p = .386$ ), but the impact of conservatism remained pretty strong and highly significant ( $\beta = -.28$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Additionally, it turned out that understanding democracy as a Catholic state decreased support for democracy ( $\beta = -.14$ ,  $p = .002$ ). The role of P\_R\_N was not significant ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .269$ ). The increase in the percentage of explained variance of support for democracy in Step 2 was low, though statistically significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $p = .005$ ). The regression equation was significant ( $F(4, 641) = 24.65$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and in total explained 13% of support for democracy variance.

In Study 4 in Step 1 of regression analysis conservatism and religiousness once again turned out to be distinct predictors of weak support for democracy (respectively:  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p = .0001$  and  $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In Step 2, three ways of understanding democracy were entered: “democracy as privileges, rights, and nation worship” (P\_R\_N), “democracy as a Catholic-national state” (C\_N), and “democracy as political pluralism” (P). As in previous analyses, in Step 2 conservatism remained a significant predictor of weak support for democracy ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p = .001$ ), while religiousness lost its predictive power ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $p = .496$ ). Additionally, it turned out that the higher C\_N, the weaker the support for democracy ( $\beta = -.39$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The effects of P\_R\_N and P turned out to be no significant (respectively:  $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .283$ ,  $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = .176$ ). The increase in the percentage of explained variance of support for democracy in Step 2 amounted to 12% ( $p = .001$ ), while the regression equation, which was highly significant ( $F(5, 722) = 44.57$ ,  $p = .001$ ), in total explained 23% of support for democracy variance.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this paper we tried to conduct an empirical investigation to identify the colloquial ways of understanding democracy (and their changes) and their significance for support for democracy during a time of democracy crisis in Poland.

Answering the first research question, it should be said that the term democracy – as it was expected – turned out to have different colloquial meanings. Furthermore, the accurate meaning was not found first, if at all, among the ways of understanding democracy that exist in the minds

of ordinary Poles. Let us start with the colloquial meaning, which is obviously inconsistent with the lexical definition of democracy. The construal “democracy as a Catholic state” was present in all four main studies. It was enriched with item(s) diagnostic for “democracy as a national state” twice (studies 2 and 4). On the other hand, the markers of democracy showed the greatest tendency to migrate between factors. In studies 1 and 2 we discovered a factor which mainly loaded items describing a democratic state. However, in studies 3 and 4 such an accurate way of understanding democracy disappeared. It lost its identity and completely blended in with the factor called “privileges and rights.” A relatively weak factor loading mainly the item “*There are many political parties with different programs*” also appeared in Study 4. The first way of understanding democracy (in terms of percent of explained variance) turned consistently out to be “democracy as privileges and rights” (with the leading item “*The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone*”). Its core were items diagnostic for a welfare estate, but it also consisted of markers of democracy mainly describing democratic liberties. Since the second half of 2016 it also absorbed items diagnostic for “democracy as a national state.” Thus democracy in colloquial meaning became very broad and even blurred concept. That is why this factor gained the alternative name “democracy as everything except for a Catholic state.” The question arises whether the observed changes are permanent or are they a temporary freak of nature. Two studies carried out on representative samples in 2017 and 2019 (with the use of CAPI methodology)<sup>10</sup> confirmed the fact of dissolution of specific understanding democracy as democracy. Tables 5 and 6 placed in Appendix show the first main strong factor which constantly can be interpreted as „privileges and rights”.

It seems worthwhile to answer why, since Study 3 (December 2016), markers of democracy became (almost) completely dissolved in the first factor, while understanding democracy just as democracy still did well in the first half of 2016 (and previously – cf. Jaśko & Kossowska, 2008, Korzeniowski, 2015, Reykowski, 1995). This attempt will be preceded by a short introduction explaining the inaccurate ways of understanding democracy.

