

Attitudes towards redistribution and the welfare state in Poland

Introduction

Social scientists have long been interested in measuring and explaining attitudes towards various forms of social inequalities, and the role of the state in reducing them. This interest has both theoretical and practical implications. Understanding mechanisms leading to the legitimization of a given inequality system and redistributive regime may allow for predicting individual and collective behaviors such as voting patterns, charity contributions, strikes, and so on (Zelditch and Walker 1984).

Contemporary sociological studies of attitudes toward redistributive policies conceptualize these preferences as a function of individuals' self-interest and/or ideological beliefs. Self-interest is usually measured in terms of traits, such as income, age, gender or employment status, which determine individuals' perceptions of being either the beneficiary or benefactor of the redistributive policies. In other words, people support or oppose welfare policies based on their perception of the likelihood of benefiting from them as opposed to incurring their costs.

Ideology, on the other hand, is defined in terms of stable beliefs that are largely independent of self-interest. This might include, for example, views about *meritocracy* – that is, whether a given system offers an equal opportunity for everyone to succeed, and thus whether individual outcomes are a function of individual effort and talent. Another important example of ideological beliefs that might shape redistributive preferences are those about *egalitarianism*, the belief (or lack thereof) that everyone has basic social rights, including the right to an acceptable level of economic welfare and security.

A large body of research has demonstrated that both the utility- as well as the ideology-based viewpoints have merit: There is a link between these views and individuals' socioeconomic

positions/circumstances (e.g., Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989; Owens and Pedulla 2013); but there is also powerful evidence that persons who hold egalitarian views show more support for welfare state and redistribution than those who perceive their systems as meritocratic (Fong, 2001; Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003).

Cross-national differences in these attitudes, on the other hand, are typically viewed as function of nation-level institutions reflecting and reinforcing levels of support for redistribution, as well as group based-cleavages in attitudes (e.g., by classes, gender, etc.). From this perspective, in general, research shows that individuals in nations with less inequalities and more egalitarian welfare states support redistributive policies to a greater degree than individuals in nations with higher inequality and lower welfare spending (Esping-Andersen 1990; Glass, Marquart-Pyatt 2007). The direction of causality between the attitudes towards inequality and redistribution and the welfare regime and existing levels of inequality is, however, unclear and requires further research (Kerr 2011).

