

Article

Party Organisation of PiS in Poland: Between Electoral Rhetoric and Absolutist Practice

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Abstract

The article analyses the organisation of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) in Poland. The case of PiS does not only allow us to explore the organisational features of a strongly institutionalized, incumbent party which uses populist radical right (PRR) politics. PiS, we argue, is also an ideal case to contrast what such parties might rhetorically declare and substantively do about their organisational features. Using party documents, press reports, quantitative data, and insights from the secondary literature based on interviews with activists, we evaluate the extent to which PiS has developed a mass-party-related organisation, and centralized its intra-party decision-making procedures. We find that while PiS made overtures to some aspects of mass-party-like organisation for electoral mobilization, the party remained reluctant to actively expand its membership numbers and put little effort into fostering the integration and social rootedness of its members through everyday intra-party activities. Furthermore, despite attempts to enact organisational reinvigoration, in practice PiS continued to revolve around strongly centralized structures and, in particular, the absolutist leadership style of the party's long-time Chair Jarosław Kaczyński. The analysis contributes to assessing the variety and functions of organisational features and appeals within the comparative study of PRR parties. Most particularly, it invites further research into the still relatively under-researched interactions between PRR party organisation and active party communication.

Keywords

Law and Justice; organisation; party politics; Poland; populism; radical right

Issue

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1. Introduction

The case of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) in Poland offers interesting insights that can further contribute to our growing understanding of the diversity across populist radical right (PRR) party organisations (Albertazzi, 2016; Bolleyer, 2013; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Analysing the current Polish incumbent does not only allow us to explore organisational features of a strongly institutionalized, established party, which over time has internalized core elements of PRR politics. Additionally, the case of PiS, which flexibly operated between radical and conventional politics, invites us to account for and juxtapose what parties might rhetorically declare and substantively do regarding their organisational features.

Polish parties are generally characterized by particularly weak membership bases, even in comparison to other Central and Eastern European countries (GUS, 2020; van Biezen et al., 2012). Concurrently, since the onset of the democratic transition, Polish parties focused more on efforts to promote their mediatized, electoral “product” in coordination with specialist campaign agencies and political consultants rather than to build strong party-voter linkages, developing their central office organisations and internal power relations accordingly (cf. Biskup, 2011; Mazur, 2011; Sula, 2008). Hence, while in Western Europe parties have gradually shifted from mass towards electoral-professional organisations (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Panebianco, 1988), after 1989 Polish politics witnessed a much swifter emergence of instant electoral-professional parties.

In this context, we could thus expect even less attempts from established parties—and particularly those with office ambitions pursuing flexible vote-maximizing strategies—to develop mass-party-type organisations, which we characterize here by efforts to recruit a large number of active party members and to foster their intra-party social rootedness (cf. Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021). Yet parties may actively adapt to, or try to defy, their operative contexts. Especially for parties which fundamentally contest “politics as usual,” organisational innovation and appeals to reinvigorate party-voter linkages might constitute an advantageous distinguishing trait in party competition (Barr, 2009). Indeed, Polish anti-establishment actors regularly combined their primary ideological stances with invocations of dedicated representation and efficacious governance, presenting their organizations as viable to overcome merely short-term election-oriented politics, negative campaigning, and sociotechnical “PR spin.”

Yet rhetorical strategies may not necessarily reflect substantive organisational practice. In 2015, the PiS electoral campaign simulated organisational processes of dispersing power away from its long-time Chair (*prezes*), Jarosław Kaczyński. It also portrayed the “renewed” organisation as capable of fundamentally “fixing” Polish representative politics by closing gaps between parties and citizens (Engler et al., 2019; Pytlas, in press). Nonetheless, in the Polish public debate, the party continues to stand out as a prime example of a strongly centralized, hierarchical party dominated by its Chair. Accordingly, we argue that it is relevant to evaluate party organisations by juxtaposing communicative declarations with the actual lived practices of political parties in general, and PRR actors in particular.

Following the conceptual framework proposed by Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021), in this article we focus primarily on the extent to which PiS made substantive efforts to develop a mass-party-related organisation, and to centralize its intra-party decision-making procedures. At the same time, we approach this question specifically by accounting for what parties using PRR politics might rhetorically declare and substantively do about their organisational features. To achieve these goals, we triangulate multiple data sources, including party documents, press statements, quantitative data, and insights from secondary literature based on interviews with activists.

We find that while PiS used overtures to some aspects associated with mass-party-like organisation for electoral mobilization, the party put little effort into actually recruiting a large number of engaged party members or fostering their social rootedness. Concurrently, while the party tried to enact an image of leadership renewal, its everyday organisational practice continued to revolve around strongly centralized, hierarchical structures and, in particular, an absolutist leadership style of the party’s long-time leader. The findings provide a relevant contribution to assessing the variety and functions of mass-party-related features within the com-

parative study of PRR party organisation. Most especially, our results invite further research on still relatively underexplored aspects in this research field: the relationship between PRR organisations and mediatisation of politics (Art, 2018), and most particularly on the interactions between PRR organisation and active party communication.

2. The Law and Justice Party and Populist Radical Right Politics

Since its foundation by Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński in 2001, PiS has swiftly developed into an electorally relevant and strongly institutionalized party (Figure 1). From the onset of the political activity of the Kaczyński brothers, their political projects have involved an anti-liberal and anti-establishment anger which challenged the legitimacy of the post-1989 Polish transformation (Stanley, 2016). With time, PiS also developed its ability to flexibly adapt and successively monopolize the political offer of its different populist and radical right competitors (Pytlas, 2015).

A brief look at the history of PiS allows us to trace its programmatic development and how it internalized PRR politics (cf. in detail Pytlas, in press). The first party founded by Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński in 1990, the Centre Agreement (Porozumienie Centrum [PC]) underscored legalism, tradition, as well as the importance of the Catholic Church and Catholic Social Teaching. In 1992 the PC-backed, conservative minority government lost a vote of no-confidence which led to the advent of a right-wing, anti-establishment conspiracy theory. This myth claimed that “communist-liberal pacts” worked to “steal the transition,” and PiS has subsequently internalized this narrative (cf. Pytlas, 2015). PiS itself emerged in 2001 after the collapse of the incumbent centre-right electoral coalition. The party’s name reflected the popular agenda of Lech Kaczyński, who served as Justice Minister 2000–2001. PiS accordingly expanded PC’s social-conservative platform with an increased focus on law and order, and anti-corruption issues.

