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Do Political Parties Represent Women, the Poor, and the Elderly?

Party Images, Party System, and Democracy

Abstract: *In the course of their political lives, parties acquire policy reputations. These reputations consist of subjective evaluations of a party's position on the issues of the day, the totality of which is called "party image." I use a subsample of POLPAN 2008 to examine the party images of ten Polish political parties on the extent to which they represent women, the poor, and the elderly, and these images' relationships with attitude toward democracy and democratic engagement. I equate individuals' evaluation of all parties as their subjective evaluation of the entire party system. I measure evaluation of the party system by whether an individual believes that at least one of the ten parties represents the disadvantaged to either a high or moderate degree. I find that the significant few who have a nonpositive evaluation of the party system are less likely to think that democracy is always the best form of government and are less likely to want to vote. The effect of nonpositive evaluations is not specific to disadvantaged groups' evaluation of their own representation; rather, it is a general condition that strikes a sizable portion of the entire social structure.*

In the course of their lives, political parties acquire policy reputations, that is, subjective evaluations held by individuals and groups of a party's position on the issues of the day. The totality of these perceptions is referred to as their "party image" (Baumer and Gold 1995, 2007; Philpot 2004; Trilling 1976). Distinct issues fragment party images, such that a party may have the reputation of being a defender of women's interests, while its reputation as proponent of the poor may be different.

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At the same time, social groups may disagree on party image; for example, women may view a party's reputation as representing women differently than men.

In this article, I use a subsample of POLPAN 2008 to examine the reputations of ten Polish political parties for representing women, the poor, and the elderly. I reconceptualize party image as an individual-level subjective evaluation of the party system. Evaluation of the party system is measured by whether an individual believes that at least one of the ten parties represents the disadvantaged to either a high or moderate degree.

Many party image studies focus on vote choice (Johns et al. 2009; Ogmundson 1975; Trilling 1976), but I am interested in the relationship between party image and other aspects of democracy, including the health of the party system, attitude toward democracy, and democratic engagement. That voters have images of the available political parties is sometimes taken as a sign that parties continue to be relevant actors, a positive indicator of the health of the party system (Baumer and Gold 1995). As an indicator of how well the party system works, party images are associated with attitude toward democracy and democratic engagement. The relationship works in the following way. Some argue that beyond establishing formal universal political rights, the political inclusion of the disadvantaged is required to enhance the quality of democracy (Dryzek 1996; McDonagh 2002). The party system is central to democratic functioning. No matter how slow the democratic inclusion of the disadvantaged, at the very least the disadvantaged and the public at large should believe that the major political parties in the government care about women, the poor, and the elderly. At the same time, social and economic marginalization can adversely affect democratic engagement (Solt 2008). In countries such as Poland, where acceptance of democracy as the ideal form of government is not a given and propensity to vote is relatively low (Marquart-Pyatt 2007; Peoples 2007), a belief that the party system fails the disadvantaged is psychologically demobilizing, both for disadvantaged groups and the public at large. Those who believe that the party system is a failure would be more likely to be noncommittal toward democracy and less willing to participate in politics.

The key finding in this article is that nonpositive evaluations of the party system, in terms of refusing to definitively endorse any party as representing the disadvantaged, are negatively associated with attitude toward democracy and democratic engagement. The effect of nonpositive evaluations is not specific to disadvantaged groups' evaluation of their own representation; rather, it is a general condition that strikes a sizable portion of the entire social structure.

I outline the measurement and characteristics of party image in Poland, noting the relatively high proportions of "don't know" responses, even for the top parties. I explore how party image is an indicator of overall perception of the party system. Finally, I explore the consequences of party image on attitude toward democracy and democratic engagement. In presenting the analyses, I am interested in the perceptions of parties, and not in how well these perceptions match actual party policy.

Measurement and Characteristics of Party Image

In 2008, a representative subsample of POLPAN respondents (n = 535) were asked about the extent to which each of ten different political parties—PO, PiS, SLD, PSL, LPR, Samoobrona, SDLP, PPP, KPEiR, and Partia Kobieta (for full names of the parties, see the Appendix)—represent women, the poor, and the old, using a total of thirty different questions. The five fixed category responses were (a) high degree, (b) moderate degree, (c) low degree, (d) "on the whole, not," and (e) "don't know."

