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Determinants of Success in Public Opinion in Poland: Factors, Directions and Dynamics of Change

Abstract: In this paper we present the analysis of changes in perceiving subjective determinants of success in Poland, including implicit attitudes towards the idea of meritocracy. On the basis of factor analysis, we have prepared two scales for the 'meritocratic' and 'family and friends' dimensions of opinion about path to success. We investigate how support for these scales is differentiated and influenced by socio-demographic characteristics and social class. We accompany in the paper the analysis of 'meritocratic' and 'family and friends' scales with the analysis of the changing support for individual determinants, such as for example 'hard work', 'good education' and 'knowing the right people'. We examine how the opinion of the same group of people on path to success changes over time and to which extend radical changes have occurred in the perception of certain determinants. Our analyses are based on data from the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN, 1988–2013), where the question as to what conditions success in life was asked in every survey wave. It provides an opportunity to compare attitudes towards success from just before regime transformation and every five years thereafter. We place in the paper a particular emphasis in the paper on previously unanalysed data from the years 2008–2013.

Keywords: Subjective determinants of success, meritocracy, transformation, social classes, panel survey

The assessment of factors that influence success in life offers researchers enormously rich information about society. Understanding the main determinants of success is important for a number of reasons. First, they mirror the broader changes of the political system and the ideology associated with it. They are also very sensitive to the economy and its fluctuations, such as during the economic transition or during economic crises. The evaluation of the path to success can also contribute to the debate on personal values and decisions. It shapes the active or passive roles that actors take in order to succeed. It reflects the sense of agency and control over one's own position, or disaffection and lack of hope, to influence one's own situation and decisions in life. It is important not only to one's choice of career, but also to decisions about raising children, educational paths, or even about free-time management. Furthermore, deeper analysis of the determinants that respondents think influence success reveals opinions reflecting broader categories of attitudes, such as those towards meritocracy.

The main aim of this study is to analyze how subjective determinants of success are perceived, including implicit attitudes towards the idea of meritocracy, and the extent to which they are accepted by individuals belonging to different social groups.

We are also interested in the dynamics of change that have occurred in Poland since the last years preceding the collapse of the state socialist system, through the transformation period, and up to the present. Our analyses are based on data from the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN) 1988—2013, and are a continuation of the theoretical and empirical debate on the causal factors of success and their perception.¹ In our research we also pay particular attention to the results from the most recent, previously unanalyzed data from the years 2008 and 2013.

Public Opinion on Success

Success, broadly understood as the realization of an aim or activity directed towards its fulfillment, is a concept that is widely used in public as well as in academic discourse, despite the diversity of meanings that the term conceals. The framing of meanings of success varies greatly, being understood by some as the positive outcome of an undertaking or highly prized achievement, or by others as the experience of happiness and satisfaction from life (Firkowska-Mankiewicz 1997; Wolny-Peirs 2005; Hildebrandt-Wypych 2010). A major contribution to defining and clarifying the areas in which the concept of success is examined in Poland comes from qualitative studies by Firkowska-Mankiewicz (1997), in which she proposed a categorization of definitions of success. Firkowska-Mankiewicz distinguished between: (1) materialistic (measured by income or possessions); (2) stratification-prestigious (defined by level of education or income); (3) emotional-affiliate (such as subjective satisfaction from work and/or private life); and (4) self-realizational (connected with the feeling of fulfillment). Leszkowicz-Baczyński (2007) combined these categories into three broader dimensions: economic, social, and cultural.² Regardless of the differences and imprecise definitions of success for which we may strive, perception plays an important role in the path to achieving success (Słomczyński 2007; Gładys-Jakóbk 2005; Bylok 2005).

The path to success, although seemingly a highly subjective phenomenon, has an undeniable social background. In social research, the diversity of opinions about the main determinants of success is often understood as a kind of litmus test of changes occurring in social structure (Janicka, Słomczyński 2007; Słomczyński, Janicka 2005). The subjective assessment of determinants and mechanisms that may influence individuals' success depends on the broader social, economic and political situation.

Success and Meritocracy

Previous research has shown that responses to the validity of individual determinants of success can be reduced to two main dimensions: 'meritocratic' (meaning individual

¹ See in Baczko-Dombi A., Wysmulek I. (2014) and Janicka K., Słomczyński K. M. (2007).

² An important qualitative study on the perception of success in Poland (especially success understood as the carrier growth and economic prosperity) was conducted by Grzeszczyk (2003), where she compared the Polish understanding of success with the USA, underlining the ambivalent meaning of individual success in the perception of Poles, which is loaded with ethical judgments.

talent supported by good education and hard work), and ‘family and friends’ (meaning social origin and social network) (Janicka, Słomczyński 2007). These dimensions, determined using factor analysis, are also observed by other researchers (Skarzyńska, Chmielewski 1998; Kozłowski, Matczak 2013).³

