

# Public sentiment, activism and attitudes towards **democracy** according to Polish public opinion.

Opinion poll results, June 2023.

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# Introduction

This report delves into the initial segment of a comprehensive analysis derived from a quantitative study conducted in June 2023. The study surveyed a representative sample of 4,088 Polish citizens, both women and men, aged 17 years and above. The sample reflects the population's distribution across various demographics, including gender, age, location, and province (voivodeship) of residence. The data collection employed a blend of online and face-to-face interview techniques. The index provides a thorough overview of the research methodology employed.

Our report primarily focuses on three core areas: public activism, attitudes towards democracy, and the level of trust in public institutions. These areas are critical in assessing the overarching scenario in Poland. The objectives of reviewing these topics are twofold. Firstly, the report contributes to the ongoing discourse regarding the quality of democracy and the state of civil society within Poland. Secondly, the insights gained from this study were instrumental in assisting various civic coalitions in optimizing their advocacy and communication strategies ahead of the elections in October 2023.

The design of the study aligns with the goals of several civic coalitions supported by the Central Europe Civic Engagement Program (CECEP). This five-year initiative aims to amplify civic participation in political processes by enhancing competencies and fostering experience exchange among groups across Central Europe. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) oversees the program, with the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP) serving as the principal partner in Poland. The ISP's role encompasses bolstering the capacities and advocacy skills of selected civic coalitions in Poland, focusing on education, the rights of marginalized groups, environmental protection, urban development with an emphasis on green spaces, and combating discrimination against ethnic and national minorities and individuals with refugee or migration backgrounds.

The findings of this study are not only pertinent to the entities engaged in the CECEP but also hold significance for other groups concerned with the state of democracy and civic engagement in Poland. A considerable portion of the questionnaire echoes themes explored in previous studies conducted jointly by the ISP and the NDI in 2018, 2020, and 2021. This report primarily leverages data from these preceding years to track opinion

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trends, especially among the younger participants in the cohort. The concluding section of this analysis presents overarching conclusions and actionable recommendations aimed at reversing negative trends in the Polish populace's attitudes towards democracy and bolstering their engagement in public activism, thereby enhancing the functioning of the nation and its local communities. We trust that you will find the study's results insightful and a valuable contribution to the discourse.

### The situation in Poland; interest in politics and public activity

This section explores how perceptions of the state's functionality and its institutions intertwine with the general evaluation of the country's situation. A growing sentiment that the country is heading in the wrong direction could potentially dampen the enthusiasm for civic engagement beyond personal and familial interests. However, the influence of such a perception is not uniform; it is subject to a variety of factors.

On one side, increasing dissatisfaction with the country's state of affairs might discourage individuals from utilizing formal channels to impact the workings of democratic institutions. On the other side, this dissatisfaction could propel some individuals towards alternative

forms of engagement, such as participating in protests or supporting initiatives that operate independently of the state.

Notably, there has been a marked decline in public morale and the overall perception of the country's status, particularly since the onset of the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. This trend underscores the necessity of examining these dynamics within the context of Poland. Therefore, before delving into the specific findings of the study, we will first consider the general mood of the respondents and investigate how this mood may have influenced their public involvement in recent years.

### The situation in the country

Our research reveals a significant level of discontent among the Polish population regarding the current state of affairs in the public domain, encompassing both political and economic aspects. A substantial majority, exceeding 70% of the respondents, indicated dissatisfaction in these areas.

The pattern of dissatisfaction displays consistent trends across different social demographics, with a notable correlation between higher levels of education and increased dissatisfaction. The data highlights that the youngest cohorts, specifically those aged 17–24 and 25–29, exhibit the highest levels of discontent. In contrast, dissatisfaction tends to slightly diminish among older age groups, aligning closer to the overall average of the entire sample. However, this trend reverses, showing an uptick in dissatisfaction within the 50–64 age bracket. Interestingly, dissatisfaction starts to recede once more among those in the retirement age category, namely individuals aged 65 and above.

Notably, the demographic expressing the most satisfaction with the political and economic situation in the country is the age group over 75 years. This finding is visually represented and further detailed in Figure 1, which illustrates the varying levels of dissatisfaction with Poland's political situation across these demographic groups.

Notably, dissatisfaction with the political situation has been systematically deepening in recent years among the group aged 16 to 29, i.e. the youngest respondents. In 2018, 41% of young Poles were dissatisfied with the political situation; by 2020 their level of dissatisfaction had reached 63%<sup>2</sup>.

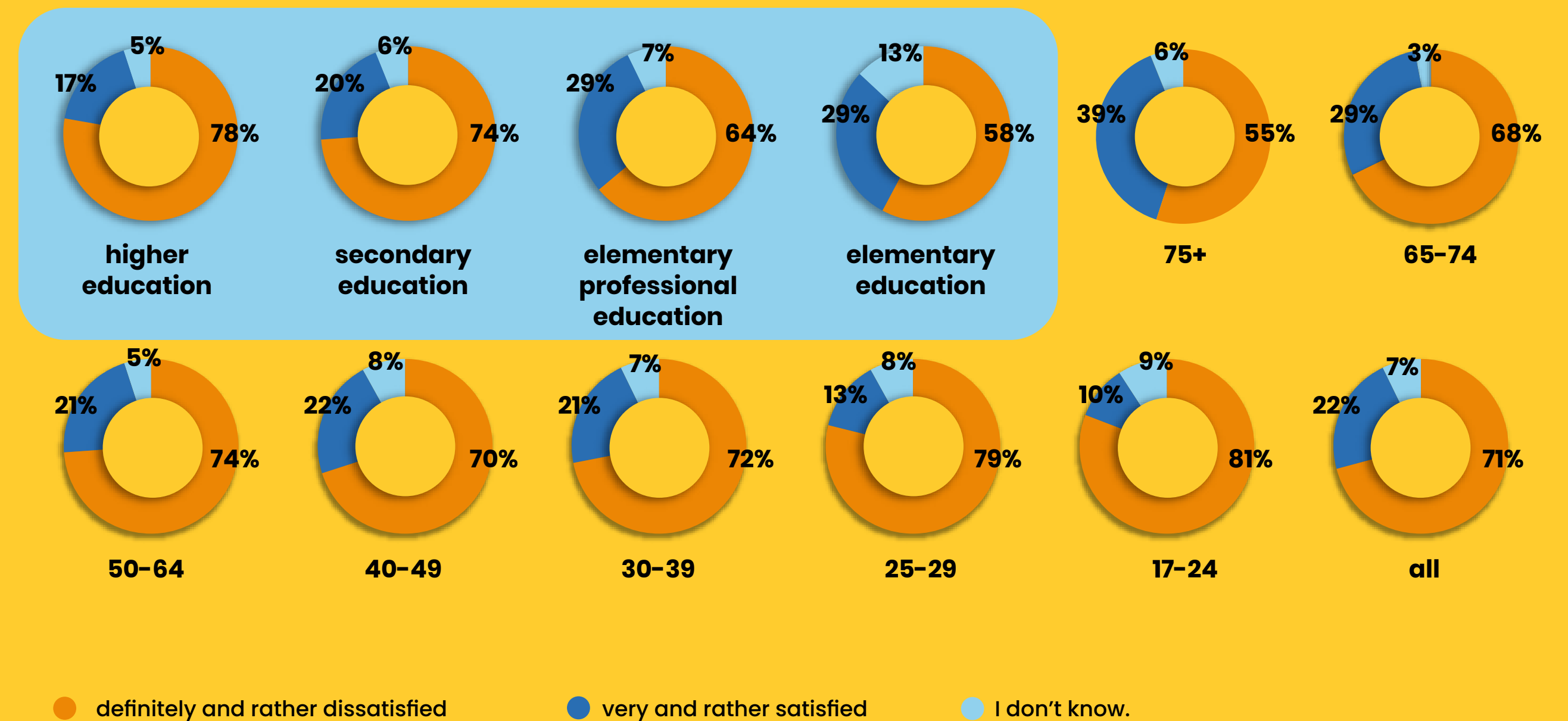
<sup>1</sup> See e.g. J. Scovil, *Nastroje społeczne w drugiej połowie sierpnia*. [Social sentiment in the second half of August.] Research note 2023, No. 105, p. 2, CBOs, Warsaw, [https://www.cbos.pl/SPiS\(Law and Justice\)KOM.POL/2023/K\\_105\\_23.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPiS(Law%20and%20Justice)KOM.POL/2023/K_105_23.PDF) [accessed 9.11.20223].

<sup>2</sup> See: F. Pazderski, *Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Poland*, ISP/NDI, Warszawa–Washington DC 2020,

Figure 1

## Level of dissatisfaction with the political situation in Poland among various demographic groups.

Are you personally satisfied with the current political situation in Poland?



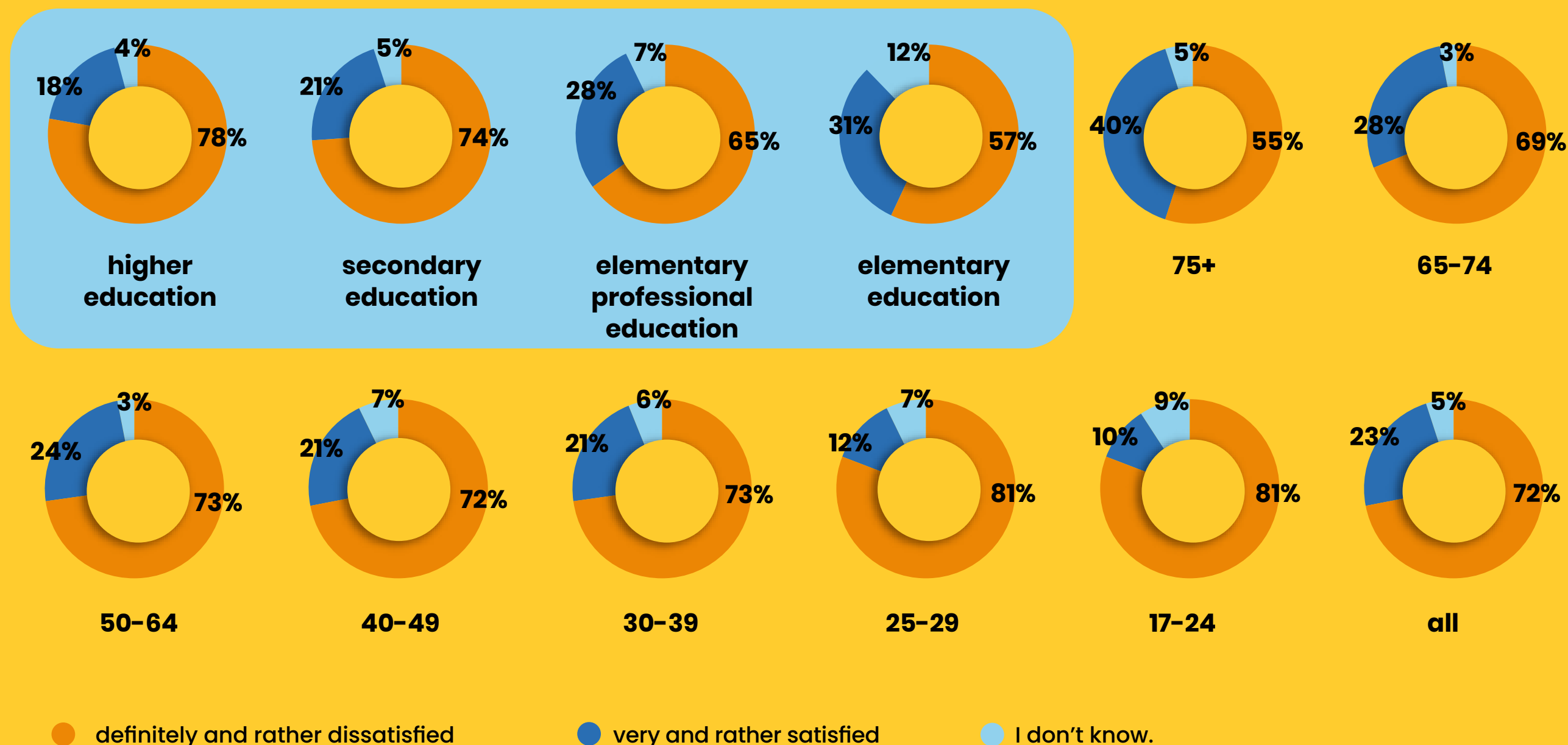
**Our research reveals a significant level of discontent among the Polish population regarding the current state of affairs in the public domain, encompassing both political and economic aspects.**



**Figure 2**

**Level of dissatisfaction with the political situation in Poland among various demographic groups.**

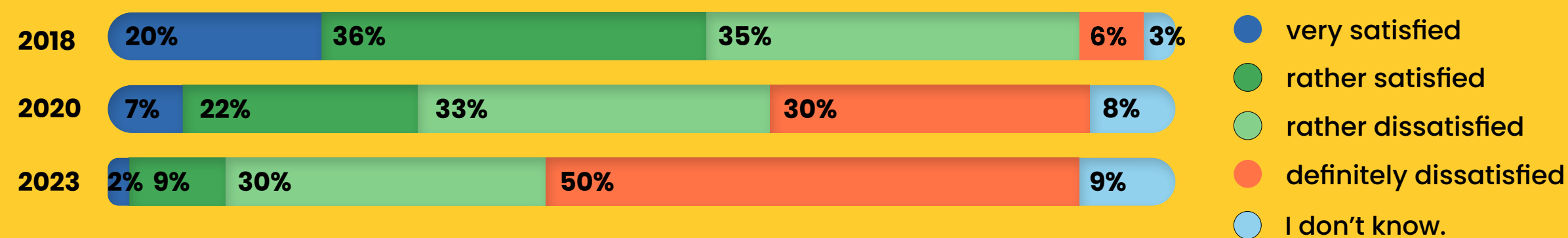
Are you personally satisfied with the current economic situation in Poland?



**Figure 3**

**Change in the level of satisfaction with the political situation in Poland among the youngest cohort (2018 and 2020 – people aged 16–29; 2023 – people aged 17–29).**

Are you personally satisfied with the current political situation in Poland?



Source: data 2018–2020: ISP/ NDI, Warsaw-Washington, 2020 (N = 750); data 2023: ISP, Warsaw 2023 (N = 705).

When dissecting the responses based on social and occupational categories, it becomes evident that a majority of these groups express dissatisfaction at a higher rate compared to the overall sample. Particularly, business owners who employ others, students, and individuals in mid-level and office positions are the most critical regarding the country's current state. Conversely, specific groups such as the unemployed, manual laborers, agricultural workers, and pensioners show levels of dissatisfaction that are relatively lower than the average observed in the overall sample.

However, it's crucial to note that even within these groups, negative perceptions still predominate over positive ones. Interestingly, retirees and pensioners are identified as having the highest degree of satisfaction with the current political and economic conditions. Yet, it is significant to point out that less than one-third of individuals in this demographic reflect this sentiment of satisfaction, as demonstrated in Figures 4 and 5.

The study sought to understand the perspectives of individuals employed in specific industries or economic sectors critical to the coalitions engaged in the Central Europe Civic Engagement Program (CECEP). However, it's important to note that the professions declared by respondents may not always align precisely with their actual occupations. Consequently, we specifically identified those working in agriculture, forestry, and education—regardless of their positions, which could range from managerial to mid-level roles.

