

CHAPTER 4.

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WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT DO ABOUT CORRUPTION? PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS*

Introduction

Corruption is currently perceived as “one of the greatest evils of our times” (Hough 2013). Regardless of whether one has given a bribe or not, most Poles have an opinion about the level of corruption in the country and often consider corruption as a social problem (e.g. Makowski 2008). The literature investigating the causes and consequences of the perception of corruption establishes that a) depending on the context, perception of corruption might differ from corruption-related experience and behavior, b) corruption perception, although being an abstract phenomenon which may not reflect reality, has a direct influence on the attitudes of citizens and their political trust (e.g. Heidenheimer and Johnston 2002; Shabad and Slomczynski 2011; Slomczynski and Shabad 2012). Thus, even the appearance of corruption is critical with respect to the legitimacy of the political systems and quality of governance. In some respect, the perception of corruption may have more devastating effects than actual corruption itself, for example by generating a “culture of distrust” in the society (Melgar, Rossi, and Smith 2010).

* In this chapter I use my earlier working paper (Wyszumulek 2016); cf. https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/related-documents/post-1945_poland_working_papers_pomp_2016.pdf.

Although corruption is a problem found in all European countries, regardless of their economic development, high levels of perceived political and administrative corruption have been often understood as the distinctive disease of the countries “in transition” (Gong 2002; Kaufmann 2005; Melgar, Rossi, and Smith 2010). Poland, as the largest Central-Eastern European country which has gone through a number of political, social, and economic changes, is a particularly interesting case for analysis. Since 1989, Poland has transformed from “the authoritarian state with a planned economy to a democratic, prosperous country at the heart of European Union” (Hough 2013). If we take GDP growth as a measure, researchers call Poland “a miracle” due to its rapid economic success (Kolodko 2005; Lehmann 2012). If we take the measures of democratization, Freedom House’s annual report on global political rights and civil liberties classifies Poland as a fully free country (score 1 in *Freedom in the World* 2014) with a consolidated democracy (score 2.18 in *Nations in Transition* 2014). If we check the indexes of the quality of life and access to knowledge, we will find that Poland gets the maximum scores on the *Human Development Index* (score in HDI 2014: very high). Although we can argue whether such general aggregated indexes measure what they intend, there seems to be persuasive evidence from a variety of sources that the situation in Poland has improved. How does it relate to the level of citizen satisfaction with their government and their evaluation of the effectiveness of its policies?

In this chapter I investigate the perceptions of corruption level and efficiency of government in fighting corruption in Poland. First, I present prospective and retrospective evaluations of corruption levels in Poland as seen by Polish citizens. Second, I highlight the dynamics of change in the evaluation of the government effectiveness in fighting corruption. Third, I concentrate on the relationship between trust and corruption, examining what determines or what influences the perception of corruption.

My analysis is based on the Polish Panel Survey POLPAN 1988–2013, which offers unique information on the opinion of Poles since 1988, through the transformation period and up to the present. The panel format of the data offers a new angle in the analysis of corruption and enriches the understanding of changes that Poland has gone through.

Evaluating Government Effectiveness in Fighting Corruption: Hypothesis

The level of political trust and satisfaction with the government's policy are tightly interconnected (Blind 2007). People become trustful or distrustful depending on whether they are satisfied with their government (see for example the empirical research of Miller 1974). In other words, low effectiveness of actions on the part of the government may cause a decrease of trust over time. Similarly, a low level of political trust may have an influence on the dissatisfaction with policy, independent of its effectiveness (Porte and Merlay 1996). Following Newton and Norris (2000: 53), political trust is "a central indicator of public's underlying feeling about its [government's] polity." Thus, among other things, it is anticipated that those with a higher level of general trust in political parties tend to be satisfied with the actions undertaken by the current government.