The idea of rewarding individuals for their merits, talents, and hard work, which underlies basic meritocratic thinking, has existed for a long time. A meritocratic system, in which rewards are granted according to merits (according to the equation: *merit = talent + effort*), is often considered to be a fair system and thus a panacea to the various ills of society (Wnuk-Lipiński 2005; Sztompka 2003; Giddens 2004). It also has a rather positive connotation in contemporary public and political discourse. However, meritocracy as an idea as well as its foreseeable consequences has often been criticized (see Young 1958; McNamee, Miller 2004; Wozniak 2012). Young (1958), a founder of the concept, underlined the negative implications that meritocracy may have for society, such as the alienation of upper social classes, while Herrnstein and Murray (1994) alerted that together with the separation of the so-called “cognitive elite,” there will be a growing frustration and humiliation among those with “average” or “lower-than-average” intelligence. In response to both critics and supporters of the idea of meritocracy, Domański (2007) underlines that although this notion of meritocracy offers equal opportunities, this is only a “semblance of equality,” and thus does not eliminate hierarchical social structure or the influence of ascriptive factors (p. 29).

The concept of meritocracy itself is based on the liberal theory of equal opportunity, in which the aim of the state is to set the procedures that enable fair competition. Thus, this vision of social justice accepts unequal outcomes as a result of lesser effort or merit. By contrast, theoreticians of socialism perceive social justice in a completely different manner. They underline that the fight against social inequality is possible only when the state provides an equitable distribution of goods, regardless of merit (Walzer 2007; Foltyniewicz 2012).

Taking into consideration the above mentioned differences in approaches to social justice, the case of Poland as a country that underwent a regime change and a change of dominating ideology is particularly interesting. Research on the issue of meritocratic development in Poland has shown increasing interest (e.g. Domański 2011; Kozłowski and Matczak 2013; Cichomski et al. 2013). For instance, Kozłowski and Matczak (2013), summarizing their research on the opinions of parents of primary school children in Poland on the path to success, have written that “respondents reveal the hyper-individualistic stance, characteristic features of which are: orientation of achievements, high aspirations and self-confidence” (p. 163). However, they underline that their sample is not representative and is dominated by parents with higher education. Nevertheless, these results confirm a number of similar studies made in Poland. According to *Diagnoza Społeczna (Social Diagnosis 2009)*, a majority of Poles believe that success can be achieved through one’s own efforts and abilities. This observation is also supported by the results of the Polish General Social Survey

³ In some cases, these dimensions are labeled differently, but their composition is functionally or actually equivalent.

(*Polski Generalny Sondaż Społeczny*), which reveals that in 1999, opinions on the importance of education significantly increased in comparison to levels in 1992, and the importance of origins from rich families decreased (see also Cichomski et al. 2013).

In the following sections of this paper we will present what can be learned about the determinants of success from the data gathered in the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN) 1988–2013.⁴ These data offer a unique tool to develop our knowledge of the subject for two main reasons. Firstly, the data allow us to track the subjective assessment of the main determinants of success over a broad time frame, from 1988 to 2013, which provides an opportunity to compare attitudes towards success from just before regime transformation and every five years thereafter. Secondly, due to its panel character, the data allow the possibility to conduct deeper analyses of the dynamics of respondents' views across changing political and economic contexts.

Path to Success—Duality of Dynamics

Strong dependencies can be observed in the way respondents evaluate certain determinants of success. It can be said that respondents think about criteria for achieving success categorically through bundles of determinants, and that strategies for answering questions form distinct patterns. Following the results from Janicka and Słomczyński (2007), we reduce the determinants of success to two groups, corresponding with two dimensions of thinking about achieving success in life—that is, two sets of features and actions which, as per Poles' opinions, determine individual prosperity:⁵

‘Meritocratic’ dimension:

This dimension depicts the strategy of achieving success based on the *internal resources* of an individual. In this case, success is connected with the effort put in education and hard work, supported by innate abilities, talents, and ambition.

‘Family and friends’ dimension:

This dimension corresponds with the strategy of achieving success based on *external resources*, associated with respondents' social networks (family, friends, influential acquaintances), and supported by ‘good luck’ (chance happenstance). The possibility to be successful in life is here less dependent on the individual than on circumstance, thus success is beyond personal control (determined by origin, connections, and destiny).

⁴ In the panel survey POLPAN the question on main determinants of success appears in each wave of the study—from 1988 until 2013. Respondents are asked: “To what extent—in your opinion—are certain things important for achieving success in life? For achieving success in life [...] is (1) absolutely necessary (2) very important (3) somewhat important (4) somewhat not important (5) not at all important.” Respondent is asked one by one about the importance of such determinants as: ambition, knowing the right people, hard work, political influence, coming from a rich family, good education, good luck, innate abilities and talents.

⁵ Factor analysis, on which base that part of the paper, was conducted separately for two sets of characteristics with the use of principal components method without factors rotation, so as not to force “artificially” the separability of them and to enable comparisons between waves. The analysis and results for data before 2003, together with the detailed methodological description can be found in Janicka and Słomczyński (2007). In this paper we continue the analysis for 2008–2013 data.

