


Secularisation as a driver of single axis political conflict: evidence from Poland.

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Abstract

This study examines how regionally heterogeneous secularisation can increase the saliency of religion as a determinant of political behaviour. Changes in the electoral outcomes in Poland over the last 25 years are discussed in a comparative setting, where the regional variation of election results is compared with that of Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. When placed against the backdrop of major European democracies, Poland emerges as an outlier where, over time, the voting outcomes align along a single dimension of conflict without a corresponding reduction in the effective number of parties. The source of the atypical behaviour is sought in the trajectory of secularisation, which is analysed in the last 25 years with regionally resolved civil and religious marriage counts, with Italy and Spain (Catholic countries with religious-civil marriage equivalence) used for comparison. The direct negative effect of secularisation on the outcome of right-wing parties, studied in a two-way fixed effects design (around 6 percentage points in the period of study), is compared with an overall rise in significance of religion using a variance decomposition approach (changing from 20% to 68% of explained variance). The results show that common descriptions of the rise of populist support in response to increasing economic inequality are founded on a religious monolith assumption which crumbled over the last decades.

Introduction

Changes in the voting patterns during last two decades have been a source of much alarm-bell-ringing in the case of Poland and Hungary—the twin poster children of right-wing-populist success (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Holesch & Kyriazi, 2022; Krastev, 2007, 2016). The dynamism of the phenomenon excited much debate, especially considering that, unlike in other populist movements (e.g. Babiš in Czechia or Vučić in Serbia), these were led by well established parties which originated from the anti-communist movements. (Bernhard, 2021) Are the lessons learned based on the democratic rebound in Poland (and more recently Hungary) valid in other national contexts or are the country-specific factors dominant in these recent elections?

In analyses which focussed on the “measurable” declines in the liberal democracy indicators (such as V-dem Electoral Democracy Index or “democraticness” measured by Freedom House), the illiberalism of the right-wing populist governments was emphasised (Waldner & Lust, 2018) and a term of “backsliding” was coined to describe the observed phenomenon. The semantic implication being, that the rise in populist appeal amounts to reverting to a more primitive form of democracy on a linear spectrum of developmental inevitability. An alternative view is provided by the “hollow” regimes description (Dawson & Hanley, 2016) in which post-soviet countries were, in the process of democratisation, born with the “Western” institutional shape, but without the mass civic and political engagement that accompanies the templates of their designs. Consequently, the populist mobilisation can be recontextualised as a catch-up mechanism wherein “by raising and combining disparate or ignored political issues, populist parties encourage the articulation of suppressed cleavages and demands.” (Krastev, 2007)

The list of possible backsliding determinants includes at least: economic failures of liberal regimes, public backlash against globalisation and cosmopolitanism, decline in the role of

EU (Krastev, 2016), echoes of the elite-focussed transformation to capitalism (Dawson & Hanley, 2016; Śpiewak, 2022), xenophobia (Sadurski, 2018), euroscepticism, populists delivering on the social spending promises (Grzymala-Busse, 2019) and illiberal attitudes of the electorate (Kayser & Nalewajko, 2026; Wunsch, Jacob, & Derksen, 2025). Whether they convincingly address “the backsliding” phenomenon depends on their geographic and temporal specificity – they should put the first decade of XXI cent. on a special footing and describe mechanisms, which should differentially affect the countries which experienced “the backsliding”.

Focusing more concretely on the Polish example, at least some of the economic mechanisms outlined have been empirically verified, with the influence of the redistributive policies on poverty (Morawski & Brzezinski, 2024) and the impact of redistributive policies on the electoral success of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) (Gromadzki, Sałach, & Brzeziński, 2024) being quantitatively corroborated. The effect size of the social transfers on the electoral outcomes is, nevertheless, rather modest. In the temporal dimension the most concrete diagnosis is that of Bernhard (2021) who points to the 2007-09 recession and the refugee crisis of 2015 as the critical juncture of the populist mobilisation. The problem with that diagnosis is that these affected Poland less than its neighbours. He intuitively that, therefore, the changes in social attitudes have to be the more proximate causes of the changes in the political situation due to the relatively positive economic outcomes. Survey-based experiments in Poland confirm both partisan (Kayser & Nalewajko, 2026) and more general (Wunsch et al., 2025) illiberal attitude’s impact on the electoral outcomes. The sociological explanation is shared by Sadurski (2018, p. 164) who identifies the importance of non economic factors within the Hofstadter’s framework of politics of paranoia and points to “[...] obsessions, fears and concerns [that] resonate with [...] the electorate” as critical in development of populist attitudes. Of the identified obsessions, he presents islamophobia as a paradoxical mobiliser in a country with “no Muslims”. Is the fear-based discourse aimed

at the catholic-conservative population an artificial construct or does it reflect a “threat” which is closer to the electorate than the phantom Muslims of Sadurski? One of the so-called paradoxes of the Polish political scene is to blame here: the simultaneous rise of the right-wing catholic populists and the country’s secularisation. In this paper, I argue that secularisation, despite its negative direct effect on right-wing support, can nevertheless increase the saliency of religion-based divisions when heterogeneous. Thus, counter-intuitively, it can reinforce right-wing populist narratives.

Study of partisan splitting along religious lines traces at least to Lipset’s cleavage theory (Lipset, Rokkan, et al., 1967) where state-church dichotomy is envisioned as a source of group identification. In some cases the mechanisms sustaining the alignment of the religious and partisan dimensions can be elusive, like in the case of Canadian voting, where large effect size (of the order of 20% correlation) was not associated with religiously motivated political discourse at the time (Irvine, 1974). The opposite is true for contemporary Poland – analyses hint at the role of church and religion in politics (Grzymała-Busse, 2026), while the quantification of the relationship remains challenging.