Already four years after its creation, PiS won the Polish parliamentary election with 27% of the vote. PiS formed its first government, led by Jarosław Kaczyński, with the PRR League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin [LPR]) and the agrarian-populist Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland party (Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej; Stanley, 2016). At least since that time, PiS has increasingly expanded its social-conservative stances with core PRR elements. These include populist appeals to a monist general will of the “pure people” directed against a “corrupt elite,” as well as nativist narratives centred on defending a homogenous “nation” allegedly threatened by socio-cultural “othered” (Mudde, 2007). PiS combined narratives of its coalition partners into an overarching, anti-liberal project of a “Fourth Republic,” creating a single divide between “liberal” and “social-solidaristic”

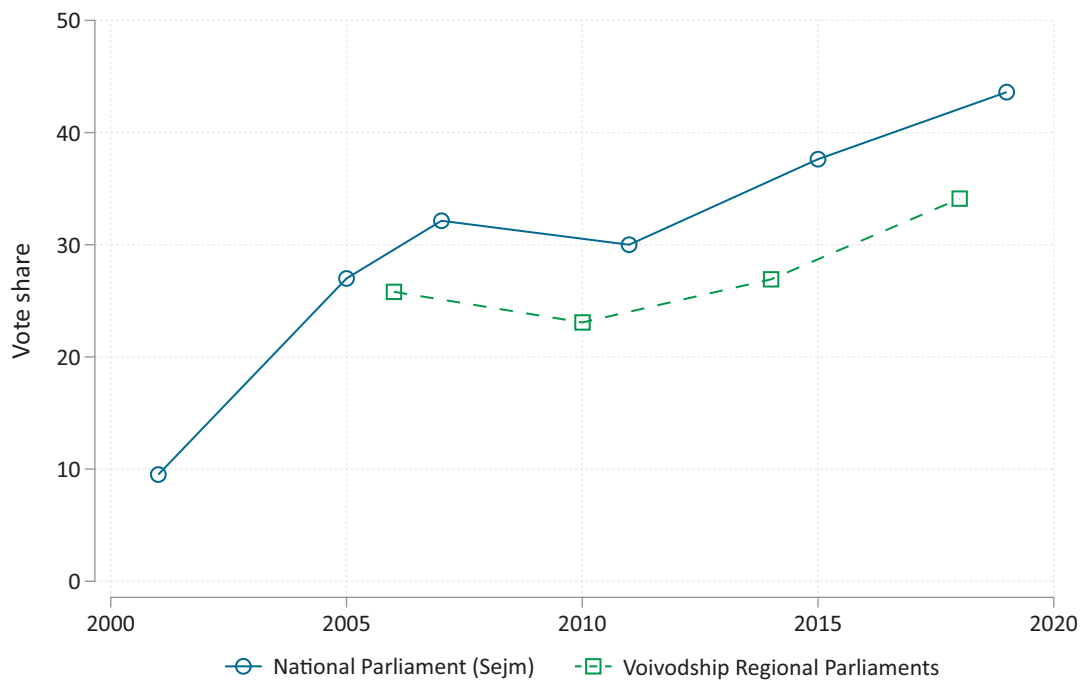


Figure 1. PiS results in national and voivodship-level parliamentary elections. Source: National Electoral Commission (2021).

Poland (Szczurbiak, 2007). Most notably, it adapted the LPR’s nativist claims regarding the alleged threats to “Polish Catholic values” and national identity coming from left-wing and liberal parties, their ideas and supporters, as well as from LGBTIQ persons (Pytlas, 2015).

As a result of internal power struggles, the government fell in 2007. PiS was succeeded in power by its arch-rival, the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska [PO]). Since the PiS leader, Lech Kaczyński, became Warsaw President in 2002 and Polish President in 2005, the party’s affairs have increasingly become the domain of his brother Jarosław. PiS’s anti-establishment conspiracy myths reignited after a 2010 plane accident over Smolensk led to the tragic death of 96 passengers, including Lech Kaczyński and several top-level public officials.

While PiS continuously delegitimized Polish politics, after two consecutive failures to secure a governmental majority the party adjusted its electoral tactics. During the 2015 presidential and *Sejm* electoral campaigns, PiS “hid” Jarosław Kaczyński, as his radicalism and authoritative leadership style were deemed hurtful to the party’s appeal (Engler et al., 2019). The presidential election was surprisingly won by the less well-known PiS Member of the European Parliament (MEP), Andrzej Duda. Duda tactically downplayed intra-Polish socio-cultural divisions and promised a humble presidency, open to the concerns and active initiatives of citizens. Directed by Duda’s campaign manager Beata Szydło, PiS repeated these euphemising tactics during the subsequent parliamentary election. In addition to redistributive policies, PiS promised to fundamentally fix Polish politics by bring-

ing about a “good change” towards new, efficacious, and attentive political elites. These tactics allowed PiS to flexibly shape its image between a radical outsider and a conventional established party (cf. Pytlas, in press).

Immediately after the victorious 2015 election, PiS returned to its radical mode, aggrandising political power to the detriment of democratic principles and constitutional norms. The party swiftly seized control over the public media and captured main institutions of the independent judiciary (Pytlas, 2018; Sadurski, 2019). This has nonetheless not halted the party’s repeated victories in 2019. At least since 2016, when confronting increased competition from the elitist radical right Confederation (Konfederacja) in 2016, PiS reactivated its nativist demonization of LGBTIQ persons (cf. “Kaczyński o patriotyzmie,” 2019; OSCE, 2020; Tilles, 2020). Since October 2020, the government has faced mass protests sparked by the decision of the PiS-captured Constitutional Tribunal to further restrict pro-choice rights, leading to their de facto ban (Walker, 2020). Jarosław Kaczyński characterized civic protests as an attack by evil forces on the Polish “nation” (cf. Onet Wiadomosci, 2020). Thus, already shortly after its successful 2015 electoral campaign, PiS has further consolidated its anti-liberalism around core radical right ideology.

3. Did the Law and Justice Party Pursue a Mass-Party-Type Organisation?

Having introduced the party’s electoral and ideological development, we begin the main analysis by assessing whether PiS attempted to develop a mass-party-style

organisation. We follow Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021), focusing first on the party’s organisational complexity, as well as how (if at all) PiS tried to attract active members and supporters while also facilitating their social rootedness within the party.

3.1. Organisational Complexity

PiS swiftly developed a complex party structure. PiS’s statute names the Committee as the basic organisational party unit (PiS, 2016). Local party branches are managed by District Boards (*zarząd okręgowy*). The boards are distributed in correspondence to the constituency structure for parliamentary elections. Since 2012, PiS structures also include 16 Regional Councils (*rada regionalna*) which manage the party’s activities at the highest administrative level of a voivodship (*województwo*) and coordinate the activities of lower-level bodies. Regarding local organisational strength, PiS did not differ much from other established parties in Poland (Figure 2). Nevertheless, PiS’s local organisation has been more extensive compared to all Polish political parties—many of them including anti-establishment newcomers.

