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Poles' Commitment to the Rights of Political Dissenters

Abstract: Empirical research on support for democracy and democratic values in Eastern Europe has proliferated in the last decade and a half. Based on survey data from a recent, nationally representative survey of Polish public opinion, I contribute to this growing literature by exploring the dynamics of Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters. Using multivariate regression analysis, I model the relationships between a variety of socio-political assessments and support for political dissenters' rights. I find that Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters is far from uniform and varies as a function of authoritarianism, approval of the government in power, anomie, education, and (marginally) gender. I conclude with a discussion of my findings' implications for democratic consolidation in Poland.

Keywords: political tolerance, minority rights, authoritarianism.

While systematic research on democratic mentality has a long tradition in the United States and in the Western world more generally (e.g., Prothro and Grigg 1960; McClosky and Brill 1983; Sullivan, Shamir, Walsh, and Roberts 1985), solid empirical research on democratic orientations in countries transitioning to democratic governance is of relatively more recent vintage and in a shorter, albeit quickly growing, supply (e.g., Gibson et al. 1992; Gibson and Duch 1993a,1993b; Hahn 1991; Reisinger et al. 1994).

In a contribution to the growing literature on attitudinal concomitants of democracy, I empirically investigate Poles' commitment to the rights of political dissenters. In an attempt to illuminate the etiology of Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters, I consider theoretically relevant aspects of Poland's socio-political environment. Based on extensive survey evidence showing deeply-entrenched pessimism about the state of Poland's politics and economy (www.cbos.pl), I model the relationships between a variety of broad (e.g., anomie) and specific (e.g., approval of the government in power) socio-political assessments on the one hand and support for the rights of political minorities on the other. Given the high levels of authoritarianism in Poland (Koralewicz 1987; Korzeniowski 1993, 2002), in addition, I examine the linkages between authoritarianism on the one hand and support for political minority groups' rights on the other. I control for a host of socio-demographic background attributes (e.g., education and age) that can be expected to influence support for democratic principles.

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The investigation I undertake in this paper is important for several reasons. It is important to establish the ways in which the dynamics of support for democratic orientations in the countries of the former Soviet Union generalize or do not generalize to other cultural contexts. Conversely, country-specific studies can offer clues about more general patterns that can be subsequently investigated in more comparative studies. Investigating Poles' commitment to the rights of political dissent is important, finally, because commitment to democratic norms is one of the most important antecedents of political tolerance, an important concomitant of democratic governance (e.g., Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, and Wood 1995).

Conceptual Framework

Empirical research commenced during the democratic transition in Poland shows that Poles have made great strides in sowing and cultivating institutional manifestations of democratic government since the country's first semi-democratic elections in 1989 (e.g., Bajda, Syposz, and Wojakowski 2002). Researchers have also explored attitudinal concomitants of democratic government by, for example, studying Poles' commitment to democracy as a form of government and satisfaction with the operation of Polish democracy (e.g., Waldron-Moore 1999; Grabowska and Szawiel 2001) as well as the extent and etiology of political (e.g., Karpov 1999a, 1999b) and religious (e.g., Golebiowska 2004) tolerance in Poland.

My primary objective in this paper is to conduct a multivariate examination of Poles' commitment to the rights of political dissenters, exploring the linkages between authoritarianism and various socio-political assessments on the one hand and Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters on the other. I test the expectations described below using data from a relatively recent nationally representative survey of Polish public opinion. The data were collected in face-to-face interviews by the Social Opinion Research Center (CBOS), in June, 2001.[1]

Theoretical Model

I include four categories of predictor variables in my model of Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters:

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[1] All adult (18 years or older) residents of Poland constitute the population from which CBOS samples are drawn. Samples are drawn in three stages: 1) a sample of statistical regions is drawn; 2) a sample of households within the previously drawn sample of statistical regions is drawn; and 3) a sample of adults in the previously drawn sample of households is selected using the Kish method. More details about the Center and the methods it uses in its public opinion surveys are available on the Center's web site (www.cbos.pl) or upon request from the author.