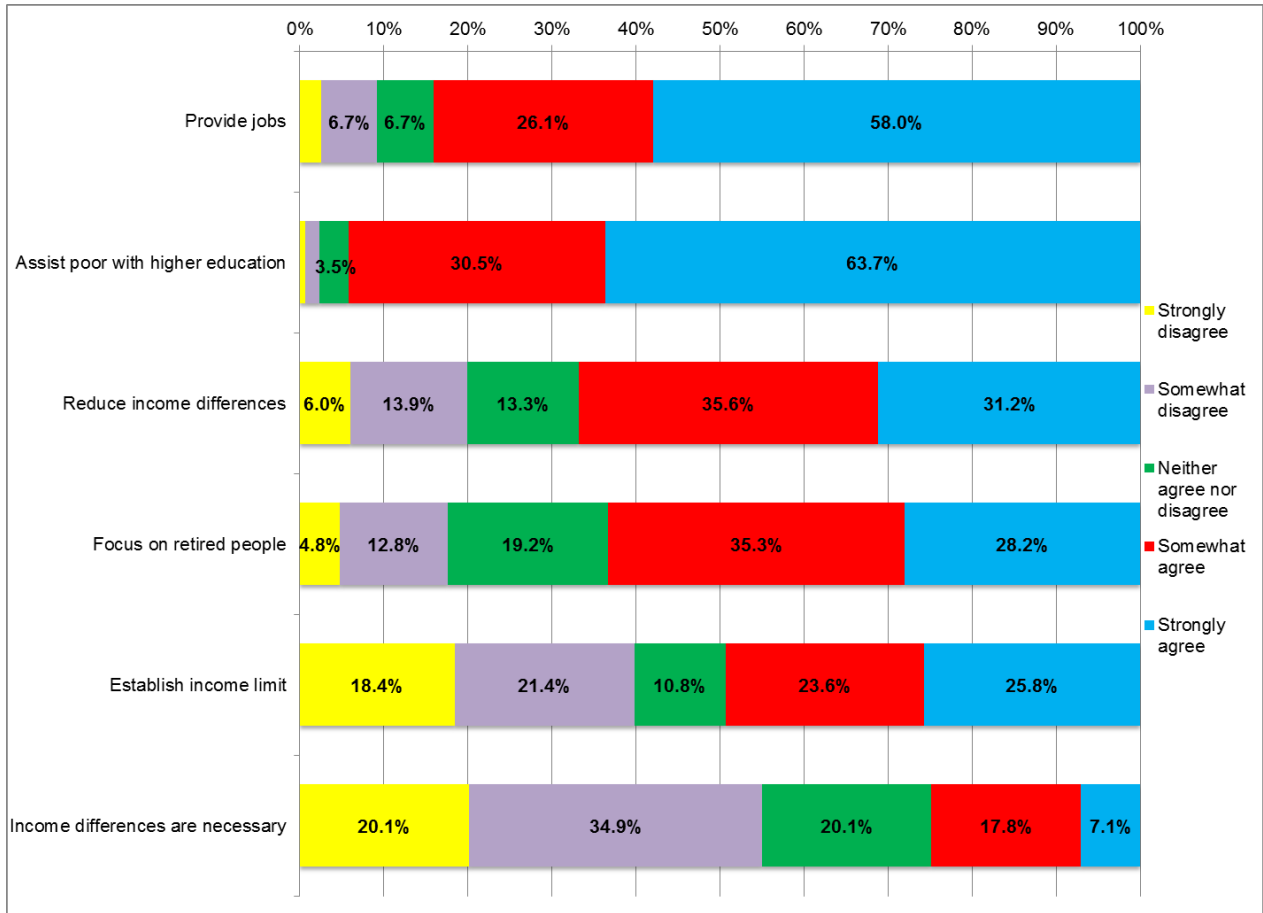
Attitudes towards inequality and redistribution: selected results

Since the first wave of the POLPAN longitudinal study in 1988, respondents have been asked every five years for their opinions regarding inequality and the role of the state in reducing them.

A synopsis of Polish attitudes toward welfare and distribution in 2013.

We will start by providing a quick overview of attitudes toward several types of redistributive interventions, as well as about the functional role of inequality, using POLPAN data from 2013. Figure 1 presents the distribution of responses to a selection of welfare/redistribution-related questions in the 2013 survey.

Figure 1. Distribution of responses to questions about inequality and the state’s role in redistribution, 2013.



Notes: Full wording to questions are as follows: The state should provide jobs for everyone who wants to work; The state should assist children from poor families by facilitating their access to higher education; The state is responsible for reducing differences in people’s incomes; Instead of making plans for the future, the state should now focus on the interests of people of retirement age; An upper income limit, which no one could exceed, should be established; Large differences in income are necessary to assure the prosperity of the country. Some data labels have been suppressed due to lack of space.

As shown in Figure 1, support for most of these propositions is quite high. Overwhelming majorities agree (“somewhat” plus “strongly”) with the statements that the state should provide jobs for those who want to work and facilitate access to higher education for children from poor families. Agreement is also very strong (65-70 percent) among respondents asked whether the state should reduce income differences and focus on the interests of retired Poles. Even in the case of the most “drastic” concrete proposal – that the state should set a maximum income level, above which no person could earn – agreement is still roughly 50 percent, and only two out of five respondents express some level of disagreement. Finally, when asked the question about whether large income

differences are necessary to ensure prosperity, 45 percent of respondents express disagreement, while only about one-quarter agrees.

As a whole, these results suggest that Poles are generally quite supportive of active state intervention and a robust welfare state, though the strength of that support can vary substantially by the type of intervention about which they are asked.

Trends in Poles' attitudes, 1988-2013.

Although the selection of questions varies somewhat between waves, it is also interesting to look at trends in responses over time, particularly since the period of time since the first POLPAN wave has included a drastic change in the nature and role of government.

Let us look at trends in two indicators of respondents' attitudes towards the state's redistributive role, both of which have been asked in all six POLPAN waves. They are responses to two questions discussed briefly above: "The state should provide jobs for everyone who wants to work" and "The state is responsible for reducing differences in people's incomes." We will begin with the question about reducing income differences.