Analysis of emerging political scenes of the new democracies of Eastern Europe points to “existence of sufficient diversity of cross-cutting cleavages” (Evans & Whitefield, 1993) as the critical component of democratic stability with Lust and Waldner (2015) emphasising the need to study “cleavage structures that drive backsliding” more generally. In this publication a dramatic reduction of that diversity in Poland since 2000 is shown, by examining the election results. Next, the source of this disappearance is studied with heterogeneous secularisation identified as its critical component. I propose the following mechanism for the loss of electoral stability in Poland: first, a single axis conflict overwhelms existing diversity of earlier cross-cutting cleavages; second, the origin of this crystallisation lies in a dramatic rise in heterogeneity of secularisation—going from initial religious, single-confession monolith to an unusual diversity.

The underlying question about similarity of the populist mobilisation in Poland to populist mobilisation in other countries is thus answered negatively. First, the electoral outcomes in Poland are dissimilar to that of (for example) France and Germany both qualitatively and quantitatively. Second, the underlying mechanism fuelling the loss of political-cleavage diversity is specific to Poland.

Religious politics of XXI cent. Poland

The theologisation of the public sphere in the 2010s was hard to miss, with turbulent enactment of the total abortion ban (which involved mass protests of proposed laws, presidential vetoes and finally a resolution by democratically uncountable Constitutional Tribunal) and the enactment of “LGBT free zone” resolutions by councils of many local administrative units. The second example is particularly baffling as the resolutions had no legal consequences other than the eventual halting of the European Union funding to the councils – an explicitly costly exercise in signalling, which nevertheless had a measurable effect on the population (Adrjan & Gromadzki, 2025; Bogatyrev & Bogusz, 2025; Haas, Bogatyrev, Abou-Chadi, Klüver, & Stoetzer, 2025). The homophobic fear-mongering has been identified as one of possible drivers of the populist popularity (Krstev, 2007). At the discourse level involve-

ment of Fr. Rydzyk’s catholic-media empire and its role in politics of the period should also be mentioned (Żuk & Żuk, 2019).

The difficulty of studying this phenomenon quantitatively lies in the measurement strategies employed. Looking at Poland at the national level (Grzymała-Busse, 2026) one gets an impression of a religiously monolithic country with 91% of answers declaring belonging to a religion and 98% of them belonging to Catholic Church (GUS, 2023); large share of those are, however, not attending church. According to the Catholic Church data, proportion of churchgoers went from 39% to 28% in the years 2014 to 2021.

The surface level “paradoxical” association of secularisation with rise in populist right can be framed through the lens of the traditional church-state opposition (Lipset et al., 1967). Within this framework the state’s power is opposed by the church in contest for cultural hegemony in the domains of culture in general (reformation vs counter-reformation) or moral authority (secular vs religious control of mass education).

Within this viewpoint, it is difficult to conceptualise the role of the Catholic Church in political life in the 80’s and 90’s. The role of the church in toppling the communist regime and formation of ideological backbone of the Solidarity movement can hardly be overstated. Much effort of the nascent neoliberal elite during the transformation was put into recontextualising early years of Solidarity from a labour-catholic union into a civil society movement (Śpiewak, 2022), liberating it from its hyper-egalitarian foundations. In the early days of Solidarity, the unifying allegiance to the church had no serious counterbalance with church-nation unity symbolically epitomized by the signature Black Madonna pin everpresent in Wałęsa’s lapel (Wałęsa, 2018). The upcoming opposition of technocratic-liberal and conservative wings of the new governing powers is masterfully anticipated by Kiesłowski in “Dekalog I” (Kiesłowski, 1988) (first instalment of the film cycle exploring morality in general), where the false god replacing Catholicism (again represented by the Black Madonna icon) is not the fervour of civil society, but the protagonist’s blind trust in the computer calculation. In short, the cross was a shorthand for “us”, the nation, against “them”, the alien, secular Communists (Zubrzycki, 2007). In that sense the Catholic Church and the nascent Polish Republic were allies in vanquishing the Communist enemy, in the 90’s there was no church-state tension because the underlying secular-religious cleavage was simply not there. Simultaneously, during the transformation, the Catholic Church achieved much of its goals both economically (tax exemptions, founding of the church fund as reparations for communist expropriations) and politically (partial abortion ban, civil-religious marriage equivalence), through, among others, bargaining in the process of the constitutional referendum.

The opposition to the Pole-Catholic doxa emerged when a sufficient proportion of the population had secularised – resulting in a new cleavage that was captured by the Law and Justice (PiS)–Civic Platform (PO) duopoly, which has dominated the Polish political scene since the 2010s. As the separation became ever stronger, the rhetoric of the right wing PiS became increasingly sharper and more populist (with much anger directed at “the elites” and various minorities) as did (although to a lesser extent) the PO’s platform (such as the calls for “the time of the reckoning” after re-taking the government). The (bleakly) colourful highlight of the present strength of the religious undercurrent in the national politics of Poland is the rising popularity of the ultranationalist Confederation of the Polish Crown party (not to be confused with

Table 1: Elections included in the data

		2000s	'10s	'20s
Poland	e	04, 09	14, 19	24
	p	00, 05	10, 15	20, 25
	l	01, 05, 07	11, 15, 19,	23
France	e	04, 09	14, 19	24
	p	02, 07	12, 17	22
Germany	e	04, 09	14, 19	24
	l	02, 05, 09	13, 17	21, 25
Italy	e	04, 09	14, 19	24
	l	01, 06, 08	13, 18,	22
Spain	e	04, 09	14, 19	24
	l	00, 04, 08	11, 15, 16, 19, 19	23

Notes: p – presidential (both rounds where applicable), l – legislative, e – European

the Confederation party, another far right party) which advocates (among other things) for Jesus Christ to be enthroned as the King of Poland.