Furthermore, PiS developed a formally complex internal party structure (Figure 3). In central office, the PiS statute names the Congress as the highest party authority (PiS, 2016). The Congress elects the Chairperson (*prezes*) and decides on the party’s ideological principles. The Chairperson is the highest executive authority of PiS. Among other executive and representative functions, the Chair proposes candidates for parliamentary positions, coordinates socio-political activities of

the party, and organises the work of the party in central office as well as the parliamentary group via its chairpersons. According to PiS statute, it is the Political Committee (*komitet polityczny*) led by the PiS Chair that runs the everyday activities of the party, with regional structures explicitly described as auxiliary to this goal (PiS, 2016, p. 15). Among management tasks, the Political Committee confirms the party’s candidates in elections and elects further administrative bodies. Finally, the Political Council (*rada polityczna*) is the highest legislative authority of PiS and is directed by the Chairperson. In addition to administrative functions, the Council develops the party’s programmatic direction and elects several central bodies proposed by the PiS Chair, as well as candidates in parliamentary, local, and presidential elections. In addition to this complex formal structure, Figure 3 illustrates that the PiS Chair has been granted a key role in the party organisation already at the formal level. As we will see below, the organisational practice of the party turns out to be much simpler once we account for the strongly leader-based accountability mechanisms and decision-making processes, as well as the absolutist leadership style of Jarosław Kaczyński, popularly dubbed as *The Prezes*.

3.2. Law and Justice Party Membership in Context

Already in the early 2010s, Poland exemplified the broader trend of party membership decline. Only under 1% of the electorate were members of a party, leaving Poland to trail behind all Central and Eastern European democracies except for Latvia (van Biezen et al., 2012).

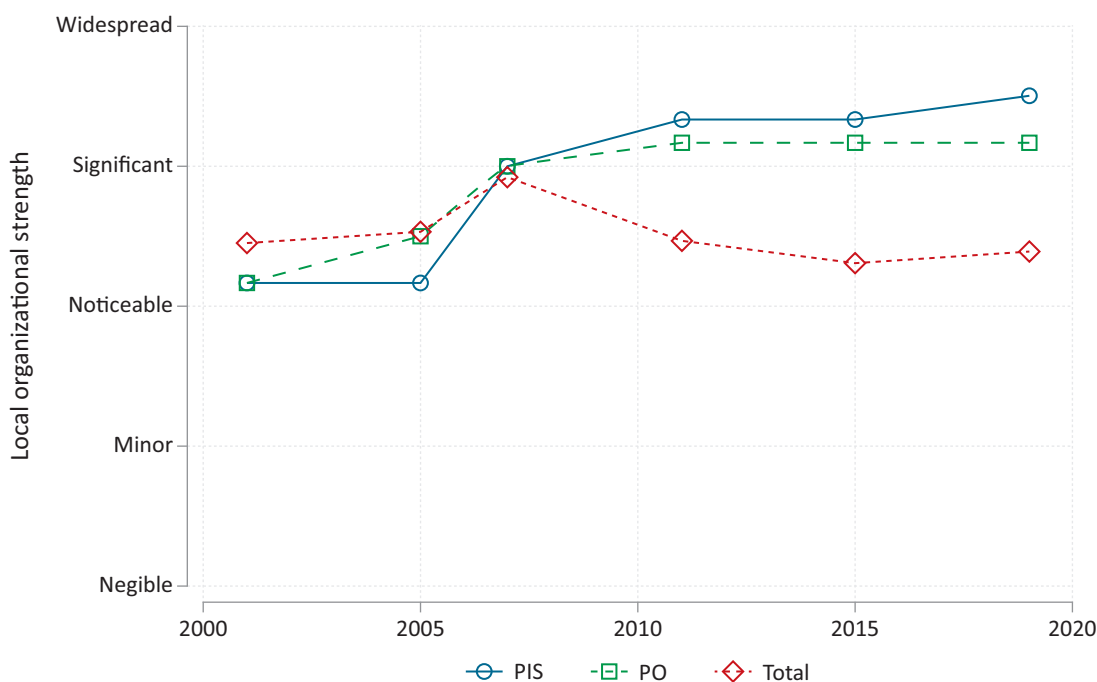


Figure 2. Local organisational strength of PiS, PO, and all main Polish political parties 2001–2019. Source: V-Party Dataset (Lührmann et al., 2020)

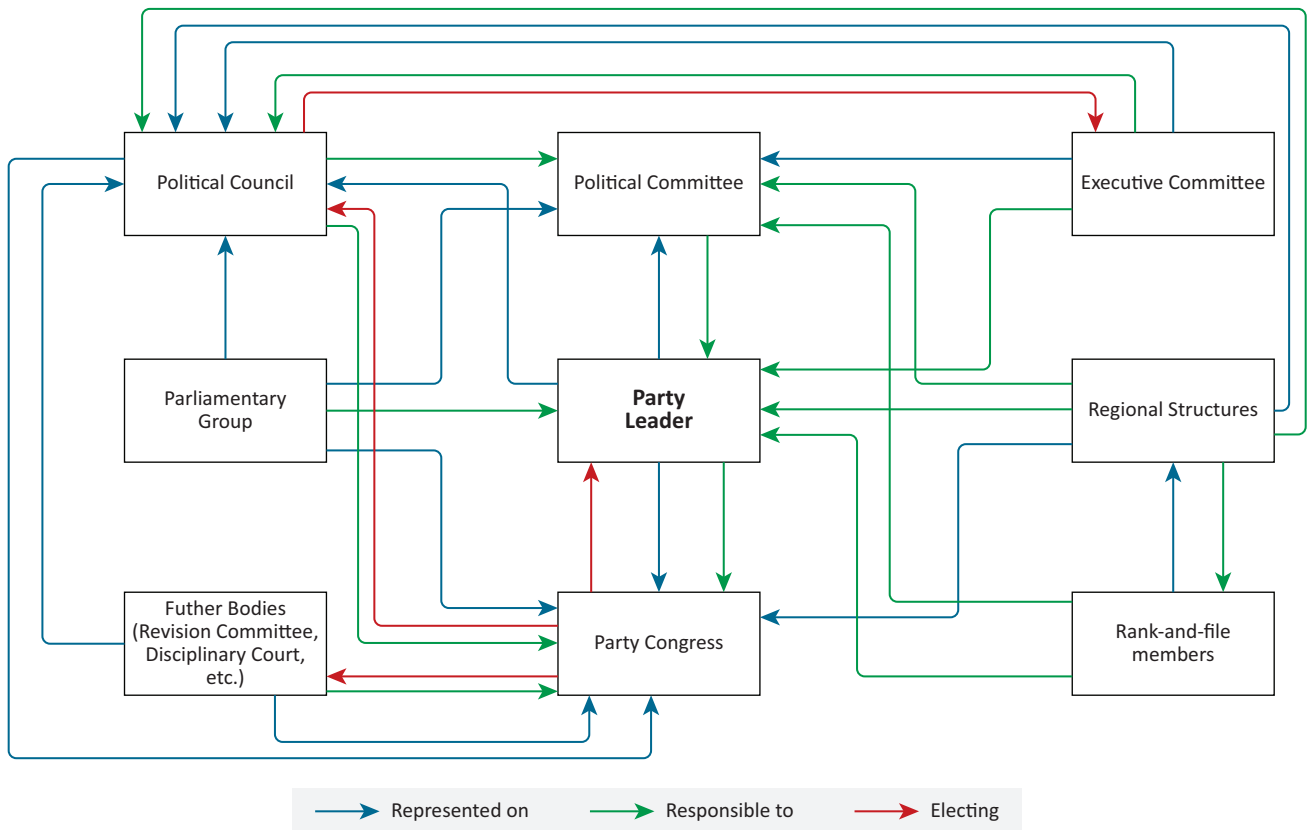


Figure 3. PiS Organigram. Source: Own composition, based on PiS (2016).

