

CIVIL SOCIETY CRISIS IN POLAND AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICIANS

**Adam Grabowski, PhD, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn,
Katedra Psychologii, ul. Prawocheńskiego 13, 10-100 Olsztyn, Poland,
gradam@uwm.edu.pl, +48503642953**

Abstract. The unsettlingly high percentage of Polish citizens (especially young and well-educated ones) choosing not to participate in democratic procedures, such as elections, referenda etc., can be regarded as the basic symptom of a serious civil society crisis observed in Poland nowadays. In search of the antecedents of the crisis, analysts point primarily to the faulty functioning of the state main institutions. Social psychology suggests a different approach to studying the antecedents: It may be much more important how politicians themselves are perceived and evaluated than what the citizens' opinion about the state institutions is. Thus, the present study examined young people's attitudes (and the attitudes' predictors) towards politicians – members of the three parties representing the main political forces in Poland: PiS (Law and Justice), SLD (Democratic Left Union), and PO (Citizens' Platform). The results consistently demonstrate that Polish politicians, even those representing the PO who evoked the respondents' most positive reactions as compared to those from the other two parties, are not too highly-evaluated, particularly because their morality is assessed as low. The personal, usually far from being positive, attitudes towards politicians then might be the main reason why so many Poles choose not to participate in the social-political life.

Key-words: Citizens, politicians, dialogue, attitude, competence, morality.

Introduction

In any democratic country politicians and citizens are interdependent: On the one hand, politicians' being in power depends on citizens' participating in democratic procedures, on the other, virtually all aspects of citizens' everyday existence are affected by politicians' decisions. The interdependence or reciprocal influence (Markus, 2001) could be perceived as a form of dialogue between the society and its political leaders (Habermas, 1996). This paper aims to examine why the Polish post-communist democracy resembles the politicians' monologue rather than their dialogue with the citizens. Indeed, even though the politicians always remain the active party in the interaction, there is an unsettlingly high percentage of Polish citizens (especially young and well-educated ones, cf. Czeńnik, 2007; Korkut, 2005) withdrawing from the dialogue and choosing not to participate in elections, referenda or any other democratic procedures (Regulska, 2009). This democratic passivity is regarded as the basic symptom of a serious civil society crisis affecting the post-communist Polish democracy (Czeńnik, 2007; Szumlewicz, 2008). The usual turnout at the parliamentary election, for example, oscillates between 40 and 50%. It decreases to barely 40%, however, if the election is to local self-government structures (Regulska, 2009) and even more so, to approximately 20% (!), if the European Parliament Members are elected.

Analysing the meagre participation phenomenon, experts point out that Polish citizens may generally feel neglected and exploited by the faulty functioning state institutions represented by officials (usually recruited from political parties) pursuing their own rather than the citizens'

happiness (Cześnik, 2007; Lipiński, 2004). Further, as sociologists emphasise, a considerable number of citizens might feel discouraged to vote because of the discrepancy between what politicians promise before the elections and what they actually do afterwards (Korkut, 2005). Also, there could be widespread confusion over the politicians' real intentions as it is frequently the case that the social goals political parties claim to pursue are incompatible with their political options (cf. Lipiński, 2004; Szumlewicz, 2008).

One important aspect, however, still seems to be insufficiently explored: How Polish citizens perceive and evaluate politicians as humans rather than the parties or state institutions they represent. The present research concentrates on this very aspect. It focuses both on citizens' overall personal evaluations of politicians, and on their assessments of the politicians' morality and competence (the most probable antecedents of the evaluations). Psychologists analysing social perception processes have already shown that competence and morality (or agency and communion, as they tend to be called nowadays) are the two basic dimension of interpersonal judgement (e.g.: Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke, 1991; 1994; 2005). The morality/communion dimension pertains to one's relations with others. One's morality, e.g. whether or not one is honest, just, truthful, etc., primarily affects the recipient(s) of one's actions rather than oneself. The competence/agency dimension, on the other hand, pertains to one's individual strivings. One's competence, e.g. whether or not one is effective, efficient, intelligent, etc., primarily affects oneself. Therefore, the interpersonal overall judgement is usually predominated by the morality assessment. Even several positive competence characteristics cannot counterbalance a moral one if it is seriously negative. An intelligent, imaginative, and efficient person, for example, is not typically considered to be positive if they are a thief. On the contrary, the more competent the thief should turn out to be, the more negatively they would generally be evaluated.