The source of government support during the backsliding is often sought, as outlined, in the rising inequalities – this approach, however, does not place Poland on a special footing in relation to other European democracies which did not experience backsliding in recent years. What makes Poland dissimilar to European democracies is its religiosity: it has the fifth highest declared religiosity in Europe after only Cyprus, Serbia, Greece and Slovakia (ESS, 2024). To address the question of temporal placement of the backsliding further nuance and a strategy capable of capturing secularisation heterogeneity is required. One possible proxy for the diversity of the religious practices is the share of civil marriages relative to all marriages in a given time and region. This strategy was previously applied to the study of secularisation in Italy (Ignazi & Wellhofer, 2013), where relationship between church and partisan politics is more complicated than in the Polish case. I present a comparative analysis of the Polish electoral patterns with a backdrop of the major European democracies and a comparison of secularisation patterns with two nations: Italy and Spain, which share confession with Poland and all used to have high religious participation.

The paper is structured as follows. In Sec. 3, I describe the election results data, the civil marriage share as a revealed preference proxy for religiosity, and wages data. In Sec. 4 direct effect of secularisation on the support on the right-wing PiS is studied with an additional analysis of its time heterogeneity. In Sec. 5 the reshaping of the Polish political scene due to the heterogeneity in secularisation is quantified. Sec. 6 concludes the paper.

Data

Election results

To facilitate a regional analysis data from election results from Poland, Germany, France, Italy and Spain were gathered and harmonised at NUTS₃ level for all countries and additionally at LAU₁ (powiat) for Poland (379 units rather than 79 NUTS₃ units) (Waszkiewicz, 2025) this data covers elections which took

place in the last 25 years (number of elections per country being PL: 23, ES: 17, FR: 16, DE: 15, IT: 13) as summarised in the Table 1. The election data for Poland, Spain, France and Italy was harmonised directly from the official results tables (KBW, 2026; infoelectoral.gob.es, 2026; SIE, 2026) and in the case of France a commune level elaboration was aggregated to NUTS₃ level (data.gouv.fr, 2026). In the case of Germany, results (BWL, 2026) were recoded into the current NUTS₃ layout using crosswalk files provided by BBSR (BBSR, 2026). For the elections which were missing kreis-level elaborations (European elections in years: 1999, 2004, 2009) the EU-NED dataset were used (Schraff, Vergioglou, & Demirci, 2023). The raw results were preferred over the previous elaboration in EU-NED because of its sophisticated, but also complex, treatment of postal votes which makes verification of parsing and harmonisation procedures more complicated. In the case of Italy some of the official results are reported with the province names, while others are not. Where possible, exact matches on province-commune name pairs were used (around 95% of communes in elections reported with province data). If province name was not available, commune names were used (around 95% of communes when province data was absent). In cases where an exact match was not obtained the remaining available columns describing regional divisions were used to place a given commune in a “neighbourhood”. These were: *circonscrizione*, *regione*, *collegio*, *collegio plurinomiale*, *collegio uninominale*. Missing NUTS₃ codes were filled by commonest code from the neighbourhood.

This treatment facilitated cross-country comparison of the overall changes in the electoral landscape of the listed countries as measured by the share of explained variance in the PCA analysis.

Further analysis of impact of secularisation was performed at the level of parties for the three countries with corresponding religiosity data: Italy, Spain and Poland. For Poland, the impact on PiS vote share was analysed, setting theoretical considerations aside this had a practical reason: PiS remained a relatively stable unit of analysis for the entire duration of period under consideration. Similarly, in the case of Spain, vote share of Partido Popular (PP) was used as dependent variable. Results for Poland and Spain are relatively easy to compare because of the structural similarity of the legislature composition, which in both cases is dominated by two well established parties PO and PiS in the case of Poland, and PSOE and PP in the case of Spain. The political scene of Italy has been, in general, more fragmented than that Poland and Spain. Nevertheless, similar coding is also possible for Italy: here the unit of analysis is the coalition rather than an individual party following the conceptualisation of fragmented duopoly of Hopkin (2016). The members of the right-wing coalition were manually labelled based on the electoral groupings as reported by Wikipedia (Wikipedia contributors, 2026c).

Religious marriage

Share of religious marriages as a fraction of total number of marriages in the cross sectional unit was chosen as a measure of religiosity. This approach has been previously used to study religion’s impact on electoral outcomes in Italy (Ignazi & Wellhofer, 2013). The motivation to use of civil marriage share as a revealed preference proxy for religiosity in this study is the same as in the Italian case, “the decision to marry at the town hall instead of in church expresses an unambiguous, public, and conscious act of distancing

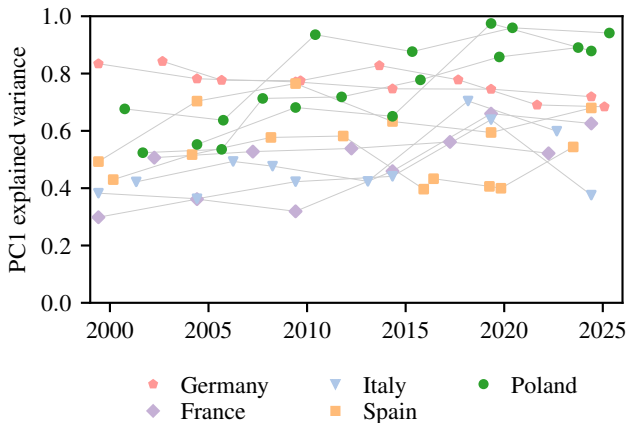


Figure 1: **Extraordinary linearisation of political landscape in Poland.** Share of explained variance by first principal component in a selection of European countries. Eye guides connect results for the same type of election in a given country (for example European parliament elections). Out of the countries presented Polish political scene is unusually linearised with first principal component explaining as much as 90% of the variance comparable only with early 2000s in Germany.

from Church prescriptions”. (ibid.)