A short description of the parties would place analyses of these items in context. In terms of holding parliamentary seats, since 2008, the major political parties are the PO, the PiS, the SLD, and the PSL; the rest are fringe parties to varying degrees. The PO is a pragmatic, European Union–friendly center-right party and, since 2008, has emerged as the most popular political party in Poland. In late 2010, with the PO as the majority, the Sejm passed a law requiring that the candidate list of all political parties have 35 percent women (there was no substantial provision for women's list placement). The PiS is a nationalist, Catholic traditionalist, and economic liberal party whose zenith in political power lasted from 2005 to 2007; by 2008 it held the presidency and was the main minority opposition to the PO. The SLD is the classic postcommunist party, among the most statist and leftist of the political parties that have held parliamentary seats since 1991. During the 2007 elections, the SLD was part of the LiD, a coalition of leftist parties that also included the SDLP, a fringe social democratic party. The LiD dissolved a year later, leaving the SDLP without a seat in the parliament. The PPP, the self-declared socialist party, has never won a seat in the parliament. The PSL is the long-standing peasant party, which, while never in their postcommunist history having enjoyed a majority, has always managed to gain just enough of the popular vote to acquire a few seats in the parliament. Like the PiS, the LPR and Samoobrona are nationalist and Catholic traditionalist, but unlike the PiS they are more statist and perennially struggle on the fringe. The KPEiR declared that pensioners were its main constituents and held no seats in the parliament as of 2005. Finally, the Partia Kobieta is a women's party established in 2006 whose goal is to represent the interests of Polish women; it has never won a seat in a national election.

The most striking characteristic of the responses to the party image questions is the relatively high proportions of "don't know" responses (Table 1). As would be obvious, in comparison with fringe parties such as the PPP (average of 0.49) and the Partia Kobieta (average of 0.38), the four major political parties— the PO, the PiS, the SLD, and the PSL—have the overall lowest proportion of respondents who say they do not know whether the party represents the disadvantaged groups.

Another striking characteristic is that "don't know" responses are not a result of lack of interest in politics or level of education. Some might argue that interest in politics and level of education is a precondition for (a) having an opinion about the party and (b) deciding about the extent to which the party represents the interests of

Table 1

Proportion of Respondents Who Responded "Don't Know" by Party and Disadvantaged Group

Party	Women	Poor	Old	Average all disadvantaged groups
PPP	0.53	0.46	0.48	0.49
Partia Kobieta	0.27	0.40	0.47	0.38
KPEiR	0.48	0.36	0.28	0.37
SDLP	0.38	0.33	0.37	0.36
Sam	0.32	0.31	0.36	0.33
LPR	0.33	0.30	0.31	0.31
PSL	0.33	0.25	0.29	0.29
SLD	0.25	0.21	0.26	0.24
PiS	0.23	0.17	0.20	0.20
PO	0.22	0.16	0.19	0.19

the specified group. Political interest is more a measure of the extent to which the respondent pays attention to politics, and education encapsulates, rather broadly, the ability to understand political information. Neither of these factors is a significant predictor of whether someone has an opinion about the party.

Which party has the most positive reputation for disadvantaged group representation? Limiting my analysis to respondents who had an opinion, Table 2 presents the mean value of party reputation for representing disadvantaged groups of women, the poor, and the elderly. Category responses were recoded such that the higher the number, the more positive the reputation for representing that disadvantaged group. Parties in Table 2 are ranked on their average score for all three disadvantaged groups. Not surprisingly, the two parties that specifically target particular disadvantaged groups—the Partia Kobieta for women and the KPEiR for the elderly—rank highest. At this point, it is worth noting that there is no political party among the ten whose target constituency is the poor, although the KPEiR comes closest by advocating for pensioners, but edges toward the elderly poor. The difference between the SLD, the PO, and the PiS is not substantial, though the PSL notably trails behind.

