

Social Policy as the Instrument for Buying Political Support

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is analysing Polish ruling party (Law and Justice) politics in the context of social policy and populism. Populism can be described as proffering of material goods in return for electoral support. Voters remain loyal to the party because they expect to receive benefits in exchange. It was important reason Law and Justice won election. During the election campaign, they have promised to give monthly PLN 500 (€ 114) in cash handouts to families for every second and subsequent child. In effect Law and Justice party (PiS) won absolute majority in the Parliament and Senate in 2015 elections. They did as promise and after more than a year from election support for ruling, PiS is still climbed, despite Polish government is clearly threatening democratic principles.

How could be explained this phenomenon in a country like Poland? Maybe the mass support for populist PiS reflects growing socioeconomic inequalities and socially insecure. After decades of communist rule, Poland transitioned to a democratic government and a market economy. For more than two decades, the country was developing at a pace exceeding an average of 4% a year. On the other hand, in Poland is rapidly rising level of wealth and income inequality and mass support for populist political parties. PiS, a right-wing party influenced by the country’s powerful Catholic church, has long argued that the fruits of Poland’s economic growth over the past decade have been felt only by the minority from urban middle classes. Rewarding working-class people, who typically have larger families and live in rural areas, mainly in the country’s poorer eastern regions, was a key part of the party’s election victory.

The analyse of values, principles and goals of social policy will show that the new family benefit founded by PiS has nothing to do with social policy or with populist politics. Its meaning PiS simply used social policy as electoral investment instrument for attracting electoral support and buying votes. This situation is very dangerous for democracy and for the future of civil society in Poland.

Introduction

For many long years, political parties which succeeded during election in Poland had to face two challenges. The first one was the need to operate as a coalition government due to election rules favoring a fragmented political scene rather than a consolidated one. The other challenge was the so-called erosion of authority consisting in none of the parties or coalitions being able to retain political support for a long time [1] [2, pp. 262].

It seems that none of the aforementioned rules apply to the case of success of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) during the election in 2015. As a result of the election, PiS gained majority in Parliament, which allowed it to form the government on its own. Furthermore, political support polls show that PiS's government retains high levels of support – in April 2017 they amounted to 38% [3], which is only slightly less than on the day of their election, that is one year and a half before that [4]. How could be explained this phenomenon in a country like Poland? The concept of populism may be the key to explain this phenomenon, in particular the fact that the party was successful during the election because it managed to make everybody interested in the course of the political game and results of the election, even those who had not shown any interest before, because they knew well that their living conditions would remain the same, regardless of the outcome of the election. PiS managed to change such people's approach and convinced a large portion of their electorate that PiS's victory will significantly improve their living conditions. Social policy was used as a tool serving that purpose. During the election campaign, they promised citizens that they will implement a child-support benefit called Rodzina 500+ (Family 500+) and they kept that promise. The benefit amounts to PLN 500 per month. It is granted to each second and following child in a family, regardless the family's income. The benefit for the first child can be awarded, if the family's income is below a certain threshold. This is a substantial amount, considering that the average disposable income in Poland in 2016 per 1 person amounted to PLN 1,475 [5]. Whereas Social Minimum Baskets, i.e. model cost of living at poor households amounted to PLN 1,079.53 in 2015 for a single person of working age and PLN 3,421.56 in case of families with two children, i.e. PLN 855,29 per person [6].

Family 500+ as an example of electoral bribery

Populism can be defined as offering material goods in return for support during an election. The Criminal Code which was binding in Poland in the 1930s considered this kind of behavior as electoral bribery consisting in granting or promising to grant a financial or personal benefit to a person with a right to vote or to another person to influence the way in which the person with the right to vote would vote or to prevent that person from voting [7]. **The substance of this offense is “appealing to low instincts of an individual, his egoism, in order to gain his vote during the election” [8, pp. 225], which is an excellent reflection of populism and populist political practice. However, currently binding Polish legal regulations do not contain such stipulation, because the offense of electoral bribery is construed as actually gained benefits which would actually entail providing the benefits rather than merely promising to do so [9].**

In a country like Poland, a promise to pay a universal child benefit in a substantial amount considering conditions in the country in case of successful election must have resulted in success. It was and remains attractive for all those citizens who did not benefit from the political transformation which occurred in Poland. The thesis is confirmed by results of research on social sources of populism. The results of analyzing the demographic and social controls confirm that populist support in Europe is generally stronger among the older generation, men, the less educated, the religious, and ethnic majorities [10]. It should be remembered that the primacy of neoliberal supply-side economics in socio-economic politics led to a

situation in which as much as approx. 43% of people in households in 2014 lived below the minimum subsistence figure threshold which is treated as a threshold for the minimum fair standard of living, i.e. they lived in poverty, on the verge of social integration [11].