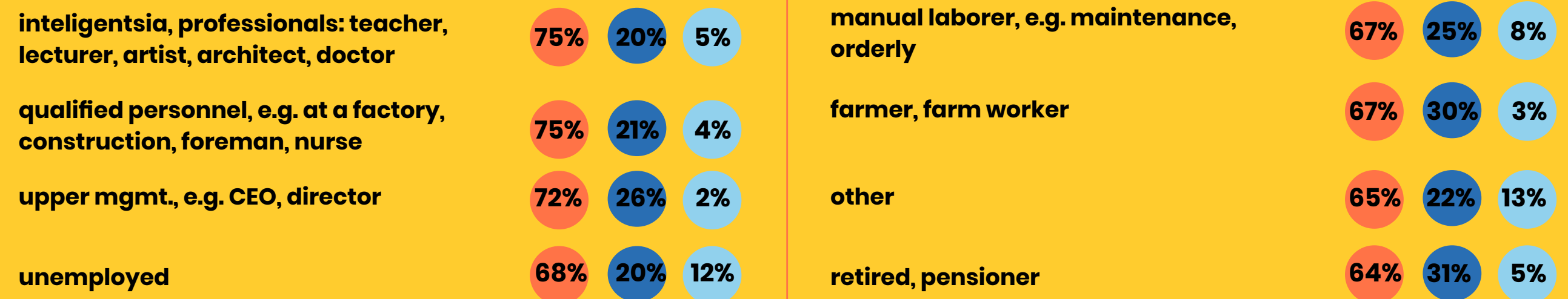
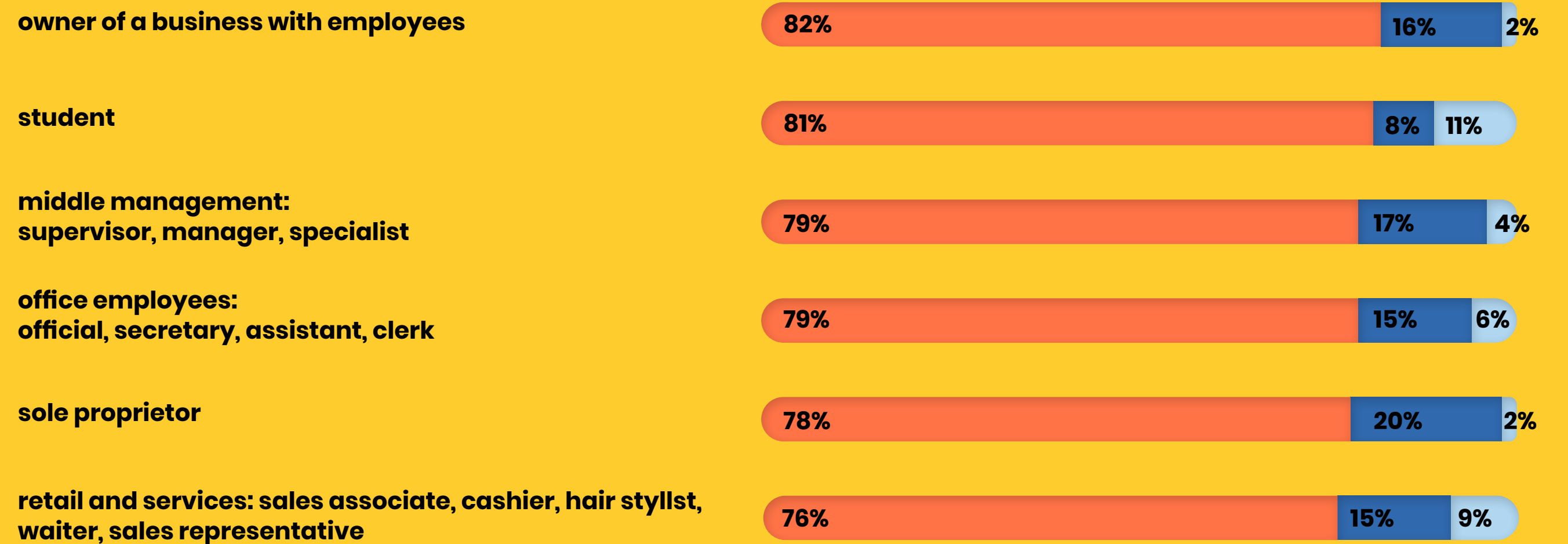
<https://www.isp.org.pl/en/publications/youth-attitudes-on-politics-and-democracy-in-poland> [accessed 9.11.2023].

**Those employed in the agricultural and forestry sectors exhibit a noticeably lower level of dissatisfaction with the political and economic situation compared to the general population**

**Figure 4**

**Level of dissatisfaction with the political situation in Poland among from various social and occupational groups.**

Are you personally satisfied with the current political situation in Poland?



● definitely and rather dissatisfied    ● very and rather satisfied    ● I don't know.

# Retirees and pensioners are identified as having the highest degree of **satisfaction** with the current political and economic conditions.

Our findings indicate that those employed in the agricultural and forestry sectors exhibit a noticeably lower level of dissatisfaction with the political and economic situation compared to the general population, with dissatisfaction rates at 57% and 60% respectively. Conversely, individuals employed in education—including teachers, managers of educational institutions, and employees in relevant public administration sectors—demonstrated dissatisfaction levels akin to the overall population, with 71% expressing dissatisfaction with the political situation and 74% with the economic state.

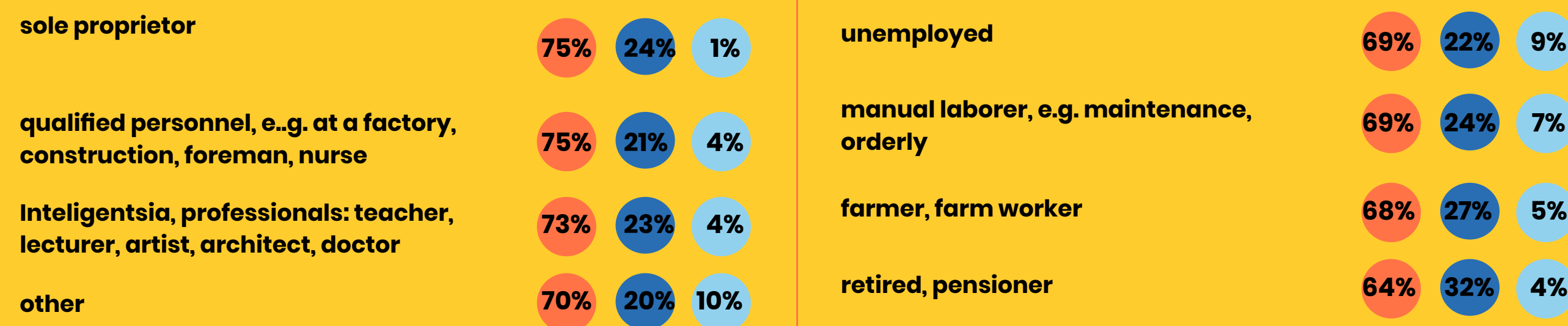
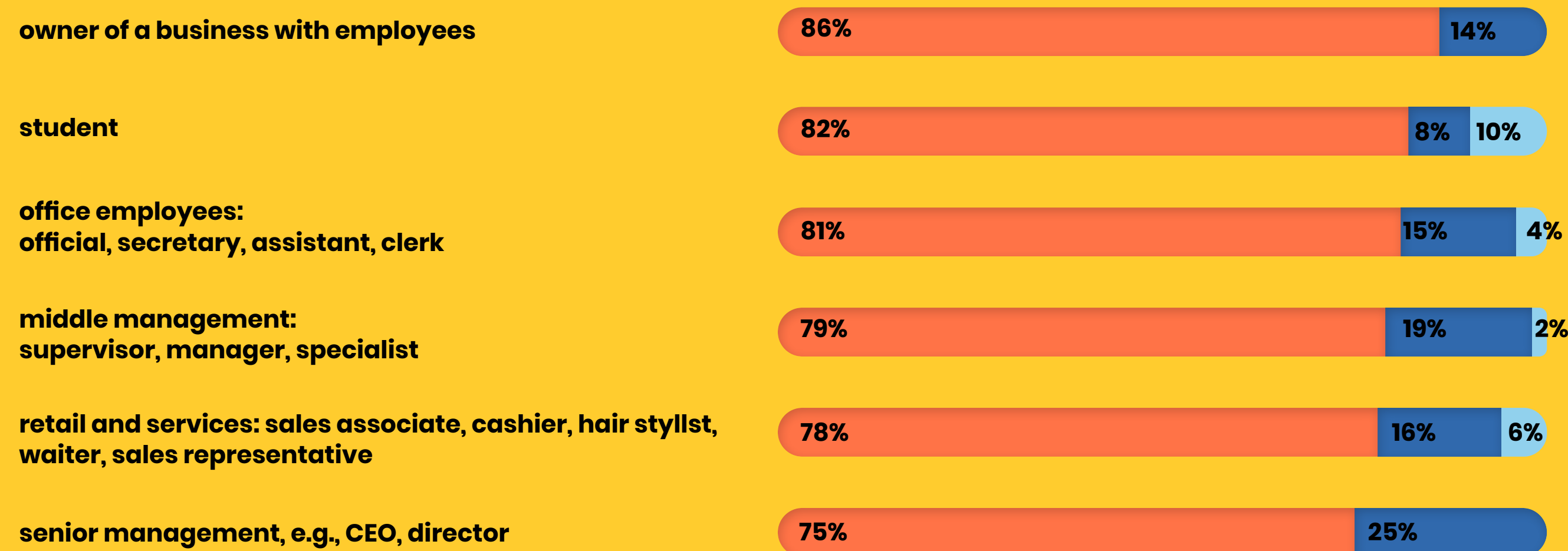
Moreover, the study reveals a clear correlation between people’s assessment of the country’s situation and their political preferences. Supporters of PiS (Law and Justice), the party holding the parliamentary majority at the time of the survey, are the only group predominantly positive about the country’s state in both political and economic aspects. In contrast, supporters of other main political parties active on the scene hold opposing views, as depicted in Figures 6 and 7. Those who refrained from commenting on this topic or expressed disinterest in participating in the elections exhibited similar levels of dissatisfaction, potentially indicating a sense of disappointment and apathy within this group.

This prevalent dissatisfaction could pose challenges for the ruling parliamentary majority in attracting voters by October 2023, given their association with the negatively perceived current situation. On the other hand, the opposition parties, by articulating well-founded criticisms of the government and proposing solutions that resonate with the electorate, have the potential to mobilize voters who are currently not supportive of the government. The implications of this dynamic and its potential influence on voter behavior will be further

Figure 5

## Level of dissatisfaction with the economic situation in Poland among various social and occupational groups.

Are you personally satisfied with the current economic situation in Poland?



● definitely and rather dissatisfied    ● very and rather satisfied    ● I don't know.

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explored in the second part of our report.

### Evaluation of the government's activities

The public's perception of the government's activities mirrors their overall assessment of the country's situation, albeit with a slightly more favorable tilt. Across the entire population, negative opinions prevail, yet these are marginally less severe compared to the general assessment of the country's condition.

This trend of dissatisfaction is consistent across various demographic segments, including those differentiated by educational background and age. Notably, the level

Figure 6

### Level of dissatisfaction with the political situation in Poland among individuals declaring support for various political parties and blocs.

Are you personally satisfied with the current political situation in Poland?

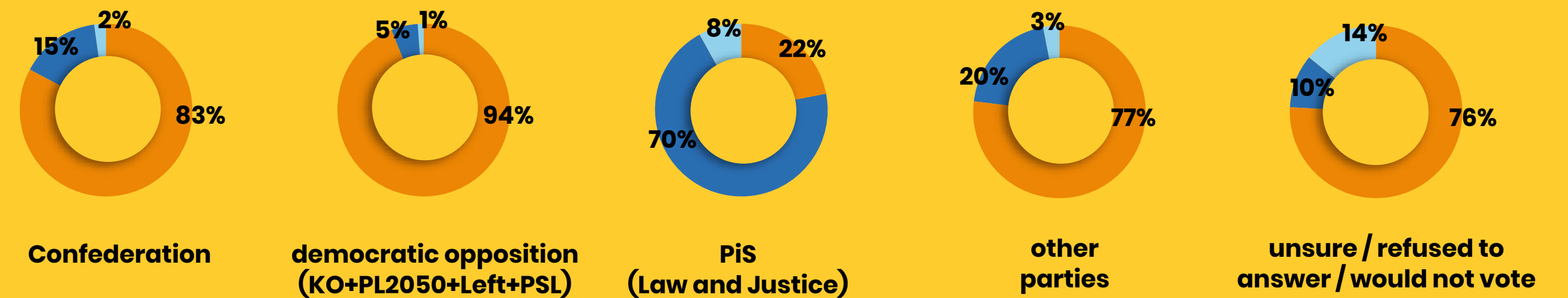
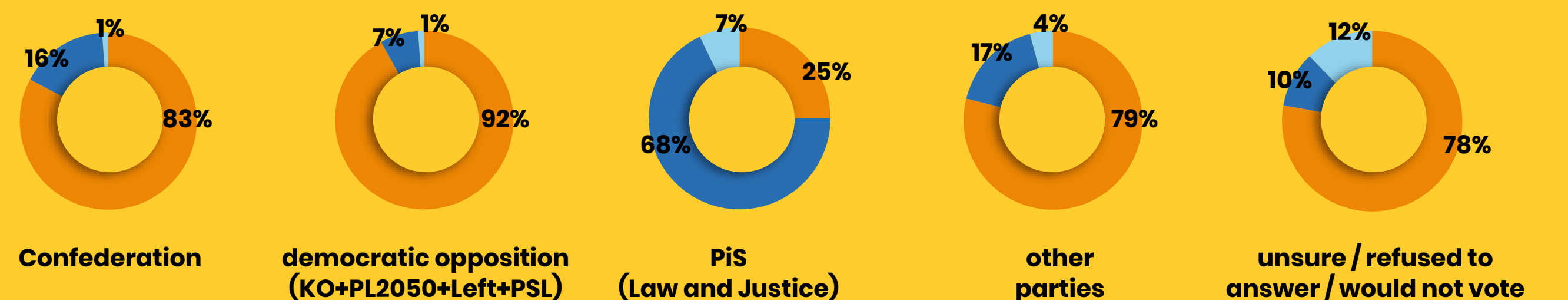


Figure 7

### Level of dissatisfaction with the economic situation in Poland among individuals declaring support for various parties and political blocs.

Are you personally satisfied with the current economic situation in Poland?



● definitely and rather dissatisfied    ● very and rather satisfied    ● I don't know.

of dissatisfaction escalates with higher education levels. Among the age groups, the youngest individuals (aged 17–24) express the highest level of discontent with government activities. As the age increases, this dissatisfaction gradually diminishes. Interestingly, the least negative assessments come from the cohort over 75 years of age. Despite this, it is significant to observe that even within this group, half still express dissatisfaction with the government’s performance, as detailed in Figure 8.

Men particularly stand out in their assessment of the government’s activities. Twenty-eight percent of men express satisfaction with the government’s work, a figure that is higher than both the overall sample average and the percentage among women, of whom only 21% report satisfaction. Residents of small towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants) and medium-sized towns (up to 100,000 inhabitants) also show higher satisfaction levels, at 27% and 28% respectively, compared to the overall sample. In contrast, only 17% of residents in the largest cities, with populations over 500,000, express satisfaction, which is significantly lower than the average.

Breaking down the evaluation by individual voivodeships, the regions of Podkarpackie (Subcarpathian), Lublin, and Lower Silesia stand out with 35%, 31%, and 29% positive assessments, respectively. However, it’s important to note that in each of these areas, negative ratings still outweigh the positive ones.

Not surprisingly, political preferences greatly influence the assessment of the government’s work. At the time of the survey, 80% of supporters of the parliamentary majority praised its activities, while 14% of the same group had a contrary opinion. In contrast, supporters of all other major political groups expressed negative views on the government’s actions, as shown in Figure 9. Voters of the parties forming the Senate Pact for the October 2023 elections were particularly critical, with 94% expressing negative opinions about the government’s work.

Religious practices also seem to play a role in government assessment. People who regularly participate in religious activities are more inclined to view the government’s work positively, with 41% giving positive assessments. Additionally, 30% of individuals belonging to a national, ethnic, or religious minority offer positive evaluations of the government’s actions.

Figure 8

### Level of dissatisfaction with government activities among people belonging to various demographic groups.

To what extent are you satisfied with the actions of the Polish government?

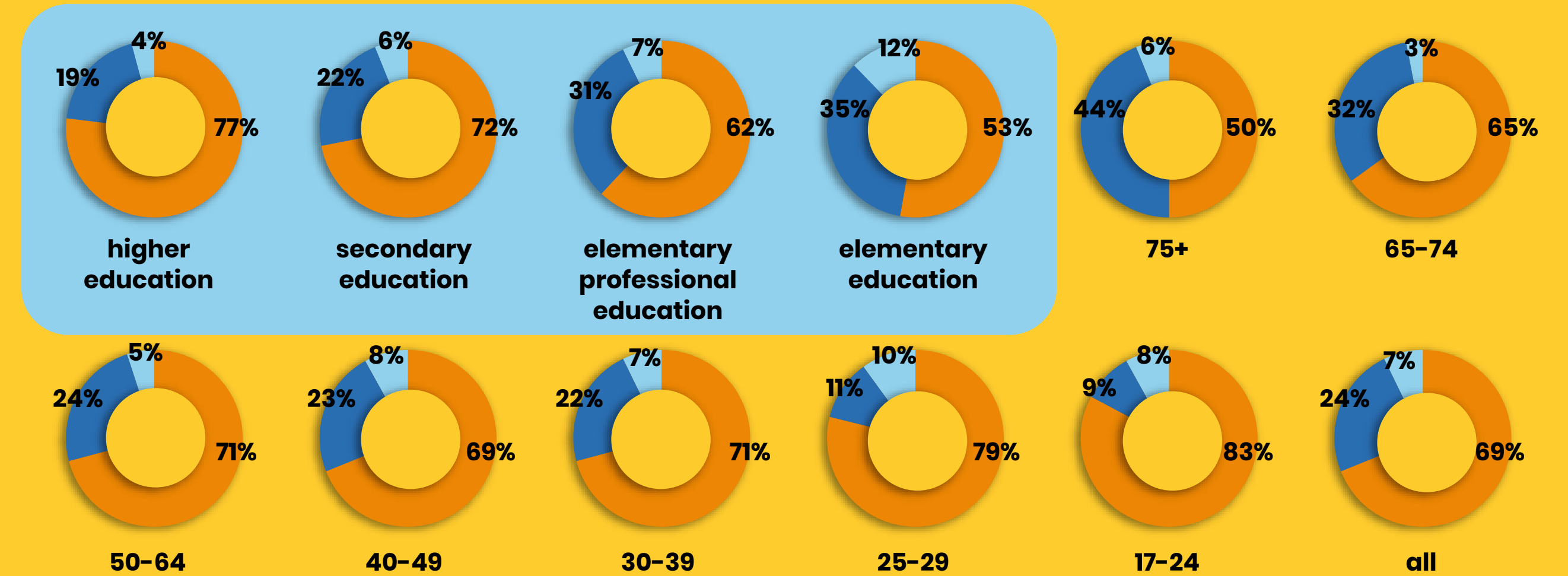
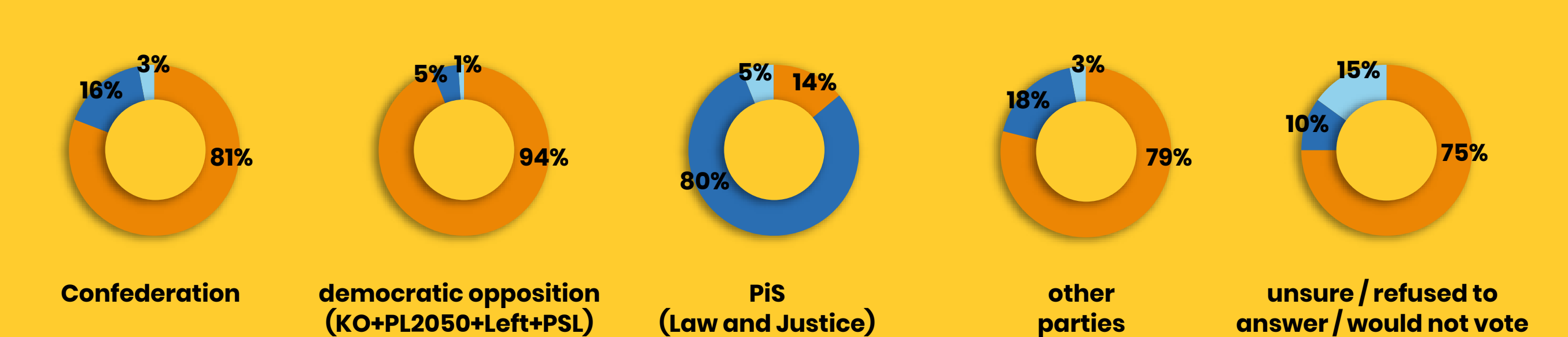


Figure 9

### The level of dissatisfaction with the government’s activities among people declaring support for various parties and political blocs.