The other part of the hypothesis comes from the assumptions that people tend to be satisfied with the actions of a political party if they identify themselves with this particular party (Keele 2005). Thus, I hypothesize that the positive evaluation of the attempts of the current Polish government to fight corruption are related to the political affiliation with the ruling party.

Especially interesting is the relationship between age and evaluation of government effectiveness. Previous research shows that political trust and evaluation of government have a strong and significant correlation with age. However, the direction and character of this correlation may differ. In the study of Espinal and Hartlyn (2006) on trust in government in the Dominican Republic, for example, we find that older generations tend to be more tolerant of the attempts of a democratic government to fight corruption. The authors assume that it might be due to the experience of older generations with authoritarian institutions and, in comparison, bigger political trust in democratic ones (Espinal and Hartlyn 2006). However, such positive association of age and evaluation of government is not observed in industrialized countries, where together with age, the level of satisfaction with government policies and political trust decreases (Inglehart 1997; Blind 2007). In my research I intend to explore the direction of the relationship between age and evaluation of government in fighting corruption in Poland.

Perception of Corruption in Poland: Tracing Public Opinion in POLPAN

Perhaps tellingly, in 1988 when the Survey first launched, there were no questions covering neither attitudes towards corruption nor perception of corruption in current government. This is not to claim that researchers had absolutely no freedom to ask about corruption; however, there is a theory presented in number of previous studies that in the communist period corruption was “swept under the carpet” (Krastev 2004; Hough 2013). As to Makowski (2008), corruption at that time has not been presented (nor even considered) as a social problem. Generally, the public did not have access to information about high level political corruption. Had that been the case, it may have led to the “corruption paradox” described by Krastev (2004): independent of expert evaluation of corruption level, based on public opinion surveys, citizens in post-communist countries perceive post-communism as more corrupt than communism. On the other hand, Hough (2013) argues that despite little access to formal information, people living in communist times knew through their personal experience that political connections and bribery could solve many everyday problems. Poles prior to 1989 also suspected government of active involvement in a series of corrupt relationships (Hough 2013). This gives rise to questions regarding corruption perceptions following regime change: in the eyes of Polish citizens, did the situation improve? Did the radical change of government lead to changes in perception of the level of corruption of those in power?

The Polish Panel Survey of 1993 asks respondents to evaluate on the 11 point scale whether the government is corrupt or honest. It asks about the respondent's feeling about the situation in Poland five years ago (in 1988), currently (in 1993) and in five years¹. Table 4.1 presents the results of the distribution of answers to this question. We can see that despite the lack of information, generally, Poles perceived government in 1988 as

¹ Question wording in POLPAN 1993 questionnaire: *Below there are twelve pairs of antagonistic/contrasting features. Below each pair there is an eleven-point scale showing whether we are getting nearer the feature on the left or on the right hand side. Taking into account your feelings, on each scale please indicate the point where:*

Poland was 5 years ago, i.e. in 1988; – Poland is currently situated; – Poland will be in 5 years

Corruption of the ruling power/government – Honesty of the ruling power/government

very corrupt and the majority of the answers fall in the negative evaluation side. It is interesting that despite the regime change, the respondents' opinion about corruption level of those in power did not change. We can observe that the distributions of responses regarding the past government and current government are almost identical. However, it should be underlined that Poles expressed a certain level of hope for improvement in the future. When asked about the evaluation of the scale of corruption of the ruling government in five years, respondents tended to answer more optimistically and believed that government will become more honest (see Figure 4.1).