Table 1

The results of a factor analysis of determinants that, in respondents' opinions, influence success in life

	Determinant	Factor loadings					
		1988	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013
Meritocratic dimension	Ambition	0.398	0.327	0.365	0.344	0.646	0.642
	Hard work	0.289	0.325	0.328	0.205	0.516	0.623
	Good education	0.555	0.560	0.575	0.592	0.717	0.627
	Innate abilities and talents	0.543	0.549	0.547	0.556	0.688	0.692
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	1.604	1.676	1.560	1.551	1.672	1.670
	<i>Proportion of explained variance</i>	0.401	0.419	0.390	0.388	0.418	0.418
Family and friends dimension	Knowing the right people	0.532	0.387	0.474	0.479	0.686	0.733
	Political influence	0.631	0.669	0.586	0.607	0.705	0.748
	Coming from a rich family	0.494	0.593	0.551	0.560	0.709	0.752
	Luck	0.176	0.224	0.292	0.344	0.613	0.467
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	1.657	1.657	1.688	1.684	1.846	1.881
	<i>Proportion of explained variance</i>	0.414	0.419	0.422	0.421	0.461	0.470

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013. Analyses on the base of whole data sets for each wave of the study; coefficients for 1988–2003 according to Janicka, Słomczyński 2007.

In responses to the questions evaluating the main determinants of success in POLPAN, classification into these two dimensions can be observed in the structure of the data from the very beginning of the panel (see Table 1).

Although in subsequent years the ‘meritocracy’ and ‘family and friends’ dimensions were based on the same set of variables, there are interesting fluctuations in the degree to which the dimensions are shaped by individual factors. We aim to accompany the changing proportional impact of single determinants of success within each dimension with the analysis of the changing support for individual determinants, depicted in responses from subsequent years of the panel. There is a need for such two level analyses in situations where some determinants may be perceived as very important to respondents while lacking strong component scores for a given dimension. Similarly, some determinants may generally be considered less important by respondents, but are key constructs of dimensions. Thus, we can speak about dual dynamics—those of the structure of dimensions and those of respondent opinions about certain determinants. The latter are presented in Table 2.

At present, the meritocratic dimension of success consists primarily of talent, ambition and hard work. For comparison, in 1988 the strategy based on these internal resources included primarily education and talent. By 2013 the meritocratic factors ambition and hard work gained importance in relation to previous years.

The promotion of hard work deserves special attention. This determinant of success saw the largest change in importance over time. The revolution in attitudes towards the importance of hard work in achieving success can be traced when comparing the distribution of answers to the question of its role in life of respondents in each wave of the panel survey. Compared to 1988, proportion of respondents that considered this determinant to be very important increased by 33 percentage points by 2013 (from 38% to 71%). It should be underlined that the biggest change has

Table 2

“Absolutely necessary” and “very important” determinants of success

Determinants of success	1988	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013
	(%)					
Ambition	70	70	69	74	74	77
Luck	66	66	69	73	76	73
Innate abilities and talents	72	77	74	76	79	73
Good education	61	71	80	84	84	73
Hard work	38	49	45	49	53	71
Knowing the right people	53	58	60	69	65	67
Coming from a rich family	35	34	32	36	34	39
Political influence	26	28	26	30	27	26

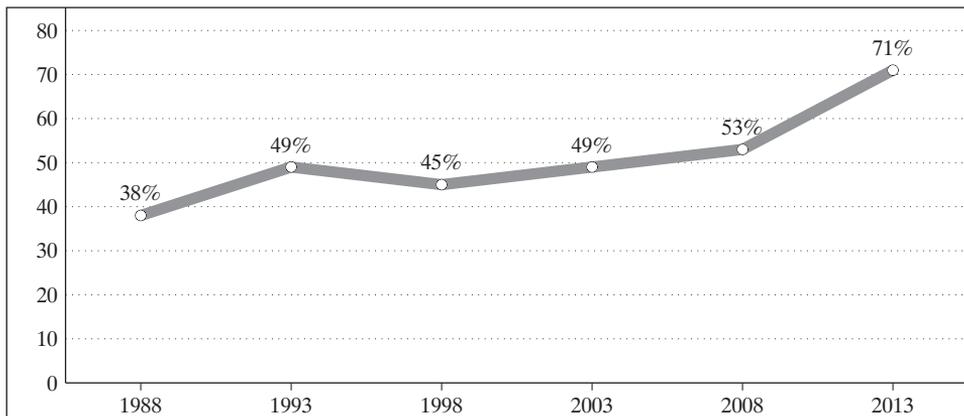
The light gray background shows the determinants of success that were chosen as the most important in a given year (two top values); the dark gray background highlights the determinants chosen least often (two bottom values).

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013. Analyses on the base of whole data sets for each wave of the study; coefficients for 1988–2003 according to Janicka, Słomczyński 2007.

occurred during the last five year period, when the importance of this determinant increased by 18 percentage points. This provides a clear indication of the changes that have occurred in Polish society, showing that Poles began to believe in the causative power of their own actions and in the importance of an active approach to achieving success.

Figure 1

The importance of the “hard work” determinant in 1988–2013



The graph shows the added percentage of answers “absolutely necessary” and “very important.”

