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## VOTING PIS: VOTING LEFT WHEN VOTING FAR-RIGHT POPULIST?

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**ORCID no.** 0000-0002-6335-6878**e-mail:** pascal.siemsen@rub.de**Abstract**

Populist, especially far-right populist, parties have gained votes in recent elections across Europe recently. This observation is true for Poland as well. The far-right populist party Law and Justice (PiS, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) won the parliamentary election in 2015. Next to the well-known nativist and populist messages, PiS promoted a social policy: the Family 500+ programme. Did this programme attract voters? The findings of this study lend reason to answer the question in the affirmative. The inclusion of social policies usually associated with left-wing parties might hence be a path to be explored by other far-right populist parties as well.

**Keywords:** PiS, voting behaviour, social policy, far-right, populism

## Introduction

Populism is on the rise, as is research on populism. The average vote share of populist parties – mostly far-right parties – has been rising since the 1960s, as Norris and Inglehart (2018) state. At the same time, the amount of studies analysing this phenomenon has increased as well as Rooduijn (2019) observes.

This study analyses a special case of rising populism support: the electoral success of Law and Justice (PiS, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) in the parliamentary election of Poland 2015. The case is special because PiS, classified as a far-right populist party (e.g. by Rooduijn et al., (2019)<sup>1</sup>, prominently promoted social policies associated with left parties. The study hence advances the current research on populism.

The question at hand is, “Did the promotion of social policies attract voters independently of nativist and populist attitudes?”

<sup>1</sup> PiS is also classified as belonging to the conservative rather than the right-wing party family, e.g. by Döring and Manow (2019). This paper will not get into the discussion of classifying PiS in this paper. As Rooduijn et al. (2019) is a wide collaboration of researchers being experts on the field of right-wing populism and has been extensively used in other papers in peer-reviewed journals (see Rooduijn et al. 2019), this paper relies their classification. But, this does not imply that the classification by Döring and Manow (2019) might be wrong.

To this author's knowledge, this question has not been analysed. The present study proposes a first attempt to answer that question. Assuming that voters' preferences are close to the party they voted for, voters supporting redistribution policies should be more inclined to vote for PiS as a result of the promotion of redistributive social policies. That effect should be visible in controlling for attitudes associated with voting for far-right populist parties.

The empirical analysis brought forward in this paper shows just this. The probability of voting for PiS increases if one is in favour of redistribution. In addition, the main beneficiaries of the proposed policy (single parents struggling on their income) have a higher probability of voting PiS as well.

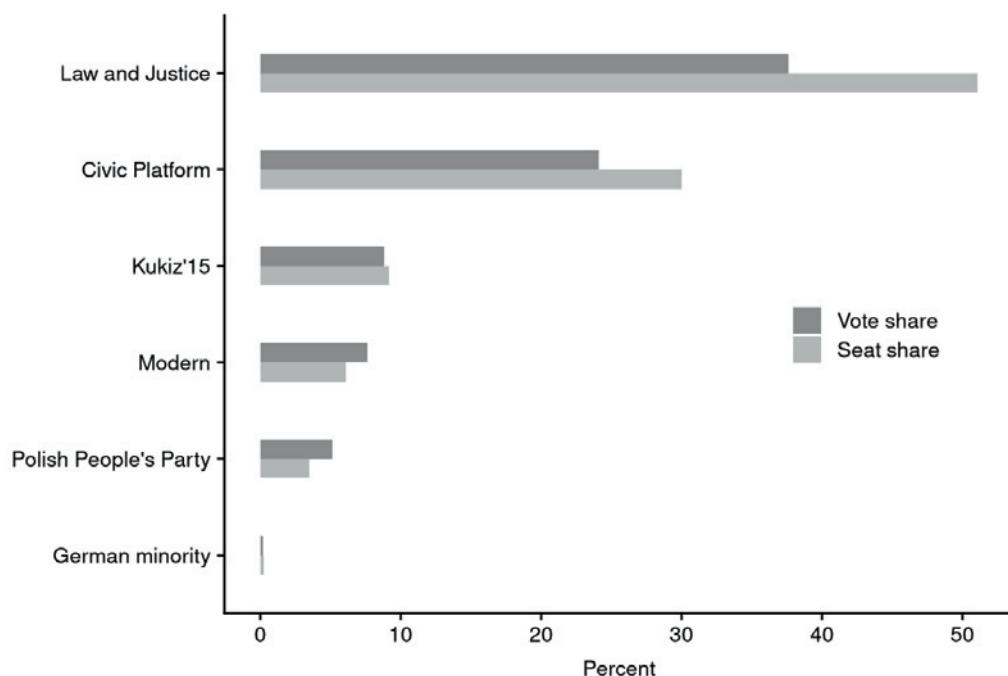
The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a brief summary about the 2015 parliamentary election in Poland. Possible explanations for the success of PiS follow. The empirical analysis is presented in the subsequent section. The last section discusses the results and draws a conclusion.

## PiS and the Parliamentary Election 2015

### *Election Results*

The parliamentary election in Poland in 2015 saw a huge victory for PiS. They not only won the relative majority of votes but also gained the absolute majority of parliamentary seats. A rather average vote share of 37 percent translated into 51 percent of parliamentary seats (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Results of Parliamentary Election 2015



The governing parties prior to the election, the centrist Civic Platform and the agrarian Polish People's Party, lost votes and formed the opposition to PiS. The Civic Platform was still the second largest party in the parliament with a seat share of 30 percent.

Interestingly, parties from the left did not win any parliamentary seats. The Democratic Left Alliance and Your Movement joined forces and ran as the United Left. They fell shy of the 8 percent threshold for party alliances. The far-left Razem (Together) did not pass the 5 percent party threshold.

As a result, PiS was able to form a government without needing to enter into a coalition with another party<sup>2</sup>. Poland saw a one-party government for the first time in 26 years of democracy.

### *PiS Election Campaign*

PiS is commonly classified as a far-right populist party. For example, the *PopuList* (Rooduijn et al., 2019) lists it under “far-right” and “populist”. According to the definition applied by the *PopuList*, these parties share a nativist, authoritarian and anti-elite political agenda.

Nativism holds that countries should be “inhabited exclusively by members of the native group and that non-native elements are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state” (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Authoritarianism understands society to be strictly ordered. Populism is defined as a political ideology that sees society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (Mudde 2004, 543).

These features can also be observed in the electoral campaign of PiS in 2015<sup>3</sup>. According to Markowski (2016), PiS promoted the idea that Poland was in the hand of the corrupt elite. They also assessed an inability of Poland to fulfil national interests and pointed to the political elite as the reason (Marcinkiewicz 2016, 465).

The refugee crisis 2015 brought the topic of migration on the agenda as well. The chairman of PiS, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, stated he was against migration from Muslim countries and the refugee quotas proposed by the EU (Marcinkiewicz, 2016; Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier, 2016).

So far, so familiar for a far-right populist party. One feature made the 2015 electoral campaign special though: the Family 500+ programme. Under this programme, families would receive 500 Polish zlotys (120 euros) for each second subsequent child. Families with a low income will receive support from the first child onwards as well (MPIPS, 2019a).

The programme is labelled as rather generous (Sowa 2016). All families are eligible, there is no means test and the benefit is twice as high as the previous average child-raising benefit (Sowa 2016). Goals of the programme were to increase the number of births and to reduce poverty, especially among children, according to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MPIPS, 2019b).

<sup>2</sup> PiS ran together with Polska Razem and Solidarna Polska forming the United Right Coalition. Voting results are presented only for PiS following Döring and Manow (2019).

<sup>3</sup> It is not the task of this paper to classify the party or provide evidence e.g. for a nativist agenda. Instead, the classification „far-right populist” provided by the *PopuList* (Rooduijn et al. 2019) was used. The examples are of illustrative nature.

In summary, the political agenda of PiS in 2015 consisted of the typical nativist and anti-elite messages. Adding to that, PiS promoted a social policy with the Family 500+ programme. It would redistribute and be clearly de-commodifying. Hence, adding to the nativist and populist agenda of PiS, there is a classical left-wing policy<sup>4</sup>.

## Why vote for PiS?

### *Far-right populism*

There is a vast amount of research trying to explain the success of far-right populist parties. The explanations of the success of these parties can be structured with demand and supply. It is generally assumed that voters' policy preferences will be in line with the party they support (Evans 2004, 93). The demand side includes attitudes and traits of voters that make them lean towards far-right populist parties. The supply side refers to all features of the party itself. The explanation presented below will focus on the demand side but it also incorporates the supply side.

Two theses explaining far-right populism have emerged: the economic anxiety thesis and the cultural backlash thesis (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018). It is not the task of this paper to settle the fight between these theses, but rather to include all possible explanations for voting for radical right populists in order to assess whether redistribution-friendly voters were attracted to vote for PiS.

