ATTITUDINAL AND BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS OF POLISH CIVIC CULTURE 2009

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I. Introduction

To understand the place of democratic ideas in the Polish political culture, one has to understand their historical roots. Poland was one of the first democratic countries in the world. In 1791 the Polish parliament voted for the Constitution of May the 3rd, which was a kind of compromise between monarchical and republican orientations. The Constitution followed British patterns, Montesquieu's division of powers, the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This constitution was the first modern democratic constitution in Europe, though some historians consider it the second one, after the Corsican Constitution of 1755.

The Polish parliamentary tradition is very liberal and very controversial at the same time. Since the rule of *liberum veto* allowed one deputy to block the decisions of the majority, it was a potential obstacle to introducing a new, purely democratic constitution, and the fact that the Constitution was passed is proof of very strong reformative influence.

However, the time of Constitution passage was unfortunate since the first partition of the Polish territory had occurred in 1772, partitioning Poland

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between Russia and Prussia. The second partition took place in 1793, and the third partition in 1795 when Austria joined Russia and Prussia in a very complicated political arrangement. Poland lost its political and national independence for the next 123 years; essentially, the state no longer existed.

The primary aim of the partition of Poland was, of course, the fulfillment of the imperial goals and interests of Russia, Prussia and, later, Austria. However, also important was an attempt by these authoritarian powers, especially Russia and Prussia, to stop the spread of democratic ideas in Europe. Thus, all Polish freedom movements since then concerned, at least to some extent, not only national but also democratic ideas. That pro-democratic component of national ideas was reinforced more currently by the opposition to and fight against Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union.

It is a kind of paradox that, after the long-awaited recovery of the Polish state in 1918, democracy could not fully develop because of short period of time between 1918 and the beginning of the Nazi occupation in 1939 and then– the Soviet Union control. A democratic parliamentary system established right after 1918 was curbed by an autocratic–albeit far from dictatorial–regime in 1934, which was not unusual in Europe at that time.[1]

Polish civic culture has to be discussed with this historical context in mind. The classic definition of civic culture has three main components: citizen interest and involvement in politics, congruency between political culture and political structure (citizens' positive orientation towards democratic political structure), and the balance between the participatory orientation of citizens and their orientation as subjects/parochials (Almond and Verba, 1989).
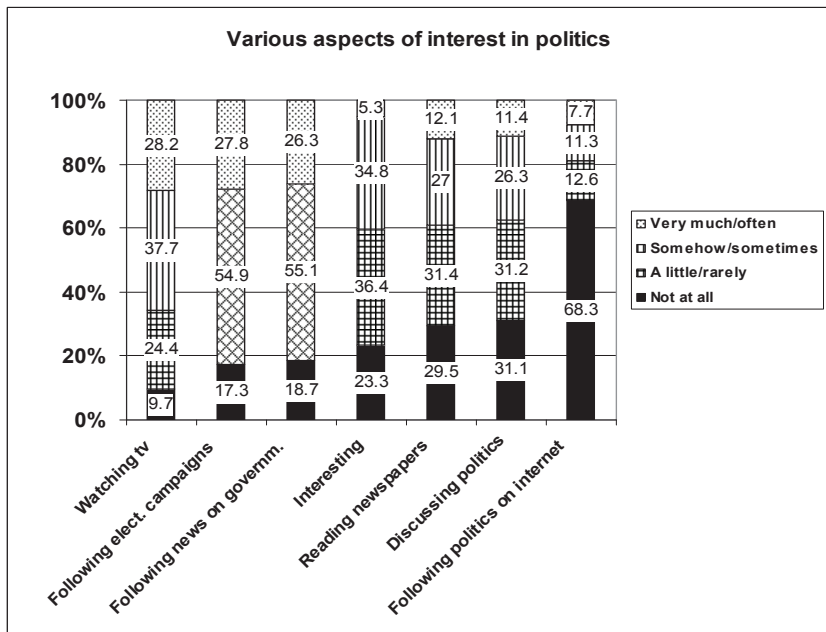
The following sections measure and discuss factors that contribute to these three elements, namely, overall interest and involvement in politics, different kinds of trust in and distrust, perception of foreign nations' attitudes toward Poles, and religiosity. Finally, the correlates of these factors are discussed.

II. Overall interest and involvement in politics

The very existence of civic society depends on the people's interest in politics. The interest in politics among Poles was measured by a series of survey questions about ways in which such interest is manifested. In our opinion, the best indicators of a real interest in politics are the two extreme responses to questions about such interest ("very much/often" and "not at all").