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013. Analyses on the base of whole data sets for each wave of the study. Results for 1988–2003 according to Janicka, Słomczyński 2007.

Similarly, changes have occurred in opinions about the role of ambition in achieving success. On the level of performance of this indicator in the meritocratic dimension

(see [Table 1](#)), we can see that after some fluctuations in 1988 and 2003 (with lowest factor loading being 0,33 in 1993 and highest—0,4 in 1988) there can be observed remarkable (but not so spectacular as in the case of the ‘hard work’) growth to 0.65 and 0.64 by 2008 and 2013, respectively.

The dynamics of the ‘good education’ determinant are also worth of special attention across the last five years of POLPAN. As we can see in the [Table 1](#), the role of education in the composition of the meritocratic dimension was already very strong in 1988. Its impact has been constantly growing through 2008, but it decreased by the last panel wave in 2013. This finding is robust when we analyze the distribution of opinions on the importance of good education independently, not only as a component of the meritocratic dimension. In 1988, the first wave POLPAN prior to Polish democratization, 61% of respondents expressed the opinion that a good education is important in order to achieve success in life. Since that time, there is a continuous increase in the role of this determinant—initially, during the first years after the transformation (1993 and 1998 waves), the importance increased by about 9 percentage points, and in successive waves (2003 and 2008), this position was shared by 84% of respondents.

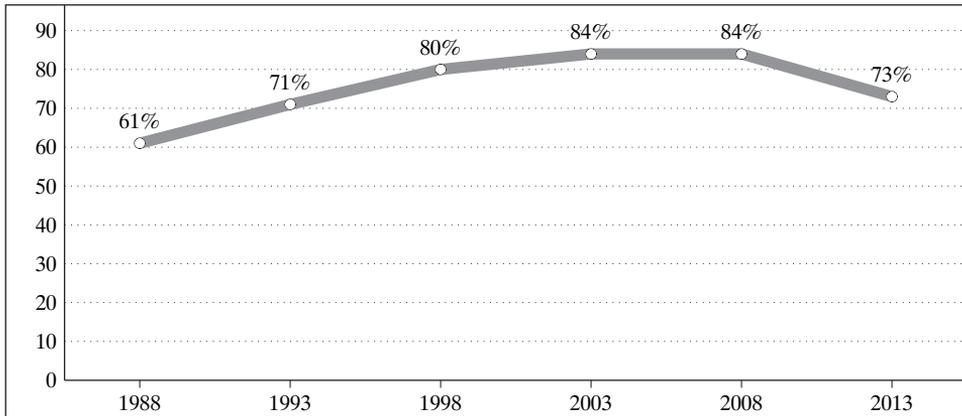
The data from 2013 signals a change in attitudes towards education: for the first time in 25 years, the percentage of Poles thinking that a good education is important dropped to 73%. The change might have been influenced, among other things, by disappointment from the ‘unfulfilled expectations of the role of higher education, especially visible during times of crisis. This disappointment was revealed in the results of research on the evaluation of higher education in Poland ([CBOS 2013](#)). The educational boom, the proliferation of higher education among today’s cohorts of twenty-, thirty-, and forty-year olds, and their painful experience of competing in the labor market probably played a significant role in the gradual depreciation of this factor.

The family and friends dimension also evolved with respect to the impacts of its components. In 1988 the strongest component in this dimension was ‘knowing the right people’ and ‘political influence’ (see [Table 1](#)). At that time, having ‘good luck’ had the weakest impact. It is worth mentioning, however, that on the factor level (independent of dimensions), the percentage of support for ‘good luck’ as being important has been relatively strong in all waves of POLPAN (fluctuating between 66% and 73%).

In 2013, as compared to previous years, the component strength for the family and friends dimension increased. Particular attention may be paid to the role of the ‘good luck’ determinant. An increase in belief in the driving force of good luck occurred in 2003, with only minor fluctuations until 2013. Janicka and Słomczynski (2007) point out that this tendency is “likely to be the effect of an increasing sense of the unpredictability of the fortunes of life, which is particularly clear around the turn of the century” (p. 251).

The strongest components of the family and friends dimension, ‘coming from a rich family’ and ‘political influence’, were rarely chosen as the most important things for success in comparison to other factors. Since the beginning of panel research until the most recent wave, these determinants ‘lead the bottom’ of the list of important factors, with little fluctuation over time.

Figure 2
The importance of the “good education” determinant in 1988–2013



The graph shows the added percentage of answers “absolutely necessary” and “very important.”

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013. Analyses on the base of whole data sets for each wave of the study. Results for 1988–2003 according to Janicka, Słomczyński 2007.