The economic anxiety thesis states that modernisation has created a segment of the population that lost out economically. In consequence, these "losers of modernisation" feel resentment and are fearful and threatened by immigration (Betz, 1993). Defined in absolute terms, "losers of modernisation" would be the unemployed, the low educated, the lower classes or people with a low income. They hence turn to the radical right, which is not associated with these processes (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels, 2017) and in turn promises to restore the old order.

The cultural backlash thesis refers to values and attitudes. Nativism and authoritarianism are thought to be a direct reaction to immigration and multiculturalism. It has been argued that the same social groups, like the unemployed and lower classes, hold anti-immigration attitudes (Rooduijn, 2018; Arzeheimer, 2016). Others have included the generational aspect as the primary factor (Norris and Inglehart 2018). Studies show that attitudes and values can exert an effect independent from the socio-economic conditions (Rooduijn 2018). Though it would be interesting to analyse where the attitudes come from, for this analysis it is solely important to include different attitudes in the model.

Economic anxiety and cultural backlash are explanations for nativism and authoritarianism. Recently, the populist feature of populist far-right parties has received more attention. Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and Andreadis (2018) understand populist attitudes to be present in every voter. They become activated if representation and responsiveness is low. These populist anti-elite attitudes can be captured by low levels of trust in politicians.

The different accounts of explaining the vote for far-right populist parties lead to the following hypotheses:

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<sup>4</sup> The aim of strengthening families and increasing the fertility rate can be interpreted as promoting traditional values though.

- *Hypothesis 1: Losers of modernisation have a higher probability of voting for PiS.*
- *Hypothesis 2: Voters who hold anti-immigration attitudes or have a low trust in politicians have a higher probability of voting PiS.*

### *Social policy*

In order to help explain the vote for PiS in 2015, one must consider the party's redistributive social policies and look beyond their classification as a far-right populist party. For Rooduijn (2019), it is important to carefully distinguish populism from other concepts and to "carefully categorise parties". In his own party classification, the left-wing policies of PiS are not represented. Explaining preferences for redistribution and social policies in general has a long history. The "power resource approach", developed in the 1980s, states that labour in comparison to capital is a subordinated class (Korpi 1983, 14). Through social policies like unemployment or sickness benefits, the working class could enhance their power resources. These policies are economically instrumental as well: lower classes do profit from redistribution the most (Marx and Schumacher, 2018). Hence, lower classes tend to support left parties who promote these policies.

This explanation can be applied to the Family 500+ as well. The programme is directed at low-income parents. This social group should profit the most from the programme and hence be inclined to vote for it.

Related to that, voters who support redistribution and a more equal society would favour the Family 500+ programme. Pro-redistribution attitudes would hence also lead to a higher probability of voting for PiS. Redistribution attitudes can be found in the lower and middle classes (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015).

Do these concerns about redistribution have an independent impact on voting for PiS? Even if Family 500+ is attractive to some voters, they might be deterred by PiS' promotion of nativism and populism. The answer to that question is an empirical one and the considerations presented above lead to the following hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 3: Parents struggling on their current income have a higher probability of voting PiS.*
- *Hypothesis 4: Voters who favour redistribution have a higher probability of voting PiS.*

## **Analysis**

### *Data and Model*

This section test the previously formulated hypotheses. To do so, data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 8 is used. The ESS is a biennial cross-national survey of attitudes and behaviour. Round 8 was released in 2016 and covered the parliamentary election of 2015.

The data set for ESS Round 8 for Poland includes 1,694 cases. Post-stratification weights are applied to be able to get representative results.

The dependent variable in this study is "voted for PiS". The ESS Round 8 includes the question "Which party did you vote for in that election?" (In ESS Round 8, this question

refers to the parliamentary election in 2015<sup>5</sup>.) The dependent variable takes the value 1 if *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* was ticked and 0 if not. Non-voting and non-answers (e.g. ‘don’t know’) are coded as “missing”. Looking at the frequency distribution of the dependent variable, 43 percent of respondents to ESS Round 8 voted PiS. This is slightly higher than the official election results for PiS (38 percent).