To what extent are you satisfied with the actions of the Polish government?



● definitely and rather dissatisfied    ● very and rather satisfied    ● I don't know.

## Main observations

- **A substantial portion of the Polish population, over 70%, expresses dissatisfaction with both the political and economic conditions of the country.** This level of discontent also extends to the activities of the Law and Justice coalition and its junior partners.
- Gender differences in satisfaction levels are evident: **only 20% of women are satisfied with the political situation, compared to 25% of men.** In terms of the economic situation, the satisfaction figures are 19% for women and 27% for men.
- **Political affiliations strongly influence individuals' perceptions of the country's direction and the government's performance.** Supporters of the Law and Justice party, which held power during the study period, are the only group with predominantly positive views. In contrast, negative evaluations of the government are widespread among supporters of other political parties and among those who are hesitant or unable to declare their political preferences.
- The degree of dissatisfaction is notably higher among individuals with higher education and the youngest age group, ranging from 17 to 29 years. Within this younger cohort, dissatisfaction with the political situation has surged by 30 percentage points in the past five years, increasing from 41% in 2018. **Conversely, individuals aged 65 and above show a level of dissatisfaction that is lower than the overall sample average.**
- **The most critical assessments of the country's state come from specific occupational groups: business owners with employees, students, mid-level, and office employees.** In contrast, the unemployed, manual laborers, agricultural workers, and pensioners exhibit lower levels of dissatisfaction compared to the general population.



**Over three-fifths of the surveyed individuals express varying degrees of interest in this area. Interest in political matters increases with age, peaking in the 50–65-year-old demographic.**

### Interest in politics and public activism

Polish society demonstrates a notably high engagement in public affairs. Over three-fifths of the surveyed individuals express varying degrees of interest in this area. Notably, a significantly larger proportion of men than women report such interest.

Interest in political matters increases with age, peaking in the 50–65-year-old demographic. However, this interest notably declines in older age groups. Among those over 65 years of age, only about half claim to have an interest in politics, as depicted in Figure 10.

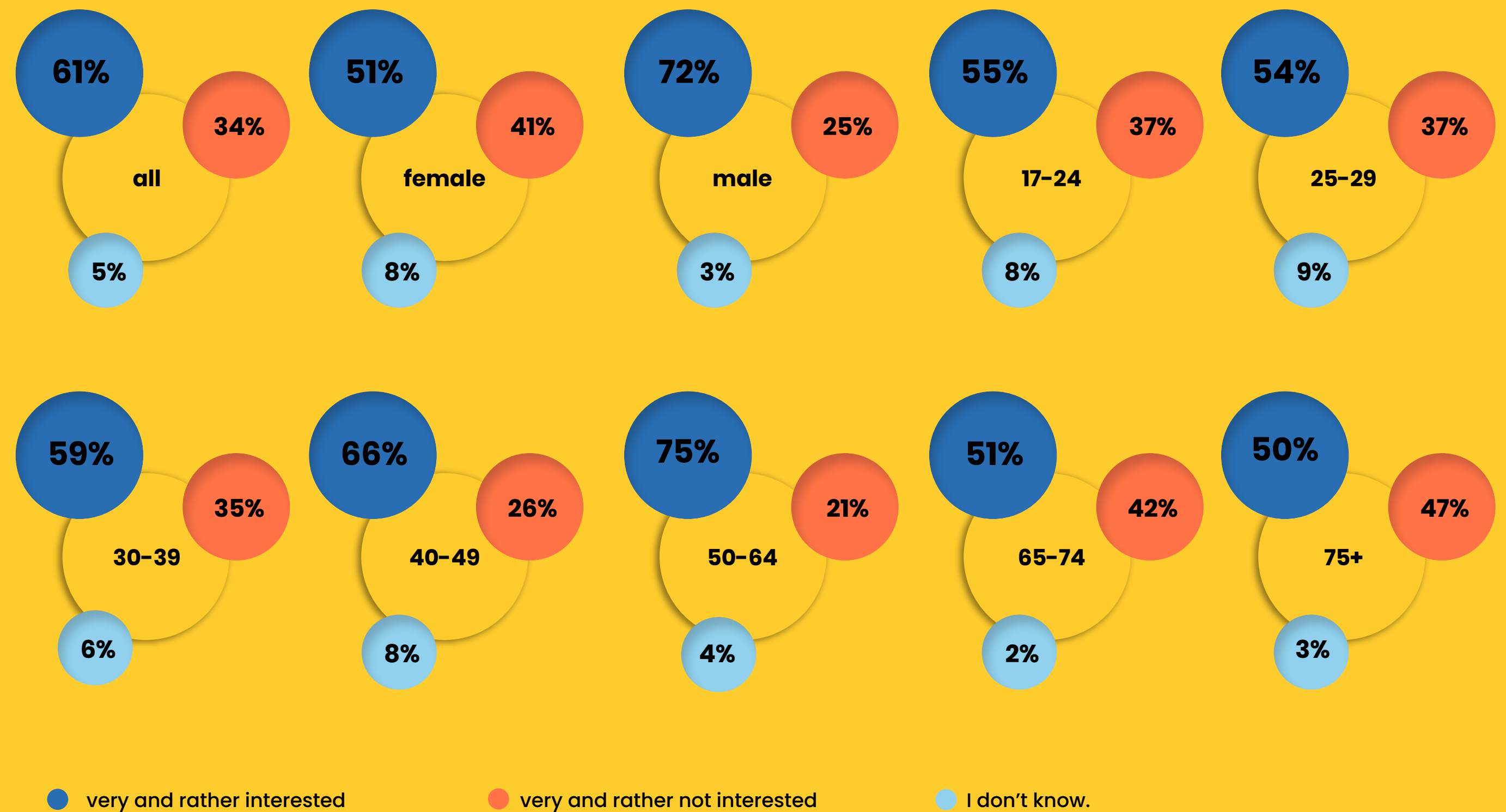
Educational background also plays a crucial role in political engagement. Approximately 45% of individuals with primary and basic vocational education show an interest in politics. This percentage rises among those with secondary education, where 64% express interest, and further escalates to 73% among those with higher education.

The study highlights a clear correlation between professional occupation and the level of interest in public affairs and politics. Senior managers show the highest level of interest, with 85% expressing engagement. This high level of interest continues across various professions, including the intelligentsia and mid-level employees (75%),

Figure 10

### Interest in politics among various social groups

How would you describe your level of interest in politics and public affairs?



professionals (72%), sole proprietors (71%), specialists (71%), business owners with employees (70%), and office workers (69%). In other occupational groups, the level of interest either matches the average of the entire population or falls below it. Notably, the lowest levels of interest are seen among the unemployed (48%), retail and service workers (49%), students (55%), and pensioners (57%).

Political alignment also influences interest in public affairs. Supporters of major political forces during the study period show high levels of engagement. Confederation (Konfederacja) party voters report 75% interest, voters aligned with the Senate Pact coalition (KO, PL2050, PSL, Left) show 73% interest, and Law and Justice (PiS) voters exhibit 70% interest. However, those undecided or disenchanted with politics display a markedly lower level of interest, with only 31% expressing engagement in politics and public affairs, almost half the rate of those declaring no interest.

The study also investigated the extent and nature of public engagement among Poles. Interestingly, just over a third of respondents (35%) do not engage in any public activities. Less than 11% can be classified as actively involved, participating in at least half of the activities listed in the questionnaire. The remaining 54% fall into a slightly active category, engaging in one to four types of activities. However, these activities vary greatly in nature and the time commitment they require, ranging from social media commentary or monetary donations to attending demonstrations or meetings with local officials. This diversity makes it challenging to compare the levels of activism based solely on the number of different engagement forms undertaken by an individual.

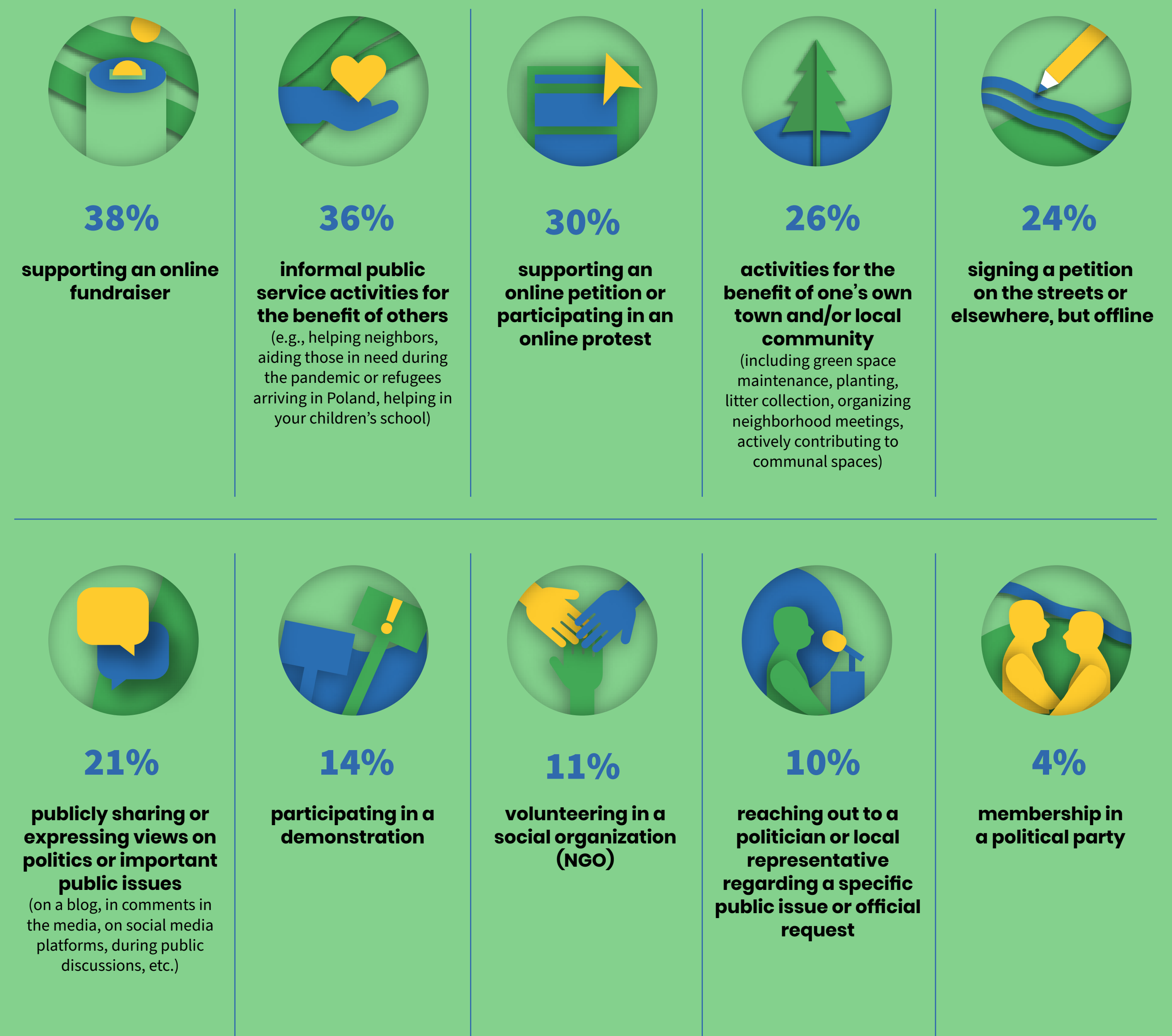
Respondents indicated online fundraising as their most frequent form of public activism. Nearly two-fifths of respondents engaged in this manner over the last two years. Notably, the popularity of this form of activism has been systematically increasing in recent years and Poland stands out in this respect among other countries in the region<sup>3</sup>. This was probably due to events related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the tremendous civic mobilization in raising funds to help refugees from Ukraine. Both circumstances also likely contributed to informal social activities for the benefit of other people being reported as the second most frequent kind of activism. Supporting online petitions and participation in an online protest followed third and fourth on the list. Approximately one third of Poles engaged in each of these three activity forms (see Figure 11). Online forms of civic activism are gaining importance as the fastest and most convenient ways

<sup>3</sup> See: F. Pazderski, Large cities in CEE – Communication with Citizens and Public Participation, Survey results in V4 countries, April-May 2021, NDI, Washington, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Large\\_Cities\\_in\\_CEE\\_Research\\_2021\\_results-V4.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Large_Cities_in_CEE_Research_2021_results-V4.pdf) [accessed 9.11.2023]; NDI, Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Central Europe, National Democratic Institute (NDI) 2020, Washington DC, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI\\_Youth2020\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_Youth2020_FINAL_0.pdf) [accessed 9.11.2023].

**Figure 11**

## Level of engagement in various forms of public activity (affirmative responses across the entire sample)

For each of the mentioned ways of engaging in public life, please indicate whether you have been involved in them in the last two years.



The figure presents data from selected questions only; the results do not add up to 100.

to engage in public life - a trend that has been clearly developing for some time.

It is indicative that the most popular forms of activism are those that are the least time-consuming. On the other hand, at the opposite end of the scale, are the types of engagement that requires effort to find and contact the right person, devote time to reach them and arrange a meeting, or involve activities not esteemed by Poles such as contacting a politician or local representative or actual membership in a political party. Only one in ten people volunteered for a social organization. People clearly prefer informal and direct activity, unrelated to any additional procedures or administrative requirements that relies on direct interactions in their own local community. Meanwhile, 14% of respondents declared participation in a demonstration over the last two years, which indicates increased popularity of this form of civic engagement in recent years and is likely caused by the numerous protests organized during that time<sup>4</sup>.

The graph summarizes data from individual questions; the results do not add up to 100. What influences public activism? We attempted to answer this question using linear regression. If activity is measured by the number of forms of engagement, it depends primarily on age, education and political preferences – the older the respondents, the lower the level of engagement ( $\beta = -0.239$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Meanwhile, the most active groups are young people aged 17–24, people between 50 and 64 years of age, and those 65 years of age and older. However, this situation may stem from the activities included in the questionnaire. Some refer to online activity, and this is lower among older people regardless of their activity in other spheres. On the other hand, people with higher education are clearly more active ( $\beta = 0.172$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Among supporters of the analyzed political groupings, only those reporting voting for parties aligned as part of the Senate Pact before the October 2023 elections were significantly more active ( $\beta = 0.146$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ). Their gender nor economic situation did not matter.

The survey allowed respondents to share their experiences with public activism and to report their lack of knowledge about certain forms of activism. A significant finding is that the majority of respondents were unfamiliar with formal volunteering opportunities within social organizations. This gap indicates a need for these entities to enhance their efforts in promoting this type of activity among the Polish population. This lack of awareness might also stem from shortcomings in civic education within the formal education system.