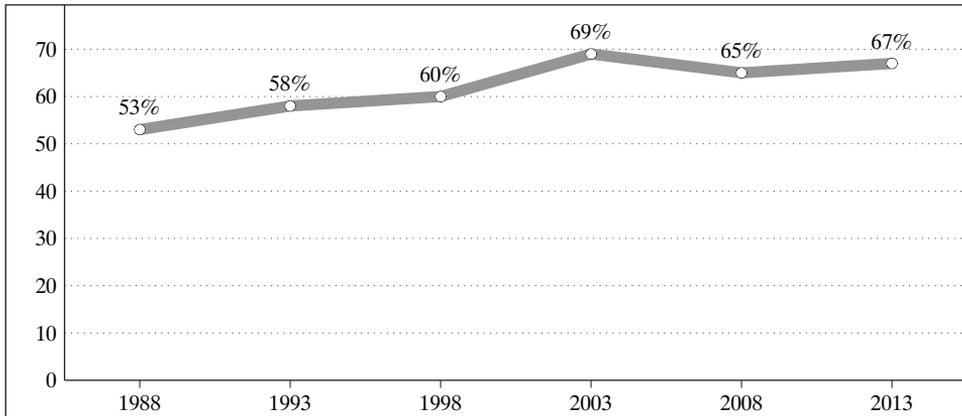
Surprisingly, over the last waves we can also observe a general increase in the role of ‘knowing the right people’. Being one of the typical measurements of social capital, the evaluation of this factor underwent fluctuations vis-à-vis historical changes. In 1988 11% of respondents considered this factor unimportant, while 53% of respondents believed that knowing the right people was very important in order to succeed. The importance of this determinant has increased in subsequent years (up to 69% in 2003), although the data from 2008 and 2013 suggest a relative stabilization of opinion about this factor. The stability of this opinion of Poles is counterintuitive and very interesting, while in public debate on the influence of ‘knowing the right people’ exists the belief that this factor was essential before transformation, but has been gradually losing its importance since that time. Different picture can be seen when panel respondents from POLPAN are analyzed.

Diversification of Success Strategies

On the basis of results from factor analysis, we have prepared two scales for the ‘meritocratic’ and ‘family and friends’ dimensions of opinion about the determinants that influence success in life, based on the two most recent waves of POLPAN (2008 and 2013).⁶ In this section, we investigate how support for these scales is differentiated and influenced by socio-demographic characteristics and social class. It seems that, as before, we can speak in terms of dual dynamics. On the one hand, we still have to

⁶ Scales were constructed analogically to scales for 1988–2003 waves of POLPAN study by Janicka and Słomczyński (2007). Scales are normalized, with mean 0 and standard deviation 1.

Figure 3

The importance of the “knowing the right people” determinant in 1988–2013

The graph shows the added percentage of answers “absolutely necessary” and “very important.”

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013. Analyses on the base of whole data sets for each wave of the study. Results for 1988–2003 according to Janicka, Słomczyński 2007.

deal with changes in the role of individual determinants, which could be a result of the transformation of social realities. On the other hand, changes in support for the ‘meritocratic’ and ‘family and friends’ dimensions may be reflections of more general changes in social structure.

Previous research by Janicka and Słomczynski (2007) has shown that support for the meritocratic character of determinants of success depends on neither occupation nor income, but rather to some extent on gender and age of respondents. However, support for the family and friends dimension depended on respondents’ socio-occupational position and income. This raises the following questions: do these micro-level determinants remain important differentiators of opinions? What can the newest POLPAN data tell us about the characteristics of the groups that perceive meritocratic ideas differently? To answer these empirical questions, we have analyzed whether the tendency to adopt one of two paths to success is differentiated by respondents’ gender, age, education, income and occupation. For this purpose, independent regression analyses of the meritocratic and family and friends dimensions were performed on the 2013 POLPAN data.

It appears that in the case of the meritocratic dimension, only a level of education had a significant impact. The strength of the role of education did not increase dramatically from 2003 (from 0,12 to 0,14); at the same time, occupational status stopped being a significant differentiating factor in this case.

As for the family and friends dimension, the role of occupational status and income still remain important determinants of support for this approach. Additionally the age of respondents is also significant—older respondents (to a small albeit significant degree) were more likely to express opinions that external factors influence success.

Table 3

Regression of ‘meritocratic’ and ‘family and friends’ dimensions of opinions on determinants influencing success in life by demographic and stratification variables, 2013

	B	St. error	β	Significance
Meritocratic dimension				
(intercept)	-.440	.174		.012
sex (female = 0, male = 1)	.034	.057	.017	.551
age (in years)	-.001	.002	-.010	.732
education	.043	.012	.141	.001
occupation (SRQ)	.000	.000	-.043	.264
income	.000	.000	.018	.525
Family and friends dimension				
(intercept)	-.014	.172		.936
sex (female = 0, male = 1)	.034	.057	.017	.551
age (in years)	.006	.002	.080	.006
education	-.006	.012	-.020	.627
occupation (SRQ)	.000	.000	-.103	.008
income	-.000	.000	-.077	.007

Meritocratic dimension: $F = 9,106$, $p < 0.001$, R^2 (adjusted) = 0.011; ‘family and friends’ dimension: $F = 3,920$, $p < 0.001$, R^2 (adjusted) = 0.030.