This type of marriage data can be compared cross-country in cases where choosing civil vs religious ceremony has similar legal ramifications. Of the countries listed above three have legal equivalence between civil and religious marriage: Italy, Spain and Poland. As a consequence, all binding marriages have to be centrally registered, resulting in perfect coverage by the statistical agencies. The civil and religious marriage counts were obtained from national regional demography databases of Poland (GUS, 2026a), Italy (ISTAT, 2026) and Spain (INE, 2026). These three countries share relatively high religiosity with mean values of the ESS religiosity question (0-10 scale, ESS round 11 – 2023) are 5.4 for Italy, 4.1 for Spain and 5.8 for Poland. In the countries under consideration, other religious organisations are also capable of performing legally binding marriages, but their share in overall number of marriages is negligible. This data was prepared at NUTS3 level for Italy, Spain and Poland and LAU 1 (powiat) for Poland and covers last 25 years for Poland and Spain, and 2004-2023 for Italy.

Income

To control for the economic differences between the regions mean wage data was derived from the available datasets at the regional level. For Poland the National Statistics agency data was used (2000-2024) (GUS, 2026b), for Italy wages based on the pension register data (1990-2021) (INPS, 2026) and for Spain wages based on the personal income tax records were used (2009-2024) (Agenzia Tributaria, 2026). In all cases these were normalised to the country average in a given year. These were all prepared at NUTS3 level plus LAU 1 level for Poland. The datasets were chosen for their superior historical coverage, albeit at a price of some methodological cross-country variation.

Individual level

For a comparison with the individual level the European Social Survey data was used (ESS, 2024) (waves 1 through 11). All three religion related questions (‘rlgdgr’ – personal assessment of the degree of religiosity, ‘pray’ – how often does the respondent pray outside of church, ‘rlgatnd’ – how often does the respondent attend religious services) were added and normalised to 0-1 range to avoid lumpy distribution of the self declared religiosity degree question (e.g. strong bias towards 7 out of 10 in case of Poland) in a methodology similar to earlier publications documenting single latent factor underpinning these three questions (Mäntyneva, 2024; Meuleman, Davidov, & Billiet, 2018).

Results

Dedifferentiation of political outcomes

To facilitate over-time comparison of elections which is robust to party renaming and party emergence/disappearance vote shares for each party were computed from the vote count data and decomposed with year-by-year unweighted PCA. The methodology was slightly different for France because of the data limitations. There, the vote shares were computed at the level of *nuance politique*, a Ministry of Interior codes assigned to political candidates, which are distinct for all major parties, but can be shared by minor parties and various independent candidates. These still distinguish between ‘left aligned minor party candidates’ and ‘right aligned minor party candidates’ for example. Since this additional aggregation is present only for fringe candidates it has no significant bearing on the result of the analysis. Elections with just two candidates (such as second round of presidential elections in Poland) were excluded from the analysis because the space of regional outcomes is one-dimensional by construction.

By choosing unweighted PCA region is the unit of analysis; otherwise undue weight is given to large cities which form only a small number of observations. The results of weighted PCA are qualitatively the same with minor quantitative differences.

Share of variance explained by the first PCA component is presented in figure 1. Eye guides join the same type of election (for example European Parliament elections in a given country). Whenever variance explained by PC1 is high we can expect a single factor (or at least a single, strongly correlated group of factors) to explain much of cross-region variation in the given country—this metric varies from values as low as 0.30 for France in 1999 to as high as 0.97 for Poland 2019 (in both cases for European Parliament elections). Moreover it is generally similar across different types of elections (at least compared to cross-country variation). One possibility to achieve such high linearisation of the political outcomes is for the country to adopt an effectively two party system – this is, however the opposite of the Polish situation in the years 2011 to 2023 with the effective number of parliamentary parties (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979) going from 2.86 to 3.13. A more familiar statistic to Polish commentators is the share of the total vote by the biggest two parties’ (PiS and PO) candidates which was only 61% in the first round of the 2025 presidential elections, the lowest value in 20 years.

In summary, Poland moved from the middle of the pack to being a strong outlier with the recent elections showing near perfect correlation (or anticorrelation) between the results of the parties

