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Evaluating Democratic Support in Poland: A Case Study of University Students

Introduction

Well over a decade on since the rejection of the past regime, a clear picture has emerged of the public attitudes towards the new democratic order in Poland. A low level of public satisfaction is present with respect to the functioning of the current democracy. In May 1995 during a bitter Presidential election campaign, satisfaction with the functioning democracy fell to 24%¹, and as recent as 2001 CBOS recorded only 8% satisfaction². The dissatisfaction with the functioning democracy has not however been reflected in a fall in democratic support. By democratic support I mean the belief that many parties competing for power through free elections is the ‘best’ system of government available³. On the contrary, as Table 1 illustrates, the belief in the current democracy’s superiority to alternative systems of government has actually raised from approximately half of the population in 1992 to a relatively stable ratio of approximately two thirds of the population.

This article sets out to investigate the reasons for democratic support at times of widespread dissatisfaction. I divide the investigation into the following key fields of enquiry on the subject:

- First I investigate the importance to democratic support of the democratic principle of power.

¹ CBOS, *Spoleczna ocena demokracji i instytucji politycznych*, BS/59/99, Warsaw 1999.

² CBOS, (2001), http://www.cbos.pl/ENGLISH/BULLETIN/2001/03_2001.pdf.

³ Democratic support is the cognitive support for a system of government with free elections and many parties. Note that political support has been divided into cognitive support and its behavioural manifestations, or what Easton terms covert and overt support. D. Easton, *A System Analysis of Political Life*, Wiley and Sons, New York 1965.

- Second I investigate the importance to democratic support of the perceived effectiveness of the current democratic regime.
- Third I investigate the importance to democratic support of social and economic conditions.
- Fourth I investigate the importance to democratic support of perceptions of economic change.

Table 1

The pattern of democratic support in Poland

	Oct 92	June 93	May 95	March 99	April 02
Best	52%	62%	67%	64%	66%
Not best	15%	11%	17%	19%	14%
Difficult to say	33%	27%	16%	17%	20%

Source: CBOS.

The Case Study

As in any case study, targeting a specific group binds the research to a particular time and place. The investigation is based on a case study that I conducted in March and April 1998, a period of relative economic optimism in Poland⁴. Furthermore, the investigation was limited to a relatively advantageous group of students at the University of Nicholas Copernicus (UMK) in Toruń. My target was a sample of 700 students that were broadly representative of the university population. To achieve a fair representation from the university, I accessed an array of students from across various departments through the Department of Foreign Languages (LJO or **Lektorat**). The **Lektorat** was an ideal centre for conducting quantitative research because all students from all departments must necessarily attend language courses at the centre.

The methodology used in the research was a questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions in the Polish language that would provide variables of interest for correlation. The independent variable was the measurement of democratic support. Respondents answered whether

⁴ Between 1995 and 1997 the national economy was growing at an annual rate of between 6% and 7%.

'a political system with free elections and many parties is best'⁵. The wording in this question was designed to mirror the most appropriate features of existing support measurements. The question avoided the usage of the politically loaded term 'democracy', and respondents stated whether they favoured a democracy over 'all' alternatives. The choice of answers was ordinal. Respondents chose whether democracy is 'certainly best' (strong supporters), 'rather better' (weak supporters), 'rather not better' (weak non-supporters), 'certainly not best' (strong non-supporters) or that they 'didn't know' (undecided)⁶.

In total 79.5% of the students were 'supporters' of democracy. This percentage of supporters can be compared with a national average in 1997 of 63%⁷, indicating that the group sampled is more favourable to democracy than the average cross section of Polish society. Despite the sample group being largely supportive of democracy, the majority of respondents were not 'strong supporters', which indicated a significant level of doubt. 33% were weak supporters, 13.8% were 'undecided' and 6.8% were non-supporters ('rather not better' or 'certainly not best').