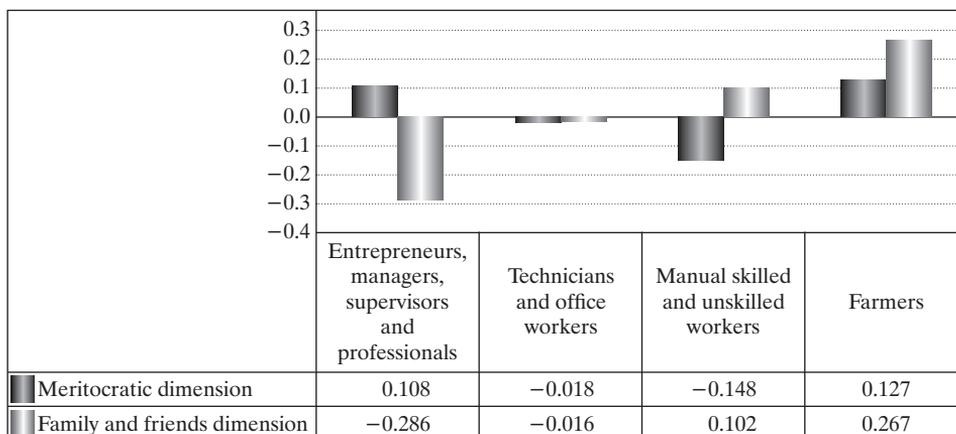
Source: POLPAN data, 2013. Analyses on the base of the whole data set.

While analyzing the diversification of the medium of the meritocratic and family and friends dimension of opinions on determinants influencing success in life according to different social classes, Janicka and Slomczynski (2007) concluded that in 1988 faith in the power of innate abilities (such as ambition, talent, hard work, and education) was more likely to occur in circles of professionals and entrepreneurs. It seemed to serve the function of rationalization for those occupying privileged positions in society. The meritocratic determinants were to a much lesser degree supported by such occupational groups as technicians, office, and manual workers. Political transformation in Poland, however, disseminated views until that point held by the upper classes of society. As can be seen from the data published by Janicka and Slomczynski (2007), a few years after 1989, the strongest attachment to a meritocratic path to success was also found among the newly formed managerial class. On the other hand, the ‘losers’ of the transformation period—found mostly among manual skilled and unskilled workers—due to their new social position and perception of their chances on success, had lost their faith in the power of meritocratic determinants and individual efforts. Nonetheless, their levels of support for exogenous social determinants did not change significantly. Somewhat different was the case of farmers, who after 1998 stopped being ‘visible’ in the meritocratic dimension, in contrast to the family and friends dimension, which saw stronger support in 1993.

How does the structure of support for these two dimensions look like now? Reflecting data from 2013, the ‘winners’ of transformation continue to believe in the meritocratic path to success (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Mean values of 'meritocratic' and 'family and friends' dimensions of determinants of success according to social classes



The values in the table are the standardized averages (from -1 to 1), where negative values indicate the support lower than the average, and positive values show support higher than the average. The value of η coefficient is $0,1$ for dependence of meritocratic dimension on social classes and $0,18$ for analogical relation of 'family and friends' dimension.

Source: POLPAN data, 2013. Analyzes on the base of the whole data set.

25 years after the regime change, manual skilled and unskilled workers, who were the groups that on average lost the most during the transformation time, consequently are still not in favor of the opinion that individual merits and efforts can bring success. Interestingly, farmers' attitudes have changed most significantly over time since the transformation: they began to value the meritocratic approach, while at the same time not resigning from the importance of social networks and external circumstance. For comparison, in 2003 the mean of the meritocratic scale for farmers was $-0,087$, but in 2013 it was $0,127$. For the social dimension (including family, friends, and good luck determinants), it was respectively $0,192$ and $0,297$. The changes in attitudes among farmers might be the consequence of the material support that they gained after the accession of Poland to the European Union.

Dynamics of Opinion Changes in 2008–2013

Panel studies offer a unique opportunity to see how the opinion of the same group of people changes over time. POLPAN as such allows for deeper longitudinal analysis of attitude dynamics that we have presented above. We are interested in tracing changes in opinion in such situations in which respondents endure grand transformations, and in which their opinions change greatly. For example, when a respondent in one panel wave declared that some determinant of success was essential or very important, but then five years later stated that it was somewhat not important or completely unim-

portant, it raises questions regarding the nature or cause of such a radical change over such a short period of time.⁷ Such radical changes in opinion should be distinguished from lighter changes involving only a marginal strengthening or weakening of opinions (e.g., from ‘absolutely necessary’ to ‘very important,’ or from ‘somewhat important’ to ‘somewhat not important’). This suggests that respondents’ attitudes are generally stable across time, and such slight changes as minor fluctuations in intensity of support from one wave to the next may come only from the specificity of the scale.

In this paper we concentrate on the analysis of the dynamics of change in opinion of panel respondents on the time span from 2008 to 2013, which are the two last waves of the POLPAN survey. This gives the possibility to understand how the distribution of opinions about the importance of the determinants of success has been shaped in the last decade. We investigate whether and which opinions seem to be relatively stable and the extent to which radical changes have occurred in the perception of the determinants.