Representatives of analyzed social groups showed very strong reluctance to participation in civic life based on their conviction that it would not improve their situation in any way [12].

The analysis of results of polls carried out before the 2015 election shows a gradual decrease in voters' trust in their representatives and an increasing sense nationwide reluctance toward political elites and politics as such. Analyses of motivation for choices made during the election, which were carried out after the 2015 election, show that the primary reason was feeling disappointed with politics, alienated and a belief that there was a gap between the citizens and political elites. The next dominant response was socio-economic motivation. A substantial part of PiS's electorate believed that there is an actual possibility for that party's social, tax and economic projects affecting them and their families [13]. Due to that it can be assumed that the immediate execution of financial promises made during the election campaign is the reason for the continued high level of support for Prawo i Sprawiedliwoss's government.

From the point of view of theory of politics, PiS's actions constitute a classic example of populism consisting in promising financial benefits in return for certain actions being undertaken by voters.

PiS's election-related activities are an example for using social policy as an instrument for gaining and maintaining political power without paying attention to long-term outcome of undertaken activities. Such political practices constitute a threat to social development and are a sign of a serious crisis of democracy.

Social policy can be defined as consciously affecting the society using various instruments (including political power) to cause changes in the social structure which are compliant with the accepted value system [14]. The primary objective of such changes is social development construed as constant improvement of the quality and level of people's lives. Social policy is something more than a kind of a political game within the political system of a contemporary country. It is also something more than political activity aimed at pursuing political interests.

The significance of the concept of social policy is managing, planning, public sphere development strategies, i.e. the process of governing – setting directions of social development to shape the social relationships system. Social policy is both an activity and an analysis of that activity. It consists in consistently applying rules and methods aimed at reaching certain social goals (such as social security or housing policy, healthcare policy, labor market policy, etc.). The government not only regulates the coexistence of people belonging to the community (by introducing legislation and enforcing it), it also organizes and manages the activity of various social institutions – it consciously affects directions of social development.

It is clear that the notion of social policy does not include all techniques for gaining political power, but rather the manner in which it is carried out or the way the country is governed at all levels of its administration. By distinguishing procedures for gaining power from the manner in which it is carried out one could reduce social policy to a sphere of practical activities aimed at achieving certain goals executed using particular methods and instruments at broadly understood administration's disposal.

Such view shows social policy as a rational activity aimed at pursuing goals which are adequate with regard to objectively (i.e. scientifically) recognized needs [14].

Due to that, social policy is not about building and maintaining political subjectivity, and it is not about gaining and maintaining power. Politics is not about policy. Politics is only a practical activity aimed at reaching particular political gain (power). Such activity offers room for populism, i.e. appealing to

individuals' low instincts, their egoism and desire to take revenge for their failures.

Social policy is a practice which is the result of theoretical (scientific) activity, using certain methods in a planned manner.