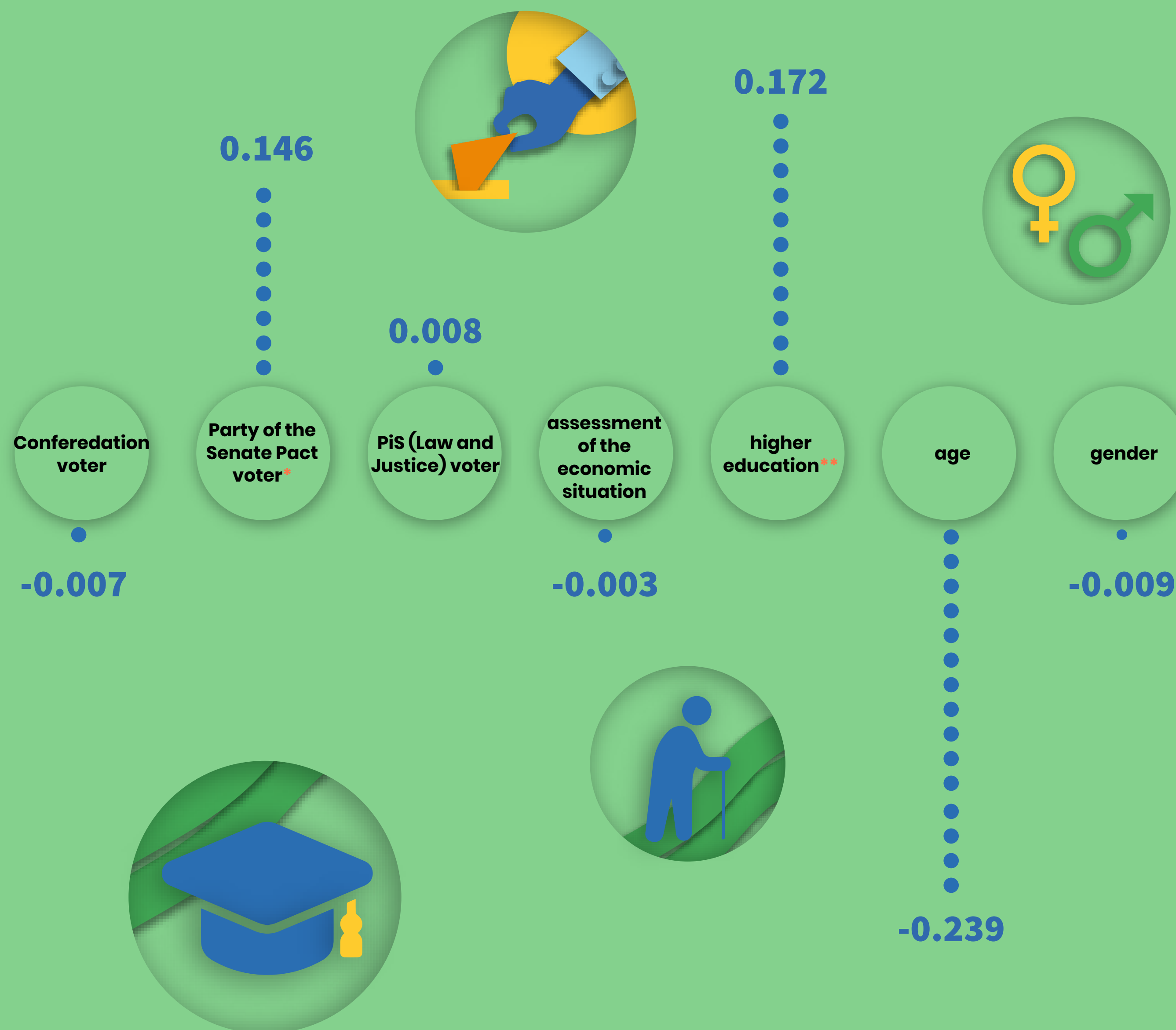
The highest level of unawareness regarding formal volunteering is notably prevalent among

<sup>4</sup> On the growing trend of several forms of civic engagement, cf. M. Feliksiak, Aktywności i doświadczenia Polaków w 2022 roku. [Activities and experiences of Poles in 2022.] Research note 2023, No. 18, pp. 6–7, CBOs, Warsaw, [https://www.cbos.pl/SPI-SKOM.POL/2023/K\\_018\\_23.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPI-SKOM.POL/2023/K_018_23.PDF) [accessed 9.11.2023].

**Figure 12**

## Factors affecting public activity

Statistical significance: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; only values marked with vivid color and asterisks are statistically significant.



individuals aged 25–29, who have recently completed their education and are entering the workforce. This observation could support the notion of inadequate civic education. In comparison, this lack of awareness is less pronounced among the older cohort aged 50–64. Furthermore, the survey identified three other forms of activity where the disparity in awareness between young adults and those in their later professional years is even more pronounced. These activities include contacting a politician or local representative, signing a petition on the street, and participating in informal social activities for others. This difference in awareness levels is detailed in Figure 13.

The survey asked people admitting to a lack of social involvement on behalf of their own locality or local community about the reasons for this passivity. The reasons respondents indicated, in order of popularity, are as follows: lack of time or energy, lack of health or interest, but also not being asked to do so as well as putting their own and family’s needs first. Previous study results indicate the same reasons<sup>5</sup>. Interestingly, among people aged 17–24 there is also an exceptionally low level of knowledge about where to seek information about social engagement opportunities along with that groups’ lowest familiarity with groups or organizations correlating to its interests that could channel engagement. This group also exhibits the lowest level of interest in such activity and least knowledge about where to look for information about various opportunities to engage (see Figure 13). On the one hand, such may testify to the low quality of civic education in Poland, but also offers social organizations and public administration ample space to present young people with accessible information about various forms and locations for involvement. It is obviously not sufficient that this information is relatively easily available on the Internet. A relatively large group of the youngest respondents (24%) admitted that they are convinced of their lack of appropriate skills or experience, so it is worthwhile to counter the misconception (or excuse) that special prior preparation is a prerequisite for social activism.

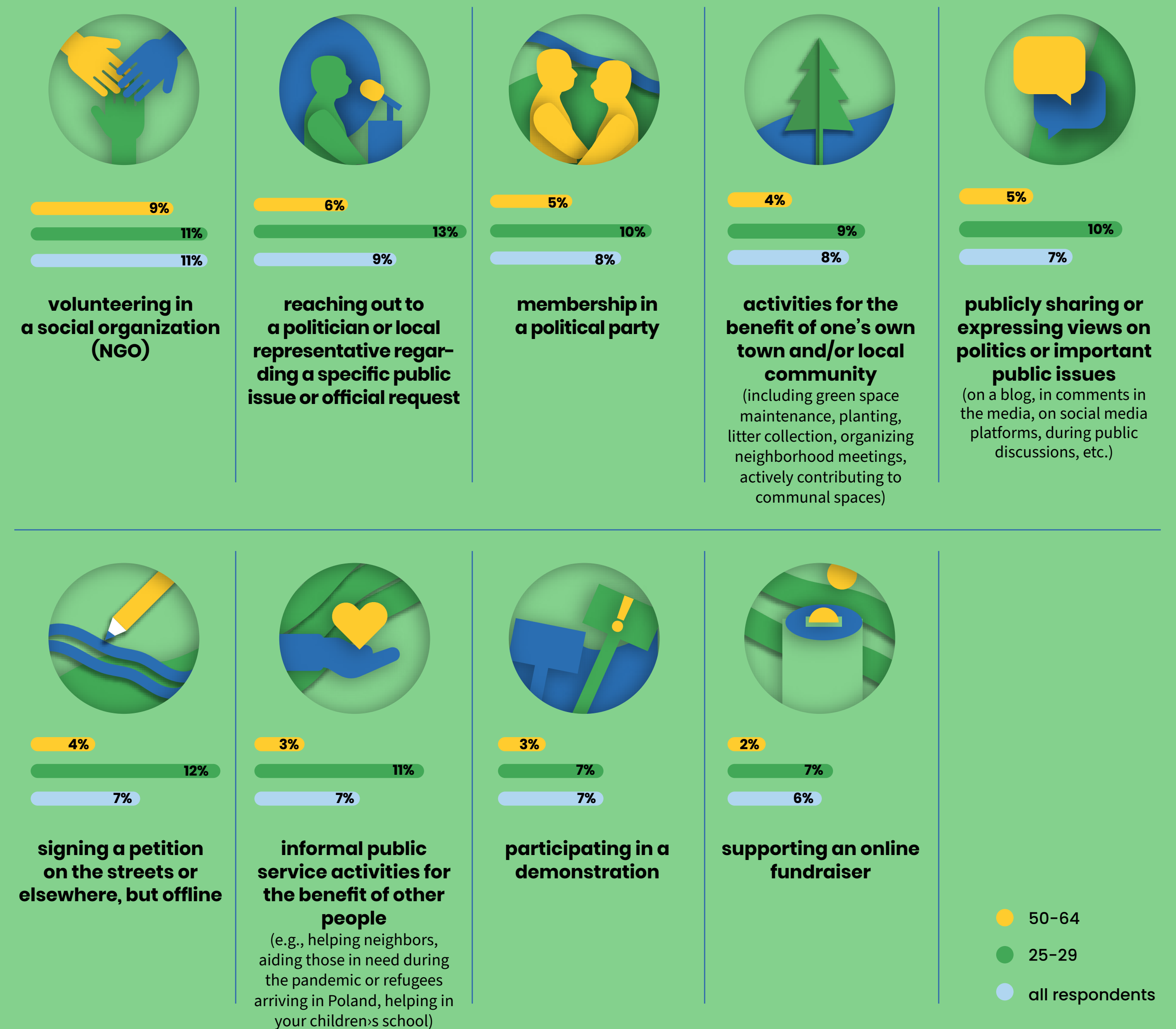
Multiple-choice question, percentages do not add up to 100; the question was only asked of respondents who declared no engagement in activities on behalf of their town or local community.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. P. Adamiak, Zaangażowanie społeczne Polek i Polaków. [Social Engagement of Poles.] Raport z badań 2013, Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, Warsaw 2014, p. 60, <https://api.ngo.pl/media/get/115182> [accessed 9/11/2023]; N. Hipsz, K. Wądotowska, Aktywność społeczna Polaków – poziom zaangażowania i motywacje [Social Activism Among Poles - levels of engagement and motivations], BS/62/2011, pp. 12–13, CBOs, Warsaw, [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2011/K\\_062\\_11.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2011/K_062_11.PDF) [accessed 9.11.2023].

**Figure 13**

## Level of knowledge about different forms of activity by age group

Please indicate the forms of activity that you are not familiar with?



The figure summarizes data from selected questions only; the results do not add up to 100.

# Declared parliamentary election participation grows linearly according to education levels.

However, it is impossible to discuss civic activism without referring to political participation, often referred to in Polish as the „salt of democracy.” It is „a fundamental right that every citizen should exercise if she or he wants to have an impact on surrounding reality<sup>6</sup>.” The study shows Poles attach great importance to the act of participation in the system of representative democracy. A very high percentage reported participation in the most recent elections to various institutions. Depending on the type of election, 68-82% of people reported participation (see Figure 15). Unfortunately, that data clearly differs from actual voter turnout, which totaled 48.83% in local government elections of October 2018, 45.68% in European Parliament elections in May 2019, 61.74% in the elections to the Sejm and Senate of October 2019, and 64.51% and 68.18% respectively in the first and second rounds of voting of the presidential elections at the turn of June and July 2020<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, there exists a group falsely declaring participation in past elections because they believe social norms dictate such is appropriate<sup>8</sup>.

When focusing specifically on participation in parliamentary elections, it becomes evident that older age groups, particularly those aged 50–64 (83%) and 65–74 (76%), are more likely to report having voted in recent years. In contrast, the youngest respondents, aged 17–24, show the lowest voting frequency. The 31% turnout in this age group can be partially attributed to

<sup>6</sup> See: G. Makowski, Nieformalna edukacja obywatelska, czyli nowa-stara rola biblioteki publicznej [Informal citizen education, i.e. the new-old role of the public library], in: Inspirator Obywatelski. Przewodnik po nieformalnej edukacji obywatelskiej w bibliotekach publicznych [Guide to informal civic education in public libraries], (ed.) F. Pazderski, G. Makowski, Fundacja Instytut Spraw Publicznych / Fundacja Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Informacyjnego, Warsaw 2011, p. 24, <https://www.isp.org.pl/pl/publikacje/inspirator-obywatelski-przewodnik-po-nieformalnej-edukacji-obywatelskiej-w-bibliotekach-publicznych> [accessed on 9.11.2023].

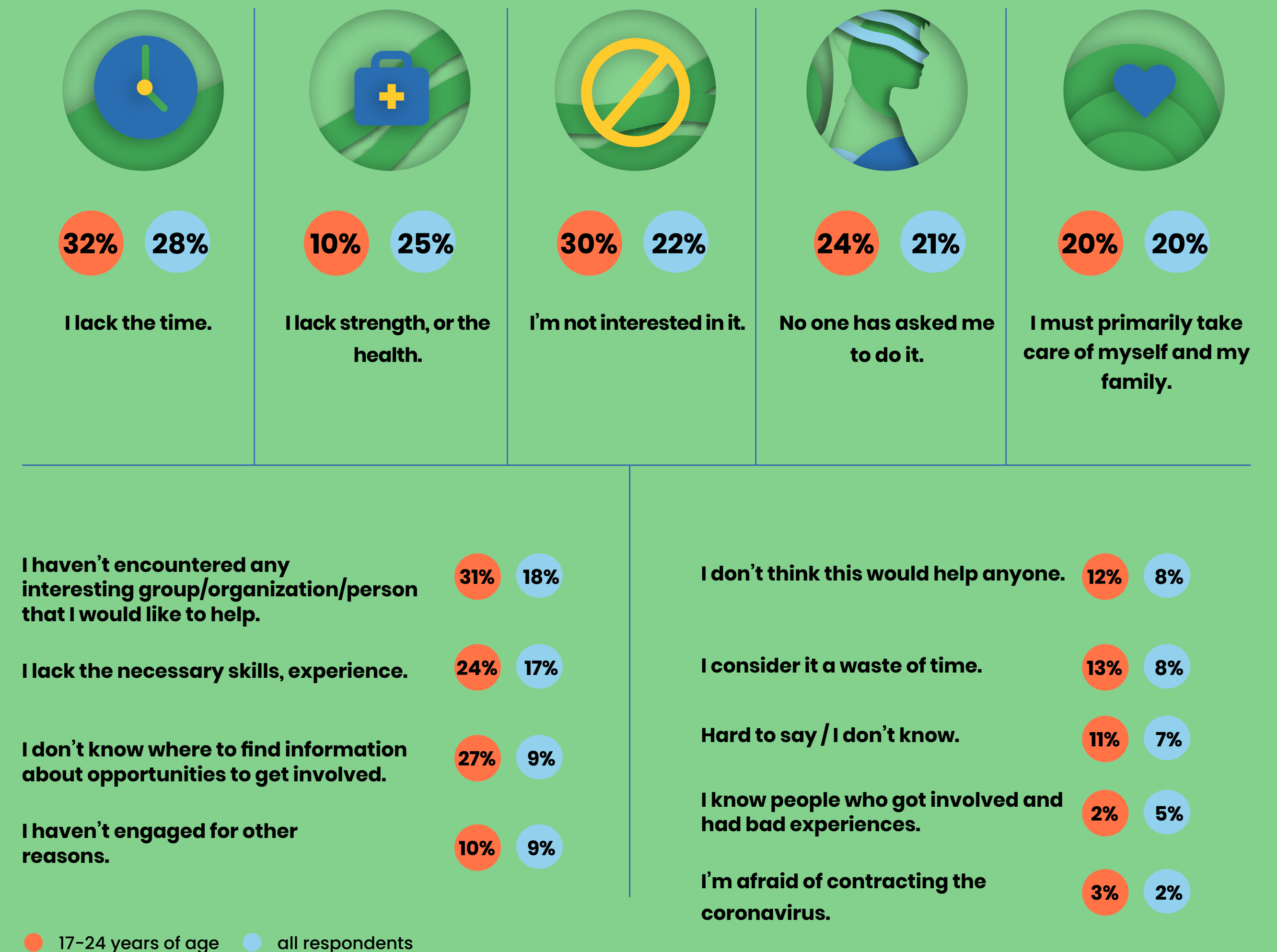
<sup>7</sup> See all data available via <https://www.pkw.gov.pl/wybory-i-referenda/wybory-do-sejmu-i-do-senatu>.

<sup>8</sup> Similar conclusions may be drawn from pre-election research carried out, for example, by CBOS, where a much larger group of people regularly declare their intent to participate in upcoming elections than actually participate; see, e.g. M. Bożewicz, Preferencje partyjne w kwietniu. [Party preference in April.] Research note 2023, No. 105, p. 2, CBOs, Warsaw, [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K\\_105\\_23.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_105_23.PDF) [accessed 9.11.2023].

Figure 14

## Reasons for lack of social engagement among 17–24-year-olds and all respondents

Which of the following reasons contributed to your lack of involvement in civic activities for the benefit of your own town and/or local community?



Multiple-choice question, percentages do not add up to 100; the question was only asked of respondents who declared no engagement in activities on behalf of their town or local community.

the fact that many within this cohort were not yet eligible to vote. Additionally, 50% of this group, as of June 2023, acknowledged they had never voted but planned to do so in the next elections, the highest percentage among all age groups. In the 25–29 age group, 62% reported voting, which is lower than the overall sample average.

The likelihood of participating in parliamentary elections also increases linearly with education levels. Individuals in a less favorable economic situation, particularly those with a net per capita income of up to PLN 1,499, report a lower participation rate compared to the overall average. Conversely, more affluent individuals (earning over PLN 4,000) and those with children are more likely to participate in elections. Election participation is particularly high among parents of college-age children (83%) and those with children not attending any educational institution (78%).

The voivodships of Lower Silesia and Podkarpackie (Subcarpathian) exhibit higher voter turnout compared to the overall sample and other regions. Professionally, practicing professionals (80%), mid-level employees (88%), office workers (79%), small business owners, and sole proprietors (90-82%) report higher voting frequencies. The least frequent voters are the unemployed (50%), agricultural workers (63%), retail and service employees (64%), and manual laborers (65%).