As can be seen in [Figure 5](#), the most dynamic changes of opinions in 2013 as compared to 2008 occurred in the case of the evaluation of the ‘political influence’ and ‘coming from a rich family’ determinants of success. Here we can see the highest percentage of panel respondents who have changed their opinions, from thinking that these factors were crucial to then switching to the view that they are not at all important.

In the case of ‘political influence’, 44% of respondents changed their opinion in a positive direction, and nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of them (13% of total) switched their view from extremely negative (saying that political influence is not at all important) to positive (meaning that it is important or essential). Fewer respondents changed their opinion in the opposite direction (29%) as compared to 2008. 8% of respondents changed their opinion radically, from positive to negative: from clear support for the importance of political influence in achieving success to negating that it has any influence. The dynamics of opinion about the role of coming from a rich family is almost identical, with a slight difference in a greater percentage of change towards a negative direction of evaluation.

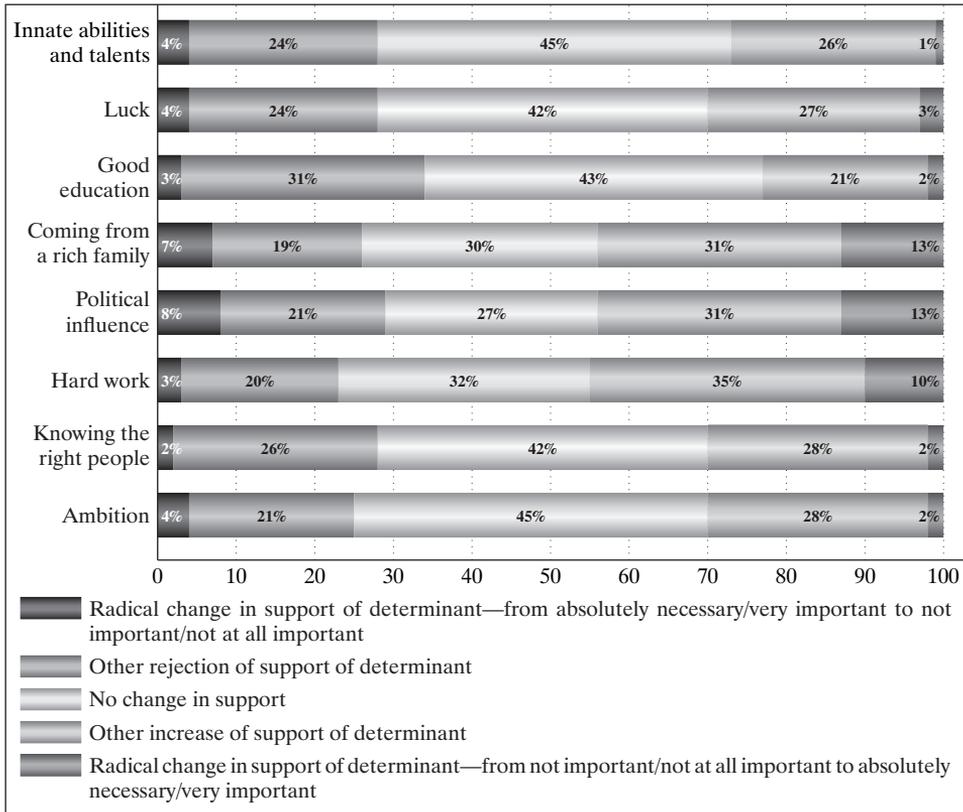
The factor with the biggest positive balance is ‘hard work’. Here up to 45% of respondents changed their opinion in a positive direction, and 10% switched from a radical rejection of the importance of this factor to a positive recognition of its role in achieving success. In [Figure 5](#) we can also see how the role of good education weakened over the last five years—although there are relatively few major changes here, a visibly large percentage of panel respondents changed their opinion in a negative direction. As such, it is the factor with the highest negative balance.

We have also investigated the extent to which the pattern of the dynamics of individual success determinants is visible on the aggregate level of the two attitudinal dimensions: meritocratic and family and friends. Such analysis will show us the radicalization of attitudes on a more general level, and will depict the overall increase or decrease of support of meritocracy in Poland. In order to perform such an analysis and

⁷ In the analysis we treat the answer ‘(3) somewhat important’ as the middle of the scale, meaning the neutral response.

Figure 5

Structure of dynamic of respondents opinions about determinants of success in years 2008–2013. Comparison of the percentages of respondents who changed their opinion radically (from positive to negative and vice versa), with mild changes (with the division into an increase in support and rejection of each determinant of success), and with the percentage of respondents whose opinion maintained unchanged