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[1] For a comprehensive discussion of the Polish history, see Davies, 1981.
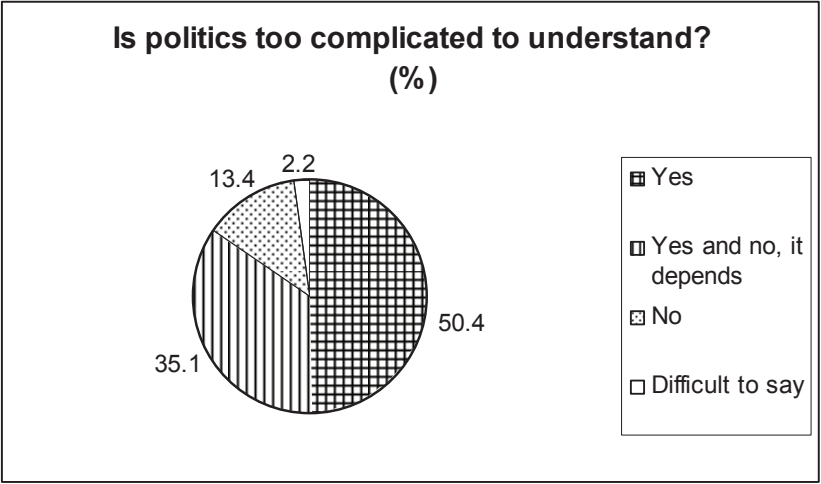
Figure 1

Overall, interest in politics is low in Poland, and is demonstrated to a large extent by watching informational programs on TV, and following electoral campaigns and government activities (figure 1). Only a quarter of the adult population reports watching TV for the purpose of getting information about politics very often, and other sources of information are used even less frequently, probably because using them requires more effort.

It is significant that only 11% of adult Poles report participating in political discussions. This result contradicts a long-held stereotypical assumption that Poles are talented in discussing politics in informal social circles.

A large majority of the population (almost 70%) never use the internet as a source of political information, and less than 8% use it for that purpose very often, which is surprising given that most recent research on internet penetration has indicated that 56% of the population uses the internet for various purposes (Wentzel, 2009).

The low interest in politics might be explained by the common belief that politics is too complicated to understand (figure 2). Over half of adult Poles reported that it was often too complicated to understand, and another 35% reported that it was sometimes too complicated to understand.

Figure 2

The observation of low interest in politics is confirmed by the data concerning political behavior (FIGURES 3 and 4). Only two-thirds of Poles said they had voted in the last election and less than half intended to vote in the next election (The actual electoral participation in Poland is usually below fifty percent).
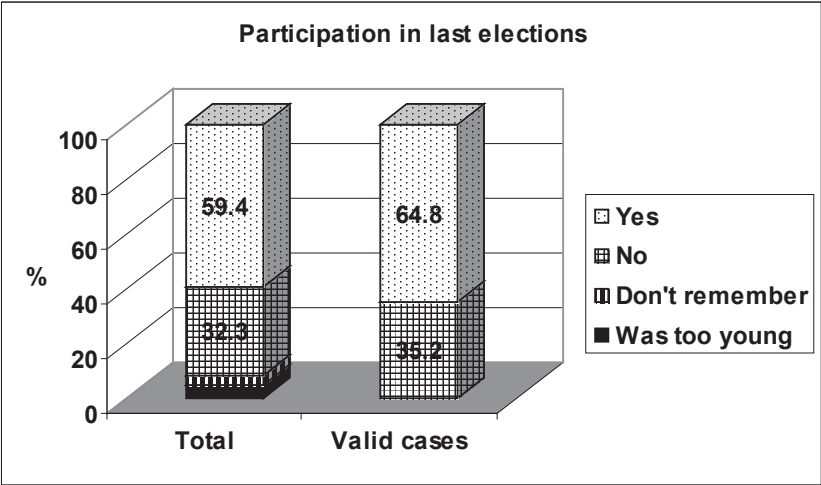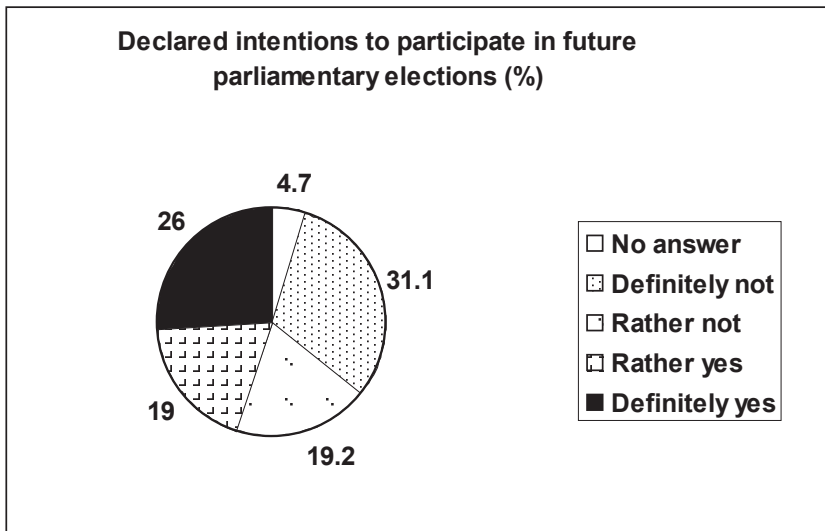
Figure 3

Figure 4

Declared intentions to participate in future parliamentary elections (%)

4.7
26
31.1
19
19.2

☐ **No answer**
▨ **Definitely not**
☐ **Rather not**
▨ **Rather yes**
■ **Definitely yes**

The percentage of voters who say that they will definitely not vote in the next election is significantly larger than those who say they will definitely participate in the election. Because of intransigent problems and conflicts on the political scene in Poland, the electorate seems to be bored with new scandals and quarrels and is disappointed with the performance of political elites, although there is no real alternative to currently active politicians. Thus, the voters in most elections tend to vote "against", rather than "for". The view that a typical individual citizen cannot have any significant influence on the economic and political decisions made by those who govern the society is very common. For additional evidence of overall low interest in politics, we asked Poles how often they had tried to influence economic or political decisions on various levels of society and found that the number was negligible on the local, national or parliamentary level (Figures 5-7).
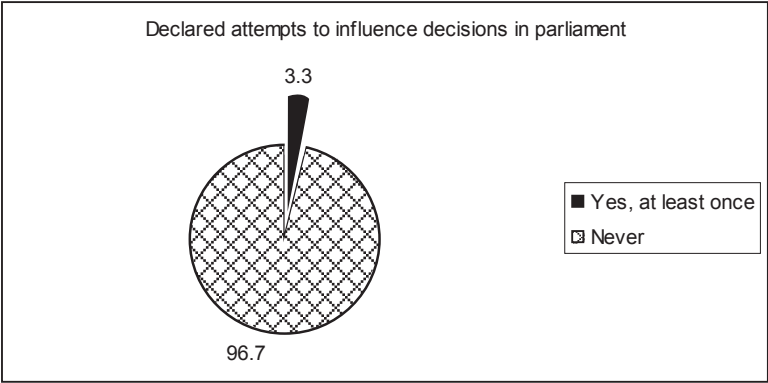
Figure 5

Declared attempts to influence decisions in parliament

3.3

96.7

■ Yes, at least once
☒ Never

Figure 6

Declared attempts to influence decisions on national level

1.1 4.8

94.1

■ Often
▤ Once or few times
☒ Never

Figure 7

Declared attempts to influence decisions on local level
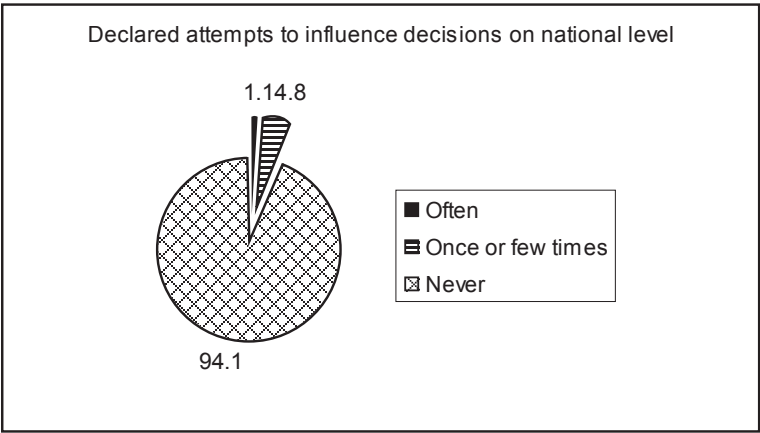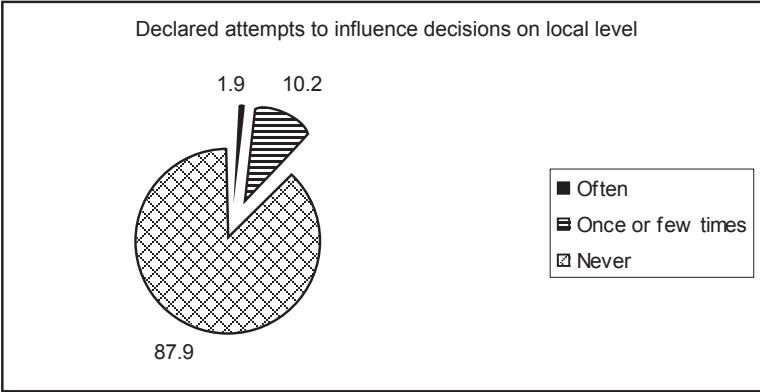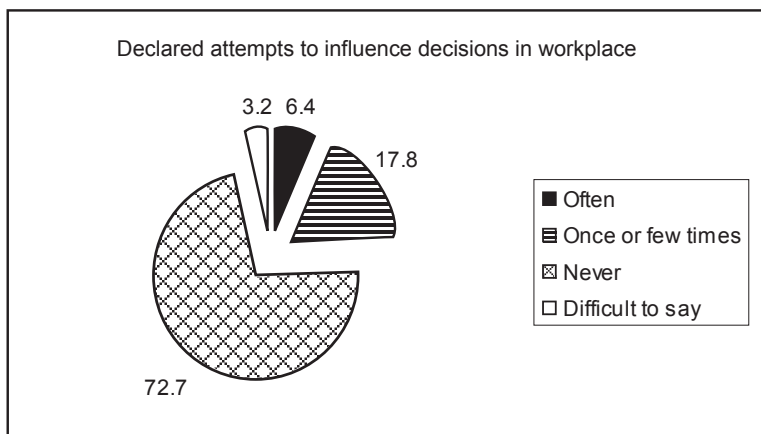

1.9   10.2

87.9

■ Often
▤ Once or few times
☒ Never

Only one in eight adult Poles have tried to influence economic or political decisions on the local level, and the number of those who had tried to so often is negligible. The percentage of people who have tried to influence decisions at their workplace often (7%) or once/few times (18%) is higher than at the higher societal levels, but still not high (figure 8).

Figure 8

Such a low level of political activity on all levels confirms the low level of interest in politics and the low level of trust in individuals' ability to influence the system. Sztompka (2007) contended that a social climate of trust depends on five factors:

— historical inheritance;
— structural context (stability of norms of safety of existence);
— stability of social order;
— subordination of power elites to the legal norms;
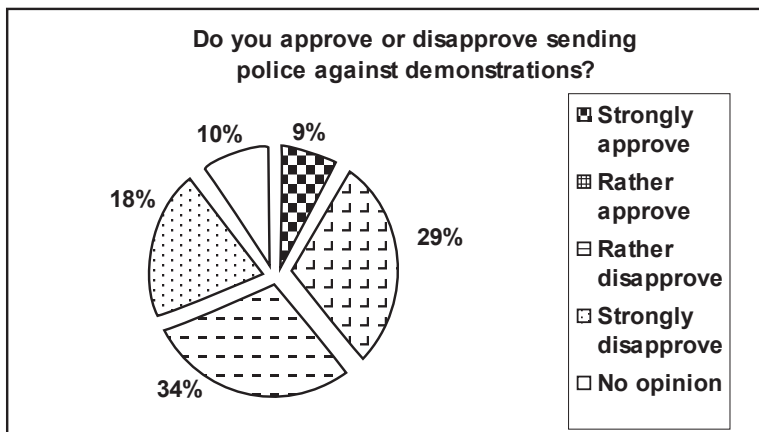— execution of obligations and satisfaction of rights.

Polish citizens' historical experiences, the instability of the social order, and unclear (from the legal point of view) actions of power elites have produced poor ground for social trust.

Participation in various types of social organizations is also rare. The questionnaire included 29 questions concerning membership in differentm-kinds of social organizations. For some types of organizations (for example., trade unions, political parties, parish organizations) a positive answer to a question indicated membership in one organization since most persons can

belong to only one. However, positive answers could sometimes indicate membership in more than one organization for, for example, sport organizations, academic associations etc. Thus, our data on number of memberships concern the number of different types of organizations to which an individual belongs. We may assume, though, that the number of types of organizations is only slightly lower than the number of organizations to which a person belongs, since memberships in several similar organizations tends to be rare. This may be especially true in Poland, where few people belong to any organization at all. About 70% of Poles do not belong to any organization. About a fifth of them (19.2%) participate in one kind of organization and only about one in ten (10.6%) belong to more than one. An "average" Pole belongs to 0.52% of the 29 types of organization we listed. Similar observations were found in research conducted by CBOS (i.e., Wciorka, 2008b); in addition, membership in social organizations tended to diminish over the period 1998-2008. The figures are even lower, if we ask about active participation (membership and activity) in organizations. Only 11% of Poles consider themselves as active members (Zukowski and Theiss, 2010).
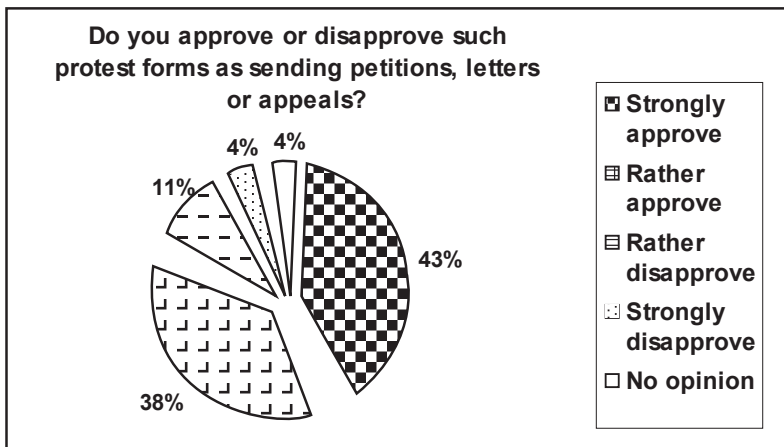
Some political scientists contend that the relative weakness of Polish non-governmental organizations is recompensed by the great number of legitimized social protests, which supposedly constitute a specific feature of Polish civic society. Some of these scholars have suggested that the number of socially acceptable protests consolidates, rather than destabilizes, the Polish democracy (Ekiert and Kubik, 2001). The acceptance of social protests, whether economic or political, is best indicated by the rejection of the use force against them (figure 9).

Figure 9

Do you approve or disapprove sending police against demonstrations?

- Strongly approve
- Rather approve
- Rather disapprove
- Strongly disapprove
- No opinion

About half (52%) of Poles are against using force against demonstrations, while 38% would accept it. When we asked about acceptance of one of the weakest forms of protest, signing petitions or appeals and sending protest letters, as many as 81.3% approved such protests, while only 14.7% disapproved them (figure 10). However, only a little more than a third of Poles (36.3%) indicated that they had ever signed a petition, protest letter or appeal.
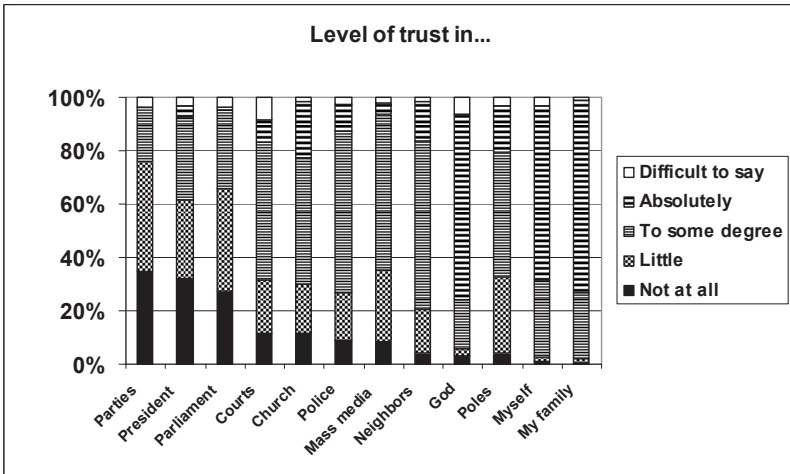
Figure 10

This finding shows the social tendency to protest, rather than to act positively on behalf of change. People do not believe in the efficiency of individual or group involvement in influencing social life, but they do believe in the efficiency of organized protest. Poland is characterized by a "culture of distrust" that can be observed on various societal levels (Wieczorkowska, 2007, Sztompka, 2007, Wierzbinski, 2009, Slomczynski and Janicka, 2009).

III. TRUST AND DISTRUST

The "culture of distrust" hypothesis can be confirmed by low level of trust in social and political institutions. One of the reasons for the low number of Poles who attempt to influence political decisions may be the low level of trust in social and political institutions. Poles trust God, their families and themselves, followed at some distance by the Catholic Church.

