Evidence Bite - Beyond backsliding: tracing the roots of Polish gender troubles with democracy in transition-era reproductive policies

This article by CCINDLE partners Julia Pałejko and Conny Roggeband explores how Poland's restrictions on reproductive rights first emerged during the country's democratic transition, and why understanding this history is essential for explaining today's anti-gender politics and democratic turmoil. Recent decades of Polish history demonstrated a textbook process of post-communist democratisation, followed by democratic backsliding and attacks on women's rights linked to the rise of the right-wing populist Law and Justice government. The article argues that these developments did not begin in 2015. Instead, it traces today's conflicts over reproductive rights and the very essence of the democratic project back to Poland's transition from communism in the early 1990s, showing how democracy was built on political compromises that limited women's reproductive autonomy from the outset, while rejecting genuine deliberation and civil participation. This evidence bite offers a concise summary of its conclusions.

The **key observations** of the article include that:

1. Poland's democratic transition was not equally democratic for everyone

The article argues that Poland's transition to democracy involved political bargains between emerging political elites and the Catholic Church, which shaped reproductive policy. The resulting 1993 'Abortion Compromise' was presented as a democratic consensus but largely excluded women from decision-making and established one of Europe's most restrictive abortion laws.

Rather than expanding equal citizenship, the transition embedded gender inequalities into the new democratic system. These findings suggest that democratic transitions, instead of being treated like openings for greater inclusion, should rather be seen as contested moments in which gender and power are renegotiated with varying outcomes.

2. Reproductive policy defines who counts as a full citizen

The study shows that abortion policy is about more than healthcare, it determines whose rights and autonomy are recognised by the state. By prioritising the rights of the foetus over women's bodily autonomy, reproductive policy limited Polish women's ability to participate as equal citizens. The article thus argues that reproductive rights are central to democracy itself.

3. Contemporary anti-gender politics has deep historical roots

Recent restrictions on abortion and attacks on gender equality did not emerge in isolation. Instead, today's anti-gender politics builds upon democratic norms, political alliances, and narratives established during the democratic transition. Viewing Poland only through the lens of 'backsliding' risks overlooking the longer-term structural conditions that made democratic erosion possible.

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The **key takeaway messages** of the article include that:

- **Democratic transitions can reproduce existing inequalities and generate new ones:** Poland's transition to democracy, for instance, sidelined women's rights and interests and did not lead to inclusive citizenship.
- **Reproductive rights are democratic rights:** Access to reproductive healthcare is fundamental for equal participation, bodily autonomy, and democratic inclusion.
- **Historical legacies help explain modern politics:** Current anti-gender mobilisation is rooted in political compromises and institutional choices made decades ago, not just recent political trends.

This study challenges the idea that Poland's democratic problems are simply the result of recent backsliding. Instead, it shows that the foundations of democratic exclusion were laid during the country's transition to democracy, particularly through reproductive policies that marginalised women's political participation and rights. By tracing these historical roots, the article encourages a broader understanding of democracy; one that asks not only whether democratic institutions exist, but who has been included, excluded, and recognised as a full citizen from the very beginning. You can read the article in full here.

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