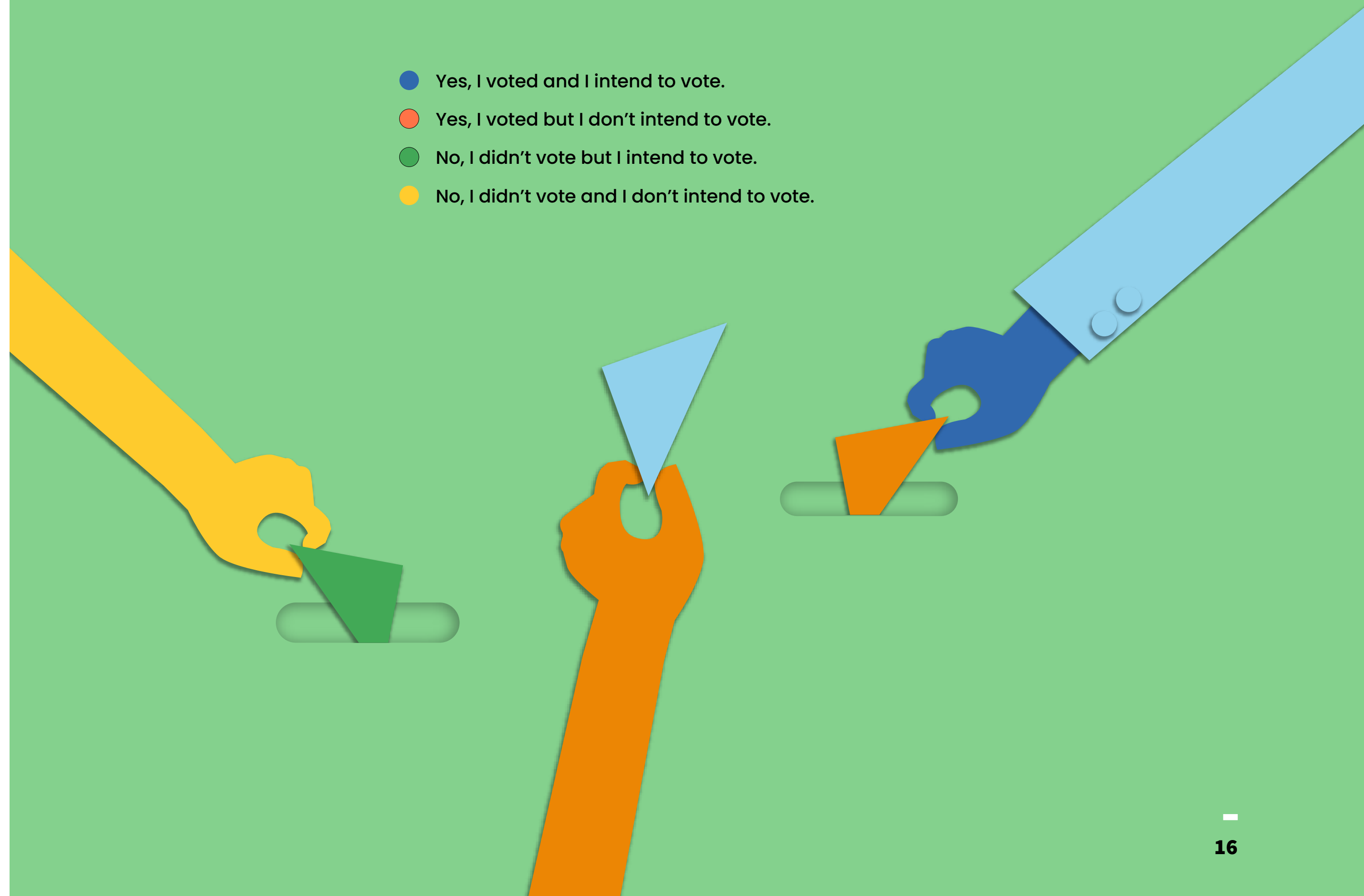
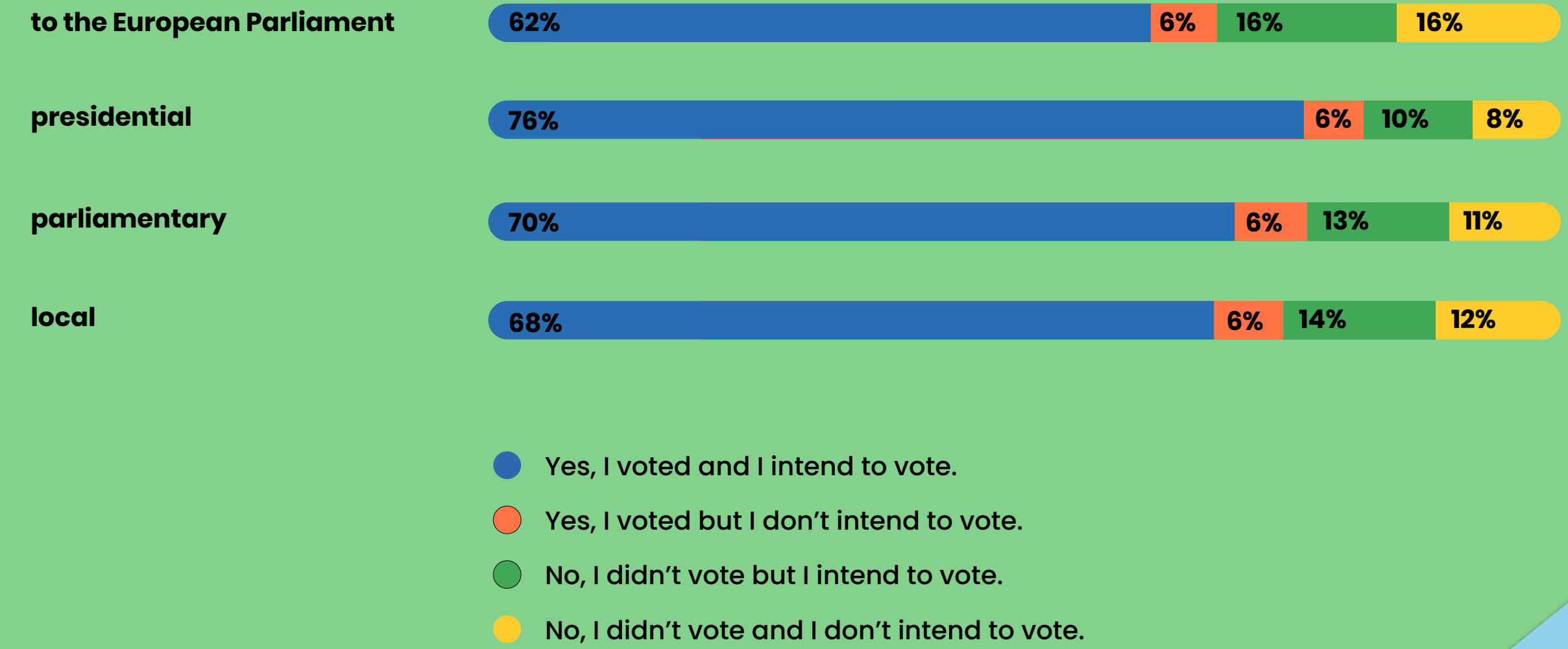
Supporters of the two main parties on the polarized political scene— Law and Justice (81%) and the parties forming the Senate Pact (83%)—show greater election interest. Individuals who participate in religious practices at least once a week also report a similar participation level (80%). However, only 59% of those belonging to a national, ethnic, or religious minority reported participating in parliamentary elections, suggesting potential feelings of underrepresentation or unaddressed needs by political parties.

To identify the strongest predictors of political activity, we conducted a regression analysis with variables such as gender, age, education, self-assessed economic situation, and political views (see Figure 16). The results indicate that higher education has the strongest correlation with political activism ( $\beta = 0.210$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by age ( $\beta = 0.180$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and gender ( $\beta = 0.115$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Economic status has a lesser impact ( $\beta = 0.097$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), while political views are not a significant factor. Overall, individuals with higher education, older age, male gender, and a more favorable view of their economic status are more likely to be politically active.

**Figure 15**

## Declared participation in recent elections to various levels of government

Did you vote in each of these most recent elections?



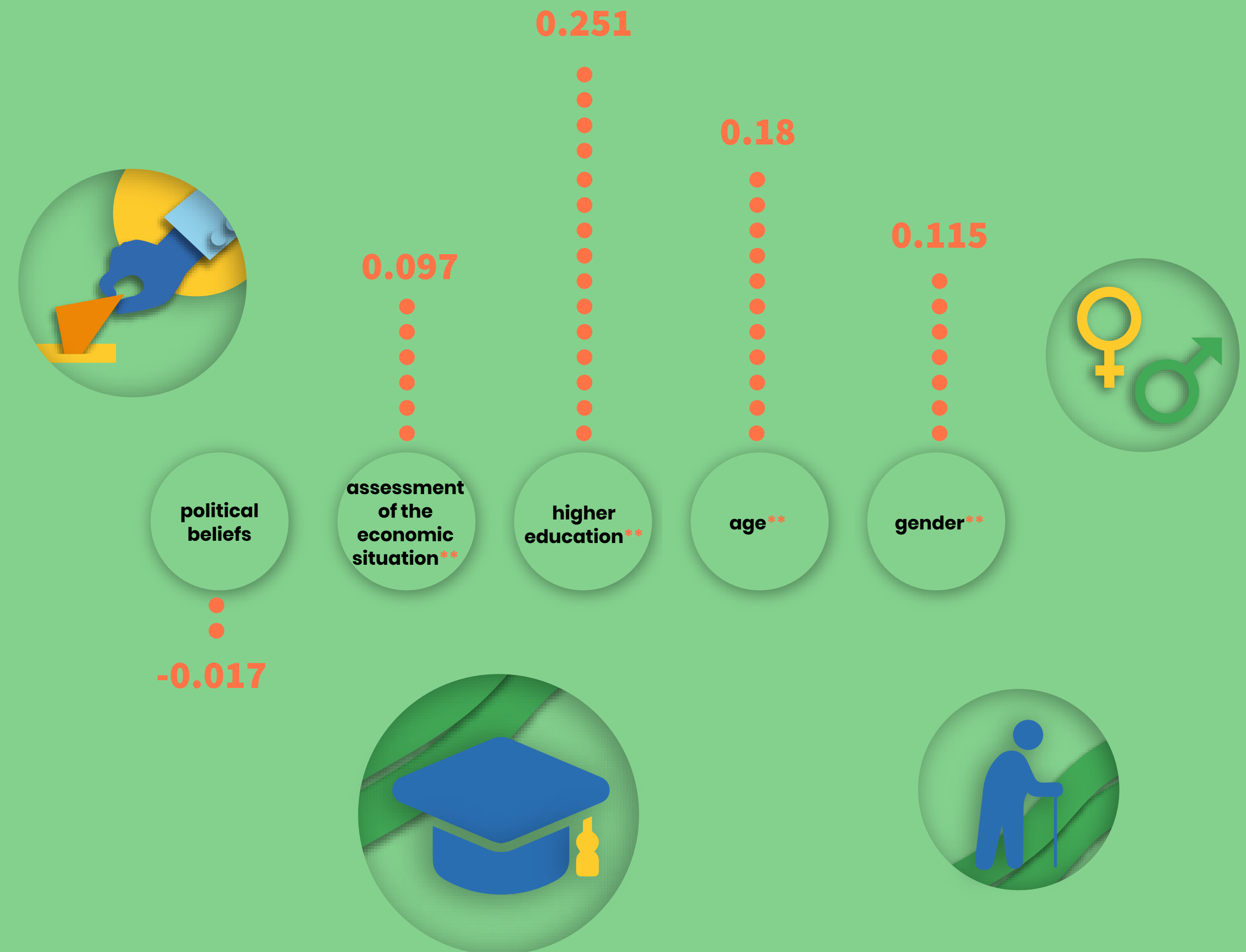
## Main conclusions

- **Online civic engagement has seen a notable rise in popularity over the past few years**, emerging as a quick and convenient method of participating in public life. Among various political activities, online donations are the most common, with two-fifths of Poles participating in such contributions.
- **There has been a significant increase in informal engagement for the benefit of others and local communities in recent years.** This surge is likely attributed to the popularization of community-based activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to assist individuals affected by the war in Ukraine.
- **The age groups of 17–24 and 50–64 are identified as the most socially active.** However, there is a marked decline in engagement among individuals over 65 years of age.
- Factors such as age, higher education, and declared support for one of the parties forming the Senate Pact prior to the October 2023 elections **are all influential in determining higher levels of public activism.**
- **Individuals with higher education, older people, and men**, and to a slightly lesser extent, those with a more positive assessment of their economic situation, **tend to be more politically active.**
- **There is a noticeable contrast between the age groups of 50–64 and 25–29 in terms of awareness of different forms of civic involvement.** The former group generally has a higher awareness of various civic activities, while the latter group of young adults reports the lowest level of familiarity.
- **The youngest respondents' limited awareness of potential sources of information about social involvement, along with their minimal knowledge of groups or organizations they could contribute to,** can be seen as indicative of shortcomings in Polish civic education. There still exists a prevalent belief (or excuse) that specialized knowledge or experience is necessary to engage in work for the benefit of others.

Figure 16

## Factors influencing political activity

Statistical significance: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; only values marked with vivid color and asterisks are statistically significant.



## Attitude toward democracy and trust in institutions

One key factor influencing the readiness to engage in public life is the belief that such activities are impactful and form the foundation of a democratic society. Simultaneously, a lack of interest in such activities may stem from a diminished faith in the concept of democracy itself. In addition to the determinants of activity already discussed, trust in the institution of representative democracy plays a potentially even more vital role. This trust is essential for individuals to feel motivated to engage in various forms of cooperation. It is unrealistic to expect people who are skeptical about the effectiveness and legitimacy of public offices and institutions to show interest in interacting with them. We explore these issues in the next section of the report.

### Evaluation of the functioning of democracy

According to the views of three-fifths of Poles, the most favored system of government in their country is liberal democracy, which is characterized by its consideration for the interests of various minorities. This finding aligns with results from the Central Europe Social Survey (CESS), where Poland recorded the second-highest preference for liberal democracy in the region, surpassed only by Germany, where almost 64% of respondents favored this system<sup>9</sup>. Notably, a significant portion of the population also supports alternative political systems. A quarter of the respondents view a system ruled by experts (though the survey did not specify the selection process for these experts) as ideal. Smaller groups prefer majority democracy, where minority expectations are less regarded (9%), and even fewer favor the rule of a strong leader unconstrained by parliament and elections (7%). Positively, only a small fraction (2%) supports a dictatorship led by the armed forces, as shown in Figure 17.

Support for liberal democracy is notably lower among the youngest respondents, particularly those aged 17–29 years. However, this trend is largely influenced by the 25–29 age group, where only 46% identify this system as the optimal form of governance for Poland. In contrast, 52% of those aged 17–24 support liberal democracy, closely mirroring the 30–39 age group, which shows a 53% preference.

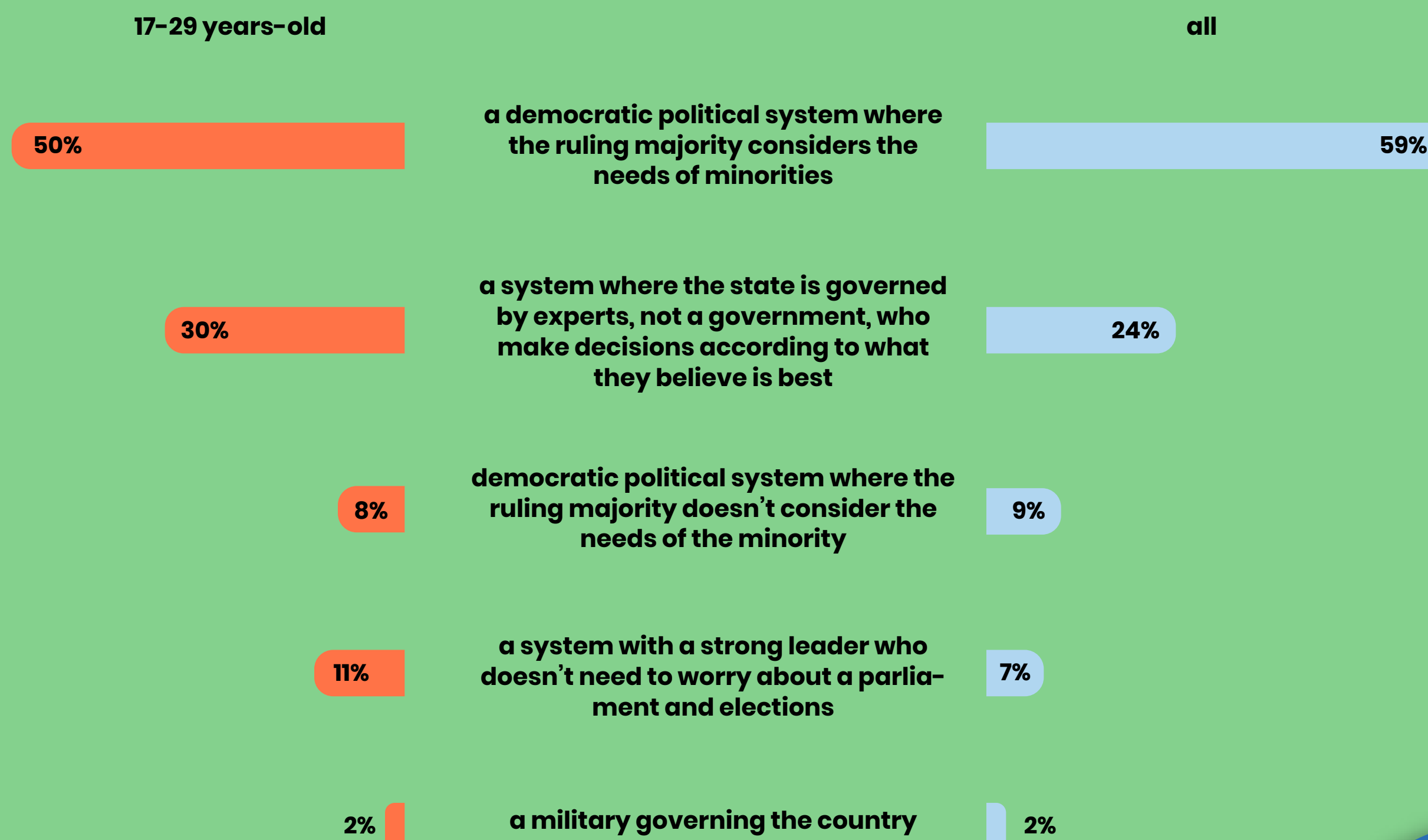
Across all younger respondent groups (ages 17–24, 25–29, and 30–39), there's a smaller

<sup>9</sup> See: E. Ciżewska, B. Walczak, *Religia, nadzieja, demokracja: komunikat wstępny ze Środkowoeuropejskiego Sondażu Społecznego, prezentacja na konferencji Zjazd Socjologiczny PTS [Religion, hope, democracy: introductory message from the Central European Social Survey, presentation at the PTS Sociological Congress conference]*, September 2022.