In general, the following variable selection is guided by previous models (e.g. Rooduijn 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). For example, Norris and Inglehart (2019 p. 280) state that “the final model 5, combining a wide range of social controls and cultural attitudes, provides a comprehensive account of voting support for authoritarian parties in Europe”. This study includes a wide range of social controls and cultural attitudes as well. This is desired here since the goal of this study is to check whether redistribution preferences played a role in voting PiS on top of variables included in prior research<sup>6</sup>.

Two independent variables to test the hypotheses of an effect of the Family 500+ are included: Redistribution preferences and low-income families.

Redistribution preferences are measured by the following statement: “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels”. The 5-points scale ranges from 1 being “agree strongly” to 5 being “disagree strongly”. The scale was re-coded to indicate redistribution friendly, neutral or negative attitudes. The resulting variable accordingly can take on the values “yes”, “neutral” and “no”.

A dummy variable was created to measure the probability of voting for PiS by parents with low income. The question “Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household’s current income?” can take values ranging from “Living comfortably on present income” to “Very difficult on present income”. The variable “Children living at home or not” indicates if a respondent lives with children at home. Using these two variables, the dummy variable is built. It takes on the value “yes” if one struggles with income and has children at home or “no”.

To test the modernisation loser hypothesis, several variables concerning the socio-economic status are included. Unemployment takes on the value “yes” if the respondent is unemployed. Low education indicates a lower level of education. It takes on the value “yes” if the respondent has completed lower secondary education or less (ISCED <=2). Income is measured again by the respondent’s own feeling about sufficient income.

Finally, class is measured by Oesch’s (2006) class scheme. The variable measuring class takes the value “yes” if the respondent is a member of the “low-skilled working class” and “no” otherwise.

Two variables tap into attitudes supposed to be associated with voting PiS: Low trust in politicians and anti-immigration attitudes. The following question is used to measure respondents’ trust in politicians: “...on a score of 0–10, how much do you personally trust each of the institutions.... Zero means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.” The variable takes the value “yes” if the respondent indicates to have a trust level lower than 5 and “no” if higher than 5. The response of 5 translates into “neutral”. Anti-immigration attitudes are measured by taking the question “Would you

5 Specifically, the question is: „Obecnie wielu ludzi z różnych przyczyn nie bierze udziału w wyborach. Czy brał/-a P. udział w ostatnich wyborach do Sejmu w październiku 2015 roku?”

6 Note that to establish causal effects, variable selection should be guided by causal graphs and include all confounders and no colliders or mediators (Morgan and Winship, 2014). However, it is not the goal of this paper to come up with a causal model for any mentioned independent variable.

say that [country]’s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?” The variable ranges from “Cultural life undermined” to “Cultural life enriched” on a 11-point scale. The variable measuring immigration attitudes is coded in the same way as the previous: lower than 5 translates into being anti-immigration, 5 shows a neutral attitude and every value above 5 indicates positive attitudes towards immigration.

Several other variables are included to control for alternative explanations. First of all, “Urban” measures whether the respondent lives in a “big city” or close to one and measures the effect of an urban-rural divide. Specifically, for the 2015 election in Poland, it has been shown that urbanization explains a great deal of voting for PiS (Marcinkiewicz, 2018). Age and gender are included as controls, again following previous research (Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer, 2018).

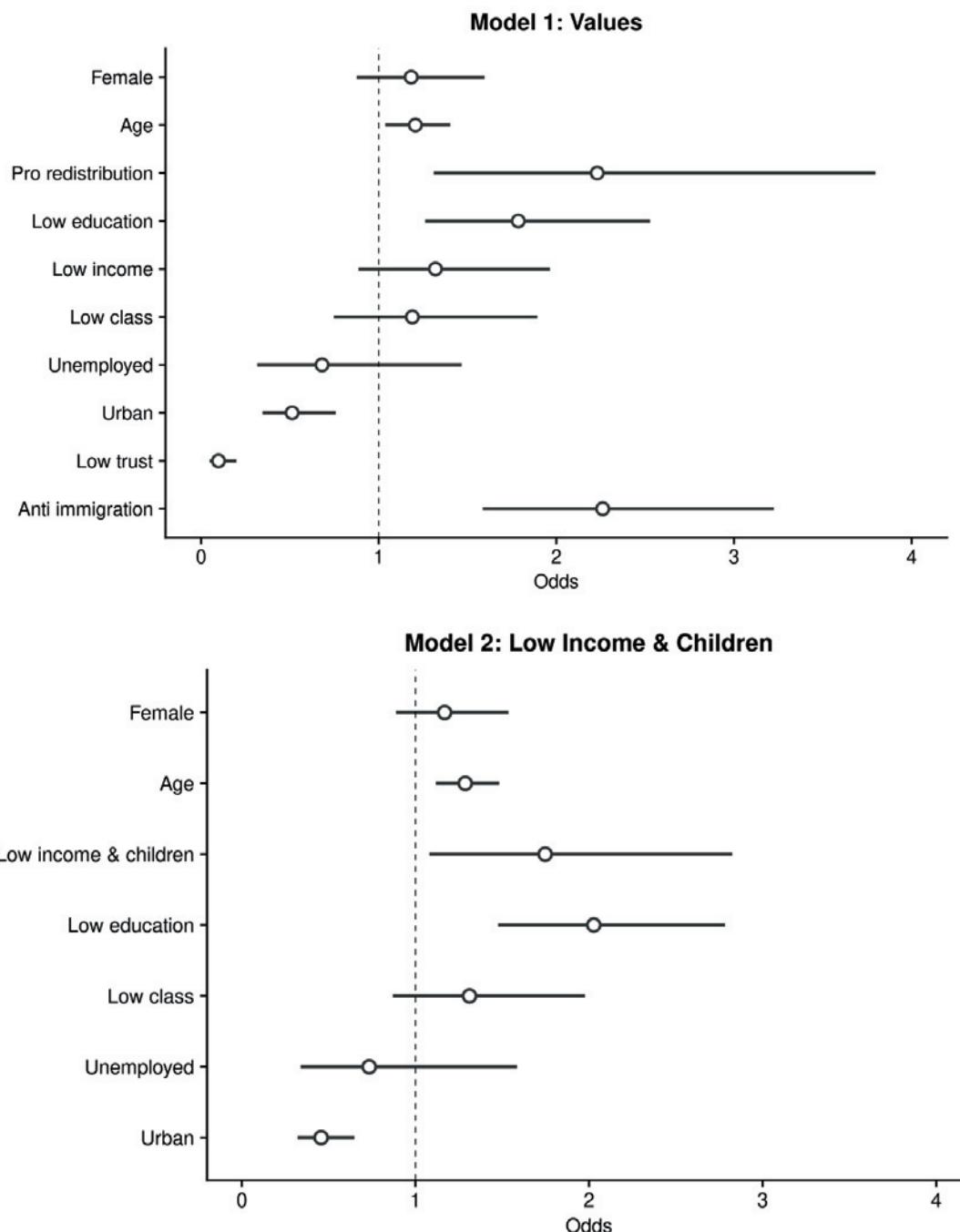
The dependent variable (voting for PiS) is binary. Accordingly, a logistic regression is carried out. It allows this study to assess the effect of the independent variables on the probability of voting PiS.

This study has two models. The first model tests the influence of redistribution preferences. This model includes all variables mentioned above except for the dummy variable of having a low income and children. This variable would be too similar to the low-income dummy variable. The second model tests the influence of having a low income and children, hence being a main beneficiary of the proposed policies by PiS. It does not include variables measuring values. As with previous research on this topic (e.g. Rooduijn, 2018), this study should reveal for these values to be influenced by socio-economic characteristics. Including these values would absorb much of the effect of the socio-economic variables, like the one of interest here. For example, it does not make sense to control for redistribution preferences, hence keeping them fixed, if one would like to assess the effect of income.

### *Findings*

Figure 2 shows the regression coefficients of interest. The results are based on the full models that can be found in the Appendix. On the x-axis, odds<sup>7</sup> are displayed. Odds greater than 1 indicate a positive effect on the probability of voting PiS. Odds less than 1 represent a negative effect on voting for PiS. Lines next to the point estimate show the 95 percent confidence interval. If the confidence interval does not cross the line at 1, the effect is statistically significant.

<sup>7</sup> Odds represent the ratio of the probability that an event occurs to the probability that it will not occur.