However, the percentage of people who distrust the Church is significantly higher than the percentage of those who distrust their own families, God or themselves (figure 11).

Figure 11

The most significant level of distrust concerns political institutions: parties, the president, parliament and the government, as well as the mass media, especially the media in Poland that is tied to political parties and reflects their interests. Other social institutions, such as the courts, the Church and police, gained higher scores than political institutions. Poles trust their neighbors and other Poles more than any political institution. With the exception of God and, to a lesser extent, the Church, Poles rely much more on subjects they can influence somehow: family, the local neighborhood and, obviously, themselves. To conclude, the institutions on the list that might be perceived as associated with politics and dependent on political elites gathered low level of trust.

This finding is in contrast to what has been found in the American society, where people tend to be more positively inclined in terms of objects and situations that are unknown or abstract (Wierzbinski 2009). The Polish society tends to be distrustful in general but to have more positive attitudes and trust when the objects or situations are known but not abstract .

To find more general dimensions of trust in Polish society, we use factor analysis (more precisely the principal component analysis) to distinguished four separate dimensions of trust: social, political, religious and self. The distinction of political social and individual dimensions of trust, resulting
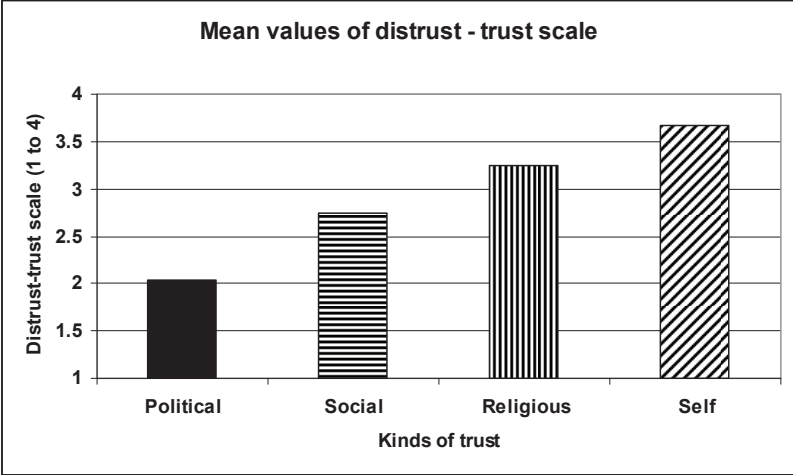
from empirical analysis, is consistent with intuitions and distinctions made by other social scientists and concerning different countries (see Schyns and Koop 2010 and the literature cited by them). The social dimension of trust consists of trust in the courts, the police, mass media, church, neighbors and Poles. This social dimension can be interpreted as concerning all the fundamental institutions of a society outside the politics. The political dimension of trust is empirically defined as trust in political parties, government and president, so it covers all of the most important political institutions. The religious dimension of trust includes trust in God and the Church, and self-trust concerns trust in one's family and oneself (table 1).

Table 1

Results of factor analysis

WHOM/WHAT DO YOU TRUST?	DIMENSIONS OF TRUST			
	SOCIAL	POLITICAL	RELIGIOUS	SELF
	Factor loadings (correlations with composite index)			
Courts	.656	0.328	0.198	-.144
Police	.642	0.226	0.357	-.106
Mass media	.593	0.255	0.027	0.027
Neighbors	.581	-.094	0.000	0.371
Compatriots (Other Poles)	.570	-.130	-.013	0.371
Political parties	.063	.838	.047	.047
Government	.228	.797	-.054	.104
President	.129	.462	.443	.015
Church	.252	.084	.797	.094
God	-.019	-.079	.779	.203
My family	.074	.075	.049	.805
Myself	-.040	.122	.271	.686

Figure 12 presents the average level of trust in subjects in each of the four dimensions on a scale of 1 to 4. Consistent with previous findings, the trust in family and oneself is much stronger than that even in God and Church.
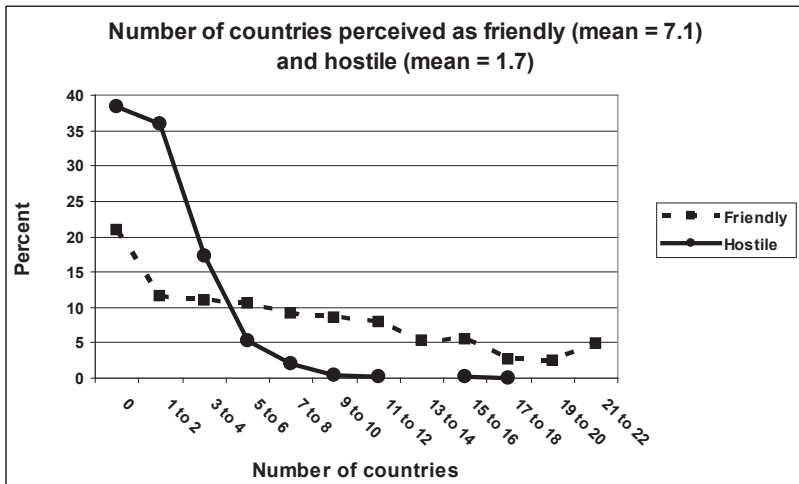
Figure 12