In 2018, the 83 registered Polish parties had a total of 241,600 members—around 0.8% of the Polish electorate. An average Polish party had around 4,100 members, whilst half of Polish parties had no more than 300 members (GUS, 2020).

Observing self-reported party membership development for major parties since 2011, we see that the agrarian-conservative Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe [PSL]) continues to have the strongest member base (cf. Figure 4). PO’s membership, on the other hand, peaked in 2011 with 50,234 members, but dropped to around 32,000 in 2020, a development observed also with the social-democratic Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej [SLD]). Conversely, PiS was able to double its membership since 2011, declaring around 40,000 members in 2020.

Overall, we need to be mindful of the (in)accuracy inherent to self-reported membership data, and it is important to place the figures in context. While PiS membership clearly increased since 2015, membership fees in 2019 still constituted only around 1.3% of the party’s revenue. Ninety-six percent of PiS’s income came from credits (around 50%) and state subsidies (around 46%; cf. PKW, 2019). Concurrently, organisational density (members/voters’ ratio) of PO fell from 0.0089 in 2011 to 0.0063 in 2019; for PiS, it remained stable with 0.0049 and 0.005, respectively. Thus, since 2015 PiS caught up with its arch-rival in absolute terms. Yet despite the

downward trend, PO still had a higher share of members relative to its electorate when compared to PiS.

3.3. Campaign Mobilization of Engaged Sympathisers—But No Efforts to Attract and Socialize Members

Regarding mobilization practices, major Polish parties have primarily emphasized political marketing and mediatized campaigning. Nonetheless, this focus did not replace organisational development. Major Polish parties—including PiS—swiftly developed electoral-professional organisations (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Panebianco, 1988) as the centre of strategic campaign efforts (cf. Mazur, 2011; Sula, 2008). Increasingly specialized party-affiliated staff and central offices thus play a decisive role in shaping the political “product” promoted in coordination with external campaign agencies and political consultants (cf. Biskup, 2011). To be sure, parties also did not relinquish face-to-face campaigning, such as organising public rallies and meetings with party figureheads. Yet, the campaign expenses of PiS and other major parties have become increasingly dominated by mass media communication, most notably television ads (Mazur, 2011).

After 2011, PiS began professionalizing its social media activity and dynamically campaigned on several channels, most notably Facebook and Instagram. Under growing competitive pressure from newly emerging

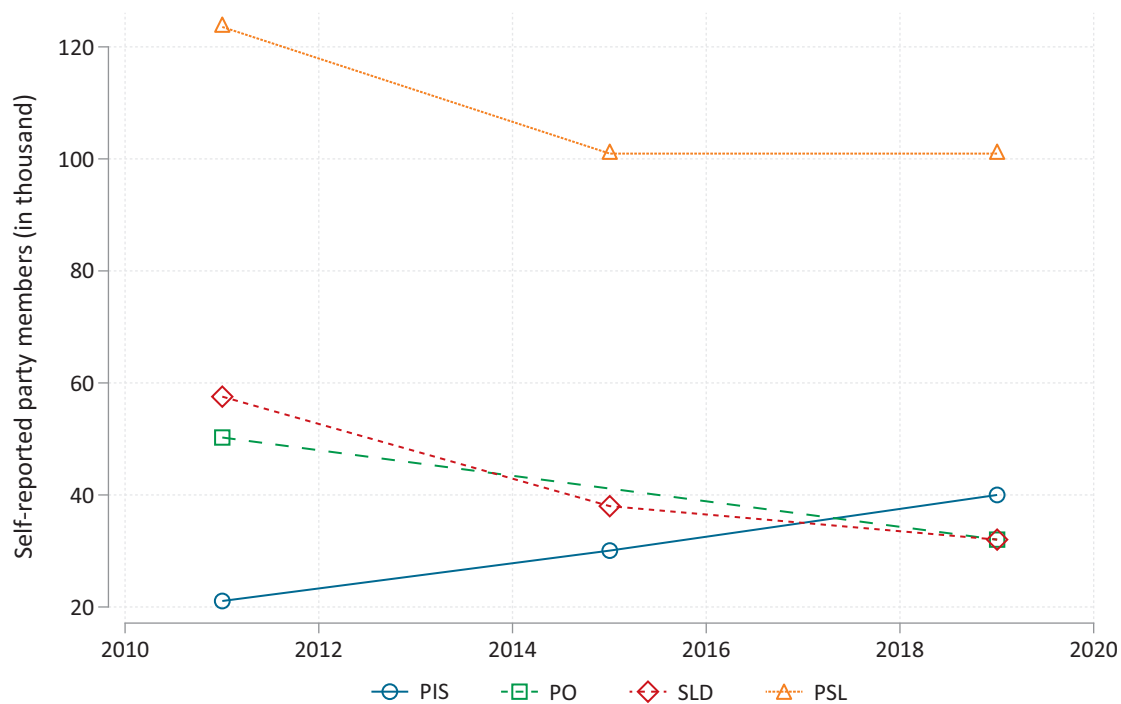


Figure 4. Self-reported membership numbers of PiS, PO, SLD, and PSL. Source: “Przybywa członków PiS” (2020), van Haute & Paulis (2016).

anti-establishment actors, PiS’s electoral campaign of 2015 tactically increased appeals to rebuilding representative party linkages. On the one hand, the aforementioned vision of “good change” invoked a passive notion of mass-party-like linkages, promising to close representational gaps by a caring elite attentive to the concerns of “the citizens.” On the other hand, the party’s new candidates constructed an image of PiS as an organisationally reinvigorated and united “team of good change” (wPolityce.pl, 2015). Yet PiS also appealed to more active mass-party-related linkages. For example, the video ad #wecandothis (#damygrade) mobilized sympathizers to actively participate in the PiS campaign by sharing and discussing the party’s programmatic arguments on social media, but also by engaging in personal conversations and canvassing (PiS, 2015). During the 2019 election, PiS launched a campaign titled Join the Team of Good Change. Its actual goal was nonetheless not to attract activists, but rather to advertise an SMS-messaging newsletter where subscribers could be informed about the party’s campaign activities (“PiS uruchamia system,” 2019).