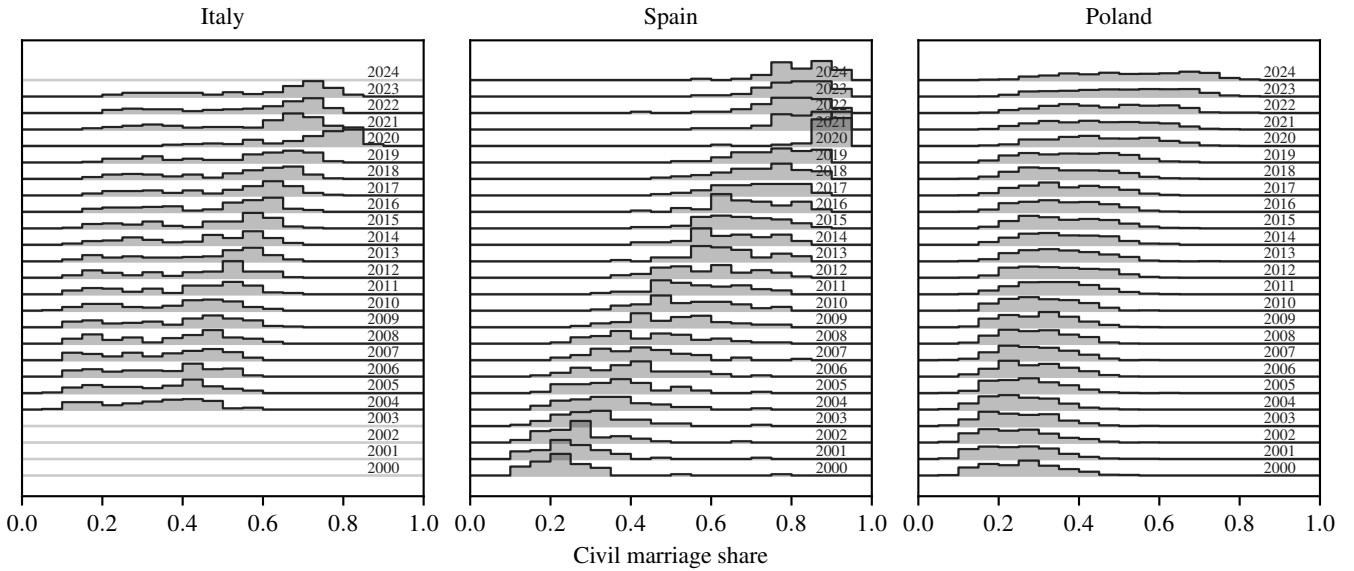


Figure 2: **Cross-country look at secularisation heterogeneity.** Histograms of regional civil marriage share as a function of time (data for 2000-2024 range where available). Currently in both Italy and Poland religiosity is very heterogenous across regions, while Spanish regions are almost universally secularised. This is a new development – 20 years ago (2005) Poland was closer to Spain than to Italy, with a homogenous and religious population.

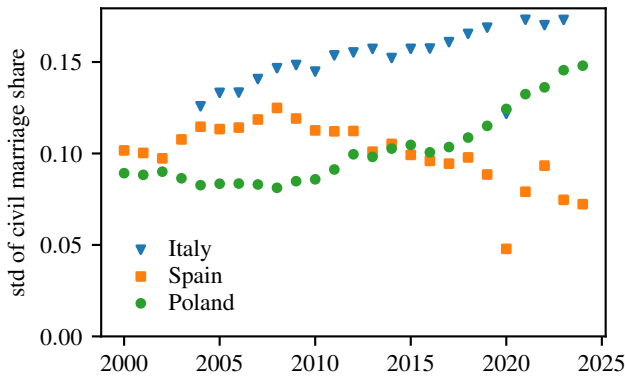


Figure 3: **Intra-country religious tension over time.** Standard deviation of the civil marriage share across regions as a function of time. Despite the largest change in overall level of religiosity Spain maintained homogeneity with intra-country differences in religiosity declining since 2008, in contrast variability of religiosity is continuing to rise in both Italy and Poland.

across the analysed regions.

Intra-country religious tension

Comparison of countries' secularisation trajectories can be examined in Fig. 2 where a histogram of the share of civil marriages computed at the level of regions is presented for each of the years available in the data. For Italy we see some of the regions secularising significantly while others remain highly religious leading to a distribution with a dip in the middle. This large variation is also reflected in standard deviation of civil marriage share as shown in Fig. 3 where, in Italy case, the cross-region variability goes from 13 to 17 percentage points in the two decades under consideration.

Spain provides a stark contrast. Here, even though the 2004 results are comparable with Italy, secularisation was remarkably ho-

	Italy	Spain	Poland
Civil marriage share	0.273*** (0.053)	-0.065 (0.075)	-0.179*** (0.016)
Wage index	0.030 (0.016)	0.105 (0.094)	0.045* (0.022)
Region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Election fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	838	459	7,211
Adjusted R^2	0.910	0.958	0.898

Notes: Heteroskedasticity-robust (HC3) standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

mogenous in the whole country and with a generally unimodal distribution throughout the two decades. Its standard deviation is in decline since 2008 indicating the end of the secularisation process as illustrated in Fig. 3.

Finally, Polish data (computed at higher resolution than Italy and Spain and thus with smoother appearance) move from range comparable with Spain in 2000 to an extremely broad distribution in the most recent observations. The transformation from a religiously homogenous country to this remarkable heterogeneity can be seen quantitatively in Fig. 3 where standard deviation of the distribution moves from 9 to 15 percentage points.

Direct effect of secularisation on the Polish right-wing success

One of the so-called paradoxes of the Polish political scene is simultaneous rise of the right-wing catholic populists and the country's secularisation (Grzymała-Busse, 2026). First step in disarming this paradox is to assess whether the intuition that direct effect of sec-

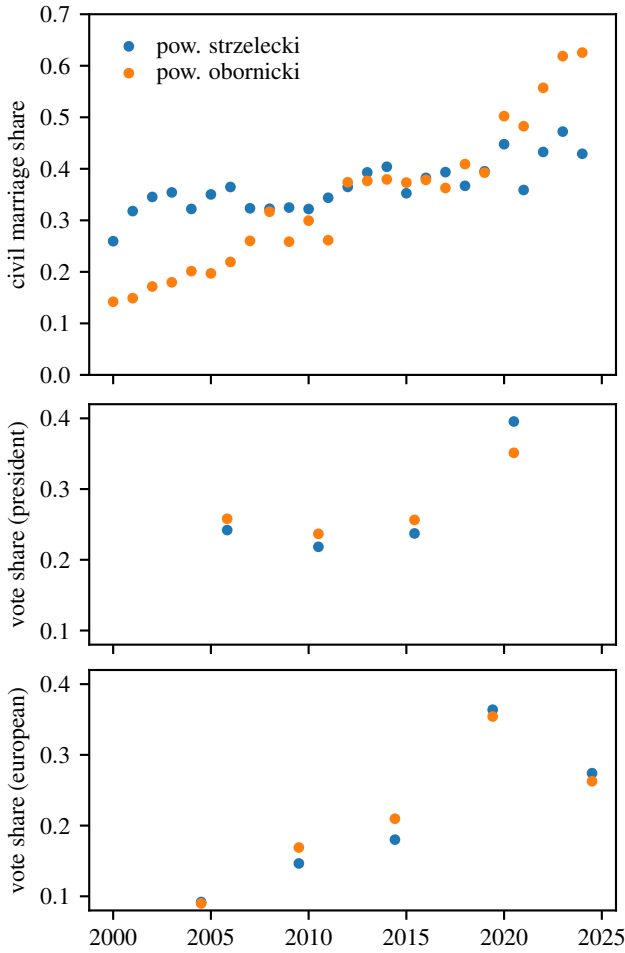


Figure 4: **Case study: two regions in Poland.** Comparison of two powiaty in Poland (with the highest crossover of marriage statistics in 2005–2024 range). Powiat strzelecki starts as more secular but, due to much faster secularisation rate in powiat obornicki gets overtaken in late 2010’s. This coincides with a switch in voting patterns in presidential and european elections where pow. strzelecki had initially lower, but then higher support for PiS candidates.