Party Image as Evaluation of the Party System

Much of the early work on party images has focused on the United States and the extent to which parties are still relevant for democratic functioning (Baumer and Gold 1995). There was concern that political parties have become too similar in

Table 2

Mean Value of Party Reputation for Representing Disadvantaged Groups of Women, Poor, Elderly, and All Disadvantaged Groups Combined

Party	Women	Poor	Elderly	Average of all disadvantaged
Partia Kobieta	3.25	2.09	1.99	2.44
KPEiR	2.00	2.39	2.74	2.38
SLD	2.48	2.22	2.10	2.27
PO	2.47	2.11	2.08	2.22
PiS	2.13	2.18	2.16	2.16
SDP	2.32	2.09	1.99	2.14
PPP	2.09	2.19	2.11	2.13
PSL	2.08	2.16	2.08	2.11
LPR	2.01	2.03	2.05	2.03
Sam	1.64	1.88	1.83	1.79

Notes: Includes only those who had an opinion. Category responses were coded (1) "on the whole, not," (2) low degree, (3) moderate degree, and (4) high degree. Ranges from 1 to 4, where the higher the average, the greater the party reputation for representing the disadvantaged.

platform and policies, such that one party cannot be meaningfully distinguished from the other. According to this logic, health of the party system can be ascertained based on the extent to which people hold party images that differ by party. Assessing the health of the party system is, in part, subjective, depending on personal thresholds that demarcate health from ill health. For example, the fact that one out of every five respondents do not know whether the PO represents women, that the SLD represents the poor, or that the PiS represents the elderly could be taken as a sign that the party system is in ill health. An equally persuasive argument is that about 80 percent of the public holds a coherent party image, indicating relatively good health of the party system. No study focuses specifically on party images of disadvantaged group representation in eastern Europe.

In this article, I conceptualize party image as an individual-level subjective evaluation of the party system. Evaluation of the party system is measured by whether an individual believes that at least one of the ten parties represents the disadvantaged to either a high or moderate degree. Thus, a positive evaluation of the party system is measured by whether respondents believe that at least one party out of ten represents any of the disadvantaged groups—women, the poor, and the elderly—to either a high or moderate degree. A nonpositive evaluation of the party system is measured by respondents' refusal to rate any of the ten parties as representing any disadvantaged group to a high or moderate degree; in other words, those who rank

Table 3

Differences Between Positive and Nonpositive Evaluators of the Party System (%)

	Evaluation of the party system is . . .	
	Positive ($n = 452$)	Nonpositive ($n = 83$)
Women	50.7	57.8
Lowest income quintile	17.7	31.3
Elderly	40.9	37.3
Education (high)	26.8	25.3
Interest in politics (high)	16.6	8.4

all parties with "low," "on the whole, not," or "don't know" for all ten parties have a nonpositive evaluation of Poland's party system.

   With ten political parties, most people find at least one that they believe represents a disadvantaged group to either a high or moderate degree. Yet a relatively large 15.5 percent refused to endorse any of the ten parties as representing any of the disadvantaged groups to either a high or moderate degree. An astonishing 28 percent refuse to endorse the top four political parties as representing women, the poor, or the elderly in this way.[1]

   Those with a nonpositive evaluation of the party system with regard to disadvantaged group representation are found throughout the social structure (Table 3). "Poor" is measured by being a member of the lowest income quintile; while not a formal measure of poverty, this income quintile is most vulnerable to falling into poverty. "Elderly" means being fifty-five years old and older. Between those with a positive and those with a nonpositive evaluation, there are no statistically significant differences in gender, age, and education level (post high school and up = 1, otherwise = 0). However, nonpositive evaluators are more likely to come from the lowest economic quintile and less likely to have a relatively high interest in politics (somewhat interested to high degree = 1, otherwise = 0).

Party Image, Attitude Toward Democracy, and Democratic Engagement

I examine the relationship between party image and two aspects of democracy: attitude toward democracy and democratic engagement. I focus on those who refused to endorse any of the ten political parties as representing any of the disadvantaged groups to either a high or medium degree.

   Attitude toward democracy is measured using the item "For people like you . . ." with response categories of (a) democracy is always the best form of government, (b) nondemocratic government is better, and (c) there is no difference [between the two choices]. Of those who hold a nonpositive evaluation of the party system,

28.9 percent feel that democracy is always best; of those who positively endorsed at least one party as representing the disadvantaged, 48.7 percent feel democracy is best, a substantial and statistically significant difference. It is important to realize that the nonendorsers are not more antidemocratic than the rest: They simply do not care what form of government is in place. Of the nonendorsers, 42.2 percent believe that there is no difference between democratic and nondemocratic governance, while of the endorsers, only 29.4 percent believe this (again, a substantial difference).