Overall, since 2015 PiS’s electoral rhetoric increasingly suggested that political change depends on hard work and active engagement of the party’s sympathizers, thus creating a mobilizing image of a united effort by party elites and supporters. Yet it seems that since 2014 the activity of PiS voters did not substantively increase (see Figure 5). The share of self-declared PiS voters who contacted politicians, engaged in party work, or openly expressed campaign support, remained comparatively low. It was also lower than the average share of active

voters for other major parties (cf. European Social Survey, 2018, rounds 7–9).

Furthermore, while PiS made rhetorical appeals to strengthen both active and passive mass-party-related linkages, evidence suggests that the party was reluctant to actually engage in attracting a large number of active members. In the wake of the Smolensk accident, a well-known right-wing publicist complained that local PiS officials resisted admitting the activated supporters of PiS-adjacent civic organisations into the party (Ziemkiewicz, 2011, as cited in Nyzio, 2014, p. 213). After the party’s return to power in 2015, PiS did not relax its relatively restrictive criteria for party admission. To become a PiS member, the candidate needs to provide a recommendation from at least two current party members already prior to submitting the application (cf. PiS, 2016; “Przybywa członków PiS,” 2020). PiS also did not launch a visible public campaign aimed at broadening its rank-and-file. On the contrary, statements by party officials instead suggest a reserved stance to expanding the membership base. Commenting on the party’s recent membership growth, the Chair of PiS Executive Committee noted that the party does not accept all membership applications and added “if this was the case, we would have 15–20 thousand members more” (cf. “Przybywa członków PiS,” 2020, translation by the author).

Analysing different sources, including secondary literature, local press reports, as well as party websites and social media communication channels, we have also found no evidence of substantial efforts by PiS to socialize and integrate their rank-and-file members

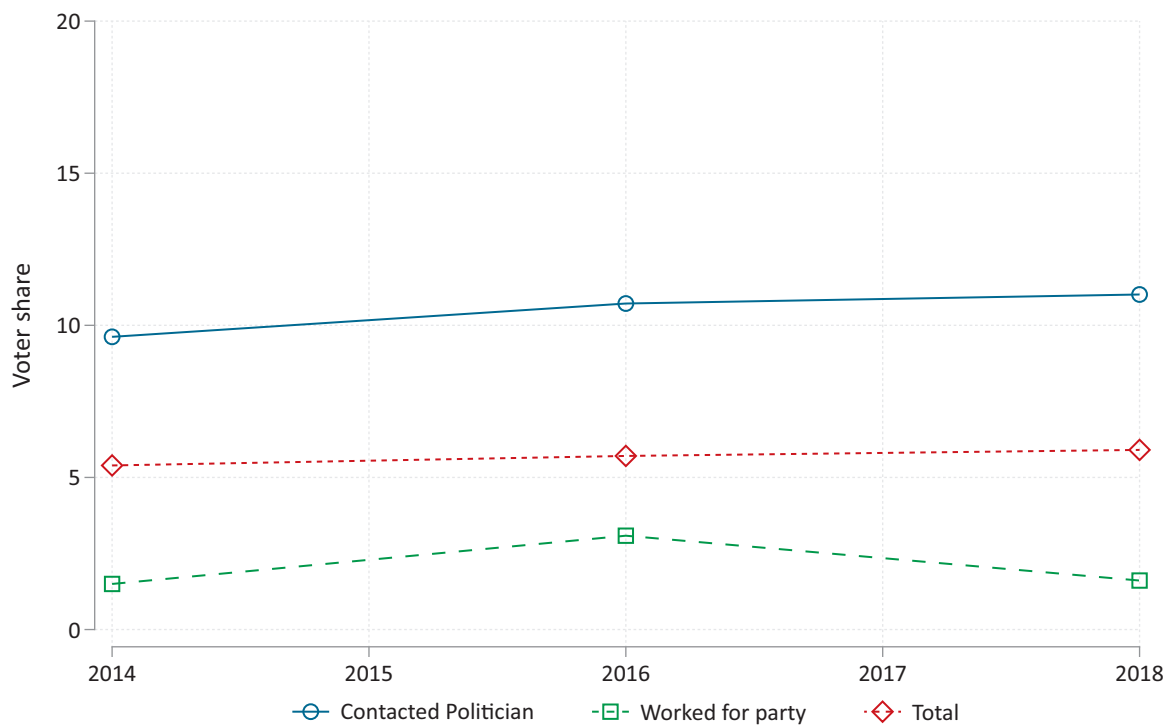


Figure 5. Activity of PiS electorate. Source: European Social Survey (2018, rounds 7–9).

more deeply into the party beyond electoral campaigns. Studies which survey party activists suggest that PiS members indeed had considerable mass-party-related expectations regarding their potential party activity, but these were not prioritized by the party organisation. Surveyed PiS members most frequently expected the party to foster a collective feeling of belonging, as well as to engage members in social activities and exchange (31% of all responses; Winćławska, 2020). The activities which PiS members named as actually performing within PiS included participation in party demonstrations and meetings with officials (32.8%), as well as instrumental tasks, such as signature collection or paying membership fees (40.1%; Winćławska, 2020). Interviewed PiS officials themselves perceived the role of membership mainly in instrumental terms and admitted that the party has fewer ideas about how to engage rank-and-file members beyond periods of electoral campaigning (Pacześniak & Winćławska, 2017). Thus, despite PiS’s electoral campaign calls for sympathizers to engage with the party, actual efforts made by the party to foster the intra-party social rootedness of its members seem to have been largely absent.

3.4. Why Didn’t the Law and Justice Party Actually Pursue Mass-Party Organisation?

What are the possible reasons behind PiS’s reluctance to actually grow a large activist membership base? In general, party leaders need to consider trade-offs between their particular interests and a more sustainable development of their organisation (Bolleyer, 2013; Heinisch

& Mazzoleni, 2016). Here, it is important to account for the temporal aspect behind contingent choices by party officials on how to achieve their personal or policy goals, such as prioritizing short-term strategies shaped by electoral cycles or more long-term, and possibly uncertain investment in collective party building (cf. Bolleyer, 2013; Goetz, 2014).

On the one hand, in the case of an institutionalized, leadership-oriented party such as PiS, expanding its active membership base might have been viewed as secondary to short-term priorities such as vote maximization and office-seeking. These goals usually come with a trade-off between responsiveness to core supporters and strategic adjustments to the broader, potential electorate (Giger & Schumacher, 2020; Kitschelt & McGann, 1995; Schumacher & Giger, 2018). To be sure, this rule is not automatic. Northern League (Lega Nord) in Italy which combined vote-maximizing office ambitions with active member integration is just one example (Albertazzi, 2016; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Nonetheless, building and sustaining a large, engaged membership costs time and can be perceived by party officials as disadvantageous for their ability to manage the party.

On the other hand, it is vital to note that organisational choices might also be related to various power conflicts within and across different levels of party hierarchy (cf. Bolleyer, 2012). Particularly in organisations shaped around multi-level patronal dependencies, not only central, but also regional mid-level leaders might fear that the uncontrolled entry of engaged members could shake up existing power structures and create potential risks for their own intra-party influence.