Figure 17

## Political system preferences (responses in the 17–29 age group and in the entire population; single-choice question)

Which political system would be the best way to govern Poland?



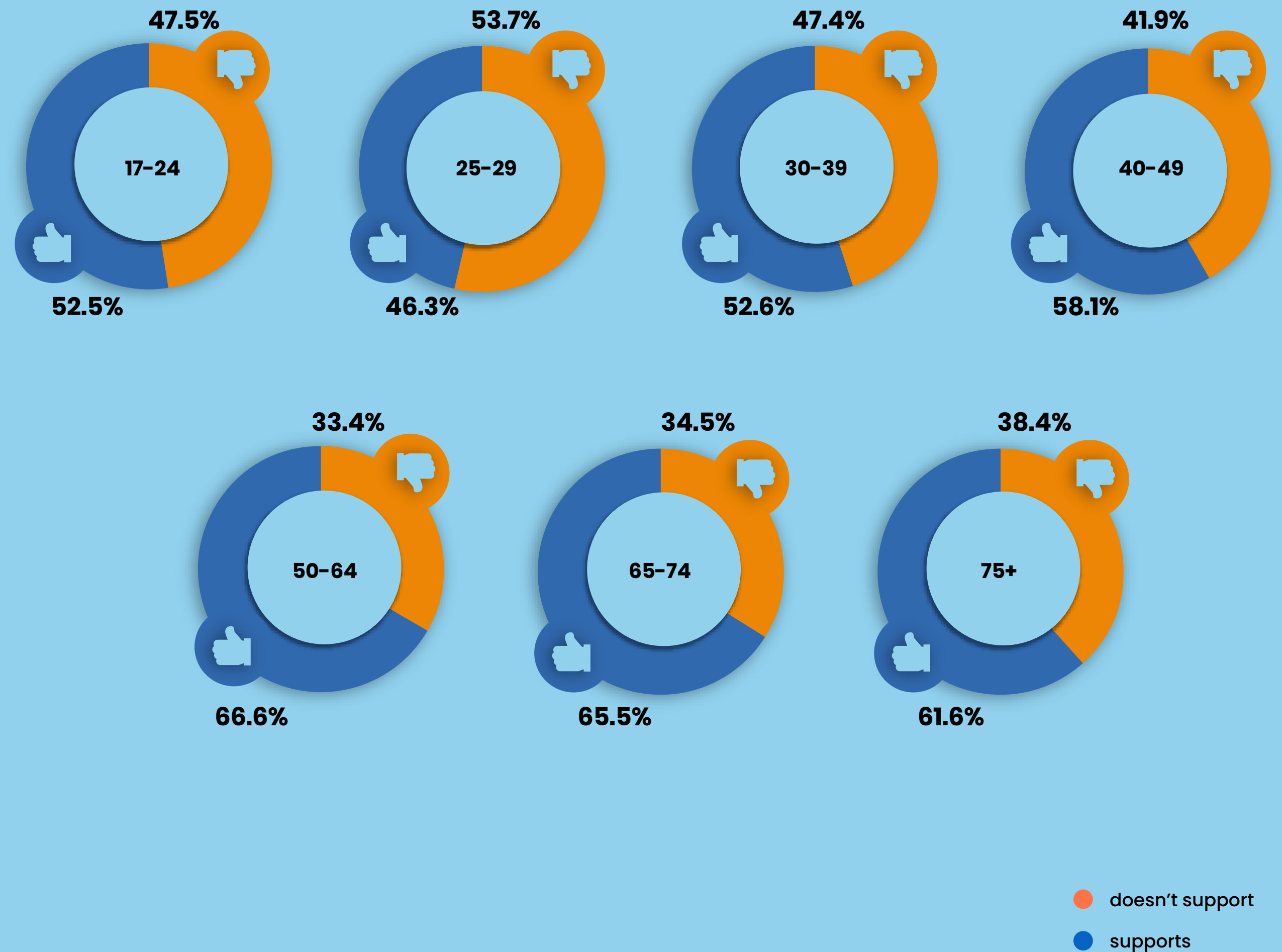
proportion supporting liberal democracy and a larger faction favoring rule by experts, in comparison to the entire sample and older respondents. Notably, within the 17–29 age bracket, there’s increased backing for rule by a strong leader, as illustrated in Figure 17. However, in the 30–39-year-old cohort, support for such authoritarian governance aligns with the overall sample average.

Among people up to the age of 39, the least support for liberal democracy is evident, particularly in the 25–29 age group. Conversely, the 17–24 age bracket exhibits a level of support for democracy similar to the 30–39-year-olds. This pattern does not hold for the support of rule by a strong leader, as this preference exceeds the sample average in the up to 29 age group but not in the 30–39 group.

In older age groups, support for liberal democracy escalates, reaching its zenith in the 50–64 age group at 67%. This trend continues in the older cohorts, with 66% support among 65–74-year-olds and 62% in those aged 75 and above. These results among younger cohorts may signal a less entrenched endorsement of liberal democratic values. Our logistic regression analysis supports this observation, confirming that the likelihood of favoring liberal democracy increases with age (Odds Ratio = 1.016;  $p < 0.001$ ), though the relationship isn’t linear. Specifically, the 25-29 age group shows lower democratic support than younger groups and is more often against democracy than for it. Additionally, the affinity for democracy starts to wane among retirement-aged individuals, as depicted in Figure 18.

Figure 18

**Differences between the percentages of people supporting and not supporting liberal democracy in different age groups (based on logistic regression).**



**Among people up to the age of 39, there is the least recognition for liberal democracy, with those aged 25–29 standing out the most in this regard.**

Upon examining the varied responses of young people to questions about different aspects of democracy as the preferred political system, it becomes clear that their views are not uniform. Starting with the overall sample, nearly 70% of Poles deem democracy the best political system. However, support drops slightly, by about two percentage points, if democracy is contingent upon ensuring economic security.

Furthermore, between 30-40% of Poles are open to sacrificing some rights or freedoms for protection against terrorism or war, or for a higher standard of living. Willingness to limit rights and freedoms under specific conditions is most prevalent among the oldest respondents (aged 65+), and least common among the youngest (aged 17-29), as illustrated in Figure 19. Among the 17-29 age group, there is a notable trend: they are both least likely to view democracy as the best political system and least likely to favor it if it guarantees economic security.

When comparing the current data with the results from a study conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in early July 2020, there is an evident deepening trend of declining support for democracy among young Poles, as shown in Figure 20. However, this trend is not straightforward. Three years ago, a higher percentage of young people supported democracy while also showing a willingness to sacrifice some civil liberties. In 2020, 66% of young people regarded democracy as the best political system, and 59% agreed that it was preferable as long as it ensured economic security. Back then, about two-fifths of young people were open to restricting human rights and civil liberties for a higher standard of living or better protection against terrorism and other threats. Over 50% were willing to accept such trade-offs for health security during the pandemic<sup>10</sup>.

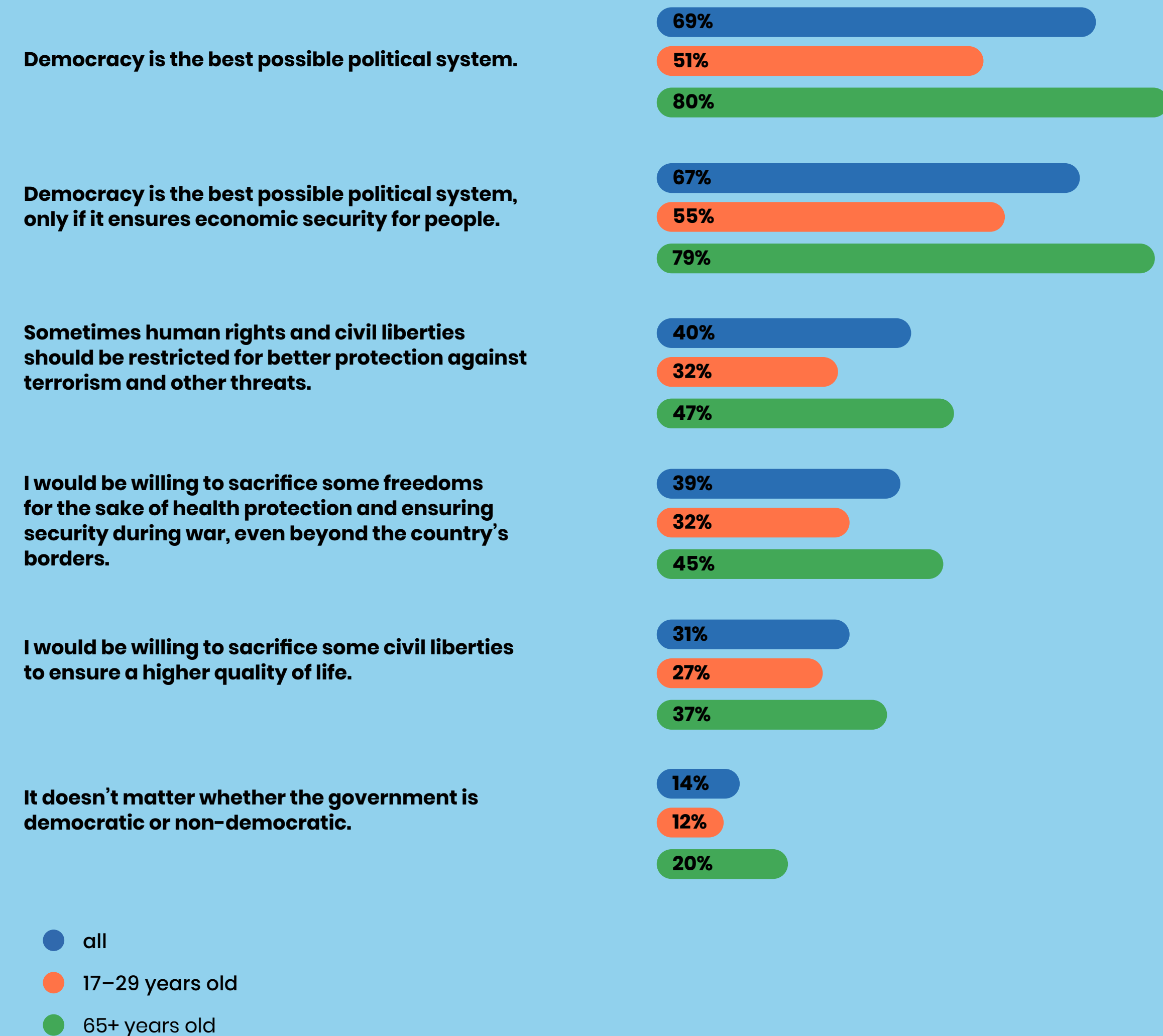
Recent survey differences indicate a decrease in the percentage of young people willing to forego some of their rights and civil liberties in exchange for various benefits. Notably, the current support for waiving rights and freedoms due to the threat of war in a neighboring country is lower than it was for the threat of terrorism three years ago. This shift might suggest a change in young people's views, placing increased importance on civil rights. Additionally, a slightly smaller percentage now claim indifference about whether their government is democratic, which could reinforce the observation of changing attitudes. Despite this, young people (though less frequently than older demographics) still express support for democracy when asked about it in a more general context.

10 F. Pazderski, Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Poland, op.cit.

Figure 19

## Opinions on various aspects of the functioning of democracy among particular age groups

To what extent do you agree with each of the presented general statements on democracy and the political system?



The figure summarizes data from selected questions only, the results do not add up to 100; only the answers "I strongly agree" and "I rather agree" are shown in the total.

# Individuals aged 25–29 not only show more **disillusionment with democracy** compared to the 17–24 age group but also exhibit a lower willingness to forgo civil rights for safety, health, and welfare.

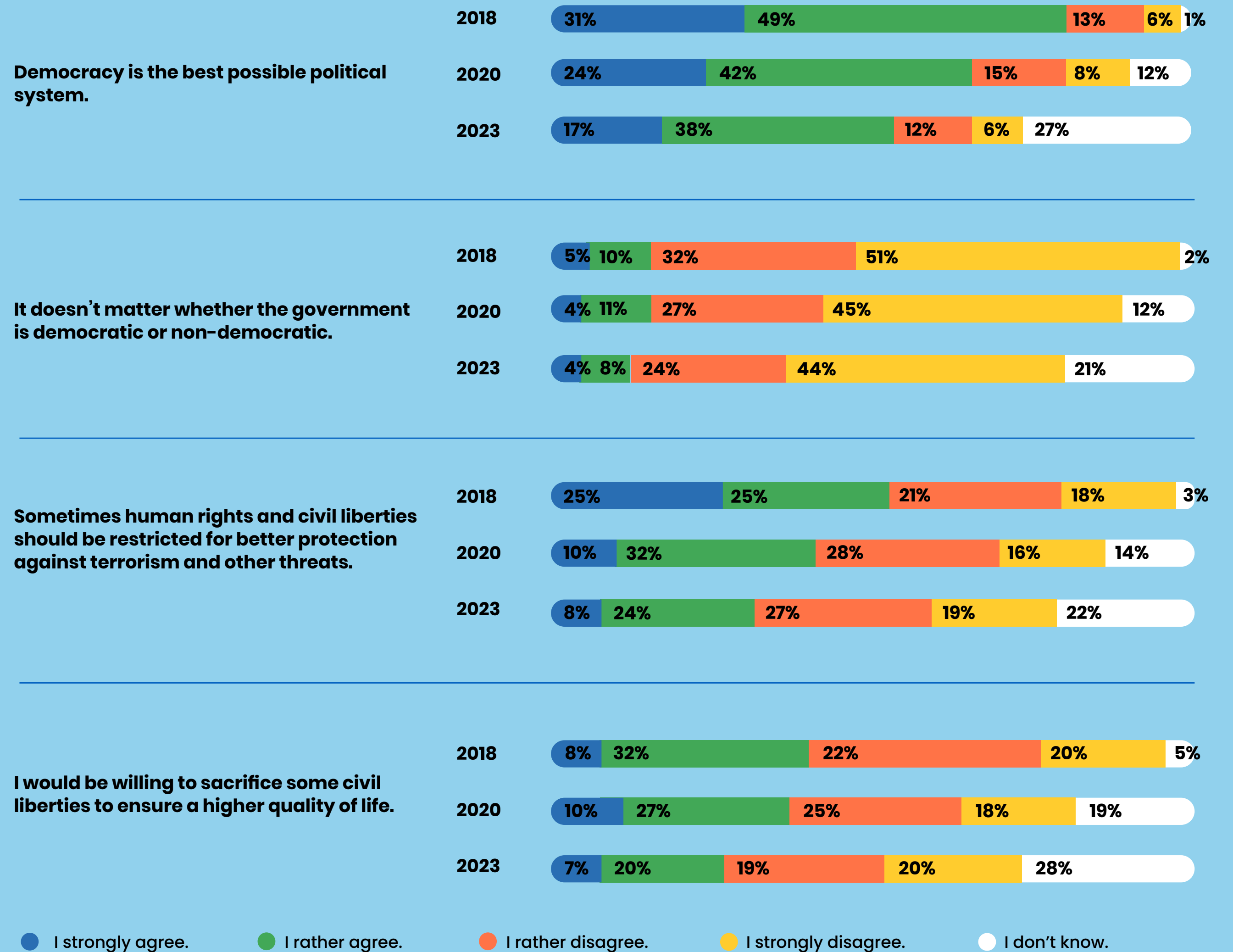
The recent changes in attitudes, particularly among young Poles, become more apparent when comparing the opinions of two distinct young age groups in our latest survey. Individuals aged 25-29 not only show more disillusionment with democracy compared to the 17-24 age group but also exhibit a lower willingness to forgo civil rights for safety, health, and welfare. This indicates a strong conviction in the 25-29 age group about the importance of maintaining rights and freedoms. It's interesting to note that this age group, which now includes individuals who were part of the youngest respondent group in surveys three and five years ago, showed greater attachment to democracy but with a relatively high willingness to give up some rights and freedoms. This shift suggests a significant evolution in attitudes within this primary affected group. However, the permanence of this change among young Poles remains a question.