Democratic engagement is measured by whether respondents would vote if the elections were held on the day that they were interviewed by the survey-taker. Of those who refuse to endorse any parties, about half (49.4 percent) would vote, in contrast to 67.5 percent of the reference group, a substantial difference.

The effect of refusing to positively endorse any party retains its statistical significance even when controlling for other factors that influence attitude toward democracy and democratic engagement. Table 4 presents the logistic regression equations for both variables, including democracy is best form of government (otherwise = 0) and would vote today (otherwise = 0). One would expect that a high level of interest in politics (somewhat to high degree = 1, otherwise = 0) and education (post–high school and up = 1, otherwise = 0) to be positively related to democratic engagement. Thus, I expect that being a member of a disadvantaged group (women, lowest economic quintile, and the elderly) has a negative relationship with democratic engagement. One would also expect that those who believe democracy is always the best form of government would be more likely to vote. With the exception of gender, all these expectations are met. Model fit for both is significant, though the variance explained is rather low (12 percent and 8 percent, respectively). All else being equal, refusing to positively endorse any of the parties reduces the likelihood of thinking that democracy is always best by 66 percent and of voting by 46 percent.

Other analyses used interaction terms between disadvantaged groups—women, the poor, and the old—and nonpositive evaluations of their own representation. In models with the interaction terms and their constituent variables as independent variables, it was found that none were significantly associated with attitude toward democracy and democratic engagement.[2] Thus, the effect of nonpositive evaluation of the party system is not specific to disadvantaged groups' evaluation of their own representation.

Conclusion

Party reputations for representing disadvantaged groups are consequential for various aspects of democracy. At a minimum, enhancement of democratic quality requires the psychological mobilization of the citizenry to engage in the pursuit of those rights. There are three major conclusions of this study.

First, people differentiate the reputation of parties with respect to parties' representing disadvantaged groups of women, poor, and old. Different parties are seen as representing different disadvantaged groups. A full fifth of the population does not know where the four major parties stand on policies toward women, the poor, and the elderly.

Table 4

Logistic Regression of Democratic Engagement on Selected Independent Variables

	Democracy is always best			Would vote if elections were today		
	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Exp(B)
Woman	0.12	0.19	1.12	0.11	0.19	1.12
Lowest income quintile	−0.45†	0.25	0.64	−0.35	0.23	0.70
Elderly	−0.18	0.19	0.83	−0.08	0.20	0.92
Interest in politics (somewhat to high = 1)	0.76*	0.27	2.13	0.99**	0.33	2.69
Education level (high = 1)	1.24**	0.22	3.46	0.61*	0.24	1.84
Democracy is always best				0.38†	0.20	1.47
Nonpositive evaluation of the party system	−0.82**	0.28	0.44	−0.61*	0.25	0.54
Constant	−0.40*	0.17	0.67	0.33†	0.19	1.39
−2 log likelihood	667.29			650.06		
χ^2	70.24			44.85		
Cox and Snell R^2	0.12			0.08		
N	535			535		

† $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Second, belonging to disadvantaged groups has only a small impact on the view as to whether a given party represents the interest of these groups.

Third, the overall image of the party system with respect to representing disadvantaged groups has a sizable impact on political attitudes, view of democracy, and intention of voting. The significant few who have a nonpositive evaluation of the party system are less likely to think that democracy is always the best form of government and are less likely to want to vote.

Notes

1. More than half (55.3 percent) of those who refuse to endorse any of the top four parties refuse to endorse any party.

2. It is interesting to note that party image variables are not significant predictors of voting behavior. In models with disadvantaged group, their party image of their own representation, and an interaction variable of the two, in no model for any party were these variables statistically significant.

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Appendix

Ten Political Parties in Poland in 2008 by Acronym, and Polish and English Name

Party acronym	Polish	English
PO	Platforma Obywatelska	Civic Platform
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	Law and Justice
SLD	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	Democratic Left Alliance
PSL	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	Polish Peasant Party
LPR	Liga Polskich Rodzin	League of Polish Families
Samoobrona	Samoobrona	Self-Defense
SDPL	Socjaldemokracja Polska	Social Democracy of Poland
PPP	Polska Partia Pracy	Polish Labor Party
KPEiR	Krajowa Partia Emerytów i Rencistów	National party of Retirees and Pensioners
P.Kobieta	Partia Kobiet	Women's Party