

Us and Them. Populism of Polish political parties

In their rhetoric, populists point to those responsible for the bad state of the economy and the unsatisfactory standard of living of citizens. They present the world in a dichotomous way: there are good "us" (people and populists representing the people) and bad "them" (elites, or certain ethnic, national, sexual, etc. groups). In their emotional messages, they indicate the enemies responsible for the evil that happens to people in their daily lives or their failures. Populism, however, is not an *a priori* positive or negative phenomenon. Despite this, and perhaps because of this, increased interest in this subject has been observed in recent years.

The concept of populism, however, is burdened with many definition problems; in the science of politics and administration, the definition often includes phrases such as elevation of the people above the rest, anti-elitism, opposition to pluralism, and representative democracy, a dichotomous view of the world and pointing to the enemy. Populism can be treated as: a "thin-core" ideology, a set of ideas, discourse, style of political communication, or an election strategy. The ontological status of populism that the researcher will choose determines the research tools used.

The aim of the research is to determine the level of populism of Polish political parties in the years 2001-2023. Populism was assumed to be not a binary but a gradual phenomenon. The research will be carried out on the basis of the programs of Polish political parties that have received funding from the state budget, Sejm parliamentary debates, and parliamentarians' entries on X/Twitter. The second goal of the project is to investigate which parties are calling for increased participation of direct democracy in the decision-making process.

The main research hypotheses assume that (1) the level of populism of Polish political parties presented in the parliamentary discourse is higher than in the party's program documents and the highest on X/Twitter; (2) the level of populism has been systematically increasing from one parliamentary term of office to another; (3) the level of populism in the extreme parties is higher than in the centrists; (4) opposition parties more often postulate to increase the share of direct democracy in the decision-making process; (5) extreme parties more often postulate increasing the participation of direct democracy in the decision-making process; (6) the level populism of parliamentarians using X/Twitter increases in the period since the announcement of the elections and decreases after the elections are held; (7) the highest level of populism among politicians using X/Twitter is found among the deputies who obtained a mandate with a small margin of victory.

The operationalization of the term "populism" poses even more problems than its conceptualization. For the purposes of this project, it was assumed that populism is defined by a set of three general attributes that do not have to occur simultaneously: a positive attitude towards the people, a negative attitude towards the elite, a critical attitude towards the enemy ("other", "strangers"), and contrasting "us" with "them". Noting the mentioned elements in sentences will result in assigning them a specific numerical value. The work will use statistical methods (concordance, frequency lists, and collocations) that will complement the qualitative content analysis carried out in MAXQDA2024.

The project will contribute to the development of populism research in Poland in terms of methodology and theory. In the face of the abuse of the term "populism" observed in the Polish public discourse, which seems to be slowly losing its meaning and becoming empirically empty, the knowledge acquired as part of the project may also be important for society *per se* and the quality of public debate.