Part 1. The Support Significance of the Principle of Democracy

In Part 1 the support significance of the democratic principle of power is tested. The principle under investigation is the core democratic idea of 'power through/by the people'. To measure this principle the participants expressed their 'preferred distribution of power across society'.

Figure 1 illustrates that respondents' power preference was generally in favour of more political control by citizenry than by elite. This 'democratic' orientation was to be expected from the sample group. Poland possesses a long democratic heritage that is not only felt most strongly across educated circles, but was also revived in the spirit of empowerment during the 1970s and 1980s. However, the cross-tabulations in Table 2 show an absence of a positive relationship between supporters of democracy and believers in the principle of democracy (Correlation coefficient is -0.05).

⁵ The Polish translation for the support question was as follows: 'Generalnie, czy uważasz, że najlepszym ustrojem politycznym jest urząd z wolnymi wyborami i wieloma partiami?'

⁶ The Polish translation for the choice of answers was 'zdecydowanie tak', 'raczej tak', 'raczej nie', 'zdecydowanie nie' and 'nie wiem'.

⁷ CBOS, *Spoleczna Stosunek do Demokracji*, BS/152/152/97, Warsaw 1997.

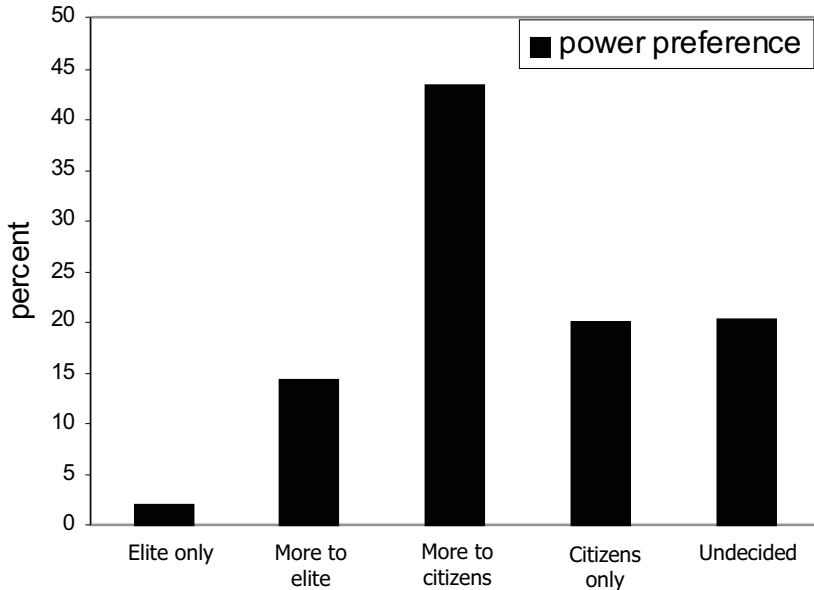


Figure 1. Belief in public empowerment

Table 2

Relationship between 'democratic support' and 'power preference'

	Value	Std. Error	Level of sig.	No
Pearson chi-square	2.55	–	>.05	555
Correlation coefficient (Spearman's rho)	-.05	.04	>.05	555

Those 'undecided' about their power preference are removed from the calculation, hence the low number.

The lack of a positive relationship might best be explained through a widely conceived gap between the 'principle' and 'practice' of democracy⁸ or, alternatively, by the perspective that democratic principles appeal

⁸ Respondents may 'in principle' support ideas of public empowerment, but 'in practice' there is a historically rooted sense of powerlessness in Poland. Even by 2000 82% believed that they could not influence what was going on in the country. CBOS, (2000), http://www.cbos.pl/ENGLISH/BULLETIN/2000/01_2000.pdf.

without being highly valued⁹. However one wishes to explain the absence of a positive relationship, the underlining factor of importance is that the results indicate that democratic support cannot be founded on a belief in the democratic principle of power, and hence cannot explain democratic support at a time of widespread dissatisfaction with the functioning democracy.