The opposite is true for the group aged 65+. This cohort contains the largest group supporting democracy in general, but at the same time it has the highest level of consent to limit rights and freedoms in the event of a threat and the opinion that democracy is good as long as it provides economic security. This shows a greater attachment among the elderly to the broad idea of democracy that does not always go hand in hand with recognition for all its

Figure 20

## Changing opinions on various aspects of the functioning of democracy in 2018–2023

The figure contains data from selected questions only; the results do not add up to 100; only responses of “I strongly agree.” and “I rather agree.” are shown in total.



Source: data 2018–2020: ISP/ NDI, Warsaw-Washington, 2020 (N = 750); data 2023: ISP, Warsaw 2023 (N = 705).

key components. Such differences in opinions may be related to a different hierarchy of needs of people belonging to different age cohorts and may depend on their life situation. Similar opinions may also result from the life experience of older people, a significant part of whose lifetimes took place in an undemocratic state and who are now more tolerant of all forms of government, those that are at least slightly better than the system they know from the past. However, it would be worthwhile to verify these hypotheses in an additional qualitative study.

Summarizing this part of the analysis on attitudes toward democracy, there seems to be a decrease in the number of young people who view liberal democracy as the best governance model for Poland over the last three years. However, this hasn't led to increased support for authoritarian government among the youth, which has actually declined. This trend might indicate that the waning support for liberal democracy is more about its functioning in Poland rather than the concept itself. Recent experiences, including protests for women's rights, have likely heightened young people's appreciation for democratic governance and civil liberties. The past few years may have served as an informal civic education period for many young Poles <sup>11</sup>.

While age is a crucial factor, it's not the only one influencing support for liberal democracy. To examine this, it may prove useful to compare individuals who believe democracy is a desirable political system, characterized by the ruling majority considering the needs of minorities, with those who support different political systems. We constructed a logistic regression model in which the indication of the political system was an explained variable while gender, age, population of the place of residence, higher education, assessment of the economic situation and political preferences are deemed predictors (see Figure 21).

Being a voter of the parties forming the Senate Pact in the elections on October 15, 2023, is the strongest influence on the likelihood of indicating liberal democracy. Compared to people declaring support for other parties, it is associated with a more than threefold (exactly 230%) increase in the probability of indicating liberal democracy as the optimal political system (OR = 3.298;  $p < 0.001$ ). For the voters of the United Right, the correlation is clearly weaker, but still very salient: compared to other respondents, the probability of indicating liberal democracy increases almost two and a half times (increase by 146%, OR = 2.464,  $p = 0.003$ ). Among the voters of the Confederation, the increase is 86%, slightly below the significance limit (OR = 1.865;  $p = 0.051$ ). Thus, those who supported one of the listed parties in the last parliamentary elections support liberal democracy regardless of political

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. A. Kordasiewicz, P. Sadura (ed.), *Edukacja obywatelska w działaniu [Civic Education in Action]*, Wydawnictwo Scholar, Warsaw 2014.

**Figure 21**

## Predictors of support for liberal democracy

Statistical significance: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; only values marked with vivid color and asterisks are statistically significant.



preferences (with some doubt as to those voting for the Confederation). However, there are clear differences between them. The strongest support for democracy appears among voters of the parties constituting the Senate Pact, and the weakest among supporters of the United Right, with Confederacy voters slightly below the significance threshold.

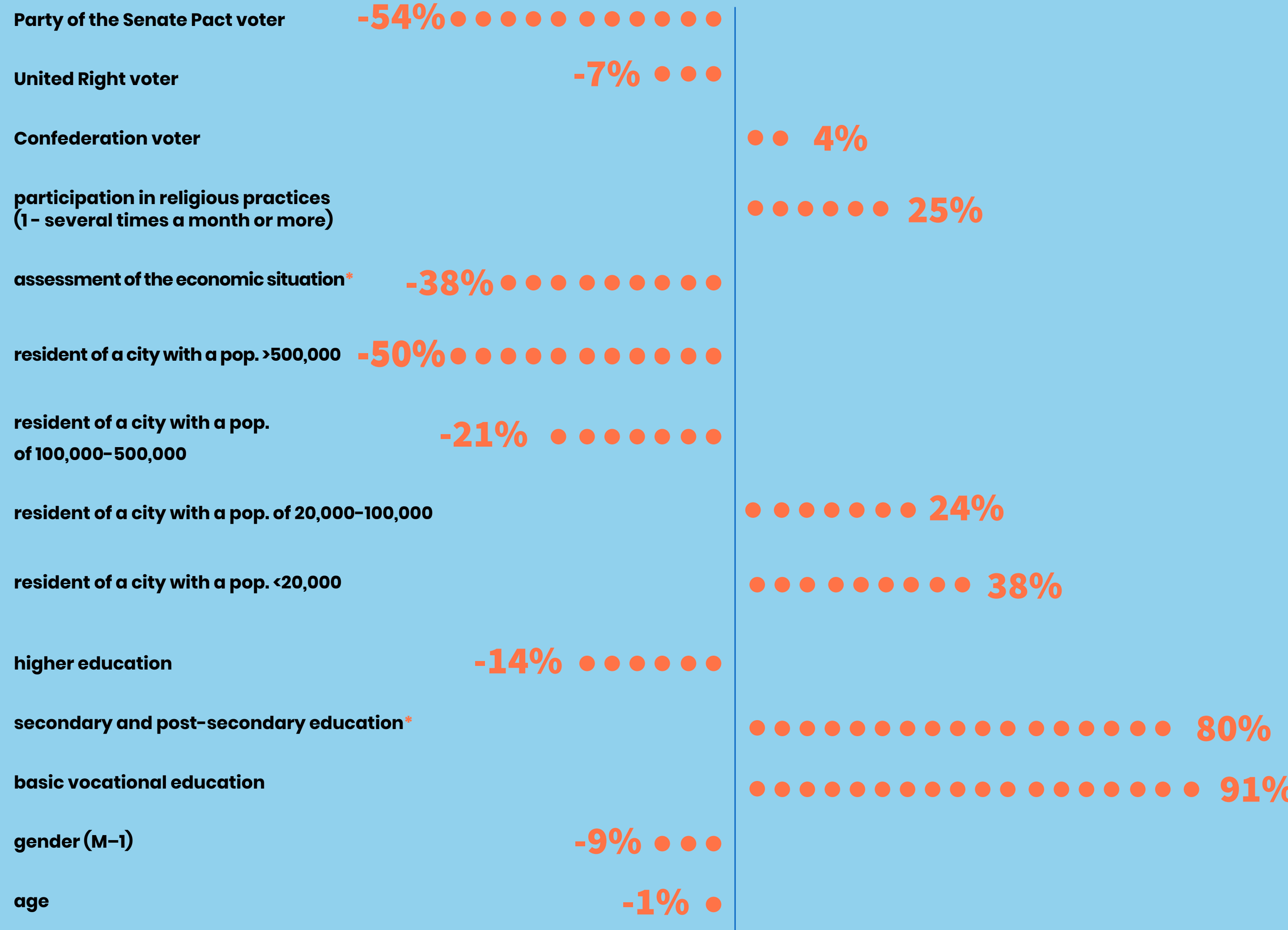
Of the remaining factors, the previously analyzed age and education were significant. In relation to education, an important predictor is basic vocational education, which is associated with a decrease in support for liberal democracy by 32.5% (OR = 0.675, p = 0.01).

Gender is not a significant variable in the entire sample, but if we divide it into age groups, it turns out that among women aged 20–29, there is a significantly larger group of supporters of liberal democracy (54%) than among their male peers (42%). In the remaining age groups, no similar patterns were observed.

**Figure 22**

## Factors affecting the likelihood of support for an authoritarian regime

Statistical significance: \* p ≤ 0.05, \*\* p ≤ 0.001; only values marked with vivid color and asterisks are statistically significant.



## Main conclusions

- **The majority, 70%, of people living in Poland indicate liberal democracy as the best system of government for the country,** though only 68% value democracy so long as it provides economic security. A significant part of the population prefers alternative political systems, where 24% support expert governments, 9% support majority democracy, and 7% favor a strong leader.
- **Support for liberal democracy is lowest among the youngest respondents (17–29 years of age),** among whom there is also a higher percentage of support for a government of experts and a strong leader.
- The level of support for liberal democracy is influenced by factors beyond just age. Electoral preferences play a crucial role; **notably, there is a strong correlation between increased support for choosing democracy as the best system and declared support for the parties forming the Senate Pact** in the October 15, 2023 elections. Additionally, individuals with basic vocational education tend to show lower support for liberal democracy.
- **Incomplete secondary, secondary or post-secondary education increases the likelihood of indicating an authoritarian regime as a desirable way of governing Poland.** This probability decreases by almost two-fifths among people who positively assess their economic situation.
- **The willingness of Poles to compromise some rights or freedoms for protection against terrorism, war, or to achieve a higher standard of living varies,** with 30–40% open to such trade-offs. This readiness to relinquish rights and freedoms under certain conditions is most pronounced among the oldest citizens (aged 65+), while it is least prevalent among the younger population (aged 17–29 years). The perspectives on democracy between these age groups show notable differences. Both the 17–29 and the 65+ age groups recognize democracy as the best political system. However, the younger group is much less inclined to agree to limitations on their rights and civil liberties, a stance more readily accepted by the older age group. Additionally, individuals aged 65+ are most likely to perceive democracy favorably, provided it ensures economic security.
- **Since 2018, support for democracy among Poles aged up to 29 has generally decreased, because the group of young people who consider liberal democracy to be the best method of governing Poland has decreased.** However, this fails to translate into increased support for authoritarian forms of government, which has slightly decreased. This may mean that the decline in support for liberal democracy is actually related to people's assessment of its functioning in the country.
- **The experience of recent years, including protests in defense of women's rights, has apparently made young people aware of the value of democratic principles and the availment of civil rights.** The number of young people who agree to abrogate human rights and civil liberties under various conditions, including in exchange for a higher standard of living, has decreased significantly. Over the past three years, the percentage of people aged up to 29 claiming that democracy is good so long as it provides economic security has also decreased. However, the durability of such a change in attitudes is open to question.
- **The attitudes of young adults aged 25–29 towards liberal democracy are particularly noteworthy. In this age group, a higher percentage are opposed to liberal democracy than those who support it,** which is a contrast to other age cohorts where supporters of democracy are in the majority. Furthermore, this group exhibits the lowest level of support for liberal democracy as the best form of governance for Poland. Interestingly, when compared to the 17–24 age group, the 25–29-year-olds are less willing to give up their civil rights and freedoms in various circumstances.



## Trust in institutions

Proper strength of the ties that bind society constitute a prerequisite for the proper functioning of a democratic state<sup>12</sup>. Social trust plays a crucial role in reinforcing these connections, making it a significant indicator of the robustness of civil society. It is difficult to imagine that “the relationship between the individual and the state will be correct if the level of trust of people in each other and in public institutions is low<sup>13</sup>.” A higher level of trust in government actions, as indicated by the expressed trust in the institution, not only contributes to the stability of the democratic system but also fosters a greater willingness among citizens to participate actively within it. Trust is also an important determinant of how citizens perceive the quality of institutions in a democratic state and the legitimacy of this system in society.

For years, Poland has recorded lower rates of trust in the government and state institutions than in Europe, especially compared to Western Europe<sup>14</sup>. Such a low level of trust in institutions is characteristic of post-communist states, most of which evidence lower trust levels than Poland. For over 30 years since the political transformation, these indicators have not changed significantly in Poland, they still oscillate around levels found 10–15 years ago.

Starting from these premises, our study focused on gauging the extent to which Poles trust various institutions functioning in the public sphere, particularly in<sup>15</sup> a deeply polarized society where distrust tends to exacerbate polarization, and within the context of an intense political conflict. To avoid compelling respondents to express artificial opinions on institutions they might not be familiar with, we provided an option for them to acknowledge their lack of awareness about these entities. Figure 23 presents their responses.

12 E. Durkheim, *On Education and Society*, (ed.) J. Karabel, A. Halsey, Routledge, London 1977.

13 G. Makowski, *Nieformalna edukacja obywatelska, czyli nowa-stara rola biblioteki publicznej [Informal citizen education, i.e. the new-old role of the public library]*, in: *Inspirator Obywatelski. Przewodnik po nieformalnej edukacji obywatelskiej w bibliotekach publicznych [Guide to informal civic education in public libraries]*, (ed.) G. Makowski, F. Pazderski, Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warsaw 2011, p. 24, [www.isp.org.pl/publikacje\\_1,461.html](http://www.isp.org.pl/publikacje_1,461.html) [accessed on 9.11.2023].

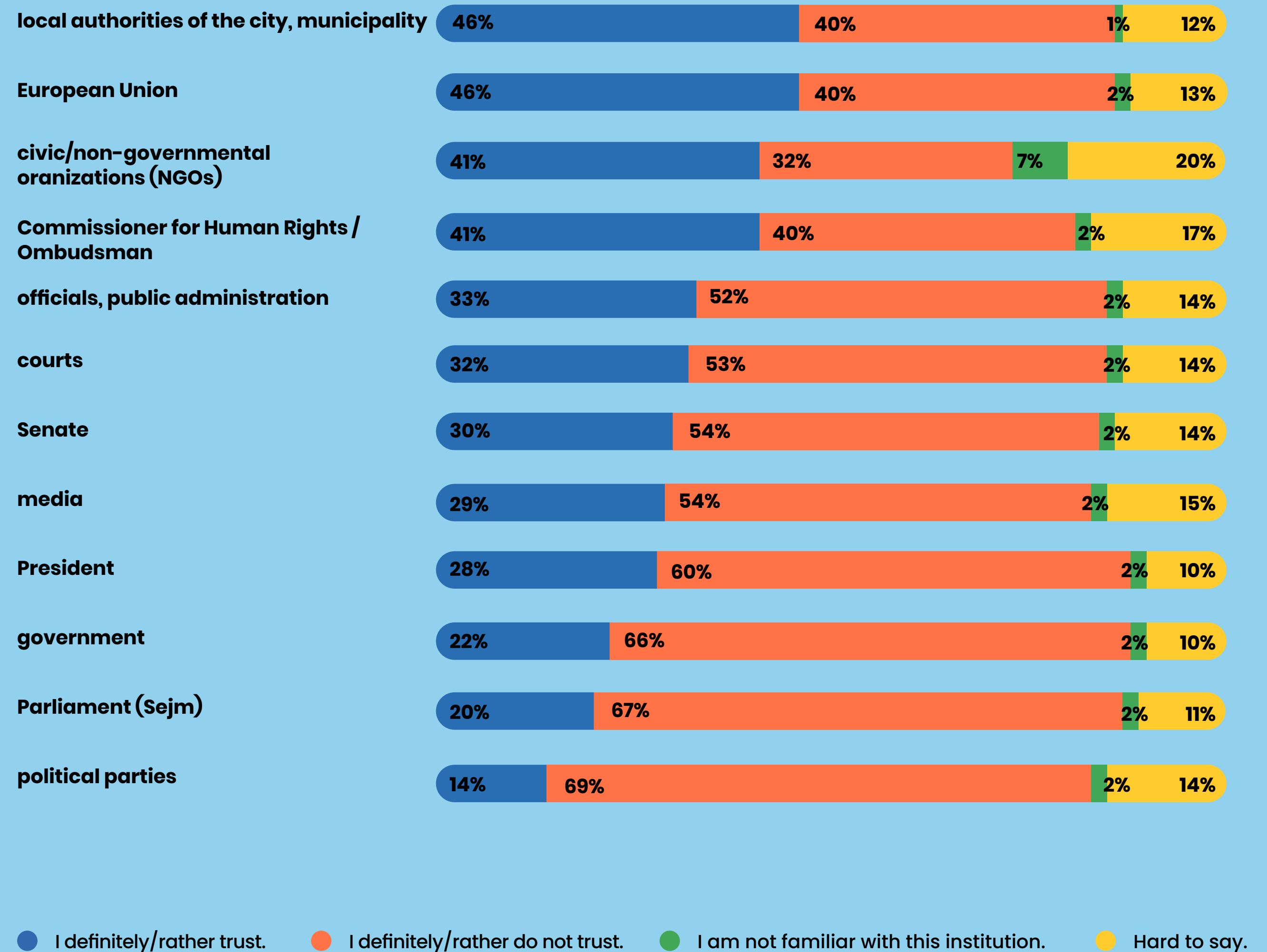
14 See: Trust in government, OECD Data 2023, <https://data.oecd.org/gga/trust-in-government.htm> [accessed 9.11.2023]; Trust in public institutions, Government at a Glance 2021, OECD iLibrary, [oecd-ilibrary.org](http://oecd-ilibrary.org) [accessed 9.11.2023].

15 See: 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer. Navigating a Polarized World, pp. 15-24, Edelman Trust Institute, <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer> [accessed 9.11.2023].

Figure 23

## Trust in institutions in public space in Poland (total respondents)

In general, do you or do you not have confidence in these institutions?