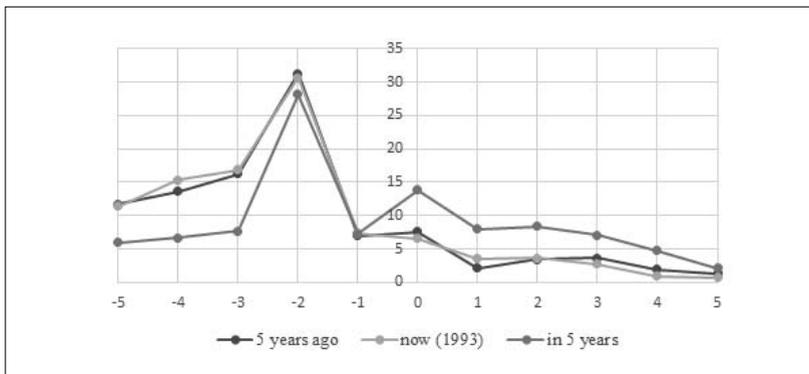


Figure 4.1. Perception of Corruption in the Ruling Government in Poland, 1993

Note: 11 point scale, where -5 = corrupt and 5 = honest.

In order to capture the differences between the prospective and retrospective evaluations of the ruling government, the opinions were aggregated into five categories, presented in Figure 4.2. Such rescaling allows us to better illustrate and compare the opinions, as well as the direction of changes they underwent. A large percentage of respondents considered the government as very corrupt in 1993 (44 %) and a very similar percent of respondents thought that the government was very corrupt in 1988 (42%). Regarding the situation in five years, the group of respondents that evaluated the future government as honest, compared with the current government, increased by 19% (11% in 1993 compared to 30% in five years from 1993). It is also worth mentioning that the number of respondents who have chosen the middle response category has increased

(up to 14%), which shows uncertainty, yet a general hope for a more honest government in the future.

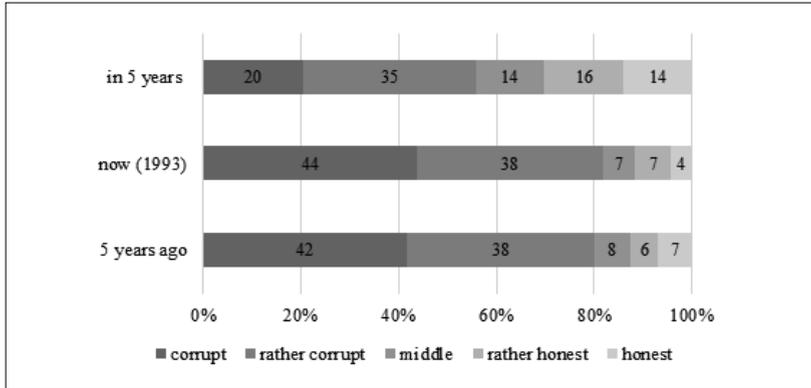


Figure 4.2. Perception of Corruption in the Ruling Government – Rescaled Illustration for Five Point Scale, 1993

Influence of Government on Corruption: Dynamics of Change

Similar hopes for reduced corruption were observed in responses in the following 2003 and 2008 waves of the survey. In these two waves, the questions related to corruption were different from the one included in the 1993 questionnaire. While in the latter, respondents were asked for evaluations of past, present, and future governments' honesty levels, the 2003 survey asked the respondents to assess the ability of the government as an institution to influence the level of corruption.² A similar question was repeated in 2008.³

² Question wording in POLPAN 2003 questionnaire: *We are interested in people's views on corruption. In your opinion, is the influence of the government on corruption (1) very significant (2) somewhat significant (3) negligible, or (4) practically nonexistent?*

³ Question wording in POLPAN 2008 questionnaire: *How do you evaluate the influence of the government on corruption. In your opinion, the influence of the government on corruption is (1) very high (2) somewhat high (3) somewhat low (4) very low (5) practically none.*

Given the general decline of trust in government depicted in other empirical studies,⁴ alongside the corruption scandals around the SLD party which was in power at that time,⁵ we would expect people to not see government as an institution capable of fighting corruption effectively. However, when asked about the potential of such influence, 76 percent of respondents replied that this influence may be high or very high. The hope that government can change corruption levels is also expressed in 2008 responses, where only 27 percent of respondents declared that government can have low influence on the overall fight against corruption.