ularisation on the result of PiS is indeed negative. At an anecdotal level this can be examined by observing the results of PiS in two powiaty with the strongest crossover of civil marriage share (this pair was selected by first fitting a simple logit model with time as the only independent variable to each powiat’s secularisation trajectory and selecting the pair with the strongest crossover in the time period 2005-2025, this methodology was chosen as a de-noising effort). Changes in the secularisation level and PiS result in two types of elections with common time axis are shown in Fig. 4. Initially pow. strzelecki is the more secular one and has lower results of PiS support than pow. obornicki. Around 2017 the situation reverses in both secularisation and relative vote shares. In this case study we can also see that overall PiS support went up with the differences over time being much larger than across powiaty.

To quantify this effect a two-way fixed effects model was estimated using the data described earlier. The vote share v_{it} in region i at election t was regressed against the civil marriage share m_{it} and the wage index w_{it} with time fixed effects η_t and region fixed effects ζ_i with model given by

$$v_{it} = \beta_m m_{it} + \beta_w w_{it} + \eta_t + \zeta_i + \epsilon_{it}. \quad (1)$$

Table 3: Voting for PiS, individual data

	(1)	(2)
Secularity	-0.608*** (0.015)	-0.579*** (0.015)
Region fixed effects	No	Yes
Election fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	10,461	10,461
Adjusted R^2	0.175	0.193

Notes: Heteroscedasticity-robust (HC3) standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The regression results are presented in the table 3. The results for Poland are consistent with the intuition that secularisation impacts right-wing catholic parties negatively with the coefficient $\beta_m = -0.179$ ($p < 0.001$). Considering the typical change of the civil marriage share of about 30 percentage points during the period under consideration it would result in about 6 percentage points drop in support for PiS. At the same time we observe no significant association between civil marriage share and vote share of PP and positive impact on the parties belonging to right wing coalitions in Italy. The result for Spain is consistent with the reasoning outlined in the introduction – whenever an issue is largely homogenous in a given country, it has limited reflection in regional variation of the electoral outcomes because it is harder to organise political movements around less contentious ideological lines. The negative direct effect on the right wing support is not an inevitability – in case of Italy the relationship between the church and the state is less straightforward with long lasting legacies of Pope’s scepticism to *risorgimento* and left wing *Democrazia Cristiana* (Giorgi, 2019).

Regardless of the sign, the absolute size of the effect is consistent with the intra-country tension hypothesis with Italy showing the strongest effect followed by Poland, and Spain showing no significant effect (cf. Fig. 3).

Within this exercise, we can simultaneously assess the effect of wage inequality on the outcomes of right wing parties. Here, the effect is generally not significant (with only Poland showing marginally significant and positive effect of wage index $p = 0.037$) when region fixed effects are taken into account.

Time-heterogeneity of the secularisation effect can be examined by including an interaction term between the civil marriage share and the election dummies (and between the wage index and the election dummies)

$$v_{it} = (\beta_m)_t \eta_t m_{it} + \beta_w w_{it} + \eta_t + \zeta_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

the results of the model including interaction are compared with election-by-election OLS (note: this setting does not allow for region fixed effects).

$$v_{it} = (\beta_m)_t m_{it} + (\beta_w)_t w_{it} + \eta_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

The results of the three variants and the original two way fixed effects model are presented in figure 5. The coefficient estimates show substantial variation over the years with recent values (post 2015) more closely aligned with the overall model without interaction (blue). When data is analysed using a simple year-by-year OLS the coefficient estimates are consistently negative with values of around -0.7 since the collapse of post-soviet left in early 2010’s.

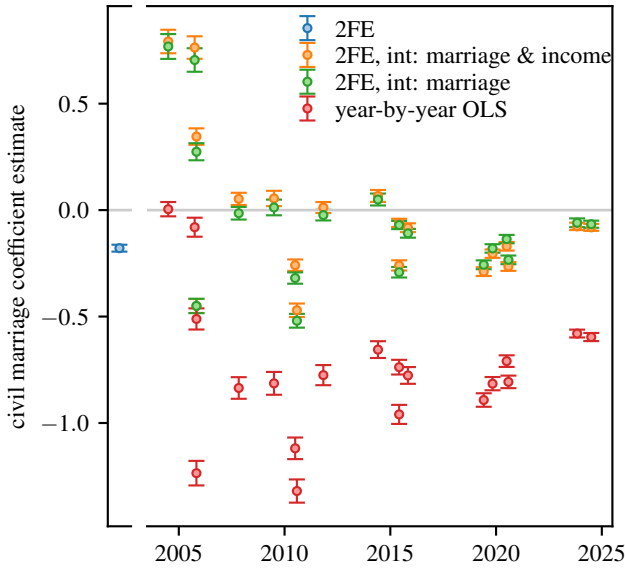


Figure 5: **Poland: fixed effects with time interactions.** Estimated time dependence of the influence of the degree of secularization on PiS result. Two way fixed effects estimate (blue), compared with a specification allowing for year-by-year difference by interacting civil marriage share with year dummies (green) or both marriage and income index (orange). Alternative estimates without region and election fixed effects computed by year-by-year OLS (red).

When region fixed effects are included the effect size hovers around -0.2 .

As a robustness check, individual data from ESS was modelled using a linear probability model. A binary indicator set to 1 for respondents who voted PiS in the last election and 0 for voters for other parties was chosen as dependent variable. Non voters were excluded from the analysis. It was regressed against the aggregate secularity score with election fixed effects both with and without region fixed effects.

The results are shown in Table 3. In both regressions secularity is a highly significant predictor of voters probability of voting for PiS.