**Figure 2.** Regression Results

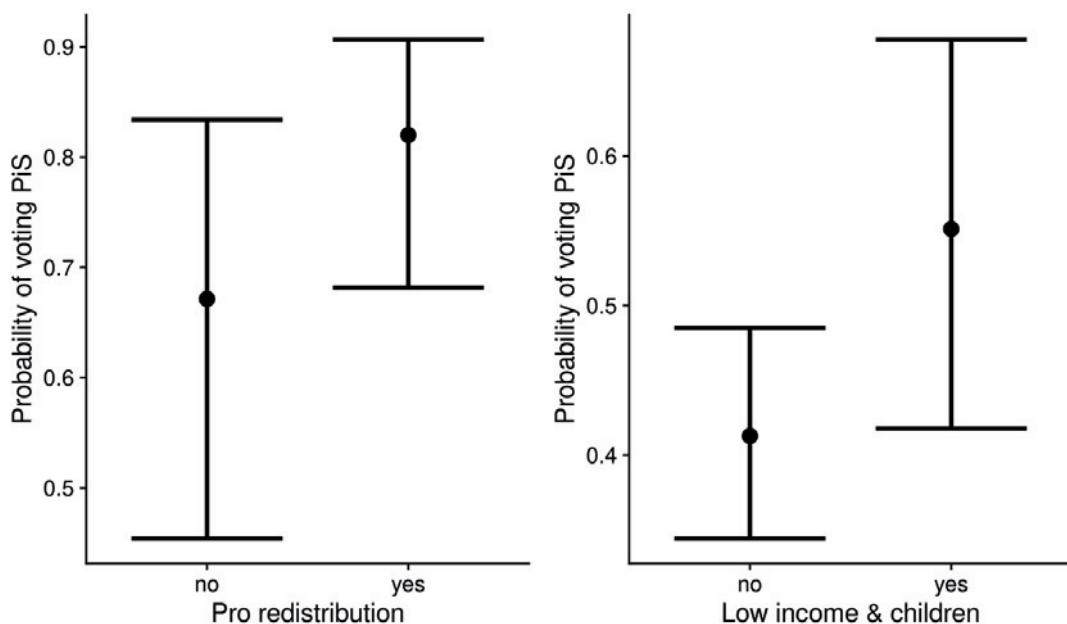
Starting with the socio-economic variables in Model 1, testing the modernisation loser hypothesis, low education, low class and low income all show the expected positive effect of voting for PiS. Only the effect of low education reaches statistical significance, though. Hence, with confidence it can be argued that education played a role in voting PiS.

Coming to the immigration and anti-elite attitudes (also Model 1), the effects are clear and significant. Having a negative opinion about immigration increases the probability of voting PiS. Surprisingly, low trust in politicians decreases the probability of voting PiS.

This finding goes contrary to theoretical expectations but may very well be an artefact of the frequency distribution of the variable itself. Only 7.5 percent of the respondents' trust politicians. This is such a small number that every other political party must have received votes from non-trusting voters as well.

Being pro-redistribution (Model 1) and having a low income and children (Model 2) both exert a positive effect on the probability of voting PiS. Both effects are significant on the 5 percent level. To get a better understanding of these effects, the marginal effect is calculated (Figure 3). It shows the probability of voting for PiS for voters that are in favour of redistribution compared to voters that are not in favour<sup>8</sup>. Voters who are against redistribution have a 67 percent probability of voting for PiS. The probability of voting for PiS increases by 15 percent for voters who support redistribution. This is a substantial effect showing the importance of redistribution attitudes in the vote for PiS. Similarly, the probability of voting for PiS increases from around 41 percent to 55 percent for voters with a low income and children.

**Figure 3.** Marginal Effects



## Discussion

Three observations can be found in this study's findings. First, there are more motives voting for far-right populist than currently assumed. That is because far-right populist parties might pursue policies going beyond what their classifications suggest.

Attitudes of votes towards redistribution played a role in their voting for the far-right populist party PiS in 2015, next to and independent of their immigration preferences and trust towards politicians. This effect holds even after controlling for a range of other possible reasons to vote for PiS such as urbanisation and education. To thoroughly explain

<sup>8</sup> For the predictions, all continuous variables are set to their mean value. Factor variables are set to their base level and dummy variables are set to 0.

voting for populist right-wing parties, one should take into account their campaigns and other explanations.

These findings also relate to the recent topic research of anticipating voting choices of people with a lower socio-economic status. Margalit (2019) shows that different theories expect different effects. Possible options include non-voting, voting left, voting right or voting populist. No research to date offers any insight on what to expect. Similarly, for the PiS vote in 2015, one simply does not know which mechanism has been decisive. To merely label a vote for PiS as a far-right populist vote in the sense of anti-elite and anti-immigration attitudes is, in any case, too simple.

Second, these results support the assumption that the social policy element of the election campaign of PiS was successful in gaining votes. Redistribution preferences played a role in voting for PiS. This association might very well be motivated by the offered Family 500+ programme of PiS as it taps into the redistribution dimension. It offered a tax-financed benefit for everybody with children meaning a higher income for many families.