Figure 2. Distribution of responses to the proposition, "The state is responsible for reducing differences in people's incomes," 1988-2013.

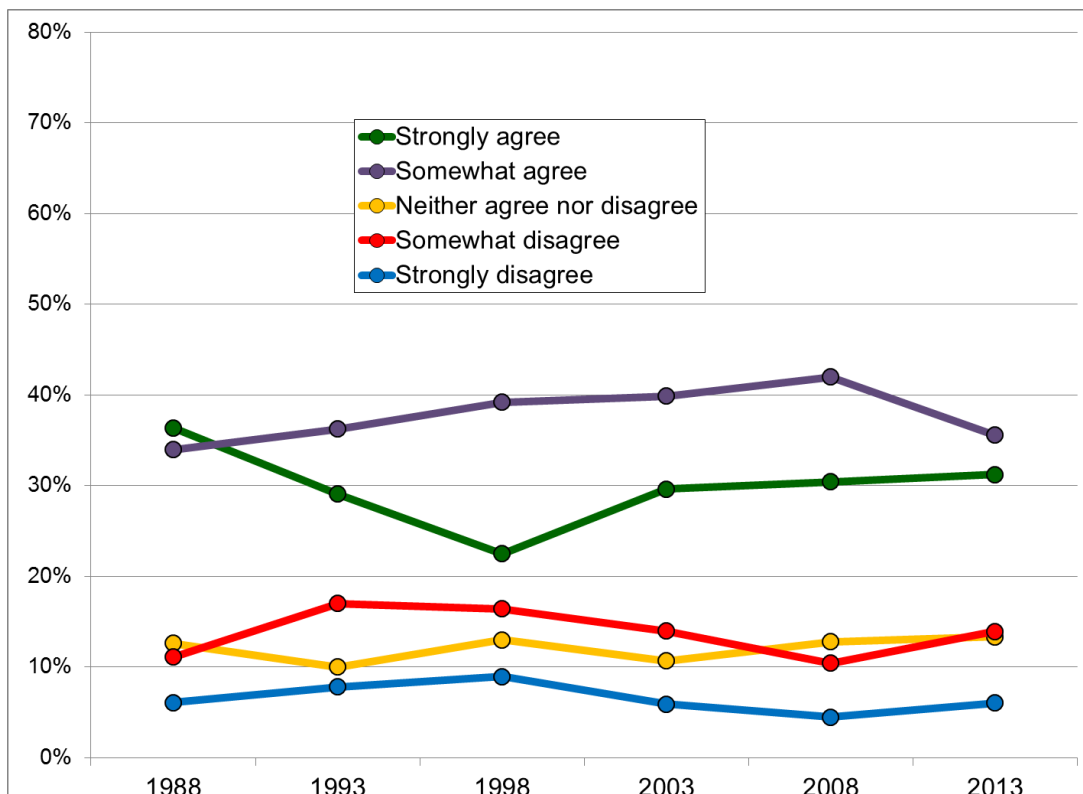
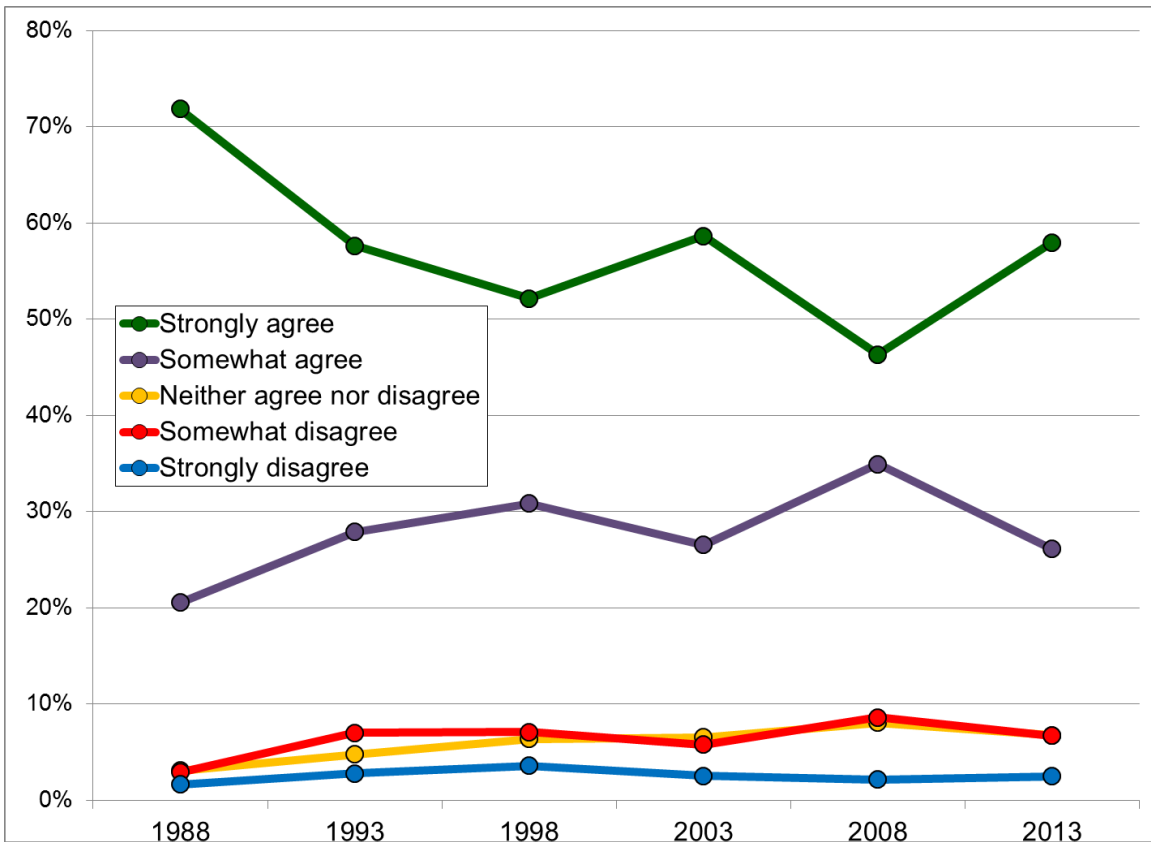