Poles show much weaker trust in political and social institutions than the other two dimensions of trust. This finding confirms that of earlier research (Wciorka, 2008a).

IV. Perception of foreign nations' attitudes toward Poles

In order to understand various correlates of political interest and involvement, we investigated our respondents' perception of foreign nations' attitudes toward Poles. We assume that level of xenophobia may negatively influence other aspects of civic society.

Figure 13 shows that Poles perceive the outer world as predominantly friendly; the majority see at least some foreign nations as friendly toward Poles, and about 40% see no hostile attitudes toward Poles by any of the 22 nations listed in the questionnaire. As many as a third perceive only one or two nationalities as hostile, with Germans and Russians cited most frequently.

Figure 13

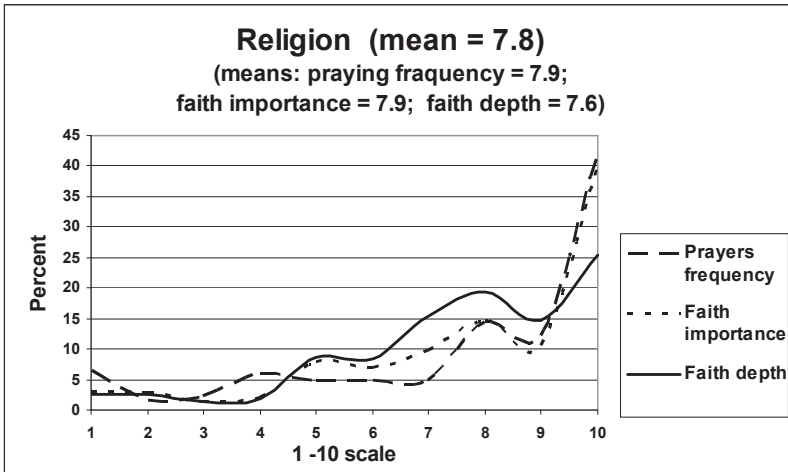**Number of countries perceived as friendly (mean = 7.1) and hostile (mean = 1.7)**

The perceptions of foreign nations are likely to be dependent on the social distance to the objects evaluated. Although the two nations, Russia and Germany, cannot be perceived by Poles as distant and not known, the historical experience with them was harmful. This historical experience, rather than perceptual distance, drives the perception of hostility toward Poles.

V. RELIGIOSITY OF POLES

We investigated three components of religiosity —praying frequency, importance of faith and depth of faith— and measured each on a ten-point scale. Poland is considered a Catholic country and Poles are usually seen as strongly involved in religion and religious practices.

The index of religiosity (the mean of the three scales) confirms that common belief only to an extent. Although the means of all three indicators are relatively high (nearly 8 on a 10-point scale), the religiousness of Poles is reflected more in frequency of prayer and the declared importance of faith, rather than the depth of faith (figure 14). Irrespective of that, all three aspects of religiosity are so strongly correlated that the composite index calculated as their average can be used in further analyses.

Figure 14

Religion (mean = 7.8)
(means: praying fraquency = 7.9;
faith importance = 7.9; faith depth = 7.6)

VI. Correlates of interest and involvement in politics

There is a relatively small but still positive correlation between participation in elections and political trust, national pride (measured by a separate question), perceiving other nations as friendly, trust in social institutions, and self-trust (figure 15). It is not surprising that educated people tend to vote more often than uneducated ones.

Negative correlates of participation in elections are religiosity, religious trust, perception of foreign nations as hostile, and age (the older the person, the less likely a he or she participates in elections).