1. Personality Attributes

In light of the high levels of authoritarian orientations in Poland (Korzeniowski 1993, 2002), and strong theoretical reasons to expect a nexus between authoritarianism and support for the rights of political dissenters, authoritarianism is one of the principal predictors in my model. In line with previous research, I conceptualize authoritarianism as a stable psychological orientation, acquired early in life, and in part defined by a commitment to hierarchical relations and subordination to authority (Adorno 1950). I expect authoritarians to be less supportive of the rights of political dissenters than non-authoritarians in part because threat perceptions likely stimulated by unorthodox political groups' beliefs should translate into authoritarians' lower willingness to extend democratic rights to minority groups (Feldman and Stenner 1997).

2. Broad Socio-political Predispositions

Anomie, interest in politics, ideological self-identification, and general support for democracy as a form of governance are four predictors in this category. I distinguish these predispositions from personality and other background attributes as well as specific assessments of the country's socio-political situation (see below) because they are arguably more stable than the latter though less stable than the former.[2] High levels of anomie in Poland, or perceptions that norms are unclear or absent (Sztompka 1996), should negatively shape Poles' support for democratic principles. Those higher in anomie, put differently, should be less inclined to extend democratic rights to unpopular minorities.

Political interest, a proxy for exposure to elite-conveyed cues, may also influence Poles' reasoning about what rights to extend to political minorities. Since Poland's political elites have been conveying overwhelmingly pro-democratic cues (Golebiowska 2004), ordinary Poles who are attentive to politics should mimic elite opinions to a greater extent than Poles for whom politics is less central. This prediction is supported by research on political tolerance in the United States showing that political experts (or those more interested in and knowledgeable about politics) are more tolerant because they are more strongly committed to democratic norms, in part because they are more likely to be exposed to and comprehend them than political novices (or those less interested in and knowledgeable about politics) (Marcus et al. 1995).

In line with previous research, I expect that Poles' ideological self-identification may also influence their support for political minority groups' rights. I expect that ideological self-identification will have countervailing effects on support for the rights of political dissenters. On the one hand, because identifiers with the Polish left have been shown to be more tolerant of religious minorities (Golebiowska 2004), they might be more tolerant of political unorthodoxy in general. On the other hand, previous research shows that identifiers with the Polish right tend to express a stronger

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[2] For example, while interest in politics can be expected to vary over time, it likely oscillates around some central tendency because it is predicted very well by stable individual characteristics such as education (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997).

commitment to democracy than identifiers with the Polish left (Strzeszewski and Zagórski 2003). Thus, self-locating at the right end of the Polish ideological spectrum might affect commitment to the rights of political dissent positively through its positive impact on general support for democracy.

Individuals distinguished by a more fervent commitment to democracy as a superior form of government, finally, should be more willing to extend specific democratic rights to controversial minority groups than those with reservations about the superiority of democracy to other forms of governance. This prediction is consistent with much previous research on political tolerance in the United States demonstrating that commitment to general democratic norms is one of the most important predictors of commitment to the rights of political dissenters (e.g., Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; Marcus et al. 1995).

3. Specific Socio-political Assessments

I consider three dimensions of Poles' specific responses to experiences with democratic governance and free market economy (assessments of the country's political and economic situation and respondents' family situation, approval of the government in power, and satisfaction with democracy) as potential influences on their support for political minorities' rights.

Poland's transition to democracy and a concomitant transition from a command to a free market economy have involved great hardships for most people (e.g., higher prices and continuing unemployment rates currently averaging almost 20%) (www.stat.gov.pl). Since, before the collapse of communism, Eastern Europeans counted on the government to ensure their economic well-being (Waldron-Moore 1999), economic dissatisfaction might translate into diminished support for the new, democratic regime and its concomitants (Waldron-Moore 1999). Yet, the weight of research evidence based on other countries seems to suggest that economic indicators predict support for democracy only weakly once political performance indicators are controlled (Finkel et al. 1999; Waldron-Moore 1999). Previous research offers no guidance on the question of whether and how respondents' assessments of their family situation might play into their democratic orientations. On balance, I cautiously expect individuals who assess the country's economic situation as well as their family situation negatively to have greater reservations about the rights of political dissenters than those who evaluate the country's economic situation and their family situation more positively—although the influence of such economic assessments might not hold up in the face of controls for assessments of political performance. With regard to the latter, I expect that unhappiness about the work of incumbent officeholders might spill over to support for the rights of political dissenters, with individuals critical of highly visible officeholders scoffing at the idea that radical and fringe groups are entitled to the same democratic rights and freedoms as anyone else.