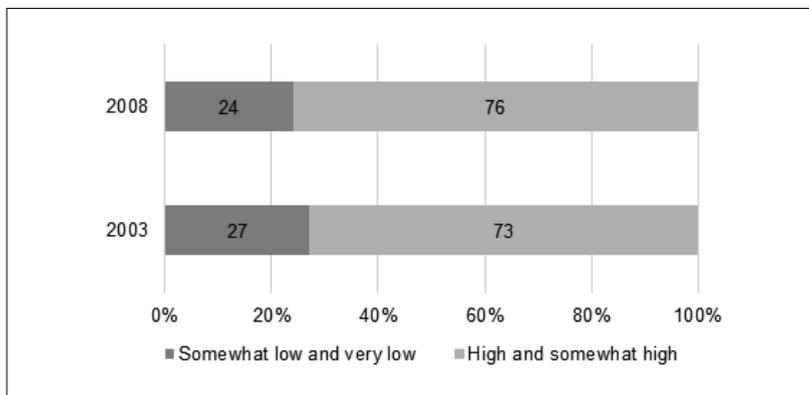


Figure 4.3. Influence of Government on Corruption, 2003 and 2008

However, if we analyze the responses more deeply, we can trace a slight tendency of increasing hopes regarding the extent to which the government may potentially influence corruption. Table 4.1 presents the distribution of 2008 responses regarding government's potential impact on corruption, conditional on analogous responses provided five years earlier, on a subsample of respondents who participated in both waves of the panel.

⁴ See for example P. K. Blind, "Building trust in government in the twenty-first century: Review of literature and emerging issues," report prepared for the 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government Building Trust in Government (Vienna, Austria, 2007).

⁵ The Democratic Left Alliance party (SLD) was accused in 2004 of corruption and incompetence and its popularity went into a rapid decline and further on it led the party into the split. For more information check for example: Frances Millard (2008).

It shows that out of all 264 respondents with a negative opinion about the potential influence of government on corruption in 2003, 70 percent have changed their opinion into a positive one in 2008. If we look at the positive opinions in 2003 we can observe that out of all 816 responses only 20 percent have changed their opinion into a negative one. Thus, if we look at the overall results, the distribution of opinions between 2003 and 2008 are very similar. However, if we trace the changes in opinion, we can observe a broader trend moving toward positive perceptions.

Table 4.1. Perceived Government Influence on Corruption: Crosstabulation of 2003 and 2008 Results

	Low influence 2008	High influence 2008	Total
Low influence 2003	79 (30%)	185 (70%)	264 (100%)
High influence 2003	166 (20%)	650 (80%)	816 (100%)
Total	245	835	1,080

Determinants of Corruption Policy Evaluation

The optimism and hope for effective governance reflected in the previous POLPAN waves change dramatically if we ask respondents to evaluate the current governmental fight against corruption. In the opinion of the majority of respondents in 2013, the effectiveness of actions undertaken by the current Polish government towards the reduction of corruption is somewhat low (30%) or very low (29%).⁶ According to POLPAN 2013 data, only 13 percent of all respondents consider the actions undertaken by the government in this field to be satisfactory. The question arises: what determines opinions about the effectiveness of government in fighting corruption? How are opinions about the current government (at the time of data collection) related to evaluations of the potential capacity of government as an institution to cope with corruption? What are the characteristics of the group of individuals who negatively evaluate the actions of the current government and its specific anti-corruption policy in Poland?

