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Policy Institute

Generation Z's Impact on Democratic Revolution

By: Mitchell Basham, Baeden Eaton, and Quin Student



INTRODUCTION

Across the world, technology and the rise of younger generations to positions of political power has created a situation where weak autocratic regimes no longer have the ability to fully repress their citizenries. Beginning with the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, which saw millennials across North Africa and the Middle East rise up in support of democratic values and an end to political oppression, younger people across the world have become more and more organized politically, giving rise to new political voices in many parts of the world. Today, a new generation, Gen Z, is entering into the world of politics and attempting to bring democratic reform to oppressed nations across the globe. In the following piece, we will examine two such states, Venezuela and Poland, displaying how Generation Z use the innovations they have grown up with to effect real political change, even in the most dire situations.



VENEZUELA PROFILE:

Venezuela, a diverse South American nation with around 28 million people and a petrostate economy heavily reliant on oil exports, is facing its worst crisis in history. Under Hugo Chavez, the negative impacts of the petrostate were masked by generous government programs funded by oil revenue. However, after the death of Hugo Chavez and the rise of Nicolas Maduro, economic instability worsened due to fluctuating oil prices and international sanctions. The once-beloved government programs ended, leading to mass migration and societal distrust. Maduro responded by consolidating power and rewriting the constitution, triggering a power struggle with opposition leader Juan Guaidó. With two presidents, Venezuela's plight deepens as the international community grapples with the legitimacy of leadership.



GEN Z IN VENEZUELA:

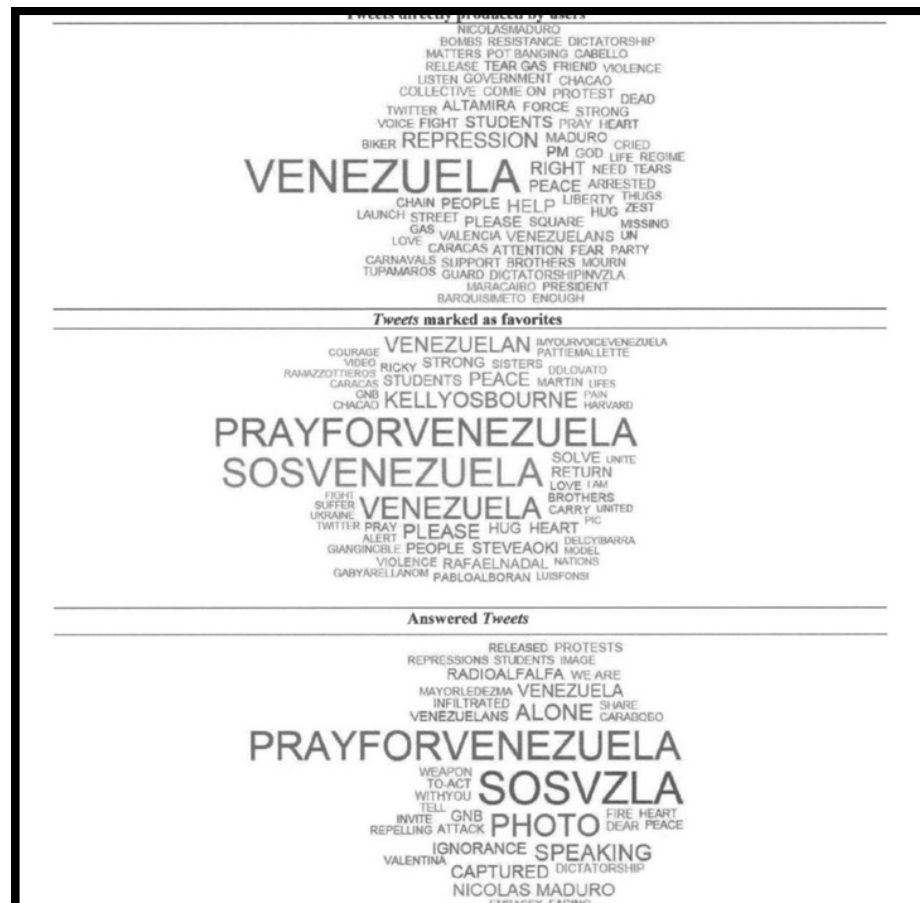
With such political backslides and a lack of consensus within its population, Venezuela requests that the world, particularly its people, participate in the fight for change. With such a lack of stability in all aspects of the government: societal, economic, political, and humanitarian, civilians require a change to come.