Religion’s rise in significance

The results of the two-way fixed effects model identify negative direct impact of secularisation on PiS electoral outcomes – at the same time PiS was the governing party in 2005-2007 and 2015-2023 years, pointing to simultaneous country-level effect offsetting losses due to direct impact captured by the two-way fixed effects model. One possible mechanism for offsetting these negative direct effects is coupling of results in a given location to secularisation in other locations—news of rising support for progressive policies in the cities could act as a validation of the “besieged fortress” narrative, and through this mechanism mobilise the conservative electorate. Since this is a country-level mechanism, two-way fixed effects model would not be able to capture it and a different measurement strategy is required, I go back to the earlier PCA setting augmented with a regression of PCA loadings onto secularisation as described below.

Throughout the 25 years analysed, PiS remained a relatively sta-

ble political unit making its support as an attractive modelling target. To answer the question of extraordinary linearisation of the political scene a party-based analysis is not the most convenient framework. Going back to PCA setting alleviates the problem of changing party identities and multiple fusions of PO and to a lesser extent PiS with various satellite parties.

To examine the rising significance of religion on the political scene in Poland in a descriptive way, the results of all elections under consideration were processed with PCA to obtain first principal component loadings z_{it} . The sign of the PC1 loadings was chosen to keep positive correlation between neighbouring years and positive projection onto PiS in last year. This resulted in a panel dataset of PC1 loadings z_{it} at region i at time t , which was regressed on civil marriage shares m_{it} with pooled OLS

$$z_{it} = \beta m_{it} + \eta_t + \epsilon_{it}. \quad (4)$$

The resulting $\beta = -1.073 \pm 0.011$ gives average effect of secularisation on PC1 loadings (around 1 percentage point per percentage point). With the auxiliary model the question of rise of significance of religion over time can be addressed directly. An aggregate performance metric of eq. (4) together with PCA was constructed by generalising share of explained variance (SEV) typically reported in PCA analyses, which allows for time resolved analysis. Analogously to the classical SEV extended SEV compares mean square error with that of a constant model, with higher values indicating better explanatory power.

In a traditional setting, SEV of first component can be computed as the difference of the true vector of observables \mathbf{y} and its one-dimensional projection along PC1 $\hat{\mathbf{y}}_{PC1}$

$$SEV = 1 - \frac{\sum_i \|\mathbf{y}_i - \hat{\mathbf{y}}_{PC1i}\|^2}{\sum_i \|\mathbf{y}_i - \bar{\mathbf{y}}\|^2} \quad (5)$$

with $\|\cdot\|$ denoting L_2 norm. By defining the PC1 residual vector $\hat{\mathbf{q}} = \mathbf{y} - \hat{\mathbf{y}}_{PC1}$ and taking $\hat{\mathbf{e}}$ as unit vector along PC1 direction we can incorporate auxiliary model for PC1 loadings z into the SEV metric

$$\begin{aligned} SEV &= 1 - \frac{\sum_i \|\hat{\mathbf{q}}_i + (z_i - \hat{z}_i)\hat{\mathbf{e}}\|^2}{\sum_i \|\mathbf{y}_i - \bar{\mathbf{y}}\|^2} \\ &= 1 - \frac{\sum_i \|\hat{\mathbf{q}}_i\|^2 + (z_i - \hat{z}_i)^2}{\sum_i \|\mathbf{y}_i - \bar{\mathbf{y}}\|^2} \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

because $\hat{\mathbf{e}} \perp \hat{\mathbf{q}}$.

This generalised SEV quantifies the quality of the composite model which predicts election results in a given election in a given region as a unit PC1 direction vector (for a given election) multiplied by a loading \hat{z} the model estimates. This SEV is necessarily bounded above by the SEV of plain PC1 (because of the additional error introduced by the $(z - \hat{z})^2$ term). Raw SEV for the PCA and generalised SEV for the secularisation influence were computed for each election using the formulae above. The time dependent SEV is shown in Fig 6. At the beginning of the period under consideration, only 20% of the variance was captured by the religiosity impact on the first principal component – by the end of the period of study 68% of variance across the regions can be explained with differences in share of civil marriage.

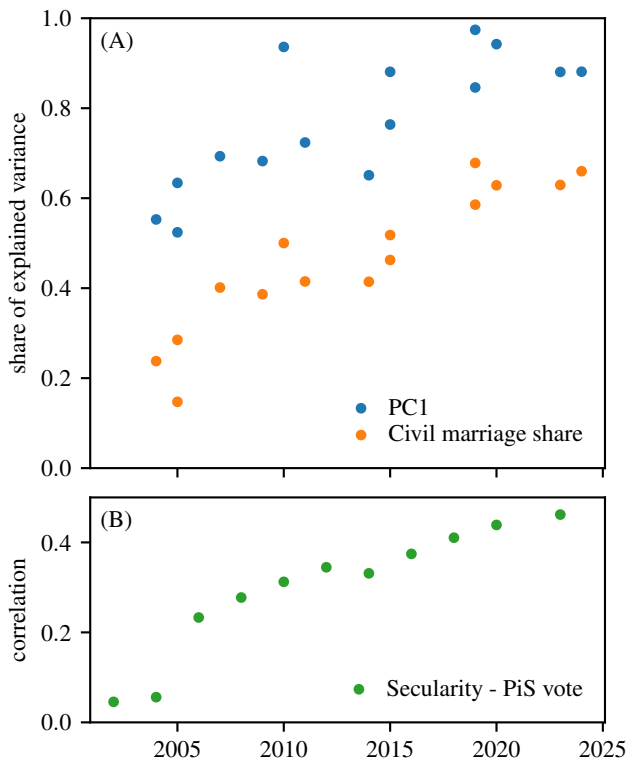


Figure 6: **Poland: emergence of religiosity as line of contention.** (A) Share of explained variance by first principal component (blue), share of explained variance from religiosity influence on first principal component (orange). (B) Correlation of individual religiosity with PiS vote probability.

