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Post-communist transformation in progress: Poles' attitudes toward democracy



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates how Poles perceive the post-communist political system of contemporary Poland. A nationwide random sample of 400 adults was selected, using a probability quota sampling strategy, and interviewed face-to-face in respondents' homes. The chief outcome variables were: full acceptance, conditional acceptance, and rejection of the Polish version of democracy. The majority of respondents generally approved, fully or at least conditionally, the new democratic system in Poland. Multiple regression analyses showed that differential attitudes toward Polish democracy depend on respondents' age, their understanding of the concept of democracy, evaluations of democracy in general, and levels of political anomie.

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1. Introduction

Poland, as one of the Soviet Bloc countries where at the end of 1980s the communist rule collapsed, has just entered its third decade of the democratization process. Thus, an attempt at a progress report is warranted. What attitudes toward their relatively new political system currently predominate among Poles? How do they feel about it, and how do they understand it? What are their expectations about their future? An analysis of attitudes of Poles toward democracy in general, as well as toward democracy in their own country after 20 years of transformation may also shed some light on a more universally relevant question: how do nations cope with dramatic challenges of progression from the authoritarian to democratic rules of governance?

2. Historical and economic context of political system transitions

The collapse of a political system could be a drawn out process. In Poland and in other countries that were once collectively labeled “behind the Iron Curtain,” communist rule failed economically, and political authoritarianism spurred a wave of spiraling public dissatisfaction and dissent. The end of World War II marked the outset of the Soviets' political, economic, and cultural invasion of Poland, which was met from its inception with a strong resistance on the part of some Poles. The communist government tried to crack down on the opposition, while it simultaneously attempted to sway the general populace with ideals of egalitarianism and wide access to valued resources, such as education and health care. The new authorities promised and partly delivered opportunities for the majority of the population to advance upward on the

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economic and social status ladders. A successful eradication of illiteracy and extreme poverty, and rebuilding of the country devastated by the war brought to many citizens a sense of hope for better future and the trust for the new order in modern Poland (Rakowski, 1998).

Changes instated by the new system, though, welcomed improvements over social life, and political conditions that existed in Poland between the first and second World Wars, ultimately disappointed expectations. Centralization of economy and its policies, political and military subordination to the USSR, and political totalitarianism aggravated both the governing elites and the citizens. Several reforms of the communist regime were attempted. Both the revisionist movements within the Communist Party were emerging and political dissident groups were gaining more attention from the general public. The opposition was protesting the human rights violations and restrictions of civil rights such as free speech, right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and right to travel abroad. People became more aware of the preordained nature of political elections; of the ineptitude of Polish industry leaders; of the fallacies of a collectivist economy; and of the one-party ideological monopoly. The dissent included condemnation of the Soviet Union's political, military, and economical servitude.

Since the mid-1950s, political demonstrations and revolts were igniting on an almost regular basis, all of them crushed by governmental militia and military. Hundreds of dedicated dissidents and opposition sympathizers were imprisoned. The economic downfall in the late 1970s augmented the level of public denunciation of the system and propelled Polish workers and their supporters ("the intelligentsia") to the establishment of free labor unions. The "Solidarność" (Solidarity) movement, led by the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Lech Wałęsa, was not just a labor union. Instead, it was a political organization that connected and integrated previously disunited Polish opposition and its supporters, representing diverse subgroups of the population. The Solidarity movement successfully executed many economically costly labor strikes as a means of protesting against the poor standards of living in Poland and the ruling hegemony of the Communist Party (Polish United Workers' Party - PZPR). By the end of 1981, the Polish government imposed martial law, imprisoned many Solidarity leaders and supporters, forcibly pushed the entire movement underground, and eventually delegitimized and banned the union.

The institution of martial law in Poland did not improve the economic situation in the country, as the decline of the standards of living continued in the 1980s. Hyperinflation and lack of financial stability defeated most of the feeble attempts of the Polish communist government to bring economic relief to the citizens. The resulting crisis led to rationing of several products and necessities, including basic foods and supplies. By 1988, Poland's economic situation was thus at its lowest point, also partly due to foreign sanctions and the government's refusal to introduce reforms. A new wave of strikes swept the country after food costs were dramatically increased again. Finally, the government had to give in and started to negotiate the return of Solidarity to the official political and economic life.

1989 was the keystone of the political transition from the old regime to a new system. The government and Solidarity movement engaged in negotiations known as the "Polish Roundtable Talks," the results of which ultimately changed the political landscape of contemporary Poland with the first free parliamentary elections since the end of WWII. The elections (June 4, 1989) were won by the Solidarity opposition, and the parliament (*Sejm*) elected Solidarity delegate Tadeusz Mazowiecki as the Prime Minister of Poland. General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the leader of Communist Party and the man who ordered the crackdown on the Solidarity movement in 1981, was elected president. The Senate was composed of members of the Communist Party. This partition of power was the beginning of a formalized and institutionalized process of political transformation in Poland. Communism in Poland collapsed, and a few months later, the Berlin Wall, proudly standing since 1961 as a symbol of Soviet domination of Eastern and Central Europe, collapsed as well.

3. Political transformation: past and present

The process of a political system transformation is a salient and long-lasting economic, social, and political crisis. It is a time of chaos and uncertainty as the historically sanctioned governmental institutions begin to dissolve. The most fundamental tasks are to create new foundations for political functioning, to replace the centralized economic organization with a free-market economy, and to form new democratic institutions, for example, all-inclusive free elections, independent judiciary mechanisms, the abolition of censorship, and creation of autonomous and alternative media. Revised or incipient educational, health care, and retirement systems must be shaped. The transformation in Poland has been a demanding and ongoing process, and it has not been yet completed.

At first, these initiatives were accompanied by universal enthusiasm and support from the public. There was consensus that the final goal of the transformation was the establishment of democracy. However, the concept of democracy meant different things to different people, and understanding often deviated from its normative and defining features: a government established by a system of representation involving periodically held inclusive free elections and recognition of the primary importance of individual freedom (Rokeach, 1973; Sartori, 1987).

Citizens' difficulties in understanding the workings of democracy were collateral remnants of past historical experiences. Simply put, Poles could not rely on their collective memory in defining democracy. In its modern history, Poland had only a short-lived encounter with democracy when it regained its sovereignty after close to 150 years of political nonexistence. The 20-year period between the two World Wars (1918–1939) was inundated with political turmoil and military conflicts with neighbors, thus, it was too brief a period to complete the democratic renewal of the country. After WWII, Poland was forced to embrace an autocratic political system referred to by the Communist Party propaganda as "socialist democracy." For the majority of Poles, the concept of democracy thus had a connotation of political dictatorship and inept economy that did not make it easy to adopt an understanding of democracy in its formal terms.

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