The question of whether dissatisfaction with the operation of democracy undermines commitment to democracy itself has been of great concern to students of democratic transitions. The dominant view has been that diffuse support for democracy can

co-exist with widespread discontent about the practice of democracy (e.g., Grabowska and Szawiel 2001; Strzeszewski and Zagorski 2003). Yet, previous research offers less guidance on the question of whether and how satisfaction with democracy might affect support for the rights of political minorities. To the extent that democratic transitions enable previously repressed groups to enjoy greater freedoms and visibility, those groups may function as easy targets for individuals dissatisfied with democracy's operation. Following this logic, I expect that dissatisfaction with democracy will be negatively linked with support for democratic principles.

4. Socio-demographic Background Attributes

In keeping with previous research, the socio-demographic background variables serve as controls in my model. I expect that education and age will be particularly influential predictors, with the well-educated and younger individuals more supportive of extending democratic rights to political dissenters than their poorly-educated and older counterparts (Waldron-Moore 1999; Grabowska and Szawiel 2001; Strzeszewski and Zagorski, 2003). Polish women may be less supportive of political dissenters' rights than Polish men because "Eastern European women have been found… to prefer the order and security of authoritarian rule and to be less willing to accept political diversity" (Waldron-Moore 1999: 37). On the other hand, gender differences may not be significant because rhetoric in formerly communist countries repeatedly proclaimed gender equality and gender equality was also practiced in some ways even before communism was toppled (e.g., women worked along men outside the home) (Waldron-Moore 1999: 37). I include religiosity in my model even though previous research on support for democracy and democratic principles does not consider its potential importance. I expect religiosity might affect support for the rights of political dissenters negatively because Roman Catholic church in Poland has been identified with intolerance of diversity, dogmatism (e.g., Jowitt 1992), and "theocratic impulses" (Ramet 1997: 98).[3] Once respondents' education and subjective assessments of economic conditions are controlled, I do not expect income to play a significant role in respondents' enthusiasm for democratic principles but control for it to be sure. Based on previous research on anti-Semitism and religious tolerance in Poland (e.g., Datner-Spiewak 1996; Golebiowska 2004), finally, I expect that individuals residing in more rural areas may be less supportive of political minorities' rights than those who reside in more urban milieus.

Poles' Support for the Rights of Political Dissenters

I start by drawing a simple portrait of Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters, using survey respondents' answers to six questions about their reactions to

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[3] Although the impact of religiosity in other religions may be different, I cannot control for the influence religion because no questions about respondents' religious affiliation were included in the survey I use to test my expectations. The amount of error this introduces into the data should not be substantial, however, because about ninety five percent of Poles are Catholic (Golebiowska 2004).

political views and behaviors falling outside the political mainstream or views critical of the Polish government (the wording of all items is listed in the Appendix and in Table 1). Responses to each question were measured on 4-point scales, anchored with "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" endpoints. All items are coded such that a lower score corresponds to a lower commitment to democratic principles. Table 1 reports frequency distributions of responses to each question.

Table 1

Poles' Support for the Rights of Political Dissenters

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
Society shouldn't tolerate political views that are too different from the majority	16.5	31.3	35.8	16.4
Radical and fringe political groups shouldn't be allowed to demonstrate	24.9	38.2	27.2	9.7
Freedom of speech doesn't include the right to expound fringe political views	22.6	37.5	30.1	9.9
The idea that everyone has a right to their own opinion is being pushed too far today	14.9	33.4	38.0	13.6
Foreigners who don't like our government and criticize it should not be allowed to live here	31.3	31.1	26.3	11.2
We shouldn't listen to people who don't like our system of government	11.6	23.9	46.9	17.6

The data summarized in Table 1 demonstrate that Poles' commitment to the rights of political dissenters is substantially less than uniform. On three of the six questions, a majority of respondents offers an anti-democratic response (agreeing that radical and fringe groups should not be allowed to demonstrate, that freedom of speech does not include the right to expound fringe political views, and that foreigners who do not like the Polish form of government should not be allowed to live in Poland). Although not attaining a majority, the preponderance of anti-democratic responses on the remaining three questions is also high. In short, large numbers of Poles are willing to deny fundamental democratic rights and liberties to controversial minorities or individuals.