First results of the Family 500+ in place also show that it worked in the proposed way. As the EU notes, poverty in Poland is down and fertility is up (EU, 2018). This might be an additional reason to vote for PiS<sup>9</sup>.

Third, the inclusion of social policy elements in party manifestos might be a route other right-wing populist parties will take. Following Kitschelt (1994), in the two-dimensional policy space, nativism and anti-elitism lie on an axis vertically cutting the economic (or state-market) axis. Hence, right-wing populist parties are free to explore policy options on the economic axis. As Hillen and Steiner (2018) recently showed, this combination has not been on offer, leading to more abstention and less satisfaction with democracy.

The combination of both dimensions must be considered in the future, though. Although a comprehensive social policy (including immigrants, for example) might not be on the list of policy options for a right-wing party. There are many more alternatives. In the case of PiS, this combination worked as well in the party's promotion of the Family 500+ programme, as it demonstrated that PiS supports the traditional family. Besides, the population share of immigrants from non-EU countries was just 1.7 percent in 2015 (Eurostat, 2020). Social policy for natives might be an ever more attractive option for parts of the population to vote right-wing populist.

## Conclusion

This study has analysed motives of voting for *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* in the parliamentary election 2015 in Poland. It assumed that redistribution preferences next to immigration attitudes and anti-elite rhetoric played a role in the success of PiS. One prominent part of the election campaign of PiS was the Family 500+ programme. It offered a generous child-benefit financed by tax. Hence, it was a redistributive programme falling in the category of social policies. This programme therefore had the potential to attract voters supporting redistributive policies.

The empirical analysis does not lead to falsify the hypothesis. Independent of a range of other factors, being in favour of redistribution has had a positive effect on voting for PiS. The group that would profit the most, low income families with children, also show

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<sup>9</sup> However, side effects like the exclusion of women from the labour market are more than likely and hence may deter voters.

a higher probability of voting for PiS. Both effects do reach conventional levels of statistical significance ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Therefore, the Family 500+ programme is likely to have played a role in the electoral success of PiS. As always is the case when using survey data, causality cannot be established.

## Appendix

**Table 1.** Full regression results

Model 1: Values						
term	estimate	std.error	statistic	p.value	conf.low	conf.high
(Intercept)	0.30	0.47	0.63	0.53	-0.63	1.22
gndr2. Female	0.17	0.15	1.10	0.27	-0.13	0.47
agea	0.01	0.00	2.44	0.02	0.00	0.02
lowEduyes	0.58	0.18	3.27	0.00	0.23	0.93
lowIncyes	0.28	0.20	1.37	0.17	-0.12	0.68
lowClassyes	0.17	0.24	0.73	0.46	-0.29	0.64
unempyes	-0.38	0.39	-0.98	0.33	-1.15	0.38
urbanneutral	-0.31	0.18	-1.74	0.08	-0.65	0.04
urbanyes	-0.67	0.20	-3.35	0.00	-1.06	-0.28
proRedneutral	0.50	0.32	1.55	0.12	-0.13	1.13
proRedyes	0.80	0.27	2.95	0.00	0.27	1.33
lowTrustneutral	-1.65	0.40	-4.19	0.00	-2.43	-0.88
lowTrustyes	-2.32	0.36	-6.44	0.00	-3.03	-1.61
antiImmineutral	0.31	0.19	1.64	0.10	-0.06	0.68
antiImmiyes	0.82	0.18	4.51	0.00	0.46	1.17

Model 2: Low income and children						
term	estimate	std.error	statistic	p.value	conf.low	conf.high
(Intercept)	-0.92	0.20	-4.63	0.00	-1.31	-0.53
gndr2. Female	0.16	0.14	1.11	0.27	-0.12	0.43
agea	0.02	0.00	3.50	0.00	0.01	0.02
lowincchildyes	0.56	0.25	2.28	0.02	0.08	1.04
lowEduyes	0.71	0.16	4.37	0.00	0.39	1.02
lowClassyes	0.27	0.21	1.30	0.19	-0.14	0.68
unempyes	-0.31	0.39	-0.79	0.43	-1.08	0.46
urbanneutral	-0.50	0.16	-3.10	0.00	-0.81	-0.18
urbanyes	-0.78	0.18	-4.39	0.00	-1.13	-0.43

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