Part 2. The Support Significance of Perceptions of Effectiveness

In Part 2 of the research I will test whether, despite the widespread dissatisfaction with the functioning democracy, the current democratic system is perceived as effective in comparison to alternative political systems. I will follow this with an evaluation of the support significance of the perceived effectiveness of the current democratic regime, hence indicating the extent of the instrumental foundations to democratic support.

Two measurements of effectiveness were used in the investigation: perceived effectiveness in the economy and perceived effectiveness in law and order. As illustrated in Figure 2, the current system is widely perceived as effective in comparison to alternative political systems. Furthermore, many of those who were not positive were undecided (don't know) rather than negative ('rather not best' or 'certainly not best'). One particular point of interest however is the difference between the two fields of effectiveness. Concern over crime¹⁰ seems to have resulted in a weaker belief in 'law and order effectiveness'. Despite 53.6% believing in the current system's superiority in dealing with law and order, only 15.5% of those sampled were 'certain' of its effectiveness. Moreover, 25.2% of the total number of responses was negative about 'law and order effectiveness', which contrasted with only 8.9% that was negative about 'economic effectiveness'.

The perceptions of effectiveness were significantly related to democratic support. Table 3 shows a correlation coefficient of .52 with respect

⁹ Interestingly, approximately half of respondents in 2000 rejected the importance to democracy of 'active participation in political life'. CBOS, (2000), http://www.cbos.pl/ENGLISH/BULLETIN/2000/08_2000.pdf.

¹⁰ In 1995 57% of those responding to a CBOS poll felt more threatened by crime in a democratic country rather than in a non-democratic country. In contrast, only 23% felt safer in a democratic country CBOS. *Spoleczna wizja ustroju demokratycznego*, BS/118/99/95, Warsaw 1995.

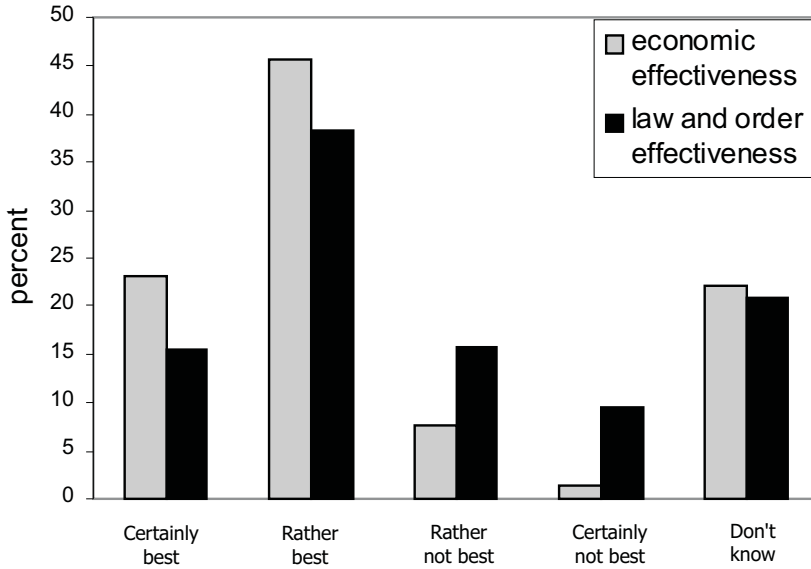


Figure 2. Perceptions of the effectiveness of the current democracy

to economic effectiveness, and Table 4 shows a slightly weaker correlation coefficient of .47 with respect effectiveness in law and order. Also of interest is that, when controlling for ‘law and order effectiveness’, the coefficient between ‘democratic support’ and ‘economic effectiveness’ fell to a significantly lesser extent than when controlling for ‘economic effectiveness’ (.37 and .27 respectively). Therefore, the perception of economic effectiveness is not only a highly significant support factor, but one that is of greater significance than perceptions of effectiveness in law and order. This accordingly indicates that democratic support has strong instrumental (economic) foundations that do not appear to have been significantly eroded by widespread political dissatisfaction.

Table 3

Relationship between ‘democratic support’ and ‘perception of economic effectiveness’

	Value	Std. Error	Level of sig.	No
Pearson chi-square	225.67	–	<.001	696
Correlation coefficient (Spearman’s rho)	.52	.03	<.001	696
Partial correlation – Controlling for law and order effectiveness	.37	–	<.001	692

Table 4

Relationship between 'democratic support' and 'perception of effectiveness in law and order'

	Value	Std. Error	Level of sig.	No
Pearson chi-square	171.06	–	<.001	695
Correlation coefficient (Spearman's rho)	.47	.03	<.001	695
Partial correlation – Controlling for economic effectiveness	.27	–	<.001	692

Part 3. The Support Significance of Social and Economic Conditions

Social factors

In the investigation social factors were not significantly related to democratic support. There was a slight tendency for the strongest supporters of democracy to come from large towns and to have a weak religious/Catholic commitment but, as Table 5 illustrates, the relationships were weak (.06 for religious commitment and .09 for size of hometown)¹¹. Instead, gender proved to be a far more significant support factor, with females less likely than males to have a favourable attitude towards democracy (Correlation coefficient is .17). Why might this gender difference occur? From a social perspective, it has been argued that women are more supportive of authoritarian values. However, the gender factor is better explained through an argument founded on female uncertainty because females were not so much 'against' democracy as 'undecided' about democracy. 17.8% of females were undecided, in contrast to only 5.6% of males¹².

¹¹ Further research also shows that the general tendency is for those from the countryside to be more 'uncertain' in their support attitudes. See CBOS, *Spoleczna ocena demokracji i instytucji politycznych*, BS/59/99, Warsaw 1999.

¹² A slight tendency for female 'uncertainty' can be observed in other studies. 20% of women from a CBOS survey from 1999 were unable to say whether democracy is a better system of government, which contrasted with 12% of men. CBOS, *Spoleczna ocena demokracji i instytucji politycznych*, BS/59/99, Warsaw 1999.

Table 5

Relationships between democratic support and social factors

Spearman's rho	Value	Std. Error	Level of sig.	No
Religious Commitment	.06	.04	>.05	691
Size of Hometown Population	.09	.04	<.05	697
Gender	-.17	.04	<.01	697

Economic Conditions

For the investigation on economic conditions two family wealth variables were tested: 'existing level of family wealth' and 'changes to family wealth since 1989'¹³. The decision to measure 'family' wealth was based on the presumption that students had experienced most of their lives in the economic conditions of their family. However, as Table 6 illustrates, the strength of the support relationships was weak with respect to both 'existing wealth' and 'changing wealth' (Correlation coefficient .07 and .1 respectively). This suggests that factors relating to experienced economic conditions are, for these students, only a minor support factor.

A certain point of interest can be induced from the difference between the two tested variables. 'Change in family wealth' was with a stronger support relationship than 'current family wealth', which suggests that existing levels of economic wealth have not been as important to democratic support as the associated change in economic conditions. The relevance to democratic support of 'change in economic conditions' is supported by other findings. Rychard has stressed the support significance of being a winner rather than a loser in economic change¹⁴. Indeed, in a CBOS survey from 1998 76% of winners were supporters of democracy whereas 46% of losers were supporters¹⁵. But, with almost half of 'losers' still supporting democracy, the relationship should not be exaggerated.

¹³ For measuring 'existing family wealth' I lessened the margin of error by measuring both the 'comparative level of family wealth' and the 'existing financial situation'. These two sets of responses were then collapsed into a single scale. For measuring 'changes to family's wealth', I targeted the change in the family's purchasing power since the transfer of power in 1989.

¹⁴ A. Rychard, *Beyond Gains and Losses: In Search of Winning Losers*, „Social Research” 1996, 63:2, p. 645–85.

¹⁵ CBOS, *Spoleczna ocena demokracji*, BS/78/78/98, Warsaw 1998.

Table 6

Relationships between democratic support and economic circumstances

Spearman's rho	Value	Std. Error	Level of sig.	No
Existing family wealth	.07	.04	>.05	593
Changes to family wealth	.10	.04	<.01	696
Experience of entertainment	.11	.04	<.01	697
Partial correlation – Experience of entertainment when controlling wealth variables	.03	–	>.05	588
Experience of foreign travel	.09	.04	<.05	697
Partial correlation – Experience of foreign travel when controlling wealth variables	.6	–	>.05	588

The support significance of experience in the revitalised leisure economy was also tested. Two variables were used: a 'travel' variable based on the extent of foreign travel and 'entertainment' variable based on how often such places as bars, restaurants, clubs and cinemas were visited. The results showed that the 'foreign traveller' was more likely than the 'non-traveller' to support democracy, and that those experiencing the most entertainment were most likely to support democracy. However, as with family wealth variables, the support significance was weak (.09 for foreign travel and .11 for entertainment). Furthermore, the data indicates that the experience of the leisure economy does not relate to democratic support independent of family wealth. When controlling for the two family wealth variables, the strength of the support relationships fell significantly. Hence, the results do not indicate a qualitative influence on democratic support based on enjoyment of the leisure economy.

The results show that the democratic support significance of economic conditions is limited, especially with respect to this group of university students who might arguably be said to focus on their future as much as their past or present. One point of interest however has been the suggestion that existing levels of economic wealth are not as important to democratic support as being/feeling a 'winner' under transition. Accordingly, this raises an interest in the support significance of perceptions of the ongoing economic changes.

Part 4. The Support Significance of Perceptions of Economic Change

Due to the past regime's deep reluctance to relinquish economic control during the 1980s, the economic liberalisation programme in Poland has largely been associated with the ongoing policy of democratically elected governments. Indeed, the Solidarity Movement packaged the process of democratisation and economic liberalisation closely together, which led to a holistic understanding of political and economic transition. These holistic associations have faded over time, and by 1997 a sizeable minority of citizens had come to actually believe that democracy is counter-productive to the goal of liberalising the economy. In a CBOS poll from 1997, 23% of those polled believed that democracy postponed necessary economic reform¹⁶. Nevertheless, with consecutive democratic governments continuing to liberalise different sectors of the economy in preparation for EU membership, it is perhaps unavoidable that continued economic liberalisation remains associated with the new democratic order.

The support significance of the preferred direction of economic change

In this section I investigate the support significance of a belief in economic liberalisation. I measure the preferred direction of state expenditure in areas of welfare (Towards higher or lower levels of taxation/expenditure in such fields as education and health). I also measure the preferred direction of ownership (Towards more private or public ownership).

Table 7 shows that the attitudes towards state expenditure are unrelated to democratic support (Correlation coefficient is $-.02$). In contrast, a strong relationship exists between democratic support and preferred direction of ownership (correlation coefficient is strong at $.32$). Those who favoured an increase in private ownership were significantly more likely to be supporters of democracy than those who favoured an increase in public ownership¹⁷. Might such a relationship be spurious? The rejection of

¹⁶ CBOS, *Funkcjonowanie demokracji w Polsce*, BS/14/14/97, Warsaw 1997.

¹⁷ Amongst others, Whitfield and Evans record a general relationship between 'democratic support' and 'support for marketisation'. S. Whitefield and G. Evans, *The Politics and Economics of Democratic Commitment – Support for Democracy in Transitional Societies*, „British Journal of Political Science” 1995, 25:4, p. 485–514.

communism during the 1980s generally paralleled the rejection of the political and economic status quo; hence both democratic support and ownership belief might flow from the same rejection of the old regime. Partial correlation however indicates that ownership belief should not be ignored. When controlling for 'perceived economic effectiveness of the current democracy', the strength of the relationship between 'democratic support' and 'ownership belief' significantly falls (See Table 7). This would suggest that belief in private ownership relates to democratic support by reinforcing a belief in the economic effectiveness of the democratic system.