The distinction between the two dimensions of power and authority is essentially about differences between ideologies, strategies, plans, programs, acts and regulations and their execution, combined with a rational (i.e. free from impact of ideologies and political interests) assessment of results of undertaken activities. In the first case, populism is one of the methods used to gain society's support. It is a dangerous and unethical method, but, as latest events in Europe showed, it proved to be very effective considering common disappointment in politics as a method for improving one's living conditions. Populist politics has nothing in common with social development. Therefore, it is unable to resolve any social problems. In practice, it means that the 500+ benefit will not significantly improve the numbers and structure of the population of Poland. Since the 500+ program encourages women with low education to leave the labor market, great difficulty connected with their return to employment after the 18 years of using the benefit is to be expected. Neither will it contribute to improving the chance of the poorest, because it stops financing the conventionally understood concept of a family at the most difficult economic stage of its development, i.e. when it needs to finance education and their children's start in life. The 500+ benefit's creation was motivated by the traditional image of a family and assignment of social roles of women and men. Since the benefit is granted to each second and following child, the birth-rate-related nature of the benefit is clear in terms of its promotion of large families. The benefit motivates women with low education and low income to leave the labor market under the condition that they have a large number of children, and thus the basis for family's income, apart from the benefit, would be their husbands' income. Therefore, it is an attempt to restore the shape and function of a 19th-century family, which is an absurd in post-industrial reality. Due to that, the 500+ program is attractive for people who have traditional views, who tend to be inhabitants of villages rather than inhabitants of large cities, those with low education and low income, who have trouble properly assessing the reality. Thus, it is difficult to consider the 500+ program as a social policy instrument, but it is easy to see it as a tool aimed at buying the ability to gain power and control.

Conclusions

The practice of buying political support transforms politics from the art of governing into art of manipulation. The building of subjectivity on the basis of promises of substantial benefits is a threat to democracy and a sign of loss of conventional, long-term thinking in the area of political activity.

A reliable reflection and a rational debate as well as selection of goals underlie the functioning of the society which is to be perceived as a democratic and civic one. Populism construed as buying support is a threat to democracy for two reasons. First of all, it distorts the function of aggregation and articulation of social interest which is being carried out by political parties. That way, they are virtually not representing any interest apart from their own. Secondly, it causes voters to become government's clients – they are passive and inert, marginalized because they deprive themselves of the possibility to efficiently replace the elites, which they support in return for an illusion of financial security.

Finally, it should be mentioned that political subjectivity built around populist practice and mythologization of reality is only formal – it does not entail the ability to undertake independent activities. Actual interest and social needs stop being noticed by political game subjects. Parties stop acting to support social interest, and in return they provide myths based on atavistic behaviors which are deeply rooted in human nature. As a result, political game subjects deprive themselves of the possibility to efficiently act to resolve social problems and favor social development.

It is not a surprise the electoral strength of populist parties, coupled with the corresponding erosion in support for mainstream parties [15]. Cas Muddle argues that the impact of populist parties has been exaggerated [16], [17]. But these parties have gained votes and seats in many countries, and entered government actions in Western old democracies, including in Austria, Italy and Switzerland [18].

According to Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris even in countries without many elected populist representatives, these parties can still exert tremendous ‘blackmail’ pressure on mainstream parties, public discourse, and the policy agenda, as is illustrated by the UKIP’s role in catalyzing the British exit from the European Union, with massive consequences [10]. The electoral fortunes of populist parties are open to multiple explanations. Probably the best the socio-economic inequality perspective - emphasizes the consequences for electoral behavior arising from profound changes transforming the life conditions in post-industrial

The 2015 election showed that the Polish society is strongly convinced that the government needs to share the fruits of economic growth. PiS’s victory at the cost of a universal child benefit introduced expensive solutions to Polish political system on a permanent basis, which constitute a threat to stability of public finances. The result of the election also confirms the existence of a strong demand for a political myth (such as Smolensk crash), the role of which is to legitimize the system, provide a sense of security and stabilization in the complex reality granting political elites a socially accepted identity and ability to act. The program of activities which was presented to voters is also aimed at satisfying the dissatisfied public’s desire for revenge on representatives of elites which are held accountable for the miserable condition of politics and the country. As Margaret Canovan explained, populist have never limited themselves to suggesting practical solutions to people’s problems – including in those countries in which they have been able to serve in government. On the contrary, they have offered nothing less than a “politics of redemption” in contrast to the establishment’s “politics of pragmatism” which includes the promise to return power to where it belongs – the people [19]. In that sense, such mythologization constitutes an example of political populism aimed at gaining and retaining power. To do that, relevant marketing techniques are necessary. The offer must be adjusted to expectations, language and expectations of a potential buyer-voter. The fact that it entails trivialization of political life and replacing rational thinking with easy stereotypes is of secondary importance to political game subjects. This situation is very dangerous for democracy and for the future of civil society in Poland.

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