Figure 2 presents the distribution for the full POLPAN sample in each year. Although the year-to-year stability of these responses (not shown) is roughly 35 percent, most respondents exhibit at least moderate support for state’s role in reducing income inequality in the past 25 years. It is, however, also interesting to note the decline in support occurring between 1988 and 1998, during the time when Poland was transitioning from a Communist to a more market-based system.

Similar conclusion can be drawn from the results presented in Figure 3, which is the distribution of responses to the question about the state’s role in providing jobs for those who want to work. Although, again, there is a lot of instability in respondents’ opinions (year-to-year stability is roughly 50 percent), most of this volatility is between levels of agreement. The overwhelming majority of respondents in each wave support the state’s responsibility in creating jobs for those who need them and are willing to work.

Figure 3. Distribution of responses to the proposition, “The state should provide jobs for everyone who wants to work,” 1988-2013.



Moreover, as in Figure 2, there is a marked decline in support for the state's redistributive role between 1988 and 1998, one that once again seems to be concentrated between the two "agreement" responses ("strongly agree" and "somewhat agree"). Compared with Figure 2, however, there is considerably more volatility in Figure 3 between 1998 and 2013, with fluctuations in the proportion of respondents who "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree."

Conclusions

Support for the welfare state and the a general state role in reducing inequalities is very high in Poland, and, despite some interesting fluctuations, this has been the case for the past 25 years, before, during and after the transformation from a state-run to a free market economy. It is also clear, however, that both the level of support, as well as trends over time, vary considerably by the type of policy in question.

Existing analyses of attitudes toward redistribution using POLPAN data, though still relatively few in number, suggest that Poles' attitudes toward are significantly associated with characteristics that might represent respondents' self-interest, both in any given year (e.g., Glass and Marquart-Pyatt 2007) as well as over time (e.g., Wysienska-Di Carlo et al. 2014). Further research is required to unpack these instrumental factors from those of a more ideological nature, as both are no doubt important.

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