As demonstrated by Fazio (1990), an attitude, conceived of as an overall evaluation, usually underlies one's behaviour towards the evaluated. Thus, as for the "dialogue" between Polish citizens and politicians, the former's conduct could essentially be due to their attitudes towards the latter. As mentioned above, analysts seem to be particularly concerned about young and well-educated citizens' reluctance to participate in democratic procedures. The present research concentrates therefore on junior intellectuals' attitudes towards politicians and aims to verify two hypotheses. **Hypothesis 1:** The attitudes are not positive as they are primarily determined by the negative assessment of the politicians' morality. Note that this could essentially clarify why so many young (and other) citizens choose to remain democratically inactive. If politicians are not

highly-evaluated because they are generally perceived as immoral (at least in the social-psychological sense, see above), there really seems to be no point in participating in elections. It would amount to voting for the untrustworthy in any case. **Hypothesis 2:** The current political situation, i.e. which party is (and which is not) in power, does not significantly affect the attitudes towards politicians.

Research method

The politicians in question (i.e. the objects of the analysed attitudes) represented three main Polish political parties: PiS (Law and Justice, a right-wing party), SLD (Democratic Left Union, a left-wing party), and PO (Citizens' Platform, a liberal party). In order to verify Hypothesis 2, the study was carried out twice. First in spring 2007 when PiS had been in power for over a year after taking it over from SLD in 2005, and PO had been the most likely winner of the following parliamentary election (to happen, as it turned out, as early as in the autumn of that same year 2007). Then, for the second time, in 2009 when PO had been in power for over a year. Three hundred and eighteen men and women (191 in 2007, and 127 in 2009) at the average age of 26.5 years and representing intelligentsia took part in both parts of the study.

The participants' attitudes were assessed with a standard attitude measure (cf. Fazio 1995), i.e. with a seven-point scale (1 = "extremely negative", 7 = "extremely positive"): "*My overall opinion about politicians representing (PO, PiS, SLD) is ...*" – each questionnaire page with a different party name. Similarly, the politicians' perceived morality and competence were both measured with seven-point scales (1 = "not at all", 7 = "absolutely"): "*In my opinion, the politicians representing (PO, PiS, SLD) are ...*" followed by four positive (+) and four negative (-) characteristics (two morality-related (M) and two competence-related (C) in either set): "*truthful*" (+M), "*egoistic*" (-M), "*intelligent*" (+C), "*dishonest*" (-M), "*just*" (+M), "*not resourceful*" (-C), "*clever*" (+C), and "*inefficient*" (-C).

Results and discussion

a) Overall attitude

As hypothesised, the overall attitudes towards politicians were not positive. Even the PO members, though generally perceived far better than the representatives of the other two parties, were not in fact evaluated positively but neutrally at best. The average attitude measure value did not significantly exceed 4, i.e. the middle point on a 7-point scale. Also, as hypothesised, the

attitudes towards representatives of each party were scarcely modified by the political situation. Though the average attitude values in 2007 slightly differed from those in 2009 (see: Table 1), the differences did not reach the standard level of statistical significance (as verified with the *t*-Student test).

Table 1. Overall attitudes towards politicians (a 7-point scale, 1 = “extremely negative”; 7 = “extremely positive”)

| When measured: | Overall attitude towards politicians representing: | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------|------|------|
| | PO | PiS | SLD |
| 2009 | 4.29 | 2.15 | 2.96 |
| 2007 | 3.86 | 2.23 | 3.11 |

b) Antecedents of the overall attitudes – the politicians’ perceived morality and competence

The mean evaluation of the politicians’ truthfulness, egoism, dishonesty, and justness was the measure of their morality. Two variables, “egoistic” and “dishonest”, were reverse-coded (i.e. 1 = 7, 2 = 6, 3 = 5, ... 7 = 1), so that the participants’ evaluations of the politicians’ all morality-related characteristics could be interpreted uniformly. The mean evaluation of the politicians’ intelligence, inefficiency, cleverness, and non-resourcefulness was the measure of their competence. Similarly, two variables, “inefficient” and “not resourceful”, were reverse-coded.