First, organisational considerations might thus revolve around perceived trade-offs between central and regional leader-oriented loyalty. From the point of view of central leaders, sustaining an engaged base of active members requires both distributing more resources and delegating more powers to local branches. While institutional routinization itself does not have to be problematic for strongly centralized parties, related “value infusion” which could potentially lead to a stronger transfer of loyalty from leaders to the party organisation itself might be perceived by the central leadership as a bigger challenge (Bolleyer, 2013). The central office may thus oppose a mass-party approach due to concerns over the diversification of power networks and the increased relevance of regional charters. Second, it is important to account for the crucial role of mid-level elites which might also not be willing to jeopardize their own intra-party influence at the regional level. For local officials, new highly engaged members can represent a source of competition in terms of regional power and position within the party hierarchy.

Comprehensive data on party elite attitudes regarding their organisations and party membership is generally scarce. Yet studies conducting deep interviews with Polish party officials and members lend empirical plausibility to some of the above assumptions. One PiS official commented: “In my private opinion, 30–35 thousand members is a kind of an optimal state, one which one is able to handle considering financial and human engagement” (Winclawska, 2020, p. 128, translation by the author). Another PiS member noted: “Local branches of Law and Justice do not really want new members, being convinced that this will destabilize some kind of current relationsThat new, more active, intellectually fitter people will come who feel like doing more” (Winclawska, 2020, p. 128, translation by the author). This further suggests that the party—including its regional mid-level elites—saw little merit in recruiting a large engaged member base. Additionally, this first evidence also supports the argument that PiS officials perceived such organisational approach as potentially problematic for effectively running the party and especially as a challenge to existing intra-party power relations and hierarchies.

4. Power Centralization and Internal Democracy

4.1. Centralization

While PiS is not the only strongly centralized Polish party, it stands out regarding its strongly leader-oriented character (cf. Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018; Tomczak, 2015; Uziębło, 2016). For example, unlike other parties such as SLD, PO and the new left party Together (Razem), PiS’s regional charters lack the freedom to decide on local coalitions (Uziębło, 2016). Overall, on a scale of leadership strength related to selection procedures and prerogatives, as well as the role of party Chair in legisla-

tive candidate selection and in parliament, PiS obtained a score of 24 of possible 28 points, with a large lead over the second-placed PO with 10 points (Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018). With his leadership tenure reaching 18 years in 2021, Jarosław Kaczyński is the longest consecutively acting party leader in Poland. PiS was the only Polish party in which the last four leadership elections took place without even a pro forma counter-candidate (cf. Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018).

Returning to Figure 3, we see that the PiS leader has wide-ranging, formal prerogatives within the party. The leader derives his strength especially from the vast personalized possibilities to control, veto, and sanction members and activists. The Chair can personally suspend a party member based on a reasonable presumption that the member harmed PiS’s interests, even prior to taking the case to the Party Disciplinary Court (PiS, 2016, p. 6). PiS’s leader also has de facto control over candidate nomination in parliamentary elections. Even though candidate lists are officially confirmed by the Political Committee, it is the PiS Chair who has the personal prerogative to present the final candidate lists for approval. According to expert assessments, since 2011 Jarosław Kaczyński has increased his control over candidate nomination procedures (Figure 6).

In addition to formal prerogatives, the leader’s position is thus further strengthened by de facto control over the party’s daily executive and legislative activities. The PiS Chair presides both over the Political Council and the Political Committee. Thus, few key decisions in the party can be made without the knowledge and consent of the PiS Chair. Interestingly, in “urgent matters” the PiS leader can single-handedly make a decision pertaining to the Committee’s competences, subject to validation at the subsequent session (PiS, 2016; cf. Tomczak, 2015). The fact that it is the Committee that formally runs the everyday activities of the party gives the PiS Chair personal control over party branches. The PiS Chair, via the Committee, thus has the prerogative to nominate and dismiss local party leadership, as well as to create, suspend, or disband regional PiS structures as a whole.

4.2. Intra-Party Democracy

While the PiS Chair already enjoys strong formal powers, the key feature of PiS’s organisational practice lies in the highly patronal and absolutist leadership style of Jarosław Kaczyński. In the past, the Chair did not hesitate to make use of his sanctioning tools, either directly or via the Political Committee. A regular disciplinary tool is the suspension of members and parliamentarians who have fallen out of favour with the leadership. Around 2010–2011, when the party entered an internal crisis, several officials increasingly criticized the leadership style of Jarosław Kaczyński. In 2011, the Political Committee disbanded the party’s local organisations in the constituencies of regional officials or

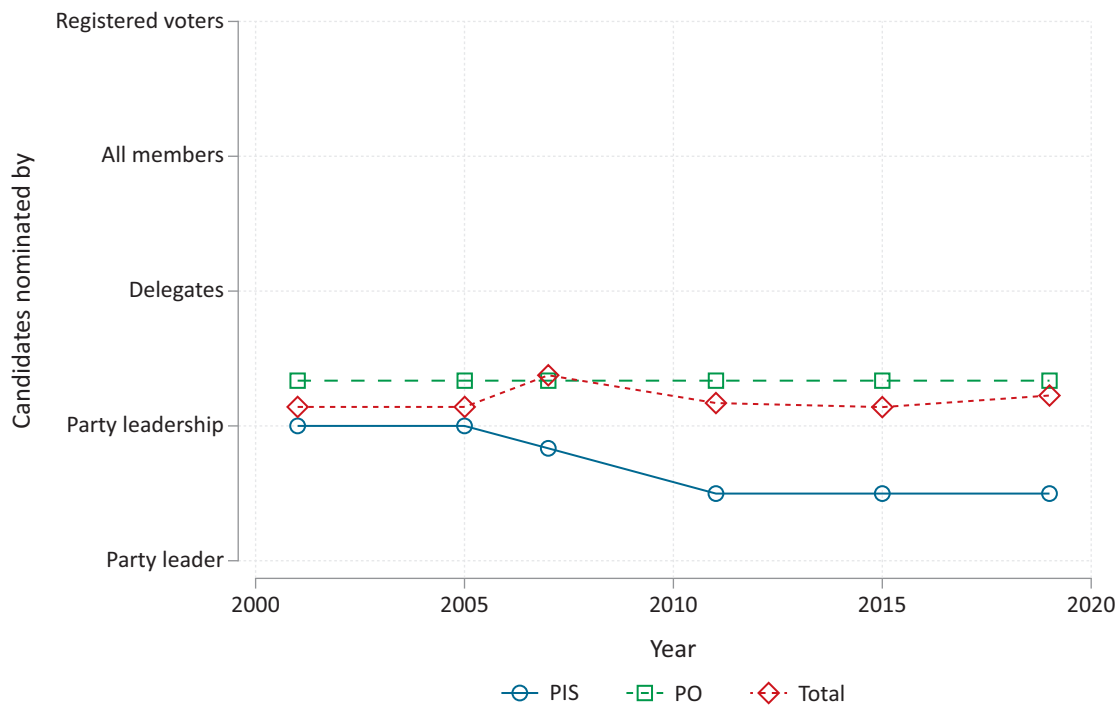


Figure 6. Decision-making power over candidate nomination in legislative elections in PiS, PO, and all Polish parties. Source: V-Party Dataset (Lührmann et al., 2020).