The strongest correlates of political involvement are trust in political institutions and level of education: the higher they are, the more likely a person is to have participated in the last election and to intend to participate in the next one (figure 15).
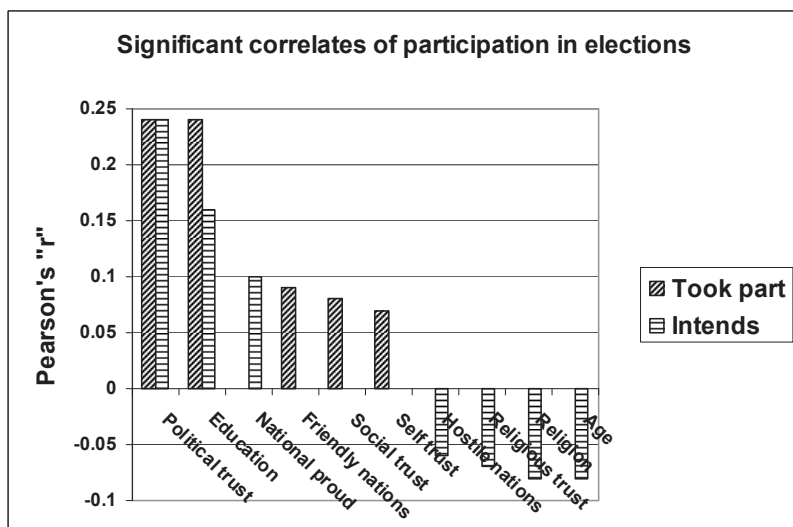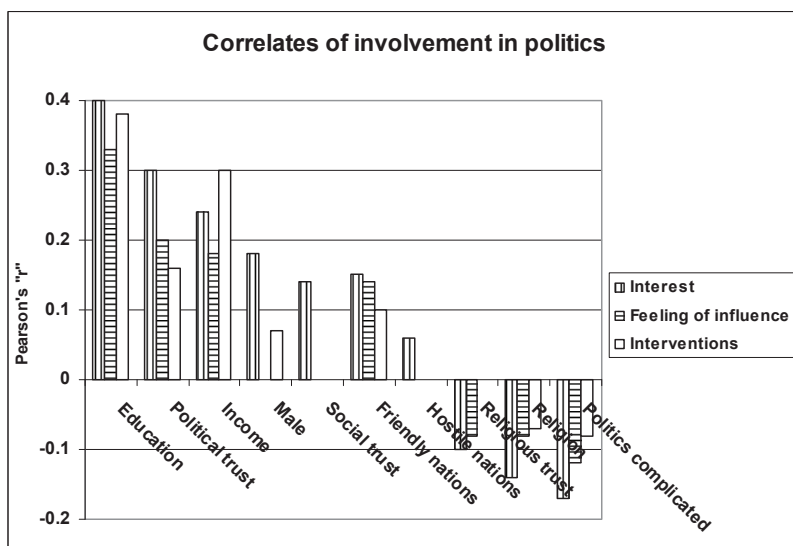
Figure 15

Significant correlates of participation in elections

Figure 16

Correlates of involvement in politics

The most important correlates of interest in politics and political involvement is education. Trust in political institutions is correlated to overall interest in politics, and income is correlated to the feeling that one can intervene effectively in politics and, to a lesser extent, overall interest in politics. There are negative correlations between interest in politics and difficulty understanding politics, religiosity and trust in God and church (figure 16).

Although the perception that the foreign world is hostile is negatively correlated with voting behavior, it is positively correlated with interest in politics (but not with feeling an ability to influence or attempts to intervene). Perceiving foreign nations as predominantly friendly is positively correlated with actual participation in elections and with interest in politics, feeling an ability to influence and attempts to intervene.

All observed correlations, although statistically significant, are relatively weak.

Earlier analyses have indicated that social activity is positively correlated with religiosity (Wciorka, 2008; Zukowski and Theiss, 2010). Our data, too, show a positive correlation between religiosity and participation in social organizations. However, the correlation between religiosity and voting, as well as other aspects of political involvement, is negative. Thus, it may be reasonably concluded that religion is positively related to social involvement only on the local parish level.

VII. Conclusions

This paper is descriptive rather than theoretical. Its general conclusion is that Polish society is neither very interested nor very active in politics, and that this perspective is related to low levels of trust in political and social institutions. The current state of the Polish political culture is far from the civic culture model, so Polish society can be hardly called a developed civic society. Further development of the civic culture in Poland will require time.

Even so, earlier analyses indicated that Poles have democratic attitudes, so the hypothesis can be proposed that insufficient development of civic culture is not detrimental for the legitimacy and consolidation of a democratic system in Poland. That will constitute the subject of the next chapter, which will examine the Polish civic culture from the viewpoint of democratization.

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