⁶ Question wording in POLPAN 2013 questionnaire: *Many countries experience such problems as unemployment and corruption. Do you evaluate the effectiveness of actions undertaken by the current government towards reducing corruption as very high, somewhat high, average, somewhat low or very low?*

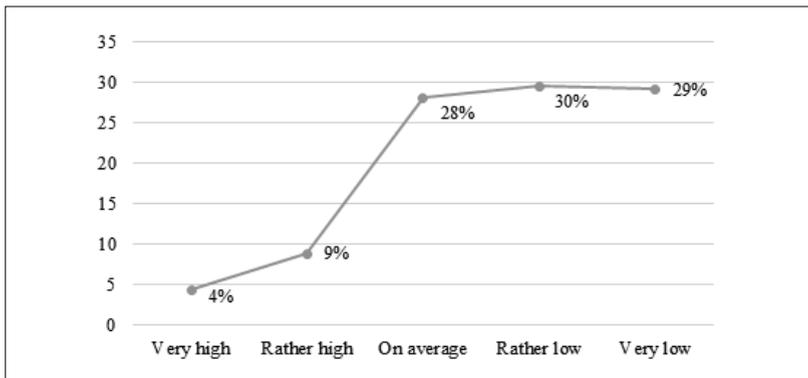


Figure 4.4. The Effectiveness of Current Government in Fighting Corruption, 2013

In order to explore the impact of certain attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics on the probability of a negative evaluation of the effectiveness of current government in fighting corruption, I use logistic regression analysis. The models are reported in Table 4.2.

The dependent variable in the regression models is the evaluation of the effectiveness of the current government in fighting corruption, where 1 stands for low and somewhat low effectiveness.

The independent variables were selected on the basis of previous research in the field, and include (a) variable measuring political trust (specifically trust in political parties),⁷ (b) variables identifying party affiliation of the respondent through the declared voting behavior and general attitude to the current government coalition, (c) basic socio-demographic variables, such as age, gender, and education.⁸

In the model I use the following two indicators of party affiliation. First, a dummy variable identifying respondents who voted for *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform, PO) in the 2011 elections (in the regression this is a dummy variable where 1 = voted for PO). Second, I also include

⁷ Question wording in POLPAN 2013 questionnaire measuring trust in political parties: *Now, I will list various institutions. Please indicate to what extent you have trust in them. To what extent do you trust ... political parties? To a very high extent, to a high extent, to a moderate extent, to a low extent, very little or not at all?*

⁸ In the model, age is measured in years; gender is coded as 1 for male and 0 for female; and education is coded as 1 for tertiary education of respondent and 0 for any other level of education.

Table 4.2. Logistic Regression Results of Evaluation of Government Effectiveness in Fighting Corruption, 2013

		Model 1	Model 2
2007 brought more losses	Odds Ratio	2.017	2.284
	Std. Err.	0.309	0.455
	P > z	0.000	0.000
low trust in political parties	Odds Ratio	2.628	2.197
	Std. Err.	0.515	0.562
	P > z	0.000	0.002
voted for ruling party (PO)	Odds Ratio	0.587	0.614
	Std. Err.	0.089	0.119
	P > z	0.000	0.012
tertiary education	Odds Ratio	1.106	1.122
	Std. Err.	0.180	0.238
	P > z	0.538	0.586
female	Odds Ratio	1.138	1.269
	Std. Err.	0.169	0.240
	P > z	0.386	0.208
age in years	Odds Ratio	1.023	1.019
	Std. Err.	0.004	0.007
	P > z	0.000	0.004
low effectiveness of government, 2008	Odds Ratio	-	1.781
	Std. Err.	-	0.607
	P > z	-	0.090
Number of obs.		1,160	635
Wald Chi ² (7)		90.57	52.02
Prob > chi ²		0.00	0.00
Pseudo R ²		0.08	0.08
Log pseudolikelihood		-745.15	-458.56

Note: Dependent variable: low effectiveness of current government in fighting corruption

in the model the overall evaluation of the PO-PSL coalition⁹ that was introduced in Poland since 2007 (a dummy indicator, where 1 stands for the opinion that the PO-PSL coalition has brought more losses than gains).¹⁰

In Table 4.2 there are two logistic regression models presented. The first model explains the negative evaluation of effectiveness of the current government's fight against corruption by including the six independent variables described above. Estimates are based on the sample of respondents who took part in 2013 wave of the Polish Panel Survey. The second model includes an additional indicator of the way the respondents evaluated the government potential influence on corruption in 2008, which means that the estimation is made on the sample of respondents that took part in both the 2008 and 2013 waves of POLPAN.