MEPs who had criticized Kaczyński. Conflicts emerged particularly between Jarosław Kaczyński and his former Justice Minister, Zbigniew Ziobro. In 2011, Ziobro—then PiS deputy Chair and MEP—called for the party’s “modernisation” and “bottom-up democratization, but without too much exaggeration” (“Wołanie o demokrację,” 2011). Ziobro’s challenge was echoed by the critique of Kaczyński’s absolutist rule by other prominent PiS MEPs, most notably Jacek Kurski and Tadeusz Cymański. In reaction, PiS’s Political Committee expelled all three officials from the party. Ziobro went on to form a fringe splinter-party, United Poland (Solidarna Polska), and returned as Justice Minister in the 2015 PiS-led government. After 2015, the formally non-partisan Kurski was entrusted with presiding over Polish public TV, soon turned into a PiS mouthpiece.

While Jarosław Kaczyński tightened his grip on PiS, his radical image and absolutist leadership style did not fit the party’s aforementioned new electoral tactics. In 2015, he re-emerged only late in the campaign to mobilize core supporters, and subsequently did not assume any senior office. Until 2020, Kaczyński formally remained a “mere rank-and-file” PiS member of parliament. It is from this back seat position that he nonetheless continued to exert personal control over not only parliamentary, but also governmental, PiS activities.

Formally, it is the PiS Chair who directs the activities of the party’s parliamentary group via its chairpersons (PiS, 2016). This means that the official of the party in central office has key decision-making power over the party’s parliamentary representation even if not personally elected to the *Sejm*. Jarosław Kaczyński’s guise as

an “ordinary member of parliament” ensured that he was able to control the party’s activities without facing direct accountability for the government’s actions. Independent media reports have nonetheless regularly highlighted his decision-making role, not only within the parliamentary group, but also within the government. Kaczyński enjoyed more privileges than an ordinary “rank-and-file” member of parliament. For example, he entered the lectern and told the PiS *Sejm* speaker that he would make a statement without considering the Parliament’s debate regulations. The PiS Chair—without holding any position in the executive—has, on occasions, personally announced government bills to quell scandals which had gained enough public visibility to pose a liability to the party. In 2019, media furthermore reported on regular meetings between Jarosław Kaczyński, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, and the president of the PiS-captured Constitutional Tribunal, Julia Przyłębska, at the latter’s private home during PiS’s attempts to gain control over the Supreme Court and the National Council of Judiciary (cf. Wroński & Kondzińska, 2019).

In 2020, internal power struggles, problems with the management of the Covid-19 public health crisis, and failure to contain mass anti-government civic protests, cumulated in a party and coalition crisis. Kaczyński entered the PiS government to “stabilize” the coalition as a deputy prime minister without a portfolio, responsible for public security. *The Prezes* suspended 15 PiS parliamentarians who voted against his favoured bill on animal rights protection, depicted as the alleged main reason behind the coalition crisis. In 2020, party officials began—mostly anonymously—to voice their irritation

with the leadership’s chaotic actions, unclear tactical direction, and attempts to intimidate dissenting voices (cf. Dziubka, 2020).

Given this absolutist leadership style as well as the general hierarchical and patronal organisation, intra-party democracy within PiS was thus almost non-existent. Similarly to other Polish parties, the PiS statute gives party members active and passive voting rights, the right to participate in PiS activities and to propose political or organisational initiatives to party bodies, as well as to seek party protection from any “repressive actions” related to being a party member (PiS, 2016, p. 7). Unlike in other major parties, such as SLD and PO, the PiS statute nonetheless does not grant individual members even the formal power to directly shape the party’s programme or direction. Direct bottom-up decision-making is generally uncommon in Polish political parties, but several have nonetheless introduced singular direct democratic mechanisms. For example, the PO has inclusive procedures of candidate nomination for public office; the PO, SLD, and Razem give members the right to select the party leadership; and both the SLD and Razem allow internal referendums before taking important party decisions (Winclawska et al., 2021). While the referendum initiative used by the SLD applies only to the central office, the statute of Razem foresees the possibility of a referendum initiated from the bottom-up by members or local party boards (Uziębło, 2016).

Summing up, rank-and-file members and PiS officials outside of central office had little practical influence on the party’s decision-making and programmatic direction. PiS stood out in this regard significantly, even when com-

pared to other centralized Polish political parties (see Figure 7). Again, a considerable share of PiS members hoped to have the opportunity to contribute by influencing the party’s programmatic course or running in elections (25.4% of responses). Yet fulfilling meritocratic tasks amounted only to 17.1% of responses to the question which activities PiS members actually pursue within the party—and the tasks mentioned were still predominantly restricted to running in elections (Winclawska, 2020). Even though in 2015 the campaign rhetoric of PiS signalled a turn towards openness to civic policy initiatives, within the party itself those activists who wanted to participate in shaping the party’s programmatic course remained sealed off from the party’s hermetic, centralized organisation.

5. Conclusions

This article analysed the organisational development of PiS in Poland. The framework by Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021) allowed us to observe PiS’s efforts to develop a mass-party-related organisation, as well as to explore the extent to which the party has centralized its intra-party decision-making procedures. The case of institutionalized incumbent PiS contributes not only to observing the organisational variety and dynamics in parties using PRR politics. Most notably, analysing a party which flexibly operated between radical and conventional politics shows that it is important to account for what parties using PRR politics might declare versus what they actually do, also with regard to their organisational characteristics.