Discussion

In the general context of the European electoral systems, Poland has received much attention as a frontrunner of populist support, with the hope that lessons learnt there can be applied to understand similar transformations in other European nations. I hope the observations presented in this manuscript will urge more caution in seeking such parallels.

The top-level analysis facilitated by the PCA of regional variability of electoral outcomes shows Polish pattern as distinct from its European neighbours. The extraordinary linearisation of the political space is in that regard a Polish phenomenon which makes it dissimilar to France, Italy and Spain which show no particular trend in the SEV of PC1 and even more unlike Germany where SEV of PC1 is steadily decreasing. This coarse grain signal is insensitive to the identity of the potential underlying singular cleavage and should be able to detect, for example, if cost of living entirely monopolises the political debate in a country under consideration.

At the country level, the analysis shows where the linearisation came from – its origin can be traced to the dramatic increase in heterogeneity of religious belief. The co-occurrence of secularisation and rise of religion-based politics came as surprise to some. The origin of this bewilderment lies in two assumptions: first, that secularisation necessarily harms the catholic right and second, that Poland is a ethno-religious monolith.

The first assumption is partially correct. Indeed, the direct effect of the secularisation on PiS is significantly negative and (considering the secularisation rate) moderately large as shown in the

two-way fixed effects design (cf. 3). Such analyses overlook, however, the global changes of the political sphere which affect voting behaviour in a regionally uniform fashion. The second assumption was correct 25 years ago, and is simply no longer valid. The religious practices of Poles are about as varied as the measurement allows (cf. 2). In one sense, they are even more diverse than that of Italians where the missing middle allows for a simplified dichotomous conceptualisation – in the Polish case, the whole spectrum is populated and in a near uniform fashion.

High value of effective number of parliamentary parties and emergence of new parties to the right of PiS calls for a supra-party level analysis of the linearisation as facilitated by regressing PC1 loadings onto the religiosity levels. By generalising SEV to the PCA supplemented with this auxiliary model, the changes in the structure of the electoral outcome space can be followed quantitatively and confirm the hypothesis of secularisation as the critical driver of the linearisation. By construction, this result is robust to restructuring of the party landscape.

The biggest limitation of the regional design presented is lack of access to effects of covariates with negligible variation across regions – the particularly salient examples are gender and age/cohort effects. The relationship between gender and voting outcomes in Poland is present in the exit poll data, for example 8 pp difference in 2025 presidential election (Wikipedia contributors, 2026b) and (if stable across religiosity levels) could explain persistence of large (effective) number of parliamentary parties while the regional electoral outcomes collapse onto a one-dimensional space. These gender differences are more pronounced in outcomes of less centrist parties with hard-right *Konfederacja* and left *Lewica* showing 6.5 pp and 3.3 pp gender difference compared to only 0.4 split for PiS in the same election (Wikipedia contributors, 2026a). The role of gender in voting for the minor parties (not PO and PiS) is discussed in greater detail by Cześnik, Szczupska, and Sychowiec (2026).

How much of the observed differences can be explained in purely demographic terms (cohort turnover and migration) remains an open question. In recent years the total inflowing migration into cities was below 250 thousand people (with net migration being negative) while population living in the cities was around 22 million giving a very crude estimate of 1% of yearly migratory turnover in the cities. Similarly the current life expectancy is around 78 years, placing the effects of cohort turnover at round 1% of population per year. Both of these are of similar magnitude to the dynamics of the secularisation process (cf. 4) and would likely account for some of the changes. It is exceedingly unlikely, however, that all of the leaving population is religious and all of the arriving is secularised thus the observed effects also necessarily include changes of opinion during the life course.

Even though two-way fixed effects methodology offers difference-in-differences-like conclusions, a fully causal identification is likely impossible in this simple observational setting. Indeed, while religion based voting is a well established electoral behaviour (direct causality), reverse causality is also possible where changes in political alignment are antecedent of changes in religious belief or at least behaviour. Examples from other countries can include loss of Irish church authority as a result of publicization of sex scandals (Donnelly, 2016; Grzymała-Busse, 2026) or significant decrease in seminary enrolment in response to legalisation of same-sex marriage (Seror & Ticku, 2021). Qualitative analyses of the influence of church rhetoric on policy in Poland combined with media fragmentation along political

lines (Žuk & Žuk, 2019), recent documentaries concerning church abuses and anti LGBT campaigns make either causality direction plausible. (Bogatyrev & Bogusz, 2025; *Tylko nie mów nikomu (Just don't tell anyone)*, 2019).

Conclusions

Origins of the rise in populist support were primarily sought in either rising economic inequality or fracturing doxa in the space of moral judgments (whether regarding European integration or homosexuality).

Without dismissing rise of economic inequality as a serious societal problem, I find economic explanations of changes in Polish political scene insufficiently specific both temporally and regionally. Bernhard (2021) proposal that 2007-09 recession is to blame for the changes is correct in its timing, but does not align with Poland being less affected than its neighbours. On the other hand, heterogenous secularisation as the proximate cause of the unusual Polish predicament is both country-specific and time-specific.

Poland, with its initial universal religiosity had undergone a dramatic change to a very heterogenous state where the whole spectrum of religiosity is currently represented. Within the same religious mechanism the support for marriage equality and reproductive rights can be viewed as a proxy for secularisation. With the help of regionally resolved data, we can correlate the onset of the rise of populist rhetoric with the increase in secularisation heterogeneity. In this way, the diagnosis of populist mobilisation arising from “suppressed cleavages” (Krastev, 2007) is correct, but only partially. The religious cleavage in Poland was not suppressed; it simply did not exist 25 years ago, but when it manifested, the political scene was ready to accommodate it through populist mobilisation.

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Data availability. Reproduction codes, raw and harmonised data are available on GitHub (Waszkiewicz, 2025) and (Waszkiewicz, 2026).

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