Population breakdown of Venezuela shows that around 41% of the population is under the age of 25, meaning that a significant amount is a part of Gen Z. With Gen Z being the new voting population, they are the ones who must articulate the vision of the nation. Voting allows people to create the vision they want, although it may differ from the world's vision for the country. If it is what the people want and they do it through democratic means, then the decision is satisfactory. Not only the people of the country but many of the citizens are also internally displaced; 51% of them are aged 15-25, creating a further challenge when it comes to the ability for elections that will represent the whole of the population that is eligible to vote. While the youth may be disconnected from each other due to displacement, many are united in their shared vision for the country they love, Venezuela. Young people have begun creating parties of their own, nonprofits, and levels of leadership in all they are involved in. The ability to learn from their past is vital, and with already being in positions of power, Gen Z is on its way to building a better Venezuela for themselves and all (Santi, 2022).



SOCIAL MEDIA IN VENEZUELAN REVOLUTIONS:

Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the “Chavista” regime, named for Hugo Chavez the president of this era, implemented a series of restrictions on the people, leaving many to seek political alternatives to escape these encroachments on their freedoms. However, one of the most prominent of the “Chavista” restrictions was the creation of state-controlled media, which allowed for the censoring of information that went against the government, resulting in a shift to private media. While creating a “traditional” media channel exempt from the government's eyes was nearly impossible, many began shifting their focus toward social media. The shift to social media primarily took place in 2015, when many Gen Zs were beginning to have a cell phone of their own, as those born at the beginning of the generation were approaching the age of 13 or were over that age. With people now having their own private devices, many began downloading social media platforms, the most prominent being Twitter (now known as X). This new interconnectedness of the population sparked a shift from traditional media outlets to these platforms, allowing movements to be created without interference from the state regime. A movement known as “Twitter smart mobs” came to be made, leading to a change felt by the whole of Venezuela. Many of the topics being discussed on Twitter were focused on reforming the government's economic and political sectors (Said-Hung, 2018). Online discussions later evolved into in-person discussions, allowing large demonstrations to emerge, demonstrating Venezuelans and Generation Z's immense care for the country. A sizable amount (49.4%) of those discussing the change for the country were linked to the movement on the ground that took place. While the ideas created on Twitter were well received online and by those who participated in the movements after 2015, which led to Chazes' removal from power, many of the reforms were not truly actualized following the implementation of the new regime (Smith, 2015).



POLAND PROFILE:

Poland is located within the easternmost region of the European continent and is home to 38 million individuals, all with distinct historical, economic, and (most importantly) political views. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Poland entered a newfound era of free-elections and political autonomy, which has generally had positive results for most of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, following elections to the parliament (the Sejm) the populist Law and Justice Party (PiS) was able to form a majority coalition and seize control of government. Throughout the next eight years, PiS was able to maintain their grip on Polish politics, and slowly began to implement policies that effectively weakened the Polish government and limited political rights for various groups of individuals. Thereby reducing the levels of democracy within the states. However, following popular elections in October of 2023, PiS was ousted from power and the process of reforming the social and political realities has been slowly implemented by the new coalition led by the Civic Coalition (KO).



DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING & RECOVERY POLAND

2015:

Poland elects the populist **Law and Justice Party (PiS)** for a majority within the parliament for their simple platform following numerous scandals within the governing centrist **Civic Platform Party**



2016:

PiS-lead Coalition introduces legislative measures that jeopardize the independence of the judiciary through:

- Granting Executive Control over hiring and dismissal
- Executive can remove all common court presidents for any reason
- Allowing the Legislature to appoint judicial representatives to Constitutional Tribunal

2016:

PiS begin introducing further legislation to limit media freedoms and autonomy through:

- Establishment of the National Media Council with Politically appointed members



SEPT. 2016-2017:

PiS policymakers introduce further restrictions, for an already highly restricted system, on reproductive and abortion laws which incites mass civil protests

2018:

The European Union threatens to strip Poland of its voting rights under **Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty** due to continued issues with the Rule of Law



2020:

PiS introduce and pass a near-total ban on abortion, state-sanction homophobia; incites mass protests and anger from Polish Populace



OCT. 2023:

PiS ousted from power in popular elections, replaced by a new coalition:

- Civic Coalition (KO)
- Third Way (TS)
- New Left (NL)

KOALICJA OBYWATELSKA

OCT. 2023-NOW

KO-lead Coalition begins amending discriminatory legislation, committees and reducing corruption created throughout **PiS's** tenure

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GEN Z IN POLAND:

Any examination of the democratic backsliding in Poland would be remiss without properly examining the prominent role that Generation Z has played in the 2023 elections. As with many of the democratic revolutions that have occurred throughout the world in recent years, one of the defining characteristics of the Polish shift away from the populist PiS has been Generation Z voters. Throughout their tenure in power, PiS attempted to establish a variety of policies which only served to alienate younger voters. One of the most notable was their near-total ban on abortions, which subsequently led to mass protests and public unrest. At the forefront of these protests were women, specifically members of younger generations who felt that this “legal” ban infringed upon their fundamental human rights. In a poll conducted by Reuters, nearly 70% of all Poles felt that this ban was a threat to women’s health and safety throughout the state (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Stop Killing Us:). These protests began in October of 2020 following the implementation of the abortion ban, and demonstrated a clear line that Generation Z was unwilling to cross regarding their individual and humanitarian needs. Moreover, alongside the near-total ban on abortion, both the national regime and various local governments have enacted LGBTQ-free zones (Pichetta, Polands LGBT Zones). These zones serve to institutionalize homophobia across the state, leading to many, both within and outside the LGBTQ community, to feel further removed from the government. This legislature has further served to galvanize members of Gen Z as they are one of the generations with the largest proportion of queer identifying individuals. Although it is hard to accurately gauge the exact demographic data on a global scale; a survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental rights reported that 62% of respondents felt that they must Always or most often had to hide their sexual orientation prior to turning 18 (European Union, EU LGBT Survey). This data represents a majority of younger members of Gen Z and the discrimination they constantly face throughout the Polish state. While these are just two prominent examples of the ways in which the reign of PiS has consistently alienated members of Gen Z, it represents the broader trend of political unrest throughout the state, eventually resulting in their loss of the majority in October of 2023.



SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLAND:

The role that social media played in the removal of the PiS from power is difficult to accurately gauge. This is primarily due to the restrictive policies passed by the regime throughout their tenure, which essentially consolidated a majority of media outlets into tools for political propaganda. However, beyond their attempts to restrict news and information from the general public through “traditional media,” social media has also been transformed into a tool for political manipulation. Through the usage of fake accounts, chatbots, and generalized hate speech, politicians have been able to manipulate social media in ways that suit their interests (Woolley, Poland: Unpacking Ecosystem). Their control over this form of media is especially interesting as we consider the ways in which Generation Z use social media. According to information recorded from Statista, Generation Z Poles most commonly utilize mediums such as Facebook, and Instagram as both a leisure tool and for their information (Puzio, Most Popular Social Media). Due to the predominance of social media as a source of both information and entertainment, the attempts made by politicians may be concerning; however, the source of these mediums is just as, if not more, influential in the minds of Generation Z. Facebook, like many of the most used social media platforms within the state, originates from the United States. As a result most of the “real” content featured comes from the Western democracy and subsequently spreads pro-democratic ideals online. Moreover, during the election itself, the media presence of both politicians and idealized individuals skyrocketed. As the report from Democracy Reporting International suggests, despite a dramatic increase in social media interactions from Politicians on both sides, favoring the PiS however, these efforts did not directly relate to voter turn-out or sentiments (Democracy Reporting, From Hashtags to Votes). In fact, the data suggests that issue-based platforms spread across social media platforms were in-fact more influential on the voting populace than individual-based platforms like those spread by PiS. With Generation Z utilizing social media as their primary sources for both entertainment and information this data suggests that information originating from social media, rather than direct online mobilization, influenced the voting sentiments throughout Generation Z. As such, it would be logical to assert that the impact of social media on Generation Z throughout the 2023 parliamentary elections was essential to the dispulsion of the PiS as the ruling-party. Therefore, although they were not as directly involved in the production of information, as shown in other states with similar developments, their political sentiments were.



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