It is commonly known that democracy, as polyarchy (see Dahl, 1971), is an incredibly complex system and comprehending it requires well-developed, or as Norris (2011, p 152) would call it, enlightened political knowledge. Reykowski (1993) showed that the immanent feature of democracy is the existence of antinomies (e.g. majority-minority, conflict-consensus, autonomy-obedience, law-conscience). Cognitive coping with these antinomies is possible when an advanced level of cognitive development is achieved, i.e. the ability to coordinate opposite perspectives, achieving an operational or systemic level of cognitive development. In other words, democracy is

<sup>10</sup> These two studies were sponsored by National Science Centre, Poland, grant No. 2016/23/B/HS6/00281.

difficult to encompass for the ordinary mind. Let us remember that the majority of Poles positively assess the abstract term or slogan of democracy. For them it probably describes a just, fair, and safe arrangement of a state. People try to understand democracy as far as they are able. When unable to deal with the cognitive requirements imposed by democracy, they choose options that are simpler, clearer, devoid of nuances, but according to them describing “just, fair, and safe state.” Norris (2011, p. 14) mentioned two conditions of enlightened knowledge about the essentials of liberal democracy: long historical experience of this form of governance and education. That may explain why in the approximately 90 percent Catholic Poland less educated people are prone to identify democracy with a Catholic state. On the other hand, what arrangement may be considered more just, fair, and safe than a welfare state? Let us recall that in new democracies, where democratic principles are not deeply rooted (e.g. in post-communist countries), the popular or prevalent understanding of democracy is as a welfare state (or “protection of socio-economic conditions”) (cf. Hofferbert & Klingerman, 2001, Jaško & Kossowska, 2008, Korzeniowski, 2015, Reykowski, 1995).

However, the situation becomes more complex when taking into consideration ongoing changes in contemporary Poland. In the middle of 2016 the principles of democracy were undermined officially in the name of democracy, e.g. antidemocratic laws were introduced in the name of so called sovereign (see: pp. 8-10). In these circumstances, in the minds of ordinary people the concept *democracy* started losing its identity, got muddled, and became an element of the broader construal. The way of understanding democracy called “democracy as privileges, rights with nation worship” which appeared at the end of 2016 and lasted into 2019 seems to describe the populist way of understanding democracy and make us think of “democracy as government *for* the people.” It contains some markers of democracy but mainly comprises social and national entitlements. Our results once again confirm the possible existence of hybrid ways of understanding democracy and show how they may depend on the current political situation of the state – the content and form of governance. This time, however, we might observe a more complex phenomenon, namely the disappearance of the concept of democracy as a distinctive and separate construal of the socio-political mentality of ordinary people.

The second research question concerned the predictive power of ways of understanding democracy for support for democracy. Let us start this section with a short clarification of what support for democracy means as it was measured in the presented studies. It is worth recalling that this concept is far from clear and explicit, even though it is often used in professional literature. Support for democracy is measured with the use of many methods (from simple declarations to more complex research scales), raising well-grounded doubts concerning their accuracy, validity, and reliability (cf. Ariely & Davidov, 2011, Canache, Mondak, Seligson, 2001,

Carnaghan, 2011, Linde, Ekman, 2003). In the presented studies, support for democracy was operationalized as a readiness to entrust parties respecting the democratic principles and being advocates of democracy with the right to rule the country. Its opposite was trust in authoritarian-populist parties, adulating tastes and beliefs of the crowd, undermining democratic principles, promoting conservatism and nationalism, etc. Let us note that the pole indicating support for populism was readiness to vote not only for the Law and Justice (PiS) party but also for another populist political party (Kukiz’15), and that they do not form an official parliamentary coalition. We believe our index comprises the most important component of essential support of democracy, going beyond simple declarations concerning the concept of democracy (which as we know may have different meanings) and beyond attachment to fine slogans like liberty, equality, and fraternity. The core of support for democracy which we deal with in this article captures the practical aspect of political engagement. It means on the one hand respect for the democratic creed (including participation in elections), and on the other identification with democratic projects and tradition.

Our second research question was linked with the conjecture that support for democracy is decreased by conservatism and religiousness, which was consistently confirmed. In Step 1 of all conducted regression analyses conservatism and religiousness decreased support for democracy. This picture underwent change after entering ways of understanding democracy in Step 2 of the analyses. Conservatism remained as a predictor but religiousness lost its predictive power. The consistent relationship between conservatism and low support for democracy, apart from the theoretical, may also be interpreted by methodological reasons. It may be said that – taking into account the methods of their measurement – they both reflect identification with the peculiar political option. In this respect the described results seem banal. The role of religiousness seems different. The initial common variance of religiousness and support for democracy seems to be explained by ways of understanding democracy. Support for democracy was most strongly and consistently decreased by “democracy as a Catholic state” (or by “democracy as a Catholic-national state”). This result may be interpreted by the fact that between 88 (census in 2011) and 93% (data of Central Statistical Office of Poland) of Polish citizenry declare a Catholic denomination, and that the polity of the Catholic church (McGuire, 2008) does not provide the citizenry with democratic values and procedures. As long as “democracy as a democratic state” existed in the people’s minds (till May 2016), it increased support for democracy. The role of “democracy as privileges and rights” in the first studies turned out to be ambiguous – decreasing in Study 1 and increasing in Study 2 the level of support for democracy. As many different factors (including pure chance) might come into play, we must leave this difference unexplained. The understanding called “democracy as privileges, rights with nation

worship” and interpreted as a populist interpretation of democracy turned out to be unrelated to support for democracy.

### CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In accordance with our expectations, different ways of understanding democracy can be observed. In the days of a crisis of democracy, understanding democracy as a democratic state turned out to be a weak and unstable construal. It easily dissolved into the populist way of understanding democracy, which turned out to be unrelated to support for democracy. Let us remember, however, that if an accurate understanding of democracy exists in the people’s minds, it increases support for democracy. Understanding democracy as a Catholic state turned out to be the most stable way. This construal consistently diminished support for democracy. Therefore, we can say that in conditions lacking democratic traditions, and especially in time of democracy crisis, every form of governance could be called “democratic” as soon as it is perceived as just, fair, and safe. This sentence sounds banal, but it could have remarkable consequences. We know of many examples in which the banner of democracy is carried by advocates of un- or antidemocratic order.

An important limitation of the presented studies is the very short and simple research tool we used to measure the ways of understanding democracy, which does not cover many important aspects and nuances of democracy. Its main merit is that it was used many times before in many nationwide studies, which allows us to check on changes of ways of understanding democracy over a long period of time and in different moments of Polish history. The presented results are also limited by the fact that they are based on four independent samples. It seems that conducting longitudinal research would provide us with more reliable data, as well as with deeper insight into the nature of changes of ways of understanding democracy, and would enable us to study the determinants of these changes.

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**APPENDIX. SUSTAINABILITY OF THE DISSOLUTION OF SPECIFIC WAY OF UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRACY. RESULTS OF STUDIES CONDUCTED IN 2017 AND 2019 ON REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLES WITH THE USE OF CAPI METHODOLOGY.**

**Table 5. Factor loadings and percentages of explained variance for exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation of ways of understanding democracy (Study 5, N = 2000; autumn 2017)**

	Components	
	1	2
Everyone can publicly express their beliefs	.825	
Majority takes into account minority's rights	.738	
Every citizen has the same electoral rights	.733	
The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone	.731	
Poland is truly independent	.715	
The state guarantees education for everyone who wants it	.713	
Polish Catholic traditions are being nurtured		.873
In raising children. religious commandments are being obeyed		.889
The state helps the poor and those who earn less money	.644	.407
Everyone is allowed to benefit from healthcare	.623	.455
There are many political parties with different programs	.682	
For all Poles the nation is the supreme value	.544	.438
Explained variance (%)	40.83	19.43

**Table 6. Factor loadings and percentages of explained variance for exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation of ways of understanding democracy (Study 6, N = 1000; autumn 2019)**

	Components	
	1	2
Everyone can publicly express their beliefs	.755	
Majority takes into account minority's rights	.721	
Every citizen has the same electoral rights	.692	
The state guarantees education for everyone who wants it	.690	
Poland is truly independent	.665	
The state provides for decent living conditions for everyone	.647	
There are many political parties with different programs	.629	
For all Poles the nation is the supreme value	.493	
In raising children. religious commandments are being obeyed		.874
Polish Catholic traditions are being nurtured		.868
Everyone is allowed to benefit from healthcare	.504	.574
The state helps the poor and those who earn less money	.530	.540
Explained variance (%)	34.83	22.60