## Low trust in political parties is not uniform across those expressing support for various options.

Local and European Union authorities are the most trusted institutions as confirmed by the results of other research carried out in Poland and abroad<sup>16</sup>. Unsurprisingly, political parties draw the lowest confidence and usually land at the bottom of the rankings. The third ranking result, showing relatively high trust in civic organizations, suggests that citizens recognize and value the role these organizations play. Often complementing public institutions' activities, they have earned considerable trust for their contributions. Notably, a survey by the Klon/Jawor Association in early 2023 found this indicator at an even higher level, where 63% of Poles declared trust in non-governmental organizations, and 62% believed that such were needed in Poland. However, most of the entities included in the Klon/Jawor study obtained higher confidence indicators<sup>17</sup>. Nonetheless, there is a blemish on the generally positive image of social organizations. Society's relatively high rate of unawareness of organizations in compared to other institutions may be worrying.

The political affiliations of respondents significantly influence their level of trust, particularly in their attitudes towards the European Union. Among those who support Law and Justice (PiS), 57% express a lack of trust in the EU, while only 30% indicate trust. This skepticism is

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g.: S. Sas, Ranking of most trusted institutions in Poland in 2022, Statista 20.06.2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1316078/poland-ranking-of-most-trusted-institutions/> [accessed on 10.11.2023]; Research communication. Zaufanie społeczne 2022, nr 37, CBOS,

<sup>17</sup> B. Charycka, J. Bednarek, M. Gumkowska, Ufamy, ale... Polki i Polacy o organizacjach pozarządowych. [We trust, but... Poles about NGOs.] Research report 2023, Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, Warsaw 2023, pp. 39 and 55, <https://fakty.ngo.pl/raporty/ufamy-ale-polki-i-polacy-o-organizacjach-pozarządowych-raport-z-badan-2023> [accessed on 10.11.2023].



even more pronounced among Confederation supporters, with 77% distrusting the EU and a mere 16% expressing trust. In contrast, voters of the Senate Pact coalition predominantly show confidence in the bloc, with 73% trusting the EU and only a fifth expressing distrust. Regarding local authorities, there is a more balanced distribution of trust across different party supporters. However, it is noteworthy that individuals who support PiS tend to trust local authorities the most.

Confidence levels in political parties vary significantly among supporters of different political options. Voters of Law and Justice (PiS) display the least critical stance towards political parties, though a majority still express distrust, with 47% indicating a lack of trust. On the other hand, voters of the Senate Pact and the Confederation are among the most critical of political parties. A substantial 78% of Senate Pact voters and 80% of Confederation voters indicate that they do not trust political parties.

It is interesting to observe that individuals aged 50 and above consistently exhibit greater trust in institutions (excluding social organizations) compared to the younger demographic of 17–24-year-olds. This could be attributed to the older group's direct past experiences with Poland's non-democratic system, potentially leading them to place more trust in institutions that emerge from democratic processes. However, such uniformity in trust levels is not evident across different educational levels. Those with higher education tend to have more trust in institutions like the European Union, social organizations, and the Senate. Conversely, individuals with primary education express greater confidence in institutions such as the Presidency, courts, media, and the Sejm.

**Those aged 50+ consistently exhibit greater trust in institutions (except for social organizations) than individuals aged 17–24.**

## Main conclusions

- **Poles tend to trust local authorities and the European Union** the most. Social organizations that the respondents know the least follow immediately behind the foregoing in terms of trust. This indicates the need for further activities aimed at building awareness of organizations and recognition of their societal role.
- Political parties and institutions of representative democracy with the highest competences – **the Sejm and the government - garner the lowest trust levels among the public institutions** included in the question.
- **On average, people over 50 show greater trust in individual institutions** than the youngest group aged 17–24.

# Summary



This report is based on a study conducted following nearly eight years of right-wing populist governance in Poland. Throughout this period, there has been an erosion in the country's constitutional order, primarily due to the dismantling of numerous rule of law checks and balances. This dismantling has led to frequent disputes between the Polish government and European institutions. Additionally, various government actions during this time have regularly sparked mass protests among the Polish population, which, in some instances, have been met with excessively harsh responses from security services. All said circumstances caused a clear decline in the country's ranking among<sup>18</sup> democratic indices and were part of the democracy backsliding process observed in international comparative analyzes since the mid-2010s.<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, Poland's situation has been significantly impacted by two major global events: the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The latter event led to a substantial influx of war refugees into Poland. Both these occurrences have disrupted or severed international supply routes and economic connections. In response to Russia's aggression, the international community implemented successive economic sanctions against Russia, affecting numerous global economies, including Poland's. Poland's economy, being at least partially reliant on Russian raw materials, felt the repercussions, leading to an energy crisis and surges in prices. These developments have also been contributing factors to inflation and an economic slowdown within Poland.

Macroeconomic indicators show the Polish government has not sufficiently improved

18 See: e.g. Gorokhovskaia Y., Shahbaz A., Slipowitz A., Freedom in the World 2023. Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy, Freedom House 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years> [accessed 17.11.2023]; Democracy Index 2022. Frontline democracy and the battle for Ukraine, The Economist Intelligence Unit Ltd. 2023, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/> [accessed 17.11.2023]; Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization, University of Gothenburg 2023, V-Dem, <https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/> [accessed 17.11.2023]; RSF, World Press Freedom Index 2023, Reporters sans frontières (RSF), <https://rsf.org/en/index> [accessed 17.11.2023].

19 See: The global state of democracy in 2023. The New Checks and Balances, International IDEA 2.11.2023, Strömsborg, <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-democracy-2023-new-checks-and-balances> [accessed 17.11.2023]; Bermeo N., On democratic backsliding, „Journal of Democracy” 2016 27(1), p. 5; Daly T.M., Democratic Decay: Conceptualising an Emerging Research Field, „Hague Journal on the Rule of Law” 2019, No. 11, pp. 9–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-019-00086-2> [accessed 17.11.2023].

the situation, though a reliable assessment of its actions is not possible due to opaque information on the condition of public finances. The government hid some spending in various special-purpose funds and other instruments that formally remain outside the state budget. The fiscal notification submitted by the Polish government to the European Commission, which was published by Eurostat at the end of October 2023, reveals that Poland's public finance sector faced a deficit of 5.6% in 2023, amounting to over PLN 192 billion. This deficit not only exceeds the government's official projection for the year by PLN 100 billion but also ranks as the second highest deficit in the EU, following Slovakia.<sup>20</sup>

**The daily experiences of Poles, influenced by significant events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, along with their heightened interest in these issues through traditional and online media, likely contributed to the extremely low social sentiment observed in the June 2023 study.** A vast majority, over 70%, of Poles expressed dissatisfaction with both the political and economic situations in the country. A similarly large group also indicated dissatisfaction with the activities of the Law and Justice (PiS) government. Notably, the only demographic demonstrating predominantly positive assessments across all three dimensions (political, economic, and government performance) are the voters supporting Law and Justice, the ruling party until autumn 2023. This reflects the political polarization within Polish society.

**The prevalent negative emotions among most Polish citizens likely played a role in their high mobilization during the election on October 15, 2023. This voter turnout can be interpreted as an expression of disapproval by a significant portion of the populace regarding the country's condition.** Further analysis of sentiments across specific social groups supports such conclusions. **People aged 17–29, one of the more dissatisfied groups, have seen their dissatisfaction with the country's political situation increase by 30 percentage points over the past five years (from 41% in 2018). Additionally, women have shown to be less satisfied than men** with both the political situation (a difference of five percentage points) and the economic situation (a difference of eight percentage points). The voter turnout in October 2023 saw a significant increase compared to the 2019 elections, particularly among these two groups<sup>21</sup>.

20 See e.g. Szymański D., Rząd wysłał do Brukseli pismo, w którym musiał odkryć karty. „Uderzające” [The government sent a letter to Brussels in which it had to reveal its hand. “Powerful”], Money.pl 27.10.2023, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/rzad-wyslal-do-brukseli-pismo-w-ktorym-musial-odkryc-karty-uderzajace-6956475690289696a.html> [accessed on 17.11. 2023]; Kolany K., Budżetowe dziury i bzdury. Co „ukrywa” rząd, a co opozycja? Każdy ma coś za uszami [Budget holes and nonsense. What are the government and opposition „hiding”? Everyone is a little guilty], Bankier.pl 24.10.2023, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Budzetowe-dziury-i-bzdury-Co-ukrywa-rzad-a-co-opozycja-8633109.html> [accessed 17.11. 2023].

21 See: Ipsos poll, late poll, TVN24 18.10.2023, <https://tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wyniki-sondazowe> [accessed 17.11.2023].

**The widespread dissatisfaction with the country's situation might have impacted the perception of liberal democracy as the suitable political system for governing Poland.**

While the majority of the surveyed sample holds a positive view of this system, an equally substantial portion believes that democracy is only beneficial as long as it guarantees economic security.

Moreover, varying opinions about democracy emerge across different age groups. **Among the youngest respondents (17–29 years), support for liberal democracy is the lowest.**

This group also shows a higher inclination towards a government led by experts or a strong leader. In contrast, **the oldest cohort (65+) predominantly views democracy as the best political system.** However, they are more likely than the younger generation to believe that democracy's merit lies in its ability to ensure economic security.

Regarding the willingness to sacrifice certain rights or freedoms for protection against terrorism, war, or in pursuit of a higher standard of living, opinions diverge significantly between age groups. The oldest group (65+) is most agreeable to relinquishing civil liberties under these conditions. On the other hand, young people aged 17–29 are the least inclined to make such concessions.

The group most discouraged toward the functioning of liberal democracy in Poland are people aged 25–29. Young adults also exhibit a lower willingness than those aged 17–24 to forgo their civil rights in exchange for the protection of life or health, safety and welfare. Therefore, **the group aged between 25 and 29 exhibits the strongest conviction about the need to exercise these rights and freedoms.** Interestingly, this indicates a change of opinion in the group covered by previous research carried out by ISPs and NDI in 2018 and 2020. Three and five years ago, the youngest respondents exhibited a greater attachment to democracy though combined with a relatively high willingness to give up their freedoms and rights. Apparently, some of the people presenting such attitudes who were then aged 17–24 changed their minds over time.

The study's findings offer some insightful conclusions about both young and older age groups. Since 2018, there has been a general decline in support for democracy among young Poles (up to 29 years of age). Interestingly, **this decrease in support for liberal democracy has not been accompanied by an increase in favor of authoritarian governments, which has also seen a decline.** This trend suggests that the waning support for liberal democracy among young people might be more about their assessment of its implementation in Poland, rather than an overall aversion to the system itself.

**Since 2018, the support of Poles up to 29 years of age for democracy has generally decreased, but this has not translated into an increase in support for authoritarian forms of governance, which has also weakened.**

Furthermore, recent experiences, such as participation in or support for demonstrations defending women's rights, may have heightened the younger generation's appreciation of democratic principles and the importance of civil rights. Notably, **the willingness of young people to relinquish human rights and civil liberties under various circumstances, including for a higher standard of living, has significantly diminished.** Over the past three years, there has been a decline in the proportion of people under 29 who believe democracy is beneficial only if it ensures economic security.

The 25–29 age group, which first voted in the 2015 elections, presents a particularly interesting case. This cohort shows a relatively high level of disillusionment with liberal democracy and greater support for authoritarian regimes. The cohort of 25–29 year-olds not only shows significant disillusionment with liberal democracy but also has the smallest proportion of individuals willing to forgo civil rights and freedoms for enhanced protection against threats or during wartime. On the other hand, the younger group of 17–24 year-olds, including those voting for the first time in October 2023, demonstrate a stronger commitment to democracy compared to the slightly older young adults. However, a marginally higher portion of this younger group is prepared to sacrifice some civil liberties, though this proportion is still smaller than that observed in the overall respondent pool.

Given these dynamics, it would be valuable to continue monitoring how the attitudes and civic behaviors of the youngest Poles evolve. Their perspectives could either trend towards a stronger attachment to democratic principles or lean towards opposing values. The future political landscape and decisions made by authorities will play a critical role in shaping this group's sentiments towards democracy and their engagement with the rights it offers.

**The group aged 65 and older prioritizes various aspects of security, including economic and physical safety, over the exercise of civil rights in their hierarchy of needs.** This demographic is more inclined to forgo their rights and freedoms in return for security assurances. Concurrently, these individuals exhibit a stronger attachment to the concept of liberal democracy, a sentiment likely shaped by their life experiences. Observing how the attitudes between the youngest and oldest Poles evolve over time will be intriguing. Future shifts in opinions among the oldest societal group could significantly influence the trajectory of Poland's democracy, especially given this group's increasing proportion in the population due to progressive aging.

According to data from the Central Statistical Office, in 2007, there were approximately 6,400,000 voters aged 20–29 and 6,900,000 voters over 60 years old. However, by 2023, these numbers have shifted to about 3,900,000 voters in the 20–29 age group and 9,800,000 voters over 60. **This demographic change highlights the growing importance of the older cohort's views in shaping the future of Poland's democracy.** Therefore, politicians in future elections may have an increasing tendency to consider older voters' expectations.

A negative assessment of the country's situation and a critical stance towards the functioning of institutions might also impact public activity. Such perspectives could demotivate many from engaging, while others might simply lack the time for actions that benefit others. For some, negative sentiments may act as a catalyst, motivating them to partake in activities that serve as a form of protest. Additionally, the perceived mismanagement and poor performance of state institutions could prompt individuals to bypass these institutions and directly engage in problem-solving or assisting those in need. The study's findings reflect such trends among Poles.

**The most prevalent activities undertaken by Poles are those that provide direct assistance to those in need, be it through financial donations, informal support for people in distress, or initiatives for their local community.** This trend has been particularly evident in recent years, often as a response to insufficient state action in addressing emerging challenges, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and the influx of refugees from Ukraine. Slightly less common is public activity that can be considered a form of protest against the situation in Poland or government decisions, like signing petitions



or participating in demonstrations. **Engagement in activities involving contact with representative democracy bodies is least likely**, partly due to the greater personal time investment required compared to online activities. This might also explain the relatively low involvement in formal volunteering.

**The reluctance to interact with public institutions or political representatives is influenced by the low level of trust Poles declare**, with political parties ranking at the very bottom of the trust scale for public institutions included in the questionnaire.

The study highlights notable differences in the levels of engagement among various age groups. The youngest respondents, aged 17–24, emerge as the most socially active group. They frequently participate in a variety of activities, particularly online, a trend matched only by individuals aged 50–64. In contrast, the young adult group (25–29 years old) comprises the largest segment that lacks awareness of different forms of civic engagement. Given that many in this group have only recently completed their education, this lack of awareness may indicate deficiencies in the quality of civic education in Poland.

Additionally, **the youngest respondents (17–24 years old) show a lack of skills in seeking information about social engagement opportunities and have the least knowledge about organizations worth supporting**. This trend could be seen as further evidence of shortcomings in the educational system. There is also a prevalent misconception or excuse among this age group that specialized knowledge or experience is necessary for social activism, which may hinder their participation in such activities.

**The apparent lack of awareness among various age groups about civic engagement opportunities opens up significant scope for educational and informational initiatives**. These initiatives could be undertaken by civic organizations and public institutions to promote involvement. Civic organizations, in particular, can leverage these activities to enhance public awareness of their existence and role. There is considerable work to be done in this area, as indicated by the survey responses showing that a large percentage of respondents are least familiar with civic organizations compared to other public institutions listed in the questionnaire.

**Addressing this lack of familiarity could enable organizations to further build societal trust. Currently, trust in civic organizations is already at a relatively high level, almost on par with trust in local governments and the European Union. Improving awareness and understanding of these organizations opens potential to strengthen trust even more.**

- The study under consideration suggests multiple strategies that could aid in improving the functioning of liberal democracy in Poland:
- Enhancing support for democracy could be achieved if **politicians demonstrate that operating within this system can yield tangible outcomes**. Specifically, implementing public policies that address societal needs, formulated through consultations with various communities, and ensuring economic security are crucial. In the second report from this study, we outline the key areas where Poles predominantly expect solutions from their authorities.
- **Political initiatives that meet social expectations will serve to build trust in public institutions and politicians themselves**. Increasing transparency of public life and participatory decision-making mechanisms constitute additional tools that may be further conducive to reinforcing such trust.
- **To function properly, democracy needs democrats**. Introducing a new and effective system of civic education in all its dimensions – formal, non-formal and informal learning – will help change the social approach to **the political system specified in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and increase civic engagement levels**.
- **Social organizations play a vital role in boosting civic activism and healing social divisions**. Hence, it's essential for these organizations to engage with various groups within the Polish population in a manner that fosters the building of connections among their members. **To facilitate this, these organizations should have access to public aid**. This aid should be allocated based on objective criteria related to the merits of the projects they support, and it should be independent of the ideological leanings of the individual organizations.
- **For a democratic society to effectively address its challenges, there must be an environment conducive to open discussions**. A foundational requirement for such discussions is a basic, commonly understood knowledge about the primary causes of various societal problems. This understanding should transcend political polarization. **Achieving this necessitates a well-organized media landscape, especially a public broadcasting system that operates independently of political influence and caters to the broader interests of society**. Fulfilling the true mission of public media can aid in rebuilding social trust, which, as highlighted in the second report of our study, is currently at a low level. The same report also details the sources of information about politics that Poles currently rely on.

# Methodology



## Sample

A statistically representative sample of the Polish population beginning at 17 years of age, accounting for the distribution of gender, age and place and province (voivodeship) of residence.



## Execution date

- 7-29 June 2023
- Contractor: Ipsos



## Sample size

- N = 4088 (unless otherwise indicated in the figure)
- Age: 17+ years old
- Statistical error – +/-1.5% (with a confidence level of 0.95)



## Research method

- Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI), n = 3068 (respondents up to 64 years of age), quota sample
- Computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI), n = 1020 (respondents 65+), random-quota sample

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