Table 7

Relationships between democratic support and belief in the direction of economic change

Spearman's rho	Value	Std. Error	Level of sig.	No
Belief in direction of ownership	.32	.04	<.001	693
Partial correlation – Belief in direction of ownership when controlling for economic effectiveness	.14	–	<.01	682
Belief in direction of state expenditure	–.02	.04	>.05	692

The implication from these results is that economic beliefs have a largely positive impact on democratic support because in Poland there is broad support for the private ownership with which democracy is associated¹⁸. Certainly there is widespread concern over the relaxation of the protective role of the state, particularly with the recent slowdown of the economy and rise in unemployment¹⁹. Yet, with preferred levels of state expenditure unrelated to democratic support, the implication is that attitudes towards the protective role of the state do not impact democratic

¹⁸ Though the educated sample group would be expected to have a disproportionately favourable attitude towards the free market, the majority of Poles have come to believe in the market forces. A figure of 39% who favoured the power of manufacturers over the state in 1985 had by 1998 increased to a figure of 61%. CBOS, *Państwo a rynek – poglądy Polaków po 13 latach*, BS/149/149/98, Warsaw 1998.

¹⁹ Even in my own study of supposedly liberal-minded university students, a widespread support for private ownership was not matched by widespread support for reductions in state expenditure in welfare. Whereas 65.3% of respondents favoured an increase in private ownership, approximately half of those surveyed rejected any reduction in state expenditure.

support²⁰. So, whereas democracy has gained support through an accompanying belief in private ownership, it has not significantly lost support through concerns over the relaxation of the protective role of the state. Such an interpretation however must be put into context. Any belief in the direction of private ownership cannot be expected to reinforce democratic support in isolation from the real or perceived effects of those changes on the individual. In Part 3 I suggested the importance to democratic support of being a winner under the economic changes. In the next section I investigate the support significance of the perception that one will become a winner by the economic changes.

The support significance of the perceived effect of change on the future

In this section I investigate the support significance of the perceived effect of economic change on 'future income' and 'future job security'. The results showed that those who believed that economic change would positively effect their future work situations were the most likely to support democracy. The relationship with 'future income' was significantly stronger than that with future job security (Table 8 illustrates correlation coefficients of .17 and .1 respectively). Furthermore, the importance of 'job security' could not be treated as a significant support factor independent of 'future income' because, when controlling for 'future income', the coefficient with 'future job security' fell to .05.

The support significance of 'future income' is not altogether surprising, especially for a group of university students who, at least in theory, are focusing on their future. Also, in Poland this 'future' perspective has been particularly important with Polish society being described by Tarkowska as a 'waiting society' because of historic experience²¹. Furthermo-

²⁰ Poles have consistently understood democracy as having a social component. In 2000 approximately three in four of respondents described important characteristics of democracy as 'guaranteeing a minimum standard of living' and 'financing health service, science and culture by the state'. CBOS, (2000), http://www.cbos.pl/ENGLISH/BULLETIN/2000/08_2000.pdf. Furthermore, the mechanism of democracy has arguably allowed the existing political system to remain associated with a social role because citizens' votes have resulted in political players who have followed a 'gradualist' approach to economic liberalisation.

²¹ E. Tarkowska, *A Waiting Society: The Temporal Dimension of Transformation in Poland*, "Polish Sociological Bulletin" 1993, 102:2, p. 93–102. Due to the high

re, results from various other studies have indicated a significant relationship between positive economic expectations and positive evaluations of the political system²². The belief that one 'will be a winner' is seemingly as significant to democratic support as the belief that one 'is a winner'. These results however indicate more than the support significance of future expectations. They also illustrate the importance to democratic support of the perceived impact of the economic changes on the individual.