Even though the politicians representing PO were perceived as more moral and more competent than the representatives of the other two parties, the average evaluations of their morality and competence were again neutral at best. They were also perceived as more competent than moral, and so were those representing SLD (in either case the differences statistically significant, as verified with the *t*-Student test). The politicians representing PiS were perceived as equally moral as competent but in either case less so than those from the other two parties (see: Table 2).

Table 2. Politicians’ perceived morality and competence (a 7-point scale, 1 = “not at all”; 7 = “absolutely”)

| When measured | PO | | PiS | | SLD | |
|---------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| | morality | competence | morality | competence | morality | competence |
| 2009 | 4.06 | 4.43 | 2.99 | 2.98 | 3.19 | 3.73 |
| 2007 | 3.94 | 4.46 | 2.60 | 2.70 | 3.17 | 3.94 |

In order to find out whether the general opinion is primarily determined by the morality assessment (as postulated in Hypothesis 1), the overall attitude was regressed on the morality and competence measures. The pattern of results was generally concordant with the hypothesised. The overall attitude towards the PiS representatives, however, in 2009 turned out to be dependent on their competence more than on morality, though the difference was minimal. On the other hand, also in 2009, the general evaluation of the PO politicians was apparently independent of their competence but strongly determined by morality (see: Table 3).

Table 3. Overall attitude regressed on morality and competence (β coefficients). All results *-signed statistically significant ($p=.02$).

| When measured | General evaluation of PO predicted by | | General evaluation of PiS predicted by | | General evaluation of SLD predicted by | |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------------|------------|
| | morality | competence | morality | competence | morality | competence |
| 2009 | .69* | -.01 | .34* | .35* | .39* | .23* |
| 2007 | .36* | .33* | .46* | .18* | .32* | .25* |

The results obtained in both parts of the study yield a very convergent pattern. As hypothesised, the participants' attitudes towards politicians did not appear to be positive. Even the PO representatives, who compared quite favourably with those of the other two parties, were in fact evaluated neutrally at best. Also, as predicted, the overall evaluation of the politicians tended to be primarily determined by the assessment of their morality. The only marginal exception was the attitude towards the PiS representatives in 2009 (see above). Thus the present results are consistent with the previous social-perception research on the primacy of morality over competence judgements in overall evaluations of others. Interestingly enough, though for the second time examined in an altered political situation and with a different group of participants, the attitudes towards the three selected parties turned out to be virtually identical, which lends credence to Hypothesis 2.

Conclusion

The present study is a pioneering attempt to view the civil society crisis in Poland, i.e. the problem of citizens' meagre participation in democratic procedures, from the social-psychological perspective. As mentioned above, the previous, mainly sociological analyses, concentrated

primarily on the faulty functioning of the state institutions and citizens' possible reactions. However important those aspects of the relations between politicians and citizens might be, the present findings are very likely to demonstrate the actual reason for the citizens' common withdrawal from the democratic activity. Though not representative of the entire Polish society, the results presented above clearly point to personal, usually far from positive attitudes towards politicians. The attitudes do not seem to be dependent on the current political situation, i.e. which politicians are, and which only aspire to be in power. Instead, the factor most affecting the attitudes turns out to be the politicians' perceived morality (which is in line with the previous social-psychological research on the interpersonal perception and judgement main dimensions, e.g. Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; see above). Thus, the common passivity at the election time does appear to result from the attitudes (cf. Fazio, 1990). Indeed, it seems hardly surprising that so many Poles choose not to vote if they regard politicians as not particularly truthful, just or honest. "There's no point in voting for anyone – you can't trust any of them" – is most probably the passive citizens' opinion (Regulska, 2009). As a matter of fact, ever since 1989, there have definitely been a sufficient number of incidents involving politicians doing their "best" to deserve the negative opinion. Overt cynicism and two-facedness, greed, total incompetence as well as involvement in corruption and nepotism have all sadly been far too often characteristic of representatives of various Polish political parties (Labuda, 2004).

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