Based on Model 1 (Table 4.2) we can say that, *ceteris paribus*, the respondents who expressed a low level of general trust in political parties are two times more likely to evaluate government effectiveness in fighting corruption negatively. However, voting for PO during the 2011 elections (with all other things being equal) decreases the odds of negative evaluation of corruption policy by 41 percent. The opinion that the PO-PSL coalition has brought Poland more losses than gains increases the odds of evaluating of current government effectiveness with fighting corruption negatively by three times. The data also show that a negative evaluation of the government increases together with age of respondent by 2.3 percent every year (which means a 23 percent difference between respondents whose age differs by ten years, controlling for other factors in the model).¹¹ Gender and tertiary education appear to be not significant in evaluating current government's actions, although controlling for these factors seems to be reasonable for the clarity of interpretation.

In Model 2, the evaluation of the government's potential to fight corruption, although suggestive of an association with evaluation of current government effectiveness in fighting corruption, did not achieve statistical significance (p -value = 0.09). However, we see that controlling for

⁹This is a parliamentary coalition of center-right Civic Platform (PO) party and Polish Peasant Party (PSL).

¹⁰Question wording in POLPAN 2013 questionnaire: In your opinion, changes introduced in Poland since 2007 – that is, since the PO-PSL coalition came to power – brought most people in Poland... only gains/only loses?

¹¹In public perception, among older generations of Poles there are more supporters of Law and Justice party (PiS), than Civic Platform party (PO), which, in contrary, is associated with “younger, educated, from big cities” voters.

the respondents' opinions in 2008 did not change the level of significance of the other factors in the model, such as political trust, party affiliation and age.

Conclusions

Fighting corruption in Poland is one of the most sensitive issues in the public debate. It is a process accompanied by many hopes and expectations. This chapter has analyzed survey respondents' perceptions of corruption levels in Poland since 1988, and the effectiveness of government in reducing corruption, as seen through the eyes of Polish citizens. My main aim was to highlight the changing dynamics of corruption perception in Poland and to investigate the characteristics of the group that is dissatisfied with the current government's efforts, paying a special attention to the relation between corruption and political trust.

The results of the analysis suggest that the majority of Poles consider government to be very corrupt, both in 1989 and in 1993, despite the regime change. We can trace, though, the hope for a more honest government in the future, which is expressed in the generally positive responses to the prospective question asked in the 1993 survey wave about corruption levels in five years.

Interestingly, the results from the 2003 and 2008 waves of the surveys reveal that the vast majority of Poles declare the belief in the capability of government as an institution to fight corruption effectively. In the context of the general decline in political trust throughout Europe and growing number of publicly discussed corruption scandals, this positive view of the potential of government to fight corruption is unexpected. It might be related to the fact that corruption is understood mainly as a sphere limited to authorities. Thus, the view that government can fight corruption may not signify the support for government, but strong criticism of government's failure to address citizens' expectations.

The latter interpretation is consistent with the observation that, in 2013, only 13 percent of respondents considered the actions undertaken by the current government in fighting corruption to be satisfactory. The results of logistic regression analysis have shown that such negative evaluations of government action may be explained by the low levels of political trust, as well as the dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition. Those who voted for the ruling party appear to have more positive views

of government corruption policy, which can be explained by the fact that respondents tend to support parties that they identify with. The older respondents tend to perceive government as less effective in fighting corruption as compared to younger respondents.

Finally, it should be noted that the present study offers a first insight into the characteristics of those who question the effectiveness of the government's fight against corruption. This issue merits further, more detailed and systematic analyses, in order to improve our understanding of the tendencies reported above.