The Sources of Poles' Support for the Rights of Political Dissenters

In my exploration of the underpinnings of Poles' support for the political dissenters' rights, I combine respondents' answers to the six individual questions described in the preceding section into an additive scale.[4] I also measure authoritarianism, anomie, and approval of the government in power with additive scales formed on the basis

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[4] Factor analysis and reliability scaling of the six individual questions suggest this was an appropriate decision. One factor with an eigenvalue of 2.66 emerges and accounts for 44.37% of the variance in the individual indicators. The six items have a respectable alpha of .75.

of items listed in the Appendix. I use a three-item scale to capture respondents' assessments of the country's political and economic situation and their family's situation because responses to the three individual items were strongly correlated and unidimensional, as confirmed by factor analysis and reliability scaling. The wording of principal items is reproduced in the Appendix; wording of all other items is available upon request. Where appropriate, all items are coded such that a lower score corresponds to a lower amount of the quality being measured (lower support for democracy and democratic principles, satisfaction with democracy, authoritarianism, approval of the government in power, anomie, education, income, interest in politics, frequency of religious attendance, and age). The remaining items are coded in the following manner—gender: 1 = male, 2 = female; area of residence: lower score = more rural; ideology: lower score = more left-wing; and assessments of Poland's political and economic situation and the situation of respondents' family: lower score = more negative.

Bivariate Relationships

Before inspecting the results of my multivariate analysis, I examine the bivariate correlations between Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters and all the predictors in my model. Table 2 below lists the bivariate correlation coefficients.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Between Poles' Support for the Rights of Political Dissenters and all Predictors

Authoritarianism	−.58**
Anomie	−.27**
Interest in politics	.08*
Ideological self-identification	.01
General support for democracy	.13**
Assessments of political and economic situation in the country and situation in respondents' family	.06
Satisfaction with Polish democracy	.06
Approval of government in power	.10*
Education	.25**
Age	−.11**
Gender	.01
Religiosity	−.10**
Income	.14**
Area of residence	.14**

*p < .05,   **p < .01

The data in the above table demonstrate that a majority of the expected linkages are empirically supported. Authoritarians, individuals higher in anomie, those lower

in political interest, less supportive of the general principles of democracy, less well-educated, older, higher in religiosity, more likely to live in rural areas, and earning lower incomes are significantly less supportive of political minorities' rights than their counterparts. Approval of the government in power is significantly linked with support for political dissenters' rights as well, though the direction of this linkage is inconsistent with my initial expectation (see below for a suggested explanation). Bivariate analysis reveals no significant associations involving respondents' ideological self-identification, assessments of the country's political and economic situation as well as respondents' family's economic situation, satisfaction with the operation of democracy in Poland, and gender, on the one hand, and support for the rights of political dissent on the other.

Multivariate Estimation

The bivariate linkages I describe above do not conclusively establish what matters in predicting Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters because many of the predictors I consider are themselves interrelated. I therefore use multivariate regression analysis to sort out the relative impact of different variables. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Influences on Poles' Support for the Rights of Political Dissenters: Multivariate Results

	b (standard error)	Beta
Authoritarianism	−.42 (.03)***	−.44
Anomie	−.10 (.04)***	−.08
Interest in politics	−.03 (.10)	−.01
Ideological self-identification	.04 (.06)	.02
General support for democracy	.20 (.13)	.04
Assessments of political and economic situation in the country and situation in respondents' family	.04 (.06)	.02
Satisfaction with Polish democracy	.004 (.05)	.003
Approval of government in power	.20 (.06)***	.11
Education	.09 (.04)**	.07
Age	.001 (.01)	.004
Gender	.30 (.18)*	.05
Religiosity	.07 (.08)	.02
Income	8.09E-006 (.00)	.001
Area of residence	.06 (.05)	.04

R-squared = .26
F = 25.52, p < .0001

*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01

As the data summarized in Table 3 demonstrate, support for political minorities' rights varies significantly as a function of authoritarianism, approval of the government in power, anomie, education, and (marginally) gender. As expected, authoritarians, individuals higher in anomie, poorly educated, and (marginally) men are less supportive of dissenters' rights than their counterparts. Counter to expectations, individuals who are more approving of the government tend to be less supportive of extending democratic protections to controversial groups and ideas. This unexpected direction of the effect of government approval actually makes sense given the focus of some individual indicators measuring support for the political dissenters' rights (those asking respondents to indicate whether they would allow the criticism of their government). In line with what could be expected, higher approval of the government is associated with significantly greater support for democracy as a form of government (data available upon request).