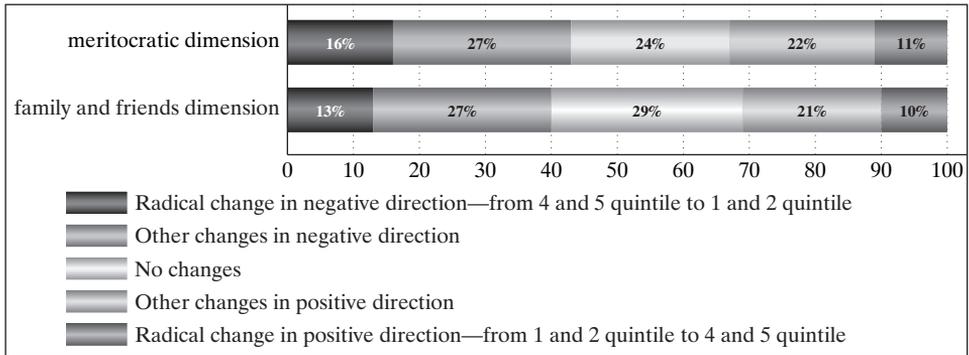
Source: POLPAN data, 2008–2013. In analyzes were taken into account those respondents who took part in both waves of the survey.

to offer comparability on two dimensions of attitudes with individual determinants, we have recoded each factor to a 5-point scale by dividing values into quintiles. Values from 1 to 5 were assigned to those intervals, where 1 is a categorical rejection of the dimension, 2 stands for moderate rejection, 3 is the middle of the scale, 4 represents moderate support, and 5 indicates full support of the factor. Analysis of the two dimensions is conducted analogically to the analysis of individual determinants—meaning that a radical change of opinion is understood as a switch from 1 or 2 to 4 or 5, and vice versa. Other one-point changes in the measure of opinion are treated as non-radical.

Figure 6, which shows the patterns of the change of opinions of panel respondents on the meritocratic and social dimensions, shows that fluctuations in overall attitudes on the level of individual determinants is mitigating, resembling patterns observed

Figure 6

Structure of dynamic of respondents support for ‘meritocratic’ and ‘family and friends’ dimension of success in years 2008–2013. Comparison of the percentages of respondents who changed their opinion radically (from positive to negative and vice versa), with mild changes (with the division into an increase in support and rejection of each determinant of success) and with the percentage of respondents whose opinion maintained unchanged



Source: POLPAN data, 2008–2013. In analyzes were taken into account those respondents who took part in both waves of the survey.

among both dimensions. For the social dimension we can observe the relatively high stability of opinions as compared to the meritocratic dimension: respectively, 29% vs. 23% of respondents maintained the same positions. There is also a slightly higher percentage of radical changes in opinions on meritocratic determinants. The percent of slight changes in either positive or negative directions for both meritocratic and social dimensions are close to identical, which is an interesting pattern in itself.

Summary

An important element of studying individuals’ biographies is the analysis of whether they have achieved success in life and what determined their success. In this analysis we show what Poles think about the determinants of success and how these opinions have been changing over the last quarter of a century. We have asked respondents for their opinions about the role of such factors as: ambition, knowing the right people, hard work, good education, good luck, innate abilities and talents, political influence, and coming from a rich family.

A deeper analysis of the determinants of success provides an opportunity to distinguish between two hidden dimensions in the data structure, which describe two different sets of characteristics that influence success: a meritocratic dimension (meaning that success in life is connected with hard work and good education, together with ambition and innate abilities and talents); and a dimension associated with the power of one’s social network (family, acquaintances, people with influence), supported by a ‘good luck’ factor. Success in this latter conceptualization is based on external resources. Our analysis shows that the division between these two dimensions

has not become obsolete in the last 5 years, and that they are a reflection of the views of Poles.

The opinion that success in life depends on innate talents, developed by a good education and hard work (effort), suggests support for the meritocratic idea of social justice, in which the reward (or in this case broadly defined success) is distributed according to individual merit. Based on observed changing attitudes towards individual determinants of success, fluctuations in the meritocratic dimension are particularly interesting, specifically regarding attitudes towards good education and hard work. These determinants, in their own way, reflect an effort that should be made on the way to success. Currently, we see that the faith of Poles in hard work has increased significantly, but the belief that a good education is important has comparatively decreased.

Incredibly interesting are the results of the analysis of how the endorsement of both dimensions of success vary between social groups. Analysis shows that support for the meritocratic dimension grows together with the education of respondents. As for the 'family and friends' dimension, support decreases with higher social status and income, although it increases together with the age of respondents.

It turns out that belief in the meritocratic dimension of achieving success is highest among groups that benefitted the most from the transformation; the strongest correlation was observed among the expert and managerial classes. On the other hand, the groups that mainly 'lost' during the transformation, such as skilled and unskilled workers, were less likely to have faith in the power of meritocracy. Among social classes, the biggest change since the transformation occurred in the attitudes of farmers—they began valuing the meritocratic approach while at the same time not resigning from valuing the importance of social networks and good luck.

The analysis of the dynamics of panel respondents' opinions on the main determinants of success have revealed the extent to which views and opinions have changed over the last two waves of the POLPAN survey. The relatively largest change in attitudes occurred in the evaluation of such determinants as coming from a rich family and political influence.

What changes in the perception of success we can expect in the future? Many issues cannot be predicted in a rapidly changing reality and with new generations of Poles. However, there is a good chance of maintenance of the growing strength of meritocratic criteria of achieving success in life, meaning the growing positive evaluation of an active path to success, although with the reduced role of higher education.

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