Table 8

Relationships between democratic support and the perceived impact of economic change on future work situation

Spearman's rho	Value	Std. Error	Level of sig.	No
Impact on future income	.17	.04	<.001	696
Impact on future job security	.10	.04	<.01	695
Partial Correlation – Impact on future job security when controlling for future income	.05	–	>.05	691

Conclusion

The findings from the case study do not provide a complete explanation of democratic support. There is not one determining factor that can explain support, and the empirical study has targeted specific support explanations. The findings must also be understood in the context of a group of Polish university students at a period of relative economic optimism. These students are not a representative group of the whole Polish nation.

levels of tolerance to difficult economic conditions, some social scientists have stressed the importance of a 'hope factor' across the region. See R. Rose and W. Mishler, *Trajectories of Fear and Hope-Support for Democracy in Post-communist Europe*, „Comparative Political Studies” 1996, 28:4, p. 553–581.

²² See K. Zagórski, *Hope Factor, Inequality, and Legitimacy of Systemic Transformations – The Case of Poland*, „Communist and Post-communist Studies” 1994, 27:4, p. 357–376. Similarly, Markowski found a strong relationship between 'trust in institutions' and 'prospects for the future'. R. Markowski, *Trust in Institutions in East Central Europe at the Beginning of Transformation*, in: A. Bozoki ed., *Democratic Legitimacy in Post-communist Societies*, T-Twins, Budapest 1994.

Nevertheless, the empirical investigation has offered an insight into the reasons for democratic support.

The findings provided no evidence to indicate that democratic support is significantly founded on a belief in the democratic principle of power. Despite the appeal of public empowerment in the decision making process, this appeal does not relate to democratic support. Instead the findings indicate that democratic support is largely founded on instrumental factors, most notably with respect to economic factors. The economic factors that are most closely related to democratic support are those relating to the perceived (future) impact of economic change on the individual, rather than existing economic conditions/experiences. This in itself is of value observing, though the importance of the subjective over the objective should not be overstressed. During the first decade under the transition process democracy unavoidably became associated with individual hopes and expectations from economic liberalisation. Also, the case study sampled a group of university students who might be influenced by economic beliefs and expectations as much as their immediate material reality.

I conclude this article with a short discussion on the current implications of using a broad economic logic for the explanation of democratic support. As Table 1 illustrates, in the early 1990s support for democracy and the economy were at a low following the initial effects of freeing price controls. By the middle of the decade the situation had significantly improved along with people's optimism as the economy grew at an annual rate of 5–7%. Yet, since the late 1990s the economic situation has significantly worsened with growth stagnant and official unemployment figures approaching 20% by 2002. Accordingly, attitudes towards the direction of change have hardened with only 38% in 2001 stating that the introduction of the free market had been beneficial to the country²³. Certainly the extent of the economic difficulties should not be over-exaggerated with wide society still able to associate democracy with a prosperity that was so absent under the previous political regime²⁴. However, the research does indicate that widespread democratic support should not be taken for granted, especially if a period of prolonged economic hardship erodes belief in the future.

²³ CBOS (2001), http://www.cbos.pl/ENGLISH/BULLETIN/2001/03_2001.pdf.

²⁴ The percentage satisfied with their material situation rose to 60% by 2001. CBOS (2001), http://www.cbos.pl/ENGLISH/BULLETIN/2001/12_2001.pdf.

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcono ocenie przyczyn popierania demokracji w okresach niezadowolenia z jej praktycznego funkcjonowania. Ocena oparto o studium przypadku polskich studentów uniwersyteckich. Rezultaty badań wskazują, że poparcie dla demokracji wynika z instrumentalnej wiary w porównywalną skuteczność systemu, raczej niż z demokratycznej zasady siły. Dalsze wyniki wskazują na znaczenie postrzeganego wpływu przemian ekonomicznych dla popierania demokracji.