Of the significant effects in the model, authoritarianism is by far the most influential. Judging from the size of the standardized regression coefficients, the influence of authoritarianism on Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters is almost four times greater than that of the next most important predictors (approval of the government in power, anomie, and education). The amount of variance explained by the model is not only significant ($F = 25.52$, $p < .0001$) but also substantial (R-squared $= .26$).

Concluding Remarks

My investigation of the antecedents of Poles' support for the rights of political dissenters has mixed implications for the future trajectory of democratic orientations in Poland. The overwhelming, negative influence authoritarianism has on Poles' support for political dissenters' rights has troubling implications for the future of political minorities' rights and liberties because authoritarianism has had a strong hold on the Polish collective psyche at least since the onset of Poland's democratic transition (Koralewicz 1987; Korzeniowski 1993, 2002). The negative effect of anomie, widespread in Poland in recent years (Sztompka 1996), contributes to the negative implications of this analysis for the future of political minority rights in Polish public opinion, although to a smaller degree.

On a more positive note, should levels of education in Poland continue to increase, support for the rights of political dissenters should grow in tandem because respondents' education plays a significant role in their commitment to democratic principles with implications for the rights of political dissent. In addition, and in line with much research conducted in other countries undergoing transitions to democratic governance, Poles' assessments of the socio-political situation in the country and their family's situation do not directly carry over into their support for important democratic principles. In a related vein, it is reassuring that Poles' satisfaction with democracy has no direct bearing on the extent to which they are supportive of political minorities' rights. The latter testifies to the strength of Poles' commitment to

democracy as a form of government, unshaken by substantial levels of dissatisfaction with the operation of democracy in practice.

Appendix

I. Indicators of principal variables (items followed by X have been reverse-coded in all analyses)

Support for the rights of political dissenters

I will read you a description of different views—when thinking about each one, please indicate whether you agree or disagree (definitely agree, agree, disagree, definitely disagree)
  1. Society shouldn't tolerate political views that are too different from those of the majority
  2. Radical and fringe political groups should not be allowed to demonstrate
  3. Freedom of speech doesn't include the right to expound fringe political views
  4. The idea that everyone has a right to their own opinion is being pushed too far today
  5. Foreigners who don't like our government and criticize it should not be allowed to live here
  6. We shouldn't listen to people who don't like our system of government

Authoritarianism

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements (definitely agree, agree, disagree, definitely disagree)
  1. It's better to live in a disciplined society than to give people too many freedoms X
  2. You should always obey authority X
  3. Schools should teach kids obedience to authority X
  4. Censoring movies and magazines is necessary to protect social morality X
  5. Today's youth doesn't have enough respect for traditional Polish values X
  6. Instead of political parties, people would be happier with a decisive, knowledgeable person X
  7. A little bit of dictatorship has never hurt anyone X

Anomie

I will read you a number of views—thinking about each, please indicate whether you agree or disagree (definitely agree, agree, disagree, definitely disagree)
  1. It is becoming more and more difficult to figure out what is going on in the world today X
  2. Since there are so many ideas, theories, and opinions, it is frequently hard to know X
  3. These days it is hard to know whether you can depend on anyone X
  4. Often it is hard to know whether the government's tendencies are right and proper or senseless X

Assessments of political and economic situation in the country and situation in respondent's family

Response categories that accompanied the first three items: very good, good, neither, bad, very bad
  1. How would you rate the current political situation in Poland? X
  2. How would you rate the current economic situation in Poland? X
  3. How would you describe your and your family's economic situation? X
  4. Generally speaking, is the situation in our country proceeding in the right or wrong direction? (response categories: good, bad) X

Support for democracy

I will read you a description of different views—when thinking about each one, please indicate whether you agree or disagree (definitely agree, agree, disagree, definitely disagree)
    Democracy has its flaws but no one has invented a better system yet X

Approval of the government in power

Response categories for all four items: very good, good, bad, very bad
  1. How would you evaluate the work of the Sejm? X
  2. How would you evaluate the work of the Senate? X

3. How would you evaluate the work of the Council of Ministers? X
4. How would you evaluate the work of the Prime Minister? X

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