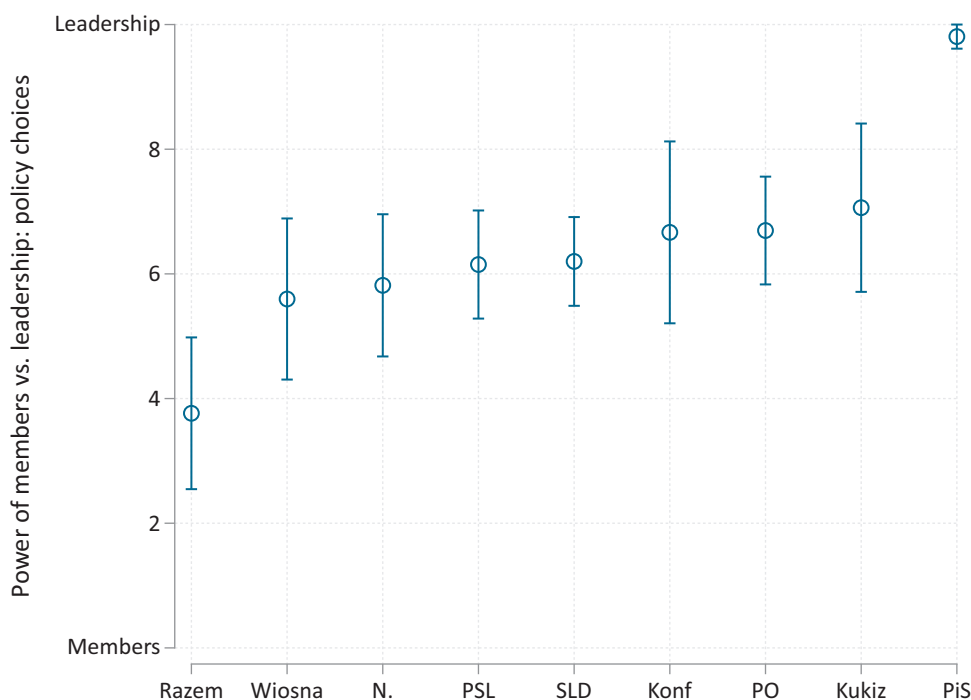


Figure 7. Policy decision-making power of leadership vs. members in Poland 2019. Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019 (Bakker et al., 2020).

Particularly during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, PiS attempted to simulate not only programmatic but also organisational renewal. The campaigns highlighted that fundamentally “fixing” politics is only possible by a united effort of both “new” efficacious party elites and engagement of (non-member) sympathizers. This shows that political actors may try to increase their potential mobilization appeal also by enacting their organisational reinvigoration, such as a supposed move away from more broadly stigmatized leaders, or a shift towards stronger mass-party-type linkages with engaged supporters.

Nonetheless, while PiS enacted mass-party-linkages to mobilise sympathisers especially during electoral campaigns, it did not actually pursue to develop a mass-party organisation. While between 2015 and 2019 PiS reported to have doubled its membership numbers, it did not actively engage in actually expanding its member base. Most notably, PiS branches also did not seem to put effort into fostering opportunities for its rank-and-file to develop a feeling of collective belonging and grassroots socialization through everyday intra-party activities. Surveyed PiS officials justified their reluctance to admit new members by citing issues related to party management. Local officials also feared that new, highly engaged members, would destabilize intra-party relations and increase competition over influence within the party (Winclawska, 2020). These insights invite further research into intra-elite conflict and contingent, organisation-related choices by party officials—not only central leadership, but also mid-level elites across and within different (sub-)national party levels.

Despite its performative reorganisation, PiS has also remained a strongly centralized party built around patronal networks and the power of its long-time leader. While PiS developed a complex and widespread organisation, the actual structure of decision-making relations within PiS remained much simpler and orbited around the party’s Chair, Jarosław Kaczyński. The continued dominance of Kaczyński over the party was sustained by his absolutist leadership style. *The Prezes* did not hesitate to deploy his vast prerogatives—whether personally or via central office bodies—to control, veto, and sanction party officials and local structures in practice. Regarding power centralization and instruments used to keep the leader in power despite stronger party institutionalization, PiS therefore did not differ in substance from most PRR parties in Western Europe (cf. Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Concurrently, the specific tactic of running the party from the back seat allowed Kaczyński, aided by PiS-loyal media, to present himself as a symbolic saviour of Polish politics—if necessary, even from the malaise of his own party organisation. On the record, PiS officials pledged allegiance to the party leader, underscoring his wisdom, skills, and charisma (cf. Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018). Yet obedience to Kaczyński seems to have rested not primarily in charismatic traits, but rather in his tight grip over party members and struc-

tures, as well as his use of sanctions to tame internal dissent. The potential for intra-party intrigue thus continued to simmer beneath the surface of a seemingly coherent organisation.

Our findings have important broader implications. Most notably, they invite further studies on the still relatively underexplored aspect of research on the radical right: the relationship between PRR party organisation and the mediatisation of politics (Art, 2018). Specifically, our analysis demonstrates that it is useful to complement crucial research advances on how external media outlets react to the PRR (de Jonge, 2021; Ellinas, 2009, 2014) with a perspective on how parties in general, and PRR parties in particular, actively communicate about and perform organisation. Concurrently, the case of PiS demonstrates that it is analytically relevant to disentangle and contrast what parties might rhetorically declare to what they actually do in terms of their organisational features. This implies the need to account for the ways communication and organisation constantly interact, rather than observing them just as a zero-sum game (Art, 2018).

Accordingly, our findings suggest that parties might try to actively navigate potential trade-offs between different organisational features and associated priorities, such as short-term office-seeking. Performative organisational “rebranding” facilitated PiS’s ability to include selected mass-party appeals into their campaign while minimizing time-intensive organisational costs and perceived risks to internal power hierarchies. At the same time, it allowed the party to blur its organisational profile. This has additionally helped PiS enact an image of a renewed challenger distinct from “politics as usual,” without impeding the party’s primary vote-maximizing strategy. These first insights invite further comparative research into the diverse ways by which parties try to de-demonize and broaden the appeal of their leadership and organisations without necessarily shifting their positions—an aspect particularly relevant to the analysis of the radical right (Akkerman et al., 2016). Future studies should also explore the impact of communicative strategies on political conflicts and party organisation itself.

The organisational development of PiS in Poland remains an important, but also a highly dynamic case. Fierce personal conflicts within PiS re-emerged anew since 2020 amidst the Covid-19 public health crisis and confrontation with anti-government protests. The most recent Congress, postponed to 3 July 2021 due to the pandemic, confirmed Jarosław Kaczyński as party leader, and he declared that this would be his last term in office. Simultaneously, the party signalled first steps towards reorganising its regional operations. In its core, the planned reform will prohibit officials with duties in public office from also serving as district chairs. Instead, the primary task of new district leaders would be to manage their regional branch. At first sight, this could suggest that PiS might be moving towards

strengthening bureaucratic ties between mid-level officials and ordinary members. In this vein, PiS central leadership has justified its reform plans by citing the need to end inertia caused by the inactivity of local party “barons” (*baronizacja*) and public officials who lack the time to adequately attend to their local organisations (Wróblewski, 2020). Still, given that the new officials would be directly remunerated by the central office, this reform might further cement the weak autonomy of local branches. Furthermore, given increased direct dependency on central office (qua the function of secretary general), hierarchical power conflicts are not unlikely to further impede developing a larger, socialized member basis. Party officials indeed expressed concerns about potential intra-party conflicts between new and old mid-level elites, suggesting that the planned reform is primarily aimed at strengthening the regional influence of officials loyal to the current Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (Wróblewski, 2020), one of potential heirs to Jarosław Kaczyński. It will be relevant to observe which trajectory the party might take in the future, also once its founding leader decides to pass the torch to a successor.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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