Populist Parties in Poland

The previous chapter dealt with populist parties in a long-established Western European democracy. This chapter, which is structured in a similar way, moves beyond this part of the continent, and provides an analysis of populist parties in Poland. Similarly to the Netherlands, early 21st-century Poland has witnessed the rise and fall of populist parties, and in Poland populist parties have also taken part in a coalition government. The country thus lends itself equally well to the purpose of comparing successful and unsuccessful electoral performances of populist parties. As became clear in Chapter 2, post-communist Central and Eastern European countries often pose a challenge when the aim is to determine which parties are populist, and which are not. This is also the case in Poland. I will nevertheless argue that, in the period from 2001 onwards, two parties emerged that can be identified as populist parties: Self Defence (Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, SO) and, since 2005, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS). For the latter party, nevertheless, populism seemingly remained a relatively loose supplement to its national-conservative core ideology. The League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR), often considered to be populist as well, is not classified as a genuine populist party in this book.

As will be discussed, the Polish populist parties were not much hindered by the electoral system and benefited from widespread discontent with the dominant Polish mainstream parties. A disregard for many voters’ socio-economic concerns and involvement in corruption scandals seriously undermined the appeal and trustworthiness of the Polish political elites. SO, the party that most clearly appealed to the Polish ‘transition losers’, was one of the parties able to benefit from this. After the adoption of a more explicit populist discourse, however, PiS became the most credible party voicing populist anti-establishment rhetoric. The party could rely
on a strong anti-corruption image and present itself as the chief agent of conservative and ‘solidaristic’ Poland, and it largely ‘devoured’ the support of its junior coalition partners in 2006 and 2007: SO and the LPR.

The following section first provides a brief overview of the developments in the Polish party system after the transition to democracy. These developments need be understood in order to identify the populist parties that have emerged since the turn of the 21st century. The subsequent section turns to the electoral performance of the populist parties identified in Poland. The concluding section summarises the findings and draws implications from the Polish case.

Identifying the populist parties in Poland

1989–2001: A fluid party political landscape

Towards the end of the communist period a mass opposition force was able to develop, embodied by the trade union federation Solidarity (Solidarność). In 1989 the ‘Round-Table negotiations’ between Solidarity and the communist government led to semi-open elections. Solidarity’s overwhelming victory in these elections marked the beginning of the end for the communist party (Polish United Workers’ Party, PZPR). Its position was severely weakened and the election results led to a ‘negotiated retreat’ of the PZPR from the political scene (Millard 1999: 9). The following decade in democratic Poland was characterised by the instability of the party system. Various parties emerged from the Solidarity movement, and the first truly free parliamentary election in 1991 resulted in an extremely fragmented Lower House (Sejm). No fewer than 29 parties or electoral committees occupied the 460 seats (Sanford 1999: 36). It proved to be a tumultuous period: three short-lived governments followed each other rapidly; a lack of party discipline contributed to frequent clashes between parliament and government; cabinets were internally divided; and their relationship with President Lech Wałęsa, the former chairman of Solidarity, was often difficult.

In 1993 a new parliamentary election was held under a new, less proportional, electoral system. This proved detrimental to the divided ‘post-Solidarity camp’, as the many, relatively small, parties with a Solidarity history failed to cross the threshold. Strikingly, no fewer than 34.5 per cent of the votes were ‘wasted’ (Sanford 1999: 41). At the same time, the pragmatic and much better-organised social democrats of the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD), which emerged out of the PZPR, benefitted from the electoral system, and eventually formed a coalition government with the Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo...